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The Concept of Self as Expressed in Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra

Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra is one of the most famous text of Mahāyāna Buddhism devoted to the positive affirmation of the eternal Self (or True Self) as opposed to impermanent non-self. The Sūtra belongs to the group of Buddhist texts known as the "Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras". As with the majority of Mahāyāna sūtras, the actual date of its creation is unknown. Hajime Nakamura believes that "it must have been compiled in the period 200-400 A.D." (212). There are several existing translations of Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra: "the shortest and earliest extant translated version is the translation into Chinese by Faxian and Buddhahadra in six juan (418CE); the next in terms of scriptural development is the Tibetan version (c790CE) by Jinamitra, Jñānagarbha and Devacandra; and the lengthiest version of all is what is known as the "Northern version" in 40 juan by Dharmakṣema (422CE)" (Page 1). In Mahāyāna tradition the sūtra is believed to be the last teaching of the Buddha before entering into Parinirvāṇa.¹

Although Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra discusses various topics related to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine and practices, the particular attention of the present paper is given to the notion of True Self that is expressed in the Sūtra. The great specialty of Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra lies in the fact that it

¹ See Nakamura, 213.

equates the Buddha-nature or tathāgatagarbha present in every living being with the Self: “formerly, Buddhism, advocating the theory of Non-ego, was against the theory of *ātman*, but here in this scripture the Buddha teaches the theory of Great Ātman” (Nakamura 213). The Buddha explains in Chapter 12 of Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra as follows: "O good man! "Self" means "Tathagatagarbha" [Buddha-Womb, Buddha-Embryo, Buddha-Nature]. Every being has Buddha-Nature. This is the Self. Such Self has, from the very beginning, been under cover of innumerable defilements” (101). Equating tathāgatagarbha with ātman is not only found in Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, but also in Avataṃsaka Sūtra.² Buddha gives the following characteristics to the notion of Self: “The Self (ātman) is reality (tattva), the Self is permanent (nitya), the Self is virtue (guna), the Self is eternal (śāśvatā), the Self is stable (dhruva), the Self is peace (siva)” (Page 2).

Such a notion of eternal True Self is explained in opposition to the concept of non-self, which is our mistaken idea of ego: “in contrast to our individual ego, Buddhism points us towards the 'Great Self' which is the presence of the Dharma-Body in all of us, also known as *Buddha-nature*” (Paraskevopoulos 23). Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra clearly defines what belongs to the realm of selflessness and what possesses the True Self: “Non-Self is Samsara, the Self is the Tathagata; impermanence is the sravakas and pratyekabuddhas, the Eternal is the Tathagata’s Dharmakaya; suffering is all tirthikas, Bliss is Nirvana; the impure is all compounded [samskrta] dharmas, the Pure is the true Dharma that the Buddha and Bodhisattvas have” (29). Of course, such an exposition is rather unusual for the disciples of the Buddha who were previously trained by the Tathāgata to practice the contemplation on non-self. They express their perplexity and question the Buddha further.³ The answer given by the Tathāgata is rather definitive: “Even though he has said that all phenomena [dharmas] are devoid of the Self, it is not that they are completely/truly devoid of the Self. What is this Self? Any phenomenon [dharma] that is true [satya], real [tattva], eternal [nitya], sovereign/autonomous/self-governing

² See Zimmerman, 83.

³ See MMPNS, 30.

[aisvarya], and whose ground/foundation is unchanging [asraya-aviparinama], is termed 'the Self' [atman]"(32). Such a reply seems to have no room for any other interpretation but the literal one.

The Buddha cautions his disciples not to fall into a one-sided view of seeing only emptiness and suffering in everything, which he compares with taking stones for gems.⁴ He further instructs to “study well the Way, how to act, wherever you go, and “meditate on the Self, the Eternal, Bliss, and the Pure” (30). To illustrate this idea, the Buddha tells the simile of the King and the Skillful Doctor in Chapter 3 called “On Grief”. In very short rendering, this simile talks about the skillfulness of the Doctor who first prohibited to cure all sicknesses with a milk medicine, because such was the practice of an unskilled doctor before him. However, later on when the King himself got ill, the Doctor prescribed him the milk medicine, since he saw that it can help the King. In the same way the Buddha first wanted to subdue the unskillful methods of the teachers before him by saying “there is no self, no man, no being, no life, no nurturing, no knowing, none that does, and none that receives” (MMPNS 32). A very significant sentence uttered by the Buddha right after that explains why he teaches the doctrine of non-self: “This is to adjust beings and because he is aware of the occasion.” Therefore, the idea of non-self is used by the Buddha as skillful means to adjust to the level of understanding of his disciples. It is explained in Chapter 12: “Engaging in the notion that there is no Self with regard to the mundane self, they do not understand the skilful words of implicational purport of the Tathāgata ... They have the notion that there is no Self and are unable to know the True Self” (Page 3-4). In the Chapter 10 “On The Four Truths”, the Buddha further warns his disciples of the wrong view of applying the characteristics of impermanent Samsara to the eternal domain of Tathāgata: “Any person who says that the Three Treasures are non-eternal and holds this view of life, then this is a false way of practice and is not the noble truth of the Way” (98). Such a person “annuls what is right and won’t allow it to live. On account of this, that person does not know “Dharmata” [essence of Reality]. Not knowing this, he

4 See MMPNS, 30.

repeats birth and death and suffers greatly” (97). The Tibetan version of Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra contains even a greater caution in the same chapter: “By having cultivated non-Self with reference to the tathāgata-dhātu and having continually cultivated Emptiness, suffering will not be eradicated, but one will become like a moth in the flame of a lamp”.⁵

Based on the above, we can see that, as claimed by the Mahāyāna tradition, the final teaching of the Buddha before entering into Parinirvāṇa, has a very radical position on the Self. Although the Buddha did not deny the traditional characterization of all dharmas belonging to the world of Samsara as impermanent, suffering, selfless and impure, such characteristics must not be applied to the domain of Nirvāṇa. According to Williams, “This sūtra is quite categoric in asserting that the error here lies in looking in the wrong direction – in other words that finally there is an equal error in seeing impermanence where there is permanence, suffering where there is happiness, not-Self where there is Self, and impurity where there is purity, in failing to see the positive element in Buddhahood which contrasts with the negative realm of unenlightenment” (109). Nakamura states that the origins of such a position “can be traced to ancient times... a precursor of the concept of Buddhahood can be noticed even in *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra*” (213). The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras in general talk about the Buddha-Nature as existing in all living beings, but in the case of earlier Sūtras, prior to Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, it was used more in a sense of describing the inherent potential in all beings to become a Buddha.⁶

Although the purport of the teaching on the Self in Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra is the subject of an ongoing debate among the scholars⁷, it undoubtedly explains the concept of True Self. Williams writes that “the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra teaches a really existing, permanent element ... in sentient beings. It is this element which enables sentient beings to become Buddhas”. In whichever way we can understand

5 Quoted from Page, 4.

6 See Zimmerman, 2-13.

7 See Page, 4-5.

the notion of True Self, it is absolutely clear that Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra represents the positive aspect of the reality of Nirvāṇa and Tathāgata which is frequently forgotten or overlooked in the field of Buddhist studies and practice.

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