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# Nonorigination and *Nirvāṇa* in the Early *Tathāgatagarbha* Literature

# by William Grosnick

One of the most interesting notions found in the early tathagatagarbha literature is the idea that nirvana should be understood as nonorigination (anutpāda). This idea is explicitly formulated in two texts, the Ratnagotravibhāga, the only sāstra extant in Sanskrit which is completely devoted to the tathagatagarbha and Buddha-nature teachings, and the Iñanalokalankarasūtra, the sūtra upon which the Ratnagotravibhāga bases its exposition of nonorigination. The Iñānālokālankārasūtra itself does not speak of the tathāgatagarbha or Buddha-nature doctrines, but the Ratnagotravibhaga takes the Inanalokalankarasutra explanation of nonorigination and links it to the view of nirvana found in two of the important early sūtras that do speak of the tathāgatagarbha, the Anunatvāpurnatvanirdesa and the Śrimālādevisūtra. This interpretation of nirvana in terms of nonorigination is of considerable importance in understanding the early tathagatagarbha teaching, for it clarifies certain notions frequently associated with the tathagatagarbha like the "natural purity of mind" (cittaprakrtivisuddhi)—notions which have been hotly debated ever since the doctrine's inception. It may also tell us something about the conceptual issues which divided the schools of early Buddhism and so hold clues for understanding the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In order to see how the tathāgatagarbha theorists could understand nirvāṇa as nonorigination it is necessary first to examine some of their ideas about nirvāṇa. It is of course well known that the earliest Mahāyāna literature placed great emphasis on the figure of the Buddha, and urged beings to strive for buddhahood rather than personal liberation. At first glance this would seem to give the impression that buddhahood and nirvāṇa were thought of as separate and distinct goals, the understanding being that one should strive for

buddhahood in order to help other beings attain nirvāṇa. Buddhahood would be the higher goal because it represents selfless activity on behalf of others rather than selfish striving for personal release. This indeed is how some Mahāyāna Buddhists apparently understood the relationship between buddhahood and nirvāṇa, for the authors of the so-called "triyāṇa" texts like the Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra and the Mahāyānasūtrālankāra reasoned that certain beings (the tathāgatayānagotraka) had the superior faculties necessary for buddhahood while others (the śrāvakayānagotraka and the pratyekabuddhayānagotraka), had only the faculties necessary for attaining nirvāṇa. 1

But "ekayāna" texts like the Ratnagotravibhāga and the tathāgata-garbha sūtras upon which it relies do not make this conceptual distinction between buddhahood and nirvāna. Buddhahood is not simply a superior state of wisdom and compassion from which one helps others attain liberation—it is also itself a state of liberation. Thus the Ratnagotravibhāga maintains that from the highest point of view "buddhahood and nirvāna are one and the same"; and the Śrīmālādevīsūtra, in a passage quoted in the Ratnagotravibhāga, says

The *srāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles all enter the great vehicle. The great vehicle is the Buddha vehicle. Therefore the three vehicles are the one vehicle. One who attains the one vehicle attains supreme, perfect enlightenment. Supreme enlightenment is the realm of *nirvāna* (*nirvānadhātu*). And the realm of *nirvāna* is the Dharma-body of the Tathāgata.<sup>3</sup>

Thus buddhahood was not simply understood as the attainment of those various powers and kinds of wisdom by which one might aid others to find liberation in *nirvāṇa*—it was itself a form of liberation. Indeed, it was the only form of liberation that there was.

What above all made possible this identification of buddhahood and nirvāṇa was the rejection of the notion that nirvāṇa represented extinction. This idea was probably implicit in the doctrine of the eternality of the Tathāgata so vigorously expounded in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka and the first half of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra. But the sūtras of the tathāgatagarbha tradition do not just speak of nonextinction for the Tathāgata, they also make clear that it is wrong to think of any sentient being attaining extinction. In the Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeša, the title of which means the "sūtra which expounds neither increase nor decrease," the Buddha responds to the question of whether there is any increase or decrease in the number of beings

transmigrating through the triple world first by rejecting the questions as ill-conceived, and then by explicitly attacking both the idea that nirvāna represents a kind of severance, destruction, or non-being (the view of "decrease"), and the idea that it represents a reality over and above the phenomenal life that arises suddenly without cause (the view of "increase"). The text goes on to say that these two erroneous views of nirvāna would not arise if beings understood the one dharmadhātu. The Śrīmālādevīsūtra follows a similar line of thought in its discussion of the third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering (duḥkhanirodhasatya). In a widely quoted passage the sūtra says:

By the truth of the cessation of suffering, O World-honored One, is not meant the destruction of a single *dharma*. By the expression "cessation of suffering" is meant the Dharma-body of the Tathāgata, which is beginningless, unproduced, unborn, of no destruction, free from destruction, eternal, pure by nature, free from the covering of *klešas*, and inseparable from the *buddhadharmas*, which are more numerous than the sands of the Ganges River.<sup>6</sup>

The Ratnagotravibhāga comments on this passage by saying that this is how the truth of the cessation of suffering should be understood; it should never be explained that the truth gets its name because of the extinction of something.<sup>7</sup>

What this seems to mean is that the authors of the Ratnagotravibhaga and other tathagatagarbha texts rejected the idea that nirvana was a state of extinction reached when one destroyed one's ignorance and passions and exhausted one's rebirths. It is possible that their arguments were directed at the notions of nirvana "with a remainder" (sopādhisesanirvāna) and nirvāna "without a remainder" (anuphādhisesanirvana) found in texts like the Itivuttaka,8 for both of these notions emphasized extinction. Nirvāṇa with a remainder (also called klesanirvana), represented the extinction of asravas ("outflows") like sensual desire, desire for existence, and ignorance and the extinguishing of klesas like greed, hatred, and pride. It represented the attainment of an arhat who had not yet departed this life. Nirvana without a remainder represented the extinction realized by the arhat at death, when the five skandhas (the "remainder") are dispersed. Both of these articulations of nirvana suggest that there is a point in time when certain dharmas, be they klesas or skandhas, are completely extinguished, and this appears to be precisely the kind of extinction which

the tathāgatagarbha texts were arguing against. Moreover, the idea that nirvāṇa is attained or entered at a particular point in time is also something argued against in the texts. The Jñānālokālankārasūtra says that:

It is impossible to see the Tathāgata enter nirvāna, though sentient beings give rise to such a notion and say that the Tathāgata has attained ultimate nirvāna... The Tathāgata's true, all-pervading knowledge is unborn, undying, unoriginated, and undestroyed.... From beginningless time he realizes eternal mahāparinirvāna.

The view of nirvāṇa brought forward in the early tathāgatagarbha texts as an alternative to the idea of extinction was the rather remarkable notion of nonorigination. The authors of the Ratnagotravibhāga and Jāānālokālankārasūtra (and perhaps the other tathāgatagarbha sūtras), seemed to believe that true attainment is to be found not in the extinguishing of ignorance and passion, but in their nonorigination. This rather ingenious notion is clearly brought forward in the Jāānālokālankārasūtra where it is said that:

Where there is neither origination nor extinction, mind, intellect, and consciousness do not take place. When mind, intellect, and consciousness do not take place, there is no false discrimination by which incorrect thought would arise. One who arouses correct thought never originates ignorance. Nonorigination means the non-arising of the twelve parts of existence.<sup>10</sup>

The idea seems to be that correct practice consists of not generating those mental activities by which illusory realities are conceived. Correct thought seems to be thought which does not originate those notions of "me" and "mine" that in turn give rise to desire, craving, hatred, and the other passions that plague human existence. Correct thought is the nonorigination of any false and foolish conceptions of reality (prapañca). And the Jñānālokālankārasūtra clearly associates this nonorigination with nirvāna, the liberation from samsāra:

One who has been able to reach the truth does not give rise to vain imaginings (prapañca). One who does not give rise to vain imaginings does not act in accordance with falsely posited realities. One who neither imagines nor acts in such ways does not dwell in samsāra.<sup>11</sup>

In the analysis provided by the Ratnagotravibhaga, human bondage (vibandha) is "the origination of desire, hatred, and ignorance" which is preceded by superficial thought (ayonisomanasikāra). Superficial thought is thought which conceives of and grasps after illusory realities because of its attachment to what are really only the conceptual characteristics (nimitta) of things. When one understands that this thought is extinct by nature one ceases to originate duality and discrimination and the suffering associated with them. Therefore the text says, "there is absolutely no origination of suffering."12 The text seems to be saying that human suffering is the illusory product of mental activity. When one understands this one's proper response is not to try to destroy suffering, but simply not to originate it. Those practitioners whom the Ratnagotravibhaga characterizes as sravakas do not understand this and therefore seek to destroy suffering. This is probably why the text claims that the obstacle of bravakas is the notion of suffering (duhkha-samjñā) and the fear of suffering (duhkha-bhīrutva). 13 Suffering is not a dharma one should extinguish, but an illusion one should not produce. In the words of the Iñanalokalankarasūtra,

If the bodhisattva does not originate mind he does not effect the extinction of dharmas or the origination of dharmas... He sees that dharmas are extinct from the outset and that they are not extinguished.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, rather than understanding the noble truth of the extinction of suffering as a state of nonbeing or extinction, it would appear that the early tathagatagarbha thinkers regarded it as a kind of practice -namely the practice of nondiscriminative wisdom (avikalpa-mana). Nondiscriminative wisdom is not a practice aimed at deliverance (virāga), but a practice that is already deliverance, 15 for ignorance and its attendant passions and sufferings are simply not originated. It is also a practice that does not involve the application of correctives (pratipaksa) for specific ills (as, for example, in the case of a man prone to hatred who might consciously cultivate benevolent thoughts toward his enemies). The mind of one who practices correct thought (i.e., nonorigination), is "pure by nature," and as the Inanalokalankarasutra puts it, "because mind is pure by nature in one who practices correct thought, there is no need for pratipaksa."16 This rejection of pratipaksa would suggest that the understanding of practice found in the Ratnagotravibhaga and Iñanalokalankarasutra may have more in common with certain Sino-Japanese views of practice (like the Zen Master Dogen's "enlightenment-based practice")<sup>17</sup> than it does with more traditional Indian Buddhist understandings of practice like the five path system of the *Abhisamayālankāra*.

Since the nonorigination of ignorance is an activity, rather than a state of extinction, it is not surprising that the tathāgatagarbha texts portray it using the dynamic, personified figure of the Buddha's Dharma-body rather than using the traditional term nirvāṇa with its connotation of stasis. It is probably because of this active sense of nonorigination that the Ratnagotravibhāga literally identifies the extinction of suffering with the dharmakāya of the Tathāgata. Indeed, the active nonorigination of ignorance is so central to the tathāgatagarbha theory that some of the texts seem almost to make nonorigination into the defining characteristic of the dharmakāya. The Śrīmālādevīsūtra defines the dharmakāya as beginningless, unproduced, and non-arisen. And the Jāānālokālankārasūtra says that the pure Dharma-body

is unmoving, does not originate mental actions, does not engage in pointless speculation, and does not reason dualistically. It does not discriminate; it is free from discrimination. It does not speculate; it is free from speculation. It does not imagine; it is free from imagination. It is tranquil and quiescent, of neither origination nor destruction.<sup>20</sup>

In another passage of the Jñānālokālankārasūtra that is quoted by the Ratnagotravibhāga, the text says that "he who is said to be of neither origination nor destruction is called the Tathāgata."<sup>21</sup>

The understanding of nirvāṇa and the dharmakāya in terms of nonorigination has several important implications for understanding the tathāgatagarbha theory. One of the most obvious of these implications concerns the proper interpretation of the notion of the "natural purity of mind" (cittaprakṛtivisuddhi) or the "natural luminescence of mind" (cittasya prakṛtiprabhāsvaratā). 22 Some scholars of Buddhism, most notably Obermiller, 23 seem to have felt that these notions imply a sort of Brahmanical monism—that underlying the constant flux of mind-produced illusions there is a sort of pure mental substratum that remains eternally the same. This interpretation would have it that the natural purity of this mental substratum serves as an ultimate refuge from the uncertainties and sufferings of transitory human existence.

It is clear, however, from the idea of the nonorigination of

ignorance that there is no need to go so far as to posit a mental substratum in order to understand the theory of the natural purity of mind. The natural purity of mind can be thought of simply as the awareness of one who does not originate thoughts of "me" and "mine" and other illusory realities. Nothing special is being said about any kind of mystical penetration into an absolute or universal mental nature. The natural luminosity of mind is only the natural purity of one who does not generate foolish thoughts. It is completely unthinkable, unlocalizable, and indescribable,<sup>24</sup> and thus fully compatible with the *prajūapāramitā* teaching of emptiness.

A second important implication of nonorigination involves the sister concept of the tathagatagarbha, the Buddha-nature (buddhadhātu). An important problem confronting scholars of the Mahāparinirvanasūtra was how to reconcile the various assertions made in the sūtra that the Buddha-nature is both a cause and a result; the idea of nonorigination may show how this is possible. For example, in the "Kāsyapa" Chapter of the Mahāparinirvānasūtra, the Buddha says that before enlightenment the Buddha-nature is a cause but that after enlightenment it is a result.25 Later in the same chapter the Buddha says that when he speaks following his own volition (i.e., not adapting his thought to the capacities of listeners), he explains that the result lies in the cause and the cause in the result.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the sūtra itself does not do much to clarify these rather confusing statements; but if one were to identify the Buddha-nature with the active nonorigination of ignorance, this apparent contradiction between cause and result might be resolved. As noted earlier, the practice of not originating ignorance is not simply the means to liberation (cause), it is also liberation itself (result). By not originating false notions of reality, beings actualize their innate purity. All beings are said to possess the Buddha-nature because they possess the capacity to practice nonorigination—this is the Buddha-nature as cause. When they practice it becomes result.27

It is also interesting to note that the identification of liberation with nonorigination that is found in the tathgatagarbha literature may hold some clues for understanding the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, or at least for understanding the philosophical questions which divided them from their so-called "Hīnayāna" opponents. For it is clear from the tathāgatagarbha literature that the early Mahāyāna thinkers had some strong views regarding the nature of nirvāna. The Śrīmālādevīsūtra, as we have noted, is most adamant in asserting that

the truth of the cessation of suffering (duḥkanirodhasatya) should not be thought of as extinction. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that one of the philosophical issues that led Mahāyāna Buddhism to distinguish itself from other Buddhist schools of thought was the proper understanding of nirvāṇa. How far back can one trace the notion that nirvāṇa should be thought of as nonorigination rather than extinction?

If one examines what the historical Buddha is purported to have said about nirvana, it is clear that there was plenty of room for disagreement right from the start. Certainly there are plenty of references to extinction in the Buddha's utterances-allusions to the extinguishing of a lamp or flame, to the extinction of desire, hatred, and illusion, and even to the "stopping of becoming." 28 There are also, however, some important qualifications of the idea that nirvana is extinction, perhaps foremost among them being the refusal of the Buddha to answer questions like whether or not the Tathagata exists after death<sup>29</sup> or whether or not a monk who has destroyed the asravas exists after the dissolution of the body. 30 It is certainly clear from this that he did not lay down as dogma the notions of nirvana with and without a remainder. Moreover, because of the Buddhist rejection of the reality of the self, or ātman, it is apparent that there is nothing that ever really needs to be extinguished in the first place. In an early discourse attributed to Sariputra it is concluded that "a Tathagata cannot be held to be perceived as existing even in this life in truth and reality."31 Assertions like these suggest that extinction is in a very real sense already attained, and it is only the illusion of self that could present a problem. The question might well then have become, should one extinguish such illusions or simply not originate them? And finally there is that curious quote from the *Udāna*, which almost seems to suggest that nirvana should be understood as existing:

There is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded; if there were not, there would not be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded, there is therefore an escape from the born, the become, the made, and the compounded.<sup>32</sup>

It would be stretching things to suggest that this quote expresses the view of nonorigination that is found in the Jñānālokālankārasūtra, but it is nevertheless clear that even in those statements attributable to the

Buddha, nonbirth and nonorigination were important notions. Debate over extinction or nonorigination could have begun even during the lifetime of the Buddha.

As a sidelight it is worth noting that the idea of nonorigination might have also figured in the dispute over the backsliding of an arhat that apparently divided some of the splinter schools. Schools like the Theravadins and the Vibhājyavadins, which rejected the idea that an arhat can fall back from his attainment, almost always based their arguments on the idea of extinction. The Theravadins, for example, asserted that an arhat cannot backslide because he has destroyed the roots of klesas. And the Vibhājyavadins compared the arhat's destruction of klesas to a fire reducing a tree to ashes—nothing remains of the original that could grow back.

On the other hand, it would seem that if one thought of practice not as the extinction of klesas, but as the nonorigination of klesas, practice would be endless, and would never bring one to any sort of final state. Backsliding would either always remain a possibility, or else it would remain a possibility as long as one had the mistaken idea that at some point in time one's klesas would be extinct (then, conceivably one might erroneously relax his vigilance). This might have been the reasoning of the Sarvāstivādins, for there is some evidence that they felt that the possibility of backsliding was tied to one's understanding of nonorigination. According to Vasumitra, one of the theses of the Sarvastivadins was the rather surprising contention that streamwinners (srotāpanna) cannot backslide but arhats can-a contention that is strange because it seems to reverse the traditional order and place streamwinners above arhats. The very next Sarvāstivādin tenet listed by Vasumitra asserts that all arhats do not obtain the wisdom of nonorigination (anutpādajñāna),35 and though no connection is made between these theses in Vasumitra's enumeration, one might conjecture that the second was originally put forward as an explanation for the first. That is, the reason that some arhats slide back is that they have not obtained the wisdom of nonorigination.

All this is highly speculative, and there is no indication that the Vātsiputriyas or Sammitayas followed similar reasoning when they argued for the backsliding of arhats. But it does show that the issue of nonorigination was central to some of the doctrinal disputes among the splinter schools. Mahāyāna Buddhism might well have developed from doctrinal disputes like these.

#### **NOTES**

- 1. D. Seyfort Ruegg, La Théorie du Tathāgatagarbha et du Gotra (Paris: Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1969), pp. 73-74, 78.
- 2. Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō. XXXI, 835c and Jikidō Takasaki, A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Rome: Serie Orientale Roma, 1966), p. 261.
  - 3. T. XII, 220c. RGV quote: T. XXXI, 821a, b and Takasaki, p. 144.
  - 4. T. XVI, 466a, b.
  - 5. T. XVI, 466c.
  - 6. T. XII, 221c. RGV quote: T. XXXI, 824a and Takasaki, pp. 167-68.
  - 7. T. XXXI, 824a and Takasaki, p. 167.
- 8. Edward Conze et al., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 96-97.
  - 9. T. XII, 241c.
  - 10. T. XII, 247c. RGV quote: T. XXXI, 824a and Takasaki, p. 167.
  - 11. T. XII, 244b.
  - 12. T. XXXI, 824a, b and Takasaki, pp. 167-69.
  - 13. T. XXXI, 829a and Takasaki, p. 205.
  - 14. T. XII, 247b.
- 15. The RGV explains that deliverance has the common feature of both nirodhasatya and mārgasatya. T. XXXI, 823c and Takasaki, p. 164.
  - 16. T. XII, 244c.
- 17. Cf. Shōbōgenzō "Muchūsetsumu," ed. Fumio Masutani (Tokyo: Kadogawashoten, 1975), IV, 162.
  - 18. T. XXXI, 824a and Takasaki, p. 168.
  - 19. T. XII, 221c.
  - 20. T. XII, 240c.
  - 21. T. XII, 242b. RGV quote: T. XXXI, 823a and Takasaki, p. 159.
- 22. Cf. T. XXXI, 824c-825a and 833a, b and Takasaki, pp. 172-74 and 238-40.
- 23. Cf. Y. Y. Obermiller, The Sublime Science of the Great Vehicle to Salvation, Being a Manual of Buddhist Monism (Copenhagen: Acta Orientalia IX, 1931) (Reprint: Shanghai, 1940).
- 24. Cf. the following quote from the JAA: "The Tathāgata's Dharma-body is markless and free from any discernible aspect. It is without location and cannot be localized." T. XII, 241c.
  - 25. T. XII, 571b.
  - 26. T. XII, 580c.
- 27. This may be why the *Nirvāṇasūtra* devotes so much space to discussing the *icchantika*, a being whose current practices represent the antithesis of correct Buddhist practice.
  - 28. Conze et al., pp. 92-93.
- 29. Majjhima-Nikāya, I, 157. Quoted in E. J. Thomas, The History of Buddhist Thought (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1951), p. 124.
  - 30. Samyutta-Nikaya, III, 109. Thomas, p. 125.
  - 31. Samy., III, 109. Thomas, p. 126.
  - 32. *Udāna*, VIII, 1-3. Conze, et al., p. 95.

- 33. André Bareau, Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule (Saigon: Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1955), p. 212.
  - 34. Bareau, p. 174.
  - 35. Bareau, p. 140.