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The Problem of the *Icchantika* in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra**

by Ming-Wood Liu

I. The Buddha-Nature Doctrine and the Problem of the *Icchantika*

In the Chinese Buddhist Canon, there are two corpuses of texts which go by the name of the *Mahāpārīnirvāṇa-sūtra* (henceforth, *MNS*). The first corresponds in main to the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* in the *Dīgha-nikāya* of the Pāli Canon. Being essentially Hīnayāna in outlook, it has received little attention in China. The second, which exhibits all the features of a Mahāyāna text, generated immediate enthusiasm on its first introduction into China in the early fifth century, and has exerted enormous influence on the development of Chinese Buddhist thought. Especially worth mentioning in this connection is its teaching of Buddha-nature. It is well-known that the idea of Buddha-nature, one of the central concepts in Chinese Buddhism, was first made popular in the country by the Mahāyāna version of the *MNS*, which remains the principal source of reference as well as the final authority in all subsequent discussions on the subject. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to assert that without a proper understanding of the Buddha-nature doctrine as appears in this Mahāyāna version of the *MNS*, it would be impossible to grasp the significance of the subsequent evolution of the concept in the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

It is the orthodox belief that the *MNS* teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. Since in the *MNS* "Buddha-nature" refers to "the nature of the Buddha" and "to possess" the Buddha-nature in the case of sentient beings usually indicates "to have in the future,"¹ this belief amounts to the conviction that the *MNS* maintains that all sentient beings will achieve Buddhahood someday. This conviction is well attested

by the text of the *MNS*. Thus, we find it clearly expressed in the *MNS* that “all three vehicles will eventually share the same Buddha-nature”:

Good sons! The same is true of the śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas, [all of whom will attain] the same Buddha-nature, in the like manner as [cows of different colours produce] milk [looking the same]. Why is it so? For all of them will [sooner or later] put an end to defilements. However, there are various sentient beings who maintain that Buddhas, bodhisattvas, śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are different [with respect to their final destiny]. [Thus,] there are various śrāvakas and common people who doubt [the teaching] that the three vehicles are not different. These sentient beings will finally come to understand that all three vehicles [will eventually share] the same Buddha-nature. . . .²

Those who refuse to accept the tenet that all sentient beings without exception will possess the Buddha-nature are criticized by the *MNS* as wanting in faith.³ In the sūtra, this idea of the universal presence of the Buddha-nature is presented as one of the distinctive themes of Mahāyāna writings⁴ as well as among the principal claims to excellence of the *MNS* itself.⁵ It is so highly esteemed that it is described as representing the “essential meaning” (*tsu-i*^a) of the Buddha’s teaching;⁶ and, together with the doctrine of the eternal nature of the Tathāgata, it is said to be definitive (*chüeh-ting*^b) and not open to future amendments.⁷

If this thesis of the eventual enlightenment of all sentient beings does indeed constitute the central theme of the *MNS*, it is strongly qualified by the presence in the sūtra of the concept of the *icchāntika*. The term “*icchāntika*” is derived from the Sanskrit root *ic* meaning “to desire,” “to wish” and “to long for.” This explains the variant Chinese renderings of the term “*icchāntika*” as “a being of many desires” (*to-yü*^c), “a being cherishing desires” (*lo-yü*^d) and “a being full of greed” (*ta-t’an*^e).⁸ But in the *MNS*, the failings attributed to the *icchāntikas* far exceed those which are usually associated with people of such descriptions. In the sūtra, the *icchāntika* is described as “devoid of good roots”⁹ and as “the most wicked being.”¹⁰ He is depicted as “having no capacity for the [true] Dharma”¹¹ such that he can

never be rehabilitated by the instruction of the Buddha and so will never attain supreme enlightenment. Taken at its face value, this picture of a being condemned forever to spiritual darkness appears to contradict the proposition of the *MNS* that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature and so are destined for Buddhahood, and commentators of the *MNS* have been hard pressed to find a viable way out of this apparent dilemma.

The present article, which is the second of a two-part study on the problem of Buddha-nature in the *MNS*,¹² is an attempt to unravel the various strands of thought present in the *MNS* regarding the character and fate of the *icchantikas*. It is hoped that our discussion, brief and sketchy as it is, will be of help in throwing light on this highly intricate question.

II. *The Character of An Icchantika*

The portrayal of *icchantikas* in the *MNS* amounts to no less than a catalogue of all the major vices in Buddhism. Of the many iniquities the *MNS* attributes to the *icchantikas*, those falling under the following three categories receive on the whole the most attention:

i. Deficiency in faith and harbouring incorrect views:

The *MNS* often describes the *icchantikas* as “without faith:”

Good sons! In Jambudvīpa, there are two types of sentient beings: first, those who have faith, and secondly, those who are without faith. Those who have faith can be cured. Why? Because they will definitely attain nirvāṇa [which is] free of sores and goitres (i.e., suffering) . . . Those who are without faith are called *icchantikas*, and *icchantikas* are known as the incurable ones.¹³

On the general level, by “without faith,” the *MNS* means the repudiation of human efforts and the denial of religious ideals. Thus, the *MNS* gives the name *icchantika* to all men, women, ascetics and brahmins who maintain that there is no road to salvation, no enlightenment and no nirvāṇa; and denounces them as followers of Māra and slanderers of the Dharma and the Buddha.¹⁴

The *MNS* also frequently charges the *icchantikas* with re-

jecting causal law and the karmic theory—understandably, since negating the link between cause and effect tends to weaken our sense of moral responsibility and puts in doubt the effectiveness of human actions in charting the course of the future.¹⁵

On the more specific level, by “without faith,” the *MNS* means the refutation of the lessons of Buddhism, especially the lessons of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Thus it is said that since the *icchantikās* have no eyes for the good and the evil, they disparage the broad and universal teachings of the Mahāyāna.¹⁶ Defaming Mahāyāna sūtras, together with committing the four grievous trespasses and the five deadly sins, is by far the most underscored characteristic of the *icchantikās* in the *MNS*.¹⁷ Furthermore, since among the numerous tenets of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the *MNS* regards the universal presence of the Buddha-nature and the eternal nature of the Tathāgata as the most central, it is natural that ignorance of these two truths is singled out as a prime feature of the *icchantikās*:

The Buddha teaches sentient beings [that all of them] possess the Buddha-nature. [But] those *icchantikās*, transmigrating in [the realm of] saṃsāra, cannot comprehend [this truth]. Thus, we say that they are blind to the work of the Tathāgata. Again, the *icchantikās*, seeing that that Tathāgata attains the supreme nirvāṇa, take him to be really impermanent [in nature], in the same manner as when [the flame of] a lamp goes out, its oil also is exhausted at the same time. Why [do they maintain such a perverted view]? It is because their evil karma never wears out.¹⁸

It is also asserted in the *MNS* that those who believe that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature should never be called *icchantikās*.¹⁹

ii. *Immoral conduct and breaking monastic precepts:*

In the *MNS*, *icchantikās* are repeatedly said to be guilty of the four grievous trespasses of sexual immorality, stealing, killing and false speaking, and the five deadly sins of patricide, matricide, murdering an arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, and instigating schism in the saṅgha:

The *icchantikās* commit the four grievous trespasses, and are guilty of the five deadly sins. Such people also can not be described as tranquil in body and mind.²⁰

Besides these abominable transgressions, the *MNS* also includes in the list of infirmities of the *icchantikas* the failings of being miserly, gluttonous and unfilial:

This person (the *icchantika*) originally worshipped the three jewels and various devas, but has changed since then, and now worships his own desires [instead]. He loved to give alms in the past but has now become miserly. He was by nature moderate in his diet, but has now turned gluttonous. He had an ingrained aversion for evils, but now looks on them with sympathy. He was born filial and esteemed his parents, but now he has no thought of respect for his father and mother.²¹

The specification of the *icchantika* here as someone who "originally worshipped the three jewels and various devas" is significant, for it suggests that the *icchantika* was once a faithful follower of the Buddhist way, but has since then turned his back on the Truth. This idea is also implied in what is perhaps the most exhaustive enumeration of the *icchantika*'s vices in the *MNS*:

Good sons! For six reasons, the *icchantika* and his kind are bound to the three evil ways and cannot be set free.²² What are these six?

- i. Because they are intense in their evil thoughts.
- ii. Because they do not believe in after-life.
- iii. Because they enjoy practising defiled [deeds].
- iv. Because they are far removed from good roots.
- v. Because they are obstructed by evil karma.
- vi. Because they seek the company of bad friends.

Again, for five [kinds of mis-]conduct, they are bound to the three evil ways. What are these five?

- i. Because they misbehave in relation to monks.
- ii. Because they misbehave in relation to nuns.
- iii. Because they misappropriate the properties of the saṅgha.
- iv. Because they misbehave in relation to womankind.
- v. Because they instigate disputes among the five groups in the saṅgha.²³

Again, for five [kinds of mis-]conduct, they are bound to the three evil ways. What are these five?

- i. Because they often declare that there are neither good nor bad fruits.
- ii. Because they kill sentient beings in whom the thought of enlightenment has arisen.

- iii. Because they like to talk about the shortcomings of their teachers.
- iv. Because they call the true untrue, and the untrue true.
- v. Because they listen to and receive the Dharma only to find fault with it.

Again, for three [kinds of mis-]conducts, they are bound to the three evil ways:

- i. They maintain that the Tathāgata is impermanent and is annihilated forever [at death].
- ii. They maintain that the true Dharma is impermanent and mutable.
- iii. They maintain that the saṅgha, [the third of the three] jewels, can be destroyed.

As a consequence, they are forever bound to the three evil ways.²⁴

While “to enjoy practising defiled deeds,” “to seek the company of bad friends,” etc., are misdeeds quite common among the average run of mankind, “to misbehave in relation to monks,” “to misbehave in relation to nuns,” “to misappropriate the properties of the saṅgha” and “to instigate disputes among the five groups in the saṅgha” are misdeeds pertaining largely to members of the monastic community. Thus, it appears that the *icchantikas* are not just ordinary sinners who happen to violate the ways of thinking and rules of conduct of the Buddhist religion. Rather, they are renegade Buddhists, who purposely disclaim all the principles to which they have formerly sworn allegiance; and the extreme severity of the assaults against the *icchantikas* in the *MNS* testifies indirectly to the intense internal conflict and spiritual crisis the Buddhist saṅgha was confronting at that time.²⁵

iii. Pride and absence of the sense of shame:

For all the aforementioned iniquities, the *icchantikas* should be liable to subsequent rehabilitation, if not for another feature of theirs which the *MNS* often calls to our attention, i.e., their insurmountable pride, which quashes all feelings of guilt and so blocks every avenue to penitence. Thus, it is declared in the *MNS* that the *icchantikas*, “due to their arrogance and pride, do not have any fear despite the many evils they have done; and for this reason, will not attain nirvāṇa.”²⁶ Pride puts out any sense of shame:

Who are the sinners [who cover up their misdeeds]? They are the *icchantikas*. The *icchantikas* are those who do not believe in [the law of] cause and effect, and are *deprived of the sense of shame*. They are sceptical of [the function of] karma and do not recognize [any connection between] the present and the future. They stay away from virtuous friends, and do not follow the instruction of the Buddhas. Such people are known as the *icchantikas*.²⁷

That the *icchantikas*' terrible fate has more to do with their stubborn sense of self-sufficiency than with any concrete act of transgression is vividly demonstrated in the following passage, which appends to each pronouncement of the *icchantikas*' misdeed the qualification of their never entertaining any thought of repentance or shame for them:

Cunda! Suppose there are monks, nuns, male householders and female householders who speak evil and slander the true Dharma, and never repent or feel ashamed despite such serious misdeeds. [It should be understood] that such people are known as "heading for the path of the *icchantikas*." [Cunda!] Suppose there are people who are guilty of the four grievous trespasses and the five deadly sins. Even though they know that they will definitely commit such serious crimes, they do not have any thought of fear and shame beforehand, and refuse to confess [afterwards]. [Furthermore,] they never have the intention to preserve and to establish the true Dharma, but rather defame and despise it; and err repeatedly in their words. [It should be understood] that such people are also known as "heading for the path of the *icchantikas*."²⁸

III. *Can An Icchantika Attain Buddhahood?*

While the depiction of the character of the *icchantikas* remains reasonably consistent throughout the *MNS*, speculation on their future destiny is not. Hitherto, we have spoken as if the *MNS* is committed to the view that the way of enlightenment is forever closed to the *icchantikas*. However, more careful reading of the *sūtra* shows that its standpoint on the subject is far from being so clear-cut. Indeed, different parts of the *sūtra* seem to contain diverse opinions on the subject, which strongly suggests that the *MNS* is not the product of a single author, but

comprises several strata of material coming from various hands. In the rest of this article, we shall try to sort out these different layers of material, as well as expound their positions regarding the fate of the *icchantikas*.

i. The View of the First Part (Chapters 1–5)

The *MNS*, as it has come down to us in the Chinese translation of Dharmakṣema (385–433), consists of thirteen chapters. It has long been suspected that the first five chapters of this translation are actually an independent work, for not only do they possess most of the features of a separate sūtra,²⁹ but there also were passed down to us two other translations of this part, one in Chinese by the famous pilgrim Fa-hsien^f (completed in 418) and the other in Tibetan by Jinamitra, Jñānagarbha and Devacandra. This conjecture appears all the more plausible when we consider the question of whether the door of enlightenment is open to the *icchantikas*, for the reply suggested by this part of the *MNS* contrasts sharply with that of the rest of the book, and it is a definite no. Thus, the *icchantika* is described in these chapters as one who “never works for the good dharmas.”³⁰ He is further said to be so devoid of the roots of virtue that not a single thought of goodness will ever arise in him:

What is an *icchantika*? An *icchantika* is one whose roots of goodness have been completely eradicated. His original mind is so devoid of any desire for good dharmas that not a single thought of goodness will ever arise in him.³¹

If the *MNS* often declares the Buddha-nature to be the property of all sentient beings, the *icchantikas* are clearly meant to be the exceptions, for the following citation openly announces that the *icchantikas* are devoid of the Buddha-nature and so can never realize Buddhahood:

Again, [suppose] there is a monk who preaches the most profound scriptures which are the secret treasury of the Buddha[, and asserts]: “All sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. Due to this nature, they can cut off innumerable billions of bonds of defilements, and attain the most perfect enlightenment. The only exceptions are the *icchantikas*.”

Suppose a king and his ministers, [on hearing the words of the monk], say as follows: “Monk! Will you become the Buddha or not? Do you have the Buddha-nature?”

The monk replies, “I definitely have the Buddha-nature in my body at present. As to whether I shall realize it or not, it is not for me to judge.”

[Then] the king says, “Most virtuous one! [I guess] *if you do not become an icchantika, you will for certain realize [Buddha-hood].*”

The monk answers, “Your Majesty has spoken correctly.”

[It should be understood that] even though that person (the monk) holds that he definitely has the Buddha-nature, he is not guilty of the unpardonable sin [of exaggerating his spiritual attainment].³²

Given the above descriptions of the *icchantikas*, it is hardly surprising that this part of the *MNS* would conclude by excluding them from the realm of the most perfect enlightenment forever:

Again, I (the Buddha) manifest in Jambudvīpa as an *icchantika*, and all people [seeing me] consider me to be an *icchantika*. But I am actually not an *icchantika*. [For] how can an *icchantika* ever attain the most perfect enlightenment?³³

In stressing the resistance of the *icchantikas* to all kinds of beneficial influences, especially the beneficial influences of the *MNS*, this first part uses a large number of similes. So the *icchantikas* are compared to the deaf, whom the sound of Dharma can never penetrate:

Again, good sons! Just as the deaf are oblivious to all sounds, the same is true of the *icchantikas*, who cannot hear even if they want to hearken to this wonderful scripture (the *MNS*).³⁴

A parallel is drawn between the *icchantika* and diamond imperious to exterior permeation:

Again, good sons! Just as heavy rain never stays in midair, the same is true of this wonderful scripture which is the *MNS*, which lets fall on all places its rain of Dharma, which, however, does not abide in the case of the *icchantikās*. [For] the *icchantikās* are compact through and through like a diamond, and cannot withhold anything from outside.³⁵

Perhaps the most often used simile in the *MNS* with respect to the *icchantika* is the scorched seed which can never send forth sprout:

Again, good sons! It is just as scorched seeds will never send forth sprouts even if nourished by timely rain for hundreds and thousands of kalpas. If [we see] sprouts coming out, it can never be from such sources. The same is true of the *icchantikās*. Even if they hearken to the wonderful scripture which is the *MNS*, there will never arise in them the slightest sign of the thought of enlightenment. If [the thought of enlightenment] arises, it can never be in such beings. Why? For these people have completely cut off their good roots; and, like scorched seeds, they will never send forth the sprout of enlightenment.³⁶

Another favorite simile for the *icchantikās* in the *MNS* is the fatally sick, to whom no medicine, however efficacious, is of any avail:

Again, good sons! It is just as there is a medical herb known as the King of Medicine, which is the most excellent among drugs. . . . Good sons! The same is true of this wonderful scripture which is the *MNS*, which can put an end to the bad karma of all sentient beings, [including that resulting from] the four deadly sins, the five grievous trespasses and all evils inner or outer. With [the *MNS*] as cause, people who have never entertained the thought of enlightenment will develop the thought of enlightenment. Why? Because this wonderful scripture is the king of sūtras, just as that medical herb is the king of drugs. No matter whether one is striving for the supreme nirvāṇa or not, if, on hearing the name of this sūtra, one reveres and has faith in it, all his defilements and serious ailments will come to an end. However, [this sūtra] cannot establish [on the way of] the most perfect enlightenment the *icchantikās*; in the same way as that wonderful medicine can cure all sorts of serious diseases, but cannot heal those who are bound to die.³⁷

The epithet "bound to die" is applied to the *icchantikas* again and again in the *MNS*. Thus, a few paragraphs later, we come across the following remarks:

Again, good sons! It is just as there is a skilful doctor well versed in the eight branches of medical [art], and can cure all diseases except the fatal ones. . . . Good sons! Again there is a skilful doctor whose [skill even] surpasses the eight branches of [medical] art, and can relieve the pains of sentient beings, except that he cannot cure diseases which are fatal. The same is true of the Mahāyāna scripture which is the *MNS*. It can wipe away all the defilements of sentient beings and establish them in the pure and wonderful cause of the Tathāgata, and it can [also] make the thought of enlightenment arise in people who have never entertained the thought of enlightenment. The only exceptions are the *icchantikas*, beings who are bound to die.³⁸

All in all, the account of the *icchantika* in the first five chapters of the *MNS* amounts to one of the most authoritative statements of eternal damnation in Buddhism.³⁹

ii. The View of the Second Part (Chapters 6–9)

Chapters 6-9 of the *MNS* are somewhat an enigma. They are evidently meant to be a continuation of the first part, for the first part concludes with Śākyamuni proclaiming himself to be sick, while this second part opens with the Bodhisattva Kāśyapa chiding Śākyamuni for assuming the appearance of being ill, thus misleading sentient beings into believing that the Tathāgata is transient in nature. Furthermore, these chapters continue some of the main themes of the first part, the most obvious of which is the thesis of the eternal, blissful, personal and pure nature of nirvāṇa. However, so far as structure is concerned, this part shows most of the features of a separate work. For example, it begins with a short prelude consisting of an appeal to teach from the assembly and a display of supernatural power by the Buddha, as is typical of Mahāyāna sūtras. Its main body is devoted to the exposition of the five categories of deeds obligatory on all bodhisattvas (i.e., saintly deeds, pure deeds, deva-deeds, baby [-like] deeds and ailment deeds), and is complete in itself.⁴⁰ It also ends in a typically Mahāyāna fashion, with a prediction of the future fulfilment of the pre-

ceding instructions by the Buddha and a promise to practise by the Bodhisattva Kāśyapa. That this section of the *MNS* is compiled independently seems all the more plausible when we consider the biography of Dharmakṣema in the *Kao-seng chuan*⁸, where it is mentioned that the *MNS* as translated by Dharmakṣema was imported into China in three parts at three different times, thus confirming our suspicion that the *MNS* as found today is actually a conglomeration of material coming from various hands.¹¹ All considered, it seems most likely that this portion of the *MNS* was written by someone who had intimate knowledge of the "first part," and wished to clarify some of its main ideas and modify some of its less acceptable features. One of the most significant modifications introduced by this part is concerned with the problem of the *icchāntika*.

These chapters continue to attack the *icchāntika* in uncompromising terms reminiscent of the early chapters. For example, the *icchāntika* is labelled as one "with the most inferior roots," for whom the Buddha would never turn the Wheel of the Law.¹² He is described as bound to suffering, so much so that even the compassion of the bodhisattvas is of no avail to him.¹³ If the miraculous power of the Buddha can make the blind see, the deaf hear and the faithless faithful, it can exercise no change whatever in the *icchāntika*.¹⁴ In this section, the *icchāntika* is compared to a corpse, which no doctor can restore to life.¹⁵ It is even affirmed that no sinful karma will be procured if one kills an *icchāntika*:

Just as no sinful karma [will be engendered] when one digs the ground, mows grass, fells trees, cuts corpses into pieces and scolds and whips them, the same is true when one kills an *icchāntika*, for which deed [also] no sinful karma [will arise].¹⁶

If the second part shares the view of the first part on the present condition of utter degradation of the *icchāntikas*, it is not so with regard to the question of their eventual enlightenment. As we have seen, the reply of the first part of the *MNS* to this question is purely negative. In the second part, however, sentences and passages begin to emerge which suggest a more optimistic view. Thus, we find the following statements in connection with the great compassion of the bodhisattvas:

Good sons! The most wicked ones are known as *icchantikas*. When bodhisattvas [who have reached] the first [of the ten] abodes practise the great compassion,⁴⁷ they do not harbour any thought of discrimination, [even] with respect to the *icchantikas*. Since they do not perceive the faults of the *icchantikas*, they are not beset by anger. For this reason, they are called [beings of] great compassion. Good sons! Bodhisattvas are known as [beings of] great compassion because they strive to remove the non-beneficial [elements] in sentient beings.⁴⁸

If the above quotation only intimates indirectly that *icchantikas* are susceptible to good influences, by speaking of bodhisattvas "striving to remove the non-beneficial elements in sentient beings" (thus including the *icchantikas*), the following passage on the fatherly affection of the bodhisattvas puts the matter far more explicitly:

Good sons! Just as when a well-beloved son is going to die, his parents would be [greatly] saddened, and would willingly risk their life [to save his], the same is true of the bodhisattvas, who, on seeing that the *icchantikas* are heading for hell, would resolve to be born in hell with them. Why? [Because they reflect,] "When these *icchantikas* are being tortured [in hell], there may arise in them a moment of thought of repentance. [If we are with them,] we will presently preach various dharmas to them, so that there may arise in them a moment of good roots."⁴⁹

The idea that the thought of repentance may nevertheless arise in the *icchantikas* notwithstanding all their serious faults finds clear expression in the following discussion of the two types of *icchantikas*, i.e., those who have good roots at present, and those who will have good roots in the future, a discussion which flatly contradicts previous assertions that the *icchantikas* have cut off all their good roots and will forever remain in *saṃsāra*:

icchantikas can be classified into two types: first, those who have good roots at present, and secondly, those who will have good roots in the future. The Tathāgata preaches the Dharma to those *icchantikas* whom he knows perfectly well to possess good roots at present. He likewise also preaches the Dharma to those [*icchantikas*] who will possess good

roots in the future. For even though [what is said at present] is of no benefit to them [for the time being], it can serve as the cause [of the arising of good roots in them] some later day. With this in mind, the Tathāgata preaches the essence of the Dharma for the sake of the *icchantikas*. Again, there are two types of *icchantikas*, those with superior roots, and those with average roots. While those with superior roots shall obtain good roots in their present life, those with medium roots will obtain good roots in their future lives.⁵⁰

While the parable of the man stuck in a cesspool is used by the authors of the *āgamas* to stress the extreme degree of spiritual degradation of Devadatta, the arch-fiend in early Buddhism,⁵¹ it is borrowed by the compiler of this part of the *MNS* for the very different purpose of illustrating the potential for future reform of the *icchantikas*:

The Buddhas, the world-honoured ones, never preach the Dharma without definite purpose. . . . It is as if a clean man has fallen into a cesspool; and his virtuous friends, seeing him [in such state], would have pity on him, and would immediately come forward, catch his hair and pull him out. The same is true of the Buddhas, the Tathāgatas. Seeing that sentient beings have fallen into the three evil ways,⁵² they employ various means to rescue them and liberate them [from their predicament]. Thus, the Tathāgata preaches the Dharma for the sake of the *icchantikas*.⁵³

iii. *The View of the Third Part (Chapters 10–13)*

If our conjecture on the process of formation of the first two parts of the *MNS* is correct, chapters 10–13 were the last portion of the sūtra to appear, and they were compiled as a continuation of the preceding sections. One clear indication is the treatment of the *icchantikas*. This section is so emphatic on the capacity for future enlightenment of the *icchantikas*, and differs in this respect so markedly from the harsh condemnation of the *icchantikas* in the first part and the ambivalent treatment of the *icchantikas* in the second part, that it seems quite unlikely that the three can be of the same origin. Thus, this part speaks in unmistakable terms of the possession of the Buddha-nature by the *icchantikas*:

Good sons! All sentient beings will definitely attain the most perfect enlightenment. With this in mind, I proclaim in [various] sūtras that all sentient beings, down to the transgressors of the five deadly sins and the four grievous trespasses and the *icchantikas*, possess the Buddha-nature.⁵⁴

It lists this idea of the possession of the Buddha-nature by the *icchantikas* among the items which a true follower of the Buddhist religion should have faith in:

What is perfect faith? [It comprises] believing whole-heartedly that the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha are eternal, that the Buddhas of the ten directions are the skilful manifestations [of the one immutable Tathāgata], and that all sentient beings, including the *icchantikas*, possess the Buddha-nature . . .⁵⁵

It further places this idea among the central tenets of the *MNS*, the rejection of which will result in submersion in the stream of birth and death:

By people submerged [in the stream of birth and death], we refer to those who hear the *MNS* teaching that:

- [1.] The Tathāgata is immortal and immutable.
- [2.] [The Tathāgata] is eternal, blissful, personal and pure, and will never enter the final nirvāṇa.
- [3.] All sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature.
- [4.] [Even] the *icchantikas*, who slander the broad and universal [teaching of Mahāyāna] sūtras and commit the five deadly sins and the four grievous trespasses, will definitely attain the way of enlightenment.
- [5.] [Even] Hīnayāna sages, [including] the stream-winners, the once-returners, the non-returners, the arhats and the pratyekabuddhas, will definitely realize the most perfect enlightenment.⁵⁶

On hearing these words, they do not believe, but promptly entertain [perverted] thoughts. Having entertained such thoughts, they speak as follows: "This text on the nirvāṇa [of the Tathāgata] is the writing of non-Buddhists. It is not a Buddhist sūtra!"

[From] that time [on], these people stay away from virtuous friends and do not listen to true Dharmas. Even if they happen to listen, they do not deliberate on them. Even

if they deliberate on them, they do not deliberate correctly. Since they do not deliberate correctly, they will abide [long in the realm of] evil dharmas.⁵⁷

In plain departure from the first part, which assigns the *icchantikas* to everlasting doom, the last part affirms that the way to nirvāṇa will be open to the *icchantikas* once they give up their “original evil mind”:

Good sons! Nirvāṇa can also be described as “definite,” and it can also be described as the “fruit.” Why do we describe nirvāṇa as “definite”? We describe it as “definite” because the nirvāṇa of all Buddhas [have the definite characteristics of] being eternal, blissful, personal and pure. We describe it as “definite” because it [definitely] does not have [the features of] birth, old age and disintegration. We describe it as “definite” because *it will definitely be attained by icchantikas*—who transgress the four grievous trespasses, slander the broad and universal [teaching of Mahāyāna sūtras] and commit the five deadly sins—once they give up their original [evil] mind.⁵⁸

The same theme reappears a little later, in a discussion on the superior knowledge of the bodhisattvas who follow the teaching of the *MNS*, in which it is stated that “the *icchantikas* will definitely attain the most perfect enlightenment”:

What do [the bodhisattvas] know? They know that there is no self and no qualities pertaining to the self. They know that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. [They know that] *owing to the Buddha-nature [which they possess], the icchantikas will definitely attain the most perfect enlightenment once they give up their original [evil] mind.* These are the truths which the śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas can never comprehend, but can be comprehended by the bodhisattvas.⁵⁹

If the above exposition demonstrates that this third part is basically at variance with the first two parts of the *MNS* on the question of the eventual deliverance of the *icchantikas*, the three parts are nevertheless meant to be read as a single text; and so the main task facing the author of this final part is not to refute the contentions of the preceding parts, but, rather, to find a way to bridge the latter’s antagonistic attitude towards the *ic-*

chantikas and its own more sympathetic stand, so that its view can be considered as a development of rather than a criticism of the opinions of the rest. Thus, in deference to the previous sections, this part continues to refer to the *icchantikas* as “beings devoid of good roots”:

The *icchantikas* are called [beings] devoid of good roots. Since they are devoid of good roots, they submerge in the river of birth and death and cannot get out. Why is it so? It is because their evil karma is heavy. It is because they are without the power of faith.⁶⁰

It still depicts the *icchantikas* as stubborn in their evil ways,⁶¹ as so deeply sunk in the stream of defilements that not even the Tathāgata can rescue them.⁶² It even asserts that it is better to kill an *icchantika* than to kill an ant:

[The Bodhisattva Kāśyapa asked,] “World-honoured one! Why are *icchantikas* without good dharmas?”

[The Buddha replied,] “Good son! It is because the *icchantikas* have cut off their good roots. It is because sentient beings all have the five roots [of virtue] such as faith, but the *icchantikas* have destroyed them forever.⁶³ For these reasons, [it is maintained that] one commits the sin of murder on killing an ant, but one commits no sin of murder on killing an *icchantika*.⁶⁴

While conceding that all these stringent censures against the *icchantikas* are true, these final chapters set about to show that these facts can by no means exclude the *icchantikas* from the rank of the Buddhas-to-be.

But how can beings totally devoid of good roots attain Buddhahood? To resolve the problem, the author of the third part resorts primarily to two tactics:

i. By presenting the extreme degradation of the icchantikas as a temporary condition, which can be removed with proper religious practice:

Thus, it is argued that when the Buddha describes the *icchantikas* as “incurable,” he has in view their immediate fate of being bound for hell, not their everlasting damnation:

Good sons! It is just as [when] a person sinks in a cesspool until only the tip of a single hair remains visible, even though there is still the tip of one hair left undrowned, it cannot be compared with the whole body [in size], the same is true of the *icchantikās*. Even though *they will come to have good roots in the future*, [their faculty of virtue is so weak at present that] it can not deliver them from the tortures of hell [to which they are destined]. Even though *they will be redeemed in the future*, nothing can be done about them now. Thus, we describe them as “incurable ones.”⁶⁵

The same is true when the Buddha compares the *icchantikās* to “barren fields,” “broken utensils” and “the fatally sick.” These parallels are drawn by the Buddha with the view that the *icchantikās* are “without virtuous friends” and “cannot be of any benefit to others” *for the time being*, but the Tathāgata will continue to plant the seed of virtue in them with their eventual deliverance in mind.⁶⁶ So, strictly speaking, no sentient being is endowed with fixed nature either good or bad, and the *icchantikās*, if given the right opportunities, will recover some day the good roots which they have once lost:

Thus, it should be understood that sentient beings are not definite in nature. Since sentient beings are not definite [in nature], it may happen that those who have cut off their good roots will recover them again [some day]. If sentient beings are definite in nature, it will never occur that [good roots], once cut off, can be revived once more. Also, [if sentient beings are definite in nature, the Buddha] would not maintain that *icchantikās having fallen into hell will live there for one kalpa only*.⁶⁷

Thus, by restricting the relevance of the accusations against the *icchantikās* to the present, the author of these last chapters finds it possible to give assent to most of the harsh judgements against the *icchantikās* contained in the first two parts, while at the same time affirming that the *icchantikās* will sooner or later fulfil the Buddha-nature and reach the final enlightenment:

The *icchantikās* are without any element of goodness, whereas the Buddha-nature is [the supreme] good. [Nevertheless,] since [“to have” may be taken to mean] “to have in the future,” [we can maintain that] the *icchantikās* [, who

are without any element of goodness at present,] all possess the Buddha-nature. Why? Because the *icchantikas* will definitely [all] attain the most perfect enlightenment [in the future].⁶⁸

ii. *By appealing to the non-dual character of the Buddha-nature, which transcends all essential distinctions:*

In its characterization of the Buddha-nature, the *MNS* repeatedly equates it with the middle way and the supreme form of emptiness, with the intention of demonstrating that it is above all thoughts of distinctions.⁶⁹ On the ground that the Buddha-nature transcends all basic differences, the *sūtra* claims that it cannot be cut off:

Since the Buddha-nature is neither past, present, nor future, it cannot be cut off.⁷⁰

It only makes sense to speak of “cutting off” something if the thing severed is tangible and possesses definite characteristics. Since the excellence of the Buddha-nature rests precisely on its being non-tangible and non-dual, the phrase “cutting off” cannot be applied to it:

You ask how [one can say that] the *icchantikas* have cut off their good roots, if the Buddha-nature [can]not be cut off. Good son! There are two types of good roots, first, the internal, and secondly, the external. Since the Buddha-nature is neither internal nor external, it [can]not be cut off. Again, there are two types of good roots, first, the defiled, and secondly, the non-defiled. Since the Buddha-nature is neither defiled nor non-defiled, it [can]not be cut off. Again, there are two types [of good roots], first, permanent, and secondly, impermanent. Since the Buddha-nature is neither permanent nor impermanent, it [can]not be cut off.⁷¹

Thus, even though the *icchantikas* are deprived of good roots, they are not separated from the Buddha-nature, and can still realize Buddhahood some day. On the same basis that the Buddha-nature is above all discriminations, the *sūtra* further asserts that it does not exclude from its providence any sentient being, including the *icchantikas*:

Good sons! Just as the seven groups of sentient beings dwelling in the Ganges do not live apart from water, even though they assume [different] names such as fish and turtle, the same is true of [the seven groups of sentient beings] from the *icchāntikas* up to the Buddhas [existing] under [the providence of] the wonderful *mahānirvāna*, all of whom also do not live apart from the water [of deliverance which is the] Buddha-nature, even though they take on diverse names.⁷² Good sons! These seven groups of sentient beings are the Buddha-nature, whether they practise the good Dharma, the bad Dharma, the way of expedience, the way of deliverance, the way of gradual fulfilment, [deeds pertaining to the stage of] cause, or [deeds pertaining to the stage of] fruit.⁷³

This parallel between the *icchāntikas* and the sentient beings living in the Ganges seems to imply that despite all their imperfections, the *icchāntikas* are never debarred from the life-giving power of the Tathāgata.

The above two maneuvers of the author of the third part to reconcile his belief in the eventual enlightenment of all sentient beings with the earlier parts' idea of the eternal damnation of the *icchāntikas* are not beyond criticism. For example, against (i), we may ask if one can without contradiction conceive the degradation of the *icchāntikas* as temporary, if one accepts the initial definition of the *icchāntika* as someone who "never works for the good" and who "never harbours the thought of enlightenment." Against (ii), we may object that even if it is granted that it is not meaningful to speak of "cutting off" and "not having" the Buddha-nature when the Buddha-nature is not an entity with determinate features, this argument remains valid only on the level of expression; for the mere fact that there is no word in our vocabulary which can truthfully express the everlasting failure of the *icchāntikas* to assume the nature of the Buddha would not make their failure less a failure. Furthermore, while it is true that viewed from the perspective of the Buddha, nothing, not even the *icchāntikas*, falls outside his non-discriminating essence, this fact alone would not guarantee that all sentient beings are capable of *actively* assuming the nature of the Tathāgata, just as the fact that a father cherishes all his children equally does not by itself entail that all his children will respond to his love. But if the posed solutions outlined above

are theoretically dubious, they nevertheless confer a surface unity to the three portions of the *MNS*. As a consequence, for centuries, the sūtra was regarded in China as a unified work, and the idea of the possession of the Buddha-nature by all sentient beings was commonly accepted by Chinese Buddhists as among the cardinal theses of the *MNS*.

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NOTES

1. Refer to the analyses of the concepts "Buddha-nature" and "having Buddha-nature" in my article "The Doctrine of the Buddha-nature in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5.2 (1982), pp. 63–94.
2. Takakusu Junjirō^m & Watanabe Kaikyoku,ⁿ eds., *Taishō shinshū daizō-kyō*^o (henceforth abbreviated to *T*), vol. 12, p. 422c,1.28–p. 423a,1.3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 575b,11.25–26.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 405a–b.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 487b–c.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 573c, 11.19–20 & p. 574b,11.28–29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 522c,11.23–24.
8. See Mizutani Kōshō, *op.cit.*, pp. 66–69 and Ogawa Ichizō^p *Busshō shisō*^q (Kyoto: 1982), pp. 123–131.
9. *T*, vol.12, p. 554b,1.18.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 454a,11.5–6.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 419b,1.16.
12. See n.1 above.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 391c,11.22–26.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 466b,11.12–15.
15. See *ibid.*, p. 562a,11.10–12, p. 562c,11.18–19 & p. 569c–570a.
16. *Ibid.*, P. 419a,11.5–6.
17. For example, see *ibid.*, p. 487c,11.23–24, p. 505a,11.21–22, p. 546b,11.17–18 & p. 559b,11.9–10.



18. *Ibid.*, p. 418c,11.23–27.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 519c,11.12–13.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 527a,11.4–5.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 482a,11.15–19.
 22. The three evil ways are rebirths as animals, hungry ghosts and beings in hell.
 23. The five groups in the saṅgha are monks, nuns, nun-candidates (*śikṣamāṇā*), male-novices and female-novices.
 24. *T*, vol. 12, p. 554b,1.20–c,1.5.
 25. Consult Mizutani Kōshō, “Bukkyō ni okeru kiki iyaku no ichi kōsatsu,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 8.2 (1960), pp. 606–609.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 418c,11.17–18.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 477c,11.26–29.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 425b,11.3–9.
 29. Such as concluding with an injunction to preach the sūtra.
 30. *T*, vol.12, p. 420a,11.25–26.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 393b,11.14–16.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 404c,11.4–11.
 33. *Ibid.*, p. 389b,11.15–17.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 420b,11.11–13.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 418b,11.21–24.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 418a,11.4–9. Also see p. 418b,11.18–21 & p. 425c,1.22 – p. 426a,1.1
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 418a,1.18–b, 1.4.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 419b,11.17–25.
 39. In Dharmakṣema’s translation of this first part, on which our present discussion is based, there are several passages which appear to back away from this extreme idea of everlasting damnation. Thus, the *icchāntikas* are mentioned on several occasions as among the objects of compassion of the bodhisattvas and Buddhas:
 - (i) When bodhisattvas divert their good karma [for the accomplishment of] the most perfect enlightenment [in all sentient beings], they will also bestow this gift on the *icchāntikas*, even though [the latter repeatedly] attack, destroy and vow disbelief of [the Buddhist Dharma]. [Why?] Because they want to realize the supreme Truth with them. (*Ibid.*, p. 418c,11.27–29)
 - (ii) [Since] the Tathāgata looks on all [beings] as if they are [his only son] Rāhula,
How can he renounce compassion and enter nirvāṇa forever?
Only after the *icchāntikas* have attained the Buddhist way in their present bodies
And are established in the supreme bliss would [the Tathāgata] enter nirvāṇa. (*Ibid.*, p. 424b,11.21–24)
- Since it is generally agreed that Buddhas and bodhisattvas are bound for nirvāṇa, their vows not to realize this state until all *icchāntikas* are saved seem to imply that the latter are not lost forever. One paragraph even attributes the Buddha-nature to the *icchāntikas*, only with the qualification that in their case,

"it is so bound up with innumerable impurities and sins" that the effect of its presence can hardly be felt:

- (iii) Even though *the icchantikas have the Buddha-nature*, it is so bound up with innumerable evil defilements that it can not manifest itself, like a silkworm shut up in a cocoon. Due to [their evil] karma, there will never arise [in them] the wonderful principle of enlightenment, and they will transmigrate perpetually [in the realm of] *saṃsāra*, (*Ibid.*, p. 419b,11.5-7)

The clearest expression of the redeemability of the *icchantikas* in this part of the *MNS* is found in the following description of the future of the *icchantikas* as "indefinite":

- (iv) With the term "indefinite", [we try to demonstrate that] it is not the case that the *icchantikas* will remain forever unchanged and those guilty of the [five] grievous trespasses will never fulfil the way of the Buddha. Why? For at the time these people gain pure faith in the true Dharma of the Buddha, they will forfeit [their condition of] being *icchantikas*. If they further [accept the three jewels] and become male householders, they will again forfeit [their condition of] being *icchantikas*. When people guilty of the [five] grievous trespasses put away their sins, they will attain Buddhahood. Thus, it is not the case that [the *icchantikas*] will remain forever unchanged and [those guilty of the five grievous trespasses] will never fulfil the way of the Buddha. (*Ibid.*, p. 393b,11.5-10)

However, if we turn to Fa-hsien's translation of the text, we discover that of the four excerpts listed above, only (ii) remains in essentially the same form, and in place of (i), (iii) and (iv), we find passages conveying almost exactly the opposite message. Thus, instead of (i), which talks of bodhisattvas bestowing the gift of Dharma upon the *icchantikas*, we find denunciation of the *icchantikas* as "vulgar, ignorant worldlings," as "forever cut off from the causes and merits of enlightenment":

The *icchantikas* are forever cut off from the causes and merits of enlightenment, and are known as vulgar, ignorant worldlings. Those who maintain that such vehicle [as the *icchantikas*] is capable of [attaining] the final awakening and becoming the Buddha should also be called vulgar and ignorant. (*Ibid.*, p. 892c,11.3-5)

If (iii) does not deny the Buddha-nature to the *icchantikas*, its counterpart in Fa-hsien's version declares the *icchantikas* to be "forever excluded from the nature of the Tathāgata":

The icchantikas are forever excluded from the nature of the Tathāgata because they slander [Mahāyāna scriptures] and create extremely evil karma. Just as silk worms entangled in their own threads can find no way to escape, the same is true of the *icchantikas*, who can never discover the nature of the Tathāgata and engender the causes of enlightenment; and will remain forever so until the end of time. (*Ibid.*, p. 893a,11.8-11)

The most conspicuous divergence rests with (iv), in lieu of which we find one of the most stringent accusations against the *icchantikas* in the *MNS*:

It is just like the *icchantikas*, who are indolent, lazy, and rest [on their

backs] like corpses all day; and yet claim that they will attain Buddhahood. It will never happen that they will attain Buddhahood. Even if a male householder having faith in the [Buddhist] Dharma wants to seek liberation and reach the other shore, it would never happen [that his wish will be fulfilled,] not to speak of [the *icchantikas*, who] rest [on their backs] like corpses [all day]. Why is it so? Because it is not in their nature to reach the other [shore]. As a consequence, they can never work towards liberation. (*Ibid.*, p. 873c.11.11–15)

Given the fact that the first part of the *MNS* most probably once existed as an independent work, these disparities strongly suggest that passages (i), (iii) and (iv) were not components of the original body of the text, but were inserted later when more material was added to this “first part” to form the huge corpus of the *MNS* we have today, presumably in order to bring it more in line with the way of thinking regarding the *icchantikas* in the newly compiled sections, as we shall see below.

40. In fact, only the first, second and fourth categories are dealt with in detail in the text proper. Furthermore, the part on the pure deeds includes a long discourse between King Ajātaśatru and the Buddha, which is hardly related to what precedes and what comes after, and is most probably a late insertion.

41. *T*, vol.50, p. 336a–b.

42. *T*, vol.12, p. 447c,11.22–23.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 457a,11.24–25.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 430b,11.15–18.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 478a,11.1–2.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 460b,11.17–19.

47. The “ten abodes” are ten stations on the path of enlightenment of the bodhisattvas. Refer to Leon Hurvitz, *Chih-i* (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1962), pp. 363–364.

48. *T*, vol.12, p. 454a,11.5–9.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 459a,11.9–13.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 482b,11.6–12.

51. For example, see *Ekottarāgama*, *T*, vol.2, p. 567a,11.20–28.

52. See n.22 above.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 482b,11.12–16.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 534c,11.13–15.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 549a,11.11–13.

56. “Stream-winner,” “once-returned” and “non-returned” are three stages on the path to arhatship.

57. *T*, vol.12, p. 574c,1.24–p.575a,1.5.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 505a,11.19–23.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 505c,11.13–17.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 554b,11.18–20.

61. See *ibid.*, p. 550b.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 501c,11.19–20.

63. The five roots of virtue are faith, zeal, mindfulness, meditation and wisdom.

64. *T*, vol.12, p. 562b,11.3–7.
 65. *Ibid.*, p. 562b,11.13–18.
 66. See *ibid.*, p. 560c.
 67. *Ibid.*, p. 562c,11.24–27.
 68. *Ibid.*, p. 524c,11.2–5.
 69. For example, see *ibid.*, p. 523b.
 70. *Ibid.*, p. 562b,11.18–19.
 71. *Ibid.*, p. 493c,1.26–494a,1.3.
 72. The seven groups of sentient beings in the Ganges include various kinds of fishes and turtles, which are compared in the *MNS* to sentient beings of different levels of spiritual attainment, from the *icchantika* up to the Buddha. See *ibid.*, p. 574c–579b.
 73. *Ibid.*, p. 579b,11.14–19.

Chinese Terms

- a. 白意
 b. 決定
 c. 多欲
 d. 樂欲
 e. 大貪
 f. 法顯
 g. 高僧傳
 h. 常盤大定
 i. 佛性の研究
 j. 水谷幸正
 k. 一闍提考
 l. 佛教大學研究紀要
 m. 高楠順次郎
 n. 渡邊海旭
 o. 大正新脩大藏經
 p. 小川一乘
 q. 佛性思想
 r. 佛教における危機意識の一考察
 s. 印度學佛教學研究