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The Doctrine of the Buddha-Nature in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-Sūtra*

by *Ming-Wood Liu*

I. Introduction

In the Buddhist Canon, there are two main corpuses of texts which go by the name *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (henceforth abbreviated to *MNS*) and have as their main concern the recounting of the events and dialogues of the last days of the Buddha. The first, presumably of earlier origin, is a comprehensive compendium of Hīnayāna ideas and precepts. It exists today in its Pāli, Sanskrit and Chinese versions, and for its attention to factual details has been resorted to as the principal source of reference in most standard studies of the Buddha's life. As for the second, only its Chinese and Tibetan translations are still extant.¹ While it also relates some of the well-known episodes of the final months of the Buddha Śākyamuni, notably his illness and the last meal offered by Cunda, such narrations are treated in the work merely as convenient spring-boards for the expression of such standard Mahāyāna ideas as the eternal nature of Buddhahood and expedience as method of instruction. Both in style and content, this corpus exhibits the disregard of historical particulars and the fascination with the supernatural and the ideal which characterize Mahāyāna writings in general. As a Mahāyāna sūtra, it is of rather late date, for it mentions such influential "middle Mahāyāna" works as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* and the *Śūramgamasamādhī-nirdeśa* in its text, and so could not have been compiled before the second century A.D.² It is this Mahāyāna version of the *MNS* which we are going to examine in our present study.

At present, there are three extant Chinese translations of

this Mahāyāna version of the *MNS*, the earliest being the one completed by the famous pilgrim Fa-hsien 法顯 and Buddhahadra (359–429) in the southern capital of Chien-k'ang 建康 in 418. The second translation, undertaken almost simultaneously by Dharmakṣema (385–431) in the northern kingdom of Pei Liang 北涼, was finished in 421. Comparison of the two translations shows that Fa-hsien's version corresponds in the main with the first five chapters of Dharmakṣema's version, and since the *MNS* is known to have existed in separate parts, posterity often calls Fa-hsien's translation and the first five chapters in Dharmakṣema's translation the "first portion" (*ch'ien-fen* 前分). The third Chinese version appeared in the South around 436, and as a consequence is often referred to as the "Southern edition," in contradistinction to which Dharmakṣema's version is usually designated as the "Northern edition." Compiled by the monks Hui-yen 慧嚴 (363–443) and Hui-kuan 慧觀 (?–453) and the poet Hsieh Ling-yun 謝靈運 (385–433), this Southern edition is not a new translation, but is a stylistic revision of the Northern edition. Since the Sanskrit original was not consulted in making the changes, the Southern edition, despite its great popularity, is a less reliable source in the study of the *MNS* than the Northern edition. Thus, we shall base our discussion of the *MNS* on Dharmakṣema's version of the text.³

The *MNS* attracted immediate attention on its introduction into China, and it was so widely discussed and commented on in the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (fifth and sixth century) that historians speak of the existence at that time of a Nirvāṇa School, which had as its main concern the exposition and the propagation of the teachings contained in the *MNS*.⁴ Even though study of the *MNS* rapidly declined with the advent of the T'ang Dynasty (7th century), a number of ideas and sayings of the *MNS* had by that time become so deeply ingrained in the minds of Chinese Buddhists that they remained permanent furniture of the Chinese Buddhist world, and continued to exert enormous influence. A good example is the doctrine of the Buddha-nature. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the *MNS* has provided the historical starting-point as well as the chief scriptural basis for enquiry into the problem of the Buddha-nature in China, and it would be difficult if not impossible to grasp the significance of the concept

and its subsequent evolution in Chinese Buddhism without a proper understanding of the teaching of the *MNS* on the subject.⁵

There are three questions which Chinese Buddhists most frequently ask when they approach the problem of the Buddha-nature, and these questions provide a convenient framework for investigating the teaching on Buddha-nature in the *MNS*:

1. What is the Buddha-nature?
2. What does the sūtra mean when it speaks of sentient beings “having” Buddha-nature?
3. Do all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature?

Since answering the last question would require exhaustive inquiry into the position of the *MNS* on the problem of the *icchantika*, i.e., the problem of whether there exist sentient beings who are deprived of the roots of goodness and so will never attain enlightenment, I prefer to postpone discussion of it to another article.⁶ Meanwhile, I take for granted the orthodox view that the *MNS* teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature, and will examine the answers of the *MNS* to the first two questions on that understanding.

II. What is the Buddha-Nature?

1. Buddha-Nature Is One of the Central Themes of the *MNS*:

Speaking of the advantages of having virtuous friends, the author of the *MNS* explains what it means by “really listening to the Dharma”:

Really listening to the Dharma means listening to and accepting [the teaching of] the *MNS*. Since one learns from the *MNS* that [all sentient beings] possess the Buddha-nature and the tathāgata does not enter the final nirvāṇa, one is said to be listening to the Dharma with one mind [when one listens to the *MNS*].⁷

In this passage, the author claims the *MNS* to be the paragon of Buddhist Dharma, and the reason given for the claim is that the sūtra teaches the eternal nature of the tathāgata and the presence of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings. Indeed, the

two theses of “the eternal and immutable nature of the tathāgata” and “the universal presence of the Buddha-nature” are repeatedly mentioned as the most fundamental tenets of the *MNS*. Thus, the *MNS* exhorts its readers to “apprehend perfectly the meaning and flavour” of the *MNS*, which consists in comprehending that “the tathāgata is eternal, immutable and perfectly blissful,” and that “sentient beings all possess the Buddha-nature.”⁸ One of the benefits of following the instructions of the *MNS*, according to its author, is the “hearing of what one formerly has not heard,” among which are the doctrines that “All sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature” and “All Buddhas do not enter the final nirvāṇa and are eternal and immutable.”⁹ Finally, its preaching of the idea of the Buddha-nature is given as the chief mark of excellence of the *MNS*:

Again, good sons! Just as all rivers flow to the sea, all sūtras and all forms of meditation lead ultimately to the *MNS*. Why? Because it expounds in the most excellent manner [the doctrine that all sentient beings] possess the Buddha-nature.¹⁰

Thus, it is abundantly clear that “Buddha-nature” is one of the central themes of the *MNS*.

2. *Buddha-Nature Means “The Nature of the Buddha”*:¹¹

We find the following definition of “Buddha-nature” in the *MNS* after an exposition on the importance of understanding the truth of dependent origination:

Good sons! That is why I teach in various sūtras that if a person perceives the twelve links of the chain of dependent origination, he sees the Dharma. To see the Dharma is to see the Buddha, and [the term] “Buddha” [alludes to] the same [thing] as [the term] “Buddha-nature.” Why? Because all Buddhas have [the Buddha-nature] as their nature.¹²

When it is said that the term “Buddha” alludes to the same thing as the term “Buddha-nature” because all Buddhas become Buddhas in virtue of “Buddha-nature,” “Buddha-nature” is evidently taken to mean what constitutes a Buddha, or the

nature of a Buddha. That the *MNS* often uses the term “Buddha-nature” this way is attested by a number of concepts which are often cited in the *sūtra* as synonymous with “Buddha-nature,” among which are “the realm of the tathāgatas” and “the most perfect enlightenment”:

Good sons! In case there are people who can comprehend and fathom the meanings of the *MNS*, it should be understood that they perceive the Buddha-nature. The Buddha-nature is inconceivable. It is the realm of the Buddhas and tathāgatas, and cannot be known by śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas.¹³

Those who really comprehend the meaning [of Dharma] know that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. By Buddha-nature, we mean the most perfect enlightenment.¹⁴

Since one cannot become a Buddha without attaining “the realm of the tathāgatas” and “the most perfect enlightenment,” both represent the essential conditions of being a Buddha, to which the term “Buddha-nature” refers. Furthermore, since liberation from the realm of saṃsāra and readiness for entrance into nirvāṇa are also characteristic features of Buddhahood, the *MNS* also regards them as part of the significance of the term “Buddha-nature”:

“Buddha-nature” is equivalent to “tathāgata.” “Tathāgata” is equivalent to “all the distinctive characteristics [of the Buddha].” “Distinctive characteristics [of the Buddha]” is equivalent to “liberation.” “Liberation” is equivalent to “nirvāṇa.”¹⁵

Besides such general definitions, the *MNS* also associates the “Buddha-nature” with a number of more specific attributes generally considered to be the marks of a Buddha. For example, it speaks of the six and seven aspects of “Buddha-nature”:

How do bodhisattvas know the Buddha-nature? The Buddha-nature has six aspects. What are these six? [They are:] first, to be eternal, secondly, to be pure, thirdly, to be real, fourthly, to be virtuous, fifthly, to be discerned in the future [by everyone], and sixthly, to be true. It also has seven

aspects: the first is “being attainable [by everyone],” while the remaining six are the same as [the six aspects listed] above. [When bodhisattvas recognize these aspects of the Buddha-nature,] we say that they know the Buddha-nature.¹⁶

Furthermore, the Buddha-nature is equated in the *MNS* with the *ekayāna* (one vehicle), “the state of supreme excellence,” and the *Śūramgama-samādhi*, “the mother of all Buddhas.”¹⁷ In one passage, “Buddha-nature” is regarded as the proper designation of a series of attributes, including “the great compassion and the great pity,” “the great joy and the great abandonment,” “the great faith,” “the stage of [perfect love, in which one treats all beings like one’s] only son,” “the fourth of the ten powers,” etc., all of which are features peculiar to the tathāgata. In a similar manner, the sūtra associates the Buddha-nature with the ten powers,¹⁸ the four forms of fearlessness,¹⁹ and “mindfulness under all three conditions,”²⁰ all being perfections of the Buddha.²¹

Besides relating to us what the Buddha-nature is, the *MNS* also informs us what the Buddha-nature is not, and what it teaches in this respect also serves to indicate that in the *MNS*, the Buddha-nature is often taken to mean the essence of being a Buddha. Thus, we are told that when the tathāgata talks about the Buddha-nature, he takes heed of what it has as well as what it does not have:

As for what [the Buddha-nature] has, [they include] the so-called thirty-two marks and eighty noble characteristics [of the Buddha],²² the ten powers, the four forms of fearlessness, mindfulness under all three conditions, the great compassion, the great pity, the infinite *Śūramgama-samādhi*, the infinite *Vajra-samādhi*, the infinite *Upāya-samādhi*, and the infinite *Pañca-jñānāni-samādhi*. These are known as what [the Buddha-nature] has. As for what [the Buddha-nature] does not have, [they include] the so-called good, bad, and neither good nor bad karmas and their fruits, defilements, the five skandhas and the twelve links in the chain of dependent origination. These are known as what [the Buddha-nature] does not have.²³

In short, what the Buddha-nature has are the distinctive marks

of a Buddha, and what it does not have are the features of the realm of saṃsāra. In connection with the non-saṃsāric character of Buddha-nature, the *MNS* repeatedly notes that the Buddha-nature is not “a kind of conditioned being” (*saṃskṛta dharma*),²⁴ and that “Those who see the Buddha-nature are no longer sentient beings.”²⁵ Negative terms are frequently used in order to emphasize the transcendental nature of the Buddha-nature:

Good sons! The Buddha-nature is matter, non-matter, and neither matter nor non-matter. It is with marks, without marks, and neither with marks nor without marks. It is one, not one, and neither one nor not one. It is neither permanent, nor impermanent, nor neither permanent nor impermanent. It is being, non-being, and neither being nor non-being. It is finite, infinite, and neither finite nor infinite. It is cause, effect, and neither cause nor effect . . .²⁶

In another instance, Buddha-nature is compared to space, which “neither is born nor originates, is neither made nor created, and is not a conditioned being.”²⁷

III. Buddha-Nature and Sentient Beings

In the previous section, we have seen that the *MNS* takes “Buddha-nature” chiefly to mean the nature of the Buddha. However, the *MNS* also frequently applies the term “Buddha-nature” to sentient beings, and speaks of all sentient beings having Buddha-nature. Since sentient beings are by definition beings of the realm of saṃsāra, it is unlikely that the sūtra would maintain that all sentient beings are in actual possession of the essence of Buddhahood. Thus, in the *MNS*, the term “Buddha-nature” must carry a peculiar connotation in relation to sentient beings, and it is the purpose of this section to uncover this special connotation as well as to explore its general significance.

1. With Respect to Sentient Beings, to Have the Buddha-Nature

Means to be Able to Attain the Nature of the Buddha in the Future:

In explaining what it means by sentient beings having the Buddha-nature, the *MNS* distinguishes three different ways of understanding the term “to have,” namely, to have in the past, to have at present, and to have in the future:

Good sons! There are three ways of having: first, to have in the future, secondly, to have at present, and thirdly, to have in the past. All sentient beings *will have in future ages the most perfect enlightenment, i.e., the Buddha-nature*. All sentient beings *have at present* bonds of defilements, and so do not now possess the thirty-two marks and eighty noble characteristics [of the Buddha]. All sentient beings *had in past ages* [deeds leading to] the elimination of defilements, and so can now perceive the Buddha-nature [as their future goal]. For such reasons, I always proclaim that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature . . . Good sons! It is just like a man who has coagulated milk at home. If someone asks him, “Do you have butter?” he will reply, “I have.” Butter strictly speaking is not milk. [Nevertheless,] since using the proper method, one *will definitely obtain* [butter from milk], the man answers that he has butter, [even though all he has is milk]. The same is true of sentient beings, all of whom are endowed with a mind. Since whoever is endowed with a mind *will definitely attain* the most perfect enlightenment, I always proclaim that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature.²⁸

Since the above passage identifies sentient beings’ ways of having Buddha-nature with the third way of having, i.e., having in the future, it is apparent that in preaching the doctrine that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature, the *MNS* is not entertaining the idea that sentient beings are at present endowed with all the features and excellences of the Buddha. Indeed, as given in the above quotation, the doctrine is no more than the Mahāyāna way of presenting an insight which was already present in early Buddhism in the form of the last two of the four noble truths, i.e., there is cessation of suffering and there is a way leading to this cessation, so that all beings with life (“capable of thinking”), provided that they are willing to follow the way, will sooner or later achieve final deliverance. That “to have the Buddha-nature” in the case of sentient beings means

“to have the nature of the Buddha in the future” is a point the *MNS* returns to again and again throughout its exposition. To cite another example:

Good sons! Since the tathāgata is eternal, we describe it as the self. Since the dharmakāya of the tathāgata is boundless and all pervasive, never comes into being nor passes away, and is endowed with the eight powers [arising from the knowledge of the pāramitā of being personal],²⁹ we describe it as the self. Sentient beings are actually not in possession of such a self and its [attending] properties. Nevertheless, since [all of them] *will definitely attain* the most supreme form of emptiness [in the future], we designate them [with the term] “Buddha-nature.”³⁰

The Buddha uses the term “Buddha-nature” to describe sentient beings not because he thinks that all of them have already achieved the characters and powers of the tathāgata, but because with their ability to learn and with his own incessant effort to teach, every one of them eventually “will definitely attain the most supreme form of emptiness,” i.e., the true wisdom of the Buddha.

Another proof that the *MNS* has the hereafter rather than the present in mind when it speaks of all sentient beings having the Buddha-nature is the vehement criticism it levies against those who interpret the doctrine of the presence of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings as the teaching that all sentient beings have already achieved enlightenment, and think that, as a consequence, religious practice is no longer necessary:

Suppose someone declares that he has already attained the most perfect enlightenment. When asked for the reason, [he replies,] “It is because [the tathāgata teaches that all sentient beings] have the Buddha-nature. Since whoever is in possession of the Buddha-nature should have already attained the most perfect enlightenment, [I declare] that I have attained enlightenment now.” It should be understood that such a person is guilty of the *pārājikas*.³¹ Why? It is because even though [the Buddha teaches that all sentient beings] have the Buddha-nature, they have not yet cultivated various beneficial means, and so still have no vision of [the Buddha-nature which they are going to have]. Since they still have no vision [of the Buddha-na-

ture], they have not attained the most perfect enlightenment.³²

The practising of various beneficial means is necessary in order to bring the Buddha-nature into view, because even though the Buddha, with his compassionate heart, profound wisdom and infinite power, is certain that he will sooner or later bring all sentient beings into his realm, and attributes the Buddha-nature to every one of them on that basis, the actual possession of the Buddha-nature in the case of sentient beings is still a matter of the far-away future; and to assure that this glorious future is not postponed forever, initiative on the part of sentient beings themselves is absolutely essential. That is why the sūtra affirms that “Even though all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature, they can perceive it only if they keep the rules of discipline.”³³ The *MNS* abounds in illustrations which tell of the need of exertion on the part of sentient beings despite the universal presence of the Buddha-nature. Typical are the following comparisons:

If you say that sentient beings need not practise the holy paths [because all of them have the Buddha-nature], that is not true. Good sons! It is like a man travelling in the wilderness who approaches a well when thirsty and tired. Even though the well is dark and deep and he cannot catch sight of any water, he knows that there must be water [at the bottom]. And if with various opportune means, he gets hold of a can and a rope and draws the water up, he will see it. The same is true of the Buddha-nature. Even though all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature, they have to practise the non-defiled and holy paths before they can perceive it.

Good sons! When when we have hemp seeds, [we know that] we shall see oil; and yet without [applying] various opportune means [to the hemp seeds], we shall never perceive oil. The same is true of sugar cane [and sugar]. . . . Just as sentient beings cannot see the roots of grass and underground water because they are hidden in the ground, the same is true of the Buddha-nature, which sentient beings cannot perceive because they do not practise the holy paths.³⁴

One may wonder if the *MNS* is misleading its readers when it asserts that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature, al-

though they are not yet in actual possession of it. The reply of the *MNS* is that in everyday conversation, we do frequently employ the term “to have” to indicate “to have in the future,” so that in speaking of sentient beings having the Buddha-nature in the sense of having it in the future, it has not actually departed from the common usage of the term. We have already seen the cases of the coagulated milk and butter, the thirsty traveller and the water in the well, and the hemp seeds and oil, when people speak of “A having B” without B being actually at hand or even in existence. Another example which the *sūtra* cites is the way we use the terms “beings of hell” or “beings of heaven” to call other people. When asked whether there is further need for sentient beings to follow the rules of conduct, when it is understood that the Buddha-nature refers to the realm of the Buddha and it is further understood that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature, the *MNS* explains that just as we sometimes do call a bad person “a being of hell” and a good person “a being of heaven” considering that they will fall into hell and ascend into heaven respectively *in the future*, we may also call sentient beings who have not yet got the thirty-two marks and eighty noble characteristics of the tathāgata “beings with the Buddha-nature,” considering that all of them will attain Buddhahood one day.³⁵ On the other hand, the *MNS* agrees that we may also maintain that sentient beings do not have the Buddha-nature, if we restrict the sense of “to have” to mean “to have at present.” Thus, in connection with sentient beings, we can assert in one breath that the Buddha-nature is both existent and non-existent, i.e., existent with respect to the future, and non-existent with respect to now. This, according to the author of the *MNS*, is an instance of the truth of the middle way:

Thus, [we maintain that with respect to sentient beings,] the Buddha-nature is neither existent nor non-existent, [or] is both existent and non-existent. Why do we say that the Buddha-nature is existent? Because all [sentient beings] *will have it* [in the future]. Since sentient beings will continue [to pass from one life to another] without interruption like the flame of a lamp until they achieve the most perfect enlightenment, we say that [with respect to sentient beings, the Buddha-nature] is existent. Why do we say that the Buddha-nature is non-existent? We say

that [the Buddha-nature with respect to sentient beings] is non-existent, because all sentient beings *do not yet have* [the excellences of] being eternal, blissful, personal and pure, characteristic of all Buddha dharmas. The union of [the two aspects of] existence and nonexistence is the middle-way.³⁶

2. *The Buddha-Nature qua Cause and Effect:*

As the Buddha-nature indicates the realm of the Buddha, it is not an entity of our everyday world of conditioned existence. So, strictly speaking, the category of cause and effect is not applicable to it. Nevertheless, as the Buddha-nature is not yet realized by sentient beings, and sentient beings are beings of the realm of cause and effect, the *MNS* often resorts to the terms “cause” and “effect” in discussing the fulfillment of the Buddha-nature in sentient beings. Thus, it talks of two types of causes of Buddha-nature when the Buddha-nature is considered with respect to sentient beings:

Good sons! With respect to sentient beings, the Buddha-nature also consists of two types of causes: first, direct cause (*cheng-yin* 正因), and secondly, auxiliary cause (*yüan-yin* 緣因). The direct cause [of Buddha-nature] is sentient beings, and the auxiliary cause is the six pāramitās.³⁷

The *MNS* explains what it means by “direct cause” and “auxiliary cause” with an analogy:

Good sons! There are two types of causes: first, direct cause, and secondly, auxiliary cause. Direct cause is like milk which produces cream, and auxiliary cause is like warmth and yeast [which are added to milk to form cream.] Since [cream] is formed from milk, we say that there is the nature of cream in milk.³⁸

Since we can never obtain cream without milk, it is said that milk is the direct cause of cream. However, since milk will never turn to cream without being processed with warmth and yeast, we call warmth and yeast the auxiliary causes of cream. A similar relation exists between sentient beings, the six pāramitās and the Buddha-nature. Since nothing other than sentient beings who are “endowed with a mind”³⁹ can embody the Bud-

dha-nature, we describe sentient beings as the direct cause of the Buddha-nature. Yet, this possibility of all sentient beings' becoming the Buddha will never be realized unless every one of them follows the holy paths, such as the six pāramitās. Thus, we call the six pāramitās the auxiliary causes of the Buddha-nature.

Also significant to the later development of the Buddha-nature doctrine in China is the analysis in the *MNS* of the Buddha-nature into "cause," "cause vis-à-vis cause," "effect" and "effect vis-à-vis effect" in connection with its attainment by sentient beings:

Good sons! the Buddha-nature has [the aspects of] cause, cause vis-à-vis cause, effect, and effect vis-à-vis effect. The cause is the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, the cause vis-à-vis cause is wisdom, the effect is the most perfect enlightenment, and the effect vis-à-vis effect is the supreme nirvāṇa.¹⁰

The reason for naming the twelvefold chain of dependent origination "the cause" and wisdom "the cause vis-à-vis cause" of the Buddha-nature is hinted at in an earlier passage, where it is pointed out that just as we sometimes refer to cucumber as fever on the ground that consuming cucumber is conducive to fever, we may also refer to the twelvefold chain of dependent origination as the Buddha-nature, since the wisdom arising from meditation on the twelvefold chain of dependent origination is "the seed of the most perfect enlightenment."¹¹ Now, both the "twelvefold chain of dependent origination" and the "wisdom" arising from the meditation on it are factors contributing to the realization of the Buddha-nature in sentient beings, and so more exact analysis speaks of them as the *causes of* Buddha-nature rather than generally as "Buddha-nature." Furthermore, since "wisdom" only arises with "the twelvefold chain of dependent origination" as its object, wisdom is a cause (i.e., cause of the Buddha-nature) which itself stands in need of another cause (i.e., the twelvefold chain of dependent origination). That is why the sūtra designates "wisdom" as "the cause vis-à-vis cause" of the Buddha-nature, while alluding to the twelvefold chain of dependent origination simply as "the cause." The same principle can be applied to explain why the

MNS draws a distinction between “the most perfect enlightenment” and “the supreme nirvāṇa” in referring to the former as “the effect” and the latter as “effect vis-à-vis effect.” As has been shown earlier, the *MNS* often identifies “the most perfect enlightenment” and “nirvāṇa” with the Buddha-nature, and when so understood, neither of them can be called “effect,” as the Buddha-nature in itself is not an effect. Nevertheless, when viewed with respect to their fulfilment in sentient beings, both are the fruits resulting from meditating on the twelfth chain of dependent origination, and so both may be regarded as “effect.” Furthermore, since it is common practice to consider “nirvāṇa” as the final consummation of “the most perfect enlightenment,” the former is given the appellation of “effect vis-à-vis effect,” as it is an effect deriving from another effect (i.e., the most perfect enlightenment), whereas the latter is simply presented as “the effect.”

Despite its frequent association of the Buddha-nature with the concepts of “cause” and “effect,” the *MNS* is careful to observe that such analysis is only applicable to “Buddha-nature with respect to sentient beings” (*chung-sheng fo-hsing* 衆生佛性), whereas the Buddha-nature in itself, understood as the essence of the Buddha, is not a mundane object susceptible of such categorization. The following remarks are found right after the afore-quoted exposition of the Buddha-nature as cause, cause vis-à-vis cause, effect and effect vis-à-vis effect:

Good sons! “To be cause and not effect” is like the Buddha-nature [considered with respect to sentient beings]. “To be effect and not cause” is like the supreme nirvāṇa. “To be both cause and effect” is like dharmas arising from the twelfth chain of dependent origination. As for “to be neither cause nor effect,” it is what is known as the Buddha-nature.¹²

The Buddha-nature considered with respect to sentient beings is “cause and not effect,” for the Buddha-nature remains an abstract possibility yet to be realized in the case of sentient beings. The supreme nirvāṇa is “effect and not cause,” for nirvāṇa indicates the complete annihilation of all defilements, when the bases of future rebirths finally come to an end. Dhar-

mas arising from the twelfold chain of dependent origination are “both cause and effect,” for as entities in the realm of saṃsāra, they are conditioned by past events as well as serving as the support for the formation of future events. Finally, the Buddha-nature, considered in itself, is “neither cause nor effect,” for as the ultimate ideal, it is ontologically distinct from the saṃsāric world of interdependent existence, and its perfection is not contingent upon its being fulfilled by sentient beings.

3. *Why All Sentient Beings Will Eventually Possess the Buddha Nature: An Examination of a Number of Similes:*

If the *MNS* teaches that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature because all of them are capable of achieving Buddhahood in the future, and moreover describes them as “the direct cause” of the Buddha-nature on that ground, it appears relevant to inquire on what basis such thoughts are entertained. Thus, we may ask if this belief in the future enlightenment of all sentient beings in the *MNS* is a conclusion drawn from a particular theory of their ontological structure, or if the doctrine is primarily soteriological in intent, taught out of religious rather than out of philosophical considerations.

In demonstrating how sentient beings come to realize the Buddha-nature, the *MNS* often resorts to similes; and so far as these similes are concerned, the sūtra seems to incorporate several diverse answers to the above question. One of the best known of the similes in the *MNS* with respect to the problem of the Buddha-nature is the pearl of the strong man:

Good sons! Just as there was in the royal family a very strong man who had an extremely hard pearl between his eyebrows. When he was wrestling with another strong man [one day], the other strong man struck his brow with his head, and as a consequence, the pearl sank under his skin and vanished. When a boil [began to] develop on the spot, the strong man called for good doctors to cure it. At that time, there was a clever doctor well skilled in diagnosing diseases, and he knew that the boil was caused by a pearl which had entered the body and was concealed under the skin. So the doctor asked the strong man, “Where has the pearl on your brow gone?”

In great alarm, the strong man replied to that king of



doctors, "Is the pearl on my brow lost? Where is the pearl now? Has it disappeared into thin air?" And [so speaking, he began to] wail in anxiety and sorrow.

Then the good doctor consoled the strong man, "You need not be in such great sorrow! The pearl had entered your body when you were fighting, and is now dimly perceivable under the skin. Since you were in an angry and malignant mood when fighting, you did not notice even when the pearl had sunk into your body."

At that time, the strong man did not trust the doctor's words, [and he demanded,] "If the pearl is [hiding] under the skin, why didn't it come out with the bloody pus and [other] impurities? If it is inside the muscle, you would not be able to see it. Why do you try to deceive me?"

Then the doctor took a mirror and showed the strong man his face; and there, the pearl appeared distinctly in the mirror. When the strong man saw it, he was greatly surprised, and a thought of wonder arose in his mind.

Good sons! The same is true of all sentient beings. Since they do not cherish virtuous friends, they cannot perceive the Buddha-nature even though [all of them] possess it . . .

Good sons! Just as the good doctor showed the strong man the hard pearl [under the skin], in the same manner the tathāgata teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. Sentient beings, due to the superimposition of myriad defilements, fail to realize the Buddha-nature [which they have]. When all defilements come to an end, they will be able to discern it perfectly, just as the strong man recognized the precious pearl distinctly in the bright mirror.⁴³

Since the precious pearl was initially part of the constitution of the strong man, and was never lost, even though it had disappeared under the skin, the comparison of the Buddha-nature with the pearl seems to imply that the Buddha-nature is an inborn essence of sentient beings, even though sentient beings are ignorant of it at present due to the superimposition of myriad defilements. The simile calls forth in our mind the doctrine of the intrinsically pure consciousness found in the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* 大乘起信論 and taught by masters of the *Ti-lun School* 地論宗 and the *She-lun School* 攝論宗 in the Northern and Southern Dynasties.⁴⁴ According to that doctrine, there is immanent in every sentient being from the begin-

ningless past a pure mind, or the tathāgatagarbha, and so everyone is destined for enlightenment—just as the strong man was born with a precious pearl between his eyebrows, which remained his property forever. However, due to the permeation of ignorance, sentient beings do not realize this nature of enlightenment which they originally possess—just as the strong man fought with another strong man in “an angry and malignant mood,” and did not notice that the precious pearl had sunk under his skin. Religious awakening, when interpreted in the framework of this theory, would mean the coming into awareness of the intrinsic pure essence inherent in all living beings, just as the strong man, when given a mirror by the king of doctors, came to perceive the precious pearl he had deemed lost. Indeed, there is no lack of indications in the *MNS* that the attainment of the Buddha-nature by all sentient beings in the future is understood as the rediscovery of something with which everyone is initially endowed, and attainment is considered possible also on this ground. Besides the simile of the precious pearl of the strong man, the comparisons in the *MNS* of the Buddha-nature with the gold mine and the diamond buried underground also appear to carry similar connotation.¹⁵ Repeatedly, we encounter in the sūtra the remark that all sentient beings are in actual possession of the Buddha-nature, but they fail to notice it because it is hidden by defilements.¹⁶ And, if the *Ta-ch'eng ch'ihsin lun* says that the pure mind of sentient beings is “eternal and immutable,” but “being defiled by ignorance, a defiled [state of mind] comes into being,”¹⁷ we also find in the *MNS* the statement that the Buddha-nature is “not a dharma newly created, but is kept from view due to [the presence of] adventitious defilements.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, if it is not difficult to cite passages which support the allying of the concept of Buddha-nature in the *MNS* with the idea of the intrinsically pure consciousness in the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* and in the teachings of the Ti-lun and She-lun masters, it is also easy to produce excerpts from the sūtra which prove the contrary. For instance, right after the last quotation, we find the sūtra comparing the Buddha-nature with flowers blossoming on the tusks of elephants:

All elephant tusks send forth flowers when clouds and thunders gather in the sky, and without [the quaking of] thunders, no flowers will appear, not even their images. The same is true of the Buddha-nature with respect to sentient beings (*chung-sheng fo-hsing*), which remains always out of view due to the superimposition of all forms of defilements. For this reason, I teach that sentient beings are without self. [However,] if they have the chance to listen to the profound scripture which is the *MNS*, they will perceive the Buddha-nature, just as flowers [will blossom] on elephant tusks [when roused by thunders].⁴⁹

In this passage, a parallel is drawn between the relation of the Buddha-nature to sentient beings, and the relation of flowers to the elephant tusks on which they blossom. Just as elephant tusks send out flowers when roused by thunders, sentient beings achieve the Buddha-nature when coming under the beneficial influence of the teaching of the *MNS*. However, unlike the precious pearl, which is originally the property of the strong man, flowers are clearly not part of the intrinsic made-up of elephant tusks. At most, we can only say that elephant tusks contain the potency to produce flowers. When this simile is applied to the interpretation of the relation of the Buddha-nature to sentient beings, the conclusion would be that the Buddha-nature does not pre-exist in sentient beings in the manner in which the pure mind pre-exists in all men, as expounded in the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* and the works of the Ti-lun and She-lun masters. The most we can infer from this comparison is that there is immanent in all sentient beings the potential to develop the nature of the Buddha when the right occasions arise. That the *MNS* conceives of the possession of the Buddha-nature by all sentient beings in the future as the actualization in the future of a latent faculty is strongly suggested by its frequent use of the seed metaphor to illustrate the Buddha-nature. Thus, the Buddha-nature is once referred to in the sūtra as "the seed of the middle-way, which is the most perfect enlightenment of all the Buddhas."⁵⁰ On another occasion, the Buddha is reported to have claimed that he had inside his body "the seed of the Buddha-nature."⁵¹

However, if we accept the above exposition as exemplifying the general position of the *MNS*, we should be greatly puz-

zled when we come across later in the sūtra the story of the king and the lute, the overt objective of which is to controvert any pretension to base the idea of the future enlightenment of sentient beings on a particular understanding of their metaphysical made-up:

Good sons! There was a king who on hearing the clear and melodious sound of a lute was deeply attracted; and he enjoyed and longed for it so much that he could not get it off his mind. So he asked [one of his] ministers, "Where does such melodious sound come from?"

The minister replied, "Such melodious sound comes from a lute."

Thereupon, the king ordered [the minister], "Bring me the sound."

So, the minister brought a lute right away; and placing it before the king, he announced, "Your Majesty! Here is the sound you want."

Thereupon, the king addressed the lute, "Speak out! Speak out!" However, the lute remained silent. [In a fit of impatience,] the king cut the strings [of the lute], but still no sound was produced. And even though the king [proceeded] to break the cover and frame of [of the lute] in order to get at the sound, he still could not obtain [what he wanted]. Then the king [stared] angrily at the minister [and demanded], "Why do you cheat me?"

The minister explained to the king, "Your majesty! This is not the way to get the sound. The lute will only give out sound when all [needed] conditions [are fulfilled] and when it is played in the proper manner."

[Good sons!] The same is true of the Buddha-nature with respect to sentient beings. *It abides nowhere, and is apprehended when one practices the opportune means.* On apprehending it, one will attain the most perfect enlightenment.⁵²

This story draws a parallel between the sound produced by a lute and the Buddha-nature. The lesson it attempts to convey is that just as it is foolish to try to get at the clear and melodious sound of a lute by breaking down its cover and frame, it is also futile to analyse sentient beings in order to arrive at a metaphysical principle (be it in the form of a latent potentiality or in the form of an intrinsically pure consciousness) with which their eventual attainment of Buddhahood can be explained.

The central theme of the story is summed up in the concluding declaration that the Buddha-nature “abides nowhere,” i.e., is not immanent in some form in sentient beings, just as sound is not immanent in any part of the lute. In the same manner as sound is produced when all necessary conditions are satisfied, the Buddha-nature will reveal itself to sentient beings when they practice in earnest the way to enlightenment prescribed by the tathāgata.

4. *Why All Sentient Beings Will Eventually Possess the Buddha-Nature: The Purpose of the Doctrine of the Buddha-Nature:*

Our cursory examination of a number of similes in the *MNS* relating to the problem of the Buddha-nature has disclosed at least three possible responses to the question of why all sentient beings will eventually possess the Buddha-nature:

- a. Because all of them are endowed with an intrinsically pure essence, which they will become fully aware of when they have brought to an end the working of ignorance.
- b. Because all of them embody the potency or “the seed” of Buddhahood, which will send out fruit, when all necessary conditions are satisfied.
- c. Because the way to enlightenment is open to all to follow, and one can be certain of achieving Buddhahood if one follows this way.

Such metaphysical speculations as (a) and (b) are irrelevant to the actual fulfilment of the Buddha-nature in sentient beings in the future.

Our next task will be to determine which of the three replies is most representative of the overall standpoint of the *MNS*. While granting that all three positions have some textual support in the *MNS*, (c) should be given preference for the following reasons:

- i. It is more akin to the general anti-metaphysical tone of the *MNS*. The *MNS* repeatedly enjoins its listeners to steer clear of metaphysical speculation and to concentrate their minds on the search for final deliverance. Thus, it is said that the Buddha-nature will not be perceived by bodhisattvas who harbour specific views regarding dharmas.⁵³ The well-known indeterminate questions, such as “whether the world is eternal or non-eternal,” “whether the world is finite or infinite,” “whether the

tathāgata exists or does not exist after death," etc., appear several times in the *MNS*, and are dismissed for being conducive to attachment rather than to cessation of ills.⁵¹ Further, non-attachment to views is pictured in the *MNS* as the distinctive mark of the sage⁵⁵ and the tathāgata⁵⁶, and is further equated with the "ultimate nirvāṇa," "the supreme form of emptiness" and "the most perfect enlightenment."⁵⁷

ii. In the *MNS*, we find statements openly refuting the idea that the Buddha-nature is an entity immanent in sentient beings.

Good sons! If it is said that the Buddha-nature abides in sentient beings [, it is wrong]. Good sons! Dharmas which are eternal abide nowhere. If a dharma abides anywhere, it is not eternal [in nature].⁵⁸

Again, it is observed:

Good sons! If someone maintains that all sentient beings definitely possess the Buddha-nature which is eternal, blissful, personal and pure, [and further maintains that the Buddha-nature] is neither produced nor born, but is not perceived by sentient beings due to the presence of defilements, it should be understood that he has slandered the Buddha, the Dharma and the saṅgha.⁵⁹

iii. Besides the story of the king and the lute, we find in the *MNS* miscellaneous remarks and similes indicating strong opposition to any attempt to ground man's future enlightenment on the existence in him at present of a dormant principle. A well-known example is the comparison of the cream obtained from milk and the Buddha-nature to be attained by sentient beings:

Good sons! Only the ignorant will speak as you have argued: that if milk does not have the nature of cream, it cannot produce milk, just as if banyan seeds do not have the nature of being five *chang* 丈 from the ground,⁶⁰ it cannot produce concrete [trees] five *chang* tall. The wise will never speak that way. Why? For [they understand that things] do not have [definite] nature.

Good sons! If milk already has the nature of cream, it would not need the support of various conditions [to produce cream].

Good sons! Milk will never turn into cream when mixed with water even if we allow it to stand for one month, but if we add one drop of the juice of the *p'o-chiu* 頗求 tree to it,⁶¹ cream will be formed right away. If milk already has [the nature of] cream, why is it dependent on [such] conditions [as the juice of the *p'o-chiu* tree to produce cream]? The same is true of the Buddha-nature with respect to sentient beings (*chung-sheng fo-hsing*). The Buddha-nature is apprehended [by sentient beings] at the fulfillment of various conditions. . . . Since [sentient beings] attain the Buddha-nature dependent on various conditions, they do not have any [definite] nature; and since [sentient beings] do not have any [definite] nature, they can attain the most perfect enlightenment.⁶²

Seeing that milk, when properly processed, turns into cream, common sense usually infers that there must reside in milk the nature of cream, which explains its tendency to be transformed into cream. It is this common-sense attitude that the *MNS* is attempting to challenge, when it declares that "things do not have definite nature," and points out that if milk already possessed the nature of cream, it would not require the support of external conditions before its transmutation into cream could take place. When this argument is applied to the Buddha-nature with respect to sentient beings, it speaks against the tendency to infer from the eventual attainment of Buddhahood by sentient beings to the existence in them at present of an ontological disposition to assume the characteristics of the Buddha. Just as the transformation of milk into cream should not be understood as the actualization of the nature of cream in milk, the realization of the Buddha-nature in sentient beings also should not be construed as the coming to fruition of an inborn faculty in sentient beings. And if the necessity of the agency of the juice of *p'o-chiu* trees is a proof against the presence of the nature of cream in milk, the existence of such prerequisites of the attainment of the Buddha-nature as the observance of monastic rules and the listening to the teaching of the *MNS* also militates against attributing to sentient beings an innate essence to become a Buddha.⁶³

This comparison of the Buddha-nature with cream is supplemented by a series of other similes, all of which convey the same lesson. What follow are some of the most prominent examples, the significance of which can easily be inferred following the line of reasoning outlined above:

Good sons! If there is [the nature of] cream in milk as you have maintained, why do milk-sellers ask for the price of milk only, and not the price of cream as well? Why do mare-sellers ask for the price of the mares only and not the price of colts [which will be born from the mares] also? A man of the world asks for the hand of a woman because he is without offspring; and once a woman gets pregnant, she would no longer be called a girl. Now, if it is said that a girl gets married with the nature of a child in her, that would be wrong. Why? For if she had the nature of a child, she would also have [the nature of] a grandchild; and if she had [the nature of] a grandchild, [her child and her grandchild] would be brothers. Why? Because both of them owe their existence to the same belly. Therefore, I assert that girls do not possess the nature of the children [to whom they will give birth]. If there is the nature of cream in milk, why can't we detect in it simultaneously the five tastes [of milk, cream, curd, butter and ghee]? If there is the substance of a banyan tree five feet tall in the seed, why can't we observe [in the seed] at once the miscellaneous forms of sprout, stem, branches, leaves, flowers and fruit? Good sons! Milk differs [from cream] in its colour, taste and products, and the same is true of ghee. How can we say that there is the nature of cream in milk? Good sons! Just as [it is absurd to maintain that] a person who will eat curd to-morrow gives out a bad smell today, equally [absurd is it to maintain that] there exists definitely the nature of cream in milk. Good sons! A person writes words with a brush, paper and ink, when there was initially no word on the paper. It is because there was at first [no word] on the paper that [we say that] words are formed dependent on conditions [such as brush and ink]. If there were originally words on the paper, why would they need [the presence of] various conditions to be formed? We mix the colours blue and yellow together to form the colour green. It should be understood that the two [colours blue and yellow] do not embody originally the nature of greenness. If [the nature of greenness] already exists [in the colours blue and yellow], why do we have to mix [the colours blue and yellow] together to form [the colour green]? Good

sons! Sentient beings are kept alive with food, but there is actually no life in food. If there is life in food initially, food would be life even before it was consumed. Good sons! All dharmas are without [definite] nature.⁶¹

iv. The *MNS* seldom alludes to the inherent ontological structure of sentient beings when it gives its reason for believing in their eventual enlightenment. Rather, it often satisfies itself with the general observation that as sentient beings are different from non-sentient objects such as stones and walls, which are incapable of the thought of enlightenment and so can never assume the characteristics of a Buddha, the Buddha-nature is attributed to them by way of contrast. So the *MNS* asserts:

Good sons! I speak of “nirvāṇa” due to [the existence of conditions] contrary to nirvāṇa. I speak of the “tathāgata” due to [the existence of conditions] contrary to the tathāgata. I speak of the “Buddha-nature” due to [the existence of things] contrary to the Buddha-nature.

What are [the conditions] described as contrary to nirvāṇa? They include all dharmas which are defiled and conditioned. The destruction of these defiled and conditioned [dharmas] is known as “nirvāṇa.” As for [the conditions] contrary to the tathāgata, they range from [the state of] the *icchantika* up to [the state of] the pratyekabuddha. The cessation of [the state of] the *icchantiku* up to [the state of] the pratyekabuddha is known as the “tathāgata.” As for [things] contrary to the Buddha-nature, they include walls, tiles, stones and all non-sentient objects. Apart from such non-sentient objects, we can apply the name of “Buddha-nature” [to the rest].⁶⁵

Thus, when it is said that sentient beings have the Buddha-nature, our attention is drawn to the fact that sentient beings, unlike non-sentient objects like walls and tiles, can win Buddhahood by means of proper religious practices. This way of thinking is perfectly illustrated by the familiar story of the blind men’s attempt to describe an elephant, found in the *MNS*.⁶⁶ The blind men have no conception of the form of an entire elephant. Nevertheless, they have some ideas of the shapes of some of its parts; and if they recover their power of vision, they can surely report in full the appearance of a complete elephant.

In the same way, sentient beings, due to their ignorance, are strangers to the Buddha-nature. That does not, however, preclude them from having some vague inkling of what the Buddha-nature is like at present, and from gaining a perfect conception of the Buddha-nature in the future, when their mind's eye is opened. It is based on this belief that sentient beings, unlike walls, tiles and stones, "are not by nature resistant to the Buddha-nature"⁶⁷ and so are forever susceptible to the influence of the salvific work of Buddhas and bodhisattvas (rather than on speculation of their ontological structure) that the *MNS* propounds the idea that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature.⁶⁸

v. The *MNS* stresses very much the practical implication of the teaching of the presence of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings. Thus, it explains why bodhisattvas preach the concept of the Buddha-nature:

Even though bodhisattvas perceive the evil deeds and errors of sentient beings, they never dwell on them. Why? They are afraid that this will lead to the arising of [further] defilements [in sentient beings]. With the arising of [further] defilements, sentient beings will fall into the evil modes of existence.⁶⁹

On the other hand, bodhisattvas, on perceiving the least sign of goodness in sentient beings, praise them. What do we mean by good? It is the so called Buddha-nature. Bodhisattvas laud the Buddha-nature so that sentient beings will develop the thought of the most perfect enlightenment.⁷⁰

Of similar import is the story of the Buddha's encounter with five hundred brahmins, in which the Buddha declares explicitly that the Buddha-nature is in fact *not* the self, but is *called* the self only for the sake of instructing sentient beings:

Good sons! Once, I was bathing in the Nairāṅjanā River . . . At that time, five hundred brahmins also came to the riverside, and approaching where I was, they talked among themselves, "What has [Gautama] done to achieve the diamond body? If Gautama has not taught that life

ends with death, we shall follow him and receive the rules of discipline [of the Buddhist order].”

Good sons! At that time, I, with my power to discern others' thought, knew what the brahmins had in mind. So I spoke to these brahmins, “Why do you say that I teach that life ends with death?”

The brahmins replied, “Gautama, you have taught in various sūtras that all sentient beings are without self. If you preach [the idea of] no-self, how can you maintain that [you have not taught that] life ends with death? If there is no self, who keeps the rules of discipline, and who transgresses them?”

The Buddha answered, “Surely, I have not preached that all sentient beings are without self. [On the other hand,] I always proclaim that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature. What else can the Buddha-nature be if not the self? Thus, I have never taught that life ends with death . . .”

When the brahmins heard that the Buddha-nature is the self, there immediately arose in their minds the thought of the most perfect enlightenment; and soon, they left the household life to practise the path of enlightenment. All birds of the air and animals of the land and the sea [who were present at this discourse] also resolved to attain the supreme enlightenment, and with the arising of such thought, they soon abandoned their [animal] form.

Good sons! *The Buddha-nature is in fact not the self. For the sake of [guiding] sentient beings, I described it as the self.*⁷¹

When so viewed, the tenet of the eventual Buddhahood of all sentient beings is essentially a soteriological doctrine, the primary significance of which lies in its efficacy in developing “the thought of the most perfect enlightenment” in man. As the tenet is not the outcome of a systematic investigation of the nature of reality, any wholesale attempt to interpret the Buddha-nature taught in the *MNS* as entailing either (a) a pure essence or (b) a potency, should be looked upon with some suspicion.

NOTES

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1. Fragments of the Sanskrit original of this Mahāyāna version of the *MNS* have been recovered in recent years, and are recorded in Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡邊海旭, *Watanabe rombun shū* 渡邊海旭論文集 2nd ed. (Tokyo: 1936), pp. 570–585 and Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 & Watanabe Kaikyoku, eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 85 vols. (Tokyo: 1924–1934) (henceforth abbreviated to *T*), vol. 12, p. 604. Also see G. M. Bongard Levin, “New Buddhist Sanskrit Texts from Central Asia: An Unknown Fragment of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4, 2 (1981), pp. 7–16.

2. See *T*, vol. 12, p. 388b, 1.22, p. 390a, 1.8, p. 470c, 1.14, p. 485b.11.11–12 & p.493b.11.4–5. Also consult Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨, *Bukkyō kyōten naritatsu-shi ron* 佛教經典成立史論 2nd ed. (Kyoto: 1946), pp. 255–273.

3. A very comprehensive study of the various Chinese translations of the *MNS* has been done by Fuse Kōgaku 布施浩吉 in his *Nehanshū no kenkyū* 涅槃宗 no 研究, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: 1973), vol. 1. In this work, Mr. Fuse has made an elaborate comparative study of the three Chinese translations of the *MNS*, and has found only minor discrepancies in content. Also consult T'ang Yung-t'ung 湯用彤 *Han Wei Liang-Chin Nan-pei ch'ao fo-chiao shih* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史, 2nd ed. (Peking: 1963), pp. 601–610 and Takasaki Jikidō 高崎直道 *Nyoraizō shisō no keisei* 如來藏思想 no 形成 2nd ed. (Tokyo: 1974), pp. 128–131.

4. For a detailed study of the tradition of the study of the *MNS* in China, consult Fuse Kōgaku, *op. cit.*, vol. 2. Also refer to T'ang Yung-t'ung, *op. cit.*, pp. 677–678 & pp. 832–834; Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 113–116, 128–129 & pp. 180–181; and Andō Toshio 安藤俊雄 “Hokugi Nehangaku no dentō to shoki no shiron-shi 北魏涅槃學 no 傳統 to 初期 no 四論師” in *Hokugi bukkyō no kenkyū* 北魏佛教 no 研究 2nd ed. (Kyoto: 1978), pp. 179–201.

5. For an erudite study of the historical transformation of the concept of the Buddha-nature in India, China and Japan, refer to Tokiwa Daijō's 常盤大定, *Bussō no kenkyū* 佛性 no 研究 (Tokyo: 1944). Also consult *Shina bukkyō no kenkyū* 支那佛教 no 研究 vol. 3 (Tokyo: 1943), pp. 247–300, by the same author.

6. Discussion on this problem will lead to the problem of the textual development of the *MNS*. See Tokiwa Daijō, *Bussō no kenkyū*, pp. 36–66 and my paper “Do All Sentient Beings Possess the Buddha-nature?—The Problem of the *Ichchantika* in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*” (presented at the Fifth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, 1982).

7. *T*, vol. 12, p. 511a, 11.16–18.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 399a, 11.5–7.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 487a, 11.15–18. For similar passages, refer to p. 472b & p. 553c.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 414c, 1.29—p. 415a, 1.2

11. Due to limited space, we will not enter into the difficult problem of the Sanskrit original of the term “Buddha-nature” and its synonyms. For information on this much discussed subject, see Mizutani Kōshō

水谷幸正 “Busshō ni tsuite 佛性 *ni tsuite*,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku no kenkyū* 印度學佛教學 *no* 研究 2p94,2 (1956), pp. 550–553, Okawa Ichijō 小川一乘, “Busshō to buddhatva 佛性 *to* buddhatva,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku no kenkyū* 11,2 (1963), pp. 544–545 and Takasaki Jikidō, *op. cit.*, part 1, chap. 2.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 524a, 1.28–b, 1.1

13. *Ibid.*, p. 526a, 1.28–b, 1.2

14. *Ibid.*, p. 463c, 11.21–22.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 576a, 1.29–b, 1.1. Also refer to p. 395c.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 513a, 11.3–5.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 524c.

18. The ten powers are concrete manifestations of the omniscience of the Buddha, who has perfect knowledge of (1) what is right or wrong in every situation; (2) what is the karma of every deed, past, present and future; (3) all stages of samādhi and liberation; (4) the faculties and powers of all beings; (5) the desires and aspirations of all beings; (6) the nature and deeds of all beings; (7) the direction and consequence of all conducts; (8) the previous existences of all beings; (9) the birth, death and destinies of all beings; and (10) the destruction of the *āsravas* of all beings. Consult Mochizuki Shinkō, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 佛教大辭典 vol. 3 (Tokyo: 1933), pp. 2402–2404.

19. The four forms of fearlessness are (1) fearlessness arising from the attainment of the most perfect enlightenment, (2) fearlessness arising from the abandoning of all defilements, (3) fearlessness regarding all anti-Buddhist teachings, and (4) fearlessness arising from the cessation of all sufferings.

20. The Buddha remains undisturbed whether (1) all creatures believe in his teaching, or (2) do not believe in his teaching, or (3) some believe and others do not believe in his teaching.

21. *T*, vol. 12, p. 525c, 11.3–4.

22. For a detailed list of these marks and characteristics, refer to Leon Hurvitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 353–361.

23. *T*, vol. 12, p. 574b, 11.15–20.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 461b, 1.19.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 480c, 11.13–14.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 526a, 11.2–6.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 447c, 11.9–12.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 524b, 1.25–c, 1.10.

29. The eight powers are: (1) the power of self division, (2) the power of self expansion, (3) the power of flying, (4) the power of manifesting in countless forms in one time and at one place, (5) the power of using one physical organ for the functions of all the others, (6) the power of achieving all things while remaining unattached, (7) the power of preaching for countless kalpas by expounding just one stanza, and (8) the power of being all-pervasive like space. See *Ibid.*, p. 502c–p. 503a.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 556c, 11.11–14.

31. The *pārājikas* refer to the most serious transgressions of monks and nuns, such as sexual immorality, stealing, murder and false speaking, which entail expulsion from the saṅgha.

32. *T*, vol. 12, p. 405b, 11.12–18.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 405a, 11.19–20.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 555b, 11.9–18.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 524b, 11.11–21.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 572b, 11.18–23.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 530c, 11.15–17.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 530b, 11.26–29. Refer to n.62 below.
39. See n. 28 above.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 524a, 11.5–8.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 523c, 1.26–p. 524a, 1.5.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 524a, 11.12–15.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 408a, 1.9–b, 1.11.

44. The *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* (*Awakening of Faith*) is one of the most influential Buddhist texts in China, and has been translated into English several times. The orthodox view is that the work was composed by Aśvagh-ōṣa, and was translated into Chinese by Paramārtha in 550, but both claims have been challenged in recent years. Mochizūki Shinkō suggests in his *Bukkyō kyōten naritatsu-shi ron* that the work was the compilation of a Ti-lun master living in the second half of the sixth century. See *op. cit.*, pp. 532–641. For a list of titles of classic studies on the problem of the authenticity of the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun*, consult Yoshito S. Hakeda, trans., *The Awakening of Faith* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 119–122. The teachings of the Ti-lun and She-lun schools represented the initial Chinese interpretation of Yogācāra Buddhism when the latter was first imported into China in the sixth century. While the two schools disagreed with each other on many points, both agreed that there exists in every sentient being an intrinsically pure consciousness, which serves as the ontological basis of enlightenment as well as the metaphysical ground of the phenomenal world. Even though both schools gradually died out in the second half of the seventh century, their concept of the pure mind was passed on through the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* as well as the teachings of the Hua-yen school 華嚴宗 and certain sects of the Ch'an school 禪宗, and continued to exert enormous influence on the development of the Buddha-nature doctrine in China.

45. See *T*, vol. 12, p. 407b & p. 408c.
46. For example, see *ibid.*, p. 462c, 11.1–2.
47. Yoshito S. Hakeda, trans., *op. cit.*, p. 50.
48. *T*, vol. 12, p. 411b, 11.28–29.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 411c, 11.1–5.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 523c, 11.1–2.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 410c, 11.13–14.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 519b, 11.6–17.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 521b.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 596c–597b.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 413a, 1.17.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 503a, 11.8–9.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 464b.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 555c, 11.27–28.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 580c, 11.2–4.

60. "Chang" is a Chinese unit of length equivalent to 3 1/3 metres.

61. I still cannot find out the Sanskrit original of the name "p'o-chiu."

62. *T*, vol. 12, p. 519b, 1.22-c, 1.3.

63. The argument above would certainly appear inconclusive to those who are sympathetic with views (a) and (b), for they also believe that the fulfilment of the Buddha-nature in sentient beings in the future requires the satisfaction of various conditions, but that has not deterred them from investigating the metaphysical basis of sentient beings' eventual deliverance. However it may be, this analogy between cream and the Buddha-nature is significant for our present purpose, for it displays in the most emphatic fashion the aversion to speculation on the ontological source of enlightenment, characteristic of the *MNS*. Several pages later, this simile of milk and cream is again picked up for similar purpose:

The Buddha explained, "I have never maintained that there is [the nature of] cream in milk. When people say that there is [the nature of] cream in milk, it is because [they see that] cream is produced from milk."

[The Bodhisattva Simhanāda asked,] "World-honored one! Everything produced surely must have its occasions."

[The Buddha replied,] "Good sons! When there is milk, there is no cream, and there is also no curd, butter and ghee If there is [cream in milk], why don't we give milk the double name [milk-cream], just as we call a person skillful in [making] both [articles of gold and iron] gold- and black-smith? Good sons! There are two types of causes: first, direct cause, and secondly, auxiliary cause. Direct cause is like milk which produces cream, and auxiliary cause is such as warmth and yeast [which are added to milk to form cream]. Since [cream] is formed from milk, we say that there is the nature of cream in milk."

The Bodhisattva Simhanāda asked, "World-honored one! If there is not the nature of cream in milk, there is also not the nature of cream in horns. Why isn't cream formed from horns?"

[The Buddha replied,] "Good sons! Cream is also formed from horns. Why? I have mentioned two auxiliary causes of cream: first, yeast, and secondly, warmth. Since horns are warm in nature, they can produce cream."

[The Bodhisattva] Simhanāda asked, "World-honored one! If horns can produce cream, why do people who want cream look for milk and not horns?"

The Buddha replied, "Good sons! That is why I teach that there are [two types of causes:] direct cause and auxiliary cause. (*Ibid.*, pp. 530b, 1.20-c, 1.6)

In this interesting dialogue, the bodhisattva Simhanāda represents the position of the ordinary man, who sees the need of postulating "occasions" to account for the production of cream from milk. Thus, it is asked, if there is nothing in the composition of milk which is especially conducive to the forma-

tion of cream, why do people who want cream look for milk, and not some other things such as horns? The Buddha, on the other hand, consistently refuses to view the matter this way. He declares that the everyday assertion that there is cream in milk should not be taken literally as indicating the presence of the nature of cream in milk, but rather as a loose way of relating the fact that cream is always formed from milk. As for the question why people look for milk instead of horns when they need cream, the Buddha answered by classifying causes into two categories: direct and auxiliary. Milk is the first thing to come to our mind in case we need cream because it is the direct cause. Furthermore, horns, being warm in nature, can serve as the auxiliary cause of cream. So it is not totally wrongheaded if a person wanting cream asks for horns, because warmth, as the auxiliary cause, is as necessary to the formation of cream as milk. This falling back on the idea of two types of causes in the reply again will not satisfy questioners like the bodhisattva *Siṃhanāda*, for they can continue to beg for the principle behind the division of causes into direct and auxiliary, as well as the ontological ground for regarding certain causes as direct and other causes as auxiliary. It would take us too far afield to follow the intricate and often quite unpromising discussion which follows the above quotation, but if the two parties appear to be arguing at cross-purposes all the time, that alone suffices to demonstrate how strongly antipathetic the *MNS* is to the form of reductive reasoning exhibited in the interrogation of the bodhisattva *Siṃhanāda*.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 531a, 11.8–26.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 581a, 11.17–23.

66. See *Ibid.*, p. 556a, 11.8–21.

67. The story of the blind man and the elephant are preceded by the following remarks:

Good sons! As sentient beings are not [by nature] resistant to the Buddha-nature, we declare that they have [the Buddha-nature]. As sentient beings are heading straight for [the Buddha-nature], as they will some day possess [the Buddha-nature], as they will definitely attain [the Buddha-nature], and as they will definitely perceive [the Buddha-nature], we thereby say that all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature. (*Ibid.*, p. 556a, 11.6-8).

68. Of course, to those who are accustomed to look for an explanation for everything, it would seem necessary to go on to inquire for the metaphysical basis of this peculiar propensity of the sentient to participate in the essence of the Buddha, which is not shared by the *non-sentient*. Furthermore, they would question the *MNS* for repeating the obvious, for is it not common knowledge that only beings with life and consciousness can be taught and so only they can apprehend the Buddha-nature? We have seen that the *MNS* has inherited the anti-metaphysical attitude inherent in the doctrine of the middle way and the discussions on the indeterminate questions in early Buddhism, and so tends to view all searches for underlying ontological principles with suspicion. As for the criticism of repeating the obvious, the reply of the *MNS* would be that what is obvious may still be of great significance, especially in the realm of practical religious life. See (v) below.

69. Of the five modes of existence in the realm of saṃsāra, those of animals, hungry ghosts and beings in hell are considered evil.

70. *T*, vol. 12, p. 517c, 1.29–p. 518a, 1.4.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 525a, 1.12–b, 1.1.