

The Unchangingness of the Realm of Sentient Beings: The *Tathagatagarbha* Doctrine in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta**

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The *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta*, which was translated into Chinese in 520, is about a critique of two types of wrong views regarding the realm of sentient beings, namely, the view of increase in two aspects and the view of decrease in three aspects. This paper examines the notions in an equation noted in the sūtra and investigates the interrelation between the notions. It argues that the sūtra's doctrine about the unchangingness of sentient beings is based on the equivalence of the supreme truth, the realm of sentient beings, the Buddha-nature, the dharma-body, and the single realm. The highest idea in the sūtra is neither abiding in nirvana nor in saṃsāra.

Keywords: *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta*, *tathagatagarbha*, unchangingness, realm of sentient beings

The *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* (AAN) 佛說不增不減經 is a short Mahāyāna sūtra translated into Chinese in 520 by Bodhiruci (菩提流支, aka. 菩提留支). Although its full Sanskrit text is no longer available, a large portion of its text survives in the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* (RGV) 究竟一乘寶性論 (Silk, 2015, p. 5, n18). The AAN is about a critique of two types of wrong views regarding the realm of sentient beings (*sattva-dhātu* 眾生界), namely, the view of increase in two aspects and the view of decrease in three aspects. Its principal doctrine is that the realm of sentient beings is without change, that is, all beings in the six paths, the three realms, and the four types of birth are consistent. This paper examines the notions in an equation noted in the sūtra and investigates the interrelation between the notions. The verse pertinent to the notions reads: “The extremely profound purport is precisely the supreme truth. The supreme truth is precisely the quintessence of beings. The quintessence of beings is precisely the embryo of the *tathāgatas*. The embryo of the *tathāgatas* is precisely the dharma-body” (Silk, 2015, p. 65 (§4i)) 甚深義者，即是第一義諦。第一義諦者，即是衆生界。衆生界者，即是如來藏。如來藏者，即是法身 (T.16.0668.046716-a19).

It is on this equation, namely, the supreme truth (*paramārtha*) = the realm of sentient beings, or the quintessence of beings (*sattva-dhātu*) = the Buddha nature, or the embryo of the *tathāgatas* (*tathagata-garbha*) = the dharma-body (*dharma-kāya*), that the principal doctrine of the AAN is based.

Two Wrong Views: The View of Increase and the View of Decrease

To interpret the meaning of the above equation, we should first deal with the question that whether

* This article is supported by the Youth Project of the National Social Science Fund of China (Grant No. 20CZW004).

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nirvāṇa is such that it comes into being (*utpāda*) and whether it is annihilation. So it is necessary to clarify the two types of wrong views: the view of increase and the view of decrease. To be precise, regarding the view of increase, there are two aspects: (1) the view that *nirvāṇa* came to exist at some point in time, (2) the view that *nirvāṇa* came to exist without a cause. The two aspects are two forms of the notion of increase, interwoven as in a gauze net (Silk, 2015, p. 82 (§7i)).¹ However, they are wrong in that the first would seem to claim that *nirvāṇa* should be understood as arising in time; the second would claim that *nirvāṇa* is an absolute existent, separate from conditional reality and the path. Regarding decrease, there are three aspects: (1) the view of annihilation, that is, that there is absolute ending, (2) the view that there is extinction, that is, precisely *nirvāṇa*, (3) the view that there is no *nirvāṇa*, that is, that this *nirvāṇa* is empty (Silk, 2015, p. 74 (§5ii)).² It is because of the two wrong views that all sorts of wrong views arise. So they are criticized as the teaching of extremely evil and fundamental calamity.³

The two wrong views also entail an important connotation: the single realm (*eka-dhātu* 一界). “These two [types of wrong] views rely on the single realm, are the same as the single realm, and are united with the single realm” 此二種見依止一界，同一界，合一界 (T.16.0668.0466c29). Sentient beings with different *karma* and *avidyā* abide in different realms. Note that “the same as” 同 can either be construed in ontological or epistemic terms. From the ontological perspective, the multiple realms in which sentient beings abide are different appearances 相 of the realm of sentient beings, and they can be understood as a unit or a single real in terms of their essential nature or the same property 體—emptiness—they have. On an epistemological position, however, only the appearance of the single realm is known or seen by ordinary mortals. Because of the epistemological perspective, the ordinary mortals “have ideas of extremely evil and greatly wrong views, that is, the realm of beings increases or that the realm of beings decreases” 一切愚癡凡夫，不如實知彼一界故，不如實見彼一界故，起於極惡大邪見心，謂衆生界增，謂衆生界減 (T.16.0668.0466c29). In other words, the two wrong views are the consequence of the misconstrual of the single realm.

A follow-up question is: How would mortals know or see the single realm in accordance with reality? Buddha reveals:

At that time the Buddha said to the venerable Śāriputra: “This extremely profound purport is exactly the Tathāgatha’s sphere of insight and it is the range of the Tathāgata’s mind. Śāriputra, such a profound purport as this cannot be known by the insight of all the auditors and lone buddhas, cannot be seen, cannot be examined. Still how much less could all foolish common people fathom it. It is indeed only the insight of the buddhas and tathāgatas which can examine, know and see this purport. [Despite] the insight possessed by all auditors and lone buddhas, Śāriputra, with respect to this purport, they can only have faith; they are not able to know, see or examine it in accord with reality.” (Silk, 2015, pp. 89-92 (§10i, 10ii))⁴

爾時，世尊告慧命舍利弗：“此甚深義乃是如來智慧境界。亦是如來心所行處。舍利弗，如是深義一切聲聞、緣覺智慧所不能知，所不能見，不能觀察。何況一切愚癡凡夫而能測量。唯有諸佛如來智慧乃能觀察、知、見此義。舍利弗，一切聲聞、緣覺所有智慧，於此義中，唯可仰信；不能如實知、見、觀察。” (T.16.0668.0467a10-16)

¹ 此諸衆生依於增見，復起二見。此二種見與彼增見，不相捨離，猶如羅網。何謂二見？一者，涅槃始生見；二者，無因無緣忽然而有見 (T.16.0668.0466c16-18).

² 復次舍利弗，此諸衆生依於減見，復起三見。此三種見與彼減見不相捨離，猶如羅網。何謂三見？一者，斷見，謂：畢竟盡；二者，減見，謂：即涅槃；三者，無涅槃見，謂：此涅槃畢竟空寂 (T.16.0668.0466b26-29).

³ 舍利弗，此二種見乃是無明諸惑根本，所謂：涅槃始生見，無因無緣忽然而有見。舍利弗，此二種見乃是極惡根本大患之法。舍利弗，依此二見起一切見。此一切見與彼二見不相捨離，猶如羅網。一切見者，所謂：若內、若外、若龜、若細、若中、種種諸見，所謂：增見、減見 (T.16.0668.0466c23-28).

⁴ I changed “World-honored One” into “the Buddha” in Silk’s translation.

According to the Buddha's explanation, to know or see the single realm in accordance with reality is an "extremely profound purport" that reaches to "the Tathāgatha's sphere of insight" and it is "the sphere of the Tathāgatha's mind". That is, the single realm can only be perceived and seen by the insight of a buddha. Thus, the only way for the mortals to perceive the single realm is to "have faith".

The Realm of Sentient Beings and the *Dharma-Dhātu*

Seen from the point of view of the experiential world, the emphasis on *dharma-dhātu* and the realm of sentient beings has subtle differences. The *dharma-dhātu* can be regarded as the constituents of beings and concentrates more on the process of birth and death of the beings. The realm of sentient beings, which refers to a mass of beings 衆生聚, the ocean of beings 衆生海, the gathering field of beings, or all living beings, focuses more on different appearance amongst individuals and their identification. To Buddha, however, the *dharma-dhātu* is precisely the realm of sentient beings because Buddha transcends from the experiential world to the ontological world. As discussed in the first section, the single realm is the essence of the realm of all beings from an ontological perspective. Buddha does not abide in various phenomena but constitutes all *dharmas*, thus having the capability to know and see the single realm in accordance with reality.

In the AAN, the *dharma-dhātu* has four characteristics. First, it is not a concept about a given phenomenon but a panoramic reality. The *dharma-dhātu* is not extracted from the perception or imagination of a cognitive subject but from the deep essence of things, in other words, suchness. Second, the *dharma-dhātu* does not refer to the existence of an individual but to all *dharmas* 共相. Third, more than signifying the unchanging constituents of beings, the *dharma-dhātu* focuses on the unchangingness of impermanence 无常, birth and death 生灭, interdependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada* 缘起), middle way 中道, etc. Fourth, the range of the dynamic mechanisms is limitless in time, space, entity, content, and form. The *dharma-dhātu* is not a specific phenomenon that arises in a specific time and space, distinguishes from other phenomena, and is different from any single existent being that can be approached and perceived from a given angle. Instead, the *dharma-dhātu* is the nature of all *dharmas* (Tsai, 2004).

The Dharma-Body

The connotation of the dharma-body is perplexing in the AAN. The following two verses on *dharma-body* are significant to construe the meaning of the dharma-body and its central position in the AAN. The first verse reads:

As I have expounded, Śāriputra, the meaning of the dharma-body is inseparable from, indivisible from, not cut-off from, not different from the inconceivable qualities definitive of a buddha, greater in number than the sands of the Ganges, [namely,] the merits and insight of a tathāgata. It is like a lamp, Śāriputra, whose brightness, color and tactile sensation are inseparable and indivisible [from the lamp itself]. Again, it is like a maṇi gem whose characteristics of brightness, color and form are inseparable and indivisible [from the gem itself]. The meaning of the dharma-body expounded by the Tathāgata, Śāriputra, is also once again like this: It is inseparable from, indivisible from, not cut-off from, not different from the inconceivable qualities definitive of a buddha greater in number than the sands of the Ganges, the merits and insight of a tathāgata. (Silk, 2015, pp. 96-98 (§11, 12))

舍利弗！如我所說法身義者，過於恒沙，不離、不脫、不斷、不異。不思議佛法，如來功德智慧。舍利弗！如世間燈，所有明、色、及觸，不離、不脫。又如摩尼寶珠，所有明、色、形相，不離、不脫。舍利弗！如來所說法身之義，亦復如是，過於恒沙。不離、不脫、不斷、不異。不思議佛法，如來功德智慧。(T.16.0668.0467a20-26)

The verse first indicates the nature of the dharma-body. It is inseparable from 不離, indivisible from 不脫, not disconnected from 不斷, and not different from 不異, the inconceivable qualities defining buddha-dharma. The qualities are further clarified by the analogies with a lamp and a mañi gem. Note that the concrete object *lamp* should be understood in the sense of *light*. The relationship between light and its shining is as that of *ti* 體 and *yong* 用. The inseparability, indivisibility, non-disconnection, and non-difference of the dharma-body mean that its nature is permanently intertwined with “the inconceivable qualities definitive of buddha-dharma” 不思議佛法 or buddha-dharmas 功德—excellent ways of being typical on Buddhahood, and thus unchangeable.

The quote also demonstrates that the inextricable relationship between dharma-body and the real world lies in that the dharma-body does not break away from living beings in any case; meanwhile, it does not separate from the practice of the dharma in any case. Based on this arises an immediate question: Is the dharma-body, like the karmic phenomena, subject to the change of birth and death in the real world? The second verse about the dharma-body provides a clue to the answer.

This dharma-body, Śāriputra, is one that has the quality of being unborn and unperishing. It is unlimited in the past and unlimited in the future because it is free from the two extremes. It is unlimited in the past, Śāriputra, because it is free from a time of birth, and it is unlimited in the future because it is free from a time of perishing. The Tathāgata’s dharma-body, Śāriputra, is permanent because of its quality of immutability, because of its quality of inexhaustibility. The Tathāgata’s dharma-body, Śāriputra, is constant because it can permanently be taken as a refuge, because of its equality with the future limit [of saṃsāra]. The Tathāgata’s dharma-body, Śāriputra, is tranquil because of its non-dual nature, because of its absence of discrimination. The Tathāgata’s dharma-body, Śāriputra, is unchangeable because of its imperishable nature, because of its uncreated nature. (Silk, 2015, pp. 100-101 (§13i, 13ii))

舍利弗！此法身者，是不生不滅法。非過去際，非未來際，離二邊故。舍利弗！非過去際者，離生時故。非未來際者，離滅時故。舍利弗！如來法身常，以不異法故，以不盡法故。舍利弗！如來法身恆，以常可歸依故，以未來際平等故。舍利弗！如來法身清涼，以不二法故，以無分別法故。舍利弗！如來法身不變，以非滅法故，以非作法故。(T.16.0668.0467a27-b05)

Explicitly, the verse indicates that the dharma-body is unborn and unperishing. This tenet is represented in five layers. The first is that the dharma-body is unborn and timeless. Since it is free from arising and ceasing, it does not belong to the past, thus does not arise; meanwhile, it does not belong to the future, thus is unending. In this context, the “two extremes” may respectively refer to nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) and eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*). The limitlessness of the dharma-body in the past and the future harks back to the ideas of the first two types of the six views evoked by and inseparable from “the view of the absolute nonexistence of *nirvāṇa*” 畢竟無涅槃見 in the AAN: (1) the view that the world has a beginning; (2) the view that the world has an end.⁵ A similar idea appears in the *Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra* 勝鬘師子吼一乘大方便方廣經 (*The Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala Sūtra*), in which the dharma-body is also identical to Tathāgata. The text in the *Śrīmālādevī* reads that “the Tathāgata does not dwell within the limits of time; the Tathāgata-Arhat-Samyaksam buddhas dwell at the uttermost [future] limit [aparāntakoṭiṇiṣṭha]”⁶ 如來無有限齊時住，如來、應、等正覺後際等住 (T.12.0353.0220c27).

The rest four layers/signifiers of the dharma-body nature indicated in the second verse are 常 (*nitya*), 恒 (*dhruvo*), 清涼 (*śivo*), 不變 (*śāśvato*). The difference between the terms in the verse, such as 常, 恒, and 不

⁵ 舍利弗，依畢竟無涅槃見復起六種見。此六種見與無涅槃見不相捨離，猶如羅網。何謂六見？一者，世間有始見；二者，世間有終見；三者，眾生幻化所作見；四者，無苦無樂見；五者，無眾生事見；六者，無聖諦見 (T.16.0668.0466c10-14).

⁶ The translation is by Alex and Hideko Wayman.

變, is ambiguous. Tola and Dragonetti render *nitya* as constancy into the future (Tola & Dragonetti, 1980, pp. 2-3), which also includes the meaning of unchangingness (不變, *śāśvato*); Xuanzang translates *dhruva* in 30th verse of the *Triṃśikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhi* 三十唯識頌 as 常 (此即無漏界, 不思議善常) rather than 恒; and the *nitya* of the four virtues in the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* 大般涅槃經 is also 常 in Chinese. Thus, the three terms—*nitya*, *dhruvo*, *śāśvato*—in the AAN may be interchangeable. That the dharma-body is constant is multi-faceted. At a negative position, the dharma-body is endowed with immutable qualities 不異法 and inexhaustible qualities 不盡法, always nondual 不二法 and free from discrimination 無分別法. The dharma-body does not perish because of its imperishable nature 非滅法 and is not established through deliberate creation because of its uncreated nature 非作法. In a nutshell, none of the causes of phenomena, such as changes, perdition, and exhaustion, exhaust the dharma-body. On the other hand, the dharma-body is not opposed to the karmic phenomena. It is, at an affirmative position, a constant refuge at any time or on any occasion 常可歸依 and equal with the future limit of *saṃsāra* 未來際平等.

The Dharma-Body and the Realm of Sentient Beings

That the dharma-body is unborn and unperishing is also the character of beings or the realm of beings. In the AAN, Buddha reveals that:

Regarding this unborn, unperishing, eternal, tranquil, unchanging refuge [i.e. the tathāgatagarbha], Śāriputra, the inconceivable, pure dharma-realm [dharmadhātu], I term it “beings.” Why? To say “beings” is [only] a synonym for precisely this unborn, unperishing, eternal, tranquil, unchanging refuge, [this] inconceivable, pure dharma-realm, and so on. With this intention, regarding those qualities, I term it “beings.” (Silk, 2015, p. 178 (§19ii))

舍利弗，我依此不生、不滅、常恒、清涼、不變歸依、不可思議、清淨法界，說名“衆生”。所以者何。言“衆生”者，即是不生、不滅、常恒、清涼、不變歸依、不可思議、清淨法界等異名。以是義故，我依彼法，說名“衆生”。(T.16.0668.0467b10-14)

Therefore, “not separate from the *sattvadhātu* is the *dharmakāya*, not separate from the *dharmakāya* is the *sattvadhātu*. The *sattvadhātu* of beings is precisely the *dharmakāya*, the *dharmakāya* is precisely the *sattvadhātu*” (Silk, 2015, p. 112 (§15ii))⁷ 不離衆生界有法身，不離法身有衆生界。衆生界即法身。法身即衆生界 (T.16.0668.0467b16-18). In his investigation of the realm of beings in the AAN, Jones argues that the identification of the realm of beings and the *dharmadhātu*

affirms both the fundamental qualitative (dhātu as nature) and numerical (dhātu as realm) identity of beings with Buddhas. In equating beings with the dharmadhātu—the nature/realm of dharmas—the AAN can be considered to have explained this “single dharmadhātu” both in the sense of a common nature shared by all sentient beings and in the sense of a single realm of existence to which all sentient beings belong. (Jones, 2016, p. 62)

The very dharma-body is termed differently depending on its relationship with mental afflictions (*kleśa* 煩惱) in Mahayana sūtras. It is termed “sentient beings” when ensnared by *kleśa*:

When this very same dharma-body, Śāriputra, ensnared by limitless defilements greater in number than the sands of the Ganges, drifting on the waves of the world from beginningless ages, comes and goes through birth and death, then it is termed “Beings”. (Silk, 2015, p. 103 (§14i))

舍利弗，即此法身過於恒沙無邊煩惱所纏，從無始世來隨順世間波浪漂流，往來生死，名為“衆生”。(T.16.0668.0467b07)

⁷ The translation is adjusted by Jones.

After practicing and purifying, the very dharma-body is termed “bodhisattva” and “Tathāgata” when it is liberated from the casting of worldly *kleśa*:

When this very same dharma-body, Śāriputra, repels the anguish and suffering of birth and death in the world, banishes all desires, practices the ten perfections, collects the eighty-four thousand teachings, and cultivates the practices leading to bodhi, then it is termed “bodhisattva.” (Silk, 2015, p. 106 (§14ii))

舍利弗！即此法身，厭離世間生死苦惱，棄捨一切諸有欲求，行十波羅蜜，攝八萬四千法門，修菩提行，名為“菩薩”。復次，舍利弗！即此法身，離一切世間煩惱使纏，過一切苦，離一切煩惱垢，得淨，得清淨，住於彼岸清淨法中，到一切衆生所願之地，於一切境界中究竟通達，更無勝者，離一切障，離一切礙，於一切法中得自在力，名為“如來、應、正遍知”。(T.16.0668.0467b08-15)

The verses about the process of purifying dharma-body are also mentioned in the RGV, with commentary:

The explanation in three names is to be known as explained in sequential order in respect to the three states, to wit: the state of impurity refers to the realm of beings, the state of both purity and impurity refers to the bodhisattva, and the state of complete purity refers to the Tathāgata. (Johnston, 1950, pp. 40:7-8, 14-16)

The polysemy of *dhātu* in the term *sattva-dhātu* is worth further investigation. In Sanskrit, “sentient beings” is *sattva-dhātu*; in Chinese translations, the term is rendered into 衆生 in the similar verse of the RGV, and into 衆生 and 衆生界 in the verses of the *Mahāyānadharmadhātunirviśeṣa* (MDN) 大乘法界無差別論.⁸ The two relevant foci of the meanings in the AAN amongst its wide semantic range of usages are “realm” and “element”/“essence”/“quintessence”. The being suffering from anguish in the above quote is undoubtedly in the *realm* of sentient beings. However, it would be problematic when the *sattva-dhātu* in the core tenet of the AAN (the supreme truth is precisely *sattva-dhātu*; *sattva-dhātu* is precisely the Buddha-nature; and the Buddha-nature is precisely the dharma-body) is also rendered by the common meaning of the term, namely, “the *realm* of the sentient beings” which refers to the entirety of beings. The equivalence of the supreme truth, *sattvadhātu*, the Buddha-nature, and the dharma-body is true only when the *dhātu* is “element”/“essence”/“quintessence”. Jonathan A. Silk discusses the usage of *dhātu* in his translation and study of the AAN and argues that *dhātu* as “realm” and *dhātu* as “quintessence” both appear in the text. Even though “there is one and only one word being deployed here”, the term should be rendered based on the particular context and sometimes “it might have been better to give both renderings together” (Silk, 2015, p. 26).

Conclusion

In the framework of the critique of the wrong view that the realm of beings increases and decrease, the Buddha reveals that there is no such basis, rather, there is an absence of this dichotomy. The non-increase and the non-decrease in the sūtra mean the unchangingness of sentient beings or the realm of sentient beings. The tenet is on the basis of the equivalence of the supreme truth, the realm of sentient beings, the Buddha-nature, and the dharma-body. Since the single realm is the essence of the realm of all beings in an ontological view, the final equation we may draw is such that “the supreme truth (*paramārtha*) = the realm of sentient beings

⁸ RGV: 舍利弗，即此法身過於恒沙無量煩惱所纏，從無始來隨順世間生死濤波，去來生退，名為“衆生”(T.31.n1611.0832a24-26); MDN: 舍利弗，即此法身為本際無邊煩惱藏所纏，從無始來，生死趣中生滅流轉，說名“衆生界”(T.31.n1627.0893a9-11); MDN: 舍利弗，即此法界過於恒沙無邊煩惱所纏裏，無始世來，常為生死波浪漂流，往來生滅恒處中流，說名“衆生”(T.31.n1627.0895c2-5).

(*sattva-dhātu*) = the Buddha nature (*tathagata-garbha*) = the dharma-body (*dharmakāya*) = the single realm (*eka-dhātu*)” (Jones, 2016, p. 62).⁹ The parallel terminologies justify the basic principle in *Tathāgatagarbha*, namely, all beings, despite wandering in saṃsāra have the fullness of the reality of Buddhahood.

Each of the five notions in the equation can be regarded as a continuous flow of life that has no beginning, end, border, or crack. It does not break away from the life form or life process of any living beings in three realms and six ways; meanwhile, it is not confined in a specific life form, nor is it tangled in the turbulence of any period of life. To wit, the highest is 不住, or neither abiding in nirvana nor in saṃsāra.

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⁹ Jones points out that it is unique to the AAN to use a form of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine to explain constancy in the number of sentient beings.