

Nirvana Sutra

Introduction

The Nirvana (*Mahayana Mahaparinirvana*) Sutra, even though in part a probable Chinese fabrication in its long form, was an influential scripture in the formative years of the C'han (Zen) and T'ien-t'ai schools of Chinese Buddhism.¹ One of the Tathagatagarbha sutras of Mahayana Buddhism, it promoted many new ideas, such as the presence of the Buddha-nature (Buddha-dhatu) in all sentient beings, and new teachings on emptiness (*sunyata*), tathagatagarbha (embryonic Buddha) thought, the eternal rather than this-life nature of Buddhas, and the presence of a true Self in all beings.² Its emphasis on the capability of all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, because they all contain Buddha-nature, was of primary importance in the development of East Asian Buddhism. Like the Surangama and Avatamsaka sutras, the Nirvana Sutra is a relatively long sutra, thus partially accounting for its general neglect in Western lay-oriented Buddhist centers.³

This primer provides summaries of the Sutra's origin and history, its storyline and central teachings, and, briefly, why for critics, some teachings of the Sutra are not considered Buddhist teachings.

Origin and Brief History

The earliest versions of the Nirvana Sutra are now lost, though Sanskrit fragments exist. From differences between the fragments, it seems that the Sutra underwent a number of stages in its development since its origin (in the short form, see below) between c. 50 and 130 CE, perhaps in the coastal Andhra region of east India. Today three surviving versions of the sutra are in other languages, each apparently translated from different Sanskrit fragments. Two surviving translations were made into Chinese: a "six fascicle text" translated by Faxian and Buddhahadra between 416 and 418 and a "northern text," with 40 fascicles, translated by Dharmaksema between 421 and 430. A "southern text," with 36 fascicles was completed by Huiguan and Huyan in c. 453 as a more polished rewriting of (primarily) Dharmaksema's text.⁴ It is generally agreed that Dharmaksema or his agents added an additional 30 fascicles to the short form of the text that have a more sinic (Chinese), non-Indic, orientation.⁵ The Sutra was also translated by Jinamitra, Jnanagarbha, and Devacandra into Tibetan in c. 790.

In spite of its diverse origins and creation in part in China, the longer ("southern") version of the Sutra gained great importance and popularity in East Asia. As expressed by Mark Blum, a Nirvana Sutra scholar, "It would be difficult to overstate the impact of [the] *Nirvana Sutra* in East Asian Buddhism. Not only did it inspired numerous commentaries on the sutra itself in China, Korea, and Japan, it is cited extensively in the works of untold numbers of Buddhist writers and frequently appears in 'secular' literature as well [...] the very idea of Chan [Buddhism] without the concept of buddha-nature is unthinkable."⁶ Today, as translations of the Sutra into English become more readable and available, its popularity in the West is rapidly increasing, too. The focus of this primer is the extended "southern" version of the sutra.

The Storyline

As the sutra opens, the Buddha is in the town of Kusinagara preparing for his final sermon before his death in his present human form. Large numbers of individuals, including "80 billion hundred thousand" great bhiksus (monks), have come from distant areas to hear his final words. Many plead with him not to die but to remain in this world to teach them, the as yet unenlightened. In

answer, the Buddha then explains at length in a questioning and answer format the nature of buddhas, the nature of nirvana, and the other teachings discussed in the following section.

A distinguishing feature of the Nirvana Sutra is a more nuanced approach than usual in sutras to answering questions like, “What is the nature of buddha? What is the nature of nirvana? How is it possible that an unenlightened individual could actually become a buddha? What does the teaching of nonself really mean? [and] How can those who commit crimes turn themselves around so a proper life becomes possible again?” – among other questions.⁷ Each of these questions is answered at length from a variety of perspectives using everyday language to clarify the answers to these and other questions.

The content and nature of the storyline of the Nirvana Sutra is to be understood within the context of the belief in East Asia Buddhism during the medieval period that the dharma was fading, as was apparent in the heavily institutionalized interpretations and practices of monastic Buddhists at the time.⁸ In contrast to the pessimism of these institutionalized beliefs, the Nirvana Sutra is full of joy, promise, and new forms of practice and belief, a new way of seeing and being in the world that energized many leading Buddhists. The Nirvana Sutra is an exemplar of this new understanding of basic Buddhist beliefs and what it means to be a Buddhist.

Central Teachings of the Nirvana Sutra

The concepts and teachings of Buddhism explained by the Buddha in the Nirvana Sutra are not so much new concepts as clarifications and augmentations of traditional concepts and teachings, as understood (of course) from a specific Mahayana perspective. Eight of these concepts and teachings are reviewed in this section in question form. The section ends with an explanation of why the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra is regarded by its supporters as the ultimate of all Mahayana discourses and the Buddha’s final true teaching, though it is extremely difficult to understand by the unenlightened.

What is a Buddha? In contrast to non-Mahayana sutras in which the historic buddha Shakyamuni dies at the age of 80, a Buddha’s final death (parinirvana) in human form in this sutra and other Mahayana sutras does not mean his ultimate destruction, but merely the death of his present manifestation.⁹ The true body of a Buddha is uncreated, unchanging, and eternal. As the sutra stresses, a Buddha is never born and is not created. As a consequence, a Buddha has no beginning and no end, but remains active on behalf of the suffering of all beings and all phenomena. With this goal in mind, Shakyamuni Buddha and other eternal Buddhas occasionally manifest themselves in a variety of forms across time and space to promote the dharma and save all beings, human and otherwise.

The body of the Tathagata is one that is eternal, one that is indestructible, and one that is adamantine [unbreakable or perhaps ‘carved in stone’], one that is not sustained by various kinds of food. It is the Dharma-Body. (PY-Chap. 5)

As the Dharma is eternal, so too are all Buddhas eternal. (PY-Chap. 7)

You well know that the Tathagata is one eternal and unchanging, and is an Uncreate. (PY-Chap. 2)

What is the Buddha-Nature? According to the Nirvana Sutra, not only is the Buddha-nature common to Buddhas, but it is present in all things and in all phenomena. It is eternal, blissful, pure, and characterized by a personal Self that is no other than the reality of a Buddha (see below).¹⁰ This is a core theme of the sutra. It is particularly noteworthy that this includes the icchantikas, those who commit crimes and reject the dharma.¹¹ Nonetheless, though all beings

contain Buddha-nature, personal afflictions may prevent them from realizing it. As a result, one's Buddha-nature needs to be awakened and revealed. In East Asian Buddhism, the Nirvana Sutra provided a scriptural basis for the belief that all living beings have Buddha-nature and that each one of us regardless of our present condition (except, perhaps, the icchantikas) has the potential for salvation.

All beings possess the Buddha Nature. Only by observing the precepts can one see it. When one sees the Buddha-Nature, one attains unsurpassed Enlightenment. (PY-Chap. 9)

All that is made is not eternal. The Void is not anything made. So, it is eternal. The Buddha-Nature is not what is made. So, it is eternal. The Void is the Buddha-Nature; the Buddha-Nature is the Tathagata; the Tathagata is not what has been made. (PY- Chap. 20).

What is Nirvana? In traditional views of nirvana in Buddhism, nirvana means most basically freedom from the effects of karma and delusion. It is a state that is attained. Nirvana in the Nirvana Sutra is the emergence of an awareness of one's identity with the cosmic force that is the world. It is recognition of the true nature of ultimate reality and of oneself.

[Nirvanic] quietude has nothing to supercede it. All phenomenal existences are done away with, with nothing remaining. This indicates what is fresh, clear, eternal, and unretrogressive. That is why we say that Nirvana is eternal. It is the same with the Tathagata. He is eternal, with no change. (PY-Chap. 7)

... when the fire of illusion is extinguished, there is Nirvana. (PY-Chap. 7)

In Nirvana there remain no trace of the sun, moon, stars, ... Such is the abode of Nirvana and the tathagata, who is Eternal and does not change. (PY-Chap. 7)

Should You Delay Attaining Nirvana Until All Beings Are Saved? In contrast to many other Buddhist teachings, as in the Prajnaparamita Sutra, in which nirvana is liberation from repeating cycles of birth, life, and death (*samsara*), and the realization of emptiness and the extinction of all suffering, the Nirvana Sutra describes nirvana as eternal, joyous, personal, and pure in nature. It is not annihilation, but an eternal, joyous state of which buddhas are embodiments of true reality. In addition, in contrast to many other Mahayana sutras, the highest goal in the sutra is not the bodhisattva ideal in which one renounces nirvana to save all beings first before entering nirvana oneself. One is urged instead to attain nirvana for oneself first, for one will be best placed to lead others to it (though one should still work to free all beings along the way, too).

Hear Dharma, save yourself and then save others. First, understand yourself, and let others understand ... First, gain Nirvana yourself, and then let others gain it. (PY-Chap. 27)

What is the Nature of Ultimate Reality? The Nirvana Sutra equates the nature of ultimate reality with nirvana, the Buddha-nature, and the Tathagata – with the cosmic presence of an ever-present life force that pervades all and of which all are nothing other than that life force. Our true Self is none other than this life force; the Buddha is none other than this life force; the Buddha-nature is none other than this life force. This view is sharply different from the traditional static view that ultimate reality is emptiness, which is the dissolving of dualities and delusions about reality. When one sheds delusions about reality in this traditional view, one awakens and becomes enlightened. In contrast, in these Mahayana teachings ultimate reality is an active cosmic force that expresses itself in all beings and phenomena. These beings and phenomena are in turn

nothing other than that active cosmic force. This view “profoundly changed the way Buddhism in China presented its vision of the truth.”¹² It also changed what it means in Zen (Chan) to meditate. Rather than a concentration on the delusions and tensions that fog one’s mind, one sits serenely in Zen manifesting one’s oneness with the cosmic energy that is ultimate reality.

If it is the case that Nirvana, the Buddha-Nature, definiteness, and the Tathagata are one and the same (PY-Chap. 7)

Do Living Beings Have a Self? What is considered one of the more radical teachings of the Nirvana Sutra is the existence of a true self. According to traditional Buddhist teachings a personal self or personality does not exist. In fact, the thought that it does was considered a key source of suffering. The Nirvana Sutra by contrast identifies the existence of a genuine self with one’s Buddha-nature. According to this view, “a really existing, permanent element exists in sentient beings. It is this element that enables sentient beings to become Buddhas. It is beyond egoistic self-grasping, but the very opposite. It also fulfills several of the requirements of a Self in the Indian tradition. What is interesting is that this sutra (though joined by some other tathagatagarbha sutras) is prepared to use the word ‘Self’ (*atman*) for this element. So the Sutra is quite self-consciously modifying or criticizing the non-Self tradition of Buddhism.”¹³

As usual, the Buddha uses words in the Nirvana Sutra as *upaya* (skillful means). If a person is overly attached to a sense of self and a desire for things, either material or abstract, the Buddha is likely to deny the existence of a personal self and to stress the concept of emptiness. According to the Sutra, these teachings are not the Buddha’s final teachings nor do they reflect the true nature of reality.

Is there Self ... or not? The Buddha said: “O good man. Self means ‘Tathagatagarbha’ [Buddha Womb, Buddha-Embryo, Buddha-Nature]. Every being has Buddha-Nature. This is the Self. (PY-Chap. 12)

The nature of Self is nothing other than the hidden storehouse of the Tathagata. (PY-Chap. 12)

The Self, too, is not a thing. (PY-Chap. 7)

What Disposition Should All Living Beings Strive to Adopt? The sutra encourages people to adopt the good qualities inherent in the nature of the Buddha. These qualities include loving-kindness, friendliness, compassion, empathetic joy, and the equal treatment of all beings. All hatred is to be rejected as a moral contaminant (*klesa*). This disposition opens the Path to Awakening to Nirvana.

Because of the [existence of the] Buddha-Nature [within them], beings are viewed with equal [non-discriminating] eyes, and there is no difference. (PY-Chap. 13)

How can [a person] possess great virtues and practice the Way ... One who does not injure the life of beings and strongly upholds the prohibitions, and who learns the Buddha’s all-wonderful teachings ... and always giving to all others .. not telling lies ... using gentle words (and so on at length) (PY-Chap. 27)

Why is Faith in the Buddha’s Teachings Important? An important component of the teachings in the Nirvana Sutra is the request by the Buddha to take his most seemingly controversial and puzzling teachings on faith. Since the vast number of beings that listen to his sermons are not yet enlightened, they cannot grasp the truth of all of his teachings. The Sutra

emphasizes that this is especially true of his teachings on the presence of Buddha-nature (*tathagatagarba*) in all living beings.

All that is said in these [Mahayana] sutras is the truth of the Way [marga] ... As I have already stated, if one believes in the Way, such a Way of faith is the root of faith. This assists the Way of awakening ... The Way begins with the root of faith (PY-Chap. 20)

The Buddha-Dharma is incalculable and hard to fathom. The same is also the case with the Tathagata. He is beyond knowing. (PY-Chap. 5)

Faith in the Buddha is seen as a positive virtue as it leads to more attentive listening to Dharma, which in turn strengthens faith still further. The Buddha remarks: "Faith arises out of listening to Dharma, and this listening is [itself] grounded in faith." (PY-Chap. 34)

If a person does not possess faith [prajna], such a person increases his ignorance. If a person possesses insight, but not faith, such a person will increase [his/her] distorted views. ... A person who has no faith will say, out of an angry mind: 'There cannot be any Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.' (PY-Chap. 42)

Why Should We Not Eat Meat? The Nirvana Sutra is also notable for its stern warning against meat eating.¹⁴ Tony Page summarizes the basic points on his Web site (Vegetarianism (2)) as follows: "(1) Animals are sentient beings like humans, hungry ghosts, demons, asuras, and devas [and] therefore [are] meant to be included in our 'moral universe'. (2) The basic ethical precept within our compassion is to 'treat others the way we wish to be treated' and therefore we do not eat animals. (3) Even for selfish reasons, there are ill effects of animal flesh eating. (4) Even for the animals that are not eaten, our odor changes so that we induce terror in them. (5) Animal flesh eating is an addiction or intoxicant that hurts our mental Calm and clarity." This doctrine profoundly influenced Buddhism in East Asia.

... those who do partake of meat, whether they are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, will produce an odor of meat that all living beings will smell and this inevitably creates a sense of fear in them. It is like a man who gets close to lions; a crowd that sees him do this will smell the odor of the lion on him afterward and become afraid. (Blum 2013:112)

Whenever you receive donations of food from lay donors you should regard [any meat in] the food as if it were the flesh of your own son. (Blum 2013:111)

Good man, to eat meat is to cut out the seeds of your own great compassion. (Blum 2013:111)

According to the Nirvana Sutra, the above teachings are not provisional and in need of interpretation, which many other sermons by the Buddha are because of their provisional nature (i.e., the Buddha is talking to people with a limited – and often very limited – comprehension of what he is talking about). Instead they reveal the ultimate meaning of all sutras because the Nirvana Sutra is the Buddha's final sermon before his death in his present human form. Therefore many Mahayana Buddhists consider the sutra the ultimate of all his discourses, though it is difficult to understand because the inexpressible is being expressed in words. It was claimed as well that just hearing the words of the sutra or its name could bring happiness and lead to Awakening.

It is the best of all sutras. (PY-Chap. 6)

What the Tathagata speaks about is that which does not change and is not different. It is the true Dharma. (PY-Chap. 2)

The Buddha-Dharma is incalculable and hard to fathom. The same is also the case with the tathagata. He is beyond knowing. (PY-Chap. 5)

Is the Nirvana Sutra a Non-Buddhist Scripture?

Although this primer is about the Nirvana Sutra and its contents, readers should be aware of intense criticism of some key teachings in the sutra and in Mahayana Buddhism more generally, in particular the doctrine of Tathagatagarbha (Buddha-nature) and its association with the notion of a real Self (*atman*) in all beings, assertions that traditional Buddhism denies.¹⁵ These criticisms are most basically about what constitutes “true Buddhism” and will not be examined further here. Nonetheless, the criticisms and responses to them illustrate the stormy waters that roil advanced Buddhist studies.

Notes

1. The sutra shares its title but not its teachings with the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, a well-known scripture in the Pali Canon. To emphasize the difference, the word Mahayana usually precedes the Mahayana version, thus the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. For English translations of the sutra, see Yamamoto (1973-1975), Blum (2013), Kato (2014), and Page and Yamamoto (2014). As the quality of the translations has improved, the recognition of the importance of the Sutra has accelerated in Western Buddhism. For other commentaries on the sutra, see Blum (2003), Hodge (2006), Lai (1982), Liu (1982, 1984, 2005), Radich (2015), and Sasaki (1999). Also see Tony Page’s Nirvana Sutra website (<http://www.nirvanasutra.org.uk/>). The origin of the quotations cited in this primer is marked by a PY for Page and Yamamoto, and ‘Blum (2013: page number)’ for Blum. Although rather rough, the confused will find Yamamoto’s (1973-1975:1007-1036) “Chapters Explained” section useful.
2. Traditionally there are ten Tathagatagarbha sutras. Others besides the Nirvana Sutra are the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, the *Srimal-devi-simhanada Sutra*, and the *Angulimaliya Sutra*. Related is the important Ratna-gotra-vibhaga scripture. All contain the idea that since all beings possess the “embryo” (garbha) of the tathagata (the Buddha), that is the Buddha-nature, they have the possibility of attaining Buddhahood. These concepts are elaborated upon below.
3. Yamamoto’s 1973-1975 translation of the “southern” version includes 993 pages of sutra text; Blum’s 2013 translation of the first ten fascicles (chapters) is 334 pages long.
4. For a 102-page scholarly review of the origins of the text and its translations, see Hodge (2012; also see Hodge 2004). Although the “southern text” has only 36 fascicle, “this does not mean that any content has been omitted – it is just that the *juan* length and divisions were altered” (Hodge 2012:24). A fascicle (or *juan*) is a separately published installment of a book or other manuscript (for texts that we are most familiar with, this generally means a chapter).
5. As stated by Hodge (2012:26), “I suspect that this material was actually manufactured by Dharmaksema himself ..., or else, at best, ‘commissioned’ by him for his own reasons. This, in my view, considerably reduces the value of this material, despite the high esteem in which it was held amongst Chinese Buddhists in the past and apparently by some scholars in the present.” For Dharmaksema, see Chen (2004).
6. Blum (2013:xix).
7. Blum (2013:xv). Besides the presence of “80 billion hundred thousand” great bhiksus in the audience, the sutra contains many other typical Mahayana phantasms. A second example, also in the ‘1. Introductory’ section of Page and Yamamoto is “... the World-Honored One emitted from his mouth rays of light of various hues, namely: blue, yellow, red, white, crystal, and agate.” This long sutra is packed full of questions posed to the Buddha (often in a ‘but you said this before’ manner’) and his answer. A small example includes: What are the Four Truths? How do you know Dharma? How do

- you practice loving-kindness? What are the two kinds of created things? What is the nature of physical things? Of impermanence? Of suffering? Of non-self? Of evil? And so on.
8. This fading of the Dharma is expressed in the Japanese word *'mappō.'* For an overview of the fading of the Dharma and its influence on later developments in Buddhism, see Nattier (1991).
 9. For an introduction to the bodies of the Buddha, see Williams (2009:172-186). But be wary here: a Buddha only makes these claims to ones who seek answers- but he is beyond words. So he is eternal and not eternal, unchanging and changing, etc. As the Buddha proclaims, “All of these are twisted views of life” (PY-Chap. 28).
 10. Some specialists prefer the use of terms like *Buddha-dhatu*, *Tathagatagarbha*, or Buddha Principle to that of Buddha-nature. As expressed by Tony Page on his Nirvana Sutra Web site, these terms are used “to avoid the impression that what is being spoken of here is the Buddha’s ‘temperament’ or ‘character’ or ‘disposition’ within us. This is not quite the meaning ascribed to it in the *Nirvana Sutra*. The *Buddha-dhatu* has more of the sense of ‘Buddha Factor’ or ‘Buddha Principle’ than ‘nature.’” For commentaries on the Buddha-nature, see King (1991), Stambaugh (190), Dalai Lama XIV (1997), and Brown (2010).
 11. According to some Mahayana sutras, the icchantikas lack Buddha-nature, so they are beings that will never become free from samsara. In other sutras, the icchantikas do possess the Buddha-nature. For many Buddhists at the time, the denial in the Nirvana Sutra of the negative thesis was for many a liberating aspect of later Mahayana Buddhism. However, the Nirvana Sutra itself presents a mixed message on the icchantikas potential for enlightenment, as in these quotations: “The icchantikas possess the Buddha-Nature, but overspread by innumerable defilements, he cannot gain the all-wonderful cause of enlightenment, but repeats birth and death unendingly” (PY-Chap. 16); “Someone who has transgressed in committing a heinous crime can, after having eliminated his offense, go on to attain buddhahood. This is why there is no basis for the claim that people are fixed in who they are ...” (Blum 2013:150).
 12. Keown (2003:197). For an exploration of this view of reality in a Zen context, see Dainin Katagiri’s (2017) *The Light That Shines Through Infinity: Zen and the Energy of Life*. This may be a result of the extensive incorporation of Taoist concepts like Chi in Chan (Zen) Buddhism, an incorporation that gave some schools of Chinese Buddhism a distinctive Sinitic cast.
 13. From Tony Page’s “Appreciation of the ‘Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra’” on his Web site. On the existence of a Self, also see Williams (2009:108-109)
 14. For three studies of vegetarianism in contemporary Buddhism that resonate with issues brought up in the Nirvana Sutra, see Stewart (2016), Ricard (2016), and Barstow (2018).
 15. For overviews of what is called ‘Critical Buddhism,’ see Swanson (1993), Hubbard and Swanson (1997), and Shields (2011).

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