

Genshin's Interpretation of the Buddha-nature  
as found in the *Ichijō yōketsu*

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In the tenth month of 1006, the Tendai monk Genshin (942-1017), then sixty-five years of age, took to bed with illness. As he later recalled, on his sickbed he became convinced with the need to prove, once and for all, the truth of the Tendai doctrine that all beings can attain Buddhahood, and refute the Hossō sect's position that not all beings can become Buddhas. Upon recovery, he called upon the assistance of several disciples and made a thorough study of past works on this topic from India, China and Japan. Based on his research, Genshin sat down to compose the *Ichijō yōketsu* (*Determining the Essentials of the One Vehicle*), a learned and encyclopedic treatise in three fascicles defending the Tendai position of universal Buddhahood.<sup>1</sup>

The question of whether or not all beings are capable of achieving Buddhahood had long been a point of bitter controversy between the Tendai and Hossō sects in Japan.<sup>2</sup> The Tendai sect unequivocally held that all beings without exception can attain Buddhahood. The Tendai position was based on such well-known Buddhist scriptures as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. In its famous doctrine of the One Vehicle, the *Lotus Sūtra* asserts that there is in truth only one goal in Buddhism: the attainment of perfect Buddhahood through the practice of the bodhisattva path. According to this sūtra, all beings can, and indeed must, strive to achieve complete Buddhahood; they should not be content with lesser spiritual attainments such as *pratyekabuddha*-hood and *arhat*-hood.<sup>3</sup>

Just as important for the Tendai position is the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Genshin's account of how he came to write the *Ichijō yōketsu* is found in the preface to this work. See Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaikyoku eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* vol. 74 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924-1934): 327c. All references hereafter to the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, the standard edition of the East Asian Buddhist canon, will be given as "T", followed by volume, page and column number(s).

<sup>2</sup>Important works on this topic include Tokiwa Daijō, *Busshō no kenkyū* reprint (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1977), and Fukihara Shōshin, *Chūgoku Nihon busshō shisōshi* (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Fujita Kotatsu, "Ichijō to sanjō," in *Hokke shisō*, ed. Ōchō Enichi (Kyoto: Heirakuji, 1969): 352-405.

<sup>4</sup>There are two versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. The first is the forty fascicle version which was translated into Chinese in 421 by Dharmakṣema (385-431). The second is the revision of the forty fascicle version completed in south China in 436; this version is thirty-six fascicles in length. This thirty-six fascicle version is commonly called the "Southern edition" to distinguish it from Dharmakṣema's version, which is popularly known as the "Northern edition." It was this revised "Southern

and its doctrine that "all beings, without exception, have the Buddha-nature."<sup>5</sup> According to this sūtra, there is no one in the world incapable of attaining Buddhahood. This is because each and every being possess within himself or herself the nature of the Buddha. Indeed, this sūtra asserts that even *icchantikas*, totally depraved and evil beings, possess the Buddha-nature and are thus capable of reaching Buddhahood.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, the Hossō sect, which traces itself back to the teachings of the Indian Yogācāra school, held that not all beings are capable of achieving Buddhahood. Instead they argued that all beings can be distinguished into five "lineages" (*gotras*) in accordance with their innate spiritual abilities.<sup>7</sup> Each being's ultimate spiritual attainment is foreordained depending on the lineage to which he or she belongs. The five lineages are:

- (1) the bodhisattva lineage
- (2) the *pratyekabuddha* lineage
- (3) the *śrāvaka* lineage
- (4) the indeterminate lineage
- (5) lineageless beings

The first three lineages correspond to the three traditional paths (or "vehicles") to enlightenment described in Mahāyāna texts: the bodhisattva vehicle, *pratyekabuddha* vehicle and *śrāvaka* vehicle. These three lineages culminate in Buddhahood, *pratyekabuddha*-hood and *arhat*-hood, respectively. The indeterminate lineage refers to those who practice according to one of the Three Vehicles for some time and later convert to another vehicle. Typically, it denotes a practitioner of the *śrāvaka* vehicle who converts to the Mahāyāna bodhisattva vehicle. Finally, the last lineageless (*agotra*) beings refer to *icchantikas* who are eternally bound to the cycle of birth-and-death and totally incapable of gaining release from transmigratory existence.

The present essay is a study of Genshin's views concerning the Buddha-nature as found in the *Ichijō yōketsu*.<sup>8</sup> As stated above, Genshin wrote the edition" which became the most popular version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* in East Asia.

In the *Ichijō yōketsu*, Genshin consistently quotes from the Northern edition of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, but after the quotation always notes where the corresponding passage can be found in the Southern edition. Following Genshin, in the pages below, I will give references to both the Northern and Southern editions when citing the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*.

<sup>5</sup>On the Buddha-nature doctrine in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, see Ming-wood Liu, "The Doctrine of the Buddha-nature in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5-2 (1982): 63-94.

<sup>6</sup>On the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*'s treatment of *icchantikas*, see Ming-wood Liu, "The Problem of the *Ichchantika* in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7-1 (1984): 57-81.

<sup>7</sup>On the Hossō theory of the Five Lineages, see Fukaura Seibun, *Yuishikigaku kenkyū* vol. 2 (Kyoto: Nagata bunshōdō, 1954): 638-658.

<sup>8</sup>Okubo Ryōjun, *Ichijō yōketsu* (Tokyo: Daitō shuppan, 1990) is the only book-length

*Ichijō yōketsu* in order to defend the Tendai position that all beings can attain Buddhahood. Naturally he looked to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and its theory that "all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature" to provide him with scriptural support for his arguments. In the following pages, I will briefly consider the major points of Genshin's analysis of the Buddha-nature concept, focusing in particular on his argument that even *icchāntikas*, thoroughly evil beings devoid of faith in the Buddhist teachings, can attain Buddhahood because they possess the Buddha-nature.

### 1. Genshin on the Universality of the Buddha-nature

In the fourth chapter of the *Ichijō yōketsu*, entitled "Quotation of Passages concerning how All Beings Possess the (Buddha-) nature and Attain Buddhahood" (*In issai shujō ushō jōbutsu mon*; T 74, 343a-348b), Genshin quotes a total of twenty passages from a number of sūtras and treatises to demonstrate that all beings possess the Buddha-nature. Half of these twenty passages derive from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the single most important scripture concerning the Buddha-nature doctrine. For example, Genshin quotes the following passage found in fascicle 27 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Northern edition [T 12, 522c]; fascicle 25 in the Southern edition [T 12, 767a-b]).

The lion's roar is called the definitive preaching. (It preaches:) all beings without exception possess the Buddha-nature; the Tathāgata is eternal and changeless. (T 74, 346b)

Here the sūtra declares that the teaching that "all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature" is the definitive and final teaching of the Buddha. In another passage, cited from fascicle 21 (Northern edition [T 12, 488b]; in the Southern edition it is found in fascicle 19 [T 12, 731b]), the sūtra declares that the Buddha-nature doctrine is the Buddha's "extremely profound secret" -- a special teaching revealed nowhere else within the scriptures.

To know well the meaning of the Tathāgata's profound secret: this is the so-called great *parinirvāṇa*. All beings without exception possess the Buddha-nature. (Thus) after one has repented (all transgressions of) the four cardinal prohibitions, removed all thought of slandering the Dharmā, exhausted the five grave offences and destroyed *icchāntikas*, one can attain *anuttara-(samyak)-sambodhi*. This is called the extremely profound secret meaning. (T 74, 346a)

This passage, comments Genshin, states unambiguously that all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature. Although the Hossō sect claims that certain beings -- specifically the lineageless beings or *icchāntikas* -- study on this text. Yaḡi Kōe, *Eshin kyōgaku no kisoteki kenkyū* (Kyoto: Nagata bunshōdō, 1962) contains important material on the *Ichijō yōketsu*. See also Robert F. Rhodes, "Genshin and the *Ichijō yōketsu*: A Treatise on Universal Buddhahood in Heian Japan," Ph. D. diss., Harvard University, 1985.

are eternally denied liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death, Genshin argues that the Hossō position is contradicted by these lines. According to this passage, even *icchantikas* are able to attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, or supreme enlightenment, and escape the cycle of transmigration if they repeat their past actions and no longer engage in those acts which make one into an *icchantika*, such as slandering the Buddhist Dharma and committing in the five grave offenses. For this reason, no being is incapable of achieving Buddhahood.

Other passages which Genshin quotes from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* repeat the point that even *icchantikas* possess the Buddha-nature. It is found, for example, in the following lines from fascicle 28<sup>9</sup> (Northern edition [T 12, 534c]; in the Southern edition, it is found in fascicle 26 [T 12, 779c]).

Son of good family! All beings will definitely attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*. For this reason, within the sūtra, I preach that all beings without exception, even down to (those who commit) the five grave offenses, transgress against the four cardinal prohibitions and *icchantikas*, possess the Buddha-nature. (T 74, 346b)

Likewise a passage from fascicle 35 (Northern edition [T 12, 571b]; fascicle 32 of the Southern edition [T 12, 818a]) states,

The Buddha addressed Kāśyapa Bodhisattva, saying, "Concerning your previous question, 'Do people who have eliminated all wholesome roots<sup>10</sup> have the Buddha-nature?' (I reply as follows). These people also possess the Tathāgata's Buddha-nature. They will also possess the Buddha-nature in future reincarnations. These two Buddha-natures (those of the present and the future) are said to be non-existent because their future (Buddhahood) is (presently) obstructed. Because they ultimately attain (Buddhahood), they are said to exist. This is called a discriminating reply." (T 74, 346b)

In the lines above, the phrase "people who have eliminated all wholesome roots" refer to *icchantikas*, who are said to be devoid of all wholesome roots leading to enlightenment. However even these *icchantikas* possess the Tathāgata's Buddha-nature. Although these *icchantikas* were previously called incapable of attaining liberation from birth-and-death, this only means that they are temporarily unable to do so. Since they actually do possess the Buddha-nature, even they are able to attain Buddhahood at some point in the future. The same argument is also found in the lines below, which derive from fascicle 24 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Northern edition [T 12, 505c]; fascicle 22 in the Southern edition [T 12, 749c]).

<sup>9</sup>In the *Ichijō yōketsu*, Genshin notes that this passage derives from fascicle 29 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, but in the Taishō edition of this text, the passage is found in fascicle 28.

<sup>10</sup>Qualities conducive to the attainment of nirvāṇa.

What is called knowledge? It is to know that there is no self and that there is nothing which can be possessed by the self. It is to know that all beings possess the Buddha-nature. Because of their Buddha-nature, *icchāntikas*, etc., can repudiate their earlier attitudes and attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi* without exception. This is entirely something which cannot be known by *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. It can be known by bodhisattvas. (T 74, 346a)

Here too, the sūtra claims that all beings without exception, including even *icchāntikas*, have the Buddha-nature. Because they possess the Buddha-nature, *icchāntikas* are able to repent their evil past, repudiate their *icchāntika*-like actions and ultimately reach Buddhahood. These passages, concludes Genshin, prove beyond all doubt that, thanks to their Buddha-nature, all beings can achieve Buddhahood.

## 2. The Hossō Theory of *Ichchantikas*

Of course, the Hossō position that not all beings can escape from the cycle of birth-and-death is not without scriptural backing. As stated above, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* proclaims that even *icchāntikas* can achieve Buddhahood because they possess the Buddha-nature. However, these words are found only in the sūtra's later chapters. In its early chapters, the sūtra clearly states that, due to their thoroughly corrupt and evil natures, *icchāntikas* are eternally prevented from gaining release from transmigratory existence. For example, it states,

Again, there may be a *bhikṣu* who preaches the Buddha's secret treasury and profound scripture (in this way): "All beings have the Buddha-nature. Because of this nature, they eliminate innumerable billions of defilements and fetters and are able to attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*. (However) *icchāntikas* are excepted." (T 12, 404c [Northern edition]; T 12, 645b [Southern edition])

Here the sūtra states that *icchāntikas* are excepted from attaining *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*. A similar view is also expressed in the following passage.

Son of good family! Even if innumerable beings should attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi* all at once, the Tathāgatas do not see (among them even one) *icchāntika* (who) attains enlightenment. (T 12, 418c [Northern edition]; T 12, 659c [Southern edition])

A number of other statements making the same point are also found in the sūtra.

Proponents of the Hossō position often cited passages from these early chapters as proof of their position that there truly exist a class of beings who cannot gain liberation. But Hossō scholars were then faced with the necessity of explaining why the sūtra later declares that *icchāntikas* can ultimately reach Buddhahood. They answered this question by arguing that the *icchāntikas* who are declared destined for eventual Buddhahood in the

sūtra's later chapters are not the same as the *icchāntikas* alluded to in the sūtra's earlier chapters.

The Hossō reply is based on the notion that there are several distinct types of *icchāntikas*, only some of whom can attain Buddhahood. For example, the *Mahāyāna-sūtra-ālamkāra*, an important Yogācāra treatise, makes the following distinction.

Those without the dharma of *parinirvāṇa* refer to (beings) of the rank of those who are devoid (of the Buddha-nature). This is of two kinds: (1) those who attain *parinirvāṇa* with time, and (2) those who are ultimately without the *nirvāṇa* dharma. There are four types of people among those who attain *parinirvāṇa* with time: (1) those who solely practice evil deeds, (2) those who have thoroughly eliminated wholesome dharmas, (3) those who lack good roots leading to liberation, and (4) those who do not possess good roots. As for those ultimately without the *nirvāṇa* dharma, they are, by nature, unable (to attain) of *parinirvāṇa* because they do not possess the cause (for Buddhahood). That is to say, they only seek birth-and-death and do not desire *parinirvāṇa*. (T 31, 595a)

Here the *Mahāyāna-sūtra-ālamkāra* distinguishes two kinds of beings devoid of the *nirvāṇa* dharma (= *icchāntikas*): (1) those who attain *parinirvāṇa* with time, and (2) those who are ultimately without the *nirvāṇa* dharma. According to this passage, even though the former *icchāntikas* possess numerous evil qualities, they can eventually gain liberation. In contrast, beings ultimately without the *nirvāṇa* dharma are eternally bound to the cycle of birth-and-death.

Closely related to this view is the Hossō theory of the three types of *icchāntikas*. This theory is presented in a number of texts, including the *Neng hsien chung pien hui jih lun* (*Treatise of the Sun of Wisdom Revealing the Middle and the Extreme*; cited hereafter as the *Hui jih lun*), written by Hui-chao, a learned Chinese scholar of the T'ang period. In this work, Hui-chao distinguishes three types of *icchāntikas*.<sup>11</sup>

(1) *Ichchantika* (Chinese: *i ch'an ti chia*; Japanese: *issenteika*). According to Hui-chao, the term literally means "desire." It refers to beings who desire to be reborn within the cycle of birth-and-death. They refer to beings devoid of wholesome roots necessary to reach *nirvāṇa*.

(2) *Achandika* (Ch.: *a ch'an ti chia*; J.: *asenteika*). This term means "lack of desire." They refer to beings who do not have the desire to seek *nirvāṇa*, specifically to *icchāntikas* of great compassion described in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. (*Ichchantikas* of great compassion refer to bodhisattvas who refuse to achieve Buddhahood until all beings are ferried over to *nirvāṇa*. Since the number of beings who must be ferried over to *nirvāṇa* are infinite, these bodhisattvas are eternally unable to achieve Buddhahood. It is for this reason that these bodhisattvas are called "*icchāntikas*," i. e.,

<sup>11</sup>On Hui-chao interpretation of the *icchāntika*, see T 45, 441b-2b.

beings incapable of realizing nirvāṇa.<sup>12)</sup>

(3) *Atyantika* (Ch.: *a tien ti chia*; J.: *atenteika*). According to Hui-chao, this term means "ultimate." It refers to beings who are ultimately lacking the nature of nirvāṇa.

Of the three types of *icchāntikas* above, the first two are capable of reaching nirvāṇa in the future. Because of their evil natures, the *icchāntikas* are presently lacking the ability to practice the Buddha way. However, after an immensely long period of time, they will repent their evil past, arouse faith in the Mahāyāna, and eventually attain Buddhahood. Likewise, even though *achāntikas* are called *icchāntikas*, they are in reality bodhisattvas. Thus in the final analysis, they too are capable of attaining Buddhahood.

In contrast, the third type of *icchāntikas* are forever incapable of escaping from the cycle of birth-and-death because they are totally lacking in the nature of nirvāṇa. It is these beings who are *icchāntikas* in the true sense. When the *Mahāpratinirvāṇa Sūtra* states that *icchāntikas* can attain Buddhahood, it is referring only to the first two types of *icchāntikas*, and not to the third (and authentic) kind of *icchāntikas*.

Furthermore, Hossō scholars sought to provide ontological justification for distinguishing among *icchāntikas* through the theory of the two kinds of Buddha-natures. The two kinds of Buddha-natures refer to (1) the Buddha-nature as principle (*ri busshō*) and (2) practical Buddha-nature (*gyō busshō*). The Buddha-nature as principle refers to the Tathatā found within all beings, while the practical Buddha-nature refers to the undefiled seed within the *ālayavijñāna* which is the actual cause of Buddhahood. According to the Hossō understanding, when the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* states that all beings, including *icchāntikas*, have the Buddha-nature, it means that they possess the Buddha-nature as principle, i. e., the Tathatā immanent in all things. However, this does not mean that they can all actually attain Buddhahood. The capacity to attain Buddhahood is determined by whether or not one possesses the undefiled seed leading to Buddhahood, i. e., the practical Buddha-nature. Only beings with the practical Buddha-nature can reach Buddhahood; conversely the possibility of attaining Buddhahood is forever denied to beings lacking this type of Buddha-nature.

Applying this theory to their doctrine of the three types of *icchāntikas*, Hossō scholars argued that all *icchāntikas* possess the Buddha-nature as principle. However, they insisted that only certain types of *icchāntikas* (*icchāntikas* who attain *parinirvāṇa* with time [in terms of the *Mahāyāna-sūtra-ālamkāra*] or *icchāntikas* and *achāntikas* [in terms of *Hui jih lun*]) possess the practical Buddha-nature and are consequently able to reach Buddhahood. Other types of *icchāntikas* -- *icchāntikas* who are ultimately without the nirvāṇa dharma [*Mahāyāna-sūtra-ālamkāra*] or *atyantika* [*Hui*

<sup>12)</sup>On *icchāntikas* of great compassion, see Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Studies in the Lankavatara Sūtra* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1930): 219-220.

*jih lun*] -- are without the practical Buddha nature, and are thus forever excluded from Buddhahood. Through such arguments, the Hossō sect attempted to reconcile their position with the words of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and demonstrate that certain beings are truly incapable of attaining Buddhahood.

### 3. Genshin's Criticism of the Hossō Theory of the Two Kinds of Buddha natures

Throughout the *Ichijō yōketsu*, Genshin criticizes this theory of the two kinds of Buddha-natures. He argues that there is no valid scriptural ground for distinguishing between the Buddha-nature as principle and the practical Buddha-nature. In Genshin's view, the statement that "all beings without exception possess the Buddha-nature" literally means what it says: all beings possess the nature of the Buddha which enables them to attain Buddhahood.

Nowhere in the *Ichijō yōketsu* does Genshin present a systematic rebuttal of the Hossō doctrine of the two kinds of Buddha-natures. Instead, his strategy is to invoke Hossō interpretations of scriptural passages based upon the distinction of the two types of Buddha-natures, and demonstrate that they contradict the meaning of the sūtras they were meant to interpret. Due to the lack of space, only two example of Genshin's method will be discussed here.<sup>13</sup>

First, according to a passage from fascicle 36 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Northern edition [T 12, 580b]; in the Southern edition it is found in fascicle 33 [T 12, 827c]), both people who preach that "All beings definitely have the Buddha-nature," as well as those who assert that "All beings definitely do not have the Buddha-nature," are guilty of slandering the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma and *saṅgha*). This passage was often cited as proof-text for the theory of the two kinds of Buddha-natures by the Hossō sect. For example, Tokuitsu, a Hossō scholar who engaged Saichō (the founder of the Japanese Tendai sect) in a lengthy debate over universal Buddhahood in the early Heian period, explains,

*Ichchantikas* ultimately without the (Buddha-) nature do not have the practical Buddha-nature. Therefore, to preach that (all beings) definitely have the Buddha-nature is called slandering the Three Treasures. *Ichchantikas* who have eliminated wholesome roots and *icchantikas* without the (Buddha-) nature both have the Buddha-nature as principle. Therefore, to preach that (all beings) definitely do not have the Buddha-nature is called slandering the Three Treasures. (T 74, 353a)

In these lines, Tokuitsu interprets the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*'s words using

<sup>13</sup>I have discussed these passages in an earlier article. See Robert F. Rhodes, "Genshin's Criticism in the *Ichijō yōketsu* of Hossō Proofs for the Existence of *Ichchantikas*," *Bukkyōgaku seminar* 56 (1992): 94-6, 101-104.

the Hossō doctrine of the two Buddha-natures. According to Tokuitsu, the meaning of the sūtra passage is as follows. Because *icchāntikas* ultimately without the Buddha-nature (one of the two kinds of *icchāntikas* enumerated in the *Mahāyāna-sūtra-ālaṅkāra*) do not possess the practical Buddha-nature and are thus incapable of attaining Buddhahood, it is incorrect to say that all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature. On the other hand, because all beings possess the Buddha-nature as principle, it is incorrect to say that all beings definitely do not have the Buddha-nature. For this reason, if anyone proclaims that all being either do or do not have the Buddha-nature, this is to slander the Buddha, Dharma and the *saṅgha*.

This interpretation, argues Genshin, represents an illegitimate attempt to read the Hossō doctrine of the two kinds of Buddha-natures into the sūtra. It does not accord with what the sūtra itself wishes to express by these words. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* makes the statement above in order to stress that the Buddha-nature is empty, non-substantial and beyond all dualisms, such as those of existence and non-existence. To demonstrate that this is indeed the case, Genshin quotes this passage as it is found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* itself.

Son of good family! If a person says that all beings definitely possess the Buddha-nature which is eternal, bliss, self, pure, uncreated and unborn and that it cannot be perceived because of the causes and conditions of defilements, you should know that this person slanders the Buddha, Dharma and *saṅgha*. If a person should preach saying all beings, each and every one of them, do not have the Buddha-nature, that (the Buddha-nature) is like horns on hares, that it arises through expedient devices, that (it is) originally non-existent but now existent, and that once existing, it returns to non-existence, you should know that this person slanders the Buddha, Dharma and *saṅgha*. Suppose a certain person should preach saying, "The Buddha-nature of beings is not existent like the sky, and is not non-existent like horns on hares. Why? It is because the sky is eternal and horns on hares are non-existent. Therefore it is possible to say that (the Buddha-nature) neither exists nor does not exist. Because it exists, (it is possible to) negate (the view that the Buddha-nature is like) horns on hares. Because it is non-existent, (it is possible to) negate (the view that the Buddha-nature is like) the sky." To preach in this way is to not slander the Three Treasures. (T 12, 580c [Northern edition], T 12, 827 [Southern edition])

From the context, it is clear that the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*'s words above are meant to express the idea that the Buddha-nature is beyond all dualistic extremes such as existence and non-existence. Thus Genshin concludes that the sūtra's only intends here to point out that the Buddha-nature is empty and non-substantial. In no way can this passage be considered proof for the existence of two kinds of Buddha-natures.

Genshin presents a similar treatment of the Hossō interpretation of another

passage from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. This passage in question is found in fascicle 36 of the sūtra (in the Northern edition [T 12 574b-c]; in the Southern edition, it is found in fascicle 32 [T 12, 821c]). It states,

Son of good family! Although I preach saying that all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature, beings do not understand that these are words which accord with the Buddha's own intention. Son of good family! Even bodhisattvas in their final reincarnation (before attaining Buddhahood) cannot understand (them). How much less can the (practitioners of the) Two Vehicles and other bodhisattvas!

In the *Hui jih lun*, Hui-chao interprets the meaning of these lines as follows: Reflecting on the meaning of this passage (I [Hui-chao] conclude that it means as follows:) if all beings have the Buddha-nature and the Buddha preaches this overtly, why can't bodhisattvas in their final reincarnation (before attaining Buddhahood) comprehend it? Why aren't they able to comprehend it at once? For this reason, it should be known that (this passage is suggesting that beings either) have or do not have the practical Buddha-nature, whereas the principle of the Tathatā is all-pervasive. (T 45, 413c)

According to Hui-chao, the teaching that all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature is plainly enunciated throughout the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. However, in this passage, the Buddha declares that this teaching (that all beings possess the Buddha-nature) is exceedingly difficult to fathom, and is beyond the comprehension of even those bodhisattvas who are in their final reincarnation before attaining Buddhahood. But how can the simple and uncomplicated teaching that all beings possess the Buddha-nature be incomprehensible to bodhisattvas of the highest attainments? Hui-chao concludes that this passage is hinting at the existence of a hidden meaning behind the manifest meaning of the sūtra's teaching concerning the Buddha-nature. These words from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, argues Hui-chao, is to be understood as a veiled reference to the existence of two kinds of Buddha-natures: the Buddha-nature as principle possessed by all beings and the practical Buddha-nature possessed only by a limited number of beings.

Predictably, this interpretation is rejected by Genshin. According to Genshin, the sūtra makes this statement in order to emphasize that the Buddha-nature is non-substantial and beyond all discrimination. As Genshin's states,

The substance of the Buddha-nature is neither being nor non-being. It is beyond the four alternatives and the hundred-fold negations. It is extremely profound and difficult to comprehend. It is for this reason that (the sūtra) states, "Even bodhisattvas in their final reincarnation cannot understand (it)." It does not refer to differences (such as whether one) has or does not have the practical (Buddha-) nature. (T 74, 354b)

The point which the sūtra's wishes to make here, continues Genshin, is

clearly revealed by the context in which this statement is made. Immediately following the passage above, the sūtra continues with these well known lines which it attributes to the Buddha.

Son of good family! At one time in the past, I resided at Mt. Ḡḡhrakūṭa, and discussed the Conventional Truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) with Maitreya Bodhisattva. Five hundred *śrāvakas*, such as Śāriputra and others, could not comprehend this matter (i. e., the discussion concerning the Conventional Truth). How much more so the supramundane Truth of Supreme Meaning (*paramārtha-satya*). (T 12, 574c)

Here the sūtra claims that not even accomplished *arhats*, such as Śāriputra, are able to comprehend the meaning of the Conventional Truth and the Truth of Supreme Meaning. The Buddha-nature is also like this. Because it is empty and beyond all discriminative thought, it is beyond the understanding of even the most advanced Buddhist practitioner. Seen from this perspective, continues Genshin, it is clear that Hui-chao's interpretation misses the import of the sūtra's words. The sūtra's words are not evidence for the existence of two kinds of Buddha-nature. It is meant to show that the Buddha-nature is beyond all discrimination and is totally beyond the grasp of ordinary reasoning.

In these ways, Genshin presents several arguments to disprove the Hossō theory of the two types of Buddha-nature. In Genshin's view, there is no basis for the Hossō doctrine within the Buddhist canon. The statement that "all beings have the Buddha-nature" found in various sūtras does not refer only to the Buddha-nature as principle, as the Hossō scholars contend. It means that all beings without exception have the actual potential to attain Buddhahood.

#### 4. Genshin's Criticism of the Hossō Doctrine that *Ichchantikas* Cannot Attain Buddhahood

Likewise Genshin firmly rejects the Hosso sect's division of *icchāntikas* into different types and maintains that all *icchāntikas* are equally capable of gaining release from the cycle of birth-and-death and achieving complete Buddhahood. Using a common Buddhist hermeneutic strategy, he argues that the position taken by the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* in its later chapters -- that *icchāntikas* are able to attain Buddhahood -- is the Buddha's complete teaching, while the position of the earlier chapters -- that *icchāntikas* can never find liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death -- is the Buddha's incomplete teaching. For scriptural confirmation of his position, Genshin turns to the *Buddha Nature Treatise (Fo hsing lun)*. In an important passage, this treatise first cites two sūtra passages, the first which affirms that *icchāntikas* possess the nature of nirvāṇa (and are thus capable of attaining nirvāṇa), and the second which proclaims the opposite position that *icchāntikas* definitely do not have the nature of nirvāṇa. After introducing

these two positions, the treatise then declares,

If so, these two sūtras contradict each other. (How are we to) reconcile them? (Answer:) The first is complete, while the second is incomplete. Thus they do not contradict each other. To say that they have the nature (of nirvāṇa) is called the complete teaching, while to say that they are without the nature (of nirvāṇa) is the incomplete teaching. (T 74, 345a-b; original is found in T 31, 800a)

In this way, Genshin resolves the discrepancy found in the early and later sections of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* concerning the ultimate status of the *icchāntika* by declaring that they respectively represent the Buddha's provisional and final teaching on this topic.

But if *icchāntikas* can ultimately attain nirvāṇa, why did the Buddha preach that they are forever incapable of escaping from the cycle of birth-and-death in the earlier section of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*? To answer this question, Genshin again turns to the Buddhist canon and quotes two works. The first passage is from the *Buddha Nature Treatise*.

Therefore the Buddha preached that those who do not have faith in or seek the Mahāyāna are called *icchāntikas*. Because he wished to make them reject and set themselves apart from the mental attitudes of an *icchāntika*, he preached that once one becomes an *icchāntika*, one will definitely be unable to attain liberation. But if there should be a sentient being who possesses a pure self-nature and is eternally incapable of attaining liberation, such a thing could never be. (T 74, 345b; the original passage is found at T 31, 800a)

Next Genshin cites a virtually identical argument from the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*.

Previously it was preached that *icchāntikas* never enter nirvāṇa, and do not have the nature of nirvāṇa. What does this mean? (This was preached) in order to reveal the reason why they slander the Mahāyāna. What does this show? It was preached in this way (because those who slander the Dharma cannot attain nirvāṇa for) an immensely long time. But because, in truth, they have a pure nature, it is not to be preached that they ultimately never have a pure nature. (T 74, 344c; the original passage is found at T 31, 831b)

According to these works, the sūtras preached that *icchāntikas* cannot attain nirvāṇa for a certain didactic purpose. A major distinguishing characteristic of *icchāntikas* is that they lack faith in the Mahāyāna Dharma and refuse to follow its teachings. However, without faith in the Mahāyāna it is impossible to gain liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death and gain nirvāṇa. Thus the sūtras preached that *icchāntikas* are incapable of reaching liberation in order to indicate the grave consequence of their lack of faith in the Mahāyāna teachings. In other words, by preaching that *icchāntikas* are eternally prevented from reaching nirvāṇa, the sūtras aimed to put fear into the hearts of those beings who would repudiate the Mahāyāna, and persuade them to

follow the Mahāyāna teachings. But in no way does this mean that *icchantikas* are truly incapable of attaining nirvāṇa. For, as the *Buddha Nature Treatise* states, it is impossible that a sentient being who possesses a pure nature should eternally be incapable of gaining liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death.

But here arises another question. The sūtras all agree that *icchantikas* are totally depraved beings, possessing an incalculable amount of evil karma. Moreover they are also said to be completely lacking in wholesome dharmas which would enable them to reach nirvāṇa. How can such *icchantika* attain Buddhahood? Doesn't the fact that *icchantikas* possess an incalculable amount of defilements effectively prevent them from attaining liberation?

To this query, Genshin answer as follows. It is true, he states, that *icchantikas* are totally evil and depraved beings, and are confronted with seemingly insurmountable obstacles to enlightenment. However, they have within themselves the Buddha-nature which, though concealed under innumerable defilements, will eventually mature and enable them to achieve Buddhahood.

According to Buddhist teachings, all things arise through the interaction of various causes and conditions; nothing possesses an immutable self-nature. This principle applies to sentient beings as well, including *icchantikas*. This means that no being is by nature an *icchantika*. One falls into the rank of an *icchantika* through various causes and conditions. But by the same token, one is able to extract oneself from the rank of an *icchantika* if one encounters the appropriate conditions. Genshin quotes the following famous verse from the *Lotus Sūtra* to make his point.

The Buddhas, the most venerable of two-legged beings,

Know that dharmas are eternally devoid of (self-) natures.

The seed of the Buddha arise through conditions.

For this reason, they preach the One Vehicle. (T 74, 362a)<sup>14</sup>

As these lines suggest, enlightenment and Buddhahood arise from the confluence of a number of causes and conditions. Thus anyone can attain Buddhahood, once they encounter the appropriate conditions. For this reason, Genshin stresses, even *icchantikas* are able to attain liberation if the conditions are right. Specifically, this means that once they are able to encounter the Buddha (or the Dharma which he left to the world), internal and external factors (the Buddha-nature within the *icchantikas* and the Buddha [or the Buddha's teachings] that they encounter, respectively) will together enable the *icchantikas* to awaken their dormant Buddha-nature, practice the Buddha Dharma, gradually improve their spiritual capacities and finally attain Buddhahood.

<sup>14</sup>The original passage is found at T 9, 9b. For an alternate English translation, see Leon Hurvitz tr., *The Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976): 41.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and other texts, Genshin argues in the *Ichijō yōketsu* that all beings without exception possess the Buddha-nature and are capable of attaining Buddhahood. His position was diametrically opposed to that of the Hossō sect, which distinguished all beings into five distinct spiritual lineages, and which claimed that certain beings are forever bound to the cycle of rebirth without any hope for release. A major portion of the *Ichijō yōketsu* is devoted to refuting this Hossō view.

The *Ichijō yōketsu* had a great impact on the subsequent development of Buddhism in Japan. Although Hossō monks continued to maintain that certain *icchāntikas* cannot attain liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death, eventually, by the Kamakura period, the majority of the Japanese Buddhist community came to accept that all beings are capable of attaining Buddhahood. Indeed, it became the central axiom of all of the new Buddhist sects which arose during the Kamakura period, including the Pure Land sect founded by Hōnen (1133-1212), the True Pure Land (Shin) sect founded by Shinran (1173-1262), the Ji sect founded by Ippen (1239-1289), the Rinzai and Sōtō sects of Zen Buddhism founded by Eisai (1141-1215) and Dōgen (1200-1253), respectively, and the Nichiren sect founded by Nichiren (1222-1282). Although each of these sects preached a different path to salvation, they were all united in claiming that all beings, including even *icchāntikas*, can become Buddhas.

## List of Characters

a ch'an ti chia	阿闍底迦	
a tien ti chia	阿顛底迦	
Ben Busshō sabetsu	弁仏性差別	
Fa-pao	法宝	
Fo hsing lun	仏性論	
gyō busshō	行仏性	
Hossō	法相	
Hui chao	慧沼	
i ch'an ti chia	一闍底迦	
I ch'eng fu hsing chiu ching lun	一乘仏性究竟論	
Ichijō yōketsu	一乘要決	
In issai shujō ushō jōbutsu mon	因一切衆性成仏文	
Neng hsien chung pien hui jih lun	能顯中辺慧日論	
ri busshō	理仏性	
Tendai	天台	
Tokuitsu	徳一	
Saichō	最澄	