

The Concept of the  
“Innate Purity of the Mind”  
in the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas*\*

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Abstract:

The concept of the “innate purity of the mind” (*cittaprakṛtiprabhāsvara*) is a very important notion in the Mahayana Buddhism and has a great influence on the Chinese Buddhism. It is often used synonymously with “*tathāgatagarbha*” in many Mahāyāna texts. However, the origin of this concept can be traced back to the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas*. It is quite interesting to find such a concept in these sutras which very much emphasize the concepts of impermanence and non-ego. The purpose of this study is to clarify the true meaning of this concept of the innately pure mind in the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas*. This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, the original statements

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concerning this concept are discussed within the context of the entire collection of the Buddha's discourses. Since the formula of this concept involves the defilements of the mind, the second part of this study focuses on the types of the defilements which contaminate the mind. The analogies found in the texts discussing the defilements also help to further clarify the meaning and functions of the concept discussed in part one. As there is a lot of debate on this concept in the Abhidharma literature, the third part presents some of the debate to illuminate the issues concerning whether the mind can be truly polluted and the relationship between the mind and the defilements. In the conclusion, in addition to summing up the discussion on the true meaning of the concept of the innately pure mind in the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas.*, the difference between its use in these sutras and that in the Tathāgatagarbha sutras is also briefly mentioned

Key words: Innately pure mind, Original purity of the mind, Adventitious defilements, Brightly pure, Pliable, Intent concentration, Five hindrances, Sixteen defilements of the mind, Emancipated mind, Defiled mind, Nature of the mind, Attributes of the mind, Mind of the fundamental nature, Mind of the provisional nature



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The concept of the “innate purity of the mind” (*cittaprakṛtiprabhāsvara*) is a very important notion in the Mahayana Buddhism and has a great influence on the Chinese Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> It is often used synonymously with “*tathāgatagarbha*” (the embryo/quintessence of the Buddha) or “*buddhadhātu*” (the Buddha nature) in many Mahāyāna texts.<sup>2</sup> The origin of this concept can be traced back to the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas*. Scholars from the East and the West all

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<sup>1</sup> This concept can be found in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, the *Mahāsannipātasūtra*, and various texts of the Tathāgatagarbha theory and the Vijñānavāda. It influences the theories of the major schools in Chinese Buddhism such as San-lun, T’ien-tai, Hua-yen, Fa-hsiang, and Ch’an schools.

<sup>2</sup> To name just a few of the famous ones: the *Śrīmālādevīsīhanādasūtra*, the *Anūratvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, the *Ratnagotravibhāgasāstra*, the *Mahāyānadharmadhātuvaiśeṣasāstra*, the *Buddhadhātusāstra*, the *Mahāyānasamgrahabhāṣya*, the *Mahāyānasūtralaṅkāra*, etc.



identify the same passages in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* as the possible origin of this concept.<sup>3</sup> However, what does not seem to bother the compilers of the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas* arouses much discussion and argument in the Abhidharma literature. For instance, this concept of the mind being pure in its nature is refuted in the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* as an incorrect interpretation of the Buddha's teaching: "If the innately pure mind arises before the defilements without contaminating it, it means that the mind abides in two consecutive moments—one for its arising and the second moment for its waiting for the contamination of the defilements from without. This is contradictory to the teaching of the mind being arising and perishing from moment to moment and quite impossible to last in two

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<sup>3</sup> Japanese scholars such as Chizen Akanuma (in his *Bukkyō Kyōri no Kenkyū*, Tokyo: Hozokan, 1981, p. 210), Yukio Sakamoto (in his "One Aspect of the Nature of Citta," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1953, p. 20), Shunkyō Katsumata (in his *A Study of the Citta-Vijñāna Thought in Buddhism*, Tokyo: Sankibo-Busshorin, 1961, p. 465), Kōgen Mizuno (in his "The Meaning of Citta-pabhassara," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, Vol. XX, No. 2, 1972, p. 10), and Jikidō Takasaki (in his *Formation of the Tathāgatarbha Theory*, Tokyo: Shunjū-sha, 1974, p. 754) all cite the same passages in *Aṅguttaranikāya* in their discussions of the origin of this concept. So do the Chinese scholar Master Yin-shun (in his *Ju-lai-tsang Chih Yen-chiu*, Taipei: Cheng-wen, 1986, p. 69) and David Seyfort Rugg (in his *La Theorie du Tathagatarbha et du Gotra*, Paris: Ecole Française d'Extreme-Orient, 1969, p. 411).



consecutive moments.”<sup>4</sup> Harivarman in his *Satyasiddhiśāstra* also refutes this concept in a similar way:

That the mind abides continuously is but a worldly truth, not the ultimate truth. Even on the level of worldly truth, there is still a mistake in this conception. There is a gap between the perishing of the mind and its next arising. How, then, can the mind be claimed to abide continuously? Therefore, the mind does not have a pure nature which can be contaminated by the adventitious defilements. The Buddha teaches this concept to benefit two kinds of beings: To those who cling to the permanence of the mind, he declares that the mind can be contaminated by the adventitious defilements and becomes impure; and to those who are indolent and sluggish, he proclaims that the mind is innately pure because this kind of beings would not make any effort to purify their mind when they hear that the mind is impure by nature and is therefore not subject to any changes.<sup>5</sup>

The central issue of the controversy brought up by the composers of the Abhidharma literature is that this concept of the mind having purity as its nature is in direct contradiction

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<sup>4</sup> *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, *Taishō*, Vol. 27, p. 140c.

<sup>5</sup> *Satyasiddhiśāstra*, *Taishō*, Vol. 32, p. 258b.



to one of the most fundamental laws of Buddhism—all, including the mind, is impermanent. As can be observed empirically, the mind/thought never ceases to arise and perish for a moment. To propose that such a mind possesses a changeless nature, pure or impure, is quite contradictory to the empirical observation, not to mention that it violates one of the fundamental laws taught by the Buddha himself. What is worse is that it implies the existence of a “self” (ātman) behind this concept of the mind with an innately pure nature. We may find this implication in a passage cited in the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, “The Discriminators maintain that the essence of the mind is the same whether the mind is contaminated or not. The mind is named the ‘tainted mind’ when it is united with the defilements. However, when the mind is severed from all the defilements, it is called the ‘untainted mind.’ It is like some copperware. When they are with stains and tarnish, they are called the tarnished ware. After they are cleansed and polished, they are called the unblemished ones.”<sup>6</sup> The changeless essence of the mind, together with the analogy of the copperware, in this passage reminds us of the tathāgatagarbha theory and the analogies in the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*.<sup>7</sup> This changeless essence of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, *Taishō*, Vol. 27, p. 140c.

<sup>7</sup> The analogy of the copperware bears some resemblance to the analogies of the gold in the impurities and the golden statue in the



mind seems to pose a “self,” or somewhat a permanent subject/substance, within all beings. This goes against another fundamental law in Buddhism—all dharmas are without a self (anātman). However, since the source of this concept of the mind possessing an innately pure nature comes from the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, one of the earliest documents which all believe to be the most faithful records of the Buddha’s teaching, authors of the Abhidharma literature do not venture to accuse this concept of being heretical. The five hundred arhats who composed the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* simply declare that the exponents of this concept misinterpret the Buddha’s teaching, while Harivarman regards this concept as a skillful means (upāya) of the Buddha to benefit certain kinds of beings.

Is the concept of the mind possessing an innately pure nature truly in conflict with the laws of impermanence and non-self (anātman)? If so, why does the Buddha teach such a controversial concept to his followers because, by his wisdom, he must have foreseen the future debate and argument among the later generations of his followers relating to this concept as is attested in the Buddhist history? Is it worth all the contention among the later generations of his followers for him to teach such a concept just simply to encourage the lazy

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*Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. *Taishō*, Vol. 16, pp. 458a-459a and pp. 462c-464a.



ones to ardently engage in purifying their minds? To answer these questions, it is necessary to take a closer look at the context where this concept is introduced and look for the purpose(s) of the Buddha in proclaiming such a concept in the discourses where the laws of impermanence and non-self are much emphasized.

### I. *Pabhassaracitta* vs. *Āgantukopakkilesa*

As is mentioned above, all scholars interested in this concept have identified some passages in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*<sup>8</sup> as the possible original source of this concept. Let us examine these passages one by one. The most renowned two passages are to be found in the Book of the Ones (Ekanipāta) in the AN:

(1) Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho  
āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhan ti.

Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho  
āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttan ti.<sup>9</sup>

(2) Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho  
āgantukehi upakkilesehi uppakkiliṭṭham. Tam assutavā

<sup>8</sup> Hereafter, it will be referred to as AN

<sup>9</sup> *Aṅguttaranikāya*, ed. Richard Morris, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1999, Vol. I, p. 10 (I-5).



puthujjano yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. Tasmā  
assutavato puthujjanassa citta bhāvanā n’atthi ti vadāmi  
ti.

Pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho  
āgantukehi upakkilesehi vipamuttam. Taṃ sutavā  
ariyasāvako yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. Tasmā sutavato  
ariyasāvākassa citta bhāvanā atthi ti vadāmi ti.<sup>10</sup>

The English translation of these two passages goes like this:

(1) This mind, monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by taints that come from without; that mind, monks, is luminous, but it is cleansed of taints that come from without.<sup>11</sup>

(2) This mind, monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by taints that come from without. But this the uneducated manyfolk understands not as it really is. Wherefore for the uneducated manyfolk there is no cultivation of the mind, I declare.

That mind, monks, is luminous, but it is cleansed of taints that come from without. This the educated

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (I-6).

<sup>11</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, trans. F. L. Woodward, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995, Vol. I, p. 8 (Chapter V).



Ariyan disciple understands as it really is. Wherefore for the educated Ariyan disciple there is cultivation of the mind, I declare.<sup>12</sup>

As many Japanese scholars have pointed out, there are no corresponding passages in the Chinese translation of the *Ekottarāgama*; however, a similar passage corresponding to the second one of the above is cited in the *Śāriputrābhidharma*.<sup>13</sup> According to Kōgen Misuno, “pabhassara” (prabhāsvara in Sanskrit) in these passages has the meanings of brightly white (paṇḍara) and completely clean/pure (parisuddha).<sup>14</sup> Whether it indicates “luminous,” “white,” or “clean/pure,” this adjective is used here to qualify the mind as being completely free of taints. It should be noted that the word “pakati” (prakṛti in Sanskrit, meaning “nature”) does not appear in the Pali text; however, the translators of *Śāriputrābhidharma* add this word in the Chinese version of the corresponding passage.<sup>15</sup> Even though the word “nature” (of the mind) is not explicitly mentioned in the above passages, it can be inferred by the word “āgantuka,” which

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 8 (Chapter VI).

<sup>13</sup> *Śāriputrābhidharma*, *Taishō*, Vol. 28, p. 697b. This treatise was translated into Chinese between A. D. 407 and 414 by Dharmayaśas and Dharmagupta and is the only version of this text extant.

<sup>14</sup> Kōgen Mizuno, p. 10

<sup>15</sup> Yukio Sakamoto (p.21), Shunkyō Katsumata (p. 466) and others have noticed this in their discussion of these passages.



means “adventitious” or “from without,” because apparently the taints (*upakkilesa*) are foreign substances which do not belong to the mind and come to contaminate the mind from without. This means that the mind possesses a nature different from that of the taints. Since the taints do not belong to the mind and have a different nature, they can be removed or eliminated by the cultivation of the mind. Therefore, it is very important for the Ariyan disciple to understand the true nature of the mind as it really is. In other words, the purpose of cultivating the mind is to cleanse the mind of the taints which come from without and restore it to its original pure state. To reach this goal, one must first possess the knowledge concerning the true nature of the mind.

If such a concept of cleansing the originally pure mind of the adventitious defilements seems to cast a shadow of posing a permanent self within, on what occasion and for what purpose is it pronounced? The first passage of the above appears at the end of a talk which deals with the benefit of keeping the mind tranquil and unstirred:

Suppose, monks, a pool of water, turbid, stirred up and muddied. Then a man who has eyes to see stands upon the bank. He could not see the oysters and the shells, the pebbles and the gravel as they lie, or the shoals of fish that dart about. Why not? Because of the turbid



state of the water. Just so it is impossible for that monk whom I speak to understand with his turbid mind [overgrown by the five hindrances] either his own profit or that of others: impossible for him to understand both his own profit and that of others, or to realize states surpassing those of ordinary men, the excellence of truly Ariyan knowledge and insight [the fruits of trance, insight and Way]. What is the cause of that? It is the turbid nature of his mind, monks. But suppose, monks, a pool of water, pellucid, tranquil and unstirred. Then a man who has eyes to see, while standing on the bank, could see the oysters and the shells . . . and the shoals of fish that dart about. Why so? Because of the untroubled nature of the water, monks. Just so it is possible for that monk of whom I speak with his untroubled mind to understand either his own profit or that of others, both his own profit and that of others: it is possible for him to realize . . . truly Ariyan knowledge and insight. What is the cause of that? The untroubled nature of his mind, monks. Just as, monks, of all the different sorts of trees the *phandana* is reckoned chief of pliability [*mudu*] and adaptability [*kammañña*], even so do I know of no other single condition so conducive to its pliability and adaptability as the cultivation and making much of the



mind. Indeed, monks, the mind that is cultivated and made much of becomes pliable and adaptable.<sup>16</sup>

Here the mind is compared to a pool of water which loses its lucidity and tranquility when stirred up and muddied. The word “nature” in the “turbid nature of his mind” and the “untroubled nature of his mind” of this English translation is a bit misleading because in the Pali text, the same adjectives, that is, “āvila” (stirred up, disturbed, stained) and “anāvila” (undisturbed, clean, pure), are used to describe both the water and the mind. It is therefore better to interpret it as “state” rather than as “nature” in this passage.<sup>17</sup> A monk with his mind in a turbid state can not see the guests (oysters, shells, pebbles, gravel and shoals of fish) or the activities (darting about) within his mind and thus becomes unable to gain profit for himself and others or to realize the surpassing states of the Ariyan disciples. A monk with his mind in an undisturbed/a tranquil state can do exactly the contrary. That is, he can understand his own profit and that of others and realize states

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<sup>16</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Woodward, Vol. I, pp. 6-7 (AN, Vol. 1, p. 9 [I-5]). The words in the brackets of this quotation are taken from the footnotes of this translation which helps to explain the related phrases.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Rowland Jayetilleke Gooneratne in his translation of the same text consistently uses “state” to describe both the water and the mind. *The Aṅguttara Nikāya of the Sutta Piṭaka*, Galle, Ceylon: Lankaloka Press, 1913, pp. 9-10.



surpassing those of ordinary men through Ariyan knowledge and insight.

Actually, the purport of this talk is not to discriminate two different states of the mind but to stress the importance of training and cultivating the mind, that is, to engage the mind in absorbed meditation so as to settle the turbidity of the mud and dirt foreign to the mind and to bring forth the original luminosity and tranquility of the mind. Earlier in the same talk, the Buddha uses the simile of the spike of bearded wheat or bearded barley to illustrate the difference between the ill directed mind and the well directed mind. A monk with a well directed mind will pierce ignorance, draw knowledge, and realize Nibbāna (Nirvāṇa) while a monk of ill directed mind will not. “Paṇihita” can be translated not only as “directed” but also as “applied, intent on, bent on, and controlled.” All these meanings are associated with absorbed meditation. So, a well directed mind means a mind that is well focused, well absorbed in meditation. If the mind is well focused and absorbed, it will not be easily stirred up or upset by the taints from without and can maintain its original state of luminosity and tranquility which is conducive in gaining the truly Ariyan knowledge and insight. Such a well directed and cultivated mind is like the *phandana* trees, which are famous for their pliability and adaptability. What the “taints from without” (*āgantukopakkilesa*) are is not clearly stated in this talk. We



will come back to discuss this later. The main point of this talk is to urge the monks to train and cultivate their minds in this way so that they can penetrate ignorance, obtain insightful knowledge and attain Nirvāṇa.

The second passage quoted above comes at the beginning of the next talk in the Book of the Ones, which deals with the instantaneous changes of the mind. After proclaiming the importance of knowing the true nature of the mind (i.e. its luminous and pure nature), which can lead to the possession of a meditative mind,<sup>18</sup> the Buddha moves on to talk about the instantaneous changes of the mind and then the power of the mind which gives rise to evil actions or good actions:

Monks, if for just the lasting of a finger-snap a monk indulges a thought of goodwill [mettacitta], such an one is to be called a monk. Not empty of result is his musing. He abides doing the Master’s bidding. He is one who takes good advice, and he eats the country’s alms-food to some purpose . . . . Monks, if for just the lasting of a finger-snap a monk cultivates a thought of goodwill, such an one is to be called a monk. Not

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<sup>18</sup> “Bhāvanā” in the phrase “cittabhāvanā” has the meaning of “dwelling on something, putting one’s thoughts to something, or developing by means of meditation.” Woodward translates “cittabhāvanā” as “cultivation of the mind” (p. 8), but Gooneratne translates it as “a meditative mind” (p. 11).



empty of result is his musing . . . . Monks, if for just the lasting of a finger-snap a monk gives attention to a thought of goodwill, such an one is to be called a monk . . . . Monks, whatsoever things are evil, have part in evil, are on the side of evil:—all such have mind for their causing. First arises mind as the forerunner of them, and those evil things follow after. Monks, I know not of any other single thing of such power to cause the arising of evil states, if not yet arisen, or to cause the waning of good states, if already arisen, as negligence. In him who is negligent evil states, if not already arisen, do arise, and good states, if arisen, do wane. Monks, I know not of any other single thing of such power to cause the arising of good states, if not yet arisen, or to cause the waning of evil states, if already arisen, as earnestness. In him who is earnest good states, if not yet arisen, do arise, and evil states, if arisen, do wane.<sup>19</sup>

Because the mind changes so instantly, if a monk can indulge, cultivate, or give attention to a thought of goodwill for just a split second, he is worthy of being called a monk, can accept the Buddha's admonition, and deserves to eat the

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<sup>19</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Woodward, Vol. I, pp. 8-9. AN, Vol. I, pp. 10-11 (1-6).



alms-food given by the laity and his cultivation of meditation will not be in vain. The mind is the forerunner of all actions. As it changes so rapidly, the very moment it causes the evil states to arise, that instant fade the good states; and vice versa. It is therefore very precious for a monk to develop or cultivate a thought of goodwill even for just a very brief moment. In the previous talk discussed above, the Buddha also mentions the capriciousness of the mind right before he declares to the monks that the mind is luminous and only defiled by adventitious taints: “Monks, I know not of any other single thing so quick to change as the mind: insomuch that it is no easy thing to illustrate how quick to change it is.”<sup>20</sup> It is no accident that these two talks are arranged one immediately next to the other and that both include statements concerning the luminosity of the mind, which are rarely mentioned in this entire collection of the Buddha’s discourses. In fact, the above-cited two statements concerning the luminosity of the mind appear at the end of one talk and at the beginning of the next one. It seems as if the second talk continues the discussion of the first one. So, if we take these two talks together and try to string out the meaning in them, it goes like this: The mind is extremely capricious and hard to control. It can instantly cause the good states or evil states to arise. To be worthy of the appellation of a Bhikkhu and eating the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8. AN, Vol. I, p. 10 (I-5).



alms-food given by the laity, a monk has to cultivate his mind by keeping it well under control, well directed. To well control his mind, he needs to understand that the mind itself is luminous and free of all the taints that come from without. It is like a pool of water undisturbed—pure, clean, and tranquil. It is only because the mind is agitated by the taints from without that a monk fails to understand his and others' profit or to realize the supremacy of Ariyan knowledge and insight. The agitated mind will not lead him to the penetration of ignorance or the attainment of Nibbāna.

Since the Buddha's sayings are not randomly arranged in this Book of the Ones, we can find other talks stressing the importance of controlling, taming the mind prior to these two talks. For instance, the two talks preceding the ones we have just discussed precisely deal with this topic:

Monks, I know not of any other single thing so intractable as the uncultivated mind [abhāvitacitta]. The uncultivated mind is indeed a thing intractable. Monks, I know not of any other single thing so tractable as the cultivated mind [bhāvitacitta]. The cultivated mind is indeed a tractable thing. Monks, I know not of any other single thing so conducive to great loss as the uncultivated mind. The uncultivated mind indeed conduces to great loss. Monks, I know



not of any other single thing so conducive to great profit as the cultivated mind. The cultivated mind indeed conduces to great profit. Monks, I know not of any other single thing so conducive to great loss as the mind that is uncultivated, not made lucid. The uncultivated mind indeed conduces to great loss. Monks, I know not of any other single thing so conducive to great profit as the mind that is cultivated, made lucid. The cultivated mind indeed conduces to great profit . . . . Monks, I know not of any other single thing that brings such woe as the mind that is uncultivated, not made much of . . . . Monks, I know not of any other single thing that brings such bliss as the mind that is cultivated, made much of.<sup>21</sup>

This same formula is repeated in describing the untamed mind (*adantacitta*) and the tamed mind (*dantacitta*), the uncontrolled mind (*aguttacitta*) and the controlled mind (*guttacitta*), the unguarded mind (*arakkhitacitta*) and the guarded mind (*rakkhitacitta*), and the unrestrained mind (*asaṃvutacitta*) and the restrained mind (*saṃvutacitta*). No matter it is *danta*, *gutta*, *rakkhita*, or *saṃvuta*, they all point to the same thing, that is, to keep the mind well controlled by guarding it, protecting it,

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<sup>21</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Woodward, Vol. I, pp. 4-5 (I-3). AN, Vol. I, pp. 5-6 (I-3).



and restraining it. From what is it to be guarded and protected? The taints from without. From what it is to be restrained? From being easily stirred up by the taints from without and changing instantaneously at all times.

Thus, when we examine the context of the two passages declaring that the mind is luminously pure and is only tainted by adventitious defilements, we find that the Buddha does not set out to establish the concept of a permanent self in these talks. Rather, he tries to call his disciples' attention to the intractability and instability of the uncultivated mind and emphasizes the importance of taming the mind by guarding it, with intentness and meditation, from the agitation aroused by the defilements from without. After the mind is fully cultivated, that is, fully released (*vippamutta*) from the adventitious defilements, it will become luminously pure, serene, pliable (*mudu*) and adaptable (*kammañña*). Such a mind is not a kind of substance or entity for one to cling to. The ultimate goal of developing such a mind is to destroy ignorance, gain the supreme Ariyan knowledge and insight, and attain Nibbana. What are the adventitious defilements from which the mind is to be released? To find an answer to this question, we have to go beyond this collection of the Buddha's sayings.

## II. Defilements of the Mind



In the Book on the Seven Limbs of Wisdom (satta bojjhaṅgā) in the *Saṃyuttanikāya*, the taints of the mind are pointed out in a simile of the corruptions of gold:

Monks, there are these five corruptions of gold, tainted by which corruptions gold is neither soft, nor pliable, nor gleaming, easily broken up [pabhāṅgu, brittle], nor fit for perfect workmanship. What are the five? Iron, monks, is a corruption of gold, tainted by which corruption gold is neither soft nor . . . . Copper . . . tin . . . lead . . . silver, monks, is a corruption of gold, tainted by which corruption gold is neither soft, nor pliable, nor gleaming, nor easily broken up, nor fit for perfect workmanship. These, monks, are the five corruptions of gold . . . . In like manner, monks, there are these five corruptions of the heart [citta], tainted by which corruptions the heart is neither soft, nor pliable, nor gleaming, nor easily broken up, nor perfectly composed for the destruction of the asavas. What are the five? Sensual desire, monks, is a corruption of the heart, tainted by which the heart is neither soft, nor pliable . . . nor perfectly composed for the destruction of the asavas. Malevolence . . . sloth and torpor . . . excitement and flurry . . . doubt and



wavering, monks, are corruptions of the heart, tainted by which. . . of the āsavas.<sup>22</sup>

Here the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa)—sensual desire (kāmacchanda), malevolence (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīnamiddha), excitement and flurry (uddhaccakukkucca), and doubt and wavering (vicikicchā)—are compared to five metals, namely iron, copper, tin, lead and silver, which make gold (the mind) impure and unfit for workmanship. When the gold/mind is purified of these five corruptions/hindrances, it will become soft, pliable, gleaming, no longer brittle, and perfect for workmanship/the destruction of the āsavas. The context in which these five hindrances are brought out is to cultivate the mind so that it can become pliable and perfect for the cultivation of the seven limbs of wisdom: “The seven limbs of wisdom, monks, if unrestrained, unhindered, if cultivated and made much of with uncorrupted heart, conduce to realizing the fruits of liberation by knowledge . . . . [A]t the time when the Ariyan disciple makes the Norm [dhamma] his object, gives attention to it . . . at such time these five

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<sup>22</sup> *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, trans. F. L. Woodward, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2001, Part V, pp. 77-78. *Samyuttanikāya*, ed. Léon Feer, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2000, Vol. V, p. 92 (XLVI-33). Henceforth, this text will be referred to as SN.



hindrances exist not in him: at such time the seven limbs of wisdom by cultivation go to fulfillment.”<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that the same adjectives are used in the description of the purified mind in this passage as those in the passages we have discussed in section one: luminous (*pabhassara*), soft/pliable (*mudu*), and pliable/adaptable (*kammaniya*). Even though the adventitious defilements are not mentioned in this passage, since the five metals are foreign substances to gold just as the five hindrances to the mind, the idea underlying is basically the same as what is stated in the AN. As a matter of fact, these five hindrances are also elucidated in the AN prior to those talks discussed above:

Monks, I know not of any other single thing of such power to cause the arising of sensual lust, if not already arisen, or, if arisen, to cause its more-becoming and increase, as the feature of beauty (in things). In him who pays not systematic attention to the feature of beauty, sensual lust, if not arisen, arises: or, if already arisen, is liable to more-becoming and increase . . . the arising of malevolence . . . as the repulsive feature (of thing) . . . the arising of sloth-and-torpor . . . as regret, drowsiness, languor,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 79. SN, Vol. V, p. 95.



surfeit after meals and torpidity of mind . . . the arising of excitement-and-flurry . . . as non-tranquility of mind . . . the arising of doubt-and-wavering . . . as unsystematic attention.<sup>24</sup>

However, on this occasion, these five hindrances are not explicitly identified as the taints of the mind. In this talk, only the causes which produce these five hindrances and the means of abandoning them are explained. Even so, with the help of the lucid explanation in the above-cited passage from the *Saṃyuttanikāya*, there is no mistake that these five hindrances are the taints of the mind. Aside from the feature of beauty, the repulsive feature, regret, drowsiness, and so on, the main cause which produces these five hindrances is the unsystematic attention or distracted attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*) to the feature of beauty, the repulsive feature, regret, and so on. Consistent with the other talks of the AN discussed above, this talk also points to the importance of cultivating the mind by concentration/meditation so that it will not be distracted by the feature of beauty, the repulsive

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<sup>24</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Woodward, Vol. I, pp. 2-3 (AN, Vol. 1, pp. 3-4 [I-2]). The literal meaning of “*āsava*” is “outflow;” however, it is hard to be rendered into English in the Buddhist context. In Buddhist texts, it is often used synonymously with “*nīvaraṇa*” or “*kilesa*.”



feature, regret, and so on and give rise to the five hindrances which obstruct the mind from realizing the fruits of liberation.

The simile of purifying gold of its impurities is also applied in the AN in a talk which discusses the development of higher consciousness (*adhi-cittam-anuyuttassa*) in a monk. The entire process of removing impurities from gold is described in great detail:

Monks, there are gross impurities in gold, such as dust and sand, gravel and grit. The dirt-washer or his prentice heaps it into a trough and washes it . . . and runs the dirt out. When this process is abandoned and ended, there still remain moderate impurities in the gold, such as fine grit and coarse sand. The dirt-washer or his man repeats the process. When this abandoned and ended there still remain trifling impurities such as fine sand and black dust. The dirt-washer or his man repeats the process. Thereafter the gold-dust alone remains. Then the goldsmith or his man heaps that sterling gold into a crucible and blows it (till it melts), melts it together but does not run it out of the crucible. That sterling gold is then blown till it melts: it is molten but not flawless, it is not done with yet, its impurities are not yet strained off. It is not pliable nor workable nor



glistening. It is brittle, not capable of perfect workmanship. But a time comes, monks, when that goldsmith or his man blows that gold till it melts, melts it down and runs it out of the crucible. Then that sterling gold is melted, molten, flawless, done with, its impurities strained off. It is pliable, workable, glistening, no longer brittle; it is capable of perfect workmanship. For whatsoever sort of ornament one wishes, . . . he can make use of it for that purpose.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar way, a monk who is interested in developing the higher consciousness must refine his mind by removing all kinds of impurities, from the grossest and coarsest to the finest and subtlest, from his mind in a repeated process. The impurities of the mind are graded as follows: Sins of deed, word, and thought are the grossest ones and need to be abandoned and kept in check first. Next to be removed are sensual, malicious, and cruel reflections as they are the moderately gross impurities. Then, the minute impurities to be extinguished are the reflections about one's relatives, district, and reputation. After that are the reflections about mind-states

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<sup>25</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Woodward, Vol. I, pp. 231-232 (AN, Vol. I, pp. 253-254 [III-100]). A corresponding text of this talk can be found in the Chinese translation of *Saṃyuktāgama*, *Taishō* Vol. 2, pp. 341b-342a.



(dhammavitakka).<sup>26</sup> The cultivation of the mind up to this point reaches a kind of concentration which is neither tranquil nor excellent. It has not yet reached one-pointedness (ekodibhāva) and is in a state of painful habitual restraint. What is left to be cultivated is to reach the kind of concentration which “is calm, lofty, has gotten tranquility, has reached one-pointedness, [and] is not a state dependent on painful habitual restraint.”<sup>27</sup> One who has attained this kind of concentration can “direct his mind [to whatever branch of special knowledge] for the realization thereof. . . [and] acquire the power to realize personally such, whatever his range may be.”<sup>28</sup>

It is clear from the text that the process of purifying the mind is repeated until all different sorts of defilements are completely removed and the mind becomes soft, pliable, radiant, and tranquil. The defilements listed here are the sins of deed, word, and thought, sensual, malicious, and cruel reflections, reflections about one’s relatives, district, and

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<sup>26</sup> Woodward prefers to translate this phrase as “thoughts about mental states” (p. 232), while Gooneratna translates it as “qualities of reflection” (p.271). According to Woodward, these are the mental impressions which have to be abandoned by the *yogi* before *samādhi* is thoroughly attained. Gooneratna refers them to the ten reflections that pollute *vipassana bhāvanā*.

<sup>27</sup> Woodwad, p. 233. AN, Vol. I, p. 254 (III-100).

<sup>28</sup> Woodward, p. 233. AN, Vol. I, pp. 254-255 (III-100).



reputation, and reflections about mind-states.<sup>29</sup> The goal of the cultivation of the mind in this talk is to reach the one-pointed concentration (*samādhi*) in which, as the mind is pliable and workable, different magical/supernatural powers can be attained. Six such powers are listed in the talk: 1. the power to change one's form from being one to many and from being many to one, to travel through the air like a bird and through a wall, a rampart, or a mountain as if through the air, to walk upon water without parting it, and to stroke the moon and the sun with one's hand, 2. the deva-power of hearing, 3. the deva-sight, 4. the power to know the minds of other beings, 5. the power to call to mind one's former births in divers ways, and 6. the power of the liberation of mind by insight which is free from the *asavas*.<sup>30</sup> In the description of the power to know the minds of other beings, sixteen different mental states are listed: lustful, free from lust, full of hate, free from hate, deluded, free from delusion, cramped, diffuse, lofty, mean, inferior, superior, uncontrolled, controlled, in bondage, and released. These sixteen mental states are widely spotted in different parts of all four *Nikāyas* whenever the power to know the minds of other beings is mentioned. For example, in the *Ākaṅkheyyasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, the Buddha addresses to the monks about the fruits of fulfilling the moral

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<sup>29</sup> As this talk is in the Book of the Threes, the defilements are basically grouped in threes.

<sup>30</sup> Woodward, pp. 233-235. AN, Vol. I, pp. 255-256 (III-100).



habits, being intent on mental tranquility within (that is, with uninterrupted meditation within), and being endowed with vision. One of the fruits which a monk should aspire to obtain is the power to know the minds of other beings:

May I know intuitively by mind the minds of other beings, of other individuals, so that I may know intuitively of a mind that is full of attachment . . . aversion . . . confusion, that is full of attachment . . . aversion . . . confusion; or of a mind that is without attachment . . . without aversion . . . without confusion, that is without attachment . . . without aversion . . . without confusion; or so that I may know intuitively of a mind that is contracted that it is contracted, or of a mind that is distracted that it is distracted, or of a mind that has become great that it has become great, or of a mind that has not become great that it has not become great, or of a mind with (some other mental state) superior to it that it has (some other mental state) superior to it, or of a mind that has no (other mental state) superior to it that it has no (other mental state) superior to it, or of a mind that is composed that it is composed, or of a mind that is not composed that it is



not composed, or of a mind that is freed that it is freed,  
or of a mind that is not freed that it is not freed.<sup>31</sup>

A lot of scholars cite these sixteen mental states in their discussion on whether the mind being pure, impure or a mixture of being pure and impure. We will come back to discuss this issue later.

Besides the five hindrances and the impurities mentioned in the simile of gold ore, there are sixteen defilements of the mind identified in the *Vatthūpamasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*: “And what, monks, are the defilements of the mind? Greed and covetousness is a defilement of the mind, malevolence . . . anger . . . malice . . . hypocrisy . . . spite . . . envy . . . stinginess . . . deceit . . . treachery . . . obstinacy . . . impetuosity . . . arrogance . . . pride . . . conceit . . . indolence is a defilement of the mind.”<sup>32</sup> In this sutta, the Buddha first

<sup>31</sup> *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, trans. I. B. Horner, Lancaster: The Pali Text Society, 2007, Vol. I, pp. 43-44. *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2002, Vol. I, pp. 34-35. Hereafter, this text will be referred to as MN. Japanese scholar Giyū Nishi has located the places where these sixteen mental states are narrated in all four *Nikāyas* in his book on the thought of *prajñā* in the Primitive Buddhism, *Genshi Bukkyō ni okeru Hannya no Kenkyū*, Yokohama: Okurayama Bunka Kagaku Kenkyūjo, 1953, pp. 328-331.

<sup>32</sup> Horner, Vol. 1, p. 46 (MN, Vol. I, pp. 36-37). According to Horner, “greed” is the passion of delight for one’s own possessions, while



uses a simile of cloth to illustrate to the monks the importance of keeping the mind pure before he points out the defilements of the mind:

Monks, as a cloth that is stained and dirty and which a dyer might dip into this and that dye—be it dark green or yellow or red or crimson—would be dyed a bad colour; it would not be clear in colour. What is the reason for this? Monks, it is because the cloth was not clean. Even so, monks, a bad bourn is to be expected when the mind is stained. Monks, as a cloth that is quite clean, quite pure, and which a dyer might dip into this or that dye—be it dark green or . . . would be dyed a good colour; it would be clear in colour. What is the reason for this? Monks, it is because the cloth was clean. Even so, monks, a good bourn is to be expected when the mind is not stained.<sup>33</sup>

On the surface, it seems that the purpose of keeping the mind pure is to gain a birth in the good realms of man and deva in the future. As we all know, this is not the goal that the Buddha wants his disciples to achieve. What, then, is implied in this simile? If we connect the teaching of this simile with a talk in

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“covetousness” is that for another’s possessions. See the footnote of this passage in Horner’s translation.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. MN, Vol. I, p. 36.



the AN discussed above, we will better understand the implication here: the mind is the forerunner of all virtuous actions and evil actions and it is the mind which takes one to a birth of good realms or bad realms or to the cessation of the cycle of birth and death. It is thus very essential for a monk to tame and cultivate his mind so that it can be well immersed in dhamma just like a cloth that can be dyed a good color when it is clean and pure. As the sutta goes, after a monk realizes that greed and covetousness . . . indolence are the defilements of the mind, he can get rid of them and become possessed of unwavering confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Order. After he acquires knowledge of the dhamma and the delight that is connected with the dhamma, his body becomes impassible because of the rapture which is born from that delight. With the body impassible, joy is felt and because of joy, the mind is well concentrated (*cittam samādhīyati*).

There are two Chinese translations of this sutta extant, one collected in the *Madhyamāgama* and the other an independent one.<sup>34</sup> The title of both these two versions is not the simile of a cloth as is displayed in the Pali text. Instead, it is the name of a Brahman who thinks that one can be purified by water, Brahman the Water-Purified One. As this Brahman thinks that bathing in the river Bahuka can purify one of all the sinful

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<sup>34</sup> *Taishō*, Vol. 1, pp. 575a-576a & pp. 843c-844b.



deeds, the focus of these versions is not about having unwavering confidence in the Three Jewels and well cultivating one’s mind but about the difference between cleansing the body and cleansing the mind. The Buddha starts his discourse on the defilements of the mind when he sees this Brahman comes toward him from afar. Then, he draws on the simile of a dirty, greasy clothing to make his point. The dirty clothing in these versions is not to be dyed but to be thoroughly cleansed. Then, the dialogue between the Buddha and the Brahman reveals the motivation of the Buddha’s explication of the defilements of the mind in the beginning of his talk. What is interesting is the number of the defilements listed in this discourse. Instead of sixteen, it is twenty one.<sup>35</sup> Except for a few minor variations, the significant difference between these two groups of defilements is the adding of the three hindrances which are not included in the sixteen defilements (namely, sloth and torpor, excitement and flurry, and doubt and wavering), and the wrong views.

No matter it is the impure gold or the soiled cloth, the impurities or defilements do not belong to the gold or the cloth itself and they do come from without. All the similes in the examples displayed above seem to confirm what is declared in the AN: the mind is originally pure and the

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<sup>35</sup> Taishō, Vol. 1, p. 575a & p. 843c.



defilements which pollute the mind are alien to it. No matter the number is five, sixteen or twenty one, the defilements of the mind are basically mental factors which can be boiled down to greed, malevolence, and delusion, the most fundamental stumbling blocks which prevent one from being emancipated. Are these defilements capable of polluting the mind? Is the nature of the mind subject to the pollution of foreign entities?

### III. Is the Mind Contaminable?

There is much discussion in the Abhidharma literature about whether the mind is originally pure or impure in nature according to the passages of the AN discussed in first section of this study. Basically, advocates of the Mahasangika and the Vibhajyavadin<sup>36</sup> maintain that the mind is originally pure. Based on the two passages of the AN quoted above, they believe that the mind possesses the same pure nature whether it is defiled or not. Unfortunately, the extant documents that

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<sup>36</sup> There are different speculations about the actual school the so-called “Vibhajyavādin” belong to. Some suppose that they belong to the Sammatīya school, while others surmise that they belong to the Mahīśāsaka, the Kāśyapīya, or the Prajñāptivādin school. However, Chizen Akanuma believes that it is a general name for all those who have the same attitude toward certain issues and in different treatises they are used to refer to different schools. See the note on this issue in Shunkyō Katsumata’s *A Study of the Citta-Vijñāna Thought in Buddhism*, pp. 508-509.



record their theory are those that refute their concept of the originally pure mind. The famous ones of such documents are the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, the *Satyasiddhiśāstra*, and the *Abhidharmanyāyānusāriśāstra*.<sup>37</sup> These treatises are written by proponents of the Sarvastivada. They, on the whole, uphold that the mind is both pure and impure by nature. As is expounded in the MVBH,<sup>38</sup> the Sarvastivadins believe that when the mind is still entangled with the impurities of greed, malevolence, and delusion, it is a defiled and undelivered mind. Once it is severed from the impurities of greed, malevolence, and delusion, it is an emancipated mind. This view is presented to refute the concept held by adherents of the Vibhajyavādin that the mind is liberated even while it is still defiled by the impurities of greed, malevolence, and delusion. In other words, the authors of the MVBH consider that the liberated mind and the defiled mind are different. They strongly hold that before it is severed from the defilements, the mind can not be claimed to be pure. As a matter of fact, they believe that the pure mind and the impure mind are different by nature:

Some people, such as the proponents of the theory that the mind possesses a continuum, maintain that the

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<sup>37</sup> From now on, these three treatises will be referred to as MVBH, SSI and ANYA.

<sup>38</sup> *Taishō*, Vol. 27, p. 140c.



mind is one and that the nature of the mind remains the same with or without the defilements. They claim that the [dharma of the] holy path is in direct contrast not to the nature of the mind but to the defilements. It is set for the purpose of dealing with the defilements not with the mind, just as when we wash dirty clothes, polish a mirror or refine gold, we try to remove the stains, tarnish and impurities, not to break up the clothes, mirror or gold . . . . The difference between the mind with defilements and the mind without defilements is different names in different phases. The nature of the mind does not change in these different phases. It is like naming the clothes with stains dirty clothes, and naming the clothes without stains clean clothes. Different names are given to different phases of the same thing. One of the purposes in composing this treatise is to overturn this kind of theory and to make known that the mind with defilements and the mind without defilements each possesses a different nature.<sup>39</sup>

In the SSI, Harivarman also classifies the mind into the pure one and the impure one: “The pure mind and the impure mind are different by nature. The mind which is pure by

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<sup>39</sup> Taishō, Vol. 27, p. 110a.



nature can not be polluted, just as the sunlight which is immaculate can not be defiled. That [mind] which is impure can not be purified, just as the hair which is black by nature can not be whitened. There is indeed pure mind in the act of charity donation and in the act of killing there is indeed impure mind. The mind does not have a consistent unity.”<sup>40</sup> Sanghabhadra in his ANYA holds a similar view:

If the mind which is pure by nature becomes defiled when it comes into contact with the defilements, it means that it loses its nature [of purity]. Since it loses its own nature, it can no longer be called the mind. Therefore, it is incorrect to assert that the mind is pure in nature but is sometimes contaminated by adventitious defilements. My persistent faith in Buddhism forbids me to claim that the discourse which contains this statement is not truly Buddhist. However, it should be known that this kind of saying is not the supreme teaching of the Buddha. If so, what is the concealed true meaning of this statement? The undisclosed meaning of this statement is that the mind has two kinds of nature—the fundamental one and the provisional one. The mind with the fundamental nature is definitely pure, whereas the mind of the

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<sup>40</sup> Taishō, Vol. 32, p. 278b.



provisional nature can be defiled. The former is neutral and can not be affected by such emotions as joy or distress . . . . This mind is immaculate and not subject to any pollution. Apart from this one, all the other minds belong to the mind of the provisional nature . . . . This mind is not always pure and subject to pollution.<sup>41</sup>

Despite their explanations differing slightly from each other, their standpoints are essentially the same. They all believe that the mind is not a consistent one without any variation at all times but a mixture of pure ones and impure ones, depending on whether it is bound with the defilements or not, and that the pure mind and the impure mind each has its own nature. None of them has the audacity to argue that the statement concerning the mind being pure by nature and polluted only by adventitious defilements is not a true saying of the Buddha. On the other hand, they have evidence to support their own theories from another saying of the Buddha as well: “By a tainted mind, brethren, beings are tainted. By purity of mind beings are made pure.” (*Cittasamkilesā bhikkave sattā samkilissanti// cittavodāna sattā visujjhanti//*)<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *Taishō*, Vol. 29, p. 733b.

<sup>42</sup> *SN*, Vol. III, p. 151. A corresponding text of this discourse can be found in the Chinese translation of the *Samyuktāgama*, *Taishō*, Vol. 2,



This saying gives them a good reason to postulate that the mind is manifold, a mixture of pure ones and impure ones. In the same discourse, the Buddha uses three similes to further elucidate his point:

Well, brethren, this so-called show-piece is thought out by mind. Wherefore, brethren, mind is even more diverse than that show-piece. Wherefore, brethren, again and again must one regard one’s own mind thus: “For a long time this mind has been tainted by lust, by hatred, by illusion.” By a tainted mind, brethren, beings are tainted. By purity of mind beings are made pure. Brethren, I see not any single group so diverse as the creatures of the animal world. Those creatures of the animal world, brethren, are thought out by mind. Wherefore, brethren, mind is even more diverse than those creatures of the animal world. Wherefore, brethren, a brother must again and again thus regard his own mind: “For a long long time this mind has been tainted by lust, by hatred, by illusion.” By a tainted mind, brethren, beings are tainted . . . . Just as if, brethren, a dyer or a painter, if he have dye or lac or turmeric, indigo or madder, and a well-planed board

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p. 69c. The English translation here is taken from F. L. Woodward’s *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part III, p. 128.



or wall or strip of cloth, can fashion the likeness of a woman or of a man complete in all its parts, even so, brethren, the untaught manyfolk creates and re-creates its body, its feelings, its perception, its activities, its consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

Here in this passage, it is stressed over and over again that the mind is diverse. Not only is the mind diverse, but it is also creative. It can create a work of art and even think out the creatures of the animal world. The third simile of a dyer or a painter who can create vivid, colorful portraits on a plane board or a wall or a strip of cloth may have been the source which gives rise to the idea that the mind is neutral, without good or evil.<sup>44</sup> That is, it can paint good or evil deeds on the mind like a painter on a blank canvas.

Another source which the composers of the Abhidharma literature might have drawn from the *Nikāyas* to propose that the mind is both pure and impure is the sixteen mental states

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<sup>43</sup> *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part III, pp. 128-129 (SN, Vol. III, pp. 151-152). In the Chinese version, only two similes are mentioned here, that of the diverse creatures of the animal world and that of a dyer or a painter. The simile of a show-piece is missing. Furthermore, the diverse creatures of the animal world are narrowed down to birds of variegated colors. The feathers of a bird is variegated because its mind is diverse. *Taishō*, Vol. 2, p. 69c.

<sup>44</sup> Shunkyō Katsumata has noticed the association between the simile and the idea that the mind is neutral in his *A Study of the Citta-Vijñāna Thought in Buddhism*, p. 471.



mentioned above: a mind that is full of attachment, a mind that is without attachment, a mind that is full of aversion, a mind that is without aversion . . . a mind that is freed and a mind that is not freed. These mental states are observed by one who has cultivated his mind by absorbing in meditation and developed the magical power of knowing the minds of other beings. They are actually eight pairs of positive and negative mental states. Needless to say, the negative ones such as the minds full of attachment, aversion, and confusion are the impure minds and the positive ones are the pure minds. Since they are mentioned abundantly in the four *Nikāyas*, they become clear evidence for the authors of the treatises cited above to support their view that the mind is diverse and it is both pure and impure by nature.

Even though the adherents of the Sarvāstivāda reject the idea that the mind is permanently pure by nature, they all acknowledge that the mind is pure when the defilements are eradicated. The point of their argument is that when the mind is still polluted by the defilements, it is impure, and that this polluted mind can not be claimed to be pure in nature. However, since their opponents have a statement by the Buddha as the origin of their theory, they feel the need to explain away the contradiction between that statement and their own theories. In their attempts to bridge the



contradictory gap between two sayings of the Buddha, some of them come very close to postulate the same thought pattern as that underlying the theory they oppose to. For instance, Sanghabhadra's theory of the fundamental nature and the provisional nature of the mind shows unmistakable similarity to the theory he tries to refute. The mind of the fundamental nature can be explained as the mind of originally pure nature and the mind of the provisional nature is the mind temporarily tainted by the defilements. In the MVBH, a simile conceived by the Buddha is cited to support the authors' point of argument in this way:

To prove this point, it is necessary here to refer to a discourse by the Buddha. The Buddha once said to his disciples, "Monks, the sun and the moon are sometimes covered, obscured, screened, veiled, and concealed by five objects and lose their luster and luminosity. Which are the five objects? They are clouds, smoke, dust, fog and the hand of Asura Rāhu. Sometimes in the midsummer, a few clouds will suddenly increase to a sea of clouds which will entirely cover the sun or the moon. Occasionally, forest fires produce the smoke so thick and widespread that the sun or the moon will become totally obscured. Once in a while, long periods of droughts crack the



earth and when a strong gale blows, it churns up swirls of dust which will screen the sun or the moon. Every now and then in the autumn or winter, heavy fog would steam up in the mountains or on the rivers . . . . When the fog densely envelop far and wide, it will veil the sun or the moon. When devas are warring against asuras, they often use the sun and the moon as their banners. As devas, taking advantage of the predominance of the sun and the moon, triumph most of the time, Asura Rāhu bears hatred against the sun and the moon. Being unable to destroy either of them, he would raise his hand to conceal them.” . . . . The sun and the moon never actually come into contact with or mix with these five objects. However, their luster and luminosity will not be restored until these objects are dispersed or lifted. Once these objects are dispersed or lifted, they will shine brightly and pervasively. In a similar way, the mind is never united with or mixes with greed, malevolence, or delusion. Nevertheless, it will not be emancipated until greed, malevolence and delusion are completely eliminated.<sup>45</sup>

If the mind is like the sun and the moon described above, then it is never truly tainted by the defilements of greed,

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<sup>45</sup> Taishō, Vol. 27, p. 141a.



malevolence, delusion, and so on. On the other hand, the defilements of greed, malevolence, delusion, and so on are just temporary obstacles which block the luminosity and purity of the mind from being seen or known. In other words, we see a tainted mind as a tainted mind without knowing that it is pure from the outset. This not only echoes what is declared by the Buddha in the AN but also seems very much similar to the theory this very treatise is arguing against. Why would hairsplitting composers of this treatise make such an obvious mistake right in the middle of an argument? Let's take a closer look at their refutation of the Vibhajyavādin's theory first before jumping into a conclusion right here. The argument goes like this:

Followers of the Vibhajyavādin adhere to the view that the mind is pure by nature and the adventitious defilements only contaminate its attributes, not the essence. One of the purposes in the composition of this treatise is to put an end to this kind of adherence of theirs by showing them that this view is incorrect. If the mind is pure by nature and the defilements taint only its attributes, why is it not the other way round? Why is it not the case that the defilements are impure by nature and their attributes become pure when they unite with the mind which has purity as its nature? If



the defilements are impure by nature and their attributes remain impure, totally unaffected by the purity of the mind, then the attributes of the mind should remain pure, unaffected by the impurity of the defilements likewise. Furthermore, does this innately pure mind arise before or at the same time with the defilements? If it arises first and then abides to wait for the coming of the defilements, it means the mind lasts more than one moment. This is against the theory concerning the mind of this particular school.<sup>46</sup>

Here an interesting question is posed: Can the purity of the mind exert any influence on the impurity of the defilements? There is no mention of this in the statements we have discussed in the *Nikāyas*. As is shown in the above, the cultivation of the mind is to restore and reveal the original purity of the mind which is concealed underneath the defilements. Can the original purity of the mind have any influence on the defilements? Let us ask ourselves these questions. Can the purity of distilled, clean water purify the mud, dirt and any other such substances which contaminate it? Can the cleanliness and whiteness of a clean white shirt make the stains on it clean and white? Despite the fact that the original purity of the mind might not exercise any influence

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 140b.



on the defilements, the knowledge of this purity of the mind is very much emphasized: “That mind, monks, is luminous, but it is cleansed of taints that come from without. This the educated Ariyan disciple understands as it really is. Wherefore for the educated Ariyan disciple there is cultivation of the mind, I declare.” The Buddha manifestly declares that the knowledge of the true nature of the mind will lead one to the cultivation of his mind and ultimately cleanse the mind of all the defilements that come from without.

Another interesting point in the above quotation is the separation of the mind into essence and attributes. The essence/nature of the mind may remain pure constantly, while only its attributes are contaminated by the defilements. It is similar to the sun and the moon which remain brilliant and immaculate while the clouds, smoke, dust or fog veil(s) and obscure(s) them. This brings us back to the question asked in the beginning of this section: Can the mind be really contaminated? If the mind is divided into essence and attributes, then its essence is not contaminable and only its attributes are tainted by the defilements. If the authors of the MVBH agree with this, what is the difference between their theory and that of the Vibhajyavādin? It has to do with the question they ask about the moment when the originally pure mind arises. To them, the mind does not stay the same at all



times. To be in accordance with the law of impermanence, they maintain that the mind arises in one moment and vanishes in the next moment. This is the reason why they question the followers of the Vibhajyavādin whether the mind arises before the coming of the defilements or at the same time. Similarly, when they try to clarify their point about the liberated mind, they say that “once the mind is severed from greed, malevolence and delusion, it is liberated. However, when it is still connected with greed, malevolence and delusion, it is not a liberated mind.”<sup>47</sup>

Harivarman also expresses a similar view in the SSI. In his refutation against the theory that the mind being pure in nature and tainted by defilements from without, he also applies this view in his argument:

It is incorrect to say that the mind is innately pure and becomes contaminated by the defilements from without. What is the reason to claim so? If the defilements constantly unite with the mind in their emergence, they can not be said to be foreign to the mind. Further, the mind can be divided into three different kinds: good, evil and neutral. Good and neutral minds can not be claimed to be impure. If the

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<sup>47</sup> Taishō, Vol. 27, p. 141a.



evil minds are impure by nature, they can not be said to be foreign to the mind itself. In addition, the mind arises and vanishes instantaneously. It does not stay to wait for the defilements to come to unite with it. If it arises together with the defilements at the same moment, the latter is a partner rather than a “guest” to the former. [Imagined opponent’s counter remark:] “The mind perceives an object from the external and creates an image of that object. The defilements are produced from that image and taint the mind.” It is not so. The mind perishes instantly before the attributes of the taints are produced. After the mind perishes, what is left for the taints to contaminate?<sup>48</sup>

It is this conviction that the mind perishes instantly after it arises that brings Harivarman to hold the view that the mind is diverse and that the pure mind and the impure mind each has its own nature: “There are pure sensations and impure sensations; hence, we know that the mind is diverse. There are all sorts of different actions from which we know that the mind is diverse. The nature of the pure mind and that of the impure mind are different.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Taishō, Vol. 32, p. 258b.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 278b.



Sanghabhadra not only endorses the view that the mind arises and perishes instantly. He goes one step further in distinguishing the nature of the pure mind and the nature of the impure mind by coining two designations for the two different kinds of nature: the fundamental nature and the provisional nature of the mind.

For instance, the Buddha says, “the mind is not liberated because it is tainted by the defilements.” This saying provides evidence to support that the mind is liberated only after it is purified of defilements such as greed and so on. It is like the purified water which will only emerge after the muddy water disappears. Thus, only after the mind accompanied by the defilements perishes will the purified mind arise. This mind which is released from the defilements is then called a liberated mind. . . . . Those who advocate that the mind is innately pure say that the nature of the mind is not contaminable. If it is so, when the mind becomes tainted in uniting with the defilements, the defilements should become purified in uniting with the essence of the pure mind. If the nature of the mind is pure, it can not be tainted in any way no matter the mind arises before, after, or at the same time with the defilements. If the innately pure mind



arises first and is then contaminated by the defilements which appear in the next moment, the essence of the pure mind does not perish instantly. If the innately pure mind arises after the emergence of the defilements and becomes tainted by those defilements which appear before its arising, the essence of the defilements does not perish instantly. If it co-arises with the defilements, it can not be claimed to be the “host” while the defilements become the “guests.” . . . . The undisclosed meaning of this statement [that the mind is innately pure and is tainted by adventitious defilements] is that the mind has two kinds of nature—the fundamental one and the provisional one.<sup>50</sup>

In order not to contradict either of the Buddha’s sayings, these writers of the Abhidharma literature acknowledge that the mind is pure by nature on the one hand. On the other hand, they adhere to the view that the mind arises and perishes instantaneously in conformity with the law that all is impermanent. Consequently, they hold that there are pure mind and impure mind. The pure mind perishes before the impure mind arises. That is the reason why they all question their opponents about why the purity of the mind exerts no

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<sup>50</sup> Taisho, Vol. 29, pp. 732c-733a.



influence on the defilements. In the MVBH and the ANYA, we can see that the authors all agree that the pureness of the mind is not subject to contamination. It can be inferred from their argument that the mind can be divided into essence and attributes. The essence of the mind may remain uncontaminable, while its attributes are sometimes subject to the contamination of the defilements, just like the sun and the moon may sometimes be obscured by the clouds, the fog, etc. In this, their theory are not so contrary to that of their opponents as they claim to be. As they believe that the mind does not abide in two consecutive moments, they put their emphasis on the attributes of the mind instead of its essence, that is, the relationship between the mind and the defilements, the moment of contamination, etc. In rejecting the idea that the mind possesses a continuum, they avoid posting an ego (*ātman*) on their theory concerning the mind.

**Conclusion:**

Basically, the word “nature” (*pakati*) of the mind does not appear in any of the Pali texts quoted above. It is added in the Chinese and English translations of the corresponding passages and is widely discussed in the Abhidharma literature. When we explore the context of the statements which give rise to the concept that the mind is originally pure and luminous and that the defilements which contaminate it are



merely adventitious, uninvited guests, we find that these statements are brought forth for the sake of encouraging the monks to cultivate their minds. It is especially related to the cultivation of one-pointed concentration or meditation. To gain the result of one-pointed concentration or meditation, the Ariyan disciples should know that the mind is originally pure and luminous without the disturbance of the defilements from without. This knowledge will lead them to cleanse the defilements of the mind and restore the mind to the state of purity, tranquility and luminosity.

Unlike the Mahāyāna theory of tathāgatagarbha, which claims that the innately pure mind possesses all the virtues of the Buddha and that the revelation of this mind is the attainment of the Buddhahood, statements in the Pali texts only emphasize the knowledge of the innate purity of the mind as a prerequisite step in the cultivation of the mind and the restoration of the purity of the mind is not the end of religious practices. As a matter of fact, after the removal of the defilements, the mind is not only pure, tranquil, and luminous but also soft, pliable, and adaptable. It then becomes suitable for the destruction of all the āsavas or the cultivation of the seven limbs of wisdom, and the like. This means that the tranquil, luminous, and pliable mind is just the basis for further religious practices.



Even though the nature of the mind is not explicitly mentioned in the statements on the original purity of the mind, the analogues used to compare the original state of the mind to such as clean water, pure gold or untainted cloth clearly imply the meaning that the mind possesses a nature unaffected by the defilements or impurities which are alien to it. Composers of the abhidharma treatises are the ones who try to systematize the Buddha’s teachings by analyzing and classifying all kinds of dharmas. They are doomed to fall into a debate on the true nature of the mind. Some of them postulate that the nature of the mind is permanently pure with or without the defilements contaminating it. Some maintain that only the pure mind has a pure nature, while the contaminated mind has an impure nature. Here we encounter a problem: Is the nature of things subject to change? If the nature of the mind changes all the time, can it be claimed to still have a nature? According to Harivarman, the pure mind in such an act as charity donation has purity as its nature and the impure mind in such an act as killing has an impure nature. The Buddha tells us that the mind is the forerunner of good or evil things and it changes instantaneously. If we take the good or evil state of the mind as its nature, can we really call the goodness or the evilness the mind’s true nature as it changes from moment to moment? The analogy of the sun and the moon discussed in the MVBH and the fundamental nature



proposed by Sanghabhadra seem to suggest that the mind has “a kind of nature” which is impervious to changes. Of course, whether the mind has more than one nature is beyond the scope of this study. What can be certain here is that those who object to the idea that the mind is permanently pure by nature with or without the entanglement of the defilements still admit that the mind has purity as its nature without the defilements and this nature can not be polluted.



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## 「自性清淨心」在阿含經和 尼科耶中的意涵

釋如念\*

### 摘要

「自性清淨心」為大乘佛典中重要的思想觀念之一，在如來藏系的經典中常被視為是如來藏的同義語，而其思想淵源可追遡至阿含經與尼科耶中。為何在這些強調無常、苦、無我思想的初期經典中，出現此一似乎帶有常我思想的觀念，是一頗為值得玩味的問題。本論文之研究目的即在探討「自性清淨心」於阿含經與尼科耶中的真正意涵。「自性清淨心」在這些初期的佛典中是以「心性本淨，為客塵所染」的敘述方式被呈現出來，而其源頭可見於巴利經典中的增支部，但是在增支部的原文中並未出現心性的「性」字，本論文的第一部份是分析整理此一觀念在增支部中的原文及其在該部典籍框架中所具之意涵。論文的第二部份是就相應部和中部裡有關去除心垢的經文，整理出客塵煩惱的內容和種類，並從其所使用的譬喻與增支部中的「心性本淨」說交相對照，深化且證成「心性本淨」說在初期的佛典中被提出的用意與目的。由於阿毘達磨的論師們對於「心性本淨」說在阿含經的中意涵有諸多的爭論，論文的第三部份，是藉由三部現存的有部

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論書針對此一觀念所作的論辯，進一步釐清心性是否本淨以及自性清淨心與客塵煩惱之間的關係等問題。在結論中，除重申論文中研究分析所得出之「心性本淨」說在阿含經中的意涵外，並分辨「自性清淨心」在阿含經與如來藏系的經典中的差異性。

關鍵字：自性清淨心、心性本淨、客塵煩惱、明淨、柔軟、禪定、  
五蓋、十六心垢、解脫心、有睡眠心、心性、心相、本性心、  
客性心

