

In Search of the Origins of the Five-Gotra System

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0. The differentiation of the innate capacities of sentient beings into five types, referred to hereafter as the “five-gotra system” (*wuxing gebie* 五姓各別), is said to be a defining characteristic of the Chinese Consciousness-only (*weishi* 唯識) school. Some scholars would also seek to apply this five-gotra system to the Indian Yogācāra school. But is it really valid to do so? In order to consider this question, let us begin by examining in what form the idea of a five-gotra system existed in the thought of the Indian Yogācāra school.

It is to be surmised that the controversy about the five-gotra system in China had its origins in the *Yogācārabhūmi* (*Yuqie lun* 瑜伽論) and *Buddhabhūmi-sāstra* (*Fodijing lun* 佛地經論), translated by Xuanzang 玄奘 in A.D. 648 and 649 respectively. Prior to Xuanzang’s translations, Consciousness-only thought had been accepted in China and modified in a way suited to the Chinese on the basis of Tathāgatagarbha thought, and it was considered to be an orthodox form of Buddhist thought. Having some misgivings about the content of this thought, Xuanzang endeavoured to translate as faithfully as possible into Chinese the Yogācāra thought that was actually being practised in India. It is to be surmised that for scholar-monks ingrained with the idea that “all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature” even the notion of Three Vehicles would have been difficult to accept.¹⁾

1. The five-gotra system, with five separate categories of beings, is not systematically expounded in the *Yogācārabhūmi*, and each category is explained separately in different parts of the work. Here I shall cite as one example a passage in the section on “maturation” (*paripāka*) in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, of which the Sanskrit text has survived. In response to a question concerning “maturation,” it is explained as follows “from the perspective of the person to be matured” (*BoBh*, p. 78,21ff; T.1579, 30:496c12ff):

There are in brief four kinds of people to be matured. Someone with the lineage of a *śrāvaka* should be matured in the Śrāvaka Vehicle, someone with the lineage of a *pratyekabuddha* in the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, and someone with the lineage of a Buddha in the Buddha Vehicle. Even he who dwells in no lineage should be matured by bodhisattvas and Buddhas, Blessed Ones, in order to go to a good destiny. These four kinds of people should be matured in these four categories. Maturation should be known in this manner from the perspective of the person to be matured.

What would a monk believing in the attainment of Buddhahood by all beings think on reading a passage such as this? It is here stated that there are people with no lineage (*gotra*) or predetermined nature, and though it may be possible for them to be reborn in a good destiny, they will stay within the cycle of transmigration and never attain Buddhahood. This would probably have been felt to be unconscionable. Yet the idea that beings are reborn in a good destiny is also found, for example, in the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*.²⁾ But just because they were deemed on account of a current of Indian thought underpinned by the notion of transmigration to be reborn in a good destiny rather than attaining Buddhahood, this would not necessarily have meant that they were ultimately abandoned by Buddhism.

2. The definitive passage for the five-*gotra* system is found in the *Buddhabhūmi-śāstra* translated by Xuanzang (T.1530, 26:298a12ff). The passage in question describes all five categories of beings, the first four of which all ultimately attain Buddhahood through the power of the Buddha's compassion. The important point about the *Buddhabhūmi-śāstra* is that it adds a fifth category of beings who will never attain Buddhahood even with the help of the Buddha's compassion. Past research has shown that whereas Wōnch'uk 圓測 and others focused their attention on the question of how to enable those of indeterminate lineage to attain Buddhahood, Kuiji 窺基 stressed the fact that those of this fifth category were completely beyond salvation.³⁾

In which scriptures was this idea of a category of beings without any possibility of attaining Buddhahood actually propounded? Let us consider the case of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.⁴⁾ What is worth noting here is the fact that it mentions only the first four categories, and it would appear, moreover, that those of indeterminate lineage, who have not yet entered the first stage of the bodhisattva, may engender

the aspiration for unsurpassed perfect awakening on hearing the teaching of *prajñā-pāramitā* and will eventually attain Buddhahood just like those destined for one of the three vehicles. To the best of my knowledge, the addition of a fifth category of beings devoid of any possibility of salvation does not appear in the lineage of the Three Vehicles, but appears in relation to *aparinirvāṇa-dharma*, which belongs to a different current.

That being so, did the reference to beings without any defining lineage exist in the original text of the *Buddhabhūmi-śāstra*? Xuanzang's translation combines several commentaries on the *Buddhabhūmi-sūtra* which he attributed to Bandhuprabha and others. Among these commentaries, the only to have survived (in Tibetan translation) is the *Buddhabhūmi-vyākhyāna* by Śīlabhadra, under whom Xuanzang studied at Nālandā. A careful comparison of Xuanzang's Chinese translation with the Tibetan translation of Śīlabhadra's commentary would suggest that he used Śīlabhadra's commentary as his main source when translating the *Buddhabhūmi-śāstra*. At the same time, Xuanzang's translation includes many additional passages not found in Śīlabhadra's *Buddhabhūmi-vyākhyāna*, and some of these passages, moreover, contain ideas that were to characterize the doctrines of the Chinese Faxiang 法相 school. Furthermore, the above section on the five-*gotra* system is completely missing in the Tibetan translation, and therefore the original Sanskrit, of Śīlabhadra's commentary. What does this signify?

3. According to an account given in the *Yuqielun ji* 瑜伽論記 as restored through a comparison with Saichō's 最澄 *Hokke shūku* 法華秀句,⁵⁾ Xuanzang made the following observations in this regard:

(1) The five categories of beings are expounded in the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*. The fifth of these (*agotra*) consists of two types of *icchāntika*, namely, the *icchāntika* who does not attain Buddhahood so as to save all sentient beings and the *icchāntika* who, though he has cut off his roots of goodness, can still attain Buddhahood if he encounters a Buddha or bodhisattva, generates the aspiration for enlightenment, and practises towards this end. This is what was stated in the Sanskrit text seen by Xuanzang.

(2) According to scholars of the western regions (probably Nālandā), the fifth category of *agotra* (in this case, beings with no potential whatsoever for enlightenment and

therefore unable to attain Buddhahood even should they encounter a Buddha or bodhisattva) was not expounded in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*. Since bodhisattvas aspiring to non-abiding *nirvāṇa* (*apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*) and *icchāntika* who will ultimately attain Buddhahood, referred to in (1) above, are also mentioned in the *Daji jing* 大集經 and *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論, it was perhaps felt that there was no need to include them as a fifth category.

(3) It is stated that the five categories of beings, including those with no possibility of attaining Buddhahood, are not explicitly explained in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, but are clearly explained in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*.

(4) When Xuanzang was about to return to China, several scholars suggested that it would be better to expunge the section on the teaching about beings without Buddha-nature since it would not be believed in China, but Xuanzang's teacher Śīlabhadra rebuked them for making such a suggestion.⁶⁾

Of course, since the above is not Xuanzang's own account but what had been transmitted in later times, it is quite likely to contain Chinese biases. But because it provides some important leads for exploring the origins of the five-*gotra* system, in the following I shall examine each of the above points.

Let us begin with Śīlabhadra's reproof of some other scholars' desire to delete the section on the five-*gotra* system. His reproof implied, at least in the view of later Chinese, that the notion of the five-*gotra* system was regarded as an important part of Yogācāra thought by Śīlabhadra or by people at Nālandā. Were that so, it is then rather strange to find no reference whatsoever to this notion in the text of the *Buddhabhūmi-vyākhyāna* attributed to Śīlabhadra and preserved in Tibetan translation. At the time when Xuanzang was residing at Nālandā Śīlabhadra was more than one hundred years old, and even assuming that he had written the *Buddhabhūmi-vyākhyāna* in his youth, it is hardly likely that he would have completed it in a short span of time never to subsequently revise it. Even in the case of basic Yogācāra texts such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* and *Mahāyānasamgraha* it is possible to observe a process of historical development. In view of the fact that there is no mention of the five-*gotra* system in Śīlabhadra's *Buddhabhūmi-vyākhyāna*, it would seem more natural to suppose that even if ideas such as the five-*gotra* system were discussed among scholars at Nālandā, it was not regarded as an idea representative

of the Yogācāra school.

4. As Indian sources for the five-*gotra* system, the *Yuqielun ji* cites the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* and *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*. Owing to limitations of space, I shall here focus on the question of how *agotra* is treated in these two works.

4.1. Let us begin with the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*.

[Question:] Next, Mahāmati, what are the five lineages with intuition (*abhisamaya*)?

[Answer:] They are the lineage with the intuition of the Śrāvaka Vehicle, the lineage with the intuition of the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, the lineage with the intuition of the Tathāgata Vehicle, the lineage not determined either way, and the fifth without a lineage. (*LAS*, p. 63,2-5)

Of importance here is the addition of a “fifth” (*pañcamam*) category “without a lineage” (*agotram*).⁷⁾ The lineages of the three vehicles and the indeterminate lineage basically belong to Three Vehicles thought, and the addition of a fifth “lineage-less” category results in what to all appearances looks like the five-*gotra* system.

The Sanskrit text of the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* goes on to explain *agotra* (*LAS*, p. 65,17-67,1), and its explanation coincides in content with point (1) made in the *Yuqielun ji* cited earlier. The first *icchāntika* corresponds to the idea of non-abiding *nirvāṇa*, while the second reflects the idea of universal Buddhahood going back to the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, according to which even the *icchāntika* can attain Buddhahood. In other words, there is no reference to the *agotra* with no potential whatsoever for attaining Buddhahood. The notion of the *icchāntika* belongs in fact to a different current of thought from the *agotra* of the five-*gotra* system. If they merely happened to be mentioned in close proximity in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*,⁸⁾ there then is a possibility that the word “fifth,” as in *agotram ca pañcamam*, was not present in the original Sanskrit. Supposing that the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* follows the four-*gotra* system of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, *Śrīmālā-sūtra*, and so on, and that it originally had only the lineages of the three vehicles and the indeterminate lineage, this would then mean that the earliest Chinese translator Guṇabhadra added in A.D. 443 the number “five” to a passage that in the original had neither “four” nor “five.” The fact that he translates the word *abhisamaya* in the extant Sanskrit text as *wujian* 無間 and *agotra* as *gebie zhongxing* 各別種姓 suggests that his Sanskrit text may have differed from the extant text. If the first sentence of the

above passage quoted from the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* had read for instance “*punar aparaṃ Mahāmate ’bhisamayagoṭrāṇi katamāni*,” without any reference to the number “five,” then it would agree with the assertion of scholars at Nālandā that there was no mention of *agotra* in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* as reported in the *Yuqielun ji*.⁹⁾ This means, in other words, that the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* cannot serve as an authority for a five-*gotra* system that included the *agotra* with no potential for Buddhahood.

4.2. Does this mean, then, that a five-*gotra* system that included the *agotra* with no potential for Buddhahood was not propounded in India? In order to consider this point, let us next examine the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*.

A verse on the distinction between the kinds [of lineages]:

The lineage may be determinate or indeterminate, shakeable or unshakeable

By conditions. This distinction between lineages is, in brief, fourfold. (v. 6)

In brief, lineages are fourfold. They are determinate and indeterminate, and these are in [that] order unshakeable and shakeable by conditions. (*MSA* III.6 [F: 21,14-18; L: 11,20-24])

As is evident from this passage, while the lineages are divided into four, there are in effect only two. Asvabhāva and Sthiramati would subsequently equate these four lineages with the three vehicles and an indeterminate lineage, but no such interpretation can be found in the original. Assuming that the use of verse was necessary for the purposes of memorization and recollection in the practice of *yoga*, then the practitioner actually reciting this verse would have experienced in the course of his practice a sense of gradually progressing from a state of vacillation to one in which under the guidance of his teacher he was no longer vacillating in his resolve. This sixth verse is merely one of ten verses showing how one should bear in mind and put into practice the notion of “lineage,” and the reason that there are four lineages is that in the first verse it is stated that for each of the eight aspects to be treated four kinds will be presented (*MSA* III.1 [F: 20,2-3; L: 10,8-9]). In my view, this had largely practical connotations.

Asvabhāva clearly defines “someone who possesses a determinate lineage” as “someone who determinately abides in the lineage of the *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha* or Buddha,” and Sthiramati too, following this line of thinking, expands on it in great detail. In both cases they have reinterpreted the “four kinds” as the lineages of

the three vehicles and a fourth indeterminate lineage, which is readily understandable in theoretical terms. But an examination of other sections in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* expounding One Vehicle thought (including Vasubandhu's commentary) shows that there were as yet no signs of this fourfold classification,¹⁰ and it does not seem likely to me that people had this in mind at the time.

Meanwhile, the *agotra* with no potential for Buddhahood is taken up in verse 11 of the same chapter of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, and rather than being linked to verse 6, *agotra* is posited in contrast to the *gotra* dealt with in the first ten verses. This makes it all the more difficult to suppose that there was any notion of a five-*gotra* system that included a category without any potential for Buddhahood. Bearing this in mind, let us now consider the verse on *agotra*.

A verse on the distinction of him who dwells in no lineage:

One person is only intent on evil conduct, another has destroyed all good qualities;
One person has no goodness conducive to liberation, [another] has little good, and another lacks the cause.

In this [verse] "he who does not have the quality for *parinirvāṇa*" is meant by "he who dwells in no lineage." He is, in brief, of two kinds: he who does not have the quality for *parinirvāṇa* during that time and [he who does not have the quality for *parinirvāṇa*] in perpetuity. Those who do not have the quality for *parinirvāṇa* during that time are of four kinds: he who is only intent on evil conduct, he who has severed the roots of goodness, he who does not have roots of goodness conducive to liberation, and he who has only inferior roots of goodness and whose stock [of merit] is incomplete. On the other hand, he who does not have the quality for *parinirvāṇa* in perpetuity is someone who lacks the cause, and for him the lineage for *parinirvāṇa* is completely nonexistent. (*MSA* III.11 [F: 22,21-23,3; L: 12,19-13,2])

This passage describes two kinds of *agotra*, namely, those who do not attain Buddhahood for a certain period of time, but can do so after the end of this period, and those who will never attain Buddhahood. While it is conceivable that the explanation for the existence of those among the *agotra* with a possibility of attaining Buddhahood was omitted when explaining the various kinds of *gotra*, the omission of any explanation of those with no possibility whatsoever of attaining Buddhahood, not mentioned anywhere else in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, invites the charge of a deficiency in its theories. The *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* included the *agotra* with no

potential for Buddhahood so as to avoid any omissions in its explanation of *gotra*, and it did not actively propound the notion of a *gotra* unable to attain Buddhahood.

There exist commentaries on the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* by Asvabhāva, thought to have flourished around A.D. 500, and by Sthiramati, thought to have lived *circa* A.D. 510-570. Sthiramati almost certainly wrote his commentary by expanding on that by Asvabhāva. With regard to the above passage, Asvabhāva merely gives an explanation based on the usage of the negative prefix *a-*, while Sthiramati provides a more detailed exposition.

While there is no evidence for the existence of a scheme consisting of the lineages of the three vehicles and the indeterminate lineage at the time when the verses and Vasubandhu's commentary were composed, it had gradually evolved by the time of Asvabhāva. But even in the case of Asvabhāva's commentary it hardly seems likely that he linked these to the *agotra* without any potential for Buddhahood so as to create a single scheme. Whereas Asvabhāva's commentary begins by commenting directly on Vasubandhu's commentary (*MSAṬ*, P.5530: 59a8f), Sthiramati adds: "Where it says 'a verse on the distinction of the lineage-less,' having earlier explained the lineage of the *śrāvaka*, the lineage of the *pratyekabuddha*, the lineage of the bodhisattva, and the indeterminate lineage, it now explains the lineage-less" (*SAVbh*, P.5531: 52b3ff). Whereas Asvabhāva clearly refers to the lineages of the three vehicles and the indeterminate lineage in his commentary on verse 6, but does not link them directly to the verse on *agotra*, there is clear evidence in Sthiramati's commentary of an intent to create a scheme of five *gotra*. Here one can see the way in which the scheme of five *gotra* gradually evolved. It should of course be noted that there is no evidence of Sthiramati's having emphasized and actively propounded here or elsewhere the idea of a five-*gotra* system.

5. It is to be surmised that at the time when Xuanzang was studying under Śīlabhadra at Nālandā, a five-*gotra* system that included the *agotra* with no potential for Buddhahood was not attracting very much attention. There is, however, a possibility that around the same time or a little earlier Sthiramati was formulating a scheme of five *gotra* at Valabhī. Xuanzang probably did not meet Sthiramati when he visited Valabhī, but according to a later account he studied under one of Sthiramati's disciples.¹¹⁾ When one takes these circumstances into account, it is pos-

sible that the idea of a five-*gotra* system introduced by Xuanzang to China derived from a current of thought associated with Valabhī. It is at any rate certain that the idea of a five-*gotra* system as found in China did not exist in the Indian Yogācāra school, or at least, even if a scheme along these lines can be found in Sthiramati's commentary, it had not developed into a theory that was attracting much interest.

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Because of strict restrictions on space, all notes have had to be omitted. Reference should be made to my articles in Japanese dealing with the same subject, including *aparinirvāṇa-dharma*, which it was not possible to deal with here.

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