

Bussho (Buddha-nature)

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1. Buddha nature in Mahayana Buddhist scriptures

“Buddha-nature” means the original nature as a buddha that is intrinsic to sentient beings. At the same time it also means the potential to become a buddha – a sense of being an embryo of a buddha (*tathagatagarbha*). This concept was particularly fully developed in the forty-volume version of the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* in the Chinese translation of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. This sutra contains the well-known phrase, “All sentient beings have Buddha-nature.”

The “Chapter on The Nature of Tathagata” says;

“Self” means a tathagata embryo. All sentient beings have Buddha-nature. This means the self. This meaning of the self has been covered up by immeasurable delusion since the beginning. That is why sentient beings cannot see it.

As is mentioned above, Buddha-nature is the self. But sentient beings cannot see it because it is covered by delusion. Buddha-nature is, however, the embryo of a *tathagata*. Having this capacity, a sentient being is capable of becoming a buddha through practice. This doctrine of Buddha-nature is further developed in the “Chapter of the Lion’s Roar,” where we find the following points:

- All sentient beings can definitely attain unsurpassable awakening. Therefore they all have Buddha-nature.
- Icchantikas (those lacking the capacity to become a buddha) can attain unsurpassable awakening. Therefore all icchantikas have Buddha-nature.
- All sentient beings continue in the cycle of birth and death without recognizing their Buddha-nature because of their delusion. But if they can perceive their Buddha-nature, they can let go of delusions, free themselves from the cycle of birth and death and attain great nirvana.
- Buddha nature is *tathagata*. It also has different names like “great compassion and great loving-kindness,” “great faith” and others. These qualities are the source of the bodhisattava’s ability to teach sentient beings.

In such claims as these, Buddha-nature is described as a basis of the bodhisattva’s ability, an ideal within Mahayana Buddhism and as the original nature of buddha which ultimately leads to buddhahood.

2. Existence or nonexistence of Buddha-nature

In Mahayana Buddhism, in the context of conflict between the thought of the Three Vehicle schools and that of the One Vehicle schools, there has been a dispute concerning the possibility that all sentient beings can become buddhas. In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the “Chapter on The Nature of Tathagata” and the “Chapter on All-shining Highly-Virtuous King” deny the possibility that icchantikas can become buddhas since they lack faith. But the “Chapter of the Lion’s Roar” asserts that icchantikas have Buddha-nature. In the former, icchantikas who lack faith in the Buddha’s teachings cannot attain buddhahood just as they are. But their minds are also mutable in the sense that, though it is very difficult, it is still possible to stop being icchantikas. This latter chapter emphasizes this possibility, so in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* Buddha-nature is a universal reality. Buddha-nature is postulated to be an inherent dimension of all sentient beings.

But when Buddha-nature is considered as a function in a more concrete dimension, it stops being something universal and gets more relativized. To understand the theory of Buddha-nature developed in Chinese Zen such a concrete dimension should be taken into consideration. Chinese Zen master Joshu (778-897) had the following dialogue:

A monk asked Joshu, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?”

Joshu said, “Yes, it has.”

A monk said, “You said yes, but why did it creep into that skin bag?”

Joshu said, “Because it knowingly committed a crime. .”

Another monk asked, “Does the dog have Buddha-nature, or not?”

Joshu said, “No, it has not”.

The monk said, “All living beings have Buddha-nature. Why doesn't the dog have any?”

Joshu said, “Because it still has karmic-consciousness.”

(*The Book of Serenity* case no.18)

Joshu freely expounds on the existence and nonexistence of Buddha-nature. According to him, the reason why someone currently exists as a dog even though they have Buddha-nature is because they knowingly committed a crime. The reason why they do not have Buddha-nature is because of their karma-consciousness (the source of confusion). He addressed the question of the existence and nonexistence of Buddha-nature from the perspective of its function in reality.

3. Dogen’s *Shobogenzo* “Buddha-nature”

On October 14th, 1241, Dogen Zenji presented *Shobogenzo* “*Busshō*” (Buddha-nature) to the assembly of monks at Kosho-ji in Kyoto. I would like to briefly write about the significance of this fascicle.

At the beginning of this fascicle Dogen Zenji quotes the phrase “All beings have Buddha-nature and the *Tathagata* is eternal and unchanging” from the “Chapter on Bodhisattva Lion’s Roar” in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. He says this is the Buddha’s turning of the wheel of the Dharma, and that all buddhas and ancestors have studied it without fail. It is said that Dogen Zenji

gave a unique interpretation to Buddha-nature by writing the following paragraph.

The “all” is none other than sentient beings and living beings. Thus, all are Buddha nature. One form of all beings is sentient beings. At this very moment, the inside and outside of sentient beings are the “all are” of Buddha-nature.

It is said that Dogen Zenji denies Buddha-nature as an intrinsic essence, which is implied by the statement that “all *have* Buddha-nature,” by interpreting that sentence as “all *are* Buddha-nature.” But that subject was already carefully treated in *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* by the discussion on the self. We should understand that Dogen Zenji, following the sutra, simply criticized the popular theory of Buddha-nature in those days that interpreted Buddha-nature as some actual substance within sentient beings. The sentence “The inside and outside of sentient beings are the ‘all are’ of Buddha-nature” may imply that the beings called “sentient beings” are only a part of Buddha-nature which is all beings. Sentient beings are Buddha-nature itself.

The relationship between sentient beings and Buddha-nature is explained in *Shobogenzo “Bussho”* (Buddha-nature) in this manner.

Yanguan, National Teacher Qi’an of Hang Region, who was a dharma heir of Mazu, once said to his assembly, “All sentient beings have Buddha-nature.” Guishan, Zen Master Dayuan of Mount Gui, once told his assembly, “All sentient beings have no Buddha-nature.”

Among the humans and devas who have heard his words, some have had great occasion for rejoicing. But it is not that there has been no one who was shocked or suspicious.

Shakyamuni Buddha’s expounding of the way was that sentient beings all are Buddha-nature. What Guishan said was “All sentient beings have no Buddha-nature.” These two statements—“all are” and “have no”—are far apart. Whether Guishan’s statement is right or wrong can be questioned. However, “all sentient beings have no Buddha-nature” stands high in the Buddha Way. Yanguan’s statement “have Buddha-nature” can be likened to joining hands with an ancient buddha, or two people holding one walking staff.

But Guishan’s statement is not like that; it is a single staff swallowing both people. Yanguan is an heir of Mazu, and Guishan is a descendant of Mazu. However, the descendant is advanced in Mazu’s way and the heir is not yet mature.

Here Yanguan (?~842), a disciple of Mazu, and Guishan (771~853), a grand-disciple of Mazu, respectively discuss the relationship between sentient beings and Buddha-nature in terms of its existence or nonexistence. Dogen Zenji says that Guishan’s view of no Buddha-nature is superior to Yanguan’s. Sentient beings and Buddha-nature are not two separate entities which can overlap each other. If we really try to show how sentient beings are Buddha-nature, there is no other way than saying, “All sentient beings have no Buddha-nature.” As for “Sentient beings have Buddha-nature,” Shakyamuni Buddha’s statement and Yanguan’s look similar but it is like two people carrying one doctrine. It is inferior to Guishan’s statement. Therefore Dogen Zenji’s

treatment of Buddha-nature through interpreting Guishan's statement can be said to be the ultimate expression of the universal interpretation of Buddha-nature.

4. Another theory of Buddha-nature in Soto tradition

The issue of the existence or nonexistence of Buddha-nature culminates in an emphasis of question about the existence or nonexistence itself.

For example, Keizan Zenji(1264~1325) wrote;

Now, I hear about the realization of the Way by the earth and sentient beings and I newly clarify the true cause of originally possessed Buddha-nature.

(Keizan's Pure Standards, "Explanation of Buddha's Realization Ceremony")

It is the Buddha's simultaneous enlightenment with the earth and sentient beings that makes the universality of Buddha-nature universal. It also clarifies originally possessed Buddha-nature as a true cause of realizing the Way. Keizan Zenji takes Buddha-nature as both something universal and the original source of sentient beings' realization of the Way. This clearly follows what the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* postulated as two aspects of Buddha-nature. In his statement here, Keizan tried to show us the path toward awakening to the fact that sentient beings are already buddha, using the wonderful opportunity of performing the ceremony to celebrate Buddha's realizing the Way.

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