

A note on *Niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ* in the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra*

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Abstract

Section VI of Conze's edition of the *Heart Sutra*, containing the word *niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ* or perhaps *niṣṭhānirvāṇaprāptaḥ*, has given translators and commentators considerable difficulty. *Nirvāṇa* being a neuter noun, the word *niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ*, in the masculine, has to be a *bahuvrīhi* compound. Conze has divided *niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ* and two other adjectives from the noun they describe—i.e. *bodhisatvaḥ*²—by inserting a sentence break between them. Removing the extraneous full stop and reuniting the two halves of the sentence resolves many problems with the passage.

Introduction

The word *niṣṭhānirvāṇa* occurs in Section VI of Conze's editions of the *Heart Sutra* (1948, 1967, 1975). Jan Nattier comments,

“... the Chinese expression 究竟涅槃 (lit. ultimate[ly] *nirvāṇa*) is attested in a number of other Buddhist texts, and might well be described as standard (even idiomatic) Buddhist Chinese, while the corresponding Sanskrit phrase *niṣṭhā-nirvāṇa*... strikes the reader as overly abbreviated at best, and has required a certain amount

¹ I'm grateful to Jeffrey Kotyk and Thomas Quinn for their helpful comments on this article.

² In this article I favour the Buddhist Sanskrit spelling *bodhisatva* except where directly quoting another work which uses the (over-corrected) classical spelling *bodhisattva*.

of textual supplementation not only in the English translations of Edward Conze, but even in some of the Sanskrit manuscript copies themselves” (Nattier 1992: 178).³

With reference to “textual supplementation”, Nattier goes on to describe in a note how some Nepalese manuscripts add the verb *prāpṇoti* “he attains” and some add the past participle *prāptaḥ* to the compound giving *niṣṭhānirvānaprāptaḥ* (cf. Conze 1948: 152, n.44). The versions of the *Heart Sutra* in the Tibetan *Kanjur* do the same. Conze’s (1975) translation is “in the end he attains to *nirvāna*” where “attains” suggests a finite verb *prāpṇoti* but in fact translates the past participle *-prāptaḥ*. Huifeng (2014) has alerted us to deeper problems with Section VI, but in this note I will show that there is a simple way to resolve the problems regarding *niṣṭhānirvānaḥ* in Conze’s Edition as it stands.

Conze’s earlier text of Section VI (1948) reads:

*Tasmāc Chāriputra aprāptivād bodhisattvasya prajñāpāramitām āśritya viharaty acittāvaraṇaḥ. Cittāvaraṇa-nāstitvād atrasto viparyāsa-atikrānto niṣṭhā-nirvānaḥ.*⁴

No translation is given with this edition, but a translation of this wording apparently appears in Conze (1973: 143):

“Therefore, O Śāriputra, owing to a bodhisattva's indifference to any kind of personal attainment, and through his having relied on the perfection of wisdom, he dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, in the end sustained by Nirvana.”

Here Conze is translating *niṣṭhā* “state, condition; completion, perfection” as “sustained”. This translation and the concept of someone being “sustained by Nirvana” are both problematic, but are not repeated elsewhere. In his translation of the extended version of the *Heart Sutra* text in the same volume, Conze (1973: 141) has translated not *cittāvaraṇa* “thought-coverings” but *cittālabhana* “an objective support to his thought” and he lists *cittāvaraṇa* as a variant reading. The confusion between these two terms is one of the few textual problems discussed by Conze (1948: 156-7). It falls to Huifeng (2014) to resolve the

³ I have replaced Nattier’s Wade-Giles Romanisation with the appropriate Chinese characters.

⁴ Conze 1967 has a full stop after *viparyāsa-atikrānto*, which seems to be a typographical error.

ambiguity by showing that neither Sanskrit word is a likely translation of the underlying Chinese phrase. I wish to put off pursuing this thread for another article in preparation. Regarding the last phrase, Conze notes that there is a variant reading “and he has attained to final Nirvana” (1973: 141 n.4). This appears to be a translation of *niṣṭhā-nirvāṇa-prāptaḥ*.

In the 1967 revised edition of the Sanskrit text, *bodhisattvasya* is amended to *bodhisattvo* (though *sandhi* rules legislate *bodhisattvaḥ*), and *nishṭhā-nirvāṇaḥ* becomes *niṣṭhā-nirvāṇa-prāptaḥ*. The Sanskrit text and translation that appear in Conze’s popular *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (1957 and 1975: 93) reflect a hybrid of the two versions of his edition:

Tasmāc Chāriputra aprāptivād bodhisattvasya prajñāpāramitām
āśritya viharaty acittāvaraṇaḥ. Cittāvaraṇa-nāstivād atrasto
viparyāsa-atikrānto nishṭhā-nirvāṇa-prāptaḥ

Therefore, O Sariputra, it is because of his non-attainmentness that a Bodhisattva, through having relied on the perfection of wisdom, dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains to Nirvana.

Nor have other translators and commentators done any better in resolving these issues.⁵

Resolving Conze’s Difficulties

My starting point in parsing the second sentence in Section VI is *niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ*. The noun *nirvāṇa* is grammatically neuter (*nirvāṇam*). Here, however, it has a masculine nominative singular case ending (*-aḥ*). This means that we must unequivocally read *niṣṭhā-nirvāṇaḥ* as a *bahuvrīhi* compound. As Arthur Macdonnell says, “These compounds are essentially adjectives agreeing with a substantive expressed or understood.” (1926: 175). A *bahuvrīhi* compound takes the gender, case, and number of the substantive it describes. Thus, we expect a noun or pronoun in the masculine nominative singular. However, in this sentence, there is no such noun or pronoun. There are three other words in the sentence. One is *cittāvaraṇa-nāstivād*, which is acting as a qualifier, in the

⁵ See for example, Conze 1973, 1975; Wayman 1984, Nattier 1992, Pine 2004, Jones 2012, Tanahashi 2014, and Hanh 1998, 2017.

ablative of cause, linking this sentence to the previous one. The other words are two more adjectives *atrastaḥ* and *viparyāsātikrāntaḥ* which we expect to apply to the same (missing) substantive. Notice that the sentence has no verb nor any word acting in the place of a verb. It is not a proper sentence at all. No wonder this sentence causes difficulties and no wonder there is a temptation to add a verb or verbal derivative to make the sentence whole.

However, even with the present sentence structure, there is an *implied* substantive. When Conze translates “*he* has not been made to tremble” the “*he*” is obviously the *bodhisatva* in the previous sentence. There are two simple ways to make this apparent in Sanskrit. For example, the translator or editor might have added a pronoun such as *saḥ*, to the second sentence, e.g. *Cittāvaraṇānāstivāt so atrasto...* Even so, the missing verb is still a problem. While some manuscripts add *prāpṇoti*, this does not work. The verb is transitive, something must *be attained*, but in this sentence, the quality we might expect the *bodhisatva* to attain—*niṣṭhā-nirvāṇaḥ*—is in the masculine nominative singular, meaning that it cannot be the object of the verb. The only verb we could reasonably add would be a copula, i.e. \sqrt{as} or $\sqrt{bhū}$.

The other way to resolve the problem is to remove the full stop after *acittāvaraṇaḥ* and make it a single sentence. By doing this *niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ* and the other *bahuvrīhi* compounds come into an unambiguous grammatical relationship with *bodhisatvaḥ* and nothing need be added. What’s more, if *niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ* is a *bahuvrīhi* describing *bodhisatvaḥ*, then no (extra) verb is required. Moreover, nothing is gained by adding *prāptaḥ* to the compound, because having the *attainment* of *nirvāṇa* as one’s ultimate goal is no different from having *nirvāṇa* as one’s ultimate goal. Translating the resulting sentence becomes a straightforward and unambiguous task.

In summary, there is only one sentence here, with *bodhisatvaḥ* as the agent (or subject), *viharati* as the main verb, and a string of adjectives of the *bodhisatva* following the verb. The removal of the extraneous full stop resolves most of the problems that have bedevilled both editors and translators of this section for decades.

Why Was There a Full Stop in the First Place?

The relationship of adjectives to nouns is so very basic in Sanskrit that we may wonder why Conze did not see it (and why none of the many scholars who have followed him also didn’t see it). Does Conze leave any clues as to why he

breaks the sentence where he does? His notes in 1948/1967 unhelpfully avoid any mention of punctuation. Of the manuscripts from Conze's (1967) list that I have access to, we find:

Ja has no punctuation marks.

Jb has a *daṇḍa* where Conze has a full stop.

Cb, Cc, Ce, Cg, Nb, Ne, Nm, and Nn⁶ do not have a *daṇḍa* here.

Two (badly corrupted) manuscripts have a *daṇḍa* displaced by one word.

Ni: *viharati* | *cittalamba*

Nk: *acittārambāna mātratvāt* | *anuśapa*

Cd and Nh are partial and lack this passage.

On the whole, then, Conze's sources seem to point away from breaking the sentence where he does. It is significant that Ja—the Hōryū-ji manuscript, the oldest of the Sanskrit sources—lacks any punctuation, as do the earliest Chinese versions of the text. It reminds us that punctuation is a relatively recent invention that postdates the composition of the *Heart Sutra*. However, it is extremely unlikely that Conze had direct access to the Hōryū-ji manuscript. In all likelihood, he was working from Müller's diplomatic edition, which was punctuated by Müller. Conze's full stop corresponds to where Müller has inserted a *daṇḍa* i.e. ...*acittāvaraṇaḥ* | *cittāvaraṇa-nāstitvād*... (Müller 1884: 50). One might argue that there is some kind of hiatus here, even if it is not a sentence break, so a *daṇḍa* might be appropriate, but Müller clearly translates it as a full stop (1884: 50). In T251, by contrast, the Taishō editors have inserted a semi-colon in the corresponding place, though we note that the sentence structure appears to be very different in Chinese.⁷ If anything, Müller's *daṇḍa* seems to have confused the issue.

Conclusion

⁶ This manuscript, British Library Manuscript EAP676/2/5, was not available to Conze, but has been discovered since. This note is based on my transcription and diplomatic edition. <https://prajnaparamitahrdaya.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/british-library-manuscript-eap67625-nn/>

⁷ 心無罣礙；無罣礙故 (8.848.c15-6)

Section VI of Conze's Edition of the *Heart Sutra* should be minimally amended by removing the full stop after *acittāvaraṇaḥ* and merging the two sentences into one. Following the argument for it in Attwood (2017), I spell *bodhisatva* the way it is spelt in all *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscripts, with one *t*. This is a ubiquitous *feature* of Buddhist Sanskrit, rather than a bug, and the hyper-correction to *bodhisattva* is unjustified. The amended text reads:

*Tasmācchāriputra aprāptivād bodhisatvaḥ prajñāpāramitām
āśritya viharaty acittāvaraṇaḥ cittāvaraṇa-nāstitvād atrasto
viparyāsa-atikrānto niṣṭhā-nirvāṇaḥ.*

I would translate this as:

Therefore, Śāriputra, in the absence of attainment, the bodhisatva who is without mental obstructions dwells having relied on perfect understanding, [and] being free of mental obstructions he is unafraid, overcomes delusions, and his extinction is complete.

Removing the full stop from Conze's edition solves the immediate problems with respect to *niṣṭhānirvāṇa* and Section VI. Taken together with the revision in Attwood 2015, the text now appears to be parsable and translatable, though Section VI could not be described as felicitous or elegant.

Although the grammatical problems are easily recognised and resolved, doing so raises a more difficult issue. Conze's faulty edition and the various faulty translations based on it are widely used, even *revered*, in the Buddhist world. Some of the translators and commentators are high-status individuals, both in their own milieux (whether religious or academic) and in the wider world. In an ideal world, persuading scholars is simply a matter of stating the facts as clearly as possible and the truth will out. Of course, it is never as simple as this. Politics is unavoidable when correcting a text like the *Heart Sutra*. My standing in the eyes of other Buddhist Studies scholars will always be a factor in how my work is assessed (hence the case for *anonymous* peer-review). The scholarly discussion is simplicity itself in contrast with persuading high-status religious and their followers of the same facts. Such attempts invoke all the long-held anxieties that Buddhists have around the issues of authority and legitimacy. High-status religious rarely admit to having made a mistake, especially where it concerns doctrine and the interpretation of core religious texts like the *Heart Sutra*. Buddhists often informally maintain a version of Papal infallibility

with respect to matters of doctrine. Respected leaders *cannot* make the kind of mistake that I am outlining in this article and therefore they do not. On the other hand, Thich Nhat Hanh has recently revised his own translation of the *Heart Sutra* because of a perceived internal contradiction in the Sanskrit text.⁸ While scholars typically try to shy away from such political issues, in this case, they cannot be avoided. My main concern is to eliminate the mistakes introduced into this important Buddhist text by Dr Conze as editor and translator. Nevertheless, if I am right, then a lot of other people are or have been wrong.

However, I am also acutely aware that Huifeng's analysis of this passage (2014) points to deeper *textual* problems. The original translation from Chinese into Sanskrit was flawed in several ways. There are problems with the words *aprāptivād*, *viharati*, *cittāvaraṇaḥ*, *-nāstivād*, and probably also with *niṣṭhānirvāṇa*. Also, while the words used are similar, the syntax of the Chinese versions of this passage appears to involve a finite verb with direct and indirect objects rather than three *bahuvrīhi* compounds. This note is thus preliminary to a thorough-going review of Section VI in a future full-length article, with a view to revising the Sanskrit translation of the *Heart Sutra*.

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⁸ The new translation was announced on his website in September 2014 and published in 2017.

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