

WIENER STUDIEN ZUR TIBETOLOGIE UND BUDDHISMUSKUNDE
HEFT 103

BUDDHA NATURE ACROSS ASIA

KLAUS-DIETER MATHES & CASEY KEMP



ARBEITSKREIS FÜR TIBETISCHE UND BUDDHISTISCHE STUDIEN UNIVERSITÄT WIEN
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There is nothing to be removed from it
And nothing to be added.
The real should be seen as real,
And seeing the real,
You become liberated.

The [buddha] element is empty of the adventitious,
Which are by definition separable.
But, it is not empty of the unsurpassable qualities,
Which are by definition not separable.

Ratnagotravibhāga 1.154–55

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Editors' Introduction

The *tathāgatagarbha* or buddha nature¹ doctrine is centered on sentient beings' potential for buddhahood—sometimes understood in the sense that all beings already contain a “buddha within.” This notion is found through various strands of early Mahāyāna sources that, notwithstanding their complex and interwoven development, came to share enough common features to summarize them under the doxographical category of Tathāgatagarbha, a position distinct from those of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.²

Within the context of the Mahāyāna goal of establishing all sentient beings in buddhahood, the possibility of enlightenment came to be a Buddhist axiom of central importance. Either there needed to be a clear causal process for its production, or its existence had to be understood as primordial. The latter would also apply if buddhahood is taken to not be produced from scratch. The way the process of becoming a buddha is addressed in teachings and commentaries is a foundational touchstone for systematically comparing the philosophical and hermeneutical positions of various Mahāyāna masters in Central and East Asia, which is particularly highlighted within the context of buddha nature theory.

The essays contained in this volume cover a range of research topics related to the notion of buddha nature across major Buddhist traditions. These contributions were originally presented as papers during the symposium “Tathāgatagarbha across Asia: The Reception of an Influential Mahāyāna Doctrine in Central

1 While there are a variety of acceptable English translations for *tathāgatagarbha*, this is the most standard translation for the term for this particular volume.

2 The common distinguishing feature of most Tathāgatagarbha sūtras is that all sentient beings already possess, within themselves, a fully grown buddha that is permanent and which is at times equated with the *dharmakāya*. This common characteristic has various interpretations, just as in the case of the common characteristics of dependent arising and emptiness in Madhyamaka or the three natures in Yogācāra. However, working with the doxographic category of a Tathāgatagarbha position (i.e., a permanent, fully developed buddha within) proves useful in describing, for example, the textual development of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*: while the Tathāgatagarbha position can be clearly identified in the older layers (see Takasaki 1966 and Schmithausen 1971) of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the final version of this treatise displays a systematic Yogācāra interpretation. Buddha nature then is restricted to the notion of a positively understood, luminous suchness, a dynamic principle that accommodates the Yogācāra notion of the three *kāyas* of a fully developed buddha arising from the naturally present and fortified potentials. See Mathes 2015: 119–26. We do not agree with Kiyota (1985), however, who proposed understanding Tathāgatagarbha as an entirely separate Mahāyāna school.

and East Asia,” which was held in Vienna from July 16–19, 2019.³ This symposium brought together academic scholars focusing on religio-historical developments of buddha nature theory and traditional teachers and monastics who offered emic perspectives on the relevance of the concept within the context of their own tradition. The resulting volume therefore aims at contributing to the overall better understanding of Tathāgatarbha doxography, both historically and in living Buddhist communities.

Sources, Interpretations, and Debates on Buddha Nature

The *Tathāgatarbhasūtra*, which is, together with the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, the earliest source in which the word *tathāgatarbha* occurs, in its description of the first simile⁴ of a buddha in the lotus, takes our term as a *bahuvrīhi* compound referring to sentient beings who always contain (*garbha*) a tathāgata.⁵ In the same source, in the simile of the future emperor (*cakravartin*) in the womb of a destitute woman, we also find the explanation that “the element of a tathāgata” (*tathāgatasthātu*) has arisen and is present in each sentient being in “an embryonic state” (*garbhagata*).⁶ Thus we already have in this early source the two main interpretations of *tathāgatarbha*, namely, that all sentient beings already possess in themselves a fully developed tathāgata, or they possess only a tathāgata embryo (i.e., a potential to become a tathāgata).

In the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, which, as recent research suggests, was probably earlier than the *Tathāgatarbhasūtra*, *garbha* can be understood as either “content,” “womb,” or “essence” (*sāra*), so that we find the meanings of a tathāgata embryo, a womb for the tathāgata, or something in us that has a tathāgata as its essence. While the first meaning implies that one has only the potential to become a buddha, the second meaning could be understood to support the idea that the *dharmakāya*—the womb in which we buddha embryos are nurtured—is our basic condition. In the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the seminal Indian treatise on the subject, these two ideas became two of the three interpretations for the presence

3 We would like to express our appreciation to the Foundation for sponsoring the Tathāgatarbha across Asia symposium and for supporting buddha nature research more broadly.

4 For a recent discussion of an old and new lotus simile and the occurrence of the term tathāgatarbha only in the new one, see Zimmermann 2020: 43–45.

5 As cited in RGVV 73.11–12, for example: “Whether tathāgatas appear or not, these sentient beings always contain a tathāgata” (*utpādād cā tathāgatānām anutpādād vā sadaivaite sattvās tathāgatarbhā iti*). See also Zimmermann 2002: 105–6.

6 As cited in RGVV 72.11–12: *tatra ca sattve sattve tathāgatasthātur utpanno garbhagataḥ saṃvidyate*. See also Zimmermann 2002: 58, 136.

of buddha nature in all sentient beings.⁷ As for the understanding of *garbha* as essence in this context, Masahiro Shimoda and Kazuo Kano point out that the “something in us that has a tathāgata as its essence” can also be interpreted as a stūpa present in our body.⁸ These understandings of *garbha* preclude the ideas of a buddha embryo or potential growing into a fully grown buddha, which imply the quality of impermanence.

As for the competing notion of a tathāgata element in its embryonic state in the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, two out of the nine similes in this sūtra—namely, the tree grown from a seed and the future emperor in the womb—appear to indicate the growth of buddha nature. Michael Zimmermann convincingly argues, however, that the main focus of the simile of the tree lies not on the growing tree, but on the imperishability of its seed and that the result of the tree is already contained in the seed, while the second simile emphasizes the unchanging nature of the future monarch in the sense that his future role is already preordained and his poor mother already protected.⁹ Zimmermann thus concludes that all nine similes of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* convey the idea of a full-fledged buddha present in living beings throughout beginningless time.

With regard to the understanding of buddha nature as a tathāgata embryo in the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, Kazuo Kano, in his study of this sūtra, reports the interesting explanation that unenlightened persons interpreted buddha nature as potentiality in order to avoid the offense of claiming to already be a buddha.¹⁰ In light of the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*'s repeated description of buddha nature as permanent, stable, peaceful, and eternal, passages in which buddha nature is taken as a tathāgata embryo could be understood to be intentional and not of definitive meaning. The series of attributes starting with being permanent is also found in other *Tathāgatagarbhasūtras*,¹¹ such as the *Āṅgulimāliyasūtra*, *Śrīmālādevīśiṃhanādasūtra*, and *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśasūtra*.¹²

Although the *Tathāgatagarbha*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and other Mahāyāna sūtras are counted as the earliest sources asserting buddha nature, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*

7 The third being the fact that sentient beings and buddhas do not ultimately differ in terms of their suchness or nonduality.

8 Shimoda 1997 and Kano 2020: 26–28.

9 Zimmermann 2002: 63–64.

10 Kano 2020: 30–31.

11 Used here as a generic term for the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and the other sūtras teaching *tathāgatagarbha* (buddha nature) or *tathāgatadhātu* (buddha element). See Mathes and Sheehy 2019: 3, and for a list of the *Tathāgatagarbha* sūtras see *ibid.*: 18, fn. 24.

12 Kano 2020: 34–35.

and its *vyākhyā* make up perhaps the most famous treatise centering on the doctrine. While this text was largely ignored in India until the eleventh century CE, the Indian teachings on buddha nature quickly spread throughout the Mahāyāna Buddhist world in Central and East Asia. Buddha nature has been a particularly important concept for many traditions in Tibet, where it continues to be debated, particularly in terms of whether it is necessarily cataphatic and whether it is a definitive Buddhist teaching. This doctrine, which has at times been understood to assert the existence of an unchanging self, is considered by many Buddhists to be controversial and continues to be a subject of debate among modern Buddhist traditions.

To sum up, the diversity of views on buddha nature already has its roots in early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. Depending on whether one follows the original understandings of the term as found in the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras or its particular Yogācāra interpretations, buddha nature can refer to either an already fully developed buddha, a buddha embryo, or the naturally present potential, sentient beings' capacity to become buddhas. In Madhyamaka commentaries, buddha nature is taken as either a teaching of provisional meaning (*neyārtha*) or merely a synonym of emptiness (i.e., our buddha nature is a non-affirming negation of mind's inherent existence). This already complex picture of the primary Indian scriptural sources fanned out further as these teachings were translated and spread throughout Central and East Asia.

Given the rich development of buddha nature thought in Asia, it has not only become a focus of academic studies but has also captured the minds of many convert Buddhist communities. Tibetan masters in particular have taught the concept in the West as an essential part of Mahāyāna philosophy and a bridge to tantric practice. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the subject matter in both the practitioner and academic realms.¹³

Chapter Summary

The first two chapters of the proceedings deal with Indian sources on buddha nature. Christopher V. Jones' contribution, "Varieties of Early Buddha Nature Teaching in India," makes for a good start to the proceedings, as it not only summarizes cutting-edge research on early buddha nature teachings in India but also explores a recent reassessment of its history in light of current evidence. Jones endorses Michael Radich's position in taking the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* as our

13 See for example Tsadra Foundation's online Buddha-Nature resource: <https://buddhanature.tsadra.org/>.

earliest available source for teachings on *tathāgatagarbha*, inviting a fresh look at not only that text but also the wider corpus of Indian literature concerned with buddha nature. Its earliest understanding thus involves the notion that what is essential to a buddha (*buddhadhātu*) abides in all sentient beings. Jones' research—the focus of his recent monograph¹⁴—is centered around a revised trajectory of how buddha nature was conceptualized in India in the first half of the first millennium CE. This is informed by the hypothetical primacy of Indian sources that explain buddha nature to refer to the permanent, indestructible nature of a buddha, and which also explicitly teach that this constitutes the Buddha's account of the self (*ātman*). Jones' paper draws attention to the fact that our earliest Indian literature concerned with *tathāgatagarbha* does not speak with one voice about what this expression refers to, and that by focusing on what sūtra materials tell us we encounter a range of quite different perspectives on the common principle that all sentient beings already have the nature or qualities of a buddha.

The second chapter, Kazuo Kano's "The *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa* of Sajjana: A Reading Sanskrit Text and Annotated Translation," contains a new edition and translation of Sajjana's (fl. second half of the eleventh century) *Pith Instructions on the Treatise of the (Mahāyāna-)Uttaratantra*. Kano also includes a fresh translation of interlinear glosses, probably added to Sajjana's pith instructions by a second hand. The text is of great value for the study of the late phase of Indian buddha nature thought and its Tibetan reception. In only thirty-seven verses, Sajjana manages to analyze and bring to light the internal structure of the *Uttaratantra*, more commonly known as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, which is centered around the three reasons for the presence of buddha nature in all sentient beings—namely, being pervaded by the Tathāgata's *dharmakāya*, sharing the same suchness as the Tathāgata, and possessing the potential for the Tathāgata to arise. It thus prepares the ground for most of the numerous Tibetan commentaries. The interlinear glosses are of great interest, too, as they suggest a subtle difference between the buddha nature contained in an ordinary being and the *dharmakāya* of a fully awakened being, and take buddha nature as an unconditioned luminous mind that continues over a series of moments.

By the time of Sajjana, buddha nature thought had already reached East Asia, where it spread in multiple directions. One related concept that flourished, especially in medieval Japan, was the doctrine of "original enlightenment" (*hongaku hōmon*). Two chapters shed light on this crucial development of Japan's intellec-

14 *The Buddhist Self: On Tathāgatagarbha And Ātman* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020).

tual history. The first is by Jacqueline Stone and titled “From Buddha Nature to Original Enlightenment: ‘Contemplating Suchness’ in Medieval Japan.” This chapter observes that the dominant theories of buddha nature circulating in medieval Japan entailed the proposition that all phenomena are empty, nondual, and mutually inclusive, each encompassing and pervading all others without losing their individual character. Following this line of thought, the “Buddha” was somehow present in ordinary beings, and thus buddhahood could be realized with this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*). In her contribution, Stone shows that this concern for rapid attainment culminated in the Tendai Buddhist doctrine of original enlightenment, which asserts that buddhahood is not a goal at all but the true status of all things. Suffering arises from the failure to realize this, while liberation lies in the insight, or even the faith, that one is a buddha already. *Hongaku* thought has often been disparaged in modern scholarship as an uncritical affirmation of worldly existence that, in valorizing all phenomena as expressions of original enlightenment, in effect negated the need for practice and legitimated sinful acts. However, *hongaku* is more accurately understood in terms of a radical inversion of practice and attainment: buddhahood is not a future achievement but inherent from the outset, and practice is not a means to realize buddhahood but its paradigmatic expression. Stone’s chapter examines features of original enlightenment thought as seen through a twelfth-century text known as *Contemplation of Suchness* (*Shinnyōkan*), which asserts that buddhahood lies precisely in contemplating self and others—humans and animals, pebbles and trees—as buddhas, just as they are.

In a related essay following Stone’s chapter, Seiji Kumagai investigates how the concepts of buddha nature and “original enlightenment” (*hongaku*) were interpreted by Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of the Jōdo-Shin-Shū School of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. While the theory of buddha nature as maintained by the Japanese Tendai school insists that since all sentient beings possess the essence of a buddha and are thus capable of becoming enlightened in the future, the theory of *hongaku* means that all sentient beings are innately enlightened, all phenomena being a manifestation of the Buddha. This unique theory was criticized by Japanese Buddhist monks both inside and outside the Tendai school. Thus the theory does not appear in any of the attested treatises of Genshin (942–1017), a highly influential representative of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. Although Honen (1133–1212), the founder of the Jōdo-Shū school, was opposed to the idea of *hongaku*, Tamura Yoshiro and later Japanese Buddhologists think that Honen’s disciples, including Shinran, embraced the theory. Kumagai now shows that Shinran, too, showed a negative attitude toward the idea of *hongaku*, notwithstanding his usage

of terms that are often understood to be associated with the theory of original enlightenment. In his chapter, Kumagai gives an overview of Shinran's particular position concerning the ideas of buddha nature and innate enlightenment.

This leads to the contributions on Tibetan Buddhism, among which the four initial essays are on the early Kagyü (Bka' brgyud) tradition: Casey Kemp looks at the transmission of early Mahāmudrā teachings on luminosity from India into Tibet; the chapter by Martina Draszczyk focuses on Gampopa (Sgam po pa), the forefather of the majority of Tibetan Kagyü schools; and two chapters by Katrin Querl and Khenpo Tamphel are on the important founder of the Drikung Kagyü ('Bri gung bka' brgyud) school, Jigten Sumgön ('Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1217).

Casey Kemp's chapter, "The Basis for Buddhahood: The Naturally Luminous Mind and Buddha Nature in the Early Mahāmudrā Tradition," focuses on an important concept related to buddha nature and our innate propensity for buddhahood—"natural luminosity" (*prakṛtiprabhāsvaratā*), the theory that the inherent condition of mind is luminous and pure, and afflictions (*kleśa*) are merely adventitious. While this idea is found in the Pāli canon, it came to be particularly thematized as the basis for buddhahood among the various Mahāyāna traditions. The natural luminosity of mind is a central topic in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* and came to be understood by some commentators to be synonymous with buddha nature, especially within the Tibetan Kagyü Mahāmudrā tradition. Kemp provides a semantic gloss of the term among key Indian canonical texts, including sūtra, tantra, and *dohā* sources, that directly influenced the doctrine of natural luminosity among the early Kagyü Mahāmudrā teachings. Kemp looks into how Maitrīpa (986–1063), Nāropa (1016–1041), and Marpa (1012–1097) in particular understood the luminous mind to be inseparable from the *dharmakāya*, which led to later traditional Kagyü Mahāmudrā understandings of buddha nature. While buddha nature sources are not extensively referenced in the earliest available Mahāmudrā teachings, Kemp demonstrates how the doctrine of natural luminosity directly influenced teachings on buddha nature, and vice versa, in the tradition.

Looking at buddha nature as seen by early Kagyü masters, Martina Draszczyk argues that it is essential to first study Gampopa's teachings. The way he taught impacted his disciples to such an extent that the traditions evolving from them were all summed up under the umbrella term Dakpo (Dwags po) Kagyü (i.e., Gampopa Kagyü). How essential buddha nature is for Gampopa can be best seen from his *Precious Ornament of Liberation* (*Thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*), a Mahāyāna manual, which he begins by emphasizing that buddha nature is the very basis for spiritual progress culminating in awakening. Equating buddha nature with the

mind's emptiness, his presentation of buddha nature seems to be made from a negating perspective. Draszczyk points out, however, that in several of Gampopa's other teachings recorded by his disciples and preserved in his collected works, buddha nature is not mere essencelessness, but rather coemergent wisdom or natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), both of which become key terms among Kagyü Mahāmudrā teachings. While Gampopa uses this terminology, and hardly ever the term *buddha nature*, Layagpa (La yag pa, twelfth century), one of his immediate disciples, explicitly equates nonarising, coemergent wisdom, and natural awareness with buddha nature imbued with inconceivable buddha qualities. A century later, during the time of the Third Karmapa (1284–1339), it would become standard for Kagyü masters to equate natural awareness with buddha nature endowed with qualities while simultaneously refraining from attributing any substantial quality to it. In her chapter, Draszczyk takes a closer look at the early Tibetan masters and explores how their meditation-oriented approach is based on both affirming buddha nature as the ground and goal of Buddhist soteriology and avoiding its reification into an entity with real properties.

In the first chapter on the Drikung Kagyü founder Jigten Sumgön, Katrin Querl looks at the notion of buddha nature in the *Single Intention* (*Dgongs gcig*), one of the most influential works of Jigten Sumgön in the intellectual milieu of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Tibet. Querl observes that while the *Single Intention* was highly contested by some of his contemporaries, most famously by Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251), other scholars like Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal ('Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal) reportedly based their Mahāmudrā hermeneutics and exegeses of the *Uttaratantra* on his works. Even though there is no independent work on buddha nature by Jigten Sumgön, the topic is widely discussed in the *Single Intention*. Relevant themes include the relation between buddha nature and emptiness, the qualities that buddha nature possesses, that it is of virtuous nature and worthy of dedication, and the defense of a single potential (*rigs gcig*) and a single vehicle (*theg pa gcig*). Drawing on texts such as the two earliest commentaries on the *Single Intention* by direct disciples of Jigten Sumgön and other records of his teaching, Querl's paper provides a comprehensive overview of this pivotal thinker's view on buddha nature. It sheds further light on the early Mahāmudrā tradition of Tibet, with a particular focus on its meditative approach (*sgom lugs*) to buddha nature literature.

In the last chapter of the early-Kagyü group, Khenpo Tamphel investigates the difference between a sentient being and a buddha based on Jigten Sumgön's *Mahāmudrā Investigation into Confusion: An Instruction for Identifying the Process*

of Confusion (*Phyag chen 'khrul pa rtsad gcod 'khrul lugs ngos 'dzin gyi gdams pa*). This text explains what differentiates sentient beings from buddhas and how they are ultimately inseparable. Tamphel shows that for Jigten Sumgön the relation between buddhas and sentient beings is best explained in terms of *dharmin* and *dharma* (i.e., beings and their true nature). *Dharmatā* exists within all sentient beings, and their confusion is caused by not recognizing that this *dharmatā* exists within them. According to Jigten Sumgön, recognizing this *dharmatā* is to become a buddha. Tamphel also investigates Jigten Sumgön's view on buddha nature, the three *dharmacakras*, and how he takes issue with Ngog Loden Sherab's (Rngog Blo ldan shes rab) interpretation of buddha nature as a non-affirming negation that is only based on study and reflection. Contrasting this apophatic approach with the positive understanding of buddha nature in the meditation tradition, Jigten Sumgön observes that even Loden Sherab needs to proceed from studying buddha nature to its experience in meditation if he is to reach enlightenment.

The next two contributions are on the *zhentong* (*gzhan stong*, "empty of other") interpretation of buddha nature by the founder of the Jonang (Jo nang) school, Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361), and his disciple Shangton Sönam Drakpa (Zhang ston Bsod nams grags pa, 1292–1370), who advocate a literal interpretation of those passages in the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras that fully equate *tathāgatagarbha* with buddhahood and the ultimate and claim that it possesses the characteristics of purity, self (*ātman*), bliss, and permanence. Buddha nature thus is not "empty of an own nature" (*rang stong*), but "empty of other" (*gzhan stong*), that is, the adventitious stains that do not belong to it. The first of the two papers on these early Jonang masters is by Michael Sheehy on "Tantric Zhentong Visions of Tathāgatagarbha in Early Jonang Kālacakra Yoga Manuals." In his chapter, Sheehy investigates the concept of *śūnyatābimba* (*stong gzugs*), "images of emptiness" or expressions of emptiness, in the *Kālacakra Tantra* and gives attention to how this phenomenon was interpreted to be direct expression of buddha nature by Dölpopa, a Tibetan Kālacakra master, and his immediate disciples. Sheehy looks into the tantric epistemology of the textual connections of these "images of emptiness" to buddha nature, and into correlative contemplative experiences described within Tibetan meditation manuals on the Kālacakra's sixfold *vajrayoga*. Sheehy shows that these expressions of buddha nature are taken to be observable and experiential, and are claimed to come about through the careful execution of the yogic procedures explained in the *vajrayoga* practice of the Kālacakra. To contextualize Dölpopa's claims, Sheehy analyzes passages from early meditation procedural manuals on the sixfold *vajrayoga* prac-

tices composed by two of his closest disciples, Choklé Namgyal (Phyogs las rnam rgyal, 1306–1386) and Lotsāwa Lodrö Pal (Lo tsā ba Blo gros dpal, 1313–1391), interlinear commentarial writings on the *Kālacakra Tantra*, prescriptive guidebooks about remedying blockages to meditative realization, and autobiographical accounts of Jonangpa yogis.

The second essay on early Jonang masters is by Klaus-Dieter Mathes on “Shangton Sönam Drakpa’s Defense of Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen’s Clear-Cut Distinction between Buddha Nature and the Ground Consciousness.” Mathes observes that Dölpopa’s zhentong position requires a straightforward distinction between an ultimate, unconditioned buddha nature, which is identical with the ultimate and with buddhahood, and the conditioned ground-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), including all the samsāric states of mind that emerge from it. This strict distinction excludes from the ultimate anything dependently arisen. Mathes investigates how Dölpopa’s disciple Shangton Sönam Drakpa defends his master’s view by addressing opposing statements in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and the *Ghanavyūhasūtra* that equate buddha nature with the ground consciousness. Shangton’s discussion constitutes the major part of the introduction to his commentary on the *Tathāgata-garbhāsūtra* and is in large part also contained in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary. Mathes shows how Shangton elaborates, based on numerous passages from the Maitreya Works, the *Avikalpaprapveśadhāraṇī*, the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*, and even other parts of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* itself, that one faces eight undesired consequences if one does not strictly differentiate buddha nature from the ground consciousness. Shangton not only argues against a position that Mathes could identify in Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal’s *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary, namely, an exegetical system that regards buddha nature and adventitious stains as not ontologically different, any more than ocean water and its waves, but also the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé’s (Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339) Yogācāra-based distinction between the ground consciousness and the pure mind (i.e., the equivalent of buddha nature) that accepts in the basis of negation a dependently arising perfect nature.

The Jonang position on buddha nature triggered a significant amount of discussion and criticism, even among masters of traditions that allowed positive descriptions of buddha nature as luminosity or coemergent wisdom. While an investigation into Geluk (Dge lugs) interpretations of buddha nature is not represented in the present volume, aspects of it are indicated in Mathes’ comparison of Shangton with Gö Lotsāwa, who was influenced by Jé Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (Rje

Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419). Moreover, an influential *rangtong* (*rang stong*, “empty of an own nature”) interpretation of buddha nature is presented by Khenpo Ngawang Jorden, who investigates the famous Sakya scholar Gorampa Sönam Sengé’s (Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge, 1429–1489) understanding of the concept of buddha nature presented in his *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye’i kha kong*). This text was written to critique and clarify what Gorampa saw as misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the theory of buddha nature prevalent throughout Tibet in the fifteenth century. One of the major subjects of his criticism was the Jonangpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, whose assertions on buddha nature he refuted, presenting and defending his interpretations. Ngawang Jorden shows that contrary to the Geluk position of only refuting the inherent existence of anything dependently arisen in terms of relative truth, Gorampa did not have an issue with the Jonangpas’ complete denial of relative truth.

On our timeline of the intellectual history of buddha nature thought in Tibet, the next century was dominated by the polymath and extremely critical thinker Mikyö Dorjé (Mi bskyod rdo rje), the Eighth Karmapa (1507–1554). In his chapter, David Higgins investigates this Karma Kagyü master’s prolific writings on how buddha nature relates to different conceptions of selfhood. On the one hand, Mikyö Dorjé broadly rejects, along the lines of standard Madhyamaka critiques of the belief in self (*ātmagrāha*), any equation between buddha nature and a self: while his critiques take in the controversial current of early Indian buddha nature theory that had equated buddha nature with a true self, their primary target is Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal’s purported identification of buddha nature with a subtle self, which was allegedly made under the tutelage of Jé Tsongkhapa’s conception of a subtle self. On the other hand, the Karmapa does accept a conception of authentic selfhood or transcendent perfection of a self (*ātmapāramitā*) advanced in certain buddha nature and Buddhist tantric texts that is said to be realized precisely through understanding selflessness. Higgins suggests that a touchstone of Mikyö Dorjé’s attempt to reconcile these two seemingly antithetical views on the relationship between buddha nature and selfhood is to regard them as complementary rather than contradictory. On this view, the negation of self is considered to be a crucial moment in the discovery of authentic selfhood, which is, in this case, synonymous with *dharmakāya* and resultant buddha nature. Higgins also explores the broad range of Indian and Tibetan views on buddha nature and selfhood considered by Mikyö Dorjé and shows how he presented and defended his own tradition’s position in relation or reaction to these.

The next two chapters are again about Jonangpa masters. First, Sina Joos investigates Tāranātha's (1575–1635) zhentong interpretation of buddha nature. Tāranātha had already looked back on three centuries of critique from various camps of Tibetan Buddhism, and he was the last Jonangpa writer from the school's main seat at Jomonang (Jo mo nang) in Tsang province, which at that time was still in a position of economic and political power. He is considered second in importance to Dölpopa in relation to the proclamation of zhentong and the number of his authored works. He clarified and expanded Dölpopa's exegesis of zhentong unlike anyone before him. In her paper, Joos looks into Tāranātha's *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* (*Dbu ma theg mchog*), which covers a variety of topics relevant to the zhentong view including essential Mahāyāna concepts ranging from Yogācāra to Madhyamaka and from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* to the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. In the third chapter of his *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, Tāranātha gives a detailed presentation of buddha nature, which he equates to the *dharmadhātu* and to suchness. The *Ratnagotravibhāga* is quoted extensively and exclusively in this chapter, while the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* is quoted throughout the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*.

Filippo Brambilla's chapter on "Empty of True Existence, Yet Full of Qualities" describes the buddha nature position of Tsoknyi Gyatso (Tshogs gnyis rgya mtsho, 1880–1940), a late Jonang master who combined Geluk with Jonang thinking. Never straying more than a few kilometers from the valleys of the Dzamthang ('Dzam thang) area of southern Amdo (A mdo) where he was born, a stronghold of the Jonang tradition, Tsoknyi Gyatso led a sedentary life. Still, he was exposed to a broad range of philosophical views through many teachers, such as Bamda Gelek ('Ba' mda' dge legs, 1844–1904) and Ngawang Chöjor (Ngag dbang Chos 'byor, 1846–1919), who also appreciated Geluk scholasticism. These masters had studied with some of the most prominent Kagyü and Nyingma authorities of the nineteenth century, such as Kongtrul (Kong sprul, 1813–1899), Paltrul (Dpal sprul, 1808–1887), and Ju Mipham ('Ju Mi pham, 1846–1912). Brambilla examines how this broad range of views translated to Tsoknyi Gyatso's position on the polarizing topic of buddha nature. On the basis of key passages from two of his major philosophical works, the *Illuminating Light* (*Rab gsal snang*) and *Removing the Anguish of Holding to Extremes* (*Mthar 'dzin gdung 'phrog*), Brambilla argues that he sought to harmonize the orthodox perspective of his own tradition on this subject with that of, essentially the opposite, the Gelukpas. In line with the latter, Tsoknyi Gyatso presents buddha nature as immanent in all sentient beings inasmuch as it is nothing but the mind's emptiness of inherent existence that is determined through logical-analytical investigation. On the other hand, Brambilla observes,

he does not depart from the fundamental view of Dölpopa and elaborates on that same buddha nature-qua-emptiness in positive terms. Accordingly, he maintains that once it is directly realized in the meditative equipoise of bodhisattvas, in which all adventitious stains are naturally exhausted, buddha nature becomes manifest as primordially existent, replete with qualities, and transcending all conceptual elaborations.

Douglas Duckworth's chapter, "Sentient Beings Within: Buddha Nature and the Great Perfection," rounds out the Tibetan chapters on buddha nature by focusing on the Nyingma (Rnying ma) master Ju Mipham, who is said to have met and praised Tsoknyi Gyatso's main teacher Bamda Gelek. In his contribution, Duckworth considers how Mipham's unique treatment of buddha nature reflects the Nyingma legacy of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). Based on his extensive study of Mipham, Duckworth describes the status of a sentient being in the Buddha, rather than how the Buddha, or buddha nature, exists in sentient beings. In his paper, Duckworth also focuses on how Mipham interprets buddha nature in light of his tradition of the Great Perfection. Duckworth observes that the acceptance of buddha qualities as primordially present, unconditioned, and thus not newly produced resembles the affirmation of a zhentong view. While Mipham accepts this position, he also qualifies his assertion by emphasizing that, in an analysis of the ultimate, buddha nature is also empty. In terms of entirely conventional valid cognition that analyzes the mode of appearance, however, a zhentong interpretation permits distinguishing between the way things are (in which all of a buddha's qualities are primordially present) and the way things appear (in which the qualities of a buddha seem to be newly produced).

The final chapter of the volume is by Shenpen Hookham, whose contribution is titled "The Impact of a Zhentong Interpretation of Tathāgatarbha Doctrine from the Point of View of a Western Buddhist Practitioner." Hookham produced a pioneering doctoral dissertation on buddha nature that was published as a book in 1991, titled *The Buddha Within: Tathāgatarbha Doctrine according to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, which continues to be a foundational resource for buddha nature studies. In Hookham's chapter, she addresses the difference between what she calls "Rangtong and Zhentong models" of reality, providing glimpses into what this difference means specifically for Western Buddhist practitioners. In this context, Hookham's piece also suggests potential precursors of the buddha nature complex in the Pāli canon based on her framework of these two models. Hookham considers emic perspectives when discussing interpretations of buddha nature as received in Western Buddhist practitioner communities,

which are often allusive to text-based and historically oriented academic scholarship on the topic.

Spanning nearly two millennia, from the beginning of Tathāgatagarbha thought in early Mahāyāna sūtras to its contemporary reception in the West, the sixteen papers of this volume shed fresh light on the intellectual history of buddha nature across Asia. Bringing together academic and traditional scholars, all specialized in Tathāgatagarbha studies but working with different time periods and regions, has contributed to the sharing of valuable research on buddha nature conducive to a fruitful dialogue across the limits of individual disciplines.¹⁵

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Varieties of Early Buddha Nature Teaching in India

Christopher V. Jones

In this chapter I offer an overview of some recent developments in the study of early buddha nature thought in India, and some reflections on its diversity. This entails a recent and somewhat revisionist model of the early life of the enigmatic expression *tathāgatagarbha*, and with it the idea that all sentient beings, across successive lives, already have what is proper to a buddha. I will omit many of the details relevant to arguments about the relative dating of Mahāyāna sūtra materials that feature in this model, regarding which the interested reader might consult some of the publications mentioned herein.¹ Whether or not one considers this account of the earliest context for the expression *tathāgatagarbha* and for what it stands to be persuasive, it certainly demonstrates that it can sometimes serve our understanding of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism to suspend the influential exegesis provided by notable commentaries; in this case, the great treatise on buddha nature thought, the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* or, as it has otherwise been known, the (*Mahāyāna*-)*Uttaratantraśāstra*. By attending to Mahāyānist sūtra materials on their own terms, we encounter different and sometimes underappreciated perspectives on the expression *tathāgatagarbha*, and we witness a more diverse range of understandings, some of which are doctrinally very challenging, about how buddhahood can be said to be immanent to all sentient beings.

Early Explanations of *Tathāgatagarbha*

As is well known, the expression *tathāgatagarbha*—although it relates always to the idea that sentient beings somehow possess what is proper to a buddha—evades one single, unequivocal translation. In versions of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* it appears to have been employed as an exocentric compound (*bahuvrīhi*) that describes sentient beings themselves: they “are *tathāgatagarbha*” in the sense that they each “contain” (*garbha*) a *tathāgata* (i.e., a buddha).² This phrasing is preserved in Sanskrit sources: in commentarial material of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* and in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, both of which may have originated in the fourth

1 Most recently, Radich 2015: 19–58 and Jones 2021: 229–37 (summarizing arguments from earlier chapters of that volume); also Silk 2015: 9–12. See also Zimmermann 2020.

2 This usage is preserved in the Sanskrit *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, e.g., Johnston [1950] 1991: 25.18: *sarvasattvās tathāgatagarbhā iti*.

century, and in other, later Indian literature besides.³ But both verses and the prose commentary of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, together with surely older Sanskrit sources, also preserve *tathāgatagarbha* taken to refer to something that sentient beings themselves possess: in other words, they “have” the *garbha* of/for a *tathāgata*/buddha.⁴ This usage is also found in surviving Sanskrit of the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, another of our very earliest sources for this expression, and is reflected in Chinese and Tibetan translations of this and other sūtra works in which the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* exhibits comparatively little interest (about which more will be said below). Where *tathāgatagarbha* refers to something that sentient beings “have,” a range of translations of *garbha* are possible. Foremost, it can have the sense of an “embryo,” or alternatively of a “womb,” or more generally the “chamber” for something.⁵ But rather than being fixated on how to translate *tathāgatagarbha*, an expression that may have been coined to be purposefully enigmatic, I believe we learn more by attending to that to which *tathāgatagarbha* refers in one or other Indian source concerned with it.

In many discussions of the expression *tathāgatagarbha*—of Indian or Tibetan provenance, or in modern scholarship—it is commonly accepted that it is some manner of epithet for the natural state the mind. This is surely, among other factors, due to the long-standing appeal of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*—its verse materials and commentary, which circulated together by the early sixth century at very latest—which certainly understands *tathāgatagarbha* to somehow refer to the mind’s original or innate stainlessness (*prakṛtipariśuddhacitta*; *cittaprakṛtivaimalya*) or luminosity (*cittaprakṛtiprabhāsvara*).⁶ The identification

3 There is allusion to teaching about *tathāgatagarbha* preserved in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, most notably at verse 9.37, as well as in the commentarial materials with which it circulated (the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya*, traditionally attributed to Vasubandhu, which may predate the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*: see Griffiths 1990). The exocentric use of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* appears again in tantric sources, for example, the *Adhyardhaśatikā-prajñāpāramitā* (Toganō [1930] 1982: 6.18–19), regarding which see the thorough discussion by Kano (2016: 1–13, in particular n. 17); also Jones 2021: 195, n. 50.

4 This usage is preserved in Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, e.g., Habata 2019: 141 (fragment no.18.4): *[t](a)thāgatagarbho <’>stīti*. A root verse (*mūla*) that is likely basic to the composition of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (i.e., the verse text on which the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, in its complete form, comments: see Schmithausen 1971; Mathes 2015: 119–26) preserves the sense that “in sentient beings there is the *jinagarbha* (*sattveṣu jinagarbho*)”; see Johnston [1950] 1991: 39.10–11; Takasaki 1966: 229.

5 Recent discussions of how the term *tathāgatagarbha* can be unpacked, with reference to some of the literature discussed below, include Kano 2020, Saitō 2020, and Zimmermann 2020.

6 The likely earliest mention of this intrinsic purity of the mind in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* is found among the root verses of the text (specifically verse 1.49; Johnston [1950] 1991: 66.16–17), and likely one that is early or most “basic” to its structure; see references in n. 4,

of the *tathāgatagarbha* with the mind or its basic state is found in sūtra materials upon which the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* draws heavily, in particular the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda(nirdeśa)sūtra* (henceforth simply *Śrīmālādevī*) and *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* (henceforth *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva*). This mentalistic understanding of buddha nature accords with the general character of much Buddhist teaching, which makes claims about human nature (or better still the nature of all sentient beings) that privilege the mind and its workings, and understands liberation from rebirth to be a process of doing things to the mind, with the mind.⁷

But it is striking that what has commonly been taken to be the earliest text of this tradition, the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, in none of its surviving versions (two Chinese and two Tibetan translations, as well as lengthy quotation by the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*) exhibits any interest in explaining that *tathāgatagarbha* refers to the basic nature of the mind, its purity or luminosity. The core content of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* is nine evocative similes, which in each instance describe the presence of what is proper to a buddha, in all sentient beings, obscured by afflictions (*kleśa*) that are accidental to it. Surviving forms of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* preserve a diverse range of terminology used to describe something precious and enduringly present in all sentient beings. In some instances it is the Buddha's knowledge (*buddhajñāna*), but just as frequently it is his body (*jinakāya/sugatakāya*), or the property of being “self-produced” (*svayambhūtvā*), or the Buddha's ten powers (*daśabala*), or otherwise some non-specific “nature” (e.g., *dharma-tā, prakṛti*).⁸ The *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* quotes these similes in verse forms that are different to what we find across versions of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* itself. In the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, what the similes are meant to explain is strikingly uniform: they almost exclusively describe the presence of some “essential nature” (*dhātu*; Tib. *kham*s, *dbyings*), which the accompanying commentary

above; also Jones 2020: 68–73. Notably, the subject in this and accompanying verses is not clearly *tathāgatagarbha*, but some nature/element (*dhātu*) signified by it, which in this verse is identified with the mind that is naturally without stain (*cittaprakṛtivaimalya*).

7 Famously encapsulated in the claim found in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (Pali Text Society edition III.415) that what leads to further transmigration (i.e., *karman*) is precisely intention (*cetanā*) or, in other words, the condition of the mind. Arguably, this perspective underlies Indian Buddhist literature in general, though we must also recognize that some very influential texts—for just one example the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, discussed further below—do not devote much attention to the mind or its functions at all.

8 Thorough detail of how similes across versions of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* describe buddha nature is provided in Zimmermann 2002: 50–62; 2020: 51–53. The Sanskrit terms presented here are all highly probable reconstructions based on extant Tibetan versions of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*.

identifies as the nature of a buddha (*tathāgatadhātu*).⁹ It is only in a commentarial verse of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* that this *dhātu* is glossed to refer to the mind and its innate purity.¹⁰ This understanding of buddha nature in terms of the mind is not apparent in the similes themselves, or as they appear in the content of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*.

The similes that make up most of the content of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* are not systematic in their presentation of buddha nature, and perhaps they were not meant to be; their intent may have been to inspire confidence in the immanence of buddhahood to all beings without giving this any detailed doctrinal exposition.¹¹ But it is also telling, as Michael Zimmermann was first to identify, that it is only in likely late material in the composition of this text, perhaps as its constituent similes were brought together and framed in the narrative that we know today, that the expression *tathāgatagarbha* appears to have been introduced to its lines.¹² Perhaps it was only at a late stage of its production that the term *tathāgatagarbha* was generated, or we might otherwise entertain that this curious expression was brought to these similes from another literary context, and was then employed to complete what was finally called the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*.¹³

More curious still is that other early literature concerned with *tathāgatagarbha*, which invests more interest than the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* in explaining to what this expression refers, does not relate it to the mind or its nature. Three texts of this literary tradition—all still sūtras that we know, from dates attached to their Chinese translations, to have existed by the early fifth century at the absolute latest—present what is called *tathāgatagarbha* as something distinctly corporal; it refers to something “in the body,” or at least “about one’s constitution,” in a fashion quite distinct from what we find in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*. These three texts are the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (*mahāsūtra*) together with the little-studied *Āṅgulimālīya* (*sūtra*) and *Mahābherī* (*hārakasūtra*), which have until recently been treated as something of a derivation from a “mainstream” of literature con-

9 We find this in *Ratnagotravibhāga* verses 1.97, 98, 103, 116 (slightly different: *śubhadharmadhātu*), 120, and 122; verse 1.101 alone states that what is obscured by afflictions is *sambudhagarbha*. For these, see Johnston [1950] 1991: 60–66; Takasaki 1966: 269–77.

10 Specifically, verse 1.129 equates the nature of all sentient beings (*sattvadhātu*), which is apart from the afflictions that always cover it, with the stainless mind (*cittaprakṛtivaimalya*); see Johnston [1950] 1991: 66.16–17.

11 See Zimmermann 2002: 75–77.

12 Ibid.: 27–34; also 2020: 43–45.

13 This is discussed further below. For recent reflections on where the expression *tathāgatagarbha* fits into the development of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, see Zimmermann 2020.

cerned with *tathāgatagarbha*, represented by the better-remembered *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, *Śrīmālādevī*, *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva*, and *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*.¹⁴ What has sometimes been called the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group of texts has in the past been somewhat sidelined by scholarship, in part due to some doctrinal or terminological features that distinguish its members from literature that understands *tathāgatagarbha* in terms of the mind or its purity, and in part because Buddhist authors themselves—in India and Tibet especially—seem to have been comparatively less influenced by them.¹⁵

In a sense this lack of interest in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group is quite reasonable, as these works are mentioned relatively little in Indian and Tibetan commentarial discussions of buddha nature, which likely began with the commentarial verses or scholastic prose of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*.¹⁶ Their lack of any pronounced influence on the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, either the commentary or the verses on which it is based, could indeed suggest that these sources were unpopular, or perhaps even unknown, to whoever composed it.¹⁷ However, the perspective of these sūtras on the expression *tathāgatagarbha* and to what it refers is significant. In these works, *tathāgatagarbha* designates the presence of what is called the permanent, indestructible *buddhadhātu*: the Sanskrit term that lies behind, via the Chinese translation *foxing* 佛性, our English reference to *tathāgata-*

14 This sense of a “mainstream” body of *tathāgatagarbha* literature, from which the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group somehow departs, can be traced back to work by Takasaki, e.g., 1971; 1974: 39–126, 768–69.

15 Tibetan exegetes of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, especially influential authors writing in the fourteenth century, did attempt to make sense of the challenging content of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group; for example, in the *Mountain Doctrine* of Dölpopa (see Hopkins 2006), who was favorable to them, and the *Treatise on Tathāgatagarbha* of Buston (see Ruegg 1973), who believed they required further explanation. An overview of both works, and other relevant Tibetan commentaries besides, is Wangchuk 2017.

16 Sources including the *Laṅkāvatāra*(sūtra) remember the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and *Āṅgulimālīya* as discourses concerned with vegetarianism (see Nanjio 1923: 258.4–5), although the *Laṅkāvatāra*—another text that understands *tathāgatagarbha* in terms of the mind and a subliminal stratum of it—also critiques a form of buddha nature teaching highly reminiscent of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and *Āṅgulimālīya* in particular (ibid.: 77.13–78.4). It is well known that the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* went on to have a greater role in East Asian Buddhism, although it ultimately became considered something of a complement to the still more influential *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*).

17 The *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* does quote one passage from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Johnston [1950] 1991: 74.22–75.12), and it can be argued that other material harks back to the form of buddha nature teaching exhibited by it (see Jones 2020: 68–74). There is no evidence that the author of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* knew either the *Āṅgulimālīya* or *Mahābherī*.

garbha in terms of “buddha nature.”¹⁸ These three sūtras describe the *buddhadhātu* as something that is somehow “within” one’s constitution;¹⁹ it is permanently present, unchanging, and survives both physical harm and the death of the body.²⁰ Somewhat notoriously, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group also states that this *tathāgatagarbha*, otherwise the presence of the *buddhadhātu*, is that which the Buddha declares to be the self (*ātman*), in clear tension with earlier and wider Buddhist teaching. Much ink has been spilled over how far teaching about *tathāgatagarbha* constitutes a betrayal of earlier Buddhist teaching about transmigration and its end, which generally did not make any use of a notion of a self, or indeed anything permanent (*nitya*), and which instead developed sophisticated ways of discussing identity and its continuity in terms of “selfless” causal sequences.²¹ What is particularly striking is that texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group do not merely imply that *tathāgatagarbha* refers to something like an account of the self, but they declare that the Buddha unambiguously explains it to *be* the self.²²

18 For simplicity, in this chapter I will privilege the Tibetan version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and its critical edition produced by Hiromi Habata (2013), over the no-less-important Chinese translations attributed to Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (Taishō no. 374) and Faxian 法顯 (Taishō no. 376), both produced in the early fifth century. For detailed discussion of all these witnesses to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, in particular regarding what they teach about buddha nature, see Jones 2021: 29–33. Regarding other sūtras, I will refer to their Tibetan translations present in the Derge and Peking editions of the Tibetan Kangyur (*bka’ gyur*), and to their Chinese translations in the Taishō edition (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經) of the Chinese canon, accessed via CBETA online (<https://www.cbeta.org>).

19 See, for example, material in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*: Habata 2013: §405–14. In these lines we are told repeatedly that advanced bodhisattvas might perceive buddha nature “within their bodies” (Tib. *rang gi lus la*; Ch. 自身中觀). For brief discussions of this same language in the *Āṅgulimāliya* and *Mahābherī*, see Jones 2020: 60–64, and further analysis in respective chapters of Jones 2021.

20 See Habata 1990; Jones 2021: 47–55.

21 Accusation that teachings about *tathāgatagarbha*, in particular what is found in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, advance a kind of monism reminiscent of Brahmanical (specifically Advaita) Vedānta is found as far back as Obermiller’s English translation of the Tibetan *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* ([1931] 1991: 212); discussions of these themes include Ruegg 1989a: 17–55 and King 1991: 99–115; 1997. Another notable critique is found across publications representative of the Critical Buddhist movement (*hihan bukkyō* 批判仏教) in Japan, several of which are collated in Hubbard and Swanson 1997. Matsumoto Shirō (e.g., 1997) is notable for having characterized the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition as “not Buddhist” due to what he terms its *dhātuvāda* orientation, by which he means that it supposes a generative locus from which all things are produced that is apart from the mechanics of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Apart from those collected in Hubbard and Swanson 1997, a recent response to the Critical Buddhist reading of *tathāgatagarbha* is Shimoda 2020.

22 A lingering trace of association between *tathāgatagarbha* and teachings about a self (*ātmavāda*) survives in a root verse of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (1.52), which differs from a verse of the

Buddhahood “Within” and Buddhahood “Beneath”

Our understanding of the early history of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* in India has recently undergone some reassessment. It has long been accepted that the composition of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* was related to the birth to the expression *tathāgatagarbha* itself, giving a name to the vague idea, evident in some still earlier works of Mahāyāna sūtra literature (the *Tathāgatotpattisambhavanirdeśa*, for example, to which we return below), that the Buddha or his qualities (foremost his knowledge) has some presence in all sentient beings. The primacy of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* in this tradition had already been asserted in the work of Takasaki Jikidō, whose 1974 *Nyoraizō shisō no keisei* (“Formation of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory”) remains the longest, most thorough treatment of buddha nature teaching, and the expression *tathāgatagarbha*, across all relevant Indian literature concerned with it. Takasaki’s model was accepted by Michael Zimmermann, whose erudite 2002 study, edition, and translation of versions of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* retained the perspective that this text sits at the beginning of Indian literature concerned with the expression named in its title. However, in 2015 Michael Radich proposed, as part of a study of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, that this less understood member of the *tathāgatagarbha* textual family may in fact be our best contender for earliest work in this tradition, predating the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. Radich’s argument builds on an earlier and important investigation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* by Masahiro Shimoda (1997) and valuable studies by Stephen Hodge (2006; 2010/2012), as well as meticulous work on the Tibetan and surviving Sanskrit of the text by Hiromi Habata (e.g., 2007; 2013; 2019). However, Radich goes further than these authors by arguing that the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* provides a plausible “scenario of origin” for the enigmatic expression *tathāgatagarbha*, which complements themes in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* still more fundamental to it than the introduction of a form of buddha nature teaching.²³

As its name suggests, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is a (Mahāyānist) retelling of the Buddha’s final days, last teachings, and apparent departure from the world (*parinirvāṇa*), as otherwise recounted in various mainstream Buddhist works, such as the Pāli *Mahāparinibbānasutta*.²⁴ But in this version of the story the Buddha re-

Bhagavadgītā (13.32) by only three syllables, and which replaces the sense of a pervading self (*ātman*) with affirmation of a pervading nature (*[buddha?]dhātu*); see Johnston [1950] 1991: 42.6–7; Takasaki 1966: 235. The relationship between *tathāgatagarbha* and discourse concerned with selfhood (*ātmavāda*) is explored at length throughout Jones 2021.

23 Radich 2015: 101–74, after Schmithausen 1987: 1:11.

24 *Dīgha Nikāya*, Pali Text Society edition II.72–168. The Pāli text is of course witness to just one form of this narrative; one might also consider, for example, the Mūlasarvāstivādin form of the *parinirvāṇa* story studied by Waldschmidt 1950–1951.

veals that he exists beyond his worldly body, through a permanent mode of being that does not die: his “dharma body” (*dharmakāya*) or indestructible “adamantine body” (*vajrakāya*).²⁵ The Buddha’s activities—from his birth to his death, as well as innumerable other events in the world besides—are docetic apparitions; they are displays or appearances, projected into the world by a buddha who is in fact, and has been for a very long time, beyond it.²⁶ Building on earlier observations by Takasaki and Shimoda, Radich contends that the presentation of the *tathāgatagarbha* in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, articulated throughout as the presence of the Buddha’s nature or essence (*buddhadhātu*), is a creative reimagining of an important aspect of the established *mahāparinirvāṇa* narrative: the Buddha’s deathbed pronouncement of what should become of his bodily relics.²⁷ Radich draws attention to Indian Buddhist sources in which the stūpa—the pan-Indian and later pan-Asian site for the preservation of a Buddhist relic—is referred to in terms of the chamber that contains (*garbha*) a relic (*dhātu*) of a buddha (or *tathāgata*); what was important about a stūpa to Indian Buddhist culture was its status as *tathāgata(dhātu)garbha*.²⁸ Hence, the second great revelation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is that the true nature of a buddha is in some fashion “enshrined,” imperceptibly, in all sentient beings. Simply put, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is first a story about the Buddha’s death in which he does not truly die (he is already beyond death), and second about the location of what is essential to him, which situates the precious trace of a buddha not in any stone reliquary, but in the constitution of every sentient being.

Radich’s hypothesis considers further the manner in which a report of the Buddha’s death is transformed into an account of how new buddhas can be produced. A buddha, who in his true nature is beyond what is seen of him in the world, is “born” from the “womb for a buddha” (*tathāgatagarbha*) that is unlike the rest of a sentient being, who is otherwise constituted by the ephemeral results of their earlier actions through transmigration.²⁹ This reading of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* challenges the assumption that it constituted something like a departure from a main trajectory of buddha nature thought begun by the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and systematized in the *Śrīmālādevī* and *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*. We might now im-

25 Regarding *vajrakāya* specifically, see Radich 2011 (2012).

26 See Habata 2013: §187–214.

27 This relies on a stratification of material in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* proposed first by Shimoda (e.g., 1997: 160–71), according to which material concerned with the Buddha’s permanence appears to predate that which concerns *tathāgatagarbha*; see also Radich 2015: 19–22, 207–10; Jones 2021: 29–33.

28 Radich 2015: 159–68 (especially n. 437); see also Kano 2017.

29 Radich 2015: 132–43.

agine that the expression *tathāgatagarbha* began life, at least in part, as a reference to the Buddhist stūpa: a pervasive symbol of Buddhist ritual life but also, very significantly, of the manner in which buddhas remain somehow present and influential in the world.³⁰ Understanding *tathāgatagarbha* to stand for the presence of the Buddha's relic, or we might better say *that which is essential to and enduring about a buddha*, also informs how we read two more works belonging to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group: the *Āṅgulimālīya*, which has to date been most thoroughly studied by Kazuo Kano (e.g., 2000), and the *Mahābherī*, the subject of several articles by Suzuki Takayasu (e.g., 2002; 2015; also Jones 2016b).³¹ Collectively, these three sources might reflect an early mode of teaching about buddha nature that took *tathāgatagarbha* (apropos of sentient beings, rather than any actual stūpa) to designate the presence of some abiding *buddhadhātu*, and which the Buddha states is the true self, or what is enduringly valuable in the constitution of any sentient being. The present author has attempted to flesh out this new picture of how teaching about buddha nature might have developed after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Jones 2021), taking as a guiding theme the extent to which different works of the Indian *tathāgatagarbha* tradition articulate buddha nature as an account of what deserves to be called the self.

If the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* might be our earliest source for teaching about *tathāgatagarbha*, we should attend carefully to what it does and does not say. The first thing to appreciate, after Radich, is that in all complete surviving witnesses to this work the terms *tathāgatagarbha* (e.g., Tib. *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*; Ch. *rulaizang/fozang* 如來藏/佛藏) and *buddhadhātu* (e.g., Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi khams/dbyings*; Ch. *foxing/rulaixing* 佛性/如來性) seem to be interchangeable, and this work also gives the sense that this can be called one's self, or *ātman* (Tib. *bdag*; Ch. *wo* 我).³² An audience of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* learns that buddha

30 A related theme in both the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and *Āṅgulimālīya* is the sense that a bodhisattva, by accepting (though not yet seeing) his *tathāgatagarbha*, is already akin to a buddha in the world. See Jones 2021: 79–83.

31 All three texts are given attention by chapters in Takasaki 1974, though there they are considered somehow derivative of the main trajectory of buddha nature teaching in India; see n. 14 above.

32 Note that surviving Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* do not themselves attest the term *buddhadhātu*, or any passages in which it is unequivocal that *tathāgatagarbha* is being discussed in terms of the presence of a self (*ātman*; see however Habata 2019: 140 [fragment 18.3], in which Habata reconstructs the Sanskrit *māhātmya*, though corresponding in the Tibetan *Mahāparinirvāṇa* to—somewhat irregularly—*che ba nyid*, rather than what the Tibetan more commonly calls simply *bdag* [Skt. *ātman*]). It remains beyond reasonable doubt, however, that the forms of the Indian *Mahāparinirvāṇa* used in the production of its Chinese and

nature resides at the mysterious, hidden chamber for a buddha, one's *tathāgata-garbha*, and that it is an enduring and superlatively precious kernel of one's constitution or identity. Where the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* first describes buddha nature, it is already something that sits in difficult tension with teachings about absence of self. Just as it is distorted (*viparyasta*), we are told, to believe that anything of the world deserves to be considered the self (likely uncontroversial for many Indian Buddhist audiences), it is also distorted to hold that what *is* the self, otherwise one's own buddha nature, is not the self.³³ This surprising statement colors how the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* explains buddha nature elsewhere in its content, primarily through a string of similes or short parables that unpack how all sentient beings have something precious about themselves, at all times, even though they are not able to perceive it. One of the most instructive of these similes concerns a mother who will not allow her child to her breast so long as the infant is taking medication that requires some time to digest. The mother smears her breast with pungent nimba leaf and instructs the child that this is poisonous; he is then reluctant to return to the breast once his medication has done its work and the mother's breast is clean, such that the mother must persuade him that it is now safe. Similarly, we are told, the Buddha had taught about absence of self only to undermine worldly notions of selfhood; what is now on offer is the Buddha's own account of the self, otherwise the nature of the Buddha, which is superlatively valuable and which his monks should certainly accept.³⁴

The authors of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* did not take this revelation about Buddhist selfhood lightly. In the midst of its parables regarding buddha nature, the text presents a number of questions (one might even say objections) voiced by the Buddha's interlocutor, a bodhisattva named Kāśyapa.³⁵ The Buddha is asked how teaching about a self relates to the inevitability of old age and death; how actions done in one's past can justifiably lead to different modes of birth (differentiations that should not exist, if indeed everyone has the same basically awakened nature);

Tibetan translations reflected (1) the sense that sentient beings "possess" the *tathāgata-garbha*, (2) that this expression marks the presence of some *buddhadhātu*, and (3) an acknowledged tension between this and Buddhist teaching that eschews any notion of a self.

33 See Habata 2013: §373. This follows other material in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*—likely from an earlier stage in its composition—in which selfhood is attributed to the Buddha himself; see *ibid.*: §101–4. It is this material that is quoted by the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (see n. 17, above; also n. 58).

34 Habata 2013: §377–78. See also Jones 2021: 45–47.

35 Notably, this is not the arhat (Mahā)Kāśyapa, who in other accounts of these events only learned of the Buddha's death after it had happened.

how it is that people do wicked actions or become intoxicated (if their basic nature is the same as that of a buddha); and whether this mysterious nature is something somehow hidden about the body, or risks injury if the body is somehow injured.³⁶ The Buddha's responses to these questions come in the form of further short parables: *tathāgatagarbha* designates that which endures, or even "lives" (Tib. *'tsho ba pa*; Skt. **jīvaka*), in any sentient being, is apart from the bodily elements that make up the rest of their constitution, and is indestructible.³⁷ Buddha nature is that which a bodhisattva might look for in his body, and although it is beyond the vision of anyone but a buddha it is something that an advanced bodhisattva, at the tenth stage of accomplishment (*bhūmi*), might begin to perceive, albeit indistinctly.³⁸ In the meantime, the assiduous bodhisattva must accept the presence of buddha nature on faith, and understand it to be nothing like any worldly account of the self, for which the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* supplies imagery highly reminiscent of some that is found in several Brahmanical Upaniṣads.³⁹ Particularly fascinating is the final word of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* on this subject: that when one hears an account of the self that is in accord with Dharma, this can only be the work of a bodhisattva, or rather an emanation (*nirmāṇa/nirmita*) by one.⁴⁰ Discourse about the self either is worldly, and so wrong minded, or it speaks about the true self that gestures beyond what is worldly, and is hence a trace of teaching about buddha nature.

36 Habata 2013: §379–80. These contentions surrounding buddha nature are discussed in Jones 2021: 47–50.

37 In these parables, buddha nature is compared to a precious jewel lost beneath the flesh of an athlete (§381–82), to a healing elixir that can be extracted from the ground, surrounded by dense flora (§383–84), and to a diamond that can be unearthed from stone (§385). Regarding all of these, see Jones 2021: 50–55.

38 See material from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* cited in n. 19 above. The sense that the *tathāgatagarbha* can be "seen partially" (*iṣat paśyanti*) by tenth-stage bodhisattvas lives on in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (Johnston [1950] 1991: 77.3–4; Takasaki 1966: 303–4), in which it does not fit so neatly with how that commentary generally explains buddha nature.

39 For example, Habata 2013: §417.12–16. Specifically, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* mentions worldly notions of a self that is like a person the size of a thumb, or comparable to the size of various grains, or like a fire resident in one's heart. These are particularly reminiscent of imagery found in the *Kaṭha*- and *Śvetāśvatara-upaniṣads*. Similar imagery appears in the *Āṅgulimālīya*: see, e.g., Derge no. 213, 151b1–14; Peking no. 879, 158b3–7, or in Chinese translation Taishō no. 120 (vol. 2), 525b7–14. The relevance of this Upaniṣadic imagery is explored in greater depth in Jones 2021: 223–28, 245–53.

40 Habata 2013: §417–18. A similar argument, that non-Buddhist discourse about the self owes its presence in the world to buddhas or bodhisattvas teaching about buddha nature, is found in the *Āṅgulimālīya*: see Jones 2016a; also Jones 2021: 91–95.

That buddha nature is somehow “in or about the body” is a defining feature of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group of sūtras, of which the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* itself is best known. The *Āṅgulimālīya* echoes many of its themes and concerns, in particular where it articulates that teaching about *tathāgatagarbha* is something of a corrective to understanding the Dharma to mean that there is nothing that warrants designation as the self.⁴¹ The *tathāgatagarbha* is otherwise the presence of an enduring nature that is “one’s own” (Tib. *bdag gyi dbyings*; Skt. **ātmadhātu*), so vital because it is that within all aspiring bodhisattvas—indeed, in all sentient beings—that allows for them to achieve the exalted, supramundane status of a buddha.⁴² In the *Āṅgulimālīya*, the presence of this enduring nature is also used to buttress arguments for celibacy and for vegetarianism, which are prescribed if every sentient being has the same essential buddha nature “within” them, and which here and in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* are important aspects of a bodhisattva’s arduous vocation.⁴³ Perhaps more remarkable still is the *Mahābherī*, which declares that teachings about absence of self, and also those about emptiness, are incomplete and anticipate revelations about the *tathāgatagarbha*.⁴⁴ How, the *Mahābherī* asks, could there be the enduringly pleasant existence enjoyed by a buddha if there was not, prior to the achievement of awakening, something that could be called the self?⁴⁵ The expression *tathāgatagarbha* is used to designate the presence of something that endures after liberation; freed from those things that obscure it, it allows for the emergence in the world of a fully-formed buddha.⁴⁶

The manner in which *tathāgatagarbha* is explained in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group of texts is quite different from what we find in more influential works

41 See, for example, in the Tibetan *Āṅgulimālīya*, Derge no. 213, 153a6–7; Peking no. 879, 160a3–4, or in Chinese translation Taishō no. 120 (vol. 2), 525c25–28. For more, see Jones 2021: 70–91.

42 Following the Tibetan version of the *Āṅgulimālīya*, this is first explained at Derge no. 213, 151a6–b1; Peking no. 879, 158a8–b3; comparable to Taishō no. 120 (vol. 2), 525a29–b6. See also Jones 2016a: 137–39; also 2021: 74–77.

43 With respect to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, see Habata 2013: §173–78; see also Schmithausen 2020: I: 212–37; III: 7–40; also Jones 2021: 87–91.

44 For this in the Tibetan translation of the *Mahābherī*, see Derge no. 222, 107b6–108a1; Peking no. 888, 112b2–3, or in its Chinese translation Taishō no. 270 (vol. 9), 296b8–10. See also Suzuki 2000; Jones 2021: 109–14.

45 See Jones 2016b: 68–75; also 2021: 100–107.

46 This is particularly evident in the first of the *Mahābherī*’s similes that explain buddha nature, in which the *tathāgatagarbha* (or otherwise one’s self) is compared to an eye that requires the removal of a cataract: see, in Tibetan translation, Derge no. 222, 110b3–5; Peking no. 888, 115b2–4, or in Chinese translation Taishō no. 270 (vol. 9), 297b4–7.

like, for example, the *Śrīmālādevī*. The *Śrīmālādevī* is the most frequently quoted sūtra in commentarial material of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, and provides the backbone of its teaching about *tathāgatagarbha* and for what that expression stands. The *Śrīmālādevī* is unambiguous, even offhand, in stating that the term *tathāgatagarbha* designates nothing like an account of the self (*ātman*);⁴⁷ it instead leads its audience to identify *tathāgatagarbha* with the innately pure status of the mind (*prakṛtipariśuddhacitta*),⁴⁸ which once cleared of afflictions is the Buddha's true and supramundane mode of being (*dharmakāya*).⁴⁹ There is no sense that what is taught by the expression *tathāgatagarbha* should sit in any delicate tension with teachings about absence of self; the *Śrīmālādevī* is consistent with orthodox Buddhist teaching that there is nothing that warrants consideration as one's self, and the basic nature of the mind—which is here “the womb for a buddha”—is no exception. Similar is found in the *Laṅkāvatāra*(sūtra), which both names the *Śrīmālādevī* as a source for its own exposition of *tathāgatagarbha* in decidedly mentalistic terms, and moreover reinterprets *tathāgatagarbha* to be an epithet for the substratum- or store-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) that is central to the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition.⁵⁰ The *Laṅkāvatāra* also denies that this is anything like a self, but concedes that the Buddha had sometimes taught the *tathāgatagarbha* to be like a self for the benefit of audiences who would be attracted to just such a notion.⁵¹ The *Śrīmālādevī* and *Laṅkāvatāra*, both of which are cited by a number of later Indian Buddhist commentators, do not take *tathāgatagarbha* to refer to the presence of any *buddhadhātu*, but instead to the proper state of the mind once it has been cleansed of all things that pollute it.⁵² Finally, the influence of the

47 See, in the Tibetan *Śrīmālādevī*, Derge no. 92, 275a1–a3; Peking no.760 (48), 281b4–6, or in one of its (two) Chinese translations, Taishō no. 353 (vol. 12), 222b19–b21.

48 Specifically, the *Śrīmālādevī* associates afflictions (*kleśa*) with both the *tathāgatagarbha* and then, later, with the pure nature of the mind. Surviving Sanskrit of the *Śrīmālādevī*'s statements about the pure mind is found in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*; see Johnston [1950] 1991: 22.1–4; Takasaki 1966: 188.

49 See Derge no. 92, 272a5; Peking no.760 (48), 278b1–2, and otherwise Taishō no. 353 (vol. 12), 221c10–11. For further discussion of the *Śrīmālādevī*, see Jones 2021: 119–38.

50 See Nanjio 1923: 222.9–223.13.

51 Ibid.: 78.8–12. Notably this is somewhat the inverse of what the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group promotes: that absence of self was taught to suppress non-Buddhist teachers and their erroneous notions, prior to the Buddha revealing what is the *true* self, or buddha nature. See also Jones 2016a, and 2021: 183–88.

52 For citations of these texts in Buddhist commentarial works (for example, by several notable masters in the Madhyamaka tradition: Bhāviveka, Candrakīrti, and Kamalaśīla), see (e.g.) Kano 2016: 7–11; also Jones 2021: 195–99.

Śrīmālādevī is also apparent in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva*, which identifies the *tathāgatarbha*—or the afflicted form of the *dharmakāya*, or, once again, the pure status of the mind—with reality itself (*tathatā*; *dharmadhātu*).⁵³ This is another facet of the most familiar, perhaps “classical” model of teaching about *tathāgatarbha* that scholars encounter in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*.⁵⁴

We can hence distinguish between at least two different modes of teaching about *tathāgatarbha* in early Indian buddha nature literature: those in which this expression refers to the presence of some hidden essence (*dhātu*), or one’s “self,” that is imperceptibly “within” the person of any sentient being, and those in which it refers to the mind and its naturally (*prakṛti*) awakened status. Apart from these we have content of the *Tathāgatarbhasūtra*, which makes no mention of whether or not buddha nature should be taught in terms of the self, but which also does not preserve any sense that *tathāgatarbha* refers to the purity of the mind, and moreover offers little context to explain from where the term *tathāgatarbha* might have come.⁵⁵ The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* does just this, never clearer than where it says that bodhisattvas could themselves be considered like stūpas: sites at which the presence of a buddha can reside, albeit hidden from view, for the benefit of all sentient beings.⁵⁶ This line of thinking, in which *tathāgatarbha* is imagined in corporeal terms, and which prefigures the discovery and subsequent emergence of an awakened subject (*ātman*) that is hidden within every sentient being, con-

53 That the *Śrīmālādevī* likely predates the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva* is persuasively argued by Silk (2015: 11–13). Regarding the core doctrine of the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva*, see *ibid.*: 14–51.

54 Though its expositions exceed these, the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* frames its account of *tathāgatarbha* in terms of three teachings meant by it: (1) the inclusion of all sentient beings within the Buddha’s knowledge (or, elsewhere in its lines, the *dharmakāya*), (2) the lack of differentiation across reality (*tathatā*), whether seemingly pure (awakened) or impure (afflicted), and (3) the sense that all sentient beings belong to the lineage (*gotra*) for becoming a buddha; see Johnston [1950] 1991: 26.1–6; Takasaki 1966: 172–73.

55 Zimmermann (2002: 32, 40) explores the possibility that the compound *tathāgatarbha* was generated by the image, used by the *Tathāgatarbhasūtra* only late in its composition, of buddhas concealed in lotus calyxes, who are “contained in lotuses” (*padmagarbha*). However, these lotus-encased buddhas do not clearly evoke any earlier trope of established Buddhist thought or practice. By contrast, as Radich has argued, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and its account of an internalized relic (*dhātu*), which creatively transforms a story about the Buddha’s absence into a revelation of his presence, provides a conceptual *mise en scène* for the earliest use of the expression *tathāgatarbha* in relation to sentient beings.

56 See Habata 2013: §391.10–18, and in particular the following sentiment: “May I be like a stūpa for all those sentient beings who are not willing to revere [the Buddhas]; may my body become a site of worship for them all!” (*phyag byed mi ’dod pa’i sems can thams cad kyi mchod rten lta bur bdag gyur cig | bdag gi lus sems can thams cad kyi phyag bya ba’i gnas su gyur cig |*).

tinues in the *Angulimāliya* and *Mahābherī-sūtras*, which must be taken seriously as sources for what is perhaps the earlier Indian mode of teaching about buddha nature.⁵⁷

The *Śrīmālādevī* constitutes a response to and departure from this kind of thinking. It seems to know and moreover develop ideas and language from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*; for example, that the Buddha taught that what is supramundane can be called (and contrary to all things worldly) permanent, the self, pure, and pleasant (*nitya*, *ātman*, *śubha*, *sukha*), which in the *Śrīmālādevī* become a set of four “perfections” (*nityapāramitā*, *ātmapāramitā*, etc.) that qualify the *dharma* *makāya*.⁵⁸ The *Śrīmālādevī* otherwise goes on to explain *tathāgatagarbha* in a fashion that was demonstrably less contentious than anything that we find in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group: it is a basis (*niśraya*), support (*ādhāra*), and foundation (*pratiṣṭhitā*) for conditioned existence (i.e., transmigration) that is also somehow distinct from it, and in which are located the inconceivable qualities proper to the *dharma* *makāya*.⁵⁹ In other words, *tathāgatagarbha* refers to something like an enduring substrate that runs “beneath” or “throughout” the experience of transmigration and the liberated state that might come after it. It is in this fashion that *tathāgatagarbha* is understood in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva*, *Laṅkāvatāra*, *Ratnagotravibhāṅgavyākhyā*, and later Indo-Tibetan commentaries.⁶⁰

Other evidence supports the primacy of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group, or at very least the mode of teaching about *tathāgatagarbha* found in them. For example, the *Śrīmālādevī* omits any statement that explicitly ties the expression *tathāgatagarbha* to all sentient beings: i.e., either that they “possess it” (found across the *Mahāpari-*

57 This is not to suppose that these two texts are necessarily older than, for example, the *Śrīmālādevī* and *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, although their teachings are beyond doubt proximate to those of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.

58 In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, see Habata 2013: §100–104, §370–74. In the *Śrīmālādevī*, and then inherited in the *Ratnagotravibhāṅgavyākhyā*, the “perfection” of permanence, self, etc. suggests a further qualification of what is said, more simply, in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. For this in the *Śrīmālādevī*, see Derge no. 92, 273b3–274a2; Peking no. 760 (48), 280a4–280b3, or in Chinese Taishō no. 353 (vol. 12), 222a18–26. For further exposition in the *Ratnagotravibhāṅgavyākhyā*, see Johnston [1950] 1991: 30.4–35.12; Takasaki 1966: 207–20.

59 For this in the *Śrīmālādevī*, see Derge no. 92, 274a6–b5; Peking no. 760 (48), 280b8–281b1, and otherwise Taishō no. 353 (vol. 12), 222b5–b19. This is an interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* picked up and developed by the *Ratnagotravibhāṅgavyākhyā*; see Johnston [1950] 1991: 73.2–8 (Takasaki 1966: 291–93).

60 This is to say nothing of how this influenced Chinese Buddhism; for example, the notion of a stainless mind (**amalavijñāna*) in works attributed to Paramārtha 真諦 (499–569), regarding which see Radich 2016.

nirvāṇa-group) or perhaps that they somehow “contain a buddha” (preserved in the Sanskrit *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* and implied in most surviving versions of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*). This suggests that the *Śrīmālādevī* did not need to explain that the expression *tathāgatagarbha* pertains somehow to “all sentient beings,” but was instead in the business of clarifying quite how this expression relates to them.⁶¹ Moreover, in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group the term *tathāgatagarbha*, loaded always with secrecy (the interior of a stūpa, the real focus of any reverence shown to it, is necessarily always hidden from view), is frequently presented as an aspect of the Buddha’s Dharma that he had otherwise taught only by means of cryptic utterances (*saṃdhā-/sandhāvacana*), tailored always to what his audiences were ready to hear. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* the Buddha goes so far as to explain that this did not mean that he kept any secret (Tib. *gsang ba*; Skt. *guhya*) from his followers, though it is otherwise clear that buddha nature, or that which deserves to be called one’s self, is something that the Buddha very purposefully did not make explicit earlier in this teaching.⁶² This air of secrecy, or at very least of the Buddha’s caution with respect to teaching about buddha nature, is peculiar to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group. The *Śrīmālādevī* accepts that the *tathāgatagarbha* is certainly difficult to understand, but it is not something that had been kept obscured in earlier pronouncements of Buddhist Dharma, “behind” the Buddha’s teachings about absence of self.⁶³ Any “secret,” by the time of the *Śrīmālādevī*, was certainly already “out,” which is perhaps why this work dispenses with the mystique that is prevalent throughout the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group of sūtras.

Buddha Nature Beyond, and Behind, *Tathāgatagarbha*

My recent monograph concerns the early life of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* and traces its association, through Indian Mahāyānist literature, with discourse about the self. If the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is our earliest source for the expression *tathāgata-*

61 A surviving Sanskrit colophon of the *Śrīmālādevī* considers it to be “an explanation (*nirdeśa*) of the various stratagems (*upāya*) proper to the single vehicle (*ekayāna*; see Matsuda 2000: 74):” another Mahāyānist doctrine, far from universal to sūtra literature, that the *Śrīmālādevī* explains in some depth. See also Jones 2021: 203–10.

62 See Habata 2019: 170–72 (§219–21). Here the Buddha explains that there can be no accusation of secrecy if what is somehow “concealed” is ultimately for the benefit of his audience. This has obvious echoes of the parable of the burning house, famous from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, in which the Buddha defends himself from the implication that he spoke any kind of falsehood when promoting arhatship (see below; for a recent discussion of this parable, see Lopez and Stone 2019: 77–79). Regarding the air of secrecy in our Chinese translations of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, see Radich 2015: 193–98; regarding this theme across *tathāgatagarbha* literature, see also Jones 2021: 210–14.

63 For further discussion of the *Śrīmālādevī*, see Jones 2021: 119–38.

garbha, and that text explicitly declares that this amounts to what can be called the self, then we must take seriously that the development of the expression *tathāgata-garbha* was at least in part the history, and then legacy, of a Buddhist account of the self. I also contend that this is an early example of a Mahāyānist attempt to expand the parameters of Buddhist Dharma to account for wider Indian discourse about liberation; a Buddhist account of what deserves to be called the self, from which all other teachings about such a thing can be said to originate, further elevates the Mahāyāna above not only mainstream Buddhism but all teachings about liberation, Buddhist or otherwise, in general.⁶⁴ This outward-looking enterprise does not, however, account for the development of buddha nature thinking in general, and we should not disregard the importance of doctrinal precursors to buddha nature teaching as we find it promoted in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, *Tathāgata-garbhasūtra*, and elsewhere.⁶⁵ With this in mind, in the rest of this chapter I present some further thoughts about how we might best conceptualize teaching about buddha nature as a facet of Mahāyāna Buddhism that is intertwined with, but not reducible to, use of the expression *tathāgata-garbha*.⁶⁶

In recent scholarship we witness a curious inversion regarding the way in which we might think about the *Tathāgata-garbhasūtra* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* as early sources for buddha nature teaching. It had previously been understood that the *Tathāgata-garbhasūtra* is a text that provides us with the earliest-known occurrence of the expression *tathāgata-garbha*; it is, after all, the named topic about which the Buddha explicitly claims that he is speaking, and in later centuries the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* turns to the nine similes of this text to unpack multiple understandings of what is intended by *tathāgata-garbha*. Meanwhile, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* was a text that was sidelined by scholarship for what was couched as something like an appropriation of the term *tathāgata-garbha*—from the *Tathāgata-garbhasūtra* or another source like it—to refer to the abiding presence of the *buddhadhātu*, which this unconventional discourse affirms can be called the self. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* was seen to be more invested in affirming the

64 Discussed in Jones 2016a, and further in Jones 2021: 245–60.

65 These influences are explored at length throughout Takasaki 1974. However, chapters in Takasaki’s monumental study still privileged the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* as a lens through which to make sense of the early history of buddha nature thinking in India, which can limit appreciation of sūtra materials, for example those of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group, on their own terms.

66 A subtly different reflection on some of these themes, also informed by new thoughts regarding *tathāgata-garbha* and its relationship to buddha nature, is that by Zimmermann (2020). My sense of a “buddha nature idea,” independent of the expression *tathāgata-garbha*, is itself very much indebted to phrasing found in Zimmermann 2002.

immanent “nature of a buddha”: language which the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* interprets without the clear sense that it has anything to do with the Buddha’s abiding, yet supramundane, relics.⁶⁷

In his study of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, Zimmermann discerned that the expression *tathāgatagarbha* features only in what appears to be relatively late material in the composition of that text: it appears in its narrative framework, together with a final “bridging” simile (numerically its first in the completed text) that frames the eight other similes more basic to the text, which themselves laud the presence of the qualities or body of a buddha without ever mentioning the key term *tathāgatagarbha*.⁶⁸ Whatever was the source of the expression *tathāgatagarbha*, it seems to have been introduced at a late stage in the production of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* as we know it, either coined by its own authors or, quite plausibly, imported from another text or even a different Mahāyānist literary milieu. Meanwhile, Radich’s study of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* draws attention to the fact that although that discourse is concerned with the presence of the *buddhadhātu*, our surviving Sanskrit and Tibetan materials that are witnesses to it still seem to privilege the

67 Notably, where the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* explains *tathāgatagarbha* to mean the lineage (*gotra*) of/for a buddha, it also glosses the expression *dhātu*, used in its own presentation of similes from the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, to mean “cause” (*hetu*: see Johnston [1950] 1991: 72.7–73.16; Takasaki 1966: 289–96). This is an important move that requires further study; it is never clear that *dhātu* in our sūtra materials is used in this sense, so much as meaning the “essence” of a buddha that is itself what must be found and revealed. Sources like the *Śrīmālādevī* and *Laṅkāvatāra* conspicuously avoid the language of *dhātu* precisely, I believe, to avoid the sense that *tathāgatagarbha* refers to the presence of something precious, like a buddha’s essence, about one’s body. The sense in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* of a (*buddha*) *dhātu* as a “cause” rather than the “essence,” already present, of a buddha owes much to the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda leanings of its commentarial material, although this claim requires further consideration beyond what I present here.

68 See Zimmermann 2002: 27–32. I here add a further observation. The only apparent occurrence of the term *tathāgatagarbha* in what Zimmermann demonstrates to be “early” material of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* appears in one version of the simile of treasure buried beneath a house (*ibid.*: 120–25; also 37). Zimmermann finds that it is more likely that this has been corrupted from **tathāgatājñāna*, represented in our other witnesses to the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, which is certainly very plausible. However, as Zimmermann and others have discussed, a very similar simile features in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Jones 2021: 44–47; see also Radich 2015: 56–57). I suggest that this single trace of the term *tathāgatagarbha* in basic content of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, in the sense of a “precious store” of qualities and tied to a simile otherwise present in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, may be further evidence of this having entered the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, in which it is clear enough that *tathāgatagarbha* refers to some “chamber” for the precious nature or qualities of a buddha (Kano 2020: 32–35).

term *tathāgatagarbha* over it.⁶⁹ This suggests that the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* invested more in the expression *tathāgatagarbha*—the mysterious chamber/womb for the nature of a buddha—than did early or core material of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. In summary, it turns out that core material of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* is less about *tathāgatagarbha* and more about the nature of a buddha in all sentient beings, while the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is the text that may explain from where the expression *tathāgatagarbha* may have originated. This is something of an inversion of how these texts were, until quite recently, generally understood.

With these kinds of developments in mind, and to still better understand the early life of the term *tathāgatagarbha* and the literature associated with it, I suggest that we keep our attention on the general idea or set of ideas for which *tathāgatagarbha* stands. This entails a distinction between usage of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* and, more broadly, what I have elsewhere called the buddha nature idea: that something proper to all sentient beings across their successive births and deaths is, at all times, that which is proper also to a buddha.⁷⁰ This distinction helps us to explain the development of our earliest sources concerned with *tathāgatagarbha*: an expression that is not at the beginning of buddha nature thinking in its broadest sense, so much as the term by which a developing trend, which may have pervaded diverse Mahāyāna literary communities, achieved a kind of concretization. As Zimmermann writes, *tathāgatagarbha* became a useful “catchword” for variations on the idea that sentient beings possess already, and at all times, something proper to a buddha.⁷¹

Although texts concerned with the buddha nature idea frequently make use of the expression *tathāgatagarbha*, they clearly do so in different fashions. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group takes *tathāgatagarbha* to designate something enduring and precious in the constitution of every sentient being; the *Śrīmālādevī*, *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva*, and *Laṅkāvatāra* relate *tathāgatagarbha* (in subtly different fashions) to the nature of the mind, and the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* uses this expression to frame a set of evocative similes that celebrate the presence of a buddha’s knowledge, nature, or body present already in our character. The similes of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* are by themselves sufficiently diverse to demonstrate that early forms of thinking about buddha nature were not of one kind, even before we consider other Indian works that seem to diverge over the matter of to what the expression *tathāgatagarbha* properly refers. It has long been established

69 Radich 2015: 23–34.

70 Discussed at greater length throughout Jones 2021.

71 Zimmermann 2020: 45–47.

that other Mahāyāna works reflect something very close to the buddha nature idea without promoting, by name, an account of *tathāgatagarbha* or any abiding (*buddha*)*dhātu*. These include the *Tathāgatotpattisaṃbhavanirdeśa*, a text that became part of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* collection of sūtras, in which is taught the pervading presence of the Buddha's knowledge (*tathāgatajñāna*) in all sentient beings.⁷² That several of the similes of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* focus on the presence of the Buddha's knowledge covered by afflictions (though not, it should be stressed, in terms of a "pure mind") has not gone unnoticed.⁷³ Other relevant sources are some Mahāyānist discourses that are of a still more "mentalistic" orientation, such as those present in the commentarial material of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*. These include the *Gaganagañjaparipṛcchā* and *Sāgaramatiparipṛcchā*, which concern the innate luminosity of the mind.⁷⁴ These texts all have something of the buddha nature idea about them, in so far as they dabble with the notion that awakening or some aspect of it is somehow present already to sentient beings, although there is no sign in these texts of anything so developed as we find in sources that discuss the *tathāgatagarbha* or *buddhadhātu*.

Evidence suggests that the most significant precursor to our *tathāgatagarbha* literature, and a text in which a kind of proto-buddha nature thinking sits adjacent to its central message, was likely the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, or more commonly the *Lotus Sūtra*. As is well known, the first of several major revelations in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is that there is ultimately only a single vehicle of Buddhist teaching (*ekayāna*), which aims at the achievement of buddhahood; the status of an arhat, sought by followers of the Śrāvakayāna, together with the status supposedly enjoyed by a "solitary buddha" (*pratyekabuddha*), are revealed to be no ends to transmigration at all, and so liberation can be only the realization of complete awakening, as embodied in a buddha.⁷⁵ Fortunately for all, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* teaches that the exalted status of a buddha is ultimately possible for an-

72 A lengthy quotation of the *Tathāgatotpattisaṃbhavanirdeśa*, detailing the pervasiveness of the Buddha's knowledge in all sentient beings, features in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*; see Johnston [1950] 1991: 22.10–24.8; Takasaki 1966: 189–92.

73 See Takasaki 1958; 1974: 574–602. Zimmermann 2002: 53–66.

74 Relevant materials from these sūtras concerning the innate luminosity of the mind are quoted by the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* at, for example, Johnston [1950] 1991: 48.19–50.8 (Takasaki 1966: 248–50) and 44.8–45.3 (Takasaki 1966: 239–40). Both are discussed in Takasaki 1974: 681–91. Regarding earlier, non-Mahāyāna accounts of the mind's innate luminosity, see Anālayo 2017; more proximate to its role in buddha nature teaching, see Ruegg 1969: 409–37; Takasaki 1974: 704–21; Radich 2016: 256–62, 268–79.

75 A recent and excellent guide to all these themes in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is Lopez and Stone 2019.

yone who has begun to follow the Dharma in any of its articulations, Mahāyānist or otherwise. In a simile that would be just as at home in any of our *tathāgatagarbha* works, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* likens awakening to a jewel that has been hidden in the seam of a poor man's clothes, who does not realize that he has a valuable treasure on his person all the time.⁷⁶ If, as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* teaches, complete awakening is possible, eventually, for anyone—including the most repellant kind of villain, or an arhat who might otherwise have been thought to have missed any chance of becoming a buddha—then potential for the status of a buddha must be proper to all sentient beings, at all times, in spite of appearances.

The influence of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is visible throughout our early *tathāgatagarbha* sources. That the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* is indebted to the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* has been demonstrated already by Zimmermann (1999). Meanwhile the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* mentions the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* by name,⁷⁷ and while the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* itself does not (apart from in material found in only one of its Chinese translations, of questionable origin),⁷⁸ the *Āṅgulimālīya*, *Mahābherī*, and *Śrīmālādevī* all understand themselves to be teaching about the single vehicle.⁷⁹ It is otherwise very clear that all three texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group understand the Buddha's enduring nature and his use of docetic displays in a fashion that accords closely with what is found in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*. Finally, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and *Āṅgulimālīya* all consider the Buddha's use of cryptic utterances (e.g., *saṃdhābhāṣya*, *saṃdhāvacana*) to be for the purposes of educating audiences not ready to accept the magnitude of what

76 See Zimmermann 1999.

77 Preserved in a Sanskrit fragment, reconstructed in Habata 2019: 161–62 (no. 21.3), which includes *saddharmapuṇḍarīka*(a)[m](*ahāsūtra*-); otherwise see Habata 2013: §495.17.

78 This is material in the translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* that is attributed to Dharmakṣema (Taishō no. 374; also in Taishō no. 375, which is essentially a revision of it), which is around three times the length of content that is common to all three translations (i.e., found across Taishō no. 374, Taishō no. 376, and our Tibetan translation, as well as surviving Sanskrit fragments, mostly from Central Asia). Material exclusive to Dharmakṣema's translation, traditionally believed to have been found by him in either Khotan or Dunhuang, continues after the end of what is common to all surviving versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and is characterized by a number of subtle doctrinal shifts regarding buddha nature. See Hodge 2010/2012: 9–27; Radich 2020: 578–606; Jones 2021: 62–67.

79 The *Mahābherī* in fact repeats two whole parables from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*; see Suzuki 2015. Less clear is the position of the *Anūnatvāpūrnatva*, although its emphasis on a single realm of reality (*ekadharmadhātu*) that underlies both buddhas and every sentient being seems to suppose a single vehicle model of liberation. The relationship of teaching about buddha nature to the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* has already been considered by Takasaki (1974: 412–46), and is revisited in Jones 2021: 203–14.

could, for sure, have been taught more clearly earlier in his career.⁸⁰ By using the notion of cryptic utterance in a manner not common to wider Mahāyāna sūtras, authors of both the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*-group exhibit a compulsion to explain how what they reveal (that liberation always means the status of a buddha, and that all sentient beings always possess buddha nature) could be true, while also jarring so obviously with wider and earlier Buddhist doctrine (that an arhat is liberated from transmigration, and that nothing warrants designation as one's self).⁸¹

Although the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* does not use the expression *tathāgata-garbha*—or *buddhadhātu*, or any other term to refer to what it is about a buddha that is already present in sentient beings—it at very least invites some form of buddha nature teaching. If anyone who reveres the Dharma is capable of becoming a buddha, and this extends also to arhats who were believed to have (by definition) forfeited any opportunity to become buddhas, then we are only one step away from the position that something proper to all of these beings explains how becoming fully awakened is something other than transforming oneself, over countless lifetimes, into what *appears* to be a liberated being (an arhat, or a buddha visible in the world).⁸² The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* teaches that true buddhahood is a kind of transcendence, the status enjoyed by Śākyamuni apart from the docetic displays produced by him, and so awakening is an achievement of that which exceeds the

80 Tibetan translations of these texts reflect the expressions *dgongs pa'i tshig* or *ldem po ngag*; corresponding Chinese materials reflect more clearly that the Buddha has spoken “cryptically,” or even that teaching about *tathāgata-garbha* constitutes some “secret teaching” (*yinfu shuo* 隱覆說; *mijiao* 密教). See also the note below. It is an interesting detail, which requires further attention beyond this chapter, that Kumārajīva's 鳩摩羅什 (344–413) highly influential translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Taishō no. 262) downplays the role played by this language—very evident in surviving Sanskrit of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*—and instead remains focused on the related sense that the Buddha uses different methods (Ch. *fāngbian* 方便; Skt. *upāya*) of teaching for different audiences.

81 Regarding this language, see Ruegg 1989b. The specific term *sandhā-/saṃdhāvacana*, together with the synonymous *saṃdhābhāṣya*, is more integral to the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, and to our *tathāgata-garbha* sources, than to other Mahāyānist sūtras that refer to the Buddha's use of “allusion” in his speech (*saṃdhāya*). In short, teaching about the single vehicle, the Buddha's enduring existence, or the presence of buddha nature are explanations of what the Buddha calls cryptic utterances, which explains their apparent contradiction to the Dharma established previously (i.e., that arhats are liberated, buddhas die, and nothing warrants designation as the self); see Jones 2021: 210–13.

82 This distinction between earlier and more widely-established Buddhist soteriology, which imagines liberation in terms of development, and buddha nature teaching with its focus on disclosure of a liberation that is already “there,” is discussed well in Zimmermann 2014; see also Ruegg 1989a: 17–55.

world and yet is attainable, always, for anyone in it. This accords perfectly with the understanding of buddha nature evident in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*: a text that exalts the transcendent permanence of the Buddha and explains that beyond what is seen of a buddha in the world, his true origin—or the real “womb” from which a buddha can emerge—is the transcendent-yet-immanent *tathāgatagarbha*, which denotes the enduring-yet-indiscernible trace of a buddha in every sentient being.

Let us briefly return to the matter of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and their respective places in the history of buddha nature thought. The similes that are the core of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, which likely predate being framed as pronouncements about, by name, *tathāgatagarbha*, are certainly about buddha nature in its broadest sense. But these are simply similes; they are works of one or more Buddhist imagination, perhaps produced in the wake of the kind of teaching found in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, that may have circulated without association to any one clear idea of quite what it means for sentient beings to have in or about themselves what is proper to a buddha. It is plausible that these similes are particularly old, and may even predate the striking way of teaching about buddha nature found, perhaps first, in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. However, both the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa* more clearly reflect on how a buddha’s physical person, both before and after his death, is not his true character. This tension between a buddha’s apparent postmortem longevity, in his relics, and his real “transmortem” existence, apart from worldly entities but still imperceptibly “present” in all sentient beings, may have given life to the expression *tathāgatagarbha* as a designator for that which makes all sentient beings more valuable than they appear to be.

It is from its sense preserved in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, perhaps, that the expression *tathāgatagarbha* was picked up and used to frame other articulations of buddha nature, such as the similes that become content of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. Elsewhere, it was used to develop more systematic models of buddha nature understood in terms of what underlies the mind (in the *Śrīmālādevī*), which might also be the nature of reality itself (in the *Anūratvāpūrṇatva*). And *tathāgatagarbha* could be interpreted differently, once again, to explain buddha nature thinking as it developed in the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition; a development that is evident, albeit in different ways, in both the *Laṅkāvatāra* and *Ratnagoṭravibhāṅgavyākhyā*. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* may provide an original context for the expression *tathāgatagarbha*, but not for the *idea* of buddha nature in its broadest sense, for which it stands. Finding a beginning to that is more challenging, precisely because different strands of Indian Mahāyānist writing, many more of which are woven togeth-

er in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, explored differently the ways in which what is proper to a buddha may have some presence in sentient beings.⁸³ This does not mean that the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* is exhaustive in its exposition of buddha nature, as it conspicuously omits virtually any mention of texts that articulated buddha nature in terms of the self. These sūtras may have been particularly formative in the early life of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* but proved too problematic for later Indian authors, who were nonetheless very much invested in teaching about buddha nature in some other guise.

In summary, it serves us to be careful how we talk about the ideas found in sources concerned with the expression *tathāgatagarbha*: to distinguish between different sūtras that each present themselves as definitive revelations about Buddhist truths, and commentarial materials that reflect on and attempt to make sense of these revelations.⁸⁴ The *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* acknowledges the multivalence of *tathāgatagarbha*, which is very evident across both the sūtra materials that it quotes and others which, knowingly or otherwise, its authors do not mention. But buddha nature thinking, or the sense that something of the Buddha is ours already and at all times, is discernable beyond sources concerned with the expressions *tathāgatagarbha* and *buddhadhātu*, and can be found in nascent forms across a variety of other Mahāyānist literature from the early centuries of the Common Era. Attention to the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* alone is sufficient to demonstrate that buddha nature was not imagined in just one way. It seems very likely that the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, its notion of a single vehicle, and its striking account of the Buddha's transcendence were particularly influential for early sources concerned with the expression *tathāgatagarbha*. Nevertheless, the sense that what makes a buddha is not as remote as one might naturally think was something that different strands of Mahāyāna Buddhist literature explored in different ways.

In its broadest sense, teaching about a buddha nature proper to sentient beings does not “begin” with the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, though it was perhaps in its milieu that the productive expression *tathāgatagarbha* first emerged and was used

83 Another important strand that is woven into the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, which has been the focus of detailed investigation by Ruegg (e.g., 1969), concerns the Buddha's “lineage” (*gotra*): however, it does not appear that this mode of thinking about buddha nature was so relevant to sūtra materials concerned with the expression *tathāgatagarbha* prior to the production of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*.

84 The line between these enterprises is certainly a blurred one: the *Laṅkāvatāra* is a fascinating example of a sūtra text that is both a patchwork and, in its own fashion, a commentary on statements made in earlier Mahāyāna sūtra literature, including the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and *Śrīmālādevī*.

to affirm something essential to a buddha in the bodies all sentient beings. If so, this constitutes a single, influential episode in the history of buddha nature thinking in India, which is a trend in the Buddhist imagination that exceeded one single formulation and went on to develop further, and in diverse ways, across other Buddhist cultures. Discrete forms of buddha nature thinking converged in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, although this remains a text that is necessarily shaped by the perspective(s) of its authors, who had their own opinions about how buddha nature should or should not be articulated. Scholars will continue to debate the meaning(s) of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* and its likely origins, but perhaps a greater concern should be the history of to what it refers: the Mahāyānist reimagining of liberation as a process of discovery, or the purification of what one has, or is, already.

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The *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa* of Sajjana

a Reading Sanskrit Text and Annotated Translation

Kazuo Kano

The Kashmiri paṇḍita Sajjana (fl. second half of the eleventh century) is considered to be one of the most significant masters to have contributed to the transmission of the teaching of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (abbr. RGV) to Tibet.¹ The only works of Sajjana to have come down to us are the *Putralekha* addressed to his son Mahājana, *Sūtrālamkārapīṇḍārtha*,² and *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa*.³ The first is preserved only in the Tibetan translation, while the last two are available only in Sanskrit manuscripts and have a common format: they consist of verses that summarize core doctrinal topics dealt with in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* or in the RGV. The *Mahāyānottaratantaśāstropadeśa*, a small work consisting of thirty-seven verses, presents Sajjana's own view, according to which the core topics of the RGV, as he lists them, can be correlated with each successive soteriological stage.

Textual Materials of Sajjana's *Upadeśa*

The only surviving material to provide insight into Sajjana's understanding of the RGV is his *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa*. This work occupies a single folio of a palm-leaf manuscript written in Proto-Śāradā script (datable to between the

1 His activities and his doctrinal position were clarified in Kano 2016: 135–37, and 215–17. On the life of Sajjana, see also Kano 2006b.

2 For the critical edition of the Śaraṇagamana chapter of Sajjana's *Sūtrālamkārapīṇḍārtha*, see Kano 2020.

3 For the *Putralekha*, see Dietz 1984 and 2008; Hahn 1999: 206–7; Hanisch 2002. The Sanskrit title of the work is a tentative one, which is transliterated as *su tam la kha* (D 4187, 67a6) or *pu tra lekha* (P 5687, 316a6). The colophon reads (D 79a2; P 319b7–8): *bu la spring ba paṇḍita mkhas pa chen po sad dza na chen pos mdzad pa rdzogs so || || kha che'i mkhan po ma hā dza na dang | bod kyi lo tsā ba mar pa chos kyi dbang phyug (phyugs D) gis bsgyur cing zhus te gtan la bab pa'o ||*. For the fragments from the *Sūtrālamkārapīṇḍārtha*, see Kano 2008. For the *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa*, see Takasaki 1975 and Kano 2006b. Sajjana's doctrinal positions are referred to by Bu ston, Kun dga' grol mchog, and 'Jam dbyangs dga' ba'i blo gros (see Kano 2006b). We can also find Sajjana's assertions (in total more than fifty examples) on the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* in Phyapa's *Mdo rgyan nyi 'od*.

eleventh and thirteenth centuries;⁴ palm leaf, 20²/₃ × 2¹/₃ inches,⁵ with two string holes). The scribe of the manuscript is a Kashmiri. The manuscript was once preserved at Shwalu Riphuk (Zhwa lu ri phug) Monastery, where it was very probably included in the proto-Śāradā manuscript set. Today it is likely to be housed in the Tibet Museum in Lhasa. The negative photographed by Sāṅkrtyāyana (the positive prints of which are currently preserved at Göttingen University under shelf mark Xc14/1) is scarcely legible, while the photographs by Tucci are of a better quality.

As a complete work in thirty-seven verses (in most cases *śloka*s), it does not only specifically aim to analyze the doctrine of buddha nature, but it also summarizes the entire contents of the RGV. In fact, Sajjana models his own soteriological views after the doctrinal topics of the RGV, which are summarized as the seven *vajrapadas*, the three aspects of buddha nature, its ten topics, the ten defilements, and the ten similes.

Despite its great significance for the doctrine of buddha nature in Tibetan Buddhism, the *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa* has hitherto not been adequately studied, given both the lack of a critical edition and its highly elliptical style.

Previous Studies of the *Upadeśa*

The work was first referred to by Johnston in 1950 (who saw a glass-plate image of the text photographed by Sāṅkrtyāyana and preserved in Patna)⁶ as part of his introduction to the Sanskrit edition of the RGV. Later it was mentioned by Giuseppe Tucci, who himself had photographed the manuscript (probably at Zhwa lu) and then given a copy to V. V. Gokhale.⁷ Jikidō Takasaki (1975) first provided an over-

4 In this manuscript, the scribe sometimes uses vowel signs with *prṣṭamātrā*, which had been used until the fifteenth century; and also sometimes writes syllable *rtha* in an old writing way. For details, see Kano 2006b: 36.

5 The size is described by Sāṅkrtyāyana (1935: 31).

6 Johnston 1950: vi: "Of the three MSS. mentioned, one proved on examination not to be of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. As at present constituted, it consists of three folios in a script, which is substantially older than that of the other two MSS., VIII century perhaps or even earlier, and is hard to decipher in the photographs; it contains a brief summary of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, as appears from the colophon, *Mahāyānottaratantrapadeśa kṛtiś Śrī Satyajñānapādānām*. The author, *Satyajñāna*, is apparently not mentioned elsewhere, and I have not noted any passages which throw light on the text of the main work." The reading "*Satyajñā*" is wrong (correctly *sajjana*).

7 Tucci 1958: xi: "The *Ratnagotra-upadeśa* of Sajjanapāda I sent for publication to my friend V.V. Gokhale who has devoted a great part of his time to the study of the *Ratnagotra*."

view of the contents of the text and a rough transcription of the manuscript on the basis of the photocopy of the manuscript handed down from Tucci. Takasaki's transcription, however, did not include the interlinear notes of an anonymous hand inserted in the Sanskrit manuscript. With the help of Takasaki's great courtesy, I was able to access a positive copy of the manuscript image. On the basis of this photocopy, I deciphered the interlinear glosses of the manuscript, provided a critical edition of the Sanskrit text including the glosses, analyzed the text (Kano 2006a), and presented a list of corrections to Takasaki's transcription, a paleographical analysis of the manuscript, and an overview of general doctrinal position of Sajjana (Kano 2006b).

As for a further *testimonia* for the text of Sajjana's *Upadeśa*, I reported quotations from the *Upadeśa* found in a Kashmiri RGV commentary known as *Mahāyānottaratantraparicaya* by an anonymous hand (possibly by Sajjana's son, Mahājana⁸) and included in a proto-Śāradā palm-leaf set (Kano 2014). This *Paricaya* (fols. 6v6–7, 7r2–3) cites the verses 7c–8d, 9cd, 10ab, 11, 25cd, 26, 27, 14, and 15 (with some crucial variant readings) from Sajjana's *Upadeśa*, along with two lines and one verse of Sajjana not found in the *Upadeśa* manuscript.⁹

8 The *Mahāyānottaratantraparicaya* is probably composed by Mahājana because (a) this text quotes the *Upadeśa* of Sajjana, who is Mahājana's father; (b) Mahājana's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayārthaparicaya* (whose Derge version mistakenly calls the title *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayaparijñāna*) refers to two of his own works, which are hitherto unavailable: 'Brel pa grub pa chung ngu'i yongs su shes pa (*Laghupratibandhasiddhiparicaya) and rNam par nges pa'i yongs su shes pa (*Vinīśayaparicaya); see D 3822, 309a4–5; (c) the *Pratibandhasiddhiparicaya*, *Sūtrālamkāraparicaya*, and *Mahāyānottaratantraparicaya* are preserved in the same codex of the Sanskrit manuscript that contains Mahājana's *Sūtrālamkāradhikārasaṅgati* together with the above-mentioned works of Sajjana; (d) all of these works relevant to Mahājana bear the word *paricaya* in their titles. Points (a)–(d) suggest that the *Mahāyānottaratantraparicaya* is a work by Mahājana.

If this is the case, the writings of Mahājana include (1) **Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayaparicaya* (Tib.), (2) *Sūtrālamkāradhikārasaṅgati* (Skt. complete), (3) *Pratibandhasiddhiparicaya* (Skt. incomplete), (4) *Sūtrālamkāraparicaya* (Skt. incomplete), (5) *Mahāyānottaratantraparicaya* (Skt. incomplete), and (6) **Vinīśayaparicaya* (rNam par nges pa'i yongs su shes pa, yet to be available). Among them, (1) and (2) are works in which Mahājana's authorship is testified by colophons. See Kano 2017: 25–26 and 2021. For the edition of the Śāraṇagamana chapter of the *Sūtrālamkāraparicaya*, see Kano, Ye, Li 2020.

9 As for an evaluation of Karl Brunnhölzl's translation (in his book *When the Clouds Part: The Uttaratantra and Its Meditative Tradition as a Bridge between Sūtra and Tantra* [Boston: Snow Lion, 2014]), which was done based on my earlier, unpublished annotated translation and my Sanskrit edition of this text (in Kano 2006a), see my previous paper of 2015 (especially, pp. 1, 6, 18 fn. 64, 19 fn. 71, 20 fn. 75–78), which I mentioned in n. 1 of the present paper.

Structural Analysis of the *Upadeśa*

The *Upadeśa* follows the five-chapter structure of the RGV: verses 1–28 summarize the teaching of RGV I, verses 29–34 encapsulate RGV II–IV (verses 29–30b: general remarks; verses 30c–32: RGV II; verse 33: RGV III; and verse 34: RGV IV), and verses 35–37 digest RGV V. Although verses 1–28 have an ambiguous structure at first glance, we can, on the basis of *antaraśloka*s (“intermediate/concluding verses,” verses 14, 15, and 24), divide them into five parts: verses 1–7, 8–15, 16–24, 25–27, and 28.¹⁰

For a structural analysis of verses 1–27, verse 7cd, and verses 25–27, witness the following division: verse 7cd¹¹ suggest that a series of explanations of *cintā* and *bhāvanā* practices of buddha nature start with verse 8, while verses 25–27 conclude the explanations associating the practices with verses in the RGV. Verse 26ab¹² (along with its interlinear gloss) teaches RGV I.27 and 28 as the basis of *cintā* practice, while verses 26cd and 25 associate the ten topics and the nine similes (RGV I.29–152) with *bhāvanā* practice. Actually, Sajjana’s explanation of RGV I.27 and 28 starts with verse 8 and that of the ten topics begins with verse 16.

His way of presentation has the following structural features: he first states a general idea and then provides its details, e.g., verses 20ab (general statement) and 20c–21 (its details), verses 22 (general statement) and 23 (its details), verses 25 (general statement) and 26–27 (its details), verses 30cd (general statement) and 31–32 (its details), verses 29–30b (general statement) and 30c–34 (its details). The outline of the entire text can be analyzed accordingly.

Synoptic Analysis of Sajjana’s *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa*

(RGV I)

The seven *vajrapadas* (RGV I.1–26)

1–4 The Three Jewels

5–6b The seven *vajrapadas*

6c–7ab The last three *vajrapadas* as soteriological foundations

7cd A starting point of *cintā* and *bhāvanā* practices

10 An insertion *iti smṛtaḥ* by the scribe (or Sajjana’s disciple) after verse 7 suggests a semantic punctuation that divides verses 1–7 and verses 8ff.

11 Verse 7cd: *tato dhātvartham āśritya cintābhāvanayor višet*.

12 Verse 26ab: *tatra piṇḍārthanirdeśaḥ prāk cintāvatarāśrayaḥ*.

The *cintā* practice relating to buddha nature (RGV I.27, 28)

- 8–9b A compound analysis of the *tathāgatagarbha*
- 9c–11 *Dhātu, tathatā, gotra*, and *dharmakāya*
- 12, 13 The soteriological sequence of the seven *vajrapadas*
- 14, 15 Summary by *antaraśloka*

The *bhāvanā* practice relating to buddha nature (RGV I.29–152)

- 16–19 The ten topics as objects of cultivation (RGV I.29–94)
- 20, 21 The ten topics and the nine defilements (RGV I.130–43)
- 22, 23 Repressing laxity and excitation (the nine similes [RGV I.95–129], three aspects [RGV I.144–52], and nine defilements [RGV I.130–43])
- 24 Summary by *antaraśloka*

Tracing *cintā* and *bhāvanā* practices back to the RGV

- 25 The sequence of *cintā* and *bhāvanā*—the three aspects, the ten topics, and the nine similes.
- 26, 27 Tracing *cintā* to RGV I.27, 28 and *bhāvanā* to RGV I.29–152

Removal of mistaken view on buddha nature (RGV I.156–67)

- 28 The tenet relating to buddha nature is established by refuting the objection to the authoritative teaching.

(RGV II–IV)

The last three *vajrapadas*

- 29–30b The soteriological sequence and the last three *vajrapadas*
- 30c–32 Awakening (RGV II)
- 33 Buddha Qualities (RGV III)
- 34 Buddha Activities (RGV IV)

(RGV V)

- 35–36 *Anuśaṃsā* and *rakṣā* of the treatise (RGV V.1–24)
- 37 Dedication (RGV V.25)

Each of these thirty-seven verses was outlined and analyzed in Kano 2016: 221–26, and Sajjana’s soteriological schemas on the *Ratnagotravibhāga* were clarified in Kano 2016: 226–28.

About the Translation and Reading Text

In the following, I shall provide a reading text of Sajjana's *Mahāyānottaratantra-śāstropadeśa* and its annotated translation. I also provide translation of interlinear glosses written in the manuscript by the scribe, whose Sanskrit text is found in Kano 2006a. All headings are mine. In my text, I utilized Sajjana's verses cited verses in the *Mahāyānottaratantraparicaya*: verses 7c–11 (= cited in fol. 6v6–7) and verses 25cd–27,14, 15 (= cited in fol. 7r2–3). A critical edition of the text was provided as an appendix in Kano 2006a, and its improved version is currently under preparation for publication.

Translation and a Reading Text

The Three Jewels

bhinnasantānavṛttīni ratnāni trinayānugaḥ |
sādhāraṇaphalepsur vā ratnabuddhyā prapadyate || 1

Those¹³ who follow the three methods or those who wish [merely] common¹⁴ results^a approach the [Three] Jewels, which manifest as separate continua,¹⁵ [each] with their [own] understanding of [what] the Jewels [are] (*ratnabuddhyā*).¹⁶

Interlinear gloss:

- ^a For (*hi*) the [words] “regarding those who follow [one of] the three vehicles” (RGV I.19b) are expressive of a refuge for persons who strive for ultimate bliss (or final emancipation, *niḥśreyasa*); the [words] “those who are inclined toward (or have faith in, *adhimukta*) the three [forms of] paying homage” (RGV I.19c) [are expressive of] a refuge that conforms

13 I take the singular case ending here as signifying a category, in the sense of a collective noun (*jāti*). The “three methods” (*trinaya*) are the three vehicles. The followers alluded to take the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha) as corresponding respectively to the three vehicles (*bodhisattvayānika*, *pratyekabuddhayānika*, *śrāvakayānika*). Cf. RGV I.19 and RGVV on I.19.

14 “Common” (*sādhāraṇa*) with reference to results means their ordinariness or mundaneness (according to the interlinear gloss, *laukika*). Regarding the expression *sādhāraṇaphalepsur*, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārahāṣya* (71.12, ad XI.61) has similar wording (*svaparārthaprayoge sādhāraṇaphalecchāmanasikāraḥ*, but there “common” expresses the divergent meaning of something shared by oneself and others). The first verse distinguishes two kinds of persons: those who strive for awakening and those who strive for a better life.

15 The expression *santāna* in *bhinnasantānavṛttīni* (verse 1b) does not suggest *cittasantāna* (“mind stream”) in the present context. Cf. verse 2b: *tāny abhinnāni vastutaḥ* “they (i.e., the Jewels) are in reality inseparable.” The word *vṛtti* in verse 1b hints at “unreal manifestation,” which contrast to *vastutaḥ* (“in reality”) in verse 2b.

16 Cf. RGV I.22 teaches six reasons why they are called *jewel*.

to [the needs of] beginners who [are still] striving only for [mundane] happiness (especially agreeable rebirth, *abhyudaya*)¹⁷—since in a beginner there is no arising of inclination toward nirvāṇa, and [he] is striving only for mundane prosperity.¹⁸

ātyantikam tu śaraṇam tāny abhinnāni vastutaḥ |
cittotpādaś ca tatrārthaḥ samudāgamagocaraḥ || 2

But the [single] ultimate refuge (i.e., the Jewel of the Buddha)^a is [all] those [three together], which are in reality not different. And the purpose in this (i.e., in teaching the ultimate refuge to beginners) is [to promote their] generation of resolve (*cittotpāda*), which [in turn] has the complete attainment [of awakening] as its goal (*samudāgamagocaraḥ*).¹⁹

Interlinear gloss:

^a [RGV I.21:] “However, [buddhahood is] the single [ultimate] refuge of the world.”²⁰

so 'suddhiśuddhyā svānyārthabhedād vā samudāgamaḥ |
śaraṇasyāpi śaraṇe vyāpāro 'tra pratiyate || 3

This complete attainment (*samudāgama*)²¹ exists with [the division of the path into stages of] impurity and purity^{22/a} or on the basis of the division [of it into] a goal of one's own and a goal on behalf of others,^b in this regard,²³ engagement in (*vyāpāra*)²⁴ “the refuge even of the object of the refuge²⁵” is known.

17 On the contrast between *niḥśreyasa* and *abhyudaya*, cf. for instance, *Ratnāvalī* 1.4: *sukham abhyudayas tatra mokṣo naiḥśreyaso mataḥ*; *ibid.*: 1.24–25.

18 On *laukikasampatti*, see, for instance, MAVT 202.15 (ad MAV V.3).

19 On *samudāgama*, see RGVV 37.18: *buddhajñānasamudāgamahetuḥ* (Tib 73.6: *sangs rgyas kyi ye shes thob pa'i rgyu*); BHSD (s.v.) “attainment (of awakening)” or “full knowledge”; cf. also MSA IX.57.

20 See RGV I.21ab: *jagaccharaṇam ekaṁ tu buddhatvaṁ pāramārthikam* | (This reading of the interlinear gloss (*ekaṁ tu*) is better than Johnston's *ekatra*. Further, Johnston reads *jagaccharaṇam* instead of *jagaccharaṇam*). For the teaching of the Jewel of the Buddha (or buddhahood [*buddhatva*]) as the ultimate refuge, see also MSA IX.7–11.

21 The “complete attainment” (*samudāgama*) consists of “that which is not yet full-fledged” (*asampūrṇa*, on the eighth to tenth stages) and “the full-fledged” (*paripūrṇa*, on the stage of the Buddha), according to verses 29–30b.

22 The word *aśuddhiśuddhyā* can be understood as *aśuddhiśuddhibhedāt*. Cf. verse 12b: *aśuddhaśuddhabheda°*.

23 The pronoun *atra* refers to *samudāgama*.

24 Or “application toward.”

25 The term *śaraṇa* literally means that which is to be taken as refuge and probably indicates the

Interlinear glosses:

- α [It is called] “impurity” because one attains the Three Jewels at the stages from the eighth [up to the tenth]. “Purity” [refers to] the Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities, [which are attained] at the eleventh stage.
- β [The Three Jewels]—the Buddha and the others—are “one’s own goal.” The Awakening and Buddha Qualities have the nature of “goals on behalf of others,” since they establish (*pratiṣṭhāpana*) all sentient beings in the result of this (i.e., *parārtha*). The Buddha Activities are [the immediate] cause of this (*parārtha* or *pratisthāpana*). And the *dhātu* (i.e., buddha nature) is the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of the [other] six topics (i.e., *vajrapadas*).²⁶ Thus [the number of *vajrapadas* is precisely] seven.

tenāsaṃbhr̥tasambhāre buddho dharmo gaṇas tathā |
prapadyate pratyayatvaṃ pāraṃparyakramāgatam || 4

Therefore, for someone who has not yet accumulated the requisite accumulation (*asaṃbhr̥tasambhāra*),²⁷ the Buddha, Dharma, and the Saṅgha^α [each] becomes (*prapadyate*)²⁸ an [attendant] condition, which occurs in sequential order²⁹ (*pāraṃparyakramāgata*).^β

Jewel of Saṅgha, and the refuge for the Saṅgha is the Jewel of the Buddha. RGV I.21d supports the idea that the Buddha is the refuge for Saṅgha (*tanniṣṭhatvād gaṇasya* “because the community has this [i.e., the Buddha] as their goal”).

- 26 The idea that the *dhātu* is nothing but the intrinsic nature of the other six *vajrapadas* supports the reading *dhātuḥ* in verse 12, which serves as the subject noun for the verb *prapadyate* in the same verse: “the *dhātu* becomes/reaches the result” (*dhātuḥ prapadyate... phalaṃ*). This idea further supports that the *dhātu* remains as the syntactical subject of verse 13: “the *dhātu* becomes Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, ... as well as Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities” (*buddhaṃ dharmam saṅgham... prapadyate... bodhiguṇakarmākhyam*).

A similar notion is found in a work of Sajjana’s Tibetan disciple Rngog Blo ldan shes rab’s (1159–1109) RGV commentary *rGyud bla don bsdus* (A 3b2–3, B 5b3): *des na ’bras bu dkon mchog gsum dang | nye ba’i rgyu rkyen bzhi dang | ring ba’i rgyu rkyen bzhi po ni mtha’ dag kyang khams nyid do*; *ibid.* (A 4b4–5, B 7a6): *rdo rje’i gnas bdun po ’di mtha’* (om. B) *dag khams kyi rang bzhin du bsdu ba*. (A = the block-print version; B = the *dbu med* manuscript; See Kano 2016: 426.)

- 27 The expression *asaṃbhr̥tasambhāra* is found, for instance, in ASBh 118.4; MSA IV.8, VI.6, etc.

- 28 In this text, *prapadyate* is sometimes used as referring to the grammatical subject of both a practitioner (verse 1) and a topic of seven *vajrapadas* (verses 12 and 13).

- 29 Or “have come down in unbroken succession.”

Interlinear glosses:

- ^α The foundation of the conventional Three Jewels is the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya*, in due order.³⁰
- ^β Because they (i.e., beginners on the path) are not suitable [candidates] for directly perceiving the Buddha and [the other two Jewels].³¹

The Seven Vajrapadas

tadyathā

That is,³²

saṃbuddhato dharmacakrapravṛttiḥ saṅghagocarā |
saṅghas tu tasyādhikāir avabhāsaiḥ kṛpāguṇaiḥ ||
karmabhiś cety upāyena dhātuṃ śodhayati kramāt | 5–6b

From the Perfect Buddha [comes] the turning of the wheel of the Dharma, which (i.e., the turning) has the Saṅgha as its target. And (*tu*) the Saṅgha gradually purifies the *dhātu*^{α/33} through skillful means (*upāya*), that is, through its (i.e., the *dhātu*'s) topics (*adhikāir*),³⁴ manifestations (i.e., Awakening), qualities of [the Buddha's] compassion, and Buddha Activities.³⁵

30 According to this gloss, the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha respectively correspond to the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya*. The expression “conventional Three Jewels” (*sāmvṛtaratnatraya*) refers to the Three Jewels for beginners on the path. This contrasts to the ultimate Three Jewels, which in turn are attained respectively at the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages. See verse 13: “*buddhaṃ dharmam saṅgham bodhibhūmitraye yathānukramataḥ... prapadyate*”; and the interlinear gloss on verse 3.

31 According to this gloss, a beginner who has not yet accumulated the requisite accumulation (*asaṃbhr̥tasambhāra*) is unsuitably equipped for directly perceiving the Three Jewels (attained as results from the eighth stage on; see verse 13). Therefore, for them, the conventional Three Jewels function as conditions in their appropriate succession, i.e., the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha.

32 The word *tadyathā* inserted before verse 5 suggests that this verse offers an explanation of *prapadyate pratyayatvaṃ* in verse 4.

33 Cf. RGV I.3b: *saṃghe garbho jñānadhātuvāptiniṣṭhaḥ*.

34 The syntax and meaning of *tasyādhikāir* is unclear. The reference may be to the ten topics of buddha nature. Cf. RGV I.29ff.

35 I take verses 5–6 as an explanation of the order of the seven vajrapadas reflecting RGV I.3: *buddhād dharmo dharmataś cāryasaṃghaḥ saṃghe garbho jñānadhātuvāptiniṣṭhaḥ | tajjñānāptiś cāgrabodhir balādyair dharmair yuktā sarvasattvārthakṛdbhiḥ ||*. The four topics (i.e., from *tasyādhikāir* up to *karmabhiś*) very probably refer to the last four *vajrapadas* (i.e., *dhātu*, *bodhi*, *guṇa*, and *karman*). In this regard, the word *avabhāsair* possibly refers to *bodhi*. The word *karmabhiś ceti* (verse 6a) in the plural form—corrected from *karmaś ceti*—seems to be slightly odd. Cf. verse 7a.

Interlinear gloss:

- ^a [They are] ordinary persons, since [they] lack the nature of the noble ones.³⁶

The Last Three Vajrapadas as Soteriological Foundations

mokṣanirvedhabhāgīyamārgānantaramārgagaḥ |
bodhir guṇāḥ karma ceti sākṣāt pratyayam eti saḥ |
tato dhātvartham āśritya cintābhāvanayor viśet ||^{*} 6c–7³⁷

He (*saḥ*) who treads the path leading to liberation (*mokṣabhāgīya*), the path leading to penetration (*nirvedhabhāgīya*), and the path of immediate succession (*anantaramārga*) directly approaches the [attendant] conditions, that is, the Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities.^{a/38} Having resorted to the [ten] topics (*artha*) of the element (*dhātu*),³⁹ one should engage in reflection (*cintā*) and cultivation (*bhāvanā*).⁴⁰

36 The meaning of this gloss is not clear to me (particularly, the abstract suffix *tva* in **hānatvāt*). A possible interpretation is that this gloss explains the Saṅgha in verse 5c, which/who has not yet purified their *dhātu* (they thus abide still in the level of ordinary beings). The causal clause shows that the *svabhāva* of an ordinary being differs from that of an *ārya*. *Svabhāva* is here not an ultimate nature but rather a “Beschaffenheit” like the heat of fire. The difference probably is then that the Buddha Qualities have not yet blossomed/developed in ordinary beings.

37 Verse 7cd is from *Paricaya*, fol. 6v6: *tato dhātvartham āśritya cintābhāvanayor viśet ||*.

38 The practitioner abiding in the *mokṣabhāgīya* takes Awakening as condition, the one abiding in the *nirvedhabhāgīya* takes the Buddha Qualities as condition, and the one abiding in the *anantaramārga* takes the Buddha Activities as condition. The Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities are conditions for attaining certain results, that is, here, the Three Jewels (cf. RGV I.26). Sajjana’s disciple Rngog Blo ldan shes rab calls the soteriological schema “the circle of the [Three] Jewels” (*dkon mchog gi ‘khor lo*). Verse 4 earlier terms the Three Jewels themselves “conditions.” Rngog calls this latter schema (which corresponds to RGV I.3) “the circle of the *apratīṣṭhitanirvāṇa*” (*mi gnas pa’i mya ngan las ‘das pa’i ‘khor lo*).

39 The meaning of the compound *dhātvartham* is not clear. I tentatively interpret it as referring to the ten topics (*artha*) of buddha nature (i.e., *dhātu*), since Sajjana teaches the topics that relate to his soteriological progression in verses 16–19. In the light of the context, *dhātvartham āśritya* seems to relate specifically to the stage of learning (*śruta*), inasmuch as the stages of reflection (*cintā*) and cultivation (*bhāvanā*) follow immediately after. An alternative rendering of *dhātvartha* is “the [literal, core] meaning (*artha*) of the *dhātu*.”

40 According to the verse between verse 11 and 12 (only found in the *Paricaya* that runs, *śarīraṃ saptadhā yat tat tridhā tṛṇi navātmanā | mūlādicitabheditvād iyaṃ cintāmayī matiḥ*), and verse 25ab (*gotrādisūcito vyaktaṃ śāstre cintādikaḥ kramaḥ*), the three aspects of buddha nature (i.e., *dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra* along with the nine similes) are objects of reflective insight (*cintāmayī matiḥ*), whereas, according to verses 20ab and 24, the ten topics are objects of cultivation (*bhāvanā*). Furthermore, verse 26 suggests the three aspects as the objects of reflection and the ten topics as the objects of cultivation, maintaining that the teaching of

Interlinear gloss:

- ^a [This represents four verses of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*], beginning with [RGV I.23]: “The stained *tathatā*, the undefiled *tathatā*, the immaculate qualities of the Buddha, and his activities; [these are four aspects of] the sense object (*viṣaya*) for those who perceive] the ultimate truth, [from which arise the pure Three Jewels]” up through [RGV I.26]: “What is to be awakened, the awakening, the ancillaries of it, [and] the acts that lead to [others’] awakenings; [of these four successive topics, one topic (i.e., the first) is the cause, and the three others are the conditions necessary for its (i.e., the *dhātu*’s) purification.]”

Thus it has been transmitted (*iti smṛtaṃ*).⁴¹

A Compound Analysis of *Tathāgatagarbha*

tathāgatasya garbhatvāt sattvārthasya jināśrayāt |*
tathāgato vā yadgarbhas tathatārthānuvṛttitaḥ ||*
tathāgatasya vā garbho yasya tadgotrasambhavāt |*
†*ratnatrayaṃ yad āśritya tat trikāyena piṇḍitam* ||* 8–9b⁴²

RGV I.28 (which teaches the three aspects) is a support for entering *cintā* and that the stages relating to the ten topics (RGV I.29–94) follow after *cintā*.

However, it is not clear to me exactly which stages are being alluded to by the words *cintā* and *bhāvanā*. According to statements in RGV I.27 and a number of other relevant passages (e.g., RGVV 25.11–15, verses 6 and 28 of the present work, cf. *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.44; AKVy 188.14–16), *cintā* relates to both the *mokṣabhāgiya* and *nirvedhabhāgiya* paths, and *bhāvanā* to the *darśanamārga* (see table below).

Table: Stages of Practice according to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*

seven vajrapadas		corresponding characteristics	corresponding stages
<i>bodhi, guṇa, karman</i>	<i>śruta</i>	<i>paratośabda</i>	<i>mokṣabhāgiya</i>
<i>dhātu</i>	<i>cintā</i>	<i>yoniso manasikāra</i>	<i>nirvedhabhāgiya</i>
<i>ratnatraya</i>	<i>bhāvanā</i>	<i>samyagdrṣṭi</i>	<i>darśanamārga</i>

41 The words *iti smṛtaṃ* (Ms. *smṛtaḥ*), inserted by the scribe (or a disciple of Sajjana), suggest a semantic break between verses 7 and 8.

42 Verses 8–9b and a half verse are cited in the *Paricaya* (fol. 6v6):
tathāgatasya garbhatvāt satvārthasya jināśrayāt || (Sajjana 8ab)
tathāgato [vā] yadgarbhas ta(6v upper margin)[*tathatārthānuvṛttitaḥ*] (≈ Sajjana 8cd)
[*tathāgata + yadgarbho + + + gotrasambhavāt*] | (up to here in the margin) (Sajjana 9ab)
†*ratnatrayaṃ yad āśritya tat trikāyena piṇḍitam* (This line is not found in the manuscript of Sajjana’s text.)

Boldfaced words differ from the readings in the manuscript of Sajjana’s text. A plus-sign (+) represents an illegible *akṣara* in the manuscript.

[All sentient beings have *tathāgatagarbha*], for [they] are the *garbha* (“children/embryos”)⁴³ of a *tathāgata*, inasmuch as [the beneficial activities] for the sake of sentient beings depend on the Victorious One (i.e., the *dharmakāya*).⁴⁴

Or (*vā*), if we follow the meaning of *tathatā*, [the compound *tathāgatagarbha* can be analyzed as] those whose *garbha* (“core”) is a *tathāgata*.⁴⁵

Alternatively (*vā*), because the *gotra* (“potential”) of this [*tathāgata*] exists [in everyone], [the compound *tathāgatagarbha* can be analyzed as] those who possess the *garbha* (“essence”) of a *tathāgata*.⁴⁶

43 For the meaning of the term *tathāgatagarbha*, see Takasaki 1974: 55–59; Zimmermann 2002: 39–46; and Zimmermann 2014: 116–112. In expounding the meaning “the children of the *tathāgata*” (*tathāgatagarbha*), Zimmermann (2002: 43) refers to Hara’s argument.

44 However syntactically ambiguous verses 8a–9b may be, Sajjana is presenting three types of compound analysis of *tathāgatagarbha*, corresponding to the core verses RGV I.27 and 28, which teach three reasons why the Buddha teaches “all sentient beings have buddha nature.” See RGVV p. 25.18–19: *yad uktam sarvasattvās tathāgatagarbhā iti tat kenārthena*. The reasons are taught in RGV I.27 and 28 and in the commentary on them (RGVV p. 26.7–9): *buddhajñānāntargamāt sattvarāśes tannairmalyasyādvayativāt prakṛtyā | baud-dhe gotre tatphalasyopacārād uktāḥ sarve dehino buddhagarbhāḥ ||27|| saṃbuddhakāyaspha-ṛaṇāt tathatāvyatibhedataḥ | gotrataś ca sadā sarve buddhagarbhāḥ śārīriṇaḥ ||28||. samāsatas trividhenārthena sadā sarvasattvās tathāgatagarbhā ity uktam bhagavatā | yad uta sarvasattveṣu tathāgatadharmakāyaparispharaṇārthena tathāgatataṭhātāvyatibhedārthena tathāgatago-trasaṃbhavārthena ca*.

Verse 8ab refers to the *dharmakāya*, the first of the three modes of buddha nature (the other two being *tathatā* and *gotra*). Since the RGVV, in this regard, analyzes the compound *tathāgatagarbha* as a *tatpuruṣa* (RGVV p. 70.17–18: *tathāgatasyeme garbhāḥ sarvasattvā iti paridīpitam*), I take Sajjana’s explanation *tathāgatasya garbhatvāt* as an analysis of a genitive *tatpuruṣa*. The second part of line 8ab (*sattvārthasya jināśrayāt*) suggests that, since sentient beings’ activities of benefit—that is, compassion—for others are based on those of a *tathāgata* or the *dharmakāya*, they are called *tathāgatagarbha*.

45 I adopt the reading *yadgarbhas* cited in the *Paricaya* (fol. 6v6) instead of *yadgarbhe* in the manuscript of Sajjana’s text. In the latter case (“those in whose *garbha* a *tathāgata* abides”), the compound analysis of *tathāgatagarbha* is a *vyadhikaraṇabāhuvrīhi* (the case endings of the members of the compound are different), but both the *Paricaya*’s reading and that of the RGVV (p. 71.11) regard it as a *samānādhikaraṇa* (see below).

Verse 8cd refers to *tathatā*, which is the second of the three modes of buddha nature: all sentient beings have suchness. In this mode, the RGVV equates *tathāgata* with *tathatā* and explains the compound *tathāgatagarbha* as a *bāhuvrīhi* (which Sajjana follows). See RGVV p. 71.11: *tathāgatas tathataiśaṃ garbhaḥ sarvasattvānām iti paridīpitam*.

46 Verse 9ab refers to *gotra*, which is the third of the three modes of buddha nature: all sentient beings have an inherent disposition to become a buddha. In this regard, the RGVV analyzes the compound as a *bāhuvrīhi*. See RGVV p. 72.8–9: *tathāgatadhātur eśaṃ garbhaḥ sarvasattvānām iti paridīpitam*. Sajjana follows this analysis (*tathāgatasya vā garbho yasya*). The word *garbha* in this case can mean “essence” or “heir.” See Zimmermann 2002: 41. Sajjana very probably borrows the term *gotrasaṃbhava* from RGVV 26.9; 37.3–4 (ad I.28; 41).

That (i.e., *gotra*) on which the Three Jewels depend is encapsulated in the three bodies.⁴⁷

Interlinear gloss:

And so one should go, however, to [the sevenfold] body [of the treatise] containing the ninefold [set of similes] (?).⁴⁸ In this [context], the basis of the Three Jewels is the threefold body (i.e., *nirmāṇakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya*, and *dharmakāya*), forming the viewpoint of ultimate truth.⁴⁹ ... and in the nine similes... (Illegible phrases follow.)

Dhātu, Tathatā, Gotra, and Dharmakāya

dvidhā dhātur ayaṃ bījaṃ - - - jinagotrakam |⁵⁰

dhātoś ca tathatākliṣṭaparatantraviviktatā |*

tanmātraṃ prakṛtisthaṃ ca samānītaṃ ca nāmavat |*⁵¹

ṛggbhāvanātmanī mārge samudānītaṃ iṣyate || 9c–10

47 This line is not found in the manuscript of Sajjana's text and only appears in the citation in the *Paricaya* (fol. 6v7) as a verse by "our teacher" (*asmadguravaḥ*), that is, Sajjana.

The line probably summarizes RGV I.23 and 26, which teach the Three Jewels as results, the last three *vajrapadas* as attendant conditions, and buddha nature as the fundamental cause. Although the word "threefold body" (*trikāya*) normally refers to *dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya*, we can interpret this as referring to the last three *vajrapadas*, that is, Awakening, Buddha Qualities and Buddha Activities, taking into consideration RGV I.23, 26, along with Sajjana's verse 13–15 and the interlinear gloss on verse 15.

From a syntactic viewpoint, this verse can be interpreted in different ways. My translation (associating *ratnatrayaṃ* with *āśritya*) is based on the contents of verses 12, 14–15, which teach the Three Jewel (sometimes expressed as "the threefold body") as a basis. I take *gotra* as the grammatical subject of this line in the sense of buddha nature, which is the subject in verses 8–9b (verses 8–10 very likely utilize the three words *tathāgatagarbha*, *dhātu*, and *gotra* as synonymous).

48 The Sanskrit text runs *tad evaṃ udghātārthaṃ ca śarīre navadhā tv iṣyāt* (sic).

49 Up to here, the sentence of the gloss is metrical.

50 This line (verse 9cd) can be a gloss. If it is a *śloka*, there are three syllables (- - -) missing after *bījaṃ* in verse 9d.

51 The *pādas* from *dhātoś* up to *nāmavat* are cited in *Paricaya* (fol. 6v6–7):

dhātoś ca tathatākliṣṭaparatantraviviktatā | (verse 9cd)

tanmātraṃ <pra> prakṛtisthaś ca samānītaś ca nā (fol. 6v7) *mavat* | (verse 10ab)

Boldfaced words differ from the readings in the manuscript of Sajjana's text. In Kano 2006a, I read *viśvatra* for *tanmātra*. The manuscript image is unclear, but the reading *tanmātra* is supported by the citation in the *Paricaya*. Both the manuscript and the citation in the *Paricaya* read *prakṛtisthaś ca samānītaś ca* instead of *prakṛtisthañ ca samānītañ ca* (both of which qualify *gotraṃ*). The reading *ātmanī* (for *ātmani*) is *metri causa*.

This element (*dhātu*) is twofold: the seed [... three syllables are missing...] and that which possesses the disposition (*gotra*) of the Victorious One.⁵²

Furthermore (*ca*), the *dhātu* is [of three modes]: *tathatā*, [the mode characterized by] defiled dependency, and [the mode characterized by] transcendence.⁵³ It (i.e., the *dhātu* = *gotra*) is called “just that much” (*tanmātra*), “what is naturally present,”⁵⁴ and “what has evolved.”^{55/α}

“The evolved [*gotra*],” it is held, [is attained] on the paths of vision and cultivation.⁵⁶

Interlinear gloss:

- α However (*tu*), [there is another classification of the *gotra*], which is three-fold in line with the division *tathatā*, *prakṛtistha*, and *samudānīta*.

*bodhir guṇā dharmakāyād anyonyānatirekiṇaḥ |**
gambhīraudārikī cāsya deśanā kila kāraṇam ||^{*57} 11

52 Verse 9cd is hardly legible in the manuscript owing to cancellations and corrections by the scribe.

53 This line (*dhātoś ca tathatākliṣṭaparatantraviviktatā*) can be interpreted in several different ways. My interpretation is based on verse 15ab (*tathatāprakṛtāvasthasamānītatrigotrakāḥ*) and the interlinear gloss on verse 10ab (*tathatāprakṛtisthasamudānītabhedāt tu trividham*), both of which teach the threefold *gotra* (here a synonym for *dhātu*; these two are defined as synonyms in BBh 2.7–8). In unfolding this notion of *trigotra* (probably unique to Sājjana), we can take verse 9cd as consisting of three members, namely, *tathatā*, *kliṣṭaparatantra*[*tā*], and *viviktatā*, which correspond to *tathatā*, *prakṛtistha*, and *samānīta* in verse 15.

An alternative interpretation is “The *dhātu* is nothing but *tathatā* and is of [three modes]: [those having] defiled, dependent, and transcendent [characteristics].” This represents the well-known triple characteristic (*trīsvabhāva*), that is, *parikalpita*-, *paratantra*-, and *pariṇiṣpanna*-*svabhāva*. The *kalpita*- and *paratantra* are discussed in the same context in prior passages in the *Paricaya* (fol. 6v4 etc.).

54 The term *prakṛtistha* can also mean “abiding in its basic state.”

55 My translation is based on the reading cited in the *Paricaya* (6v6), which has *tanmātram* instead of *viśvatram*. This interpretation fits in with the threefold *gotra* taught in verse 15.

An alternative translation (reading *viśvatra*° for *tanmātram*) is “[There are two types of *gotra*]: what is called the natural, omnipresent one and the evolved one.” These two kinds of *gotra* are taught in RG V I.149: *gotraṃ tad dvividham jñeyam nidhānaphalavṛkṣavat | anādi-prakṛtistham ca samudānītam uttaram ||*. This alternative translation is incompatible with the threefold *gotra* of verse 15, but it fits in better with the expression *tu* in the interlinear gloss on the present verse (i.e., there are two kinds of *gotra*... however [*tu*], there are also three kinds of *gotra*...).

56 Sājjana adopts the word form °*ātmani* (for locative) for °*ātmani* (*metri causa*). The shift of grammatical gender in two synonyms (*samānītaḥ* in line 10b to *samudānītam* in line 10d) reflects the change of subject from *dhātuḥ* to *gotraṃ*, both of which are all but synonymous in this context.

57 Verse 11 is cited in *Paricaya* (fol. 6v7): *bodhir guṇā dharmakāyād anyonyānatirekiṇaḥ | gambhīraudārikī cāsya deśanā kila kāraṇam ||*.

Awakening and the Buddha Qualities do not deviate from the *dharmakāya*, nor it from them.^{58/a} And, as taught (*kila*) [in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*], the profound and extensive instruction is the cause of [one's attaining] this [*dharmakāya*].⁵⁹

Interlinear gloss:

- ^a [RGV I.145:] “The *dharmakāya* is to be known in two aspects, namely, the sphere of reality (*dharmadhātu*), which is perfectly immaculate; and its natural outflow (*niṣyanda*), that is, the profound and extensive instruction.” This is to be known [from RGV I.28a:] “Because the body of the Perfect Buddha pervades [everything].”

The Soteriological Sequence of the Seven Vajrapadas

†*śarīraṃ saptadhā yat tat tridhā tṛṇi navātmanā* |*
mūlādicittabheditvād iyaṃ cintāmayī matiḥ ||⁶⁰

The body [of the treatise] (i.e., the *vajrapadas*) is sevenfold [in view of RGV I.1], and is also threefold (i.e., the *dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra*) [in view of RGV I.144]. The three are [associated] with the nine kinds [of similes] in view of their partitioning of the mind, beginning with “root.”⁶¹ This is reflective insight.

buddho dharmāḥ saṅgho bodhir guṇakarmanīty anukramataḥ |
ālambanena dhātuḥ prapadyate 'śuddhaśuddhabhedaphalam || 12

⁵⁸ The word *anyonya*^o implies that the relation is not unidirectional: the *dharmakāya* does not hold sway over the Awakening and Buddha Qualities. The term *anātirekinaḥ* can be taken as a synonym of *avyatirekinaḥ*.

⁵⁹ The RGVV teaches the twofold *dharmakāya*, i.e., the dharma of realization (*adhigamadharmā*) and the dharma of instruction (*deśanādharmā*), and it states that “the dharma of instruction” is the cause of one’s attaining “the dharma of realization” (*tatprāptihetu*). See RGVV p. 70.7 (ad I.145).

My translation is based on the reading of the scribe’s correction written in the bottom margin of the manuscript (*gaṃbhīraudārikī cāsyā deśanā kila kāraṇaṃ*). This is supported by the citation of the verse in the *Paricaya*, fol. 6v7. The word *kila* “as is taught” apparently refers to RGV I.145, which teaches that the *dharmakāya* consists of the completely immaculate *dharmadhātu* (*sunirmaladharmadhātu*) and the instruction (*deśanā*).

⁶⁰ The *Paricaya* (fol. 6v7) cites this *pādas śarīraṃ saptadhā yat tat tridhā tṛṇi navātmanā* (very likely composed by Sajjana) after verse 11. The word *tṛṇi* can be standardized to *trīṇi*.

⁶¹ *Mūlādicitta* very probably refers to six modes of the mind: *mūlacitta*, *anucaracitta*, *vicāraṇā-citta*, *avadhāraṇācitta*, *saṃkalanacitta*, and *āśāsticitta*. See MSABh on XIV.4–6 (explaining *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*). Among them, *mūlacitta* and *āśāsticitta* (or *āśāstimati*) are referred to by Sajjana in respectively the present verse and verse 16. The MSABh defines *mūlacitta* as *tatra mūlacittaṃ yat sūtrādīnāṃ dharmānāṃ nāmālambanaṃ* | *avavādaṃ śrutvā svayaṃ vā kalpayitvā* | *tadyathānīyaṃ duḥkhaṃ śūnyam anātmyaṃ ca yoniśo na cetyādi* (for the problems posed by this sentence, see Nagao 2007: vol. 2, 248).

It is by taking [the *vajrapadas*] as objective supports (*ālambanena*)^a in succession—the Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha, Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities—that the *dhātu* is yielded as the results that are classified as impure and pure.”⁶²

Alternative translation:⁶³

By taking [the *vajrapadas*] as objective supports (*ālambanena*)^a in succession—Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha, Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities—one approaches the *dhātu*⁶⁴ whose result is classified as impure and pure.

Interlinear gloss:

- ^a Taking [the *vajrapadas*] as an objective support (*ālambana*), namely, as refuges (i.e., the Three Jewels) and as conditions (i.e., the Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities).⁶⁵

buddhaṃ dharmaṃ saṅghaṃ bodhibhūmitraye yathānukramataḥ |
akramam atha buddhabhūmau prapadyate bodhiguṇakarmākhyam || 13

[The *dhātu*]⁶⁶ becomes the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha^a at the three stages of Awakening in precisely that order (or gradually), and spontaneously becomes Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities^b at the stage of a buddha.⁶⁷

62 The meter of verses 12–13 is *gīti*, while that of the others is *śloka*. The shift of meter (*śloka* in verses 8–11 into *gīti* in verses 12–13) might suggest a change of theme, and indeed we can see a pivot between verses 8–11, which teach the three aspects of buddha nature, and verses 12–13, which teach the relation between the seven *vajrapadas* and the soteriological stages.

Although *sandhi* normally does not apply to a dual case-ending, it is applied here to the words *guṇakarmanīti* (for °karmanī iti) in verse 12b (*metri causa*).

63 Reading *dhātuṃ* instead of *dhātuḥ* in 12c.

64 The reading *dhātuṃ* for *dhātuḥ* is a possible conjecture both in the light of both the context and the similar syntax in verses 13, 15, etc. The manuscript reads *dhātuḥ* for *dhātuṃ*: “... the *dhātu* yields the results that are classified as impure and pure.”

65 Cf. RGV I.26.

66 The idea that the *dhātu* (or buddha nature) itself becomes the other six *vajrapadas* is supported by the interlinear gloss on verse 3: *dhātuś ca śāṇṇām arthānām svabhāva(h)*.

67 The “three stages of awakening” (*bodhibhūmitraya*) refer to the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages. The RGVV states that the Jewel of the Buddha is attained at the eighth stage, the Jewel of the Dharma at the ninth, and the Jewel of the Saṅgha at the tenth. See RGVV 3.21–4.9 (ad I.2). Sajjana’s statement in verse 13cd is, however, incompatible with RGVV 3.20, RGV I.23, 26, asserting as it does that the last three *vajrapadas* are results attained at the stage of a buddha, whereas the RGV teaches the same three *vajrapadas* as causing the Three Jewels to be attained. The meter of verse 13c remains problematic (perhaps calling for emendation of the text).

Alternative translation:⁶⁸

One attains/approaches Buddha[hood], the Dharma, and the Saṅgha^α at the three stages of Awakening in precisely that order. Then (*atha*) one attains what are called Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities^β at the stage of a buddha all at once (*akramam*).

Interlinear glosses:

^α [As for verse 13ab] he (i.e., Sajjana) says: the impure results.⁶⁹

^β [As for verse 13cd] he says, too: the pure results.⁷⁰

Summary: Intermediate Stanza

trikāyaṃ dharmakāyaṃ ca trir asaṃbhṛtasambhṛtau |*
pāraṃparyetaratvābhyāṃ saḥakāriṇaṃ āśritaḥ ||*
tathatāprakṛtāvasthasamānītatrigotrakāḥ |*
eti trikāyīm ca phalaṃ dharmakāyatrayīm ca saḥ ||*⁷¹ 14–15

[At the stage] in which the requisite accumulation has not yet been fully accumulated,⁷² he who depends on the threefold body^α as the attendant condition⁷³ in a continuous/gradual way⁷⁴ and the threefold *dharmakāya*^β as attendant condition in a discontinuous/spontaneous way,⁷⁵ and who possesses the [threefold] disposi-

68 Reading *dhātuṃ* instead of *dhātuḥ* in 12c.

69 “The impure result” refers to the eighth through tenth stages.

70 “The pure result” refers to the eleventh stage, the stage of a buddha. See the interlinear gloss on verse 3: *aṣṭāmyādaṃ triratnalābhād aśuddhiḥ*, śuddhir ekādaśyāṃ eva bodhiguṇakarmāṇi.

71 Verses 14–15 are cited in *Paricaya* (fol. 7r3): *trikāyaṃ dharmakāyaṃ ca trir asaṃbhṛta-sambhṛtau* | *pāraṃparyeṇa sākṣāc ca saḥakāriṇaṃ āśritaḥ* (sic) || *tathatāprakṛtāvasthāsamānītatrigotrakāḥ* | *eti trikāyīm ca phalaṃ dharmakāyatrayīm ca saḥ* ||. Boldfaced words differ from the readings in the manuscript of Sajjana’s text.

72 For the expression *asaṃbhṛtasambhṛtau*, cf. *asaṃbhṛtasambhāre* in verse 4a. Verse 4 similarly teaches the Three Jewels as conditions (*pratyaya*).

73 The term “attendant conditions” (*saḥakāriṇ*) refers to the six *vajrapadas* (Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha, Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities). Cf. RGV I.26, which teaches the last three *vajrapadas* (Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities) as conditions (*pratyaya*) governing the attainment of the Three Jewels, while the fourth *vajrapada* (the *dhātu*, i.e., *tathāgatagarbha*) as the main cause of their attainment.

74 The words *pāraṃparya* and *itaratva* (paralleling *anukramataḥ* and *akramam* in verse 13) respectively correspond to the threefold body and threefold *dharmakāya*. The expression *pāraṃparya* has already appeared in verse 4d, which likewise teaches the Three Jewels (i.e., the threefold body in verse 14) as “conditions that come down in unbroken succession” (*prapadyate pratyayatvaṃ pāraṃparyakramāgatam*). The same verse cited in the *Paricaya* (fol. 7r3) reads *sākṣāt* (“directly”) instead of *itaratva*.

75 According to verse 13 and the interlinear gloss on verse 15 (*trikāyī buddhādivad acalādaṃ* |

tion (*gotra*)—that is, *tathatā*, the inherently abiding disposition, and the evolved disposition⁷⁶—heads toward (*eti*) [both] the threefold body^γ and the threefold *dharmakāya*^δ as results.⁷⁷

Interlinear glosses:

- ^α The *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya* have the *dharmakāya* as their support. [... the manuscript illegible...] ⁷⁸
- ^β At the stage where the requisite accumulation is [fully] accumulated (i.e., the stage of a buddha), the threefold *dharmakāya* is self-originated/son (?) (*ātma*) in due order (*ānulomya*)—the Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities (*dharmakāyatrayaṃ bodhiguṇakarmānulomyātmajaṃ*) (?).
- ^γ The threefold body [is realized] at [the stages] from “the immovable” (i.e., the eighth stage) onward, like the Buddha and so forth (i.e., the Three Jewels).⁷⁹
- ^δ The threefold *dharmakāya* [is realized] at the stage of a buddha, like the Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities.⁸⁰

dharmakāyatrayī bodhiguṇakarmavad buddhābhūmau), the threefold body (*trikāya*) refers to the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha (which are attained at the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages), while the threefold *dharmakāya* refers to the Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities (which are attained at the eleventh stage). Moreover, according to the interlinear gloss on verse 4, the *nirmāṇakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and *dharmakāya* are the foundation of the mundane Three Jewels.

76 This line (15ab) *tathatāprakṛtāvasthasamānītatrigotrakaḥ* summarizes the fourth *vajrapada*, the *dhātu* (cf. verse 10), while the other lines in verses 14–15 summarize the other six *vajrapadas* as attendant conditions and as results. In verse 10, Sajjana suggests that the *dhātu* and *gotra* are synonyms, for in verse 10 he treats the two terms *samānītaś* (qualifying *dhātuḥ*) and *samudānītaṃ* (qualifying *gotraṃ*) as synonymous.

77 The words *trikāyīm* and *dharmakāyatrayīm* go with *phalam eti*. *Trikāyī* and *dharmakāyatrayī* are *dviguṣamāsa* in the sense of “a collection of three.” The interlinear gloss on verse 15 states *trikāyī buddhādivad... dharmakāyatrayī bodhiguṇakarmavat*. On *trikāyī* and *dharmakāyatrayī*, cf. *Paricaya*, Ms. fol. 7r3–4: *trikāyīpratīlambho hy atrācalāditraye buddharatnādikramāt pūrvavat | buddhābhūmau ca* [5 akṣara illegible] *dharmakāyatrayapratīlambho* (7r4) *bodhiguṇakarmayogād veditavyaḥ | yadvā svārthāpekṣayā trikāyī | parārthānusāreṇa ca hetuphalabhedād dharmakāyatrayī veditavyā* (see Kano 2014: 156). This passage appears just after the quotation of *Upadeśa* verses 14–15.

78 Cf. the interlinear gloss on verse 4.

79 *trikāyī buddhādivad acalādaḥ*. The expression “like” (*vat*) in *buddhādivat* implies the difference between the threefold body and the Three Jewels (i.e., they are similar, but not identical).

80 See the interlinear glosses on verses 4 and 14.

This is an intermediate stanza (*ity antaraślokaḥ*).⁸¹

Ten Topics as Objects of Cultivation

tatra

In this context [of the soteriological sequence]:⁸²

athāśāstimaṭiṃ kuryāt svabhāvādyarthagocarām |
svabhāvenāvatīrṇasya hetunā paripācanā || 16

Now (*atha*), one should engage the thought of desire (*āśāstimaṭi*),⁸³ which has, as its objects, the [ten] topics^α [of buddha nature] beginning with the nature.^β

The Cause (2: *hetu*) gives rise to maturation for one who has entered (*avatīrṇa*) [the soteriological path] by means of one's [immaculate] Nature (1: *svabhāva*).⁸⁴

Interlinear glosses:

^α [The ten topics are taught in RGV I.29:] “Nature, Cause, Result, Function,” and so forth.

^β [The topics], beginning with Nature, belong to those who are free from passion [but are still abiding] on a mundane level (*laukikavītarāga*).⁸⁵

phalāt sampratyayavataḥ karmaṇā pathi yujyate |
yogo mārgaṇa śāstyasya vṛttyartho bhāvanāśrayaḥ || 17

81 The verses 14–15 (which are *antaraśloka*s) summarize the contents of verses 1–13. On the term *antaraśloka* and its function, see Mimaki 1980.

82 *Tatra* is inserted before verse 16.

83 The term *āśāstimaṭi* is probably a synonym of *āśāsticittaṃ*. See MSABh on XIV.6: *āśāsticittaṃ yadarthaṃ prayukto bhavati samādhyarthaṃ vā tatparipūryarthaṃ vā śrāmaṇya-phalārthaṃ vā bhūmipraveśārthaṃ vā viśeṣagamanārthaṃ vā tacchandasaḥagataṃ vartate |*

84 RGV I.29–95 teaches ten topics relating to buddha nature. The first two (*svabhāva* and *hetu*) are taught in RGV I.30 and in the commentarial verses I.31–34.

RGV I.30ab and 31 teach *svabhāva* as buddha nature's immaculateness abiding in all three modes of buddha nature, i.e., *dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra*, and RGV I.30cd and 32–34 teach *hetu* as devotion, wisdom, meditation, and compassion, which are equipped (*anvaya*, I.30d) in buddha nature and which function as counter agents against four kinds of obstacles.

According to Sajjana, the cultivation of *svabhāva* is the cause of entering the path (*avatīrṇa*), and the cultivation of *hetu* is the cause of maturation (*paripācanā*). The expression *avatīrṇa* is used by Sajjana in his *Sūtrālaṃkārapīṇḍārtha*, in the first verse of the *gotra* chapter (*avatīrṇa* [fol. 1v7] *syā tasyaivaṃ syāt prayogasya niśrayaḥ | gotrasya cittotpādasya vibhedād dvividhaś ca saḥ ||*), in which *avatīrṇa* means one who has entered the Buddhist path upon taking the Three Jewels as a refuge.

85 *trṇi svabhāvāditi* (read: *trīṇi svabhāvādīni*?) *laukikavītarāgāṇām*. The reading *trṇi* (for *trīṇi*?) before *svabhāvāditi* is not clear. My translation of this sentence is very provisional (the Sanskrit text needs improvement). See RGVV 67.12–15 (ad I.130–31).

For one who possesses perfect faith on the basis of the [topic] Result (3: *phala*), Connection (5: *yoga*)⁸⁶ is appropriate on the path by way of Function (4: *karman*).⁸⁶ For one who is to be instructed⁸⁷ by means of the path, the topic Manifestation (6: *ṛtti*) serves as a support for [the path of] cultivation (*bhāvanā[mārga]*).⁸⁸

Interlinear gloss:

- ^α The topic of Connection with Result is produced from the topic of Connection with Cause [and] is included within the path of vision (*darśanamārga*).⁸⁹

avasthāsarvagārthābhyāṃ bhāvanāmārgaṇīśrayāt |
hīnabodhyarthanādināṃ prahāṇir upajāyate || 18

By resorting to the path of cultivation on the basis of two topics (*artha*)—namely, the [Different] states (7: *avasthā*) and the All-pervasion (8: *sarvaga*)—[obscurations] such as aiming for a lesser awakening (*hīnabodhyarthanā*)⁹⁰ come to cease.⁹¹

86 The topics *karman* and *phala* are taught in RGV I.35 and the commentarial verses (I.36–41): *śubhātmasukhanityatvaḥpāramitā phalam | duḥkhanirvicchamaprāpticchandapraṇidhikarmakāḥ ||35||*. The topic *yoga* is taught in RGV I.42 and the commentarial verses (RGV I.43–44).

RGV I.35ab teaches *phala* as the resultant qualities of buddha nature to be attained through practices of *hetu*, and RGV I.35cd teaches *karman* as buddha nature's function that encourages ordinary people to give up sufferings of *samsāra* and to wish *nirvāṇa*. RGV I.42 teaches *yoga* as buddha nature's connection with the Buddha Qualities.

I understand *phalāt sampratyaḥyavataḥ karmaṇā pathi yujyate yogo* as one sentence, and *mārgaṇa śāstyasya ṛttyartho bhāvanāśrayaḥ* as another; but there are also other possibilities. My provisional translation asserts that one attains perfect faith by ensuring/confirming one's future attainment of the goal (see RGV I.35ab: *phala*), and one is encouraged to follow the path with the aid of Function (see RGV I.35.cd: *karman*), which is linked with (i.e., Connection, *yoga*) the causal qualities leading to purification and the resultant immaculateness (see RGV I.42: *yoga*).

87 The meaning of the term *śāstyasya* is unclear to me. In my provisional translation, I take it in the sense of *śāstyasya*.

88 The topic *ṛtti* is taught in RGV I.45 and the commentarial verse I.46. RGV I.45 teaches *ṛtti* as buddha nature's three kinds of manifestation in accordance with the respective stages, i.e., those of a buddha, bodhisattvas, and ordinary beings. On the topic *ṛtti*, see the interlinear gloss on verse 20: *ṛttyarthasyāśrayatvenāganānāt*.

89 The topic *yoga* belongs to the path of vision (*darśanamārga*), and the topics 6–8 (*ṛtti*, *avasthā*, and *sarvaga*) to the path of cultivation (*bhāvanāmārga*).

90 See MSA IX.8/MSABh on IX.8: *hīnayānaparitrāṇatvam aniyatagotrāṇaṃ mahāyānaikāyanīkaraṇāt*.

91 See RGV I.47–48 (on *avasthā*); 49–50 (on *sarvatraga*).

mārgasya parivrddhiś ca bhūtrayyām avikārataḥ |
mārgasyaiva phalaunmukhyam abhedārthasvabhāvagam || 19

The development⁹² of the path [is accomplished] at the three stages⁹³ by means of Invariance (9: *avikāra*).^α The expectation of (*aunmukhya*) the result on the path itself falls under the nature of the topic Indivisibility (10: *abheda*).⁹⁴

Interlinear gloss:

- ^α And the *dharmadhātu*, which is nonarising (*anutpattika*) owing to its being unbound, inexhaustible, and unceasing, is non-empty because it has a nonconceptual [character] as its intrinsic essence (*svarasavāha*).⁹⁵

The Ten Topics and the Nine Defilements

tad evam iyaṃ etasmin bhāvanā syān navātmikā | 20ab

This cultivation (*bhāvanā*) should be, therefore, ninefold in this [practice schema], as mentioned above [in verses 16–19].^α

Interlinear gloss:

- ^α [The number is nine] because the topic Manifestation (*vr̥tti*) is not counted [as an object of cultivation] inasmuch as it is a locus [for other topics].⁹⁶

yasyāḥ

Among them⁹⁷ [i.e., among the nine stages of cultivation]:

tribhī rāgādyanuśayāḥ paryavasthānam ekataḥ |
ḍṛḡ-heyā ekato dvābhyāṃ bhāvanāheyasaṃjñitāḥ |
aśuddhaśuddhārthakleśā ekaikāḥ kṣayabhāgināḥ || 20c–21

92 Lit. “increase” (*parivrddhi*). This can also mean “advancement along.”

93 The “three stages” (*bhūtrayyām*) refer to either the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages, or the stages of ordinary beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. RGV I.51–83 (on *avikāra*) describes the nature of buddha nature as not changing throughout the three stages, in this case clearly those of ordinary beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. An alternative interpretation of the verse would be to correlate *bhūtrayyām* with *avikārataḥ* (“Invariance throughout the three stages”).

94 In the last line, the last topic (*abheda*) (which teaches the inseparability of buddhas’ and ordinary beings’ intrinsic nature) reaffirms the result of Buddhist practice and thereby serves an important motivating function. See RGV I.35, 40, 41, 161, IV.23, V.7–10; RGVV p. 5.6, etc.

95 My translation is based on a conjecture: *aśūnyaś* (Ms. *aśūnyā*) *cābaddhākṣayānirodhamukhenānutpattiko* (Ms. °ka°) *dharmadhātuḥ nirvikalpakasvarasavāhāt*. Alternatively, a conjectured *aśūnyaś* for *aśūnyā* is also possible.

96 See verse 17: *vr̥ttiartho bhāvanāśrayaḥ*.

97 *Yasyāḥ* is inserted before verse 20c.

The latent states (*anuśaya*) of [the three kinds of defilement] beginning with desire⁹⁸ are destroyed (*kṣayaabhāgin*) by [focusing on] the [first] three topics (1–3: *svabhāva*, *hetu*, and *phala*)^α; their intense outburst (*paryavasthāna*)⁹⁹ is destroyed by [cultivating] one topic (4: *karman*)^β; the [defilements] to be abandoned on the path of vision (*ḍṛg-heya*) are destroyed by [cultivating] one topic¹⁰⁰ (5: *yoga*)^γ; those that are called [the defilements] to be abandoned on the path of cultivation (*bhāvanāheya*) are destroyed by [cultivating] two topics (7: *avasthā* and 8: *sarvatra*)^δ; the defilements that are objects [to be rejected at stages] of impurity and those of purity¹⁰¹ are destroyed [by cultivating two topics] (9: *avikāra*^θ and 10: *asambheda*^λ). [All of them are destroyed] one by one.¹⁰²

Interlinear glosses:

- ^α [The three defilements] beginning with desire [should be known] by [cultivating] the topics *svabhāva*, *hetu*, and *phala*, respectively.
- ^β [The defilements consisting in an intense outburst of the above three defilements should be known] by [cultivating] the topic *karman*, i.e., an aspiration to attain stability/durability in the halting of pain.
- ^γ [The *ḍṛg-heya* should be known] by [cultivating] the topic *yoga*, [which links up] with the result.
- ^δ [The *bhāvanāheya* should be known] by [cultivating] the topics *avasthā* and *sarvatra*.
- ^θ The defilements that are objects of the [stages of] impurity [should be known] by [cultivating] the topic *avikāra*.
- ^λ The defilements that are objects of the [stage of] purity [should be known] by [cultivating] the topic *abheda*.

Repressing Laya and Auddhatya

atra padmādidṛṣṭāntair layaḥ pratividhīyate |
nirvedakatvād rāgāder anvikṣauddhatyabādhani || 22

In this [tenfold cultivation],^α laxity/depression (*laya*) is counteracted (*pratividhīyate*) by the [nine] similes beginning with the lotus.^β A proper investigation (*anvikṣā*) of [the ninefold defilement] beginning with desire suppresses excitation/

98 That is, desire, hatred, and delusion. See RGVV 67.9–10 (ad I.130–31): *rāgānuśayalakṣaṇaḥ kleśaḥ | dveṣānuśayalakṣaṇaḥ | mohānuśayalakṣaṇaḥ |*.

99 See RGVV 67.10–11 (ad I.130–31): *tivrarāgaḍveṣamohaparyavasthānalakṣaṇakleśa*.

100 See the interlinear gloss on verse 17: *hetuyogārthaprasūtaḥ phalayogārtho darśanamārga-saṃgrhītaḥ*.

101 The stages of impurity are the eighth through tenth stages, and the stage of purity the eleventh stage. See interlinear gloss on verse 3.

102 *Ekaikāt* (going with *aśuddhaśuddhārthakleśā*) is a possible conjecture for *ekaikāḥ*.

elation (*auddhatya*), inasmuch as it gives rise to disgust [with mundane enjoyment] (*nirvedaka*).¹⁰³

Interlinear glosses:

^α [RGV I.23:] “Regarding *hetu*, *phala*, *karman*, *yoga*, and *vr̥tti* [...]”

^β [RGV I.96:] “the Buddha in a faded lotus [...]”¹⁰⁴

layasyaivāpravr̥ttyartham dharmakāyādibhedavān |
svabhāvas trividho bhāvyah kuśale vyākṛtatvataḥ || 23

In order that depression not be operative,^α one should meditate on/cultivate the threefold nature consisting of the *dharmakāya* and the others (i.e., *tathatā* and *gotra*),^β since it has been determined (*vyākṛta*) that [this nature] is wholesome (*kuśala*).^{γ/105}

Interlinear glosses:

^α [Depression is expressive of] desire and so forth. (?)

^β [The phrase “*dharmakāya* and so forth” means] *dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra*.¹⁰⁶

^γ The [nine] similes beginning with a buddha in a lotus eliminate laxity, for it has been confirmed that they are wholesome (*kuśalavyākṛtatvena*). This is the difference (*iti viśeṣaḥ*).¹⁰⁷

103 An alternative interpretation of verse 22cd is, “A proper investigation (*anvikṣā*) rejects excitation (*auddhatya*), inasmuch as it pacifies [the ninefold defilement] beginning with desire.” For the paired notions *laya* and *auddhatya*, see, for instance, Nagao 2007–2011 (on MSABh XIII.49, 53, 65) and *Madhyāntavibhāga* I.4, IV.5. I owe the interpretation of these and their English renderings to Mr. David Reigle (personal communication).

104 RGV I.23: *samālā tathatātha nirmalā vimalā buddhagunā jīnakriyā | viśayaḥ paramārthadarśinām śubharatnatrayasambhavo^a yataḥ ||* (^a Schmithausen [1971: 140] corrected *sargako* to *sambhavo*);

RGV I.96: *buddhaḥ kupadme madhu makṣikāsu tuṣeṣu^a sārāṇy aśucau suvarṇam | nidhiḥ kṣītaḥ alpaphale 'nkurādi praklinnavastreṣu jīnātmabhāvaḥ ||* (^a Johnston reads *tuṣeṣu*). This interlinear note, written below the line, may relate to verse 27.

105 Verse 23 teaches that the positive aspect of buddha nature illustrated by a buddha in a withered lotus, etc., counters the depressive state of laxity. For this pragmatic function of buddha nature, which is also dealt with in the RGV, see verse 19cd.

106 RGV I.144–52 teaches the threefold nature (*dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra*) and associates it with the nine similes. Cf. also RGV I.28.

107 “The difference” means the difference between the function of the proper investigation (*anvikṣā*), which suppress (*bādhani*) the increase of *laya* (“depression”) (verse 22) and the function of the threefold intrinsic nature (*trividha-svabhāva*), which eliminates (*nibarhaṇa*) or brings to an end (*apavr̥tti*) *laya* (verse 23). Alternatively, the difference may also refer to the difference between counteracting *laya* (verse 22ab and 23) and *auddhatya* (verse 22cd).

A Summary of Cultivation

bhāvādibhāvanā tena parikarmātmabhāvanā |
asyāpavādaḥśāntaiḥ parikarmātmabhāvanā || 24

Thus, the cultivation of [the ten topics] beginning with Nature is the cultivation of purifying aids/preparation.^{α/108} The cultivation of purifying aids/preparation in turn is [taught] by way of [nine] contrary similes^{β/109} for this [threefold nature, i.e., *dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra*].

This is an intermediate stanza (*antaraśloka*).

Interlinear glosses:

- α [The phrase *bhāvādi* means the ten topics] beginning with *svabhāva*, *hetu*.
 [...] the manuscript is illegible...].
- β [RGV I.96 and 97:] “The Buddha in a faded lotus [...]”

Tracing the Practices of Reflection and Cultivation Back to the RGV

*gotrādisūcīto vyaktaṃ śāstre cintādikaḥ kramaḥ |**
*svabhāvādivyavadhinā piṇḍārthaṃ yad vibhaktavān |**
 †*udāharaṇabhedenā kramasyāsyā saṃvedakaḥ |* 25*¹¹⁰

In [this] treatise (i.e., the RGV),^α the [soteriological] sequence of reflection (*cintā*)^β and [cultivation]¹¹¹ is clearly (*vyaktaṃ*) indicated (*sūcīto*) by [the topics] beginning with *gotra*,¹¹² for (*yad*) [the author of the RGV] expounded the essen-

108 In the manuscript, the scribe emends the word *svabhāva* to *bhāva*, canceling *sva-* on metrical grounds, the result being obviously meant in this context in the same sense as *svabhāva* (i.e., the first of the ten topics). This is supported by the interlinear gloss on verse 24: “*svabhāva*, *hetu*, and so forth.”

109 The term *apavādaḥśānta* literally means “similes [that illustrate buddha nature] in negative terms (i.e., a withered lotus flower).” The corresponding similes are taught by RGV I.96, 97, and 130–43.

110 Verse 25cd and a half verse are cited in the *Paricaya* (fol. 7v2): [... illegible akṣaras...] *cintāder eṣa <kra> krama[h] ||* (cf. verse 25ab) *svabhāvādivyavadhinā piṇḍārthaṃ yad vibhaktavān ||* (verse 25cd) *udāharaṇabhedenā kramasyāsyā sa(m)vedakaḥ |* (missing in the manuscript of Sajjana’s text)

111 See verse 7cd: *tato dhātvarthaṃ āśritya cintābhāvanāyora viśet*. Verse 7cd suggests that a series of explanations of *cintā* and *bhāvanā* practices start with verse 8, while verses 25–27 conclude the explanation with the author justifying his soteriological interpretation.

112 All topics relating to reflection and cultivation beginning with *gotra* (i.e., *tathatā*, *dharmakāya*, the ten topics, the nine defilements, the nine similes) are being recalled here. The expression “clearly indicated” (*sūcīto vyaktaṃ*) might sound self-contradictory, but in using this expression Sajjana is defending his own interpretation, confident that his soteriological system is

tial meaning (*piṇḍārtha*)¹¹³ with the division (*vyavadhi*)¹¹⁴ of [the ten topics] beginning with intrinsic nature, and makes known the sequence of this [essential meaning]¹¹⁵ through the classification of [nine] similes.

Interlinear glosses:

- α ["The treatise" refers to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, especially, verse I.28:] "because the body of the Perfect Buddha pervades [...]."
- β [The word] "reflection" refers to the cultivation of Intrinsic nature etc. (i.e., the ten topics), though reflection is [normally] not taught as cultivation.

*tatra piṇḍārthanirdeśaḥ prāk cintāvataraśrayaḥ |**
*svabhāvāder ato vyaktir bhāvyatvasyānuvartikā ||** 26¹¹⁶

Regarding this [sequence], first (*prāk*), the explanation (i.e., RGV I.27–28)^α of the essential meaning is the basis for engaging (*avatara*) in reflection (*cintā*). After that, there follows the setting forth (*vyakti*, i.e., RGV I.29–94) that [the ten topics] beginning with Intrinsic nature are the object of cultivation.¹¹⁷

Interlinear gloss:

- α [RGV I.27:] "The group of sentient beings is included within the Buddha's wisdom, whose immaculateness is nondual by nature, [and] whose result is metaphorically transferred to (*upacāra*) the Buddha's *gotra*. Therefore, it is taught that all sentient beings possess buddha nature."¹¹⁸

not his own fabrication but an authentic one, as suggested by the *Ratnagotravibhāga* itself.

113 It is less likely that the term *piṇḍārtha* is meant to refer to RGV I.127–29, which verses are defined as a "summary" of the nine similes: *udāharaṇānāṃ piṇḍārthaḥ* (RGVV p. 66.11). Instead, *piṇḍārtha* very probably means here the "essential meaning" of buddha nature in the sense of the true intention of the RGV.

114 Or "by separating out." The term *vyavadhi* normally means "concealing" and the like, but it also means "separating, dividing." The term parallels *bheda* in the next line: *udāharaṇabhedena*.

115 The pronoun *asya* in *kramasyāsyā* in this line refers to either *piṇḍārtha* (verse 25d) or *cintādika kramaḥ* (verse 25b).

116 Verse 26 is cited in *Paricaya* (fol. 7v2): *tatra piṇḍārthanirdeśaḥ prāk cintāvataraśrayaḥ | svabhāvāder ato vyaktir bhāvyatvasyānuvartikā ||*.

117 This verse clarifies RGV I.27 and 28 as the basis of *cintā*, and RGV I.29–94 (the ten topics) as objects of *bhāvanā*. Sajjana teaches the former in his verses 8–15, and the latter in verses 16–19. In brief, the *cintā* practice is to analytically reflect on the teaching that every sentient being possesses buddha nature, while the *bhāvanā* practice is to cultivate or meditate on the ten topics. Furthermore, Sajjana associates the latter with the nine defilements, the three aspects/natures, and the nine similes.

118 This is followed by very ambiguous passages. The manuscript runs, *ity ev[ekam dvīdhāvā-*

*piṇḍārthasyaiva nirdeśo yaḥ paścād upamākramāt |**
*heyam prāpyam svabhāvāder bhāvanāyās sa śamsati ||** 27¹¹⁹

The later explanation (RGV I.130–52) of the same essential meaning, [as expounded] in the sequence of [nine] similes,¹²⁰ declares (*śamsati*) what is to be removed (i.e., the nine defilements; RGV I.130–43) and to be attained (i.e., the three aspects/natures; RGV I.144–52) on the basis of the cultivation¹²¹ of Intrinsic nature and [the other nine topics].

A Refutation of an Objection to the Authoritative Teaching

adhikārasya śeṣo 'smin dṛṣṭiśuddhikaro mataḥ |
yuktyā prasāadhanād āptabādhoddhārāc ca tatsthitih || 28

In this [treatise], the remaining part^a of the [present] chapter is understood as [teaching for] purifying mistaken views (*dṛṣṭi*). It is on the basis of a refutation (*ud-dhāra*) of an objection to the authoritative [teaching] (*āptabādha*) and (*ca*) on the basis of proof (*prasādhana*)^b through logical reasoning (*yukti*)^c/122 that it (i.e., the correct view) is established.¹²³

Interlinear glosses:

- ^a [“The remaining part” is the passage] starting with “the *dhātu* beginningless in time [...]” [RGVV 72.13].¹²⁴
- ^b [Regarding *prasādhana*, RGVV 73.11–12 teaches:] “This is, O son of a good family, the true nature of phenomena”; and (*ca*) [RGV I.153 teaches:] “[This] can be understood only through devotion (*śraddhā*).”¹²⁵

daneṣu] nāsti sambuddhakāyaspharaṇād ity eva bahu (the right edge of the manuscript is broken).

119 Verse 27 is cited in *Paricaya* (fol. 7v2): *piṇḍārthasyaiva nirdeśo yaḥ paścād upamākramāt | heyam prāpyam svabhāvāder bhāvanāyās sa śamsatī ||*.

120 An interlinear gloss (“the Buddha in a faded lotus”: RGV I.96) written above the line explains either the word *upamā* of verse 27 or the word *padmādidṛṣṭāntair* in verse 22a.

121 We can alternatively understand *bhāvanāyās* in verse 27d as genitive (instead of ablative) —“The later explanation... declares what is to be removed and to be attained among the cultivation...”

122 “The logical reasoning” indicates what is taught in RGV I.156, which is reformulated as “everything, given its contingent nature (or because it is conditioned), is as empty as a cloud or the like” (*sarvaṃ śūnyam saṃskṛtatvān meghādivad iti*) in the marginal gloss.

123 *Tatsthitih* literally means the “establishment of it” or “doctrinal system relating to it.” Verse 28cd teaches that refutation and proof combined establish the correct view on the buddha nature doctrine.

124 RGVV 72.13: *anādikāliko dhātuḥ sarvadharmasamāśrayaḥ | tasmin sati gatiḥ sarvā nirvāṇā-dhigamo 'pi ca ||* (a quotation from the *Abhidharmasūtra*).

125 The phrase *pratyakṣarūpaṃ* in the interlinear gloss is unclear; it might be meant to explain *prasādhana* in verse 28c.

Endnote of the manuscript:

- γ The “objection to the authoritative [teaching]” (*āptabādha*) is [presented in RGV I.156:] “Everything is to be known everywhere as being empty, like clouds, [a vision in] dream [...]”¹²⁶ Its refutation is [taught in RGV I.157:] “A depressed mind, contempt toward all beings [...]”¹²⁷

[The statement] taught in the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* that the nature of mind is ultimate (i.e., not empty) is invalidated, since [the statement] “Everything is empty, inasmuch as it is conditioned (*saṃskṛta*), like clouds and so forth”¹²⁸ is widely taught (lit. made known) in every scripture, [such as the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*] without difference. This much is the content of the objection to the authoritative [teaching] (*āptabādha*).

And with regard to this statement (i.e., “everything is empty”), the conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) is completely pervaded (*abhivyāpta*)¹²⁹ by emptiness, whereas the luminous mind (*prabhāsvaraṃ cittam*) is not conditioned. This is because [in the luminous mind] nothing is done through causes and conditions coming together (*saṃhatya hetupratyayair akaraṇāt*),¹³⁰ given that the origin of the [luminous] mind in a succeeding moment (*uttarasamvitprasūti*) depends on its being generated solely by a congener (*sajāti*) of itself in the previous moment.¹³¹

And [the three] examples (*dṛṣṭānta*), namely, clouds, dreams, and illusions, are meant to indicate that *kleśasaṃkleśa*, *karmasaṃkleśa*, and *janmasaṃkleśa* are possessors of the property that is to be established (*sādhya*dharmīn).¹³² This is because emptiness is what is to be established

126 RGV I.156: *śūnyaṃ sarvaṃ sarvathā tatra tatra jñeyaṃ meghasvapnamāyākṛtābham | ity uktvaivaṃ buddhadhātūḥ punaḥ kiṃ sattve sattve 'stīti buddhair ihoktam ||*. Sajjana’s text incorrectly reads *tatra* instead of *tatra tatra*.

127 RGV I.157: *līnaṃ cittam hīnasattveṣv avajñābhūtagrāho bhūtagrāho bhūtagrāho bhūtagrāho bhūtagrāho | ātmasnehas cādhikāḥ pañca doṣā yeṣāṃ teṣāṃ tatprahāṇārtham uktam ||*. translate Sajjana’s text reads *sarvasattveṣv* instead of *hīnasattveṣv*. The latter reading fits better into the present context.

128 This is a summary of RGV I.156.

129 I.e., *saṃskṛta* is necessarily empty. *Abhivyāpta* can also mean “comprehended.”

130 “Causes and conditions” means here those other than mind itself. This discussion may relate to a passage in the *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti*, namely PVSV 7.10–12: *pūrvasajātīmātrahetutvāc chaktiprasūteḥ sāmāgryā yogyatānanyāpekṣiṇīty ucyate*.

131 According to this passage, the luminous mind is not conditioned by external factors, since it is generated by another instance of its own kind (*sajāti*) in the previous moment. However, this does not accord with the ordinary definition of *asaṃskṛta*. See Mathes 2008: 333 for a similar interpretation found in Gzhon nu dpal’s RGV commentary.

132 I.e., only three *saṃkleśas* (which embrace all kinds of defilements) are empty, while buddha nature or the luminous mind is not. The present passage thereby clarifies that buddha nature is empty of defilements, as taught in RGV I.155.

for the *kleśasaṃkleśa* and [the other two *saṃkleśas*].¹³³ For if [clouds etc.] were mere examples/illustrations (i.e., if clouds etc. did not indicate any specific thing), then given that [the point] could not have possibly been conveyed in any other way (or given that nothing else would be possible) (*anyathānupapāda*),¹³⁴ it follows that [the examples] would be useless.

Therefore, buddha nature is not established as conditioned. Buddha nature is, thus, not produced from defilements.¹³⁵ [This much is] the meaning of the removal of the contradiction (*virodhaparihārārthaḥ*)¹³⁶ between [the teaching of] the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and that of other sūtras [such as the *Prajñāpāramitā*].

Although [buddha nature] is inconceivable, [RGV I.157] teaches the words “having a depressed mind and so forth”¹³⁷ in order to show¹³⁸ [the function of buddha nature to ordinary persons who cannot perceive buddha nature].

The Soteriological Sequence and the Last Three Vajrapadas

evaṃ ca bhāvanāyogān niryāte samudāgamaḥ |
acalādāv asaṃpūrṇaḥ sa ca prāg eva varṇitaḥ ||
paripūrṇas tu bodhyādiḥ sa ca saṃbuddhabhūmigaḥ | 29–30b

The examples beginning with a cloud refer to three defilements beginning with the *kleśasaṃkleśa*. The respective correspondences of the three examples to the three *saṃkleśas* is taught in RGV I.158–59: *viviktaṃ saṃskṛtaṃ sarvaprakāraṃ bhūtakotiṣu | kleśakarmavipākārthaṃ meghādivad udāhṛtaṃ || kleśā meghopamāḥ kṛtyakriyā svapnopabhogavat | māyānirmitavat skandhā vipākāḥ kleśakarmanām ||*

133 In the present context, *sādhya*dharmīn refers to *kleśajanmakarmasaṃkleśa*; *sādhya* refers to *śūnyatā*; *hetu* refers to *asaṃkṛtatva*; and *dṛṣṭānta* refers to *meghasvapnamāyā*.

134 From the semantic viewpoint, one would expect that the word *anyathānupapādād* has a relation to *°sūcanārthaḥ*.

135 The gloss concludes that defilements are empty because they are conditioned, whereas buddha nature is not empty because it is not conditioned. See also *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā* on III.22b–d (on which, see Mathes 2000: 211 and 2008: 544–45, n. 1879).

136 *Virodhaparihārārthaḥ* is the explanation of āptabādhoddhāra in verse 28c.

137 This is in answer to the objection represented by RGVV 77.9–10: “(Objection:) If the *dhātu* is thus so difficult to perceive and is not a fully experiential object even for the highest saints who abide on the final level of nonattachment, what is the use in teaching it to ordinary people?” (*āha*^a *yady evaṃ asaṅgaṇiṣṭhābhūmipraṭiṣṭhitānām api paramāryāṇām asarvaviśaya eṣa durdṛśo dhātuḥ | tat kim anena bāla*^b *janam ārabhya deśiteneti* | .^a *āha* in Mss. A/B is omitted by Johnston. See Schmithausen 1971: 160. ^b In place of *bāla*^o, the reading in Mss. A/B, Johnston supplies *°prthag*^o after *bāla* on the basis of the Tibetan translation. See Schmithausen 1971: 160).

138 The manuscript is unclear in this part (*pratyāyanaprayojanava[r]ttanaṃ tu*?).

In this way, when one sets out [on the soteriological path] by engaging oneself in cultivation, attainment (*samudāgama*) [will ensue]. The attainment is, [however,] not full-fledged at the stages of “the immovable” (*acala*) and those [immediately] following (i.e., the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages),¹³⁹ and (*ca*) [indeed] this [unfulfilled attainment] was already explained [in the first chapter of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*].^α

On the other hand (*tu*), the full-fledged [attainment] consists in the Awakening and the other [two *vajrapadas*, i.e., the Buddha Qualities and Buddha Activities], and (*ca*) this [fully fledged attainment] is [brought forth] at the stage of the Perfect Buddha, [that is, the eleventh stage].¹⁴⁰

Interlinear gloss:

- ^α [Regarding the stages, RGVV 3.17–19 teaches:] “[The Buddha] realized the sameness of all phenomena, turned the wheel of Dharma in the proper way, and trained innumerable disciples in the proper way.”¹⁴¹

The Buddha’s Awakening

tatra bodhir guṇākhyānād āropāpohato dvidhā || 30cd

Among the [three] (*tatra*),¹⁴² the Awakening is of two kinds, namely, in terms of an explanation of its qualities (topics 1, 3, 4, and 6) and in terms of the exclusion of superimposition (topics 2, 5, 7, and 8).¹⁴³

śuddhir viyogas svānyārtho vṛttiś ceti guṇakramah | 31ab

Purity (1: *śuddhi*), Separation [from defilements] (3: *viyoga*), Benefit for oneself and others (4: *svānyārtha*) and Manifestation (6: *vṛtti*); this is the sequence of the qualities [of Awakening].^α

Interlinear gloss:

- ^α Natural Purity (1: *prakṛtiśuddhi*), Abandonment (3: *prahāṇa*), Activity (4: *karman*), Profundity, Extensiveness, and Magnificence (6: *gām-*

139 The “incomplete accomplishment” (attained on the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages) represents the Three Jewels. See verses 3 and 13, as well as the interlinear gloss on verse 3.

140 Cf. RGV II.2 *buddhabhūmivyavasthitiḥ* (corrected from °*bhūmiṣvava*° based on Schmithausen 1971: 162).

141 The Three Jewels are realized respectively on the eighth, ninth, and tenth stages. See RGVV 4.21–5.7, verse 13, and interlinear glosses on verses 3 and 15.

142 That is, the three components of the full-fledged (*paripūrṇah*) attainment (*samudāgama*) of verse 30a, namely, Awakening, Buddha Qualities, and Buddha Activities.

143 RGV II.1–2 teaches eight topics relating to Awakening: (1) *śuddhi* or *svabhāva*, (2) *prāpti* or *hetu*, (3) *viśamya* or *phala*, (4) *svaparārtha* or *karman*, (5) *tadāśraya* or *yoga*, (6) *gāmbhīryaudāryamāhātmya* or *vṛtti*, (7) *yāvatkāla* or *nitya*, (8) *yathāvat* or *acintya*.

bhīryaudāryamāhātmya); [these are] the bases of this [sequence of qualities] (*tadāśrayaḥ*).

mārgadvayasya jñānasya cchedābhyāṃ śobhanātmanām |
lokagocarabhāvena samāropaś caturvidhaḥ |
prāptyāśrayatvanityatvācintyatvais tadapohanam || 31c–32

Four kinds of superimposition [arise], namely, [two] from the cutting off of two of the paths,¹⁴⁴ [one] from the cutting off of wisdom,¹⁴⁵ and [one] from [an erroneous attribution of] excellent [qualities] to a mundane object.¹⁴⁶

One excludes this [fourfold superimposition] by means of Attainment (2: *prāpti*), Foundation (5: *āśraya*), Permanence (7: *nitya*) and Inconceivability (8: *acintya*).

Buddha Qualities

pāramārthikamāyīyakāyadvayasamāśritāḥ |
viśaṃyogaguṇā jñāne rūpe vaipākikā guṇāḥ || 33

On the basis of both the ultimate body and the illusory body,^α [two sets of qualities arise]: the qualities of dissociation (*viśaṃyoga*) pertaining to wisdom (i.e., the *dharma*kāya) and the qualities of maturation (*vaipākika*) pertaining to the physical [body].^{β/147}

Interlinear glosses:

^α [The two bodies referred to are] the *dharma*[kāya] and *rūpa*[kāya].

^β [Wisdom and the physical body relate respectively to] the *dharma*[kāya] and *rūpa*[kāya].

Buddha Activities

yāvadyathāvadākāraṃ guṇebhyaḥ karma tat punaḥ |
yathāsaṃkhyena śodhā ca navadhā ca prakīrtitam || 34

144 The “two paths” (*mārgadvaya*) probably refers to the paths of vision and cultivation. When one cuts them off, there arise two kinds of superimposition, which are removed by means of the second and fifth topics of the Awakening, namely, *prāpti* and *āśraya*.

145 When one cuts off wisdom, there arises a form of superimposition that is removed by the seventh topic, *nitya*.

146 Erroneous attribution produces a form of superimposition that is removed by the eighth topic, *acintya*. We can alternatively translate 31c–32b as, “Owing to the cutting off of two paths and the cutting off of wisdom, one superimposes excellent [qualities] on mundane objects, [and this superimposition] is fourfold.”

147 RGV III.1–3 associates the *dharma*kāya with qualities of release and being of benefit to oneself, and the physical body (*rūpakāya*) with qualities of maturation and being of benefit to others.

The Buddha Activities in their aspects of extension and of correctness (*yāvad-yathāvadākāra*)¹⁴⁸ [arise] from the Buddha Qualities,¹⁴⁹ and these [activities] in turn are taught sequentially in terms of six [topics]¹⁵⁰ and nine [similes].¹⁵¹

Anuśamsā and Rakṣā of the Treatise

iyatā śailanirdeśaḥ śāstre 'sminn anuśamsayā |
prarocanāvaśeṣeṇa śāstrarakṣā ca prṣṭhataḥ || 35

The mountain instruction (*śailanirdeśa*) [is taught] to such an extent (*iyatā*).¹⁵² Exciting interest (*prarocanā*) in this treatise, [the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, is generated] by [verses RGV V.1–19, which teach] wonderful/beneficial qualities (*anuśamsā*).¹⁵³ Then the protection offered to the treatise [is taught] in the remaining¹⁵⁴ [verses, RGV V.20–24].

drṣṭvānuśamsāṃ vartante prayoktāro niranantaram |
rakṣayādīnavajñāś ca nivartante kumānataḥ || 36

After reading [the verses of] wonderful qualities, people will continuously practice (or engage in) [the teaching of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*]. On the basis of [the verses of] protection, they will come to know the disadvantages (or bad consequences) (*ādinavajña*) [resulting from misdeeds]¹⁵⁵ and hence refrain from erro-

148 On *yāvadyathāvadākāra*, see RGV I.14–16 and RGVV 24.9–25.3 (on I.25).

149 On the relation between the Buddha Qualities and the Buddha Activities, see RGVV 21.11–13 (ad I.24); 25.13–15 (ad I.26).

150 RGV IV.1–12. RGV IV.5 lists the six topics: (1) *niryāna*, (2) *tadupastambha*, (3) *tatphala*, (4) *tatparigraha*, (5) *tadāvṛti*, and (6) *taducchittipratyaya*, which correspond to *yāvadākāra*.

151 RGV IV.13–98. RGV IV.13 lists the nine similes: (1) *śakra*, (2) *duṇḍubhi*, (3) *megha*, (4) *brahman* (masculine), (5) *arka*, (6) *maṇiratna*, (7) *pratiśrutka*, (8) *ākāśa*, and (9) *prthivī*, which correspond to *yathāvadākāra*.

152 Sajjana suggests chapters 1 to 4 as the main body of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. In this context, the word *śaila* is a synonym of *gotra* in the sense of “mountain” or “mine,” and hence *śailanirdeśa* means the *Ratnagotravibhāga* itself, for the first member of the title, *ratnagotra*, means “a mine of jewels.” This expression is a suitable one for buddha nature/potential (*gotra*), which produces the Three Jewels (*ratna*). Cf. Takasaki 1989: ii.

153 Or “by [verses that teach] that which is of great advantage” (*anuśamsayā*).

154 Lit. “by the remaining.”

155 On *ādinavajña*, see MSA XIX.66: *ādinavajñāḥ svaparigraheṣu bhogeṣv asakto hy anigūḍhāvairah | yogi nimitte kuśalo 'kudṛṣṭir adhyātmasaṃsthaḥ khalu bodhisattvaḥ ||* “A bodhisattva is he who knows the bad consequences relating to his own possessions, who has no attachment to the [mundane] enjoyments, who has no secret enmity, who is a practitioner, who is specialized in [three] factors (i.e., *śamatha*, *parigraha*, and *upekṣā*), who does not have mistaken views, and who abides inside (i.e., in the Mahāyāna tradition).

neous reasoning.¹⁵⁶

Dedication

svakriyāṃ kevalāṃ atra noddīśya pariṇāmanam |
kevalaṃ śubharaḥṣāyai pareṣāṃ api darśitam || 37

[It is] not exclusively for the sake of (*uddīśya*) one's own activities (*svakriyā*); an intense (*kevalaṃ*) dedication (*pariṇāmana*) is presented here [i.e., RGV V.25] in order to protect the merits for the sake of others, too (*api*).¹⁵⁷

Colophon

mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśaḥ kṛtiḥ śrīmatsajjanapādānām |
Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa composed by the venerable Sajjana.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ See RGV V.20–24.

¹⁵⁷ The dedication verse RGV V.25 reads, *ratnāni vyavadānadhātum amalāṃ bodhiṃ guṇān karma ca vyākṛtyārthapadāni sapta vidhivad yat puṇyam āptaṃ mayā | teneyaṃ janatāmītāyusaṃ ṛṣiṃ paśyed anantadyutiṃ dṛṣtvā cāmaladharmacakṣurudayād bodhiṃ parāṃ āpnuyāt ||*. Cf. RGV V.16 (*itīdam āptāgamayuktisaṃśrayād udāhṛtaṃ kevalam ātmaśuddhaye | dhiyādhimuktyā kuśalopasampadā samanvitā ye tadanugrahāya ca ||*). In verse 37a (*svakriyāṃ kevalāṃ*) Sajjana paraphrases the expression *kevalam ātmaśuddhaye* in RGV V.16b and interprets it as implying benefit for others too.

We can alternatively translate this last verse as, “Not purely for the sake of (*uddīśya*) one's own activities (*svakriyā*), but also (*api*) purely (*kevalaṃ*) in order to protect the merits of others, [the verse of] dedication (*pariṇāmana*) is presented here [i.e., RGV V.25].”

¹⁵⁸ The present paper is an updated, shortened version of my previous article “*Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa* of Sajjana: An Annotated Translation with a Reading Text”, *Kōyasandaigaku daigakuinkiyō* 14 (2015): 1–49. As for the sections “Textual Materials of Sajjana's *Upadeśa*”, “Previous Studies of the *Upadeśa*”, and “Structural Analysis of the *Upadeśa*” of the present paper, see Kano 2016: 217–18, 218–19, and 219–20, respectively. I am grateful for a number of suggestions and improvements to my critical edition of Sajjana's *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa* to Prof. Harunaga Isaacson, Prof. Diwakar Acharya, Prof. Lambert Schmithausen, and Dr. Pascale Hugon. I would like to thank Mr. Philip Pierce for English proofreading. This research was supported in part by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [17H04517] [17K0022] [18H03569] [18K00074].

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Signs

- † Verse line(s) not contained in the manuscript of Sajjana's *Upadeśa* and only found in citation in the *Paricaya*
- * Verse line(s) contained in the manuscripts of Sajjana's *Upadeśa* and the *Paricaya*.

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From Buddha Nature to Original Enlightenment

“Contemplating Suchness” in Medieval Japan

Jacqueline I. Stone

In East Asia, theories of buddha nature (Ch. *foxing* 仏性, J. *busshō*) have varied widely. Some teachers, following the Madhyamaka tradition, have understood it in terms of emptiness, in that denial of independent metaphysical essences at once establishes an ontological equality between the Buddha and ordinary beings. Other thinkers, attracted by *tathāgatagarbha* ideas, have seen buddha nature as a luminous inherent nature, replete with wondrous buddha qualities. Still others, drawing on Yogācāra thought, have understood it in terms of the maturing of seeds present in the store consciousness or *ālayavijñāna*. The issue of buddha nature has drawn heated debate. Is it a potential, or an ontological ground? Is it confined to sentient beings? Ideas of buddha nature are not merely abstract philosophical issues but entail soteriological questions: What actions are necessary to manifest the buddha nature, and how long does it take?

This chapter addresses a distinctive approach to these questions found in the doctrine of “original enlightenment” (J. *hongaku hōmon* 本覺法門), which dominated the intellectual mainstream of the influential Tendai school (天台宗) of Japanese Buddhism from roughly the late eleventh through early eighteenth centuries. Today, the term *hongaku* or “original enlightenment” (also “intrinsic enlightenment,” “inherent awakening,” etc.) is often used loosely to mean any kind of innate buddha nature theory. This essay employs it in a stricter sense to refer to a specific discourse, or group of discourses, produced within medieval Japanese Tendai and grounded in its tradition of *Lotus Sūtra* interpretation. In essence, original enlightenment doctrine asserts that buddhahood is neither a potential to be realized nor a goal to be achieved but the true status of all things. Ordinary deluded people do not transform and become buddhas; we are buddha already, from the outset, and have only to realize it. The radiant buddhas with their extraordinary marks who appear in the sūtras are not real buddhas but merely provisional signs. The real buddha is the ordinary worldling (Skt. *prthag-jana*, J. *bonbu* 凡夫), just as he or she is. Liberation depends not on merit accumulation, moral cultivation, or eradication of defilements but solely on the insight, or even the faith, that one is buddha originally.

Tendai original enlightenment discourse was first brought to the attention of the Japanese Buddhist academic world by the early twentieth-century scholar Shimaji Daitō (島地大等, 1875–1927). In a time of massive importation of, and comparison with, Western academic traditions, critics claimed that “Japan has religion but no philosophy.” Shimaji found a counterargument in original enlightenment doctrine, or, in his term, “original enlightenment *thought*” (*hongaku shisō* 本覚思想).¹ For Shimaji, *hongaku* discourse represented the “climax” of Buddhism as philosophy, in that it pushed to their limits the implications of Mahāyāna nonduality. He characterized it as an “absolute affirmation” of reality that celebrates all things as enlightened just as they are. Since Shimaji’s time, some commentators have found in this affirmation something distinctively “Japanese,” reflecting a putative cultural attitude of accommodation to the natural world.² Others have seen *hongaku* doctrine as antinomian and morally problematic: an uncritical valorization of the phenomenal realm that in effect denies the need for religious practice and even legitimates wrongdoing. Advocates of so-called “critical Buddhism” (*hihan Bukkyō* 批判仏教), Hakamaya Noriaki (袴谷憲昭) and Matsumoto Shirō (松本史朗), have on the contrary denounced original enlightenment thought as an authoritarian discourse that sacralizes the status quo and perpetuates social inequities.³

Such blanket characterizations tend to be overdrawn and require qualification and correction. For example, *hongaku* doctrine is far more consistent with broader Mahāyāna thought than has often been acknowledged. It does not deny the need for practice but rather reconceives it. I have addressed these matters in detail elsewhere.⁴ This chapter examines how the conceptual shift from “buddha nature” as a universal potential to the claim that all are buddhas from the outset radically altered understandings of the Buddhist path. The first section provides background by outlining two prior doctrinal developments fundamental to the emergence of Tendai *hongaku* thought. The second illustrates how original enlightenment thought reconceives the relationship of practice and enlightenment, focusing on a specific text, the twelfth-century *Shinnyokan* (真如觀, *Contemplation of Suchness*).

1 Shimaji 1931b. Shimaji’s approach to *hongaku* doctrine as “philosophy” or “thought” has encouraged a tendency to view this discourse in the abstract, without due attention to its institutional or practice contexts. Nonetheless, “original enlightenment thought” is a heuristically convenient expression, and I use it here with the understanding that it does not imply “thought” as opposed to “practice.”

2 Tamura 1987.

3 Hubbard and Swanson 1997.

4 J. Stone, 1999a and 1999b.

Two Key Antecedents

Medieval Tendai *hongaku* doctrine draws on multiple strands of earlier Mahāyāna thought. Since it would be impossible to detail here all the intellectual currents that contributed to its rise, let's focus on two antecedent developments that are especially important to understanding both original enlightenment ideas and the *Shinnyokan*. First are Sinitic Buddhist notions, also embraced in Japan, of the world as a holistic cosmos in which all things interpenetrate and encompass one another. Second is an issue that engaged many Japanese Buddhist thinkers: whether buddhahood might not somehow be realized quickly and by ordinary persons at early stages of the path.

The Interpenetrating Cosmos

During the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, Chinese Buddhism entered a new era, when its dominant forms took shape and its exegetes creatively reformulated their received Indic tradition to meet Chinese concerns.⁵ One result was a dynamic reformulation of the implications of emptiness teachings. Dissatisfied with the relentless “neither A... nor B” apophasis of Madhyamaka texts that sought to illuminate the Dharma by saying what it is not, Chinese Buddhist thinkers sought to express notions of emptiness and nonduality in more affirmative terms. In a significant article, Robert Gimello has argued that the Chinese intellectual categories of “principle” (*li* 理) and “phenomena” (*shi* 事) as used by Buddhist exegetes parallel the Sanskrit terms “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and “form” (*rūpa*) but significantly expand their meanings.⁶ Principle, he says, may be understood as the principle that particular forms are empty of metaphysical essence, thus encapsulating the relationship of the two and stressing the modal status of emptiness in a manner that avoids its false reification either as a “thing” or as “nothingness.” *Shi* or phenomena can indicate not only traditional categories of dharma analysis, such as the five skandhas that unite to form the common-sense phenomena of our ordinary perception, but also those common-sense phenomena themselves. This new language, Gimello suggests, enabled each particular to be seen not only as empty but also as full, in the sense of encompassing in itself the nonduality of principle and phenomena. This in turn enabled a positive revalorizing of the phenome-

5 Gimello 1976a: 95–119 passim, and Gregory 1991, esp. 1–20. Both build on the work of the Japanese scholar Yūki Reimon (結城令聞, 1902–1992).

6 Gimello 1976b. Gimello specifically addresses the thought of Dushun (杜順, 557–640), later celebrated as the first patriarch of the Huayan school. However, his insights about the implications of Dushun's language have a much broader application.

nal world, not as something innately delusory that must be abandoned if liberation is to be achieved, but as the very locus of liberative activity.

In consequence, Sinitic concepts of “buddha nature” frequently characterize awakening as liberative insight into the world as an interrelated cosmos in which all things, being empty of fixed substance, interpenetrate and contain one another without losing their individual identity. These concepts are both ontological, explaining that each concrete phenomenon instantiates this mutual inclusion, and also soteriological, in showing liberation to consist of insight into this nonduality. This radical interrelation was formulated in multiple ways by different thinkers and traditions. As a heuristic device, and at some risk of oversimplification, let’s consider three models of this interpenetrating cosmos that emerged in China and became foundational for much of Japanese Buddhist thought.

The first model draws on *tathāgatagarbha* notions of an originally pure, enlightened mind intrinsic to all sentient beings, characterized as the “womb” or “embryo” of the buddhas and innately endowed with wondrous buddha qualities. In sentient beings it is the potential for buddhahood; in buddhas, the fully realized truth or dharma body (*dharmakāya*). In its Chinese iterations, all phenomena are said to emanate from an innately pure, undifferentiated one mind. This model is closely associated with the influential sixth-century Chinese apocryphon known as the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* (*Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論), which offers the following analogy. Just as calm water, agitated by the wind, produces waves, the originally pure mind, coming into contact with adventitious defilements, generates the phenomenal world. Owing to delusion, one arouses notions about differentiated phenomena such as self and other as real entities, leading to craving, attachment, and suffering. But with the stilling of the wind, the waves subside, and the water returns to its perfect reflective clarity: Liberation lies in discerning that the phenomena of the saṃsāric world are in essence no different from the one mind and thus originally pure.⁷ Broadly influential, this concept would undergo particular development within the Huayan (J. Kegon 華嚴) school and among Chan (J. Zen 禪) thinkers.

This model of all phenomena emanating from a single source was also incorporated into the esoteric teachings (J. *mikkyō* 密教), and in Japan, Kūkai (空海, 774–835) used it to systematize his esoteric Shingon (真言) doctrine.⁸ The combining of Huayan or Kegon elements with esoteric thought yielded a second, structurally similar model, in which the single source from which all things emanate is the

7 Taishō 1666.32.576c11–16 and 1667.32.585b5–10; Jorgensen et al. 2019: 76. For discussion, see Gregory 1991: 160–61; Jorgensen et al. 2019: 19–21.

8 Tamura 1990; Stone 1999a: 11–12.

dharma-body buddha of the esoteric teachings, Mahāvairocana (J. Dainichi Nyōrai 大日如来). In this case the “dharma body” is understood not as a remote or abstract principle but as dynamically unfolding in all things. Mahāvairocana is, so to speak, the cosmic buddha, who permeates everywhere. Earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness—the six great elements that constitute all things—are the body and mind of Mahāvairocana and also form the bodies and minds of all living beings. Thus all phenomena, including the bodies and minds of all living beings, are already inseparable from this universal buddha, though the unenlightened do not realize this. This concept informed the secret techniques of esoteric practice. Mudrās—symbolic ritualized hand and bodily gestures as well as the implements used in esoteric ritual—are the body of Mahāvairocana. Mantras, sacred syllables or invocations, are his speech, and maṇḍalas, the cosmic diagrams of his realm, instantiate his mind. Through the practice of the “three mysteries” (*sanmitsu* 三密)—the forming of mudrās, the chanting of mantras, and the visualization or contemplation of the maṇḍalas or other esoteric symbols—the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner are aligned or “synced,” as it were, with the body, speech, and mind of Mahāvairocana. Thus in the very act of practice, the identity of the adept and the cosmic buddha is realized.

A third and structurally different model of an interrelated cosmos, originating with Tiantai (J. Tendai 天台) Buddhism, denies that mind is prior to phenomena. Things do not emanate from an original source. The mind and all things are always mutually inclusive; wherever there is the slightest moment of consciousness, the entire phenomenal world is also present. Where the Huayan totalistic vision is “dynamic,” emphasizing how the one mind gives rise to the myriad phenomena, the Tiantai version is “concrete,” in that form and mind are mutually identified in every phenomenal particular.⁹ One could say that the Tiantai model of the interpenetrating cosmos goes even further than its Huayan counterpart in valorizing the phenomenal world. The distinctions among good and evil, ignorance and enlightenment, self and other, and all ten dharma-realms of sentient beings and their environments, from hell dwellers to buddhas, are not the products of delusion clouding an innately pure mind but the true aspect of all things (*shohō jissō* 諸法実相). This position rules out notions of primal purity; evil is innate, although not manifest, even in the Buddha.¹⁰ There is no greater reality beneath, behind, or above the one we see. In Tiantai language, “Of every form and fragrance, there is none that is not the Middle Way.”¹¹

9 Tamura 1965: 73–94, and 1973: 485; Stone 1999a: 8–10.

10 On the controversial Tiantai doctrine of “innate evil,” see Donner 1987.

11 Guanding’s preface to the *Mohe zhiguan*, Taishō 1911.46.1c24–25.

This model provides the conceptual basis for the perfect interfusion of the three truths (J. *en'yū santai* 円融三諦) and the threefold contemplation or discernment in a single mind (*isshin sangan* 一心三觀), central to Tiantai thought and practice. All phenomena are empty of fixed substance, a discernment that frees one from attachments and corresponds to the wisdom of śravakas and novice bodhisattvas. At the same time, phenomena exist conventionally in dependence upon causes and conditions. Freed from false reifications and attachments, correct discernment of the phenomenal yields the wisdom to act compassionately in real situations in the world and corresponds to the wisdom of more advanced bodhisattvas. Thus phenomena are both empty and yet conventionally existing and yet neither exclusively one nor the other; to hold both insights simultaneously while maintaining the tension between them is the Middle, the buddha wisdom.¹²

To speak of these totalizing visions as discrete models associated with specific traditions is, as noted, a heuristic device, as their development was shaped by reciprocal borrowings, debates, and ongoing refinements of interpretation. In China, differences between the Tiantai and Huayan concepts provoked intense controversy.¹³ This was less so in medieval Japan, and Tendai original enlightenment thinkers drew freely on all three versions just outlined. For them, the key point was the vision of a nondual, interpenetrating universe, implying an ontological equality of the buddha and all beings and valorizing the phenomenal world. That vision was essential to the emergence of Tendai *hongaku* thought.

“Shortening the Path”

According to the Mahāyāna sūtras and early commentaries, buddhahood takes an inconceivably long time to achieve: “three immeasurable kalpas” was one common formulation. For the compilers of those sūtras and their exegetes, this evidently did not pose a problem. Rather, the nobility and grandeur of the bodhisattva path was underscored by the vast length of time required to complete it. But many Sui- and Tang-dynasty Chinese commentators were dismayed by so remote a vision of the goal and sought more readily accessible modes of liberation.¹⁴ Dis-

12 On the threefold truth and threefold contemplation, see Swanson 1989: 115–56; and Donner and Stevenson 1993: 9–17.

13 For an overview, see Tamura 1973: 485–504. Debate over whether “mind” should be understood according to orthodox Tiantai as the deluded mind of the ordinary person, or in a Huayan-influenced manner as originally pure, informed disputes between the “mountain” (*shanjia* 山家) and “off-mountain” (*shanwai* 山外) factions within Tiantai during the Song dynasty (960–1279). See Donner and Stevenson 1993: 84–94; Stone 1999a: 9–10.

14 Gimello 1976a: 96–100, 113–17.

courses of “sudden enlightenment,” which would later become famous in Chan circles, began to emerge. The widespread attraction of Pure Land devotion owed in large measure to the notion of birth in the buddha Amitābha (J. Amida 阿弥陀)’s western Land of Bliss as a shortcut on the long bodhisattva path; once born there, it was said, one would not again fall back into the realms of saṃsāric rebirth but was assured of attaining buddhahood.¹⁵

In Japan, the possibility of quickly realizing buddhahood was reformulated in a different context and argued in new terms, sparking intense scholastic engagement. Discussion centered around the “realization of buddhahood with this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏), a term only rarely encountered in Chinese sources. Kūkai and Saichō (最澄, 766/767–822), celebrated respectively as the founders of the Japanese Shingon and Tendai schools and preeminent Buddhist teachers of the Heian period (794–1185), both addressed it.¹⁶ Both positioned themselves against the rival Hossō (法相, Ch. Faxiang) school, which asserted that only a limited number of beings are capable of achieving buddhahood, and only after three immeasurable kalpas of bodhisattva practice. For Kūkai, in performing the three mysteries of the esoteric teachings, the body, speech, and mind of the adept are identified with those of the cosmic buddha, and one realizes buddhahood “with this very body.”¹⁷ Since the body and mind of the practitioner are ontologically no different from the body and mind of Mahāvairocana, the possibility of such attainment was in theory open to all; in practice, however, it was restricted to adepts, who had access to the requisite training and specialized ritual knowledge.

Where Kūkai developed the concept of *sokushin jōbutsu* in asserting the superiority of the esoteric teachings, Saichō saw it as a distinguishing feature of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the central scripture of Tendai and also revered more broadly for its promise that all can attain buddhahood. Saichō drew specifically on the episode in chapter 12 of the eight-year-old *nāga* princess (“dragon girl,” in Chinese translation), who in the presence of the assembly achieves buddhahood “in the space of a moment.”¹⁸ How was this possible? Was she an advanced bodhisatt-

¹⁵ Inagaki 1962.

¹⁶ Sueki 1995: 271–83; Groner 1989. The phrase “shortening the path” is taken from Groner 1992.

¹⁷ Inagaki 2006.

¹⁸ The episode of the *nāga* girl is at *Miaofa lianhua jing* (妙法蓮華經), Taishō 262.9.35a18–c26; Hurvitz 2009: 181–85. The sixth Tiantai patriarch Zhanran (湛然, 711–782) first used the term *sokushin jōbutsu* to describe her attainment in his *Fahua wenju ji* (法華文句記), Taishō 1719.34.314b23–24.

va already close to full awakening before she first heard the *Lotus Sūtra* from the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in the *nāga* palace beneath the sea? Or was she still at an early stage of the path, a figure who could serve as a model for less advanced, ordinary Japanese monks? Where some Chinese exegetes had placed her within the ten grounds (*daśa-bhūmi*, *jūji* 十地), an advanced stage of bodhisattva practice not far short of full buddhahood, Saichō positioned the dragon girl at a much earlier stage, at the level of the first abode or *bhūmi* (*shojū* 初住).¹⁹ The first abode denotes that point on the bodhisattva path when one transitions from the status of an ordinary worldling (*bonbu* 凡夫) to that of a sage (*shō* 聖). From then on, rebirth is driven, not by deluded action, but by compassion. In other words, Saichō located her attainment at precisely this transition and equated *sokushin jōbutsu* with partial, not full, enlightenment, potentially opening this possibility to ordinary practitioners. Saichō seems to have regarded the dragon girl as representing beings with heavy karmic disadvantages who are nonetheless able to attain buddhahood quickly through the extraordinary power of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Indeed, for him, one superior feature of the *Lotus* was that it represented the “direct path” to buddhahood. Depending upon individual capacity, he said, practitioners of the *Lotus Sūtra* could realize buddhahood in only one to three lifetimes.²⁰

After his death, Saichō’s disciples addressed these matters at length.²¹ Some of them wrote seeking clarification from their Chinese counterparts, who tended to respond in abstract terms and seem not to have shared the Japanese monks’ fascination with rapid attainment as an actual possibility.²² Did *sokushin jōbutsu* mean full or partial buddhahood? At what stage did it occur? Esoteric perspectives were soon incorporated into these discussions, as Japanese Tendai increasingly developed its own esoteric tradition and the *Lotus Sūtra* was redefined as an esoteric scripture. In the process, Tendai exegetes tended to argue the possibility of this attainment at increasingly lower levels of the path. These were scholastic discussions, rarely explicitly tied to practice; mention of practice in connection with

19 Saichō here appears to follow Zhanran, who criticized those exegetes who interpreted the dragon girl as having already achieved an advanced stage of bodhisattva practice and thus failed to acknowledge the power of the *Lotus Sūtra* in bringing about her attainment (Taishō 34.314c6–7; Sueki 1995: 279).

20 *Hokke shūku* (法華秀句), DDZ 3:261, 265–67. See also Groner 2000: 183–90; 1989: 65–68.

21 Asai 1981; Sueki 1995: 283–361; Ōkubo 1998.

22 These questions and the Chinese Tiantai scholar-monks’ responses were compiled in collections called *Tōketsu* (唐決, “Tang decisions”). See Groner 1992 for discussion of relevant examples.

sokushin jōbutsu usually referred to esoteric techniques. Here again, one imagines that despite growing doctrinal inclusivity, actual prospects for “realizing buddhahood with this very body” may have been deemed limited to adepts.

Then, around the late eleventh to twelfth century, a new discourse began to emerge that united the two antecedents discussed above—the interpenetrating cosmos as both the ground for and content of awakening, and the possibility of “realizing buddhahood with this very body”—in order to assert that everything is buddha already; talk of “attaining” or “not attaining” was thus beside the point. This is the idea of original enlightenment. As this discourse developed, the concepts of practice (cause) and realization (effect) would be significantly revised. Let us turn now to some of its ramifications as seen in the *Contemplation of Suchness*.

The Contemplation of Suchness

The *Contemplation of Suchness* or *Shinnyokan* is attributed to the great Tendai master Genshin (源信, 942–1017), best known for his compendium *Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land* (*Ōjō yōshū* 往生要集). However, the *Shinnyokan* is not Genshin’s work but postdates him by at least a century or more. Medieval Tendai works on original enlightenment doctrine were frequently attributed to eminent scholar-monks of the past, making dating and attribution extremely difficult. In the case of the *Shinnyokan*, however, its date of compilation—probably by around the late twelfth century—can be pinned down with relative precision, thanks to internal and external references.²³ Like much of original enlightenment literature, the *Shinnyokan* may have originated in secret oral transmissions handed down from master to disciple in scholastic lineages, which were later written down on strips of paper called *kirigami* (切紙) and then eventually assembled into larger works. The *Shinnyokan* has a complex textual history, and multiple versions survive. Despite some differences in form and content, considerable overlap occurs among the various recensions.²⁴ One feature shared by most versions is the use of *kana majiri*

23 *Shinnyokan* cites a work called *Bodai yōshū* (菩提要集), which was composed before 1105. Also, the Pure Land teacher Hōnen (法然, 1133–1212), who advocated the sole practice of chanting the buddha Amida (Amitābha)’s name, criticizes “the various contemplations of suchness” associated with Genshin as beyond most people’s capacity in his *Ippyaku shijūgokajō mondō* (一百四十五箇条問答), article 3, HSZ 648. See also the following note, as well as Stone 1990a: 422 n. 4, and Nishimura 2001: 80, who dates the *Shinnyokan* to around 1200.

24 Modern printed editions, including the one cited in this paper, are based on a 1692 woodblock edition, which in turn derives from a 1645 manuscript. Although this version may not represent the original form of the text, it is quite similar to a 1327 manuscript found at Shinpukuji (新福寺) in Nagoya. There are several *Shinnyokan* variants; judging from its colo-

bun (仮名交じり文), a written form combining Chinese characters with the Japanese syllabary and employing Japanese syntax. This would have made the *Shinnyokan* more accessible than most *hongaku*-related works, which, like Buddhist doctrinal writings in general, were commonly written in Buddhist literary Chinese. The content of some passages, discussed below, suggests that the work was possibly aimed at educated lay persons. *Shinnyokan* dates to an early phase of original enlightenment discourse and does not represent its full development. Nonetheless, it will serve well as an example here for two reasons. The first is precisely its accessibility, which minimizes the need to unpack the dense, specialized Buddhist terminology in which much original enlightenment literature is couched. The second is that *Shinnyokan* addresses more explicitly than do many *hongaku* writings the question of what the shift from “buddha nature” to “original enlightenment” meant for actual practice.

Seeing Everything as Suchness

The *Shinnyokan* opens with a brief statement of the interpenetration of all phenomena, quoting a famous passage, already touched on, from Guanding (灌定, 561–632)’s introduction to the *Great Calming and Contemplation* (*Mohe zhiguan* 魔訶止觀) by the Chinese Tiantai master Zhiyi (智顗, 538–597): “Of every form and fragrance, there is none that is not the Middle Way. So too it is with the realm of the self, the realm of the Buddha, and the realm of living beings.”²⁵ “Self,” here, the *Shinnyokan* explains, is the mind of the practitioner. “Buddha” means all buddhas of the ten directions, that is, throughout the universe, and “living beings” refers to all sentient existence. “Every form and fragrance” means non-sentient beings and includes grasses and trees, tiles and rocks, mountains and rivers, the great earth, and the sea and sky. All these instantiate the “Middle Way”: empty of substance or permanence yet conventionally existing as elements of empirical reality; neither one-sidedly empty nor existing, yet simultaneously both. This sta-

phon, dated 1282, the earliest is a manuscript discovered inside the famous Sedgewick image of Prince Shōtoku held by Harvard University. For recent work on the dating and versions of *Shinnyokan*, see Ōshima 1995; Nishimura 2001; and Michimoto 2008. I thank Bryan Lowe for sharing these references with me. Michimoto suggests that the *Shinnyokan* originated in oral transmissions concerning the contemplation of suchness that only gradually took shape in various texts (35–38). This would account for occasional disjunctures and repetitions in the text. However, his claim that a text by this title specifically attributed to Genshin did not emerge until the mid-thirteenth to early fourteenth century seems questionable, given that the twelfth-century *Hōbutsu shū*, discussed below, explicitly cites “a work called *Shinnyokan* by Eshin Sōzu (恵心僧都) [i.e., Genshin]” (SNKBT 40: 289).

25 *Mohe zhiguan*, Taishō 46.1c24–25.

tus of “two but not two” has many names: suchness, the true aspect, the dharma realm, the dharma body, the dharma nature, tathāgata, the cardinal principle, and so forth. Here, however, the text announces, it will employ “suchness” as a key term for clarifying the contemplation of the middle set forth in the sūtras and treatises.²⁶

“Suchness” (Skt. *tathatā*, J. *shinnyo* 真如), like emptiness, is a term intended to designate without describing, for words cannot fully convey enlightened insight. Suchness represents a key concept in the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, mentioned above, where it indicates the fundamental aspect of the mind of sentient beings as intrinsically pure and unchanging, in contrast to the mind as subject to arising and perishing. In the Chinese and Korean Huayan tradition, suchness came increasingly to be understood as the absolute, original principle or “one mind” that gives rise to the phenomenal world.²⁷ Tiantai thinkers, beginning with the sixth patriarch Zhanran (湛然, 711–782), also appropriated the term “suchness” but in a manner consistent with their own metaphysics, that is, as denoting the interpenetration of the mind and all phenomena without assigning priority to either and without notions of original purity.²⁸ In the *Shinnyokan*, suchness is synonymous with original enlightenment.²⁹

Having established its key term, the text continues:

If you wish to attain buddhahood quickly or be born without fail in [the Pure Land] of Utmost Bliss, you must think, “My own mind is precisely the principle of suchness.” If you think that suchness, which pervades the dharma realm, is your own essence (*wagatai* 我体), you are at once the dharma realm; do not think that there is anything apart from this. When one is awakened, the buddhas in the worlds of the ten directions and also all bodhisattvas dwell within oneself. To seek a separate buddha apart from one’s own person is [the action of] a time when one does not know that oneself is precise-

26 THR 120. The full text of *Shinnyokan* is at 120–49. For a partial translation, see Stone 1999c.

27 Gregory 1991: 6–7 n. 8, 110, 232; Jorgensen 2017: 36–55 passim.

28 See Stone 1999a: 9–10, 371–72 n. 24, and the sources cited there.

29 The term “original enlightenment” also has its locus classicus in the *Awakening of Faith*, where it is discussed in connection with the mind as arising and perishing, not from the absolute perspective of the mind as suchness. That is, it denotes the potential for enlightenment in deluded beings. In medieval Tendai thought, however, it assumes the status of suchness or absolute principle (Shimaji 1931a; Stone 1999a: 11–12, 37–38).

ly suchness.³⁰

Here we have a short initial statement, elaborated throughout the text, of a sole essential practice: to generate continually the thought that oneself is identical to suchness. According to the *Shinnyokan*, this attitude may be cultivated in connection with other practices, such as copying or reciting sūtras or chanting the Buddha's name, or as a practice in its own right. The mention of aspiration for birth in the Pure Land might initially seem discordant, as it appears to contradict the assertion that "all buddhas of the worlds in the ten directions dwell within oneself." People in premodern Japan commonly framed their postmortem aspirations in terms of birth in a pure land, most commonly that of the buddha Amitābha, said to lie far away in the western quarter of the cosmos. However, the *Shinnyokan* proceeds to destabilize that understanding by asserting an immanentalist one. When one knows that oneself is none other than suchness, then none of the buddhas—Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Bhaiṣajyaguru, or any other buddha—exists separately:

The buddha Amida of that land together with his holy entourage of bodhisattvas all dwell within oneself. Thus one need not journey far to reach the land of Utmost Bliss. But even though one may insist that birth in the Pure Land is achieved while remaining in this world, without knowing the principle of suchness, it will be in vain, as otherwise one cannot know that one's own person and Amida are in essence nondual."³¹

In this regard, *Shinnyokan* belongs to a larger, emerging trend that drew on esoteric and original enlightenment ideas to reinterpret Amida and his Pure Land in immanentalist terms.³² Where birth after death in Amida's "Land of Bliss" was originally considered a shortcut on the long bodhisattva path, here even that shortcut is radically truncated, from the next life to the present moment. *Shinnyokan*'s references to birth in the Pure Land also reinforce the conceit of its composition by Genshin, a pivotal figure in the development of Tendai Pure Land thought.³³

The *Shinnyokan* goes on to explain that one is to arouse the thought that oneself is identical to suchness not only while engaged in specific Buddhist practices but

³⁰ THR 120.

³¹ THR 142.

³² See for example Hanano 1979; Proffitt 2015.

³³ One passage even says, "I will write elsewhere concerning the causes for birth in the Pure Land" (THR 142), undoubtedly intending to suggest Genshin's famous *Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land*.

amidst all activities of daily life: walking, sitting, standing, or lying down. Being simple to practice, this contemplation is touted as suitable for everyone: “Clergy or laity, male or female, all should contemplate in this way.”³⁴ One should contemplate not only oneself as suchness but also others; human beings of course, but animals, too, down to the tiniest ants and crickets, should be regarded as suchness, and so should all insentient existents. “Because grasses and trees, mountains and rivers, the vast sea, and the empty sky are all suchness, there is none that is not buddha.”³⁵

According to the *Shinnyokan*, because suchness is the real aspect of all things, to regard both oneself and others in this way is to access a dimension in which individuals are not isolated, unrelated, or conflicting existences but nondual; without losing its own identity, each pervades the totality of all that is and encompasses all others within itself. In other words, a correct discernment of self sees self not as a separate existence but as permeating and encompassing all others. This practice clearly rests on the premise, discussed above, of an interpenetrating universe in which all things are mutually contained and the Buddha is not separate from ordinary beings. In this regard, the *Shinnyokan*, and original enlightenment thinking more broadly, are consistent with larger Mahāyāna concepts of emptiness and nonduality.

The text then proceeds to make two major claims for the benefits of contemplating suchness. First, it says, this single practice contains the merit of all practices. For example, when one offers a single flower or lights one stick of incense to a single buddha, because that single flower or stick of incense is precisely suchness, it pervades the dharma realm, and because the single buddha to whom it is offered is precisely suchness, that one buddha is all buddhas, and the countless buddhas of the ten directions without exception all at once receive that offering. The same holds true if one carries out this contemplation while, for example, invoking the Buddha’s name even a single time or while reciting or copying a single verse or phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra*. “The merit gained [in so doing] by thinking that each character is the principle of suchness [will be so vast that one] cannot explain it in full.”³⁶

This claim, too, is then extended to include not only explicitly religious acts but also mundane activities:

34 THR 133.

35 THR 125.

36 THR 134.

When you provide for your wife, children, and retainers, or even feed oxen, horses, and the others of the six kinds of domestic animals, because the myriad things are all suchness, if you think that these others are precisely suchness, you have in effect made offerings to all buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions and to all living beings, without a single exception.³⁷

Thus, the single thought, “This is suchness,” produced with respect to whatever comes within one’s field of consciousness, contains infinite merit that is boundlessly refracted throughout the universe.

This particular passage, along with the use of Japanese syntax and phonetic syllables, suggests that *Shinnyokan* may have been written for lay persons. It is not the only surviving medieval text to recommend the contemplation of suchness to lay practitioners. The late twelfth-century *Collection of Treasures* (*Hōbutsu shū* 宝物集), an anthology of Buddhist didactic tales (*setsuwa* 説話) attributed to the warrior official and literatus Taira no Yasuyori (平康頼, 1146?–1220), contains this passage:

When you eat, visualize this act as making offerings to the thirty-seven honored ones, and when you feed others, form the thought that you are, upwardly, making offerings to the buddhas of the ten directions and three periods of time [past, present, and future], and downwardly, giving alms to hell dwellers, hungry ghosts, and those in the animal realm. And you should likewise form this thought when you provide clothing and food for your servants and retainers or give feed to horses and cattle, birds and beasts. For lay persons, men and women engaged in public and private affairs, what practice could possibly be superior?³⁸

The *Hōbutsu shū* clearly states that this practice follows “a work called *Shinnyokan* by the Administrator of Monks Eshin (恵心僧都) [i.e., Genshin],” indicating that some version of the *Shinnyokan* must have been in circulation at the time.

In short, in contemplating the immediate object of one’s attention as suchness, not only explicitly religious actions but any activity becomes Buddhist practice. Like *Shinnyokan*, other works associated with original enlightenment thought

37 THR 133. The “six kinds of domestic animals” are horses, oxen, sheep, dogs, pigs, and chickens.

38 *Hōbutsu shū*, SNBT 40: 289. The “thirty-seven honored ones” are the deities of the Diamond Realm maṇḍala.

tend to stress a particular attitude of mind, rather than to prescribe formal practice regimens. In that respect, the “contemplation of suchness” calls to mind the formless meditation of “cultivating samādhi wherever the mind is directed” elucidated by Zhiyi, along with more formal meditation methods involving specific postures and ritual settings.³⁹ In that meditation, whatever enters the field of consciousness immediately becomes an object for contemplation of the threefold truth. But where Zhiyi saw this free-form contemplation as something only the most advanced practitioners should undertake, the “contemplation of suchness” is promoted as especially suited to ordinary persons.

“Defilements are Enlightenment, Karma is Liberation”

A second major claim of the *Shinnyokan* is that this practice will override all karmic obstructions:

From today on, knowing that your own mind is itself suchness, you will not be hindered by evil karma or defilements; fame and profit will instead become nourishment for the fruition of buddhahood and enlightened wisdom. Even if you should violate the precepts without shame or be negligent and idle [in religious disciplines], so long as you always contemplate suchness and never forget to do so, you should never think that evil karma or defilements will obstruct [your realization of buddhahood or] birth in the Pure Land.⁴⁰

Several points in this passage merit notice. First is its flat denial that evil karma or defilements could obstruct enlightenment for one who contemplates suchness; the soteriological power of this contemplation outweighs and overpowers all such obstacles. Yet at the same time, contemplating suchness does not eradicate karma or defilements. Because the defilements have no separate existence, they cannot be eradicated; “defilements are precisely enlightened wisdom” (*bonnō soku bodai* 煩惱即菩提) and “karma is precisely liberation” (*gō soku gedatsu* 業即解脫) are recurring claims within original enlightenment discourse. How exactly fame and profit “become nourishment” for the buddha wisdom is not elaborated, but the implication would seem to be that, in the contemplation of suchness, desires are naturally redirected in soteriologically helpful ways. Contemplating suchness is

³⁹ Stevenson 1986: 75–84.

⁴⁰ THR 125.

also said to compensate for laxness in precept observance and other practices, presumably disciplinary regimes such as regular buddha-name or sūtra recitations, prostrations, and so forth. There is a certain irony, however, in that this compensation rests on the condition that one “always contemplate suchness and never forget to do so”—a discipline in its own right that would require considerable effort and ongoing commitment, thus undercutting the apparent tolerance for negligence.

Another passage explains that contemplating suchness not only transcends the pull of karmic obstructions but confers all sorts of practical benefits. Because suchness is the healing buddha Yakushi (藥師, Skt. Bhaiṣajyaguru), he will cure any illness and extend life. Because suchness is the fortune-bestowing deity Bishamon (毘沙門天, Vaiśravaṇa), he will confer great good fortune on those who desire it. Because suchness is Monju (文殊, Mañjuśrī), the great bodhisattva of wisdom, he will bestow wisdom on those who seek it. Because suchness is the fierce deity Fudō (不動明王, Ācālā), he will subdue demonic hindrances for those troubled by them. Most closely related to the negating of karmic obstructions is the claim that contemplating suchness surpasses all other methods for subduing demons. “When you think that the demonic realm and the buddha realm both have suchness as their essence, then there are no separate demons.”⁴¹ To contemplate an enemy as suchness and thus nondual with oneself is, apparently, to negate its destructive power.

In short, this simple contemplation is said to be immensely powerful. However, the *Shinnyokan* warns, there is one act that can obstruct it, namely, disbelief that all things are suchness. That disbelief could take the form of seeking a separate buddha or pure land outside oneself, or of regarding oneself as a separate existence whose interests necessarily oppose those of others. *Shinnyokan* presents this as the fundamental error that generates saṃsāric suffering. Failing to recognize that ourselves and others are equally suchness, we “arbitrarily regard as self what is not really the self,” arousing anger toward those who go against us and possessive attachment toward those who affirm us, thus perpetuating deluded rebirth.⁴² Worse yet, because suchness is the essence of all buddhas, one who disbelieves that everything is suchness slanders all buddhas throughout time and space.

Shinnyokan seeks to discourage this unwholesome attitude with an overview of karmic retribution in the lower rebirth realms. This section, again implicitly evoking the authority of Genshin, seems intended to recall to the informed reader the first chapter of his *Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land*. But where Genshin’s text elaborates on the horrors of the six realms of rebirth in order to inspire long-

41 THR 145.

42 THR 131.

ing for Amida's western Pure Land, the *Shinnyokan* does so to encourage contemplation of self and all others as suchness. First, like Genshin's *Essentials*, it enumerates the sufferings in the eight major hells. But in contrast to Genshin's extensive treatment of the hells, *Shinnyokan* dwells in particular on the animal realm, and specifically on small insects, inviting the reader to contemplate the plight of crickets, ants, and even the countless invisible creatures that inhabit each of our 84,000 pores. When, it asks, will beings like these achieve liberation? Birth in such a small body, the *Shinnyokan* asserts, is the fruit of attachment to a narrow concept of self, but in the act of contemplating oneself and others as equally identical to suchness, one returns to the reality of original enlightenment and at once fills the dharma realm. The suggestion here is that failure to perceive or even believe that all things are suchness, and thus mutually encompassing, ultimately contracts the self into a small, severely limited form, but contemplation of suchness will open one's person to become coextensive with all that is. Realizing that self and other are not essentially different, one no longer gives rise to the egocentric passions that prompt the deliberate commission of evil.

Later Tendai *hongaku* texts would develop this idea to counter claims that concepts such as "the defilements are precisely enlightened wisdom" legitimize wrongdoing. For example, the *Collection of the Light of Han* (*Kankō ruijū* 漢光類聚), dating to around the latter half of the thirteenth century, defends the assertion that "karma is precisely liberation" and denies that it legitimates evil deeds:

Karma and liberation are [in terms of their essence] both the ungraspable, wondrous nature of the Dharma. This is called "karma being none other than liberation." This being the case, how could one [who has realized this] fall into a one-sided emotion and commit evil deeds?... Moreover, karma is endowed with the three thousand realms [i.e., all phenomena], and liberation is also endowed with the three thousand realms. Therefore "karma being none other than liberation" means that self and others are nondual and that all dharmas are of a single nature that is without self. At the time [of so realizing], how could one entertain separate discriminations of this and that and so commit evil deeds?⁴³

Parenthetically, we should note that the ethical problems raised by asserting the nonduality of defilements and enlightenment, or of karma and liberation, are by

43 Taishō 2371.74.388b24–28.

no means limited to medieval Japanese original enlightenment discourse but are inherent in Mahāyāna thought more broadly. Once one asserts the nonduality of good and evil, or enlightenment and delusion, the potential for such issues arises. Thus, while Tiantai doctrine famously maintains that even evil can serve as an object of liberative contemplation, Zhiyi himself warned against teaching it indiscriminately.⁴⁴

“How awesome,” the *Shinnyokan* says. “Whether we fall into the Avīci hell or are born in the pure land of Utmost Bliss depends solely on our attitude of mind in this lifetime.”⁴⁵ Liberation depends solely on one practice, the contemplation of self and others as suchness; similarly, it can be obstructed only by one error: failure to discern, or even to believe in, this nonduality. As we have seen, the contemplation of suchness entails cultivating a particular mental attitude, rather than keeping the precepts or carrying out a particular disciplinary regimen. It can be a practice sufficient in itself or a foundation for other religious disciplines. In its emphasis on a single act as sufficient for liberation, *Shinnyokan* bears some similarity to the better-known “single-practice” movements of Japan’s Kamakura period (1185–1333).⁴⁶

Rethinking Practice and Attainment

Now let’s see how *Shinnyokan* represents the path, first considering this passage:

When you eat, if you carry out this contemplation, the merit of the perfection of giving at once fills the dharma realm, and because one practice is equivalent to all practices, the single practice of the perfection of giving contains the other *pāramitās*. And because cause and effect are nondual, all practices, which represent the causal stage, are simultaneously the myriad virtues of the stage of realization. Thus you are a bodhisattva of the highest stage, a *tathāgata* of perfect and ultimate enlightenment (*kaji engoku no nyorai* 果地円極の如来).⁴⁷

Here we see a third major claim: In contemplating suchness, one realizes nonduality not only in spatial terms (“one’s merit fills the dharma realm”) but also in terms

44 Donner 1987. For more on this issue in *hongaku* literature, see Stone 1999a: 218–28.

45 THR 123.

46 The relation of Tendai original enlightenment thought to the so-called “Kamakura new Buddhism” has been treated extensively. For an overview of scholarship and a revised perspective, see Stone 1999a, esp. 55–94 and 228–36.

47 THR 133–34.

of time (“at once”). Because cause (practice) and effect (awakening) are nondual, they are said to be simultaneous, and the myriad virtues of complete enlightenment are immediately accessed in the practice of the present moment. According to the *Shinnyokan*, this extraordinary idea—that the totality of the Buddha’s supreme awakening is realized in a single moment’s practice—is unique to the *Lotus Sūtra*, which was revered in the Tendai school as the Buddha’s highest teaching. The Tendai system of doctrinal classification (*kyōhan* 教判) broadly divided Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings into two: provisional teachings, preached according to the capacity of their hearers and therefore one-sided and incomplete; and the true or perfect teaching, which fully instantiates the nonduality and mutual encompassing of all things. Tendai identifies the *Lotus Sūtra* in particular as the complete and perfect teaching. Saichō, the Japanese Tendai founder, correlated the distinction between “provisional” and “true” with the length of the time required to attain buddhahood: provisional teachings represent the circuitous path of practice spanning countless kalpas, while the *Lotus Sūtra* is the “great direct path,” which enables the realization of buddhahood in this lifetime.⁴⁸ Original enlightenment thinkers of Japan’s medieval period pushed this distinction still further, claiming that provisional and true teachings not only differed in terms of the length of time deemed necessary for attainment but represented different concepts of the path altogether. As the *Shinnyokan* explains, the provisional teachings represent practice as a linear undertaking in which, to reach enlightenment, one must first eradicate the defilements, and to achieve nirvāṇa, one first must escape saṃsāra. Thus,

bodhisattvas of the provisional teachings, ignorant of the contemplation of suchness, for countless kalpas carried out difficult and painful practices, not begrudging bodily life, and thus attained buddhahood. But it was not real buddhahood, only a provisional fruit achieved in a dream. Those who know the contemplation of suchness become buddhas in an instant.⁴⁹

This amounts to a thorough rejection of conventional notions of the bodhisattva path, based on the model established by none other than Śākyamuni himself, who is said to have achieved buddhahood only after countless kalpas of austere prac-

48 Groner 2000: 183–90.

49 THR 128.

tices. As the *Lotus Sūtra* puts it, expressing this conventional view, “There is no place in all the trichiliocosm, not even the size of a mustard seed, where the bodhisattva [Śākyamuni] did not cast away bodily life for the sake of living beings.”⁵⁰ Bodhisattvas set out to acquire the six perfections (*pāramitās*)—giving, precept observance, forbearance, assiduousness, meditation, and wisdom—each requiring many kalpas to master. Acquiring a buddha’s thirty-two superior physical marks was likewise said to take three immeasurable kalpas and more.⁵¹ As the *Shinnyokan* passage just quoted suggests, rejecting this model of bodhisattva practice spanning kalpas entails a double inversion. First the concept of a buddha as a radiant, perfected being is overturned and dismissed as “buddhahood in a dream”; the “real buddha” is the ordinary person, the common worldling, in the moment of contemplating suchness. And just as the conventional notion of buddhahood is overturned, so is that of the path to achieve it. Here we see a thorough denial of buddhahood as a future goal, the culmination of a linear process of cultivation and attainment. Instead, we might call this a maṇḍalic idea of buddhahood, always and fully accessible in the present moment.

Medieval Tendai exegetes found the basis for these reversals in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. In chapter 16, “Fathoming the Lifespan of the Tathāgata,” Śākyamuni Buddha reveals that he had not, as everyone thought, achieved awakening for the first time in this life under the bodhi tree; rather, he has been the Buddha since the inconceivably remote past. Since then, so inconceivably vast a span of time has passed that one would have to reduce countless world systems to dust, letting each particle represent one kalpa, even to begin to express it. Śākyamuni’s departure from his father’s palace, his harsh ascetic practices, his search for the way, and even his entry into final nirvāṇa were no more than his “skillful means,” a pedagogical device. In fact, he declares, “I am always here, preaching the Dharma.”⁵² Medieval Tendai thinkers interpreted the Buddha’s revelation of his primordial awakening in the remotest past as a metaphor for the originally enlightened status of all beings, an enlightenment to be accessed fully in the moment of practice without traversing successive stages. One might in fact understand medieval Japanese *hon-gaku* thought as an effort to rethink the entire received Tendai tradition from this perspective.

50 *Miaofa lianhua jing*, Taishō 9.35b23–25. Here Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulation (Prajñākuṭa, 智積) is voicing his doubts that the *nāga* princess can realize buddhahood “quickly.”

51 *Dazhidu lun* (大智度論), Taishō 1509.25.86c16–20.

52 *Miaofa lianhua jing*, Taishō 9.42b26–27.

At this point, the *Shinnyokan* posits a hypothetical question:

Someone asks: I do not understand how we can all be buddhas, without distinction.... A buddha is one who possesses the thirty-two marks, whose supernatural powers and wisdom surpass those of all others, and whose compassion for the world is limitless.... “Buddha” means “Awakened One.” How can creatures such as ants and crickets be spoken of as “awakened ones”?... Even if you call yourself a buddha, you do not possess the thirty-two features, nor have you gained supernatural powers. Arousing surpassing arrogance, you call it the buddha wisdom, a boundless and incalculably grave sin! How do you respond?⁵³

Here the interlocutor raises a common-sense objection: Buddhas are superior beings whose appearance and abilities clearly set them apart from ordinary beings. How can all beings be buddhas? This objection provides an opening to introduce a new understanding of buddhahood and the path of its realization from the standpoint of original enlightenment. The *Shinnyokan* responds with reference to the “six stages of identity” (*rokusoku* 六即), a traditional Tiantai/Tendai *mārga* scheme for the practice of the perfect teaching. The six stages are (1) identity in principle (*ri-soku* 理即), the stage of the deluded person who has not yet heard the Buddhist teachings but is nonetheless in principle equal to a buddha; (2) verbal identity (*myōji-soku* 名字即), the initial stage of practice, at which one encounters a teacher or scripture and understands at the verbal level that all “all dharma are the Buddhadharma”; (3) identity of meditative practice (*kangyō-soku* 觀行即), where one’s contemplative wisdom accords with one’s intellectual understanding, and one’s actions match one’s words; (4) identity of resemblance (*sōji-soku* 相似即), where one’s wisdom begins to resemble true enlightenment; (5) identity of partial realization (*bunshin-soku* 分身即 or *bunshōsoku* 分証即), at which stage one increasingly eradicates delusion and manifests wisdom; and (6) ultimate identity (*kukyō-soku* 究竟即), or full buddhahood. “Identity” in the name of each stage means that, whatever one’s level of attainment, one is ontologically no different from the Buddha.⁵⁴ Were one to categorize the contemplation of suchness in these terms, the *Shinnyokan* continues, it would correspond to the stage of verbal identity, *myōji-soku*. Conventionally, *myōji-soku* was understood as the

⁵³ THR 145.

⁵⁴ *Mohe zhiguan*, Taishō 46.10b7–11a8; Swanson 2018: 229–41. See also Groner 1989: 63–65.

very beginning stage of practice. For the *Shinnyokan*, however, and for original enlightenment discourse in general, it is the only stage that matters. At this stage, “We have already heard the name of the threefold truth and understood that we, ourselves, are precisely suchness.”⁵⁵ The distinguishing physical marks and supernatural powers of buddhas belong to the later stages, but it would be the height of foolishness, the text insists, to regard them as the defining characteristics of buddhahood. Wheel-turning kings, after all, are not enlightened but possess the thirty-two marks, and non-Buddhists may have supernatural powers. The real Buddha is suchness, and those who contemplate suchness are at once the Buddha of original enlightenment. Their every action is the mudrā of suchness; their every utterance is a mantra; and their every thought, deluded though it may be, is esoteric contemplation.⁵⁶ In short, between stages one and two lies the entire difference between bondage and liberation—between knowing that all things are suchness and not knowing it.

We have already touched on the earlier efforts of Japanese Tendai thinkers to locate the “realization of buddhahood with this very body” at progressively lower stages of the path. As early as the ninth century, scholar-monks such as Enchin (円珍, 814–891), Annen (安然, 841–?) and Rinshō (隣昭, n.d.) had suggested that buddhahood might be realized at least partially at the stage of *myōji-soku*.⁵⁷ In original enlightenment discourse, however, claims for attainment at the stage of *myōji-soku* make a quantum leap. The *Shinnyokan* asserts that the six perfections are completed and their merits obtained in the single moment in which one contemplates oneself and others as suchness.⁵⁸ Thus, in one sense, *Shinnyokan* extends the efforts of earlier Tendai thinkers to “shorten the path,” abridging the time deemed necessary to realize buddhahood from three immeasurable kalpas to a single moment. Yet it can also be seen as representing an early stage in a new way of conceiving the path in nonlinear terms. Where the *Shinnyokan* leaves open

55 THR 146.

56 THR 148. This statement appears to derive from the *Shingonshū kyōjigi* (真言宗教時義) by the Tendai esoteric thinker Annen, mentioned below (Taishō 2396.75.387b4, b15–22).

57 Asai 1981: 17–18; Groner 1992: 447; Sueki 1995: 303–4; Ōkubo 1998: 146. Rinshō goes to the extent of suggesting that the superior marks are in fact present at the stage of *myōji-soku*, although ordinary deluded persons cannot see them (Sueki 1995: 327, 682–83).

58 This idea has antecedents in earlier *Lotus Sūtra* thought. The *Sūtra of Unfathomable Meanings* (*Wuliangyi jing* 無量義經), considered an introductory scripture to the *Lotus*, says that for those who embrace it, “even if they do not yet practice the six *pāramitās*, the six *pāramitās* will immediately be present in them” (Taishō 276.9.388b12–13). Simultaneous fulfillment of the six *pāramitās* also appears as a theme in the writings of Huisi (慧思, 515–77), Zhiyi’s teacher (Stevenson and Kanno 2006: 65–66).

the possibility that one might at some point advance to later stages, manifesting the thirty-two marks, somewhat later original enlightenment writings explicitly collapse all later stages into the initial stage of practice, so that the path turns back on itself and its fulfillment is present in the beginning. We can see this, for example, in a passage from the *Notes on the Abbreviated Account of Self-Practice* (*Jigyō ryakki chū* 自行略記注), retrospectively attributed to Genshin's disciple Kakuchō (覚超, 960–1034) but almost certainly a later composition:

At the stage of *myōji-soku*, one completes all six stages and realizes buddhahood with this very body. One does not traverse subsequent stages. Were there to be a sequence of even one further stage... that would not be the perfect teaching. It would not accord with the meaning of mutual identification or the teaching of mutual encompassing or the principle of perfect interfusion. It would not be the wonderful Dharma that opens the provisional [to reveal the true]... or accord with nonduality, nondiscrimination, and the inconceivable. It would essentially destroy the scriptural proofs of the perfect teaching and devolve into the one-sided, provisional, incomplete practice of the circuitous path.⁵⁹

As seen in this passage, original enlightenment discourse is committed to asserting an absolute temporal nonduality, undercutting the very idea of the path as a graded progression toward a future goal. Any notion of buddhahood achieved as the future result of cultivation over time—the idea of “acquired enlightenment” (*shikaku* 始覚)—is dismissed either as an inferior, provisional view or as an outright error.⁶⁰ Later texts in a *hongaku* vein reject the idea of acquiring the superior marks and supernatural powers altogether. The real buddha of original enlightenment has “transcended the august forms” (*shussongyō* 出尊形) that traditionally were thought to distinguish a buddha. The forms of all beings of the ten realms and the everyday conduct of ordinary people—“our wearing clothes and using fans”—are all his true appearance.⁶¹

59 *Jigyō ryakki chū* 13. For further examples, see Stone 1999a: 205–7.

60 Like “original enlightenment,” the term “acquired enlightenment” has its *locus classicus* in the *Awakening of Faith*, where “original enlightenment” is the potential for awakening in the mind of deluded persons, and “acquired enlightenment,” its realization through practice. In medieval Tendai, however, the two terms come to designate different approaches to enlightenment and are correlated respectively with the true and provisional teachings (Shimaji 1931a; Stone 1999a: 37).

61 Shinsō (心聡, fl. 1329), *Ichijō shō* (一帖抄), TZ 9:43b–44a; Stone 1999a: 185.

These claims do not deny the need for practice. Rather, practice is no longer instrumentalized: it is not a means *to* enlightenment but inseparable from it. In the inversion of the path seen in *hongaku* literature, enlightenment becomes the ground of practice, rather than its end goal. Some later original enlightenment texts term this a reversal of cause and effect: One abandons the perspective of proceeding from cause (practice) to effect (enlightenment) (*juin shika* 從因至果) and adopts that of proceeding from effect to cause (*juga kōin* 從果向因)—a “Copernican revolution within Buddhism,” as one scholar has termed it.⁶² While constraints of space preclude an extended discussion here, this inversion of practice and attainment was variously appropriated by other Buddhist figures of Japan’s Kamakura period who emerged from the Tendai school. Examples include the Zen teacher Dōgen (道元, 1200–1253), who stressed the “oneness of practice and attainment” (*shushō ittō* 修証一等); Shinran’s (親鸞, 1173–1263) concept of “immediate achievement of birth in the Pure Land” (*sokutoku ōjō* 即得往生); and also Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282), who taught that all Śākyamuni Buddha’s causal practices and their resulting merits are inherent in the invocation of the *daimoku* (題目), the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*—*Namu Myōhō-rengē-kyō* (南無妙法蓮華經)—and are immediately accessible to the practitioner in chanting it.⁶³

Doctrinal writings dealing with Tendai original enlightenment discourse tend to focus on the dynamics of the single moment in which buddhahood is accessed; they have little to say about how their radically inverted view of practice and attainment plays out over the course of a day, a week, or a lifetime. However, we do not live solely in the moment but experience time in a linear fashion; we reflect on the past and plan for the future, and one imagines that many persons would find continued practice difficult without some sense of progress over time. The *Shinnyōkan* is unusual among original enlightenment writings in explicitly addressing this issue. It acknowledges that, due to individual differences in capacity, not everyone will readily be able to sustain the insight that all things are suchness. “Beings of the highest faculties, like the dragon girl, perceive that they themselves are precisely true suchness, and immediately become buddhas,” it says. However, “beings of dull faculties”—which presumably includes most persons—

may in one moment perceive that they are precisely suchness, but at the next moment, because it has been their habit since time without

62 Kawaii 1943. On the reversal of causality, see for example the interpretations of the six stages of identity from a *hongaku* perspective in *Kankō ruiju* (Taishō 2371.74.391c2–16 and 393b20–23).

63 Stone 1999a: 229–31.

beginning, on seeing forms or hearing voices, their mind moves in accordance with external objects. Meeting that which pleases them, they arouse the defilement of greed; meeting that which displeases them, they arouse the defilement of anger... In accordance with the distinction of superior and inferior faculties, there exists an inequality of sooner or later in the maturing of contemplative practice, and there are those who can manifest enlightenment in a day, two days, a month, two months, a year, or even a lifetime.⁶⁴

The perception that “I am suchness”—identified in *Shinnyokan* with the realization of buddhahood—can apparently be gained in one moment, lost in the next, and then regained. Such a reading is supported by other *hongaku* writings, such as the *Notes on Thirty-Four Articles* (*Sanjū shika no kotogaki* 三十四箇事書), which reads, “The day that one does not know this [nonduality], the *tathāgata* is apart from oneself. The day that one knows it, all is oneself... This is called ‘returning to and becoming identical with original enlightenment’ (*gendō hongaku* 還同本覺).”⁶⁵ Individuals are assumed to differ in how long it might take to establish the contemplation of suchness as one’s default mental stance. Depending upon one’s faculties, one might need days, months, or years to develop mature contemplation, but all are certain to do so within this lifetime. Thus, the *Shinnyokan* stresses continuous contemplation of suchness in all activities, “even while lying down with one’s sash untied.”⁶⁶ One passage suggests the “contemplation of emptiness” (*kūkan* 空觀) as an auxiliary practice, to help loosen one’s attachments; in fact, the contemplations of suchness and of emptiness may have been taught concurrently as a meditative system.⁶⁷ Even after having established one’s mind in “the path of sudden enlightenment”—seeing self and others as suchness—one should “exert oneself [to continue it] night and day.”⁶⁸ Thus linear progress is not altogether

64 THR 144.

65 THR 158.

66 THR 123.

67 THR 143. Michimoto (2008: 37) notes that the Harvard *Shinnyokan* manuscript includes a passage on contemplating emptiness and that Hōnen’s *Ippyaku shijūgokajō mondō*, articles 3 and 4, also treats the two contemplations together, dismissing both as practices beyond the capacity of ordinary persons (HSZ 648). Although Michimoto does not note it, a further supporting piece of evidence appears in *Hōbutsu shū* 6–8 (SNKBT 40: 282–307), where both contemplations are recommended, together with a third, the contemplation of impurity (*fūjōkan* 不淨觀), which may have been inspired by Genshin’s *Ōjō yōshū*.

68 THR 143.

denied. Crucially, however, this development is not represented as a progression through stages or as advancement toward an external goal. The nondual realm of original enlightenment is fully accessible with the first thought, “I am suchness”; each subsequent moment of such practice deepens an enlightenment one already has.

Summation

The *Shinnyokan* illustrates several broad features of original enlightenment thinking. Fundamental to these is an inversion in the relationship of practice and enlightenment. Enlightenment is no longer the goal of practice, but its foundation; practice is not the cause of enlightenment but its paradigmatic expression. One does not traverse stages; because enlightenment is originally inherent and accessed fully in the present moment, it does not depend on the logic of accumulating merit or eradicating defilements. Cultivation serves not to shorten the distance to the goal but to deepen awareness of a buddhahood always and already present.

In consequence, the concept of buddhahood itself changes. The *Shinnyokan*’s claim that “the real buddha is suchness” brings about what we might call an anti-transcendent move. Buddhahood finds expression not in supernatural powers or extraordinary marks, but in daily activities, even eating or feeding domestic animals. It is something shared with dogs and cats, ants and crickets. Buddhahood is immediately accessible, without extirpating delusion; this perspective is touted as far superior to the idea of buddhahood as an ideal state cultivated through the bodhisattva’s austere practices spanning countless kalpas. The latter “is not real buddhahood,” we read, “only a provisional fruit achieved in a dream.” In contrast, original enlightenment is accessed in an instant. But one trades for this very accessibility the ideal (or perhaps the illusion?) of someday becoming a perfected being: Buddhahood is manifested only while remaining a deluded ordinary worldling. Later texts in a *hongaku* mode further develop this idea, asserting that the “real buddha” of original enlightenment has “transcended august forms” and dwells solely in the mundane world.

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How the Concepts of Buddha Nature and Original Enlightenment Were Interpreted by Shinran

Seiji Kumagai

1. Introduction

1.1 The Tendai Theory of Original Enlightenment Peculiar to Japanese Buddhism

Japanese Buddhism has developed many peculiar characteristics and concepts. One of these specific ideas is the Tendai (天台) school's theory of "original enlightenment" (J. *hongaku* 本覚), which is closely related (but fundamentally different) in meaning from the concept of "buddha nature" (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*, J. *nyoraizō* 如来蔵). Buddha nature admits the existence of a buddha within all sentient beings or guarantees the future enlightenment of all sentient beings. The notion also has had a strong influence on Pure Land Buddhism, which guarantees the enlightenment of all sentient beings that are reborn in the Pure Land (浄土往生).

In medieval Japan, especially in the Tendai school, the theory of buddha nature developed into the "Tendai theory of original enlightenment" (天台本覚思想); thereafter, the thought has been influential in Japanese Buddhism. Here exists a question: What is the difference between the theory of buddha nature and the Tendai theory of original enlightenment?

The theory of buddha nature guarantees the essence or possibility of the enlightenment of all sentient beings. It admits a conflictive (or dichotomic) relation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. On the other hand, the Tendai theory of original enlightenment, which had gradually developed over time, finally insisted that all sentient beings are already enlightened; thus, it affirms monism without any conflict between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, or affliction and enlightenment.

This monistic theory peculiar to Japanese Buddhism, different from the theory of buddha nature found in Indian Buddhism, overemphasized the absolute affirmation of this actual world. One of its extreme interpretations gave rise to what were considered immoral and non-Buddhist notions, disregarding Buddhist practices and rather promoting evil activities. The theory was naturally criticized by traditional Buddhist monks.

Japanese Pure Land Buddhists, affirming the theory of buddha nature, also criticized the Tendai theory of original enlightenment. For example, Hōnen (法然, 1133–1212), the founder of the Jōdo school (J. *jōdoshū* 浄土宗), opposed the

monistic theory of original enlightenment. He defended the dichotomic method of the “Invocation of the Name of Amida Buddha” (称名念仏), which guarantees the rebirth from the world of saṃsāra into Amida’s Pure Land (極樂浄土).

However, Yoshiro Tamura (田村芳朗, 1921–1989) insists that Japanese Pure Land Buddhism returned to the Tendai monistic theory of original enlightenment with Shōkū (証空, 1177–1247), Kōsai (幸西, 1163–1247), and finally Shinran (親鸞, 1173–1263), all direct disciples of Hōnen.¹

Indeed, as pointed out by many modern scholars, Shinran’s treatises contain expressions and words that are representative of the Tendai theory of original enlightenment.² However, there still remains a question: Did Shinran really admit the Tendai theory of original enlightenment while being a proud direct disciple of Hōnen? This paper will reexamine Shinran’s interpretation of the theory of buddha nature and the Tendai theory of original enlightenment by referring to his collected works.

1.2 Previous Research on the Tendai Theory of Original Enlightenment

One of the first modern scholars to focus on the Tendai theory of original enlightenment was Daitō Shimaji (島地大等, 1875–1927). He found that there occurred an important movement in support of the theory of original enlightenment in medieval Japan, which is necessary to understand traditional Japanese culture and, especially, the theories developed by medieval Japanese Buddhist thinkers such as Shinran, Dōgen (道元, 1200–1253) and Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282).³

After the World War II, Japanese Buddhologists such as Yoshiro Tamura further emphasized that the Tendai theory of original enlightenment was the common basis for Japanese medieval Buddhism.⁴

Japanese historian Toshio Kuroda (1975) insisted that the integrated Buddhism of Sūtrayāna and Vajrayāna was the mainstream in medieval Japan and its core tenet was the Tendai theory of original enlightenment.

Since the 1990s, Noriaki Hakamaya (1990) and Shirō Matsumoto (2005) have strongly criticized the theory itself for being contradictory to original Indian Buddhist doctrines.

1 Tamura 1965: 535–36.

2 See Ui 1947, Shimaji 1929, Tamura 1965 and 1973.

3 Shimaji 1929, 1931, and 1933.

4 Tamura 1965.

1.3 Theoretical Development of the Four Stages of the Theory of Original Enlightenment

Tamura⁵ postulates the following four stages of the development of the theory of original enlightenment:⁶

1. Empty logic of nonduality (空的相即論)
2. Immanent logic of nonduality (內在的相即論)
3. Manifestational logic of nonduality (顯現的相即論)
4. Actualized logic of nonduality (顯在的相即論)

First, the “empty logic of nonduality” is found in Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and also in Mādhyamika treatises. According to the theory, all phenomena exist on the mutual basis of emptiness, thus, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and affliction and enlightenment have “common identity” (相即) in that they are both empty.

Second, the “immanent logic of nonduality” is the theory of buddha nature or *tathāgatagarbha*, found in scriptures such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, that admits the nature or possibility of enlightenment in all sentient beings. Namely, it is the theory of nonduality based on buddha nature.

Third, the “manifestational logic of nonduality” insists that buddha nature manifests as phenomena while it is contained inside sentient beings. That is to say, all phenomena and sentient beings are the manifestation of buddha nature. It is thus the theory of nonduality between buddha nature and phenomena.

Fourth, the “actualized logic of nonduality” claims that actual phenomena themselves are what constitutes reality. It is a monist theory affirming only actual phenomena; thus, there is no correlation between buddha nature and phenomena.

1.4 Origin of the Theory of Original Enlightenment

The term “original enlightenment” (本覺) is attested in sūtras such as the *Vajrasamādhisūtra* (金剛三昧經, translated into Chinese in 765) and treatises such as the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* (大乘起信論, translated by Paramārtha 真諦 in 554).⁷

⁵ Tamura 1973: 481.

⁶ Matsumoto (2005: 308–5) criticized the four stages but postulated only two stages: the theory of internal enlightenment (仏性內在論) and theory of manifest enlightenment (仏性顯在論).

⁷ According to Tamura (1973: 48), the term “original enlightenment” (本覺) was first used in the *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun*.

The *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* postulates the concept of original enlightenment contrary to the concept of the “realization of buddha nature through practices” (始覺),⁸ thus the treatise belongs to the (2) immanent logic of nonduality.

The Huayan (華嚴) school regards the pure mind as the absolute truth and phenomena as the manifestation of the pure mind, so it seems close to the (3) manifestational logic of nonduality. The Chinese Tiantai (天台, Tendai in Japanese) school emphasizes actual phenomena, so it seems close to the (4) actualized logic of nonduality. However, there still remained the dichotomic conflict between affliction and enlightenment in both schools.⁹ Therefore, they are not fully the (3) manifestational logic of nonduality or the (4) actualized logic of nonduality. Both theories were finally completed in the Japanese Tendai theory of original enlightenment.

1.5 Development of the Theory of Original Enlightenment in Japan

In Japan, Kūkai (空海, 774–835), the founder of the Shingon school, and the Tendai monk Annen (安然, 841–915?) presented a primitive theory of buddha nature. According to Tamura,¹⁰ Kūkai referred to the concept of original enlightenment as opposed to the “realization of buddha nature through practices” in our cyclic world, so his theory still remained at the stage of the (2) immanent logic of nonduality. Annen correlated the nature of the mind of ordinary beings to “principle” (理) and buddhahood to “actuality” (事), and he admitted the development of the mind of ordinary beings up to the buddhahood. His theory was also dichotomic and remained at the stage of the (2) immanent logic of nonduality.

The Tendai theory of original enlightenment was expressed in treatises such as the *Shinnyokan* (真如觀) and the *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* (三十四箇事書), which were traditionally attributed to master Genshin (源信, 942–1017) but were actually composed by another thinker much later, between 1200 and 1250.¹¹

The *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* says, “The Trace Gate (迹門, the first half of the *Lotus Sūtra*) explains the real state of ‘principle’ (理), so it is the threefold contempla-

8 *Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun* (Taishō 1666.32.576b14–16): 本覺義者, 對始覺義說。以始覺者即同本覺。始覺義者, 依本覺故而有不覺, 依不覺故說有始覺。

9 See Tamura 1973: 490–91, 503–4.

10 Ibid.: 504–21.

11 Tamura (1973: 527) estimates that both the *Shinnyokan* and the *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* were composed between 1200 and 1250. However, the *Shinnyokan* must have existed earlier, i.e., before the thirteenth century, as it was (wrongly) referred to by Hōnen as a treatise composed by Genshin.

tion in a single mind (三觀一心). On the other hand, the Source Gate (本門, the second half of the *Lotus Sūtra*) explains the real state of ‘actuality’ (事), so it is the single mind with the threefold contemplation (一心三觀).¹² The *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* regards actual phenomena to be real and eternal in the state of the Source Gate. The *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* goes on to say, “The eternality of the ten realms of beings (十界) is not denied; rather, plants, sentient beings, and the five aggregates are eternal.”¹³ Thus, the (4) actualized logic of nonduality was expressed in or before the first half of the thirteenth century.

1.6 Development of Original Enlightenment in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism

The *Ōjōyōshū*, composed by Genshin, is a treatise aiming to have people take rebirth in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. It thus affirms a dichotomy which in principle is opposite to the Tendai monistic theory of original enlightenment. But we must note that here there is only a single passage referring to the concept of original enlightenment.¹⁴ Quoting the *Mahāvaiṣṭyapūrṇabuddhasūtraprasaṅgānārthasūtra* (大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經), Genshin defended the theory of the sameness of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa and of affliction and enlightenment, but he declared that he had forgotten the path of original enlightenment because of his ignorance as an ordinary being. Thus, he himself remained in the dichotomic state.

Genshin could not always exclude the influence of the Tendai theory of original enlightenment, but Hōnen clearly denied the theory. In his *Ippyaku Shijūgo Kajō Mondō* (百四十五箇条問答), Hōnen clearly criticized the *Shinnyokan*: “The [*Shinnyokan*] is a meaningless treatise even though it was composed by the master Genshin.”¹⁵ Hōnen appreciated Genshin as a pioneer of Pure Land Buddhism but criticized the very treatise presenting Tendai’s theory of original enlightenment.

12 *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* (Tada et al. 1973: 172): 迹門は理の実相を説くが故に、三觀一心の意なり。本門は事の実相を説くが故に、一心三觀なり。

13 *Sanjūshika no Kotogaki* (Tada et al. 1973: 167): 常住の十界全く改むるなく、草木も常住なり、衆生も常住なり、五陰も常住なり。

14 *Ōjōyōshū* (Taishō 2682.84.69c14–18): 如大圓覺經偈云、一切諸衆生、無始幻無明、皆從諸如來圓覺心建立。當知生死即涅槃、煩惱即菩提、圓融無礙無二無別。而由一念妄心入生死界來、無明病所盲、久忘本覺道。

15 *Ippyaku Shijūgo Kajō Mondō* (Taishō 2611.83.228a11–13): コノ眞如觀ハ、志候ヘキ事ニテ候カ。答、コレハ惠心ノト申テ候ヘトモ、イラヌ物ニテ候也。

2. Previous Research on Shinran's Interpretation of the Tendai Theory of Original Enlightenment

Many modern scholars insist that Japanese Pure Land Buddhist masters after Hōnen, who clearly rejected the theory, turned back to the Tendai theory of original enlightenment. For example, as mentioned above, Tamura insists that Japanese Pure Land Buddhism turned back to the Tendai monist theory of original enlightenment with Shōkū, Kōsai, and finally with Shinran, all direct disciples of Hōnen.¹⁶

Tamura also insists that Shinran regarded those who had acquired the absolute faith to be identical to the Buddha¹⁷ thus, he admitted the Tendai theory of original enlightenment by referring to his treatises:

Those who are pleased with the absolute faith are explained to be the same as the Buddha. The great absolute faith is the same as buddha nature. Buddha nature is the same as the Buddha.¹⁸ (*Jōdo Wasan*, 浄土和讃)

The absolute faith is the same as buddha nature. Buddha nature is the same as the Buddha. Acquisition of the absolute faith is called the Joy. Those who are pleased [with the absolute faith] are called those who are the same as buddhas.¹⁹ (*Yūishinshō Mon-i*, 唯信鈔文意)

The *Avatamsakasūtra* (華嚴經) says that those who acquired the absolute faith are the same as buddhas. It means that those who are pleased with the absolute faith are the same as buddhas.²⁰ (*Mattōshō*, 末燈鈔)

However, as will be seen, these expressions are merely rhetoric; therefore, they should be reexamined according to Shinran's own interpretation.

There are also scholars who insist that Shinran was partially influenced by the Tendai theory of original enlightenment. For example, Daien Fugen (1964) admitted partial influence of the theory on Shinran's interpretation of buddhahood,

¹⁶ Tamura 1965: 535–56.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 528.

¹⁸ *Jōdo Wasan* (JSSZ II.497): 信心よろこぶそのひとを、如来とひとしときたまふ、大信心は仏性なり、仏性すなはち如来なり。

¹⁹ *Yūishinshō Mon-i* (JSSZ II.633): この信心すなはち仏性なり、仏性すなはち如来なり。この信心をうるを慶喜といふ。慶喜するひとは諸仏にひとしきひとゝなづく。

²⁰ *Mattōshō* (JSSZ, II.662): 華嚴經に言、信心歡喜者と諸如来等といふは、信心よろこぶひとはもろもろの如来とひとしといふなり。

but he emphasized that Shinran's statement regarding original enlightenment does not refer to ordinary persons but to the Buddha.

Some researchers negate the influence of the Tendai theory of original enlightenment on Shinran's thought. At the beginning of the chapter on absolute faith in his main treatise *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証), Shinran clearly refuted previous Buddhist thinkers and practitioners who admitted the monistic theory of original enlightenment.²¹ Referring to the passage, Mitsuya Dake (1991) insists that the Tendai theory of original enlightenment was the target of Shinran's criticism.

In the verses *Shōshinge* (正信偈) presented in his *Kyōgyō Shinshō*, Shinran insisted that ordinary persons who have acquired the absolute faith will attain enlightenment without eliminating afflictions:

If the one thought-moment of joy arises,
Nirvāṇa will be attained without eliminating afflictions;
When ignorant and wise, even grave offenders and slanderers of the
dharma, all alike turn
And enter [into the absolute faith towards nirvāṇa],
They are like waters that, on entering the ocean, become one in taste
with it.²²

Mitsuya Dake (1994) insists that Shinran here admitted "future enlightenment" but not "immediate enlightenment," so Shinran's position is different from the Tendai theory of original enlightenment. Dake may be the first modern scholar to notice an important factor: for Shinran, there is a time difference between the acquisition of absolute faith and the attainment of enlightenment.

As will be examined in detail later, Shinran did not admit enlightenment during a single lifetime (即身成仏); rather, he admitted a future-oriented path of buddhahood with different stages of practice, roughly based on the fifty-two bodhisattva stages of practice.

21 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.47): 末代道俗, 今世宗師, 沈自性唯心貶淨土真宗。

22 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.44): 能發一念喜愛心, 不斷煩惱得涅槃, 凡聖逆謗齊迴入, 如衆水入海一味。

3. Shinran's Interpretation of the Tendai Theory of Original Enlightenment

This section presents an overview of the main characteristics of Shinran's thought. As will be mentioned later, Shinran asserts the gradual path toward buddhahood: (1) acquisition of absolute faith, (2) rebirth in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, (3) practice following the stages of a bodhisattva, and (4) final attainment of enlightenment. Therefore, Shinran's interpretation is different from the Tendai theory of original enlightenment, which admits enlightenment during this lifetime.

3.1 Statements That Clearly Deny the Tendai Theory of Original Enlightenment

First, we will present an overview of Shinran's statements that clearly deny the Tendai theory of original enlightenment.

3.1.1 Denial of Enlightenment During a Single Lifetime in the *Tannishō* (歎異抄)

In the *Tannishō* (歎異抄), composed by Shinran's direct disciple Yui-en (唯円), we can find that Shinran denied enlightenment during a single lifetime, namely the attainment of buddhahood before one's death, even with an afflicted body and mind.²³ Shinran pointed out that even pure monks of the Shingon Vajrayāna school and the Tendai school prayed to be reborn in the Pure Land and attain buddhahood there after death.

According to Shinran,²⁴ ordinary beings can attain the Pure Land by the power of a "primal vow" (本願) made by Amida Buddha. Thereafter, as a saintly bodhisattvas they begin rescuing all sentient beings in the world. If people could attain enlightenment in the state of ordinary beings, they would manifest themselves in various appearances to rescue sentient beings, possess the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a buddha, teach the Dharma, and benefit sentient beings just as the Buddha does. However, there is no such person. That is to say, "being guaranteed birth in the Pure Land" (正定聚) by the power of the primal vow made by Amida Buddha should not be confused with enlightenment during a single lifetime. Actually, Shinran states, "The master Hōnen told us that those who follow the path to the Pure Land will acquire the absolute faith in the primal vow conducted by Amida Buddha during their lifetime, be reborn into Amida Buddha's Pure Land, and finally attain enlightenment there."

²³ *Tannishō* (JSSZ II.786–7).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

3.1.2 Criticism of Original Enlightenment at the Beginning of the Chapter on Absolute Faith in His *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証)

As mentioned by Dake (1991), at the beginning of the chapter on absolute faith in his *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証), Shinran clearly refuted previous Buddhist thinkers and practitioners who declared the Tendai theory of original enlightenment.²⁵

3.2 Interpretation of the Expressions That Seem to Be Based on the Tendai Theory of Original Enlightenment in Shinran's Treatises

As mentioned by many scholars, Shinran makes use of several expressions that seem to be associated with the Tendai theory of original enlightenment. For example, Tamura regards his expression “same as the Buddha” as a proof that Shinran admitted the theory. However, this section will prove that these are only rhetorical expressions.

3.2.1 Interpretation of the Expression “Being the same as the Buddha” in the *Mattōshō* (末燈抄) and *Jōdo Wasan* (浄土和讃)

In the letters exchanged between Keishin (慶信) and Ren-i (蓮位) published in the *Mattōshō* (末燈抄), they discussed the expression “being the same as the Buddha.”²⁶

In his letter to Ren-i, Keishin criticized those who wrongly regarded the expression in the *Jōdo Wasan* (浄土和讃) to be based on the theory of enlightenment during a single lifetime: “He is said to be equal to the Buddha. The absolute faith is buddha nature. Buddha nature is the Buddha.”²⁷

Ren-i, as a representative of Shinran, evaluated Keishin's interpretation. Ren-i critically examined both expressions: “same as Maitreya” and “same as the Buddha.” First, the reason those who have acquired the absolute faith are called “equal to Maitreya” is that they are guaranteed to be reborn in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha and stay in their practical stages toward enlightenment, thus they are guaranteed to finally achieve enlightenment. They are the same as Maitreya in that they both are guaranteed to achieve enlightenment. However, this does not mean that they have attained the stage of non-retrogression (不退転地), where Maitreya abides. Needless to say, those who have acquired the absolute faith have not yet attained the stage of buddhahood. Thus, the expression “same as the Buddha” is only used rhetorically, not in a literal sense.

25 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ II.47): 末代道俗, 今世宗師, 沈自性唯心貶浄土真宗.

26 *Mattōshō* (JSSZ II.674–80).

27 *Mattōshō* (JSSZ II.674–5): 其人を, 如来とひとしと説きたもう, 大信心は仏性なり, 仏性即如来なり.

3.2.2 The Expression “Same as Maitreya” Stated in the *Shōzōmatsu Wasan* (正像末和讃)

In his *Shōzōmatsu Wasan* (正像末和讃), Shinran says,

Those who will finally attain buddhahood, powered by Amida Buddha’s primal vow, which allows people to be reborn in his Pure Land in the future, are the same as Maitreya, who will attain enlightenment.²⁸

Those who have acquired the absolute faith are guaranteed to be reborn in the Pure Land and are the same as Maitreya, who will also attain buddhahood.²⁹

Those who believe Amida Buddha’s inconceivable omniscience are guaranteed to be reborn in the Pure Land. Those who are spontaneously reborn [in the Pure Land] have superior wisdom and will attain buddhahood.³⁰

Shinran thus admitted that those who acquired the absolute faith are the same as Maitreya in the sense that they both are guaranteed to attain buddhahood in the future, but this does not mean that they both belong to the same stage of bodhisattva practice. We will also prove here that there is a time gap between the acquisition of the absolute faith, rebirth in the Pure Land, and attainment of enlightenment.

3.2.3 Interpretation of “Same as Maitreya” or “Same as the Buddha” in the Chapter on the Absolute Faith in the *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証)

In the chapter on the absolute faith in the *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証), there is also an explanation of the notion of “same as Maitreya” that may be misinterpreted as meaning that those who have acquired the absolute faith will achieve enlightenment when they die:³¹ Maitreya will become the Buddha during his lifetime because he is at the “state of future buddhahood being only a single existence away” (一生補処). On the other hand, those who have acquired the absolute faith will attain enlightenment [a long time] after they die.

28 *Shōzōmatsu Wasan* (JSSZ, II.519): 念仏往生の願により、等正覚にいたる人、すなわち弥勒におなじくて、大般涅槃をさとるべし。

29 *Shōzōmatsu Wasan* (JSSZ, II.519): 真実信心をうるゆえに、すなわち定聚にいりぬれば、補処の弥勒におなじくて、無上覚をさとるなり。

30 *Shōzōmatsu Wasan* (JSSZ, II.521): 仏智不思議を信ずれば、正定聚にこそ住しけれ、化生の人は智慧すぐれ、無上覚をぞさとける。

31 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.79).

The confusing explanation may mislead one into thinking that Shinran also admitted the theory of enlightenment during a single lifetime. However, as we proved above, Shinran did not admit the theory of immediate enlightenment; rather, he admitted the gradual enlightenment following the bodhisattva path. Actually, since he omits some steps, we may call his theory “quick but gradual (i.e., not instant) enlightenment.”

3.2.4 Interpretation of “Understanding of the Sameness of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa” (証知生死即涅槃) and the “Attainment of Enlightenment without the Elimination of Afflictions” (不斷煩惱得涅槃) in the “Shōshinge” (正信偈)

In the “Shōshinge” (正信偈) verses in his *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証), Shinran says, according to the interpretation of Tan-luan (曇鸞, 476–572), “When afflicted ordinary persons acquire the absolute faith, they realize that saṃsāra is the same as nirvāṇa.”³² The phrase “they realize that saṃsāra is the same as nirvāṇa” (証知生死即涅槃) may be misinterpreted as meaning that ordinary persons attain enlightenment while living with afflictions in saṃsāra. However, it does not mean that they can directly attain buddhahood in the very state of ordinary people.

Here Shinran also says, “If the one thought-moment of joy arises, nirvāṇa will be attained without eliminating afflictions.”³³ The phrase “attainment of enlightenment without the elimination of afflictions” (不斷煩惱得涅槃) may be again misinterpreted as meaning that ordinary persons attain enlightenment while living with afflictions in saṃsāra. However, Shinran stated that those who have acquired the absolute faith will be reborn in the Pure Land even without having eliminated their afflictions. After that, they will complete the bodhisattva practices in the Pure Land and finally attain buddhahood. The theory of gradual enlightenment is thus different from the theory of the sameness of the afflicted state and enlightenment.

3.3 Gradual Development toward Enlightenment, Explained by Shinran

The above sections have proved that Shinran rejected the Tendai theory of original enlightenment and that he admitted gradual enlightenment with several stages of bodhisattva practice. What are these stages?

In the chapter on practice of his *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証), Shinran explained the development of practice through death according to Jiūn (慈雲, 964–1032): those

32 “Shōshinge” in the *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.45): 感染凡夫信心発, 証知生死即涅槃.

33 “Shōshinge” in the *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.44): 能発一念喜愛心, 不斷煩惱得涅槃.

who pray purely to Amida Buddha by following Pure Land Buddhism will (1) feel comfort and joy without fear even at the time of death, (2) see the Buddha and bodhisattvas in front of them, (3) be reborn in the Pure Land, (4) attain the state of non-retrogression by eliminating afflictions, and (5) finally attain enlightenment in a short time.³⁴ Thus, there exist stages toward enlightenment: (1) to pray to Amida Buddha or have the absolute faith in him, (2) to die, (3) to be carried away by Amida Buddha, (4) to be reborn in the Pure Land, (5) to attain the state of non-retrogression, and (6) to become enlightened.

In the chapter on enlightenment of his *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (教行信証), Shinran further explained the process from rebirth into the Pure Land until enlightenment according to Tan-luan's *Wu-liang-shou Jing You-po-ti-she Yuan-sheng-jie Zhu* (無量壽經優婆提舍願生偈註).³⁵

If a bodhisattva with an afflicted mind (未証淨心菩薩), who belongs to a stage between the first and the seventh stages, looks at Amida Buddha, they will finally realize the dharma body with equality; namely, they will become a bodhisattva at a stage between the eighth and tenth stages. There is thus a gradual development: (1) being reborn into the Pure Land (namely, attaining the first stage of a bodhisattva), (2) seeing Amida Buddha, (3) attaining the eighth, ninth, or tenth stages, and finally (4) attaining buddhahood.

While in principle it takes a very long time (two immeasurable kalpas) to progress from the first stage to buddhahood, it takes much less time through the “gateway of Pure Land” (淨土門). However, even the gateway of Pure Land does not guarantee immediate enlightenment. As a result of seeing Amida Buddha, those who arrive at the Pure Land will finally (but not immediately) attain a stage above the eighth stage of a bodhisattva, but that is not an immediate attainment.

34 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.30).

35 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.126–27). Cf. *Wu-liang-shou Jing You-po-ti-she Yuan-sheng-jie Zhu* (無量壽經優婆提舍願生偈註, Taishō 1819.40.840a19–b16): 即見彼佛未證淨心菩薩畢竟得證平等法身與淨心菩薩與上地諸菩薩畢竟同得寂滅平等故。平等法身者八地已上法性生身菩薩也。寂滅平等者即此法身菩薩所證寂滅平等之法也。以得此寂滅平等法故名為平等法身。以平等法身菩薩所得故名為寂滅平等法也。此菩薩得報生三昧。以三昧神力能一處一念一時遍十方世界。種種供養一切諸佛及諸佛大會衆海。能於無量世界無佛法僧處。種種示現種種教化。度脫一切衆生常作佛事。初無往來想供養想度脫想。是故此身為平等法身。此法名為寂滅平等法也。未證淨心菩薩者初地已上七地已還諸菩薩也。此菩薩亦能現身。若百若干億若百千萬億無佛國土施作佛事。要須作心入三昧。乃能非不非心。以作心故名為未得淨心。此菩薩願生安樂淨土即見阿彌陀佛見阿彌陀佛時與上地諸菩薩畢竟身等法。龍樹菩薩證數樂頭菩薩輩願生彼者當為此耳。問曰。案十地經。菩薩進趣階級漸有無量功勳。逕多劫數然後乃得此。云何見阿彌陀佛時畢竟與上地諸菩薩身等法耶。答曰。言畢竟者未言即等也。畢竟不失此等故言等耳。問曰。若不即等復何待言菩薩。但登初地以漸增進自然當與佛等。何假言與上地菩薩等。答曰。菩薩於七地中得大寂滅。上不見諸佛可求。下不見衆生可度。欲捨佛道證於實際。

In the chapter on the absolute faith in his *Kyōgyō Shinshō*, Shinran said that people can joyfully acquire the absolute faith at the “ten stages of faith” (十信位) but not at superior stages such as the “ten stages of dwelling” (十住位) and the “ten stages of behavioral activities” (十行位).³⁶

In the chapter on enlightenment of his *Kyōgyō Shinshō*, Shinran explains the process and causal relationship of rebirth into the Pure Land and Amida’s intention about them according to the *Fo-shuo Guan Wu-liang-shou-jing Shu* (仏説觀無量壽經疏) of Shan-dao (善導, 613–681):³⁷ Amida Buddha’s primal vow is extensive, but he kept his profound intention secret. It is thus extremely difficult, even for “three-virtuous-position practitioners” (or inner stages, 三賢/内凡夫) and “ten-stage bodhisattvas” (十聖), to understand completely his profound intention by only studying the sūtras. It is meaningless and unnecessary for a foolish person such as Shinran, below the “ten stages of faith,” to try to understand his intention. One should note that Shinran himself humbly admitted that he had not yet attained even the “ten stages of faith,” meaning he had not acquired the absolute faith. Such confession is also attested in the *Tannishō* (歎異抄).³⁸

As discussed above, we found that Shinran admitted gradual enlightenment according to the following steps toward enlightenment:

1. listening to the Dharma teaching about Amida Buddha and his name;
2. acquiring the absolute faith at the “ten stages of faith” (十信位), namely “being guaranteed rebirth in the Pure Land” (正定聚);
3. being reborn into Amida’s Pure Land after death, namely attaining the first stage of a bodhisattva (初地歡喜地);
4. seeing Amida Buddha and quickly (but not immediately) attaining a superior stage above the eighth stage of a bodhisattva realizing the dharma body with equality;
5. quickly practicing between the eighth and tenth stages;
6. attaining the “state of future buddhahood being only a single existence away” equivalent to Maitreya; and
7. achieving enlightenment, namely attaining buddhahood.

36 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.78).

37 *Kyōgyō Shinshō* (JSSZ, II.106).

38 *Tannishō* (JSSZ, II.777–78).

Shinran thus denied the theory of enlightenment during a single lifetime and the Tendai theory of inner enlightenment; rather, he admitted a gradual development of practice until enlightenment with several stages, while the speed of his process is much quicker than that given by traditional Mahāyāna Buddhists.

According to Shinran's theory of practice as described above, how much time does it take to become enlightened? How much time of practice could Shinran omit in comparison to the traditional Buddhist theory of practice?

According to traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist theory, it takes one immeasurable kalpa (一阿僧祇劫) from the "ten stages of faith" until the "first stage of a bodhisattva." According to Shinran's Pure Land Buddhist interpretation, it takes only a short time from the acquisition of the absolute faith in the "ten stages of faith" until the end of this life, that is, several years or several dozens of years, to attain the first stage of a bodhisattva by being reborn in Amida's Pure Land. According to traditional Mahāyāna theory, it takes one immeasurable kalpa from the first to the eighth stage of a bodhisattva, and one more immeasurable kalpa from the eighth stage to enlightenment and buddhahood. On the other hand, Shinran admitted a quicker practice.

Thus, Shinran's interpretation enables the possibility of attaining enlightenment quickly, within two immeasurable kalpas at the longest, while it takes at least three immeasurable kalpas according to the traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines. Here we must note again that he did not admit "immediate enlightenment" in one's life but admitted a "quick but gradual enlightenment" after death.

4. Conclusions

This paper has examined Shinran's interpretation of the theory of buddha nature and its related Tendai theory of original enlightenment. Needless to say, Shinran also, like other Pure Land Buddhist thinkers, admitted the theory of buddha nature. On the other hand, this paper has proven that he did not admit the Tendai theory of original enlightenment.

As mentioned by many modern scholars, we can attest terms and expressions that are associated with the Tendai theory of original enlightenment in his works. Such terms and expressions seem to have misled modern scholars into thinking that Shinran also admitted the Tendai theory of original enlightenment. However, this paper has proven that such expressions are only rhetorical. Actually, Shinran refuted such theory in many passages.

The paper has also proven that he instead admitted a gradual development of practice until enlightenment with several stages, while the speed of his process

is much quicker than that declared by traditional Mahāyāna Buddhists (see the list above). Shinran's interpretation enables the possibility of attaining enlightenment swiftly, within two immeasurable kalpas at the longest, by skipping the stages from the "ten stages of faith" to the "first stage of bodhisattva" and shortening the lapse of time from the "first stage of bodhisattva" until buddhahood. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines, in comparison, it takes at least three immeasurable kalpas to reach buddhahood. We may conclude that Shinran admitted a "quick but gradual enlightenment" after death.

Shinran was a man of many talents, especially as a poet. Thus, he used a lot of rhetorical language and examples in his works, especially in his religious poems. Such expressions seem to have misled modern scholars into thinking that he admitted the Tendai theory of original enlightenment and the theory of immediate enlightenment during this lifetime. But as examined in this paper, they are only exaggerating rhetorical devices. In any case, he admitted the theory of buddha nature, which enables all sentient beings to be reborn in the Pure Land and finally attain enlightenment, but not the Tendai theory of original enlightenment that absolutely affirms actual phenomena.

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The Basis for Buddhahood

The Naturally Luminous Mind and Buddha Nature in the Early Mahāmudrā Tradition

Casey Kemp

The view that the mind is by nature luminous (*cittaṃ prakṛtiprabhāsvaram*, *sems ni rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba*) can be found across the major Buddhist systems of thought. The naturally luminous mind is primarily understood in terms of that which is separate from afflictions (*kleśa*), which are considered to be adventitious and temporary. Afflictions are what bind sentient beings within *samsāra*, and it is precisely because they are not inherent to mind streams that all beings have the potential to purify their karmic obscurations (*karmāvaraṇa*) and attain buddhahood. Natural luminosity is closely associated with the concept of natural purity (*prakṛtipariśuddha*), and some scholars understand the two terms to be practically synonymous.¹ Across Mahāyāna sūtra, śāstra, and tantra literature, natural luminosity is not only used to describe a mind (state) that lacks afflictions, but it is also understood to be the unchanging nature of reality, buddhahood, and appearance in positive terms, sometimes identified with the *dharmadhātu* or *dharmakāya*, as well as the nature of all phenomena and reflexive- or self-awareness (*svasaṃvitti*, *rang rig*).² The naturally luminous mind shares a strong semantic connection with the notion that all beings have buddha nature (usually understood in terms of *tathāgatagarbha*, *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*), and some Buddhist thinkers have understood these two concepts to be one and the same.³

Particularly in Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the notion of natural luminosity and how it is understood within the context of the common soteriological scheme

1 See, for example, Jonathan Silk's (2015: 135–40) comparative analysis of the terms *pariśuddha* and *prabhāsvara* in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and their Chinese translations, in which the terms are treated as synonymous.

2 A preliminary survey of sources that use this term to describe a range of such concepts associated with the ultimate nature of reality and mind was presented in my IATS 2019 Paris conference presentation titled "Typologies of Luminosity ('od gsal ba) in Early Bka' brgyud Tantric Manuals." These correlations can be easily found through the University of Vienna digital Kangyur resource platform, Resources for Kanjur & Tanjur Studies: www.istb.univie.ac.at/kanjur/rktsneu/sub/index.php.

3 On the development of the relationship between *tathāgatagarbha* and mind's nature as luminous and pure in *tathāgatagarbha* sūtras, see Jones 2020: 214–17.

of basis, path, and result becomes increasingly nuanced and contextually dependent on the specific interpretations of a particular lineage or genre of text. The Tibetan Kagyü Mahāmudrā tradition emphasizes the naturally luminous nature of mind (*sems nyid rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba*) as the basis for liberation. The direct recognition of this nature of mind as luminous is the means to liberation (the path), ultimately leading to the attainment of liberation itself, that is, the *dharmakāya* (the result). In this tradition, natural luminosity is the unchanging nature of both the basis and result, and familiarizing oneself with this inseparable nature is precisely what is to be cultivated on the path. It is therefore crucial to the view and practice of Mahāmudrā and is closely aligned with the doctrine of buddha nature.

Here I will provide a brief overview of the significance of the natural luminosity of mind as the basis for buddhahood, and will explore evidence of explicit correlations with the concept of buddha nature among the texts that are considered by the tradition to be some of the earliest sources for Kagyü Mahāmudrā teachings.⁴ This formative period beginning with Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1012–1097) transferring the teachings of the Indian *siddhas* to Tibet coincides with the time period during which the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the major Indian śāstra on buddha nature, was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan by Ngog Loden Sherab (Rngog Blo ldan shes rab, 1059–1109) and Sajjana (eleventh century).⁵ By taking a closer look into the earliest Tibetan Mahāmudrā sources on natural luminosity, we will gain a better understanding of how buddha nature teachings influenced the early development of the views and practices of this particular tradition.⁶

The Semantic Scope of Natural Luminosity in Canonical Sources

Referred to several times in the Pāli canon, perhaps the most well-known quote attributed to the Buddha on the topic of luminosity is from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, which reads:

This mind, monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements.⁷

4 This brief introduction will be limited to the earliest Kagyü sources that discuss the naturally luminous mind, and will not be addressing later expressions or debates, let alone how this concept has evolved in other Tibetan esoteric traditions such as Kālacakra or Dzogchen.

5 For a detailed study of this translation, see Kano 2016.

6 Special thanks are due to Professor Klaus-Dieter Mathes, Professor Jonathan Silk, and Dr. Chris Jones for their helpful feedback on this contribution.

7 *pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ* (Morris 1961: 10).

Numerous Pāli sources describe the mind and meditative states as luminous and likened to a refined piece of gold.⁸ However, whether the luminous quality of mind was something intrinsic was a point of debate from our earliest available sources on the topic. Franco's study of the Spitzer manuscript (of the late Kuṣāṇa period) reveals an early debate regarding whether the concept of the luminous mind can be accepted, particularly in terms of the relationship between consciousness and afflictions.⁹ Questions that arose in this manuscript are similar to those still considered to this day: How can something luminous be defiled? Can defilements exist apart from the mind? Can the undefiled mind be perceived? Does the undefiled mind possess qualities? These questions reflect core debates regarding the efficacy of the concept of the naturally luminous mind, namely, (1) whether it is momentary or conditioned¹⁰ and (2) whether it is cataphatic,¹¹ describing something that truly exists. In later Mahāyāna discourse, both hermeneutical debates centered on how luminosity relates to ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) and whether teachings on luminosity should be considered definitive (*nītārtha*).¹²

Among Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtras and śāstras, it is generally accepted that the mind is by nature luminous, and the term came to be associated with central Mahāyāna concepts such as emptiness and *bodhicitta*.¹³ The most well-known canonical source on the topic frequently cited by Tibetan authors is found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*:

The mind is not mind; the nature of mind is luminous.¹⁴

These two statements have been the subject of numerous commentaries throughout Mahāyāna intellectual history,¹⁵ and have been read both as appositive, in the

8 For a detailed analysis of the above *Āṅguttara Nikāya* passage and survey of other Pāli sources referring to mind and meditative states as luminous (*pabhassara*), see Anālayo 2017: 20–36.

9 See Franco 2004: 94–98.

10 Wangchuk 2007: 208.

11 Ruegg and Schaeffer discuss the cataphatic understanding of *tathāgatagarbha*. See Ruegg 1989 and Schaeffer 1995: 77–79.

12 While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail these debates further, an awareness of these concerns among Buddhist authors helps to contextualize teachings on the luminous mind and its correlation to *tathāgatagarbha*, which has also been subject to similar debates.

13 Karl Brunnhölzl has also provided an overview of the use of the term across Indian Mahāyāna literature that includes a range of quotations articulating the naturally luminous mind in his *Praise of Dharmadhātu* (2007: 68–83). For canonical references to *bodhicitta* as luminous, see Wangchuk 2007: 206–7.

14 *tac cittam acittam | prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā* | (Vaidya 1960: 3).

15 See for example Haribhadra's *Āloka* (Vaidya 1960) or Ratnākaraśānti's *Sāratamā* (Seton 2015).

sense that the two statements are merely referring to the mind's ultimate empty nature, and as opposing, in the sense that the two statements together describe the two sides of the nondual nature of the mind—empty, yet luminous.¹⁶

Natural luminosity is considered in some Mahāyāna sources to not only describe the nature of mind but also the nature of all phenomena, which from a Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda perspective implies the view that phenomena are merely projections of mind itself. In this sense, if the nature of the mind is luminous, the nature of phenomena must also be luminous as objects of the awareness or cognition. For example, it is stated in the *Purification of Karmic Obscurations Sūtra* (*Karmāvaraṇaviśuddhisūtra*):

Monk, since all phenomena are naturally luminous, they are without delusion.¹⁷

The nature of phenomena being naturally luminous is not only common to Mahāyāna sūtras and Yogācāra texts but is also a core view in tantric literature. For example, the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* states,

Phenomena, being naturally luminous, are pure from the beginning, equal to space.¹⁸

The tantric method involves cultivating a pure vision of the mind stream, subtle energies of the body, and indeed all phenomena as inseparable from a buddha's realm or maṇḍala, where the mind and objects of consciousness are completely purified. The notion of the natural luminosity of the mind and phenomena is not only essential to the tantric view but is also to be taken onto the path as an object of meditative cultivation.¹⁹ Luminosity has been used not only as a descriptive quality pointing to the purified aspect of something, but also a mind state to be induced through tantric means. An experience of exemplary luminosity—

16 See, for instance, the commentary to this passage found in the *Bṛhattīkā* (sometimes attributed to Vasubandhu), in which the “not mind” is understood as referring to the mind of the imaginary nature (*parikalpitasvabhāva*) and the luminous mind is described as the *dharmakāya* of the perfect nature (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*). For an English translation of the relevant passage, see Brunnhölzl 2011: 33.

17 D218, 286b₅: *dge slong chos thams cad ni rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba'i phyir gti mug med pa'o*.

18 *prakṛtiprabhāśvarā dharmāḥ ādiśuddhā nabhaḥsamāḥ* (See Fremantle's critical edition, 1971: 194).

19 See, for example, Tomabechei (2006: 81–83) for an explanation on the meditation of *prabhāśvara* according to the *Guhyasamāja* system as described in Nāgārjuna's *Pañcakrama*.

luminosity that still includes marks (*lakṣaṇa*) or karmic imprints (*vāsanā*)—is to be cultivated in this life in order to prepare the yogi to realize the true or ultimate luminosity as the *dharmakāya* at the time of enlightenment in this life or to recognize the manifestation of the natural luminosity at the moment of death, thus attaining full awakening.²⁰

There are also numerous references among the Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras that more explicitly correlate the naturally luminous mind with positive terms such as wisdom (*jñāna/prajñā*), as stated in the quote attributed to the *Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā Sūtra* (*Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādasūtra*) found in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*:

The mind, being naturally luminous, is therefore precisely wisdom. It is therefore said, “The perfect awakening is completely and perfectly awakened through wisdom that is encountered and endowed in a single instant.”²¹

The *Teachings of the Great Compassion of the Tathāgata Sūtra* (*Tathāgatamahākaraṇa-nirdeśasūtra*)²² correlates the luminous nature of mind with awakening (*bodhi*) itself—the nature of which is characterized as the complete lack of afflictions and thus likened to space:

Since the mind is naturally luminous, awakening is naturally luminous. Why is the nature called luminous? That which is the nature is entirely without affliction, comparable to space. It possesses the nature of space, is united with space, is equal to space, and is equal [to luminosity]. The nature is utter luminosity.²³

20 Within the higher yoga tantras, particularly as preserved in the various Tibetan tantric practice traditions, types of luminosities were commonly used to describe (purified) mind states at different levels of the path. Thus, one can read of the luminosity of the ground—the natural luminosity of mind—but different types of “luminosities” are also described, such as the luminosity of meditation and the ultimate luminosity. See Kemp 2015.

21 *prakṛtiprabhāsvaram cittaṃ | tat tathāiva jñānam | tata ucyate | ekakṣaṇalakṣaṇasamāyuktayā prajñayā samyaksaṃbodhir abhisambuddheti* | (Johnston 1950: 22,5–7). According to Takasaki (1966: 188), this quote is from the *Dhāraṇīśvararājasūtra*.

22 Also known as the *Gzungs kyi dbang phyug rgyal pos zhus pa'i mdo* (*Dhāraṇīśvararājasūtra*), referred to as an important *tathāgatagarbha* sūtra. See 'Gos lo tsā ba's reference to the sūtra in his section on “Buddha Nature and Its Purification Through the Three Dharmacakras” in Mathes' study (2008: 214). There is no known Sanskrit version.

23 D 147, 176b₁₋₃: *sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba'i phyir | byang chub rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba'o | ci'i phyir rang bzhin 'od gsal ba zhes bya zhe na | rang bzhin gang yin pa de ni | kun nas*

The *Kālacakra Root Tantra* (*Kālacakramūlatantra*)—as quoted by Gampopa (Sgam po pa, 1079–1153) when listing canonical sources in his “Teaching on the Empty Luminous Mind”²⁴—associates the luminous nature of mind with its central concept of primordial buddhahood (*ādibuddha*):

The nature of a sentient being’s mind is luminous and primordially free from arising, ceasing, and remaining. From beginningless time, this is the primordial supreme buddhahood. Without a cause, it is untainted by conditions.²⁵

While the naturally luminous mind of all sentient beings is directly related to the *dharmakāya* and the *dharmadhātu* among the earliest sources of the Mahāmudrā tradition in terms of fruitional language, it is difficult to locate sources among the texts constituting the Tibetan Kangyurs that explicitly relate these concepts.²⁶ One finds an emphasis on the naturally luminous mind as a means to describe the ultimate, including correlations made to the *dharmakāya* and *dharmadhātu* among Yogācāra commentarial literature, particularly among the Maitreya/Asaṅga (fourth century) works and their various commentaries.²⁷

Most notably, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* along with its commentary (*vyākhyā*), largely considered by Tibetans to be the most important canonical source for buddha nature doctrine, emphasizes throughout the natural purity and luminosity of mind, and explains at various points throughout the text how the naturally luminous mind is associated with temporary afflictions yet is never truly stained or marked by them. The *vyākhyā* dedicates a section in its first chapter to explaining

nyon mongs pa med pa | nam mkha' dang mtshungs pa | nam mkha'i rang bzhin | nam mkha' dang mnyam par gzhol ba | nam mkha' dang mnyam pas mnyam pa ste | rang bzhin de ni | shin tu 'od gsal ba nyid do |

24 Sgam po pa, *Sems 'od gsal stong par bstan*, in *Bstan bcos lung gi nyi 'od*, 32b–34b.

25 Sgam po pa, *Lung gi nyi 'od*, 34a–34b: *dus 'khor rtsa rgyud du | sems can sems nyid 'od gsal zhing | gdod nas skye 'gag gnas bral te | thog ma med pa'i sngon rol nas | dang po mchog gi sangs rgyas te | rgyu med rkyen gyis ma bsalad pa |*

26 A cursory segment search across the available digital Bka' 'gyur collections on the University of Vienna Resources for the Kanjur and Tanjur website reveals no direct correlations between *sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba* (and its variant spellings) and *chos dbyings* or *chos sku/chos kyi sku*. However, *chos sku* and *chos dbyings* are described as luminous in several sūtra and tantra sources.

27 For a selection of quotes from the Maitreya/Asaṅga works on natural luminosity, see Brunnhölzl (2007: 75–77).

the relationship between natural luminosity and the defilements, or more precisely their lack of a relationship, stating,

Here, “the mind’s natural luminosity and its related afflictions” are extremely difficult to realize to both be [found] within the immaculate *dhātu*. [It is common Buddhist opinion that] a virtuous [mind] and unvirtuous mind occur one at a time, given that [the one cannot] unite with the other.²⁸

This statement is followed by a quote from the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*, repeating the basic point that while there are “related afflictions” (*upakleśa*), these afflictions do not “touch” (*sprśanti*) the mind, and yet afflictions still exist. The passage ends by reiterating that this relationship is difficult to discern.²⁹ Here, afflictions are none other than false imputation (*parikalpa*).³⁰

The *vyākhyā* goes on to quote a passage from the *Gaganagañjāpariprcchāsūtra* that echoes the well-known *Aṅguttara Nikāya* passage mentioned above regarding the luminous mind possessed of afflictions.³¹ To further clarify the association between the naturally luminous mind and afflictions, later in the text the luminous mind is likened to a cloudy sky, muddy water, or a tarnished jewel. Even after one thousand years of being covered in tarnish, the tarnish can be wiped away and the jewel polished, never penetrating the nature of the jewel.³² In the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, buddha nature is described as naturally luminous³³ and free of afflictions, as well as synonymous with buddhahood, nirvāṇa, and the *dharmakāya*,³⁴ though it is not explicitly stated to be synonymous with the naturally luminous mind per se.

28 *tatra yā cittasya prakṛtiprabhāsvaratā yaś ca tadupakleśa ity etad dvayam anāsrave dhātau kuśalākuśalayoś cittayor ekacaratvād dvitīyacittānabhisaṃdhānayogena paramaduṣprativēdhyam* | (Johnston 1950: 14,16–15,3). For alternate translations see Takasaki (1966: 174) and Brunnhölzl (2014: 346).

29 See Johnston 1950: 14,16–15,8.

30 Ibid.: 44,10 and 49,12.

31 *tata ucyate prakṛtiprabhāsvaraṃ cittam āgantukair upakleśair upakliśyata iti* | (Johnston 1950: 45,2–3). See also Takasaki 1966: 239.

32 Johnston 1950: 49,5–9.

33 “Indeed, this tathāgata essence, (*tathāgatadhātu*) at the level of the Buddha, [abides] in its own nature, which is completely stainless, pure, and luminous.” *sa khalv eṣa tathāgatadhātur buddhabhūmāv atyantavimalaviśuddhaprabhāsvaratāyām svaprakṛtau* | (Johnston 1950: 54,3–4).

34 Ibid., 56,1–9.

Still, in other contexts the naturally luminous mind is directly associated with buddha nature itself, particularly in later Tibetan commentarial literature from at least the eleventh century. The canonical source most often quoted by Tibetans when establishing this correlation is from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*:³⁵

The naturally luminous mind is the virtuous buddha nature.
[While] it is indeed the grasping [mind] of beings, it is free from
limitations and nonlimitations.³⁶

In his *Madhyamakāloka*, Kamalaśīla also states that buddha nature is correlated to natural luminosity in the sense of the *dharmadhātu* that pervades all sentient beings,³⁷ which is echoed by Abhayākara Gupta's *Munimatālaṃkāra*.³⁸ Sajjana in his commentary to the *Ratnagotravibhāga* also supports the understanding that buddha nature referred to the naturally luminous mind, while Ngog emphasized buddha nature as referring to emptiness. As Kazuo Kano aptly puts it,

While Sajjana (or his Kashmiri disciple) understands buddha nature as the luminous mind (*prabhāsvaraṃ cittam*), which is unconditioned and thus, not empty of itself... rNgog equates buddha nature with emptiness. Of course, luminosity and emptiness are not necessarily mutually exclusive notions, but their points of focus are nevertheless different.³⁹

Atiśa Dīpaṃkara (980–1054) also discusses at length the natural luminosity of mind in his teachings, as has been noted by Apple.⁴⁰ In his *Great Teaching on the View and Meditation* (*Lta sgom chen mo*), he cites a variety of non-tantric and tantric sources to explain the centrality of luminosity within the context of

35 To my knowledge, this is the only mention of this direct correlation found within the Bka' gyur collections that is not considered to be an "apocryphal" Chinese sūtra.

36 *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (10 sagāthakam; 750): *prakṛtiprabhāsvaraṃ cittam garbham tāthāgataṃ śubham | upādānam hi sattvasya antānantavivarjitam* | (Nanjio 1923: 358).

37 For a translation of the relevant passage, see Kano 2016: 10.

38 Ibid.: 111.

39 Ibid.: 154.

40 Apple (2017: 13) states, "Atiśa has inherited a mode of exegesis that emphasizes gnostic awareness, rather than ritualized sexual intercourse, as the secret of esoteric discourse. Atiśa's emended citations of the Cakrasaṃvara and Hevajra, given above, demonstrate his emphasis on the clear light nature of the mind as the basis of his view."

Cakrasaṃvara practice, citing the same passage found above from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, as well as referencing the *Laṅkāvatāra* and *Guhyasamāja*.⁴¹ Atiśa's teachings on luminosity are in fact central to his teachings on Mahāmudrā, in which the result of Mahāmudrā is attained once the natural luminosity is met or merged with the experience of luminosity cultivated through meditation. This is explained in his *Essential Condensed Summary of the Instructions on Connate Union* (*Lhan cig skyes sbyor gyi gdams ngag mdor bsdus snying po*):

Thus, through the power of meditation—just like recognizing an old friend when you meet—the accomplishment of Mahāmudrā is realized when natural luminosity and the luminosity of meditation meet.⁴²

Early Mahāmudrā Sources for the Luminous Mind and Buddha Nature

As the *Ratnagotravibhāga* was being transferred to Tibet by Ngog, Sajjana, and Tsen Khawoché (Btsan kha bo che, b. 1021) in the eleventh century, the Tibetan Kagyü Mahāmudrā tradition was in its formative period. Texts attributed to the earliest Kagyü masters were inspired mainly by the teachings of the Indian *śiddhas*, most notably Saraha (c. eighth century), Tilopa (988–1069), Nāropa (1016–1100), and Maitrīpa (c. 1007–1085), whose instructions were transferred to Tibet primarily by the Tibetan translator Marpa Chökyi Lodrö. Atiśa, who was a contemporary of Nāropa and Maitrīpa, is said to have also taught Mahāmudrā in Tibet.⁴³ Gampopa is credited with integrating Mahāmudrā teachings into a cohesive soteriological framework, and later Kagyü authors such as Phagmo Drupa (Phag mo gru pa, 1110–1170), Düsüm Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa, 1110–1193), and Jigten Sumgön ('Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1217) built upon Gampopa's instructions, developing unique teaching programs that came to define their particular lineage traditions, such as the fivefold Mahāmudrā program of the Drikung Kagyü.⁴⁴ By the sixteenth century, comprehensive manuals such as *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā* (*Phyag chen zla ba'i 'od zer*) established Mahāmudrā pedagogy that continues to be taught to this day. While other Tibetan schools study and transmit Mahāmudrā teachings, the various Kagyü lineages emphasize Mahāmudrā as

41 Apple 2017: 7–13.

42 *de ltar bsgoms pa'i stobs kyi sngar 'dris kyi mi dang | 'phrad pa ltar ngo shes te | rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba dang | bsgoms pa'i 'od gsal gnyis phrad nas phyag rgya chen po'i dngos grub thob |* (See transcription in Apple 2019: 34, with an alternative translation provided on page 31).

43 See Apple 2017: 1–42.

44 See Sobisch 2002: 139–62.

the heart of their practice tradition, which can be understood to encompass traditional higher yoga tantra methods (primarily those taught within the six yogas of Nāropa system), as well as so-called sūtra-based and “essence” methods aimed at directly realizing the nature of mind without necessitating tantric empowerment.⁴⁵ In this tradition, it is precisely the direct realization of the luminous nature of mind that is called *mahāmudrā*.

The available texts ascribed to Mahāmudrā masters such as Nāropa, Marpa, and Gampopa continue to inform the doctrinal parameters of the pedagogical frameworks and yogic programs of the various Kagyü lineages. These texts have been collated by later adherents into para-canonical collections such as collected works of a single author (*gsung 'bum/bka' 'bum*), cycles of Dharma teachings (*chos skor*), and treasuries of collected writings attributed to a particular lineage or school (*chos mdzod/chos lugs*). Such collections map the process of systemization of both views and practices as well as sūtra and tantra terminology and hermeneutics into a cohesive tradition. The *Great Drikung Dharma Treasury* (*'Bri gung chos mdzod chen mo*), for example, includes two volumes (*ga* and *nga*) dedicated to the collected writings attributed to the Indian *siddhas* Saraha, Tilopa, and Nāropa.⁴⁶ This treasury also includes the *Collected Teachings of Marpa* (*Mar pa'i bka' 'bum*), teachings attributed to his students Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa*, 1040–1123) and Rechungpa (*Ras chung pa*, 1083/4–1161), the *Collected Teachings of Gampopa* (*Sgam po pa'i bka' 'bum*), as well as collections from other influential early Kagyü masters particularly associated with the Drikung line of transmission. Other notable corpora of early Kagyü Mahāmudrā teachings include the *Indian Mahāmudrā Teachings* (*Phyag chen rgya gzhung*),⁴⁷ which comprises various foundational Mahāmudrā teachings attributed to Indian masters, the available editions of *Marpa's Collected Writings*,⁴⁸ which contain extensive translations of teachings by both Nāropa and Maitrīpa, as well as the available editions of *Gampopa's Collected Teachings*.⁴⁹

45 These three approaches are generally considered by the tradition to have been taught by Gampopa, though he is not known to have explicitly taught this threefold framework. See Jackson 2019: 91–92.

46 *'Bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo* (51 volumes. Lhasa: 'Bri gung mthil dgon, 2004).

47 See Mathes 2011 for a detailed analysis of the history and significance of this collection.

48 A three-volume *gsung 'bum* was recently rediscovered and published in Lhasa in 2009. This collection is searchable through BDRC (W1KG12222).

49 A searchable digital edition of Gampopa's two-volume *gsung 'bum* is available on Adarsha's website: www.adarsha.dharma-treasure.org/kdbs/gampopa.

These text collections that attempt to preserve the earliest sources for the Kagyü Mahāmudrā line of transmission are now largely digitized and searchable.⁵⁰ While the naturally luminous mind is frequently mentioned throughout these collections, one rarely encounters references to buddha nature.⁵¹ Marpa's teacher Maitrīpa is credited with having “rediscovered” the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, and it is clear that that he did in fact know of this text. Maitrīpa's Mahāmudrā-related teachings more often focus on non-mentation (*amanasikāra*), or nonconceptual realization in the sense of “luminous self-empowerment,”⁵² and reality as inseparable from the natural luminosity of mind and the reflexive awareness free of stains, rather than buddha nature per se.⁵³ There is currently little evidence to suggest that Saraha, Tilopa, or Nāropa studied or taught explicitly on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. While Marpa Chökyi Lodrö does not appear to have written on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, his contemporary Marpa Dopa Chökyi Wangchuk (Mar pa do pa Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1042–1136) wrote one of the earliest-known Tibetan commentaries⁵⁴ on the text under the guidance of Parahitabhadra and was familiar with the works of Ngog Loden Sherab and Sajjana.⁵⁵

Gampopa is credited with attributing the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as the sūtric basis for Mahāmudrā (implying the buddha nature teachings are the basis for the view of non-tantric Mahāmudrā instructions).⁵⁶ His *Jewel Ornament to Liberation* (*Thar rgyan*) quotes the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, and the first chapter of this work is dedicated to teaching buddha nature, which he describes as the basis for buddhahood.⁵⁷ It is possible Gampopa's knowledge of the text and the influence it had on his particular non-tantric Mahāmudrā teachings was in part due to his exposure

50 The Drikung Songtsen Library is slowly digitizing the *'Bri gung chos mdzod chen mo*, and many other relevant Kagyü collections are searchable on BDRC, including the *Phyag chen rgya gzhung* (W3JT13319).

51 Terms including *tathāgatagarbha* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*), *sugatagarbha* (*bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po*), *tathāgata dhātu* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i kham*), or *buddhadhātu* (*sangs rgyas kyi kham*).

52 See Maitrīpa's concluding paragraph of his *Justification of Amanasikāra* (*Amanasikārādhāra*), in which he defines *a-manasikāra* (*a* = *prabhāsvāra*; *manasikāra* = *svādhiṣṭhāna*) as “luminous self-empowerment” (*prabhāsvāra svādhiṣṭhāna*). See Mathes' (2015: 247) translation.

53 See Mathes 2015, particularly page 91.

54 Brunnhölzl (2014: 1054, n. 1027) notes that this commentary was mistakenly included in the most recent publication of Marpa Chökyi Lodrö's *Collected Writings* (Lhasa, 2009).

55 For a translation and study of Marpa Dopa's commentary, see Brunnhölzl 2014: 88–91, 473–694.

56 See Mathes 2008: 34.

57 See Gampopa 1998: 47–56.

to the Kadam teachings of Atiśa, who helped translate the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in Tibet and also apparently taught on Mahāmudrā, the instructions of which he received from the *siddha* Dombiheruka.⁵⁸

Among the earliest Mahāmudrā teachings, I have yet to locate teachings that focus on the explicit topic of buddha nature within the *Phyag chen rgya gzhung* or *Marpa's Collected Writings*. Direct references to the concept are only occasionally used in the available teachings of Maitrīpa, Nāropa, and Marpa, particularly in the context of listing synonyms for the nature of mind. However, when discussing the inherent nature within all beings that is pure and is inseparable from the nature of the *dharmakāya* and suchness (*tathatā*), natural luminosity is frequently referenced and elaborated on as the primary basis for the path and buddhahood, much akin to what is described in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as buddha nature.

The Basis for Buddhahood in Early Mahāmudrā

Buddha nature and the naturally luminous mind, however interpreted, are deeply imbedded in Mahāmudrā soteriology and are generally accepted as synonymous terms among Kagyü writers⁵⁹ from at least the time of the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé (1284–1339), who taught extensively on both buddha nature and the naturally luminous mind.⁶⁰ The shared semantic range between the concept of buddha nature and natural luminosity of mind is well documented and has already been addressed by scholars and translators including Ruegg,⁶¹ Brunnhölzl,⁶² and Kano.⁶³ As mentioned, both terms focus on the ground or basis for awakening and thus have shared debates among Buddhist scholars over the centuries.

Authors such as the Fourth Shamar Chödrak Yeshé⁶⁴ (Chos grags ye shes, 1453–1524), the Seventh Karmapa Chödrak Gyatso⁶⁵ (1454–1506), and Dakpo Tashi

58 See Namgyal 2019: 175–77 and Apple 2017: 17.

59 There are still some objections to this correlation that can be found among Kagyü writings. For example, the Eighth Karmapa and Karma Phrin las pa stated that a fully grown buddha does not transmigrate in saṃsāra with the mind's nature of a saṃsāric being. See Mathes 2008: 55 and 414.

60 Brunnhölzl 2009.

61 Ruegg, 1989.

62 Brunnhölzl 2007: 57–63.

63 Kano 2016.

64 See Martina Draszczyk's illuminating article on Chos grags ye shes' view of luminosity: "A Eulogy of Mind's Connate Qualities: Zhwa dmar Chos Grags ye shes on the Hidden Meaning of Luminosity," 2015.

65 See for example Brunnhölzl's (2009) translation of 'Jam mgon kong sprul's *Commentary on the Treatise on Pointing Out the Tathāgata Heart*, in *Luminous Heart*, particularly 208.

Namgyal⁶⁶ (1513–1587) all stated that buddha nature is in fact referring to the naturally luminous mind, and this view continues to be maintained by proponents of the living tradition. But how prevalent was the concept of buddha nature, particularly in relation to teachings on the naturally luminous mind, among Mahāmudrā teachings before the Third Karmapa’s time? While it is difficult to pinpoint the earliest teachings explicitly correlating the two within the context of Mahāmudrā, it is worth exploring some of the earliest available sources on natural luminosity from the Indian *siddhas*, the important Tibetan translator of Mahāmudrā teachings Marpa, and the teachings of the Tibetan Mahāmudrā systematizer Gampopa to explore the potential extent of the influence buddha nature theory had on the earliest Mahāmudrā teachings pertaining to what constitutes the basis for buddhahood.

The Luminous Nature in Indian Mahāmudrā Teachings

Throughout the works of the earliest Indian Mahāmudrā masters, natural luminosity is used frequently to describe both the nature of mind and the nature of phenomena, as well as the nature of reality and buddhahood. Natural luminosity is also sometimes used to describe *mahāmudrā* itself. Saraha, in his *Vajra Song of the Immortal Body Treasury* (*Sku’i mdzod ’chi med rdo rje’i glu*),⁶⁷ correlates the luminous *mahāmudrā* with *bodhicitta*, reality or suchness (*tathātā*), and wisdom itself:

Luminous *mahāmudrā*, the authentic essence itself—
As *bodhicitta*, there is no change whatsoever;
As reality, subject and object are free of essence;
As true wisdom, appearances are seen to hold the meaning.⁶⁸

While the concept of buddha nature is not found in the available *dohā* literature of Saraha and Tilopa—who are considered to be the wellspring from which the Mahāmudrā view emerged—they do refer to luminosity and natural luminosity in relation to the nature of mind throughout their songs. Saraha discusses at length *mahāmudrā* in terms of positive qualities such as the connate or coemer-

66 See Callahan’s translation of Dakpo Tashi Namgyal’s *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā* (Namgyal 2019: 121).

67 Lara Braitstein offers a critical edition (2004: 145–69) and full translation (2004: 187–211) of this text in her dissertation on Saraha’s *vajragīti*. I refer to Lara’s critical edition for my translations.

68 ‘od gsal phyag rgya chen po gnyug ma’i ngo bo nyid | gang yang ’gyur med byang chub sems su gcig | kho na nyid la gzung ’dzin ngo bo bral | snang ba don ldan ye shes nyid du mthong | (Braitstein 2004: 162).

gent (*sahaja*, *lhan cig skyes pa*), reflexive awareness, and the nature of mind. Saraha, as well as later Mahāmudrā masters, uses the term *sahaja* as a synonym of *mahāmudrā*, and does in fact state that *sahaja* exists within all beings. As Braitstein notes, this language can be understood to echo buddha nature doctrine:

Just as a flawless lotus blooms [from] a single root,
Likewise, *sahaja* abides within all beings.⁶⁹

Tilopa's *Inconceivable Mahāmudrā* (*Phyag rgya chen po bsam gyis mi khyab pa*) opens with a description of the luminous *dharmatā*, which is described as the path of Mahāmudrā:

To the luminous *dharmatā* that is without beginning or end,
The inexpressible, unthinkable, ineffable path of *mahāmudrā*,
The unidentifiable *amanasikāra*,
Which is profound, peaceful, and unconditioned—I pay homage.⁷⁰

Nāropa also discusses natural luminosity throughout his teachings, commentaries, tantric instructions, and songs. In his *Concise Summary of the View* (*Lta ba mdor bsdu pa*), considered an important work outlining the Mahāmudrā view, he states,

Yet, the mind is afflicted
By the stains of adventitious thoughts
Like [muddy] water, [covered] gold, or [a cloudy] sky.
Its condition is both pure and impure.
The naturally luminous mind
And the stains of adventitious thoughts—
Whether the two are one or separate
Is something extremely vast and profound.
Scholars have studied it because it is extremely profound.
While they have expounded [on this point], I will not write [about it here].

69 *rtsa ba gcig rgyas skyon med padma bzhin* | 'gro ba kun la lhan cig skyes bzhin gnas | (Braitstein 2004: 148).

70 *skye 'gag med pa'i chos nyid 'od gsal ni* | *smra bsam brjod med phyag rgya chen po'i lam* | *ngos bzung dang bral yid la mi byed pa* | *zab zhi 'dus ma byas la phyag 'tshal lo* ||. (Torricelli 2007: 11, which includes an alternative translation). Torricelli's reading is based on Padma Karpo's commentary to the text, which he also documents in his article.

Emptiness is just that which is known as “awareness.”

Even *bodhicitta* is just that.

Even buddha potential is just that.

Buddha nature is just that.⁷¹

Here, Nāropa acknowledges the complexity of the nature of the relationship between afflictions and the naturally luminous mind, which is also stated in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Furthermore, Nāropa mentions three metaphors common to *tathāgatagarbha* literature to describe this relationship—muddy water, covered gold, and a cloudy sky—which implies he was aware of at least the same rhetoric used in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* to describe natural luminosity. He then states that awareness (*rig pa*)—which is described as naturally luminous—is what is meant by emptiness, *bodhicitta*, buddha potential, and buddha nature. The text goes on to state that this awareness is what is meant by tantric bliss, primordial enlightenment, and self-arisen wisdom.⁷²

The Naturally Luminous Mind as Reflexive Awareness

Marpa's direct teachers of Mahāmudrā, Maitrīpa and Nāropa, are both known for being proponents of the concept of reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvitti*, also translated as self-awareness), the capacity of the mind to be aware of itself. This reflexive awareness, as understood in terms of the path, is an object of purification, and when purified of the stains of conceptuality it is identified with/inseparable from the naturally luminous mind by these masters. In his *Precious Light* (*Rin po che'i 'od*), Nāropa claims that the luminous essence, which he states that all beings possess, is the natural wisdom free of exertion or movement (i.e., duality/conceptuality) and is identified with the effortless (i.e., nondual) *prajñā*, *bindu*, and reflexive awareness:

This luminous essence, which is perfect,
With precious instruction is known through investigation
To be itself the intrinsic wisdom
That all beings in the six realms possess...

71 *Lta ba mdor bsdu pa*, 244b₅₋₆: 'on kyang sems de glo bur gyi| rnam rtog dri mas nyon mongs te| chu dang gser dang nam mkha' ltar| gnas skabs dag dang ma dag gnyis| rang bzhin 'od gsal sems de dang| glo bur rnam rtog dri ma nyis| gcig gam tha dad gang yin pa| shin tu zab pa chen pa nyid| shin tu zab phyir mkhas pas dpyod| bshad pa yod kyang ma bris so|| stong pa de nyid rig pa shes| byang chub sems kyang de nyid do| sangs rgyas rigs kyang de nyid yin| bde gshegs snying po de nyid de||

72 See *Lta ba mdor bsdu pa*.

This self-arisen luminous essence,
 Since its nature is free of characteristics,
 Is the *prajñā* that is free from the attachment of methods,
 Is the *bindu* that does not express desire, diffuse, or gather,
 And effortless reflexive awareness that blissfully abides.⁷³

In the fifth verse of his *Tattvadaśaka*, which has been translated by Mathes, Maitrīpa asserts that all phenomena are luminous, which is recognized through the *samādhi* of realizing reality:

Thus phenomena are [all] of one taste,
 Unobstructed, and without an abode.
 They are all [realized as] luminous
 Through the *samādhi* of realizing true reality as it is.⁷⁴

Sahajavajra in his commentary to this text states that this luminosity is referring to the reflexive awareness free of stains.⁷⁵ In his *Golden Garland of Mahāmudrā* (**Mahāmudrakanakamālā*), Maitrīpa also connects reflexive awareness (self-awareness) with natural luminosity by stating,

Self-awareness has never arisen.
 It is empty, uncontrived, and without effort.
 The naturally luminous jewel [of this] nature of mind, which is
 self-awareness,
 Is bright, pure, and unobstructed.
 Natural luminosity is not found
 Through [any] conceptual [state of] meditation or non-meditation:
 It is uncontrived, undistracted ease
 In undistracted non-meditation.⁷⁶

73 *Rin po che'i 'od*, 354b₁₋₂, 356a₄₋₅: 'od gsal snying po rdzogs pa 'di| rin chen gsung gis brtags pas shes| 'gro drug sems can thams cad la| rang gnas ye shes nyid ldan pa|... rang 'byung 'od gsal snying po 'di| mtshan ma med pa'i rang bzhin pas| shes rab thabs kyi chags pa bral| thig le 'dod rtsol spro bsdu med| rang rig rtsol bral bde ba'i gnas|.

74 *Tattvadaśaka* 5. Translation by Mathes (2015: 212, Sanskrit and Tibetan editions: 486).

75 See Mathes 2015: 218.

76 *Phyag rgya chen po gser phreng*, I, 20–21. Translation by Mathes (2015: 277, Tibetan edition: 514).

Maitrīpa further mentions that this reflexive awareness is the buddha nature (*sangs rgyas snying po*) that exists within all beings:

The coemergent body of self-awareness, [namely]
The buddha nature [of all beings] in the six realms,
Which essentially is self-luminous awareness,
Possesses the ornament of non-conceptual commitment.⁷⁷

Maitrīpa and Nāropa’s position connecting the effortless or nonconceptual reflexive awareness with the naturally luminous mind could be understood to reflect the centrality of the concept of reflexive awareness maintained by some scholars such as Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660) and later Ratnākaraśānti (c. eleventh century), who was a teacher of Maitrīpa. Ratnākaraśānti is known for his position of “illumination only” (*prakāśamātra*), asserting that what remains after the removal of afflictions is pure illumination.⁷⁸ While *prabhāsvāra* refers to the innately pure, unafflicted nature of mind, *prakāśa* usually refers to the capacity of the mind to illuminate objects of consciousness, which can include the capacity for reflexive awareness (mind illuminating itself).⁷⁹ Given their close semantic ties, *prakāśa* (illumination) and *prabhāsvāra* (luminosity) are sometimes conflated. It is important to note that among the various Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhist philosophies of mind these two terms are generally distinguished as separate qualities of mind, including in Mahāmudrā teachings and manuals.⁸⁰ Interestingly, when defining luminous awareness in his *Mirror That Illuminates the Hearing Lineage* (*Snyan rgyud gsal ba’i me long*), Gampopa makes a point to differentiate natural luminosity from the self-illuminating reflexive awareness:

Luminous awareness is luminous not in dependence on anything else to illuminate [it]; it is natural luminosity. Luminous awareness is not the self-illuminating reflexive awareness that scholars of Cittamātra maintain as ultimate truth; like a lamp inside the vase, it is naturally

⁷⁷ Ibid., II, 27. Translation by Mathes (2015: 288, Tibetan edition: 523).

⁷⁸ See Yiannopoulos’s section of his dissertation titled “The Luminous Nature of Mind,” which is an illuminating overview of the concept of *prakāśa* according to Dharmakīrti and later commentators (2020: 370–83, particularly 380–81).

⁷⁹ See Watson 2014.

⁸⁰ See, for example, the passage on the nature of mind as natural luminosity in *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā* (Namgyal 2019: 262–65, especially page 263).

luminous, that is, it does not depend on something else to illuminate [it]. This natural luminosity is also bliss, not, however, like the bliss that is ordinary and contaminated; it is great bliss. It is not the bliss of peace like that which the śrāvakas [maintain]; it is the great bliss of nondual wisdom. That itself is emptiness, but it is not an emptiness that is nonexistence from the beginning, or an emptiness that is nonexistence after dissolution, or an emptiness that is complete nonexistence; it is empty of nature or of an own-essence.⁸¹

Here, Gampopa is emphasizing the ultimate nature of natural luminosity in terms of both affirming and non-affirming language—that it does not depend on an “other” (i.e., it is nondual), it is the great bliss of nondual wisdom, and it is empty of an own-being that is beyond extremes.

Natural Luminosity in the Six Yogas of Nāropa

The six yogas of Nāropa teachings and associated commentaries are often considered to be the basis for the tantric view and path within the Marpa Kagyü Mahāmudrā tradition. In this context, the naturally luminous mind is described as the basis for practice, which is to be pointed out by a teacher who has already stabilized their own experience. Once the luminous mind has been pointed out and the practitioner has experienced a direct recognition of innate luminosity, this experience is to be cultivated through tantric meditation techniques in order to stabilize this recognition. The practice of cultivating or familiarizing oneself with the experience of luminosity is most commonly associated with sleep meditation in the six yogas tradition, with “luminosity” counting as one of the six yogas.⁸²

While many of the six yogas instructions describe in detail the yogic techniques of the completion-stage practices, they are also a crucial resource for understanding the view of luminosity within this tradition. The *Later Authoritative Text* (*Bka' dpe phyi ma*), considered one of the few authoritative texts of the six yo-

81 *Snyan brgyud gsal ba'i me long*, 3b₂₋₅: *rig pa 'od gsal | gsal byed gzhan la ma ltos par 'od gsal rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba'o | | rig pa 'od gsal ni | sems tsam pa'i shes pa rang rig rang gsal don dam du 'dod pa lta bu ma yin te | bum nang gi mar me bzhin | rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba yin te | de yang gsal byed gzhan la ma ltos par gsal ba'o | | rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba de yang bde ba ste | de yang tha mal pa'i zag pa dang bcas pa'i bde ba lta bu ma yin te | bde ba chen po'o | | nyan thos lta bu zhi ba'i bde ba ma yin te | gnyis su med pa'i ye shes kyi bde ba chen po'o | | de nyid stong pa ste | de yang sngar nas med pa'i stong pa'am | zhig nas med pa'i stong pa | gtan nas med pa'i stong pa lta bu ma yin te | rang bzhin nam | rang gi ngo bos stong pa'o |*

82 See Kragh 2011 and Kemp 2015.

gas tradition,⁸³ regarding taking natural luminosity onto the tantric path, states that the natural luminosity of phenomena is to be understood as the pure appearance of emptiness:

As for taking luminosity as the path,
Phenomena are natural luminosity,
Primordially pure like the sky...
There is no emptiness, there is no not emptiness;
In between is also not apprehended.

Just as from a pristine river
Fish quickly jump,
Likewise, from the clear emptiness of everything,
The net of illusory manifestations arises and ceases.

It is taught that this luminosity has five types:
The luminosity that is natural,
The *prajñā* that arises as luminosity,
The luminosity of *samādhi*,
The luminosity of suchness,⁸⁴
And the luminosity of realization.

There are five times during which they occur:
At the time of death and abiding in between,
When one is asleep and in meditative equipoise,
[When] meditation and post-meditation become one taste,
And when *vipaśyanā* is realized.
Once luminosity truly manifests,
Unity⁸⁵ arises from that.⁸⁶

83 Torricelli claims it to be one of the earliest available texts articulating the six yogas program that can be attributed to Nāropa. Kragh (2011: 151) notes that early commentaries to this text only refer to the section on *gtum mo* practice, doubting the authenticity of the verses on the other yogas. Nonetheless, this text inclusive of the teachings on luminosity is preserved in the Co ne and Sde dge Bstan 'gyurs.

84 *de bzhin nyid, tattva*.

85 *zung' jug pa, yuganaddha*.

86 *Bka' dpe phyi ma*, 274b₁₋₄: 'od gsal lam du bya ba ni| chos rnam rang bzhin 'od gsal ba| gdod nas

This early six yogas teaching on luminosity introduces a fivefold typology and the five times these luminosities are experienced (on the path). In the various typologies of luminosity outlined in the six yogas commentarial literature, the first of the three, four, or five types of luminosity is always natural luminosity, which is to be pointed out, recognized, and then used as the basis for tantric practice.⁸⁷

In Nāropa's instruction above, the natural luminosity (of mind) "occurs" at the moment of death after the dissolution of all physical and mental elements. This section on luminosity ends by stating, "Buddhahood by means of sleep is the instruction of luminosity."⁸⁸ In this context, the tantric path is to take advantage of the process of falling asleep, which mimics the death process through the dissolution of bodily and mental elements. A related teaching, the *Luminosity Instruction* ('Od gsal ka dpe) preserved in Marpa's *Collected Works*, states,

The aggregates and so forth dissolve into the subtle elements, the subtle elements dissolve into the subtle mind, and even the mind dissolves into ignorance, which is how one falls asleep. Then, there is the natural luminosity of wisdom. Ignorance, which is like a hook, should not be mixed at all with consciousness. [Instead,] directly perceive the essence of luminosity itself; attain enlightenment in this life. Then, one will be able to travel to any realm that one desires. This was taught by Tilopa.⁸⁹

Instructions on luminosity yoga, typically titled in six yogas literature as *Luminosity of Sleep* (Gnyid 'od gsal), can be found throughout the early teachings and com-

dag pa nam mkha' bzhin| ... ma lus yul la bzhugs nas ni| 'od gsal bar na zhugs par 'gyur| stong pa ma yin med stong min| dbu mar yang ni mi dmigs so| ji ltar dang ba'i chu klung las| nya dag myur du 'phar ba ltar| de bzhin thams cad stong gsal las| sgyu 'phrul dra ba 'byung zhing 'gag| 'od gsal 'di ni rnam lnga ste| rang bzhin gyis ni 'od gsal dang| shes rab 'od gsal la 'char ba dang| ting nge 'dzin gyi 'od gsal dang| de bzhin nyid kyi 'od gsal dang| rtogs pa'i 'od gsal bstan pa'o| de la dus ni lnga yin te| 'chi ba'i dus dang dbu mar gnas| mnyam gzhas dang ni log pa'i tshel| mnyam rjes ro gcig gyur ba dang| lhag mthong rtogs pa'i dus yin no| 'od gsal mngon du gyur pa las| de las zung du 'jug par 'char|.

⁸⁷ Kemp 2015.

⁸⁸ Bka' dpe phyi ma, 274b₄: gnyid 'thug pos sangs rgya ba 'od gsal gyi tshig sbram|

⁸⁹ 'Od gsal ka dpe, 546: phung po la sogs khams phra ba la gzhus go| khams ni sems phra ba la gzhus go| sems kyang ma rig pa la gzhus ste| de ltar gnyid log par bya'o| phyis ni ye shes kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal ba'o| ma rig pa de lcags kyu dang 'dra| rnam par shes pa gang la'ang 'dre bar mi byed do| 'od gsal ba'i ngo bo nyid mngon sum du byed do| skye ba 'dis 'tshang rgya'o| de nas rang gar 'dod pa'i zhing khams khyad par can du 'gro na 'gro| zhes tee lo pas gsung ngo||

mentaries.⁹⁰ These detailed meditative instructions—how to position oneself, the ideal setting, the duration of sleep, how a partner should aid the meditation, what to visualize, and so on—are intended to enable the practitioner to recognize the natural luminosity (of mind) when it naturally manifests itself at the moment of falling asleep when gross conceptuality ceases (before the arising of the dream state). Instead of the practitioner allowing the ignorance or dullness of sleep to overpower them, awareness is maintained and a tantric vision of reality is cultivated so that when the natural luminosity manifests itself, it is recognized and stabilized.

These instructions for the tantric path rely on cultivating first the view that all experiences are in fact by nature luminous—whether one is sleeping, awake, or in the intermediate state. The *Four Meanings of Luminosity* (*'Od gsal don bzhi ma*), preserved in Marpa's *Collected Works* and the *Phyag chen rgya gzhung*, attributed to Milarepa,⁹¹ emphasizes this point:

According to the general instructions of Jetsun [Milarepa], there are four types of luminosity. First, there is the natural luminosity. The sights and sounds of all phenomena of the inanimate and animate world are indeed the transcendent luminosity. All phenomena are luminosity. Like clouds in the sky—whether forming, whether remaining, whether dissolving—they dissolve into the essence of the sky itself. Similarly, all phenomena that also form, form from luminosity; and when remaining, remain within luminosity; and when dissolving, dissolve into luminosity.

Furthermore, since all phenomena are luminous and empty—whether moving, whether sitting, whether lying, or whether conversing with many people—what is the use of other spiritual practices or even taking meals? It is luminosity. By keeping in mind that experience is in fact luminosity, practice again and again.⁹²

90 Perhaps one of the earliest and most authoritative teachings of the six yogas tradition on sleep luminosity is Nāropa's instructions titled *'Od gsal gti mug rdo rje'i shog dril* in his *Chos drug sras mkhar ma* (54b–59a).

91 The text can be found in the *Mar pa gsung 'bum* in the *'Bri gung chos mdzod chen mo* (vol. 6, 71a–71b) and the *Phyag chen rgya gzhung* (549–50). The text attributes itself to the Jetsun, generally understood to be Milarepa as asserted by Padma Karpo (see Torricelli 2000: 385).

92 *'Od gsal don bzhi ma*, in *Mar pa'i bka' 'bum*, vol. kha, 71a₁₋₅: *spyir rje btsun gyi gdams pas* | *'od gsal rnam pa bzhi las* | *dang po rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ni* | *brtan pa snod kyi 'jig rten dang g.yo ba nang bcud kyi 'jig rten nam* | *snang grags kyi chos thams cad 'od gsal las ye ma 'das pa yin te* | *chos*

These teachings reflect a tantric approach to recognizing, cultivating, reflecting, and habituating oneself directly with the innate nature of phenomena as naturally luminous in accordance with the Mahāmudrā view. Nāropa states in his *Vajra Scroll of Luminosity and Delusion* ('Od gsal gti mug rdo rje'i shog dril),

The great master Lavapa said,
 "If for up to twelve years
 One sleeps in a state of luminosity,
 One will obtain the siddhi of *mahāmudrā*.⁹³

Natural luminosity is thus in this context not only the basis for buddhahood but also a means to awakening and the realization of *mahāmudrā*. In this same text there is a note, possibly made by Marpa, about the difference between how Nāropa and Maitrīpa describe what occurs when the unborn luminosity of enlightenment manifests:

[Regarding] how enlightenment [occurs], Nāropa maintains that after this body of the path of liberation dissolves into luminosity, [one attains] enlightenment. Maitrīpa maintains that enlightenment is like an alchemical process or like a snake shedding its skin.⁹⁴

Natural Luminosity as the Luminous Dharmakāya

While all terms related to the true nature of reality—*dharmatā*, *dharmadhātu*, *dharmakāya*, suchness, nondual wisdom or awareness, buddhahood, and enlightenment—are ultimately attempts to describe the ineffable, when taught on a relative level these concepts are understood as sharing the characteristic of being naturally luminous—free of afflictions, conceptuality, and duality. Within

thams cad 'od gsal yin pas| dpe mkha' la sprin byung kyang gnas kyang denges kyang nam mkha' nyid kyi ngo bor denges pa bzhin du| chos thams cad byung yang 'od gsal las byung| gnas kyang 'od gsal du gnas| denges kyang 'od gsal du denges pa'o| de yang chos thams cad 'od gsal stong pa yin pas na| 'gro yang rung| 'dug kyang rung| nyal yang rung| mi mang po dang gleng lab gtong yang rung| dge sbyor gzhan ma dang| zas za ba bya ba ci byed kyang 'od gsal yin te| 'od gsal yin snyam du blos bzhas gis yang dang yang du bsgom|.

93 'Od gsal gti mug rdo rje'i shog dril, 58b₂: *slob dpon chen po zla ba pas| lo ni bcu gnyid bar du ni| 'od gsal ba la gnyid log pas| phyag rgya chen po'i dngos grub thob|.*

94 'Od gsal gti mug rdo rje'i shog dril, 55b₁₋₂: *sangs rgyas tshul| nA ro pa thar lam gyi lus 'di 'od gsal du thim nas sangs rgyas par 'dod| mi tri pas| gser 'gyur gi rtsi ltar ram| sbrul lpags rjes pa ltar sangs rgyas par 'dod||.*

the Mahāmudrā teachings in particular, the luminous *dharmakāya* is emphasized as the result or fruition of practice and inseparable from the naturally luminous mind. In his instruction on luminosity and delusion, Nāropa states that delusion possesses the essence or nature of luminosity and that, furthermore, luminosity possesses the essence or nature of the *dharmakāya*:

Delusion, which has the essence of luminosity,
Will later be sealed with luminosity,
Which has the essence of the unborn *dharmakāya*.⁹⁵

Maitrīpa also states in his *Golden Garland of Mahāmudrā* (*Phyag rgya chen po gser phreng*) that when the luminous reflexive awareness is recalled and duality ceases, the afflictions are naturally purified and thoughts are recognized to be the *dharmakāya*:

When the inconceivable luminosity of self-awareness is recalled,
No [duality of] a perceived and a perceiver whatsoever [remains].
Defilements become naturally purified, and thoughts [are recognized
as] the *dharmakāya*...⁹⁶

In the same text, Maitrīpa also states that appearances are ultimately the same as the natural luminosity of mind and the *dharmakāya*, but are temporarily veiled in the darkness of ignorance:

Appearances [are rightly seen] in the sun of the true nature of
phenomena.
But they are [usually] consigned to the dark prison of the perceived and
the perceiver;
The nature of mind, [its] luminosity, [and] the very *dharmakāya* itself
Are [thus] covered by a net of dark ignorance.⁹⁷

Gampopa's teachings in particular emphasize the luminous *dharmakāya* nature of thoughts and appearances. He quotes the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (below referred to as

95 'Od gsal gti mug rdo rje'i shog dril, S9a₁: gti mug 'od gsal ngo bo can| rjes la 'od gsal rgya yis thebs| skye med chos sku'i ngo bo can|.

96 *Phyag rgya chen po gser phreng*, I,35. Translation by Mathes (2015: 280, Tibetan edition: 517).

97 Ibid., III,23. Translation by Mathes (2015: 296, Tibetan edition: 530).

the *Uttaratantra*) to define the *dharmakāya* luminosity, which he describes as the nature of all phenomena:

The various external appearances that appear in white, red, and so forth, and also the various internal realizations through mindful awareness, are the *dharmakāya*-luminosity. ... All thoughts and perceptions—whether it is pleasure or pain, something to abandon or something that remedies, a fault or a quality—the various appearances, everything, is the nature of the *dharmakāya*-luminosity. Therefore, there is nothing about it that is to be changed, increased, decreased, negated, established, rejected, or accepted. The *Uttaratantra* states, “From this, there is nothing to remove and nothing to be added.”⁹⁸

Here he quotes the famous *Ratnagotravibhāga* passage describing the *tathāgata-garbha* as the correct way of understanding emptiness (*śūnyatārthanaya*).⁹⁹ As already mentioned, Gampopa references the *Ratnagotravibhāga* also in the chapter on buddha nature in his *Jewel Ornament to Liberation* (*Thar rgyan*). In his *Sunlight of Scriptures and Reasoning* (*Bstan chos lung gi nyi 'od*),¹⁰⁰ Gampopa dedicates a section of the text to the naturally luminous mind, in which he lists authoritative quotes describing natural luminosity, focusing on the emptiness aspect of natural luminosity as the *dharmadhātu*:

The mind is the naturally luminous *dharmadhātu*, which is emptiness.¹⁰¹

Gampopa does not quote the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in this work, but does quote several of the canonical passages mentioned above, including the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*

98 *Mgon po zla 'od gzhon nus mdzad pa'i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in *Dwags po rin po che'i bka 'bum*, vol. 1, 40a_{2-3,6-7}: *phyi rol dkar dmar gyi snang ba sna tshogs su snang ba dang | nang dran rig gis rtogs pa sna tshogs su 'char ba 'di thams cad kyang | 'od gsal chos kyi sku yin | ... dran snang gi chos thams cad la yang bde ba dang sdug pa | spang bya dang gnyen po skyon dang yon tan la sogs pa sna tshogs su snang yang thams cad kyang 'od gsal chos kyi sku'i rang bzhin yin pas | bcas bcos dang | 'phel 'grib dang | dgag sgrub dang spang blang byar med de | rgyud bla ma las kyang | 'di la gsal bya ci yang med | | bzahag par bya ba cung zad med |.*

99 *tatra katamaḥ sa tathāgatagarbhaśūnyatārthanaya ucyate | nāpaneyam atah kimcid upaneyam na kimcana | draṣṭavyam bhūtato bhūtaṃ bhūtadarśi vimucyate ||* (Johnston 1950: 75,17–76,2).

100 An edition can be found in *Dwags po'i lha rje'i bka' 'bum* in *'Bri gung chos mdzod chen mo*, vol. 13, 21a–56a.

101 *Bstan chos lung gi nyi 'od*, 32b₁: *sems ni rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba'i chos dbyings stong pa nyid yin |.*

passage correlating the luminous mind with buddha nature.¹⁰² To the best of my knowledge, the *Lung gi nyi 'od*, if authored or at least orally authored by Gampopa or his direct disciples, would be the earliest Kagyü reference that explicitly quotes this passage in defining the luminous mind, which has since become a standard canonical reference for Mahāmudrā teachings to define the naturally luminous mind in terms of buddha nature.¹⁰³

One of the most well-known supporters of Gampopa's view of *dharmakāya*-luminosity is Jigten Sumgön, who is known to have also supported the claim that the *Ratnagotravibhāga* is the foundation for the Mahāmudrā view. Just like Gampopa, Jigten Sumgön also emphasized that the naturally luminous mind is the basis for buddhahood and inseparable from the fruit that is the *dharmakāya*:

Regarding natural luminosity, the nature of your mind is luminous, [however,] you do not know that it primordially abides within the *dharmakāya*. ... Thus, an authentic guru points out the luminosity of the basis as the *dharmakāya*, which is put into practice.¹⁰⁴

Jigten Sumgön's famous teaching on the fivefold luminosity, clearly influenced by the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, explains how the basis luminosity (luminosity of the nature of mind) is inseparable from the ultimate luminosity (luminosity of the *dharmakāya*):

First, one's true mind is luminosity, neither coming nor going, abiding primordially as the unborn *dharmakāya*, free from adventitious afflictions. For example, a lotus, although born from mud, is not tainted by mud,¹⁰⁵ nor is gold stained by tarnish.¹⁰⁶ Since it is not known that it is this way, one is unaware or ignorant of the delusion regarding reality. On account of this, there is attachment to beauty and aversion to ugliness. Since ignorance has produced the basis for those [inclina-

102 Ibid., 33b₁₋₂.

103 See for example *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā* (Namgyal 2019: 262).

104 *Bsre ba'i man ngag*, 7a: rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ni rang gi sems nyid 'od gsal | chos kyi sku ru gdod ma nas gnas pa de ngo ma shes pa yin | de kho na nyid la rmongs pa'i ma rig pa'am | gti mug gis de'i rkyen gyis gzugs la sogs pa legs pa rnams la chags | mi legs pa rnams la sdang zhing | rgyu 'bras log par spyod pa rnams las | rgyu 'bras la rmongs pa'i ma rig pa'am gti mug gis | de la bla ma dam pas gzhi'i 'od gsal chos kyi skur ngo sprod pa de sgom par byed pa la |.

105 Simile of the buddha found in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (Johnston 1950: 51,17–18).

106 Fourth simile of *tathāgatagarbha* from the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and described in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (Johnston 1950: 37,6–9).

tions], one wrongly perceives cause and effect. [Thus,] one roams in cyclic existence that is the ocean of suffering, unaware or ignorant of the delusion regarding karma, cause, and effect.

Second, regarding the luminosity of the path, it is the method for [realizing] what is the basis. Having been pointed out by a genuine guru, that introduction is like meeting someone who is already familiar. In terms of the resolve that one's own mind is the *dharmakāya*, the recognition of oneself by oneself, one practices with regard to the basis. [Through this,] all thoughts of attachment and aversion in the day are like snow falling on heated rocks, or one realizes the lack of inherent nature, or awareness that is untainted by stains, being stripped naked, is like a clear lump of crystal...

Regarding the ultimate luminosity, after arriving in terms of the true luminosity of the basis, the meaning of the *dharmakāya* as neither coming nor going is realized. Thus, the *rūpakāya* appears to the perception of others, transforming into beneficial action for any sentient being who is to be tamed. For example, it is like after drawing a precious jewel from the mud, then washing it three times, wiping it three times, and so forth, it becomes all that is needed and desired; or like gold free of tarnish that is able to fulfill its function.¹⁰⁷

Within this context, early Kagyü Mahāmudrā masters understood the naturally luminous *dharmakāya* to be inseparable from the naturally luminous mind. Both

107 *Bsre ba'i zhal gdams khag*, 151a–b: rang gi sems nyid 'od gsal 'gro 'ong med pa| skye med chos kyi sku ru ye gdod ma nyid nas gnas te| blo bur gyi dri ma dang bral ba'o| dper na padma 'dam nas skyes kyang 'dam gyis ma gos pa'am| gser la g.ya' ma gos pa lta bu'o| de ltar yin pa la yin par ngo ma shes pas| de kho na nyid la rmongs pa'i ma rig pa'am| gti mug pa'o| de'i rkyen gyis gzugs legs pa rnams la chags| mi legs pa rnams la sdang| de dag gi gzhi gti mug gis byas nas| rgyu 'bras log par spyad pas| 'khor ba sdug bsngal gyi rgya mtshor 'khyams pa ni| las rgyu 'bras rmongs pa'i ma rig pa'am| gti mug go| gnyis pa lam gyis 'od gsal ni| gzhi ji ltar yin pa'i tshul| bla ma dam pas ngo sprad nas| ngo 'phrod pa de sngar 'dris kyi mi dang 'phrad pa bzhin du| rang gis rang ngo shes pa rang sems chos skor blo thag chod pa'i steng du| gzhi thog tu nyams su blangs pas| nyin par chags sdang gi rnam rtog thams cad rdo tshan la kha ba bab pa lta bu'am| rang bzhin med par rtogs pa'am| dris mas ma gos par rig pa rjen la bud pas| shel sgong gya' dag pa lta bu'o| ... mthar thug gi 'od gsal ni| gzhi'i 'od gsal de nyid kyi steng du phebs nas| chos sku 'gro 'ong dang bral ba'i don rtogs pas gzhan snang la gzugs sku rnam gnyis kyi snang ba shar nas| sems can gang la gang 'dul gyi don byed par 'gyur ro| dper na| nor bu rin po che 'dam nas bton nas| bkru ba gsum dang| phyi ba gsum la sogs pa byas pas| dgos 'dod thams cad 'byung ba'am| gser g.ya' dang bral bas don byed nus pa lta bu'o| 'od gsal lnga gcig tu bsre ba'i man ngag zab mo'o||

the mind and the *dharmakāya* not only share the same characteristic of being pure by nature, but they are in fact one and the same from the perspective of the result—the mind's nature is the *dharmakāya*, and when freed of afflictions, the mind is the *dharmakāya*. For Gampopa and indeed Jigten Sumgön—both of whom are well known for emphasizing the luminous *dharmakāya* nature of not just the mind but even thoughts—the luminosity of the basis (for buddhahood), the naturally luminous mind, is inseparable or no different from the ultimate or fruitional luminosity that arises at the time of enlightenment. Why is this so? Because they are both of the nature of the *dharmakāya*, a position that is in accord with the *Ratnagotravibhāga* teachings.

Concluding Remarks

While the overview I have provided here may seemingly reflect an evolution of thought on the naturally luminous mind from Indian Buddhism through to early Mahāmudrā and six yogas teachings, this is in fact intended to be merely a sketch of the semantic scope of the naturally luminous mind among these textual traditions. Given the sheer amount of textual material that still needs to be systematically processed, it is almost impossible to reflect a clear historical chronology and full account of the scholastic spiritual writing on the topic. What I hope has been made clear from this sketch is the centrality of the concept of the luminous nature of mind to the Mahāmudrā tradition, which from its earliest Tibetan expressions has relied doctrinally on Indian sūtric, tantric, commentarial, and *dohā* traditions.

While buddha nature has generally come to be accepted as synonymous with the naturally luminous mind in the Mahāmudrā tradition, this has not always necessarily been the case in all contexts. Rather, at least during the tradition's more formative period, concepts such as nondual wisdom, *prajñā*, suchness, effortless reflexive awareness, and the nature of mind have been more commonly used to describe the natural luminosity of mind as the basis for buddhahood—whether in terms of establishing the view or recalling on the path. From the perspective of the result, the naturally luminous mind is perhaps most often described as the *dharmakāya* from the time of Gampopa.¹⁰⁸

Although explicit correlations made between buddha nature and the natural luminosity of mind are rare among the earliest available writings on luminosity in

108 From the time of Sgam po pa, this view of luminosity was considered a Mahāmudrā view, which is said to be based on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. This is asserted by 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nus dpal. See Mathes 2008: 34–35.

the Mahāmudrā tradition, the semantic overlap and shared use of metaphors are made clear from the earliest sources. As more texts and collections become available and searchable, I hope to provide a more comprehensive study on the semantic relationship between buddha nature and the naturally luminous mind in the early Mahāmudrā teachings.

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A Meditation-Oriented Approach to Buddha Nature as Seen by Early Kagyü Masters

Martina Draszczyk

Gampopa's Life and Legacy

Gampopa (Sgam po pa Bsod nam rin chen, 1079–1153) “holds a unique position among the many illustrious philosopher-saints of Tibet.”¹ This is how Herbert V. Guenther phrased it in his introduction to his pioneering translation of Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (*Thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*), which he published as early as 1959. And in fact, up until the present day, Gampopa, also known as Nyam me Dakpo Larje, the “incomparable healer from Dakpo,” is held in the highest esteem in Tibetan Buddhism. According to the various hagiographies, Gampopa was married, had two children, and led a successful life as a physician. Yet, life hit him hard in that a contagious illness caused the death of his entire family. Shortly afterward, at the age of twenty-five, he took full monastic ordination and began his studies with well-established and strongly monastic-oriented Kadam masters such as the well-known Jayülwa Shönu Ö (Bya yul ba Gzhon nu 'od, 1075–1138) and Chakriwa (Lcags ri ba, twelfth century).² By virtue of their guidance and paired with his consistent meditative practice, Gampopa acquired a comprehensive knowledge of Buddhism and achieved stable meditation states. Then, at the approximate age of thirty, he sought further spiritual guidance—despite strongly voiced objections from the side of his Kadam teachers—and followed his impulse to find the yogi Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1040–1123), who quickly became his main or root teacher.³

As far as historical records tell us, Gampopa's Kadam teachers were rather critical of Milarepa and his unconventional life. Taking this into account, it is not difficult to imagine that Gampopa went through a period of tension between two strands of teachings: on the one hand the Kadam tradition tracing back to Atiśa's (982–1054) teaching activities in Tibet, and on the other hand the Mahāmudrā tradition that Gampopa received from his main teacher Milarepa, going back to Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1012–1097), who in turn had re-

1 Guenther 1959: ix.

2 Ibid.: x.

3 Tib.: *rtsa ba'i bla ma*. See Gyaltrul Rinpoche 2004: 18–54.

ceived it from his main Indian siddha teachers Nāropa (eleventh century) and Maitrīpa (986–1063).⁴ As time passed, Gampopa became famous for merging the two streams of the Kadam and Mahāmudrā traditions into one teaching system.⁵ He thereby created a template for spiritual practice that attracted a great number of disciples, and all the Kagyü traditions that have evolved from it are to this day summed up under the umbrella term Dakpo Kagyü.

The Main Views on Buddha Nature in Gampopa's Spiritual Vicinity

Having taken this short tour through Gampopa's life and legacy, let us now turn to the topic of buddha nature as he viewed it. In this regard it may in turn be worthwhile to see what kind of views regarding buddha nature were prevalent in Tibet during Gampopa's time and within his spiritual vicinity. These were mainly the positions of Ngog Loden Sherab (Rngog Blo ldan shes rab, 1059–1109) and Tsen Kawoché (Btsan kha bo che, b. 1021), who both were disciples of the Kashmiri teacher Sajjana and both held the main Indian śāstra discussing buddha nature, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, to be of definitive (*nītārtha*) rather than provisional (*neyārtha*) meaning, albeit in different ways. In Tibet, this work is usually referred to with the alternative title *Uttaratantraśāstra* (i.e., the treatise *Ultimate Continuum*).⁶

The Analytical Tradition of Ngog Loden Sherab

Ngog Loden Sherab equates buddha nature with natural purity in the sense of emptiness or essencelessness that pervades the mind of all sentient beings. This view can be traced in Indian Buddhism, for example, to the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and the works of several prominent Madhyamaka thinkers such as Candrakīrti, Bhāvaviveka, Kamalaśīla, Jñānaśrīmitra, and Jayānanda.⁷

Later on, Ngog Loden Sherab's position was called, for example by Śākya Chokden (Shakya mchog ldan, 1428–1507), the “analytical tradition” of *Ratnagotravibhāga* exegesis that defines buddha nature as emptiness and the definitive meaning of this treatise in the sense of a non-affirming negation.⁸ Śākya Chokden also called it the “tradition of studying and reflecting” to distinguish it from the

4 See *ibid.*: 83–93, where Gyatrul Rinpoche also discusses the tension Gampopa experienced in his efforts to be at home in both the Kadam and Mahāmudrā traditions.

5 Tib.: *bka' phyag chu bo gnyis 'dres*.

6 See an English translation of the *Ultimate Continuum*, including its commentary by Asaṅga, in Brunnhölzl 2014.

7 Kano 2016: 8 and n. 26. See also Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 1, 46 and n. 20.

8 Tib.: *med dgag*.

“tradition of meditation”⁹ using the template of the early Buddhist classification of three types of insight (*prajñā*), that is, insight deriving from studying, reflecting, and meditating. Śākya Chokden defines buddha nature in one of his early works, for example, as “nothing but the natural purity, that is, the emptiness aspect of all phenomena, which pervades all that is knowable and which is a non-affirming negation, something akin to space.”¹⁰ It should be mentioned at this point, however, that in the course of his life Śākya Chokden shifted his position from advocating a non-affirming presentation of reality to an affirming “other-empty” presentation.

The Meditative Tradition of Tsen Kawoché

Tsen Kawoché equates buddha nature with wisdom and luminosity imbued with qualities. It is said that the Kashmiri teacher Sajjana instructed Tsen Kawoché and another Tibetan called Zu Gawé Dorjé in all of the Five Works of Maitreya and that he gave them the key instructions for the associated meditation practice.¹¹ This view that considers buddha nature as inseparable from wisdom and luminosity and its qualities can be traced in Indian Buddhism, for example, to the *Tathagātagarbhasūtra* or the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*.

For Tsen Kawoché, the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) is the naturally pure wisdom (*rang bshin rnam dag gi ye shes*), or natural luminosity (*rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba*), referred to as buddha nature that pervades everything from buddhas to sentient beings.¹² Śākya Chokden, for example, explains by referring to Tsen Kawoché's tradition that “the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) I discovered from having studied the Maitreya Teachings at age fifty-nine is the naturally pure wisdom that pervades everything from buddhas to sentient beings.” It is precisely this naturally pure wisdom or natural luminosity that Śākya Chokden, as stated above, labels

9 Tib.: *mtshan nyid lugs/thos bsam gyi lugs* versus *sgom lugs*. See for example in *Mus rabs 'byams pa'i dris lan*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 23, 458₄₋₅. For a critical edition of the Tibetan text and its translation see Higgins and Draszcyk 2016: vol. 1, 82 and n. 200. See also Higgins and Draszcyk 2019: 42.

10 See Śākya Chokden in *Dbu ma'i 'byung tshul*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 4, 239₇–240₁: *de'i ngos 'dzin yang | chos thams cad kyi rang bzhin rnam dag gi cha | shes bya thams cad la khyab byed du 'jug pa de nyid yin la | de yang med par dgag pa nam mkha' lta bu zhig ste |*. This passage is translated and discussed in van der Kuijp 1983: 43.

11 See Kano 2006: 53–54. See also Higgins and Draszcyk 2019: vol. 1, 42.

12 See Śākya Chokden in *Dbu ma'i 'byung tshul*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 4, 240₂₋₃: *rang lo drug cu lon pa'i tshes byams pa'i chos gsan pa las rnyed pa'i nges don ni | sangs rgyas nas sems can gyi bar la khyab pa'i rang bzhin rnam dag gi ye shes | rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba de nyid bde bar gshegs pa'i snying por gsungs pa yin no zhes |*.

a “meditative tradition” that defines buddha nature as emptiness in the sense of an affirming negation.¹³

The famous philosopher and historian Gö Lotsāwa (’Gos lo tsA ba, 1392–1481), states in his own commentary on the *Ultimate Continuum*:

The Dharma master Drikungpa [Jigten Sumgön] rejoiced in Jé Gampopa’s statement that the basic text of these mahāmudrā instructions of ours is the [Ratnagotravibhāga] *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* composed by the illustrious Maitreya; and since it is evident in the notes to [his] *Uttaratantra* explanations, the points he makes when presenting the three dharmacakras, and also the explanations deriving from Sajjana’s heart disciple Tsen Kawoché, are [all] in accordance with mahāmudrā proper, I have relied on them and have made [this] clear to others as best as I could.¹⁴

Just as Gö Lotsāwa¹⁵ singled out Tsen Kawoché’s interpretation as the one that accords with Gampopa’s Dakpo Mahāmudrā, Tsen Kawoché’s interpretation was widely endorsed by the majority of later Kagyü masters in their strongly meditation-oriented approach to the spiritual path. Thus, also at the later end of this tradition’s historical spectrum in Tibet, Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé (’Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas, 1813–1899) called Tsen Kawoché’s system “the superior lineage of extraordinary exegesis and practice.”¹⁶ He also confirms in his introduction to his commentary on the *Ultimate Continuum* that this continued to be the view maintained in the Karma Kagyü tradition and that Gö Lotsāwa represents exactly this meditative tradition of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* exegesis.¹⁷

13 Tib.: *ma yin dgag*. See Mathes 2008: 368. See also Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 1, 42 and n. 57.

14 Translation by Mathes 2008: 368. See also Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 1, 42 and n. 57.

15 On Gö Lotsāwa’s reference to this in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba’i me long* (574_{8–13}), see Kano 2016: 353, n. 35. On Gö Lotsāwa’s reference to this in his *Deb ther sngon po*, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2016: vol. 2, 17 and n. 11.

16 See *Mi ldog pa seng ge’i nga ro*, 12_{13–14}: *thun mong ma yin pa’i bshad pa dang nyams len gyi rgyun khyad par ’phags pa yin* |. This is discussed in Higgins and Draszczuk 2016: vol. 1, 83 and n. 202.

17 See Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 1, 42 and n. 57.

Śākya Chokden's Summary

Śākya Chokden summarizes these two interpretations of buddha nature, which can be traced back to Ngog Loden Sherab and Tsen Kawoché, and states that the *Ultimate Continuum* clearly attests the meditative tradition:

According to the teachings of former masters, the identifications of buddha nature in the sense that the emptiness of duality is an instance of a non-affirming negation and/or an instance of an affirming negation were said to be distinguished according to whether they explained the Maitreya teachings in line with studying and reflecting or in line with the tradition of meditation. In the root [text, i.e., the *Ratnagotravibhāga*] and commentary, the latter system is clearly attested.¹⁸

Gampopa's Treatment of Buddha Nature

Gampopa was well acquainted with the interpretations of both the analytical approach of Ngog Loden Sherab and the meditative approach of Tsen Kawoché. Ngog Loden Sherab's interpretation of buddha nature was definitely transmitted in Kadam circles and thus an interpretation that Gampopa studied with his Kadam teachers. Moreover, within the Kadam tradition, Tsen Kawoché's perspective was also taught and practiced, at least to a certain extent.¹⁹ Additionally, Gampopa's main teacher was Milarepa. He in turn was heir to the teaching tradition of Marpa, who, at least as described by Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé,²⁰ had received the "meditative tradition" of the "Five Treatises of Maitreya" directly from Maitrīpa.

How did Gampopa treat these perspectives on such a central issue—if not *the* actual backbone—of the sūtric and tantric Mahāyāna? Other than later Tibetan scholars, Gampopa does not seem to see a contradiction in (a) an affirmative account that defines mind's true nature as emptiness in the sense of luminous wisdom imbued with enlightened qualities and (b) a non-affirming account that regards mind's true nature as emptiness in the sense of essencelessness lacking any ontological essence. On the one hand this may have to do with the fact that during Gampopa's time, polemic issues regarding Madhyamaka expositions

18 See *Mus rab 'byams pa'i dri lan*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 23, 458₄₋₅: *slob dpon snga ma dag gi gsung nas | gnyis stong med dgag gi cha dang ma yin dgag gi cha la snying po'i ngos 'dzin du byed pa | byams chos thos bsam ltar 'chad pa dang | byams chos sgom lugs ltar 'chad pa'i khyad yin gsung | rtsa 'grel na ni lugs phyi ma de nyid gsal bar bzhugs |*.

19 See Mathes 2015: 304–7.

20 See Draszczyk 2015: 84 and n. 288.

of the doctrines of emptiness and essencelessness, as well as those regarding the various theories on buddha nature, were not at the forefront of Tibetan Buddhist discussions as they were one or two centuries later. The main reason, however, presumably has to do with Gampopa's extremely pragmatic approach to spirituality in that he strongly emphasized meditation practice and Mahāmudrā teachings, introducing his students directly into mind's ultimate nature.

In short, it seems that he was not interested in long philosophical debates but simply encouraged his students to focus on the meditative practice of Mahāmudrā. This is not surprising, given that the yogi Milarepa has been his main teacher, and, in particular, if one thinks of the farewell present Milarepa is said to have offered to him when Gampopa left for his own retreat: Milarepa showed him his buttocks covered with calluses from decades of sitting in meditation on hard rock.

Gampopa's way of guiding his students, along with his view of mind's true nature, may best be exemplified in the following short excerpts from his *Presentation of the Three Trainings*:

There are two types of insight: ultimate insight and conventional insight. The ultimate one is the innate. The conventional one is the precise discernment of phenomena. ...

There are three exclamations: the exclamation that is pleasant to hear, the exclamation expressive of well-being, and the exclamation as to appearances.

The exclamation that is pleasant to hear: The innate, that is, con-nate wisdom [*lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes, saḥajajñāna*], which is present in the mind stream of all sentient beings,—as that is present within oneself, it does not need to be searched for elsewhere.

The exclamation expressive of well-being: The *dharmakāya*, that is, the great well-being that is the relinquishment of suffering—this *dharmakāya* is nothing but the awareness of one's own mind; on its own, it is nonexistent and therefore does not need to be searched for.

The exclamation as to appearances: All these appearances and sounds are one's own mind—they do not occur on their own, and therefore you do not need to be afraid of them. ...²¹

21 *Bslab gsum rnam gzbag*, in *G_{SB}* vol. 3, 338₁–340₁: *shes rab rnam pa gnyis ni | don dam pa'i shes rab dang | kun rdzob kyi shes rab bo || don dam pa ni gnyug ma'o || kun rdzog ni chos rnams la rnam par 'byed pa'o || ... 'o dod rnam pa gsum ni | snyan pa'i 'o dod | bde ba'i 'o dod | grags pa'i 'o dod | snyan pa'i 'o dod ni | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes 'gro ba thams cad kyi rgyud la yod pa'i gnyug ma | de rang la yod pas gzhan nas btsal mi dgos so || bde ba'i 'od dod ni | sdug bsngal spangs pa'i bde*

In the context of buddha nature, the key phrases in these statements are

The innate, that is, connate wisdom, which is present in the mind stream of all sentient beings—as that is present within oneself, it does not need to be searched for elsewhere.

And

This *dharmakāya* is nothing but the awareness of one's own mind; on its own, it is nonexistent and therefore does not need to be searched for.

Let us therefore explore these two—connate wisdom and the *dharmakāya*—in the framework of Gampopa's teachings.

Gampopa's View on the Dharmakāya as Connate Wisdom

As for the *dharmakāya* and its nonexistence or emptiness, an explanation in the context of buddha nature is given by Gampopa in the first part of his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, where he establishes buddha nature as the basis of the spiritual path. In this context, in explaining stanza 1.28 from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*,

Because the body of the perfect Buddha is [all-]pervading,
Because suchness [*tathatā*] is undifferentiated, and
Because they have the potential,
All sentient beings are always endowed with buddha nature.²²

Gampopa states that buddhahood is equivalent to the *dharmakāya* in the sense of emptiness that pervades all sentient beings, and that all beings are therefore endowed with buddha nature. As he does not specify what he means exactly when equating the *dharmakāya* with emptiness, it would appear, at least at first glance, that Gampopa echoes the non-affirming interpretation of Ngog Loden Sherab, for whom the mind is natural purity, empty in and of itself.²³

ba chen po chos kyi sku de | rang gi sems rig pa chos kyi sku 'di kho na yin | logs na med pas btsal mi dgos so || grags pa'o 'od dod ni | snang grags kyi chos 'di dag thams cad rang gi sems yin | logs nas ma byung khyod de la 'jigs mi dgos so ||.

22 RGV 1.28 (Johnston 1950: 16): *saṃbuddhakāyaspharaṇāt tathatāvvyatibhedataḥ | gotrataś ca sadā sarve buddhagarbhāḥ śarīriṇaḥ |* . According to Schmithausen (1971: 142), *spharaṇa* here means that beings are embraced and pervaded (“umhüllt-und-durchdrungen”) by the *saṃbuddhakāya*.

23 See Kano 2016: 257.

Regarding connate wisdom, Gampopa's *Collected Works*, which consists largely of transcripts compiled by his students based on his oral teachings, provides us with plenty of information about it. Here it is evident that Gampopa defines the realization of mind's empty nature affirmatively as connate wisdom that exists in sentient beings. In his *Excellent Qualities: Teachings to the Assembly*, for example, he specifies,

The truth is the actuality that the nature of mind is not nonexistent;
connate wisdom is the truth.

When mind is realized, the nature of reality is directly revealed.²⁴

Moreover, as an equivalent for connate wisdom Gampopa also makes frequent use of the term *natural awareness* (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), another key term in Dakpo Mahāmudrā. In this regard, for example, he says,

My noble teacher [Milarepa], who is endowed with experiences and realization said that connate wisdom [*sahajajñāna*] is precisely that which exists as primordially present natural awareness.²⁵

In his *Great Teachings to the Assembly* he further explains,

If one now wishes to liberate oneself from saṃsāra, it is necessary to recognize natural awareness because this is the root of all qualities. So what is referred to as *natural awareness* is one's mind, abiding in itself, not diluted by any phenomenon whatsoever, not polluted by any worldly consciousness whatsoever, not obscured by any drowsiness, torpor, or thoughts whatsoever. ... [Natural awareness] directly makes the ultimate the path; it is direct [realization]. The recognition of natural awareness is ... the king of all wisdoms, the king of all qualities.²⁶

24 *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, in G_{SB} vol. 1, 511₄₋₅: *bden pa ni sems kyi ngo bo med pa ma yin pa'i don | lhan cig skyas pa'i ye shes bden pa yin | sems rtog pa'i dus su chos nyid mngon du grub |*.

25 *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, in G_{SB} vol. 3, 493₅–494₁: *rtogs pa nyams myong dang ldan pa'i bla ma rje btsun gyi zhal nas | sa ha dza'i ye shes ni | da lta tha mal gyi shes pa yod pa 'di nyid yin gsung |*. See also a similar statement in *Rje dwags po lha rje'i gsung zhal gyi bdud rtsi thun mong ma yin pa*, in G_{SB} vol. 1, 587₅: *bdag gi bla ma rin po che'i zhal nas | lhan cig sgyes pa'i ye shes ni | da ltar gyi tha mal gyi shes pa ye nas yod pa 'di nyid yin gsung |*.

26 *Tshogs chos chen po*, in G_{SB} vol. 2, 45₁–49₁: *da res 'khor ba las thar bar 'dod na | chos thams cad kyi rtsa ba yin pas tha mal gyi shes pa ngo shes dgos | de yang tha mal gyi shes pa zhes bya ba | rang*

It appears that Gampopa takes buddha nature as mind's natural purity in the sense that mind's emptiness is innately imbued with qualities. While ordinary sentient beings are not in touch with this, the full realization of mind's true nature or natural awareness is the *dharmakāya* in terms of realization that is nothing other than connate wisdom. Thus, his approach to buddha nature combines two aspects:

1. the emptiness or natural purity aspect of buddha nature, or the *dharmakāya*, and
2. the aspect of its innate qualities, i.e., its radiance (*gsal ba*) or manifestation (*snang ba*).

Realization discloses the inseparable unity of these two aspects:

1. buddha nature's lack of an intrinsic or ontological essence and
2. its soteriological efficacy manifesting as buddha qualities.

It is a view that emphasizes the inseparable unity of the two truths, of emptiness and clarity or manifestation.

Gampopa's Preference of the Siddha and Tantric Method

In his *Eloquent Teachings to the Assembly*, in which Gampopa also discusses Madhyamaka issues, he points to his emphasis of the siddha and/or Mantrayāna methods of directly realizing connate wisdom.²⁷ By the same token, he goes on to say,

gi shes pa 'di la chos kyi rnam pa gang gis kyang ma bslad pa | 'jig rten gyi rnam par shes pa gang gis kyang ma rnyogs pa | bying rmugs dang rtog pa gang gis kyang ma gtum par rang sor gzahag pa yin | ... don ngos lam du byed pa yin | mngon sum pa yin ... tha mal gyi shes pa ngo shes pa ni ... 'di ye shes thams cad kyi rgyal po yin no | yon tan thams cad kyi rgyal po yin |.

27 *Mgon go zla 'od gzhon nus mdzad pa'i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in *G_{SB}* vol. 1, 336₁₋₅: "Madhyamaka comprises the 'Illusion-like' (Māyopama) and the 'Nonfoundational' [or 'Non-abiding'] (Apratiṣṭhāna). From the [latter derives] the scriptural traditions of Apratiṣṭhāna [in the sense] of Unity (*zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa*) and Apratiṣṭhāna [in the sense] of Cessation (*rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa*). The Secret Mantra has many [subdivisions] such as the New (*Gsar ma*) and Old (*Rnying ma*), outer and inner, and Father tantras and Mother tantras. To summarize, there are two [paths]: a Path of Accumulation of the Perfections (Pāramitā) and a Path of Methods of Secret Mantra (Guhyamantra). Since the first of these takes a long time and its conduct is difficult to practice, I do not currently teach it. [As for the second,] based on the warmth of the teacher's blessing, perfect wisdom is recognized. One thus enters the gate of the Path of Methods of Secret Mantra, which makes one realize coemergent wisdom directly." *dbu ma la sgyu ma lta bu dang rab tu mi gnas pa'o | | de las zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa dang | rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa'i gzhung dang | gsang sngags la yang gsar ma dang | rnying ma | phyi ma dang nang pa | pha rgyud dang ma rgyud la sogs mang du yod kyang | bsdu na gnyis | pha rol tu*

When the teacher's blessing has permeated [us], all the supreme and ordinary accomplishments are realized without difficulty. For example, although a great treasure that eliminates the suffering of poverty for seven generations is [hidden] in the house of a poor man, as long as the treasure is not revealed, the suffering due to poverty [continues]. However, the moment it is discovered, [the man] is free from the suffering of poverty. We are just like the poor man in this example. Although the treasure-like connate mind as such is innately present in the mind stream of all sentient beings, as long as the teacher's blessing has not permeated [us]—which is akin to the treasure not being revealed—[we] don't take it up and we lack a method to attain the two types of accomplishment. When the teacher's blessing does permeate [us]—akin to opening the treasure—we recognize connate wisdom and attain the two types of accomplishment without any difficulty.²⁸

Thus, Gampopa illustrates his preferred siddha and/or tantric teaching method by way of the famous analogy of a poor man's discovery of a hidden treasure beneath his hut, an example reminiscent of Indian buddha nature classics such as the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Unlike the accounts found in these texts, however, Gampopa speaks about a personal teacher, not the buddha or a seer (*ṛṣi*), who reveals the hidden treasure. Moreover, in specifying the referent of this analogy, Gampopa substitutes connate wisdom for buddha nature, thereby showing the siddha and/or tantric provenance of his teachings.

In surveying his corpus in the *Collected Works*, in particular the transcripts of his oral teachings, which make up the bulk portion of this collection, it becomes very clear that Gampopa made use of the terminology in line with the Indian siddha

phyin pa tshogs kyi lam dang | gsang sngags thabs kyi lam mo | | de la yang dang po ni dus yun ring du 'gor zhing | spyod pa nyams su blang dka' bar 'dug pas da res de mi ston | bla ma'i byin rlabs kyi drod la brten nas yang dag pa'i ye shes ngos zin te | lhan cig skyepa pa'i ye shes mgnon sum du rtogs par byed pa'i gsang sngags thabs kyi lam gyi sgor zhugs nas ...

- 28 Ibid., 337₂–338₁: *bla ma'i byin rlabs zhugs na mchog thun mong gi dngos grub thams cad tshegs med par 'grub ste | dper na mi dbul po'i khyim na mi rabs bdun rgyud du dbul ba'i sdug bsngal sel bar byed par byed pa'i gter chen gcig yod yang | gter kha ma phyed kyi bar du dbul ba'i sdug bsngal dang bcas la | kha phyed tsa na dbul ba'i sdug bsngal dang bral lo | | dpe de bzhin du mi dbul po dang 'dra ba'i 'o skol sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la | gter dang 'dra ba'i sems nyid lhan cig skyes pa de rang chas su yod kyang | gter kha ma phyed pa dang 'dra ba'i bla ma'i byin rlabs ma zhugs na | de mi zin cing dngos grub rnam gnyis 'grub pa'i thabs med | gter kha phyed ba dang 'dra ba'i bla ma'i byin rlabs zhugs na | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes ngos zin te | dngos grub rnam pa gnyis thob pa la tshegs med de | ...*

tradition and/or tantras and with the key instructions of his root teacher Milarepa, rather than the standard buddha nature terminology of *tathāgatagarbha* discourses as presented in sūtras and śāstras or philosophical treatises associated with the third wheel of Dharma. To be more precise, Gampopa usually spoke in distinctly positive terms about connate wisdom, mind as such (*sems nyid*), and natural awareness, rather than buddha nature; and, at the same time, he did not associate any ontological essence with buddha nature.

Another clear indication of Gampopa's affirming position can be found in his *Key Instructions of the Two Modes of Abiding and the Two Armors*, where he looks at the inherent qualities of mind's true nature:

The characteristic of [mind's] essence as such is that realization has always been spontaneously present within it as the four *kāyas*.²⁹

Gampopa's View That Sentient Beings and Buddhas Share the Same Nature

Moreover, Gampopa is very explicit in stating that sentient beings and buddhas share one and the same nature that is mind as such. To be more precise, he considers them to be of "one nature with different features."³⁰ The difference between sentient beings and buddhas is that the first are deluded by adventitious defilements while buddhas have relinquished these defilements and realized that the mind as such is unborn. In his *Eloquent Teachings to the Assembly*, for example, he says,

they have one essence [i.e., mind being unborn], but they have different features. ... In what way do the features differ? Buddhahood is specified by the realization of the truth that the mind as such is unborn. In this regard, the *Ātyayaññānasūtra* says, "When the mind is realized, this is wisdom. Therefore, cultivate the understanding that buddhahood should not be searched for elsewhere."³¹

Sentient beings are all those who are subsumed within the five or six types. In the mind stream of all of them the mind as such, natural purity, is inherently present [but] is obscured by the defilements of af-

29 *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, in *G_{SB}* vol. 3, 451₂₋₃: *ngo bo nyid kyi mtshan nyid ni | rtogs pa gdod ma nas sku bzahir lhun gyi grub pa yin |*.

30 Tib.: *ngo bo gcig dang ldog pa tha dad*.

31 Kangyur D vol. 122, 153b.

fictions and cognitions. ... In this regard the *Hevajra*[*tantra*]³² says, “Sentient beings are indeed buddhas. However, they are obscured by adventitious defilements.”³³

All in all, Gampopa certainly gives special emphasis to the mind being empty and unborn. However, he affirms mind’s empty nature to be connate wisdom and endorses a cataphatic view with regard to it, even though he does not explicitly posit a buddha nature with inherent buddha qualities as is done by later Kagyü masters.

Gampopa’s Terminology of Concept-Dharmakāya

It should also be highlighted that Gampopa connects this affirming view of mind’s true nature with his view of concept-*dharmakāya* (*rnam rtog chos sku*³⁴), a term that he coined and that he used consistently in his meditation teachings. In the introductory part of his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa had already hinted at this view, without, however, using this particular term “concept-*dharmakāya*.” In this introduction, he first offers a concise definition of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, explaining that concepts or thoughts—which make for the entire delusion of *saṃsāra*—are naturally empty, whereas *nirvāṇa* or the *dharmakāya* is characterized by the absence of delusion. Since concepts and delusions are experienced nowhere but in mind, they are not different from mind itself, just as waves—being water—are not different from water. And since the nature of mind, mind itself, being unborn, is *dharmakāya*, what is experienced by the mind, i.e., concepts, also does not exist independent of this *dharmakāya*. Mind itself is therefore comparable to the sky, which as such is neither affected by cloud formations—the adventitious processes of consciousness—gathering and dissipating, nor is it essentially different from them: the true nature of the adventitious processes of con-

32 *Hevajratantra* (HT), 2.4.69 (Snellgrove 1959: Skt., 70; Tib., 71): *sattvā buddhā eva kiṃ tu āgantukamalāvr̥tāḥ || tasyāpakaṛṣanāt sattvā buddhā eva na saṃśayaḥ ||*. See another Tibetan version in H/Q 378b, vol. 79, 366b₄.

33 *Mgon go zla ’od gzhon nus mdzad pa’i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in G_{SB} vol. 1, 345₄–347₃: *ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad pa dang gsum mo || ... ngo bo gcig kyang ldog pa tha dad pas bsgrub dgos te | ldog pa ji ltar tha dad na | buddha ni sems nyid skye ba med pa’i don rtogs pas khyad par du byas pa yin | de ltar yang ’da’ ka ye shes las | sems rtogs na ye shes yin pas sangs rgyas gzhan nas mi tshol ba’i ’du shes rab tu bsgom par bya’o || zhes gsungs so || sems can ni rigs lnga’am drug gis bsdu pa thams cad do || de thams cad kyi rgyud la sems nyid rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa rang chas su yod pa nyon mongs pa’i sgrib pa dang shes bya’i sgrib pas bsgribs nasde ... ltar yang kyee rdo rje las | sems can rnams ni sangs rgyas nyid || ’on kyang glo bur dri mas bsgribs || zhes gsungs so ||*.

34 For more details on this view of concept-*dharmakāya* see also Draszczyk 2021.

sciousness is not different from mind itself. Thus, ultimately nothing is to be relinquished: as concepts are empty by nature there is, in fact, nothing that could be relinquished. Likewise, there is nothing to be accomplished: as the actual nature of concepts is luminous *dharmakāya*, they are, in fact, nothing but mind's nature at all times. The only thing to be done is to realize that concepts and delusion do not exist as anything other than luminous *dharmakāya*:

The outer [world] appearing as a variety of manifestations and the inner [world] arising as a variety of thoughts, which are memories and cognitions—all of these are but the luminous *dharmakāya*. ... As for all these phenomena of memories and experiences appearing as a variety of happiness and suffering, that which is to be relinquished and remedies, flaws, qualities, and so forth—all are but the nature of luminous *dharmakāya*. Therefore there is nothing to modify, increase, or decrease, refute or establish, relinquish or take up. As it is said in the *Ultimate Continuum*, “From there, there is nothing to be removed, and nothing to be added.”³⁵

Similarly, he explains in his *Responding to Questions of Dūsum Khyenpa*,

Buddhas and sentient beings are of one stream. Manifestations and mind as such are not separable from each other. The nature of the innate is suchness that immature people do not know. Thus they are confused as to the meaning of [buddha] nature.³⁶

Gampopa's main point, that is, concept-*dharmakāya* or the inseparability of the two truths—as outlined in the quotes above—which is *the* backbone of Dakpo

35 Mgon go zla 'od gzhon nus mdzad pa'i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma, in G_{SB} vol. 1, 484₂–485₃: *phyi rol dkar dmar gyi snang ba sna tshogs su snang ba dang | nang dran rig gi rtogs pa sna tshogs su 'char ba 'di thams cad kyang 'od gsal chos kyi sku yin | ... (485₃) dran snang gi chos thams cad la yang bde ba dang sdug pa | spang bya dang gnyen po | skyon dang yon tan la sogs pa sna tshogs su snang yang thams cad kyang 'od gsal chos kyi sku'i rang bzhin yin pas | bcas bcos dang | 'phel 'grib dang | dgag sgrub dang spang blang byar med de | rgyud bla ma las kyang | 'di la bsal bya ci yang med | bzhag par bya ba cung zad med | ces gsungs pas so |*

36 Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhus lan, in G_{SB} vol. 2, 280₁₋₂: *sangs rgyas dang sems can rgyud (text: rgyu) gcig | snang ba dang sems nyid tha mi dad | gnyug ma'i rang bzhin de kho na nyid de | byis pas ma shes snying po'i don la 'khrul ||*

Mahāmudrā, continued to remain the central view of later Kagyü masters as well.

Some among them placed more and others less emphasis on mind's true nature being buddha nature with all its qualities, but none of them, at least to my knowledge, later shifted to the position represented by the Jonang masters who explicitly negate all conventional appearances and, in contradistinction to it, establish buddha nature to be the truly existing absolute.

Thus, those who later either directly or implicitly favored *zhentong*-like positions³⁷ did so within the framework of this view of the inseparability of the two truths. This holds true, for example, for the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339), for the Second Shamarpa, Khachö Wangpo (Mkha' spyod dbang po, 1350–1405), for the Fourth Shamarpa, Chödrak Yeshe (Chos grags ye shes, 1453–1524), for the Seventh Karmapa, Chödrak Gyatso (Chos grags rgya mtsho 1454–1506), for the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorjé (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507–1554), or much later for the First Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé, to name just a few well-known masters from within the Karma Kagyü tradition. The Third Karmapa, for example, plainly equates natural awareness with the “nature of the victors,” that is, with buddha nature, and maintains that the sixty-four qualities of buddhahood, that is, the thirty-two qualities of freedom and the thirty-two qualities of maturation, are inherent to buddha nature.

Just this natural awareness is called the *dharmadhātu*, the nature of the victors. It is not enhanced by the noble ones; it has not deteriorated in sentient beings. Although it is expressed in many terms, its meaning is not understood through expressions. Its unhindered manifestations [as] the sixty-four qualities is [merely] a coarse [description]; each one of them is said to comprise tens of millions [of qualities].³⁸

Layagpa Jangchup Ngödrub's View on Buddha Nature

While Gampopa hardly ever uses the term *buddha nature*, his direct students and successors started to equate this siddha terminology with the buddha nature terminology of *tathāgatagarbha* discourses. As an early example, Layagpa Jangchup

37 Regarding an overview of *zhentong*-like positions in the Kagyü school, see Mathes 2019: 115–44.

38 *De bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bstan pa'i bstan bcos*, 56_{14–20}: *tha mal shes pa de nyid la || chos dbyings rgyal ba'i snying po zer || bzang du 'phags pas btang ba med || ngan du sems can gyis ma btang || tha snyad du ma brjod mod kyang || brjod pas de yi don mi shes || de nyid ma 'gags rol pa la || yon tan drug cu rtsa bzhi po || rag pa yin te re re la'ang || bye ba phrag rer gsungs pa yin ||*.

Ngödrub (La yag pa byang chub dngos grub, twelfth century), one of Gampopa's direct students, explicitly identifies buddha nature with the mind as such, natural luminosity, and wisdom that is endowed with qualities. He says in his commentary on Gampopa's *Four Dharmas*,³⁹

Buddha nature in the mind streams of all sentient beings is the mind as such; it is natural luminosity, free from an arising and ceasing, and the complete pacification of all proliferations. [Thus, sentient beings] are endowed with wisdom that is inseparable from inconceivable buddha qualities.⁴⁰

A little further down in the same commentary, Layagpa equates buddha nature also with connate wisdom:

That which is called buddha nature or connate wisdom is mind as such that is naturally luminous and utterly pure.⁴¹

Specifying the meaning of his teacher Gampopa's identification of buddha nature with the *dharmakāya* as an all-pervading natural purity, Layagpa says also in this commentary:

The *dharmakāya* is moreover the nonduality of the expanse and wisdom that has the nature of being endowed with inconceivable buddha qualities.⁴²

Phagmo Drupa Dorjé Gyalpo's View on Buddha Nature

Another of Gampopa's main and direct disciples was the influential Phagmo Drupa Dorjé Gyalpo⁴³ (Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po, 1110–1170), from whom the so-

39 Tib.: *dwags po chos bzhi*.

40 *Mnyam med dwags po'i chos bzhir grags pa'i gzhung gi 'grel pa snying po gsal ba'i rgyan*, 189₅₋₇: *sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po gang sems nyid rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba skye 'gag med cing spros pa thams cad nyer bar zhi ba | sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa rnams dang ma bral ba'i ye shes can yin ||*.

41 Ibid., 210₆₋₇: *gang de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'am | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes zhes bya ba sems nyid rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal zhing rnam par dag pa . . .*

42 Ibid., 148₂₋₃: *chos kyi sku yang dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su med pa sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa thams cad dang ldan pa'i bdag nyid yin |*.

43 In 1158, Phagmo Drupa built a hermitage at Phagmo Drupa ("Sow's Ferry Crossing") in a juniper forest in Nedong above the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river valley. Later, as his fame

called eight secondary Dakpo Kagyü traditions unfolded. In his *Five Instructions of the Essential Meaning*, he interprets Gampopa's concept-*dharmakāya* teaching in line with buddha nature by using the famous example of sesame oil that is naturally and fully contained in the sesame seed:

In the *Ātyayaññānasūtra* it is said, "Realizing the mind, one is a buddha." As for the realization endowed with a view, when the meaning of the view is realized, one becomes enlightened. Realization endowed with the view is twofold:

(1) As for the realization that buddhahood and sentient beings are one continuum, [they both are] the concepts of mind. The initial non-arising of concepts is the *dharmakāya*. At the end, [concepts] do not cease, which is the *sambhogakāya*, and at present, they are not identifiable, which is the *nirmāṇakāya*. [Thus,] at the very time when a concept arises, the concept as such abides as the three *kāyas*.

Therefore, buddhahood and sentient beings are of one continuum. This is, similar to the analogy of sesame and sesame oil in that, [with respect to] the two, sesame and oil, the sesame is not earlier and the oil not later, but are [both] sesame and oil. The sesame has never contaminated the oil. However, as long as an expert has not extracted the oil from the seed, a beneficial usage of butter-lamps, deep-fried [foods], and so on does not come about. After the oil is extracted, it will not return into the lees. Just as in this example, when by way of the instructions of an authentic teacher concepts are understood as *dharmakāya*, one does not return into *saṃsāra*.⁴⁴

spread and disciples gathered, this site developed into the major monastic seat of Densa Thel, which was the center of the Phagdru Kagyü school, one of the four great Dakpo Kagyü schools.

44 *Snying po don gyi gdams pa sogs kyi skor la cho tshan dgu*, 456₁–462₅: 'da' ka ye shes las | sems rtogs na sangs rgyas yin pas zhes gsungs so || rtogs pa lta ba dang ldan pa ni | lta ba'i don de rtogs pas sangs rgya ba ni | rtogs pa dang lta ba dang ldan pa ste | de la gnyis | sangs rgyas dang sems can rgyud gcig tu rtogs pa ni | sems kyi rnam rtog yin la | rnam rtog dang por skye ba med pa chos sku | tha mar 'gag pa med pa longs sku | da ltar ngos bzung med pa sprul sku | rnam rtog skye ba'i dus nyid na rnam rtog nyid sku gsum du gnas pas | sangs rgyas dang sems can rgyud gcig pa'o || de yang dper na | ril dang til mar lta bu ste | til dang til mar gnyis til mi snga | til mar mi phyi | til dang til mar ro || til gyis til mar la gos ma myong | 'on kyang kha mkhan gyis til la mar nag ma | bton gyi bar du mar me dang khur ba la sogs pa gzhan gyi don mi 'ong | mar nag btsir nas 'ba' char slar mi ldog | dpe de bzhin du bla ma dam pa'i gdam ngag gis rnam rtog chos skur shes nas 'khor bar mi ldog go ||.

In his famous *Mahāmudrā, the Practice of the Connate*,⁴⁵ he emphasizes that mahāmudrā is, at all times, mind's true nature with its qualities:

In general, *mahāmudrā* is endowed with four [aspects], which are pervasiveness, formlessness, freedom from coming and going, and its presence in the three times. ... Regarding its presence in the three times, at the time of sentient beings these three [i.e., joy, clarity, and non-conceptualization] are present, and they are also present at the time of buddhahood. If they weren't present [in the] three [times], then due to the lack of joy the *sambhogakāya* that benefits others won't come to be. Due to the lack of clarity, there wouldn't occur the *nirmāṇakāya* benefiting others, and due to the lack of non-conceptualization, there wouldn't occur the *dharmakāya* benefiting oneself.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The extant corpus of Gampopa's teachings—glimpses of them were provided above—convey a clear and consistent picture. His focus was to support his students in their meditative processes aiming at a direct realization of mind's true nature. In his view, mind itself, while being empty and unborn, is connate wisdom, luminosity inseparable from qualities. In this regard, he spoke of natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), positively affirming mind's nature without associating with it any ontological quality. While Gampopa makes consistent use of this terminology, Layagpa, one of his direct students, started to equate the terms *connate wisdom* and *natural awareness* with buddha nature and its inconceivable buddha qualities. Thus, these early masters set the stage for a particular type of terminology that later Kagyü masters continued to use with their intention to affirm buddha nature as both the basis and result of the Buddhist path without reifying it into an entity with real properties.

45 Tib.: *Phyag chen lhan cig skyes sbyor*.

46 *Phyag chen lhan cig skyes sbyor*, 539₅–540₅: *spyir phyag rgya chen po bzhi dang ldan te | khyab pa | gzugs can ma yin pa | 'gro 'ong dang bral ba | dus thams cad du gnas pa'o | ... dus thams cad du gnas pa ni | sems can gyi dus su yang gsum po de gnas la | de nyid sangs rgyas pa'i dus su yang yod pa'o || gsum po de med na ni bde ba med na gzhan don longs sku mi 'byung la | gsal ba med na gzhan don sprul sku mi 'byung | mi rtog pa med na rang don chos sku mi 'byung |*

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Abbreviations

- D Derge edition of the Kangyur and Tengyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Taipei Edition. Taipei, Taiwan: SMC Publishing, 1991.
- G_{SB} Gsung 'bum Gampopa Bsod nams rin chen, s.v. Gampopa Bsod nams rin chen.
- HT *Hevajratantra*, s.v. *Hevajratantra*.
- RGV *Ratnagotravibhāga*, s.v. *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra/Ratnagotravibhāga*.

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Preliminary Notes on the Notion of Buddha Nature in the *Single Intention*

Katrin Querl

Introduction

This contribution¹ seeks to discuss the presentation of the notion of buddha nature² in the *Single Intention* (*Dgongs gcig*), a monumental text corpus expounding the views of the seminal Tibetan master Drikung Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön ('Bri gung Skyob pa 'Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1217). It will explore the following two questions: (1) How did Jigten Sumgön and some of his immediate disciples understand and present the notion of buddha nature? (2) And how did they incorporate this presentation in their general system of a single intention underlying all of the Buddha's teachings?

Jigten Sumgön or Jigten Gönpö Rinchen Pel ('Jig rten mgon po rin chen dpal) was born into the Kyura (Skyu ra) clan in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham (Khams) in 1143. In his twenties he traveled to Densa Thil (Gdan sa thil) in central Tibet, where Phagmo Drupa Dorjé Gyalpo (Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po, 1110–70), who was one of the four main disciples of Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen, 1079–1153), became his teacher. After the passing of Phagmo Drupa, Jigten Sumgön spent seven years in retreat and in 1179 he established Drikung Jangchupling ('Bri gung Byang chub gling), which would later grow into the major monastic center of the Drikung Kagyü ('Bri gung Bka' brgyud) lineage. Jigten Sumgön passed away in 1217 at the age of seventy-four.³

1 I would like to thank Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen of Kagyu College (Dehradun, India), whose kindness in sharing his abundant knowledge of Jigten Sumgön's works both in direct conversation and in the form of recordings of his classes has greatly benefitted this paper. Further thanks go to Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, Klaus-Dieter Mathes, and Sonam Spitz, who kindly read through the first draft of this paper and offered their encouragement and feedback.

2 Throughout this paper, for sake of convenience, *buddha nature* is used to denote four interchangeable terms that occur in the early commentaries on the *Single Intention*: "buddha essence" (*sangs rgyas kyi snying po*, *buddhagarbha*), "sugata essence" (*bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po*, **sugatagarbha*), "tathāgata essence" (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*, *tathāgatagarbha*), and "essence of awakening" (*byang chub [kyi] snying po*, **bodhigarbha*). Among these, *sugata essence* and *tathāgata essence* are most frequently used. *Essence of awakening* appears only once in the sense of buddha nature, although *byang chub [kyi] snying po* is frequently used as a rendering of the Sanskrit *bodhimaṇḍa* when referring to the *seat of awakening*, the place where buddhas are thought to attain awakening.

3 A biographical account of Jigten Sumgön's life composed by one of his closest disciples was translated into German by Christine Sommerschuh and later translated from German to English by Ani Jinpa Lhamo. See Jungné 2014 and 2017.

Although Jigten Sumgön did not compose an independent work on buddha nature, the topic plays a major role in his system of thought and is widely discussed in his writings and those of his disciples. Most famously it is treated in the *Single Intention*, the *Root Text* of which was composed by Jigten Sumgön's student and nephew, Sherab Jungné (Shes rab 'byung gnas, 1187–1241).⁴ In its final form this text consists of one hundred fifty theses called vajra statements (*rdo rje'i gsung*), which are organized into seven chapters or clusters (*tshoms*) and are structured along two major segments: the presentation of a general opinion (*spyi bzhed*) to be refuted and the respective *unique Dharma* (*khyad chos*) or uncommon viewpoint of Jigten Sumgön.⁵ As for commentaries on the *Single Intention*, the present study mainly relies on the two earliest surviving commentaries⁶ by direct disciples of Jigten Sumgön, namely Dorjé Sherab (Rdo rje shes rab, b. twelfth/thirteenth century) and Rinchen Jangchup (Rin chen byang chub, b. twelfth/thirteenth century).⁷ With reference to their authors' names, these two commentaries have become known as *Dosherma* (*Rdo sher ma*) and *Rinjangma* (*Rin byang ma*) respectively.⁸

Besides the literature of the *Single Intention*, other supporting sources for the present undertaking include the *Great Drikung Teaching to the Assembly* (*'Bri gung tshogs chos chen mo*), a series of teachings by Jigten Sumgön recorded by his disciple Drakpa Jungné (Grags pa 'byung gnas, 1175–1255), and the *Essence of the Mahāyāna Teachings* (*Theg chen bstan pa'i snying po*) by Ngorjé Repa (Ngor rje ras pa, thirteenth century), another direct disciple of Jigten Sumgön. Although not all of these texts are strictly speaking part of the *Single Intention* corpus, they will be treated as textual witnesses for the formative period of this core teaching of the Drikung Kagyü tradition.

4 For information on Sherab Jungné's life, see Sobisch 2014 and Sobisch 2020: 10–15.

5 On the compilation process of the *Single Intention* and an overview of its structure, see Martin 2001: 148–53. Besides the original *Root Text* by Sherab Jungné, there is a more popular versified version of the text composed by the first Chetsang Könchok Rinchen (Che tshang Dkon mchog rin chen) in 1610; see *Versified Root Text*.

6 For a list of available commentaries on the *Single Intention*, see Sobisch 2020: 733–35.

7 Historical information about the authors of the two early commentaries on the *Single Intention* are very scarce. Dorjé Sherab, who wrote his commentary in 1267, is said to have been a disciple of both Jigten Sumgön and of Jigten Sumgön's nephew, Sherab Jungné. Rinchen Jangchup was presumably a younger brother of Sherab Jungné; see Sobisch 2020: 15–16.

8 See the bibliography for full titles of these works.

Taking into consideration these hitherto largely untranslated materials,⁹ I have singled out five major themes in the presentation of buddha nature by the authors of the *Single Intention* that will form the following main part of this paper: The first section centers around the general identification of buddha nature; the second introduces the defense of a single potential, a single vehicle, and a single result; the third seeks to shed light on the interrelation between buddha nature and emptiness; the fourth discusses the qualities that buddha nature is thought to be endowed with; and the fifth centers around the controversial statement that buddha nature is a virtue worthy of dedication. Having thus provided an overview of the prevalent topics of Jigten Sumgön's engagement with buddha nature, the concluding part of this paper provides an outline of the findings and summarizes the key points of my analysis. Finally, the paper is supplemented with a list of vajra statements referred to in this study.

It should be noted that the present undertaking does not claim to paint a complete picture of the treatment of buddha nature by Jigten Sumgön and his disciples. It excludes, for instance, buddha nature discussions in the context of the six yogas of Nāropa or *mahāmudrā* pith instructions, which can be found in the section of *profound teachings* (*zab chos*) in Jigten Sumgön's *Collected Works* and have been addressed elsewhere.¹⁰ Moreover I have to refrain from a juxtaposition of Jigten Sumgön's views with those of other Tibetan authors, since that would be beyond the scope of the present study.

Identifying Buddha Nature

In order to identify the ways in which Jigten Sumgön and his disciples define buddha nature, we first have to consider their understanding of true reality as a fundamental nature (*gshis babs*). This fundamental nature of reality is what forms the basis for their formulation of a single intention, and as we will see below a single potential, a single vehicle, and a single result. That the fundamental nature is the

9 Neither the *Rinjangma* nor the *Doshorma* have so far been translated into English. However, Jan-Ulrich Sobisch's notes on each vajra statement in his translation and study of the *Light of the Sun* (*Nyi ma'i snang ba*), a seventeenth-century commentary on the *Single Intention* by Rikdzin Chödrak (Rig 'dzin chos grags), frequently refer to similar passages in the two early commentaries; see Sobisch 2020. In many ways, the present study has immensely benefitted from this groundbreaking research. In addition, the '*Bri gung tshogs chos chen mo* has recently been translated into English by Sonam Spitz; see Sumgön 2021.

10 See the contributions by Casey Kemp and Khenpo Konchok Tamphel in this volume.

crux of all the *Single Intention*'s one hundred fifty vajra statements is clearly stated by Rinchen Jangchup in his commentary on vajra statement 1.1:¹¹

Similarly, the turnings of the wheel of Dharma are said to reveal the original state of the fundamental nature (*gshis babs kyi gnas lugs*). If one understands the meaning of that, nothing is left to understand regarding the entire one hundred fifty principles of the *Single Intention*.¹²

Thus, fundamental nature is not only the quintessence of the *Single Intention* as a literary corpus but also the single subject of all the Buddha's teachings. In fact, since fundamental nature encompasses all of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa and pertains to ordinary beings and the Buddha alike, there is nothing apart from it that the Buddha could possibly teach. To put it in another way, the fundamental nature of reality is independent of whether it is taught by a buddha, and the Buddha's role—as prominently stated in vajra statement 1.1—is merely to “reveal the original state of the fundamental nature or natural condition.”¹³

11 Note that Rinchen Jangchup's commentary follows a different chapter order than the *Root Text*. In his commentary the cluster on the Dharma wheels is the fifth. On the five possible chapter orders of the *Single Intention* as laid out in the *Introduction to the Single Intention* (*Dam chos dgongs pa gcig pa'i khog dbub*) attributed to Dorjé Sherab, see *Introduction to the Single Intention*, 253–55, and Sobisch 2015: 8–9. For sake of convenience, the numbering of vajra statements in the present study follows the chapter order in the *Root Text*.

12 *Rinjangma*, 294: *de dang tshul mthun par chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba gshis babs kyi gnas lugs bstan pa zhes bya ste | 'di yi don go na dgongs pa gcig pa'i tshul brgya lnga bcu mtha' dag la mi go ba med*. This point is also further elaborated in the *Introduction to the Single Intention*, 245: “In the first [chapter], the ‘Vital Points of the Dharma Wheels,’ the [vajra statement] designated as ‘All of the Buddha's teachings reveal the original state of the fundamental nature’ summarizes the entire message of the excellent teaching, the *Single Intention*, into a single vajra statement. Therefore it is the introduction to this teaching, the body of the text” (*dang po chos kyi 'khor lo spyi'i gnad bsdu la sangs rgyas kyi chos thams cad gshis sam babs kyi gnas lugs bstan bya ba 'dir ni | dam pa'i chos dgongs pa gcig pa 'di'i don mtha' dag phyogs gcig tu rdo rje'i gsung gcig gis bsdoms pa yin pas | chos 'di'i khog phub lus rnam par gzhaq pa yin*). Note that although the *Introduction to the Single Intention* is commonly attributed to Dorjé Sherab, Sobisch suspects it to be an expanded later version of the first few pages in an older edition of the *Dosherna*; see Sobisch 2020: 762.

13 See vajra statement 1.1 in the *Root Text*, 291b_{4–5} and *Versified Root Text*, 2b₄–3a₁. See also Sobisch 2020: 32–34. According to Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen, in the oral tradition the two synonymous terms *fundamental nature* (*gshis*) and *natural condition* (*babs*), when separated by the nominal particle *'am*, are sometimes explained separately, with *gshis* referring to the conventional (*kun rdzob kyi gshis*) and *babs* to the ultimate (*don dam gyi babs*); Khenchen Nyima Gyaltzen in personal communication with the author, September 25, 2018.

But what, precisely, is meant by *fundamental nature*? According to the early proponents of the *Single Intention*, the “fundamental nature or natural condition is dependent origination”¹⁴ and as such is described as the union (*zung ’jug, yugan-addha*) of two aspects, namely the dependent origination of cause and result (*rgyu ’bras kyi rten ’brel*) and the dependent origination free from the eight extremes of proliferation (*spros pa’i mtha’ brgyad dang bral ba’i rten ’brel*). These two naturally abide in the way that dependent origination free from the extremes of proliferation emerges as causality, while causality in turn abides free from the extremes of proliferation. Thus these two aspects are thought neither to contradict each other nor to be a combination of two separable entities. Instead they are an inseparable union that abides unaltered and unchangingly at the time of the ground, the state of an ordinary being, at the time of the path, when practicing yoga, and at the time of consummate buddhahood.¹⁵

On the inner level, the fundamental nature of one’s own mind is buddha nature, which—as we will see below—is also understood to be unchangeable throughout the levels of ground, path, and result.¹⁶ It is no surprise then that buddha nature—just like fundamental nature or dependent origination—can also be said to be at the core of the Buddha’s teachings. The opening verse of the *Essence of the Mahāyāna Teachings* reads,

The topic of the *muni*’s teachings is the [buddha] element [of] sentient beings,
The naturally pure and unchanging *dharmakāya*.
It is obscured by the clouds of ignorance in the cycle of existence,
But through their purification, the undefiled *nirvāṇa* is achieved.¹⁷

In other words, according to the authors of the *Single Intention*, the only purport of the Buddha’s teaching activity is to bring beings to the realization of their fundamental nature, that is to say, their buddha nature.

¹⁴ Rinjangma, 292: *de la gshis sam babs kyi gnas lugs de yang rten ’brel yin*.

¹⁵ See *Great Drikung Teaching to the Assembly*, 83–84 and 156–57.

¹⁶ See e.g. *Light of the Sun*, 37: “Fundamental nature, according to what has just been said, is nothing but the sphere of reality of sentient beings’ elemental continuum” (*gshis babs ni sngar bshad ma thag pa ltar sems can khams rgyud kyi chos kyi dbyings kho na las gzhan med*). See also Sobisch 2020, 50.

¹⁷ *Essence of the Mahāyāna Teachings*, 174: *thub pa’i chos kyi* (text: *kyis*) *bstan bya sems can khams || rang bzhin rnam dag ’gyur med chos kyi sku || ma rig sprin gyis srid pa’i ’khor lor bsgrigs || dag pas zag med mya ngan ’das pa thob ||*.

The fact that this single subject of the Buddha's teaching can be referred to by many different names is evident from the great number of terms to denote buddha nature that are used in the early commentaries on the *Single Intention*. The following examples are just some of the most prevalent ones that I have come across in my reading of the texts: [buddha] element (*kham*s, *dhātu*), potential (*rigs*, *gotra*), absolute bodhicitta (*don dam byang chub kyi sems*, *pāramāthikabodhicitta*), *dharmakāya* (*chos* [*kyi*] *sku*), nature of mind (*sems kyi rang bzhin*),¹⁸ all-basis (*kun gzhi*, *ālaya*), true reality (*de bzhin nyid*, *tathatā*), limit of reality (*yang dag mtha'*, *bhūta*koṭi), ultimate virtue (*don dam pa'i dge ba*), [primordially] existing virtue (*yod pa'i dge ba*), emptiness (*stong pa nyid*, *śūnyatā*),¹⁹ and *mahāmudrā* (*phyag rgya chen po*).²⁰ In the grand scheme of things, all these terms are treated as interchangeable by the authors of the *Single Intention*. With this terminology and the general importance of buddha nature for the early exponents of the *Single Intention* in mind, we will now turn to some of the key themes of their presentation.

Single Potential, Single Vehicle, and Single Result

Let us first address who actually possesses buddha nature. The authors of the *Single Intention* would simply say *all beings*. To stress this point, they frequently point to the famous verse 1.28 from the *Uttaratantra*, which offers three reasons for the existence of buddha nature in sentient beings. Drakpa Jungné explains:

If one were to think that tathāgata essence exists in the four noble persons (*'phags pa'i gang zag*, *āryapudgala*) and the tathāgata but not at the stage of [ordinary] beings, then one would be wrong. As it is said [in the *Uttaratantra*], "Because of being pervaded by the body of the perfect Buddha, because of true reality being inseparable, and because of having the potential, all beings always possess buddha essence." Thus [tathāgata essence] exists on the causal stage of sentient

18 Alternatively, similar terms like *mind-essence* (*sems kyi ngo bo*), *mind's own-essence* (*sems kyi rang ngo*), *mind itself* (*sems nyid*), and *original state of mind* (*sems kyi gnas lugs*) are also used.

19 As we will see below, the equation of buddha nature with emptiness only holds true as long as emptiness is understood in positive terms as possessing qualities. This emptiness is also often referred to as *profound emptiness* (*zab mo stong* [*pa*] *nyid*).

20 See, e.g., *Dosherna*, 3:312–13: "Mahāmudrā, the naturally pure [buddha] element, the perfection of insight (*prajñāpāramitā*), freedom from the extremes of all proliferation, and ultimate luminosity have the same meaning" (*phyag rgya chen po kham rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa dang | shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa dang | spros pa thams cad kyi mtha' dang bral ba dang | 'od gsal don dam pa'i bden pa rnam don gcig*).

beings and it abides in hell beings inseparable from their very sufferings in hell. Tathāgata essence is neither corrupted by suffering nor improved at the time of buddhahood, just as space is not burned or destroyed when the worldly realm perishes.²¹

Here buddha nature is essentially equated to space, and accordingly it is said to pervade not only buddhas and noble persons but all beings up to and including the beings tormented by sufferings in the hells. As a sign that buddha nature abides in all sentient beings, even the most vicious ones, Jigten Sumgön repeatedly points to wild animals like hawks and wolves. That even these beings have compassion for their offspring and females he considers as evidence for the existence of their buddha nature.²²

This lack of an exception for the presence of buddha nature is also at the core of two vajra statements that center around the defense of a single potential, a single vehicle, and consequently a single result. The first of these, vajra statement 1.29, contains a refusal of the ultimate distinction into various potentials and paths. In the *Dosherma* various models of classifying sentient beings' potential are mentioned, most prominently the fourfold division into certain (*niyata*), uncertain (*aniyata*), losable (*hārya*), and unlosable potentials (*ahārya*) as taught in *Mahāyānasūtrāṃkāra* 3.6,²³ and the twofold division into naturally present po-

21 *Great Drikung Teaching to the Assembly*, 87–88: *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po de 'phags pa'i gang zag bzhi'am de bzhin gshegs pa la yod cing sems can gyi dus na med dam snyam na de ma lags te | rdzogs sangs sku ni 'phro phyir dang || de bzhin nyid dbyer med phyir dang || rigs yod phyir na lus can kun || rtag tu sangs rgyas snying po can || gsungs na rgyu sems can gyi dus na yod cing | de yang sems can dmyal ba rnams la yang dmyal ba'i sdug bsngal de nyid dang dbye ba med par gnas te | sdug bsngal des de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po de ngan du btang ba med | sangs rgyas pa'i dus su yang bzang du song ba med de | 'jig rten gyi khams 'jig pa'i dus su yang nam mkha' tshig pa'am 'jig pa med pa dang 'dra |* The same verse is also quoted in the context of vajra statement 1.29 in *Rinjangma*, 337 and *Dosherma*, 2:103. In a similar vein, it is also quoted in *Light of the Sun*, 375 in the context of vajra statement 7.15 in order to stress that there is no outer dwelling place of the buddhas apart from the elemental continuum of sentient beings; see Sobisch 2020: 671–76. See also *Uttaratantra* 1.28, Tib. Tengyur D 4024, *mdo 'grel (sems tsam)*, *phi*, 56r₂₋₃; Skt. Johnston 1950: 26: *buddhajñānāntargamāt sattvarāśes tannairmalyasyādvayatvāt prakṛtyā | bauddhe gotre tatphalasyopacārād uktāḥ sarve dehino buddhagarbhāḥ ||*.

22 In both commentaries, *Dosherma* and *Rinjangma*, the examples of the compassion of hawks and jackals are referred to in the context of both vajra statement 1.29 and 1.30. In *Dosherma* (2:100) on vajra statement 1.29, this example is ascribed to Phagmo Drupa. See also *Light of the Sun*, 105 and *Rinjangma*, 337 and 370.

23 *Mahāyānasūtrāṃkāra* 3.6 (quoted in *Dosherma*, 2:101): “The potential can be certain, uncertain, losable, and unlosable through conditions. In brief, this is the fourfold division of potential”; Tib. Tengyur D 4020, *mdo 'grel (sems tsam)*, *phi*, 4r₃₋₄: *rigs ni nges dang ma nges dang ||*

tential (*prakṛtisthagotra*) and potential acquired by practice (*samudānītagotra*) as taught in *Uttaratantra* 1.149.²⁴ With regard to these, Dorjé Sherab sorts possible potentials into three groups: the perfectly certain (*samyaktvaniyata*), the falsely certain (*mithyātvaniyata*), and the uncertain. The perfectly certain potential is comprised of the potential of the śrāvakas, the potential of the pratyekabuddhas, and the potential of the bodhisattvas; while falsely certain corresponds to *those with great desire* ('*dod chen pa, icchantika*), and the uncertain refers to those who can be altered by conditions.²⁵

For the early exponents of the *Single Intention*, however, such a division into various potentials exists only temporarily, and it does not follow that any of these beings never achieves buddhahood.²⁶ Even those with great desire, who are generally also referred to as *without potential* (*chad pa'i rigs, agotraka*), are said to nevertheless possess a *tiny virtuous seed* (*dkar po'i sa bon cung zad*), through which they will eventually attain buddhahood. The only difference is the time it takes.²⁷

rkyen rnams kyis ni mi 'phrogs dang || 'phrogs pa nyid de mdor na rigs || dbye ba 'di ni rnam pa bzhi ||; Skt. Lévi 1907: 11: *niyatāniyataṃ gotraṃ ahāryaṃ hāryaṃ eva ca | pratyayair gotrabhedo 'yaṃ samāseṇa caturvidhaḥ* ||. On the fourfold potential in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, see also D'Amato 2003.

24 *Uttaratantra* 1.149 (quoted in *Dosherma*, 2:103): “The [buddha] potential is known to be two-fold, the one naturally abiding since beginningless time, and the one that has taken up the supreme”; Tib. Tengyur D 4024, *mdo 'grel (sems tsam)*, *phi*, 61v₃: *rigs de rnam gnyis shes bya ste || thog med rang bzhin gnas pa dang || yang dag blan ba mchog nyid do ||*; Skt. Johnston 1950: 71: *gotraṃ tad dvividhaṃ jñeyaṃ nidhānaphalavṛkṣavat | anādi prakṛtisthaṃ ca samudānītaṃ uttaram* ||. Note that the classification into a naturally present potential and the potential acquired by practice can also be found in *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* 3.4 and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*; see D'Amato 2003: 129.

25 See *Dosherma*, 2:102–3.

26 While the division into temporarily and ultimately existing potentials has to be understood from the context in the two early commentaries, the *Light of the Sun* (107) directly states, “[While these divisions] were intended only temporarily, in reality there is not more than one potential since there are no dissimilarities in the [buddha] element, namely the tathāgata essence” (*skabs don tsam la dgongs kyi | yang dag par rigs gcig las gzhan pa med de kham bde gshegs snying po la mi 'dra ba med pa'i phyir* |).

27 See *Dosherma*, 2:103: “Also those with wrong craving like Sunakṣatra or Devadatta have a tiny virtuous seed in their continuum” (*log sred can legs skar ram | lha sbyin lta bu de yang | rgyud la dkar po'i sa bon cung zad yod*); and *Dosherma*, 2:104: “Also Devadatta was prophesized in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka[sūtra]* to [attain] buddhahood, and in the *Gtan la phab pa* and the *Vinaya* Sunakṣatra was prophesized to finally [attain] buddhahood, even though it takes [him] a longer time” (*lhas sbyin yang dam chos pad dkar du sangs rgyas par* [text: *bar*] *lung bstan | gtan la phab pa dang 'dul bar legs skar yang dus ring ba ma gtogs pa mthar thug sangs rgyas par* [text: *bar*] *shugs kyis lung bstan* |). On the *Gtan la phab pa* or *Mdo sde gtan la phab pa*, see Sobisch 2020: 94, n. 216.

Therefore, according to Jigten Sumgön and his disciples, the ultimate existence of various potentials is only mistakenly read into certain passages of Cittamātra texts, such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, which like all other teachings of the Buddha in fact teach nothing but the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) of Madhyamaka.²⁸

Moreover Dorjé Sherab explains the *Uttaratantra*'s differentiation into a naturally present potential and the potential acquired through practice. According to him the first refers to buddha nature, the naturally pure buddha element as present in all sentient beings. Thus, he concludes, on the causal level all sentient beings are of a single Mahāyāna potential. The latter then refers to the three trainings (*bslab pa gsum*, *śikṣātraya*) on the paths, which are—since all beings are “Mahāyānists”—nothing but the single Mahāyāna Vehicle. Thus, since there is no ultimate division of potentials in terms of vehicles, he concludes that the division into a Śrāvaka Vehicle, a Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, and a Bodhisattva Vehicle must be only temporary. In reality there is only one path, namely the Mahāyāna.²⁹

Having established a single potential and a single vehicle, vajra statement 1.30 references two cases of beings that are usually regarded as not attaining complete awakening, namely the śrāvakas³⁰ and those with wrong craving. While in both commentaries the content of this passage is quite similar to the previous vajra statement, it seems to focus more on the possibility of attaining the result. Thus vajra statements 1.29 and 1.30 together can be said to seek to establish a single potential, a single vehicle, and a single result. As for the benefits of such a view, Rinchen Jangchup states,

28 That all Buddha word teaching Cittamātra in fact teaches Madhyamaka is the topic of vajra statement 1.11, the essential meaning of which is summarized in *Dosherma*, 2:46: “With regard to meaning, when all appearances of mind-only are established as the mind, then this very mind is Madhya[maka], free from all extremes. When one understands this vital point of the nonduality of appearance and mind, then the very Buddha word [teaching] Mind Only has no choice but to teach the Middle [Way]” (*don la sems tsam gyi snang ba thams cad sems su gtan la phab tsam na | sems de nyid mtha' thams cad dang bral ba'i dbu ma yin | de ltar snang sems gnyis med kyi gnad go na sems tsam ston pa'i bka' nyid dbu mar mi ston kha med yin pas 'di'i don bdag cag gis nyams su len rgyu yin gsungs* |). The refusal of the early proponents of the Single Intention to classify certain teachings of the Buddha as not teaching a definitive meaning is expressed in vajra statement 1.10; see Sobisch 2020: 86–92. However, this point has attracted criticism by scholars like Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251); see Jackson 1994: 107–10.

29 See *Dosherma*, 2:103–4.

30 That śrāvakas eventually attain buddhahood is also the topic of a vajra statement in the supplementary section of the *Single Intention*; see Sobisch 2020: 690–91.

Therefore, if one understands this point, first one does not dedicate the roots of virtue for anything but the unsurpassable awakening. Secondly, understanding sentient beings as being of a single potential and a single vehicle, one understands the existence of buddha nature in all sentient beings. Thirdly, if one understands all of the Buddha's teachings to be a single vehicle, one will not divide the teachings into good and bad.

By ascertaining all persons who have entered the path as [followers of] the Mahāyāna, one will not view them as good or bad or belittle them. Thus, errors based on the Dharma and persons will not arise. For this reason, [Jigten Sumgön] asked us to keep in mind and practice according to the principle that all sentient beings are of a single potential [at the time of] the ground, they are of a single vehicle [at the time of] the path, and they are heading towards a single result, which is unsurpassable awakening.³¹

Here, in short, understanding the singularity of the result, one gains confidence in the possibility of attaining buddhahood and develops an aspiration toward it; understanding the singularity of the potential, one does not belittle sentient beings; and understanding the singularity of the vehicle, one is able to see the unity of the teachings without degrading any of them.

In conclusion, I suppose that while the singularity of potential, vehicle, and result is a standard Madhyamaka teaching and has been defended by the great majority of Tibetan masters, it is treated in such detail in the *Single Intention* because it lays the foundation for establishing the unchanging nature of buddha nature and all its equivalents, which then subsequently contributes significantly to the agenda of a single intention.

Let us now take a closer look at how Jigten Sumgön and his disciples present the character and different aspects of this potential for awakening that pervades all beings without exception.

31 Rinjangma, 340: 'di'i don go na dge ba'i rtsa ba rnams bla na med pa'i byang chub ma gtogs pa gzhan du mi bsngo ba zhig byung ba dang gcig sems can rnams rigs gcig theg pa gcig tu shes pas thams cad la byang chub snying po yod par go ba dang gnyis | sangs rgyas kyi chos thams cad theg pa gcig tu go bas chos la bzang ngan dang ris su mi gcod pa dang gsum | lam la zhugs pa'i gang zag thams cad theg pa chen po sha stag tu nges pas | gang zag la bzang ngan du lta ba dang bskur ba 'debs su mi 'byung te | chos dang gang zag la brten pa'i nyes pa mi 'byung ba yin pas | de'i phyir na sems can thams cad gzhi rigs gcig lam theg pa gcig 'bras bu bla na med pa'i byang chub tu gzhol zhing 'bab par gcig pa'i tshul 'di thugs la bzahag nas nyams su len par zhu'o gsungs ||.

Buddha Nature and Emptiness

Although the authors of the *Single Intention* generally equate buddha nature with emptiness, they seek to distinguish their position from what they call a mere emptiness (*stong nyid kho na*), meaning an emptiness without any inherent qualities. This relation between buddha nature's emptiness on the one side and its qualities on the other is mainly discussed in vajra statement 1.26. In both commentaries the opposing or general opinion³² is said to be based on the interpretation of certain passages from the Prajñāpāramitā literature, such as the *Saṃcayagāthāprajñāpāramitā* 12.4:

Whether the wise ones abide in the world or in nirvāṇa,
The faultless true reality [of] phenomena remains empty,
And bodhisattvas perceive this true reality (*tathatā*) accordingly.
Therefore, the buddhas are called by the name *tathāgatas*.³³

According to the early exponents of the *Single Intention*, some interpreters of these passages claim buddha nature to be a mere emptiness of all phenomena and free from any faults or qualities.³⁴ It is this equation of buddha nature with a mere emptiness that they seek to disprove. By doing that—although not pointing the finger at any particular opponent—Jigten Sumgön and his disciples take a clear stand against the *emptiness only* position held by an influential group of Tibetan

32 Like the *Root Text*, the two early commentaries *Dosherma* and *Rinjangma* begin their presentation of each vajra statement with a section on the general or opposing opinion. In the *Dosherma* this is usually marked by “here in general” (*de la spyir*), while the *Rinjangma* tends to use “regarding this” (*de yang*). This part of the exposition is then followed by a passage that presents Jigten Sumgön's take on the matter, introduced almost inevitably by “here [Jigten Sumgön] himself said” (*'dir zhal snga nas*) in *Dosherma*; and “here according to the heart intention [of Jigten Sumgön]” (*'dir thugs dgongs ltar na*) and “here according to the intention of the master” (*'dir rje'i dgongs pa ltar na*) or sometimes simply “here” (*'dir*) in the *Rinjangma*.

33 *Saṃcayagāthāprajñāpāramitā* 12.4 (quoted in *Rinjangma*, 366), Tib. Kangyur D, *sher phyin, ka*, 8r₆₋₇: *m khas pa 'jig rten gnas sam mya ngan 'das kyang rung || chos nyid skyon med chos rnam stong pa 'di gnas te || byang chub sems dpa' de bzhin nyid 'di rjes su rtogs || de phyir de bzhin gshegs zhes sangs rgyas mtshan gsol to ||*; Skt. Yuyama 1976, 50: *tiṣṭhanta loka vidunām parinirvrtānām | sthita eṣa dharmata niyāmata śunya dharmāḥ | tām bodhisattva tathatām anubuddhayanti | tasmā hu buddha kṛtu nāma tathāgatebhiḥ ||*.

34 Rinchen Jangchup describes the general opinion in *Rinjangma*, 366: “[Some] say with regard to the statement of the Bhagavān that tathāgata essence exists in the continua of sentient beings that this is a mere emptiness free from any of the faults and qualities of phenomena” (*bcom ldan 'das kyi de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po sems can gyi rgyud la yod par gsungs pa de ni chos thams cad kyi skyon yon gang yang med pa'i stong pa kho na yin no || zhes smras*).

Madhyamaka scholars such as Ngog Loden Sherab (Rngog Blo ldan shes rab, 1059–1109) and Sakya Paṇḍita Kūnga Gyaltsen (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251).³⁵

When Jigten Sumgön's position on the relation between buddha nature and emptiness is reported, both Dorjé Sherab and Rinchen Jangchup formulate it along the lines of the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra* as quoted in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* and summarized in *Uttaratantra* 1.155:

The [buddha] element is empty of the adventitious [defilements],
Which bear the characteristic of being separable [from it].
It is not empty of the unsurpassable [qualities],
Which bear the characteristic of being inseparable [from it].³⁶

In the *Dosherna*, Dorjé Sherab explains,

Since [buddha nature] does not abide coemergently with any of the defilements, it is known as being separable (*bral shes pa*). Since it is not adulterated with defilements—because of the defilements being adventitious—it is separable (*dbyer yod pa*). Since it is not tainted by the defilements and is isolated from them, it is empty of the sheaths of defilements. Since it is not distinct from all the qualities of dissociation and maturation, it is known as being inseparable. Since it abides inseparable from all the primordial buddha qualities, it is inseparable. Since it is full of buddha qualities more numerous than the sand grains in the banks of the Gaṅgā, it is not empty.³⁷

35 For a starting point on Ngog Loden Sherab's position of buddha nature being a nonaffirming negation (*med dgag, prasajyapratishedha*), see "Ngog Loden Sherab's Analytical Interpretation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*" in Mathes 2008: 25–34.

36 *Uttaratantra* 1.15 (quoted in *Dosherna*, 95), Tib. Tengyur D 4024, *mdo 'grel (sems tsam)*, phi, 61v₅: *rnam dbye bcas pa'i mtshan nyid can || glo bur dag gis khams stong gi || rnam dbye med pa'i mtshan nyid can || bla med chos kyis stong ma yin ||*; Skt. Johnston 1950: 76: *śūnya āgantukair dhātuh savinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ | aśūnyo anuttarair dharmair avinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ ||*. For the corresponding lines in the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*, see Wayman 1974: 99, and Paul 2004: 45. See also Mathes 2008: 331.

37 *Dosherna*, 2:95: *nyon mongs pa thams cad dang lhan cig tu mi gnas pas na bral shes pa | nyon mongs pa rnams blo bur ba yin pa'i phyir nyon mongs dang ma 'dres pas na | dbyer yod pa | nyon mongs pas ma gos shing dben pas na nyon mongs pa'i sbubs kyis stong pa | bral ba dang rnam par smin pa'i yon tan thams cad dang tha dad du med pas na bral mi shes pa | gdod nas sang rgyas kyi yon tan thams cad dang dbyer med du gnas pas | rnam par dbyer med pa | gang 'ga'i klung gi bye ma snyed las 'das pa'i sangs rgyas kyi chos kyis gang bas na mi stong pa.*

This is to say that for the early exponents of the *Single Intention* buddha nature has two essential aspects: one that is empty and separable from the adventitious stains and one that is not empty and inseparable from the buddha qualities.³⁸ Jigten Sumgön also speaks of these two aspects as the *aspect of emptiness* (*stong pa'i cha*) and the *aspect of purity* (*gsal ba'i cha*). In his *Shogtrama Mahāmudrā*, for instance, he relates these two aspects of buddha nature to realizations on the path of the four yogas of *mahāmudrā*:

The mind has an essence, a nature, and a characteristic. At the time of one-pointedness (*rtse gcig*) the essence of mind is realized as empty, at the time of freedom from proliferation (*spros bral*) its nature is realized as purity, and at the time of the single taste (*ro gcig*) its characteristic is realized as nonduality.³⁹

Having thus understood first buddha nature's empty aspect and then its qualities, the realization of their inseparability finally brings about the yoga of non-meditation (*sgom med*) that is the resultant stage of buddhahood. If instead buddha nature was "some great empty" (*stong pa chen po zhig*)⁴⁰ free from virtuous qualities and faulty misdeeds, the authors of the *Single Intention* argue, beings would neither turn away from suffering and be inclined toward nirvāṇa nor be able to traverse the path of the bodhisattva levels. To underline this point, they quote *Uttaratantra* 1.40:

If there was no buddha element,
No aversion to suffering would arise.
Nor would there be ambition,
Striving, and aspiration for nirvāṇa.⁴¹

38 On the relation between buddha nature and emptiness in the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*, see Paul 1979: 195–96, and Ruegg 1989: 36. For studies and translations see Wayman 1974 and Paul 2004.

39 *Shogtrama Mahāmudrā*, 459: *sems la ngo bo rang bzhin | mtshan nyid gsum du yod pas | rtse gcig gi dus su sems kyi ngo bo stong par rtogs pa yin | spros bral gyi dus su rang bzhin gsal bar rtogs | ro gcig dus su mtshan nyid gnyis su med par rtogs pa yin* |. On the four yogas in the *Single Intention*, see also Sobisch 2020: 294–95 and 364–66.

40 *Dosherna*, 2:97.

41 *Uttaratantra* 1.40 (quoted in *Dosherna*, 2:96), Tib. Tengyur D 4024, *mdo 'grel* (*sems tsam*), *phi*, 56v₃: *gal te sangs rgyas khams med na || sdug la skyo bar mi 'gyur zhing || mya ngan 'das la 'dod pa dang || don gnyer smon pa'ang med par 'gyur ||*; Skt. Johnston 1950: 35: *buddhadhātuh sacen na syān nirvidduḥkhe 'pi no bhavet | necchā na prārthanā nāpi praṇidhir nirvṛtau bhavet ||*.

Moreover, if buddha nature was nothing but empty, any progress on the path would be impossible for a bodhisattva on the first stage (*bhūmi*) who has already gained a realization of emptiness:

Thus, the naturally pure result of dissociation is endowed with qualities. If that was not the case and it would be some great emptiness without any faults or qualities whatsoever, free from virtue and free from misdeeds, there would be nothing on which to traverse from the first stage upwards after having perceived the truth of true reality, because no progress could come about with regard to something space-like.⁴²

In short, as far as the relation between buddha nature and emptiness is concerned, we can say that as long as emptiness is understood as being endowed with qualities, it is a term interchangeable with buddha nature. A mere emptiness, however, can only be said to be one constituent of buddha nature.

Buddha Nature Endowed with Qualities

As we have seen, the authors of the *Single Intention* describe buddha nature positively as being endowed with qualities. This leads us to the following questions: Are sentient beings endowed with all or only some of the buddha qualities? And are these qualities thought to exist as fully developed or in subtle form? In the eyes of the early exponents of the *Single Intention*, buddha nature is endowed with all buddha qualities without exception from beginningless time, even at the time of the ground, that is to say, the state of an ordinary being. Moreover, there is no hint that they understand any of these qualities as existing only in subtle form or as being subject to a process of growth. For instance, Rinchen Jangchup states,

It is maintained that all ultimate buddha qualities abide in just the same way in the tathāgata essence.⁴³

Within the *Single Intention*, the question of buddha qualities is mainly treated in the context of three successive vajra statements (1.26, 1.27, and 1.28), in which cer-

42 Dosherna, 2:96–97: *de ltar na rang bzhin gyis rnam dag bral 'bras yon tan dang ldan pa yin | de ltar min nas dge med sdig med skyon yon gang yang med pa'i stong pa chen po zhig yin na | sa dang po chos nyid kyi bden pa mthong nas de yan chad du bgrod rgyu med par 'gyur te | nam mkha' lta bu de la bogs 'byung rgyu med pa'i phyir ro ||*.

43 Rinjangma, 366: *mtar thug sangs rgyas kyi yon tan mtha' dag ji lta bar de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying por gnas par bzhed do |*.

tain sets of qualities are established to exist equally at the level of the ground, at the level of the path, and at the level of the result. The first of these, vajra statement 1.26, centers around the set of thirty-two qualities of dissociation (*bral ba'i yon tan*)—the ten strengths, the four fearlessnesses, and the eighteen unique qualities—which together with the thirty-two qualities of maturation (*smin pa'i yon tan*), in other words the thirty-two marks of a great being, make up a pair of qualities that is usually associated with the level of the resultant stage of buddhahood. In the *Uttaratantra*, for instance, the thirty-two qualities of dissociation are related to ultimate truth and the *dharmakāya*, while the qualities of maturation are related to conventional truth and the *rupakāyas*.⁴⁴ While others thus maintain that these qualities exist only on the level of the result, for the authors of the *Single Intention* all of these qualities exist equally on the levels of ground, path, and result. What they mean by buddha qualities is therefore both the qualities of dissociation and the qualities of maturation.⁴⁵

In vajra statement 1.27, a similar case evolves around the group of thirty-seven factors of awakening (*byang chub phyogs* [*kyi*] *chos*, *bodhipakṣadharma*). According to the general opinion as reported in *Dosherma* and *Rinjangma*, others view these factors to be practiced and acquired along the four paths of learning.⁴⁶ They maintain that these factors—just like a boat or a bridge that can be left behind after a river has been successfully crossed—are only required on the path, and that they neither exist at the time of the ground nor are required at the time of the result, that is, the path of no-more-learning. According to another view, the thirty-seven

44 See *Uttaratantra* 3.1–3, Tib. Tengyur D 4024, *mdo 'grel* (*sems tsam*), *phi*, 65v₁₋₃: *rang don gzhan don don dam sku dang ni || de la brten pa kun rdzob sku nyid de || bral dang rnam par smin pa'i 'bras bu ni || yon tan dbye ba drug cu bzhi 'di dag || bdag nyid kyi ni 'byor ba'i* (text: *pa'i*) *gnas || dam pa'i don gyi sku yin te || drang srong rnams kyi brda yi sku || pha rol phun sum tshogs pa'i gnas || dang po'i sku ni stobs la sogs || bral ba'i yon tan rnams dang ldan || gnyis pa skyes bu chen po'i mtshan || rnam smin yon tan dag dang ldan ||*; Skt. Johnston 1950: 91: *svārthah parārthah paramārthakāyas tadāśritā samvrtikāyatā ca | phalaṃ viśaṃyogavipākabhāvād etac catuḥ śaṣṭiguṇaprabhedam ||, ātmasaṃpattiyadhiṣṭhānaṃ śarīraṃ pāramārthikam | para-saṃpattiyadhiṣṭhānaṃ rṣeḥ sāmketikam vapuḥ ||, viśaṃyogaguṇairyuktaṃ vapur ādyaṃ balādi-bhīḥ | vaipākikair dvitīyaṃ tu mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇaiḥ ||*.

45 See, e.g., *Dosherma*, 2:93 on vajra statement 1.26: “This tathāgata essence, the naturally pure element, possesses the buddha qualities without exception. At the time of the ground it is inseparable from all the qualities of dissociation and maturation” (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po kham rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa 'di ni sangs rgyas kyi yon tan rnams ma tshang ba med pa zhig yin te | gzhi'i dus na bral ba dang rnam par smin pa'i yon tan thams cad dang dbyer med pa zhig yin*).

46 The exposition of the general opinion regarding the correspondence of the thirty-seven factors to the four paths of learning follows the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*; see Rahula 2001: 158–60 and 159, n. 203.

factors of awakening are taught to be the thirty-seven deities of the Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala, and therefore they are said to exist only on the level of the result; while yet others hold them to exist on both levels of path and result. The authors of the *Single Intention*, however, again maintain that they exist equally on the levels of ground, path, and result.

While vajra statement 1.26 and 1.27 were concerned with sets of qualities that are mainly associated with the stages of the result and the path respectively, vajra statement 1.28 centers around another set of qualities, namely those of the four immeasurables. These are sometimes regarded as being a worldly path and leading only to worldly results. Here, the view of Jigten Sumgön and his disciples corresponds to the previous vajra statements, since they maintain that the four immeasurables exist equally on the levels of ground, path, and result.

Although the term is not used in the two early commentaries on the *Single Intention*, in his seventeenth-century commentary Rikdzin Chödrak states in the context of vajra statement 7.15 that buddha nature is endowed with the twofold purity (*dag pa gnyis ldan*), meaning that it is free from both the obscurations of defilements (*kleśāvaraṇa*) and the obscurations to the objects of knowledge (*jñeyāvaraṇa*).⁴⁷ Thus we can conclude that for the authors of the *Single Intention* there is no difference whatsoever between the qualities of the *dharmakāya* at the stage of complete buddhahood and the qualities of buddha nature in ordinary beings. So then how is it that sentient beings come to unfold the buddha activities? Dorjé Sherab explains:

Once one has purified the masses of adventitious defilements and obscurations in one's mind stream, one does not have to obtain the buddha activities from somewhere else, as something that does not exist on the ground. Instead, one actualizes what is already primordially existent in oneself. To purify the obscurations through the path, which consists of the two accumulations, is the means to actualize the Buddha within oneself.⁴⁸

47 See *Light of the Sun*, 375–76: “Regarding this, the Buddha resides in one’s elemental continuum since beginningless time, and moreover he resides without any impurities, possessing the twofold purity” (*de ni thog ma med pa nas sangs rgyas rang gi kham rgyud la bzhugs pa yang ma dag pa med pa dag pa gnyis ldan du bzhugs*).

48 Dosherna, 2:96: *rang rgyud la yod pa’i glo bur gyi nyon mongs dang sgrub pa’i tshogs dag nas | sangs rgyas kyi yon tan rnams logs nas gzhi la med pa zhig sgrub mi dgos te | gdod ma nas rang la yod pa rnams mngon du ’gyur pa yin | sgrub pa dag par byed pa la lam tshogs gnyis kyi bsdu tshad rang la yod pa’i sangs rgyas de mngon sum du byed pa’i thabs yin*.

In the same vein, Rinchen Jangchup states the following in the context of vajra statement 5.25:

The result of dissociation of having purified the three poisonous defilements is the three bodies. Since the five bodies, the five wisdoms, and so forth arise as the result of dissociation of having purified the five poisons, [buddhahood] is nothing but the purification of defilements.⁴⁹

In other words, even though all the buddha qualities primordially exist in sentient beings' mental continua and buddhahood is therefore nothing to be newly acquired, they must undergo a process of purification in order to actualize buddhahood and the activities that come along with it. What has to be purified on the path are the defilements, which can be summarized either as the three or the five poisons. To purify these means to give rise to the result of dissociation, namely the three or five bodies of the Buddha respectively. The purification of defilements and the simultaneous uncovering of buddha qualities from the sheaths of the adventitious stains, is thus the reason for the Buddha to teach the Dharma.⁵⁰ In *Great Drikung Teaching to the Assembly*, Drakpa Jungné reports Jigten Sumgön saying the following:

Here, in terms of the ultimate meaning, the substantial cause is the naturally pure element, the primordially unborn mind itself, which is neither created by the Buddha nor fabricated by sentient beings and which by fundamental nature abides in all sentient beings. The conducive condition is the excellent, qualified guru. The conjuncture of causes and conditions is called dependent origination. Well then, one might wonder if [such] a [buddha] element that is not produced by causes and not destroyed by conditions is compatible with dependent origination. [In fact,] it is the basis for dependent origination. An example is space, which although being neither produced by causes nor destroyed by conditions is the basis for the entirety of the environ-

49 Rinjangma, 289: *nyon mongs pa dug gsum dag pa'i bral 'bras sku gsum yin la | dug lnga dag pa'i bral 'bras sku lnga'am ye shes lnga la sogs pa 'byung bas na nyon mongs pa sbyang ba ma gtogs med |*.

50 See Rinjangma, 368: "In order to actualize the wisdom that abides in the [mind] streams of sentient beings, the Buddha turned the wheels of Dharma" (*sems can gyi rgyud la gnas pa'i ye shes de mngon du 'gyur bar bya ba'i phyir | sangs rgyas kyis chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba yin no ||*).

ment and [its] inhabitants. In the same way, that [buddha element] is the basis for the dependent origination of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.⁵¹

Thus, ultimately buddha nature itself possesses all the qualities and is the substantial cause (*nye bar len pa'i rgyu*, *upādānakāraṇa*) for awakening, while the Buddha or a qualified guru is the conducive condition that triggers the process of purification that leads to the unfolding of buddha bodies, wisdom, and activities. This primordially present buddha nature with its infinite qualities is therefore permanent in the sense that—unlike the adventitious stains that arise, abide, and cease—it is not produced by causes and cannot be destroyed by conditions. Still it does not go beyond causality or dependent origination, being the space-like underlying fundamental nature that gives rise to the world of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa in the first place.

Buddha Nature Is a Virtue Worthy of Dedication

Let us now turn to vajra statement 4.23, which states that all roots of virtue of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are to be dedicated. For Jigten Sumgön and his disciples, these roots of virtue encompass two kinds of virtues, namely the virtue performed or accumulated by oneself and all other sentient beings as well as primordially existing virtue (*yod pa'i dge ba*). Among these, primordially existing virtue is identified with buddha nature. Rinchen Jangchup states,

What [we] call “[primordially] existing virtue” refers to what is equivalent to and the same as the naturally pure [buddha] element, sugata essence, and the *dharmakāya* of the Buddha within all sentient beings.⁵²

These two kinds of virtues are compared to the ocean and its waves. While performed virtue is said to be like waves on the ocean's surface, primordially existing

51 *Great Drikung Teaching to the Assembly*, 135: *de la don dam pa ltar nye bar len pa'i rgyu kham rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa sems nyid gdod ma nas ma skyes pa sangs rgyas kyis ma mdzad | sems can gyis ma bcos pa de gshis sam babs kyis sems can thams cad la gnas pa de yin | lhan cig byed pa'i rkyen mtshan nyid dang ldan pa'i bla ma dam pa yin | rgyu rkyen 'dzoms pa de la rten 'brel zer | 'on na khams de ni rgyus ma bskyed | rkyen gyis mi 'jig pa de ni rten 'brel du btub bam snyam na | rten 'brel gyi* (text: *kyi*) *gzhi de yin te dper na nam mkha' rgyus ma bskyed | rkyen gyis mi 'jig kyang snod bcud thams cad kyi gzhi yin pa bzhin du 'khor 'das kyi rten 'brel gyi gzhi de yin |*

52 *Rinjangma*, 233: *yod pa'i dge ba zhes bya ba sems can thams cad la kham rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po sangs rgyas rnam kyis chos kyis sku dang mtshungs shing mnyam pa yod pa de la zer.*

virtue is said to be like the ocean itself.⁵³ Regarding the latter, primordially existing virtue, two opposing views are brought up in the early commentaries on the *Single Intention*, namely that buddha nature is not a virtue and that it cannot be dedicated.⁵⁴

The first objection therefore concerns buddha nature being a virtue. It is said that since buddha nature is a synonym of emptiness, it cannot be positioned as virtue. In reply, Rinchen Jangchup points to the two aspects of buddha nature:

Here, the intention of the father [and his spiritual] son is that while the empty true reality, which—like space—cannot be categorized as virtue or nonvirtue, is one aspect of tathāgata essence, there is also another aspect that is not [empty].⁵⁵

Here reference is made to the previously mentioned two aspects of buddha nature, namely the empty aspect that could be said to be neither virtue nor nonvirtue and the aspect of it being full of virtuous buddha qualities. The authors of the *Single Intention* thus seem to argue that since emptiness is only one of two indivisible aspects of buddha nature, the “neither-virtue-nor-nonvirtue” character of emptiness does not contradict buddha nature as a whole being a virtue.

The second objection concerns buddha nature being fit for dedication. It is said that since dedication means to change something from one state into another and since true reality is unchanging, it follows that it cannot be dedicated. If it was changing, however, buddha nature would have to be impermanent. Confronted with this objection, the authors of the *Single Intention* argue that the same would have to be true for all phenomena, since the *Śatasāhasrikaprajñāpāramitā*

53 *Rinjangma*, 235: “[Jigten Sumgön] taught that performed and accumulated virtues are like ripples on the ocean and primordially existent virtues are like the great ocean [itself]” (*byas dang bsags pa’i dge ba rnam ni rgya mtsho’i gnyer ma’ dra la | gdod ma nas yod pa’i dge ba ni rgya mtsho chen po dang mtshungs gsungs*). See also *Dosherna*, 3:90–91.

54 Jigten Sumgön’s claim that buddha nature is a virtue worthy of dedication has been directly criticized by Sakya Paṇḍita. Although the opposing view as presented in the early commentaries also questions the virtuous character of buddha nature and the possibility of dedicating it, further research would be needed to determine if the arguments mentioned here are on par with the criticism by Sakya Paṇḍita. For a starting point on the unfolding debate between Sakya Paṇḍita and later proponents of the *Single Intention*, see Sobisch 2020: 385 n. 848 and Rhoton 2002: 51–58.

55 *Rinjangma*, 234: *de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po mi rtag par ’gyur zer ba la | ’dir rje yab sras kyi dgongs pas | de bzhin nyid de stong nyid nam mkha’ lta bu dge mi dge gang du yang bzhag tu med pa de yang bde bar gshegs pa’i snying po phyogs gcig yin te | phyogs gcig ma yin |*

teaches that just as true reality is unchanging, all phenomena are also ultimately unchanging.⁵⁶

In a nutshell, what the authors of the *Single Intention* presumably want to convey is that every single goodness, up to and including the most fundamental goodness underlying all sentient beings, can be utilized for awakening. Thus the initial statement of buddha nature being a virtue worthy of dedication as formulated in the early commentaries on the *Single Intention* reads more like a piece of practical advice rather than a philosophical statement.

Concluding Remarks

What I have attempted to do in this paper is to briefly present the ways in which Jigten Sumgön and some of his immediate disciples understand the notion of buddha nature. Three essential points may be made regarding their description of buddha nature. First, it is thought that buddha nature exists in all beings without exception from beginningless time and that even the lowest of all will eventually reach the state of buddhahood. Second, buddha nature has to be understood as the union of two aspects, namely emptiness and qualities. Thus, although buddha nature is empty in the sense of being free from the extremes of proliferation, it is at the same time endowed with the complete and perfect buddha qualities. Third, since buddha nature is permanent and unchanging, all its qualities exist fully developed throughout the levels of ground, path, and result. However, in order to actualize them, beings have to undergo a process of purifying the defilements. When defilements are purified, buddhahood is revealed.

Regarding the second interest of this paper, namely how the authors of the *Single Intention* incorporate their presentation of buddha nature into their system of a single intention, it has become evident that the notion of buddha nature and the notion of a single intention are inseparably linked. Thus, although there are vajra statements in the *Single Intention* that directly concern buddha nature, the topic in fact pervades the whole textual corpus, since all teachings of the Buddha can be said to be for the single purpose of guiding beings to the realization of their buddha nature. As we can see, buddha nature with its equivalent of fundamental nature, as well as with its two aspects of emptiness and qualities, is what comprises

⁵⁶ See *Dosherna*, 3:90: *yum rgyas pa las | ji ltar sems la 'gyur ba med cing rnam par rtog pa med pa de bzhin du | gzugs nas rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa nyid kyi bar du yang 'gyur ba med par gsungs*. This seems to be an indirect quotation summarizing a longer passage in the *Śatasāhasrikaprajñāpāramitā* with similar meaning; see *Śatasāhasrikaprajñāpāramitā*, Kangyur D 8, 'bum, ka, 326v₄–32r₄.

the true reality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. This single true reality, whether we call it buddha nature, fundamental nature, dependent origination, or any of the other synonyms, in turn led Jigten Sumgön and his disciples to propose a single potential, a single vehicle, and a single result.

These topics could only be briefly touched upon within the scope of the present study. A more detailed analysis and definition of the exact relation between the teaching of buddha nature and other major themes in the *Single Intention*, such as the three vows and the three turnings of the Dharma wheels, will be left for future research.

List of Vajra Statements⁵⁷

Vajra Statement 1.1

In general, people claim that since the tathāgata is the master of the Dharma (*dharmēśvara*), things turn out just the way he wants because he says so. Here, it is maintained that all the teachings of the Buddha only reveal the original state of the fundamental nature or natural condition.⁵⁸

Vajra Statement 1.10

Some people claim that since all buddha words are taught with “provisional meaning,” “definitive meaning,” and so forth, the tathāgata skillfully taught lies. Here, it is maintained that whatever has been taught with the six alternatives is only of definitive meaning.⁵⁹

Vajra Statement 1.11

People claim that the buddha word [teaching] Madhya[maka] and the buddha word [teaching] Cittamātra are different. The vajra statement maintains that the buddha word teaching Cittamātra reveals Madhya[maka].⁶⁰

57 My translation of the vajra statements from the *Root Text* was greatly aided by the translation of Jan-Ulrich Sobisch (2020), which I sometimes use almost verbatim.

58 *Root Text*, 292a₄₋₅: *spyir de bzhin gshegs pa ni chos kyi dbang phyug yin pas des gang ltar bzhed pa de ltar gsungs pas de nyid du 'gyur bar 'dod pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni sangs rgyas kyi chos thams cad gshis sam babs kyi gnas lugs kho na bstan par bzhed do |*.

59 *Root Text*, 292b₄–293a₁: *bka' thams cad drang ba'i don dang nges pa'i don la sogs par bstan pas 'ga' zhig de bzhin gshegs pas thabs kyi brdzun gsungs par 'dod pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni mtha' drug tu gsungs pa thams cad kyang nges don 'ba' zhig tu bzhed do |*.

60 *Root Text*, 293a₁₋₂: *dbu ma'i bka' dang sems tsam pa'i bka' tha dad par 'dod de | rdo rje'i gsung || sems tsam ston pa'i bka' nyid dbu mar ston par bzhed |*.

Vajra Statement 1.26

Although sugata essence, the naturally pure element, is taught as emptiness, here it is maintained that the naturally pure element possesses the qualities of the result of dissociation.⁶¹

Vajra Statement 1.27

[People claim that] the thirty-seven factors of awakening were only taught as the path of the three vehicles. Here, it is maintained that the thirty-seven factors of awakening exist in sugata essence.⁶²

Vajra Statement 1.28

People claim that the four immeasurables are merely a worldly *samādhi*. Here, it is maintained that the four immeasurables are the nature of tathāgata essence and buddhahood.⁶³

Vajra Statement 1.29

People claim that the three vehicles are ascertained as three different causes, paths, and results. Here, all vehicles are maintained to be a single potential and a single vehicle.⁶⁴

Vajra Statement 1.30

It is said that *śrāvakas* and those with wrong craving do not attain buddhahood and that to be a *śrāvaka* is a permanent obstacle. Here, according to the Muni's intention it is maintained that even those with wrong craving and the *śrāvakas* finally achieve the great awakening.⁶⁵

61 Root Text, 294b₂₋₃: *bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po khams rang bzhin rnam dag ni stong nyid du bstan pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni khams rang bzhin gyis (text: kyis) rnam par dag pa bral 'bras yon tan lhag par bzhed do |*.

62 Root Text, 294b₃₋₄: *byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos sum cu rtsa bdun ni theg pa gsum gyi lam kho nar ston pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos sum cu rtsa bdun bde bar gshegs pa'i snying por yod par bzhed do |*.

63 Root Text, 294b₅–95a₁: *tshad med pa bzhi 'jig rten pa'i ting nge 'dzin kho nar 'dod pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni tshad med pa bzhi de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po de sangs rgyas kyi ngo bo yin par bzhed do |*.

64 Root Text, 295a₁₋₂: *theg pa rnam pa gsum ni rgyu dang lam tha dad cing 'bras bu tha dad gsum du nges par 'dod pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni theg pa thams cad rigs gcig theg pa gcig tu bzhed do |*.

65 Root Text, 295a₂₋₃: *nyan thos dang log sred can sangs rgyas mi thob pa dang nyan thos gtan gyi gegs su gsungs pa yod mod kyi | 'dir ni thub pa'i dgongs pas log sred can dang nyan thos kyang mthar byang chub chen po 'gyur bar bzhed do ||*.

Vajra Statement 4.23

People claim that one dedicates the root of virtue [only] inasmuch as it was performed by oneself. Here, it is maintained that the root of virtue of all of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is dedicated.⁶⁶

Vajra Statement 5.25

People maintain that defilements are the Buddha's family and line. Here, it is maintained that the result of having purified the defilements is the sugata.⁶⁷

Vajra Statement 7.15

People claim that all the buddhas dwell in Akaniṣṭha or similar places. Here, it is maintained that all the buddhas dwell in the elemental continuum of sentient beings.⁶⁸

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66 *Root Text*, 301b₁₋₂: dge ba'i rtsa ba rang gis ji ltar byas pa'i bsngo ba byed par 'dod pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni 'khor 'das thams cad kyi dge ba'i rtsa ba bsngo bar bzhed do |.

67 *Root Text*, 304a₃₋₄: nyon mongs pa ni sangs rgyas kyi rigs dang gdung du bzhed pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni nyon mongs pa dag pa'i 'bras bu bde bar gshegs pa yin par bzhed do ||.

68 *Root Text*, 308a₃₋₄: sangs rgyas thams cad ni 'og min nam de lta bu'i gnas na bzhugs par 'dod pa yin mod kyi | 'dir ni sangs rgyas thams cad sems can gyi khams rgyud la bzhugs par bzhed do ||.

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Jigten Sumgön's View of Buddha Nature and How Confusion Distinguishes a Sentient Being From a Buddha

Khenpo Konchok Tamphel

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the Early Kagyü Masters

The Kagyü schools place much importance on the lineage masters and their blessings for the success and effectiveness of whatever practice they undertake. From this point of view, Maitrīpa (986–1063) being credited with discovering the texts of *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) and *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, and Sajjana subsequently receiving the transmission of these texts from Ānandakīrti, (twelfth century) a disciple of Maitrīpa, establishes a close lineage connection between Maitreya's RGV and the Kagyü lineage, as Maitrīpa was Marpa's main teacher of the Mahāmudrā teachings, and thus he is considered one of the main Indian Kagyü masters.

In addition to this, the importance of Maitreya's teaching on buddha nature and its relevance to the Mahāmudrā teachings of the Kagyü lineage is evident in how often Gampopa (Sgam po pa, 1079–1153), Phagmo Drupa (Phag mo gru pa, 1110–1170), Jigten Sumgön ('Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1217), and other Kagyü masters make reference to the RGV in their works. For instance, Gampopa begins his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (*Dwags po thar rgyan*) by citing RGV 1.27 to establish the cause of perfect awakening.¹

The status Gampopa, Phagmo Drupa, and Jigten Sumgön gave to RGV becomes clear from the following passage from Jigten Sumgön's work, *Questions of Onge* (*Ong ges zhus pa*):

[About Gampopa]

The guru of beings, prophesied by the Sage,
The marvelous lord in the time of degeneration,
The one known as the Lord Physician Guru said,
“The Dharma [I teach] is none other than
The *Sublime Continuum* of the Great Vehicle.”

1 *rdzogs sangs sku ni 'phro phyir dang|| de bzhin nyid dbyer med phyir dang|| rigs yod phyir na lus can kun || rtag du sangs rgyas snying po can||* “The perfect Buddhakaya is all-embracing, suchness cannot be differentiated, and all beings have the disposition. Thus, they always have buddha nature” (Maitreya 2000: 23).

[About Drogön Phagmo Drupa]
 The friend of the three worlds, the protector of beings,
 The king of Dharma, the precious teacher,
 Repeatedly said, “The Dharma [I teach]
 Is the *Sublime Continuum* of the Great Vehicle.”
 I have heard the protector of the world [Drogön Phagmo Drupa] say
 repeatedly,
 “I have endeavored carefully in the instructions
 Of this, the *mahāmudrā* of the *Sublime Continuum* of the Great Vehicle.”²

Jigten Sumgön and the Two Traditions of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*

Of the two main traditions of the RGV, Jigten Sumgön seems to have taken the route of the meditative tradition of Tsen Kawoché, probably because he was himself a practitioner of *mahāmudrā*. This is evident in how he emphasizes the practice of Dharma over study and contemplation, and being a realized person (*rtogs ldan*) over a scholar (*dge bshes*). At the end of the following passage, he even makes an almost-ironic reference to Ngog Lotsāwa (1059–1109), who was the source of the analytical tradition (*byams chos mtshan nyid pa'i lugs pa*) of Maitreya's works in Tibet:

Some say that each person who belongs to [a community] of study and contemplation is a scholar. However, those who are in the company of an authentic teacher are realized beings. Realized beings are buddhas, and a single realized being is superior to the many scholars who fill the world like a forest of sugar cane. Therefore, [the practice of Dharma] is more excellent. The inherent nature of the mind is primordially unborn, and it is emptiness. When one realizes this directly, the three times and the entire sphere of what is knowable (*shes 'bya'i dkyil 'khor*) are also directly realized to be this way (*de nyid kyis*). The attainment of the vast clairvoyance that knows the three times (*dus gsum mkhyen pa'i mgon shes*) is also described as a result of this. It is

2 OZ, 34.2: *thub pas lung bstan 'gro ba'i bla ma rje|| snyigs ma'i dus su rmad byung rje btsun pa|| 'tsho byed ming can bla ma rje btsun des|| nga yi chos di theg pa chen po'i rgyud|| bla ma 'di nyid yin zhes gsungs pa dang|| 'jig rten gsum gyi gnyen gyur 'gro ba'i mgon|| chos kyi rgyal po bla ma rin chen gyis|| nga yi chos 'di theg chen rgyud bla ma|| 'di nyid yin zhes bka' stsal yang yang gsung|| phyag rgya chen po theg chen bla ma'i rgyud|| 'di yi khrid la 'bad pas nan tan byas|| 'jig rten mgon las yang dang yang du thos||*.

by the power of such realization that one becomes capable of bringing stability to the unstable minds of others and frees them from the interference of *māras*. When the noble master (i.e., Nāgārjuna) stabilized Nāgābodhi's mind, it was not because he was a scholar that he could do so. All the qualities, such as abandoning *saṃsāra* and so forth, result from this [realization], not from study and contemplation or scholarly qualities. Even Ngog Lotsāwa could not stop at study and contemplation; he had to meditate.³

Jigten Sumgön's Position on the Status of the Third Wheel of Dharma

Referring to the Buddha's own words,⁴ Jigten Sumgön says,

A buddha is flawless because of the perfections of purity, self, joy, and permanence; and the Dharma he teaches, as well as the saṅgha who puts the Dharma into practice, are uninterrupted.⁵ This statement [of the Buddha] was disputed with various questions, and the Bud-

3 TCC, 193.2: *tshan gcig na re| thos bsam gyi grangs na du yod kyang de rnams dge bshes re re yin zer bar 'dug ste| mtshan nyid dang ldan pa'i bla ma zhig gi drung na du yod pa de rnams rtogs ldan yin| rtogs ldan de rnams sangs rgyas yin| de gcig dang yang thos bsam pa 'dzam bu gling bu ram shing gi tshal bzhin gang ba dang yang bsdo ba ma yin| des na ngo mtshar 'di che ba yin mod| sems nyid gdod ma nas ma skyes pa stong pa nyid 'di rtogs| mngon gsum du gyur pa'i dus su dus gsum shes bya'i dkyil 'khor thams cad de nyid kyi mngon gsum du gyur nas| dus gsum mkhyen pa'i mngon par shes pa rgya chen po 'byung ba yang de nyid kyi mthur bzhed pa yin| rang nyid gzhan gyi sems mi gnas pa gnas par byed pa dang| bdud mi 'jug pa la sogs pa rnams 'di nyid rtogs pa'i mthus 'byung ste| slob dpon 'phags pas klu'i byang chub kyi sems gnas pa bsgrub pa de yang mkhas pa las byung ba ma lags| 'khor ba spong ba la sogs pa'i yon tan thams cad 'di nyid las byung ba ma gtogs pa thos bsam mam mkhas pa'i yon tan las mi 'byung| thos bsam la rngog lo tsā bas kyang bzhag sa ma rnyed pa yin| sgom dgos pa yin|.*

4 ŚDS, 546.4: *bcom ldan 'das thams cad mkhyen pa'i ye shes kyi yul dang| de bzhin gshegs pa'i chos kyi sku ni nyan thos dang| rang sangs rgyas thams cad kyi shes pa dag pas kyang sngon ma mthong lags so|| bcom ldan 'das sems can rnams de bzhin gshegs pa la dad pas rtag par 'du shes pa dang| bde bar 'du shes pa dang| bdag tu 'du shes pa dang| gtsang bar 'du shes pa'i sems can de dag ni bcom ldan 'das phyin ci log tu 'gyur ba ma lags te| bcom ldan 'das sems can de dag ni yang dag pa'i lta ba can du 'gyur ba lags so|| de ci'i slad du zhe na| bcom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa'i chos kyi sku nyid rtag pa'i pha rol tu phyin pa dang| bde ba'i pha rol tu phyin pa dang| bdag gi pha rol tu phyin pa dang| gtsang ba'i pha rol tu phyin pa lags pa'i slad du'o||.*

5 ŚDS, 537.7: *kye 'jig rten la phan pa'i phyir chos mi zad pa dang| chos rtag pa dang| chos brtan pa dang| skyabs kyi sems can a la la zhes mchi bdag kyang de bzhin gshegs pa nyid la yang dag par smra bas smra ba lags so|| bcom ldan 'das de lta lags pas 'di ltar de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rnams ni skyabs ma mchis pa dang| skyob pa ma mchis pa'i 'jig rten na phyi ma'i mthar thug par skyabs mi zad pa dang| skyabs rtag pa dang| skyabs brtan pa lags so||.*

dha established it. Unwise, ignorant people say that this is a sūtra that shows various vehicles (*theg pa sna tshogs ston pa'i mdo sde*). Calling it an “established sūtra” (*mdo sde gtan la phab pa*) is good, but someone who knows what is established is hard to find. It is just as if they cut the root of a tree and praise the tiny little branches; one wonders what will be the state of those who despise the third turning of the wheel, which is the unsurpassed essence of Dharma that reveals the definitive meaning.⁶

Jigten Sumgön's View of RGV

Apparently, the Tibetan exponents of the Tathāgatagarbhasūtras and *Ratnagotravibhāga* give differing interpretations of the three reasons given in RGV 1.27 to establish the presence of buddha nature in all sentient beings. Although these interpretations are numerous, they roughly fall into two groups:

1. Those who accept that buddha nature in sentient beings is a full-fledged buddha and that the qualities and activities of the *dharmakāya* are primordially inseparable from it; and
2. Those who accept that buddha nature pervades sentient beings as merely the potential in the minds of sentient beings, the natural purity (*rang bzhin rnam dag*) that serves as the substantial cause (*nyer len gyi rgyu*) of the wisdom of buddhahood, or *dharmakāya*. When this cause is referred to as “the essence (*snying po*) of tathāgata,” the name of the result (*tathāgata*) is nominally applied to the cause (*'bras ming rgyu la btags pa*).

The second position is based on Ngog's interpretation of the three reasons given in RGV 1.27, namely,

1. When the pervasion of the *dharmakāya* is taken as the reason for the presence of buddha nature in sentient beings, “buddha” in the

6 OZ, 32.3: *gtsang bdag bde dang rtag dang yon tan gyi|| pha rol phyin pas sangs rgyas skyon med cing || des gsungs chos kyang rgyun chad med pa dang || chos de nyams su len pa'i dge 'dun yang || rgyun mi chad par rgyal bas dam bcas pa|| de rgol ba'i dri ba sna tshogs kyis|| brgal zhing don 'di gtan la phab pa las|| theg pa sna tshogs ston pa'i mdo sde zhes|| mi mkhas rmongs pa'i skye bo rnams kyis smra|| mdo sde gtan la phab pa zhes smra ba|| legs par smra ba yin te ci zhig cig|| gtan la phab pa shes pa dka' bar 'dug|| dper na ljon shing rtsa ba bcad nas ni|| yal ga phra'u la bstod byed pa ltar|| nges pa'i don ston bla med snying po yi|| chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba gsum pa la|| smod par gyur pa de dag ci 'gyur snyam||.*

compound “buddha nature” refers to the actual buddha, while sentient beings’ possession of the buddha’s “nature” is nominal.

2. Suchness (*de bzhin nyid*) is the actual essence of both a tathāgata and sentient beings, as it is, merely from the perspective of the natural purity, present in both.
3. Potential (*rigs*) is nominated as the essence of a tathāgata for being its cause. Actually, it is the essence of sentient beings, and tathāgata is here (in no. 3) only nominal.⁷

Thus, those who interpret this verse from RGV in line with Ngog do not agree with the interpretation that buddha nature on the levels of the ground, path, and result are identical.

In this regard, Jigten Sumgön seems to take the position of the first group, as we can see in his *Teaching to the Assembly Transcribed for Rinchen Jangchup by Chenna Sherab Junge* (*Tshogs chos rin mgon ma spyan snga sher 'byung gi zin bris*):

Today, on this occasion on which the important people of Tshal have come, I am going to teach a Dharma that is extremely great. Therefore, keep this in your minds. If one wonders, “well, what is this extremely great Dharma?” It is the fact that all of us sentient beings in general have been completely awakened buddhas since primordial time. If one wonders, “where is this one extremely great Dharma, and who taught it?” It was taught by the teacher, the Tathāgata, but let us put the Great Vehicle Secret Mantra to the side for the time being. It is the intention of the Perfection Vehicle of characteristics, as established by Lord Maitreya in what is called the *Sublime Continuum*. It is *sublime* because there is nothing superior to it and it is not common to the *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and bodhisattvas; actually, it is not [common] to Madhyamaka. It is known as the *dhātu*, or the essence of a tathāgata (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*), or the ground. No sentient being has fallen outside this nature of being a completely awakened buddha since primordial time. Therefore, it itself is the ground, it itself is the path, and it itself is the fruition, and thus it is known as the *continuum* (*rgyud*).⁸

⁷ See Mathes (2008: 28) for a literal translation of Ngog's relevant passage in the *Bsdus don*.

⁸ TRG, 415.3: *de ring mtshal pa mi chen po rnam byon pa'i dus 'dir | chos shin tu che ba zhig bshad pas | 'di yid la zung shig | de la chos chen po de gang yin na | spyir nged rang sems can thams cad*

Thus the *dhātu* in sentient beings is completely pure by nature (RGV 1.96–97), as was also taught by the Buddha through nine analogies and nine meanings in the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*; so RGV is *sublime* in the sense that there is no other sūtra superior to it. It is a *continuum* in the sense that the *dhātu* (i.e., the *dharmakāya* nature of the mind) is identical on the levels of ground, path, and fruition.

Among these nine analogies, Jigten Sumgön uses the analogy of a buddha who is fully adorned with the major and minor marks sitting inside a fully blossomed lotus to establish his position that a completely awakened buddha has existed in all sentient beings since primordial time.⁹ Furthermore, Jigten Sumgön equates this nature of sentient beings with the *dharmakāya*, and he also says that the qualities and activities of *dharmakāya* are not separate from *dharmakāya*. In fact, they are inseparable, just as form is empty and emptiness is form.

One may wonder, “isn’t that simply the state of utter peace, or the unborn, or suchness that is spontaneously present?” Both the qualities and the activities of the *dharmakāya* are not separate from the *dharmakāya*, just like the sun and its light rays or musk and its fragrance. They are [inseparable], just as form is emptiness and emptiness is form. [Ordinary beings] cannot [comprehend] this level of the Buddha’s teaching, as it is like the sun shining on the blind. What [Buddha] has shown is what is present in the nature of [beings], and when one puts that into practice, one attains the result of buddhahood.¹⁰

gdod ma nas rdzogs pa'i byang chub tu sangs rgyas pa de yin| de la khyod kyi chos chen po gcig gang na 'dug| de gang gis bshad snyam na| ston pa de bzhin gshegs pas gsungs te| 'dir theg pa chen po gsang sngags re shig bzhugs su gsol la| mtshan nyid pha rol tu phyin pa'i theg pa'i dgongs pa| mgon po byams pas gtan la phab pa| rgyud bla ma bgyi ba nyan thos dang | rang sangs rgyas dang | byang chub sems dpa' rnam te| don gyis dbu ma dang | thun mong ma yin pa| gong na med pas na bla ma yin la| de la kham zhes bya ba'am| de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po zhes bya ba'am| gzhi'am| gdod nas sems can thams cad rdzogs pa'i byang chub tu sangs rgyas pa'i gshis de las mi 'da' bas gzhi'ang de nyid| lam yang de nyid| 'bras bu yang de nyid yin pas na rgyud ces bya ste|.

9 TRG, 417.2: *zhes pas pad ma shin tu rgyas pa'i nang na sangs rgyas kyi sku mtshan dang dpe byad kyis spras pa bzhugs pa bzhin du| ye gdod ma nas sems can thams cad rdzogs pa'i byang chub tu sangs rgyas par yod pa yin no.*

10 TRG, 417.3: *'o na de ni nye bar zhi ba'am| skye ba med pa'am| de bzhin nyid lhun gyis grub pa tsam zhig ma yin nam snyam na| chos kyi sku dang| chos sku de'i yon tan dang | phrin las rnam pa gnyis ni chos kyi sku de dang tha mi dad de| nyi ma dang 'od zer ram gla rtsi dang gla rtsi'i dri bzhin du mtshungs par gyur te| gzugs stong pa nyid dang | stong pa nyid gzugs dang 'dra bas| ston pa'i gsung gi rim pa de las mi tub te [em.thub ste] | dper na dmus long la nyi ma shar ba dang dra ba yin pas| gshis la yod pa de ston pa yin| bstan pa de nyams su blangs pas 'bras bu sangs rgyas thob pa yin gsung|.*

A Mahāmudrā Investigation into Confusion

The question remains, if sentient beings are already endowed with all the buddha qualities in the form of buddha nature, what is it that separates a sentient being from a buddha? In his *Mahāmudrā Investigation into Confusion* (*Phyag chen 'khrul pa rtsad gcod*),¹¹ Jigten Sumgön describes the occurrence of a buddha and sentient being by investigating how confusion—the primary adventitious defilement—arises and how it can be eliminated. This Mahāmudrā instruction on how to identify confusion is also elaborated upon by presenting sentient beings in terms of *dharmins*, and buddha nature in terms of *dharmatā* (*chos can dang chos nyid*).

Between a buddha and the sentient being, one does not come before the other. To begin with, when there is neither the buddha nor the sentient being, there is no ground, path, and result: there is no mind, no Dharma, no teacher; there is nothing to say, think, and describe; there is no listening, no hearing, and no words; there is no self and other, no good and bad, no joy and suffering, no excellent and wicked, and so forth. Thus, it is just like space, without divisions, and it is neither full nor empty, neither increasing nor decreasing. However, in terms of the Buddha, it is the *dharmatā*—what is known as the original tathāgata; the unproduced, self-arisen, primordial buddha—that is foremost. In terms of the sentient being, it is the unceasing *dharmin*—what is known as the mind, the mental consciousness, and the dependent—that is foremost. Since these two occur simultaneously, the *dharmin* and the *dharmatā* serve as the bases for both the Buddha and the sentient being, and thus they came into being simultaneously.¹²

11 I have made an attempt to translate and introduce portions of Jigten Sumgön's *Mahāmudrā Investigation into Confusion* (*Phyag chen 'khrul pa rtsad gcod*) in the hope that it will become research material for studying the similarities between RGV and the Mahāmudrā teachings of the early Kagyü masters. I have found three versions of this text from different editions of Jigten Sumgön's works (*bka' 'bum*). After careful comparison, I have chosen to base my translation on the older version, which is handwritten and found in Phyang monastery, Ladakh, except for the few occasions where one of the other two versions made more sense. I sincerely thank Professor Klaus-Dieter Mathes and my good friends—Dr. Kay Candler, Casey Kemp, Filippo Brambilla, Tasha Kimmet, and others—for their valuable suggestions during the translation of this work, and also for proofreading the final draft of my paper and translation.

12 KT, 179.6: *sangs rgyas dang sems can gnyis la dus la snga phyi med de | dang po sangs rgyas dang sems can gang yang med pa'i dus der | yid med chos kyang med | ston pa yang med | smra bsam brjod*

The essence of buddha nature is the union of clarity and emptiness (*gsal stong zung 'jug*). The clarity is equated with the *dharmin* and the emptiness with the *dharmatā*. Thus, buddha nature is the ground of both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, in the sense that the realization of buddha nature brings *nirvāṇa*, and the failure to realize the same brings *saṃsāra*. This is in line with RGV 1.46,¹³ which mentions how an ordinary being, a realized being, and a tathāgata perceive the same buddha nature differently, i.e., incorrectly, correctly, and precisely.

Since the *dharmin* and *dharmatā* are inseparable and simultaneous, buddha and sentient being occur at the same time. Thus, this passage explains that buddha nature is the ground of both a sentient being and a buddha, and thus it is in line with RGV 1.55–57,¹⁴ which explains how all the aggregates, elements, and senses are based on karma, afflictions, and incorrect conceptualities that abide in the pure nature of the mind, just as earth, water, fire, and wind abide in space.

The *dharmatā* is also known as the primordial Buddha. It is also known as the spontaneously present Buddha, the ground. It does not waver from the state of the great primordially pure ground, it is the state of sameness, and it is spontaneously present. It is devoid of the three times and has no arising, ceasing, or changing. This, known as the primordial, original Ādibuddha, is present in all beings. Being un-

pa'i rgyu yang med| nyan pa dang thos pa dang tshig kyang med| bdag gzhan dang | bzang ngan dang | bde sdug dang | legs nyes la sogs gzhi lam 'bras bu gang yang med de| nam mkha' lta bur phyogs ris dang| gang stong 'phel 'grib med pa la| sangs rgyas la snga shos chos nyid dang po'i de bzhin gshegs pa bya ba byas pa med pa'i rang byung ye sangs rgyas pa'o|| sems can la snga ba chos can ma 'gags pa| sems yid gzhan dbang bya ba dang gnyis dus mnyam du 'ongs nas| chos dang chos nyid de gnyis kyis sangs rgyas dang sems can gnyis ka'i gzhi byas te dus mnyam du 'ongs pa yin no||

13 *so so skye bo phyin ci log|| bden pa mthong ba bzlog pa ste|| de bzhin gshegs pa ji lta bzhin|| phyin ci ma log spros med nyid||* “[It manifests as] perverted [views in] ordinary beings, [as] the reversal [of these in] those who see the truth, and [it manifests] as it is, in an unperverted way, and as freedom from elaboration [in] a tathagata” (Maitreya 2000: 25).

14 *sa ni chu la chu rlung la|| rlung ni mkha' la rab tu gnas|| mkha' ni rlung dang chu dag dang|| sa yi kham la gnas ma yin|| de bzhin phung po kham dbang rnam|| las nga nyon mongs dag la gnas|| las dang nyon mongs tshul bzhin min|| yid la byed la rtag tu gnas|| tshul bzhin ma yin yid byed ni|| sems kyi dag pa la rab gnas|| sems kyi rang bzhin chos rnam ni|| thams cad la yang gnas ma yin||* “Earth rests upon water and water upon wind. Wind fully rests on space. Space does not rest upon any of the elements of wind, water or earth. Likewise, skandhas, elements and senses are based upon karma and mental poisons. Karma and poisons are always based upon improper conceptual activity. The improper conceptual activity fully abides on the purity of mind. Yet, the nature of the mind itself has no basis in all these phenomena” (Maitreya 2000: 26–27).

able to recognize [such] presence is known as the *dharmīn*, the mental consciousness, and the mind.¹⁵

This passage equates the naturally pure essence of the mind (*rang bzhin rnam dag*), or buddha nature, with *dharmatā*, the primordial buddha. This echoes what Jigten Sumgön says in his TRG, that all sentient beings are primordially fully awakened. Therefore, one can deduce that for Jigten Sumgön, the presence of buddha nature in sentient beings, as introduced in RGV 1.27, is not merely the emptiness of the mind; it is the *dharmakāya* and is not separate (*tha dad med pa*) from the qualities and activities.

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15 KT, 180.3: *chos nyid ye sangs rgyas zhes kyang bya | gzhi lhun grub kyi sangs rgyas zhes kyang bya | gzhi ye dag chen po'i ngang las ma gyos shing mnyam nyid lhun grub dus gsum skye 'gag dang | 'pho gyur med pa de la ye thog dang po'i sangs rgyas bya ba yin te | 'gro ba kun la yod pa yin no || de yod pa ngo ma shes pa ni chos can yid dam sems zhes bya'o||*.

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Images of Emptiness in a Prognostic Mirror

Tantric Zhentong Visions of Tathāgatagarbha in Early Jonang

Kālacakra Yoga Manuals

Michael R. Sheehy

During the fall of 1322, at the age of thirty, the contemplative scholar Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361) traveled from where he was studying at Sakya Monastery in southern Tibet to the mountain hermitage nestled deep in the Jomonang valley to meet the Kālacakra adept Yontan Gyatso (Yon tan rgya mtsho, 1260–1327), and receive full empowerment of the *Kālacakratantra*.¹ On this occasion, Yontan Gyatso transmitted along with the initiation several distinct lineages of guidance instruction on the sixfold yoga (*ṣaḍaṅgayoga*, *rnal 'byor yan lag drug*) completion stage processes of the Kālacakra system, known in the Jonang Kālacakra literature as *vajrayoga* (*rdo rje rnal 'byor*).² Following these transmissions, Dölpopa immediately went into secluded retreat at Khachö Deden (Mkha' spyod Bde ldan)—the “Bliss-Infused Enjoyment of Space” meditation cave at Jonang. After his retreat, Dölpopa spent the next year traveling from Jonang to Sakya and other nearby monasteries to give and receive teachings. Three years later, in 1325, upon returning to the Jonang hermitage, Dölpopa entered into strict retreat for a year in the Kachö Deden cave to practice the sixfold *vajrayoga*. It was during this intensive retreat period, writes his biographer Kunpang Chödrak Palsang (Kun spangs Chos grags dpal bzang, 1283–1363), that Dölpopa initially tasted the fruits of the first four of the six branches of yoga—the so-called images of emptiness (*śūnyatā-bimba*, *stong nyid gzugs brnyan*). As a result of the yoga of withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*, *so sor sdud pa*) and meditative stabilization (*dhyāna*, *bsam gtan*), Dölpopa is said to have experienced resplendent visions of buddhas and buddha fields.³ As a result of the yoga of harnessing vitality (*prāṇāyāma*, *srog rtsol*) and the yoga of retention (*dhāraṇā*, *'dzin pa*), he experi-

1 Stearns 2010: 15–16.

2 In order, these six yogas are (1) withdrawal or severance (*pratyāhāra*, *so sor sdud pa* / *so sor gcod pa*), (2) meditative stabilization (*dhyāna*, *bsam gtan*), (3) harnessing vitality (*prāṇāyāma*, *srog rtsol*), (4) retention (*dhāraṇā*, *'dzin pa*), (5) mindfulness or recollection (*anusmṛti*, *rjes dran*), and (6) meditative absorption (*samādhi*, *ting nge 'dzin*). On the sixfold yoga, see Stearns 2010: 104–5; Wallace 2001: 203–8; Newman 2000; Grönbold 1996; Orofino 1996.

3 Dol po pa discusses similar visions in his advice to yogis. Dol po pa, *Dge slong rnal 'byor*, 843–44.

enced blazing blissful warmth.⁴ For the yogic procedures that require withdrawal of the sense faculties from sensible objects, Dölpopa meditated in the dark room (*mun khang*) in the cave.

According to seventeenth-century Jonangpa historian Tāranātha (1575–1635), it was as a result of the meditative experiences that emerged from practicing the six-fold *vajrayoga* during this second extended retreat at Jonang that Dölpopa began to formulate his distinct synthesis of emptiness and *tathāgatagarbha* that became his hallmark teaching known as *zhentong* (*gzhan stong*).⁵ For Dölpopa and the Jonang tradition, perfection of the Kālacakra completion stage *vajrayoga* composed of six successive ancillary phases is the apex of contemplative practice. The performance of these six distinct tantric yogic procedures is understood by the Jonang tradition to be an extraordinarily efficient process of successive unfoldment to unexcelled buddhahood (*samyaksambodhi*).

Due largely to its late arrival and reception in the eleventh century, during the latter transmission and dissemination of Buddhist tantras, the *Kālacakratāntra* had a profound impact on tantric Buddhist thought and practice in Tibet.⁶ As new Tibetan orders emerged during the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, each sought to align its identity with different aspects of Indic Buddhist thought and praxis, including distinct bodies of yogic and tantric knowledge. Starting from the eleventh century, Tibetans wrote prolifically about Kālacakra practice. Descriptive writings about the practices and yogic experiences that emerge during the six-fold *vajrayoga* are derived directly from the extensive canonical Indic Kālacakra literature, especially the *Sekoddeśa* and *Laghukālacakratāntra*, the detailed *Vimalaprabhā* or *Stainless Light* commentary on the root verses by Puṇḍarīka, and the commentary on difficult points (*dka' 'grel*) of the tantra by Kālacakrapāda titled *Padmini: The Lotus Girl*.

Myriad streams of tantric transmission occurred simultaneously during this formative period, causing tremendous cross-fertilization among tantric systems. This made it incredibly important for Tibetans to synthesize and codify the disparate Indian tantric systems they were receiving.⁷ In the case of the *Kālacakratāntra*, the first Jonangpa, the Tibetan yogi Kunpang Tukjé Tsöndru (Kun spangs

4 Stearns 2010: 16.

5 Ibid: 17–18.

6 Sheehy 2009.

7 Buddhist tantric traditions define authentic transmission (*brgyud*) according to (1) textual authorization (*lung*) of the tantra, (2) empowerment (*dbang*) of the associated ritual and contemplative practices, and (3) instructions (*khrid*) on the meaning and precise performance of tantric practices.

Thugs rje brtson 'grus, 1243–1313), synthesized seventeen different transmission lineages of the Kālacakra sixfold *vajrayoga*.⁸ This consolidated and recorded direct whispered transmissions (*snyan brgyud*) and oral histories of the tantra for the first time. Kunpangpa's project collated written and oral instructions from the Tibetan forefathers of the lineage, including those from Yumo Mikyö Dorjé (Yu mo Mi bskyod rdo rje, b. 1027), a Dro Kālacakra lineage forefather who is claimed to be the earliest author to articulate a view of tantra *zhentong* (*sngags kyi gzhan stong*).⁹ Yumowa's work, *Lamp That Illuminates Emptiness*, one cycle in his *Cycle of the Four Illuminated Lamps*, is dedicated exclusively to commenting on the verse in the Sādhana chapter (4.198) of the *Kālacakratāntra*, which describes the visual manifestation of the deity to be *mahāmudrā*—the great seal—as the dynamic expression of emptiness.¹⁰ This verse describes Viśvamātā, the consort of the Kālacakra and whom Yumowa, following the *Lotus Girl* commentary, equates with the mother of buddhas, Prajñāpāramitā.¹¹ In this way, Viśvamātā is emblematic of both the esoteric reality of the tantric consort and the female embodiment of emptiness. Yumowa discerns emptiness to be devoid of an intrinsic reality and precluded from being cognized because it cannot become an object of the intellect.¹² For Yumowa, Viśvamātā is not cognized or conjured; she is observable emptiness (*dmigs pa dang bcas pa'i stong pa nyid*) born from yogic contemplation. Viśvamātā is the *mahāmudrā* image of emptiness (*phyag rgya chen po stong gzugs*).¹³ As translated below, following verses from the *Sekoddeśa*, her image appears as emptiness “without following it” (*rjes brtags min*) or investigating. This idea concurs with a passage from Kālacakrapāda's *Lotus Girl* in which Viśvamātā appears to be neither internal nor external. Such imagery of emptiness—or in this case, emptiness herself—is understood not to be contingent on perception or memo-

8 These seventeen sixfold *vajrayoga* traditions are from (1) Lotsāwa Gyi jo Zla ba'i 'Od zer, (2) Lotsāwa Rma dge ba'i Blo gros, (3) Khrom Lotsāwa Padma 'Od zer, (4) Bla ma Nag po Mngon shes can, (5) Kha che PaN chen Zla ba Dgon po [Kashmiri Paṇḍita Somanātha], (6) Rwa Lotsāwa Chos rab, (7) Tsa mi Lotsāwa Sangs rgyas Grags, (8) Amoghavajra to Ras chung Rdo rje Grags pa, (9–11) Rga lo and Tsa mi, (12–13) Kashmiri Paṇḍita Śākyaśrī, (14–15) Paṇḍita Vibhūticandra, (16) Paṇḍita Nyi dbang Srung ba to Chags Lotsāwa Chos rje Dpal, and (17) Man lung Gu ru. Tā ra nā tha, *Rdo rje*, 146–47.

9 Ngag dbang, *Jo nang chos 'byung zla ba'i sgron me*, 18 and Sheehy 2009.

10 Wallace 2010: 242 and Hatchell 2014: 163–99.

11 Hatchell 2014: 44 and 164–65. On Viśvamātā in Yu mo ba's *Phyag chen gsal sgron*, see Kemp 2019: 190–91 and 194–97.

12 Yu mo ba, *Stong nyid gsal ba'i sgron me*, 9: *rang bzhin gyis stong pa nyid rtog cing nyams su myong pa mi 'thad de| de nyid blo'i yul du mi 'gyur ba'i phyir ro|*. Hatchell 2014: 43.

13 On *pratisenā* in Yu mo ba's *Phyag chen gsal sgron*, see Kemp 2019: 190–91.

ry or accessed via inference, and therefore not a product of imagination.¹⁴ For the Kālacakra, yogic vision of Viśvamātā is the singular expressive force of the gnostic universe.

Yumowa's *Cycle of the Four Illuminated Lamps* and the numerous guidance manuals and the condensation of the *Kālacakratantra* that Kunpangpa authored had a conspicuous influence on Dölpopa.¹⁵ This distinct philosophical and contemplative understanding of tantra *zhentong*—a vision that Dölpopa is said to have had direct yogic experience of while practicing the sixfold *vajrayoga*—synthesizes the doctrines of emptiness and *tathāgatagarbha*. Dölpopa's view drew extensively from sūtra and tantra, and consequently generated both magnetic interest as well as historic polemic in Tibet. To understand how tantric philosophy of *tathāgatagarbha* developed across intellectual discourses in Tibet, I argue that we must understand the *zhentong* vision of the Kālacakra sixfold *vajrayoga* that describes the natural-born phenomena known to be the “images of emptiness.” As we will see, it is the images of emptiness, described as ensuing directly from the Kālacakra *vajrayoga* practice, that Dölpopa and later Jonang authors correlate directly with absolute expressions of *tathāgatagarbha*, suggesting that *tathāgatagarbha* can be accessed via precise contemplative technique.¹⁶ Here, I will discuss how a descriptive language for emptiness that is detailed in the Kālacakra literature, based on practices of the sixfold *vajrayoga*, is explicitly connected by Dölpopa and two of his closest disciples—Nyawon Kunga Pel (Nya dbon kun dga' dpal, 1285–1379) and Choklé Namgyal (Phyogs las rnam rgyal, 1306–1386)—with the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine. In so doing, my comments are limited to the early Jonang tradition from the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries and give attention to questions about the contextualization of *tathāgatagarbha* within tantric philosophy in Tibet.

Images of Emptiness in the Kālacakra

The Kālacakra sixfold *vajrayoga* contemplative system follows the normative Buddhist tantric practice paradigm of first presenting the common preliminaries (*thun mong gi sngon 'gro*) before advancing onto the uncommon preliminaries

14 On Kālacakra philosophy of perception of deities via direct perception (*pratyakṣa*, *mngon sum*) or inference (*anumāna*, *rjes dpag*), see Hatchell 2014: 108–9. On yogic perception, see Dunne 2006.

15 This fourfold cycle concerns (1) emptiness (*stong pa nyid*), (2) coalescence (*zung 'jug*), (3) luminosity (*'od gsal ba*), and (4) *mahāmudrā* (*phyag rgya chen po*), critical topics in the Kālacakra completion stage literature.

16 For discussion about a modern Jonang author on tantric *zhentong* and the Kālacakra, see Sheehy 2019b: 365–68.

(*thun mong ma yin pa'i sngon 'gro*). In the Jonang Kālacakra system, however, generation-stage (*bskyed rim*) deity yoga is performed to support the completion-stage (*rdzogs rim*) yogic process and is part of the uncommon preliminaries. These practices prepare a yogi for the completion stage practices of the *vajrayoga* by reversing the practitioner's involvement with delusory sensory experiences and adversarial circumstances, as well as purifying the practitioner's perceptions. Once the uncommon preliminaries of the generation-stage process are mastered, the practitioner proceeds through the three isolations (*dben pa gsum*). These three isolations of the body, voice, and mind are performed as a special preparation for the completion-stage yogas. Each of these practices are performed in darkness in order to isolate the habitual activities of one's ordinary perceptions and expressions, typically for fifty- or one-hundred-day periods. Accomplishing both the common and uncommon preliminary practices prepares the practitioner for the primary practices (*dnegos gzhi*), the path of the sixfold *vajrayoga*. Once the generation-stage practices are perfected, the initial postures of the six subtle subsidiary yogas are performed successively. Through the support of multiple bodily postures and exercises (*'phrul 'khor*), and specialized means of abiding in tranquility, the practitioner advances through each of the six yogas according to signs that indicate progress.

In summary, this process of the sixfold *vajrayoga* is succinctly described by Kunpang Tükjé Tsöndru in his *Lamp that Illuminates the Vajra Verses*, a commentary on the condensed Kālacakra:

Along the path that is propitious at the beginning, during the interval of withdrawing (*so sor spong*) and meditative stabilization, discerning wisdom perceives the qualities of the myriad images of emptiness together with their correlative meditative objects (*dmigs*).

Along the path that is propitious in the middle, during the time of harnessing vitality and retention, by harnessing vitality, living beings and the abiding way of the three roots are shown.

Along the path that is propitious at the end, during the time of mindfulness and meditative absorption, by practicing yoga and cultivating the three *mudrās*, you accomplish the fourfold *vajra*.¹⁷

17 Kun spangs, *Rdo rje'i tshig 'byed gsal sgron*, 398: *thog mar dge ba'i lam (da ni gzugs) so sor spong dang bsam gtan gyi dus su mthong pa shes rab dmigs bcas sna tshogs stong gzugs kyi mtshan nyid dang | bar du dge ba'i (da ni) lam srog rtsol dang 'dzin pa'i dus su srog rtsol bas 'gog pa'i gnas rtsa*

Kunpangpa frames the entire completion-stage process according to these three phases—the beginning, middle, and end—and he composed distinct yoga instruction manuals that address the dynamics of how these are practiced progressively.¹⁸ Each of the six yogas is practiced until accomplished before progressing onto the next yoga.

Vajrayoga involves a progressive visionary integration of the images of emptiness through each of the six phases of the yogic process, culminating in the coalescence of ordinary forms or images with the sublime image of emptiness, that is, the Kālacakra deity. Images of emptiness are said to emerge during the first yoga, that of withdrawal, and are understood by the Jonang Kālacakra tradition to be natural manifestations of *tathāgatagarbha*. What is emphasized throughout Dölpopa's writings, and those of later Jonangpa authors, is that the images of emptiness are experiential. Such visionary experiences emerge from the careful execution of the yogic procedures explicated in the *vajrayoga* practice of totally withdrawing the sense perceptions from mundane stimuli. This suggests that the images of emptiness are experienced through contemplative practice, and that because they are ontically enduring, images of emptiness are experientially accessible via precise yogic technique.

This first yoga of withdrawal involves the adept absorbing, stabilizing, and dissolving the vital winds into the central channel. As a result of this withdrawal of sensory projections from their correlative objects, inconceivable and intangible yet formulated natural manifestations appear within the perceptual field of the yogi.¹⁹ This initial yoga is practiced in an environment of total darkness until the signs (*nimitta*, *rtags*) of successful yogic withdrawal arise.²⁰ Through the

gsum gyi gnas tshul dang 'gro ba bstan pa | mtha' mar dge ba'i lam rjes dran dang ting nge 'dzin gyi dus su (da ni) rnal 'byor goms pas phyag rgya gsum bsten nas rdo rje bzhi bsgrub pa'o]. Note that Kun spangs pa refers to the first yoga as *so sor spang* here, an alternative along with *so sor gcod*. In Kālacakra the three *mudrās* normally are *karmamudrā*, *jñānamudrā*, and *mahāmudrā*. See Vienna Buddhist Translation Studies Group 2020.

18 Kun spangs Thugs rje's main instruction manuals are (1) *Zab lam gyi thog mar dge ba'i khrid*, (2) *Zab lam gyi bar du dge ba'i khrid*, and (3) *Zab lam gyi tha mar dge ba'i khrid*. Both Phyogs las rnam rgyal and 'Bri gung Lotsāwa wrote expansions for each of these.

19 Also, "yoga of renunciation" or "yoga of severance." Phyogs las rnam rgyal notes that these are synonyms for the same practice of the first yoga of withdraw, *so sor spang* or *so sor spong ba* according to Sha ba ri system of sixfold yoga and is referred to as *so sor gcod pa* according to Guhyasamāja (*gsang 'dus*). Phyogs las, *Zab lam thog mar*, 143.

20 There are ten signs during the yoga of withdraw, six daytime signs and four nighttime signs, including smoke, mirage, and fireflies. These date back to early Indian yogic traditions and are found in other tantric completion-stage yogas, including the *Guhyasamājantra*. The signs of yogic success are manifestations of the yogi's mind and are parallel with the images of emp-

second yoga of meditative stabilization, the yogi perceptually engages images of emptiness as distinct reference points via contemplative technique to stabilize the mind so that these new references—the images of emptiness—are held steadily within their perceptual field. Once the yogi has balanced and stabilized images of emptiness, the third yoga of harnessing vitality is practiced to interfuse yogic perception with images of emptiness through vigorous contemplative methods to draw-in, harness, and sustain the primary and subsidiary flows of the vital breath-winds within the subtle body. During the yoga of retention (*dhāraṇā*, 'dzin pa), performed fourth in the sequence, the adept blends images of emptiness with perceptions and vital winds, generating indestructible seminal spheres (*bindu*, *thig le*) within the six cakras, fusing subtle essences of the body with these seminal spheres. With integration of the subtle body with images of emptiness, the yoga of mindfulness (*anusmṛti*, *rjes dran*) is practiced to master these subtle essences, draw forth the four joys, and successively increase and stabilize the supreme immutable bliss that emerges during recollection of the images of emptiness.²¹ In sync, the climatic yoga of meditative absorption (*samādhi*, *ting nge 'dzin*) extends the yoga of mindfulness to increase immutable blissfulness that dematerializes the yogi's physical body within the bliss-filled subtle body so that the nondual gnostic body (*jñānakāya*, *ye shes sku*) is actualized. At this pinnacle point of coalescence, the yogi's body fuses with the Kālacakra deity's enlightened body, and the consort is known to be the *mahāmudrā* image of emptiness (*phyag rgya chen po stong gzugs*), which is naturally arisen blissful emptiness.²²

The Tibetan language phrase that I am translating as, “image(s) of emptiness” (*śūnyatā-bimba*, *stong nyid gzugs brnyan*), a phrase employed throughout the Kālacakra literature, is in its abbreviated form *tong zuk* (*stong gzugs*), which literally means “empty forms” and is typically translated as such. However, the full utterance that this phrase abbreviates literally means “reflection of emptiness” (*stong pa nyid kyi gzugs brnyan*). The Tibetan term “zuk” in this phrase is an abbreviation

teness. According to the Kālacakra, the full recognition of the images of emptiness are the realization of the yogi's body as the immaterial form of emptiness. For discussion on the signs, see Wallace 2011: 212, Wallace 2015: 167, and Henning 2009.

21 Several supplementary enhancement yogas are practiced during this yoga, including sexual yoga with an actual or visualized consort and the generation of tummo (*caṇḍālī*, *gtum mo*). The yoga of fierce fire is particularly emphasized to induce the blazing appearances that serve as the basis for special images of emptiness that give rise to the experience of immutable blissful emptiness.

22 Imagining a consort is a conceptual method that is abandoned during the stage of completion; however, there are authors in the tradition, including Nāropa, who make reference to actual sexual consort practice.

of the term *zuk nyen* (*gzugs brnyan, bimba*), which has the semantic range of meaning “reflection,” “expression,” or “manifestation,” in addition to visible shapes or images, and is used interchangeably.²³ While this phenomenon of *tong zuk* is in fact a form (*gzugs*), correlative with the five sense faculties (*dbang po lnga*) in the normative Buddhist model of the mind-body complex, it is more properly conceived in the tantric literature to be an image that has the capacity to be reflected or be a reflection (*gzugs brnyan*), correlative with yogic extrasensory perception.²⁴ Throughout the explanatory Tibetan literature, the dominant metaphors used to describe the *tong zuk* are visucentric, suggesting that the dominant sense perception is visual. This is also referred to as the “image of wisdom” (*prajñābimba*).²⁵ Though this language is specific to the Kālacakra tradition, the phrase *tong zuk* is used in other contexts, perhaps most notably within Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā literature.²⁶

23 Tibetan authors also abbreviate this to be *stong nyid kyi gzugs*.

24 All five sense faculties and their correlative sense objects (*yul lnga*) do not appear in their ordinary capacity, but rather as reflections (*gzugs brnyan*). The internalization of meditation objects has a long history in Buddhism. From early Abhidharma discussions up to the most refined elaborations on the luminosity of mind found in the *Unexcelled Yoga Tantras*, there are careful deliberations about what is a construed mental image or object of meditation (*alam-bana, dmigs pa*), and what is naturally internal. Part of the issue is the boundaries between the inner and the outer. In fact, this exact interval may be blurred. Again, how we get at this subject/object tension has been a prevailing question throughout Buddhist discourse for millennia. On the ordinary perceptible level, there is the observable, constructible, and consensual. The normative object of meditation is a conceptual point of reference that through the power of memory and the imaginative faculty is visualized. With the process of visualization, there is the internalization of an impression of the image. This is the interval where the image itself disappears and the mental image appears. It is in this space where the death of the thing occurs. An image is a representation of an external thing or “form” that is categorically a shape or configuration that can be seen. See Choklé Namgyal’s explanation below. Wallace 2001: 203–4 and Sheehy 2019c: 58–59.

25 Wallace 2015: 167.

26 For example, this includes *dohā* songs by Indian great *siddhas*, where the phrase is found relatively frequently in the *Do ha skor gsum*. For instance, Padma dkar po, *Phyag chen gyi zin bris*, 83 in translation reads, “. . . resting like a baby staring at a temple: By binding your elephant mind tightly to the pillar of mindfulness and meta-awareness, your breath will settle into its natural repose. Through the power of this, you will [perceive] images of emptiness, such as smoke and so forth, will nearly wander off into bliss, and will fall into nonthought that is similar to empty appearances that are without bodily or mental feelings, and so forth. However, whatever ephemeral experiences [you have], do not hold them to be special or stop them from appearing, or regard them to be pleasurable or to be faults. Neither stopping nor holding on to appearances is said to be ‘like a baby staring at a temple.’ ” ... *bu chung lha khang blta ba ltar*

The phrase *tong zuk* evokes the simile of an image that manifests like a reflection in a mirror. This special dharma language derives from the Kālacakra root tantra, and this simile is employed in the *Sekoddeśa*, the largest section of the *Paramādibuddha*, to describe the visionary manifestations that appear to a yogi in the sky while practicing the sixfold yoga. From the Dro lineage of the Kālacakra, transmitted by Somonātha and translated into Tibetan by Dro Sherab Drakpa (c. twelfth century), it reads,

With the eyes neither open nor closed,
In the empty, without following it,
An image will be seen, as in a dream.
Meditate continually on this image.

This meditation on immaterial images
Is not the [conceptual] meditation of yogis;
Because mind is without the material or immaterial,
This is seeing the empty without imagining.²⁷

Just as a virgin girl sees prognostic images in a mirror
That are born immaterial,
In this same way, the yogi sees in space
Past and future phenomena.

This [image] is neither material nor immaterial
Because the matter that she sees is in fact empty;
Its existence is neither material nor immaterial—
Like a hallucination, a dream, an optical illusion.

gzhag pa ni | sems kyi glang po dran shes kyi ka ba la dam por thogs pas rlung rang mal du zin | de'i dbang gis du ba la sogs pa'i stong gzugs dang | bde bas brgal ba tsam dang | mi rtog pa lus sems yod du mi tshor ba bar snang stong pa la 'dug pa lta ba la sogs pa'i nyams kyi snang ba ci shar yang dga' ba dang skyon du bltas nas | ched du 'dzin pa dang snang cha 'gog pa gang yang mi bya bas | snang cha ma 'gags la 'dzin pa med pa bu chung lha khang blta ba lta bur gzhag pa zhes bya'o |.

27 Orofino 1994a: n. 3. Śūnye here is read to be *bimbe*, i.e., *gzugs* and not *stong pa*, confirmed by translators of the *Sekoddeśa* and its commentator, Nāropa. I have translated this literally from the critical edition to be *stong par* or “in the empty,” though it is likely a reference to the *stong pa'i gzugs*, so following that interpretation it would read, “This is unimagined perceiving of the images of emptiness.”

While these phenomena do not exist,
 The manifestation of phenomenon is fully observed.
 Like a wish-granting gem
 That utterly fulfills the hopes of infinite living beings.

In the magical image, the virgin
 Sees a thief who was not visible,
 And with temporary vision, having gone there,
 The diviner sees the thief.

If she sees an image that exists,
 Why does she not see her own face?
 If she sees an image that does not exist,
 Is this not like horns on a hare?

She does not see with other's eyes,
 Nor does she see with her own eyes.
 What she sees has not manifested—
 Like the child of a virgin.²⁸

This passage introduces the Kālacakra imagery of emptiness by drawing from the Indian prognostication rite wherein a young virgin girl divines prognostic images (*pratisenā*, *pra phab*) while her eyes are blindfolded during a mirror divination (*phra 'bebs*). These images are seen by her mind, which is empowered by her guru's mind, and not by her own eyes.²⁹ In the Kālacakra, these images experienced

28 *Sekoddeśa*, stanzas 27–34: *bkab dang ma bkaḥ mig dag gis | stong par 'di ni rjes brtags min | rmi lam bzhiḥ du gzugs mthong 'gyur | rtag tu gzugs de bsgom par bya | dngos med gzugs la sgom pa de | rnal 'byor pa yi bsgom ma yin | dngos po dngos med sems kyi min | stong par ma brtags mthong phyir ro | ji ltar pra phab me long la | gzhoṇ nu mas mthong dngos med skyes | de bzhiḥ 'das dang ma 'ong chos | mkha' la de nyid rnal 'byor pas | 'di la dngos po dngos med 'gyur | dngos po stong pa'i don mthong phyir | dngos po dngos med don yod pa | sgyu ma rmi lam mig 'phrul bzhiḥ | med pa'i chos can dag la chos | skye ba 'di ni rab tu mthong | yid bzhiḥ nor ltar mtha' yas pa'i | sems can bsam pa yongs rdzogs byed | pra phab pa yi gzhoṇ nu mas | ma mthong ba yi rkun po mthong | nyi tshē ba yi mig dang gis | song nas sgrub pa po yis mthong | gal te yod pa'i gzugs mthong na | rang gi gdong pa cis mi mthong | gal te med pa'i gzugs mthong na | ri bong rwa ni ji ltar min | gzhan gyi mig gis mi mthong zhiṅ | rang gi mig gis mthong min pa | skye ba med pa mthong ba ni | gzhoṇ nu ma yi bu ji bzhiḥ*. See Orofino, 1994a: 612, and Orofino 1994b: 63–65, and Vienna Buddhist Translation Studies Group 2020.

29 *Pratisenā* is, however, not limited to mirrors and refers to a diversity of oracular methods and rites used for diagnosis and divination. Nāropa, in his commentary on the *Sekoddeśa*, refers to

during the prognostication rite are a simile for the *tong zuk* that express *tathāgata-garbha* and are revealed through the sixfold yoga practice while the mind rests in nonconceptuality.

The images of emptiness for a yogi are likened to images seen by a virgin girl in a prognostic mirror in that prognostic images are described to be neither material (*dn̄gos po*) nor immaterial (*dn̄gos med*) and are analogized to be an optical illusion (*mig 'phrul*). Because the images of prognosticated future events have not occurred and have not come into existence, they do not reflect events outside the mirror. In the same way, images of emptiness are perceived by a yogi while not existent.³⁰ This raises important questions about the epistemological nature of these special images as objects of perception. The commentary on difficult points of the *Kālacakratantra* by the elder Kālacakrapāda addresses the epistemological nature of these images of emptiness. *The Lotus Girl* reads,

Let's take for example a unique image (*gzugs*): while it is perceived in a mirror, it abides prior to where it appears. The external material thing (*phyi rol gyi dn̄gos po*) itself does appear in a mirror, because it remains in its own [place]. However, it is not apart from that because it appears to be just how it is. Similarly, due to the power of constantly meditating on the sixfold yoga, the yogi perceives images of emptiness that are endowed with every expression, externally in the sky. In this same way, these are perceived internally via the mental faculty.

Therefore, things that appear to be internal or external are not existent, because these transcend the relationships between a producer and a product. However, these are also not nonexistent because they make up distinct fields of experience (*spyod yul*). Consequently, these are special!³¹

the *Pratisenāvatārantra*, the source text for this rite, which states that these prognostic images can be perceived via eight divinatory devices: (1) a mirror (*me long*), (2) a thumb (*mthe bong*), (3) a lamp (*sgron me*), (4) the moon (*zla ba*), (5) the sun (*nyi ma*), (6) water (*chu*), (7) a sword (*ral gri*), and (8) an eye (*mig*). See Nya dbon, *Bstan pa spyi 'grel*, 117. Each of these eight devices support the divining of the visible from the invisible by a young virgin girl during this rite, resulting in the vision of special prognostic images. Orofino 1994a: 612, and Stearns 2010: n. 430, 532, and 546. On *pratisenā* as a diagnostic method in Tibetan medicine, see McGrath 2019.

30 Wallace 2011: 206.

31 Dus zhab pa, *Padma can*, 7, 466: *dper na gzugs gcig pu ni me long gi nang du mthong ba dang | ngon gyi gnas la gnas par snang ba'o | phyi rol gyi dn̄gos po de nyid me long la snang ba ma yin te | rang la gnas par gyur pa'i phyir ro | de las ma gtogs par yang ma yin te de nyid de bzhin du snang*

This passage further elaborates on the simile of the mirror detailed in the *Sekoddeśa* verses, using the exact language of images of emptiness. A danger is to conceive of these images of emptiness as external objects (*bāhyārtha*, *phyi don*), things that can be seen out there in the world. As the quote states, even while these images appear in the sky, they are perceived internally. Because the images of emptiness are knowable through the practice of the sixfold yoga, and because the nature of these images of emptiness is that they do not exist either internally nor externally, this yogic perception is likened to looking into a mirror. While the perceptible images of emptiness are not material things that exists outside of the perceiver, what is reflected in the mirror is devoid of materiality, as it appears in the mirror.

Another dimension emphasized is that while these images of emptiness are reflections of emptiness, they are not expressed from a nihilistic vacuum. The image is rather described to be the expression of the visceral bliss (*nang gi bde ba*) that naturally emerges as a practitioner proceeds through the successive yogas. Elaborating on this point, the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary reads,

In the ether of sky, emptiness with every expression (*rnam pa thams cad pa'i stong pa nyid*) is definitively perceived to be unmanifest phenomena, like prognostic images in a mirror. In fact, these are conceived to be analogous to dreams that intensively appear to be fabricated by your own mind.

That which is the accumulative identity of the subtlest particles (*rdul phra rab*) is far removed from that which is empty of thoroughly analyzed phenomena, nihilistic emptiness. Visceral bliss emerges from your passion for these phenomena that are a reference for your own awareness (*rang rig par bya*).

Having fully renounced the phenomenal bliss that is a reference for your own awareness due to external forces, uniquely adept at stabilizing the bodhicitta that is endowed with the identity of wisdom and method, and having received spoken instructions for the path of wisdom and gnosis that is supreme immutable great bliss, this is

bar gyur pa'i phyir rol | de bzhin du sbyor ba'i rnal 'byor pas yan lag drug rtag tu bsgom pa'i dbang gis rnam pa thams cad dang ldan par gyur pa'i stong pa nyid kyi gzugs ni phyir rol du nam mkha' la mthong zhing nang du yid kyi dbang pos kyang de bzhin du mthong ngo | de bas na phyi dang nang gi snang bar gyur pa'i dngos po ni yod pa ma yin te | bskyed bya byed byed kyi 'brel pa las 'das par gyur pa'i phyir rol | med pa yang ma yin te dbang po so so la spyod yul du gyur pa'i phyir rol | de bas na khyad par du gyur pa'i phyir rol |.

not asserted to be the fully imagined phenomena that are supports and markers for support, colors, gestures, shapes, and maṇḍala of the deity.³²

Hence, what is described is not an emptiness that results from intellectual analysis (*dpyad pa*) equated with a nihilistic emptiness (*chad pa'i stong pa nyid*). Not born from vacuity, the images of emptiness are not phenomena that exist suspended in a split-off visual domain, nor are these a cerebral conjecture that occur in an abstract sphere of the intellect.³³ Making the point that images of emptiness give rise to bliss, the *Vimalaprabhā* prioritizes these squarely in the domain of experience, not abstract analysis. The bliss that the yogi yearns for is the bliss born from experience; however, the danger being flagged is to not succumb to the bliss that comes about due to external forces (*phyi rol gyi dbang*). That is, inducing something from outside oneself reifies the very dualistic paradigms that are antithetical to this blissful yogic realization. This is further emphasized by warning that what is not being discussed here are the generation-stage contemplations that intentionally and constructively simulate a deity to be imputed or imagined phenomena (*brtags pa'i chos*).

32 Rigs ldan Padma dkar po, *Bsdus pa'i rgyud*, 1202: *nam mkha'i kham la rnam pa thams cad pa'i stong pa nyid me long gi pra phab pa bzhin du skye ba med pa'i chos nges par mthong ba | rang gi sems kyi spros pa'i rab tu snang ba rmi lam dang mtshungs pa'i don du sems pa | rdul phra rab tshogs pa'i bdag nyid kyi chos rnam par dpyad pa'i stong pa chad pa'i stong pa nyid las ring du byas pa | nang gi bde ba rang rig par bya ba'i chos la rjes su chags pa | phyi rol gyi dbang pos rang rig par bya ba'i bde ba'i chos yongs su spangs pa | shes rab dang thabs kyi bdag nyid can | byang chub kyi sems brtan par byed pa la gcig tu mkhas pa | mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde ba chen po'i shes rab ye shes kyi lam gyi man ngag thob pas rten dang brten pa mtshan ma dang kha dog dang phyag dang dbyibs dang dkyil 'khor kyi lha yongs su brtags pa'i chos mi 'dod do |.*

33 Nāropa's *Sekoddeśatikā* commentary on verse 21 of the *Sekoddeśa* explicitly connects the visceral bliss that emerges from passions with the deity: *mahāmudreti gaganodbhavabimbam | tasyāḥ svarasavāhibhāvanākhyānu-rāgāj jātaṃ niḥspandata iti niruddho vajramaṇer bāhyaspandaḥ srāvaḥ |*. Verse 21 of the *Sekoddeśa* states that the passion that emerges for the *mahāmudrā* with the deity is bliss without vibration (*niḥspanda*, *gyo med*). Nāropa explains that this passion for her, which is meditation on her, gives rise to bliss without vibration, and is no different than her image (*bimba*) emerging from space. Here, the phrase “without vibration” means wavering undulation that extends externally, i.e., emission from the *vajra* jewel is stopped. See Sferra 2006: 106; and for verse 21, see Vienna Buddhist Translation Studies Group 2020.

Dölpopa on Images of Emptiness

For Dölpopa, whose hermeneutical enterprise is concerned with syncretizing the sūtras and tantras, images of emptiness are not merely obscure references cited from the esoteric language of the Kālacakra but are rather contextualized throughout Buddhist literature.³⁴ Referencing how the intangible phenomena are experienced, in his *Mountain Dharma*, Dölpopa quotes the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* and adds his interlinear commentary,

Furthermore, this is how it is taught that adventitious stains and *tathāgatagarbha* are empty:

Moreover, the [*Mahāparinirvāṇamahā*]sūtra eloquently discusses the distinctions between that which is associated with an image of emptiness, and that which is associated with an image of what is not empty:

Kaundinya, there are images [with stains] that are empty [of an inherent nature]. Due to conditions of cessation, there are also images of emptiness.³⁵ These are realized to be a completely free images [of *tathāgatagarbha*] that are not empty. Similarly, fully recognize [that there are these two] spectra for sensations, perceptions, impressions, and consciousness.

As it states here, these are, in respective order, images with adventitious stains and so forth, emptiness devoid of substance [the emptiness of being empty], and that which itself is empty of an inherent essence, as well as the *images of tathāgatagarbha*, and so forth. These are the emptiness of the very nature of what is devoid of substance [and the emptiness of what is not empty]. This is ultimate *zhentong*!³⁶

34 Sheehy 2019a: 71–73.

35 The “conditions of cessation” referenced in the sūtra quote are likely the yogic procedures of withdrawing one’s senses from mundane stimuli, rescinding one’s involvement from objectification.

36 Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, *Ri chos*, 374–75: *yang de nyid glo bur dri ma dang bde gshegs snying po’i stong tshul du gsungs pa* | *yang mdo de nyid du stong pa’i gzugs la sogs pa dang mi stong pa’i gzugs la sogs pa legs par phye ste bka’ rtsal pa* | *’di lta ste* | *ke’u di nya* [*bur dri ma’i*] *gzugs ni* [*rang gi ngo bos*] *stong pa’o* | *stong pa’i gzugs de* | *’gags pa’i rkyen gyis* [*rang gi ngo bos*] *stong pa ma yin pa’i* [*bde gshegs snying po’i*] *gzugs kyi rnam par grol ba thob par* | *’gyur te* | *tshor ba dang* | *’du shes dang* | *’du byed dang rnam par shes pa’i bar du yang de bzhin du rgyas par* | [*gnyis gnyis su*] *rig par bya’o* | *zhes pa la de dag ni rim pa ltar glo bur dri ma’i gzugs sogs dngos po med pa stong*

With Dölpopa we have a hard pivot to equate the images of emptiness with *tathāgatagarbha*, asserting that these are *zhentong* emptiness. Echoed in this sūtra quote, the meaning stressed in the context of the Kālacakra sixfold *vajrayoga* terminology is that these images are a natural manifestation of absolute emptiness. In Dölpopa's commentary on the quote, we read his characterization of this elusive expression of non-emptiness; that these are in fact the *image of tathāgatagarbha*. Warning not to conflate the manifestation of the conventional with the ultimate, Dölpopa reminds his readers that these are actually manifestations of the indwelling *tathāgatagarbha* that continually pervade things stable and wavering, tangible and intangible.³⁷ With this, he points to a key variable in the *zhentong* code.

In his *General Commentary on the Doctrine*, one of his most important works, Dölpopa further elaborates on the visible quality of *tathāgatagarbha*,

I bow at the feet of the masters who decipher and demonstrate that
 “The conventional threefold world is merely deceptive appearances and
 imputations,³⁸
 While the ultimate threefold world is *tathāgatagarbha*:
 Invincible, unimputed, and nondeceptive appearances.”³⁹

Distinguishing the two truths of the conventional world of deceptive appearances from the ultimate world of nondeceptive appearances, Dölpopa states that the ultimate threefold world is no different from *tathāgatagarbha*, thereby asserting that *tathāgatagarbha* appears to be non-deceptive.

Nyawon Kunga Pel, the tenth throne-holder at Jonang, in his explanatory commentary on the *General Commentary on the Doctrine* titled *Dispelling the Darkness of the Psyche by Illuminating the Intent*, further elucidates Dölpopa,

pa nyid [dang stong pa'i stong pa nyid] de rang rang ngo bos stong pa dang | bde gshegs snying po'i gzugs sogs dngos po med pa'i ngo bo nyid stong pa nyid [dang mi stong pa'i stong pa nyid] de don dam gzhan stong ngo. Brackets added from Dol po pa 2007 from the annotated commentary (*mchan 'grel*), which were included in the translation above. See also, Hopkins 2006: 215. The final lines here resemble *pariṇiṣpanna* emptiness, the nature of the nonexistence (*dngos po med pa*) of duality as described in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and *Madhyāntavibhāga*.

37 Throughout the commentarial literature, the phrase, “conventional images of emptiness” (*kun rdzob stong pa nyid kyi gzugs*) is employed to make this distinction. For discussion, Phyogs las, *Gzhi lam 'bras*, 168.

38 In the Kālacakra practice system, the yogi trains the mind during the generation stage to perceive the threefold world of desire, form, and formlessness. Wallace 2011: 205.

39 Dol po pa, *Bstan pa spyi 'grel*, 689: *kun rdzob srid gsum 'khrul snang sgro btags tsam | don dam srid gsum bde gshegs snying po ni | gzhom med ma brtags ma 'khrul snang ba zhes | phye ste ston mdzad bla zhabs la 'dud*. See also, Stearns 2010: 122.

Following this, the two truths are distinguished according to the threefold scheme of outer, inner, and other. The two truths are again distinguished according to what defines the *threefold world*. The conventional threefold world is the three realms subsumed within *samsāra* because they are deceptive appearances that emanate from ignorance. In fact, because they are mere imputations, they [do not exist and] can be overcome by the antidote of perfect gnosis.

As for the images of emptiness that clearly manifest in the form of the threefold world as they appear directly to the yogi, this is the ultimate threefold world. Being the natural luminosity of the mind, these are **sugatagarbha*. These cannot be overcome by an antidote because this is the consummate essence of perfection; not imputed by concepts of a yogi during meditation, this cognition appears without deception.

So, I bow at the feet of the sublime masters who elegantly decipher and demonstrate this.⁴⁰

Elaborating on Dölpopa, Nyawon's commentary reiterates the clear distinction made by Dölpopa throughout his writings that the two truths of the conventional (*kun rdzob*) and ultimate (*don dam*) are totally distinct domains. He further explains that the ultimate threefold world is the images of emptiness, that this ultimate world is the luminous nature of mind, and that these are equated with *tathāgatagarbha*. Nyawon draws from the Kālacakra commentarial literature on the sixfold *vajrayoga* to reiterate that these ultimate realities are not imputed or imagined (*ma brtags*), reminding his reader that this kind of emptiness cannot be accessed via inference.⁴¹

Continuing in the next stanza of his *General Commentary on the Doctrine*, Dölpopa discusses the causality of *tathāgatagarbha*,

40 Nya dbon, *Bstan pa spyi 'grel*, 105: *de dag gis phyi nang gzhan gsum la bden gnyis sogs kyi rnam dbye bstan nas srid gsum zhes pa'i tshig don la'ang bden gnyis kyi rnam dbye ston te kun rdzob kyi srid pa gsum ni 'khor bas bsdu pa'i kham gsum ste| de ni ma rig pas sprul pa'i 'khrul snang yin pa'i phyir don la sgro btags pa tsam yin pa'i phyir na gnyen po yang dag ye shes kyis gzhom du [med yod cing]| rnal 'byor pa'i mngon sum la snang ba'i srid gsum gyis rnam par gsal ba'i stong gzugs sogs ni don dam pa'i srid gsum ste| de nyid sems kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal yin pas bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po yang yin la| de nyid ni gnyen pos gzhom du med de yang dag pa'i snying po mthar thug pa yin pa'i phyir| sgom pa po'i rnal 'byor ba sogs kyis rtog pas ma brtags shing shes pa ma 'khrul ba'i snang ba yin no zhes legs par phyen ste ston par mdzad pa'i bla ma dam pa'i zhabs la 'dud do|.*

41 See for instance, Nyi ma, *Sbyor ba yan lag drug pa'i 'grel pa*, 430: *stong nyid kyi gzugs brnyan ma brtags pa'i du ba la sogs pa la mngon sum du mthong pa'i phyir ro.*

I bow to you who teach that
 The *tathāgatagarbha* has a supreme cause and result.
 Its other cause is the luminous images of emptiness,
 And its other result is immutable great bliss,
 Analogous to the eight prognostic images.⁴²

Making sense of this dense, terse stanza, Nyawon Kunga Pel frames his commentary in terms of teaching the consummate empty-bliss (*bde stong*) by example,

In numerous sūtras and tantras, it has been taught that all living beings are endowed with *tathāgatagarbha*, and it has been taught that the *tathāgatagarbha* has [a supreme] cause and result. Moreover, this cause and result is not a producer and a product like a seed and a sprout.

This is taught in the [*Vimalaprabhā*] commentary on the *Kālacakratantra*, where it reads, “Accordingly, there is a supreme cause and a supreme result, an unconditioned cause and result.” Furthermore, the supreme cause is the naturally luminous emptiness that is endowed with all sublime attributes. So, what is this? These are images of emptiness (*stong nyid gzugs brnyan*), the images of emptiness that are directly perceived during the yoga of withdrawal and so forth. These are also referred to in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* and elsewhere as “images of true reality” (*chos nyid kyi gzugs*) and so forth. These are synonyms to describe the echoes of emptiness (*stong nyid kyi sgra brnyan*), sounds of true reality (*chos nyid kyi sgra*), and so on...

Immutable great bliss (*gyur ba med kyi bde ba chen po*) is the supreme result, the nature of which is not merely the bliss of immutable melting bliss. This result is said to be free from causes other than those that come from the ultimate meditation on luminous emptiness.⁴³

42 Dol po pa, *Bstan pa spyi 'grel*, 690: *bde gshegs snying po rgyu dang 'bras bu gzhan | rgyu gzhan 'od gsal stong nyid gzugs brnyan te | 'bras bu gzhan ni 'gyur med bde ba che | pra phab brgyad dang mtshungs par ston la 'dud |*. Stearns 2010: 124.

43 Nya dbon, *Bstan pa spyi 'grel*, 116: *mdo rgyud mang por sems can thams cad gyi de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po can no | zhes gsungs pa ltar gyi | bde gshegs snying po de rgyu dang 'bras bur [gzhan] yang gsungs shing | de yang sa bon dang myu gu lta bu'i skyed byed dang bskyed bya'i rgyu 'bras 'di ma yin gyi | dus kyi 'khor lo'i rgyud 'grel las gsungs pa ltar rgyu gzhan dang 'bras bu gzhan te | 'dus ma byas pa'i rgyu dang 'bras bu'o | de yang rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba'i rnam kun mchog ldan gyi stong pa nyid de rgyu gzhan yin la de yang gang yin na stong nyid gzugs brnyan te so sor bsdu la sogs pa'i rnal 'byor gyis mngon sum du mthong ba'i stong gzugs te | de nyid sher phyin gyi mdo la*

Connecting the images of emptiness that are said to be emergent from the first yoga of withdrawal with descriptions from the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* of “images of true reality,” Nyawon highlights Dölpopa’s syncretic hermeneutic, interpreting sūtras by means of tantras and vice versa.⁴⁴ In so doing, he opens wider fields of perceptual experience that include not only the visual, but also the auditory. Citing that emptiness is not only seen, he makes the point that emptiness is heard as “echoes of emptiness” and “sounds of true reality.” Nyawon switches registers from cause to result to make the direct correlation with an experience of immutable great bliss that emerges from meditation on naturally luminous emptiness.

With cause and result attributed to emptiness and bliss, Nyawon asserts that these are no different than *tathāgatagarbha*. Continuing his commentary, Nyawon writes,

From the *Kālacakra* root tantra it reads, “That which seizes the images of emptiness is the cause, and that which seizes immutable compassion is the result.”⁴⁵ In this way, unconditioned bliss and emptiness are identical with *tathāgatagarbha* and the ultimate *dharmakāya* (*don dam chos kyi sku*). This is the true reality of phenomena, how things exist as such, and so forth...

Furthermore, this is not the freedom from elaboration (*spros bral*) that is known in the dialectical vehicles (*mtshan nyid theg pa*), which is emptiness that is simply eliminated via a negandum (*dgag bya*). This is for the following reason: These images arise directly—like a thief and so forth—and are analogous to the eight prognostic images (*pra phab brgyad*) that appear to a virgin girl in a mirror to be decoded during a divination rite. They directly and clearly arise within the gnosis of a yogi’s own discerning awareness.

sogs par| chos nyid kyi gzugs zhes sogs gsungs pa dang don gcig yin la des mtshon nas stong nyid kyi sgra brnyan sogs kyang chos nyid kyi sgra la sogs pa'o| zhu bde 'gyur med kyi bde ba tsam min pa'i rang bzhin ['gyur med kyi bde ba che]n po [ni] ['bras bu gzhan] te| rgyu gzhan 'od gsal stong nyid bsgom pa mthar thug pas mngon du gyur pa tsam la bral ba'i 'bras bu zhes bzhas pa'o|. Brackets inserted in the Tibetan were removed in English translation for readability. For translation of the root verses, see Stearns 2010: 124 and n. 430.

44 'Bri gung Lotsāwa (1289–1363) makes the distinction between tantric images of emptiness (*sngags kyi stong gzugs*) and *Prajñāpāramitā* images of emptiness (*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i stong gzugs*). 'Bri gung Lotsāwa, *Zab lam*, 164. On Dol po pa's hermeneutic and the *Kālacakra*, see Sheehy 2019a: 67–73.

45 See also *Sekoddeśa* 147ab: *śūnyatābimbadhṛg hetuḥ karuṇākṣaradhṛk phalam*.

Moreover, if this were an emptiness that is merely free from elaboration or is simply eliminated via a negandum, it would consequently be impossible for it to directly and clearly appear either to ordinary beings or to buddhas. With respect, I pay homage at the feet of the sublime masters who have elegantly taught this.

Therefore, those traditions that take pride in asserting only *rang-tong* (intrinsic emptiness) to be the supreme emptiness have a problem. It is impossible for them to know the objects that appear while directly realizing the sublime true reality of phenomena or how things exist.⁴⁶

Nyawon makes a clear distinction between conceptual emptiness that can be cognized via an object of negation and what is being discussed in the context of the images of emptiness. He draws his reference from the *Sekoddeśa*, suggesting that images of emptiness appear like a thief that was invisible and only made visible to the virgin prognosticator in a mirror. If this were emptiness—and likewise *tathāgatagarbha*—that could be accessed via negation, these reflective images could not appear. Since these images of emptiness appear to yogis, so the claim is made, the logic follows that those who assert *rangtong* emptiness to be superior have a problem.⁴⁷

Choklé Namgyal on Images of Emptiness

Choklé Namgyal was appointed by Dölpopa to be his dharma heir to the abbatial throne at Jonang after Lotsāwa Lodrö Pal (1299–1354) in 1354, and among the ear-

46 Nya dbon, *Bstan pa spyi 'grel*, 116: *dus 'khor rtsa rgyud las| stong nyid gzugs brnyan 'dzin pa rgyu| snying rje 'gyur med 'dzin pa 'bras| zhes so| de lta bu 'i 'dus ma byas kyi bde stong de nyid bde gshegs snying po dang don dam chos kyi sku dang don gcig pa yin no| de nyid chos rnams kyi chos nyid dang de bzhin nyid la sogs pa'ang yin no| de yang mtshan nyid theg par grags pa'i spros bral zhes pa dgag bya rnam par bcad pa tsam gyi stong nyid ma yin te| gzhon nu mas me long la sogs la pra phab brgyad 'bebs tshul gyis phab pa'i snang ba la rkun po sogs kyi gzugs brnyan mgnon sum du shar ba dang mtshungs par rnal 'byor pa'i so so rang rig pa'i ye shes la mngon sum du gsal bar shar ba'i phyir spros pa dang bral tsam mam dgag bya rnam par bcad pa tsam gyi stong nyid yin na| sems can nas sangs rgyas kyi bar su la yang mngon sum du gsal bar snang mi srid pa'i phyir| zhes legs par ston pa'i bla ma dam pa'i zhabs la 'dud do| de ltar na rang stong kho na stong nyid mchog tu lrom pa rnams kyi lugs la chos rnams kyi chos nyid dam de bzhin nyid mngon sum du rtogs pa'i snang ba shes bya la mi srid pa'i skyon yod do|. For translation of the root verses, see Stearns 2010: 124 and n. 430.*

47 For a discussion on sublime multifaceted emptiness (*rnam kun mchog ldan gyi stong nyid*) and nihilistic emptiness (*chad stong*) in the context of the sixfold vajrayoga meditation practice and its relation to *tathāgatagarbha*, see Nya dbon, 'Od gsal rgyan, 37.

ly Jonangpa, he is among the more prolific authors on the Kālacakra.⁴⁸ To complement Dölpopa's interlinear commentary, Choklé Namgyal composed an extensive annotated commentary (*mchan 'grel*) on the Jonang translations of the *Kālacakratāntra* and *Vimalaprabhā*.⁴⁹ In addition, he composed summaries of the tantra and *Vimalaprabhā*, several guidance instruction texts on the sixfold *vajrayoga* practice, and numerous other writings, including his description of the landscape of Shambhala.⁵⁰ Elaborating on many of the themes that Dölpopa employs, while writing with his own distinctive style and voice, Choklé Namgyal gives detailed attention to both the practical application of the yogas and the philosophical content of the tantra.

In his condensed commentary on the *Vimalaprabhā*, in a section on what to renounce and acquire along the contemplative path of the Kālacakra, Choklé Namgyal, describing the visionary experiences that ensue during the yogas of withdraw and meditative stabilization, compares the epistemological nature of the images of emptiness with external images (*phyi rol gyi gzugs*):

The intent is that there will be no experience of objects of the limited sense faculties, such as external images and so forth, by subsuming engagement of your sense faculties, including the eye and so forth, with external objects of form and so forth.

While practicing the samādhi of withdrawal, meditative stabilization, and so forth, the images of emptiness and so forth are the meditative objects (*dmigs*) within the fleshy eye and so forth. The very appearances of images of emptiness appear to be like prognostic images. Since external forms and so forth do not appear, these objects are said to be “non-appearances” (*snang ba med pa*).⁵¹

48 van der Kuijp 2016: 124.

49 Over the past several years several versions of the annotated commentary (*mchan 'grel*) by Phyogs las rnam rgyal have surfaced along with versions attributed to Dol po pa. There remains some confusion, and likely conflation, about whose notes are whose. Stearns 2010: n. 91 and van der Kuijp 2016: 125–28.

50 Phyogs las, *Gzhi lam 'bras 'bu'i ngo sprod* and *Dpal sham bha la'i bkod pa*.

51 Phyogs las, *Dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i rgyud*, 130: *phyi rol gyi gzugs sogs nyi tshe ba'i dbang po'i yul gyi snang ba med par gyur pa la dgongs pa yin te | mig la sogs pa'i dbang po rnam sogs sogs phyi rol kyi yul rnam la 'jug pa bsdu nas sha'i mig la sogs pa nang du stong pa nyid kyi gzugs la sogs pa la dmigs pa'i so sor sdud dang bsam gtan la sogs pa'i ting nge 'dzin bsgoms pa na | stong pa nyid kyi gzugs pra phab pa'i snang ba lta bu snang ba de nyid phyi rol gzugs sogs kyi snang ba med pas na | snang ba med pa zhes bya ba yin te*.

With this, Choklé Namgyal clarifies that yogic vision of the images of emptiness is not perceived via the ordinary eyes or other physiological organs of perception but rather with esoteric “eyes,” including that of the “fleshy eye” (*sha’i mig*).⁵² As initially perceived during the yoga of withdrawal, this vision involves restraint from engaging in the sense objects and keeping the twenty-five tantric commitments, which are prerequisites for the sixfold *vajrayoga* practice.⁵³ As Choklé Namgyal describes, by retracting the five sense faculties from their engagement with the five corresponding sense objects through the yoga of withdraw, an inverse perceptual process occurs.⁵⁴ This contemplative process is enacted by withdrawing the subtle vital energies (*prāṇa, rlung*) from the left and right channels, and merging them into the central channel. By ceasing the flow of energy within the left and right channels, connections between the five sense faculties and their corresponding sense objects are severed. This process disengages the correlative types of ordinary awareness (*vijñāna, rnam shes*) from referents in the external world, rendering these faculties inept and giving rise to extrasensory perception.⁵⁵ While Choklé Namgyal does not present a parallel anatomic model of perception, he asserts that images of emptiness are not perceptible objects of the physiological sense faculties, suggesting that they are accessed via extrasensory perception. Referencing the prognostic images described in the *Sekoddeśa* passage, he makes the point that images of emptiness are meditative objects of the first and second of the subsidiary yogas, and while these do not appear within an objectified field of perception, they are disclosed to be perceptible. However, technically these are not appearances in the ordinary sense, hence they are “non-appearances.”

In his detailed *vajrayoga* guidance text, *Pointing Out the Ground, Path, and Fruition*—the text that Tāranātha cites as the main instruction manual practiced at the Jonang mountain hermitage up until his revision of the *vajrayoga* instructions several generations later in the 1590s—Choklé Namgyal prefaces his instructions on the *vajrayoga* practices with a discussion about *tathāgatagarbha*.⁵⁶ This section

52 Hatchell 2014: 105–10.

53 Restraint (*niyama*) is a prerequisite to the Kālacakra sixfold *vajrayoga*; it is present in each phase of the yoga as a qualifying condition, and thereby not considered to be a separate stage. Wallace 2001: 26.

54 Wallace 2001: 203–4. The Abhidharma model is that for there to be a moment of perception, there must be the threefold conditions of a sense faculty (*dbang po*), an object (*yul*) to be perceived, and a mode of perceptual awareness (*rnam shes*).

55 Wallace 2010: 158–61.

56 Phyogs las, *Gzhi lam ’bras*. Stearns 2010: 71. This work is undated but was written in Ngam ring, likely during his abbacy at Byang Ngam ring during the period from 1344–1354 before

on *tathāgatagarbha* serves as a discussion on the philosophical preliminaries of tantra, to prepare his reader for the more extensive guidance on the actual practices. Discussing the mind's luminous essence (*snying po 'od gsal kyi sems*), he connects the images of emptiness with the nature of mind:

The myriad images of emptiness are the nature of mind, not divisible from luminous empty-bliss. While these images vividly appear as the images of smoke and so forth, because they are without being the subtlest particle of matter, they are not material. These [images of emptiness, however,] transcend the limits of eternity or existence. They exist in the reality that clearly appears in the immediate empty sky of a yogi. These transcend the limits of nonexistence or vacuity.

In this way, these vividly appear to be invincible sounds, smells, tastes, tactile stimuli, and so forth. Recognize how these are free from limits or facets.⁵⁷

Choklé Namgyal explains that images of emptiness, as they do not consist of atomic particles or material properties, are not defined by distinguishable facets that characterize their phenomenal identity.⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the Kālacakra literature, specifically in the fifth chapter of the *Lotus Girl* and its corresponding chapter in the *Vimalaprabhā*, visualization of the Kālacakra deity is described to be atom-less emptiness.⁵⁹ That is, these images are understood within this system to not be formed through the genesis of the five coarse elements, and therefore are not material but are rather intangible properties. Echoing Nyawon Kunga Pel's commentary, drawn from the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*, which extends the images of emptiness to other sense modalities, Choklé Namgyal reemphasizes that al-

he assumed his abbacy at Jo nang; see van der Kuijp 2016: 127–28. For discussion by Phyogs las rnam rgyal on *tathāgatagarbha* outside of the tantric context, see his *Bde gshegs snying po'i rgyan gyi 'khrul 'joms*, and for further discussion on his *Gzhi lam 'bras bu'i ngo sprod*, particularly in relation to Maitreya's *Five Treatises* (*Byams chos sde lnga*), Mathes 2019.

57 Phyogs las, *Gzhi lam 'bras*, 169: *sems kyi rang bzhin ni 'od gsal bde stong gnyis med sna tshogs stong pa nyid kyi gzugs 'di ni du ba la sogs pa'i gzugs kyi rnam par snang yang gzugs kyi rdul phra rab med pas gzugs ma yin pa ni rtag pa'am yod pa'i mtha' las 'das pa yin la| rnal 'byor pa'i mngon sum gyi nam mkha' stong pa la gsal bar snang ba'i don du yod pa ni med pa'am chad pa'i mtha' las 'das pa yin no| de bzhin du gzhom med kyi sgra dang dri dang ro dang reg bya sgra sogs kyi rnam par snang ba rnams la'ang mtha' dang bral ba'i tshul shes par bya'o|.*

58 On the unconditioned (*'dus ma byas*), gnosis (*ye shes*), and *tathāgatagarbha*, see Dol po pa, *Bde gshegs snying po me long*, 434–35.

59 Hatchell 2014: 115.

though images connote a visual reference, and visual experience is predominant, there are other objects stressed in the Kālacakra *vajrayoga* terminology.

Having linked the images of emptiness with the luminous nature of mind, Choklé Namgyal connects the images of emptiness with *tathāgatagarbha*:

The luminous nature of mind is *tathāgatagarbha*. From the beginning, it is empty of all adventitious stains and is the ultimate limit. It is said to be devoid of everything that is conditioned. Since, from the beginning, it is empty of conventional conditioned phenomena, it is free from the limits of superimpositions, and consequently it is non-differentiable phenomena.

Because it is forever not empty due to the inconceivable phenomenon of buddhahood, it is free from the limits of being deprecated. Whatever does not exist, that which is empty, and that which remains is called “continually existent.”

The luminous true reality of living beings is not empty of an inherent nature but is empty of other, namely the conditioned and adventitious. This is the great emptiness (*stong pa nyid chen po*). This is what is called *zhentong*!⁶⁰

For Choklé Namgyal, particularly in this context of his experiential manual for practicing the sixfold *vajrayoga*, there is a triangular configuration between the luminous nature of mind, images of emptiness, and *tathāgatagarbha*. He asserts that these are not empty due to having an inherent nature (*rang gi ngo bos mi stong*), and he recognizes their ultimate and continual presence. This is quintessential *zhentong*. *Zhentong* contemplative thinking acknowledges a continuity of empty luminous presence that is not contingent on the binary constructs by which ordinary sensory perceptions operate, yet has the capacity to be perceptible. In his practical instruction on the yoga of withdrawal, Choklé Namgyal makes the point that the images of emptiness are not cognitive or perceptual constructs but are embodied

60 Phyogs las, *Gzhi lam 'bras*, 170: *sems kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po 'di glo bur gyi dri ma mtha' dag gis gdod ma nas stongs shing | yang dag mtha' ni 'dus byas kyi | rnam pa thams cad dben pa ste | zhes/ kun rdzob 'dus byas kyi chos rnams kyis gdod ma nas stong pas na sgro 'dogs pa'i mtha' dang bral zhing | rnam par dbye ba med chos phyr | zhes bsam gyi mi khyab pa'i sangs rgyas kyi chos rnams kyis nam yang mi stong bas na skur ba 'debs pa'i mtha' dang yang bral ba yin la | gang zhig gang na med pa de ni des stong pa dang gang zhig lhag mar gyur pa de ni de la rtog par yod ces bya ba 'dis sems can gyi chos nyid 'od gsal ba 'di rang gi ngo bos mi stong zhing gzhan 'dus byas glo bur pa rnams kyis stong pas na stong pa nyid chen po gzhan stong zhes bya ba yin par bzhed do |* See also Mathes 2019: 247.

through the yogic practices of mingling the seminal essences (*thig le*) in the channels of the subtle body. He states that perception of the images of emptiness during practice marks the visionary progression toward seeing the body of a *tathāgata* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i sku*).⁶¹ This is an important point that reiterates how the images of emptiness—manifestations of *tathāgatagarbha*—are not conceptual but are rather understood to be perceptually emergent from precise somatic processes.

Further Visions of *Tathāgatagarbha*

In philosophical tantra, especially within the system of thought elucidated by the *Kālacakratantra*, there is an explicative language ripe with descriptions of the capacities and efficacies of emptiness. Phrases that include “images of emptiness,” “animate emptiness” (*blun pa ma yin stong pa nyid*), “emptiness that is observable” (*dmigs pa dang bcas pa'i stong pa nyid*), and “emptiness that is imbued with multifaceted expression” (*rnam pa thams cad dang ldan pa'i stong pa nyid*) are elucidated throughout the *Kālacakra* literature.⁶² This language that expresses the dynamism of emptiness is articulated and emphasized by early Dro lineage *Kālacakra* authors, specifically Yumo Mikyö Dorjé and Kunpang Tukjé Tsöndru. While this language is evident in the *Kālacakra* canonical literature and is employed by early Tibetan authors to describe the experiences said to emerge from the sixfold *vajrayoga* practices, the doctrinal linkage between the tantric vision described by the *Kālacakra* and *tathāgatagarbha*—specifically via usage of cataphatic language shared with the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtras* and other third-turning discourses—is not made explicit in the same way that Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen and his immediate disciples elucidate it.⁶³ In fact, I suggest, Dölpopa finds doctrinal precedent in the *Kālacakra* to identify the images of emptiness—*śūnyatā-bimba*—with *tathāgatagarbha* on the grounds of the “animate emptiness” that the tantra articulates. For Dölpopa, and as an extension of his thought Nyawon Kunga Pel and Choklé Namgyal, *tathāgatagarbha* is a critical touchstone for describing the experiences of absolute emptiness correlated with the *vajrayoga* experience. Rather than a latent potentiality that resides hidden within beings to be discovered like a treasure trove as we find reiterated throughout the *Ratnagotravibhāga*

61 Phyogs las, *Gzhi lam 'bras*, 226.

62 These are *blun pa ma yin stong pa nyid* (*ajadā śūnyatā*), *dmigs pa dang bcas pa'i stong pa nyid* (*sālabana śūnyatā*), and *rnam pa thams cad dang ldan pa'i stong pa nyid* (*sarvākāravaropetā śūnyatā*). Hatchell 2014: 373, n. 19.

63 Yu mo Mi bskyod rdo rje cites the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in his fourfold cycle, *Gsal sgron skor bzhi*. Kemp 2019: 187, 189–90.

and other third-turning sources, *tathāgatagarbha* for these authors is fully expressive, reflective, and cognizant.⁶⁴ The vision of yogic reality they articulate understands the images of emptiness detailed in the Kālacakra exegetical literature to be dynamic elusive expressions of non-emptiness, equivalent to *tathāgatagarbha*. For these Jonang Kālacakra authors, *tathāgatagarbha* is tantric.

Reception of the *Kālacakratānta* was not, however, unequivocal in Tibet. Along with the Kadam master Chomden Rikpé Raltri (1227–1305), perhaps the most well-known critic of the Kālacakra in Tibet was Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa's (1357–1419) principal teacher, Rendawa Shönu Lodrö (1349–1412). His doubts about the authenticity of the tantra were extensive, and at least based on his key points as preserved by Taktsang Lotsāwa (b. 1405) in his general commentary on the Kālacakra, Rendawa's primary objection was that the tantra's presentation of emptiness does not align with normative Buddhist philosophical thinking.⁶⁵ Rendawa further critiques the tantra's equivalence of the images of emptiness with the body of reality (*dharmakāya*, *chos sku*), a doctrinal parallel with *tathāgatagarbha*.

Tsongkhapa nevertheless authored several works on the Kālacakra, and during his formative years, practiced the Kālacakra *vajrayoga* under both Nyawon Kunga Pel and Choklé Namgyal in a meditation cave at the Jonang mountain hermitage.⁶⁶ While he does not make any allusion to *tathāgatagarbha*, in his exposition on difficult points in the Kālacakra that he dictated to Khedrup Gelek Palsang (1385–1438), Tsongkhapa spotlights how by relying on the *mahāmudrā* image of emptiness, which is predominant during the fourth empowerment process, supreme immutable great bliss arises. In a passage detailing how the fourth empowerment of the Kālacakra is a distinguishing feature of the tantra, and how the tantra makes nondual gnosis explicit, he clearly states that there are two types of emptiness in the Kālacakra: (1) emptiness that is devoid of fixations on conceptual attributes (*mtshan 'dzin*), and (2) the images of emptiness that give rise to immutable great bliss.⁶⁷ Tsongkhapa comments,

As for emptiness that is ascertained with the right view, this is what

64 Ngag dbang, *Rgyu dang 'bras*, 142.

65 Jinpa 2009: 320 and Stag tshang, *Stag tshang lo tsā'i dus 'khor*, 376–77.

66 Jinpa 2019: 66–68, 104, 119, and 194–96.

67 This is repeated by the Geluk scholar Mkhas grub Nor bzang rgya mtsho (1423–1513) in his commentary on the *Vimalaprabhā* where he states, “Emptiness does not only refer to an emptiness of true existence but to ‘empty form endowed with every supreme aspect.’” Gyatso 2004: 262.

is ascertained from the intent of Nāgārjuna and his successors, including the glorious Candrakīrti. For the higher and lower vehicles, and for all four classes of tantra, this is normative. There is also, however, the emptiness of multifaceted images that is the object for the guidance techniques that accomplish immutable great bliss. This is a special dharma teaching that is not normative. Among these two, certainly the emptiness that leads to great bliss is emphasized over the emptiness that destroys fixation on conceptual attributes. Nevertheless, just as the glorious Candrakīrti explained the emptiness that destroys fixation on conceptual attributes, according to different tantras, there is also this [emptiness] that is detailed very extensively. So, in this way, there are two modes of emptiness...⁶⁸

For Tsongkhapa, though he does not, like Jonangpa authors, connect the Kālacakra vision of emptiness with *tathāgatagarbha*, he does state that there are two modes of emptiness, one of which is the images of emptiness detailed in the tantra.⁶⁹ A close read of this passage reveals that with a clever grammatical maneuver, Tsongkhapa reverses the normative phrase “multifaceted images of emptiness” to be “emptiness of multifaceted images” (*rnam pa thams cad pa'i gzugs kyi stong pa nyid*).⁷⁰ With this authorial sleight of hand, Tsongkhapa switches the *tong zuk* to be *zuk tong*; that is, he flips *zhentong* to be *rangtong*. Tsongkhapa does, however, go on to describe how the images of emptiness are objectified and observable (*dmigs bcas*) in the context of the emergence of immutable great bliss. All of this raises important questions about tantric visions of emptiness in the Kālacakra traditions and correlative interpretations of *tathāgatagarbha* that are articulated more broadly within philosophical tantra in Tibet.

68 Tsong kha pa, *Stong phrag bcu gnyis pa*, 13–14: yang dag pa'i lta bas gtan la dbab par bya ba'i stong nyid ni 'phags pa klu sgrub yab sras kyi dgongs pa dpal ldan zla bas gtan la phab pa 'di nyid theg pa gong 'og dang rgyud sde bzhi kha'i thun mong ba yin zhing | mi 'gyur ba'i bde chen 'dren pa'i thabs su sgrub par bya ba rnam pa thams cad pa'i gzugs kyi stong pa nyid ni 'di'i thun mong ma yin pa'i khyad chos yin pas de gnyis kyi nang nas mtshan 'dzin 'jig pa'i stong pa las bde chen 'dren pa'i stong pa rtsal du bton nas 'chad mod | 'on kyang mtshan 'dzin 'jig pa'i stong nyid dpal ldan zla bas bshad pa ltar 'chad pa'ang rgyud sde gzhan las 'di nyid shin tu rgyas so | de'i phyir de ltar stong nyid gnyis yod par...

69 Jinpa 2009: 325.

70 The phrase used in the Kālacakra literature is “emptiness that is imbued with multifaceted expression” (*rnam pa thams cad dang ldan pa'i stong pa nyid*).

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Shangtön Sönam Drakpa's Defense of Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen's Clear-cut Distinction Between Buddha Nature and the Ground Consciousness

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Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen's (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361) position is well known for its clear-cut distinction between an unconditioned buddha nature, which is identical with the ultimate and buddhahood, and the conditioned ground consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), including all saṃsāric states of mind emerging from it. This strict distinction excludes from the ultimate anything dependently arisen. Dölpopa's disciple Shangtön Sönam Drakpa (Zhang ston Bsod nams grags pa, 1292–1370)¹ defends his master's view by addressing opposing statements in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and the *Ghanavyūhasūtra* that equate buddha nature with the ground consciousness. Shangtön's discussion constitutes the major part of the introduction to his commentary on the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*,² and is in large part also featured in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary.³ In the present paper it will be shown how Shangtön argues on the basis of numerous passages from the Maitreya Works, the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*, the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*, and even other parts of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* itself that there are eight undesired consequences if one does not carefully differentiate buddha nature from the ground consciousness. Shangtön not only argues against a position that I could identify in Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal's ('Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481) *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary, i.e., an exegetical system that regards buddha nature and adventitious stains as not ontologically different, any more than ocean water and its waves are, but also the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé's (Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339) Yogācāra-based distinction between the ground consciousness and the pure mind (i.e., the equivalent of buddha nature) that accepts within the basis of negation a dependently arising perfect nature.

The general idea the nine examples of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* convey is that all sentient beings already possess in themselves a full-fledged tathāgata.⁴ One could argue, however, as Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal does, that the examples of a tree

1 Van der Kuijp 2016: 22.

2 Zhang ston, *De bzhin gshegs pa'i mdo'i 'grel ba snying po rab gsal*, 223–50.

3 Zhang ston, *Rgyud bla ma'i 'grel pa bka' 'khor lo tha ma'i gsal byed*, 34–46.

4 Zimmermann 2002: 63–64.

grown from a seed and the future monarch (*cakravartin*) in the womb indicate a growth of the buddha qualities.⁵ Shangtön does not follow this line of thought and explains that there is no movement (i.e., development) in buddha nature whatsoever when it is becoming free from its adventitious stains.⁶ Following the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*⁷ to the letter, Shangtön fully endorses the equation of the buddha nature with the *dharmakāya*, and thus, according to RGV I.84ab, the ultimate nirvāṇa.⁸ Shönu Pal, in comparison, views this equation in the context of RGV I.27, where the fruit, or the *dharmakāya*, has been only metaphorically applied to a buddha nature, which is its potential or cause.⁹ In RGV I.27 the third reason for the presence of a buddha nature in sentient beings is only because “its (i.e., the buddha nature’s) fruit has been metaphorically applied to the buddha potential.”¹⁰ In the eyes of Shönu Pal, buddha nature, and also buddhahood for that matter, are not entirely unconditioned. The common attribute “unconditioned” he explains as meaning that buddha nature is not artificially (Tib. *phral du*) conditioned by adventitious causes and conditions.¹¹ The main difference between Shangtön and the position Shönu Pal adopted a century after Shangtön is that Shönu Pal is adamant in not taking buddha nature and the ground consciousness as two separate things.¹² In other words, buddha nature itself manifests the defile-

5 Mathes 2008: 342–43.

6 Zhangston, *De bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po’i mdo’i ’grel ba snying po rab gsal*, 272: “Even in such a process of becoming stainless, there is not the slightest movement in buddha nature” (*dri bcas dri med du gyur ba de lta na’ang kham de la gyo ba ci yang yod pa ma yin no* |).

7 See Zhangston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 239₂₁–240₁ and RGVV 2_{11–13}: “Śāriputra, ‘ultimate’ is an expression for the [buddha] element in sentient beings. And the ‘[buddha] element in sentient beings,’ Śāriputra, is an expression for buddha nature. And ‘buddha nature,’ Śāriputra, is an expression for the *dharmakāya*.” *shā ri’i bu don dam pa zhes bya ba ’di ni sems can gyi kham kyī tshig bla dwags so || shā ri’i bu sems can gyi kham zhes bya ba ’di ni de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po’i tshig bla dwags so | shā ri’i bu de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po zhes bya ba ’di ni chos kyī sku’i bla dwags so |; paramārtha iti śāriputra sattvadhātor etad adhivacanam | sattvadhātur iti śāriputra tathāgatagarbhasyaitad adhivacanam | tathāgatagarbha iti śāriputra dharmakāyasaitad adhivacanam |.*

8 See Zhangston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240_{1–2} and RGVV 55_{3–4}: “This [buddha nature] is therefore the *dharmakāya*, the Tathāgata. It is the truth of the noble ones, the ultimate nirvāṇa.” *gang phyir de ni chos sku de ni de bzhin gshegs || de ni ’phags pa’i bden pa don dam mya ngan ’das |; sa dharmakāyaḥ sa tathāgato yatas tad āryasatyam paramārthanirvṛtiḥ |.*

9 DRSM 24_{2–5}.

10 RGVV 26_{3–4}: *baudhe gotre tatphalasyopacārād.*

11 Mathes 2008: 333.

12 Mathes 2008: 241–42.

ments of the ground consciousness, in the same way—to use Shönu Pal's example—as the property of heat is not different from that of hot iron. Ordinary sentient beings' buddha nature also functions as a basis that manifests all defilements. When purified, it no longer functions as a basis of defilements. The two modes of buddha nature thus are like the ocean when displaying waves and when not. Shönu Pal thus favors, at least to some extent,¹³ the equation of buddha nature with the ground consciousness in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, and not, for example, the clear-cut distinction in the *Mahāyānasamgraha* between an impure ground consciousness and a pure *dharmadhātu*,¹⁴ the latter distinction being the preference of the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé.

Among the passages in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, which support the equation of buddha nature with the ground consciousness, Shangtön quotes from the prose part after LAS VI.8 and verse LAS X.59:

[They are] the eight consciousnesses. What are the eight? They are as follows: buddha nature called ground consciousness, the [afflicted] mind, the mental consciousness, and the five groups of [perceptive] consciousness, which are [also] described by the non-Buddhists. ... The ground consciousness called buddha nature is accompanied by the [afflicted] mind.¹⁵

The supreme ground consciousness is cognition.
The ground, however,
Is free from a perceived and perceiver,
Wherefore I teach it as suchness.¹⁶

13 With the restriction, however, that for Gzhon nu dpal the ground consciousness is only a reflection of buddha nature.

14 Mathes 2017: 70–71.

15 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 234_{4–8}; LAS 235_{7–9}, 16–17: *rnam par shes pa brgyad rnams so || brgyad gang zhe na || 'di lta ste de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po kun gzhi rnam par shes pa zhes bsgrags dang | yid dang yid kyi rnam par shes pa dang | mu stegs can gyis brjod pa'i rnam par shes 'dus pa lnga rnams so | zhes dang | kun gzhi rnam par shes pa de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po zhes bsgrags pa yid dang lhan cig pa ...; aṣṭau vijñānāni | katamāny aṣṭau yaduta tathāgatagarbha ālayavijñānasamśābdito mano manovijñānaṃ ca pañca ca vijñānakāyās tīrthyānuvarṇitāḥ | ... ālayavijñānaṃ tathāgatagarbhasamśābditaṃ manaḥsahitaṃ ...*

16 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 234_{8–10}; LAS 272_{5–6}: *kun gzhi'i rnam shes dam pa ni | rnam par rig ste kun gzhi yang || gzung dang 'dzin pa bral ba'i phyir || de bzhin nyid du ngas bshad do |; paramālayavijñānaṃ vijñaptir ālayaṃ punaḥ | grāhyagrāhākāpagamāt tathatāṃ deśayāmy aham ||.*

The quotation from the *Ghanavyūhasūtra* that in the eyes of Shangtön supports the equation of the ground consciousness with buddha nature is as follows:

Even though the ground consciousness can be cut into pieces by mental imprints, it is, in its purified form, the buddha potential. It must be taken as buddhahood.¹⁷

Shangtön thus admits that there is doctrinal support for the equation of ground consciousness and buddha nature, but argues,

If this confused tradition were true, there would be eight undesired consequences. There are undesired consequences
 If the unconditioned were the same as the conditioned;
 If the nonconceptual and conceptual were the same;
 If the dependent and perfect [natures] were the same;
 If what must be abandoned and what attained were the same;
 If the neutral and virtuous were the same;
 If the ultimate and relative were the same;
 If luminosity and obscurations were the same.
 [Finally,] there are undesired consequences because of many other grave mistakes.¹⁸

1. The Undesired Consequence That the Unconditioned and Conditioned Would Be the Same

In order to show that buddha nature is, contrary to the ground consciousness, unconditioned, Shangtön skillfully quotes two works by the same author (at least according to the Tibetan tradition), Asaṅga. In his *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*,

17 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 234₁₀₋₁₂: *de bzhin kun gzhi'i^a rnam par shes || bag chags^{(b)kyis ni bcag stubs kyang^{b)} || rnam dag sangs rgyas rigs yin te || sangs rgyas nyid du de^{(c)bzungs so^{c)}} |.}*

^a D gzhi^b D rnams kyis bcags brdungs pa^c D gzung ngo. For the readings in D, see Derge Kangyur, Tōhoku catalogue no. 110, *mdo sde*, vol. *cha*, 44b1.

18 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 234₁₄₋₁₉: *'khrul pa'i lugs bzhin bden na ha cang thal ba la brgyad | 'dus ma byas dang 'dus byas gcig na ha cang thal ba | mi rtog pa dang rtog pa gcig na ha cang thal ba | gzhan gyi dbang dang yongs grub gcig na ha cang thal ba | spang bya'i don dang thob bya gcig na ha cang thal ba | lung ma bstan dang dge ba gcig na ha cang thal ba [|] dam pa'i don dang kun rdzob gcig na ha cang thal ba | 'od gsal ba dang mun pa gcig na ha cang thal ba | nyes skyon gzhan yang dpag med 'byung bas ha cang thal ba'o |.*

Asaṅga explains, with reference to the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*, that the buddha element or buddha nature always remains unchanged:

Buddha nature remains unchanged in the impure state even by these fires of death, disease, and old age. In consideration of this it is stated [in the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*]:

This is worldly convention, illustrious one: someone has died, or someone has been born. “Has died,” Illustrious One, [means] “the termination of the life force.”¹⁹ “Has been born,” Illustrious One, means “the manifestation of a new life force.” However, Illustrious One, buddha nature, is not born, nor does it become old. It does not die, pass over, or arise. For what reason? Illustrious One, buddha nature is beyond objects whose defining characteristic is to be conditioned. It is permanent, stable, calm, and eternal.²⁰

In his *Mahāyānaśāstra*, Asaṅga shows that the ground consciousness is conditioned, inasmuch as it and indeed all defilements mutually act as cause and effect:

Why is it called the ground consciousness? It is the ground consciousness because all emerging phenomena [in the form] of all defilements, inasmuch as they are effects [of it], stick²¹ to it, or rather it sticks to

19 The Sanskrit has “sense faculties” (*indriya*).

20 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 234₂₀–235₈ and RGVV 45₂₀–46₄: *de bzhin gshegs pa'i kham ma dag pa'i gnas skabs na yang 'chi ba dang na ba dang rga ba'i me gsum po 'di dag gis mi 'gyur ba nyid las brtsams te | 'di skad ces | bcom ldan 'das 'chi ba zhes bgyi ba 'di ni 'jig rten gyi tha snyad do || bcom ldan 'das 'chi ba zhes bgyi ba 'di ni srog gi dbang po 'gags pa lags so || bcom ldan 'das skye ba zhes bgyi ba 'di ni dbang po sar (!) pa rnams thob pa'o || bcom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po ni skye ba dang rga dang 'chi ba dang shi 'phos pa dang skyes pa ma lags so || de ci'i slad du zhe na bcom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po ni | 'dus byas kyi mtshan nyid kyi yul las 'das pa ste | rtag pa brtan pa gyung drung zhes gsungs so; ebhir api mrtyuvyādhijarāgnibhir avikāratvam ārabhya tathāgatadhātor aśuddhāvasthāyām idam uktam | lokavyavahāra eṣa bhagavan mṛta iti vā jāta iti vā | mṛta iti bhagavann indriyoparodha eṣaḥ | jāta iti bhagavan navānām indriyānām prādurbhāva eṣaḥ | na punar bhagavaṃs tathāgatagarbho jāyate vā | jīryati vā mriyate vā cyavate votpadyate vā | tat kasmād dhetoḥ | saṃskṛtalakṣaṇaviśayavyatīrṭto bhagavaṃs tathāgatagarbho nityo dhruvaḥ śivaḥ śāśvata iti |.*

21 Tib. *sbyor ba* very probably translates a form derived from *ā-li*, from which the word *ālaya* derives. See Brunnhölzl 2018: vol. 1, 490.

them. Or, it is the ground consciousness because in terms of their identity²² sentient beings stick to it.²³

How can the ground consciousness and the phenomena of all defilements be regarded as being simultaneously the cause of each other? The blazing flame of a butter lamp and the burning of the wick²⁴ mutually [cause each other] simultaneously, and a pole tent²⁵ does not collapse, [its poles] lending simultaneous support to each other. Similarly, [the ground consciousness and defilements] are regarded as being simultaneously the cause of each other. Just as the ground consciousness is the cause of the phenomena of all defilements, so also are the phenomena of all defilements the cause of the ground consciousness. Thus, they are presented as a causal condition, because other causal conditions are not perceived.²⁶

To Shangtön's first undesired consequence, namely that buddha nature is, contrary to the ground consciousness, unconditioned, Shönu Pal would object that buddha nature is not entirely unconditioned and only permanent in the sense that it is forever contained in its own sphere.²⁷ Once the hindering adventitious

22 Tib. *de'i bdag nyid*, Skt. **tādātmya*. Not recognizing the technical term, Brunnhölzl (2018: vol. 1, 157) translates this as "as being their self," which harbors the danger of taking the ground consciousness as a personal self (*ātman*).

23 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 235₉₋₁₁ and MS 4₁₃₋₁₇ (I.3): *ci'i phyir de kun gzhi rnam par shes pa zhes bya zhe na | skye ba can kun nas nyon mongs pa'i chos thams cad 'bras bu'i dngos por der sbyor ba'am | de yang rgyu'i dngos por de dag tu sbyor ba'i phyir kun gzhi rnam par shes pa'o | [yang na sems can dag de'i bdag nyid du sbyor bas kun gzhi rnam par shes pa'o]*. The last part in brackets is not quoted by Zhang ston.

24 I.e., taking *snying po* in the sense of *vartī* (Nagao 1994: part 1, s.v.).

25 With reference to the Sanskrit equivalent *naḍakalāpa* and the Chinese translation, Brunnhölzl (2018: vol. 1, 163 and 499) translates as "[two standing] bundles of reeds."

26 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 235₁₁₋₁₇ and MS 10₁₀₋₁₉ (I.17): *kun gzhi rnam par shes pa dang | kun nas nyon mongs pa'i chos de dag dus mnyam du gcig gi rgyu nyid du gcig 'gyur bar ji ltar blta zhe na | dper na mar me'i me lce 'byung ba dang | snying po tshig pa phan tshun dus mnyam pa dang | mdung khyim yang dus mnyam du gcig la gcig brten nas mi 'gyel ba bzhin du 'dir yang gcig gi rgyu nyid du gcig 'gyur bar blta'o || ji ltar kun gzhi rnam par shes pa kun nas nyon mongs pa'i chos rnams kyi rgyu yin pa de ltar kun nas nyon mongs pa'i chos rnams kyang kun gzhi rnam par shes pa'i (argyu yin pa'o | de ltar^a) rgyu'i rkyen rnam par bzhas ste | rgyu'i rkyen gzhan mi dmigs pa'i phyir ro | ^a Zhang ston om. (my translation follows MS).*

27 This is clear from his commentary (DRSM 83₁₁₋₁₂) on RGV 1.5 (RGVV 7₁₄₋₁₅: *asamskṛtam ... buddhatvam* ...): "With 'unconditioned' it is taught that buddha nature is not artificially (Tib. 'phral du) conditioned by adventitious causes and conditions but rather is permanent in the sense that it has forever been contained in its own sphere." *de yang 'dus ma byas pas ni de bzhin*

stains are removed it blossoms into buddhahood. Such a dynamic process is possible because buddha nature endures in a beginningless series of moments of buddha qualities. The point here is that Shönu Pal attributes to a positively described ultimate (i.e., buddha nature) the two contradictory attributes of being unconditioned and momentary. To exempt buddha nature or the luminosity of mind from the rule that only something conditioned is momentary can be traced back to a source of late Indian Buddhism. In an interlinear note on verse 28 in Sajjana's²⁸ *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa* we find:

The luminous mind (*prabhāsvaraṃ cittaṃ*) is not conditioned, because [in the luminous mind] there is nothing to be done through causes and conditions coming together. This is based on the fact that the origination of the [luminous] mind in the following moment depends on [the mind] that was generated by its (i.e., the mind's) own kind (*sajāti*) in the previous moment.²⁹

2. The Undesired Consequence That the Nonconceptual and Conceptual Would Be the Same

Based on the following paragraph of the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*, Shangtön claims that buddha nature is nonconceptual. This makes sense since for Shangtön buddha nature is identical with the ultimate and the “touching of the nonconceptual sphere”:

Sons of the family! This example, then, is given in order to understand the meaning [of the nonconceptual]. The rock, which can be unanimously called solid and hard, is expressive of someone rooted in all defilements and in duality, of the variety of conditioned formative forces (*saṃskāra*), [so to say]. The treasure of the great wish-fulfilling jewel underneath is expressive of the nonconceptual sphere. The person who desires this great treasure³⁰ is expressive of a bodhisattva, mahāsattva. The person who supernaturally sees this great treasure

gshegs pa'i snying po glo bur ba'i rgyu dang rkyen gyis 'phral du' dus byas ma yin gyi | thog ma med pa'i dus nas rang gi ngang gis rjes su zhugs pa'i rtag pa yin par bstan la |.

28 A Kashmiri paṇḍita from the eleventh century who figured prominently in the transmission of the Maitreya texts in India and thus indirectly influenced later Bka' brgyud masters.

29 ... na ca prabhāsvaraṃ cittaṃ saṃskṛtam, pūrvasajātīmātraprasavāpekṣatvād uttarasaṃvit-prasūteḥ, saṃhatya hetupratyayair akaraṇāt (see Kano 2016: 227).

30 I.e., following the Tibetan syntax. In the Sanskrit, “great treasure” is in the instrumental.

is expressive of a tathāgata, arhat, and perfectly enlightened one. The rock is expressive of the characteristic signs of natural imagination. The digging is expressive of not becoming mentally engaged. The adamantine rock that is silver in appearance, is expressive of the characteristic signs of the interpretative imagination relating to the remedy. The adamantine rock that is golden in appearance, is expressive of the characteristic signs of the interpretative imagination relating to emptiness and so forth. The rock having the appearance of a variety of precious stones is expressive of the characteristic signs of the interpretative imagination relating to attainment. Finding the treasure of the great wish-fulfilling jewel is expressive of touching the nonconceptual sphere. O sons of the family, one should [now] understand the entrance into the nonconceptual sphere with [the help of] the distinct elements of this example.³¹

31 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 235₂₁–236₁₃; APDh 97₁₀ (§12): rigs kyi bu dag ji tsaṃ du don 'di shes par bya ba'i phyir 'di dper bya ste | brag gcig tu mkhregs shing sra ba zhes bya ba de ni 'du byed kyi rnam pa kun nas nyon mongs pa dang gnyis la so sor nye bar gnas pa'i tshig bla dwags so || 'og na yid bzhin gyi nor bu rin po che'i gter chen po zhes bya ba de ni rnam par mi rtog pa'i dbyings kyi tshig bla dwags so || yid bzhin gyi nor bu rin po che'i gter chen po 'dod pa'i mi zhes bya ba de ni byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po'i tshig bla dwags so || gter chen po mngon par shes pa'i mi zhes bya ba de ni de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyi tshig bla dwags so || brag ces bya ba de ni rang bzhin la rtog pa'i mtshan ma rnams kyi tshig bla dwags so || rkos shig ces bya ba de ni yid la mi byed pa'i tshig bla dwags so || dngul du snang ba'i rdo rje rdo zhes bya ba de ni gnyen po la rnam par rtog pa'i mtshan ma rnams kyi tshig bla dwags so || gser du snang ba'i rdo rje rdo zhes bya ba de ni stong pa nyid la sogs pa la rnam par rtog pa'i mtshan ma rnams kyi tshig bla dwags so || rin po che sna tshogs su snang ba'i rdo zhes bya ba de ni 'thob pa la rnam par rtog pa'i mtshan ma rnams kyi bla dwags so || yid bzhin gyi nor bu rin po che'i gter chen po rnyed ces bya ba de ni rnam par mi rtog pa'i dbyings la reg pa'i tshig bla dwags so | rigs kyi bu dag de ltar dpe nye bar bkod pa 'dis rnam par mi rtog pa'i dbyings la 'jug pa khong du chud par bya'o; tathā hi kulaputrā iyaṃ upamā kṛtā yāvad evāsyārthasya vijñaptaye | ekaghaṇasāramaya pāṣāṇaparvata iti saṃkleśadvaya pratyupasthitasya saṃskāraprakārāṇāṃ etad adhivacanam | adhastān mahācintāmaṇiratna nīdhanam ity avikalpadhātor etad adhivacanam | mahānīdhanānenārthīti bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasyāitad adhivacanam | mahāratna nīdhanābhijñāḥ puruṣa iti tathāgatasyārhatāḥ samyak sambuddhasyāitad adhivacanam | prakṛtipāṣāṇam iti prakṛtīkalpanimittānam etad adhivacanam | utkhananam iti amanasikārasyāitad adhivacanam | rūpya pratibhāsam pāṣāṇam iti pratipakṣanirūpaṇavikalpanimittānam etad adhivacanam | suvarṇa pratibhāsam pāṣāṇam iti śūnyatādivikalpanimittānam etad adhivacanam | nānāratna pratibhāsam pāṣāṇam iti prāptīkalpanimittānam etad adhivacanam | mahācintāmaṇiratna nīdhanasya pratilambha ity avikalpadhātusparśanāyā etad adhivacanam | iti hi kulaputrāḥ anenopamopanyāsenāvikalpapraveśo 'nugantavyaḥ |.

As a doctrinal support for the conceptual nature of the ground consciousness, Shangtön quotes *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.20:

There are ten types of conceptuality. The main one is the ground consciousness.³²

Here one could argue, in line with Shönu Pal, that false imagining and its natural luminosity, which is nonconceptual in virtue of being the simple capacity of any cognition to experience itself in the most basic sense, are not two different entities. Their relationship could justifiably be compared to that between waves and the ocean.³³

3. The Undesired Consequence That the Dependent and Perfect Natures Would Be the Same

Shangtön starts by quoting *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (MSA) XI.40 together with Vasubandhu's commentary:

False imagining,
Consisting of appearances that fall under two sets of threefold forms,
And whose defining characteristic is the perceived and perceiver,
Is the defining characteristic of the dependent.

Vasubandhu comments:

It has appearances that fall under two sets of threefold forms. Thus, we get "consisting of appearances that fall under two sets of threefold forms."³⁴ The first set refers to the appearances of a place, object, and physical body. The second set refers to the appearances of the mind (*manas*), perception, and concepts. The mind is always defiled. Perception comprises the five types of consciousness. Concepts are the mental consciousness. The first of these [two sets] has the defining characteristic of the perceived object. The second has the defining

32 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 236₁₄₋₁₆ and MS 34₉₋₁₁ (MS II.20): *rnam par rtog pa rnam pa bcu ste | rtsa ba'i rnam par rtog pa ni 'di lta ste | kun gzhi rnam par shes pa'o |*.

33 Mathes 2008: 48.

34 I.e., following the Sanskrit, which is the analysis of a *bahuvrīhi* compound.

characteristic of the perceiving subject. Such false imagining is the defining characteristic of the dependent.³⁵

Further, MSA XIX.51 is quoted:

Wisdom, which has suchness as its object
Is free from dualistic clinging,
And has manifested a body of baseness,
Which is meant for wise ones to destroy.

Vasubandhu comments:

This teaches that it is because one knows the three natures as they are that one comes to destroy the dependent nature: It is because one has come to thoroughly know the perfect nature by having suchness as one's object, the imagined [nature] in terms of being free from dualistic clinging, and the dependent [nature] in terms of the manifestation of a body of baseness that one comes to thoroughly know the dependent [nature].³⁶ Then³⁷ one destroys the dependent nature [inasmuch as it is] the body of baseness, the ground consciousness.³⁸

35 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 236₁₇–237₂ and MSA 64₂₇–65₅ (MSA XI.40): *rnam gsum rnam gsum snang ba can* || 'dzin dang gzung ba'i mtshan nyid ste || yang dag ma yin kun rtog ni || gzhan gyi dbang gi mtshan nyid do || 'di la rnam pa gsum dang rnam pa gsum du snang ba yod pas rnam pa gsum dang rnam pa gsum du snang ba can no || de la rnam pa gsum du snang ba ni gnas su snang ba dang don du snang ba dang lus su snang ba'o || yang gsum du snang ba ni yid dang | 'dzin pa dang | rnam par rtog par snang ba ste | yid ni rtag tu nyon mongs pa can gang yin pa'o || 'dzin pa ni rnam par shes pa lnga'i tshogs so || rtog pa ni yid kyi rnam par shes pa'o || de la rnam pa gsum du snang ba dang po ni gzung ba'i mtshan nyid do || gnyis pa ni 'dzin pa'i mtshan nyid de de ltar na yang dag pa ma yin pa'i kun du rtog pa 'di ni gzhan gyi dbang gi mtshan nyid yin no; trividhatrividhābhāso grāhyagrāhakalakṣaṇaḥ | abhūtaparikalpo hi paratantrasya lakṣaṇam || trividhas trividhaś cābhāso 'syeti trividhatrividhābhāsaḥ | tatra trividhābhāsaḥ padābhāso 'rthābhāso dehābhāsaś ca | punar trividhābhāso mana-udgrahavikalpābhāsaḥ | mano yat kliṣṭam sarvadā | udgrahaḥ pañca vijñānakāyāḥ | vikalpo manovijñānam | tatra prathamatrividhābhāso grāhyalakṣaṇaḥ | dvitīyo grāhakalakṣaṇaḥ | ity ayam abhūtaparikalpāḥ paratantrasya lakṣaṇam |.

36 The Sanskrit has: "This is in order to destroy the latter" instead of "comes to thoroughly know the dependent [nature]."

37 The last sentence is translated from the Tibetan.

38 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 237_{3–10} and MSA 169_{18–23} (MSA XIX.51): *de bzhin nyid dmigs ye shes dang* || gnyis su 'dzin pa rnam spangs dang || gnas ngan len lus mngon sum pa || blo ldan de zad byed par 'dod | 'dis ni ngo bo nyid gsum ji ltar yongs su shes pas gzhan gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid zad par 'gyur ba de yongs su bstan te | de bzhin nyid la dmigs pa nyid kyi yongs su grub pa'i

Based on that, Shangtön then points out that

what is taught as the main [form of] conceptuality in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* also establishes that it is the dependent [nature]. Since buddha nature is unchangeable suchness, it is the unchangeable perfect nature. Therefore, since there is a difference between the dependent and the unchangeable perfect, they cannot be identical.³⁹

Next, Shangtön quotes MSA VI.1:

Neither existent nor nonexistent; neither identical nor different.⁴⁰

Vasubandhu comments:

The ultimate has the meaning of nonduality. It is taught in five points. Neither existent, [i.e.,] in terms of the imagined and dependent marks, nor nonexistent, [i.e.,] in terms of the perfect mark; neither identical, because the perfect is not one with the imagined and the dependent, nor different, because it is not different from the two either.⁴¹

*ngo bo nyid yongs su shes pa dang | gnyis su 'dzin pa rnam par spangs pa nyid kyis kun brtags pa dang | gnas ngan len gyi lus mngon sum pa nyid kyis gzhan gyi dbang yongs su shes nas gnas ngan len gyi lus kun gzhi rnam par shes pa gzhan gyi dbang de nyid zad par 'gyur ro |; tathatālamba-
naṃ jñānaṃ dvayagrāhavivarjitaṃ | dauṣṭhulyakāyapratyakṣaṃ tatksaye dhīmatāṃ mataṃ ||
etena yathāsvabhāvatrāyaparijñānāt paratantrasvabhāvākṣayāya saṃvartate | tat paridīpitaṃ |
tathatālabhanatvena pariniṣpannaṃ svabhāvaṃ pariñāya | dvayagrāhavivarjitatvena kalpitaṃ |
dauṣṭhulyakāyapratyakṣatvena paratantraṃ | tasyaiva kṣayāya saṃvartate dauṣṭhulyakāyasyāla-
yavijñānasya tatksayārthaṃ tatksaye |.*

39 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 237_{10–13}: *rtsa ba'i rtog pa zhes theg bsdu su gsungs pa des kyang gzhan dbang du grub bo | de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po ni 'gyur ba med pa'i de bzhin nyid yin pa'i phyir 'gyur med yongs grub tu grub bo | des na gzhan dbang dang 'gyur med yongs grub kyi khyad par yod pa'i phyir gcig pa mi srid te |.*

40 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 237_{13–14} and MSA VI.1 (MSABh 22₁₂): *yod min med min de bzhin min gzhan min |; na san na cāsan na tathā na cānyathā |.*

41 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 237_{14–17} and MSABh 22_{14–21}: *kun brtags pa dang gzhan gyi dbang gi mtshan nyid dag gis ni yod pa ma yin no || yongs su grub pa'i mtshan nyid kyis ni med pa ma yin no || kun brtags pa dang gzhan gyi dbang dag dang yongs su grub pa gcig pa nyid med pas de bzhin ma yin no | de dag kho na gzhan pa nyid med pas gzhan ma yin no |; advayārtho hi paramārthaḥ | tam advayārthaṃ pañcabhir ākārāḥ saṃdarśayati | na sat parikalpitaparatan-
tralakṣaṇābhyāṃ na cāsat pariniṣpannalakṣaṇena | na tathā parikalpitaparatantrābhyāṃ pari-
niṣpannasyaikatvābhāvāt | na cānyathā tābhyāṃ evānyatvābhāvāt |.*

Shangtön's argument rests on reducing the ground consciousness to the impure dependent nature that must be abandoned, and buddha nature to the unchangeable perfect nature. This analysis tacitly ignores, however, the unmistakable perfect nature (*aviparyāsaparinīṣpattyā pariniṣpanna*, i.e., the nonconceptual wisdom of the path), which some masters, such as Dölpopa, call the "pure dependent."⁴² Being beyond duality, one could argue, it still partakes of suchness and thus buddha nature. This, in fact, is the view of the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé. In other words, even though Rangjung Dorjé distinguishes the ground consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*) from a stainless mind (*kun gzhi* and suchness),⁴³ he still includes both categories within dependent arising.⁴⁴ Buddha nature would then not be restricted to the unchangeable perfect but also include the unmistakable perfect, which Rangjung Dorjé takes as the expressible ultimate truth (*pariyāyaparamārtha*).⁴⁵

4. The Undesired Consequence That What Must Be Abandoned and What Attained Would Be the Same

In order to show that the ground consciousness must be completely abandoned, Shangtön quotes *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.48:

Upon complete transformation, even the ripening consciousness, which contains all seeds, will become seedless and abandoned in every respect.⁴⁶

The difference between what must be abandoned and attained is then elaborated by simply quoting MSA XI.13 together with its commentary by Vasubandhu:

42 Mathes 2004: 305.

43 Mathes 2008: 57.

44 In his commentary on the first line of the first chapter of the *Zab mo nang don* ("As to the cause, it is the beginningless true nature of the mind"), Rang byung rdo rje explains, "As to 'beginningless,' since a beginning and end of time is a [mere] conceptual superimposition, it refers here to the true nature of both the stainless [mind] and the [mind] mingled with stains. [This true nature] is dependent arising, [the stainless mind and mind mingled with stains] being free from identity and difference. Since there is no other beginning than it, one speaks of beginningless time." Rang 'grel, 10b₃₋₄: *thog med la zhes bya ba ni | dus kyi thog ma dang tha ma ni rtog pas sgro btags pa yin pas 'dir ni dri ma med pa dang dri ma dang bcas pa'i rang gi ngo bo ni rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba de nyid dang gzhan las rnam par grol ba ste | de las thog ma gzhan med pa'i phyir thog ma med pa'i dus zhes bya ste |*.

45 Mathes 2008: 66–68.

46 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 237₁₈₋₂₀; MS 20₁₂₋₁₄ (§48): *gnas rnam pa thams cad du gyur na | rnam par smin pa'i rnam par shes pa sa bon thams cad pa yang | sa bon med par gyur pa dang rnam pa thams cad du spangs pa yang yin no |*.

Reality is always without duality, is the basis of error,
 And is entirely inexpressible, beyond the nature of mental fabrication;
 It is to be known, abandoned, and purified.
 [Still,] it should properly be thought of as naturally stainless, since it,
 like space, gold, and water, is unsoiled by defilements.

Vasubandhu comments:

As for reality being “always without duality,” this refers to the imagined nature because it does not exist at all in terms of the defining characteristics of a perceived and perceiver. As for “the basis of error,” it is the dependent inasmuch as [the perceived and perceiver] are imagined through it. As for “entirely inexpressible, beyond the nature of mental fabrication,” this refers to the perfect nature. Of these, the first reality must be known; the second one abandoned; and the third one purified of adventitious stains, it [itself] being naturally pure. The purity from defilements of that which is naturally pure is like the one of space, gold, and water. It is not the case that space and the others are not pure by nature. It is not the case either that their purity in terms of being free from adventitious stains is not maintained.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 237₂₀–238₉ and MSA 58_{19–24} (MSA XI.13): *rtag tu gnyis bral 'khrul pa'i rten gang yin dang gang zhig rnam kun tu || brjod par nus ma yin zhing spros pa med pa'i bdag nyid de kho na || shes bya spang bya rang bzhin dri med 'dod gang rnam par sbyang bya ste | de ni nam mkha' gser dang chu ltar nyon mongs pa las rnam dag 'dod | de kho na nyid rtag tu gnyis dang bral ba ni kun brtags pa'i ngo bo nyid yin te | gzung ba dang 'dzin pa'i mtshan nyid du gtan du med pa'i phyir ro || 'khrul pa'i rten gzhan gyi dbang ste des kun rtog pa'i phyir ro || brjod du med cing spros pa med pa'i bdag nyid ni yongs su grub pa'i ngo bo nyid do || de kho na nyid dang po ni yongs su shes par bya ba yin no | gnyis pa ni spang bar bya ba yin no || gsum pa ni glo bur gyi dri ma las rnam par sbyang ba bya ba yin te | rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag go | rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa de ni nam mkha' dang gser dang chu lta bur nyon mongs pa las rnam par dag pa yin te | nam mkha' la sogs pa ni rang bzhin gyis ma dag pa yang ma yin la | de dag glo bur gyi dri ma dang bral ba'i sgo nas rnam par dag pa mi 'dod pa yang ma yin no |; tattvaṃ yat satataṃ dvayena rahi-
 taṃ bhrāntes ca saṃnīśrayaḥ sakyāṃ naiva ca sarvathābhilapitūṃ yac cāprapañcatmakāṃ |
 jñeyāṃ heyam atho viśodhyaṃ amalāṃ yac ca prakṛtyā mataṃ yasyākāśasuvarṇāvarīśadrśī
 kleśād viśuddhir matā || satataṃ dvayena rahiṭaṃ tattvaṃ parikalpitaḥ svabhāvo grāhyagrāha-
 kalakṣaṇenātyantaṃ asattvāt | bhrānteḥ saṃnīśrayaḥ paratantras tena tatparikalpanāt | an-
 ābhilāpyam aprapañcatmakāṃ ca pariniṣpannaḥ svabhāvaḥ | tatra prathamāṃ tattvaṃ pari-
 jñeyāṃ dvitīyāṃ praheyāṃ tṛtīyāṃ viśodhyaṃ cāgantukamalād viśuddhaṃ ca prakṛtyā yasya
 prakṛtyāviśuddhasyākāśasuvarṇāvarīśadrśīkleśādviśuddhiḥ | nahyākāśādiniprakṛtyāśuddhāni
 | na cāgantukamalāpagamād eṣāṃ viśuddhir neṣyata iti |.*

Next Shangtön quotes the *Suvarṇabhāṣottamasūtra*:

Sons of the family! Ordinary immature persons are bound and hindered because of the three characteristics and [so remain] far removed from the three *kāyas*. What are these three? They are the imagined characteristic, the dependent characteristic, and the perfect characteristic. Since these characteristics are not known (i.e., the imagined), terminated (i.e., the dependent), and purified (i.e., the perfect), the three *kāyas* are not attained. It is by knowing, terminating, and purifying these three characteristics that the three *kāyas* of the illustrious Buddha will be perfectly [realized]. Sons of the family! It is because they have not abandoned the three types of consciousness that ordinary immature persons are far removed from the three *kāyas*. What are these three [types of consciousness]? The consciousness of engaging with entities, the [defiled] mind of abiding in the ground [consciousness], and the ground consciousness. By abiding in the purification of the path, one purifies the active consciousness. By abiding on the path of elimination, one purifies the [defiled] mind abiding in the ground [consciousness]. By abiding on the path of the supremely victorious ones, one purifies the ground consciousness. Once the active consciousness is purified, the *nirmāṇakāya* becomes manifest. Once the [defiled] mind abiding in the ground [consciousness] is purified, one displays the *sambhogakāya*. Once the ground consciousness is purified, the *dharmakāya* is attained. Thus the body, speech, and mind of the tathāgatas are present without effort.⁴⁸

48 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 238₉₋₂₄ (Derge Bka' 'gyur, Tōh. no. 555, fol. 36a–b): rigs kyi bu de la byis pa so so'i skye bo rnam ni mtshan nyid gsum gyi^a phyir 'ching (^bdang sgrib pa yod^b) pas sku gsum^c (^dlas ring du gyur to^d) || gsum gang zhe na kun^e brtags pa'i mtshan nyid dang gzhan gyi dbang gi^f mtshan nyid dang yongs su grub pa'i mtshan nyid do | § | mtshan nyid de rnam shes pa dang 'gog pa dang dag par ma gyur pa de'i phyir sku gsum ma thob po || de lta bu'i mtshan nyid gsum shes pa dang 'gog pa dang rnam par byang bar gyur pas sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnam sku gsum yongs su rdzogs par gyur to | rigs kyi bu byis pa so so'i skye bo rnam kyis rnam par shes pa gsum ma spangs pa'i phyir sku gsum las ring du gyur to | gsum gang zhe na dngos po las 'jug pa'i rnam par shes pa dang | kun gzhi la gnas pa'i yid dang || kun gzhi rnam par shes pa'o || lam sbyong ba dag la gnas pas 'jug pa'i rnam par shes pa sbyong ngo || gcod pa'i lam la gnas pas kun gzhi la gnas pa'i yid sbyong ngo || mchog tu rgyal ba'i lam la gnas pas kun gzhi rnam par shes pa sbyong ngo || 'jug pa'i rnam par shes pa sbyangs na sprul pa'i sku mngon du 'gyur ro || kun gzhi la gnas pa'i yid sbyangs pas longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku ston to || kun gzhi rnam par shes pa sbyangs pas ni chos kyi sku 'thob ste | de ltar de bzhin gshegs pa rnam sku gsum lhun gyis grub pa zhes bya'o ||.

Next Shangtön quotes RGV II.3

The teaching that buddhahood is luminous by nature means that it is
 covered, like the sun and the sky,
 By the thick clouds of solid adventitious defilements and conceptual
 objects
 But endowed with all stainless buddha qualities: it is permanent, stable,
 and eternal, and
 Attained through the wisdom of nonconceptual discernment of the
 dharmas.⁴⁹

Shangtön concludes:

It being established that buddha nature is what must be attained,
 there is a difference between what must be abandoned and what at-
 tained. Therefore, it is impossible that [the ground consciousness
 and buddha nature] are the same.⁵⁰

-
- ^a D dang ldan pa'i ^b D 'ching ba dang bcas shing sgrib pa dang bcas ^c D gsum po dag ^d D thag ring du spong zhing sku gsum po dag dang nye bar mi 'gyur ro ^e D kun tu ^f D las byung ba'i ^g From here on D differs as follows: | 'di ltar mtshan nyid 'di dag yongs su ma shes pa'i phyir dang zhi bar ma gyur pa'i phyir dang yongs su ma dag pa'i phyir te | de lta bas na sku gsum po 'di dag dang nye bar ma gyur pa yin no || 'di ltar mtshan nyid gsum po 'di dag shes shing nye bar zhi ba dang yongs su dag par gyur pa'i phyir de lta bas na sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnams sku gsum dang ldan par 'gyur ba yin no || rigs kyi bu byis pa so so'i skye bo rnams ni sems rnam pa gsum po 'di dag ma spangs pa'i phyir sku gsum po dag thag ring du spangs nas nye bar mi 'gyur ba yin no || gsum gang zhe na | bya ba slong ba'i sems dang | rtas ba la brten pa'i sems dang | rtas ba'i sems gang yin pa'o || thul bar byed pa'i lam rnams la brten nas ni bya ba slong ba'i sems zad par 'gyur ro || chos kyi spong ba'i lam la brten nas ni rtas ba la brten pa'i sems zad par 'gyur ro || mchog tu 'gyur ba'i lam la brten nas ni | rtas ba'i sems zad par 'gyur ro || bya ba slong ba'i sems nye bar zhi bar gyur pa'i phyir ni sprul pa'i sku ston par 'gyur ro || rtas ba la brten pa'i sems nye bar zhi bar gyur pa'i phyir ni longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku ston par 'gyur ro || rtas ba'i sems nye bar zhi bar gyur pa'i phyir ni chos kyi sku 'thob par 'gyur bas de'i phyir de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad sku gsum dang ldan par gyur pa yin no |.
- 49 Zhangston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 238₂₄–239₃; RGVV 148₂₋₅: rang bzhin 'od gsal zhes brjod gang yin nyi dang mkha' bzhin glo bur gyi || nyon mongs shes bya'i sprin tshogs stug po'i sgrib pa yis ni bsgribs gyur pa || dri med sangs rgyas yon tan kun ldan rtag brtan gyung drung sangs rgyas nyid || de ni chos la mirtog rnam 'byed yeshe dag la brten nas 'thob |; buddhatvaṃ prakṛtiprabhāsavaram itiproktaṃ yad āgantukakleśajñeyaghaṇābhrajālapāṭalacchannam ravivyomavat | sarvair buddhaguṇair upetaṃ amalair nityaṃ dhruvaṃ śāśvataṃ dharmāṇāṃ tad akalpanapravicaya jñānāśrayād āpyate ||.
- 50 Zhangston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 239₄₋₅: bde gshegs snying po thob byar grub pa'i phyir spang bya dang thob bya'i khyad par yod pas kyang gcig pa mi srid do |.

To sum up this point, for Shangtön one abandons the ground consciousness in order to discover what has always been there: buddha nature, which is identical in Shangtön's eyes with the ultimate, the unchangeable perfect nature and buddhahood. This translates into a three-nature model in which only the unchangeable perfect is accepted as the basis of negation, the negandum being everything else: the imagined, dependent, and unmistaken perfect. In standard Yogācāra, the basis of negation is the dependent nature. In it, moreover, buddhahood is the result of a fundamental transformation, whereupon the dependent nature ceases to exist in the mode of false imagining. That, then, is the abandonment of the ground consciousness. The dependent nature thus is not completely abandoned but partakes as nonconceptual wisdom (the "unmistaken") in the perfect nature. Again, in this case, buddha nature would not be exactly the same as buddhahood.

5. The Undesired Consequence If the Neutral and Virtuous Were the Same

Next, Shangtön starts out by pointing out, based on *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.62, that the ground consciousness is neutral:

Why is [the ground consciousness, which is the] ripening of virtuous and unvirtuous mental factors, called unhindered and neutral ripening? Being unhindered and neutral, it is opposed to neither the virtuous nor the unvirtuous. It is the virtuous and unvirtuous that are mutually incongruous. If ripening were either virtuous or unvirtuous, it would not be possible to oppose the group of all defilements. Therefore, the ripening consciousness is taught as being unhindered and neutral.⁵¹

In order to show that by contrast buddha nature is virtuous, Shangtön quotes *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.116:

Inside the skin of the fruit of sentient beings' ignorance and so forth,
Covered up by this sheath, is the realm of pure qualities.

⁵¹ Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 239₅₋₁₁; MS 24₁₅₋₂₂ (§I.62): *ci'i phyir dge ba dang mi dge ba'i chos rnams kyi rnam par smin pa ma bsgribs la lung du ma bstan pa'i rnam par smin pa zhes bya zhe na | 'di ltar ma bsgribs la lung du ma bstan pa ni dge ba dang mi dge ba dang 'gal ba med de | dge ba dang mi dge ba ni phan tshun mi mthun no || rnam par smin pa yang dge ba dang mi dge bar gyur na ni | kun nas nyon mongs pa ldog par mi rung ngo || de lta bas na rnam par smin pa'i rnam par shes pa ni ma bsgribs la lung du ma bstan pa nyid do |.*

Based on this virtue or that,
One gradually attains the state of the king of sages.⁵²

From this, and also the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, Shangtön infers that buddha nature is established as constituting virtue. Hence there is a difference between the neutral ground consciousness and virtuous buddha nature.

6. The Undesired Consequence If the Ultimate and Relative Were the Same

Shangtön first quotes the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*:

Śāriputra, “ultimate” is an expression for the [buddha] element in sentient beings. And the “[buddha] element in sentient beings,” Śāriputra, is an expression for buddha nature. And “buddha nature,” Śāriputra, is an expression for the *dharmakāya*.⁵³

Followed by *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.84ab:

Therefore, this is the *dharmakāya*, the Tathāgata,
The truth of the noble ones, ultimate *nirvāṇa*.⁵⁴

Shangtön concludes,

Buddha nature thus is established as ultimate truth. As for the ground consciousness, since it is the root concept, false imagining, the dependent, and one of the eight consciousnesses, it is established as rela-

52 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 239₁₂₋₁₃; RGVV 64₇₋₁₀ (RGV I.116): *sems can rnam s ky i ma rig sogs 'bras ky i || lpags sbubs nang chod chos kham s dge ba yang || de bzhin dge ba de de la brten nas || rim kyis thub pa'i rgyal po'i dngos por 'gyur ||; sattvesv avidyādīphalatvagantaḥ kośāvanad-dhaḥ śubhadharmadhātuh | upaiti tat tat kuśalam pratītya kramēṇa tadvan munirājabhāvam ||*.

53 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 239₂₁₋₂₄₀; RGVV 2₁₁₋₁₃: *shā ri'i bu don dam pa zhes bya ba 'di ni sems can gyi kham s ky i tshig bla dwags so || shā ri'i bu sems can gyi kham s zhes bya ba 'di ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i tshig bla dwags so | shā ri'i bu de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po zhes bya ba 'di ni chos ky i sku'i bla dwags so ||; paramārtha iti śāri[putra] sattvadhātor etad adhivacanam | sattvadhātur iti śāriputra tathāgatagarbhasyaitad adhivacanam | tathāgatagarbha iti śāriputra dharmakāyasyaitad adhivacanam |*.

54 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240₁₋₂; RGVV 55₃₋₄: *gang phyir de ni chos sku de ni de bzhin gshegs || de ni 'phags pa'i bden pa don dam mya ngan 'das ||; sa dharmakāyaḥ sa tathāgato yatas tad āryasatyam paramārthanivṛtiḥ |*.

tive truth, and cannot be identical [with buddha nature].⁵⁵

It should be noted that in traditional Yogācāra with its acceptance of the Abhidharma equation of material existence with ultimate truth, the dependent nature is real in the sense of existing on the level of ultimate truth. Salvini shows that for Sthiramati ultimate and relative existence are the same as real (*dravyasat*) and nominal existence (*prajñaptisat*), and thus the dependent and imagined natures respectively.⁵⁶ This distinction is also at work in Vasubandhu's texts, with the restriction, however, that the dependent is mostly not explicitly said to exist ultimately. Of interest is his commentary on MAV I.3d ("Because of its nonexistence, this does not exist either."),⁵⁷ where he is clear in his position that only consciousness in its aspect of a perceiving subject (*grāhaka*) is negated:

Because of its (i.e., the perceived object's) nonexistence, this (i.e., consciousness)—inasmuch as it is the perceiving subject—does not exist either.⁵⁸

Sthiramati for his part holds that the mind as the dependent nature or false imagining⁵⁹ is not included in this negation:

It cognizes; thus, it is consciousness. In the absence of a perceived [object], the very act of cognizing does not make sense. Therefore, given the object's nonexistence, consciousness as the subject of cognition is nonexistent, but not as [the consciousness, which has] objects, sentient beings, a self, and cognitions as its appearance.⁶⁰ If the

55 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240₃₋₅: *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po ni don dam bden par grub la | kun gzhi rnam shes ni | rtsa ba'i rtog pa dang | yang dag pa ma yin pa'i kun rtog dang | gzhan dbang dang | rnam shes tshogs brgyad kyi ya gyal yin pa'i phyir kun rdzob bden par grub pas gcig pa mi srid do |*.

56 Salvini 2015: 44–50.

57 MAV I.3d (MAVBh 18₂₂): *tadabhāvāt tad apy asat |*. For a translation of the entire verse and commentary, see D'Amato 2012: 119.

58 MAVBh 19₃₋₄: *tasya grāhyasyārthasyābhāvāt tad api grāhakam vijñānam asat |*.

59 Even though equated with the dependent nature in MAV I.5 (MAV 20₁₉₋₂₀: *abhūtaparikalpah paratantraḥ svabhāvaḥ*), false imagining is best described as the functioning of the impure dependent that manufactures the perceived and perceiver of the imagined nature.

60 I.e., taking *arthasattvātmavijñaptipratibhāsam* in the root text (MAV I.3, MAVBh 18₂₁₋₂₂) as a *bahuvrihi* depending on *vijñānam*. This was pointed out by Harunaga Isaacson (according to Salvini 2015: 42, fn. 30).

latter did not exist, complete nonexistence would follow.⁶¹

It has been argued that the Yogācāra texts of Maitreya negate the real existence of nondual mind, because in the formulas defining the fourfold Yogācāra practice, which leads to the realization of a state free from perceived and perceiver, “mind only” (*cittamātra*), or “cognition only” (*viññaptimātra*) is also relinquished. False imagining (i.e., “mind only” as the dependent) is said to exist,⁶² however, and only abandoned at the time of liberation, not during the fourfold practice. Moreover, it is unlikely that *viññaptimātra* or *cittamātra* in the following formulas refer to false imagining or the dependent nature. Vasubandhu's commentary on MAV I.6cd reads,

Based on the nonperception of an object, the nonperception of mere cognition (*viññaptimātra*) arises.⁶³

It is clear that *viññaptimātra* is here not the technical term referring to the Yogācāra tenet of everything existing as cognition only, but simply expresses the logical impossibility of cognition without any object.

7. The Undesired Consequence If Luminosity and Obscuration Were the Same

Shangtön first quotes *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.63:

This luminous nature of mind,
Just like space, never undergoes changes.
It bears the afflictions caused by adventitious stains such as attachment,
Which have arisen from false imagining.⁶⁴

61 MAV I, 20₁₋₄: *viññātīti viññānam grāhyābhāve vijñānanāpy ayuktam | tasmād arthābhāvād viññā-
tr̥tvena viññānam asad | na tv arthasattvātmavijñaptipratibhāsatayā | tadasattve hi sarvathā
'bhāvaprasaṅgaḥ |*. See also Salvini 2015: 41–42.

62 MAV I.1a (MAVBh 17₁₆): *abhūtaparikalpo 'sti*.

63 MAVBh 20₃₋₄: *arthānupalabdhiṃ niśritya viññaptimātrasyāpy anupalabdhir jāyate |*.

64 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240₆₋₈ and RGVV 43₉₋₁₂: *sems kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal gang yin
pa || de ni nam mkha' bzhin du 'gyur med de || yang dag min rtog las byung 'dod chags sogs || glo
bur dri mas de nyon mongs mi 'gyur |; cittasya yāsau prakṛtiḥ prabhāsvarā na jātu sādya iva yāti
vikriyām | āgantukai ragamalādibhis tv asav upaiti saṃkleśam abhūtaparikalpajaiḥ ||*.

Followed by *Ratnagotravibhāga* II.5:

[Buddhahood] is endowed with luminous buddha qualities
That surpass in number the grains of sand of the river Gaṅgā.
All of them are not produced
And emerge as being inseparable [from it].⁶⁵

And *Dharmadhātustotra* 18–19:

Even the stainless sun and moon
Become obstructed by the five hindrances:
Clouds, mist, smoke,
Eclipses,⁶⁶ and dust.

Similarly, the luminous mind
Becomes obstructed by the five hindrances:
Attachment, malignancy, laziness,
Self-exaltation, and doubt.⁶⁷

Shangtön concludes:

This establishes buddha nature as luminosity, and the ground consciousness, because of its conceptuality, as obscuration. Thus, being ignorance, the latter is not luminous. Being consciousness, it is established as darkness. There being a difference between luminosity and darkness, they cannot be the same.⁶⁸

65 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240_{8–9} and RGVV 80_{9–10}: 'od gsal byas min dbyer med par | 'jug can gang gā'i klung gi ni || rdul las 'das pa'i sangs rgyas kyi || chos rnams kun dang ldan pa nyid | gaṅgātīraro' titairbuddhadharmaiḥ prabhāśvaraiḥ | sarvairakṛtakairyuktam avinirbhāga-vṛttibhiḥ ||.

66 Lit. "the mouth of Rāhu."

67 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240_{10–13} and Ruegg 1971: 466: dri med nyi ma zla ba yang || sprin dang khug sna du ba dang || sgra gcan gdong dang rdul la sogs || sgrib pa lnga yis bsgribs par gyur || de bzhin 'od gsal ba yi sems || 'dod dang gnod sems le lo dang || rgod pa dang ni the tshom ste || sgrib pa lnga yis bsgribs par gyur |; nirmalau candrasūryau hy āvṛtau pañcabhir malaiḥ | abhranīhārādhūmena rāhuvaktrarajomalaiḥ || evaṃ prabhāśvaraṃ cittam āvṛtaṃ pañcabhir malaiḥ | kāmavyāpādamiddhena audhatyavicikitsayā ||.

68 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240_{13–16}: de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po 'od gsal bar grub la kun gzhi rnam shes ni rnam rtog yin pa'i phyir gti mug yin zhing | des na ma rig pa yin pa'i phyir | 'od

It should be noted, though, that the natural luminosity of mind is accepted as momentary luminosity in the Pramāṇa system; i.e., the ordinary ability of every mental event to be aware of itself (relative self-awareness). The Seventh Karmapa Chödrak Gyatso (Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho, 1454–1506) for one takes it in terms of unconditioned, but still momentary, luminosity of mind.⁶⁹ Thus the luminous nature of mind (the basis of emptiness) must be taken as a continuous flow rather than as permanent and unchanging—along the lines of the unconditioned luminous mind that still passes through moments (see the gloss in Sajjana's text above), or Rangjung Dorjé's pure mind, which still falls under dependent arising. This puts Chödrak Gyatso's *zhentong* view closer to that of Śākya Chokden (Shākya mchog ldan, 1428–1507), whose main difference with Dölpopa—according to Tāranātha's (1575–1634) *Twenty-One Differences with regard to the Profound Meaning* (*Zab don nyer gcig pa*)—is that Śākya Chokden takes nondual wisdom (the basis of emptiness) to be impermanent, while for Dölpopa it is permanent. Moreover, Śākya Chokden defines the basis of negation as the dependent nature (which for him exists on the relative level), and for Dölpopa it is the unchangeable perfect nature.⁷⁰

Probably having such a possible objection in mind, Shangtön quotes *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* XIII.19:

The mind is taken to be luminous by nature;
It is [only] tainted by adventitious faults.
A natural luminosity [consisting] of another [dependent] mind (*cetas*),
Different from the mind as true nature (*dharmatā*), is not taught.⁷¹

Vasubandhu explains:

The mind is taken to be luminous by nature; it is [only] tainted
by adventitious faults. Another mind that is different from the

mi gsal la rnam shes yin pa'i phyir mun par grub pas | 'od gsal dang mun pa yin pa'i khyad par yod pa'i phyir yang gcig pa mi srid do |.

69 This at least follows when he explains the natural luminosity of mind also in terms of *Pramāṇavārttika* I.208cd. See Mathes 2019: 121–22.

70 Mathes 2004: 310–11.

71 Zhangston, *Snyingpo rab gsal*, 240_{16–18} and MSABh 88_{9–10}: *sems nirtag turang bzhin 'od gsal' dod || de ni glo bur nyes pas ma rung byas || chos nyid sems las gzhan pa sems gzhan ni || 'od gsal ma yin rang bzhin la brjod do |; matam ca cittam prakṛtiprabhāsvaraṃ sadā tad āgantukadośadūṣitam | na dharmatācittam rte 'nyacetasaḥ prabhāsvaratvaṃ prakṛtyā* (text: *prakṛtau*) *vidhīyate ||*.

mind as true nature and has the defining characteristic of the dependent is not taught as being luminous by nature.⁷²

This means that the luminous nature of mind only pertains to the mind as true nature (*dharmatācitta*), and not to the dependent nature. A contemporary of Shangtön and further disciple of Dölpopa, Jonang Choklé Namgyal (Jo nang Phyogs las rnam rgyal, 1306–1386), also argues against the explanation that buddha nature or natural luminosity is permanent only in terms of a continuous flow, and refers to MSA IX.66cd:

With regard to these [*kāyas*] there is the permanence
In terms of nature, not being interrupted, and staying connected.⁷³

Vasubandhu comments:

With regard to these three *kāyas*, permanence should be known to be threefold respectively. Thus, the tathāgatas are said to have permanent *kāyas*. They are naturally permanent because the *svābhāvika*[*kāya*] is permanent in terms of its own nature. [They are permanent] in terms of not being interrupted, because the *sambhoga*[*kāya*] is the uninterrupted enjoyment of the Dharma. [They are permanent] in terms of staying connected, because the *nirmāṇa*[*kāya*] shows, after its disappearance, manifestations again and again.⁷⁴

In his *Conqueror of Delusion, Which Is an Ornament of Buddha Nature* (*Bde gshegs snying po'i rgyan gyi 'khrul 'joms*), Choklé Namgyal infers from these two lines in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*:

72 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240_{19–21} and MSABh 88_{16–18}: *sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal bar 'dod pa las glo bur gyi nyes pas ma rung bar byas so || chos nyid kyi sems las ma gtogs pa sems gzhan te | gzhan gyi dbang gi mtshan nyid ni rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba nyid du mi brjod do | evaṃ cittam prakṛtyā prabhāsvaraṃ matam āgantukais tu doṣair dūṣitam iti | na ca dharmatācittād rte 'nyasya cetasaḥ paratantralakṣaṇasya prakṛtiprabhāsvaratvaṃ vidhīyate | tasmāc cittatathatāivātra cittam veditavyam |*

73 MSA IX.66 (MSA 46₉): *prakṛtyā 'sraṃsanenāpi prabandhenaiṣu nityatā |*

74 MSABh 46_{12–15}: *teṣu ca triṣu kāyeṣu yathākramaṃ trividhā nityatā veditavyā yena nityakāyās tathāgatā ucyante | prakṛtyā nityatā svābhāvikasya svabhāvena nityatvāt | asraṃsanena sāmḥogikasya dharmasambhogāvicchedāt | prabandhena nairmāṇikasyāntarvayye punaḥ punar nirmāṇadarśanāt | buddhajñānavibhāge daśa ślokāḥ |*

Permanence in terms of nature means ultimate permanence. Moreover, the reasons for the [different kinds of] permanence with regard to the form *kāyas* and the *dharmakāya* would not differ. This is because the *dharmakāya* would be only permanent in a metaphorical sense, or in terms of being uninterrupted.⁷⁵

This, in fact, is a strong argument in favor of Shangtön, especially if one follows the closely related *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, which explains the *svābhāvikakāya*, which is synonymous with *dharmakāya* in Yogācāra, as possessing all uncontaminated qualities.⁷⁶ Thus, ultimate or real permanence does not only apply to the never-changing absence of duality.

8. Finally, There Are Undesired Consequences Because of Many Other Grave Mistakes

Shangtön concludes:

In many Mahāyāna sūtras and pure treatises, buddha nature has been taught as the *dharmakāya*, *svābhāvikakāya*, suchness, the extreme limit of reality, signlessness, the *dharmadhātu*, the pure self, purity, permanence, the stable, the eternal, the uncontaminated sphere, the unchangeable, the pure, the blissful, the Buddha, and the stainless sphere. These attributes are not complete in the ground consciousness, since the ground consciousness is impermanent, not stable, not eternal, unclean, suffering, impure, and changeable. Those who maintain that these two are identical only talk senseless talk, not realizing what buddha nature and ground consciousness are.⁷⁷

75 Jo nang Phyogs las rnam rgyal, *Bde gshegs snying po'i rgyan gyi 'khrul 'joms*, 95₁₄₋₁₇: rang bzhin gyi rtag pa zhes pa ni don dam par rtag pa'i don yin no | gzhan yang gzugs kyi dang chos kyi sku la rtag pa'i rgyu mtshan la yang khyad med par 'gyur te | chos kyi sku yang rnam grangs kyi rtag pa'am rgyun chad pa med pa tsam gyi | rtag pa yin pa'i phyir ro |.

76 AA VIII.1 (AA 38₃₋₄): "The *svābhāvikakāya* of the Sage has the natural defining characteristic of all uncontaminated qualities, which have attained to purity in every respect" (*sarvākārām viśuddhiṃ ye dharmāḥ prāptā nirāsravāḥ | svābhāviko munēḥ kāyas teṣāṃ prakṛtilakṣaṇāḥ ||*).

77 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 240₂₂₋₂₄₁₈: theg pa chen po'i mdo dang bstan bcos rnam dag mang po las | de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po de nyid la | chos sku dang | ngo bo nyid kyi sku dang | de bzhin nyid dang | yang dag pa'i mtha' dang | mtshan ma med pa dang | chos kyi dbyings dang | dag pa'i bdag dang | rnam par dag pa dang | rtag pa dang | brtan pa dang | ther zug dang | zag pa med pa'i dbyings dang | gzhan du 'gyur ba min pa dang | gtsang ba dang | bde ba dang | sangs rgyas

In the next paragraph Shangtön “explains the intent of these canonical passages, which have become a basis of confusion”:

Thus, if buddha nature and the ground consciousness were the same, there would be an immeasurably huge mistake. Therefore, it must be understood that these unique teachings in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and the *Ghanavyūhasūtra* are intentionally provisional (*ābhīprāyika*), given that the other scriptures are more numerous and stronger.⁷⁸

Moreover, Shangtön quotes passages from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* in support of his interpretation:

Mahāmāti, if one asks what the perfect nature is, Mahāmāti, it is suchness free from characteristic signs, names, substance, defining characteristic, and thought; it is the experiential object of the noble ones’ own wisdom, attained through the realization of the noble ones’ wisdom. This perfect nature, Mahāmāti, is the heart of buddha nature.⁷⁹

Mahāmāti, my teaching of buddha nature does not resemble the heretical doctrine of a self (*ātman*). Rather, O Mahāmāti,⁸⁰ the tathāgatas teach as buddha nature what is called emptiness, the limit of reality, nirvāṇa, nonorigination, signlessness, wishlessness, and similar categories, and then the tathāgatas, the arhats, the perfect buddhas, in order to avoid [giving] fools a reason for becoming afraid

dang | dri ma med pa'i kham la sogs pa'i rnam grangs mang pos gsungs pa'i don rnam kun gzhi rnam shes la ma tshang la | kun gzhi rnam shes ni | mi rtag pa dang mi brtan pa dang ther zug min pa dang mi gtsang ba dang | sdug bsngal dang rnam par ma dag pa dang gzhan du 'gyur ba la sogs pa yin pas 'di gnyis gcig yin par smra ba des ni | de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po dang kun gzhi rnam shes gnyis ka'i yin lugs ma rtogs par brlab col 'ba' zhig smra bas so |.

78 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 241_{11–13}: de ltar snying po dang kun gzhi rnam shes gcig na nyes pa chen po dpag tu med pa yod pa des na | lang kar gshegs pa dang rgyan stug po'i mdor gcig par gsungs pa de dag dgongs pa can du go dgos te | lung gzhan mang zhing stobs che ba'i phyir ro |.

79 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 241_{13–17} and LAS 67_{15–68}₁: blo gros chen po de la yongs su grub pa'i rang bzhin gang zhe na | 'di sta ste mtshan ma dang ming dang dngos po'i mtshan nyid rnam par rtog pa dang bral ba'i de bzhin nyid 'phags pa'i ye shes thob pas 'phags pa so so rang gis rig pa'i ye shes kyi spyod yul te blo gros chen po yongs su grub pa'i rang bzhin 'di ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po thugs so |; tatra mahāmate pariniṣpannasvabhāvaḥ katamo yaduta nimittanāmavastulakṣaṇavikalpavirahita(m) tathatāryajñānagatigamanapratyātmāyajñānaga tigocara eṣa mahāmate pariniṣpannasvabhāvas tathāgatagarbhahṛdayam ||.

80 The two vocatives *mahāmate* are only rendered once.

of the lack of essence, teach the nonconceptual experiential object without characteristic signs by means of instructions that make use [of the term] *buddha nature*. Future and present bodhisattvas and great beings get attached to a self.⁸¹

From this, Shangtön concludes,

Since what is said about buddha nature (the limit of reality etc.) stands in contradiction to what is said about the ground consciousness, [their equation] is established as intentionally provisional. Based on its apparently many contradictions, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* is known to experts as a divisive sūtra. Given its similar Dharma terminology, it is obvious that [the equation of the ground consciousness with buddha nature in] the *Ghanavyūha* is intentionally provisional, too.⁸²

For Shangtön, the intent of Asaṅga is as follows:

What is the intent of noble Asaṅga, then? [His] explanation of buddha nature in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary is of definitive meaning, whereas [his] explanation of the ground consciousness in the *Mahāyānasamgraha* is of provisional meaning. With this in mind,

81 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 241₁₈–242₂ and LAS 78_{5–12}: *blo gros chen po de'i de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bstan pa ni mu stegs can gyi bdag tu smra ba dang mtshungs pa ma yin te | blo gros chen po de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rnams ni stong pa nyid dang yang dag pa'i mtha' dang mya ngan las 'das pa dang ma skyes pa dang mtshan ma med pa dang smon pa med pa la sogs pa'i tshig gi don rnams la | de dzhin gshegs pa'i snying por bstan pa byas nas byis pa rnams bdag med pas 'jigs pa'i gnas rnam pa spang ba'i don du de bzhin gshegs pa'i [snying po'i] sgo bstan pas rnam par mi rtog pa'i gnas snang ba med pa'i spyod yul ston te | 'di la blo gros chen po ma 'ongs pa dang da ltar byung ba'i byang chub sems dpa' chen po rnams kyis bdag tu mngon par zhen par mi bya'o |; na hi mahāmate tīrthakarātmavādatulyo mama tathāgatagarbhopadeśaḥ | kimtumahāmatetathāgatāḥśūnyatābhūtakoṭinirvāṇānutpādānimittāprāṇihitādyānām mahāmate padārthānām tathāgatagarbhopadeśaṁ kṛtvā tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksambuddhā bālānām nairātmyasaṁtrāsapadavivarjanārthaṁ nirvikalpanirābhāsagocaraṁ tathāgatagarbhamukhopadeśeṇa deśayanti | na cātra mahāmate anāgatapratyutpannaiḥ bodhisattvair mahāsattvair ātmābhīniveśaḥ kartavyaḥ |.*

82 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 242_{3–7}: *yang dag pa'i mtha' las sogs pa rnams bde gshegs snying por gsungs te | 'di ni kun gzhi rnam shes snying por gsungs pa dang 'gal ba'i phyir dgongs pa can du grub po || gzhan yang lang kar gshegs pa la nang 'gal ba mang du snang ba la brten nas | phra ma byed pa'i mdo zhes mkhas pa rnams la grags shing | rgyan stug po yang de dang chos skad' dra bas dgongs pa can mngon no |.*

[Asaṅga thus] explained each individually; he did not teach with any notion that buddha nature and the ground consciousness are the same.⁸³

Conclusion

Even though Shangtön Sönam Drakpa adduces numerous canonical sources and arguments for a clear-cut distinction between buddha nature and the ground consciousness, the opposing position finds canonical support, too. As for Asaṅga, the numerous Yogācāra influences in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* could be easily cited to identify him as a follower of Yogācāra, one who interprets the Tathāgata-garbhasūtras in line with Yogācāra. This has been nicely elaborated in Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal's *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary, in which buddha nature is merely taken as the beginningless, but still momentary natural flow of mind's luminosity. The Jonangpas accept this as standard Yogācāra but claim that passages with uncommon three-nature presentations, such that the *dharmakāya* is truly permanent and that only the unchanging perfect nature is the ultimate, reveal the true intention of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.

83 Zhang ston, *Snying po rab gsal*, 242₂₀–243₁: 'o na 'phags pa thogs med kyi dgongs pa gang zhe na | rgyud bla'i 'grel par snying po la bshad pa de nges don gyi bshad pa dang | theg bsdus su kun gzhi rnam shes la bshad pa de drang don gyi bshad pa la dgongs nas so sor bshad kyi | snying po dang kun gzhi rnam shes gcig tu dgongs nas gsungs pa ni ma yin no |.

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11

Buddha Nature through the Eyes of Gorampa Sönam Sengé

Khenpo Ngawang Jorden

My paper will outline Gorampa Sönam Sengé's (Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge, 1429–1489) refutation of the Jonang position on buddha nature as expounded by Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361). I will present the refutation mainly based on Gorampa's text *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows* (*Sdom gsum kha skong*), particularly the first chapter on the base or buddha nature.

Introduction to *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*

The Sakyapa scholar Gorampa was concerned with the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the theory of buddha nature and three codes, or sets of vows—the *prātimokṣa* vow, the bodhisattva vow, and the mantric vow—that were spreading across central Tibet during his time in the fifteenth century. The main issue Gorampa saw was the misidentification of what buddha nature actually was. His own writings and those of many commentators, such as Mangthö Ludrup Gyatso (Mang thos Klu sgrub rgya mtsho, 1523–1596), tell us that following Sakya Paṇḍita's advice to uphold the purity of the Buddha's teaching, Gorampa wrote the *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows* to critique and clarify such misunderstandings. I will identify what he saw as the Jonang's misidentification of buddha nature according to his critiques found in his *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*.

Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows is written in verse, and Gorampa did not write an auto-commentary to it. Any philosophical text of this nature is not only difficult but almost impossible to understand without relying on commentaries. Therefore, my primary source for understanding *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows* is the *Elegant Commentary: A Garland of Precious Jewels, a Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows* (*Sdom gsum kha skong gi rnam bshad legs par bshad pa nor bu'i phreng ba*), written by Mangthö in 1565.¹

Mangthö was born in a region called Drong ('Brong), north of upper Sang (Zang), Tibet. He became a monk at the age of fifteen and studied with many great masters, such as Tsarchen Losal Gyatso (Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho, 1502–1566) and the Venerable Kunga Drölchok (Kun dga' grol mchog, 1507–1566). The *Sakyapai Karchak* (*Sa skya pa'i dkar chag*),² *A Bibliography of Sakyapa Litera-*

1 Mang thos, *Rnam bshad nor bu'i phreng ba*, 375.

2 *Dkar chag mthong bas yid 'phrog chos mdzod bye ba'i lde mig*, 99.

ture, mentions that Mangthö's writings were collected in eleven volumes. To my knowledge, Mangthö's *Elegant Commentary* is the earliest commentary on Gorampa's *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*.

Until the mid-1990s, this commentary was unavailable outside Tibet, and even in Tibet this text was very scarce because it had never been printed before. In 1997, however, Leonard van der Kuijp kindly handed me a photocopy of a handwritten copy. Since Mangthö is a well-known figure in Tibetan religious and academic society, both for his scholarship and for his commentary being the earliest, I used this commentary as my primary reference.

In the concluding section of *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*, Gorampa explains his motivation for writing this work and gives a brief history of how he decided to compose it:

Such a proper explanation as this is written
 Not for announcing my fame or for hurting others.
 It is solely for the benefit of the teachings.
 The darkness of the erroneous explanations
 Of both non-Buddhists and Buddhists in the Land of Āryas
 Has been dispelled by the ornaments who beautified the world,
 Such as Nāgārjuna who was prophesied by the Buddha.

In this land of Tibet, the teachings and the practices
 Of the supreme Vajrayāna were made like the stream of a river
 By Rinchen Sangpo,³ the great Lama Drok,⁴ and the translator Gö.⁵
 After that, with the light of scriptures and reasoning,
 The renowned Mañjughoṣa of Sakya
 Dispelled false teachings, which had increased,
 And clarified the light of the wholesome path.

This protector, together with his students, passed on
 To other buddha fields. Thereupon, in this land of Tibet,
 There arose many who, having deceived those who are not well versed
 By means of self-made religious systems devoid of scriptures,

3 Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055.

4 Bla ma 'Broq, 993–1050.

5 'Gos Khug pa lhas tsas, eleventh century.

Logical reasons, and essential instructions, demolished
 The principal meanings pertaining to the practice of the three sets of
 vows.

Having dispelled those mistakes through scriptures and logical reasons,
 I wrote this sizeable treatise for the sake of those
 Who have the fortune to engage in the essential practices without error.
 I proclaim with a high-pitched voice, “If this treatise
 Is looked upon properly by those with sharp and clear eyes,
 Free of prejudice and myopia, the wholesome path will be cleared.”

Why? Because I have composed this treatise after investigating
 The essential points of sūtra and tantra with an untainted intellect.
 Therefore, in this degenerate time, those fortunate ones, seekers of the
 Profound meaning, who have been guided by this elegant saying,
 Are suitable to journey into the city of texts.⁶

Gorampa’s *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*, specifically its role in defining buddha nature in its own right, was significant to the intellectual climate of fifteenth-century Tibet, and it constitutes a unique contribution to Buddhism in general. David Jackson says that *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows* was written to complete the original *Differentiating the Three Sets of Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye*) of Sakya Paṇḍita (perhaps basing his opinion on the term *kha skong* as “supplement”), adding the promised but missing section on the basis (*gzhi*), path (*lam*), and fruit (*’bras bu*).⁷ However, according to Khenchen Ngawang Chödrak (Mkhan chen Ngag dbang chos grags, 1572–1641) and others, the term *kha skong* does not mean that Gorampa intended to complete Sakya Paṇḍita’s *Differentiating the Three Sets of Vows*, because *Differentiating the Three Sets of Vows* is a complete text in its own right. Rather, the word *kha skong* should be taken here as indicating a “continuation” or “updating” (*’phro ’thud pa*, literally “means to connect the remainder”) vis-à-vis the three vows problem.

As with many of his works, Gorampa wrote this text to rectify what he saw as erroneous views, encountered during his lifetime, about the three vows, or codes, and the theory of buddha nature. In turn, he drew attention to the work of Sakya Paṇḍita and his contribution to the subject at hand. Throughout history, *Supple-*

6 Go rams pa, *Sdom gsum kha skong*, 63–64.

7 Jackson 1983: 17.

ment to the Three Sets of Vows has inspired commentaries by later scholars such as Mangthö, Khenchen Ngawang Chödrak, Tanak Khenchen Chö Namgyal (Rta nag Mkhan chen Chos rnam rgyal, sixteenth century),⁸ and Khenpo Sangyé Tenzin (Mkhan po Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin, who passed away in the 1980s in Darjeeling, India).

History of the Jonang Tradition

Gorampa identified Dölpopa as representing the Jonang school. Dölpopa, known as the Great Omniscient One of Jonang, came from Dölpo in present-day Nepal. His real name was Sherab Gyaltsen. In *The Buddha from Dölpo*, Cyrus Stearns writes,

Dol po pa was born in 1292 to a family closely affiliated with the Rnying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism. But he studied with Skyi stengs pa 'Jam dbyangs grags pa rgyal mtshan, a Sa skya teacher at first in the village where he was born. He followed this teacher to upper Mustang, in present-day Nepal, and eventually to Sa skya monastery. Little is known of Skyi stengs pa, who was so instrumental in Dol po pa's early development of scholarship.⁹

In 1314, he embarked upon a tour of the many institutions of learning in the Ü (Dbus) and Tsang (Gtsang) provinces, for the purpose of rounding out his education and meeting with the best teachers in other regions of Tibet. During this period, he grew famous and became known as “Omniscient” because of his mastery of scriptures, a title he was known by for the rest of his life. In 1321, Thukjé Tsöndrü (Thugs rje brtson 'grus, 1243–1313) had established a monastery at a place called Jomolang in Tsang, Western Tibet. Dölpopa visited the Jonang monastery for the first time and returned to Jonang again in 1322 to meet the master Yönten Gyatso (Yon tan rgya mtsho, 1260–1327), from whom he received the complete transmission of the *Kālacakratantra* and many different lineages of its perfection-stage

8 Dr. Dan Martin, of the Institute of Tibetan Classics, verbally informed me that according to David Jackson, Chos rnam rgyal flourished in the early 1600s, and it does seem that he was a preceptor of the Mustang king in and around the 1650s. However, according to Professor van der Kuip, this date is too late. I found in a booklet by Tanak Khenchen Mipham Ngakgi Wangchuk, titled *Brief History of Tanak Thupten Namgyal Monastery*, that he was born in the Female Wood Pig year of 1575, but no year for his death.

9 Stearns 1999: 12–14.

practices, the six-branch yoga.¹⁰ Dölpopa, having come from the Dölpo region near the frontier with Nepal, stayed at that monastery and spread the doctrine. From that time, those who maintained the teachings of Dölpopa were called Jonangpa.¹¹ He was thus considered the first systematizer of the Jonang tradition.

Dölpopa had been a follower of the Sakya school until he went to Jomonang at the age of thirty-one. There he requested many tantric teachings from Yönten Gyatso, including empowerments, particularly the Kālacakra empowerment and its instruction. Through his realization in meditation of the *ṣaḍaṅgayoga* (*sbyor drug rnal 'byor*), the sign of perfect *prāṇāyāma* (*srog rtsol*) appeared in him. He then accepted the seat of Jonang and constructed the great Kumbum (Sku 'bum) stupa. At that time Dölpopa fully developed the theory of “emptiness of other” (*gzhan strong*) and wrote many texts devoted to it. Among his writings, the most popular is *Mountain Dharma: The Ocean of Definitive Meaning* (*Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*), from which the saying, “the ocean burst out by piling up mountains,” became known throughout Tibet. As a result of his work of spreading this doctrine, the Jonang was firmly established as a distinct school of Tibetan Buddhism.¹²

A Summary of the Jonangpa's Emptiness of Other Theory

In *Mountain Dharma*, Dölpopa asserts that there are two emptinesses: emptiness of self (*rang stong*) and emptiness of other (*gzhan stong*). He also explains the two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth, and the three natures of things: the imputed characteristic (*parikalpitalakṣaṇa*, *kun btags*), dependent characteristic (*paratantralakṣaṇa*, *gzhan dbang*), and perfect characteristic (*pariṇiṣpannalakṣaṇa*, *yongs grub*). The imputed and dependent characteristics are conventional truth, and the conventional truth is empty of self because it does not have any inherent existence, like dreams or an illusion. Dölpopa calls this emptiness of self *nihilistic emptiness*, *emptiness of matter*, and *inferior emptiness*. It is not the pure emptiness that is ultimate truth.¹³

According to the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, starting from form to the omniscient wisdom of Buddha, all are empty of self. Nāgārjuna also mainly talked about the emptiness of self in his writings on Madhyamaka philosophy. However, according to the Jonangpa, such sūtras and śāstras do not demonstrate the complete ultimate truth. The *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*'s statement above refers to imputed nature,

¹⁰ Ibid.: 15–17.

¹¹ Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long*, 212.

¹² Ibid., 214.

¹³ Go rams pa, *Lta ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer*, 7.

and the analogy that these are like dreams and illusion refers to dependent nature. For Dölpopa, this absolutely does not mean that a thoroughly established nature is false and does not exist. To prove this, Dölpopa quoted from Dignāga's *Aṣṭa-sahasrikā Samāsārtha*:

The words “not exist” negate all *parikalpita*. The analogy “like illusion, etc.” refers to *paratantra*. After teaching four purities, *pariniṣpanna* is taught.¹⁴

Pariniṣpanna, the ultimate truth, is *empty of other* because it is devoid of composite things that have *parikalpita* and *paratantra* nature. The *emptiness of other* is pure, unerring ultimate truth, *dharmakāya* (the buddha body), and *tathatā* (the ultimate nature of all things). This ultimate truth primordially possesses all the excellent qualities of the Buddha, such as power (*bala, stobs*), fearlessness (*avaiśāradya, mi 'jigs pa*), and the major and minor marks (*lakṣaṇānuvyañjana, mtshan dang dpe byed*). To prove their point, Jonangpas use the example of the trichiliocosm (*tri-sahāśraṃ lokadhātu*) found in the *Avataṃsakasūtra*, and nine metaphors found in the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. They also claim that this notion is clearly expounded in the *Mahābherisūtra*, the *Jñānālokālaṃkārasūtra*, the *Śrīmālādevīśiṃhanādasūtra*, the *Ratnakūṭa*, the *Anunatvāpurnatvanirdeśa*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, and the *Suvarṇaprabhāṣottamasūtra*. It has been set forth in detail in the *Uttaratantra* of Maitreya and its commentary, where the intention of the last turning of the wheel of Dharma is explained. Furthermore, this notion is explained in the treatises by Asaṅga and his brother Vasubandhu, as well as in the *Collection of Praises of Nāgārjuna*.¹⁵

Since conventional truth, *parikalpita* and *paratantra*, are empty of self and do not ultimately exist from the beginning, the conventional truth is free from the extreme of eternalism. The sphere of reality (*dharmatā*), the *pariniṣpanna*, has never been nonexistent: from beginningless time it is truth and it is permanent. Hence it is free of the extreme of nihilism. Therefore, the emptiness of other is the *great middle way* (*dbu ma chen po*), free from both extremes. Because of the numerous reasons given above, Jonangpas claim the Jonang tradition teaches the essence of the Buddha's teaching.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

Positioning the Jonang School

The Sakya scholar Rendawa Shönu Lodrö (Red mda' ba Gzhon nu blo gros, 1349–1412) said that the Jonang school is not a Buddhist school at all. He argued that the theory of emptiness of other, as they call the great middle way, is not the meaning of any Hīnayāna or Mahāyāna sūtra. It is contradictory to the four Buddhist schools: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra (Mind Only), and Madhyamaka, and it does not reflect the meaning of any great Indian or Tibetan scholar. Rendawa goes on to say that this system is not within the Buddhist tradition for the following reasons. The Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika schools posit an emptiness that is merely devoid of personal self (*pudgalātman, gang zag gi bdag*), but they accept the existence of mere aggregates. These aggregates are impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless in nature. These two schools do not accept an emptiness that is characterized by permanence, changelessness, and so forth. Thus Rendawa firmly asserted that the Jonang tradition does not convey the meaning of the Hīnayāna sūtras of Early Buddhism.¹⁷

In reference to Mahāyāna, Nāgārjuna talks about two emptinesses: (1) emptiness established by logical reasoning and (2) emptiness realized by meditators through self-awareness. The emptiness established by reasoning has two parts: (a) the emptiness of personal self (*pudgalātman, gang zag gi bdag*) and (b) the emptiness of phenomenal self (*dharmātman, chos kyi bdag*). The first is devoid of the self of person (*puruṣātman, gang zag*) as the enjoyer of objects. Ordinary people and non-Buddhists superimpose this self on the basis of the aggregates (*skandha, phung po*), sensory spheres (*dhātu, kham*s), and sources of perception (*āyatana, skye mched*), although they are established as mere phenomena (*dharma, chos*). The emptiness of phenomenal self is an establishment of merely illusory interdependent causation through negating the superimpositions of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, such as the outer and inner sensory spheres and sources of perception being permanent, impermanent, arising, and nonarising. These two emptinesses are called *nominal ultimate* (*paryāyaparamārtha, rnam grangs pa'i don dam*) because they are established through the knowledge of listening (*śruta, thos pa*) and contemplation (*cintā, bsam pa*).¹⁸

The emptiness that yogis individually realize is an inexpressible one. It is an object beyond all other objects. This emptiness, or sphere of reality, is also the nature of illusory interdependent causation. Besides these three emptinesses, Nāgārjuna

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

never asserted that any emptiness ultimately exists, although it is still emptiness because it is devoid of conventional identities. Although the Jonang tradition may try to assert that Nāgārjuna taught the emptiness of other, there is no available passage in Nāgārjuna's treatises that directly indicates the emptiness of other. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, he says,

If there were even a speck that were nonempty,
Then speck emptiness would exist.
However, since there is not even a trifle that is nonempty,
How could emptiness be existent?¹⁹

According to Gorampa, the Jonangpas respond to this by saying,

In Nāgārjuna's six treatises on Madhyamaka (*rigs tshogs drug*), he has only taught the emptiness of self, but in his writings of praise (*bstod tshogs*), the emptiness of other, the ultimate truth, has been taught.

Rendawa denied this as well, saying that even in Nāgārjuna's writings of praise there is not a single word indicating that there is something that ultimately exists. Rather, Nāgārjuna rejects all extremes, just as he does in his Madhyamaka treatises. Therefore, Rendawa concluded, the Jonang tradition does not represent Nāgārjuna's tradition.²⁰

Rendawa further says that three different kinds of emptiness appear in Asaṅga and Vasubandhu's works: (a) emptiness of own character (*rang gi mtshan nyid kyi stong pa nyid*), (b) emptiness of not being [the way it appears] (*yod pa min pa'i stong pa nyid*), and (c) emptiness of its own nature (*rang bzhin gyi stong pa nyid*). The first is *parikalpita*, the second is *paratantra*, and the third is *pariniṣpanna*. Of these three, the *paratantra* is established by its own character. The *paratantra* being devoid of *parikalpita* is the *pariniṣpanna* that ultimately exists. This is the middle path because it is free from the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Thus it is said in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*,

The imagination of what is unreal exists. In this imagination, duality does not exist. In it, however, emptiness exists, and in this emptiness,

¹⁹ Ibid. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chapter XIII, verse 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

this imagination exists. It is said that nothing is empty, and nothing is nonempty, because of the existence of the imagination, the nonexistence of duality, and existence of emptiness in the imagination. This is the middle path.²¹

The Jonangpas' theory of ultimately existing *pariniṣpanna*, which is devoid of *parikalpita* and *paratantra*, is discordant with Asaṅga and Vasubandhu's views because the Jonangpas asserted that *paratantra* also does not exist as *parikalpita*. However, in the treatises of the two brothers, *paratantra* does ultimately exist like the object of a magician's magic show. Therefore, the Jonang tradition is neither part of the Mind Only tradition nor the Madhyamaka tradition. Rendawa refutes the theory of the Jonang tradition in this way.²²

In analyzing Rendawa's criticism of the Jonang, Gorampa says that it is too harsh to conclude that they are a non-Buddhist tradition because they accord with neither the Hīnayāna nor the Mahāyāna school. In fact, Gorampa maintains that the Jonang tradition is superior to other Realist (*dnegos po yod par smra ba*) schools and actually leads one to a point where one effortlessly understands the Madhyamaka view, because except for *pariniṣpanna*, the Jonangpas do establish that ultimately all phenomena do not exist. The Jonangpas also accept sūtras related to the third-turning teachings of the Buddha Maitreya's texts, and they accept what Asaṅga and Vasubandhu interpreted as definitive meaning.²³ To prove that the Jonang tradition is not adhering to Mind Only, Rendawa uses the reasoning that the Jonang tradition does not assert *paratantra* as being an ultimately existent phenomenon.

Gorampa replies that this is invalid logic because *paratantra* has been explained as an ultimately existent phenomenon in many texts of the Mind Only tradition. If a person belonging to the Mind Only tradition studies the Madhyamaka view, they will at first accept that the *paratantra* is actually devoid of ultimate existence, but some residual insistence on the ultimate existence of *pariniṣpanna* will remain. Just accepting what has been explained, having not only a common-locus (*gzhi mthun*) *paratantra* but also accepting nonexistent phenomena does not make one non-Mind Only. Otherwise, the False-Aspect Mind Only (*Sems tsam rnam brdzun pa*) tradition is no longer one of the Mind Only interpretations, because the *aspect* that is the basis of debate between the two Mind Only traditions—the

21 Maitreya, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, chapter I, verse 2 (p. 157).

22 Go rams pa, *Lta ba'i shan 'byed*, 18.

23 Ibid., 19.

True-Aspect Mind Only (Sems tsam rnam bden pa) and the False-Aspect Mind Only—is questionably *paratantra*, and the False-Aspect Mind Only does not accept this aspect as an ultimately existent phenomenon.

Thus Gorampa maintains that if one wants to say that this aspect is not *paratantra* but rather *parikalpita*, then it is wrong to say that the False-Aspect Mind Only tradition accepts it to be an ultimately existent phenomenon because the Mind Only tradition does not accept the existence of *parikalpita*.²⁴ To this point, Gorampa quotes one of his teachers, Rongtön, who says that the Jonang tradition is the best Mind Only tradition, or it is almost on par with the Madhyamaka school.

Gorampa establishes Rongtön's statement to be correct with several logical reasons:

1. The Jonang tradition was able to establish *paratantra* as being devoid of ultimate existence, with only some residual insistence on the ultimate existence of *pariṇiṣpanna*.
2. The Jonang tradition has taken a literal interpretation of the *Sandhinirmocanasūtra*.
3. The Jonang tradition identifies Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and Dharmakīrti as “the great Mādhyamikas” and accepts the works of these scholars as part of its own tradition.
4. The Jonang tradition bases its interpretation of scripture on the three characteristics, namely, *parikalpita*, *paratantra*, and *pariṇiṣpanna*.²⁵

Some followers of the Jonang school say that their school is not Mind Only because the Mind Only tradition is not only one of the Realist schools but also accepts a common locus of things and ultimate existence. For the Jonangpas, as long as there is something, it is devoid of ultimate existence. From another perspective, there is no significant difference between *what* the Jonang and Mind Only because Jonangpas also accept a common locus of mind and ultimate existence.

If one claims that the Jonang school is a Madhyamaka school because it accepts Nāgārjuna's works as valid and authoritative treatises, one has not proven the case at all. Since it is unacceptable for a Tibetan Buddhist school to refute Nāgārjuna's writings, the Jonang loosely interpreted them, attaching their own theory where they saw fit. There is no available evidence that their theory of the emptiness of

²⁴ Ibid., 19–20.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

other is Nāgārjuna's interpretation. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna says,

There is nothing conditioned, because birth,
Dissolution, and abiding could not be established.
Since the conditioned could not be established,
How could the unconditioned be established?²⁶

Again, the Jonang tradition claims that this objection does not hold true because of the above passage, and also because of one in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*:

If I have any thesis of argument, I will have this fault.
Nevertheless, since I don't have a thesis, I am indeed faultless.²⁷

According to the Jonang, these two verses were set forth in terms of meditative equipoise, not in terms of post-meditative discursive analysis. The meaning in terms of meditative equipoise is that a noble (*ārya*, *'phags pa*) meditator in meditative equipoise does not see composite and noncomposite things as truly existent; they are not apprehended as any of the four extremes of existence. Therefore, this is the way uncontaminated (*anāsrava*, *zag med*) minds grasp ultimate reality. Post-meditational analysis means that when one investigates the reality of an object, one determines whether it truly exists or does not truly exist.²⁸

According to Gorampa, this position of the Jonang is wrong. If the reference to *nonconditioned things* is made in the context of meditative equipoise, then the statement *nonexistence of conditioned things* must also be made in that context. If this is so, then it would be pointless to refute arising, abiding, and dissolution through analysis. Therefore, these verses must be referring to post-meditative analysis.²⁹

Returning to *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*, the Jonang demonstrated the basis, the path, and the result in the following way:

The Basis: The Jonang asserts that if one divides all knowable phenomena into two truths and three defining characteristics, *parikalpita* and *paratantra* are conventional because they are not established as truly existing things. But the *pariniṣpanna* is the ultimate truth and is

26 Ibid., 21. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chapter VII, verse 33.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 21–22.

established as a truly existing phenomenon. Buddha nature exists in all sentient beings' mental continua because the ultimate sphere of reality of all phenomena has no distinction of being an awakened buddha, but sentient beings are not buddhas.³⁰

The Result: Regarding the achievement of the result, the Jonang asserts that, from beginningless time, the existing self-born ultimate *dharmakāya* does not need to be obtained by means of gathering the two accumulations. They maintain that through the gathering of the two conventional accumulations, one obtains the conventional *rūpakāya* (form body).³¹

The Distinction Between Empty of Self and Empty of Other

Since the ultimate truth is empty of conventional phenomena but not empty of the buddha qualities themselves, it is empty of other and not empty of self, because the ultimate truth is permanent, stable, unchanging, and truly existing. Conventional phenomena are empty of self and not empty of other because they are empty of their own nature.³²

The Meaning of the Nondifferentiation of the Basis and the Result of Jonang

This ultimate sphere of reality is impure due to the temporary impurities of mental afflictions at the time of the basis. However, at the time of the result, the ultimate sphere of reality is pure due to the practice of purification through which the temporary impurities of mental afflictions have been purified. Except for this distinction, the sphere of reality of the basis and the sphere of reality of the result cannot be differentiated in terms of the number of good qualities or of being good and bad. This sphere of reality is also established as true because the thirty-two qualities of *dharmakāya*, such as strength (*bala*, *stobs*), and the thirty-two major and eighty minor signs of *rūpakāya* are all indistinguishably complete in this sphere of reality.³³

Refutation of the Jonang Assertion That It Is in accord with Sūtras and Śāstras

The Jonangpas have said that the notion explained above is the ultimate significance of the ten sūtras of definitive meaning. The ten sūtras are:

30 Mang thos, *Rnam bshad nor bu'i 'phreng ba*, 58–59.

31 Ibid., 59.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 59–60.

1. *Śrīmālādevīsiṃhanādasūtra*, *Lha mo dpal phreng gis zhus pa'i mdo*
2. *Nirvāṇasūtra*, *Mya ngan las 'das pa'i mdo*
3. *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, *De bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i mdo*
4. *Aṅgulimāliyasūtra*, *Sor mo'i phreng ba la phan pa'i mdo*
5. *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, *Lang kar gshegs pa'i mdo*
6. *Sandhinirmocanasūtra*, *Dgongs pa nges 'grel gyi mdo*
7. *Sthīrādhyāsayaparivartasūtra*, *Lhag bsam brtan pa'i mdo*
8. *'Phel 'grib med par bstan pa'i mdo*
9. *Sarvabuddhaviṣayāvatārajñānālokālaṃkārasūtra*, *Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi yul la 'jug pa'i ye shes snang ba'i rgyan gyi mdo*
10. *Tathāgataguṇajñānācintyaṣayāvatāranirdeśasūtra*, *De bzhin gshegs pa'i yon tan dang ye shes bsam gyi mi khyab pa'i yul la 'jug pa bstan pa'i mdo*

This is also the meaning of the five treatises of Maitreya,³⁴ as well as the Asaṅga brothers' writings such as the five Bhūmis,³⁵ the two compendiums,³⁶ and the eight Prakaraṇas,³⁷ Dignāga's summary of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* in eight thousand verses, and the seven treatises³⁸ of Dharmakīrti. These are all in agreement with what was discussed above, the Jonang has claimed, because their system is the system of the Great Madhyamaka. Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva also accept this position, the Jonang has further said, and this is the one and only meaning of all

34 The five treatises of Maitreya are: (1) *Uttaratantra*, *Rgyud bla ma*, (2) *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, *Mngon rtogs rgyan*, (3) *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, *Chos dang chos dbyings rnam 'byed*, (4) *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, *theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan*, and (5) *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Dbus mtha rnam 'byed*.

35 Asaṅga's five Bhūmis are: (1) *Sa'i dngos gzhi*, (2) *Gtan la dbab pa bsdu ba*, (3) *Gzhi bsdu ba*, (4) *Rnam grangs bsdu ba*, and (5) *Sgo bsdu ba*.

36 Asaṅga's two compendiums (*sdom rnam gnyis*) are (1) *Mngon pa kun las btus pa* and (2) *Theg bsdus*.

37 Vasubandhu's eight Prakaraṇas or Works are: (1) *Sūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya*, *Mdo sde rgyan gyi bshad pa*, (2) *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā*, *Dbus mtha' rnam 'byed kyi 'grel pa*, (3) *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti*, *Chos dang chos nyid rnam 'byed kyi 'grel pa*, (4) *Vyākhyāyukti*, *Rnam bshad rigs pa*, (5) *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa*, *Las sgrub pa'i rab byed*, (6) *Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa*, *Phung po lnga'i rab byed*, (7) *Vimśīkakārikā*, *Nyi shu pa'i rab byed*, and (8) *Trimśīkakārikā*, *Sum cu pa'i rab byed*.

38 The seven treatises of Dharmakīrti are: (1) *Pramāṇavārttika*, *Tshad ma rnam 'grel*, (2) *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, *Tshad ma rnam nges*, (3) *Nyāyabindu*, *Rig thigs*, (4) *Hetubindu*, *Gtan tshigs thigs pa*, (5) *Sambandhaparikṣā*, *'Brel ba brtag pa*, (6) *Samtānāntarasiddhi*, *Rgyud gzhan grub pa*, and (7) *Vādanyāya*, *Rtsod pa'i rigs pa*.

the profound tantras as well.³⁹ There are two parts to the investigation of this unique presentation of the Jonang:

1. Investigation with scriptures and logical reasoning without partiality;
2. Providing an explanation of why investigation is done.

As for the first, this presentation given by the Jonang is to be investigated with scriptural citations and logical reasoning without partiality because this is the object for scholars to refute and defend.⁴⁰ The second part has two sections:

1. Adopting what is agreeable;
2. Demonstrating the rest in contradiction to both the conventional and ultimate truth.

As for the first, the notion is that the sphere of reality has no difference of good or bad in terms of both basis and result in relation to buddha nature. Being buddha nature, the ultimate buddhahood, endowed with all naturally pure and spontaneously arisen qualities, such as strength, is not to be refuted because Gorampa also accepts this notion as it is the intention of Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras.⁴¹

As for the second, demonstrating the rest in contradiction to both the conventional and ultimate truth is that the *sphere of reality being a truly established one* is to be refuted because, as will be shown below, this is perceived to be contradictory to both the conventional and ultimate truths.

The Jonang assert that when a certain meaning of scriptures is explained by means of convention, the impure sphere of reality is buddha. This is in contradiction with conventional truth because if this is the case it would mean there was no distinction of inferiority, equality, and so forth on the conventional level. However, on the conventional level, one has to speak of distinguishing superiority, inferiority, equality, birth, dissolution, and so forth.⁴² In the Śūnyatāsaptati, Nāgārjuna said,

39 Mang thos, *Rnam bshad nor bu'i 'phreng ba*, 60–61.

40 Ibid., 61.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 62.

Buddha spoke of enduring, arising, disintegrating, existing, not existing, inferiority, equality, and superiority according to the world's conventional level, but not according to the true reality.⁴³

The Jonang claim that although according to the convention one has to speak of inferiority and equality individually, if that very convention is regarded as valid when the meaning of the scripture is analyzed, then the sequence of the four reliances—rely on the teaching, not the teacher; rely on the meaning, not the text; rely on the definitive meaning, not the interpretive meaning; rely on wisdom, not consciousness—would be reversed, because you are not relying on the teaching but, rather, you are relying on the teacher, and you are not relying on the meaning but on the text.⁴⁴

Gorampa's response to this is that the sequence of the four reliances is not like that. Having accepted the convention first, one eventually enters the ultimate reality later. If the convention is rejected from the beginning, then it would be useless to teach convention for the purpose of understanding ultimate reality. You would also incorrectly reverse the sequence of the four reliances. In the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna said,

Without accepting the convention, we do not explicate.

And in the *Madhyamakakārikā*, he said,

Without depending on the convention,
The ultimate reality will not be realized.
If the ultimate reality is not realized,
Nirvāṇa will not be achieved.

Also, according to Candrakīrti, since the conventional and ultimate are, respectively, the method and that which arises from the method, one who does not know the distinction between these two is on a wrong path. This statement is meant for those who mistakenly abandon the conventional in order to realize the ultimate reality.⁴⁵

43 Ibid., 62–63.

44 Ibid., 63.

45 Ibid., 63–64.

The Jonang argue that we do not have the fault of abandoning the convention because even on the conventional level, we accept the impure sphere of reality as buddha. Gorampa's reply to this is that accepting the impure sphere of reality as buddhahood contradicts the treatises of Maitreya and Nāgārjuna. To explain how this contradicts these treatises, Gorampa quotes from the *Uttaratantra* of Maitreya:

Impure, both impure and pure, and extremely pure are explained respectively as sentient beings, bodhisattvas, and tathāgatas.⁴⁶

Thus, the sphere of reality is explained by means of three individual names on these three different occasions.⁴⁷ Gorampa quotes from Nāgārjuna's *Dharmadhātustotra*,

For example, people say water is warm in spring and the same water is cold in winter. Likewise, when the sphere of reality is covered with the web of mental afflictions, it is called *sentient beings*. When that sphere of reality is free from mental afflictions it is designated as *buddha*.⁴⁸

Again Gorampa quotes from the *Dharmadhātustotra*,

For example, when a grain is covered with the husk, it is not accepted as result. Likewise, when the sphere of reality is covered with mental afflictions, it is not called buddha. For example, when the grain is free from the husk, the form of result appears. Likewise, when the sphere of reality is free from mental afflictions, *dharmakāya* of buddha clearly appears.⁴⁹

The following is also quoted from the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*:

Although thusness has no difference in all,
It is called *buddha* because it is purified.
Therefore, all sentient beings are endowed with its essence.⁵⁰

46 Maitreya, *Uttaratantra* chapter on buddha nature, verse 47.

47 Mang thos, *Rnam bshad nor bu'i 'phreng ba*, 64.

48 Ibid., 65.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

In this way, the impure aspect of the sphere of reality is designated as *sentient beings*, and when its temporary impurities are purified, then it is designated as *buddha*. So, the impure aspect of the sphere of reality is never designated as *buddha*.⁵¹

Classification of Real and Imputation: Demonstrating the Classification of Real and Imputation with Examples

The Jonang have said there are many instances where even during the causal period of the impure sphere of reality it is designated as *buddha*. They take for example, the tantric quote,

All sentient beings are buddha,
But temporary stains obstructed them.⁵²

Gorampa replies that this understanding is the fault of not knowing how to distinguish between what is real and what is imputation. “All sentient beings are buddha” means that the impure sphere of reality is just a naturally pure buddha that is an imputed buddha. “It is buddha after removing it” means that when the sphere of reality is purified of temporary impurities, it is the buddha who is pure of temporary impurities as well. This is the true and valid buddha.⁵³

Sönam Tsemo (Bsod nams rtse mo, 1142–1182), in his *General Exposition of Tantra* (*Rgyud sde spyi rnam*), said that the name Hevajra (Kye rdo rje) directly teaches the Hevajra of result tantra, while the Hevajra of cause tantra and path, and thus the skillful means, is taught indirectly. Sönam Tsemo quotes from Dignāga’s *A Brief Summary of the Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* (*Brgyad stong don bsdus*) to illustrate this:

There are no two *prajñāpāramitās*;
Wisdom (*ye shes*) is the Tathāgata.
Text and path are named *prajñāpāramitā*
Because they are connected with the goal to achieve.

Thus the true *prajñāpāramitā* is Buddha’s wisdom, and text and path are described as imputed *prajñāpāramitā*. Since it is of paramount importance to distinguish between what is real and what is imputation, the result *prajñāpāramitā* is the real

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 66.

prajñāpāramitā, and text and path are imputed *prajñāpāramitā*. Likewise, result Hevajra is the valid Hevajra, and cause and path Hevajra are the imputations. In the same manner, the temporarily pure sphere of reality is the valid buddha because in addition to being naturally pure it has now become freed of temporary stains. The naturally pure sphere of reality is the imputed buddha, as it has not yet been purified of temporary stains. In this way, despite sharing the same name, their identities should be distinguished without error.⁵⁴

Refutation of Ways in Which the Jonangpas Accept the Result

Does the aspect of *dharmakāya* that is tainted with temporary contaminations depend or not depend on the accumulation of two collections, namely, the collection of merit and collection of wisdom? If it does, then, the *dharmakāya* would not be self-arisen ultimate *dharmakāya* because that has to be achieved by means of the two collections. If it does not have to depend on the two collections, then the sphere of reality in the mental continua of all sentient beings would be free from the temporary contaminations from the beginning, because the aspect of the sphere of reality free from temporary contaminations does not have to rely on the two collections. If the Jonang accepts this idea, then how the sphere of reality in the mental continua of all sentient beings is obscured with contamination by means of nine different examples, explained in the *Uttaratantra*, would become meaningless because the sphere of reality is free of contaminations from beginningless time.⁵⁵

The Jonang tradition argues that if the contaminated *tathatā* and the *tathatā* free from contamination are the same in meaning, then buddha nature is both obscured and unobserved at the same time due to contamination, because contaminated buddha nature is simultaneously uncontaminated buddha nature. Further, it would mean that muddy water is free of mud and that cloudy sky is cloudless and clear, because contaminated *dharmakāya* is uncontaminated *dharmakāya*.⁵⁶

Refutation of the Ontology: Contradiction with Definitive Treatises

Gorampa argues that the Jonang tradition's presentation of the ultimate truth is in contradiction with the ultimate nature of things (ontology). The intention of definitive-meaning sūtras, and of Nāgārjuna, is not *pariniṣpanna* or the thor-

⁵⁴ Ibid., 66–67.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 72–73.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 73.

oughly established sphere of reality (as understood by the Jonangpas) because the five names (profundity, peace, free from elaboration, clear light, and not being conditioned) included in the sūtras are said to be synonyms of sphere of reality, the *pariniṣpanna*. For example, as previously quoted, Nāgārjuna said in the *Madhyamakakārikā*:

There is nothing conditioned, because birth,
Dissolution and abiding could not be established.
Since the conditioned could not be established,
How could the unconditioned be established?⁵⁷

These citations show that both composition and noncomposition are equally nonexistent.⁵⁸

Contradiction with Logical Reasons That Refute Realists

Furthermore, Nāgārjuna's logical reasons used in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* to refute the seven arguments⁵⁹ of Realists would backfire to Mādhyamikas themselves since they accepted the existence of truly established phenomena as the thesis of the argument. This could very well be the case, because, as previously quoted, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* says,

If I have any thesis of argument, I will have this fault.
Nevertheless, since I don't have a thesis, I am indeed faultless.

Here, *thesis* means accepting a truly established phenomenon that ultimately exists. This is also the Jonang interpretation.

All these seven arguments arose only from accepting a truly established phenomenon that ultimately exists. Therefore, if ultimately existing, truly established phenomena are accepted, all the arguments put forward by the Realists would turn on them. For example, in the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, Nāgārjuna says,

⁵⁷ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chapter VII, verse 33.

⁵⁸ Mangthos, *Rnam bshad nor bu'i 'phreng ba*, 73–74.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 74–75. The seven arguments put forward by the Realists are: (1) an argument in relation to the inappropriateness of words refuting the thesis, (2) an argument in relation to the valid means of cognition (*pramāṇa*, *tshad ma*); (3) an argument in relation to the nature of merit, etc., (4) an argument in relation to the name, (5) an argument in relation to the investigation of the objects of refutation, (6) an argument in relation to logical reasons, and (7) an argument in relation to the investigation of how refutation is undertaken.

If one accepts truly established phenomena,
 There arises a wrong view from which arises
 Inexhaustible desire and anger.
 Then argument stemming from that will take place.

It also says,

Those great beings who are free from arguments have no sides.
 One ought to understand Madhyamaka theory through these citations.⁶⁰

Contradiction with the Sequence of the Turning the Wheel of Dharma

The Jonang tradition's main theory of accepting truly established ultimate phenomena is like a crystal ball: by painting it (with citations that are to be understood as interpretive meaning), unreasonable defenses, like blue and yellow paint, transform the jewel-like school of thought into blueness and yellowness that cannot bear analytical investigation, because when the citations meet with definitive-meaning treatises and logical reasons, such as an inference proceeding from the power of fact (*dn̄gos po stobs shugs kyi rigs pa*), like paint meeting clean water, the citations have to reveal their true identities. The logical reason is that a truly established sphere of reality is unacceptable because the definitive-meaning sūtras taught us that all phenomena are devoid of true existence. For example, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* says that all phenomena are at all times devoid of true existence. And in other sūtras, such as the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, it is written that all sentient beings possess buddha nature. The question is, are these two sūtras in contradiction? The answer is that the former sūtra is the definitive meaning and the latter is the provisional meaning. For example, Maitreya said in his *Uttaratantra* that the latter sūtra was taught for the purpose of abandoning the five faults.⁶¹

Maitreya begins with a question: The Buddha taught in various places that every knowable object is forever void like a cloud, a dream, or an illusion. Having said that, why did the Buddha again declare that sentient beings possess buddha nature? Maitreya answers this question in his *Uttaratantra*:

There are five faults: faint-heartedness, contempt for those of lesser ability, to believe in the false view, to speak ill about the true teaching, and to cherish oneself above all else.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁶¹ Ibid., 79–80.

So that those in whom these faults abide might rid themselves of them, therefore was it declared.

According to Gorampa, the former passage was taught to help those who have these five faults abandon their errors: those who are discouraged, those who bully inferior people, those who hold impure views, those who disrespect the pure teaching (Dharma), and those who have excessive attachment to the self. Thus, having directly shown the purpose of the teaching that sentient beings possess buddha nature in the final turning of the wheel of Dharma, the basis of intention and the fault of accepting it literally are indirectly indicated. In this way, the second quotation is perceived as a sūtra of provisional meaning, and the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma is explained as definitive-meaning sūtra.⁶² Therefore, those who claim to be scholars must teach the two, sūtras of provisional meaning and definitive-meaning sūtras, individually, without mixing them together. It is important to do so because all the qualities of the tenet primarily come from whether or not one is able to distinguish these two.⁶³

Contradiction to the Intent of Sūtra, Tantra, and Śāstra

A truly established phenomenon such as the sphere of reality or nondual wisdom is not even the intended meaning of tantras because *self-aware wisdom, equal to the sky, free from contamination, empty of true existence*, and so on are explained as being synonyms. In order to dispel doubt as to whether they are truly established phenomena, it is said in the *Hevajratāntra* that they are devoid of oneness and multiplicity. In this way, the sphere of reality is established as not truly existent by means of a logic called “oneness and many.” Also, if the three later treatises of Maitreya, works of the Asaṅga brothers such as the five Bhūmis, the two compendiums, the eight Prakaraṇas, Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, and Dharmakīrti’s seven treatises of logic and epistemology are the treatises of the Great Madhyamaka, then it would mean that not a single uncommon treatise of the Mind Only tradition was translated and brought from the Indian continent to the Land of Snow (Tibet). The Jonang tradition claims that these texts belong to the Great Madhyamaka school, yet if they say that uncommon texts of Mind Only are translated, then they have to provide the names, but they don’t have any names besides what has been mentioned above.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 80.

⁶³ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 82–83.

Illustrating the Reasons of Investigation without Bias

Gorampa says that he has tremendous faith in the Jonangpa who are the upholders of the Kālacakra tradition and who have perfected inner realization. However, the investigation he had undertaken in relation to the Jonang tradition's tenet was done with scripture and logic and was not motivated by desire, anger, or ignorance. This investigation was done to refute an extreme grasping at eternalism, in order to establish the ultimate view as free from the four extremes. Therefore, Gorampa asks those impartial scholars to take his investigation seriously because, he says, having thought of benefitting the teachings of the Buddha and sentient beings, his advice of distinguishing what it is *to be* and *not to be* came from his heart.⁶⁵

Essence of the Important Points in Brief

In brief, according to Gorampa, buddha nature is the unity of clarity and emptiness because mind comprises all phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and the mind itself is empty of true existence and free from the four extremes. Therefore, from beginningless time buddha nature is the unity of clarity and emptiness, which is the ultimate nature of the way things really are. If buddha nature is put together, it is the nature of one's own mind that is clarity; its unceasing luster is everywhere, free from utterance through sound and perception and free from elaboration. This unity should be understood as buddha nature because that is the ultimate mode of the basis.⁶⁶

Conclusion and Own Thoughts

Here I have explored and presented the concept of buddha nature according to the fifteenth-century Tibetan scholar Gorampa Sönam Sengé. In so doing, I have provided an introduction to his *Supplement to the Three Sets of Vows*. I then focused on Gorampa's refutation of the Jonang tradition's views on the concept of buddha nature. In this paper on buddha nature, I have tried to scrutinize Gorampa's understanding of this concept, side by side with the Jonang view that Gorampa thought was wrong.

Buddha nature has been taught in various sūtras, tantras, and śāstras with different terminology and distinct emphases. Nevertheless, the essence of buddha nature is unceasing from beginningless time until buddhahood is reached. Buddha nature is never one sided in terms of virtue or nonvirtue and so on; rather, it is the basis for being both bound in and liberated from saṃsāra, depending on

⁶⁵ Ibid., 83–84.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.

whether or not it is accompanied by skillful means. Mere clarity and awareness, the characteristics of conventionality, are unceasing.

When buddha nature is investigated with logical reasons analyzing the ultimate, it is never established as existent, nonexistent, permanent, annihilated, and so on. Therefore, it is the unity of clarity and emptiness or the unity of awareness and emptiness, free from elaboration. Thus, buddha nature is the nondual nature of clarity and emptiness. It is not a mere emptiness, because mere emptiness cannot be the basis of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Buddha nature is also not mere clarity, because mere clarity is a composite entity and buddha nature is noncomposite.

When unity of clarity and emptiness is not accompanied by skillful means, it becomes the basis of saṃsāric phenomena. Out of the unity, conceptualization will arise, and then mental affliction will arise from the conceptualization. By accumulating karma with the mental afflictions, all the saṃsāric phenomena (such as *skandhas*, *dhātus*, and *āyatanas*) will arise. It is said in the *Uttaratantra*,

Earth abides in water, water abides in wind, and wind abides in space.
As for space, it does not abide in the wind, water, and earth elements.

Likewise, *skandhas*, *dhātus*, and faculties abide in karma and mental afflictions. Karma and mental afflictions always abide in distorted conceptions.

The distorted conceptions abide in the purity of mind. Phenomena, whose nature is mind, do not abide anywhere.⁶⁷

Nāgārjuna said,

By exhausting karma and mental afflictions, one will be liberated.

Karma and mental afflictions arise from conceptualization.

Conceptualizations arise from elaboration, and elaboration would be made to cease by means of emptiness.⁶⁸

When the unity of clarity and emptiness is accompanied by skillful means, it becomes the basis of all phenomena of the path in the following way. The mind, which arose due to the power of confusion, having awakened the seed of virtue in it, when the mode of mind is investigated, the aspiration of abandoning cyclic existence and achieving nirvāṇa arises. Then the mind of accomplishing them will arise. It is said in the *Uttaratantra*,

67 Maitreya, *Uttaratantra*, chapter I, verses 55–57.

68 Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chapter XVIII, verse 5.

Seeing the fault of suffering in *samsāra* and seeing the quality of happiness in *nirvāṇa* is the result of possessing spiritual propensity. If one were to ask why, the answer is because those who do not possess spiritual propensity do not have it.⁶⁹

Therefore, when the mind is nondual clarity and emptiness, free from all temporary mental afflictions through the power of meditating on the path, then the pure mind becomes the basis of all qualities, serving the purposes of others and oneself. These qualities are the strength (*stobs*) and the two form bodies (*saṃbhogakāya*, or enjoyment body, and *nirmāṇakāya*) of the Buddha, and so forth. Double-purity *dharmadhātu*, endowed with undefiled qualities such as strength and various manifestations of Buddha, will appear, starting from *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*, as rabbits, tigers, lions, trees, bridges, and so on, depending on the degree of purity of the followers. In brief, according to the Madhyamaka system, buddha nature, the sphere of reality, and natural spiritual propensity are to be understood as unity, the inseparability of the clarity and awareness, and the absolute sphere of reality free from all extremes.

Ascertainment with Evidence

The unity of clarity and emptiness, the essence of buddha nature, the nature of mind free of all elaboration, is explained in some treatises from the point of view of clarity, and in other treatises from the point of view of emptiness. The absolute nature of the mind is explained in some treatises from the point of view of the result, *dharmakāya*, and in others from the point of view of the cause, which is spiritual propensity. In this way, although there are many ways of explaining buddha nature through the defining characteristic that captures the complete and exact nature of it, it is mentioned in the *Uttaratantra*,

All who possess a body are always endowed with buddha nature because the buddha body emits forth, suchness has no difference, and spiritual propensity exists in sentient beings.⁷⁰

Further, the *Uttaratantra*, having identified these three defining characteristics—the natural *dharmakāya*, suchness, and spiritual propensity—divides them into nine meanings with nine examples. The three examples—a pure image of a bud-

⁶⁹ Maitreya, *Uttaratantra*, chapter I, verse 41.

⁷⁰ Ibid., chapter I, verse 27.

dha, honey with one taste, and an essence of a grain inside many layers of husks—exemplify the sphere of reality free from temporary defilements, treatises that teach profound emptiness, and treatises that teach various subjects. These are mentioned in the *Uttaratantra*:

The *dharmakāya* should be known as two: the perfectly immaculate sphere of reality, and the favorable conditions for this—the teachings in their profound and manifold aspect.⁷¹

The example of a gold image signifies naturally pure sphere of reality. Treasure beneath the earth, a tree with fruits, an image made out of precious gems, a universal king (*cakravartirāja*), and an image of a creature made out of gold respectively signify natural spiritual propensity, matured spiritual propensity, and the results of these two: the *svābhāvikakāya* (essential body), *saṃbhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya*.

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Rnam bshad nor bu'i 'phreng ba; Sdom gsum kha skong gi rnam bshad legs par bshad pa nor bu'i phreng ba. A copy of handwritten manuscript courtesy of Professor van der Kuijp.

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12

Buddha Nature and Selfhood

Critical Reflections by the Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé

David Higgins

[Buddha] nature is ... authentic selfhood because in its selflessness even conceptual elaborations regarding no-self have completely subsided.

— Mikyö Dorjé, *Commentary on the Single Intent*¹

Is not a moment of self-dispossession essential to authentic selfhood?

—Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*²

The Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507–1554) prolific writings on *tathāgatagarbha* contain several extended disquisitions on the topic of how buddha nature relates to different Buddhist conceptions of selfhood. On the one hand, he broadly rejects, along the lines of standard Buddhist nominalist critiques of the belief in self (*ātmagrāha*), any equation between buddha nature and a self. On the other hand, he does accept a kind of authentic selfhood or transcendent perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*) elaborated in certain Buddhist *tathāgatagarbha* and tantric texts³ that is said to be realized precisely through understanding selflessness. While his criticisms do occasionally touch on the controversial current of early Indian buddha nature theory that had equated buddha nature with a true self, their primary target is the identification of buddha nature with a “subtle self” or “subtle person” that Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal (’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481) is alleged to have made in his early *Kālacakratāntra* commentary *Secrets of the Three Continua* (*Rgyud gsum gsang ba*; hereafter *Secrets*) under the influence of Tsongkhapa’s (Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419) conception of a subtle self (*phra ba’i bdag*).

The fact that Gö Lotsāwa’s *Secrets* remains unavailable at present, though it is listed in an index of texts preserved at Nechu Lhakhang (Gnas bcu lha khang)

1 *Dgongs gcig kar ṭig*, in *Mi bskyod rdo rje gsung ’bum*, vol. 6, 897–8: *snying po ... bdag med pa bzhin bdag med kyi spros pa’ang nye bar zhi bas bdag dam pa* |.

2 Ricoeur 2000: 128.

3 Mi bskyod rdo rje’s interpretations of particular *tathāgatagarbha* and tantric conceptions of selfhood are discussed in the pages to follow.

in Drepung ('Bras spungs) Monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa,⁴ hinders any attempt to definitively determine the extent and precise nature of this influence, or to reconstruct Gö Lo's views on the relationship between buddha nature and selfhood and assess the cogency of the Eighth Karmapa's criticisms thereof. My own efforts to reconstruct these views and criticisms are therefore largely confined to the critiques Mikyö Dorjé advanced in two works (specified below) spanning the earliest and latest stages of his short but highly productive literary career. These are strikingly consistent both in how they characterize and refute the rival position. Trying to glean the views of one author through the critical lens of another is always a dubious enterprise, and even more so when the target of criticism is unavailable. Helpful in this regard are Mikyö Dorjé's quotations from the *Secrets*, most notably the substantial passage on buddha nature as a subtle self quoted in his final masterwork, which is translated and discussed below.⁵ Also useful are the treatments of buddha nature by Gö Lotsāwa that are available to us, most importantly those presented in his late commentary on the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (RGVV), composed in 1473, some thirty years after *Secrets* (composed in 1442).⁶ These provide a solid basis for assessing Gö Lo's mature views on buddha nature and also furnish important clues for reconstructing his earlier views on buddha nature and gauging how some of these may have undergone revision in his later years.

On the question of influence, we do have valuable indications from the biography of Gö Lotsāwa by the Fourth Shamar Chödrak Yeshé (Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes, 1453–1524) that Gö Lo counted Tsongkhapa among his teachers and that he was in fact urged to uphold the Dge lugs pa tradition by one of his Karma Kagyü teachers Rimi Babpa Sönam Rinchen (Ri mi 'babs pa Bsod nams rin chen, 1362–1453) on the occasion of receiving various core Kagyü teachings from him in 1440, just two years before composing *Secrets*. It is interesting to note, however, that Gö Lo is said to have been taken by surprise by his teacher's request:

Later, [to Gö Lo's] astonishment [Rimi Babpa] said, "Just as I do not reject the *mahāmudrā* view, don't you reject it either. Just as I do not

4 The 'Bras spungs dkar chag gives this work as *Dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i rgyud bshad pa la 'jug pa rgyud gsum gyi gsang ba rnam par phye ba* and names 'Gos Lo tsā ba as the author (see vol. 1, 3, *phyi ka*, no. 12). This index lists several other currently unavailable works that are attributed to 'Gos Lo tsā ba.

5 We can safely assume that such quotations have been reliably reproduced given the general reliability of other passages the Karma pa quotes from extant texts in his many critical reviews of Tibetan philosophical viewpoints.

6 See Mathes 2008 and 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal 2003 (ed. Mathes).

reject the independent tradition of the Gedenpa (i.e., Gelukpa), don't you reject it either." Having declared that he would not reject it, Gö Lotsāwa replied, "I will hold [their] independent tradition to be very authentic" and showed great respect.⁷

Chödrak Yeshé also reports that Gö Lotsāwa had already received teachings from Tsongkhapa in 1414 and that he greatly appreciated the latter's analytical approach and especially his distinction between definitive and provisional meaning on the basis of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁸ This background helps explain why the Eighth Karmapa would (almost a hundred years later) criticize Gö Lotsāwa for purporting to uphold the Karma Kagyü viewpoint on buddha nature while at the same time advancing a variety of "claims that have been adulterated by the views and tenets of Tsongkhapa and his disciples."⁹

With these considerations in mind, our philosophical aim in this paper is to examine how Mikyö Dorjé attempted, within the purview of his critique of Gö Lotsāwa's alleged equation of buddha nature with a subtle self, to navigate the long-contested relationship between buddha nature and differing Buddhist conceptions of selfhood. A touchstone of the Karmapa's attempts to reconcile the negational and affirmative positions is to regard them as complementary rather than contradictory. On this view, the negation of the putative self is regarded as an indispensable moment in the discovery of authentic selfhood, which is in this case synonymous with *dharmakāya* and resultant buddha nature (*'bras bu de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*). This article will explore the broad range of Indian and Tibetan views on buddha nature and selfhood considered by Mikyö Dorjé and then show how he presented and defended his own tradition's position in relation or reaction to these.

We must first consider how this position reflected, and was shaped by, his primary philosophical affiliations. As a staunch proponent of both the Consequentialist (*thal 'gyur pa*; *Prāsaṅgika) and Nonfoundationalist (*rab tu mi gnas pa*; *apratīṣṭhāna*)¹⁰ currents of Madkhyamaka thought, the Karmapa resolutely re-

7 See Mathes 2008: 143, and n. 795. The translation is altered slightly for consistency. The term *rang tshugs* (independent, self-controlled) is unclear in this context and is provisionally translated as "independent tradition."

8 See Mathes 2008: 136.

9 See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016: vol. 2, 108.

10 The full name of this tradition, *Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda*, can be translated as "the doctrine that all phenomena are not founded/do not abide [on/in anything]." On varying permissible interpretations of the term *apratīṣṭhāna*, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016: vol. 1, 33–34, Isaacson and Sferra 2015: 321, Mathes 2007: 555, and Almogi 2009: 208–9. The term

jects any identification of buddha nature with a self (ātman). His most penetrating arguments on this matter are presented in those sections of his early *Nerve Tonic for the Elderly* (*Rgan po'i rlung sman*; hereafter *Tonic*), which was composed in 1533, and his final masterwork *Commentary on the Introduction to the Three Embodiments* (*Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad*; hereafter *Embodiments*), completed in 1549.¹¹ It is in these sources that he specifically criticizes Gö Lotsāwa for having identified buddha nature with a subtle self or person under the tutelage of Tsongkhapa's conception of a subtle self. Consider the following passage from Mikyö Dorjé's *Tonic*, in which he rather hyperbolically suggests that this influence was substantial enough to warrant regarding *Secrets* as a work of joint authorship:

[Your] juxtaposition of [buddha] nature and the metaphysical view of self is similar to aspects of the system of the master [Tsongkhapa] Losangwa, yet [you] proclaim that [your] meditation system is in accord with whatever is maintained by those who are nowadays renowned as [Mahā]mudrā proponents. But whether or not there is freedom via such paths should be made known by those who have attained the great eye of Dharma with regard to canonical literature.¹² Now, the master and disciple who are the authors¹³ of this so-called *Secrets of the Three Continua* are known to have consciously accepted as "true Dharma" and taken as the essence of their practice those

apratisthāna is defined in Böhtlingk as "ohne festen Ort," "without fixed location." See Monier-Williams, s.v. "pratiṣṭhāna": "n. a firm standing-place, ground, foundation ... pedestal, foot"; Böhtlingk: "fester Standpunct," "Grundlage," "Fussgestell."

11 These two critiques are translated, edited, and discussed in Higgins and Draszczyk 2019, the relevant portions of which will be referenced in the pages to follow.

12 Mi bskyod rdo rje here touches on a sensitive issue that has been hotly debated by Tibetan Buddhist masters of all schools since the time of the Bsam yas debate (eighth century). At issue is the question of whether enlightenment is continuous or discontinuous with conceptual analysis. Most Bka' brgyud (and Rnying ma) followers maintain that the cessation of mind (*cittanirodha*)—and the attendant cessation of the six modes of consciousness (the five senses plus mind [*manas*])—is a necessary condition for spiritual realization. On their view, goal-realization consists in the disclosure of a transsubjective experiential dimension that is radically discontinuous with analytical thought process and is therefore accorded its own autonomy and claims to legitimacy. The other side of this debate bases itself on what Tillemans 2013 has called a "continuity thesis," the view that enlightenment is continuous with philosophical reasoning.

13 By using master and disciple (*dpon slob*), the author implies that the views presented in 'Gos Lo's *Secrets* are in fact a synthesis of 'Go Lo's and Tsongkha pa's.

teachings that had been identified as “non-Dharma” by [former scholar-translators] such as Lochen Rinchen Sangpo¹⁴ and Lochen Loden Sherab¹⁵ and Sa Lo¹⁶ and Buton Lotsā.¹⁷

Both in his *Tonic* and the *Embodiments*, the Karmapa repudiates this juxtaposition of buddha nature and the metaphysical view of self, mainly within the purview of standard Buddhist nominalist arguments against the existence of self that will be examined in the pages to follow. In advancing this critique, the Karmapa is in some instances required to explain and justify certain conceptions of buddha nature advanced in early Tathāgatagarbha works that had equated buddha nature with a true self or with the substratum consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*).¹⁸

Before examining the arguments he advances to defend his own Karma Kagyü position, let us first look briefly at the background of this latter strain of thought. In apparent contradiction to the central Buddhist teaching on the absence of self (*nairātmya*), certain early Tathāgatagarbha texts not only embraced the existence

14 This refers to the great translator (*lo tsā ba chen po*) Rin chen bzang po (958–1055), a key protagonist in the later diffusion (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet who was a student of the renowned Bengali master Atiśa. He is credited by tradition with initiating a second wave of translations (*phyi bsgyur*) of Buddhist Sanskrit works in Tibet and with being one of its principal translators. It is said that as a young man, he was sent along with a group of Tibetan scholars by the King Ye shes 'od (allegedly a ruler of Zanskar, Guge, Spiti, and Kinnaur) to Kashmir and other western Himalayan regions in order to study and bring back Buddhist teachers and teachings to central Tibet. He is also credited with establishing over one hundred monasteries in Western Tibet.

15 This is Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109), who founded an analytical school of the Maitreya Works that considered all but the RGV to be of provisional meaning (*neyārtha*) and interpreted buddha nature as a nonaffirming negation. See his *Theg chen rgyud bla'i don bsdus* (1b₂–4a₃) and relevant discussion in Mathes 2012, 198–202. For an excellent translation of this work and a detailed discussion of Rngog's life and writings, with a particular focus on his role in the transmission of the RGV in Tibet, see Kano 2016.

16 This likely refers to Sa skya lo tsā ba Kun dga' bsod nams (b. 1485–1533), one of the most prolific writers of the Sa skya tradition.

17 Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290–1364). For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 160: *snying po dang bdag lta'i 'jog mtshams rje blo bzang ba'i lugs dang cha 'dra la | sgom pa'i lugs deng sang phyag rgya par grags pa rnam kyis ji lta' 'dod pa lta' smra bar byed mod | lam de dag la grol ba yod med gsung rab la chos kyi spyen po che thob pa dag gis rtogs par byis shig | des na rgyud gsum gsang bar grags pa 'di byed pa po dpon slob | lo chen rin chen bzang po dang | lo chen blo ldan shes rab dang | sa lo dang | bu ston lo tsa sogs kyis chos min du ngo sprod pa'i chos rnam kyang shes bzhin du 'di dag gis dam pa'i chos su khas blangs shing nyams len gyi snying por byed par grags so ||.*

18 For a useful survey of some of these developments, see Jones 2015.

of some permanent essential constituent (*dhātu*) of sentient beings, but in some cases also explicitly identified this with a self. The *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (MPNS), arguably the earliest extant work on buddha nature,¹⁹ at times characterizes a buddha, or more specifically the buddha element (*buddhadhātu*) in sentient beings, as a permanent self²⁰ that underlies the flux of conditioned existence and undergoes transmigration. It is in some instances also qualified as the true self that beings may discover within, once they comprehend the nonexistence of the empirical self as advocated by non-Buddhist devotees.²¹ The teaching of a true self is thus at times characterized as a final teaching reserved for those who have grasped the provisional teaching of selflessness.²²

It is hardly surprising that a view as seemingly antithetical to the key Buddhist *anātman* (no self) doctrine as this would attract considerable attention and, indeed, would come under increasing interrogation in the centuries to follow. While the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (LAS) treats the identification of buddha nature with a self as a teaching that was given in order to attract non-Buddhist ātmavādins, other texts such as the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādasūtra* (ŚDS), as well as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) and its *vyākhyā* (RGVV), admit a conception of true selfhood or transcendent perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*) that, as Christopher Jones puts it, “is arrived at precisely through understanding the absence of anything wrongly deemed a self.”²³ This strand of Tathāgatagarbha doctrine intersects with the Buddhist tantric ideas of a supreme self (*paramātman*) or reality of [one]self (*ātmatattva*),²⁴ which are also at times said to be realized precisely through understanding selflessness. On this view, the negation of self is regarded as an indispen-

19 See Radich 2015: 19ff., and Habata 2017: 176.

20 *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (MPNS), D 120, 35b.6–36b.1: “It is not the case that all phenomena are selfless. The self is true reality. The self is permanence. The self is excellence. The self is eternality. The self is stability.” *chos thams cad ni bdag med pa yang ma yin te | bdag ni de kho na nyid do || bdag ni rtag pa nyid do || bdag ni yon tan nyid do || bdag ni ther zug pa nyid do || bdag ni brtan pa nyid do ||*. On the equation of buddha nature with a self in the different extant versions of this sūtra and their characterizations of the self as a true, permanent entity inherent in sentient beings, see Jones 2015: 102–5.

21 See Jones 2015: 100–1.

22 This is the gist of the provocative parable in which a mother (= the Buddha) prevents her lactose-intolerant infant (= the disciple) from drinking milk (= the true-self doctrine) until the infant’s condition is cured through skillful means (= understanding ātman), after which the infant is able to consume the milk freely. On the import of this story, see Jones 2015: 110–13.

23 Jones 2015: 375.

24 These terms are very widespread in Buddhist tantras.

sable moment in the discovery of authentic selfhood,²⁵ which is, in turn, equated with *dharmakāya* or buddhahood itself.

This background helps us frame the Eighth Karmapa's position on the relationship between buddha nature and selfhood. Broadly speaking, his understanding of this relationship is guided by the two seemingly antithetical stances noted above: (1) a reluctance to identify buddha nature with a self and (2) an avowal of authentic selfhood equated with selflessness. Let us now look more closely at the philosophical underpinnings of these stances. Mikyö Dorjé's resolute rejection of selfhood follows well-established Buddhist nominalist critiques of the belief in self (*ātmagrāha*), especially as advanced in the so-called *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka tradition of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti.²⁶ His acceptance of an authentic selfhood arrived at through realizing selflessness takes its cue from certain buddha nature texts such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and *Śrīmālādevīsīmaṇādasūtra* (ŚDS), as well as certain Buddhist tantric works considered below. Seen in light of this philosophical background, the task of reconciling these two stances on selfhood can be regarded as part of the Karmapa's broader philosophical project of coordinating, in rigorously dialectical fashion, the longstanding negative and affirmative orientations of Buddhist thought, discourse, and practice.²⁷

25 A similar line of inquiry was opened up by the late French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur. In response to Derek Parfit's quasi-Buddhist rejection of selfhood, he poses the question "Is not a moment of self-dispossession essential to authentic selfhood?" See Ricoeur 2000: 138.

26 The shared premise of such critiques is that the "self" is a mere nominal designation (*prajñāpti*) for what is in reality a heterogeneous assemblage of partite factors. Although nominalism is often associated with Buddhist epistemological views concerning the ontological status of universals, early Buddhist thinkers already regarded composite entities such as selves and persons as having a mere nominal existence. Along these lines, early Abhidharma traditions distinguished between substantially existent (*dravyasat*) and nominally existent (*prajñāptisat*) entities, and regarded the "person" as nothing more than a merely conventional denomination established on the basis of the five psychophysical aggregates and having a merely conventional reality. According to Mi bskyod rdo rje, as will be noted below, Madhyamaka thinkers such as Candrakīrti denied even "nominal existence" to selves and persons within the tenets of their own system.

27 For Bka' brgyud scholars in general, the goal to synthesize positive and negative philosophical orientations coincided with the task of bridging affirmative (cataphatic) and negative (apophatic) styles of traditional Buddhist discourse. In practice this required integrating positive descriptions of the nature of mind affirmed in tantras, buddha nature texts, and the spiritual songs and writings of the Buddhist *siddhas* with the Madhyamaka philosophy of radical negation outlined by Nāgārjuna and his successors. In the words of Mi bskyod rdo rje, "It is said that the instructions of Nāgārjuna were taught from a negative orientation (*bkag phyogs*), whereas those by Saraha were taught from an affirmative orientation (*sgrub phyogs*)." *Glo bur*

In his *Tonic*, a substantial part of his lengthy critique of the tantric buddha nature theory ascribed to Gö Lotsāwa's *Secrets* is devoted to repudiating its alleged identification of *tathāgatagarbha* with a subtle self or sentient being. This critique is later succinctly reprised in the Karmapa's last major work, the *Embodiments*, as part of a critical review of five rival tantric buddha nature views held by Tibetan scholars of the preceding generation, a group that notably includes Tsongkhapa and one of his two main disciples, Gyaltsab Je (Rgyal tshab rje, 1364–1432).²⁸ In the *Embodiments*, the following quotation from the *Secrets* precedes Mikyö Dor-jé's synoptic critique of Gö Lo's tantric buddha nature theory that identifies the subtle self with the causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*), a term regarded by Tibetan scholars as a tantric version of buddha nature:

In the words of the great scholar [Gö Lotsāwa] Yisang Tsepa,²⁹ “Regarding the so-called self, which is of two kinds, the coarse self and subtle self, it is necessary to posit the extraordinary causal continuum of the Mantra[yāna] on the basis of the subtle self as explained in the *Mañjuśrī* root tantra³⁰ and the *Mantrāvatāra*,³¹ which comments

gyi dri ma tha mal gyi shes par bshad pa'i nor pa spang ba, in *Mi bskyod rdo rje gsung 'bum*, vol. 15, 1074s; *klu sgrub kyis gdams pa 'di bkag phyogs nas bstan la | sa ra ha nyid kyis ni bsgrub phyogs nas btsan zhes |*. See Higgins and Draszczuk 2016: vol. 1, 32 passim, and 2019: vol. 1, 35–36.

28 These are the views of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, Rgyal tshab Dar ma rin chen, Red mda' ba Gzhon nu blos gros, Bla ma Bsod nams rgyal mtshan, and 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal. All lived during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For the translation and critical text of this passage, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 2, 312–27 and 328–38 respectively.

29 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal was also known as Yid bzang brtse pa (“the man from Yid bzang brtse”) on account of his close association with Yid bzang brtse, where he frequently took up residence. According to van der Kuijp (2007: 280), this may have been a hermitage or temple in the vicinity of Sne'u thog, the palace and administrative center of the Phag mo gru dynasty. See also Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes, *Gzhon nu dpal gyi rnam thar*, 32b_{6–7} and Mathes 2008: 144. 'Gos Lo tsā ba's connection with the Phag mo gru family is reflected in another of his sobriquets: Rtse[d] thang Lo tsā ba, i.e., “the translator of Rtse[d] thang,” the name of a monastery near Sne'u thog that had apparently become an important Phag mo gru institution by this time. Both these names reflect 'Gos Lo tsā ba's close connections with the ruling elite of the Phag mo gru dynasty. Van der Kuijp (2007: 81) adds that “'Gos Lo tsā ba was so closely connected with this family and its neighboring vassals that he often served in the capacity of what we may call their court chaplain.”

30 *Mañjuśrīmūlatantra* (MMT), Tib. 'Phags pa 'jam dpal gyi rtsa ba'i rgyud, Kangyur: D 543, 105a₁–351a₆.

31 *Mantrāvatāra* (MAT), Tib. *Gsang sngags la 'jug pa drug bcu pa*, Tengyur: D 3718, 194a₄–196b₁; A vol. 41, 528–35.

on the meaning [of this subtle self]. The coarse self is construed as nominally existent, an imputation of a self or person, the object of the mind that posits a self or person once it has objectified the collocation that comprises the psychophysical aggregates and the rest. The subtle self is construed as the *ālayavijñāna*, the mind characterized as continually immersed in all states of *saṃsāra*. This is precisely the subtle selfhood (*phra ba'i bdag nyid*) that is called “the true reality”³² or “the person who is a great man.”³³ Also, the *mahāsiddha* Luipa has described the causal continuum, which is very difficult to discover, as a person who is a spiritual practitioner. He identifies such a person as “a leader in pure ethics and learning.”³⁴ Being endowed with qualities such as these, he belongs to the definitive lineage of Great Yoga. For the *mahāpañḍita* Nāropa as well, the “jewel-like person”³⁵ is explained in terms of this subtle self (*phra ba'i bdag*). In this regard, even though the causal continuum is in this case posited on the basis of the subtle self, it is not like the self of the non-Buddhist Sāṃkhyas that is explained as having five constituents [of subtle matter].³⁶

32 Tib. *de kho na nyid*; Skt. *tattva*.

33 Tib. *skye bu chen po'i gang zag*; Skt. *mahāpuruṣa pudgala*.

34 See **Pradīpodyotanāṭikā* (PUT), 3b₂: *tshul khriṃs dag cing mkhas la sgrin*.

35 On the “jewel-like person” see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 321, n. 1348.

36 In the context of the twenty-five basic principles (*tattva*) of the Sāṃkhya system there are (1) pure consciousness (*puruṣa*), (2) primordial materiality (*mūlaprakṛti*), (3) intellect (*buddhi* or *mahat*), (4) self-grasping (*ahaṃkāra*), and (5) mind (*manas*), the latter being both a sense capacity and an action capacity. Then there are the five sense capacities (*buddhindriya*): (6) hearing (*śrotra*), (7) touching (*tvac*), (8) seeing (*cakṣus*), (9) tasting (*rasana*), and (10) smelling (*ghrāṇa*); and the five action capacities (*karmendriya*): (11) speaking (*vāc*), (12) grasping (*pāṇi*), (13) walking/motion (*pāda*), (14) excreting (*pāyu*), and (15) procreating (*upastha*). Moreover, there are the five subtle elements (*tanmātra*): (16) sound (*śabda*), (17) touch/contact (*sparśa*), (18) form (*rūpa*), (19) taste (*rasa*), and (20) smell (*gandha*), as well as the five gross elements (*mahābhūta*): (21) ether/space (*ākāśa*), (22) wind/air (*vāyu*), (23) fire (*tejas*), (24) water (*ap*), and (25) earth (*prthivī*). The first two—(1) pure consciousness (*puruṣa*), which is inherently inactive, and (2) primordial materiality (*mūlaprakṛti*), which is inherently generative—are independent existents, coexisting separate from one another outside of ordinary space and time. Factors (3) through (25) make up the subdivisions of primordial materiality, representing parts of a totality. They are generated, temporal, spatial, etc. The subtle elements are so called because they are the generic (*aviśeṣa*) material essences for all specific (*viśeṣa*) elements. They are imperceptible to ordinary persons, whereas gross elements can be perceived by ordinary persons. The five subtle elements are generated out of self-grasping (*ahaṃkāra*, literally “I-maker”) but also generate the five gross elements (*mahābhūta*). In-

Rather, in the *Kālacakratāntra* (KCT), that self is ascertained as emptiness. Hence, when such emptiness is directly realized, the voidness of [impure] mind and apprehension [of selflessness] become manifest. Therefore, not only does this not become a metaphysical view of the self (*bdag lta*), it is even the supreme antidote to it.³⁷

Mikyö Dorjé's main objection to this account is its acceptance, however qualified, of personal self, an idea roundly rejected by Buddhists of all stripes: "This doctrine that there is a personal self (*pudgalātman*) is not [found] anywhere [in Buddhism] from the Kashmiri Vaibhāṣikas up to those who proclaim the authentic Dharma of the Bhagavān Kālacakra."³⁸ The Karmapa firmly upholds the Buddhist nominalist rejection of a personal self along with its contention that a human being is simply an ever-changing flux of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and predispositions, with no central "I" to anchor them. Before continuing with his criticism of this passage, it may be worth noting that Gö Lotsāwa in his late commentary on the *Ratnagotravibhāṣavyākhyā* explicitly denies that the personalistic view (*satkāyadrṣṭi*)—i.e., the belief in a real person based on attributing a self to the five aggregates (*skandha*)—has any place in a Buddhist account of buddha nature:

tellec is generated out of primordial materiality but also generates self-grasping. See Larson, Bhattacharya 1987: 49–50.

37 For critically edited Tibetan text of the below passage ascribed to 'Gos Lo's *Secrets*, see Higgins and Draszcyk 2019: vol. 2, 333–34: *bdag ces bya ba la rags pa'i bdag dang phra ba'i bdag gnyis su 'jam dpal rtsa rgyud dang | de'i dgongs 'grel sngags la 'jug pa drug bcu pa las gsungs pa'i phra ba'i bdag gi steng nas sngags kyi rgyu rgyud thun mong min pa 'jog dgos pa yin te | rags pa'i bdag ni phung sogs kyi tshogs pa la dmigs nas bdag gam gang zag tu 'jog pa'i blo de'i yul bdag gam gang zag tu btags pa'i btags yod la bya la | phra ba'i bdag ni 'khor ba'i gnas skabs thams cad du rgyun 'jug pa'i mtshan nyid can gyi sems kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa la bya la | 'di nyid la phra ba'i bdag nyid de kho na nyid dam skyes bu chen po'i gang zag ces bya ste | grub chen la ba pas kyang | rgyu rgyud shin tu rnyed par dka' ba sgrub pa po'i gang zag la gsungs pa dang | gang zag de'i ngos 'dzin kyang || tshul khrims dag cing mkhas la sgrin || zhes sogs kyi yon tan dang ldan pas rnal 'byor chen por rigs nges pa dang | pañ chen nā ro pas kyang | rin chen lta bu'i gang zag la bshad pa'ang phra ba'i bdag 'di'i dbang du byas pa yin la | de lta na rgyu rgyud phra ba'i bdag gi steng nas bzhang pa de lta na'ang mu stegs grangs can gyi bdag yan lag lnga ldan du bshad pa dang mi mtshungs te | dus kyi 'khor lo'i rgyud' dir bdag de stong pa nyid du gtan la phab pas | de lta'i stong nyid de mngon du rtogs pa na sems rnam par dben pa'am 'dzin pa mngon du gyur pa yin pas | bdag ltar mi 'gyur bar ma zad | de'i gnyen po mchog tu 'gyur ba'i phyir zhes zer ro |.*

38 See also the *Tonic*, Higgins and Draszcyk 2019: vol. 2, 333; vol. 2, tr., 322, ed., 334, where he states, "In general, from the Vaibhāṣika, such as the Vātsīputrīya, up to the great secret Vajrayāna, there is no option of accepting a substantially existing self. And even the presence of a nominally existent [self] is not accepted above the Alikākāravāda-Cittamātra [school]. Consequently, the self has never ever been something knowable, even conventionally. So, how is it possible for this buddha nature (*buddhagarbha*) to be a self?"

“Assertions that ‘the personalistic view (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) represents the tradition of the Buddha’ serve no purpose at all and are not pursued by learned people. [I] think [such claims] are far removed from the underlying intent of the teaching that buddha qualities are not recognized as something separate from mind, but that attachment and the like *are* recognized as something separate. In this case, it may be granted that the qualities of realization, such as the [ten] strengths, are intrinsically present within the sentient beings in a subtle form.”³⁹ This statement suggests that while Gö Lotsāwa, in his later years, did accept that sentient beings possess intrinsic buddha qualities in a subtle form, he denies that this requires, or indeed justifies, recourse to a non-Buddhistic view of self.

Returning to Mikyö Dorjé’s critique of the identification of buddha nature and a subtle self, we pick up at the point where he outlines his nominalist stance:

As for what is termed “sentient beings,” since each of their substantial [constituents] are empty of nature, how could they be established as [real] particulars? In the case of not being so established, if one is [supposed] to identify something such as “this is a sentient being,” it is not found, so how could I possibly identify that? Now, from a deluded perspective, one may label a mere collection-universal—a non-existing appearance—as a “sentient being.” But apart from mistaking what is only a nominal designation for a substantially existing sentient being, it is certain that a sentient being apart from this could scarcely exist.⁴⁰

Responding to a hypothetical counter-argument that certain Buddhist schools such as the Vātsīputrīyas do in fact “propound an indescribable (*avācyatā*) self that is neither identical with nor different from the self [*qua* aggregates],” the Karmapa

39 See ‘Gos lo tsā ba’s *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba’i me long*, 239_{15–18}: ‘jig tshogs la lta ba sangs rgyas kyi gdung ngo zhes smra ba de dag la don byed pa ci yang med pa ni mkhas pas don du gnyer bya ma yin pa dang | yon tan gyi chos rnams sems las nam yang bral mi shes pa dang | ‘dod chags la sogs pa rnams bral shes pa nyid du gsungs pa’i dgongs pa las ring du gyur to snyam mo || ‘o na sems can rnams la rtogs pa’i chos stobs la sogs pa rnams phra mo’i ngo bos yod du chug mod |. See also Mathes 2008: 51 and n. 267.

40 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 142: *sems can zhes bya ba ni rdzas re ba na rang bzhin gyis stong pa nyid yin pas rang gi mtshan nyid kyis ci ltar ‘grub | ma grub na sems can zhes bya ba de ngos zung zhig zhes sogs na | ma grub pa de kho bos ngos ‘dzin ga la nus | ‘on kyang ‘khrul ngor med snang gi tshogs spyi tsam zhig la sems can du btags mod | btags pa de tsam la sems can rdzas yod du ‘khrul pa ma gtogs de las sems can zhes bya ba gzhan du grub re kan du thag chod pa na |.*

replies, “Candrakīrti declared in his commentary on the [*Madhyamaka*] *avatāra* that for those who assert personal selfhood there is no liberation, and that it would therefore be difficult to consider this doctrine correct.”⁴¹

Returning to the Karmapa’s critique, he proceeds to deflect a further rebuttal that Buddhists do at least accept a nominally existent self, as per the *Abhidharma-kośabhāṣya* (AKBh) statement “but if you admit that the person is only nominally existent, you abandon your doctrine and side with our view.”⁴² He explains that “even though the Mādhyamikas simply repeat what others say about this nominally existent self as a mere linguistic convention, they never ever posit an established personal self as a nominally existent real entity within the tenets of their own system!”⁴³ Such exchanges reflect the author’s staunch adherence to the Madhyamaka refutation of the belief in personal selfhood: “Hence, the posited phenomenon that is presented as a nominally imputed self and sentient being—a conventional linguistic designation acknowledged by others—is never ever established as an existent self in our tradition.”⁴⁴

Mikyö Dorjé now extends his general repudiation of personal selfhood to encompass all varieties of self, from coarsest to subtlest:

If even a mere[ly imputed] self (*bdag tsam*) is not posited in one’s tradition, then how is it acceptable to posit in one’s tradition many degrees of selves, differentiated in profundity from coarse to subtle, either generally in the doctrinal system of Buddhists or specifically in the doctrinal system of the Madhyamaka of the causal and resultant vehicles? Furthermore, you take great pains to proclaim that “on the side of imputation, the imputed phenomenon of a person or a self is established by valid sources of knowledge,” and you thereby define the Madhyamaka doctrinal system along these lines. But apart from copying these quotations extracted from the *Eloquent Explanation* of Tsongkhapa, the great leader in the later wave of those so-called Mādhyamikas who describe things in this way, how would it be acceptable in the context of the pure doctrinal system of the earlier wave of Madhyamaka?⁴⁵

41 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 2: 334.

42 See AKBh IX, “Refutation of Personhood,” Following La Vallée Poussin 1980, vol. 5, 233. This chapter appears to have been appended to the AKBh, which formally concludes with the commentary on the final eighth chapter of the AK.

43 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 2, 335.

44 Ibid. “Existent self” renders Tib. *bdag gi dngos po*; Skt. *ātmabhāva*.

45 Ibid.

Like many of his postclassical coreligionists, the Eighth Karmapa here adopts a standard Tibetan rhetorical strategy of framing certain later doctrinal innovations, in this case Tsongkhapa's subtle self, as untenable deviations from the doctrinal and rational norms established in the earlier, and allegedly purer (viz., more authentic), system of Madhyamaka doctrines and practices. In this regard, he shares Candrakīrti's steadfast refusal (viz., *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI.81)⁴⁶ to accept the reality of a nominally imputed self (here compared to Tsongkhapa's "coarse self"), even on the conventional level of discursive practices. As Candrakīrti states, "the way you have accepted the dependent [self] as a real entity is not accepted, even conventionally, by me. But, as a means to an end, I have said nonexistent things exist in compliance with the whims and wishes of the world."⁴⁷

Looking more closely at Gö Lotsāwa's supposedly understanding of the subtle self that is established on the conventional level as the substantially existent mind, i.e., the *ālayavijñāna*, the Karmapa pinpoints this as a Pudgalavādin position, one that accepts substantially existent persons. He further exposes the underlying Cittamātra strain of subjective idealism—the view that the mind or person is all that exists—which this viewpoint presupposes:

You accept a nominally existent coarse self and posit, conventionally, a subtle self as the substantially existent *ālayavijñāna* that is mind. In this regard, you become a proponent of substantially existent persons. But this is precisely what is refuted in the extensive canonical scriptures of the complete and perfect Buddha! That is not all: if you proclaim that mind is a person *qua* agent, then because the agent of all phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is none other than mind only and the activities of mind only, it follows that the self and person who is the agent of all of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa would also exist. But in that case, no theory has [yet] been devised that strays that far, including even the self as an inner creator of the non-Buddhist heretics (*tīrthika*)!⁴⁸

The Karmapa reserves his harshest criticism for Gö Lotsāwa's belief that, in addition to the nominally imputed coarse self and the conventionally imputed subtle self, there exists a continuous, subtle ultimate self that is said to be identical with the Cittamātra *ālayavijñāna*. This is presumed to be a self that remains when

46 For the Skt. text of MA VI.81, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 324, n. 1355.

47 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 335.

48 Ibid.

the ordinary person possessing “coarse continua of the aggregates and so on” is left behind. It is also assumed to be the referent of tantric epithets such as “jewel-like person.” Mikyö Dorjé flatly rejects Gö Lotsāwa’s supposed allegation that this conception of an ultimate self is unlike that of the non-Buddhists such as the Sāṃkhya; he even suggests that it is more misguided since at least some non-Buddhists consider the ultimate self to be composite:

Not satisfied with the mere conventionally and nominally imputed self, you further claim there is a continuous and subtle, ultimate self. Yet at the same time you assert that it is nothing like the doctrine of a personal self espoused by non-Buddhists such as the Sāṃkhya. [This] is a great insuperable lie that contradicts your own words. [How so?] Because even the Sāṃkhya and others who were [similarly] not satisfied with a merely conventionally-positing, putative personal self did not accept even the slightest personal self besides their theory of the ultimate consisting in a self possessing the five causally-efficacious constituents and the rest.⁴⁹

The author proceeds to provide reasons why the equation of the subtle self or *ālayavijñāna* with buddha nature or the tantric causal continuum is self-refuting. He takes as his focal point Gö Lotsāwa’s supposed assertion that when, according to the *Kālacakratāntra* (KCT), the self is ascertained as emptiness, this engenders not a view of self (*ātmaḍṛṣṭi*) but rather its supreme antidote. In the Karmapa’s eyes, it is difficult to see how the belief in an ultimate subtle self can be its own antidote: “[buddha nature *qua* ultimate self] could not possibly be an antidote against the view of self because that ultimately established self, which is primordial and extremely subtle and not just nominally imputed, is established as the ultimate or as the uncontrived nature of suchness [and thus] could not possibly become emptiness due to the influence of extraneous, retroactive conditions.”⁵⁰

49 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 2, 336. Mi bskyod rdo rje proceeds to reply to a possible objection that “there is a big difference [between these conceptions] because this self of the Sāṃkhyas is believed to be unproduced and permanent.” He replies, “One cannot establish such a difference by this [criterion] alone because there are also a great many heretics (*tīrthika*) who believe that this ultimate efficacious self is impermanent and conditioned.” Unfortunately, the Karma pa does not specify which non-Buddhist “heretics” maintain such beliefs. For an indication of the place of the self (“I-maker,” *ahaṃkāra*) in Sāṃkhya metaphysics, see note 37 above.

50 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 2, 336. It must be reiterated that we presently have no independent textual evidence (apart from Mi bskyod rdo rje’s quotations

Mikyö Dorjé concludes his critique with a standard nominalist argument against interpreting the epithet of the Buddha as a “great man” (*mahāpuruṣa*), widely attested in sūtras and tantras, as anything more than a collection universal (*tshogs spyi : sāmagrī-sāmānya*). As he explains, “great man” is “only a designation for the qualities of the referent of the designation (*gdags gzhi*) ‘Buddha’ endowed with [all] the major and minor marks and so on.”⁵¹ Interestingly, the author here acknowledges the presence of buddha qualities without, however, accepting that there exists a single permanent core of selfhood or personhood to which they can be said to belong. This resonates with Gö Lotsāwa’s later remark that one can maintain the view that beings possess subtle buddha qualities without recourse to a personalistic view of self. The Karmapa concludes that “if it was impossible for anyone to say there is a person who is a great man apart from each of these qualities such as the major and minor marks, then what is more illogical than postulating a self as the creator of the designated qualities (*gdags chos*) of all who are the referents of designation (*gdags gzhi*), i.e., the persons who are great men in the Mantra [scriptures].”⁵²

Having examined some of Mikyö Dorjé’s main arguments against the equation of buddha nature and selfhood in his *Embodiments*, we may turn our attention to some of the absurd consequences he attributes to this view in his earlier *Tonic*. For Mikyö Dorjé, Gö Lotsāwa’s purported identification of buddha nature with a subtle self involves an unwarranted personification of buddha nature, one that ends up confusing sources of bondage and delusion with sources of liberation and awakening.

Reviewing the author’s criticisms in this regard, it is possible to pick out two ways in which ’Go lo tsā ba is alleged to have illegitimately personified buddha nature. One is to regard buddha nature as a *patient* of phenomenal experiences such as suffering. The other is to regard it as an *agent* of liberation. The Karmapa traces both to an indefensibly literalist reading of a *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādasūtra* passage (ŚDS sec. 13) that Gö Lotsāwa had cited as scriptural support for the view that buddha nature is a subtle self (*qua* substratum consciousness) that undergoes

from *Secrets*, most notably the lengthy passage under discussion here) that ’Gos Lo tsā ba endorsed such a self or that he equated it both with buddha nature and the *ālayavijñāna*. It is also worth noting that in his later RGV commentary, buddha nature is interpreted an endless dynamic stream, and only an essence (*svabhāva*) in the specific sense of not depending on external conditions.

51 Ibid., 338.

52 Ibid.

suffering and strives for liberation:⁵³

Bhagavān, whatever be these six consciousnesses, and whatever be this [other] consciousness—Bhagavān, these seven factors are unstable, disconnected,⁵⁴ and momentary, and they do not experience suffering. ... Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha*, being inseparably connected and not momentary, does experience suffering.⁵⁵

On the face of it, the passage does indeed appear to suggest that the *tathāgatagarbha* experiences suffering, grows weary of it, and aspires to liberation from it. To better glean the import of this passage as Mikyö Dorjé understands it and the main thrust of his criticism of Gö Lotsāwa's interpretation of it, it may be helpful

53 Commenting on RGV I.40–41 (along with the ŚDS quote from the RGVV) in his *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long*, 'Gos Lo explains that the anxiety concerning suffering and the wish for liberation are mental factors from whose presence the buddha element in the form of the buddha potentials can be inferred. See 'Gos Lo tsā ba (ed. Mathes) 2003: 315–16.

54 Note that the qualifications that the seven factors of consciousness are disconnected (*ma 'brel ba*) whereas the *tathāgatagarbha* is inseparably connected (*'brel ba rnam par dbyer med pa*) are not found in the relevant passage of canonical editions of the *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanādanirdeśasūtra* (ŚDS) that I consulted (Derge, Peking, and Lhasa editions). However, the immediately preceding passage (Tib. D 92, 548₃₋₄) states that “the *tathāgatagarbha* is the ground, basis, and support of those having knowledge liberated from the chaff [of defilements] regarding what is undifferentiated and connected (*tha dad du mi gnas shing 'brel*). ... It is [also] the ground, basis, and support of external conditioned factors consisting in knowledge regarding what is disconnected and differentiated (*'brel pa ma mchis shing tha dad du gnas*) that is not liberated.”

55 This quotation is an abridged and slightly altered version of the passage found in the *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanādanirdeśasūtra* (sec. 13 in Tib. D 92, 548₅–549₁). The passage is worth quoting here in full as Mi bskyod rdo rje presupposes knowledge of it in his ensuing arguments: “Bhagavān, if there were no *tathāgatagarbha*, there would be no weariness of suffering or longing, searching, and praying for nirvāṇa. For what reason is that so? Because, Bhagavān, whatever be these six consciousnesses, and whatever be this [other] consciousness—Bhagavān, these seven factors are unstable, momentary, and do not experience suffering. It is therefore not logical that these factors [experience] weariness of suffering or the longing, searching, and praying for nirvāṇa. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha*, being the ultimate without beginning or end, and having an unborn and undying nature, experiences suffering. It is therefore appropriate that this *tathāgatagarbha* grows weary of suffering and longs, searches, and prays for nirvāṇa. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not a self, is not a sentient being, is not a life-force, is not a person. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not the domain of beings who have succumbed to personalistic false views, who have transgressed due to distorted [views], and whose minds are distracted from emptiness. Bhagavān, this *tathāgatagarbha* is the quintessence of the authentic *dharmadhātu*, the quintessence of *dharmakāya*, and the quintessence of transmudane qualities.”

to briefly consider three competing accounts of the basis of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* that our authors were confronted with in studying the major Indian classics on buddha nature. Each of these accounts proposes the existence of some invariant constituent of experience that exists throughout cyclic existence and after liberation from it.

1. *Ātmavāda* accounts posit a self that underlies the flux of sentient existence and survives transmigration. We have noted that the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* at times describes the buddha (or *dharmakāya*) in terms of this unchanging true, permanent self, albeit one alleged to be superior to the empirical or transcendental selves of non-Buddhists. This self is further equated with buddha nature.

2. *Tathāgatagarbha* accounts postulate *tathāgatagarbha* itself as the basis of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This is presented in certain early buddha nature texts, such as the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* (TGS), *Āṅgulimāliyasūtra* (AAN), and *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanādasūtra* (ŚDS). These commonly avoid equating *tathāgatagarbha* with a self, but instead construe it as the unchanging presence of awakened qualities in the constitution of sentient beings (*Āṅgulimāliyasūtra*) or the constitutive element (*dhātu*) of sentient beings that identifies them as buddhas to be (*Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*).⁵⁶ Additionally, the ŚDS identifies *tathāgatagarbha* as *dharmakāya*, which is innate in beings, and further interprets it as the basis and support for *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. It is based on this last-mentioned interpretation that the ŚDS portrays buddha nature as both the *patient* of suffering and the *agent* of liberation: “Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha*, being the ultimate without beginning or end, and having an unborn and undying nature, experiences suffering. It thus makes sense that this *tathāgatagarbha* grows weary of suffering and longs, searches, and prays for *nirvāṇa*.”⁵⁷ However, the text proceeds to deny that this *tathāgatagarbha* has any connection with worldly selfhood or personhood: “the *tathāgatagarbha* is not a self, is not a sentient being, is not a soul, is not a person. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not the domain of beings who have succumbed to personalistic views, who have transgressed due to distorted [views], and whose minds are distracted from emptiness.”⁵⁸ Intriguingly, the text presents the *tathāgatagarbha* as an unchanging substrate, one that underpins the seven ever-changing modes of consciousness but stops short of identifying this with *ālayavijñāna*. It does, however, ascribe true selfhood or the perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*) to *dharmakāya* (buddhahood), though not to buddha nature.

⁵⁶ Jones 2015: 376.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

3. Certain Yogācāra accounts posit a substratum consciousness as the basis of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa and as the repository of latent tendencies for the manifestation of both.⁵⁹ The most noteworthy scriptural precedent, as we noted above, is the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (LAS), which explicitly equates this *ālayavijñāna* with buddha nature, though it disapproves of identifying either with a self. This text cites much of the earlier Tathāgatagarbha literature including the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (MPNS) and *Śrīmālādevīsiṃhanādasūtra* (ŚDS). It follows the latter in maintaining that buddha nature is the substrate of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, but it diverges from it in identifying this nature with the substratum consciousness. Indeed, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* suggests that the doctrine of *ālayavijñāna* is better suited to describing the causes of karma and rebirth than the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, which is likely to be confused (especially by *tīrthika*) with a doctrine of self: “Mahāmati, the *tathāgatagarbha* is the cause of all good and bad [deeds], engendering all types of rebirth, assuming many guises like an actor, [but] lacking any self or what belongs to self. ... Not understanding [this], the non-Buddhist sectarians are mired in attachment to a cause.”⁶⁰ Further, in view of the propensity to confuse *tathāgatagarbha* with a self, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* has the Buddha advise Mahāmati that *tathāgatagarbha* should be understood to mean emptiness, the limit of reality, nirvāṇa, unoriginatedness, signlessness, and wishlessness.⁶¹ Finally, we are told that the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine was taught with the objective “to attract non-Buddhist sectarians who are attached to the view of self,”⁶² and elsewhere that its aim is “to dispel the fear of no-self among the ignorant.”⁶³

Now, it would appear that Gö Lotsāwa had synthesized key elements of each of these three accounts in presenting buddha nature as a subtle self, which he in turn identifies as the *ālayavijñāna*. A problem the Karmapa struggles with is that the *Śrīmālādevīsiṃhanādasūtra* (ŚDS) passage that Gö Lotsāwa allegedly cites in support of his account does indeed construe buddha nature not only as the basis (or cause) of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa but, more dubiously, as the very “experiencer of suffering”—that which “grows weary of suffering and longs, searches, and prays

59 See *Mahāyānasamgraha* (MS) I.45–48, however, where the *ālayavijñāna* is said to store latent tendencies of saṃsāra but not latent tendencies of learning (*śrutavāsanā*), which are, rather, the natural outflow of *dharmadhātu*.

60 See LAS, 220, 1.9–13: *tathāgatagarbho mahāmate kuśalākuśalahetukaḥ sarvajñanmagatikartā pravartate naṭavadgatisaṃkaṭa ātmātmīyavarjitā ... na ca tīrthyā avabudhyante kāraṇābhini-veśābhiniṣṭhāḥ* |. Our translation is adapted from Jones 2015: 300 but altered slightly for consistency.

61 LAS, 78, 6–8. See Jones 2015: 303.

62 LAS, 79, 1. See Jones 2015: 305.

63 LAS, 78, 8–12. See Jones 2015: 303–4. Translation is our own.

for nirvāṇa.” This prompts the Karmapa to contend that the passage is “not scriptural support [for the view] that buddha nature experiences suffering” but is rather an instance where “the Bhagavān discussed the *ālayavijñāna* using the term [buddha] nature in order to graciously take on board Mind Only proponents.”⁶⁴ Mikyö Dorjé here adds that the Buddha “in these cases considered the *ālayavijñāna* that experiences suffering to be the aspect of karmic ripening (*vipāka*), but he did *not* consider it to be the aspect of karmic seeds (*bīja*) and the like.”⁶⁵ The ŚDS passage is in this way legitimized as a provisional rhetorical device employed to make Tathāgatagarbha doctrine palatable to the Yogācāra, who identify the substratum consciousness, rather than the putative self, as the actual basis of all phenomena comprising saṃsāra, nirvāṇa, and the path.

What this account leaves unanswered, however, is the question of how such experiences of karmic effects such as suffering could make consciousness aspire for liberation rather than continue to languish in misery. To lead to transcendence, such experiences of worldly suffering must be somehow felt and perceived as a limitation imposed on human existence. It follows that the recognition of such a limitation as limitation must be based on a criterion that transcends the limit.⁶⁶ The criterion or standard of fulfilment is in this case buddha nature, the

64 Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 2, 153: *bcom ldan 'das kyis sems tsam pa dag rjes su bzung ba'i phyir | kun gzhi rnam shes la snying po'i sgras bstan pa zhig yod pa*.

65 Although the Eighth Karma pa concedes that the *ālayavijñāna* may be considered the experiencer of actions and results in the specific context of karmic ripening, he regarded its equation with buddha nature to be a kind of mistaken identification among certain Cittamātra followers that the Buddha nonetheless permitted as a kind of heuristic fiction. Commenting on the same *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanādanirdeśasūtra* passage in his *Embodiments*, in *Mi bskyod rdo rje gsung 'bum* vol. 21, 152₅–153₄, Mi bskyod rdo rje draws a sharp contrast between the perishable *ālayavijñāna* and the enduring buddha nature. He explains that “the *ālayavijñāna* is not perpetually continuous (*rgyun brtan pa min*) since it comes to an end once the karmic seeds aspect [ceases on] the eighth level and the karmic maturation aspect [ceases on] the ninth level.” Buddha nature, on the other hand, “is perpetually continuous since it neither waxes nor wanes from sentient beings up to buddhas” (*ibid.*, 152₆–153₂). So it is that the buddha element is said in RGVV 41₂₁ “to be of an unchangeable nature” (*gyur ba med pa'i chos nyid; avikārtavadharmatā*).

66 This is a point made by Géza von Molnár in his summary of the mysticism of Meister Eckhart (1987), 173: “All individuals are more or less keenly aware of the limitations imposed on their existence. An awareness of limitation as limitation must be based on a criterion that transcends the limit. In order to judge something inferior, a standard derived from something better must be applied. If the standard of judgment were equal to the thing to be judged, inferiority could never be predicated. The sense of lack that accompanies all human experience throughout life can only be produced against the background of a standard of fulfillment. Since nothing the world has to offer can grant the absolute gratification desired, the criterion for fulfillment must necessarily transcend the realm of empirical existence ...”

immanent “affiliation” or “potential” (two of the many senses of the term *gotra*). While one is in a state of suffering, it is on account of this potential that one tacitly senses the possibility of a state without suffering.⁶⁷ This vaguely sensed recognition that there is “more to life” triggers the yearning to find a state beyond self-imposed affliction and limitation and thus motivates the quest for liberation from *samsāra*. Here, the reasoning behind Mikyö Dorjé’s rejection of any equation of *ālayavijñāna* with *tathāgatagarbha* is that it confuses the sources and criteria of delusion with those of spiritual awakening.⁶⁸

In this regard, the Karmapa maintains that Gö Lotsāwa’s literalistic reading of the ŚDS passage is unsupported by its underlying sense and intent: “It is evident that the meaning of the quotation from the *Śrīmālā* does not support your explanation of it and that the intent of those having extensive learning you refer to also does not support that.”⁶⁹ The Karmapa is emphatic that such a personification of *tathāgatagarbha*, taken at face value, can only result in a mistaken understanding of its nature and functions:

Having copied [this] quotation, when [you] summarized its meaning as the final word [on the matter], it appears that you published the statement “given that in the phase of *samsāra* it is inadmissible that [*samsāric* phenomena could come] from [anything] other than

67 RGV I.41 (RGVV, 36, ll₈₋₉) explains that this is “because this seeing of the fault of suffering in cyclic existence and the advantage of the bliss of *nirvāṇa* occurs when there is a potential, but not for those without potential.” *bhavanirvāṇatadduḥkhasukhadoṣagunekṣaṇam | gotre sati bhavaty etad agotrāṇām na tad yataḥ^a ||*^a Johnston 1950 ed. *vidyate* (see Schmithausen 1971: 145). See also RGVV, 36, ll₁₀₋₁₂: “Whichever seeing of the fault of suffering in cyclic existence and the advantage of the bliss of *nirvāṇa* there is, it occurs when there is the potential of a virtuous person, and not without cause or condition. Why? If it [occurred] without a potential, without cause and condition, it would [occur] even for the *Icchantikas*, who have no potential for perfect *nirvāṇa*, [simply] by uprooting wrongdoings.” *yad api tat samsāre ca duḥkha-doṣadarśanam bhavati nirvāṇe ca sukhānuśamsadarśanam etad api śuklāṁśasya pudgalasya gotre sati bhavati nāhetukaṁ nāpratyayam iti |^a kiṁ kāraṇam^a yadi hi tad gotram antareṇa syād ahetukaṁ apratyayam pāpasamucchedayogena tad icchantikānām apy apari nirvāṇagotrāṇām syāt |^a kiṁ kāraṇam*, inserted according to Schmithausen 1971: 145.

68 It is worth noting that in his later RGV commentary, ‘Gos Lo tsā ba explains that his claim that the substratum consciousness is buddha nature signifies not that the former is equivalent to the latter, but rather that it is a reflection of it: “To sum up, I have explained the mind, [that is,] the *ālaya* [*vijñāna*]. I explained it, among other things, as [buddha] nature. I explained it not in the sense that it is actual buddha nature. I explained it as a reflection of [buddha] nature” (*De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba’i me long*, 178.2–3).” See Mathes 2008: 342.

69 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 147.

space-like luminosity, there [must] exist subtle sentient beings who are the basis for karma and results.” This is inadmissible because, in point of fact, your assertion that luminosity and [buddha] nature are subtle sentient beings that serve as the basis for karma and results carries the implication that nature and luminosity are subtle *selves* that serve as a basis of karma and results. If so, then since the precious lama [Tsongkhapa] Losang, who you take as your authority, is known to have postulated a self that serves as the basis of karma and results, it is in this case [clear that] you, disciple and teacher, commit the following faults one after the other.

It is inadmissible to claim that natural luminosity and buddha nature are experiencers (*myong ba po*) of karma and results, that they grow weary of saṃsāra, and that they strive for liberation from it. It is inadmissible that they are sentient beings. It is inadmissible that they are a self.⁷⁰ It is inadmissible that natural luminosity is firmly immersed in the states of saṃsāra.⁷¹

It would be a mistake, at this juncture, to regard Tsongkhapa’s admission of a “subtle self” as a concession to the heretical ātman doctrine. Rather, it should be viewed as part of the Dge lugs pa founder’s thorough critique of this very doctrine along the lines of a *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka *lokaprasiddha* position. As Thupten Jinpa explains, “Tsongkhapa understands the concept of self to be highly complex with degrees of reality (*phra rags*) that are constructed at different levels of our thought processes. In Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka dialectics, discerning these levels is crucial to an ascertainment of what exactly is being refuted.”⁷² For Tsongkhapa, the object of refutation is not the empirical or conventional self (*tha snyad kyi bdag*) of our everyday worldly transactions but the metaphysical self of the non-Buddhists, conceived in terms of intrinsic nature as a permanent, unitary, and self-sufficient entity. To put it simply, in targeting metaphysical conceptions of selfhood and entities, Tsongkhapa wishes to preserve the conventional validity of our customary perceptions of self and world. As part of his wholesale repudiation of this project, Mikyö Dorjé rejects the validity of a conventional self on the grounds that it is precisely the subtle, conventional self of the everyday world that

70 That buddha nature is *not* a self and sentient being is emphatically stated in *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanādanirdeśasūtra*, sec. 13 in Tib. D 92, 548₅–549₁, on which see above note 56.

71 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 146.

72 Jinpa 2002: 71.

forms the basis for the coarser metaphysical concepts of self espoused by proponents of ātman doctrines. In his eyes, the object of refutation must be the belief in self in all its forms, ranging from the subtlest forms of self-identification to the coarsest metaphysical postulates.

Mikyö Dorjé proceeds to outline in graphic detail a variety of absurdities that follow from equating buddha nature with a self, coarse or subtle. He begins with a general refutation of this premise: “If buddha nature were a self and sentient being that is able to be a basis for karma and results, it would absurdly follow that buddha nature doctrine gives rise to the view of self (*ātmaḍṛṣṭi*) held by certain non-Buddhist and Buddhist heretics (*tīrthika*).⁷³ And, if a sentient being were buddha nature, it would absurdly follow either that [1] [this buddha nature] would never be liberated from saṃsāra or, conversely, that [2] for the deluded state of consciousness, saṃsāra would have never ever existed, even conventionally. The evidence that sentient beings experience suffering is not acceptable as a proof from effect that buddha nature is a sentient being because it does not logically follow that these two are [related as] cause and effect.”⁷⁴

We can distill from Mikyö Dorjé’s lengthy criticism that ensues two general objections to this equation: (1) its unfounded personification of buddha nature as a *patient*-self and *agent*-self, and (2) its conflation of sources of delusion (*ālaya-vijñāna* vis-à-vis the belief in self) with sources of awakening (*tathāgatagarbha* vis-à-vis the realization of selflessness). Let us examine some of the absurd consequences he associates with each of these positions.

The view that buddha nature or natural luminosity is a subtle self that is both *patient* and *perpetrator* of suffering absurdly presupposes that it not only produces karma but is also the recipient of its effects. As Mikyö Dorjé contends, this is a view strikingly at odds with the mainstream Buddhist view that buddha nature

73 Against standard practice, Mi bskyod rdo rje in some cases extends the term *mu stegs pa* (Skt. *tīrthika*) to include Buddhists who believe in the existence of a self.

74 Mi bskyod rdo rje later returns to clarify this point: “Moreover, based on the evidence that suffering is experienced by sentient beings, forget about this [counting as an instance of] ‘correct reasoning from effect’ that sentient beings are *buddhagarbha* and *dharmadhātu* and natural luminosity. If one sets out to prove it in that way, it is nonprobative and is moreover proof of the opposite. It is like this: if one advances the proposition ‘the subject (*dharmīn*) buddha nature is a sentient being because it [i.e., buddha nature] experiences suffering,’ this is not proven. On the other hand, if one advances the proposition ‘the subject “sentient being” is buddha nature because it [i.e., the sentient being] experiences suffering,’ this is proof of the opposite because given that buddha nature is characterized as genuine bliss, if it is established in terms of brute suffering, then this rules out that [this experiencer] is buddha nature.” For the Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 147.

is unconditioned and beyond the causal nexus of karma and results. Buddha nature would on this account absurdly be associated with the truths of suffering and its source rather than with the truths of cessation and the path. This would make buddha nature something that should be relinquished rather than realized:

If the results of karmic joys and sorrows were experienced by natural luminosity and buddha nature, then this “experiencer” would have to have performed virtuous and nonvirtuous karma. More to the point, if it produced nonvirtue, then its mind stream would have been encumbered with emotionally-afflicted intentions. And in this case, the natural luminosity and *garbha* would have carried out karmic deeds and emotional afflictions. If so, one would have to accept that buddha nature and natural luminosity commit the deeds that incur immediate results [after death]⁷⁵ and the rest. Therefore, if the agent and experiencer is natural luminosity, then this so-called natural luminosity would be natural luminosity in name only. And in that case, by accepting that [buddha] nature and luminosity are encumbered with karma, emotional afflictions, and their results, it would absurdly follow that they are not beyond the truths of suffering and its source and would therefore be something to relinquish.⁷⁶

Furthermore, once buddha nature is assumed to be the patient and perpetrator of karma, it becomes difficult to comprehend how it could escape all the trials and tribulations associated with cyclic existence:

Were it possible for buddha nature and natural luminosity to experience karma and its results, it would absurdly follow that even later, when perfectly complete awakening [has occurred], karma would

75 “Deeds with immediate results” is a paraphrase of *mtshams med pa* (lit. “those without interval”), which refers to the “five immediates” (*mtshams med pa lnga; pañca anantargāhī*), i.e., five actions that make one go directly to hell without an intervening (*mtshams med pa*) period in the intermediate state (*bar do*) between rebirths. The five are patricide, matricide, murdering an arhant, causing schisms in the saṃgha, and making a tathāgata bleed with evil intent.

76 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 148. In response to this critique it could be argued that luminosity is the basic self-awareness intrinsic to every mental factor. On this understanding, luminosity accompanies (flows along with) the conditioned mind stream, yet remains, in its aspect of self-awareness, unconditioned. In this case, however, it would perhaps be more appropriate to regard luminosity as a “witness” of such experiences rather than their agent and/or patient (“experiencer”).

still be accumulated and its results experienced because there would be no fundamental difference between earlier and later. Also, were it possible for these to serve as the basis for karma and results, the fallacious consequence would follow that buddha nature is beset by heat and cold, hunger and thirst. Not only that, but countless other deleterious [effects] would transpire, such as the flesh and blood of one buddha nature becoming food for another buddha nature.⁷⁷

The Karmapa next turns his attention to the view that buddha nature is a subtle self that is an *agent* of liberation. He targets the position arrived at through his *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation that this buddha nature possesses thoughts, intentions, and feelings, a view that runs counter to the central *Ratnagotravibhāga* view that buddha nature is the state of liberation and awakening, which is beyond the sphere of conceptual thought and afflictions. In short, the properties commonly associated with buddha nature are antithetical to those associated with a self:

Natural luminosity and buddha nature do not need to strive for the goal of liberation because they are already fully liberated from the states of *saṃsāra*. [Buddha] nature and natural luminosity do not entertain thoughts of seeking liberation because they are beyond the sphere of intellectual thought. They do not need to attain liberation because they are already established as the ultimate object of refuge that is devoid of the dichotomy between cause and effect. They are not a sentient being because they are the great awakening, primordial-ly endowed with the inconceivable, inexhaustible qualities of the five spiritual embodiments (*kāyas*), which are completely beyond mind, mentation, and consciousness. They do not for a moment possess mind and mental factors, because they are devoid of the unbroken chain of latent tendencies and have, in essence, never been contaminated by the defilement of debilitating malaise.⁷⁸ They are not a sentient being because they are the embodiment of reality (*dharmakāya*) and the wisdom of the expanse of reality (*dharmadhātu*) that are fully replete with buddha qualities. They are not a sentient being because it is not possible for their mode of abiding to come within reach until

⁷⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁷⁸ On *gnas ngan len* (*daṣṭhūlyā*), see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 1, 171, n. 370.

the stream of the ten spiritual levels has culminated in complete perfection. So, you can forget about natural luminosity and the like being a self!⁷⁹

This brings us to the second drawback of identifying buddha nature with the “subtle self”: the resulting conflation of sources of delusion and awakening. Since its inception, Buddhism has viewed the belief in a self as a primary cause of bondage and viewed its elimination as a primary cause of liberation. This view provided a basic framework for later attempts to articulate the conditions necessary for (1) the genesis of this nefarious “sense of self” and its worldly entanglements (e.g., *ālayavijñāna*) and (2) the possibility of liberation from both (e.g., *tathāgatagarbha*). For Mikyö Dorjé, the sense and relevance of this soteriological framework are both undermined by equating buddha nature with a self. First, the equation absurdly implies that buddha nature possesses all the detriments associated with selfhood such as being nonexistent, the false conventional, and a groundless subject (*gzhi med kyi yul can*) of experience:

If you explain that buddha nature is what is designated as self, then there follow drawbacks such as the absurdities that this buddha nature is nonexistent, that it is the false conventional, and that it is a baseless subject [of experience]. In particular, if [buddha] nature was that which is imputed as the self of persons, there would follow errors such as the absurdities that the natural luminosity is removed by [the Path of] Seeing of all three vehicles and that natural luminosity is [only] nominally existent.⁸⁰

A further drawback of the equation is that it conflicts with the traditional views that third *dharmacakra* buddha nature discourses help one overcome the belief in self and that “in the mind streams of those who see (*lta ba po*) natural luminosity and buddha nature, thoughts of selves of phenomena and persons do not arise at all.”⁸¹ As the Karmapa further explains,

Among the sūtras, it is said that if buddha nature doctrine was taught without being preceded by selflessness, then it would be wrongly im-

79 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 148.

80 Ibid., 149.

81 Ibid.

puted as a self among those of inferior intelligence, and thus be a great detriment. It is also said that those of great intelligence do not become attached in any way to buddha nature as being self or no self, real or unreal, and so forth. But these statements would not be tenable [to you] because, on your account, the Bhagavān has taught that when those fortunate ones whose unrefined minds lack virtue analyze things carefully, buddha nature itself turns out to be the self or sentient being that is able to serve as a basis for karma and results.⁸²

The foregoing analysis of the Eighth Karmapa's criticisms against the equation of buddha nature and selfhood demonstrate just how uncompromising he could be in defending and deploying traditional Buddhist criticisms against the belief in self. We are finally prepared to consider the type of selfhood the author does endorse. For this, we need look no further than the conceptions of the perfection of selfhood outlined in Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha works such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) and *Mahāvānasūtrāṃkāra* (MSA), and of authentic or transcendent selfhood prevalent in the tantras. In the RGV, the realization of the perfection of selfhood is said to mark the culmination of understanding the absence of self. As Mikyö Dorjé remarks in his early treatise on buddha nature, *The Lamp of Fine Discernment Regarding the Tradition of the Gzhan stong Madhyamaka Proponents*,⁸³

The sense in which the ultimate buddha nature is the perfection of purity, permanence, bliss, and authentic selfhood is [as follows]. The meaning of perfection (*pha rol tu phyin pa*) is also “to arrive at the other side” (*pha rol tu son pa*)⁸⁴ of purity, permanence, joy, and authentic selfhood because it overcomes the reductive partiality of taking *athagatagarbha* to be nothing but purity, permanence, joy, and authentic selfhood. It is [thus] explained as “having a pervasive nature that transcends all partiality.” In short, ultimate purity [means] total purity because of [its] general and specific natures and [its] be-

⁸² Ibid., 151.

⁸³ *Dbu ma gzhan stong smra ba'i srol legs par phye ba'i sgron me*.

⁸⁴ Mi bskyod rdo rje here exploits the two permissible etymologies of *pāramitā*: (1) that which has gone to the other side, i.e., “transcendent” (*pāram-ita-tā*, becoming *pāramitā*), and (2) the “highest” form of some quality, i.e., “perfection” (*parama* > *pārami* > *pāramitā*). The first etymology is reflected in the Tibetan translation *pha rol tu phyin pa* (“gone to the other side”). See Jones 2015: 292, and Lopez 1988: 21.

ing immaculate.⁸⁵ Being free from self and no self is the meaning of authentic selfhood. Being free from all the tumultuous aspects of body and mind from ordinary beings up to the end of the tenth level is the meaning of bliss. Not clinging to the nefarious deceptions of the impermanent world and not solely conceptualizing the permanence of nirvāṇa is the meaning of permanence.⁸⁶

In the final analysis, then, ultimate buddha nature may be characterized as authentic selfhood in the specific sense of a transcendent subjectivity that is beyond self and no self. The Karmapa's disclosive perspective opens up the possibility of seeing the revelation of buddha nature as the rediscovery of authentic selfhood occasioned by the realization of selflessness.⁸⁷ Stated succinctly, the process of *becoming all it is in one to become* (buddha nature) is a matter of simply *being one-self* (authentic selfhood) once the habitual self-objectifications that engender the false sense of "I" and "mine" have been left behind. To the extent that we venture to describe the remaining *dharmakāya* or resultant buddha nature in terms of authentic selfhood, it must be understood in terms of a process of pre-reflective self-awareness that is free from all self-identifications, including a *patient*-self who undergoes suffering and an *agent*-self who strives for liberation.

85 Khenpo Konchok Tamphel (University of Vienna) suggested (personal communication) that the general and specific nature could refer to the twofold purity (*dag pa gnyis ldan*), i.e., the natural purity (*rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa*) referred to by the "general nature," and the purity of freedom from adventitious defilements (*glo bur gyi dri ma dag pa*) referred to as the specific nature.

86 For Tibetan text, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 2, 62.

87 See Jones 2015: 306: "Interesting is the expression *tathāgatanairātmyagarbha*, which contains what the Tibetan translation certainly implies, a qualification of the term *tathāgatagarbha* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bdag med pa*). The sense of this compound in the Sanskrit is presumably that the *tathāgatagarbha* is properly an 'absence of a self': a concise expression of the line taken by the LAS in regards to this doctrine, and its ultimate reduction to that of *nairātmya*."

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RGVV *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (Asaṅga)

See RGV (The manuscripts A and B on which Johnston's edition is based are described in Johnston 1950, vi–vii. See also Bandurski et al. 1994, 12–13).

ŚDS *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādasūtra*

D 92, *dkon brtsegs*, vol. *cha*, 255a–277b (pp. 509₂–554₇). Dpe bsdur ma, *dkon brtsegs*, vol. 44, 712–66₇.

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Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad (KN). Full title: *Sku gsum ngo sprod kyi rnam par bshad pa mdo rgyud bstan pa mtha' dag gi e vam phyag rgya*. Editions used: (1) Varanasi: Vajra Vidya Institute Library, 2013. 3 vols. (2) In *Mi bskyod rdo rje gsung 'bum*, vols. 21–22. (3) Gangtok: Rumtek Monastery, 1978. 4 vols. (in *dbu med*)

Rngog Blo Idan shes rab

Rgyud bla don bsdus. Full title: *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i don bsdus pa*. In: *Bka gdams gsung 'bum*, vol. 1, 289–367.

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The Role of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in Tāranātha's *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*

Sina Joos

Introduction¹

In the third chapter of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle of the Great Madhyamaka: an Extensive Teaching of the Supreme Vehicle* (in its short form *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*),² called *Establishing Buddha Nature, the Dharmadhātu*, Tāranātha (1575–1635) gives a detailed presentation of buddha nature, which he equates to the *dharmadhātu* and suchness. Throughout the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* texts like the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (MSA) are quoted much more often than the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV), but in the third chapter the *Ratnagotravibhāga* is quoted extensively, thus showing the significance Tāranātha ascribed to this important text for explaining buddha nature.

The chapter is divided according to the nine main characteristics of the *dharmadhātu*, the fourth of which alone is illustrated by six verses from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. These nine points are taken from the *Extraordinary Pith Instructions on Madhyamaka*,³ a short and early text of Dölpopa (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361) that he wrote at the request of his teacher Sonam Drakpa (Bsod rnam grags pa, 1273–1352). As Stearns notes, “several of these terms [i.e., *self*, *permanent*, *stable*, and so forth] are also found and some of the themes he would later develop are present in embryonic form.”⁴ Tāranātha uses the text of Dölpopa as an outline, commenting on most of its verses in the chapters of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*. Two verses from Dölpopa that enumerate the nine characteristics of the *dharmadhātu* form the basis of Tāranātha's third chapter. Almost

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Klaus-Dieter Mathes for his support and for reading drafts of my translation and also to the Tsadra Foundation for organizing the Tathāgatagarbha Symposium in Vienna. I am also indebted to Khenpo Konchok Tamphel as well as to Khenpo Nyima Gyaltsen for explaining difficult points of the commentary to me.

2 *Theg mchog shin tu rgyas pa'i dbu ma chen po rnam par nges pa*, short form *Dbu ma theg mchog*. In the 'Dzam thang edition of the collected works of Tāranātha, this text is found in volume 18, pages 19–89, with the third chapter on pages 29–35.

3 *Dbu ma'i man ngag khyad 'phags*, found in volume 2 of the 'Dzam thang edition of Dölpopa's *Collected Works*, 265–72. I would like to thank Filippo Brambilla for generously providing me with searchable documents and other material.

4 Stearns 2010: 51.

all of the characteristics are attested by direct quotes from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, only the fifth characteristic, “non-elaboration,” is attested by a quote from the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* and none from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁵

This study will examine the ways in which Tāranātha utilizes the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in his *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* to assert his understanding of buddha nature as being “empty of other” (*gzhan stong*)⁶ in contrast to the more broadly accepted Madhyamaka hermeneutics that take the ultimate as a non-affirming negation that is “empty of self” (*rang stong*)⁷ and impermanent, and also in contrast to differing “empty of other” views like that of the Third Karmapa, Śākya Chokden, and others. Before shortly turning to these zhentong positions, I would like to determine how Tāranātha defines the “ultimate.”

In the middle of the first chapter of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, Tāranātha lists synonyms and definitions that already anticipate what he will elaborate further in his third chapter:

The ultimate [is known by these synonyms:] suchness, self, true self.
The ultimate is partless, omnipresent, all-pervading.
[It is] non-self, *sugatagarbha*, highest self,
The abiding nature, great Madhyamaka, unchanging.⁸

This verse again is a quote from Dölpopa’s *Extraordinary Pith Instructions*, where it is the first verse, defining and setting the stage for what is going to come in the remainder of the text. From the commentary to the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* (in its short form the *Notes*) it can be understood that “ultimate” refers to the ultimate sphere (*don dam dbyings*) or the *dharmadhātu* (*chos dbyings*). The commentary explains that the omnipresent and all-pervading qualities of the ultimate sphere denote permanence, something we will encounter later as the first of the nine characteristics of the *dharmadhātu* by Dölpopa. The *Notes* stresses that permanence does not imply a permanence of continuity. A continuity consists of the

5 The *Ratnagotravibhāga* verses in the footnotes are given first in Sanskrit (quoted from Johnston 1950) and then in Tibetan (taken from the Derge Tengyur, D 4024, *sems tsam*, *phi*, 54b–73a). Variant readings from the different editions of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* or the Derge Tengyur are listed below. See the appendix for the sigla.

6 Phonetically spelled *zhentong*.

7 Phonetically spelled *rangtong*.

8 Tāranātha, *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, 224: *don dam de bzhin nyid bdag dam pa'i bdag || don dam cha med kun 'gro khyab pa po || bdag med bde gshegs snying po bdag gi mchog || gnas lugs bdu ma chen po 'gyur ba med ||*.

arising and ceasing of moments of time, but the ultimate sphere is beyond arising and ceasing and thus a natural permanence.

To understand how the zhentong view of Tāranātha differs from that of other exegetes, we now turn to a contemporary of Dölpopa. Nearly all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism feature scholars who in their works have adhered to a zhentong approach. The Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339) “combines mahāmudrā and Dzogchen with Asaṅga’s Yogācāra, whose strict distinction between an impure *ālayavijñāna* (basic consciousness) and the pure dharmadhātu (expanse of phenomena) served as a basis for later zhentong traditions.”⁹

Another Kagyü scholar was Gö Lotsawa Shönu Pal (’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481), whose commentary on the *Ratnagotravibhāga* has been studied in depth by Mathes.¹⁰ He endorses a positive understanding of emptiness as explained in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*,¹¹ and the Eighth Karmapa has called him a zhentongpa. However, Mathes is careful to point out the differences between Shönu Pal’s understanding of buddha nature and that of Dölpopa or the Third Karmapa, since Shönu Pal relies on the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* when he equates the *ālayavijñāna* with buddha nature, and not on the *Mahāyānasamgraha* with its strict distinction between an impure ground consciousness and the pure *dharmadhātu*.¹²

Another important proponent of zhentong before Tāranātha was the Sakya scholar Śākya Chokden (Śākya mchog ldan, 1428–1507). In his *Twenty-One Differences* (*Zab don nyer gcig pa*), Tāranātha compares the view of Dölpopa with that of Śākya Chokden, arriving at the conclusion that they differ in “that they take non-dual wisdom (*gnyis med ye shes*) to be respectively permanent and impermanent.”¹³ In this sense, Śākya Chokden is in line with the general Sautrāntika as well as Yogācāra position, that anything that exists must perform a function and is therefore impermanent. This is a hermeneutical strategy used by many zhentong proponents, especially in the Kagyü school, even though it is not always labeled as zhentong. Mathes concludes that “from the time of Dol po pa it is possible to trace, parallel to the Jonang position, another ‘g’zan grol’ or g’zan ston which distinguishes the basis of negation from the negandum in a different way,”¹⁴ being more on

9 Mathes 2008: 5.

10 Mathes 2008.

11 Ibid.: 419.

12 Ibid.: 420.

13 Mathes 2016a: 6. See also Burchardi 2007.

14 Mathes 2004: 294.

the side of a Yogācāra understanding that is based on the *Mahāyānasamgraha* and *Madhyāntavibhāga* in contrast to a *tathāgatagarbha*-based understanding.¹⁵

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé ('Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, 1813–1899) used Tā ra nā tha's *Essence of the Emptiness of Other* (*Gzhan stong snying po*) extensively in his *Treasury of Knowledge* (*Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*), quoting from it wherever it seemed fit to him and turning to Śākya Chokden when disagreeing with his view.¹⁶ When positing the basis of emptiness to be the dependent nature free of the imagined nature, he adheres to a Yogācāra-based zhentong view,¹⁷ even though his admiration for Tāranātha and his use of his works is obvious.

Interestingly, Khenpo Kangshar's (Mkhan po gang shar, 1925–ca. 1958) work on zhentong exhibits an extraordinary hermeneutic that is based on Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka and does not adduce the three-natures theory in support of zhentong.¹⁸ He combines Prāsaṅgika reasoning with zhentong, thus demonstrating an inclusivist strategy with regards to all Tibetan Buddhist schools. Furthermore, in the Nyingma school, the zhentong view has enjoyed popularity with masters like Katok Tsewang Norbu (Kaṅ thog Tshe dbang nor bu, 1698–1755) and Jamgön Mipham ('Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho, 1846–1912).

As Tāranātha based his treatise on Dölpopa's *Extraordinary Pith Instructions on Madhyamaka* and is known to have expanded and systemized Dölpopa's view, their two positions will also be compared, albeit in only a preliminary manner. In his commentary on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the *Sun's Rays of Light* (*Nyi ma'i 'od zer*),¹⁹ Dölpopa does not clearly state his zhentong view, but in his *Mountain Dharma* (*Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*) he reads his uncommon zhentong understanding into the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Therefore, I will rely more on the *Mountain Dharma*²⁰ rather than the *Sun's Rays of Light* for comparison.²¹

A commentary on the first six chapters of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* was composed by Tāranātha's disciple Yeshé Gyatso (Ye shes rgya mtsho, sixteenth/seventeenth century), who recorded notes from the direct teachings of Tāranātha.

15 As Mathes notes, this distinction between a Yogācāra and *tathāgatagarbha*-based understanding has already been made by the Nyingmapa scholar Lochen Dharma Śrī (Lo chen Dharma śrī, 1654–1717). Mathes 2016b: 115.

16 Mathes 2004: 293ff.; Kongtrul 2007.

17 Mathes 2016b: 115.

18 Mathes 2016a: 9.

19 *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos legs bshad nyi ma'i 'od zer*.

20 See Hopkins 2006.

21 See Mathes 2008: 3 and 75ff.

It is said that Tāranātha gave teachings on this text at least once each year over a period of time.²² I consider this commentary, the *Notes to the Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* (*Theg mchog zin bris*, in its short form *Notes*),²³ up to chapter six, as representing Tāranātha's direct teachings and views and will use it to clarify the root verses. My analysis of the verses is thus mainly based on the commentary. According to the preface to the 2011 edition of the Jonang Well Being Association,²⁴ the commentary to the final two chapters was composed by Shākya Gelong Lobsang Khedrub Gyatso (Shākya'i dge long Blo bzang mkhas grub rgya mtsho). The colophon of the Jo nang dpe tshogs edition and the Jo nang mdo sngags rigs pa'i dpe tshogs edition, on the other hand, state that it was composed by a certain Śākya Gelong Lobsang Chokdrub Gyatso (Śākya'i dge long Blo bzang mchog grub rgya mtsho), leading to the assumption that none other than Dzago Geshé (Dza 'go dge bshes, died 1914) can be meant here.

Tāranātha begins his third chapter by explaining *sphere* (*dbyings*). He quotes *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* 11.13 and 11.14²⁵ as an explanation for *true reality* (*yang dag pa'i mtha'*):

Reality is always free from duality, the basis of deception;
It is entirely inexpressible and free from conceptual elaborations;
It is to be known, abandoned, and purified.²⁶
It is considered as being completely free from the afflictions and is like
space, gold, and water unsoiled by defilements.²⁷

22 See the colophon to the commentary of the modern edition of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*: *Jo nang mdo sngags rigs pa'i dpe tshogs*, vol. 19, 571–72.

23 The commentary named *Notes to the Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* (*Theg mchog shin tu rgyas pa'i dbu ma chen po rnam par nges pa'i rnam bshad zin bris dbu phyogs legs pa*, short form *Theg mchog zin bris*) can be found in volume 22 of the 'Dzam thang edition of the collected works of Tāranātha.

24 'Phags yul jo nang 'gro phan lhan tshogs kyis 'grem spel byas, Dharamsala.

25 The verses of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* in Sanskrit are from Lévi 1907, the Tibetan from the Derge Tengyur (D 4020).

26 According to the Sanskrit, which has *jñeyam heyam atho viśodhyam*.

27 MSA 58_{15–18}: *tattvaṃ yat satatam dvayena rahitam bhrantes ca samñisrayaḥ sakyam naiva ca sarvathābhilapitum yac cāprapañcātmakam | jñeyam heyam atho visodhyam amalāṃ yac ca prakṛtyā matam yasyākāśasuvāṇavārisadṛśi kleśād visuddhir matā ||*. Tib.: Derge 4020, sems tsaṃ, phi, 1b–39a, 13b: *rtagtugnyis bral'khrul ba'irten gangyin dang gangzhig^a rnam kuntu || brjod par^b nus ma yin^c cing^d spros pa med pa'i bdag nyid de kho na || shes bya spangs bya rang bzhin dri med 'dod gang rnam par sbyang bya ste || de ni nam mkha' gser dang chul tar nyon mongs pa las rnam dag' dod ||*.

^a B zhig om. ^b T pa ^c [ma yin] T pa min ^d J zhing.

There is nothing else in the world apart from that.
 But since all sentient beings are confused about it,
 The existent has been utterly abandoned, but they are attached to what
 is nonexistent.
 Alas, how grave is this ignorance concerning the world!²⁸

In the *Notes to the Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, suchness (*de bzhin nyid*) and *buddha nature* (*bde gzhegs snying po*) are given as synonyms for *true reality* (*yang dag pa'i mtha'*). True reality is then defined as being unmistaken (*yang dag*) and having reached the limit (*mtha'*) of the *dharmatā*. Moreover *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* 11.13 defines the three natures: even though the mind is always and in all aspects free from the duality of subject and object, the mind is confused about it. This is the imagined nature. The basis of this confusion is the dependent nature. And the perfect nature is inexpressible and free from all conceptual elaborations. The imagined nature doesn't need to be eliminated, because it will be eliminated by itself when the dependent nature is given up. This is likened to the eye sickness of seeing fallen hair. This illusion will naturally disappear as soon as the sickness disappears. Likewise, if one applies the antidote, that is, practicing the path, the basis of delusion will be abandoned and with it the imagined nature will disappear by itself. This definition of the three natures is very much in-line with Vasubandhu's commentary to this verse.

The *Notes* continues with the meaning of *essence* (*snying po*) referring to *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* 9.37:

Even though suchness (*tathātha*) exists without distinction,
 In its purified form it is the state of a *tathāgata*.
 Therefore all beings possess the essence (*garbha*) of him
 (i.e., the *Tathāgata*).²⁹

28 MSA 58₂₅₋₂₈: *na khalu jagati tasmād vidyate kiṃcid anyaj jagad api tad aśeṣaṃ tatra saṃmūḍhabuddhi || katham ayam abhirūḍho lokamohaprakāro yad asad abhiniviṣṭaḥ sat samantād vihāya ||||*. Tib: Derge 4020, sems tsam, phi, 1b–39a, 13b: 'gro ba dag na de las gzhan pa'ang^a cung zad yod min la^b || 'gro ba ma lus pa yang de la kun tu rmongs pa'i blo || yod pa kun nas spangs te med la mngon zhen^c gang yin pa || 'jig rten rmongs pa'i rnam pa tshabs chen 'di ko ji lta bu ||. ^a T du'ang ^b T pa ^c B zhan.

29 MSA 40₁₃₋₁₄: *sarveṣāṃ aviśiṣṭāpi tathatā śuddhim āgatā | tathāgatatvaṃ tasmāc ca tadgarbhāḥ sarvadehinaḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4020, sems tsam, phi, 1b–39a, 10a: *de bzhin nyid ni thams cad la || khyad par med kyang dag gyur^a pa || de bzhin gshegs nyid de yi phyir || 'gro kun de yi snying po can ||*. ^a B the ra of gyur missing but was probably intended there.

The *Notes* explains that the *dharmadhātu*, or suchness (*tathatā*), exists in the Buddha and in sentient beings without difference. It cannot even be described with the word *similarity*, because it is without even the slightest difference, which is more than just similarity. When all adventitious defilements have been removed, this is called Tathāgata. But it is not that the Buddha's suchness is the mind stream of sentient beings. Sentient beings' mind stream is the *ālayavijñāna*, while suchness is wisdom (*ye shes*). Sentient beings' suchness is the *dharmakāya* of all the buddhas of the ten directions and three times and vice versa. The meaning of *essence* is that sentient beings possess this *tathāgatagarbha* without even the slightest difference.

This is followed by an explanation of the Sanskrit word *garbha*, showing Tāranātha's affinity for and knowledge of the Indian language. He explains it as something that is inside something outer that obscures it, well in-line with the Sanskrit meaning. But he supplements it with two more definitions: first he defines it as "the supreme wealth," therefore called the *best* or *heart* (*hrdaya*), and second as firm and stable, hence the Sanskrit word *sara*.³⁰ Therefore, *essence* bears these three meanings for Tāranātha: something hidden inside something else, something supreme and more precious than anything else, and something stable and unchanging.

After this, Tāranātha turns to the nine characteristics by quoting mainly from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. These quotes are then followed by the above-mentioned two verses from Dölpopa that enumerate the nine characteristics. Following these verses, he revisits most of the points in order to resolve any remaining uncertainties. The basic structure of this chapter is thus threefold: the quotations taken mostly from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the verses by Dölpopa that enumerate the nine characteristics of the *dharmadhātu*, and the commentarial verses³¹ by Tāranātha himself. In later passages Tāranātha continues to explain *tathāgatagarbha* and the difference between the *ālayavijñāna* and the all-ground wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*).

Verses from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* Quoted in the Third Chapter of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*

After the quotes from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and other texts, Tāranātha presents the nine characteristics through the above mentioned two verses from Dölpopa's *Extraordinary Pith Instructions on Madhyamaka*, which also mention the two modes of existence and appearance:

³⁰ Which should probably be *sāra*.

³¹ The commentarial or root verses quoted here are taken from the 'Dzam thang edition of the *Dbu ma theg mchog*; the Tibetan is given in the footnotes and variants are listed directly below them. For the sigla see the appendix.

The *dharmadhātu* is buddha nature.

It is permanent, all-pervading, the wisdom of reflexive awareness, and Possessing all aspects; these are the characteristics of positive determination.

Free from conceptual elaborations and untainted are the points of negative determination.

It is union, natural potential, and the ultimate element;

Thus we have nine characteristics of the *dharmadhātu*.

Concerning these there is the way the ultimate *dhātu* really exists
And the way it appears for the yogi.³²

Thus we have the following presentation as it is clarified in the commentary:
Characteristics of positive determination (*yongs gcod*):

- permanence (attested by RGV 1.80, 1.51)
- pervasion (RGV 1.49, 1.50)
- wakefulness (RGV 1.104cd)
- all aspects (RGV 1.84, 2.5, 1.42, 1.43, 1.44, 1.92)

Characteristics of negative determination (*rnam bcad*):

- non-elaboration (MSA 6.1)
- unmixed or untainted (RGV 1.30ab, 1.52)

32 Tāranātha, *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, 31₅₋₆: *chos dbyings de ni bde gshegs snying po ste || rtag pa kun khyab rang rig ye shes dang || rnam^a pa thams cad pa ste yongs gcod mtshan || spros dang bral zhing ma gos rnam bcad don || zung' jug rang bzhin rigs dang don dam khams || de ltar de yi mtshan nyid rnam pa dgu || 'di la don dam dbyings kyi gnas tshul dang || rnal 'byor can la ji ltar snang tshul lo ||*^a T rnam. Dölpopa, *Extraordinary Pith Instructions*, 268₁₋₂: *chos dbyings don dam bde gshegs snying po ste || rtag pa kun khyab rang rig ye shes dang || rnam pa kun ldan yongs dpyod mtshan nyid de || spros bral ma gos rnam bcad mtshan nyid de || zung' jug rang bzhin rigs dang don dam khams || de ltar de yi mtshan nyid rnam pa dgu || 'di la don dam dbyings kyi mtshan nyid dang || rnal 'byor can la snang tshul so sor yod ||*. “The ultimate *dharmadhātu* is buddha nature. It is permanent, all-pervading, the wisdom of reflexive awareness, and possessing all aspects; these are the characteristics of positive determination. Free from conceptual elaborations and untainted are the characteristics of negative determination. It is union, natural potential, and the ultimate element, thus we have nine characteristics of the *dharmadhātu*. Concerning these there is respectively the characteristic of the ultimate *dhātu* and the way it appears to the yogi.”

Three general (*thun mong*) characteristics:

- union (RGV 1.155)
- potential³³
- element (RGV 1.27, 1.96, 1.97)

With the exception of non-elaboration, all characteristics are exclusively illustrated by quotes from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, taken mostly from its first chapter.

Permanence (rtag pa)

Tāranātha starts by quoting *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.80, in which permanence, stability, peace, and immutability are equated to being without birth, death, harm, and aging:

It (i.e., the *tathāgatadhātu*) is not born, nor does it die;
It is not tormented or subject to old age,
Because it is permanent,
stable, peaceful, and unchanging.³⁴

In the *Notes*, the following syllogism is given: Because suchness is without birth, it is permanent; because it knows neither death nor destruction, it is stable; because there is no harm of disease for it, it is peaceful; because it is without aging, it is unchanging; and, vice versa, because the *dharmadhātu*, that is to say, suchness, is stable, it is without birth, and so forth. The second quote is *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.51:

Since it is accidentally endowed with flaws
And naturally endowed with qualities,
It is of unchangeable nature—
As it was before, so it is after.³⁵

³³ Treated by Tāranātha in combination with last characteristic, the element.

³⁴ Johnston 1950, RGVV 53_{15–16}: *na jāyate na mriyate bādhyate no na jīryate | sa nityatvād dhruvatvāc ca śivatvāc chāśvatatvataḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, *sems tsam, phi*, 54b–73a, 58a: *skye ba med cing 'chi ba med || gnod med rga ba med pa ste || de ni rtag dang brtan phyir dang || zhi ba'i phyir dang gyung drung phyir ||*.

³⁵ Johnston 1950, RGVV 41_{20–21}: *doṣāgantukatāyogād guṇaprakṛtiyogataḥ | yathā pūrvam tathā paścād avikāritvadharmatā ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 57a: *nyes pa glo bur dang ldan dang || yon tan rang bzhin nyid ldan phyir || ji ltar sngar bzhin phyis de bzhin || 'gyur ba med pa'i chos nyid do ||*.

The Sanskrit equivalent for *immutable* (*gyung drung*), namely *śāśvata*, is given in the commentary; the Tibetan term itself means “permanent” and “stable.” In the *Notes*, Tāranātha turns to Sanskrit in a number of instances, which demonstrates the importance he attributed to the source language.³⁶ Suchness is explained as being the same at the time of the basis as it is as at the time of the result, thus being essentially immutable. If it was endowed with faults and lacked qualities at the time of the basis, then at the time of the result the *dharmadhātu* would feature the abandonment of faults and the attainment of new qualities. However, this is not the case since the assembly of faults, in other words the defilements and so forth, are intrinsically nonexistent and never tainted the nature of the *dharmadhātu* in the first place. Thus these stains are only adventitious. Likewise the ultimate qualities such as the powers are not newly attained, but the *dharmadhātu* is naturally and spontaneously endowed with these qualities since beginningless time. The notion of having stains first and qualities later arises only because the mind is obscured by adventitious defilements. The commentary of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* states that because the *dharmadhātu* is untainted by stains since beginningless time, it is the natural, ultimate abandonment. Because it is naturally endowed with qualities, it is the natural, ultimate realization.

In the passage in which Tāranātha resolves uncertainties, he explains that if the ultimate sphere was not permanent, it would lead to the undesired consequence that it would be a substantial thing; and this would certainly be incorrect and contradict being an ultimate:

It would be mistaken [for the *dharmadhātu*] to change, because then it would be a substantial entity. Because it exists immutably, it is entirely permanent.³⁷

To summarize, the ultimate sphere is not a substantial entity and does not change. It has its own nature and is permanent. Tāranātha’s reasoning here is similar to that in his *Essence of the Emptiness of Other*, where he argues that if the ultimate sphere were a permanent continuity, it would pertain to *saṃsāra*, and the ultimate could never be tainted by adventitious stains in the first place.³⁸

36 For a detailed presentation of Tāranātha life as an Indophile, see Templeman 2009.

37 Tāranātha, *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, 316: *gyur na dngos po yin phyir rdzun pa ste || 'gyur ba med pa yod phyir shin tu rtag ||*.

38 “Also, to say that to assert permanence is the system of the non-Buddhists is nothing but refuting the [Tathāgata-]garbhasūtras. It is also illogical to assert the meaning of permanence as a permanent continuity, because also all of *saṃsāra* and subject-object duality are

When comparing these statements to Dölpopa, we can see that for the latter a form of permanence free from proliferations in meditative equipoise takes a prominent role:

Similarly, on occasions of delineations within distinguishing permanence and impermanence, thusness—the pervasive, omnipresent, partless, pristine wisdom free from singular and plural moments—is posited as permanent, everlasting, eternal, and immutable, and all phenomena that are not beyond momentariness are posited as having the attributes of impermanence, instability, non-everlastingness, and mutability. However, on occasions of conclusive profound meditative equipoise, non-proliferation of anything such as permanence, impermanence, and so forth is necessary.³⁹

This emphasis on the freedom from proliferations is important for avoiding the extreme of ontological existence.⁴⁰ Dölpopa's understanding of buddha nature as permanent, nonmomentary and primordially free from stains is in stark contrast to the understanding of Shakya Chogden, for whom the ultimate is a continuity.⁴¹

Pervasion (kun khyab)

The second characteristic of the *dharmadhātu* given by Dölpopa is pervasion. Tāranātha quotes *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.49–50 to illustrate this. In these verses, the *dharmadhātu* is equated to space, which—without being tainted—contains everything from inferior forms, such as the impure *skandhas* or hell beings, up to highest forms, such as a king's palace:

Just as space with its nonconceptual nature
Is contained in everything,

a mere permanent continuity. If a permanent continuity is a substitute for permanence, then everything conditioned would also be permanent. Thinking that anything is impermanent because it first had stains and later on is without stains, then from the perspective of the *dharmadhātu* it did not have stains in the first place and it does not become free from stains later on, because being endowed with stains and being free from stains depends on the mind-stream of the individual. The beings' condition changes, but the condition of the *dharmatā* does not change." Quoted from Burchardi 2016: 71, n. 20.

39 Quoted from Hopkins 2006: 32.

40 See Mathes 2008: 45.

41 See Burchardi 2016.

Likewise the stainless *dhātu*⁴²

That is the nature of mind is contained in all [living beings].⁴³

Saying that the *dhātu* is contained without differentiation in all beings, in impure *saṃsāra* and pure *nirvāṇa*, and in the outer vessel and the inner sentient beings is the meaning of “pervasion.” Because the natural clear light of the mind is primordially free from conceptual elaborations, the stainless *dhātu* pervades everything without distinction as to pure or impure phenomena. Whatever the *dharmadhātu* pervades, good or bad, it does not alter the *dharmadhātu*, neither in a positive nor in a negative way. In RGV 1.50, *dhātu* is further explained as follows:

Its general characteristic is that it pervades flaws,⁴⁴

Qualities,⁴⁵ and the consummate,⁴⁶

Just like space inside all objects,

be they inferior, average, or particular.⁴⁷

The *Notes* explains that the *dharmadhātu* is also contained in the ultimate result of a buddha’s form bodies, but that the nature of the *dharmadhātu* is not the same as the nature of the form bodies that appear to the disciples. Later on, Tāranātha explains that all substantial entities have parts and are therefore unable to be all-pervasive, but that the *dharmadhātu* is partless:

If it were endowed with parts, it would be impossible to be
all-pervading.

42 *Dhātu* and *tathāgatagarbha* are understood as synonyms in the RGV. See for example Brunnhölzl 2016: 332.

43 Johnston 1950, RGVV 41₇₋₈: *sarvatrānugataṃ yadvaṃ nirvikalpātmakam nabhaḥ | cittapra-kr̥tivaimalyadhātuḥ sarvatragas tathā ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 56b: *ji ltar rtog^a med bdag nyid can || nam mkha’ kun turjessongltar ||*^b *semskyirangbzhin dri med dbyings || de bzhin kun tu’ gro ba nyid ||*.
^a D *rtogs* ^b B the *shad* is missing, probably due to a printing error.

44 The commentary specifies these as sentient beings in places like the Avici hell and so forth, which are likewise pervaded by the *dharmatā*.

45 Explained in the commentary as being the qualities of clairvoyance, miraculous powers, and others that are also pervaded by the *dharmatā*.

46 According to the commentary, this refers to the *nirmāṇakāya* and other *kāyas*.

47 Johnston 1950, RGVV 41₁₀₋₁₁: *taddoṣaguṇaṇiṣṭhāsu vyāpi sāmānyalakṣaṇam | hīnamadhyaviśiṣṭeṣu vyoma rūpagateṣu iva ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 57a: *de spyi’i mtshan nyid nyes pa dang || yon tan mthar thug khyab pa ste || gzugs kyi rnam pa dman pa dang || bar ma mchog la nam mkha’ bzhin ||*.

Because it is partless, it is reasonable that it pervades everything without bias.⁴⁸

Everything endowed with form has parts that range from gross parts to subtle particles. Even consciousness (*shes pa*) has parts, albeit not spatial parts but parts of time. Nothing with parts can be all-pervading, as illustrated by the example of sand covering a heap of sand. The commentary states that only the ultimate *dhātu* can pervade everything, because it is without spatial or temporal parts. Interestingly, Dölpopa also quotes these two verses in his *Mountain Dharma* when discussing buddha nature, which pervades everything like space, so the context is similar here.⁴⁹

Wakefulness (*rig pa/rang rig ye shes*)

While the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* itself only quotes two lines of *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.104 which Tāranātha uses to demonstrate how his own tradition defines *tathāgatagarbha*, the commentary gives more detail by elaborating on three different traditions of defining *tathāgatagarbha* and positing it as an affirming (*ma yin dgag*) or non-affirming negation (*med dgag*). The first definition given in the *Notes* is the one by Ngog Lotsāwa Loden Sherab (Rngog Lo tsā ba Blo ldan shes rab, 1059–1109), who is said to identify *tathāgatagarbha* as the emptiness of a non-affirming negation, but who also takes the last wheel of teachings to be very profound and *śāstras* like the *Ratnagotravibhāga* to elucidate its intention. Concerning the status of the three wheels of teachings of the Buddha,⁵⁰ Tāranātha lists the authors and sūtras he will rely on in the beginning of the first chapter of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*:

[I will rely] on the sūtras of definitive meaning, on the lord of the tenth *bhūmi* [Maitreya], on the excellent noble being Asaṅga—who has been prophesized as the one who distinguishes between the provisional and definitive meaning—together with the crown ornament of the learned ones [Vasubandhu], and on Nāgārjuna, who was prophesized as having realized non-elaboration, and others.⁵¹

48 Tāranātha, *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*, 31₆₋₇: *cha dang bcas la kun khyab mi srid cing || cha med nye ring med pas khyab par 'thad ||*.

49 Hopkins 2006: 84.

50 See Mathes 2008: 26ff., for the RGV as a commentary on a discourse of definitive meaning (*nitārtha*).

51 Tāranātha, op. cit., 21₄₋₅: *nges don mdo^a dang sa bcu'i dbang phyug dang || drang nges 'byed par lung bstan^b 'phags pa'i mchog || thogs med zhabs te mkhas pa'i gtsug rgyan bcas || spros bral rig par*

The *Notes* questions how Ngog Lotsāwa can state that the last wheel is very profound while at the same time posit a non-affirming negation. Since a non-affirming negation was posited in the middle wheel of teachings, it is said in the *Notes*, any statement that the last wheel is profound would mean that there is no difference between these two wheels of teachings.

The second tradition presented to us is that of Sakya Paṇḍita (Sa skya Paṇḍita, 1182–1251), who takes the intentional ground of *tathāgatagarbha* to mean emptiness only, that is to say, an emptiness free from conceptual elaborations. Tāranātha finds that he does not explain his position clearly in his *Differentiating the Three Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye*).

The third tradition mentioned is that of Butön (Bu ston, 1290–1364), who takes buddha nature (*snying po*) as being the ālayavijñāna.

So how does Tāranātha's own tradition identify *garbha*? He likens *garbha* to honey, as is done in *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.104cd:

The undefiled awareness in living beings is like the honey, the afflictions are like the bees, and the Victor, who is a master in defeating them, is like this person.⁵²

With this he refutes the above-mentioned positions and demonstrates that *garbha* is an object accessible to the discriminating awareness of noble beings and the natural clear light of mind free from duality.

Tāranātha subsequently explains that the ultimate *dhātu* is established as reflexive awareness and is free from the differentiation between a perceiving subject and a perceived object:

It is established as being reflexive and awareness
Since it is without division between the subject and object of
consciousness
And since the Victor [also] knows it [this way].
Although awareness exists, neither an object of awareness nor someone
who is aware is needed.

lung bstan klu sgrub sogs ||. ^a B mdo ^b D brtan.

52 Johnston 1950, RGVV 61_{14–15}: *kuryāt kāryam anāsravam madhunibham jñānam tathā dehiṣu kleśāḥ kṣudranibhā jinaḥ puruṣavat tadghātane kovidāḥ* ||. Tib.: Derge 4024, 59a: *de bzhin lus can^a la yod zag pa med pa'i shes pa sbrang ma'i rtsi dang 'dra* || *nyon mongs sbrang ma dang 'dra de 'joms pa la mkhas pa'i rgyal ba skyes bu bzhin* ||. ^a [*de bzhin lus can*] BDJT *lus can*. This refers to a person who removes the bees from the honeycomb in order to get to the honey, as taught in lines a and b of the same verse.

For wetness [in the example of water] there is also no [separate] object of wetness or someone who is making it wet.⁵³

In the realm of consciousness, a distinction exists between subject and object. This however does not apply to self-awareness. The ultimate *dhātu* is free from the dualism of subject and object and pertains to the realm of primordial wisdom. Therefore it is posited as reflexive awareness or wakefulness.

The commentary to the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* clarifies that the argument that a blade cannot cut itself is only from the viewpoint of conventions and designations, but ultimate wakefulness requires neither an object of consciousness nor an agent. It is established as nothing but its own nature (*rang gi ngo bor grub tsaṃ*) through the cause of awareness (*rig pa'i rgyu mtshan gyis*), therefore it is posited as self-awareness (*rang rig*). The wetness and fluidity of water is given as an example in which there is neither anything that needs to be made wet nor anything wetting it. Thus water is wet by its essential nature:

It is like positing the mere nature of wetness.

Who is able to refute this mere awareness on its own?⁵⁴

That an object and agent of awareness are required and that defilements are there before clarity is only a supposition and cannot refute self-awareness, which is free from this dualistic reasoning.

At this point in the commentary Tāranātha gives the Sanskrit term for wakefulness, *so sam be ta*, corresponding to *svasaṃvid* in Sanskrit.⁵⁵

Dölpopa quotes *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.155 in his *Mountain Dharma* in order to explain reflexive awareness. Reflexive awareness is equated to primordial wisdom that is inherently existent in the *dharmadhātu* from beginningless time.⁵⁶ This supreme quality is inseparable, as mentioned in RGV 1.155.⁵⁷ Dölpopa provides synonyms for this kind of wisdom that combine the language of sūtra and tantra, like

53 Tāranātha, op. cit., 317–321: *shes dang shes bya'i dbye ba med phyir dang || rgyal bas mkhyen phyir rang dang rig par grub || rig kyang rig bya rig byed mi dgos te || gsher ba la yang gsher bya gsher byed med ||*.

54 Ibid., 321: *gsher ba'i ngo bo tsaṃ zhig 'jog pa ltar || rang nyid rig pa tsaṃ 'di^a dgag nus so ||*.
^a T du.

55 As given in the 'Dzam thang version of the commentary.

56 In contrast to the wisdom that is acquired on the path.

57 Hopkins 2006: 186ff. Tāranātha uses the same verse to explain *union*; see below in the part on *union*.

vajra, evaṃ, and *buddha nature*, whereas in this chapter Tāranātha generally uses terms from sūtra.

All Aspects (rnam pa thams cad pa)

With the fourth characteristic Tāranātha fully endorses the equation of the *tathāgatadhātu* with the *dharmakāya*, in which case it is stated to possess all buddha qualities. In this respect, *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.84 says,

Therefore this [*tathāgatadhātu*] is the *dharmakāya*, it is the Tathāgata,
The truth of the noble ones, the ultimate nirvāṇa.
This being the case, because the qualities are inseparable [from the
dhātu]
Like the sun and its rays of light,
There is no nirvāṇa apart from buddhahood.⁵⁸

As we can see here, Tāranātha compares the *dharmadhātu* to the sun, which is inseparable from its rays of light, and vice versa. Without the sun there would be no light. Likewise the *dharmadhātu* is inseparable from its ultimate qualities. Therefore there is no other nirvāṇa than the buddha's *dharmakāya*. Tāranātha continues by quoting *Ratnagotravibhāga* 2.5,⁵⁹ which explains that the clarity aspect of the mind (that is, the ultimate *dhātu*) is endowed with limitless buddha qualities that are more numerous than the grains of sand in the Ganges. Another verse demonstrating the unlimited number of qualities is *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.42–43:

[The *dhātu*] is like the great ocean,
Which is the inexhaustible source of boundless virtues.
Because its nature is endowed with inseparable qualities,

58 Johnston 1950, RGJV 55_{3–4}: *sa dharmakāyaḥ sa tathāgato yatas tad āryasatyam paramārthanirvṛtiḥ | ato na buddhatvam r̥te 'rkaraśmivād guṇāvinirbhāgatayāsti nirvṛtiḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 58a: *gang phyir de ni chos sku de ni de bzhin gshegs || de ni 'phags pa'i bden pa don dam mya ngan 'das || de phyir nyi^a dang zer bzhin yon tan dbyer med pas || sangs rgyas nyid las^b ma gtogs mya ngan 'das pa med ||*. ^a T nyid ^b T la.

59 Ibid., RGJV 80_{9–10}: *gaṅgātīraro'ṭitair buddhadharmaiḥ prabhāsvaraiḥ | sarvair akṛtakair yuktam avinirbhāgavṛtibhiḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 62b: *'od gsal byas min dbyer med par^a || 'jug^b can ganggā'i^c klung gi ni || rdul las 'das pa'i^d sangs rgyas kyi || chos rnam kun dang ldan pa nyid ||*. ^a DJ pas ^b T lus ^c J ganggā'i ^d Derge phyir. “The uncreated inseparable clear light [of the mind] is endowed with all the buddhadharmas, which are more numerous than the grains of sand of the river Ganges.”

It is like a butter lamp.⁶⁰

Because it comprises the *dhātu* (that is, the source) of *dharmakāya*,
The Victor's wisdom, and compassion,
Its similarity to the ocean is demonstrated
By being a vessel, a jewel, and water.⁶¹

The three features of the *dharmadhātu* are the *dharmakāya*, or suchness as the basis for all qualities, which is like the vessel of the ocean; the wisdom of the buddha as the assembly of all the qualities that are like jewels, which abide in the *dharmakāya* since beginningless time; and compassion, which pervades the *dharmakāya* and which is likened to the water, it is explained in the *Notes*. While for example the Third Karmapa endorses the equation of *dhātu* with *dharmakāya* as well,⁶² for Gö Lotsawa Shönu Pal the *dhātu* is only the source of the *dharmakāya* and thus the potential for everything pure and impure.⁶³

Another example is the light, the heat, and the hue of a lamp as demonstrated in *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.44.⁶⁴ The commentary elaborates that the light of the lamp is likened to the wisdom that perceives the multiplicity of things (*ji snyed pa mkhyen pa'i ye shes*), the wisdom that sees things as they are (*ji lta ba mkhyen pa'i ye shes*) to the heat that burns all stains, and the stainless reality to the hue of the butter lamp.

60 Johnston 1950, RGJV 37₁₁₋₁₂: *mahodadhir ivāmeyagūṇaratnākṣayākaraḥ | prādīpavad anirbhāgaṇayuktasvabhāvataḥ* ||. Tib.: Derge 4024, 56b: *rgya mtsho che bzhin dpag med pa'i || yon tan rin chen mi zad gnas || dbyer med yon tan dang ldan pa'i || ngo bo nyid phyir mar me bzhin* ||.

61 Ibid., RGJV 37₁₄₋₁₅: *dharmakāyajinājñānakaruṇādhātusaṃgrahāt | pātraratnāmbubhiḥsāmyam udadher asya darśitam* ||. Tib.: Derge 4024, 56b: *chos skur gyal ba'i ye shes dang || thugs rje'i kham ni^a bsdu pa'i phyir || snod dang rin chen chu yis 'di^b || rgya mtsho dang ni mtshungs par bstan* ||. ^a T ni inserted later below the line ^b D ni.

62 See Mathes 2008: 54: "To sum up, Rangjung Dorjé fully equates the *dharmakāya* with the *dharmadhātu*, which is thus inseparably endowed with buddha qualities. The latter are simply hindered by adventitious stains and unfold fully at the time of purification."

63 See *ibid.*, 194.

64 Johnston 1950, RGJV 38₁₀₋₁₁: *abhijñājnānavaimalyatathatāvyatirekataḥ | dipālakoṣṇatāvarṇa sādharmyaṃ āimalāśraye* || (padas cd have been emended according to Schmithausen 1971, 146ff. Johnston reads, *dipālakoṣṇavarṇasya sādharmyaṃ vimalāśraye*) Tib.: Derge 4024, 56b: *dri med gnas la mgon shes dang || ye shes dri med de nyid dang || rnam dbye^a med phyir mar me yi || snang dang^b dro mdog chos mtshungs can* ||. ^a J dbyer ^b T the nga of dang is inserted below the line. "Because in the stainless place, clairvoyance, wisdom, and stainlessness are inseparable from true reality, they resemble the properties of the light, heat, and hue of a butter lamp."

All these examples serve to demonstrate the inseparability of the *dharmadhātu* and its qualities. It is said in the commentary to the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* that only when all qualities of the six *pāramitās* come together—as when a painter is able to paint the whole body of a king⁶⁵—will the emptiness endowed with all supreme aspects manifest as form.

In the passage on resolving uncertainties, Tāranātha explains that the ultimate sphere is inseparable from the exalted insight of the Victor and can therefore be established as exalted wisdom.⁶⁶ It is endowed with all limitless qualities and knows all objects of knowledge.⁶⁷ Thus all aspects of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* arise in the ultimate *dhātu*, and so it is established as having all aspects.

The commentary continues with references to the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* and other such sūtras, which state that because virtuous dharmas such as the ten *pāramitās* and others are limitless in the *dharmatā*, the ultimate *dhātu* abides in the *dharmatā* in accordance with these virtues.⁶⁸ By familiarizing with these virtues the ultimate *dhātu* will manifest. It does not abide in the *dharmatā* in accordance with the nonvirtues, therefore the ultimate sphere will not manifest by familiarizing with the nonvirtues. Thus, it is said that only by purifying and completely shedding the nonvirtues will the *dharmatā* manifest.

Dölpopa takes the teaching that sentient beings are endowed with buddha qualities literally, and he quotes extensively from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*, and the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* on this topic.

65 Johnston 1950, RGVV 57_{16–17}: *lekhakā ye tadākārā dānaśīlakṣamādayaḥ | sarvākāravaroṣetā śūnyatā pratimocyate* ||. Tib.: Derge 4024, 58b: *de rnams 'dri byed gang yin pa || sbyin dang tshul khrims bzod la sogs || rnam pa kun gyi mchog ldan pa'i || stong pa nyid ni gzugs su brjod* ||. “Who are the painters of these [parts]? They are generosity, discipline, patience, and so forth. Emptiness that is endowed with all supreme aspects is said to be in this form.”

66 Tāranātha, op. cit., 32₁: *rgyal ba'i mkhyen dang dbye ba med pa'i phyir || dbyings te^a rgyal ba'i mkhyen par tshad mas grub* ||. ^a D probably reads *dbyings te* but is illegible T *de*. “Because it is not separable from the exalted insight of the Victor, the *dhātu* is established through valid cognition as the exalted insight of the Victor.”

67 Ibid., 32_{1–2}: *de phyir yon tan mtha yas ci phyir med^a || des ni shes bya mtha dag shes pa'i phyir || shes bya kun gyi don dam rnam pa 'dzin || de phyir de la 'khor 'das rnam kun 'char* ||. ^a T *mod*. “This being the case, why would it not have the limitless qualities? Therefore, because [the exalted insight] knows each and every knowable object, it holds the ultimate aspect of all knowables. So all aspects of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* manifest in it.”

68 Ibid., 32_{2–3}: *pha rol phyin kun mthun pa'i chos nyid pas || de goms^a pa las^b 'di yang mngon du 'gyur || nyon mongs kun gyi mi mthun chos nyid pas || de sbyangs dbang las 'di mngon 'gyur ba yin* ||^c. ^a B *gom* T the *s* in *goms* is written below the line ^b T *la* ^c T ||. “Because its nature accords with all *pāramitās*, by familiarizing with these it (i.e., the *dhātu*) will also manifest. Because its nature does not accord with any defilements, through the power of purifying them it (i.e., the *dhātu*) will manifest.”

Unmixed (*ma 'dres pa*) or Untainted (*ma gos pa*)

The commentary to the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* explains that while the *dharmadhātu* pervades sentient beings, it has never been tainted by stains such as their hatred or desire. Just like naturally pure water, the *dharmadhātu* is naturally untainted by the defilements, as taught in *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.30ab:

Just like a pure jewel, space, and water,
It is always naturally undefiled.⁶⁹

In the *Notes*, this is again likened to space that pervades all forms without being altered by or mixed with them. Just as space pervades the fire element without attaining the properties of being hot or burning, similarly the *dharmadhātu* is not tainted or mixed with the defilements:

Just as space that pervades everything
Is completely untainted due to being very subtle,
Likewise this [buddha nature] that abides in all sentient beings
Is completely untainted.⁷⁰

Here Tāranātha cites the same verse that Dölpopa uses for attesting that buddha nature pervades everything like space.⁷¹ Thus for Tāranātha the verse seems to emphasize the untaintedness of the all-pervading *dharmadhātu* and not the pervasiveness of the *dharmadhātu*, as it does for Dölpopa.

By stating that concepts such as “the ultimate sphere is not real” cannot taint it, because in the ultimate sphere concepts like these are primordially non-existent, the commentary explains the following root verse:

Because incorrect concepts are primordially nonexistent,
Stains are not possible in it, [so] it (i.e., the *dhātu*) is untainted.⁷²

69 Johnston 1950, RGVV 26₂₀: *sadā prakṛtyasaṃkṣiptaḥ śuddharatnāmbarāmbuvat* | Tib.: Derge 4024, 56a: *rin chen nam mkha' chu dag bzhin || rtag tu rang bzhin nyon mongs med ||*.

70 Johnston 1950, RGVV 42₆₋₇: *yathā sarvagataṃ sauksmyādākāśaṃ nopalipyate | sarvatrāvasthitaḥ sattve tathāyaṃ nopalipyate* || Tib.: Derge 4024, 57a: *ji ltar nam mkha'^a kun song ba || phra phyir nye bar gos pa med || de bzhin sems can^b thams cad la || gnas 'di nye bar gos pa med ||*.

^a T mkhar (fort) ^b B has abbreviation for *sems can*: *semn*.

71 Hopkins 2006: 85.

72 Tāranātha, op. cit., 32₃₋₄: *yang dag min^a rtog gdod nas med pa'i phyir || de la gos pa mi srid de ma gos ||*. ^a T mi.

The thought that the various faults of sentient beings will taint the *dhātu* and become mixed with it—since the *dhātu* pervades all of them—is just an adventitious illusion and untrue, the commentary says.

Union (zung 'jug)

Because the *dharmadhātu* is empty of all adventitious defilements that are separate from it and because it is not empty of the qualities that are inseparable from it, it has the characteristic of being the union of emptiness and non-emptiness. Tāranātha quotes the famous verse 1.155 from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*:

The element is empty of the adventitious [stains]
That have the characteristic of being separable,
But it is not empty of the supreme qualities
That have the characteristic of being inseparable.⁷³

As Higgins and Draszcyk note, “The Jo nang pa used this passage to support their view that buddha nature with its inseparable qualities constitutes an intrinsic essence (*rang gi ngo bo, svabhāva*).”⁷⁴ The *Notes* subsequently elaborates this by stating that the union of the two truths, which is the emptiness of the relative and the non-emptiness of the ultimate sphere, is the presentation of union. Then it goes on to question how something that is actually one can be posited as the union of two things, and explains that it is only from the perspective of the intellect that there is the presentation of two dissimilar things coming together on one basis to form a union. In reality nothing comes together to form a union, because it was never separate in the first place. While the ultimate sphere is empty of the relative, it is also not empty in the sense that it is not empty of the ultimate wisdom:

Empty and non-empty are unified.
In reality, if there is no pair (*zung*), then there is no union (*'jug*).
[The ultimate *dhātu*] is indivisible, [and yet] a presentation of it is put forth.

73 Johnston 1950, RGVV 763–4: *śūnya āgantukair dhātuḥ savinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ | aśūnyo 'nuttarair dharmair avinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 113b: *rnam dbyer bcas pa'i mtshan nyid can || glo bur dag gis khams stong gi* |^a *rnam dbyer med pa'i mtshan nyid can || bla med chos kyis stong ma yin ||*. ^a B gi||.

74 Higgins and Draszcyk 2019: vol. 1, 155–56.

It is empty of the relative and not empty of wisdom.⁷⁵

Potential (rigs) and Element (khams)

The last two characteristics are treated jointly in the third chapter of the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*. Tāranātha quotes *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.28, which is another famous verse that gives three reasons for sentient beings to possess buddha nature:

Because of being embraced and pervaded⁷⁶ by the *kāya* of the perfect
Buddha,
Because suchness is not differentiated,
And because [they] possess the potential,
All beings always have a buddha as their nature.⁷⁷

Tāranātha supplements this quote with the nine examples of the *Tathāgata-garbhāsūtra*, which are of such great importance that almost no commentator on *tathāgatagarbha* can afford to leave them out. The *Notes* further states that they are a presentation that accords with the way it is recognized by a practitioner. Tāranātha lists them in order to explain that the *dharmadhātu* abides hidden in sentient beings and covered by adventitious stains. He quotes the nine examples as they appear in *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.96–97:

Just like a buddha in a rotten lotus, honey amidst bees,
A seed in the husk, gold in dirt,
A treasure in the earth, a sprout grown from a rice grain,
A statue of the buddha in shabby cloths,

The ruler of men in an unworthy woman,
And a precious statue in the ground,

75 Tāranātha, op. cit., 32₅₋₆: *stong dang*^a *stong min zung du 'jug pa ste || don la zung med phyir na 'jug pa'ang med || rnam dbyer med la de yi rnam gzha*^b *byas || kun rdzog kyis stong ye shes kyis mi stong ||*. ^a *T dang* is inserted below the line ^b *D bzha*g.

76 See Schmithausen 1971: 142.

77 Johnston 1950, RGVV 26₅₋₆: *saṃbuddhakāyaspharaṇāt tathatāvyatibhedataḥ | gotrataś ca sadā sarve buddhagarbhāḥ śarīriṇaḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 56a: *rdzogs sangs sku ni 'phro phyir dang || de bzhin nyid dbyer med phyir dang || rigs yod phyir na lus can kun || rtag tu sangs rgyas*^a *snying po can ||*. ^a B has abbreviation for *sangs rgyas*: *sangyas*.

The element abides in sentient beings
Tainted by the stains of adventitious defilements.⁷⁸

In the *Notes*, Tāranātha again turns to Sanskrit and explains *gotra* as meaning “being very similar.” He says that the suchness of sentient beings and that of the Buddha are similar and of the same nature, therefore it is called *potential*. The Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507–1554) criticizes this view, which was also expressed by Gö Lotsawa Shönu Pal in his *Gyüsum Sangwa* (*Rgyud gsum gsang ba*, a text not available to us) while commenting the import of a passage⁷⁹ in the *Hevajratantra* commentary by the Third Karmapa. He says that the similarity of a sentient being with a buddha is only in number and formality.⁸⁰

The passage on resolving uncertainties in the *Notes* is lengthy and covers a wide range of topics. First, Tāranātha reminds us that presenting the *dhātu* as the buddha potential or the causal element is in accordance only with the way it appears to the yogi. Second, he provides us with the definition of *gotra* according to the Yogācāra system as found in Asaṅga’s *Bodhisattvabhūmi*:⁸¹

Corresponding to the intellect and understanding of the yogi,
It is the *gotra* as well as the *dhātu*.
[As a *gotra*] it is taught as endowed with the three specific
characteristics:
Existing as a beginningless continuum, being obtained as *dharmatā*,
And resembling a particular set of six āyatanas.
The essence (that is, the ultimate *dhātu*) is taught by way of nine similes.⁸²

78 Johnston 1950, RGJV 59₁₆–60₆: *buddhaḥ kupadme madhu makṣikāsu tuṣesu sārāṇy asucau suvarṇam | nidhiḥ kṣitāv alpā-phale ’ṅkurādi praklinnavastreṣu jinātma bhāvaḥ || jaghanyanārī jaṭhare nṛpatvaṃ yathā bhaven mṛtsu ca ratnabimbam | āgantukakleśamalāvṛteṣu sattveṣu tadvat sthita eṣa dhātuḥ ||*. Tib.: Derge 4024, 106b: *sangs rgyas pad ngan^a sbrang rtsi^b sbrang ma la || sbun la snying po mi gtsang nang na gser || sa la gter dang smyug sogs ’bras chung^c dang || gos hrul nang na rgyal ba’i sku dang ni || bud^d med ngan ma’i lto na mi bdag dang || sa la rin chen gzugs yod ji lta bar || glo bur nyon mongs dri mas bsgrigs pa yi || sems can rnams la^e de bzhin kham^s ’di^f gnas ||*.
^a T nang^b T rtsa’i^c BDJT phyung^d T bu^e B the la is inserted later on below the line^f BDJT de.

79 Higgins and Draszczuk 2019: vol. 1, 115.

80 Ibid.: 116.

81 See also Ruegg 1976 and D’Amato 2003.

82 Tāranātha, op. cit., 32₆₋₇: *rnal ’byor can gyi blo dang go bstun nas || de ni rigs yin de ni kham^s kyang yin || thog med dus nas brgyud de ’ongs pa dang || chos nyid kyis thob skye mched^a drug gi chos || de ’dra ba zhes khyad chos gsum ldan par || gsungs dang dpe dgus snying po bstan pa’i tshul ||*.

^a T mchod.

[These ways of teaching] are mostly in accord with the intellect of the practitioner.

There is one [buddha] nature for every sentient being.⁸³

It is a continuum⁸⁴ and it is the potential

That merely resembles the body and mind of a buddha.⁸⁵

The commentary explains that “being obtained as dharmatā” (*chos nyid kyi[s] thob pa*) refers to the fact that—as the natural clear light of the mind—buddha nature is nothing newly attained but is naturally abiding. Since this is present as an uninterrupted stream, it is a beginningless continuum (*thog ma med pa'i dus nas brgyud de 'ong ba*). The clear and conscious mind is based on a particular set of six āyatanas (*skye mched drug gi khyad par*) and resembles the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha only in its most subtle parts. In the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* this particular set is said to refer to the naturally present potential that is there from beginningless time.⁸⁶ However, the commentary does not elaborate on this, which seems to imply that Tāranātha simply wants to state the various definitions and experiences for a yogi, but since this is not the true mode of existence of buddha nature, there is no need for him to go into a deeper discussion of these terms.

Tāranātha also reminds us that there are not just two modes of existence, that is, how buddha nature appears to the yogi and how it really is, but that there are further distinctions. The commentary explains that for ordinary beings endowed with all fetters the mode of existence cannot be understood at all. Beings that have practiced devoted conduct and attained the body of *samādhi* can deduct the clarity aspect of the *dharmatā* from their experience, but they cannot directly perceive it. Noble beings on the path of learning can have a direct perception of it, but this perception is still mixed with illusions:

83 This refers to the second characteristic, attained as *dharmatā*. The commentary mentions that this essence was not newly produced but abides as its nature.

84 This refers to the first characteristic, continuously existing since beginningless time.

85 This refers to the third characteristic, the dharma of the six *āyatanas*. Tāranātha, op. cit., 327–331: *phal cher sgrub po'i blo ngor mthun tshul yin || sems can re re'i^a snying po re re dang || rgyun ldan tshul dang sangs rgyas rnam kyib^b nic^c || sku dang thugs su 'dra mtshungs tsam gyi rigs ||*. ^a B rer^b DJ kyis ^c D sangs rgyas rnam kyis ni seems to be a later insertion.

86 Wogihara, *Bodhisattvabhūmi* 32–6: *tatra prakṛtistham gotraṃ yad bodhisattvānām śaḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ | sa tādrśaḥ paramparāgato 'nādikāliko dharmatāpratīlabdhaḥ | tatra samudānītaṃ gotraṃ yat pūrvakuśalamūlābhyāsāt pratīlabdham* |. “The naturally present potential from among these [two] is the distinct set of six cognitive domains of a bodhisattva. Such a [distinct set] is obtained as the true nature of phenomena, from one [life] to the next, throughout beginningless time. The acquired potential is attained by the former practice of the roots of virtue.”

Moreover the manner in which it develops on the path and so forth
Is how it appears to the yogi. This is for the following reasons:
The modes of perception here are different for ordinary beings and for
noble ones.

These [modes of perception] are not from the perspective of true reality.⁸⁷

He continues by giving reasons for the ultimate *dhātu* being beginningless and beyond the three times. While the *dhātu* pervades the three times simultaneously, it is unrelated to them and therefore not posited as a continuum, so Tāranātha continues to refute the notion of the *dhātu* being a continuum. He provides another reason why the *dhātu* cannot be a continuum. It would entail the undesired consequence that it would consist of parts that make up those moments of time that build the continuum. If this was posited, then the *dharmadhātu* would be something illusionary and not truly established. Thus the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle* continues:

Even though this [ultimate *dhātu*] pervades the three times, it is
timeless.

Therefore it is not posited here as a continuum.

There is no continuum, because it only appears as such to the confused,
And wisdom exists as non-confusion.⁸⁸

In his commentary, Tāranātha likens this to understanding the buddha potential as a seed that grows on the path. This is not the true mode of existence and not how it naturally exists, because it would then rely on causes and conditions, which would entail the fault of being adventitious. It might appear to be evolving, but actually one can only speak of an increase inasmuch as the sky gradually appears more vast when looking at it through an increasingly larger hole in the wall. Thus the *gotra* is described as something that abides obscured in something else and therefore cannot be understood as a cause. This is as said in the *Great Madhyamaka Vehicle*:

87 Tāranātha, op. cit., 33₁₋₂: *de yang lam gyis 'phel bar^a 'gyur tshul sogs || rnal 'byor can la ji ltar snang tshul te || de la'ang skyed 'phags mthong tshul so sor yod || de dag gnas tshul dbang du byas pa min ||*. ^aD par.

88 Tāranātha, op. cit., 33₂: *'di ni dus gsum khyab kyang dus dang bral || de phyir rgyun zhes bya ba 'dir mi 'dod || rgyun ni 'krhul ngo tsam du zad phyir med || ye shes ma 'khrul ngo bor^a yod phyir ro ||*.
^a ngo bor (Skt. *rupam*) can mean that something is in the form of something.

If [the ultimate *dhātu*] existed separately, it would not be real because of being mistaken,
Like the atoms that abide in their individual places.
Also, because increment on the path is not its nature,
There would be the mistake of the Buddha's wisdom being adventitious.⁸⁹

Since [the ultimate *dhātu*] is all-pervading and the all-ground, it is the *dhātu* of all phenomena.
Since it is endowed with all aspects, it is the [*buddha*] *gotra* as well.
Dhātu means [to pervade], as in the case of the element of gold pervading gold ore.
Gotra means to be of a similar kind or identical.⁹⁰

As mentioned before, Tāranātha's third chapter continues with further explanations concerning *tathāgatagarbha*, the all-ground wisdom and the object of attainment, but since this is not directly related to or attested by the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, it goes beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

In these nine characteristics that establish buddha nature, Tāranātha endorses his full-fledged zhentong view, in which he equates buddha nature to the *dharmadhātu*. This is evident from his argument against a continuous permanence and for a complete changelessness of the *dharmadhātu*. Thus buddha nature pervades every sentient being without becoming tainted, and is primordially empty of stains but not empty of qualities. Tāranātha emphasizes this union of not being empty of qualities but being empty of the adventitious stains, which is no real union since it was never separate in the first place. He cites as many as six verses from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* for the characteristic "being endowed with all aspects", commenting on it with three verses of his own, in effect demonstrating the importance of understanding buddha nature as zhentong rather than rangtong (*rang stong*). This emphasis on the positive qualities that exist in the ultimate *dhātu* is in fact the trademark of the zhentong view. These qualities do not need to be developed,

89 Tāranātha, op. cit., 33₂₋₃: *so sor yod na 'khrul phyir de mi bden || dper na go sa tha dad gnas rdul bzhin || lam gyis^a 'phel ba'ang rang bzhin ma yin pas || sangs rgyas ye shes glo bur ba nyid skyon ||*.
^a J gyi.

90 Tāranātha, op. cit., 33₃₋₄: *kun khyab kun gzhi yin pas chos kun gyi || kham yin rnam kun pas na rigs kyang yin || kham don gser kham gser rdo la^a khyab bzhin || rigs ni 'dra dang yang na gcig pa'i don ||*. ^a [rdo la] D rdo (fort), maybe rdo sa.

since they are not understood as a seed or cause, but as fully present since beginningless time. Tāranātha stresses this complete absence of development concerning the *gotra* and the qualities and cites the nine famous examples from the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* as proof. Tāranātha explains that the two of the nine examples that suggest development or change are only in accord with the way it appears to a yogi and not with ultimate reality. In his passage on *garbha*, Tāranātha specifies that all beings, without distinction, possess this essence and that all beings are buddhas once they are purified. Thus both buddhas and sentient have the same *tathāgatagarbha* essence.

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Abbreviations used for the editions for Tāranātha's Gsung 'bum

B	Bris ma
D	'Dzam thang par ma
J	Jo nang dpe tshogs
T	Rtag brtan phun tshogs gling gi par ma

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Empty of True Existence, Yet Full of Qualities

Ngawang Tsoknyi Gyatso on Buddha Nature

Filippo Brambilla

Introduction¹

Ngawang Tsoknyi Gyatso² (Ngag dbang tshogs gnyis rgya mtsho, 1880–1940) was born in 1880 in Rabkha (Rab kha), a small cluster of houses standing at the mouth of a side valley a few kilometers northwest of Dzamthang ('Dzam thang), in southern Amdo (A mdo). In this vicinity, his own Jonang (Jo nang) tradition established the monastery of Tsangwa (Gtsang ba) as its new main seat after facing persecution at the hands of the Geluk (Dge lugs) and subsequently declining in central Tibet during the second half of the seventeenth century.³ Even though he lived a mostly circumscribed life practicing, studying, and teaching at the local hermitages and monasteries of Tashi Lhari (Bkra shis lha ri), Gephel (Dge 'phel), Tsangwa, and Raop (Rwa 'ob), which are all situated within walking distance of each other, Tsoknyi Gyatso was exposed to a broad range of philosophical views through his teachers. In fact, after spending the second half of his first twenty years practicing the Jonang path of Kālacakra extensively under the guidance

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2 For more detailed biographical information on this scholar, see Ngag dbang blo gros grags pa, *Jo nang chos 'byung zla ba'i sgron me* (henceforth referred to as JC), 482–96; *Jo nang mdo sngags rig pa'i dpe tshogs*, 1–4. See also Sheehy 2009c and Brambilla 2018: 16–20.

3 The monastery of Gtsang ba was established in 1657 when Mkhas grub Blo gros rnam rgyal (1618–1683) visited 'Dzam thang (see JC, 67–69, and Sheehy 2009b: 14–17). However, Gtsang ba became the new seat of the main Jo nang lineage holders effectively only during the early eighteenth century, after Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin rnam rgyal (1691–1738) resettled from central Tibet to 'Dzam thang in 1717 (see JC, 71–75). Later on, by the end of the eighteenth century, Gtsang ba came to be the most influential Jo nang monastic institution of southern Amdo as a result of the decline of 'Dzam thang's Chos rje monastery (established in 1425) under the rule of the sixth Chos rje Nges don bstan pa dar rgyas (1742–1776; see JC, 104–12 and 141–43). For a more detailed overview of the Jo nang resettlement from Gtsang to Amdo, see Brambilla 2021. On the decline of the Jo nang in Gtsang during the seventeenth century, see Sheehy 2009b.

of Ngawang Chözin (Ngag dbang chos 'dzin, d. 1899)⁴ and thereby consolidating his contemplative experience,⁵ Tsoknyi Gyatso dedicated the following decade to the study of Buddhist philosophy and epistemology⁶ under the renowned scholar Bamda Thupten Gelek Gyatso ('Ba' mda' Thub bstan dge legs rgya mtsho, 1844–1904)⁷ and the fourth vajra master of Tsangwa monastery Ngawang Chöjor Gyatso (Ngag dbang chos 'byor rgya mtsho, 1846–1919).⁸ Although all of Tsoknyi Gyatso's teachers were primarily holders of the Jonang tradition, both Bamda Gelek and Ngawang Chöjor had close relations with some of the most prominent Kagyü (Bka' brgyud) and Nyingma (Rnying ma) authorities of the nineteenth century, such as Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé (Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, 1813–1899), Dza Patrul (Rdza Dpal sprul, 1808–1887), and Mipham (Mi pham; 1846–1912).⁹ Moreover, Bamda Gelek in particular cultivated a strong appreciation of Geluk scholasticism to the point of seeing himself as an emanation of Jamyang Shepa ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, 1648–1721/22)¹⁰ and following the Geluk tradition of Labrang (Bla brang) in most of his commentarial works on exoteric treatises.¹¹ Notably, apart from the variegated influence of his Jonang teachers, Tsoknyi Gyatso had no significant exchange with masters of other Buddhist traditions during his formative years. Rather, his earliest direct contacts with local Nyingma adepts like Nyakla Terchen (Nyag Bla Gter chen) date only to the second decade of the twentieth century,¹² and his only encounters with Geluk authorities like the ninth Paṇchen Losang Thupten Chökyi Nyima (Paṇ chen Blo bzang thub bstan chos kyi nyi ma, 1883–1937) took place even later, between the third and the fourth decade of the same century, when Tsoknyi Gyatso was already an established teacher and scholar.¹³

4 For a biography of Ngag dbang chos 'dzin, also known as Lha bzo bla ma, see JC, 388–403.

5 See JC, 482–83.

6 See JC, 483–86.

7 For a biography of 'Ba' mda' Dge legs, see JC, 412–24. For further studies discussing this Jonang master, see Kapstein 1997: 462–67; Sheehy 2009a: 28–29; Cabezón 2015; Sheehy 2017; Brambilla 2018: 8–12; Sheehy 2019: 353; Brambilla 2021: 149–51.

8 For a biography of Ngag dbang chos 'byor rgya mtsho, see JC, 201–7.

9 See Brambilla 2021: 151–52.

10 See JC, 412.

11 See Kapstein 1997: 464.

12 See JC, 485.

13 On Tshogs gnyis rgya mtsho's encounter with A mdo dge bshes 'Jam dpal rol pa'i blo gros (1888–1936) in 1925 ca. and his meeting with the ninth Paṇ chen Bla ma in 1935, see, respectively, JC, 487 and 491.

Throughout Tsoknyi Gyatso's philosophical writings, the legacy of his teacher Bamda Gelek emerges most distinctively in terms of a genuine and tolerant appreciation of Geluk theories that brings his otherwise hierarchical inclusivist approach closer to a reconciliatory form of pluralism.¹⁴ I have sketched an overview of Tsoknyi Gyatso's approach toward Geluk positions¹⁵ and elaborated on the historical intersectarian dynamics that may have contributed to shaping his view¹⁶ in two previous publications. As the philosophical oeuvre of this lesser-known Jonang scholar still requires and deserves substantial investigation, the present paper focuses on Tsoknyi Gyatso's view on the polarizing topic of buddha nature, albeit without losing sight of the importance of his sympathetic interest in distinctive Geluk views. In particular, this article analyzes passages from two of his seminal works, *The Illuminating Light* (*Rab gsal snang ba*)¹⁷ and *Removing the Anguish of Holding to Extremes* (*Mthar 'dzin gdung 'phrog*),¹⁸ which serve as its primary sources.

Empty of True Existence, Yet Full of Qualities

If we consider the view of buddha nature that Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361)—the founder of the Jonang tradition—articulated in works such as the *Mountain Doctrine* (*Ri chos*),¹⁹ what strikes immediately is his full equation of buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*; *de gshegs snying po*) with the *dharmakāya* and emptiness, but only inasmuch as the latter is the emptiness of other, namely, of all relative phenomena, adventitious defilements, and discursive elaborations. Dölpopa's buddha nature is presented almost entirely in positive terms: it is empty of other, truly established, unconditioned in the sense of being

14 Here, I follow the definitions of inclusivism and reconciliatory approach provided respectively by Paul Hacker and Dorji Wangchuk. Hacker's inclusivism consists of an interreligious approach in which other religions or doctrinal positions are accepted as subordinate or preparatory to one's own (see Hacker 1995: 244). Wangchuk defines a reconciliatory or harmonizing approach as one in which opposing doctrinal positions are presented as compatible and equal to reconcile them (see Wangchuk 2004: 191).

15 See Brambilla 2018.

16 See Brambilla 2021.

17 The full title reads, *Kun mkhyen jo nang pa'i bzhed dgongs dbu tshad kyi gzhung spyi dang gung bsgribs te dpyod pa'i spyi don rab gsal snang ba* (henceforth referred to as RN).

18 The full title reads, *Kun mkhyen jo nang pa chen po'i dgongs pa gzhan stong dbu ma'i tshul legs par bshad pa mthar 'dzin gdung 'phrog* (henceforth referred to as TD).

19 The full title reads, *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho zhes bya ba mthar thug thun mong ma yin pa'i man ngag* (henceforth referred to as RC). For an English translation see Hopkins 2006.

beyond time, and fully endowed with ultimate buddha qualities. This view also reflects his sharp distinction between the relative and the ultimate truth, here corresponding respectively to the states of sentient beings (including even relative buddha *kāyas*) and ultimate buddha *kāyas*, as being different in that their identity is negated (*gcig pa bkag pa'i tha dad*).²⁰ According to Dölpopa, while the relative is empty of any true intrinsic essence (*rang gi ngo bo bden pas stong pa*), the ultimate is empty of anything relative but not of its true intrinsic essence. Moreover, as he also defines these two realms as the object of consciousness (the relative) and the object of nonconceptual wisdom (the ultimate), their clean separation is both ontological and epistemological.²¹

20 See Mathes 2008: 77–81.

21 These distinctions emerge quite clearly in Dol po pa's *Sun Illuminating the Two Truths* (*Bden gnyis gsal ba'i nyi ma*; henceforth referred to as BN). See, for example, the following passages. BN_A, 4.1–4.3; BN_B, 813.2–813.4; BN_C, 697.2–697.3; BN_D, 110.6–110.10: “The first [point, the actual defining characteristics of the two truths.] Being an object of consciousness and fundamentally empty of true intrinsic essence is the defining characteristic of the relative truth. And any object of the genuine wisdom of the noble ones, being fundamentally not empty of true intrinsic essence, is the defining characteristic of the ultimate truth.” *dang po ni | rnam shes kyi yul gang zhig | gshis la rang gi ngo bo bden pas stong pa ni | kun rdzob bden pa'i mtshan nyid dang | 'phags pa'i ye shes dam pa'i yul gang zhig | gshis la rang* (BN_A; BN_D: addit. *rang*) *gi ngo bo bden pas mi stong pa ni | don dam bden pa'i mtshan nyid de |*. BN_A, 4.5–4.6; BN_B, 813.6–814.1; BN_C, 697.4–697.5; BN_D, 110.14–110.17: “Since the relative does not actually exist, it is self-empty, and it appears to consciousness, but not to wisdom. And since the ultimate does actually exist, it is not empty of self but empty [of] other, and it appears to wisdom, but never to consciousness.” *kun rdzob ni | don la med pas rang stong dang | rnam shes la snang gi ye shes la mi snang ba dang | don dam ni | don la yod pas rang gis mi stong par* (BN_A; BN_D: *pa*) *gzhan stong dang | ye shes la snang gi* (BN_A; BN_D: *gis*) *rnam shes la gtan nas mi snang ba yin te |*. BN_A, 21.1–21.2; BN_B, 829.1–829.3; BN_C, 709.5–709.6; BN_D, 123.7–123.10: “Hence, it is said that the ‘strands of hair,’ the ‘moon,’ and so forth that appear to eyes with floaters do not appear to flawless eyes. And, just as the appearances of dreams do not manifest to the awake consciousness, the appearances of the relative—phenomena that are specific to sentient beings—do not to manifest to buddhas.” *zhes rab rib can gyi mig la snang ba'i skra shad dang zla gnyis sogs || mig skyon med la mi snang ba dang || rmi lam gyi snang ba rnams gnyid sad shes pa la mi snang ba ltar || sems can pa'i sgos* (BN_A; BN_D: *dgos*) *chos kun rdzob kyi snang ba rnams sangs rgyas rnams la mi snang bar gsungs so ||*. BN_A, 22.2–22.3; BN_B, 830.1–830.3; BN_C, 710.3–710.4; BN_D, 124.3–124.6: “Even though there is no appearance of phenomena that are long gone or yet to come, [a buddha] knows [them], and this is just like knowing the appearance of a dream when it has vanished, although there are no appearances. Therefore, phenomena do not appear directly to a buddha. Rather, phenomena are known implicitly, by the power of knowing [their] *dharmatā* from [its] explicit appearance.” *'das ma 'ongs dus ring po'i chos rnams mi snang yang mkhyen pa dang || rmi lam gyi snang ba sad dus snang ba med kyang shes pa bzhin no || des na sangs rgyas la chos rnams dngos su mi snang yang chos nyid dngos su snang nas mkhyen stobs kyis chos rnams shugs la mkhyen pa yin te |*.

At least in the two works examined here, the primary declared aim of Tsoknyi Gyatso is to clarify the intention of Dölpopa. In doing this, although Tsoknyi Gyatso does not intend to depart from the view of his spiritual forefather, he tends to emphasize the importance of understanding buddha nature from a negative perspective as well.

Dölpopa's view is largely based on his interpretation of Maitreya's Five Treatises (*byams chos sde lnga*)²² in line with the so-called meditative tradition (*sgom lugs*) that stemmed from Tsen Khawoché (Btsan Kha bo che, b. 1021) and that the Jonangpas identify with their sūtra lineage of the Empty of Other Madhyamaka (*gzhan stong dbu ma*).²³ Among the five works ascribed to Maitreya, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (or *Uttaratantra*) is considered as one of the primary Indian sources for the buddha nature theory. For this reason, I have started my investigation of Tsoknyi Gyatso's position on this subject by examining his *Brief Summary of the Condensed Meaning of the Uttaratantra* (*Rgyud bla'i bsdus don mdo tsaṃ bkod pa*),²⁴ which constitutes the concluding chapter of his *Removing the Anguish of Holding to Extremes*. From the very first lines of this very succinct section, Tsoknyi Gyatso clearly states that the focus of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* coincides with the intention of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma (*dharmacakra; chos 'khor*), the teaching of buddha nature:

This great commentary predominantly on the intention of the last [turning of the] wheel [of Dharma], the great treatise entitled *Uttaratantra*, [teaches that] a buddha potential is equally present in all beings. It is the luminous nature, the clear awareness, and the mind's

22 The five treatises ascribed by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to Maitreya (*byams chos sde lnga*) are the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.

23 In his *Zab mo gzhan stong dbu ma'i brgyud 'debs* (henceforth referred to as ZUG), Tāranātha lists Btsan Kha bo che (or Kha'o che) as a lineage holder of the Empty of Other Madhyamaka. See ZUG_A, 485.5–485.6; ZUG_B, 5.3; ZUG_C, 2.6–2.8: *mi pham gzhung la mkhas pa'i phul du gyur | dbu ma'i lam las chos nyid zam mo gzigs | sdom brtson dam pa btsan rigs kha'o che | dri med shes rab [la gsol ba 'debs]* |. Paraphrasing Tāranātha's supplication, Ngag dbang Blo gros Grags pa includes Btsan Kha bo che in his account of the sūtra transmission line of the Jo nang tradition. See JC, 11.17–11.18: *mi pham gzhung la mkhas shing nges don dbu ma'i lam bzang thugs su chud pa'i sdom brtson dam pa btsan rigs kha'o che dri med shes rab* |. On the meditative and the epistemological (*mtshan nyid kyi lugs*) traditions of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the latter of which was established by Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109), see van der Kuijp 1983: 41–44, and Mathes 2011/2012: 198–202.

24 See TD_A, 353.2–357.2; TD_B, 185.9–189.9; TD_C, 158.23–161.4.

emptiness of true [existence], in which all the coarseness of conceptual signs is exhausted. However, it is hidden, just like a treasure underground or a butter lamp inside a vase.²⁵

Immediately thereafter, Tsoknyi Gyatso provides a concise description of the content of each of the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma in line with the hermeneutical classification provided by the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*.²⁶ Accordingly, the three sets of the Buddha's discourses are distinct and organized based on the mental capacities of the students to whom their teachings are addressed and, therefore, on the profundity and explicitness of their content, which varies from being provisional to being definitive in meaning:

The Tathāgata alone sees that very potential just as it is and then [teaches in stages,] through his great compassion, as in the case of the cleansing of a jewel [carried out in steps by a skillful jeweler]. In accordance with the disciples' mental capacity, in the first [turning of the] wheel [of Dharma], [the Buddha] taught [topics] such as impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness while [temporarily] accepting the very appearance of form and so on just as it manifests. He [thus] taught the sole method for developing revulsion toward saṃsāra, entering the path of emancipation from saṃsāra, and, thus, reaching the state of liberation.

In the middle [turning of the] wheel [of Dharma], [the Buddha] taught those who have a mature mind the nature of suchness free

25 TD_A, 353.2–353.4; TD_B, 185.9–185.14; TD_C, 158.22–158.27: *bstan bcos chen mo rgyud bla ma zhes bya ba | gtso bor 'khor lo tha ma'i dgongs 'grel chen mo 'dis | rang bzhin 'od gsal dwangs ba'i rig pa rnam par rtog pa'i mtshan ma'i rtsub reg mtha' dag ye nas zad pa'i {sems} bden stong gi sangs rgyas kyi rigs zhig 'gro ba kun la nye ring med par yod kyang | sa 'og gi gter dang | bum nang gi mar me ltar lkog tu gyur pa yin la |*.

26 It must be noted that the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* itself never teaches buddha nature explicitly. However, the Jo nang pas interpret this text as implicitly teaching it through the explanation of the third type of absence of own-being (*niḥsvabhāvatā*; *ngo bo nyid med pa*), the ultimate absence of own-being (*paramārthanīḥsvabhāvatā*; *don dam gyi ngo bo nyid med pa*), which can be understood as a positive quality that pervades all phenomena. In fact, the combination of their own interpretation of the three natures theory (*trisvabhāva*; *rang bzhin gsum*) of Yogācāra with the doctrine of buddha nature allows the Jo nang pas to equate the ultimate absence of own-being with the unchangeable aspect of perfect nature (*pariniṣpanna*; *yongs grub*), which is empty of both the imagined (*parikalpita*; *kun brtags*) and the dependent natures (*paratantra*; *gzhan dbang*), and with the buddha element, which is empty of stains but not of ultimate qualities. See Mathes 2000: 215–20, and Mathes 2011/2012: 189–98.

from all elaborations, namely, [he taught] that all phenomena from form and so forth up to the [factors conducive] to enlightenment, being just like a rope [mistaken] for a snake, are empty of being independently established.

In the last [turning of the] wheel [of Dharma], [the Buddha] taught those who have a mature mind [to the extent that] they have ascertained the absence of [relative] signs and elaborations the incommensurable sphere, which is empty of true [existence]. [He taught] that it exists as possessing all the ultimate clear aspects from the major and minor marks up to the [ten] strengths and so forth, not having, in view of nonconceptual wisdom, the form of nothing whatsoever.²⁷

Hence, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains that, through the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha taught the four noble truths to disciples of lower capacity, without undermining the reality of relative phenomena. The second turning is then addressed to students of higher intellectual capacity and introduces them to the realization that all relative phenomena are empty of being independently existent. This emptiness is there presented as nothing more than freedom from discursive elaborations. Eventually, according to Tsoknyi Gyatso, the third turning of the wheel of Dharma teaches the most mature students that, in the context of the nonconceptual wisdom, that very emptiness of true existence is not a blank nothingness but the emptiness endowed with all the ultimate clear aspects which are, in fact, the ultimate buddha qualities. In this respect, it must be noted that such an equation between the mere negative emptiness and the fully-fledged buddha potential is to be found already in the opening lines of the *Brief Summary* quoted above.

For Tsoknyi Gyatso, the definitive meaning conveyed by the third turning of the wheel of Dharma is thus the concealed presence of a buddha potential cov-

27 TD_A, 353.4–354.2; TD_B, 185.14–189.11; TD_C, 158.27–159.12: rigs de nyid de bzhin gshegs pa nyag gcig gis ji lta ba bzhin du gzigs nas thugs rje chen pos nor bu'i sbyong bzhin du gdul bya'i sems can gyi blo'i mthu dang mthun par 'khor lo dang por | gzugs sogs kyi snang ba de nyid ji ltar snang ba sor bzhag gi steng nas mi rtag sdug bsngal stong bdag med sogs bstan nas 'khor ba la yid 'byung ste | 'khor ba las grol ba'i lam du zhugs nas thar ba'i go 'phangs bgrod pa'i thabs tsam bstan | des blo smin pa rnams la 'khor lo bar bas | gzugs sogs nas byang phyogs kyi bar gyi chos thams cad thag khra la sbrul ltar | rang gi ngos nas grub pas stong pa'i spros pa mtha' dag dang bral ba'i de bzhin nyid kyi rang bzhin du bstan | des mtshan ma'am spros pa med par thag chod pa'i blo smin pa rnams la 'khor lo tha mas bden stong gi dbyings mtshan ma'i gting mtha' med pa de yang | spros bral rnam par mi rtog pa'i ye shes la ltos na cang med kyi rnam pa can ma yin par | mtshan dpe nas stobs sogs kyi bar gyi don dam dwangs ba'i rnam pa thams cad par yod pa nyid du bstan nas | ...

ered by defilements and waiting to become manifest in the mental *continua* of all sentient beings. Nevertheless, he clearly indicates that one could also correctly describe this same referent as the nature of sentient beings' minds, that is, the emptiness of true establishment. It must be noted that, for the Gelukpas, this same absence of true existence is the very quality that applies to everything from vases and sentient beings to buddhas.²⁸ Accordingly, the Gelukpas dismiss the hermeneutics of the *Samādhirājasūtra* in favor of that of the *Akṣayamatirdeśasūtra* and the *Samādhirājasūtra*, which categorize the Buddha's discourses as provisional and definitive in meaning depending respectively on whether they teach all phenomena as empty of inherent existence or not.²⁹

Tsoknyi Gyatso concludes his summary of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* by explaining that this treatise must be considered as a perfect compendium of the entire Mahāyāna path. The seven vajra points³⁰ that constitute the basic structure of the text, he explains, are presented in ascending order, where the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha) are the goal to be attained, the buddha element is the cause for their realization, and enlightenment, buddha qualities, and buddha activities are the conditions for such realization. Notably, as the section is just a very condensed summary, it contains almost no quotations of scriptural sources. Only a brief quotation from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* clarifies the correlation between the Three Jewels,³¹ and another one from Nāgārju-

28 See Duckworth 2010: 100.

29 On the Dge lugs hermeneutical approach as propounded, in particular, by Rgyal tshab Dar mar chen (1364–1432), see Wangchuk 2017: 103–4.

30 See RGV I.1: “The Buddha, the Dharma, the Noble Community, the element, the enlightenment, the qualities, and, finally, the buddha activities: the body of the entire treatise, in brief, [consists of] these seven vajra points.” Tib. Nakamura 1967 ed.: 2.2–2.3: | *sangs rgyas chos tshogs khamdang byang chub dang* || *yon tan sangs rgyas phrin las tha ma ste* || *bstan bcos kun gyi lus ni mdor bsdu na* || *rdo rje yi ni gnas bdun 'di dag go* |. Skt. Johnston 1950 ed.: 1₂₋₃: *buddhaś ca dharmaś ca gaṇaś ca dhātur bodhir guṇāḥ karma ca bauddham antyam* | *kṛtsnasya śāstrasya śarīram etat samāsato vajrapadāni sapta* |.

31 RGV I.3.a is quoted at TD_A, 355.3–355.4; TD_B, 187.12–187.13; TD_C, 160.2–160.3. See RGV I.3: “From the Buddha comes the Dharma. From the Dharma comes the Noble Community. Within [the setting of] the Community, [buddha] nature leads to the attainment of the [buddha] element of wisdom. The attainment of such wisdom is the supreme enlightenment, endowed with qualities that benefit all sentient beings, such as the [ten] strengths.” Tib. Nakamura 1967 ed.: 11.2–11.4: | *sangs rgyas las chos chos las 'phags pa'i tshogs* || *tshogs las snying po ye shes khamd thob mthar* || *ye shes de thob byang chub mchog stobs sogs* || *sems can kun don byed chos rnamdad ldan* |. Skt. Johnston 1950 ed.: 7.1–7.4: *buddhād dharmo dharmataś cāryasaṃghaḥ saṃghe garbho jñānadhātvāptiniṣṭhaḥ* | *tajjñānāptiś cāgrabodhir balādyair dharmair yuktā sarvasattvārthakṛdbhiḥ* |.

na's *Dharmadhātustava* establishes that the buddha element must be understood as the cause for one's realization of buddhahood.³²

To better comprehend Tsoknyi Gyatso's view of buddha nature, it is necessary to analyze another important work of his, *The Illuminating Light*. Just like Dölpopa, Tsoknyi Gyatso does not hesitate to assert that all relative phenomena are empty of being truly, inherently, or independently established. However, in the fourteenth chapter of *The Illuminating Light*, which Tsoknyi Gyatso dedicates to the analysis of buddha nature and its qualities, he deviates from Dölpopa's distinctively clear-cut presentation. He states that that emptiness, inasmuch as it is the nature of sentient beings' minds, is equivalent to their buddha nature and, as such, is immanent in their mental continua. Moreover, Tsoknyi Gyatso propounds the idea that, if one accepts that the equation between the mind's emptiness of true existence and the buddha potential, cause, or nature establishes the potential's presence in the mental continua of sentient beings, then, on a purely conceptual level, one can also conceive of this same causal element in terms of the actualized result and impute that it is ever-present as devoid of any obscurations and endowed with any qualities. One could still argue against this theory by concluding that, while the potential *qua* the mind's emptiness of inherent existence can coexist with adventitious stains, the actualized result cannot. Nevertheless, Tsoknyi Gyatso ignores this line of reasoning and pursues his working theory inasmuch as its imputational character is acknowledged. To clarify this point, he explains that, on a gross and naive conceptual level, one can similarly conceive that a sprout (the result) coexists with its seed (the cause). However, besides overlooking the physical embeddedness of a causal nexus in space and time, a so conceived coexistence will be easily refuted by any valid cognition, like the eye consciousness, which will find no sprout at the time of the seed:

32 DhS 11 is quoted at TD_A, 355₅₋₆; TD_B, 187.17–187.18; TD_C, 160.6–160.8. See DhS 11: “If the potential/element exists, by taking action, one will see the purest gold. Without the potential/element, even if one takes action, one will end up producing useless exhaustion (*nyon mongs*) only.” Tib. Liu 2015 ed.: 31.19–31.22: *kham s yod na ni las byas pas || sa le sbram dag mthong bar 'gyur || kham med par* (TD_A, TD_B, TD_C: *na*) *ni las byas na'ang* (TD_A, TD_B, TD_C: *kyang*) || *nyon mongs* <‘ba’ zhig skyed bar> (TD_A, TD_B, TD_C: *ngal ba tsam du*) *zad* |. Skt. Liu 2015 ed.: 9.21–10.3: *gotre ca sati vyāyāmo jātārūpanidarśanāt | gotre asati vyāyāmaḥ śramaḥ kevalam iṣyate* |. As kindly pointed out to me by Professor Klaus-Dieter Mathes, a translation based on the Sanskrit would rather read, “Because one sees refined gold [through] exertion in the presence of a potential/element, in its absence, exertion is considered to be useless exhaustion only.”

It may be concluded that a sprout [pre]exists within the nature of a seed—the cause—because when one thinks that “that seed is the cause of the sprout,” the sprout appears to [one’s] conceptual [mind] as [pre]existent on the basis of the seed. If so, it is not entailed for the following reason. On the conceptual level, it appears that the sprout [pre]exists on the basis of the seed. However, since this does not appear to direct perceptual valid cognitions such as eye consciousness, the assertion, under the dominance of the conceptual [mind], that the sprout [pre]exists on the basis of the seed will not be able to withstand invalidation.³³

On the other hand, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains, if one explicitly presents it as it is, namely, as a mere conceptual imputation, the proposition of the coexistence of a sprout with its seed is acceptable:

It may be concluded that, on the conceptual level, the appearing aspect of an appearing sprout or, [in other words,] the imputed aspect of a conceptually imputed sprout, [pre]exists on the basis of a seed because, for the conceptual [mind] that apprehends the seed as being the cause of the sprout, the sprout appears to [pre]exist within the nature of the seed. If so, this is accepted because, on the conceptual level, there is the [imputed] appearance of a sprout [that preexists] on the basis of the seed.³⁴

Then, once the equation of the emptiness of true existence with buddha nature is established, an imputational approach will allow one to conceive of a fully-fledged buddha nature as preexisting within the mental continua of sentient beings. Thereby, one will obtain a conceptual understanding of buddha nature being present as a synonym of emptiness. Still, according to Tsoknyi Gyatso, the mind’s emptiness of true existence is also the actual, real buddha nature because, unlike in the case

33 RN_A, 157.6–158.1; RN_B, 270.13–270.17; RN_C, 209.6–209.10: *rgyu sa bon gyi rang bzhin du myu gu yod par thal | sa bon de myu gu’i rgyu’o snyam pa’i tshe | rtog pa la sa bon gyi steng du myu gu yod par ’char ba’i phyir na | ma khyab ste | sa bon gyi steng du myu gu yod par rtog ngor shar yang | mig shes sogs mngon sum tshad ma la mi snang bas rtog (RN_B: rtogs) pa dbang btsan par byas nas | sa bon gyi steng du myu gu yod par khas len pa la gnod pa mi bzad pa ’babs pa’i phyir |*.

34 RN_A, 158.1–158.2; RN_B, 271.1–271.4; RN_C, 209.10–209.13: *sa bon gyi steng du rtog ngor myu gu snang ba’i snang cha’am rtog pas myu gu btags pa’i btags cha yod par thal | sa bon myu gu’i rgyu yin par ’dzin pa’i rtog pa la sa bon gyi rang bzhin du myu gu yod par snang ba’i phyir na | ’dod de | sa bon gyi steng du myu gu rtog ngor shar ba yod pa’i phyir |*.

of the seed and the sprout, this emptiness *qua* buddha nature is eventually validly cognized, together with all its qualities, in the direct realization of the meditative equipoise:

Similarly, although the [mental] continua of sentient beings possess a part in which the [pre]existing Buddha shines forth [already] on the conceptual level, this in itself does not [lend support to] positing an ultimate buddha [pre]existing in the [mental] continua of sentient beings, for the following reasons. This empti[ness] of true [existence of] sentient beings' minds is the object designated by the terms *buddha potential*, *cause of buddhahood*, and *buddha nature*. Therefore, not only does the aspect of the buddhahood [endowed with qualities] such as the [ten] strengths emerge for the conceptual [mind] that apprehends that kind of empti[ness] of true [existence of] the mind as the buddha potential and as the aspect of buddhahood, but that mind's empti[ness] of true [existence] is also the [real] potential and cause of buddhahood. Or, [in other words,] when that empti[ness] of true [existence]—the cause and potential of buddhahood—is directly realized by the equipoise of the noble ones of Mahāyāna, that empti[ness] of true [existence]—the potential—does not appear as aspects such as the conventional, relative [ten] strengths, but rather as the aspects of buddha qualities such as the [ten] strengths that are like magical reflections, lack the subtlest elaborations, and pertain to the ultimate *dharmatā*. Accordingly, it was merely theorized that the buddhahood [that possesses qualities] such as the ultimate [ten] strengths [pre]exists in the [mental] continua of sentient beings based on the fact that, as the object of the general mind that thinks in terms of the buddha potential being the mind's empti[ness] of true [existence], that potential merely appears in every respect as the aspects of [qualities] such as the [ten] strengths, which are the essence of the ultimate *dharmatā*.³⁵

35 RN_A, 158.2–158.7; RN_B, 271.4–272.1; RN_C, 209.13–209.26: *de bzhin du sems can gyi rgyud la rtog ngor sangs rgyas yod par shar ba'i cha yod kyang | de tsam gyi sgo nas sems can gyi rgyud la don dam pa'i sangs rgyas yod par 'jog pa ma yin te | sems can gyi sems bden stong de ni sangs rgyas kyi rigs dang | sangs rgyas kyi rgyu (RN_B: rgyud) dang | sangs rgyas kyi rang bzhin gyi sgra 'jug pa'i yul yin pas | de 'dra'i sems bden stong de sangs rgyas kyi rigs dang | sangs rgyas kyi cha yin par 'dzin pa'i rtog pa la stobs sogs sangs rgyas kyi rnam pa 'char ba ma zad | sems bden stong de sangs rgyas kyi rigs dang rgyu yin pa'am sangs rgyas kyi rgyu (RN_B: rgyud) dang rigs su gyur pa'i bden stong*

Next, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains,

There is justification [for asserting that], when that mind's empti[ness] of true [existence] is assessed in terms of being the buddha potential, then the aspect of the buddhahood [endowed with qualities] such as the [ten] strengths manifests for the wisdom of the noble ones just as [it does] in the case of the conceptual [mind]. This is for the following reasons. (1) Since that mind's empti[ness] of true [existence] is free from all signs of [discursive] elaborations, it is something capable of performing anything [and] manifesting in any way to the mind that directly realizes it. (2) Moreover, the way in which its [conceptual] aspect is established is also [that of] being established as the cause and potential of a buddha.³⁶

In other words, for Tsoknyi Gyatso, the conceptual proposition that a fully-fledged buddha nature is already existent at the time of a sentient being is justified by being consistent with the immediate, direct experience of the meditative equipoise of the noble ones of Mahāyāna. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the ultimate buddha qualities appear to the nonconceptual wisdom the way the ordinary mind conceives of them, that is, as relative qualities. Once buddha nature becomes manifest, it becomes evident that it is indeed associated with qualities, just as conceptually established in the first place. However, these actually appearing qualities have nothing in common with relative experience and discursive elaborations. As the meditative equipoise is entirely nonconceptual, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains the boundless variety of aspects that appears in it in terms of the buddha nature *qua* emptiness' immeasurable and inexhaustible capability to manifest in any possible way.

de | theg chen 'phags pa'i mnyam bzhag gis mngon sum du rtogs pa na yang rigs bden stong de kun rdzob tha snyad kyi stobs sogs kyi rnam par mi snang yang | don dam chos nyid kyi char gyur pa'i shin tu phra ba'i spros med phra phab pa lta bu'i stobs sogs sangs rgyas kyi yon tan gyi rnam par snang ba yin la | de ltar sems bden stong gi sangs rgyas kyi rigs kyi cha nas bsam pa'i blo spyi'i yul du rigs de don dam (RN_B: nam) chos nyid kyi ngo bor gyur ba'i stobs sogs kyi rnam par rnam pa kun tu snang tsam gyi steng nas | sems can gyi rgyud la don dam pa'i stobs sogs kyi sangs rgyas yod pa'i rnam bzhag tsam byas pa yin pa'i phyir |.

- 36 RN_A, 159.1–159.2; RN_B, 272.1–272.7; RN_C, 209.26–210.4: *sems bden stong de sangs rgyas kyi rigs yin pa'i cha nas gzhal tshe | 'phags pa'i ye shes la yang rtog bcas ltar stobs sogs sangs rgyas kyi rnam pa 'char ba'i rgyu mtshan yod de | sems bden stong de ni spros pa'i mtshan ma mtha' dag dang bral ba yin pas | rang mngon sum du rtogs pa'i blo ngor cir yang 'char du rung ba gang yang las [RN_C: lus] su rung ba zhig yin pa dang | rang gi cha grub tshul sangs rgyas kyi rgyu dang rigs su grub pa yang yin pa dang rgyu mtshan gnyis kyi yin pa'i phyir ro ||.*

For Tsoknyi Gyatso, any proposition about buddha nature being already present and endowed with qualities in the mental continua of sentient beings is only put forward in terms of ultimate buddha nature and qualities, and never entails their relative existence or their existence *as* distinct relative properties:

[Rival claim:] Some suggest, among other things, that if the buddhahood that possesses the ten strengths existed in the [mental] *continua* of sentient beings, it would follow that there would be noble buddhas who have become liberated without relying on the path and without effort, and who do not display buddha deeds.

[Response:] This is not a valid refutation for the following reason. The Omniscient Sherab Gyaltzen and [his] disciples said that in the [mental] *continua* of sentient beings there exists the buddhahood [that possesses qualities] such as the [ten] strengths. They never said that buddhahood *universally* exists or that there is a buddhahood that has distinct relative properties. Rather, they asserted that there exists an ultimate buddhahood or a buddhahood that is the *dharmatā* [of sentient beings' minds, namely, their] nature.³⁷

At this point, the question arises about which of all the features predicated about buddha nature are eligible for the status of ultimate truths and which are just relative truths. A possible answer is to be found once again in a section of *The Illuminating Light*, the twelfth, which Tsoknyi Gyatso dedicates to the rebuttal of a hypothetical opponent's misconceptions about the features of *dharmatā* and buddha nature as propounded by Dölpopa. This becomes possible by explicating the different perspectives that underlay most of the passages cited and discussed above:³⁸

37 RN_A, 153.4–153.6; RN_B, 266.1–266.8; RN_C, 206.12–206.18: | *kha cig gis* | *sems can gyi rgyud la stobs bcu mnga'* ba'i sangs rgyas yod na | *lam la ma ltos par* 'bad med du grol ba dang sangs rgyas kyi mdzad pa mi ston pa'i sangs 'phags yod par thal ba sogs 'phen pa ni sun 'byin yang dag ma yin te | **kun mkhyen shes rab rgyal mtshan** yab sras kyis | *sems can gyi rgyud la stobs sogs kyi sangs rgyas yod par gsungs pa ni* | *spyir sangs rgyas yod pa dang bye brag kun rdzob chos can gyi sangs rgyas yod par gsungs pa gtan ma yin par* | *don dam pa'i sangs rgyas sam chos nyid rang bzhin gyi sangs rgyas yod par gsungs pa yin pa'i phyir* |.

38 See Brambilla 2018: 24–25.

[Rival claim:] The Venerable Tsongkhapa and his followers accepted that [propositions] such as that the ultimately true *dharmatā* is the ultimate truth, that it pervades all *dharmins*, that it is endowed with stains when [one is] a sentient being, and that it is stainless when [one becomes] a buddha, are [only] relative truths posited by a conventional valid cognition about the ultimate *dharmatā*. However, since the Great Omniscient Jonangpa accepted that the empty aspect on the level of relative [truth] is the relative and the appearing aspect on the level of ultimate [truth] is the ultimate, he accepted that [even] all the conceptual delimitations that are distinctive features of the ultimate emptiness are ultimate truths.

[Response:] If someone thinks so, it is not the case for the following reasons. (1) For the unerring wisdom that evaluates the consummate mode of being of all phenomena, there is, from the perspective of negating the *negandum*, freedom from elaborations, [which includes] non-affirming negations [such as] that all phenomena are merely not established in terms of own nature. And, (2) from the perspective of establishing the distinctive [features] of such freedom from elaborations, [there are] nondiscursive manifestations of the qualities of the *dharmakāya*, which has the ultimate [ten] strengths, the [four] fearlessnesses, and the eighteen unique features as its nature. These appearances surpass the [number of the] particles of [sand of the river] Gaṅgā. [These qualities] are the ultimate emptiness itself and are like the magical reflections [seen] by a maiden in a state where not even the slightest sign of relative experience manifests. [Dölpopa] accepted that these are emptiness, namely, the ultimate truth. (3) Nonetheless, [he also] accepted that [propositions] such as that this *dharmatā* is the [buddha] potential when [one is] a sentient being and that it is the result of separation when [one becomes] a buddha are only relative truths.³⁹

39 RN_A, 148.1–148.6; RN_B, 260.5–261.5; RN_C, 203.3–203.16: *rje tsong kha ba rjes 'brang dang bcas pas chos nyid don dam bden pa de don dam bden pa yin pa dang | chos can thams cad la khyab pa yin pa sems can gyi tshe dri bcas yin pa dang | sangs rgyas pa'i tshe dri med yin pa sogs don dam chos nyid la tha snyad tshad mas bzahg pa'i kun rdzob bden pa yin par bzhed kyang | kun mkhyen jo nang ba chen pos ni | kun rdzob kyi stong cha kun rdzob dang | don dam gyi snang cha'ang don dam du bzhed pas don dam stong nyid kyi khyad chos kyi ldog cha thams cad don dam bden par bzhed do snyam na ma yin te | chos rnam kyi yin lugs mthar thug 'jal ba'i ye shes ma 'khrul ba'i ngor | dgag bya bkag phyogs nas chos thams cad rang bzhin gyis ma grub pa tsam gyi med dgag*

Thereby, Tsoknyi Gyatso identifies three valid perspectives through which *dharmatā* and so buddha nature and its features may be viewed and categorized: (1) the analytical perspective of negating the *negandum* (*dgag bya bkag phyogs*), (2) the experiential perspective of establishing the distinctive features (*khyad chos sgrub phyogs*), and that which may be defined as (3) the imputational perspective dealing with *dharmatā* only as a mere conceptual or linguistic construct.

The Perspective of Negating the Negandum

From the perspective of negating the *negandum*, which is the true or inherent establishment of relative phenomena, *dharmatā* is presented only in negative terms. In this context, it is entirely acceptable, according to Tsoknyi Gyatso, to define buddha nature as a non-affirming negation (*med dgag*) whether it is emptiness of true establishment or freedom from discursive elaborations. These terms refer to the representational emptiness (*rnam grangs pa'i stong nyid*),⁴⁰ which is nevertheless ultimate truth. Notably, Tsoknyi Gyatso dedicates the entire sixth section of *The Illuminating Light* to explaining why even Dölpopa, who is rather famous for presenting the ultimate as an affirming negation (*ma yin dgag*), would accept the definition of *dharmatā* as a non-affirming negation. This, for Tsoknyi Gyatso, re-

spros bral dang | spros bral de'i khyad par sgrub phyogs nas kun rdzob myong snang gi mtshan ma cung zad kyang ma shar ba'i ngang nas gzhon nu mas phra phab pa ltar | don dam stong nyid rang yin par gyur pa'i don dam pa'i stobs dang | mi' jigs pa sogs rang bzhin chos sku'i yon tan gang gā'i rdul las 'das pa'i snang ba spros med du shar ba rnams ni | stong nyid don dam bden pa yin par bzhed kyang | chos nyid de sems can gyi tshe rigs yin pa dang | sangs rgyas kyi tshe bral 'bras yin pa la sogs pa ni kun rdzob bden pa kho na yin par bzhed pa'i phyir |

- 40 See, for example, RN_A, 79.3–79.6; RN_B, 197.4–197.11; RN_C, 166.5–166.11: “In short, [both] (1) the emptiness that is only established in the context of conceptual analysis and inference and (2) the emptiness that is only explicitly taught in the middle wheel are representational emptiness, for the following reasons. (A) The former—that selflessness free from elaborations—is not the emptiness that appears as the one possessing all the ultimate aspects. Moreover, since that subjective inference is conceptual, it is not free from the elaborations of object-universals (*arthasāmānya*; *don spyi*) and the elaborations of dualistic appearances. Hence, also, the emptiness that is the object of such [inference] is not the real one that is free from elaborations. (B) And although the latter—the emptiness to the extent that it is explicitly taught in the middle wheel—is subtle selflessness and is free from elaborations, it is not the one that possesses all the ultimate aspects.” *mdor na rjes dpag rtog bcas kyi dpyad ngor grub pa tsam gyi stong nyid dang | 'khor lo bar bas dngos bstan tsam gyi stong nyid ni rnam grangs pa'i stong nyid yin te | snga ma bdag med spros bral de don dam pa'i rnam pa thams cad par 'char pa'i stong nyid ma yin pa dang | de ma zad yul can rjes dpag de rtog bcas yin pas don spyi'i spros pa dang gnyis snang gi spros pa ma bral bas | de'i yul gyi stong nyid kyang spros bral mtshan nyid pa ma yin pa'i phyir dang | phyi ma 'khor lo bar ba las dngos su bstan tshod tsam gyi stong nyid ni | bdag med phra mo dang spros bral yin kyang don dam pa'i rnam pa thams cad pa ma yin pa'i phyir ro ||*. See also Brambilla 2018: 24–30.

quires understanding the distinction between Dölpopa's exceptional use of the term *affirming negation* and the affirming and non-affirming negations as defined by the common Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa traditions:

[Rival claim: For the Jonang tradition,] given the sphere without a self, *dharmatā*, it absurdly follows that it is not a non-affirming negation, because it is an affirming negation. If you accept this, it [also] follows that the wisdom of the equipoise of the noble ones becomes associated with elaborations, for it is [then] the awareness that grasps an affirming negation as a mode of apprehension.

[Response:] The basic reason for *dharmatā* being an affirming negation is not established, because that *dharmatā* is the non-affirming negation of the common Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa traditions. [Why?] This is for the following reason. [In the case of such a non-affirming negation,] the mind that explicitly realizes *dharmatā* itself eliminates its *negandum*. Apart from just this elimination of the *negandum*, no relative mode of apprehension of any other phenomenon established inwardly for the mind occurs as a remainder [of the elimination]. This follows because, in the case of the affirming negation of the common Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa, the mind that explicitly realizes [*dharmatā*] itself eliminates its *negandum*. Apart from just this elimination of the *negandum*, the experience of another phenomenon that can be established inwardly in terms of a mode of apprehension [still] occurs. From this perspective, another phenomenon can be established inwardly.⁴¹

41 RN_A, 107.6–108.4; RN_B, 217.2–217.13; RN_C, 178.1–178.10: *bdag med pa'i dbyings chos nyid chos can | med dgag ma yin par thal | ma yin dgag yin pa'i phyir | 'dod na | 'phags pa'i mnyam bzhag ye shes spros pa can du 'gyur bar thal | khyod ma yin dgag 'dzin stangs su bzung ba'i rig pa yin pa'i phyir | zhe na | chos nyid ma yin dgag yin pa'i rtsa rtags ma grub ste | chos nyid de dbu tshad thun mong gi lugs kyi med dgag de yin pa'i phyir te | chos nyid rang dngos su rtogs pa'i blo rang gi dgag bya bcad shul du dgag bya bcad tsam de las chos gzhan gang yang blo ngor tshur grub pa'i kun rdzob kyi 'dzin stangs 'byung du med pa can yin pa'i phyir | khyab ste | dbu tshad thun mong gi ma yin dgag la ni | rang dngos su rtogs pa'i blo rang gi dgag bya bkag shul du dgag bya bcad tsam de las gzhan pa'i chos zhig 'dzin stangs kyi ngor tshur sgrub tu yod pa'i snang ba 'byung ba'i sgo nas chos gzhan zhig tshur sgrub tu yod pa can ma yin pa med pa'i phyir |.*

The affirming negation of the common Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa traditions, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains, negates the *negandum* but has a remainder (*shul*) that is still a conceptual mode of apprehension and, therefore, pertains to the level of relative truth. A non-affirming negation, on the contrary, only negates the *negandum* without ever entailing any conceptual remainder. As such, it suitably and unequivocally eliminates all relative elaborations. Therefore, as the actual *dharmatā*, i.e., buddha nature, is entirely beyond the realm of the relative and the conceptual, it must be rather defined as the non-affirming negation of the common Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa traditions: it is better to provide a limited or one-sided description of *dharmatā* than one that is mistaken and misleading. For Tsoknyi Gyatso, Dölpopa uses the term *affirming negation* in an exceptional way, to stress the fact that, although *dharmatā* is essentially freedom from elaborations, it is not the mere blank nothingness propounded by other Tibetan Mādhyamikas but, rather, it spontaneously appears to the nonconceptual wisdom of the noble ones of Mahāyāna as endowed with all the ultimate aspects and buddha qualities. Tsoknyi Gyatso summarizes this view as follows:

In brief, as for the Omniscient One's assertion that *dharmatā* is an affirming negation, the intention is that for the mind that directly realizes it, that negation of the self is something that intrinsically appears, without elaborations, as endowed with the aspects of the entire ground of empti[ness]. However, [Dölpopa] never maintained that [*dharmatā*] is that affirming negation that can be associated with a mode of apprehension that grasps something other than the mere negation. [Such a mode of apprehension] would result from finding a phenomenon that—as the remainder of the negation of the self for the mind that explicitly realizes it in accordance with the common Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa—is other than that [self] and from the consequent collapse of the mode of apprehension of the mere negation of the *negandum*. This is because, in the accepted intention of the Omniscient One, when distinctive qualities of *dharmatā*, such as an ultimate blue or yellow, are ascertained by the wisdom of the equipoise that directly realizes [*dharmatā*] itself, [there occurs] only the mode of apprehension of the non-affirming negation that pacifies the mind's engagement in the mere negation of the two [types of] self, which are the *neganda*. Apart from this, [Dölpopa] never accepted that the slightest mode of apprehension of an affirming negation oc-

curs following the collapse of the mode of apprehension of a non-affirming negation.⁴²

To further prove that Dölpopa also presents *dharmatā* as a non-affirming negation, in the twelfth section of *The Illuminating Light*, Tsoknyi Gyatso repeatedly quotes and comments on passages from Dölpopa's *Instructions to the Great Meditators in Jonang* (*Jo nang du sgom chen spyi la gdams pa*):⁴³

In the *Instructions to the Great Meditators in Jonang*, it is said,

There being neither “me” nor “mine” within *dharmatā*, the consummate profound mode of abiding, there is no grasped or grasper either.⁴⁴

Then, it is stated,

The ground devoid of all faults is *dharmatā*.⁴⁵

Hence, [Dölpopa] asserted that the non-affirming negation that negates all elaborations of real entities, which are the *neganda*, is *dharmatā*.⁴⁶

42 RN_A, 109.7–110.4; RN_B, 219.4–219.15; RN_C, 179.6–179.15: *mdor na kun mkhyen chen pos* | *chos nyid ma yin dgag tu gsungs pa ni* | *rang mngon sum du rtogs pa'i blo ngor bdag bkag pa de stong gzhi mtha' dag gi rnam pa can du spros med rang chas su 'char rgyu zhig yin pa la dgongs pa yin gyi* | *dbu tshad thun mong ltar rang dngos su rtogs pa'i blo ngor bdag bkag shul du* (RN_B: om.) *de las gzhan pa'i chos zhig rnyed pa'i sgo nas* | *dgag bya bkag tsam gyi 'dzin stangs log nas bkag tsam las gzhan zhig 'dzin pa'i 'dzin stangs can tu 'gyur rgyu'i ma yin dgag de yin par gsungs pa gtan ma yin te* | *kun mkhyen chen po'i bzhed dgongs la* | *chos nyid kyi khyad chos don dam pa'i sngo ser sogs ni rang mngon sum du rtogs pa'i mnyam bzhag ye shes kyi gzhal ba na* | *dgag bya bdag gnyis bkag tsam du blo'i 'jug pa zhi ba'i med dgag gi 'dzin stangs kho na las* | *med dgag gi 'dzin ltangs log nas ma yin dgag gi 'dzin stangs cung zad kyang 'byung bar mi bzhed pa'i phyir ro* ||.

43 In all the available editions of Dol po pa's collected works containing this text, it appears with a different title: *Bar skabs su thor bu brjod pa* (henceforth referred to as BT).

44 BT_A, 856.3; BT_B, 635.6–635.7; BT_C, 250.11–250.12: | *gnas lugs zab mo mthar thug chos nyid la* || *bdag med bdag gi med cing gzung 'dzin med* |.

45 BT_A, 856.5; BT_B, 636.1; BT_C, 250.15: *skyon kun med pa'i* (BT_B: *pa*) *gzhi ni chos nyid yin* |.

46 RN_A, 149.2–149.4; RN_B, 261.13–261.15; RN_C, 203.23–203.27: ... *jo nang du sgom chen spyi la gdams par* | *gnas lugs zab mo mthar thug chos* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *stong*; em. as per BT_A, BT_B, BT_C) *nyid la* || *bdag med bdag gi* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *gir*; em. as per BT_A, BT_B, BT_C) *med cing*

The Perspective of Establishing the Distinctive Features

The second perspective through which *dharmatā* can be defined is that of establishing its distinctive features. This is the perspective of the meditative equipoise of the noble ones of Mahāyāna, which is free from any relative and discursive sign, and where there arises the direct, immediate experience of the emptiness endowed with all the ultimate aspects—the *dharmakāya* and its qualities. It is the direct experience of the actual, nonrepresentational emptiness (*rnam grangs ma yin pa'i stong nyid*), which cannot but be ultimate truth. In this case, too, Tsoknyi Gyatso seeks to prove his point by quoting and commenting on a passage from Dölpopa's *Instructions to the Great Meditators in Jonang*:

[In the *Instructions to the Great Meditators in Jonang*, it is said,]

The qualities that surpass even the [number of the] particles of [sand of the river] Gaṅgā, [namely,] the immaculate, inseparable, and inconceivable qualities of the *dharmakāya* such as the [ten] strengths, the [four] fearlessness, and the [eighteen] unique features, are also *dharmatā*.⁴⁷

As for [its, i.e., *dharmatā*'s] nature of [being] the non-affirming negation that negates the subtle self of phenomena and persons, even the [qualities] such as the ultimate [ten] strengths are *dharmatā*, the ultimate truth.⁴⁸

Even though, as we will see, this perspective does not belong to the sole context of tantric realization, it must be noted that Tsoknyi Gyatso's descriptions of it are steeped in references to the vivid visionary experiences that arise in the

gzung 'dzin med || ces pa nas | <skyon kun> (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: rgyu rkyen; em. as per BT_A, BT_B, BT_C) med pa'i gzhi ni chos nyid yin || zhes dgag bya bden dngos kyi spros pa mtha' dag bkag pa'i med dgag de chos nyid yin par gsungs pa dang | ...

47 BT_A, 856.5; BT_B, 636.1–636.2; BT_C, 250.15–250.17: | stobs dang mi 'jigs ma 'dres la sogs pa || zag med mi 'bral bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i || chos sku'i yon tan gang gā'i rdul las kyang || 'das pa'i yon tan rnam kyang (BT_B, BT_C: kyi) chos nyid yin |.

48 RN_A, 149.4–149.6; RN_B, 261.17–262.3; RN_C, 203.27–204.3: ... | stobs dang mi 'jigs ma 'dres la sogs pa || zag med mi 'bral bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i || chos sku'i yon tan gang gā'i rdul las kyang || 'das pa'i yon tan rnam kyang chos nyid yin || zhes chos dang gang zag gi bdag phra mo bkag pa'i med dgag gi rang bzhin ni | don dam pa'i stobs sogs kyang chos nyid don dam bden pa yin pa'i phyir |.

context of the practice of the sixfold yoga (*ṣaḍaṅgayoga*; *sbyor ba yan lag drug*) of Kālacakra, the principal tantric practice of the Jonang tradition.⁴⁹ These extraordinary perceptual appearances, subsumed under the label of *reflections of emptiness* (*śūnyatābimba*; *stong pa nyid kyi gzugs brnyan*), begin to manifest during the stage of withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*; *so sor sdud pa*), the first branch of the sixfold yoga. Stated briefly, withdrawal consists of retracting from one's ordinary senses and their objects, as well as from any object that is conceptually constructed. Thereby, suprasensory faculties arise and allow for the spontaneous, direct perception of objective aspects that are not other than their perceiving subject—the yogi's mind. This is made possible mainly by practices that involve sensory deprivation: a night yoga, to be practiced in complete darkness, and a day yoga, to be practiced by gazing at the cloudless, glowing blue sky.⁵⁰ In this manner, one encounters the natural arising of ten signs (*rtaḥ bcu*),⁵¹ the first four of which manifest during the night yoga and the last six during the day yoga,⁵² which the Jonangpas interpret as aspects of the same evolving perception of the reflections of emptiness.⁵³ Throughout the following branches of the sixfold yoga, the yogi has to combine the experience of the reflections of emptiness with other practices involving the control of the flow of vital winds (*prāṇa*; *rlung*) and drops (*bindu*; *thig le*) in the channels (*nāḍī*; *rtsa*) of the subtle body until the eventual achievement of the union of bliss

49 Notably, according to Tāranātha, it was indeed after a series of intensive retreats dedicated to the practice of Kālacakra's sixfold yoga, between 1322 and 1325, that Dol po pa fully developed his ultimate philosophical view. See Stearns 2010: 15–18.

50 See Orofino 1996: 129–30; Sferra 2000: 22–23; Henning 2009: 240–41; Wallace 2013: 167; Hatchell, 2014: 32–35 and 105–10.

51 The ten signs, as listed by the *Śrīlaghukālacakratāntrarāja* (LKCT), are smoke, mirage, firefly, lamp, flame, moon, sun, vajra, subtlest phase of the moon, and drop. See LKCT V.115: “The smoke, the mirage, the brilliant stainless firefly, the lamp, and [then] the flame, the moon, the sun, the vajra, the subtlest phase of the moon, and the drop are seen [to manifest] from the void by those whose mind is completely focused on space, whose eyes are not closed, and who have fully entered the vajra path. In the middle of that [drop arises] the Buddha's image that is free from objects, that is, the manifold *saṃbhogakāya*.” Tib. D 3622, 113a.2–113a.3: | *nam mkhar kun nas zhen pa'i sems dang mig ni mi 'dzums rdo rje'i lam du rab tu zhugs pa yis* || *stong pa las ni du ba smig rgyu rab gsal dri ma med pa'i mkha' snang nyid dang mar me dang* || *'bar ba dang ni zla ba nyi ma rdo rje rnams dang mchog gi cha dang thig le mthong bar 'gyur* || *de yi dbus su sangs rgyas gzugs ni yul dang rnam par bral ba du ma longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku* |. Skt. Banerjee 1985 ed.: 228.9–228.12: *ākāśāsaktacittair animiṣanayanair vajramārgaṃ praviṣṭaiḥ śūnyād dhūmo marīciḥ prakāṭavimalakhadyota eva pradīpaḥ | jvālā candrārkavajrāṇy api paramakalā drśyate bindukaś ca tanmadhye buddhabimbaṃ viṣayavirahitānekasaṃbhogakāyam* ||.

52 See Sferra 2000: 23; Henning 2009: 240.

53 See Henning 2009: 240–41.

and emptiness, and the attainment of the body of wisdom (*jñānadeha*; *ye shes sku*).⁵⁴ The metaphor recurrent throughout Kālacakra literature and often used also by Tsoknyi Gyatso to describe such ultimate appearing aspects is that of the magical reflections (*pratisenā*; *pra phab*) that appear on the surface of the mirror used in divination rituals where a maiden, empowered by mantras, acquires the ability to see the past or the future.⁵⁵ Just like the magical reflections that emerge on the divination mirror, the aspects that manifest in the direct perception of *dharma*-*matā*, i.e., buddha nature, lack substantiality and are not produced, yet they can appear, transcending existence and nonexistence.⁵⁶ In addition to the passage quoted above, where Tsoknyi Gyatso lists three valid perspectives through which *dharma*-*matā* may be viewed, the simile of the magical reflections occurs again, for example, in the following excerpt from the seventh section of *The Illuminating Light*, where Tsoknyi Gyatso quotes and comments on a passage from Dölpopa's *Instructions to Tönpa Drupsang* (*Ston pa grub bzang la gdams pa*):⁵⁷

In the *Instructions to Tönpa Drupsang*, the Omniscient Master of the Dharma⁵⁸ stated,

In brief, as all phenomena[’s basic nature] is freedom from elaborations, place [your mind] in a state free from elaborations.

54 The first of branch of the sixfold yoga of Kālacakra, withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*; *so sor sdud pa*), is followed by the branches of meditative stabilization (*dhyāna*; *bsam gtan*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*; *srog rtsol*), retention (*dhāraṇā*, *’dzin pa*), recollection (*anusmṛti*; *rjes dran*), and meditative concentration (*samādhi*; *ting nge ’dzin*). For detailed accounts of the practice of the sixfold yoga of Kālacakra, see Orofino 1996; Sferra 2000: 11–37; Henning 2009; Wallace 2012 and 2013.

55 The *locus classicus* for the *pratisenā* simile is found in stanzas 27 through 34 of the *Sekoddeśa*. See Orofino 1994.

56 On the transcendent nature of the reflections of emptiness see, for example, the following passage from the first chapter of the *Vimalaprabhāṭikā* (VP), commenting on LKCT I.1: “Here, again, the reflection [of emptiness], whose essence is emptiness and compassion, the thoroughly pure mind that is like the magical reflection [that appears] to a maiden, does not have the defining characteristic of matter (*rūpa*; *gzugs*) because it does not consist of atoms. It does not have the defining characteristic of non-matter because it exists in the empty (i.e., as reflections of emptiness).” Tib. D 845, 39a.7–39b.1: *’dir yang stong pa nyid dang snying rje’i bdag nyid kyi gzugs rnam par dag pa’i sems gzhon nu ma’i pra phab pa lta bu ni gzugs kyi mtshan nyid ma yin te rdul phra rab med pa’i phyir ro || gzugs med pa’i mtshan nyid ma yin te stong pa la yod pa’i phyir ro* | Skt. Upādhyāya 1986 ed.: 43.24–43.25: *iha punaḥ śūnyatākaraṇātmakasya bimbasya viśuddhacittasya kumārikāpratisenopamasya na rūpalakṣaṇam, paramāṇor abhāvāt; nārūpalakṣaṇam, śūnye vidyamānatvāt* |.

57 This text is henceforth referred to as TG.

58 I.e., Dol po pa Shes rab gyal mtshan.

When [the mind] is set in that way, whatever appearance arises, it does not transcend the experience [of] *dharmatā*, nor is there any [relative] truth in it.⁵⁹

Hence, in the context of wisdom, which is free from the elaboration of the true establishment [of] all phenomena, no matter what magical reflection-like appearance may arise, it is only *dharmatā*. Accordingly, in the context of the [meditative] equipoise, such manifestation of *dharmatā* as endowed with all aspects is void of any truly established sign or any relative sign, i.e., [any] object produced [by relative] experience. There are, [however,] a great many [passages where Dölpopa] presents the ultimate *dharmatā* as selflessness or as the mere negation of elaborations.⁶⁰

The Imputational Perspective

The third perspective through which *dharmatā* may be viewed deals with it only as a mere conceptual or linguistic construct. Whatever is established within this context can well be a provisionally workable concept but is nothing more than relative truth. In fact, any distinction such as that between buddhas and sentient beings, nirvāṇa and saṃsāra, and the like is a mere relative truth because its opposing aspects are not established in the context of the nonconceptual wisdom but only in that of the most ordinary discursive mind. Tsoknyi Gyatso supports his

59 TG_A, 654.6–655.2; TG_B, 186.6–186.7; TG_C, 75.17–76.1: | *mdor na chos thams cad spros pa dang bral ba'i phyir* | *spros pa med pa'i ngang la zhog mdzod* | *de ltar bzhag pa'i tshe snang ba gang shar yang* | *chos nyid nyams su myong ba'i snang ba las ma 'das shing* | *de la bden pa gang yang med pas dga' mi dga' cir yang mi bzung gi* | *de nyid kyi ngang la ma g.yos par slar de nyid la gtad de de lta ba nyid thams kyi mchog lags* |.

60 RN_A, 117.4–117.7; RN_B, 227.16–228.6; RN_C, 184.8–184.15: ... | *kun mkhyen chos rjes ston pa grub bzang la gdams pa las* | *mdor na chos thams cad spros pa dang bral ba'i phyir* || *spros pa med pa'i ngang la zhog mdzod* | *de ltar bzhag pa'i tshe snang ba gang shar yang* || *chos nyid nyams su myong ba'i snang ba las ma 'das shing* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *pas*; em. as per TG_A, TG_B, TG_C) || *de la bden pa gang yang med pas* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *do*; em. as per TG_A, TG_B, TG_C) || *zhes chos thams cad bden grub kyi spros pa dang bral ba'i ye shes kyi ngor phra phab pa lta bu'i snang ba ci shar yang* | *chos nyid 'ba' zhig yin pas mnyam bzhag gi ngor chos nyid rnam pa thams cad par shar ba de la bden grub kyi mtshan ma dang* | *myong snang skyes yul gyi kun rdzob kyi mtshan ma gang yang med par gsungs pa la sogs pa don dam chos nyid de bdag med pa dang* | *spros pa bkag tsam nyid du gsungs pa shin tu mang ba'i phyir ro* ||. Note that I have not translated the *phyir* at the end of this passage, which connects it to the argument proving that Dol po pa did not eschew discussion of the ultimate in terms of nonaffirming negation.

claim that this was indeed Dölpopa's view by quoting and commenting on another passage from the *Instructions to Tönpa Drupsang*:⁶¹

In the *Questions and Answers of Tönpa [Drupsang]*, it is said,

Sentient being, buddha, saṃsāra, and nirvāṇa. There is no difference in [their] nature, suchness. Suchness is called buddha or sentient being, and liberated or saṃsāric person, [on the basis of] being separated or not from incidental stains. Ultimately, there is no saṃsāra or nirvāṇa whatsoever. They are expressed in such a way in the context of the relative appearance.⁶²

Hence, in terms of the exclusion *qua* thing itself that is *dharmatā*, the [basic] nature, there are no particular elaborations such as the states of buddha and sentient being or the states of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra. However, in the context of the appearance of the valid cognition that analyzes the relative, being separated from incidental stains [is posited] as the state of a buddha, and not being separated from incidental stains is posited as the state of a sentient being. Nonetheless, it is said that the respective aspects of the “states of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa” are not established in the context of the nonconceptual wisdom that realizes the ultimate: this is the ultimate meaning.⁶³

61 Note that, in the quoted passage, Tsoknyi Gyatso refers to the text by a different title: *Questions and Answers of Tönpa [Drupsang]* (*Ston pa'i dris lan*).

62 TG_A, 652.4–652.6; TG_B, 185.2–185.3; TG_C, 74.5–74.9: *sems can sangs rgyas 'khor ba mya ngan 'das || rang bzhin de bzhin nyid la khyad par med || glo bur dri ma bral dang ma bral ba'i || de bzhin nyid la sangs rgyas sems can dang || mya ngan 'das dang 'khor ba pa zhes brjod || dam pa'i don du 'khor 'das gang yang med || kun rdzob snang ngor brjod pa de ltar lags* |.

63 RN_A, 149.6–150.3; RN_B, 262.3–262.14; RN_C, 204.3–204.13: ... | *ston pa'i dris lan du | sems can sangs rgyas 'khor ba mya ngan 'das || rang bzhin de bzhin nyid la khyad par med || glo bur dri ma bral dang ma bral ba'i* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *la*; em. as per TG_A, TG_B, TG_C) | *de bzhin nyid la sangs rgyas sems can dang || mya ngan 'das dang 'khor ba pa zhes brjod || dam pa'i don du 'khor 'das gang yang med || kun rdzob snang ngor brjod pa de ltar lags || zhes rang bzhin chos nyid kyi rang ldog la sangs rgyas dang | sems can kyi gnas skabs dang | myang 'das dang | 'khor ba'i gnas skabs la sogs pa'i bye brag gi spros pa med kyang | kun rdzob dpyad pa'i tshad ma'i snang ngor glo bur dri ma bral ba la sangs rgyas pa'i gnas skabs dang | glo bur dri ma ma bral ba la sems can gyi gnas skabs zhes 'jog pa sogs yin gyi | dam pa'i don te don dam rtogs pa'i mi rtog ye shes kyi ngor 'khor ba dang myang 'das kyi gnas skabs zhes pa'i cha so so grub pa med par gsungs pa dang | ...*

Thus, we see here how the value of the third perspective is only contextual and extrinsic. In contrast, the first and the second perspectives—that of negating the *negandum* and that of establishing the distinguishing features—can convey respectively a consistent, proper understanding of the ultimate in representational and nonrepresentational terms. The perspective of negating the *negandum* is the one embraced throughout the process of conceptual analysis and inference that focuses on discarding the true existence of relative phenomena and can only lead to an understanding of freedom from elaborations that is conceptually derived and, therefore, representational. The perspective of establishing the distinguishing features, on the contrary, mirrors the direct nonconceptual experience of the ultimate that is unmediated by any conceptual construct.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, for Tsoknyi Gyatso, both these latter two distinguishable modes of discourse and knowledge refer to the same *dharma*tā:

An emptiness subtler than [the one taught] from the perspective of negating the *negandum* in the Prajñāpāramitā[sūtras of] the middle [turning's] discourses has not been taught in [those of] the last [turning of the Dharma] wheel including Mantra[yāna].⁶⁵

From a hermeneutical perspective, this constitutes a decisive turning point for Tsoknyi Gyatso. The selflessness or the absence of true existence that is the explicit teaching of the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras is still, at least implicitly or in general terms, the same fully qualified emptiness or buddha nature on which the discourses of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma elaborate explicitly. Therefore, the sūtras of both the second and the third turning respectively implicitly and explicitly refer to the same definitive meaning:

In accordance with the ultimate intention of the two Supreme Noble Ones, Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga, the Omniscient Jonangpa and [his] disciples have accepted [the following propositions]. The [discourses of the] last [turning of the Dharma] wheel do not teach an emptiness subtler than the emptiness that is explicitly taught in the Prajñāpāramitā[sūtras] from the perspective of negating the *negandum*. Nevertheless, that emptiness explicitly taught [in] the Prajñā-

⁶⁴ See Brambilla 2018: 28–30.

⁶⁵ RN_A, 77.1; RN_B, 194.11–194.13; RN_C, 164.18–164.20: ... | *dgag bya bkag phyogs nas bka' bar ba sher phyin las phra ba'i stong nyid zhig 'khor lo phyi ma sngags dang bcas pa las ma gsungs pa'i phyir dang* |.

pāramitā[sūtras] is, in general, the one endowed with the limitless qualities of the ultimate Victorious One, that is, his own distinctive features. However, that which is not taught explicitly and clearly in the middle [turning's] discourses themselves is taught most clearly and explicitly in [those of] the last [turning of the Dharma] wheel and Mantrayāna. Hence, the emptiness taught in the latter ones is the emptiness of ultimate definitive meaning.⁶⁶

Here, Tsoknyi Gyatso's hermeneutical interpretation is, however, not to be seen as a complete novelty but rather as consistent with the approaches of earlier Jonang scholars. In fact, as Matthew Kapstein has already argued, other major figures of the Jonang tradition, such as Dölpopa, Tāranātha, and Bamda Gelek, dealt with the Prajñāpāramitā literature as entailing a type of esotericism that allows for a reading of particular passages in line with the Jonang view of the emptiness of other (*gzhan stong*).⁶⁷

Two Approaches to Realization

As we have seen, the two opposing perspectives of negating the *negandum* and establishing the distinctive features play an essentially descriptive role. The first perspective provides an analytical understanding of buddha nature as the mere emptiness of true existence. In contrast, the second one enriches this description by presenting that emptiness as experienced in meditative equipoise, that is, as endowed with all the ultimate aspects. For Tsoknyi Gyatso, both perspectives also play a crucially prescriptive and soteriological role because they come to characterize two distinct valid approaches to realization: a logical-analytical approach and a direct approach.⁶⁸ The predominant application of the logical-analytical approach distinguishes the Pāramitāyāna, just as the predominant application of the

66 RN_A, 78.5–79.2; RN_B, 196.8–196.15; RN_C, 165.21–166.1: ... | 'phags mchog klu thogs gnyis kyi dgongs pa mthar thug ji bzhin du kun mkhyen jo nang pa yab sras kyi | dgag bya bkag phyogs nas sher phyin las dngos su bstan pa'i stong nyid las phra ba'i stong nyid zhig 'khor lo phyi ma las ma bstan kyang | sher phyin dngos bstan kyi stong nyid de ni rang yin gyi khyad chos don dam pa'i rgyal ba'i yon tan mtha' yas pa dang ldan pa zhig spyir yin kyang | bka' bar ba rang las dngos su gsal bar ma bstan pa de ni 'khor lo phyi ma dang | sngags kyi theg pa las ches gsal bar dngos su bstan pas na | de las bstan pa'i stong nyid ni nges don mthar thug gi stong nyid yin par bzhed pa'i phyir te |. Note that I have not translated the *phyir* at the end of this passage, which connects it to Tshogs gnyis rgya mtsho's larger argument about the distinction between representational and non-representational emptiness (see RN_A, 78.2–79.3; RN_B, 195.16–197.3; RN_C, 165.13–166.4).

67 See Kapstein 1997.

68 For similar distinctions between negating and affirming approaches to realization, see Mathes 2008: 354–56; Higgins and Draszczuk 2016: vol. 1, 238–42; Mathes 2016.

direct approach distinguishes the Mantrayāna. Still, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains that the practice of the one does not exclude the application of the other, and vice versa:

That being so, in relation to the two existing perspectives of (1) negating the *negandum* and (2) asserting the qualities with respect to *dharmatā*, the two modes [of realizing emptiness] are only presented in general. (a) [In the one mode,] one first directly realizes [*dharmatā*] predominantly from the perspective of negating the *negandum*, and then directly realizes it [from] the perspective of establishing the distinctive qualities. (b) [In the other mode,] one first directly realizes [*dharmatā*] predominantly from the perspective of establishing the distinctive qualities, and then directly realizes [it from] the perspective of negating the *negandum*. This is because, (i.) in the Mahāyāna Pāramitāyāna, [*dharmatā*] is realized predominantly in accordance with the former [mode], and, (ii.) in the Mahāyāna Mantrayāna, it is realized predominantly in accordance with the latter [mode].⁶⁹

In the final section of *The Illuminating Light*, after a long passage discussing the two distinct approaches,⁷⁰ Tsoknyi Gyatso presents the following explanation as one of the reasons why both the Mahāyāna Pāramitāyāna and the Mahāyāna Mantrayāna will be eventually conducive to the same direct experience of *dharmatā* as endowed with all the ultimate aspects:

(1) *Dharmatā*—the absence of true existence [of relative phenomena]—is the unceasing appearance of the consummate mode of abiding that occurs as a simultaneously identical taste and essence with *dharmins* such as form. (2) Moreover, the [meditative] equipoise's mind is the nondiscursive cognition of the unceasing appearance of [*dharmatā*]: what bears the imprint of a very vast accumulation and is perceived directly and nonconceptually. For these two reasons, *dharmatā*—the empti[ness] of true [existence of relative phenomena]—

69 RN_A, 167.5–168.1; RN_B, 280.12–281.1; RN_C, 214.25–215.4: *de ltar na chos nyid de la dgag bya bkag phyogs kyi cha dang | yon tan sgrub phyogs kyi cha gnyis yod pa'i nang nas gtso bor dgag bya bkag phyogs kyi cha nas sngon du mngon sum du rtogs nas | khyad chos sgrub phyogs kyi cha phyis su mngon sum du rtogs pa dang | gtso bor khyad chos sgrub phyogs nas sngon du mngon sum du rtogs nas dgag bya bkag phyogs kyi cha phyis su mngon sum rtogs pa dang tshul gnyis spyi'i rnam bzhag tsam du yod de | theg chen phar phyin theg par gtso bor snga ma ltar rtogs pa dang | theg chen sngags kyi theg par gtso bor phyi ma ltar rtogs pa yin pa'i phyir ro ||*.

70 See RN_A, 165.2–167.2; RN_B, 278.7–280.5; RN_C, 213.16–214.18.

manifests as possessing all the aspects of *dharmatā* (a) in the [meditative] equipoise of the noble ones of Mahāyāna of the Pāramitā path and, analogously, (b) in the [meditative] equipoise of the ordinary beings of the unsurpassed Mantra [system].⁷¹

In both *The Illuminating Light* and *Removing the Anguish of Holding to Extremes*, Tsoknyi Gyatso does not lay out any actual instruction on how to practice according to the Pāramitāyāna and the Mantrayāna. However, he does expound their basic structures and brings out the distinct mechanics by which one can attain the nonconceptual direct perception of the mind's emptiness of true existence *qua* buddha nature.

The Pāramitāyāna Approach

Tsoknyi Gyatso characterizes the basic structure of the Pāramitāyāna as a twofold process whereby one first determines *dharmatā* analytically as a non-affirming negation and then takes this as one's object of meditative cultivation. That is, on this path, one first applies Madhyamaka logical reasoning to relative phenomena and finds them to lack any inherent existence. Subsequently, one engages in the process of cultivation of (or familiarization with) the emptiness that results from such critical scrutiny. In the sixteenth and final section of *The Illuminating Light*, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains,

[There is] one mode in which, [first,] one generates the certainty of having determined that, based on reasonings such as that of being free from being one and many or that of dependent arising, [relative phenomena] such as the [ordinary] mind and form do not inherently exist. Next, one fosters and gains familiarity with the continuum of understanding the empti[ness] of true [existence] by repeatedly drawing on the strength of that certainty, without letting it diminish.⁷²

71 RN_A, 167.2–167.5; RN_B, 280.5–280.12; RN_C, 214.18.214.24: *bden grub med pa'i chos nyid ni gzugs sogs chos can rnam dang grub bde ngo bo ro gcig tu song ba'i mthar thug gi gnas lugs snang ba 'gag pa med pa yin pa dang | mnyam bzahag gi blo yang tshogs rgya chen po'i lag rjes bzahag pa'i rtog med mngon sum du gyur pa'i rang snang 'gag med kyi spros bral gyi shes pa yin pa dang | rgyu mtshan gnyis kyis chos nyid bden stong ni phar phyin lam gyi theg chen 'phags pa'i mnyam bzahag dang | de'i dod thub kyi sngags bla med kyi so skyes mnyam bzahag sogs la chos nyid kyi rnam pa thams cad par 'char ba yin pa'i phyir |.*

72 RN_A, 163.4–163.6; RN_B, 276.9–176.13; RN_C, 212.17–212.20: *gcig du (RN_B: tu) bral dang rten 'brel la sogs pa'i rigs pa la brten nas sems dang gzugs sogs rang bzhin gyis grub pa med par thag chod*

The decisive transformative moment in this approach occurs, according to Tsoknyi Gyatso, during its second step, when constant and long cultivation is applied to the right object. Thereby, the one who carries out this practice persistently until its culmination will eventually attain the immediate, nonconceptual cognition of its object. Tsoknyi Gyatso elaborates on the process leading to this goal in the ninth section of *The Illuminating Light*, just after establishing that a Mahāyāna practitioner only reaches the first *bhūmi* through the direct experience of selflessness in the total exhaustion of all relative characteristic signs of consciousness.⁷³ To this end, he quotes and comments on *Pramāṇavārttika* III.285, a verse crucial for understanding the cultivation process within the framework of the theory of yogic direct perception (*yogipratyakṣa*; *rnal 'byor mngon sum*) as advanced by Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660):⁷⁴

In the *Pramāṇavārttika* it is said,

Therefore, whichever real or unreal [object] is intensively cultivated, once the cultivation is perfected, it has a clear nonconceptual mind as its result.⁷⁵

Hence, it has been said that, if one gains familiarity with an [object] that is either existent or nonexistent, there will arise a nonconceptual mind in which that [object] appears clearly. Accordingly, no matter whether the object is existent or nonexistent to the extent that it

pa'i nges cha bskyed nas | nges cha de shugs nyams su mi 'jug par yang yang drangs pa'i sgo nas bden stong gi go ba'i rgyun bskyangs shing goms par byed pa'i tshul gcig dang | ...

73 See RN_A, 120.5–121.2; RN_B, 231.10–232.5; RN_C, 186.10–186.20.

74 For two extensive discussions of Dharmakīrti's theory of yogic direct perception, see Dunne 2006 and Eltschinger 2009.

75 PV III.285. Tib. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 81.1–81.2: *| de phyir yang dag yang dag min || gang gang shin tu bsgoms gyur pa || bsgom pa yongs su rdzogs pa na || de gsal mi rtoḡ blo 'bras can |*. Skt. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 80.1–80.2: *tasmād bhūtaṃ abhūtaṃ vā yad yad evābhībhāvyaṭe | bhāvanāpariṇiṣpattau tat sphuṭākālpadhīphalaṃ ||*. Note that, while Miyasaka adopted the alternative chapters' order of the *Pramāṇavārttika* supported by commentators such as Jayanta (I. *pramāṇasiddhi*, II. *pratyakṣa*, III. *svārthānumāna*, and IV. *parārthānumāna*), the chapters are here and henceforth enumerated in the original intended sequence, which is supported by Devendrabuddhi and Śākyabuddhi: I. *svārthānumāna*, II. *pramāṇasiddhi*, III. *pratyakṣa*, and IV. *parārthānumāna*. See Ono 1997 and Kellner 2004.

abides [on its own], if one gains familiarity [with it, its] clear appearance will occur. This is the mind's nature.⁷⁶

Hence, as per Dharmakīrti's definition, the cultivation of any kind of object will culminate in a nonconceptual cognition wherein the object appears most clearly and vividly. Tsoknyi Gyatso further establishes the nonconceptual nature of the thus-resultant cognition by distinguishing it from its opposite: conceptual cognition. In this case, too, he proceeds by quoting and commenting on Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, where, at PV III.287ab, conceptual cognition is defined as the one that apprehends a verbal object (*śabdārtha*; *sgra don*).⁷⁷ That is, conceptual cognition is the one whose content is only a universal (*sāmānya*; *spyi*), a conceptually construed image that may be expressed through words. On the contrary, the cognition that arises from the intense cultivation of an object is nonconceptual because it apprehends nothing but the immediate and vivid cognitive content that manifests at the end of such cultivation when conceptual activity ceases.⁷⁸ For Tsoknyi Gyatso, this last moment consists in the exhaustion of any verbal object or universal, and the newly acquired cognition is further characterized by being free from any attachment to its object:

The meaning of [saying that] such mind becomes nonconceptual with regard to that object [of cultivation] is the opposite of what is stated in the *Pramāṇavārttika*, namely, that

The cognition that apprehends a verbal object in relation to the [object it cognizes] is a conceptualization of that [object].⁷⁹

76 RN_A, 121.2–121.4; RN_B, 232.5–232.9; RN_C, 186.20–186.24: *tshad ma rnam 'grel las | de phyir yang dag yang dag min || gang gang <shin tu bsgoms gyur pa>* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *don ni gang gang la*; em. as per PV, Miyasaka 1972 ed.) || *<bsgom pa yongs su rdzogs pa na>* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *ji lta ji ltar goms gyur pa*; em. as per PV, Miyasaka 1972 ed.) || *de gsal mi rtog blo 'bras can || zhes yod med gang goms kyang de gsal bar snang ba'i rtog med kyi blo 'byung bar gsungs pa ltar | yul gnas tshod la yod med ji ltar yin kyang goms na gsal snang 'byung ba sems kyi chos nyid yin la |*.

77 See Dunne 2006: 508–9 and 512; Eltschinger 2009: 192.

78 See PV III.281: “The yogis’ cognition has [already] been explained before. Their [cognition] is born from cultivation. It is free from the net of concepts and, therefore, it appears clearly.” Tib. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 79.23–79.24: *rnal 'byor shes pa sngar bshad pa || de dag gi de bsgoms byung yin || rtog pa'i dra ba rnam bsal bas || gsal ba nyid du snang ba yin |*. Skt. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 78.23–78.24: *prāguktam yoginam jñānam teṣām tad bhāvanām ayam | vidhūtakaḥ pañjālam spaṣṭam evābhāṣate ||*. See also Dunne 2006: 499–500; Eltschinger 2009: 192.

79 PV III.287ab. Tib. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 81.5: *| shes gang gang la sgra don 'dzin || de ni de la rtog pa yin ||*. Skt. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 80.5: *śabdārthagrāhi yad yatra tajjñānam tatra kalpanā ||*.

That [nonconceptual cognition] is the mind free from a verbal object's appearance in relation to that object [it cognizes]. Moreover, being free from the appearance of verbal objects in relation to that object, that mind also has no fixed attachment to that object. That being so, whatever the object [of cultivation], be it the nonexistence of a personal self or the selflessness of phenomena, by gaining familiarity with that object at first through a conceptual [mind], at some point the aspect of [the mind] that firmly clings to its object can be exhausted. As for what that mind experiences once the aspect of clinging to its object is exhausted, there is no appearance of a universal, i.e., a verbal object. However, there are many different [instances] of that mind's appearing object that is the remainder of the exhaustion [, at the culmination of cultivation,] of [any] appearing object that is a universal, i.e., a verbal object.⁸⁰

Now, if intense cultivation always gives rise to nonconceptual cognition regardless of its object, the question arises about what differentiates the experience sought by a Buddhist practitioner from a hallucination resulting from someone's obsessive thinking. According to Dharmakīrti, the cognition of a yogi is distinguished based on its reliability, which in turn depends on its apprehension of a real object.⁸¹ Thus, by being both nonconceptual and reliable, the cognition of a yogi also qualifies as perception.⁸² However, it must be noted that, in this context, the real-

80 RN_A, 121.4–122.1; RN_B, 232.9–232.18; RN_C, 186.24–187.7: *yul de la blo de rtog med du 'gyur ba'i don yang | rnam 'grel las | shes gang gang la sgra don 'dzin || de ni de la rtog 'pa yin* (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: *par 'dod*; em. as per PV, Miyasaka 1972 ed.) || *ces pa'i ldog zla yul de la sgra don snang ba dang bral ba'i blo yin pa de yin zhing | yul de la sgra don snang ba dang bral ba yang blo de yul de la zhen gtad med pa {ni} yin no || des na gang zag gi bdag med dang chos kyi bdag med sogs yul gang yin kyang | yul de thog mar rtog bcas kyis goms par byas pas nam zhig na | rang yul de la nan gyis zhen pa'i cha zad pa zhig 'ong du yod la | rang yul la zhen pa'i cha zad pa'i tshe blo de'i snang ngor sgra don gyi spyi mtshan nyid pa snang ba med kyang | sgra don gyi spyir gyur ba'i snang yul de zad pa'i shul gyi blo de'i snang yul de la mi 'dra ba du ma yod de |.*

81 See PV III.286: "As for these [clear and nonconceptual cognitions,] we accept as a means of valid cognition the direct perception that, arising from cultivation, is reliable, like [the cognitions of] the things that we have elucidated earlier. The remaining [cognitions] are delusions." Tib. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 81.3–81.4: *| de la sngar bshad dngos po bzhin || slu ba med can gang yin de || bsgoms byung mngon sum tshad mar 'dod || lhag ma nye bar bsad* (Miyasaka: *bslang*; em.) *ba yin |*. Skt. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 80.3–80.4: *tatra pramāṇaṃ saṃvādi yat prāṇ nirṇītavastuvāt | tadbhāvanāṃ pratyakṣaṃ iṣṭaṃ śeṣā upalavāḥ ||*. See also Dunne 2006: 500 and 515; Eltschinger 2009: 195–96.

82 See Eltschinger 2009: 192.

ity (*bhūta*; *yang dag*) of Dharmakīrti's object of cultivation does not depend on its phenomenological appearance or its ontological status. In fact, no distinction can be drawn in terms of phenomenological appearance, whether it be the appearance of the object at the beginning of the cultivation process (when the object arises as a mental image in conceptual cognition) or at its end (when the object arises vividly in nonconceptual cognition). Moreover, in terms of Dharmakīrti's Sautrāntika ontology, an object of cultivation can only be a universal (*sāmānya*; *spyi*), a conceptually construed image that is always permanent, incapable of performing a function, and, therefore, always unreal.⁸³ The reality of Dharmakīrti's object of cultivation depends instead on its capacity to withstand previous rational scrutiny.⁸⁴ Accordingly, the four noble truths are the only real objects of cultivation and yogic perception because, before approaching the final stage of cultivation, they are thoroughly ascertained and proven conceptually, at first from listening to the Buddha's teachings, and, secondly, through reasoned philosophical analysis.⁸⁵ Moreover, since their eventual direct experience is conducive to one's liberation, the four noble truths are also of proven soteriological efficaciousness.⁸⁶ In contrast, the cultivation of any object that is unreal (*abhūta*; *yang dag min*) because it is unable to pass rational scrutiny will engender cognitions that are also nonconceptual and vivid but essentially delusional, namely, nothing more than obsessive hallucinations.⁸⁷ A lovesick man who tortures himself with the constant thought of an absent, unapproachable lover will indeed come to experience the vivid image of the latter, but, upon trying to embrace her, he will only end up groping the air.

As indicated by the first of the last two passages quoted above from *The Illuminating Light*, Tsoknyi Gyatso takes a further step by shifting and adapting Dharmakīrti's theory to his own Jonang model of reality. Accordingly, the real object of cultivation is "what exists to the extent that it abides on its own" (*don steng du gnas*

83 See Phuntsho 2005: 403–4 and 411; Dunne 2006: 500–4 and 510–11.

84 See Eltschinger 2009: 193 and 196.

85 See Dunne 2006: 504–10; Eltschinger 2009: 196–99.

86 See Dunne 2006: 515.

87 See PV III.282: "[Those who are] deceived by the influence of desire, grief, or fear, or by dreams about thieves and so on, see [such things] as if [they were] in front of them, although [they] are unreal." Tib. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 79.25–79.26: | 'dod 'jigs myang na gyis brlams dang || rkun po rmi sogs kyis bsal pas || mdun na gnas pa bzhi du ni || yang dag min pa'ang mthong bar 'gyur |. Skt. Miyasaka 1972 ed.: 78.25–78.26: *kāmaśokabhayonmādacaurasvapnādyu-paplutāḥ* | *abhūtān api paśyanti purato 'vasthitān iva* ||. See also Dunne 2006: 499–500 and 513–14; Eltschinger 2009: 193–94.

tshod la yod pa)⁸⁸ or, in other words, that which is found to be ultimately real as the mode of abiding (*gnas lugs*) of phenomena and persons. More precisely, the real object of cultivation of the Pāramitāyāna context, by Tsoknyi Gyatso's account, cannot be but the *dharmatā* established from the perspective of negating the *negandum*: the emptiness of true existence that results from the rigorous Madhyamaka analysis of phenomena and persons and which, as we have seen, coincides with buddha nature inasmuch as it is the nature of sentient beings' minds.

In the sixteenth section of *The Illuminating Light*, Tsoknyi Gyatso details the culmination of Pāramitāyāna's cultivation process. The practice of prolonged familiarization with the absence of true existence, he explains, gradually evolves up to the peak moment when this non-affirming negation merges completely with all bases of negation that instantiate it as their mode of abiding, whether they be relative phenomena or persons. This point coincides with the total exhaustion of any conceptual activity and any cognitive content belonging to the sphere of the relative. Thereby, it marks the extinction of ordinary consciousness and the rise of wisdom, through which the yogi experiences, for the first time in an immediate nonconceptual way, that long-cultivated emptiness. Moreover, this newly acquired perception marks one's attainment of the first *bodhisattvabhūmi*. However, as one roams the realm of wisdom during the thus-reached meditative equipoise, the object of one's direct, nonconceptual cognition is not the non-affirming negation of the mere absence of true existence established from the perspective of negating the *negandum*. Rather, for Tsoknyi Gyatso, wisdom discloses its object as the nonrepresentational ultimate posited from the perspective of establishing the distinctive features. Hence, at the culmination of the cultivation process, the practitioner attains a direct perception of emptiness as endowed with all the ultimate aspects or, in other words, of buddha nature and its qualities:

The absence of truly existent phenomena and persons is the consummate mode of abiding of the [respective] bases of negation. Therefore, when one has become familiar with and actualized that very [absence] by grasping it through the power of the vast accumulation of the practice of the one hundred seventy-three aspects of the three [types of] knowledge, then it is understood and appears to the intellect as integrated with the bases of negation as their consummate mode of being.

88 Note that the passage quoted above reads only *gnas tshod la yod* (RN_A, 121.4; RN_B, 233.8; RN_C, 186.23), whereas, in some of the following lines, we can read *don steng du gnas tshod la yod pa* (RN_A, 122.1; RN_B, 233.2; RN_C, 187.8) or *don steng du yod pa* (RN_A, 122.4; RN_B, 233.7; RN_C, 187.12).

The closer that *dharmatā*, the mode of abiding, is to being actualized through the cessation of the feature of discursive thought, to that degree it is actualized through the exhaustion of relative signs, which are the aspects of the ground and the path appearing to the intellect. Accordingly, once the Mahāyāna *bhūmi* of the noble ones is attained, not even an iota [of] the appearing aspects of the relative arises for that intellect, and the experience of the relative vanishes not only [in] the ascertainment of the [general] sphere of the intellect but also in the ascertainment of each and every peripheral aspect of the intellect. Then, having momentarily transcended the realm of consciousness, one moves into the realm of wisdom.

At that moment, that *dharmatā*, the object, is simultaneously one in essence with *dharmas* such as form, and its exclusion *qua* thing itself is not just absolute nothingness but unceasing appearance. The [meditative] equipoise, the subject, is the thoroughly nondiscursive cognition of the unceasing appearance of what, following the acquisition of the ability to familiarize for a long time with all the aspects of the three [types of] knowledge [in the state of] post-meditation, bears the imprint of post-meditation. And the way that *dharmatā*, the object, is realized by wisdom, the subject, is realized and appears for the intellect by way of being integrated with the basis of negation as its consummate mode of being. For these reasons, after the ascertaining factor of the wisdom of the equipoise and the appearance factor have become one, for such wisdom, that *dharmatā* [appears] as that which possesses the aspects of each and every basis of negation and the aspects of each and every omniscience that apprehends [in the meditative] equipoise. And, in particular, that *dharmatā* that is the naturally present potential—that *dharmatā* that is the emptiness of a truly existing mind—appears as being endowed with all the aspects of *dharmatā*. [That is, it appears as being] endowed with the aspects of each and every buddha quality, such as the [ten] strengths and the [eighteen] unique [attributes] associated with the potential.⁸⁹

89 RN_A, 165.5–166.7; RN_B, 278.15–280.2; RN_C, 213.23–214.16: *chos dang gang zag bden grub med pa ni dgag gzhi de'i gnas lugs mthar thug yin pas | de nyid mkhyen gsum gyi rnam pa brgya don gsum nyams su len pa'i tshogs rgya chen po'i nus pas zin pa'i sgo nas goms par byed pas mthar mngon du gyur pa na | blo ngor dgag gzhi de'i yin lugs mthar thug tu 'dres pa'i tshul du rtogs pa dang snang ba yin la | gnas lugs chos nyid de la rnam rtog gi cha 'gags nas mngon sum du gyur pa la*

The Mantrayāna Approach

The direct approach embodied by the Mantrayāna, albeit leading to the same realization as the one attained in the Pāramitāyāna, does so more swiftly and by following a different trajectory. In the Mantrayāna, one first mainly embraces the perspective of establishing the distinctive qualities of *dharmatā qua* buddha nature through the direct experience of the reflections of emptiness and clear awareness. During this phase, the yogi deliberately avoids any analytical endeavor. Nevertheless, once the practitioner has first encountered a vivid nonconceptual experience of emptiness and luminous awareness, there occurs the need for observing and analyzing the relative appearance of phenomena and persons. Thus, as no independent truly established self or mind can be found upon search, the yogi cultivates the certainty resulting from this analysis and, thereby, comes to integrate the perspective of negating the *negandum* into his or her mental continuum. In *The Illuminating Light*, Tsoknyi Gyatso explains,

At the outset, one observes the abiding feature of mind's clear awareness, the reflections of empti[ness], and so forth with the intention of seeking the mind's consummate mode of being, without analyzing through [reasonings] such as that of being free from being one and many. Thus, one experientially recognizes the relative defining characteristics of awareness itself, and there arises a stable one-pointed meditative concentration toward the defining characteristics of the clear awareness of mind and so forth. At this time, directing the mind

thag ci tsam nye ba de tsam du blo de'i snang ngor gzhi lam gyi snang cha'i kun rdzob kyi mtshan ma zad pa'i sgo nas mngon du gyur nas | theg chen 'phags pa'i sa thob pa na blo de'i snang ngor kun rdzob kyi snang cha rdul phra rab tsam yang mi 'char zhing | blo dbyings kyi nges ngo ma zad blo'i zur cha mtha' dag (RN_B: thag) gi nges ngor kun rdzob kyi myong snang nub nas | re zhih rnam shes kyi rgyal khams brgal (RN_B: bsgal) nas ye shes kyi rgyal khams su 'pho bar gyur pa'i tshe | yul chos nyid de chos can gzugs sogs dang grub bde ngo bo gcig yin pa dang | rang gi rang ldog can med tsam ma yin par snang ba 'gag med yin pa dang | yul can mnyam bzahag yang rjes thob mkhyen gsum gyi rnam pa thams cad yun ring du goms pa'i nus pa 'gos nas | rjes thob kyi lag rjes bzahag (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: zhog; em.) pa'i rang snang 'gags med kyi spros pa mtha' dag bral ba'i shes pa yin pa dang | yul chos nyid de yul can ye shes kyis rtogs tshul yang blo ngor dgag gzhi de'i yin lugs mthar thug tu 'dres pa'i tshul tu rtogs pa dang snang ba rgyu mtshan rnam kyis | mnyam bzahag ye shes de'i nges ngo dang snang ngo yang gcig tu gyur nas ye shes de'i ngor chos nyid de dgag gzhi de dang de'i rnam pa can dang | mnyam bzahag zin byed kyi 'rnam mkhyen' (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: mkhyen rnam; em.) de dang de'i rnam pa can dang | khyad par sems kyi bden stong gi chos nyid sogs rang bzhin gnas rigs su gyur pa'i chos nyid de rigs can stobs dang ma 'dres pa sogs sangs rgyas kyi yon tan de dang de'i rnam pa can sogs chos nyid kyi rnam pa thams cad par snang ba yin te |.

toward the way phenomena and persons lack true [existence], one analyzes the defining characteristics of the inner mind based on experience. If [things such as] a truly established “I” [that is] the object of the innate attachment of believing in an “I”, or a truly established mind [that is] the object of the attachment of believing mind to be real, were to exist on their own [just] as they appear, they would necessarily lack origination and cessation, transition and transformation, and so on. Rather, at this moment, one knows the “I” and the truly established mind based on the particularity of [their relative] mode of appearance. That “I” appearing to the conventional mind, the mind ascertaining the object in the present moment, and so on are not something completely static that lacks origination, cessation, transition, transformation, and so forth. And, once this is experientially ascertained, there will arise the factor ascertaining that the “I” of one’s [mental] continuum, the mind, and so forth are not tru[ly existent], nor do they stand on their own. At this time, on the basis of the mode in which one experiences the defining characteristics of mind, its appearing feature, and the rest, one repeatedly draws on the certainty that phenomena and persons do not exist independently. Then, after one’s understanding that phenomena and persons are empty of true [existence] has gradually merged into [one’s mental] continuum, the relative part of the experience is depleted within the sphere [of reality]. This is an[other] mode [of realizing emptiness], and [thus] there are two [modes of realizing it].⁹⁰

90 RN_A, 163.6–164.5; RN_B, 276.15–277.16; RN_C, 212.20–213.8: ... *thog mar gcig du* (RN_B: *tu*) *bral sogs kyis mi dpyod par sems kyi yin lugs mthar thug 'tshol ba'i bsam pas sems gsal rig gi gnas cha dang | stong gzugs sogs la dmigs nas rig pa rang gi kun rdzob kyi mtshan nyid myong bas ngos zin par byed cing | sems kyi gsal rig gi mtshan nyid sogs la rtse gcig pa'i ting nge 'dzin brtan po skyes pa'i mtshams zhig nas | chos dang gang zag bden par med pa'i tshul la blo kha phyogs te nang sems kyi mtshan nyid nyams su myong thog nas dpyod pa na | ngar 'dzin lhan skyes kyi zhen yul bden grub kyi nga dang | sems bden 'dzin gyi zhen yul bden grub kyi sems sogs snang ba ltar tshugs thub tu yod na | skye 'gag dang 'pho 'gyur sogs med dgos par nga bdag dang bden grub kyi sems snang tshul gyi spu ris la brten nas shes la | blo tha snyad pa la nga zhes snang ba de dang da lta yul go byed kyi sems sogs skye 'gag dang 'pho 'gyur sogs med pa'i dam hrang nge ba zhig ma yin pa dang | myong bas nges nas rang rgyud kyi nga dang sems sogs bden pa tshugs thub med pa la nges cha skye 'ong la | de tshe chos dang gang zag rang ngos nas med pa la sems dang sems kyi snang cha sogs kyi mtshan nyid nyams su myong tshul la sogs pa'i sgo nas nges pa yang yang drangs nas | chos dang gang zag bden stong gi go ba rim gyis rgyud la 'dres nas kun rdzob kyi myong cha dbyings su zad par byed pa'i tshul gcig dang gnyis yod la |*

In the works taken into consideration in the present paper Tsoknyi Gyatso's main concern, with regard to the Mantrayāna approach, is to define and explain the essential mechanics of its distinctive realization process. Nevertheless, even though Tsoknyi Gyatso generally avoids too explicit an association of this approach with a precise tantric system and eschews any prescriptive detail, his *The Illuminating Light* contains several implicit references to the visionary experiences that arise from the practice of Kālacakra's sixfold yoga. In addition to the already mentioned recurrent simile of magical reflections, this connection emerges quite clearly, for example, at the beginning of the ninth section of *The Illuminating Light*, where Tsoknyi Gyatso lists the first occasions, in Pāramitāyāna and Mantrayāna respectively, in which the practitioner moves from a conceptual to a nonconceptual cognition of emptiness:

In this [Jonang] tradition, in the Omniscient Nyaönpa's (Nya dbon pa, 1285–1379) commentary on the [Prajñā]pāramitā[sūtras]⁹¹ it is stated that even the [meditative] equipoise of the Mahāyāna path of preparation is a mind that directly realizes emptiness. Moreover, the Venerable Tāranātha (1575–1634) asserted that since the wisdom of the [stage of] withdrawal⁹² of the Unexcelled Mantra [System] directly realizes the reflections of empti[ness], and the reflections of empti[ness] are emptiness, even ordinary beings [can] have a direct realization of emptiness.⁹³

Most plausibly, when mentioning the great Jonang scholar Tāranātha, Tsoknyi Gyatso implicitly refers to passages such as the following one, extracted from Tāranātha's *Supplement to the Meaningful to Behold* (*Mthong ba don ldan gyi lhan*

91 See Nya dbon kun dga' dpal, *Bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i rgyas 'grel bshad sbyar yid kyi mun sel*.

92 As already mentioned earlier in this paper, withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*; *so sor sdud*) is the first branch of the sixfold yoga of Kālacakra. It is the stage during which the experience of the reflections of emptiness can occur for the first time. See, for example, Orofino, 1996: 129–30.

93 RN_A, 120.6–120.7; RN_B, 231.11–231.16; RN_C, 186.12–186.16: | *lugs 'dir kun mkhyen nya dbon pa'i phar phyin tikār* | *theg chen sbyor lam mnyam bzhag kyang stong nyid mngon sum du rtogs pa'i blo yin par gsungs pa dang* | *rje btsun sgrol mgon zhabs kyis* | *sngags bla med kyi so sor sdud pa'i ye shes kyis stong gzugs mngon sum du rtogs shing stong gzugs ni stong nyid yin pas* | *stong nyid mngon sum du rtogs pa so skyes la yang yod par gsungs pas na* | ...

thabs),⁹⁴ which constitutes, together with the text it integrates,⁹⁵ one of his main works on the sixfold yoga practice of Kālacakra:

[According to] our tradition, since the appearance of the reflection (or form), sound, smell, taste, and touch of empti[ness] appears in direct perception, it is a sensory direct perception. Since it is the wisdom wherein the winds—the riding mounts of mental conceptualizations—have ceased, it is a mental direct perception. Since those reflections of empti[ness] are the reflections [of] the ultimate *dharmatā* itself, the cognition that perceives *dharmatā* is a yogic direct perception. The reflections of empti[ness] and the awareness that perceives them are one in essence, and therefore, since that [awareness] perceives these [reflections], it is a self-aware direct perception. Thus, although in general [the perception of the reflections of emptiness] is at once all four [types of] direct perception, it is said that, in the context of [the stages of] withdrawal and meditative absorption, it has predominantly the characteristic of sensory direct perception.⁹⁶

Hence, according to Tāranātha, the experience of the reflections of emptiness is a direct perception of *dharmatā* or emptiness itself and, therefore, of the fully qualified buddha nature. The basic mechanics that allow this perceptual cognition to dawn are related to the control and cessation of vital winds, the sources of conceptualizations. This is further made clear by Tsoknyi Gyatso in one of the very last pages of his *The Illuminating Light*, where he explains that funneling the winds into one's central channel (*avadhūtī*; *rtsa dbu ma*) and withdrawing discursive thought are the essential, necessary conditions for the arising of the reflections of emptiness:

94 The full title reads *Rdo rje'i rnal 'byor gyi 'khrid yig mthong ba don ldan gyi lhan thabs 'od brgya 'bar ba* (henceforth referred to as TDDL).

95 See Tāranātha, *Mthong ba don ldan*. The full title reads *Zab lam rdo rje'i rnal 'byor gyi 'khrid yig mthong ba don ldan*.

96 TDDL_A, 712.4–713.1; TDDL_B, 311.7–312.3; TDDL_C, 316.20–317.7: *rang lugs ni stong pa'i gzugs sgra dri ro reg bya'i snang ba mngon sum du snang ba'i phyir | dbang po'i mngon sum | yid nam rtog gi bzhon pa rlung 'gags pa'i ye shes yin pa'i phyir yid kyi mngon sum | stong gzugs de don dam chos nyid rang gzugs yin pas chos nyid mthong ba'i shes pa rnal 'byor mngon sum | stong gzugs dang de mthong* (TDDL_B: *mtho*) *ba'i rig pa ngo bo gcig pa'i phyir des de mthong bas rang rig mngon sum yin pas | spyir mngon sum bzhi car yin yang | sor bsam gyi skabs 'dir dbang po'i mngon sum gyi mtshan nyid gtso che gsung ngo |*.

Nonetheless, it is asserted that the reflections of empti[ness], which are seen during stages of the Unsurpassed Mantra [System] such as that of withdrawal, are emptiness, and that their direct perception is the direct perception of emptiness. From that [meditative stage], through the entrance of the winds into the central channel [and] by the power of withdrawing discursive thought, [the reflections of emptiness] arise spontaneously, without being imagined. Such appearance is in accordance with the mode of abiding of the upward progression toward the level of a buddha. Moreover, in terms of such appearance, that nakedly exposed feature which, free from the husk of the relative signs of the appearing aspects of the path, arises without conceptualizations, spontaneously, and unreflectively, is *dhar-matā* and emptiness. For these reasons, even what is now perceived on the stage of withdrawal only engenders a vague direct perception of [signs] such as the smoke[-like appearance] of emptiness.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, it must be known that, except for some [types of] wisdom [realizing] the emptiness of true [existence] that can be equivalent to the wisdom of the [meditative] equipoise of the noble ones of the Mahāyāna Pāramitā[yāna], there is no certainty that, in the case of the ordinary beings [who practice] the Unsurpassed Mantra [System], the entire path on which one perceives the reflections of empti[ness] is the wisdom that realizes the ultimate emptiness. This is because the authentic insight that realizes emptiness must be one that, in general, has a mode of apprehension that is free from elaborations, such that one does not find [any] object to be apprehended in the context of the [ordinary] mind. [Why?] Because the insight that

97 The perception of the reflections of emptiness is first developed through the experience of ten signs (*rtags bcu*), the first four of which appear during night yoga and the last six appear during the day yoga: smoke, mirage, fireflies, lamp, flame, moon, sun, *Rāhu*, *Kalāgni*, and drop. See LKCT V.115. Tib. D 3622, 113a.2–113a.3: | *nam mkhar kun nas zhen pa'i sems dang mig ni mi 'dzums rdo rje'i lam du rab tu zhugs pa yis* || *stong pa las ni du ba smig rgyu rab gsal dri ma med pa'i mkha' snang nyid dang mar me dang* || *'bar ba dang ni zla ba nyi ma rdo rje rnam dang mchog gi cha dang thig le mthong bar 'gyur* || *de yi dbus su sangs rgyas gzugs ni yul dang rnam par bral ba du ma longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku* |. Skt. Banerjee 1985 ed.: 269.9–269.12: *pratyāhāras jinendras bhavati daśavidhas dhyānam akṣobhyas eva prāṇāyāmas ca khadgī punar api daśadhā dhāraṇā ratnapāṇis* | *ḍombyām ca anusmṛtis syāt api kamaladharas śrīsamādhiś ca cakrī ekaikas pañcabhedais punar api ca yatas bhidyate hi ādikādyais* ||.

realizes emptiness must be associated with a state in which the self of phenomena and persons is not found upon search.⁹⁸

Thus, during the practice of the first branch of the sixfold yoga, even an ordinary person may achieve the direct perception of the reflections of emptiness. However, at that stage, it can only be a “vague direct perception” that still needs to develop into its full focus and form. Mantrayāna and, in particular, the practices prescribed in the *Kālacakratantra* grant an effective shortcut for piercing through the realm of the conceptual. Nevertheless, as long as one is even slightly entangled in discursive elaborations and conceptual constructs, such direct experiences are nothing more than momentary, blurred perceptual flashes and do not automatically extend to the rest of one’s path.

Concluding Remarks

In *The Illuminating Light and Removing the Anguish of Holding to Extremes*, Tsoknyi Gyatso consistently propounds two distinct yet complementary definitions of *dharmatā*, which the Jonangpas fully equate with buddha nature: it is both the emptiness of true existence (*bden stong*), which is the nature of sentient beings’ minds, and the emptiness endowed with all the ultimate aspects (*don dam pa’i rnam pa thams cad pa*). These two definitions relate, respectively, to the two distinct perspectives of negating the *negandum* and establishing the distinctive features, which coincide in turn with the explicit teaching modes of the second and the third turnings of the wheel of Dharma. The perspective of negating the *negandum* characterizes mainly the logical-analytical approach of Pāramitāyāna. In con-

98 RN_A, 168.1–168.7; RN_B, 281.1–281.17; RN_C, 215.5–215.19: ‘on kyang sngags bla med kyi sor sdud la sogs pa’i skabs su mthong ba’i stong gzugs de stong nyid yin pa dang | de mngon sum du mthong ba stong nyid mngon sum du mthong ba yin par gsungs pa ni | de las rlung dbu mar zhugs pa’i rkyen gyis rnam par rtog pa sdud pa’i stobs kyis ma btags (RN_A, RN_B, RN_C: brtags; em.) rang byung du shar ba yin pa dang | snang ba de yar ldan du sangs rgyas kyi sar ‘gro ba’i gnas lugs dang mthun pa yin pa dang | snang ba de’i steng gi lam gyi snang cha’i kun rdzob kyi mtshan ma’i shun pa bral ba’i ma bsam par rang shugs kyi rtog (RN_B: rtogs) med du shar ba’i cha rjen char du bud pa de chos nyid dang stong nyid yin pa’i rgyu mtshan gyis | da lta sor sdud kyi skabs su mthong ba de yang stong nyid kyi du ba sogs ‘ol spyi’i tshul du mngon sum du mthong ba yin pa’i rnam bzhag mdzad pa tsam yin gyi | theg chen phar phyin gyi ‘phags pa’i mnyam bzhag ye shes kyi dod thub pa’i bden stong gi ye shes ‘ga’ zhig ma gtogs | sngags bla med kyi so skyes skabs kyi stong gzugs mthong ba’i lam thams cad don dam stong nyid rtogs pa’i ye shes yin pa’i nges pa med par shes par bya ste | stong nyid rtogs pa’i shes rab mtshan nyid pa yin pa la | spyir blo de’i ngor gzung bya ma rnyed pa’i spros bral kyi ‘dzin stangs can zhig yin dgos pa’i phyir te | stong nyid rtogs pa’i shes rab ni | chos dang gang zag gi bdag btsal nas ma rnyed pa’i ngang tshul can zhig yin dgos pa’i phyir ro ||.

trast, the perspective of establishing the distinctive features characterizes mainly the direct approach of Mantrayāna. Nevertheless, according to Tsoknyi Gyatso, both vehicles eventually lead to the actualization of the same fully-fledged buddha nature, whose dawning direct experience is most suitably portrayed through the metaphorical language of the Kālacakra literature.

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Sentient Beings Within

Buddha Nature and the Great Perfection

Douglas Duckworth

Introduction

This paper describes how buddha nature is interpreted by Mipam ('Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho, 1846–1912) in light of his tradition of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). I provide several citations from a range of Mipam's work to show how he accepts that the qualities of the buddha are primordially present, unconditioned, and thus not newly produced. Mipam also presents buddha nature as a groundless or empty ground, and thereby qualifies his assertion of the primordial presence of buddha nature by emphasizing the way that buddha nature is also empty, and by making a distinction between the way things are (in which all of the buddha qualities are primordially present) and the way things appear (in which the qualities of a buddha are newly produced). This paper considers the way that his unique treatment of buddha nature reflects his legacy of the Great Perfection. I aim to show here that in his tradition, the relationship between a sentient being and a buddha might be better reflected by how a sentient being exists within a buddha rather than how a buddha, or buddha nature, exists within sentient beings.

Appearance and Reality

In his *Lion's Roar: Exposition of Buddha Nature* (*Bde gshegs snying po'i stong thun chen mo seng ge'i nga ro*), Mipam describes the essence of the buddha nature as follows:

The essence of the buddha nature itself is free from all conceptual constructs such as existence and nonexistence, permanence and annihilation; it is the equality of the single sphere of indivisible truth.¹

He describes buddha nature here as free from all conceptual constructs in the same language he uses to describe emptiness. Buddha nature, like emptiness, is the basic nature of all phenomena. He also affirms buddha nature with language such as “the single sphere of indivisible truth” and calls it “the great unconditioned”:

¹ Mipam, *Lion's Roar*, 598: *bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po rang gi ngo bo ni yod med rtag chad la sogs pa'i spros pa thams cad bral ba bden pa dbyer med thig le nyag gcig mnyam pa nyid de*.

Even though partial cognitions that cognize objects are necessarily impermanent, the wisdom that is the one taste of the knower and known, “the one with the space-*vajra* pervading space” (*mkha' khyab mkha' yi rdo rje can*), is not like that [impermanent cognition]. This is because in the state of unchanging luminous clarity, which is the self-vibrancy of the unconditioned, all the phenomena of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra are incorporated (*'ub chub*); hence, an intelligent cognition that examines the consummate [reality] (*mthar thug dpyod pa'i rig shes*) establishes that there is primordially no arising or ceasing in the essence of that. Therefore, wisdom such as this is the “great unconditioned,” which does not abide in either extreme of being conditioned or unconditioned; it is not at all like a mere non-entity. Since entities and non-entities are phenomena and are dependent arisings, or dependent imputations, when authentically analyzed they are hollow, fake, lies, and deceptions; buddha nature is the great unconditioned, the basic nature of all phenomena that are entities or non-entities, which is authentically non-deceptive.²

He explains that partial cognitions (i.e., consciousnesses) are necessarily impermanent; wisdom, however, is beyond the dichotomy of impermanent entities and permanent non-entities. He argues that buddha nature is “the great unconditioned”—the basic nature of all phenomena that are entities or non-entities.

Mipam also qualifies wisdom as permanent. He states that from the perspective of sentient beings, ordinary conventional sources of knowledge exclusively observe functional, thus impermanent, entities. However, in the perspective of wisdom, omniscience is permanent:

2 Ibid., 575: *yul shes pa'i shes pa nye tsho* [read *nyi tsho*] *ba la mi rtag pas khyab kyang* | *shes dang shes bya ro gcig pa'i ye shes mkha' khyab mkha' yi rdo rje can ni de dang mi 'dra ste* | *'dus ma byas pa'i rang gdangs 'od gsel* [read *gsal*] *mi 'gyur ba'i ngang der 'khor 'das kyi chos kun 'ub chub pas na de'i ngo bo la skye 'gags ye nas med par mthar thug dpyod pa'i rig shes kyi grub pa'i phyir ro* | *des na de 'dra ba'i ye shes de ni 'dus byas dang 'dus ma byas kyi mthar gang la'ang mi gnas pa'i 'dus ma byas chen po ste* | *dnegos med rkyang pa dang gtan mi 'dra la* | *dnegos dnegos med gnyis ka chos yin zhing* | *de dag brten nas skyes pa'am brten nas btags pa'i phyir na yang dag par dpyad na 'dus byas dang gsog gsob rdzun pa bslu ba yin la* | *bde gshegs snying po ni dnegos dnegos med kyi chos nyid 'dus ma byas chen po yang dag par mi bslu ba yin te* | *rtsa ba shes rab las* | *rang bzhin dag ni bcos min dang* | *gzhan la ltos pa med pa yin* | *zhes dang* | *dnegos dang dnegos med 'dus byas yin* | *mya ngan 'das pa 'dus ma byas* | *zhes gsungs pa bzhin no*.

There is no permanent source of knowledge
Because the realization of the existence of entities is a source of
knowledge and
Objects of knowledge are impermanent;
That [omniscience] is only impermanent.

3 Ibid., 593–94: gnas yongs su ma gyur pa'i gdul bya gzhan gyi bsam ngo dang bstun te rnam mkhyen
mi rtag ces lung las gsungs shing | rigs pa yang rnam 'grel las | tshad ma rtag pa nyid yod min | | dngos
yod rtogs pa tshad phyir dang | shes bya mi rtag pa nyid kyi | de mi rtag pa nyid phyir ro | zhes

That functional entities are necessarily impermanent phenomena is a claim made within the Buddhist epistemological system of reliable sources of knowledge (*tshad ma*, *pramāṇa*) developed by Dharmakīrti, where cognition is said to be impermanent because of the mutually exclusive dichotomy of (1) functional entities and (2) permanent non-entities, devoid of functional capacity. However, Mipam contextualizes the statements regarding wisdom as impermanent; he says that the absence of permanent phenomena is necessarily established as such in the perspectives of non-Buddhists and others who have not trained their minds in the manner of “transformation within the essence of the inconceivable basic nature.” He delimits the necessity of cognition being impermanent to only the perspective of consciousness (*rnam shes*), not the perspective of wisdom (*ye shes*). Thus, he makes an epistemological distinction between appearance and reality based on consciousness and wisdom, respectively. Wisdom is unchanging; only in the perspective of consciousness is there apparent change.

Moreover, Mipam states that there is no arising or ceasing of dualistic phenomena in the basic nature that abides without ever changing. He adds that this basic nature can also be called “permanent” because it (1) exists and (2) is not momentary:

To an untransformed one who has dualistic perception, there is the incontrovertible and undeniable appearances of inequality—all the changing, adventitious defilements suitable to be removed, occurring sequentially as arising and ceasing moments, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, good and bad, etc.; however, the basic nature abides as the great equality in which arising, ceasing, and dualistic phenomena are not established. All spatial aspects and temporal changes are incorporated within that state. This exists as the domain of a sublime being’s individual reflexive awareness wisdom (*so so rang rig pa’i ye shes*), and

gsungs te | sems bskyed pa dang stong nyid goms pa la sogs lam gyi rgyu las rnam mkhyen 'byung gi rgyu med du 'byung ba mi rigs pa dang | de chos thams cad la mngon sum pa'i tshad ma yin pa'i phyir | tshad ma ste mi bslu ba'i blo yin na rtag pa zhig med de dngos po yod pa la de de bzhin 'jal ba'i tshad ma yin la | de'i yul shes bya ni mi rtag pa nyid kyi phyir 'jal byed tshad ma de yang mi rtag ste rim can du 'byung gi | rtag pa yin na don byed nus pas stong par tshad mas grub pa'i phyir yul 'jal ba la sogs pa'i byed pa mtha' dag gis stong par nges pas na rnam mkhyen ni rtag par shin tu mi rigs te mi rtag par 'grub la | de bzhin dngos po thams cad mi rtag pa dang | dngos med la rtag par btags kyang rtag rgyu'i gzhi med pas rtag pa mtshan nyid pa'i chos gang yang mi rnyed par 'gyur rol | tshul 'di ni phyi rol mu stegs can dang | bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i chos nyid kyi ngo bor gnas gyur pa'i tshul la blo ma sbyangs pa'i theg pa thun mongs pa'i ngor de ltar sgrub dgos te | rnam shes kyi ngor snang tshul la de las gzhan du 'char ba'i thabs ci yang med do | 'on kyang gnas yongs su gyur pa'i ye shes kyi gzigs pa'i dbang du byas na rnam mkhyen rtag par 'grub ste.

there is no pollution by the changes of the three times. So why not give this the name “great permanence”? [It is designated as such] because (1) it exists and (2) it does not arise and cease momentarily.⁴

Mipam affirms that the basic nature (buddha nature) exists, and it does not arise and cease momentarily; therefore, it can be called “permanent” by definition of what it means to be permanent. He denies, however, that the basic nature is an entity (*dnegos po*). He states that when the basic nature is evaluated from its own side, it is observed as neither a conditioned entity nor an unconditioned non-entity. He explains as follows in his *Vajra Essence* (*Gnyug sems 'od gsal ba'i don rgyal ba rig 'dzin brgyud pa'i lung bzhin brjod pa rdo rje snying po*):

When evaluated in terms of the basic nature (*chos nyid*) from its own side, it is observed as neither of the two—a conditioned entity or an unconditioned non-entity—because the basic nature, not abiding in the extremes of either the conditioned or the unconditioned, is known through individual reflexive awareness... At the time when the primordial basic nature is actualized as a buddha, the wisdom body of the great permanence—like a *vajra* that never deviates from the basic field of reality—is the great unconditioned; it is not conditioned. However, in terms of its mode of appearance, it is posited as newly arisen from the aspect of being a freed effect of previous training on the path; and it is posited as conditioned from the aspect of progressively engaging in enlightened activity for beings to be trained, etc.—you will be freed from the web of doubt when you distinguish the respective intended meanings in accord with what is generally proclaimed in scriptures.⁵

4 Ibid., 595–96: 'gyur bcas glo bur 'bral rung gi dri ma gang dag skad cig ma'i skye 'gag rim gyis 'byung ba dang| 'khor 'das dang bzang ngan la sogs pa'i mi mnyam pa 'di ni gnas ma gyur pa'i gnyis snang can la de ltar bslu med bsnyon med du snang yang | gshis la skye 'gag dang gnyis chos ma grub par mnyam pa chen por gnas pa| de'i ngang du phyogs kyi cha dang dus kyi 'gyur ba thams cad 'ub chub cing | de ni 'phags pa rnams kyi so so rang rig pa'i ye shes kyi yul du yod pa yin cing | dus gsum gyi 'gyur bas bsld med pas na de la rtag pa chen po'i tha snyad cis mi gtags te| yod pa gang zhig skad cig gi skye 'gag can min pa'i phyir ro.

5 Mipam, *Vajra Essence*, 404–5: chos nyid rang ngos nas gzhal na| 'dus byas dnegos po dang 'dus ma byas dnegos med gnyis kar mi dmigs te| chos nyid 'dus byas dang 'dus ma byas kyi mtha' la mi gnas pa so so rang rig par bya ba yin cing... gdod ma'i chos nyid mngon du gyur pa sangs rgyas kyi dus na| chos kyi dbyings de las nam yang mi g.yo ba'i rdo rje lta bu rtag pa chen po ye shes kyi sku ni 'dus ma byas chen po yin te 'dus byas ma yin mod| 'di la snang tshul gyi dbang du byas na sngar lam sgom pa'i bral 'bras yin pa'i cha nas gsar byung dang | gdul bya rnams phrin las rim can du 'jug pa'i

He states that the basic nature from its own side is neither conditioned nor unconditioned; it is “the great unconditioned” free from extremes. However, in terms of the way things appear, it is posited as newly arisen from the aspect of being a freed effect (*bral ’bras*). It is also posited as conditioned from the aspect of the progressive engagement in enlightened activity for beings to be trained. In this way, Mipam distinguishes the mode of reality (*gnas tshul*), where all is inseparable from great equality, from the mode of appearance (*snang tshul*), where everything appears distinctly. Furthermore, he explains this as follows in *Vajra Essence*:

Although it is like this, most others assert that the essence of the exalted body and wisdom of a buddha is impermanent and that it is a permanent continuity. Those who accept the intrinsic nature of the fruitional emptiness that is endowed with all supreme aspects of the exalted body and wisdom assert as follows: the own essence of the exalted body and wisdom is permanent, but in the mode of appearance of those to be trained, it is an impermanent continuity as is said in the *Sūtra That Gathers the Viewpoints* (*Mdo dgongs ’dus*). In this way, in terms of the mode of reality as it is, while no phenomenon subsumed within the three times at all deviates from the nonarising, unceasing equality in the fundamental nature, all phenomena that exist appear as unmixed—such as self and other, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, phenomena of the past, present, and future. These two are such that through holding one position, the other need not be rejected. As similar to the discourses of the manner of realization endowed with the eight profundities,⁶ for the ones in whom the understood meaning of the non-contradiction of the two truths has radiantly dawned, a certainty that is free from doubt in the viewpoints of Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras easily arises.⁷

cha nas ’dus byas lta bur ’jog pa sogs lung spyi la grags pa ltar so so’i dgongs don shan phyed na the tshom gyi drwa ba bral bar ’gyur ro.

6 The eight profundities (*zab mo brgyad*) refer to profundity regarding (1) arising, (2) ceasing, (3) basic nature, (4) objects of knowledge, (5) cognition, (6) conduct, (7) nonduality, and (8) skillful means. These are found in the fourth section of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, “joining with the perfect aspects” (*rnam rdzogs sbyor ba*) as signs of the path of meditation. See Bötrül, *Words of Maitreya*, 208–9.

7 Mipam, *Vajra Essence*, 405–6: *de ltar yang gzhan phal mo ches sangs rgyas kyi sku dang ye shes ngo bo mi rtag la rgyun gyis rtag par ’dod | sku dang ye shes rnam kun mchog ldan ’bras bu’i stong nyid kyi rang bzhin du ’dod pa dag gis | sku dang ye shes rang gi ngo bos rtag kyang | gdul bya’i snang tshul la rgyun gyis mi rtag par ’dod de mdo dgongs ’dus las gsungs pa bzhin no | de ltar gnas lugs ji*

In distinction to the way others have asserted wisdom as impermanent, such as the Sakya scholar Śākya Chokden (Śākya mchog ldan, 1427–1508),⁸ Mipam affirms a view that the essence of wisdom is permanent. He argues that according to the mode of reality, nothing ever wavers from the non-arising and unceasing equality. Nevertheless, everything appears distinctly and unmixed according to the mode of appearance. He shows that these two perspectives need not be in conflict, such that if one holds a position according to the mode of reality as it is, then one must reject the mode of appearance, and vice versa. He shows that both views—the views of the ultimate mode of reality and the conventional mode of appearance—can be held in their respective contexts, and he adds that understanding the meaning of the non-contradiction of the two truths is a key point in understanding the viewpoints of sūtras and tantras. Thus, all beings have (or are) buddha nature, it is only in the perspective of seeming reality that the world is otherwise.

Furthermore, he states that in both cases of sūtra and mantra, in terms of the conventional way of appearance, a distinction can be made between (1) the way reality is, where appearance and existence are asserted to be primordially buddha, and (2) the way things conventionally appear, where wisdom appears as a new development:

Although in terms of the ultimate mode of reality, appearance and existence are asserted to be primordially buddha and one should meditate in this way, in terms of the conventional way of appearance, insight can make a distinction of three: (1) the ground, the heritage, which is the potential to be a buddha, (2) the path, which is the occasion of practice, and (3) the fruition, which is the consummation of purity; this is accepted all the way up to the Great Perfection.⁹

lta ba'i dbang du byas na dus gsum gyis bsdu pa'i chos gang yang gshis la skye 'gag med par mnyam pa nyid las ma g.yos bzhin du | bdag dang gzhan | 'khor ba dang myang 'das | 'dus byas dang 'dus ma byas | 'das dang da lta ma 'ongs pa'i chos sogs ji snyed pa'i chos kun ma 'dres par 'char ba 'di gnyis gcig gi phyogs bzung nas gcig spang mi dgos par | zab mo brgyad dang dang [read ldan] rtogs tshul gsungs pa dang mtshungs par bden gnyis 'gal med kyi go don legs par shar ba rnams la theg chen mdo rgyud kyi dgongs pa rnams la the tshom med pa'i nges shes bde blag tu skye ba yin no.

8 In contrast to Mipam, Śākya Chokden asserts that wisdom is impermanent and claims that statements of its permanence are spoken intending a “permanent continuity” (*rgyun gyi rtag pa*). Śākya Chokden, *Golden Needle of Elegant Sayings*, 498.

9 Mipam, *Intelligent Presence*, 449: *gnas lugs don dam pa'i dbang du byas na snang srid ye sangs rgyas par khas len zhing de ltar bsgom dgos kyang | snang lugs tha snyad kyi dbang du byas na | gzhi sangs rgya rung gi rigs dang | lam nyams su len pa'i skabs dang | dag pa mthar phyin pa'i 'bras bu gsum du shes rab kyis shan 'byed du yod pa ni rdzogs pa chen po'i bar gyis 'dod de.*

He affirms the three contexts of (1) the ground that is the potential to be a buddha, (2) the path that is the occasion of practice, and (3) the fruition that is complete purity. He affirms that such a distinction can be made throughout Buddhist traditions, including the Great Perfection. In the context of meditation, however, he advocates meditation done in accordance with the mode of reality, in which everything is primordially buddha. Thus, rather than buddha nature being within sentient beings, buddha nature is the way things are, and sentient beings are an appearance within buddha nature (and a distorted appearance at that).

Mipam further explains these three contexts in terms of consciousness and wisdom. In terms of the mode of appearance, he delineates three contexts: (1) the impure, which is the function of only consciousness, (2) the impure/pure, which is the function of a mix of consciousness and wisdom, and (3) the extremely pure, which is the function of only wisdom:

Although from the beginning there are no obscurations in the essence of the expanse of the basic nature, since the ground and fruition are established as indivisible, the mode of reality is ascertained as the viewpoint of the primordial buddha; and in the mode of appearance, when perfecting the strength of meditation, one also becomes a buddha again through actualizing the concordant modes of appearance and reality. These two are not a contradiction because the basic nature—which is the indivisibility of (1) the vibrancy of natural luminous clarity and (2) the primordial purity of all constructs from the beginning—pervades all of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa; hence, from the basic nature, which is nothing whatsoever, anything can arise. The equality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is spontaneously present as the truth body (*chos sku*)! Therefore, whatever the transformations of the limitless miraculous displays—the various appearances of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are—they all arise from only the functions of consciousness and wisdom. Hence, in the mode of appearance, there is a division of three contexts: (1) the context of the impure ground, which is the function of only consciousness, (2) the context of the path endowed with both the impure and pure, which is the function of consciousness and wisdom having been mixed, and (3) the context of the extremely pure fruition, which is the function of only wisdom.¹⁰

10 Ibid., 518–19: *chos nyid dbyings kyi ngo ba la sgrib pa ye nas med par grub pas kyang | gnas tshul gzhi 'bras dbyer med du grub pas ye sangs rgyas pa'i dgongs pa gtan la phebs shing | snang tshul la goms rtsal rdzogs pa'i tshe na gnas snang mthun pa'i tshul gyis mngon du gyur pas yang 'tshang*

In this way he affirms the indivisibility of the ground and fruition in the mode of reality while he delineates three contexts of the ground, path, and fruition in the mode of appearance. The three contexts of impure, impure/pure, and extremely pure are found in the *Uttaratantra*, in terms of (1) impure “sentient beings,” (2) both impure and pure “bodhisattvas,” and (3) completely pure “tathāgatas,” the buddhas.¹¹

Mipam elaborates that while there are distinctions to be made in terms of the way things appear, at the time of meditating on the nature of reality, one should do so in accord with the way reality is, where all things are equal:

In terms of the mode of appearance, since one asserts (1) the ground as natural purity and (2) the fruition as qualified by the purity that is freed from the adventitious [defilements], it is not that there is no distinction. Nevertheless, when conclusively settling (*la zlo'i tshe*), one should ascertain in accord with the mode of reality because if one does not, saṃsāra itself will not be realized as nirvāṇa. Even though when making distinctions one accords with the mode of appearance, by that, the equality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa within the mode of reality is not negated because there is no impurity within the mode of reality.¹²

He argues that even though distinctions are made in accord with the way things appear, that does not undermine how they are in reality. In the mode of reality, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are equal because there is no impurity within the mode of reality. If one always makes distinctions even when conclusively settling upon the nature of reality, then saṃsāra itself will not be realized as nirvāṇa—the modes of appearance and reality will not accord.

rgya ba'ang yin te | de gnyis mi 'gal lo | spros kun ye nas sam ka nas dag pa dang | rang bzhin 'od gsal ba'i gdangs dbyer med pa'i chos nyid de ni 'khor 'das kun la khyab pas | chos nyid ci yang ma yin las cir yang 'char rung ba'i phyir | 'khor 'das dbyer med mnyam pa nyid chos kyi skur lhun gyis grub pa'o | de'i phyir 'khor 'das kyi snang ba sna tshogs pa'i cho 'phrul tshad med pa ci bsgyur kyang | de dag rnam shes dang ye shes kyi byed pa kho na las byung ste | snang tshul du | rnam shes kho nas las byed pa ma dag gzhi yi skabs | rnam shes ye shes 'dre nas las byed pa ma dag dag pa gnyis ldan lam gyi skabs | ye shes kho nas las byed pa shin tu rnam dag pa'i 'bras bu'i skabs te gnas skabs gsum du dbyer yod.

11 *Uttaratantra* I.47: “According to the progression of impure, impure/pure, and extremely pure, they are called ‘sentient beings,’ ‘bodhisattvas,’ and ‘tathāgatas.’”

12 Mipam, *Intelligent Presence*, 542–43: *snang tshul gyi dbang du byas na | rang bzhin rnam dag gzhi dang | glo bur bral dag gi khyad par du byas pa'i dbyings 'bras bur 'dod pas khyad med pa min yang | la zlo'i tshe gnas tshul ltar gtan la 'bab dgos kyi | de ma phab na | 'khor ba nyid myang 'das su mi rtogs so | shan 'byed pa'i tshe snang tshul ltar yin yang | des gnas lugs la 'khor 'das mnyam nyid yin pa'ang mi khegs te | gnas tshul la ma dag pa med pas so.*

In this way, he delineates two contexts: (1) in terms of the mode of reality, where there are no distinctions and the two truths are indivisible, and (2) in terms of the mode of appearance, where appearances arise as unmixed and distinctions are made. While there are no distinctions within the ultimate mode of reality known by wisdom, insight makes distinctions between what is conventionally true and what is not. In his *Lion's Roar*, Mipam states,

In the context of differentiating well by means of a reliable source of knowledge analyzing the conventional, the reality of entities in the mode of apprehension of undistorted insight is conventionally

- knowing the truth as truth, such as knowing the undeceiving path of the sublime beings;
- knowing the false as false, such as knowing those who profess liberation through meditating on the self to be misguided;
- knowing the impermanent as impermanent, knowing all conditioned entities to be momentary;
- knowing the permanent as permanent, knowing that buddha nature, the self-existing wisdom totality of [supreme] aspects, never changes;
- knowing the nonexistent as nonexistent, such as knowing that the appearances of self and perceived-perceiver [duality] are not intrinsically established; and
- apprehending the existent as existent, such as knowing (1) the mode of appearance of interdependent arising, which is incontrovertible causality, and (2) the spontaneously present qualities of the basic nature, the buddha nature, naturally abiding in all sentient beings.

Therefore, through knowing and abiding in this way, vast qualities are attained because this is the undeluded root of virtue.¹³

13 Mipam, *Lion's Roar*, 599: 'on kyang tha snyad dpyod pa'i tshad mas shan legs par 'byed pa'i skabs su bden pa la bden par shes pa 'phags pa'i lam mi bsu bar shes pa lta bu dang | mi bden pa la mi bden par shes pa bdag bsgoms pas grol bar smra ba la log par shes pa lta bu dang | mi rtag pa la mi rtag par shes pa 'dus byas kyi dngos po thams cad skad cig mar shes pa dang | rtag pa la rtag par shes pa bde gshegs snying po rang byung gi ye shes rnam pa thams cad pa mi 'gyur bar shes pa dang | med pa la med par shes pa bdag dang gzung 'dzin du snang ba rang bzhin ma grub par shes pa lta bu dang | yod pa la yod par 'dzin pa rgyu 'bras bsu med rten 'brel gyi snang tshul dang | sems can thams cad la chos nyid bde gshegs snying po lhun gyis grub pa'i yon tan rang bzhin gyi gnas par

He delineates what exists and what does not from the perspective of conventional source of knowledge. Even though there are no distinctions between buddhas and sentient beings in the mode of reality, the mode of appearance is such that sentient beings can exist as distinct from buddhas. Through delineating appearance and reality in this way, he aims to affirm the primordial endowment of the qualities of buddha in sentient beings without incurring the consequence that all sentient beings must necessarily appear as buddhas.

Heritage of the Buddha

A topic that is closely associated with buddha nature is “heritage” (*rigs*). Heritage is the potential to be a buddha at the time of a sentient being, and Mipam identifies heritage with “the essential nature” (*snying po*), saying that heritage is the basic nature of mind that abides in the manner of an extract, or essential core, enclosed by adventitious defilements:

In terms of the essence of the mode of reality itself, all phenomena are encompassed within the expanse of the basic nature and the essence of the basic nature itself abides, without arising or ceasing, as equality; without temporal distinctions such as the past or future, or aspects such as the good or bad, here or there, self or other, greater and lesser, in saṃsāra and nirvāṇa—the basic field of reality is the unchanging, single sphere (*thig le nyag gcig*). Although the mode of reality is like this, in accord with the perspective of the appearances of adventitious delusion, even when bodies, minds, and domains of the three realms of saṃsāra appear in this way and the basic nature is not seen, it is not that the basic nature does not exist; it exists without deviating in the slightest from its own nature. Therefore, although the basic nature of mind is like this, it is not actualized due to being enclosed by adventitious defilements. Even so, it abides in the manner of an extract or an essential core in the center and is called the “heritage” or the “essential nature”; for example, it is said to be known by illustration through the nine metaphors such as the underground treasure.¹⁴

shes pa lta bu la sog pa ni tha snyad du dngos po'i yin lugs la phyin ci ma log pa'i shes rab 'dzin stangs yin pas de ltar shes shing bzhugs pa las yon tan rgya chen po thob ste gti mug med pa'i dge ba'i rtsa ba yin pa'i phyir ro.

14 Mipam, *Lion's Roar*, 587–88: *gnas lugs rang gi ngo bo'i dbang du byas na chos thams cad chos nyid de yi klong du chud cing chos nyid rang gi ngo bo la skye 'gag med par mnyam pa nyid du gnas*

He states that heritage is illustrated through the nine metaphors, cited in the *Uttaratantra*.¹⁵ He characterizes the heritage as the basic nature of mind that is not actualized, or not manifest; it abides as an extract or essential core. In his *Vajra Essence*, Mipam also calls this basic nature of mind “buddha nature”:

Existing in the minds of all sentient beings in the manner of the basic nature on the occasion when obscurations dwell as suitable to be removed, it is called “buddha nature” because when this basic nature of mind is realized, one becomes a buddha.¹⁶

When the presently existing basic nature of mind is realized, one becomes a buddha. Thus, the buddha nature is not within sentient beings. Rather, buddha nature is the nature of sentient beings when their nature is seen as it is. Thus, the distortion of the world as a sentient being can be said to exist *within* the reality that is buddha nature, the self-existing wisdom.

Mipam emphasizes that self-existing wisdom is simply made manifest; it is not produced by a cause. In his *Lion's Roar*, he says that even though the truth body appears to be a new production, it is in fact a freed effect when the obscuring conditions are removed:

Self-existing wisdom is not produced by a cause because actually, the truth body freed from adventitious defilements is a freed effect. Al-

la 'khor 'das la sogs pa'i bzang ngan dang | phar rol tshu rol bdag dang gzhan che dang chung ba sogs kyi cha dang | snga phyi'i dus kyi khyad par sogs med de chos dbyings thig le nyag gcig 'pho gyur med pa'o | gnas lugs la de ltar yin kyang 'khrul pa glo bur ba'i snang ngo dang bstun na 'di ltar khams gsum 'khor ba'i lus sems yul gyi snang ba shar nas chos nyid kyi rang bzhin mi mthong ba'i tshe na'ang | chos nyid ni med pa ma yin te rang gi rang bzhin las g.yo ba cung zad kyang med par yod pas na | sems kyi chos nyid de lta bu glo bur gyi dri mas sbubs su byas nas mi mngon yang bcud dam dbus na snying po'i tshul gyis gnas pa la rigs sam snying po zhes brjod de | dper na sa 'og gi gter la sogs pa'i dpe dgu mtshon nas shes par bya.

15 The nine metaphors are found in *Uttaratantra* I.96–97: like the buddha in a lotus, like honey in a beehive, like grain in a husk, like gold in a dirt heap, like a treasure under a pauper's house, like a sprout that grows from a small seed, like a statue wrapped in an old cloth, like a king in the womb of an ugly woman, like gold in the earth; *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i rtsa 'grel*, 12–13. Richard King points out that with the exception of two metaphors representing the buddha nature as an undeveloped cause, the metaphors of the king in the womb and the seed, the other seven metaphors depict the buddha nature as a *fully developed* concealed essence. See King 1995: 208.

16 Mipam, *Vajra Essence*, 392–93: *sems can thams cad kyi sems la chos nyid kyi tshul du yod cing sgrib pa spang rung du gnas pa'i skabs na bde gshegs snying po zhes bya ste | sems kyi chos nyid de rtogs pas sangs rgya bar byed pa'i phyir ro.*

though it appears to be newly produced by a cause, it merely appears as such in the way of appearance for those who are untransformed. However, in terms of the actual meaning, in the essence of the truth body, which is the basic nature without arising or disintegration, from the beginning all phenomena are—as equality—the actual buddha, primordially nirvāṇa, naturally luminous and clear, etc. This consummate viewpoint of the profound sūtras is a topic that is difficult to fathom for pure beings, needless to mention ordinary people!¹⁷

He states that the new development of the truth body is only in the way of appearance for those who are untransformed; in actual reality, he affirms that all phenomena are primordially buddha in the essence of the truth body, which is the basic nature of all phenomena.

In *Intelligent Presence* (*gnyug sems 'od gsal ba'i don la dpyad pa rdzogs pa chen po gzhi lam 'gras bu'i shan 'byed blo gros snang ba*), Mipam states that the qualities of buddha nature at the time of the ground (i.e., at the time of a sentient being) are merely a potential to exist as manifest:

The manifest appearance of the qualities of omniscient wisdom has the endowment of twofold purity, not only natural purity.¹⁸ However, the qualities of that [omniscient wisdom] have to be asserted as present from the beginning, like the metaphor of the knife [in a sheath], etc. Therefore, one should know that at the time of the ground (*gzhi'i dus na*), the qualities of buddha nature only potentially exist as manifest.¹⁹

17 Mipam, *Lion's Roar*, 596–97: *rang byung gi ye shes rgyu las skyes par mi 'gyur te| yang dag par glo bur dri bral gyi chos sku de bral ba'i 'bras bur song ba yin la| rgyu las gсар du skye ba ltar snang ba yang gnas ma gyur pa'i snang tshul la de ltar snang bar zad kyi| yang dag pa'i don du chos nyid kyi rang bzhin chos kyi sku'i ngo bo la skye 'jig med par chos thams cad gdod nas mnyam pa nyid du mngon par sangs rgyas pa'am| gzod ma nas zhi ba mya ngan las 'das pa| rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba sogs zab mo'i mdo sde rnams kyi dgongs pa mthar thug 'di dag pa'i sems dpa' rnams kyi kyang bsam par dka' ba'i gnas yin na phal pas lta ci smros.*

18 The twofold purity is (1) natural purity, or primordial purity, and (2) purity that is freed from the adventitious [defilements] (*glo bur bral dag*).

19 Mipam, *Intelligent Presence*, 538–39: *ji snyed pa'i don kun mkhyen pa'i yon tan mngon du snang ba ni dag pa gnyis ldan la yod kyi| rang bzhin rnam dag tsam la med kyang | de'i yon tan ye ldan du khas len dgos par ral gri'i dpe sogs bzhin no| des na gzhi'i dus na bde gshegs snying po la yon tan mngon du yod rung tsam du shes par bya'o.*

Thus, we can see a distinction between two types of potential: (1) the potential to *transform* into a newly produced buddha and (2) the potential (of what is already present) to *manifest*. In his presentation of the way buddha nature exists for a sentient being, he rejects the former and accepts the latter. He states that the primordial qualities of wisdom are already present; they are an intrinsic endowment—just as a knife has the ability to cut, a mirror to reflect, and a gemstone to shine.

The primordial endowment of qualities such as the powers are spontaneously present by nature from the beginning [like] the quality of a functional knife to cut, the quality of a clear mirror to shine reflected forms, and the quality of a gem to be luminous and bestow desires; however, they are like the knife in a sheath, the mirror put in the box, and the gem covered with mud. When the obscurations are cleared, the qualities do not newly arise, but appear manifest as if newly arisen.²⁰

He describes the qualities of a buddha's mind, such as powers, as spontaneously present from the beginning. Yet like the qualities of a knife in a sheath, etc., when the qualities are obscured they are not evident. Thus, while the qualities may appear to newly arise when their obscurations are removed, in reality they do not newly arise; they are simply made manifest. Furthermore, he states in his *Difficult Points of Scriptures in General* (*Dbu ma sogs gzhung spyi'i dka' gnad skor gyi gsung sgros sna tshogs phyogs gcig tu bsdus pa rin po che'i za ma tog*):

If it is asked, “Well, do the continua of sentient beings such as dogs and pigs have the wisdom with the ten powers?” The buddha nature of their continua from the beginning has the qualities of wisdom with the ten powers because these are the qualities of its basic nature. Therefore, if there is the basic element, there are qualities; however, [the qualities] are not manifest—as a knife has the ability to cut, even so, when it is put in a sheath the ability to cut is not manifest; and a mirror has the quality to potentially shine reflected forms, yet even so, it does not manifestly shine when put in a box.²¹

20 Ibid., 537: *stobs sogs kyi yon tan ye ldan | ral gri tshad ldan la gcod pa'i yon tan | me long dwangs pa la gzugs snang ba'i yon tan | nor bu 'od dang dgos 'dod rtsol ba'i yon tan ye nas rang chas lhun grub tu yod kyang | ral gri shub dang me long sgrom du chud pa | nor bu 'dam gos bzhin no | de'i sgrib pa bsal na yon tan gsar bskyed min yang | mngon du snang ba gsar skye ltar snang ngo.*

21 Mipam, *Difficult Points of Scriptures in General*, 454: *'on na khyi dang phag sogs sems can rnam kyi sems kyi rgyud la stobs bcu'i ye shes yod dam zer na | stobs bcu'i ye shes kyi yon tan de'i rgyud kyi*

In this way, he describes heritage as the basic nature of mind, endowed from the beginning with the qualities of the buddha's wisdom, together with the ten powers.²²

Mipam's treatment of buddha nature draws upon the tradition of the Great Perfection, and the works of Longchenpa (Klong chen rab 'byams, 1308-1364) in particular, so we will turn now briefly to consider Longchenpa. Longchenpa stated that the buddha is not an effect that is newly produced. In his *Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems* (*Theg pa mtha' dag gi don gsal bar byed pa grub mtha' rin po che'i mdzod*), Longchenpa delineated two types of effects: (1) a produced effect and (2) a freed effect:

The buddha also is a freed effect from a freeing cause (*bral ba'i rgyu 'bras*), and is not established as a produced effect by a producing cause (*bskyed bya skyed kyi rgyu 'bras*), because buddha is spontaneously present from the beginning.²³

Longchenpa described buddha as a freed effect because buddha is spontaneously present from the beginning. A freed effect is not newly produced, but is simply made manifest when the conditions that obscure it are removed—like the sun freed from clouds. In contrast, a produced effect, or ripened effect, is a transformation—like a seed transforming into a sprout. Moreover, Longchenpa stated in his auto-commentary of his *Precious Treasury of the Basic Field of Reality* (*Chos dbyings rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa lung gi gter mdzod*),

gshegs snying la ye nas yod de| kho rang gi chos nyid kyi yon tan yin pas khams yod na yon tan yod mod kyi mngon du mi 'gyur te| ral gri la gcod pa'i bya ba yod kyang| shub tu chud pa la gcod pa'i bya ba mngon gyur du med pa dang| me long la gzugs brnyan 'char rung gi yon tan yod kyang sgrom du bcug pa la mngon gyur du mi 'char ba dang 'dra ste.

22 *The Dictionary of Internal Knowledge* (*nang rig pa'i tshig mdzod*) references ten powers listed in the Vinaya as "(1) the power of knowing what is and is not correct (*gnas dang gnas ma yin*), (2) the power of knowing the maturations of karma, (3) the power of knowing various inclinations (*mos pa*), (4) the power of knowing thorough affliction and complete purification, (5) the power of knowing faculties that are supreme and those that are not, (6) the power of knowing the path of all transmigrations (*thams cad 'gro ba'i lam*), (7) the power of knowing various dispositions (*khams sna tshogs*), (8) the power of remembering previous existences (*sngon gyi gnas*), (9) the power of knowing death, transference, and birth, and (10) the power of knowing the exhaustion of contamination (*zag pa*)." *Dictionary of Internal Knowledge*, ed. Purbu Tsering, 671.

23 Longchenpa, *Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems*, 877: *sangs rgyas de'ang bral ba'i rgyu 'bras las| bskyed bya skyed byed kyi rgyu 'bras kyi bsgrubs pa ma yin te ye nas lhun gyis grub pa'i phyr.*

One may think, “Do [the exalted body and wisdom] not arise from the accumulations of merit and wisdom?” It is said as follows: the two accumulations, from the beginning already complete with the qualities of emptiness and appearance, are called “spontaneously present” because the adventitious accumulations, which are the mere aspect of the conditions that remove the defilements, are merely designated as “the two causal accumulations”—just as the washcloth and cleanser that clean a dirty gemstone are called “the causes of seeing the gem.”²⁴

In this way, the exalted body and wisdom of buddha are spontaneously present within sentient beings from the beginning; they are said to be “caused” only in the sense that they become manifest when the defilements that obscure them are removed. Longchenpa said that the basic nature of mind of a sentient being is endowed with the qualities of form bodies from the aspect of appearance, and endowed with the qualities of the truth body from the aspect of emptiness. He stated this in his auto-commentary of his *Resting in the Nature of Mind* (*Sems nyid ngal so'i 'grel pa shing rta chen po*),

At the time of a sentient being, the basic nature of mind is completely endowed with the qualities of the form bodies from the aspect of appearance, and the qualities of the truth body from the aspect of emptiness. However, due to being obscured by defilements, it is not clearly manifest, so it is called “the basic element” or “heritage,” and due to being free from all defilements at the time of being a buddha it is called “awakening.” Even so, since it is unchanging, other than the essence, the nature of mind’s potential, completely appearing or not, it is not asserted that qualities that were first nonexistent at the time of a sentient being are newly produced later.²⁵

24 Longchenpa, *Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission*, 117: *bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs las byung ba ma yin nam zhe na | smras pa tshogs gnyis ni ye nas snang ba dang | stong pa'i yon tan du rdzogs zin pa la lhun grub ces brjod de | glo bur du bsags pa de ni dri ma sel byed kyi rkyen gyi cha tsam la rgyu tshogs gnyis zhes btags pa tsam ste | nor bu dri mas gos pa khros ras dang 'dag chal gyis phyi ba la | nor bu mthong ba'i rgyu brjod pa bzhin no.*

25 Longchenpa, *The Great Chariot*, 312: *sems can pa'i dus na sems kyi chos nyid la snang cha nas gzugs sku'i yon tan dang | stong cha nas chos sku'i yon tan rdzogs par ldan yang dri mas bsgribs pas mngon sum du mi bsal ba'i phyir khams sam rigs zhes btags shing | sangs rgyas pa'i tshe dri ma*

Longchenpa affirmed that the basic nature of mind is not manifest due to the obscurations of defilements. At that time, it is called “basic element” or “heritage,” and when free from defilements at the time of a buddha, it is called “awakening.” He claimed that there are no essential qualities of the nature of mind, which at first do not exist, that are newly produced at the time of a buddha. Furthermore, Longchenpa stated as follows in his *Responses to Mind and Wisdom* (*Sems dang ye shes kyi dri lan*):

These days most virtuous spiritual friends and all meditators are in accord in advocating the ground as a mere absence that is nothing at all, which is not in accord with the viewpoint of the meaning of the essential nature. Through practicing a ground that is nothing at all, buddha endowed with all qualities will not arise (1) because the three—ground, path, and fruition—are confused and (2) because buddha—with qualities that are unconditioned and spontaneously present—is manifested as a freed effect. Therefore, the view of the summit of existence appears to be in accord with them; here we assert luminous clarity itself—unconditioned and spontaneously present—as the ground.²⁶

In this way, Longchenpa claimed a ground that is not a mere absence. Rather, he affirmed the ground as luminous clarity—unconditioned and spontaneously present. Further, he said, “The ground is the wisdom of luminous clarity that exists within oneself at the time of being a sentient being.”²⁷ Moreover, he stated,

The meaning of the ground is explained as follows: the basic nature of luminous clarity from the beginning is unconditioned and spontane-

mtha' dag dang bral bas byang chub ces brjod kyang | ngo bo sems nyid kyi nus pa rdzogs par snang mi snang tsam las dang po sems can gyi dus na med pa'i yon tan phyis gсар du bskyed par 'dod pa ni ma yin te | 'pho 'gyur med pa'i phyir.

26 Longchenpa, *Responses to Mind and Wisdom*, 380–81: *ding sang ni dge ba'i bshes gnyen phal dang | sgom chen kun mthun par | stong rkyang ci yang med pa la gzhi byed pa ni snying po'i don gyi dgongs pa dang mi mthun te | ci yang med pa'i gzhi nyams su blangs pas 'bras bu sangs rgyas yon tan thams cad dang ldan pa mi 'byung ste | gzhi lam 'bras bu gsum 'dzol ba'i phyir ro | sangs rgyas de ni 'dus ma byas shing lhun gyis grub pa'i yon tan can bral ba'i 'bras bu mngon du gyur pa zhig yin pa'i phyir ro | des na srid rtse'i lta ba dang de dag mthun par snang ngo | dir 'dus ma byas shing lhun gyis grub pa'i 'od gsal ba nyid gzhir 'dod pa yin no.*

27 Ibid., 379: *sems can pa'i dus kyi 'od gsal ba'i ye shes rang la yod pa ni gzhi'o.*

ously present. From the side of emptiness, it is free from all constructed extremes like space because it is not at all established as an entity or a sign, nor is it at all confined to saṃsāra or nirvāṇa, etc. From the side of clarity, it is spontaneously present and luminously clear like the orbs of the sun and moon, endowed from the beginning with the nature of the exalted body and wisdom. These two [emptiness and clarity] are neither conjoined nor separable within the basic nature abiding from the beginning.²⁸

Using descriptive metaphors such as being empty like space and clear like the sun, Longchenpa characterized the ground as a unity of emptiness and clarity. He also described a “ultimate universal ground” (*don gyi kun gzhi*) in his auto-commentary of his *Precious Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* (*Theg pa chen po'i man ngag gi bstan bcos yid bzhin rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa padma dkar po*): “The basic element is called ‘the ultimate universal ground’ because it coexists with the unconditioned qualities of the naturally pure nirvāṇa.”²⁹ He said that this ground is the support for both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and he identified it with buddha nature:

Due to abiding as the basic field neither conjoined with nor separable from the exalted body and wisdom, it is buddha nature; due to supporting all phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, it is the mode of reality called “the ultimate universal ground”; it is unconditioned and abides as the great primordial purity. Moreover, it supports the phenomena of saṃsāra—karma and afflictive emotions—in the manner of a nonsupport (*rten pa med pa'i tshul*); as the sun and space support cloud formations, they abide within its state without contact or connection with the basis. In reality, since there is no intrinsic nature, support and supported are not established; since it appears as such it is so designated [as the support].³⁰

28 Ibid.: *gzhi don bshad pa ni* | *ye nas 'od gsal ba chos nyid 'dus ma byas shing lhun gyis grub pa stong pa'i ngos nas dngos po dang mtshan ma gang du'ang ma grub cing 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa la sogs pa gang du'ang ma chad pas spros pa'i mtha' thams cad dang bral ba nam mkha' lta bu* | *gsal ba'i ngos nas sku dang ye shes kyi rang bzhin ye ldan du lhun gyis sgrub cing 'od gsal ba nyi zla'i dkyil 'khor lta bu* | *de gnyis ka'ang 'du 'bral med pa'i chos nyid du ye nas gnas pa.*

29 Longchenpa, *White Lotus*, 1066–67: *kham ni rang bzhin gyis dag pa mya ngan las 'das pa 'dus ma byas pa'i yon tan dang lhan cig pas don gyi kun gzhi zhes bzhag pa yin no.*

30 Ibid., 151–52: *sku dang ye shes 'du 'bral med pa'i dbyings su gnas pas bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po* | *'khor 'das kyi chos rnams brten pas gnas lugs don gyi kun gzhi zhes bya ste* | *'dus ma byas shing ye nas rnam dag chen por gnas pa'o* | *de yang 'khor ba'i chos las dang nyon mongs pa rnams rten*

Longchenpa explained that the ground supports all phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. He stated that the ground supports the phenomena of saṃsāra “in the manner of a non-support”; it is merely designated as the support (conventionally), but since there is no intrinsic nature, support and supported are not established (ultimately).

Notably, he distinguished his assertion—that wisdom is simply the ground made manifest—from those who accept wisdom as a new development, a product of *real* transformation. He said that the proponents of Mind Only accept that the eight collections of consciousness are *transformed* (*gnas 'gyur*) into wisdom. However, he asserted that consciousnesses are removed and the self-existing wisdom just becomes *manifest* (*mngon pa tsam*), being merely imputed as a transformation:

Proponents of Mind Only assert that the collection of eight consciousnesses itself transforms into wisdom; here, the self-existing wisdom is merely made manifest through removing the consciousnesses, which is designated as a transformation—the difference between the two is vast.³¹

Thus, he stated that the appearances of the exalted body and wisdom are the basic nature of mind, only to be manifested. The transformation from consciousness to wisdom is just a designation.

We can see how Mipam's description of buddha nature reflects Longchenpa's description of the ground. Mipam also refers to buddha nature as the mode of reality of the “ground of the primeval beginning” (*ye thog gi gzhi*):

pa med pa'i tshul gyis brten pa ni| nyi mkha'i ngos na sprin phung brten pa ltar| gzhi la ma reg ma 'byar la de'i ngang la gnas pa ste| don la rang bzhin med pas rten dang brten par ma grub bzhin du brten par snang bas brtags pa ste. Longchenpa follows this description with a quote from the *Uttaratantra* I.55–57: “In the way that the earth abides in water, and water in wind, wind completely abides in space, while space does not abide in wind, water, or earth; in the same way, the aggregates, constituents, and faculties abide in karma and afflictive emotions, karma and afflictive emotions constantly abide in the distorted mind, and the distorted mind completely abides in the purity of mind, while the nature of mind does not abide in any phenomena.” *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i rtsa 'grel*, 8: *sa ni chu la chu rlung la| |rlung ni mkha' la rab tu gnas| |mkha' ni rlung dang chu dag dang| |sa yi kham la gnas ma yin| |de bzhin phung po kham dbang rnams| |las dang nyon mongs dag la brten| |las dang nyon mongs tshul bzhin min| |yid la byed la rtag tu gnas| |tshul bzhin ma yin yid byed ni| |sems kyi dag pa la rab gnas| |sems kyi rang bzhin chos rnams ni| |thams cad la yang gnas ma yin.* See also Longchenpa, *Responses to Mind and Wisdom*, 384.

31 Longchenpa, *White Lotus*, 1420: *sems tsam pas kun gzhi tshogs brgyad de nyid gnas 'gyur bas ye shes su 'dod la| 'dir de dag bsal bas rang byung gi ye shes mngon pa tsam la gnas 'gyur du btags pa gnyis khyad par shin tu che'o.*

Buddha nature is not a mere absence; it is emptiness and luminous clarity. It is the mode of reality of the ground of the primeval beginning of all phenomena, the mode of reality that is the indivisible truth of unity—emptiness endowed with all supreme aspects (*rnam kun mchog ldan gyi stong nyid*).³²

The mode of reality of the ground, buddha nature, is not a mere absence; it is inseparable with supreme appearing qualities. He describes the ground of the primeval beginning as the consummate basic nature: “The luminous clarity of the ground of the primeval beginning—the primordial mode of reality itself—is the consummate basic nature.”³³

Mipam characterizes the ground in the language of the Great Perfection as follows:

The ground itself, from the aspect of lacking any constructs, is primordially pure. Unlike a mere space-like absence, it is self-illuminating (*rang gsal*) without bias, confinement, or partiality—spontaneously present. As the source of all appearances of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, it is said to be “all-pervasive compassionate resonance.” In the language of the Great Perfection tantras, it is called “the ground-abiding wisdom with three endowments.”³⁴

The three endowments are (1) empty essence (*ngo bo stong pa*), which is primordial purity, (2) natural clarity (*rang bzhin gsal ba*), which is spontaneous presence, and (3) all-pervasive compassionate resonance (*thugs rje kun khyab*). Mipam’s interpretation of buddha nature reflects the Great Perfection, as seen in his statements in the *Lion’s Roar*:

Due to not existing as they appear, conditioned phenomena that appear to arise and cease in this way have never tainted the basic nature

32 Mipam, *Difficult Points of Scriptures in General*, 453: *gshegs snying ni stong kyang tsam min te | stong nyid 'od gsal yin | de chos thams cad kyi ye thog gzhi yi gnas lugs yin | zung 'jug bden pa dbyer med kyi gnas lugs rnam kun mchog ldan gyi stong nyid yin la*.

33 Mipam, *Vajra Essence*, 357: *ye thog gzhi 'i 'od gsal gdod ma 'i gnas lugs de nyid ni chos kun gyi chos nyid mthar thug yin*.

34 Ibid., 358: *gzhi de nyid spros pa gang yang med pa 'i cha nas ka dag dang | stong kyang nam mkha' lta bu min par rang gsal ris med rgya chad phyogs lhung med par lhun gyis grub pa | 'khor 'das snang ba kun gyi 'byung gnas yin pas thugs rje kun khyab ces gsungs te | rdzogs chen gyi rgyud kyi chos skad la gzhi gnas kyi ye shes gsum ldan zhes gsungs*.

of the expanse; therefore, through this essential point that (1) the primordial purity of the causality of saṃsāra and (2) the uncontaminated appearances, which are the luminous clarity of the spontaneously present nature, are neither conjoined nor separable, the undistorted manner of buddha nature should be identified.³⁵

He associates buddha nature with a distinguishing feature of the Great Perfection—the unity of primordial purity and spontaneous presence. In this way, his interpretation of buddha nature reflects the dual quality of empty essence and natural clarity of the Great Perfection.³⁶

Conclusion

Mipam affirms that all beings, without difference, are endowed with buddha nature from the beginning. He makes an important distinction in his presentation of buddha nature between the way things appear and the way things are. In the way things appear (to sentient beings), the qualities of a buddha are a new development. In the way things are, however, he describes the qualities of buddha as permanent, unconditioned, and a primordial endowment of all sentient beings. In claiming that the qualities of a buddha are the nature of reality, his position reflects an affirmation of “other-emptiness.” Nevertheless, the fact that he also describes buddha nature as empty of its own essence distinguishes his position from one that affirms the presence of buddha nature as a non-empty, substantial reality. Rather than describing buddha nature as something that exists within sentient beings, to claim that sentient beings are a distortion that occurs within buddha nature better represents the role that buddha nature plays in this tradition. Indeed, the way Mipam describes buddha nature as a primordial unity of emptiness and appearance reflects his legacy of the Great Perfection, the unified ground and fruition.

35 Mipam, *Lion's Roar*, 572: 'di ltar skye zhing 'gag par snang ba'i 'dus byas rnams ni snang ba ltar ma grub pa'i phyir dbyings kyi gshis la des gos pa yod ma myong bas | 'khor ba rgyu 'bras ye nas dag cing rang bzhin lhun gyis grub pa'i 'od gsal zag med kyi snang ba rnams dang 'du 'bral med pa'i gnad 'dis bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po'i tshul phyin ci ma log pa ngos zin par bya dgos so.

36 One should note that in the triad of empty essence, natural clarity, and all-pervasive compassionate resonance, the word “essence” (*ngo bo*) and the word “nature” (*rang bzhin*) are both words that are used to translate the same Sanskrit word, *svabhāva*, “intrinsic nature.” Thus, if a proponent of self-emptiness is defined as one holding the view that the nature of reality is *only* empty, then Mipam would not be a proponent of self-emptiness because he asserts the nature of reality as clarity (*rang bzhin gsal ba*).

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The Impact of a Zhentong Interpretation of Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine From the Point of View of a Western Buddhist Practitioner

Shenpen Hookham

This paper briefly contrasts what I term as Rangtong (*rang stong*) and Zhentong¹ (*gzhan stong*) presentations of Buddhism and looks at how the Zhentong interpretation of Tathāgatagarbha doctrine impacts the understanding and practice of Buddhism for Westerners. We will consider how the translation of key Buddhist terms into English affects the way they are understood and used. Some consideration is given to how Tathāgatagarbha could be understood in relation to some of the early teachings of the Buddha. The debate about how the tradition has interpreted the Buddha's teaching on not-self (*anātman*) continues up until today. We currently have two very different versions of what Buddhism is about and what *tathāgatagarbha* means, which continue to shape the dialogue between Buddhism and modern thought in general.

Nearly thirty years ago, my doctoral thesis was published as *The Buddha Within: Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine according to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga*.² In the same year, in an article called "The Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Buddha Nature,"³ I contrasted in a general way two radically different models of what Buddhism is all about that have existed in the Buddhist world since the first commentarial traditions began to emerge. Following relatively recent trends in Tibetan Buddhism, I have chosen to refer to these models as being either Rangtong or Zhentong interpretations of Buddhism.

Although I was the first to write a detailed analysis of the Zhentong point of view in English, since publishing *The Buddha Within*, various scholars have taken my work further, delving ever more deeply into the nuances of the controversy among the various commentators over the centuries. Klaus Dieter-Mathes's *Direct Path to the Buddha Within* is an astonishingly detailed and fascinating contribution to this field and leaves me wondering what I can add to the conversation.

Here I will speak primarily from a Western practitioner's point of view. By practitioner, here I mean a person who is committed to trying to follow the path of

1 Also spelled Shentong. "Zh" is pronounced like a French "j" or "s" in pleasure.

2 Hookham 1991.

3 Hookham 1992.

the Buddha in order to discover truth and liberation from *samsāra*. My fifty-three years of experience as a meditator and of talking to other Buddhist teachers and practitioners, including my own students, sheds light on some of the issues that the authors of the traditional texts on buddha nature are addressing and also highlights their relevance to us today. This raises various questions. For example, what assumptions does a Western practitioner bring with them when encountering Buddhism? What kind of Buddhism is emerging in the West? What in my experience do my students and colleagues understand buddha nature to be? No matter how I look at the matter I cannot escape the question of whether a student comes with basically a Rangtong or Zhentong version of Buddhism in mind. It is not a mere intellectual controversy for scholars to argue over—it impacts one’s attitude to all things Buddhist and how Buddhism is to be practiced and understood.

Self-Empty and Other-Empty

For those unfamiliar with the terms Rangtong and Zhentong, Rangtong (*rang stong*) is a Tibetan term that literally translates as “self-empty” or “empty of self-nature” and refers to how what is conditioned (*samskrta*, also understood as “compounded” or “constructed”) is illusory and empty of the false reality of its appearance. Zhentong⁴ (*gzhan stong*) translates as “other-empty” or “empty of other” and refers to how ultimate reality, the unconditioned buddha *jñāna*, is empty of the false version of reality that obscures it. Unfortunately, this brief definition doesn’t capture all the many nuances of the two terms, especially as the words used in the definition are themselves understood differently by different commentators.⁵ These definitions also do not explain that the terms are now used to distinguish two ways of using the term *emptiness*, nor do they fully reflect the two radically different models for what Buddhism is all about. This affects the whole way different schools and even different individuals within schools interpret Buddhist scriptural sources and direct their practice.

Proponents of these two models regard their own interpretation as the true message of the Buddha and may fiercely oppose the other’s. The controversy impacts on what Buddhism has to say about life, the person, the mind, intelligence, the heart, the nature of ultimate reality and how it is to be known, and so on. The doctrine of Tathāgatagarbha sits right at the heart of this controversy, and its scripture is interpreted by commentators according to their overall allegiance

4 Shar Khentrul Jamphel Lodrö. 2016.

5 For a more detailed explanation of the differences in the use of these terms see Hookham 1992.

to either a Rangtong- or Zhentong-type version of Buddhism (whether they use these terms for that allegiance or not). In other words, each interpretation has an impact on what anyone thinks *tathāgatagarbha* could possibly be.

Seven Features of the Rangtong and Zhentong Models

Elsewhere I have described each of the two models mentioned above as having seven characteristic features.⁶ I repeat them below with slightly altered wording. Note the use of “mind” in this context is synonymous with awareness or consciousness. In a Rangtong (self-emptiness) version of Buddhism,

1. The mind is a stream of moments of mind.
2. A moment of mind only exists in dependence on the momentary existence of an object of mind.
3. Purification of mind means the gradual replacement of *impure* moments by *pure* moments.
4. Nirvāṇa is the cessation of impure moments.
5. The Buddha’s mind is a stream of pure moments that have pure objects of mind and is therefore called *jñāna* rather than *vijñāna*.
6. A being/person is a stream of dependently arising events of body and mind, called the five *skandhas*, that are not the self and do not belong to the self, and there is no self in them or outside them.⁷
7. A being can become a buddha by cultivating the *prajñā* of seeing that everything (i.e., all dharmas) is dependently arising and therefore empty, and by cultivating *punya* and *jñāna*, which results in the development of all the dependently arising buddha qualities.

This model is, roughly speaking, that of the various Abhidharma schools, the followers of Cittamātra, the Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas, and the Gelukpa Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas. I should add, however, that it seems to be possible for any particular individual to take any of these traditions and interpret them according to either a basically Rangtong or Zhentong model.

Mathes cites many variations and discussions by proponents of the Rangtong model about the difficulties posed by Tathāgatagarbha sūtras and commentaries that describe *buddhajñāna* as unconditioned and as having inseparable buddha

⁶ Hookham 1992: 153–55.

⁷ See Buswell and Lopez 2014, s.v. *satkāyadṛṣṭi* (787), for a fuller expression of this definition.

qualities that do not need to be developed.⁸ Even without these difficulties, this model is faced with the problem of how impermanent, dependently arising moments of a buddha's mind can constitute liberation from suffering. By all accounts, the *skandhas* are not the self because they are impermanent and dependently arising and therefore suffering.⁹ If the Buddha's mind is impermanent and dependently arising, how is it different from or liberated from *samsāra*?

Some modern, Western styles of Buddhism are emerging—that can be considered to be based on this model—that claim liberation is an unnecessary belief and can be dispensed with. In other words, these more secular approaches to Buddhism understand that our *self* is impermanent and dependently arising, which is a truth we have to live with—that is, the ultimate truth. In this context, the Buddha's message is that acceptance of this brings peace of mind, which is the ultimate goal.¹⁰ Many of those who call themselves Buddhists in the West these days adhere to this kind of view, hence the popularity of teachers such as Stephen Batchelor.¹¹

In contrast to the Rangtong model, the Zhentong model has the following seven features:

1. Mind is essentially unconditioned.
2. Mind is essentially nondual. The belief in objects external to mind is a mistake. The mistaken mind is called *viññāna*.
3. Mind is essentially pure. Purification means the gradual emergence of this pure mind from the mists of confusion/impurities.
4. Nirvāṇa is this pure, unconditioned, nondual mind when it has emerged from confusion/impurities.

8 See Mathes 2008 in many places, e.g., 319–20 quotes Shōnu Pal's list of five different ways in which "beings are endowed with buddha qualities" can be interpreted, and then a further six (the 5+6 are quoted on pp. 319–20) possible ways scriptural statements that all beings have innumerable buddha qualities are interpreted.

9 See Pāli references to *khandhas* (Skt. *skandhas*) being impermanent, dependently arising, and suffering; for example, see Pérez-Remón 1980: 24–25.

10 See Batchelor 2007, and Sangharakshita's (2015: 215) review repudiating his main arguments.

11 See *Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Society*, Hamburg, June 2018 (www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/en/bdcs2018) for talks on modern trends in Buddhism, particularly Bhikkhu Bodhi's presentation of traditional versus revisionist versions of Buddhism. Revisionists such as Batchelor want to strip Buddhism of what they consider doctrinal baggage such as past and future lives and the six realms of *samsāra*. Similarly, the mainstream Mindfulness movement is only interested in mindfulness of the present moment in order to relieve stress in this life but is not particularly bothered about what Buddhism as a whole either does or doesn't teach.

5. The Buddha's mind is *nirvāṇa*—the essentially pure, unconditioned, nondual mind/*jñāna* that is no longer obscured.
6. We beings experience this pure, unconditioned, nondual mind/*jñāna* that is our true nature as impure and compounded *vijñāna*. In other words, our dualistic habits distort our awareness into a dualistic consciousness of our *self* as the *skandhas* that includes the world of external objects.
7. A being can become a buddha by abandoning false, dualistic habits of mind and so allowing the true nature of their being/experience to shine through, complete with its inseparable buddha qualities such as love, compassion, wisdom, vision, power to liberate others, and so on.

Just as in the Rangtong model, when the *skandhas* are analyzed, we beings do not find our self to be the *skandhas* or the *skandhas* to belong to our self; our self is not found in the *skandhas*, nor the *skandhas* in our self.¹² From the Zhentong perspective, because our true nature or self is not in the *skandhas*, we must abandon them and find our true nature through our own direct knowledge. The same language of self is used in the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras. The ultimate self (*paramātman*) is the self that is beyond all *prapañca* of self and not-self.¹³ We beings can become a buddha by abandoning our dualistic habits of mind, thus allowing the true nature of our being to shine through, complete with its inseparable buddha qualities such as love, compassion, wisdom, vision, power to liberate others, and so forth.

This model fits easily with the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras, and it also fits with many teachings of Pāli and other early *sutta* material,¹⁴ as well as the Mahāyāna

12 See Pérez-Remón 1980 for the many examples of this formulation, which differs significantly from that of Buswell and Lopez (2014). For example, see Pérez-Remón, p.238 on *sakkāyaditthi*; See also *Cūḷavedallasutta*, MN 49; *Puṇṇamasutta* SN 22.82; and *Mahāpuṇṇamasutta* MN 109. In these examples it is clear the wrong view is to take the *skandhas* to be the self or as belonging to the self, as in the self or the self in them. The implication is that the self needs to disassociate itself from the *skandhas*. Buswell and Lopez's formulation on the other hand, having stated the *skandhas* are not the self, belong to the self, are in the self adds that the self is not outside the *skandhas*. This implies there is no self at all either in or outside the *skandhas* and no self to disassociate from them. I argue this is a fundamentally different view of what the Buddha taught in the Pāli *suttas*.

13 For *paramātman*, see *Ratnagotravibhāga* verse 1.35–1.39. See also Wayman 1974, 102; Chang 1983: 379; and Hookham 1991: 104.

14 See Pérez-Remón 1980. Pérez-Remón looks at the whole body of Pāli suttas, examining all references to *atta* and *anatta* in order to establish how the Buddha is using both terms. He is particularly interested in establishing whether or not he can find any evidence for the often-stated

literature. Of particular relevance to Tathāgatagarbha doctrine are references to the clear light nature of mind (*cittasya prabhāsvaratā*);¹⁵ nirvāṇa as permanent, bliss, an entity, a place;¹⁶ Dharma as eternal and as absolute reality; enlightenment as the purifying of ordinary consciousness until the *dharmadhātu* is reached; and so on.

Again, Mathes (2008) documents in detail various different versions of a Zhen-tong-type model that have developed in Tibet in response to challenges from the Rangtong orthodoxy found throughout Tibetan Buddhism. Arguments range from whether Zhentong can be taught outside the context of direct pointing-out instructions from a qualified guru (Tib. *bla ma*) and through meditation experience to whether the Zhentong denial of any existent status to apparent reality (*samvṛtisatya*) is tantamount to rejecting a belief in karma and therefore a rejection of basic morality.¹⁷

Faith and Models of Reality

There are many avenues to explore here, but the one I have chosen to focus on is what faith means in the context of these two models and how this impacts the understanding of what buddha nature means.¹⁸ From the early Buddhist sources on, it is taught that the five faculties (*indriyas*)¹⁹ need to be brought into balance as one follows the path. These are *prajñā*, *śraddhā*, *samādhi*, *vīrya*, and *smṛti*, which could be translated respectively as wisdom, faith, concentration, energy, and

view that the Buddha taught there is no self. He examines the prevalent view of his day that the Buddha only ever used self as a reflexive pronoun that should not be taken to mean he was using self in any ultimately existent sense. Remón (299) concludes, “In the Nikāyas, the true self is the subject of emancipation, never the object of speculation or philosophical discussion. In the Nikāyas the true self is ever silently present and its reality is never brought into question, but the attention of the disciple is never focused on it as the object of philosophical speculation.” In other words, self is taken as a given on the basis of which what is not self is identified as impermanent and suffering—worthy only of being discarded.

15 See AN 1.51: “The mind, O monks, is luminous (Pāli *pabhassaramidaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ*), but is defiled by adventitious defilements.” See <https://suttacentral.net/an1.51-60/en/thanissaro>.

16 For nirvāṇa as permanence, etc., see Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro 2009.

17 See Hookham 1991: 78. Also, see Mathes 2008 on pith or pointing-out instructions versus intellectual analysis and the role of the guru in this (e.g., pp. 37, 38, 44, and 255).

18 See Hookham 1991, chapter five, “Means of Apprehending Absolute Reality,” where I discuss the role of faith within the Rangtong and Zhentong models, respectively.

19 For example, see SN 48.24: “Someone who has completed and fulfilled these five faculties is a perfected one.” Translation by Bhikkhu Sujato, Sutta Central, published 2018, <https://suttacentral.net/sn48.24/en/sujato>. See also AN 6.55: “Sona, you should apply yourself to energy and serenity, find a balance of the faculties, and learn the pattern of this situation.” Translation by Bhikkhu Sujato, Sutta Central, published 2018, <https://suttacentral.net/an6.55/en/sujato>.

mindfulness. Here, mindfulness is the faculty that enables a person to balance the other four. The Zhentong view can help balance *prajñā* (wisdom) with *śraddhā* (faith). Since at an early stage of practice *prajñā* is so closely associated with cutting through confusion, if it is not properly balanced with *śraddhā* (Tib. *dad pa*) it can go too far, that is, the attainment of complete nonconceptuality (*niṣprapañca*) can be hampered by a residual tendency to try to cut through what is false instead of simply resting effortlessly in the real. A sign of such insistent effort is that the buddha qualities are not emerging spontaneously.

Within a typical Western view such as Stephen Batchelor's, faith is seen as a hindrance because it suggests reliance on belief rather than direct knowledge. This is not far from how the term *faith* is used in Rangtong systems. Traditionally, Buddhists regard faith as necessary from the outset in the sense of believing in things we cannot know for ourselves, such as the results of karmic action passing from one life to the next, endlessly until enlightenment is reached, or that the Buddha attained complete enlightenment. It has always been believed by the Buddhist tradition that without a belief in karma we would become amoral. For Westerners, this simply doesn't hold true. We are motivated to lead a moral life based on social considerations irrespective of a belief in past and future lives, and Batchelor further argues there is no need to believe in past and future lives in order to follow the Dharma.²⁰

From a Zhentong point of view, *faith* is used not only for relying on belief but also for a faculty that allows us to open our heart to the true nature of our being and of reality itself. I have noticed over my many years of conversations with Tibetan practitioners that when describing faith, they sometimes put their hand on their heart as they say it. In English we would use this gesture when referring to our true nature, our very self, our heart or our being. In Tibetan this gesture indicates the *citta* (as well as *bodhicitta* and *tathāgatagarbha*) that is more often than not translated as "mind." Yet as English speakers, when we say "mind" or "nature of mind," we typically point to our head—the direction of intellectual or philosophical speculation. This often reflects an effort to somehow come up with a theory of everything, rather than connecting with our direct experience.²¹

As a translator, when I am faced with awkward translation choices I try to keep to the words and meaning of an original text or speaker. However, in my role as a Dharma teacher I am compelled to depart from the script and to get students to use their own words for their experience. This is the way Trungpa Rinpoche and

20 See Batchelor 1997.

21 I have mainly conversed with practitioners in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen tradition.

other modern teachers have taught in English with their Western students. Trungpa Rinpoche was particularly skillful at picking up on the resonances of words and expressing deep truths about the Dharma in nontechnical language, seeming to link directly with the experience of his audiences.

Similarly, when the Buddha himself made use of various terms such as the *skandhas* and so on, he did not describe them very precisely in the sūtras. Some scholars suggest this is because they were expanded upon orally. This makes sense because when discussing direct experience, people use their own turns of phrase, expressions, and gestures. I find when instructing people in meditation that using technical language often confuses the issue. We end up talking about what the words and texts mean instead of what we are finding in our experience. The same words can be used with a range of meanings depending on the speaker and context and are only useful if those in the discussion can tune in to each other's particular experience and understanding. Such a way of teaching is labor intensive in the sense that meditation instruction has to be done one-to-one, and the purpose for teaching the view is purely practical. The aim is to get the student to let go of grasping (that results in conceptuality or *prapañca*) and experience liberation. Even quite simple words we use for experience such as mind, awareness, and consciousness are problematic if we tie them too much to technical terms in Tibetan and Sanskrit. When I ask a student to explain what is happening in their meditation, they will typically talk about thoughts in their head, the head being the mind, the mind being the brain. Their whole body language tells me that their meditation is stuck in a fundamental split between body, heart, and mind.

What happens when a typical Westerner starts to consider the heart? Almost without exception, I have found over the last thirty years of exploring this with students that they notice mind and heart are split for them. Their associations with each are so different that I find in order to introduce them to the nature of *citta*, in this context their buddha nature, we have to talk about mind and heart as an undivided whole. This discussion alone has a profound effect on many of my students. Some resist and want to move on quickly to something more rigorous and scientific, while others notice that they are being given permission, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to actually connect with themselves. The more I explore how we use the word *heart*, the more I realize how much wisdom we are already intuiting and carrying in our heart. It is not simply sentimental nonsense. It is where we speak from when being genuine and honest; it is where we meet each other and feel genuine connection and meaning. It is where we intuit a sense of

space, clarity, and well-being. It is in our hearts that we feel that our connection with our loved ones can never die.

The word *mind* also typically promotes a split between mind and body in a way that *citta* and *heart* do not. *Mind* tends to sound disembodied, whereas *heart* tends to feel grounded and embodied. *Mind* sounds as if it could be measured and examined scientifically, whereas *heart* sounds more to do with the arts, intuition, love, and perhaps even faith.

As the Tathāgatarbha *sūtras* explain, it is through faith in the Buddha that we approach the true meaning of emptiness and buddha nature.²² From a Zhentong perspective, this is reflected in contemporary Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions where we meet the Buddha in the guru and enlightenment comes through the blessing (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of the guru and the lineage. Being open to a direct encounter with the Buddha in this way is what is meant by faith (*śraddhā*) in this context. It is our capacity not only to perceive the truth, but also to embrace it with trust and conviction. We become it because we always were it.

This serves to emphasize that discovering the nature of *citta* is not an intellectual exercise. It is something we discover for ourselves within ourselves through the dual process of letting go of grasping and discovering and learning to trust our buddha nature (used synonymously with how I use *citta* here). It is known not by focusing on an object of awareness but by the meditative experience of knowing in a completely different way—direct knowing. To advance this, we need a teacher with sufficient experience to be able to introduce us to this way of knowing. This requires openness, commitment, confidence, and a true connection of the heart. In other words, it needs faith.

As a practitioner, I find it is the Zhentong view that links analytical investigation to meditation and to other practices based on faith and devotion. By “analytical investigation” I mean the mind instructions (Tib. *sems khrid*) that consist of giving students questions about their experience that they have to answer orally from their own reflections and meditation experience. It was this kind of pointing to one’s direct experience of the nature of mind that first attracted me to Buddhism, causing me to cast aside my more devotional Christian approach. I ended up throwing the baby out with the bath water, so that when I was given practices such as praying to the Buddha and guru yoga, it took me a long time to work out how I was supposed to relate to them. It was the Zhentong interpretation of *tathāgatarbha* that supplied the key.

22 See for example Hookham 1991: 57, which contains a quote from *Anunatvapūrṇatvanirdeśa* cited in *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.1.: “Absolute Reality is to be realized through faith.”

With a Zhentong view of buddha nature, faith in the guru takes on a whole new dimension. It is about encountering the Buddha or buddha nature directly in another person. It is the meeting of *minds* or *hearts*, that is, the buddha nature of the guru and that of the disciple. This would not make much sense from a point of view that considers faith to be simply about taking what others say on trust. From the Zhentong point of view, it is opening our heart (our buddha nature) to the buddha nature of the guru, be that our personal teacher or any other manifestation of the buddha nature that we are able to open up to. Our buddha nature and the buddha nature of all beings is inseparably the same nature and inaccessible to the conceptualizing mind (*prapañca*). The conceptualizing mind is contrasted with the nonconceptual (*niṣprapañca* or *nirvikalpajñāna*), which is an implicative negation. In other words, it is not just the negation of concepts or the conceptualizing mind. *Niṣprapañca* implies a reality free of *prapañca*, that is, nonconceptual or nondual *jñāna*. This is another way of knowing that knows without *prapañca*. It is direct knowing that has to be pointed out by someone who realizes it, and for pointing out to happen, there has to be faith: faith in the sense of a quality of openness and willingness to trust the process.²³ This other way of knowing relates directly to what a Zhentong adherent means by faith, blessing (*adhiṣṭhāna*), and the guru as the Buddha. In my experience as a practitioner and as a teacher, it is this point more than any other that students need the most help with, and that is not so much because they cannot understand it as that they find it hard to trust.

As I suggest elsewhere, scholastic approaches to Buddhism seem to often favor a Rangtong interpretation, while yogic practitioners are likely to follow a Zhentong one. This is not to say meditators reject the self-emptiness of false appearances, but they use that insight to recognize the emptiness-of-other reality of the buddha *jñāna*, the *tathāgatagarbha*—the true nature of their person, mind, and being. Since this nature is free from all *prapañca*, it is the unborn, the unconditioned, that is known only through one's direct experience in meditation.²⁴ Many have argued that the meditators' approach is sufficient in itself and doesn't need to be supported by much study. Here *study* is understood to mean intellectual knowledge about the various Buddhist schools of thought and the polemics between them. Gendun Rinpoche²⁵ said of me that I had received the pointing out of the nature of mind

23 See Hookham 1991: 274.

24 See Nānananda 1971 for fuller explanation of what *prapañca* and *niṣprapañca* mean.

25 Before enrolling at Oxford University to study for my doctorate I had spent roughly ten years of my life living as a Buddhist nun in India, Nepal, and France, practicing under some of the most renowned Kagyü-Nyingma lamas of our times. For a few years I acted as translator

(Tib. *man ngag*) and so had no need for study. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso agreed, but said that I should study so that I would be able to answer students' questions. Gendun Rinpoche said all I needed was faith. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso said that might be true, but if you haven't got it you need to study in order to develop it.

Becoming a Zhentong Teacher in the West

When I arrived in India in 1969 in my early twenties, I believed that Buddhism taught that there was no self and had unconsciously assumed a Rangtong point of view, much like that outlined above. I practiced awareness of all that was fleeting and impermanent and let it go. I struggled, however, to understand why, for example, Kalu Rinpoche constantly compared my true nature to gold in gold ore or to the sun behind clouds as if there were a reality behind the clouds of confusion—an image that also occurs in the Pāli *suttas* (see note 14). Why was I being taught to have faith, pray, receive blessings (*adhiṣṭhāna*), and for all intents and purposes accept a belief system in much the same way as I had been expected to do as a Christian? In this way I was very much the typical Western Buddhist. As Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso said when he first met me, “People need something to have faith in.” I had faith in letting go of wrong assumptions and deluded ways of thinking (all of which are self-empty) but didn't know what in my experience was left to trust and have faith in. In other words, what was left to be liberated?

Shortly after arriving in Oxford in 1979, I published a small booklet called *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*. It is drawn from the teachings of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and based on a layout found in Jamgon Kongtrul's *Encyclopedia of Knowledge*. For many people it is their first introduction and main reference in terms of the Rangtong-Zhentong controversy, and it unashamedly places the Zhentong interpretation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as the pinnacle of all Buddhist views. Khenpo Rinpoche makes the point throughout the work that whatever view one is trying to understand analytically, there is only one point to the exercise, which is to let go of the analytical mind and meditate by releasing

for Gendun Rinpoche, a teacher praised for his meditation prowess by H. H. the Sixteenth Karmapa. When Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche arrived in the West in 1977, he was praised by H. H. the Sixteenth Karmapa both for his learning and meditation. He introduced me formally to the doctrinal controversy between Rangtong and Zhentong interpretations of *tathāgatagarbha*. Gendun Rinpoche, who was no scholar, had puzzled me repeatedly as he slapped his thighs laughing at what must have struck him as a cosmic joke, saying, “What is exists and what is not does not exist!” It took me a long time to realize that by “what is,” he meant our true nature, which is Zhentong, and by “what is not,” he meant delusion that is Rangtong in short!

into the space of awareness. What is interesting about this approach is that self-emptiness is presented as a view necessary for meditators as they progress through stages toward emptiness-of-other. The significance of this is that the analytical approach on its own is not considered to be enough. Finally, analysis has to switch to śraddhā. Although *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness* does not say so explicitly, a different way of knowing (nondual *jñāna*) has to be pointed out to the student in a one-to-one relationship with the guru.

Many Tibetan and Western Buddhist teachers do not assume a Zhentong-type model of Buddhism, and many are fiercely against it. The controversy continues today among Buddhist schools in every tradition I have encountered, ancient and modern, and impacts directly on me as a Buddhist practitioner and teacher. The debate about whether buddha nature should be interpreted according to the Rangtong or the Zhentong model seems identical to the controversy among Pāli scholars about what the Buddha did or did not say about the self.

When I encountered Western academia in Oxford in 1979, the prevailing orthodoxy of what Buddhism was about was a Rangtong perspective. Both my supervisor and my examiner were steeped in that commentarial tradition and were in no mood for embarking on a radical review of what they took to be Buddhist orthodoxy.²⁶ The question for me was whether the Buddha's teachings on not-self meant that the person is the self and has nothing to do with the *skandhas*, which are thus to be discarded and thought of as not truly existing (a Zhentong-type view); or did they mean that the person *is* the *skandhas* and therefore the *skandhas* are the self, which is thus impermanent and illusory and is to be discarded as not truly existing (a Rangtong-type view). The question then of course is who is there left to do the discarding?²⁷ What is clear is that—time and again—the Buddha teach-

26 Paul Williams was my supervisor and David Seyfort Ruegg was my examiner. Richard Gombrich kindly shared the role of supervisor with Paul after the latter took up his post at Bristol University. Richard Gombrich of course had no background in Mahāyāna or Tibetan Buddhism, and when he discovered the implications of the Zhentong view he dismissed it as “that old chestnut,” by which he no doubt meant the question of what the Buddha actually meant by teaching the *skandhas* were not the self.

27 See Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2007b. In this excellent essay, Thanissaro observes that the texts never explain why exactly the Buddha refers to form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness as bundles, but what is clear is that the Buddha is not saying the person is the *skandhas*. He quotes SN 22.85 on neither the self being in the *skandhas* nor the *skandhas* in the self. I appreciate the way he uses *I* and *me* rather than *the self* in his translation. To me it reads more naturally in English, and it is closer to the original to say, for example, “I am not the *skandhas*, the *skandhas* are not mine; I am not in the *skandhas*, nor are the *skandhas* in me.” I question his assertions that in the liberated mind there is no intention and that the question of “what am I?” is to be ignored. Nonetheless, I agree with his concluding remarks drawing

es against holding any speculative view whatsoever, so that to attribute any view such as the self exists, or it doesn't exist, or both, or neither is to miss his point entirely. He refused to be drawn into any such argument, in accordance with a true Mādhyamika-Prāsaṅgika approach, and was true to the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras, where the *paramātmā* is taught to be beyond all conceptual grasping.

From time to time I meet people who have struggled for decades to understand Rangtong teachers and have found that their inspiration for meditation has all but disappeared. On reading *The Buddha Within*, they say they realize that this was the very doctrine they had always intuited Buddhism to be about but had been told was a wrong understanding or even heretical. It is not that in traditions such as the Gelukpa one cannot meet yogi meditators with realization who would be considered to encompass a Zhentong approach, it is just that such a view is not taught in their academic institutions.²⁸ This emphasizes the fact that the two models of Buddhism are not determined by what school one belongs to or text one is referring to, but the overall view one has of what Buddhism is about as one listens to or reads the teachings. I notice, for example, that my students read Rangtong texts without even noticing they are presenting a view of Buddhism different from the one they are learning from me. They simply read the Zhentong view into whatever else they are reading. I am sure that much of the time the same is also going on from the Rangtong point of view.

Since Zhentong as a view is approached from the perspective of meditation and is through one-to-one oral instruction from a teacher, how can that be taught in practice here in the West? In 1989 Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso told my husband Michael Hookham (now known as Lama Rigdzin Shikpo) to start teaching Dharma in a way accessible to English speakers. Using his experience of receiving in-depth meditation instructions in the Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā traditions from Trungpa Rinpoche, he drew up a plan for a course on Buddhism, trying to avoid

our attention to MN 49: “consciousness of freedom—without feature or surface, without end, luminous all around—lying outside of time and space, experience when the six sense spheres stop functioning.” AN 10.81: “The Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness.” Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Sutta Central, updated November 20, 2013, <https://suttacentral.net/an10.81/en/thanissaro>. Thanissaro remarks, “If you use them[, the *khandhas*,] to define what you are as a person, you tie yourself down to no purpose. The questions keep piling on. But if you use them to put an end to suffering, your questions fall away and you're free...” and ultimately you are free from “the need to find words to describe that freedom to yourself or anyone else.”

28 Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso told me that in Gelukpa retreat centers (Tib. *sgrub khang*) a different, more Zhentong-type view is taught, coming through one of Tsong Khapa's teachers who was a retreat master called Wensa Rinpoche. I have had this confirmed in conversation with several Tibetan and Western informants.

technical language by using language intuitively to connect to students in their own context. On the basis of this plan and in consultation with him, I created a series of course books. The course is called “Discovering the Heart of Buddhism” (DHB), and I have been teaching it for thirty years now.²⁹ I introduced various exploratory and contemplative exercises and crafted it into a distance-learning course suitable both for beginners and experienced practitioners. It is based entirely on a Zhentong interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* and follows quite closely the teaching style of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Students are led through themes based on the central principle of the Indestructible Heart Essence (*nyingthig*—a Dzogchen technical term closely related to *tathāgatagarbha*). Students are encouraged to explore their own experience in relation to words such as *heart* and *mind*, *openness*, *clarity*, and *sensitivity*, as they are guided into ever-deeper levels of meaning, all tending toward the realization of Mahāmudrā or Dzogchen. If I have to explain to Tibetan colleagues what the course is about, I tell them it is for developing śraddhā. More than one Tibetan colleague has said to me that śraddhā is all one needs in the end and is what Westerners typically lack. The net effect of following the course (sometimes over years) is that students develop faith in their own nature and in the Buddha’s path to awakening.

Increasingly, people who have studied, sometimes for decades, within a tradition that has been exclusively Rangtong in orientation sign up for this course in order to bring their Dharma practice to life. They report that their practice has become sterile or they feel stuck, as if something vital were missing. Typically, they have rejected faith-based belief systems such as the Christianity they encountered in their childhood and like to think the Buddhist approach is, in contrast, analytical and even scientific.³⁰ Unfortunately, the scientific approach resonates readily with the notion that everything is conditioned, including the self, and that there is no great mystical secret at the heart of the universe to be discovered through direct knowledge or intuition. When trying to challenge this assumption for people with this background, it may be worth calling their attention to the fact that mathematics, on which so much science is based, is mysterious and based on direct knowledge or intuition.³¹

29 Discovering the Heart of Buddhism consists of seven course-books and the opportunity to receive mentoring or join mentored discussion groups either locally or online.

30 My supervisor Paul Williams is an example of a person holding such a view. He adhered to the Rangtong model of Buddhism and liked to refer to Zhentong as “mistakall” (a pun on “mystical”). When he eventually decided Buddhism was nihilistic and as much a belief system as Christianity was, he reverted to Roman Catholicism. See Williams 2002.

31 See Hoffman 2008.

Moreover, like myself all those years ago, most Westerners take it as a given (as do most textbooks on Buddhism) that the Buddha taught there is no self. Apart from the fact that this would be a philosophical view and the Buddha repudiated all such views, there are serious problems with presenting Buddhism as teaching there is ultimately no self. In my experience over the years, I have found many, if not most, Westerners who come to Buddhism feel so negatively about themselves that they would like to get rid of themselves all together. Buddhist meditation seems to offer this opportunity—the seeming solution to the problem of self-hatred and low self-esteem.

People find that to sit watching their thoughts mindfully and letting the thoughts go can reduce the pain of attachment to negative ideas about themselves. However, when they return to their daily life, the same old self is still there. Many students ask me how to prevent letting go of thoughts all the time from robbing them of the ability to stand up for themselves. How can they avoid simply becoming a doormat through thinking they are nothing and don't matter and all their feelings are just ego attachment? How do they make moral judgements and show strength of character? How do they discriminate what is the right way to go, if they simply let all their thoughts go and treat everything nonjudgementally? At the end of the day, isn't even wanting to gain liberation from saṃsāra just another selfish desire?

The problem is further exacerbated by advanced Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen teachings about how one has to go beyond all hope and fear. Doesn't this mean we should not reject saṃsāra and not seek nirvāṇa? The *Ratnagotravibhāga* (I.35) states that *tathāgatarbha* provokes disgust for saṃsāra and aspiration for nirvāṇa. In other words, intentionality lies at the very heart of what it is to be a person. It can never be eradicated. Going beyond hope and fear is about realizing this. In our heart of hearts, we long for freedom from the fear of suffering, which in Buddhist terms means nirvāṇa. The DHB course takes this as its premise, and students explore what is it that they most deeply long for in their heart of hearts. Left to reflect on this in their own words, people come up with qualities such as peace, happiness, ease, intimacy, meaning, freedom, and so on. The question then is what we are doing experientially when we come up with such words? Who is questioning what? Who is finding what? Who knows if it's the truth or not? The right word or not? Students gradually learn to stop questioning with their intellect. They focus on their experience of what they truly are in themselves. I find that students invariably know how to do that even though they habitually dismiss their

findings as unimportant, fleeting, or weak. Yet it is a faculty I find we all have and ultimately rely on. How can we follow a Buddhist path if we have no faculty within ourselves to recognize and choose a sense of direction or rightness? When asked where in their body they experience this, students typically describe a place they go and almost invariably use their hands to indicate it is in the heart and occasionally also the gut.³²

This inevitably leads students to notice that much of what they cling to as their self is actually only passing thoughts and feelings they can let go of. As they connect to their heart-wish (their innermost longing) they connect to who they truly are without trying to define it or wondering if it exists or not. Conversations naturally follow a pattern very reminiscent of those the Buddha had with his disciples as told in the Pāli *suttas*.³³ People are looking for who they truly are, their true nature. The Pāli *suttas* read very naturally in the same way.³⁴

What is important is our true nature (*atta*). All else is impermanent, suffering, and not self and is to be abandoned.

The Person in Buddhism and Western Discourse

If the person and the self are considered to be the *skandhas*, which are impermanent and unreliable, and, by this account, there is no self beyond the *skandhas*, passages in which the Buddha talks about self in positive terms are difficult to interpret. This tension promoted a distinction in Buddhist thought between relative truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*). The self in positive terms is taught as a relative truth for beings who would be afraid of the ultimate truth of no self. This distinction between *paramārthasatya* and *saṃvṛtisatya* was inherited by the Mahāyāna and made its way into Tibetan and now Western Buddhism. In contrast, the Buddha said he taught only one truth³⁵—the unconditioned. Dōlpopa is criticized for saying the same thing.³⁶ He talks in terms of there

32 See Gendlin 1981 on how we actually experience ourselves directly and how our own words profoundly affect our experience.

33 As a good example, see Sn 22.85, *Yamaka Sutta*: “With Yamaka,” translated by Bhikkhu Sujato, Sutta Central, published 2018, <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.85/en/sujato>.

34 For a common pattern of discourse, see Sn 22.82, *A full Moon Night Sutta*: “A Full Moon Night,” translated by Bhikkhu Sujato, Sutta Central, published 2018, <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.82/en/sujato>.

35 For example, see *Cūḷavyūhasutta Suttanipāta* 4.12: “Indeed the truth is one, there’s not another.” Translated by Laurence Khantipalo Mills, Sutta Central, published 2015, <https://suttacentral.net/snp4.12/en/mills>.

36 See Hookham 1992: 23–32, 79–83. The arguments between Dōlpopa and his opponents on these points are considered at length.

being only nondual *jñāna*, the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*). Everything that is conditioned is false. He is criticized for this, too, because it seems to deny the reality of the causes and effects of karma, which are classified as relative truth. Dölpopa does not deny the causes and effects of karma in terms of how things appear (*saṃvṛtisatya*). He simply denies they have any *existence* either as *paramārthasatya* or as *saṃvṛtisatya* (which could be translated as simply “apparent reality”).

The problem with asserting that relative truth exists in any way is that somehow it is left to haunt the meditator. It is still there even though our analysis has shown that it has no existence. From the point of view of a meditator, this is still grasping at concepts (*prapañca*)—subtle effort. The mind or mental effort that tries to grasp at philosophical views such as existence and nonexistence or any other conceptual view is baffled by not finding what it thought it knew. It is this mind or mental effort that needs to relax in order to experience reality directly. This marks a major shift in one’s practice as a meditator. The problem would present itself differently for a non-meditator. If the nonexistence of *saṃvṛtisatya* were merely a philosophical view, people could go very wrong from there. They could start denying karma, cause and effect, the endlessness of *saṃsāra*, and the need for liberation. If you are going to hold a philosophical view, better hold that *saṃvṛtisatya* exists in some way!

How does one learn the difference between holding a philosophical view and not? It seems for most people the only way is through finding a suitable teacher who can instruct them directly, face-to-face, through pointing-out instruction (*upadeśa*, Tib. *man ngag*). In the early teachings, the Buddha is portrayed as engaging in conversation on a one-to-one basis, using whatever language came naturally to his interlocutor. Since in these conversations, the Buddha takes the self or person as a given, one wonders how it became so commonplace early on for the commentarial tradition to take it as a given that the Buddha only taught that there is no self. A Zhentong interpretation of Tathāgatagarbha doctrine can be seen as simply a corrective device countering a movement toward a more Rangtong-type version of Buddhism. This would include conceptually grasping at a *saṃskṛta* self as real by calling it *saṃvṛtisatya*. This paper is too short to argue such a case, but it has at least to be considered.

Concluding Reflections

With artificial intelligence taking over more and more of our lives, modern society is faced more urgently than ever with the question of what is a *person*. The answer depends on what *the mind* is, and both questions depend on what we mean by

self. If we say, as Zhentongpas do, that the person, mind, or self of all beings is the *tathāgatagarbha* and that the buddha qualities exist in us primordially, then all our knowledge and experience is an expression of our inseparable buddha qualities. Everything, including the nature of what we take to be the material world, is intrinsic to the *tathāgatagarbha*. All our insights and intuitions, be they mathematical, artistic, or spiritual, are discovered directly without thinking, because they are inseparable from the mind or self that knows them. In other words, our task is not so much a matter of discovering we have no self as of discovering our self or person to be none other than the innate buddha together with all the inconceivable buddha qualities.

If Buddhism is going to enter into dialogue with the rest of the world and contribute to discussions of deep intellectual import, the world has to be made aware that there are two radically different interpretations of the Buddhist view of reality circulating throughout the tradition. I believe scientists are going to tend to favor a Rangtong version of Buddhism even though philosophically it could be considered quite nihilistic. Since the Zhentong approach requires a different way of knowing that is not accessible to the scientific analytical mindset, it is of doubtful interest to science.³⁷ Having said that, in terms of the nature of mathematical insight, debates rage on in mathematical circles as to what mathematics is and how insight arises.³⁸ Similarly, in the world of art, controversy rages as to what is meant by aesthetic value. The Zhentong interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* could possibly throw some light on what the heart/mind source of intuitive inspiration might be in all fields of human endeavor.³⁹

37 For more detail on this, see Hookham 1991, chapter 5: “Means of Apprehending Absolute Reality.”

38 See *New Scientist Essential Guide Number 1: The Nature of Reality; How Mathematics, Physics and Consciousness Combine to Define Our World* (London: New Scientist, 2020), 6.

39 Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche 1996.

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