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KLAUS-DIETER MATHES

Tāranātha's Presentation of *trisvabhāva* in the *gZan ston sñin po**

Abbreviations used:

MAV	<i>Madhyāntavibhāga</i>
MAVBh	<i>Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya</i>
MAVṬ	<i>Madhyāntavibhāgaṭkā</i>
MSA	<i>Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra</i>
MSABh	<i>Mahāyānasūtrālamkārabhāṣya</i>
RGV	<i>Ratnagotravibhāga</i>
RGVV	<i>Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā</i>

1. Abstract

The doctrine of *trisvabhāva* plays a central role in the formulation of the *gZan ston* ('empty of other') Madhyamaka. Normally any positive assertion on the level of ultimate truth, except that all phenomena are empty of an own-being, would not be accepted by a Madhyamaka school.¹ Tāranātha (1575-1634), a follower of the *gZan ston* exegesis of the Jo nañ pa school of Tibetan Buddhism, applies this proposition, however, only to the apparent truth, which he equates with the imagined and the dependent natures (*parikalpita*- and *paratantrasvabhāva*). The ultimate truth, or the perfect nature (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*),² is empty of other

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1. See WILLIAMS 1989: 62.

2. The equation of the Yogācāra terms *parikalpita* and *paratantra* with apparent truth and *pariniṣpanna* with the ultimate truth is quite common in the *gZan ston* Madhyamaka of the Jo nañ pas. Contrary to *parikalpita*, which is merely imagined and does not exist at all, *paratantra* is admitted to exist on the level of apparent truth. *Pariniṣpanna* exclusively exists in terms of ultimate truth. So Tāranātha says in his *gZan ston sñin po*: "Even though the two, dependent and imagined, are equal [in the sense that] they do not exist in reality, equal in being delusive appearances, and equal in being apparent [truth] and false, they should be distinguished in terms of their respective marks: The imagined does not exist even [on the level of] apparent [truth] whereas the dependent does. Since *pariniṣpanna* does not exist [on the level of] apparent [truth], [only] ultimately, it exists in reality. Likewise the imagined exists as imagination, the dependent as [mental] substance, and the perfect as something which is [even] free from the

(*g'zan ston*), that is, the imagined and the dependent, but not empty of its own-being.³ This presentation of *trisvabhāva*, which is typical of the Jonangpas, can be traced back to bTsan Kha bo che (born 1021). It mainly follows the *Bṛhaṭṭīkā*, a commentary on some of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*.⁴ Tāranātha sets forth this particular Madhyamaka understanding of the two truths in his “Essence of the Empty of Other” (Tib. *g'zan ston sñiñ po*) in a short and precise way. In its essentials, the doctrine was taken over by Koñ sprul blo gros mtha' yas⁵ and is still adhered to by modern *g'zan ston* proponents like Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtsho.

The *g'zan ston sñiñ po* is a typical Tibetan presentation of the four tenets of Buddhist philosophy (Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra and Madhyamaka). In this important *genre* of Tibetan hermeneutics the four tenets (Tib. *grub mtha'*) and their subdivisions are usually defined along the lines of the Madhyamaka distinction into apparent and ultimate truth, the Madhyamaka being considered the ultimate mode of analysis by all Tibetan schools. What makes Tāranātha's text on the four tenets special is the fact that he divides the fourth tenet into “ordinary” and “Great Madhyamaka” (*dbu ma chen po*). In the latter the two truths are presented in a typical *g'zan ston* way by relating them to the Yogācāra concept of *trisvabhāva*.

This particular *trisvabhāva* theory is largely based on the two introductory verses of the first chapter of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, where

mental fabrication ‘it does not exist in terms of these two’” (... *g'zan dbaṅ dañ kun brtags gñis bden par med mñam dañ / 'khrul snañ yin mñam dañ / kun rdzob dañ rdzun pa yin mñam yin kyañ / mtshan ñid so sor dbye dgos pa ni / kun brtags kun rdzob tu yañ med / g'zan dbaṅ kun rdzob tu yod pa yin ciñ / yoñs grub ni kun rdzob tu med la don dam du yod pas bden par yod pa'o / de b'zin du kun brtags ni brtags pas yod pa dañ / g'zan dbaṅ ni rdzas su yod pa dañ / yoñs grub ni de gñis su yod pa min yañ spros med du yod pa'o*, Tāranātha: “*g'zan ston sñiñ po ces bya ba b'zugs so*,” *rJe btsun Tāranātha'i gsuñ 'bum b'zugs so* (Leh: publ. by Namgyal & Tsewang Taru, 1982-5, Vol. 4, p. 505, ll. 1 - 3).

3. “Because that wisdom, [or] true nature of phenomena, (both are equated with the perfect nature) is established in its own right (Skt. **svabhāvataḥ*) since beginningless time, and neverchanging, it is not empty of its own-being (Skt. **svabhāvena*) and exists permanently” (*ye śes chos ñid de ni rañ gi ño bos gdod ma nas grub ciñ nam du yañ 'gyur ba med pa'i phyir rañ gi ño bos ston pa ma yin žiñ rtag tu yod pa'o*, Tāranātha, *op. cit.* (see footnote no. 2), p. 504, ll. 2 - 3).
4. See STEARNS 1999: 89.
5. Cf. *Śes bya kun khyab*, Vol. 2, pp. 546-9.

the central concepts of this Yogācāra work – duality, false imagining and emptiness – are introduced. Tāranātha further refers to the three types of emptiness presented in MSA XIV.34. In a way typical of the *gʒan ston* tradition, the presentation of the perfect nature is then combined with the *tathāgatagarbha* theory of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* on the grounds of an equation of purified suchness with the state of the Tathāgata in MSA IX.37. Finally, Tāranātha comes to the conclusion that distinguishing all phenomena on the basis of the three natures amounts to the same as differentiating such phenomena under the aspect of consciousness on the level of apparent truth, and the aspect of wisdom on the level of the ultimate truth.

In the following, I attempt an evaluation of Tāranātha's *trisvabhāva*-interpretation against the background of the pertinent passages of the Indian treatises adduced, especially the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra* and *Ratnagotravibhāga*.

2. The Initial Stanzas of the Madhyāntavibhāga

2.1. Tāranātha's interpretation

The *dbu ma chen po* chapter of the *gʒan ston sñin po* starts, after a general introduction, a second subchapter with a citation of the first two verses of the first chapter of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, which define the right middle way in the Yogācāra works of Maitreya. As an alternative to, or better, a further development of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, they play a central role for the proponents of the *gʒan ston*, distinguishing as they do the categories of the existing and non-existing. One has to bear in mind that the root text, which does not make much use of the *trisvabhāva* terms, equates the perceived object with the imagined nature, false imagining with the dependent nature, and the absence of duality, or emptiness, with the perfect nature (cf. MAV I.5).

In the following, I give a translation of the initial stanzas. The additions in brackets follow Vasubandhu's commentary.

False imagining exists. (I.1a)

Duality is not found in that. (I.1b)

But emptiness is found there, (I.1c)

[And false imagining] is found in relation to [emptiness] as well. (I.1d)

Therefore everything is taught (I.2b)

As neither empty nor non-empty, (I.2a)

Because [false imagining] exists, because [duality] does not exist, and because

[false imagining] exists [in relation to emptiness, and emptiness in relation to false imagining]. (I.2c)

And this is the Middle Path. (I.2d)⁶

Tāranātha starts by explaining that false imagining – being consciousness which takes the form of a perceived object and perceiving subject – only exists on the level of apparent truth. Duality, however, does not exist at all, since it is a pure mental creation. Thus apparent truth is free of the two extremes of nihilism and eternalism. The first extreme is avoided by asserting false imagining on the level of apparent truth, the second by negating the existence of the object-subject duality.

Emptiness, equated by Tāranātha with wisdom,⁷ really exists as the true nature of phenomena in false imagining.⁸ In a state where mental stains still prevail, false imagining also exists in relation to the true nature of phenomena or emptiness. It is to be understood, however, that false imagining exists only as something (ultimately) unreal (*bden med kyi no bor yod pa*). Being consciousness which consists of accidental stains, it must be given up eventually.⁹ Since the existence of emptiness

6. Cf. NAGAO 1964: 17-18: *abhūtaparikalpo 'sti dvayan tatra na vidyate / sūnyatā vidyate tv atra tasyām api sa vidyate // na sūnyam nāpi cāsūnyam tasmāt sarvam vidhīyate / sattvād asattvāt sattvāc ca madhyamā pratipac ca sā //*.

7. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtsho explained that the equation of emptiness with primordial wisdom follows from the fact that we are talking here about the emptiness or true nature of false imagining, which is mind.

8. “The wisdom of (genitive of identification?)^a emptiness free of mental fabrication really exists as the true nature of phenomena in consciousness, [i.e.] false imagining” (*spros bral ston pa nīd kyi ye śes de ni / rnam śes yañ dag min rtog de la chos nīd kyi tshul du bden par yod cin / ...*, Tāranātha, *op. cit.* (see footnote no. 2), p. 503, ll. 5-6).

a. In this context Sthiramati merely explains emptiness as the *dharmatā* (*chos nīd*) of false imagining: “False imagining is found in emptiness in the form of phenomena (lit. “as something possessing a quality (*dharmīn*),” i.e., possessing *dharmatā*), in the sense that emptiness exists in false imagining as its true nature” (*sūnyatāyās tu sattvam* (text: *sarvam*) *abhūtaparikalpe taddharmateti krtvā sūnyatāyām apy abhūtaparikalpo dharmīrupena vidyate*, YAMAGUCHI 1934: 15, ll. 17-9). Cf. Tib.: *ston pa nīd ni yañ dag pa ma yin pa kun rtog pa la de 'i chos nīd du yod de / ston pa nīd la yañ dag pa ma yin pa kun rtog pa chos can gyi no bor yod do* (Karmapa Tanjur, *sems tsam*, **bi**, p. 392, ll. 2-3).

9. “When stains [still] prevail, that consciousness exists in the true nature of phenomena in terms of phenomena (lit. “something possessing a quality,” i.e., phenomena possessing *dharmatā*), accidental stains which can be separated, which must be given up, [being] stains without real existence” (*dri bcas kyi skabs na chos nīd de la / rnam śes de chos can dri ma glo bur ba 'bral run / span bya*

and the non-existence of phenomena (false imagining and so forth) are asserted on an ultimate level, the extremes of nihilism and eternalism are avoided with regard to the ultimate truth.

Apparent truth, dualistic appearances, delusions, etc. do not exist in their own right; hence they are empty of an own-being. The true nature of phenomena, that is, emptiness or wisdom, exists from beginningless time. It is never-changing and therefore not empty of an own-being. This, according to Tāranātha, does not contradict the Sūtras, where it is said that even the *dharmadhātu* is empty. Being empty does not necessarily entail emptiness of an own-being. It may be understood as empty of other factors, for example, mental fabrications, which are different from wisdom or *dharmadhātu*.

What now follows is Tāranātha's definition of the three natures based on what has been said:

The imagined [nature] is [like] the sky etc., [like] all non-entities. [It consists of] all object-appearances such as: visible forms appearing to the [false] imagining, [all] relations between names and things, [which arise by] clinging to names as things and mistaking things for names, and [every] object grasped by a superimposing intellect – outside and inside, extremes and middle, big and small, good and bad, space and time.¹⁰

The dependent [nature] is mere consciousness, which appears as the subject-object relationship, because it appears by being dependent on something else, viz. the habitual imprints of ignorance.¹¹

The perfect [nature] is self-awareness, clarity in its own right, free from all mental fabrications. It is synonymous with the true nature of phenomena, the sphere of qualities (*dharmadhātu*), suchness and ultimate truth.¹²

dri ma bden med kyi ño bor yod.... , Tāranātha, *op. cit.* (see footnote no. 2), p. 503, l. 6.

10. Tāranātha, *op. cit.* (see footnote no. 2): ... *kun brtags ni nam mkha' la sogs pa dños med thams cad dañ / rnam rñog la śar ba'i gzugs sogs yul gyi snañ cha rñams dañ / miñ la don du źen pa dañ / don la miñ du 'khrul pa'i miñ don gyi 'brel pa dañ / phyi nañ mtha' dbus / che chuñ bzañ nan phyogs dus sogs blos sgro btags kyis gzuñ bya thams cad do* (p. 504, ll. 5-6).
11. *Ibid.*: *gźan dbañ ni gzuñ 'dzin gyi dños por snañ ba'i rnam par śes pa tsam ste / ma rig pa'i bag chags kyi gźan dbañ du gyur* (text: *grur*) *pas snañ ba yin pa'i phyr ro* (p. 504, ll. 6-7).
12. *Ibid.*: *yoñs grub ni rañ rig rañ gsal spros pa thams cad dañ bral ba de yin te / chos ñid dañ chos dbyiñs dañ / de bźin ñid dañ / don dam bden pa rñams miñ gi rnam grañs so* / (p. 504, l. 7 - p. 505, l. 1).

Tāranātha then elaborates the relations between these natures. Neither the imagined nor the dependent exist in reality: they are both deceptive appearances, apparent truths and false. They need to be distinguished, however, in terms of their respective features: The imagined does not even exist on the level of apparent truth, whereas the dependent does. The imagined exists as mere imputation, the dependent as mental substance. In a way typical of the Jonangpas, the perfect nature is taken to not exist on the level of apparent truth, but only on the ultimate level. Tāranātha must have seen the problems of this statement and added that the perfect nature is also without any mental fabrication, even without the mental fabrication that the perfect nature does not exist as the imagined or dependent natures.

2.2. *The Initial Stanzas in the Light of the Commentaries by Vasubandhu and Sthiramati*¹³

Based on the initial stanzas (see above), we can describe three philosophical propositions which undergird the entire treatise of the *Madhyānta-vibhāga*:

- (a) False imagining exists.
- (b) Subject-object duality, created by false imagining, is not found in that.
- (c) False imagining is found in relation to emptiness in the sense that emptiness is found in false imagining as its true nature.

The initial stanzas introduce at the same time the three main philosophical terms of the whole corpus – *false imagining*, *duality* and *emptiness*¹⁴ – which are related to the three natures in MAV I.5.

Vasubandhu explains *false imagining* in his commentary as the construction of the perceived object and the perceiving subject. *Duality* is the perceived object and the perceiving subject. *Emptiness* refers to the fact that this false imagining is devoid of any subject-object relationship. Taking up the canonical formula on *being empty* as it is found in the *Majjhimanikāya*,¹⁵ Vasubandhu then shows that he understands

13. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Schmithausen, who gave me some fruitful suggestions for this chapter, especially with regard to the problem of the two unbalanced *trisvabhāva* models in the MAV.

14. See ECKEL 1985: 35.

15. See CHALMERS 1899; and SEYFORTH RUEGG 1969: 319-320. MAVBh on I.1 runs as follows: “Thus one truly sees that something is empty of that which does

empty or *emptiness* as the absence of something, namely duality, in something else which exists (false imagining and emptiness). Sthiramati, too, defines the emptiness of false imagining as the absence of duality. He cites the common example of a rope which is falsely perceived as a snake: the rope is there; it is merely empty of "snakehood". The canonical formula on being empty (the absence of something in something which exists) is then explained as meaning that duality does not exist in false imagining. What is left over are false imagining and emptiness, both of which exist.¹⁶ Consequently, one is left wondering how Tāranātha can explain false imagining to be self-empty (*rañ stoñ*) and as ultimately not existing (a point we will come back to later).

Sthiramati gives four alternative commentaries directly on the initial propositions of MAV I.1. Summarizing these different explanations, one can say that the first two *padas* serve the purpose of (i) repudiating complete denial and wrong superimposition, (ii) establishing that all phenomena are only mind and (iii) explaining the marks of defilement. The explanations differ considerably in their way of defining the ontological status of false imagining, which exists "in terms of own being" (*svabhāvataḥ*, expl. no. 1), "substantially" (*dravyataḥ*, expl. no. 2), by nature as an [ongoing] modification of consciousness (*viññānapariṇāmātmanā*, expl. no. 3), and as "defilements" (*abhūtaparikalpasvabhāvaḥ saṃkleśaḥ*, expl. no. 4). Emptiness is described as "absence of duality in false imagining" (*grāhyagrāhakarāhitatā 'bhūtaparikalpasya*, expl. nos. 1+2), as a "referential object [conducive] to purification" (*viśuddhyālambana*, expl. no. 2), and as a "true (or existent) lack of self" (*bhūtanairātmya*, expl. no. 3). Further, it is said that its own-being is purification (*vyavadāna*, expl. no. 4) and that it is by nature the non-existence of duality.

In his commentary to the next stanza, Vasubandhu says that the proper middle path (*madhyamā pratipat*)¹⁷ is followed by asserting that everything is neither empty nor non-empty:

not exist in it, and one truly realizes that that which remains there is present, [and] hence exists there. The marks of emptiness are thus explained correctly" (*yad yatra nāsti tat tena śūnyam iti yathābhūtaṃ samanupaśyati yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭaṃ bhavati tat sad ihāstīti yathābhūtaṃ prajānātīty aviparītaṃ śūnyatā-lakṣaṇam udbhāvitaṃ bhavati*, NAGAO 1964: 18, ll. 4-7).

16. NAGAO 1964: 14, ll. 4-14.

17. Cf. MAV V.23-26, where a number of pairs of extremes are listed to make sure that the middle is correctly distinguished from all possible forms of dichotomiz-

“Neither empty” [means not empty of] emptiness and false imagining, “nor non-empty” [means empty of] duality, that is, perceived [object] and perceiving [subject]. “Everything” [means] the conditioned, which is called false imagining, and the non-conditioned, which is called emptiness.¹⁸

The paradoxical triple clause because it exists, it does not exist and it exists (MAV I.2c) is then explained as:

Because false imagining exists, because duality does not exist and because emptiness exists in relation to false imagining and false imagining in relation to it (i.e., emptiness).¹⁹

The third causal clause shows that the last two lines of MAV I.1 have to be taken together. The double locative relationship between false imagining and emptiness, the two entities of which all phenomena are not empty, suggests a mutual existence; and it is precisely this mutual existence the second *sattvāt* (“because it exists”) of MAV I.2c refers to. In his commentary on MAV I.2, Sthiramati clarifies the relationship between false imagining and emptiness by pointing out that false imagining is conditioned, because it depends on causes and conditions; emptiness does not and is therefore a non-conditioned entity. The conditioned is not empty, on account of the own-being of false imagining, but it is empty of duality. False imagining is found in relation to emptiness as something possessing a quality (i.e., phenomena possessing *dharmatā*), in the sense that emptiness exists in relation to false imagining as its true nature.²⁰

The relationship between emptiness and false imagining is further elucidated in MAV I.13, where the own-being of the non-existence of duality is taken as the mark of emptiness. The latter is described as neither existent nor non-existent. Existence does not apply because of the non-existence of duality. Non-existence is not accurate either, because of the existence of the non-existence of duality. The latter term indicates that emptiness is not the mere non-existence of a perceived

ing concepts, similarly to what one finds, for instance, in the works of Nāgārjuna (see NAGAO 1964: 69-70).

18. MAVBh on I.2: *na śūnyam śūnyatayā cābhūtaparikalpena ca / na cāśūnyam dvayena grāhyena grāhakeṇa ca / sarvaṃ saṃskṛtaṃ cābhūtaparikalpākhyam / asaṃskṛtaṃ ca śūnyatākhyam* / (NAGAO 1964: 18, ll. 10-12).

19. MAVBh on I.2: *sattvād abhūtaparikalpasya / asattvād dvayasya / sattvāc ca śūnyatāyā abhūtaparikalpe / tasyām cābhūtaparikalpasya* / (NAGAO 1964: 18, ll. 13-4).

20. MAVṬ on I.2 (see YAMAGUCHI 1934: 15, ll. 12-20).

object and a perceiving subject; rather, this absence constitutes a quality in the sense of a true mode of being. This becomes even clearer in the following, where it is concluded that emptiness is neither different from nor the same as false imagining. It cannot be different because the true nature or emptiness of a phenomenon, which appears as a result of false imagining, cannot be really different from this very phenomenon. In other words, it is due to the absence of duality that false imagining and emptiness are not different.²¹ On the other hand, under the aspect of own-being (or the existence) of the non-existence of duality, emptiness is not exactly the same as false imagining; otherwise it would not be the only referential object conducive to purification.²² The point is that even though the own-being of emptiness is defined in a negative way, it is not understood as the mere absence of something like a hare's horn, but as the true nature of phenomena, a general state of being.²³

From what has been said above, it becomes clear that the initial propositions (a) and (c) can be interpreted in different ways. The main question is, in what way false imagining exists (a) and how the relationship between false imagining and emptiness is to be explained (c). In

21. Cf. the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, where *dharmas* (explained as false imagining) and *dharmatā* (= emptiness) are similarly taken as being neither different nor the same. In the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti* their non-difference is explained on the grounds that the *dharmatā* is constituted by the mere non-existence of phenomena and is, as such, not different from what phenomena as a result of false imagining really are: non-existent. See MATHES 1996: 122.
22. By virtue of this difference, emptiness gives rise to supramundane *dharmas*. See SCHMITHAUSEN 1987, Vol. I: 78.
23. Cf. MAVṬ on I.13ab: “[The word *bhāva* in ... *abhāvasya bhāvaḥ śūnyasya lakṣaṇam* (MAV I.13ab)] is not superfluous. If only non-existence/non-entity^a of duality was taught to be the mark of emptiness, it would be understood as the mere ‘being in its own right’ of the non-existence/non-entity of duality, like the non-existence/non-entity of a hare’s horn and not – as is the case with the state of suffering etc. – in terms of true nature (*dharmatā*). Therefore, it is said: ‘The non-existence/non-entity of duality is emptiness’. And this non-existence/non-entity exists in false imagining” (Sanskrit in brackets reconstructed: [*nādhiko dvayābhāvaḥ*] *śūnyatālakṣaṇam itīyati nirdiśyamāne dvayābhāvasya svāntantryam evāvagamyate śaśaviṣāṇābhāvavat / na duḥkhatādivad dharmatārūpatā / tasmād evam ucyate dvayābhāvaḥ śūnyatā / tasya cābhāvasyābhūta-parikalpe bhāva[ḥ]...*, YAMAGUCHI 1934: 47, ll. 6-11.)
a. The Tibetan has *dnos po med pa* for *abhāva* (Karmapa Tanjur, *sems tsem*, Bi, 212a6-212b1).

Sthiramati's commentary it is possible, as we have seen, to identify at least two interpretations within his four explanations.

The central focus of the first interpretation lies on a false imagining which, according to Sthiramati's first explanation, does exist ultimately.²⁴ Emptiness is then defined as the absence of duality in false imagining. In other words, false imagining possesses or is the carrier of emptiness, which is understood as an abstract quality.²⁵ It is what false imagining really is, empty of duality. Duality and emptiness are then just two different aspects of false imagining, namely the way it appears and the way it really is. With such an interpretation of false imagining and emptiness, however, a literal translation of the locative in MAV I.1d (*tasyām*, i.e., *sūnyatāyām*) becomes problematic. Whereas the explanation that false imagining exists in relation to emptiness as "something possessing or bearing the quality [of true nature, emptiness]" (*dharmin*)²⁶ fits well the model centred on false imagining, a literal understanding of the locative *sūnyatāyām* in this sentence requires that emptiness be taken as something which pervades all phenomena like space (as is explained in MAV I.16c) and that it be able to exist even in its own right. The latter quality of emptiness is also needed to explain the fact that false imagining must be given up to attain liberation (as indicated by Sthiramati's four explanations of MAV I.d and as directly stated in MAV I.4d²⁷). In MAVBh on I.5, where the terms of *trīsva-*

24. Cf. MAVṬ I.1, where the pada *abhūtaparikalpo 'sti* is glossed with *svabhāvataḥ*. A little further down Sthiramati endorses the objection of an opponent: "[Opp.:] If thus duality was entirely non-existent like a hare's horn, and false imagining existed ultimately in its own right, then the non-existence of emptiness would follow. [Answer:] It is not like that, because emptiness is found there" (Sanskrit in brackets reconstructed: [*yadi evaṃ dva*] *yaṃ śaśaviṣāṇavat sarvathā nāsti / abhūtaparikalpaś ca paramārthataḥ svabhāvato 'sty evaṃ sūnyatābhāvaprasaṅgaḥ* (text: *sūnyatā 'bhāva-*) / *naitad evaṃ yasmāc chūnyatā vidyate tv atra*, YAMAGUCHI 1934: 10-1). In other words, there is nothing wrong with the ultimate existence of false imagining, because emptiness, i.e., the absence of duality, is found in it.

25. Cf. MAVṬ on I.13ab, where *dharmatā*, a synonym of emptiness, is compared with the state of suffering or impermanence.

26. ... *sūnyatāyām apy abhūtaparikalpo dharmirūpeṇa vidyate* / (YAMAGUCHI 1934: 15, ll. 19 20).

27. This follows also from MAV I.4: "Therefore its (= consciousness in its different forms, as explained in the preceding verse) [existence] is established as false imagining. For it is not as [it appears], nor is it completely non-existent, [since] it is assumed that from its cessation liberation results" (*abhūtaparikalpatvaṃ*

bhāva are introduced, Vasubandhu explains that the three natures, namely the perceived object, false imagining and the absence of duality (see below), are included in false imagining, as long as the latter exists. This may indicate that the model centred on false imagining describes only a *samsaric* state of mind.

The second interpretation of the initial propositions focuses on a space-like understanding of emptiness. False imagining, being only a flow of modifications of consciousness (Sthiramati's third and fourth explanation of MAV I.1a), is not said to exist ultimately. Emptiness as all-pervading true nature does not depend on false imagining and must be more than the mere absence of duality in it. This becomes clear in Sthiramati's fourth explanation of MAV I.1, where he says that the own-being of emptiness is purification because it has the own-being of the non-existence of duality. The path and cessation are also included in it, because they are constituted by emptiness.²⁸ From this one could infer that the qualities of the path etc. exist (in the sense of *gṛāṇa ston*) since beginningless time, or else they could not be included in false imagining as its true nature.²⁹ If the path is explained as in MAV III.11, namely as consisting of gradually cultivated and thus conditioned qualities like non-conceptual wisdom, it is difficult to subsume it under false imagining³⁰ and the non-existence of duality (=emptiness in the first

siddham asya bhavaty atah / na tathā sarvathā 'bhavat (the *na* seems to refer to both *tathā* and *sarvathā 'bhavat*, cf. Tib. *l de bzün ma yin ye med min* /) *tatṣayān muktir iṣyate //*, NAGAO 1964: 19, ll. 5-6 & 10). Vasubandhu elaborates: "because its (i.e., false imagining's) existence is not the way it appears. And it is [also] not completely non-existent, since it arises as mere deception. For what reason, again, is its mere non-existence not asserted? Because it is assumed that liberation results from its cessation. Otherwise, neither bondage [in *samsara*] (i.e., defilements) nor liberation (i.e., purification) would be brought about." (*yasmān na tathā 'sya bhāvo yathā pratibhāsa utpadyate / na ca sarvathā 'bhāvo bhrānti-mātrasyotpādāt / kimartham punas tasyābhāva eva neṣyate / yasmāt / tatṣayān muktir iṣyate //* *anyathā na bandho na mokṣaḥ prasidhyed...*, NAGAO 1964: 19, ll. 7-12).

28. MAVṬ on I.1 (Sanskrit in brackets reconstructed): [*śūnyatāsvabhāvo hi vyavadānaṃ dva*]yābhāvasvabhāvatvāt / *atra ca śūnyatāprabhāvitatvād mārga-nirodhayor api grahaṇaṃ veditavyam* / (YAMAGUCHI 1934: 13, ll. 9-11).
29. Cf. MAVṬ on III.22b-d, where the path is considered to be "non-conditioned" because it is constituted by emptiness and not conditioned by *karmakleśa* defilements.
30. Cf. Vasubandhu's commentary on the transformation of the basis (*āśraya-parivṛtti*) in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhaga*, where the *samsaric* state of mind is

interpretation) alike.³¹ Problematic in this model is therefore the explanation that false imagining is something which possesses emptiness (endowed with the path etc.) as its true nature.

In the MAVṬ on I.1d (fourth explanation) Sthiramati explains that the locative atra in MAV I.1c (*śūnyatā vidyate tv atra*) is used to express the notion that emptiness is not something altogether different from one's mind-stream of false imagining. One rather proceeds along the path from the side of defilements (false imagining) to that of purification (non-conceptual wisdom).

described as false imagining, and the remedy as non-conceptual wisdom. Without a transformation of the basis, the root text goes on to say, there would be no underlying support for designating a person passed into nirvana. Vasubandhu explains that it cannot be the antecedent (still samsaric) states of mind, because the cessation of that which is opposed to liberation (i.e., false imagining according to MAV I.4d) coincides with the arising of non-conceptual wisdom (remedy). False imagining and non-conceptual wisdom cannot occur at the same time, because two opposite processes do not have the same basis. This means that they cannot occur in the same *citta* (see MATHES 1996: 151).

Against this background, URBAN and GRIFFITHS' (1994: 13) statement that "the MV-ṭ 1.1.1. (=MAVṬ on I.1.^a) makes this distinction (false imagining as an undefiled nonerroneous flow of experience and as a defiled and mistaken set of percepts), identifying *abhūtaparikalpa* with error (*bhrānti*) when it is defiled (*saṃkliṣṭa*), and with emptiness (*śūnyatā*) when it is not" seems problematic to me. In MAVṬ on I.1 the own-being of false imagining is defined as defilements (*saṃkleśa*) because its defining mark is error. And the own-being of emptiness is taken to be purification, which includes the path and cessation, on the grounds that these are constituted by emptiness (cf. YAMAGUCHI 1934: 13, ll. 2-3 & 9-11). Since the path is included in the perfect nature on account of its being an unmistakable perception of reality (i.e., non conceptual wisdom), it is difficult to see how it can be called *abhūtaparikalpa*.

a. Even though the exact location is not given, this can refer only to Sthiramati's fourth explanation of MAV I.1.

31. Cf. MAVṬ on III.11, in which conditioned *dharmas* called the path are included in the perfect nature (defined as the non-existence of duality in MAV I.5) on account of their being correct perceptions of the ultimate truth. Sthiramati justifies this by pointing out that "the non existence of duality in [the dependent nature] is exclusively the perfect [nature]. But this does not rule out the possibility that [the perfect] is [also] something else than that, on the [wrong] assumption that (iti) the perfect [nature] is exclusively the non-existence of duality." (Sanskrit in brackets reconstructed: ... *tatra dvayābhāvaḥ pariniṣpanna eva / na tu dvayābhāva eva pariniṣpanna iti tadanyaprati[śedhaḥ]*, YAMAGUCHI 1934: 126, ll. 18-9). Translated into the language of mathematics, this means, "non-existence of duality" is a proper subset of "perfect nature".

In this context, it is interesting to note that in Sthiramati's four different commentaries on MAV I.1. emptiness is only taken as the absence of duality in false imagining, when a more ontological status (expl. 1 and 2) of the latter is emphasized.³² When false imagining is understood in a more epistemological sense (expl. 3 and 4), however, the absence of duality (emptiness) is also described as the "real lack of self" (*bhūtanairātmya*) or as being constituted by the path and cessation. This positive connotation of emptiness also explains why MAV I.1c is not a redundant repetition of MAV I.1b.³³ In fact, emptiness is not only defined as "the non-existence of duality", but also as "the existence of this non-existence" in MAV I.13ab. That emptiness is also taken as something more than the mere absence of duality becomes clear in the presentation of the sixteen types of emptiness in the second part of the first chapter³⁴ and MAV I.22c, where emptiness is equated with the luminous nature of mind (see also § 3.2. further down).

2.3. *The Doctrine of Trisvabhāva in the Madhyāntavibhāga and its Commentaries*

Faithful to the text they are commenting on, neither Vasubandhu nor Sthiramati translate the initial passage (MAV I.1-2) into the terms for *trisvabhāva*. We have to turn our attention therefore to MAV I.5, where the root text itself introduces the three natures.

MAV I.3-4 is a comment on the initial passage. False imagining is specified as a consciousness that takes the form of objects, living beings, a personal self and perception. In a world outside of consciousness, however, there are no such objects. For this reason, a perceiving subject does not exist either. Nevertheless, consciousness is established as false imagining, and its cessation is taken to be liberation. Only after this

32. In the second explanation emptiness is also taken to be the referential object conducive to purification.

33. If emptiness was only the absence of duality, MAV I.1c would merely repeat that duality is not found in false imagining.

34. In MAV I.20 the last of the sixteen types of emptiness, i.e., the emptiness whose own-being is non-existence (*abhāvasvabhāvasūnyatā*)^a is explained as being different from the other fifteen (the fifteenth being a summary of the first fourteen), since they describe the non existence of a perceiving person and perceived phenomena (i.e., duality).

a. See Vasubandhu's *bhāṣya* on MAV I 16c-20d (NAGAO 1964: 24-26). The root text is, as always, very cryptic, but doubtlessly confirms the above observation.

elaboration of the initial propositions are the terms for *trīsvabhāva* – *imagined, dependent* and *perfect* (*parikalpita, paratantra, pariniṣpanna*) – introduced, in order to show that they correspond to what was stated above:

The imagined, dependent and perfect [natures] are taught because of the [imagined] object, false imagining and the non-existence of duality (MAV I.5).³⁵

If one relates the central terms *emptiness*, which is defined as (i) the non-existence of duality and (ii) the existence of this non-existence (cf. MAV I.13ab), to the perfect nature, and *false imagining* to the dependent nature, the entire treatise can be understood in terms of the doctrine of *trīsvabhāva* without the help of a commentary. Especially in the third chapter on reality, the three natures are directly implied. In the first part of this chapter, ten aspects of reality are introduced. They reflect certain older concepts relating to truth/reality, such as the four noble truths of early Buddhism or the apparent and ultimate truths of the Mādhyamikas. Each of them is explained in terms of three aspects. This exposition implies the three natures so clearly that it seems to be a mere question of style that they are not mentioned *expressis verbis* throughout.³⁶ The ten aspects of reality are thus an attempt to explain older concepts on truth/reality from the point of view of the three natures, and thereby to show the continuity between mainstream Buddhist thought and Yogācāra.

Important for us is that the MAV clearly relates the two truths of the Mādhyamikas to the *trīsvabhāva*, explaining that only the perfect nature is a fit candidate for the ultimate truth (see below). If one applies this to the definition of *madhyamā pratipat* in the initial two stanzas, it would be safe to say that the non-existence of duality and the existence of false imagining refer to the level of apparent truth, and that the mutual existence of false imagining and emptiness defines the relation of apparent and ultimate truth. This, in fact, supports Śāntarakṣita's interpretation of *trīsvabhāva*, that is, Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Madhyamaka.

35. MAV I.5: *kalpitaḥ paratantraś ca pariniṣpanna eva ca / arthād abhūtakalpāc ca dvayābhāvāc ca deśitaḥ* (NAGAO 1964: 19).

36. The three natures are clearly mentioned at the beginning of the presentation of the ten aspects of reality in MAV III.3: “The threefold nature: permanently non-existent, existent, but not in reality, and in reality [both] existent and non-existent are asserted as the three natures” (*svabhāvas trividhaḥ ... asac ca nityaṃ sac cāpi atattvataḥ / sadasattattvataś ceti svabhāvatraya iṣyate*, see NAGAO 1964: 37-8).

Given the fact that the author of the extremely cryptic root text obviously tried to avoid the terms for *trīsvabhāva* in the first place, however, it is quite a difficult task to come up with a consistent theory of it. The problem is that terms which are loosely related to each other are not always completely identical. The perfect nature, for example, is related to emptiness only through the aspect of the non-existence of duality. On the other hand, the second aspect of emptiness (existence of the non-existence of duality) can only be accommodated in the perfect nature.

In his commentary on the stanza which introduces the *trīsvabhāva* terms (MAV I.5), Vasubandhu says that false imagining includes the three natures, if mere false imagining exists. This is an interesting point because the previous stanza concludes by stating that false imagining has to disappear completely in order for one to obtain liberation (MAV I.4d). In other words, the three natures are included in false imagining only in a samsaric state. This may be also the reason why it is difficult to find room for the pure dependent nature (the non-conceptual wisdom etc., of MAV III.11) within this presentation: in a samsaric state of mind the path has not been cultivated yet. Vasubandhu equates the imagined nature with the (perceived) object, false imagining with the dependent nature and the non-existence of a perceived object and perceiving subject with the perfect nature.

Sthiramati does not elaborate on Vasubandhu's *locativus absolutus* (*abhūtaparikalpamātre sati*) and the probably intended restriction of the presented *trīsvabhāva* model to a description of the samsaric state of mind. The imagined nature is explained as being entities like visible forms, sense faculties, a personal self and perceptions. As such, that is, as they appear to be, they do not exist. False imagining is taken to be the dependent nature on the grounds that it depends on causes and conditions. The perfect nature is defined as the absence of duality in false imagining. Sthiramati concludes by stating that the three natures are not different entities, but rather different aspects of false imagining. The aspect of false imagining which must be known is the imagined nature, the aspect to be known and given up (defilements) is the dependent nature, and the aspect to be known and actualized (its being free of duality) is the perfect nature.

The perfect nature "as a perfection in the sense of being an unmistakable [perception of the ultimate reality]" (*aviparyāśapariniṣpattyā*) occurs in the root text and Vasubandhu's commentary only in the third chapter on

reality, when ultimate truth is explained in terms of *trisvabhāva* (MAV III.11). In fact, this perfect nature is the path, described in MAV III.11 as conditioned and thus as a kind of “pure dependent nature”. As has been already observed above, it does not really fit the *trisvabhāva* model of MAV I.5. The reason for Sthiramati having introduced the two meanings of the perfect nature already in his commentary on MAV I.5 may be that he saw and tried to remove tensions resulting from an unbalanced presentation of *trisvabhāva*. Also in MAVṬ on I.1. he presents different explanations of the initial propositions as if they were compatible alternatives. The difference between the first two and the last explanation reflects the same tension between MAV I.5 and MAV III.11.

Sthiramati’s fourth explanation (MAVṬ on I.1) of false imagining as defilements, and of emptiness (which includes the path and cessation) as purification, corresponds to the presentation of the path and the ultimate truth in the third chapter: the dependent nature has to be finally given up (MAV III.9c) and only the perfect nature is a fit candidate for the ultimate truth (MAV III.10d). Furthermore, in the presentation of the ultimate truth as the pure object, it is said that the dependent (equated with false imagining)³⁷ cannot be any such pure object, since it occurs together with stains. Only the perfect nature – being the exclusive candidate for ultimate truth – qualifies as a pure object of wisdom (MAVṬ on III.10b-d and III.12cd). In the MAVṬ’s presentation of three types of emptiness (MAV III.6cd), Sthiramati says that the dependent nature is not completely non-existent. It exists in the way it is perceived by pure “mundane wisdom” (*laukikajñāna*), namely wisdom acquired after meditation.

The tension between two different *trisvabhāva* models is also evident in Sthiramati’s commentary on the third initial proposition: False imagining is found in relation to emptiness as “something possessing the quality [of true nature]” (*dharmīn*), in that emptiness exists in relation to false imagining as its true nature (*dharmatā*). According to the model focusing on the dependent nature, which is defined as false imagining in MAV I.5, the phenomena of the dependent nature possess or bear (*dharmīn*) the *dharmatā*. The latter is an abstract quality of the dependent, namely its being free of duality. This explanation fits the *trisva-*

37. In MAVṬ on III.12cd it is explained that the dependent and the imagined can not be pure referential objects of wisdom on the grounds that false imagining is endowed with stains and that the imagined does not exist.

bhāva model of MAV I.5 well. As already shown above, the perfect nature, or emptiness, is held in different parts of the MAV to possess qualities other than the mere absence of duality. As the luminous nature of mind (MAV I.22c) or natural emptiness (MAV III.6d), the perfect nature can exist on its own, and from the point of view of the path, the dependent, or false imagining, even has to be given up. The perfect nature pervades the dependent nature as its true nature (*dharmatā*) like space. In his fourth explanation on MAV I.1d, Sthiramati says that the path, that is, mental factors like non-conceptual wisdom, is itself constituted by emptiness. If these factors are then also contained in false imagining as its true nature, as MAV I.1c would suggest, they must exist since beginningless time as a part of the non-conditioned perfect nature.

This would contradict MAV III.11, however, where it is said that conditioned *dharmas*, called the path, are included in the perfect nature on account of their being correct perceptions of the ultimate truth. On the other hand, Sthiramati says in his MAVṬ on III.22b-d, where the meaning of the conditioned and non-conditioned *dharmas* is explained, that the truth of the path can be called conditioned and non-conditioned at the same time. It has to be brought out, but is nevertheless constituted by the non-conditioned and not caused by the *karmakleśa* defilements. In other words, the *dharmas* of the path are not caused like ordinary phenomena, but arise from a correct and non-conceptual perception of emptiness.

It would to be a difficult task to construct a consistent theory of *trīsvabhāva* based on what has been said up to now. Right from the beginning,³⁸ where the initial propositions can be interpreted in different ways, two *trīsvabhāva* models can be identified. They come close to what SPONBERG (1981: 99) calls the pivotal and progressive exegetical models of *trīsvabhāva*.

The model centred on the dependent nature (false imagining), or the pivotal *trīsvabhāva* model, starts from an ultimately existing or all-inclusive dependent nature. The imagined and perfect natures are just the way the dependent nature appears to be and really is. The dependent nature is thus a receptacle of the perfect nature, which is understood as something abstract, like the state of suffering or impermanence. When the dependent nature is purified it stops being false imagining and manifests in itself, and thus in everything, the perfect nature. The latter

38. Based on the *trīsvabhāva* definitions in MAV I.5.

becomes then, a kind of “purified dependent nature”, which in this model can be only thought of as the conditioned *dharmas* called the path – such things as non-conceptual wisdom, which is included in the perfect nature on account of its being a correct perception of ultimate reality. The ordinary world, that is, the defiled dependent nature, still remains, of course, in the non-enlightened mind-streams of other sentient beings.

In the progressive model, the focus lies more on an emptiness which pervades all phenomena of the dependent nature like space. This all-pervading emptiness possesses positive qualities and can exist, contrary to the pivotal model, in its own right, without the stream of false imagining or the dependent nature. The *dharmas* of the path participate in the non-conditioned perfect nature and are only caused in the sense that they have to be brought out. Still, a “pure” dependent nature seems to be necessary to explain where the manifestation of the perfect nature can occur. The three natures represent three levels, each revealing a progressively deeper degree of reality.

These incompatible passages in the *Madhyāntavibhāga* probably reflect, as I have already pointed out in a paper read at the IATS in Bloomington,³⁹ different strands of thought not yet completely harmonized. This is fairly typical of the early Yogācāra school, which not only incorporates early Mahāyāna thought, but also has a rich background of Abhidharma analysis. The commentaries’ uncertainty about the ontological status of false imagining may thus reflect the Abhidharmic background of this early Yogācāra material. Thus, it is generally asserted in the Hīnayana schools that conditioned, dependently arising entities really exist. Such a stance would of course be incompatible with a Madhyamaka understanding of the Yogācāra, which is at least attempted in some passages.

It is not surprising, then, that Tibetan schools had different views on these texts and interpreted them in the context of their own hermeneutical systems.

39. “Tāranātha’s ‘Twenty-one Differences in respect to the Profound Meaning’: A Possible Starting-Point for Studies in the *gZhan stong Madhyamaka*,” (to be published in the *Proceedings of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, Bloomington 1998).

2.4. Conclusion

Comparing Tāranātha's presentation of *trisvabhāva* with what has been observed in the *Madhyāntavibhāga* and its commentaries, one first of all wonders how, based on MAV I.1-2, the dependent nature can be explained as self-empty (*ran ston*) and as existing only on the level of apparent truth. This seems to be at odds with Vasubandhu's and Sthiramati's commentary, where the initial propositions of the treatise are explained by recourse to the canonical formula for the mode of emptiness (i.e., the absence of something in something which exists). Even though this formula supports a distinction between self-empty and empty of other, one would prefer to say that – contrary to the Jonangpa position – the dependent is empty of other, namely the imagined. Another proponent of the *g'zan ston*, gSer mdog paṅ chen Śākya mchog ldan (1428-1507), sees this point and contradicts what is obviously the stance of the Jonangpas by explaining that the basis which is empty of something other (*ston pa'i g'zi*) is the dependent, the negandum the duality of the imagined, and the “actual entity of emptiness” (*ston pa'i dños po*) non-dual wisdom.⁴⁰

The problem with Vasubandhu's interpretation of the initial stanzas, however, is not only, that an existing false imagining that is left over in emptiness has to be completely given up, but also that false imagining is equated with the dependent nature, and that the pure dependent factors of MAV III.11, such as *nirvikalpajñāna*, which are cultivated on the path, must also be accommodated within it. It is inconceivable, for example, how false imagining and *nirvikalpajñāna* can simultaneously exist within the same *citta*. Vasubandhu excludes such a situation in his commentary on the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, where the disadvantages of not postulating an *āśrayaparivṛtti* are elaborated. If Vasubandhu's comment on the initial stanza describes, as indicated above, only a samsaric state of mind, however, there is no problem at all: in a samsaric state of mind the pure factors of the path have not been cultivated yet! Based on this and the restriction of ultimate truth to the perfect nature in MAV III.10, it makes sense to follow Tāranātha and see in the first two *padas* of the initial *madhyamā pratipat* definition only a description of apparent truth.

40. gSer mdog paṅ chen Śākya mchog ldan, “Zab źi spros bral gyi bśad pa ston fiid bdud rtsi'i lam po che źes bya ba bźugs so,” p. 117. See also the discussion of Śākya mchog ldan's position, MATHES in print.

Whereas Tāranātha's commentary on the first part of the initial stanza reflects a reasonable and possible understanding of the whole treatise, his second step of equating emptiness with primordial wisdom is more difficult to follow. There is not a single passage in the *Madhyāntavibhāga* and its commentaries to support this notion. On the other hand, emptiness is not only taken as the non-existence of duality in false imagining, but also as "the existence of this non-existence" in MAV I.13ab. That emptiness is here something more than the mere absence of duality becomes clear in the presentation of the sixteen types of emptiness in the second part of the first chapter and in MAV I.22c, where it is equated with the luminous nature of mind. As we have seen above, Sthiramati knows also of a commentary on the initial stanza where emptiness is explained as being constituted by the path and cessation. From this one could infer that the qualities of the path etc. exist (in the sense of *gṛhanston*) since beginningless time, or else they could not be included in false imagining as its true nature. Constituting the ultimate truth, they are in reality beyond space and time and independent of false imagining. And since it is possible to transcend space and time at any place and at any time, each instant of false imagining possesses (*dharmin*) emptiness and its qualities as true nature. Thus Tāranātha restricts the perfect nature to its unchangeable aspect by saying that the perfect in terms of being unmistakable actually belongs to the pure dependent nature. Wisdom arises in this interpretation only in the sense that it becomes manifest in a mind-stream while one is removing the hindering defilements. To some extent this is supported by Sthiramati's commentary on the initial propositions (MAVṬ on I.1, 4th expl.) and on the meaning of the conditioned and non-conditioned in MAVṬ on III.22b-d, where it is said that the path is non-conditioned, being constituted by the non-conditioned, that is, emptiness, and not fabricated by ordinary *karmakleśa* defilements. It is also conditioned, because it has to be brought out. In MAV III.11, however, the path is only defined as being conditioned.

To sum up, it has become clear that Tāranātha's interpretation of the *madhyamā pratīpat* passage of the *Madhyāntavibhāga* profits from tensions between two *trīsvabhāva* models.

3. The Three Types of Emptiness and Absence of Own-Being

3.1. Tāranātha's Interpretation

Having elaborated his initial description of *trīsvabhāva* on the basis of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, Tāranātha goes on to quote MSA XIV.34, where three types of emptiness are mentioned: the emptiness of non-existence, the emptiness of phenomena not exactly existing as they appear to be and natural emptiness.⁴¹ According to Vasubandhu these three correspond to the three natures. It should be noted that we have the same threefold classification of emptiness also in MAV III.6cd,⁴² where emptiness, as one of the four traditional antidotes to the four mistaken views, is explained in terms of the *trīsvabhāva* doctrine.⁴³ The three natures are also explained in relation to the three types of *niḥsvabhāvatā* (i.e., absence of own-being in terms of phenomenal attributes, the absence of own-being in terms of arising and the ultimate absence of own-being).⁴⁴ According to the tradition of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, which explains three types of *niḥsvabhāvatā*, all knowable objects are pervaded by emptiness and by the quality "absence of own-being," and therefore the *g'zan ston* tradition asserts that all phenomena are empty and non-empty. Thus everything lacks an own-being in terms of phenomenal attributes and arising, which is in tune with the normal Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness (*rañ ston*). The ultimate absence of own-being (*paramārthaniḥsvabhāvatā*), however, constitutes a positive quality, a kind of all-pervading true nature.

Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtsho, a modern proponent of the *g'zan ston* and follower of Tāranātha, compares the *paramārthaniḥsvabhāvatā* with the

41. MSA XIV.34: "[First] one realizes the emptiness of non-existence and then the emptiness of not [exactly] existing as [what the forms of consciousness appear to be], [but only] after having realized natural emptiness is one considered to be someone who realizes emptiness" (*abhāvasūnyatām jñātvā tathābhāvasya sūnyatām / prakṛtyā sūnyatām jñātvā sūnyajña iti kathyate ||*, S. LÉVI 1907: 94).
42. Cf. MAV III.6cd: *abhāvas cāpi atadbhāvaḥ prakṛtiḥ sūnyatā matā* (NAGAO 1964: 39). Emptiness of non-existence means that the imagined does not exist at all. Emptiness of consciousness not existing as it appears means that the dependent is not completely non-existent, however, it does not exist as it is imagined. Natural emptiness is related to the perfect, the own-being of emptiness.
43. A full correspondence is drawn, of course, only in Vasubandhu's *bhāṣya*.
44. This is in accordance with the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (see J. POWERS 1995: 98-105).

genuine realization that “the true nature of thoughts, [such as worries that] there might be difficulties in [one’s] future, is [nothing else than] the luminous nature [of mind], which is really free of mental fabrications.”⁴⁵ In other words, the third *niḥsvabhāvatā* refers to the fact that the ultimate luminous nature of mind is really free or empty of everything (e.g., mental fabrications) other than its own-being (*gṛān stoṅ*).

This contradicts the so-called *rañ stoṅ* tradition which has it that everything – including the Buddha qualities – is empty of any kind of own-being or inherent existence. Pure *rañ stoṅ*, however, according to Tāranātha’s understanding of what the Buddha taught in the second turning of the wheel of the dharma, means that only the apparent truth is empty of an own-being (*rañ stoṅ*). And since the three types of absence of own-being refer to this very emptiness, they teach correct *rañ stoṅ* and are in accord with *gṛān stoṅ*. The truly existent perfect nature which is expressed by the *paramārthaniḥsvabhāvatā* does not contradict the Madhyamaka, since it is not created, does not become extinct, does not abide, neither comes nor goes, and transcends space and time.

3.2. *The Three Types of Absence of Own-Being in the Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra and the Three Types of Emptiness in the Madhyānta-vibhāga and Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*

According to *Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra* VII.7,⁴⁶ the ultimate absence of own-being (*paramārthaniḥsvabhāvatā*) is entirely different from the first two, the *niḥsvabhāvatā* of phenomenal attributes (*lakṣaṇa*) and arising (*utpatti*) – which means, different from the normal Madhyamaka understanding, that phenomena and their arising lack an own-being. The ultimate absence of own-being, on the other hand, is taken to be constituted by the fact that everything lacks a true self (*dharmanairātmya*) – which is considered to be an all-pervasive positive quality.

A similar notion is attributed to the natural emptiness (*prakṛtisūnyatā*) of the Yogācāra, which is contrasted with an emptiness of non-existence and an emptiness of phenomena not exactly existing as they appear. In MSABh XIV.34 natural emptiness is explained as the own-being of

45. “*ma ’oṅs pa la dka’ las khag po yod pa’i rnam rtog gi gnas lugs dños gnas spros bral gyi ’od gsal*” – Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtsho’s joyful comment on *paramārthaniḥsvabhāvatā* while explaining the *gṛān stoṅ sñiṅ po* passage quoted by Koṅ sprul blo gros mtha’ yas in *Ses bya kun khyab*, Vol. 2, p. 549. The teachings were given at Pullahari Monastery, Nepal, in January 1999.

46. LAMOTTE 1935: 69.

emptiness (*śūnyatāsvabhāva*) and in MAVT III.6cd as the own-being of the non-existence of duality. That natural emptiness, which is at times also expressed as *dvayābhāvasvabhāvasūnyatā* or *abhāvasvabhāvasūnyatā* in the MAV, does have a positive connotation, becomes particularly clear in the presentation of the sixteen types of emptiness in MAV I.17-20. In MAV I.20 the last two, *abhāvasūnyatā* and *abhāvasvabhāvasūnyatā* are clearly distinguished from each other. Whereas *abhāvasūnyatā* merely summarizes the first fourteen types of emptiness, that is, the non-existence of a personal self and phenomena, *abhāvasvabhāvasūnyatā* is something entirely different: it is the existence of the non-existence of a personal self and phenomena.⁴⁷ Thus also in the MSA and the MAV the existence of an absence is seen as something different from just the absence of something.⁴⁸

3.3. Conclusion

The three different types of emptiness or absence of own-being (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) provide a strong argument in favour of a *rañ stoñ / gžan stoñ* distinction. Whereas the first two types of emptiness, the ones in relation to the imagined and the dependent natures, define the absence of own-being in line with a normal *rañ stoñ* understanding of emptiness, the natural emptiness or *paramārthaniḥsvabhāvatā* leaves ample space for a *gžan stoñ* interpretation of the ultimate. One has to keep in mind, however, that such an understanding requires adherence to Tāranātha's *trisvabhāva* theory. Moreover, the explanations of natural emptiness etc. do not imply anything further than that the existence of the absence of duality is something more than the absence itself (see above). It is only Tāranātha's combination of these Yogācāra elements with the *tathāgata-garbha* of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* that fully underpins *gžan stoñ*.

47. See MATHES 1998: 462-3.

48. One could compare this with the law of gravity in physics, where the concrete attraction of two masses and the fact that masses always follow the law of gravity in the whole universe are two different things entirely. Whereas the first element represents a concrete example, a concrete object of negation or (in the example borrowed from physics) two concrete masses, the latter refers to the very validity of a law or fact, be it the all-pervasive quality "absence of an own being" or the universality of the law of gravitation.

4. *The Combination of the trisvabhāva with the tathāgatagarbha*

In a following subchapter Tāranātha explains the uncommon meaning of *gīzan ston* generated by combining his doctrine of *trisvabhāva* with the *tathāgatagarbha* theory. In order to do so, he quotes MSA IX.37:

Even though suchness is undifferentiated in all [living beings], in its purified form it is the state of the Tathāgata. Therefore all living beings have the seed/nature (*garbha*) of the [Tathāgata].⁴⁹

It is this same *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, however, which distinguishes in its third chapter sentient beings according their basic spiritual potential (*gotra*). In MSA III.11 it is said that there is a group of persons with no potential at all (*agotra*), and among those there are some who will not attain nirvana for some time, and some who will not attain it at all (*tatkālāparinirvāṇadharmā atyantam ca*). This *gotra* theory, which is quite common in the Yogācāra, is in sharp contrast with the statement in MSA IX.37. There are only two solutions. One either takes mainstream Yogācāra literally and declares the *tathāgatagarbha* stanza as a teaching with a provisional meaning within the Yogācāra, or one sticks to the *tathāgatagarbha* theory and explains away the limitations of the *agotra-stha*.⁵⁰ Tāranātha chose to do the latter. This fits his *trisvabhāva* model well: the different *gotras*, which function as a cause (*hetu*), or better, a basis for a spiritual career either as a Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha or Bodhisattva, belong to the dependent nature and are thus restricted to the level of apparent truth. The omnipresent perfect nature, which is constituted by Buddha qualities since beginningless time, pervades even those without a *gotra*. It is thus only a question of time till they become aware of their innate qualities, even if they have no *gotra* for the time being.

Tāranātha's hermeneutics have thus reached the heights of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* where suchness endowed with inseparable qualities is hindered only by exterior accidental stains. Suchness, as we have seen above, is to be understood as a synonym for the perfect nature. And in order to show that it is endowed with the immeasurable Buddha qualities, he quotes RGV II.5:

49. MSA IX.37: *sarveṣāṃ aviśiṣṭāpi tathatā śuddhim āgatā / tathāgatatvaṃ tasmāc ca tadgarbhāḥ sarvadehināḥ //* (LÉVI 1907: 40).

50. See SEYFORTH RUEGG 1969: 82.

[The state of Buddha] is endowed with Buddha qualities, which surpass the number of sand grains in the banks of the Gaṅgā. [These qualities] all radiate light, are uncreated and occur inseparably [from the true nature].⁵¹

Thus all the uncreated qualities of the ultimate Buddha exist, and the *dharmadhātu* wisdom belongs exclusively to the category of the ultimate truth. In view of their having existed since beginningless time, the other four wisdoms (mirror-like wisdom, wisdom of equality, discriminating and all-accomplishing wisdoms) are mainly part of the ultimate. But given that they are attained through meditation, these four wisdoms are also involved to a small extent in apparent truth.⁵² This holds true also for the ten powers and the four types of fearlessness. The qualities of the form-bodies and speech of the Buddha pertain in equal part to both truths. Accordingly the *svābhāvikakāya* (equivalent of *dharmadhātu* wisdom) belongs only to the ultimate, the *dharmakāya* mainly to the ultimate, and the *sambhoga*- and *nirmāṇakāya* – if one does not distinguish what is real and imputed – in equal parts to both truths. Insofar as it appears to others, Buddha activity participates in the apparent truth. Nevertheless, since wisdom, its supporting force, is ultimate, the bodies, wisdom, qualities and activity of the Buddha are contained in the ultimate and have existed since beginningless time.

Interesting for us is Tāranātha's final summary of the three natures. He starts off by saying that the imagined nature is usually differentiated into the imagined of the perceived object and the imagined of the perceiving subject. The dependent is distinguished into impure and pure, and the perfect into an unchangeable perfect nature and the perfect nature constituted by unmistaken perception. In fact, the imagined nature is only the perceived object, whereas the real perfect nature is the unchangeable one. The perfect nature constituted by unmistaken perception is included under the pure dependent nature. The imagined nature of the perceiving subject is by nature the same as the dependent. Upon careful analysis, therefore, the dependent must be included under the imagined, and since its true nature is the perfect, all phenomena are included under the imagined and the perfect. Thus, distinguishing all phenomena on the basis of the three natures amounts to the same as

51. RGV II.5: *gaṅgātīraraḥo 'tītair buddhadharmaiḥ prabhāsvaraiḥ / sarvair akṛta-kair yuktam avinīrbhāgavṛttibhiḥ //* (JOHNSTON 1950: 80).

52. This means that when the accidental stains are removed on the level of apparent truth, the four types of wisdom are shining forth, like a crystal whose surface has been cleaned (oral explanation of Thrangu Rinpoche, Baudha, Kathmandu).

differentiating such phenomena under the aspect of consciousness on the level of apparent truth, and the aspect of wisdom on the level of ultimate truth. The consciousness of visible form etc. does not really exist; its true nature, however, does.

5. Final Conclusion

Tāranātha's abandoning of the dependent nature and restriction of the perfect nature to its unchangeable aspect entails a sharp distinction between the perfect and imagined, which is hardly compatible with the main parts of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*. The dependent nature undoubtedly plays a central role as an inexpressible reality, which can be either misunderstood, becoming the imagined nature, or realized just as it is, abiding as the perfect nature. This explanation, however, is not in harmony with all strands of the treatise. And it is from these tensions that the Jonangpas profit, in that they offer a creative interpretation fitting their *g'zan ston* view.

Tāranātha's particular understanding of the *Madhyāntavibhāga* is also a prerequisite to his using the three types of emptiness of MSA XIV.34 and the three *niḥsvabhāvatā* of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* towards his end, and reading his *rañ ston* / *g'zan ston* distinction of emptiness into it. To complete this move, Tāranātha equates the perfect nature of the Yogācāra with the *tathāgatagarbha* theory of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. He thereby tacitly overlooks the problem that this identification (in MSA III.11) contradicts the typical Yogācāra classification into different potentials (*gotra*), including explicitly an ultimate cut-off potential, and leaves it to the reader himself to apply his hermeneutics and restrict the teaching of different *gotras* to the level of apparent truth.

To sum up, without the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* there would be little that directly supports Tāranātha. Even though there are fundamentally different interpretations in the Tibetan traditions regarding the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, one can say without a doubt that the ultimate is not self-empty (*rañ ston*) but endowed with inseparable supreme qualities.⁵³ Thus wisdom is explained as being already present in ordinary sentient beings as an integral part of the Buddha

53. RGV I.155: *sūnya āgantukair dhātuḥ savinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ / aśūnyo 'nuttarair dharmair avinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ* / "The Buddha element is empty of accidental [stains], whose mark is that they can be separated. It is not empty of the supreme qualities, whose mark is that they cannot be separated [from the Buddha element]." (Johnston 1950: 76). See also RGV II.5, cited by Tāranātha above.

element.⁵⁴ It only has to be cleaned of the accidental stains of defilements.

A problematic feature of the *yogācāra-tathāgatagarbha* synthesis is that Tāranātha also applies the equation “*dharmadhātu* = wisdom” to the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, and refers to “emptiness” in the third initial proposition of MAV I.1. as “wisdom of (i.e., which is) emptiness” (*ston pa ñid kyī ye śes*). As we have seen, however, this is merely one legitimate and interesting exegesis of a problematic stanza.

The Third Karmapa Rañ byuñ rdo rje (1284-1339) had earlier enunciated a similar position in his *rNam par śes pa dañ ye śes 'byed pa'i bstan bcos*, which represents his understanding of the Yogācāra works attributed to Maitreya. Unlike the Jonangpas, however, he does not present *dharmadhātu* as wisdom when describing the transformation of the eight types of consciousness into the four kinds of wisdoms in accordance with the Yogācāra works. Only in his final summary does Rañ byuñ rdo rje indicate his understanding of the *dharmadhātu* as one of the five ever-present wisdoms in a *gžan ston* sense.⁵⁵ In fact, it was Dol po pa who started to use this terminology freely according to his *gžan ston* interpretation of the Buddhist literature. In other words, Dol po pa and later Tāranātha took *dharmadhātu* or emptiness in the Yogācāra works as a kind of wisdom, and therefore felt free to call it that, a license against which other schools reacted strongly.⁵⁶

54. See RGVV on I.28: “It is said that all living beings have Buddha nature on the grounds that all (lit. “the multitude of”) sentient beings are included in the Buddha wisdom.” (*buddhajñānāntargamāt sattvarāśes ... uktāḥ sarve dehino buddhagarbhāḥ*, JOHNSTON 1950: 26, ll. 1-4). See also RGV I.102-104, where in the second of nine examples which illustrate the ever existing Buddha nature, honey is compared to undefiled wisdom and the swarm of bees concealing the honey, to defilements (JOHNSTON 1950: 26, ll. 1-4 & 61, ll. 5-15).

55. Having enunciated the transformation into four kinds of wisdom and three *kāyas* (*dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*), he explains these three *kāyas* of transformed consciousness as the *svābhāvīkākāya*, which rests in the *dharmadhātu*. In his final summary, Rañ byuñ rdo rje says: “The actualization of the own-being of the five wisdoms and four *kāyas* is Buddha-[hood]. Endowed with the stains of the mind, intellect and consciousness, it is the *ālayavijñāna*. Free from stains, it is called the essence of the victorious one” (... *ye śes ña dañ sku bzī yi / rañ bžin mñon gyur sañs rgyas te / sems yid rnam par śes pa yi / dri mar ldan gañ kun gži yin / dri med rgyal ba'i sñiñ por brjod*, Rañ byuñ rdo rje: *rNam par śes pa dañ ye śes 'byed pa'i bstan bcos bžugs so*, p. 4b4).

56. See STEARNS 1999: 48-50.

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