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The *gzhan stong* model of reality

Some more material on its origin,
transmission, and interpretation¹

Klaus-Dieter Mathes

By the time Tibetans inherited Indian Buddhism, it had already witnessed two major doctrinal developments, namely the notion of the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras that all factors of existence (*dharmas*) lack an own-being (emptiness), and the Yogācāra interpretation of this emptiness based on the imagined (*parikalpita-*), dependent (*paratantra-*) and perfect natures (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*).² Closely related to this threefold distinction was the Tathāgatagarbha restriction of emptiness to adventitious stains which cover over an ultimate nature of buddha-qualities. There can be, of course, only one true reality towards which the Buddha awakened, so that exegetes were eventually forced to explain the canonical sources (i.e., Mahāyāna Sūtras) which contain mutually competing models of reality. This set the stage for the well-known hermeneutic strategies of the Tibetan schools. The main issue at stake was whether or not one needs to distinguish two modes of emptiness: being “empty of an own-being” (Tib. *rang stong*), and being “empty of other” (Tib. *gzhan stong*).

¹ This is an enlarged version of my paper read at the 2008 IABS Conference in Atlanta, where it had the title: “Was the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339) a Proponent of *Gzhan stong*? Some More Material from Rje Bkra shis ’od zer’s (15th/16th cent.) *Ratnagotravibhāga* Commentary.”

² This threefold distinction is related to the three *niḥsvabhāvatās* of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*: the lack of essence in terms of characteristics (*lakṣaṇa-niḥsvabhāvatā*), arising (*utpatti-n.*) and the ultimate (*paramārtha-n.*). See Mathes 1996: 161.

Possible Indian precedents of *gzhan stong*

Western scholarship has tended to adopt the predominant Tibetan view that the *gzhan stong* interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine was a regrettable mistake of Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292–1361), and it was never seriously considered that *gzhan stong* might have Indian precedents and a transmission like other Madhyamaka traditions. It is true that the technical term *gzhan stong* (or a convincing Sanskrit equivalent of it) has not hitherto been located in Indian texts. However, Karl Brunnhölzl has recently pointed out at the IATS conference in Vancouver that we find something very close to *gzhan stong*, namely “emptiness of being free from other” (*gzhan dang bral ba'i stong pa nyid*) in Vinītadeva’s (645–715)³ *Triṃśikāṭikā* on line 25a:

Likewise, the perfect [nature] has the nature of non-existence. Therefore it is called without an own-being. The word “non-existence” refers [here] to the *emptiness of being free from other*, the essence of existence.⁴

This must be seen against the background of the Yogācāra idea that the non-existence of duality is a positive quality that exists, so that emptiness is defined as the existence or own-being of the non-existence of duality in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, for example.⁵ In fact, Vinītadeva’s *emptiness of being free from other* refers to the Yogācāra-formula of emptiness in Sthiramati’s *Triṃśikābhāṣya* on verse 21:

³ Jaini 1985: 470.

⁴ Derge Tengyur (D) 4070, fol. 57a₂₋₃: 'di ltar yongs su grub pa ni dngos po med pa'i ngo bo nyid yin te/ de'i phyir ngo bo nyid med pa zhes bya'o / yang na dngos po med pa'i sgra ni gzhan dang bral ba'i stong pa nyid de/ dngos po'i ngo bo la bya'o /. The Sanskrit of this part is not available. I thank Dr. Karl Brunnhölzl for this reference.

⁵ See MAVBh 22₂₄–23₁: “Non-existence, that is, of duality, the perceived object and perceiving subject; and the existence of this non-existence is the defining characteristic of emptiness” (*dvayagrāhyagrāhakasyābhāvaḥ / tasya cābhāvasya bhāvaḥ śūnyatāyā lakṣaṇam*).

The fact that the dependent [nature] is always, at any time, entirely free from the perceived object and perceiving subject is the perfect nature.⁶

Based on that, it is reasonable to look for the idea of *gzhan stong* in Indian Yogācāra literature, in the same way as it is possible to study Indian *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka*, even though the label *Prāsaṅgika* for a Madhyamaka school was only coined in Tibet.

The Jo nang pas, for one, claim that their *gzhan stong* position had earlier been staked out in India, for example by the Kashmiri Paṇḍita Sajjana (11th cent.) who adhered to a distinction between the real and imputed. In his “History of the Collection of one Hundred Instructions,” Jo nang Kun dga’ grol mchog (1507–1566) reports that Btsan Kha bo che (b. 1021) said about Sajjana:

Sajjana, the paṇḍita from Kashmir, made the very significant statement that the victorious one turned the *dharmacakra* three times. The first [*dharm*]cakra concerned the Four [Noble] Truths, the middle one the lack of defining characteristics, and the final one careful distinctions. The first two of them did not distinguish between the real and the imputed. During the ultimate ascertainment of the final one, he taught by distinguishing between the middle and the extremes (Skt. *Madhyāntavibhāga*) and by distinguishing between phenomena and their true nature (Skt. *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*).⁷

If this statement has any historical value, Sajjana follows here the hermeneutics of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* and ascribes, based on two of the Maitreya works, definitive meaning to the third

⁶ TŚBh 40₄₋₅: *tena grāhyagrāhakeṇa paratantrasya sadā sarvakālam atyantarahitatā yā sa pariniṣpannasvabhāvaḥ /*

⁷ Kun dga’ grol mchog: “Khrīd brgya’i brgyud pa’i lo rgyus bzhugs so,” 83₆–84₁ (See also *Jo nang kun dga’ grol mchog gi khrīd brgya’i skor* 104₃₋₅): */ kha che paṇḍita sajjana’i gsung gis rgyal bas ’khor lo dang po bden bzhi / bar pa mtshan nyid med pa / mthar legs par rnam par phye ba’i chos kyi ’khor lo bzlas pa lan gsum bskor ba las snga ma gnyis dngos btags ma phye ba / phyi ma don dam par nges pa’i tshe / dbus dang mtha’ phye / chos dang chos nyid phye nas gsungs zhing /* My translation follows closely the one by Stearns (1999: 42–43). In what follows this passage, Kun dga’ grol mchog tells us that this statement appears in an old notebook written by Btsan Kha bo che himself, called *Padma lcags kyu* (*ibid.*).

dharmacakra. According to *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* VII.30,⁸ the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths in the first *dharmacakra*. Both the second and the third *dharmacakras* he taught beginning with the lack of an own-being in phenomena, the fact that they neither arise nor pass out of existence, that they are quiescent from the beginning, and that they are naturally in a state of *nirvāṇa* – in other words, emptiness as taught in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* and the analytical *Madhyamaka* works of Nāgārjuna. Thus the last two *dharmacakras* are not different in terms of ontology. Still, the third *dharmacakra* differs in the fine distinctions it offers, and for this reason alone it has – contrary to the first two – definitive meaning (*nītārtha*), and so outshines the second *dharmacakra* by an uncountable factor.⁹ In VII.3 the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* explains that the Buddha was thinking of three types of “lack of own-being” (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) when he turned the *dharmacakra* beginning with the lack of an own-being in phenomena. In the following paragraphs (SNS VII.3–13) it becomes clear that the three *niḥsvabhāvatās* are the three natures of the *Yogācāra* (that is, the imagined, dependent and perfect natures), while SNS VII.24 states that the formula “beginning with the lack of own-being ...” has a hidden intention. In other words, it must be understood in terms of the three *niḥsvabhāvatās*. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the correct distinction between them is what makes the third *dharmacakra* definitive.

In the initial verse of the first chapter of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, the three natures are defined on the basis of duality (imagined nature), false imagining (dependent nature), and emptiness (perfect nature):¹⁰

False imagining exists.
Duality is not found in it.

⁸ Tr. Powers 1994: 138–141.

⁹ As explained in SNS VII.31–32 (tr. Powers 1994: 141–145).

¹⁰ See MAVBh 9_{19–20} on I.5: *arthaḥ parikalpitaḥ svabhāvaḥ | abhūtaparikalpaḥ paratantraḥ svabhāvaḥ | grāhyagrāhakābhāvaḥ pariniṣpannaḥ svabhāvaḥ |*. This does not directly support the equation of duality (*grāhyagrāhaka*) with *parikalpita*, but from MAVT 57₁₈ it is clear that *parikalpita* not

Emptiness is found there (i.e., in false imagining)
And it (false imagining) is found in it (emptiness).¹¹ (MAV I.1)

In his commentary on this verse, Vasubandhu defines emptiness as follows:

Emptiness is the freedom of this false imagining from the relation between a perceived object and perceiving subject. Thus one truly comes to see that something is empty of that which does not exist in it, and one truly realizes that that which [afterwards] remains there is present, [and] hence exists there.¹²

This translates into a dependent nature that is empty of the imagined nature and the related perceiving subject (if the imagined is taken to include perceived objects only). What remains as truly existent then are the dependent and perfect natures, or false imagining and emptiness.¹³ This leaves us wondering how something can be not empty of emptiness, and indeed in the second part of the first chapter in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, which is on emptiness, we find a distinction between an emptiness which is the non-existence of duality (i.e., the person[al self] and phenomena) and an emptiness which is the existence of this non-existence.¹⁴ The latter is not only an endorsement of the non-existence of duality, but also positively understood as the natural luminosity of mind. This is clear from the following passage in the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* on MAV I.22:

only includes *dharmas*, but also *pudgala*.

¹¹ MAVBh 17₁₆₋₁₇: *abhūtaparikalpo 'sti dvayan tatra na vidyate / śūnyatā vidyate tv atra tasyām api sa vidyate //*

¹² MAVBh 18₂₋₆: *śūnyatā tasyābhūtaparikalpasya grāhyagrāhakabhāvena virahitā ... evaṃ yad yatra nāsti tat tena śūnyam iti yathābhūtaṃ sam-anupaśyati yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭaṃ bhavati tat sad ihāstīti yathābhūtaṃ prajānātīti ...*

¹³ As Vasubandhu explains in MAVBh 18₁₀: *na śūnyam śūnyatayā cābhūtaparikalpena ca /*

¹⁴ MAV I.20 (MAVBh 26₉₋₁₀): “Emptiness is here [in the context of the first fourteen types of emptiness] the non-existence of a person and phenomena. The true existence of their non-existence in it (i.e., the perceiving subject and so forth) is a different emptiness.” (*pudgalasyātha dharmāṇām abhāvaḥ śūnyatātra hi / tadabhāvasya sadbhāvas tasmin sā śūnyatāparā //*).

[Emptiness is] neither defiled nor undefiled, neither pure nor impure. How is it that it is neither defiled nor impure? It is because of the natural luminosity of mind. How is it that it is neither undefiled nor pure? It is because of the adventitious nature of defilements.¹⁵

Just as in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* this positively understood emptiness, which is at the same time natural luminosity, is compared to the natural purity of water, gold and space, all of which can co-exist with adventitious stains. Thus the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* states:

How should the differentiation vis-à-vis emptiness be understood? [In the sense of emptiness] being defiled as well as pure (MAV I.16a). Thus is the differentiation vis-à-vis it. In what state is it defiled and in what is it pure? It is accompanied as well as not accompanied by stains (MAV I.16b). When it occurs together with stains it is defiled, and when [these] stains are abandoned it is pure. If, after being accompanied by stains it becomes stainless, how is it then not impermanent, given that it has the property of change? This is because its purity [can] be considered to be like that of water, gold and space (MAV I.16cd). [A change is admitted] in view of the removal of adventitious stains, but there is no change in terms of its own-being.¹⁶

It should be noted that the terms “defiled” and “pure” which dominate the first part of the first chapter in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, are explicitly equated with “accompanied by stains” and “stainless” – terminology doubtlessly imported from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.¹⁷

¹⁵ MAVBh 27₅₋₉: *na kliṣṭā nāpi vākliṣṭā śuddhā 'śuddhā na caiva sā / katham na kliṣṭā nāpi cāśuddhā / prakṛtyaiva / prabhāsvaratvāc cittasya / katham nākliṣṭā na śuddhā / kleśasyāgantukatvataḥ /*

¹⁶ MAVBh 24₄₋₁₃: *katham śūnyatāyāḥ prabhedo jñeyaḥ / saṃkliṣṭā ca viśuddhā ca / ity asyāḥ prabhedāḥ / kasyām avasthāyāṃ saṃkliṣṭā kasyām viśuddhā / samalā nirmalā ca sā / yadā saha malena varttate tadā saṃkliṣṭā / yadā prahīṇamalā tadā viśuddhā / yadi samalā bhūtvā nirmalā bhavati katham vikāradharminītvād anityā na bhavati / yasmād asyāḥ abdhātukanakākāśaśuddhivac chuddir iṣyate // āgantukamalāpagamān na tu tasyāḥ svabhāvānyatvaṃ bhavati /*

¹⁷ RGVV 21₈₋₁₀: “Of these, the suchness accompanied by stains is the [budha-] element when not freed from the sheath of defilements. It is called budha-nature. Stainless suchness is that [element] called the *dharmakāya* of a *tathāgata*, that which has the defining characteristic of [having undergone] a

In other words, the naturally pure ultimate coexists with adventitious stains just as space coexists with clouds. Given this influence of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, it is reasonable to define the relation between natural luminosity and adventitious stains in the MAV along the lines of RGV I.154–155:

There is nothing to be removed from it and nothing to be added.
The real should be seen as real, and seeing the real, one becomes liberated.¹⁸ (RGV I.154)

The [buddha-]element is empty of adventitious [stains], which have the defining characteristic of being separable;
But it is not empty of unsurpassable qualities, which have the defining characteristic of not being separable.¹⁹ (RGV I.155)

The *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* is as follows:

What is taught by that? There is no characteristic sign of defilements (*saṃkleśa*) whatsoever to be removed from this naturally pure [buddha-]element, for it is naturally devoid of adventitious stains. Nor does anything need to be added to it as the characteristic sign (*nimitta*) of purification, for its nature is to have [only] pure properties which are inseparable [from it].²⁰ Therefore it is said [in the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*]: “Buddha-nature is empty of the sheath of defilements, which are separable and recognized as something disconnected. It is not empty[, however,] of inconceivable buddha-qualities, which are inseparable [in that it is impossible] to recognize [them] as something disconnected, and which surpass in number the grains of sand of the river Gaṅgā.” Thus one truly comes to see that something is empty of that which does not exist in it, and one truly realizes that that which re-

fundamental transformation at the level of a buddha.” (*tatra samalā tathatā yo dhātur avinirmuktakleśakośas tathāgatagarbha ity ucyate / nirmalā tathatā sa eva buddhabhūmāv āśrayaparivṛttilakṣano yas tathāgatadharmakāya ity ucyate /*)

¹⁸ RGVV 76₁₋₂: *nāpaneyam ataḥ kiṃcid upaneyam na kiṃcana / draṣṭavyam bhūtato bhūtaṃ bhūtadarśī vimucyate //*

¹⁹ RGVV 76₃₋₄: *śūnya āgantukair dhātuḥ savinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ / asūnyo ’nuttarair dharmair avinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ //*

²⁰ The compound *avinirbhāgaśuddhadharmatā-* is taken as the abstract form of a *bahuvrīhi*.

mains there is present, [and] hence exists there.²¹

The formula of emptiness (“something is empty of that which does not exist in it”) is the same as in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, but this time it defines the absence of adventitious stains from a positively understood buddha-element. It is this definition of emptiness which fits the positive description of emptiness in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*. By contrast, the first sense of emptiness is the absence of duality from false imagining, distinguishing as it does what is merely imagined from what is real within saṃsāric states of mind, or, to use the imported terminology from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, adventitious stains. That false imagining (which in *Madhyāntavibhāga* I.1 is said to exist) does not partake of the luminous nature of the ultimate is also clear from a passage in the *Sāgaramatīpariṣcchā* quoted in Asaṅga’s commentary on *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.68, in which the example of an ever-pure *vaidūrya* stone drawn out from mud is taken to illustrate the relation between the luminous mind and adventitious stains:

In the same way, O Sāgaramati, the Bodhisattva knows the natural luminosity of the mind of sentient beings. He [here] again perceives that it is defiled by adventitious defilements. Then the Bodhisattva thinks as follows: These defilements will never penetrate into the natural luminosity of the mind of sentient beings. These adventitious defilements have sprung from false imagining.²²

²¹ RGVV 76₅₋₁₀: *kim anena paridīpitam | yato na kiṃcid apaneyam asty ataḥ prakṛtipariśuddhāt tathāgatadhātoḥ saṃkleśanimittam āgantukamalaśūnyatāprakṛtīvād asya | nāpy atra kiṃcid upaneyam asti vyavadānanimittam avinirbhāgaśuddhadharmatā^aprakṛtīvāt | tata ucyate | śūnyas tathāgatagarbho vinirbhāgair muktajñaiḥ sarvakleśakośaiḥ | aśūnyo gaṅgānadīvālikāvyativṛttair avinirbhāgair amuktajñair acintyair buddhadharmair iti | evaṃ yad yatra nāsti tat tena śūnyam iti samanupaśyati | yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭaṃ bhavati tat sad ihāstīti yathābhūtaṃ prajānāti |*

^a Johnston omits, probably inadvertently, -tā-.

²² RGVV 49₉₋₁₂: *evam eva sāgaramate bodhisattvaḥ sattvānāṃ prakṛtiprabhāsvaratāṃ cittasya prajānāti | tāṃ punar āgantukopakleśopakliṣṭāṃ paśyati | tatra bodhisattvasyaivaṃ bhavati | naite kleśāḥ sattvānāṃ cittaprakṛtiprabhāsvaratāyāḥ praviṣṭāḥ | āgantukā ete kleśā abhūtaparikalpasamutthitāḥ |*

However one wishes to combine the two formulas of emptiness, a consistent reading of the *Madhyāntavibhāga* requires, as I already pointed out elsewhere,²³ operating with the Madhyamaka distinction of two truths, and following MAV III.10 in accepting only the perfect nature as the ultimate truth. Understood in this way, *Madhyāntavibhāga* I.1 first says (in accordance with the Yogācāra-formula of emptiness), that both the dependent (i.e., false imagining) and the perfect are empty of the imagined and then, it could be argued, defines the relation between the dependent and the perfect, in terms of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* formula of emptiness, as one between adventitious stains and the true nature.²⁴ This line of interpretation would find support in the *Bṛhaṭṭīkā*, in which Vasubandhu²⁵ takes the perfect to be empty of the dependent and imagined:

The imagined nature [of phenomena] is that aspect [of them which leads to] form and the other [modes of] phenomena being called “form” and so forth. The dependent nature is that aspect [of them which], under the sway of ignorance and so forth, appears to consciousness as phenomena in a mistaken way. [Their] ultimate – perfect – nature is that ineffable aspect beyond characteristic signs, which is free from the [said] aspects of names and mistaken appearances.²⁶

This leads to the question whether our two formulas of emptiness are then the *Lankāvatārasūtra*’s inferior “emptiness of the one from the other” (*itaretarāśūnyatā*). It is true that in the *Lankāvatārasūtra*

²³ Mathes 2004: 318–323.

²⁴ This is, of course, under the condition of fully including the dependent (i.e., false imagining) within adventitious stains.

²⁵ Occasionally attributed to Daṃṣṭrasena. For a discussion of the authorship, see Brunnhölzl 2011: 9–14.

²⁶ Derge (D) 3808, *shes phyin, pha*, fol. 287a₄₋₅: *de la gzugs la sogs pa chos rnams la gzugs zhes bya ba la sogs par mngon par brjod pa'i rnam pa gang yin pa de ni kun brtags pa'i ngo bo nyid do / ma rig pa la sogs pa'i dbang gi rnam par shes pa la chos rnams su phyin ci log tu snang ba'i rnam pa gang yin pa de ni gzhan dbang gi ngo bo nyid do / gang ming dang / phyin ci log tu snang ba'i rnam pa de dang bral ba brjod du med pa / mtshan ma med pa'i rnam pa gang yin pa de ni don dam pa yongs su grub pa'i ngo bo nyid de /* See also Mathes 2004: 317.

inferior emptiness is illustrated by a similar formula, but what is empty and what remains within emptiness differs considerably:

It is said that something is empty of that which does not exist in it. It is as follows, Mahāmati:²⁷ In the mansion of the mother jackal²⁸ there are no elephants, cows, or goats. But I have told [you] that it is not empty of monks. It is said to be empty of these [animals] only. Mahāmati, it is not the case, however, that the mansion [of the mother jackal] as such does not exist, or that the monks as such do not exist. It is not the case either that elephants, cows and goats do not exist as real entities in other places. Mahāmati, the specific and general characteristics of no phenomena exist everywhere at the same time.²⁹ Therefore, the one's emptiness of the other is [what is] spoken of. Mahāmati, these are the seven types of emptiness. Mahāmati, the one's emptiness of the other is the most inferior one; you must abandon it.³⁰

Even though the wording of the formula used to define this seventh form of emptiness in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* is similar to the formulas found in the *Madhyāntavibhāga* and *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, there is after all a difference between negating the existence of elephants in a certain place and categorically negating duality. Otherwise, one could also claim that the absence of an inherently existing vase from a dependently arisen vase is inferior emptiness. Moreover, it is unlikely, that the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* which largely endorses Yogācāra philosophy intends to dismiss the emptiness of the three nature theory as *itaretaraśūnyatā*.³¹

²⁷ Skt. *mahāmate* is here rendered only once.

²⁸ This is probably a place under a huge tree in the jungle. Suzuki (1932: 67) translates: "lecture-hall of the Mrgārama."

²⁹ Lit. "the one in the other."

³⁰ LAS 75₁₀₋₁₉: *yady atra nāsti tat tena śūnyam ity ucyate / tad yathā mahāmate śṛgālamātuḥ prāsāde hastigavaīḍakādya na santi / aśūnyaṃ ca bhikṣubhir iti bhāṣitaṃ mayā sa ca taiḥ śūnya ity ucyate / na ca punar mahāmate prāsādaḥ prāsādabhāvato nāsti bhikṣavaś ca bhikṣabhāvato na santi / na ca te 'nyatra hastigavaīḍakādya bhāvā nāvatiṣṭhante / idaṃ mahāmate svasāmānyalakṣaṇaṃ sarvadharmāṇāṃ itaretaraṃ tu na saṃvidyate / tenocyate itaretaraśūnyateti / eṣā mahāmate saptavidhā śūnyatā / eṣā ca mahāmate itaretaraśūnyatā sarvajaghanyā sā tvayā parivarjayitavyā //*

³¹ See Mathes 2008b: 11–12.

It is important to read carefully the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*'s introduction to the list of seven types of emptiness:

The illustrious one said this: “Emptiness – what is called emptiness – Mahāmati, is a word for the imagined nature. Again, Mahāmati, since [you people] obstinately cling to the imagined nature, we [must] talk about emptiness, non-arising, non-duality, and the nature of essencelessness.”³²

In other words, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* first of all restricts emptiness to the realm of the imagined within the system of the three natures. As we have already seen above, the *Madhyāntavibhāga* not only distinguishes an existing dependent from a non-existing imagined, but also defines the relation between a positively understood ultimate (luminosity) and the dependent. This relation, however, cannot possibly exemplify *itare taraśūnyatā* either, but rather falls under the sixth in the list of seven types of emptiness:

Again, Mahāmati, what is the great emptiness of ultimate meaning, [that] of the wisdom of the noble ones? It is the realization – through the noble ones' own wisdom – which is empty of all faults [inherent] in views and of the [related] mental imprints. This is the great emptiness of ultimate meaning, [that] of the wisdom of the noble ones.³³

This leads to the question whether we can still follow Candrakīrti in dismissing the Yogācāra theory of three natures as a teaching with provisional meaning (*neyārtha*). His proof largely depends on the following passage from the second chapter of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*:

Mahāmati, my teaching of a buddha-nature does not resemble the heretical doctrine of a self (*ātman*). Rather, the *tathāgatas* teach as the buddha-nature that which is emptiness, the limit of reality, *nirvāṇa*, non-origination, signlessness, wishlessness and similar categories, and then the *tathāgatas*, the arhats, the perfect buddhas, in order to

³² LAS 74₁₋₅: *bhagavān etad avocat / śūnyatā śūnyateti mahāmate parikalpitasvabhāvapadam etad / parikalpitasvabhāvābhīniveśena punar mahāmate śūnyatānutpādābhāvādvayaniḥsvabhāvabhāvavādino bhavanti /*

³³ LAS 75₇₋₉: *paramāthāryajñānamahāśūnyatā punar mahāmate katamā yad uta svapratyātmāryajñānādhiḡamaḥ sarvadr̥ṣṭidoṣavāsanābhīḥ sūnyah / tenocyate paramāthāryajñānamahāśūnyateti /*

avoid [giving] fools a reason for becoming afraid of the lack of essence, teach the non-conceptual experiential object without characteristic signs by means of instructions which make use [of the term] buddha-nature.³⁴

If buddha-nature is really taken here to be *neyārtha* (the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* does not use this term), its most likely doctrinal ground would be the Yogācāra concept of emptiness expounded within the three nature theory, i.e., the emptiness which is also luminosity (as taught in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*).³⁵ Precisely such hermeneutics, i.e., the interpretation of buddha-nature in terms of Yogācāra emptiness, is also at work in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, where buddha-nature is taken as suchness accompanied by stains.

To sum up, the synthesis of Yogācāra and Tathāgatarbha in the Maitreya works reflects a serious alternative to the Madhyamaka hermeneutics of Candrakīrti, and can thus be considered a realistic Indian precedent of *gzhan stong*.

The transmission of the Maitreya works

In the previous section it has become clear that the content of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* is intimately interwoven with that of the *Madhyāntavibhāga* and hence must be included within the group of Maitreya works referred to by Sajjana. Now, if Sajjana really had a *gzhan stong* understanding of the above-mentioned works, one could raise the question why Sajjana's disciple and Tibetan translator Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109) founded his analytical school of the Maitreya works. In his summary of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, Blo ldan shes rab claims that all Maitreya works are *neyārtha*, the only exception being the *Ratnagoṭra-*

³⁴ LAS 78₅₋₁₁: *na hi mahāmate tīrthakarātmavādatulyo mama tathāgatarbhavādopadeśaḥ | kiṃ tu mahāmate tathāgatāḥ śūnyatābhūtakotoṇirvāṇānutpādānimittāpraṇihitādyānāṃ mahāmate padārthānāṃ tathāgatarbhopadeśaṃ kṛtvā tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksambuddhā bālānāṃ nairātmyasaṃtrāsapadavivarjanārthaṃ nirvikalpanirābhāsagocaraṃ tathāgatarbhamukhopadeśena deśayanti |.*

³⁵ For a detailed assessment of Candrakīrti's Yogācāra critique see Mathes 2008a: 18–19; and 2008b.

vibhāga.³⁶ This exception seems to be possible for him under the condition of taking buddha-nature as a non-affirming negation.³⁷ It is, of course, possible that a disciple will not always follow his teacher, but one possible explanation would be that Blo ldan shes rab equates buddha-nature with the form of emptiness implied by non-affirming negations, in a way compatible with *gzhan stong*. In following up this line of thought, it is worth looking at Maitrīpa's (ca. 1007–ca. 1085) definition of a non-affirming negation in the *Amanasikārādhāra*:

[A non-affirming negation (*prasajyapratīṣedha*)] is a negation of what is relevant: Not to negate what is not “applicable” (*prasajya*) is [the defining characteristic of] a non-affirming negation, like for instance “the wives of the king who do not see the sun.” The meaning of this is as follows: The wives of the king are kept secret (i.e., protected from contact with other men), so much so that they even do not see the sun.³⁸ This does not imply the non-existence of the sun. Then what [does it imply]? [Only] what is applicable, namely that the wives of the king see the sun is what is negated. In the case of becoming mentally disengaged (*amanasikāra*), too, it is [only] what is applicable, namely mental engagement [resulting] in something perceived, a perceiver and the like, that is negated by the privative *a*, and not the mind [itself]. Therefore there is no fault.³⁹

It is interesting that such a definition of non-affirming negation allows for a distinction between what should be negated (“what is applicable”) and a luminous nature or emptiness of mind, to which the yogin directs his attention.⁴⁰ Blo ldan shes rab who is considered

³⁶ Rngog Blo ldan shes rab: *Theg chen rgyud bla'i don bsdu pa*, 1b₂–2a₁.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 4a₂₋₃.

³⁸ “Sun” (*sūryaḥ*) is masculine in Sanskrit.

³⁹ AMĀ 207 (138)₉₋₁₅: *prakrāntasya pratīṣedhaḥ / nāprasajyaṃ pratīṣidhaya itī prasajyapratīṣedhaḥ / yathāsūryaṃpaśyā rājadārāḥ / ayam arthaḥ / evaṃ nāma tā guptā rājadārā yat sūryam api na paśyantīti / atra na sūryābhāvaḥ kṛtaḥ / kiṃ nāma rājadārāṇāṃ yat sūryadarśanaṃ prasajyaṃ tan niṣiddham / amanasikāre 'pi nañā manasikaraṇaṃ yad grāhyagrāhakaḍi prasaktaṃ tan niṣiddham / na manaḥ / ato na doṣaḥ /*. See also Mathes 2009: 16–17.

⁴⁰ This is clear from Maitrīpa's final conclusion: “The letter *a* stands for luminosity, and *manasikāra* for blessing from within (*svādhiṣṭhāna*). It (i.e.,

to have stood in a tradition of interpreting the Maitreya works that goes back to Maitrīpa, could have taken non-affirming negations in precisely such a way. They simply negate what applies: adventitious stains. Being beyond the reach of the mental framework of non-implying negations, neither the luminosity of mind nor buddha-nature is truly touched by them.

A similar interpretation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* is found in Maitrīpa's commentary on Saraha's definition of the co-emergent nature of mind in *Dohakośa* 20d. Maitrīpa quotes the first *Ratnagotravibhāga* verse on emptiness (RGV I.154)⁴¹ and specifies that it is co-emergent bliss, from which nothing needs to be removed and to which nothing needs to be added. Saraha's line and Maitrīpa's commentary on it are as follows:

The nature of the co-emergent is neither existent nor non-existent. (DK 20d)

“Existent” applies here to any entity whatsoever, that is to say, [any entity] as it appears to the eye and the like and as it is imagined mentally. In that case, why [is the co-emergent not existent according to such a definition]? It is because everything has arisen as the multitude of things with the co-emergent as its nature. One is not liberated by [simply] conceptualizing [this multitude] in such a way.⁴² Therefore, it

the co-emergent) is both *a* and *manasikāra*, so we get *amanasikāra*. In this way, namely by [operating with] the words *amanasikāra* and so forth, one arrives at the expression ‘a blessing from within [that is] inconceivable luminosity’ [, i.e.,] a [form of] awareness amounting to non-dual continuity in which emptiness and compassion are united as an unseparable pair.” (AMĀ 142 (203)_{17–20}: *a iti prabhāsvarapadaṃ / manasikāra iti svādhiṣṭhānapadam aś cāsau manasikāraś cety amanasikāraḥ / etenāmanasikārādīpadair acintyaprabhāsvarasvādhiṣṭhānapadam śūnyatākaruṇābhinnayuganaddhādvayavāhisamvedanam āpāditaṃ bhavati*).

⁴¹ This verse is found not only in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, but also in other treatises, such as the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (V.21). For a list of texts in which it occurs, see Takasaki 1966: 300. The Sanskrit *prakṣeptavyaṃ* suggests that the verse is quoted from the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, but here, rather than dependent arising, it is the co-emergent nature (doctrinally close to the concept of the buddha-nature), from which nothing needs to be removed, and nothing needs to be added. See Mathes 2007: 558–559.

⁴² The translation follows the Tibetan here (DKP [P] 206a): / *zhes de ltar*

must be realized through self-awareness, and so [the co-emergent] is not non-existent [either].⁴³ This is as taught [in *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* V.21 or *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.154]:

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.

How is this [quotation to be explained]? A reason must be given.⁴⁴ Humans are born on account of bliss. Seeking bliss, they are born from the union of their parents.⁴⁵ Why is [this bliss] not realized [at that time]?⁴⁶ [Bliss is something] to be directly experienced by one-self, and this is also the reason why it is not non-existent. Why is that? It is because it is inexpressible, given that one is wholly identical with it (i.e., bliss). The idea is that *this* is the bliss which lasts until death.⁴⁷

It should be noted here that in this genre of *mahāmudrā* texts a distinction is made between a provisional and ultimate co-emergent, the natural bliss of this passage being only a manifestation or

rtog par byed na / de'ang grol bar mi 'gyur ro /. DKP 89₁₉: “By imagining this correctly, you are liberated.” (*tad evam bhūtaparikalpanayā mucyate*).

⁴³ This sentence is missing in the Sanskrit and supplied from the Tibetan (DKP [P] 206b₁): *de bas na so so rang gis rig par bya ba yin pas dngos po med pa ma yin no /*

⁴⁴ This sentence follows the Tibetan (DKP [P] 206b₂): *de ji ltar zhe na / rig par bstan par bya ste /*

⁴⁵ This means that sentient beings are attracted by the bliss of their future parents' union.

⁴⁶ This question is supplied from DKP (P) 206b₃: *ma rtogs pa de cis lan zhe na /*

⁴⁷ DKP 89_{17–90}₅: *sahaja sahāva ṇa bhāvābhāva /* (DK 20d)
iti / atra bhāvaś caḥṣurādyaḥlokena yad vastu manaḥparikalpanayā ca / tatra kutaḥ / yataḥ sarvaṃ sahasvasabhāvena vastuviśvam utpāditam tad evam bhūtaparikalpanayā mucyate / tathā coktam /
nāpaneyam ataḥ kiṃcit prakṣeptavyam na kiṃcana /
draṣṭavyam bhūtato bhūtam bhūtadarśī vimucyate // (AA V.21 or RGV I.154)

iti / tat katham yuktir āha / idaṃ tad dvipadāḥ sukhenotpannāḥ / sukham icchantaś ca mātrpitṛsaṃyogāḥ jāyante / tat pratyātmavedyatayā nābhāvaḥ / kutaḥ / tanmayatvenāvācyatvāḥ / saiva maraṇāntikaṃ sukham iti bhāvaḥ /

^a The edition reads: °*tvāt ca*.

reflection of the ultimate one.⁴⁸ It is on the basis of such instructions that the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339) must have called buddha-nature “natural mind” (Tib. *tha mal gyi shes pa*).⁴⁹

To sum up, Blo ldan shes rab could have explained buddha-nature in such way that it does not exclude a positively understood ultimate. This would be, then, just as in Dol po pa’s *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*, in which an ordinary Mahāyāna explanation is distinguished from an extraordinary *gzhan stong* explanation that allows for primordially existing ultimate qualities.⁵⁰

On his trip to meet Sajjana in Kashmir, Blo ldan shes rab was accompanied by Btsan Kha bo che,⁵¹ who requested Sajjana to teach the Maitreya works along with special instructions, since he wanted to make these works his “practice [of preparing] for death” (*chi chos*). Sajjana taught all five Maitreya works, with Gzu Dga’ ba rdo rje serving as a translator. In addition, he gave special instructions with regard to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁵² In his *Blue Annals*, ’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal remarks:

The followers of the tradition of Btsan maintain that since the luminous nature of mind is the buddha-nature, the cause of buddha[hood] is fertile.⁵³

The *Theg chen rgyud bla ma’i gdams pa*

The recently published *Bka’ gdams pa’i bka’ ’bum* contains a short text called “Instructions on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*”⁵⁴ (*Theg chen*

⁴⁸ Mathes 2008c: 107–108.

⁴⁹ Mathes 2008a: 44–45.

⁵⁰ See Dol po pa: *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*, 341–344.

⁵¹ A disciple of the Gter ston Grva pa Mngon shes (1012–1090). See ’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal: *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma’i bstan bcos kyi ’grel bshad de kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba’i me long*, 4₁₄.

⁵² *Ibid.* 4_{14–20}.

⁵³ ’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal: *Deb ther sngon po* 309₇; *btsan lugs pa namas ni sems kyi rang bzhin ’od gsal ba bde bar gshegs pa’i snying po yin pas / de sangs rgyas kyi rgyu yang grung por bzhed /*

⁵⁴ Lit. *Mahāyāna-Uttaratantra* which is the ornamental title of the

rgyud bla'i gdams pa) which is also mentioned in Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas's (1813–1899) *Ratnagotravibhāga* introduction as authoritative within the meditation or Btsan tradition.⁵⁵ These “Instructions on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*” were transmitted by the eighth abbot of Snar thang Skyo ston Smon lam tshul khrims (1219–1299),⁵⁶ which means that they were part of the Bka' gdams pa tradition, and thus mainstream Tibetan Buddhism. At the end of this important text, which sheds new light on both the content and the transmission of the Btsan tradition, we find the following information on its origin and transmission:

As to the history of this Dharma, when the great learned master called Maitrīpa⁵⁷ was staying at a monastery in Magadha, he dreamt that he placed the two instructions on the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the [*Dharma*] *dharmatā*[*vibhāga* respectively] inside a four-storey *stūpa* of sandal wood and directly met Maitreya himself. [Maitreya] gave pointing-out [instructions] in general, lumping together cause and condition as a pair, [and the latter] and the fruit as a triad. He gave pointing-out [instructions] more particularly on the cause, which is the unchangeable sun of the Dharma. Then he gave pointing-out [instructions] on the four inconceivable points. Later, when [Maitrīpa] awoke, he did not grow older, even though some Dharma [teachings] had arisen in [his] mind. He thought: “Even though I was helped through the compassion of the noble [Maitreya] himself, I did not have the power to grasp [the meaning of his] Dharma.” Then he went to the

Ratnagotravibhāga.

⁵⁵ Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas: *Rgyud bla ma'i bshad srol*, 9a₆–b₂: “[Saj-jana] taught all five Maitreya Works with Gzus dga' ba'i rdo rje acting as a translator. He gave the ‘Instructions on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*,’ too. Btsan Dri med shes rab (i.e., Kha bo che) thus went to Tibet and explained them in Dbus and Gtsang. ... This was also famous as the meditation tradition of the Maitreya Works.” (*gzus dga' ba'i rdo rjes lo tsā ba byas nas byams chos lnga pa thams cad gsungs / rgyud bla ma la gdams pa'ang legs par gnang bas btsan dri med shes rab kyis bod du byon te dbus gtsang rnam su bshad pa mdzad / ... 'di la byams chos sgom lugs pa'ang grags shing*).

⁵⁶ *Bka' gdams pa'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 50, 7₁.

⁵⁷ Lit. “Maitreyañātha.” In his *Sekanirdeśapañjikā*, Rāmapāla refers to author of the *Sekanirdeśa* (i.e., Maitrīpa) as Maitreyañātha (SNP_{S(C)} 1b_{3–4}; SNP_{S(P)} 1b_{3–4}): *ihāyaṃ mahāpaṇḍitāvadhūtaśrīmanmaitreyañāthaḥ ... sekanirdeśaṃ kartukāmaḥ ...*

stūpa he had circumambulated before, and an unprecedented light had shone forth. Wondering whether there might be instructions [in it], he opened [the *stūpa*], and came upon [a text containing instructions].

The learned master Ānandakīrti thought: “I will impart these [instructions] in full to my disciple [Ratn?]ākaraśānti.” Then he (i.e., Ānandakīrti) went to Kashmir and the guru Sajjana honored him greatly. Therefore, he asked, “What hope do you have in a beggar like me?” [Sajjana] requested the instructions on the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* and the [*Dharma*]*dharmatā*[*vibhāga*] which were in the possession [of Ānandakīrti]. [Ānandakīrti said:] “Because you so-called learned masters are so proud, your true nature of mind cannot be directly pointed out for [what it is:] luminosity.” Since [Sajjana] then asked how to overcome [his] pride, [Ānandakīrti said:] “You think you know the five Maitreya works, but you do not understand a single point.” Talking about the Dharma [in such a way] he reduced [Sajjana’s] pride. Then he bestowed [the instructions upon him]. [Sajjana] taught them to Gzu Rga bar (=Dga’ ba’i) rdo rje,⁵⁸ and the latter requested that first the novice monk Dri med shes rab from Gser khang in Tho ling in Spu rangs should know [them from him]. This novice monk imparted them to somebody from southern La stod, the latter to Do pa snyan, and the latter to lama Snar [thang] pa. [The abbot of Snar thang] passed it on to the venerable Chos kyi rgyal mtshan.⁵⁹

Copied from the original. May it be virtuous! Carved in wood and corrected at the solitary place of Snar thang.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ A gloss has: “the translator from the Kashmiri city of Śrīnagar.”

⁵⁹ A gloss has: “from Ze’u.”

⁶⁰ *Bka’ gdams pa’i bka’ ’bum*, vol. 50 154₈–156₁: *chos ’di’i lo rgyus ni paṇḍita chen po byams pa’i mgon po* (gloss: *rgyal ba byams pa’i chos gnyis yod pa’i zhes bya ba ma ga dha’i* (text: *ta’i*) *dgon pa gcig na bzhugs pa la / rmi lam du tsan dan gyi mchod rten khri ’phang bzhi pa gcig gi nang du rgyud bla ma dang / chos nyid kyi gdams* (text: *gdam*) *ngag gnyis bcug nas byams pa dngos kyi ngo sprod byas te / spyir rgyu rkyen gnyis ’bras bu gsum du dril nas ngo sprad pa dang bye brag tu rgyu chos nyi mi ’gyur bar ngo sprod pa dang / bsam mi khyab bzhi la ngo sprod mdzad do / phyis gnyid sad pa dang chos ’ga’ sems la byung kyang ma rga ba las / ’phags pa dngos kyi thugs rjes bzung kyang nga la chos ’dzin pa’i nus pa med do snyam mo / / de nas sngar skor ba byed pa’i mchod rten gcig la / ’od snga na med pa de nas byung ngo / de nas gdams* (text: *gdam*) *ngag yod dam snyam nas phye bas byung go / / paṇḍita ānandakīrti* (text: *a nan ta bhī rti*) *des bsams pas nga rgyas pas nga’i slob ma ākaraśānti* (text: *a ka ra shan ti pa*) *la gtad do snyam*

It should be noted that according to the version of the story presented here Maitrīpa did not rediscover the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* and the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, but only instructions on the latter of the two. As for Rngog Blo ldan shes rab's analytical tradition of transmitting Maitreyas and Maitrīpa's teaching, one could again argue that in a scholarly exposition, such as the *Theg chen rgyud bla ma'i don bsduṣ pa*, special pointing-out instructions on buddha-nature are simply not a relevant topic.

A closer look at our old Bka' gdams pa manuscript with the "Instructions on the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*" shows that the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* is interpreted as mainly consisting of pointing-out instructions on the true nature of mind.⁶¹ In a dream Maitreya thus introduced Maitrīpa into various aspects of his true nature, as follows:

nas / des kha cher byon pa dang bla ma sa jja (text: *sja*) *nas brnyen bkur mang du byas pas nga sprang po gcig la khyod re ltos ci yod gsung ngo / des rgyud bla ma'i gdams* (text: *gdam*) *ngag dang chos dang chos nyid kyi gdams* (text: *gdam*) *ngag yod mchi ba zhu byas pa dang / khyed paṇḍita bya ba nga rgyal che ba yin pas / sems nyid 'od gsal du ngo sprad du mi btub mchi'o / 'o na nga rgyal ji ltar gcag zhus pas / khyod kyis byams chos lnga shes so snyam ste don gcig kyang mi shes so zhes gsung / chos gnam byas pas nga rgyal chag go / de nas gnam ngo / des gzu rga bar do rje* (gloss: *kha che'i grong khyer dpe med du lo tsha ba*) *la bshad / des spu rangs tho ling gser khang gyi dge tshul dri med shes rab kyis sngar nas 'di mkhyen par mdzod cig byas nas zhus so // dge tshul des la stod lho pa gcig la gnam / des do pa snyan la gnam / de bla ma snar* (add: *thang*) *pa* (gloss: *brgyad par byon pa*) *la gnam / de btsun pa chos kyi rgyal mtshan* (gloss: *ze'u*) *la gnam pa'o // ithi // phyag dpe las bris te dge'o* (text: *dgo*) *// dben gnas snar thang du zhus shing bris te* (text: *ste*) *zhus dag par byas so //*

⁶¹ That such "pointing-out instructions" already existed in India is clear from Rāmapāla's *Sekanirdeśapañjikā*: "If, as a result of the abandoning of the 'conceptual' (lit. 'carving') in its entirety, this reality were to be experienced directly, [then] it should be known through awareness [obtained as] a kindness on the part of a genuine guru. This [reality] consists of the two truths, is free from the two extremes, is undivided from emptiness and compassion, and has the nature of insight and means" SNP_{S(P)} 16b₁₋₃ (missing in SNP_{S(C)}): *yady aśeṣollekhaṇīhārāt tat tattvaṃ pratyakṣam anubhūtaṃ syāt / etac caivaṃvidhaṃ satyadvayātmakam ubhayāntarahitaṃ^a sūnyatā-karuṇābhinnam prajñopāyasvarūpaṃ / sadgurupādaprasādavitter jñeyam /*

^a P *ubhayo tu rakitam*

Then [Maitreya] asked: “When you are not dreaming anymore, do you know what this [object which] appears in such a way is?” When he replied “I do not know,” [Maitreya] directly pointed out what is inconceivable, [namely] that even though the mind is naturally pure, the *samsāra* of thoughts arises, and [went on] to say: “Cut [loose your] fear and attachment, and jump into the fire!” [Then] he heard [Maitreya saying]: “[Your] body, [now that you have] jumped, melts into the sky and you experience nothing but an awareness which is the great bliss of not focusing on anything. A sound occurs in the sky of this [melted body]. Consider now whose man and fear went where?” Since [this was only] a dream of his, [Maitrīpa] became aware that [appearances] had no basis and did not come or go. Then [Maitreya] said: “[You are] naturally pure,” and [Maitrīpa] [re-]emerged as the former man in the sky. Then his body [re-]emerged and so did all appearances there. [Maitreya asked:] “What do you think this was?” [Maitrīpa] replied: “All this happened in a dream.” [Maitreya] asked: “From what did it arise?” [Maitrīpa] replied: “A dream [arises] through thoughts and nothing else. It came from the sky.” [Maitreya] said: “You must understand that in a like manner all phenomena have arisen from the naturally pure mind.”⁶²

At this time [Maitreya] said: “I have directly pointed out what is inconceivable, [namely] that even though the mind is naturally pure, adventitious defilements arise. I directly pointed out what is inconceivable, [namely] that you are a buddha once the adventitious defilements have been purified, just as when you did not know where your body went

⁶² *Bka' gdams pa'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 50 147–148a; *de nas rmi lam med pa la de ltar snang ba 'di ci yin shes sam gsung / mi shes byas pas sems rang bzhin gyis dag pa la rtog pa'i 'khor ba 'byung ba bsam gyis mi khyab par ngo sprad pa yin te / 'jigs pa dang zhen pa chod la mer mchongs shig* (text: gcig, 1) *ces gsung ngo / mchongs lus nam mkha' (text: kha) la thim te ci yang ma dmigs pa'i bde ba chen po'i rig pa tsam nyams su myong ngo // de'i nam mkha' (text: ka) la sgra gcig byung ste / da ci'i mi dang 'jigs pa rnam gar song soms shig (text: somsp?) ces grag go / de'i rmi lam yin pas gzhi nas med pa la 'gro 'ong med do snyam du rig pa skyes so // de'i tshes rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa yin no zhes snga ma'i mi de nam mkha' (text: ka) la byung ngo // de nas rang lus byung ngo / de na snang ba thams cad byung ngo / 'di ci yin par 'dug gsungs pas / 'di thams cad rmi lam du gda' zhus so // de gang nas byung gsung / bsams pas rmi lam yin pa la gzhan nas byung ba med de nam mkha' (text: ka) las byung byas so / de bzhin du chos thams cad kyang rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa'i sems las byung bar go bar bya'o gsung ngo //*

when you jumped into the fire. Your body dissolved into the sky. First you were afraid, but then you recognized that it was a dream, and you realized that [everything] is of the same nature without any difference. [Thus] I have directly pointed what is inconceivable, [namely] that a buddha and sentient beings are not different in terms of qualities. The non-conceptual wisdom I generated in you is the non-conceptual activity of the victorious one. It is non-conceptual and yet accomplishes what is of benefit to sentient beings without effort. This is inconceivable.” Trust in the four inconceivable [points thus] arose in him. [The explanation of] the inconceivable continuum is completed.⁶³

In these instructions on the four inconceivable aspects of the last four *vajra* points in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*,⁶⁴ buddha-nature is said to exist in all sentient beings as natural luminosity and self-arisen wisdom throughout beginningless time. This is fully in line with the *Avataṃsakasūtra*, which compares the immeasurable buddha-qualities inside the ordinary mind-stream to a huge silk cloth with a painting of the universe – [all] inside an atom. That the wisdom of a buddha is considered to be already complete in every sentient being is made eminently clear in the following part of the instructions on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*:

I prostrate to the lotus feet of the guru who is the most important among all the buddhas in the three times. The natural luminosity of

⁶³ *Ibid.* 148₄₋₇: *de'i tshe sems rang bzhin gyis dag pa la nyon mongs pa glo bur skye ba bsam mi khyab du ngo sprad do // khyod kyi lus mer mchongs pa'i tshe gar song cha med pa ltar / nyon mongs pa glo bur ba dag nas sangs rgyas pa bsam gyis mi khyab pa yin no zhes ngo sprad do / khyod kyi lus nam mkhar (text: khar) thim pa dang / dang po 'jigs pa dang bcas pa dang / rmi lam yin par ngo shes pa dang khyad par med par ngo bo gcig tu ngo shes pa / sangs rgyas dang sems can yon tan dbye ba med pa'i bsam mi khyab yin no zhes ngo sprad do // ngas rtog pa med pa'i ye shes khyod la bskyed pa de ni rgyal ba'i mdzad rtog pa med pa dang / sems can gyi don lhun gyis (text: gyi) grub pa bsam gyis (text: gyi) mi khyab pa'o ces gsung ngo // bsam mi khyab pa bzhi'i yid ches (text: yid ches su) der skyes so // bsam mi khyab kyi rgyud pa rdzogs (text: sdzogs) so (text: skyo) //*

⁶⁴ These four aspects are explained in RGVV on I.25 as: (1) the mind is simultaneously pure and defiled; (2) suchness, which is free from stains, is purified from stains; (3) all sentient beings possess inseparable buddha-qualities; (4) buddha-activity unfolds everywhere simultaneously. See Mathes 2008a: 407–408.

mind is the same as all buddhas in the three times. In this [buddha-] element which is like the sky, there is neither arising nor passing out of existence. Your own mind, this buddha-nature, [knows] not even the name of birth and death in *samsāra*. Throughout beginningless *samsāra* this stainless nature of mind is not [essentially] connected to the sheath of defilements. [This] is taught through the figurative examples of the nine types of [buddha-]nature. Just as space is contained in [every] form, so too is the *dharmakāya* in all sentient beings. [Its] nature does not change because of thoughts, even though they [continue] uninterruptedly [throughout] the three times. It is the true nature of phenomena, the suchness of mind. All sentient beings have this as their nature. It is called self-arisen wisdom. [It is] the true nature of phenomena, clarity, something that cannot be identified. When free from clinging to notions, you are the same as the buddhas of the three times themselves. This natural luminosity of the mind is like a jewel placed into the mud. The essence, this buddha-nature, abides as self-arisen wisdom throughout beginningless time. This is the first piece of guidance, on identifying your mind as a buddha.⁶⁵

Self-arisen wisdom abides in all sentient beings of the three realms as [their true] nature. In [their] natural ignorance they themselves have not recognized it. The subtle movements in the mental [consciousness] of thoughts and the manifest clinging to appearances as true is the ignorance of the imagined. Attachment and aversion arise be-

⁶⁵ *Bka' gdams pa'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 50 150₃₋₇: *dus gsum sangs rgyas kun gyi gtso // bla ma'i zhabs kyi pad mar 'dud // sems kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal 'di // dus gsum sangs rgyas kun dang mnyam* (gloss: *bzang ngan*) // *nam mkha'i* (gloss: *dpe*) *kham la skye 'jig med //* (gloss: *'o na sdug bsngal myong ba ci zhe na*) *rang sems sangs rgyas snying po 'di // 'khor ba'i skye 'chi'i ming yang med // thog med 'khor ba'i dus nyid nas //* (gloss: *'o na nyon mongs pa ci*) *sems kyi rang bzhin dri med 'di // nyon mongs sbubs dang ma 'brel ba // snying po dgu'i dpe yis bstan //* (text: *'o na rtog pa skye ba ci*) *gzugs la nam mkhas khyab pa bzhin // chos skus sems can kun la khyab // dus gsum rgyun chad med par yang // rtog pas rang bzhin mi 'gyur ba // sems kyi chos nyid de bzhin nyid // 'gro kun de'i snying po can //* (gloss: *sems kyi don ci yin zhe na*) *rang byung ye shes zhes bya ste //* (gloss: *rang byung gi ye shes ngos 'dzin pa ni*) *chos nyid gsal la nges gzung med // 'du shes 'dzin pa bral ba'i dus // dus gsum sangs rgyas rang dang gcig // sems kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal 'di // nor bu 'dam du bcug pa bzhin // ngo bo sangs rgyas snying po 'di // rang byung ye shes gdod nas gnas // rang sems sangs rgyas su ngos gzung pa'i spra khrid dang po'o /*

cause of it. They have accumulated the *karman* of both virtue and wrong-doing, and even though [their true nature] may be the *dharmakāya*, they experience birth and death in the six realms of *saṃsāra* without interruption. [This state] is [thus] called [that of] a sentient being, or *saṃsāra*. It manifests as the appearances of both the outer material world and [its] sentient beings. The mind stream is fettered by clinging [to them as either] true [or] false. This is the second piece of guidance, on the conceptual confusion as a sentient being.⁶⁶

This amounts to fully equating buddha-nature (or natural luminosity) with the *dharmakāya*. There are certain restrictions to adopting this approach which are of interest. Mind's natural luminosity should not be pointed out to ordinary persons who are obsessed with notions of permanence and a self, and who lack a direct access to bliss and compassion:

Even though [buddha-]nature, this self-arisen wisdom, exists, you do not recognize it. [Therefore] you must constantly pray [to] the chief of all the buddhas of the three times, the guru who explains treatises and pith-instructions, the master of all the buddhas. You must delight him with an offering of [your] realization. You must serve the *yi dam* [deity] with [your] view. The master on the tenth level, Maitreya, said that in the following four cases it is not appropriate to point out luminosity: [1] When there is clinging to the illusionary appearances of *saṃsāra* as [if they were] permanent and true; [2] when there is clinging to the *skandhas*, the root of suffering, as [if they were] a cherished self; [3] when there is no realization of great bliss in *saṃsāra* which is [thus] abandoned for your own benefit; [4] and when there is no compassion on the supreme path, that is to say, when there is no altruistic state of

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 150₇–151₂; *kham s gsum* (gloss: *gzhi*) *sems can thams cad la // rang byung ye shes rang bzhin gnas //* (gloss: *rgyu cis sngon na*) *lhan cig skye pa'i ma rig par // rang ngo rang gis ma shes te //* (gloss: *ngo bo ni*) *rtoḡ pa'i yid du 'gyu ba dang //* (gloss: *snang ba la krugs pa la*) *snang ba la bden 'dzin shar ba 'di //* (gloss: *rgyu*) *kun brtags kyi ma rig pas chags* (gloss: *zhen pa skye nges*) *sdang skye // dge* (gloss: *rkyen*) *sdig gnyis kyi las bsags nas // chos sku yin mod kyi //* (gloss: *'bras bu ngan song*) *rigs drug 'khor ba'i gnas dag tu // skye 'chi rgyun chad med par myong // sems can dang 'khor ba'i ming gis gdags //* (gloss: *bcings lugs*) *snod dang bcud gnyis snang bar shar //* (gloss: *mī bden*) *bden rdzun zhen pas sems rgyud bcings //* (gloss: *rang ngo ma shes*) *rtoḡ pas sems can du 'khrul pa'i spra khrid gnyis pa'o |*

[intent on] benefitting others. This is the first⁶⁷ piece of guidance, on the [necessary] faith that the guru, who points out luminous self-arisen wisdom, is a buddha.⁶⁸

Basing itself on the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* describes the *dharmakāya* as possessing the four perfections of permanence and so forth, but here again it is not possible to point out these perfections as the true nature of mind when disciples still cling to the permanence of *samsāra*. This shows that positive descriptions of the ultimate are not explained away as a teaching with provisional meaning, but taken as definitive instruction for the advanced.

The term *gzhan stong* is not found, but in the following, the label *rang stong*⁶⁹ is clearly restricted to what is normally classified in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as adventitious stains:

Karman, defilements, and suffering – these three – have been taught as being without a basis and empty of an own-being. [Now,] given the purport of the Buddha's teaching that a buddha-nature, or -element exists – if your own [luminous] mind were not the cause of buddha[-hood], you would be discouraged and not [seek to be] liberated through effort on the path. [But] the realization that your mind is self-arisen wisdom, i.e., the cause of the buddhas in the three times, creates the inspiration to struggle on the path to enlightenment. Those who possess relative *bodhicitta*, [may still] have disrespect for others. [But] all sentient beings of the three realms have always been buddhas, with natural self-arisen wisdom similar in quality to a wish-fulfilling jew-

⁶⁷ For some reason, the numbering starts again with one.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 151₃–152₁: *snying po rang bzhin* (gloss: 'byung) *ye shes 'di* // *kyang rang ngo ma shes pa* // *dus gsum sangs rgyas kun gyi gtso* // *gzhung dang man ngag 'chad pa'i* // *bla ma sangs rgyas kun gyi rje* // *dus gsum rgyun du gsol ba gdab* // *bsgrub pa'i mchod pas mnyes par bya* // *yi dam lta bas bsnyen* (text: *gnyan*) *par bskur* // (gloss: *rgyud bzhi 'dod chen*) *'khor ba'i snang ba sgyu ma la* // *rtag tu bden par 'dzin pa dang* // *sdug bsgal rtsa ba phung po la* // *gces par zhen pa'i bdag 'dzin dang* // (gloss: *nyan thos*) *rang don spang pa'i 'khor ba la* // *bde ba chen* (text: *che*) *por ma rtogs dang* // (gloss: *rang rgyal*) *phan sems gzhan don spangs pa'i* // *lam mchog snying rje med dang bzhi* // *'od gsal ngo sprad ma rung zhes* // *sa bcu pa'i* (text: *bcu'i*) *dbang phyug byams pas gsung* // *'od gsal rang 'byung gi ye shes ngo sprod pa'i bla ma sangs rgyas su yid ches pa'i spra khrid dang po'o* //

⁶⁹ Or rather, *rang bzhin stong pa*.

el. Sickness, poverty, impaired conduct – the faults of sentient beings are innumerable. Thoughts[, however,] are not real things, [but] like the sky. Rather than clinging to [thoughts] as real, look at [their] nature of mind, [their] self-arisen wisdom, [remaining] free from conceptual recognition! In clinging to thoughts as real things, you have abandoned the great self-arisen wisdom. The luminous nature of your mind, the *dharmakāya*, this wisdom which is non-conceptual by nature, has not been fabricated by the intellect. Look at [this] buddha-nature as the reality of mind! The wisdom of the buddhas does not exist through an intellect. Because your own and others' [mind] streams, [all of them] being beyond one and many, rest on the foundation of self-arisen wisdom, compassion arises for those who do not realize this. This fifth piece of guidance, on the great non-conceptual wisdom, is [thereby] completed.⁷⁰

To conclude, if such teachings were transmitted by the Bka' gdams pas in Snar thang, it is also possible that this tradition of interpreting the Maitreya works was passed on from Sajjana to the Third

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 154₂₋₈: (gloss: *las kyi dgos*) *las dang nyon mongs sdug bsngal gsum // gzhi med rang bzhin stong par gsungs // sangs rgyas snying po khamas yod du // rgyal bas gsungs pa'i dgongs pa yis //* (gloss: *zhum pa*) *rang sems sangs rgyas rgyu min na // lam la 'bad pas mi grol zhum* (text: *zhim*) / *rang sems rang byung* (text: 'byung) *ye shes nyid // dus gsum sangs rgyas rgyu yin par // rtogs pas byang chub thob pa yi* (text: *pa'i*) / *lam la 'bad rtol spro ba bskyed //* (gloss: *brnyas pa*) *kun rdzob* (text: *sdzob*) *byang chub sems ldan pas // gzhan la brnyas pa'i blo dang ldan //* (gloss: *gus pa*) *khamas gsum sems can thams cad kun // rang byung* (text: 'byung) *ye shes ma bcos par // yid bzhin nor bu yon tan bzhin // rtag tu sangs rgyas nyid du gnas //* (gloss: *nyes pa 'dzin pa*) *nad dang dbul dang spyod pa nyams // sems rnam skyon grangs las 'das //* (gloss: *rtog pa dngos med*) *rnam rtog dngos med nam mkha' bzhin // bden 'dzin zhen pa ma byed par // sems nyid rang byung* (text: 'byung) *ye shes nyid // rnam rtog ngos gzung bral bar ltos //* (gloss: *dpa'*) (text: *ba*) *yod pa rnam rtog dngos por zhen pa yis // rang byung* (text: 'byung) *ye shes chen po spangs // rang sems 'od gsal* (text: *gsol*) *chos kyi sku //* (gloss: *ye shes rang bzhin*) *rtog bral rang bzhin ye shes 'di // blos byas ma yin sangs rgyas kyi // snying po sems kyi don la ltos //* (gloss: *bdag chags pa*) *sangs rgyas rnamas kyi ye shes nyid // rang gi blo yis med par byas //* (gloss: *byams pa chen*) *bdag dang gzhan gyi* (add *sems*?) *rgyud 'di // gcig dang du ma bral ba yis // rang byung* (text: 'byung) *ye shes gzhir gnas pas // don ma rtogs la snying rje skye //* (gloss: *smam la sprā khrid drug pa ltar sbyar ba'i gdam ngag 'di yin gsung*) *mi rtog pa'i ye shes chen po'i* (text: *pa'i*) *spra khrid lnga pa rdzogs so // i thi* (text: *i ti*).

Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje, as claimed by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas in his *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*.⁷¹

Rang byung rdo rje and Rje Bkra shis 'od zer's *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* commentary

The most famous proponent of *gzhan stong*, Dol po pa, criticized the *mahāmudrā* position of the Bka' brgyud pas, namely that the nature of thoughts is the *dharmakāya*. Some scholars have thus assumed up to now that Situ paṅ chen Chos kyi byung gnas (1699/1700–1774) blended the seemingly irreconcilable *gzhan stong* and *mahāmudrā* positions and spread them throughout all the Bka' brgyud traditions of Khams, and that the way in which followers of the non-sectarian movement (*ris med*), such as Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, described Rang byung rdo rje and others as *gzhan stong pas* was misleading.⁷² Bka' brgyud *mahāmudrā*, however, can be easily brought into line with another form of *gzhan stong*, one which distinguishes the basis of negation from the negandum in a different way. Whereas for the Jo nang pas the basis of negation is an eternal ultimate, one that is not subject to the three times, Shā kya mchog ldan adheres to a distinction based on Yogācāra.⁷³ Similarly to this “Yogācāra *gzhan stong*,” Rang byung rdo rje fully endorses in his commentaries on the *Zab mo nang don* and *Dharmadhātustotra* Asaṅga's *Mahāyānaśaṃgraha* I.45–48, in which an impure ground-consciousness is strictly separated from a “transmundane mind.” In this context, Rang byung rdo rje stresses the need to distinguish “ground-consciousness” (Tib. *kun gzhi rnam shes*) from the “ground” (*kun gzhi*) in terms of suchness.⁷⁴

When Kong sprul called this “ground” *kun gzhi ye shes*, he was not starting to use Dol po pa's controversial terminology and reading a *gzhan stong* position into Rang byung rdo rje's works, but was simply following a tradition which can be traced back at

⁷¹ Mathes 2008a: 46–47.

⁷² Mathes 2008a: 56.

⁷³ Mathes 2004: 285–294.

⁷⁴ Mathes 2008a: 56–60.

least to the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Rje Bkra shis 'od zer (a disciple of the Seventh Karmapa Chos grags rgya mtsho 1454–1506)⁷⁵ equated buddha-nature with *kun gzhi ye shes*. In his commentary on RGVI.3 Bkra shis 'od zer thus states:

The Buddha taught the Dharma. Based on it, a *saṃgha* that practised the Dharma arose. Thanks to these [three], the buddha-nature, which is the ground-wisdom, [i.e.,] the buddha-element of sentient beings, is realized and attained.⁷⁶

Moreover, Bkra shis 'od zer claims that it was Rang byung rdo rje who taught *gzhan stong* to Dol po pa, and not the other way around. It is noteworthy that Dol po pa did not immediately grasp this extraordinary view:

After studying under the Dharma master from Gsang phu 'Jam db-yangs Shā kya gzhon nu,⁷⁷ the precious Dharma master Rang byung rdo rje composed a summary commentary of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and Asaṅga's commentary. He taught it extensively to such disciples as Karmapa Dkon mchog gzhon nu (1333–?),⁷⁸ and [so] made it widely known. Moreover, he taught the purport of *gzhan stong* to the omniscient Jo nang pa (i.e., Dol po pa), and even though confidence did not arise at the beginning, an extraordinary realization was born [in Dol po pa] later when he had completed the sixfold yoga practice [of *Kālacakra*]. He was [thus] made to see and realize that the *sūtras* of the final turning of the wheel and treatises such as the

⁷⁵ Situ & 'Be lo: *Kaṃ tshang brgyud pa rin po che'i rnam thar* 656₂.

⁷⁶ Bkra shis 'od zer: *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi 'grel pa gsal ba nyi ma'i snying po* 136₃–137₁; *de yang sangs rgyas kyis chos gsungs / de la brten nas chos nyams su len pa'i dge 'dun tshogs pa 'byung / de dag las bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po kun gzhi ye shes sems can kyi khams rtogs shing thob pa 'byung l.*

The last sentence of this quote differs in the Indian text (RGVV 7₂): “Within [the setting of] the community, [buddha-] nature leads to the attainment of the element of wisdom.” (*saṃghe garbho jñānadhātvaṅptiniṣṭhaḥ*). But this does not invalidate Bkra shis 'od zer's equation of *kun gzhi ye shes* with buddha-nature.

⁷⁷ He occupied the chair of Gsang phu for 27 years starting from 1326. See Roerich 1949–1953: 329.

⁷⁸ Stearns (1999: 58) mentions a debate between Karma dkon gzhon and Red mda' ba.

Ratnagotravibhāga and Asaṅga's commentary have definitive meaning. Therefore he gained confidence in accordance with the position of the Dharma master Rang byung [rdo rje], and [so] he adopted the tenet of *gzhan stong*. From the Dharma master Rang byung rdo rje [this tenet] was gradually transmitted to [other] superior ones starting with His Holiness 'Dzam gling ba (i.e., 'Bri gung Chos kyi rgyal po 1335–1407), and I requested it from the precious Dharma master Chos grags rgya mtsho. Now I will explain the meaning of this treatise, taking the Summarized Meaning (i.e., the *Rgyud bla ma'i sa bcad bsdu don*) by Rang byung rdo rje as authority.⁷⁹

It is for this reason that Bkra shis 'od zer's commentary must have been included in the collected works of Rang byung rdo rje. The "Summarized Meaning" itself is presumed lost today.⁸⁰

Bkra shis 'od zer's commentary accords with the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, which can be characterized as based on a particular Yogācāra interpretation of the Tathāgatagarbhasūtras. This confirms my previous comparative studies of Rang byung rdo rje's and Dol po pa's positions: while Rang byung rdo rje's presentation of buddha-nature is clearly Yogācāra-based, Dol po pa remains faithful to the original intent of the Tathāgatagarbhasūtras.

Of particular interest is Bkra shis 'od zer's discussion of RGVI.156–157 in which the relation between the teachings of the Prajñāpāramitā and the Tathāgatagarbhasūtras, and the aim of the latter,

⁷⁹ Bkra shis 'od zer: *Op. cit.* 132₂₋₆: *gsang phu'i chos rje 'jam dbyangs shā kya gzhon nu la / chos rje rin po che rang byung rdo rjes gsan nas rgyud bla ma thogs 'grel dang bcas pa la bsdu don gyi 'grel pa mdzad / karma pa dkon mchog gzhon nu la sogs slob ma rnam la rgya cher bshad nas / shin tu dar bar mdzad / kun mkhyen jo nang pa la yang gzhan stong gi dgongs pa bshad pas / dang po nges shes ma skyes kyang / phyis sbyor ba yan lag drug pa la thams cad mdzad pas nyams rtogs thun mong ma yin pa 'khrungs / 'khor lo tha ma'i mdo rnam dang / rgyud bla ma thogs 'grel dang bcas pa sogs nges don gyis bstan bcos rnam la gzigs rtogs mdzad pas / chos rje rang byung pa'i bzhed pa dang mthun par nges shes skyes nas / gzhan stong gi grub mtha' bzung ba yin no / chos rje rang byung ba nas / drung 'dzam gling ba la sogs pa gong ma rnam la rim pa bzhin du brgyud nas / chos rje rin po che chos grags rgya mtsho la bdag gis zhus pa yin no // da ni gzhung don rang byung rdo rje'i bsdu don sor bzhag nas bshad par bya ste /*

⁸⁰ See Burchardi 2006: 9.

is spelled out:

[Somebody may] say: If the [buddha]-element is thus so difficult to see, in that it is not a fully experiential object for even the highest saints who abide on the final level of non-attachment, what is gained then by teaching it [even] to foolish (i.e., ordinary) people? [Thus] the [following] two verses are in [the way of] a summary of the aim/motive (*prayojana*) of the teaching. One is the question, and in the second the explanation [is given]:

Why did the Buddhas teach here that a buddha-element exists in all sentient beings, after they taught everywhere⁸¹ that everything should be known to be empty in every respect, like clouds, [visions in] a dream and illusions. (RGV I.156)

One may have the five faults of being discouraged, contempt for inferior persons, clinging to the unreal (i.e., adventitious stains), denying real [buddha]-properties and excessive self-love. [A buddha-element] has been [already] taught [at this stage] in order that those who have these [faults] abandon them.⁸² (RGV I.157)

After quoting the related commentary verses RGV I.158–166, Bkra shis 'od zer presents and refutes Sa skya Paṇḍita's (1182–1251) approach to this passage of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*:

The lama Sa skya Mahāpaṇḍita and other learned ones say: “The teaching that sentient beings possess a buddha-nature is neither de-

⁸¹ I.e., in many *sūtras*, such as the Prajñāpāramitāsūtras.

⁸² RGVV 77_{9–19}: *āha^a yady evam asaṅganiṣṭhābhūmipraṭiṣṭhitānām api paramāryāṇām asarvaviśaya eṣa durdṛśo dhātuḥ | tat kim anena bāla^bjanam ārabhya deśīteneti | deśanāprayojanasamgraha ślokaḥ | ekena praśno dvitīyena vyākaraṇam | śūnyam sarvaṃ sarvathā tatra tatra jñeyaṃ meghasvapnamāyākṛtābham | ity uktvaivaṃ buddhadhātuḥ punaḥ kiṃ sattve sattve 'stīti^c buddhair ihoktam || līnaṃ cittaṃ hīnasattveṣv avajñā 'bhūtagrāho bhūtheadharmāpavādaḥ | ātmasnehaś cādhikaḥ pañca doṣā yeṣāṃ teṣāṃ tat-prahāṇārtham uktam ||*

^a According to both manuscripts (A 19b₂; B 40b₅). Johnston's omission of *āha* is probably only a reading mistake (see also Schmithausen 1971: 160).

^b Johnston inserts between *bāla-* and *-janam*, against both manuscripts (A 19b₂; B 40a₅), *-pṛthag-*.

^c Both manuscripts (A 19b₃; B 40a₆) have *astīti*, which violates both sandhi and the metre.

finitive nor literal, but provisional and [taught] with a hidden intention. What is its intentional ground? It is emptiness. As for [its] aim, it is in order to abandon the five faults, starting with being discouraged. As for the contradiction of taking [the provisional statement] literally, if one claims that such a buddha-nature exists in sentient beings' continuum, is this not the same as the heretics' stance that there is a pure, permanent self which exists independently on its own?"

It is not the same. The heretics [are engaged] in the mental fabrication of clinging to a self. As for buddha-nature, [at issue] here, it is said in this treatise:

[The *dharmakāya*] is the supreme self, for [in it]

[Any] mental fabrication relating to a self or non-self has been laid to rest.⁸³ (RGV I.37cd)

Thus there is neither a clinging to a self in the manner of the heretics nor a clinging to a non-self of that of the Śrāvakas. Therefore, it is taught in Asaṅga's commentary that it is free from the mental fabrication created by these two [groups]. If the existence of a buddha-nature in sentient beings is not maintained, it (i.e., the doctrine) [can] not be studied in this way, and the five faults taught in RGV I.161⁸⁴ and other such [obstacles] will remain as before.⁸⁵

⁸³ RGVV 34₉; *paramātmāmanairātmyaprapañca^avyupa^aśāntitaḥ* //

^a Johnston: *-kṣaya-*.

⁸⁴ Bkra shis 'od zer again quotes RGV I.161 (RGVV 78₇₋₈): "Indeed, for their not having heard of it, the enlightened attitude is not generated in some whose mind is depressed. This is because of their fault of self-depreciation" (*tathā hy aśravaṇād asya bodhau cittam na jāyate / keṣāṃcin nīcacittānām ātmāvajñānaḥ* //).

⁸⁵ Bkra shis 'od zer: *Op. cit.* 206₅–207₄: *bla ma sa skya paṅ chen la sogs pa mkhas pa 'ga' zhig na re / sems can la bde gshegs snying po yod par gsungs pa ni / nges don sgra ci bzhin pa ma yin / drang don dgongs pa can yin / de'i dgongs gzhi gang yin na stong pa nyid yin / dgos pa ni / bdag nyid la brnyas pa sogs skyon lnga spangs pa'i phyir yin / dngos la gnod byed ni / de lta bu'i bde gshegs snying po sems can gyi rgyud la yod par 'dod na / mu stegs pa dag bdag rtag pa gcig pu rang dbang can yod par 'dod pa dang mtshungs par 'gyur ro zhes zer ro / / de ni mi mtshungs te (text: ste) / mu stegs pa ni bdag tu 'dzin pa'i spros pa can yin 'dir bde gshegs snying po ni / gzhung 'di nyid las / bdag dang bdag med spros pa dag / / nye bar zhi bar dam pa'i bdag / / zhes gsungs pa ltar / mu stegs bzhin bdag tu yang mi 'dzin / nyan thos bzhin bdag med du yang mi 'dzin pas / de dag gis btags pa'i spros pa dang bral bar thogs*

Sa skya Paṇḍita is here said to have demonstrated the provisional character (*neyārtha*) of the teaching on buddha-nature.⁸⁶ Doing so requires, according to the rules of Madhyamaka hermeneutics, stating an intentional ground (Tib. *dgongs gzhi*), namely the hidden truth; the aim or motive (Tib. *dgos pa*) behind the provisional statement; and a contradiction which results from taking the provisional statement literally (Tib. *dingos la gnod byed*).⁸⁷

The first three introductory verses of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* (RGV I.1–3), on the other hand, suggest that the final editor of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā* was more familiar with the five principles of Yogācāra hermeneutics.⁸⁸ In the *Vyākhyāyukti* these five principles, which must be addressed when explaining the meaning of a *sūtra*, are as follows: (1) the aim/motive (*prayojana*), (2) the concise meaning, (3) the meaning of the words, (4) the connections [between its different topics], and (5) the objections [urged by opponents] together with rebuttals [of them]. It is obvious that the concise meaning of the treatise (point 2) can be presented by listing the seven *vajra*-points (Buddha, Dharma, *saṅgha*, buddha-nature, enlightenment, buddha-qualities and activity) in RGV I.1, while the connections between them (point 4) are clearly identified in RGV I.3. Moreover, verses I.156–157 present a contradiction urged by opponents and a rebuttal of it (point 5), and the way the aim is described in RGV I.157 accords with Vasubandhu's

'grel las gsungs so // sems can la bde gshegs snying po yod pa mi 'dod na //
'di ltar de ni ma thos pas // bdag la brnyas pa'i nyes pa yis // sems ni zhum
pa 'ga' zhiḡ la / byang chub sems ni skye mi 'gyur // zhes sogs gsungs pa'i
skyon lnga so na gnas par 'gyur ro /

⁸⁶ This is also the view of Bu ston Rin chen grub (Seyfort Ruegg 1973: 29–33).

⁸⁷ See Seyfort Ruegg 1985: 309–311 and 1988b: 1–4; and Cabezón 1992: 226–227.

⁸⁸ These principles are laid out in a famous stanza (see below) quoted in the *Vyākhyāyukti* (see VY 6_{13–16}). Thanks to a quotation in Haribhadra's *Abhisamayālaṅkāraloka* (AAA 15_{23–24}) the Sanskrit of this verse is available: *prayojanaṃ sapinḍārthaṃ padārthaḥ sānusamdhikaḥ / sacodyaparihāraś ca vācyaḥ sūtrārthavādibhiḥ //*

list of possible aims in the *Vyākhyāyukti*.⁸⁹

If it is thus the hermeneutics of the Yogācāra school which is being followed, the mentioning of an aim in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā* does not imply that the two works are *neyārtha*.⁹⁰ This seems to be Bkra shis 'od zer's point here: a teaching of definitive meaning has to be given already at the level of ordinary disciples if the aim of abandoning the above-mentioned five faults is to be achieved.

Following this line of thought, Bkra shis 'od zer also summarizes and refutes the position of the Dge lugs pas:

The Dga' ldan pa (i.e., Dge lugs pa) lamas say: "One might think that to explain again buddha-nature here in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* after [the Buddha] has explained in the middle turning of the wheel that phenomena are empty like [visions in] a dream and illusions, has the fault of being a redundant repetition because the emptiness of mind is buddha-nature. This is definitively so, but [Maitreya] taught that buddha-nature exists in all sentient beings in order to [encourage] abandoning the fault of being discouraged and so forth. We do not accept that the emptiness in the [mind-]stream of sentient beings, that is, [the emptiness] of being empty of a truly [existing] mind, exists together with inseparable qualities such as the [ten] strengths. To repeat, buddha-nature is the emptiness of being empty of a truly [existing] mind; it is a non-affirming negation only."

Since no aspects of qualities whatsoever [are maintained] in this [presentation], the latter stands in contradiction to the explanation that buddha-nature and *dharmakāya* have the same meaning. This is

⁸⁹ VY 8₁₃₋₁₆: "[Possible goals are:] to correctly teach those who are completely confused, to cause the morally lax to adopt [virtues], to praise [virtues] to those who are discouraged, and to cheer up those who have correctly entered the path." (*kun tu rmongs pa la yang dag par bstan pa dang / bag med pa rnams la yang dag par len du gzhus pa dang / kun tu zhum pa rnams la yang dag par gzeng bstod pa dang / yang dag par zhugs pa rnams la yang dag par dga' bar bya ste /*).

⁹⁰ The first rule of the *Vyākhyāyukti* (the goal of the *sūtra* must be stated) applies in general to all *sūtras* one wishes to comment upon (see VY 8₁₁₋₁₂₂₆).

because it is said [in RGV I.86a]:⁹¹

[It has] inseparable buddha-qualities.⁹²

It should be noted that Asaṅga comments RGV I.86a with the help of the following quotation from the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*:

Illustrious one, the buddha-nature is not empty of buddha-properties which surpass in number the grains of sand of the river Gaṅgā. They are inseparable, not recognized as disconnected, and inconceivable.⁹³

This means that, contrary to the Dge lugs pas, Bkra shis 'od zer fully endorses this crucial point of the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*. This raises the question though, how Bkra shis 'od zer understands buddha-nature with its inseparable qualities. He answers this question by simply quoting the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*:

This luminous nature of mind, just like space,
Never undergoes change.
It is not defiled by the adventitious stains of attachment and so on,
Which have arisen from false imagining.⁹⁴ (RGV I.63)

⁹¹ RGVV 55₁₂: *buddhadharmāvinirbhāgas ...*

⁹² Bkra shis 'od zer: *Op. cit.* 207₄–208₃: / yang bla ma dga' ldan pa dag na re / bka' bar pa las rmi lam dang sgyu ma bzhin chos thams cad stong par bshad nas / slar yang rgyud bla ma 'dir bde gshegs snying po yod par bshad pa ni bzlos pa'i skyon du 'gyur te / sems stong pa nyid bde gshegs snying po yin pa'i phyir snyam na de ltar mod kyi sems zhum pa la sogs pa nyes pa lnga spangs pa'i phyir / sems can thams cad la bde gshegs snying po yod ces gsungs pa yin no / zhes pa'i bshad pa mdzad do / sems can gyi rgyud la sems bden pas stong pa'i stong nyid de stobs sogs yon tan rnam dang dbyer med du yod pa ni mi bzhed do / yang bde gshegs snying po ni sems bden pas stong pa'i stong nyid med dgag rkyang pa yin no zhes zer mod / de la yon tan gyi rnam pa ci yang med pas / bde gshegs snying po chos sku dang don gcig par bshad pa dang 'gal te / chos sku'i don la / sangs rgyas chos dbyer med pa dang / zhes gsungs pa'i phyir ro /

⁹³ RGVV 55_{14–15}: *aśūnyo bhagavaṃs tathāgatagarbho gaṅgānadīvālukāvyativṛttair avinirbhāgair amuktajñair acintyair buddhadharmair iti /*

⁹⁴ Bkra shis 'od zer: *Op. cit.* 208₃–208₄: / 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 /. The last line differs in the Sanskrit: “It is, however, endowed with defilements ...” See RGVV 43_{9–12}: *cittasya yāsau prakṛtiḥ prabhāsvarā na jātu sā dyaure iva yāti vikriyām / āgantukai rāgamalādibhis tv asav upaiti saṃkleśam*

Literature and abbreviations

Abbreviations

- D Derge edition of bsTan 'gyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*. Taipei: SMC Publishing 1991.
- P Peking edition of bsTan 'gyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*. Tokyo/Kyoto: Tibetan Tripiṭaka Research Institute 1957.

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- AA – *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. Ed. by Ramshankar Tripathi (together with the *Abhisamayālaṃkāravṛttiḥ Sphuṭārthā*). (Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series 2) Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies 1993.
- AAA – *Abhisamayālaṃkāraloka*. Ed. by Unrai Wogihara, part I. Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko 1932–1935.
- AMĀ – *Amanasikārādhāra*. In *Advayavajrasaṃgraha*. Ed. by the Study Group on Sacred Tantric Texts. *Annual of the Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism*. (Taisho University 11) 1989, 209–2202 (=136–143).
- TŚBh – *Triṃśikābhāṣya*. In *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*. Ed. by Sylvain Lévi. Paris: Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences historique et philologique 1925, 15–45.
- DK – *Dohākośa*. Contained as *pratīka* in the DKP.
- DKP – *Dohākośapañjikā*. Ed. by Prabodh Chandra Bagchi. (Calcutta Sanskrit Series 25c) 1938, 72–148.
- DKP (P) – *Dohākośapañjikā* (Tibetan translation). Peking Bstan 'gyur (P), no. 3101, *rgyud 'grel*, vol. *mi*, fols. 199a₇–231a₅.
- Bṛhatṭikā* (Tibetan translation). Quoted from the *Karmapa Tenjur* (=Tohoku no. 3808). Rumtek/Delhi, 198? (no date).
- MAV – See MAVBh
- MAVBh – *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya*. Ed. by Gadjin M. Nagao. Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation 1964.
- MAVṬ – *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭikā*. Ed. by S. Yamaguchi. Nagoya: Librairie Hajinkaku 1934.
- RGV – *Ratnagoṭravibhāga Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra*. Ed. by Edward H. Johnston. Patna: The Bihar Research Society 1950. (Includes the *Ratnagoṭravibhāgavyākhyā*).
- RGVV – *Ratnagoṭravibhāgavyākhyā*. 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.]
- LAS – *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. Ed. by Bunyiu Nanjio. (Bibliotheca Otaniensis 1) Kyoto: Otani University Press 1923.
- VY – *Vyākhyāyukti* (Tibetan translation). Ed. by Jong Cheol Lee in *A Study of Vasubandhu: With Special Reference to the Vyākhyāyukti* (in Japanese). Vol. 2: *The Tibetan Text of the Vyākhyāyukti of Vasubandhu*. Tokyo: Sankibo Press 2001.
- SNP_{S(C)} – *Sekanirdeśapañjikā*. Sanskrit manuscript from Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Or. 149.
- SNP_{S(P)} – *Sekanirdeśapañjikā*. Sanskrit manuscript from St. Petersburg, Gosvdarstvennaja Publicnaja Biblioteka im. M.E. Saltykova-Ščedrina, MS. 283.
- SNS – *Samḍhinirmocanasūtra*. Ed. by Étienne Lamotte, *Samḍhinirmocanasūtra. L'Explication des mystères*. Louvain (Belgium), Paris: Bureaux du Recueil 1935.

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- Situ Paṅ chen Chos kyi 'byung gnas & 'Be lo Tshe dbang kun khyab. *Sgrub brgyud karma kaṃ tshang brgyud pa rin po che'i rnam par thar pa rab 'byams nor bu zla ba chu sel gyi phreng ba*. 2 vols. Reproduced from a print of the Dpal spungs edition. New Delhi: D. Gyaltsan & Kesang Legshay 1972.

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