

TATHĀGATAGARBHA, EMPTINESS, AND MONISM

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The *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is one of the most significant Buddhist doctrines to have come under the scrutiny of scholars in recent times.² One of the more interesting aspects of this doctrine is that it focuses attention on the nature of the Buddhist “absolute” or highest truth in such a way as to make clear many of the problems and concerns of the Buddhist community after the advent of the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This is so because, while on the one hand the *tathāgatagarbha* is identified with emptiness (“The wisdom of the *tathāgatagarbha* is nothing but the Tathāgata's wisdom of emptiness”³), on the other hand this emptiness, which for Nāgārjuna and more so for Candrakīrti was a “non-affirming negation,” is redefined in terms of affirmative predications of the highest order (e.g. *astitva*, *mahā-ātman*, eternal, etc.). That an investigation of the *tathāgatagarbha* requires one to ask fundamental questions about the nature of the Buddhist absolute— e.g. is there an “absolute” in Buddhism, and if so, what are its characteristics, how does it differ from the substantialism of the *ātmavāda*, etc.— is also indicated by the fact that both those who assert *tathāgatagarbha* to be an absolute or monistic doctrine and those who interpret it in orthodox Buddhist terms do so based on the same line of reasoning, i.e. that *tathāgatagarbha* is but an expression of *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*. The

¹This was originally written in 1994; the publisher seems to have fallen into a black hole, so I am putting it out here myself; I have not changed it (other than fonts and some formatting issues) in order to keep the historical in perspective. I think that I still agree with myself, especially with the idea that *tathāgatagarbha* represents more of a dualism than a monism and thereby leads to ethical problems with the less-than-real (accidental) *kleśa*.

²Many of the questions considered here have been treated in David Ruegg's recent publication *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective* (Delhi: Heritage Publishers 1992); see especially Chapter One.

³Jikido Takasaki, *A Study of the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttara-tantra)*, (Rome, 1966), p. 302. Hereafter cited as *Ratnagotravibhāga*.

difference is that the former group of scholars see Mahāyāna in general as monistic while the latter do not. This essay is concerned with this question of the equation of *pratītyasamutpāda*, *śūnyatā*, and *tathāgatagarbha* and the related issue of whether or not *tathāgatagarbha* thought represents a form of Buddhist monism.

The eminent Japanese scholar Yamaguchi Susumu and his student Ogawa Ichijō are two who see *tathāgatagarbha* as an expression of the concepts of *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*.⁴ Yamaguchi has noted that the statement in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, “O noble youth, such is the essential nature of the dharma (*dharmāṇām dharmatā*). Whether the Tathāgatas appear in this world, or whether they do not, these living beings are always possessed of the Matrix of the Tathāgatas (*tathāgatagarbha*)”⁵ is but a reworking of the famous dictum from the *Sammyutta-nikāya* (2.25; T.2.84b): “Whether, brethren, there be an arising of Tathāgatas, or whether there be no such arising, in each this nature of things (*dharmatā*) just stands, this causal status, this causal orderliness, the relatedness of this to that.”⁶ Thus it is seen that whereas in the early texts *pratītyasamutpāda* was considered the universally valid principle the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* gives that distinction to the *tathāgatagarbha*. Further, because Nāgārjuna has made clear the correspondence between *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*, we can see a development in the Buddhist understanding of the “nature of things” (*dharmatā*) from *pratītyasamutpāda* to *śūnyatā* and finally to *tathāgatagarbha*.⁷ Ogawa Ichijō also takes this position, supplemented by the Prasāṅgika-madhyamaka interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* as *śūnyatā* found in the commentary to the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* by rGyal tshab dar ma rin chen.⁸

⁴Yamaguchi Susumu, *Hanya Shisōshi* (Tokyo, 1956), pp. 86-7. Ogawa Ichijō, *Nyoraizō-Busshō no Kenkyū* (Kyoto, 1969), pp. 18-21.

⁵*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, pp. 294-5. This is actually a quote from the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*, an early *tathāgatagarbha* work that is virtually absorbed in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*.

⁶*The Book of the Kindred Sayings* (London: The Pali Text Society), 1982, part II, p. 21; Yamaguchi, p. 86.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 37 ff; pp. 86-87.

⁸Ogawa, pp. 18-21. Interesting in any discussion of *pratītyasamutpāda* and *tathāgatagarbha* is that Fa-tsang put “causation by *tathāgatagarbha*” as the third of four causation theories, his own *dharmadhātu-pratītyasamutpāda* being

This same development is detailed in a quote from the *Dhāraṇīśvarāja-sūtra* found in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*.⁹ Thus, as an expression of traditional Buddhist concepts, *tathāgatagarbha* involves no idea of substance or monism. The difficulties of this exegesis, however, are shown by the persistent and convoluted interpretations of *tathāgatagarbha* as an *upāya* or teaching in need of interpretation (*neyartha*), in spite of the fact that the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* is generally considered to be Prāsaṅgika work.¹⁰

As mentioned above, several of the scholars who see the doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* as a monistic absolute do so on the basis of the same equation of concepts (*pratītyasamutpāda=śūnyatā=tathāgatagarbha*) because they see Mahāyāna in general (Takasaki) or the Madhyamaka concept of *śūnyatā* in particular (Stcherbatsky-Obermiller)¹¹ as monistic. Others (Lamotte, Frauwallner)¹² see the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as diametrically opposed to the Madhyamika and representing something more akin to the monism of the *ātman-Brahman* type, and others again (Nagao, Ruegg, and Johnston)¹³ simply voice their doubts and state that it

the fourth and highest. This form of absolute unity within difference is, in my opinion, a far more developed form of monism, as is the "round" teaching of T'ien T'ai philosophy, which Tamura has called "absolute monism" (Tamura Encho, *Bukkyō no Shisō*, vol. 5 [Tokyo, 1970], pp. 41ff).

⁹*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, pp. 150-152. Another expression of *tathāgatagarbha* in traditional terms is the MPS which equates it with the middle path, T.12.572a.

¹⁰Ogawa, p. 29. Jeffrey Hopkins, unpub. diss., (Wisconsin, 1973) "Meditation on Emptiness", pp. 322-326, relying on Candrakīrti's *Mādhyamikāvātara*; Ruegg, *Buddha-nature*, pp. 27 ff; S. K. Hookham, *The Buddha Within* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), pp. 127-131. Hookham's work is especially interesting in this regard, as she seeks to "redress a balance" between the "explaining away" of the meaning of *tathāgatagarbha* by the Gelugpa and Prāsaṅgika (including the present Dalai Lama) and the even more "orthodox" Tibetan tradition which "intuits" an ineffable, eternal, and non-changing Absolute Reality. She writes, for example, regarding rGyal tshab's attempt to interpret the *Ratnagoṭra* in terms of emptiness: "this involves [a] long, elaborate and somewhat convoluted argument . . . the most natural reading of the RGV [*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*] and the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras [sic] in which it comments is a Shentong one [i.e., as literally teaching the presence of an immutable, pure, and unchanging self]" (p.17).

¹¹For Takasaki and Obermiller's positions, see below. Stcherbatsky's description of Hinayāna and Mahāyāna as systems of radical pluralism and radical monism are well known. See his *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana* (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 3, 59; *The Central Conception of Buddhism* (Delhi, 1974), p.73; and *Buddhist Logic*, (New York, 1972), p. 509.

¹²Etienne Lamotte, trans. *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, trans. from the French by Mrs. Sara Boin, 1976, pp. LXXVI-LXXXI; Frauwallner, *Die Philosophie des Buddhismus* (Berlin, 1936), p.256.

¹³Gadgin Nagao, "What Remains' in *śūnyatā*" in M. Kiyota, ed., *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation* (Honolulu,

is similar to Vedic forms of monism and endeavor to sort out the textual and philosophical details of the similarities and differences. Finally, there is the recent controversy that has erupted in Japan, with the noted scholars Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō volubly and persistently attacking the notions of Buddha-nature, *tathāgatagarbha*, and their East Asian counterpart of *hongaku* or Original Enlightenment as not only being a form of monism (they have coined the term *dhātuvāda* to refer to its various manifestations in the Buddhist tradition) but also contributing to social injustice, racism, militarism, and more.¹⁴ The varied opinions of these scholars alone indicate the importance of the *tathāgatagarbha* thought.

Takasaki, undoubtedly the foremost scholar of *tathāgatagarbha* thought, has expressed his idea thus:

“When Buddhism developed itself into Mahāyāna Buddhism, it could not but take the appearance of Monism as a result of Absolutization of the Buddha, and approach the Upanashadic thinking in its philosophy. . . for explaining the possibility of anyone's acquiring the Buddhahood, the Monistic philosophy was used as the background. In this last point lies the significance of the *tathāgatagarbha* theory of this text [the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*]- This theory is in one sense an inevitable result of the development of Mahāyānistic Monism in its religious expression.”¹⁵

He has, however, also cautioned that the monism or Absolutism of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* is of a different nature than that of the Upanishads:

1978), p.81, n.35; D.S. Ruegg, *Buddha-nature*, pp. 19, 35-37, 54-55, *passim*; Ruegg, *Theorie Du Tathāgatagarbha et du Goṭra* (Paris, 1969), pp. 2, 4, 366ff, and 388ff. Johnston, E.H., ed., *Ratnagoṭravibhāga-Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* (Patna, 1950), pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁴Noriaki HAKAMAYA, *Hongaku Shisō hihan* (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1989); *Hihan Bukkyō* (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1990); Matsumoto Shirō, *Engi to Kū: Nyoraizō shisō hihan* (Daizō Shuppan, 1989); Matsumoto Shirō, *Zen shisō no Hihanteki kenkyū* (Daizō Shuppan, 1993); Paul SWANSON, “Zen is Not Buddhism-- Recent Japanese Critiques of Buddha-nature”, *Numen*, vol. 40 (1993).

¹⁵*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, p.28. See also Takasaki Jikido, *Nyoraizō Shisō no Keisei* (Tokyo, 1974), pp. 761-763 as well as his “Hosshin to Ichigenron” (“The Dharmakāya and Monism”) in *Hirakawa Akira Hakasei Kanreki Kinen Ronshu*, pp. 221-240.

“One thing to be added here is the similarity of the Ratna (and the *vijñānavāda* too) to the Upanishadic philosophy in the expression of the Absolute with positive terms. In its essence, it is clear, the Absolute taught in the *Ratna*, being the manifestation of *śūnyatā* is of a quite different character from the substantial Absolute of the Upanishads. Still it is not impossible to suppose that there was an influence from the Upanishadic thought for the *astivāda* of the *Ratna* to establish its monistic doctrine.”¹⁶

Obermiller has perhaps done the most to further the idea that the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is one of monism, as can be seen from the title of his translation of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, *The Sublime Science of the Great Vehicle to Salvation, being a manual of Buddhist Monism*. He states:

“The central point of this most developed theory is the teaching that the fundamental element of Buddhahood, the Essence of the Buddha in a living being represents an eternal, immutable (*asa_śkrta*) element, which is identical with the monistic Absolute and is unique and undifferentiated in everything that lives.”¹⁷

That Obermiller considered *tathāgatagarbha* “to be monistic because he, like his teacher Stcherbatsky, considers Madhyamaka in particular to be monistic, is shown clearly in the following:

“On the foundation of the *Prajñā-pāramitā* he [Asanga] has composed the *Abhisamayalamkāra*, giving up his extreme Yogācāra views and drawing near to the monistic conception of the Mādhyamikas... Finally in the *Uttaratantra* he may be considered to have attained the highest point of development in adopting a theory of purest, extreme monism... It demonstrates the teaching of the Absolute as the unique undifferentiated principle, being the negation of the separate reality of the elements in their plurality, in accordance with the *Prajñā-pāramitā* and the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*.”¹⁸

¹⁶*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, p.61.

¹⁷E. Obermiller, *The Sublime Science of the Great Vehicle to Salvation, being a Manual of Buddhist Monism*, in *Acta Orientalia*, IX, p.104.

¹⁸Obermiller, p. 95.

Thus, before examining the question of the *tathāgatagarbha* and monism, we need to look, however briefly, at the concepts which everybody claims *tathāgatagarbha* represents, namely *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*. First, though, a working definition of monism is in order.

There exist a variety of forms of monistic doctrines, but only two need detain us here: substantival monism and attributive monism. Although any form of monism refers to a unity in contrast to a duality or plurality, substantival monism is concerned with the “what” of the unity, and attributive monism with the “how” of the unity. Thus substantival monism is generally concerned with questions of ontology, and posits one substance out of which all is composed. Thus too substantival monism is usually generative, the one substance being both the basis and, there being only one substance “in the beginning,” the source of all phenomena. Classic examples of this form of monism are Spinoza's doctrine of *deus sive natura* and the *ātman-Brahman* philosophy of the Upanishads. Attributive monism, on the other hand, is so called because it predicates a unity of attribute to all things. There have been a variety of theories which have espoused different attributes as that which unifies all things, such as the unity of movement found in the Aristotelian telos, or the monadology of Leibnitz, which is, of course, pluralistic from the substantival viewpoint. This can also be seen to be a weaker form of monism, in that any theory to the effect “all *x* is *y*” partakes of a monism of attribute *y* with regard to all *x* without involving many of the thorny questions of relation, difference, change, and the like that plague substantival monism.

Pratītyasamutpāda

As is well known, awakening to the truth of *pratītyasamutpāda* formed the content of the Buddha's enlightenment. Further, this principle of causality was said to be operative in all spheres, including that of enlightenment. It is characterized as “the way of things” (*dhammatā*, Skt. *dharmatā*), and its objective validity is stressed in the passage quoted above, “Whether the Tathāgatas were to appear or not . . . this causal order . . . remains the same.”

Though *pratītyasamutpāda* is clearly put forth as a universal principle of sorts, two things are relevant to a discussion of *pratītyasamutpāda* and its development through *śūnyatā* to *tathāgatagarbha*: First, although *pratītyasamutpāda* is an all-embracing principle, it is never equated with the phenomena which it governs. The Buddha clearly separated the two (*paṭiccasamupāda* and *paṭiccasamuppāna dhamma*).¹⁹ Thus *pratītyasamutpāda* is a doctrine not about what exists but rather about the way in which things exist. Therefore, although its universality and objectivity allow us to call it attributive monism, it is clearly not any form of substantival monism. Substantival monism was known at the time of the Buddha as *satkāryavāda* and was one of the theories that *pratītyasamutpāda* was intended to combat.²⁰ Secondly, this principle of *pratītyasamutpāda* is an empirically derived principle that answers questions about our experience of things. There is no level of Absolute reality which is beyond our cognitive processes or ineffable, no transcendent Absolute before which all perceptual activity stands false. One of the common moves in the affirmation of a higher, non-contingent absolute One is the denial of the plural, rendering conceptual discrimination a false or mistaken apprehension. Hence for monist philosophies the experience of the One is necessarily non-conceptual and non-discriminating, beyond all language— in short, ineffable. Śākyamuni's truth of *pratītyasamutpāda*, on the other hand, clearly and critically discriminated the way things do exist and the way in which they do not, and he did not remain silent about either his experience or his understanding, but unflinchingly taught “with an unclosed fist.”

Śūnyatā

The second term in the development of *tathāgatagarbha* outlined by Yamaguchi is *śūnyatā*, related to *pratītyasamutpāda* in the well known passage from Nāgārjuna's

¹⁹*Samyutta-nikāya*, op. cit. Cf. David Kalupahana's recent discussion of the epistemic status of the principle of causality as an inference that “has remained valid so far. To claim anything more than this would be tantamount to rejecting the very criticism he made of absolute predictability.” *A History of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1992), p. 55. Hence even the principle may be universal (in that there are no phenomena that originate otherwise) it is not given a permanent status.

²⁰David J. Kalupahana, *Causality, the Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu, 1975), pp. 6-15.

Mūlamadhyamakakārika:

“We declare that whatever is relational origination [*pratītyasamutpāda*] is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path.”²¹

In early Buddhism also *pratītyasamutpāda* was termed the middle path, as is shown in the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*:

“‘Everything-exists’— this, Kaccāyana, is one extreme. ‘Everything does not exist’— this, Kaccāyana, is the second extreme. Kaccāyana, without approaching either extreme, the Tathāgata teaches you a doctrine by the middle. Dependent upon ignorance arise dispositions. . . [followed by the specific application of *pratītyasamutpāda* of the twelve links]”²²

In another well-known passage from the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna paraphrases a Mahāyāna version of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* (he calls it the *Kātyayanāvavāda-sūtra*) to the effect that, “The Illustrious One, who comprehends existence and non-existence, repudiated both thoughts; that ‘something is’ and that ‘something is not.’”²³ Commenting on this, Candrakīrti quotes a version of the *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta* embedded in the *Kāśyapaparivarta* of the *Ratnakūṣa*:

“To say, Kāśyapa, ‘something is’, is one extreme; to say ‘something is not’ is one extreme. What avoids these two extremes is said to be without a specific nature, beyond proof, not related, invisible, without abode, not to be known conceptually. It is, Kāśyapa, the middle way; it is the right way of regarding the true nature of things.”²⁴

²¹Kenneth K. Inada, *Nāgārjuna, A Translation of his Mūla-Madhyamakakārika with an Introductory Essay* (Tokyo, 1970), p. 148.

²²Quoted in Kalupahana, *A History*, p. 58.

²³Mervyn Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Boulder, 1979), p. 158.

²⁴Ibid., p.159.

Here we notice that the middle path which was previously described as an empirically ordained causal order is now characterized by the negative predication which is without doubt the most common feature of the *prajñāpāramitā* literature vis-a-vis the description of the truth. This negative predication is deemed necessary because the concealing (*saṃvṛti*) function of language precludes our saying anything at all about truth, a notion too well-commented upon to warrant repeating here.²⁵ This lack of correspondence between the world of language and that of fact is also true with regard to every other fact in the system. Thus, this linguistically indeterminable, nonconceptual truth is as empty as everything else, including emptiness. It is certainly not any type of substance or existence, yet neither is it any form of nihilism, for the truth pertains, even if it transcends all predication. The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* contains many warnings about the importance of the ultimate truth and the dangers of denying emptiness.²⁶ It would appear that there arose a confusion of category such that the abstract universal “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) has taken on a new and transcendent life apart from those particular things that are empty (*śūnya*), a confusion which is well evidenced throughout the later history of Buddhism in spite of Nāgārjuna's explicit warnings on the subject.

Indeed, it seems that it was the absolutization of the principle that led to the charge of nihilism (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.6) and forced Nāgārjuna to resort to the dubious notion of the two truths for the only time in the entire *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. The concept of the two truths had been percolating around for some time before Nāgārjuna, in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools. Professor Sprung, for example, has noted that “The notion of ‘two truths’ (*satyadvaya*) is implicit in Buddhism from the beginning, as it is in any philosophy or religion that holds to a norm distinct from the everyday.”²⁷ In making such a statement Sprung is

²⁵Cf. Nagao Gadjin, “An Interpretation of the Term ‘Saṃvṛti’ (Convention) in Buddhism” in *Silver Jubilee Volume of the Zinbun-Kagaku Kenkyō* (Kyoto: Kyoto University 1954).

²⁶For example *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.10; 24.14; and 24.36.

²⁷Sprung, p. 15.

obviously looking more to the fortunes of the two truths in the Madhyamaka, for as it was pointed out above, there was no “norm distinct from the everyday,” no transcendent absolute, linguistic, conceptual, or otherwise, in the empirically oriented philosophy of the Nikāyas and āgamas. These terms *saṃvṛti* (*sammuti*) and *paramārtha* (*paramātha*) are not used in this fashion in the Nikāyas, although we do find a distinction made between two kinds of discourse, *nītāttha* and *neyyattha*, and when the commentaries to the Nikāyas speak of two truths they are making the same distinction.²⁸ That is, when the Buddha spoke of impermanence, suffering, etc., his speech was direct and not in need of interpretation, hence final or *nītāttha*. When he spoke of an individual or person, however, as there is no person (*pudgala* or *ātman*) admitted in Buddhist teaching, this is speech in the conventional sense, *sammutti*, in need of interpretation, *neyyattha*, and we are not to be led astray by it. Thus we see that here *nītāttha* simply refers to the truth of a statement (such as “that person went to the store”) vis-a-vis the Buddhist teachings. It does not refer to a realm “distinct from the everyday.” As Kalupahana has stated, “. . . having rejected the metaphysical theories, he [Buddha] did not remain silent, saying that Ultimate Reality is indescribable or inexpressible, but presented his own thesis in unmistakable terms, and this thesis is the *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent arising, or simply causality.”²⁹ On the other hand, Nāgārjuna is often presented as advocating a doctrine of an ineffable absolute level of truth (*paramārthasatya*), mystically attainable but linguistically and epistemically transcendent.

Aside from the fact that to say that “there exists some linguistically and conceptually transcendent absolute truth” is a patently self-contradicting statement, it seems to have created numerous problems for later Buddhists who had to try to explain the relationship between the two truths.³⁰ Two points seem worth bearing in mind: 1) we have moved from an empirically

²⁸K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, (London, 1963), pp. 363-368. See also Iida Shotaro, *An Introduction to Svātāntrika-Mādhyamika* (unpub. diss., Wisconsin, 1969) pp. 257ff.

²⁹David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, (Honolulu, 1976), p. 133.

³⁰Personally, I don't see why the two truths aren't subjected to Nāgārjuna's dialectic in the same fashion as other antinomies. It's not hard to see the *tri-svabhāva* or “four kinds of pure dharmas” (*caturvidho vyavadāna dharmah*) of the Yogācārins, the *paryāya-paramārtha-satya* of Bhāvaviveka, or even the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as trying to

derived unity of attribute which posits no absolute to a unity of attribute characterized as linguistically and epistemically transcendent; and 2) whereas *pratītyasamutpāda* is a theory about *how* things *exist*, *śūnyatā* is a theory about *what* does *not exist*. For both of these reasons I prefer to think of the two as related or perhaps even mutually entailed but not identical.

Tathāgatagarbha

And so we arrive at the main topic of *tathāgatagarbha*. As noted above, the most common way of understanding *tathāgatagarbha*, by means of which is asserted its non-monistic nature, is to assert that it is essentially the same as *śūnyatā*, and thus, inasmuch as it is the *śūnyā* nature of the mind which allows the mind to understand *śūnyatā*, *tathāgatagarbha* refers to the potential of the human mind to attain liberation. Although both Yamaguchi and his student Ogawa conceive this as a development of thought from early Buddhism, the reasoning is basically the same as that found in the Tibetan commentary to the *Ratnagoṭra* by rGyal tshab dar ma rin chen (1364-1432). Although this equation is stated in many places in the commentary, perhaps one of the clearest is that made with regard to the “three *svabhāvas*” which the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* adduces to explain the statement “All sentient beings possess the *tathāgatagarbha*.” The *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* illustrates this statement with three types of meaning:

- 1) The *dharmakāya* of the Buddha penetrates everywhere;
- 2) The Tathāgata, being *tathatā*, is the undifferentiated whole;
- 3) There exists the *tathāgatagoṭra* in all living beings.³¹

These three meanings are interpreted slightly later in the text (chapter I, verses 145-152) where they are termed the “three *svabhāvas*”. The first item, *dharmakāya-svabhāva*, is explained as having two meanings, 1) the *dharmakāya* as the perfectly pure *dharmadhātu* which is the acting sphere of non-discriminative wisdom; and 2) the natural outflow of the perfectly pure *dharmadhātu* (*dharmadhātu-niśyanda*) as the cause for its attainment. (This last item,

reconcile two levels of truth which are for the Prasāngika mutually disjunctive.

³¹*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, pp. 196-198,

deśana-dharma, is divided into two, *nītārtha* and *neyārtha*, but this may be ignored for the purposes here.) The text goes on to state that the former is to be known as the truth realized by the Buddhas and the latter as the dharma to be taught. Ogawa, following rGyal tshab, analyzes the first meaning to indicate that the *dharmadhātu* is the cause of the *ārya-dharma* (*ārya-dharma hetuttva*), and then characterizes that *ārya-dharma* as the necessary outflow of the *dharmakāya* (*dharmakāya-niśyandah*).³² Moreover, according to rGyal tshab, it is within this potentiality that the *dharmakāya* is all-pervasive at all times. Thus the conclusion is that when the text states that, “the *dharmakāya* penetrates everywhere” it means that “sentient beings have the capacity to always hear (and be affected by) the *ārya-dharma* as the necessary outflow of the *dharmadhātu*.”³³ Of this Ogawa states, “thus it goes without saying that this is not a metaphysical question about the *dharmakāya* as some sort of idealist essence which universally pervades and exists.”³⁴

The second aspect, namely, “the Tathāgata, being *tathatā*, is undifferentiated,” is analyzed simply to mean that *tathatā*, the “way things are,” refers to *śūnyatā*, and inasmuch as this is equally the essence or ultimate way of being of *sattvas* as well as the Tathāgatas, it is seen to be undifferentiated. Therefore Ogawa states that according to rGyal tshab, to “think there exists some sort of *tathāgata*, a *satkāryavāda*-type of *pudgala* explanation, is *avicāra*.”³⁵ The commentary also states that “this is called a *Tathāgata* when purified of the accidental defilements and obstacles to wisdom.” Thus this aspect refers to *samalā-tathatā*, or *tathatā* covered with defilements.³⁶ In other words, the *garbha* of all sentient beings is the suchness (*tathatā*) of the enlightened ones, and inasmuch as *tathatā* equals *śūnyatā*, it is said that all

³²Ogawa, op. cit., pp. 75-79.

³³Ibid., p. 78.

³⁴Ibid., p. 77.

³⁵Ogawa, 82.

³⁶Ibid., p. 81.

beings have the same nature as the Tathāgata.

The third aspect of the statement “all sentient being posses the *tathāgatagarbha*,” is that there “exists the *gotra* of the Tathāgata in all beings,” and it is given two meanings, *prakṛtistha-gotra* or the innate *gotra* and *samudānīta-gotra* or the acquired *gotra*. Here it is said that all beings are possessed of the cause of the Tathāgata, the first *gotra* being the cause of the attainment of the *dharmakāya* and the second *gotra* being the cause of the attainment of the *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmānakāya*. According to rGyal tshab, *prakṛtistha-gotra* is the primary meaning of *tathāgatagarbha* because this had already been identified in Indian Madhyamika thought as *śūnyatā*, and this is the ultimate support of Buddha-wisdom and hence Buddhahood. It is not, however, a productive cause, as a board is to a cabinet. This is the *samudānīta-gotra*, all the beneficial elements of a sentient being's mind, and it is these elements that give rise to the other two *kāyas*.³⁷

Thus, we can see that the last two items, *tathatā-svabhāva* and *tathāgata-gotra-svabhāva*, are basically equated with emptiness, and of the two meanings given to *dharmakāya-svabhāva*, the emphasis is put on the *dharmadhātu-niśyanda* and the capacity of sentient beings to hear the dharma. Thus, as Jeffrey Hopkins puts it, “The Prasāṅgikas say that this teaching [of *tathāgatagarbha*] is an example of giving to the cause the name of effect; for, the emptiness of the mind of each sentient being is what allows for change of that sentient being's mind, and this emptiness is being called a fully enlightened Buddha.”³⁸ It is dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) or the lack of own-being (*svabhāva*) which allows all arising to take place for Buddhists; with regard to the mind, it is the essential emptiness of the mind which allows the realization of Buddhahood.

This approach positions *tathāgatagarbha* primarily on the causal level, as the potential of all sentient beings, due to their inherent emptiness, to hear the dharma which is the necessary

³⁷Ibid., p. 85.

³⁸Hopkins, op.cit., p. 323.

outflow from the *dharmadhātu*, cognize their true nature, and attain Buddhahood. There are two problems with this reduction of *tathāgatagarbha* to emptiness and to the causal level. First of all, the emphasis on *tathāgatagarbha* as cause seems to ignore the main thrust of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, which, as Takasaki has noted, is the explication of the dual structure of *tathāgatagarbha* or *tathatā* as both cause and result. This is clearly seen in the terms *samalā-tathatā* and *nirmalā-tathatā*, in which *tathatā*, one aspect of *tathāgatagarbha*, is common to both the result (*dharmakāya*, *nirmalā-tathatā*), and the cause (*tathāgata-gotra*, *nirmalā-tathatā*).³⁹

It is this sense of dialectic which is indicated by the three *svabhāvas* of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, and the interpretation of cause, nature, and result given by rGyal tshab (that puts the main emphasis on the causal aspect), is more likely in refutation of the Jo nan pa school rather than native to the text itself. Indeed, in my reading of the text the purity or result side of the *tathāgatagarbha* receives far and away the most attention and is the main thrust of the text. As Takasaki has noted,

“In other words, the emphasis lies on the identification of *gotra* or *garbha* with the *dharmakāya* and any difference of the *garbha* or the *sattvadhātu* from the *dharmakāya* is rather neglected.”⁴⁰

This brings me to the second difficulty in the equation of *tathāgatagarbha* and *śūnyatā*, namely that it is at heart an apologetic strategy that completely ignores the context in which the tradition evolved and the questions that it was seeking to answer. Emptiness was simply not that context, and such a Procrustean bed of apologetic exegesis does more to stretch our credibility than it does to further our understanding of *developments* within Buddhist doctrine, in which committed Buddhists attempted to meet new situations with new horizons of religious

³⁹*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁰*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, p. 59.

expression.⁴¹ With regard to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, for example, the Madhyamaka-prasaṅgika exegesis in terms of *śūnyatā* misses the point of doctrinal evolution so clearly spelled out in the very title of the text, *Ratnagotra-vibhāga-uttaratantra-śāstra*. The significance, of course, lies in the term *uttaratantra*, where *tantra* is taken to mean doctrine or teaching and *uttara* means final or ultimate, in contrast to *pūrvam*, meaning previous. This is clearly shown in the following verse:

“It has been said [in the Scriptures]
 All kinds of phenomena, made by causes and conditions
 And known in the forms of Defilement, Action, and Result,
 Are, like clouds, etc., deprived of reality.
 The Defilements are like the clouds,
 Undertaking of Actions is like the enjoyment in a dream;
 Being the Results made by Defilements and Actions,
 The Group of elements are like illusions made by magic.
 So has it been ascertained `before';
 But now, in this `ultimate' Doctrine,
 In order to remove the 5 defects [caused by the previous teaching],
 It is shown that the Essence of the Buddha exists.”⁴²

Now, the doctrine referred to as the previous (*pūrvam*) is clearly that of the *prajñāpāramitā* that regularly use such similes as clouds, etc., to designate the proper understanding of phenomena. It is also clear that the way in which the teaching of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* is superior or ultimate vis-a-vis that of the *śūnyavāda* is in its teaching that the *tathāgatagarbha* exists (*astitva*). Although this theme is emphatically stated throughout the text, it is most clearly found in the chapter titled “Essential Characteristics of the *Tathāgatagarbha*”.⁴³

⁴¹Apart from the obvious East Asian developments under a Taoist influence, Ruegg's recent treatise on *Buddha-nature* (op. cit.), for example, has clearly shown the long presence of the many strands of “immanentalism” in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and the dynamic or tension that they engender, including silence vs. discursive expression, self-potentiality or “naturalism” vs. practiced or nurtured virtue, spontaneity vs. effort, innate vs. cultivated, leap vs. gradual ascent, etc.

⁴²*Ratnagotravibhāga*, pp. 306-307.

⁴³*Ratnagotravibhāga*, pp. 294-305.

This chapter, after declaring that “all sentient beings possess the *tathāgatagarbha*” is the “highest logical truth” (*dharmatā pramāṇīkṛtya*) goes on to discuss four types of beings to whom this truth is inaccessible. First are the ordinary beings, who, because they are unable to abandon belief in the substantiality of the *skandhas*, ego, and elements, cannot believe in the existence of an “immaculate essence” which represents the annihilation of the individual. The second and third groups for whom the *tathāgatagarbha* is inaccessible are the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddhas*, who meditate on the impermanence of phenomena (*anītya*) instead of the permanence of the *tathāgatagarbha*; meditate on the lack of self (*anātman*) instead of the *tathāgatagarbha*; meditate on the suffering of phenomena instead of the bliss of the *tathāgatagarbha*; and finally, meditate on the impurity of phenomena instead of the purity of the *tathāgatagarbha*. This fourfold characterization is known as the fourfold *guṇapāramitā* and is taught in several sūtras of the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition (*Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, † *rīmālādevīsūtra*, etc.) in order to combat the predilections of those who are “attached to delusion,” i.e., do not or cannot conceive of the *tathāgatagarbha*.

These four *guṇapāramitās* are further elucidated in the chapter “Analysis of the Germ [*garbha*] from 10 points of View” under the third item, result.⁴⁴ The relatively long description of the *tathāgatagarbha* in its capacity as “result” militates against the view espoused by rGyal tshab in which the main meaning of *tathāgatagarbha* is construed as cause. Regarding the four *guṇapāramitās*, the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* states:

“Now, there is a notion of being eternal (*nītya*), blissful (*sukha*), of substantial ego (*ātman*), of being pure (*śubha*) regarding the separate things consisting of form and others which are really non-eternal, full of sufferings, of no substantial Ego and impure, respectively. Such a notion is called the “fourfold delusion (*viparyāsa*). Being opposite to this notion, there should be known “the fourfold non-delusion” (*aviparyāsa*). Which four? That is to say, the notion of being non-eternal, full of sufferings, of no substantial Ego, and impure regarding just those separate things of form, etc. Such a notion is called the fourfold opposite of

⁴⁴*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, pp. 207-221.

delusion (*viparyāsaviparyaya*). And again, this very [notion of non-delusion] is implied as delusion with reference to the Absolute Body of the Tathāgata whose characteristics are eternal, etc. Being the Antidote of this notion, there is established the fourfold Supreme Eternity (*nitya-pāramitā*), the Supreme Bliss (*śukha-pāramitā*), the Supreme Unity (*ātma-pāramita*), and the Supreme Purity (*śubha-pāramitā*).⁴⁵

That is, whereas impermanence, suffering, no-self, and impurity are the proper way of seeing the various phenomena of the world, if one characterizes the *tathāgatagarbha* thus it is delusion.

The fourth type to whom the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha* is inaccessible is the “bodhisattva newly entered upon the way because they are deprived of the cognition of the *tathāgatagarbha* in regard to the true meaning of *śūnyatā*.”⁴⁶ With regard to the “true meaning of emptiness,” the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* then quotes the *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra*:

“The Matrix of the Tathāgata is empty of all the sheath of *kleśa* which are differentiated and separated [from the Absolute Essence]. The Matrix of the Tathāgata is by no means devoid of the Buddha's Properties which are indivisible, inseparable, [from the Absolute Essence] inconceivable, and far beyond the sands of the Gaṅga in number.

Thus, wherever something is lacking, this is observed as `void' (*śūnya*) in that place (*tena*), whatever remains there, one knows that this being must exist there.”⁴⁷

This definition of emptiness as that which remains (*avaśiṣṭa*) is found in early Buddhist texts as well as in some Yogācāra texts. Its use in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* clearly brings out the distinction between *śūnyatā* as the *pūrvam* teaching and *tathāgatagarbha* as the *uttara* teaching. That is, whereas the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, like the *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra*, identifies *tathāgatagarbha* with *śūnyatā* (“The wisdom of the *tathāgatagarbha* is nothing but the Tathāgata's wisdom of

⁴⁵*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, 209.

⁴⁶*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, p. 301.

⁴⁷*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, 301.

emptiness”), the meaning of emptiness is defined as the “non-existence of adventitious defilements” and the corresponding “existence of the innumerable virtues of the Buddha.” Now it would be difficult to say that this is the same usage of *śūnyatā* found in the *prajñāpāramitā* literature or Nāgārjuna's works that declares the emptiness of all dharmas, *samskṛta* as well as *asamskṛta*, *kleśa* as well as virtue. That *tathāgatagarbha* wasn't really considered the same as emptiness is further shown by the fact that whereas all phenomena, sentient and non-sentient, are characterized by emptiness (as well as *pratītyasumtpāda*), *tathāgatagarbha* is restricted to sentient beings, leading to the prolonged discussions on the Buddha-nature of trees, rocks, and the like which took place in China and Japan. The thrust of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is not that which does not exist but rather the *existence* of the innumerable Buddha-dharmas or the existence of the *tathāgatagarbha*, a fact clearly brought out in its use of the term *śūnyatā*. It is in their inability to see the *existence* of the *tathāgatagarbha* that the bodhisattvas newly entered upon the path are said to “blind to the highest truth.”

The emptiness of defilements and *aśūnya* of Buddha-dharmas brings us to another sticky problem, namely, the relationship between the two. If, as is so strenuously argued throughout the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, this relationship is absolutely disjunctive, then how can the *garbha* also be characterized as the “foundation, support, and substratum” of all phenomena as well as nirvana?⁴⁸ I think that here we must see that the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine was not yet fully developed in the *Ratanagotra* and thus included incompatible teachings. That is, it seems to me that if we search for the problems and concerns that motivated its authors or compilers, we find at least two that are of prime importance: 1) a reaction against *śūnyatā* taken to be a nihilistic doctrine, and, similarly, against nirvana conceived as extinction; and 2) the articulation of a

⁴⁸*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, quoting the *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra*, pp. 290-292. This model has been labeled one of “arithmetical subtraction” in that purity is attained through the subtraction of obscurations that cover the already existing purity, as distinguished from a model of transformation in which purity is attained through the conversion of consciousness from ignorance into an altogether new awareness or wisdom. Cf. Nagao, “What Remains,” op. cit. As with any doctrine of absolute difference or disjunction of phenomenal, defiled consciousness and noumenal, pure Truth, the questions that this model of “arithmetical subtraction” raise for the attainment of freedom are also considerable, leading to the debates of “sudden” vs. “gradual”. Cf. Ruegg, *Buddha-nature*, pp. 44 ff.

universal principle of Buddhahood (not necessarily to be conflated with the *ekayāna* doctrine). It is in these two positive and all-embracing concepts that the importance of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine must be sought, rather than as simply another expression of *pratītyasamutpāda* or *śūnyatā*. Indeed, as I have indicated, objections can be raised against the identification of *pratītyasamutpāda* and the later idea of *śūnyatā*, and neither is the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha* the same, as was recognized by the Madhyamaka when they termed the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings *neyartha*, in need of interpretation.

Is *tathāgatagarbha* monism? Insofar as all sentient beings possess *tathāgatagarbha*, it does seem to partake of a monism of the attribute *tathāgatagarbha* with regard to the set “all sentient beings.” However, this is a limited set and does not include rocks, trees, etc. Further, the dichotomy between *kleśa* and virtue keeps the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine from a substantial monism, rendering it closer to a classical dualism. In this it is similar to most Indian Mahāyāna teachings which posit a sharp cleavage between phenomena and truth, *saṃvṛti* and *parāmārtha* at the same time that the rhetoric and structure of non-duality is employed.

In sum, the flattening or reducing of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine to *śūnyatā* or *pratītyasamutpāda* is a clearly recognizable strategy within the tradition, yet it does a disservice to both the Buddhist tradition generally and the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition specifically insofar as it denies any development in either. Students of the Buddhist tradition simply cannot deny the depth and pervasiveness of a cataphatic strain of immanentalism in its many manifestations and implications. Philosophers and Buddhists, however, will still need to assess its coherence and relation to normative Buddhist doctrine.

October 15, 1995

Dr. R. P. Srivastava
House No. 1404,
Near "B" Tank,
Patiala (PUNJAB) INDIA

Dear Dr. Srivastava,

Greetings, and I hope that this letter finds you in good health and spirits. I am writing to inquire about the progress of the publication of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Art and Culture* and the two articles which I submitted. I am currently undergoing the periodic review to which everyone in my College must submit, and so am curious to know the anticipated date of publication. I know that I and many others eagerly await the arrival of such an important work as the *Encyclopaedia* to which you are devoting your time and energies, and am sure that it will fill an important place in our understanding of Indian culture and intellectual life.

Thank you again for all of your work and efforts, and I wish you all of the best success in your endeavor.

Sincerely

Jamie Hubbard

Jamie Hubbard

January 10, 1993

Dr. R. P. Srivastava
House No. 1404,
Near "B" Tank,
Patiala (PUNJAB) INDIA

Dear Dr. Srivastava,

Thank you very much for your letter regarding the AAR Buddhism Section. I will add you and your son to our mailing list. You will then receive all of our notices; however, this is not the same as membership in the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which requires a membership fee and includes the cost of the Journal of the AAR.

Thank you also for your invitation to submit an article for your *Encyclopaedia of Indian Art and Culture*. I am happy to participate in this esteemed project. At present I have one or two articles that I am working on:

1) "Is Tathāgatagarbha Monism;"

and

2) "Pure Mind and the Sinitic Understanding of Yogācāra"

Each article will be about 12-15 pages long. Please let me know as soon as possible if you are interested in including either or both of these articles; I would also appreciate it if you could please let me know more about this wonderful *Encyclopaedia of Indian Art and Culture* project.

Enclosed please find a copy of my bio-data. Thank you very much for your letter, and I wish you all the good fortune in your project.

Sincerely,

Jamie Hubbard

Yehan Numata Chair in Buddhist Studies, Smith College

TeX Conversion Code List for Sanskrit and Japanese Diacritics

ā	→	\=a
𑖀	→	\=A
ī	→	\=i
𑖄	→	\=I
ū	→	\=u
𑖆	→	\=U
r	→	\dr
𑖙	→	\dR
𑖛	→	\d\=r
∞	→	\dl
ó	→	\d\=l
í	→	\.n
𑖛	→	\.N
ñ	→	\~n
𑖛	→	\~N
ε	→	\dt
𑖛	→	\dT
β	→	\dd
θ	→	\dD
𑖛	→	\dn
á	→	\dN
ś	→	\'s
𑖛	→	\'S
𑖛	→	\ds
≤	→	\dS
𑖛	→	\dm
𑖛	→	\dM
¿	→	\dh
𑖛	→	\dH
ō	→	\=o
𑖛	→	\=O
𑖛	→	\=e
■	→	\=E