

WIENER STUDIEN ZUR TIBETOLOGIE UND BUDDHISMUSKUNDE
HEFT 95.1

DAVID HIGGINS AND MARTINA DRASZCZYK

BUDDHA NATURE RECONSIDERED
THE EIGHTH KARMA PA'S MIDDLE PATH

VOL. I
INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS



ARBEITSKREIS FÜR TIBETISCHE UND BUDDHISTISCHE STUDIEN UNIVERSITÄT WIEN
WIEN 2019

WSTB 95.1

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GEGRÜNDET VON
ERNST STEINKELLNER

HERAUSGEgeben VON
BIRGIT KELLNER, KLAUS-DIETER MATHES
und MICHAEL TORSTEN MUCH
HEFT 95

WIEN 2019

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VOL. II
AN ANTHOLOGY OF HIS WRITINGS:
CRITICAL TEXTS AND ANNOTATED TRANSLATIONS

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WIEN 2019

Herausgeberbeirat / Editorial Board

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Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien /
David Higgins & Martina Draszczyk

ISBN: 978-3-902501-33-2

IMPRESSUM

Verleger: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien
Universitätscampus, Spitalgasse 2-4, Hof 2, 1090 Wien

Herausgeber und für den Inhalt verantwortlich:
B. Kellner, K.-D. Mathes, M. T. W. Much
alle: Spitalgasse 2-4, Hof 2, 1090 Wien

Druck: Ferdinand Berger und Söhne GmbH, Wiener Straße 80, 3580 Horn

“As it was earlier, so it is later –
It is of an unchangeable nature.”

Ratnagotravibhāga I.51cd

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Abbreviations of frequently cited works of Mi bskyod rdo rje:

Embodiments = *Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad* (KN)

Intent = *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* (GC)

Lamp = *Dbu ma gzhan stong smra ba'i srol legs par phye ba'i sgron me* (LG)

Tonic = *Rgan po'i rlung sman* (GL)

(see Bibliography in vol. 2 for full titles and bibliographic details)

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge the many people who helped us bring this project to fruition. These two volumes are the result of research generously funded by the Austrian Science Fund between 2015 and 2018 and conducted under the supervision of Prof. Klaus-Dieter Mathes. This project was entitled “Buddha nature reconsidered: Mi bskyod rdo rje and the post-classical Tibetan *tathāgatagarbha* debates” (FWF P28003-G24).

Most of our research was undertaken in the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies at the University of Vienna, which has provided an ideal work environment for our collaborative research. Among our colleagues, we owe a special debt of gratitude to Prof. Klaus-Dieter Mathes for supervising and supporting our research from start to finish. We are especially thankful for his expert guidance and advice in the translation of difficult Sanskrit and Tibetan passages. Finally, we benefitted from his comparative analysis of classical Tibetan *tathāgatagarbha* theories presented in his 2008 publication *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within: Gö Lotsawa’s Mahāmudra Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga*. This study formed an ideal chronological and doctrinal starting point for our own incursions into the world of post-classical buddha nature debates and hermeneutics.

During the preparation and writing of this book, research trips to India, Khams, and Amdo provided an invaluable opportunity to consult traditionally-trained scholars of the Bka’ brgyud doctrine on various difficult points (*dkā’ gnad*) of Mahāmudrā philosophy that we had identified in our primary sources. We also had the good fortune to benefit from the assistance of our resident Khenpo, Konchok Tamphel, who spent many hours helping us decipher some of the Eighth Karma pa’s most difficult philosophical writings and translate them into readable English. To Khenpo-la we offer our heartfelt thanks. We would also like to thank Prof. Martin Adam of the University of Victoria, Canada, for his tireless efforts, as editor of our manuscript, to ferret out mistakes and improve its overall style and readability. We are extremely grateful to professors Michael Torsten Much and Birgit Kellner for their invaluable editorial recommendations. Finally, without the interest, the inspiring exchanges, and encouragement of our many friends and colleagues, this research would have been far less stimulating and fruitful. In this regard we would like to give special thanks to Tom Tillemans, Kazuo Kano, Kent Johnson, and Thomas Doctor.

Preface

The prodigious writings on buddha nature by the Eighth Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554) reveal a persistent concern to reconcile two divergent lines of interpretation of buddha nature that had long divided Buddhist thinkers in India and Tibet. One view, advanced in the earliest extant *tathāgatagarbha* texts, takes buddha nature to be an innate unchanging constituent of a human being that exists throughout the flux of sentient existence and persists after death. The Karma pa frequently criticizes a variant of this view promulgated in Tibet by the Jo nang founder Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1243–1313) and his disciples, who stressed the permanent and transcendent status of buddha nature and ultimate reality. The other line of interpretation, advanced by several prominent Indian Mādhyamikas including Bhāviveka (6th c.), Candrakīrti (7th c.), Kamalaśīla (8th c.), Jñānaśrīmitra (10th c.) and Jayānanda (11th c.)¹, held that buddha nature is nothing but emptiness in the sense of a nonaffirming negation (*prasajyapratiṣedha* : *med par dgag pa*). This view was adopted in Tibet by Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109) and integrated into the view on buddha nature he developed in the context of his translation and interpretation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV).² This position was henceforth taken up by his disciples Rgyal Gro lung pa Blo gros 'byung gnas (12th c.) and Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge (1109–1169) and strongly influenced the buddha nature views of a number of later Tibetan scholars including the fourteenth century masters 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419), and the latter's disciple Rgyal tshab rje Dar ma rin chen (1364–1432).

The Eighth Karma pa's own position on buddha nature is perhaps best regarded as a middle way between these polarized positions, one that sought to combine the virtues of each while avoiding the vices of playing off one against the other. His method is dialectical in the sense that it seeks to reconcile the well-established affirmative and negative strains of Buddhist thought and practice

¹ The historical development of their views is discussed at length in Kano 2016. For an overview, see especially *Final Considerations*, 385–92.

² Our quotations from the RGV and RGVV follow the 1950 Johnston edition of these texts, incorporating corrections suggested by Takasaki 1966, De Jong 1968, and Schmithausen 1971. For a useful description of the sources used by Johnston, and of other available editions of these texts, see Kano 2016, 17–20. We have also followed the verse numbering of Johnston, despite occasional errors, because it is still accepted as the standard in the absence of a revised edition.

while avoiding the kinds of extreme views that may all too often result from taking either line as an end in itself. It is instructive that the author identifies as the philosophical standpoint for his Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā-based approach to buddha nature the Yukanaddha-Apratiṣṭhāna-Madhyamaka (*zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa'i dbu ma*), that is, as a “Nonfoundational (or Nonabiding) Middle Way consisting in Unity.” This nomenclature tells us much about the central philosophical aims and presuppositions of the Eighth Karma pa and his Karma bka' brgyud tradition. As a Mahāmudrā proponent, Mi bskyod rdo rje gives primacy to innate modes of being and awareness, such as coemergent wisdom or buddha nature naturally endowed with qualities, that are amenable only to direct yogic perception and revealed through the personal guidance of a qualified teacher. As an exponent of *yukanaddha* (*zung 'jug*), i.e., unity (literally, “yoking together”), he espouses the tantric goal of unity beyond extremes, a goal grounded in the inseparability of the two truths or realities (*bden gnyis dbyer med*), of appearance and emptiness (*snang stong dbyer med*). In his eyes, this unity is only fully realized when one understands that the conventional has no independent existence apart from the ultimate and that the latter is a condition of possibility of the former. As an advocate of *apratiṣṭhāna* (*rab tu mi gnas pa*), i.e., nonfoundationalism, he resolutely maintains that all outer and inner phenomena, including deep features of reality disclosed through meditation, lack any ontic or epistemic essence or foundation that the mind can lay hold of. Finally, as a champion of Madhyamaka, i.e., the Buddhist Middle Way, the author attempts to ply a middle course between the extremes of existence and nonexistence, eternalism and nihilism. These various doxographical strands are deftly interwoven in the Karma pa's view of buddha nature, which affirms the innate presence of buddha nature and its qualities in all sentient beings as well as their soteriological efficacy while denying either any ontological status.

This book is an outgrowth of our previous study on the complex philosophy of Mahāmudrā that evolved in Tibetan Dwags po Bka' brgyud traditions between the 15th and 16th centuries.³ In that work, we looked at how traditional Buddhist theories concerning buddha nature, the nature of mind, the nature of reality, and emptiness shaped, and were in turn shaped by, key developments in Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā doctrine during this period.⁴ Our research revealed the extent to

³ Higgins and Draszczyk 2016.

⁴ Our research revealed how the specific formulations of such theories allowed their proponents to [1] synthesize and systematize the representative doctrines and practices

which *tathāgatagarbha* theories in Tibet served to crystallize the central aims and presuppositions of their respective Buddhist schools. By the time Buddhism began to spread to Tibet from India (ca. 7th c.) the core premise of buddha nature theory—that beings have within them the potential to attain buddhahood—had already, in some Buddhist traditions, assumed the status of a keystone concept, one that unified and locked into place a set of representative views and practices. Because buddha nature views developed in this way as basic interpretive paradigms for both establishing and validating the doctrinal and sectarian identities of the major Tibetan Buddhist schools, their comparative analysis allows us to bring into focus some of the key discussions and debates that shaped Tibet's intellectual history.

Mi bskyod rdo rje played a pivotal role in these exchanges. As the head of the Karma bka' brgyud lineage as well as its leading philosopher, preceptor and systematizer during a tumultuous period of ecclesiastical history, his competent and charismatic leadership helped propel the Karma bka' brgyud tradition's scholastic and philosophical activities to a summit of intellectual excellence never equaled before or since. This was a period of intensifying inter-sectarian pressures. It was a time when powerful hierarchs of the ascendant Buddhist orders, particularly of the Dge lugs, the Sa skyā and the Karma and 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud sects, vied for the patronage of powerful Tibetan aristocratic clans⁵ to fill

of their traditions, [2] demonstrate the continuity of these discursive formations with authoritative antecedent Indian Buddhist paradigms, and [3] thereby verify their authenticity and, in some cases, also establish their precedence over rival Tibetan theories.

⁵ The period from 1354 to 1642 is sometimes described as the time of the “three major hegemonies” in reference to the power held by three successive Tibetan clans over central Tibet (Dbus and Gtsang): the Phag mo gru pa (1354–1478), the Rin spungs pa (1478–1565) and the Gtsang pa (1565–1642). The decades preceding Mi bskyod rdo rje's birth saw increasing rivalry between the Phag mo gru pas of Dbus and the Rin spungs pa of Gtsang and shifting power alliances between religious schools and clans. The Eighth Karma pa's predecessors, Zhwa dmar IV, Chos grags ye shes, and Karma pa VII, Chos grags rgya mtsho, enjoyed unprecedented honor and support from the Rin spungs clan. Increasing clashes between the Rin spungs pa and Dge lugs pas heightened tensions between the latter and the Bka' brgyud hierarchs, to the point that the Seventh Karma pa, during a sojourn in Lhasa vicinity, narrowly escaped death at the hands of Dge lugs pa monks by fleeing to the Jo khang temple. For details of this still poorly documented era of religious-political history, see Shakabpa 1967, 73–91; Jackson 1989 and Rheingans 2017, 36–42.

the power vacuum left by the final defeat of the Mongol-Chinese Yuan dynasty—whose rulers had been generous patrons of the Karma bka' brgyud—by the Ming dynasty in 1381.⁶ Escalating political tensions and shifting sectarian affiliations certainly fueled the polemics of this period as leading scholars from the Bka' brgyud traditions, most notably Mi bskyod rdo rje and the 'Brug pa hierarch Padma dkar po (1527–1592), took steps to defend their principal teachings and teachers from charges of philosophical incoherence and contamination by non-Indian views. Such objections were central to the wide-ranging, and often heatedly polemical, criticisms advanced by Dge lugs pa and Sa skya scholars during this period.

It would be difficult to comprehend the scope and significance of the post-classical *tathāgatagarbha* debates without an adequate appreciation for the ways

⁶ See Leonard van der Kuijp's research (van der Kuijp 2004) on the relations of mutual benefit that existed between the Karma bka' brgyud schools and their financial patrons at the Mongol court of the Yuan dynasty (Yuan period: 1276–1368). These royal patrons generally viewed the patronage of Buddhist institutions and their works as means of generating merit and thereby “ensuring the stability and the longevity of the reign of the emperor and the imperial family” (ibid., 4) and the prosperity of the empire as a whole. As van der Kuijp notes, “[t]he support took on a variety of shapes, but it did ultimately set into motion an unprecedented transfer of imperial wealth to Tibet proper that had many short and long-term consequences, from the construction of new monasteries and, concomitant with the increase in the monastic population, the institution of new monastic curricula, to an increase in book-production and things artistic, and the rise of a new aristocratic class.” (ibid., 4) Among the teachings and rites given by Karma bka' brgyud hierarchs in exchange for imperial donations, those concerned with the *Kalacakratantra* (KCT) were most favored. Elliot Sperling has observed that a similar donor-patron pattern already existed between the earliest Karma bka' brgyud hierarchs and the Tangut court in the 12th century. On Karma pa IV, Rol pa'i rdo rje's (1340–1383) relation to the Mongol court, see Sperling 2004; for the Karma pa V, De bzhin gshegs pa's, relation to Ming China, see Sperling 1980 and Schuh 1976. On the Mongol period in general, see Petech 1990, Schuh 1986, and Everding 2002. It seems that relations between Karma bka' brgyud hierarchs and the ruling foreign power continued to a limited extent in Mi bskyod rdo rje's time, judging from an exchange of letters between him and the Ming emperor Wu Tsung. Richardson 1980 translates a letter sent to invite Mi bskyod rdo rje to the court of the Chinese emperor Wu-tsung “who after a hostile start, gradually became devoted to Buddhism and very indulgent towards Tibetan lamas.” Biographical sources report that the Karma pa declined the invitation on account of inauspicious omens foretelling the emperor's death, which did indeed occur shortly afterwards.

in which Mi bskyod rdo rje sought to creatively coordinate and reconcile their competing viewpoints. As much as his contributions are an outgrowth of a long history of buddha nature speculation, they also bear the deep imprint of his intellectual milieu. His buddha nature discourses channel many of the seminal discussions and debates of his age concerning the “big problems” of Buddhist philosophy such as truth, emptiness, the nature of mind, and the relative scope and limits of conceptual and nonconceptual modes of knowledge. In short, Mi bskyod rdo rje’s philosophical writings, and especially those concerning buddha nature, open a window on one of the most complex and creative periods of Tibetan intellectual history. What is perhaps most striking about his treatments of such issues is the extent to which he attempts not only to assess multiple viewpoints, but also to work out how they should be coordinated and reconciled with one another from the standpoint of individual assimilation and praxis.

The present study comprises two volumes. The first offers a detailed analysis of Mi bskyod rdo rje’s position on buddha nature in which we have attempted to fill in some of the historical and doctrinal background necessary to understand his main contributions to this subject. The second presents a selection of critically edited texts and translations of the his most important writings on buddha nature.

While the details of Volume II can be gleaned from the table of contents, it may be useful to give a short résumé of Part I. In the first chapter, we have sketched a general outline of the author’s position on buddha nature in relation to the major lines of interpretation advanced by leading scholars of his generation that he sought to creatively resolve through his own dialectical approach. In chapter two, we take a broader view of the major views on buddha nature that had developed in India and Tibet and consider how masters of the Karma bka’ brgyud tradition positioned their own views in relation to these. We are aided in this regard by a useful synopsis of Indian and Tibetan buddha nature ideas composed by one of the Eighth Karma pa’s main teachers, Karma phrin las (1456–1539); this forms the centerpiece of the chapter. In the third chapter, we flesh out the skeletal outline of Mi bskyod rdo rje’s position traced in the preceding chapters with a more detailed analysis of his central claims regarding buddha nature. This was the most painstaking portion of the book to write and may well be the most challenging for readers unacquainted with the finer points of buddha nature theory. Yet it also contains the most substantive material for understanding the author’s interpretation of buddha nature and its doctrinal foundations. Our philosophical aim was to clarify the author’s efforts to articulate and justify his tradition’s position on buddha nature in relation to parallel or rival positions

held by other Indian and Tibetan masters. To this end, we identified in his treatments sixteen central propositions regarding buddha nature and attempted to elucidate each in terms of its historical-doctrinal evolution. In doing so, our objective has been not only to compile an inventory of the author's core propositions and to compare them with those of other Buddhist scholars, but further to probe beneath the doxographical surface of these positions to get at the guiding aims and aspirations that led him to espouse the positions he did. Though somewhat more detailed than the previous chapters, Chapter Three is nonetheless indispensable for appreciating the scope and originality of the Karma pa's contribution to the Buddhist understanding of buddha nature theory. It is thus also essential for clarifying and contextualizing the materials translated in Volume II.

Let us say a few words about the literary scope of our research. The recently published twenty-six volume edition of Mi bskyod rdo rje's *Collected Works*⁷ along with independently published works reveal a prolific author and prodigious philosopher who critically engaged with many of the leading Tibetan Buddhist thinkers of his time on a wide range of philosophical and soteriological issues. The author's writings on buddha nature are as varied as they are voluminous. In the face of this large body of material, our first task was to identify all the author's extant buddha nature writings as preserved in the two available editions of his *Collected Works*, as well as in independent collections such as the *Miscellaneous Writings*,⁸ the four volume *Commentary on Yoga Tantra and Other [Works]*,⁹ the four volume *Explanation of the Direct Introduction to the Three Embodiments*,¹⁰ and in a few independently published single works.

Our preliminary literature review identified several works that merited particular attention. The author's early views on buddha nature are well-represented by two early treatises: *The Lamp of Fine Discernment Regarding the Tradition*

⁷ On the two editions of his *Collected Works* (*gsung 'bum*), see Bibliography in vol. 2. The Lhasa 2004 edition (26 vols.) is hereafter cited as MD_{SB}. The Dpe dris ma edition available in the Vajra Vidya Institute library (Sarnath) is cited as MD_{VV}.

⁸ *Karma pa brgyad pa mi bskyod rdo rje'i gsung 'bum thor bu*.

⁹ *Rnal 'byor rgyud kyi rnam bshad sog*.

¹⁰ *Sku gsum ngo sprod kyi rnam par bshad*. The Varanasi 2013 edition (in 3 vols.) is hereafter referred to by the abbreviated title *Embodiments* and cited as KN.

of the *Gzhan stong Madhyamaka Proponents*¹¹ and *The Nerve Tonic for the Elderly: An Analysis of both “The Secrets of the Three Continua” by Rje Yid bzang rtse ba and “A Commentary on the Cakrasamvara” by Pañ chen Shākyā mchog [ldan]*.¹² In terms of content, the *Lamp* is primarily an exposition and defence of buddha nature views according to the tradition of Maitreya and Asaṅga, while the *Tonic* comprises a critical review of the buddha nature theories as presented in two tantric commentaries that were composed shortly before the author’s lifetime and which the author saw as having misrepresented in crucial ways their Indian sources: the *Secrets of the Three Continua* (*Rgyud gsum gsang ba*)¹³—a *Kālacakratantra* (KCT) commentary by ’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–

¹¹ *Dbu ma gzhan stong smra ba’i srol legs par phye ba’i sgron me*. The work is hereafter referred to by the abbreviated title *Lamp* and cited as LG.

¹² We here adopt the ornamental title *Rgan po’i rlung sman* that was used by the author himself in a bibliography of his own works he included in his *Spiritual Memoirs* (*Mi bskyod rdo rje’i spyad pa’i rabs*). The three editions to be consulted in this project bear the amended ornamental title *Sublime Fragrance of Nectar* (*bdud rtsi’i dri mchog*). See Bibliography for full title and bibliographic details. The work is hereafter referred to by the abbreviated title *Tonic* and cited as GL.

¹³ The *’Bras spungs dkar chag* (vol. 1, 3, *phyi ka*, no. 12) lists the work *Dpal dus kyi ’khor lo’i rgyud bshad pa la ’jug pa rgyud gsum gyi gsang ba rnam par phye ba*. This work unfortunately remains unavailable at present.

1481)¹⁴—and the *Cakrasamvara Commentary* (*Bde mchog rnam bshad*)¹⁵ by Shākyā mchog ldan (1423–1507). The colophon of the *Tonic* notes that the work was composed at Zing po 'bum pa sgang¹⁶ (*zing po 'bum pa sgang*) in Kong yul (i.e., Kong po, a region in southeastern Tibet) when the author was 26 years of age (1533).¹⁷ The text is listed in the Karma pa's bibliography of his own works included in his *Spiritual Memoirs* which he composed at age 40 (1547),¹⁸ seven years before his death. The *Lamp* is undated but was said to have been written at the behest of his student and biographer Sangs rgyas Dpal grub (b. 16th c.) in an area called Phrag yul zu ru gdong. Given the *gzhan stong* style of exegesis, which he appears to have largely abandoned in his later works, and the fact that the Karma pa is said by his biographer A khu a khrag (16th c.) to have averted a

¹⁴ 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal was also known as *Yid bzang brtse pa* (“the man from Yid bzang brtse”) on account of his close association with Yid bzang brtse, where he frequently took up residence. According to van der Kuijp (2007, 280), this may have been a hermitage or temple in the vicinity of Sne'u thog, the palace and administrative center of the Phag mo gru dynasty. See also Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes, *Gzhon nu dpal gyi rnam thar*, 32b_{6–7} and Mathes 2008a, 144. 'Gos Lo tsā ba's connection with the Phag mo gru family is reflected in another of his sobriquets: *Rtse[d] thang Lo tsā ba*, i.e., “the translator of *Rtsed thang*,” the name of a monastery near Sne'u thog that had apparently become an important Phag mo gru institution by this time. Both these names reflect 'Gos Lo tsā ba's close connections with the ruling elite of the Phag mo gru dynasty. Van der Kuijp (2007, 81) adds that “'Gos Lo tsā ba was so closely connected with this family and its neighboring vassals that he often served in the capacity of what we may call their court chaplain.”

¹⁵ The full title is the *'Khor lo sdom pa la rgyun chags kyi sdeb sbyor gyi sgo nas bstod pa dang || Bde mchog rnam bshad dpal dang po'i sangs rgyas rab tu grub pa*. It is hereafter cited as *Bde mchog rnam bshad*.

¹⁶ Zing po is south of modern Lha sa. Zing po 'bum pa sgang is also named as a place where Dpa' bo II Gtsug lag phreng ba (1504–1566) at age 29 received teachings from the eighth Karma pa; this coincides with the date of the composition of the *Tonic*.

¹⁷ *Rgan po'i rlung sman*, in MD_{SB} vol. 15, 1024₄: *mi bskyod rdo rjes rang lo nyer drug pa la kong yul zing po 'bum pa sgang du sbyar bas 'gro ba thams cad 'khrul med kyi rtogs par gyur cig*].

¹⁸ *Mi bskyod rdo rje'i spyad pa'i rabs*, in MD_{SB} vol. 1, 387₂: *karma pa mi bskyod rdo rje zhes bgyi bas rang lo bzhi bcu yan du rnam dkar dang 'brel ba'i bya ba las brtsams ...*

military conflict in this region in 1534,¹⁹ the work can tentatively be assigned to this early period. Volume II of this book begins with our critical editions and translations of these two important early treatises, based on a careful philological analysis of the extant editions. These, together with treatments of buddha nature views in his early commentaries on the *Abhisamayālamkāra* and *Abhidharma-kośa* as well as some of his *Replies to Queries* (*dris lan*), laid the foundation necessary for assessing his early views on the subject.

An ideal point of departure for assessing the Eighth Karma pa's later views on buddha nature was his commentary on the *Madhyamakāvatāra* entitled *Chariot of the Dwags po Siddhas*,²⁰ which he composed during 1544–45 at the age of thirty-nine. Not only does this work contain extended disquisitions on the subject, it also features important refutations of the buddha nature theories of a number of eminent masters such as Tsong kha pa, Shākyā mchog ldan and Dol po pa. In the last decade of his life, the Eighth Karma pa composed two monumental commentaries that are crucial for understanding his later views on various Buddhist topics, not least of all buddha nature. The first was a massive compilation of eight extensive commentaries on the *Single Intent* (*Dgongs pa gcig pa*) doctrine²¹ of the 'Bri gung founder 'Jig rten gsum mgon (1143–1217) composed in stages between 1536 and 1545.²² The second was a four-volume commentary on the *Direct Introduction to the Three Embodiments* (*Sku gsum ngo sprod*) of Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (probably referring to Karma Pakshi)²³ composed

¹⁹ Situ Paṇ chen relates that the Karma pa defused the situation by counselling that “there is no difference between harming a small Dge lugs establishment and cutting [one’s] throat.” As noted by Rheingans 2017, 101. A khu mentions that the Karma pa had previously reconciled hostile parties in Kong po in 1523. Rheingans 2017, 94–95.

²⁰ *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*.

²¹ This commentarial corpus is referred to hereafter by the abbreviated title *Intent* and cited using the abbreviated title *Dgongs gcig kar ḥīg* (=GC in critical editions) as adopted in the five-volume Karma Legs bshad edition (GC_{KL}). All *Dgongs gcig kar ḥīg* references are followed by the volume numbers (in Roman, I–V) and chapter numbers (in Arabic) used in GC_{KL}.

²² See Rheingans 2017, 102. We have discovered several points in the author's *Dgongs gcig kar ḥīg* and *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentaries where the works refer to each other. These intertextual references will be documented elsewhere.

²³ On the authorship of this text, see Draszczyk 2018. The colophon of the *Direct Introduction to the Three Embodiments* (*Sku gsum ngo sprod*) names Karma pa Rang byung

in 1548–49, a few years before Mi bskyod rdo rje’s death. The commentaries on the *Single Intent* are better viewed as compilations of essays on selected doctrinal topics suggested by themes in the root texts than as conventional commentaries. The *Explanation of the Direct Introduction to the Three Embodiments* is described by the Eighth Karma pa himself as a comprehensive presentation of the definitive meaning of Buddhist doctrine according to sūtras and tantras and key instructions, as they were transmitted in the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud tradition.²⁴ Both contain extensive material on buddha nature theories of Mi bskyod rdo rje and his coreligionists.

We have noted that the range of buddha nature theories discussed by the author is extensive, covering major representatives of at least five Tibetan Gsar ma schools: Dge lugs, Jo nang, Sa skya pa, Bka’ brgyud, and Bo dong. Among the Bka’ brgyud masters he cites as primary influences on his own buddha nature interpretations are Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po (1110–1170), the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), and the Eighth Karma pa’s own teachers, the First Sangs rgyas mnyan pa Bkra shis dpal ’byor (1457–1525), whom he repeatedly refers to as his root Guru (*rtsa ba’i bla ma*), as well as Chos grub seng ge (b. 15th c.) and Karma phrin las (1456–1539). In fact, Karma phrin las included in his commentary on Rang byung rdo rje’s *Profound Inner Meaning* a synoptic analysis of buddha nature theories in India and Tibet, which we have

rdo rje as the author, which in this context could refer either to the Second Karma pa Karma Pakshi (1204–1283), also known as Rang byung rdo rje, or the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339).

²⁴ KNvv vol. 3, 377₂₀–378₇: “Thinking deeply about the Buddha’s teachings and living beings, I sought out the full range of extant canonical texts of the sūtras and tantras which were well transmitted in the Karma bka’ brgyud [via] the supreme key instructions of the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud [and] summarized in the direct introduction to the three and four spiritual embodiments (*kaya*). In this illusory treatise [i.e., the *Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad*] I have set forth a few words embodying a plurality of meanings. In the future, fortunate faithful beings who may think they have not met me should immerse themselves in these *dharma* explanations and thus no longer think they never met me.”
 ...sangs rgyas kyi || bstan dang 'gro la cher bsams nas || dwags po bka’ brgyud man ngag mchog || Karma bka’ brgyud legs 'ongs pa'i || mdo dang sngags kyi gsung rab ni || yod do 'tshal ba ji snyed pa || sku gsum sku bzhi ngo sprod du || bsdus te sprul pa'i glegs bam 'dir || tshig nyung don mang ldan par bkod || phyin chad bdag dang ma phrad pa || snyam byed dad pa'i skal can rnames || chos tshul 'di la zhugs shig dang || bdag dang ma phrad ma bsam par ||.

translated and edited.²⁵ This outline, as we previously noted, provided a broad outline for the detailed analysis of Mi bskyod rdo rje's key positions undertaken out in the third chapter. Together with Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol's (b. 1608) useful historical overview of Mahāmudrā traditions in India and Tibet,²⁶ it helped us to contextualize the often-complex relationships that developed between Tathāgatagarbha and Mahāmudrā exegetical traditions in Tibet.

Given the abundance of material at our disposal, our principle of selection was to focus on materials of notable originality and influence. Critical editions and annotated translations of selected materials were first prepared following the established methodologies of classical philology. Quotations of canonical works in these materials were identified, critically edited, and compared to Indian originals (where available). On this basis, we proceeded with the task of philosophical reconstruction of the author's position on buddha nature. This required that we examine them, on the one hand, against the backdrop of the Indian Pāramitāyāna (exoteric) and Vajrayāna (esoteric) traditions that the author deemed authoritative and, on the other hand, in light of the many *tathāgatagarbha* interpretations of Tibetan masters he reviews in his own works.²⁷

This stage of comparative analysis was guided by the following specific doctrinal questions relating to the development of buddha nature theory in India and its assimilation by Tibetan schools:

- [1] How do the authors characterize the relationships between *tathāgatagarbha* and (A) suchness (*tathatā*), (B) adventitious defilements, (C) sentient beings (*sattva*), (D) the self (*ātman*), (E) the substratum consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), and (F) the *dharmakāya*?
- [2] How do these authors attempt to reconcile Indian causal (*hetu*) and resultant (*phala*) aspects of buddha nature with their corresponding “nurture” and “nature” models of goal-realization?

²⁵ *Zab mo nang don rnam bshad snying po gsal bar byed pa'i nyin byed 'od kyi phreng ba*, 331–384. The relevant section is entitled “An Outline of Buddha Nature [Theories]” (*bde gshegs pa'i snying po'i mtha' bcad pa*). See chapter 2.2.

²⁶ *Smin byed kyi dbang dang grol lam*, 842–886.

²⁷ In this respect, this study can be viewed as a chronological extension of the research undertaken in Mathes 2008a, which offered a comparative overview of 'Gos Lo tsā ba's views on *tathāgatagarbha* in relation to classical (13th–15th c.) buddha nature theories.

[3] What are their related views on the status of buddha-qualities, the nature of the naturally present potential (*prakṛtisthagotra*) and the developed potential (*paripuṣṭagotra*)?

[4] How do they coordinate their buddha nature views with related constellations of core soteriological ideas on the nature of mind, the nature of reality and emptiness?

[5] How do they relate buddha nature discourses to the hermeneutics of the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma (*dharmaśakra*) and the varying classification of these in terms of provisional (*neyārtha*) and definitive meaning (*nītārtha*)?

With such questions in mind, we set out to sketch in broad outline the antecedent ideas and doctrines that shaped the Karma pa's own stance on buddha nature and to determine how he developed these in relation to the views of other leading Tibetan masters.

Our preliminary survey of Mi bskyod rdo rje's oeuvre convinced us that his many and diverse expositions of buddha nature theory and criticisms of rival theories offer an especially fruitful basis not only for gaining a better understanding of his thinking, but also for improving our still fragmentary picture of the philosophical hermeneutics and intersectarian debates that defined his age. In addition, our analysis and translation of a number of his treatments of subjects directly related to our project—debates over self-emptiness (*rang stong*) and other-emptiness (*gzhan stong*) positions, the relationship between Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka views, the status of buddha nature and its qualities, and the nature and relative efficacy of conceptual knowledge and nonconceptual awareness—revealed to us the exceedingly broad range of views, both Indian and Tibetan, that he had managed to review and critically assess in his writings.²⁸

In addressing these various questions and issues, our philosophical aim has been not only to determine the author's buddha nature views vis-à-vis those of his predecessors and contemporaries but also to bring into sharper focus some of the motivating issues, interests and questions that animated Indo-Tibetan

²⁸ An added benefit of the Karma pa's critical assessments of Tibetan views is that he often mentions their proponents by name, unlike most Tibetan authors who followed the unwritten rule of decorum of using indefinite pronouns (e.g., *kha cig*, “someone”) to refer to adherents of rival views.

buddha nature discourses and debates during the post-classical era. It is hoped that the results of our research will contribute to a clearer picture of the Karma pa's seminal role in these exchanges and stimulate further research in this area.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Eighth Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje's short life epitomized many of the cultural currents that defined his age: the consolidation of sectarian identities around increasingly powerful monastic institutions sponsored by aristocratic clans, the synthesis and systematization of their representative doctrines, and the vigorous culture of intellectual exchange and intersectarian debate that would soon give way to the hardening of sectarian lines and entrenchment in representative dogmas that have continued down to the present day. The portrait we can assemble from biographical and historical sources as well as his own varied *Instructions* (*man ngag*), *Replies to Questions* (*dris lan*), and *Spiritual Memoirs* (*spyad rabs*)²⁹ is of a socially-engaged teacher who was incessantly on the move, giving Buddhist teachings, philosophical clarifications, and spiritual counsel to people from many traditions and walks of life. In his scholastic treatises and commentaries, we encounter a thinker of exceptional erudition and acumen who combined wide-ranging philosophical sympathies with well-honed analytical skills. From his many polemical tracts and some of the responses they provoked, we can envisage a formidable and often uncompromising opponent who did not hesitate to take on the most powerful adversaries or the thorniest philosophical issues. Both in the scope and scrupulousness of his critical engagements, he must surely rank among the most outstanding and polemically engaged thinkers in the history of Buddhist thought.

To set the stage for a detailed consideration of the Eighth Karma pa's core views on buddha nature (chapter three), it may be useful to first trace in rough outline the features of the intellectual milieu that shaped his own integrative view (chapters one and two). Much in the works on buddha nature by Mi bskyod rdo rje and his Bka' brgyud colleagues can only be brought into proper focus when viewed against the background of the long-standing Buddhist conflicts of interpretation over reality, mind, emptiness, and buddha nature that had come to dominate the polemics of their period. Perhaps the most efficient way to delineate this background, or at least the aspects of it most relevant to our understanding of the Eighth Karma pa's place in it, is to focus on a central concern that engaged these authors. If there is one desideratum underlying Bka' brgyud buddha nature discourses from the fourteenth century onward it was the reconciliation, both in theory and practice, of two seemingly divergent Buddhist views of ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya* : *don dam kyi bden pa*) and of the types of cognition,

²⁹ *Mi bskyod rdo rje'i spyad pa'i rabs*, in MD_{SB} vol. 1, 353–390.

discourse, and philosophical inquiry deemed most conducive to discerning it. One view favors a positive appraisal of the ultimate, portraying it as luminous, all-pervading reality that is amenable to nondual wisdom and expressible through affirmative styles of oral and literary articulation. The other view conceives of the ultimate in negative terms, construing it as emptiness of any essence or foundation that is ascertained through analytical investigation employing discourses based on radical negation. These two oppositional currents of thought, discourse, and praxis have had a long history in Buddhism, resurfacing time and again in the form of conspicuous tensions or antinomies calling for resolution. In this chapter, we will broadly assess some of the forms these tensions assumed in the differing Buddhist discourses concerning truth (*satya*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), buddha nature, and in the associated strands of textual and philosophical hermeneutics that engaged Mi bskyod rdo rje and other thinkers of his time.

An important finding of our previous research on post-classical Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā discourses³⁰ was that its key participants, despite the prevailing climate of sectarian discord and doctrinal dissent that marked their age,³¹ shared a common concern to reconcile two basic models of truth or reality that had long been discussed and debated in Buddhist circles: [1] a differentiation model based on robust distinctions between conventional (*kun rdzob* : *saṃvṛtti*) and ultimate (*don dam* : *paramārtha*) truths and their associated modes of cognition and emptiness, and [2] an identification or unity (*zung 'jug* : *yuganaddha*) model of these truths and their modalities. Whereas the differentiation model was typically aligned with a strongly innatist view of the ultimate (buddha nature, the nature of mind, or the nature of reality) which underscored its sublime otherness (*gzhan mchog*) from all that is conventional and adventitious, the unity model, predicated on the view of a common ground uniting all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, emphasized the pervasiveness of the ultimate and its immanence within the conventional in order to indicate how the ultimate permeates the mind-streams of individuals in bondage. A central aim of our research was to compare how Mi bskyod rdo rje and many of his Dwags po Bka' brgyud peers sought to synthesize and reconcile these two models within pertinent traditional

³⁰ Higgins and Draszczyk 2016.

³¹ A letter by Padma dkar po entitled *Bshes gnyen rnam rgyal grags pa'i dris lan*, in PK_{SB} vol. 12, 491–508, provides an important source for understanding the at times strained relationships between the 'Brug pa and Karma bka' brgyud schools in the post-classical era. On the general atmosphere of sectarian rivalry during this time, see Shakabpa 2010, 274–5 and Sørensen and Hazod 2007, 508.

Buddhist theoretical contexts such as buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*), the two truths (*satyadvaya*), the three natures (*trisvabhāva*), the two modes of emptiness (*rang stong* and *gzhan stong*), and the hermeneutics of the three *dharma* *cakra*.

For these masters, the most effective way to reconcile these differentiation and identification models was to deploy time-honored Madhyamaka tools of dialectical reasoning in order to chart a veritable middle way between extreme positions. Specifically, they sought to avoid the polarized other-emptiness (*gzhan stong*) and self-emptiness (*rang stong*) positions that had deeply divided most Tibetan schools since the latter part of the 14th century, particularly those espoused by the Jo nang pas³² and Dge lugs pas. To one side lay the type of eternalist view (*rtag lta*) of existence (*yod pa*) that had become associated in the minds of many Tibetans with Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan's (1292–1361) Empty of other (*gzhan stong*) doctrine. This doctrine posited the ultimate as an eternal, transcendental truth outside of space and time and beyond the causal complex of conventional reality. Dol po pa had on this basis described the two truths as two “great kingdoms” (*rgyal khams chen po*) “having nothing to do with each other.”³³ To the other side lay the type of “nihilist view of existence” that these Mahāmudrā masters associated with Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa's (1357–1419) version of the Empty of own-nature (*rang stong*) doctrine, which had rejected positive appraisals of reality in favor of a purely negative account characterizing the ultimate exclusively in terms of a nonaffirming negation (*med dgag*) while postulating a validly established conventional reality.

In the arena of Buddhist philosophy, post-classical Mahāmudrā thinkers came to regard the rapprochement between affirmative Mahāmudrā and negative anti-foundationalist strains of Indian Madhyamaka philosophy—specifically, the *Prāsaṅgika and Apratiṣṭhānavāda systems—as critical to their philosophical goals. This trend toward dialectical mediation via Madhyamaka models and methods marks a crucial step in the doctrinal development of the Dwags po Bka' brgyud traditions that requires some background to properly understand.

³² For a survey of the history and doctrines of this school and an analysis of Dge lugs pa criticisms of it, see Seyfort Ruegg 1963.

³³ See for example *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*. In the words of Padma dkar po, *Phyag chen rgyal ba'i gan mdzod*, in PKSB vol. 21, 1764-5: “It is said [by Jo nang pas] that there is an immense dichotomy between the two truths, and between the pairs ‘*samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*’ and ‘consciousness and wisdom’, together with their respective self-manifestations.” For Padma dkar po's critique of Jo nang philosophy, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 2, 157–174.

It may be mentioned at the outset that the attempt to align Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā doctrine with these two Madhyamaka systems is largely a post-classical concern³⁴ and rarely attested in the works of this tradition prior to the fifteenth century. Although the early generations of masters in this tradition such as Sgam po pa (1079–1153), 'Jig rten gsum mgon (1143–1217), Phag mo gru pa (1110–1170), Gtsang pa rgya ras (1161–1211), Rgod tshang pa (1189–1258), and Yang dgon pa (1213–1258) made extensive use of Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, and Vajrayāna ideas and models, often in strikingly syncretistic ways, they made little attempt to articulate and validate their core doctrines by identifying them with specific Madhyamaka viewpoints.

Sgam po pa offers an interesting case in point. He does in fact cite the Indian distinction of Madhyamaka into Māyopama (Illusion-like) and Apratiṣṭhāna (Nonfoundational or Nonabiding), a distinction which was likely introduced during his lifetime. Recent studies have traced the basic distinction, along with various sub-classifications, to a number of eleventh century Indian Madhyamaka-Mantrayāna works such as Maitrīpa's *Tattvaratnāvalī* (TRĀ).³⁵ An interesting

³⁴ We may here make a general observation that the widespread attempts by proponents of the main Tibetan Buddhist schools from the fourteenth century onward to legitimize their representative doctrines and practices by aligning them with authoritative Madhyamaka views (*lta ba*) was relatively rare prior to this century. One contributing factor was undoubtedly the general acknowledgement of the superiority of tantric doctrines and practices over their exoteric (“sūtric”) counterparts during this period. This meant in effect that the core tantric doctrines of the major Tibetan Buddhist traditions such as Mahāmudrā, Zhi byed, Lam 'bras and Rdzogs chen required no validation beyond showing their Indian Buddhist pedigree. The fourteenth century witnessed widespread doctrinal systematization as the major Tibetan schools sought to bring the diverse collections of Buddhist teachings they had preserved and developed together into coherent systems. These scholastic efforts coincided with the growth of large-scale monastic institutions which increasingly sought to codify and legitimize their respective doctrines and practices by aligning them with authoritative Indian Buddhist traditions. By this time, Madhyamaka was widely regarded as the summit of all Indian Buddhist philosophical systems, and the key representatives of the main Tibetan Buddhist orders sought, in one way or another, to align their core doctrines with specific Madhyamaka philosophies. This is certainly the case with the leading fourteenth century scholars and systematizers of the major schools such as Klong chen pa (Rnying ma), Rang byung rdo rje (Bka' brgyud), Go rams pa (Sa skyā), Tsong kha pa (Dge lugs), and Dol po pa (Jo nang).

³⁵ For a critical edition, full translation and detailed discussion of the *Tattvaratnāvalī*, see Mathes 2015, 59–94 and 341–369. Also see comments on the work by Seyfort Ruegg 2010, 162 and n. 7 and Almogi 2009, 40ff.

analysis is found in the *Dohākoṣahṛdayārthagūṭīṭkā* (DKHT) ascribed to one Avadhūtipa which distinguishes four strands of Apratiṣṭhāna: unity (*zung 'jug*), emptiness (*stong nyid*), equanimity (*btang snyoms*), and cessation (*rgyun chad*). These are presented as progressive stages of *amanasikāra mahāmudrā* realization leading to the insight that *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are illusory manifestations of mind and wisdom.³⁶ It is significant that when Sgam po pa cites the classification of Madhyamaka into Māyopama and Apratiṣṭhāna he adds the comment that he does not currently teach the Path of Perfections (*pāramitā*) because it “takes a long time and its conduct is difficult to practice.” In his view, then, the cited Madhyamaka subdivisions form part of the Pāramitāyāna which he excludes from his teaching in favor of the more expedient and effective Mantrayāna or Siddha methods of directly realizing coemergent wisdom by means of a teacher’s blessing (*adhiṣṭhāna*). In his own words:

Madhyamaka comprises the “Illusion-like” (Māyopama) and the “Nonfoundational” [or “Nonabiding”] (Apratiṣṭhāna). From the [latter derives] the scriptural traditions of Apratiṣṭhāna [in the sense] of Unity (*zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa*) and Apratiṣṭhāna [in the sense] of Cessation (*rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa*). The Secret Mantra has many [subdivisions] such as the New (Gsar ma) and Old (Rnying

³⁶ *Dohākoṣahṛdayārthagūṭīṭkā* (DKHT) D 2268, 69b₂₋₇: “In the Highest Yoga, what were termed ‘wisdoms’ in the Middle Yoga are illusion-like: [1] While the indivisibility of mindfulness and mental nonengagement is ‘*apratiṣṭhāna* in the sense of unity’ (*zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa*), [2] the absence of any mindfulness and mental nonengagement is ‘*apratiṣṭhāna* in the sense of emptiness’ (*stong nyid rab tu mi gnas pa*). [3] Nonarising and nonobstruction is ‘*apratiṣṭhāna* in the sense of equanimity.’ [4] And, since it is not intellectually knowable by anyone and inconceivable, it is ‘*apratiṣṭhāna* in the sense of cessation’ (*rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa*). Moreover, since these *apratiṣṭhāna* [strands] are indivisibly united with *amanasikāra*, it is by virtue of their capacity to reconcile any kind of dualism that the three aspects of *samsāra* and three *nirvāṇas* [comprising subject, object and act] are [deemed to be] magical emanations of [dualistic] mind and wisdom.” *rnal 'byor rab na re | rnal 'byor 'bring pos ye shes su ming du btags pa ni sgyu ma lta bu dran pa dang yid la ma byas pa dbyer mi phyed pa zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa tsam yin gyi | gang dran pa med cing yid la bya ba med pa de stong nyid rab tu mi gnas pa dang | skye ba med cing dgag tu med pa de btang snyoms rab tu mi gnas pa | gang gis blos mi rig pa bsam du med pas rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa'o || de yang rab tu mi gnas pa de dag yid la mi byed pa dang dbyer mi phyed pas | gang yang gnyis po'i sbyar ba'i nus pa des | 'khor ba rnam pa gsum dang mya ngan las 'das pa gsum ni sems dang ye shes kyi sprul pa'o ||*. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 411.

ma), Outer and Inner, and Father tantras and Mother tantras. To summarize, there are two [paths]: a Path of Accumulation of the Perfections (Pāramitā) and a Path of Methods of Secret Mantra (Guhyamantra). Since the first of these takes a long time and its conduct is difficult to practice, I do not currently teach it. [As for the second,] based on the warmth of the teacher's blessing, perfect wisdom is recognized. One thus enters the gate of the Path of Methods of Secret Mantra which makes one realize coemergent wisdom directly. ...

When the teacher's blessings have permeated [us], all the supreme and ordinary accomplishments are realized without difficulty. For example, although a great treasure that eliminates the suffering due to poverty for seven generations is [hidden] in the house of a poor man, so long as the treasure is not revealed, the suffering due to poverty [continues]. However, the moment it is discovered, [the man] is free from the suffering due to poverty. We are just like the poor man in this example. Although the treasure-like coemergent mind as such is innately present in the mind-streams of all sentient beings, so long as the teacher's blessings have not permeated [us]—which is akin to the treasure not being revealed—[we] don't take it up and we lack a method to attain the two types of accomplishment. When the teacher's blessing does permeate [us]—akin to opening the treasure—we recognize the coemergent wisdom and attain the two types of accomplishment without any difficulty.³⁷

³⁷ *Mgon go zla 'od gzhon nus mdzad pa'i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in G_{SB} vol. 1, 336–338; *dbu ma la sgyu ma lta bu dang rab tu mi gnas pa'o || de las zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas pa dang | rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa'i gzhung dang | gsang sngags la yang gsar ma dang | rnying ma | phyi ma dang nang pa | pha rgyud dang ma rgyud la sogs mang du yod kyang | bsdu na gnyis | pha rol tu phyin pa tshogs kyi lam dang | gsang sngags thabs kyi lam mo || de la yang dang po ni dus yun ring du 'gor zhing | spyod pa nyams su blang dka' bar 'dug pas da res de mi ston | bla ma'i byin rlabs kyi drod la brten nas yang dag pa'i ye shes ngos zin te | lhan cig skye pa'i ye shes mgnon sum du rtogs par byed pa'i gsang sngags thabs kyi lam gyi sgor zhugs nas ... bla ma'i byin rlabs zhugs na mchog thun mong gi dngos grub thams cad tshegs med par 'grub ste | dper na mi dbul po'i khyim na mi rabs bdun rgyud du dbul ba'i sdug bsngal sel bar byed par byed pa'i gter chen gcig yod yang | gter kha ma phyed kyi bar du dbul ba'i sdug bsngal dang bcas la | kha phyed tsa na dbul ba'i sdug bsngal dang bral lo || dpe de bzhin du mi dbul po dang 'dra ba'i 'o skol sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la | gter dang 'dra ba'i sems nyid lhan cig skyes pa de*

Two additional points in this passage are noteworthy. First, it is intriguing that Sgam po pa links these subdivisions of Madhyamaka with the exoteric Prajñāpāramitā system when one considers that they have their inception in predominantly tantric contexts and were frequently linked with higher tantric teachings by Indian Mahāmudrā masters as well as many of their later Tibetan interpreters. Second, it is interesting to observe that Sgam po pa illustrates his preferred tantric teaching method by way of the famous analogy of a poor man's discovery of hidden treasure beneath his floorboards, an example redolent of Indian buddha nature classics such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāśūtra*, the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Unlike the accounts found in these texts, however, in Sgam po pa's reframing it is one's personal teacher, not the buddha or a seer (*rṣi*), who reveals the hidden treasure. Moreover, in specifying the referent of this analogy, Sgam po pa substitutes coemergent wisdom for buddha nature, thereby showing the Buddhist tantric and Siddha provenance of his teaching. Such substitutions are a leitmotiv of his recorded oral teachings, a point we will return to toward the end of this chapter.

In notable contrast to Sgam po pa, many of his later interpreters did not hesitate to associate central Dwags po Bka' brgyud teachings with certain Madhyamaka viewpoints and to argue for both the continuity and consistency between the teachings associated with Madhyamaka and Mahāmudrā traditions. This synthesis begins to appear in Karma bka' brgyud texts only after the fourteenth century. It is worth noting in this regard that the extant *Collected Works* of the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), who did so much to synthesize and systematize the Karma bka' brgyud doctrine in the fourteenth century, gives only scant attention to the *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school. The Apratiṣṭhāna Madhyamaka tradition is not mentioned at all. From the fifteenth century onward, however, the rapprochement between Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka becomes a central preoccupation of Bka' brgyud thinkers such as the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524), his student Karma phrin las Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1456–1539), Sangs rgyas mnyan pa Bkra shis dpal 'byor (1457–1525), and of course the Eighth Karma pa himself who identified these last two masters as his principal teachers. For each of these masters, the marriage of Mahāmudrā and various Madhyamaka systems (such as Rang stong and Gzhan stong) offers

rang chas su yod kyang | gter kha ma phye pa dang 'dra ba'i bla ma'i byin rlabs ma zhugs na | de mi zin cing dngos grub rnam gnyis 'grub pa'i thabs med | gter kha phye ba dang 'dra ba'i bla ma'i byin rlabs zhugs na | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes ngos zin te | dngos grub rnam pa gnyis thob pa la tshegs med de | ...

the best prospect of bringing the opposing negative and affirmative aspects of Buddhist thought together under one roof.

Karma phrin las pa declares that “Mahāmudrā texts teach the Yukanaddha-Apratiṣṭhāna-Madhyamaka” and relates this to the Five Discourses of Maitreya which are said to transcend *Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika.³⁸ The Fourth Zhwa dmar pa maintains in his *Sixty Stanzas on Mahāmudrā* that “this Yukanaddha-Apratiṣṭhāna-Madhyamaka [deriving] from the noble Saraha, father and sons, is upheld [by] these glorious Dwags po Bka’ brgyud masters. Its method is superior to [that of] other Madhyamaka [systems].”³⁹ A rather different perspective is offered by Sangs rgyas mnyan pa Bkra shis dpal ‘byor, who is quoted by the Eighth Karma pa as stating that “the name ‘Great Madhyamaka’ with regard to *Prāsaṅgika or Apratiṣṭhāna should be applied to those Mādhyamika teachers who do not prove [things] by means of valid epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) [as Svātantrikas do] but who, instead, use examples that conform merely with what is acknowledged by others.” He adds that “those who understand this will attain the certainty that all phenomena are free from discursive elaborations.”⁴⁰

³⁸ *Dri lan snang gsal sgron me shes bya ba ra ti dgon pa'i gsims khang ba'i dris lan*, in KP_{SB}, ca 155₂₋₃: “Former masters of the glorious Dwags po Bka’ brgyud taught that because both the Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika [Madhyamaka] propound [only] the lack of intrinsic essences, the Five Discourses of Maitreya transcend both of these. The Mahāmudrā scriptures teach the Yukanaddha-Apratiṣṭhāna-Madhyamaka.” *dpal ldan dwags po'i bka' brgyud gong ma rnams || thal rang gnyis ka ngo bo nyid med du || smra phyir rgyal ba byams pa'i chos lnga po || de gnyis las 'das phyag rgya chen po'i gzhung || zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas dbu mar bzhed ||*.

³⁹ *Phyag chen drug bcu pa* (verse 49), in CY_{SB} vol. 6, 323₁₃₋₁₅: *zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas dbu ma ni || rje btsun sa ra ha pa* yab sras nas || *dpal ldan dwags po'i bka' brgyud 'di dag bzhed || de ni dbu ma gzhān las lhag pa'i tshul ||* See also verses 4–5 of the author’s *Phyag chen drug bcu pa*, in CY_{SB} vol. 6, 320₇₋₁₀: “Those who, having completely identified [suchness] as only Sākāra [with aspects] or Nirākāra [without aspects], lose their grip on the reality of the Middle. They do not understand the supreme Yukanaddha-Apratiṣṭhāna-Madhyamaka. Noble persons of this [Mahāmudrā] lineage have asserted that the *mahāmudrā* adorned with the *bla ma*’s pith instructions reveals the key points of the last [*dharma*]cakra of Pāramitā[yāna] in accordance with Mantra[yāna].” *rnam bcas rnam med nyid du yongs gzung nas || dbu ma'i de nyid dgrol bar byed pa dag || rab tu mi gnas zung du 'jug pa yi || dbu ma mchog ni shes par ma gyur to || bla ma'i man ngag gis brgyan phyag rgya che || sngags dang rjes 'brel pha rol phyin pa yi || 'khor lo phyi ma'i gnad rnams ston pa ni || brgyud pa 'di yi dam pa rnams bzhed do ||*.

⁴⁰ *Dgong gcig 'grel pa* V, Karma Lesheyling ed. vol. 4, 73₉₋₁₃: *tshad grub min kyang gzhān grags tsam || mthun dper 'god mdzad dbu ma pa'i || slob dpon rnams la thal 'gyur*

It is noteworthy that “Great Madhyamaka” is here identified with both the *Prāsaṅgika and Apratiṣṭhāna traditions and described as a system that leads to realization beyond discursive elaboration by means of teachings based not on Buddhist epistemology (*pramāṇa*) but on teachings that accord with what is acknowledged by the world (*lokaprasiddha*).

For post-classical Bka’ brgyud scholars, the synthesis of positive and negative philosophical orientations coincided with the task of bridging affirmative (cataphatic) and negative (apophatic)⁴¹ styles of traditional Buddhist discourse. In practice this required integrating positive descriptions of the nature of mind affirmed in tantras, buddha nature texts, and the spiritual songs and writings of the Buddhist mahāsiddhas with the Madhyamaka philosophy of radical negation outlined by Nāgārjuna and his successors. In the words of Mi bskyod rdo rje, “It is said that the instructions of Nāgārjuna were taught from a negating orientation (*bkag phyogs*) whereas those by Saraha were taught from an affirming orientation (*sgrub phyogs*).”⁴² When distinguished in terms of their associated rhetorical devices, it was said that the former deploys negative determinations (*rnam bcad* : *vyavaccheda*) while the latter deploys positive determinations (*yongs gcod* : *pariccheda*). The difference, as the Second ’Brug chen Rgyal dbang rje explains, is that the former “annihilates (*tshar gcad pa*) by counteracting objects to be abandoned,” whereas the latter “assimilates (*rjes su ’dzin pa*) by revealing the nonduality of objects to be abandoned and their counteragents.”⁴³

In their attempts to coordinate and mediate these contrasting modes of thought and discourse, post-classical Bka’ brgyud scholars adopted different versions of *soteriological contextualism*, a term we coined in our previous work

ram || rab tu mi gnas pa yi ni || dbu ma chen por ming thogs shig | 'di shes pa de chos kun la || spros bral nges pa rnyed par 'gyur || zhes bka' stsal pa 'di kho na la skal ba mchog snying khong rus pa'i gting nas mos pa skye bar rigs te || 'khrul bral gyi gsung 'di lta bu ni || phyis phyogs 'di'i 'dren pa dam par khas 'che ba'i gang zag gis nges pa ga la zhig ||.

⁴¹ On the use of these western philosophical-theological terms to characterize the two currents of Buddhist thought that Schmithausen 1981 (214 ff.) distinguishes as “positive-mystical” and “negative-intellectualist,” see Seyfort Ruegg 1989, 8 et passim.

⁴² *Glo bur gyi dri ma tha mal gyi shes par bshad pa'i nor pa spang ba*, in MD_{SB} vol. 15, 1074₅: *klu sgrub kyis gdams pa 'di bkag phyogs nas bstan la | sa ra ha nyid kyis ni bsgrub phyogs nas btsan zhes |*.

⁴³ See Rgyal dbang rje Kun dga' dpal 'byor, *Zab don dgongs pa'i gter mdzod grub pa'i shing rta*, in *Kun dga' dpal 'byor gsung 'bum* vol. 2, 7₁₋₃. For further discussion, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 32 et passim.

to describe the view that the sense, relevance, and efficacy of soteriological models can only be understood relative to the context(s) in which they are used.⁴⁴ On this account, the differentiation and unity models with their contrasting categories and root metaphors—the first positing a basic difference between conventional and ultimate and comparing it to the sky and its clouds, the second positing their essential equality as illustrated by the ocean and its waves—came to be seen not as contradictory but as complementary, relating as they do to different contexts of salvific theory and praxis. This is the view of the unity of the two truths or realities, and of appearance and emptiness, which is advocated by leading Bka' brgyud figures from the time of the tradition's spiritual forefather Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen onward.

The tensions between contrasting Buddhist views of mind, reality, and emptiness that frequently divided Tibetan schools were a driving force behind the development of Mi bskyod rdo rje's own integrative view of buddha nature. This is a view of buddha nature based on the unity of the two truths, a view that avoids construing the two truths as either essentially the same (*bden gnyis ngo bo gcig*) or different (*bden gnyis tha dad*). To be sure, Mi bskyod rdo rje does in his late commentary on the *Explanation of the Direct Introduction to the Three Embodiments* (*Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad*) explicitly endorse “an excellent Madhyamaka tradition properly discerned by all those who claim that the conventional is of the same nature as ultimate reality, such as those who appeared in former generations like the glorious lord Saraha, the noble Nāgārjuna, venerable Śavaripa, the teacher Buddhapālita, Candrakīrti and the master Maitrīpa.”⁴⁵ Yet he elsewhere qualifies that “single nature” (*ngo bo gcig*) in this context refers not to a relation of identity or difference between determinate entities but rather to the fact that reality as a whole lacks any intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*) and is therefore beyond discursive elaboration (*niśprapañca*). Thus, the “nature” in question is the basic “naturelessness” of phenomena.

In his *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary, Mi bskyod rdo rje argues that the two truths are neither the same nor different even conventionally “because they are reciprocally determined such that truth is posited in relation to falsity and falsity

⁴⁴ For a general account of contextualist views and their place in contemporary philosophy, see Price 2008.

⁴⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 264, ed., 273.

in relation to truth.”⁴⁶ He therefore approves of the Madhyamaka insight that oppositional terms such as “conventional and ultimate,” “*samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*,” and “delusion and wisdom,” are reciprocally determined in the sense that each member of such dyads depends on the other for its sense and relevance. Indeed, this insight helps him to undermine the metaphysical realist belief that the objects, properties, and relations the world contains exist independently of our thoughts and perceptions. It also lends support to his interpretation of the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud view that the two truths are in reality not different. In his own words,

Having in mind that the two truths do not in reality exist as different things, Bka’ brgyud rinpoches stated that “thoughts are *dharmakāya*,” “*samsāra* is *nirvāṇa*,” and that “defilements are wisdom.” But, even if they expressed things in this way, it is not the case that [pairs] such as “thoughts and *dharmakāya*” and “*samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*” which embody the meaning of the two truths can be established as being one in essence.”⁴⁷

Stated concisely, to say that the two truths do not actually exist as different things does not perforce imply that they share a single essence. Rather, it merely asserts that conventional and ultimate truths are equally devoid of any intrinsic essence that could qualify them as entities in the first place. This, he argues, is attested by the Prajñāpāramitā expression that the two truths are “the same in the sense of being equal with regard to their mode of essencelessness.”⁴⁸ In this

⁴⁶ *Dwags brgyud grub pa’i shing rta*, 147a4: ’di dag phan tshun bden pa la ltos nas brdzun pa dang | brdzun pa la ltos nas bden par rnam par bzhag pa’i phyir te ...|. For an illuminating discussion of this passage, see Mathes 2008a, 128–29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 147b5–6: ...bden pa gnyis ni don la tha dad du yod pa min pa la dgongs nas | bka’ brgyud rin po ches rnam rtog chos sku dang ’khor ba myang ’das dang nyon mongs ye shes su gsung gi | de ltar gsung na’ang bden gnyis gyi don can gyi rnam rtog chos sku ’khor ’das sogz ngo bo gcig yin par bsgrub pa ni ma yin te |.

⁴⁸ *Dwags brgyud grub pa’i shing rta*, 149a2–3: “[These Mahāmudrā teachings] do not state that *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, taken as actual things, are one in essence because locutions such as ‘the same [or one] in the sense of equality with regard to their mode of lacking an intrinsic essence’ are attested among the words of all the scriptures which teach the profound definitive meaning, such as the Prajñāpāramitā of the Illustrious One” ... ’khor ’das sogz kyi dngos don ngo bo gcig tu gsungs pa ma yin te | rang bzhin med pa’i tshul la

regard, the Mahāmudrā teachings that the two truths (or “thoughts and *dharma-kāya*”) are of the same nature should likewise be understood in the sense that both are equally essenceless and beyond elaboration, and not in the sense that they are real entities sharing a single essence. Thus, when qualified students realize the true import of Mahāmudrā teachings, they are liberated from such wrong conceptions concerning the two truths.⁴⁹

In his interpretation of the two truths, Mi bskyod rdo rje’s persistent concern was to chart a middle course that steers clear of the extremes of sameness and difference, and of existence and nonexistence. As we shall see, this interpretation was integral to his hermeneutic of buddha nature. The dialectic thrust of this hermeneutic becomes evident when we view his detailed elaborations and justifications of key distinctions based on the two truths in relation to his overarching emphasis on the unity of the two truths. His early treatments of *tathāgatagarbha* build upon a set of overlapping distinctions between conditioned and unconditioned modes of being and awareness. These he employs in various doctrinal contexts to articulate a view of the Buddhist path that draws attention to the disclosive nature of goal-realization. Examples are his differentiations between quintessence versus chaff (*snying po / shun pa*) and *tathāgatagarbha* versus *ālayavijñāna* in the context of discussing buddha nature theories; wisdom versus consciousness (*ye shes / rnam shes*) and innate versus adventitious minds (*gnyug ma'i sems / glo bur gyi sems*) in the context of Mahāmudrā instructions on recognizing the nature of mind; and phenomena versus the nature or expanse of phenomena (*chos [can] / chos nyid* or *chos dbyings*) in the context of elucidating the nature of reality.⁵⁰

For the Eighth Karma pa, such distinctions are indispensable for cultivating the Buddhist path as they enable the practitioner to distinguish buddha nature from the myriad thought forms that obscure it and thereby avoid confusing what is to be realized with what is to be relinquished. But here a question naturally arises: how can Mi bskyod rdo rje’s insistence on the value of robust soteriological distinctions be squared with his unwavering commitment to the Madhyamaka and Mantrayāna principle of the unity (*zung 'jug*) or inseparability (*dbyer med*) of the two realities? This question brings us to the heart of the Karma

*mnyam pa nyid du gcig pa'i sgra sbyor ba 'di ni bcom ldan 'das kyi rgyal ba'i yum sog
nges don zab mo ston pa'i gsung rabs thams cad kyi tshig zin la ...!.*

⁴⁹ *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 149a3.

⁵⁰ The author’s discussions of these distinctions and their sources are documented in the translations in vol. 2.

pa's philosophical project, which is to disclose the underlying unity of reality by way of phenomenological distinctions. In his eyes, such distinctions play the critical role, on the conventional level of conceptual clarification during the traversal of the Buddhist path, of helping the aspirant to discern what is essential amidst all that is superfluous, the genuine amidst the contrived. By thus separating the soteriological "wheat from the chaff," to use Mi bskyod rdo rje's favored metaphor, the aspirant learns to first glimpse and to then grow increasingly familiar with what is to be realized, while clearly differentiating it from what is to be abandoned.

Despite the important clarificatory role distinctions may play in helping one navigate the Buddhist path, the Karma pa denies them any ontological status. It is a mistake, in his eyes, to allow a useful *model* of reality to slide into the *reality* of the model, i.e., to confuse soteriology with ontology. The distinctions at best reflect how things work in shifting soteriological contexts, but not how things really are. From the Karma pa's perspective, the "way things are" eludes appropriation by conceptual thought and is beyond positive and negative determinations of existence and nonexistence, of being and nonbeing. Importantly, the model of unity he endorses is based on a relationship of asymmetrical priority between the terms of the relation. To put it simply, adventitious mental phenomena are inseparable from innate mind or buddha nature only in the specific sense that they have no autonomous existence apart from it. In fact, they exist only nominally, that is, as superimpositions or epiphenomena, which resolve into innate mind, i.e., their very nature, at the time of realization.⁵¹ In this spiritual winnowing process, to continue with the author's favored metaphor, the soteriological context is all-important: the individual on the path must learn to distinguish in theory and practice the innate from the adventitious in order to finally arrive at the deeper realization of a unity in which conceptual dichotomies have fallen away. As useful as such distinctions may be for intellectually separating the essential from the superfluous, they remain confined to the dialectical sphere of acceptance and rejection, a sphere that is transcended in the personally realized wisdom of the yogin who, via the Mahāmudrā path of direct yogic perception, discovers a unity beyond extremes of existence and nonexistence.

To summarize, the Karma pa's disclosive path hermeneutic, based on the kind of strong conventionally useful distinctions outlined in his early buddha nature writings, gives the aspirant a potent stratagem for traversing the Buddhist path. As the essence is separated from the superfluous, the aspirant is increasingly able

⁵¹ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 283–84.

to integrate the key points of Tathāgatagarbha, Vajrayāna and Mahāmudrā traditions which take the unity of the two truths or realities as their common ground and goal. Within a broad range of literary genres including treatises, commentaries, songs, poems, hymns, instructions, letters, epistles, as well as oral and written responses to questions, the Karma pa draws attention to the unity, autonomy, and efficacy of buddha nature from this disclosive standpoint.

In Mi bskyod rdo rje's later buddha nature writings, his focus on strong distinctions shifts increasingly toward the Madhyamaka and Mahāmudrā view of the unity of the two truths which goes beyond the extremes of existence and nonexistence. In his *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary (composed in 1544–45 when the author was 39 years old), the author explicitly defines *madhyamaka* in terms of the unity of the two truths. On the conventional level, all phenomena are mere combinations of interacting causes and conditions and the nominal superimpositions based on these. On the ultimate level, such phenomena are not confined to the conceptual limits of existence or nonexistence and also free from any foundation that could be called a “center”. In this sense, *madhyamaka* is specified as a “Middle Way consisting in the Unity of the Two Truths.”⁵² The author's growing emphasis on this unity finds its culmination in his extensive *Explanation of the Direct Introduction to the Three Embodiments* (*Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad*) which was composed in the last years of his life (1548–49). This study takes the doctrine of the unity of the two truths as its main thematic template. The Karma pa here articulates and defends the position that the two truths are inseparable on the grounds that all phenomena, conventional and ultimate, have always been free from discursive elaboration (*spros bral*). He presents the indivisibility of the two truths as a shared cornerstone of Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka traditions, having been upheld by a long line of masters such

⁵² *Dwags bryud grub pa'i shing rta*, 66₂₋₄: “All these phenomena are, conventionally, nothing but a mere nexus of interacting causes and conditions and the superimposition of mere reciprocally determined nominal conventions for the merely nominal elements based on such [combinations]. Ultimately, or in reality, [all these phenomena] are not grounded in any ‘limit’ of conceptual elaboration such as existence or nonexistence, and arising or cessation, and are also free from any foundation that could be called a ‘middle.’ In this regard, [this] basis is referred to as the ‘Middle Way of Unity of the Two Truths.’”
chos 'di thams cad kun rdzob par tha snyad du rgyu rkyen 'dus tsam dang | de la brten nas btags tsam gyi 'byung ba ltos bzhag gi ming tha snyad tsam sgro btags par zad kyi | don dam par ram yang dag par yod med skye 'gag sog sogs kyi spros mthar gang yang mi gnas shing | dbus zhes par yang gnas pa dang bral ba de la gzhi bden gnyis zung 'jug gi dbu ma zhes bya la ...|

as Saraha, Śavaripa, Nāgārjuna, Buddhapālita, Candrakīrti, Maitrīpa, Atīśa, and the Rnying ma pa Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (b. 11th century).⁵³ Mi bskyod rdo rje concludes that “so long as the mind has not let go of [reifying the two truths], and there is conceptual reasoning that clings to and believes in [them], it will never settle in the lofty state of the equality of the two truths, the inseparability of the two truths, the one-flavoredness of the two truths, and the unity of the two truths.”⁵⁴

Let us now consider some ways in which the dialectic between negative and affirmative views of the ultimate emerged at the center of Tibetan debates on buddha nature and gave impetus to the Bka’ brgyud aspiration toward doctrinal synthesis and mediation. In general, Bka’ brgyud masters stood united in their determination to mediate and resolve an age-old conflict of interpretation concerning buddha nature. Like other Tibetan *tathāgatagarbha* interpreters, they struggled with the apparent contradiction between an affirmative account, which emphasized the fecundity of buddha nature and defined it as luminous wisdom replete with buddha-qualities, and a negative account, which stressed its emptiness and selflessness and identified it as the sheer absence of any ontic or epistemic essence. This conflict had its roots in early Buddhist responses to the controversial associations of buddha nature with selfhood and permanence which were introduced in the earliest extant *tathāgatagarbha* works.⁵⁵ The rift steadily widened with later attempts to make buddha nature doctrine compatible with core Madhyamaka expositions of the doctrines of emptiness and selflessness. The result was two opposing schools of thought espousing seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of buddha nature.

⁵³ See vol. 2, tr., 264ff, ed., 273ff. Toward the end of his life, Mi bskyod rdo rje evidently became a strong advocate of Rong zom pa’s Apratiṣṭhāna-vāda-Madhyamaka views and especially those based on “classical texts maintaining the inseparability of the two aspects of reality” (*bden pa rnam pa gnyis dbyer med par ’dod pa’i gzhung*). On Rong zom’s Apratiṣṭhānavāda and the “inseparability of truth/reality” view which he termed “special Mahāyāna,” see Almogi 2009, 39–42.

⁵⁴ KNvv vol. 1, 114_{19–20}: *de ltar blos ma btang bar ji srid zhen ’dzin rtogs rigs yod pa de srid du bden gnyis mnyam nyid dang bden gnyis dbyer med dang bden gnyis ro gcig dang bden gnyis zung ’jug gi go ’phang la ’gar yang ’khod pa med do ||*. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2016, 24 and n. 35.

⁵⁵ For an illuminating overview of this controversy in the *tathāgatagarbha* literature, see Jones 2015. See also Mathes 2017, 124–25.

One indication that these divergent lines of interpretation continued unabated in Tibet is the well-known distinction Shākyā mchog ldan (1428–1507) draws between Rngog Blo ldan shes rab’s (1059–1109) “analytical tradition” (*mtshan nyid lugs*)⁵⁶ of *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) exegesis, which defines buddha nature as emptiness in the sense of a nonaffirming negation (*med par dgag pa* : *prasajyapratīṣedha*), and Btsan Kha bo che’s (b. 1021) “meditative tradition” (*sgom lugs*),⁵⁷ which defines it as emptiness in the sense of an affirming negation and equates it with wisdom and luminosity.⁵⁸ Both scholars were disciples of the Kashmiri teacher Sajjana and both held the *Ratnagotravibhāga* to be of definitive (*nītārtha*) rather than provisional (*neyārtha*) meaning. However, as Shākyā mchog ldan notes, Rngog defines buddha nature as “nothing but the natural purity [emptiness] aspect of all phenomena, which pervades all that is knowable and which is a nonaffirming negation, something akin to space.”⁵⁹ Btsan kha bo che for his part claims that “the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) I discovered from

⁵⁶ Shākyā mchog ldan elsewhere calls it the tradition of studying and thinking (*thos bsam gyi lugs*) to distinguish it from the system of meditation (*sgom lugs*), making use of the early Buddhist classification of three types of insight (*prajñā*). See for example in *Mus rabs 'byams pa'i dris lan*, in SC_{SB-D} vol. 23, 539₃₋₄. For the Tibetan text and its translation see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016, vol. 2, 82 and n. 200.

⁵⁷ According to 'Gos Lo tsā ba (1392–1481), this lineage had ceased by his time. It was nonetheless widely discussed by later scholars. See Kano 2016, 12, 215. It is worth noting, however, that Kong sprul mentions in his introduction to his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary that 'Gos Lo tsā ba stands in the *sgom lugs* tradition. Moreover, 'Gos Lo tsā ba states in his own *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary (574₁₀₋₁₂): “the Dharma master 'Bri gung pa [’Jig rten gsum mgon] rejoiced in Rje Sgam po pa’s statement that the basic text of these Mahāmudrā instructions of ours is the [*Ratnagotravibhāga*-] *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* composed by the illustrious Maitreya; and since it is evident in the notes to [his] *Uttaratantra* explanations, the points he makes when presenting the three *dharma* *cakras*, and also the explanations deriving from Sajjana’s heart disciple Bstan Kha bo che, are [all] in accordance with Mahāmudrā proper, I have relied on them, and have made [this fact] clear to others as best as I could.” See Mathes 2008a, 368.

⁵⁸ Btsan kha bo che’s exegetical tradition goes back to Sajjana who is said to have instructed both Gzu Dga’ ba’i rdo rje and Btsan Kha bo che in all of the five works of Maitreya, having given them the key-instructions (*gdams ngag*) for the associated meditation practice. See Kano 2006, 53–54.

⁵⁹ *Dbu ma'i 'byung tshul*, in SC_{SB-N} vol. 4, 239–240: *de'i ngos 'dzin yang | chos thams cad kyi rang bzhin rnam dag gi cha | shes bya thams cad la khyab byed du 'jug pa de nyid yin la | de yang med par dgag pa nam mkha' lta bu zhig ste |*. This passage is translated and discussed in van der Kuijp 1983, 43.

having studied the Maitreya Teachings at age fifty-nine is the naturally pure wisdom (*rang bzhin rnam dag gi ye shes*) that pervades [everything] from buddhas to sentient beings; it is precisely this natural luminosity (*rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba*) that is referred to as ‘buddha nature’.”⁶⁰

Although no representative text of Btsan’s tradition survives, his interpretation was widely endorsed by later Bka’ brgyud masters. To give only a few notable examples, Shākyā mchog ldan himself maintains that, of the two positions, it is only Btsan’s that accords with the teachings of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁶¹ Similarly, ’Gos Lo tsā ba singles out Btsan’s interpretation as the one that accords with Mahāmudrā. He further refers to the statement by ’Jig rten gsum mgon that the *Ratnagotravibhāga* provides scriptural support for Sgam po pa’s distinctive Mahāmudrā instructions.⁶² Finally, Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas (1813–1899) refers to this Btsan tradition (*btsan lugs*) or meditation tradition (*sgom lugs*) as “a superior lineage of extraordinary exegesis and practice.”⁶³

Shākyā mchog ldan’s attempts to codify and compare the buddha nature positions of his day provide us with an invaluable overview of some of the central conflicts of interpretation that Mi bskyod rdo rje and his colleagues sought to

⁶⁰ In Shākyā mchog ldan, *Dbu ma'i 'byung tshul*, in SC_{SB-N} vol. 4, 240₂₋₃: *rang lo drug cu lon pa'i tshe byams pa'i chos gsan pa las rnyed pa'i nges don ni | sangs rgyas nas sems can gyi bar la khyab pa'i rang bzhin rnam dag gi ye shes | rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba de nyid bde bar gshegs pa'i snying por gsungs pa yin no zhes |*.

⁶¹ *Mus rabs 'byams pa'i dris lan*, in SC_{SB-D} vol. 23, 539₃₋₄: “According to the teachings of former masters, people who identified buddha nature as emptiness of duality [either] as an instance of a nonaffirming negation or as an instance of an affirming negation were said to be distinguished according to whether they explained the Maitreya teachings in line with studying and thinking (*thos bsam*) or in line with the system of meditation (*sgom lugs*). In the root [text, i.e., the *Ratnagotravibhāga*] and commentary [its *vyākhyā*], the latter system is clearly attested.” *slob dpon snga ma dag gi gsung nas | gnyis stong med dgag gi cha dang ma yin dgag gi cha la snying po'i ngos 'dzin du byed pa | byams chos thos bsam ltar 'chad pa dang | byams chos sgom lugs ltar 'chad pa'i khyad yin gsung | rtsa 'grel na ni lugs phyi ma de nyid gsal bar bzhugs ||*.

⁶² On ’Gos Lo tsā ba’s reference to this in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long* (574₈₋₁₃), see Kano 2016, 353, n. 35. On ’Gos Lo tsā ba’s reference to this in his *Deb ther sngon po* (6326–6334), see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 2, 17 and n. 11.

⁶³ See *Mi ldog pa seng ge'i nga ro*, 12₁₃₋₁₄: *thun mong ma yin pa'i bshad pa dang nyams len gyi rgyun khyad par 'phags pa yin |*. This is discussed in Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 83 and n. 202.

resolve. Let us therefore review this Sa skya master's classification of Tibetan buddha nature theories presented in his *Replies to Queries of Blo mchog pa*.⁶⁴

Among the great chariots [of Buddha nature doctrine] in the Land of Snow [Tibet] there were two traditions: [1] the tradition that maintains that all sentient beings have buddha nature and [2] the tradition that maintains that they do not. The first is twofold: [1.1] those who in recognizing [buddha] nature maintain it is an instance of a nonaffirming negation, as it is not distinguished by qualities such as the [ten] powers, and [1.2] those who maintain it is an instance of an affirming negation as it is distinguished by such [qualities]. [1.1] The first [view] is that of the great Rngog Lo tsā ba and his followers. [1.2] The second is that of the omniscient Dol po pa together with his lineage of predecessors and successors. [2] The second tradition, which maintains that sentient beings do not have buddha nature, is that of the venerable Sa skya Paṇḍita and the second omniscient one Bu ston, among others.

Also in this regard, the recognition of buddha nature⁶⁵ comprises [1.3] those who maintain that it is the feature of natural purity alone⁶⁶ and [1.4] those who maintain that it signifies a combination of that [natural purity] and qualities that are inseparable from it. As for this second [view], there are moreover [1.4.1] those who claim that these qualities fulfil the criteria of being qualities of the *dharmakāya* in terms of realization and [1.4.2] those who claim they are the qualities of natural *dharmakāya* [itself].

[1.3] The first tradition represents the majority of the well-known latter-day reciters⁶⁷ in the Land of Snow. [1.4.1] The second includes the master Phag mo gru pa and the many adherents of the Bka' brgyud lineage of the master from Dwags po [Sgam po pa].

⁶⁴ For further details and discussion see Kano 2006, 235–6 and Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 79–80.

⁶⁵ These are further subsets [1A] of those who accept that sentient beings have buddha nature [1].

⁶⁶ Here, natural purity alone (*rang bzhin rnam dag rkyang pa*) signifies emptiness as a nonaffirming negation.

⁶⁷ The term *klog pa pa* (“literally those who recite [texts]”) is often used pejoratively by Shākyā mchog ldan with reference to those who uncritically parrot the words of others.

[1.4.3] The third are a few [masters] such as Pañ chen Phyogs las rnam rgyal.⁶⁸

A few points in this classification warrant further discussion. The first is that Rngog Blo ldan shes rab is identified as a representative of the view that accepts buddha nature as a definitive teaching, but only insofar as it is an instance of a nonaffirming negation and is therefore not distinguished in terms of positive features such as the buddha-qualities. By contrast, Dol po pa's Gzhan stong tradition is said to represent the view of buddha nature as an affirming negation, which is regarded as a definitive teaching precisely because it is distinguished in terms of these buddha-qualities. Now for Shākyā mchog ldan's, Rngog's position reflects the second *dharmacakra* interpretation of buddha nature, which is incompatible with the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, a work that, in his eyes, unquestionably reflects the affirmative stance of the third *dharmacakra*. By contrast, the Gzhan stong interpretation is generally said by the author to accord with the positive appraisal of the ultimate advocated by the third *dharmacakra*, though he was critical of its tendency to absolutize buddha nature along the lines of the Jo nang position.

A second noteworthy point in the above classification is the author's inclusion of Sa skyā Pañdita and Bu ston rin chen grub in the camp of those who deny that sentient beings have buddha nature. Interestingly, this is a view Shākyā mchog ldan himself endorsed in the majority of his buddha nature works, but which he conspicuously abandoned in his Mahāmudrā expositions. In the latter,

⁶⁸ *Blo mchog dri lan*, in SC_{SB-D} vol. 17, 748₅–749₅: *gangs can gyi shing rta chen po dag la lugs gnyis te | sems can thams cad sangs rgyas kyi snying po can yin par bzhed pa'i lugs dang | ma yin par bshed pa'i lugs so || dang po la gnyis te | snying po'i ngos 'dzin stobs sogz yon tan kyis khyad par du ma byas pa'i med dgag gi cha la bzhed pa dang des khyad par du byas pa'i ma yin dgag gi cha la bzhed pa'o || dang po ni | rṇgog lo tswa ba chen po rjes 'brang dang bcas pa'o || gnyis pa ni | kun mkhyen dol po pa gong 'og gi brgyud pa dang bcas pa'o || lugs gnyis pa sems can la sangs rgyas kyi snying po med pa bzhed pa ni | rje btsun sa skyā pandi ta dang | kun mkhyen gnyis pa bu ston la sogz pa'o || yang 'di ltar | snying po'i ngos 'dzin rang bzhin rnam dag rkyang pa'i cha la bzhed pa dang | de dang yon tan dbyer med kyi tshogs don la bzhed pa'o | gnyis pa la'ang | yon tan de dag rtogs pa chos sku'i yon tan go chod por 'dod pa dang | rang bzhin chos sku'i yon tan du 'dod pa'o || lugs dang po ni | gangs can du phylis grags pa'i klog pa pa phal che ba dag go || gnyis pa ni rje phag mo grub pa sogz rje dwags po'i bka' brgyud [text: rgyud] 'dzin pa mang po dang go || lugs gsum pa ni | pañ chen phyogs las rnam rgyal la sogz pa kha cig go ||. See Kano 2006, 236–238. Translation is our own. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 79ff.*

he unequivocally characterizes buddha nature as an ever-present and unchanging element in sentient beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas, a position entirely consistent with the Bka' brgyud view of buddha nature but patently at odds with his earlier, mainline Sa skya interpretation.

The final and, for our purposes, most important point to underscore in this passage is the author's identification of Mahāmudrā proponents such as Sgam po pa and Phag mo gru pa as representatives of the views that buddha nature "signifies a combination of that [natural purity, i.e., emptiness] and qualities that are inseparable from it" and that "these qualities fulfil the criteria of being qualities of the *dharma-kāya* in terms of realization." This view stands in sharp contrast to the majority opinion of Tibetan scholars who identify buddha nature exclusively with natural purity (i.e., sheer emptiness).

Now, the equation of buddha nature with emptiness or selflessness can be traced in Indian Buddhism to the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and the works of several prominent Madhyamaka thinkers such as Candrakīrti, Bhāvaviveka, Kamalaśīla, Jñānaśrīmitra and Jayānanda. Bhāvaviveka, for example, argued that the teaching that all sentient beings have buddha nature means only that emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, etc., abide in the minds of all sentient beings, but certainly does not mean that an inherent (*antahkaraṇa*) eternal *puruṣa* pervades them.⁶⁹ While Mi bskyod rdo rje and his Bka' brgyud coreligionists were certainly in favor of this type of Madhyamaka anti-essentialism, they were nonetheless opposed to views of buddha nature that emphasize emptiness to the exclusion of manifest qualities, warning that such views can all too easily give way to the espousal of a total cessation of mind of the kind allegedly advocated and practiced by the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha.⁷⁰

Stated succinctly, the Bka' brgyud integrative approach to *tathāgatagarbha* combines the emptiness or natural purity aspect of buddha nature (and *dharma-kāya*) with its radiance (*gsal*) or manifestation (*snang*) aspect. In doing so, it strikes a balance between buddha nature's lack of intrinsic essence and its soteriological efficacy in functioning as the ground of buddha-qualities disclosed through realization. We shall see that this middle view, poised between the extremes of the nonaffirming Rang stong and affirming Gzhan stong positions, epitomizes the general view of buddha nature advocated by Bka' brgyud

⁶⁹ Kano 2016, 8 and n. 26.

⁷⁰ See below Chapter Three, 2.10, 141ff.

masters, including that of Shākyā mchog ldan in his later years. It is a view that emphasizes the unity of the two truths, and of manifestation and emptiness.

It is worth pausing to look more closely at Shākyā mchog ldan's two quite different views on buddha nature, which can be broadly aligned with his Sa skya and Bka' brgyud affiliations. The delineation of these positions is germane to the present inquiry because they offer a snapshot of the key doctrinal rift that confronted post-classical thinkers such as Shākyā mchog ldan, Padma dkar po, and Mi bskyod rdo rje. Shākyā mchog ldan's typical Sa skya stance on buddha nature has been aptly summarized by Tāranātha as follows: "Buddha nature does not exist in the mind-stream of sentient beings. The natural luminosity of the mind of sentient beings is merely the cause and basic element of buddha nature... Thus, statements that this nature is endowed with the very nature of essentially inseparable qualities are [made] exclusively in the context of fruition."⁷¹ As Shākyā mchog ldan himself argues in his commentary on the *Dharmadhātutava* (DDhS) 15–16, "while it is explained that the buddha element (*buddhadhātu*) exists in sentient beings, it is not explained that buddhahood itself is the element of sentient beings."⁷² What is striking about the author's Bka' brgyud view, which accepts the existence of buddha nature and its inseparable qualities, is its obvious disparity with the view of Rngog and his successors that he had endorsed in his earlier presentations.

We have noted in our previous publication that Shākyā mchog ldan, in attempting to coordinate these negative and affirmative viewpoints on buddha nature, attributed the nonaffirming negation stance to those who explained Maitreya's teachings in accordance with insight gained through studying (*thos pa*) and thinking (*bsam pa*) and the affirming negation stance to those who explained them in accordance with the system of meditation (*sgom pa*).⁷³ Mi bskyod rdo rje for his own part insistently draws attention to the shortcomings of a no-naffirming approach, yet, at the same time cautions against establishing an

⁷¹ *Zab don khyad par nyer gcig pa*, 790_{3–4}: *sems can gyi rgyud la bde gshegs snying po med sems can gyi sems rang bzhin 'od gsal de | bde gshegs snying po'i rgyu dang khams tsam yin pas | ...*; ibid, 790–791: *snying po la yon tan ngo bo dbyer med rang bzhin nyid ldan du gsungs pa 'bras bu kho na'i skabs yin la |*. See Mathes 2004, 307–308 and Kano 2006, 238–239.

⁷² *Chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos kyi rnam par bshad pa*, in SC_{SB-N} vol. 7, 310_{5–6}: *sem can la sangs rgyas kyi khams yod par bshad kyi | sangs rgyas nyid sems can gyi snying por ma bshad do |*. See also Mathes 2008a, 53.

⁷³ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 82–84.

affirmative account that would end up reifying the ultimate by regarding it as a real entity possessing real qualities.

The foregoing discussion provides some of the context needed to understand the general Dwags po Bka' brgyud position on buddha nature and, more specifically, the ways that Mi bskyod rdo rje articulates and defends it. Let us now look briefly at how the issues and tensions we have outlined helped to shape the early Bka' brgyud view of buddha nature. Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen (1079–1153) was a younger contemporary of Rngog Lo tsā ba Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109) and responded in his own way to the conflict of interpretations over buddha nature that had only recently surfaced in Tibet and was steadily drawing the attention of many of its leading thinkers. Specifically, his treatments of buddha nature reflect the divergence between Rngog's analytical tradition and Btsan's meditative. Both of these teachers were active in Tibet less than one generation before Sgam po pa.⁷⁴ One can assume that Sgam po pa received Btsan's tradition of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (transmitted in Tibet via a number of Bka' gdams teachers), as well as the exegetical tradition of Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros (1012–1097), who had directly received many transmissions from Maitrīpa, the well-known Mahāmudrā master credited with reviving the *Ratnagotravibhāga* tradition in India.

In line with Btsan's meditative tradition, Sgam po pa equates buddha nature with the nature of mind or luminous wisdom. In his *Stages of the Path* (*lam rim*) treatise *Precious Ornament of Liberation* (*Thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*), Sgam po pa establishes buddha nature as the basis (*gzhi*) of the spiritual path. He begins the treatise with a concise definition of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, explaining that thoughts arising from delusion are naturally empty, whereas *nirvāṇa* or the *dharma-kāya* is defined as the nature of mind wherein all delusion has vanished. Since thoughts and delusions are not different from mind, and since the nature of mind, being unborn, is *dharma-kāya*, thoughts do not exist independently of this *dharma-kāya*. Realizing this is the state of awakening (*bodhi*). The unreality of delusion and its associated suffering is explained using the standard analogy of a dream that does not exist independently of the mind that creates it.

Addressing a rhetorical question as to whether such delusions vanish of their own accord, Sgam po pa replies that this is not the case, and that effort is therefore required to awaken to mind's true nature. He then specifies that the basis for such effort is buddha nature. He proceeds to quote passages affirming the

⁷⁴ Kano 2006, 84, 130, 173.

existence of buddha nature in sentient beings from the *Samādhirājasūtra*,⁷⁵ *Parinirvāṇasūtra*,⁷⁶ *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*,⁷⁷ *Mahāyāṇasūtralamkāra*,⁷⁸ and *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁷⁹ In explaining stanza I.28 from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, Sgam po pa states that buddhahood is equivalent to *dharma* in the sense of emptiness, which pervades all sentient beings, and that all beings are therefore endowed with buddha nature. It would appear that Sgam po pa here echoes the nonaffirming interpretation of Rngog, which equates buddha nature with the *dharma* understood as the natural purity (viz., emptiness) that pervades all phenomena.⁸⁰ It is interesting to note that within the author's extant *Collected Works*, buddha nature theory and the standard Tibetan terms for

⁷⁵ *Dam chos yid bzhin nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*, in G_{SB} vol. 4, 190₃; *bde gshegs snying pos 'gro kun yongs la khyab* | The Tibetan title of the sūtra is *'Phags pa cho thams cad kyi rang bzhin mnyam pa nyid rnam par spros pa ting nge 'dzin gyi rgyal po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*. See, for example, H 129 (vol. 55), *mdo sde*, ta 1b₁–269b₄. The quotation could not be identified in the two canonical translations of this sūtra we consulted (H, D). On some of the Chinese apocryphal sūtras (later included in Tibetan canons) quoted in Sgam po pa's *Precious Ornament*, see Jackson 1994, 22–24.

⁷⁶ Ibid., in G_{SB} vol. 4, 190_{3–4}; *sems can thams cad ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po can yin no* |. We could not locate this quotation in the following Tibetan versions of the *'Phags pa yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po'i mdo*: H 368 (vol. 77–78), *myang 'das*, ka 1b₁–525a₄; *kha* 1b₁–529a₇. H 122 (vol. 54) *mdo sde*, *nya* 1b₁–222b₅; H 123 (vol. 54) *mdo sde*, *nya* 222b₅–225b₆.

⁷⁷ Ibid., in G_{SB} vol. 4, 190_{4–5}; *dper na 'o ma la mar gyis khyab par gnas so* || *de bzhin du de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying pos kyang sems can thams cad la khyab par gnas so* ||. This quotation could not be identified.

⁷⁸ Ibid., in G_{SB} vol. 4, 190₅–191₁; *de bzhin nyid ni thams cad la* || *khyad par me kyang dag gyur pa* || *de bzhin gshegs nyid de yi phyir* || *'gro kun de yi snying po can* ||. MSA, IX.37 (Funahashi 1985 ed., 32): "Suchness is present in all without distinction. Yet when pure, it is the state of a Tathāgata. Therefore, all wandering beings possess him as their nature." *sarveśām aviśiṣṭāpi tathatā śuddhim āgatā* | *tathāgatatvam tasmāc ca tadgarbhāḥ sa sarvadehinah* ||. Tib. D 4020 vol. 123, 10a₅.

⁷⁹ Ibid., G_{SB} vol. 4, 191_{3–4}; *rdzogs sangs sku ni 'phro phyir dang* || *de bzhin nyid dbyer med phyir dang* || *rigs yod phyir na lus can kun* || *rtag tu sangs rgyas snying po can* ||. RGV I.28 (Johnston 1950 ed., 16): "Because the body of the perfect Buddha is [all-]pervading, because suchness is undifferentiated, | and because they have the potential, all sentient beings are always endowed with buddha nature." *saṃbuddhakāyaspharaṇāt tathatāvyatibhedataḥ* | *gotrataś ca sadā sarve buddhagarbhāḥ śarīriṇāḥ* ||.

⁸⁰ See Kano 2010, 257.

buddha nature (*de bzhin gshergs pa'i snying po, bde bar gshergs pa'i snying po*) are only explicitly presented in the introductory chapter of this treatise (*Precious Ornament*) and nowhere else in the collection. The primary focus of this collection is the nature of mind, even if it is often couched in language and imagery redolent of buddha nature theory.

Looking more closely at Sgam po pa's *Collected Works*, which consists largely of transcripts compiled by his students based on his oral teachings, it is evident that Sgam po pa defined mind's true nature affirmatively as the innate (or coemergent)⁸¹ wisdom that exists in sentient beings. In his *Excellent Qualities: Teachings to the Assembly*, for example, it is noted that "the truth is the actuality that the nature of mind is not nonexistent; coemergent wisdom is the truth. When mind is realized, the nature of reality is directly revealed."⁸² In surveying his corpus, it becomes clear that Sgam po pa was primarily indebted to the Indian siddha tradition and tantras, as well as to the pith-instructions of his root teacher Mi la ras pa, in giving preference to a terminology centered on coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes*), the nature of mind (*sems nyid*), and natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), rather than the standard buddha nature terminology of third turning *tathāgatagarbha* discourses. Instead of buddha nature and its qualities, these esoteric traditions speak of the nature of mind and its luminosity and do so in distinctly positive terms.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this juncture that in contrast to Btsan Kha bo che and many later Bka' brgyud masters who sought to marry buddha nature terminology with nature of mind terminology, Sgam po pa seems to have eschewed the former in favor of the latter as he transitioned from a scholastic to a yogic way of life. It was left to his students and successors to draw explicit parallels between these two spheres of discourse. As an early example, one of Sgam po pa's students, La yag pa Byang chub dngos grub (12th c.), explicitly identifies buddha nature with the innate or coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes*) that is endowed with qualities:

⁸¹ We translate *sahajajñāna* either as coemergent wisdom (following the literal meaning of *sahaja*, "born together") or as innate wisdom. The usage of the term *sahaja* in Buddhist tantric works combines both senses.

⁸² *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, in GSB vol. 1, 511₄₋₅: *bden pa ni sems kyi ngo bo med pa ma yin pa'i don | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes bden pa yin | sems rtog pa'i dus su chos nyid mngon du grub ||*.

Buddha nature in the mind-streams of all sentient beings is mind as such, natural luminosity, free from any arising and ceasing, and is the complete pacification of all proliferations. [Thus beings] are endowed with wisdom that is inseparable from inconceivable buddha-qualities.⁸³

La yag pa elsewhere equates buddha nature not only with coemergent wisdom but also with the naturally luminous mind as such:

That which is called “buddha nature” (*tathāgatagarbha*) or coemergent wisdom (*sahajajñāna*) is mind as such (*sems nyid*), which is naturally luminous and utterly pure.⁸⁴

Finally, in contrast to Sgam po pa’s early identification of buddha nature with *dharmakāya* in the specific sense of all-pervading natural purity (emptiness), La yag pa defines *dharmakāya* as “the nonduality of the expanse and wisdom that has the nature of being endowed with inconceivable buddha-qualities.”⁸⁵

We can finally observe that the development of buddha nature doctrine within the Karma bka’ brgyud tradition was at all times closely interwoven with its tantric transmissions and instructions, especially its core teachings on *mahāmudrā* realization, which were said to span the sūtras and tantras. A useful overview of such developments is offered by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas (1813–1899). In summarizing the teaching tradition of the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), Kong sprul emphasizes the close connection between the core doctrine of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and Karma bka’ brgyud tantric transmissions and *Mahāmudrā* teachings:

When Kun mkhyen Rang byung rgyal ba appeared in this world he primarily emphasized the Buddhist teachings known as *Zab mo*

⁸³ *Mnyam med dwags po’i chos bzhir grags pa’i gzhung gi ’grel pa snying po gsal ba’i rgyan*, 189₅₋₇: *sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po gang sems nyid rang bzhin gyis ’od gsal ba skye ’gag med cing spros pa thams cad nyer bar zhi ba | sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa rnams dang ma bral ba’i ye shes can yin ||*.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 210₆₋₇: *gang de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po’am | lhan cig skyes pa’i ye shes zhes bya ba sems nyid rang bzhin gyis ’od gsal zhing rnam par dag pa ...*

⁸⁵ Ibid., 148₂₋₃: *chos kyi sku yang dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su med pa sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa thams cad dang ldan pa’i bdag nyid yin |*.

nang don, *Hevajratantra*, and *Uttaratantra*.⁸⁶ The reason for this [emphasis] was that the Dwags po Bka' brgyud [traditions] known as the four major and eight minor ones simply disseminated the relevant tantric empowerments and teachings of the lineages of the three masters Mes, Rngog, and Mtsu,⁸⁷ thereby exclusively upholding the practice lineage (*sgrub brgyud*) of Rje btsun Mi la. In this way, without making a big deal of philosophically-oriented study and exegesis, they devoted themselves wholly to practice. However, with the aim of ascertaining what is realized in practice by means of studying and thinking, the three above-mentioned scriptures [were considered by Rang byung rdo rje to be] sufficient and knowledge of them indispensable.

As for the *Uttaratantra*, Rje Sgam po pa stated, “The scriptural source for our Mahāmudrā instructions is the *Mahāyānottaratantrāśāstra* composed by Bhagavān Maitreya.”⁸⁸ Accordingly, Bde gshegs Phag mo gru pa, Skyob pa 'Jig rten gsum mgon, and others outlined the philosophy of this tradition. And the succession of omniscient ones, such as Rang byung rgyal ba, solely made the intent of this [śāstra] their fundamental concern. Therefore, even where Mahāmudrā meditation is concerned, the knowledge of this very [treatise] is of

⁸⁶ The abbreviation *nang brtag rgyud gsum* (lit. “threefold *Inner, Second and Tantra*”) refers to three seminal texts in the Karma bka' brgyud curriculum: Rang byung rdo rje's *Profound Inner Meaning* (*nang* abbreviates *Zab mo nang don*), the *Hevajratantra, Second Chapter* (*brtag* abbreviates *Kye rdo rje'i brtag pa gnyis pa*), and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (*rgyud* abbreviates *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma*).

⁸⁷ Mes is short for Mes ston tshon po Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (11th c.); Rngog for Rngog chos sku rdo rje (1036–1097), and Mtsu for Mtsur ston dbang nge (11th c.). While the renowned Tibetan yogin Mi la ras pa (1040–1123) is generally credited with transmitting the tantric practice lineages (*bsgrub brgyud*) that Mar pa Cho kyi blo gros brought to Tibet, these three lesser known disciples of Mar pa are credited with transmitting his tantric teaching lineages (*bshad brgyud*). See Situ Chos kyi 'byung gnas *Collected Works* vol. 11, *Zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba*, 66–69.

⁸⁸ Although many scholars, including Rang byung rdo rje, Mi bskyod rdo rje, 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, and Kong sprul, attribute this statement to Sgam po pa it is not found in any of Sgam po pa's extant works. 'Gos Lo tsā ba's citation in his *Blue Annals* may have been a source for later quotations. *Deb ther sngon po*, 6326–6334: 'o skol gyi phyag rgya chen po 'di'i gzhung ni bcom ldan 'das byams pas mdzad pa'i theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos 'di yin zhes gsung shing | See also Roerich 1979, 734.

utmost importance. Hence, these three scriptures are not teachings for theoretical explanation and debate but are rather teachings to integrate with one's meditative practice. Therefore, what could be a more important essential key for those who uphold the practice lineage than to unfailingly maintain the transmission of these explanations?⁸⁹

One of Mi bskyod rdo rje's main contributions to this synthesis of Tathāgatagarbha and Mahāmudrā teaching traditions was his integration of both with Madhyamaka teachings on emptiness. This allowed him to reveal a common philosophical thread running through these exoteric and esoteric Mahāyāna Buddhist discourses. Thus, in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary, he states:

In the *Tattvadaśaka* commentary (TDT) composed by Sahajavajra it is said [of *mahāmudrā*]: "It possesses three features: [1] its nature is *pāramitā*, [2] it corresponds to the *mantra*, and [3] its name is *mahāmudrā*."⁹⁰ In this Mahāmudrā teaching method, experiential instructions (*myong khrid*) may be given without Secret Mantra empowerments first being bestowed. Rather, the principal teaching of

⁸⁹ *Shes bya kun khyab* vol. 1, 505₁₂–506₁₄: **kun mkhyen rang byung rgyal ba** 'jig rten tu byon pa nas nang brtag rgyud gsum zhes grags pa'i bshad pa'i bka' gtso bor mdzad de de'i rgyu mtshan kyang dwags po bka' brgyud che bzhi chung brgyad du grags pa rnams ni mes rngog mtshur gsum las brgyud pa'i rgyud sde'i dbang bka' ci rigs spel ba tsam las | **rje btsun mi la'i** sgrub brgyud kyi brgyud 'dzin kho na yin pas mtshan nyid phyogs kyi bshad nyan cher mi mdzad pa sgrub pa kho na la brtson pa lhur bzhes pa yin la | bsgrub bya'i nyams len thos bsam kyis gtan la 'bebs pa la gong gi gzhung rnam pa gsum po des chog cing de dag ma shes thabs med pa yin te | ... **rgyud bla ma** ni rje sgam po pa'i zhal nas | 'o skol gyi phyag rgya chen po'i gdams pa 'di'i gzhung ni bcom ldan 'das byams pas mdzad pa'i theg pa chen po **rgyud bla ma'i bstam bcos** yin no | zhes gsungs pa ltar **bde gshegs phag mo pa gru pa** | **skyob pa** 'jig rten gsum mgon sogs kyis kyang lugs de'i grub mtha' 'cha' zhing | **rang byung rgyal ba** sogs thams cad mkhyen pa na rim gyis kyang de'i dgongs pa rtsa ba'i don tu mdzad pa 'ba' zhig yin pas phyag rgya chen po sgom pa la'ang 'di nyid shes pa gal che ba yin | des na gzhung 'di gsum ni kha bshad dang rtsod pa'i chos ma yin gyi nyams len dang lto sbyar ba'i chos yin pas sgrub brgyud 'dzin pa rnams kyis bshad pa'i rgyun ma nyams par bzung ba ci nas kyang gnad che bar yod do ||.

⁹⁰ See Mathes 2006, 202 and n. 4 where he points to that these lines (quotes from the *Deb ther sngon po* vol. 2, 847, II.18–19) are not a direct quotation from the TDT, but Gzhon nu dpal's condensed assessment of the latter.

this Mahāmudrā is the Madhyamaka of emptiness free from elaborations belonging to the Sūtra tradition. And, implicitly, it teaches ordinary and extraordinary buddha nature, the final profound meaning of the sūtras and tantras.⁹¹

To conclude, Mi bskyod rdo rje's aim to coordinate and reconcile negative and affirmative strains of Buddhist thought and discourse was central to his interpretation of buddha nature. In many ways, his *tathāgatagarbha* writings are a testament to his synthesis of negative Madhyamaka and affirmative Mahāmudrā perspectives. Madhyamaka methods are used to undermine extremes of existence and nonexistence, and to thereby clear the way for a nondistortive engagement with the disclosive paths of Vajrayāna and Mahāmudrā. The understanding of buddha nature as a groundless ground is the medium of this disclosure.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude this introduction by drawing attention to a section of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (RGVV) that Mi bskyod rdo rje cites as a paradigm for his task of reconciliation. In proposing a middle way between extreme positions on buddha nature, the RGVV explains that buddha nature remains inaccessible to those who have: [1] personalistic false views, [2] attachment to falsity, or [3] minds that have deviated from emptiness.⁹² The last point refers to two types of novice bodhisattvas: [A] “those who assume that the door to deliverance, which consists in emptiness, leads to the destruction of something existent, declaring that *parinirvāṇa* is the annihilation or destruction through all future time of a *dharma* that exists,”⁹³ as well as [B] “those who cling to

⁹¹ *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 135–141: *de kho na nyid bcu pa'i 'grel pa lhan cig skyes pa'i rdo rjes*^a *mdzad par yang | ngo bo pha rol tu phyin pa | sngags dang rjes su mthun pa | ming phyag rgya chen po | zhes khyad par gsum*^b *ldan du'ang gsungs so | phyag rgya chen po'i chos tshul 'di'i myong khrid 'debs pa la mdzad pa la gsang sngags kyi dbang bskur ba yang mi mdzad la | phyag chen 'di'i dngos bstan mdo lugs kyi spros bral stong pa nyid kyi dbu ma dang | shugs las mdo sngags kyi zab don mthar thug bde gshegs snying po thun mong dang thun mong min pa'ang ston pa la ...* ^aDpal spung ed. *rjes* (DD rje) ^bDpal spung, DD sum. See also Mathes 2006, 202.

⁹² RGVV 74_{5–6}: *yathoktam | agocaro 'yam bhagavans tathāgatagarbhaḥ satkāya-drṣṭipatitānām viparyāsābhīratānām śūnyatāvikṣiptacittānām iti |* “It is said: ‘O Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not a domain accessible to those who have fallen into personalistic false views, those who are attached to falsity, and those whose minds have deviated from emptiness’.”

⁹³ RGVV 75_{14–15}: *ye bhāvavināśāya śūnyatāvimoksamukham icchanti sata eva dharmasyottarakālam ucchedo vināśah parinirvāṇam iti |* Tib. *gang dag yod pa'i chos*

emptiness, taking emptiness as they do as an object, declaring, ‘We shall attain and realize a certain entity called emptiness that exists differently from visible matter (*rūpa*) etc.’.”⁹⁴ It is not difficult to identify in these two types of deviation from emptiness the two kinds of extreme views of buddha nature that Mi bskyod rdo rje sought to avoid: the nihilistic emptiness of sheer nonexistence and the eternalistic emptiness conceived as an existent metaphysical absolute.⁹⁵

*nyid dus phyiis rgyun 'chad cing zhig pa yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa'o zhes dngos po
gzhig pa'i phyir stong ba nyid kyi rnam par thar ba'i sgo 'dod pa'am |.*

⁹⁴ RGVV 75₁₅₋₁₇: *ye vā punah śūnyatopalambhena śūnyatāṁ pratisaranti śūnyatā nāma
rūpādīvyatirekena kaścid bhāvo 'sti yam adhigamīśyāmo bhāvayiśyāma iti |. Tib. yang
gang dag gang zhig rtogs par bya ba dang | bsgom par bya ba stong ba nyid ces bya ba
gzugs la sogs pa las tha dad pa'i dngos po yod pa yin no zhes stong pa nyid la dmigs pas
stong pa nyid la brten pa'o ||.*

⁹⁵ On Mi bskyod rdo rje’s discussion of this passage in relation to tantric practice, see vol. 2, tr., 385ff, ed., 391ff.

Chapter 2: Doctrinal Background

1. Introductory remarks

The Eighth Karma pa's views on buddha nature developed out of, and often in reaction to, a diverse spectrum of Indian and Tibetan buddha nature theories. In this chapter we shall broaden our focus by looking at some of the theories that in one way or another shaped his own interpretation. We shall structure our analysis of these theories in terms of three families of buddha nature ideas representing stages in the historical development of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine:

[1] Indian buddha nature and proto-buddha nature theories and ideas that were identified by Tibetan scholars as playing a formative role in the development of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine;

[2] Bka' brgyud Tibetan buddha nature theories that variously interpreted their Indian antecedents in line with each tradition's distinctive aims and predilections; and

[3] the Dwags po Bka' brgyud view of buddha nature as it developed in relation to these Indian and Tibetan traditions and its own doctrinal foundations.

Once we have thus gained a bird's eye view of some the main Indian and Tibetan lines of buddha nature interpretation, we will be in a position to assess the Karma bka' brgyud interpretation and look at some of the ways in which it sought to integrate antecedent theories.

A useful framework for our survey is provided by a section of Karma phrin las pa's commentary on the Third Karma pa's *Profound Inner Meaning*. This excerpt, a translation of which is given below, is entitled "An Outline of Buddha Nature [Theories]." Terse though it is, it offers a valuable synoptic overview of Indian and Tibetan buddha nature theories and ideas. It also provides us with a cogent summary of the Karma bka' brgyud interpretation of buddha nature as it was presented by the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339). Within the Karma bka' brgyud lineage, the centrality and influence of the Third Karma pa's position on buddha nature and other key doctrines cannot be overestimated. Looking at the extensive commentarial literature on the *Profound Inner Meaning*, we can see Karma phrin las pa's summary of the Karma pa's buddha nature position as part of a broader attempt by the Third Karma pa's successors to clarify his position on virtually all areas of Buddhist thought and practice. From the

standpoint of Buddhist intellectual history, Karma phrin las pa's overview represents an interesting example of how Tibetan scholar-yogins defined their own traditions' representative views in line with authoritative Indian Buddhist theories and in contrast to rival Tibetan ones.

Let us turn now to the content of Karma phrin las pa's overview. The first part, on Indian buddha nature theories, was likely modeled on similar overviews presented by earlier Tibetan masters. Notable precedents in this regard are the detailed historical overviews of Indian *gotra* concepts and theories presented in the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* commentaries of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419)⁹⁶ and Go ram pa Bsod nams seng ge (1429–1489).⁹⁷ Mi bskyod rdo rje takes up most of these same theories in a variety of hermeneutical contexts and at one point in his *Intent* discusses each of them in sequence in some detail.⁹⁸ This and the fact that the *Profound Inner Meaning* and its commentaries were regarded as essential reading in his tradition make it likely that the Karma pa was well-acquainted with Karma phrin las pa's survey.

It was commonplace in Tibetan surveys of Buddhist doctrine to grant Indian Buddhist theories de facto scriptural authority and to employ various hermeneutical conventions to justify or explain away problematic claims or viewpoints as having only provisional meaning. The acceptance of provisional views hinged on the assumption that they had been taught using figurative (nonliteral) language as a concession to minds not yet able to fathom the definitive meaning.⁹⁹ As will be shown in the following chapter, this stratagem was often used by the Eighth Karma pa to contextualize and thereby legitimize certain Buddhist teachings that construed buddha nature as a cause, as a result, as a permanent nature, as selfhood, as an agent of suffering, and so on. Such tropes, he argues, were deliberately employed and sympathetically tailored to suit minds still under the influence of dualistic perception and could therefore safely be abandoned once such minds were freed from ignorance. Conversely, this same strategy was

⁹⁶ *Legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba*, 437₄–456₂.

⁹⁷ *Sbas don zab mo'i gter gyi kha 'byed*, 211₅–229₄.

⁹⁸ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, GC_{KL} vol. 4, 220₃–226₁₅.

⁹⁹ On some of the hermeneutical strategies employed, see Mathes 2008a, 13–21. In many cases, such strategies related to the historical development of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra systems and the various Madhyamaka reactions to Yogācāra in particular. See also Mathes 2007.

turned against those Tibetan scholars suspected of taking such provisional teachings literally and thereby succumbing to different kinds of reified views. Unlike their Indian counterparts, Tibetan works and ideas enjoyed no *de facto* authority and were always open to interrogation and criticism. Karma phrin las provides specific examples of such criticism in the second part of his outline.

The final section of this excerpt reveals, perhaps unsurprisingly, how closely Karma phrin las pa's summary of the Third Karma pa's buddha nature view accords with Mi bskyod rdo rje's own interpretation of buddha nature. First of all, one must again consider how profoundly the Third Karma pa's position on buddha nature and other doctrinal subjects influenced the views of his successors in the lineage. The Eighth Karma pa often quotes Rang byung rdo rje's works as scriptural authority for his own positions. Secondly, Karma phrin las was one of Mi bskyod rdo rje's two main teachers and played a formative role in his student's understanding and interpretation of buddha nature.

For the purposes of the present investigation, Karma phrin las pa's overview offers a useful tableau of the doctrinal background behind Mi bskyod rdo rje's own view of buddha nature. It broadly outlines some of the key Indian and Tibetan buddha nature ideas and issues that the Eighth Karma pa engaged with in articulating and defending his tradition's viewpoint. This raises an important methodological consideration: because overviews of this kind were typically used to define and defend the core aims and views of a tradition in relation to, and often in contrast to, those of other traditions, they cannot be taken as impartial and balanced accounts of doctrinal developments. With this proviso in mind, we have endeavored, both in footnotes and in the discussion of key points that follows Karma phrin las pa's outline, to round out his often-brusque summaries of buddha nature positions with pertinent details.

2. An outline of buddha nature¹⁰⁰ [by Karma phrin las], translation

[33]

[The idea of] buddha nature (**sugatagarbha*) as cause, which is well-known in academic treatises,¹⁰¹ is expounded in a wide variety of theories belonging to the proponents of [Buddhist] philosophical systems.

[1] [Vaibhāṣika:]

The [Abhidharma]kośa (AK) [VI.7cd–8ab] states:

Among noble lineages¹⁰² [whose nature is] nondesire,¹⁰³
[Three are [by] nature contentment.]¹⁰⁴

By three is taught the regimen; by the last, the activity.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ This is the heading *bde gshegs pa'i snying po'i mtha' bcad pa ni*. For the edited Tibetan text of this passage, see below 78–82.

¹⁰¹ The term *rigs shes bstan bcos* literally means “treatises [based on] rational cognition.”

¹⁰² The idea of “noble lineage(s)” (*āryavamśa* : ’*phags pa'i rigs*) can be traced to many *sūtras* of the Pāli canon and has generally been regarded by Tibetan scholars as a Śrāvaka antecedent of the *gotra* idea. It was subsequently elaborated in post-canonical literature such as the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Abhidharmakośa*, and a number of Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras, including the *Abhisamayālambikāra*. For sources and details, see Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 464 and n. 51. Tsong kha pa explains in his *Legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba*, 438₁ that the essence (*ngo bo*) of *āryavamśa* (’*phags rigs*) is, “a mental disposition of nonattachment” (*sems byung 'dod chags med pa*). The lineage of the noble ones (*āryavamśa*), otherwise called “noble seed” (*āryabīja*), is traditionally said to have four aspects. According to Ghosāka’s *Abhidharmāmṛta* (ADA), ch. 15, E 118–125, passage 13, there are four noble seeds; these consist in satisfaction with the bare necessities with regard to one’s [1] religious garb and blanket, [2] food and drink, and [3] bed, as well as [4] delighting in renunciation and meditation.

¹⁰³ See AK II.25, IV.8.

¹⁰⁴ We have added the omitted line AK VI.7d: *gsum ni chos shes bdag nyid do* |. Skt. *teṣāṁ tuṣṭyātmakāṇ trayam* |.

¹⁰⁵ As the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh) on AK VI.8ab explains, the Buddha “established a certain regimen and a certain activity for his disciples who, having renounced their old regimen and their old activities, are engaged in the search for deliverance. He

According to this passage, the Vaibhāśikas claim that the mental factors (*caitta*) of [1] nonattachment to the world and wordly things, [2] having few desires, and [3] contentment are the ‘lineages of the noble ones.’¹⁰⁶ In that regard, contentment with the bare necessities (*itarītara : ngan ngon*) when it comes to clothing, food and living quarters is three-fold, and delight in renunciation and meditation is the fourth.¹⁰⁷ Among these, the former three taught the regimen and the last one, the activity. Thus, if that activity is accomplished by living according to that regimen, one swiftly realizes the ‘*dharma* of the noble ones.’¹⁰⁸

[2] Sautrāntika:

The [*Abhidharmakośa*]ṭīkā (AKT) of Yaśomitra states:

What the Sautrāntikas call *gotra* refers to the germinal capacity of mind (*sems kyi sa bon nus pa*¹⁰⁹ : *cittabijaśakti*). When this causal seed (*sa bon rgyu*), having the nature of being corrupted, exists in

established the regimen in the first three *āryavamśas* and he established activity in the fourth.” See La Vallée Poussin 1980 vol. 4, 147; Pruden 1988–90 vol. 3, 915.

¹⁰⁶ See Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 464. See also La Vallée Poussin 1980, 182 on AK VI.

¹⁰⁷ As Go rams pa (1429–89) explains, the first three pacify craving for enjoyments (*longs spyod la sred pa*), while the last one pacifies craving for the body (*lus la sred pa*). See *Sbas don zab mo'i gter gyi kha 'byed*, 212₃. He adds the following: “Concerning their function, the first three temporarily pacify the clinging to ‘mine’ and the last perpetually pacifies both the clinging to ‘mine’ and the clinging to ‘I’.” Ibid. 212₄: *byed las ni dang po ni dang po gsum gyis bdag gir 'dzin pa de'i dus zhi bar byed | phyi mas ni bdag gir 'dzin pa dang | bdag tu 'dzin pa gnyis ka gtan du zhi bar byed de |*. Tsong kha pa similarly explains that “the first three pacify temporary clinging to things belonging to the self such as religious garb, whereas the last perpetually pacifies both the self and its possessions [‘mine’].” *Legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba*, 438_{2–3}.

¹⁰⁸ Go rams pa, *Sbas don zab mo'i gter gyi kha 'byed*, 212_{1–2}: “It is called the ‘lineage of the noble ones’ (*āryavamśa*) on account of one’s having attained the noble dharma (*āryadharma*) when one has performed this activity on the basis of this regimen.” *tshul 'di la brten nas las 'di byas na 'phags pa'i chos 'thob par 'gyur pas 'phags pa'i rigs zhes bya ste |*.

¹⁰⁹ See Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 465 n. 4. According to 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa (*Phar phyin mtha' dpyod* vol. 1, 178b, 182b₄), the definition of *prakṛtisthagotra* in the system of the Sautrāntikas is the germinal capacity (*bijaśakti*) of the uncorrupted mind (*zag pa med pa'i sems kyi sa bon gyi nus pa*).

the phases of ordinary individuals and learners, they are known as “those possessing the *gotra* having the nature of being corrupted.”¹¹⁰

According to this passage, “seed of mind” is held to be the capacity (*nus pa : śakti*) that makes possible the arising of uncorrupted wisdom.

[3] Yogācāra: [34]

According to the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (BBh):

In short, *gotra* is twofold: [1] naturally present (*prakṛtistha*) and [2] acquired (*saṃudānīta*). Here, [1] the naturally present *gotra* is the distinct set of six cognitive domains¹¹¹ of bodhisattvas. That [distinct

¹¹⁰ Quotation from Yaśomitra’s *Abhidharmaśaṭīkā* (AKT) D 4092, 214a₁–214a₃.

¹¹¹ The term “distinct set of six cognitive domains” renders the Yogācāra term *saḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ* (Tib. *skye mched drug gi khyad par*). In this term, the suffix *-viśeṣaḥ* may denote special members of a class of things. As explained by Tubb and Boose, *Scholastic Sanskrit: A Handbook for Students*, 31: “When words referring to species or particular types of things are glossed, the term *viśeṣa* is placed in [a] compound after a word referring to a wider class of things to make it clear that the word being glossed does not apply to all members of that wider class.” The authors also note that *viśeṣa* can simply mean “kind or variety of” (ibid. 196). While *saḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ* is presented as a Yogācāra *gotra* concept by Tibetan thinkers such as Karma phrin las (1456–1539), Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) and Go rams pa (1429–89), the Jo nang scholar Nya dbon Kun dga’ dpal (1285–1379) identifies it as a Sautrāntika term referring to the ability to eliminate obscurations. See Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 465. Interpreting this term in line with his affirmative view of buddha nature, Mi bskyod rdo rje explains that the predicate “distinctive” in the locution “distinct set of six cognitive domains” refers to a transcendent mode of cognition—the “substratum wisdom” (*kun gzhi ye shes*) [as opposed to substratum consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*)]—that is “distinct from” the six conditioned cognitive domains of sentient beings. MD_{SB} vol. 15, 1005₂₋₃: “The meaning of the term “distinct set of six cognitive domains” is not explained as being a special feature (*khyad chos*) of the “six cognitive domains”—i.e., the object having the special feature (*khyad gzhi*)—because it is explained as something distinct from (*khyad par gyi chos shig*), which is to say, ‘other than,’ the six cognitive domains of sentient beings. This has also been designated as the ‘substratum wisdom’ (*kun gzhi’i ye shes*).” *skye mched drug gi khyad par ba’i don || khyad gzhi skye mched drug gi khyad chos su bshad pa min te || sems can gyi skye mched drug las gzhan du gyur pa’i khyad par gyi chos shig la bshad pa’i phyir dang || ’di nyid la kun gzhi’i ye shes su’ang tha snyad mdzad pa yin no ||*. The Eighth Karma

set] is naturally obtained¹¹² by virtue of the nature of things since beginningless time and has continued uninterruptedly as such. [2] The acquired potential¹¹³ is what is obtained by virtue of former familiarization with the roots of virtue. Both of them are accepted with this meaning. Further, this *gotra* is also termed “seed” (*bija*), “element” (*dhātu*), and “nature” (*prakṛti*).]¹¹⁴

pa’s equation of *ṣaḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ* with substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi’i ye shes*) is further clarified by his disciple Zhwa dmar V Dkon mchog yan lag (1424–1482), who explains in one of his three *Zab mo nang don* commentaries that “*ṣaḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ* refers to the six uncorrupted sense fields (*zag pa med pa skye mched*) that are over and above the six sense fields of sentient beings.” *Zab mo nang don gtong thun rab gsal nyi mai’i snying po*, 294₁₋₂: ... *skye mched drug po’i steng du zag pa med pa’i skye mched drug dang shin tu ’dra ba’i skal mnyam gyi rgyu yod pa rnams bstan no*]. On Mi bskyod rdo rje’s understanding of *ṣaḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ* and its relevance to his view of buddha nature, see below 137.

¹¹² This passage would appear to use the term *pratilabdha* in two senses which correspond to the two senses of the English equivalent “obtain”—[1] “to exist, prevail” (as in “the situation still obtains”) and [2] “to acquire, procure” (as in “he obtained the passport”). The first sense applies to the *prakṛtistha gotra*, the second to the *samudānīta gotra*.

¹¹³ It is also known as the unfolded potential (*paripuṣṭagotra*). As the BBh explains, “In this regard, what is the unfoldment of the *dhātu*? Because of the former familiarization with wholesome *dharmas* based on the seeds of wholesome *dharmas* being naturally present, the seeds of wholesome *dharmas* in each subsequent moment become more unfolded, [then] most unfolded; they arise and abide. This is called the unfoldment of *dhātu*.” *tatra dhātupuṣṭih katamā | yā prakṛtyā kuśaladharmabījasampadām niśritya pūrvakuśaladharmābhyaśād uttarottarāṇāṇi kuśaladharmabījāṇāṇi paripuṣṭatarā paripuṣṭatamā utpattiḥ sthitih | iyam ucyate dhātupuṣṭih*]. (BBh, *Paripākapaṭala*, Wogihara ed., 80₁₂₋₁₅; Dutt ed., 56₂₃₋₂₅).

¹¹⁴ BBh (Wogihara ed., 3₁₋₈; Dutt ed., 2₄₋₈): *samāsato gotram dvividham | prakṛtistham samudānītañ ca | tatra prakṛtistham gotram yad bodhisattvānām ṣaḍāyatanaviśeṣaḥ | satādṛśaḥ paramparāgato ’nādikāliko dharmatāpratilabdhaḥ | tatra samudānītam gotram yat pūrvakuśalamūlābhyaśāt pratilabdham | [tad asminn arthe dvividham apy abhipretam | tat punar gotram bījam ity apy ucyate | dhātuh prakṛtir ity api |.]* The section in square brackets is not in Karma phrin las pa’s text but is included here for context. On this passage and various references to similar passages in MSA, MAV and their commentaries, see Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 88 n. 2, Yamabe 1997, 196–196.

As is stated [here], the capacity for developing the uncorrupted [buddha] qualities abiding in the mental continuum since time without beginning is held to “obtain by virtue the nature of things (*dharmaṭā*).” As *Sāgaramegha states [in his *Bodhisattvabhūmivākyā* (BBhV)]:

The distinct set of six cognitive domains refers to the seed (*sa bon : bija*) abiding in the *ālayavijñāna*, which is the capacity (*nus pa : śakti*) for developing uncorrupted [buddha] qualities.¹¹⁵

[4] [Madhyamaka]

In the Madhyamaka system, there is general agreement that suchness, the nature of things possessing defilement, is a *gotra*. However, there is a great multitude of divergent systems of identifying this suchness, the nature of things.

¹¹⁵ This commentarial gloss reflects the semantic overlap of *gotra*, *śakti* and *bija* ideas in the development of buddha nature theories. The *Manobhūmi* of the Basic Section of *Yogācārabhūmi* states that the following terms should be known as near-equivalents (*paryāya*) of *bija*: *dhātu*, *gotra*, *prakṛti*, *hetu* (“cause”), *satkāya* (“collection-being,” i.e., the five *upādāna-skandha* taken as a being), *prapañca* (“elaboration”), *ālaya* (“substratum,” lit. “what is clung to”), *upādāna* (“what is appropriated”), *duḥkha* (“suffering”), *satkāyadrṣṭyadhiṣṭhāna* (“basis of personalistic view [of self]”), and *asmimānādhiṣṭhāna* (“basis of the sense of self-conceit”). *bijaparyāyāḥ punar dhātūn gotrāṇi prakṛtir hetuḥ satkāyāḥ prapañca ālaya upādānām duḥkham satkāyadrṣṭyadhiṣṭhānam asmimānādhiṣṭhānam cety evambhāgīyāḥ paryāyā veditavyāḥ* ||. (*Manobhūmi*, Bhattacharya ed., 26₁₈₋₁₉). See Schmithausen 1987, §3.11.2 et passim. Go rams pa explains the connection between *bija* and *śaḍāyatana-viśeṣaḥ* in his *Sbas don zab mo'i gter gyi kha 'byed*, 214₅₋₆ as follows: “Persons who classify the [set of] six cognitive domains take it as a capacity that enables the dawning of wisdom when one encounters the seeds of incorruptibility as distinguished in line with the three potential-possessors of the three spiritual vehicles... As for *śaḍāyatana-viśeṣaḥ*, the terms ‘seed of incorruptibility,’ ‘capacity to relinquish obscurations’ and ‘latent tendency of learning’ are its synonyms in the sense that they are the reasons for characterizing it as the ‘distinct set of six cognitive domains’.” *skye mched drug la gdags pa'i gang zag rnams theg pa gsum gyi rigs can gsum du so sor 'byed pa'i zag med kyi sa bon rkyen dang phrad na ye shes skye rung gi nus pa la byed do ... skye mched drug ki khyad par | zag med kyi sa bon | sgrib pa spang rung | thos pa'i bag chags rnams ming gi rnam grags yin te | de la skye mched drug gi khyad par zhes brjod pa'i rgyu mtshan yo de |*. See also Tsong kha pa, *Legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba*, 438₂₋₃. On the term *śaḍāyatana-viśeṣaḥ* and its specific interpretation by Mi bskyod rdo rje, see above 62, n. 111.

Consequently, here in the country of Tibet, [the *gotra*] has been viewed from a wide range of different perspectives and there has appeared an endless amount of prattle.

[4.1. Sa skyā]

Even in regard to buddha nature as expounded according to the Vajrayāna, eminent masters of the Glorious Sa skyā tradition, having explained in the *Dag ljon*¹¹⁶ [cycle] and other texts that mind itself is utterly pure by nature, [35] go on to declare that the [buddha] qualities do not actually exist in it, but just exist naturally in the manner of causes. They say that when [their] fruition is made manifest by practicing the two accumulations and two stages as conditions, these causes undergo transformations and the [buddha] qualities are thereby obtained.

[4.2. Jo nang]

According to the Great Omniscient Jo mo nang pa [Dol po pa], the naturally present potential (*prakṛtisthagotra*), together with the thirty-two qualities of *dharmakāya*, has been innately present in all sentient beings primordially and this, moreover, is actual buddhahood; the unfolded potential (*paripuṣṭagotra*),

¹¹⁶ The *Dag ljon* [skor gsum] or *Three Cycles of [the Comprehensive Summary, Precious] Tree and Pure [Commentary]* refers to the three parts of the *Rgyud sde spyi'i rnam bzhag* or *Comprehensive Summary of Tantras*, a monumental overview of Buddhist tantra (with special attention to the *Hevajra* cycle) according to the Sa skyā Lam 'bras system. The first is the *Rgyud sde spyi'i rnam bzhag* itself, an introductory summary of tantra by the early Sa skyā scholar Bsod nams rtse mo (1142–82), the second is the *Rgyud kyi mnong par rtogs pa rin po che'i ljon shing*, a continuation of the first by Bsod nams rtse mo's brother Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216), and the third is the *Brtag gnyis rnam 'grel dag ldan*, a commentary on the *Hevajra* that is also by Grags pa rgyal mtshan. These are found in several collections including *Sa skyā bka' 'bum* vol. 3, 1–147, vol. 6, 1–291, and vol. 6, 403–682 respectively. A famous work on the Three Cycles is the *Dag ljon skor gsum gyi lung 'grel lung don gsal ba'i nyi ma* by the Sa skyā scholar Ye shes rgyal mtshan (d. 1406). It is included in the *Rgyud sde kun btus* (vol. 32, 491–638). For a study of the first cycle of the summary, see Verrill 2012, 18–25. See also Sobisch 2008, 66 and 151. Shākyā mchog ldan wrote a short commentary on difficult topics in the Three Cycles entitled *Dag ljon skor gsum gyi dri ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa dka' ba'i gnas gsal ba'i me long*, in SC_{SB-N} vol. 17, 426–432.

on the other hand, is said to newly arise when produced by the conditions of latent tendencies of learning (*śrutavāsanā*) and so forth.¹¹⁷

[4.3. Bo dong]

The great Tibetan scholar Gsang ba[’i] byin [i.e., Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1375–1450)¹¹⁸ of the Bo dong sect] explains [the *gotra*], which is referred to as “possessing three special features of indestructible clarity” in terms of the clarity of the three [factors] of body, speech, and mind.

[4.4. Dge lugs]

Some other Tibetans [i.e., Dge lugs pa] explain [the *gotra*] as an instance of a nonaffirming negation, i.e., as nonexistence referred to as “emptiness that is empty of a truly [existent] mind.”

[4.5. Bka’ brgyud]

The illustrious Rang byung [rdo rje] taught that buddha nature is simply “natural awareness” (*tha mal gyi shes pa*)¹¹⁹ that is beyond identifications and characteristics, and free from truth or falsity, like the moon [reflected on] water. Its nature is the inseparability of the expanse and wisdom. According to the *Treatise that Reveals the Tathāgatagarbha* [stanza 10] composed by this master:

The learned hold all things to be neither true nor false,
Like the moon [reflected on] water. [36]
Natural awareness alone is called
“Nature of the victors” (*jīnagarbha*) and *dharmadhātu*.¹²⁰

Here, “expanse” (*dhātu*) refers to the naturally luminous “expanse of phenomena” (*dharmadhātu*). Consequently, the basic meaning of *dharmadhātu* is

¹¹⁷ This summary is somewhat misleading. It is important to distinguish this overview from the special Jo nang tantric presentation of Gzhan stong according to which all qualities are primordially present. See Mathes 2008a, 78.

¹¹⁸ Text has *gsang bas byin*. For a brief overview of this tradition as presented in the Eighth Karma pa’s MAV commentary, see Seyfort Ruegg 1988.

¹¹⁹ On this term, see 69, n. 128, 241ff, and 248, n. 576.

¹²⁰ *De bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po bstan pa’i bstan bcos*, in RD_{SB} vol. 7, 285₃.

[this]: because both *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are nothing that can be truly established from their own side as different things, the whole spectrum of appearances of dualistic phenomena such as *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, factors to be relinquished and their antidotes, subject and object, and signifier and signified, have the same flavor as the ever-present great indestructible nucleus,¹²¹ the very essence of nonduality. This is called “the expanse of phenomena” (*dharmadhātu*). According to the *Dharmadhātutava* (DDhS) commentary composed by this master,

Dharma refers to the two modes of factors to be relinquished and [their] antidotes. Their *dhātu* [“expanse”] is just the way things are, which is undifferentiated into subject and object, and signifier and signified—there being nothing that can be analyzed into separate things. What constitutes its nature is the essence of buddhahood.¹²²

According to the source text, the [*Dharma*]*dharmaṭāvibhāga* (DhDh), on which this passage appears to be based:

The defining characteristic of *dharmaṭā* is the way things are (*tathatā*), undifferentiated into subject and object, signifier and signified.¹²³

As for the meaning of the term “naturally luminous”: although I have explained elsewhere that “nature,” “essence,” “abiding condition,” and the like are synonyms, [37] “luminous” here refers to the self-radiation (*rang ’od*) [of *dharmadhātu*] that is beyond identifications and characteristics. Consequently, the principle meaning is this: while the natural condition is such that its unimpeded expressive energy—as a self-effulgence that is not established as anything—

¹²¹ Karma phrin las notes that the term *gdod ma’i mi shigs pa’i thig le chen po* belongs to the context of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* (MNS), though the only comparable term in the root tantra is “great nucleus” (*mahābindu*). See MNS 144, Davidson 1981 ed., 604.

¹²² This is a paraphrase (rather than a direct quotation) from Rang byung rdo rje’s *Chos dbyings bstod pa’i ’grel pa*, combining parts of the outline heading (“Brief introduction to the modes of what is to be relinquished and its antidotes”) with an excerpt from the explanation that follows it.

¹²³ See *Dharmaṭāvibhāga* (DhDh), 26–29 (in Mathes 1996 ed.).

manifests in myriad ways, it nonetheless remains free from discursive elaborations, such as “it is this” or “it is not this.”

Dhātu in the expression “its nature is the inseparability of the expanse and wisdom” has already been explained. As for “wisdom” (*ye shes*), the [Sanskrit] term *jñāna* was [variously] rendered [in Tibetan] as wisdom (*ye shes*), knowledge (*shes pa*) and comprehension (*khong du chud pa*). Thus, in this context, the principal meaning of wisdom is personally realized awareness (*so so rang gis rig pa*).¹²⁴ It is therefore described as wisdom from the perspective of its luminosity, presence, and awareness. It follows that the principle meaning of “its nature is the inseparability of the expanse and wisdom” is personally realized self-awareness of the nonduality of [mind’s] profundity [emptiness] and clarity [luminosity]. According to the *Hevajra* (HT) commentary composed by the master [Rang byung rdo rje]:

Concerning wisdom, when all phenomena are sealed by mind, mind by self-awareness, self-awareness by bliss, and bliss by non-

¹²⁴ The author interprets *ye shes* as a special, transcendent mode of knowledge that has to be individually realized, as conveyed by the widely used technical term *so so[r] rang [gis] rig pa'i ye shes* (*pratyātmavedanīyajñāna*). In his *Zab mo phyag chen gyi mdzod sna tshogs 'dus pa'i gter*, in MD_{SB} vol. 15 (1028₁–1029₃), Mi bskyod rdo rje specifies that this *so so[r] rang rig pa'i ye shes* should not be understood to refer to self-awareness (*rang rig*), which is in each and every person (*so so skye bo*) and therefore simply a defining characteristic of mundane consciousness. Rather it refers to coemergent wisdom, i.e., wisdom that “emerges together with” with the termination of all modes of cognition rooted in ignorance. Being unmixed [with such cognitions] and nonconceptual, this intrinsically aware wisdom of each [facet], apprehending the characteristics of the ultimate, arises from that expanse. *de nas ma rig pa'i shes pa de rgyun chad pa'i tshe | de dang lhan cig tu skyes pa'i ye shes ma 'dres pa rtog bral don dam pa'i mtshan nyid pa'i so so rang rig gi ye shes de nyid dbyings las ldang ba'o ||*. For an illuminating discussion of the history and meaning(s) of this term, see Kapstein 2000. On its semantic affiliations with *rang rig* and related terminology, see Higgins 2013, 90–99.

elaboration, that is the wisdom that realizes the actual reality of the three sealings, three reassurances,¹²⁵ and four embodiments (*sku*).¹²⁶

And:

When one understands that all phenomena are subsumed under mind, notions of an external reality are relinquished. When one understands mind as self-awareness, notions concerning the white and red are relinquished. When one understands self-awareness as bliss, notions bound up with suffering and indifference are relinquished. When one understands bliss as nonelaboration,^[38] notions born of habitually clinging to real entities are relinquished.¹²⁷

The meaning of “beyond identifications and characteristics, and free from truth or falsity, like the moon [reflected on] water” is easy to understand.

As for “natural awareness,” it is the “awareness by nature” (*shes pa rang bzhin pa*)—this very awareness in the present that is uninitiated by contrivance and calculation. Among the medical texts (*Sman dpyad kyi gzhung*):

The natural energy channel is shown in the third medical tantra.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ The three assurances (*dbugs dbyung gsum*) are the assurances that you are the Tathāgata, Akṣobhya, and Vajrasattva. One ascertains [1] that the aggregates (*skandha*) are mind, [2] the emptiness of subject-object duality, and [3] the emptiness of intrinsic essence (*svabhāva*).

¹²⁶ *Dgyes pa rdo rje'i rnam par bshad pa*, in RD_{SB} vol. 8, 333₄₋₅.

¹²⁷ Ibid., in RD_{SB} vol. 8, 333₅–334₁.

¹²⁸ The Fourth 'Brug chen Padma dkar po (1527–1592) explains in his *Commentary on the Four [Medical] Tantras, the Treasure to Benefit Others* (*Rgyud bzhi'i 'grel pa gzhän la phan gter*), in PK_{SB} vol. 1, 332₂₋₄: “For the purpose of healing of any [disease] it is first necessary to know the characteristics of the body. Thus, the condition of the existent body is taught. ...When by virtue of remedies, [the patient] has become healthy, the natural (*tha mal*) condition of health is taught.” *gang gi don du gso ba la lus kyi mtshan nyid shes dgos pas grub pa lus gnas bstan | ... gnyen pos nad med par byas pas nad med tha mal gyi gnas bstan |*. This suggests that the term *tha mal* is analogous to a state of health, a state of well-being free from illness or affliction.

This makes the same key point.¹²⁹

Concerning the *garbha* (*snying po*), although it is free from partiality and uncurtailed in scope, as a remedial measure,¹³⁰ it is denoted by the term “virtue” (*dge ba*).¹³¹ Although it defies categorization into good and evil and transcends expression in language, it nonetheless prevails continuously since time without beginning in [everyone from] sentient beings up to buddha. It is immutable in essence and persists as the nature of a cause, yet it is replete with myriad [buddha] qualities. It defies categorization into ground and goal, yet it manifests as all manner of purities and impurities.

Now, let me explain the meaning of these [points] a little further. The essence of the indivisibility of the expanse and awareness is not curtailed by limits such as eternalism and nihilism, and is free from partialities, such as things to be relinquished and their antidotes. It therefore prevails as an all-pervading sovereignty. According to the root text [*Zab mo nang don* I.7]:

The cause is beginningless mind as such,
Uncurtailed and impartial.¹³²

Although it is described as “virtue” given that it transcends the characteristics of nonvirtue, it is not a “virtue” in the sense of an ^[39]actual entity because it is not of a karmic nature. It is described as an antidote that purifies away the *ālayavijñāna* because it is a seed of the *dharmaśākya* of all buddhas.¹³³ Moreover, it is held to be an essential cause of the realization of the exalted qualities (’phags

¹²⁹ The point is that “natural” signifies an unimpaired mode of being, free from affliction or debilitation, like a condition of optimal health.

¹³⁰ Tib. *gnyen po'i phyogs* : Skt. *pratipakṣa*

¹³¹ See for example LAS X.750a (Nanjo 1923 ed., 358₅): “The naturally luminous mind is the Tathāgata’s *garbha*; it is virtuous.” *prakṛtiprabhāsvaram cittam garbham tāthāgatam śubham*].

¹³² See *Zab mo nang don gyi rnam bshad snying po*, in RD_{SB} vol. 14, 38₆.

¹³³ Karma phrin las follows Rang byung rdo rje’s interpretation of *Mahāyānasamgraha*, that the latent tendencies of learning (śrutavāsanā), being the pure outflow of the supramundane *dhātu*, are in the *ālayavijñāna* but are not of its nature (as are karmic latent tendencies); rather they are its antidote. See Rang byung rdo rje’s *Zab mo nang don rang 'grel*, in RD_{SB} vol. 7, 87₃–389₅ and *Chos dbyings stod pa'i grel pa*, ibid., 29₃–314.

pa'i chos) because, although it totally pervades the states of worldly beings, it is nonetheless the natural outflow (*rgyu mthun pa*) of the thoroughly pure *dharma-dhātu*.

3. Key points in Karma phrin las pa's outline of buddha nature

Given the epigrammatic nature of Karma phrin las pa's overview of Indian and Tibetan buddha nature theories, it may be useful to examine them a little more closely in light of their assimilation by Mi bskyod rdo rje. This will be followed by a brief analysis of the main elements of Karma bka' brgyud buddha nature theory as they were articulated by Rang byung rdo rje and summarized by Karma phrin las.¹³⁴

3.1. *Tathāgatagarbha* concepts in early Indian Buddhist sources

Reviewing the development of buddha nature and *gotra* theories in India and Tibet, Karma phrin las first discusses the Vaibhāṣika idea of a noble lineage (*'phags pa'i rigs : āryavamśa*). Those having few desires and contentment are said to be part of, or to possess, the “lineage of the noble ones.”¹³⁵ Mi bskyod rdo rje, in his commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (ASA), refers to this “noble lineage” (*āryavamśa*) as a disposition toward *nirvāṇa* advocated by the Hīnayāna tradition. In his *Intent*, Mi bskyod rdo rje, like his mentor Karma phrin las, regards it more specifically as a Vaibhāṣika theory. He also follows his teacher in defining *āryavamśa* along the lines of *Abhidharmakośa* (AK), in terms of having little desire and being content. In this sense, he interprets *āryavamśa* as a sufficient substantial cause for its result, the eventual attainment of awakening.¹³⁶

Karma phrin las next turns his attention to the Sautrāntika idea of a germinal capacity of mind (*sems kyi sa bon nus pa : cittabījaśakti*)¹³⁷ that is said to remain corrupted during the phases of ordinary individuals and learners, as explained in a supporting quotation from the *Abhidharmakośaṭīkā* (AKT). It is important to bear in mind that Mi bskyod rdo rje held that descriptions of buddha nature as a

¹³⁴ In the following section, all quotes are from the above translation of Karma phrin la pa's overview unless specified otherwise.

¹³⁵ See Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 464. La Vallée Poussin 1980, AK VI, 182.

¹³⁶ See *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, GC_{KL} vol. 4, 220₇₋₈. For Mi bskyod rdo rje's discussion of this in his *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentary, see Brunnholzl 2010, 428.

¹³⁷ See Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 465 n. 4. According to 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa (*Phar phyin mtha' dpyod* vol. 1, 178b, 182b₄), the definition of *prakṛtisthagotra* in the system of the Sautrāntikas is the germinal capacity (*bījaśakti*) of the uncorrupted mind (*zag pa med pa'i sems kyi sa bon gyi nus pa*).

“cause” (e.g., a seed, a potential, an element) or an “effect” (a goal, a fruit, a result) should be regarded as concessions by the Buddha to those under the influence of ordinary consciousness, who are predisposed to thinking of buddha nature in causal and teleological terms. Such descriptions are in this regard deemed to be of provisional meaning, i.e., in need of further interpretation. As such, they are to be progressively relinquished with the growing understanding that goal-realization consists in the disclosure of what is already innately present, rather than in the production of something new.

3.2. *Tathāgatagarbha* concepts in Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna sources

Karma phrin las proceeds to abridge the main elements of Yogācāra *gotra* theory, citing a crucial distinction between the naturally present potential (*rang bzhin gnas rigs* : *prakṛtisthagotra*) and the acquired potential (*bsgrubs pa'i rigs* : *samudāñtagotra*), as it is outlined in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (BBh). The naturally present potential is identified with the so-called “distinct set of six cognitive domains” (*sadāyatanaviśeṣaḥ*),¹³⁸ an important term in the Eighth Karma pa’s buddha nature theory that he identifies with the substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*). The unfolded potential is characterized as the potential attained by former familiarization with the roots of virtue. We shall see that Mi bskyod rdo rje regards the seeming developmental aspects of this potential as illusory and sides with the disclosive view of Rang byung rdo rje and his teacher Bkra shis dpal ’byor (1457–1525). According to this view the acquired potential is precisely the naturally present potential as regarded from the standpoint of the aspirant on the path.

The Eighth Karma pa observes in his *Abhisamayālankāra* commentary that the Yogācāra describe the *gotra* as a causal disposition that abides as a seminal aspect based in the substratum (*ālaya*). Here he introduces the important Tibetan distinction between conditioned and unconditioned substrata. While the cause of *samsāra* is founded on the substratum consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*), the cause of *nirvāṇa* is founded on substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*). Mi bskyod rdo rje draws attention to a parallel distinction in Maitreya’s *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (DhDh) between consciousness and wisdom as the respective grounds for *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. We may add that Asaṅga similarly distinguishes, in his *Mahāyānasamgraha* (MS), between the *ālayavijñāna* and “the supramundane mind” (*lokattaracitta* : *’jig rten las ’das pa'i sems*). He further

¹³⁸ On the term “distinct set of six cognitive domains” see 62 n. 111.

equates the latter with nonconceptual wisdom elicited from the latent tendencies for learning that are the natural outflow of the very pure *dharmadhātu*.¹³⁹

Turning to Madhyamaka buddha nature theories, Karma phrin las observes that there is a “general agreement” among Buddhist scholars “that suchness, the nature of things possessing defilement, is a *gotra*.” However, he takes note of “the great multitude of divergent systems of identifying this suchness, the nature of things” and decries “the endless prattle” surrounding buddha nature in Tibet. The author proceeds to offer a thumbnail sketch of different Tibetan *tathāgatagarbha* theories, contending, for example, that the Sa skya pas maintain “that mind as such is utterly pure by nature” but nonetheless “declare that the [buddha] qualities do not actually exist in it, but just subsist innately in the manner of causes.” These causes, he explains, are said to undergo transformation by amassing the two accumulations and by the Creation and Completion Stages of Vajrayāna practice, leading to the attainment of buddha-qualities. Without explicitly criticizing this view, Karma phrin las elsewhere strongly rejects the view that there is a difference between buddha nature in its causal and resultant aspects.

The author next summarizes the Jo nang system as formulated by Dol po pa, who maintains that the thirty-two qualities of the *dharmakāya*, being immanent to the mind, are always present in sentient beings. These are thus said to be identical to actual buddhahood. However, Karma phrin las does not mention Dol po pa’s important claim, made in the context of Buddhist tantras, that the thirty-two bodily marks also exist fully developed in sentient beings. The author goes on to describe the position of Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1375–1459), for whom the *gotra* possesses three special features of the indestructible clarity of body, speech, and mind. Lastly and all too briefly, he summarizes the Dge lugs pa position that buddha nature is a nonaffirming negation, which consists in the mind’s emptiness of a truly existent mind. We shall have occasion to closely examine Mi bskyod rdo rje’s analysis and critique of this position in the third chapter.

3.3. Rang byung rdo rje’s Karma bka’ brgyud position on buddha nature

In summarizing the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje’s account of buddha nature, Karma phrin las draws attention to a number of central aspects of the

¹³⁹ Based on Mi bskyod rdo rje’s commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, Brunnhölzl 2010, 428. See also Mathes 2008a, 48, 56 and 58–60.

Karma bka' brgyud *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine that will be more fully explored in the chapter to follow. First and foremost is the Karma pa's equation of buddha nature with natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), a key technical term in Dwags po Mahāmudrā teachings that is held to be synonymous with coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig pa'i ye shes*) and nondual awareness (*gnyis med shes pa*).¹⁴⁰ We have noted that the term "natural" (*tha mal*) in this context signifies a state free from modification and affliction. We have also drawn attention to its usage in Tibetan medical texts to describe natural states of health or freedom from illness. This suggests that buddha nature, as natural awareness, refers to one's natural, unaffected mode of being and awareness that remains immune to the self-deprecations and self-imputations of representational thought and attendant afflictive emotions. It is thus said to be "uninitiated by contrivance and calculation."

In specifying natural awareness as another term for wisdom (*jñāna*), Karma phrin las says it is called "wisdom" from the perspective of its three qualities of radiance, presence, and awareness. He makes the further astute observation that the Sanskrit term *jñāna* was variously rendered by early Tibetan translators as "wisdom" (*ye shes*), "knowledge" (*shes pa*), and "comprehension" (*khong du chud pa*), adding that in the present context its principal meaning is "personally realized awareness" (*so so rang gis rig pa*). In his commentary to Saraha's *Queen Dohā* stanza 4, Karma phrin las equates this personally realized self-awareness with the wisdom of suchness (*de bzhin nyid kyi ye shes*).¹⁴¹ In a later comment on stanza 74 of this *dohā*, he explains that cultivating and internalizing this wisdom of suchness is tantamount to cultivating the buddha-qualities and thereby "making the goal the path."¹⁴² Returning to his commentary on the *Profound*

¹⁴⁰ This important relationship is discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁴¹ *Btsun mo dohā'i tūkā 'bring po sems kyi rnam thar ston pa'i me long*, 123₉₋₁₄: "The wisdom of suchness is 'suchness' as well as 'wisdom'; thus it is the 'wisdom of suchness'. ... It [being] personally realized wisdom, it is to be known by oneself alone." *de bzhin nyid kyi ye shes te | de bzhin nyid kyang yin la | ye shes kyang yin pas na de bzhin nyid kyi ye shes so | ... so so rang rig pa'i ye shes rang nyid kyis shes bar bya ba kho na yin ...*

¹⁴² Ibid., 183₁₃₋₁₈: "Cultivating and internalizing primordial self-arisen wisdom, which is unfathomable because it is beyond the conceptual mind and inexpressible because it is not an object of language, is tantamount to cultivating all the qualities of a buddha, the goal. Therefore, this path of the essential meaning of the unsurpassable Great Vehicle is called the 'instruction on making the goal the path.' On the basis of the training whereby

Inner Meaning, we may draw attention to the author's explanation that natural awareness, *qua* buddha nature, is beyond identifications and characteristics, free from truth and falsity, its nature being the inseparability of the expanse (*dbyings* : *dhātu*) and wisdom (*ye shes* : *jñāna*).

This brings us to a second key point of Karma bka' brgyud buddha nature interpretations, the equation of buddha nature with the polysemic term *dhātu* (constitutive element, expanse, disposition, principle), which Karma phrin las defines more precisely as "luminous *dharmadhātu*." He explains that *dharmadhātu* here signifies the very essence of nonduality: "because both *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are nothing that can be truly established from their own side as different things, the whole spectrum of appearances of dualistic phenomena such as *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, factors to be relinquished and their antidotes, subject and object, and signifier and signified, are of the same flavor as the ever-present great indestructible nucleus, the intrinsic essence of nonduality."¹⁴³

Lastly, Karma phrin las underscores the Third Karma pa's description of buddha nature in terms of the inseparability of luminous *dharmadhātu* and wisdom. It is from this vantage point of inseparability that Rang byung rdo rje's successors would stand united in rejecting various buddha nature positions that equate *tathāgatagarbha* only with the pure *dharmadhātu* (taken in the sense of nonaffirming emptiness). In their estimation, such a view overlooks the fecundity and liberative potential of buddha nature, its availability as the source of all wisdom and buddha-qualities. For them, it is difficult to see how buddha nature conceived as sheer emptiness devoid of manifest qualities could be a source of morality and meaning at all. From the Karma bka' brgyud perspective, although buddha nature is "free from partiality and uncurtailed in scope," when

one takes as one's path that inconceivable and indescribable wisdom of the ground phase which primordially abides as the goal, it is perceived directly without [its] essence changing into something other." *blo las 'das pas bsam du med cing sgra'i yul ma yin pas brjod pa las 'das pa'i ye shes ye gdod ma nas rang byung ba gang yin pa de bsgom zhing nyams su len pa de ni 'bras bu sangs rgyas kyi chos ma lus pa bsgom par gyur pa yin no || de'i phyir theg pa chen po bla na med pa snying po'i don gyi lam 'di la ni 'bras bu lam du 'khyer ba'i gdams pa zhes bya ste | ye gdod ma nas 'bras bur gnas pa'i gzhi dus kyi ye shes smra bsam brjod med de nyid lam du khyer nas sbyangs pa las ngo bo gzhan du mi 'gyur bar mngon sum du mthong bar 'gyur ro ||.*

¹⁴³ On the term *gdod ma'i mi shigs pa'i chen po*, see Karma phrin las pa's *Zab mo nang don rnam bshad snying po*, in RD_{SB} vol. 14, 1–553.

considered as a remedy, it may nonetheless be described by the term “virtue.” He adds, however, that buddha nature “defies categorization into good and evil and transcends expression in language, yet it prevails continuously since time without beginning in [everyone from] sentient beings up to buddha.” The author further explains that even though buddha nature is “described as a ‘virtue’ given that it transcends the characteristics of nonvirtue, it is not a virtue in the sense of an entity because it is not of a karmic nature.” In the final analysis, although buddha nature transcends things to be relinquished and their antidotes, it may nonetheless be described as an “antidote that purifies away the *ālayavijñāna* because it is a seed of the *dharmakāya* of all buddhas.”

4. Critical edition of Karma phrin las pa's outline of buddha nature

Zab mo nang don rnam bshad snying po gsal bar byed pa'i nyin byed 'od kyi phreng ba (ZN_{KP})¹⁴⁴

gnyis pa bde gshegs pa'i snying po'i mtha' bcad pa ni | rgyu bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po la rigs shes bstan bcos la grags pa de ni | grub mtha' smra ba'i 'dod pa mi 'dra ba du mar gnas te | mdzod las |

ma chags 'phags rigs de dag las ||
[gsum ni chog shes bdag nyid do ||]¹⁴⁵
gsum gyis tshul bstan tha mas las ||

zhes gsungs pa ltar | bye brag tu smra ba dag srid pa dang srid pa'i yo byad la ma chags pa'i sems byung 'dod pa chung zhing chog shes pa ni 'phags pa'i rigs su 'dod de | de la yang chos gos dang bsod snyoms dang gnas mal ngan ngon tsam gyis chog shes pa te gsum dang | spong ba dang sgom pa la dga' ba ste bzhi las | snga ma gsum gyis tshul dang phyi mas las bstan pa ste | tshul de la gnas nas las de bsgrubs na 'phags pa'i chos myur du 'grub pas so || zhes bzhed la | mdo sde pa ni | 'grel bshad rgyal po sras las |

mdo sde pa dag na re¹⁴⁶ rigs zhes¹⁴⁷ bya ba ni sems kyi sa bon nus pa yin te | so so'i¹⁴⁸ skye bo dang slob pa'i gnas skabs na yang yongs su nyams pa'i chos can gyi sa bon rgyu yod na yongs su nyams pa'i chos can gyi rigs can zhes bya ba la¹⁴⁹||¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ ZN_{KP} in RD_{SB} vol. 14, 33₁–84.

¹⁴⁵ addit line AK VI.7d; Skt. *teṣāṁ tuṣṭyātmakāṁ trayam* |

¹⁴⁶ ZN_{KP}: *gi*; Go rams pa: *gis*

¹⁴⁷ ZN_{KP}: *shes* [sic]

¹⁴⁸ ZN_{KP}: *so*

¹⁴⁹ ZN_{KP}: *shes bya'o*

¹⁵⁰ ZN_{KP} has a truncated version (similar to Go rams pa): *mdo sde pa dag gi rigs shes [sic] ba ni sems kyi sa bon nus pa yin te | so so skye bo dang slob pa'i gnas skabs na yang yongs su nyams pa'i chos can gyi sa bon la rigs shes bya'o ||*.

zhes gsungs pa ltar | sems kyi sa bon zag med kyi ye shes 'byung rung gi nus pa la bzhed cing | rnal 'byor spyod pa [34] pas ni | byang sa las |

de la rigs gang zhe na mdor na rnam pa gnyis te | rang bzhin gyis gnas pa dang yang dag par bsgrubs pa'o | de la rang bzhin gyis gnas pa'i rigs ni byang chub sems dpa' rnams kyi skye mched drug gi khyad par gang yin pa ste | de ni gcig nas gcig tu rgyud de 'ongs pa thog ma med pa'i dus can chos nyid kyis thob pa de lta bu yin no || de la yang dag par bsgrubs pa'i rigs ni sngon dge ba'i rtsa ba goms par byas pa las thob pa gang yin pa ste ||

zhes gsungs pa ltar | thog ma med pa nas sems rgyud la gnas pa'i zag med kyi chos bskyed par byed pa'i nus pa chos nyid kyis thob pa la bzhed de | rgya mtsho sprin las |

skyе mched drug gi khyad par ni kun gzhi'i rnam shes la gnas pa'i sa bon zag pa med pa'i chos bskyed par byed pa'i nus pa'o ||

zhes gsungs pas so || dbu ma'i lugs la | dri ma dang bcas pa'i chos nyid de bzhin nyid rigs su 'dod pa la phal cher mthun yang | chos nyid de bzhin nyid kyi ngos 'dzin lugs mi 'dra ba mang ches pas bod kyi yul 'dir lta ba tha dad pa sna tshogs pas gzigs te | mu cor smra ba dpag tu med pa zhig snang ngo | rdo rje theg pa las bshad pa'i bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po la yang | dpal ldan sa skya pa'i rje btsun gong ma rnams kyis dag ljon la sogs par | sems nyid rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa la [35] bshad nas | de la yon tan gyi chos rnams dngos su med kyang rgyu'i tshul gyis lhun grub tu yod pa | rkyen tshogs gnyis sam rim gnyis nyams su blangs pas 'bras bu mngon du byas pa na rgyu de dag gnas gyur nas yon tan gyi chos rnams thob par gsungs shing | kun mkhyen chen po jo mo nang pas ni rang bzhin gnas rigs chos kyi sku'i yon tan sum bcu rtsa gnyis dang bcas pa sems can thams cad la ye gdod ma nas rang chas su yod cing de yang sangs rgyas dngos yin la | rgyas 'gyur gyi rigs ni thos pa la sogs pa'i bag chags rkyen gyis bskyed nas gsar du byung bar bzhed do | bod kyi slob dpon chen po gsang ba'i^abyin gyis ni | dangs ma mi shigs pa khyad par gsum ldan zhes bya ba | lus ngag yid gsum gyi dangs ma la bshad cing | bod la la dag gis ni | sems bden pas stong pa'i stong nyid ces bya ba med par dgag pa'i phyogs la bshad do ||

dpal rang byung gi zhal snga nas ni dbyings dang ye shes dbyer med pa'i rang bzhin chu zla ltar bden brdzun dang bral zhing ngos bzung dang mtshan ma las 'das pa'i tha mal gyi shes pa nyid la bde bar gshegs pa'i snying por bzhed de |

rje nyid kyis mdzad pa'i de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bstan pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos las |

thams cad bden min brdzun min te ||
 chu zla bzhin du mkhas^[36] rnams bzhed ||
 tha mal shes pa de nyid la ||
 chos dbyings rgyal ba'i snying po zer ||

zhes gsungs pas so || de la dbyings ni | chos kyi dbyings rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba de nyid do || de'i phyir chos kyi dbyings shes pa'i go don ni | 'khor ba dang mya ngan las 'das pa gnyis ka rang ngos nas tha dad du bden par grub pa med pa'i phyir | 'khor 'das sam spang gnyen nam gzung 'dzin nam rjod bya rjod byed la sogs pa gnyis chos su snang ba mtha' dag gnyis su med pa'i rang gi ngo bo gdod ma'i mi shigs pa'i thig le chen po dang ro mnyam pa la chos kyi dbyings shes bya ste | chos dbyings bstod pa'i 'grel pa rje nyid kyis mdzad pa las |

chos ni spang bya dang gnyen po'i tshul gnyis te | de nyid kyi dbyings ni tha dad du dpyad du med pa gzung ba dang 'dzin pa rjod par bya ba dang rjod par byed pa la khyad par med pa'i de bzhin nyid yin te | de'i rang bzhin du gyur pa ni sangs rgyas kyi ngo bo yin pas ||

zhes¹⁵¹ gsungs la | de'i khungs kyang chos nyid rnam 'byed las |

gzung ba dang 'dzin pa dang rjod par bya ba dang rjod par byed pa khyad par med pa ni de bzhin nyid de chos nyid kyi mtshan nyid do ||

zhes gsungs pa la rten par snang bas so || rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba zhes pa'i don ni | rang bzhin dang ngo bo dang gnas tshul la sogs pa rnams ni rnam grangs yin par gzhan du^[37] bshad zin la | 'od gsal ba ni | ngos gzung dang mtshan ma las 'das pa'i rang 'od de | de'i phyir | gnas tshul la cir yang ma grub pa'i rang gdangs ma 'gags pa'i rtsal sna tshogs par shar yang 'di yin dang 'di min gyi spros pa dang bral ba ni | de'i go don yin no || dbyings dang ye shes dbyer med pa'i rang bzhin zhes pa'i dbyings ni bshad zin la | ye shes ni jñā na zhes pa | ye shes dang shes pa dang khong du chud pa la 'jug pas | so so rang gis rig pa ni skabs 'dir ye

¹⁵¹ ZN_{KP}: *shes* [sic]

shes kyi go don yin pa'i phyir | gsal ba dang snang ba dang rig pa'i cha nas ye
 shes su brjod do || des na zab gsal gnyis med du so so rang rig pa ni dbyings dang
 ye shes dbyer med pa'i rang bzhin gyi go don te | rtag gnyis kyi tī ka rje nyid
 kyis mdzad pa las |

ye shes ni chos thams cad sems | sems rang rig | rang rig bde ba | bde
 ba spros pa dang bral ba'i rgyas btab na rgyas btab gsum | dbug
 dbyung gsum | sku na bzhi | de dngos po'i de kho na rtogs pa'i ye
 shes so ||

zhes dang |

chos thams cad sems kyi lus su rtogs pa'i dus su¹⁵² phyi rol don gyi
 rtog pa spangs | sems rang rig tu rtogs pa'i dus su dkar dmar gyi rtog
 pa spangs | rang rig bde bar rtogs pa'i dus su sdug bsngal dang btang
 snyoms kyi rtog pa spangs | bde ba spros bral du rtogs [38] pa'i dus su
 dngos po la mnong par zhen pa'i rnam rtog spangs pa'o ||

zhes gsungs pas so | chu zla ltar bden rdzun dang bral zhing | ngos bzung dang
 mtshan ma las 'das pa'i don ni go bar sla la | tha mal gyi shes pa ni | shes pa rang
 bzhin pa bzo bcos dang rtsis btab sogs kyis ma bslad pa'i da lta'i shes pa 'di nyid
 de | sman dpyad kyi gzhung las |

tha mal rtsa la rtsa rgyud gsum du bstan |

zhes gsungs pa dang gnad gcig go || snying po de yang | rgyar ma chad phyogs
 su ma lhung yang gnyen po'i phyogs dge ba zhes pa'i sgras brjod du rung la |
 sems can nas sangs rgyas kyi bar la bzang ngan gyi dbye ba med cing tha snyad
 dang smra brjod las 'das kyang thog ma med pa nas rgyud de 'ongs pa | ngo bo
 la 'gyur ba med cing rgyu'i ngo bo nyid du gnas kyang yon tan gyi chos du mas
 phyug pa | gzhi 'bras dbye ba med kyang dag ma dag ci rigs par snang ba'o || da
 ni de'i don cung zad tsam bshad par bya ste | dbyings rig dbyer med kyi ngo bo
 la ni rtag chad sogs kyi rgyar chad pa dang spang gnyen sogs kyi phyogs su lhung
 ba med pa'i phyir | kun gyi khyab bdag tu grub ste | gzhung las |

rgyu ni sems nyid thog med la ||

¹⁵² *Dgyes pa rdo rje'i rnam par bshad pa addit |*

rgya chad phyogs lhung ma mchis kyang ||

zhes gsungs pas so || mi dge ba'i mtshan ma las 'das pas dge bar brjod kyang |
las kyi ngo bo nyid ma yin pa'i phyir | dge ba'i dngos [39] po ni ma yin la | sangs
rgyas thams cad kyi chos kyi sku'i sa bon yin pa'i phyir | kun gzhi'i rnam par
shes pa dag par byed pa'i gnyen por brjod cing | 'jig rten pa'i gnas skabs thams
cad du khyab kyang chos kyi dbyings shin tu rnam par dag pa'i rgyu mthun pa
yin pa'i phyir | 'phags pa'i chos rtogs par 'gyur ba'i rgyu'i ngo bo nyid du 'dod
de | ...

Chapter 3: The Eighth Karma pa's Central Claims About Buddha Nature

1. Introductory remarks

The foregoing survey of buddha nature theories in India and Tibet has broadly outlined some of the historical and doctrinal background needed to understand the development of Mi bskyod rdo rje's philosophy of buddha nature. In his numerous writings on the subject dating from his early twenties until his final years, he developed a comprehensive and complex interpretation of buddha nature, building on and refining the work of his predecessors. We have identified, as a central thread running through Mi bskyod rdo rje's own *tathāgatagarbha* discourses, a persistent concern to articulate and defend the core *Ratnagotravibhāga* position that buddha nature is innate buddhahood itself—the ground and goal of Buddhist meditation—which remains unchanging throughout its varying states of obscuration. In delineating this viewpoint, the Karma pa studiously refrains from equating buddha nature with either a permanent metaphysical absolute or a sheer absence, and thus succumbing to either of the extreme beliefs in existence or nonexistence, eternalism or nihilism.

In this chapter, we shall fill out the general outline of his Karma bka' brgyud interpretation sketched in the first two chapters by focusing on a set of specific claims regarding buddha nature that are central to this interpretation. To do so it is necessary to bring into sharper focus some of the key doctrinal issues concerning buddha nature that were routinely discussed and debated by the Karma pa's colleagues. Our aim is to determine how he in each case positioned the Karma bka' brgyud interpretation in relation to these. In this respect, it is important to reiterate that by the classical period buddha nature had emerged as a keystone concept in Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, one which locked into place various central ideas regarding the nature of truth, mind, and emptiness, and their respective roles in spiritual awakening (*bodhi*). Viewed in this light, the author's central claims concerning buddha nature pertain more broadly to his overall conception of the Buddhist path as a progressive disclosure of buddhahood.

From the author's extensive treatments of buddha nature we have singled out the following set of sixteen central propositions, which he advances in different contexts to articulate and validate his interpretation. This list makes no claim to being exhaustive. It leaves aside, for example, many of his assertions concerning tantric views of buddha nature and their associated practices. Our choice of

themes favored those most relevant to the central topics of discussion and controversy surrounding buddha nature that occupied Buddhist scholars before and during his lifetime. This selection criterion has allowed us to highlight points of convergence and divergence between his views and those of other leading Tibetan buddha nature scholars.

Sixteen Central Claims Regarding Buddha Nature

1. Buddha nature exists equally in everyone from ordinary beings to buddhas.
2. Buddha nature discourses are of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*).
3. The “nature” (*garbha*) of a buddha is actual, not nominal.
4. The *gotra* is not metaphorical (*upacāra*), but attributions of cause and result are.
5. Buddha nature is buddha(hood) obscured by defilements.
6. The three phases of buddha nature indicate progressive degrees of disclosure.
7. The classification of three vehicles has a hidden intent (*ābhiprāyika*); the one vehicle (*ekayāna*) doctrine is definitive (*lākṣaṇika*).
8. The unfolded *gotra* is the naturally present *gotra* awakened through virtue.
9. Resultant buddha nature may be equated with *dharmakāya*.
10. Buddha nature is not emptiness as a nonaffirming negation (*med dgag*).
11. Buddha nature is not a basis established (*gzhi grub*) by valid cognitions.
12. The identification of buddha nature and *ālayavijñāna* is provisional.
13. Buddha nature is not a self (coarse or subtle) but is selflessness.
14. Buddha nature is only fully revealed in Mantrayāna thought and praxis.
15. Buddha nature is natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*).
16. Buddha nature consists in the unity of the two truths.

Let us examine each of these points in turn.

2. Sixteen central claims regarding buddha nature

2.1. Buddha nature exists equally in everyone from ordinary beings to buddhas

Mi bskyod rdo rje considers his tradition's position on *tathāgatagarbha* to be fully in accord with the key doctrine of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV), namely, that all sentient beings have buddha nature, a buddha "element" (*dhātu*)¹⁵³ or a "potential" (*gotra*)¹⁵⁴ to be a buddha, which remains unchanging throughout its

¹⁵³ *Dhātu* is certainly among the most complex terms in Buddhist thought and defies any adequate translation. In Tibetan, it is translated either as *khams* ("element," "constituent") or *dbiyings* ("expanse," "sphere"). In general, we have rendered *dhātu* by element and *dbiyings* by expanse (occasionally "sphere"). Seyfort Ruegg (1969, 494–96) has noted the semantic affiliations between *dhātu* and nascent *ālayavijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha* concepts. See also *Abhidharmasamuccaya* (AS, p. 15), for example, where *dhātu* is characterized as the "seed of all phenomena" (*sarvadharma-bīja*), an identification that connects the Sautrāntika *bīja* theory with *tathāgatagarbha* concepts such as *dhātu* and *gotra*. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* establishes semantic equivalences between *dhātu* and the concepts *bīja*, *gotra*, *ādhāra*, *niśraya*, *hetu*, and so forth. In the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the term *dhātu* is used more often than *garbha* in reference to buddha nature. See Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 261–64. The author notes, however, that "...qu'il existe un certain flottement dans l'emploi du mot *dhātu*, et que ce mot n'est pas un synonyme exact de *tathāgatagarbha*, encore que les deux termes s'emploient souvent comme des équivalents." (ibid. 261, n. 1). He elsewhere comments that "...while the *tathāgatagarbha* is said [in RGV] to exist in all sentient beings without exception, the *tathāgatadhātu* on the other hand is present not only on the level of ordinary beings but also, evidently, on the level of buddhahood itself." (Seyfort Ruegg 1989, 19).

¹⁵⁴ As in the case of *dhātu*, there is no satisfactory English translation of the term *gotra* (Tib. *rigs*) that conveys this term's semantic richness. On the various meanings of *gotra* which include class, family, lineage, potential, germ, capacity, mine, and matrix, see Seyfort Ruegg 1976. Seyfort Ruegg (1976, 341) notes that "[t]he word *gotra* is frequently used in the literature of Mahāyāna Buddhism to denote categories of persons classified according to their psychological, intellectual, and spiritual types. The chief types usually mentioned in this kind of classification are the Auditors making up the *śrāvaka-gotra*, the Individual Buddhas making up the *pratyekabuddha-gotra*, and the Bodhisattvas making up the *bodhisattva-gotra*... In addition, the *gotra* functions so to

different phases of obscuration and which is progressively revealed when whatever conceals it is dispelled. In upholding this view, the Karma pa gives a qualified endorsement to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*'s claim that the teaching on buddha nature belongs to the third *dharma* *cakra* and therefore critically supersedes the second *dharma* *cakra* teaching of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic natures.¹⁵⁵ Following the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, he maintains that buddha nature is empty of extrinsic adventitious phenomena, but not empty of inherent buddha-qualities. At the same time, however, he is opposed to construing third *dharma* *cakra* discourses on buddha nature as advancing a type of affirming emptiness of other (*gzhan stong*) that is different from or superior to the second turning emptiness of intrinsic (*rang stong*) natures. For him, there is only one univocal emptiness, which does not admit of superior and inferior kinds. That said, it is his acceptance of the affirmative view of buddha nature that would bring the Karma pa and his tradition into confrontation with the many scholars, mostly from Sa skyā and Dge lugs schools, who adopted a more metaphysically austere *Madhyamaka* conception of buddha nature, one that equated it with emptiness in the sense of a nonaffirming negation (*med [par] dgag [pa]: prasajyapratīṣedha*).

Like many of his Bka' brgyud and Rnying ma coreligionists, the Eighth Karma pa regarded the doctrine of buddha nature as a basic soteriological framework shared by the main exoteric and esoteric strands of Mahāyāna discourse that were deemed to be of definitive meaning. On the one hand, the doctrine was thought to provide a comprehensive theoretical basis for understanding widespread Buddhist speculations on how the state of awakening (*bodhi*) is available to beings mired in bondage and delusion. On the other hand, it was taken to corroborate a specific claim of Buddhist tantra, as neatly epitomized in the *Hevajratantra* (HT) stanza II.iv.69: "Sentient beings are indeed buddhas, though these [buddhas] are obscured by adventitious defilements. Once such

speak as a spiritual or psychological 'gene' determining the classification of living beings into the above-mentioned categories, which may be either absolutely or temporarily different according to whether one accepts the theory that the three Vehicles (*yāna*) are ultimately and absolutely separate because they lead to the three quite different kinds of Awakening..." Thus the term can *extensionally* signify a class, lineage, or family (hence its synonyms *kula* and *vamśa*, also translated by *rigs* in Tibetan) or *intentionally* signify the spiritual capacity or potential (also "seed") that is the basis for such classification. Perhaps the term "spiritual affiliation (or affinity)" best combines these significations.

¹⁵⁵ See Kano 2016, 2–3 and 213.

[defilements] are removed, they are indeed buddhas.”¹⁵⁶ On this view, beings are “buddhas to be” in the specific sense that they are already buddhas but don’t yet know it on account of afflictive and cognitive obscurations.¹⁵⁷ This is also the main thrust of the Mahāmudrā songs and instructions (*upadeśa*) of Indian Buddhist siddhas and their Tibetan Bka’ brgyud successors that sought to elicit the discovery of innate wisdom (*sahajajñāna*) or natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), which these masters equated with immanent buddhahood itself. In short, the Eighth Karma pa discerns a common thread connecting these *tathāgatagarbha*, Mantrayāna, and Siddha discourses. It is the disclosive perspective that all beings are already buddhas and that the goal of buddhahood is therefore primarily a matter of clearing away what obscures it. In support of this viewpoint, he cites the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje’s auto-commentary on the *Profound Inner Meaning*:

Although buddha nature is immaculate, so long as all the afflictive and cognitive defilements have not been relinquished, one will not become a buddha. [This] is the meaning of “element” (*dhātu*). Although these very obscurations have been connected [with the mind] since beginningless time, they are adventitious. Therefore, these

¹⁵⁶ HV II.iv.69: Snellgrove 1959 ed., *sattvā buddhā eva kim tu āgantukamalāvṛtāḥ* || *ta-syāpakarṣanāt sattvā buddhā eva na samśayah* ||.

¹⁵⁷ The terms “afflictive obscuration” and “cognitive obscurations” render the Sanskrit *kleśāvaraṇa* and *jñeyāvaraṇa* respectively. *Kleśāvaraṇa*, taken as a *karmadhāraya* compound, can be translated as “the obscuration of (or, which is) *kleśa*.” This is the sense of the Tibetan translation *nyon mongs pa’i sgrib pa* where the genitive can be either possessive or appositional. The Sanskrit term *jñeyāvaraṇa* (Tib. *shes bya’i sgrib pa*) can be read as a dative *tatpurusa* compound and translated accordingly as “obscuration to (regarding) the knowable” (viz., obscuration to omniscience). For the Yogācāra, who grant no existence to knowable objects (*jñeya*), the “knowable” pertains to subtle mental process of reifications which obstruct a bodhisattva from attaining perfect buddhahood. For the sake of fluency and flexibility, we have opted for rendering these two terms as “afflictive and cognitive obscurations,” as is done by many current translators. These two terms are already found in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 27.724b₂₈ and T 27.42b₂₄–c₆. See Jaini 2001 ed., 178 n.14.

obscurations do not truly exist substantially. [This] is the meaning of “awakening” (*byang chub* : *bodhi*).¹⁵⁸

As Mi bskyod rdo rje understands this passage, the awakening at issue is in fact a “re-awakening” (*slar sangs rgyas*) since buddhahood is innately present.¹⁵⁹

What is perhaps most striking about the Eighth Karma pa's articulation and vindication of his tradition's buddha nature doctrine is the extent to which he sought to make its affirmative stance consistent with the views of emptiness advanced by the two strands of Madhyamaka that he regarded as the summit of the Indian Buddhist philosophical systems. These are the *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka view that all phenomena lack any intrinsic essence (*nihsvabhāva*) and the Apratisthāna Madhyamaka view that all phenomena lack any epistemic or ontic foundation. Together, these antiessentialist and antifoundationalist viewpoints deny the existence of any real entities, be they external substances, selves, or internal minds, that await discovery by observation or reasoning. Both views can be regarded as extensions of central Buddhist principles of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), impermanence (*anitya*), and selflessness (*anātman*). For proponents of buddha nature, the challenge was how to reconcile the existence and perdurance of buddha nature and its inherent qualities with these axiomatic Buddhist refutations of any abiding real entities or essences, physical or mental, and their associated properties.

Mi bskyod rdo rje is well-aware of the predicament at stake: “Even if the ground of all phenomena prevails all-pervasively and impartially in buddhas and sentient beings, there is no need to [make it] a basis established [by valid sources of knowledge],¹⁶⁰ because if there were something established in this way, the fallacy would absurdly follow that this factor and all persons individually

¹⁵⁸ *Zab mo nang don kyi 'grel pa*, in RD_{SB} vol. 7, 378₂₋₃: *sangs rgyas kyi snying po la dri mas gos pa med kyang | nyon mongs pa dang shes bya'i dri ma mtha' dag ma spangs kyi bar la sangs rgyas su mi 'gyur ba khams kyi don dang | dri ma de nyid thog ma med pa'i dus nas 'brel kyang glo bur ba yin pas dri ma de rdzas bden par grub pa med pa byang chub kyi don |*.

¹⁵⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 300, ed., 308.

¹⁶⁰ *Gzhi grub* is a technical term from Buddhist epistemology that is used in Tibetan monastic academies (*bshad grwa*) to refer to objects established by valid sources of knowledge (*prameya*). For Mi bskyod rdo rje and his tradition, buddha nature and the nature of mind are beyond the triad of valid cognition, its object, and its result (*pramāṇa*, *prameya*, and *pramāṇaphala*).

endowed with it are selves and truly established.”¹⁶¹ The concern to balance these affirmative and negative standpoints puts the Karma pa in the paradoxical position of having to radically affirm something that is deemed to not actually exist as an object of any cognition. He clearly does not wish to maintain that buddha nature is *something*; but neither does he wish to conclude that it is *nothing* at all. What, then, is buddha nature?

To assess how he navigates this challenging terrain, let us begin by considering his views on buddha nature and how it is present in sentient beings. A focal point for his interpretation is *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) I.28 which is said (in RGV 25₁₈₋₁₉) to explain the sense in which all beings have buddha nature:

Because the body of the perfect Buddha is [all-]pervading,
Because suchness (*tathatā*) is undifferentiated, and
Because they have the potential,
All sentient beings are always endowed with buddha nature.¹⁶²

At the beginning of his *Tonic*, Mi bskyod rdo rje takes the first two lines of this stanza to refer to *sugata* (“buddha”) and *garbha* (“quintessence”) respectively. As he explains, *sugata* signifies the buddha possessing twofold purity, i.e., natural purity and purity from adventitious defilements, and is equated with the adamantine form embodiments (*rūpakāya*) and their displays of indestructible illusory emanations. *Garbha* means the mind of a buddha, nonconceptual wisdom that is suchness (*tathatā*), and is equated with the luminous *dharmakāya* and its indestructible wisdom.¹⁶³ In his *Intent* commentary (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg* V.2) on vajra precept 8.36, he explains that the all-pervading quality of *sambuddhakāya* mentioned in *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) I.28a means that at the time of fruition, the buddha-activities of *dharmakāya* endowed with twofold purity pervade indissolubly the three gates of body, speech, and mind of all sentient beings beyond limits or categories.¹⁶⁴ In his *Embodiments*, he adds that *dharmakāya* is pervasive

¹⁶¹ See vol. 2, tr., 282, ed., 290.

¹⁶² RGV I.28 (Johnston 1950 ed., 16): *sambuddhakāyaspharāṇāt tathatāvyatibhedataḥ | gotrataś ca sadā sarve buddhagarbhāḥ śarīriṇāḥ ||*. According to Schmithausen (1971, 142), *spharāṇa* here means that beings are embraced and pervaded (“umhüllt-und-durchdrungen”) by the *sambuddhakāya*.

¹⁶³ See vol. 2, tr., 77, ed., 137.

¹⁶⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 79, ed., 138.

“down to the subtlest particles, wherever space extends,”¹⁶⁵ encompassing the animate and inanimate alike. Here he echoes *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.49, which compares the all-pervasiveness of buddha nature to space that impartially fills and suffuses everything. In this regard he quotes corresponding passages from the *Abhisamayālamkāra* (AA) VIII.11 and *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (MSA) IX.15. To clarify the analogy, the author states that the way *dharmadhātu* pervades is like space in that it simply makes room for things to appear. In this regard, he apparently takes his cue from *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) I.50, which describes buddha nature as a universal property (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), impartially pervading all beings, from flawed to virtuous to perfect, just as space impartially pervades all forms from worst to mediocre to best.¹⁶⁶

Returning to the *Tonic*, we may take note of Mi bskyod rdo rje's comment that for reasons outlined in *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.48a–b, “both *sugata* and *garbha* exist.” On this basis he concludes that “one has the spiritual potential [whose buddha-qualities] are not recognized as being disconnected—like inalienable bliss (*bde ba tha mi dad pa*)—or rather one has never deviated from the nature of that [potential].”¹⁶⁷ For the Karma pa, one *has* buddha nature, or its tantric equivalent inalienable bliss,¹⁶⁸ in the specific sense that one has never been without it or apart from it. It is not something acquired, though its existence generally goes unnoticed while it remains obscured. The Karma pa proceeds to identify *garbha* with the tantric embodiments (*kaya*) of great bliss (*mahāsukhakāya*) of general Buddhist tantra and with the “embodiment of the single potential of great mystery” (*gsang chen rigs gcig kyi sku*)¹⁶⁹ of the Mahāyoga system, which

¹⁶⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 278, ed., 287.

¹⁶⁶ RGV I.50 (Johnston 1950 ed., 41): “The universal property is such that it pervades defects, qualities, and perfection. It is like the space inside [all] objects, be they inferior, average, or distinguished.” *taddoṣagunaniṣṭhāsu vyāpi sāmānyalakṣaṇam | hīnamadhyavīśiṣṭeṣu vyoma rūpagateṣv iva ||*.

¹⁶⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 78, ed., 137.

¹⁶⁸ On the identification of buddha nature with the great bliss (*mahāsukha*) of Buddhist tantra, see 209.

¹⁶⁹ *Gsang chen rigs gcig* is the title of a *sādhana* (practice) text of Mahāyoga ascribed to Padmasambhava belonging to the “eight precept practices” (*sgrub pa bka' brgyad*), a cycle of texts on the eight main personal deities (*yi dam*) of Mahāyoga with their associated tantras and *sādhanas*. This text is found in the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, a cycle of Rnying ma bka' brgyad teachings whose rediscovery is attributed to Nyang ral

flourished in Tibet during the Royal Dynastic period. With this identification, he establishes a crucial point of convergence between sūtric and tantric (both Gsarma and Rnying ma) buddha nature discourses. In short, the opening two lines are used to reinforce the core Bka' brgyud view that buddha nature consists in the inseparability of appearance and emptiness (*snang stong dbyer med*) or, in Sgam po pa's phraseology, the *dharmakāya* and its luminosity. It is a view that reconciles the emptiness and dynamism of human reality, a view that sets its sights on a middle trajectory between the extremes of existence and nonexistence.

The next line, which specifies that beings have this potential (RGV I.48c), is taken to mean that “this *buddhagarbha* which is inseparable from the threefold *rūpakāya*, *dharmakāya*, and *mahāsukhakāya* is the quintessence (*garbha*) of whatever embodied beings there are in all [phases] of purity and impurity.”¹⁷⁰ In its pure condition, this buddha nature is inseparable from the pure embodiment of liberation (*vimuktikāya*), while in impure bodies, “it is a quintessence (*snying po* : *garbha*) that is similar to what is hidden in a husk (*sbun lkogs*) or chaff (*shun*

Nyi ma'i 'od zer (1136–1205). See *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor* vol. 6, 211–95. The rationale behind Mi bskyod rdo rje's identification of the *gsang chen rigs gcig kyi sku* with the *garbha* is at least partially clarified by a short *sādhana* instruction on the *Gsang chen rigs gcig* visualization practice by Mi pham rgya mtsho entitled *Bka' brgyad kyi zhi ba gsang chen rigs gcig sgrub thabs*. There the author identifies the seed syllable *hum* of one's deity-body (*lha'i sku*) as the ultimate quintessence (*mthar thug snying po*); while visualizing oneself as the *yi dam* with a deep blue *hum* in the heart and intoning the *hum*, the light-rays and sound-reverberations emanating from it resolve all things, sounds and thoughts into the brilliance, resonance and empty bliss of the *hum*. Thus, he concludes, “if we are to summarize here the eight precepts (*bka' brgyad po*), they converge in the *hum* as the ultimate quintessence. Since this alone is the authentic quintessence (*yang dag pa'i snying po*), you needn't [do] anything else—whatever you wish is accomplished.” *bka' brgyad po tshur bsdus na mthar thug snying po hum gcig la thug | 'di kho na yang dag pa'i snying po yin pas gzhān ci yang mi dgos | ci bsam 'grub po zhes gsungs so |* See *Bka' brgyad kyi zhi ba gsang chen rigs gcig sgrub thabs*, in MP_{SB} vol. 26, 184₆–5₁.

¹⁷⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 79, ed., 138.

pa)¹⁷¹ that are adventitious, false, and not inherently existing." This is the sense of the final line "All sentient beings are always endowed with buddha nature."¹⁷²

But what, precisely, is meant by "buddha nature"? For the Eighth Karma pa, buddha nature is simply that in virtue of which sentient beings grow weary of states of bondage and suffering and wish for liberation. In other words, soteriological conventions such as *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, or bondage and liberation, are predicated on the possibility of freedom from the shackles of ignorance, error and affliction; and buddha nature is precisely the condition of this possibility. As he explains in the *Embodiments*, "On the one hand, it is by virtue of [beings] having this cause, i.e., buddha nature (*buddhagarbha*), that its result is actualized. On the other hand, it is by virtue of the influence of all the adventitious defilements which obscure or obstruct [buddha nature] that all phenomena of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* occur by way of dependent arising. Thus, if this [buddha] nature did not exist, then *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, bondage and liberation, and so on would not exist on the level of discursive conventions."¹⁷³

It is worth noting that the understanding of *snying po* as a vital essence concealed within an expendable covering is central to the Eighth Karma pa's understanding of buddha nature. Taking his cue from 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), the author in his *Embodiments* draws attention to four Sanskrit equivalent of the Tibetan term *snying po*:

Thus, among the expressions for the term "quintessence" (*snying po*) such as *sāra*, *hrdaya*, *garbha* and *maṇḍa*, the first [*sāra* ("vital core")], is used] because many [qualities] spread out from a single quintessence. The second [*hrdaya* ("heart")] means something held to be vitally important like the heart of a living being. The third [*garbha* ("womb," "quintessence," "interior," "inner sanctuary")] is like the kernel (*snying po*) within a husk. The fourth [*maṇḍa*

¹⁷¹ On the meaning of *shun pa* and related terms, see below 92ff.

¹⁷² See vol. 2, tr., 80, ed., 137.

¹⁷³ For the excerpt from the *Embodiments*, see vol. 2, tr., 280, ed., 289. See also an excerpt from the *Lamp* vol. 2, tr., 18, ed., 52.

(“cream,” “best, uppermost part”)] means extracting the essence [i.e., making the most] of an opportunity.¹⁷⁴

In his *Tonic*, the Mi bskyod rdo rje suggests that the semantic associations that were traditionally drawn between *garbha*, *gotra*, *dhātu*, and *dharma dhātu* help us to understand that buddha nature (*buddhagarbha*) is inseparable from the *dharma dhātu* wisdom (*dharma dhātu jñāna*), which is replete with buddha-qualities. This interpretation of the terminology supports Mi bskyod rdo rje's view of buddha nature as the inseparability of manifestation and emptiness, of the two truths (*satyadvaya*), and of buddha nature and its qualities:

¹⁷⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 285, ed., 293. Compare also with 'Gos Lo tsā ba's *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long* (Mathes 2005 ed.), 262₂₄–263₄, paraphrased in Kano 2016, 357. According to 'Gos Lo tsā ba, the first three terms correspond to *dharma kāya*, *tathatā*, and *gotra*, i.e., the three reasons (specified in RGV I.27–28) why it is said that sentient beings possess buddha nature. The text reads as follows: “This *snying po* [renders] these Sanskrit terms: *sāra*, *hrdaya*, *garbha*, and *maṇḍa*. Although they [refer to] a single subject, it is possible to render them in all [these ways] according to the claims of [different] interpreters. Nonetheless, according to etymology, the term *sāra* (“vital core”) is termed “quintessence” because it constitutes the basis from which many qualities spread forth. [It] refers to *dharma kāya*. The term *hrdaya* (“heart”) is called “quintessence” because it is like the heart of a person. That refers to suchness (*tathatā*) because for those who desire liberation, this is precisely what they should hold in the highest esteem. The term *garbha* (“womb”) is interpreted as a “womb” or “seed” because it is taken as something which resides within the sheath of a husk. Thus it refers to the potential (*gotra*). It is *maṇḍa* (“cream”) because it is something solid and it is interpreted as the distilled quintessence, as in the expressions the “seat of awakening” (*byang chub kyi snying po* : *bo-dhī-maṇḍa*) with reference to Vajrāsana (“Vajra Seat,” i.e., Bodhgaya) and “the distilled essence of milk” (i.e., cream).” *snying po* 'di la ni samskri ta la sā ra zhes bya ba dang | hr^a da ya zhes bya ba dang | *garbha* zhes bya ba dang | *maṇḍa* zhes bya ba dag go || 'di dag chos can gcig la yang smra ba po'i 'dod pas thams cad sbyar du rung mod kyi | 'on kyang nges pa'i tshig las sā ra zhes bya ba chos du ma spro ba'i gzhir gyur pas snying po zhes bya ba yin te | chos kyi sku la bya'o || hr^a da ya zhes bya ba gces pas snying po zhes bya ste mi'i snying bzhin no || de ni de bzhin nyid la bya ste | thar pa 'dod pas 'di nyid la gces spras bya ba'i phyir ro || *garbha* zhes bya ba ni sa bon dang mngal la 'jug ste | shun pa'i sbubs na gnas pa zhig la bya ba yin pas rigs la bya'o || manda ni gcig tu mkhregs pa'i phyir dang bcud kyi snying por gyur pa la 'jug ste | rdo rje'i gdan la snying po byang chub ces bya ba dang mar gyi snying khu zhes brjod pa bzhin no ||. ^aBoth the blockprint and handwritten manuscript have *hri* (as reported in Mathes 2005 ed.)

Now, the meaning of designating buddha nature as a *gotra* is as follows. It is possible to render [buddha nature] as a wide range of objects of knowledge according to derivations from the [Sanskrit] term *dhātu*.¹⁷⁵ Thus, we here translate it as *rigs* [potential]. As for its meaning, it is necessary to explain it in terms of *dharmadhātu* because the wisdom of *dharmadhātu* is precisely that which is fully replete with all qualities such that the nature, mode of abiding, and essence of that buddha nature are not disregarded.¹⁷⁶

This passage signals the need for an understanding of buddha nature that makes room for the innate buddha-qualities of transcendent knowledge and the activities that are viewed as expressions of such knowledge. Such inherent qualities and their progressive disclosure are what allow us to affirm that any sentient being already has what it takes to be a buddha. As the author argues at length elsewhere, metaphysically austere conceptions of buddha nature that reduce it to a nonaffirming emptiness are wont to disregard precisely these criteria of buddha nature that make buddhahood itself a viable and worthwhile soteriological aim. Indeed, it is difficult to comprehend why a religious goal consisting in sheer nothingness devoid of all cognition and sensation would hold any more promise or attraction for a Buddhist practitioner than a medically-induced coma. Yet, it is noteworthy that despite Mi bskyod rdo rje's avowal of buddha nature and its qualities, he adopted a decidedly critical stance toward the proclivity among some of his coreligionists to take buddha nature as a transcendent metaphysical absolute beyond space and time. Like many of his post-classical Bka' brgyud colleagues, the Karma pa instead advocated a middle path beyond extremes, one that affirmed buddha nature as the ground and goal of Buddhist soteriology, while rejecting its reification into a real entity having real properties.

¹⁷⁵ On the polysemic significations of the term *dhātu* which include element, constituent part, ingredient, mineral, principle, cause, sphere, realm, expanse, relic, and ashes of the cremated body, see Radich 2008, 2016, Jones 2015. See Monier-Williams and Böhtlingk s.v. *dhātu*. On the meanings of *gotra*, see Seyfort Ruegg 1976. For other details regarding these terms, see also above 85, n. 154.

¹⁷⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 89, ed., 142.

2.2. Buddha nature discourses are of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*)

The Eighth Karma pa's commitment to chart a *via media* between the extremes of eternalism and nihilism, existence and nonexistence, is epitomized by his hermeneutics of the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma (*dharmacakra*). In his *Kun mkhyen rab tu 'bar ba'i phung po bskal me 'jig byed* (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg* II.2), an explanation of *Single Intent* (*Dgongs gcig*) teachings given to the 'Bri gung lineage holder Rin chen rnam rgyal Chos grags rgyal mtshan (1519–1576), the Karma pa upholds a univocal understanding of emptiness that is shared by all three turnings of the *dharmacakra*. As he explains, “all three turnings, while ranging in scope from lesser to greater in their teachings on the causes of ascertaining emptiness”—in accordance with the increasingly subtle obscurations to be removed—“are fully in accord when it comes to their respective views of emptiness. This is because, although the full range of phenomena, which are found to be empty, cannot be established in terms of intrinsic essence, [this emptiness is nonetheless] posited as a mere exclusion (*rnam par sel tsam*), not being amenable to conceptual superimpositions.”¹⁷⁷ The characterization of emptiness as a mere exclusion—on the grounds that it cannot be framed conceptually—aligns neatly with the author's view that the disclosure of buddha nature goes hand in hand with the complete elimination of reifications, a “cleansing” which leaves behind no conceptual residue.

From the foregoing it follows that the Eighth Karma pa holds that the middle and final turnings both contain teachings of definitive meaning and are, in this sense, without contradiction. Reflecting on the complementarity between the

¹⁷⁷ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* II.2, in MD_{SB} vol. 4, 1089₆–1090₁: *spyir 'khor lo gsum du stong pa nyid du gtan la dbab rgyu'i chos rgya che chung yod kyang stong pa nyid rang gi 'dod tshul mthun pa yin te | chos gang dang gang stong nyid du song ba de rang gi ngo bo nyid kyis ma grub kyang | rtog pas btags mi rung ba rnam par bsal tsam zhig la 'jog pa'i phyir |* Elsewhere in the *Dgongs gcig kar tīg*, Mi bskyod rdo rje characterizes the three *dharmacakras* as antidotes that successively remove the increasingly subtle objects to be relinquished (*spang bya*), ranging from coarse (*rags pa*), to subtle (*phra ba*) to most subtle (*ches phra ba*), that are present in those to be trained (*gdul bya*). In support of this interpretation of the three turnings, the author quotes *Catuhśataka* VIII.15. This stanza from the chapter on “The Conduct of the Student” reads “Wise is the one who understands, first, the rejection of demerit; next, the rejection of the self; and finally, the rejection of all [things].” For a translation of this passage with critical editions of Sanskrit and Tibetan, see Lang (tr.) 2003, 82–83.

middle and final turnings, the author states in the *Intent* (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg*) II.2 that Bka' brgyud masters “having in mind the subject matter of the middle turning, conventionally spoke of ‘understanding cause and effect (*rgyu 'bras*) in terms of emptiness,’ while having in mind the subject matter of the third turning, [spoke of] ‘emptiness manifesting in terms of cause and effect’.”¹⁷⁸

To understand the import of this statement, it may be helpful to reacquaint ourselves with Mi bskyod rdo rje's revisionist stance concerning traditional causal-teleological conceptions of buddha nature. He insistently maintained that those discourses on buddha nature which variously describe it as a “cause” (e.g., a seed, a potential, an element) or an “effect” (a goal, a fruit, a result) should be viewed as metaphoric devices that were deployed heuristically by the Buddha to make the subject matter comprehensible to those under the influence of dualistic consciousness who were thus predisposed to thinking of buddha nature in causal and teleological terms. Such discourses were therefore deemed to be of merely provisional meaning, i.e., requiring further interpretation. This point helps to explain why the Karma pa elsewhere claims that the middle turning discourses on emptiness are generally of definitive meaning, while the final turning discourses on buddha nature in some cases combine teachings on definitive meaning with teachings of provisional meaning. The purpose behind this combination is to make buddha nature acceptable and intelligible to those whose minds are not yet freed from the categories of causal-teleological understanding.

In a similar vein, the author deems provisional those Buddhist soteriological models that construe buddhahood as the result of fundamental transformation (*gnas 'gyur* : *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, *o-parivṛtti*).¹⁷⁹ More specifically, he targeted those models predicated on the (psychological) assumption that goal-realization consists in an altered state of consciousness, such as the transformation of ordinary consciousness, or ignorance, into wisdom. Against this view, Mi bskyod rdo rje contends that buddhahood transcends causal production and transformation. Hence, interpretations of buddha nature in terms of cause or effect must be considered as provisional, heuristic fictions—half truths or “white

¹⁷⁸ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* II.2, in MD_{SB} vol 4, 1089₅₋₆: *brgyud pa rin po che 'di pa 'khor lo bar ba'i bstan bya la dgongs nas rgyu 'bras stong nyid du rtogs pa dang | tha ma'i bstan bya la dgongs nas stong nyid rgyu 'bras su shar ba zhes tha snyad mdzad do ||*.

¹⁷⁹ However, Mi bskyod rdo rje would accept the type of fundamental transformation based on a disclosure model, as outlined for example in the DhDhV. On disclosive transformation models, see Higgins 2013, 27–30.

lies" that are geared to accommodating minds accustomed to thinking in terms of cause and effect. Stated concisely, buddhahood should be viewed not as the result of production or transformation of ordinary consciousness, but rather as that which is disclosed with the latter's elimination.

By now it should be clear that the Eighth Karma pa's efforts to reveal the complementarity between the last two turnings coincide with his commitment to avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. In his own intellectual milieu, he associated these extremes with [1] an "ontologizing" view (epitomized by the Jo nang tradition) that privileges the third turning within a Gzhan stong perspective—reifying the ultimate and downgrading the conventional—and [2] a "relativizing" view (attributed to the Dge lugs tradition) that privileges the second turning from a Rang stong standpoint—downgrading the ultimate and reifying the conventional. With these in mind, Mi bskyod rdo rje explicitly rejected the view attributed to Dol po pa that the final turning should be regarded as "vastly superior to the middle turning." The Jo nang position, as the Karma pa summarizes it in his *Intent* IV.1, maintains that the middle turning is of merely provisional meaning inasmuch as it portrays emptiness as "unreal" (*bden med*) and intrinsically empty (*rang stong*), being "coreless" like a banana plant¹⁸⁰ and therefore devoid of anything to be revealed. By contrast, the third turning is said to be of definitive meaning inasmuch as it depicts emptiness as something truly established (*bden grub*) and empty of other (*gzhan stong*), a state of liberation that is a permanent entity and therefore possesses something to be revealed.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Although banana (and related plantain) plants have a tree-like appearance, their apparent trunks are in reality false stems or pseudostems, consisting of tightly packed sheaths, which die after fruiting. For Rang byung rdo rje's illuminating interpretation of the analogy, see Mathes 2008a, 53.

¹⁸¹ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, in BC vol. 80, 141₆–142₂: "[For] some Tibetans, in the middle turning, since that emptiness has been shown to be unreal and self-empty, it is essenceless like a banana [plant], and therefore lacks something to be revealed. Thus, it is of provisional meaning. However, in the final turning, since [emptiness] is shown to be truly established and other-empty, [the state of] liberation is a permanent real entity and hence exists as something to be revealed. Thus it is of definitive meaning. Therefore, the final turning is proclaimed [by them] to be far superior to the middle turning." *bod kha cig | 'khor lo bar par ni stong nyid de rang stong bden med du bstan pas de ni chu shing bzhin snying po med pas mngon du byar med pas drang don yin la | 'khor lo tha mar ni gzhan stong bden grub bstan pas de ni thar pa rtag pa'i dngos po nyid yin pas*

Were the Jo nang assessment of the middle turning correct, the Karma pa argues, “it would absurdly follow that the meditative equipoise properly cultivated by bodhisattvas through conjoining skillful means (*thabs*) and discerning insight (*shes rab*), in line with the methods taught in the middle turning, could not bring attainment of the noble Paths of Seeing and Meditation and the rest. This is because an emptiness thus explained would be essenceless like a plantain and unable to reveal [anything]. It would also [absurdly] follow that the lucid descriptions of the middle turning that Maitreya called ‘the *dharma* *cakra* that fully ripens’ and that Nāgārjuna and his spiritual heirs called ‘the *dharma* *cakra* that reveals selflessness and self-overcoming’ would be mere words having no sense.”¹⁸² The Karma pa at this point proposes that middle turning teachings on emptiness are indeed soteriologically efficacious, having the capacity to reveal selflessness and emptiness, which are widely regarded by Buddhists as the cornerstones of spiritual realization.

The author goes on to denounce the hypostatization of the ultimate, buddha nature, arguing that it is no better than the Brahmanical belief in a metaphysical absolute. “If it was the case that the final turning discourses taught that liberation is a permanent entity and that emptiness is truly established, then it would also absurdly follow that the Buddha was a false friend (*log pa'i bshes gnyen*). This is because he clearly distinguished non-Buddhists—those who described liberation not in terms of the truth of cessation but rather in terms of a permanent entity—from the perennial tradition¹⁸³ [of Buddhists, for whom] emptiness in the sense of something truly established and so forth constitutes a metaphysical view of self (*ātmadrṣṭi*) that is imputed to phenomena.”¹⁸⁴

mngon du byar yod pas nges pa'i don yin pas 'khor lo bar pa las tha ma ches mchog tu gyur pa yin no zhes smra bar byed do ||.

¹⁸² Ibid., 142₂₋₅: *des na 'khor lo bar par bstan pa'i zab mo stong pa nyid kyi tshul de la byang chub sems dpa' dag gis mnyam par bzhag ste thabs shes 'brel ba legs par bsgoms kyang | mthong bsgom sogs 'phags lam mi thob par thal | der bshad pa'i stong nyid de mngon du byar mi rung ba chu shing lta bu'i snying med de yin pa'i phyir dang | 'dod na 'khor lo bar pa de la **mgon po byams pas** rab tu smin pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo zhes pa dang | 'phags pa yab sras kyiis bdag med bstan pa dang bdag bzlog gi chos kyi 'khor lo zhes gsal bar gsungs pa de'ang tshig tsam las don la mi gnas par 'gyur ba dang |...*

¹⁸³ On the term *ring lugs*, see Karmay 1988, 77.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 24₁₋₄: *'khor lo tha mas thar pa rtag dngos dang stong nyid bden grub bstan na sangs rgyas kyang log pa'i bshes gnyen du 'gyur te | phyi rol pa ltar thar pa 'gog bden du*

We are now in a position to understand how the complementarity of the content of the last two turnings is central to the Karma pa's interpretation of buddha nature. Understanding that all phenomena are empty undermines the metaphysical belief in buddha nature *qua* eternally existent (*rtag*), while understanding that all phenomena are dependently arisen undercuts the nihilistic belief in buddha nature *qua* eternally nonexistent (*chad*). This avoidance of extreme positions helps explain Mi bskyod rdo rje's somewhat ambivalent stance toward Rang stong and Gzhan stong views of buddha nature. This is already discernable in his early "moderate Gzhan stong" period but becomes more pronounced in his later works. The author's first major scholastic work, a commentary on the *Abhisamayālāmka* (AA)¹⁸⁵ completed when he was twenty-four (1531), records in scrupulous detail a probing mind's varying perspectives on the Rang stong and Gzhan stong positions as it struggles to specify their sense and relevance within shifting contexts of Buddhist soteriology. At one point, the author even maintains, following a standard Tibetan line of interpretation typically associated with the Jo nang trailblazer Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, that dependent and imagined phenomena are empty of own natures, whereas the perfect nature is not found to be empty of own nature, but is rather "emptiness endowed with the excellence of all aspects" (*sarvākāravaropetāśūnyatā*).¹⁸⁶ This explicit endorsement of a standard Gzhan stong view seems less surprising when it is recalled that the Karma pa's teacher Chos grub seng ge is said to have advised him to uphold the Gzhan stong view.

mi ston par rtag dngos su ston cing stong nyid bden grub sog chos la kun btags pa'i bdag tu lta ba'i ring lugs chen po dbye bar mdzad pa'i phyir ||.

¹⁸⁵ See Brunnhölzl 2010.

¹⁸⁶ *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i lung chos mtha' dag*, in MD_{SB} vol. 12, 410₆–411₂: "If the nature of all imagined and relative phenomena such as the aggregates are analyzed, they are empty of own nature, as in the example of a coreless banana plant. However, regarding the perfect [nature], viz., the 'emptiness endowed with the excellence of all aspects,' in general, it is not amenable to analysis and, no matter how it is analyzed, it does not become like that, i.e., empty of own nature." ...*phung po sog chos kun brtags^a pa dang | gzhan dbang gi chos thams cad rang gi ngo bo la rnam par dpyad pa na | rang gi ngo bo stong pa nyid de | dper na chu shing snying po med pa bzhin yin la | yongs grub rnam pa kun gyi mchog dang ldan pa'i stong nyid de ni spyir dpyad mi nus pa dang | ji ltar dpyad kyang rang gi ngo bos stong pa de ltar 'gyur ba ma yin te | de lta bu'i ye shes mchog de nyid las gzhan du mi 'gyur ba'i phyir zhes gsung ngo ||.* ^a MD_{SB}: *btags*. For an English translation of this passage, see also Brunnhölzl 2010, 146.

We may also recall that his *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentary came to be regarded by later masters in his tradition as an attempt to present the Gzhan stong views of Jo nang and Shākyā mchog ldan.¹⁸⁷ However, Mi bskyod rdo rje's early engagement with these views stand in contrast to his later, more ambivalent, stance, registered in various texts and doctrinal contexts, toward Gzhan stong theories in general, and specifically those attributed to Dol po pa and Shākyā mchog ldan.¹⁸⁸

At another point in his *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentary, Mi bskyod rdo rje elaborates a disclosive perspective on buddha nature and the path to its realization that is said to be irreducible to either a Rang stong or a Gzhan stong standpoint.¹⁸⁹ There he explains, in line with the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, that the so-called “sentient being” does not possess the *dharmadhātu* since the former is being merely a cover term for the adventitious defilements that occur due to false imaginings, thus obscuring their source, *dharmadhātu*. Rather, he argues, it is buddha nature or the pure mind (*dag pa'i sems*) that is said to possess the mode of being inseparable from buddha-qualities.¹⁹⁰ Consequently, sentient beings do not *develop into* bodhisattvas and then into buddhas. It would be more accurate to say that buddha nature, as the true mode of being, becomes increasingly manifest as the delusive structures collectively termed “sentient being” are progressively phased out. Finally, buddha(hood) is

¹⁸⁷ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 258.

¹⁸⁸ This begs the question why the head of a school who was already capable of writing 700 folia of dense philosophical commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra* would be persuaded to uphold a view at odds with his own. See Mathes 2017, 67–68.

¹⁸⁹ In *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i lung chos mtha' dag*, in MD_{SB} vol. 12, 348₁₋₃, the author concedes that it is impossible to assert a Gzhan stong view apart from a Rang stong one given that the basis of emptiness and the adventitious defilements of which it is empty are both inherently empty. Here, the adventitious, which is equated with conventional truth, does not subsist even for an instant. *chos can glo bur ba gzhān gyis stong bzhin pa'i gzhān stong de chos can | gzhi las gzhān pa glo bur dri ma de rang gi ngo bo skad cig tu mi sdod par stong bzhin pa can yin te | chos can kun rdzob kyi bden pa yin pa'i phyir | rgyu mtshan des na gzhān stong yin pa la rang stong yin pas khyab pa zhig nges par khas len dgos la | rang stong du khas len pa'i stong nyid de stong nyid go chod du khas len na ni rang stong las gzhān pa'i gzhān stong khas len par mi rung ngo |*. See also Brunnholzl 2010, 135.

¹⁹⁰ See Mathes 2008a, 63.

all that remains. It is from this disclosive vantage point that the author likens sentient beings *qua* adventitious defilements to clouds in the sky, where the sky signifies buddha nature in its open expanse, free from a center or periphery. Clouds dissolve and the clear blue sky is revealed, without anything of the sky having ever been acquired or removed. In any event, what is revealed in this disclosure process is not a permanent entity outside of space and time, but rather an ultimate state of awakening that is beyond all discursive elaboration. The Karma pa thus deems this disclosive RGV view of buddha nature to be of definitive meaning (*nītartha*). Alternative accounts, especially those guided by developmental, causal-teleological presuppositions, are viewed as provisional, having been presented with the veiled intent to accommodate those who presently do not have the capacity to relate to buddha nature directly.

With these foregoing considerations in mind, it is understandable why Mi bskyod rdo rje's interpretation of buddha nature as innate buddhahood would put him at odds with many of his coreligionists who denied that buddha nature constitutes ultimate reality and who would only go so far as to regard buddha nature as a heuristic conventional construct, but not as ultimate reality. The same scholars also typically regarded third turning discourses on buddha nature as being of merely provisional, not ultimate, meaning. It is to these conflicts of interpretation that we shall now turn our attention.

2.3. The “nature” (*garbha*) of a buddha is actual, not nominal

In articulating his view of buddha nature, Mi bskyod rdo rje takes a firm stand against the influential position of Rngog Lo tsā ba Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109) that the “nature” (*garbha*) of a buddha (*tathāgata*) is not actual or definitive (*mtshan nyid pa* : *lākṣaṇika*), but only nominal (*btags pa* : **prājñaptika*). This position was widely adopted by Tibetan masters during Rngog's lifetime and in the centuries to follow. One of its most erudite and influential exponents was the fifteenth century polymath 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), who abridged the main points of Rngog's position as follows: “In terms of the *dharmakāya*, the status of *tathāgata* is real, whereas that of *garbha* is only nominal; in terms of *tathatā*, both *tathāgata* and *garbha* are real; and in terms of the *gotra*, *tathāgata* is nominal and *garbha* is real.”¹⁹¹ In a similar vein, Rngog's

¹⁹¹ As translated in Kano 2016, 356. Kano observes (357) that 'Gos Lo tsā ba largely adopts this interpretation but differs in his interpretation of *tathatā*: “[’Gos lo] says that

disciple Gro lung pa Blo gros 'byung gnas (12th c.) maintained that for a buddha, *tathatā* and *dharmakāya* are real, but the *gotra* is nominal, whereas for a sentient being, *tathatā* and *gotra* are both real, but *dharmakāya* is nominal.¹⁹²

The Karma pa insistently rejects the position that buddha nature is only provisional and not definitive.¹⁹³ He argues that its adherents base their

"*tathatā* insofar as it abides in a buddha is a real buddha, but insofar as it abides in sentient beings is a nominal buddha." This does not mesh with rNgog's interpretation, according to which the status of *tathatā* is real both for the Buddha and sentient beings. In another passage, gZhon nu-dpal again splits *tathatā* into ultimate and conventional levels of reality." For an extensive treatment of the buddha nature views of 'Gos Lo tsā ba, see Mathes 2008a.

¹⁹² See Kano 2016, 293.

¹⁹³ In his *Lamp*, Mi bskyod rdo rje says of buddha nature that "the ultimate has always been true, and thus is not empty." See vol. 2, tr., 48, ed., 71. The sense of the term "true" is explained in Karma phrin las pa's *Zab mo nang don gyi rnam bshad snying po*, in RD_{SB} vol. 14, 3964–3973; "From the *Rigs gzhung rgya mtsho*, 'While the statement that "nondual wisdom is established as ultimate truth" means "... established as what is ultimate truth," it does not assert it is "truly established," [i.e.,] permanent, stable, and enduring.' [quotation unidentified] Some think that if [something] is established as ultimate truth, then it must be truly established. These [people] have not investigated [the matter]; they are just confused about the term 'truth'. For example, although [something may be] established as true conventionally, it is not necessarily truly established. Consequently, there is a marked difference between the general run of Gzhan stong proponents these days and the position of the glorious Rang byung [rdo rje]. Also, the statement of my teacher, the All-knowing One [Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho], that self-emptiness and other-emptiness are not mutually contradictory, was well-taught in a way that makes this meaning accessible to our minds. Thus, buddha nature should be explained according to this system, such that it exists as the great freedom from extremes, the inseparability of appearance and emptiness, the unity of the two truths." *rig/s] gzung rgya mtsho las | gnyis med kyi ye shes don dam pa'i bden par grub par gsungs pa yang | de don dam bden pa yin par grub ces pa'i don yin gyi | de bden grub rtag brtan ther zug tu bzhed pa ma yin no || kha cig | don dam pa'i bden par grub na bden par grub dgos so snyam pa de dag ni ma brtags pa ste | bden pa zhes pa'i ming tsam la 'khrul par zad pas so | dper na | kun rdzob pa'i bden par grub kyang bden par grub mi dgos pa bzhin no || de'i phyir | ding sang gi gzhhan stong smra ba phal dang | dpal rang byung gi bzhed pa la khyad par yod pa ste | bdag gi bla ma thams cad mkhyen pa'i zhal snga nas | rang stong gzhhan stong mi 'gal zhes gsung pa'ang don 'di thugs su byon pa'i legs par bshad*

conclusions on a questionable reading of a key passage in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* concerning the metaphorical ascription (*upacāra* : *nyer btags*) of the *gotra* (RGV I.27c). This is an important hermeneutical issue for the Karma pa and will therefore be treated separately in the next section. For the present, it will suffice to examine some of the more general doctrinal weaknesses and inconsistencies he associates with this view.

A good starting point is a section of his *Intent* commentary (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg* V.2) on vajra precept 8.36 wherein he defends the actuality (*mtshan nyid pa* : *lākṣanika*) of the *garbha* against the views of Rngog and his successors on the grounds of the all-pervasive character of buddhahood (or *dharmakāya*):

Here, it is explained that “the body of the perfect Buddha is [all-] pervading” [RGV I.28a] means that, at the time of fruition, the buddha-activities of *dharmakāya* endowed with twofold purity impartially pervade the three gates [body, speech, and mind] of all sentient beings beyond limits or categories. As for the meaning of “buddha,” in discussing the line [RGV I.27a] “because buddha wisdom is present in all [kinds of] sentient beings,” the great translator [Rngog] Blo ldan shes rab and others explained that *buddha* is actual, whereas the *garbha* is nominal.¹⁹⁴

In countering this position, Mi bskyod rdo rje begins by citing the interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* given by his teacher Ras pa chen po (Bkra shis dpal 'byor):¹⁹⁵

Tathāgata means “gone (*gata*) to the reality (*tathā*) of all phenomena.” When so explained, *tathā* means beyond one or many. In this regard, the *tathāgata* of sentient beings and buddhas does not exist as two different things. Therefore, the primordially undefiled wisdom, with its powers and so on, has since time immemorial “pervaded” or been innately present in each of their mind-streams.

pa'o || de ltar na mtha' bral chen po snang stong dbyer med bden gnyis zung 'jug tu yod pa'i sangs rgyas kyi snying po de'i tshul brjod par bya'o |.

¹⁹⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 198, ed., 230.

¹⁹⁵ Mi bskyod rdo rje regarded Sangs rgyas mnyan pa I, Bkra shis dpal 'byor (1457–1525), as his root Guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) and received from him various Mahāmudrā instructions, most importantly the direct introduction to the nature of mind. See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 247.

For that reason, it makes sense to explain the meaning of “purification and affliction” in terms of this suchness. Hence, it is not a contradiction to say this causal and resultant *dharmakāya* of buddha[hood] which is endowed with twofold purity is both upwardly pervasive (*yar khyab*) and downwardly pervasive (*mar khyab*), because such *dharmakāya* of buddha[hood] accompanies all buddhas and sentient beings as both cause and result, like space.¹⁹⁶

Bkra shis dpal 'byor here defines the *tathā* (reality) of *tathāgarbha* as that by virtue of which we can think and speak about phenomena of purification and affliction. Mi bskyod rdo rje takes his cue from his teacher when he refers to buddha nature as the obscured basis (*sgrib gzhi*), in other words, the condition necessary to make sense of obscuration. With this understanding, buddha nature is what is revealed by removing what conceals it: the afflictive and cognitive obscurations.¹⁹⁷ The terms “cause” and “result” are used figuratively with regard to the concealed (causal) and revealed (resultant) phases of the *dharmakāya* of a buddha. Being innately present in all beings and irreducible to one or many, it pervades sentient beings and buddhas alike.

The Karma pa next observes that his teacher's reasoning along these lines was the impetus behind his own controversial claim in his *Tonic* “that this buddha nature (*buddhagarbha*), which is the obscured basis (*sgrib gzhi*) that is obscured [in] the ‘grizzled old dog’ of a sentient being—the very epitome of obscuration—remains undifferentiated as the bearer of all buddha-qualities, such as the powers, throughout beginning, middle, and end.”¹⁹⁸ Intriguingly, the passage in question, which he also discusses in his last major work, the *Embodiments*, is not found in the three extant versions of the *Tonic* consulted for our translation. Clearly, the author used provocative imagery to underscore a salient point: buddha nature is an undifferentiated continuum that pervades buddhas and sentient beings alike and that remains unchanging throughout its states of concealment or disclosure. On this basis, Mi bskyod rdo rje concludes that “there is no contradiction in saying the ‘result’ emerges throughout beginningless time as the unbroken continuity of a homologous kind (*rigs 'dra*).”

¹⁹⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 199, ed., 231.

¹⁹⁷ On obscurations, see above, 87, n. 157.

¹⁹⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 200 and n. 744, ed., 231.

In short, resultant buddha nature is the coming to the fore of what is always already present.

In his *Embodiments*, the Karma pa further emphasizes how the putative nominal existence of the quintessence (*garbha*) is at odds with the universality of *dharmakāya*. “Because the *dharmakāya* which is endowed with the twofold purity of perfect buddhahood is [all-]pervading, down to the subtlest particles, wherever space extends, all sentient beings are [equally] endowed with *tathāgatagarbha*. Nonetheless, it has been said in this regard that buddha is actual whereas *garbha* is nominal.”¹⁹⁹ In Mi bskyod rdo rje’s estimation, the idea that buddha nature is merely nominal contradicts the standard *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine emphasizing the actuality of buddha nature in contrast to the merely nominal existence of adventitious samsaric phenomena. In support of this view, he cites the *Śrīmālādevīśiṁhanādasūtra* (ŚDS): “Bhagavān, if *tathāgatagarbha* exists, then *samsāra* is merely a nominal imputation.”²⁰⁰

In what sense does buddha nature exist in sentient beings? Mi bskyod rdo rje maintains that the presence of buddha nature in sentient beings is explained by the line “suchness is undifferentiated” (RGV I.28b). This line specifies that “the natural luminosity of the minds of everyone, from buddhas to animals, abides without differentiation as the nature of mind of sentient beings, as that essence which is free from all defilements, and without transition and transformation, like space.”²⁰¹ Buddha nature is pervasively present as the natural luminosity of mind inherent in all sentient beings. The author is thus prepared to accept that from a sentient being’s perspective, it is the *garbha* that is actual, whereas the *tathāgata* is only “actualized” by virtue of the three phases of dispelling what obscures it. In his words, “‘all sentient beings have *tathāgatagarbha*,’ but from their perspective, the *garbha* is actual²⁰² whereas *tathāgata* ‘comes about’ insofar as it is the basis of the three phases [of removing defilements].”²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 198, ed., 231.

²⁰⁰ *Śrīmālādevīśiṁhanādasūtra* (ŚDS), Tib. D 92, 274a₆₋₇.

²⁰¹ See vol. 2, tr., 279, ed., 288.

²⁰² Here it is important to note that while *tathā* (thusness) is unchanging, *tathāgata* is said to refer to one in whom buddha nature is fully revealed, purified of all adventitious defilements. From the side of sentient beings, the *garbha* is actual; from the side of buddhahood, *tathāgata* is actual and *garbha* nominal.

²⁰³ See vol. 2, tr., 279, ed., 288.

This is patently at odds with the view of Rnog Lo tsā ba that *dharmakāya*, *tathatā*, and the *gotra* are nominal in the case of ordinary beings and actual in the case of buddhas.²⁰⁴ Another notable difference is that Mi bskyod rdo rje regards the *dharmakāya* as ultimate in all its phases and thus equates it with the revealed or resultant aspect of buddha nature. This position clearly leaves no room for a nominal *dharmakāya*. Let us now direct our attention to the specific point of textual interpretation on which the Karma pa's view of the buddha potential as actual, rather than nominal, turns.

2.4. The *gotra* is not metaphorical (*upacāra*), but attributions of cause and result are

The Eighth Karma pa attributes the rival view that the buddha potential (*gotra*) is only nominal (*prajñapti*) or metaphorical (*upacāra*) to a mistaken reading of the third line of *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.27. The stanza reads as follows:

Because buddha wisdom is present in all [kinds of] sentient beings,
 Because the natural nondefilement [of buddhas and sentient
 beings] is nondual,²⁰⁵ and
 Because the result of that [buddha nature] has been metaphorically
 ascribed to the buddha potential,
 It is said that all beings are endowed with buddha nature.²⁰⁶

In his *Tonic*, the author attaches considerable importance to the third line of this stanza and takes great care in working out its correct interpretation. On his reading it is not the *tathāgatagarbha* that is said to be metaphorically ascribed (*upacāra*) to the *gotra*, but rather the notion of buddhahood being a “result” (*phala*). This appears to be well-supported by RGV I.27c: *bauddhe gotre tatphalasyopacārād* (“because of the metaphorical ascription of the result of that [*tathāgatagarbha*] to the *buddha gotra*”). Needless to say, the Karma pa's

²⁰⁴ See Kano 2016, 289 for a statement of Rngog's position and various references.

²⁰⁵ That is, not different from that of a buddha.

²⁰⁶ RGV I.27 (Johnston 1950 ed., 26): *buddhajñānāntargamāt sattvarāśes tannairma-
 lyasyādvayatvāt prakṛtyā | bauddhe gotre tatphalasyopacārād uktāḥ sarve dehino buddha-
 garbhāḥ ||*.

reading is strikingly at odds with that of Rngog who takes *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.27c as corroboration for his position that *tathāgatagarbha* is metaphorical.²⁰⁷

Since Rngog's interpretation was widely adopted and defended by his students Gro lung pa Blo gros 'byung gnas (12th c.) and Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge (1109–1169) as well as by later adherents such as 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419), and Rgyal tshab rje Dar ma rin chen (1364–1432), it is worth looking closely at the arguments Mi bskyod rdo rje advances in the *Tonic* to substantiate his variant reading. The Karma pa begins by showing that in canonical scriptures, the ideas of “cause” and “result” were often ascribed to buddhahood in a figurative way:

As for the name of this state of abiding as the inseparability of *buddhagarbha* and *dharmadhātuñāna*, the Bhagavān designated it with the terms “result of buddhahood” [and] “the supreme point of awakening” (*byang chub kyi snying po* = *bodhimāṇḍa*).²⁰⁸ In some

²⁰⁷ See Kano 2016, 1 n. 2, 164, 265.

²⁰⁸ The Tibetan *byang chub* [kyi] *snying po* was widely used in Tibetan translations of Indian Buddhist texts to render the Sanskrit *bodhimāṇḍa*, a term signifying both the “essence” (lit. “cream”) and, by extension, the “supreme place” or “seat” of enlightenment. See *Mahāyutpatti* no. 4114. In Classical Sanskrit, *māṇḍa* (lit. “cream”) properly means the “scum” that forms on top of a liquid or boiled liquid, and thus also to the cream that forms on the top of milk. From this derive the cognate senses of “essence” as well as “best,” “best part,” “highest point,” “supreme point” (compare with English expressions “the cream of the crop,” “the cream of society”). See Edgerton 1953 s.v. *māṇḍa*. Edgerton notes that “in *bodhimāṇḍa* the literal meaning of *māṇḍa* is clearly *the best, supreme point* (Tib. *snying po* : heart, essence). It is used alone, or with other qualifiers to refer to *bodhimāṇḍa*(n) : *gacchitva manḍam varapādapendram* | ‘Having gone to the supreme place, the excellent king of trees (i.e., the bodhi-tree).’” In this last example, one notes the convergence of literal and metaphorical senses of the “supreme place,” *bodhi* and the *bodhi*-tree. *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) II.26a: *buddham gacchāmi śaranam yāvad ā bodhimāṇḍataḥ* | According to Prajñākaramati's *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (BCAP) explanation of BCA II.26, “As for *māṇḍataḥ*: The word *māṇḍa* means “essence,” as [in the phrase] “essence of ghee.” This being so, [one continues] until the chief goal (*pradhānam*) of [or which is] enlightenment [is reached]. The meaning is, ‘as long as I have not realized perfect enlightenment.’” *māṇḍata iti* | *māṇḍaśabdo 'yam sāravacanam* | *ghṛtamāṇḍa iti yathā* | *tathā ca sati bodhipradhānam yāvataḥ* | *yāvataḥ samyaksam̄bodhiṁ nādhigacchāmi ity arthaḥ* |. Prajñākaramati's gloss of *bodhimāṇḍa* as *bodhipradhānam*, “the main aim/object that is awakening,” would suggest reading *bodhimāṇḍa* as a

contexts, he referred to that [factor] by means of the term “cause of buddhahood.” But labeling this *buddhagarbha* in terms of “cause” and “result” is only metaphorical.²⁰⁹

The author proceeds to warn against taking these causal descriptions and accounts as anything other than metaphorical. He further maintains that the provisional status of such causal attributions accords well with the purport of the buddha nature scriptures. In his *Lamp*, he explains that a disclosive view of buddha nature avoids the fallacies associated with the Sāṃkhya theory of causation known as Satkāryavāda, the doctrine that the effect [pre-]exists [in its cause]. The disclosive view is predicated on the premise that there is no actual difference between cause and result:

Some who pride themselves on being Mādhyamikas widely claim that one is freed from the host of discursive elaborations through logically reasoning about [whether] effects exist or do not pre-exist at the time of the cause. However, the definitive meaning here [in the tradition of Asanga and the Bka' brgyud pas] is that when it comes to ultimate buddha nature in any of its states, cause and effect do not exist as two. Rather, just as in the case of the element of water, gold, and the sky, it is shown to be present at all times without any difference between the cause itself and its result.²¹⁰

As the author explains in his *Tonic*, buddha nature was said in *Ratnagotravibhāga* and other buddha nature works to be unconditioned (*asam̄skṛta*) in precisely the sense that it is not something produced by causes and conditions; it differs in this regard from adventitious defilements, which are conditioned:²¹¹

It is not tenable to say this *buddhagarbha* is the result of anything because there is nothing in this *buddhagarbha* to [warrant] making such a distinction between substantial causes (*upādānakāraṇa*) and supporting conditions (*sahakāripratyaya*) that [together] produce [a

karmadhāraya compound *bodhiḥ eva maṇḍah*: “The supreme point/place which is enlightenment.”

²⁰⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 90, ed., 142.

²¹⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 28, ed., 57.

²¹¹ See for example RGV I.53, 154–155, 164, and III.1–3.

result]. This is proven because that which is thus unconditioned *dharmadhātu*, being unconditioned, is not established by [appeal to] the power of facts (*vastubāla*), namely, causes and conditions. For that to be a cause is untenable because it would then be established as a permanent true self. This is entailed because the means of valid sources of knowledge do not establish causes and conditions of something permanent.²¹²

Again, this account again diverges markedly from the position advanced by Rngog Blo ldan shes rab, and endorsed by 'Gos Lo tsā ba, which maintains that buddha nature is a substantial cause (*upādānakāraṇa*) of *dharmaśāya*.²¹³ In this regard, Rngog's characterization of buddha nature both as a substantial cause and as emptiness as a nonaffirming negation prompted him to further define buddha nature (and *dharmaśāya*) as a nonexistent conventional object (*tha snyad kyi yul*)—i.e., “a nonaffirming negation that is established as inherently existing [but] that does not exist in reality”²¹⁴—in order to ward off the potential criticism that emptiness cannot be a cause. For his part, the Eighth Karma pa argues that buddha nature is neither a cause nor a conventional construct. Rather, it is the *postulation* of buddha nature as a cause (or effect) that is a conventional construct, one that was deployed heuristically to make buddha nature and its realization comprehensible to those still under the influence of a dualistic

²¹² See vol. 2, tr., 90, ed., 143.

²¹³ See Rngog's *Rgyud bla don bsdus* (3a₁) where he explicitly describes buddha nature as a substantial cause (*nye bar len pa'i rgyu : upādānakāraṇa*). See Mathes 2008a, 51, n. 262. See also Kano 2016, 266.

²¹⁴ *Rgyud bla don bsdus*, 2b₃₋₄: “Therefore, the *dhātu*, which is a conventional object as a nonaffirming negation, is described as the substantial [cause] (*upādāna*) of the *dharmaśāya*, which is [itself] a conventional object as a nonaffirming negation. It is not the case, however, that [such] objects as produced or producer really exist. The term conventional object means a nonaffirming negation that is established as inherently existing [but] that does not exist in reality.” *des na med par dgag pa'i tha snyad kyi yul du gyur pa'i khams ni med par dgag pa'i tha snyad kyi yul du gyur pa'i chos kyi sku'i nyer len du brjod kyi bskyed par bya ba dang skyed par byed pa'i don nyid ni dngos su yod pa ma yin no || tha snyad kyi yul zhes bya ba ni | med par dgag pa rang bzhin du grub pa de kho nar med pa'i don to ||*. We have adopted this passage as edited by Kazuo Kano. See Kano 2016, 266. We have altered the translation for the sake of consistency.

consciousness that imputes causal and teleological properties to buddha nature that it does not in fact possess:

Now, the point of speaking in some cases of a cause of buddhahood and in others of a result of buddhahood is this. On the part of those trainees who are under the influence of [ordinary] consciousness, the *garbha* at the time when it appeared to become separated from the chaff, appeared as though it were a “result of emancipation” (*bral 'bras*).²¹⁵ Bearing this in mind, [the buddha] spoke of it as a “result.” And the *garbha* at the time when it appeared to possess the chaff, appeared as though it were a cause, namely, the cause leading to the result of emancipation from that [chaff]. Bearing this in mind,

²¹⁵ “Result of emancipation”—i.e., pure wisdom and the truth of cessation—is one of the six types of result posited in the *Abhidharmakośa* (AK) II. Mi bskyod rdo rje here refers to a well-known sūtric paradigm of the Buddhist path comprising [1] the ground of emancipation (*bral gzhi*), [2] causes of emancipation (*bral rgyu*), [3] result of emancipation (*bral 'bras*), and [4] objects to be emancipated from (*bral bya*). In the context of Mantrayāna, they are described in terms of a process of purification or clearing rather than emancipation. According to Klong chen pa, “In our account, one should understand there are four [phases]: [1] the ground where emancipation occurs (*bral gzhi*), [2] the causes of emancipation (*bral rgyu*), [3] the result of emancipation (*bral 'bras*), and [4] the objects to be emancipated from (*bral bya*). [1] The emancipation ground is our spiritual potential, the **sugatagarbha*; [2] the causes of emancipation are the facets that comprise the path, those virtuous actions conducive to liberation that clear away the defilements accreted on this [quintessence]; [3] the result of emancipation is the disclosure of qualities once the **sugatagarbha* has been freed from the plethora of defilements; and [4] the objects to emancipate from comprise the eightfold ensemble [of cognitions] that are founded on the substratum of myriad latent tendencies (*bag chags sna tshogs kyi kun gzhi*) as well as the latent tendencies [themselves]. In the Mantrayāna, these phases are declared to be [1] the ground where clearing occurs, [2] the clearing process itself, [3] the goal where obscurations have been cleared away, and [4] the objects to be cleared way. Although the names used are different, their meaning is the same.” *Sems nyid ngal gso 'grel* vol. 1, 273₁₋₄: *skabs 'dir bral gzhi | bral rgyu | bral 'bras | bral bya dang bzhir shes par bya'o | de la bral gzhi ni khams sam snying po'o | bral rgyu ni de'i steng gi dri ma sbyong byed thar pa cha mthun dge ba lam ldan gyi rnam pa'o | bral 'bras ni bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po dri ma mtha' dag dang bral nas yon tan mngon du gyur pa'o | bral bya ni bag chags sna tshogs pa'i kun gzhi la brten pa'i tshogs brgyad bag chags dang bcas pa'o | 'di dag gsang sngags ltar na | sbyang gzhi | sbyong byed | sbyangs 'bras | sbyang bya dang bzhir grags pas ming la tha dad kyang don la gcig go ||*.

[the buddha] spoke of it as a cause, a potential, and an element. From the perspective of consciousness, because the mind is mistaken concerning a *garbha*, which is unchanging and unwavering, it cannot deeply penetrate these concepts, so sometimes [the *garbha*] is mistaken for a cause, and sometimes it is mistaken for a result. However, the *garbha* is not established in any way as a cause and result. With this in mind, it was stated [in RGV I.27c] that:

Because the result of that [buddha nature] has been metaphorically ascribed to the buddha potential, ...²¹⁶

To summarize, Mi bskyod rdo rje's rejection of the nominal status of the buddha *garbha* or *gotra* hinges on his revisionist interpretation of RGV I.27c. On his reading, it is only the idea of a "result" (and causality in general) that is metaphorical, but not that to which the result is ascribed, i.e., buddha nature, buddhahood. This hermeneutical amendment is used to support not only his contention that causal descriptions and explanations of buddha nature are provisional, but also his more general thesis that buddha nature is identical to buddhahood (being the latter in an obscured state), yet radically distinct from adventitious defilements as well as sentient beings who are their epitome. It is to this general thesis that we now shift our focus.

2.5. Buddha nature is buddha(hood) obscured by defilements

In Mi bskyod rdo rje's critical review of 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal's tantric buddha nature theory in his *Tonic*, the Karma pa rejects the notion that *buddhagarbha* and *buddha* refer to different things. Although the scriptural

²¹⁶ RGV I.27c (Johnston 1950 ed., 26): *bauddhe gotre tatphalasyopacārād*. This passage is here quoted to defend the claim that buddha nature is only provisionally and metaphorically (*nye [bar] btags [pa]* = *upacāra*) posited as a result [literally "fruit"] for the benefit of those habituated to causal-teleological modes of thought and explanation, buddha nature being itself beyond causes and results. Yet another interpretation is given by the Jo nang scholar Sa bzang Mati Panchen who reads line I.27c as "because the result [lit. "fruit"] of that is enjoyed in the *buddha gotra*" in light of a version of the root text (which he claims to have corrected on the basis of a Sanskrit manuscript) that has *nye bar spyod pa* (Skt. *upabhoga*, "enjoy") instead of *nye bar btags pa* ("metaphorically ascribed"). See Mathes 2002, 86–87, Mathes 2008a, 89–91, and Kano 2016, 174–75.

target of his critique—'Gos Lo tsā ba's *Kālacakratantra* (KCT) commentary entitled *Rgyud gsum gsang ba* (composed in 1442)—is not currently available to us,²¹⁷ we were able to analyze a parallel distinction between the buddha nature (or *gotra*) and an actual buddha that is drawn by 'Gos Lo tsā ba in his extant *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary, the *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi 'grel bshad de kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long* (composed in 1473).²¹⁸ This commentary, which Mi bskyod rdo rje mentions in a rather pejorative manner in the *Tonic*,²¹⁹ allows us to corroborate some of the claims attributed to 'Gos Lo tsā ba and also provides a useful thumbnail sketch of his later views on buddha nature. That said, a balanced assessment of the cogency of the Karma pa's specific criticisms is impossible so long as the *Rgyud gsum gsang ba* remains unavailable. Commenting on RGV I.27, 'Gos Lo tsā ba claims that suchness has two parts: the suchness that exists in buddhas is actual, whereas the suchness of sentient beings is only metaphorical or nominal. Hence, *gotra* denotes a set of features that merely resemble those of a buddha but which are not, in fact, those of a buddha. In his words,

First [I.27a], because buddha wisdom is present in all kinds of sentient beings, this buddha wisdom present in sentient beings is called *tathāgatagarbha*. Even though this wisdom is the actual *tathāgata*, it is only metaphorically designated as the “*garbha* of sentient beings” (*sattvagarbha*) since it is not contained in the [mind] stream of sentient beings.

Second [I.27b], because the suchness that is the nature of mind without adventitious defilements is not different in either buddhas or sentient beings, it is said to be buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*). The suchness that exists in a buddha is the actual buddha. The suchness of sentient beings is only a nominal buddha. Therefore, this suchness has two parts.

Third [I.27c], those parts in sentient beings that are similar to a buddha, such as their aggregates (*skandha*) and the like, are the

²¹⁷ There are three versions of it listed in the *Catalogue of Manuscripts Preserved at Potala Palace*. See Luo 1985.

²¹⁸ See Mathes 2005 (critical edition) and discussion in Mathes 2008a, 317–350.

²¹⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 76–136, ed., 137–170.

buddha potential (*gotra*). When its result has been metaphorically applied to it as [if it were] a *tathāgata*, that potential is said to be of the nature (*garbha*) of a *tathāgata*. Thus, the *garbha* is actual, whereas the *tathāgata* is only nominal.²²⁰

In many respects, Mi bskyod rdo rje's critique of the *Rgyud gsum gsang ba* targets a set of positions notably similar to those outlined in this passage. However, conspicuously absent in 'Gos Lo tsā ba's *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary is his alleged equation of buddha nature with a subtle self, though he does mention that sentient beings are endowed with only a subtle form of buddha-qualities that naturally blossom into buddhahood when stains are removed.²²¹ It is possible that the stronger identification of buddha nature with a subtle self was tempered somewhat in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary composed about three decades after the *Rgyud gsum gsang ba*.

Let us briefly summarize the Eighth Karma pa's refutation of 'Gos Lo tsā ba's distinction between buddha and buddha nature as presented in the *Tonic*. Looking at the text's thematic organization, we can see that the refutation is structured around three sets of dyads. The first two highlight the distinction between [1] buddha nature and its adventitious defilements and [2] buddha and sentient being, while the third emphasizes the identity of [3] buddha nature and

²²⁰ *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long* (Mathes 2005 ed.), 262_{12–19}: *sangs rgyas kyi ye shes sems can gyi tshogs thams cad la zhugs pa'i phyir sems can la zhugs pa'i sangs rgyas kyi ye shes de la de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po zhes brjod de gcig go || ye shes de de bzhin gshegs pa dngos yin kyang sems can gyi rgyud kyis ma bsdus pas sems can gyi snying po btags pa ba'o || sems kyi rang bzhin glo bur gyi dri ma med pa'i de bzhin nyid de ni sangs rgyas dang sems can gnyi ga la khyad par med par yod pa'i phyir de la yang de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po zhes gsungs pa yin te | gnyis pa'o | sangs rgyas la yod pa'i de bzhin nyid ni sangs rgyas dngos so || sems can gyi de bzhin nyid ni sangs rgyas btags pa ba'o || des na de ni cha gnyis su gnas so || sems can thams cad la de dag gi phung po la sogs pa rnams sangs rgyas dang 'dra ba'i cha gang yin pa de ni sangs rgyas kyi rigs yin te | de la de'i 'bras bu de bzhin gshegs par nye bar btags nas rigs de la de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying por gsungs te gsum pa'o || des na snying po dngos yin kyang de bzhin gshegs pa btags pa ba yin no ||. We have followed the translation of this passage in Mathes 2008a, 326 with minor alterations for the sake of consistency.*

²²¹ See Mathes 2008a, 320–341 et passim. 'Gos Lo tsā ba argues that buddha-qualities exist in a subtle form in sentient beings. Otherwise, these beings would attain awakening in an instant. See also Mathes 2008a, 551 n. 2031.

buddha(hood). Following the internal logic of this sequence, the reader is enjoined to first discern the distinctions between buddha nature and its defilements, and between a buddha and sentient being. These provide a basis for then ascertaining the identity of buddha and buddha nature. We shall briefly consider each of these dyads in turn.

The first distinction is referred to throughout the *Tonic* by means of the short-hand expressions, “quintessence” or “kernel” (*snying po*) and “chaff” (*shun pa*). This dyad is used to differentiate what is enduring and essential from what is merely adventitious and superfluous. The metaphor is apposite: the buddha nature doctrine allows one to separate the soteriological “wheat from the chaff” by helping one to distinguish buddha nature from the reifications that obscure it, and to thereby undercut the proclivity to confuse the two.

The second distinction is used to clarify what it is that sets a buddha apart from a sentient being. According to Mi bskyod rdo rje, the term “sentient being” (*sems can* : *sattva*) is traditionally defined in contrast to, and therefore as an antonym of, “buddha.” In this respect, “sentient being” serves as a cover term for the entire constellation of adventitious afflictive and cognitive obscurations that make a person *not* a buddha. On this basis, the author contends that the term “sentient being,” like the term “self” (*ātman*), is merely a collection-universal (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) designating the five transient psychophysical constituents that, through their complex web of self-identifications, form the basis of the false sense of self. Arguing from a Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka standpoint, he states that both the designation “self” and the basis of the designation—the collection of constituents—are mere universals, lacking any intrinsic nature. By way of contrast, the author posits buddha(hood) as the “particular” (*svalakṣana*), that which withstands critical assessment and remains when the superimposed “universal” is eliminated. He summarizes the matter as follows:

[Let us] further describe the way the *tathāgatagarbha* exists in all sentient beings: [1] If, from the standpoint of assumption, the collection “sentient being” is taken as a universal, then from the standpoint of actuality, buddha nature is precisely what is revealed as the particular. [2] As for buddha, there is no differentiation into intrinsic and extrinsic natures or into categories of universals and particulars. Yet, from the perspective of not simply disregarding the potential or abiding nature or essence, which is beyond identity and difference, we label it as “buddha nature” and as the “result of complete awakening.” [3] Although metaphorically designated [as

a result] in this way, because this [buddha nature] is unconditioned, one cannot establish it in terms of cause and effect.

Having ascertained by these three reasons that all beings are universals, this buddha nature, the nondeceptive object, was said to exist in all phases of being obscured and unobscured, contaminated and uncontaminated, by defilements, and of being or not being a sentient being.²²²

The author uses this clarification of the difference between a sentient being and buddha as a basis to criticize the view that buddha nature constitutes a kind of subtle self or sentient being identifiable as the very agent of karma and samsaric suffering, a view he ascribes to 'Gos Lo tsā ba but that he traces, in turn, to the influence of Tsong kha pa's notion of a subtle self.²²³

Mi bskyod rdo rje's repudiation of attempts to equate buddha nature with a subtle self or sentient being hinges on his analysis of what it means to speak of a likeness or homology between buddhas and sentient beings. In this regard, 'Gos Lo tsā ba had explained that "when the *buddhagarbha* [is said to] be present in all sentient beings, it is not buddha[hood] that is present" but "rather something of a similar kind to the buddha."²²⁴ The Eighth Karma pa responds that it is wrong to first differentiate buddha and its "nature" (*garbha*) and to then construe similarities between them. In particular, he takes issue with 'Gos Lo tsā ba's use of a quotation ascribed to a *Hevajratantra* (HT) commentary of the Third Karma pa,²²⁵ which reads "the spiritual potential (*gotra*) is such that the triad of body, speech, and mind of sentient beings body, speech, and mind (*lus ngag yid*) are aspects similar ('*dra ba'i cha*) to the body, speech, and mind (*sku gsung thugs*) of the Tathāgata."²²⁶ 'Gos Lo tsā ba is accused of misunderstanding the import of this passage when he uses it as scriptural support for establishing likeness between buddhas and sentient beings.

²²² See vol. 2, tr., 88, ed., 142.

²²³ On Tsong kha pa's notion of a subtle self, see below 204 and 209.

²²⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 113, ed., 156. See also Mathes 2008a, 321.

²²⁵ We were unable to locate this passage in either of the extant *Hevajratantra* commentaries by Rang byung rdo rje's, or in any of his other works.

²²⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 115, ed., 157.

Mi bskyod rdo rje responds, with support from Kañha's *Hevajratantra* commentary (HTY), that a buddha's and sentient being's body, speech, and mind are only "similar" in terms of number and formal aspects. Otherwise, they should be understood to be wholly different, since the former are innate whilst the latter are adventitious. As Kañha argued, it is precisely when the superfluous latent tendencies of ordinary embodiment subside that the innate latent tendencies of the undefiled aggregates fully unfold.²²⁷ Thus, to the extent that the superfluous body, speech, and mind of sentient being are purified away, those of a buddha are able to fully manifest. Against the claim that only something similar to the uncorrupted exists in sentient beings, the Eighth Karma pa contends that it is the actual uncorrupted *buddhajñāna* which is latently present in beings, and not a mere facsimile of it.

This brings us to the heart of Mi bskyod rdo rje's third dyad, which concerns the much-contested relationship between buddha and buddha nature. The author reasons that understanding the first two distinctions leads one to ascertain the identity, and not merely resemblance, between buddha and buddha nature. As he sees it, buddha nature *is* buddha *simpliciter*, and not just an approximation of it—despite its being embedded in and obscured by the conditioned network of adventitious psychophysical aggregates that make up a sentient being. Let us now look more closely at the author's views concerning the stages of disclosure of buddha nature.

2.6. The three phases of buddha nature indicate progressive degrees of disclosure

In his *Lamp*, the Karma pa contends that buddha nature in its resultant phase is identical with both the *dharmaśāya* and the state of awakening (*bodhi*) itself. These are among the numerous terms used to describe an originary mode of being and awareness that remains invariant throughout its changing degrees of obscuration by adventitious phenomena. As the author explains,

In this system, *tathāgatagarbha*, *dharmaśāya*, the expanse of *nirvāna*, and complete and perfect awakening are only different in name but the same in meaning. The actualization of *tathāgata* itself is described as the *dharmaśāya*. Although the so-called *dharmaśāya*

²²⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 115, ed., 157.

is present throughout the three phases, when it is actualized through eliminating the host of obscurations, it is the pervader in that it pervades all phenomena, and it has the capacity to inexhaustibly reveal the spiritual embodiments (*kāya*) of engagement. Hence, it is the “embodiment of reality” (*dharma-kāya*). And likewise, it is the complete and perfect buddha that is primordial perfect awakening. Moreover, it is the state of awakening that remains unchanging throughout the three phases.²²⁸

To establish the identity of buddha nature and buddha(hood), it is necessary for the Karma pa to elucidate the process of disclosure of buddhahood in terms of the three phases outlined in RGV I.47.²²⁹ In his *Tonic*, this elucidation begins with a critical response to the following remark attributed to 'Gos Lo tsā ba: “Although that which exists in sentient beings is the actual *garbha*, there are nonetheless two parts: one which is *tathāgata* and one which is not. Having this in mind, it has been explained that ‘the quintessence is presented as [existing in] three phases’.”²³⁰ Mi bskyod rdo rje objects that this claim presupposes a dichotomy between buddha(hood) and buddha nature and absurdly implies that buddha nature mixes with, and is fundamentally influenced or adulterated by, adventitious defilements to varying degrees. This follows from the opponent's contention that sentient beings have buddha nature but do not have buddha(hood), a view influentially expounded by Rngog Blo ldan shes rab.

The Karma pa starts by characterizing the three phases of buddha nature—impure, partly pure, and completely pure—which are said in RGV I.47 to characterize the modes of being of sentient beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas (or *tathāgatas*) respectively—as a classification used to distinguish phases in the progressive thinning of the accreted adventitious defilements. These defilements consist in the deluded perceptions of phenomena as well as the resulting identifications and interactions with phenomena. To instead regard these three

²²⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 20, ed., 52.

²²⁹ RGV I.47 (Johnston 1950 ed., 40): “[Depending on whether the buddha-element is] impure, [partly] impure and [partly] pure, or perfectly pure, it is called a sentient being, bodhisattva or *tathāgata* respectively.” *asūddho'suddhaśuddho'tha suvisuddho yathā-kramam | sattvadhātūr iti proktō bodhisattvas tathāgataḥ* ||. See Schmithausen 1971, 148.

²³⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 94, ed., 145.

states as distinct ontological categories goes hand in hand with the contested view that sentient beings only have buddha nature but not buddhahood:

Not understanding that the delineation of three phases was a classification made with the intention to distinguish the threefold [gradation of] thick, thin and cleansed on the part of [ordinary dualistic] consciousness—i.e., that aspect involving deluded perceptions of phenomena—you made the mistake of explaining them as three states of buddha nature [according to how much this] essence is itself adulterated or unadulterated with the influence of the impurities. So, no sooner have you asserted that sentient beings have buddha nature than you go on to assert that they don't have buddha[hood]! By thus asserting that sentient beings have buddha nature with this fixed idea [in mind], your own established conclusions collapse from deep within.²³¹

In his *Intent*, Mi bskyod rdo rje explains that it is only “on account of this element (*dhātu*) [i.e., buddha nature] being purified or not purified of defilements that the person [concerned] is designated by the three names ‘sentient being,’ ‘bodhisattva,’ and ‘buddha’.”²³²

He next takes up a question that naturally arises from this analysis “Given that this buddha nature is essentially *not* a sentient being, how can it be described as a sentient being?” Answering his own question, he explains that the three rubrics are designations from the perspective of the individual, and the same holds for “buddha nature.” Even though buddha nature is the basis of obscuration (i.e., that which is obscured), buddha nature itself is certainly *not* the experiencer of karma and its results. He concludes that “so long as impure defilements that obscure [that buddha nature] are not relinquished, it is not a contradiction [to say] that these factors of impure suffering always accompany it—like a kernel and its chaff. Hence, it is not a contradiction to designate the [buddha] nature in terms of individuals.”²³³ The Karma pa goes on to explain that the three rubrics—sentient being, bodhisattva and *tathāgata*—no longer obtain once all the afflictions and latent tendencies which characterize members of the first two

²³¹ See vol. 2, tr., 94, ed., 145.

²³² See vol. 2, tr., 201, ed., 232.

²³³ See vol. 2, tr., 201, ed., 232.

categories, i.e., sentient beings and bodhisattvas, have been destroyed.²³⁴ In short, the classification of these three phases is intelligible and applicable *only* from the standpoint of the aspirant on the path who needs to distinguish gradations in the elimination of obscurations that conceal buddhahood. When buddhahood is fully disclosed, these categories are no longer needed, like the proverbial raft that can be safely abandoned when one has reached one's destination.

Returning to the *Tonic*, it is noteworthy that Mi bskyod rdo rje concludes his repudiation of 'Gos Lo tsā ba's position that sentient beings do not have *tathāgata* (innate buddhahood) by drawing attention to certain undesirable consequences that follow from denying that buddhahood is precisely the buddha nature beings possess:

In general, the three phases may have been delineated in that way from the perspective of [ordinary] consciousness, but from the perspective of buddha nature itself, forget about them being schematized in that way by wisdom. In this case, there is not even an appearance of them. This being so, how can it be maintained that the buddha nature in the phase of impurity is not buddha? In your view, buddha nature in the impure phase is *not* a buddha. Since it only *becomes* a buddha in the pure phase, the *garbha* does not possess any autonomy (*rang dbang*) and the impurities end up having greater efficacy (*nus pa*) than [buddha] nature!

In general, moreover, your *buddhagarbha* possessing twofold purity as posited from the standpoint of wisdom, and your *garbha* free from adventitious defilements as posited from the standpoint of consciousness, are reckoned to be one and the same from a conceptual standpoint. But it is because of this that such mistakes like the [above] occur. Moreover, when it comes to identifying the ultimate *garbha* as it is associated with the phases of defilement, you have not understood it. Since the ultimate *garbha* does not consist of states and thus cannot be subdivided, by separating it into three

²³⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 201, ed., 232.

states you have gone astray from the intent of the noble father and son [Maitreya and Asaṅga].²³⁵

For Mi bskyod rdo rje, then, “buddha nature” refers to buddhahood itself during its states of obscuration. Soteriologically speaking, to maintain that buddha nature does not exist until obscurations have been eliminated is to deny it any autonomy and efficacy and to grant the obscurations primacy over buddha nature. This follows from the rival’s logic that buddha nature exists in sentient beings but buddha(hood) does not. For it presupposes that the existence or nonexistence of buddhahood in an aspirant depends on whether adventitious factors exist! With this assumption, the opponent tacitly attributes to these impurities autonomous existence and the capacity to determine whether or not buddhahood exists in a sentient being. This is because goal-realization on this account depends primarily on the adventitious factors and *not* on buddhahood which, on the rival’s account, doesn’t even exist for those on the path.

In the Karma pa’s eyes, this account contradicts the *Ratnagotravibhāga*’s construal of buddha nature as immanent buddhahood which is perennially empty of adventitious defilements. One issue, however, which this treatise and Mi bskyod rdo rje’s explanations leave open to question, is the following: How it is possible for adventitious defilements to coexist with this innate omnipotent buddha nature, allegedly replete with limitless powers and other buddha-qualities, without being destroyed by it?

2.7. The classification of three vehicles has a [hidden] intention (*ābhi-prāyika*); the one vehicle (*ekayāna*) doctrine is definitive (*lākṣaṇika*)

Closely intertwined with the question of whether sentient beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas represent distinct types of spiritual realization or phases on a single continuum is the issue of whether there exist one or more than one spiritual potential (*gotra*), vehicle (*yāna*), and goal (*phala*). In light of the foregoing discussion, it may come as little surprise that Mi bskyod rdo rje gives precedence to the view that there is only one potential (*gotra*), one vehicle (*yāna*), and one goal (*phala*), while acknowledging that each of these related factors may be classified in various ways. More specifically, he regards the one vehicle (*ekayāna*) doctrine as real or actual (*lākṣaṇika*) and the classification of

²³⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 95, ed., 146.

three vehicles as allusive (*ābhiprāyika*). As one might suspect, the answer to the question of whether there is one or more spiritual vehicle and goal will depend on how one settles the issue of one or more spiritual potential (*gotra*) for goal-realization (and vice versa).

Before we turn to Mi bskyod rdo rje's own approach to this set of issues, let us briefly look at some of the background behind traditional Buddhist distinctions between vehicles (*yāna*). The metaphorical usage of *yāna* in the sense of a spiritual vehicle emerges quite early in the evolution of Buddhism. The classification of three vehicles obviously post-dates the Pāli Canon. Corresponding terms (such as *trīṇi yānāni*, *triyāna*, *yānatraya*) begin to appear only in post-canonical texts such as the *Mahāvastu*,²³⁶ the *Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra*,²³⁷ and the *Ekottarikāgama*.²³⁸ These works are early sources of the terms

²³⁶ The *Mahāvastu* is attributed to the Lokottaravāda Mahāsāṃgika school of early Buddhism and was most probably compiled between 2nd c. BCE and 4th c. CE. See Jones 1952 (tr.), 329 and n. 2.

²³⁷ The *Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra* is an early Abhidharma text. Its authorship has been traditionally associated with the so-called 500 *arhats* and dated roughly 600 years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Its compilation, however, is attributed to a certain Katyāyāniputra. Because the Sarvāstivāda of Kāśmīra held the *Mahāvibhāṣā* as authoritative, they were given the moniker of being Vaibhāśikas, “those [upholders] of the Vibhāṣa.” The *Mahāvibhāṣā* is said to have close affinities to Mahāyāna doctrines. See Potter 1998, 111 and 117. It distinguishes between three vehicles, i.e., *Śrāvakayāna*, *Pratyekabuḍḍhayāna*, and *Bodhisattvayāna*. See Nakamura 1999, 189. According to a number of scholars, Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished during the time of the Kuṣāṇa Empire, and this is illustrated in the form of Mahāyāna influence on the *Mahāvibhāṣa* (see Willemen et al. 1998, 123). The *Mañjuśrīmūlatantra* also records that Kaniṣka oversaw the establishment of Prajñāpāramitā doctrines in the northwest of India (see Ray 1999, 410). The similarly massive *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra* also has a clear association with the Vaibhāśika Sarvāstivādins (see Williams and Tribe 2000, 100). References to the *Bodhisattvayāna* and the practice of the six *pāramitā* are commonly found in Sarvāstivāda works (see Baruah 2008, 456). Since the Sarvāstivādins did not hold that it was impossible, or even impractical, to strive to become a fully awakened buddha (Skt. *samyaksambuddha*), they accepted the path of a bodhisattva as a valid route to awakening (ibid., 457).

²³⁸ The *Ekottarāgama/Ekottarikāgama* (“Numerically Arranged Discourses”) is the Sanskrit analogue to the Pāli *Āṅguttaranikāya*, but considerably shorter and with a more pronounced thematic structure. It was translated into Chinese (Taishō 125) from a

Śrāvakayāna, *Pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *Bodhisattvayāna* (or *Buddhayāna*). In later Mahāyāna sources, this threefold classification became commonplace, though it was interpreted differently by Cittamātra and Madhyamaka followers. The *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, which dates to circa 100 CE, offers one of the earliest known explanations of the *triyāna* scheme and its associated terminology.²³⁹ Here the three vehicles (*yāna*) are depicted as expedient means (*upāya*) belonging to one ultimate *yāna*, i.e., the great vehicle, and leading to a single ultimate goal of buddhahood. Toward that end, a parable in the sūtra describes a father who rescues his children from a burning house, luring them out with the promise to give them toy carts drawn by different animals. He finally gives them the supreme cart drawn by a white ox.²⁴⁰ The Buddha is reported to have urged his audience to “know that the buddhas, by their tactful powers, in the one Buddha vehicle (*buddhayāna*) discriminate and expound the three [vehicles].”²⁴¹ The parable is meant to illustrate the provisional and metaphorical character of the doctrine of three vehicles.

In Yogācāra sources, opinions on the issue of whether there is one or three *gotra* diverged according to differing interpretations of *Abhisamayālamkāra* (AA) I.39. The first half of the stanza (I.39ab) reads: “Since the *dharmadhātu* is not divisible, the distinguishing of potentials (*gotra*) is not appropriate.”²⁴² A number of commentators take this statement as an opponent’s position (*purvapakṣa*). They argue that equating the *gotra* with *dharmadhātu* contradicts the three *gotra/yāna* theory. To say that all beings have this single *buddhagotra*, *dharmadhātu*, which is the foundation of the three spiritual vehicles (*yāna*), would preclude distinguishing between different potentials and their associated vehicles

Middle Indic or mixed dialect of Prakrit with Sanskrit elements. While its sectarian affiliation remains disputed, its main doctrines and *pratimokṣa* rules seem to be consistent with the Dharmaguptaka school. Its introduction makes reference to the three *yāna*, and Mahāyāna influence is evident in teachings such as the six perfections (*pāramitā*), a central concept of the *Bodhisattvayāna*. The text is only extant in a Chinese recension translated by Gautama Samghadeva in 397 during the Eastern Jin dynasty. See *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* s.v. “Ekottarāgama.” See also Anālayo 2016, 1 and 469.

²³⁹ McBrewster 2009 ed., 17.

²⁴⁰ See Katō 1989, 89.

²⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 56.

²⁴² Translated by Kano 2016, 79.

and goals.²⁴³ For these commentators, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (AA) I.39cd gives the appropriate response to this position: “However, because of the distinctions among the *ādheyadharma* [i.e., practices], distinctions among *gotra* are proclaimed [on their basis].”²⁴⁴ As Kano points out, this verse leaves room for quite different interpretations.²⁴⁵

The early Buddhist scholar Dharmamitra (356–442) explains in his commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (AAK) that “the presentation of the three vehicles (and thus also of the three *gotra*) has a hidden intention (*ābhiprāyika* : *dgongs pa can*); it is not definitive (*lākṣaṇika* : *mtshan nyid pa*).”²⁴⁶ This is echoed by Vimuktasena (6th c.) who likewise, in his *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentary, says “according to this [stanza AA I.39], the presentation of the three vehicles has a hidden intention; it is not definitive.”²⁴⁷ And finally Haribhadra (8th c.) is cited as explaining in his *Abhisamayālaṃkārāloka* (AAĀ), “The statement ‘the classification of three vehicles is not definitive but has a hidden intent’ means that all beings are endowed with the ultimate goal of unsurpassed perfect and complete awakening.” With the latter remark he favors the one *gotra* doctrine. It is this passage that Mi bskyod rdo rje quotes in order to substantiate his own *ekayāna* reading of *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (AA) I.39.²⁴⁸

²⁴³ See Brunnhölzl 2010, 795 n. 848.

²⁴⁴ Translated by Kano 2016, 79, n. 34. *Ādheyadharma* is “what is based on it”; in this case, its *ādhāra* “basis” is the *dharmadhātu*.

²⁴⁵ Kano 2016, 78–94.

²⁴⁶ *Abhisamayālaṃkārakārikāprajñāpāramitopadeśāśāstraṭīkā* (AAK). Tib. *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi tshig le'ur byas pa'i 'grel bshad tshig rab tu gsal ba*. D 3796 vol. 87, 14b; *theṅ pa gsum rnam par gzhaṅ pa ni dgongs pa can yin gyi mtshan nyid ba ni ma yin no*].

²⁴⁷ *Abhisamayālaṃkārakārikāvārttikā* (AAVĀ). Tib. *'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong phrag nyi shu lṅga pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi tshig le'ur byas pa'i rnam par 'grel pa*. D 3788 vol. 81, 64b₂; *des ni theṅ pa gsum du rnam par gzhaṅ pa ni dgongs pa can yin gyi mtshan nyid pa ni ma yin no zhes bstan pa yin no*].

²⁴⁸ In *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* I.3, in MD_{SB}, vol. 4, 151_{4–5}: *'grel pa don gsal bar | theṅ pa gsum rnam par bzhaṅ pa ni dgongs pa can yin gyi mtshan nyid pa ni ma yin no || zhes lugs las 'byung ba skye bo thams cad bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub kyi mthar thug pa can yin te |* The quoted AAĀ passage is found in D 3793, vol. 86, 95b₂.

By contrast, the author of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (MSA) ascribes provisional meaning to the *ekagotra/ekayāna* doctrine along with crucial elements of the buddha nature teachings in general.²⁴⁹ According to MSA XI.54,

The perfect Buddhas have taught
 The unity of the vehicle (*ekayānatā*)
 For the sake of those who are not determinable,
 To attract some and to hold on to others.²⁵⁰

Vasubandhu's introductory remarks to this verse are as follows:

Buddhahood is the single vehicle. Thus, the unity of the vehicle must be understood, with such and such intent, in this and that sūtra. But it is not the case that the three vehicles do not exist. Why again did the Buddhas teach the unity of the vehicle with such and such intent?²⁵¹

Sthiramati's sub-commentary explicitly declares that the single vehicle teaching is provisional (Tib. *bkri ba'i don* being an alternative translation to *drang ba'i don*, Skt. *neyārtha*):

As for the explanation of “single vehicle” here, it must be taken to have provisional meaning, because he (i.e., the Buddha) taught it

See, however, Kano 9 n. 32 for a passage from AAĀ in which Haribhadra acknowledges that Asaṅga posited “various vehicles”.

²⁴⁹ This is examined in Mathes (forthcoming), which he has kindly allowed us to excerpt translations from for our MSA discussion.

²⁵⁰ MSA XI.54 (Lévi 1907 ed., 69₃₋₄): *ākarṣaṇārtham ekeśām anyasamdhāraṇāya ca | desitāniyatānām hi saṃbuddhair ekayānatā ||*.

²⁵¹ MSABh (Lévi 1907 ed., 68₂₇–69₂): *buddhatvam ekayānam evam tatra tatra sūtre tena tenābhiprāyenāikayānatā veditavyā na tu yānatrayam nāsti | kimartham punas tena tenābhiprāyenāikayānatā buddhair desitā |*.

with a [specific] intent, [namely] for the sake of sentient beings. The teaching of three vehicles has definitive meaning.²⁵²

Based on this hermeneutical strategy, MSA IX.37 (the verse on buddha nature) is taken to be a statement of provisional meaning. It should be noted that *ekayāna* is still accepted in some sense since it is deemed that śrāvakas and other Buddhist aspirants share the same *dharmadhātu*.²⁵³ Indeed, the differentiation of *gotra* is even given as a reason for establishing *ekayāna*.²⁵⁴ According to Vasubandhu, this refers only to uncertain śrāvakas, who eventually find their way to the Mahāyāna (considered the single vehicle leading to Buddhahood).²⁵⁵ In short, the MSA generally defends the definitive meaning of the three vehicle differentiation and the corresponding three *gotra* doctrine (along with its cut-off potential), notwithstanding Vasubandhu's acknowledgment that the *dharmadhātu* is shared by all.

Yogācāra disagreements over the provisional versus definitive status of *ekayāna* doctrine had important implications for the *tathāgatagarbha* theory in general. As Kano observes, the Yogācāra proponent Ratnākaraśānti (c. 1000 CE) rejects the idea that ultimately all sentient beings have buddha nature. To strengthen his claim, he emends the statement “all sentient beings have buddha nature” to read “all bodhisattvas have buddha nature.” This is more than a matter of terminological revision; for Ratnākaraśānti buddha nature exists only from the first spiritual level onward. On this interpretation, the distinction of potentials

²⁵² MSAV, D 4034, 196a₆₋₇: *de la theg pa gcig go zhes bshad pa ni sems can gyi don du dgongs pa'i dbang gis gsungs pas ni bkri ba'i don zhes bya ba la | theg pa gsum du gsungs pa ni nges pa'i don yin te |*

²⁵³ That *dharma* stands for *dharmadhātu* is clear from Vasubandhu's commentary (MSABh Lévi 1907 ed.), 68₁₇: “Sharing the same *dharma*[*dhātu*], there is the unity of the vehicle. Because the śrāvaka and the others are not separate from the *dharmadhātu*, the [single] vehicle must be taken.” (*dharma-tulyatvād ekayānatā śrāvakādīnām dharma-dhātoraḥ abhinnatvāt yātavyam yānam iti kṛtvā*).

²⁵⁴ MSA XI.53 (MSABh, Lévi 1907 ed.), 68₁₅₋₁₆: *dharmanairātmyamukti-nām tulyatvād gotrabhedaḥ | ... ekayānatā ||*.

²⁵⁵ MSABh (Lévi 1907 ed.), 68₂₀₋₂₁: “Because of the difference in families/potentials there is unity in the vehicle. This is in view of those having an uncertain śrāvaka-potential opting for Mahāyāna. Therefore, they enter the [single] vehicle.” (*gotrabhedād ekayānatā | aniyataśrāvakagotrānām mahāyānena niryāṇād yānti tena yānam iti kṛtvā*).

(*gotrabheda*) signifies that only bodhisattvas will attain a buddha's awakening, while śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas will attain a liberation or state of arhathood that is in line with their respective potentials. All this is used to vindicate his position that the *ekayāna* theory is not definitive but has a hidden intention. It is therefore not surprising that in the *Abhisamayālamkāra* (AA) commentary attributed to Ratnākaraśānti (i.e., the *Sūtrasamuccayabhāṣya*), the author criticizes those who take *Abhisamayālamkāra* I.39 as a vindication of the *ekayāna* view that the distinction into three *gotra* and three *yāna* is merely provisional and that there is ultimately only one *gotra*, one *yāna*, and one goal.²⁵⁶

In Madhyamaka sources, the single vehicle doctrine is generally considered to be of definitive meaning, while the distinction of three vehicles is deemed to be of provisional meaning. This follows from the view that *dharmadhātu*, and buddhahood itself, are undifferentiated. As Nāgārjuna argues in his *Niraupamya-stava*, verse 20,

Since there is no differentiation within *dharmadhātu*,
There can be no different vehicles;
O Master, you have taught the three vehicles
So that sentient beings will enter the path.²⁵⁷

The background outlined above helps us understand and contextualize Mi bskyod rdo rje's espousal of the Madhyamaka *ekayāna* and *ekagotra* positions. In his commentary on *Abhisamayālamkāra* I.39, he makes a reference to a parable²⁵⁸ told in the *Ratnakarāṇḍasūtra* (RKS). It describes how from a single piece of clay, different vessels are made and baked in the same oven. Some will contain honey, others oil, and others filth. In the same way, the single *dharmadhātu*, i.e., emptiness, is a vessel for bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, and ordinary beings. It remains always the same *dharmadhātu*; it is only the

²⁵⁶ See Kano 2016, 76–82.

²⁵⁷ NS 20 (NS 14_{9–10}): *dharmadhātor asambhedād yānabhedo 'sti na prabho | yāna-tritayam ākhyātam tvayā sattvāvatārataḥ ||* We have adopted this passage as it is referenced and translated in Mathes (forthcoming).

²⁵⁸ This parable is also taken up in the Fifth Zhwa dmar pa's *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentary. See Brunnhölzl 2010, 239.

appearances that change.²⁵⁹ The sūtra, in fact, proceeds to conclude that “ultimately there is not the slightest difference between afflictions and buddha-qualities”²⁶⁰ and that “as in the beginning, so it is afterwards, because reality does not change.”²⁶¹

Now, this parable can be interpreted in two ways. One is that all three *gotra*—though provisionally distinguishable—are ultimately one *gotra* or potential, i.e., the *dharmadhātu* (which is the *āryagotra*) and that consequently all beings will eventually proceed toward complete awakening, though they may temporarily abide in arhatship for some time. This would establish the *ekayāna* theory as favored in the *Madhyamaka* and buddha nature systems. The explanation of the Fifth Zhwa dmar pa's *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentary on *Abhisamayālamkāra* I.39 can also be understood in this way: “... though there is one potential to be realized, based on it there are different superior and inferior ways to realize it. It is therefore classified accordingly.”²⁶²

The other way to interpret the parable is to say that even if śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas, have a single *gotra*, i.e., the *dharmadhātu* (*āryagotra*), they nonetheless reach different goals by virtue of their different orientations. This interpretation supports the three *yāna* theory as maintained by the Yogācāra school. This latter interpretation, however, does not mesh with the aforementioned remark that ultimately there is not the slightest difference between afflictions and buddha-qualities because reality itself does not change.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ *Ratnakarāṇḍasūtra* (RKS) H 120 vol. 53, 390a₅: *rdza mkhan gyis 'jim pa'i gong bu gcig las snod rnam pa sna tshogs byas te | snod de thams cad so gcig tu btang na | de la kha cig ni 'bru mar dang mar gyi snod du gyur| kha cig ni sbrang rtsi dang li kha ra'i snod du gyur | kha cig ni ngan pa mi gtsang ba'i snod du 'gyur te | 'jim pa'i gong bu de dang so btang ba la ni tha dad pa cung zad kyang med do || btsun pa rab 'byor | de bzhin du chos kyi dbyings kyang gcig |.*

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 391b₄–391b₅: *nyon mongs pa rnams dang | sangs rgyas kyi chos rnams la tha dad par bya ba ni cung zad kyang med do |.*

²⁶¹ Ibid., 392a₃: *thog ma ji lta bar tha mar yang de bzhin du de bzhin nyid las phyir mi ldog pas de'i phyir |.*

²⁶² See Brunnhölzl 2010, 292. Translation is our own.

²⁶³ See note 255.

At this point it is worth recalling that many Tibetan scholars regarded the *Abhisamayālāmīkāra* as a treatise that could be interpreted either in line with Yogācāra or Madhyamaka tenets. Accordingly, this treatise was cited as scriptural support for *both* sides of the controversy over which of the *ekagotra* or *trigotra* doctrines is of definite meaning, and which is of provisional meaning. The Yogācāra school used the treatise to validate the existence of three different potentials, vehicles, and goals. Some Yogācāra sources add to these the further category of an undetermined *gotra* (*aniyatagotra*) comprised of aspirants who are not yet definitively linked with the three existing classes, as well as a non-*gotra* (*agotra*) class of spiritual “outcastes” (the cut-off or *icchantika* type) who belong to none of the classes, and will therefore not attain awakening.²⁶⁴ An example is found in the *Mahāyānasūtrālāmīkāra* (MSA) III.11: “Some are solely [destined for] bad conduct. [Then] there are those whose positive qualities are destroyed, [or] those who lack the virtue conducive to liberation. And some have few positive [qualities]. But there are also those who lack [any] cause [of awakening].”²⁶⁵

Recall that for the Madhyamaka the *trigotra* classification is only provisional, a convenient scheme for outlining different orientations and stages of the Buddhist path. Mādhyamikas accept the existence of a single potential, vehicle, and goal, and they deny that there are any beings who lack the potential to attain awakening. This is the view endorsed by the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud tradition since its inception. In the context of explaining the five *gotra*, for example, Sgam po pa notes that *Mahāyānasūtrālāmīkāra* (MSA) III.11 should not to be taken in a definitive sense: “In general, it is said that those who have these signs [such as lacking spiritual qualities] are the ‘outcaste’ type. However, this is taken to mean that they will linger in *samsāra* for a long time and not that they will never attain awakening. If they strive assiduously, they too will attain awakening.”²⁶⁶ He refers to the above mentioned *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* as scriptural support for his view. In a similar vein, RGVV on RGV I.41 maintains,

²⁶⁴ On these two families, see Seyfort Ruegg 1976, 341 and n. 6.

²⁶⁵ *Mahāyānasūtrālāmīkāra* (MSA) III.11: *aikāntiko duścarite 'sti kaścit kaścit samud-ghātitaśukladharmā | amokṣabhaśāśubho 'sti kaścin nihīnaśuklo 'sty api hetuhīnah ||*.

²⁶⁶ *Dam chos yid bzhin nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*, in G_{SB} vol. 4, 193₃₋₄: *lar rtags de dag dang ldan pa rigs chad du gsungs pa de yang | 'khor bar yun ring du 'gor ba la dgongs pa yin gyis | gtan nas byang chub mi thob pa ni ma yin te | 'bad pa byas na des kyang byang chub thob pa yin no |*.

in the words of Seyfort Ruegg, that “any allusion to an *icchantika* who does not attain *nirvāṇa* is to be interpreted as referring to a certain interval of time (*kālāntarābhiprāya*) only, and not to a permanent incapacity.”²⁶⁷

Mi bskyod rdo rje, for his part, upheld the standard Madhyamaka *ekayāna* position endorsed by his Dwags po Bka' brgyud predecessors in accepting the classification of three vehicles and three potentials as provisional while maintaining that ultimately there is only one *yāna* and one *gotra*. As the Karma pa explains in his *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* I.3, “In the Madhyamaka too, the śrāvaka *gotra* is not deemed to be different from the bodhisattva *gotra*, because it is maintained that there is [but] one single resultant *yāna*. ... this is the *āryagotra*. Thus, it is said in [the *Kāśyapaparivartasūtra* (KPS)] and so forth: ‘Because this *gotra* is similar to space [in extent], it is ‘equal’.’ As because this *gotra* is of the same flavor as all phenomena, it is ‘undifferentiated’.”²⁶⁸ This meshes with *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* XI.53–54,²⁶⁹ which states that ultimately, in view of the undifferentiated character of suchness (*tathatā*), there is but one vehicle.

In his *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary, Mi bskyod rdo rje cites the observation of his main teacher Sangs rgyas mnyan pa Bkra shis dpal 'byor (aka Ras pa chen po) that among the five texts of Maitreya, the *Abhisamayālamkāra* stands alone as a text common to the Madhyamaka and Cittamātra systems. As the Eighth Karma pa explains,

[My spiritual] father, Rje Ras pa chen po, taught: ‘It is established that these five works of Maitreya comment on the intent of all the

²⁶⁷ See Seyfort Ruegg 1976, 357 n. 6. See also Seyfort Ruegg 1973, 12 n. 1.

²⁶⁸ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* I.3, in MD_{SB} vol 4, 149₂–151₄: *dbu ma pa la'ang | nyan rang gi rigs de byang chub chen po'i rigs las gzhan du mi 'dod de | 'bras bu'i theg pa gcig nyid du 'dod pa'i phyir | ... de ni 'phags pa rnams kyi rigs yin te | ^arigs de ni nam mkha' dang mnyam pa nyid kyi khyad par med pa'o || rigs de thams cad kyi tshe chos kyi de bzhin nyid yin pas chos kyi ro gcig tu gyur pa nyid kyis rtag pa'o^a || zhes bya ba la sogs pa gsungs so || Quotation from *Kāśyapaparivartasūtra* (KPS) H 87 vol. 40, 242b–243a₈. The sūtra however reads ^a: *rigs de ni nam mkha' dang mtshungs pa'i phyir mnyam pa'o | rigs de ni chos thams cad ro gcig pa'i phyir khyad par med pa'o | ...* The translation is emended based on H 87.*

²⁶⁹ *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (MSA) XI.53–54: *dharmanairātmyamuktinām tulyatvāt gotrabhedataḥ | dvyāśayāpteś ca nirmāṇāt paryantād ekayānatā || [53] ākarṣaṇārtham ekeśām anyasamdhāraṇāya ca | desitāniyatānām hi saṃbuddhair ekayānatā || [54]*.

Buddha words of the general Mahāyāna of cause and result. The three middle ones [*Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, and *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*] are treatises [whose] main doctrine is specific to Cittamātra, though it is not the case that they do not teach the Madhyamaka doctrinal system in a supplementary [way]. The first treatise of Maitreya [*Abhisamayālamkāra*] is a work that is common to Madhyamaka and Cittamātra. And the final treatise of Maitreya [*Ratnagotravibhāga*] is a work that is common to the sūtras and tantras.²⁷⁰

To summarize, Mi bskyod rdo rje regarded the *ekagotra* position of his predecessors as an authoritative Madhyamaka viewpoint requiring little justification. We may note in conclusion that his interpretation accords closely with that of most Tibetan masters. The following words on this subject by the Rnying ma master Mi pham rnam rgyal rgya mtsho (1846–1912) in his commentary on *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (MSA) XI.53–59 could easily have been the Karma pa's own: “In terms of temporary context, no one can deny the existence of three vehicles that each have distinct paths and fruitions.”²⁷¹ However, he continues, “proponents of the Middle Way assert that since all sentient beings have buddha nature, they are also all able to become buddhas. There are no beings without this potential because the nature of mind is luminous clarity.”²⁷²

We shall now look more closely at how the Eighth Karma pa understands the nature and different aspects of this ever-present potential for awakening that all beings possess.

²⁷⁰ *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 502–4; *yab rje ras pa chen po'i zhal snga nas byams chos sde lnga po 'di rgyu 'bras kyi theg pa chen po spyi'i bka' thams cad kyi dgongs 'grel du grub ste | bar pa gsum zhar byung dbu ma'i chos tshul mi ston pa min kyang | dngos bstan sems tsam thun mong min pa'i bstan bcos dang | byams chos dang po dbu sems thun mong gi bstan bcos dang | byams chos tha ma mdo sngags thun mong gi bstan bcos yin pa'i phyir zhes bka' stsal to ||.*

²⁷¹ See Mi pham rgya mtsho et al. 2014, 362.

²⁷² Ibid., 362.

2.8. The unfolded *gotra* is the naturally present *gotra* awakened through virtue

Mi bskyod rdo rje's understanding of the two types of buddha potential that are first distinguished in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*—the naturally present (*prakṛtistha*) and the unfolded (*paripuṣṭa*) or acquired (*samudānīta*) potential—was guided by two insights integral to his interpretation of buddha nature: [1] the identity of buddhahood and buddha nature and [2] the provisional character of causal attributions to buddha nature. In keeping with his *ekagotra* position, he maintains that the two types of *gotra* are aspects of a single potential. Since both commonly signify innate buddhahood, the state of complete awakening, they are distinguished for explanatory purposes only. On this view, the traditional distinction between the naturally present and the acquired or unfolded potentials served to highlight two possible perspectives on the potential, corresponding to what can be called the “nature” and “nurture” aspects of buddha nature. As he states in his *Intent*, “what has been termed ‘buddha nature as potential (*gotra*) or element (*dhātu*)’ is, in its essential meaning, precisely the cause of perfect buddhahood. This, the highest cause or potential of buddhahood, is the “naturally present” [potential], and what makes it flourish is the “fully acquired” (*samādāna*) [potential].”²⁷³

We have seen that the Karma pa's view that the buddha potential is actual rather than nominal forms a cornerstone of his interpretation of buddha nature. The two aspects are accordingly distinguished in order to describe and explain both how buddhahood is present and how it is disclosed. More specifically, the term “naturally present potential” is used to describe how buddhahood is innately present as the nature of things (the nature aspect). The terms “acquired” or “unfolded potential” are used to describe how buddhahood is brought forth through the cultivation of virtue and knowledge (the nurture aspect). A concise summary of the author's disclosive interpretation is offered in his *Tonic*:

This spiritual potential has persisted as a continuity since time immemorial within the contaminated six cognitive domains of all sentient beings, and is attained [i.e., is present] as the nature of things (*dharmatā*). [Thus] it is called the “naturally present spiritual potential.” Since the faith and so on that awaken this [potential] are

²⁷³ On this passage from *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, see vol. 2, tr., 181, ed., 189.

what make the spiritual element unfold, this [potential] is [also] called the “unfolded potential.” There are two [types of] unfolded potential—[that] possessing the assemblage of the six contaminated cognitive domains and [that] comprising the constituents of the six uncontaminated cognitive domains. Of these, the first is *not* the actual spiritual element, whereas the latter *is* the actual spiritual element. Having this latter one in mind, my teacher Karma phrin las used to emphasize that “the venerable Rang byung [rdo rje] maintained that “the naturally present potential is itself the unfolded potential.”²⁷⁴

The Karma pa here introduces an important criterion for distinguishing the actual potential from that which is not actual. The former consists in the six uncontaminated cognitive domains—the unconditioned fields of sensory perception and cognition—and is simply the naturally present potential viewed from the perspective of its cultivation. By contrast, the latter consists in the six contaminated cognitive domains, the set of conditioned cognitive and sensory factors that are employed to elicit the naturally present potential.

From the foregoing it is clear that Mi bskyod rdo rje's account of the two potentials is consistent with his more general view²⁷⁵ that the buddha potential should be regarded as actual rather than nominal. Given his disclosive standpoint, it is not difficult to understand why the author would take exception to the influential view that the two potentials are merely nominal and are therefore only of a “similar kind” (*rigs 'dra ba*) to buddhahood but not actual buddhahood itself. We have noted that the Karma pa attributed this view to 'Gos Lo tsā ba, but saw it as a pernicious influence of the Dge lugs master Tsong kha pa. From this rival viewpoint, the naturally present potential refers to aspects *similar* to a buddha in sentient beings, while the unfolded potential describes the *growing proximity* of a sentient being to a buddha through cultivating virtue. Finally, when the potential becomes very similar, it turns into buddhahood. The Karma pa outlines the position as follows:

In short, according to this teacher who propounds the rival position, “what obtains as the nature of things” (*dharmatā*)—viz., an aspect

²⁷⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 210, ed., 240.

²⁷⁵ See above in Chapter 3, 2.3. 101ff.

similar to (*'dra ba'i cha*) the buddha within sentient beings—is the naturally present spiritual potential. That aspect which becomes increasingly similar to a buddha—being of a similar kind (*rigs 'dra ba*) to it—by producing the roots of virtue such as learning and so on, is the unfolded spiritual potential. So, finally, when it becomes very similar (*shin tu 'dra ba*), it turns into this very buddha. Also, the means of turning into [a buddha] are the qualities for cleansing the element (*khams*) such as faith.

To summarize, [you have] stated that “the *garbha* which exists in sentient beings is not the *garbha* of a buddha (*buddhagarbha*) but rather the *garbha* of a sentient being (*sattvagarbha*).” This is untenable. It was shown that it was a mistake to have not correctly identified the naturally present spiritual potential and the unfolded spiritual potential. [For you, they] are not actual, so however similar to it they may be, they do not [actually] become that. Hence, it was shown that in the system of this master and disciple, their claims have been adulterated by the views and tenets of Rje Tsong kha pa and his disciples. For some people, this does not count as being valid.²⁷⁶

Central to the rival account is the view that buddhas and sentient beings have different natures. The potential of a sentient being (*sattvagarbha*) is only similar to, not identical to, the potential of a buddha (*buddhagarbha*). As the Karma pa argues, this dichotomy of natures makes the goal of buddhahood a futile prospect. Here, the relation of similarity is predicated on a difference between two things which are held to share certain common properties. We can only say *s* is similar to *b* on the basis of common properties *x*, *y*, *z* if we acknowledge *s* and *b* as separate entities. The problem this relation of similarity poses for the buddha nature theorist is to account for how *s* (*sattvagarbha*) becomes *b* (*buddhagarbha*). The theorist must maintain that at some point *s* becomes *so* similar to *b* that it is finally indistinguishable from it. But this is to confound similarity and identity. Even the most convincing Elvis impersonator will never become Elvis. The Karma pa also rejects the alternative view that sentient being “matures into” a buddha, in the way a child matures into an adult. On this view, the difference between a sentient being and buddha is one of degree rather than

²⁷⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 119, ed., 159.

kind. Mi bskyod rdo rje contends that this type of transformational model is inconsistent with the *Ratnagotravibhāga*'s claim that buddha nature is unchanging and undifferentiated in buddhas and sentient beings. As he argues, even if, from the standpoint of mundane consciousness, it appears that the buddha potential turns into an actual buddha, buddha nature has in reality remained invariant throughout the transformations it appears to undergo:

The naturally present potential is precisely the extinction of all flaws and the total consummation of qualities. It is primordial buddhahood. It is the state of complete spiritual awakening. Even when, from the perspective of consciousness, the potential later “becomes” the buddha[hood] in which defilements are purified away, it has not become better than before.²⁷⁷ Since this [potential] is always and already inseparable from buddha nature that is free from defilements, it is able to fully display all the activities of a buddha. However, there are some who say that suchness possessing defilements is unable to display these buddha-activities because it is like a knife that cannot be taken from its scabbard and so forth. But this is only a belief-system of those who propound incorrect [views].²⁷⁸

Turning his attention to the unfolded potential, the Karma pa is adamant that the apparent transformation of a sentient being into a buddha is in fact the progressive disclosure of capacities and qualities that were present all along. As he sees it, spiritual awakening and the attendant unfoldment of buddha-qualities are a matter of revelation rather than transformation or maturation:

Having unerringly identified the naturally present potential, when it comes to the unfolded potential, it may seem from the standpoint of [mundane] consciousness as though certain aspects of buddha nature manifest due to adventitious defilements having been purified away. Moreover, although the naturally present potential is present as the

²⁷⁷ The author implicitly rejects the early Buddhist ‘replacement model’ of spiritual transformation which considers awakening to consist in the replacement of a ‘bad’ mode of being with a ‘good’ one in favor of an ‘elimination model’. On these two models as distinguished in Sakuma 1990, see below 171.

²⁷⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 119, ed., 159.

abiding condition for those under the influence of wisdom itself, when it comes to the unfolded potential, it seems from the perspective of conventional consciousness as if something not previously awakened had awakened. Hence, [this] is of provisional meaning because something already awakened (*gdod 'tshang*) cannot [actually] blossom (*rgya*) [into awakening].²⁷⁹ Moreover, in taking what is not actual as the basis for that which is actual, however similar it ends up being, it will never become that because the very nature [of the actual] is undifferentiated. It is similar to identical twins [among] donkeys and cattle.²⁸⁰ According to a classical text on reasoning,

Because it is similar, it is not the actual one.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Mi bskyod rdo rje here argues that the idea that buddhahood consists in the blossoming or unfoldment of qualities is provisional (i.e., in need of further interpretation) because such qualities are in fact fully present, although obscured to varying degrees, within sentient beings, like the sun obscured by clouds.

²⁸⁰ In other words, identical twins born of donkeys or cattle may appear the same but are nonetheless separate creatures.

²⁸¹ The text referred to in this passage is unclear. “Text on reasoning” (*rigs pa'i gzhung*) could plausibly be a shorthand for Chos grags rgya mtsho's celebrated *Tshad ma legs par bshad pa thams cad kyi chu bo yongs su 'du ba rigs pa'i gzhung lugs kyi rgya mtsho*, but the passage does not occur there. The passage is located in the Derge Bstan 'gyur version of *Mudrācaturaṭkāratnahr̥daya* (CMAT) (Tib. *Phyag rgya bzhi'i rgya cher 'grel pa rin po che'i snying po*), Tib. D 2259, 571. This is a commentary on Maitrīpa's *Caturmudrānvaya* (CMA) (authorship remains uncertain) by Bhitakarma (aka. Karopa) who was a disciple of Vajrapāṇi and one of Maitrīpa's heart disciples. For a translation and critical edition of the text, see Mathes 2015, 119–131 and 389–402. On the life of Karopa, see Roerich, tr., 1979, 842–3. The line quoted by Mi bskyod rdo rje is part of Karopa's explanation of why the coemergence (*sahaja*) realized through the four joys and four moments that are experienced with a female consort (*karmamudrā*) is not the real one that is realized through experiencing the four moments and four joys in the context of *dharmamudrā*. “... just as the four moments and four joys are counted on the level of *dharmamudrā*, so are they also on the level of *karmamudrā*. For this reason and because it [viz., the coemergence experienced with a *karmamudrā*] is similar, it is not the real one. This is because [the goal] to be indicated (*mtshon bya : lakṣya*) can be shown

To put it briefly, the Eighth Karma pa views the buddha potential as an actuality that is increasingly revealed when certain enabling conditions such as the cultivation of knowledge, virtue and faith, are met. This disclosure finds its culmination in the realization of *dharmakāya*, the ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya*) conceived as the ever-present ground and goal of the Buddhist path. This brings us to the question of how buddha nature is related to *dharmakāya*.

2.9. Resultant buddha nature may be equated with *dharmakāya*

It should by now be clear that the Eighth Karma pa's affirmative appraisal of buddha nature as the ultimate object (*paramārtha*) stems from a disclosure model that construes goal-realization not as the production of an effect from a cause, but rather as the incremental uncovering of ever-present buddha-qualities (innate capacities for wisdom and altruism). The relationship between buddha nature and *dharmakāya* is usefully clarified in a short work entitled *Buddha Nature and Dharmakāya: A Reply to Queries*. In it the Karma pa explains that *dharmakāya*, which he renders as *dharmatākāya* (*chos nyid kyi sku*, “the embodiment of true reality”), may be equated with resultant buddha nature in certain contexts, but not with causal buddha nature:

Although there are contexts in which resultant buddha nature and the “embodiment of the true reality” (*chos nyid kyi sku* : *dharma-tākāya*) are of the same nature, causal buddha nature is not *dharmakāya*. The *dharmakāya* is [the state in which] the two accumulations are accomplished and the clearing of the two obscurations has been completed. It is free from the obscurations of the five aggregates, twelve cognitive domains, and eighteen elements. The ensemble of the three embodiments (*sku gsum*) and five wisdoms (*ye shes lnga*) along with their buddha-activities, which [together] constitute the fundamental transformation of the eightfold consciousness, is referred to by the term *dharmakāya*.²⁸²

insofar as one directly experiences the indicator [symbol].” See Mathes 2008a, 94–5. The translation has been altered slightly for consistency.

²⁸² See vol. 2, tr., 172, ed., 174.

Mi bskyod rdo rje proceeds to explain that resultant buddha nature comprises both “the ultimate natural embodiment (*svābhāvikakāya*) and conventional (*kun rdzob*) form embodiments (*rūpakāya*).” This analysis allows the author to once again reconcile the nature and nurture aspects of buddha nature within a disclosive soteriological framework based on the inseparability of the two truths. The cause that is the natural embodiment (*ngo bo nyid kyi sku'i rgyu*) refers to the primordially pure predisposition in sentient beings, which the author equates with the “naturally present potential” and “buddha nature in the causal phase” mentioned in buddha nature discourses as well as tantric conceptions such as “first buddha” and “ground Hevajra”:

The first, the cause that is the natural embodiment, being primordially pure by nature in the mind-streams of all sentient beings, is not present as the nature of obscuration. As for its names, it is called the “naturally present potential” (*prakrtisthagotra*) and “buddha nature in the causal phase” (*rgyu dus kyi bder gshegs snying po*). And in Mantra[yāna] scriptures, it is called “first buddha” (*dang po'i sangs rgyas*) and “ground Hevajra” (*gzhi kye rdo rje*) and the like.”²⁸³

Next, the cause of the form embodiments (*gzugs sku kyi rgyu*) consists in virtues such as loving care and faith that are said to exist in the mind-streams of sentient beings. It is due to exogenous conditions such as the appearance of buddhas in the world that these virtues are awakened in sentient beings. This cause is equated with the unfolded potential and other Yogācāra conceptions such as the “distinct set of six cognitive domains” (*śaḍāyatanaviśeṣah*)²⁸⁴ from

²⁸³ See vol. 2, tr., 172, ed., 174. In the context of tantric path hermeneutics, it is further described as the ground of the clearing process (*sbyang gzhi*), the causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*), *mahāmudrā* as the fourth of the tantric seals, and the “substratum causal continuum” (*kun gzhi rgyu rgyud*) that is discussed in certain Tibetan tantric traditions such as the Sa skya Lam 'bras system. In Mahāmudrā discourses, it is specified as ground *mahāmudrā* (*gzhi phyag rgya chen po*) or the actual mode of abiding [of the ground] (*[gzhi] dngos po'i gnas lugs*). See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 276.

²⁸⁴ On the term “distinct set of six cognitive domains,” see above 62, n. 111.

the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (BBh) and “latent tendencies of learning” (*śrutavāsanā*) from the *Mahāyānasamgraha* (MS).²⁸⁵ As the Eighth Karma pa explains,

The second, the cause that is the form embodiments, consists in the eleven virtues such as loving care and faith that exist within the mind-streams of all sentient beings. Due to exogenous conditions such as the appearing of buddhas in the world, one takes up the latent tendency of learning. Thus, the awakening of [such] latent tendencies of virtue is the “unfolded potential” (*paripuṣṭagotra*). Here, concerning buddha nature in the causal phase, its several names include “distinct set of six cognitive domains” (*śadāyatanaviśeṣah*) and “latent tendencies of learning” (*śrutavāsanā*).²⁸⁶

Let us now consider how Mi bskyod rdo rje understands *dharmakāya* and its specific relationship to resultant buddha nature. In his *Lamp*, he defines *dharmakāya* both as “a disclosive capacity that empowers all sentient beings to behold the perfect Buddha and [his] authentic teachings” and “a mastery over all phenomena by assimilating all objects of knowledge within nonduality”:

The essence of the embodiment of perfect buddhahood is the embodiment of true reality (*dharmatākāya*). In that regard, the meaning of the expression *dharmakāya* is [1] a disclosive capacity that empowers all sentient beings to behold the perfect Buddha and [his] authentic teachings—the Mother of Buddhas [i.e., *prajñāpāram-itā*]—and [2] a mastery over all phenomena by assimilating all objects of knowledge within nonduality. [Such] is the meaning of *dharmakāya*.²⁸⁷

In clarifying the nature of this disclosive process, the Karma pa explains that “the basis that is made distinctive through relinquishment is called ‘completely perfect buddha[hood]’ and the basis having obscurations is called ‘sentient being’. Yet, the *tathāgata* in the mind-streams of both of these is neither good

²⁸⁵ MS I.45–48. See also Mathes 2008a, 58–61.

²⁸⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 172, ed., 174.

²⁸⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 41, ed., 66.

nor bad, it neither waxes nor wanes.”²⁸⁸ Here again, the author reaffirms the core position of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, namely, that *tathāgata* is unchanging and undifferentiated in sentient beings and buddhas throughout varying states of obscuration. On this point, he quotes a passage from the *Anūnatāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* (ANN) which states that “the *dharmakāya* is nothing but the element of sentient beings (*sattvadhātu*). The element of sentient beings as such is *dharmakāya* and the *dharmakāya* as such is the element of sentient beings. These are in fact not two. They are only nominally different.”²⁸⁹ This passage not only substantiates the central claim that the buddha potential or element is undifferentiated in buddhas and sentient beings but supports the equation between *dharmakāya* and (resultant) buddha nature. The Karma pa is careful, however, to distinguish between the defiled (ground) and undefiled (resultant) phases of this element, which, respectively, constitute its concealed and revealed aspects:

Some people appear to have taught that the element having adventitious defilements of sentient beings and the *dharmakāya* that is *tathāgatagarbha* are identical. This is not the case. [Rather,] it is explained that the element which is called the “element of sentient beings” (*sattvadhātu*) [in the above citation]²⁹⁰, namely, the element of the mind-streams of sentient beings, is synonymous with the potential (*rīgs*) and buddha nature in the ground phase. It is [further] explained that this [element] and the *dharmakāya* of the resultant phase are identical.²⁹¹

Elsewhere in the *Lamp*, Mi bskyod rdo rje further clarifies the equation of *dharmakāya* and resultant buddha nature in addressing the question “why is *tathāgatagarbha* on the level of buddha[hood] designated as *dharmakāya*?” His response underscores the need to distinguish between modes of embodiment proper to [1] ordinary beings, [2] arhats and bodhisattvas, and [3] buddhas, which

²⁸⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 41, ed., 66.

²⁸⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 41, ed., 66. The quotation is from the *Anūnatāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* (ANN), Taishō 668, 467b. It is also found in RGVV on RGV I.50 (Johnston 1950 ed., 41; Tib. D 4025, 97a₁₋₂).

²⁹⁰ For a critique of 'Gos Lo tsā ba's ideas about this *sattvadhātu*, see below, 206.

²⁹¹ See vol. 2, tr., 41, ed., 66:

are described, respectively, as [1] contaminated, [2] uncontaminated, and [3] the “embodiment of complete liberation (*vimuktikāya*) from everything contaminated and uncontaminated” that “is free from birth, death, and transition”:

The bodies of ordinary beings and dedicated aspirants [on the paths of Accumulation and Application]²⁹² are composed of the five aggregates that are appropriated (*upādānakandha*) and that are contaminated (*sāsrava*). The bodies of arhats and of bodhisattvas, who abide on the spiritual levels,²⁹³ are manifestations of a mental nature and are uncontaminated. The body of a perfect buddha is the *dharmakāya* playing forth in manifold [aspects] which coalesce in the single all-pervading sovereign, the expanse of phenomena (*dharmadhātu*). Because this body of complete liberation (*vimuktikāya*) from everything contaminated and uncontaminated is free from birth, death, and transition, it is devoid of the conditioned aspect. Within it, the host of discursive elaborations is primordially at rest and the ocean of buddha-qualities is spontaneously present.²⁹⁴

It is appropriate that Mi bskyod rdo rje concludes his account of the *dharmakāya* in the *Lamp* by drawing attention to both [1] its autonomy as prreflective self-awareness which is not conceptually determined and [2] its spiritual efficacy as the *fond et origo* of all buddha-qualities, which jointly fulfill the aims of oneself and others:

The subject, namely, the realization-awareness that realizes that [*dharmakāya*], does not depend on the extraneous host of discursive elaborations because it is by nature self-awareness. Due to the purity of it being pure self-awareness itself, it does not depend on

²⁹² In the *Mahāyānasamgraha* the *adhimukticaryābhūmi* (*mos spyod pa'i sa*; the Level of Engagement Through Aspiration) is described as pertaining to the Mahāyāna paths prior to the Path of Seeing, namely, the Paths of Accumulation and Application. See *Mahāyānasamgraha*, III.3, Tib. D 4048 vol. 134, 36b₂₋₄.

²⁹³ These spiritual levels begin with the Path of Seeing.

²⁹⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 22, ed., 54.

[anything] else.²⁹⁵ This is the unsurpassable system. {It is not the domain of those Mādhyamikas who act like the Vaibhāśikas.²⁹⁶}²⁹⁷ By virtue of its qualities, it clears away the defilements of other sentient beings through knowing and caring [which fulfill] the aims of self and others.²⁹⁸

The foregoing nine central claims have given detailed attention to Mi bskyod rdo rje's affirmative stance on buddha nature as the actual, naturally present, potential for awakening to buddhahood that exists in all beings. We are now in a position to examine how the Karma pa defends this interpretation in relation to rival Indian and Tibetan positions.

2.10. Buddha nature is not emptiness as a nonaffirming negation (*med dgag*)

The affirmative view of *tathāgatagarbha* endorsed by the Eighth Karma pa stands diametrically opposed to a widely-held Indian and Tibetan position which equates buddha nature with emptiness in the sense of a nonaffirming negation (*med [par] dgag [pa]*: *prasajyapratīṣedha*). In his early *Lamp*, this position is critically assessed and repudiated as being antithetical to the core aims and assumptions of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the other Maitreya treatises. In subsequent works, the Karma pa continues to criticize this position from a

²⁹⁵ Mi bskyod rdo rje emphasizes that the Jewel of the Buddha is *tathāgatagarbha* in the sense of *dharmaśāya* as the aspect of self-fulfilment (*rang don*). Here, the actual attainment of buddhahood does not depend on factors other than one's buddha nature. Hence, there is no dependency on the mind-stream of other *tathāgatas*. Even though study, thinking and meditation are initially required, it is finally the realization-awareness of mind's true nature, i.e., personally realized wisdom (*pratyātma-vedanīyajñāna*) which eradicates all adventitious defilements so that buddhahood fully unfolds. Since the ocean of buddha-qualities is spontaneously present, they do not newly arise. If they did, they would be conditioned and impermanent.

²⁹⁶ The Vaibhāśika system postulates the existence of indivisible, minute atoms that are permanent and ultimately existent. Probably the author here alludes to those Mādhyamikas who adopted a metaphysical realist view of conventional truth, maintaining the existence of mind-independent objects.

²⁹⁷ LG_{NI} puts this sentence enclosed in braces { } in square brackets, indicating that it was an addition to the original text, probably by a later scholar.

²⁹⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 22, ed., 54.

variety of theoretical and practical perspectives. The main target of his criticism is a certain negativistic Madhyamaka strain of *tathāgatagarbha* interpretation that emerged in the later stages of Buddhism in India and gained considerable popularity in Tibet, especially among Sa skyā and Dge lugs scholars.²⁹⁹ The trend may be broadly viewed as an attempt to de-ontologize buddha nature doctrine, to rid it of those elements by which it came to be associated, explicitly or implicitly, with non-Buddhist metaphysical postulates such as the ideas of a permanent self (*ātman*) or a cosmic absolute (*brahman*). To be fair, the Madhyamaka scholars who championed this view did not wish to reject buddha nature theory outright, but rather to bring it into line with the basic Buddhist principles of selflessness and emptiness, which are both hallmarks of Buddhism itself and cornerstones of their own critical philosophy.

Perhaps the most influential among the Buddhist texts cited as scriptural authority for making buddha nature theory compatible with Madhyamaka philosophy was the *Lankāvatārasūtra* (LAS). This sūtra not only aligned buddha nature doctrine with the three liberations (*vimokṣatraya*), i.e., emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, but further proclaimed that all the sūtras of the Buddha teach emptiness, nonorigination, nonduality, and the lack of an intrinsic nature.³⁰⁰ It should be noted, however, that the Buddha of this sūtra equates *tathāgatagarbha* with emptiness and the like “in order to avoid giving the spiritually immature a reason for becoming afraid of selflessness (*nairātyma*),” and also to ward off any association of buddha nature with the heretical doctrine of a self.³⁰¹ Kazuo Kano observes that these statements of the *Lankāvatārasūtra* suggesting an identification of buddha nature and emptiness marked a turning point in the development of buddha nature doctrine in India, signaling its deepening integration into the Madhyamaka system. For example, Candrakīrti

²⁹⁹ Some of these developments are summarized by Kano 2016, 346–381.

³⁰⁰ See Kano 2016, 5–6 for details concerning these passages and their influence.

³⁰¹ LAS, 78_{5–11}: “Mahāmati, my teaching of buddha nature does not resemble the heretical doctrine of a self (*ātman*). Rather, O Mahāmati, the tathāgatas teach as buddha nature what [really] is emptiness, the limit of reality, *nirvāṇa*, nonorigination, signlessness, wishlessness, and similar categories, and then the tathāgatas, the arhats, the perfect buddhas, in order to avoid [giving] fools a reason for becoming afraid of the lack of essence, teach the nonconceptual experiential object without characteristic signs by means of instructions that make use [of the term] *buddha nature*.” As quoted in Mathes 2008a, 17. For the Sanskrit text, see ibid., 420 n. 95.

and Kamalaśīla both cite the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*'s association of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine with the three liberations as scriptural authority for taking buddha nature to be a doctrine of provisional meaning. For Kamalaśīla, the teaching that all beings have buddha nature means that they are pervaded by *dharmadhātu*, which is characterized by the selflessness of persons and phenomena.³⁰²

On this point, however, it is noteworthy that the *Ratnagotravibhāga* styled the three liberations as a second *dharmaṭakra* teaching that prepares one for buddha nature teachings belonging to the irreversible (*avivartya*) *dharmaṭakra* of definitive meaning.³⁰³ It is on this basis that this treatise claims that its buddha nature doctrine supersedes the “emptiness only” standpoint of second *dharmaṭakra* discourses.³⁰⁴ The divergent views of buddha nature that come into opposition in late Indian Madhyamaka and *tathāgatagarbha* works set the stage for the parallel conflict of buddha nature interpretations that has divided Tibetan schools down to the present day. Indeed, from the early phase of the Later Dissemination (*phyi dar*) period (11th c.) onward, an integrated set of late Indian Madhyamaka views on *tathāgatagarbha* are widely adopted by Tibetan Madhyamaka scholars. These views not only equate buddha nature with emptiness, but also regard teachings on it to be of provisional meaning. Among its most influential proponents were Rngog Lo tsā ba (1059–1109) and Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), as well as their disciples and successors. This view was, in turn, widely criticized by proponents of affirmative accounts of buddha nature, especially in the Rnying ma and Bka' brgyud schools.

Representing this line of interpretation, the Eighth Karma pa takes a firm stand against the equation of buddha nature with nonaffirming emptiness. Thus, we read the following in the opening pages of his *Lamp*:

Some who pride themselves on being Mahāyāna Mādhyamikas, not comprehending the teaching of the irreversible Dharma wheel, cling to the point that ultimate truth is utterly ineffable due to having

³⁰² Kano 2016, 10.

³⁰³ See RGVV, Johnston 1950 ed., 6_{3–7}: *tataḥ paścāc chūnyānimittāprañihitakathayā tathāgatanetrīm avabodhayati | na ca tāvanmātreṇa tathāgato vīryam praśrāmbhayati | tataḥ paścād avivartyadharmaṭakrakathayā trimaṇḍalapariśuddhikathayā ca tathāgata-viṣaye tān sattvān avatārayati nānāprakṛtihetukān | avatīrṇāś ca samānāś tathāgata-dharmatām adhigamyānuttarā dakṣiṇīyā ity ucyanta iti |.*

³⁰⁴ See Kano 2016, 2–3 and 213.

analyzed *tathāgata* only in terms of emptiness. [But this] does not count as the definitive meaning, the ultimate abiding nature, in the Mahāyāna. Why is that? Because it would then be akin to the emptiness of total cessation (*rgyun chad stong nyid*)³⁰⁵ [of] śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha arhats.³⁰⁶ Conversely, unsurpassable and perfect buddhahood is the full accomplishment of the aims of oneself and others. That is, a *tathāgata* reveals manifold wonders via overwhelming and limitless manifestations. Since these never come to an end point later, the qualities and activities of a buddha are of the nature of being permanent and enduring.³⁰⁷ The venerable Asaṅga, the great Mādhyamika,³⁰⁸ explained that this is the ultimate truth.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ The term *rgyun chad* (*samucceda*, *upacceda*, *ucceda* etc.) refers to the goal of certain early Buddhist meditation practices consisting in the complete cessation of consciousness and the annihilation of existence. See Negi 1993 s.v. *rgyud chad*.

³⁰⁶ Mi bskyod rdo rje alludes to the sheer emptiness or the state of cessation of an arhat where it is maintained that due to the cessation of the chain of mind and mental factors, suffering and its source, *viz.*, rebirth in cyclic existence, has ceased.

³⁰⁷ Mi bskyod rdo rje understands permanence in the sense of continuity, the uninterrupted self-constancy of a mode of being and its activities over time. He of course rejects the permanence of entities, such as an immutable personal self or phenomenal essence. To clarify the Karma pa's position on the "sameness" of buddha nature over time, it may be useful to distinguish between the two senses of what it means to be "the same" indicated by the Latin terms *idem* and *ipse*: *idem* is a third-person reidentification of something as being the same (in place, time, features etc.) over time; *ipse* signifies identity in the sense of a self-relatedness over time made possible by the reflexive structure of lived existence. It is important to specify that this immanent reflexivity is more primary than conscious self-reflection. See Ricoeur 1992, 16 *et passim*. Buddha nature is thus held to be permanent in that it is both a constant mode of being, unchanged throughout states of obscuration (see RGVV on I.83), and a continuous manifestation of a buddha's qualities and activities. Mi bskyod rdo rje's description is reminiscent of RGV II.29–37 and comments on this in RGVV.

³⁰⁸ Dol po pa (1292–1361) likewise counted Asaṅga as well as Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and Nāgārjuna as "great Mādhyamikas" and considered the *trisvabhāva* theory to be Madhyamaka as well as Yogācāra. See Stearns 2010, 93.

³⁰⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 21, ed., 53.

Mi bskyod rdo rje's comment regarding the ineffability of the ultimate, buddha nature, requires a word of clarification. It is clear from a number of his other disquisitions on the topic that he endorsed Rngog Lo tsā ba's thesis that "ultimate truth is not an object of knowledge" (*jñeyā*),³¹⁰ a thesis also upheld by Sa skya Paññita.³¹¹ The Karma pa links this thesis with Śāntideva's claim in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that the ultimate (*tattva*) is not within the domain of the intellect, which is deemed to be conventional.³¹² On the other hand, he is highly critical of Rngog's student Phya pa for claiming, in opposition to his teacher, that one can grasp the ultimate truth by means of verbal and conceptual apprehensions (*sgra rtog gi zhen pa*).³¹³

What the Eighth Karma pa is in fact repudiating in the above passage is the opponent's reasoning that the *tathāgatagarbha* is ineffable *because* it consists in sheer emptiness. This he compares to the type of emptiness resulting from cognitive oblivion that is alleged to have been espoused by certain śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha meditators. For Mi bskyod rdo rje, the ultimate is ineffable not because it is nothing at all, but because its realization is held to be of such profundity and fecundity that it defies articulation by language and thought. Clearly, the account he stands behind must be able to convey the fullness of buddha nature as well as its emptiness, even if words fail to adequately capture it. To be sure, buddha nature is empty of substances and attributes; it is not a real or substantial entity. It nonetheless has the capacity to display "manifold

³¹⁰ See *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* II.2, in GC_{KL} vol. 2, 325_{6–10}: *rngog lo tsā ba chen pos kyang don dam shes bya ma yin par gsungs shing | slob dpon chen po zhi ba lhas kyang | don dam blo yi spyod yul min || zhes gsungs shing | khyad par don dam stong nyid sangs rgyas kyis kyang sgro ma btags par rang bzhin gyis grub pa'i shes byar med par gsungs na so skye lta ci smos pa'i phyir |* See also *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.2, GC_{KL} vol. 4, 308_{13–14}: *bstan pa'i theg chen rngog lo tsā ba lta bus kyang don dam bden pa shes bya ma yin pa nyid du bzhed nas | rgyu mtshan de nyid kyi phyir rgyal ba'i sras po zhi ba lhas | don dam blo yi spyod yul min |*.

³¹¹ *Thub pa'i dgongs gsal*, 32.2_{6–31}: *des na dpyad na blo ngor ma grub pas don dam pa shes bya ma yin.* See also Kano 2016, 288.

³¹² *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) IX.2: "The ultimate (*tattva*) is not a domain of the intellect; the intellect is said to be conventional." *buddher agocaras tattvam buddhiḥ saṃvṛtir ucyate ||*. The Tibetan has *don dam* for *tattva*.

³¹³ On Phya pa's position in this regard, see Kano 2016, 308–309.

wonders [via] overwhelming and limitless manifestations”³¹⁴ that are ceaselessly active for the welfare of oneself and others. In the Karma pa’s eyes, the account of buddha nature attributed to Asaṅga and Maitreya is one that makes room for both emptiness and the manifestation of innate buddha-qualities. It is a view that is said to accord with the identity of emptiness and dependent arising emphasized by Nāgārjuna in his *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Here, emptiness is explained as being the very condition of possibility for anything and everything to arise.³¹⁵

Mi bskyod rdo rje considers the construal of buddha nature as a nonaffirming emptiness to form part of a broader nihilistic interpretation of ultimate truth. In his *Lamp*, he decries would-be Mādhyamikas who “claim that in the same way that adventitious defilements have no essence, ultimate truth has no essence. It appears that they take this to be the final definitive meaning.”³¹⁶ But this view, he contends, is precisely the extreme of nihilism rejected by Mādhyamikas: “the great Mādhyamikas Asaṅga and his brother say that because [such people] declare that the ultimate definitive meaning consists in nonexistence, what else is this but the extreme of nihilism?”³¹⁷ Although he has no problem accepting Rngog’s view that ultimate truth eludes appropriation by conceptual thought, he is quick to criticize those who take this ineffability of the ultimate, buddha nature, as a proof of absence in the sense of a nonaffirming negation.

Elsewhere in his *Lamp*, the Karma pa extends this criticism to cover those Mādhyamikas who “do not accept [buddha nature] as being anything existent or nonexistent, even in a merely conventional [sense]” in the context of the post-composure state following their meditation on the ultimate, buddha nature. This he considers a hypocritical view that was declared by Asaṅga to be tainted by sophistry.³¹⁸ As he explains,

Those who pride themselves on being Mādhyamika, yet do not comprehend the meaning of this [doctrine of the perfections of

³¹⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 12, ed., 53.

³¹⁵ For example, see MMK XXIV.14a (Ye Shaoyong 2011 ed., 424): “Those for whom emptiness is possible, for them everything is possible.” *sarvam ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate* |.

³¹⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 28, ed., 57.

³¹⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 29, ed., 58.

³¹⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 34, ed., 62.

purity, permanence, joy, and authentic selfhood], declare that “emptiness is that which is beyond the intellectual scope of ordinary beings in the present.” However, [this] doctrine of nonexistence deduced from assumptions about the meaning of what amounts to mere words contradicts all the [accepted] theories of the conventional. Taking [this] as their sole mental object they declare, “This is the supreme Madhyamaka view.”³¹⁹

Though the author does not name the self-proclaimed Mādhyamikas denounced in these passages, we can infer from similar criticisms he voices elsewhere that he has in mind Dge lugs masters such as Tsong kha pa and one of his two main disciples, Rgyal tshab rje Dar ma rin chen (1364–1432). Indeed, Rgyal tshab rje claims in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary that buddha nature is only the possibility for the arising (*skye rung*) of buddha-qualities and hence is nothing but emptiness or essencelessness in the sense of a nonaffirming negation: “Because [buddha nature is] the possibility for all buddha-qualities to arise and because it has as its nature the objective support of arising buddha-qualities, it is the mere exclusion of being inherently existent... This ultimate truth is but the mere exclusion of being inherently existent.”³²⁰

In his *Embodiments*, the author takes both Tsong kha pa and Rgyal tshab rje to task for construing buddha nature and the tantric causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*) as nonaffirming emptiness and for reducing it either to a conceptual object of knowledge (Tsong kha pa) or to a subjective cognition (Rgyal tshab rje). He summarizes Tsong kha pa's position as follows:

According to the great Tsong kha pa, by reasoning that the aggregates (*skandha*) and so forth are free from one or many, the emptiness of the object of analysis, which is characterized as a

³¹⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 35, ed., 63. This is a criticism raised against the typical Dge lugs view advanced, for example, by Rgyal tshab rje Dar ma rin chen (1364–1432), one of the two main disciples of Tsong kha pa. To him, buddha nature is only the ability to give rise to qualities; it is nothing but emptiness or essencelessness in the sense of a mere negation. See also next footnote.

³²⁰ *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i tīkā*, 226₃₋₄: *sangs rgyas kyi yon tan mtha' dag skye rung dang | yon tan skye ba'i dmigs pa rang bzhin nyid du ldan pa'i phyir rang bzhin gyis grub pa rnam par bcad tsam ... don dam pa'i bden pa de rang bzhin gyis grub pa rnam par bcad tsam ...*

nonaffirming negation, is [considered to be] the nature of phenomena (*dharmatā*). It is also ultimate truth, as well as buddha nature, as well as the causal continuum as it is explained in the Great Yoga. Not only is this said to be the theory propounded in the tantras, the [tantric] bodhisattva commentaries,³²¹ and by the noble father and son [Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva], but it is also the theory [upheld by those] up to and including Abhayā[karagupta]³²² and Śāntipa [i.e., Ratnākaraśānti]³²³.

The Karma pa proceeds to deny that a nonaffirming negation, being a conceptual abstraction, can adequately describe buddha nature, the tantric causal continuum (*hetutantra*), the ultimate truth, or emptiness. This is because “the emptiness from the perspective of the analysis of an object of valid sources of knowledge is nothing more than a [conceptual] universal *qua* nonaffirming

³²¹ The Bodhisattva commentarial trilogy (*byang chub sems dpa'i 'grel pa bskor gsum*) refers to three key Indian Buddhist tantric commentaries: [1] Puṇḍarīka's *Kālacakra* commentary *Vimalaprabhātīkā* (VPT); [2] Vajrapāṇi's *Cakrasaṃvara* commentary *Lakṣhbhidhānāduddhītalaghutāntrapiṇḍārthavivatāṇa*, and Vajragarba's *Hevajra* commentary *Hevajrapiṇḍārthatīkā*. See Callahan 2007, 269–70 and 405, n. 877.

³²² This refers to Abhayākaragupta (d. 1125), an important figure in the transmission of Kālacakra doctrine and a leading later representative of Śāntarakṣita's Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Madhyamaka school who blended tantric and Madhyamaka teachings. See Seyfort Ruegg 1981a, 103. Seyfort Ruegg notes that he composed works on *tathāgatagarbha* and the one final vehicle. He was a disciple of Nāropa and an important transmitter of the Kālacakra system. See Seyfort Ruegg 1981a, 114–115. Tsong kha pa also repeatedly refers to both Abhayākaragupta and Ratnākaraśānti in his *Sngags rim chen mo*.

³²³ See vol. 2, tr., 312, ed., 328. Ratnākaraśānti (alias Śāntipa) is counted among the eighty-four Indian Buddhist mahāsiddhas. He is presented an outstanding scholar and debate-master at Vikramaśīla who, by virtue of his great renown as a Buddhist teacher, was also invited to teach in Sri Lanka where he spent three years. Having retired from his post in Vikramaśīla, Ratnākaraśānti is said to have focussed on discursive contemplation in a twelve-year retreat without attaining realization. During the same time, however, one of his students known as Koṭali (“Mattock man”; see also below 242, n. 557) conducted a twelve-year retreat focussing on the meditation of nonconceptual insight as taught by Ratnākaraśānti. Koṭali thereby attained *mahāmudrā* realization. Ratnākaraśānti is said to have then requested his disciple to teach him this method as he himself had forgotten it. After his own retreat of twelve years, he too attained *mahāmudrā* realization. See Jackson 1994, 145 ff. On Ratnākaraśānti, see also Moriyama 2014 and Umino 1985.

negation. And this universal property is nothing but a mere mental aspect [representation], an apprehended object that is [but] the mode of apprehension of this cognition.”³²⁴ In other words, since this nonaffirming negation is nothing but a conceptual construct, an object of mundane knowledge (*jñeyā*) arrived at through deductive reasoning, it is simply a product of dualistic cognition and not ultimate truth or emptiness, which “does not belong to the sphere of subject and objects, thinker and thoughts.”³²⁵ As the author concludes, “it is not the case that an object of knowledge and cognition, i.e., the experiencing of consciousness together with its objects, could turn out to be emptiness and ultimate truth.”³²⁶

Mi bskyod rdo rje next turns his attention to the interpretation of buddha nature advanced by Rgyal tshab rje, who attempts to reverse his Tsong kha pa's construal of buddha nature as a conceptual object of knowledge (i.e., nonaffirming emptiness as an abstract universal) and instead makes it a hallmark of subjective cognition:

According to Rgyal tshab dar ma, if that emptiness as a nonaffirming negation which is the object of cognition is posited as the causal continuum, this constitutes an over-entailment. However, because such emptiness of true existence is not concomitant with any predicate (*chos* : *dharma*) other than the subject (*chos can* : *dharmin*) “mind,” it stands to reason that it is buddha nature and the [causal] continuum.³²⁷

Reply: It cannot be established that such emptiness—i.e., the emptiness of a nonaffirming negation—is not concomitant with any predicate of a subject other than mind because *all* predicates of subjects, and the nature (*chos nyid* : *dharmatā*) of [their being]

³²⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 313, ed., 328.

³²⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 314, ed., 329.

³²⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 313, ed., 328. Mi bskyod rdo rje here criticizes Tsong kha pa's reduction of emptiness, ultimate truth, to a nonaffirming negation, a deductive conclusion concerning objects of knowledge which is arrived at through an analytical process of eliminating objects of negation (*dgag bya*). To treat emptiness as an object of knowledge, a universal, is to confine it to the sphere of dualistic knowledge. See Hopkins 2008, 256ff.

³²⁷ In short, emptiness is buddha nature or the causal continuum because emptiness (the predicate) is concomitant with mind (the subject).

identical in essence, are emptiness. Moreover, if that predicate [i.e., emptiness] is not concomitant with subjects other than mind, then such emptiness—mere empti[ness] of true existence—could *not* be a nonaffirming negation because mind alone was taken as the predicate to be proven (*sgrub chos*) as empty.³²⁸

Having analyzed in some detail Mi bskyod rdo rje's reservations regarding the nonaffirming construal of buddha nature, we are now prepared to look more closely at the alternative conception he proposes. A clear statement of this is provided in a section of the author's *Intent* (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1) where he defends a specific traditional definition of buddha nature—namely, as emptiness having compassion as its essence—against certain Tibetan critics. More broadly, the Karma pa takes as his basis the view common to many buddha nature discourses that this *tathāgatagarbha* is always already replete with buddha-qualities such as wisdom and compassion. On this basis, he rejects the nihilistic current of Indian and Tibetan buddha nature hermeneutics (typified by Sa skyā Pāṇḍita) that takes buddha nature to consist in sheer emptiness and that treats compassion not as an inherent quality of buddha nature but rather as a conditioned means of realizing this buddha nature conceived as sheer emptiness. In this connection, Mi bskyod rdo rje cites Sa paṇ's comment in *Sdom gsum rab dbye* I.72:

Some claim that the term “**sugatagarbha*”
 Refers to emptiness with compassion as its essence.
 That, however, is what purifies the **sugatagarbha* element;
 So it is not the actual element itself. [I.72]³²⁹

As Mi bskyod rdo rje argues, this interpretation runs counter to the Bka' brgyud understanding of buddha nature as the essence of the unity of insight and skillful means, emptiness and compassion: “By virtue of insight that realizes emptiness, one directly realizes the unity of means and insight, which gives rise to great compassion for all sentient beings oppressed by the suffering that

³²⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 317, ed., 331. As phenomena other than mind would not be included this would constitute an under-entailment.

³²⁹ See Rhoton 2002: Tib., 282; Eng., 50: *kha cig bde gshegs snying po'i sgra* || *stong nyid snying rje'i snying por 'dod* || *'di ni bde gshegs snying po'i khams* || *sbyong byed yin gyi khams dngos min* ||. Translation is our own.

appears, yet has no nature. This has also been given the name ‘buddha nature that is present as the cause of buddhahood’.”³³⁰ To substantiate the view that this “emptiness having compassion as its essence” is a defining element of buddhahood itself, he cites passages from canonical scriptures such as *Pramāṇavārttikakārikā* (PV) II.34a and *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (ŚS) I.73–74. He argues that Sa paṇ’s assertion that compassion does not belong to buddha nature but only to the process of purifying the latter of what obscures it contradicts claims found in many Buddhist scriptures which indicate that the nonreferential compassion which realizes emptiness is both the cause and goal of the Buddhist path:

It is proclaimed in the sūtras and tantras that the great compassion that realizes emptiness, or great compassion without object reference, is the cause for attaining buddhahood. Therefore, what’s wrong with [saying] this [compassion] is none other than the element (*dhātu*) or cause (*hetu*) or potential (*gotra*) of buddhahood?³³¹

For the Karma pa and his tradition, compassion in its most elemental and uncontrived expression is an important part of what makes it possible for a human being to become a buddha. It is imperative, in this regard, to distinguish between *intentional* compassion, which is cultivated as a virtue, and *innate* compassion which arises of its own accord. For the Eighth Karma pa and his tradition, the innate compassion is regarded as a natural and spontaneous expression of buddhahood itself. When elicited and put into practice by the aspirant, it functions as a “cause” of the purification process (*sbyong byed*) that clears buddha nature of all that obscures it.

2.11. Buddha nature is not a basis established (*gzhi grub*) by valid cognition.

We turn now to the question of the ontological status of buddha nature. We have noted that a salient feature of Mi bskyod rdo rje’s interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is the extent to which he attempted to make the affirmative position expounded in classical buddha nature scriptures such as the

³³⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 181, ed., 190.

³³¹ See vol. 2, tr., 182, ed., 190.

Ratnagotravibhāga consistent with antiessentialist and antifoundationalist Madhyamaka standpoints, namely, the *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka view that all phenomena are without any intrinsic essence (*nihsvabhāva*) and the Apratiṣṭhāna Madhyamaka view that all phenomena lack any epistemic or ontological foundation (*apratiṣṭhāna*). Together, these standpoints deny the existence of any real entities, be they external substances or internal minds or subjects, that might be thought to await discovery by observation, introspection, or reasoning. The author's attempts to integrate these affirmative and negative views is hardly surprising given his professed allegiance to both Madhyamaka and Mantrayāna systems of thought and praxis. From this dialectical viewpoint, he is as reluctant to affirm that buddha nature is something as he is to assert that it is simply nothing.

Both the Madhyamaka views he espouses can be regarded as extensions of central Buddhist principles of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), impermanence (*anitya*), and absence of self (*anātman*). For proponents of buddha nature, the challenge was to reconcile the existence and perdurance of buddha nature with these axiomatic Buddhist refutations of any hypostatized entities or essences, physical or mental. Mi bskyod rdo rje is well-aware of the problems at stake and repeatedly cautions against taking the ground of Buddhist soteriology as a metaphysical foundation. As he explains in his *Embodiments*,

Even if the ground of all phenomena prevails all-pervasively and impartially in buddhas and sentient beings, there is no need to [make it] a basis established [through valid sources of knowledge] because if there were something established in this way, the fallacy would absurdly follow that this factor and all persons individually endowed with it are selves and truly established.”³³²

The concern to balance these affirmative and negative standpoints puts Mi bskyod rdo rje in the challenging position of having to radically affirm something that is deemed to not actually exist. He does not want to deny its presence, but neither does his want to affirm its existence. What, then, is buddha nature and how is it best characterized? A convenient way to approach the Karma pa's answer to this question is by way of his response to the issue of what remains when the Buddhist meditator has ascertained emptiness. As the author's

³³² See vol. 2, tr., 282, ed., 290.

detailed treatment of this problem and its doctrinal background have been taken up elsewhere,³³³ it will suffice in the present context to briefly summarize how his defense of buddha nature as a remainder emerges out of his attempts to coordinate and reconcile opposing traditional viewpoints.

For the Karma pa, as for many of his coreligionists, the question of what, if anything, remains for the yogin who realizes emptiness offered a fruitful hermeneutical instrument for differentiating between affirmative (cataphatic) *gzhan stong* and negative (apophatic) *rang stong* strains of Buddhist thought. The wide-ranging Buddhist philosophical interpretations of the remainder can be traced to a famous passage from the *Cūlasuññatasutta* (CS) (*The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness*) of the Pāli Canon:

It is perceived that when something does not exist there, then “that [place] is empty of that [thing].” Further it is comprehended of what remains there that “that exists in that [place]” as a real existent.³³⁴

This locus classicus of the remainder problem has attracted the notice of a number of contemporary scholars of Buddhism including D. Seyfort Ruegg, G.M. Nagao, S. Yamaguchi, H. Urban and P. Griffiths, L. Dargay, K.-D. Mathes and Bhikkhu Anālayo.³³⁵ Taken collectively, their research poignantly reveals the extent to which the passage was excerpted from its original context and tailored to fit the aims and presuppositions of different, and at times divergent, scholastic lines of interpretation.

The divergent Tibetan assimilation of the Indian remainder views provided the raw materials for scholars of different Tibetan Buddhist traditions to evaluate

³³³ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 299–319 and a more detailed assessment in Higgins (forthcoming).

³³⁴ AN, *Majjhimanikāya*, sutta no. 121 et passim: *iti yam hi kho tattha na hoti, tena tam suññam samanupassati, yam pana tattha avasiññam hoti, tam santam idam attīti pa-jānāti* |. Tib. D (Dpe sdur ma ed.) vol. 71, 662₁₅₋₁₈; Tib. ...*gang la gang med pa de des stong ngo zhes bya bar yang dag par rjes su mthong yang | de la lhag ma gang yod pa de de la yod do zhes bya bar yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du rab tu shes te | [kun dga' bo stong pa nyid la 'jug pa 'di ni yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin te phyin ci ma log pa yin no |*. See Mathes 2012.

³³⁵ Yamaguchi 1941; Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 319 ff.; Nagao 1991, 51–60 (reprint of 1978 article); Dargay 1990; Urban and Griffiths 1994, Mathes 2009, 2012 and Anālayo 2012.

varying lines of response to an overlapping set of key soteriological problems that had long been hotly debated by Buddhist scholars. Paramount among the issues were [1] whether phenomena are best deemed to be empty of own [nature] (*rang stong*) or empty of other (*gzhan stong*), [2] whether a buddha can be said to have any cognition or wisdom at all, [3] what happens during states of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*), particularly the cessation of mind (*cittanirodha*), and [4] whether realization is ineffable, and if so, in what sense. This section will outline Mi bskyod rdo rje's attempt to present and defend his own tradition's approach to the problem of the remainder in light of the major Indian and Tibetan lines of interpretation.

The remainder emerges as a recurrent topic and theme in the Eighth Karma pa's philosophical writings, one which he treated not as an established Buddhist axiom but rather as a hotly debated philosophical problem, soliciting widely differing views and therefore demanding careful and nuanced consideration. Because conflicting Buddhist interpretations of the remainder reflect a tension at the heart of Karma bka' brgyud views of buddha nature and ultimate reality, it was not a problem Mi bskyod rdo rje could simply ignore. The tension arises from an apparent discrepancy between positive and negative ways of relating to, and characterizing *tathāgatagarbha*, each of which finds expression in one or another of the exoteric and esoteric Buddhist systems of exegesis (*bshad lugs*) and praxis (*sgrub lugs*) advocated by the Karma pa. Because he considered all these systems to be authoritative and indispensable avenues for realizing the Buddhist goal of awakening, he proceeded from the assumption that their contrasting affirmative and negative modes of thought and discourse were complementary rather than contradictory. On this basis, he was insistent that the tension between these two approaches signaled the need to strike a viable balance between them, rather than privilege one to the exclusion of the other.

Taking a wide-angle view of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the divergence between affirmative and negative appraisals of the remainder roughly coincides with fundamental distinctions between Indian Yogācāra and Madhyamaka views and Tibetan Gzhan stong and Rang stong views. In general, Indian Yogācāra and Tibetan Gzhan stong thinkers used the passage from the *CūlaSuññatasutta* (CS) just cited to support the view that following meditation on emptiness something *does* remain, though their accounts of what this something is and how it is best characterized were far from homogeneous. Conversely, Indian Madhyamaka and Tibetan Rang stong thinkers typically used the passage to vindicate their strict interpretation of the dictum that "everything is empty" (*sarvam śūnyam*), concluding that no intrinsic essences or real entities

of any kind, material or mental, can withstand critical assessment or survive the ascertainment of emptiness and dependent arising. The necessarily concise overview offered here encapsulates complex doctrinal developments spanning more than a millennium.

In the context of Tibetan buddha nature hermeneutics, the Gzhan stong and Rang stong positions were typically associated with the Jo nang pa and Dge lugs pa traditions respectively. Interestingly, these traditions arrive at diametrically opposed views of buddha nature based on their divergent readings of a key passage on the remainder in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (on RGV I.155). The passage in question states that when one recognizes that buddha nature is “not empty 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,” then “one thus perceives that ‘when something that does not exist in that [place],’ then ‘that [place] is empty of that [thing]’ and thus “comprehends that something which remains exists [permanently]”³³⁶ there as a real existent.”³³⁷

³³⁶ The Tibetan (D, P) have *de la rtag par yod*, “exists permanently there.”

³³⁷ RGV I.155 (Johnston 1950 ed., 76): “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.” *śūnya āgantukair dhātuḥ savinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ | aśūnya 'nuttarair dharmair avinirbhāgalakṣaṇaiḥ |*. For the context of the above quoted passage, see RGVV, 76₅₋₁₀: “What is taught by that? There is no characteristic sign of any of the defilements (*saṃkleṣa*) whatsoever to be removed from this naturally pure buddha element because it is naturally devoid of adventitious stains. Nor does anything need to be added to it as the characteristic sign (*nimitta*) of purification because its nature is to have pure properties that are inseparable [from it]. Therefore it is said [in the *Śrīmālādevīśūtra*]: “Buddha nature is empty of the sheath of all 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.” One thus perceives that ‘when something that does not exist in that [place],’ then ‘that [place] is empty of that [thing]’, and comprehends that something which remains exists [permanently] there as a real existent.” *kim anena paridīpitam | yato na kimcid apaneyam asty atah prakṛti-pariśuddhāt tathāgatadhātoḥ saṃkleśanimittam āgantukamalaśūnyatāprakṛtivād asya | nāpy atra kimcid upaneyam asti vyavadānanimittam avinirbhāgaśuddhadharma-prakṛtivāt | tata ucyate | śūnyas tathāgatagarbho vinirbhāgair muktajñaiḥ sarva-*

The Jo nang pa used this passage to support their view that buddha nature with its inseparable qualities constitutes an intrinsic essence (*rang gi ngo bo* : *svabhāva*). For the Dge lugs pas, the passage corroborated their view that buddha nature is mind's emptiness from an inherently existing mind; and the inseparability of buddha-qualities is interpreted, along the lines of Rngog Blo ldan shes rab, to mean that they emerge when meditating on the emptiness of mind. In short, for the Jo nang pa, buddha nature is existent and its qualities are innate, whereas for the Dge lugs pas, buddha nature is a nonaffirming negation and its qualities are emergent or acquired. On the basis of their divergent views of buddha nature, the Jo nang pas used the idea of the remainder to support the determination of a permanent metaphysical perfect nature (*chos nyid yongs grub*) construed as a basis of emptiness (*stong gzhi*) which is empty of adventitious defilements. The Dge lugs pas, on the other hand, used it to support the determination of reality just as it is, *viz.*, as empty of intrinsic essence, a stance which allows no room for any residual basis of emptiness (*stong gzhi*).

kleśakośaiḥ | aśūnyo gaṅgānadīvālikāvyativṛttair avinirbhāgair amuktajñair acintyair buddhadharmaṁ iti | evaṁ yad yatra nāsti tat tena śūnyam iti samanupaśyati | yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭam bhavati tat sad ihaśūtti yathābhūtaṁ prajānāti |. Tib. D 4025, 2267–2274: 'dis ci bstan zhe na | gang gi phyir rang bzhin gyi yongs su dag pa de bzhin gzhegs pa'i khams 'di las | bsal bar bya ba kun nas nyon mongs pa'i rgyu mtshan ni 'ga' yang med de | blo bur ba'i dri ma dang bral ba ni 'di'i rang bzhin yin pa'i phyir ro || 'di la rnam par byang ba'i rgyu mtshan bzhag par | bya ba chung zad kyang yod pa ma yin te | rnam par dbye ba med pa'i chos dag pa'i chos nyid ni rang bzhin yin pa'i phyir ro || des na de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po ni rnam par dbye ba yod pa bral shes pa | nyon mongs pa'i sbubs thams cad kyis ni stong pa yin la | rnam par dbye ba med pa bral mi shes pa bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i sangs rgyas kyi chos gang gā'i klung gi bye ma las 'das pa ni mi stong ngo zhes gsungs so || de ltar na gang zhig gang na med pa de ni des stong ngo zhes yang dag par rjes su mthong la | gang zhig der lhag mar gyur pa de ni de la rtag par yod do zhes yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du rab tu shes so ||. The last sentence Asaṅga quotes is found with minor variation in the *Śūnyatānāmamahāsūtra*, D 290 (i.e., *Cūlasuññatasutta* (CS), *Majjhimanikāya* 121), 5001: *gang la gang med pa de des stong ngo zhes bya bar yang dag par rjes su mthong yang | de la lhag mar gang yod pa de de la yod do zhes bya bar yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du rab tu shes te ||*. Though the wording is taken from the *Cūlasuññatasutta* (CS), Mathes (2007, 12) observes that the meaning is different. The *itaretaraśūnyatā* as presented in that sūtra implied that a specific area is empty of elephants without negating elephants per se, whereas the emptiness of adventitious stains negates their existence altogether.

Turning to Mi bskyod rdo rje's own treatments of the remainder issue, we find him taking his customary middle position between these contrasting currents of Buddhist thought. The main sources for his treatment are found in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* (MA) and *Dgongs gcig* commentaries, which we can assign to roughly the same period based on colophonic information and intertextual cross-references. The author's interpretive method in these works is to rigorously apply the Madhyamaka principle of freedom from extremes: "according to the Madhyamaka of sūtra and mantra [traditions], the real objects of refutation are the two great extremes of eternalism and nihilism"³³⁸ because there are no other extremes that are not subsumed under these." And, once liberated from these extremes, "there is left behind not the slightest remainder of any belief in extreme [positions]."³³⁹ Note that Mi bskyod rdo rje here qualifies the absence of remainder as pertaining to beliefs, leaving open the question of the ontological status of the remainder. Thus, the principal object of refutation is the grasping for or belief in reality (*bden 'dzin*), which is at the root of reification and ignorance.

The Karma pa investigates the remainder issue in a section of *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1 devoted to clarifying 'Jig rten gsum mgon's eleventh vajra precept from the first section of his *Dgongs pa gcig pa* (GC I.11), which states that "The teachings of Cittamātra reveal the Madhyamaka free from extremes."³⁴⁰ Mi bskyod rdo rje's excursus to some extent follows the Sa skya master Stag tshang lo tsā ba Shes rab rin chen's arguments for the superiority of Madhyamaka over Cittamātra as advanced in the latter's *Grub mtha' kun shes* auto-commentary.³⁴¹ But in clarifying the sense of 'Jig rten gsum mgon's precept, it is evident that the Karma pa wishes to emphasize not only that Cittamātra and Madhyamaka traditions are complementary, but that the latter marks a definite advance beyond

³³⁸ The view of *ucchedavāda*, "annihilationism" rejected by Buddhists maintains that something which has come into existence ceases to exist. Here, it is rather loosely translated as "nihilism" (a term which itself has many meanings in Western philosophy and theology).

³³⁹ *Dwags brygud grub pa'i shing rta*, 22₉₋₁₁: *mdo sngags kyi dbu ma mtha' dag gis dgag par bya ba'i don po rtag chad kyi mtha' chen po 'di gnyis yin te | 'dir ma 'dus pa'i mtha' gzhan med pa'i phyir te | ... mthar 'dzin gyi lhag ma cung zad kyang lus pa'i phyir |.*

³⁴⁰ *Dgongs pa gcig pa* IV.1, in GC_{KL} vol. 4, 54₂₂ (also in BC vol. 80, 194₄): *sems tsam bka' yis mtha' bral dbu ma ston ||*.

³⁴¹ See *Grub mtha' kun shes rtsa 'grel*, 10 ff. (root text) and 140 ff. (auto-commentary).

the former's idealistic standpoint. It should be noted that this interpretation underscores the superiority of Madhyamaka over Cittamātra, in contrast to 'Jig rten gsum mgon's precept, as well as its interpretation by one of his 'Bri gung commentators, Chos kyi grags pa (1595–1659), who had rather stressed the compatibility of their views. Consider, for example, Chos kyi grags pa's commentary on the precept: "the precept [I.11] teaches that all entities are not established as other than mind. Since mind, too, is free from the extremes of existence and nonexistence, who would expound a Madhyamaka different from that? Take the training in the nonduality of manifestation and mind as [your] basis."³⁴²

The Karma pa for his part explains that "although in Mahāyāna teachings, there are scriptural passages by Cittamātra teachers cited as support for the establishment of cognition (*rnam rig pa'i grub pa*), the final intent must be based solely on the interpretations by the Great Ācārya Nāgārjuna."³⁴³ It is, of course, this Indian master's teaching on emptiness that is taken by Mi bskyod rdo rje to be a core insight and indisputable axiom of Buddhist philosophical thinking. "In general, it is not declared in all the buddha's teachings that there is no distinction between provisional and definitive meaning. However, in the case of canonical writings of both the middle and final turnings, which teach the selflessness of phenomena, it is indisputable that in teaching profound emptiness as it is, they did not teach that there are superior and inferior [kinds of emptiness], or a profound difference [between such kinds]."³⁴⁴

In other words, for the Karma pa, there is only a single, comprehensive emptiness which admits of no qualitative gradations. In this regard he proceeds to quote a passage from the *Samādhirājasūtra* (SRS) which proclaims the emptiness of phenomena to have a single meaning (*don gcig*) common to all the

³⁴² *Dgongs pa gcig pa dka' 'grel*, 165₁₃₋₁₇: *gsungs pa dngos kun sems tsam las gzhan du | ma grub sems kyang yod med mtha' bral pas || de las gzhan pa'i dbu ma su yis bshad || skrang sems gnyis med nyams len rta bar gzung ||*. Translation our own.

³⁴³ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, GC_{KL} vol. 4, 55₁₋₃ (BC vol. 80, 194₄₋₅): *theg pa chen po'i bka' ni sems tsam pa'i slob dpon dag gis rnam rig pa'i grub pa'i rgyab tu 'dren yang | mthar thug gi dgongs pa slob dpon chen po nā ga rdzu nas bkral ba nyid kho nar gnas bya ba yin ||*.

³⁴⁴ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, GC_{KL} vol. 4, 55₅₋₈ (BC vol. 80, 194_{6-195₁}): *spyir bde bar gshegs pa'i bka' thams cad la drang nges kyi rnam dbye med par mi smra yang | 'khor lo bar mthar chos kyi bdag med ston pa'i gsung rab la ni | zab mo stong pa nyid kyi rang ldog bstan pa la mchog dman nam zab khyad yod par ma bstan par gor ma chag ste |*.

varied *buddhavacana*.³⁴⁵ He concludes that “Here in Tibet in particular, even among those sūtras which profess to teach the Vijñāpti[mātra], it is abundantly clear that this Vijñāpti[mātra] doctrine was shown to be the inferior one.”³⁴⁶ In this connection, Mi bskyod rdo rje quotes the following passage from the *Lankāvatāra*:

Once one has relied on [the notion of] Mind Only,
 External objects should not be imagined.
 Based on the apprehension of suchness,
 One should also pass beyond Mind Only. (LAS X.256)

Having passed beyond Mind Only,
 One should pass beyond the state which is without appearances.
 A yoga practitioner immersed in the state without appearances
 Sees the Mahāyāna.³⁴⁷ (LAS X.257)

The author at this point turns his attention to the question of the remainder:

Now, some teachers who cling to a Cittamātra position [say] that a truly established cognition (*rnam rig* : *vijñapti*) is shown by the final turning [scriptures] to be of definitive meaning. From the *Sūtra on Ultimate Emptiness* (*Don dam pa stong pa nyid kyi mdo*).³⁴⁸

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 195.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 195.: *khyad par bod 'dir rnam rig bstan par 'dod pa'i mdo dag las kyang | chos rnam rig pa'i lugs de mchog ma yin par bstan pa ni ches gsal te |*.

³⁴⁷ LAS 298₁₅–299₁: *cittamātrāṇi samāruhya bāhyam arthaṇ na kalpayet | tathatālam-bane sthitvā cittamātram atikramet || cittamātram atikramya nirābhāsam atikramet | nirābhāsasthito yogī mahāyānam sa^a paśyati ||*. ^aAccording to the Tibetan in Nanjo 1923, 299, fn. 1. Nanjo proposes reading as *na*. Mi bskyod rdo rje quotes only the first stanza, but the second is included here for context.

³⁴⁸ This title is not found in the Tibetan canon. It may be noted that the Tibetan title of the CS is *Mdo chen po stong pa nyid*. The quotation resembles the CS passage on the remainder with the exception of the last line. The same sūtra is also quoted in the *Vyākhyāyukti* on which see Mathes 2007, 335. Stag tshang Lo tsā ba Shes rab rin chen quotes the same passage and under the same title *Don dam pa stong pa nyid kyi mdo* in his *Grub mtha' kun shes* auto-commentary, 141_{13–16}.

When something does not exist there, then that [place] is empty of that [thing]. Further it is comprehended that something that remains there does exist there. This is the nonerroneous, correct view regarding emptiness, the Middle Way.³⁴⁹

In clarifying the intent behind this statement, the Karma pa first explains that the Buddhist teachings were unlimited both in content and modes of expression because they functioned as skillful means tailored to each of the multifarious mind-sets of individuals.

After outlining some of the hermeneutical devices employed in interpreting and translating Buddhist scripture, Mi bskyod rdo rje turns his attention to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*'s (RGV I.155) special interpretation of the "remainder" as buddha nature which is empty of adventitious defilements:

When it comes to the meaning of the [above] quotation, the esteemed teacher Asaṅga stated that unadulterated awareness, operative since time without beginning, which is the cause of perfect buddhahood free from obscurations, was termed "buddha nature." Since it is not possible for its mode of being to mingle with the nature of all obscurations, [the latter] exist as something separable. However, since [buddha nature] is the cause that generates qualities such as the powers on the level of buddhahood, it has not been known to be separable since beginningless time. Hence, it appeared to be explained in the sense of not being empty [of buddha-qualities].³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.1, GC_{KL} vol. 4, 55₁₈₋₂₁ (BC vol. 80, 195₅-196₁): *yang sems tsam* *gyi phyogs* *'dzin pa'i slob dpon kha cig* || *'khor lo tha mas rnam rig bden grub pa zhig nges don du bstan pa yin te* | *don dam pa stong pa nyid kyi mdo las* | *gang na gang med pa de ni des stong pa nyid yin la* | *'di la lhag ma gang yin pa de ni 'dir yod pa ste* | *'di ni dbu ma'i lam stong pa nyid la lta ba yang dag par phyin ci ma log pa'o* ...

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 196₃₋₅: ...*lung de'i don ni slob dpon thogs med* *zhabs* *kyis* | *thog ma med pa'i dus can* *gyi zag med* *kyi shes pa bden par med* *bzhin du sgrib bral rdzogs* *sangs kyi rgyu bde gshegs* *snying po'i ming can la* | *sgrib pa thams cad* *kyi rang bzhin de'i gnas tshul dang* *'dre mi rung bas* *dbyer yod la* | *sangs rgyas kyi sa'i stobs* *sogs kyi chos bskyed pa'i rgyus ni* *thog med* *nas* *'bral mi shes pas* *mi stong ba'i* *don du* *'chad par snang gi* ...

The author concludes by quoting the above-cited passage from Asaṅga's *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* to substantiate the equation of the remainder with buddha nature. This remnant buddha nature is said in RGV I.155 to be inseparable, in the sense of not being empty of unsurpassed buddha-qualities, but devoid of adventitious defilements, which are characterized as separable since they are superfluous and can be removed through spiritual praxis.

Surveying several of the Karma pa's treatments of the remainder problem, it becomes evident that his primary philosophical aim is to avoid the extremes of existence and nonexistence while at the same time balancing affirmative and negative modes of discourse. We have proposed that his Mahāmudrā and Tathāgatagarbha affiliations prompted him to acknowledge a remainder of some kind—buddha nature, the nature of mind, the nature of reality—while his allegiance to *Prāsaṅgika and Apratiṣṭhāna views led him to disavow any hypostatization of this remainder as a basis established (*gzhi grub*) through the standard Buddhist epistemological procedures. This helps to explain his emphasis, increasingly conspicuous in his later writings, on the need to ascertain an emptiness free from any residual beliefs in the extremes of existence and nonexistence.

To summarize, despite indications of his early favoring of a Gzhan stong-like affirmation of the basis of emptiness over the Rang stong-based denial of such a basis, his later works such as the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and *Dgongs gcig* commentaries endorse the metaphysically disinclined stance of the anti-foundationalist Madhyamaka traditions. In his MA commentary, he determines that among the extensive ways of teaching emptiness found among innumerable Madhyamaka, Cittamātra, and tantric sources, those presented within Madhyamaka teachings and treatises are the “most lucid” (*ches gsal ba*) because “by teaching an emptiness that leaves behind not even the slightest remainder of discursive elaborations and characteristics (*spros mtshan gyi lhag ma*), this tradition takes the remaining emptiness to be fully comprehensive in scope.”³⁵¹ Stated succinctly, this tradition’s understanding of profound emptiness, which leaves behind no ontological residue in the form of reifying superimpositions, is deemed to be the most far-reaching and soteriologically efficacious.

³⁵¹ *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 5₁₉–6₃. *lugs 'dir ni spros mtshan gyi lhag ma cung zad kyang ma lus par stong nyid du bstan nas stong pa nyid kyi lus yongs su rdzogs par mdzad pa'i phyir ||*.

2.12. The identification of buddha nature and *ālayavijñāna* is provisional

We turn now to the complex relationship between buddha nature and the Yogācāra substratum consciousness. The issue of how the two are related has long been a subject of intense discussion and debate for Buddhist scholars, both within and beyond the borders of India. Looking back on such exchanges, one is hard-pressed to find a scholar who devoted more attention to this problematic relationship than the Eighth Karma pa. In reviewing his diverse writings on the matter, it becomes clear that the issue was a focal point for several overlapping issues that were integral to his philosophical project. Among these were the concerns to reconcile the Yogācāra *ālayavijñāna* with [1] buddha nature ideas, [2] Buddhist tantric “buddha nature” proxies such as the unconditioned ground (*gzhi*) or causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*), [3] Indian and Chinese Buddhist conceptions of an immaculate consciousness,³⁵² and [4] his own tradition’s Mahāmudrā-based Yugaṇaddha-Apratiṣṭhāna-Madhyamaka. The author’s repeated forays into these contested subject areas reveal time and again his commitment to an antiessential middle way that avoids the extremes of existence and nonexistence. They reveal a thinker who was as skeptical about the ability of the mind to discover any final foundations as he was confident about its ability to discover a primary mode of being and awareness that is not conceptually determined. To adequately appreciate his contribution to understanding the relationship between buddha nature and the substratum consciousness, it is necessary to trace in broad outline the historical evolution of the *ālayavijñāna* idea and its complex confrontations with ascendant buddha nature conceptions.

A few centuries after the first appearance of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrines in India (circa 2nd c. CE), opinions became divided over whether buddha nature should be identified with or distinguished from the Yogācāra idea of a substratum consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). That the question was in large part a semantic one, was not lost on several of the Tibetan scholars who would later struggle to clarify this relationship.³⁵³ Indeed, to determine whether *tathāgatagarbha* is the same as or different from the *ālayavijñāna* (or both or neither for that matter) requires that one first ascertains the conditions necessary for applying these terms in shifting semantic contexts. To make matters more

³⁵² See Radich 2008 and 2016.

³⁵³ Higgins 2013 and Higgins and Draszczyk 2016, 231–38 et passim.

complex, both these concepts were increasingly the target of antifoundationalist critique, especially by philosophers of the *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka tradition, who were ever suspicious of the ontological commitments behind their usage and ready to question the scope and validity of the concepts themselves.

It turns out, perhaps unsurprisingly, that in the development of Buddhist thought, each of these two terms came to be interpreted in widely different ways according to changing sectarian and doctrinal climates. Each new generation of scholars was newly confronted with the task of clarifying the relationship between *tathāgatagarbha* and *ālayavijñāna* in light of these ever-mutable contexts of interpretation. Before assessing the Eighth Karma pa's contributions to the issue, we will focus on the development and explanatory role of the *ālayavijñāna* concept in Indian Buddhism, giving some attention to the unity and differentiation models that developed to help clarify its relationship to buddha nature and the nature of mind.³⁵⁴ The fact that Mi bskyod rdo rje's own attempts to elucidate the relationship were informed by an unusually extensive knowledge of this background makes such an overview a useful point of departure.

The origins and development of the *ālayavijñāna* concept in Yogācāra literature have been documented and debated elsewhere and need not be reprised here.³⁵⁵ For present purposes, our attention will be confined to the role the concept played in Yogācāra attempts to describe and explain the conditions of human errancy and liberation. In addressing this issue, leading Yogācāra scholars expanded the traditional Buddhist sixfold model of mind into an eightfold model to better account for the genesis, continuity and possible transcendence of dualistic cognition. A useful summary of this development is offered by Mchims ston Blo bzang grags pa (1299–1375) in his commentary on the *Abhidharmakośa*:

The two Śrāvaka schools [Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika] claim that consciousness is sixfold. The two Ācārya brothers [Vasubandhu and Asaṅga], however, assert it is eightfold [by including]: [1] a substratum consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) that indistinctly yet

³⁵⁴ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 26–27, 172, 190–192 et passim and Higgins 2013, 142–163.

³⁵⁵ The most authoritative source on this doctrine remains Schmithausen 1987, a detailed reconstruction of the origin and early development of *ālayavijñāna* based on meticulous historical-philological research. See also Waldron 2003.

incessantly grasps all outer and inner [referents], the world and inhabitants, by objectifying [them]; and [2] an afflicted mind (*klīṣṭam manas*) that has the aspect of grasping that [substratum consciousness] itself as an “I” by objectifying [it].³⁵⁶

The substratum and afflicted modes of consciousness are added to the traditional sixfold scheme to better account for the onset and latent structuring of experience in terms of self and other, “I” and “mine.” To understand the role this new model played in Buddhist soteriology, we need to look more closely at its explanatory force and limitations. What range of phenomena did it seek to describe and explain? Recent scholarship has cast light on several problems of continuity that the *ālayavijñāna* idea attempted to resolve, and that were thought to be inadequately explained in the Abhidharmic account of mind. Primary among these were the continuities of various elements of samsaric existence including consciousness (*vijñāna*), feelings (*vedanā*), vitality (*āyus*), personal identity (*ahamkāra*), the mind-body complex (*nāmarūpa*), latent tendencies (*anuśaya, vāsanā*), and the relation between actions and results (*karmaphala*).³⁵⁷ Most vexing was the problem of accounting for the continuity of consciousness, personal identity, and karmic maturation (positive and negative) after periods of unconsciousness or during the transition from one rebirth to the next.

In early Abhidharma exegesis, the conception of a “sub-threshold” mode of consciousness, largely inaccessible to direct reflection, gradually took shape to account for how these continuities play a constitutive role in samsaric existence. To better explain the genesis and perdurance of karmic and afflictive conditioning of mind both within and beyond this life, the Abhidharmic sixfold analysis of consciousness was broadened to include a mechanism for the sedimentation of latent tendencies from previous experience that condition the mind and structure perception in terms of subject and object. One subsequently encounters a number of more or less *ad hoc* attempts in the Abhidharma system to explain the influence of past experience on the present. These included *inter*

³⁵⁶ *Chos mngon pa gsal byed legs par bshad pa'i rgya mtsho* vol. 1, 27a₂₋₃: ...nyan thos sde ba gnyis rnam shes tshogs drug tu 'dod la || slob dpon sku mched ni dmigs pa phyi nang snod bcud thams cad la dmigs nas rnam pa mi gsal zhing ma chad par 'dzin pa'i kun gzhi'i rnam shes dang || de nyid la dmigs nas ngar 'dzin pa'i rnam pa can gyi nyon yid de tshogs brgyad bzhed so ||.

³⁵⁷ For detailed discussions of these, see Schmithausen 1987.

alia the realist Sarvāstivādin theory of possession (*prāpti*) that posited a *dharma* called *prāpti* (“obtaining” or “acquisition”) that acts as a kind of metaphysical glue, binding karmic inheritance to a particular mental stream.³⁵⁸ Another model was the nonrealist “seed theories” of the Sautrāntika school that introduced the “explicitly metaphorical notion (*prajñapti-dharma*) of seeds (*bīja*) to represent both the latent afflictions and accumulation of karmic potential within the mental stream.”³⁵⁹

It is within the Cittamātra-Yogācāra system that one meets with the first *systematic* attempt to account for this ongoing sedimentation of experience. Its analysis of latent tendencies, literally “perfuming” (*vāsanā* : *bag chags*), sought to explicate in a more methodical and comprehensive fashion those unconscious constitutive processes that remain largely inaccessible to direct apprehension, but that nonetheless influence consciousness at every moment. On this view, consciousness is never wholly accessible to direct reflection, since it is subliminally influenced at every turn by latent traces of previous experience. Stated otherwise, consciousness lives in the medium of its own history,³⁶⁰ which, however, remains largely unavailable to it. It is *karmically-affected* insofar as it operates in the light of the past and in anticipation of the future, and does so, by and large, under the influence of its own sedimented habits, presuppositions, and inclinations.

We have seen that the *ālayavijñāna-vāsanā* model allowed Yogācāra scholars to account for the largely unconscious constitutive processes that condition and

³⁵⁸ See Burton 2004, 90.

³⁵⁹ See Waldron 2003, 73.

³⁶⁰ A similar view developed in Husserl's later phenomenology as follows: “The Ego always lives in the medium of its ‘history’; all its earlier lived experiences have sunk down, but they have aftereffects in tendencies, sudden ideas, transformations or assimilations of earlier lived experiences, and from such assimilations new formations are merged together, etc.” See Husserl 1989, 350. The growing emphasis within the Abhidharma-Yogācāra systems on the constitutive role of previous experience on the present can be fruitfully compared to developments within Husserl's phenomenology from a *static phenomenology* concerned with invariant formal structures of experience such as the correlational (noetic-noematic) structure of intentionality, toward a *genetic phenomenology* concerned with the genesis of intentional experience in time and with how it is shaped by previous experience (sedimentation). On this distinction, see Steinbock 1995; Zahavi 1999, 207 f.; Thompson 2007, 28 f.

structure the dualistic mind (*citta*) at each moment. But it left unanswered an important religious and soteriological problem. Although the *ālayavijñāna-vāsanā* model certainly helped explain the sources of dualistic consciousness, it could not, on its own terms, explain the sources of spiritual awakening. A concomitant soteriological model was needed to specify why mind's cessation should result in anything other than cognitive oblivion. The real issue was how a soteriological model premised solely on the *cessation* of the mind (*cittanirodha*) and the *ālayavijñāna* could account for the genesis of the nondual wisdom of a buddha, the goal of the Buddhist path.

It was in light of this concern that there arose from the sixth century onward a number of doctrinal innovations, some internal to and others external to the Yogācāra system. Together, they sought to expand the classical Yogācāra picture of mind to include a more fundamental nondual mode of being and awareness. Just as classical Yogācāra doctrine required a conception of *karmically-affected* mind to account for the genesis and continuity of conditioned existence, so the later Buddhist soteriological systems in India, China, and Tibet needed to make room for a deeper layer of consciousness that is primordially unaffected and unafflicted. This was required to account for the possibility of a freedom from the conditioning of the afflicted and afflictive mind that was not just a sheer absence of cognitive activity. It is entirely plausible that the late Yogācāra, and also tantric, accounts of the fundamental transformation (*gnas 'gyur : āśraya-parāvṛtti, °-parivṛtti*) of consciousness into wisdom were introduced precisely to fill this explanatory gap.

In tandem with, and sometimes in opposition to, such models, there also developed a disclosive model of liberation which viewed goal-realization not as an altered state of mind, but rather as a discovery of primordial modes of being and awareness that are revealed to the extent that what obscures them has vanished. Among other things, this model provided an ingenious framework to describe and explain how the cessation of dualistic mind results not in cognitive extinction, but in the Buddhist goal of spiritual awakening (*bodhi*), the ultimate awakened mind (*bodhicitta*).

Amongst Tibetan scholars, the idea of a deeper “ground” (*ālaya*)—a pure ninth consciousness, or uncorrupted wisdom, held to be ever-present beneath or beyond the threshold of the *ālayavijñāna*—provoked a great deal of discussion and controversy. To get a sense of how different, and even divergent, such ground conceptions could be, consider the following passage by the 14th century Upper 'Brug pa (*stod 'brug*) Bka' brgyud master 'Ba' ra ba Rgyal mtshan dpal

bzang (1310–1391). In this illuminating extract from his commentary on Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal's (1213–1258) *Ngo sprod bdun ma'i mgur*, 'Ba' ra ba assesses the relative scope and significance of developmental and disclosive models of the ground:

Now, the term “ground” (*gzhi* : *ālaya*) is according to some systems a ground which is something like a field. This ground is held to be that [locus] where things ripen individually in accordance with what has been planted, like barley, wheat, lentils, and so forth. But this entails the fallacy of [taking] ground and results [lit. “fruits”] as different things, because if this productive ground is [taken as] a field, then the resultant barley and lentils and so forth are different from the field's soil.

In this regard, Chos rje Rin po che [Yang dgon pa] declared that what is termed “ground” is spontaneously present as the actual basis of all phenomena subsumed under *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa* and the path, and this ground abides naturally. Yet, it assumes specific forms when it encounters particular conditions and [may therefore] manifest as anything whatsoever. As an example, it is said to be similar to a crystal ball. When this crystal comes into contact with a condition such as something painted [red], it turns red, or, when it comes in contact with indigo, it turns blue. But even if it appears to turn red, the crystal has not changed in essence. And though it seems to turn blue, the crystal remains unchanged. So, the crystal may turn various colors, but it does not in essence turn into something else. Likewise, mind may go astray into the painful experiences of the hot and cold hells, but it has not for an instant changed in essence and turned into something evil. Even when buddhahood occurs as a result of realization, the essence of mind has not for a moment changed into something good. It is not that mind in itself realizes or fails to realize [anything]. In mind, there is neither good and evil nor anything that becomes differentiated.³⁶¹

³⁶¹ *Ngo sprod bdun ma'i 'grel pa man ngag rin po che'i sgron me*, in *Rje 'Ba' ra ba chen po Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang gi bka' 'bum* vol. 11, 211₂–212₁: *de yang gzhi zhes pa 'ga' re'i lugs kyis zhing lta bu cig gzhi yin la | nas dang gro sran la sogs pa gang btab pa bzhin so sor smin pa cig la gzhir bzhed de | gzhi 'bras tha dad du gyur pa'i skyon yod ste | skyed*

'Ba' ra ba here draws attention to a long-standing issue that had by his time (14th century) become a subject of intense debate. Can the disclosive idea of goal-realization as the discovery or *re*-cognition of a basic ground identified as the unfabricated nature of mind and reality be reconciled with those (Sautrāntika and early Yogācāra) models that construe goal-realization as a process of maturation or ripening that results from specific causes and conditions? The metaphor of a productive ground (*skyed byed kyi gzhi*) likened to a field is here deemed inadequate to capture the unchanging nature of mind itself, an innate mode of being and awareness that, like a crystal ball, remains invariant through the myriad transformations it appears to undergo. The former model works with the idea of a *developmental* ground in which causes (*hetu*) of bondage or liberation mature into their respective results (*phala*) and where causes and results are distinct from the ground itself. The latter model, as formulated in late Yogācāra texts such as the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, in buddha nature scriptures such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, and in tantric and siddha writings, features an invariant "ground," i.e., the incorruptible nature of mind and reality, that remains just as it is even while being (mis)taken for *samsāra* or *nirvāna*.

Interestingly, the same tension between developmental and disclosive models animated discussions and debates over buddha nature and the status of buddha-qualities. Are buddha-qualities a matter of nurture or nature? Are they acquired and developed or are they uncovered and disclosed? Are they "ripened" in a person through a particular combination of causes and conditions or are they disclosed when whatever obscures them is dispelled? In later Yogācāra, Tathāgatagarbha, and tantric traditions, the coordination of these developmental and disclosive models was integral to varying attempts to reconcile the

byed kyi gzhi zhing yin kyang ||'bras bu nas dang sran la sogs pa zhing sa dang tha dad du 'gyur ba'i phyir ro || 'dir chos rje rin po che'i bzhed pas | gzhi zhes pa 'khor 'das lam gyis bsdus^a pa'i chos thams cad kyi dngos gzhir lhun gyis grub cing gzhi gzhag tu gnas te | rkyen gang dang phrad pa'i rang gzugs ston cing cir^b yang 'char ba ste | dpe shel sngong lta bu cig la bzhed de | shel de nyid tshos la sogs pa'i rkyen dang phrad na dmar por 'gro zhing | rams dang phrad na sngon por 'gro yang | dmar por song yang ngo bo shel las 'gyur ba med | sngon por yong yang shes las 'gyur ba med | de bzhin du kha dog sna tshogs su 'gyur yang ngo bo shes las 'gyur ba med pa bzhin du | sems 'di 'khrul pas dmyal ba tsha grang gi sdug^a bsnigal myong yang sems kyi ngo bo las 'gyur ba'i ngan du skad cig kyang ma yongs | rtogs te 'bras bu sangs rgyas pa'i dus na'ang | sems kyi ngo bo las 'gyur ba'i skad cig kyang bzang du song ba med cing | sems kho rang rtogs ma rtogs min pa sems la bzang ngan nam tha dad du song ba med de | ... ^atext: bsdug, ^btext: spyir

ālayavijñāna and *tathāgatagarbha*, whether through emphasizing their identity or difference. In any case, the question of what to do with the *ālayavijñāna* paradigm in the face of the growing influence of late Yogācāra, buddha nature, and tantric doctrines emphasizing an unconditioned nondual mode of awareness led to diverse, and often strikingly divergent, systems of reconciliation in India, China, and Tibet.

These can be roughly divided into: [1] systems of identification in which *ālayavijñāna* is elevated into a monistic principle, a common cognitive source of all phenomena, samsaric and nirvanic phenomena alike, that is at times equated with buddha nature (taken in this universal sense), and [2] systems of differentiation which emphasize a basic distinction between the *ālayavijñāna* and an unconditioned absolute variously described in terms of buddha nature, the nature of mind, and the nature of reality.³⁶² The differentiation model was typically aligned with a strongly innatist view of the ultimate (buddha nature, the nature of mind, or the nature of reality) which underscored its “sublime otherness” (*gzhan mchog*) from all that is conventional and adventitious. By contrast, the identification model, predicated on the acceptance of a common ground uniting all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, emphasized the pervasiveness of the ultimate and its immanence within the conventional in order to indicate how the ultimate permeates the mind-streams of individuals in bondage. Each system attempted in its own way to specify the relationship (identity or difference) between conditioned and unconditioned modes of consciousness and to chart the transition (path) between them.

The innatist strain of Buddhist thought looks back upon a long history of Indian ideas concerning the luminous and stainless nature of mind.³⁶³ Let us briefly review this strain of thought. The idea that mind is originally and naturally luminous (*cittasya prakṛtiprabhāsvaratā*), but temporarily obscured by adventitious defilements, has been a recurrent, though by no means

³⁶² See Mathes 2008a, 48 for examples of the identity model (from the *Laṅkāvatāra*) and difference model (from the *Mahāyānasamgraha*).

³⁶³ See *Anguttaranikāya* vol. 1, p. 10. For a detailed survey of the ‘luminous mind’ (*prabhāsvaracitta*) idea with many examples of its occurrence in Indian Buddhist literature, see Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 412–437. See also Radich 2008 and 2016 which explore Paramārtha’s *amalavijñāna* in light of this Indian background.

homogeneously formulated, preoccupation of Buddhist thought since the time of the Pāli Canon. Its earliest known expression occurs in the *Āṅguttaranikāya*:

Luminous is the mind, monks, but sometimes it is defiled by adventitious defilements.³⁶⁴

The issue of whether and in what sense mind can be considered naturally luminous had already become a focal point of deep controversy within early Sarvāstivāda schools, as Eli Franco has shown in his analysis of portions of the so-called Spitzer Manuscript³⁶⁵, believed to be the oldest philosophical manuscript in Sanskrit (dated to the Kuṣāna period 3rd c. CE). The concept of luminous mind was in any case by this time quite widely accepted³⁶⁶ amongst early Buddhist sects, and one finds the metaphor of a crystal which only appears to change colors against different backgrounds occasionally used to illustrate the idea that mind's nature remains unmodified despite its temporary “colorations” by adventitious (*āgantuka*) defilements.³⁶⁷ On this interpretation, soteriology is a matter of clearing away adventitious defilements so that originally pure mind can reveal itself, as it really is. All this points toward the Tathāgatagarbha system, reflecting a train of thought that could at times diverge from the Yogācāra, and also tantric, view that mind is thoroughly contaminated by conditioning factors and therefore needs to be fundamentally transformed to be liberated.³⁶⁸ Much depended on whether the doctrine of transformation was

³⁶⁴ *Āṅguttaranikāya* 1.5.9: *pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam | tam ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭham ||*. See also stanzas AN 1.6.1–2, which are most naturally read as presupposing a developmental model, not a disclosive one.

³⁶⁵ See Franco 2000a, 98. See also Franco 2000b, 2.

³⁶⁶ Among Buddhist schools who accepted *prabhāsvaracitta* are the Theravāda, Vai-bhāśika, Vātsīputrīya, Andhaka, Mahāsamghika, and Vibhajyavāda. See Lamotte 1962, 53, 175, 238; Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 412; Takasaki 1966, 34, n. 57; Wangchuk 2007, 207; and Radich 2008 and 2016.

³⁶⁷ This view is summarized by Franco 1997 (86): “Just as a crystal is colored by the color of the object it covers, similarly pure cognition, when defiled by desire, is called “full of desire” (*sarāga*), and later on becomes liberated: *sarāgam cittam vimuccati*.” The Sautrāntikas and Vaibhāśikas rejected this view, claiming that mind is not originally pure but is, on the contrary, originally sullied by *karma* and *kleśas*. Lamotte 1962, 238.

³⁶⁸ According to Franco 1997 (87), the fundamental transformation (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*/⁰-*parivṛtti*) and luminous mind (*prabhāsvaracitta*) models are both found in Yogācāra

thought to describe a process consisting in the transmutation or the elimination of these defilements.

On this note, it is worth mentioning that the Buddhist doctrine of transformation, as Sakuma has observed in his study of *āśrayaparāvṛtti*, was employed within two different models: replacement and elimination.³⁶⁹ Within the replacement model, as presented in the *Śrāvakabhūmi* (SBh), an old basis of badness or malaise (*dauṣṭhulya*)³⁷⁰ is replaced by a new basis of ease (*praśrabdhi*). In the elimination model, as presented in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*,

texts but are seldom associated with each other. On the other hand, the two models are closely associated within *tathāgatagarbha* discourses. For his arguments and discussion of relevant sources, see Franco 1997, 87–89. On the association of *āśraya-parāvṛtti*/*parivṛtti* and *prabhāsvaracitta* in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *Vyākhyā*, see Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 419–24. On their relationship, the author states: “C'est en relation avec la luminosité naturelle de la Pensée et de la pureté du *tathāgatadhātu* au point de vue de sa connexion avec le plan du Fruit que la RGVV fait état de la transmutation de la Base psychique, cette *āśrayaparāvṛtti*, correspondant ainsi à l'épuisement des impuretés.” In this connection, Franco 1997 (88) pertinently poses the question of “whether the doctrine of *prabhāsvaracitta* in *Yogācāra* appears only in Maitreyanātha texts (and of course in commentaries thereon), and if so, whether this could be explained by the fact that Maitreyanātha and his tradition were strongly influenced by *tathāgatagarbha* ideas.”

³⁶⁹ Sakuma 1990; Franco 1997, 84 f.

³⁷⁰ Seyfort Ruegg 1969 (439) translates *dauṣṭhulya* (Tib. *gnas ngan len*) as ‘la Turbulence’, Davidson 1985 (177 f.) as ‘hindrances’ (and elsewhere ‘baseness’), and Schmithausen 1987 (vol. 1: 66) as ‘badness’. Schmithausen discusses many connotations of the term which include badness or wickedness (*kleśa-pakṣyam*), unwieldiness (*karmanyatā*), heaviness (**gurutva* : *lci ba nyid*), stiffness (*middhakṛtam āśrayajādyam*), incapacitation or lack of controllability (*aksamatā*), and unease or misery (*dauṣṭhulya-duhkha*). The idea here is that unsatisfactoriness permeates human existence to such an extent that it is perceived and felt most fundamentally as a situation of affliction, suffering, degradation, malaise and powerlessness. It has the effect of hindering, physically and mentally, a yogin’s ability to attain his goal (Davidson 1985, 177). Connotations of existential unease, badness, and self-recrimination are combined with moral notions of fault, failing, recrimination and hindrance in the Tibetan rendering *gnas ngan len* (lit. “identifying with (*len*) a situation (*gnas*) of baseness/badness (*ngan*).” See *Sgra shyor bam po gnyis* (Ishikawa 1990) s.v. *dauṣṭhulya*: *dauṣṭhulya zhes bya ba du ni smad pa’am ngan pa | sṭhā gatinivṛttau zhes bya ste gnas pa la bya | la ni ādāna ste len ba’am ’dzin pa’o || gcig tu na duṣṭu ni nyes pa ’am skyon gyi ming la ni gong du bshad pa dang ’dra ste | spyir na ltung ba dang sgrib pa’i ming ste gnas ngan len du btags ||.*

the basis of badness is eliminated without replacement. It is clear that an elimination model underlies the standard *Ratnagotravibhāga* thesis that goal-realization depends not on modifying a defiled state of being (e.g. *ālayavijñāna*) from “worse” to “better,” but rather of clearing it away entirely—on the assumption that it is not, in any case, *constitutive* but thoroughly *adventitious* and derivative—so that a primordial mode of being (*tathatā*), which it has temporarily obscured, can reveal itself.

All this goes to show that the tension between what we have termed developmental and disclosive models of awakening already has a long and complex history in Indian Buddhism. It is therefore not surprising that it so often surfaces in Bka' brgyud and Rnying ma discussions concerning the nature of ground, path, and result in relation to the process of awakening. At the heart of these contrasting models and root metaphors lies the soteriological problem of how to integrate a view of karmically affected cognition into a disclosive view, which gives primacy to a primordially pure mode of cognition that remains unaffected by karmic conditioning or causal production.

To better understand this tension, it is necessary to look more closely at these conflicting identification and differentiation models in view of the problems of reconciliation that their confluence in Tibet provoked. Our focus will be limited to specifying [1] the range of phenomena (within differing views of mind) that each model was intended to characterize and [2] some of the systemic problems these elicited. The assessment of these problems also requires a brief consideration of buddha nature views that came to prominence in India during the later stage of Yogācāra and concurrent early stage of Buddhist tantra, and strongly influenced ensuing developments in China and Tibet.

Identification: Identification strategies typically involved doctrinal transformations whereby the *ālayavijñāna* of classical Yogācāra conceived primarily as the source of all samsaric phenomena was reinterpreted as a common substratum (*ālaya*) of samsaric and nirvanic phenomena, a ground of pollution (*saṃkleśa* : *kun nas nyon mongs*) as well as purification (*vyavadāna* : *rnam par byang ba*). The most striking and controversial instance of this monistic trend was the *Lankāvatārasūtra*'s identification of the *ālayavijñāna* with *tathāgatagarbha*.³⁷¹ In a similar vein, a much-quoted passage from the now-lost

³⁷¹ On this interpretation and some of its Tibetan proponents such as the Bka' brgyud masters 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal and 'Ba' ra ba Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang, see

Mahāyānābhidharmasūtra was also at times used as scriptural support for an absolutized conception of the *ālayavijñāna*:

The beginningless element (*dhātu*)
 Is the basis of all phenomena.
 Because it exists, [it allows for] all forms of life
 As well as the attainment of *nirvāna*.³⁷²

The semantic ambiguity of the term *dhātu* in this passage meant, in effect, that it could be used to legitimize either *tathāgatagarbha* or *ālayavijñāna* doctrines as the context demanded.³⁷³ The irony here, as Ronald Davidson has pointed out, is that the author of the passage was likely partisan to neither of these theories but “merely wished to delineate a rudimentary form of an imperishable element which was soteriological in nature, yet acted as the basis for the stream of consciousness of an individual in bondage.”³⁷⁴ Now, the term *dhātu*, as noted previously, can mean, among other things, “constituent” or “element.” Taken in the latter sense, it was often associated specifically with space, that element considered fundamental to the other four basic elements (*mahābhūta*). But it was also employed as a shorthand for *buddhadhātu* or *tathāgatadhātu* which were early and widespread Indian buddha nature concepts.

Seyfort Ruegg has drawn attention to a number of doctrinal contexts wherein *dhātu* was used to bridge nascent *ālayavijñāna* (*gotra, bija*) and *tathāgatagarbha*

Mathes 2008a, 18, 117 and 464 n. 612. On the basis of this identification of the *ālayavijñāna* with the *tathāgatagarbha*, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* interprets *āśrayaparāvṛtti* as the transformation or purification of the seventh consciousness (*manas*) which liberates the pure *ālayavijñāna*. See Lai 1977, 67 f. On some of the critical responses to this identification in the Rnying ma tradition, see Higgins 2013, 151–4.

³⁷² Although no longer extant, this important sūtra is quoted in the RGVV. The passage in question found at RGVV 72_{13–14} reads as follows: *anādikāliko dhātuḥ sarvadharma-samāśrayaḥ | tasmin sati gatiḥ sarvā nirvāṇādhigamo 'pi ca ||*. See Takasaki 1966, 290. The *Mahāyānābhidharmasūtra* has also been quoted in the *Mahāyānasamgrahabhaṣya* (tr. by Paramārtha, Taisho Edition of the Chinese Tripitaka, XXXI, no. 1595, 157a) and the *Trimśikābhāṣya* (Skt. ed. par Lévi 1925, 37). The Tibetan translations of RGVV have *ubyings* instead of *khams* (both being accepted translations of *dhātu*).

³⁷³ For examples, see Davidson 1985, 102 and notes 80 and 81.

³⁷⁴ Davidson 1985, 102.

theories.³⁷⁵ It does not require much conjecture to see how this idea of a fundamental element (*dhātu*) or seed of *all* phenomena (*sarvadharma-bīja*) could at times be identified with the idea of a fundamental ground (*ālaya*) that is the source not only of samsaric phenomena, but nirvanic phenomena as well. On balance, however, this monistic trend seemed to find more detractors than supporters amongst Buddhist scholars in India.³⁷⁶

In China, such an identification was endorsed by certain Chinese Yogācāra scholars such as Hui-yüan, who drew scriptural support from Guṇabhadra's recensions of the *Śrīmālādevī* and *Lankāvatāra* sūtras³⁷⁷, even though Hui-yüan's own teacher Paramārtha³⁷⁸ explicitly rejected such an identification. The *rapprochement* between these systems in China has much to do with their close historical association and, more precisely, with the fact that the principal texts of

³⁷⁵ On the term *dhātu*, see 85, n. 153.

³⁷⁶ Consider the following example: "In the section of the *Tarkajvālā* devoted to Śrāvaka-kayāna teachings it is ... pointed out that the all-pervasiveness of the *tathāgatagarbha* and also the Vijñānavādin's *ādānavijñāna* (=ālayavijñāna) has been taught for the sake of certain persons who have not freed themselves from the dogmatic postulation of a self (*ātmagrāha*)."*Seyfort Ruegg* 1989, 40.

³⁷⁷ See *Paul* 1984, 51.

³⁷⁸ Paramārtha (499–569), was an Indian monk from Ujjain in central India best known for his Chinese translations of classic Buddhist works such as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kosā* (AK). He controversially postulated a ninth, immaculate consciousness (*amalavijñāna*) unaffected by conditioning influences of the *ālayavijñāna* and closely associated with the perfect nature (*pariniṣpanna*) and suchness (*tathatā*). In Paramārtha's view, the *amalavijñāna* which is invariant and undefiled contrasts the *ālayavijñāna* which is the source for afflictions and debilitating malaise. The latter's fundamental transformation (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*) entails its complete elimination, the result of which is the recovery of the immaculate consciousness (*amalavijñāna*). While this became the focus of doctrinal disputes in China, it did not gain much traction in Tibet, even though it was known due to the commentary on the *Samdhinirmocanasaṃṭra* (SNS) by the Korean monk Wöñch'ük which contains a critique of this issue. This commentary was translated into Tibetan under the title '*Phags pa dgongs pa zab mo nges par 'grel pa'i mdo rgya cher 'grel pa* Tib. D 4016 vol. 220, (ti) 1b₁–291a₇ during the Tang dynasty (7th–8th c.) by Chos grub (Chinese: Facheng). On various Tibetan (mostly Dge lugs pa) critiques of *amalavijñāna*, see Higgins 2013, 156–158.

both systems were translated at around the same time and by the same Buddhist teachers.³⁷⁹

In Tibet, as in India, the trend toward the identification of *ālayavijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha* seems to have garnered more criticism than support, whether it was explicitly rejected as bad theorizing or explained away as a rhetorical ruse to lure the spiritually immature.³⁸⁰ However, one does find an important, and all but overlooked, strain of early Rdzogs chen thought (8th to 12th c.) that equates buddha nature (or rather “bodhi nature,” *bodhigarbha*) with the substratum (*kun gzhi*), based on an understanding of both terms as virtual synonyms of ultimate *bodhicitta*.³⁸¹ However, when the Yogācāra *ālayavijñāna* enters the picture, as it does increasingly from the 9th century onward, it is invariably contrasted with the absolute *kun gzhi* (along the lines of the above quotation of ’Ba’ ra ba) and relegated to the conventional level of transient, conditioned phenomena, that dissolve at the moment of realization.³⁸²

³⁷⁹ According to Paul, 1984 (6–7), “[s]ince Tathāgatagarbha literature was translated at the same time as Yogācāra and by the same masters, these two types of thought became closely linked in the minds of their Chinese audience ... Paramārtha’s ideas, particularly his concept of *amalavijñāna* or “pure consciousness,” have often been regarded as an amalgam of Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha, because of the philosophical interfusion begun in India and the historical association of the two doctrines from the outset in China.” On the life and teachings of Paramārtha, see also Frauwallner 1951, Seyfort Ruegg 1969 (439 f., 109 f.) and Paul 1984.

³⁸⁰ An example of the latter is given by ’Jigs med gling pa states in his *Rdzogs pa chen po Kun tu bzang po ye shes klong gi rgyud*, in ’Jigs gling gsung ’bum vol. 12, 661–2: “This [ālaya] is shown in the lower [vehicles] to be the nature of *sugatagarbha, but this is for the sake of guiding spiritually immature people who are consumed by doubt about the stainless *dharma-dhātu*.” ’og ma rnams su ’di nyid bde gshegs snying po’i rang bzhin du bstan pa ni || re zhig chos dbyings dri med la the tshom za ba’i byis pa rnams drang ba’i slad du’o ||.

³⁸¹ On the Rnying ma **bodhigarbha* concept and its history, see Higgins 2013, 173–182, and forthcoming.

³⁸² This, however, raises the question of what this Rdzogs chen *kun gzhi* (ālaya) concept may have originally owed to Yogācāra thought. It is hoped that careful analysis of the earliest Rdzogs chen sources will provide a clearer sense of the textual origins and lines of transmission of the Rdzogs chen *kun gzhi* idea. Further research in this area may help us determine whether it perhaps began as an absolutized version of the Yogācāra

Differentiation: Another line of response to the encounter between Tathāgatagarbha and Yogācāra currents of thought was to sharpen and radicalize the difference between the *ālayavijñāna* and the unconditioned ultimate. In certain scriptures ascribed to Maitreya-Asaṅga such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* (DhDh), the *ālayavijñāna* is identified as the basis of all defilement and needs to be fundamentally transformed (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*, °-*parivṛtti*) or purified away for the realization of suchness to occur. The acceptance of a mode of consciousness more fundamental than *ālayavijñāna* is implicit in the distinction between *ālayavijñāna* and supramundane mind (*lokottaracitta* : 'jig rten las 'das pa'i sems) drawn in *Mahāyānasamgraha* 1.45–48.³⁸³ In Sthiramati's commentary on *Trimśikā* 29–30, a similar distinction is drawn between *ālayavijñāna* and the supramundane *jñāna* (*lokottarajñāna* : *jigs rten las 'das pa'i ye shes*) that overturns or replaces it (*parāvṛtti*).³⁸⁴ We may recall that the distinction between dual consciousness (*vijñāna*) and wisdom (*jñāna*), and the transformation of the former into the latter, was central to the Yoganiruttara tantras (*rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*) and to the Indian and Tibetan tantric works based on these. The distinction is, for example, one of the central topics of the *Profound Inner Meaning* (*Zab mo nang gi don*) of the third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339)—a doctrinal summary of the Yoganiruttara tantras—and its many commentaries.

As a general observation, we can note that the Indian and Tibetan exoteric and esoteric tantric models of transformation tended to either [1] distinguish between two modes of the substratum—viz. a defiled mode that is the basis of samsaric existence and an undefiled mode that is the basis of awakening, or [2] introduce a ninth consciousness or ninth ground beyond the *ālayavijñāna*.

[1] Bivalent substratum conceptions became widespread in the ascendant Tibetan Buddhist orders during the later diffusion (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet. Examples are the various *Bka' brgyud* distinctions between pure and impure substrata (e.g. *dag pa'i kun gzhi* versus *ma dag pa'i kun gzhi*), the *Jo nang* distinction between substratum wisdom and substratum consciousness (*kun*

ālayavijñāna that was, like a great many other Rdzogs chen terms borrowed from Mahāyāna exegesis (e.g. *jñāna*, *smṛti*, *abhiprāya* etc.), sublimated or even apotheosized in order to suit the quite different climate of tantric and Rdzogs chen soteriology.

³⁸³ Davidson 1985, 215 and Mathes 2008a, 58.

³⁸⁴ *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* (Levi 1925), 44; Davidson 1985, 218 and n. 28.

gzhi ye shes versus *kun gzhi rnam shes*),³⁸⁵ as well as the complex variety of Rnying ma distinctions between genuine and conditioned substrata (e.g. *don gyi kun gzhi* versus *rkyen gyi kun gzhi*).

[2] Systems of transformation positing a ninth factor beyond the *ālayavijñāna*³⁸⁶ were elaborated in the above-mentioned works attributed to Maitreya-Asaṅga which specified the luminous mind (*prabhāsvaracitta*) and *dharmakāya* or *dharmatā* to be modes of being or awareness distinct from, but also a precondition of, the *ālayavijñāna*. This line of thought had a considerable influence in Tibet and China as we see reflected in the works of early figures such as Paramārtha (499–569)³⁸⁷ in China and Ye shes sde (8th c.)³⁸⁸ in Tibet. The point emphasized in these systems is not that the unconditioned absolute is simply the result (*phala*) of the transformation of *ālayavijñāna*, but is rather that pre-existing ground (*ālaya*) which remains when this conditioned and conditioning overlay has been purified away. We have seen, for example, that Rdzogs chen Snnying thig thinkers at times considered the idea of fundamental transformation—literally, “a transformation of the basis” (*gnas 'gyur : āśraya-parāvṛtti, °-parivṛtti*)—to be of merely provisional meaning since it was employed with the hidden intention (*lde m dgongs*) of guiding beings in accordance with their varying interests and degrees of understanding.³⁸⁹ Their reasoning can be summarized in this way: if human reality is, in its most ontologically primary condition, spontaneously present and unconditioned, then

³⁸⁵ See Stearns 1999, 49–52, and the discussion of doctrinal contexts in Mathes 2008a, 56–7. This distinction is also articulated by classical Bka' brgyud scholars.

³⁸⁶ It is of interest to note that the term *ālaya* without *-vijñāna* is already used in the *Ghanavyūha* to denote the different bodhisattva levels (*bhūmi*). See Seyfort Ruegg 1973, 35 and Mathes 2008a, 442, n. 297.

³⁸⁷ See above, 174, n. 378.

³⁸⁸ The renowned scholar-translator Ye shes sde is credited with composing the *Lta ba'i khyad par* (*Distinction of Views*), which is probably the first independent Tibetan treatise on Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. The text is included in the *Bstan 'gyur*. See for example D 4360, 426–455₇. A different redaction of the work was retrieved from the caves at Dunhuang, on which see Seyfort Ruegg 1981b.

³⁸⁹ See Higgins 2013, 28, 156 *et passim*.

its realization requires no production or modification by means of causes and conditions.

In China, the idea of an originally and naturally stainless mode of consciousness beyond the *ālayavijñāna* gained popularity in the sixth century due to the influence of the Indian Yogācāra monk and translator Paramārtha (499–569). This scholar controversially posited a ninth, immaculate consciousness (*amalavijñāna*), which is unaffected by the conditioning influences of the *ālayavijñāna* (the karmic “seeds and fruits” of attachments and aversions), and which is closely associated with the perfect nature (*parinisp洋洋nāsabhāva*) and suchness (*tathatā*). For Paramārtha, this *amalavijñāna* is invariant and undefiled (*anāsrava*) in contrast to the *ālayavijñāna* which is transient and defiled (*sāsrava*). While the *ālaya* is the source of afflictive emotions and badness (*dauṣṭhulya*), the *amala* is the abiding source of nonconceptual wisdom (*nirvikalpajñāna*) and saintly activity. According to Paramārtha, the fundamental transformation of *ālayavijñāna* entails its complete elimination, resulting in the realization of pure consciousness (*amalavijñāna*).³⁹⁰

According to Paul Demiéville, the issue of whether the *ālayavijñāna* or *amalavijñāna* should be regarded as the basis of consciousness and the world itself was already the subject of heated doctrinal controversy in China before Paramārtha's arrival and had resulted in two distinct schools of thought.³⁹¹ Bodhiruci's (6th c. CE) school maintained that the foundation of all cognition is the *ālayavijñāna*, a view presented in the *Mahāyānasamgraha* (MS). Ratnamati's (6th c. CE) school, on the other hand, made the same claim for suchness (*tathatā*), thus betraying its allegiance to the tradition of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (MSA). The critical point of divergence was whether the *ālaya* [*vijñāna*] was considered (à la Bodhiruci) to be the ultimate neutral basis of human reality or (à la Ratnamati) to be a conditioned, and thus derivative, substratum that must be fundamentally transformed if the goal of buddhahood is to be realized. Ratnamati's school and the late Yogācāra exegesis of Asaṅga provided doctrinal support for Paramārtha's controversial claim that the foundation of all cognition is not the *ālayavijñāna* but the *amalavijñāna*. By

³⁹⁰ The fact that Paramārtha at times employs the term *amalavijñāna* to translate *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, ^o-*parivṛtti* only confuses the issue.

³⁹¹ See Demiéville 1929. On these two Yogācāra streams of thought, see Frauwallner 1951, Ueda 1967, and Paul 1984.

the seventh century, the controversy gradually died down under the authority of Xuanzang (ca. 603–664) who came down on the side of Bodhiruci in positing the *ālayavijñāna* as fundamental.³⁹²

Erich Frauwallner has additionally pointed to numerous Indian antecedents of this dispute that are symptomatic of an underlying tension that could not be so neatly divided along sectarian lines.³⁹³ Despite attempts by the Chinese schools to trace their views to Indian antecedents in the schools of Dharmapāla (530–561) in the case of *ālayavijñāna*, and Sthiramati (475–555) in the case of *amalavijñāna*, an analysis of their works does not render support for such clear affiliations. Rather, it points to deep dialectical tensions of a more systemic and perennial nature. As a case in point, Frauwallner cites the following summary of a tension between developmental and disclosive soteriological models by Sthiramati himself in his *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā* (MAVT):

The *dharmakāya* of the buddhas consists in the transformation of the basis in that all obscurations are eliminated and the seeds of the uncontaminated *dharmas* [i.e., buddha-qualities] that function as their counteragents are accumulated; it has power over all phenomena and is without a basis (*ālaya*) ...

Others, on the other hand, say that it is only the *dharmadhātu*, completely purified through the removal of all adventitious defilements, calling it the *dharmakāya*, i.e., the embodiment (*kāya*) of the nature of phenomena (*dharmaṭā*).³⁹⁴

Though both views construe the transformation of the basis as entailing the elimination of *ālayavijñāna*, they interpret goal-realization quite differently. The first views it *developmentally*, as depending on the accumulation and ripening of “seeds” of uncontaminated buddha-qualities, which serve to counteract obscurations (i.e., seeds of contaminated phenomena), leading to their final

³⁹² This account of the Chinese controversy is based on Frauwallner 1951, 148.

³⁹³ See Frauwallner 1951.

³⁹⁴ Sthiramati, *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā* (MAVT), 191, 4 f.: *sarvāvaraṇaprahānāt tatprati-pakṣānāsravadharmabījapracayāc cāśrayaparāvṛtyātmakah sarvadharmavaśavartī anālaya iti buddhānām dharmakāyah... anye tu niḥśeṣāgantukamalāpagamāt suviśuddho dharmadhātūr eva dharmatākāyo dharmakāya iti varṇayanti ||*. Quoted in Frauwallner 1951, 159. Translation is our own.

elimination. The second views goal-realization *disclosively*, as revealing the *dharmadhātu*—that which embodies the very nature of things (*dharma[tā]-kāya*)—when the adventitious defilements that shroud it are purified away.³⁹⁵

Paramārtha's view of mind seemed to have gained little traction in Tibet, though it became available to scholars early on through its critique by the Korean monk Wōnch'ük (613–696) in his extensive commentary on the *Samdhinirmocana* (SNS). The commentary was translated in Dunhuang from Chinese into Tibetan (under the title *Dgongs 'grel gyi 'grel chen*) during the Tang dynasty by Chos grub (Chinese: Facheng).³⁹⁶ Paramārtha's analysis of mind and his controversial concept of an immaculate consciousness (*amalavijñāna*) appear to have met mainly with a critical reception in Tibet, particularly at the hands of Dge lugs pa scholars such as Tsong kha pa³⁹⁷ and a number of his later commentators such as 'Jam dbyangs Bzhad pa'i rdo rje (1648–1721/22),³⁹⁸ Gung thang Dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me (1762–1823),³⁹⁹ Blo bzang 'Jam dbyangs smon lam (18th c.),⁴⁰⁰ and Blo bzang Dam chos rgya mtsho (1865–1917).⁴⁰¹ While Tsong kha pa, in his early *Yid dang kun gzhi'i dka' ba'i gnas rgya cher 'grel pa*, explicitly defends the *ālayavijñāna* as a valid doctrine, he rejects Paramārtha's introduction of a ninth consciousness on the rationale that “if there were a

³⁹⁵ This view, as Frauwallner notes, interprets the expression *dharmakāya* as deriving from *dharma[tā]kāya* ('embodiment of the nature of phenomena') by dropping the suffix *tā*. Frauwallner 1951, 159 n. 3.

³⁹⁶ *Dgongs 'grel gyi 'grel chen*, Tib. P 5517, D 4016.

³⁹⁷ *Yid dang kun gzhi'i dka' ba'i gnas rgya cher 'grel pa*. P 6149, 173–95. See also in *Collected Works of Tsong kha pa* vol. 27, 356–474. For an annotated translation, see Sparham 1993. Nagao 1978 summarizes Tsong kha pa's views on Paramārtha's *amalavijñāna* theory in *Chūkan to Yuishiki*: 419–21.

³⁹⁸ *Grub mtha' rnam bshad rang gzhan grub mtha' kun dang zab don mchog tu gsal ba kun bzang zhing gi nyi ma lung rigs rgya mtsho skye dgu'i re ba kun skongs*, in *Collected Works of 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa'i rdo rje* vol. 15, 33–1092.

³⁹⁹ *Yid dang kun gzhi'i dka' gnas rnam par bshad pa mkhas pa'i 'jug ngog*, in *Collected Works of Gung thang dKon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me* vol. 2, 279–406.

⁴⁰⁰ *Yid dang kun gzhi'i rtsa 'grel gyi dka' gnas gsal byed nyi zla zung 'jug*, in *Collected Works of Ke'u tshan sprul sku Blo bzang 'jam dbyangs smon lam* vol. 1, 187–260.

⁴⁰¹ *Rnam rig pa'i lugs kyi yid dang kun gzhi'i don cung zad bshad pa ngo mtshar gzugs bryga 'char ba'i me long*, in *Collected Works of Rongga Lozang Damchoe Gyatso gsung 'bum* vol. 1, 187–198.

fundamental (*gtso bo*) consciousness other than the *ālayavijñāna*, it would be a permanent entity (*rtag pa'i dngos po : nityabhāva*).⁴⁰² But given that entities are by nature impermanent, he argues, the concept of *amalavijñāna* is self-contradictory and in any case unverifiable. Thus, the Dge lugs pa repudiate *amalavijñāna* on the same grounds that they reject positive conceptions of *tathāgatagarbha*: both are adjudged to be metaphysical postulates, reified abstractions, that cannot withstand critical assessment.

To recapitulate, we have seen that the Tibetan reception of Indian Buddhism was marked from the outset by the kinds of deep doctrinal tensions between developmental and disclosive soteriological paradigms whose lines of influence in India and China we have been tracing. It was also marked by parallel tensions between differentiation and identification models as scholars sought to reconcile a complex variety of Buddhist ideas concerning conditioned and unconditioned modes of cognition and reality.

We are finally prepared to consider the Eighth Karma pa's substantial attempts to clarify and explain the relationship between *tathāgatagarbha* and *ālayavijñāna*. In a nutshell: the author adopts the differentiation model to the extent that he advocates an unequivocal distinction between buddha nature and substratum consciousness. Further, he considers scriptural passages equating the two to have a merely provisional meaning, as further interpretation is deemed necessary. At the same time, however, he advocates, with certain qualifications, the identification model of goal-realization when it comes to clarifying how the ultimate, buddha nature, permeates the mind streams of beings in bondage. Let us now consider how he coordinates these viewpoints.

Mi bskyod rdo rje's distinction between the *ālayavijñāna* and buddha nature, or the nature of mind, may be seen as part of a broader attempt by his tradition to integrate Yogācāra teachings into a unified buddha nature theory that can accommodate the differentiation and unity models. The result is a synthesis that accords primacy to buddha nature and the nature of mind, while at the same time allowing for provisional accounts of the organic, teleological maturation in sentient beings of the qualities characteristic of a buddha.

It must be reiterated at the outset that the Eighth Karma pa considered the identification of *ālayavijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha* to be of merely provisional

⁴⁰² *Yid dang kun gzhi'i dka' ba'i gnas rgya cher 'grel pa*, in *Collected Works of Tsong kha pa* vol. 27, 468₅: *gtso bo rnam shes yod gyur na || rtag pa'i dngos por 'gyur ba'i phyir ||*.

meaning (*neyārtha*), geared as it was toward certain Cittamātra followers who, on account of their idealist bias, were inclined to reify dynamic psychological processes. In his *Intent* (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg*) V.2, he declares that *ālayavijñāna* theory was postulated by Cittamātra proponents as a basis for *karma* and [its] results.⁴⁰³ He adds that “[the *ālayavijñāna*] was posited in a provisional sense in order to ward off the danger of a view of nihilism, though it does not exist, even in the context of correct conventional reality (*tha snyad bden pa*).” If it did exist, he argues, “one would have to experience it independently of the cognitions of the six senses. But it is precisely because it is *not* so established that Candra[kīrti] noted that anyone who says that the *ālaya*[*vijñāna*] exists is not fit to be taught emptiness [and] explained it as being ‘incorrect’ (*yang dag min*).”⁴⁰⁴ In his *Tonic*, the Karma pa had similarly observed that “there were some instances where the Bhagavān discussed the *ālayavijñāna* using the term [buddha] nature in order to graciously take on board Mind Only proponents.”⁴⁰⁵

Despite his reservations about the hypostatization of *ālayavijñāna*, the Karma pa did acknowledge its heuristic value in accounting for problems of mental causality and continuity on the level of conventional appearances. Furthermore, he did not deny the validity of inferring the operation of largely unconscious constitutive processes (latent tendencies) that continually condition and structure thought and behaviour, even if one could not purport to know anything whatsoever about their assumed location and intrinsic nature. It is clear, then, that Mi bskyod rdo rje viewed the *ālayavijñāna* as a useful explanatory model, but also as a hypothetical construct having no autonomous existence apart from the nature of things (*dharmatā*).

This latter strain in his thinking helps to explain why the Karma pa could at times approve of Candrakīrti's thesis that the *ālayavijñāna* is an untenable postulate. In his *Treasury Containing the Wealth of Profound Mahāmudrā*, for example, the Eighth Karma pa goes so far as to characterize the “no *ālayavijñāna*” thesis as being “more intellectually refined” in “the context of deeply investigating the ultimate” than accounts accepting its existence, which were endorsed by no less an authority than the Third Karma pa:

⁴⁰³ See vol. 2, tr., 228, ed., 253.

⁴⁰⁴ On this paraphrase of Candrakīrti's MA VI.43 see vol. 2, 228, ed. 254.

⁴⁰⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 108, ed., 153. See also above n. 371.

When the *Bodhicittavivarana* (BCV), *Madhyamakāvatāra* (MA), and other texts explain that the *ālayavijñāna* is untenable, they proceed to explain that mere appearances are [due to] latent tendencies alone. As for the exegesis of both the noble Ācārya [Nāgārjuna] and Candrakīrti, the reason they did not accept the *ālayavijñāna* is that all phenomena are entirely devoid of any factor that is self-sufficient in terms of function and essence. That being so, since [this *ālayavijñāna*] would have to be an independently existing consciousness capable of serving as the basis of all phenomena, [despite its being] an obscuration that shrouds *dharmadhātu* [while itself being] indeterminate, it was rightly rejected. Nonetheless, according to some other Ācāryas, the Victorious [Buddha] taught the classifications of *skandha*, *dhātu*, and *āyatana* in order to invalidate non-Buddhists' beliefs in a self, a creator, and a consumer. In particular, in the case of explanations according special status to the *ālayavijñāna* as expounded in the *Lankāvatāra* and so on, it is evident that [these texts] explained very eloquently the criteria of cause and effect in the context of establishing appearances as mind. [This account] was also extolled by the illustrious Rang byung who followed this later tradition. But for me, in the context of deeply investigating the ultimate, the former tradition appears to be [more] intellectually refined.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁶ *Zab mo phyag chen gyi mdzod sna tshogs 'dus pa'i gter*, in MD_{SB} vol. 15, 1029₃–1030₂: *byang chub sems 'grel* dang | *'jug pa* sogs las kun gzhi rnam shes mi 'thad par bshad nas | snang tsam nyid bag chags yin par bshad pa ni | *slob dpon 'phags pa* nyid dang | *zla ba grags pa* gnyis ka'i bzhed la kun gzhi mi bzhed pa'i rgyu mtshan ni | *chos thams* cad byed pa dang ngo bo nyid rang tsho thub pa'i *chos 'ga*' yang med na | *chos nyid* kyi dbyings sgrib byed kyi sgrib pa lung ma bstan *chos thams* cad kyi gnas 'cha' thub pa'i shes par rang dbang can du 'gyur dgos nas legs par bkag pa yin la | *slob dpon gzhān* dag gis ni | rgyal bas phyi rol pa rnams bdag dang byed pa dang za bar 'dzin pa bzlog pa'i phyir | *phung khams* skye mched rnam shes kyi rnam gzhag bstan la | lhag par *lang gshegs* sogs las gsung pa'i kun gzhi shes pa khyad par du rtsal bton nas bshad na | snang ba sems su bsgrub pa'i skabs su rgyu 'bras kyi 'jog mtshams shin tu legs par 'chad pa mngon la | lugs phyi ma 'di'i rjes su *dpal rang byung* gis ni bstod par mdzad kyang | bdag gis ni don dam par rnam par dpyad pa'i skabs su ni lugs gong ma 'di blo gros zhib par mngon no ||.

To understand the import of this analysis, it is helpful to bear in mind the contrasting hermeneutical paradigms Mi bskyod rdo rje was working with. To start with, the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's alleged espousal of the *ālayavijñāna* is only comprehensible in light of his adherence to the Yogācāra differentiation model—a model that strongly shaped the Eighth Karma pa's views of mind and buddha nature as well.

Let us now briefly review some precedents for Mi bskyod rdo rje's distinction between *tathāgatagarbha* and *ālayavijñāna* in the work of his Karma bka' brgyud predecessors. In his *Profound Inner Meaning* (*Zab mo nang gi don*) auto-commentary, the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje had influentially equated the *ālayavijñāna* with impure mind (*sems ma dag pa*) and sharply distinguished it from pure mind (*sems dag pa*), which he equated with buddha nature.⁴⁰⁷ He added that “the general discourses of all vehicles refer to mind as such (*sems nyid*) but this should be known to be two-fold: possessing purity and being impure.”⁴⁰⁸ He proceeds to equate the mind possessing purity with [1] mind as such (*sems nyid*), as extolled in Saraha's *Dohākoṣagīti* (DKG) 43⁴⁰⁹ as the seed of all of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, [2] buddha nature (*buddhagarbha*) as described in *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.55–57⁴¹⁰ by analogy with space, which supports the other elements but is itself unsupported, and [3] mind's luminous nature as it is defined in *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* (ASP) 5b_{1–2}.⁴¹¹

In a similar vein, the Third Karma pa further distinguished the mundane mind—the *ālayavijñāna* with its eightfold consciousness (*kun gzhi tshogs brgyad*)—from the supramundane mind ('*jig rten las 'das pa'i sems : lokattara-*

⁴⁰⁷ See Mathes 2008a, 57–59.

⁴⁰⁸ *Zab mo nang don rang 'grel*, 381_{3–4}: *theg pa thams cad kyi spyi skad la sems nyid ces gsungs kyang | dag pa dang bcas pa dang | ma dag pa gnyis su shes par bya |*. For a lucid summary of this distinction, see Mathes 2008a, 57–59.

⁴⁰⁹ Note that the original (ed. Shahidullah 1928, 140) has *citta* while Tibetan Bstan 'gyur editions generally have *sems nyid* (not just *sems* as one might expect). The *nyid* may have originally been added for metrical reasons.

⁴¹⁰ For a translation and discussion of this passage in relation to Rang byung rdo rje's interpretation see Mathes 2008a, 57.

⁴¹¹ “That Mind is not [dualistic] mind; Mind's nature is luminous.” The corresponding passage from the Sanskrit is given in Schmithausen 1977, 41 as lines E.b.1–2 *tathā hi tac cittam acittam | prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā ||*.

citta), buddha nature. This distinction is made both in his *Profound Inner Meaning* with reference to *Mahāyānasamgraha* 1.45–48⁴¹² and in his *Dharmadhātutava* (DDhS) commentary on stanza 46ab, where he states that mind is observed as having two aspects, mundane and transmundane.⁴¹³ We previously mentioned Sthiramati's similar distinction, by way of commentary to *Trīṁśikā* 29–30, between *ālayavijñāna* and the supramundane *jñāna* (*lokottarajñāna* : *jigs rten las 'das pa'i ye shes*) which overturns or replaces (*parāvṛtti*) it.⁴¹⁴

The Third Karma pa's distinction between pure and impure minds is further developed by his successors, most notably in the extensive *Profound Inner Meaning* commentarial literature. For example, Mi bskyod rdo rje's teacher Karma phrin las suggests in his *Profound Inner Meaning* commentary (dated 1509 in the colophon) that although buddha nature, which he equates with the nature of mind (*sems kyi rang bzhin*) and substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*)—a term originally coined by Dol po pa and widely adopted by Tibetan scholars⁴¹⁵—appears to be blended with the *ālayavijñāna* like milk in water, it may (as the Indian analogy suggests) be separated from it by the wise, just as milk is extracted from water by the mythical goose:

The substratum wisdom is buddha nature as explained above. This is precisely what is meant by “the nature of mind” in the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Uttaratantra* (RGV), “the mind that is like a wish fulfilling gem” in the *Dohā*,⁴¹⁶ and “the beginningless element as the basis of all phenomena” in the *Abhidharmasūtra*.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹² *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* (VMS), 44; Davidson 1985, 218 and n. 28; Mathes 2008a, 58.

⁴¹³ *Chos dbyings bstod pa'i 'grel pa*, 61₁ ff. which comments on *Dharmadhātutava* (DDhS) 46ab: *sems nyid rnam pa gnyis su mthong | ci ltar 'jig rten 'jig rten 'das |*. For translation, see Brunnholzl 2009, 252.

⁴¹⁴ See above 176, n. 384.

⁴¹⁵ Interestingly, the term is used by some of Rang byung rdo rje's *Zab mo nang don* commentators including Karma phrin las and Dwags ram pa though it is not attested in the Third Karma pa's own writings.

⁴¹⁶ This passage (DKG 41) is quoted in *Dmangs dohā'i rnam bshad sems kyi rnam thar ston pa'i me long* 45_{19–20}: “Mind alone is the seed of everything, from which existence and *nirvāna* spring forth. Homage to the mind which, like a wish-fulfilling jewel, grants all the fruits of one's desires.”

⁴¹⁷ Quotation not identified.

Here, we describe it as wisdom. It abides in the substratum consciousness in a blended manner, like water and milk.⁴¹⁸ Therefore, those being ignorant regarding the definitive meaning have not recognized the substratum wisdom (**ālayajñāna*).⁴¹⁹

In one of his “Question and Answer” (*dris lan*) texts, Karma phrin las makes the additional observation that the term “substratum wisdom” does not imply that the substratum and wisdom are the same but rather that wisdom itself resides within the substratum. With this interpretation he can claim that the wisdom present in the ground, which is equated with natural luminosity, the purity of mind, and the indestructible nucleus (*mi shigs pa'i thig le*), is the substratum *simpliciter* (*kun gzhi tsam*), serving as the ground for both *samsāra* and *nirvāna* without itself being either. This substratum *simpliciter* is distinct from the substratum consciousness, which “functions as a ground for the unfoldment of worldliness” but “is unable to serve as a ground for *nirvāna*.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁸ According to the Indian understanding, water and milk do not fully mix. The *Mahāyānasamgraha* (I.49) for example, speaks about the mythic goose (*hānsa*) which is able to separate milk from a mixture of milk and water. This is used as an analogy to explain how impure tendencies are relinquished when pure tendencies are brought forth. Another example is found in the *Dharmadhātutava* (DDhS): “It is just as in the case of a mixture of water and milk in one and the same vessel; geese drink but the milk while the water remains as it is. Likewise in the case of a mixture of afflictions and wisdom in one and the same vessel, the yogins drink the wisdom, leaving ignorance behind.” (Liu Zhen 2014 ed., 20) *yathodakena sammiśram kṣīram ekatra bhājane | kṣīram pibanti hānsā hi udakam ca tathā sthitam ||* [52/Tib. 62] *evam hi kleśasammiśram jñānam ekatra bhājane | pibanti yogino jñānam ajñānam sphorayanti te ||*. [53/Tib. 63]

⁴¹⁹ *Zab mo nang don gyi rnam bshad snying po*, in RD_{SB} vol. 14, 60₁₋₄: *de la kun gzhi'i ye shes ni | gong du bshad pa'i bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po ste | de yang sher phyin dang rgyud bla ma las | sems kyi rang bzhin du gsungs pa dang | do hā las | yid bzhin nor 'dra'i sems su gsungs la | chos mnong pa'i mdo las | thog ma med pa'i dus kyi dbyings | chos rnams kun gyi gnas yin te | zhes gsungs pa yang don 'di nyid do | de la ye shes su bshad de | de yang kun gzhi'i rnam shes la chu dang 'o ma bzhin 'dres pa'i tshul du gnas pas | nges don la rmongs pa rnams kyiis kun gzhi'i ye shes ngos ma zin par |*.

⁴²⁰ *Dri lan drang ba dang nges pa'i don gyi snang byed*, 112₄–113₁: “These [actions], such as generosity, that are connected with virtuous qualities are beyond the nature of ordinary consciousness and are taken as principles of nondual wisdom. This is ascertained as natural luminosity, the purity of mind, which is concordant with the immaculate

In a slightly later *Profound Inner Meaning* commentary (dated 1514), Dwags ram pa Chos rgyal bstan pa (1449–1524) equates Rang byung rdo rje's pure mind (*dag pa'i sems*) with the pure substratum wisdom (*dag pa'i kun gzhi ye shes*), as well as the causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*) of tantra. He goes on to distinguish it from the *ālayavijñāna*, which he equates with impure mind (*sems ma dag pa'i kun gzhi rnam shes*).⁴²¹ Citing MS I.45–48 in support of this view, he further notes that “this *Mahāyānasamgraha* text specifically characterizes the *ālayavijñāna* as the basis of sentient being (*sems can gyi gnas*), but specifies that

dharmadhātu because it functions as the ground for unsurpassable perfect awakening. It is thus referred to as substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*). Hence, it does not function as a ground for circling around in cyclic existence (*samsāra*). The substratum that possesses all the habitual tendencies is called “substratum consciousness” because it functions as a ground for the unfoldment of worldliness. However, it is unable to be a ground for *nirvāṇa*. The substratum *simpliciter* (*kun gzhi tsam*) is the wisdom itself present in the ground. Because of it, sentient beings are said to be buddhas possessing defilements. Even though [the ground] is the ground of all, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, it is not the case that it is both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This is a point that eludes ordinary thinking. Even if one maintains that substratum wisdom exists, one does not say that the substratum and wisdom are identical. Because sentient beings are buddhas having defilements, they are buddhas, but not perfectly realized buddhas. Although the substratum and wisdom are not the same, there is not the slightest fallacy of contradiction in explaining that the indestructible nucleus is the ground of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.” *de dag sbyin sogs dkar chos dang 'brel bas || rnam par shes pa'i chos nyid las 'das shing || ye shes gnyis su med pa'i tshul 'chang ba || dri med chos kyi dbyings kyi rgyu mthun pa'i || sems kyi dag pa rang bzhin 'od gsal nges || bla med rdzogs byang chub pa'i gzhi byed phyir || kun gzhi ye shes zhes gsung de yis ni || 'khor bar 'khor ba'i gzhi mi byed do || bag chags kun dang ldan pa'i kun gzhi la || kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa zhes bya ste || des ni srid pa 'phel ba'i gzhi byed kyang || mya ngan 'das pa'i gzhi ru mi rung ngo || kun gzhi tsam ni gzhi la bzhugs pa yi || ye shes nyid yin de phyir sems can rnams || dri mar bcas pa'i sangs rgyas yin par 'dod || 'khor dang myang 'das kun gi gzhi yin kyang || 'khor 'das gnyis ka yin par mi 'gyur ba || 'di ni bsam gyis mi khyab pa yi gnas || kun gzhi ye shes yod par khas len kyang || kun gzhi ye shes gcig par mi smra mod || dri bcas sangs rgyas yin phyir sems can rnams || sangs rgyas yin kyang rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas min || kun gzhi dang ni ye shes mi gcig kyang || mi shigs thig le 'khor 'das kun gyi gzhir || bshad la 'gal ba'i nyes pa rdul tsam med ||.*

⁴²¹ *Zab mo nang don sems kyi rnam par thar pa'i gsal ba'i rgyan*, in RD_{SB} vol. 12, 107₁–108₁ et passim.

is not the cause of *nirvāṇa*.”⁴²² But if this is the case, his interlocutor asks, then what generates the qualities of purification (*vyavadānadharmā*)? To this Dwags ram pa replies “the entire range of buddha-qualities of purification depends on the substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*), the aforementioned pure mind.”⁴²³ He concludes the discussion by criticizing “certain Sa skyā Lam ’bras followers who, having neither seen nor heard the above-cited *Mahāyānasamgraha* passages, assert that the *ālayavijñāna* is the ‘causal continuum substratum’ (*kun gzhi rgyu rgyud*), thus putting on display all of their hidden flaws.”⁴²⁴

Such developments certainly helped shape the Eighth Karma pa's own attempts to clarify the relationship between *tathāgatagarbha* and *ālayavijñāna*. In his *One or Two Minds? A Reply to Bla ma Khams pa*, for example, he draws a parallel distinction between innate mind (*gnyug ma'i sems*) and adventitious mind (*glo bur gyi sems*), equating the former with buddha nature and the latter with *ālayavijñāna*. As scriptural support, he cites Rang byung rdo rje's statement in the *Profound Inner Meaning* auto-commentary that mind has been explained both in terms of pure and impure modes.⁴²⁵ The Eighth Karma pa then specifies that the pure mode is underscored in the classification in *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.47 between three phases of the buddha element: impure, pure-impure, and completely pure. The pure mode, he continues, refers to self-aware wisdom free from obscurations (*sgrib bral rang rig pa'i ye shes*), whereas the impure mode

⁴²² Ibid., 111₅₋₆: *theg bsdus kyi gzhung 'dis kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa ni sems can gyi gnas khyad par can du brjod la | mya ngan las 'das pa'i rgyu ni ma yin par brjod do |*.

⁴²³ Ibid., 111₆–112₁: *rnam par byang ba'i chos ji snyed pa ni sngar brjod pa'i dag pa'i sems kun gzhi ye shes la brten pa ste |*.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 114₃₋₄: *drangs ma thag pa'i theg bsdus kyi lung snga phyi gnyis po ma mthong zhing ma thos pa'i lam 'bras pa kha gcig kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa nyid kun gzhi rgyu rgyud du khas len pas ni rang gi nang mtshang thams cad ngom par byed pa ste ...*

⁴²⁵ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 2, 118: “According to [Rang byung rdo rje's] commentary on the root text of the *Zab mo nang don*, the pure is described as mind and the impure is [also] described as mind.” This is a paraphrase of a passage in *Zab mo nang don rang 'grel*, in RD_{SB} vol. 7, 382₂₋₃: “[Mind] is explained in many ways among the tantras and treatises. It is described as that possessing purity. In describing the impure as ‘mind’, it is what is called *ālayavijñāna*.” ... *rgyud dang bstan bcos rnam las kyang mang du gsungs pa ni dag pa dang bcas pa brjod pa yin no || ma dag pa la sems su brjod pa ni kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa zhes gsung pa gang yin pa ste | ...*

refers to mundane consciousness, which is the obscured state of deluded ignorance (*sgrib bcas rmongs pa ma rig pa'i rnam par shes pa*).

Like Rang byung rdo rje and several of his commentators, Mi bskyod rdo rje recognized that the term “substratum” had been used with notably different, and at times divergent, connotations in Buddhist sources, and therefore required careful analysis and clarification. Rang byung rdo rje had observed that “the term *kun gzhi* (*ālaya*), when it is used independently of the expression *rnam par shes pa* (*vijñāna*), is not necessarily [a shorthand] for *kun gzhi rnam par shes pa* (*ālayavijñāna*) but can also refer to suchness (*tathatā* : *de bzhin nyid*)⁴²⁶.⁴²⁶ This point is later reiterated by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) when he notes that *ālaya* is combined with *vijñāna* in the compound *ālayavijñāna* in order to distinguish it from instances where buddha nature and suchness (*tathatā*) are described as substrata (*kun gzhi*).⁴²⁷

Adding his own clarification, the Mi bskyod rdo rje states in his *Embodiments* that luminous buddha nature has been called a “substratum” (lit. “all-ground”; *kun gzhi*) because it is the common ground of buddhas and sentient beings. “On the one hand,” he explains, “it is due to [beings] having this cause, buddha nature, that its result [buddhahood] is brought forth. On the other hand, it is due to the influence of all the adventitious defilements which obscure or obstruct [buddha nature] that all phenomena of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* occur by way of dependent arising. If this [buddha] nature did not exist, then the conventional arising of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, bondage and liberation, and so on would not

⁴²⁶ *Zab mo nang don gyi 'grel pa*, in RD_{SB} vol. 7, 383₂: 'di yang *kun gzhi zhes bya ba la rnam par shes pa'i sgra ma smos na de bzhin nyid la yang *kun gzhis brjod du rung ba'i phyir rnam par shes pa smos so* ||.*

⁴²⁷ See Kong sprul's *Rnam shes ye shes 'byed pa'i bstan bcos 'grel pa*, 361₂₁–362₃: “Since [the *ālayavijñāna*] constitutes a ground for the arising of all imagined phenomena, it is called ‘substratum’ (*ālaya*). [Query:] Why is it combined with the term ‘consciousness’ (-*vijñāna*)? [Reply:] Since there are contexts wherein suchness (*tathatā*) and buddha nature are also described as substrata (*ālaya*), [the compound is used] in order to clearly distinguish it.” *kun tu rtog pa'i chos thams cad 'byung ba'i gzhir gyur pas *kun gzhi zhes bya* | de la *rnam par shes pa'i sgra dang ldan pa ji ltar yin snyam na* | de bzhin nyid dam bde gshegs snying po la'ang *kun gzhir brjod pa'i skabs yod pas khyad par du 'byed pa'i phyir ro* ||*. See also Dwags ram pa, *Zab mo nang don sems kyi rnam par thar pa'i gsal ba'i rgyan*, in RD_{SB} vol. 12, 108_{5–6}.

exist.”⁴²⁸ The Karma pa adds that one must nonetheless distinguish this abiding buddha nature from the discontinuous substratum consciousness. “The substratum [consciousness] is not perpetually continuous (*rgyun brtan pa*) since it comes to an end once the karmic seeds aspect [ceases on] the eighth level and the karmic maturation aspect [ceases on] the ninth level.” By contrast, buddha nature “is perpetually continuous since it neither waxes nor wanes from sentient beings up to buddha. Thus, it was posited as the ground of all phenomena comprising bondage and freedom, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the innate and adventitious, and the two truths.”⁴²⁹

The author concludes that this ever-present and all-pervading buddha nature is available as a “cause” of realizing the goal of buddhahood precisely because it is a condition of possibility for all phenomena subsumed under the two realities. *Prima facie* it seems difficult to square the Karma pa’s conception of buddha nature as a universal substratum comprising *samsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, and the path with his repeated admonitions not to conflate unconditioned buddha nature with adventitious samsaric phenomena. He was certainly not the first to face the problem of reconciling two quite different Buddhist theses concerning the relationship between unconditioned buddha nature and conditioned phenomena: [1] an *independence thesis* specifying how unconditioned buddha nature is independent of all conditioned phenomena comprising *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* and the path; [2] a *dependence thesis* specifying how all such conditioned phenomena depend for their existence upon the unconditioned, because the latter is the very condition of their possibility. While the first takes buddha nature as a soteriological substratum—the condition of possibility of liberation and *nirvāṇa* but not of *samsāra*, the second more broadly construes it as a phenomenal substratum—the condition of possibility of all phenomena, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* and the path. The notion of a basic substratum that unifies both the processes of cyclic existence (*samsāra*) and of liberation from it (*nirvāṇa*) fulfills the demand for some principle of continuity in a system that otherwise rejects the existence

⁴²⁸ In other words, soteriological conventions such as *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, or bondage and liberation, are predicated on the possibility of freedom from the shackles of ignorance and delusion; and buddha nature is precisely the condition of this possibility. See vol. 2, tr., 280, ed., 289.

⁴²⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 281, ed., 290.

of any patient of suffering or agent of liberation that are identifiable as a self.⁴³⁰ A recurrent tension between the independence and dependence accounts is discernable in Mi bskyod rdo rje's treatments of the relationship between buddha nature and the substratum.

A variant of the *independence thesis* is defended in the author's *Intent* (*Dgongs gcig kar tīg* I.2) where he rejects the view that *mahāmudrā* and *tathāgatagarbha* can be identified as the source of both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. In doing so, he provides a valuable overview of differing conceptions of the phenomenal and soteriological substrata (*kun gzhi* : *ālaya*) that figure in Dwags po Bka' brgyud philosophy:

The way in which *mahāmudrā* does not function as a basis for all of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* requires explanation. In the Mahāyāna tradition, the presentation of the substratum (*ālaya*) is explained as having three [features]: [1] [karmic] ripening, [2] [karmic] seeds and [3] the uncorrupted element (*zag med khams*). The first two are said to function as the foundation of *samsāra*. The third is the cause of *nirvāṇa*; being the extraordinary distinct set of six cognitive domains which functions as the basis of the unfolded potential and the like, it is described as the natural outflow of *dharmakāya*. The way in which the *ālaya* is a basis of *samsāra* [comprises both]: [1] what is based on it by way of [karmic] seeds for any of the [three] realms, as the predispositions for their emergence, and [2] what is based on it by way of [karmic] ripening as the three sufferings of the three realms and so forth. [3] The progressive awakening of latent tendencies of studying, thinking, and meditating and so on is described in terms of the uncorrupted element that is precisely the producer and produced of *nirvāṇa*.

Hence, there are some for whom this *ālaya* presented as the basis for *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* functions [also] as the foundation of *mahāmudrā*. [But] this was not the intent of the Lord of Sages. The *mahāmudrā* of Mantra[yāna], the *tathāgatagarbha* of the final turning, and the *prajñāpāramitā* of the middle turning and so forth are special methods of revealing the *Single Intent*. Among these, the

⁴³⁰ For an interesting account of how early *tathāgatagarbha* and *dhātu* conceptions were used in an attempt to fulfil this demand, see Jones 2015, 32 and 969.

nature of the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) is not a foundation for either *samsāra* or *nirvāṇa* because [this] nature has always been beyond the whole tangle of conceptual elaborations, such as *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.⁴³¹

With this passage, the Eighth Karma pa sharply distinguishes the substratum of karmically-conditioned processes involving karmic seeds and their maturation (*samsāra*) from the substratum of the uncorrupted element (*anāsravadvāhātu*), which is equated with *tathāgatagarbha*, *mahāmudrā*, and *prajñāpāramitā*. Stated succinctly, *tathāgatagarbha* (viz., *mahāmudrā*) cannot be regarded as a source of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, or any other reciprocally determined constructs of this kind, because its nature eludes appropriation by conceptual thought.

The *dependence thesis*, emphasizing the pervasion of the conditioned by the unconditioned, is outlined in the above-mentioned passage from *Embodiments* —where buddha nature is identified as the substratum of *samsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, and the path. Mi bskyod rdo rje proceeds to address the question “If that buddha nature is *not* the substratum consciousness, which is of the essence of the mind of adventitious defilements, then why has it been described in that way?” He replies that “since that [buddha nature] is the root of *all* phenomena comprising pure and impure substrata etc., it is not inconsistent to explain it in that way.” To support this point, he quotes the *Ghanavyūha*:

⁴³¹ *Dgongs gcig kar ḥig* I.2, in MD_{SB} vol. 4, 256–265: *phyag rgya che des 'khor 'das kun* || *rten byed min tshul bshad par bya* || *theg chen lugs la kun gzhi yi* || *rnam par bzhag pa* || *di lta ste* || *rnam smin sa bon zag med khams* || *gsum du bshad la dang po gnyis* || *'khor ba'i rten gzhi byed par gsungs* || *gsum pa mya ngan 'das kyi rgyu* || *rgyas 'gyur rigs sog* *rten byed pa'i* || *skyte mched drug po mthun mong ba* || *min pa'i khyad par chos sku yi* || *rgyu mthun nyid du gsungs pa yin* || *kun gzhis 'khor ba rten tshul yang* || *kun 'byung 'du byed khams gang gi* || *sa bon tshul gyis brten pa yin* || *khams gsum sdug bsnal gsum sog* *kyi* || *rnam smin tshul gyis brten pa yin* || *thos bsam sgom pa la sog pas* || *bag chags rim gyis sad pa ni* || *zag med khams la mya ngan 'das* || *bskyed bya skyed byed nyid du bstan* || *des na 'khor 'das brten pa yi* || *rnam gzhag kun gzhi nyid la gyis* || *phyag chen rten gzhir byed pa sog* || *thub pa'i dbang po'i dgongs pa min* || *sngags su phyag rgya chen po dang* || *'khor lo tha ma'i gshegs snying dang* || *'khor lo bar par sher phyin sog* || *dgongs gcig ston tshul khyad par yin* || *de las rang bzhin sher phyin gyis* || *'khor 'das gang yang mi brten te* || *'khor 'das la sog spros tshogs kun* || *rang bzhin gdod nas dben phyir ro* ||.

The substratum of the various levels,
 That is also the goodness that is buddha nature (**sugatagarbha*).
 The tathāgatas have indicated this nature (*garbha*)
 By means of the term “substratum” (*ālaya*).
 Although the *garbha* has been declared to be the *ālaya*,
 It is not known by those of inferior intellect.⁴³²

Commenting on this same passage in his *Intent* (*Dgongs gcig kar ḥig*) V.2, the author explains that “the term ‘substratum of various levels’ was described as a substratum with reference to all seeds and causes of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.” He adds, however, that “when the cause of *nirvāṇa* is referred to as a ‘substratum’ (*ālaya*), it is not possible that this could [signify anything] other than buddha nature because whereas the *ālaya*[*vijñāna*] is the debilitating malaise⁴³³ of defilement, this [buddha nature] is precisely the natural luminosity, which is *not* the malaise of defilement.”⁴³⁴ This brings us full circle from the phenomenal substratum back to the soteriological one. And once again it is evident that the independence and dependence theses can only be reconciled within a broader contextualist perspective of the Buddhist path. In short, although buddha nature may indeed be regarded in an inclusive sense as a substratum or precondition of all causes and all phenomena, conditioned and unconditioned, the aspirant must nonetheless distinguish within its scope between pure and impure substrata—the unconditioned buddha nature and conditioned substratum consciousness—in order to avoid conflating the two.

In any case, when viewed in light of one another, the *independence* and *dependence* accounts of how the *tathāgatagarbha* relates to the *ālayavijñāna* equally accentuate the abiding and fundamental nature of the former and contingent and superfluous nature of the latter. In this regard, they may be viewed as two aspects of the differentiation model, the former stressing the sublime otherness (*gzhan mchog*) of buddha nature, the latter stressing its pervasiveness in all sentient beings. Considered in either aspect, their common focus on the unreality of the *ālayavijñāna* underscores the disclosive standpoint:

⁴³² *Ghanavyūhasūtra* (GhV), H 113, 85a₆–7.

⁴³³ On “debilitating malaise” (*gnas ngan len* : *dauṣṭhulya*), see above 171, n. 370.

⁴³⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 205, ed., 235.

it is only with the dissolution of the conditioned and conditioning substratum consciousness that buddha nature or substratum wisdom can fully reveal itself.

At various points, the Karma pa explores the deleterious consequences, both exegetical and practical, that may result from confusing these pure and impure substrata. In the *Tonic*, he takes particular issue with Shākyā mchog ldan and his students for not properly distinguishing within the universal substratum or ground proper between its pure and impure substrata. He begins by noting that “if the expanse of phenomena (*dharmadhātu*) is taken as the basis of adventitious defilements, then you need to clearly distinguish between the substratum wisdom (*kun gzhi ye shes*) and [substratum] consciousness ([*kun gzhi*] *rnam shes*).⁴³⁵ If you don’t distinguish them, then it is inappropriate if you explain the substratum, which serves as the basis for adventitious defilements, as being wisdom and buddha nature.”⁴³⁶ The author proceeds to underscore the need to respect the semantic ranges and functional roles of context-specific terms such as “substratum consciousness” and “substratum wisdom” in order to avoid serious confusions in thought and meditation:

Consequently, when anyone contends that it is necessary to accept [this] *ālayavijñāna*, which is the basis of adventitious defilements, it follows that it is inadmissible to then introduce within that *ālaya* a distinction between the pure and impure. This is because were it possible of that which is termed **sugatagarbha* or *dharmadhātu* or substratum wisdom to function as the basis for the arising of adventitious defilements, then there would not be any role left for the *ālayavijñāna* to be the basis of such [defilements]. Moreover, among you and the teachers in your lineage, there is not even one who has penetrated this matter deeply. Some assert that the clarity aspect in the context of the substratum consciousness is the substratum wisdom. Some assert that the clarity aspect that is the intrinsic essence of the substratum consciousness is not conducive to *nirvāna* since it does not transcend *samsāra*. Some claim that *samsāra* manifests in that clarity aspect which is the substratum wisdom or [buddha] nature. Therefore, you masters and

⁴³⁵ This important distinction is widely employed and discussed in Bka' brgyud and Jo nang texts (esp. by Dol po pa and Rang byung rdo rje and his commentators).

⁴³⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 134, ed., 168.

disciples⁴³⁷—is *nirvāṇa* the clarity aspect of the substratum consciousness or is the substratum consciousness the clarity aspect of the substratum wisdom?⁴³⁸ Masters and disciples, you must give up this ignoble talk!⁴³⁹

Just as Mi bskyod rdo rje had previously warned about the “collapse of all terminological conventions” that results from conflating buddha nature with its adventitious defilements, he here warns against the confusions that may arise from conflating aspects of the substratum wisdom, i.e., buddha nature, with aspects of the substratum consciousness.

This analysis forms part of a broader critique of the epistemological foundations of the tantric buddha nature theory outlined in Shākyā mchog ldan's *Cakrasaṃvara Commentary* (*bde mchog rnam bshad*). There, Mi bskyod rdo rje contends that the Sa skyā scholar's tendency to blur the lines between consciousness (*rnam shes*) and wisdom (*ye shes*) weakens the entire edifice of his buddha nature theory. Specifically, Shākyā mchog ldan is accused of

⁴³⁷ The plural marker *rnam*s indicates that the author is here addressing several masters and disciples, not only Shākyā mchog ldan and his student Pañ chen Rdo rgyal ba.

⁴³⁸ These are the two mutually exclusive positions under which the different theories at issue can be subsumed: the clarity aspect is either a conditioned product of the unconditioned or an unconditioned product of the conditioned. For the author, these two extremes, each untenable in its own right, illustrate the absurdities that follow from not properly distinguishing between (substratum) consciousness and (substratum) wisdom.

⁴³⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 134, ed.169. An interlinear note here explains that Shākyā mchog ldan maintained in his *Bde mchog rnam bshad* that consciousness (*rnam shes*) arises as the clarity aspect (*dwangs cha*) of wisdom whereas his student Pañ chen Rdo rgyal ba (a.k.a. Rdo rje rgyal mtshan, b. 15th c.) proclaimed that wisdom is the clarity aspect of consciousness. “Thus the positions subscribed to by these two, master and disciple, are [as] opposed as East and West.” See vol. 2, tr. 134, ed., 168. Little is known about Rdo rje rgyal mtshan but Mi bskyod rdo rje composed a response (in meter) to questions of Rdor rgyal ba. In the colophon, the Karma pa attributes numerous works to Rdor rgyal (none of which are extant) which encompassed the fields of epistemology, Madhyamaka, Abhidharma, Tantra, and “most notably [Rdo rgyal's] Gzhan stong commentarial text on the *Kālacakra*.” See *Pañ chen rdor rgyal ba'i legs bshad rnam par dkar ba'i shel gyi glegs bu la drang po'i thig baidūrya'i ri mo btab pa*, in MD_{SB} vol. 3, 257₃₋₄. The final sentence of this quotation is a provisional rendering of *dpon slob kha ngan pa gyis la byon zhig*.

equating the clear and knowing cognition—the subjective, inward-looking part of consciousness—with nondual wisdom, and of thus aligning the outward-looking (objective) and inward-looking (subjective) poles of consciousness with the two truths, the conventional and ultimate respectively. For the Karma pa, this model of consciousness reflects his opponent's allegiance to an Alīkākāravāda (False Aspectarian) Cittamātra view, which equates the apprehending aspect of cognition with nondual wisdom. Now, as Mi bskyod rdo rje and much of the Indian Buddhist tradition maintain, mundane consciousness (*vijñāna* : *rnam shes*) is dualistic precisely on account of its subjectivizing and objectifying activities, whereas wisdom (*jñāna* : *ye shes*) is characterized precisely by the absence of such a dualism. Consequently, both the sense and explanatory power of this crucial distinction, which is a cornerstone in Shākyā mchog Idan's own doctrinal system as well, are forsaken when he links the subject pole of consciousness with wisdom and erects an entire soteriology on this shaky foundation. The same line of criticism is applied to Shākyā mchog Idan's attempt to bring the *ālayavijñāna* into line with buddha nature.

Some of Mi bskyod rdo rje's most cogent reflections on the relationship between buddha nature and *ālayavijñāna* are to be found in his attempts to coordinate and clarify the tantric interpretations of these concepts. A lucid summary is given in a section of the author's *Intent* (*Dgongs gcig kar tig*) V.2 where he comments on 'Jig rten gsum mgon's *Single Intent* vajra precept 8.36: "Through the power of blessing, the substratum (*kun gzhi* : *ālaya*) is actualized in a short time."⁴⁴⁰ In clarifying this precept, the Karma pa offers a valuable explanation of sūtric and tantric views of the substratum and their complex relationship with buddha nature doctrine. Confining our attention to the parts of this section which pertain to the relationship between buddha nature and the substratum, we may begin with his initial reframing of vajra precept 8.36:

If this vajra precept is restated very clearly, it says this: "Through the instructions of one who has perceived that buddha nature of the three continua which is the final intent of the sūtras and tantras [and] which has been given the name 'substratum' (*kun gzhi* : *ālaya*), one is able to actualize it in a short time via the key points. If one is able to do this, then by directly recognizing the subtlest root of *samsāra* [i.e., the *ālayavijñāna*], which is to be abandoned via the Mantra-

⁴⁴⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 197, ed., 230.

yāna, one engages in relinquishing it. And when one engages in that, one cannot help but attain the buddha[hood] of the Sūtra and Mantra traditions.”⁴⁴¹

In this rather elaborate reworking of the precept, we can pick out several key points that are central to Mi bskyod rdo rje's own viewpoint. Buddha nature, the final intent of sūtras and tantras, is equated with the tantric continua (*rgyud*) of ground, path, and fruition, and is also said to be known as a “substratum.” It is this substratum which is actualized in a short time by way of Mantrayāna pith-instructions. These help one to recognize and finally relinquish the subtlest root of *samsāra*, which he later identifies as the substratum consciousness, and thus attain buddhahood of the Mantra tradition.

Central to this interpretation is the distinction between the unconditioned substratum (or threefold tantric continuum) and the conditioned and conditioning *ālayavijñāna*. This distinction underlies Mi bskyod rdo rje's explanation of the four perfections of buddha nature. “[This] nature is [1] “pure” because [it] does not serve as a basis for latent tendencies; [2] “true selfhood” because in [its] selflessness, even the conceptual elaborations regarding “no self” have completely subsided; [3] “bliss” because it is free from body-mind produced by the subtle movement of ignorance; and [4] “permanent” because the undefiled spiritual element of this kind is the uninterrupted continuity of buddha activities.” After quoting *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.35ab, the Karma pa proceeds to explain that such actualization goes hand in hand with understanding the increasingly subtle roots of *samsāra* that obscure it: “When one actualizes this [buddha] nature, [one] is able to understand the chaff which obscures it—*samsāra*—and [to understand] not only its coarse root, but also its subtle and subtlest roots.”⁴⁴²

In this analysis, *ālayavijñāna* is seen as the subtlest root of *samsāra*. For the Buddhist practitioner, it represents the final bulwark standing in the way of awakening once the beliefs in an inner self, an outer world, and reification in general, have been systematically dispelled. This barrier is overcome by way of third *dharma* *cakra* teachings. “The root of *samsāra* for Śrāvaka Vaibhāśikas and Sautrāntikas consists in the personalistic false views (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*), while for pratyekabuddhas, it is the belief in the reality of objects. Commonly among

⁴⁴¹ See vol. 2, tr., 197, ed., 230.

⁴⁴² See vol. 2, tr., 218, ed., 246.

Mādhyamikas, it consists in elaborations based on reifications of signs. And in the final wheel [of Dharma], it is taken to be the indeterminate *ālayavijñāna*, construed as the repository of latent tendencies, which is called the ‘defiled purity of mind’. Although [this conception of a] buddhahood in which all these roots of *samsāra* have been relinquished is discovered on the sūtric path, the roots of *samsāra* explained in the Mantra[yāna] concern the latent tendencies for transference [via rebirth].”⁴⁴³ On this note, the author claims that the Mantrayāna path of destroying all these roots of *samsāra* and attaining buddhahood supersedes the “sūtric” path insofar as the former eradicates the most deeply-rooted latent tendencies, those leading to rebirth, which are associated with the *ālayavijñāna*. To underscore this point, he distinguishes tantric from sūtric conceptions of the *ālayavijñāna*:

This kind of root of *samsāra* is also designated by the term *ālayavijñāna*. In this regard, this [tantric] *ālayavijñāna* is subtler than the *ālaya[vijñāna]* explained in the context of the sūtras. According to the *Kālacakra* [Vimalaprabhātīkā (VPT)],

[Here in *samsāra*,] in the very moment of transference, the birth of a sentient being takes place...⁴⁴⁴

And it says the following:

The *ālayavijñāna* in the womb has the nature of fully uniting with uterine blood and semen.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ See vol. 2, tr., 218, ed., 246.

⁴⁴⁴ *Vimalaprabhātīkā* (VPT), Tib. D 1347, 267a₂.

⁴⁴⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 219, ed., 247. See *Vimalaprabhātīkā* (VPT), Tib. D 1347, 267a₂₋₃. According to the Kālacakra account of embryogenesis, when the *ālayavijñāna* combines with the uterine blood of the female and semen of the male due to movements of vital life forces (*prāṇa*), conception takes place. As Vesna Wallace (2001, 6) explains: “At the time of conception, the father’s semen and mother’s uterine blood, which are made of the five elements, are “devoured” by the consciousness which, accompanied by subtle *prāṇas*, enters the mother’s womb. When conception takes place due to the power of time, the semen and uterine blood within the womb slowly develop into the body of the individual. This occurs due to the spreading of *prāṇas*. The growing fetus consumes food

In sum, the complete eradication of roots of *samsāra*, which the author correlates with the threefold purification of obscurations as outlined in *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.47, depends on eliminating two successive substrata: “[1] the aspect that serves as the ground of all afflictions and [2] that which is the ground of all latent tendencies even [when] the afflictions have disappeared.”⁴⁴⁶ He notes that the ground of afflictions is overcome once the state of arhatship [is attained by] Śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, whereas the so-called “ground of latent tendencies of ignorance” is overcome at the end of traversing the ten spiritual levels of a bodhisattva.⁴⁴⁷

The author proceeds to defend the Yogācāra theory of *ālayavijñāna* over rival non-Buddhist *ātmavādin* theories on the grounds that it provides a model of the genesis and possible cessation not only of afflictions (*kleśa*), but also of the latent tendencies which continually give rise to them. It is only the complete eradication of the latter that will bring liberation from rebirth. “Thus, if one claims that the succession of births in *samsāra* is terminated by merely having relinquished afflictions without knowing how the substratum (*ālaya*) serves as a basis for coarse and subtle afflictions, the latent tendencies and the like, this

comprised of six flavors—bitter, sour, salty, pungent, sweet, and astringent—and these six flavors originate from the six elements, the sixth being gnosis. Consequently, the body of a fetus becomes a gross physical body, composed of the agglomerates of the atomic particles. The elements of the father’s semen give rise to the marrow, bones, *nādīs*, and sinews of the fetus; the elements of the mother’s uterine blood give rise to the skin, blood, and flesh of the fetus. Thus, all the elements and psychophysical aggregates that constitute the human being come into existence due to the union of the atomic agglomerates of the father’s semen and mother’s uterine blood.” This process is described in detail in *Vimalaprabhātīkā* (VPT), Tib. D 1347, 115a₆–115b₆.

⁴⁴⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 202, ed., 232.

⁴⁴⁷ The author here mentions the *Śrīmālādevīśiṃhanādanirdeśasūtra* (Tib. H 92 435b₅–436a₄), which maintains that the ground for ingrained ignorance (*ma rig pa’i gnas kyi sa : avidyāvāsabhūmi*) is the basis for the manifesting of karma that is not contaminated [by *kleśas*] (*zag pa ma mchis pa’i las*), and that this ground is destroyed on the level of buddhahood (*buddhabhūmi*) by *buddhajñāna*. Note that the technical term *avidyāvāsabhūmi* has been rendered in Tibetan in (at least) two ways depending on how the Sanskrit compound was understood: [1] as *ma rig [pa’i] bag chags kyi sa* (e.g. Tibetan RGV translations), where the compound is resolved as *avidyā* + *vāsa[na]* (perfuming, i.e., latent tendencies) + *bhūmi*, or [2] as *ma rig [pa’i] gnas pa’i sa* (e.g. in Tibetan SMS translations), where the compound is resolved as *avidyā* + *āvāsa* (dwelling, abode) + *bhūmi*.

would be like the [view of the] nihilist heretics. For this reason, the substratum theory is superior to [the *ātman* doctrine of] heretics.”⁴⁴⁸

Mi bskyod rdo rje acknowledges the explanatory value of the *ālayavijñāna* model when it comes to identifying the most deep-seated obstacles to liberation, the source of latent tendencies of ignorance.

More specifically, to attain great awakening, it is necessary to identify that obscuration which is the “ground (*sa*) of latent tendencies of ignorance”—[i.e.,] the substratum (*ālaya*)—which is an impediment to such [attainment]. But to identify that, it is necessary to engage in the vast spectrum of renunciation and realization pertaining to the level of buddhahood. Hence, with the exception of buddhas and bodhisattvas, this doctrinal approach to the substratum (*ālaya*) is not known by commoners and ordinary yogins. As the *Laṅkāvatāra* [II, re: v. 98] states,

Were the endogenous form [of consciousness] to cease, then the *ālayavijñāna* would also cease.⁴⁴⁹ [However,] Mahāmati, if the *ālayavijñāna* ceased, then this doctrine would be no different from the nihilistic doctrine of the extremists (*tīrthika*).⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 202, ed., 232.

⁴⁴⁹ In the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the expression “endogenous form of consciousness” (*svajāti-lakṣaṇavijñāna*) refers to the deep structure of consciousness—the *ālayavijñāna* itself—which is thought to underlie the active manifest (or discernable) forms of consciousness (*lakṣaṇavijñāna*) and to survive their destruction. Here, the fundamental transformation or, literally, transformation of the basis (*gnas gyur* : *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, °-*parivṛtti*), whereby consciousness collapses or subsides into the *ālayavijñāna* (which in the LAS is equivalent to buddha nature), like waves into the ocean, first involves the cessation of these active manifest forms of consciousness, and then of the continuity (*prabandha*) aspect. The key point in the above quotation is that the cessation of dualistic perceptions and conceptions is the cessation of the karmic[ally conditioned] form of consciousness (*karmalakṣaṇa*) but not of the unconditioned endogenous form of consciousness, which is the *ālayavijñāna* itself.

⁴⁵⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 202, ed., 233. For LAS II, prose vol. II, n. 771. The *Laṅkāvatāra* explains that for the *tīrthika*, the termination of apprehension of sense objects leads to the termination of consciousness in general, and the cessation of time itself.

Still, despite his recognition of the superiority of the Yogācāra account of the genesis of affliction and cyclic existence over selfhood theories, the Karma pa does not go along with the equation of *ālayavijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha*. To be more specific, although the *Lankāvatāra*, as a Yogācāra text, had taken *ālayavijñāna* as a condition of both cyclic existence and awakening and thus identified it with *tathāgatagarbha*, Mi bskyod rdo rje restricts the scope of *ālayavijñāna* to cyclic existence and relegates the conditions of awakening to *tathāgatagarbha* (equated with the substratum proper) alone. This account leaves no room for the equation of buddha nature and the substratum consciousness.

For the Eighth Karma pa, it is the tantric analysis of *ālayavijñāna* which probes the deepest roots of cyclic existence and thus offers the best prospect of eradicating them. In this analysis, *ālayavijñāna* is otherwise described as “luminous mind which is the ‘Primal [Nature]’ (*gtso bo* : *pradhāna*, i.e., *prakṛti*)⁴⁵¹ because it generates the twenty-three transformations (*parināma*) that evolve from it.”⁴⁵² It is further described as “mind in the fourth (*bzhi pa* : *turiya*)

⁴⁵¹ The term *gtso bo* (*pradhāna*), an epithet of *prakṛti* (“nature”) in the Sāṃkhya system, reflects the Kālacakra assimilation of Sāṃkhya concepts into a Buddhist tantric context. As Mi bskyod rdo rje stresses in his *Embodiments* (see vol. 2, 339, n. 1430), this assimilation should not be understood as an attempt to establish an equivalence between the two systems since postulates such as *prakṛti*, *puruṣa*, and *ahamkāra* are not accepted, even conventionally, by Buddhists. Rather, it should be seen as an attempt to reinterpret Sāṃkhya cosmology in light of Buddhist soteriological and psychological paradigms which reject these postulates.

⁴⁵² See vol. 2, tr., 218, ed., 246.

state,'⁴⁵³ ‘luminosity of deep sleep,’ and ‘the moment mind takes rebirth’.”⁴⁵⁴ Taken together, these terms identify a state of mind which has dispensed with afflictions but not yet with the most deep-seated tendencies that perpetuate *samsāra*. Mi bskyod rdo rje cautions that this type of luminous mind is still adventitious because it appropriates the entire eightfold *ālayavijñāna* complex and remains something separable (i.e., removable): “Because this kind of luminous mind is separable (*'bral rung*), it is described as ‘adventitious defilement’. Further, since this substratum luminous mind, which is the root of *samsāra*, appropriates the entire eightfold consciousness, it is called the

⁴⁵³ In the *Upaniṣads*, ‘the fourth’ ([*ca*]turiṇya) refers to the state of pure consciousness which is said to underlie and transcend the other three states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. The idea is already found in the earliest *Upaniṣads*, for example *Chāndogya* (chs. 8.7–8.12), *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (5.14), and later elaborated in the *Maitrāyaṇīya* (sections 6.19 and 7.11) *Mandukya* (verse 7) *Upaniṣads*. This schema was assimilated into the *Kālacakra* system where the *turiṇya* state is identified with sexual supreme bliss (*mahāsukha*) and nondual wisdom (*jñāna*). Rang byung rdo rje devotes the sixth chapter of his *Zab mo nang gi don* to clarifying the relationship between consciousness (*rnam shes*) and wisdom (*ye shes*) in terms of these four *Upaniṣadic* states of consciousness as presented in the *Kālacakra* system. According to Vesna Wallace (2001, 38), “it is plausible that the *Kālacakratantra*’s description of the fourth nature of the mind comes originally from the Śaiva tantras, for the classification of the four types of awareness was known in non-Buddhist Indian traditions since the time of the *Upaniṣads*. Within the context of the *Kālacakratantra*, the fourth state of the mind is a state that supports the three aforementioned states. It is characterized by the emission of regenerative fluids. Comparative analysis of the expositions of the fourth state of the mind in the *Kālacakratantra* and in Śaiva tantras reveals striking similarities, and yet it shows some fundamental differences with regard to the nature of that state. They agree that the fourth state of the mind marks the blissful state of consciousness in which all conceptualizations disappear and any sense of duality vanishes. However, in Śaiva tantras, the fourth state of the mind is also a state of self-realization, a state in which one becomes aware of one’s undivided, essential Self, and consequently becomes free of spiritual ignorance (*avidyā*). It is a condition by which one rises to the fifth state, or the state of liberation, within one’s lifetime (*jīvanmukti*). In the *Kālacakratantra*, on the other hand, the fourth type of awareness, though nondual at the time of the emission of regenerative fluids, is still tainted with the habitual propensities of spiritual ignorance (*avidyāvāsanā*) and is thus embedded in the cycle of existence.”

⁴⁵⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 219, ed., 247.

“appropriating cognition” (*ādānavijñāna*).⁴⁵⁵ In short, such altered states of mind may provide a glimpse of buddha nature, the ultimate, but should not be confused with it. As the author explains,

When these [mind states] manifest, although the mind of [buddha] nature remains unclear, it may nonetheless become slightly clearer, even to those who have not yet embarked upon the subtlest path. In that regard, however, the activities of maturation and liberation (*smin grol*) are not effective for them—a mere glimpse does not become the *vajra yoga*. Because of this subtle and profound point, my [teacher] the venerable Ras pa chen po said these words:

Nowadays, there are some who say, “since we have already integrated with the luminosity of deep sleep, there is no doubt we will awaken [to buddhahood] in the luminosity of death.” Many [of them] harbor [such] confidence [in their] minds. But let us not confuse mind which is the root of *samsāra* with luminosity!

In the final analysis, then, the point of distinguishing buddha nature from the substratum consciousness is to clarify, as Mi bskyod rdo rje does in considerable detail, the constitutive conditions of delusion and enlightenment. The author's explication of the *ālayavijñāna* as the subtlest root of *samsāra* and as the final barrier to awakening is consistent with the Buddhist goal of eliminating all sources of suffering and bondage in order to realize liberation. But far from providing a justification for the exclusion of *ālayavijñāna* from the arena of Buddhist epistemology, his analysis instead legitimizes it as a worthy object of investigation—if only as an object of refutation (*dgag bya*) on the conventional level—on the same grounds that the conventional itself is accorded this status. The ultimate is discoverable only in and through the conventional, at which point the conventional is no more.

It should be clear from the foregoing analysis that Mi bskyod rdo rje recognizes the superiority of the Yogācāra *ālayavijñāna* theory over rival non-Buddhist *ātmavādin* theories in accounting for the continuity of mental afflictions as well as the tendencies that perpetuate them. He does not hesitate

⁴⁵⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 223, ed., 249. On the *ādānavijñāna*, see Schmithausen 1987 vol. 1, 49–50 and notes.

to employ the *ālayavijñāna* model when it comes to delineating the set of conditions necessary for both cyclic existence and awakening. In these and other ways it becomes obvious that he does not reject the Yogācāra model of mind per se but only this tradition's proclivity to hypostatize the mind and *ālayavijñāna*, to confuse them with wisdom and buddha nature and construe them a basis of awakening.

These considerations certainly help explain why distinctions between pure and impure substrata—e.g., the substratum consciousness and substratum wisdom—assume the importance they do in the author's philosophy. The reader should always bear in mind, however, that such distinctions are viewed by the author as facets of a groundless ground, or a “substratum *simpliciter*” (*kun gzhi tsam*) in the wording of his teacher Karma phrin las. This ground is, paradoxically, groundless in the dual sense of having no essential characteristics that make it what it is and no deeper, shovel-stopping bedrock on which it depends.⁴⁵⁶

2.13. Buddha nature is not a self (coarse or subtle) but is selflessness

While Mi bskyod rdo rje regards the identification of buddha nature with the *ālayavijñāna* as having no more than provisional meaning, he positively rejects any identification of buddha nature with a self (*ātman*), whether coarse or subtle. His most penetrating arguments on this matter are presented in those sections of the *Tonic* and *Embodiments* where he rejects the equation between buddha nature and the subtle self. In particular, he censures 'Gos Lo tsā ba for having made this identification under the influence of Tsong kha pa's mistaken conception of a subtle self. The Karma pa repudiates this line of thought mainly within the purview of standard Buddhist arguments against the existence of a self. However, the scope of his refutation also extends to the controversial current of early Indian buddha nature theory which had equated buddha nature with a true self.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁶ As noted in the Introduction to Higgins and Draszczyk 2016, these are the two main features of the Apratisthāna viewpoint which Mi bskyod rdo rje and several other post-classical Bka' brgyud exegetes advocated.

⁴⁵⁷ For a commanding survey of these developments, see Jones 2015.

Before examining the arguments he advances to defend his own position, let us first look briefly at the background of this latter strain of thought. In apparent contradiction to the central Buddhist teaching on the absence of self (*anātman*), certain early *tathāgatagarbha* texts not only embraced the existence of some permanent essential constituent (*dhātu*) of sentient beings, but in some cases also explicitly identified this with a self. The *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (MPNS), arguably the earliest extant work on buddha nature,⁴⁵⁸ at times characterizes a buddha, or the *buddha* element (*dhātu*) in sentient beings, as a true permanent self that underlies the flux of conditioned existence and undergoes transmigration. It is in some instances also qualified as the true self that beings may discover within, once they comprehend the nonexistence of the empirical self as advocated by non-Buddhist devotees. The teaching of a true self is thus at times characterized as a final teaching reserved for those who have grasped the provisional teaching of selflessness.⁴⁵⁹

It is hardly surprising that a view as seemingly antithetical to the key Buddhist *ānatman* doctrine as this would come under increasing interrogation in the centuries to follow. While the *Larikāvatārasūtra* treats the identification of buddha nature with a self as a provisional teaching that was used to attract non-Buddhist *ātmavādins*, other texts such as the *Śrīmālādevīśimhanādasūtra* (ŚDS) as well as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā* admit a conception of true selfhood or transcendent perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*) which, as Christopher Jones puts it, “is arrived at precisely through understanding the absence of anything wrongly deemed a self.”⁴⁶⁰ This strand of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine intersects with the Buddhist tantric ideas of a supreme self (*paramātman*) or true nature of self (*ātmatattva*),⁴⁶¹ which are also at times said to be realized precisely through understanding selflessness. On this view, the negation of self is regarded as an indispensable moment in the discovery of

⁴⁵⁸ See Radich, 2015, 19 ff and Habata 2017, 176.

⁴⁵⁹ This is the gist of the provocative parable in which a mother (= the Buddha) prevents her lactose-intolerant infant (= the disciple) from drinking milk (= the true self doctrine) until the infant's condition is cured through skillful means (= understanding *ātman*). See Jones 2015, 110–113.

⁴⁶⁰ Jones 2015, 375.

⁴⁶¹ These terms are very widespread in Buddhist tantras.

authentic selfhood,⁴⁶² which is, in turn, equated with *dharmakāya* or buddhahood itself.

This background helps us to frame the Eighth Karma pa's position on the relationship between buddha nature and selfhood. Broadly speaking, his understanding of this relationship has two touchstones: [1] his reluctance to identify buddha nature with a self and [2] his avowal of authentic selfhood equated with selflessness. Both these views build on his primary philosophical affiliations. His resolute rejection of selfhood follows well-established Buddhist philosophical critiques of the belief in self (*ātmagrāha*), especially as advanced in the so-called *Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka tradition of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. His acceptance of an authentic selfhood arrived at through realizing selflessness takes its cue from certain buddha nature texts such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and *Śrīmālādevīśiṁhanādasūtra* (ŚDS), as well as numerous Buddhist tantric texts.

In his *Tonic*, Mi bskyod rdo rje devotes a substantial part of his lengthy critique of 'Gos Lo tsā ba's tantric buddha nature theory to repudiating the identification of *tathāgatagarbha* with a subtle self or sentient being. This critique is later succinctly reprised in his last major work, the *Embodiments*, as part of a critical review of five rival tantric buddha nature views. Although the scriptural target of both critiques, 'Gos Lo tsā ba's *Rgyud gsum gsang ba*, is not currently available, the Karma pa does begin his *Embodiments* critique with a helpful quotation from 'Gos Lo tsā ba's work. The passage in question describes the subtle self and its relation to the tantric causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*) as follows:

In the words of the great scholar ['Gos Lo tsā ba] Yid bzang rtse pa, “Regarding the so-called ‘self’ which is of two kinds, the coarse self and subtle self, it is necessary to posit the extraordinary causal continuum of the Mantra[yāna] on the basis of the subtle self as explained in the *Mañjuśrī* root tantra⁴⁶³ and the *Sngags la ’jug pa*

⁴⁶² A similar line of inquiry was opened up by the late French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur. In response to Derek Parfit's quasi-Buddhist rejection of selfhood, he poses the question “[I]s not a moment of self-possession essential to authentic selfhood?” See Ricoeur 2000, 138.

⁴⁶³ *Mañjuśrīmūlatantra* (MMT), Tib. 'Phags pa 'jam dpal gyi rtsa ba'i rgyud.

drug bcu pa,⁴⁶⁴ which comments on its meaning. The coarse self is construed as nominally existent, an imputation of a self or person, the object of the mind that posits a self or person once it has objectified the collocation that comprises the *skandha* and the rest. The subtle self is construed as the *ālayavijñāna*, the mind characterized as continually immersed in all states of *samsāra*. This is precisely the subtle self (*phra ba'i bdag nyid*) that is called “the true reality”⁴⁶⁵ or “the person who is a Great Man.”⁴⁶⁶ Also, the Mahāsiddha Luipa has described the causal continuum, which is very difficult to discover, as a Person who is a Spiritual Practitioner (*sgrub pa po'i gang zag*). He identifies such a person as “a leader in pure ethics and learning.”⁴⁶⁷ Being endowed with qualities such as these, he belongs to the definitive lineage of Great Yoga.

For the Mahāpañḍita Nāropā as well, the “Jewel-like Person”⁴⁶⁸ is explained in terms of this subtle self. In this regard, even though the causal continuum is in this case posited on the basis of the subtle self, it is not like the self of the non-Buddhist Sāṃkhyas that is explained as having five constituents [of subtle matter].⁴⁶⁹ Rather, in

⁴⁶⁴ This text could not be identified.

⁴⁶⁵ Tib. *de kho na nyid* : Skt. *tattva*.

⁴⁶⁶ Tib. *skye bu chen po'i gang zag* : Skt. *mahāpuruṣa pudgala*.

⁴⁶⁷ See **Pradīpoddoyotanaṭīkā* (PUT), 3b2: *tshul khrims dag cing mkhas la sgrin*.

⁴⁶⁸ On the “Jewel-like Person” see vol. 2, 321, n. 1348, ed., 333.

⁴⁶⁹ In the context of the twenty-five basic principles (*tattva*) of the Sāṃkhya-system there are (1) pure consciousness (*puruṣa*), (2) primordial materiality (*mūlaprakṛti*), (3) intellect (*buddhi* or *mahat*), (4) self-grasping (*ahamkāra*), and (5) mind (*manas*), the latter being both a sense capacity and an action capacity. Then there are the five sense capacities (*buddhīndriyas*): (6) hearing (*śrotra*), (7) touching (*tvac*), (8) seeing (*cakṣus*), (9) tasting (*rasana*), and (10) smelling (*ghrāna*), and the five action capacities (*karmendriyas*): (11) speaking (*vāc*), (12) grasping (*pāṇi*), (13) walking / motion (*pāda*), (14) excreting (*pāyu*), and (15) procreating (*upastha*). Moreover, there are the five subtle elements (*tanmātras*): (16) sound (*śabda*), (17) touch/contact (*sparśa*), (18) form (*rūpa*), (19) taste (*rasa*), (20) smell (*gandha*), as well as the five gross elements (*mahābhūta*): (21) ether/space (*ākāśa*), (22) wind/air (*vāyu*), (23) fire (*tejas*), (24) water (*ap*), (25) earth (*prthivī*). The two first (1) pure consciousness (*puruṣa*) which is inherently inactive, and (2) primordial materiality (*mūlaprakṛti*) which is inherently generative, are independent

this *Kālacakratantra* (KCT), that self is ascertained as emptiness. Hence, when such emptiness is directly realized, the voidness of [impure] mind and apprehension [of selflessness] become manifest. Therefore, not only does this not become a metaphysical view of the self (*bdag lta*), it is even the supreme antidote to it.”⁴⁷⁰

Mi bskyod rdo rje's main objection to this account is its acceptance of a personal self, an idea rejected by Buddhists of all stripes: “This doctrine that there is a personal self (*pudgalātman*) is not [found] anywhere [in Buddhism] from the Kashmiri Vaibhāśikas up to those who proclaim the authentic Dharma of the Bhagavān Kālacakra.”⁴⁷¹ The Karma pa firmly upholds the Buddhist rejection of a personal self, specifically the contention that a human being is simply an ever-changing flux of thoughts, feelings and perceptions, with no central “I” to anchor them. Responding to a hypothetical counter-argument that certain Buddhist schools such as the Vātsīputrīyas do in fact “propound an indescribable self which is neither identical with nor different from the self,” the Karma pa replies: “Candrakīrti said in his commentary on the [Madhyamaka]avatāra that for those who assert personal selfhood, there is no liberation and that it would therefore be difficult to consider this doctrine correct.”⁴⁷²

existents, co-existing separate from one another outside of ordinary space and time. Factors (3) through (25) make up the subdivisions of primordial materiality, representing parts of a totally functioning whole. They are generated, temporal, spatial etc. The subtle elements (*tanmātras*) are so called because they are the generic (*aviśeṣa*) material essences for all specific (*viśeṣa*) elements. They are imperceptible to ordinary persons, whereas gross elements can be perceived by ordinary persons. The five subtle elements are generated out of self-grasping (*ahaṅkāra*) but also generate the five gross elements (*mahābhūta*). Intellect is generated out of primordial materiality but also generates self-grasping. See Larson, Bhattacharya 1987, 49–50.

⁴⁷⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 321, ed., 333.

⁴⁷¹ See also the *Tonic* vol. 2, tr., 322, ed., 334, where he states: “In general, from the Vaibhāśika, such as the Vātsīputrīya, up to the great secret Vajrayāna, there is no option of accepting a substantially existing self. And even the presence of a nominally existent [self] is not accepted above the Alīkāravāda-Cittamātra [school]. Consequently, the self has never ever been something knowable, even conventionally. So, how is it possible for this buddha nature (*buddhagarbha*) to be a self?”

⁴⁷² See vol. 2, tr., 322, ed., 334.

The Karma pa proceeds to deflect a further rebuttal that Buddhists do at least accept a nominally existent self, as per the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh) statement “but if you say that [the self] is nominally existent, we also endorse such a claim.”⁴⁷³ He explains that “even though the Mādhyamikas simply repeat what others say about this nominally existent self as a mere linguistic convention, they never ever posit an established personal self as a nominally existent real entity within the tenets of their own system!”⁴⁷⁴ Such exchanges reflect the author’s staunch adherence to the Madhyamaka refutation of the belief in personal selfhood: “Hence, the posited phenomenon that is presented as a nominally imputed self and sentient being—a conventional linguistic designation acknowledged by others—is never ever established as an existent self in our tradition.”⁴⁷⁵

Mi bskyod rdo rje now extends his general repudiation of personal selfhood to encompass all varieties of self, from coarsest to subtlest:

If even a mere[ly imputed] self (*bdag tsam*) is not posited in one’s tradition, then how is it acceptable to posit in one’s tradition many degrees of selves, differentiated in profundity from coarse to subtle, either generally in the doctrinal system of Buddhists or specifically in the doctrinal system of the Madhyamaka of the causal and resultant vehicles? Furthermore, you take great pains to proclaim that “on the side of imputation, the imputed phenomenon of a person or a self is established by valid sources of knowledge,” and you thereby define the Madhyamaka doctrinal system along these lines. But apart from copying these quotations extracted from the *Eloquent Explanation* of Tsong kha pa, the great leader in the later wave of those so-called “Mādhyamikas” who describe things in this way, how would it be acceptable in the context of the pure doctrinal system of the earlier wave of Madhyamaka?⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷³ See AKBh IX, “Refutation of Personhood.”

⁴⁷⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 323, ed., 335.

⁴⁷⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 323, ed., 335. “Existent self” renders Tib. *bdag gi dngos po* : Skt. *ātmabhāva*.

⁴⁷⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 324, ed., 335.

Like many of his post-classical coreligionists, the Eighth Karma pa here adopts a standard Tibetan rhetorical strategy of framing certain later doctrinal innovations, in this case Tsong kha pa's subtle self, as untenable deviations from the doctrinal and rational norms established in the earlier "pure" system of Madhyamaka doctrines and practices. In this regard he shares Candrakīrti's steadfast refusal (*viz.*, *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI.81)⁴⁷⁷ to accept the reality of a nominally imputed self (here compared to Tsong kha pa's "coarse self"), even on the conventional level of discursive practices. As Candrakīrti states, "The way the dependent [self] is accepted as an entity by you is not accepted, even conventionally, by me. But, as a means to an end, I have said nonexistent things exist in compliance with the whims and wishes of the world."⁴⁷⁸

Looking more closely at 'Gos Lo tsā ba's understanding of the subtle self that is established on the conventional level as the substantially existent mind, i.e., the *ālayavijñāna*, the Karma pa pinpoints this as a Pudgalavādin position, one that accepts substantially existent persons. He further exposes the underlying Cittamātra strain of subjective idealism—the view that the mind or person is all that exists—which this viewpoint presupposes:

You accept a nominally existent coarse self and posit, conventionally, a subtle self as the substantially existent *ālayavijñāna* that is mind. In this regard, you become a proponent of substantially existent persons. But this is precisely what is refuted in the extensive canonical scriptures of the complete and perfect Buddha! That is not all: if you proclaim that mind is a person *qua* creator, then because the creator of all phenomena of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* is none other than mind only and the activities of mind only, it follows that the self and person who is the creator of all of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* would also exist. But in that case, no theory has [yet] been devised which strays that far, including even the self as an inner creator of the non-Buddhist extremists (*tīrthika*)!⁴⁷⁹

The Karma pa reserves his harshest criticism for 'Gos Lo tsā ba's belief that, in addition to the nominally imputed coarse self and the conventionally imputed

⁴⁷⁷ For the Skt. text of MA VI.81, see vol. 2, 324, n. 1355.

⁴⁷⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 324, ed., 335.

⁴⁷⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 324, ed., 335.

subtle self, there exists a continuous, subtle ultimate self. This is presumed to be a self that remains when the ordinary person possessing “coarse continua of the aggregates and so on” is left behind. It is also assumed to be the referent of tantric epithets such as “Jewel-like Person.” Mi bskyod rdo rje flatly rejects ’Gos lo tsā ba’s allegation that this conception of an ultimate self is unlike that of the non-Buddhists such as the Sāṃkhya; he even suggests that it is more misguided since at least some non-Buddhists consider the ultimate self to be composite:

Not satisfied with the mere conventionally and nominally imputed self, you further claim there is a continuous subtle, ultimate self. Yet at the same time you assert that it is nothing like the doctrine of a personal self espoused by non-Buddhists such as the Sāṃkhya. [This] is a great insuperable lie that contradicts your own words. [How so?] Because even the Sāṃkhya and others who were [similarly] not satisfied with a merely conventionally-posed, putative personal self did not accept even the slightest personal self besides their theory of the ultimate being a self possessing the five causally-efficacious constituents and the rest.⁴⁸⁰

The author proceeds to provide reasons why the equation of the subtle self or *ālayavijñāna* with buddha nature or the tantric causal continuum is self-refuting. He takes as his focal point ’Gos Lo tsā ba assertion that when, according to the *Kālacakratantra* (KCT), the self is ascertained as emptiness, this engenders not a view of self (*ātmadrsti*) but rather its supreme antidote. In the Karma pa’s eyes, it is difficult to see how the belief in an ultimate subtle self can be its own antidote: “[Buddha nature *qua* ultimate self] could not possibly be an antidote against the view of self because that ultimately established self, which is primordial and extremely subtle and not just nominally imputed, is established as the ultimate or as the uncontrived nature of suchness [and thus] could not

⁴⁸⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 325, ed., 336. Mi bskyod rdo rje proceeds to reply to a possible objection that “there is a big difference [between these conceptions] because this self of the Sāṃkhyas is believed to be unproduced and permanent.” He replies: “One cannot establish such a difference by this [criterion] alone because there are also a great many extremists (*tīrthika*) who believe that this ultimate efficacious self is impermanent and conditioned.” Unfortunately, the Karma pa does not specify which non-Buddhist “extremists” maintain such beliefs.

possibly become emptiness due to the influence of extraneous, retroactive conditions.”⁴⁸¹

Mi bskyod rdo rje concludes his critique with a standard nominalist argument against interpreting the epithet of the Buddha as a “Great Man” (*mahāpuruṣa*), widely attested in sūtras and tantras, as anything more than a collection universal. As he explains, “Great Man” is “only a designation for the qualities of the referent of the designation (*gdags gzhi*) ‘Buddha’ endowed with [all] the major and minor marks and so on.”⁴⁸² Interestingly, the author here acknowledges the presence of buddha-qualities without, however, accepting that there exists a single permanent core of selfhood or personhood to which they can be said to belong. He concludes that “if it was impossible for anyone to say there is a person who is a Great Man apart from each of these qualities such as the major and minor marks, then what is more illogical than postulating a self as the creator of the designated qualities (*gdags chos*) of all who are the referents of designation (*gdags gzhi*), i.e., the persons who are Great Men in the Mantra [scriptures].”⁴⁸³

Having examined some of Mi bskyod rdo rje’s main arguments against the equation of buddha nature and selfhood in his *Embodiments*, we may turn our attention to some of the absurd consequences he attributes to this view in his earlier *Tonic*. For Mi bskyod rdo rje, ’Gos Lo tsā ba’s identification of buddha nature with a subtle self involves an unwarranted personification of buddha nature, one that ends up confusing sources of bondage and delusion with sources of liberation and awakening.

Reviewing the author’s criticisms in this regard, it is possible to pick out two ways in which ’Go lo tsā ba is alleged to have illegitimately personified buddha nature. One is to regard buddha nature as a *patient* of phenomenal experiences such as suffering. The other is to regard it as an *agent* of liberation. The Karma pa traces both to an indefensibly literalist reading of a *Śrīmālādevīśimha-*

⁴⁸¹ See vol. 2, tr., 325, ed., 336. It must at this point be reiterated that we have no textual evidence that Gzhon nu dpal actually posited such a self (since his *Rgyud gsum gsang ba* remains unavailable at the time of writing this book). According to his later RGV commentary, buddha nature is an endless dynamic stream, and only a *svabhāva* in the specific sense of not depending on external conditions.

⁴⁸² See vol. 2, tr., 327, ed., 338.

⁴⁸³ See vol. 2, tr., 327, ed., 338.

nādasūtra passage (ŚDS sec. 13) which 'Gos Lo tsā ba had cited as scriptural support for the view that buddha nature is a subtle self (*qua* substratum consciousness) that undergoes suffering and strives for liberation:

Bhagavān, whatever be these six consciousnesses, and whatever be this [other] consciousness—Bhagavān, these seven factors are unstable, disconnected⁴⁸⁴, momentary, and do not experience suffering... Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha*, being inseparably connected and not momentary, does experience suffering.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁴ Note that the qualifications that the seven factors of consciousness are disconnected (*ma 'brel ba*) whereas the *tathāgatagarbha* is inseparably connected ('*brel ba rnam par dbyer med pa*) are not found in the relevant passage of canonical editions of the *Śrīmālādevīśiṃhanādanirdeśasūtra* that we consulted (Derge, Peking and Lhasa editions). However, the immediately preceding passage (Tib. D 92, 548₃₋₄) states that “the *tathāgatagarbha* is the ground, basis, and support of those having knowledge liberated from the chaff [of defilements] regarding what is undifferentiated and connected (*tha dad du mi gnas shing 'brel*)... It is [also] the ground, basis, and support of external conditioned factors consisting in knowledge regarding what is disconnected and differentiated ('*brel pa ma mchis shing tha dad du gnas*) that is not liberated.”

⁴⁸⁵ This quotation is an abridged and slightly altered version of the passage found in the *Śrīmālādevīśiṃhanādanirdeśasūtra* (sec. 13 in Tib. D 92, 548_{5-549₁}). The passage is worth quoting here in full as Mi bskyod rdo rje presupposes knowledge of it in his ensuing arguments: “Bhagavān, if there were no *tathāgatagarbha*, there would be no weariness of suffering nor longing, searching, and praying for *nirvāṇa*. For what reason is that so? Because, Bhagavān, whatever be these six consciousnesses, and whatever be this [other] consciousness—Bhagavān, these seven factors are unstable, momentary, and do not experience suffering. It is therefore not logical that these factors [experience] weariness of suffering or the longing, searching, and praying for *nirvāṇa*. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha*, being the ultimate without beginning or end, and having an unborn and undying nature, experiences suffering. It is therefore appropriate that this *tathāgatagarbha* grows weary of suffering and longs, searches, and prays for *nirvāṇa*. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not a self, is not a sentient being, is not a life-force, is not a person. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not the domain of beings who have succumbed to [false] personalistic views, who have transgressed due to distorted [views], and whose minds are distracted from emptiness. Bhagavān, this *tathāgatagarbha* is the quintessence of the authentic *dharmadhātu*, the quintessence of *dharmakāya* and the quintessence of transmundane qualities.”

On the face of it, the passage does indeed appear to suggest that the *tathāgatagarbha* experiences suffering, grows weary of it, and aspires to liberation from it. To better glean the import of this passage as Mi bskyod rdo rje understands it and the main thrust of his criticism of 'Gos Lo tsā ba's interpretation of it, it is necessary to briefly consider three competing accounts of the basis of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* that our authors were confronted with in studying the major Indian classics on buddha nature. Each of these accounts proposes the existence of some invariant constituent of experience that exists throughout cyclic existence and after liberation from it.

[1] Ātmavāda accounts posit a self that underlies the flux of sentient existence and survives transmigration. We have noted that the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* at times describes the buddha (or *dharmaśāya*) in terms of this unchanging true self, albeit one alleged to be superior to the empirical or transcendental selves of non-Buddhists. This true self is further equated with buddha nature.

[2] Tathāgatagarbha accounts postulate *tathāgatagarbha* itself as the basis of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. This is common to certain early buddha nature texts, such as the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* (TGS), *Āngulimālīyasūtra* (AAN), and *Śrīmālādevīśimhanādasūtra* (ŚDS). These commonly avoid equating *tathāgatagarbha* with a self, but instead construe it as the unchanging presence of awakened qualities in the constitution of sentient beings (*Āngulimālīyasūtra*) or the constitutive element (*dhātu*) of sentient beings that identifies them as buddhas to be (*Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*).⁴⁸⁶ Additionally, the ŚDS identifies *tathāgatagarbha* as *dharmaśāya*, which is innate in beings, and further interprets it as the basis and support for *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. It is based on this latter interpretation that the ŚDS portrays buddha nature as both the patient of suffering and the agent of liberation: “Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha*, being the ultimate without beginning or end, and having an unborn and undying nature, experiences suffering. It is therefore appropriate that this *tathāgatagarbha* grows weary of suffering and longs, searches, and prays for *nirvāna*.⁴⁸⁷ However, the text proceeds to deny that this *tathāgatagarbha* has any connection with worldly selfhood or personhood: “the *tathāgatagarbha* is not a self, is not a sentient being, is not a life-force, is not a person. Bhagavān, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not the domain of beings who have succumbed to [false] personalistic views, who

⁴⁸⁶ Jones 2015, 376.

⁴⁸⁷ See above n. 485.

have transgressed due to distorted [views], and whose minds are distracted from emptiness.”⁴⁸⁸ Intriguingly, the text presents the *tathāgatagarbha* as an unchanging substrate, one which underpins the seven ever-changing modes of consciousness, but stops short of identifying this with *ālayavijñāna*. It does, however, ascribe true selfhood or the perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*) to *dharmaṅkāya* (buddhahood), though not to buddha nature.

[3] Certain Yogācāra accounts posit a substratum consciousness as the basis of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* and as the repository of latent tendencies for the manifestation of both.⁴⁸⁹ The most noteworthy scriptural precedent, as we noted in section 12 above, is the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (LAV), which explicitly equates this *ālayavijñāna* with buddha nature, though it disapproves of identifying it with a self. This text cites much of the earlier *tathāgatagarbha* literature including the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (MPNS) and *Śrīmālādevīśiṁhanādasūtra* (ŚDS). It follows the latter in maintaining that buddha nature is the substrate of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, but diverges from it in identifying this nature with the substratum consciousness. Indeed, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* suggests that the doctrine of *ālayavijñāna* is better suited to describing the causes of karma and rebirth than the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, which is likely to be confused (especially by *tīrthika*) with a doctrine of self: “Mahāmati, the *tathāgatagarbha* is the cause of all good and bad [deeds], engendering all types of rebirth, assuming many guises like an actor, [but] lacking any self or what belongs to self... Not understanding [this], the *tīrthya* are mired in attachment to a cause.”⁴⁹⁰ Further, in view of the propensity to confuse *tathāgatagarbha* with a self, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* has the Buddha advise Mahāmati that *tathāgatagarbha* should be understood to mean emptiness, the limit of reality, *nirvāṇa*, unoriginatedness, signlessness, and wishlessness.⁴⁹¹ Finally, we are told that the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine was taught

⁴⁸⁸ See above n. 485.

⁴⁸⁹ See *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.45–48, however, where the *ālayavijñāna* is said to store latent tendencies of *samsāra* but not latent tendencies of learning (*śrutavāsanā*) which are, rather, the natural outflow of *dharmaṅkāya*.

⁴⁹⁰ See Nanjio 1923, 220, 1.9–13: *tathāgatagarbho mahāmate kuśalākuśalahetukaḥ sarvajanmagatikartā pravartate naṭavadgatisaṅkāṭa ātmātmīyavarjitas...na ca tīrthyā avabudhyante kāraṇābhiniveśābhinivisṭāḥ*. Our translation is adapted from Jones 2015, 300 but altered slightly for consistency.

⁴⁹¹ LAS, Nanjio 1923, 78, 6–8. See Jones 2015, 303.

with the objective “to attract *tīrthakaras* who are attached to the view of self,”⁴⁹² and elsewhere that its aim is “to dispel the fear of no-self amongst the ignorant.”⁴⁹³

Now, it would appear that 'Gos Lo tsā ba had synthesized key elements of each of these three accounts in presenting buddha nature as a subtle self, which he in turn identifies as the *ālayavijñāna*. The problem Mi bskyod rdo rje struggles with is that the *Śrīmālādevīśimhanādasūtra* (ŚDS) passage which 'Gos Lo tsā ba cites in support of his account does indeed construe buddha nature not only as the basis (or cause) of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* but, more dubiously, as the very “experiencer of suffering”—that which “grows weary of suffering and longs, searches, and prays for *nirvāṇa*.” This prompts the Karma pa to contend that the passage is “not scriptural support [for the view] that buddha nature experiences suffering” but is rather an instance where “the Bhagavān discussed the *ālayavijñāna* using the term [buddha] nature in order to graciously take on board Mind Only proponents.”⁴⁹⁴ Mi bskyod rdo rje here adds that the Buddha “in these cases considered the *ālayavijñāna* which experiences suffering to be the aspect of karmic ripening (*vipāka*) but he did *not* consider it to be the aspect of karmic seeds (*bīja*) and the like.”⁴⁹⁵ The passage is in this way legitimized as a provisional ploy to make *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine palatable to the Yogācāra,

⁴⁹² LAS, Nanjio 1923, 79, 1. See Jones 2015, 305.

⁴⁹³ LAS, Nanjio 1923, 78, 8–12. See Jones 2015, 303–304. Translation is our own.

⁴⁹⁴ See above 182, n. 405.

⁴⁹⁵ Although the Eighth Karma pa concedes that the *ālayavijñāna* may be considered the experiencer of actions and results in the specific context of karmic ripening, he regarded its equation with buddha nature to be a kind of mistaken identification among certain Cittamātra followers that the Buddha nonetheless permitted as a kind of heuristic fiction. Commenting on the same *Śrīmālādevīśimhanādanirdeśasūtra* passage in his *Embodiments*, in MD_{SB} vol. 21, 152₅–153₄, Mi bskyod rdo rje draws a sharp contrast between the perishable *ālayavijñāna* and the enduring buddha nature. He explains that “the *ālayavijñāna* is not perpetually continuous (*rgyun brtan pa min*) since it comes to an end once the karmic seeds aspect [ceases on] the eighth level and the karmic maturation aspect [ceases on] the ninth level.” Buddha nature, on the other hand, “is perpetually continuous since it neither waxes nor wanes from sentient beings up to buddhas.” (ibid. 152₆–153₂). So it is that the buddha element is said in RGVV 41₂₁ “to be of an unchangeable nature” (‘gyur ba med pa’i chos nyid : *avikāritvadharmatā*).

who identify the substratum consciousness, rather than the putative self, as the actual basis of all phenomena comprising *samsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, and the path.

What this account leaves unanswered, however, is the question of how such experiences of karmic effects such as suffering could make consciousness aspire for liberation rather than continue to languish in misery. To lead to transcendence, such experiences of worldly suffering must be somehow felt and perceived as a limitation imposed on human existence. It follows that the recognition of such a limitation as limitation must be based on a criterion that transcends the limit.⁴⁹⁶ The criterion or standard of fulfilment is in this case buddha nature, the immanent potential (*gotra*). While one is in a state of suffering, it is on account of this potential that one tacitly senses the possibility of a state without suffering.⁴⁹⁷ This vaguely sensed recognition that there is “more to life” triggers the yearning to find a state beyond self-imposed affliction

⁴⁹⁶ This is a point made by Geza von Molnar in his summary of the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, 173: “All individuals are more or less keenly aware of the limitations imposed on their existence. An awareness of limitation as limitation must be based on a criterion that transcends the limit. In order to judge something inferior, a standard derived from something better must be applied. If the standard of judgment were equal to the thing to be judged, inferiority could never be predicated. The sense of lack that accompanies all human experience throughout life can only be produced against the background of a standard of fulfillment. Since nothing the world has to offer can grant the absolute gratification desired, the criterion for fulfillment must necessarily transcend the realm of empirical existence ...”

⁴⁹⁷ RGV I.41 (RGVV, 36, ll₈₋₉) explains that this is “Because this seeing of the fault of suffering in cyclic existence and the advantage of the bliss of *nirvāṇa* occurs when there is a potential, but not for those without potential.” *bhavanirvānatadduḥkhasukhadasaguṇekṣanam | gotre sati bhavaty etad agotrāṇām na tad yataḥ*^a ||^b Johnston 1950 ed. *vidyate* (see Schmithausen 1971, 145). See also RGVV, 36, ll₁₀₋₁₂: “Whichever seeing of the fault of suffering in cyclic existence and the advantage of the bliss of *nirvāṇa* there is, it occurs when there is the potential of a virtuous person, and not without cause or condition. Why? If it [occurred] without a potential, without cause and condition, it would [occur] even for the Icchantikas, who have no potential for perfect *nirvāṇa*, [simply] by uprooting wrong-doings.” *yad api tat saṃsāre ca duḥkhadoṣadarśanam bhavati nirvāṇe ca sukhānuśamsadarśanam etad api śuklāṇśasya pudgalasya gotre sati bhavati nāhetukam nāpratyayam iti | ^akiṁ kāraṇam^a yadi hi tad gotram antareṇa syād ahetukam apratyayam pāpasamucchayogena tad icchantikānām apy apari nirvāṇagotrāṇām syāt | ^akiṁ kāraṇam inserted according to Schmithausen 1971, 145.*

and limitation and thus motivates the quest for liberation from *samsāra*. In this regard, the reasoning behind Mi bskyod rdo rje's rejection of the equation of *ālayavijñāna* with *tathāgatagarbha* is that it confuses the sources and criteria of delusion with those of spiritual awakening.

In this regard, the Karma pa maintains that 'Gos Lo tsā ba's literalistic reading of the ŠDS passage is unsupported by its underlying sense and intent: "It is evident that the meaning of the quotation from the Šrīmālā does not support your explanation of it and that the intent of those having extensive learning you refer to also does not support that."⁴⁹⁸ The Karma pa is emphatic that such a personification of *tathāgatagarbha*, taken at face value, can only result in a mistaken understanding of its nature and functions:

Having copied [this] quotation, when [you] summarized its meaning as the final word [on the matter], it appears that you published the statement "given that in the phase of *samsāra* it is inadmissible that [samsaric phenomena could come] from [anything] other than space-like luminosity, there [must] exist subtle sentient beings who are the basis for karma and results." This is inadmissible because, in point of fact, your assertion that luminosity and [buddha] nature are subtle sentient beings that serve as the basis for karma and results carries the implication that nature and luminosity are subtle *selves* that serve as a basis of karma and results. If so, then since the precious Bla ma [Tsong kha pa] Blo bzang, who you take as your authority, is known to have postulated a self that serves as the basis of karma and results, it is in this case [clear that] you, disciple and teacher, commit the following faults one after the other.

It is inadmissible to claim that natural luminosity and buddha nature are experiencers (*myong ba po*) of karma and results, that they grow weary of *samsāra*, and that they strive for liberation from it. It is inadmissible that they are sentient beings. It is inadmissible that they

⁴⁹⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 99, ed., 147.

are a self.⁴⁹⁹ It is inadmissible that natural luminosity is firmly immersed in the states of *samsara*.⁵⁰⁰

It would be a mistake, at this juncture, to regard Tsong kha pa's admission of a "subtle self" as a concession to the heretical *ātman* doctrine. Rather, it should be viewed as part of the Dge lugs pa founder's thorough critique of this very doctrine along the lines of the *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka *lokaprasiddha* position. As Thubten Jinpa explains, "Tsong kha pa understands the concept of self to be highly complex with degrees of reality (*phra rags*) that are constructed at different levels of our thought processes. In Tsong kha pa's Madhyamaka dialectics, discerning these levels is crucial to an ascertainment of what exactly is being refuted."⁵⁰¹ For Tsong kha pa, the object of refutation is not the empirical or conventional self (*tha snyad kyi bdag*) of our everyday worldly transactions but the reified self of the non-Buddhists, conceived in terms of intrinsic nature as a permanent, unitary, and self-sufficient entity. To put it simply, in targeting metaphysical conceptions of selfhood and entities, Tsong kha pa wishes to preserve the conventional validity of our customary perceptions of self and world. As part of his wholesale repudiation of this project, Mi bskyod rdo rje rejects the validity of a conventional self on the grounds that it is precisely the subtle, conventional self of the everyday world that forms the basis for the coarser metaphysical concepts of self espoused by proponents of *ātman* doctrines. In his eyes, the object of refutation must be the belief in self in all its forms, ranging from the subtlest forms of self-identification to the coarsest metaphysical postulates.

Mi bskyod rdo rje proceeds to outline in graphic detail a variety of absurdities that follow from equating buddha nature with a self, coarse or subtle. He begins with a general refutation of this premise: "If buddha nature were a self and sentient being that is able to be a basis for karma and results, it would absurdly follow that buddha nature doctrine gives rise to the view of self (*ātmadrsti*) held by Buddhist and non-Buddhist extremists (*tīrthika*). And, if a sentient being were buddha nature, it would absurdly follow either that [1] [this

⁴⁹⁹ That buddha nature is *not* a self and sentient being is emphatically stated in *Śrīmālādevīśiṁhanādanirdeśasūtra* (sec. 13 in Tib. D 92, 5485–549₁), on which see 213, n. 485 above.

⁵⁰⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 98, ed., 146.

⁵⁰¹ Jinpa 2002, 71.

buddha nature] would never be liberated from *samsāra* or, conversely, that [2] for the deluded state of consciousness, *samsāra* would have never ever existed, even conventionally. The evidence that sentient beings experience suffering is not acceptable as a proof from effect that buddha nature is a sentient being because it does not logically follow that these two are [related as] cause and effect.”⁵⁰²

We can distil from Mi bskyod rdo rje's lengthy criticism that ensues two general objections to this equation: [1] its unfounded personification of buddha nature as a *patient*-self and *agent*-self, and [2] its conflation of sources of delusion (*ālayavijñāna* vis-à-vis the belief in self) with sources of awakening (*tathāgatagarbha* vis-à-vis the realization of selflessness). Let us examine some of the absurd consequences he associates with each of these positions.

The view that buddha nature or natural luminosity is a subtle self that is both *patient* and *perpetrator* of suffering absurdly presupposes that it undergoes and perpetuates karma and is also the recipient of its effects. As Mi bskyod rdo rje contends, this is a view strikingly at odds with the mainstream Buddhist view that buddha nature is unconditioned and beyond the causal nexus of karma and results. Buddha nature would on this account absurdly be associated with the truths of suffering and its source rather than with the truths of cessation and the path. This would make buddha nature something that should be relinquished rather than realized:

If the results of karmic joys and sorrows were experienced by natural luminosity and buddha nature, then this “experiencer” would have to have performed virtuous and nonvirtuous karma. More to the point, if it produced nonvirtue, then its mind-stream would have

⁵⁰² Mi bskyod rdo rje later returns to clarify this point: “Moreover, based on the evidence that suffering is experienced by sentient beings, forget about this [counting as an instance of] ‘correct reasoning from effect’ that sentient beings are *buddhagarbha* and *dharma-dhātu* and natural luminosity. If one sets out to prove it in that way, it is nonprobative and is moreover proof of the opposite. It is like this: if one advances the proposition “the subject (*dharmin*) buddha nature is a sentient being because it [i.e., buddha nature] experiences suffering,” this is not proven. On the other hand, if one advances the proposition “the subject ‘sentient being’ is buddha nature because it [i.e., the sentient being] experiences suffering,” this is proof of the opposite because given that buddha nature is characterized as genuine bliss, if it is established in terms of brute suffering, then this rules out that [this experiencer] is buddha nature.” See vol. 2, tr., 99, ed., 147.

been encumbered with emotionally-afflicted intentions. And in this case, the natural luminosity and *garbha* would have carried out karmic deeds and emotional afflictions. If so, one would have to accept that buddha nature and natural luminosity commit the deeds that incur immediate results [after death]⁵⁰³ and the rest. Therefore, if the agent and experiencer is natural luminosity, then this so-called “natural luminosity” would be natural luminosity in name only. And in that case, by accepting that [buddha] nature and luminosity are encumbered with karma, emotional afflictions and their results, it would absurdly follow that they are not beyond the truths of suffering and its source and would therefore be something to relinquish.⁵⁰⁴

Furthermore, once buddha nature is assumed to be the patient and perpetrator of *karma*, it becomes difficult to comprehend how it could escape all the trials and tribulations associated with cyclic existence:

Were it possible for buddha nature and natural luminosity to experience karma and its results, it would absurdly follow that even later, when perfectly complete awakening [has occurred], karma would still be accumulated and its results experienced because there would be no fundamental difference between earlier and later. Also, were it possible for these to serve as the basis for karma and results, the fallacious consequence would follow that buddha nature is beset by heat and cold, hunger and thirst. Not only that, but countless other

⁵⁰³ “Deeds with immediate results” is a paraphrase of *mtshams med pa* (lit. “those without interval”) which refers to the “five immediates” (*mtshams med pa lnga* : *pañca anantar-ghāṇī*), i.e., five actions that make one go directly to hell without an intervening (*mtshams med pa*) period in the intermediate state (*bar do*) between rebirths. The five are patricide, matricide, murdering an *arhant*, causing schisms in the *saṅgha*, and making a *tathāgata* bleed with evil intent.

⁵⁰⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 99, ed., 148. In response to this critique it could be argued that luminosity is the basic self-awareness intrinsic to every mental factor. On this understanding, luminosity accompanies (flows along with) the conditioned mind stream, yet remains, in its aspect of self-awareness, unconditioned. In this case, however, it would perhaps be more appropriate to regard luminosity as a “witness” of such experiences rather than their agent and/or patient (“experiencer”).

deleterious [effects] would transpire, such as the flesh and blood of one buddha nature becoming food for another buddha nature.⁵⁰⁵

Turning his attention to the view that buddha nature is a subtle self that is an *agent* of liberation, the Karma pa here targets the hypothesis that buddha nature has thoughts, intentions and feelings, a belief which runs counter to the central *Ratnagotravibhāga* view that buddha nature is the state of liberation and awakening, which is beyond the sphere of conceptual thought and afflictions. In short, the properties commonly associated with buddha nature are antithetical to those associated with a self:

[N]atural luminosity and buddha nature do not need to strive for the goal of liberation because they are already fully liberated from the states of *samsāra*. [Buddha] nature and natural luminosity do not entertain thoughts of seeking liberation because they are beyond the sphere of intellectual thought. They do not need to attain liberation because they are already established as the ultimate object of refuge that is devoid of the dichotomy between cause and effect. They are not a sentient being because they are the great awakening, primordially endowed with the inconceivable, inexhaustible qualities of the five spiritual embodiments (*kāyas*), that are completely beyond mind, ego-mind, and consciousness. They do not for a moment possess mind and mental factors because they are devoid of the unbroken chain of latent tendencies and have, in essence, never been contaminated by the defilement of debilitating malaise.⁵⁰⁶ They are not a sentient being because they are the embodiment of reality (*dharma-kāya*) and the wisdom of the expanse of reality (*dharma-dhātu*) that are fully replete with buddha-qualities. They are not a sentient being because it is not possible for their mode of abiding to come within reach until the stream of the ten spiritual levels has culminated in complete perfection. So, you can forget about natural luminosity and the like being a self!⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 99, ed., 148.

⁵⁰⁶ On *gnas ngan len* (*dauṣṭhulya*), see above 171, n. 370.

⁵⁰⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 100, ed., 148.

This brings us to the second drawback of identifying buddha nature with the subtle self: the resulting conflation of sources of delusion and awakening. Since its inception, Buddhism has viewed the belief in a self as a primary cause of bondage and viewed its elimination as a primary cause of liberation. This view provided a basic framework for later attempts to articulate the conditions necessary for [1] the genesis of this nefarious “sense of self” and its worldly entanglements (e.g., *ālayavijñāna*) and [2] the possibility of liberation from both (e.g., *tathāgatagarbha*). For Mi bskyod rdo rje, the sense and relevance of this soteriological framework are both undermined by equating buddha nature with a self. First, the equation absurdly implies that buddha nature possesses all the detriments associated with selfhood such as being nonexistent, the false conventional, and a groundless subject (*gzhi med kyi yul can*) of experience:

If you explain that buddha nature is what is designated as self, then there follow drawbacks such as the absurdities that this buddha nature is nonexistent, that it is the false conventional, and that it is a baseless subject [of experience]. In particular, if [buddha] nature was that which is imputed as the self of persons, there would follow errors such as the absurdities that the natural luminosity is removed by [the Path of] Seeing of all three vehicles and that natural luminosity is [only] nominally existent.⁵⁰⁸

A further drawback of the equation is that it conflicts with the traditional views that third *dharma* *cakra* buddha nature discourses help one overcome the belief in self and that “in the mind-streams of those who see (*lta ba po*) natural luminosity and buddha nature, thoughts of selves of phenomena and persons do not arise at all.”⁵⁰⁹ A final shortcoming is that it takes buddha nature to be something only nominally existent that is eventually eliminated by the Path of Seeing: “In particular, if [buddha] nature were that which is imputed as the self of persons, there would follow errors such as the absurdities that the natural luminosity is eliminated by [the Path of] Seeing of all three vehicles and that natural luminosity is [only] nominally existent.”⁵¹⁰ As the Karma pa further explains,

⁵⁰⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 101, ed., 149.

⁵⁰⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 101, ed., 149.

⁵¹⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 101, ed., 149.

Among the sūtras, it is said that if buddha nature doctrine was taught without being preceded by selflessness, then it would be wrongly imputed as a self among those of inferior intelligence, and thus be a great detriment. It is also said that those of great intelligence do not become attached in any way to buddha nature as being self or no self, real or unreal, and so forth. But these statements would not be tenable [to you] because, on your account, the Bhagavān has taught that when those fortunate ones whose unrefined minds lack virtue analyze things carefully, buddha nature itself turns out to be the self or sentient being that is able to serve as a basis for karma and results.⁵¹¹

The foregoing analysis of the Eighth Karma pa's criticisms against the equation of buddha nature and selfhood demonstrate just how uncompromising he could be in defending and deploying traditional Buddhist criticisms against the belief in self. We are finally prepared to consider the type of selfhood the author does endorse. For this, we need look no further than the conceptions of the perfection of selfhood outlined in Yogācāra and *tathāgatagarbha* works such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) and *Mahāyānasūtrālauṇkāra* (MSA), and of authentic or transcendent selfhood prevalent in the tantras. In the RGV, the realization of the perfection of selfhood is said to mark the culmination of understanding the absence of self. As Mi bskyod rdo rje remarks in his *Lamp*,

The sense in which the ultimate buddha nature is the perfection of purity, permanence, joy, and authentic selfhood is [as follows]. The meaning of perfection (*pha rol tu phyin pa*) is also “to arrive at the other side” (*pha rol tu son pa*)⁵¹² of purity, permanence, joy and authentic selfhood because it overcomes the reductive partiality of taking *tathāgatagarbha* to be nothing but purity, permanence, joy and authentic selfhood. It is [thus] explained as “having a pervasive nature that transcends all partiality.” In short, ultimate purity

⁵¹¹ See vol. 2, tr., 104, ed., 151.

⁵¹² Mi bskyod rdo rje here exploits the two permissible etymologies of *pāramitā* noted by Hikata: [1] that which has gone to the other side, i.e. “transcendent” (*pāram-ita-tā*, becoming *pāramitā*), and [2] the ‘highest’ form of some quality, i.e. “perfection” (*para-ma* > *pārami* > *pāramitā*). The first etymology is reflected in the Tibetan translation *pha rol tu phyin pa* (“gone to the other side”). See Jones 2015, 292 and Lopez 1988, 21.

[means] total purity because of [its] general and specific natures and [its] being immaculate.⁵¹³ Being free from self and no self is the meaning of authentic selfhood. Being free from all the tumultuous aspects of body and mind from ordinary beings up to the end of the tenth level is the meaning of joy. Not clinging to the nefarious deceptions of the impermanent world and not solely conceptualizing the permanence of *nirvāna* is the meaning of permanence.⁵¹⁴

In the final analysis, then, ultimate buddha nature may be characterized as authentic selfhood in the specific sense of a transcendent, de-centered subjectivity that is beyond self and no self. The Karma pa's disclosive perspective opens up the possibility of seeing the revelation of buddha nature as the rediscovery of authentic selfhood occasioned by the realization of selflessness.⁵¹⁵ Stated succinctly, the process of *becoming all it is in one to become* (buddha nature) is a matter of simply *being oneself* (authentic selfhood) once the habitual self-objectifications which engender the false sense of "I" and "mine" have been left behind. To the extent that we venture to describe the remaining *dharmakāya* or resultant buddha nature in terms of authentic selfhood, it must be understood in terms of a process of prereflective self-awareness that is free from all self-identifications, including a patient-self who undergoes suffering and an agent-self who strives for liberation.

2.14. Buddha nature is only fully revealed in Mantrayāna thought and praxis

If we adopt a bird's eye view of Mi bskyod rdo rje's interpretation of buddha nature as it evolved during his literary career, we can discern a persistent attempt

⁵¹³ Khenpo Konchog Tamphel suggests that the general and specific nature could refer to the twofold purity (*dag pa gnyis ldan*), i.e., the natural purity (*rang bzhin gyis rmam par dag pa*) referred to by the 'general nature', and the purity of freedom from adventitious defilements (*glo bur gyi dri ma dag pa*) referred to as the specific nature.

⁵¹⁴ See vol. 2, tr., 34, ed., 62.

⁵¹⁵ See Jones 2015, 306: "Interesting is the expression *tathāgatanairātmagarbha*, which contains what the Tibetan translation certainly implies, a qualification of the term *tathāgatagarbha* (*de bzhin gshergs pa'i snying po bdag med pa*). The sense of this compound in the Sanskrit is presumably that the *tathāgatagarbha* is properly an 'absence of a self': a concise expression of the line taken by the LAS in regards to this doctrine, and its ultimate reduction to that of *nairātmya*."

to compare and synthesize the viewpoints of the so-called sūtric cause-oriented Pāramitāyāna (*rgyu pha rol tu phyin pa'i theg pa*) and tantric goal-sustained Vajrayāna (*'bras bu rdo rje kyi theg pa*). By the Karma pa's time it had become commonplace for scholars of buddha nature to compare these two systems based on the parallelism between the three phases of buddha nature outlined in *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.47 and the threefold continuum (*rgyud gsum*) of cause, path, and result as outlined in the following passage of the supplemental tantra of the *Guhyasamājatantra* (GST):

Tantra [i.e., continuum] is the term for continuity.
 Tantra has three aspects,
 Classified as ground, nature, and inalienableness.
 The aspect of the nature is the cause,
 The ground is known as the means,
 And inalienableness [is] the fruition.
 [Such] is the summary of the three [aspects] of tantra.⁵¹⁶

What unites these exoteric and esoteric standpoints, according to the Karma pa, is their disclosive standpoint. They share the premise that buddha nature or the tantric continuum signify innate buddhahood which remains invariant throughout the process of becoming progressively revealed. At the same time, the author's attempts to coordinate these views of buddha nature and the tantric continua were guided by his unequivocal emphasis on the superiority of tantric views and methods over their exoteric counterparts. In his final masterwork, the *Embodiments*, the primacy of tantric views of buddha nature is a cornerstone of his syncretistic vision of Buddhist doctrine and praxis.

Let us consider some of his main arguments for the primacy of tantric views and practices as advanced in an excerpt from the *Embodiments* on the connection between the three continua. This section addresses the following question: "Even in the Perfections Vehicle, the cause of buddhahood which is termed 'buddha nature' is explained as an ongoing continuity (*rgyun rjes su 'gro ba*) throughout the three [aspects of] ground, path, and fruition. Isn't this precisely what is here in Mantrayāna doctrine posited as the three continua (*rgyud gsum*)?"⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁶ From the eighteenth chapter appended to the root text. See Higgins 2013, 166, n. 413.

⁵¹⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 297, ed., 305.

From his lengthy response to this question we can extract three reasons he gives for granting primacy to esoteric views and practices over exoteric ones: [1] The tantric tradition's direct views and methods based on experiential interaction supersede the sūtric tradition's oblique views and methods based on inferential knowledge, [2] its conception of an invariant continuum (*rgyud*) supersedes psychological Yogācāra buddha nature concepts, and [3] its disclosive goal-oriented perspective transcends its counterpart's developmental causal-teleological perspective.

[1] Mi bskyod rdo rje begins his response to the above question by citing his main teacher Bkra' shis dpal byor's view that the buddha nature indicated in *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.47⁵¹⁸ is "a mere definiendum (*mtshon bya*)⁵¹⁹, i.e., some uncontaminated factor, the cause of buddhahood which is the thing obscured (*sgrib gzhi*) by the eightfold consciousness." Consequently, he continues, "the defining conditions [definiens] (*mtshan nyid*) for such a cause of buddhahood are not fully, but only partially, revealed."⁵²⁰ The upshot of this dense statement is that the buddha nature alluded to in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* passage on the three phases of *tathāgatagarbha* refers obliquely to an indicated object (*mtshon bya*) and therefore only partially reveals the defining conditions (*mtshan nyid*) of this cause of buddhahood. To put it simply, exoteric buddha nature discourses do not clearly articulate the actual phenomena of buddha nature, and the particular instance (*mtshan gzhi*) referred to remains hidden, so to speak, behind

⁵¹⁸ For a translation of this passage, see vol. 2, tr., 297, ed., 305.

⁵¹⁹ According to the Tibetan "classification of definiens, definiendum, and illustrative instance" (*mtshan mtshon gzhi gsum gyi rnam bzhag*), as it developed within the epistemological systems of Sa skyā Paññita (*sa lugs*) and Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge (*phyā lugs*), the definiens (*mtshan nyid*) of a thing (F) refers to the defining conditions, i.e., the necessary and sufficient conditions G, H, etc. for something to be an F. Thus, for all x, x is an F if and only if x is a G and x is an H, etc. The definiendum (*mtshon bya*) is what is being defined, i.e., the F in question. The illustrative instance (*mtshan gzhi*) refers to the illustrative cases of F. Thus, for example, the *definiens* (*mtshan nyid*) of a vase (*bum pa*) is having a spout, being splay-bottomed, and able to perform a function of carrying water (*lto ltir zhabs zhum cho skyor gyi don byed nus pa*). The definiendum (*mtshon bya*) is the thing called "vase" (*bum pa*) and the illustrative instance (*mtshan gzhi*) is something like a golden vase (*gser bum lta bu*). We are grateful to Tom Tillemans for clarifying the terms in this classification and the relationship between them.

⁵²⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 297, ed., 305.

its allusive terminology and descriptions. Such discourses hint at the actual subject matter, buddha nature, using metaphorical language without divulging how to directly engage with it, how to make it the path. The tantras, on the other hand, reveal buddha nature unambiguously as the invariant resultant continuum that is ever-present and that is taken as the path from the outset.

For the Karma pa and his teacher, the living reality of buddha nature is only fully brought to light and actualized in the context of the tantras. Mi bskyod rdo rje continues: “In particular, regarding such a definiendum, [the passage RGV I.47] does not clearly articulate the phenomenon designated (*gdags bya'i chos*), namely, the particular instance (*mtshan gzhi*) of the designation. And thus [this factor] is extremely secret and kept hidden. In light of this key point, because buddhahood that is realized on the basis of the actual phenomenon of **sugatagarbha*—i.e., the basis for such designation—does not come to light in the buddhahood of the Sūtra tradition, the resultant Vajrayāna has been deemed superior to the causal Pāramitāyāna.”⁵²¹

The Eighth Karma pa goes on to quote the above *Guhyasamāja* (GST) passage on the threefold continua. As he explains, the continuum is a “nature” in the sense of a substantial cause, which is realized at the outset and brought to light through the co-operating cause of skillful means (the Creation and Completion Stages) until it becomes an inalienable actuality in the life of the practitioner. “Of these, the causal continuum is the continuum of the nature. The path continuum is the continuum of the ground or the means. The resultant continuum is inalienableness. Therefore, it is the continuum of nonregression, of No More Learning. The first continuum is the substantial cause. The second is the co-operating cause. When these two causes unequivocally combine, the third continuum infallibly occurs as the result of this combination.”⁵²²

[2] The Karma pa deems that the Mantrayāna descriptions of innate buddhahood in terms of the threefold continuum supersede standard Yogācāra descriptions of buddha nature, which are deemed provisional at best. On this matter, he addresses the question of what distinguishes the actual referent of the term (*gdags gzhi*) buddha nature as explained in the tantras from what is explained in the sūtras. In response, he maintains that standard exoteric sources on buddha nature generally refer to some distinctive cognitive factor (*shes pa'i*

⁵²¹ See vol. 2, tr., 297, ed., 305.

⁵²² See vol. 2, tr., 298, ed., 306.

khyad par gyi chos zhig), in addition to the six empirically verifiable modes of cognition, with recourse to Yogācāra constructs such as “substratum cognition” (*kun gzhi'i shes pa*). Such constructs, however, cannot be claimed to exist, even conventionally, and must be regarded as heuristic conventions:

Amongst sūtras of the final wheel, [buddha nature] is described as a distinctive factor of cognition called the “substratum cognition” (*kun gzhi'i shes pa*). In this regard, the master Candrakīrti and others declared that there is no substratum cognition consensually verifiable as an empirical experience, even conventionally. Hence, it turns out that buddha nature according to the Sūtra system does not exist even conventionally. If it is thereby assumed that buddha nature as explained in the Sūtra system is not established as a phenomenon that is able to fulfill the requirement of being a cause and a result in the quest for the goal of liberation, there is no such problem. [Why?] Because although a substratum cognition is not established even conventionally as something distinct from the sixfold consciousness, it is not untenable to posit a substratum consciousness conventionally. The sixfold consciousness is three-fold: [1] a coarse consciousness belonging to the sphere of the nine levels of the three realms and so forth, [2] a subtle consciousness belonging to the sphere of the eight levels and so forth of the inferior śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, and [3] a very subtle consciousness belonging to the sphere of the ten levels and so forth of the Mahāyāna. As there is therefore not only the coarse sphere of the sixfold consciousness, the very subtle sixfold consciousness is posited as the so-called “substratum cognition.”⁵²³

The author proceeds to defend the conception of the *ālayavijñāna* as an “extremely subtle consciousness,” arguing that this constitutes a valid provisional construct. To this end, he draws on relevant passages from the *Ghanavyūha* and *Laṅkāvatāra* (on II.98)⁵²⁴ sūtras for scriptural support. This substratum consciousness referred to in these sources is in fact identical with “completely perfect buddhahood,” which is said to be beyond “the domain of consciousness of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas and the like.” It is, after all, “the

⁵²³ See vol. 2, tr., 298, ed., 306.

⁵²⁴ For the relevant passages, see above 173, 193.

domain of buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Sūtra system and above.”⁵²⁵ That said, the Karma pa goes on to explain how the Mantrayāna account of buddha nature supersedes its sūtric counterpart’s psychologistic assumption that buddha nature is reducible to traditional Buddhist models of human psychology.

For the Eighth Karma pa, then, tantric buddha nature “is definitely not the sphere of the sixfold or eightfold consciousnesses belonging to the continua of defiled sentient beings. It is the sphere of the innate, natural, and spontaneously present wisdom which is summed up by all the cognitions of the continua of undefiled buddhas. This dimension of the continuum which is the nature of the cause is—when purified through the path which accords exactly with this causal continuum and the continuum of the fruition—present in the classifications of the eleventh and twelfth levels of the Vajrayāna Path of Learning and the thirteenth and fourteenth additional levels of No More Learning and so forth.”⁵²⁶ In a later excerpt from the *Embodiments* entitled “On the Presentation of our own System,” the author explains why buddha nature as elucidated in the tantras can neither be reduced to the workings of the Yogācāra eightfold consciousness, nor to the framework of the traditional buddha nature concepts based on these. In short, psychologistic descriptions of buddha nature such as *ālayavijñāna* or Paramārtha’s *amalavijñāna* can, at best, shed light on how buddha nature makes its presence felt from within the medium of conditioned consciousness.

In that regard, what is posited as the “distinct set of six cognitive domains” (*śadāyatanaviśeṣah*)⁵²⁷ and a ninth mode of “immaculate consciousness” (*āmalavijñāna*)⁵²⁸ and the like appear in the scriptures of the causal vehicle and [in] the scriptural system of scholar-abbots [who composed] early treatises explaining their intent.⁵²⁹ In this regard, however, this causal buddha nature—[described by concepts] such as: the “distinct set of six cognitive domains,” “the immaculate consciousness,” both “the latent tendency of learning” (*śrutavāsanā*), and the “substratum”

⁵²⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 299, ed., 307.

⁵²⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 300, ed., 307.

⁵²⁷ See above 62, n. 111.

⁵²⁸ On Paramārtha, see above 174, n. 378.

⁵²⁹ See vol. 2, 341, n. 1436 for another possible translation of this passage.

(*ālaya*),⁵³⁰ and the “omniscient wisdom,” which is extracted [from ignorance] unmixed like [the pure milk extracted from a mixture of] water and milk [by the mythical goose]⁵³¹—is not the actual full-fledged body of buddha nature, the causal continuum, as it is explicated in the tantras of the profound and vast Vajrayāna. [Why not?] Because if it were, then [the causal continuum] would not exist as a [genuine] birth-place [of spiritual realization] since it would not exist independently of the sphere of the adventitiously defiled eightfold consciousness. Nevertheless, the immaculate consciousness as explained in the sūtras is a partial aspect of the causal continuum, buddha nature, as elucidated in the Mantrayāna because, were it not, it would be impossible for it to clear away the obscurations of the contaminated [aspects] of the eightfold consciousness once these have been fundamentally transformed into uncontaminated wisdom.⁵³²

The author next addresses the vexing problem of how the tantric idea that one is already a fully awakened buddha can be reconciled with the core Buddhist ideal of re-awakening to buddhahood by means of the path and its fruition. As he puts it, “if this referent of the term “buddha nature” in the Mantra [tradition] is a sphere of innate natural consciousness that is the continuum of buddhahood, then since that has been present as buddha-wisdom since beginningless time, wouldn’t it be unnecessary at present to re-awaken to buddhahood by means of the path and fruition, and wouldn’t such buddhahood therefore be impossible.”⁵³³ He replies that the buddha nature that tantras describe as “first buddha” (*ādi-*

⁵³⁰ Based on *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.45–48. For a precise discussion as to how the tendencies of learning (*śrutavāsanā*) are the natural outflow of the very pure *dharmadhātu* and to be regarded as the seed of the supramundane mind and *dharmaśāya* and as a remedy of the substratum consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*), see the translation of the Third Karma pa's commentary on that by Mathes 2008a, 58–59. Regarding the immaculate consciousness which exists as the nature of the four wisdoms see also Mathes 2008a, 60.

⁵³¹ See above, 186, n. 418.

⁵³² See vol. 2, tr., 341, ed., 345.

⁵³³ See vol. 2, tr., 300, ed., 308.

*buddha)*⁵³⁴ and “first protector” (*ādinātha*)⁵³⁵ is seen as an “engendering cause of the re-awakening⁵³⁶ of all buddhas via the path and fruition” and is “correctly

⁵³⁴ According to V. Wallace (2001, 17–18), the so-called *ādibuddha* in the Kālacakra tradition has different connotations. In the context of beginningless and endless buddhahood, it pertains to innate wisdom that pervades the minds of all sentient beings and is the basis for both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. In the context of asserting the need to generate merit and wisdom in order to attain buddhahood, it pertains to the actual realization of one’s own innate wisdom. Wallace concludes that *ādibuddha* in the Kālacakra tradition refers to both the absolute nature of one’s own mind and to the one who has realized it through merit and wisdom and the associated process of purification. See also Hammar (2005, 88–140), who provides a comprehensive study of the notion of *ādibuddha* in the Kālacakra system.

⁵³⁵ In the context of the *Guhyasamājatantra* (GST), the so-called *ādhinātha* (referred to as “germinal Vajradhara” by the tantric Nāgārjuna) is associated with the *sambhogakāya* as it is cultivated in the Creation Stages of this practice. It marks the second step (*anuyoga*) that follows from the first—the contemplation of emptiness. The process continues through the third step called *atiyoga*, where the chosen deity is fully embraced, and culminates in the fourth step—the arcane body of the Completion Stages. See Waymann 1980, 163, 262–263 and 348.

⁵³⁶ Mi bskyod rdo rje explains and contextualizes this idea of re-awakening in his commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, MD_{SB} vol. 12, 306₂₋₅: “As far as the definitive meaning is concerned, precisely this potential of [buddha] nature is actual buddhahood. To sentient beings who are obscuring it and in the perception of others who are to be trained, it appears as if there is [a process] of becoming a buddha. [Yet] this is [just] seeming buddhahood. At the time when [the mind] is being purified from adventitious defilements, it appears as if this buddhahood itself needed to re-awaken into completely perfect omniscient buddhahood. However, in terms of the definitive meaning, when this very buddha nature is simply realized, it is buddha[hood]. Hence, there is no need for it to re-awaken and there is nothing at all apart from itself that can make it awaken. Thus, when investigated and analyzed, apart from this buddha[hood] being buddha[hood], it is impossible that a noble person could awaken to buddhahood in any of the three times apart from this.” *nges pa'i don du ni snying po'i rigs de nyid sangs rgyas dngos yin cing | de nyid sgrub byed kyi sems can dang | gdul bya gzhan snang du sangs rgya ba ltar snang ba ni sangs rgyas ltar snang yin te | gnas skabs der glo bur gyi dri ma dag pa na sangs rgyas de nyid rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa yang dag par rdzogs par 'tshang slar rgya dgos pa ltar snang ba yin gyi | nges pa'i don du ni sangs rgyas kyi snying po nyid grub tsam nas de sangs rgyas yin pas de 'tshang slar rgya mi dgos pa dang | de gzhan gang gis kyang 'tshang rgya bar byed mi nus pas brtags shing dpyad pa na | sangs rgyas des sangs rgyas yin pa las ma gtogs par de las gzhan du na 'phags pa'i gang zig dus gsum gang*

established as the ‘Buddha Jewel’ in its causal [i.e., undisclosed] phase.”⁵³⁷ The Karma pa goes on to show that it is precisely this buddha continuum that is progressively disclosed through the phases of ground, path and fruition: “The fact that the buddha-continuum which arises infallibly as the fruition of complete and perfect buddhahood as the unsurpassed [culmination] of path, and fruition, which follow from the pure buddha potential in the causal phase is attested in the meaning of the vajra statement “[buddhahood] emerges as the continuity (*rgyun chags*) of the three [aspects] of ground, path and fruition.”⁵³⁸

Here, the tantric innate buddhahood is viewed as an emergent continuum, progressively disclosed through empowerments, Creation and Completion Stages practices, and the teacher’s pith-instructions. He notes that it is referred to in various ways in the tantras: in the Kriyā and Caryā tantras, it is described in terms of “classifications of the continuum in terms of the three potentials.” In Yogatantras, it is described as “beginningless *bodhicitta*,” “all-positive (Samantabhadra) mind,” “glorious supreme Primal Being,” and “Mind.”⁵³⁹

For the Karma pa, the Mantrayāna has primacy over its exoteric counterpart to the extent that it has given up the latter’s developmental picture of buddha nature as the result of maturation via causal-teleological processes. The tantras abandon not only the traditional depictions of buddha nature as a causal seed, germinal capacity, or latent tendency within the conditioned substratum that is made to ripen into the fruit of buddhahood through appropriate conditions, but the entire causal-teleological framework that gives such concepts their sense and relevance. The exoteric discourses tend to identify buddha nature with, or locate it within, the conditioned medium of consciousness (sixfold or eightfold), construing it as both a cause and a result. By contrast, the tantras describe buddha nature, the continuum, as the innate, natural, and spontaneously present wisdom, which persists below or beyond the workings of the putative substratum consciousness and its latent tendencies as an ever-present precondition for both their genesis and their cessation.

yang rung bar 'tshang rgya bar srid pa ma yin no ||. The translation is our own, supplied for the sake of being consistent in terminology. See also Brunnholzl (tr.) 2010, 446.

⁵³⁷ See vol. 2, tr., 300, ed., 308.

⁵³⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 300, ed., 308. The quotation has not been identified.

⁵³⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 301, ed., 308.

Coming to the heart of the tantric conception of buddha nature, Mi bskyod rdo rje alludes to Rang byung rdo rje's description of buddha nature and the nature of mind at the beginning of his *Profound Inner Meaning* (I.3).

The cause is beginningless mind as such.
 Even though it is unbiased and uncurtailed in scope,
 It is empty in essence, lucent by nature and,
 Being unimpeded, arises as anything whatsoever.⁵⁴⁰

Commenting on this passage, the Eighth Karma pa explains that this buddhahood or mind as such (*sems nyid*), which is the causal continuum, is of the nature of buddha wisdom. It is empty in essence because it does not ultimately exist as a real entity, as is maintained in the Cittamātra tradition. Yet it is lucent by nature since it is not devoid of the appearances of knower and known. Being empty in essence and lucent by nature, it is present as the possibility for anything to arise. As such, it manifests in varying phases of closure and disclosure as an invariant continuum, the abiding ground of possibility of all appearances of delusion and awakening. As Mi bskyod rdo rje explains,

This aforementioned buddhahood or mind as such, which is the beginningless causal continuum, is free from restrictions and bias due to the fact that buddhas and sentient beings, the innate and the adventitious, or ground, path, and result are in every respect free from identity and difference. Thus, since that buddhahood of the causal continuum, which is the nature of such wisdom, does not ultimately exist as a real entity, as [maintained] in the Cittamātra [tradition], it is "empty in essence." And since this wisdom, which is of the character of emptiness, is not without the appearances of knower and known, it is "lucent by nature." How does it clearly manifest? In the phase of possessing impure obscurations, it occurs together with the appearances of karma and emotional afflictions. In the phase of being both pure and impure, [it occurs together with] the appearances of *samādhi* experiences. And in the completely pure

⁵⁴⁰ *Zab mo nang gi don zhes bya ba'i gzung*, in RD_{SB} vol. 7, 311: *rgyu ni sems nyid thog med la || rgya chad phyogs lhung ma mchis kyang || de nyid ma 'gags rol pa las || ngo bo stong la rang bzhin gsal || rnam pa 'gag med cir yang 'char ||*.

phase, [it occurs together with] the appearances of the inexhaustible ornamental wheel of the enlightened body, speech, and mind.⁵⁴¹

[3] This account raises further questions that bear upon Mi bskyod rdo rje's third reason why tantric buddha nature conceptions are superior to their exoteric counterparts. Specifically, the interlocutor poses two questions: [A] "Do the two latter appearances [*samādhi* experiences and enlightened body, speech, and mind] clearly appear as the phase of buddhahood [already] in the causal phase?" and [B] "Do the two initial appearances [karma and afflictions] clearly appear in the phase of the resultant continuum?" In answering these questions, the Karma pa clarifies how the disclosive goal-oriented perspective of the Mantrayāna goes beyond its exoteric counterpart's developmental causal-teleological perspective. In doing so, he also clarifies the specific sense in which buddha nature can be considered a cause and result from a disclosive perspective.

To the first question he acknowledges that these experiences of spiritual awakening are held to be latently present in the ground phase "in the manner of a causal capacity (*rgyu nus*) that has the nature of a potentiality for appearing (*snang du rung ba'i bdag nyid*). Otherwise, if they were not always already present as qualities that have the capacity for appearing, then they would later on appear as something newly arisen (*gsar byung*). But this is not the case."⁵⁴² This conception of the causal capacity as a potentiality for appearing supports the author's view that the realization of buddhahood and its qualities is not the creation of something new but the uncovering of something innately present.

To the second question, the author replies that "the reason for it being a 'resultant continuum' is that the impure appearances of the causal continuum do not appear at the time of the resultant continuum. [Why not?] Because precisely these [impure] appearances are the appearances that had obscured the causal continuum and that have been cleared away. However, it is not the case that the stream of appearances of the means [i.e., path] continuum of that [causal] stream would [also] no longer manifest because this stream of appearances of the resultant continuum is precisely the appearances of the means continuum which have become increasingly clear and excellent (*je gsal je bzang*). Even so, at the

⁵⁴¹ See vol. 2, tr., 301, ed., 308.

⁵⁴² See vol. 2, tr., 301, ed., 309.

time of the resultant continuum, the entire range of appearances of the three continua of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* other than oneself manifest clearly.”⁵⁴³

In specifying the nature and kinds of appearances that obscure the causal continuum, Mi bskyod rdo rje summarizes the complex of mind and mental factors known from Abhidharma psychology. He goes on to explain, however, that the dissolution of such appearances in tantric Creation and Completion Stages practices occasions the disclosure of the wisdoms and spiritual embodiments that are innate “creative expressions” within mind and mental factors.

In the impure phase of that causal continuum, the conceptualizations of [1] the fifty-one mental factors of the sixfold obscurational adventitious consciousness, [2] the mind with its three illuminations,⁵⁴⁴ and [3] the mind and mental factors possessing one hundred and sixty natures⁵⁴⁵ manifest unceasingly. On the other

⁵⁴³ See vol. 2, tr., 302, ed., 309.

⁵⁴⁴ The term “three illuminations” refers to the three stages of the dying process during which the psychophysical elements gradually dissolve. This process is mirrored in Completion Stages (*rdzogs rim*) practices wherein the reification of the physical body dissolves into the experience of an insubstantial illusory body (*sgyu lus*). The dying process is generally described in *Bar do* (Intermediate state) literature as involving the following stages: [1] (whitish) illumination (*snang ba*), [2] (reddish) diffusion of light (*mched pa*), and [3] the darkness (*mun can : tamas*) of imminence (or near-attainment, *nyer thob : upalabdhi*), which may prefigure the dawning of [4] the state of luminosity (*'od gsal : prabhāsvara*). For an overview of this process, see Tucci 1980, 61–2. See also vol. 2, 220, n. 829 and 222, n. 834. In the *Guhyasamājatantrasyatantratīkā* (GSTT) attributed to the tantric Nāgārjuna (D *dpe bsdur ma* ed. vol. 15, 114₃₋₄), the three illuminations (to be overcome) and luminosity (to be attained) are mentioned prior to a discussion of the one hundred and sixty natures that are to be relinquished (on which, see the next footnote).

⁵⁴⁵ We were not able to find a complete list of these one hundred and sixty natures. Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje mentions them in his *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* V.2 commentary on vajra precept 8.36: “... all the sufferings of debilitating malaise—[its] seeds [being] the eighty misconceptions [based on] the three illuminations as the root of *samsāra* which, multiplied by the two blisses of the male and female sexual sensations, [make] one hundred and sixty natures [in total]” (see vol. 2, tr. 225, ed. 250). The first nine of these one hundred and sixty natures are mentioned in Āryadeva's *Caryāmelāpakapradīpa*, Tib. D

1803 vol. 35, 104a₂₋₃: “The one hundred and sixty natures such as freedom from desire, medium desire, etc. and, furthermore, wrathfulness and peacefulness, joy and sorrow, hunger and thirst, and sensations, etc.” ’dod chags dang bral ba dang | ’dod chags bar ma la sogs pa dang | gzhan yang drag po dang | zhi ba dang | dga’ ba dang | mya ngan dang | bkres pa dang | skom pa dang | tshor ba zhes bya ba la sogs pa rang bzhin brgya drug cu ... The tantric Nāgārjuna’s *Guhyasamājatantrasyatantrāṭīkā* (GSTT, 114₂₋₁₇) contextualizes these: “The *skandha* and *dhātu* and the apprehended and the apprehender are consciousness and the objects of consciousness. Their causes, i.e., the one hundred and sixty natures are relinquished. This occurs in this sequence: There are four things to purify the mind: illumination, the diffusion of light, and immanence, as well as luminosity. [From among these, the first] three are to be overcome. The fourth is to be adopted, it being the fruition. In terms of these, there is again a fourfold distinction into minor etc. In this regard, “illumination” [consists of] minor illumination, medium illumination, great illumination, and supreme illumination. The same holds true for minor “diffusion of light” and so on up to supreme “luminosity.” To this point it consists of sixteen moments. Likewise there is a minor “minor illumination,” a medium “minor illumination,” a great “minor illumination, and a supreme “minor illumination.” The same applies for the “medium [illumination]” up to “luminosity,” totaling sixty-four moments. When this is distinguished into day and night, it [comes to] one hundred and twenty-eight moments. As also the one hundred and sixty natures such as without desire etc. are distinguished into minor etc. and, when added together in terms of day and nights, it [comes to] five thousand two hundred [factors].” *phung po dang khams dang | gzung ba dang ’dzin pa rnams ni shes pa dang shes bya ste | de rnams kyi rgyur gyur pa rang bzhin brgya drug cu dag spangs pa’o | | ’dir yang rim pa ’di yin te | sems rnam par dag par bya ba’i phyir dngos po bzhi yin te | snang ba dang snang ba mched pa dang | snang ba nye bar thob pa dang | ’od gsal ba ste gsum ni spang bya yin la | bzhi pa ni blang bya ste ’bras bu yin no | | de rnams la yang chung ba la sogs pa dbye ba rnam pa bzhi yin te | re zhig snang ba ni snang ba chung ba dang | snang ba ’bring dang snang ba chen po dang | snang ba chen bo’i chen po’o | | de bzhin du snang ba mched pa chung ba nas ’od gsal ba chen po’i chen po’i bar du skad cig ma bcu drug yin no | | de bzhin du snang ba chung ngu’i chung ba dang | snang ba chung ngu’i ’bring dang | snang ba chung ngu’i chen po dang | snang ba chen po’i chen po’o | | de ltar ’bring la sogs pa nas ’od gsal ba’i bar du skad cig ma drug cu rtsa bzhi ste | nyin mo dang mtshan mo’i dbye bas skad cig ma brgya nyi shu rtsa brgyad du ’gyur ro | | ’dod chags dang bral ba la sogs pa’i rang bzhin brgya drug cu yang chung ba la sogs pa’i dbye bas nyin mo dang mtshan mor bsgres na lnga stong brgya nyi shu yin no | |. And as Khro phu bu ston explains in his *Dpal gsang ba ’dus pa’i ṭīkā sgron ma rab su gsal ba*, 110₁₀₋₁₇: “... from luminosity comes ignorance [i.e., immanence]. From that [light-]diffusion, from that illumination. These three are imbued with the movement of wind. From wind occurs fire, from that water, from that earth, from that the *skandha*, *dhātu*, and *āyatana*, from these the three appearances, from these the 160*

hand, in the phases of the path and fruition continua, the creative expressions of mind and mental factors—[i.e.,] the principal and retinue, such as the innate and unobscured three embodiments and four wisdoms or five embodiments and six wisdoms—manifest unceasingly.⁵⁴⁶

To summarize, the tantras view buddha nature not as a germinal potential that is made to mature through appropriate causes and conditions, as in the exoteric causal-developmental model. Rather, they regard buddha nature, following the goal-disclosive model, as the unconditioned nature of mind itself, which remains innately present while being temporarily shrouded by adventitious obscurations and which is fully revealed when such obscurations are dispelled. It was in view of their causal-exotelic and acausal-autotelic⁵⁴⁷ modes of engagement that these perspectives were often distinguished as the cause-oriented and goal-oriented approaches. It is evident, then, that the Karma pa's distinction between exoteric and esoteric Mahāyāna views of buddha nature builds upon a fundamental and longstanding tension between two Buddhist perspectives concerning the nature of goal-realization.

We can turn now to a passage in the *Embodiments* which provides a succinct but lucid indication of how the tantric practitioner works directly with buddha nature or the continuum in the Creation and Completion Stages. By creatively imagining adventitiously defiled consciousness as a deity in the Creation Stages and receiving its blessings and *siddhis*, the coarse aspects of this consciousness

natures, from these the 98 afflictions and the 64 views etc. By virtue of the karma accumulated through them, sentient beings of the four types of birth come about and thus this is the root of all realms of sentient beings.” ’od gsal las ma rig pa | de las mched pa | de las snang ba | de gsum ni rlung gi bzhon pa can te | rlung las me | de las chu | de las sa | de las phung po khams dang skye mched ’byung | de las snang ba gsum ’byung | de las rang bzhin brgya drug cu ’byung ngo | de las nyon mongs pa dgu bcu rtsa brgyad dang lta ba drug cu rtsa gnyis la sogs pa ’byung | des las bsags pa’i dbang gis skye gnas bzhi’i sems can ’byung bas sems can gyi khams ma lus pa’i rtsa ba ’di yin no ||.

⁵⁴⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 302, ed., 309.

⁵⁴⁷ Activity is autotelic when it contains its end in its doing. Activity is exotelic when it has ends external to and other than the activity itself. These terms are adapted from Csikszentmihalyi 1990. The similar terms, *endotelic* and *ectotelic*, are used in the context of visual and performing arts to distinguish intrinsically-directed (endotelic) from extrinsically-directed or instrumental (ectotelic) styles of engagement.

are purified away. By then cultivating the innate wisdom as the deity in the Completion Stages and receiving its blessings and *siddhis*, the subtlest aspects of adventitiously defiled consciousness are purified away. Here, the path is envisaged as a clearing process that discloses innate wisdom, which is equated with buddhahood itself:

Now, the *mandala* inhabitant⁵⁴⁸ during the causal phase first of all cultivates the aspect of the adventitiously defiled consciousness as the deity. In regard to the result of that cause, the deity that thus appears, or manifests, is described as the deity of the Creation Stages. The deity thus attained as a vivid perception and the host of deities of inseparable commitment and wisdom beings that are one with the *mandala* inhabitants, equal to space, are the culmination of the highest accumulation and purification. Through the spiritual blessing and *siddhis* of these deities, the coarse aspects of the adventitiously defiled consciousness of the meditator are purified away.

Now, [the meditator] cultivates the aspect of innate wisdom free from obscurations as the deity. Regarding the result of that cause, the deity that appears, or manifests, is described as the deity of the Completion Stages. The deity thus attained as a vivid perception and the host of deities of inseparable commitment and wisdom beings that are one with the *mandala* inhabitants, equal to space [in extent, mark] the culmination of the highest accumulation and purification. When through the spiritual blessing and *siddhis* of these deities, the aspect of innate wisdom of this meditator has awakened as the *mandala* inhabitant of the resultant continuum, then the debilitating malaise of the subtlest aspects of adventitiously defiled consciousness are cleared away, like patina from gold.⁵⁴⁹

On this account, the perfect deity is itself innate buddhahood, otherwise termed self-occurring *mahāmudrā*, which is primordially present even at the time when the mind is covered by obscurations in the causal phase of impure sentient

⁵⁴⁸ This refers to the practitioner of the Creation Stages who visualizes herself or himself as a chosen deity (*iṣṭha-deva[tā]* : *yi dam*) at the center of its *mandala*.

⁵⁴⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 373, ed., 378.

beings. It may therefore be directly encountered by a disciple when a qualified teacher reveals it by means of specific forms of verbal or symbolic communication:

The deity of the causal continuum and buddhahood itself are present in the primordially present great Completion Stages. In this regard, when a fortunate disciple of highest capacity and a qualified teacher come together in auspicious circumstances, then by the teacher simply making a connection using mere symbolic indications or words, the wisdom of self-arisen *mahāmudrā* or the face of the primordially present buddha is encountered directly. Among the Bka' brgyud pas this is known as “the emergence of *mahāmudrā* realization.” Therefore, the buddha of the causal continuum or the perfect deity itself are present as primordial buddha[hood] even during the obscured phase of impure sentient beings.⁵⁵⁰

Elsewhere in the *Embodiments*, Mi bskyod rdo rje observes that “the methods of gathering the two provisions of the Creation and Completion [stages]—the focus of consciousness and wisdom [respectively]—do not exist in the causal vehicle.”⁵⁵¹ By means of a crucial distinction, which he attributes to his teacher Bkra' shis dpal 'byor, he concludes that the causal vehicle in and of itself lacks the capacity to bring the aspirant to complete awakening: “By merely gathering, via the causal vehicle, the provision of merits such as generosity and the provision of wisdom that realizes emptiness, beings are unable to attain the buddhahood of the Mantra[yāna], which eradicates the obscurations that give rise to the cycle of mundane existence.

This is because the buddhas of the sūtras after awakening to complete and perfect buddhahood take beings who are recipients of enlightened activities as objects of great compassion. It is [also] because the buddhas of this [Mantra] system also take beings who are recipients of enlightened activities as objects of

⁵⁵⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 357, ed., 366.

⁵⁵¹ KNvv vol. 2,166₉₋₁₀: ... *rnam shes dang ye shes kyi dmigs pa'i bskyed rdzogs kyi tshogs gnyis sog tshul rgyu'i theg par med pas ...*

the great compassion of awakening, but moreover as the essence of the deity, which is of the nature of great bliss.”⁵⁵²

Here, the crucial point which distinguishes tantric views on buddha nature from their exoteric counterparts is the recognition that beings are of the nature of the deity and of great bliss (tantric equivalents of buddha nature).

From this tantric perspective, Mi bskyod rdo rje explains that the qualities of freedom and maturation are already complete in buddha nature. Being uncontrived, innate, primordial, and natural, this nature or continuum does not depend on anything else. For Bka' brgyud masters, buddha nature is on this basis equated with natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*). Natural awareness may first be glimpsed during tantric empowerment which marks the first step in the disclosure of buddha nature. Within the Bka' brgyud tradition this is known as “the emergence of *mahāmudrā* realization.”⁵⁵³ Let us now look at how the Dwags po Bka' brgyud description of buddha nature in terms of natural awareness served to unite this tradition's distinctive interpretations of *tathāgatagarbha* and *mahāmudrā*.

2.15. Buddha nature is natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*)

Karma phrin las pa's historical survey of buddha nature theories, translated and discussed in Chapter Two, identified two major cornerstones of the Third Karma pa's authoritative stance on buddha nature, both of which became integral to Mi bskyod rdo rje's own interpretation. One was the equation of buddha nature with natural awareness or innate (or coemergent) wisdom. The other was the description of buddha nature in terms of the inseparability of this awareness (or wisdom) and its expanse, or put differently, of luminosity and emptiness. We

⁵⁵² KNvv vol. 2, 166₁₀₋₁₇: ... *rnam shes dang ye shes kyi dmigs pa'i bskyed rdzogs kyi tshogs gnyis sog tshul rgyu'i theg par med pas rgyu'i theg pa'i sbyin sogs bsod nams kyi tshogs dang | stong nyid rtogs pa'i ye shes kyi tshogs sog tsam gyis 'gro ba tha mal pa'i 'khor lo 'char ba'i sgrub pa rtsad nas gcod par byed pa'i sngags kyi sangs rgyas thob par byed nus pa ma yin te | mdo'i sangs rgyas de mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas pa nas phrin las 'jug yul gyi 'gro ba la thugs rje chen po'i yul du mdzad pa'i phyir | tshul 'di'i sangs rgyas kyis ni phrin las kyi 'jug yul gyi 'gro ba la'ang bde ba chen po bdag nyid kyi lha'i ngo bor gyur pa'i byang chub kyi snying rje chen po'i yul du mdzad pa'i phyir |.*

⁵⁵³ See above, 240, n. 550. See also vol. 2, tr., 357, ed., 366

shall examine the first cornerstone in this section and the second in the next and final section.

In his *Embodiments*, Mi bskyod rdo rje observes that the locus classicus for the explanation of the threefold tantric continuum presented in the supplementary eighteenth chapter of the *Guhyasamājatantra* (GST)⁵⁵⁴ had characterized the ground or causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*) in terms of the “aspect of nature.” With this in mind, he proceeds to equate the tantric ground or causal continuum with the primordial and innate “natural awareness” that is encountered as the very gist or meaning (*don*) of tantric empowerment, and which is thus the foundation of the *Mantrayāna*. The passage underscores the vital role natural awareness plays in Dwags po Bka' brgyud systems of pedagogy and practice:

Now, concerning the “aspect of the nature” in the citation “The aspect of the nature is the cause,” being innate (*gnyug ma*) or primordial (*gdod ma*), [namely,] uncontrived and not dependent on something else that is new, it is naturalness (*tha mal pa nyid*), present since beginningless time. As is stated [in the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* XV.2b],

An intrinsic nature is unfabricated and does not depend on something else.⁵⁵⁵

To explicate the implicit meaning (*don can*) of such a citation, the term “natural” (*rang bzhin* : *prakṛtyā*⁵⁵⁶) was [used] accordingly.

⁵⁵⁴ See above 226, n 516 and Higgins 2013, 166, n. 413. The relevant passage reads “*Tantra* (continuum, *rgyud*) is the term for continuity (*rgyun*). *Tantra* has three aspects, classified as ground, nature and inalienableness. The aspect of the nature is the cause, the ground is known as the means, and not to be alienated [is] the fruition. [Such] is the summary of the three [aspects] of tantra.”

⁵⁵⁵ MMK XV.2b (Ye Shaoyong 2011 ed., 236): *akṛtrimah svabhāvo hi nirapekṣah para-tra ca* || Tib. D 3824 vol. 96, 8b₅.

⁵⁵⁶ The text reads *prakṛta*, i.e., “produced, made” which we have amended to *prakṛtyā*, i.e., “natural”; (the instrumental form of *prakṛti*, i.e., “nature”). See also Böhtlingk on *prakṛti*: nature, the natural or original form, and *prakṛtyā*: natural, by nature, in its original state.

The great editors of former times also translated this [Sanskrit] term *prakṛtyā*, in other contexts, by the term *tha mal* [“natural” or “ordinary”]. Such a translation is an even better semantic equivalent because, when a yogin experiences in himself the first dawning of the primordially natural causal continuum, this must be considered the starting point of the path continuum. And because when that natural awareness is first directly encountered through the auspicious coincidence of the process of empowerment and [this] ground is thus recognized, it is deemed essential that the meaning of the empowerment conferred, the foundation of Mantra[yāna], is directly encountered and arises [in one's mind]. According to the noble Mahāsiddha Koṭali,⁵⁵⁷

Natural awareness awakens in the middle of the heart.⁵⁵⁸

And the Dharmarāja Sgam po pa stated that “the best students, having the opportunity for Mantra[yāna], are freshly introduced to

⁵⁵⁷ Koṭali/Kaudālika/Kuddāli is considered one of the Indian Mahāsiddhas known in Tibetan works as Tog rtse pa (Tog tse pa?), the “Mattock-man.” His nongradual Mahāmudrā teachings gained considerable popularity in Tibet. The ’Bri gung Bka’ brgyud founder ’Jig rten mgon po once commented that from among all the Indian and Tibetan adepts, it was only the Indian Koṭali and Tibetan Sgam po pa who directly pointed out the nature of mind. See Jackson 1994, 13, 142 and 145–46. See also Roerich 1979, 869 f., and Chimpā and Chattopadhyaya 2004, 262 f.

⁵⁵⁸ The full passage is quoted in Vīraprabhāsvara’s *Caturaśītisiddhasaṃbodhīhṛdaya* (CSH), Tib. D 2292 vol. 52, 156a₄₋₅: “In the words of Koṭali, ‘Any joy and suffering arise from the mind. With the instructions of the teacher, explore the mountain of the mind. Intelligent people, even if they explore the mountain of the earth, will not attain genuine great bliss. Natural awareness awakens in the middle of the heart. When the six modes [of consciousness] are purified, bliss flows freely. All imputations are pointless, the cause of suffering. Remain in [this] genuine state, [whether in] meditation or non-meditation.’ *gu ru ko ta la'i zhal nas | bde dang sdug bsngal thams cad sems las byung || bla ma'i gdams pas sems kyi ri bo brkos || blo ldan sa yi ri bo brkos gyur kyang || gnyug ma'i bde ba chen po thob mi 'gyur || tha mal shes pa snying gi dbus su sad | tshogs drug dag na bde ba rgyun mi chad || btags pa thams cad don med sdug bsngal rgyu || bsgom dang bsgom med gnyug ma'i ngang la shog ||*”

natural awareness.” This is thoroughly established as the most arcane among [all that is] arcane.⁵⁵⁹

The Karma pa's reference to Sgam po pa's pith-instruction on natural awareness draws our attention to the preeminent source of this concept in Dwags po Bka' brgyud traditions. In addition, he mentions the lesser-known Khro phu Bka' brgyud tradition as another source of teachings on natural awareness. The Karma pa thus specifies two major lineages of Amanasikāra-Mahāmudrā teachings from India to Tibet: [1] the Dwags po Bka' brgyud doctrinal system passed down from Saraha and Śavari dbang phyug to Mar pa, Mi la ras pa, Sgam po pa etc., and [2] the Khro phu Bka brgyud tradition of instructions (*gdams srol*) on *amanasikāra* given by Mitrayogin (*mi tra dzo gi*)⁵⁶⁰ to Khro phu Lo tsā ba Byams pa'i dpal (1173–1225)⁵⁶¹ during the former's sojourn in Tibet in 1198–1199 on the latter's invitation. These instructions were said to contain the definitive meaning of sūtras and tantras.⁵⁶² As the Karma pa explains, “This [teaching], which primarily takes as its view and meditation the point where the nature of these two [cognition and emptiness] have resolved like water poured into water is called “sustaining natural awareness.” It evolved predominantly in [1] the extensive traditions that maintained the instruction transmission (*gdams srol*) renowned among the [Mahā]mudrā, such as the Khro phu Bka brgyud tradition, and [2] the Dwags po Bka' brgyud tradition in Tibet. These stem from the *dohā* explanations in the tradition originating with [Vajra]pāṇi in India, and

⁵⁵⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 303, ed., 310.

⁵⁶⁰ Mi tra dzo gi/ki (Mitrayogi) was the popular name of a siddha from India identified by Bu ston as Śrī Jagatamitrānanda (śrī dza ga ta mi tra a nanta) who visited Tibet in 1198–1199 on the invitation of the translator Khro phu Byams pa'i dpal (1173–1225). With Khro phu, he translated tantric texts including the *Cakrasaṃvara Ekajaṭā sādhana* cycle (D 2122–26) and *Svacittaviśramopadeśa* cycle (D 2129). He is also credited with composing and translating the *Sugataśāsanaratnavohittha* (D 2462). See Obermiller 1931–32, 222–24. He is also credited by Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737–1802) with consecrating the land for Khro phu monastery and thus establishing a foundation for the Khro phu Bka' brgyud tradition. See Sopa 2009, 136.

⁵⁶¹ The history and teachings of with this lineage are as yet poorly understood and remain desiderata for future research.

⁵⁶² *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 325_{13–21} and *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* IV.2, in MD_{SB} vol. 6, 99₃–100₁. For further details on these lineages and authors, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 330–36.

[from] Jo bo Mitrayogin (*mi tra dzo gi*).⁵⁶³ After Sgam po pa's time, both these lineages of Mahāmudrā teachings on natural awareness were passed down by his successors in the various Dwags po Bka' brgyud traditions.

To comprehend the scope and significance of the equation between natural awareness and buddha nature we must look more closely at the teaching and practice traditions that were promulgated by Sgam po pa. He is traditionally credited with uniting two streams (*chu bo gnyis 'dres*): [1] the monastic Bka' gdams pa tradition founded on the basis of the Bengali master Atiśa's (982–1054) teaching activities in Tibet and [2] the Mahāmudrā tradition which Sgam po pa received from his root Guru Mi la ras pa (1040–1123). Sgam po pa was thus heir to a complex diversity of exoteric and esoteric Buddhist views and meditative techniques. His great achievement was to integrate these different, and at times seemingly divergent, doctrines and practices into an integrated system of study and meditation.⁵⁶⁴ The foundation and goal of his teaching system was the direct recognition of natural awareness, otherwise known as innate or coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes : sahajajñāna*), which may be elicited in a disciple by a qualified teacher. Sgam po pa's discussions of natural awareness are to be found not in his scholastic treatises such as his famous path summary, the *Precious Ornament of Liberation*⁵⁶⁵, but rather in lectures and conversations recorded by his disciples—which make up the bulk of his *Collected Works*. To get a better sense of how he understood and used this term, it may be helpful to look at how he defines it. In a collection of Mahāmudrā instructions, Sgam po says this about natural awareness or innate coemergence (*sahaja*):

⁵⁶³ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. I, 333. The Khro phu bka' Brgyud lineage was founded by Rgyal tsha rin chen mgon (1118–1195), a disciple of Phag mo gru pa, and Kun ldan ras pa (1148–1217). Their nephew Khro phu Lo tsā ba is credited with developing the tradition under the influence of the Indian Mitrayogin as well as Śākyasrī-bhadra (d. 1225), both of whom he invited to Tibet. Some details on this tradition are provided by Seyfort Ruegg 1988.

⁵⁶⁴ Regarding the tension Sgam po pa must have faced in this regard see Gyaltrul Rinpoche 2004, 79–87.

⁵⁶⁵ *Dam chos yid bzhin nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*, in G_{SB}vol. 4, 185–652. See also the English translation by Guenther 1959 and further English translations.

Coemergence is natural awareness. It is uncontrived. It is innate. It is the *dharmakāya*. It is buddhahood. It is directly recognized. When natural awareness is simply left as is, it remains undisturbed by outer and inner distractions.⁵⁶⁶

In other oral teachings, Sgam po pa credits his teacher Mi la ras pa with describing natural awareness in terms of innate wisdom:

In the words of the revered teacher [Mi la ras pa], who is endowed with experience and realization, coemergent wisdom (*sa ha zda'i ye shes*) is precisely that which is present right now as natural awareness.⁵⁶⁷

A similar statement occurs in another collection of oral teachings:

In the words of my precious teacher, coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes*) is precisely that which is ever-present as natural awareness in the present.⁵⁶⁸

We can also draw attention to a quotation illustrating Sgam po pa's use of the term natural awareness in a pedagogical context wherein he alludes to the famous stanza *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.154⁵⁶⁹:

⁵⁶⁶ *Snying po don gyi gdams pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum thig*, in G_{SB} vol. 3, 93₁₋₃: *lhan cig skyes pa ni tha mal gyi shes pa yin | de ma bcos pa yin | de gnyug ma yin | de chos sku yin | de sangs rgyas yin | de ngo shes par byed pa yin | tha mal gyi shes pa rang gar bzhag pas | phyi nang gi g.yeng bas mi gnod pa yin no ||*.

⁵⁶⁷ *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, in G_{SB} vol. 3, 493₅–494₁: *rtogs pa nyams myong dang ldan pa'i bla ma rje btsun gyi zhal nas | sa ha dza'i ye shes ni | da lta tha mal gyi shes pa yod pa 'di nyid yin gsung |*.

⁵⁶⁸ *Zhal gyi bdud rtsi thun mong ma yin pa*, in G_{SB} vol. 1, 587₅: *bdag gi bla ma rin po che'i zhal nas | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes ni | da ltar gyi tha mal gyi shes pa ye nas yod pa 'di nyid yin gsung |*.

⁵⁶⁹ RGV 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, one becomes liberated.” *nāpaneyam atah kinçid upaneyam na kimcana | draṣṭavyam bhūtato bhūtam bhūtadarśī vimucyate ||*.

When mind as such, which is the object seen by itself, is seen by this mind as such, which is the seer itself, that mind as such itself is beheld as natural awareness as such... Looking at one's mind, the real should be seen as the real. One's mind seeing itself sees the real and thus becomes liberated.⁵⁷⁰

Sgam po pa elsewhere provides a more precise definition of this natural awareness, which he extols as the king of all buddha-qualities:

If one now desires liberation from *samsāra*, it is essential to recognize natural awareness because this is the root of all phenomena. In this regard, what is termed “natural awareness” is simply one's own awareness. It remains just as it is, not adulterated by any phenomenon, not polluted by any worldly consciousness, and not shrouded by any mental dullness and thoughts. When this is recognized as it is, it is self-aware wisdom. When it is not realized, it is coemergent ignorance. When realized, it is known as awareness, essence, coemergent wisdom, natural awareness, the innate, freedom from elaborations, and luminosity ...

Natural awareness is the ultimate reality. ... Natural awareness takes the actual ultimate as the path. It is immediacy. ... The direct recognition of natural awareness is the king of insight. ... As the five wisdoms are included therein, it is the wisdom of the expanse of phenomena. Since it is the realization of the nonduality of subject and object, it is the discriminating wisdom. Since all aims are accomplished in a single moment without having to traverse the five paths and the rest, it is the task-accomplishing wisdom. Since all conventional phenomena are understood to be like reflections in a mirror, it is the mirror-like wisdom. Since the whole of *samsāra* and

⁵⁷⁰ *Snnying po don gyi gdams pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum thig*, in G_{SB} vol. 3, 100₄–101₅: *blta bya rang gis sems nyid la || lta byed rang gi sems nyid des || bltas pas rang gi sems nyid de || tha mal shes pa nyid du mthong || ... rang gi sems la blta ba ni || yang dag nyid la yang dag blta || rang sems rang gis mthong ba ni || yang dag mthong nas rnam par grol ||.*

nirvāna are equal as self-awareness, it is the wisdom of equality. ... This is the king of all wisdoms, the king of all qualities.⁵⁷¹

It is interesting that Sgam po pa does not explicitly equate this natural awareness or coemergent wisdom with buddha nature. We previously noted that the author's *Mahāmudrā* teachings, which make up most of his *Collected Works*, reveal a consistent predilection for terminology centered on innate or natural awareness deriving from Indian tantric and siddha traditions. Thus, instead of employing the standard buddha nature terminology of third turning *tathāgatagarbha* discourses (with which he was well-aquainted), Sgam po pa chooses to employ terms such as mind's nature, luminous mind, natural awareness, and coemergent wisdom. We also had occasion to note, however, that Sgam po pa did refer to this innate mode of awareness using descriptions, analogies, and narratives redolent of those used to characterize buddha nature in the *tathāgatagarbha* classics.

It was left to Sgam po pa's successors to more explicitly equate natural awareness with buddha nature. This is already evident in writings by one of Sgam po pa's immediate disciples, La yag pa Byang chub dngos grub (12th c.). We previously drew attention to La yag pa's statement that "buddha nature in the mind-streams of all sentient beings is mind as such, natural luminosity free

⁵⁷¹ *Rje dwags po rin po che'i tshogs chos chen po*, in GSB vol. 2, 451–491: *da res 'khor ba las thar bar 'dod na | chos thams cad kyi rtsa ba yin pas tha mal gyi shes pa ngo shes dgos | de yang tha mal gyi shes pa zhes bya ba | rang gi shes pa 'di la chos kyi rnam pa gang gis kyang ma bslad pa | 'jig rten gyi rnam par shes pa gang gis kyang ma rnyogs pa | bying rmugs dang rtog pa gang gis kyang ma gtum par rang sor gzhag pa yin | de ngo shes na rang gi rig pa'i ye shes yin | ma rtogs na lhan cig skyes pa'i ma rig pa yin | rtogs na rig pa zhes bya | ngo bo zhes bya | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes shes bya | tha mal gyi shes pa shes bya | gnyug ma zhes bya | spros bral zhes bya | 'od gsal zhes bya ... tha mal gyi shes pa ni don dam pa'i bden pa yin | ... don dngos lam du byed pa yin | mngon sum pa yin ... tha mal gyi shes pa ngo shes pa ni shes rab kyi rgyal po yin | ... ye shes rnam pa lnya yang 'di la tshang pa yin te | chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes | gzung 'dzin gnyis med du rtogs pas so sor rtog pa'i ye shes yin | ... lam lnya la sogs pa bgrod mi dgos par | skad cig gcig gis don thams cad grub pas bya ba grub pa'i ye shes kyang 'di yin | kun rdzob kyi chos thams cad kyang me long gi gzugs brnyan ltar rtogs pas me long lta bu'i ye shes kyang 'di yin | 'khor ba dang mya mngan las 'das pa thams cad rang gi rig par mnyam pas mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes kyang 'di yin | ... 'di ye shes thams cad kyi rgyal po yin no | yon tan thams cad kyi rgyal po yin |.*

from any arising and ceasing, and is the complete pacification of all proliferations. [Thus beings] are endowed with wisdom that is inseparable from the inconceivable buddha-qualities.”⁵⁷² He goes on to clarify the connection between buddha nature and the luminous nature of mind: “that which is called “buddha nature” (*tathāgatagarbha*) or coemergent wisdom (*sahajajñāna*) is mind as such (*sems nyid*), which is naturally luminous and utterly pure.⁵⁷³

By the time of the Third Karma pa, it had become commonplace for Bka’ brgyud masters to equate natural awareness with buddha nature, as Rang byung rdo rje himself does in his *Treatise Revealing Buddha Nature*. There he describes natural awareness as *dharmadhātu* and buddha nature (*jinagarbha*, an equivalent of *tathāgatagarbha*) and portrays it as the ineffable and immutable source of manifold buddha-qualities:

This natural awareness is what is
 Called *dharmadhātu*, the nature of the Victors (*jinagarbha*).
 It is not turned good by the noble ones,
 It has not turned bad by sentient beings.
 Although it is described by many terms,
 Its meaning is not understood through description.
 [That] its unimpeded display comprises
 Sixty-four [buddha] qualities
 Is a rough [description]; each of these
 Is said to comprise tens of millions [of qualities].⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷² *Mnyam med dwags po'i chos bzhir grags pa'i gzhung gi 'grel pa snying po gsal ba'i rgyan*, 189₅₋₇: *sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po gang sems nyid rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba skye 'gag med cing spros pa thams cad nyer bar zhi ba | sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa rnams dang ma bral ba'i ye shes can yin |*.

⁵⁷³ *Mnyam med dwags po'i chos bzhir grags pa'i gzhung gi 'grel pa snying po gsal ba'i rgyan*, 210₆₋₇: *gang de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'am | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes zhes bya ba sems nyid rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal zhing rnam par dag pa |*.

⁵⁷⁴ *De bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bstan pa'i bstan bcos*, 56₁₄₋₂₀: *tha mal shes pa de nyid la || chos dbyings rgyal ba'i snying po zer || bzang du 'phags pas btang ba med || ngan du sems can gyis ma btang || tha snyad du ma brjod mod kyang || brjod pas de yi don mi shes || de nyid ma 'gags rol pa la || yon tan drug cu rtsa bzhi po || rag pa yin te re re la'ang | bye ba phrag rer gsungs pa yin ||*.

The Third Karma pa's syncretistic interpretation of buddha nature exerted a powerful influence on subsequent Karma bka' brgyud interpreters. This is evident from the wide range of terms these scholars employed to describe the nature of mind, some of which were translations of Indic terms, others Tibetan neologisms.⁵⁷⁵ These included mind as such (*sems nyid*), natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*)⁵⁷⁶, natural mind (*rang bzhin gyi sems*), beginningless nature of mind (*thog ma'i sems nyid*), innate mind (*gnyug ma'i yid*), wisdom (*ye shes*), nondual wisdom (*gnyis med kyi ye shes*), naked awareness (*rjen pa'i shes pa*), and coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes*). Bka' brgyud masters typically made use of such terminology not only to characterize the enduring, nondual character of mind, but also to emphasize its primacy, and its distinction from ordinary dualistic mind (*sems*), mentality (*yid*), cognition (*shes pa*), or consciousness (*rnam shes*).

Karma phrin las played an important role in the transmission of the Third Karma pa's teachings on buddha nature and natural awareness. An interesting example is found in his commentary on Rang byung rdo rje's *Profound Inner*

⁵⁷⁵ Some of these are included in a list of synonyms (*ming gi rnam grangs*) for the beginningless nature of mind (*sems nyid thog med*) given by Karma phrin las in his *Zab mo nang don rnam bshad snying po*, 17₆–18₂: “As for its quasi-synonyms, which are said to be limitless, they include natural awareness, fresh mind, innate mind, *mahāmudrā*, supreme bliss, *nāda*, invincible *hūṇ*, space-pervading space *vajra*, *tathāgatagarbha*, energy current of wisdom, central channel of wisdom, invincible seminal nucleus, and Prajñāpāramitā from the perspective of the perfections.” *de la ming gi rnam grangs su ni* | *tha mal gyi shes pa* | *sems so ma* | *gnyug ma'i yid dang* | *phyag rgya chen po dang* | *bde ba chen po dang* | *nā da dang* | *gzhom med kyi huṇ* | *mkha' khyab mkha'i rdo rje dang* | *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po* | *ye shes kyi rlung dang* | *ye shes kyi rtsa dbu ma dang* | *gzhom med kyi thig le dang* | *pha rol tu phyin pa'i phyogs las shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma zhes sogs rnam grangs mtha' yas pa gsungs so* |. Dwags ram pa adds to the list the following synonyms, many of which are found in the *Vimalaprabhātīkā* (VPT): supremely unchanging bliss supreme (*mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde ba chen po*), coemergent wisdom (*lhan cig skyes sbyor pa'i ye shes*), great compassion (*snying rje chen po*), first buddha (*dang po'i sangs rgyas*), original protector (*thog ma'i mgon po*), **sugatagarbha* (*bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po*), great seminal nucleus (*thig le chen po*), thusness (*de kho na nyid*), and utterly pure mind (*rnam par dag pa'i sems*). See *Zab mo nang don sems kyi rnam par thar pa'i gsal ba'i rgyan*, in RD_{SB} vol. 12, 45₆–47₂.

⁵⁷⁶ On this important Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā term, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 1, 36, 152, 162, 175, 177, 186 and n. 534.

Meaning, where he clarifies the scope of natural awareness and its relationship to wisdom, using language again reminiscent of buddha nature theory:

When this natural awareness is purified of obscurations, it is the very nature of the three wisdoms. The purification of the afflictive ego-mind (*kliṣṭam manas*) is the wisdom of equality (*samatājñāna* : *mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes*) that unwaveringly works for the benefit of others. The purification of the sixth, ego-mind with its misconceptions, is the discriminating wisdom (*pratyavekṣanajñāna* : *so sor rtog pa'i ye shes*). The purification of the cognitions of the five senses together with their objects is the task-accomplishing wisdom (*kṛtyānuṣṭānajñāna* : *bya ba [s]grub pa'i ye shes*), being the fundamentally transformed engaged cognitions ('jug shes).⁵⁷⁷

Karma phrin las elsewhere describes such affirmative conceptions of mind's true nature or buddha nature as illustrative of the profound view of Gzhan stong but adds, quoting his teacher Karma pa VII Chos grags rgya mtsho, that Rang stong and Gzhan stong are not incompatible:

Therefore, ultimate reality is nothing but the nature of mind, which is free from the concepts of the apprehended and the apprehender. It is said that precisely this natural awareness, which is natural luminosity, unity, coemergence, and the inseparability of the expanse and awareness, is the profound view of Gzhan stong. Thus, my teacher explained that "even the so-called Rang stong and Gzhan stong are not incompatible."⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁷ *Zab mo nang don rnam bshad snying po*, in RD_{SB} vol. 14, 350₄₋₆: *tha mal pa'i shes pa* 'di nyid sgrib pa rnam par dag pa na ye shes gsum gyi ngo bo nyid yin te | *nyon mongs pa* can gyi yid rnam par dag pa ni mi 'g.yo bar gzhan don byed pa mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes dang | *kun tu rtog pa ste drug pa yid shes rnam par dag pa so sor rtog pa'i ye shes dang* | *sgo lṅga'i rnam shes yul dang bcas pa rnams rnam par dag pa ni* | 'jug shes gnas gyur pa bya ba grub pa'i ye shes so ||.

⁵⁷⁸ KP_{DL}, 92₂₋₃: *de phyir gzung 'dzin rnam rtog dang bral ba'i* || *sems nyid kho na don dam bden pa ste* || *rang bzhin 'od gsal zung 'jug lhan cig skyes* || *dbyings rig dbyer med tha mal shes pa nyid* || *gzhan stong zab mo'i lta ba yin zhes gsung* || *des na rang stong gzhan stong zhes pa yang* || 'gal ba min zhes bdag gi bla ma bzhed ||.

We are finally in a position to comprehend the extent to which Dwags po Bka' brgyud masters such as Sgam po pa, Rang byung rdo rje, and Karma phrin las helped to shape Mi bskyod rdo rje's own syncretistic understanding of buddha nature in terms of natural awareness or coemergent wisdom. A valuable illustration of the author's syncretism is given in a passage from the *Intent VIII* in which he defends the Mahāmudrā *amanasikāra* and natural awareness teachings against those who rejected their efficacy and authenticity. Cognizant of the prevalence of *amanasikāra* teachings in Indian tantric and non-tantric Buddhist discourses, the Eighth Karma pa contends that those who rejected these teachings as non-Buddhist and soteriologically nonefficacious, and even as detrimental, were, in effect, rejecting a major current of Buddhist thought common to Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna systems:

Query: Some have asked, “Isn’t it the case that even fools when they cultivate *mahāmudrā* as taught in the Unsurpassed Mantra will not plunge into lower destinies, whereas you by cultivating the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud natural awareness, mental nonengagement, which you label as *mahāmudrā*, will plunge into the lower destinies?”

Reply: Since it appears that the Ācārya Nāgārjuna and the perfect Buddha designated this *amanasikāra* as *mahāmudrā* and *prajñā-pāramitā*, and introduced it as a meditation for many sages and fools [alike],⁵⁷⁹ it follows that the Perfect Buddha and Nāgārjuna must be false friends. For the *Hevajra*[*tantra* I.8.44ab] states the following:

The whole world should indeed be cultivated
Such that it is not cultivated by mentation.⁵⁸⁰

And according to Nāgārjuna [*Jñānālokālamkāra* (JĀA)],

Homage to you who is without imagined thoughts,
Whose mind has no foundation at all,
Who is without reflection, and not mentally engaged,

⁵⁷⁹ Mi bskyod rdo rje explains in this commentary that these profound Mahāmudrā instructions enable the wise and foolish alike to attain the goal of Vajradhara.

⁵⁸⁰ HT I.8.44a: Snellgrove 1959 ed., Skt. *bhāvyate^a hi jagat sarvam manasā yasmān na bhāvyate ||*. ^aAsiatic Society of Bengal Ms. has *bhāvyante*; Tib. *gang phyir yid kyis mi sgom par || 'gro ba thams cad bsgom par bya ||*.

And who has no objective reference.⁵⁸¹

Because such statements are widely attested in Buddhist teachings and treatises, enough elaboration! Here, the term “natural awareness” is described as buddha nature, i.e., *mahāmudrā*, which corresponds to coemergent wisdom whose nature is made manifest by the power of the empowerments and two stages [Creation and Completion]. It is that which is the transformed basis [revealed] via path *mahāmudrā*. Therefore it is not singled out and described as the sixfold cognition that consists in adventitious defilements. This is because, as venerable Karma pa Rang byung explains [in his *Treatise Revealing Buddha Nature*],

This natural awareness is what is
Called *dharmadhātu*, the nature of the Victors (*jinagarbha*).
It is not turned good by the noble ones;
It is not turned bad by sentient beings.⁵⁸²

If one plunges into the lower destinies by taking this self-occurring, genuine, coemergent wisdom, which is personally realized as one's view and meditation, then all the teachings of the Unsurpassed Vajrayāna would make one attain lower destinies. Therefore, who has a mind that could repeat such prattle?⁵⁸³

⁵⁸¹ JĀA, 146₁₋₂: This important passage is quoted in *Caturmudrānvaya* (CMA), D 2225, 156₇–157₁, which has been critically edited and translated by Mathes 2015. Translation altered slightly for sake of consistency. The passage reflects the close connection that existed between the Apratiṣṭhānavāda and Amanasikāra traditions.

⁵⁸² See above 249, n. 574.

⁵⁸³ *Dgongs gcig kar tīg* V.2, in BC vol. 83, 6₆–8₁: *de la kha cig sngags bla med nas bshad pa'i phyag chen de blun pos sgoms na ngan song du mi lhung kyang | khyed dwags po bka' brgyud pa'i tha mal shes pa yid la mi byed pa la ming phyag chen du btags pa de bsgoms pas ngan song du lhung bar 'gyur ro zhe na | 'o na slob dpon klu sgrub dang rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyis kyang yid la mi byed pa de phyag rgya chen po dang sher phyin du ming btags nas mkhas blun mang po la sgom du bcug snang bas rdzogs sangs dang klu sgrub sogs kyang log pa'i bshes gnyen du 'gyur te | dgyes rdor las | gang phyir yid kyis mi sgom par || 'gro ba thams cad sgom par bya || zhes dang | klu sgrub kyis | kun tu rtog pas ma brtags par || rab tu mi gnas pa yi yid || dran pa med cing yid byed med || dmigs pa med la phyag 'tshal 'dud || ces 'byung ba sogs bka' bstan bcos mtha' klas pa*

The passage helps clarify the central place instructions on natural awareness and buddha nature occupy within the complex framework of Karma bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā teachings. Both are intricately interwoven with skeins of core soteriological ideas drawn from Madhyamaka, Tathāgatagarbha, and Vajrayāna traditions. Moreover, both are here shown to be equated with *amanasikāra*, a key concept in Dwags po Mahāmudrā teachings deriving from the Indian siddhas and their late interpreters such as Maitrīpa (alias Maitreyanātha), whose Apratiṣṭhāna teachings combined Madhyamaka and Mantrayāna doctrines. *Amanasikāra* is in turn held to be synonymous with *prajñāpāramitā* as expounded by Nāgārjuna and *mahāmudrā* itself, the *conditio sine qua non* of Buddhist tantra. Natural awareness, here equated with *mahāmudrā*, is in turn identified with the coemergent wisdom (*sahajajñāna*) elicited through tantric empowerments and Creation and Completion Stages yogas in the Vajrayāna system. It is further defined as the basis transformed, or revealed, via path *mahāmudrā* when what obscures the ground *mahāmudrā* is cleared away. Finally, natural awareness is identified with buddha nature, following the Third Karma pa. In conclusion, it is emphasized that natural awareness cannot be singled out and described in terms of the six modes of consciousness, which are merely the adventitious defilements that conceal it. The passage from the *Jñānālokālaṅkāra* (JĀA) is quoted here, as it was in Maitrīpa's (or the tantric Nāgārjuna's) *Caturmudrānvaya* (CMA), to underscore the intimate connection between the syncretistic Apratiṣṭhānavāda and Amanasikāra traditions. Both traditions forged a unity between Madhyamaka and Mahāmudrā currents of late Indian Mahāyāna and Mantrayāna Buddhism.

For Mi bskyod rdo rje, buddha nature is defined as natural awareness in the specific sense that it brings attention to a mode of being and awareness that is innate, natural, and uncontrived. It is primordial insofar as it remains structurally

nas 'byung ba'i phyir spros pa chog go | 'dir tha mal gyi shes pa zhes bya ba'ang dbang dang rim gnyis kyi mthus mngon du gyur pa'i rang bzhin lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes bzhin phyag rgya chen po bde gshegs snying po de lam phyag chen du gnas gyur pa la brjod kyis glo bur dri ma'i tshogs drug gi shes pa'i rang ldog nas brjod pa min te | karma pa rang byung zhabs kyis | tha mal shes pa 'di nyid la || chos dbyings rgyal ba'i snying po zer || bzang du 'phags pas btang ba med || ngan du sems can gyis ma btang || zhes 'byung ba'i phyir | rang byung gnyug ma lhan cig skyes pa'i so so rang rig pa'i ye shes la lta sgom byas pas ngan song du lhung bar 'gyur na ni rdo rje theg pa bla na med pa'i chos thams cad ngan song sgrub byed du 'gyur bas ci 'di lta bu'i rjes bzlos ni sems yod su zhig gis brjod par nus ||.

prior to and a precondition of the activities of the six or eight conditioned modes of consciousness. The author elucidates the meaning of “natural” in his *Intent*:

Supreme bliss, buddha nature, is called *prakṛti* [“nature”], and was also translated [into Tibetan] as nature (*rang bzhin*), innate (*gnyug ma*), uncontrived (*bcoś min*), coemergent (*lhan skyes*), and natural (*tha mal*). Thus, Kotali⁵⁸⁴ declared that “natural awareness awakens in the center of the heart.”⁵⁸⁵

It is noteworthy that the Fourth 'Brug chen Padma dkar po also cites as an authoritative Indian source for the Tibetan term for “natural awareness” (*tha mal gyi shes pa*) the same passage of the *mahāsiddha* Koṭalipa. Like Mi bskyod rdo rje, he stresses that the term *tha mal* has the sense of “natural” rather than “vulgar” or “commonplace”:

Regarding the term “natural awareness,” these days there are many thoughtless people who assume it is something bad (*ngan pa*) and very unpleasant (*sdug sdug*). This is a major fallacy that stems from not having come to even a partial [understanding] of the grammar of terms such as this. Given that the [Sanskrit] term *prakṛti* can be rendered either as “nature” (*rang bzhin*) or “ordinary” (*tha mal*), it is a term for “natural knowing” (*rang bzhin gyi shes pa*). If you think this term has no authoritative scriptural source, [consider what] Koṭalipa said: “Natural awareness awakens in the center of the heart. When the sixfold consciousness is purified, bliss flows freely.” So, there are limitless names given to this natural awareness, some calling it natural luminosity, others calling it ground *mahāmudrā*. But in the classical texts of the Mantra [vehicle], it is called the naturally coemergent. Although it is explained as the coemergent (*sahaja*)—the object being emptiness and the subject being natural luminosity—in the language of experience, it is called “free-rising awareness” (*thol skyes pa'i rig pa*) that is nothing but the unimpeded

⁵⁸⁴ See above, 148, n. 323 and 242, n. 557.

⁵⁸⁵ See vol. 2, tr., 208, ed., 239.

luminosity of cognition. Not recognizing it, there is *samsāra*; recognizing it, there is *nirvāṇa*.⁵⁸⁶

We previously had occasion to mention Mi bskyod rdo rje's important distinction between adventitious mind (*glo bur gyi sems*) and innate mind (*gnyug ma'i sems*) drawn in his *One Mind or Two? Reply to Bla ma Khams pa*. In that text, when pressed to define "innate mind," the Karma pa responds that "it is simply this natural awareness in one's own mind-stream in the present moment." In reply to the subsequent question of whether his "two minds" thesis contradicts the tantric principle of inseparability (*dbyer med*) or equality (*mnyam nyid*) of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, he replies "this is not a problem because both phenomena of the samsaric and nirvanic minds are conventionally alike in being separate and nonconvergent" and yet they are inseparable inasmuch as "the very nature of the samsaric and nirvanic minds is ultimately present as a great openness and equality, inseparable in their freedom from discursive elaborations."⁵⁸⁷

The Eighth Karma pa concludes that innate mind or natural awareness is concurrent (*dus mnyam*) yet nonconvergent (*ma 'dres*) with adventitious mind and its obscuring activities. However, once the adventitious is seen as adventitious, it freely resolves in the equality and openness of innate mind. With this explanation, the author integrates his affirmative stance of the primacy and primordiality of natural awareness, *qua* buddha nature, into his tradition's core philosophical viewpoint: the inseparability of the two truths or realities (*satyadvaya*), of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and of appearance and emptiness. Let us now conclude our overview of the author's central claims regarding buddha

⁵⁸⁶ *Rnal 'byor bzhi'i bshad pa don dam mdzub tshugs su bstan pa*, in PK_{SB} vol. 21, 485–486; *tha mal gyi shes pa zhes bya ba la | deng seng ma go ba mang pos ngan pa sdug sdug zhig la blo gtod kyi 'dug ste | de 'dra sgra rig pa'i phyogs tsam la yang ma phyin pa'i skyon chen po yin te | pra kr ta zhes pa rang bzhin nam tha mal la 'jug pas | rang bzhin gyi shes pa zhes bya ba'i yin no | tshig zin la tshad thub kyi lung med snyam na | slob dpon chen po tog rtse pas | tha mal shes pa snying gi dbus su sad | tshogs drug dag na bde chen rgyun mi 'chad | ces gsungs na | tha mal shes pa de la 'ga' zhig tu rang bzhin 'od gsal | la lar gzhi phyag rgya chen po sogs ming mtha' yas mod | de nyid sngags gzhung du rang bzhin lhan skyes zhes bya bar grags so | de ni yul stong nyid dang | yul can rang bzhin 'od gsal lhan cig skyes pa la bshad kyang | myong ba'i skad na | shes pa gsal la go ma 'gags tsam gyi thol skyes pa'i rig pa 'di nyid yin la | de ngo ma shes pa 'khor ba | shes pa myang 'das |.*

⁵⁸⁷ See Higgins and Draszczyk 2016 vol. 2, 120.

nature by looking more closely at how he views buddha nature in terms of the inseparability of the two truths.

2.16. Buddha nature consists in the unity of the two truths

Mi bskyod rdo rje prefaces a lengthy disquisition on buddha nature in the *Embodiments* by announcing his intention “to discuss [buddha nature in the context of the two truths] by taking up the intent of the *Great Notes on the Oral Instructions* of Vanaratna,⁵⁸⁸ who was a direct disciple of the glorious Śavaripa.”⁵⁸⁹ As he explains, “among phenomena subsumed under the two truths the so-called ‘buddha nature’ is declared to be an ultimate phenomenon. Yet it is also that which, in conventional terms, embodies the modality of wisdom. [Thus, buddha nature] is precisely the inseparability of the two truths, which is held in the highest esteem as the object of ascertainment of worthy persons.”⁵⁹⁰

In other words, because buddha nature is deemed to be an ultimate phenomenon which nonetheless conventionally manifests as buddha wisdom, it is best explained in terms of the inseparability of conventional and ultimate truths, of manifestation and emptiness. Here, the Karma pa integrates his position on buddha nature into his tradition’s core philosophical standpoint, the inseparability of the two truths. Despite the centrality of this standpoint in Bka’ brgyud and Rnying ma traditions, and its radical philosophical implications, which we will turn to shortly, it is rather surprising how little attention it has received in contemporary Buddhist scholarship on the two truths. It may therefore be useful to provide some idea of its history, scope, and significance before considering how Mi bskyod rdo rje uses it as an interpretive key for understanding buddha nature.

There can be few scholars in the history of Buddhist thought who have given as much attention to the inseparability of truth doctrine as the Eighth Karma pa himself. A cursory survey of his extant corpus reveals an increased focus on this doctrine in his later writings. A succinct definition appears in his commentary on the *Madhyamakāvatāra* wherein he defines the “Middle Way consisting in the unity of the two truths” as the view that, ultimately, all phenomena “are not

⁵⁸⁸ On Vanaratna and this text which we were unable to locate, see vol. 2, 277, n. 1172.

⁵⁸⁹ See vol. 2, tr., 277, ed., 287.

⁵⁹⁰ See vol. 2, tr., 277, ed., 287.

grounded in any ‘limit’ of conceptual elaboration such as existence or nonexistence, and arising or cessation, and are also free from any foundation that could be called a ‘middle’.”⁵⁹¹ The author’s *Embodiments*, composed in the last years of his life, takes the doctrine of the inseparability of the two truths as its unifying theme. He there describes the inseparability of two truths as “an excellent Madhyamaka tradition properly discerned by all who claim that the ultimate reality and the conventional are of the same nature”⁵⁹² in that both elude conceptual elaboration (*spros bral : niṣprapañca*). Viewing this inseparability as a doctrinal cornerstone uniting Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka philosophies, Mi bskyod rdo rje traces it through a long line of Indian Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka masters including Saraha, Śavaripa, Nāgārjuna, Buddhapālita, Candrakīrti, Maitrīpa,

⁵⁹¹ *Dwags brygud grub pa'i shing rta*, 664: *dbus zhes par yang gnas pa dang bral ba de la gzhi bden gnyis zung 'jug gi dbu ma zhes bya la ...* For the full quotation on the two truths to which this line belongs, see above, 40, n. 52.

⁵⁹² See vol. 2, tr., 264, ed., 268.

Atiśa,⁵⁹³ and as well as the 11th century Tibetan Rnying ma master Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po.⁵⁹⁴

The inclusion of the last-named figure, the eleventh century Rnying ma pa Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po, is intriguing given that no mention is made of this master in Mi bskyod rdo rje's *Collected Works* apart from in the *Embodiments*, where he is cited six times. A close reading of these citations reveals that the Karma pa had in his last years become a keen advocate not only of Rong zom pa's core Rdzogs chen view but also of his assessment of Apratiṣṭhānavāda Madhyamaka views, especially those based on "classical texts maintaining the inseparability of the two aspects of reality" (*bden pa rnam pa gnyis dbyer med par 'dod pa'i gzhung*). Among the Karma pa's references to Rong zom pa, the

⁵⁹³ Atiśa Dipamkāra (982–1054) does not mention the inseparability or unity of the two truths doctrine in his two principal Madhyamaka works—the *Satyadvayāvatāra* (SDA) and *Madhyamakopadeśa*. Nor is it discussed in the summary of the Madhyamaka view given in his *Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā* or in the general explanation of the two truths entitled *Bden gnyis spyi bshad dang / Bden gnyis 'jog tshul*, which is said to summarize the master's oral teachings on the two truths. On this last-mentioned work, see Apple 2016. However, in the *Satyadvayāvatāra* (SDA), Atiśa does maintain that there is only one truth, the ultimate, since *dharmatā* is cannot be established in any way. In this regard, this single ultimate truth or reality is indivisible into two or more aspects. See SDA stanza 4 (Lindtner ed., 190): "The ultimate object is only one, [though] others claim it is twofold. How could this nature of things (*dharmatā*), which is not established as anything, be 'two' or 'three' and so forth?" *dam pa'i don ni gcig nyid de || gzhān dag rnam pa gnyis su 'dod || cir yang ma grub chos nyid de || gnyis dang gsum sog ga la 'gyur ||* In a similar vein, Atiśa later explains that the conventional is not found to exist at all, and that this "unfindability" is precisely the ultimate (*don dam*), the ever-present *dharmatā*. Again, from the standpoint of *dharmatā*, no distinction between two truths obtains. See SDA stanza 21 (Lindtner ed., 192): "This conventional, however it appears, if analyzed by reasoning, is not found at all. This unfindability is precisely the ultimate, the ever-present nature of things (*dharmatā*)."*kun rdzob ji ltar snang ba 'di || rigs pas brtags na 'ga' mi rnyed || ma rnyed pa nyid don dam yin || ye nas gnas pa'i chos nyid do ||* To conclude, although Atiśa does not explicitly espouse the inseparability of truth doctrine, it is clear that his "single truth/reality" thesis accords with Mi bskyod rdo rje's own asymmetrical unity thesis regarding the two truths.

⁵⁹⁴ Concerning Rong zom's endorsement of Apratiṣṭhānavāda and the "inseparability of truth" view which he termed "special Mahāyāna," see Almogi 2009, 39–42 et passim.

most detailed and illuminating is the former's synopsis and discussion⁵⁹⁵ of the doctrine as outlined in the latter's short text entitled *Black Snake Digest*.⁵⁹⁶

In this concluding section of the first volume, we will look at how Mi bskyod rdo rje articulated and defended the inseparability doctrine in relation to other Buddhist truth theories and used it to frame his interpretation of buddha nature. Let us begin with a short sketch of the doctrine. There is widespread agreement amongst scholars of Rnying ma and Bka' brgyud traditions that the view of the inseparability of the two truths marks the culmination of all Buddhist thinking about truth. However, opinions diverge over whether this doctrine has its inception in *Madhyamaka* or *Vajrayāna* traditions. Two leading Rnying ma scholars, Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (1042–1136) and Klong chen rab 'byams pa (1308–1364), maintain that the inseparability of truth is first realized in *Vajrayāna*, but here too their accounts differ. Klong chen pa claims in the eighteenth chapter of his *Wish-fulfilling Treasury* that this doctrine represents the definitive meaning (*nges pa'i don*) of all Buddhist attempts to capture the way things are, the abiding nature (*gnas lugs*). The inseparability of truth is identified with definitive [buddha] nature (*nges pa'i snying po*) and with the tantric ground continuum (*gzhi'i rgyud*), and is declared to be the “secret treasury of the buddhas.”⁵⁹⁷ Klong chen pa further asserts that this view is first revealed in the inner tantras when one has transcended the various bivalent conceptions of truth—predicated on attributions of truth and falsity to perceptions or

⁵⁹⁵ In KNvv vol. 1, 112–115.

⁵⁹⁶ *Sbrul nag gyi stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 66–69. Rong zom pa's black snake example is briefly discussed in Köppl 2008, 47–49. A more abridged version of the black snake allegory is contained at the beginning of the third chapter of Rong zom pa's famous defence of Rdzogs chen entitled *Entrance into the Great Vehicle* (*Theg chen tshul 'jug*). For a translation of this important Rnying ma text, see Sur 2017.

⁵⁹⁷ *Yid bzhin mdzod* 18_{3–4} (*Yid bzhin mdzod 'grel*, 1390_{4–5}): “In this regard, first of all, it is crucial to understand the abiding nature. Although [it has] many aspects by virtue of the [different] spiritual vehicles, [its] definitive essence is the inseparability of truth. [This] is the secret treasury of the buddhas.” *de la dang po gnas lugs shes pa gces* || *theg pa'i dbang gis rnam pa mang na yang* || *nges pa'i snying po bden pa dbyer med* || *sangs rgyas rnams kyi gsang ba'i mdzod khang yin* ||.

propositions—advanced by the different schools of Buddhist philosophy.⁵⁹⁸ As he explains,

Concerning Vajrayāna, within the three outer tantras, the views are similar to the Great Vehicle of characteristics in that one ascertains that [phenomena] are ultimately of the nature of not being established at all. Most *mantrikas* nowadays subscribe to that [view]. According to the three inner [tantras], once the conventional appears as the nature of the deity, truth is deemed to be inseparable. When one has thereby abandoned the belief that truth is differentiated, all phenomena are ascertained as [buddha] nature (*snying po*), which alone is of definitive meaning (*nges pa'i don*). Hence, apart from merely removing what obscures [this] spontaneously present essential element, the essence is not held to

⁵⁹⁸ *Yid bzhin mdzod 'grel*, 13964–13974: “Since this luminous wisdom is not touched by the cloud-like conventional phenomena of *saṃsāra*, not the slightest mistaken appearance is established. If that is not found, then one also does not establish an “ultimate” evaluated as the emptiness of all that is perceived. Since neither of these is established, none of the distinctions between two truths as evaluated by the philosophical systems are established. Given that these do not exist, one goes beyond the two truths as they are intellectually imputed in terms of what is “true” and “false”. In this pacifying of all discursive elaborations, since imputed truth is no longer established, it is described as the “inseparability of truth”. Since this goes beyond what is expressed in terms of being *conventionally* established and *ultimately* not established, this luminous wisdom as the basic expanse is described as “great utterly pure spontaneity”. However, since it also does not exist as anything like the two truths of appearance and emptiness as acknowledged in the philosophical systems, it is also described as the “inseparability of truth.” ’od gsal ba'i ye shes de la 'khor ba kun rdzob pa'i snang ba sprin dang dra bas reg pa med pas 'khrul par snang ba tsam du'ang ma grub || de ma grub pa na || snang tshod stong nyid du gzhal ba i don dam ma grub || de gnyis ma grub pas grub mthas gzhal ba 'i bden gnyis kyi dbye ba gang du ang grub pa med || de med pas blos bden rdzun du sgro btags pa 'i bden gnyis las 'das te spros pa thams cad zhi ba di ni || btags pa i bden pa ma grub pas kyang bden pa dbyer med ces brjod la|| kun rdzob tu grub pa dang don dam du ma grub par brjod du med pas || dbyings 'od gsal ba'i ye shes ni || lhun grub rnam dag chen po zhes brjod kyang || grub mthar grags pa 'i snang stong dbyer gnyis lta bur med pas kyang bden pa dbyer med ces bya bar brjod pa yin te |.

be differentiated in terms of cause and result. Thus, it is recognized as an unconditioned, self-manifesting *mandala*.⁵⁹⁹

Some two and a half centuries before Klong chen pa, Rong zom pa had maintained that this doctrine, which he regards as the final view of great equality of all phenomena, is first glimpsed in the outer tantras but only fully realized in *Rdzogs chen*.⁶⁰⁰ In the outer tantras (Kriyā etc.), he states, “the view of equality which realizes the inseparability of the ultimate and conventional is first attained to a small degree.”⁶⁰¹ It is subsequently attained to a medium degree in the inner Mahāyoga, and is only fully actualized in *Rdzogs chen*.⁶⁰² That said, Rong zom elsewhere attributes this doctrine to the so-called “special Mahāyāna,” a doctrinal system elaborated in certain progressive sūtras and tantras. Though the details of this “special Mahāyāna” are not clearly specified in Rong zom’s extant works, it likely refers to the Apratiṣṭhānavāda Madhyamaka tradition of Mantrayāna, which includes the unity of the two truths among its core doctrines. We have seen that Mi bskyod rdo rje, for his part, traces the inseparability of truth doctrine to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, though he agrees that it is presented most explicitly in the tantras.

⁵⁹⁹ *Yid bzhin mdzod 'grel*, 1390s–13914: *phyi'i rgyud gsum ni | lta ba mtshan nyid theg pa chen po dang cha 'dra bar | don dam par gang yang ma grub pa'i rang bzhin du gtan la 'bebs la | deng sang gi sngags pa phal che ba rnams de'i rjes su 'brang ngo || nang pa gsum gyis kun rdzob lha'i rang bzhin du snang ba nyid nas bden pa dbyer med du 'jog pas | bden pa tha dad du 'dzin pa dor nas | chos thams cad nges pa'i 'ba' zhig gi snying por gtan la 'bebs pas | lhun grub snying po'i khams kyi sgrib pa sel ba tsam las | ngo bo rgyu 'bras tha dad du mi 'dod pas | 'dus ma byas rang snang ba'i dkyil 'khor du shes par byed do ||*.

⁶⁰⁰ See, for example, his *Lta ba'i brjed byang*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 12_{16–18}: “Finally, in the *Rdzogs chen* system, all phenomena are said to be in the state of great equality beyond acceptance or rejection, but [this] is not shown in terms of the language of the two truths. [Rather,] all phenomena are said to be inseparable.” *tha ma rdzogs pa chen po'i tshul las chos thams cad mnyam pa chen po'i ngang du blang dor med par smra ba'ang bden pa gnyis kyi brdas mi ston te | chos thams cad dbyer med par smra la |*.

⁶⁰¹ *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 67_{15–16}: *don dam pa dang kun rdzob dbyer med par rtogs pa'i mnyam pa'i lta ba dang or chung ngur thob pa yin no |*.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 67₂₁–68₄: *bden pa gnyis dbyer med pa'i bsam pa 'bring du thob pa'o | rdzogs pa chen po'i lta ba yin te | ... don dam dang kun rdzob kyi bden pa'i 'dzin pa phra mo yang bral bas lta ba thams cad dang bral te ...*

It is clear then that, despite the lack of consensus regarding the specific source of the inseparability of truth doctrine, there is general agreement that it received its most lucid and thorough expression in Vajrayāna, and particularly in the Rdzogs chen and Mahāmudrā systems, which represent the apex of the inner tantras in the Old (*rnying ma*) and New (*gsar ma*) traditions, respectively. In sum, it is possible to identify two major lines of interpretation of this doctrine in Tibet, both developing in response to the Madhyamaka two truths doctrine of Nāgārjuna and his successors: [1] a Rnying ma tantric line culminating in Rdzogs chen, and [2] a Gsar ma tantric line culminating in Mahāmudrā. Both are to some extent indebted to the Apratiṣṭhānavāda Madhyamaka system, as is certainly the case with Rong zom pa and Mi bskyod rdo rje, who each integrated key elements of this Madhyamaka view into their Rdzogs chen and Mahāmudrā interpretations of the inseparability of truth.

For both authors, the allegory of the black snake as presented in Rong zom pa's *Black Snake Digest*⁶⁰³ provides a cogent illustration of the progressive understanding of the inseparability of the two truths that unfolds as one proceeds from the lower to higher Buddhist vehicles (*yāna*). In his *Black Snake Digest*, Rong zom pa views the stages of transition from one vehicle to the next as phases in the progressive de-reification of phenomena as one's habituation to the belief in real entities is relinquished. This is illustrated by the example of varying Buddhist responses to the perception of the reflection of a black snake in water following a standard doxographical hierarchy of viewpoints:

To summarize, [1] Śrāvakas (Mi bskyod rdo rje adds worldly heretics) see the black snake's reflection as real and causally efficacious. They are afraid to touch it but want desperately to get rid of it and crush it underfoot. It is explained that their fearful reaction and *renunciate* response stem from their ontological belief in ultimate and conventional realities and in substantial existence (*dravyasat*). Hence, they believe in the conventional and ultimate as separate truths or realities. [2] Mahāyāna Mādhyamikas see the reflected snake as unreal yet causally efficacious. They too are afraid to touch it but nonetheless take steps to repel it by applying appropriate antidotes using skillful means. This fearful

⁶⁰³ We unable to find any precedent for Rong zom pa's black snake allegory in Indian or Tibetan sources. The allegory is presented in Rong zom's *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 66₂–69₁₄ and, in an abridged form, in his *Theg pa chen po'i tshul la 'jug pa*, RZ_{SB} vol. 1, 459₄–460₂₀. For a critical edition and translation of Mi bskyod rdo rje's comments on Rong zom's *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, see vol. 2, tr., 264, ed. 268.

reaction and *remedial* response are based on their ontological belief in conventional reality and in substantial and nominal existence. Hence, they too believe in the two separate realities but view the conventional as illusion-like. [3] Adepts of the outer tantras (Kriyā and Yoga according to Rong zom; Kriyā and Caryā according to Mi bskyod rdo rje) perceive the snake's reflection as unreal and nonphysical yet efficacious. They too are afraid to touch it and summon a divine hero having the power to vanquish it. This fearful reaction and *supplicatory* response are based on their ontological belief in conventional reality and nominal existence. Here, for the first time, the inseparability of reality is realized to a small extent. [4] Adepts of the lower inner tantras (Mahāyoga for Rong zom; Mi bskyod adds Niruttarayoga) see the snake's reflection as unreal and nonefficacious but nonetheless engage in yogic practices (*vrata*) aimed at removing the last traces of residual fear and reification due to former conditioning. This reaction and yogic response are based on their ontological belief in nominal existence. Here, the inseparability of reality is realized to a medium extent. [5] Finally, adepts of Rdzogs chen see the snake's reflection as unreal and nonefficacious, and therefore find nothing to accept or reject. Since there is no longer any basis (*gzhi med*) for fear, there are no grounds to accept or reject anything. Since all phenomena are nonfoundational, there is no need to respond at all. Beyond hope and fear, acceptance and rejection, the understanding of the inseparability of reality has here reached its culmination.

Table:

Buddhist Metaphysical Views and Ontological Commitments according to the *Black Snake Digest*. (Key: 'M' = Mi bskyod rdo rje; '+' = adds)

Metaphysical View	Perception of black snake's reflection	Reaction and Conduct	Ontological Commitment (4 existences)	Inseparability of truth view
Śrāvakas M + worldly tīrthikas	real and causally efficacious	afraid and want to get rid of it (renounce)	Ultimate Conventional Substantial (2)	two separate truths
Mahāyāna Mādhyamikas	unreal yet causally efficacious	- afraid to touch; apply counteragents (via <i>thabs</i>) (remedial)	Conventional Substantial Nominal	two truths but conventional is illusion-like
Kriyā & Yoga M: Kriyā & Caryā (Outer tantras)	unreal and non-physical yet efficacious	- afraid to touch; summon 'hero' (supplicatory)	Conventional Nominal	attained to a small degree
Mahāyoga M + Niruttara (Inner tantras)	unreal and non-efficacious	- last traces of fear & reification removed by yogic practices (vrata)	Nominal	attained to a medium degree
Rdzogs chen	unreal, nonefficacious, nothing to accept/reject	- no basis for fear, no need to accept or reject anything		Understanding reaches fullest extent

For both Rong zom pa and Mi bskyod rdo rje, the final realization of the inseparability of truth attained through Rdzogs chen practice marks the concluding stage in the de-reification of phenomena, the point where the entire framework on which bivalent truth theories depend has collapsed. Rong zom pa describes this Rdzogs chen realization as follows:

Here, one realizes that, given that [appearances] are like an illusion, all avoidance, fear, and outright destruction have arisen from a view based on the belief in real entities. But being like an illusion, one realizes there is no basis (*gnas med*) for efforts because there is nothing at all left to negate, but also nothing at all to accomplish. In this system, comprehending the illusion-like reaches its full extent, for by recognizing the characterlessness of appearance, one is freed from even the subtlest habituation to conventional reality and is thus

freed from all metaphysical views. This is conventionally called the view of the inseparability of ultimate and conventional; this is what is meant by “equality.”⁶⁰⁴

For Rong zom pa, realizing the inseparability of the two truths is the final cure for metaphysical realism (*dngos po smra ba*), the view that the objects, properties, and relations the world contains exist independently of how and whether we perceive, experience, or think about them. For Rong zom pa, this view stems from essentialism, our tenacious belief in the existence of real entities having real properties. In the hierarchy of Buddhist vehicles, as he classifies them, metaphysical realism is reinforced to varying degrees by bivalent conceptions of truth that interpose a separation between appearance and reality. In this regard, he draws an interesting distinction between two levels of appearance: immediate and adventitious. The immediate appearance encountered by human beings, produced as it is by the power of deep-seated latent tendencies (*bag chags*), is not quickly averted. Conversely, the clinging or habituation to it due to adventitious mistaken notions is easily averted once the essentialist conception (*ngo bo nyid kyi rtog pa*) on which such misconceptions depend is relinquished. Strikingly, Rong zom pa regards the view of two separate realities as both a cause and symptom of this essentialist conception.

Since immediate appearance has arisen due to the power of latent tendencies, it is not quickly averted. Since habituation to it is produced by adventitious mistaken notions, it is easily averted. This habituation, moreover, stems from the belief in characteristics. That in turn stems from the view of real entities. If these three conceptions are overturned, then even if appearance [based on the]

⁶⁰⁴ *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 67₂₃–68₅; 'di ltar sgyu ma lta bu yin na | spang ba dang skrag pa dang | mnong du rdzi ba lta bu kun kyang dngos por zhen pa'i lta ba las byung bar rtogs pa yin te | sgyu ma lta bu la ni rtsol ba'i gnas med par rtogs te | gang yang mi 'gog la gang du yang mi stsol so || tshul 'di la sgyu ma lta bu'i blo tshad du chud pa yin te | snang ba'i mtshan nyid med par rigs pas | don dam dang kun rdzob kyi bden pa'i 'dzin pa phra mo yang bral bas lta ba thams cad dang bral te | de la tha snyad du don dam pa dang kun rdzob dbyer med par lta ba mnyam pa nyid kyi dgongs pa zhes 'dogs so ||.

essentialist conception has not subsided, there will still not be the metaphysical view of truth as dual.⁶⁰⁵

As he explains in his preface to the *Black Snake Digest*, the major disagreements among Buddhist exegetes arise not over appearance *simpliciter*—the naïve evidence of things encountered by everyone from beginners to tenth level bodhisattvas—but over what, and *how*, characteristics are attributed to appearance.

If we concisely summarize the specific types of views and practices of the higher and lower vehicles, they should be known as follows. The various views are posited in dependence upon the manifestations of bodies, environments, and objective domains comprising body, speech, and mind. As for the question of how things appear or do not appear: for people who maintain the various textual traditions, from beginners to tenth level [bodhisattvas], this is not a matter for disputation. Why? Because in the immediacy of appearance, there are no imputations or deprecations. Therefore, the disputes concerning this [question] arise over the status of the characteristics (*mtshan nyid*) of appearance.⁶⁰⁶

In Rong zom pa's view, the various vehicles of Buddhist thought and practice are hierarchically distinguished in terms of the progressive eradication of essentialist beliefs and aspirations.

⁶⁰⁵ *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 68₅₋₁₀: *mngon par snang ba ni bag chags kyi stobs las byung bas myur du mi ldog do || zhen pa ni glo bur gyi 'du shes phyin ci log gis bskyed pas ldog pa sla ste | zhen pa de yang mtshan mar 'dzin pa las 'byung ngo || de yang dngos por lta ba las 'byung ste | rtog pa 'di gsum log na | ngo bo nyid kyi rtog pa snang ba ma log kyang bden pa gnyis su lta ba mi 'byung ngo ||*.

⁶⁰⁶ *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 66₂₋₇: *theg pa mtho dman gyi lta spyod kyi bye brag la | mdor bsdus na 'di ltar shes par bya ste | lus dang ngag dang yid kyis bsdus pa'i lus dang gnas dang spyod yul du snang ba 'di la brten nas lta ba sna tshogs 'jog ste | 'on kyang snang ngam mi snang zhes ni | gzhung sna tshogs pa 'dzin pa'i gang zag kyang rung | las dang po pa nas sa bcu pa'i bar du gyur kyang | 'di la rtsod par ni mi byed de | gang gi phyir mngon sum du snang ba la sgro skur med de | de'i phyir 'di la rtsod pa rnams ni snang ba'i mtshan nyid ji ltar yin pa las 'byung ste |*.

For the Eighth Karma pa, as for Rong zom pa, the Rdzogs chen adept's realization of the inseparability of the two truths marks the final liquidation of reifying views along with the varying emotional reactions and religious responses based on these.

Practitioners of Atiyoga, the Great Perfection, realize that all avoiding, fearing, touching, or pulverizing of anything amidst the joys and sorrows of the illusion-like phenomena of the two truths, persist because of a reifying view (*dngos lta*) of the merely illusory conventional. Having thereby abandoned all such fears and heroic feats, they proceed spontaneously without doing [anything], not achieving, not accomplishing, and not rejecting anything at all. Regarding illusion-like phenomena, since illusory entities and the belief in the illusion are purified away, they awaken to complete and perfect buddhahood and are thereby free directly on the Samantabhadra ground. Hence, they do not view the phenomena of the two truths as existent, nominally or conventionally.⁶⁰⁷

In his *Intent*, Mi bskyod rdo rje further explains that the inseparability of the two truths is a matter of discovery not achievement, given that the distinction between conventional and ultimate is a mere imputation. Reality is itself nondual and undifferentiated. In his own words,

Conventional truth as phenomena (*chos can*) and ultimate truth as the nature of phenomena (*chos nyid*) are an indivisible unity. It is not that they previously existed separately when not revealed by insight that sees reality and were later combined and united as a pair when they were revealed by this [insight]. Rather, they have been present *primordially* as an indivisible unity because when the

⁶⁰⁷ KN_{VV} vol. 1, 113₁₉–114₃; *a ti yo ga rdzogs pa chen po'i rnal 'byor pa dag gis ni^a | sgyu ma lta bu'i bden gnyis kyi chos kyi bde sdug gang la'ang spang skrag reg rdzi thams cad da dung sgyu ma tsam gyi kun rdzob pa'i dngos lta las byung bar rtogs nas de lta'i skrag pa dang dpa' ba'i^b spyod pa thams cad dor nas gang yang mi rtsol mi sgrub mi 'gog byar med lhun 'grub tu 'gro^c bas sgyu ma lta bu'i chos la sgyu dngos dang sgyu 'dzin dbyings su dag pas mnong par rdzogs par sangs rgyas pas^d kun tu bzang po gzhi thog tu grol ba'o || 'di pas ni bden gnyis kyi chos btags pa dang kun rdzob tu yod par yang mi blta la |.*

^aKN_{SB}: *gis ni* missing. ^bKN_{SB}: *bas*. ^cKN_{SB}: *grol*. ^dKN_{SB}: *nas*

hindrances, which obscure that [unity]—due to a deluded mind which believes the two truths to be separate—have cleared, and what was separate is recognized as being without duality, this is called the “revelation of unity.”⁶⁰⁸

The unity of truth or reality revealed in Rdzogs chen or Mahāmudrā meditation is clearly not a conjunction of two disparate phenomena (as the term *yuganaddha*, “yoked together,” would seem to imply), but neither is it a commensurability established between two equally existent states of affairs or objects of knowledge. Rather, the two realities stand to one another in a relationship of asymmetrical ontological priority according to which ultimate truth is the condition of possibility of conventional truth but not the reverse. On this understanding, there is only a single reality, which is perceived more or less distortively as one progresses on the path toward nondual wisdom. Mi bskyod rdo rje again cites Rong zom pa as a key proponent of this asymmetrical unity of two truths thesis, arguing how it differs from a view of the two truths as *alternative truths* or the monistic belief in a single truth in itself (*rang bden pa*):

Thus, in whatever way the two truths are imputed in terms of property-possessors and properties—viz., conventional truth being the nondeceptiveness of the phenomena of the two truths and ultimate truth being the emptiness of intrinsic nature on account of [such phenomena] being deceptive and fictitious—they are not established in any way in terms of contradiction or correlation. From the standpoint of not being established in that way, [the two truths] were variously described by scholars of yore: “the equality of the two truths,” “the inseparability of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*,” “the unity of phenomena and the nature of phenomena,” “thoughts are *dharma-kāya*,” and “these vivid displays of the conventional which directly [reveal] the nature of reality.”

⁶⁰⁸ *Dgongs gcig kar tig* IV.1, in GC_{KL} vol. 4, 312₁₇₋₂₂: *chos can kun rdzob bden pa dang chos nyid don dam bden pa dbyer mi phyed pa'i zung du 'jug te sngar de nyid mthong ba'i shes rab kyis mngon du ma byas pa'i tshe so sor yod la phyis des de mngon du byas pa na de gnyis 'dres nas zung 'jug tu gyur pa ni ma yin te | gdod nas zung du 'jug pa dbyer med pa gnas pa de la so so bar 'dzin pa'i blo 'khrul pas bsgrigs pa'i sgrib pa sangs shing so so ba gnyis su med par rtogs pa na der zung 'jug mngon du byas so zhes rnam par bzhag pa'i phyir te |.*

However, for those in Tibet who are lauded as good meditators but whose minds have not comprehended this key point, the two truths do not exist as two separate things, [but rather as] something true in itself. At the time of delusion due to not recognizing this [truth] in itself by itself, there is the conventional, and at the time of nondelusion due to recognizing it in itself by itself, there is the ultimate. Thus, because there is nothing besides this difference, these two have a single essence. Such is the unity of the two truths. In this way, they proclaim that the two truths are like the front and back of the hand. This is a great misunderstanding and is therefore [farther] outside than the outsiders [non-Buddhists]. So it is proclaimed in the Stages of the Path (Lam rim) [discourses] of eminent spiritual friends in the tradition that runs from Nāgārjuna to Atiśa.

And, in the *Memorandum of Views*⁶⁰⁹ of the great Paṇḍita of Tibet, Rong zom chos bzang, [the question arises]: are these phenomena of *samsāra* something nonexistent that cannot be objects of knowledge because they are erroneous, or are they something existent that can be objects of knowledge because they are not erroneous? In the latter case, it would impossible to awaken to complete and perfect buddhahood. [Why?] Because were the conventional—the mistaken phenomena which are deceptive and fictitious—something existent that can be objects of knowledge, i.e., nonerroneous, then that would be the way they really are, so they could not be dispelled (*sangs pa*). And if they are not dispelled, one would not find any opportunity for buddhahood. But, in the first case, because the conventional, which is erroneous, is nonexistent, such that it cannot be an object of knowledge, there is no reason why it could not be invalidated by scripture, reasoning and experience.⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰⁹ *Lta ba'i brjed byang chen mo*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 1–27.

⁶¹⁰ KN_{VV} vol. 1, 100_{1–22}: *des na bden gnyis kyi chos kyi mi bslu ba kun rdzob bden pa dang | bslu rdzun gyi phyir rang bzhin stong pa nyid kyi don dam bden pa gnyis la chos can dang chos nyid cir btags kyang 'gal ba dang 'brel^a ba gang du yang ma grub pa ma yin pa'i phyir | de lta ma grub pa'i cha nas bden gnyis mnyam nyid dang 'khor 'das dbyer med dang | chos can chos nyid zung 'jug dang | rnam rtog chos sku dang | kun rdzob lam*

From the foregoing discussion, one is led inescapably to the conclusion that authors such as Rong zom pa, Klong chen pa, and Mi bskyod rdo rje maintain that the traditional Buddhist bivalent conception of truth is provisional, predicated as it is on a heuristic, but unfounded, distinction between ultimate and conventional phenomena—a bogus dichotomy between existent reality and nonexistent appearance. Let us briefly consider some of the more striking philosophical observations and implications arising from this insight.

One observation worth making is that the idea of two truths represents a dubious extension of notions of truth and falsity (T/F) from propositions to states of affairs. It is interesting to note that the very distinction of truth into conventional versus ultimate seems to have originally been used to distinguish Buddhist discourses into those which are *held to be true* and those that *actually are true*, a role later relegated to the distinction between provisional (*neyārtha*) vs. definitive meaning (*nītārtha*).⁶¹¹

Now, given that propositional truths are parasitic upon perception, and this in turn upon phenomena, it becomes understandable how the bivalent truth theory of propositions could be re-enlisted to distinguish the *way things seem to be* from the *way things really are*, both perceptually and ontologically. The problem here is that the path leading back from proposition to perception and to phenomena is

*me ba 'di dag chos nyid du bkrong nge ba sogs du mar sngon gyi slob dpon chen po rnams kyis gsungs pa la | bod kyi sgom bzang por grags pa rnams kyis gnad 'di blo bar ma khums nas bden gnyis rang bden pa zhig so sor gnyis su med par rang gis rang ma rig nas 'khrul dus kun rdzob | rang gis rang rig nas ma 'khrul ba'i dus don dam ste khyad par de tsam las med pa'i phyir de gnyis ngo bo gcig pa bden gnyis zung 'jug yin te | bden gnyis lag pa'i lto rgyab bzhin zhes smra ba de ni log pa'i shes pa chen pos rgyud bslad pa'i phyi rol pa las kyang phyi rol pa'o || de ltar **mgon po klu sgrub** kyi zhal rgyun **dpal ldan a ti sha** nas brgyud dge bshes gong ma dag gi lam rim nas byung ba brjod zin la | de dang mthun par bod kyi **pan di ta chen po rong zom chos bzang** gi **lta ba'i brjed byang** las kyang | kun rdzob pa'i chos 'di phyin ci log gi phyir shes byar mi rung ba'i med pa zhig yin nam | phyin ci ma log pa'i phyir shes byar rung ba'i yod pa zhig yin | phyi ma ltar na yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas sangs rgyas par mi rigs te kun rdzob bslu rdzun gyi 'khrul chos phyin ci ma log par shes par bya rung du yod na de gnas lugs la zhugs pas de nyid sangs par mi 'gyur la | de ma sangs na sangs rgyas pa'i skabs mi rnyed pa'i phyir | dang po ltar na phyin ci log tu gyur pa'i kun rdzob shes bya la yod mi rung ba med pa'i phyir na | de la lung rigs nyams myong gis gnod par byar rgyu med par 'gyur ro |. ^a text: 'grel; ^btext: *pan dyi ta**

⁶¹¹ See Tillemans and Newland 2011, 3–22.

a slippery one; the truth seeker is likely to allow judgements concerning the truth or falsity of assertions to slide into seemingly parallel judgements about the nature of perception and phenomena. From the above critiques of the two truths doctrine, we can detect a central thread of argumentation: the transposition of bivalence (T/F) from proposition to perception to ontology leads to a questionable imputation of categorically false and true levels of reality: the false appearances of the benighted and the true reality of the *āryas*. In this way, Buddhist philosophers from Sarvastivādins to Mādhyamikas interposed a category of wholly erroneous appearance between perception and phenomena. Stated simply, their views of reality are predicated on a putative dichotomy between *false* appearance (total error) and *true* reality (total absence, emptiness).

This raises the question of whether the two truths doctrine is part of the solution or part of the problem in the Buddhist project of dispelling the myriad forms of self-deception and ignorance that prevent human beings from seeing “things as they really are” (*yathabhūta*). In other words, is the two truths theory a remedy for this deficiency or rather the “illness for which it purports to be the cure” (as the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus famously said of psychoanalysis)? Rong zom pa, for one, seems to side with the latter alternative:

This evaluation of objects of knowledge [as illusory] by focusing the mind on the distinction between the two truths was held to be a remedy for people excessively habituated to real entities. However, the nature of phenomena is without characteristics and duality. When the grasping for [and believing in] any characteristics has subsided, one is free from [such] habituation. Thus, when there no longer arises craving and wishfulness with respect to anything that appears, it is called the “view of great equality.”⁶¹²

Mi bskyod agrees: “So long as the mind has not let go of [reifying the two truths], and there is conceptual reasoning that clings to and believes in [them], it

⁶¹² *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 69₁₋₄: *de bas na bden pa gnyis kyi rkya bar du blo bcug nas shes bya la 'jal bar byed pa 'di ni | dngos po la cher zhen pa'i gang zag rnams kyi gnyen por gsungs pa yin te | 'on kyang chos kyi ngo bo nyid la ni | mtshan nyid gnyis med do | gang gi mtshan mar 'dzin pa log na zhen pa dang bral ba yin pas | cir snang yang sred (sred bsam |) cing smon (smon bsam |) pa mi 'byung ba de'i tshe mynyam pa chen po'i lta ba zhes gdags so |*. Note: terms in brackets are interlinear notes added to original text and are included in the translation.

will never settle in the lofty state of the equality of the two truths, the inseparability of the two truths, the one-flavoredness of the two truths, and the unity of the two truths.”⁶¹³

For both authors, a key problem with traditional bivalent truth theories is that they tend to ontologize a useful distinction and embed it in the nature of things. One is thereby saddled with the nagging, but ill-founded, conviction that one must get behind or beyond appearances (the conventional) to get in touch with the underlying reality (the ultimate). The hapless wayfarer, as Rong zom pa puts it, “believes appearance to be conventional and thus believes, in the back of his mind, that freedom from elaborations regarding that is the ultimate.”⁶¹⁴

Proponents of the *unity* of reality doctrine advocate an alternative to the “two worlds” view presupposed by traditional Buddhist truth theories. On their understanding, reality itself is *disclosive*, revealing itself more and more as the habitual belief in the imputed reality of phenomena subsides. However, the unity doctrine is intended not as substitute or replacement for the traditional views of the two truths outlined in the philosophical schools, but rather as an attempt to articulate the condition of their possibility. For these scholars, there is only one world that is disclosed more fully and clearly to the extent that the reifications and superimpositions that distort and obscure it are dispelled. Though there is no monolithic “truth in itself” awaiting discovery, there is one truth continuum,

⁶¹³ KN_{VV} vol. 1, 114₁₉₋₂₁: *de ltar blos ma btang bar ji srid zhen 'dzin rtogs rigs yod pa de srid du bden gnyis mnyam nyid dang bden gnyis dbyer med dang bden gnyis ro gcig dang bden gnyis zung 'jug gi go 'phang la 'gar yang 'khod pa med do ||*.

⁶¹⁴ The relevant passage in *Sbrul nag po'i stong thun*, in RZ_{SB} vol. 2, 69₆₋₁₀, reads: “A further question: ‘Isn’t this “mere appearance” itself conventional?’ This was already indicated above with regard to any person who believes appearance to be conventional and thus believes, in the back of his mind, that freedom from elaborations regarding that is the ultimate. On the other hand, for a mind that does not believe in the reality of the two truths, to ask whether to believe them to be one or two was established in scripture to be like asking whether the son of a barren woman is blue or white.” *yang dris pa | snang ba tsam nyid kun rdzob ma yin nam zhe na | gang zag gang la snang ba kun rdzob yin par 'dzin pa de la spros bral don dam pa yin pa zhe ba la 'dzin pa gong du bstan par zad do || 'o na bden pa gnyis bden par mi 'dzin pa'i blo la gcig dang gnyis su 'dzin pa 'dri bar byed pa de ni gzhag par lung bstan pa yin te | mo gsham gyi bu sngo'am dkar zhes 'dri ba lta bu'o ||*.

so to speak, underlying the dichotomy between truth and reality, between *what really is* and what merely *seems to be*.

What implications does this unity of reality doctrine have for Mi bskyod rdo rje's interpretation of buddha nature? Significantly, it allows him to reconcile the emptiness of buddha nature or ultimate reality—its absence of determinate substance and attributes—with the fecundity of its manifest aspects, its abundance of qualities. For the Eighth Karma pa and other proponents of unity of reality, the kind of truth discovered by Buddhist insight and meditation—variously described as *nirvāṇa*, ultimate reality, the nature of reality, or nondual wisdom—is entirely free from conventional imputations, such as beliefs in the existence or nonexistence, and postulates of truth or falsity. In his short text *Buddha Nature and Dharmakāya*, the Karma pa explains that the ultimate reality, which he equates with resultant buddha nature, is beyond provisional attributions of truth and falsity, and even of the view that there is one “truth” (*nirvāṇa*) defined in contradistinction to what is “false.” The author explains that accounts of the two truths that establish conventional *samsāra* to be false and the ultimate truth to be true are relevant only “in the context of asserting the representational ultimate (*rnam grangs pa'i don dam*), but not in the context of [asserting] the nonrepresentational ultimate (*rnam grangs min pa'i don dam*).”

Now, when mind, whose nature is emptiness, manifests as the variety of dependently arisen error—the [state of] bondage of the two obscurations—it is *samsāra*. When mind, whose nature is emptiness, manifests as the variety of dependently arisen accumulations and purifications without error, the [state of] freedom from the two obscurations, it is nonabiding *nirvāṇa*.⁶¹⁵ It follows, then, that *nirvāṇa* is true, whereas *samsāra* is untrue. Therefore, since *samsāra* is delusive and false, it does not belong to the mode of being of objects. Since *nirvāṇa* is nondeceptive and nondelusive, it is posited as “ultimate truth.” In this regard, however, the positing of *samsāra* as “false” and the ultimate truth as “true” is [applicable only] in the

⁶¹⁵ The term *mi gnas pa'i myang 'das* means “*nirvāṇa* which abides neither in quiescence nor worldliness” (*srid zhi la mi gnas pa'i mya ngan las 'das pa*).

context of asserting the representational ultimate but not in the context of [asserting] the nonrepresentational ultimate.⁶¹⁶

Mi bskyod rdo rje at this point draws our attention to Candrakīrti's claim that the case for positing the conventional as "truth" is impossible both provisionally and absolutely. Provisionally, we can posit the ultimate alone as "truth," the obvious Buddhist example being *nirvāṇa* which, according to Nāgārjuna, "alone is true." But ultimately, adds Mi bskyod rdo rje, "even the final *nirvāṇa* is not the definitive ultimate because it is not beyond the conditioned." With this provocative statement, we can infer that the Karma pa takes *nirvāṇa* to be conditioned when it is taken as an oppositional construct that is posited in contradistinction to *samsāra*. Consequently, in the final analysis, one discovers no single transcendent truth, no single reality beyond dependent arising and dependent designation, either.

In Śrī Candrakīrti's own system, the case for positing the conventional as "truth" is impossible both provisionally and absolutely. Provisionally, only the ultimate is posited as "truth" and, in that instance, concerning its illustrative instance (*mtshan gzhi*), it was declared [by Nāgārjuna] that "*nirvāṇa* alone is true."⁶¹⁷ That said, even the final *nirvāṇa* is not the definitive ultimate because it is not beyond the conditioned. Thus, in the final [analysis], the "one truth" is also not discovered.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁶ See vol. 2, tr., 173, ed., 174. Ultimately, neither *samsāra* nor *nirvāṇa* exist and hence the perfect knowledge of *samsāra* is *nirvāṇa*. See also Nāgārjuna's *Yuktisaṣṭikā* (YS) 6.

⁶¹⁷ Nāgārjuna's *Yuktisaṣṭikā* (YS) 35a. The full stanza (YS 35) reads: "If the Victorious Ones have said that *nirvāṇa* is the only true thing, then what wise men could think that the rest is not false?" See Tola and Dragonetti 1983, 113. The Sanskrit for this stanza is not extant. For the Tibetan, see *Yuktisaṣṭikā* (YS), Tib. D 3825, 21b₅ and Candrakīrti's *Yuktisaṣṭikāvṛtti* (YSV), Tib. D 3864, 22a₇.

⁶¹⁸ See vol. 2, tr., 173, ed., 174.

3. Conclusion

A common ground underlying Mi bskyod rdo rje's interpretations of buddha nature and the inseparability of the two truths is to be found in the disclosive path of goal-realization he persistently affirms. To put it concisely, the prospect of an undifferentiated reality which comes increasingly into view with the progressive de-reification of phenomena coincides with the prospect of buddha nature or the tantric continuum becoming increasingly evident as adventitious defilements are purified away. To the extent that the Karma pa regards buddha nature or the tantric continuum as simply ultimate reality itself in its obscured condition, he can consider Buddhist views of truth and buddha nature as aspects of the same disclosive process, as viewed from the slightly different perspectives of truth and immanence.

For the Karma pa, it is particularly within the sphere of praxis that these two perspectives converge. From the standpoint of meditative praxis, it is when the adventitious flux of conscious activities is purified away that the deeper source—described variously as natural awareness, buddha nature, the tantric continuum, or ultimate truth—reveals itself. This disclosure consists in the progressive familiarization with natural awareness or coemergent wisdom as all that obscures and obstructs it is removed. For the Karma pa and his tradition, the most efficacious means of such familiarization are the tantric empowerments and Creation and Completion Stages, and above all the *Mahāmudrā* pith-instructions imparted by a qualified teacher. It is because the Mi bskyod rdo rje understands goal-realization to consist in the growing disclosure of, and acquaintance with, what has been there all along, and not in the production of something new, that he so strongly stresses the unconditioned and unchanging aspects of buddha nature and natural awareness. From this perspective, as a bodhisattva seemingly develops toward buddhahood, the successive stages of development in altruistic capacities are viewed as phases in the progressive unfolding of buddha nature and its inherent qualities.