
Onto-theology and Emptiness: The Nature of Buddha-Nature

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In this article, I chart a trajectory from deconstruction to embodiment in the intellectual history of Buddhist traditions in Tibet. I focus on embodiment as a participatory approach to radically deconstructed and unthematized meaning, in contrast to an interpretation of truth as purely an analytic category or an approach to meaning that deals with values, such as emptiness, as simply truth claims or representations. I show how certain Buddhists in Tibet have represented the meaning of emptiness as a uniquely participatory encounter in such a way that its meaning is necessarily embodied. To speak of it otherwise, I argue, is to misrepresent its meaning fundamentally. An important way that the embodiment of emptiness is formulated is through the discourses of buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). I show how Tibetan interpretations of Buddha-nature reflect postmodern concerns about metaphysics and onto-theology.

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS of the Perfection of Wisdom discourses (*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), exemplified in the discourses of the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) and Yogic Practice Schools (*Yogācāra*) that stem from medieval Indian Buddhist thought, can be seen to prefigure two directions in “postmodern” thought: one toward deconstruction and one toward embodiment. By *deconstruction*, I mean to represent the culmination of modern rationality, in which a disembodied ego’s quest for a

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central core or true essence has finally come to an end; that is, an “end” in the sense of a hard-won recognition that the quest for essence is doomed from the start. By *embodiment*, I mean to suggest a turn to the body, and other (constructive) participatory encounters with meaning in response to this failed modern project. We could just as well call the project of deconstruction “most modern” as “postmodern,” since it is a continuation (and culmination) of a predominant feature of the same old modern paradigm—although with a different result. With deconstruction, the result is incompleteness—the ever unfinished truth that “there is no essence.”

The discourses of modernity flow from the Cartesian assumptions of certainty and that essence is foundational, and by the perpetuation of the fantasy that the future will inevitably discover the presumed essences that constitute the foundation or grounding of things. In the discourses of both deconstruction and modernity, however, we see the same paradigm play out. The same story unfolds, only with deconstruction it is retold, or unwound, such that the modern fantasy is uncovered and exposed for what it is—empty. Yet the modern ideal of an essence or foundation lies at the heart of both discourses. In other words, deconstruction thrives like a parasite on its host; its survival depends upon the presumptions of modernity.

Being without essence, however, brings the possibility of an alternative, something else that expresses the lived and living dimensions of meaning that are not simply truth claims tied to a predetermined and determinate, limited and limiting, schematic paradigm, as in the case of modern notions of meaning and their binary counterparts—their deconstructions. Within a recognition of the fully contingent, constructed nature of essence (the “result” of deconstruction), we have the opportunity to recognize meaning (and the role of our minds and bodies) in the constitution of our worlds in new ways—ways that do not simply follow the same old patterns of the modern, Cartesian, and Kantian legacies (Ferrer and Sherman 2008: 32–36). It is in these lived, decentered spaces—with/in and between the body/mind—where a truly “postmodern” turn can become meaningful (and not simply in “deconstruction,” which I argue here is simply the regurgitation of the modern, reacting against it while still buying into its fundamental framework). Hence, it is the turn to the lived and living body where the hallmark of what is truly *postmodern*, or nonmodern, can be discovered—the unthematized, lived spaces where the re-membered body can re-mind us about the (enminded) nature of being (empty).

I attempt here to chart a trajectory from deconstruction to embodiment in the intellectual history of Buddhist traditions in Tibet. I focus on embodiment as a participatory approach to radically deconstructed and

unthematized meaning, in contrast to an interpretation of truth as purely an analytic category, or an approach to meaning that deals with values, such as emptiness, as simply truth claims or representations. I show how certain Buddhists in Tibet have represented the meaning of emptiness as a uniquely participatory encounter in such a way that its meaning is *necessarily* embodied. To speak of it otherwise is to misrepresent its meaning *fundamentally*.

An important way that the embodiment of emptiness is formulated is through the discourses of buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). This subject, central to the traditions discussed, involves how one conceives the nature of being, the relationship between the ultimate and relative truths, and also the relationship between the buddha(s) and sentient beings. Many of the discourses of buddha-nature express how the buddha is alive within being(s), and often do so with narrative and metaphor rather than through analytic and propositional statements. Such discourse thus tends to not be abstracted from the dynamic process of enacted meaning (Varela et al. 1991: 205). That is, its meaning is rooted in the performative and participatory dimensions of body and mind.

In Tibet, acknowledging the presence of buddha-nature in being(s) has a central place in tantra. For instance, according to Longchenpa (1308–64), an important figure in the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition (the “old school” of translations in Tibet), in the “causal vehicle” (of non-tantric Buddhism), one sees the buddha-nature as a cause that will result in the future in becoming a buddha, whereas in the “resultant vehicle” (a.k.a. “tantra”), one sees buddha-nature as the immanently present reality, qualitatively indivisible from its effect, the buddha (Longchenpa 1983: 1169–1170). The significance of buddha-nature is rooted in the *Secret Essence Tantra* (*Guhyagarbhatantra*), the most important tantra in the Nyingma tradition, where the theme of universal buddha-nature—the doctrine that all beings have the innate potential to become buddhas—is extended to embrace a view that everything is already the buddha. Thus, the *Secret Essence Tantra* represents an important turn within Buddhist thought: a shift from “buddha-nature” (*tathāgata-garbha*), the universal *potential* for awakening, to the “secret-nature” (*guhya-garbha*), the affirmation of universal awakening *right now*. This turn toward immanence is a major feature of the tradition of tantra in Tibet, as well as in Buddhist traditions across East Asia.

According to Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the renowned forefather of the Geluk (*dge lugs*) tradition, what distinguishes the path of tantra, or Vajrayāna, is the practice of deity yoga (Tsongkhapa 1995: 21): that is, identifying with the buddha, or the appearing aspects of the divine (or buddha) nature. Perceiving the presence of the buddha in this body, here

and now, certainly marks a fundamental shift from the body regarded as a site of disgust and repulsion, as it tends to be represented in early Buddhist discourses (*sūtra*). The shifting referents of the fundamental nature of the body and world that we find in various Buddhist texts and traditions throughout history are relevant to the story here, as I argue that different iterations of this nature are part of the essential core of the meaning of buddha-nature. As emptiness is also an integral part of buddha-nature, and is coextensive with its meaning, it is first of all important to be clear on this quality, so for our purposes much of this article will be focused on explicating this aspect, or modality, of buddha-nature's meaning. After all, it is emptiness that is distinctive to Buddhist discourse on *nature*; that is, it is emptiness that puts the *buddha* in buddha-nature.

DE/CONSTRUCTING EMPTINESS

Reductive ontological analyses typical of the discourses of deconstruction can be found in a Madhyamaka style of reasoning. This kind of negative dialectic is inspired by the Perfection of Wisdom discourses, paradigmatic of what in Tibet is commonly referred to as the Buddha's second "turning of the wheel of dharma," the second *dharmacakra*. A key passage from the *Discourse Explaining the Intent* (*Samādhinirmocanasūtra*, c. fourth century), an influential scripture for interpreting Buddhist texts in Tibet, outlines three distinct wheels of doctrine, which are divided according to the content of the discourse and the capacities of the audience (Powers 1995: 138–141). The *sūtra* describes the deconstructive discourses of emptiness as the second wheel of doctrine, and explicitly states that these are not the full disclosure of the Buddha's teaching.

According to the three-wheel scheme in the *Discourse Explaining the Intent*, the first wheel of doctrine conveys the teachings of "the four noble truths." The emphasis of the teachings here is the nature of existence as suffering, impermanence, and no-self (*anātman*). The content of the second wheel of doctrine, which the *sūtra* calls "signlessness," is characterized by emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the principle that all phenomena lack any true essence. While the second wheel of doctrine is certainly a response to the first, where the ethical foundations of Buddhism are laid, the discourses of the second wheel are not a critique of ethics per se, but rather critique a causally constructed, relational world composed of static, discrete entities. That is, the Perfection of Wisdom discourses of the second wheel convey that every phenomenon is empty; even wisdom, nirvana, and the principal teaching of the first wheel (the four noble truths) are denied the status of having any ultimate existence or real identity. Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE) (1957) showed how such denials cut

through metaphysical views (*dr̥ṣṭi*) of reality when he stated: “The Victorious Ones have proclaimed emptiness as that which relinquishes all views; but those who hold emptiness as a view are incurable” (*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* [*Mūlamadhyāmakakārikā*] XIII.8). In short, the second wheel exemplifies deconstruction.

In contrast to simply deconstruction, in the third wheel, we get a different characterization of the ultimate truth. The *Discourse Explaining the Intent* says that the third wheel contains “the excellent differentiation [of the ultimate].” Rather than simply depicting the ultimate truth *via negativa*, the third wheel reveals the ultimate as an immanent reality; it depicts the pure mind as constitutive of the ultimate. It is the third wheel of doctrine that Tibetan exegetes identify with the teachings of the presence of buddha-nature (in addition to *Yogācāra*). Significantly, the relationship between emptiness in the second wheel and the presence of buddha-nature in the third wheel becomes a pivotal issue around which Buddhist traditions in Tibet stake their ground.

For the Jonang (*jo nang*) tradition of Tibet, it is the third wheel rather than the second that is held to most clearly reveal the ultimate truth, as exemplified in the words of the twentieth-century Jonang scholar Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa (*mkhan po blo gros grags pa*, 1920–75):

In the middle [wheel of doctrine], the expanse free from the constructs of all signs was taught, merely half of the definitive meaning; finally [in the last wheel], the complete ultimate and definitive truth was taught, the nonconceptual ground-expanse, the great wisdom. (1993: 52)

According to his explanation, it is in the last wheel that the complete ultimate meaning is found (in buddha-nature). The middle wheel’s teaching of the lack of essence is only partial; it is incomplete. For the Jonang tradition, the ultimate truth is the expanse of wisdom, the buddha-nature, which is the foundation of all phenomena (Dölpopa 1976: 166).

Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa makes a distinction between “Mādhyamikas who follow the middle wheel” (1998: 242–243), a category under which he classifies the position of “self-emptiness” (*rang stong*), and “Mādhyamikas who follow the last wheel,” which he identifies with the position of “other-emptiness” (*gzhan stong*) (1998: 268–270). The Jonang school is famous for its important distinction between these two modes of emptiness. “Self-emptiness” refers to a phenomenon’s lack of its own essence, which is emphasized in the second wheel, but this is not the complete picture of the ultimate truth. The full meaning of the ultimate truth is disclosed by “other-emptiness,” which is most clearly indicated in the last wheel. Other-emptiness refers to what exists within reality; it

points to the nature of reality that is empty of all aspects of distortion that are extrinsic to it: “Since adventitious, relative entities do not exist at all in reality, they are empty of their own essences; they are self-empty. The innate ultimate, which is the ultimate emptiness of these relative things, is never non-existent; therefore, it is other-empty” (Dölpopa 1998: 416).

Dölpopa (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292–1361), the fourteenth-century forefather of the Jonang tradition, states: “Mere self-emptiness does not fulfill its role. Why? It is because . . . self-emptiness does not clear away the extreme of nonexistence” (1976: 177). According to Dölpopa, self-emptiness alone leaves one with “the extreme of nonexistence,” which is simply the lack of true identity held as a mere absence. This is a stale negation that can ossify into a static referent of deconstruction. When this happens, it is something like the “bad infinite” (Hegel 1969) or the binary counterpart of the finite—a stagnant infinity hinged upon the notion of the finite. A bad infinity is a numeric infinity, a place marker on a Cartesian grid that is forced to play the role of its finite counterpart rather than being identified as constituting the whole structure (and more). Likewise, in the case of “the extreme of nonexistence,” the notion of nonexistence, or absence of essence, is hinged upon a mistaken notion of presence—an abstract presence divorced from a dynamic, open presence that “grounds” emptiness. In contrast to this kind of “bad emptiness” that is a reified absence, emptiness that is a dynamic presence is enminded and embodied and constitutes being (and more).

Before we look into this open presence that is buddha-nature, we should bear in mind that for the Buddhist tradition, getting stuck in this kind of “bad emptiness” is like falling into “the extreme of nonexistence,” which is just as bad as falling into “the extreme of existence.” In fact, it is worse, as Saraha, the eighth-century Indian master, is alleged to have said: “To hold onto things as real is to be stupid like a cow. To hold on to things as unreal is to be even more stupid!” (Kongtrül 1990: 144).

FROM ABSENT-MINDED BODIES TO BODY-CITTA

Deconstruction on its own—held outside of its performative function, its lived dimension—is simply negation. We can see that the kind of negation that mere deconstruction exhibits corresponds to a nonimplicative negation (Sanskrit *prasajya-pratiśedha*; Tibetan *med dgag*). A nonimplicative negation is simply denial, like the denial of essence or identity, without implying anything else or deferring that essence to some “other.” There is no nostalgia or romanticism in this kind of deconstruction. Dislodged from heart and mind, there are no signs of life in this discourse; there is “nothing outside the text,” nothing but “free-floating

signifiers.” In other words, deconstruction itself is pure, disembodied abstraction. Deconstruction thus is not “postmodern”; rather, it is the quintessential discourse of modernity. It is based on exactly the kind of reductive analysis in which the myth of modernity is perpetuated: where meaning is objective knowledge enacted by a disembodied ego (“the ghost in the machine”) on mind-less objects of knowledge.

In contrast to a nonimplicative negation—the linguistically-bound negation of deconstruction—an implicative negation (Sanskrit *paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*; Tibetan *ma yin dgag*) is the type of negation preferred by the proponents of “other-emptiness,” like the Jonang tradition, in the way they approach the ultimate truth. An implicative negation is a negation that points beyond its constructed identity to something other. In this case, the system of linguistic representation does not merely deconstruct itself and succumb to the absence of its self-referential self-destruction. Rather, it is understood to imply, or presume, something else. The classic example of an implicative negation is: “The fat Devadatta does not eat during the day.” While this statement is explicitly a negation, the connotative force of the statement implies something else: that he eats at night. This leaves the interpreter with an unstated, yet implied, state of affairs. In contrast, when we consider the classic example of a nonimplicative negation, “Brahmins should not drink alcohol,” we can see how the connotative force of this negation is simple denial devoid of implication.

For the Jonang tradition, the negation of essence should be understood as an implicative negation rather than a nonimplicative one. That is, it should be seen not simply as an absence, but should be understood to imply, or presume, something more: a ground in which one always already participates. This ground is the basis of negation; it precedes reflection as the ground of being (and nothingness) that constitutes the possibility of reflection. For Dölpopa, the ultimate truth is not the emptiness that is a lack of true existence or essence; rather, the meaning of ultimate truth is the basis of negation—what remains after negation is the primordial ground that has been (t)here all along. This ultimate truth is irreducible; it is the ground of being, the innate nature, or buddha-nature.

Dölpopa states that even the ground of a nonimplicative negation is an implicative negation (1976: 88). By this, he suggests that the presence of language, all utterances, necessarily imply or presuppose a state of affairs that is an underlying ground that constitutes the possibility of discourse and thought. For Dölpopa, this empty-ground is cognitive; it is wisdom. He goes on to say that wisdom dwells within the ground from the beginning, and that this ground is the buddha (1976: 313–314).

A deconstructionist would be quick to point out that this presumed ground that constitutes the very fabric of linguistic construction is itself

another linguistic construction, a deferred “transcendent signified” that is just another essence that is simply not there. Indeed, the distinctive language of the Jonang tradition not only flies in the face of deconstructive sensibilities and the critique of metaphysics, but in the face of early Buddhist discourses of denial as well. It is common in Jonang texts to find the ultimate truth described with terms such as “permanent” and “truly existent,” in direct contrast to the language of impermanence in the first wheel of doctrine and emptiness in the second wheel. For instance, we see this in the way that Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa outlines the three wheels of doctrine as follows:

In general, with respect to the supreme teacher’s first discourse, the wheel of doctrine of the four truths . . . for those disciples of dull faculties . . . he mainly taught relative phenomena in the manner of their existence as true entities. Concerning the middle discourse, the wheel of “the absence of signs,” for disciples of not very mature faculties . . . he mainly taught all phenomena, from form to omniscience, in the manner of their lacking true nature. In the last discourse, the wheel of “the thorough differentiation of the ultimate,” for disciples of sharp and extremely mature faculties, he mainly taught, through elegantly differentiating: (1) the ultimate truth itself as truly existing, meaning that it is permanent, steadfast, and eternal in the perspective of the wisdom of sublime beings . . . and (2) relative phenomena comprising subject–object duality as not truly existing. (1993: 50)

Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa shows here how the three wheels are a progression, and thus how the middle wheel’s teaching of the absence of essence (or deconstruction) is not the full disclosure of ultimate truth. However, given the fact that he uses the words “permanent and truly existing” to describe the ultimate, is he reintroducing essence without appreciating the value of the deconstructive critique? Or is he simply treating language as language in some kind of nonsubstantialist, postmetaphysical way?

The danger of reifying the ultimate in the third wheel was not missed by Tibetans. Indeed, some Geluk rivals of the Jonang school, for instance, have accused the Jonang tradition of being heretical, “non-Buddhist,” for making claims that flirt with a view of metaphysical realism (Tuken 1969: 243–248). In the Geluk’s own tradition, the middle wheel’s deconstructive teachings of emptiness, an absence of essence that is a nonimplicative negation, are held to be the definitive meaning, the real meaning, rather than the last wheel’s teachings of the innate presence in beings of the qualities of a buddha. The Geluk school holds that the last wheel’s explicit teaching of an ultimate buddha-nature that is an immanent presence in being(s) is a provisional teaching, a teaching that serves the purpose of

leading those who are not yet able to appreciate the import of its true meaning—emptiness (as the absence of true existence):

If this kind of buddha-nature existed, it would be like the self of the heretics, for its literal meaning is invalidated. Its basis of intention [that is, what the buddha-nature is really referring to] is the pure nature that is the suchness of mind. Its purpose is to eliminate the fear of those with rigid habitual patterns to strongly grasp to the heretical self, for if emptiness were explicitly taught to them, they would be frightened. . . . Those who teach such a buddha-nature to be the literal, definitive meaning should be known to be completely fixated upon the heretical self. (Khedrupjé 1972: 396)

Thus, Khedrupjé (1385–1438), a follower of Tsongkhapa, expresses the position of the Geluk tradition: that after being guided by this provisional teaching—that is, the innate presence of the buddha’s qualities in being(s) taught in the third wheel—those who are less intelligent will eventually be able to realize the more subtle ultimate (of absence) that is clearly laid out in the second wheel. Simply put, the Geluk school explains the relationship between the second and third wheels of doctrine in a way that inverts the Jonang school’s interpretation of the import of these teachings, and emptiness as absence of essence is held to be the ultimate truth rather than the immanent ground of wisdom that is buddha-nature.

This absence, for the Geluk tradition, comes to subsume the discourse on the ultimate status of buddha-nature as well. Khedrupjé outlines what buddha-nature means for the Geluk tradition as follows:

If the buddha-nature did not exist within the continua of sentient beings, it would be impossible for sentient beings to become buddhas because there would be no cause in their continua. Yet if the buddha-nature and the Essential buddha-body [Tibetan *ngo bo nyid sku*; Sanskrit *svabhāvika-kāya*] were equivalent, and were present within the continua of all sentient beings, then all sentient beings would already be buddhas. Since a buddha does not become a buddha again, it would be impossible for sentient beings to become buddhas. Thus, we accept neither of these positions. How is it then? . . . The buddha-nature is the cause for becoming a buddha. Yet a mere cause for becoming a buddha is not called “buddha-nature.” So what is it? It is the emptiness that is the mind’s lack of true establishment. (1968: 50–53)

Khedrupjé defines the buddha-nature as the emptiness of the mind, the mind’s *absence* of essence, which soon became the standard formulation of buddha-nature in the Geluk tradition. We can see how the

presence of the qualities of a buddha in sentient beings is downplayed in the philosophy of the Geluk tradition, while the qualities of a buddha's wisdom—innate, unconditioned, and all-pervasive—are eclipsed by *absence* in this school's formulation of buddha-nature as the ultimate truth and the potential for complete awakening. This absence is a nonimplicative negation; that is, a negation with no remainder. Significantly, this interpretation directly contrasts with the Jonang tradition's depiction of buddha-nature as the ground of all being(s), as well as its affirmation of a buddha's unconditioned, primordial wisdom as always present within all beings.

Although the status of buddha-nature and the tension between the discourses of the second and third wheels crystallized in the debate between the Jonang and Geluk schools, another model for configuring emptiness with an immanent ultimate was put forward in Tibet by Mipam (*'ju mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912), who emphasized the indivisibility of emptiness and appearance, presence and absence. What is significant about Mipam's contribution is that he put the assertions of an ultimate presence in check without subverting that presence with an emptiness that is a metaphysical absence (or deconstructive denial). An important way in which he did this—and how he clarified a central issue at stake in this debate—was by delimiting (1) the static emptiness that is merely a negation of essence from (2) the dynamic “emptiness” that is an (inconceivable) unity of appearance and emptiness (Mipam 1997: 51). The former emptiness is a mere absence, which I have associated here with deconstruction (as modernity's parasite or byproduct). It is in elaborating this latter emptiness (as unity) that he makes his unique contribution.

Whereas the Jonang school represents the ultimate as “truly existing” and “permanent,” Mipam sharply distinguishes his “unity” (*zung 'jug*) from an ultimate that is a naïve metaphysical presence. Mipam does this by distancing himself from the Jonang school's language of implicative negation, which is its preferred discourse for indicating the ultimate truth. While he accepts, with the Jonang school, that the qualities of the buddha are present within the ground of being(s) from the beginning, he qualifies his representation of buddha-nature as being empty of essence, just like everything else. Thus, he distinguishes his Nyingma tradition's interpretation by arguing that neither implicative nor nonimplicative negations can adequately indicate the ultimate, which he consistently emphasizes is beyond cognitive representations and linguistic constructs (Mipam 1997: 49).

Mipam's denial of even negation as representative of any ultimate truth highlights the fact that he takes (radical) deconstruction seriously. However, he does not settle upon the purely negative dialectic of

deconstruction, but appeals to an ultimate that is a dynamic presence (“unity”) rather than simply a conceptual referent or “object” of negation. This dynamic presence is buddha-nature, a truth he consistently emphasizes cannot be objectified, for it is a unity of emptiness and appearance that constitutes a lived and living cognitive presence:

Awareness [*rig pa*] and luminous clarity [*'od gsal*] are posited from the aspect of appearance, but are not separate from emptiness. Also, “emptiness” is not separate from appearance. In reality, unity alone is suchness; it is thoroughly important that neither emptiness nor appearance on its own is the great suchness, the consummate ultimate. (Mipam 1987b: 599)

Before looking further into Mipam’s representation of the consummate ultimate, or buddha-nature, it may be helpful to consider the implications of these traditions’ discourses on buddha-nature and emptiness in light of a parallel issue in contemporary thought.

A BUDDHIST ONTO-THEO-LOGY?

As we saw above, ultimate reality in the Jonang tradition is the all-pervasive ground of everything that it is not empty of itself; it is nothing other than the nature of the buddha (buddha-nature) and it is real. This ground is an ontological ground and also (as buddha-nature) a theological ground. This kind of discourse can be said to be “onto-theo-logical,” that is, it represents a convergence of two modes of thought, that of ontology and theology. As Merold Westphal states, “Onto-theo-logy points to a self-presence, an absolute foundation, a closure and unity of meaning” (1997: 264–265). Before concluding, I want to consider buddha-nature in light of onto-theo-logy, a mode of thought that took on a unique significance in the works of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger described this particular strand of metaphysical thinking as follows: “When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theo-logic” (1969: 70–71). Here he characterizes ontology as that which looks to a ground that is common to all beings and theology as that which looks to the highest being that accounts for all beings taken as a whole. Even though Heidegger wrote his analysis of metaphysics with “Western” traditions in mind, there is no reason why his insights cannot be brought to bear upon Buddhist

traditions as well. In fact, there are impelling reasons to do so because important avenues for thinking can be drawn out from this comparison.

In Heidegger's appraisal, (Western) metaphysics is *ontology* because it "thinks of the Being of beings as the ground-giving unity of what is most general and indifferently valid everywhere" (1969: 58) and it is also *theology* because "the essential constitution of metaphysics is based on the unity of beings as such in the universal and that which is highest" (61). This rings true for much that has been said of buddha-nature as well. The problem with the conflation of ontology and theology is that ontology sets out to ascertain essences, and when it sets its sights on what is of highest value (i.e., God, buddha-nature), it seeks to determine what is indeterminate. That is, the highest being (the "indeterminate" subject matter of theology) becomes conflated with substance (the "determinate" subject matter of ontology), and the supreme being is thereby reduced to the order of beings and subjected to its logic (of domination).

Another problem with onto-theo-logy is that theology, which at its best is the domain of faith, when wed to ontology becomes bound to the constraints of a certain way of thinking. That is, the subject matter of theology becomes *resolved*, pinned to a fixed essence and definite closure. It thereby loses its open-ended dimension, its *openness to mystery* that arguably sustains the life and vitality of its subject matter as a transforming and transformative discipline.

In Buddhism, we can see a similar issue play out, an onto-theo-logy or "onto-buddha-logy" if you will. The ground, or buddha-nature (the indeterminate subject of theology/faith) becomes conflated with emptiness (the subject matter of ontology). Yet emptiness is not an ontology (of substance); it is the exact opposite. But to the extent that buddha-nature/emptiness can become an object determined by thought, it can be reduced to the order of beings (in the ontic sense *à la* Heidegger) or become a relative entity (in a Buddhist sense). When this happens, buddha-nature is purged of its *mystery* or dynamic dimension—its creative potential as a transformative ultimate reality that is alive, not (pre)determined. It is also interesting to note that Immanuel Kant (who coined "ontotheology") originally used the term (in a way that was different from Heidegger) to refer to the attempt to infer the existence of God by concepts without reference to experience (1998: 584). I would contend that for Buddhist traditions, too, an inquiry into buddha-nature or emptiness divorced from reference to an experiential dimension would also be a prime candidate for ontotheology in both the Kantian and Heideggerian senses, given the strong rhetoric of experience in Buddhism.

By bringing the language of "ontotheology" to bear on Buddhist thought, I wish to highlight how in the Jonang school, there is a danger of

the buddha-nature being reified as a stagnant, transcendent essence—a substance. This is a pitfall of the “metaphysics of presence” that becomes a target of deconstructive postmodernism as well. The Geluk tradition responds to what it sees in the Jonang school as essentialism, in a way that corresponds to the role that deconstruction plays in Western metaphysics. The Geluk tradition’s rigorous critique of essence and unflinching critical stance constantly undermine anything that would serve as an ultimate ground. Indeed, Tsongkhapa’s critique of Dölpopa’s buddha-nature resembles a critique of ontotheology. Yet a danger creeps into the Geluk tradition as it becomes institutionalized, routinized, and modernized: a stale and programmatic emptiness can take the place of a dynamically unfolding dialectic. That is, a metaphysics of absence can set in when deconstruction goes bad (which I have tried to outline in discussing the stale emptiness or “bad infinite” above). In this case, emptiness (or buddha-nature) can become a reified absence—a static, determinate truth that one is only to capture and pin down, certify and quantify, after one has “identified the object of negation.” That is, emptiness is left as an object of conquest (objectified) rather than as an open horizon of possibilities to which one is to attune (participatory).

In a significant way, the Geluk school represents a prototypically “modernist” view; or rather, the Geluk school epitomizes Tibet’s intellectual correlate for Northwestern European-inspired modernity. Their critical stance is uncompromising: for them, there is no ultimate ground of reality, substance is only designation, and buddha-nature is an absence. Also, in this light, it comes as no surprise that Tsongkhapa maintains in his highest portrayal of Madhyamaka (Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka) a unique assertion of the existence of external objects along with (internal) cognitions (Tsongkhapa 1998: 226). Even though these Buddhists had no René Descartes to draw upon, the Geluk school’s penchant for deconstruction and unapologetic assertion of duality as a feature of the tradition’s highest view serves as yet another example that reveals the kinship between the discourses of deconstruction and those of *modernity* (rather than *postmodernity*).

In contrast, Mipam’s writings highlight how iterations of the ultimate constantly evade determination. From emptiness in the second turning of the wheel of doctrine to buddha-nature in the third, in tantra and beyond, the fundamental nature—as a *groundless* ground—challenges the mind’s tendency to pin it down. Mipam steers away from a metaphysics of presence by claiming that the fundamental nature of emptiness is not adequately represented by an implicative negation (Mipam 1993a: 10). Yet he does not reify absence either, but positions the understanding of absence as the beginning of true understanding:

Only at the start, if a lack of true existence is not taught, there will be no method to eradicate the beginningless habit of mistakenly apprehending entities; and if merely that [lack of true existence] is taught as the ultimate, some narrow-minded people will think: “A mere absence—the elimination of the object of negation—is the abiding reality!” This grasping at emptiness will become an incorrigible view. Further, there are two ways to grasp: grasping at emptiness as an entity and grasping at emptiness as a nonentity. (1990: 88)

In contrast to an entity or nonentity (presence or absence) constituting the ultimate, he articulates “unity”:

Both the emptiness of true existence and the appearance of interdependent arising, which are the components of a division into two truths, are separate from the aspect of merely a contradistinction [*ldog pa*]. However, just as impermanent phenomenon and product are not objectively separate, the pair of appearance and emptiness, being essentially of an indivisible nature within the uncontrived fundamental abiding reality that does not abide in any extreme, is called “the indivisible truth” or “the unity of the two truths.” (1993b: 543)

To be separated merely by “contradistinction” is to be only conceptually or virtually separate, not actually so, like “two sides of the same coin.” This undivided unity he positions as buddha-nature, the unity of emptiness and appearance:

Even though the reasoning that analyzes the ultimate establishes the emptiness of all phenomena, it does not negate the qualities of [buddha-] nature because although the sublime qualities exist, they are also claimed to be essentially empty. Therefore, the meaning demonstrated by the middle wheel that all the phenomena (of thorough affliction and complete purification) are taught to be empty is established as such because buddha-nature is also the nature of emptiness . . . the emptiness taught in the middle wheel along with the exalted body [Tibetan *sku*; Sanskrit *kāya*] and wisdom taught in the last wheel should be integrated as a unity of emptiness and appearance. (1987a: 585–586)

What he presents here as a dialectical unity of emptiness and appearance poses a challenge to the stultifying tendencies of monological determinism in a metaphysics that either collapses buddha-nature into a stagnant absence or presumes an inert, transcendent presence. The unity is not the product of a synthesis of two discrete things, because emptiness and appearance are not really separate; this is an *irreducible, dialectical*

unity. Also, since the unity is embodied (with a buddha's exalted body) and enminded (with a buddha's wisdom), it calls for a participatory enactment, one that is alive in dynamic movement. Thus, Mipam depicts buddha-nature in a way that resonates with Jorge Ferrer's portrayal of spiritual truth as creative enactment: "If we accept the generative power of the dialectical relationship . . . then to reify either of the two poles as the Truth cannot but hinder the natural unfolding of the mystery's creative urges" (2008: 157).

Like "the emptiness of emptiness," which expresses the dialectic by showing us how emptiness itself is empty and is not to be reified as a negative essence, we could say that "the [buddha-]nature of buddha-nature" is the constantly creative counterpart, the dynamic energy of the buddhas that continually (re-)creates itself, (re-)awakening unceasingly. In a direct parallel to the universality of emptiness, which brings along the ongoing negative dialectic of emptiness, the universality of buddha-nature brings the never-ending play of presence (and absence).

In this light, buddha-nature embodies the nonsubstantialist and expressive qualities of a buddha's dynamically creative activity. Buddha-nature cannot be defined because it must be performatively exemplified; it cannot be delimited or represented (but only re-presented). That is, buddha-nature is not defined in the sense of a determinate essence, but in an expressive activity. Buddha-nature is a verb. It manifests in human activities and relationships that challenge the stagnant forces of egoism, entropy, and stasis. It is alive in moments of inspiration, clarity, and care, and is most clearly instantiated when it does not repeat or rewind, nor travel down well-trodden roads or settle in preplanned cul-de-sacs of thought, with destiny fulfilled. Rather, it unfolds in creative expressions. Importantly, it is a living ground of being that is not a *presumed* ground that is already determined because it continually evades determination by unfolding *in front*—as a dynamic unity of presence and absence.

If we can think of buddha-nature in this way, then buddha-nature is not a transcendent truth, but is what is discovered in the unfolding *processes* of life; it is found (that is, it manifests) in acts of expression and creation, and thus always unfolds in dynamically changing forms. These forms do not remain the same, but inevitably generate complex patterns (which are not predetermined) that are outflows of creative energy. Like the expanding universe, the constant is not to be found in the explicit expressions but perhaps in something like an *implicate order* (Bohm 1980), the guiding impulse of evolution, an *élan vital* (Bergson 1911), which is not a static essence or the negation of that essence, but a basic intelligence that acts like light, for it is a potency behind evolutionary change that

silently beckons us from within and harkens us in myriad ways from all around: to awaken and fulfill the potential that we are.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to frame discourses on buddha-nature in a way that they not only speak meaningfully to the (ever renewed) present, but do so in a way that can be understood in response to a parallel issue that Heidegger has pointed out as the Western “onto-theo-logical” tradition. Some formulations of buddha-nature, particularly what we find in the Jonang tradition, can be seen to reflect a tendency toward romanticism. That is, this tradition appeals to what we may call “theological” over ontological formulations of truth, or a tendency that we may call “anti-intellectual” or “mystical.” I have also suggested ways in which the Geluk tradition can be understood as a correlate to modernity. Certainly, the hegemony of deconstruction and the eclipse of buddha-nature by absence in this tradition, or in other words, the succumbing of theology to ontology (in direct contrast to the Jonang), is characteristic of a “logic of domination”—culture over nature, reason over emotion, mind over body—the modern man’s dream.

In Buddhist traditions, emptiness can be seen to reflect a *logic of culture* and buddha-nature an appeal to a *mythos of nature*. Emptiness (as absence) is a product of culture in that it reflects the deconstruction of (cultural) constructs to let the nature of reality shine forth. In this light, the Geluk tradition represents the triumph of culture. The Jonang tradition, on the other hand, seeks to represent *nature* in its notion of “other-emptiness,” for any idea we have is just a construct and buddha-nature is the ground of all of our ideas. When we undo constructs, empty them—or better yet, let them be (empty) themselves—we let (buddha-)nature manifest. Yet “nature” can also be a construct, as in conceptual constructs of (buddha-)nature that “miss the mark.” (Unlike “deconstructive post-modernism,” for Buddhist traditions, there are not simply cultural surfaces to deconstruct; there is unconstructed nature. Buddhism is not nihilistic; there is nirvana.) This is where Mipam contributes: by showing how unconstructed nature can and should be distinguished from its constructed (and romanticized) ideal.

We should not forget that the unity of emptiness and buddha-nature in Mipam’s works can be thought of as onto-theo-logical, in the sense that he brings emptiness (ontology) and buddha-nature (theology) into an explicit synthesis. In fact, unlike the Jonang tradition, where buddha-nature and (self-)emptiness maintain distinct domains—that is, buddha-nature remains fully theological and self-emptiness remains fully

ontological—for Mipam, buddha-nature and emptiness are an integral whole. Also, unlike the Geluk school's presentation of Madhyamaka, where there is nothing theological because both emptiness and buddha-nature fall solely within the realm of ontology (because buddha-nature really refers to the mind's *absence* of essence), it is Mipam's tradition, not that of the Jonang or the Geluk, which may be the best candidate for wedding the ontological and theological. Yet the unity that Mipam represents in his characterization of buddha-nature is *dialectical*, and may offer something to avoid the potential pitfalls of monological determinism that plague ontotheology. I have attempted to argue that it is the gesture, or directionality, toward openness (to mystery) in the *irreducibly open-ended dialectical movement* that can avoid the pitfalls of onto-theological closure. This openness—to the mystery that is buddha-nature—is by no means exclusive to Mipam's Nyingma tradition, but also can be found (or rather, discovered) in the Geluk tradition's radical deconstruction and the Jonang tradition's "other-emptiness" as well.

In any case, we have seen how for Buddhists in Tibet, the ultimate truth is represented in the second wheel of doctrine primarily as emptiness that is a negation of essence, which clearly resembles the modern discourses of deconstruction. In contrast, in the last wheel, the ultimate truth is explicitly represented as an immanent presence. As an immanent truth, the ultimate here calls for a lived, participatory experience, eluding not only a simple reduction to a "thing" or essence, but also any simple reduction to the *absence* of such an essence or entity as well—because presence and absence are intimately bound together, just like the modern notion of essence and its deconstruction. It is here that interpretations of (buddha-)nature can become reified as a static essence or absence or move beyond to fresh and creative formations.

The interchange between presence and absence, like the field of energy between the positive and negative charges of a battery, is something like a force that drives Buddhist philosophical traditions to reinvent themselves and keep the discourses of buddha-nature relevant and *alive*. The re-creations always involve a creative process, as traditions draw from the past but must continually respond anew to the ever unfolding present. Buddha-nature does not stop or repeat, but continues to challenge the boundaries of tradition and push the limits of those boundaries further and further. This is exemplified in the shift in the *nature of nature* in Buddhist exegetical discourses: from a reductive essence, to a lack of essence, to a metaphysical ground, to a process of creative disclosure. . . . This disclosure can be seen as the ongoing "revelation" of buddha-nature and enacts the quality of buddha-nature that defies definition. By derailing the worn-out tracks of habitual thought and representation, this

unfolding process unsettles the settling tendencies of thought that attempt to seize, stabilize, and define what buddha-nature is.

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