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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BUDDHA-NATURE AND THE LOGIC OF PANTHEISM

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Douglas Duckworth

INTRODUCTION

Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) is a central topic in Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. As the pure nature of mind and reality, it conveys the nature of being and the relationship between the buddha(s) and sentient beings. Buddha-nature is that which allows for sentient beings to become buddhas. It is the living potential for awakening.

In this chapter I will look into interpretations of buddha-nature starting with the *Sublime Continuum* (*Uttaratantra*, ca. fourth century), the first commentarial treatise focused on this subject. I will then present its role(s) in Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, and in the interpretations of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka in particular. Next I will discuss the role of buddha-nature as a key element in the theory and practice of Buddhist tantra, which will lead into a discussion of this doctrine in light of *pantheism* (“all is God”). Thinking of buddha-nature in terms of pantheism can help bring to light significant dimensions of this strand of Buddhist thought.

An etymology of the term “buddha-nature” (*tathāgatagarbha*) reflects the variable status and complexity of the subject matter. The Sanskrit compound *tathā + gata*, meaning “the thus gone one” (i.e., buddha) is the same spelling as the compound *tathā + āgata*, meaning “the thus come one”; the term reveals the dual-quality of a transcendent buddha thus gone and an immanent buddha thus come. Also, “*garbha*” can mean “embryo,” “womb,” and “essence.” On the one hand, as an embryonic seed it denotes a latent potentiality to be *developed* and the subsequent consummation in the attainment of buddhahood. As a womb, it connotes a comprehensive matrix or an all-embracing divine presence in the world to be *discovered*.

The relationship between the transcendent world of buddhas and the immanent world of beings is a central topic of buddha-nature discourses. There are nine analogies in the *Sublime Continuum* (I.96–97) that illustrate this relationship. The examples depict how buddha-nature exists in the world: like the buddha in a lotus, like honey in a beehive, like grain in a husk, like gold in a dirt heap, like a treasure under a pauper’s house, like a sprout that grows from a small seed, like a statue wrapped in an old cloth, like a king in the womb of an ugly woman, and like gold in the earth. These nine analogies are drawn from the only sūtra dedicated specifically to buddha-nature, the *Buddha-Nature Sūtra* (Takasaki 1966: 268). It

is noteworthy that with the exception of two analogies representing buddha-nature as a latent cause, the king in the womb and the sprout, the other seven depict it as a concealed pure essence, *fully present* in the phenomenal world (King 1995: 209).

Buddha-nature, as a pure essence residing in temporarily obscured sentient beings, is a considerable diversion from the negative language found in many other Buddhist texts, and also is a language that is strikingly similar to the very positions that Buddhists often argue against. Although the term “*tathāgathagarbha*” is a new usage in Mahāyāna literature, a similar concept, the innate nature of mind (*cittaprakṛti*), is found in early Buddhist texts, such as the *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* in the Pali Canon (Takasaki 1966: 34). Yet the unchanging, permanent status attributed to buddha-nature is certainly a radical departure from the language emphasizing impermanence within the discourses of early Buddhism. Such language demonstrates a decisive break from the early Buddhist triad of impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*), and selflessness (*anātman*). The *Sublime Continuum* even states: “The qualities of purity (*śubha*), self (*ātman*), bliss (*sukha*), and permanence (*nitya*) are the transcendent results ...” (I.35).

INTERPRETATIONS OF BUDDHA-NATURE

As a positive nature of mind and reality, buddha-nature is a distinctively Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, taking a place along with the Yogācāra doctrine of the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) and the universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of Madhyamaka. The doctrine of emptiness holds that there is no intrinsic nature in anything, even the buddha. Stated straightforwardly, emptiness is the denial of any and all grounds. In contrast to this *groundlessness*, the doctrine of buddha-nature on the surface seems to mean just the opposite, a groundless foundation or ground of being that is the positive counterpart of emptiness. The relationship between emptiness, as the transcendent nature of all things, and buddha-nature, as the immanent nature of the buddha in the world, is complex. How are emptiness and buddha-nature reconciled in Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions?

A key passage from the *Discourse Explaining the Intent* (*Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, ca. fourth century), an influential scripture for interpreting Buddhist texts, presents a way to understand this relationship and reconcile conflicting messages conveyed in Buddhist sūtras. The text outlines the teaching of the Buddha in terms of three distinct “wheels of doctrine,” which are divided according to the content of the discourse and the capacities of the audience (Powers 1995: 138–41). The sūtra describes the discourses of emptiness as the second wheel of doctrine and explicitly states that these are not the full disclosure of the Buddha’s teaching. While the sūtra does not explicitly mention buddha-nature, this idea comes to be interpreted by later Buddhist thinkers in terms of the distinctive teaching of the third wheel of doctrine.

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, the principle that all phenomena lack any intrinsic existence. The 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 intrinsic nature.

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. In addition to the Yogācāra doctrines laid out in the *Discourse Explaining the Intent*, the third wheel of doctrine also comes to be identified with teachings of the presence of buddha-nature. 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 Mahāyāna traditions stake their ground.

As buddha-nature is adopted into Yogācāra and the third wheel of the three-wheel scheme of the *Discourse Explaining the Intent*, this doctrine comes to be identified with the basic consciousness, the fundamental mind. The *Descent to Lanka Sūtra* (*Laṅkāvatārasūtra*), for instance, portrays the basic consciousness as a synonym for buddha-nature (Suzuki 1968: 190–93). The *Densely Arrayed Sūtra* (*Gandavyūhasūtra*) also describes buddha-nature in terms of the basic consciousness (alternatively translated here as “universal ground”):

The various grounds are the universal ground (*kun gzhi*; Skt. *ālaya*),
Which is also the buddha-nature.

The buddhas taught this [buddha-]nature
With the term “universal ground.”¹

As the intrinsic purity of mind, buddha-nature supplements a Yogācāra theory of mind, by offering a positive alternative to the theory of a basic consciousness that otherwise functions simply as the distorted cognitive structure of suffering. In this way, buddha-nature plays the role of not only the potential for an awakened mind, but the cognitive structure of awakening, too.

In a similar way that this doctrine is integrated into Yogācāra, it is also absorbed into the Madhyamaka tradition (the other main Mahāyāna school). Yet in Madhyamaka, rather than being assimilated with the basic consciousness, buddha-nature comes to be identified with emptiness, the nature of reality. Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650), an influential figure in this tradition, cites the *Descent to Lanka Sūtra* where the text’s interlocuter, Mahāmāti, asks the Buddha how buddha-nature is different from the Self proclaimed by non-Buddhists, and he answers:

Mahāmāti, my buddha-nature teaching is not similar to the non-Buddhists’ declaration of Self. Mahāmāti, the Tathāgatas, Arhats, and completely perfect Buddhas teach buddha-nature as the meaning of the words: emptiness, the authentic limit, nirvana, non-arising, wishlessness, etc. For the sake of immature beings who are frightened by selflessness, they teach by means of buddha-nature.

(Candrakīrti 1957: 196; see also Suzuki 1968: 68–69)

Here buddha-nature is said to be the meaning of emptiness, taught to those who are frightened by the teaching of no-self. This is echoed in a Tibetan commentary on the *Sublime Continuum*, where Gyeltsapjé (rGyal tshab rje, 1364–1432), a scholar in the Geluk (dGe lugs) tradition, says that what is really meant by buddha-nature is emptiness (Gyeltsapjé n.d.: 75a–78b). In this Madhyamaka interpretation, buddha-nature is taken to be a place-holder for emptiness, another way of articulating the lack of intrinsic nature of mind and reality.

Yet buddha-nature in Madhyamaka is not only interpreted as a way of expressing this lack of intrinsic nature. Buddha-nature is also taken to mean the other (positive) side of emptiness, and thus the doctrine comes to shape a Madhyamaka interpretation of emptiness in a positive light, in a way that parallels its place in a Yogācāra interpretation (as a positive foundation of mind). In Madhyamaka, buddha-nature comes to supplement the meaning of emptiness, as emptiness becomes delineated in two ways. That is, two meanings of emptiness are distinguished to account for two ways of being empty: (1) being empty of that which is extrinsic and (2) being empty of that which is intrinsic. To illustrate this distinction with a simple example, in the way that water can be empty of (i.e., lack) the quality of Cl (chlorine), but not lack the quality of H₂O, something can be (extrinsically) empty of something else without being (intrinsically) empty of itself. In Tibet, these two modes of emptiness come to be known as “self-emptiness” (*rang stong*) and “other-emptiness” (*gzhan stong*), respectively. While buddha-nature gets associated with both kinds of emptiness in Madhyamaka (and sometimes only with one and not the other), it is distinctively identified with the latter, other-emptiness, as a positive ground of being.

A key source for the distinction between these two ways of being empty is another stanza from the *Sublime Continuum*. This is frequently used to show that buddha-nature, the “basic element” (*kham*s; Skt. *dhātu*), is only empty in the sense that it lacks what it is not, but it is not empty of the positive qualities that constitute what it is:

The basic element is empty of those adventitious [phenomena] that have the character of separability,
But not empty of the unexcelled qualities that have the character of inseparability.
(I.155)

Here buddha-nature, as the ground of emptiness, is not simply a lack of intrinsic existence; it is what remains in emptiness when defilements are removed. As a positive foundation, buddha-nature supplements emptiness in Madhyamaka in a similar way as it supplements Yogācāra’s basic consciousness.

A positive interpretation of buddha-nature, as the pure nature of mind and reality, has been critized by the “critical Buddhism” movement in modern Japan. This doctrine has continued to be a flashpoint in a contemporary debate and has been contested as a reified absolute and as a misguided extrapolation of Śākyamuni’s intent that is not “authentically Buddhist” (see Hubbard & Swanson 1997). Robert Sharf, depicting this movement’s opposition to buddha-nature, shows that the doctrine has been seen not only as a result of intellectual stagnation, but of moral decline as well:

The dogma that ultimately all distinctions are illusory – that all beings are essentially equal from the perspective of their shared buddha-nature – is inherently reactionary in so far as it obviates the need for genuine equality, social justice, and political engagement.
(Sharf 1999: section I)

Despite these critical claims voiced from modern Japan, which reproduce medieval scholastic debates on this issue, it is precisely the *ethical* dimensions of buddha-nature that are put forward in the *Sublime Continuum*, the first commentarial treatise on this topic. There we find a verse that states that the teaching of this “basic element” is for the purpose of removing five faults:

The existence [of the basic element] is taught to relinquish these five faults: discouragement, disparagement of inferior beings, not apprehending the authentic, denigration of the authentic truth, considering ourselves superior.

(I.157)

Longchenpa (kLong chen pa, 1308–64), an important figure in the Nyingma (rNying ma) tradition (the “old school” of translations in Tibet), explains these five faults as follows:

If the essential nature of awakening is not seen to exist within oneself, then these faults will arise: (1) one may become discouraged, [thinking] “someone like myself cannot become a buddha,” and not generate the mind of awakening; (2) even if [the awakened mind is] generated, one may disparage others, [thinking] “I am a bodhisattva, others are ordinary,” which will hinder the attainment of the higher path; (3) through holding onto the extreme of emptiness, one will not engage in the ultimate nature of the expanse, and thus not apprehend the authentic; (4) due to falling to an extreme of eternalism or annihilationism, one will disparage the authentic doctrine; (5) by not seeing other sentient beings and oneself as equal, one will incur the faults of holding onto self and other.

(Longchenpa 1996a: 902–3).

Rather than a reactionary ideology that legitimates egoism and oppression, the doctrine of buddha-nature does just the opposite: it helps to overcome obstacles to liberation like discouragement, pride, misunderstanding the self and emptiness, and inequality. Longchenpa shows how buddha-nature serves as a remedy to these faults:

By knowing that such a basic element exists as spontaneously present in oneself and others, one will be able to accomplish great benefit for others: (1) one will be joyous, knowing that the accomplishment of liberating one’s mind is without difficulty; (2) with respect for all sentient beings as buddhas – in addition to not inflicting harm or hurting them – one will benefit them; and one will be able to accomplish the benefit of others through developing: (3) supreme knowledge that realizes the ultimate expanse; (4) wisdom that sees the abiding reality; and (5) the maṇḍala of limitless love.

(Longchenpa 1996a: 904–5)

Here we see a kind of functionalist explanation of the theory of buddha-nature: it is taught for its role in overcoming obstacles on the path to awakening. Thus, the doctrine is depicted as another skilful means in the practice of Mahāyāna, instrumental to the development of such qualities as joy, respect, understanding, and love. As an integral part of the Mahāyāna tradition, the concept of buddha-nature is portrayed as a means to cultivate compassion and insight, which are the two aspects of the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*), the method and wisdom at the heart of the Mahāyāna.

THE LOGIC OF BUDDHA-NATURE

A stanza from the *Sublime Continuum* offers three reasons to show that buddha-nature exists in beings. It reads:

Because the body of the perfect buddha is radiant,
Because thusness is indivisible,
Because of possessing heritage;
Therefore, all beings always possess the essential nature of buddha.

(I.28)

Ngok Loden Sherap (rNgog bLo ldan shes rab, 1059–1109), who translated this text from Sanskrit to Tibetan, explained the three reasons for the existence of buddha-nature respectively in terms of (1) effect, (2) nature, and (3) cause (Ngok 2006: 331). The first verse of the stanza puts forward a reason for the existence of buddha-nature through proving the cause from its *effect*, like knowing fire from smoke. That is, if a buddha is acknowledged, an unconditioned and “radiant” state that is the culminating effect of the journey of a sentient being, then the cause, the unconditioned and radiant nature, must also permeate beings.

This first reason is an argument based on the presumption of the existence of a buddha, a kind of *teleological argument* for the immanence of the divine. Of course this is not the same kind of teleological argument we find in the argument from design – inferring a designer from the presence of complexity (presumed to be the creation of God) – but I wish to draw out a family resemblance between these two kinds of analysis. Here I aim to show how arguments for buddha-nature attempt to reconcile reason with faith in a way that parallels ideas in the philosophical theology of Abrahamic traditions. There are of course significant differences between these distinctive contexts – given the fact that Buddhist traditions are not driven by concerns revolving around a creator God, and indeed reject such a notion in favor of dependent origination and emptiness. Nevertheless, by pointing out parallels here, I want to claim a place for Buddhist thought in a more global, less culturally specific way of thinking about issues in the philosophy of religion.

As for a Buddhist version of a teleological argument for buddha-nature, it can run something like this: if a future is acknowledged when beings are united with a perfect and unchanging divinity (or buddha), then that unchanging divinity must also in some way participate in the present world because any change between pre- and post-union would by definition contradict the unchanging divinity. In the way things appear, however, this may or may not be realized due to the presence of adventitious defilements that obscure this reality for a sentient being, yet the potential of being a buddha exists nevertheless.

The second verse of the stanza from the *Sublime Continuum* quoted above, ‘Because thusness is indivisible,’ proclaims the indivisibility of thusness (*de bzhin nyid*; Skt. *tathatā*), the nature of reality. This verse, which Ngok characterized as evoking *nature* rather than an *effect*, makes a case for the presence of the buddha in the world of beings due to there being no distinctions in thusness, the nature of reality. Since there cannot be the slightest qualitative difference in the nature of what is unconditioned, the nature of a buddha cannot be different from that of a sentient being. Here we are reminded of the distinctive Mahāyāna interpretation of the inseparability of cyclic existence (*samsāra*) and nirvana, which implicates the ultimate indivisibility of buddhas and sentient beings.

The reason evoking the indivisible nature in this second verse can be seen as a kind of *cosmological argument* for buddha-nature, an argument based on the presumption of metaphysical unity (as opposed to a metaphysical assumption of real, separate things with external relations). That is, it posits the idea that since “suchness” (or nature) is unchanging, there is continuity – or a common ground – between sentient beings and buddhas. While

defilements may obscure this reality for a sentient being, defilements are adventitious; they are accidental and contingent – not inherent within the nature of beings. The nature of the buddha, however, pervades all beings. Thus, in essence all beings presently participate in the changeless and timeless nature of the buddha.

The third verse, “Because of possessing heritage,” states that all beings have the potential to be a buddha because it is their *heritage* (*gotra*). The buddha-nature, as the heritage of all beings, is something like a divine spark within them, or in Ngok’s terms, the *cause* of a buddha. As Parkum and Stultz put it, “We all have Buddha Nature ... we are born with Original Blessing, not Original Sin” (Parkum & Stultz 2003: 282).

The third verse can be seen to put forward a kind of *ontological argument* for buddha-nature, one based on the presumption that sentient beings have what it takes to be buddhas. This of course is quite different from the “ontological argument” popularized by Anselm (1033–1109), and it is based on quite different presumptions, too: namely, there is no ontological rift between God (or buddha) and world (or sentient being). That is to say, sentient beings can become buddhas because they are not ontologically distinct. Since everyone possesses it, buddha-nature presumes liberation and buddhahood for all, unlike the claim that some beings are eternally damned to suffer in cyclic existence, as in the Yogācāra doctrine of the “outcastes” (*icchantika*) who lack this heritage.

Mipam (Mi pham, 1842–1912), a late Tibetan commentator on buddha-nature thought, summarized the reasons for buddha-nature from the *Sublime Continuum* as follows:

In this way, (1) the existence of the cause, heritage, is essentially not distinct from the Truth Body (*chos sku*; Skt. *dharmakāya*) at the time of the fruition, and (2) if the Truth Body at the time of the fruition exists, then at the time of sentient beings it also necessarily exists without increase or decrease, and (3) although there is the imputation of causality and temporality, in reality the expanse of reality is one taste within the immutable essence; the three reasons establish that all sentient beings have buddha-nature due to the authentic path of reasoning that is engaged by the power of fact.

(1987b: 583–84)

In this way, he puts forward reasons “by the power of fact” to support buddha-nature. Inferential reason is not typically associated with the doctrine of buddha-nature, which tends to be taken as an immanently practical doctrine, or treated simply as an article of faith. Indeed, the *Sublime Continuum* states that the ultimate truth is understood by faith alone: “The ultimate truth of the self-existing is understood only by faith; the blazing disk of the sun cannot be seen by the blind” (I.153). While reasoned arguments for buddha-nature may be subordinate to its practical purposes in the Buddhist tradition, the process of establishing its reality through reason, and (reflexively) understanding it, is not necessarily “bad logic,” but is arguably circular by necessity. This feature of logical circularity is a feature of pantheistic strands of religion that do not presume an unbridgeable, ontological gulf between God and world or between a buddha and sentient being.²

The point I wish to raise here is not only that metaphysical presumptions shape an inquiry into reality (or that they are embedded within any inquiry into the nature of reality), but that the process of reasoning into reality itself becomes a phenomenological project in the end. That is, the structure of reasoning into the nature of reality is reflexive: such reasoning always entails an inquiry into the inquiring subject. In other words, there is no abstract domain of pure logic here; subjectivity is always already an integral part of the equation.

There is no way to look into the nature of reality from the outside; querying nature must always act upon itself. This nonduality is highlighted in the discourses of tantra, which we will discuss below as we consider the doctrine of buddha-nature in light of pantheism, a doctrine that likewise presumes no duality between God and world.

BUDDHA-NATURE AND TANTRA

Buddha-nature, as the pure nature of mind and reality, is a theme that extends from Mahāyāna into Vajrayāna, or tantra. Buddha-nature has even been called “what joins *sūtra* and tantra” (Mipam 1987a: 453). While many of the practices of the Vajrayāna are also shared with Mahāyāna and are not different from other Mahāyāna rituals,³ the practical application of this theory in Vajrayāna takes on a distinctive form.

According to Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419), the renowned forefather of the Geluk tradition, what distinguishes 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. He also said that Vajrayāna is called the “resultant vehicle” due to taking the effect as the path (Tsongkhapa 1995: 15–16). In the “causal vehicle” of *sūtra* one relates to the buddha as a future goal of a causal process of transformation from a sentient being to a buddha. However, in the resultant vehicle of tantra the approach is different; one does not see a separate buddha “out there” to be attained in a distant future; the buddha is approached as an immanently present reality accessible *right now*.

According to Longchenpa, in the “causal vehicle” one sees buddha-nature as a cause that will result in the future event of becoming a buddha, while in the “resultant vehicle” (a.k.a. “tantra”) buddha-nature is conceived as the immanently present reality, qualitatively indivisible from its effect, the buddha (Longchenpa 1996b: 1169–70). Not all Buddhist sects follow Longchenpa’s formulation *vis-à-vis* buddha-nature, but perceiving the qualities of the buddha here and now is an essential part of the practice of tantra not only in his tradition, but across all major Buddhist sects in Tibet. The importance of buddha-nature in tantra is reflected in the words of Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama:

The substance of all these paths [*Guhyasamāja*, *Kālacakra*, Great Perfection] comes down to the fundamental innate mind of clear light. Even the *sūtras* which serve as the basis for Maitreya’s commentary in his *Sublime Continuum of the Great Vehicle* [*Uttaratantra*] have this same fundamental mind as the basis of their thought in their discussion of the Buddha nature, or essence of a One Gone Thus (*Tathāgatagarbha*, *De bzhi gshegs pa’i snying po*), although the full mode of its practice is not described as it is in the systems of Highest Yoga Tantra.

(Dalai Lama 1984: 224; emphasis mine)

Thus, the underlying philosophy behind the practice of deity yoga can be said to be the presence of buddha-nature within being(s).

The significance of buddha-nature is evident in the *Secret Essence Tantra* (*Guhyagarbhatantra*), which is 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 traditions of tantra in Tibet, as well as Buddhist traditions across East Asia.

In China, for instance, in the seventh and eighth centuries (around the same time as the composition of the *Secret Essence Tantra*), buddha-nature came to be interpreted not only as the heritage of sentient beings, but as a quality of insentient objects as well. Robert Sharf has argued that “Zhaozhou’s dog,” the most famous kōan in the Chan/Zen tradition – where a monk asked, “Does a dog have buddha-nature or not?” and the master said, “Not!” (Jp. *mu*) – is rooted in the historic context of a Chinese debate over precisely the status of buddha-nature in insentient things (Sharf 1999: section IV). As Mahāyāna Buddhism spread through Asia, the direction that the interpretation of buddha-nature took exemplifies a distinctive turn toward the affirmation of an immanent absolute.

I believe that “pantheism” is a useful category with which to make sense of the place of buddha-nature in this turn. Although there may be a variety of pantheisms, in *Concepts of Deity*, H. P. Owen characterizes “pantheists” in general as follows: “‘Pantheism’ (which is derived from the Greek words for ‘all’ and ‘God’) signifies the belief that every existing entity is, in some sense, divine” (1971: 65). A definition from the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* reads: “Pantheism essentially involves two assertions: that everything that exists constitutes a unity and that this all-inclusive unity is divine” (MacIntyre 1971: 34). A pantheistic view undoes the duality between the divine and the world, as Michael Levine states in his pioneering study, *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity*: “Taken as an alternative to, and denial of, theism and atheism, pantheists deny that what they mean by God (i.e. an all-inclusive Unity) is completely transcendent. They deny that God is ‘totally other’ than the world” (1997: 2).

In the doctrine of buddha-nature we see a major departure from the duality of God/world in classical theism. In the words of H. P. Owen: “The God of classical theism is *transcendent*. This adjective means ... that God is substantially distinct from the world ... Conversely the world is not in any sense a part of God” (1971: 34–35). A problem with classical theism is that such a notion of the infinite, which precludes the finite, assumes an unbridgeable ontological gulf between God and the world. Pantheism denies this ontological rift. Pantheism and the doctrine of divine immanence bridge the gap between God and world (see Levine 1997: 6–8).

We have seen how the Mahāyāna doctrine of buddha-nature in the *Sublime Continuum* presents the nature of the buddha as immanent, not a buddha *out there*, separated in space. In tantra, the nature of buddha is not presented as separate in time either, as the goal is not something to be attained in a distant future, but is an immanent reality *right now*. Levine echoes this sentiment in his depiction of the “goal” of pantheism: “The pantheist eschews any notion of their [*sic*] being further goals; for example, the theist’s beatific vision; personal immortality; *nirvana*; and even Spinoza’s ‘blessedness,’ interpreted as something otherworldly” (1997: 347). Yet Levine, in his otherwise excellent study of the topic, fails to adequately account for Mahāyāna Buddhism in his characterization of pantheistic practice.

For instance, he states that “The practice of pantheism has never been associated with ritual practice” (Levine 1997: 309). This is quite ironic given the fact that Buddhist scholars such as Tsongkhapa identify the traditions of tantra exclusively with *ritual practice* (rather than with a distinctive philosophical view), and in light of Zen traditions, where we find a profusion of ritual along with a vast literature of anti-intellectual rhetoric. Yet Levine even speculates that ritual may be incompatible with pantheistic belief (1997: 311). Levine

furthermore claims that “in pantheism there is no apparent community of believers organised around their common (though not identical) beliefs by an established body of religious teaching and scripture” (289). Yet the community of Buddhists who study and practice Zen or the *Secret Essence Tantra* clearly have organized communities, and living communities at that.

The category of “pantheism” (as an alternative to atheism or “non-theism”) can shed light on important dimensions of the Buddhist tradition, particularly those traditions for which buddha-nature holds a central place. As with pantheism, buddha-nature (and its apotheosis in tantra) is a contested doctrine that shares a tenuous relationship with predominant institutional and orthodox forms of its home tradition. Moreover, it may be that the “antinomian” doctrines of pantheism and buddha-nature have been and continue to be embedded in their host traditions in a fundamentally constitutive way (despite the rhetoric to the contrary).

I wish to argue that the pantheistic “theology” of buddha-nature functions in Buddhism in a way that is parallel to that of pantheism. Pantheism as a category and as a doctrine is often disparaged, misunderstood, and misrepresented. Pantheism in Northwest European traditions has historically been rejected, not because it is irrational, but because it is pagan. Hegel and Spinoza were labeled “pantheists” and even atheists, although they did not describe their own views in those terms. Hegel even denied that Spinoza was an atheist; rather, he said that Spinoza had “too much God” (Hegel 1896: 282). While there may be ambiguity about what constitutes a pantheist, and even less certainty about what pantheistic practice entails, I would like to resuscitate this term to shed light on an important resonance in Buddhist thought, by thinking of the doctrine of buddha-nature as a version of pantheism.

In considering buddha-nature in terms of pantheism, we should remember that the term “theology” (*theologia*) predates classical Christian theology; it was used by Greeks, including Plato. Thus, I not only feel that we *can* speak of Buddhist thought using this term, but that it can be helpful to do so. By speaking of “theology” in a Buddhist context, I have in mind something like Paul Tillich’s delineation: “The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us” (1951–57: 1:12). The object of *ultimate concern* for Buddhists is nirvana, or the state of the buddha; hence, propositions regarding the buddha are theological when understood along the lines of Tillich’s use of the term. To deny Buddhists an ultimate concern, or to not speak of ultimate concern in the context of Buddhism (and thus to not speak of Buddhism theologically), denies the Buddhist claims to nirvana and the buddha.

Moreover, I believe that buddha-nature can be fruitfully considered in parallel to Tillich’s “ground of being” theology: “Many confusions in the doctrine of God and many apologetic weaknesses could be avoided if God were understood first of all as being-itself or as the ground of being” (1951–57: 1:235). The positive nature of emptiness, and the pregnant potential of buddha-nature, is reflected in Tillich’s discussion of “being”: “The same word, the emptiest of all concepts when taken as an abstraction, becomes the most meaningful of all concepts when it is understood as the power of being in everything that has being” (1951–57: 2:11). The buddha-nature, like Tillich’s “God” and “being,” is not abstract; at least it is not limited to an abstraction. With Tillich, we may say that the “buddha” in buddha-nature is neither an abstract entity nor a person, but that the buddha is certainly not less than a person. Rather, the buddha, like Tillich’s “being,” is suprapersonal (*überpersönlich*) (see Tillich 1951–57: 2:12). Furthermore, in his *Theology of Culture*, Tillich stated that:

Man discovers *himself* when he discovers God; he discovers something that is identical to himself although it transcends him infinitely, something from which he is estranged, but from which he never has been nor can be separated.

(1964: 10)

It is not surprising that Tillich has been labelled a “pantheist” for making this claim (Westphal 1998: 159–60). As we can see with pantheism and the doctrine of buddha-nature, the infinite is embodied in the finite. The infinite is not pitted against the finite, but the finite is a part of the infinite, and necessarily so. As Hegel (who had been labeled a “pantheist”) stated: “The real infinite, far from being a mere transcendence of the finite, always involves the absorption of the finite into its own fuller nature” (Hegel 1873: 78). Compare this sense of the infinite with the infinite of classical theism in Owen’s statement: “The ‘in’ in ‘infinite’ is to be taken as a negative prefix. It means that God is non-finite. In order to arrive at a true notion of him we must deny to him all those limitations that affect created being” (13). Such a notion of the infinity of God negates the world and makes God an imagined “other” that is separate from the finite world. This kind of dualism has had the consequence that God becomes valorized at the expense of a devalued world. Nietzsche proclaimed that this kind of theism is effectively atheism; his words are echoed by Patrick Masterson:

The atheism of our day, in its reflective philosophical expression, consists chiefly in asserting the impossibility of the coexistence of finite and infinite being. It is maintained that the affirmation of God as infinite being necessarily implies the devaluation of finite being, and in particular, the dehumanisation of man.

(1971: 1)

Such a devaluation of finite being is not limited to the modern world, where “the death of God has accompanied the slow deadening of the universe” (Keller 2014: 73). We can see similar instances of the devaluation of body and world in other forms of South Asian Buddhist traditions, including medieval Mahāyāna and modern Theravāda. The doctrine of buddha-nature, as a pantheist affirmation of the absolute, can be seen as an alternative to the denigration of being in a Buddhist context. That is, the doctrine of buddha-nature is an alternative to the life-denying doctrines of unrelenting *suffering*, to the basic consciousness that only perpetuates a cycle of existence in distortion in a Yogācāra theory of mind, and an alternative to a Madhyamaka doctrine of ultimate truth that is simply a static emptiness, a mere lack of intrinsic nature.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen how buddha-nature is interpreted in various ways within Mahāyāna Buddhism. Buddha-nature is a complex and slippery topic, and it takes on several meanings in Buddhist traditions. As the nature of mind and potential for awakening, buddha-nature also can be seen to provide the philosophical underpinning of Mahāyāna, including the practices of Zen and tantra.

We have seen how this doctrine is identified with both the basic consciousness of Yogācāra and with emptiness in Madhyamaka and how it supplements both of these Mahāyāna schools with a positive ground of being. As the presence of the buddha in the world, buddha-nature is not only interpreted as a groundless emptiness (the lack of intrinsic

nature in things), but also as the ground of being as well. This presence of the buddha in the world reaches its apotheosis in the theory and practice of tantra, where buddha-nature arguably functions as the theoretical and practical foundation of Vajrayāna. This presence, I have suggested, can be understood as a form of “pantheism.”

Buddha-nature, like pantheism, is a doctrine of immanence. Thinking about buddha-nature in terms of pantheism can shed light on important facets of its place in Buddhist traditions. I hope to have shown this here, and to have sparked a new direction in thinking about buddha-nature, one that will enrich further conversations about Buddhism and pantheism.

NOTES

- 1 *Densely Arrayed Sūtra (Gandavyūhasūtra)* Peking edition #778, vol. 29: 152.2.1.
- 2 Such a circularity in the case of buddha-nature is articulated well in Paul Tillich’s “mystical apriori,” a foundation of dialectical inquiry in the context of his Christian theology. We will consider Tillich’s theology in relation to buddha-nature below, but a statement he makes is relevant here:

In both the empirical and metaphysical approaches, as well as in the much more numerous cases of their mixture, it can be observed that the a priori which directs the induction and the deduction is a type of mystical experience. Whether it is “being itself” (Scholastics) or “universal substance” (Spinoza), whether it is “beyond subjectivity and objectivity” (James) or the “identity of spirit and nature” (Schelling), whether it is “universe” (Schleiermacher) or “cosmic whole” (Hocking), whether it is “value creating process” (Whitehead) or “progressive integration” (Wieman), whether it is “absolute spirit” (Hegel) or “cosmic person” (Brightman) – each of these concepts is based on an immediate experience of something ultimate in value and being of which one can become intuitively aware. Idealism and naturalism differ very little in their starting point ... Both are dependent on a point of identity between the experiencing subject and the ultimate ... The theological concepts of both idealists and naturalists are rooted in a “mystical apriori,” an awareness of something that transcends the cleavage between subject and object. And if in the course of a “scientific” procedure this a priori is discovered, its discovery is only possible because it was present from the very beginning. This is the circle which no religious philosopher can escape. And it is by no means a vicious one. Every understanding of spiritual things (*Geistwissenschaft*) is circular.

(Tillich 1951–57: 1:9)

- 3 Indeed, if we had access to living communities of Buddhist Mahāyāna practice in India like we have in East Asia and Tibet, we can reasonably speculate that we would find many rituals (e.g., *buddhānusr̥ti*) that resemble Vajrayāna practices.

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