

Grounds of Buddha-Nature in Tibet

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국문요약

본고는 티벳에서 구축된 중관, 유식, 그리고 불성(*tathāgatagarbha*) 교리의 통합을 논한다. 불성은 독특하게도 근본식(*ālayavijñāna*)에 대한 유식교리의 측면과 함께 중관의 보편적인 공의 측면을 취하는 대승불교의 교리이다. 실제의 근본적인 바탕으로서, 불성은 (중관에서의 경우) 공의 긍정적인 측면과 동일시 되고, (유가행파의 경우) 아뢰야식과 동화된다. 또한 내재적인 청정한 마음으로서, 불성은 완전한 깨달음의 가능성으로서 원인 역할을 한다.

불성은 (마음과 실제의 기반을 긍정하는) 유가행파의 이해와 유사한 방식으로, 긍정적인 측면에서 공의 중관적인 이해를 형성하게 되었다. 불성은 고통의

왜곡된 인지 체계로서 기능할 뿐만 아니라, 식 이론에 대해 긍정적인 대안을 제공함으로써 마음과 실제에 대한 유식 이론을 보강한다. 따라서 불성은 성불의 가능성 뿐만 아니라 깨달음에 대한 인지 내용이기도 하다.

티벳에서는 불성의 이해가 구조적으로 동일한 방식으로 중관사상과 만나는 것을 볼 수 있다. 불성과 연계되어 중관학파에서 공의 개념은 ‘자공’, 즉 내적 본성의 결여에서, ‘타공’, 즉 남겨진 청정한 바탕으로 전환한다. 불성 교의의 특징에 대한 기술에서도 우리는 역시 유사한 전환을 볼 수 있다. 즉 본식, 의타성, 그리고 자기인식과 같은 왜곡된 바탕이 청정하고 영지적인 바탕 내부에서 발생했다는 인과적인 서술로 다시 기술되는 것이다.

주제어: 불성, 유식, 중관, 의타성, 아뢰야식, 자기인식

I. Introduction

This paper discusses syntheses forged in Tibet among the doctrines of Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). Buddha-nature is a distinctively Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, taking a place along side of the Yogācāra doctrine of the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) and the universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of Madhyamaka. As a fundamental ground of reality, buddha-nature comes to be identified with a positive side of emptiness (in the case of Madhyamaka) and is assimilated with the basic consciousness (in the case of Yogācāra) as well. As the intrinsic purity of mind, buddha-nature also plays a causal role as the potential for complete awakening.

Buddha-nature 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 and reality). Buddha-nature supplements a Yogācāra theory of mind and reality by offering a positive alternative to a theory of consciousness that otherwise functions simply as the distorted cognitive structure of suffering. It thus is not only the potential for an awakened mind, but the cognitive content of awakening, too.

II. From Emptiness to Buddha-Nature: the Ground of the Groundless

The doctrine of universal emptiness advances the claim 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 seems to convey 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 a fundamental axis around which Buddhist thought revolves in Tibet.

Offering his interpretation of the relationship between emptiness and buddha-nature, Candrakīrti (*ca.* 7th c.), an influential interpreter of Nāgārjuna in India, cited the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* where the Buddha's interlocuter, Mahāmati, asked the Buddha how buddha-nature is different from the Self proclaimed by non-Buddhists, and the Buddha answered as follows:

Mahāmati, my buddha-nature teaching is not similar to the non-Buddhists' declaration of Self. Mahāmati, 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.¹⁾

Here buddha-nature is said to be the meaning of emptiness, taught to those who are frightened by the teaching of no-self. Another influential interpreter of Nāgārjuna, Bhāviveka (*ca.* 6th c.), also claimed that "Possessing buddha-nature' is so called because emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness,

1) Candrakīrti, *Auto-commentary on the Madhyamakāvātāra*, 196; see also English trans. in Suzuki, 68-9.

and so forth exist in the continua of all sentient beings.”²⁾ These Madhyamaka views are echoed by Gyeltsapjé (1364-1432), a Tibetan scholar in the Geluk (*dge lugs*) tradition, who said that what is really meant by buddha-nature is emptiness.³⁾ This view was reiterated by Khedrupjé (1385-1438), another Geluk scholar and direct student of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419).⁴⁾ Tsongkhapa, the forefather of the Geluk tradition, did not explicitly describe buddha-nature in this way, but what came to be the orthodox interpretation of this school in the words of his students was that buddha-nature is a place-holder for emptiness, another way of articulating the lack of intrinsic nature of mind and reality.

Yet buddha-nature is not only interpreted in Tibet as a way of expressing a lack of intrinsic nature. Buddha-nature is also taken to mean another (positive) side of emptiness, as emptiness (and buddha-nature) comes to be delineated in two distinct ways. Two meanings of buddha-nature can be distinguished in parallel with two ways of being empty: (1) being empty of that which is intrinsic and (2) being empty of that which is extrinsic.

A key source for a distinction between two ways of being empty is a stanza from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, another text associated with Madhyamaka (and even Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka) in Tibet. This stanza is frequently used to show that buddha-nature, the “basic element” (Tib. *khams*; Skt. *dhātu*), is only empty in the sense that it lacks what it is not, but is not empty of the positive qualities that constitute what it is:

2) Bhāviveka, *Tarkajvāla*, D.3856, 169a.

3) Gyeltsapjé, *Commentary on the Uttaratantra*, 75a-78b.

4) Khedrupjé, *Opening the Eyes of the Fortunate*, 396.

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.⁵⁾

As the basic element, buddha-nature is not simply a lack of intrinsic existence; it is what remains when defilements are removed. This interpretation is also found in the words of Nāgārjuna's *Dharmadhātustotra*:

All the sūtras demonstrating emptiness
That the Victorious One taught
Were all uttered to avert afflictions,
Not to diminish the basic element.⁶⁾

That is, emptiness undermines what perpetuates false distortions (i.e., afflictions), yet does not undermine what is true (i.e., buddha-nature).

To clarify this point, the two modes of emptiness can be distinguished in the way that water can be empty of (i.e., lack) the quality of Cl (chlorine), but not lack the quality of H₂O. That is to say, something can be (extrinsically) empty of something else without being (intrinsically) empty of itself. These two modes of emptiness, specifically concerning the ultimate truth, come to be known in Tibet as “other-emptiness” (*gzhan stong*) and “self-emptiness”

5) Maitreya, *Ratnagotravibhāga* I.155; see also, Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga*, 301.

6) Nāgārjuna, *Dharmadhātustotra* v. 22.

(*rang stong*), respectively. While buddha-nature gets associated with both kinds of emptiness in Tibetan traditions of Madhyamaka (and sometimes only with one and not the other), as a positive ground of being it is distinctively identified with the former, other-emptiness. Other-emptiness is most forcibly argued by Dölpopa (1292-1361), who described buddha-nature as the ground of all phenomena: “This which is thusness, the buddha-nature—having many synonyms such as reality (*chos nyid*), and so forth—is the ground of all phenomena.”⁷⁾ In this way, buddha-nature, as a positive foundation, supplements emptiness in Tibetan interpretations of Madhyamaka.

III. From Yogācāra to Buddha-Nature: Transformation of the Basis

Madhyamaka isn't the only Mahāyāna tradition into which the discourses of buddha-nature are integrated, for buddha-nature comes into Yogācāra traditions as well. In a way that parallels how emptiness is transcribed with a positive meaning and associated with buddha-nature in Tibet, buddha-nature has a similar role to play in the interpretation of Yogācāra there as well. Although “Yogācāra” as a distinct school in Tibet is generally framed as “mind-only,” which is inferior to Madhyamaka, the theory and practice inspired by Yogācāra plays an integral role in tantric traditions in Tibet, along with buddha-nature.

In particular, three signature Yogācāra doctrines stand out with distinctively

7) Dölpopa, *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, 166.

positive roles, transformed in the process of assimilation with the doctrine of buddha-nature. The three topics, which we will consider in turn, are: (1) the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), (2) the dependent nature (*paratantra*), and (3) self-awareness (*svaṣvedana*). All three of these doctrines play pivotal roles in Yogācāra accounts of the causal story of the world, and share a similar fate (in taking a positive turn) as we see in the case of emptiness in (non-Geluk) Buddhist traditions in Tibet. The overturning of these Yogācāra categories is marked by a rewriting of both the nature of things and the narrative of causality.

We have seen how the assimilation with buddha-nature accentuates a positive side of emptiness in the case of interpretations of Madhyamaka. A similar shift in the causal account of these key Yogācāra doctrines can be seen as buddha-nature is integrated with them. That is to say, we find stories of transformation written within a positive, gnostic ground across topics of Yogācāra (as with the basic consciousness, the dependent nature, and self-awareness) as we see in the case of Madhyamaka (as with “other-emptiness”).

Firstly, as for the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), it is a doctrine used in Yogācāra texts to account for the continuity of habitual patterns and causal processes that perpetuate life in *saṃsāra*. Like self-awareness, the basic *consciousness* is nominally a “consciousness” (*vijñāna*), and so can easily be misidentified as merely the subjective pole of perception. Yet the basic consciousness is the source of not only the subjective representations of mind, but also of objective representations of bodies, environments, and materials as well. The *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* states: “Mahāmāti, the basic consciousness simultaneously reveals forms of body, place, and material objects

(*longs spyod*) appearing to mind.”⁸) Also, Asaṅga in his *Mahāyānasamgraha* states: “The nature of the basic consciousness is the resultant cognition with all potentialities; it comprises all bodies of the three realms and all existences.”⁹) The basic consciousness is thus a structure that is not only internal, nor only mental, but a causal process that is the source and content of the attribution of subjects and objects. As a kind of absolute idealism, the basic consciousness is the structure of the world. Yet without buddha-nature, it is the structure of solely a *distorted* world.

Like the basic consciousness, the dependent nature (*paratantra*) is structured by dependent arising and is another category used in Yogācāra to account for the world. The framework of three natures shows the incongruity of our conceptions of the world with the way things are. This is because the dependent nature represents the inexpressible foundation of the way things are (since once it is expressed, it is the conceptual, imagined nature); the world as conceived is the imagined nature (*parikalpita*), and the lack of the imagined nature in the dependent nature is the consummate nature (*pariniṣpanna*).¹⁰) The dependent nature is also associated with the distorted mind and the basic consciousness, says Asaṅga in his *Mahāyānasamgraha*: “What is the characteristic of the dependent nature? It is a cognition comprised by unreal imagination concerning the basic consciousness potentiality.”¹¹)

8) *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, D.0107, 77a. See also Asaṅga, *Yogācārabhūmi* (*rnal 'byor spyod pa 'i sa rnam par gtan la dbab pa bsdu ba*), D.4038, 7a; English trans. in Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious*, 185. See also, Mipam, *Gateway to Scholarship*, 21.

9) Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.21; *theg pa chen po 'i bsdu pa*, D. 4048, 7a.

10) See, for instance, Maitreya, *Madhyāntavibhāga* I.5; English trans. in D'Amato, *Maitreya's Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes*, 120.

Thus, the dependent nature and the basic consciousness can be seen as related notions that share structurally parallel functions.

A metaphor for the dependent nature used in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* is a colorless crystal.¹²⁾ The mind, like a crystal, reflects whatever is around it: it looks like a ruby when placed on a red cloth, a sapphire on a blue cloth, *et cetera*. The backdrop of the crystal is integral to its appearance. In the same way, the mind and the appearing world are dependently interconnected. Yet a number of questions remain in this account: does a crystal (or mind) remain in a pure, colorless glory, independent of a backdrop of an environment to reflect? Or do cognitions, like crystals, always only subsist as long as they are embedded in a world of appearances? And if so, are appearances necessarily illusory, fueled solely by distorting habits? Or can there be pure appearances, arising as pure expressions of gnosis? The different answers given to these questions reflect different interpretations of Yogācāra (e.g., the so-called “stained” and “stainless” False Aspectarian views), and mark a “tantric turn” in the interpretation of Yogācāra: from phenomenal appearance interpreted as mere distortions that come to a close in liberation to phenomenal appearance interpreted as the creative dynamics of gnosis, or buddha-nature.

A similar story of a transfigured causal foundation can be found in the case of self-awareness as well. That is to say, self-awareness can also be

11) Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* II.2; *theg pa chen po 'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 13a.

12) This example is taken from the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, chapter VI. See Tibetan and English translation in Powers, *Wisdom of Buddha*, 84-87. The crystal metaphor is also used by Vācaspati-Miśra in his commentary on the *Yogasūtras*, and Śāṅkara on the *Vedānta Sūtra* (III.2.11); see Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 520n54.

seen to pivot between distorted duality and pure singularity (or nonduality) in a way that parallels the shifting roles of the basic consciousness and the dependent nature. Self-awareness, as it is formulated by Dignāga and developed by Dharmakīrti and his followers, is an important feature of the logico-epistemological tradition of Yogācāra that extends into Tibet. As is the case with the basic consciousness and the dependent nature, self-awareness functions as an indubitable and indefinable ground that is the content and means by which the world unfolds. Also, self-awareness is not simply the subjective aspect of an apprehension, but is the unified field of a subject-object presentation of the world. Dharmakīrti expressed the nature of this awareness as follows: “Awareness is undifferentiated, but its appearance is differentiated into two. That being the case, that dualistic appearances must be cognitive confusion.”¹³⁾ Śāntarakṣita also described self-awareness this way: “Being singular without parts, it cannot be divided into three [the knower, the known, and the knowing]. This self-awareness is not constituted by action and agent.”¹⁴⁾ These portrayals of self-awareness are not forms of subjective idealism, but rather, a kind of absolute or “objective idealism.”¹⁵⁾ Nevertheless, the dualistic, subject-object structure of self-awareness, like the dependent nature and the basic consciousness, rests on a distorted structure because it is presented dualistically as the product of distorting habitual patterns from beginningless time.

13) Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇavārttika* 3.212, translation from Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*, 406.

14) Śāntarakṣita, *Madhyamakālaṅkāra*, v. 17.

15) On the difference between subjective and absolute idealisms, see Fredrick Beiser, *German Idealism*, 370-72.

Buddha-nature overturns the causal story at the foundations of each of these Yogācāra doctrines by replacing the causal agent of karma with gnosis. We can clearly see in Buddhist Tibet the way that buddha-nature supplements each of these foundational Yogācāra doctrines. Firstly, as for the basic consciousness, it had already been identified with the buddha-nature in Mahāyāna Sūtras like the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, which describe buddha-nature in terms of the basic consciousness (alternatively translated here as “universal ground”):

The various grounds are the universal ground (Tib. *kun gzhi*, Skt. *ālaya*),
Which is also the buddha-nature.
The buddhas taught this [buddha-]nature
With the term “universal ground.”¹⁶⁾

In eighth-century Tibet, Yeshe De affirmed this continuity when he stated: “When the buddha-nature has not become clearly manifest, it is called ‘the universal ground’; when it has become clearly manifest, it is called ‘the Truth Body’ (Tib. *chos sku*, Skt. *dharmakāya*).”¹⁷⁾ In the fourteenth century, Dölpopa made a further distinction between the basic consciousness (*kun gzhi rnam shes*, *ālaya-vijñāna*) and the basic gnosis (*kun gzhi ye shes*, **ālaya-jñāna*), a difference between distorted, ordinary consciousness and pure gnosis,¹⁸⁾ which is buddha-nature. Later in the fourteenth century,

16) *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, P.778, vol. 29, 152.2.1.

17) Yeshe De, *Distinctions of View*, D. 4360, 218b.

18) Dölpopa, *The Great Assessment of the Doctrine*, 13.

Longchenpa (1308-1364) also identified buddha-nature with the ultimate universal ground (*don gyi kun gzhi*),¹⁹⁾ and with gnosis.²⁰⁾

The relationship between distortion and gnosis is at issue here with the doctrine of the buddha-nature. Longchenpa distinguished his claim regarding gnosis—that gnosis is simply the primordial ground made manifest—from those who accept gnosis as a new development, a product of *real* transformation. He said that it is the proponents of “Mind-Only” who accept that the eight collections of consciousness are *transformed* (*gnas 'gyur*) into gnosis. For him, however, transformation is simply a designation for self-existing gnosis becoming *manifest* (*mngon pa tsam*):

Proponents of Mind-Only assert that the collection of eight consciousnesses itself transforms into gnosis; here, the self-existing gnosis is merely made manifest through removing the consciousnesses, which is designated as a transformation—the difference between the two is vast.²¹⁾

We can see here how he claims that *transformation* is just a designation; in reality, distorted consciousness is simply cleared away and gnosis - which is there from the beginning - just manifests at the time of awakening. This is the narrative of disclosure that characterizes the doctrine of buddha-nature. In the way that the ground of emptiness becomes a positive one in “other-emptiness,” the basic consciousness, as the ground of gnosis, becomes a

19) Longchenpa, *White Lotus*, 151-52; see also Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-Nature*, 104.

20) Longchenpa, *Precious Treasury of Words and Meanings*, 956.

21) Longchenpa, *White Lotus*, 1420.

positive foundation to be disclosed in buddha-nature - the nature that remains unchanged at the time of the ground and fruition.

As for the dependent nature, a “pure dependent nature” (*dag pa'i gzhan dbang*) gets distinguished in Tibet from the “impure dependent nature” (*ma dag pa'i gzhan dbang*) that is the distorted ground of *saṃsāra*.²²⁾ The pure dependent nature—as a positive flux of enminded, yet empty, appearances—is another iteration of Yogācāra’s positive turn. The pure dependent nature is the *pure appearance* of the world, appearances not encapsulated by conceptual constructions. Significantly, this purity is not simply one that is an absence of conceptual construction, for *purity* takes on a positive dimension here. This positive articulation reflects buddha-nature, the gnostic ground of the world that is not simply a world of distortion, karma, and suffering to be shunned; but rather, a world of gnosis to be uncovered, recognized, and embraced.

Dölpopa claimed that while the dependent nature is the temporary ground of a distorted world, the consummate nature (a.k.a. buddha-nature) is the ultimate ground of all things.²³⁾ Following Dölpopa, Śākya Chokden (1428-1507) laid out a clear distinction between Yogācāra models of the three natures and those like Dölpopa’s, that are based on gnosis. He did so when he outlined two lines of interpretation of the three natures, representing the two models as Madhyamaka interpretations of “other-emptiness”:

There are two different ways of identifying the subject (*chos can*) that is the

22) See, for instance, Longchenpa, *Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems*, 746-747.

23) Dölpopa, *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, 192-193; 379. See also Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-Nature*, 65-66.

empty ground in other-emptiness (*gzhan stong gi gzhi*): (1) in Yogācāra texts, the empty-ground is the dependent nature, the imagined nature is the object of negation, and the emptiness of the imagined nature in the dependent nature is the consummate nature, reality (*chos nyid*); (2) in texts such as the *Sublime Continuum* (*rgyud bla ma*, *Ratnagotravibhāga*) and the *Conquest over Objections about the Mother* (*yum gyi gnod 'joms*, *Bṛhaṭṭīkā*), reality, the consummate nature, is empty of the imagined nature.²⁴⁾

Here we see a Yogācāra model - with the dependent nature empty of the imagined nature - contrasted with a gnostic model, where the consummate nature takes the place of the ultimate foundation for both the imagined and dependent natures. The latter model based in gnosis reflects the grammar of buddha-nature: the pure ground and fruition indivisible.

Tāranātha's (1575-1634) distinctions between Dōlpopa's and Śākya Chokden's views also demonstrate the relationship between Yogācāra and gnostic models. For instance, he distinguishes views on the dependent nature by claiming that Śākya Chokden portrays the dependent nature as merely conceptually distinct from the consummate nature (*ldog cha nas tha dad*), whereas Dōlpopa represents the two as radically different.²⁵⁾ Tāranātha further outlined the way these two figures represent the dependent nature

24) Śākya Chokden, *Extensive Commentary on the Treatise that Establishes the Definitive Meaning as One*, 520; see also Komarovski, *Visions of Unity*, 129. A similar statement was made by the Nyingma scholar, Lochen Dharmaśrī (1654-1717), in his *Cluster of Supreme Intentions*, 374; see Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-Nature*, 66-67.

25) Tāranātha, *Twenty-One Profound Points* ('*dzam thang* ed.) vol. 18, 213-4; English trans. in Mathes (2004), 300-301.

in a way that parallels their differing treatments of self-awareness. He did so by claiming that Śākya Chokden treats all forms of self-awareness as ultimate *in terms of reflexivity* (*rang gi rig rang ldog nas don dam*), whereas Dölpopa again makes a radical distinction between relative and ultimate self-awareness, with no overlap.²⁶⁾

We clearly see an extended, positive version of self-awareness in Tibet - the last of the three Yogācāra “foundations” (along with the basic consciousness and the dependent nature). Śākya Chokden, for instance, claimed that the only thing that is real is self-awareness. For him, self-awareness is the ultimate reality—the real ground for the unreal subject-object presentation of duality. Yet the self-awareness that Śākya Chokden claims to be real is exclusively a nondual awareness, not ordinary (conventional) self-awareness, for he denies the reality of any awareness that perceives duality.²⁷⁾ Real self-awareness for him is of another order than ordinary cognitions. This self-awareness is a kind of supermind, or gnosis (*ye shes*), as opposed to ordinary consciousness (*rnam shes*).

The distinction that Śākya Chokden makes between two types of self-awareness reflects the distinction Longchenpa made between self-awareness (*rang rig*) in Yogācāra (or “Mind-Only”) and the gnosis of self-awareness (*so sor rang rig pa'i ye shes*) in the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*).²⁸⁾

26) Tāranātha, *Twenty-One Profound Points* (‘dzam thang ed.) vol. 18, 214; English trans. in Mathes (2004), 302.

27) Śākya Chokden, *Commentary on Pramāṇavartikā*, vol. 18, 477-78. See also Komarovski, 163-64.

28) For a discussion of this difference, see Matthew Kapstein, “We are All Gzhan stong pas,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7 (2000), 109-15.

Longchenpa's distinction between the basic consciousness (*kun gzhi*) and the Truth Body (*chos sku*) similarly conveys this fundamental difference between distorted and undistorted worlds.²⁹⁾ In fact, Longchenpa distinguished his view of the Great Perfection from that of "Mind-Only" in terms of buddha-nature, expressed as the "basic element" (*khams*):

Proponents of Mind-Only assert a changeless permanence and mere [ordinary] awareness as self-illuminating, but this position differs because we assert the unconditioned spontaneous presence beyond permanence and annihilation, and the spontaneously present qualities of the basic element."³⁰⁾

Longchenpa appeals here to the presence of unconditioned awareness that transcends conditioned states of ordinary mind. While doing so, he again distinguishes his position from the claims of the proponents of Mind-Only by making a clear distinction between self-aware *mind* and self-aware *gnosis*. He characterizes the mind (*blo*) as relative (*kun rdzob*) and distorted, whereas he says that "the essence of the ultimate is the domain of self-aware gnosis beyond conceptual extremes," and that "self-awareness (*so so rang gi rig pa*) is undistorted gnosis beyond thought, words, and expression."³¹⁾

His characterization falls in line with the way that the Jonang tradition distinguishes its claims from Mind-Only as well.³²⁾ In fact, Dölpopa used

29) See, for instance, Longchenpa, *Precious Treasury of Words and Meanings*, 926-927.

30) Longchenpa *White Lotus*, 1420.

31) See Longchenpa, *White Lotus*, 1155-56.

32) See Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa, *Roar of the Fearless Lion*, 63; 214-223. See also Duckworth,

this kind of criterion to distinguish “relative mind-only” (*kun rdzob kyi sems tsam*), which he rejects, from the “ultimate mind-only” (*don dam pa'i sems tsam*) that he endorses.³³) Dölpopa distinguished ultimate self-awareness from its relative counterpart by saying that: “The difference between knower and known is [a property of] relative object-awareness (*kun rdzob gzhan rig*); for ultimate self-awareness (*don dam rang rig*), the knower and known are the same.”³⁴) For Dölpopa, ultimate self-awareness is simply another name for buddha-nature. Here again we see a reinscription of Yogācāra: from an absolute idealism grounded in fundamental distortion to one grounded in gnosis or buddha-nature.

In contrast to all three of these grounds (the basic consciousness, dependent nature, and self-awareness) functioning as the causal support for *samsāra*, their place in Tibet takes shape alongside buddha-nature as a substrate (or *superstrate*) that is the support of nirvana. This is the ground of the unconditioned element. This kind of interpretation is not unique to Tibet, for we find support for this in Asaṅga’s *Mahāyānasamgraha*:

The beginningless element is the abode of all phenomena.

Since it exists, all beings achieve nirvana.³⁵)

Also, this role for the buddha-element is clear in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as well:

Mipam on Buddha-Nature, 64-65.

33) Dölpopa, *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, 396-8.

34) Dölpopa, *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, 601.

35) Cited under Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.1; *theg pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D.4048, 3a; see also Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious*, 129.

If the buddha-element did not exist
 There would be no aversion for *samsāra*
 And there would be no desire for nirvana
 And likewise no wish to endeavor to pursue it.³⁶⁾

Moreover, this language is not distinct to Mahāyāna, as it appears in Pāli Buddhist literature as well: “Monks, if there were no unconditioned element whose individual nature it is to be without birth, etc., then there would be no escape in this world from form and the rest.”³⁷⁾ Certainly the trajectory of interpretation I sketch here is distinct from one that rejects the basic consciousness and self-awareness, or describes the functioning of consciousness solely in terms of the perpetuation of distortion. Nevertheless, this trajectory, which is taken up in India, Tibet, and East Asia, has a place for the presence of undistorted cognitive content, or gnosis, and buddha-nature plays a major role in formulating this picture of a buddha’s cognition and the potential to achieve it.

IV. Conclusion

Buddha-nature, as a positive foundation of reality, is not just a structure of distortion to be removed, but an unconditioned element to be disclosed.

36) Maitreya, *Ratnagotravibhāga* I. 40; see also, Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga*, 221.

37) *Udāna-aṭṭhakathā* cited in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 171.

This kind of positive ground contrasts with emptiness understood as a mere lack of intrinsic nature and also contrasts with Yogācāra representations of a fundamental ground (e.g., the basic consciousness) that is solely a structure that perpetuates distortion.

In Tibet we see buddha-nature converge with the Mahāyāna doctrines of Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and tantra. Paired with buddha-nature, the doctrine of emptiness in Madhyamaka pivots from a “self-empty” lack of intrinsic nature to an “other-empty,” pure ground that remains. In narratives of disclosure characteristic of the doctrine of buddha-nature, we see parallel shifts in the foundations of Yogācāra, as grounds of distortion like the basic consciousness, the dependent nature, and self-awareness are reinscribed into a causal story that takes place within a pure, gnostic ground.

The doctrine of buddha-nature exemplifies a characteristically Mahāyāna turn from transcendence to immanence. This can be expressed as a “tantric turn” from *liberation from saṃsāra* to *liberation in saṃsāra*. This turn parallels what we see in East Asian Buddhism and Japan, for instance, where Dogen initiated a shift from “all beings have buddha-nature” to “all beings are buddha-nature.” In Tibet, the shift moves from “buddha-nature exists in all beings” to “all beings exist in buddha-nature.” In this turn we see a shift from a cognitive process that is driven by fundamental distortion, or error theory, to an absolute idealism that is driven by the creative expression (*rtsal*) of a divine spirit or gnosis. With the unfolding of absolute gnosis, the story of *saṃsāra* is rewritten by replacing the antagonist - karmic creation - with gnostic creativity in the lead role.

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Abstract

Grounds of Buddha-Nature in Tibet

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This paper discusses syntheses forged in Tibet among the doctrines of Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). Buddha-nature is a distinctively Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, taking a place along side of the Yogācāra doctrine of the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) and the universal emptiness (*sūnyatā*) of Madhyamaka. As a fundamental ground of reality, buddha-nature comes to be identified with a positive side of emptiness (in the case of Madhyamaka) and is assimilated with the basic consciousness (in the case of Yogācāra) as well. As the intrinsic purity of mind, buddha-nature also plays a causal role as the potential for complete awakening.

Buddha-nature 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 and reality). Buddha-nature supplements a Yogācāra theory of mind and reality by offering a positive alternative to a

theory of consciousness that otherwise functions simply as the distorted cognitive structure of suffering. It thus is not only the potential for an awakened mind, but the cognitive content of awakening, too.

In Tibet we see the interpretation of buddha-nature converge with Mahāyāna doctrines in structurally parallel ways. Paired with buddha-nature, the doctrine of emptiness in Madhyamaka pivots from a “self-empty” lack of intrinsic nature to an “other-empty,” pure ground that remains. In narratives of disclosure characteristic of the doctrine of buddha-nature, we also see parallel shifts in the foundations of Yogācāra, as grounds of distortion like the basic consciousness, the dependent nature, and self-awareness are reinscribed into a causal story that takes place within a pure, gnostic ground.

Keywords: buddha-nature, Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, dependent nature, *ālayavijñāna*, self-awareness