

## Shakya Chokden's (1428-1507) Approaches to the Buddha Nature

### Common and uncommon terms and ideas

#### *Common*

we know what the buddha taught; we have to sort out what he really intended; all the three dharmacakras are the words of the Buddha; interpretive and definitive; superior and inferior Buddhist teachings; prioritizing the ultimate over the conventional; self-emptiness vs. other-emptiness; Madhyamaka vs. Yogācāra; Sūtra vs. Tantra; tathāgatagarbha real and imputed; luminosity and purity

#### *Uncommon (when taken together)*

seeing as possessing tathāgatagarbha free from adventitious stains  
 such tathāgatagarbha exists only starting from the first bodhisattva ground  
 imputed and real tathāgatagarbha  
 tathāgatagarbha is luminous jñāna  
 sharp split between jñāna and vijñāna; only the former exists  
 existence = real existence; conventional existence is nonexistence  
 tathāgatagarbha is momentary/impermanent and compounded  
 tathāgatagarbha is a virtue  
 in non-tantric systems, no need to believe in tathāgatagarbha to become a buddha  
 in Anuttarayoga Tantra, its identification and incorporation into practice are indispensable

### Periods, contexts, trajectories

*Changes in perspective:* following his teachers before 1477, crystallizing unique views afterwards. 1475: questioning Sakya Pandita's *Differentiation of the Three Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye*); 1481: writing *Golden Lancet* (*Gser gyi thur ma*); 1489: writing *Rain of Ambrosia* (*Bdud rtsi'i char 'bebs*)

*Trajectory:* natural purity as in the 2d dharmacakra → purity from adventitious stains → purity from adventitious stains and the natural purity imbued with buddha qualities as in the 3rd dharmacakra → the support and supported tantric maṇḍalas

*Sūtras:* tathāgatagarbha pervades Mahāyāna āryas and, when divided into the ultimate and conventional, the ultimate beings

*Tantras:* tathāgatagarbha pervades the whole animate and inanimate universe

### Predominantly sūtric writings

*Ocean of the Meaning of Scriptural Statements* (*Lung don rgya mtsho*), written in 1454, followed Rongtön (*Rong ston shes bya kun rig*, 1367-1449): tathāgatagarbha is the sphere of natural purity of mind; “one and the same reality of mind in the mental continuum of sentient beings is called ‘lineage’ (*rigs*) and ‘disposition’ (*kham*) from the perspective of having stains; it is called ‘sugatagarbha’ from the perspective of being naturally pure”; all sentient beings possess tathāgatagarbha

*Essence of Sūtras and Tantras: Explanation of the Buddha-Essence* (*Sangs rgyas kyi snying po'i rnam bshad mdo rgyud snying po*), written in 1474 and *The Sun Unseen Before: the Definitive Meaning of the 'Sublime Continuum' Treatise* (*Rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi nges don sngon med nyi ma*) written some-time later. *Key points of both texts:*

- only Mahāyāna āryas have tathāgatagarbha characterized by the purity from adventitious stains
- tathāgatagarbha is inseparable from the positive qualities of a buddha

*Two ways of approaching the tathāgatagarbha inseparable from positive qualities of a buddha* (its identification as the purity from adventitious stains is present in both):

*Essence of Sūtras and Tantras:* as purity from adventitious stains—removal of all or some negative qualities that prevent one from directly seeing tathāgatagarbha

*The Sun Unseen Before*: as purity from adventitious stains *and* the natural purity with the positive qualities (texts written close to the end of Shakchok's life tend to reflect the second approach)

*Close connection between seeing tathāgatgrbha free from adventitious stains and having it, between becoming free from adventitious stains and acquiring positive qualities of a buddha*: tathāgatgrbha is never the suchness with stains, but/because it is qualified by separation from stains (hence, "There is nothing to eliminate here," etc.); starts only from the first ground when reality is seen directly, then is seen as an increasing moon (as in *Praise to Dharmadhātu*).

#### *Essence of Sūtras and Tantras*

*Two types of tathāgatagrba*:

- in the 2d dharmacakra and non-tantric Madhyamaka writings of Candrakīrti, etc.: the non-affirming negation of all extremes of elaborations that pervades all beings but not all phenomena; not a real tathāgatagrba, only an imputed one
- in the 3rd dharmacakra: sūtras and tantras

Sūtras—two types:

- a. tathāgatagrba endowed with all positive qualities of a buddha is present in all sentient beings
  - b. explain that position as having a veiled intent—the natural luminosity free from all extremes of elaborations, the object of experience of the individually self-cognizing jñāna, which is an affirming negation (*Sublime Continuum* too interpreted a. as interpretive, but its explanation of the basis of intent in a. was misinterpreted by some as the actual tathāgatagrba); the actual tathāgatagrba free from (some) adventitious stains starts from the first bodhisattva ground
- \* tathāgatagrba, as all types of jñāna, is a functional thing and thus is momentarily disintegrating impermanent, and sompounded; it is explained as permanent in terms of the permanence of continuity (*rgyungyi rtag pa*)

Anuttarayoga Tantras: tathāgatagrba is the uncontaminated great bliss transcending all elaborations

*Two types*:

- a. jñāna of the innate nature (*rang bzhin lhan cig skyes pa*); pervades everything inanimate and animate
  - b. jñāna of the innate bliss (*bde chen lhan skyes ye shes*); pervades all embodied beings
- whatever appears to the yogin's jñāna is pervaded by the actual tathāgatagrba, being of one taste within the jñāna of great bliss; that happens starting from the tantric path of seeing
  - whatever appears as an object of consciousness of a person with impure mind is pervaded by the union of clarity and emptiness (*gsal stong zung du 'jug pa*) that is merely imputed as tathāgatagrba
  - clarity-emptiness is the essence of both cyclic existence and buddhahood; conjoined with tantric methods it is the actual tathāgatagrba

#### *The Sun Unseen Before*

*The main topic of the Sublime Continuum*: dharmadhātu jñāna intrinsically and spontaneously having all positive qualities and abiding in buddhas and sentient beings—the naturally pure suchness

*Two types of tathāgatagrba* (also two types of buddhas and sentient beings):

- a. relative—newly acquired, possesses newly acquired positive qualities, pervades only relative beings; not all relative beings possess the relative tathāgatagrba, because tathāgatagrba is not identified as having obscurations, while sentient beings do have obscurations
  - b. ultimate—exists forever, possesses primordially established positive qualities, pervades only ultimate beings; being naturally pure of all objects of abandonment, it has all positive qualities
- when it is stated that tathāgatagrba does not pervade all sentient beings, the relative one is intended

- when it is stated that the teachings of tathāgatagarbha pervading all sentient beings are interpretive, the tathāgatagarbha addressed is the relative one pervading all relative beings, with newly abandoned stains and newly acquired positive qualities
- when such teachings are explained as definitive, the tathāgatagarbha addressed is the ultimate one pervading all ultimate beings

*Disconnecting jñāna and vijñāna, etc.:*

Two factors/parts of mind:

- factor of outward-looking apprehended-aspect (*kha phyir blta gzung rnam gyi cha*): apprehender (*'dzin pa*); nonexistent and thus lacks clarity and cognition (*gsal zhing rig pa*)
- factor of inward-looking apprehender-aspect (*kha nang blta 'dzin rnam gyi cha*): clarity-factor of jñāna (*ye shes kyi gsal cha*), clarity and cognition, the very entity and essence of all types of consciousness; without it, adventitious consciousness does not emerge as mistaken appearances (similar to clouds in the sky, rust on gold, and dirt in pure water)

*Secret Mantra practice of utilizing afflictions and concepts as the path:*

- the inward-looking factors initially serve as the basis of accomplishment of the two stages
- in the middle, they spontaneously become the very entity of the two stages
- finally, the outward-looking factors of the objects of abandonment are purified by themselves like clouds dissolving into the sky

### **Tantric writings**

*Sevenfold Treasury of Gems: Explanation of the Glorious 'Secret Assembly' (Dpal gsang ba 'dus pa 'i rnam bshad rin po che 'i gter mdzod bdun pa), and Thorough Establishment of the Glorious Original Buddha: [Treatise] Condensing the Essence of All Sūtras and Tantras of the Pronouncement of the Third Dharmacakra (Dpal dang po 'i sangs rgyas rab tu grub pas bka' 'khor lo gsum pa 'i mdo dang rgyud sde kun gyi snying po bsdus pa), both written in 1504*

*Continuing emphasis on the sharp divide between the ultimate and conventional beings, etc.:*

- tathāgatagarbha free from anything to eliminate or posit does not exist in the mental continua of conventional sentient beings because, similar to sons of a barren woman, such continua do not exist
- in contrast to the ultimate sentient beings, the conventional one are not possessors of tathāgatagarbha, are not to become buddhas, and are not the basis of accomplishment of the tantric deities

*Only the non-dual jñāna exists as the other-emptiness, empty of all conventional phenomena; whatever exists (e.g., tathāgatagarbha, ultimate maṇḍalas, jñāna winds, etc.) has to be jñāna itself*

- tantric practice requires the other-emptiness view; the self-emptiness view is only partially useful
- all ultimate and conventional appearances are mind-made; no external or material phenomena exist
- the truly existent jñāna should be used as the basis of tantric contemplative practice
- to progress in tantric practice, one has to realize that jñāna is the primordially present tathāgatagarbha with all buddha qualities complete
- appearances of real maṇḍalas, illusory body, winds, etc., cultivated on the tantric path, arise from and appear to jñāna

*The nonexistence of anything other than mind has to be realized: no practical progress in establishing the support and supported maṇḍalas, etc., can be achieved as long as one has not realized that no material world exists apart from mind and has not determined as mistaken the mind appearing as the impure external and internal world*

*Thorough Establishment* treats tathāgatagarbha as jñāna imbued with deities, etc., that has to be identified and meditated upon: “Having recognized (*ngo 'phrod*) and known the basis-level jñāna with the deities and awakening factors naturally complete in it, without separation from the branches of familiarization one eventually reaches the very completion of familiarization, at which time the collections of merit and wisdom are spontaneously complete. This is the profound feature of Vajrayāna and of Cakrasaṃvara in particular.”

*Sevenfold Treasury of Gems* treats maṇḍala appearances as the ultimate reality: “There is no other option but to assert that at the time of the actual part of *sādhana* practice, because the ordinary appearance and adherence to that appearance have been stopped, all clear appearances of the support and supported maṇḍalas are the ultimate reality. It should also be accepted that at the time of engaging in jñāna of the completion stage after having stopped conceptual minds adhering to the sublime deity, that final jñāna is the ultimate reality. Otherwise, if it is accepted as a conventional reality, it will follow that it is either polluted by ignorance or cannot withstand analysis by reasoning.”

*Cakrasaṃvara body-maṇḍala is tathāgatagarbha* pervading all phenomena of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra (in the latter case underlying saṃsāra as one of the two aspects comprising consciousness):

- the general Mahāyāna position is to identify the basis of designation of any phenomenon as none other than cognizance appearing as that phenomenon
- phenomena of nirvāṇa are objects of experience of jñāna; phenomena of saṃsāra are mere appearances to consciousness

- *Consciousness's two factors:*

- a. the outward-looking factor of dualistic appearances (*phyi blta gnyis snang gi cha*)—the stain factor positing saṃsāra (*'khor bar 'jog byed dri ma'i cha*), the apprehended-aspect of consciousness (*rnam shes kyi gzung rnam*)
  - b. the inward-looking factor of clarity and cognition (*nang blta gsal rig gi cha*)—the apprehender-aspect (*'dzin rnam*), jñāna
- because the mode of being of all conventional phenomena is exclusively jñāna, all phenomena are pervaded by tathāgatagarbha, the ultimate body-maṇḍala

*Meditation on the Cakrasaṃvara body-maṇḍala culminating in buddhahood:*

- in the face of consciousness (*rnam shes kyi ngor*) the ordinary body is envisioned as the deities and mansion of Cakrasaṃvara; no other conventional body-maṇḍala can be identified apart from conceptual mind adhering to the parts of one's conventional body as the deities and mansion
- within the two factors of that conceptual mind—the outward-looking consciousness factor of the apprehended-aspect (*phyir blta gzung rnam rnam shes kyi cha*) and the inward-looking jñāna factor of the apprehender-aspect (*nang blta 'dzin rnam ye shes kyi cha*)—at the completion of the contemplative process the outward-looking stain factor (*phyi blta dri ma'i cha*) vanishes, and one manifests the inward-looking jñāna factor (*nang blta ye shes kyi cha*) that is the ultimate maṇḍala and the buddha
- such is the only way of purifying all stains of consciousness not only here, but in general too
- the actual ultimate body maṇḍala is the naturally pure buddha with all positive qualities spontaneously accomplished, but to make it directly manifest the yogin has to penetrate the vital points of the conventional body
- afterwards, due to the manifestation of the ultimate maṇḍala, what appears as the conventional maṇḍala is discarded by itself
- everything called “taking afflictions and conceptuality as the path” has to be approached in this way

(Y. Komarovski)