

The Nature of Things
Emptiness and Essence
in the Geluk World

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In these first two verses, Nāgārjuna indicates the three cardinal characteristics of an essence: An essence (or an entity that exists in virtue of possessing an essence) is uncaused, independent of other phenomena, and not fabricated from other things. It is important to bear this in mind in any Madhyamika analysis of emptiness. For when Nāgārjuna argues that phenomena are all empty, it is of essence in this sense that they are empty.²¹⁵

Garfield asserts that phenomena are empty of the putative nature having the three attributes and also feels this is taught in the first two stanzas. He identifies the meaning intended by the term *svabhāva* to be the non-existent nature possessing the three attributes of non-fabrication, independence, and immutability.

William Ames' discussion of *svabhāva* is in some ways closer to that of Candrakīrti and Dzong-ka-ba than those of the scholars cited above. Ames concurs with Dzong-ka-ba that Candrakīrti describes two different kinds of *svabhāva*. He sees that there is a *svabhāva* that is an intrinsic establishment that things do not have and that does not exist, and also realizes that "Candrakīrti asserts that Nāgārjuna does, indeed, accept that a *svabhāva* of the sort which he defines in *MMK* 15-2cd exists."²¹⁶

Ames recognizes that Candrakīrti asserts Nāgārjuna to be speaking of emptiness in XV.2, yet he is puzzled about the existential status of this *svabhāva*. He states:

Candrakīrti apparently equates this genuine *svabhāva* with ultimate reality (*paramārtha*). Thus although *svabhāva* exists, it, like *paramārtha*, is neither an entity nor a non-entity.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Garfield, 221.

²¹⁶ William Ames, "The Notion of *Svabhāva* in the Thought of Candrakīrti," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 10 (1982), 164.

²¹⁷ Ames, 165.

In D̄zong-ka-ba's presentation, emptiness is an existent entity. Although the reality nature exists, the object-to-be-negated nature does not exist at all as a real object.

THE INDEPENDENT AND POSITIVE NATURE

Döl-bo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen, one of the most influential religious thinkers of Tibet's 14th century, developed an innovative doctrinal synthesis composed of themes borrowed from sūtra and tantra. He called his synthesis the Great Middle Way.²¹⁸ One of the central Great Middle Way teachings was that the ultimate is an uncontaminated primordial wisdom, empty of all contaminated phenomena while being a positive, independent *tathāgata-garbha*.

Praised by some and excoriated by others, Shay-rap-gyel-tsen's doctrines took hold in the latter half of the 14th and early 15th centuries, and his school — the Jo-nang-ba — became widespread in a religious climate that seemed to favor creative synthesis.

D̄zong-ka-ba came of age in a disputatious tradition. His own Sa-gya lama, the scholar Ren-da-wa, disputed the Jo-nang assertion of a positive Buddha nature and even cast aspersions on the Jo-nang-ba's tantric lineage, the Kālachakra. In turn, later Jo-nangs called Ren-da-wa "an evil demon who would spread the nihilist view."²¹⁹

D̄zong-ka-ba himself did not target the Kālachakra, but he did subject almost every other aspect of Döl-bo's synthesis to scathing rebuttal, not only in the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, but also — and principally — in his later *The Essence of Elo-*

²¹⁸ *dbu ma chen po*, **mahāmādhyaṃyāmika*.

²¹⁹ Cyrus R. Stearns, "The Buddha From Dol po and His Fourth Council of the Buddhist Doctrine," University of Washington (unpublished dissertation), 88.

quence. In these works D̄zong-ka-ba tries to reverse the syncretism introduced by Döl-ḅo that contained the view of a permanent, stable *tathāgatagarbha*. In *The Essence of Eloquence*, D̄zong-ka-ba expands considerable energy refuting the Jo-nang notion that passages of the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought* — usually held to be Mind Only — present the views of Döl-ḅo's Great Middle Way. In the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, he devotes a section of the chapter on refuting a too narrow object-to-be-negated to the refutation of the Jo-nang-ba concept of a positive, independent nature.

DÖL-ḅO'S SYNTHESIS

The presence in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras of discussions of the three natures was held to be significant by the syncretic Döl-ḅo Śhay-rap-gyel-tsen. For Śhay-rap-gyel-tsen, the presence of three-nature discussions in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras was evidence that the three natures are not just Mind Only doctrines but are also part of an overarching Great Middle Way. Stearns describes this situation:

Although the *trisvabhāva* theory is an integral part of the *Yogācāra* system, as Dol po pa pointed out it is also found in some of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. In Tibet this fact had important hermeneutical implications for the understanding of the development of Indian Buddhist doctrine. In particular, what might be called the "orthodox" Tibetan view of the Three Turnings of the *Dharmacakra* was challenged by the presence of this theory in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*.²²⁰

The presence of the three-nature doctrines in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras was evidence, for Döl-ḅo Śhay-rap-gyel-tsen, of a system hinted at by Indian authors of an ontologically substantial

²²⁰ Stearns, 136.

ultimate — an "other-emptiness"²²¹ — that transcends the so-called "self-emptiness"²²² usually associated with the Middle Way School. According to Stearns, this innovative hermeneutic by Döl-ḅo Śhay-rap-gyel-tsen draws from discussions of the three natures expounded in the *Bṛhatīkā*²²³ commentary on the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras.

Döl-ḅo Śhay-rap-gyel-tsen drew not only on the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, but also on treatise literature. For instance, his *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*²²⁴ quotes Maitreya's *Treatise on the Later Scriptures of the Mahāyāna*²²⁵ to the effect that the afflictions preventing Buddhahood do not exist as their own reality and thus the basic constituent (the *tathāgatagarbha*) has a pure nature of good qualities:

Because of being fabricated [by conditions] and being adventitious,

The faults [i.e., the afflictive emotions and so forth] of sentient beings do not [exist as their] own reality.

In reality these faults are selfless

²²¹ *gzhan stong*.

²²² *rang stong*.

²²³ *'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa 'bum pa dang nyi khri lnga stong pa dang khri bryad stong pa'i rgya cher bshad pa, ārya śatasāhasrikā pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāsādhāsāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā brhatīkā* (often attributed to Vasubhandu and called, *yum gsum gnod joms*), Tibetan Triptika, Vol. 93: 202.1.1-339.3.6.

²²⁴ *ri chos nges don rgya miso zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos dang bsadus don* (Bir: D. Tsondu Senghe, 1984).

²²⁵ Maitreya[nātha] (*byams mgon*), *theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos, mahāyānottaratantrāsāstra*, P5525, with bracketed commentary by Mi-pam.

[And thus the basic constituent has from the start] a pure nature of beneficent qualities.²²⁶

Döl-ḅo Ṣhāy-rap-gyel-tsen's understanding of the nature in the phrase, "a pure nature of beneficent qualities," is that it is the ultimate reality.

In Ḍzong-ka-ḅa's system, the ultimate is a negative phenomena — the substrata that is the lack of the object-to-be-negated nature. It exists as one entity with its conventional truth. For Döl-ḅo Ṣhāy-rap-gyel-tsen, the nature is the Great Middle Way "other-emptiness;" an ultimate truth that is a substantially ontic *tathāgatagarbha*²²⁷ present in all beings. On the conventional level, phenomena are empty of self nature;²²⁸ they are actually non-existent. On the ultimate level exists the *tathāgatagarbha*, it-self empty of other phenomena.²²⁹ Stearns explains the situation succinctly:

Dol po used the term *gzhan stong*, "empty of other," to describe absolute reality as empty of other relative phenomena. This view is Dol po's primary legacy...In Dol po's view the absolute and the relative are both empty, as Buddhism has always proclaimed, but they *must* be empty in different ways. Phenomena at the relative level (*samṛti, kun dzob*) are empty

²²⁶ *ri chos nges don rgya miso zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos dang bsduḅ don, 63.1. Commenting upon Maitreya's theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos:*

*bcos ma glo bur pa nyid phyir || sems can skyon de yang dag min
|| yang ryes de bdag med pa || yon tan rang bzhin dag pa yin ||*

²²⁷ The *Blue Annals* reports that the term "Natural Buddha" (*rang bzhin sangs rgyas*) is found in Döl-ḅo's *Fourth Council (Blue Annals, 777)*.

²²⁸ *rang stong, svabhāvāsūnya.*

²²⁹ *gzhan stong, *parabhāvāsūnya.*

of self-nature (*svabhāvāsūnya, rang stong*), and are no more real than the fictitious horn of a rabbit, or the child of a barren woman. In contrast, the reality of absolute truth (*paramārtha, don dam bden pa*) is empty only of other (**parabhāvāsūnya, gzhan stong*) relative phenomena, and not itself empty.²³⁰

Döl-ḅo identified the ultimate of this school with a substantially existent *tathāgatagarbha* inherent in everyone's continuum, having all the major and minor marks of a fully enlightened Buddha. This other-emptiness is a positive, independent, and enlightened nature within each individual's continuum.

Unlike the ultimate found in Ḍzong-ka-ḅa's Consequentialist system, which is a negative — a mere lack of inherent existence — the Jo-nang ultimate is positive and independent. Although it is not a conventional consciousness, this other-emptiness is still gnosis. Stearns reports that Döl-ḅo describes this *tathāgatagarbha* to be "naturally luminous clear light, which is synonymous with the *dharmakāya*, and a primordial, indestructible, and eternal state of great bliss inherently present in all its glory within every living being."²³¹ Although this *tathāgatagarbha* which is *dharmakāya* is a gnosis, it is not impermanent, since it is the essential nature. Döl-ḅo's *Fourth Council* states:

Therefore the Victors have stated, "Gnosis transcending the momentary is the ultimate essential nature of all *dharmas*."²³²

Stearns remarks that this quote from Döl-ḅo paraphrases the Kālachakra commentary, *Great Commentary on the "Kālachakra*

²³⁰ Stearns, 4.

²³¹ Stearns, 125.

²³² Stearns, quoting the autocommentary (*bka' bsduḅ bzhi pa'i rang 'grel*) 13a.

Tantra," the *Stainless Light*,²³³ which states that, "Gnosis free from single and multiple moments is the essential nature of the Victors."²³⁴ Stearns reports, moreover, that Döl-bo thinks of this gnosis in terms of its being a "wisdom basis of all":

The *tathāgatagarbha* is the gnosis which is the ground or substratum (*kun gzhi ye shes*, **ālayajñāna*) for every phenomenon experienced in *samsāra* and *nirvāna*.²³⁵

Thus, the nature asserted by the Jo-nang-bas is revealed here to be positive in that it is a consciousness. It is independent in the sense that it is absolute. Empty of all conventional phenomena, this nature is self-arisen, not a dependent-arising.

Döl-bo Šhay-rap-gyel-tsen agrees with Nāgārjuna that nature must be non-fabricated. In his commentary on the *Treatise on the Middle* (XV.2) — in the *Ocean of Definitive Meaning* — Döl-bo places an interesting spin on Nāgārjuna's statement that "Nature is non-fabricated and does not depend on another." He states:²³⁶

Nature is the Nature Body. This is because the statements [in the *Treatise on the Middle*] that "Nature is non-fabricated and does not depend on another," and "Change of a nature is never feasible" refer to the Sugatagarbha.²³⁷

²³³ Kalkī Puṇḍarīka (*rigs ldan pad ma dkar po*), *Great Commentary on the "Kālachakra Tantra*," the *Stainless Light* (*bsdus pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po dus kyi 'khor lo'i 'grel bshad rtsa ba'i rgyud kyi rjes su jug pa stong phrag bcu gnyis pa dri ma med pa'i 'od ces bya ba, vimālaprabhānāmūla-tantrānusārīnīdvādāsāsāharīkālaghukālacakratraṅrajātikā*), P2064.

²³⁴ Stearns, 178.

²³⁵ Stearns, 125.

²³⁶ *ri chos nges don rgya mso zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos dang bsdus don* (Bir: D. Tsundu Senghe, 1984).

²³⁷ *Ocean of Definitive Meanings*, 163.5:

Döl-bo Šhay-rap-gyel-tsen's interpretation of these stanzas differs radically from that of Džong-ka-ba. Not subscribing to an ultimate beyond that of the Middle Way School emptiness, Džong-ka-ba asserts that the emptiness spoken of by Nāgārjuna is a negative phenomenon, one entity with its corresponding subject or base. Döl-bo Šhay-rap-gyel-tsen thinks of the other-emptiness ultimate as an omniscient Buddha nature that is not any conventional phenomenon.

REFUTING THE INDEPENDENT AND POSITIVE NATURE

Džong-ka-ba devotes a section of the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* to the refutation of an assertion by Döl-bo to the effect that nature is positive and independent:

Some [i.e., the Jo-nang-bas following Döl-bo Šhay-rap-gyel-tsen] did not posit the ultimate truth as a mere elimination of the elaborations of the two selves, the object-to-be negated, and so forth. They asserted that when one realizes the ultimate mode of being, [that entity] appears — as the object of a non-erroneous mind — in the way that blue, yellow, and so forth appear in the manner of being established independently. They also asserted that the ascertainment of its existing in this way is the view realizing the profound meaning.

Also, they assert that the realization of these external and internal phenomena — which are the bases that sentient beings misapprehend as the two selves — as not existent [by]²³⁸

rang bzhin ni rang bzhin gyi sku ste rang bzhin dag ni bcos min dang gzhan la los pa med pa yin || rang bzhin gzhan du gyur pa ni nam yang 'khad pa ma yin no zhes pa bde gzhag snying po'o ||

²³⁸ The particle *gyis* is inserted in the *MCHAN*, 405.6.

nature, is a place for going astray with respect to the correct view (*lta ba'i gol sa*).²³⁹

Ḍzong-ka-ba himself holds that the ultimate truth is a mere negative of the elaboration of the two selves of persons and phenomena. It is the Geluk view that all Mind Only and Middle Way systems assert that negative phenomena must be imputedly existent. Jam-*yang-shay-ba*, writing in the *Four Interwoven Annotations*, states:

In any Mind Only or Middle Way system a negative phenomenon must be imputedly existent;²⁴⁰ therefore the assertion that reality is a positive independent phenomenon that does not depend upon the elimination of an object-to-be-negated is wrong.²⁴¹

Therefore, the assertion that reality is positive and independent and does not depend upon the elimination of an object-to-be-negated goes against a basic Geluk tenet. Writing in the *Four In-*

²³⁹ LRC, 868.5-869.1:

gang dag don dam pa'i bden pa dgag bya bdag gnyis la sogs pa'i spros pa rnam par bcaḍ pa tsam la mi jog par sngo ser la sogs pa lhar yin lugs rtags pa'i blo ma 'khrul ba'i yul du rang dbang du grub pa'i tshul gyis 'char ba dang de ltar yod par nges pa ni zab mo'i don rtags pa'i lta ba yin par 'dod cing sems can rnam kyis gang la bdag gnyis su zhen pa'i gchi phyi nang gi chos 'di rnam rang bzhin med par rtags pa ni yang dag pa'i lta ba'i gol sar 'dod pa ||

²⁴⁰ Jam-*yang-shay-ba* may be forgetting that in the Mind Only system, emptiness — a negative — is truly existent.

²⁴¹ MCHAN, 405.1:

dbu sems su'i lugs la dgag pa la biags yod dgos pas dgag bya bcaḍ pa la ma ltos pa'i rang bdang ba'i sgrub par 'dod pa mi 'thad ||

terwoven Annotations, Jam-*yang-shay-ba* provides further information:

The Jo-nang-bas, who pretended²⁴² to take as their source the Kālacakra and Maitreya's *Treatise on the Later Scriptures of the Great Vehicle*,²⁴³ or some Tibetans who profess to be wise,²⁴⁴ did not posit the ultimate truth as a mere elimination of the elaborations of the two selves of persons and phenomena, the object-to-be-negated, and so forth. They asserted that even when one realizes the ultimate mode of being, that entity appears — as the object of a non-erroneous mind — in the way that blue, yellow, and so forth appear to the mind as unmixed diverse substances in the manner of its entity being established independently (*rang dbang du*), unmixed with any other, from its own side, and not dependent on another. They also asserted that what appears in this way exists in accordance with its appearance and that the ascertainment of its existing in this way is the final view realizing the profound meaning in the Kālacakra system and Asaṅga's system.

²⁴² The verb Jam-*yang-shay-ba* uses is *khul*. [405.1]. Chandra Das provides a paradigm sentence: "If you do not know, act the manner of knowing [i.e., pretend to know]" (*yang ma shes na shes khul byas*). Das, *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Gaurav Publishing House, 1985), 149.

²⁴³ Maitreya[nātha] (*byams mgon*), *theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos, mahāyānottaratantrāśāstra*, P5525.

²⁴⁴ These two identifications are by different annotators:

- (1) Jam-*yang-shay-ba*'s note says, "The Jo-nang-bas, who pretended to take as their source the Kālacakra and Maitreya's *Treatise on the Later Scriptures of the Great Vehicle*" (*jo nang pas dus 'khor dang rgyud bla ma'i khung byed khul gyi*) [405.1]

- (2) Nga-wang-rap-den's note says, "some Tibetans who

Also, they assert that the realization by Nāgārjuna, Haribhadra, and so forth, of these external and internal phenomena — which are the bases that sentient beings misapprehend as the two selves of persons and phenomena — as not existent by nature (*rang bzhin gyis med pa*), is a view of annihilation and a place for going astray with respect to the correct view (*lta ba'i gol sa*).²⁴⁵

The annotators add their opinion that the Jo-nang-ba view is the result of a mistaken syncretistic mixture of the Kālacakra Tantra and Maitreya's *Treatise on the Later Scriptures of the Mahāyāna*.

profess to be wise" (*bod kyi mkhas par khas 'che ba*) [405.1-2].

²⁴⁵ MCHAN, 405.1-405.5:

*jo nang pas dus 'khor dang rgyud bla ma'i khungs byed khul gyi
pod kyi mkhas par khas 'ches ba gang dag don dam pa'i bden pa
d'ag bya chos dang gang zag gi bidag gnyis la sogs pa'i spros pa
ruams par b'ad pa tsam zhig la mi 'jog par sngo ser la sogs pa
rdeas so so ma 'dres pa blo la shar ba ltar don dam par yin gnus
lugs rrogs pa'i tshé na'ang blo ma 'kbrul ba'i yul du kho rang gi
ngo bo g'zhan dang ma 'dres par yul steng nas g'zhan la ltos med du
rang d'bang du grub pa'i tshul gyis 'char bar 'dod pa dang gang
shar ba de ltar du yod pa yin la de ltar yod par nges pa ni dus
'khor dang thogs med kyi lugs kyi zab mo'i don rrogs pa'i lta ba
mthar thug yin par 'dod cing klu sgrub dang seng b'zang sogs kyi
sems can ruams kyi gang la gang zag dang chos kyi bidag gnyis su
zhen pa'i g'zhir gyur pa'i phyi nang gi chos 'di ruams rang bzhin
gyis med par rrogs pa ni chad lta dang yang dag pa'i lta ba'i gol sa
[...] r 'dod pa ||*

I have omitted from the quotation a gloss on the phrase "place for going astray with respect to the correct view" (*lta ba'i gol sa*). In brief, according to the MCHAN, the phrase "place for going astray with respect to the correct view" comes to mean "direction opposite to the correct view" (*yang dag pa'i lta ba'i log phyogs*). For the full citation see page 217.

The Jo-nang-ba position as stated here in the *Four Intervuven Annotations* is that the ultimate entity, when perceived by a non-erroneous mind (i.e., a Superior's uncontaminated meditative equipoise), appears in the way that diverse substances appear to the mind as if (1) unmixed, like blue and yellow, (2) on the side of the object, (3) independent, and (4) established under its own power.²⁴⁶

Īzong-ka-ba finds these doctrines so heterodox as to be non-Buddhist. The *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* states:

Such assertions are outside the sphere of all the scriptures of the Greater and Lesser Vehicles because (1) those [Jo-nang-bas] assert that it is necessary to overcome the conception of self that is the root binding persons in cyclic existence, and (2) the bases that are apprehended by this [conception] as self are these [phenomena] realized as not existent by nature. Hence, without overcoming that, they assert that the conception of self is overcome through realizing some other phenomenon unrelated with that [conception of self] as true.²⁴⁷

Īzong-ka-ba makes the point that the Jo-nang-bas themselves assert that individuals must overcome the conception of inherent

²⁴⁶ Further research is required to determine whether this is a correct assessment of Dōl-bo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen's thought. Our focus here is on the Geluk response to an assertion about nature which they perceived as being heterodox.

²⁴⁷ LRC, 869.1-3:

*ibeg pa che chung gi gsung rab thams cad las phyi rol tu gyur pa
yin te sems can thams cad 'khor bar ching ba'i rtsa ba b'dag du
'dzin pa s'dog dgos par ni 'dod la des b'dag tu b'zung ba'i g'zhi de
rang bzhin med par rrogs pas de mi ldog par de dang 'brel med kyi
chos g'zhan zhig bden par song bar rrogs pas b'dag tu 'dzin pa ldog
par 'dod pa'i phyir ro ||*

existence to free themselves from cyclic existence. Although they assert this, they attempt to reverse the conception of self *not through realizing the lack of the object-to-be-negated nature* but instead through realizing some other, unrelated phenomenon.

Although D̄zong-ka-ba and the annotators of the *Four Interwoven Annotations* do not establish either of these points with a quotation from Döl-ḅo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen, D̄zong-ka-ba does present an analogy that aptly describes the situation as he sees it:

Regarding this, for instance, it is no different than if [some person] conceives there is a snake to the east and becomes distressed, and if [someone else] thinking the distress cannot be overcome by thinking there is no snake to the east — instead says, “Think on the fact that to the west there is a tree. Through this, you will get rid of your conception of a snake in the room and will overcome your distress.”²⁴⁸

In this analogy the snake in the east is the object-to-be-negated nature, the cause of fear and distress. For D̄zong-ka-ba, putting forth the other-emptiness of Döl-ḅo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen is akin to speaking of a tree in the west to dispell the conception of the snake in the east — it is completely beside the point. This analogy helps D̄zong-ka-ba clarify his primary point: the positive, independent nature spoken of by Döl-ḅo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen is not a Mahāyāna assertion because Mahāyāna ultimates are negative phenomena.

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L.R.C. 869.3-6:

*dper na shar phyogs na sbrul med bzhin du yod par bzung nas
skrag ste sdug bsngal bar gyur ba'i sdug bsngal ldog pa la shar
phyogs su sbrul cung zad kyang ma grub po sriyam du bzung bas
sbrul 'dzin de mi ldog gi nub phyogs na shings dong yod do sriyam
du zungs shig dang dras sbrul 'dzin dang sdug bsngal de sdog par
'gyur ro zhes zer ba dang khyad par ci yang mi snang ngo ||*

Döl-ḅo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen's positive, independent ultimate violates these criteria. Moreover, D̄zong-ka-ba believes that realization of it does not address the main issue of Buddhist soteriology: abandoning the conception of inherent existence that underlies all afflictive emotions. Instead, D̄zong-ka-ba says, Döl-ḅo Shay-rap-gyel-tsen's ultimate involves an unrelated topic, as unrelated to the realization of emptiness as thinking about a tree in the west is unrelated to a snake in the east.