

Prajnaparamita, Indian gzhan stong pas, and the beginning of Tibetan gzhan stong

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Prajñāpāramitā, Indian “gzhan stong pas,” and the beginning of Tibetan gzhan stong

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there is an ongoing debate about whether the gzhan stong system was “invented” by Tibetans, in particular by Dol po pa, or whether there are Indian precursors of that view. I will discuss evidence for a number of typical gzhan stong positions in several Indian texts and early Tibetan works before Dol po pa.

The “Maitreya Chapter” in the prajñāpāramitā sūtras

What the Tibetan tradition commonly calls “The Chapter Requested by Maitreya” is found in chapter 83 of the Aṣṭadāśāsāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra, chapter 72 of the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra, and the revised version of the latter. Certain parts of this chapter differ in their diction from the prajñāpāramitā sūtras in that all phenomena are divided into three aspects, such as “imaginary form (parikalpitaṃ rūpaṃ),” “conceived form (vikalpitaṃ rūpaṃ),” and “dharmatā-form (dharmatārūpaṃ).” These three types of phenomena and their descriptions match the three natures (parikalpita, paratantra, and pariniṣpanna). Therefore, many scholars regard the “Maitreya Chapter” as a later addition.

In general, there are two models for the relationship between the three natures. The common model (1) in Indian Yogācāra texts is that pariniṣpanna is described as paratantra’s being empty of parikalpita. Model (2), found in most of the texts discussed below and virtually all Tibetan works on gzhan stong, means that pariniṣpanna itself is empty of both paratantra and parikalpita. In Tibetan gzhan stong texts, the contrast between these two models is usually highlighted as representing one of the major differences between the views of sems tsam and gzhan stong.

In the “Maitreya Chapter,” the Buddha uses model (1), but says that both imaginary form (mere conventional designations such as “form”) and conceived form (the conditioned entities to which these designations are applied) do not exist ultimately, while only the dharmadhātu exists ultimately. When the latter is directly observed through nonconceptual wisdom, those entities are not observed. When they are observed, it is only through conception (vikalpa). This description is quite a standard explanation of the three natures as also found in the Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra (Chapters VI and VII) and many Yogācāra texts. The “Maitreya Chapter” also offers a distinction between these three kinds of form in terms of their being ultimately real or unreal, saying that imaginary form is nonsubstantial, conceived form is substantial (by virtue of conception’s substantiality, but not because it

exists independently), and dharmatā-form is neither substantial nor nonsubstantial, but is the ultimate.

The Śatasāhasrikāpañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitābr̥haṭṭikā

This text is often attributed to Vasubandhu and said to be equivalent to what is called his Paddhati, but its authorship is disputed (several editions of the Tengyur and the majority of Tibetan commentators except for the Gelugpas accept Vasubandhu's authorship).

The Br̥haṭṭikā and the related Āmnāyānusāriṇī are the only known Indian commentaries on the prajñāpāramitā sūtras that consistently use the hermeneutical framework of the three natures to explain all the various topics of these sūtras. Both also use the terms tathāgatagarbha and “fundamental change” (āśrayaparivṛtti), while making it clear that the perfect nature—suchness or mind's natural luminosity—is completely unchanging and only obscured by adventitious stains.

While the Br̥haṭṭikā comments directly on the threefold distinction of all phenomena in the “Maitreya Chapter” and explicitly equates them with the three natures, the text's own explanations always follow model (2)—pariṇiṣpanna being empty of both parikalpita and paratantra, such as in its comments on the well known statement in the prajñāpāramitā sūtras that “form is empty of form”:

The perfect [nature] that is nothing but suchness and is devoid of the aspects of both the imaginary and the conceived is called “dharmatā-form.”

Likewise, “the eye is empty of the eye” is explained in that vein:

It is the personally experienced perfect nature that is called “the dharma[tā]-eye.” In that regard, in [the phrase] “the eye is empty of the eye,” “the eye” refers to the dharmatā-eye. “Of the eye” means [its being empty] of the imaginary and conceived eye.

Thus, contrary to typical Madhyamaka explanations of the eye being empty of itself or of any nature of its own, the Br̥haṭṭikā repeatedly states that the ultimate nature of the eye (the perfect nature) is empty of something other—both the imaginary eye and the conceived (or other-dependent) eye. Thus, this is clearly an Indian precedent of what is typically explained in Tibetan gzhan stong works—the ultimate (the perfect nature or buddha nature) being empty of what is other than it (both the imaginary and other-dependent natures).

The Br̥haṭṭikā comments in a similar way on the Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra's famous statement “The mind is no-mind. The nature of the mind is luminosity,” saying that “mind” refers to the imaginary mind, while the perfect nature—the mind of perfect enlightenment that is the dharmakāya—is beyond all imagination and conception. Since it lacks the characteristics of “mind,” it is called “no-mind.” Thus, the nature of the mind that is the dharmakāya is luminosity.

Several passages say that this natural luminosity—the perfect nature—is always free from all adventitious stains (the imaginary and other-dependent natures) that can never be a part of or taint mind's natural luminosity (another typical gzhan stong position). In this vein, the

Br̥haṭṭikā uses and connects the terms tathāgatagarbha and āśrayaparivṛtti several times and equates both terms with pariniṣpanna (suchness).

The perfect nature—suchness that is to be personally experienced—is described as the ultimately existent remainder that is empty of something else, that is, imaginary and other-dependent phenomena, which are nonexistent (also a classical gzhan stong assertion). This is supported by the well-known quote from the Cūlasuññatasutta:

In accordance with true reality one understands that when something does not exist somewhere, the latter is empty of the former. In accordance with true reality one understands that what remains there exists there.

Though never using the exact term gzhan stong, the Br̥haṭṭikā says that

Empty [means] being devoid of what is other, such as a vase being called “empty,” because it is devoid of water. Likewise, phenomena are thought to be “empty,” because they are devoid of a nature such as specific characteristics.

Thus, in effect, the Br̥haṭṭikā does speak of gzhan stong in terms of the perfect nature being empty of what is other—the other two natures.

The Bhagavatyaṃnāyānusāriṇīnāmavyākhyā

This text is a commentary on the Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra by *Śrīrāja Jagaddalanivāsin (twelfth century). The Āmnāyānusāriṇī quotes the Br̥haṭṭikā several times and also often incorporates passages from it without acknowledging their origin. According to the table of contents of the Derge Bstan ‘gyur, it is a commentary that is based on the Br̥haṭṭikā as well as Dignāga’s Prajñāpāramitārthasaṃgraha. Its own colophon says that it follows Vasubandhu’s Paddhati, Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka, Dignāga’s Prajñāpāramitārthasaṃgraha, and Asaṅga’s De bzhin nyid la dri ba rnam par nges pa (a lost commentary on the prajñāpāramitā sūtras and/or the Abhisamayālaṅkāra).

Like the Br̥haṭṭikā, the Āmnāyānusāriṇī equates the three kinds of phenomena in the “Maitreya Chapter” with the three natures. Throughout, prajñāpāramitā (being equated with the perfect nature, natural luminosity, and emptiness) is said to be the true reality in which both the imaginary and other-dependent natures (referred to as “imagination” and “conception”) have been discarded and are not observable. The imaginary and other-dependent natures are realized to be nonexistent, while the perfect nature—emptiness—is seen to be existent and is in fact the nature of a buddha’s omniscience, which is to be perceived ultimately. Thus, the perfect nature is the remainder that represents the final fundamental change in terms of all ultimately nonexistent imaginary and other-dependent phenomena, which are just adventitious stains.

In accordance with Yogācāra, since all phenomena have the nature of mere cognizance (vijñaptimātra) appearing in delusive ways, there are no real referents outside of the mind. However, this mere cognizance too does not exist on its own and is delusive. Therefore, again, the perfect nature is free from both the imaginary and other-dependent natures.

That the perfect nature is nonduality does not just mean the sheer absence of any entity (just as the horns of a rabbit), but the ultimate emptiness that is to be personally experienced by the nonconceptual wisdom of the noble ones. This insight is to be developed through the four prayogas as they are presented in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and many *Yogācāra* texts (supported by several quotes from texts by Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu, Nāgārjuna's *Acintyastava* and *Dharmadhātustava*, and the *Abhidharmasūtra*). The *Āmnāyānusāriṇī* also relates suchness (the perfect nature) to its three stages of being impure, partially pure, and being utterly pure, usually explained as referring to *tathāgatagarbha*. Suchness, *prajñāpāramitā*, and the *dharmakāya* are held to be equivalent and said to represent ground, path, and fruition, respectively, in terms of the one and same suchness being more or less obscured by adventitious stains.

Furthermore, it is the nonexistence of both the imaginary and the other-dependent natures versus the existence of the perfect nature that allows full liberation through avoiding the two extremes of superimposition and denial. What is called “attainment” and “realization” is nothing but the termination of the adventitious stains within the naturally luminous *dharmadhātu* with all its pure qualities. Ultimately, there is nothing to be attained nor any means to attain anything.

In line with the “Maitreya Chapter,” the *Āmnāyānusāriṇī* discriminates the ways in which each of the three natures can be said to exist, but it explicitly denies the ultimate existence of the other-dependent nature, because it is dependent origination, supporting this by quotes from Nāgārjuna. In light of this explanation, another passage on the other-dependent nature being “mere mistakenness that is illusionlike dependent origination,” and the text's general stance of the other-dependent nature's lack of ultimate existence, the conclusion is that the ultimate—the perfect nature—is not dependent origination and is in fact beyond dependent origination. This represents an essential position for many *gzhan stong pa*s (foremost among them *Dol po pa*), being fiercely attacked by others in Tibet who maintain that the ultimate—emptiness—and dependent origination are equivalent.

The text declares that all phenomena are utterly nonexistent in terms of the imaginary nature, mere delusive appearances in terms of the other-dependent nature, and suchness in terms of the perfect nature. However, the text also specifies the ways in which each one among the three natures can be said to be both existent and nonexistent, while at the same time pointing out that none of the three natures can be said to be absolutely existent or nonexistent.

Very importantly, just as *Dol po pa* later, the author of the *Āmnāyānusāriṇī* obviously regards his presentation of the three natures as representing *Madhyamaka* and not as the common *Yogācāra* or *Vijñānavāda* position (sharply criticizing the *Sākāra-Vijñānavādin* branch in particular). While always promoting model (2) of the relationship between the three natures, the soteriological sufficiency of the usual *Yogācāra* model (1) is explicitly denied. However, the text also states that, without engaging in the *Yogācāra* position of *cittamātra* as the path, the *Madhyamaka* fruition of the emptiness of all phenomena cannot be realized. The text follows the gradual approach of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, and so on in terms of working with the notion

of cittamātra as a provisional, but necessary, step in the progression toward realizing ultimate reality. Thus, the Āmnāyānusāriṇī strongly and repeatedly denies that those, such as the Sākāravādins, who consider mere cognizance and the other-dependent nature to be ultimately existent, while taking emptiness to only exist on the level of conventions, are outside of the Buddhist teachings. Instead, the supreme realization is not to reify, or abide in, anything.

Just as in the “Great Madhyamaka” of Dol po pa and others, the Āmnāyānusāriṇī emphasizes that emptiness and prajñāpāramitā are explained in an equal manner by Maitreya, Nāgārjuna, and their respective followers, whereas the Sākāra-Vijñānavādins misrepresent what Maitreya taught. Since the author of the Āmnāyānusāriṇī strongly criticizes the Sākāra-Vijñānavādins, but never the Nirākāravādins, and takes his own presentation of the three natures and so on to be Madhyamaka, one may argue that he represents a **“Nirākāra-Mādhyamika”* (dbu ma rnam med pa) or *“Alīkākāra-Mādhyamika”* (dbu ma rnam brdzun pa).

While repeatedly denying any contradictions between Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu versus Nāgārjuna and his followers, the Āmnāyānusāriṇī also emphasizes that, in the mahāyāna, ultimate true reality does not mean total nonexistence. On the other hand, true reality is said to be existent only due to the fact that the wisdom mind of the noble ones cannot express it as anything. In particular, the text underscores the positions of both Asaṅga and Vasubandhu as truly authentic commentators on the Buddha’s teachings. Thus, their words are not of expedient meaning, but represent the definitive meaning of what the Buddha said. Consequently, the Āmnāyānusāriṇī absolutely endorses the explanations of the Paddhati/Brhaṭṭikā and that it was authored by Vasubandhu.

Since the teachings by Maitreya, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and Nāgārjuna all include the rejection of the ultimate existence of consciousness, none of them represent Vijñānavāda, which only teaches the expedient meaning. Hence, the text refutes the rather common position that Vasubandhu commented on the prajñāpāramitā sūtras from the perspective of Vijñānavāda. When reading this in connection with the passage above that explains Yogācāra to be the path and Madhyamaka to be the fruition, with the realization of the latter depending on having engaged in the former, the Āmnāyānusāriṇī obviously regards Maitreya, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, and Nāgārjuna as (Great) Mādhyamikas.

Ratnākaraśānti’s works

Ratnākaraśānti (early eleventh century) was the eastern gatekeeper at Vikramaśīla and a teacher of both Atiśa and Maitrīpa. He is known for his synthesis of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka that does not fit easily into any of the default Tibetan doxographic categories (from which he is in fact often absent).

As for the relationship between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, both his Prajñāpāramitopadeśa and Madhyamakālaṃkāropadeśa state that the philosophical systems of these two schools are congruent. In particular, the Prajñāpāramitopadeśa says that the final liberating realization is considered as the same in both schools, even if they differ

slightly in their assertions about the ultimate nature of phenomena, which is mind's unobscured natural luminosity.

According to the Madhyamakālaṃkāravṛtti, the Yogācāras are those who say that phenomena arise through the power of beginningless latent tendencies, while those who propound the three natures are the Mādhyamikas. However, those who say that everything is delusive are only pseudo-Mādhyamikas. Furthermore, the middle path means that the imaginary nature is not existent, while the other two natures are not nonexistent. The Prajñāpāramitopadeśa and the Madhyamakālaṃkāropadeśa call their presentation of the three natures “the Madhyamaka of the three natures.” The former text also says that the perfect nature as the ultimate is an implicative negation (paryudāsapratīṣedha) and not a nonimplicative negation (prasajyapratīṣedha). This accords with Dol po pa and many other gzhan stong pas.

According to the Prajñāpāramitopadeśa, mind does not exist as apprehender and apprehended, but the existence of the sheer lucidity of experience cannot be denied. Rebutting the well known objection against the existence of self-awareness that something cannot act upon itself, just as a sword cannot cut itself and a finger cannot touch itself, Ratnākaraśānti emphasizes the soteriologically crucial role of mind's natural luminosity being nondual self-awareness. If mind just experiences its own delusional superimpositions onto this nature, it appears as mistakenness, but when it realizes its own true nature directly, it is unmistakable nondual wisdom. The transition from the former to the latter state is accomplished through progressively stripping away all characteristics of mistakenness through the four yogabhūmis, thus experiencing the lucidity of all phenomena empty of the adventitious stains of duality. Ratnākaraśānti also highlights that realization and buddhahood cannot be reasonably defined as the cessation of the entirety of mind and mental factors. Though the ālaya-consciousness ceases, the uncontaminated elements of mind and mental factors remain to operate forever.

Thus, Ratnākaraśānti clearly argues against all Mādhyamikas who deny self-awareness, while emphasizing that it is precisely this self-awareness that is the nature of the experiential quality of realizing the ultimate. He dismisses the position of those, such as Candrakīrti, who take this realization to be just the complete cessation of mind and its objects (as explained in Madhyamakāvatāra XI.17).

While Ratnākaraśānti's other texts describe the three natures in accordance with model (1), his Sūtrasamuccayabhāṣya suggests model (2). Similarly, unmistakable wisdom is said to be empty by virtue of its being devoid of something other, that is, saṃvṛti and mistakenness (the cause of saṃvṛti). Tathāgatagarbha is said to be naturally pure suchness merely obscured by adventitious stains, or natural luminosity free from apprehender and apprehended. This is the single goṭra that serves as the basis for there being only a single yāna ultimately.

In sum, Ratnākaraśānti sees himself clearly as a Mādhyamika, but integrates many essential elements of Yogācāra and the teachings on tathāgatagarbha. At the same time, Ratnākaraśānti refutes both Sākāravādin-Yogācāras and Nirākāravādin-Yogācāras as well

as those Mādhyamikas who assert that external referents exist and that cognition has aspects. This would make him a *Nirākāra-Mādhyamika, while some Tibetans refer to him as propounding a *Vijñapti-Madhyamaka (rnam rig gi dbu ma pa). Though Ratnākaraśānti does not accord with all typical gzhan stong positions, his writings exhibit significantly enough traits of this view.

Sajjana's Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa

Two of the verses of this text (a summary of the Uttaratantra) and their glosses contain interesting passages along the lines of the Brhaṭṭīkā and Āmnāyānusāriṇī in terms of a gzhan stong stance with regard to tathāgatagarbha. Verse 9, which comments on Uttaratantra I.27–28, says:

[Beings are endowed with] tathāgatagarbha,
Because the disposition (gotra) for the [tathāgata] exists [in them].
The suchness of the dhātu is devoid
Of what is afflicted—the other-dependent.

Thus, tathāgatagarbha is explicitly said to be empty even of the other-dependent nature, and thus of course empty of the imaginary nature too. In addition, an interlinear gloss refers to tathāgatagarbha as “the seed that represents the disposition of the victors [being covered by] the two kinds of obscurations” (afflictive and cognitive). Thus, both obscurations are included in the other-dependent nature.

Verse 28 comments on Uttaratantra I.156–167 as being the justification for dispelling the wrong view that the tathāgatagarbha teachings are not authoritative. An interlinear gloss refers to the objection in I.156 that everything is to be understood as empty because of being conditioned. In response, tathāgatagarbha—luminous mind—is said to be unconditioned. Unlike ordinary states of mind, which are always contingent on four conditions, the sole factor for the arising of luminous mind is a previous instance of that very luminous mind. Accordingly, unlike the adventitious stains of conditioned phenomena, luminous mind is not empty, because it is unconditioned. Thus, tathāgatagarbha does not arise from anything nor is it produced by anything—it is merely revealed by realizing that the stains are illusory and never existed in the first place.

Kun dga' grol mchog's synopsis of Btsan kha bo che's gzhan stong
Btsan kha bo che traveled to Kashmir in 1076, where Sajjana taught him the five Maitreya texts by relying on the translator Gzu Dga' ba'i rdo rje. Thereafter, both Btsan and Gzu were instrumental in the early transmission of those texts in Tibet.

The Jo nang master Kun dga' grol mchog collected one hundred and eight essential teachings from different lineages, which appear in volume eighteen of Kong sprul's Gdams ngag mdzod. In the history section of his collection, Kun dga' grol mchog provides some context for Btsan kha bo che's view and the following excerpts from the latter's lost notebook (called Lotus Hook). According to Btsan kha bo che, Sajjana stated that the first dharmacakra teaches the four realities of the noble ones; the second one, the lack of

characteristics; and the final one makes excellent distinctions. The first two do not distinguish between what is actual and what is nominal, but the last one, being based on the certainty about the ultimate, distinguishes between the middle and extremes and also between phenomena and their true nature (thus following the hermeneutical principle of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, with only the last dharmacakra being of definitive meaning). For Kun dga' grol mchog, this remark in Btsan's old notebook shows that one should reject the later Tibetan claim that the term gzhan stong was completely unknown in India and only appeared later with Dol po pa. Kun dga' grol mchog also refers to Bu ston saying that it seems to be the previously existent philosophical system of Rta nag pa Rin chen ye shes (thirteenth/fourteenth century) that was later maintained and enhanced by Dol po pa. It is noteworthy that the record of received teachings of the Sa skya master Zhu chen Tshul khrims rin chen (1697–1774), one of the editors of the *Derge Bstan 'gyur* and definitely not known as a gzhan stong pa, also declares that, according to what Btsan kha bo che's notebook says, the transmission of gzhan stong already existed in India.

Tāranātha's Dpal 'dus kyi 'khor lo'i chos bskor gyi byung khungs nyer mkho reports that Dol po pa received the five works of Maitreya from Rta nag pa Rin chen ye shes in 1313. Volume 20 in a recently published collection of Bka' gdams writings contains a 212-folio commentary on the *Uttaratantra* by Rin chen ye shes, which will be interesting to examine in light of Kun dga' grol mchog's remarks.

The Guiding Instructions on the View of Other-Emptiness (*Gzhan stong gi lta khrid*) that Kun dga' grol mchog compiled from the instruction manual of Btsan kha bo che—apparently the above-mentioned Lotus Hook—offers a brief glimpse into the earliest available Tibetan source of the gzhan stong view. Though not using the term gzhan stong, its subject matters can be easily identified in later gzhan stong works.

Btsan kha bo che initially follows the descriptions of the three natures in classical *Yogācāra* texts. However, while saying that the other-dependent nature is empty of the imaginary nature (representing the perfect nature as in model (1)), he also explicitly states that the perfect nature is empty of both the imaginary and the other-dependent natures, thus conforming to model (2). This accords with the *Brhaṭṭikā*, the *Āmnāyānusāriṇī*, and Dol po pa. Also, in relating the three natures to the example of mistaking a rope for a snake, in line with many gzhan stong texts, Btsan kha bo che goes a step further than what the classical *Yogācāra* texts say in terms of the perfect nature. Though he agrees in his comparison of the imaginary nature to the snake and the other-dependent nature, to the rope, he describes the perfect nature as being like the space that exists in the rope in an all-pervasive manner. Furthermore, Btsan kha bo che describes the perfect nature not only as consisting of the classical twofold division into the unchanging and the unmistaken perfect natures, while also including the realizations on the path and the fruition of omniscient buddhahood (thus echoing, for example, *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* II.26 describing the perfect nature as the four pure dharmas). He also includes the fruitions of the *sāmbhogikakāya* and the *nairmāṇikakāya* as well as “dharmatā-phenomena” (as in the “Maitreya Chapter,” the *Brhaṭṭikā*, and the *Āmnāyānusāriṇī*). Likewise following these three texts, Btsan kha bo che states that both the imaginary and the other-dependent natures exist only seemingly, while the perfect nature exists ultimately. Still, the perfect nature as dharmatā is neither the

same as nor different from the other-dependent nature as the dharmin (the bearer of this dharmatā). In conclusion, just as Dol po pa and others later, Btsan refers to all of this as “the Great Madhyamaka free from all extremes” and not as Yogācāra, Vijñānavāda, or sems tsam.

In addition, Śākya mchog ldan’s Dbu ma’i ‘byung tshul reports on Btsan kha bo che’s position on tathāgatagarbha, saying that the definitive meaning obtained from his studies of the Maitreya works is that tathāgatagarbha is the naturally pure wisdom—natural luminosity—which pervades everyone from buddhas to sentient beings. This accords with the gzhan stong view and is also close to what the above-mentioned interlinear note on verse 28 of Sajjana’s Mahāyānottaratantraśāstropadeśa says.

Skyo ston Smon lam tshul khrims’ Ye shes kyi ‘jog sa

Given its unique title and its contents, there is no doubt that this text by the eighth abbot (1219–1299) of Snar thang Monastery, is identical with the Ye shes bzhag sa mentioned in the Deb ther sngon po. In agreement with what the same author’s Theg chen rgyud bla ma’i gdams pa says in terms of the transmission of the five works of Maitreya, the colophon of the Ye shes kyi ‘jog sa states that Smon lam tshul khrims gave the teachings contained in it to Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, who wrote it down. Thus, the text seems to represent the oral instructions (often in the form of questions and answers) of Smon lam tshul khrims based on the lineage of Btsan kha bo che and the Uttaratantra in particular, which obviously were a part of Bka’ gdams pa mainstream at the time.

The style and contents of the Ye shes kyi ‘jog sa conform with both the gzhan stong view and direct Mahāmudrā instructions on realizing confusion as wisdom. As Sgam po pa (1079–1153) and other Bka’ brgyud masters said, “The treatise of our Mahāmudrā is this Uttaratantraśāstra composed by the Bhagavān Maitreya.”

The Ye shes kyi ‘jog sa begins by declaring, just as Btsan kha bo che, that the texts of Maitreya are the ones into which one should place one’s trust when making a teaching one’s “death dharma.” In particular, the Uttaratantra is said to be Maitreya’s instruction on true actuality, contained in the seven vajra points. This is followed by describing the first three vajra points based on the corresponding verses of the Uttaratantra, but primarily in terms of mind’s luminosity and self-arisen wisdom. Thus, the Buddha refers to the self-arisen wisdom in which conceptions are terminated through realizing the luminosity of one’s own mind. The dharma is twofold—the realities of cessation and the path.

Cessation—the luminosity of one’s own mind—is inconceivable in being free from conceptions and afflictions. In the path, three features must be complete—the afflictions becoming pure through realizing the luminosity of one’s own mind, the nature of knowable objects being clearly realized as luminosity, and the dharma serving as the remedy for the superimposing mind. The saṃgha consists of the prajñā of realizing one’s own mind as luminosity arising at the same time as the compassion of realizing the minds of others as luminosity. Also, this nature of one’s own mind is buddhahood, which cannot be produced. The fourth vajra point is described as the dhātu or “the basic element” (khams), which is

mind's true nature, versus the adventitious stains that obscure it (interestingly, a “sentient being” is equated with these stains). Mind's natural luminosity is unchanging and beyond any need for purification or remedy, and the mahāyāna is explained from an internal perspective as the union of prajñā and compassion within this luminosity. Among the two types of disposition, the naturally abiding disposition (prakṛtisthagotra) is defined as the unconditioned dharmakāya, while the accomplished disposition (samudānītagotra) is the weariness for saṃsāra that is the seed for realizing the luminosity which is the naturally abiding disposition. Ultimately, there are no beings with the “cut-off disposition,” since this term refers only to the lack of aspiration for the mahāyāna in certain beings.

The fifth vajra point—the dharmakāya of buddhas—is defined as knowing what appears to sentient beings through wisdom (realizing the luminosity of the minds of these beings to be as pure as their own) as well as compassion (realizing that the adventitious stains of these beings are actually nonexistent). The dharmakāya refers to the unconditioned luminosity of one's own mind, in which all conceptions have been terminated. The sāmāhāyikakāya is the appearance of self-arisen wisdom as the thirty-two major marks, which is simultaneous with the termination of conceptions. The nairmāṇīkākāya is what appears of that luminosity and self-arisen wisdom to those with pure mind streams.

Buddha wisdom, which is not formed through conceptions, does exist, but in a way that is ultimately indescribable. If buddha wisdom existed as something conditioned, it would not be different from the wisdom of bodhisattvas. To say that the continuum of buddha wisdom is not severed means that self-arisen wisdom does not form a continuum in the first place. Thus, it abides without arising and ceasing, since conceptions have been terminated. This wisdom is asserted as being nothing but the nature of phenomena, just as space alone remaining upon the cessation of what is conditioned. Through stopping the clinging to the pleasure of objects of conception, the realization of Madhyamaka only cancels out what is conditioned (adventitious stains), but not this existing self-arisen buddhahood.

As for the difference between the self-awareness of sems tsam and self-arisen wisdom, if that wisdom is said to exist, the text says that the assertion of all appearances being appearances of conception is in accord with sems tsam. The difference here lies in the assertion that, when their luminosity is realized, conceptions are self-arisen wisdom—the dharmakāya. This accords with a typical gzhan stong distinction between sems tsam and gzhan stong in terms of the ultimate existence of mind versus wisdom. To say that self-arisen wisdom exists as the luminosity inherent in every thought also matches the well-known Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā teaching of “the nature of thoughts being dharmakāya.” Bodhisattvas are said to progress through the ten bhūmis by gradually eliminating all stains from luminosity, which is like the gradual steps of cleansing a gem. Likewise, the dharmadhātu is also the cause for śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas entering the mahāyāna and becoming buddhas too—there is only a single yāna.

The Ye shes kyi 'jog sa strictly separates ultimate reality and seeming reality, saying that the ultimate and buddhahood are one in nature, while the seeming and sentient beings are also one in nature. Nevertheless, without gathering the accumulations of conditioned merit and wisdom, one cannot become a buddha. Though a precious gem always exists in an

unaltered way even when encrusted by ordinary minerals, its qualities do not visibly manifest without cleansing it. Likewise, though the buddha that is the luminosity of one's own mind exists, it does not perform the activity of a buddha, if it is not liberated from the afflictions. However, it is not that wisdom is produced by conditioned virtue. Otherwise, it would be conditioned too and thus cease without continuing to accomplish the welfare of sentient beings. Also, it is only from our own perspective that the wisdoms of the ten bhūmis seem to become wisdom, but from the perspective of a buddha even a single subtle conception in itself is wisdom. Thus, the path is clearly said here to consist only of dispelling the adventitious stains, or rather seeing through their illusionlike nature, while there is nothing to accomplish in terms of buddha qualities, since they already exist as the altruistic display of mind's luminous nature.

The Theg chen rgyud bla ma'i gdams pa

This text by Skyo ston Smon lam tshul khriṃs contains Maitreya's very direct pointing-out instructions based on the appearances in a dream of Maitrīpa (often very similar to Mahāmudrā pointing-out instructions), through which Maitreya explains the inconceivability of the last four vajra points of the Uttaratantra in a very immediate experiential manner. These inconceivable points are that tathāgatagarbha is naturally pure and yet afflicted by adventitious stains, that enlightenment was never afflicted by adventitious stains and yet is purified from them through the path, that all buddha qualities exist already in sentient beings and yet do not manifest until buddhahood, and that enlightened activity fulfills the needs of those to be guided and yet is completely free from thoughts or plans. Maitreya's instructions equate tathāgatagarbha with mind's ultimate true nature, mind's natural luminosity, self-arisen nonconceptual wisdom, buddhahood, and the dharmakāya, all of which are said to exist already in sentient beings, but are merely obscured by imaginary adventitious stains. The main means to realize these four inconceivable points is to supplicate one's guru, who is to be regarded as a perfect buddha, and receive his or her pointing-out instructions. The text also specifies that these are very advanced teachings that should not be pointed out to four kinds of people—(1) ordinary beings with great attachment who cling to the illusionary appearances of saṃsāra as being permanently real, (2) the tīrthikas who cling to the skandhas as being a real self, (3) the śrāvakas who do not realize great bliss within saṃsāra and thus abandon it for their own benefit, and (4) the and pratyekabuddhas who lack compassion in order to benefit others.

Conclusion

Among modern scholars, it seems to be generally accepted that Dol po pa was the first one to use the terms rang stong and gzhan stong in a systematic and extensive way and widely propagated the gzhan stong system. Thus, from his time onward, what was also known in Tibet by names such as “the meditative tradition of the dharma works of Maitreya,” (byams chos sgom lugs) “False Aspectarian Madhyamaka” (dbu ma rnam brdzun) and “profound luminous Madhyamaka” (zab gsal dbu ma) became mostly referred to as “the gzhan stong system” (gzhan stong lugs) or “gzhan stong Madhyamaka.” However, as shown above, at least in terms of the contents, if not the name, there clearly were Indian and Tibetan precursors who discussed crucial elements of what came to be called the gzhan stong view,

though they did not use that term and did not necessarily give full-fledged or systematic presentations of gzhan stong as found in later Tibetan works. Therefore, it seems to be justified to refer to the authors of the *Br̥haṭṭikā* and the *Āmnāyānusāriṇī*, Sajjana, and Ratnākaraśānti as Indian forerunners of “Great Madhyamaka” as an equivalent of the gzhan stong view. The same applies to Btsan kha bo che and Smon lam tshul khrims as early Tibetan examples of this view before Dol po pa.

Most Tibetan followers of the gzhan stong view (Dol po pa in particular) indeed take the *Br̥haṭṭikā* as a major source of gzhan stong and also refer to Sajjana and Btsan kha bo che as important persons in the transmission of this view. Some, such as the Jo nang pas and Kong sprul, also refer to Ratnākaraśānti as an Indian forerunner of gzhan stong. However, to my knowledge, neither *Jagaddalanivāsin (or his *Āmnāyānusāriṇī*) nor Skyo ston Smon lam tshul khrims are mentioned as precursors of the gzhan stong view by any Tibetan proponents of that view.

Still, this leaves the open question why, if Vasubandhu is indeed the author of the *Br̥haṭṭikā*, he never referred to model (2) of the relationship between the three natures in any of his other texts, but always used model (1). Though most followers of gzhan stong accept Vasubandhu’s *Yogācāra* texts in general as belonging to the gzhan stong view, in light of his always using model (1), the frequent explanation in gzhan stong texts that model (1) is characteristic for sems tsam, while model (2) represents one of the most crucial features that distinguishes gzhan stong from sems tsam, then appears to be problematic not only with regard to Vasubandhu’s works. This equally applies to the texts of Maitreya and Asaṅga (held to be the principal forefathers of gzhan stong) and all other Indian *Yogācāras*, since they all use model (1). In addition, Tibetan gzhan stong pas differ as to which ones among those *Yogācāras* they consider to be proponents of gzhan stong and which ones they merely regard as sems tsam pas.

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