Maitreya’s *Ratnagotravibhāga*, also known as the *Uitaratanastra*, is the main Indian treatise on buddha nature, a concept that is heavily debated in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. In *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within*, Klaus-Dieter Mathes looks at a pivotal Tibetan commentary on this text by Gö Lotsāwa Zhönu Pal, best known as the author of the *Blue Annals*. Gö Lotsāwa, whose teachers spanned the spectrum of Tibetan schools, developed a highly nuanced understanding of buddha nature, tying it in with mainstream Mahayana thought while avoiding contested aspects of the so-called empty-of-other (zhentong) approach. In addition to translating key portions of Gö Lotsāwa’s commentary, Mathes provides an in-depth historical context, evaluating Gö Lotsāwa’s position against those of other Kagyü, Nyingma, and Jonang masters, and examining how their views affect Gö Lotsāwa’s understanding of the buddha qualities, the concept of emptiness, and the practice of mahāmudrā.

“A fundamental issue for religion in general is how to understand the presence of the sacred in the profane. In Buddhist terms this becomes a question of how to understand the buddha nature that inheres in all sentient beings. Dr. Mathes’ study of this issue as dealt with in a late-fifteenth-century Tibetan work is a truly outstanding contribution to this important branch of Buddhist philosophy. He lucidly historicizes a good number of fundamental treatises—their authors, Indian and Tibetan, and their ideas. Mathes’ diction is also first rate, rendering his exemplary work easily accessible.”—Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp, Harvard University

“Klaus-Dieter Mathes has rendered an extraordinary service to students of Tibetan intellectual and contemplative traditions by editing this singular work in full, and providing us with a clear and meticulous English translation of its key sections. His thorough introduction and annotations resolve the many difficult points found herein and place Gö Lotsāwa’s contribution in its proper context in the history of the tradition. In *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within*, Mathes sets a lasting standard for the presentation of Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal writings.” —Matthew T. Kapstein, The University of Chicago and the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris; author of *Reason’s Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*
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### Abbreviations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BHSD</td>
<td>Edgerton: <em>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, Dictionary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHSG</td>
<td>Edgerton: <em>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, Grammar</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRSM</td>
<td>Gos Lo tsä ba Gzhon nu dpal: <em>Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi 'grel bshad de kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Johnston (with reference to his <em>Ratnagotrav-ibhāgavyākhyā</em> edition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>Lokesh Chandra: <em>Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MVY</td>
<td><em>Mahāvyutpatti</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW</td>
<td>Monier Williams: <em>A Sanskrit-English Dictionary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGMPP</td>
<td>Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skt.</td>
<td>Sanskrit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tib.</td>
<td>Tibetan</td>
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For the abbreviations of Sanskrit sūtras and śāstras, see the bibliography.
Preface

This mind, O monks, is luminous!
But it is defiled by adventitious defilements.

—The Buddha: Aṅguttara Nikāya I.5, 9

Like cloth purified by fire,
[That is,] when one puts [a cloth]
Sullied with various stains over a fire,
The stains are burnt
But not the cloth,
Similarly, with the luminous mind,
Sullied with stains arisen from desire,
The stains are burnt by wisdom
But not the luminous [mind].
Those sūtras taught by the victorious ones
In order to reveal emptiness—
All eliminate defilements
But do not diminish the [buddha] element.

—Nāgārjuna: Dharmadhātustotra, stanzas 20–22

Numerous passages in the sūtras and āśāstras distinguish the adventitious stains of a suffering mind from its coexisting natural purity, which is at times called luminosity, buddha nature, or dharmadhātu. This natural purity is a kind of true nature of mind endowed with innumerable buddha qualities since beginningless time, even during our wildest excesses of attachment or hatred. Put another way, buddha nature (Skt. tathāgatagarbha) is empty of adventitious stains but not of its own qualities. If we take the above-quoted passage from the Dharmadhātu-stotra seriously (and all Mahāyāna exegetes accept that this stotra was composed by Nāgārjuna), we have to restrict the validity of Madhyamaka logic to the adventitious defilements—anything else cannot be the object of a conceptualizing mind. Some Tibetan interpreters have distinguished two
modes of emptiness: being “empty of an own-being” (Tib. rang stong), and being “empty of other” (Tib. gzhan stong). The former rangtong view is that buddha nature means simply that the mind, like all phenomena, lacks an own-being or self. The latter zhentong view is that buddha nature is an ultimate nature of mind that is endowed with all buddha qualities and that is empty only of adventitious defilements (the “other”), which do not reflect its true nature.

The old Tibetan discussion of whether the teachings of a luminous mind or buddha nature in the so-called third turning of the wheel of Dharma (dharma-cakra), such as in the passage above, should be taken more literally or whether the third dharma-cakra should be interpreted via the rangtong analysis became a contemporary issue when my Tibetan teachers Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtsho and Thrangu Rinpoche began to propagate the controversial zhentong interpretation of the Rgyud bla ma (the Uttaratantra or Rtag na tshig bshad) in the 1970s and 80s. Up until then the Tibetan reception of the Rtag na tshig bshad had mainly been known of in the West through David Seyfort Ruegg’s publications, which were to some extent influenced by the prevailing Gelug (Dge lugs) hermeneutics. The Gelug school follows Candrakīrti’s (seventh-century) lead in taking the teaching in the second dharma-cakra of the lack of an independent nature or own-being as the underlying intention of any positive statement about the ultimate.

Against this background, it would of course be useful to investigate how other Tibetan schools have interpreted the theory of buddha nature, and when I was appointed director of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project in Kathmandu in October 1993, I had great hopes of collecting new material for a future research project on this subject. But it was only when I went through the Tibetan texts kept at Chetsang Rinpoche’s library in Dehra Dun in March 1997 that I finally discovered something interesting, namely Gó Lotsāwa Zhònû Pal’s (Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal) (1392–1481) Rtag na tshig bshad gsum bshad de kho na nyid rab tu gsal bai me long [“A Commentary on the Treatise Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra (i.e., Rtag na tshig bshad)—The Mirror Showing
Reality Very Clearly”) at the beginning of 2003. This commentary is the main source for the present study, which was accepted as my habilitation thesis by the University of Hamburg in April 2004.

It is my pleasure to acknowledge the various forms of help I have received from others in preparing this work. First of all, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche, who assisted me in my research continuously, whether in Kathmandu, Sarnath, or the West, by patiently going through long lists of questions and discussing the subtle points of my research on buddha nature, emptiness, and mahāmudrā. Similar thanks go to Khenpo Lobsang from the Vajra Vidya Institute in Sarnath, who helped me to understand difficult passages in the Tibetan and who, thanks to his having memorized many treatises, was able to identify some of the unattributed quotations. Even though I was able to meet the Venerable Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche only once—in the summer of 2002 in Hamburg—I gratefully recall his clear and precise explanations of certain aspects of tantric zhentong, sūtra-mahāmudrā, and essence mahāmudrā at an important stage in my writing.

I also express my gratitude to professors Lambert Schmithausen and David Jackson, who carefully read important parts of my study and offered most welcome solutions to a number of difficult points. Having only joined the Indian and Tibetan Department in Hamburg in the summer of 2001, I nevertheless feel sufficiently qualified to praise the collegial, “bodhisattva-like” atmosphere in which scholarly problems are addressed. This is true in particular of Dr. Diwakar Acharya, who provided repeated assistance in deciphering all the nearly unreadable aksaras of the Ratnagotravibhāga-vyākhyā manuscripts and in working with the numerous Lankāvatārasūtra manuscripts from Nepal.

Many thanks also to Philip Pierce (Nepal Research Centre, Kathmandu) and David Kittelstrom (Wisdom Publications) for carefully reading through the entire manuscript and improving my English. Furthermore, I profited from the very fruitful exchanges I had during regular meetings with Kazuo Kano (Kyoto, currently University of Hamburg), whose doctoral thesis on Ngog Loden Sherab’s (Rngog Blo Idan shes rab) Ratnagotravibhāga commentary (the Theg chen rgyud bla’i don bsadus pa) I have been supervising for the past two years.

Finally I would like to thank the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) for enabling me to conduct the present study in the first place by financially supporting me for three years with a scholarship.
Introduction

General Remarks

The doctrine of “buddha nature” (Tib. de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po), or the teaching that all sentient beings are already buddhas or have the ability to attain buddhahood (depending on which interpretation you prefer), became an important issue in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Tibet. It was not only much discussed among masters, such as Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltse (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan) (1292–1361), who were intimately involved in the practice of the Kalacakratantra, but also came to form an important doctrinal foundation for the dzogchen (rdzogs chen) teachings of Longchen Rabjam (Klong chen rab ’byams pa) (1308–63) and the mahāmudrā instructions of the Kagyūpas (Bka’ brgyud pa). Thus, Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje) (1284–1339) equated buddha nature with the central mahāmudrā term natural mind (Tib. tha mal gyi shes pa), and Gö Lotsāwa Zhönu Pal (’Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal) (1392–1481) composed an extensive commentary of the standard Indian work on buddha nature, the Ratnagotravibhāga, from within the mahāmudrā tradition of Maitreya (ca. 1007–ca. 1085) and Gampopa (Sgam po pa) (1079–1153). Zhönu Pal and his mahāmudrā interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga are the main subject of the present study.

One of the main goals of Zhönu Pal’s Ratnagotravibhāga commentary is to show that the Kagyū path of mahāmudrā is already taught in the Maitreya works and the Laṅkāvatārasūtra. This approach involves resting your mind in a nonconceptual experience of luminosity or the dharmadhātu (the expanse or nature of all phenomena) with the help of special “pith instructions” (Tib. man ngag) on how to become mentally disengaged. A path of directly realizing buddha nature is thus distinguished from a Madhyamaka path of logical inference and it is with this in mind that Zhönu Pal’s commentary can be called a “direct path to the buddha within.”

The Ratnagotravibhāga Mahāyānottaratantra belongs, if we follow the Tibetan tradition, to the “five treatises of Maitreya,” though its oldest layers had probably already been composed by Sāramati in the third or fourth century. It was not quoted in India until centuries later, and the only safe terminus ante quem for it is 508 C.E., the year in which Ratnamati, who
translated the "Ratnagotravibhāga" into Chinese, arrived in China from Madhyadesa (India). According to Tibetan tradition, the future Buddha Maitreya taught the "Ratnagotravibhāga" to Asaṅga in the Tusita heaven. Asaṅga is also said to have composed the "Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā". This commentary on the "Ratnagotravibhāga" quotes a number of sūtras that teach that all sentient beings possess the nature of a buddha, doubtlessly in the sense that they are already complete buddhas but do not know and actualize their true being because of their adventitious stains or spiritual defilements. But the "Ratnagotravibhāga" and its vyākhyā also contain passages that try to embed the teaching of buddha nature within mainstream Mahāyāna and relate it, for example, with suchness, and thus only with the cause or seed of buddhahood.

Such a form of the tathāgatagarbha theory can be discerned in the Yogācāra works among the Maitreya texts, and in his "Madhyamakāloka", Kamalaśīla (ca. 740–95) brings the tathāgatagarbha theory in line with Madhyamaka thought in order to establish the teaching of a single path (ekayāna). But the Indian reaction on the whole was simply to ignore the "Ratnagotravibhāga" and its teaching of buddha nature for six centuries. Things changed, however, in the eleventh century. During this period scholars such as Jñānakīrti (tenth/eleventh century) or Maitripa started to use tantric terms more freely. Their works reflect the latest developments in Indian Buddhism, which may be characterized as a genuine attempt to incorporate certain elements of the originally tantric teachings of the mahāsiddhas into the more traditional mainstream Mahāyāna, though they still maintained the superiority of tantra. In this undertaking, the teaching of buddha nature proved to provide good doctrinal support, and thus, not surprisingly, the "Ratnagotravibhāga" became a highly esteemed treatise in these circles. Tradition has it that the "Dharmadharmatāvibhāga" and the "Ratnagotravibhāga" were rediscovered and taught by Maitripa, but Maitripa’s teacher at Vikramaśīla, Jñānaśrimitra (ca. 980–1040), must have already known these two works when he composed his "Sākārasiddhiśāstra" and "Sākārasaṅgraha". Ratnākaraśānti, another teacher of Maitripa, also quotes the "Ratnagotravibhāga" in the "Sūtrasamuccayabhāṣya". Maitripa passed the "Dharmadharmatāvibhāga" and the "Ratnagotravibhāga" on to *Ānandakīrti and Sajjana. With the help of Sajjana, the Tibetan scholar Ngog Loden Sherab (Rngog Loden Sherab) (1059–1109) translated the "Ratnagotravibhāga" and its vyākhyā into Tibetan. For Loden Sherab (Blo Idan shes rab) buddha nature was a synonym of emptiness, which could be realized by means of nonaffirming negations. He thus founded what is known as the analytical tradition (mtshan nyid lugs) of interpreting the Maitreya works.
The corresponding meditation tradition (sgom lugs) was founded by Tsen Kawoché (Btsan Kha bo che) (b. 1021), who received explanations of the Ratnagotravibhāga from Sajjana with the help of the translator Zu Gawai Dorjé (Gzu Dga’ ba’i rdo rje).14

This set the stage for the different interpretations of the Ratnagotravibhāga in Tibet. The main issues at stake were whether the teaching that all sentient beings are already buddhas within themselves has a provisional or a definitive meaning—in other words, whether the doctrine of buddha nature was taught with the intention of furthering beings who would otherwise be afraid of the true doctrine of emptiness, or whether the Buddha truly meant that sentient beings are buddhas within. Among those who accepted the teaching of buddha nature as definitive, it was further discussed whether all or only some qualities already exist in sentient beings, and whether they exist in a fully developed or only a subtle way. Apart from these issues, the Ratnagotravibhāga and its related sūtras were also used in different ways to doctrinally support disputed traditions, such as the zhen-tong (gzhan stong) (“empty of other”) of the Jonangpas (Jo nang pa) or sūtra-based mahāmudrā.

**Delimitation of the Subject and Methods Employed**

To determine Gō Lotsāwa Zhönu Pal’s position on buddha nature, which is the main goal of the present study, we are forced to rely completely on his extensive commentary on the Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā, for the simple reason that it is his only philosophical work available to date. Fortunately, his work is far more than a simple commentary. It not only quotes and discusses nearly all Mahāyāna treatises and a number of sūtras, but also explains a few passages of the Ratnagotravibhāga in the light of the (sūtra-based) mahāmudrā tradition of Maitripa and Gampopa. Still, the result of our analysis must remain preliminary, since it is difficult to say whether Zhönu Pal’s commentary on the Ratnagotravibhāga reveals his true opinion on the subject of buddha nature. It may well be that, like others, his statements as a commentator merely reflect an ordinary explanation in line with general Mahāyāna, the final view on the buddha qualities and so forth being revealed only in a tantric context. Dölpopa (Dol po pa), for one, refrains as a commentator from presenting his extraordinary zhen-tong understanding in his Ratnagotravibhāga commentary. If we only had Dölpopa’s Ratnagotravibhāga commentary, then we would have remained ignorant of his full-fledged zhen-tong interpretation.15
Zhōnu Pal subdivides his commentary into three explanations for disciples with sharp, average, and inferior faculties. Besides his introductory remarks, it is the explanation for those with average faculties which is of particular interest. Technically, it is a commentary on the first three stanzas of the first chapter of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. The mahāmudrā-based explanations Zhōnu Pal offers in his commentary on the threefold purification of a *vaiḍūrya* gem and the three dharmacakras in RGVV I.2 are especially helpful in assessing his hermeneutic strategy of fully endorsing the *Saññhirmocanasūtra*, which only assigns definitive meaning to the teachings of the last dharmacakra. The superiority of the last dharmacakra derives, according to Zhōnu Pal, from the particularly efficient, direct approach to the natural mind that the mahāmudrā pith instructions allow. An annotated translation of this explanation for disciples with average faculties thus forms, together with the translation of the introduction and the explanation for those with sharp faculties, the basis of our analysis of Zhōnu Pal’s *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary.

Because Zhōnu Pal deals in the main part of his commentary with almost every aspect of the Buddhist doctrine, it is necessary to delimit the scope of our inquiry and define methodological principles that will enable us to structure this vast material and evaluate it in terms of a history of ideas. In other words, it is first necessary to identify and describe the specific points Zhōnu Pal makes with regard to buddha nature in order to be able to systematically compare his position with those of other exegetes. An initial study of Zhōnu Pal’s *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary suggests three promising lines of inquiry:

1. What does Zhōnu Pal mean by the presence of “subtle” buddha qualities in sentient beings?
2. How does Zhōnu Pal tie the teaching of buddha nature in with the *prajñāpāramitā* literature by distinguishing two types of emptiness?
3. In what way does Zhōnu Pal read his mahāmudrā pith instructions into certain passages of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the other Maitreya works, and the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*?

Given Zhōnu Pal’s broad educational background, a systematic comparison of his views with all other major commentarial traditions of his time would seem called for, but such a wide-ranging study would go beyond the scope of a single monograph. Since it is Zhōnu Pal’s main concern to explain the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the other Maitreya works from within his mahāmudrā tradition, which is closely related to the meditation tradition of Tsen Kawoché, Zhōnu Pal’s position will be mainly evaluated.
against the background of a carefully chosen selection of interpretations by masters of the Kagyü, Nyingma (Rnying ma), and Jonang (Jo nang) schools who figure within or are close to his tradition. The fourteenth century, which experienced some of the most important developments of the above-mentioned traditions, together with the fifteenth century, Zhönu Pal’s own century, will form the time frame for the present study.

The earliest exegete I have chosen is the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé (1284–1339), who not only stands in the tradition of Tsen Kawoché, but also combines mahâmudrâ and dzogchen with Asaṅga’s Yogācāra, whose strict distinction between an impure alayavijñâna (basic consciousness) and the pure dharmadhâtu (expanse of phenomena) served as a basis for later zhentong traditions. The next two are Dölpopa (1292–1361) and his disciple Sabzang Mati Panchen (Sa bzang Mati pañ chen) (1294–1376), both of whom contributed considerably to the spiritual history of Tibet by their extraordinary zhentong interpretation of buddha nature. Since Rangjung Dorjé assimilated dzogchen ideas, it is also of great interest to determine Longchen Rabjampa’s view on buddha nature, which may have influenced Zhönu Pal’s theory of beginningless subtle qualities. In fact, Zhönu Pal’s teacher Lhakhang Tengpa Sangyé Rinchen (Lha khang steng pa Sangs rgyas rin chen) (1339–1434) belonged, together with Longchenpa, to the circle of disciples of the Saky (Sa skya) master Lama Dampa Sönam Gyaltse (Blu ma Dam pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan) (1312–75). Of great interest is also a Ratnagotravibhâga commentary by Sangpupa Lodrö Tsunmê (Gsang phu pa Blo gros mshungs med) (thirteenth/fourteenth century) who, as an assistant professor under Jamyang Shâkzhön (‘Jam dbyangs Shâk gzhon), must have had some exchange of views with the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé about the Ratnagotravibhâga. Finally I have selected the Drugpa (‘Brug pa) Kagyü master Barawa Gyaltse Palzang (‘Ba’ ra ba Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang) (1310–91), whose mahâmudrâ interpretation of buddha nature is nearly identical with that of Zhönu Pal.

The differences between the various Ratnagotravibhâga commentaries, while numerous, are often a matter of minor technical detail, and in order to avoid a mere collection of subsidiary material, we will concentrate in each case on a few major philosophical issues that can be directly compared or related with the three above-mentioned questions regarding Zhönu Pal’s position. Toward this goal it is not enough to simply compare how a few crucial stanzas of the Ratnagotravibhâga are explained. Especially since Ratnagotravibhâga commentaries do not survive for each chosen exegete, and furthermore, in some cases only the independent works of the master
clearly reveal his philosophical views. To give an example, when reading Dölpopa’s commentary on RGV I.152–53 (J I.149–50), we could get the impression that the fortified potential, from which the qualities of the form kāyas arise, is something newly acquired by effort, and based on this passage alone we are not able to correctly describe the Jonang position that in reality all buddha qualities exist throughout beginningless time. The explanation of this *prima facie* contradiction is that the latter is the extraordinary explanation, which is not given in an ordinary commentary. But we only come to know this by consulting Dölpopa’s *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*. Longchenpa, on the other hand, comments on these stanzas (RGV I.152–53) in the nontantric part of his *Grub mtha’ mdzod* fully in line with the dzo paycheck notion that qualities are not produced but spontaneously present. Thus the ascertainment of a given exegete’s philosophical position not only involves a critical assessment of the sources used, be it his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary or any other text, but also requires a thorough knowledge of the hermeneutical principles to which an exegete adheres.

Still, while our limited selection of texts by these fourteenth-century masters does not provide scope for a comprehensive description of the traditions related to Zhönu Pal’s position in this period, it does provide a basis for depicting a few first prominent spots on an otherwise empty map, and so serves as a preliminary guide for understanding the development of ideas during this interesting period. To sum up, my study of Rangjung Dorjé, Longchenpa, Lodrö Tsungmé (Blo gros mtsungs med), Barawa, and the Jonang position remains a first step and is only meant to better contextualize some of Zhönu Pal’s important views on the buddha nature.

The “analytic” interpretations of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in the Gelug and Sakya traditions have been accurately dealt with by Seyfort Ruegg. Zhamar Chödrag Yeshé (Zhva dmar Chos grags ye shes) (1453–1524) mentions in his biography of Zhönu Pal the interesting detail that the latter was fond of Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa) (1357–1419) for having taught a possible distinction between provisional and definitive meaning according to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. On the other hand, Zhönu Pal is reported to have had an argument with Tsongkhapa’s student Gyaltsab Jé (Rgyal tshab rje) (1364–1432) over great bliss in highest yoga tantra (Tib. *rnal ’byor bla na med pa’i rgyud*). While Gyaltsab Jé explained that such bliss cannot be ascertained as anything, Zhönu Pal insisted that there is a way of ascertaining it in his (Zhönu Pal’s) own tradition. It would thus be interesting to find out if Tsongkhapa really did uphold, contrary to his disciple Gyaltsab Jé, a tradition embracing a positive direct approach to the ultimate—one that met with the approval of Zhönu Pal—but this would go beyond the scope of this study.
The Ratnagotravibhāga and Its Vyākhyā

The RatnagotravibhāgaVyākhyā was translated from the Tibetan by Obermiller in 1931. After Johnston (1950) had edited the original Sanskrit on the basis of two manuscripts brought by Śāṅkṛtyāyana from Tibet, the vyākhyā was translated for a second time, from the Sanskrit, by Takasaki (1966). Both Johnston’s edition and Takasaki’s translation are pioneering works, yet they contain a number of serious mistakes, as can be seen from de Jong’s (1979) and Schmithausen’s (1971) extensive reviews. Unfortunately, the latter two did not correct the entire edition and translation, so each time I quote and translate or refer to a passage from the RatnagotravibhāgaVyākhyā, I have had to check the original manuscript. Even though Seyfort Ruegg’s (1969) French paraphrases of the most important parts of the latter are also very valuable, they are sometimes too influenced by the prevailing Gelug interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga. In RGVV I.1, for example, the buddha qualities are characterized, based on a quotation from the Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdesa, as being inseparable:

“Śāriputra, the dharmakāya taught by the tathāgata possesses inseparable (avinirbhāga) properties and qualities impossible to recognize as something disconnected (avinirmuktajñāna-), in the form of properties of the tathāgata, which surpass in number the grains of sand of the river Gaṅgā.” Thus the sixth vajra point should be understood according to the Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdesa. Seyfort Ruegg (1969:360) regards the compound members avinirbhāga—and avinirmuktajñāna—as qualifications of the dharmakāya and translates: “…le dharmakāya…a pour qualité d’être inséparable, et il a la propriété du savoir non séparé—[inséparable] des dharma de tathāgata dépassant [en leur nombre] les sables de la Gaṅgā.” In the Śrīmālādevisūtra, however, both compounds are used to mark the buddha qualities, which is also the most natural grammatical construction here. The difference is significant. If the qualities themselves are inseparable, it is much more difficult to read the Gelug understanding that the qualities are produced by the fortified potential into the Ratnagotravibhāga. Still, Seyfort Ruegg’s work was groundbreaking in having accurately described the Ratnagotravibhāga interpretation of the later dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug, whose lines of scholastic thought sometimes influenced the other schools.

The Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā quotes a group of sūtras which clearly
state that all sentient beings possess a buddha nature that is inseparably endowed with innumerable buddha qualities. This doctrine is clearly expounded in the nine examples from the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra, which are also presented and discussed in detail in the Ratnagotravibhāga. According to Michael Zimmermann, all nine examples convey the idea of a full-fledged tathāgata in living beings throughout beginningless time. The authors of the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra were obviously somewhat uncautious, attributing as they did substantialist notions to buddha nature and fitting them out with philosophically ambiguous terminology. It could be argued, as Zhōnu Pal does, that the examples of a tree grown from a seed and the future monarch (cakravartin) in the womb indicate a growth of the buddha qualities, but in support of the original purport of the sūtra, we can say that the main focus of the example of the tree lies not on the growing tree, but on the imperishability of its seed and that the result (kārya), namely the tree, is already contained in the seed. Again, in the second example adduced, that the cakravartin is still an embryo does not seem crucial for understanding it. His nature of being a cakravartin will not change, for his future role is already preordained, and his poor mother already protected.

The Śrīmālādevisūtra, too, conveys the idea that the inconceivable buddha qualities are inseparable from buddha nature. In other words, sentient beings already possess the buddha qualities, and only differ from an actual buddha in that they have not yet purified themselves from their adventitious stains. This is also supported by the Anūnātavāpūrṇatvanirdeshāparivarta which is quoted in RGVV I.1 as canonical support for the fourth vajra point, namely buddha nature:

“Śāriputra, ultimate is an expression for the [buddha] element in sentient beings. The [buddha] element in sentient beings, Śāriputra, is an expression for buddha nature. Buddha nature, Śāriputra, is an expression for the dharmakāya.” Thus the fourth vajra point should be understood according to the Anūnātavāpūrṇatvanirdeshāparivarta.41

The crucial stanzas on emptiness in the Ratnagotravibhāga and its vyākhyā (RGV I.157–58, (J I.154–55)) are also clear in this respect: they fully endorse the inseparable connection of the qualities with buddha nature:

There is nothing to be removed from it and nothing to be added. The real should be seen as real, and seeing the real, you become liberated.
The [buddha] element is empty of adventitious [stains], which have the defining characteristic of being separable; but it is not empty of unsurpassable qualities, which have the defining characteristic of not being separable.\textsuperscript{43}

The vyākhya is:

What is taught by that? There is no characteristic sign of any of the defilements (saṅkheṣa) whatsoever to be removed from this naturally pure buddha element, because it is naturally devoid of adventitious stains. Nor does anything need to be added to it as the characteristic sign (nimitta) of purification, because its nature is to have pure properties that are inseparable [from it].\textsuperscript{44} Therefore it is said [in the Śrīmālādevisūtra]: “Buddha nature is empty of the sheath of all defilements, which are separable and recognized as something disconnected. It is not empty[, however,] of inconceivable buddha qualities, which are inseparable [in that it is impossible] to recognize [them] as something disconnected, and which surpass in number the grains of sand of the river Gaṅgā.” Thus we truly see that something is empty of that which does not exist in it, and we truly realize that that which remains there is present, [and] hence exists there. Having [thus] abandoned the extremes of [wrong] assertion and denial, these two stanzas correctly elucidate the defining characteristic of emptiness.\textsuperscript{45}

This passage clearly states, in the sense of the Śrīmālādevisūtra, that buddha nature is not empty of inseparable qualities, and the traditional formula on being empty as found in the Cūlasuṇṇatasutta\textsuperscript{46} confirms that these inseparable qualities are left in emptiness.\textsuperscript{47} The quotation from the Śrīmālādevisūtra that immediately follows in the vyākhya (“The tathāgatas’ wisdom [that knows] emptiness is the wisdom [that knows] the buddha nature”\textsuperscript{48}) must be understood in the same context. The sūtra does not simply here equate the buddha nature with Madhyamaka emptiness, but takes emptiness as an aspect of the buddha nature, namely its being empty of adventitious stains. Seyfort Ruegg remarks on this point that the Ratnakūṭavibhāgavyākhya tries to integrate the theory of emptiness into a particular doctrine of an absolute that is inseparable from buddha qualities.\textsuperscript{49} Schmithausen here identifies a form of “inclusivism” under which emptiness is understood as buddha nature empty of adventitious stains.\textsuperscript{50}
On the other hand, there are some passages in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā* that try to avoid a too substantialist notion of buddha nature and its qualities. Thus, RGV I.29 introduces the ten aspects of buddha nature in the first chapter with the remark that the latter are taught with the underlying intention of the ultimate buddha element:

[The ten aspects are:] [its] own-being, cause, fruit, function, connection, manifestation, phases, all-pervasiveness, unchangeability, and inseparable qualities. With regard to them we should know that the intended meaning [is that] of the ultimate [buddha] element.\(^{51}\)

In other words, RGV I.29 would have us understand the unchangeability of the element and inseparability of its qualities in terms of the ultimate aspect of buddha nature—this, after all, is also implied in the above-quoted passage from the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvānirdeśa*, which equates buddha nature not only with the dharmakāya, but also with the ultimate. Now two different sets of qualities can be taken as pertaining to the ultimate. First, an ultimate kāya (*paramārthakāya*) is said to be endowed with the “thirty-two qualities of the dharmakāya”\(^ {52}\) (i.e., the ten strengths, the four fearlessnesses, and the eighteen exclusive features);\(^ {53}\) and secondly, an ultimate aspect is referred to in the introduction of the *Ratnagotravibhāga vyākhyā* to the stanzas II.29–37,\(^ {54}\) in the following way:

The explanation that the Buddha has the defining characteristics of space was taught with the underlying intention of the ultimate and exclusive buddha characteristic of the tathāgatas.\(^ {55}\)

In RGV II.46c–47d it is further specified how the endowment of immeasurable qualities is to be understood:

Since its nature is [that of] the dharmadhātu, [the svābhāvikakāya] is luminous and pure.

The svābhāvikakāya is endowed with qualities that are immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable, and incomparable, and that have reached the [state of] final purity.\(^ {56}\)

In other words, the svābhāvikakāya is here said to possess largely space-like qualities, which are not at variance with the concept of emptiness in mainstream Mahāyāna. Various Tibetan exegetes such as Barawa saw in
this ultimate aspect of the qualities the inseparable qualities of the Śrīmālādeviśīstra and the Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa. Following this line of thought, Gō Lotsāwa Zhōnu Pal, for example, took the sixth and the eighth examples of the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra as an indication that the qualities exhibit aspects of growth, notwithstanding the clear intention of the sūtra, which becomes evident in its explanation of the fifth example (a treasure buried under a poor man’s house), where buddha nature is fully equated with the thirty-two qualities of the dharma-kāya.57 The Ratnagotravibhāga (I.117 (J I.114)), which otherwise faithfully renders the nine examples of the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra, only speaks of the treasure of properties (dharma-nidhi).58 That this is not only an unintentional inaccuracy is clear from RGV I.152–55 (J I.149–52), where the treasure illustrates the naturally present potential, from which the svābhāvikakāya (i.e., the thirty-two qualities of the dharma-kāya) is said to be obtained (see below). In other words, the treasure of buddha nature no longer stands for the thirty-two qualities of the dharma-kāya, but rather for their cause. Given these somewhat unbalanced strands of the Ratnagotravibhāga, we can either follow the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra and fully equate the qualities of buddha nature with the thirty-two qualities of the dharma-kāya, or elaborate on a difference between a buddha nature that consists of merely space-like qualities, on the one hand, and a buddha endowed with all qualities, on the other.

Such a strategy of distinguishing buddha nature from the dharma-kāya finds support from one of the oldest building blocks of the Ratnagotravibhāga, stanza I.27,59 which implies a subtle distinction between buddha nature, or potential, and an actual buddha:

By virtue of the presence of buddha wisdom in [all] kinds of sentient beings,
The fact that its (i.e., buddha nature’s) stainlessness is by nature without duality
And the fact that its (i.e., buddha nature’s) fruit has been
“metaphorically” applied (Skt. upacāra) to the buddha potential,
All sentient beings are said to possess the essence of a buddha.60

Zhōnu Pal here explains upacāra by citing the example of a Brahmin boy who is called a lion because he is a hero and fearless.61 Whereas a real lion is an animal, the word lion is applied to the brave boy only metaphorically. It may be the case, however, that upacāra simply stands for a “custom or manner of speech,” the buddha potential being vaguely called a buddha, even though the buddha element, which already possesses its inseparable
qualities, has not yet been purified from its separable stains. But Dölpopa, for whom the only difference between an actual buddha and buddha nature is whether one has purified all stains or not, ignores this stanza, while his disciple Sabzang Mati Panchen has great difficulty in making it fit the Jonang position.

Further support for a distinction between different sets of qualities is offered in the first three stanzas of the third chapter of the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga*, which distinguish between the qualities of the dharma-kāya (i.e., the ultimate kāya) and those of the form kāyas:

Benefit for oneself and others is [equivalent respectively to] the state of having the ultimate kāya and the kāyas of apparent [truth], which are based on it. Representing the state of dissociation and maturation, the fruit possesses a variety of sixty-four qualities.

The body partaking of the ultimate is the support for accomplishing one’s own benefit, while the support for accomplishing the benefit of others is the embodiment (vāpūḥ) of the Sage on the level of conventional [truth].

The first body is endowed with the qualities of dissociation, such as the [ten] strengths, and the second with those of maturation, the [thirty-two] marks of a great being.

The major (and minor) marks of a buddha, or the thirty-two qualities of the form kāyas, are called qualities of maturation and belong to the conventional level of truth. This distinction between two sets of qualities is also clearly stated in RGV I.152–55 (J I.149–52):

One should know that the potential is twofold in being like a treasure and a tree [grown] from a fruit. It is the primordial naturally present [potential] and the acquired (=fortified) supreme [potential].

It is maintained that the three kāyas of the Buddha are obtained [by starting] from these two potentials: the first kāya from the first, and the latter two from the second.

One should know that the beautiful svābhāvikakāya is like a precious image, since it is nonartificial by nature and since it is the source of precious qualities.

The saṁbhoga[kāya] is like the cakravartin, since it possesses the great kingdom of Dharma. The nirmāṇa[kāya] is like the golden statue, since its nature is that of being a reflection.
In other words, the form kāyas and thus their qualities are obtained from
the acquired or fortified potential, which is normally explained as the accu-
mulation of merit. It should be noted that it is only the svābhāvikakāya that
is described as “nonartificial.” Given that in RGV III.3 the ultimate kāya is
said to be endowed with the ten strengths, etc. (i.e., the thirty-two quali-
ties of the dharmakāya), the latter cannot be taken as something artificially
produced either.

Another important issue among Tibetan scholars was the question
whether the Ratnagotravibhāga comments on sūtras that have definitive or
provisional meanings, namely whether the teaching of buddhanature is to
be taken literally or interpreted in line with the emptiness taught in the
prajñāpāramitā sūtras. Immediately after the stanzas on emptiness (RGV
I.157–58 (J I.154–55)), the relation between the teachings of the prajñā-
pāramitā sūtras and the tathāgatagarbha sūtras, together with the aim of the
latter, is spelled out:

[Somebody] says: If the [buddha] element is thus so difficult to
see, given that it is not a fully experiential object for even the
highest saints who abide on the final level of nonattachment,
what is gained then by teaching it [even] to foolish (i.e., ordi-
nary) people? [Thus] the [following] two stanzas [are dedicated]
to a summary of the aim/motive (prayojana) of the teaching.
One is the question, and in the second the explanation [is
given]:

Why did the buddhas teach here that a buddha element
exists in all sentient beings, after they taught everywhere67
that everything should be known to be empty in every
respect, like clouds, [visions in a] dream and illusions.
One may have the five faults of being discouraged, con-
tempt for inferior persons, clinging to the unreal [adventi-
tious stains], denying real [buddha] properties, and
excessive self-love. [A buddha element] has been [already]
taught [at this stage] in order that those who have these
[faults] abandon them.68

According to Madhyamaka hermeneutics, you have to fulfill three
requirements in order to show that a teaching has a provisional meaning
(neyārtha), that is, that it has been given with a hidden intention (Skt.
ābhiprāyika, Tib. dgongs pa can).69 You have to be able to name the basis of
such an intention, or the intentional ground (Tib. *dgongs gzhi*), namely the hidden truth; the motive (Skt. *prayojana*, Tib. *dgos pa*) behind the provisional statement; and a contradiction that results from taking the provisional statement literally (Tib. *dngos la gnod byed*). Seyfort Ruegg has shown that the exegetical principles of the Madhyamaka school were already applied in Dharmamitra’s subcommentary on Haribhadra’s (ca. 800) *Abhisamayālaṃkāra-vṛtti*, the *Prasphuṭapada*, and it is not entirely impossible that early forms of these principles were already being used at the time stanzas I.159–60 (J I.156–57) of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* were written. Nor is it impossible to see in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* a formal proof that the teaching of buddha nature has a hidden intention and thus a provisional meaning. The intentional ground would be emptiness as taught in the *prajñāpāramitā*, and the motive of teaching buddha nature the removal of the five faults; while the contradiction between the teachings of the *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras and the *tathāgatagarbha* sūtras is clearly formulated in RGV I.159 (J I.156).

The first three introductory stanzas (RGV I.1–3), on the other hand, suggest that the final editor of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā* was more familiar with the five principles of Yogācāra hermeneutics. In the *Vṛkṣavyāyukti* these five principles, which must be addressed when explaining the meaning of a sūtra, are: (1) the aim/motive (*prayojana*), (2) the concise meaning, (3) the meaning of the words, (4) the connections [between its different topics], and (5) the objections [urged by opponents] together with rebuttals [of them]. It is obvious that the concise meaning of the treatise (point 2) can be presented by listing the seven vajra points (Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha, buddha nature, enlightenment, buddha qualities, and activity) in RGV I.1, while the connections between them (point 4) are clearly explained in RGV I.3. We could further argue that the meaning of the words (padārtha) buddha, etc. (point 3), is explained by the term *vajra point* (or -word) (*vajrapada*), which conveys the notion that these seven points are difficult to realize by listening and thinking. The seven main topics of the treatise (vajra points) thus hint at a reality that is beyond the reach of the intellect, and the aim (point 1) of the treatise would then be to realize this reality. Whether the aim called for by the *Vṛkṣavyāyukti* is hinted at in RGV I.1 or not, the way it is described in RGV I.160 (J I.157) accords with Vasubandhu’s list of possible aims in the *Vṛkṣavyāyukti*. If it is thus the hermeneutics of the Yogācāra school that is being followed in this passage of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā*, the mentioning of an aim in the RGV does not imply that the latter is *neyārtha*. Moreover, stanzas I.159–60 (J I.156–57) would seem to pres-
ent a contradiction urged by opponents and a rebuttal of it (point no. 5 of the Vyākhya-yukti).

In this case, however, it is the prajñāpāramitā sūtras that are neyārtha and whose intention (ābhāpādā) must be clarified in the light of the tathāgatagarbha doctrine, precisely the way it has been done in the preceding stanzas I.157–58 (J I.154–55). This is, at least, the hermeneutic strategy of the Vyākhya-yukti, in which Vasubandhu tries to show that the prajñāpāramitā sūtras can only be protected against criticism on the part of the Hinayāna schools (which assert that the “nihilistic” teaching of the prajñāpāramitā harms people) by demonstrating that the teaching of emptiness possesses a thought content (ābhāpādā) of what is really true. Therefore it must be interpreted in the light of this truth, which is the trīśabhāva theory. While Vasubandhu refers to the Saññhinirmocanasūtra, the Ratnagotra-vibhāgavyākhyā adds the Dhārānīśvararājasūtra, in which the three dharmacakras are explained as in the Saññhinirmocanasūtra, except that the second dharmacakra, with the prajñāpāramitā sūtras, is not explicitly called neyārtha. Still, the ambiguous term leading principle of the tathāgata (tathāgataneti) doubtlessly hints in this direction.

To sum up this possible interpretation, for the reasons described in stanza I.160 (J I.157) it is necessary to clarify already at an early stage the provisional teaching of emptiness in the prajñāpāramitā sūtras with the help of the nītartha teaching of buddha nature, even though the latter is difficult to grasp even for advanced bodhisattvas.

The uncertainty of the Dhārānīśvararājasūtra with regard to the status of the second dharmacakra leaves room for a third interpretation, namely that both the second and third dharmacakras are nītartha. Following this line of thought, we could argue that since buddha nature is taught as being as inconceivable as emptiness, stanza I.159 (J I.156) does not simply express a contradiction between the teachings of the prajñāpāramitā sūtras and tathāgatagarbha sūtras, but rather objects that either the two dharmacakras contradict each other or the teaching of an inexpressible buddha nature (third dharmacakra) is a redundant repetition of the teaching of an inexpressible emptiness (second dharmacakra). Stanza I.160 (J I.157) would then explain why the third dharmacakra is not redundant, even though it is in accordance with the second dharmacakra.

What goes against the first possibility, that is, the theory that the author of the final Ratnagotravibhāga views his own treatise as neyārtha, is its entire fifth chapter, which explains the advantages of experiencing faith in buddha nature, enlightenment, the buddha qualities, and activity. In stanza V.5 it is said, for example, that only hearing one word of these teachings on
buddha nature yields much more merit than anything else. This reminds us very much of Śāṅkhārya-nirvāṇa-sūtra VII.31–32, which describes in a similar way the advantage of hearing the teachings of definitive meaning (nītārtha), namely those of the third dharmacakra. Stanza RGV V.20, which refers to the means of avoiding becoming deprived of the teaching, also warns against violating the sūtras of definitive meaning:

There is nobody anywhere in this world who is more learned than the Victorious One,
No other who is omniscient and knows completely the highest truth in the right way.
Therefore, the sūtra[s] of definitive meaning put forth by the Sage (i.e., the Buddha) himself should not be violated;
Otherwise the correct doctrine (dharma) will be harmed, since they will fall away from the way of the Buddha.

If this stanza is by the same author as the one who penned stanzas I.159–60 (J I.156–57), it is difficult to see how one and the same person could have composed an extensive treatise on the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra in which he takes the latter to have provisional meaning, and then issue a warning not to violate the sūtras of definitive meaning. It is also not the case that the Ratnagotravibhāga-vyākhyā refers to the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, which explains that the teaching of buddha nature has a provisional meaning. To summarize, the similarities between RGV V.5 and the Śāṅkhārya-nirvāṇa-sūtra do indeed suggest that the latter sūtra is being followed and that the third dharmacakra (and thus the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra) is taken to have definitive meaning.

With regard to the later discussion of the zhentong and mahāmudrā interpretations of the Ratnagotravibhāga, the question whether the latter propounds a form of monism or not remains to be addressed. Whereas the Jonangpas assert a substantial identity between the dharmakāya and buddha nature, in that the true nature is the real dharmakāya of enlightenment, some mahāmudrā traditions identify buddha nature with the natural unfabricated mind, which naturally manifests as dharmakāya after the purification process has been completed. According to Thrangu Rinpoche, a modern proponent of mahāmudrā, every sentient being manifests, then, its own dharmakāya. Lambert Schmithausen has pointed out that the latter explanation is supported by a passage from the Avatāra-sūtra quoted in RGVV I.25. Its teaching that the wisdom of the Buddha is contained in all sentient beings, which is an early stage of the doctrine of buddha nature,
does not vindicate monism, since enlightenment is described as being equal to but not identical with the already existing tathāgata. The following statement comes after the example of the huge silk cloth with a painting of the universe inside an atom (which illustrates the immeasurable buddha qualities inside the ordinary mindstream):

I will try to remove in sentient beings all bonds of conceptions, through the teaching of the noble path, so that they themselves cast off by themselves the big knot of conceptions by attaining the strength of the noble path, recognize the wisdom of the tathāgata [within themselves] and become equal to a tathāgata.

The Reaction of Mainstream Mahāyāna to the Theory of Buddha Nature

The earliest Indian reaction to the theory of buddha nature is found in the Lankāvatārasūtra, which is of an extremely heterogeneous structure. It is safe to say, though, that it mainly upholds the Yogācāra doctrine of the three natures (trisvabhāva), mind-only, and basic consciousness (ālayavijñāna). In this Yogācāra sūtra buddha nature is said to be the purity of natural luminosity and to abide in the body of all sentient beings as the bearer of the thirty-two marks [of a great being]. In reply to Mahāmati’s objection that this comes close to the heretical teaching of a personal self, the Buddha is reported to have said:

Mahāmati, my teaching of buddha nature does not resemble the heretical doctrine of a self (ātman). Rather, O Mahāmati, the tathāgatas teach as buddha nature what [really] is emptiness, the limit of reality, nirvāṇa, nonorigination, signlessness, wishlessness, and similar categories, and then the tathāgatas, the arhats, the perfect buddhas, in order to avoid [giving] fools a reason for becoming afraid of the lack of essence, teach the nonconceptual experiential object without characteristic signs by means of instructions that make use [of the term] buddha nature.

Based on that, we could argue that the notion of buddha nature is simply a provisional teaching (neyārtha) for those who do not grasp emptiness. The Lankāvatārasūtra also equates buddha nature with the ālayavijñāna:
The illustrious one then said this to him: “Buddha nature, Mahāmati, which contains the cause of wholesome and unwholesome [factors], and which is the agent of all [re]birth and of [all] going [to this and that state of existence], moves on to the distress of [various] states of existence, like an actor [assuming different roles]. Yet it is devoid of an I and mine. Not understanding [this], [buddha nature, which] is endowed with the impulse of the condition of the three meeting [factors], moves on. But the non-Buddhists who adhere to a persistent belief in [metaphysical] principles do not understand this. Being permeated throughout beginningless time by the various imprints of baseness left by mental fabrication, [buddha nature is also] called ālayavijñāna. Together with [the other] seven forms of consciousness which arise on the level of dwelling in ignorance, it moves on in such a way that its body is never interrupted, just as the ocean and the waves.”

This raises the question whether the Laṅkāvatārasūtra then considers the ālayavijñāna to be a provisional expression for emptiness, too. Based on the Laṅkāvatāra’s equation of buddha nature with emptiness, Candrakīrti (seventh century) in his Madhyamakāvatāra indeed infers that the Yogācāra notions of ālayavijñāna, mind-only, and trisvabhāva are neyārtha:

Having shown with the help of this canonical passage [from the Laṅkāvatārasūtra] that all parts of sūtras with a similar content, of which the Vijnānavādins claim that they are nitārtha, are [really] neyārtha…

That Candrakīrti holds the teaching of an ālayavijñāna to be neyārtha becomes clear in his autocommentary on MA VI.42, which asserts that only emptiness is implied by the term ālayavijñāna. It is doubtful, however, whether we can go as far as to affirm that other parts of the Yogācāra doctrine, such as that everything is only mind (cittamātra), is taken by the Laṅkāvatārasūtra as being neyārtha too. But this is precisely what Candrakīrti does with reference to LAS II.123:

Just as a physician provides medicine for each patient, So the buddhas teach mind-only (cittamātra) to sentient beings.
This stanza taken on its own suggests indeed that the *cittamātra* teaching is of provisional character (*neyārtha*) in that it is compared to a healing agent for a particular disease. But the following stanza (LAS II.124), which has not been quoted by Candrakirti, sheds a different light on the issue:

[This *cittamātra* teaching] is neither an object of philosophers nor one of śrāvakas.
The masters (i.e., the buddhas) teach [it] by drawing on their own experience.\(^{101}\)

In other words, the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* takes the main point of the Yogācāra teaching as something that can be only experienced by the buddhas, being beyond the reach of an analytical intellect. But while most parts of the Yogācāra doctrine (e.g., *cittamātra*, *trisvabhāva*) are presented as a definitive teaching in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, it could be argued that the notion of buddha nature (and implicitly that of *ālayavijñāna*) is not accepted according to its literal meaning, and is thus *neyārtha*.

The argument could be given further, however, that this only refers to a too-substantialist definition of buddha nature, namely as possessing the thirty-two marks of a supreme being, and that a more moderate understanding of it (namely as suchness mingled with stains, as in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*) would be accepted at least by some Yogācāras. This is indeed implied by the equation of buddha nature with suchness in *Mahāyāna-sūtrālankāra* IX.37:

Even though suchness is undifferentiated in all [living beings], in its purified form it is the state of the tathāgata. Therefore all living beings have the seed/nature (*garbha*) of the [tathāgata].\(^{102}\)

In the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, too, the influence of buddha nature (taken as suchness) can be noticed. Whereas in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* suchness can be accompanied by stains (buddha nature) or not (enlightenment), a positively understood emptiness may be taken to be either defiled or not in MAV I.22:

[Emptiness is] neither defiled nor undefiled, neither pure nor impure (MAV I.22ab). How is it that it is neither defiled nor impure? It is because of the natural luminosity of mind (MAV I.22c). How is it that it is neither undefiled nor pure? It is because of the adventitious nature of defilements (MAV I.22d).\(^{103}\)
In the same way as in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, mind’s luminosity is compared to the natural purity of water, gold, and space, which can coexist with adventitious stains. This becomes clear in *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* I.16:

> How should the differentiation of emptiness be understood? As being defiled as well as pure (MAV I.16a). Thus is its differentiation. In what state is it defiled and in what is it pure? It is accompanied as well as not accompanied by stains (MAV I.16b). When it occurs together with stains it is defiled, and when its stains are abandoned it is pure. If, after being accompanied by stains it becomes stainless, how is it then not impermanent, given that it has the property of change? This is because its purity is considered to be like that of water, gold, and space (MAV I.16cd). [A change is admitted] in view of the removal of adventitious stains, but there is no change in terms of its own-being.  

It should be noted how the terms “defiled” and “pure” of the first section are explicitly equated with the imported terminology “accompanied by stains” and “stainless.” The latter doubtlessly stem from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā*, where buddha nature is defined as suchness accompanied by stains (samalā tathātā) and the transformation of the basis as stainless suchness (nirmalā tathātā). Such an understanding of the transformation of basis is also found in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*.  

Even though the term tathāgatagarbha is not found in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, it is clearly implied by the comparison of natural luminosity with the original purity of space, gold, and water, which can coexist with adventitious stains. To sum up, we can discern an influence of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* on the Yogācāra texts among the Maitreya works, while the way buddha nature or its equivalent of an original purity is referred to in them, namely as emptiness, suchness, or natural luminosity, accords well with the interpretation of buddha nature as emptiness, etc., in the *Laiṅkāvatārasūtra*.  

Judging from his critique of Yogācāra in the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, it is hard to imagine that Candrakīrti accepted such an interpretation of buddha nature. There must, however, have been some other currents within Madhyamaka that more readily accepted the new developments in Mahāyāna. Thus, the *Sūtrasamuccaya* (attributed to Nāgārjuna by tradition) quotes and discusses certain Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the Śrīmālādevisūtra, that restrict the dictum that all phenomena lack an own-being (i.e., their emptiness) to the level of the phenenomenal world. In order to show that there is ultimately only one single yāna, the compilers of the *Sūtrasamuccaya*
even quote from the *Dhāraṇīśvanarūjasūtra* the example of the threefold purification of a *vaidūrya* stone, which illustrates the successive teachings of the three dharmacakras. This passage plays an important role in the hermeneutics of the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*, implying that the second dharmacakra, which teaches the emptiness of the *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras, is outshone by a final dharmacakra, which describes the ultimate in positive terms. The question thus arises how some Mādhyamikas could selectively pick certain passages from the above-mentioned sūtras instead of endorsing the entire *Śrīmālādevisūtra* literally, and thus claim, for example, that buddha nature is empty of all defilements, which are separable, but not of inseparable buddha qualities.