The Buddha Nature Thoughts in Tibetan Buddhism*

Hua'er Meji  
Northwest Minzu University  
Lanzhou, China

Daoji Rening**  
Northwest Minzu University  
Lanzhou, China  
**Corresponding Author

Abstract—The tathagatagarbha concept is a fundamental philosophical question of Buddhism. Tathagatagarbha (Sanskrit) has the original contextual meaning of “embryonic Buddha” (Tib: bade gasbegs snginga po) or “Buddha heart”. Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and particularly Prasangika School expresses the term as “Buddha nature”. Within the three surviving nikayas of Theravada Buddhism, there are several ways of understanding tathagatagarbha and according to different sutas. The most significant doctrines lie in the Tathagatagarbha, Lankavatara, Mahaparinirvanya, Maharatnakuta, Mahabheri Haraka Parivarta, and Angulimalya sutas, which define tathagatagarbha as a monism and something permanent. Prasangika and Tibetan Buddhism schools (Nyingma, New Bon, Kadam, Sakya, Jonang, Gelug, Kagyu) meanwhile, see tathagatagarbha as an expression of the concepts of pratityasamutpada (dependent arising) and sunyata (emptiness). Many researchers believe that the particular Buddhist practice of mahasampanna (Eng: Dzogchen, Tib: rdzogas chena) and Mahamudra (Eng: the Great Seal, Tib: phyga rhy chen mo) are based on the concept of an “absolute” tathagatagarbha. In this paper the author focuses on the Tibetan Buddhist interpretation of tathagatagarbha and argues that its concept concerns “emptiness” and “dependent arising” but nothing else. The author has five main arguments: 1) All Tibetan Buddhist schools, in theory and practice, assert that they follow Mahayana Buddhism and its Prasangika school; Tibetan Buddhism is enshrined in the doctrines of both Nagarjuna and Candrakiriti who both stated that ultimate truth is sunyata but not atman (infinite, ego-less, svabhava); 2) Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhayamakakarika declares: “whatever is relational origination [pratityasamutpada] is sunyata” which means that all phenomena (dhammas) are sunyata including Buddha nature; 3) The Tibetan Buddhist sutras insist that all Buddhist sutras be explained in terms of Nagarjuna’s theory and wisdom. The Buddha himself prognosticated Nagarjuna as his re-disseminator and this is recorded in several scriptures, for instance Tsongkhapa’s In praise of dependent arising; and 5) Tibetan Buddhist schools agree on the tathagatagarbha concept and this understanding corresponds with the principles of Buddhist scripture, in particular the “revelation of the whole truth” and “partial revelation of the truth”, the four seals of Buddha truth (chatur udan) and the four reliances (catrari pratisaranan).

Keywords—tathagatagarbha; pratityasamupada; sunyata; Tathagatagarbha Sutra

I. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Tibetan Buddhist sutras philosophy, scholars always pay much attention to Madhyamaka, cittamatra only but a little concern about Tathāgatagarbha. Actually, Tathagatagarbha philosophy also plays a very important role in Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy.

Tathāgatagarbha is an important philosophic question in Mahayana Buddhism. Also key to enter Buddhist researching. Early in India, although there sutras related with Tathagatagarbha are appeared during the late Mahayana, it did not developed like other Mahayana schools Cittamatra and Madhyamaka. For instance, in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as Chinese Buddhism, Buddhist scholars argues if it fit to Cittamatra tradition or Madhamaka philosophical schools of Buddhism. For instance, in Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, scholar never had common views on Tathagatagarbha. As root text of Tathagatagarbha, Ratnagotravibhāga has many commontarie and it never comes to the end.

II. TEACHING AND TRANSMISSION OF RATNAGOTRAVIBHAGA

Although According to Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, Ratnagotravibhāga is one of treaties by Ārya Maitreya (rje btsun byams mgon), some Buddhist historians still think hard to find that evidences[1], in including the famous translator ‘Gos Lo tsan bzhin mu dpal. Some recent researcher like Tsultrim Kelsang Khangkar yet believed that it is true that Ratnagotravibhāga was not popular the time at Maitri-pa, but it does not proof it was not existed before him, because the Chinese translator Ratnamati translated it into Chinese at year of 511. [2] In Chinese Buddhism, Sāramati, born in central India in the 7th centuries, possible of author of the Ratnagoravibhāga [3]. Some Chinese texts say that Saramati was born 700 after Buddha passes away, [4] hypothetically, if this is the case, Saramati must be born after 317 A.D, then it can be proved that Ratnagotravibhāga was exited sometime during the 4 centuries. The Tibetan translation has come much more lately, when Rngog lo tsawa blo ldn shes rba (1059-1109) and Btsan Kha poche (1021-?) in 11 centuries.

III. BTSAN KHA POCHE AND RATNAGOTRAVIBHAGA

First who translated Ratnagotravibhāga into Tibetan was unclear but there were several people mentioned in Tibetan doctrines. For example: Atisa (982-1052) and Nag sho lo...
Asang’s commentary with Kashmir pandita Sajjana while he including Ratnagotravibhāga with its commentary by Sanskrit and Buddhism. He translated many treaties lotwawa, actually, this was nephew of Rngog legs ba'I she founder of Dge Lugs School Tsongkapa praises him as translator of Tibetan Buddhism translation history. The Tibetan translator’s help. As soon as he got the teaching, he translated Ratnagotravibhāga from Sajjana, who was famous Buddhist teacher, especially for treaties of Ratnagotravibhāga teaching traditions, and he went back to Tibet, he wrote a brief commentary on Ratnagotravibhāga himself. After that, there were more commentaries of Ratnagotravibhāga bases on his translation.

V. COMMENTS OF RATNAGOTRAVIBHĀGA
Although first commentary on Ratnagotravibhāga in Tibet need to be translator himself, the Author of the Blue Annals says there was one a annotation or a commentary by Lotsawa Gzi dga bai rdorje (Geoge N.Roerich’s translation,P 348, 1949) who, become tutor of Bstan kha poche but it is not proved. So we only can say the first commentary is Lotsawa Rngog himself. Later on, there were many commentaries, for example: Gro lung ba chen mo blo gros ‘byung gns, Zhng she sphyong ba chos kyi bla ma, Gtsng ngs pa, Dan ‘bgs pa, and so on. Bu ston rin chen grub and his disciple Sgr shad pa. Rong ston shaky rgyl msth an, Phag gru rgyl mstan bzng po, Rgyl stho dar ma rin chen, Gu ri rgyl msth n bzng bo, Krma rng byung rdro rje. Krma dkon gzhon, Krma phrun ls pa, ‘gos lotswa gzhong mu dpahl, Pan chen bsod nms grgs pa, the Tsonghkha’s teacher Rje bstun re mda ba, Jonang kun mkhen dol po pa, they all have commentaries on Ratnagotravibhāga.

In the all commentaries, there two branch of style of teachings. As mentioned before, one if from Btsan kha po che’s tradition and the other is Rngog Lotsawa’s style of teaching. Btsan’s tradition becomes Jonang teachings and Shaky mchog Ldn’s method two. Rngog Lotsawa’s developed three small branches, Bu ston, Tsonghkha, and Rong ston Shaky rgyl msth an.

VI. THE TATHAGATABARBH THOUGHT IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM
In terms of Tathagatagarbha in Tibet Buddhism, there were two main branch thoughts developed since Lotsawa Rngog blo ldn shes rba’s translation. One is the early though, which spread through Bstan kapa po who went to Kashimir particular receiving of the teaching of Ratnagotravibhāga.

According to Btsan’s tradition, the Tathagatagarbha, is actually, the nature of mind (citta-prakriti-prabhasvarata), which one of important philosophical questions in pali suras. According to Btsan’s tradition, the Tathagatagarbha, is actually, the nature of mind (citta-prakriti-prabhasvarata), which one of important philosophical questions in pali suras. The Blue Annals writer says in his book “according to the followers of the school of bTsan: the pure nature of the Mind was the Essence of the Sugata(Tathagatagarbha), and therefore it was stated to be the fertile seed of Buddhahood”[8].

The second thought started by Lotsawa Rngog blo ldn shes rba, the first translator of Ratnagotravibhāga. Himself and his followers, believe that Tathagatagarbha is the ultimate true of two truths and it also emptiness of from Nagarjuna’s Reasoning which is not even object of words, which mean cannot describe with words or beyond comprehension. ‘Gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal’s says in his The Blue Annals

“Lotsawa and the teacher Tsan nag pa have maintained that the so-called Tathagatagarbha or the Essence of Buddhadhood represented the Paramārtha-satyā (Transcen-
Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, volume 310

717

According to Tsutshrim Kelsang Kungkar, Japanese scholar H.Nakamura’s calculation of Buddha’s birth and death dates (463–383) is more reliable.


The Blue Annal, George N. Roerich, first Edition: Calcutta,1949, Printed in India, By Shantilal Jain, At Shrī Jainendra Press, A-45, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi-7, P348

The Blue Annal, George N. Roerich, first Edition: Calcutta,1949, Printed in India, By Shantilal Jain, At Shri Jainendra Press, A-45, Phase-I, Industrial Area, Naraina, New Delhi-28 And Published By Narendra Prakash Jain. For Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi-1-7, P348

The Blue Annal, George N. Roerich, first Edition: Calcutta,1949, Printed in India, By Shantilal Jain, At Shri Jainendra Press, A-45, Phase-I, Industrial Area, Naraina, New Delhi-28 And Published By Narendra Prakash Jain. For Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi-1-7

Series Title: bod kyi gtug lag gees btus vol.17 Volum title: bbde gshegs snyingpo rigs kyi chos skor, Author: Selected anthology, Printed and bound in India by Indrapastha Prss(CBT), New Delhi. Editor gling ril a lha rams thub bstn shyn pa in his preview say “Ratnagotravibhaga and its commentary, first person who translated into Tibetan was Atsua, ngog lo tsa wa, pa sthab niy ma grgs, yar lung lo tasa, jonng lostawa, all have translations. Unfortunetely ngog lotsawa’s translation available only in bstan ‘gyur today.”

A Synthetic Study Of The Treatises Of Maitreyañatha, by Tsultrim Kelsang Khangkar. Emeritus Professor of Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Letters, Okin University in Memory of the 1269 Year of King Khir-Srong –Ile-Ts‘tan’s Birth, Japanese and Tibetan Budhist Culture Series, XII, Published by the Tibetan Buddhist Culture Association Minamida-cho 22-9, Jdo-ji, Sakyu-ku, Kyoto 606-8043, Japan, June4,2011, Originally Published in 1984.

‘gos lo tsa ba gzhon ma dpal’ monmentary on the Ratnagotravibhagavyakhy (Teg pa chen po by rgyud bla ma’i bstn beos kyi ‘grel bshad de kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba’i me long), Critically edited by klaus-dieter mathes...