

Chapter 1

General Introduction

At various times and places within the Buddhist tradition, intellectual understanding has gained ascendancy over the more intuitive or mystical understanding of the yogin meditator. Although the scriptures abound with statements reaffirming the vital role of the faculty of "faith" (*sraddha*) in the process of realization and enlightenment, a strong body of thought within Buddhism places the intellectual faculty as supreme over faith, and actively denies even the existence of intuitive wisdom beyond the dualism of knower and known. This present work aims, through scriptural reference and argument, to pose a challenge to those westerners who are in danger of adopting such a one-sided view of the Buddhist tradition.

It is hoped that this present work will prove useful to both the general reader as well as the specialist in the field of religious studies and particularly Buddhism. The subject matter raises issues of profound religious, philosophical, and practical importance to the whole field of Buddhist studies. Accordingly, I have devoted the first section to clarifying these issues so that the reader may approach the next two sections with them fully in mind.

These issues include the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, the Buddha's wisdom mind, Buddha qualities, faith and insight as means of apprehending absolute reality, the meaning of non-conceptuality, the meaning of Buddha nature and so on.

All these issues are discussed in the light of the fact that from earliest times the Buddha's doctrine of ultimate reality has been presented both in positive as well as in negative terms. On the positive side, the Buddha is described as eternal, non-conditioned, compassionate, all-knowing and so forth, having realized nirvana, which is eternal, non-conditioned, bliss and so on. On the negative side, the Buddha is described as having realized nirvana, which is the cessation of all that is conditioned, impermanent, suffering and so on. He realizes this through ceasing to cling to conceptual creations, either positive or negative.

The fourteenth century Tibetan master, Dolpopa, of the Jonangpa school promulgated a teaching that emphasized that what is conditioned, impermanent, suffering and so on is illusory and hence self-empty (*rang-*

tong); what is non-conditioned, permanent, bliss and so on is Reality.* This Ultimate Reality is empty in the sense that the ignorant mind that clings to conceptual creations can find nothing to grasp onto or understand. Since conceptual creations are illusory and unreal, Ultimate Reality can be described as empty of them. In other words, it is empty of what is other than itself. In Tibetan the term for this is “Shentong” (literally emptiness-of-other).

The second section gives some of the history and context of the various traditions that develop the implications of this “Shentong” nature of reality. Of prime importance here is the Tathagatagarbha doctrine of Buddha-nature, which arose in India around the third century A.D. at almost the same time as the Prajnaparamita sutras. The relationship between Prajnaparamita and Tathagatagarbha (Buddha-nature) doctrine has been a central issue for the original Indian commentators and for Tibetan and other Mahayana commentators ever since. It is central to the *Ratnagotravibhaga* [RGV] and its commentary *Ratnagotravibhagavyakhya* [RGVV], which seem to have been written primarily in response to this very question.

The third section of this present work shows how the issues and background introduced in the previous two sections relate to the study and interpretation of a key Sanskrit commentarial work. This work consists of the RGV and RGVV, which are known in the Tibetan tradition as the “*Mahayanottaratantrasastra*” (*Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos*) and its auto-commentary (*rang'grel*). Although the Tibetan tradition counts the RGV as one of the five works of Maitreya and the RGVV as a work of Asanga—fifth century A.D.—it is more likely that both are a composition by the third century Indian writer Saramati.¹

In this third section, the RGV and RGVV are briefly paraphrased with a view to bringing out the particular features of a Shentong interpretation of Tathagatagarbha doctrine, following such Tibetan commentators as Dolpopa—thirteenth-fourteenth centuries—the Kagyu Lamas Rangjung Dorje—thirteenth-fourteenth centuries—Mikyo Dorje—fifteenth century, and Jamgon Kongtrul—nineteenth-twentieth centuries—and contemporary Kagyu-Nyingma Lamas such as Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rimpoche, Gendun Rimpoche, and Thrangu Rimpoche. The essential feature of a Shentong interpretation of Tathagatagarbha doctrine is that the Buddha is literally within all beings as their unchanging, permanent, non-conditioned nature. Shentongpas explain scriptural statements that the Buddha is present as a seed to be figurative only, because Buddha is by all accounts considered

* See “Conventions Used” p. 367 of this work.

to be non-conditioned, eternal, unchanging, bliss, compassion, wisdom, power, and so on. For Shentongpas the fact that Buddha is non-conditioned means the essence of Buddha is complete with all the Buddha Qualities in a timeless sense. There is no question of them arising from a seed.

By way of contrast, reference is made to the parallel “Rangtong” interpretation stemming from Ngog—thirteenth-fourteenth centuries—through Rongton—1367–1449—a Sakya Lama. Both the Rangtong and the Shentong traditions of interpretation of Tathagatagarbha doctrine are thought to stem from Sajjana in Kashmir in the eleventh century. Comparison also is sometimes made in this present work with the RGV commentary by Gyaltsab—fifteenth century—a Gelugpa Lama; the commentary is known as the *Dartik*. Professor D. Seyfort Ruegg, who has written more on the subject of Tathagatagarbha and related subjects than any other Western academic, bases his explanations of the RGV for the most part on the *Dartik*, as does E. Obermiller who produced the only existing complete translation of the RGV and RGVV in any Western language. The RGV on its own is also available in translation under the title *The Changeless Nature* by Katia and Ken Holmes.²

The third section of the present work also provides a footnoted translation of Kongtrul’s introduction to his commentary on the RGV.

Further Comments

The distinction between self-emptiness (rangtong) and Emptiness-of-other (Shentong) is not merely, nor indeed primarily, of academic interest. It has implications of profound proportions for the Buddhist practitioner, touching on his whole attitude to himself, the world, the Guru and others, the path, and above all meditation practice. The controversy within the Tibetan tradition of when, if at all, the rangtong-Shentong distinction should be introduced to the disciple is a live issue today and will, I am sure, be a live issue among Western Buddhists for a long time to come. The reason it is and should always be a live issue is that by all accounts the realization of Enlightenment lies beyond concepts, positive, negative, gross, or subtle. Until that point is reached, subtle unacknowledged concepts lurk in the background of the mind. The rangtong-Shentong controversy brings them into the foreground where they can be properly examined and addressed.

The problem lies in the practical need to express what is by definition precise and yet inexpressible. Negations, pinpointing what it is not, help remove imprecision, but there is the danger that what was to be expressed through negation is itself negated by this process. Shentong type statements and arguments are to remedy this fault by appealing to a faculty which

understands through direct experience, untainted by conceptual creation. Shentong reasoning is based on the assumption that there is such a faculty and the proof of it lies in the experience of the meditator. For this reason it can be argued that it is unsuitable as a subject of intellectual investigation and should only be introduced to the experienced meditator when he/she is ready. Others argue that since even ordinary beings have the faculty to respond with “faith” to inspired utterances, much as we respond intuitively to poetry, there is good reason to introduce it early on.

It would take more than a single work of this kind to examine the whole range of traditions based on the Tathagatagarbha sutras, (for example, Cittamatra, Hua Yen, Rangtong Madhyamaka and others), so this present work presents primarily the Shentong Yogacara Madhyamaka interpretation of Tathagatagarbha doctrine as expressed in the *Ratnagotravibhaga* and the *Vyakhya*. The importance of these texts is that they are the only texts on Tathagatagarbha preserved in Sanskrit.

The present study is of particular relevance because the RGV and the Tathagatagarbha doctrine on which it is commenting, form the all-important link between the Sutra-Madhyamaka traditions and the Tantra-Siddha traditions that were introduced from India into Tibet in the eleventh century. These two traditions were originally quite distinct, and although the task of linking them began in India just before Buddhism died out there towards the end of twelfth century, the Tibetans continued this process in finer detail. Dolpopa’s Shentong doctrine brings out the connection particularly well by making explicit the distinction between self-emptiness and Emptiness-of-other found implicitly in the Sutras and Tantras.

Perhaps a warning is in order here for the reader who thinks self-emptiness is a translation of the term *svabhavasunyata* (emptiness of self-nature) of the Prajnaparamita Sutras and associated commentarial traditions. It is not. Self-emptiness is an expression promulgated by Shentong commentators such as Dolpopa and Kongtrul expressly for distinguishing the empty nature of illusion (*rangtong*) from the Empty nature of Reality (Shentong). *Svabhavasunyata* and *praktisunyata* can be understood in two different ways, depending on whether one understands them to be referring to rangtong or to Shentong.³

Because Rangtong Madhyamikas (such as the followers of Gyaltsab and Ketrub of the Gelugpa school) take the ultimate truth taught by the Buddha to be the self-emptiness of illusion, they do not accept that there is any Ultimate Reality to discover beyond this. For this reason, these followers rightly do not use the convention of a capital *R* for reality or *A* for absolute in their translations. For Shentong Madhyamikas, the whole point of establishing the empty nature of illusion (*rangtong*) is to discover the Reality of the Absolute Buddha Wisdom Mind (Paramarthabuddhajana) beyond the

reaches of the conceptual mind that can only function in terms of grasping its own creations. I have pondered for a long time over the question of the appropriateness of using capitals for such a “Reality” since it might imply it was conceptually graspable. Finally, I have come to the conclusion that since this “Reality” refers to the living presence of the Buddha within all beings and the sacred nature of all our experience when seen unobscured by ignorance, it should, out of respect, be referred to with capitals.

The present work is the first book in a Western language to discuss at length the views of Tibetan Shentong writers on the basis of their own works. Previously, Western scholars have tended to make comments concerning Dolpopa and the Jonangpa Shentong doctrine based on the views of their largely Gelugpa informants. Because of the disquietingly different use of familiar terminology by writers commentating from a Shentong point of view, Gelugpa and also Sakya scholars often dismiss the Jonangpa formulation of the Buddha’s doctrine out of hand as being non-Buddhist. To do so is to dismiss a recurrent theme of the Buddhist tradition found throughout its textual heritage. Even though, like the Gelugpa followers of Gyaltsab and Ketrub, the scholarly Theravadin traditions choose to ignore or explain away passages in their scriptures that are suggestive of a Shentong view, it cannot be denied that they have been so integral to the earliest collections of texts that even their opponents could not justify their removal on the grounds of inauthenticity.

The Omniscient Dolpopa’s Prayer That Unties the Vajra Word Knots⁴

OM: May it be Accomplished!

I pray to all the Conquerors and their sons in the ten directions
to bestow their blessing.

May they have pity on those stuck in impoverished (*ngan*) views
and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the
Buddha’s teaching on emptiness concerned self-emptiness alone
and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the
Buddha’s teaching on emptiness concerned a non-affirming
negation alone and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the
Buddha’s teaching on emptiness concerned mere nothingness alone
and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the Buddha's teaching on emptiness concerned non-appearance alone and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the Buddha's teaching on emptiness concerned total nothingness alone and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that non-elaboration (*nisprapanca*) is always self-emptiness alone . . . a non-affirming negation alone . . . mere nothingness alone . . . non-appearance alone . . . total nothingness alone and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the Buddha's teaching on freedom from extreme philosophical positions concerned self emptiness alone . . . a non-affirming negation alone . . . mere nothingness alone . . . non-appearance alone . . . total nothingness alone and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the Buddha's teaching on absence concerned self-emptiness alone . . . a non-affirming negation alone . . . mere nothingness alone . . . non-appearance alone . . . total nothingness alone and hold them in their compassion.

May they have pity on those who hold that the whole of the Buddha's teaching on openness concerned self-emptiness alone . . . a non-affirming negation alone . . . non-appearance alone . . . total nothingness alone and hold them in their compassion.

The intended meaning of the whole of the Buddha's teaching on emptiness always being the most profound true nature is the Place of Emptiness (*stong pa'i gzhi*).

The intended meaning of the whole of the Buddha's teaching on freedom is the Place of Freedom (*bral ba'i gzhi*).

The intended meaning of the whole of the Buddha's teaching on absence is the Place of Absence (*med pa'i gzhi*).

The intended meaning of the whole of the Buddha's teaching on openness is the Open Place (*dben pa'i gzhi*).

Those who understand correctly in this way are more learned than the most learned, brighter than the brightest, profounder than the profoundest, more solid than the solidest, wider than the widest, Guru of the highest Guru, the highest of the highest.

Therefore this is the Ultimate True Nature that is the Prajnāparamita, the Madhyamaka, and the Mahāmudrā.⁵