

The Buddha Nature Thoughts in Tibetan Buddhism*

Hua'er Meji

Northwest Minzu University
Lanzhou, China

Daoji Renqing**

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 gashegas snging po) or “Buddha heart”. Mahayana Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and particularly the 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 sutras. The most significant doctrines lie in the Tathagatagarbha, Lankavatara, Mahaparinnirvana, Maharatnakuta, Mahabheri Haraka Parivarta, and Angulimalya sutras, 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 pratyasamutpada (dependent arising) and sunyata (emptiness). Many researchers believe that the Tibetan 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 focused 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 Candrakirti who both stated that ultimate truth is sunyata but not atman (infinite, ego-less, svabhava); 3) Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika declares: “whatever is relational origination [pratyasamutpada] is sunyata” which means that all phenomena (dharma) are sunyata including Buddha nature; 4) The Tibetan Buddhist schools 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 (catvari pratisaranan).

Keywords—tathagatagarbha; pratyasamutpada; 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 Tathāgatagarbha 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 intance, in Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, scholar never had common views on Tathagatagarbha. As root text of Tathagatagarbha, Ratnagotravibhāga has many commentaries 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 btun byms mgon), some Buddhist historians still think hard to find that evidences[1], in including the famous translator ‘Gos Lo tsa ba gzhong 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 Ratnagotravibhāga [3]. Some Chinese texts say that Sāramati was born 700 after Buddha passes away, [4] hypothetically, if this is the case, Sāramati must be born after 317 A.D, then it can be proved that Ratnagotravibhaga was existed 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 stho lo

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tsawa (1011 - 1064)[5] so on, but undoubtedly, the Rngog lotsawa blo ldan shes rba was the first translator of Ratnagotravibhāga in Tibet but he did not finish this alone. It is collaboration work with Kashmir pandita Sajjana.[6] Even some believe there were three persons Rngog lotsawa, Sajjana, and Ratnavajra (J.Takasaki). Although the Rngog lotsawa's translation is only translation we can see today but there were two main traditional teaching developed in Tibet. One is of course Rngog lotsawa, and the other is Btsan kha poche. There are very few information about Btsan Kha poche except 'gos lotsawa gzhon nu dpal's commentary on the Ratnagotravibhāgavṛkhyā (Tib: theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi 'grel bshad de kho nanyid rab tu gsal ba'i me long) and The Blue annals (teb ther sngon po) give us some. Btsan kha poche was born 1020 and he arrived at Srinagar in Kashmir on year 1078 with Rngog lotsawa when it was 19 year old. At the time, for Btsan kha poche, it was not easy to learn a new language, so he gave up learning Sanskrit and try to find a master where can get Maitreya's treatise before he return to Tibet. He received teachings of Ratnagotravibhāga from Sajjana, who was famous Buddhist teacher, especially for treatise of Ārya Maitreya with Lotsawa kzi dga bai rdor rje's (a Tibetan translator, who lived in Kashmir when Btsan and Rngog were there) interpretation. Btsan kha poche returns to Tibet soon and started his teaching which he just got from Kashmir pandita. In the Blue Annals 'Gos Lotsawa ba said there were not existence of Btsan kha poche and his teaching of Ratnagotravibhāga today (George N. Roerich's translation, P 348, 1949). In contrast, in his commentary on the Ratnagotravibhāgavṛkhyā, he said the "Sgam po pa (1079 - 1153) says our so called the Great Mahamudra, is Maitreya's Ratnagotravibhāga...after Rje rгод Sthng also says our the Great Mahamudra is passes Maitri-pa, and Btan kha poche's traditions" [7]. At all events, later on many Jonangpa believe their school traditions has strong influences of Btan kha poche, and they count he was one of their spiritual master of their teaching history, especially, in case if Ratnagotravibhāga.

In conclusion, Btsan kha poche was one of two branches of Ratnagotravibhāga teaching traditions, and he went Kashmir when he was 56 with great translator Rngog Lotsawa blo ldan shes rab. He received teachings of Ratnagotravibhāga from Kashmir pandita Sajjana with a Tibetan translator's help. As soon as he got the teaching, he left Kashmir to Tibet and started his teaching all over the Tibet.

IV. RNGOG LO TSAWA BLO LDAN SHES RAB AND RATNAGOTRAVIBHAGA

Rngog lotwa ba blo ldan she rab was one of the great translator of Tibetan Buddhism translation history. The founder of Dge Lugs School Tsongkapa praises him as "the Great Translator". There two lotwawas who called Rngog lotwawa, actually, this was nephew of Rngog legs ba'i she Rab (11 centuries). He spent 17 years in Kashmir for study Sanskrit and Buddhism. He translated many treatises including Ratnagotravibhāga with its commentary by Asang's commentary with Kashmir pandita Sajjana while he was Srinagar, which is capital of Kashmir. When he comes

back to Tibet, he wrote a brief commentary on Ratnagotravibhāga himself. After that, there were more commentaries of Ratnagotravibhāga based on his translation.

V. COMMENTARIES OF RATNAGOTRAVIBHAGA

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 (George N. Roerich's translation, P 348, 1949) who, become tutor of Bstan khapoché 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 'byng gns, Zhng sthe sphyong ba chos kyi bla ma, Gtsng ngs pa, Dan 'bgs pa, and so on. Bu ston rin chen grub and his disciple Sgr sthad pa, Rong ston shakya rgyl msthan, Phag gru rgyl mstan bzng po, Rgyl stho dar ma rin chen, Gu ri rgyl msthan bzng bo, Krma rng byung rdor rje, Krma dkon gzhon, Krma phrun ls pa, 'gos lotsawa gzhong mu dphal, Pan chen bsod nms grgs pa, the Tsongkhapa'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 poche'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, Tsongkhapa, and Rong ston Shakya rgyl msthan.

VI. THE TATHAGATAGARBHA THOUGHT IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

In terms of Tathagatagarbha in Tibetan Buddhism, there were two main branch thoughts developed since Lotsawa Rngog blo ldan shes rab's translation. One is the early thought, which spread through Bstan khapoché who went to Kashmir particular receiving of the teaching of Ratnagotravibhāga.

According to Btsan's tradition, the Tathagatagarbha, is actually, the nature of mind (citta-prakṛiti-prabhasvarata), which one of important philosophical questions in Pāli sūtras. 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 ldan shes rab, 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 Buddhahood represented the Paramārtha-satya (Transcendental Truth)"

dental Truth), they asserted that the Paramārtha-satya could not be object of even an approximate judgment(zen-pa, adhyavasāya), to say nothing of it being a direct of object of perception.”[9]

Later on, those two branches become some small thoughts. There were two branches of important of thoughts of Tathagatagarbha of Btsan. First one is most of Jonangpa scholars particularly Kun mkhyen dol po bashes rab rkyl mshan(1292-1361) , who was very famous at his time, and the second one is Shakay mchok ldn(1428-1507), who were belong to Skyapa school, considering one of most influenced person in Tibetan Buddhism at time.

Shakay mchok ldn and Kun hkhyen dol po ba both believe that Tathagatagarbha is emptiness-others (gzhan stong) which is also The Middle Way (Mādhyamika) but Shakay mchog ldn's view is that there are two kind of emptiness, one is emptiness from Nagarjuna Six Treaties of Reasoning and the other emptiness is from Maitreya's of five treaties. The second one is the ultimate true and it also so called Tathagatagarbha.

Lotsawa Rngog blo ldn shes rab's Tathagatagarbha view becomes three important traditions. There were Tsongkapa(1357-1419), Rong ston Shakya Rgyl mshan(1367-1449), and Bu ston Rin chen grub(1290-1364). Tsongkapa and his disciples, most importantly, his students, Rgyal tsab darma rinchen (1384-1438) and his Treaties on Ratnagotravibhaga says that “ Although Tathagatagarbha Sutras are ultimate mean of Buddha, it is emptiness of Prasangika, it is emptiness of inherent existence but nothing else” [10]

Shakya Rgyl mshan believed that Tathagatagarbha supposed to be explained Svatantrika way but not Prasangika.

Bu stonn Rin chen grub explained the Tathagatagarbha sutras as conventional but not ultimate, his give several reasons of this in his Ornaments of Tathagatagarbha clearly.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in order to understanding of Tathagatagarbha philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, there are no other ways to study it except to learn development of Ratnagotravibhāga. There are hundreds of commentaries and annotations of Ratnagotravibhāga written by Tibetan Buddhist scholars but few of them have left for today. Among of them, Bu Ston, Dol po pa, Tsongkapa, Shakya mchog ldn, and Shakya rgyl msthan, are strangely influential today.

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