
The Sentient Reflexivity of Buddha Nature: Metaphorizing Tathagatagarbha

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Abstract: Buddha Nature, or tathagatagarbha in Sanskrit, is a core element of Buddhist philosophical discourse and doctrinal debate. Who or what possesses Buddha Nature, how it manifests itself, and what role it plays in Buddhist soteriology have been sustained questions in actual Buddhist practices and in the works of Buddhologists from ancient times to the present. Based on the author's textual interpretation, this paper attempts to present a threefold argument: Buddha Nature is not separate from its alleged opposite, sentience; it is not a tangible substance but a state of being whose felt meaning is only metaphorically conveyed; and finally it is a heuristic device or a means of provoking a Buddhist or anyone who takes interest in Buddhism, to visualize the inner complexity of his or her sentient mode of being.

Key words: Buddha Nature, tathagatagarbha, metaphor, sentience, dichotomy

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In Buddhist philosophical systems, particularly the Mahayana traditions, a person is often automatically qualified as a potential Buddhist and, even better, as a potential Buddha due to each person possessing what the Buddha calls "Buddha Nature." One's becoming a Buddhist is then only a matter of a public announcement through a ritualized acknowledgement in front of a Buddhist teacher. Our fear of impermanence and our transcendental aspiration for liberation from impermanence is Buddha Nature at work. What is Buddha Nature then? Where does one find it in oneself? How does one feel its presence? What does one have to do to cover the distance between Buddha Nature and Buddhahood? No single sutra states what Buddha Nature is in a single, substantive phrase; however, metaphoric expressions of it are readily found in various sutras and sastras. Drawing textual sources from Sino-Tibetan Buddhist discourses I write this article as my hermeneutic effort to make a threefold argument: first, Buddha Nature is not separate from its alleged opposite, sentience; second, it is not a tangible substance but a state of being whose felt meaning is only metaphorically conveyed; and finally it is a heuristic device provoking a Buddhist, or anyone who takes interest in Buddhism, to visualize the inner complexity of his or her sentient mode of being.

Where does the dichotomy of Buddha Nature and sentience begin?

It was the tenth anniversary of Sakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment, and more than a thousand bhikkhus were gathering around the Buddha on Vulture Peak, including Mahakasyapa, Subhuti, Sariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, and other well-known bhikkhus. After having his meal, the Buddha performed a miraculous vision: thousands of lotus flowers emerged from the Candagarbha Hall. Each one of them, full of magnificence and fragrance, had a tathagata (如来; buddha) seated within whose radiance shone through all the Buddhalands. All the bhikkhus were astounded at the scene, the likes of which they had never witnessed

before. Still reeling in astonishment, the lotus flowers suddenly withered and began to emit a foul odor; however, all the tathagatas within the withered flowers retained their majestic beauty, sending out infinite rays of light to the universe. The Buddha then said to everyone present, “Buddha Nature in all of you is not a bit different from that within me...Whether emerging to the world or not, Buddha Nature in all sentient beings never changes its permanence.”^①

In this miraculous vision, the Sakyamuni Buddha gives his affirmation to a transcendental quality of all sentient beings—Buddha Nature—with which the enlightened mode of being becomes attainable. What the Buddha says above is implicitly referential. He affirms to the bhikkhus the sameness of Buddha Nature in everyone but gives no straightforward definition. The vision he performs metaphorically demonstrates that the tathagatas are permanently transcendent whereas the lotus flower enveloping each of them, represents the impermanence of the sentient world which is subject to decay. Thus, the Buddha-world and the world of sentient beings appear dichotomized. While all strands of the Buddha’s teachings emphasize the non-duality of the enlightened state of being, the actual teaching of a Dharma master cannot help but present Buddha Nature as having qualities like a substance which, being permanent and eternal, is in opposition to the impermanent nature of sentient existence. Whenever Buddha Nature is invoked, it is articulated with multiple sets of dichotomies, such as samsara and nirvana^②, impermanence and permanence^③, phenomena and pure being^④, to name a few. It is thus assumed that Buddha Nature is the “potential of Buddha”^⑤ but not Buddha-ness itself, in which a linear distance is implied between the actual and the potential, or the real and the ideal. The dichotomized impression of Buddha Nature set against the sentient backdrop can be traced back to such texts as the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, the Mahaparinirvana Sutra and others.

These canonical texts affirm that, “Buddha Nature in all of you is not a bit different from ‘that which is in’ me.”^⑥ This statement establishes what I would call “a kindredness” between the Buddha himself and his disciples with the assumption that each has an identical inner quality, that is, Buddha Nature. Thus every one of his disciples begins an inner search for Buddha Nature with the Buddha as his or her ultimate teacher. According to these texts, the Sanskrit word for Buddha Nature is tathagatagarbha etymologically consisting of two parts, tathagata and garbha. “Tathagata is itself understood as a compound word that can be interpreted in two ways: as tatha + agata, ‘thus come’; or tatha + gata, ‘thus gone.’”^⑦ Tathagata is an honorific title for the Buddha, reflecting the unchanging quality of the Buddha. In The Diamond Sutra the Buddha tells Subhuti, “The Tathagata is neither at once whence nor at once whither.”^⑧ In other words tathagata is absolute suchness, without coming or going, arising or ceasing.

Garbha means “storehouse,” “concealment,” or “womb.” In Sallie B. King’s finding, garbha has an additional

① *The Tathagatagarbha Sutra*; Taisho, 1929, Vol. 16, No.667, pp.460-461.

② Zasep Tulku Rinpoche 2001 *Buddha-Nature: The Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra Commentary*. Vancouver, BC Canada: Zuru Ling Tibetan Buddhist Centre, p.83.

③ Boaz, David Paul 2006 *the Nature of Mind: The Buddhist View: Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen*. Corrales, NM: Copper Mountain Institute, p.7.

④ Mipham Jamyang Namgyal 2004 *Maitreya’s Distinguishing Phenomena and Pure Being with commentary by Mipham*. New York: Snow Lion Publications, p.67.

⑤ Zasep 2001, p.62.

⑥ *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*; Taisho, 1929, Vol. 16, No.667, p.461.

⑦ King, Sallie B. 1991 *Buddha Nature*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p.4.

⑧ *Diamond Sutra*; China Social Science Academy, 1991, p.11.

meaning, “embryo.”^① “Embryo” is not literal but extended meaning of garbha or womb. In the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, the word “womb” (not counting King’s use of garbha) appears four times. Among the four appearances, three are phrased as “lotus-wombs” in which multifarious tathagatas sit, and one refers to the “wombs” of sentient beings in which countless tathagatas rest. The literal translations of the four verses with the usage of “womb” are: (1) “All the tathagatas in the wombs of the lotus flowers respectively radiate infinite rays of light, shining through all majestic Buddhalands;”^② (2) “In the womb of every lotus flower dwells a tathagata sitting in lotus-position and emitting thousands of rays of light;”^③ (3) “I have not seen such a miraculous vision in which infinite numbers of tathagatas immovably abide in the wombs of lotus flowers;”^④ (4) “Compassionate men and women, there are measureless numbers of Buddhas in your wombs which are flooded with delusions.”^⑤

So, in my reading of the texts, tathagatagarbha, commonly referred to as Buddha Nature, has three direct meanings, each of which contributes to the later, dichotomized, discursive understanding of Buddha Nature. First, the delusions (klesa) of sentient beings blind them from the pure tathagata. In this state tathagata is not seen. As Ding Fubao points out, “Because of their delusions sentient beings are unable to see tathagata. It is the garbha state [or state of concealment] in which tathagatha is cloaked from sentient beings.”^⑥ Second, while tathagata “dwells” in sentient beings, it co-exists and entwines itself with all sentient delusions and defilements even while it retains its own identity. Tathagata in this state saturates all sentient beings indiscriminately while preserving its flawless state of being. Third, tathagatagarbha, which is essentially the potential of Buddhahood concealed in sentient delusions, will eventually give birth to tathagata, the actuality of Buddhahood incarnated in a sentient body. Tathagatagarbha or Buddha Nature is thus the potential state of enlightenment, setting itself as juxtaposed to the actual state of enlightenment. Buddha Nature, to Sakyamuni, appears as a reality and is conveyed with substance-like qualities, while to non-enlightened sentient beings, it is a concept or an ideality. As an enlightened reality it is seen as an indivisible quality. It remains as it is. As a desired ideality it is sought after as what many contemporary Dharma teachers call “the essence of enlightenment”^⑦, “the essence of the mind,”^⑧ or “the seed of enlightenment.”^⑨ This substantive projection of Buddha Nature as an attainable thing contributes to reinforcing the temporal and spiritual distances between a potentiality and an actuality or between sentience and Buddhahood. This dichotomization process makes both sentience and Buddhahood unreal if viewed from the other standpoint: to the enlightened, sentient existence is illusory, not awakened to reality, whereas to the unenlightened, Buddhahood is, not real in the sense of not realized since it is only a desired and ideal state of being.

Metaphorizing tathagatagarbha as an actual state of consciousness

In my reading of the canonic texts I see tathagatagarbha or Buddha Nature as an omnipresent vision or

① King 1991, p.4.

② *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*; Taisho, 1929, Vol. 16, No.667, p.461.

③ Ibid, p.461.

④ Ibid, p.461.

⑤ Ibid, p.461.

⑥ Ding, Baofu, editor, 1991 *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Studies*; Shanghai Book, p.1086.

⑦ Lama Gursam 2006 “Buddha Nature,” http://www.lamagursam.org/buddha_nature.html, accessed at 10:35, 11/23/2012.

⑧ Suzuki Roshi 2010 in David Paul Boaz “Zen Mind: View, Path and Result.” Corrales, NM: Copper Mountain Institute, p.5.

⑨ Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche “Buddha Nature.” http://www.dharma-media.org/media/kagyu/drigung/khenchen_gyaltshen/buddha_nature.pdf, accessed at 09:13, 11/09/2012.

awareness and as real as it gets. It is not a potentiality but an actuality in the sense that it never sets itself apart from sentience as its assumed opposite. As an actuality it is not a substance or a thing with tangible attributes for grasping. As an actuality it is a state of mind or the presence of the enlightened state of being identical to that of the Buddha. To better express what I attempt to state, I reiterate what Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche says, “Many scholars think that we have Buddha Nature like a seed, and that as we practice, it then transforms into the fully enlightened state. But...this Buddha-nature is not like a seed.”^① In other words Buddha Nature is not dormant but is rather active and integrally entwined in one’s sentient mode of being, e.g. touching, feeling, thinking, reflecting, and discerning. For the purpose of Buddhist pedagogy it is often regarded as “the pure being”^② opposite to the phenomenal world; however, as aforementioned, this pedagogically-intended dichotomy only makes Buddha Nature conceptually graspable but perpetuates it in a future tense signifying a linear progression of one’s practice from the unenlightened state of sentience to the enlightened state of Buddhahood. This resembles the utopian, iconoclastic, vision of an ideal future based on intense dissatisfaction with the present condition of being.

Returning to the key texts of Mahayana Buddhism, I say the Buddha does not initiate the dichotomous terms of potentiality and actuality, the ideal and the real, or the pure and the defiled. If he does, he does not set Buddhahood apart from Buddha Nature but affirms the same qualitative identity of both. His discourse on Buddha Nature is characteristically metaphoric rather than literal. In his metaphoric expressions I see Buddha Nature presented as an enlightened way of seeing that steers us away from modes of being that breed suffering. This is the fundament of what the Buddha means by “enlightenment” or “liberation.” Therefore, Buddha speaks of the vision from his way of seeing, not of a thing or a substance, for the purpose of directing his audience to experiencing the enlightened state of being through a set of metaphors and similes.

In the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha shares his vision of the sentient world with Vajraprajna Bodhisattva who earnestly inquires about Buddha Nature. The Buddha tells him that Buddha Nature residing in sentient beings is a beehive full of honey that is surrounded by protective bees; like grains of rice or wheat wrapped up with rough husks; someone’s pure gold bullion dropped in filthy and odious waste; a poverty-ridden man sleeplessly contemplating his poverty without knowing treasures are buried under his house; and a monstrous-looking pregnant woman who does not know that her forthcoming child will be one who will turn the Dharma Wheel.^③ The Buddha professes to Vajraprajna Bodhisattva and others present, “You all have the Buddha Body in you, which will consequently manifest as the state of the ultimate awakening.”^④

The metaphors that Vajraprajna Bodhisattva receives from the Buddha are a set of connectives signifying the presence or the active state of Buddha Nature. The relationship between the honey and the bees, the grains of rice and the husks, or the gold bullion and the waste covering it, does not suggest the dichotomy of latency and continuance. The honey and the bees, or the pregnant woman and her expected child are all simultaneously in their own states of being, in each other’s presence but without awareness. It is a matter of seeing or not

① Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche 2007 *Buddha-Nature: Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra by Arya Maitreya with Commentary by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche*. Canada: Siddhartha’s Intent, p.37.

② Mipham Jamyang Namgyal 2004 *Maitreya’s Distinguishing Phenomena and Pure Being with commentary by Mipham*. New York: Snow Lion Publications.

③ *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*; Taisho, 1929, Vol. 16, No.667, pp.462-463.

④ Ibid, p.463.

seeing. When Buddha Nature is seen, it is Buddha. When it is not seen, it remains as Buddha Nature active in its own right but parallel to the nonseeing state. Buddha Nature is then a constant, uninterrupted flux of consciousness, and each Buddha is a signifier of such flux. The Buddha calls this continuous tathagata or suchness, which is neither pure nor impure, as Asanga states, “for these reasons all sentient beings have had the nature of the absolute Buddha, always and uninterruptedly, since beginningless time.”^①

In addressing the flux of suchness or the enlightened state that flows in the sentient realm, a few skillful Dharma teachers have not limited their disciples’ quest for the presence of tathagata only in themselves but have encouraged them to look outward, metaphorically, in their physical environs in such elements as the sky, the ocean, sunlight, earth, and air. All these elemental components of one’s lifeworld are thus equally saturated with Buddha Nature, and, thus, become one’s external references of how Buddha Nature manifests itself as an “all pervasive” that is “present within all beings alike.”^② In this regard, I think that metaphorizing how Buddha Nature works is the primary method of the Buddha’s teachings concerning the innate, identical quality found in himself and his disciples. This has been a consistent pedagogy of among Dharma teachers.

In the Aristotelian sense, metaphorization generates intuitive perception of the similar in the dissimilar.^③ In the case of these Dharma masters’ teachings of Buddha Nature, the metaphors and similes of the sky, the sun, and the ocean connect the inner with the outer, extending the reality of Buddha Nature from the personal realm to a greater existential realm and vice versa. By saying Buddha Nature is the sky, these skillful masters signify that the presence of Buddha Nature is all encompassing and indiscriminate. It is found in good and evil, the clean and the defiled. This approach accords with what is written in the aforementioned key sutras.

Rescuing icchantikas (一禅提) with Buddha Nature

When metaphorized as the encompassing earth or the sky, Buddha Nature no longer makes a distinction about who can be enlightened and who cannot as it is inclusive of everyone and everything, without constraints, and as an amoral state like sunlight that shines indiscriminately on everyone. For instance, the question concerning whether or not icchantikas (一禅提 the spiritually-base beings) have Buddha Nature has been an impassioned debate among Buddhists for centuries; however, because of the all-encompassing nature of Buddha Nature, icchantikas are ultimately deemed to have the same Buddha Nature as everyone else.

In the works of the late Daisetz Suzuki, icchantikas are “those who are destitute of Buddha Nature.”^④ Suzuki’s definition is based on his reading of icchantika in the Lankavatara Sutra. As its lexical meaning suggests impoverishment and deprivation, “destitute” is not the best interpretation of what the sutra states. In the sutra there are two types of icchantikas, “Bodhisattva-icchantika” and “icchantikas.”^⑤ The former keep themselves away from nirvana because of their vows made for all beings, which states “So long as they [all beings] do not attain Nirvana, I will not attain it myself.”^⑥ This does not mean that these “Bodhisattva-icchantika” cut themselves off from Buddha

① Arya Asanga 2000 *the Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra*, New York: Snow Lion Publications, p.118.

② Ibid, p.319.

③ Ricoeur, Paul 1977 *The Rule of Metaphor*. trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costellos. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, p.6.

④ Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, *The Lankavatara Sutra*; Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1959, p.58, footnote.

⑤ Ibid, p.59.

⑥ Ibid, p.59.

Nature; instead it suggests that they are already in the enlightened state of being. The Buddha says, “Knowing that all things are in nirvana itself from the very beginning, the Bodhisattva-Icchantika would never enter nirvana.” This statement explicitly conveys a message that “Bodhisattva-Icchantikas” are mahasattvas who, already in nirvana, need not enter nirvana but actively direct sentient beings to nirvana.

What Suzuki means by icchantikas is the second type referring to those who “never awaken the desire for emancipation... because they have abandoned all the stock of merit,” and “will not enter into Nirvana.”^① However, the narrative of the Buddha moves further in the sutra. Toward the end of his discourse on icchantikas, the Buddha says to Mahamati, “Those icchantikas who have forsaken all the stock of merit might someday be influenced by the power of all tathagatas and be convinced at any moment to cultivate the stock of merit. Why? Because, Mahamati, no beings are left aside by the tathagatas.”^② Obviously the Buddha does not deprive this type of icchantikas of Buddha Nature because of their moral destitution but gives a description of their present conditions in relation to nirvana. The non-awakened state of these icchantikas prevents them from entering into nirvana; however, Buddha Nature itself is not in an impoverished state.

At this point, I prefer Vasubandhu’s view that icchantikas are those who “enjoy dwelling in birth and death.”^③ We cannot forget the fact that icchantikas are sentient beings. If all sentient beings have Buddha Nature, why not icchantikas? When Mahakasyapa asked the Buddha about the state of icchantikas, the Buddha replied, “Bhikkhu, there is no lotus flower that will not bloom under the sunlight...Icchantikas are enfeathered with boundless transgressions; nonetheless they have Buddha Nature.”^④ The omni-encompassing quality of Buddha Nature is not affected by icchantikas’ spiritual delusion toward the Buddha’s teachings. In this sense both spiritual delusion and the omnipresence of Buddha Nature exist in the unseeing state of icchantikas. It is not a matter of one side dominating and suppressing the other but of icchantikas’ total unseeing state of being that prevents them from recognizing the presence of both. As the Buddha says, “Buddha Nature in all of you is not a bit different from [that which is within] me,”^⑤ and even “Icchantikas have Buddha Nature,”^⑥ Buddha Nature then is an a priori existence identical in all sentient beings as well as in the Buddha himself. It is always in an active state in its own right.

Buddha Nature as a reflex-turned-vision for Enlightenment

When the Buddha demonstrates the presence of Buddha Nature through the images of the radiant tathagatas and the withered lotus flowers, it is tempting for us to see the image of the tathagatas as Buddha Nature. To reiterate what I said earlier, I prefer to see both tathagatas and lotus flowers as inherent parts of Buddha Nature—a continuous flux of consciousness responding to all sentient activities. I further argue that Buddha Nature is never “covered” by the “bees,” the “waste” or the “monstrously looking mother” as the literal meaning of the text suggests; instead, it is reflexively active; therefore it possesses its own agency, so to speak. The very essence of the Buddha’s teachings is concerned systematic methods of liberation from suffering of all kinds, whereas Buddha Nature of a non-Buddhist sentient being acts in a reflexive manner when he or she

① Ibid, pp.58-59.

② Ibid, p.59.

③ Vasubandhu, *The Treatise on Buddha Nature*; Taisho, 1929, Vol. 31, No. 1610, p.797.

④ *The Great Nirvana Sutra* (Mahaparinirvana Sutra); Taisho, 1929, Vol. 12, p.419.

⑤ *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*; Taisho, 1929, Vol. 16, No.667, p.461.

⑥ *The Great Nirvana Sutra*, Taisho, 1929, Vol. 12, p.419.

encounters actual or potential suffering. It is the basis of our sentience that we each reflexively defend our own life when facing imminent harm. This instinctual reflex can be considered an inherent part of Buddha Nature, as the term used by some Dharma teachers infers. “The primordial mind”^① materially found in dwelling spaces that seek to maximize safety, and the living routines of humans and non-human species that indicate our reflex to minimize harm and suffering and thus to sustain the ways and means for flourishing and wholesomeness.

To continue my argument that Buddha Nature is in an active state rather than a latent state, I say this “inner teacher” is our “true being” or our primordial being which reflexively knows what harm is and what happiness is. By “primordial” I do not mean “primeval” or “earliest” as if our “true being” was lost in a remote time; instead I mean “coevalness” or “contemporaneity” but in the spatial and existential senses. In other words the presence of this “inner teacher” as our primordial being pervades our sentient modes of being just as the air envelopes the earth and enters the bodies of countless beings through their reflexive breathing. Again it is the different degrees of awareness that differentiates one sentient being from another and sets the Buddha from everyone else. Buddha Nature itself remains indivisible and non-temporalized. Fundamentally the primordial state of being of the Buddha and us is the same. I then reiterate Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche’s rhetorical question, “What makes you not a Buddhist?” Everyone is a Buddhist when we see how this “inner teacher” reflexively works in us when encountering imminent harm, psychological ailments, moral dilemmas, and spiritual disorientation. This “natural state” of being a Buddhist is reflexive in nature but evolves from its reflexive state to a reflective, conscious state when one adopts formal methods of practice in the Buddha’s teachings.

In this regard, for the formal training of a Buddhist practitioner, the reflexive mode of Buddha Nature undergoes a reflective transformation during which the immateriality of it has to be articulated in metaphoric terms. In Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche’s teaching of Buddha Nature, he addresses tathagatagarbha as kham in Tibetan or “element.”^② Because of this “element” in us, we reflexively try to avoid harm and desire peace and happiness. According to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, the purpose of a sangha then is to “work with this kham, this element. And by working with the element, then the Sangha achieves enlightenment.”^③ In the process of a Buddhist’s practice, this element is simultaneously a cause, an action, and a result.^④ As a cause, it obviously teaches us to avoid suffering and attain happiness. In every sense it tells us to stay away from things, people, and events that put us in harm’s way. In the Buddha’s teachings, it is reasonable to assume that he utilizes this aspect of our primordial being as a heuristic device to motivate his disciples to have a conscious and embodied acceptance of Buddha Nature as the state of liberation from sufferings. Therefore, tathagatagarbha, as our primordial being, is the cause or the driving force of a Buddhist toward Buddhahood. In this regard, Youru Wang states, “the notion of tathagatagarbha is nothing but a soteriological notion of the inner cause or thrust for liberation within all sentient beings. It serves the soteriological purpose of affirming the possibility and potentiality of attaining enlightenment within sentient beings and encouraging them to move forward on the Buddhist path.”^⑤

The element, Buddha Nature, as an action entails methodic ways of seeing and experiencing sentience.

① Boaz, David Paul 2006, p.10.

② Dzongsar 2007, p.6.

③ Ibid, p.11.

④ Ibid, p.40.

⑤ Wang, Youru “De-Substantializing Buddha-Nature in the Tathagatagarbha Tradition,” *The International Journal for Field-Being*, Vol. 1(1), Part 2, Article No.10, 2001.

In the Buddha's teachings he terms the sentient mode of being as samsara or the realm of birth and death signifying the reality of sufferings. As the Buddha says, "...Buddha Nature dwells in the Five Skandhas [五蕴]."^① As a mahasattva himself, the Buddha lived in the sentient world demonstrating the entwinement of nirvana and samsara. Regardless of his parallel discourse on emptiness, the sentient sense and sensibility plays a critical role in the Buddhist spiritual understanding of the pervasiveness of Buddha Nature in both temporal and spatial terms, not just in the interiority of the individual.

The Five Skandhas, as the Buddha observed, "flow like a river in every one of us: the river of form (rupa), which means our body, the river of feelings (vedana), the river of perceptions (samjna), the river of mental formations (samskara), and the river of consciousness (parijnana). They are always flowing in us."^② Each of them has its own realms (境) and roots (根). Rupa (色), for example, refers to the material forms we see and touch. In Buddha's teachings the Rupa Skandha consists of five realms and five roots, each of which cannot exist without the other. The five roots are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body,^③ which depend on the five realms of sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch.^④ Interlocking each other they inseparably function as one entity interfacing the inner with the outer and vice versa. The occurrence of sight, for instance, is due to the usage of the eye; without the eye there is no sight. Likewise, the roots of the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body act together with the realms of sound, scent, taste, and touch. Their synchronicity is like the doctor and the patient, who mutually define each other's identity. It is also analogous to the relationships between the poet and the poem, clouds and rain, and the caterpillar and the butterfly.

The rest of the Five Skandhas—feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—operate in the same pattern as the Rupa Skandhas. But, they are very much influenced by the forms of material things. "Buddha Nature dwells in the Five Skandhas" as the Buddha say, but it is also the Five Skandhas that block us from recognizing Buddha Nature as a universal, transpersonal, trans-species quality of all beings. It is because the field of the individual's sensing, for example, eye-vision and ear-sound, is rooted in the partiality of our sense organs and self-centered intellect. Thus, the Five Skandhas on the individual level operate with the discrimination of "this" and "that" or "self" and "other." Such a differential habit of seeing oneself and the world dichotomizes one's vision into Buddhahood and sentience, and purity and defilement. In this partial way of seeing, Buddha Nature appears like long-lost property or a future ideal to be sought. However, in the greater scheme of different sentient modes of being, one's sense and sensibility of Buddha Nature emerge only in the Five Skandhas through the fusion of one's sense organs and their corresponding fields of the external world. The separation of nirvana and samsara is obviously a philosophical exercise for a rational grasping of how Buddha Nature saturates all beings and their surrounding environments. While The Heart Sutra states the emptiness of the Five Skandhas, it also says emptiness is form. Our ability to sense such contradiction itself is Buddha Nature or our primordial being at work. There is no consistent severance of nirvana and samsara, or of Buddha and Buddha Nature. Thus it is inevitable that Dharma teachers, like Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche have posited conceptual terms like "element" and "pure being" to articulate the meaning of the Buddha's initial term tathagatagarbha and have devised intellectual tools as skillful means

① *The Great Nirvana Sutra*, Taisho, 1929, Vol. 12, No.374, 408.

② Nhat Hanh, Thich 1988 *The Heart of Understanding*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, Berkeley, 9.

③ The Sanskrit names for these five roots are Oaksur, Srotra, Ghrana, Jihva, and Kaya.

④ The Sanskrit names are Rupa, Sabda, Gandha, Rasa, and Sparsa.

for their students to have the full vision of Buddha Nature. For instance, Nagarjuna categorizes five spiritual or transcendental roots that are said to lead a practitioner toward enlightenment. They are faith, diligence, remembrance, quiescence, and wisdom.^① Faith means a complete trust in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and in the Four Noble Truths of Suffering, the Arising of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering, and the Path to Liberation. Diligence refers to one's unrelenting practice of the Dharma. Remembrance signifies how the Buddha's teachings resonate with one's daily routines. Quiescence means the concentration of the mind on enlightenment without distraction. Wisdom means one's devotion to the contemplation of the true nature of all things. Venerable Asvaghosha added another five methods of practice in *The Awakening of Faith*, "they are the practices of charity, observance of precepts, patience, zeal, cessation of illusions, and clear observation."^② Asvaghosha emphasized the last one of the five, "he who practices 'clear observation' should observe that all conditioned phenomena in the world are in constant change and are subject to instantaneous transformation and destruction; that all activities of the mind arise and are extinguished from moment to moment; and that, therefore, all of these induce suffering."^③

Nagarjuna's five roots, Asvaghosha's five methods, Mipham's pure being, or Dzongsar Khyentse's element allow their disciples to cognize intellectually how Buddha Nature works. In the meantime, from the perspective of comparative studies of religion, it is a means of ethics for delineating Buddha Nature in a relational fashion based on the Buddha's initial statements such as "the true liberation is tathagata,"^④ "Buddha Nature is the true liberation,"^⑤ and "true self is named Buddha Nature...and is also tathagata."^⑥ In this regard, these Dharma teachers' explanatory scheme of Buddha Nature is shown in terms of "self," "true," and "pure" in juxtaposition with "other," "false," and "defiled"—a set of dichotomies that are inherent in the existential compass of sentient species. Again, in the greater scheme of the universe, Buddha Nature is a formless state of the mind. It moves between countless contradictions and dichotomies in the sentient realm but is always in present tense as it is "beginningless and endless."^⑦ When it fully displays its presence, it does not moralize but accepts the natural course of all events as shown in the acts of the Buddha. One day when the Buddha was meditating under a tree, a group of merchants with five hundred caravans ran by him. The dust they stirred up covered the meditating Buddha. Without moving an inch to dust himself off, the Buddha completed his meditation. Later one of the merchants asked the Buddha if he saw and heard the caravans. The Buddha replied, "No." The merchant asked again if he was asleep. The Buddha said, "I never sleep and never enter Samadhi, but I am Quiescence." Another time when the Buddha was meditating by a rice field, a thunderstorm came and killed two brothers and their four buffaloes. Later some villagers asked the Buddha why he did not see the accident and why he was asleep. The Buddha replied, "I never sleep and never enter Samadhi, but I am Quiescence."^⑧

These two vignettes could be read in different ways. To the merchants, the meditating Buddha is seen as a victim of their carelessness or as someone who is immune from offenses. To the villagers the Buddha appears to be

① Nagarjuna, *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra*. Shanghai: Classical Works, 1993, p.126.

② Asvaghosha, *The Awakening of Faith*. translated by Yoshito S. Hakeda. New York: Columbia University Press. 1967, p.93.

③ Ibid, p.100.

④ *The Great Nirvana Sutra*, Taisho, 1929, Vol. 12, No.374, p.392.

⑤ Ibid, p.395.

⑥ Ibid, p.395.

⑦ Zasep 2001, p.33.

⑧ *The Parinirvana Sutra*; Taisho, Vol. I, No.8, p.198.

an indifferent bystander showing no sympathy to the tragic accident; therefore his peacefulness could be looked upon as lacking moral concern. If the Buddha is seen from the perspective of how tathagata is characterized in the sutras discussed so far, the Buddha accepts all happenings as results from a moving chain of causes, effects, and conditions in the same enclosure whereas the sentient moral reflexivity is centered on the very moment of pain and suffering. The gravity of these two vignettes is the Buddha's statement—"I never sleep and never enter Samadhi, but I am Quiescence." He is already in the state of samadhi or total awareness; thus entering and leaving samadhi is the talk of the sentient mind filled with an endless string of opposites, contradictions, and dichotomies: "here" and "there," "in" and "out," "living" and "dying," or "nirvana" and "samsara." The seeing mind of the Buddha is a constant while the sentient mind is unconscious but reflexively ready to defend itself from harm. The Huayen Sutra (Avatamsaka Sutra) best elucidates the Buddha-mind as the enlightened state of being, "The universe does not have a body. Neither does tathagata that permeates everywhere and saturates all sentient beings, all dharmas, and all realms. It does not reach out but reaches everything. Why? It is because the body of tathagata is not a body; for the sake of sentient beings, it is manifested in a body."^①

Therefore, to the Buddha, Buddhahood and Buddha Nature are one and the same without the differentiation of the actuality and the potentiality discussed earlier. Buddha is an incarnation of the primordial being or pure being. To sentient beings in an unenlightened state of being, Buddha Nature is not totally absent but rather manifests itself when they reflexively react to moments of suffering or happiness. In other words, a sentient being is a potential buddha when the awareness of Buddha Nature is absent, and a sentient being could also be "momentary buddha" when reflexively protecting his or herself from harm and striving for sustained happiness. Again, this is how Buddha Nature works in most instances in the sentient realm. It is active in its own course but is not fully recognized in the sentient consciousness. The Buddha and the successive generations of skillful Dharma teachers recognize this mode of sentient spirituality: Buddha Nature is found nowhere else but in the sentient realm as a state of all-knowing consciousness; thus it is only natural to state, "Do not renounce samsara, for if you renounce it, you will not attain buddhahood."^②

中文提要:

佛性或如来藏(梵文 *tathagatagarbha*) 是佛教哲学体系和教义里一个具争议的核心内容。自古以来,“谁或什么具有佛性”、“佛性是怎样显现的”,以及“佛性在佛教解脱论里起到怎样的作用”等问题在佛教实践中及佛学研讨里是一系列持续的论题。本文作者基于自己对佛教文献的解读希望表达三个有关佛性的论点。首先,佛性与其所谓的反面“众生”(sentience)是不分离的。第二,佛性不是一样具型的东 西,或是某个过去的或隐藏的精神状态,而是一个当下的、持续的生命神识状态。第三,佛性在经文里是一类使用隐喻和譬喻的启发式(heuristic)辩术方式,其目的是激起佛教徒或任何对佛家哲学思想有兴致的人对自身的生命状态进行内在视觉上的观想作用。

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① *The Huayen Sutra* (Avatamsaka Sutra), Taisho, 1929, Vol. 10, p.266.

② Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*. Translated and edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991, p.900.