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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

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### A. The Role of the Buddha Nature Concept

The concept of Buddha nature, though little discussed in Western surveys of Buddhism, is one of the most important ideas in East Asian Buddhism. In its simplest form, the Buddha nature concept provides the answer to a question with which the ancient Chinese were very much concerned: Are all beings capable of attaining Buddhahood, or are there some who will never be free of the sufferings of *samsāra*? Buddha nature theory answers without equivocation: “All sentient beings possess the Buddha nature” and thus are guaranteed the realization of Buddhahood. Not only human beings, but all beings born and reborn in the six destinies—hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, fighting demons, human beings, and gods—are promised that Buddhahood awaits them. The belief in the *icchantika*, the one forever incapable of attaining Buddhahood, is expressly rejected. At its basis, then, the Buddha nature concept is an optimistic and encouraging doctrine.

When we look further into this notion, its optimism increases, as do the philosophical problems attached to it. When one asks how the promise of future Buddhahood is realized, what the present mechanism for this future achievement is, the answer is that insofar

as we “possess” the Buddha nature, we already are Buddhalike, we already possess the attributes of a Buddha—wisdom and compassion. This introduces the second level of the Buddha nature concept: Not only will we be Buddhas in the future, we already are Buddhas now. Buddha nature, then, is both the potential to realize Buddhahood that is possessed by all and the already complete Buddhahood that is ours in the present.

Obviously, we do not experience ourselves as Buddhas—perfectly wise and compassionate beings—in our present condition of delusion. Insofar as our Buddha nature is not experientially realized—insofar, that is, as we experience ourselves as deluded beings—we *are* deluded beings and not, experientially, Buddhas. In such a case, our Buddha nature is covered up or concealed from us by “adventitious defilements,” such as ignorance, hatred, fear, desire—all the Buddhist vices. These defilements constitute our “ordinary” experience in *samsāra*. Buddha nature theory holds that these defilements are adventitious or accidental; in other words, they are not necessary, not essential to the human condition, but simply the products of past karma.

It is possible, however, to free oneself of that past karma and thus of the power that the defilements have to construct our reality. Once we are free of the defilements, our Buddha nature will become experientially available to us. It, unlike the defilements, is essential to the human condition; it is there for us always, whether or not we are experientially in touch with it. The defilements are able to conceal the Buddha nature from us only to the extent that we allow our past karma to determine our lives. With meditation and meritorious deeds we can free ourselves of our karma and realize our Buddhahood. Our Buddha nature, then, is our true and essential nature and identity. Buddha nature theory affirms that each of us is fully capable of realizing—making experientially present to ourselves—this enlightened nature that is our birthright as sentient beings.

This optimistic view of both human nature and of our ultimate spiritual destiny was attractive to the Chinese. Indeed, the acceptance of Buddha nature became normative for Chinese Buddhism as a whole. The Fa-xiang school (Fa-hsiang; Chinese *Yogācāra*) of Xuan-zang (Hsüan-tsang) was relegated to a relatively low status in the hierarchical rankings of Buddhist doctrine constructed by leading Chinese thinkers due to its affirmation of the *icchantika* doctrine and rejection of universal Buddhahood.

This acceptance of Buddha nature entered into the foundations of the indigenous Chinese Buddhist schools, especially Tian-tai (T'ien-t'ai), Hua-yan (Hua-yen) and Chan (Ch'an), in all of which it played a major role. The influence of Buddha nature thought on the Pure Land school, with its emphasis on faith in Amida, is somewhat less straightforward. Several texts of the *tathāgataḡarbha*-Buddha nature tradition,<sup>1</sup> such as the *Śrīmālādevī Simhanāda Sūtra* and the *Wu Shang Yi Jing*, make much of the fact that Buddha nature, as such, is inconceivable, and on this basis they recommend faith in the Buddha who teaches this doctrine as the appropriate religious practice. Moreover, the *tathāgataḡarbha*-Buddha nature doctrine of the four "perfections" possessed by the Buddha's *dharmakāya* and the very positive language with which the Buddha, *dharmakāya*, *nirvāṇa*, and the like are lauded in texts of this tradition open the door to devotional practices in Buddhism. Takasaki Jikidō goes so far as to say that "the core of the *tathāgataḡarbha* theory is in . . . the 'pure' faith in the Buddha" and asserts that there is an "essential interrelation" among *tathāgataḡarbha* theory, laudation of the Buddha, and *stūpa* worship.<sup>2</sup> This claim of an essential interrelationship, however, applies only to one part of the *tathāgataḡarbha*-Buddha nature textual corpus, not, in fact, to the text that is the subject of this study. It is true, though, that texts of the devotional *tathāgataḡarbha*-Buddha nature tradition probably contributed in a general way to the development of the devotional Pure Land tradition. A direct link can be seen in Japan, where Shinran stated that the actualization of faith (the faith upon which all else hinges in his Jōdo Shinshū sect) is accomplished in the individual by the action of the Buddha nature.<sup>3</sup>

As appropriated and developed by the four major indigenous schools of Chinese Buddhism, the Buddha nature concept traveled to the other East Asian Buddhist countries, where it played a vital role. In short, the Buddha nature concept is pivotal for all of East Asian Buddhism. It stands at the foundation of East Asian Buddhist concepts of human being and spirituality and informs their understanding of the possibilities and ends of human life. It is an essential piece to the puzzle of East Asian Buddhist thought and practice.

## B. Terms

Any discussion of the term *Buddha nature* must begin with consideration of the term *tathāgataḡarbha*, to which it is closely

linked. The Sanskrit work *tathāgataḡarbha* is a compound of two terms, *tathāgata* and *ḡarbha*. *Tathāgata* is itself understood as a compound word that can be interpreted in two ways: as *tathā + āgata*, “thus come”; or *tathā + gata*, “thus gone.” It is an epithet for a Buddha, who is “thus gone” in realization from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa*, and “thus come” from *nirvāṇa* to *samsāra* to work for the salvation of all. The term *ḡarbha* also has two meanings, embryo and womb. Thus, the term *tathāgataḡarbha* may mean either “embryonic Tathāgata” (i.e., the incipient Buddha) or “womb of the Tathāgata,” understood as that which possesses the essential attributes of the Tathāgata in their fully developed form. The first meaning often is discussed as the “cause” of the Tathāgata, and the latter meaning as the “fruit” of Tathāgata. As “fruit,” it represents the fulfillment of the Buddha Path and is linked with such terms as *dharmakāya*, *nirvāṇa*, perfect wisdom, and realization.

The Chinese decided generally to translate the term *tathāgataḡarbha* in the latter sense as womb of the Tathāgata. In Chinese, the term is rendered *ru-lai-zang* (Japanese *nyoraisō*). The term *ru-lai* exactly renders *tathāgata* as “thus come,” and a *zang* is a storehouse. Thus the Chinese translation shows a preference for conceiving the *tathāgataḡarbha* as the container of the Tathāgata (i.e., the womb) rather than that which is contained (the embryo).

The *Buddha Nature Treatise* (hereafter *BNT*),<sup>4</sup> the focal text of this study, uses a distinctive device to maintain the double meaning of the Sanskrit *tathāgataḡarbha* in Chinese. The author of our text glosses *ru-lai-zang* as (1) the contained, that which is held within the storehouse, and (2) the storehouse as the container (*BNT* 795c–796a). The first meaning represents the understanding of *ḡarbha* as embryo; the *BNT* specifies that that which is contained in the storehouse, the embryo, is ordinary sentient beings. The second meaning represents *ḡarbha* understood as womb qua the fruit of the Buddhist path. This text likens the *tathāgataḡarbha* in this respect to jewels, which represent the Buddha’s merits. These two readings thus retain the bivalent sense of the Sanskrit *ḡarbha*.

The term *Buddha nature* (Chinese *fō xing*, Japanese *bussō*) is closely related in meaning to *tathāgataḡarbha*. However, it is not the Chinese translation of the latter; in fact, *fō xing* is a Chinese term for which the Sanskrit equivalent is not readily apparent. This missing Sanskrit equivalent has been the topic of considerable discussion among

Buddhist scholars.<sup>5</sup> Scholars now generally agree that the Sanskrit equivalent is *buddhadhātu*. Takasaki Jikidō explains *buddhadhātu* as signifying: (1) the nature (*dhātu* = *dharmatā*) of the Buddha, thus equivalent to the term *dharmakāya*, and (2) the cause (*dhātu* = *hetu*) of the Buddha. Moreover, he says, “the link between the cause and the result is the nature (*dhātu*) common to both, which is nothing but the *dharmadhātu*.”<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that this understanding claims for the Sanskrit *buddhadhātu* the bivalence of the Chinese *fo xing*, embracing as it does the sense of *buddhadhātu* as cause of Buddhahood and as Buddhahood in fruition.

In passing we may also mention Whalen Lai’s observation that the Chinese had a predilection for the use of the term *xing*, due to the use of the term *xing* (nature, or human nature) in the Confucian tradition, where it represented the essence or core of human personhood.<sup>7</sup> The Confucian tradition assumed that the essence of a human being was a moral nature and debated the loftiness or depravity of that moral nature. The Buddhist use of the term *xing* in *fo xing*, unlike the Confucian use, is not concerned primarily with the moral nature of the human being, although ethical implications are imbedded in the notion. Like the Confucian use, however, the term *fo xing* refers to what, in the Buddhist view, is essential in the human being. Given the history of the term *xing* in China, it was a natural choice for the translators of Buddhist texts. As the indigenous Chinese Buddhist tradition developed, the term *ru-lai-xang* rapidly faded in prominence, whereas the term *fo xing* grew to become central for the entire tradition.

### C. History

Buddha nature thought is rooted in the Indian Mahāyāna doctrinal tradition. It will be helpful for a proper understanding of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* to place it historically in the context of the history of Yogācāra, *prajñāpāramitā*, Mādhyamika, and *tathāga-tagarbha* thought.

#### The Yogācāra School

An intellectual history of the Yogācāra school cannot be given with any confidence at present. Not only are the authorship and dates of a number of the major Yogācāra works subject to debate and the

lineage of ideas within the school undetermined, the very ideas themselves are subject to a great breadth of interpretation. For this reason, our understanding of even the most basic history and principles of this school is constantly subject to revision.

The Yogācāra school is based upon the works of two brothers, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, fourth-century C.E., and a third figure, Maitreya (or Maitreya-nātha), the historical status of whom is subject to debate but who is regarded as the teacher of Asaṅga.<sup>8</sup> Tibetan tradition ascribes to Maitreya the authorship of five books: the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, and *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* (*Uttara-tantra*). The first three of these are foundational to Yogācāra thought and represent pre-Asaṅgan Yogācāra thought. The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, on the other hand, is concerned with *praññāpāramitā* ideas; and the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* belongs to the *tathāgatagarbha* line.

Asaṅga wrote a number of important Yogācāra works, including the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, *Mahāyānasamgraha*, and *Vajracchedikāpraññāpāramitā-sūtra-sāstra-kārikā*. In addition to his literary works, Asaṅga is famous for converting his younger brother, Vasubandhu, to Mahāyāna and Yogācāra. Following his conversion, Vasubandhu is said to have pored over the Mahāyāna literature, especially the *praññāpāramitā sūtra* literature and to have counted *sūtras* in this category among his favorites.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, the brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, together with the historical or nonhistorical Maitreya, were regarded as the founders of the Yogācāra school.

Vasubandhu's intellectual career had two major chapters. He early composed a commentary on Sarvāstivāda teachings, his famous *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*. After his conversion to Mahāyāna, Vasubandhu wrote voluminously, including *Vimśatikā-kārikā*, *Triṃśikā-kārikā*, *Madhyānta-vibhāga-bhāṣya*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra-bhāṣya*, and *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa*, as well as commentaries on many Mahāyāna *sūtras*, including the *Lotus* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*), *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and *Daśabhūmika*.<sup>10</sup>

Until recently, modern scholars have thought of the two great Indian Mahāyāna schools, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, as inherently opposed to each other. Mādhyamika has been conceived as the *śūnya* school, the school characterized by the relentless critical dialectic of Nāgārjuna that demolishes all metaphysical views. Without substituting a "view" of his own, Nāgārjuna demonstrates that due to the

interdependence and hence mutual relativity of all things (as taught in the early Buddhist *pratītyasamutpāda*), all entities are empty (*śūnya*) of own-being (*svabhāva*)—the ability to “own” their own being, the ability to be themselves by themselves—and hence are lacking in all *independent* identity and characteristics.

As part of his avoidance of establishing any constructive view of his own, Nāgārjuna emphasized that *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is not to be regarded as the Truth, but merely as a tool (*upāya*) to be used for soteriological purposes; that is, the purposes of the Buddhist practitioner striving for liberation. *Śūnyatā* itself is empty and surely not any kind of ultimate. The teaching of emptiness, however, is not nihilistic, because as a teaching it promotes liberation and, moreover, is identical with the principle of *pratītyasamutpāda* or the dependent co-arising of all things. Nevertheless, these balancing points did not prevent the Mādhyamika school’s standpoint from being viewed as negative. Given the school’s emphasis on destructive criticism, its refusal to advocate any “view,” and its espousal of the term *śūnyatā*, this response was inevitable.

In contrast, the Yogācāra school, until recently, has been viewed by modern scholars as espousing a metaphysical view; namely, Idealism. Yogācāra was regarded as teaching that external objects are not real as such, that the category of “objects” is empty, and that what we take to be objects simply are constructions of the mind. In this understanding of Yogācāra, the Mind itself is real; in fact, the only reality. The apparent fact that the advocacy of this view by the Yogācārins could follow on the heels of Nāgārjuna’s destruction of the very possibility of holding metaphysical views at all has puzzled and dismayed many a Buddhist scholar. Recently the scholarly community, however, has determined that this picture of two antithetical Mahāyāna schools has been overstated, that Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, at least in their classical forms, are not in fact mutually incompatible in a philosophical sense.

First, as we have seen, Mādhyamika is not nihilistic and is negative only in the form of its language and dialectic; strictly speaking, its philosophical standpoint is not negative, because negativity is dualistic and *śūnyatā* is the emptying of all dualisms. Thus, regardless of the philosophical status of Yogācāra, Mādhyamika itself cannot occupy a negative pole in any typology of philosophical positions.

Second, most scholars now believe that Yogācāra and Mādhyamika should be seen as differing in emphasis, though not disagreeing on major points. Nagao Gadjin, for example, has long held that classical Mādhyamika and Yogācāra should be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic: the former stressing logic and the dialectic of *śūnyatā*, the latter stressing meditation and the understanding of consciousness. Of course, later Yogācāra and Mādhyamika thinkers did come to argue as adversaries, but such was not the attitude of the founders of the schools. Nagao summarizes the situation in the East Asian context as follows:

In the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition, the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tenets have been understood to be both parallel and opposite to each other. The San-lun-tsun, the Chinese version of the Mādhyamika, was regarded as nihilistic or an Emptiness School, and the Fa-hsiang-tsun, the Vijñānavāda, was regarded as realistic or an Existence School. These traditional but erroneous views have now been revised by most modern scholars. Presently, the Mādhyamika philosophy . . . is believed to be wholly inherited by Maitreya-nātha, Asaṅga, and other Yogācāras. The *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* are equally revered as authentic by both schools, and further, the doctrine of emptiness occupies an important position even in the Yogācāra school.<sup>11</sup>

Third, as Nagao mentions, it is important to bear in mind that the Yogācāra school, in its classical form, does not reject the emptiness teaching of the Mādhyamika school, but on the contrary integrates it in an essential way into its own philosophy. As Nagao stated, the works of Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu, in their original form, have “wholly inherited” the emptiness teachings of the Mādhyamika. Thus the founders of Yogācāra are not the opponents of Mādhyamika, but their successors. We have seen that both Asaṅga and Vasubandhu commented upon *prajñā* texts and that Vasubandhu was so taken by the *prajñāpāramitā* literature that coming to terms with it formed one of the pillars of his Mahāyāna conversion. Their work, and the works attributed to Maitreya, reflect an acceptance of *śūnyatā* as foundational, but with an interpretation and extension of that thought in a fresh direction.

With *śūnyatā* at its roots, what are we to make of the view that Yogācāra teaches an Idealism that regards objects as false and the mind as real? In brief, we must recognize the existence of more than



one view within Yogācāra. Minimally, we must distinguish between three chapters of Yogācāra thought: (1) the original teachings of Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu; and the interpretations of the original teachings made by (2) Dharmapāla and Xuan-zang and (3) Paramārtha.

Dharmapāla and Xuan-zang's work may properly be called *Idealism*. The importance of Xuan-zang in the East Asian tradition is one reason why the label of *Idealism* has been attached to the Yogācāra school as a whole. However, the idea that the Yogācāra school as a whole may simply be labeled *Idealist* is mistaken or misleading in two senses. First, it is a moot point whether Idealism is present in the texts of Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu in their original form. Contemporary scholars line up on both sides of this issue. Second, it is definitely not the case that the Yogācāra of Paramārtha (Zhen-di, the translator of the present *Buddha Nature Treatise*) is Idealism.

Those scholars who argue that Vasubandhu's views are not Idealist generally agree on an alternative view as to what is his philosophy of mind. Ueda summarizes his understanding as follows:

*Vikalpa* or *viññānapariñāma* refers to the consciousness of an ordinary man, i.e., a man who is not yet enlightened. The object which is known through this *viññānapariñāma* is not a thing as it really is, but rather a conceptualized thing. In other words, this mind does not grasp the object as it really is, but rather as a concept or name. In truth, he does not take real existence itself as the object, but instead takes the concept as the object and thinks that he is taking real existence as the object, not realizing what he has done. . . . In contrast to this, the mind of the Yogacara philosopher is called *praññā* or *nirvikalpa jñāna* (wisdom "apart" or different in its nature from *vikalpa* or *viññāna*). This mind does not know an object through conception, but rather it knows directly the object as it really exists (*yathābhūtārtha*).<sup>12</sup>

Janice Willis agrees with this assessment as applying to both Vasubandhu and Asaṅga:

[T]he *Viṃśatikā* [of Vasubandhu] illuminates the ordinary being's chief delusion, namely, his mistaking the commonly perceived universe of appearance to exist as *perceived* rather than as a universe distorted by conceptualization of all sorts. Indeed, this overlay of constructive imaginations (*kalpanā*, *viññapti*, *vikalpa*) is all that we commonly contact

and cognize. We do not see the thing as it really is; we see only a conceptualized thing. And this is precisely Vasubandhu's point (as it had been Asaṅga's also). All that we commonly perceive is *viññaptimātra*. It is only "representation" or "just conceptualization." And because of this, it is not ultimate reality.<sup>13</sup>

Whether this assessment fairly represents Vasubandhu's corpus as a whole will continue to be debated by the scholarly community. I am confident, however, that this summary does represent the Vasubandhu that Paramārtha understands himself to be transmitting to China. In other words, what "consciousness-only" means in Vasubandhu, as understood by Paramārtha, is a strong version of something we realize in a weak way in contemporary Western psychology and philosophy: Ordinary human consciousness does not have access to a purely "objective" reality. Our experiential world, the world we perceive and in which we live, is shaped in all moments of ordinary consciousness by what we project—our expectations, fears, memories, confusions, suspicions, beliefs, and so forth—onto what is given to us. We do not experience reality; we experience our personally shaped (and consequently distorted) perceptions of reality.

Unlike Western thought, however, the *raison-d'être* of the Yogācāra school is the belief that it is possible, and ultimately necessary, by means of meditation to effect a revolution in the manner of one's being conscious such that one no longer lives in a distorted perception of reality but can actually perceive reality As It Is. This is the aim of Yogācāra practice; it is toward this that Vasubandhu's writings, as understood by Paramārtha, point. This also is a prominent theme of the *BNT*.

The main points here, moreover, are in harmony with the emptiness teachings of Mādhyamika. As part of the realization of reality As It Is, this understanding of Yogācāra includes a realization of the falseness of the dualistic split between subject and object that ordinary consciousness believes is real. We have seen earlier that "subjectivity" participates in what we ordinarily take to be the "objective" and from this follows the emptiness of the "objective"; that is, the deep dependence of the "objective" upon the "subjective." The same applies, in reverse, to the status of the "subjective." When one realizes the emptiness of the "objective," realization of the emptiness of the "subjective" follows in its wake. If there is no "object" to perceive, there can be no "subject" perceiving. Hence the

categories subject and object are mutually dependent and as such demonstrate each other's emptiness. Again, Janice Willis summarizes: "far from advocating the superiority of thought over objects, Asaṅga's explication of śūnyatā and the Middle Path involves the cessation of both subject and object, both apprehender and thing apprehended."<sup>14</sup> We shall meet this idea again in the *BNT*. The dualistic distinction between "subject" and "object" itself is false; freedom from experience in the form of this distinction constitutes access to experience of reality As It Is. This is subject-object nondualism.

So far I have emphasized the common ground shared by Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, their shared foundation in śūnya thought, but it is obvious that the two schools also differ on this very subject. This difference can be summarized in two points. First, for pedagogical reasons, Yogācāra authors did not like the negative form of Mādhyamika. In their experience this negativity frightened or demoralized people. Since all Buddhist forms are *upāya* anyway, it made no sense to espouse a form that drove people from the Dharma when a more appealing form easily could be used. This sentiment is abundantly clear in many Yogācāra texts. Second, and more substantively, Yogācāra authors believed that the Mādhyamika version of Mahāyāna did not say everything it could say; it was incomplete. Even today one can read Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* and debate forever about whether, for Nāgārjuna, Buddhist practice gives access to reality As It Is. The *Kārikā* themselves give us no basis for deciding yes or no. This is a mark of the perfection of the *Kārikā*. A literary or logical perfection, however, is not sufficient for most religious practitioners. Yogācāra authors felt it important to affirm the existential and spiritual benefits that resulted from the practice of their disciplines. For these reasons, they took up the language of Thusness (*tathatā*) and reality As It Is (*yathābhūta*), being careful to note that these pointed in the direction of the experiential fulfillment of emptiness, not its negation.

### **Tathāgatagarbha Literary History**

The *tathāgatagarbha* literature, like the *prajñāpāramitā* literature, is not the property of any identifiable school in Indian Buddhism. In the former we have a body of texts introducing and expanding upon a similar theme, the idea that "all sentient beings

posses the *tathāgatagarbha*.” Although this theme and the set of concerns associated with it are readily identifiable in the texts, we cannot identify the authors of the texts nor even, with any specificity, the group among whom the texts circulated at the time of their composition. The four most important early *tathāgatagarbha sūtras* are the *Tathāgatagarbha sūtra*, *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-sūtra*, *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva-nirdeśa*, and *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*.<sup>15</sup> These texts were composed in India between approximately 200 and 350 C.E.<sup>16</sup> That puts them before the time of Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu.

The *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* may have been the first of the *tathāgatagarbha* texts; it introduces the idea that “all sentient beings possess the *tathāgatagarbha*” in a metaphorical and philosophically unsophisticated manner. The text consists of nine examples that represent the relationship between the *tathāgatagarbha* and the adventitious defilements that conceal it. Thus the *tathāgatagarbha* is compared to grain covered by the husk, a treasure buried under the ground, a Buddha statue wrapped in a rag, and so on; where the defilements are the husk, the ground, the rag—whatever covers or conceals that which is precious. Although these images are not philosophically developed, as images they are appealing to the imagination and convey the basic idea of the universal immanence of Buddhahood that nonetheless is experientially unavailable to ordinary persons.

Other texts built on this basic idea, and sometimes on the images themselves, in a much more sophisticated manner. The *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-sūtra*, in which Queen Śrīmālā instructs the assembly, speaks in both a devotional and a philosophically astute manner of a *tathāgatagarbha* conceived in terms of positive attributes. It is critical of a purely negative understanding of *śūnyatā* and teaches that the *tathāgatagarbha* is both *śūnya* (with respect to all defilements) and *aśūnya*, “not-empty” (with respect to the perfection of the *buddhadharmas*). The *garbha* possesses the four *guṇapāramitā*, or perfections, of permanence, bliss, self, and purity. It is the intrinsically pure mind that is concealed by defilement. This relationship between the intrinsically pure mind and the defilement that conceals it is incomprehensible, understood only by a Buddha. Ultimately, the *garbha* is identified with the *dharmakāya* of the Tathāgata; thus only a Buddha attains *nirvāṇa*. This kind of elevation and laudation of the Buddha and his attributes is a popular theme in

much of the *tathāgataḡarbha* literature and often is seen as an important foundation of Mahāyāna devotionalism.

The *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva-nirdeśa* is a short text with a simply stated but paradoxical theme: the absolute identification of *tathāgataḡarbha*, *sattvadhātu* (the totality of all sentient beings in their essential nature), and *dharmakāya* or *dharmadhātu*. The text emphasizes that in order to become free of wrong views, one thing must be known; namely, the single *dharmadhātu*. The latter is identified with the *tathāgataḡarbha* and the *dharmakāya*. This *dharmakāya*, when bound by defilements, “drifting on the waves of *saṃsāra*,” is called *sentient beings*. This same *dharmakāya*, when filled with repugnance for the suffering of *saṃsāra*, in putting aside all desires, practicing the ten *pāramitā*, embracing the 84,000 Dharma gates, and cultivating *bodhisattva* practices, is called *bodhisattvas*. Again, this same *dharmakāya*, when free from all defilements and utterly pure, is called *Tathāgata*. Thus the *dharmakāya* is the realm of sentient beings, and the realm of sentient beings is the *dharmakāya*. These are two names with one meaning.<sup>17</sup> Hence, whereas the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* emphasizes the transcendence of the *tathāgataḡarbha* in the Buddha, this text emphasizes the immanence of *tathāgataḡarbha* in ordinary sentient beings. These, of course, are not contradictory positions but complementary emphases, given the basic *tathāgataḡarbha* doctrine of concealed immanence; that is, ontological immanence joined with existential transcendence.

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* is a Mahāyāna alternative to the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* of early Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> The former text’s teachings on the Buddha nature exerted enormous influence on the history of Buddha nature thought in China, especially the question of the universality of future Buddhahood. The Chinese debate on the question was framed by the fifth century translations of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* by Dharmakṣema and Fa-xian (Fa-hsien). The first translation, that of Fa-xian, indicated that the *icchantika* would not attain Buddhahood. Despite the authority of this scripture, the great monk Dao-sheng (Tao-sheng) doggedly insisted upon universal Buddhahood and consequently was ostracized from the Sangha. He later was vindicated and elevated to prominence when the much longer translation by Dharmakṣema was seen to include passages supporting universal Buddhahood, even for the *icchantika*.<sup>19</sup> With this resolved,

Chinese scholars settled into careful and extensive study of the text's teachings about what Buddha nature is.

Despite this important historical role, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* does not present any important innovation in *tathāgata* theory comparable to the three texts already discussed. As we have seen, it tends to be rather unsystematic and seems to speak with many voices. This very imprecision, however, made the text a fruitful one for later students and commentators, who were obliged to create their own order and bring it to the text. Substantively, the text emphasizes the eternity of the Buddha, implicitly criticizing the idea that *nirvāṇa* means extinction, and linking this belief with the idea of the *tathāgata*.<sup>20</sup> Within this framework, however, the text speaks of Buddha nature in so many different ways that Chinese scholars created a variety of lists of types of Buddha nature that they discerned in the course of their studies of the text.<sup>21</sup>

The most important innovation of the text in the context of the development of *tathāgata*-Buddha nature thought is its linking of the term *buddhadhātu* or *tathāgatadhātu*, which appears to be used for the first time in this text, with the *tathāgata*.<sup>22</sup> We saw earlier that the Chinese term *fó xíng* best translates the Sanskrit *buddhadhātu* or *tathāgatadhātu*, so this is a crucial point for Chinese Buddha nature thought.

These are the four most important *tathāgata* *sūtras* of the early period. This early tradition is summarized by an important *sāstra*, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, also known as the *Mahāyānōttaratantraśāstra* or simply *Uttaratantra*. In the West this text is perhaps the best known of the early *tathāgata* texts (with the arguable exception of the *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra*, which has received recent attention), having been translated into English and studied by both Obermiller and Takasaki.<sup>23</sup> Modern scholarship has revised our beliefs about the text of the *Ratnagotra*. As we have seen, Tibetan tradition attributes the *Ratnagotra* to Maitreya, as one of the Five Books of the latter. On the basis of his studies, Takasaki leaves the attribution of the *Ratnagotra*'s verses to Maitreya intact (though unsure) but names Sāramati as the author of the prose commentary of the text.<sup>24</sup> He dates the text as we have it to the early fifth-century C.E. and places the verses sometime between Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga.<sup>25</sup> Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions of the text all exist, though the Sanskrit text was discovered only recently, with the edited version published in 1950.<sup>26</sup>

Although the basic verses are from Maitreya, the *Ratnagotra* lacks characteristic Yogācāra teachings and is a text of the *tathāgatagarbha* group. The *Ratnagotra* quotes extensively from the first three *tathāgatagarbha sūtras* listed earlier and less extensively from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. It does quote two Yogācāra texts, *Mahāyānābhīdharmasūtra* and *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, but without referring to their specifically Yogācāra teachings.<sup>27</sup> In general it is a summary and systematization of then-extant *tathāgatagarbha* thought.

The *Ratnagotra* is noted for its discussion of the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and clear elevation of the Buddha as the Supreme Refuge as compared to the Dharma and Sangha. Like the *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra* this manifests the tendency of some *tathāgatagarbha* literature to provide a foundation for Mahāyāna devotionism. There is a glorification of the Buddha followed by a discussion of the importance of faith at the end of the text.

The *Ratnagotra* also is important for its systematization of *tathāgatagarbha* discourse around ten characteristics in terms of which the *tathāgatagarbha* is discussed. These ten characteristics reappear in the *BNT* together with considerable additions.<sup>28</sup> As found in the *Ratnagotra*, they are: own-nature (essential nature of the *tathāgatagarbha*); *tathāgatagarbha* as cause (of purification, i.e., realization); *tathāgatagarbha* as result (of purification, i.e., the four *gūṇapāramitā*); function of *tathāgatagarbha* (i.e., the urge towards realization); yōga or union (with the Buddha's qualities of purity, wisdom, and compassion); manifestation (of the *tathāgatagarbha* in various classes of beings); states of manifestation (of the *tathāgatagarbha* among ordinary persons, *bodhisattvas*, and the Tathāgata); all-pervadingness (of the *tathāgatagarbha* in these three states); unchangeability (of the *tathāgatagarbha* in these three states); and nondifferentiation (of the *tathāgatagarbha* and *dharma-kāya*, Tathāgata, *nirvāṇa*).<sup>29</sup>

These are the early, important texts of *tathāgatagarbha* thought. We need now to consider the relationship of these ideas to the idea of emptiness as found in the *prajñāpāramitā* literature, as we did with the Yogācāra tradition. As with the Yogācāra, we will see that *tathāgatagarbha* thought, at least as it is found in the *Ratnagotra* and closely related texts, is a successor to *śūnya* thought, a

development from within this tradition, rather than an antagonistic opponent standing without.

In his *Hannya Shisōshi (History of Prajñā Thought)*, Yamaguchi Susumu traces the development of Buddhist thought from *pratītya-samutpāda* and *sūnyatā* to the *tathāgata-garbha* thought of the *Ratnagotra*.<sup>30</sup> He argues for a single tradition in which the Buddha speaks of *pratītya-samutpāda*; Nāgārjuna extends this idea to *sūnyatā*; and the *Ratnagotra* extends the same idea to *tathāgata-garbha*. The *Ratnagotra* itself invites us to see this continuity. The text first quotes the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* to the effect that *tathāgata-garbha* is not accessible to those outside of *sūnya* realization and then proceeds to claim its *tathāgata-garbha* teachings to be a corrective to the errors of those fledgling *bodhisattvas* who have misunderstood *sūnya* teachings in a nihilistic or absolutistic manner.<sup>31</sup> This means that realization of emptiness is a necessary precondition to realization of *tathāgata-garbha*. However, a one-sidedly negative perspective betrays an incorrect apprehension of emptiness that can be corrected by realization of *tathāgata-garbha*. The role assigned *sūnyatā* here is much like that assigned it in the Yogācāra evaluation: *Sūnyatā* is essential, but must not be understood in a negative sense (and we may safely conclude on the basis of all this concern that it frequently was so understood).

Like the Yogācāra authors, the author of the *Ratnagotra* feels even this is not enough; there is something positive to be realized when one's vision has been cleared by *sūnyatā*; namely, the *tathāgata-garbha-dharmakāya*, resplendent with the four *guṇapāramitā* of eternity, bliss, self, and purity, identical to *nirvāṇa* and realization of the Supreme Truth. Thus the *sūnya* teachings as they stand in the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings are true but incomplete. They require further elucidation, which the *Ratnagotra* provides. This is reflected in the alternative name of the *Ratnagotra*, namely *Uttaratantra*. The *Ratnagotra* assumes the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings as the *pūrva* or prior teachings; it itself is *uttara*, in the sense of both subsequent and superior.<sup>32</sup> Thus the *Ratnagotra's* *tathāgata-garbha* teaching does not negate but extends *prajñā* teachings. It both corrects the misunderstanding of *sūnya* as nihilistic and completes the message that *sūnyatā* merely begins by naming the superlatives that *sūnyatā* prepares the mind to perceive.

Yamaguchi's analysis of the relationship between *prajñā* thought



and the *tathāgataḡarbha* thought of the *Ratnagotra* is persuasive to me for one reason: my reading of the *Buddha Nature Treatise*. This text, which closely follows the *Ratnagotra* in many respects, states in unmistakable terms: “Buddha nature is the Thusness revealed by the dual emptiness of person and things. . . . If one does not speak of Buddha nature, then one does not understand emptiness” (787b). One may argue whether the authors of the *Ratnagotra* and the *BNT* succeed in their portrayal of *tathāgataḡarbha*–Buddha nature thought as the extension and fulfillment of *prajñā* thought, fully compatible with the latter. But that this is the intention of these authors is beyond dispute. I hope to show in the present study that the author of the *BNT* succeeds.

### *Yogācāra-Tathāgataḡarbha Thought*

The historical relationship between Yogācāra and *tathāgataḡarbha* lines of thought has not yet been settled. It is clear that the border between the two sets of ideas was not absolute, and that there was a definite overlap between them. On the other hand, it is also clear that the two sets of ideas cannot simply be regarded as the property of a single school, as quite distinctive, sometimes incompatible ideas may be found in some of the texts of the two groups.

One view has it that what would come to be known separately as Yogācāra and *tathāgataḡarbha* ideas first developed together in a single community. Evidence for this view can be seen in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, an early Yogācāra text attributed to Maitreya, in which reference to the *tathāgataḡarbha* can be found. This view holds that classical Yogācāra thought (in Asaṅga and Vasubandhu) developed out of this line, emphasizing the formulation of a critical philosophy of consciousness. Later still, Yogācāra commentators and translators tended to fall into two categories, representing the divergent emphases within Yogācāra history. Thus Paramārtha emphasized the affinity of Yogācāra and *tathāgataḡarbha* ideas that always had been part of the tradition, whereas Dharmapāla and Xuan-zang emphasized the critical philosophy of consciousness, which had been part of the tradition from the time of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.<sup>33</sup>

Another view sees Yogācāra-*tathāgataḡarbha* thought as a syncretism of two originally distinct lines. In this view, though the

identities of the authors and earliest enthusiasts for *tathāgataḡarbha* thought are unknown, it was a portion of the Yogācāra community who subsequently took up the *tathāgataḡarbha* texts, studied them, and ultimately combined *tathāgataḡarbha* ideas with their own Yogācāra philosophy. Thus, some time after the composition of the exclusively *tathāgataḡarbha* texts discussed earlier, a number of syncretic Yogācāra-*tathāgataḡarbha* texts were written.<sup>34</sup> Prominent examples of such texts include the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*,<sup>35</sup> the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna (Da Sheng Qi Xin Lun)*, and the present *Buddha Nature Treatise*.

This is not to say that all later Yogācārins embraced *tathāgataḡarbha* thought. The school of Dharmapāla and Xuan-zang tended to keep its distance from *tathāgataḡarbha* ideas. This school maintained the *gotra* theory, according to which different beings had differing potentials for spiritual attainment, depending upon the nature of the “seeds” or *bīja* stored in the *ālaya-vijñāna* and responsible for shaping the nature of their subsequent births. In this view each being belonged to one of the five *gotra*, fixing his or her spiritual destination as Tathāgata, *pratyekabuddha*, *arhat*, worldly rebirth (*icchantika* or *atyantika*), or indeterminate. The latter *gotra*, “was undoubtedly created to fit the *ekayāna* [One Vehicle] teaching of the *buddhadhātu* [Buddha nature] into the *trīyāna* [Three Vehicles] model, for it was maintained that the teaching of the Buddha that all beings possess the *buddhadhātu* was intended for the edification of those who belonged to this indeterminate *gotra*.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, though this teaching incorporates *tathāgataḡarbha* doctrine in a minor way, it is an obvious patchwork of inherently contradictory ideas. Another area of incompatibility can be found in this school’s emphasis upon the idea of an impure mind infected with unwholesome seeds that must be uprooted one by one through an indefinitely long period of yoga practice. This view is entirely alien to the *tathāgataḡarbha*–Buddha nature emphasis upon an innately pure mind that needs only to manifest itself.<sup>37</sup>

Outside of this stream represented by Dharmapāla were other Yogācārins whose views put them in a position to welcome consideration of *tathāgataḡarbha* thought. Who were the authors of the most important Yogācāra-*tathāgataḡarbha* texts is difficult to say, but we do know the identities of a number of individuals who translated into Chinese some combination of Yogācāra,

*tathāgataḡarbha*, or *Yogācāra-tathāgataḡarbha* texts. These men, Ratnamati (fifth–sixth-centuries), Guṇabhadra (394–468), Bodhiruci (sixth-century), and Paramārtha (499–569), demonstrated in their life’s work that they highly valued this double stream.<sup>38</sup>

Grosnick isolates three factors in non-Dharmapāla *Yogācāra* that were sufficiently compatible with *tathāgataḡarbha* ideas to pave the way for syncretism.<sup>39</sup> All three are central features of *Yogācāra* thought, and all are prominent in the *BNT*. The first is the belief that *śūnya* teachings leave themselves open to a nihilistic misunderstanding and are incomplete as found in *praññā* and *Mādhyamika* texts. As discussed earlier, *Yogācāra* and *tathāgataḡarbha* thinking on this point is remarkably close: They agree that it is vital to convey that Buddhist practice not only frees one from delusion but also frees one to realize Truth, Truth that is not nihilistic but affirmative of that which one will discover.

The second feature of *Yogācāra* that Grosnick cites as opening it to *tathāgataḡarbha* thought is subject-object nondualism. In *Yogācāra*, subject-object nondualism is a feature of Thusness (*tathatā*), and Thusness is an expression for what one realizes at the end of the Path. It is in this affirmative function that both subject-object nondualism and Thusness are identified with Buddha nature in the *BNT*.

Finally, the *Yogācāra* doctrine of *trisvabhāva*, the three natures, also appears prominently in a number of syncretic texts, including the *BNT*. This doctrine in its *Yogācāra* context explains the relationship between delusion and enlightenment. *Parikalpita-svabhāva* is delusion experience, *pariniṣpanna-svabhāva* is enlightenment experience, or seeing things as they are. *Paratantra-svabhāva*, the dependent nature, is the given: When seen through delusion, it is *parikalpita*; when seen without delusion, it is *pariniṣpanna*. Because the relationship between delusion and enlightenment is a weak point of *tathāgataḡarbha* thought (the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* is typical of *tathāgataḡarbha* literature in avoiding this issue by stating “only a Buddha understands this”), the *trisvabhāva* doctrine strengthened *tathāgataḡarbha* thought by supplementing its account of delusion and enlightenment. Moreover, used in this way, the *trisvabhāva* doctrine integrates perfectly with the dual *Yogācāra-tathāgataḡarbha* insistence upon confirming the positive nature of what one attains through Buddhist practice: One

attains Thusness (*tathatā*), or in other words, *pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*.

These three points are prominent in the *BNT*. However, the most familiar syncretic texts, the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* and the *Awakening of Faith*, are better known for amalgamating the Yogācāra concept of *ālaya-vijñāna*, the “storehouse consciousness,” and the *tathāgata-garbha*. This association, however, is not a straightforward matter. In the *Awakening*, the *tathāgata-garbha* is given at least two roles. First, *ālaya-vijñāna* and the *tathāgata-garbha* are spoken of side by side in connection with the production of *saṃsāra*: “On the basis of the *tathāgata-garbha* there is the mind of production and destruction. *Ālaya-vijñāna* is the name for the harmonious joining of ‘nonproduction-and-nondestruction’ with ‘production-and-destruction’ such that they are neither one nor different.”<sup>40</sup> Later in the text, after listing the superlative attributes of Thusness (*tathatā*), we are told that, because the latter possesses these attributes, it is identified with both *tathāgata-garbha* and *dharmakāya*.<sup>41</sup> It seems, then, that in this text when *tathāgata-garbha* is identified with *tathatā* its innately pure nature that is full of superlative attributes is connoted, whereas when it is identified with *ālaya-vijñāna* its immanence and participation in the world of *saṃsāra* and delusion is indicated. The *Awakening* is so terse, however, as to leave the exact relationship among *ālaya-vijñāna*, *tathatā*, and *tathāgata-garbha* in need of further interpretation by the commentators.

Although the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* is encyclopedic rather than terse, its account of the relationship between *tathāgata-garbha* and *ālaya-vijñāna* also is ambivalent. In some passages it teaches a straightforward identification of *tathāgata-garbha* and *ālaya-vijñāna*, as follows:

Mahāmati, the Tathāgata-garbha holds within it the cause for both good and evil, and by it all the forms of existence are produced. . . [W]hen a revulsion [or turning-back] has not taken place in the Ālayavijñāna known under the name of Tathāgata-garbha, there is no cessation of the seven evolving Vijñānas. . . For this reason, Mahāmati, let those Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas who are seeking after the exalted truth effect the purification of the Tathāgata-garbha which is known as Ālayavijñāna.<sup>42</sup>

Such a passage as this, in which *tathāgata-garbha* and *ālaya-vijñāna* are identified, seems to effect this identification by canceling out the