

## Rise of the *Uttaratantra* in Tibet

### Early Kadam Scholars Revitalize the Newly Discovered Indian Exegesis

#### Introduction

The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw the revitalization of Buddhist culture in the form of Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts from India, establishment of monasteries and temples in Tibet, and scholastic study of texts such as the *Five Treatises of Maitreya*, as well as Madhyamaka texts by Indian masters such as Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Bhāviveka. It was in this cultural milieu that the *Uttaratantra* was first translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit by several Tibetan translators, including Ngok.<sup>1</sup> Not only was Ngok one of the translators, but he was also an early commentator on the Indian treatise. He was born into an aristocratic family and traveled to Kashmir, India, in 1076, where he studied for seventeen years, receiving instruction on the *Uttaratantra*. Upon his return to Tibet, he became the second abbot of Sangpu monastery<sup>2</sup> and contributed greatly to the study of the middle way, perfection of wisdom through his commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, and Buddhist epistemological literature.<sup>3</sup> He is believed to have extensively taught and written on the three middle way treatises, notably, the *Madhyamakālaṅkāra* by Śāntarakṣita, the *Madhyamakāloka* by Kamalaśīla, and the *Satyadvayavibhaṅga* by Jñānagarbha. These Indian treatises became instrumental for what would later be referred to as the Svātantrika Madhyamaka with which Ngok and Chapa are associated. His contribution to the field of Buddhist epistemology is equally great as he is credited with founding the “new epistemology” (*tshad ma gsar ma*) through his translations and commentaries on Indian Buddhist works on epistemology.

Ngok was not the only commentator on the *Uttaratantra* from that time period. Chapa,<sup>4</sup> from the same monastery, also wrote a commentary on the treatise. He also ascended to the abbatial seat of Sangpu monastery and made valuable contributions to the study of Buddhist philosophy and epistemology. Unlike Ngok, Chapa never went to India to study under Indian scholars, nor did he know Sanskrit.<sup>5</sup> Chapa interpreted Indian treatises such as the *Uttaratantra* according to Ngok's system because of his affiliation with Ngok and Sangpu monastery. As Leonard van der Kuijp argued: "Phya-pa [that is, Chapa], following the trends established by the Rngog-lugs [that is, Ngok's system], was quite active in interpreting the Svātantrika-Madhyamaka doctrines."<sup>6</sup>

As a defender of Svātantrika Madhyamaka, Chapa became the earliest Tibetan critic of Candrakīrti's thoughts regarding middle-way philosophy and had to defend his system against the followers of Candrakīrti, notably, Jayānanda (ca. twelfth century), a staunch proponent of what would be later called Prāsaṅgika Madyamaka.<sup>7</sup> Jayānanda is arguably the first scholar who indicated that the *Uttaratantra* is provisional within the Tibetan intellectual landscape.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the two Sangpu scholars praise the *Uttaratantra* as the most definitive and authoritative treatise. Ngok claims that the *Uttaratantra* is the only text that is definitive among the *Five Treatises of Maitreya*, while Chapa refers to the *Uttaratantra* as "the secret of the Mahāyāna."

While the two Sangpu scholars were formidable in disseminating the *Uttaratantra* in Tibet in this early period of the treatise, several other prominent masters from the same era also interpreted the treatise as definitive. Tsen Khawoché and Zu Gawé Dorjé, two lineage holders of the contemplative tradition of the *Uttaratantra*, are believed to have written commentaries on the text that interpreted the treatise in a positive manner, but their commentaries are no longer available. Drolungpa Lodrö Jungné (*gro lung pa blo gros 'byung gnas*, b. eleventh century), one of the four disciples of Ngok and a teacher of Chapa, is believed to have written a commentary<sup>9</sup> to the *Uttaratantra* that accorded with Ngok's presentation of the treatise.<sup>10</sup>

In his *Ornament of the Precious Liberation* (*thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*),<sup>11</sup> Gampopa (*sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen*, 1079–1153), the famed disciple of the most celebrated Tibetan meditation master Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*, 1052–1135), repeatedly cites the *Uttaratantra* as a central textual authority, and he does so in ways that appear to

accept its doctrinal expositions straight-forwardly as expressive of the ultimate truth. Not surprisingly, buddha-nature is mentioned as the first point, the causal ground, in his *Ornament of the Precious Liberation*. Furthermore, as Kongtrül states, “Lord Gampopa says that ‘The treatise for our Mahāmudrā tradition is *Mahayanottaratantrasāstra* [that is, the *Uttaratantra*] composed by Bhagavan Maitreya.”<sup>12</sup>

Mabja (*rma bya byang chub brtson 'grus*, d. 1185), a prominent disciple of Chapa who later went on to study with his master’s opponent,<sup>13</sup> states in his commentary on the *Madhyamakakārikā* that the *Uttaratantra* and Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvātāra* interpret the last-wheel teachings from a Madhyamaka perspective.<sup>14</sup>

In his *Trees of Clear Realization* (*mngon rtogs ljon shing*), Drakpa Gyeltsen (*grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1147–1216), one of the luminaries of the Sakya tradition, also demonstrates that the *Uttaratantra* is definitive:

So, if all sentient beings have the buddha-essence then would it not contradict [the notion] of the cut-off buddha-nature mentioned in the *Sūtralaṅkāra*? It is not contradictory because the [latter remark] is a provisional statement from the Cittamātra system, whereas here [in the Madhyamaka system] cut off buddha-nature is not possible, as the *Uttaratantra* demonstrates.<sup>15</sup>

It is quite evident that the *Uttaratantra* assumed a significant textual authority for many prominent Tibetan masters from this early period. It is to the two earliest extant commentaries—Ngok’s *Condensed Meaning of the Uttaratantra* (*theg chen rgyud bla’i don bsdus pa*)<sup>16</sup> and Chapa’s *Illumination of the Meaning of the Uttaratantra* (*theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma’i bstan bcos kyi tshig dang don gyi cha rgya cher bsnyad pa phra ba’i don gsal ba*)<sup>17</sup>—that I now turn.

### Ngok and Chapa on the Pervasive Nature of the Buddha-Body

Both Ngok and Chapa offer an interesting interpretation of a well-known verse from the *Uttaratantra* that demonstrates that all beings have tathāgata-essence because of three reasons. The verse reads: “All sentient beings always have the buddha-essence because 1) the buddha-body radiates [to all sentient beings], 2) the suchness [of a

buddha and sentient beings] is indivisible, and 3) the buddha-nature exists [in all sentient beings].”<sup>18</sup> In their commentaries, the Sangpu scholars argue that tathāgata-essence found in that verse must be understood in terms of the second reason, which is that suchness is indivisible, without any dualistic entity. Tathāgata-essence must not be connected to either the first reason—the notion that the resultant buddha-body pervades all beings—or the third reason which is that causal buddha-nature exists in all beings. Therefore, tathāgata-essence is neither the resultant buddha-body nor the causal buddha-nature, rather it is the ultimate nature of suchness.

On the first reason, Ngok argues:

With respect to this [the notion that buddha-body pervades all sentient beings], the tathāgata stands true [in that buddha-body is fully enlightened, but the notion that] sentient beings possess tathāgata-essence [in this context] is [purely] a designation. Since beings have the lot to achieve buddha-body it is said that it pervades [all sentient beings].<sup>19</sup>

Ngok interprets the first reason—the buddha-body pervades all sentient beings—to merely demonstrate that sentient beings have the potential to achieve buddha-body,<sup>20</sup> not so much to show that they have tathāgata-essence from the perspective of the first reason. Kamalaśīla (eighth century), one of Ngok’s influences, also holds a similar position in his *Madhyamakāloka*. The Indian master argues, “That all sentient beings have the tathāgata-essence inevitably shows that all are suitable to achieve the supreme complete buddhahood.”<sup>21</sup>

Following in the footsteps of both Kamalaśīla and Ngok, Chapa also shows:

The suchness of the purified state is the complete buddha-body, the resultant dharma-body. [The term] “radiates” means being pervaded [by dharma-body]. It is also pervasive in the sense that all sentient beings have the capacity to achieve it. With respect to this, the tathāgata is the actual [buddha], but as the essence of sentient beings it is imputed. Because [sentient beings] have the good fortune to achieve dharma-body, dharma-body is designated as pervading [sentient beings].<sup>22</sup>

Hence, both Ngok and Chapa argue that sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence on the basis of the first reason because they do not have the purified enlightened body of a buddha, rather they have the potential to achieve an enlightened state.

However, they agree that sentient beings have the tathāgata-essence from the perspective of the second reason, which is that suchness is indivisible or nondual. As Ngok states, "That both a tathāgata and ordinary beings have [tathāgata] essence is actually the case."<sup>23</sup> The first reason is true only for enlightened beings, but only designated for ordinary beings; the second reason applies to both enlightened beings and sentient beings. Chapa also comments on the second reason as follows:

[The passage] "because there is no distinction with respect to suchness" [shows] the essence of suchness, the nature of the absence of distinction with respect to emptiness. It is both the essence of a tathāgata and the essence of sentient beings in actuality. This is because the suchness that is devoid of natural defilements [but] endowed with adventitious defilements is the buddha's entity and [it] exists in sentient beings.<sup>24</sup>

Chapa uses language similar to Ngok's to explain the second reason for the existence of tathāgata-essence in sentient beings. Therefore, both Kadam commentators assert that only the second reason establishes an actual link between enlightened beings and sentient beings in terms of their ultimate nature.

In regard to the last reason, Ngok states:

Since the seed of wisdom and compassion, the predisposition for virtue, [which is] the cause for achieving the state of completely pure suchness, is the cause of a tathāgata, it is imputed as tathāgata. [On the other hand,] it is a fact that it is the essence of sentient beings.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Chapa argues, "[The passage] that 'because buddha-nature exists [every one has the tathāgata-essence]' shows that since the cause for achieving [pure] suchness, the virtuous predisposition, the seed of wisdom and compassion is the cause of tathāgata,

[buddha-nature is merely] designated by tathāgata, but it is indeed the case that it is the essence of sentient beings."<sup>26</sup> Essentially both Ngok and Chapa argue that the third reason cannot establish a link between enlightened beings and sentient beings in terms of their ultimate nature because it is only a characteristic of sentient beings, but not of enlightened beings.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, the two Kadam masters argue that sentient beings do not have the tathāgata-essence from the perspective of either the first reason of the resultant essence or the third reason of the causal essence. Rather it is the second reason that becomes the central point for establishing the link between enlightenment and sentient beings. It is the middle reason that shows that sentient beings and tathāgatas are the same in their ultimate nature.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the only thing that sentient beings have in common with enlightened beings is the ultimate nature of their minds.

### Ngok and Chapa on Definitive or Provisional Nature in the *Uttaratantra*

Given that the two Sangpu scholars say that the tathāgata-essence is the same as suchness or ultimate truth, they assert that the *Uttaratantra* is a treatise explaining the definitive meaning of the Buddha's teachings. Ngok states, "There are two types of scriptural Dharma: teachings of ultimate truth and teachings of conventional truth."<sup>29</sup> According to him, the Buddha's teachings either explicate the ultimate truth of emptiness or the conventional phenomena. He elaborates on this by saying, "The teachings of the ultimate are like honey because they contain the same flavorful taste. The teachings of conventional phenomena are like fruit because they come in a variety that pervades everywhere."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Ngok clearly argues that the scriptures that explain the ultimate truth of phenomena, the emptiness of inherent existence, are definitive, whereas the teachings that elaborate on the multifaceted aspects of conventional phenomena are provisional.

Chapa also asserts that the *Uttaratantra* is a definitive work. He uses phrases such as "the supreme meaning" (*mchog gi don*) and "the secret of the Mahāyāna" (*theg pa chen po'i gsang ba*) to refer to the *Uttaratantra*.<sup>31</sup> Chapa contrasts the *Uttaratantra* with the other four texts attributed to Maitreya and concludes that the *Uttaratantra* is superior

to the other four. However, unlike Ngok,<sup>32</sup> Chapa states that certain phrases of the *Uttaratantra* are not necessarily definitive. He argues, “The exposition of emptiness in the other one [that is, the middle-wheel teachings] accords with the literal meaning, [while] here [in the last-wheel treatises] the explication that the buddha-element exists as cause requires interpretation. They are not contradictory because this [that is, the explication of the buddha-element being cause in the last-wheel teachings] is not literal.”<sup>33</sup> While Chapa shows that the *Uttaratantra* is definitive, he demonstrates that certain phrases in the *Uttaratantra* are not necessarily definitive—such as the passage teaching the buddha-element as cause. This is because for Chapa being a cause in this context entails being conditioned and conventional and something that exists only on the causal state of enlightenment, whereas the buddha-element is unconditioned and ultimate and something that exists pervasively as the ultimate nature on both the causal and resultant levels of enlightenment.

### Ngok and Chapa on the *Uttaratantra* as a Last-Wheel Treatise

About the difference between the two wheels, Ngok states:

[A]lthough all characteristics are ultimately negated in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*, [it does not mean that these teachings] contradict with the explanation of [the ultimate character] as the cause for producing enlightened qualities [found] here [in the last-wheel teachings]. The reason is that, [in the middle-wheel teachings] the mere ultimate character is explained from the perspective of the two truths, [whereas] here [in the last-wheel teachings it is shown] as a cause for achieving enlightened qualities by contemplating the [ultimate] character explicated there [in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. So the ultimate] character that is mentioned there [in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*] is established as a cause [in the last-wheel teachings].<sup>34</sup>

Ngok argues that the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* or the middle-wheel teachings teach merely the ultimate truth whereas the last-wheel teachings

explain the ultimate truth as a causal factor for enlightenment also. Chapa makes Ngok's point more clear by focusing on the subjective mind that realizes the ultimate truth:

Does [the phrase] "the buddha-element exists" [found in the *Uttaratantra*] not contradict [what the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* teach]? There is no contradiction because objects are ultimately empty, but the subjective mind [perceiving the emptiness] produces enlightened qualities. Because of that it is described as a cause."<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, for both Ngok and Chapa, the *Uttaratantra* is a definitive work, and it is also a treatise that explains the meaning of the last-wheel sutras such as the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*.

### Buddha-Element as a Conceived Object

Both Ngok and Chapa address the issue of whether the buddha-element is knowable or not by human consciousness. They describe the ultimate truth or the buddha-element as a knowable object. Ngok, while commenting on how gnosis exists in sentient beings, makes the direct correlation between the object of knowledge and dharma-reality and points out that the wisdom and its object are indivisible.<sup>36</sup> When Ngok delineates the difference between the buddha-element (the fourth point of the *Uttaratantra*) and enlightenment (the fifth point of the *Uttaratantra*) he points out that the former is the object of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> In both cases, not only is the buddha-element considered an object of knowledge, but it is also specifically discussed in the context of objects of knowledge.

Like Ngok, Chapa also claims it is an object of knowledge. In his *Uttaratantra* commentary, Ngok makes reference to how ultimate truth or buddha-element is not a conceived object of speech and conceptual thought. Ngok states, "The ultimate is not an object of speech; conceptual mind is conventional; because of that the ultimate is not an object of conceptuality. The meaning of [it being] not an object of speech is that it is not a conceived object of speech and conceptual thought."<sup>38</sup>

Chapa provides more explanation as to what Ngok means to hold when he asserts buddha-element is not a conceived object of speech and conceptual thought. He states:



Not being mentioned explicitly means that [the buddha-element] does not appear to the conception in connection with the term-universal; it is only the object-universal that appears to conception in connection with the term-universal. Because all of its self-characteristics do not appear to conception in connection with the term-universal.<sup>39</sup>

As Georges Dreyfus shows Chapa and his followers do not assert that external objects such as a red vase, a chair, and so forth are appearing objects of their respective conceptions; rather it is their object-universals that are the appearing objects of their respective conceptions.<sup>40</sup> Chapa claims that because the buddha-element by itself can never fully be spoken of and cannot be fully conceived by conceptual mind, it is not a conceived object of speech and conceptual cognition. Nonetheless, he states that the object-universal of the buddha-element can be spoken of and can be conceived by conceptual mind. It is through the medium of this that the buddha-element is explained using terms and concepts in the *Uttaratantra* and other tathāgata-essence literature.<sup>41</sup> Chapa discusses the object-universal of the buddha-element within the context of the path of preparation and the path below it,<sup>42</sup> where direct realization of emptiness has not dawned, whereas he speaks of the realization of the actual buddha-element within the context of the path of seeing and above, where individuals have begun to see the buddha-element directly.<sup>43</sup>

### Ngok and Chapa Differ on Emphasis

Chapa follows Ngok quite closely not only in terms of content, but also in terms of wording as shown above. In addition to that, Chapa makes use of certain technical terms such as “awakened buddha-element” (*sad pa'i khams*), “ripened buddha-element” (*smin pa'i khams*), and so forth<sup>44</sup> that are found in Ngok’s commentary as well.

However, their commentaries differ from each other in terms of emphasis in that Chapa elaborates on issues that are not addressed in Ngok’s commentary: (1) Chapa makes more use of the term “all-basis-consciousness”; (2) he makes systematic use of the two terms “naturally abiding buddha-nature” (*rang bzhin gnas rigs*)<sup>45</sup> and “developmental buddha-nature” (*rgyas 'gyur rigs*),<sup>46</sup> in conjunction with the all-basis-consciousness; (3) he mentions the cut-off buddha-nature

(*rigs chad*); and (4) he discusses the misconception of emptiness in a Cittamātra system that asserts cut-off buddha-nature.

Ngok uses the term “all-basis-consciousness” only once in his *Uttaratantra* commentary in reference to a stanza apparently quoted from the *Mahāyānābhīdharmasūtra*: “The [buddha-] element that has no beginning is the basis for all phenomena. Because it exists, all transmigratory beings exist, and nirvāṇa will also be attained.”<sup>47</sup> Commenting on the term “buddha-element,” Ngok argues, “That which has such various potentialities is also called all-basis-consciousness.”<sup>48</sup> Ngok identifies the buddha-element mentioned in this verse with all-basis-consciousness without offering any further explanation on it.

On the other hand, Chapa’s commentary on the same verse gives a more nuanced description. He argues, “There is certainly no beginning for emptiness, the naturally abiding buddha-nature. Although there is a beginning for the virtuous seed, the developmental buddha-nature, there exists no beginning for its basis, the all-basis-consciousness. Hence, [the developmental buddha-nature] is designated as having no beginning.”<sup>49</sup> Although Chapa demonstrates that a relationship between the developmental buddha-nature and the all-basis-consciousness exists, he does not equate the two. However, he shows that the naturally abiding buddha-nature is emptiness.

Chapa shows how the two types of buddha-nature can function as the basis for cyclic existence as well as liberation. He states, “It is through cultivating the correct mind-set that perceives the naturally abiding buddha-nature that the qualities of liberation ensue. Similarly, it is through increasing the power of the contemplatively derived buddha-nature [which is the same as the developmental buddha-nature], that liberation ensues.”<sup>50</sup> He argues that the two types of buddha-nature are causes of liberation from cyclic existence. However, he also demonstrates that they function as a basis for cyclic existence. Chapa states:

It is with emptiness, the naturally abiding buddha-nature, as a basis for misperception that the mistaken mind-set is generated. Through [the mistaken mind-set] karma and afflictions [arise] . . . Although afflictions are not generated through the developmental buddha-nature—the virtuous seed concordant with liberation—afflictions are generated through the all-basis-consciousness, the basis [for the

developmental buddha-nature], that is tainted by the seeds of afflictions.<sup>51</sup>

Hence, Chapa treats all-basis-consciousness as an important concept to explain how the developmental buddha-nature functions as a basis for cyclic existence.

Another issue that Chapa addresses at length in his commentary is the topic of the cut-off buddha-nature which Ngok does not mention in his commentary.<sup>52</sup> Chapa argues that “because the Naturelessness proponents (*ngo bo nyid med par smra ba*) claim that [the naturally abiding buddha-nature] refers to the reality, emptiness, [they] do not accept the completely cut-off buddha-nature.”<sup>53</sup> Chapa argues that Madhyamaka proponents like him assert that all sentient beings have the potential to become a buddha in that their emptiness enables them to transform.

In response to an unnamed person who claims that the cut-off buddha-nature exists because it is mentioned in the *Niroāṇasūtra*, Chapa affirms the passage requires interpretation, and therefore it is not to be accepted literally. He demonstrates that the texts that teach the cut-off buddha-nature are provisional because they are taught (1) with a certain purpose and (2) with a basis in the Buddha’s thought, and (3) because one can refute the meaning of their explicit teachings.<sup>54</sup>

In the context of his discussion of cut-off buddha-nature, Chapa mentions Cittamātra. He identifies the proponents of a certain emptiness mentioned in *Asaṅga Commentary* as the exponents of Cittamātra.<sup>55</sup> However, there is no mention of Cittamātra in Ngok’s commentary. While Chapa endorses the concept of all-basis-consciousness as an important theme for his presentation of the developmental buddha-nature in his commentary, he rejects the notion of the cut-off buddha-nature and sources the incorrect view in this Cittamātra system.<sup>56</sup> For him, the fact that the *Uttaratantra* teaches all sentient beings as having the buddha-nature shows that the *Uttaratantra* is a Madhyamaka text, not Cittamātra.<sup>57</sup>

Chapa discusses the misconceptions of emptiness in two ways that are not addressed in Ngok’s commentary. Chapa mentions the emptiness of a phenomenon that has become nonexistent through disintegration and the emptiness of the-one-not-existing-in-another.<sup>58</sup> The first emptiness refers to an emptiness that comes into existence through a transformation, as in the case of the emptiness of a vase

produced by the destruction of the vase. The second one is an emptiness of what is simply absent, as in the case of a valley which is devoid of a large body of water. Although both emptinesses are referred to as emptiness, they are not actual ultimate truth or real emptiness according to Chapa.

### Conclusion

Although scholars such as Tsen Khawoché, Zu Gawé Dorjé, Gampopa, Mabja, and Drakpa Gyeltsen from this early formative period contributed to the positive evaluation of the *Uttaratantra*, Ngok and Chapa made the largest contribution to its scholastic interpretation by composing the two earliest Kadam commentaries on it. The two Sangpu thinkers interpreted the text as the most definitive treatise explicating the last-wheel teachings of the Buddha. Their expositions on the *Uttaratantra* influenced later scholars, as will be discussed in the following chapters. At the same time, the seeds of later critiques of the *Uttaratantra* as provisional are already evident in this time period as seen in Jayānanda's descriptions. It is to the beginning of the debate over the definitive nature of the *Uttaratantra* that I now turn.