

On the Knowability and Expressibility of Absolute Reality in Buddhism¹⁾

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The doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha*, a well-known theory of an important current of thought in Mahāyāna Buddhism, teaches that all sentient beings (*sattva*) without exception carry in themselves the germ of buddhahood, so that it is certain that they are all able sooner or later to attain liberation and buddhahood. If from the soteriological point of view the *tathāgatagarbha* theory thus presents absolute spiritual reality as immanent – or, more accurately stated, as proleptically present – in all beings in *saṃsāra*, the question arises as to how it is to be realized cognitively. For at the same time the Buddhist scriptures declare that the *tathāgatagarbha* is known only to the Tathāgata himself,²⁾ or to the most advanced Bodhisattvas,³⁾

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- 1) This paper was read before the 20th anniversary meeting of the Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kai (Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies) in Tōkyō on 5 June, 1971.

The following abbreviations have been used: *MPNS*=*Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (bKa' 'gyur, lHa sa edition, mDo, vol. ña); *RGV*=*Ratnagotravibhāga-Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* (edited by E. H. Johnston, Patna, 1950); *RGVV*=Commentary on the *RGV*; *ŚMDSS*=*Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādasūtra* (bKa' 'gyur, lHa sa edition, dKon brtsegs, vol. cha); *Théorie*=*La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du goṭra, Études sur la soteriologie et la gnoséologie du bouddhisme*, par David Seyfort Ruegg (Publications de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, volume LXX, Paris, 1969).

- 2) *V. RGVV* 1. 1 (quoting the *Drḍhādhyāśayaparivarta* and the *Anānatvāparṇatvanirdeśaparivarta*), 153–154; *RGV* 5. 1–2 (cf. 1. 24, 33; 2. 69).
- 3) Cf. *ŚMDSS*, fol. 450a2–3 (quoted in *RGVV* 1. 25; cf. *RGVV* 1. 15); *RGVV* 1. 153, where reference is made to the 'young' Bodhisattva who has just entered on his spiritual course (*navayānasamprasthita*).

But see *RGVV* 1. 154–155, where it is said that the Bodhisattvas established on all the ten stages (*bhūmi*) see the *tathāgatagarbha* only in part. Cf. *MPNS*, fol. 16lf.; *RGV* 2' 33, 69, 73.

and that it is inaccessible to the Auditors (*śrāvaka*) and Pratyekabuddhas.⁴⁾ In addition they not only state that absolute reality is beyond the reach of deliberative, ratiocinative thinking (*atarkya*) and free from the four extremes of discursive thought (*cātuṣkoṭika*), and that it cannot therefore be expressed verbally (*avācya*, *anabhilāpya*), but they also affirm that it is inconceivable (*acintya*) and even unknowable. In other words, if the *paramārtha* is altogether unthinkable and unknowable, is not absolute reality in its function as the base or ground of spiritual practice – i.e. the *prakṛtisthagotra* or *tathāgatagarbhā* – cognitively quite inaccessible also? And in this case are we not faced with a curious and rather paradoxical situation in which an absolute that is immanent in all beings from the soteriological point of view would nonetheless be altogether transcendent from the gnoseological point of view? Such a view could indeed be considered the logical consequence of the Mahāyānist theory of the inexpressible transcendence of absolute reality.

Now if the texts affirm that the *paramārtha* is inexpressible, this evidently means that discursive language cannot penetrate to its very nature (*sva-lakṣaṇa*), for such language is inextricably bound up with discursive usage (*vyavahāra*) and with the dichotomizing conceptualization (*vikalpa*) inherent in discursive development (*prapañca*); and if these texts add that the *paramārtha* is unthinkable, this no doubt signifies merely that it cannot be the object of conceptual thought. But does this signify that the *paramārtha* cannot be comprehended by any form whatsoever of knowledge, and that conceptual thought and language can never even point to it? The texts speak frequently enough of comprehension of the Absolute, stating that it is to be known directly and introspectively (*pratyātman*); but the replies which the fundamental works on the *tathāgatagarbha* theory have given to these two questions are, unfortunately, perhaps not quite as explicit as one might wish. As a result, the later commentators are in some disagreement about the precise gnoseological status of the *paramārtha* and the *tathāgatagarbha*.

4) *ŚMDSS*, fol. 449a (quoted in *RGVV* 1. 153); *MPNS*, fol. 138a (and 52a). Cf. *RGVV* 1. 32–33.

The problem of the transcendence as against the immanence of absolute reality is closely connected with the question of faith (*śraddhā*).⁵⁾ The Sūtra and Śāstra sources indeed state that the *paramārtha* can only be approached (*a-gam-*, *anu-gam-*) through faith;⁶⁾ and the commentary on the *Ratnagotravibhāga* sums up the matter by saying that *dharmatā* is the object of neither deliberative thought nor of dichotomizing conceptualization, and that it can therefore only be the object of convinced adhesion (*adhimokṭavyā*).⁷⁾ Convinced adhesion (*adhimukti*), a partial equivalent of *śraddhā*, in fact figures as one cause of the purification of the *tathāgatadhātu* leading to the attainment of reality;⁸⁾ for it is the remedy against the *icchantika*'s hostile resistance (*pratigha*) to the *dharma* of the Mahāyāna.⁹⁾ And if a person is so to speak committed (*adhimucya*) to the immutability of the *dharma*, he does not experience fatigue with respect to the *dharma*.¹⁰⁾

The circumstance that absolute reality can be approached only through faith holds good, according to the sources, not only for the worldling (*prthagjana*) but also for the Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha, who can understand the inconceivable (*acintya*) fact of both the naturally pure Mind (*prakṛtipariśuddhacitta*) – in other words the *tathāgatagarbha* – and its state of defilement only through *śraddhā*.¹¹⁾ And it holds good also for the Bodhisattva who has only recently started out on his course (*navayānasamprashita*); for such a 'young' Bodhisattva is not yet capable of knowing the *tathāgatagarbha* as *śūnyatā* since his mind is still distracted by reason of the fact that he either erroneously takes *śūnyatā* to be the destruction of a previously existing entity or to be something to which to cling.¹²⁾ It may be noted

5) See also the so-called **Mahāyānaśraddhotpādaśāstra* (*Ta ch'eng ch'i hsin lun*).

6) See the Sūtras quoted in *RGVV* 1' 1; *RGV* 1. 153.

7) *RGVV* 1. 149-152: *sā [dharmatā] na cintayitavyā na vikalpayitavyā [kevalam tv] adhimokṭavyā*.

8) *RGVV* 1. 36.

9) *RGVV* 1. 32-33.

10) *Sāgaramatipariṣecchā* (quoted in *RGVV* 1. 68, p. 49).

11) *ŚMDSS*, fol. 450a (quoted in *RGVV* 1. 25). Cf. *Kaśyapaparivarta* § 99 (*RGVV* 1. 15).

that the Sūtra text in which the true nature of *śūnyatā* is thus stated emphasizes in addition the equivalence of the *tathāgatagarbha* with *śūnyatā*.¹³⁾ Therefore, according to this view, the persons for whom absolute Reality is directly accessible are those Bodhisattvas endowed with the great *dharma*, who are consequently able to understand it on their own.¹⁴⁾

It is then for these reasons that one school of thinkers held that absolute reality is utterly transcendent and that the *tathāgatagarbha* is accordingly cognitively inaccessible; not only is it beyond words and discursive thought, but it cannot even be the object of a cognitive judgement.¹⁵⁾ This school reached its fullest development in Tibet, where it was represented by rNog Blo ldan šes rab, the pupil of the Kaśmirian scholar Sajjana (11th century) with whom he translated the *Ratnagotravibhāga* into Tibetan, by gTsañ nag pa, and later by Bu ston (who assimilated the *tathāgatagarbha* directly with the *dharmakāya* on the level of *phala* 'result' or 'fruit', i. e. with the stage of the *buddha*). This school bases its views chiefly on the above-mentioned passages drawn from the *Śrīmāladevisiṃhanādasūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* together with its commentary.

Other interpreters, especially those belonging to the Tibetan dGe lugs pa school, have however laid the emphasis elsewhere; and they accordingly prefer to regard faith not as the direct means of comprehending absolute reality but rather as a preliminary required for calming the mind (cf. *citta-prasāda*) so that it can understand the *paramārtha*. This shift in emphasis concerning the gnoseological status of the *paramārtha* and the role of

12) *ŚMDSS*, fol. 445a; *RGVV* 1. 154-155 (*avataraṇikā*). Indeed, the *MPNS* states that even the Bodhisattvas of the tenth stage have difficulty in seeing the *buddhadhātu* or *tathāgatagarbha* (fol. 161b). The *RGVV* (1. 154-155) also states that these Bodhisattvas see the *tathāgatagarbha* partially; and it recalls that only those whose intelligence is unlimited see the *dharmakāya* wholly.

13) *ŚMDSS*, fol. 445a, *RGVV* 1. 154-155. Cf. *Théorie*, p. 313-318, 402-403. — On the connexion between the *tathāgatagarbha* and the *nirodhasatya* see *ŚMDSS*, fol. 445a (quoted in *RGVV* 1. 12) and *MPNS*, fol. 145b-146a.

14) See above, n. 3.

15) *žen pa'i yul*. V. *Théorie*, p. 302.

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faith is due to several reasons, some of which are evidently of a systematic nature. In the first place these interpreters observe that *śraddhā*, at least to the extent that it is based on a teaching received from without in the form of a communication from a teacher or a sacred text, is necessarily bound up with language, and hence with *vikalpa* and *prapañca*. The idea that language is inextricably related with conceptual dichotomizing thought is commonly accepted by the Mahāyānist philosophers. Now it is, as we have already seen, axiomatic with the schools in question that the ultimate comprehension of absolute reality must be immediate and introspective, and that it is attained finally through non-conceptual Gnosis (*jñāna*); and it is therefore clear that faith can never be considered to be the *direct* instrument of comprehension of the *paramārtha*. Hence, without in any way minimizing the transcendent absoluteness of ultimate reality, the advocates of this interpretation stress a certain immanence of the *paramārtha*; needless to say, faith understood as receptive clarity of spirit (*prasāda*) is highly prized by these thinkers also.¹⁶⁾ It is moreover to be noted that the passage quoted above from the commentary on the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (1. 153) concerning *śraddhā* does not really stand against this interpretation; for in it the opposition is not between faith and direct non-conceptual knowledge, but between faith and deliberative dichotomization or conceptual thought. The implication is then that the *paramārtha* may indeed have to be *approached* in the first instance with the help of faith, that is to say, through receptive clarity of spirit; but that is not to deny that its actual comprehension ultimately takes place only through non-conceptual Gnosis (*jñāna*). In other words the *paramārtha* is knowable (*jñeya*).

In the second place, these interpreters differ from certain other Buddhist schools in maintaining that not only the Saints (*ārya*) belonging to the Bodhisattvayāna but also the Saints of the other two courses (*yāna*) – viz. the Ārya-Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas – have also to be able to comprehend

16) Compare the canonical Pāli term *aveccappasāda* expressing intellectualized faith.

the non-substantiality (*nairātmya*) of the existential factors (*dharma*) as well as of the person (*pudgala*); thus, according to them, the only difference between the advanced adepts of the three *yānas* rests in the comprehensiveness of their realization of *śūnyatā*, which is fuller in the case of the Ārya-Bodhisattva than in that of the Ārya-Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha. Following this interpretation, the references in the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda-sūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* to the primordial role of faith in understanding the *paramārtha* have therefore to do with the fact that only the Bodhisattva whose faculties are sharp (*tikṣṇendriya*) is able, even on the earlier stages of his path, to understand it exclusively through his transcending discriminative knowledge (*prajñā*) and in all its aspects, so that faith may indeed be properly said to be characteristic of the other two courses: the *yāna* of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha. In sum, although the object of the Śrāvaka's and the Pratyekabuddha's understanding – *nairātmya* – is the same as for the Bodhisattva, the mode of their comprehension is partial, and their understanding is incomplete.¹⁷⁾

It thus appears that this school has drawn what might be called the systematic consequences of the gnoseological implications of the theory of the *tathāgatagarbha* by combining it with the theory of the Single Course (*ekayāna*). In fact, apart from its classificatory function (and an occasionally polemical one), the doctrine of the *yānas* has a very marked gnoseological content in the Mahāyāna.¹⁸⁾ Now it is exceedingly difficult if not altogether impossible to reconcile the theory of the three distinct *yānas* of the Śrāvaka, the Pratyekabuddha and the Bodhisattva, only the last of which would lead ultimately to buddhahood, with the *tathāgatagarbha* theory, which affirms that the germ of buddhahood is present in all *sattvas* without exception, and which may therefore be thought to imply that they are all destined sooner or later to become *buddhas*. On the other hand, the *ekayāna* theory, which holds that all *yānas* finally converge in a single course lead-

17) For some details see *Théorie*, p. 309ff.

18) Cf. *Théorie*, p. 180.

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ing to buddhahood, is in complete harmony with the *tathāgatarbha* theory, of which it is indeed the corollary.¹⁹⁾

According to this school, then, the *paramārtha* and the *tathāgatarbha* are knowable and at least partially accessible even on the earlier stages of the Path. And as such it is possible to indicate it, or to point to it by means of words, however unsuited the latter may be to penetrate to its very nature; this is indeed what the Sūtras are engaged in doing. For this interpretation the thinkers of the second school we have been considering can also find authority in the systematic exegesis of the scriptures outlined above, so that for them absolute reality is both soteriologically immanent (in the form of the *tathāgatarbha*) and gnoseologically accessible in the world of *saṃsāra* and relativity.

In this connexion it is to be noted that while according to the dGe lugs pas, one of the chief schools advocating this view, the *tathāgatarbha* is indeed to be identified with absolute reality (*tathatā* = *śūnyatā*), it is not to be identified with this reality in its pure aspect (*nirmalā tathatā*) – i.e. with the level of ‘result’ (*phala*) or the *dharmakāya* (as has been maintained by some of the other schools) – but rather with the ‘causal’ level or *prakṛtisthagotra*, that is to say with this reality when it appears as involved in *saṃsāra* (*samalā tathatā*).

19) V. *Théorie*, pp. 177–243; 514–515.