

Michael Zimmermann

The Process of Awakening in Early
Texts on Buddha-Nature in India
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Chen-kuo Lin / Michael Radich (eds.)

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in memoriam

John R. McRae (1947-2011)

The Process of Awakening in Early Texts on Buddha-Nature in India

Michael Zimmermann

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to throw some light on the question of how the authors of early texts on buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*, *buddhadhātu* etc.) in India, in the first centuries of the Common Era, perceived the process of awakening, i.e., how they imagined the actual realization of this buddha-nature, and how they described this process in terms of their own underlying vision. As far as I can see, the discussions of the last twenty years or so about the question of whether buddha-nature thought might actually be Buddhist at all¹ have lost their immediate punch and relevance, and might already have become an historical topic to be studied in its own right. New approaches have entered the world of academic Buddhist Studies. They have shown Buddhism to be a multi-layered phenomenon to be studied on many diverse levels, and honored it as such, taking into consideration not only doctrinal aspects of the religion, but also the contexts in which these doctrines came into exis-

¹ An excellent summary of the positions put forward by the proponents of the idea that buddha-nature is not Buddhist, on the one hand, and criticism of this position, on the other, is found in Hubbard and Swanson, 1997. It is my understanding that the representatives of the so-called Critical Buddhism movement (*hīhan bukkyō* 批判仏教) started out with the aim of reforming certain deplorable states of affairs in Japanese Buddhism, but quickly turned against much of what characterizes the history of Buddhist ideas in India and beyond. Though their immediate aim was thus laudable, the normativity of their approach makes it difficult for a critical scholar of the intellectual history of Buddhism to accept their criticisms.

tence, as much as their assumed social ramifications. I have never doubted that the idea that all sentient beings have buddha-nature, alongside other notions, has always been of central interest for the Mahāyāna movement. It is an idea which can be found expressed in many of the *sūtras* of the Mahāyāna – not only those explicitly dedicated to the elucidation of this issue, but also in texts which in certain passages subscribe to the theory in passing, so to say.²

Descriptions of buddha-nature in early Indian texts

For the topic at issue here, I would like first of all to recall the essence of what buddha-nature theory in India looked like. Regarding this point, it is probably safe to say that in terms of the fundamental structure, we are confronted with at least two quite distinct branches – and both of them seem already to have been present in what can be considered one of the oldest texts, if not *the* oldest text, dealing explicitly with the idea of buddha-nature in India: the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* (TGS).

The TGS probably came into existence in third-century India, and thus is not part of the oldest layer of Mahāyāna literature. However, it counts as one of the basic texts which form the earliest stage of the Indian development of buddha-nature thought.³ A detailed analysis of the basic concepts contained in the TGS brings some interesting conclusions to light. First, the *sūtra* is structured as a series of similes, and does not allow for a consistent analysis along strict philosophical lines. This, however, is in any case not to be expected, given that the *sūtra* style is that of a narrative, aiming to draw the attention of its listeners directly to its main message. As in the TGS, the best way to do this is by means of similes, in which situations from daily life, with which the audience is well acquainted, illustrate metaphorically the spiritual concepts the text tries to promulgate. It is in these illustrations in the TGS, then, that two basic concepts of how buddha-nature should be imagined come to light.

² The most comprehensive discussion of the scriptures on buddha-nature in India is still Takasaki, 1974.

³ For a detailed study and translation of the TGS see Zimmermann, 2002.

Buddha-nature as already present, and only requiring disclosure

The first of these basic conceptions could be termed a *theory of disclosure*. Here, the underlying notion is that living beings already carry perfect buddhahood within themselves, just as is indicated by the term *tathāgatagarbha*, which, in the context of this *sūtra*, bears the sense of “containing a Buddha”.⁴ The main point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*) is that a precious and pure element is hidden within all living beings. However, this core is unknown to the living beings themselves; they are in need of some agent with supernatural faculties who can inform them about their precious essence, and only then will they take up the work of setting it free. This precious element, which all sentient beings have carried within themselves since beginningless time, is already perfect. In itself, it needs no transformation, no refinement, no change at all. Its nature is forever unchanging, just as gold will forever remain gold without ever losing the nature of gold, so that even if, as the *sūtra* has it, the piece of gold were to fall into a pit of excrement and lie hidden there for more than a thousand years, it would still be the very same gold.⁵

Parallel to this, in the spiritual realm, this element is identified with the buddha-nature of all living beings. This buddha-element is present in each sentient being, and in its essence, does not need any treatment in order to come to fruition. Living beings and buddhas are, in their essence, of the same eternally unchanging nature, i.e., they all carry the state of full awakening within themselves. However, even though this buddha-element is within them, nonetheless, its efficacy is blocked – because sentient beings are not aware of its existence, and, as a consequence of this unawareness, sentient beings have not turned to cleansing the buddha-element from external impurities, namely, the excrement of the simile, corresponding to the *kleśas*, i.e., the emotional and cognitive defilements which completely cover these living beings’ precious buddha-like nature. Once these defilements have been cleared away, the buddha-

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the compound *tathāgatagarbha* and its use in the TGS, see Zimmermann, 2002: 39–46.

⁵ See TGS in Zimmermann, 2002: 117–119 (“The simile of a gold nugget in excrement”).

nature can unfold its full potency, and a being that has realized this stage would be called a buddha in the full and unrestricted sense of the word.

This theory of disclosure bears striking similarities to other doctrines with which we are acquainted from elsewhere in the Indian religious world, such as, for instance, the Pāśupata doctrine of *abhivyakti*, which characterizes liberation as the manifestation of one's innate Śiva-like perfection through the removal of impurities (*mala*). It is therefore not so surprising to find similar ideas in the Buddhist doctrinal world as well. We will later come back to the question of how the process of disclosure of one's buddha-nature is imagined in detail.

Buddha-nature as something which has to be developed

Let us now turn to the second of the two basic concepts of how buddha-nature is imagined in the early *sūtras* on *tathāgatagarbha*, which could be termed a *theory of development*. As I have shown at some length (Zimmermann, 2002: 50-67), in the very same TGS, we also find the idea that buddha-nature is an element, which is, however, not yet fully developed, but rather, is a germ or an embryo which still needs further ripening and appropriate nurturing in circumstances which would allow this element to come to full perfection. Here we are clearly talking about a different idea, i.e., the idea that living beings carry nothing more than a potential within themselves – a potential which is illustrated in the language of the *sūtra* by the image of a sprout inside the kernel of a plant, which will become a huge tree; or an embryo in the belly of a despised and ugly woman, where the embryo is destined in future to become a universal ruler (*cakravartin*). No doubt, the compound *tathāgatagarbha* conveniently allows for such an interpretation, given that the term *garbha* at the end of the compound also has the meaning of “embryo”, which would bring the meaning of the whole term to “embryo of a *tathāgata*”.

I am fairly sure that the authors of this early text did not spend too much time pondering the evolving implications of such different conceptions of buddha-nature. Rather, I suspect that at this early stage, the authors were probably aiming merely to convey to an audience, in terms as easily apprehensible as possible, the idea – which at that time was not so common – that all sentient beings can somehow attain full awakening.

Similes brought together from different fields of the experience of the audience served well to accomplish this task. However, it was only natural that not all of the similes chosen in this process would prove to imply the same underlying conception of how exactly this buddha-nature or buddha-germ should be imagined.

Of course, the implications resulting from this alternative model were to become rather significant. The actual process of awakening would not be seen any more as a disclosure of an essence assumed to have hitherto been latently present in living beings, as I described it above; rather, we could call the underlying idea a *theory of development*, in the sense that the buddha-constituting characteristics would now have to be brought to ripening by the sentient being, and awakening would only become effective once this had been done.

In sum, the first formulations of buddha-nature thought in India deal with two rather diverse concepts: that of *disclosure* on the one hand, and that of *development* on the other. This is the first conclusion that we can draw from an analysis of the earliest texts on buddha-nature in India.

Awakening from the perspective of sentient beings

Let us look at some other issues which come to light in the TGS, in the context of our discussion of the process of awakening. Here, I would like to focus on the perspective from which the awakening is described, and contrast it to that found in what can be counted as one of the *sūtra*'s most direct forerunners: the **Tathāgatotpattisaṃbhava-nirdeśa* (TUSN), first translated into Chinese by the Indo-Scythian monk Dharmarakṣa under the title *Fo shuo rulai xingxian jing* 佛說如來興顯經,⁶ with later translations as a part of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. Dharmarakṣa's translation was made at the end of the 3rd century CE, which is about the same time that the first translation into Chinese of the TGS is reported to have been

⁶ T10:291.592c-617b; later translations are the *Da fangguang Fo huayan jing Baowang Rulai xingqi pin* 大方廣佛華嚴經寶王如來性起品, translated by Buddhahadra (359-429 CE), T9:278.611b-633b, and the *Da fangguang Fo huayan jing Rulai chuxian pin* 大方廣佛華嚴經如來出現品, translated by Śikṣānanda (652-710 CE), T10:279.262a-278c.

produced.⁷ In a famous simile in the TUSN, which is structurally identical with the nine similes of the TGS, tathāgata-knowledge (*tathāgatajñāna*), which is said to permeate all sentient beings without exception, is compared to a piece of cloth with the whole universe painted on it in its original size.⁸ We are to imagine what would happen if the cloth were then to be compressed to the size of a tiny particle. In this form, it would be completely useless; only a person with god-like vision would be able to perceive how rich the content of this particle was, whereupon they might break it open with a diamond, and so make it useful for the whole world. In the same way, the Tathāgata is then said to teach living beings and induce them to practice the Noble Path, so that in the end, they will recognize the pervasive nature of the Buddha's knowledge and attain "equality" (*samatā*) with the tathāgatas.⁹

Setting aside the obvious structural parallelism to the similes of the TGS, what makes the passage in the TUSN distinctly different from our *sūtra* is the viewpoint from which the whole scenario is described. The TGS is based on the viewpoint of individual sentient beings each equipped with buddha-nature, which in several passages is also called *tathāgatajñāna*; that is to say, each single sentient being is seen as the "owner" of his or her own internal buddha-knowledge, with this knowledge neatly packaged in confined personal units. The main point of reference here is the sentient being and the fact of his or her inherent buddhahood. All this is in clear contrast to the TUSN, whose mission is to illustrate and glorify the unfathomable qualities of the Tathāgata: his unlimited and undifferentiated outreach to all living beings; his supreme compassion and active engagement in liberating sentient beings; the omnipresence of his body, voice, and knowledge; and his never changing, eternal nature. Living beings merely happen to fall within the sphere of his efficacy, without ever stepping into the foreground. They are the *objects* of the Tathāgata's all-pervasiveness, like everything else, profiting from his beneficial work irrespective of any differentiation. It is the quasi-totalistic

⁷ For a discussion of the dates see Zimmermann, 2002: 69–75.

⁸ The illustration is cited in Sanskrit in the *Ratnagotravibhāga-vyākhyā* (RGVV), 22.10–24.8. All references to the RGVV are from the text as edited in Johnston, 1950.

⁹ A part of the Sanskrit text is provided below.

eternal realm of the Tathāgata, the *dharmadhātu*, which is portrayed in these passages of the TUSN.

The author(s) of the TGS, however, were not interested in this dimension of the Tathāgata. They took up the task of thinking through what this all-pervasiveness of buddha-knowledge would mean when seen from the individual perspective of sentient beings, and how this idea would work out in a concrete form: that is, how this buddha-knowledge in each being is to be imagined; why it does not manifest itself immediately; what the Tathāgata's role in the whole process would be; and not least, how, on this model, it would be possible to become awakened at all. In other words, this new perspective shifted to a view from "below", so that the more abstract doctrine of an all-pervading Tathāgata, of which the TUSN is just one representative, was turned upside down. What seems important here is that in contrast to the TUSN, the early beginnings of buddha-nature thought in India were based on a view which focused on the individual as the major anchoring point and described the issue of awakening from this perspective – a remarkable step towards setting aside the Buddha's beneficial influence as the major or even the *only* source for the attainment of awakening by sentient beings.

The role of the Buddha on the path to realization

This leads to a third point worth mentioning: in the TGS, the exact role of the Buddha on the path to realization is not completely clear. In my view, the *sūtra* seems to follow in the footsteps of the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which the standard portrayal of the Buddha is that of an almighty father figure, who takes care of and protects living beings just as he would his own children.¹⁰ In many passages, however, the TGS is not very explicit, and it is left to the reader to figure out the exact impact of the salvific activities of the Tathāgata, and where the individual striving of the sentient being itself has to be involved. It seems that the emphasis fluctuates: some particular passages seem to go so far as to present the role of the Tathāgata as that of the decisive person in charge of liberating senti-

¹⁰ On the relation between the TGS and the *Lotus Sūtra* see Zimmermann, 1999. For a completely different view cp. Kariya, 1979.

ent beings – he envisions the benefit of sentient beings and, so it seems, does the job of liberating them all by himself; whereas in other passages, the role of the Buddha is more restricted, and he functions merely as somebody who stimulates or encourages sentient beings to strive for awakening.

This brings us to a fourth interesting observation regarding the question how the path leading to liberation is conceived of in the early *sūtras* on buddha-nature. Strikingly, no concrete descriptions of this path are found in the texts, and no particular recommendations for moral or spiritual practices are provided. This problem does not even seem to be on the radar for the authors, that is, it seems not to attract their interest whatsoever. As I said earlier, the main point seems merely to be to promulgate the new idea that all sentient being have buddha-nature. In place of such concrete models, all we find in the TGS (towards the end) are some fairly stereotypical Mahāyāna-like encouragements to memorize the *sūtra*, copy it and propagate it to other people, which is supposed to result in beneficial results and finally lead to awakening (TGS 10A–10D).

One very interesting question, in this respect, is that of the terms in which the realization of awakening is portrayed in the texts. The TUSN passage I already mentioned earlier, which has come down to us in Sanskrit through citation in the *Ratnagotravibhāga-vyākhyā* (RGVV),¹¹ employs the verbal root *pratyabhi-jñā* with respect to the realization of *tathāgatajñāna*. This term is remarkable in this context, as it suggests a kind of recollection of the vision of a buddha, in precisely the sense of rediscovering something which one has always been connected with inside of oneself, albeit not knowingly. Let us look at the TUSN passage in question in some more detail:

Suppose now that by teaching [them] the Noble [Eightfold] Path, I remove from these sentient beings all the fetters that are caused by [their wrong] conceptions, so that through attaining power [by following] the Noble Path, they remove this great knot of [wrong] conceptions by themselves, recognize *tathāgatajñāna* [which penetrates

¹¹ See n. 8 above.

them through and through], and attain equality with the tathāgatas. Then, thanks to the Tathāgata's teaching [them] the Path, they will get rid of all the fetters caused by [wrong] conceptions (RGVV 24.4–7).

*yan nv aham eṣāṃ sattvānām āryamārgopadeśena^A sarvasaṃjñākṛtaban-
dhanāpanayanam kuryāṃ yathā svayam evāryamārgabalādhānena maha-
tīm saṃjñāgranthim vinivartya tathāgatajñānam pratyabhijānīran | tathā-
gatasamatām cānuprāpnuyuh | te tathāgatamārgopadeśena sarvasaṃjñākṛ-
tabandhanāni vyapanayanti |*

[^Aāryeṇa mārgo° emended to āryamargo° according to Takasaki, 1966: 397]

This passage is very clear in attributing the actual process of purification to sentient beings alone (*svayam eva*). The Tathāgata's role is limited to teaching them the Eightfold Path, thereby setting their purifying activities in motion. The text stresses that it is sentient beings themselves who remove their misconceptions and finally realize *tathāgatajñāna*. The verb used to describe this realization is *pratyabhijānīte*. It is here used in the sense of “to become aware of” or “recognize” something which living beings have always been carrying around within them, namely *tathāgatajñāna*. This recognition is the result of living beings' practice along the Noble Path, and coincides with the full manifestation of their *tathāgatajñāna*, the realization of their buddhahood.

The verb *pratyabhijānīte* implies, then, more than just the pure act of recognizing. According to this TUSN passage, recognition can only take place when living beings follow the Noble Path. It is thus clear that the meaning of *pratyabhijānīte* in this passage goes far beyond the process of abstractly remembering the fact that one possesses buddha-nature. Here, the term implies a fundamental change brought about by the adoption of certain rules and corresponding behaviors that lead to the full manifestation of buddhahood. In the lines preceding the passage translated above, the Buddha had stated that as long as living beings are defiled by wrong conceptions, they would not “be aware of” or “realize” their *tathāgatajñāna*. Four verbs are used in these lines, and we can see that they cover the meaning contained in the verb *pratyabhijānīte*. These verbs are *jānanti*, *prajānanti*, *anubhavanti* and *sākṣātkurvanti* (RGVV 24.1). It is quite possible that any such Sanskrit term could be understood in both ways, i.e., “to become aware of” and “to accomplish”. The former alternative

would entail that knowledge of the presence of a buddha within was considered extremely important on the path leading to awakening.

The importance of religious confidence and motivation (*śraddhā*) for the process of awakening

This fourth point leads to another question, that is, the role of *śraddhā* in the awakening process.¹² In one of its verses, the RGV(V), the most important systematic treatise on buddha-nature in India, argues that just as a blind person cannot see the blazing sun, in the same way, the highest truth can only be grasped (*anugantavya*) by means of religious confidence and motivation (RGV I.153). The immediately following commentary adds that *dharmatā*, i.e., absolute reality, cannot be the object of deliberative thinking (*na cintayitavyā*) nor of conceptual construction (*na vikalpayitavyā*), but can only be approached by means of conviction and delight (*adhimoktavyā*). This idea is further discussed in the commentary to verse I.36, which has it that the cultivation of conviction and delight in the teachings of the Mahāyāna (*mahāyānadharmādhimuktibhāvanā*) is one of the causes of the purification of the *tathāgatadhātu*, the buddha-element, from the adventitious defilements which obscure it in the state of non-awakening. Conviction and delight is here deemed necessary as an antidote to break the doubts of those who do not find pleasure in the teachings of the Mahāyāna, and in particular, to break the hostile resistance of the so-called *icchantikas*.

In other passages, it is made clear that religious confidence and motivation (*śraddhā*) is understood as a necessary means for approaching absolute reality not only for worldly persons, but also for *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, who can comprehend only in this way the inconceivable

¹² I understand the complex Sanskrit term *śraddhā* in this context as “religious confidence and motivation”. It partly overlaps with the term *adhimukti* (“conviction and delight”) as can be seen from the passage immediately below. A comprehensive analysis of both of these terms and their exact connotations in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism is, to my knowledge, still a desideratum. In my attempt to render *śraddhā* I aimed at avoiding the standard translation “faith”, which has deep roots and implications in the Christian theological traditions. My understanding and translation of *śraddhā* owes a great deal to Hacker, 1963.

fact that mind is both naturally pure (*prakṛtipariśuddhacitta*), that is, that it is buddha-nature; and that it is defiled (*upakliṣṭatā*) at the same time. This, by the way, is also said to hold true for the *bodhisattva* who has freshly set out on the Mahāyāna path (*navayānasamprasthita*).¹³

On the other hand, the texts are largely silent about the question of whether this same *śraddhā* can also function as the decisive (and maybe even exclusive) means for attaining awakening. In one passage, the RGVV emphasizes that only *bodhisattvas* endowed with great qualities (*mahādharmaśamanvāgata*) are able to understand the highest truth, whereas others need to base themselves on confidence in the buddhas (*tathāgataśraddhā*).¹⁴ My impression is that in the earliest texts on buddha-nature, we do not find a homogenous position on the question of how *śraddhā*, on the one hand, and discriminative knowledge (*prajñā*) or non-conceptual gnosis (*jñāna*), on the other, are linked, in the process of attaining awakening. That different interpretations of their relation exist is demonstrated, for instance, by much later Tibetan commentators and schools, from a period when buddha-nature doctrine became a topic of vivid debate in Tibet, spawning a wide range of diverse positions.

Now, we do not know the exact historical developments through which Indian texts on buddha-nature came into existence, and even texts like the RGV and its commentary seem to be end products of complex developments in both their compilation and their diverse interpretative strategies, as Takasaki Jikidō and Lambert Schmithausen have convincingly shown.¹⁵ Given this, I tend to conceive of the oldest layer of buddha-nature texts as belonging to a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism which is more oriented towards factors of religious emotionality as crucial in the process of attaining liberation – a branch whose main emphasis lies on the non-rational recognition of the overwhelmingly positive and absolute character of buddhahood and buddha-nature. Especially in

¹³ See, e.g., RGV(V) commentary to I.1 and I.25; verse I.153.

¹⁴ See RGVV 22.1-4 (quoting from the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*).

¹⁵ Based on Takasaki Jikidō's ground-breaking study of the RGVV, in which he outlines his idea of the oldest parts of the RGVV (Takasaki, 1966), there is at least one more contribution of fundamental importance that takes up and elaborates upon Takasaki's argument, namely Schmithausen, 1971.

two other early texts on buddha-nature, the Mahāyānist *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*, we find buddhahood exposed in very positive terms, such as claims that it is permanent (*nitya*), blissful (*sukha*), pure (*śubha*) and even self (*ātman*).¹⁶ These characterizations are cited in the RGV(V), and lead me to assume that the beginnings of buddha-nature thought in India lie more in the direction of an orientation towards particular religious emotions, such as confidence, and a resulting positive motivation, or, in Schmithausen's terms, a "positive-mystical" direction, rather than in a direction which has been labeled a "negative-intellectual" conception of liberation and awakening.¹⁷

The RGV understands itself as an attempt to correct the failure to positively appreciate the factors that constitute buddhahood, which are, according to the RGV, truly existent; while at the same time correcting the foolish assumption that other *dharmas* are real, whereas in fact, they have no existence in themselves.¹⁸ Indeed, the topics of confidence in buddhahood, the supporting power of one's buddha-nature, and the need to engage with full motivation emerge as a principal theme in one of the similes found in the TGS, i.e., the simile of the pregnant woman who, ugly and despised though she feels, unknowingly carries a future world-emperor in her womb.¹⁹

This same issue of the importance of confidence and motivation undergoes a more lengthy treatment in another *sūtra*, which, according to Takasaki, is also part of the oldest layer of texts on buddha-nature: the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*. However, the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* also does not seem to expound a unified structure in terms of which the awakening process should be imagined, and which stipulates a definitive position for these factors in this process.

One of the underlying problems which seem to pervade the history of buddha-nature thought can already be felt here: How can the buddha-

¹⁶ See the commentary and the citation of the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* in RGVV 30.9–31.6.

¹⁷ This is, of course, a topic far too extensive to touch upon in more detail. Suffice it to point out some of the works dealing with this topic from one perspective or another: la Vallée Poussin, 1937; Schmithausen, 1981; Vetter, 1988.

¹⁸ See RGV verses I.36, 37 with the prose commentary.

¹⁹ See TGS 8A-C and corresponding verses, in Zimmermann, 2002.

element, which is ultimately transcendent in character and is of the same nature with the buddhas, be realized cognitively in this world?²⁰ Soteriologically, the buddha-nature of all sentient beings implies, no doubt, the immanence of the absolute. On the other hand, the source texts claim that this pure absolute reality, which at the same time is also defiled, is beyond rational thinking (*acintya*) and accessible only to an omniscient being (*sarvajñaviṣaya*).²¹ How then should this absolute, which is immanent only from a soteriological standpoint, be cognitively grasped? I am afraid that the texts are not explicit enough to allow for an answer to this question. My impression is, once again, that the proponents of the theory did not focus on expounding an exact Abhidharma-style framework for the process of awakening, but rather, aimed at producing a new and inspiring spiritual concept, which would be understood by practitioners and encourage them on their path to spiritual emancipation.

The efficacy of buddhahood

In closing this paper, I would like to deal with the question of how the awakened state, and the characteristics of an individual who has undergone this transformative process, will become manifest. Here, I think, we are on more solid ground, given that the texts abound with descriptions of how the state of buddhahood is to be imagined, and how the activities of a buddha are to be described. RGV(V) alone dedicates the last two of its five chapters to the qualities of a buddha (*buddhaguna*) and the acts of a buddha (*jinakriyā*). The author(s) of the TGS, similarly, do not tire of emphasizing that the realization of one's buddha-nature leads to the performance of the tasks of a buddha by the awakened individual.²² The

²⁰ Exactly this question, both from a more general perspective and with respect to the buddha-nature scriptures, is dealt with in Ruegg, 1989, to which I owe much inspiration.

²¹ See RGVV 21.17–18 and 74.10.

²² In the latter part of most of the nine illustrations, we find typical statements such as the following: "...then [they] will be designated 'tathāgata, honorable one and perfectly awakened one', and [they] will also perform all the tasks of a tathāgata" (1B);

texts obviously consider this fact as an automatic consequence of the manifestation of one's buddha-nature, and in several passages it is stated that this activity is a characteristic of buddhahood.

This in itself demonstrates that efficaciousness was a key category in the early stage of *tathāgatagarbha* thought. The reason for describing a buddha primarily in terms of dynamic activity may well lie in an attitude in which worldly engagement predominates over more theoretical concerns. At the same time, we encounter another characteristic of the buddha-nature teaching, namely, that the attributes of a buddha are thought of as inseparably linked to absolute reality, which, of course, also constitutes the buddha-nature of sentient beings. This makes the buddha qualities *per se* unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) elements.²³ Consequently, once living beings realize their true nature, their buddha qualities, being inseparably linked with it, automatically become active too. This is by no means a general matter of course, given that in other soteriological systems, the buddha qualities count as additional elements which, after one has realized ultimate reality, can be produced in a kind of supplementary process in order for one to count as a full buddha. The Yogācāra teaching of the five *gotras*, where different levels of awakening are taken into consideration and not all of them lead to complete buddhahood, is just a sophisticated reflection of this old Buddhist idea, completely alien to our buddha-nature texts. At the same time, the *tathāgatagarbha* texts thus seem to promote the idea of a perfect uniformity of buddhahood in terms of the full arrangement of all buddha qualities, without leaving any room for individual traits. In terms of the buddha-nature theory, all these uncreated buddha-qualities will always unfold their efficacy, inde-

“[When their] tathāgata's mental vision (*tathāgatajñānadarśana*) has become purified, [they] will perform the tasks of a tathāgata in the world” (2B); “[I do this] in order to induce those [sentient beings], after becoming tathāgatas, to continually perform the tasks [of a tathāgata] throughout the world, and with readiness in speech to teach the Dharma...” (2.4); “At some point [you will] attain the essence of awakening (*bodhimaṇḍa*). Then [you] will proceed to liberate myriads of living beings” (8.6). All passages from the TGS are quoted from Zimmermann, 2002.

²³ See the citation from the *Śrīmālā-sūtra* in RGVV (73.1–5) and the discussion of this issue as found in the RGV(V) in Schmithausen, 1973: 135–138.

pendent of the particular exercises the individual predominantly cultivated before his awakening.

This, however, is just as should be expected, given that the idea that all beings have buddha-nature implies that there cannot be an alternative level of liberation, be it above or below that of a buddha. Just like the sun, so will each buddha, once awakened, shine indifferently on all other sentient beings, without needing to activate a particular function in order to do so.²⁴ I consider this last point – that buddha qualities are uncreated and latently present in all living beings – particularly worth mentioning, given that it is exactly this somewhat this-worldly dimension of the *tathāgatagarbha* strand of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and its view of the liberated individual, that positions it in contrast to some of its doctrinal predecessors and competitors.

Abbreviations

RGV(V)	<i>Ratnagotravibhāga(vyākhyā)</i>
TGS	<i>Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra</i>
TUSN	* <i>Tathāgatopattisambhava-nirdeśa</i>

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²⁴ See, e.g., RGV IV.63–65.

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