On the Knowability and Expressibility of Absolute Reality in Buddhism

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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 samsāra, 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, or to the most advanced Bodhisattvas.

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, 1Ha sa edition, mDo, vol. 8a); RGV=Ratnagotravibhāga-Mahāyānantaratatantrasūtra (edited by E. H. Johnston, Patna, 1950); RGVV=Commentary on the RGV; ŚMDSS=Srimaladevisimhanādasūtra (bKa’ ’gyur, 1Ha sa edition, dKon brtsegs, vol. cha); Théorie=La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra, Études sur la sotériologie et la gnoseologie 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 Drdhadhyaśayaparivarvata and the Anānataśparṇatvaniṛdeśaparivarvata), 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 (bhāmi) see the tathāgatagarbha only in part. Cf. MPNS, fol. 16lf.; RGV 2’ 33, 69, 73.
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and that it is inaccessible to the Auditors (śrāvakā) 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 (catuskoti), and that it cannot therefore be expressed verbally (avācya, anabhilapiya), 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 tathāgatagarbha—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 (vālaksana), 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 (pratyatmam); 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 RGVVV 1. 153); MPNS, fol. 138a (and 52a). Cf. RGGV 1. 32–33.

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The problem of the transcendence as against the immanence of absolute reality is closely connected with the question of faith (śraddha). The Sūtra and Śāstra sources indeed state that the paramārtha can only be approached (a-gam-, anu-gam-) through faith; and the commentary on the Ratnagotравibhāga sums up the matter by saying that dharmata is the object of neither deliberative thought nor of dichotomizing conceptualization, and that it can therefore only be the object of convinced adhesion (adhimoktavyā).

Convinced adhesion (adhimukti), a partial equivalent of śraddha, in fact figures as one cause of the purification of the tathāgatadhatu leading to the attainment of reality; for it is the remedy against the icchantika's hostile resistance (pratigha) to the dharma of the Mahāyāna. 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.

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 (prakṛtiparisuddhacitta) – in other words the tathāgatagarbha – and its state of defilement only through śraddha. And it holds good also for the Bodhisattva who has only recently started out on his course (navayānasamprasthitā); 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. It may be noted

5) See also the so-called *Mahāyānasraddhotpadasāstra (Ta ch'êng ch'i hsin lun).
6) See the Śūtras quoted in RGGV 1. 1; RGV 1. 153.
8) RGVV 1. 36.
9) RGVV 1. 32-33.
10) Sagaramatiparipṛcchā (quoted in RGVV 1. 68, p. 49).
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that the Sūtra text in which the true nature of śānyāta is thus stated emphasizes in addition the equivalence of the tathāgatagarbha with śānyāta. 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.

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. This school reached its fullest development in Tibet, where it was represented by rNog Blo Idan šes rab, the pupil of the Kaśmirian scholar Sajjana (11th century) with whom he translated the Ratnagotravibhāga into Tibetan, by gTsañ neg 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 Śrīmālādevīsimhanādasaśūtra 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. cittaprasāda) so that it can understand the paramārtha. This shift in emphasis concerning the gnoseological status of the paramārtha and the role of

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12) ŚMDSS, fol. 445a; RGVV 1. 154–155 (avataranika). Indeed, the MPNS states that even the Bodhisattvas of the tenth stage have difficulty in seeing the buddhādhatu 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 dharma-kāya wholly.


14) See above, n. 3.

15) zen pa'i yul. V. Théorie, p. 302.
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. 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 (nairatmya) 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 yanas 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 Śrīmalādevīśimhanāda-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—nairatmya—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 yanas 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.
According to this school, then, the paramartha and the tathagatagarbha 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 Sutras 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 tathagatagarbha) 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 pa, one of the chief schools advocating this view, the tathagatagarbha is indeed to be identified with absolute reality (tathātā = śānyata), it is not to be identified with this reality in its pure aspect (nirmalā tathātā) - 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 tathātā).

19) V. Théorie, pp. 177–243; 514–515.