

## The Doctrine of Buddha-Nature Is Impeccably Buddhist

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ONE OF THE MOST important arguments made by the exponents of Critical Buddhism is, as Matsumoto Shirō asserts in the title of one of his papers, that “The Doctrine of *Tathāgata-garbha* Is Not Buddhist.” In brief, the claim made by Matsumoto and Hakamaya Noriaki is that *tathāgata-garbha* or Buddha-nature thought is *dhātu-vāda*, an essentialist philosophy closely akin to the monism of the Upaniṣads. In Matsumoto and Hakamaya’s view, only thought that strictly adheres to the anti-essentialist principle of *pratityasamutpāda* taught by Śākyamuni should be recognized as Buddhist. Buddha-nature thought, being a *dhātu-vāda* or essentialist philosophy, is in fundamental violation of this requirement and consequently should not be regarded as Buddhist. On the basis of this reading of Buddha-nature thought, Matsumoto and Hakamaya proceed to make the several subsequent claims documented in this volume. Since the assertion that Buddha-nature thought is *dhātu-vāda* is such a foundational claim, I will focus my remarks upon this one point in their corpus, though at the end of this chapter I will have a few words to say regarding their charge that Buddha-nature thought is to blame for the weakness of Japanese Buddhist social ethics.

I propose in this paper to challenge Matsumoto and Hakamaya’s reading of Buddha-nature thought. In my understanding, while Buddha-nature thought uses some of the terminology of essentialist and monistic philosophy, and thus may give the reader the impression that it is essentialist or monistic, a careful study of how those terms are used—how they actually function in the text—leads the reader to a very different conclusion. I will attempt to demonstrate that Buddha-nature thought is by no means *dhātu-vāda* as charged, but is instead an impeccably Buddhist

variety of thought, based firmly on the idea of emptiness, which in turn is a development of the principle of *pratityasamutpāda*.

In making my remarks I draw upon the exposition of Buddha-nature thought given in the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* (*Fo hsing lun*), attributed to Vasubandhu and translated into Chinese by Paramārtha.<sup>1</sup> The *Buddha-Nature Treatise* is a particularly useful text to consult in this matter inasmuch as it constitutes a considered attempt, by an author of great philosophical sophistication, to articulate the Buddha-nature concept per se and to explain both its philosophical meaning and its soteriological function. Indeed, the author is savvy enough to have anticipated the criticisms that this concept would face, including the particular criticisms leveled in our time by Matsumoto and Hakamaya, and to have effectively countered them in the 6th century CE. In this chapter, then, I will consider some of these criticisms in turn and see how the author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* defends as Buddhist the concept of Buddha-nature and the language in which it is expressed.<sup>2</sup>

Before delving into the particular criticisms, however, we must consider the intention of the author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*. Why does he write this text? What is his motivation? What are the underlying concerns that move him to speak as he does? What does he hope to achieve with this text? Answers to these questions are not difficult to find in the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, as the author frequently refers to his concerns and objectives.

Probably the single most important motivation for the author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* (and, I surmise, others in the Buddha-nature camp) is his concern over the negative language prevailing among exponents of *śūnyavāda*. The author states many times that an important part of his audience is neophyte bodhisattvas who misunderstand the language of emptiness as nihilistic. Mind you, the author himself does not make this mistake, and indeed incorporates the idea of emptiness in a fundamental way into his own work. He is aware, however, that there are some among his contemporaries who, by virtue of the doctrine of emptiness, regard the Buddha as having expounded a nihilistic view and are themselves engaged in spreading this interpretation. Others seem to have responded to emptiness language with fear and perhaps left the Buddhist fold altogether. Still others apparently found that the relentless negativity of *śūnya* dialectics simply sapped them of the positive motivation they needed to sustain Buddhist practice.

To all such persons, the author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* was very much concerned to demonstrate that Buddhism is not nihilistic but, much to the contrary, holds a promise of something of great value that can be discovered through Buddhist practice. Since emptiness language has these negative effects, and since, after all, *śūnyavāda* is not the Truth but simply an *upāya*, why not experiment with other ways to communicate the Dharma? And since *śūnyavāda* had pretty well exhausted the *via negativa*, and language, being dualistic, basically offers only negative and positive options, why not experiment with articulating the Dharma in positive language?

Our author wants to attract people to the Buddha-dharma; in particular, he wants very much to encourage them to practice so that they will realize in their own lives that to which the words of scripture point. In his view, negative language has had its day; it is time to give positive language a try. His dilemma, of course, is a classic one for a Buddhist: how to speak positively of that which the Buddha himself refused to elucidate; how to speak of what is found at the end of the Path without betraying fundamental Buddhist philosophical or soteriological principles. I am convinced that our author is consciously walking a tightrope between the unacceptable negativity of *śūnyavāda* on the one hand, and, on the other, language that violates Buddhist principles (in particular, essentialist or entitative language). What kind of language can he construct that will overcome the negativity of emptiness language without itself becoming entitative? Readers may judge for themselves whether our author succeeds in this very difficult undertaking, but I urge you to understand his effort in the context of this motivation and this objective. Now to the criticisms.

#### *PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA*

Matsumoto and Hakamaya have argued that only *pratītyasamutpāda* thought is acceptable as “Buddhist” thought. They maintain that Buddha-nature thought is incompatible with *pratītyasamutpāda* thought and therefore is not Buddhist. However, our author completely accepts *pratītyasamutpāda* teachings; he assumes their validity and builds upon them to construct Buddha-nature thought. Let us examine a passage where the author uses *pratītyasamutpāda* thought to examine the concept of an “own-nature,” in order to distinguish the latter from Buddha-nature.

## BUDDHA-NATURE IS IMPECCABLY BUDDHIST

For example, what formerly is a seed subsequently produces a grain plant. The “former” and “subsequent” stages of this grain are neither one [the same] nor two [different], neither exist nor do not exist. If they were one [the same], then there would be no “former” and “subsequent.” If they were different, then what was originally grain could subsequently be a bean. Therefore, they are neither the same nor different....

Therefore we say that there being no own-nature is like the former and subsequent [stages of a] plant. It is neither one [i.e., eternally the same] nor different [i.e., discontinuous between former and subsequent stages] and [therefore] is able to function broadly and variously.<sup>3</sup>

Note that the argument conveyed in this passage is composed of concepts from *pratītyasamutpāda* thought. This is a dynamic type of argument in which the emphasis is upon causation: this being the case, that follows. Note that it is precisely because the world is conceived as dynamic, as a series of processes, rather than constructed of entities, that life as we know it is possible: plants are processes, not entities, that grow in an orderly fashion from seed to fruit; this is classic *pratītyasamutpāda* thought. It is in this context that the author is able to clarify his concept of Buddha-nature. Note well that the latter is not a static entity: just like the plant, it is neither the same nor different over time—because, like the plant, it is not an entity, but a process. Note that its functioning is made possible precisely by the fact that it is not an entity but a process functioning in an orderly fashion within the world of cause and effect. Finally, note that Buddha-nature is being described solely in terms of its functions. Thus far, there is no conflict between *pratītyasamutpāda* and Buddha-nature thought.

## ATMAN AND THE OTHER GUNAPĀRAMITĀ

In his essay “The *Lotus Sutra* and Japanese Culture,” Matsumoto argues that the *tathāgatagarbha*, or *dhātu*, is equivalent to an atman and serves as the essence or foundation that produces all things. He has constructed a chart that shows all particular dharmas being produced by the underlying *dhātu* (atman). He points out that the *Śrīmālādevī Sutra* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* actually call the *tathāgatagarbha*, or Buddha-nature, atman. Thus, it is argued, Buddha-nature thought is *dhātu-vāda* that violates Buddhist strictures negating the existence of essences or substances.

The *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, like the above-mentioned sutras, also directly calls the Buddha-nature “atman.” However, in doing so it in no way adheres to *dhātu-vāda* or crypto-Hindu philosophy. On the contrary, the author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* goes to considerable lengths to explain his use of the word “atman” in terms of mainstream Mahayana thought. We shall see below that our author does not accept the kind of monistic metaphysics that Matsumoto calls *dhātu-vāda*, but first let us examine his use of the term “atman” itself.

The discussion of atman in the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* may be examined most profitably in the context of the text’s discussion of the four *guṇapāramitā*, the perfect or transcendent qualities, of the *dharma-kāya*.

All non-Buddhists, in their various ways, conceive of and grasp a self (*wō* 我) in those things that lack self; namely the five skandhas, e.g., form, etc. Yet these things, such as form, differ from what one grasps as the mark of self; therefore, they are eternally lacking in self. [However,] with the wisdom of thusness, all Buddhas and bodhisattvas realize the perfection of not-self (*anātmapāramitā*) of all things. Because this perfection of not-self and that which is seen as the mark of not-self are not different, the Tathagata says that this mark of the eternal not-self is the true, essential nature (*chen t'i hsing* 真體性) of all things. It is because of this that the perfection of not-self is called “self”....

All non-Buddhists perceive and grasp a self within the five skandhas. By overturning that attachment to self as vacuous and cultivating *prajñāpāramitā*, they may realize the supreme not-self that is identical to the perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*). This is the fruit [of the practice of *prajñāpāramitā*]. This is the appropriate knowledge [for them].<sup>4</sup>

In other words, in this text, *ātmapāramitā* = *anātmapāramitā* = the true, essential nature of all things. Here we have language not only of atman but even a direct statement that this atman is the “true, essential nature of all things.” On the face of it, this would seem to be a perfect illustration of the phenomenon that Matsumoto decries. However, upon closer examination, the fact that this atman cum essential nature of all things is identical to anatman and is realized through the practice of *prajñāpāramitā* absolutely precludes such a reading.

The author agrees with early Buddhism that the five skandhas lack self. He agrees with proponents of *śūnyavāda* that cultivation of *prajñā-pāramitā* yields realization of the lack of self (the emptiness) of all things.

But he also agrees with those Yogacarins who felt that this was not a good place to stop! That is, ontologically, universal anatman is the final word; but linguistically and strategically, another word—a positive word—needs to be added. Thus, he goes on to point out that *anātmapāramitā* actually *is the case*—and this is a positive statement. Furthermore, it is not sad, unpleasant, regrettable, or otherwise a negative factor that universal anatman is the case. In fact—and here he takes a tangible step forward in committing to what is the case beyond mere linguistic packaging—it is an extremely wonderful thing that anatman is the case. Here we go a step beyond the level of assertion that *śūnya* theorists were willing to make. He wants there to be no question in the practitioner’s mind: what is to be found at the end of the path is wonderful. He needs to create a new language to express this!

An examination of the other three *gunapāramitā* will confirm that our author wishes to remain Buddhistically orthodox while creating a language that allows him to speak positively of what may be found at the end of the Buddhist path. Indeed, his effort to remain orthodox is so patent that there is little doubt in my mind that he is very conscious of what he is doing. The following is one of several passages discussing the *gunapāramitā*, with the passage on *ātmapāramitā* (translated above) omitted.

Next, [we will discuss] the Tathagata’s four *gunapāramitā*...purity (*vimala*, *ching* 淨), self (atman, *wō* 我), bliss (*sukha*, *le* 樂), and eternity (*nitya*, *ch’ang* 常).

The *icchantika* vehemently reject the Mahayana. In order to overturn their pleasure in dwelling in the impurity of samsara they may cultivate the bodhisattva’s faithful joy in the Mahayana and obtain the purity-paramita that is the fruit [of this practice]. This is the appropriate knowledge [for them].

#### [*ātmapāramitā*]

Because the sravaka deeply fear the pain (*duḥkha*) of samsara, they enjoy living serenely in samsara, extinguishing *duḥkha*. In order to overturn this [false] notion of pleasure, they may cultivate the samadhi that overcomes false emptiness vis-à-vis all mundane and supramundane dharmas [and obtain] the bliss-paramita that is the fruit [of this practice]. This is the appropriate knowledge [for them].

The pratyekabuddha pay no attention to actions to benefit sentient beings but only dwell in peaceful isolation. In order to overturn this sentiment, they may cultivate the bodhisattva’s *mahākaruṇā* in order to take

action for the benefit of sentient beings until samsara itself is exhausted. Since there always will be those who need support and assistance, [they obtain] the eternity-paramita that is the fruit [of this practice]. This is the appropriate knowledge [for them].

In this way, faithful joy in the Mahayana, prajna-paramita, the samadhi that overcomes false emptiness, and bodhisattva *mahākaruṇā* are the four causes that bring to completion the four *gunapāramitā* of the Tathagata's *dharma-kāya*.<sup>5</sup>

Here, then, are the notorious *gunapāramitā*: the purity, self, joy, and eternity that are given as *guna*—qualities or descriptors—of the *dharma-kāya* in Buddha-nature literature. But what are the *guṇapāramitā*? A careful reading shows these to be functions, processes, or continuously evolving conditions of being. They are the completed or perfected form of the four practices or disciplines that are given as their causes. Consider purity: ultimately it reduces to faithful joy in the Mahayana. Who or what “has” this purity? A person (perhaps a former “*icchantika*”), bodhisattva, or Buddha. Who or what “has” this purity in its ultimate or paramita form? A Buddha or Tathagata (or in other words, the Tathagata's *dharma-kāya*). What, then, is this faithful joy in the Mahayana? A little reflection will reveal that faith or joy in anything is something that changes moment by moment. It is certainly not a static thing, but a continuously evolving condition of being—a function, or process—of a person, bodhisattva, or Buddha.

Consider bliss: ultimately it reduces to the samadhi that overcomes false emptiness; it represents freedom from fear of *duḥkha*, freedom from negativity and nihilism. Again, who or what “has” this joy? A person, bodhisattva, or Buddha, the latter of whom “has” it in its ultimate form. Again, a short reflection on the kind of thing we are discussing—a blissful condition of freedom from fear—reveals that we are talking about something that changes moment by moment and thus is a process or function of person, bodhisattva, or Buddha.

Last, eternity. Here we might expect to find some “thing” that lasts forever. To the contrary, however, what we find is the Buddha's *mahākaruṇā* committed to work for the benefit of sentient beings again and again, over and over, until all sentient beings are free from samsara. This is a dynamic process: a commitment that is constantly renewed, moment by moment, as the Buddha continuously engages in an endless variety of acts for the sake of sentient beings. If this is *dhātu-vāda*, then all

of Mahayana Buddhism must be *dhātu-vāda*. Since we are not talking about a *dharmakāya* as an eternal “thing,” however, but rather about a Buddha working endlessly in compassionate actions for sentient beings; nor of a *dharmakāya* as a pure, substantive (self-ful) or blissful “thing,” but of a Buddha whose joy in the Mahayana is perfect, who has fully realized the selflessness of all things, and who is blissfully free of all fear and negativity, it is clear that we are not expressing any kind of ontological theory at all, much less a *dhātu-vāda* ontology. We are just talking about what a Buddha is like and extolling the virtues of such a being.

Thus, the issue of the use of the term *atman* (and the other *guṇapāramitā*) in Buddha-nature texts reduces to a matter of mere words. The author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, for one, is following a particular strategy of language use as an *upāya*, based upon his judgment as to what kind of language will be most effective in bringing sentient beings to enlightenment.

However, we have by no means yet resolved the issue raised by Matsumoto and Hakamaya concerning whether Buddha-nature thought represents *dhātu-vāda* or monism. This issue needs to be addressed on a more fundamental level, the level of ontological views, to which we now turn.

#### ONTOLOGY

As mentioned above, Matsumoto and Hakamaya believe Buddha-nature thought to be a version of *dhātu-vāda* and thus to constitute a substantialist monism in which the Buddha-nature is the sole foundational reality out of which apparent reality is produced. It will be my task in this section to show that this is not the case, at least in the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* (though I suspect my argument has broader application).

#### *The Affirmation of Buddha-Nature*

The first priority of the author of this text is to affirm Buddha-nature. From the outset, however, he takes considerable pains to frame his affirmation of Buddha-nature in language that will leave him within the parameters of Buddhist orthodoxy. The text opens with the carefully constructed question, “Why did the Buddha speak of Buddha-nature?”<sup>6</sup> Note that the question is not, “What is Buddha-nature?” The latter question would immediately beg the ontological question by implying that

Buddha-nature “is” something. But our author is too sophisticated to make such a mistake. His immediate answer to the question asked is:

The Tathagata said that all sentient beings universally possess Buddha-nature in order to [help people] overcome five errors and give rise to five virtues—that is, in order to cause sentient beings to overcome inferior mind, arrogance, delusion, denial of the true Dharma, and attachment to self.

Regarding causing sentient beings to overcome inferior mind, those sentient beings who have not yet heard the Buddha say that there is Buddha-nature do not know that in themselves they certainly have Buddha-nature and can attain Buddhahood. Therefore in this lifetime, they develop an inferior state of mind and are unable to give rise to *bodhicitta*. Wishing to have them to put aside their inferior state of mind and give rise to *bodhicitta*, [the Buddha] says all sentient beings universally possess Buddha-nature.

Regarding arrogance, there are people who have heard the Buddha say that sentient beings possess Buddha-nature and this caused them to give rise to an [arrogant] mind. Being [arrogant] they then say, ‘I possess Buddha-nature and therefore I can give rise to the [Buddha] mind.’ They become proud and say, ‘Others cannot do it.’ In order to break down this attitude, the Buddha said all sentient beings, every one, possesses Buddha-nature.

Regarding overcoming delusion: If a person has this arrogant mind, then true wisdom with respect to the thusness-principle and thusness-realm does not become manifest and delusion arises....

Overcoming denial of the true Dharma all comes down to sentient beings’ errors regarding the dual emptiness [of person and thing]. By realizing emptiness, pure wisdom and virtue arise. This is what is called truth. As for “denial”: if they do not speak of Buddha-nature, they have not fully understood (*liao 了*) emptiness. Even if they have grasped the truth, they speak ill of thusness. [In them] neither wisdom nor virtue is complete.

Regarding overcoming attachment to self: If one does not see in sentient beings [both] falseness and error as well as truth and virtue, one will not give rise to *mahākaruṇā*. Because one hears the Buddha speak of Buddha-nature, one knows [there is both] falseness and error as well as truth and virtue in sentient beings and one gives rise to *mahākaruṇā*. There is no “this” and “that” [self and other] and therefore one overcomes attachment to self.

With these five meanings as cause and condition, the Buddha spoke of Buddha-nature producing five virtues, viz., diligence, reverence,

wisdom (*prajna*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and compassion (*mahākaruṇā*). These five virtues can overcome [the corresponding] five errors....

To destroy five errors and produce five virtues—this is why the Buddha said all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature.<sup>7</sup>

Why did the Buddha speak of Buddha-nature? The reasons fall into two categories: psychological/pedagogical and substantive. As the first reason shows, he wants to encourage people to practice; specifically, he wants them to aspire to Buddhahood and arouse *bodhicitta*. The second and fifth reasons show he is concerned that they detach ego from achievement. The third and fourth reasons show that there is, however, an issue of substance here; a matter of truth is at stake. We will examine this below. First, however, let us see how the above remarks relate to the issue of the “existence” of Buddha-nature. At the end of the treatise, the author gives the following question and answer:

Question: ‘The Mahayana sutras spoken by the Buddha formerly all declared that all dharmas are empty, like a cloud, a dream, or magic. Since *kleśa* can conceal, they are like clouds. Karmic action is not real, so it is like a dream. Everything is produced by the five skandhas, karmic retribution, the *kleśa*, and karmic action, so it is all compared to magic. This is the meaning that has been declared in the sutras. Why, then, do you say that all sentient beings possess (*yu* 有) the Buddha-nature?’

Answer: ‘As I said at the beginning [of this treatise], the five virtues overcoming the five errors manifest the existence (*yu*) of Buddha-nature. That is why I speak of it “being” (*yu*).’<sup>8</sup>

Here we have the verb for existence (the verb *yu* can be translated as either “have/possess” or “exist/be”) attributed to Buddha-nature. Note, however, that as the author uses it, his affirmation that sentient beings “have” Buddha-nature or that “existence” can be attributed to Buddha-nature is only in the sense that speaking of Buddha-nature encourages practice, corrects certain errors in practice and gives a fuller representation of what is the case than does the language of emptiness.

Ordinarily in this text, however, the author does not attribute simple existence to Buddha-nature, but instead affirms that Buddha-nature “aboriginally exists” (*pen yu* 本有). Again, this sounds like the kind of language that concerns Matsumoto and Hakamaya. However, let us examine its use in the text.

Question: According to you, why did the Buddha say that [some] sentient beings do not dwell in [Buddha-]nature and eternally fail to attain *parinirvāna*?

Answer: The cause of being an “*icchantika*” is vehemently rejecting the Mahayana. When one [behaves] in this manner, samsara will not be exhausted for a very long time. It was in this sense that the sutras speak—i.e., in order to cause sentient beings to cast aside this behavior. [However,] it is in accordance with the principle of the Tao (*tao li* 道理) that all sentient beings aboriginally possess (*pen yu*) pure Buddha-nature. It is not the case that there should be one who eternally failed to attain *parinirvāna*. This is why Buddha-nature assuredly aboriginally exists. It has nothing to do with [Buddha-nature] either “being” (*yu*) or “not-being” (*wu*).<sup>9</sup>

Once again, Buddha-nature is affirmed. However, it is explicitly stated that this has nothing to do with Buddha-nature either existing or not existing. To say that Buddha-nature “aboriginally exists” is to affirm that there are really no *icchantika* per se, that if a person does not attain *parinirvana* it is because he or she rejects the path of liberation. The bottom line is that the author wants to get people to practice, to aspire to Buddhahood, to realize the Way. To say that “Buddha-nature aboriginally exists” is a way to attain this goal. Like speech affirming atman, speech affirming the “aboriginal existence” of Buddha-nature is an *upāya*, a method that the author hopes will encourage practice and thus contribute to the great end of liberating all sentient beings.

#### *A Different View of Reality*

Now we may proceed to the substantive issue. It seems that our author does, in fact, have a somewhat different vision of reality than that expressed in *śūnyavāda*. The question is, does this different vision remain within the confines of Buddhist orthodoxy? Let us examine the text.

Our author expresses his central point like this: “Buddha-nature is the thusness revealed by the dual emptiness of person and things.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he maintains as we saw above, “If one does not speak of Buddha-nature, one has not completely understood emptiness.”<sup>11</sup> As I have emphasized, our author accepts completely the principle of what he calls “the dual emptiness of persons and things.” To him, this is truth. However, he, along with many others in the Yogacara and *tathāgata-garbha* circles he seems to have frequented, felt that while emptiness

teachings were fully true, they were not the fullness of the truth. To negate error via the path of emptiness, to free oneself of delusion is, in his view, not all that there is to the religious path, specifically the Mahayana path of practice and realization. One frees oneself from delusion and, either right on the heels of this or simultaneously with it, one sees what is true. One can make affirmative statements on the basis of such experience—the problem, as always, is to find the appropriate language with which to do so. Our author uses the Yogacara language of thusness and reality as-it-is (using *ju* 如, *ju-ju* 如如, *chen-ju* 眞如, and *ju-shih* 如實 more or less interchangeably) to speak at this juncture.

It is my understanding that part of the impulse behind the development of the Yogacara movement was the desire to give expression to what was realized in yogic experience, or Buddhist meditative practice. Thusness language is only comprehensible from this perspective. If “thusness” represents an ontological view, it must be said that it is quite a minimalist one. In scope it falls very short of the kind of grandiose claims made for *dhātu-vāda*. Ontologically, after all, the word “thus” is really a tautology—reality is as it is: thus! It is a pointer at reality, and eschews making a substantive predication about reality. Where it does make a claim, it maintains, originally on the basis of an interpretation of meditative experience, that reality can be seen as it truly is in itself. Now this is a substantive claim, indeed, though primarily about human beings and only secondarily about reality as such. It is a claim that human beings are such that through an intensive and extensive transformative process (Buddhist practice) they can become capable of seeing reality as it is in itself. It is a claim, secondarily, that what is experienced on the part of one who has undergone this transformation is reality as it is in itself.

Here we are getting into territory extremely pertinent to the argument made by Matsumoto and Hakamaya. They claim that the Buddha-nature is the fundamental ontological reality and that the multiple dharmas, though fundamentally “inexistent,” have “a degree of existence” since they are “produced from” the fundamental ontological reality and have that reality as their “essence.”<sup>12</sup> Thus we have here a very particular theory of the relationship between the multiple dharmas and the fundamental reality of Buddha-nature.

What then, according to the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, is the ontological relationship between Buddha-nature and dharmas, or reality in its plurality? The text, following Yogacara teaching, does not in fact speak of

a “relationship” between these two—not, indeed, because they are “all one” in a monistic totality, but because reality is nondualistic, as expressed in Yogacara thusness and *trisvabhāva* language.

Yogacara *trisvabhāva* language describes reality as experiential reality; that is, it expresses subject-object nonduality. In this perspective, reality is not conceived as if it were constituted, on the one hand, by minds, and on the other, by objectively existing things “out there.” Instead, reality is constructed in three ways. In *parikalpita-svabhāva* (*fen-pieh hsing* 分別性), deluded minds and a distortion of reality cognized and experienced in terms of subject and object, names and concepts, arise in mutually constructive interdependence. In *paratantra-svabhāva* (*yi-t'a* 依他), reality presents itself and is experienced as *pratītyasamutpāda*. Here reality presents itself as it truly is and one perceives reality as such.

*Parikalpita-svabhāva* is based on the language of provisional speech. Without such language, *parikalpita-svabhāva* would not come into being. Therefore you should know that this *svabhāva* is merely a matter of verbal expression; in reality it has no essence and no properties. This is what is called *parikalpita-svabhāva*.

*Paratantra-svabhāva* is the principle manifest in the twelvefold chain of cause and condition [i.e., *pratītyasamutpāda*]. It serves as the basis for *parikalpita-svabhāva*; therefore, it is established as the *paratantra-svabhāva* (*i-t'a*, other-basis).

*Parinispalpa-svabhāva* is the thusness (*chen-ju*) of all dharmas. It is the nondiscriminating wisdom-realm (*chih ching* 智境) of the wise. Because it purifies the [first] two *svabhāva*, is the realization of the third, and draws out all virtues, it is established as the *parinispalpa-svabhāva*.<sup>13</sup>

In this perspective, therefore, it is not a question of “things” as cognized by common sense being related to an underlying ontological substratum that constitutes true reality. “Things” as cognized by common sense are constructed by a deluded mind that imposes on reality its own grid, which transforms reality as it really is into something made up of discrete, individual entities that exist independently out there as “things.” The fact that such a notion is, in fact, contrary to *pratītyasamutpāda* thought is demonstrated by *paratantra-svabhāva*, which sees reality as interdependently co-arising—i.e., it sees reality in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda* and maintains that is what reality is.

*Parinīpanna-svabhāva* is the thusness of all dharmas, not their ontological foundation. This is enough in itself to invalidate Matsumoto and Hakamaya's thesis. What does it mean to speak of the "thusness of all dharmas"? Recall, "Buddha-nature is the thusness revealed by the dual emptiness of person and things....If one does not speak of Buddha-nature, one has not completely understood emptiness." Thusness is revealed by emptiness; emptiness ultimately leads to thusness. Emptiness removes all errors, views, and attachments from the mind. However, according to the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, one should not stop there. If one penetrates emptiness to the exhaustion of emptiness, then thusness stands revealed.

I take thusness to be a kind of ecstatic experiential apprehension of reality as-it-is. At that point, no thoughts, views, or concepts enter into the experience; they remain extinguished by emptiness. Here, however, an ecstatic experience—of reality, of "all dharmas"—opens up. This has nothing to do with reducing these dharmas to something more primary, more real. The dharmas, just as they are in that ecstatic moment, are intensely real, intensely vivid, and uniquely themselves, though without labels. This is not an ontological theory; this is experience. And if there is an ontological theory implicit in this experience, it is certainly not monism.

Note that *parinīpanna* is given as the "wisdom-realm" of the wise. *Chih* ("wisdom") is the standard term for the subjective and *ching* ("realm") is the standard term for the objective. Thusness is often given in this text as *ju-ju*, a term which incorporates in a single abbreviation the *ju-chih* (如智) and the *ju-ching* (如境), i.e., both the "subjective" and the "objective" components of a single experiential reality. Here is how this works.

The word "thus" of "Thus-come" (the *ju* of *ju-lai* 如來, Tathagata) has two meanings, thusness-wisdom (*ju-ju-chih*) and thusness-realm (*ju-ju-ching*). Since the two stand together, we use the name "thusness" (*ju-ju*).<sup>14</sup>

Thusness, then, is simultaneously reality as-it-is and the experience of reality as-it-is; it is the experiential reality that is immediately "given" and is prior to its bifurcation into subjective and objective components.

To reinforce this point, note that the author does embrace the view that, ontologically speaking, reality is accurately represented by *paratantra-svabhāva*, i.e., *pratītyasamutpāda*. He states:

*Paratantra[-svabhāva]* is of two kinds: impure *paratantra* and pure *paratantra*. With the secondary cause of discrimination (*fen-pieh*), impure *paratantra* comes into being. With the secondary cause of thusness (*ju-ju*), pure *paratantra* comes into being.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, *paratantra* (i. e., *pratītyasamutpāda*) is, as it were, the ontological “given.” One may perceive the ontological given in one of two ways: either through the discriminatory patterns of the deluded mind, or with a mind that sees reality as-it-is, without distortion. When discrimination is present, *paratantra* becomes *parikalpita-svabhāva*. When thusness is present, *paratantra* becomes *pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*. Therefore, in this sense, *paratantra* constitutes the ontological view, while both *parikalpita* and *pariniṣpanna* are soteriological conditions.

When Matsumoto and Hakamaya insist that in Buddha-nature thought there are discrete dharmas whose reality is derived from an underlying monistic *dhātu*/atman/Being-itself, they are not seeing reality at all as our author sees it. For the author of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, discrete entities are false because the very notion of discrete entities is a false notion based upon deluded consciousness. What does exist is a process of interdependent co-origination—*pratītyasamutpāda*—more deeply seen as sunyata, and even more penetratingly as thusness or reality as-it-is.

I must point out that not all Buddha-nature texts are Yogacara amalgams, as is the text used here (however, there are many texts that are Yogacara–Buddha-nature syntheses). There are, of course, also Buddha-nature texts that do not draw on Yogacara tenets and Yogacara texts that either make no reference to *tathāgata-garbha* or are opposed to *tathāgata-garbha* thought. I would like to suggest, therefore, that Buddha-nature thought does not constitute an ontological theory (monistic or otherwise). Buddha-nature thought is a soteriological device. It seems also to be something of a faith statement, i.e.: “I believe that all sentient beings can and ultimately will attain freedom from samsara.” When an author wants to compose a text using Buddha-nature thought for soteriological purposes, he is free to draw on another body of thought (e.g., Yogacara) if he wishes to make ontological statements as well.

I have spoken throughout this chapter of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*. To what extent does the case I have made for this text apply to other prominent Buddha-nature thought texts? I said above that Buddha-nature is a soteriological device and a faith statement, rather than an onto-

logical theory. It does seem to me, in fact, that one needs to consider each Buddha-nature text individually to determine both what point it is making about Buddha-nature and what ontological stance, if any, it is taking.

Let us consider just one other example, the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*. This sutra may well be the oldest of the *tathāgata-garbha* texts. I take this sutra to be a clumsy and philosophically unsophisticated introduction of the concept of *tathāgata-garbha* through the use of concrete examples. In the sutra the pure *tathāgata-garbha* is said to exist uncorrupted within the *kleśa*-bound body and experience of ordinary sentient beings. The Buddha says, “With my Buddha-eye I behold all sentient beings and see that in their *kleśa* of desire, anger, and delusion, there is the Tathagata-wisdom, the Tathagata-eye, and the Tathagata-body.... All sentient beings, in all destinies, in their *kleśa*-bodies possess the *tathāgata-garbha* eternally free of corruption.”<sup>16</sup>

We are then given a series of metaphors to illustrate this point. The pure *tathāgata-garbha* in the midst of *kleśa* is illustrated by comparison with such things as a kernel of rice still within the husk, gold fallen into a filthy place, a storehouse of precious jewels in a poor house, a Buddha statue wrapped in a rag.

Do these illustrations introduce an ontological theory according to which the *tathāgata-garbha* is an entity of some kind that exists in some literal sense within sentient beings? Certainly not! These passages do mean that no matter what condition one is in, one has within oneself something pure, precious, beautiful. But don’t take this “something” as an entity! That “something” is the possibility of self-transformation, ultimately of enlightenment. The examples only mean that no matter what condition one is in, one always has within oneself the possibility of turning around one’s condition by cultivating Buddhahood. In all these examples, it seems to me, the author is interested in asserting the universal possibility of enlightenment, despite all appearances to the contrary! The author is innocent of philosophical pretensions and does not even try to make ontological claims in this text. Thus the *tathāgata-garbha* here is a metaphor for the ability of all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, no more and no less. Here again, then, the *tathāgata-garbha* teaching is introduced as a metaphor for soteriological purposes, but in this case this teaching is not conjoined with any ontological theory at all.

The point is simply that an ontological theory cannot be straightforwardly attributed to Buddha-nature thought, inasmuch as close examination reveals a variety of ontological theories, and an occasional absence of ontological theory, in texts that also espouse Buddha-nature soteriology. Indeed, even the soteriology is not monolithic. The *Śrīmālādevī Sutra* and the *Wu Shang I Ching*, for example, both contrast with the *Buddha-Nature Treatise* in strongly espousing faith as a response to the “inconcevability” of Buddha-nature, whereas the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, while mentioning faith, emphasizes transformational experience.

My first conclusion, then, is that the assertion concerning Buddha-nature thought as a form of *dhātu-vāda* is false, for Buddha-nature is a soteriological device and is ontologically neutral.

#### SOCIAL ANALYSIS IN CRITICAL BUDDHISM

Let me turn very briefly now to a consideration of the social analysis that constitutes an important part of Critical Buddhism. If Buddha-nature is taken as a soteriological device and not as an ontological entity or principle, then it may usefully be compared to a similar (not identical) soteriological principle, namely the “Light Within” or “That of God Within” embraced by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). In both cases we have a soteriological principle that asserts the immanence, within every human being (all sentient beings, in the case of Buddha-nature), of supreme value and perfection. Religious practice, in both cases, is intended to bring the individual person to practical realization of this supreme value, which will yield a liberating or salvific noesis, and transform the person into a selfless and loving being.

The striking difference between the two, as embedded in their historical religious traditions, is that in Quakerism the Light Within is directly tied to ethical teachings and practice—of exactly the kind Matsumoto and Hakamaya seem to seek—while in Buddhism the ethical import of the Buddha-nature has, until modern times, been rather minimal. In Quakerism we see belief in the Light Within directly and explicitly tied to a belief in human equality and the inherent dignity and value of each human being. These, in turn, engender the belief that it is religiously and ethically right to challenge authority, to defy social practices that support social inequality and hierarchy, and to practice strict nonviolence.

Why should such similar soteriological views and practices be associated with such dissimilar ethical views and practices? I do not claim to have a complete answer to this question, but I would like to suggest the obvious—that the difference in ethical postures is due not to some aspect of the soteriological view (Buddha-nature and the Light Within) but to some other, contingent factor(s). It is highly likely, for example, that the ethical stance of Quakerism was strongly influenced by the socioeconomic status of its founder, George Fox (he was from a poor, lower-class stratum of society) and by the severe government persecution that early Quakers endured—for, after all, being from the lower-class might make one more likely to be critical of class structure, and being persecuted by authority might tend to make one critical of authority.

Consider some Buddhist cases. We know next to nothing about the social conditions of the authors of Buddha-nature thought, but it is highly unlikely that they were beaten, jailed, and hung for their religious views, as were some Quakers. Why should it then occur to our Buddha-nature authors that they need to emphasize in their writings the importance of being critical of authority? On the other hand, at least some of those who originated from the lower classes, such as Nichiren, and those who suffered official persecution, such as Nichiren and the founders of Sōka Gakkai, did develop antiauthoritarian ideas and were capable of engaging in social criticism.<sup>17</sup> While these remarks are obviously meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, I submit that it is factors such as these and many others (the influence of Confucianism, the nature of the state, forms of social control, native Japanese ethnocentrism) that will prove most fruitful in an effort to understand—and challenge—the rather somnolent ethical posture of East Asian Buddhist civilizations.

I do not mean to suggest that concepts have no influence upon social practice. *Pratīyasamutpada*, for example, is perhaps the Buddhist philosophical concept most frequently cited by contemporary Buddhist social activists to both explain and justify their activism. The Buddha-nature concept also appears in this company. In some strands of contemporary “Engaged Buddhism,” Buddhist social activists specifically cite Buddha-nature as their justification. Thinkers and movements as diverse as Risshō Kōseikai, Sōka Gakkai, and Thich Nhat Hanh all assert that it is an important part of practice to manifest one’s Buddha-nature through bodhisattva action in the form of concrete acts of compassion and social activism. Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, writes, “The capacity to wake

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up, to understand, and to love is called Buddha-nature.... When you understand, you love. And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.”<sup>18</sup> Here action “that can relieve the suffering of people” is understood to encompass everything from simple kindness to energetic antiwar activity and efforts to free political prisoners and to undo economic injustice.

These modern developments demonstrate that Buddha-nature thought does have resources upon which the Buddhist can draw to justify social engagement and action to transform society. That Buddhists in the modern period can and do put the term to this kind of use, while pre-modern Buddhists largely did not, simply demonstrates the importance of hermeneutics: a text will yield one set of answers to one set of questions, and quite another set of answers to another set of questions—it depends upon what assumptions, needs, and aspirations one brings to the text. A group or individual that wants to take up social engagement, and brings those concerns to texts of the Buddha-nature tradition, will find in those texts usable resources for their project.

My second and final conclusion, then, is that it is plainly invalid to blame the weakness of Japanese Buddhist social ethics on Buddha-nature thought, for clearly Buddha-nature thought can be and is used to inspire, justify, and direct Buddhist social activism. The culprit must be sought elsewhere.