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Is Buddhism Really Nontheistic?

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Buddhism is commonly distinguished on doctrinal grounds from monotheistic and polytheistic religions by the fact that it refutes the existence of a divine Creator, and indeed there is ample textual evidence in early Buddhist, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna treatises to support this claim.¹ However, a careful analysis of Vajrayāna Buddhist cosmogony, specifically as presented in the Atiyoga tradition of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, which presents itself as the culmination of all Buddhist teachings, reveals a theory of a transcendent ground of being and a process of creation that bear remarkable similarities with views presented in Vedānta and Neoplatonic Western Christian theories of creation. In the following paper I shall present this Vajrayāna Buddhist theory in terms of its images of space and light in the creation of the universe, and I shall conclude with a reappraisal of the non-theistic status of Buddhism as a whole.

Sūtrayāna Buddhist Antecedents

In the early Buddhist *suttas*, the Pāli term commonly translated as "world" (*loka*) refers not to some purely objective universe that exists independently of experience, but to the world experienced by sentient beings. The world that we as human beings experience, however, is not the only world, for there are other worlds in addition to our own²; but all worlds are said to be "unreal" and insubstantial like a bubble and a mirage.³ As for the origination of the six modes of consciousness by which human beings experience our world, the Buddha

likened such origination to the production of fire by rubbing a fire-stick. As Peter Harvey points out, this Buddhist theory, like that of the Upaniṣads, takes for granted the existence of a latent fire element that is present in fuel, which becomes manifest when the fuel is set aflame.⁴ This would imply that specific forms of consciousness likewise emerge from a latent mode of consciousness when the appropriate conditions are met, and that underlying consciousness is denoted in Pāli with the term *bhavaṅga*, which can be translated as "the ground of becoming."⁵

In early Buddhist literature this ground-state of consciousness is said to be primordially pure and radiant, regardless of whether it is obscured by adventitious defilements,⁶ and it is from this state that all active mental processes (*javana*), arise, including volition and, therefore, *karma*. Thus, since the manifold worlds experienced by sentient beings are asserted in Buddhism to be produced by the *karma* of sentient beings, it follows that the *bhavaṅga* must be the ground from which arise all *karma*, all the worlds formed by *karma*, and all states of consciousness by which these worlds are known. Moreover, the nature of this ground of becoming is said to be loving kindness, and it is the source of sentient beings' incentive to meditatively develop their minds in the pursuit of *nirvāṇa*.⁷ When final liberation is achieved, one comes to experientially realize the nature of the *bhavaṅga*, which then retains its integrity and is no longer prone to obscuration by defilements.⁸

While the Theravāda tradition largely marginalized the *bhavaṅga* in both theory and in practice, Mahāyāna Buddhism attributed central importance to the *tathāgatagarbha*, which bears a close resemblance to the *bhavaṅga*. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (p. 77) says of the *tathāgatagarbha* that it is the naturally radiant and primordially pure awareness within each sentient being, which is obscured by such adventitious defilements as attachment, aggression, delusion, and

compulsive ideation. It adds that this radiant awareness is the ground from which both good and evil arise, and it produces all forms of existence, like an actor taking on a variety of appearances (p. 220). The *Śrīmāla-devī Siṃhanāda Sūtra* asserts that it is that which inspires sentient beings to seek *nirvāṇa*,⁹ and the *Ratnagotra-vibhāga* (vv. 51, 84) makes the further claim that this awareness, which is naturally present since beginningless time, is implicitly replete with all the qualities of Buddhahood. But in order for those innate qualities to become manifest, the *tathāgatagarbha*, or *buddha-nature*, must be separated from defilements, much as gold ore must be refined to reveal its intrinsic purity. Thus, even in these pre-Vajrayāna writings, there were clear and elaborated theories concerning a beginningless ground-state of awareness, which was the source of all other states of consciousness, the phenomenal world, and all sentient beings within it.

Vajrayāna Cosmogony

As the early Buddhist theory of the *bhavaṅga* was developed into the Mahāyāna theory of the *tathāgatagarbha*, the realization of which now took on paramount importance in meditative practice, the precise manner in which the *buddha-nature* gives rise to the phenomena world was further developed in the Vajrayāna tradition. My primary source for the following account of Vajrayāna cosmogony is *The Vajra Heart Tantra*,¹⁰ a "mind-treasure" (*dgongs gter*) of Dūdjom Lingpa (1835-1904), a nineteenth-century Atiyoga master of the Nyingma order of Tibetan Buddhism. Although this treatise is of quite recent origin, its well developed theory of cosmogony is an accurate representation of the general Atiyoga view, which is largely compatible with Vajrayāna theory as a whole. According to Dūdjom Lingpa, the source of the teachings in *The Vajra Heart Tantra* is the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra, who, like the *tathāgatagarbha*, is

of the nature of beginningless, naturally pure, radiant awareness, replete with all the qualities of Buddhahood.

While the most common metaphor for the *bhavaṅga* and the *tathāgatagarbha* is that of radiant light, *The Vajra Heart Tantra* adds to this the central metaphor of space. According to this cosmogony, the essential nature of the whole of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is the absolute space (*dhātu*) of the *tathāgatagarbha*, but this space is not to be confused with a mere absence of matter. Rather, this absolute space is imbued with all the infinite knowledge, compassion, power, and enlightened activities of the Buddha. Moreover, this luminous space is that which causes the phenomenal world to appear, and it is none other than the nature of one's own mind, which by nature is clear light (p. 133). Samantabhadra distinguishes five types of primordial wisdom implicit within the natural *buddha* of awareness (p. 120):

"Its essential nature is primordial, great emptiness, the absolute space of the whole of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the primordial wisdom of the absolute space of reality (*dharmadhātu*). Mirror-like primordial wisdom is of a limpid, clear nature free of contamination, which allows for the unceasing appearances of all manner of objects. The primordial wisdom of equality is so called, for it equally pervades the nonobjective emptiness of the whole of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The primordial wisdom of discernment is so called, for it is an unceasing avenue of illumination of the qualities of primordial wisdom. The primordial wisdom of accomplishment is so called, for all pure, free, simultaneously perfected deeds and activities are accomplished naturally, of their own accord. When the natural glow of awareness that is present as the ground—the

dharmakāya in which the five primordial wisdoms are simultaneously perfected—dissolves into its inner luminosity, it is classified as *unobscured primordial wisdom*."¹¹

If the essential nature of each sentient being and the universe as a whole is that of infinite, luminous space, endowed with all the qualities of perfect enlightenment, why is this not realized? Samantabhadra explains that the reality of all phenomena arising as displays of the all-pervasive, ground-awareness is obscured by ignorance. Consequently, the *tathāgatagarbha*, which utterly transcends all words and concepts—including the very notions of existence and nonexistence, one and many, and subject and object—appears to be a blank, unthinking void, which is known as the universal ground (*ālaya*) (p. 120). The experience of this void is comparable to becoming comatose or falling into contentless, dreamless sleep. From that state arises limpid, clear consciousness as the basis from which all phenomena appear; and that is the universal ground consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). No objects are established apart from its own luminosity, and while it produces all types of appearances, it does not enter into any object. Just as reflections of the planets and stars appear in limpid, clear water, and the entire animate and inanimate world appears in limpid, clear space, so do all appearances emerge in the empty, clear, universal ground consciousness.

From that state arises the consciousness of the mere appearance of the self. The self, or *I*, is apprehended as being over here, so the objective world appears to be over there, thus establishing the appearance of immaterial space. To relate this evolution of the universe to the obscuration of the previously mentioned five types of primordial wisdom, it is said that ignorance initially obscures the inner glow of one's innate, primordial wisdom of the absolute space

of reality (p. 122), which causes an external transference of its radiance. As this evolutionary process continues, those five types of primordial wisdom transform into the five great elements (viz., the five primary colors) and the five derivative elements in the following way:

1. In the all-pervasive space of the *dharmakāya*, or *buddha*-mind, the inner glow of the primordial wisdom of accomplishment is obscured, and due to the activation of karmic energies, the quintessence of the air element arises internally and transforms into radiant green light. Due to the power of delusion, this green light is reified and consequently arises externally as the derivative, or residual, air element.

2. With the obscuration by ignorance of the primordial wisdom of the absolute space of phenomena, its radiance appears as the great element of deep blue light. As a consequence of reifying this blue light, the derivative element of space appears.

3. With the obscuration of mirror-like primordial wisdom, its radiance appears as the great element of white light, which, when reified, appears as the derivative element of water.

4. With the obscuration of the primordial wisdom of equality, its radiance appears as the great element of yellow light, which, when reified, appears as the derivative element of earth.

5. Finally, with the obscuration of the primordial wisdom of discernment, its radiance appears as the great element of red light, which, when reified, appears as the derivative element of fire. In this way, all the elements of the physical world are regarded as symbolic expressions of the *tathāgatgarbha*, and all the five elements are said to be present in each one, just as all the five primordial wisdoms are present in each one.

The five types of primordial wisdom manifest not only as the five elements that make up the objective universe, but their essential natures also manifest as the five psycho-physical aggregates that constitute a human being in *saṃsāra*. Specifically, once the appearance of duality arises within the domain of the primordial wisdom of the absolute space of reality, that wisdom appears as the aggregate of form; when such dualistic appearances and reification occur in the domain of mirror-like primordial wisdom, it manifests as the aggregate of consciousness; when the primordial wisdom of equality is so obscured, it manifests as the aggregate of feeling; when the primordial wisdom of discernment is veiled by reification, it appears as the aggregate of recognition; and when the primordial wisdom of accomplishment is so obscured, it arises as the aggregate of compositional factors.

As a development of the thesis stated in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* that the *tathāgatagarbha* is the source of both good and evil, *The Vajra Heart Tantra* asserts that it is the ground not only of all the qualities of enlightenment, but of the primary mental afflictions of delusion, hatred, pride, attachment, and jealousy. Specifically, thoughts of delusion arise due to the obscuration of the primordial wisdom of the absolute nature of reality; thoughts of hatred arise from the obscuration of mirror-like primordial wisdom; thoughts of pride emerge from the obscuration of the primordial wisdom of equality; thoughts of attachment emerge from the obscuration of the primordial wisdom of discernment; and thoughts of jealousy arise from the obscuration of the primordial wisdom of accomplishment. An assertion that is crucial to the theory and practice of Vajrayāna as a whole is that all mental afflictions are in reality of the very same nature as the kinds of primordial wisdom from which they arise (p. 125).

In summary, the five primary colors, the five derivative elements, the five aggregates, and the five mental afflictions all originate from the obscuration of

the five primordial wisdoms. In terms of the general Buddhist theory of the three realms of existence—the sensory realm, the form realm, and the formless realm—it is said that birth in the formless realm is due to reifying the universal ground; birth in the form realm is due to reifying the universal ground consciousness; and birth as a god of the desire realm is due to achieving attentional stability in the realm of the dualistic mind (*citta*). In this way, Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha whose nature is identical with the *tathāgatagarbha* within each sentient being, is the ultimate ground of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*; and the entire universe consists of nothing other than displays of this infinite, radiant, empty awareness. Thus, in light of the theoretical progression from the *bhavaṅga* to the *tathāgatagarbha* to the primordial wisdom of the absolute space of reality, Buddhism is not so simply non-theistic as it may appear at first glance.

Parallels with Polytheistic and Monotheistic Cosmogonies

While the nontheism of Buddhism is often set in stark contrast to the polytheism of the Vedas, the tradition of Vedānta, meaning the "culmination of the Vedas," presents a cosmogony strikingly similar to the preceding Atiyoga account. According to Vedānta theory, the universe is created through a series of illusory manifestations of Brahman, who alone is ultimately real and is identical with the real identity (*ātman*) of every sentient being.¹² The nature of Brahman is pure consciousness, beyond all conceptual distinctions such as subject and object, and its differentiation into individual animate and inanimate beings is only by way of appearances. Drawing on an analogy that is shared with the Atiyoga tradition illustrating the relation between the *dharmakāya* and the minds of individual sentient beings, the Vedāntin philosopher Śaṅkara likens Brahman to space, which is single and continuous, while each individual (*jīva*) is likened to

the space confined inside a pot. In this metaphor, the "space" of Brahman can be apparently enclosed within the "pot" of each individual without affecting the transcendent unity of Brahman. But such differentiation, he adds, is merely the result of our failure to discriminate the *ātman* from its adjuncts such as the body, senses, and so on. Each individual is a mere appearance or reflection of the transcendent Self, or *ātman*, like the reflection of the sun in rippling water. Although the unity of Brahman and the *ātman* has never been different from the universe, defects are perceived in the phenomenal world due to defilements in the minds of individuals. Thus, in order to see reality as it is, the mind, with all its afflictions, conceptual constructs, and tendencies of reification, must be transcended.

Despite the many significant differences between Buddhist and Christian doctrines, medieval Christianity was profoundly influenced by Neoplatonic ideas concerning creation, which are also profoundly similar to those of Vajrayāna Buddhism and Vedānta. According to the ninth-century Christian philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (815?-877?), prior to God's creative self-disclosure in the generation of the natural world, He subsisted as a primordial unity and fullness which, from the limited perspective of created intellects and language, can best be described as *nihil*, or nothingness.¹³ John characterizes this nothingness, not as an absence, but as a transcendent reality beyond negation and affirmation. It is, he writes:

"the ineffable, incomprehensible, and inaccessible brilliance of the divine goodness, which is unknown to all intellects, whether human or angelic, because it is superessential and supernatural. I should think that this designation [*nihil*] is applied because, when it is thought through itself, it neither is nor was nor will be. For in no

existing thing is it understood, since it is beyond all things...When it is understood as incomprehensible on account of its excellence, it is not improperly called 'nothing.'"¹⁴

As the divine nothingness, which is ontologically prior to the very categories of existence and nonexistence, manifests in the phenomenal world, God comes to recognize himself as the essence of all things. In this way, the whole of creation can be called a theophany, or divine appearance, and nothing could exist apart from that divine nature, for it is the essence of all that is. Following the Biblical assertion that man is created in the image of God, John declares that the mind of man, like the divine nature, retains its simple unity, as something that cannot be known objectively, in relation to its manifold expressions.¹⁵ Just as God comes to know Himself fully only through His self-expression as the phenomenal world, the human mind is fully comprehended only through its outward manifestations, even though it always remains invisible inwardly. In that way, each human recapitulates within himself the entire dialectic of nothingness and self-creation. Hence John argues that man's inability to objectively know the nature of his own mind marks him as being an image of God, for just as the mind of God does not objectively see itself, so is human consciousness never perceived as an object of the intellect.¹⁶

Conclusion

While Buddhism is deemed nontheistic, the Vedas are regarded as polytheistic, and the Bible is monotheistic, we have seen that the cosmogonies of Vajrayāna Buddhism, Vedānta, and Neoplatonic Christianity have so much in common that they could almost be regarded as varying interpretations of a single theory. Moreover, the commonality does not end there, for in the Near

East, the writings of Plotinus (205-270) also influenced Islamic and Jewish theories of creation. This apparent unity could be attributed to mere coincidence, or to the historical propagation of a single, speculative, metaphysical theory throughout south Asia and the Near East. For example, the *Upaniṣads* may well have influenced the writings of early Mahāyāna thinkers in India, and they could also have made their way to the Near East, where they might have inspired the writings of Plotinus. On the other hand, Plotinus declared that his theories were based on his own experiential insights, and similar claims have been made by many Buddhist and Vedāntin contemplatives. If these cosmogonies are indeed based upon valid introspective knowledge, then there may some plausibility to the claims of many contemplatives throughout the world that introspective inquiry can lead to knowledge, not only of the ultimate ground of being, but of the fundamental laws of nature as well.¹⁷

¹For a refutation of a Creator by the Buddha as recorded in the Pāli canon see the *Pāṭika Sutta* 2.14-17 in the *Dīgha-Nikāya*; Śāntideva presents a classic Mahāyāna refutation of a Creator in his *Bodhicāryāvātāra* IX: 118-125; and a similar refutation in Vajrayāna literature is found in the *Kālacakratantra* and its principal commentary the *Vimalaprabhā* II: 168-170.

²Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* 1.402

³Cf. *Sutta-Nipāta* 9; *Dhammapada* 170

⁴Peter Harvey. (1995) *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*. Surrey: Curzon Press, pp. 155-157. Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* 1.259-60, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III.340-41, *Milindapañha* 73; R. H. Robinson. (1970) *The Buddhist Religion*. Belmont, Calif., Dickenson, 1st ed., pp. 38-39.

⁵Peter Harvey, p. 160.

⁶Cf. *Milindapañha* (pp. 299-300), *Aṅguttara Nikāya* A.I.9-10 & A.I.61

⁷*Aṅguttara Nikāya* A.I.10-11

⁸Peter Harvey, p. 174.

⁹D.M. Paul (1980) *The Buddhist Feminine Ideal—Queen Śrīmāla and the Tathāgata-garbhā*. Missoula, Montana, Scholar's Press, ch. 13.

¹⁰*The Vajra Heart Tantra: A Tantra Naturally Arisen from the Nature of Existence from the Matrix of Primordial Awareness of Pure Perception* (Tib. *Dag snang ye shes drova pa las gnas lugs rang byung gi rgyud rdo rje'i snying po*). Collected Works of H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche.

¹¹All translations from the Tibetan are my own.

¹²Karl H. Potter (ed.) (1981) *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Advaita Vedānta up to Śaṅkara and His Pupils*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 81.

¹³Donald F. Duclow (1977) "Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena." *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 57, No. 2, April 1977, p. 110.

¹⁴John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon (De divisione naturae)* ed. H. J. Floss, Migne *Patrologia latina* 122, 680D-81A, trans. by Donald F. Duclow, op. cit. p. 110. Cf. *Bodhicāryāvātāra* IX: 2. "This truth

is recognized as being of two kinds: conventional and ultimate. Ultimate reality is beyond the scope of the intellect. The intellect is called conventional reality."

¹⁵*Kālacakratāntra* V: 65: "Apart from sentient beings there is no great Buddha."

¹⁶Cf. *Ratnacūḍasūtra*: "The mind, Kāśyapa, is formless,unseen, intangible, unknowable, unstable, ungrounded. The mind, Kāśyapa, was never seen by any of the Buddhas. They do not see it, they will not see it...the mind, Kāśyapa, being sought all around is not found: what is not found is not established; what is not established is not past, present, or future..." [Cited in Śāntideva. (1981) *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, trans. Cecil Bendall & W. H. D. Rouse. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 220-221] My own translation. Cf. Thomas Tomasic, "Negative Theology and Subjectivity: An Approach to the Tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1969).

¹⁷Cf. Dom Cuthbert Butler. *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*. 3rd ed., with "Afterthoughts" by Prof. David Knowles. London: Constable & Co., 1967, p. 419.