

Book of Dzyan Research Report

The Doctrine of Svabhāva or Svabhāvatā and the Questions of Anātman and Śūnyatā

The doctrine of svabhāva or svabhāvatā, as was discussed in the previous *Book of Dzyan Research Report*, “Technical Terms in Stanza II,” is a fundamental doctrine of the “Book of Dzyan” as presented in *The Secret Doctrine* by H. P. Blavatsky. To establish its validity outside the small circle of believing Theosophists, it must be traced in the Buddhist texts where it is said to be found. Until it can be traced in the Buddhist texts, the affirmation of its former existence by a Nepalese Buddhist Vajracharya carries no more weight to objective investigators than do statements about it by Theosophical Mahatmas. To trace it in the Buddhist texts we must necessarily do so in terms of the “dharma,” the word they use throughout for all the “elements of existence.” Here we will need to reconcile their universally-held doctrine that all dharmas are anātman, or “without self,” with the Theosophical teachings which regularly use the term ātman. Then we come to their teaching of śūnyatā, the “emptiness” of all dharmas. Only at this point are we back to svabhāva, for śūnyatā is defined as the niḥsvabhāva, the “lack of svabhāva,” of all dharmas.

It will already be obvious that for our research we must first find out if there is anything taught in Buddhism that is not a dharma, something beyond the “elements of existence.” The Buddhist authority Walpola Rahula, explaining dhamma, the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit dharma, tells us that there is not:¹

There is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than *dhamma*. It includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the non-conditioned, the Absolute, Nirvāṇa. There is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or non-conditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term.

In an earlier *Book of Dzryan Research Report*, “Theosophy in Tibet: The Teachings of the Jonangpa School,” the Buddhist teaching of the dhātu, the “element,” described as permanent, stable, quiescent, and eternal, was likened to the Theosophical teaching of the “one element.” What, then, is the relationship between the one element, the dhātu, and the many elements of existence, the dharmas? A verse from the now lost *Mahāyāna-abhidharma-sūtra*, quoted in several extant Buddhist texts, tells us that it is their basis or support (*samāśraya*):²

anādi-kāliko dhātuḥ sarva-dharma-samāśrayaḥ |
tasmīn sati gatiḥ sarvā nirvāṇādhiḡamo ’pi ca ||

From beginningless time the element is the basis of all the dharmas. Because it exists, all the destinies [of living beings] exist, and even the [possibility of the] attainment of nirvāṇa.

This seems to also provide us with a firm basis for tracing the Theosophical svabhāva or svabhāvatā doctrine in Buddhist sources. If the element is thought of as svabhāva, and svabhāva is indeed given as one of its meanings in Maitreya’s *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*,³ we would have it. So what happened to this teaching?

Early Buddhism was divided into many schools. Although they classified the dharmas differently, and even had different numbers of dharmas, generally speaking they held that each dharma was a real existent (*dravya*), had its own svabhāva, and was impermanent (*anitya*).⁴ Thus the svabhāva of a dharma is here its individual nature, which is non-eternal. An exception to this was the Sarvāstivāda school. The teachings of this once-dominant school have been preserved for us as taught by the Vaibhāṣikas of Kashmir in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharma-kośa*. This text, however, says little about their svabhāva teaching. But the same author wrote a commentary on this text criticizing many of its teachings from the standpoint of the Sautrāntika school. Strangely enough, it is here in a verse ridiculing this teaching that we find its clearest statement:⁵

svabhāvaḥ sarvadā cāsti bhāvo nityaś ca neṣyate |
na ca svabhāvād bhāvo ’nyo vyaktam īśvara-ceṣṭitam ||

Svabhāva always exists, but an existent thing is not held to be permanent; yet an existent thing is not different from svabhāva. Clearly, [and absurdly,] this is the doing of [some imaginary] God.

No Buddhist school has ever believed in God. The Sautrāntikas are saying that this position is so illogical that it would have to be the work of an all-powerful God who could transcend the laws of reason, and hence for Buddhists it is completely absurd. The Sarvāstivāda position seems to be that the svabhāva of a dharma is eternal, although an independently existing thing (*bhāva*) is not eternal. If this svabhāva is taken to be the one element, we would have an exact statement of the Theosophical position. There is the one element, only the one element, and nothing but the one element; and it is eternal. All apparently existing things are non-eternal as such. Yet, if there is nothing but the one element, all apparently existing things cannot be different from it. But the Sarvāstivāda position was not seen in this way. Rather it was seen like that of the other early Buddhist schools to refer to the svabhāva of the individual dharmas. For as stated in the early *Samaya-bhedoparacana-cakra* by Vasumitra, who was himself a Sarvāstivādin, “The svabhāva [of a dharma] does not combine with the svabhāva [of another dharma].”⁶ Vasumitra’s treatise is terse and admittedly not always easy to understand, but my bracketed material in the above quote certainly reflects how later schools understood the Sarvāstivāda position, namely that their eternal svabhāva is that of the individual dharmas.

Buddhist thought as studied in Tibet for the last millennium holds that the Sarvāstivādins or Vaibhāṣikas were refuted by the Sautrāntikas; the Sautrāntikas were refuted by the Yogācārins or Cittamātrins; the Yogācārins were refuted by the Svātantrika Mādhyamikas; and these were refuted by the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas. This latter is accepted as the highest teaching on earth by the majority of Tibetan Buddhists. In this manner the old Sarvāstivāda teaching of svabhāva as eternal, taken to refer to the individual dharmas, was superseded.

The teaching of the eternal element or dhātu as the basis of all the dharmas, allowing the possibility of seeing in it a single eternal svabhāva, was taken differently by different schools. The

Yogācārins understood the dhātu to refer to the *ālaya-vijñāna*, or substratum consciousness. The Mādhyamikas understood the dhātu to refer to the *tathāgata-garbha*, or Buddha-nature, taken to be the emptiness of the mind. Buddhist schools sought to avoid emphasizing this teaching in any way which could be seen as holding a unitary eternal svabhāva, apparently because of the similarity of this idea to the Hindu ātman doctrine.

The Question of Anātman

All known schools of Buddhism have always taught that all dharmas are anātman or “without self.” This means that ātman as the universal higher self taught in Hinduism and also taught in Theosophy is denied. This distinctive teaching of Buddhism defines for Buddhists their teachings as Buddhist. Thus most Buddhists regard Theosophy as derived from Hinduism, not from Tibetan Mahatmas who as Buddhists could not hold the ātman doctrine. Conversely some Theosophists as well as others have attempted to show that Buddhism does not really deny ātman. Since this doctrine is so central to Buddhist teachings, any Theosophist who wishes to trace a svabhāva or svabhāvātā doctrine in the Buddhist texts must first reconcile the anātman doctrine one way or the other with the Theosophical teachings. To do this we should consider the words of Walpola Rahula:⁷

What in general is suggested by Soul, Self, Ego, or to use the Sanskrit expression *Ātman*, is that in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world. . . .

Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a Soul, Self, or *Ātman*. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality. . . .

“The negation of an imperishable *Ātman* is the common characteristic of all dogmatic systems of the Lesser as well as the Great Vehicle, and, there is, therefore, no reason to assume that Buddhist tradition which is in complete agreement on this point has deviated from the Buddha’s original teaching.”

It is therefore curious that recently there should have been a vain attempt by a few scholars to smuggle the idea of self into the teaching of the Buddha, quite contrary to the spirit of Buddhism. These scholars respect, admire, and venerate the Buddha and his teaching. They look up to Buddhism. But they cannot imagine that the Buddha, whom they consider the most clear and profound thinker, could have denied the existence of an *Ātman* or Self which they need so much. They unconsciously seek the support of the Buddha for this need for eternal existence—of course not in a petty individual self with small s, but in the big Self with a capital S.

It is better to say frankly that one believes in an *Ātman* or Self. Or one may even say that the Buddha was totally wrong in denying the existence of an *Ātman*. But certainly it will not do for any one to try to introduce into Buddhism an idea which the Buddha never accepted, as far as we can see from the extant original texts.

The term *ātman* is used in Theosophy for the seventh or highest principle in man. In the “Cosmological Notes” from October 1881 a Mahatma gives in parallel columns the seven principles of man and of the universe in Tibetan, Sanskrit, and English.⁸ The term *ātman* is found in two forms in the Sanskrit column for the principles of man. The Tibetan terms given for these, however, are not translations of the Sanskrit terms, but rather represent a different system. In other words, the Tibetan system used here by the Mahatmas does not have *ātman* or its translation; only the Sanskrit system does, which consists of terms drawn from Hinduism. It is well known to readers of *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* that the Mahatmas expressed great difficulty in finding appropriate terms with which to teach their doctrines, and they often drew from wherever they could find similar ideas, including even the European philosophy of the time. Indeed, this practice could satisfactorily explain their references to the Svābhāvika school of Buddhism thought to exist in Nepal, which no one could later find, were it not for the fact that the term *svābhāvāt* is given seven times in the Stanzas from the “Book of Dzyan.” Since the Mahatmas had Hindu chelas, they would have already had intact a system of Hindu

terms. But it does not necessarily follow that the Mahatmas were themselves followers of the schools from which the terms were taken. E.g., “We are not Adwaites [followers of the Hindu school of advaita or non-dual Vedānta], but our teaching respecting the one life is identical with that of the Adwaitee with regard to Parabrahm.”⁹ So also, from their use of parallel terms it does not necessarily follow that the Mahatmas accept all the implications of the term thus used, as we learn from an article published at about that same time.

An article by the Adwaitee Hindu chela T. Subba Row, “The Aryan-Arhat Esoteric Tenets on the Sevenfold Principle in Man,” came out in *The Theosophist*, January 1882, with notes by H. P. Blavatsky. These notes were written before the publication in 1883 of A. P. Sinnett’s highly influential Theosophical classic, *Esoteric Buddhism*, and therefore before Blavatsky felt obliged to counter the view that Theosophy is esoteric Buddhism so as to stress its universality (as she later did in *The Secret Doctrine*). Thus she here speaks unguardedly of the differences between the esoteric Buddhist or Arhat doctrine of the Tibetan Mahatmas and the esoteric Brahmanical or Aryan doctrine of the Hindu Initiates. By the time this article was reprinted three years later in *Five Years of Theosophy*, key sentences giving these differences were omitted; and in her subsequent writings we read only of the identity of the Hindu Vedāntic parabrahman and ātman with the Buddhist teachings and with Theosophy. Here are the relevant excerpts from her notes:¹⁰

So that, the Aryan and Tibetan or Arhat doctrines agree perfectly in substance, differing but in names given and the way of putting it, a distinction resulting from the fact that the Vedantin Brahmins believe in Parabrahman, a *deific* power, impersonal though it may be, while the Buddhists entirely reject it. [p. 406]

The Impersonal Parabrahman thus being made to merge or separate itself into a *personal* “*jīvātma*,” or the personal god of every human creature. This is, again, a difference necessitated by the Brahmanical belief in a God whether personal or impersonal, while the Buddhist Arahats, rejecting this idea entirely, recognize *no* deity apart from man. [p. 410]

We have already pointed out that, in our opinion, the whole difference between Buddhistic and Vedantic philosophies was that the former was a kind of *rationalistic* Vedantism, while the latter might be regarded as *transcendental* Buddhism. If the Aryan esotericism applies the term *jīvatma* to the seventh principle, the pure and *per se* unconscious spirit—it is because the Vedānta postulating three kinds of existence—(1) the *pāramārthika* (the true, the only real one), (2) the *vyāvahārika* (the practical), and (3) the *pratibhāsika* (the apparent or illusory life)—makes the first *life* or *jīva*, the only truly existent one. Brahma or the ONE SELF is its only representative in the universe, as it is the *universal life in toto* while the other two are but its “phenomenal appearances,” imagined and created by ignorance, and complete illusions suggested to us by our blind senses. The Buddhists, on the other hand, deny either subjective or objective reality even to that one Self-Existence. Buddha declares that there is neither Creator nor an ABSOLUTE Being. Buddhist rationalism was ever too alive to the insuperable difficulty of admitting one absolute consciousness, as in the words of Flint—‘wherever there is consciousness there is relation, and wherever there is relation there is dualism.’ The ONE LIFE is either “MUKTA” (absolute and unconditioned) and can have no relation to anything nor to any one; or it is “BADDHA” (bound and conditioned), and then it cannot be called the ABSOLUTE; the limitation, moreover, necessitating another deity as powerful as the first to account for all the evil in this world. Hence, the Arahāt secret doctrine on cosmogony admits but of one absolute, indestructible, eternal, and uncreated UNCONSCIOUSNESS (so to translate), of an element (the word being used for want of a better term) absolutely independent of everything else in the universe; . . . [pp. 422-23]

The central doctrine of the upaniṣads, and therefore of Vedānta, is that there is nothing but brahman, or parabrahman, and further that brahman and ātman, the Self in all, are one. Buddhism, for whatever reason, did not teach an a-brahman or “no brahman” doctrine, but rather taught an an-ātman or “no self” doctrine. At the time of the Buddha there existed in India other Hindu schools, such as Sāṃkhya, who interpreted the

upaniṣads differently than the Vedāntins. The Sāṃkhya school understood brahman as referring to unconscious substance. This may be seen from the extensive polemics against them by Śāṅkarācārya in his commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra*, also called the *Vedānta-sūtra*, whose whole point is to prove that brahman is omniscient, and therefore not unconscious. Since they are the primary target of Śāṅkarācārya's polemics, we may assume that the Sāṃkhya school was once quite influential; and this is indeed borne out by the old epic literature of India. So there was in early India an influential Hindu school which held that brahman was unconscious substance (*acetana pradhāna* or *prakṛti*). But despite the teaching that brahman and ātman are one, the Sāṃkhya school understood ātman as referring to the conscious *puruṣa* or spirit, much like the Vedānta school's ātman as the conscious *jīvātman* in man. Thus, if the Buddha's point was to refute an absolute consciousness, he would have been obliged to refute ātman rather than brahman. As such, I would choose to reconcile the Theosophical teachings in favor of the anātman doctrine of the Buddhist teachings, despite Theosophy's use of the term ātman, which I would then take as a working but not entirely overlapping parallel.

If, on the other hand, the Buddha's point with the anātman doctrine was not to refute an absolute consciousness, but to refute an absolute substratum of any kind, the Buddhists have some very embarrassing sūtras of their own to reconcile. These are the Tathāgata-garbha or Buddha-nature sūtras,¹¹ said by the Jonangpas to be of definitive meaning, and said by the Gelugpas to require interpretation. For example, one of these, the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, teaches that:¹²

The ātman is the Tathāgatagarbha. All beings possess a Buddha Nature: this is what the ātman is. This ātman, from the start, is always covered by innumerable passions (*kleśa*): this is why beings are unable to see it.

It is noteworthy that this very sūtra, extracts from which had been translated by Samuel Beal as far back as 1871, was quoted in *The Mahatma Letters* on this very question of ātman:¹³

Says Buddha, “you have to get rid entirely of all the subjects of impermanence composing the body that your body should become permanent. The permanent never merges with the impermanent although the two are one. But it is only when all outward appearances are gone that there is left that one principle of life which exists independently of all external phenomena. . . .”

The teachings of the Tathāgata-garbha sūtras are synthesized in a unique and fundamental text, the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*, which is considered in Tibetan tradition to be one of the five texts of Maitreya. This text refers to the four qualities which Buddhism had always taught as characterizing all dharmas or phenomena, namely, impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*), no-self (*anātman*), and impurity (*aśubha*); but says that their opposites characterize the dharma-kāya or absolute, namely, permanence (*nitya*), happiness (*sukha*), self (*ātman*), and purity (*śubha*). The commentary then quotes in explanation of this a passage from the *Śrī-mālā-sūtra*, which I here translate in full.¹⁴

O Lord, people hold mistaken views about the five perishable personality aggregates which form the basis of clinging to existence. They have the idea of permanence about that which is impermanent, the idea of happiness about that which is suffering, the idea of self (*ātman*) about that which is without self (*anātman*), and the idea of purity about that which is impure. Even all the Śravakas and Pratyeka-Buddhas, O Lord, because of their knowledge of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), hold mistaken views about the dharma-kāya of the Tathāgata (Buddha), the sphere of omniscient wisdom, never before seen. The people, O Lord, who will be the Buddha’s true sons, having the idea of permanence, having the idea of self (*ātman*), having the idea of happiness, and having the idea of purity, those people, O Lord, will hold unmistakable views. They, O Lord, will see correctly. Why is that? The dharma-kāya of the Tathāgata, O Lord, is the perfection of permanence, the perfection of happiness, the perfection of self (*ātman*), and the perfection of purity. The people, O Lord, who see the dharma-kāya of the Tathāgata in this way, see correctly. Those who see correctly are the Buddha’s true sons.

Terms such as Tathāgata-garbha and dharma-kāya have multiple connotations, so I have left them untranslated above. As mentioned in an earlier *Book of Dzyan Research Report*, the Tathāgata-garbha, or Buddha-nature, and the dharma-kāya, or body of the law, are what the dhātu, or element, is called when obscured and when unobscured, respectively; and these three terms correspond well with the “One Life,” the “One Law,” and the “One Element,” of *The Mahatma Letters*. These three terms for the absolute are interpreted by the Gelugpas as referring to the absolute truth of the emptiness of all things, and not to any absolute substratum. But for the Jonangpas they come from texts of definitive meaning which require no interpretation, so do refer to an absolute substratum which is empty of everything but itself. The Tathāgata-garbha texts, like all Buddhist texts, still deny ātman in regard to phenomenal life, but accept ātman in regard to ultimate reality; that is, as applied to the Tathāgata-garbha and the dharma-kāya, or the obscured and unobscured dhātu, the element, which is described as eternal, but not as conscious. This certainly justifies the Mahatma’s use of the term, even from a Buddhist standpoint.

The Question of Śūnyatā

Having reconciled the Buddhist anātman doctrine with Theosophical teachings, at least to my own satisfaction, we can now proceed to the śūnyatā, or “emptiness” question, which is closely linked with the svabhāva question. The doctrine of anātman is taught throughout Buddhism from beginning to now, and in all its branches. The doctrine of śūnyatā, however, comes from sūtras said to have disappeared from the realm of humans forty years after the time of the Buddha, and only brought back centuries later. These texts form the basis of Mahāyāna or northern Buddhism, but were not accepted by Hīnayāna or southern Buddhism. Primary among these are the *Prajñā-pāramitā* or Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, which were brought back by Nāgārjuna from the realm of the Nāgas, the “serpents” of wisdom, called by Blavatsky, “initiates.”¹⁵ Hīnayāna Buddhism in general teaches that all dharmas, though they are

impermanent or momentary, really exist, so each has its own svabhāva. The *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts teach that all dharmas do not really exist, that they are empty of any svabhāva of their own; thus adding to the early anātman doctrine regarding persons (*pudgala-nairātmya*) an anātman doctrine regarding dharmas (*dharma-nairātmya*).

The doctrine of śūnyatā, the central teaching of the *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts, is stated in terms of the śūnyatā, the “emptiness” or “voidness” of all dharmas; or more fully, that all dharmas are svabhāva-śūnya, “empty” (*śūnya*) of svabhāva. These texts never tire of repeating this teaching:¹⁶ No dharma has ever come into existence (*anutpāda*); they do not exist (*na samvīdyate*); they are non-existent (*abhāva*); they are empty (*śūnya*); they are empty of svabhāva (*svabhāva-śūnya*); they are without svabhāva (*niḥsvabhāva*); their svabhāva is non-existent (*abhāva-svabhāva*). Again, I have left svabhāva untranslated. One may employ any number of possible translations: essence, own-being, inherent existence, self-existence, self-nature, essential nature, intrinsic nature, intrinsic reality. As may now be seen, most occurrences of the term svabhāva in these texts are found in conjunction with occurrences of the term śūnyatā, because the whole point of the doctrine of śūnyatā is to refute the doctrine of svabhāva.

The śūnyatā or emptiness teachings of the *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras were first formulated into a philosophy by Nāgārjuna. This is the Madhyamaka or “middle way” philosophy, so called because it seeks to avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Its primary text is the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, or “Root Verses on the Middle Way.” In this text Nāgārjuna underscores how critical it is to understand śūnyatā correctly:¹⁷

An incorrect view of emptiness destroys the slow-witted, like an incorrectly grasped snake, or an incorrectly cast spell.

Yet early on, varying schools of interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s treatise arose. Its verses or *kārikās* are concise and often hard to understand without a commentary. Nāgārjuna is thought to have written his own commentary on it, called the *Akutobhaya*, but his authorship of the extant text of that name found in the

Tibetan canon is rejected by Tibetan tradition.¹⁸ By the time of Tsong-kha-pa, more than a millennium after the original text was written, there existed many commentaries. After studying these, Tsong-kha-pa wondered what the correct interpretation was. Through mystical means, the Buddha of Wisdom Mañjuśrī told him that the interpretation by Chandrakīrti was in all ways reliable.¹⁹ In this way Tsong-kha-pa and the Gelugpas came to champion Chandrakīrti's school, the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamaka, which became dominant in Tibet.

The Prāsaṅgika or “consequence” school uses a type of statement called *prasaṅga*, somewhat reminiscent of Socratic dialogue, which points out unexpected and often unwelcome consequences in whatever anyone can postulate of a positive nature regarding what exists. It reduces these postulations to absurdity. Through this type of reasoning dharmas are analyzed and shown not to be findable, and as a consequence are proven to be empty. Not only are all dharmas empty, so too is emptiness empty. Śūnyatā itself does not exist any more than anything else. It is not the void in which things may exist. Śūnyatā is here absolute only in the sense of being the absolute truth of the emptiness of all things, including itself.

Would this, then, also be the Theosophical understanding of śūnyatā? The Theosophical teachings are said to represent an esoteric school of interpretation, so one should not expect them to agree with the exoterically known schools, such as “the Prasaṅga Mādhyamika teaching, whose dogmas have been known ever since it broke away from the purely esoteric schools.”²⁰ For as Blavatsky points out:²¹

Esoteric Schools would cease to be worthy of their name were their literature and doctrines to become the property of even their profane co-religionists—still less of the Western public. This is simple common sense and logic. Nevertheless this is a fact which our Orientalists have ever refused to recognize.

So now that Blavatsky did bring out to the Western public some of the esoteric teachings, under instruction from certain of the Tibetan Mahatmas who believed that the time had come for

this, where do we find the Theosophical understanding of śūnyatā? Returning to the passage quoted earlier from Blavatsky's notes on Subba Row's article, we continue reading:²²

Hence, the Arahat secret doctrine on cosmogony admits but of one absolute, indestructible, eternal, and uncreated UNCONSCIOUSNESS (so to translate), of an element (the word being used for want of a better term) absolutely independent of everything else in the universe; a something ever present or ubiquitous, a Presence which ever was, is, and will be, whether there is a God, gods or none; whether there is a universe or no universe; existing during the eternal cycles of Maha Yugas, during the *Pralayas* as during the periods of *Manvantara*: and this is SPACE, the field for the operation of the eternal Forces and natural Law, the *basis* (as our correspondent rightly calls it) upon which take place the eternal intercorrelations of Akāśa-Prakriti, guided by the unconscious regular pulsations of *Śakti*—the breath or power of a conscious deity, the theists would say—the eternal energy of an eternal, unconscious Law, say the Buddhists. Space, then, or *Fan*, *Bar-nang* (*Mahā-Śūnyatā*) or, as it is called by Lao-tze, the “Emptiness” is the nature of the Buddhist Absolute.

The term “space” is Samuel Beal's rendering of śūnyatā in his 1871 translation of the most condensed *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtra, the *Heart Sūtra*.²³ Blavatsky had quoted it earlier in another note to Subba Row's article:²⁴

Prakriti, Svabhavat or *Akāśa* is—SPACE as the Tibetans have it; Space filled with whatsoever substance or no substance at all; *i.e.*, with substance so imponderable as to be only metaphysically conceivable. . . . ‘That which we call form (*rupa*) is not different from that which we call space (*Śūnyatā*) . . . Space is not different from Form. . . .’ (Book of *Sin-king* or the *Heart Sutra*. . . .)

Beal was one of the first western translators of Buddhist texts. Influenced by Brian Hodgson's account of the four schools of Buddhism, Beal believed that Chinese Buddhism followed the Svābhāvika school, accepting a “universally diffused essence.”²⁵

So in Beal's understanding, *śūnyatā* or space was just another form of the absolute *svabhāva*. Several decades later the first comprehensive study in English of the Madhyamaka school based on a thorough study of Nāgārjuna's original Sanskrit text came out: T. R. V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 1955. Although no longer based on a Svābhāvika idea, Murti still understood *śūnyatā* to be the Buddhist absolute. Therefore Madhyamaka was seen by him as a kind of absolutist philosophy. In recent decades, however, since the Tibetan displacement, a number of new works have come out based on collaboration with Tibetan Gelugpa lamas, which severely criticize the earlier absolutist interpretations of Madhyamaka.²⁶ They point out that Madhyamaka is by definition the middle way which avoids the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Neither of these two forms of absolutism can be the correct interpretation. The Tibetans are heirs to an unbroken tradition of Madhyamaka spanning more than fifteen hundred years. Since this tradition has been thoroughly sifted by generations of scholars, they have every reason to believe that theirs is the correct interpretation of *śūnyatā*; and this *śūnyatā* is not something which itself exists in any absolute way such as space. Do we here have another case where Blavatsky quoted whatever she could find which seemed to support the esoteric teachings, but which later turns out not to support them after all? I don't think so.

In one of the most significant extracts drawn from secret commentaries and found in *The Secret Doctrine*, we find:²⁷

. . . As its substance is of a different kind from that known on earth, the inhabitants of the latter, seeing THROUGH IT, believe in their illusion and ignorance that it is empty space. There is not one finger's breadth (ANGULA) of void Space in the whole Boundless (Universe). . . .

This leaves no doubt that *śūnyatā* or space is indeed understood in the Arhat secret doctrine as the absolute, the one element, the eternal substance. But how can there be an absolute in the middle way taught by the Buddha?

Tracing Absolute Śūnyatā and Absolute Svabhāva

There is a tradition known as “Great Madhyamaka,” which was introduced in Tibet by Dolpopa and the Jonangpas several centuries ago. It fully agrees with the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school that absolutist philosophies of eternalism and nihilism are extremes to be avoided. Like all Madhyamaka traditions, it accepts as authoritative the words of Nāgārjuna:²⁸

Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is proclaimed by the Buddhas as the leaving behind of all philosophical views, but they have pronounced those who hold a philosophical view about emptiness (*śūnyatā*) to be incurable.

Any conception, however subtle, that dharmas either absolutely exist or absolutely do not exist, is considered incorrect; but the Great Mādhyamikas hold that there is something beyond what can be postulated by the mind. This inconceivable something, whatever it may be called, is described in the Tathāgata-garbha sūtras as absolute and eternal. If it did not exist, Buddhahood and all its qualities could not exist. Since it is beyond the range and reach of thought, it transcends any philosophical view. Just as the Prāsaṅgikas in denying the absolute existence of anything, including śūnyatā, are careful to point out that this does not imply nihilism, so the Great Mādhyamikas in affirming the absolute existence of Buddha qualities, as well as śūnyatā, are careful to point out that this does not imply eternalism.

There are many precedents for the teaching of absolute śūnyatā in the words of the Buddha. If there were not, no one would have taken it seriously, any more than any one would take seriously Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* without such precedents. Primary among these sources is a sūtra called the “Disclosure of the Knot or Secret Doctrine” (*Sandhi-nirmocana*), in which the Buddha says he has given three promulgations of the teachings, or turnings of the wheel of the dharma, and will now disclose the true intention or meaning of these apparently contradictory teachings. As summarized from this sūtra by Takasaki:²⁹

The ultimate doctrine of the Mahāyāna is no doubt taught in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, but its way of exposition is ‘with an esoteric meaning,’ or ‘with a hidden intention.’ For example the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaches the *niḥsvabhāvatā* [lack of svabhāva] in regard to the *sarvadharma* [all dharmas], but what is meant by this *niḥsvabhāvatā* is not so clear. The purpose of the *Sandhinirmocana* is to explain this meaning of *niḥsvabhāva* ‘in a clear manner,’ that is to say, to analyze and clarify the significance of the *sūnya-vāda* [doctrine of sūnyatā]. Just because of this standpoint, the Sūtra is called ‘*sandhi-nirmocana*,’ i.e. the Disclosure of the Knot or Secret Doctrine.

In the first promulgation the Buddha taught that all dharmas really exist. Though they are impermanent, they all have their own svabhāva. This is the teaching of the sūtras accepted by southern or Hīnayāna Buddhism. In the second promulgation the Buddha taught that all dharmas are in reality non-existent. They are empty (*sūnya*) of svabhāva. This is the teaching of the sūtras accepted by northern or Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially of the *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras. In the third promulgation the Buddha clarified in what way dharmas exist and in what way dharmas do not exist. To do this he put forth the teaching of the three svabhāvas or natures.³⁰ The nature of dharmas as they are conceptualized to have their own svabhāva is their imagined or illusory nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*); in this way they do not really exist. The nature of dharmas as they arise in dependence on causes and conditions is their dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*); in this way they exist conventionally. The nature of dharmas as they are established in reality is their perfect nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*); in this way they truly exist.

This teaching of the three svabhāvas was elucidated in the treatises of Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu. Although these writers are often classified as being Citta-mātra, or “mind-only,” and hence denigrated by Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas, Dolpopa considers them to be “Great Mādhyamikas.” As such, they would be vitally interested in the understanding of sūnyatā. Indeed, it is clear from their writings that they were; and as we saw earlier, the terms sūnyatā and svabhāva are normally found together in

Buddhist texts. Vasubandhu quotes in his commentary at the beginning of Maitreya's *Madhyānta-vibhāga* a classic definition of śūnyatā, as something that exists, and not just the emptiness of everything including itself:³¹

Thus, "a place is empty (*śūnya*) of that which does not exist there;" [seeing] in this way, one sees in reality. Again, "what remains here, that, being here, exists;" [knowing] in this way, one knows in reality. In this way, the unmistakable definition of śūnyatā (emptiness) arises.

Later in the same chapter Maitreya and Vasubandhu discuss the sixteen kinds of śūnyatā. The last two of these are called *abhāva-śūnyatā*, the emptiness which is non-existence (*abhāva*), and *abhāva-svabhāva-śūnyatā*, the emptiness which is the svabhāva or ultimate essence of that non-existence. Vasubandhu explains that this kind of śūnyatā truly exists:³²

[The former is] the emptiness of persons and dharmas. [The latter is] the true existence (*sad-bhāva*) of that non-existence.

The source of this teaching in the words of the Buddha may be found in the Tathāgata-garbha sūtras of his third promulgation. One of these, the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, puts it this way, as translated from Tibetan by S. K. Hookham:³³

Thus, these are respectively, the emptiness that is the non-existence (*abhāva-śūnyatā*) of the accidentally stained form etc., which is their each being empty of their own essence [*svabhāva*], and the Tathāgatagarbha Form etc., which are the Emptiness which is the essence of [that] non-existence (*abhāva-svabhāva-śūnyatā*), the Absolute Other Emptiness.

Note the use of the phrase "Absolute Other Emptiness" (*don dam gzan ston*) in this quotation to describe the sixteenth kind of śūnyatā, *abhāva-svabhāva-śūnyatā*. This is one of many quotations utilized by Dolpopa to establish the teaching of an absolute (*paramārtha*) śūnyatā.³⁴ This śūnyatā is empty of every-

thing other than itself, hence it is “empty of other” (*gʒan ston*), but it is not empty of itself. In contradistinction to this, the *śūnyatā* taught by the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school is empty of everything, including itself. Theirs is a *svabhāva-śūnyatā*, or an emptiness of any ultimate *svabhāva* in anything. The Great Mādhyamikas, too, accept the teaching that all dharmas, or the manifest universe as we know it, are empty of any *svabhāva* of their own, so are ultimately non-existent. But beyond the range and reach of thought there is a truly existent absolute *śūnyatā* empty of anything other than itself, which is the truly existent absolute *svabhāva* of the non-existent manifest universe.

This mind-boggling teaching of the Great Mādhyamikas was quite shocking to the orthodoxy when brought out in Tibet by Dolpopa and the Jonangpas in the fourteenth century. The later Jonangpa writer Tāranātha tells us that at first some found this “empty of other” doctrine hard to understand, while others were delighted by it. But later when adherents of other schools heard it they experienced “heart seizure” (*sñiñ gas*) and “scrambled brains” (*klad pa ’gems pa*).³⁵ This led finally to the banning of Dolpopa’s works by the Gelugpas in the seventeenth century. As one appreciative recent writer comments:³⁶

Dol po pa’s work . . . has the glorious distinction of being one of the very few works in Tibet ever banned as heretical.

Dolpopa was in many ways to fourteenth-century Tibet what Blavatsky was to the nineteenth-century world. The London writer W. T. Stead spoke in a similar vein about Blavatsky’s work just after her death:³⁷

. . . it [the creed which Madame Blavatsky preached] has at least the advantage of being heretical. The truth always begins as heresy, in every heresy there may be the germ of a new revelation.

While the Gelugpas and the Sakyapas, two of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, found the Great Madhyamaka teachings to be heretical, the Nyingmapas and the Kagyupas, the other two schools, in general accepted these teachings. In

fact, leading teachers from these two schools used the Great Madhyamaka teachings as a unifying doctrinal basis for their “non-sectarian” (*ris med*) movement. This was begun in Tibet in the latter part of the 1800s, the same time the Theosophical movement was being launched in the rest of the world.

Just as Blavatsky devoted the bulk of *The Secret Doctrine* to supportive quotations and parallels from the world’s religions and philosophies, so Dolpopa devoted the bulk of his writings to supportive quotations from the Buddhist scriptures. Today many scholars are finding that Dolpopa’s understanding of his sources makes better sense than that of his critics. One reason for this is that he takes them to mean what they say, rather than to require interpretation. It took the genius of Tsong-kha-pa to bring about the “Copernican revolution” of making the second promulgation or turning of the wheel of the dharma to be of final or definitive meaning and the third promulgation to be of provisional or interpretable meaning, and thereby reverse the teaching of the *Sandhi-nirmocana-sūtra*. Buddhist scholar Paul Williams writes:³⁸

In portraying the *tathāgatagarbha* theory found in the *sūtras* and *Ratnagotravibhāga* I have assumed that these texts mean what they say. In terms of the categories of Buddhist hermeneutics I have spoken as though the Tathāgatagarbha *sūtras* were to be taken literally or as definitive works, and their meaning is quite explicit. The *tathāgatagarbha* teaching, however, appears to be rather different from that of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, and were I a Tibetan scholar who took the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka emptiness doctrine as the highest teaching of the Buddha I would have to interpret the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching in order to dissolve any apparent disagreement.

Dolpopa is most known for the Shentong or “empty of other” teaching of an absolute *śūnyatā*, said by him to be based on the three Kālacakra commentaries from Śambhala,³⁹ and supported by him with quotations from the Tathāgata-garbha or Buddha-nature *sūtras* whose teachings are synthesized in Maitreya’s *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* and its commentary. Despite this,

the majority of Dolpopa's writings are on the *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts. Thus he, like Tsong-kha-pa, put most of his attention on the primary texts of the second promulgation. In doing so he drew heavily on a lengthy commentary which gives, according to him, the Great Madhyamaka interpretation of these texts. It is a combined commentary on the 100,000 line, 25,000 line, and 18,000 line Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, called the *Śata-sāhasrikā-pañcaviṃśati-sāhasrikāṣṭādaśa-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā-brhat-ṭīkā*, attributed by some to Vasubandhu. Unfortunately, it has not yet been translated into a western language. The late Edward Conze, who was practically the sole translator of *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts throughout his lifetime, lamented that:⁴⁰

The most outstanding feature of contemporary *Prajñāpāramitā* studies is the disproportion between the few persons willing to work in this field and the colossal number of documents extant in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan.

Dolpopa believed that śūnyatā is found in two different senses in the *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts, that must be distinguished through context and through knowledge of absolute śūnyatā, as may be found in the above-mentioned commentary. This text utilizes a three svabhāva type scheme in its explanations, as we have seen from the *Sandhi-nirmocana-sūtra*. Dolpopa refers frequently to the “Questions Asked by Maitreya” chapter of the 18,000 and 25,000 line *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras for the source of the three svabhāva teaching in the *Prajñā-pāramitā* texts.⁴¹ It is there given in related terms; e.g., *dharmatā-rūpa*, translated by Conze as “dharmic nature of form,” is there given for *pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*, the “nature which is established in reality.” Dolpopa considers this chapter to be the Buddha's auto-commentary, which should be used to interpret the *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras. This chapter, like elsewhere in these sūtras, also speaks of the inexpressible dhātu, saying that it is neither other than nor not other than the dharmas. While the teaching that all dharmas are empty of any svabhāva of their own is repeated tirelessly in the *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras, Dolpopa also finds in them the Great Madhyamaka doctrine of the truly existent absolute śūnyatā

empty of everything other than itself, but not empty of its own svabhāva, which is established in reality (*pariniṣpanna*).

All Madhyamaka traditions seek to avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism, which are the two cardinal doctrinal errors: superimposition (*samāropa*) of real existence onto that which has no real existence; and refutation (*apavāda*) of real existence in regard to that which has real existence. According to Great Madhyamaka, the *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras and the texts on philosophical reasoning by Nāgārjuna address the error of superimposition of real existence onto that which has no real existence. They do this by teaching that all dharmas are empty of any svabhāva. This is the Prāsaṅgika teaching. But one must also address the error of refutation of real existence in regard to that which has real existence. This, say the Great Mādhyamikas, is done primarily in the Tathāgata-garbha sūtras of the third promulgation and their synthesis in the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* of Maitreya, and also in the hymns of Nāgārjuna. They do this by teaching the real though inconceivable existence of the dhātu or element, both when obscured as the Tathāgata-garbha, and when unobscured as the dharma-kāya. They teach that the dhātu is not empty of svabhāva, that its svabhāva is threefold, consisting of:⁴² the dharma-kāya, “body of the law;” *tathatā*, “suchness” or “true nature;” and *gotra*, “germ” or “lineage.” This is its truly existent absolute svabhāva established in reality.

Śūnyatā, as we saw above, is without doubt understood in the Arhat secret doctrine to be an inconceivable absolute like Shentong, the emptiness of everything but itself. So svabhāva is without doubt understood in the Arhat secret doctrine to be a truly existent absolute, as seen in a phrase consisting of the few “technical terms as employed in one of the Tibetan and Senzar versions” of the Book of Dzyan given in *The Secret Doctrine*:⁴³

Barnang and Ssa in Ngovonyidj.

This means: “space (*bar-snang*) and earth (*sa*) in svabhāva or svabhāvatā (*ngo-bo-nyid*).” The Tibetan word *ngo-bo-nyid* or *ño-bo-ñid* is one of two standard translations of the Sanskrit svabhāva or svabhāvatā. Robert Thurman notes that:⁴⁴

Where it is used in the ontological sense, meaning “own-being” or “intrinsic reality,” the Tibetans prefer *ngo bo nyid*. Where it is used in the conventional sense, meaning simply “nature,” they prefer *rang bzhin*, although when it is used as “self-nature,” that is, stressing the *sva-* (*rang*) prefix, they equate it with *ngo bo nyid*.

This phrase occurs in stanza I describing the state of the cosmos in pralaya before its periodical manifestation. If space and earth are dissolved in svabhāva, it must be the svabhāva of something that truly exists, even when the universe doesn't.

Conclusion

The concept of svabhāva or svabhāvatā found throughout known Sanskrit writings is the concept of the “inherent nature” of something. This something may be a common everyday thing or it may be the absolute essence of the universe. In terms of doctrines, then, there must first be the doctrine of an existing essence before there can be the doctrine of its inherent nature or svabhāva. If a doctrinal system does not posit the existence of an essence, whether of individual things or of the universe as a whole, there can be no doctrine of svabhāva. Rather there would be the doctrine of niḥsvabhāva: that since nothing has an essence, nothing has an inherent nature; such as is taught in Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhism.

The concept of svabhāva or svabhāvatā found in the Book of Dzyan comes from the stanzas dealing with cosmogony, not from stanzas laying out its doctrinal system, which we lack. But from the writings of Blavatsky and her Mahatma teachers it is clear that the doctrinal system of the Book of Dzyan and *The Secret Doctrine* is based on the existence of the one element. This, then, is a unitary essence, with a unitary inherent nature or svabhāva, not a plurality of essences with a plurality of svabhāvas such as is taught in early Abhidharma Buddhism.

From what we have seen above, there can be little doubt that the svabhāva spoken of in the Book of Dzyan is the svabhāva of the dhātu, the one element. This teaching in Buddhism is focused in a single unique treatise, the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*. The

doctrinal standpoint of the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* as understood in the Great Madhyamaka tradition is of all known texts far and away the closest to that of *The Secret Doctrine*, just as the ethical standpoint of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is of all known texts far and away the closest to that of *The Voice of the Silence*. These facts take us well beyond the realm of probability. Blavatsky indeed had esoteric northern Buddhist sources.

We are here speaking of the doctrinal system, not of the cosmogonic system, which the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* does not deal with. The doctrinal standpoint of the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* has been taken by most Buddhists down through the ages, other than the Great Mādhyamikas, to be quite different from the other four treatises of Maitreya. One of the reasons for this is that it uses a largely different set of technical terms. Its primary concern is the dhātu, the element, while that of its commentary is the Tathāgata-garbha, the obscured element as the Buddhature, or what we may call the one life.⁴⁵ Neither of these terms is the concern of the other four treatises of Maitreya. In fact, the authorship of the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* is not even attributed to Maitreya in the older Chinese tradition, though it has always been attributed to Maitreya in the Tibetan tradition. Blavatsky in a letter to A. P. Sinnett specifically links *The Secret Doctrine* she was then writing to a secret book of Maitreya:⁴⁶

I have finished an enormous Introductory Chapter, or *Preamble*, Prologue, call it what you will; just to show the reader that the text as it goes, every Section beginning with a page of translation from the Book of *Dzyan* and the Secret Book of “Maytreya Buddha” *Champai chhos Nga* (in prose, not the five books in verse known, which are a blind) are no fiction.

Given their doctrinal similarity, it is likely that the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*, or more specifically its secret original, is the book of Maitreya that Blavatsky refers to here. The known *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*, though it may be a “blind,” still apparently represents the same doctrinal standpoint as that of *The Secret Doctrine*. The other four books of the “*Champai chhos Nga*” (*byams-pa'i chos lnga*), the five (*lnga*) religious books (*chos*, Sanskrit *dharma*) of

Maitreya (*byams-pa*, pronounced Champa or Jampa),⁴⁷ however, according to the Great Mādhyamikas also represent the same doctrinal standpoint as that of the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*. The *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* forms the heart of the Great Madhyamaka tradition, which significantly was represented by Dolpopa to be the “Golden Age Tradition.” Although this tradition teaches an inconceivable absolute śūnyatā or Shentong (*gʒan ston*) which is not empty of svabhāva, its teachings are not presented in terms of svabhāva, so it is not a Svābhāvika tradition.

The only references I am aware of to a Svābhāvika school in Buddhist texts are those found in texts like the *Buddha-carita*, where they do not refer to a Buddhist school of this name, but rather to a non-Buddhist school.⁴⁸ The *Samaya-bhedoparacana-cakra* by Vasumitra, said to have been written only four centuries after the time of the Buddha, gives an account of the eighteen schools of early Buddhism, none of which is the Svābhāvika. Thus, leaving aside the now largely discredited account of the Svābhāvika school of Buddhism given by a Nepalese Buddhist pandit to Brian Hodgson, I am aware of no traditional sources for any Buddhist school either calling themselves Svābhāvikas or being called Svābhāvikas by other Buddhist schools.

The southern or Hīnayāna schools in general accepted a svabhāva in their impermanent but real dharmas. In this sense they could be called Svābhāvikas, but apparently they were not. Since this svabhāva is impermanent, it cannot be the eternal svabhāva referred to in Theosophical writings. We have noted above an exception to this in the Sarvāstivāda school, which taught an eternal svabhāva. But its doctrinal standpoint on this is not clearly known; and this svabhāva was apparently still the svabhāva of the individual dharmas rather than the svabhāva of the one dhātu. Thus it cannot be the unitary svabhāva referred to in Theosophical writings. Again, the Sarvāstivādins were not considered either by themselves or by others to be Svābhāvikas.

The northern or Māhāyana schools in general would be the opposite of Svābhāvikas, teaching that all dharmas are empty of svabhāva (*niḥsvabhāva*). Just as dharmas are ultimately non-existent, so their svabhāva is ultimately non-existent. As put by Chandrakīrti, svabhāva is not something (*akimcīt*), it is

merely non-existence (*abhāva-mātra*).⁴⁹ The inherent nature or svabhāva of fire, for example, is here not its common everyday nature of burning, but rather is that its essence is non-existent. In other words, the inherent nature (*svabhāva*) of dharmas is that they have no inherent nature (*niḥsvabhāva*). This position is most fully developed in the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school, the dominant school in Tibet, generally considered to be the culmination of the Mahāyāna schools.

The Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna is known for its teaching of the three svabhāvas, derived from the *Sandhi-nirmocana-sūtra*. These svabhāvas or natures, which are also called lakṣaṇas or defining characteristics, are applied to the dharmas: a dharma has an illusory nature, a dependent nature, and a perfect nature established in reality. However, these are balanced in the same texts with the teaching of the three niḥsvabhāvas, culminating with the absolute lack of svabhāva (*paramārtha-niḥsvabhāvatā*). So this certainly would not be considered a Svābhāvika position.

The Great Madhyamaka tradition accepts a truly existent though inconceivable absolute śūnyatā which is not empty of svabhāva. Since this tradition presents its teachings in terms of śūnyatā and not in terms of svabhāva, as noted above, they are not Svābhāvikas. Yet it is only here that we find a match with the doctrine of svabhāva or svabhāvatā found in Theosophy. The match is to their teaching of the dhātu, the element, which is described in terms of absolute śūnyatā or Shentong empty of anything other than itself, and whose svabhāva is also absolute and truly existent. This, however, is the very teaching most pointedly refuted by the Gelugpas, who in other regards are considered by Theosophists to be closest to Theosophy. But Theosophists and others often remain unaware that the Gelugpas refute this teaching, because as stated by Hookham:⁵⁰

Unfortunately for those who intuit a Shentong meaning somewhere behind the Buddha's words, it is possible to listen to Gelugpa teachings for a long time before realizing that it is precisely this intuition that is being denied. The definitions and the "difficult points" of the Gelugpa school are designed specifically to exclude a Shentong view; they take a long time to master.

Research in Buddhist texts is in its early stages in the West. The Great Madhyamaka tradition remained largely unknown here until quite recently, and only now are its texts starting to come out. Much remains to be done in preparation for the coming out of an original language text of the Book of Dzryan.

Notes

1. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1959; second enlarged edition, New York: Grove Press, 1974, p. 58. Note that many current Buddhist writers translate “dharma” as “phenomena.”

2. All translations are by myself unless otherwise noted. This verse is here taken from Asaṅga’s commentary after 1.152 of the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*, where it explains the *tathāgata-garbha* or Buddha-nature, the dhātu or element when obscured. Hence, dhātu’s Tibetan translation is here *khams*, element. When this verse occurs in Yogācāra texts, as at the beginning of Asaṅga’s *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*, and in Sthiramati’s commentary on verse 19 of Vasubandhu’s *Vijñapti-mātratā-siddhi-triṃśikā*, it explains the *ālaya-vijñāna* or substratum consciousness. Hence, dhātu’s Tibetan translation is there *dbyñs*, or realm. This verse is accepted not only by the Jonangpas and the Yogācārins, but also by the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas, the dominant school in Tibet. It is quoted approvingly by Jam-yang-shay-ba in his somewhat polemical Tibetan monastic study manual, with the comment: “The Prāsaṅgikas accept these passages literally.” See Jeffrey Hopkins’ partial translation of this study manual in *Meditation on Emptiness*, London: Wisdom Publications, 1983, where this occurs on p. 623.

3. *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* 1.29 gives ten meanings for the dhātu, the first of which is svabhāva.

4. See: Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śaka Era*, translated from the French by Sara Webb-Boin, Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste de l’Université Catholique de Louvain, 1988, p. 600.

5. This verse is found in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* on 5.27.

6. “Origin and Doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools: A Translation of the Hsüan-chwang Version of Vasumitra’s Treatise,” trans. Jiryo Masuda, *Asia Major*, vol. 2, 1925, p. 48 (section 3, chapter 5, verse 29). See also *Abhidharma-kośa* 1.18 for a similar statement.

7. *What the Buddha Taught*, pp. 51-56.

8. In *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*, compiled by A. T. Barker, 1925; facsimile reprint, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1973, pp. 376-386.

9. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, comp. A. T. Barker, 2nd ed. 1926, p. 53; 3rd ed. 1962, p. 53; chronological ed. 1993, p. 271.

10. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff, vol. 3.

11. There are said to be ten Tathāgata-garbha sūtras: *Śrī-mālā-devī-siṃha-nāda-sūtra*; *Jñānālokālaṃkāra-sūtra*; *Sandhi-nirmocana-sūtra*; *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*; *Avikalpa-praveśa-dhāraṇī*; *Dhāraṇīśvara-rāja-pariprcchā* (*Tathāgata-mahākaruṇā-nirdeśa-sūtra*); *Ārya-aṅguli-mālīya-sūtra*; *Mahā-bherī-hāraka-sūtra*; *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*; *Anūnatvāpūrṇatva-nirdeśa-parivarta*.

12. Étienne Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, Eng. trans. by Sara Boin, London: The Pali Text Society, 1976, Introduction, p. lxxvii.

13. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, 2nd ed. p. 455; 3rd ed. p. 448; chron. ed., p. 217. Compare: *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, by Samuel Beal, London: Trübner & Co., 1871, p. 184.

14. *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga-vyākhyā* after 1.36; E. H. Johnston ed. pp. 30-31; Z. Nakamura ed. p. 59. A perfectly good translation of this exists by J. Takasaki from Sanskrit, pp. 209-210, and also by E. Obermiller from Tibetan, p. 166. I have retranslated it in order to bring out the technical terms, particularly ātman, which Takasaki and Obermiller translate as “unity” rather than “self.”

15. *The Secret Doctrine*, by H. P. Blavatsky, vol. I, p. 404; vol. II, pp. 211, 501.

16. These representative examples are drawn from the 25,000 and 18,000 line *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras. There is at present no complete Sanskrit edition of any of the three large *Prajñā-pāramitā* sūtras. But as pointed out by Edward Conze, their contents are essentially identical, with the 100,000 line version spelling out in full the extensive and repetitive lists of categories which are only abbreviated in the 18,000 and 25,000 line versions. So each of the three can be divided according to subject matter into eight progressively achieved “realizations” (*abhisamaya*), following Maitreya’s *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. Using this, we can readily see what the available Sanskrit editions cover:

Ātasāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā, ed. Pratāpacandra Ghoṣa, vol. 1 (18 fascicles, 1676 pp.), vol. 2 (1 fasc., 71 pp., incomplete), Calcutta, 1902-1914, Bibliotheca Indica 153; includes 13 parivartas covering most of the 1st abhisamaya.

The Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, ed. Nalinaksha Dutt,

London: Luzac & Co., 1934, Calcutta Oriental Series 28; covers the 1st abhisamaya.

Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā II • III, ed. Takayasu Kimura, Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin Publishing Co., 1986; covers the 2nd and 3rd abhisamayās.

Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā IV, ed. Takayasu Kimura, Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin Publishing Co., 1990; covers the 4th abhisamaya.

The Gilgit Manuscript of the Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā, Chapters 55 to 70 corresponding to the 5th Abhisamaya, ed. & trans. Edward Conze, Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1962, Serie Orientale Roma 26.

The Gilgit Manuscript of the Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā, Chapters 70 to 82 corresponding to the 6th, 7th and 8th Abhisamayās, ed. & trans. Edward Conze, Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1974, Serie Orientale Roma 46.

The 25,000 line editions of Dutt and Kimura, covering the first through fourth abhisamayās, and the 18,000 line editions of Conze, covering the fifth through eighth abhisamayās, make up the complete subject matter of these texts. Thus it was not until 1990, with Kimura's edition completing the last of the eight abhisamayās to be edited, that we had access to a complete large *Prajñā-pāramitā sūtra* in printed form.

More sections of the 25,000 line text have also been published:

Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā V, ed. Takayasu Kimura, Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin Publishing Co., 1992; covers the 5th abhisamaya.

“Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-VI Anupūrvābhisamayādhikāraḥ,” ed. Shōgo Watanabe, *Tōyō Daigaku Daigakuin Kiyō* (Bulletin of the Graduate School, Toyo University), vol. 25, 1988, pp. 182-165; covers the 6th abhisamaya.

“Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-VII Ekakṣaṇābhisamayādhikāraḥ (1),” ed. Shōgo Watanabe, *Tōyō Daigaku Daigakuin Kiyō*, vol. 27, 1990, pp. 136-117; “. . . -VII Ekakṣaṇābhisamayādhikāraḥ (2),” vol. 29, 1992, pp. 134-119; covers the 7th abhisamaya.

17. *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* 24.11:

vināśayati durdṛṣṭā sūnyatā manda-medhasam |
sarpō yathā durgr̥hito vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā ||

18. *Meditation on Emptiness*, Jeffrey Hopkins, p. 360

19. *The Door of Liberation*, by Geshe Wangyal, New York: Maurice Girodias Associates, 1973, p. 66.

20. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. 43.

21. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14, p. 433.

22. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 423.

23. Found in *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, by Samuel Beal, London: Trübner & Co., 1871, pp. 282-284. It had been published earlier in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s., vol. 1, 1865, pp. 25-28.

24. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 405-406.

25. Beal, *Catena*, p. 11: "Both these writers adopted the teaching of the Swābhāvika school of Buddhism, which is that generally accepted in China. This school holds the eternity of Matter as a crude mass, infinitesimally attenuated under one form, and expanded in another form into the countless beautiful varieties of Nature." Also, p. 14: "The doctrine of a universally diffused and self-existing essence of which matter is only a form, seems to be unknown in the Southern schools. It would appear, therefore, that there has been no advance in the Southern philosophical code since the date of Nagasena [i.e., Nāgārjuna], who was a strenuous opponent of the Swābhāva theory."

26. See, for example: *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence: Reason and Enlightenment in the Central Philosophy of Tibet*, by Robert A. F. Thurman, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984; *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, by C. W. Huntington, Jr., with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989; *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, by Jay L. Garfield, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. However, Huntington in *The Emptiness of Emptiness* seems to have himself fallen into an absolutist interpretation, holding that Madhyamaka has no views of its own, which according to Gelugpa exegesis amounts to the extreme of nihilism. See Paul Williams' review article, "On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 19, 1991, pp. 191-218. For a refutation of the idea that Madhyamaka has no views of its own, besides Thurman's translation of *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold* (e.g., pp. 329-332), see the further explanations in José Ignacio Cabezón's *A Dose of Emptiness: An Annotated Translation of the sTong thun chen mo of mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 257 ff. (esp. p. 266).

27. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. 289. See also vol. II, p. 239 fn.: "Creation"—out of pre-existent eternal substance, or matter, of course, which substance, according to our teachings, is boundless, ever-existing space."

28. *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* 13.8:

śūnyatā sarva-dṛṣṭīnām proktā niḥsaraṇam jinaih |
yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatā-dṛṣṭis tān aśādhyān babhāṣire ||

29. *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra)*, by Jikido Takasaki, Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966, Serie Orientale Roma 33, Introduction, p. 58

30. *Sandhi-nirmocana-sūtra*, chapters 6 and 7. For English translation see: *Wisdom of Buddha: The Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, translated by John Powers, Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1995.

31. *Madhyānta-vibhāga-bhāṣya*, 1.1 in G. Nagao ed.; or 1.2 in N. Tatia & A. Thakur ed., and in R. Pandeya ed.: evaṃ yad yatra nāsti tat tena śūnyam iti yathā-bhūtaṃ samanupaśyati yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭaṃ bhavati tat sad ihāstūti yathā-bhūtaṃ praṇānātūti aviparītaṃ śūnyatā-lakṣaṇam udbhāvitam bhavati. This is also quoted, with minor variants, in Asaṅga's *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga-vyākhyā* on 1.155; in Asaṅga's *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, U. Wogihara ed. p. 47 (ll. 17-20), N. Dutt ed. p. 32 (ll. 12-14); and in Asaṅga's *Abhidharma-samuccaya*, P. Pradhan ed. p. 40 (ll. 10-11) [Pradhan's re-translation here does not match, but the Tibetan does]. In the phrase, *yad yatra nāsti, tat tena śūnyam*, the word *tena* is not taken as in the standard Sanskrit idiom, *tena śūnyam*, "empty of that," but rather as in the common Buddhist Sanskrit idiom, *yena/tena = yatra/tatra*, where it equals *tatra*, "there," correlating with *yatra*, "where." I spell this out because my translation is here more of a paraphrase, in order to follow English idiom for "empty." A literal translation would be, "what does not exist somewhere, that is empty (i.e., absent) there;" or, "where something does not exist, there that is empty (i.e., absent)."

32. *Madhyānta-vibhāga-bhāṣya*, 1.20 in Nagao ed.; or 1.21 in Pandeya ed.: pudgala-dharmābhāvaś ca śūnyatā | tad-abhāvasya ca sad-bhāvaḥ.

33. *The Buddha Within: Tathagatagarbha Doctrine According to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga*, by S. K. Hookham, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 139.

34. On absolute (*paramārtha*) śūnyatā, see: *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga-vyākhyā* on 1.155: na hi paramārtha-śūnyatā-jñāna-mukham antareṇa śakyate 'ikalpo dhātur adhigantaṃ sāksātkartum; "Not indeed without entering into the knowledge of absolute emptiness is it possible to directly realize the non-conceptual element (*dhātu*, Tib. *dbyiṅs* here)."

35. "Dol-po-pa Shes-rab Rgyal-mtshan and the Genesis of the *Gzhan-stong* Position in Tibet," by Cyrus Stearns, *Asiatische Studien*, vol. 49, 1995, p. 836.

36. Gareth Sparham, "On the Proper Interpretation of Prajñā-Paramitā," *Dreloma: Drepung Loseling Magazine*, no. XXXII-XXXIII,

1994-95, p. 20.

37. W. T. Stead, "Madame Blavatsky," *Review of Reviews*, June, 1891 (pp. 548-550); reprinted in *Adyar Library Bulletin*, vol. XIV, part 2, 8th May, 1950, p. 67.

38. Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 105-106.

39. These three commentaries are: Puṇḍarīka's *Vimala-prabhā-tīkā* on the *Kālacakra-tantra*; Vajrapāṇi's *Laghu-tantra-tīkā* on the *Cakra-saṃvara-tantra*; and Vajragarbha's *Hevajra-piṇḍārtha-tīkā* on the *Hevajra-tantra*. The latter two explain their respective tantras from the standpoint of Kālacakra.

40. Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1975, p. x.

41. Sanskrit text printed in "Maitreya's Questions' in the Prajñāpāramitā," by Edward Conze and Iida Shotaro, *Mélanges D'Indianisme a la Mémoire de Louis Renou*, Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1968, pp. 229-242; English translation in *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, trans. Edward Conze, pp. 644-652.

42. *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* 1.144. See also note 3.

43. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 23.

44. *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence*, p. 193, fn. 11.

45. It should be noted, however, that Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas such as the Gelugpas rather interpret the Tathāgata-garbha as emptiness, specifically the emptiness of the mind. E. Obermiller more or less followed this interpretation in his 1931 pioneering translation of the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* or *Uttara-tantra*, since he followed Gelugpa commentaries, even though he considered that it taught monism. Similarly, David Ruegg in his 1969 monumental study of the Tathāgata-garbha, *La Théorie du Tathāgatagarbha et du Gotra*, also followed this interpretation. A review article by Lambert Schmithausen, "Zu D. Seyfort Ruegg's buch 'La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra'," in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für Indische Philosophie*, 1973, criticizes this interpretation. As summed up by Paul Williams: "Schmithausen has argued that reference to the *tathāgatagarbha* as emptiness must be understood in terms of the particular meaning of emptiness for this tradition—that emptiness is a particular aspect of the *tathāgatagarbha*, i.e., that the *tathāgatagarbha* is empty of defilements, not that it is identical with the [Prāsaṅgika] Madhyamaka emptiness. I agree." (*Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 1989, p. 281, note 11.)

46. *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*, p. 195.

47. The other four books are: *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*; *Madhyānta-vibhāga*; *Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga*; *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*. Note the unfortunate blunder of Geoffrey Barborka in translating *Champai chhos Nga* as “the whole doctrine in its essentiality,” copied in Boris de Zirkoff’s “Historical Introduction” to the definitive 1978 edition of *The Secret Doctrine*, p. [69], n. 130. I have more than once contacted the publishers concerning this, but it could not be corrected.

48. Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddha-carita* 9.58-62. See also 18.29-41 for a refutation of the svabhāva doctrine. The svabhāva doctrine is also refuted as a non-Buddhist school in the *Tattva-saṃgraha*, by Śāntaraṅgita, verses 110-127.

49. *Prasanna-padā* commentary on *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* 15.2.

50. *The Buddha Within*, p. 17.

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