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### A MEDITATION-ORIENTED APPROACH TO BUDDHA NATURE AS SEEN BY EARLY KAGYÜ MASTERS

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#### Gampopa's Life and Legacy

Gampopa (Sgam po pa Bsod nam rin chen, 1079–1153) “holds a unique position among the many illustrious philosopher-saints of Tibet.”<sup>1</sup> This is how Herbert V. Guenther phrased it in his introduction to his pioneering translation of Gampopa’s *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (*Thar pa rin po che’i rgyan*), which he published as early as 1959. And in fact, up until the present day, Gampopa, also known as Nyam me Dakpo Larje, the “incomparable healer from Dakpo,” is held in the highest esteem in Tibetan Buddhism. According to the various hagiographies, Gampopa was married, had two children, and led a successful life as a physician. Yet, life hit him hard in that a contagious illness caused the death of his entire family. Shortly afterward, at the age of twenty-five, he took full monastic ordination and began his studies with well-established and strongly monastic-oriented Kadam masters such as the well-known Jayülwa Shönu Ö (Bya yul ba Gzhon nu ’od, 1075–1138) and Chakriwa (Lcags ri ba, twelfth century).<sup>2</sup> By virtue of their guidance and paired with his consistent meditative practice, Gampopa acquired a comprehensive knowledge of Buddhism and achieved stable meditation states. Then, at the approximate age of thirty, he sought further spiritual guidance—despite strongly voiced objections from the side of his Kadam teachers—and followed his impulse to find the yogi Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1040–1123), who quickly became his main or root teacher.<sup>3</sup>

As far as historical records tell us, Gampopa’s Kadam teachers were rather critical of Milarepa and his unconventional life. Taking this into account, it is not difficult to imagine that Gampopa went through a period of tension between two strands of teachings: on the one hand the Kadam tradition tracing back to Atiśa’s (982–1054) teaching activities in Tibet, and on the other hand the Mahāmudrā tradition that Gampopa received from his main teacher Milarepa, going back to Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1012–1097), who in turn had received it from his main Indian siddha teachers Nāropa (eleventh century) and

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1 Guenther 1959: ix.

2 Ibid.: x.

3 Tibetan: *rtsa ba’i bla ma*. See Gyaltrul Rinpoche 2004: 18–54.

Maitrīpa (986–1063).<sup>4</sup> As time passed, Gampopa became famous for merging the two streams of the Kadam and Mahāmudrā traditions into one teaching system.<sup>5</sup> He thereby created a template for spiritual practice that attracted a great number of disciples, and all the Kagyü traditions that have evolved from it are to this day summed up under the umbrella term Dakpo Kagyü.

### The Main Views on Buddha Nature in Gampopa's Spiritual Vicinity

Having taken this short tour through Gampopa's life and legacy, let us now turn to the topic of buddha nature as he viewed it. In this regard it may in turn be worthwhile to see what kind of views regarding buddha nature were prevalent in Tibet during Gampopa's time and within his spiritual vicinity. These were mainly the positions of Ngog Loden Sherab (Rngog Blo ldan shes rab, 1059–1109) and Tsen Kawoché (Btsan kha bo che, b. 1021), who both were disciples of the Kashmiri teacher Sajjana and both held the main Indian śāstra discussing buddha nature, the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, to be of definitive (*nītārtha*) rather than provisional (*neyārtha*) meaning, albeit in different ways. In Tibet, this work is usually referred to with the alternative title *Uttaratantraśāstra* (i.e., the treatise *Ultimate Continuum*).<sup>6</sup>

### The Analytical Tradition of Ngog Loden Sherab

Ngog Loden Sherab equates buddha nature with natural purity in the sense of emptiness or essencelessness that pervades the mind of all sentient beings. This view can be traced in Indian Buddhism, for example, to the *Lañkāvatārasūtra* and the works of several prominent Madhyamaka thinkers such as Candrakīrti, Bhāvaviveka, Kamalaśīla, Jñānaśrīmitra, and Jayānanda.<sup>7</sup>

Later on, Ngog Loden Sherab's position was called, for example by Śākya Chokden (Shakya mchog ldan, 1428–1507), the “analytical tradition” of *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* exegesis that defines buddha nature as emptiness and the definitive meaning of this treatise in the sense of a non-affirming negation.<sup>8</sup> Śākya Chokden also called it the “tradition of studying and reflecting” to distinguish it from the “tradition of meditation”<sup>9</sup> using the template of the early Buddhist clas-

4 See *ibid.*, 83–93, where Gyatrul Rinpoche also discusses the tension Gampopa experienced in his efforts to be at home in both the Kadam and Mahāmudrā traditions.

5 Tibetan: *bka' phyag chu bo gnyis 'dres*.

6 See an English translation of the *Ultimate Continuum*, including its commentary by Asaṅga, in Brunnhölzl 2014.

7 Kano 2016, 8 and n. 26. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 1, 46 and n. 20.

8 Tib.: *med dgag*.

9 Tib.: *mtshan nyid lugs/thos bsam gyi lugs* versus *sgom lugs*. See for example in *Mus rabs 'byams pa'i dris lan*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 23, 458<sub>4-5</sub>. For a critical edition of the Tibetan text

sification of three types of insight (*prajñā*), that is, insight deriving from studying, reflecting, and meditating. Śākya Chokden defines buddha nature in one of his early works, for example, as “nothing but the natural purity, that is, the emptiness aspect of all phenomena, which pervades all that is knowable and which is a non-affirming negation, something akin to space.”<sup>10</sup> It should be mentioned at this point, however, that in the course of his life Śākya Chokden shifted his position from advocating a non-affirming presentation of reality to an affirming “other-empty” presentation.

### *The Meditative Tradition of Tsen Kawoché*

Tsen Kawoché equates buddha nature with wisdom and luminosity imbued with qualities. It is said that the Kashmiri teacher Sajjana instructed Tsen Kawoché and another Tibetan called Zu Gawé Dorjé in all of the Five Works of Maitreya and that he gave them the key instructions for the associated meditation practice.<sup>11</sup> This view that considers buddha nature as inseparable from wisdom and luminosity and its qualities can be traced in Indian Buddhism, for example, to the *Tathagātagarbhasūtra* or the *Śrīmālādevīsūtra*.

For Tsen Kawoché, the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) is the naturally pure wisdom (*rang bshin rnam dag gi ye shes*), or natural luminosity (*rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba*), referred to as buddha nature that pervades everything from buddhas to sentient beings.<sup>12</sup> Śākya Chokden, for example, explains by referring to Tsen Kawoché's tradition that “the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) I discovered from having studied the Maitreya Teachings at age fifty-nine is the naturally pure wisdom that pervades everything from buddhas to sentient beings.” It is precisely this naturally pure wisdom or natural luminosity that Śākya Chokden, as stated above, labels a “meditative tradition” that defines buddha nature as emptiness in the sense of an affirming negation.<sup>13</sup>

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and its translation see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016: vol. 1, 82 and n. 200. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: 42.

10 See Śākya Chokden in *Dbu ma'i 'byung tshul*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 4, 239<sub>7</sub>–240<sub>1</sub>: *de'i ngos 'dzin yang | chos thams cad kyi rang bzhin rnam dag gi cha | shes bya thams cad la khyab byed du 'jug pa de nyid yin la | de yang med par dgag pa nam mkha' lta bu zhis ste |*. This passage is translated and discussed in van der Kuijp 1983: 43.

11 See Kano 2006: 53–54. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 1, 42.

12 See Śākya Chokden in *Dbu ma'i 'byung tshul*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 4, 240<sub>2-3</sub>: *rang lo drug cu lon pa'i tshe byams pa'i chos gsan pa las rnyed pa'i nges don ni | sangs rgyas nas sems can gyi bar la khyab pa'i rang bzhin rnam dag gi ye shes | rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba de nyid bde bar gshegs pa'i snying por gsungs pa yin no zhes |*.

13 Tib.: *ma yin dgag*. See Mathes 2008, 368. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 1, 42 and n. 57.

The famous philosopher and historian Gö Lotsāwa (‘Gos lo tsA ba, 1392–1481), states in his own commentary on the *Ultimate Continuum*:

The Dharma master Drikungpa [Jigten Sumgön] rejoiced in Jé Gampopa’s statement that the basic text of these mahāmudrā instructions of ours is the [*Ratnagotravibhāga*]. *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* composed by the illustrious Maitreya; and since it is evident in the notes to [his] *Uttaratantra* explanations, the points he makes when presenting the three dharmacakras, and also the explanations deriving from Sajjana’s heart disciple Tsen Kawoché, are [all] in accordance with mahāmudrā proper, I have relied on them and have made [this] clear to others as best as I could.<sup>14</sup>

Just as Gö Lotsāwa<sup>15</sup> singled out Tsen Kawoché’s interpretation as the one that accords with Gampopa’s Dakpo Mahāmudrā, Tsen Kawoché’s interpretation was widely endorsed by the majority of later Kagyü masters in their strongly meditation-oriented approach to the spiritual path. Thus, also at the later end of this tradition’s historical spectrum in Tibet, Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé (‘Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas, 1813–1899) called Tsen Kawoché’s system “the superior lineage of extraordinary exegesis and practice.”<sup>16</sup> He also confirms in his introduction to his commentary on the *Ultimate Continuum* that this continued to be the view maintained in the Karma Kagyü tradition and that Gö Lotsāwa represents exactly this meditative tradition of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* exegesis.<sup>17</sup>

### *Śākya Chokden’s Summary*

Śākya Chokden summarizes these two interpretations of buddha nature, which can be traced back to Ngog Loden Sherab and Tsen Kawoché, and states that the *Ultimate Continuum* clearly attests the meditative tradition:

14 Translation by Mathes 2008, 368. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 1, 42 and n. 57.

15 On Gö Lotsāwa’s reference to this in his *Ratnagotravibhāga* commentary *De kho na nyid rab tu gsal ba’i me long* (574<sub>8-13</sub>), see Kano 2016, 353, n. 35. On Gö Lotsāwa’s reference to this in his *Deb ther sngon po*, see Higgins and Draszczyk 2016: vol. 2, 17 and n. 11.

16 See *Mi ldog pa seng ge’i nga ro*, 12<sub>13-14</sub>: *thun mong ma yin pa’i bshad pa dang nyams len gyi rgyun khyad par ’phags pa yin* |. This is discussed in Higgins and Draszczyk 2016: vol. 1, 83 and n. 202.

17 See Higgins and Draszczyk 2019: vol. 1, 42 and n. 57.

According to the teachings of former masters, the identifications of buddha nature in the sense that the emptiness of duality is an instance of a non-affirming negation and/or an instance of an affirming negation were said to be distinguished according to whether they explained the Maitreya teachings in line with studying and reflecting or in line with the tradition of meditation. In the root [text, i.e., the *Ratnagotravibhāga*] and commentary, the latter system is clearly attested.<sup>18</sup>

### Gampopa's Treatment of Buddha Nature

Gampopa was well acquainted with the interpretations of both the analytical approach of Ngog Loden Sherab and the meditative approach of Tsen Kawoché. Ngog Loden Sherab's interpretation of buddha nature was definitely transmitted in Kadam circles and thus an interpretation that Gampopa studied with his Kadam teachers. Moreover, within the Kadam tradition, Tsen Kawoché's perspective was also taught and practiced, at least to a certain extent.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Gampopa's main teacher was Milarepa. He in turn was heir to the teaching tradition of Marpa, who, at least as described by Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé,<sup>20</sup> had received the "meditative tradition" of the "Five Treatises of Maitreya" directly from Maitrīpa.

How did Gampopa treat these perspectives on such a central issue—if not *the* actual backbone—of the sūtric and tantric Mahāyāna? Other than later Tibetan scholars, Gampopa does not seem to see a contradiction in (a) an affirmative account that defines mind's true nature as emptiness in the sense of luminous wisdom imbued with enlightened qualities and (b) a non-affirming account that regards mind's true nature as emptiness in the sense of essencelessness lacking any ontological essence. On the one hand this may have to do with the fact that during Gampopa's time, polemic issues regarding Madhyamaka expositions of the doctrines of emptiness and essencelessness, as well as those regarding the various theories on buddha nature, were not at the forefront of Tibetan Buddhist discussions as they were one or two centuries later. The main reason, however, presumably has to do with Gampopa's extremely pragmatic approach to spirituality in that he

18 See *Mus rab 'byams pa'i dri lan*, in his *Collected Works* vol. 23, 458<sub>4-5</sub>: *slob dpon snga ma dag gi gsung nas | gnyis stong med dgag gi cha dang ma yin dgag gi cha la snying po'i ngos 'dzin du byed pa | byams chos thos bsam ltar 'chad pa dang | byams chos sgom lugs ltar 'chad pa'i khyad yin gsung | rtsa 'grel na ni lugs phyi ma de nyid gsal bar bzhugs | |*.

19 See Mathes 2015: 304–7.

20 See Draszczyk 2015: 84 and n. 288.

strongly emphasized meditation practice and Mahāmudrā teachings, introducing his students directly into mind’s ultimate nature.

In short, it seems that he was not interested in long philosophical debates but simply encouraged his students to focus on the meditative practice of Mahāmudrā. This is not surprising, given that the yogi Milarepa has been his main teacher, and, in particular, if one thinks of the farewell present Milarepa is said to have offered to him when Gampopa left for his own retreat: Milarepa showed him his buttocks covered with calluses from decades of sitting in meditation on hard rock.

Gampopa’s way of guiding his students, along with his view of mind’s true nature, may best be exemplified in the following short excerpts from his *Presentation of the Three Trainings*:

There are two types of insight: ultimate insight and conventional insight. The ultimate one is the innate. The conventional one is the precise discernment of phenomena. ...

There are three exclamations: the exclamation that is pleasant to hear, the exclamation expressive of well-being, and the exclamation as to appearances.

The exclamation that is pleasant to hear: The innate, that is, con-nate wisdom [*lhan cig skyes pa’i ye shes, sahajajñāna*], which is present in the mind stream of all sentient beings,—as that is present within oneself, it does not need to be searched for elsewhere.

The exclamation expressive of well-being: The *dharmakāya*, that is, the great well-being that is the relinquishment of suffering—this *dharmakāya* is nothing but the awareness of one’s own mind; on its own, it is nonexistent and therefore does not need to be searched for.

The exclamation as to appearances: All these appearances and sounds are one’s own mind—they do not occur on their own, and therefore you do not need to be afraid of them. ...<sup>21</sup>

21 *Bslab gsum rnam gzhas*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 3, 338<sub>1</sub>–340<sub>1</sub>: *shes rab rnam pa gnyis ni | don dam pa’i shes rab dang | kun rdzob kyi shes rab bo || don dam pa ni gnyug ma’o || kun rdzog ni chos rnam la rnam par ’byed pa’o || ... ’o dod rnam pa gsum ni | snyan pa’i ’o dod | bde ba’i ’o dod | grags pa’i ’o dod | snyan pa’i ’o dod ni | lhan cig skyes pa’i ye shes ’gro ba thams cad kyi rgyud la yod pa’i gnyug ma | de rang la yod pas gzhan nas btsal mi dgos so || bde ba’i ’od dod ni | sdug bsngal spangs pa’i bde ba chen po chos kyi sku de | rang gi sems rig pa chos kyi sku ’di kho na yin | logs na med pas btsal mi dgos so || grags pa’o ’od dod ni | snang grags kyi chos ’di dag thams cad rang gi sems yin | logs nas ma byung khyod de la ’jigs mi dgos so ||.*

In the context of buddha nature, the key phrases in these statements are

The innate, that is, connate wisdom, which is present in the mind stream of all sentient beings—as that is present within oneself, it does not need to be searched for elsewhere.

And

This *dharmakāya* is nothing but the awareness of one’s own mind; on its own, it is nonexistent and therefore does not need to be searched for.

Let us therefore explore these two—connate wisdom and the *dharmakāya*—in the framework of Gampopa’s teachings.

### *Gampopa’s View on the Dharmakāya as Connate Wisdom*

As for the *dharmakāya* and its nonexistence or emptiness, an explanation in the context of buddha nature is given by Gampopa in the first part of his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, where he establishes buddha nature as the basis of the spiritual path. In this context, in explaining stanza 1.28 from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*,

Because the body of the perfect Buddha is [all-]pervading,  
Because suchness [*tathatā*] is undifferentiated, and  
Because they have the potential,  
All sentient beings are always endowed with buddha nature.<sup>22</sup>

Gampopa states that buddhahood is equivalent to the *dharmakāya* in the sense of emptiness that pervades all sentient beings, and that all beings are therefore endowed with buddha nature. As he does not specify what he means exactly when equating the *dharmakāya* with emptiness, it would appear, at least at first glance, that Gampopa echoes the non-affirming interpretation of Ngog Loden Sherab, for whom the mind is natural purity, empty in and of itself.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding connate wisdom, Gampopa’s *Collected Works*, which consists largely of transcripts compiled by his students based on his oral teachings, provides us

22 RGV 1.28 (Johnston 1950: 16): *sambuddhakāyaspharaṇāt tathatāvvyatibhedataḥ | gotrataś ca sadā sarve buddhagarbhāḥ śarīriṇaḥ |*. According to Schmithausen (1971: 142), *spharaṇa* here means that beings are embraced and pervaded (“umhüllt-und-durchdrungen”) by the *sambuddhakāya*.

23 See Kano 2016: 257.



with plenty of information about it. Here it is evident that Gampopa defines the realization of mind's empty nature affirmatively as connate wisdom that exists in sentient beings. In his *Excellent Qualities: Teachings to the Assembly*, for example, he specifies,

The truth is the actuality that the nature of mind is not nonexistent;  
connate wisdom is the truth.

When mind is realized, the nature of reality is directly revealed.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, as an equivalent for connate wisdom Gampopa also makes frequent use of the term *natural awareness* (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), another key term in Dakpo Mahāmudrā. In this regard, for example, he says,

My noble teacher [Milarepa], who is endowed with experiences and realization said that connate wisdom [*sahajajñāna*] is precisely that which exists as primordially present natural awareness.<sup>25</sup>

In his *Great Teachings to the Assembly* he further explains,

If one now wishes to liberate oneself from saṃsāra, it is necessary to recognize natural awareness because this is the root of all qualities. So what is referred to as *natural awareness* is one's mind, abiding in itself, not diluted by any phenomenon whatsoever, not polluted by any worldly consciousness whatsoever, not obscured by any drowsiness, torpor, or thoughts whatsoever. ... [Natural awareness] directly makes the ultimate the path; it is direct [realization]. The recognition of natural awareness is ... the king of all wisdoms, the king of all qualities.<sup>26</sup>

24 *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 1, 511<sub>4-5</sub>: *bden pa ni sems kyi ngo bo med pa ma yin pa'i don | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes bden pa yin | sems rtog pa'i dus su chos nyid mngon du grub |*.

25 *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 3, 493<sub>5</sub>-494<sub>1</sub>: *rtogs pa nyams myong dang ldan pa'i bla ma rje btsun gyi zhal nas | sa ha dza'i ye shes ni | da lta tha mal gyi shes pa yod pa 'di nyid yin gsung |*. See also a similar statement in *Rje dwags po lha rje'i gsung zhal gyi bdud rtsi thun mong ma yin pa*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 1, 587<sub>5</sub>: *bdag gi bla ma rin po che'i zhal nas | lhan cig sgyes pa'i ye shes ni | da lta rgyi tha mal gyi shes pa ye nas yod pa 'di nyid yin gsung |*.

26 *Tshogs chos chen po*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 2, 45<sub>1</sub>-49<sub>1</sub>: *da res 'khor ba las thar bar 'dod na | chos thams cad kyi rtsa ba yin pas tha mal gyi shes pa ngo shes dgos | de yang tha mal gyi shes pa zhes bya ba | rang gi shes pa 'di la chos kyi rnam pa gang gis kyang ma bslad pa | 'jig rten gyi rnam par shes*



It appears that Gampopa takes buddha nature as mind's natural purity in the sense that mind's emptiness is innately imbued with qualities. While ordinary sentient beings are not in touch with this, the full realization of mind's true nature or natural awareness is the *dharmakāya* in terms of realization that is nothing other than connate wisdom. Thus, his approach to buddha nature combines two aspects:

1. the emptiness or natural purity aspect of buddha nature, or the *dharmakāya*, and
2. the aspect of its innate qualities, i.e., its radiance (*gsal ba*) or manifestation (*snang ba*).

Realization discloses the inseparable unity of these two aspects:

1. buddha nature's lack of an intrinsic or ontological essence and
2. its soteriological efficacy manifesting as buddha qualities.

It is a view that emphasizes the inseparable unity of the two truths, of emptiness and clarity or manifestation.

### ***Gampopa's Preference of the Siddha and Tantric Method***

In his *Eloquent Teachings to the Assembly*, in which Gampopa also discusses Madhyamaka issues, he points to his emphasis of the siddha and/or Mantrayāna methods of directly realizing connate wisdom.<sup>27</sup> By the same token, he goes on to say,

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*pa gang gis kyang ma rnyogs pa | bying rmugs dang rtog pa gang gis kyang ma gtum par rang sor gzhag pa yin | ... don ngos lam du byed pa yin | mngon sum pa yin ... tha mal gyi shes pa ngo shes pa ni ... 'di ye shes thams cad kyi rgyal po yin no | yon tan thams cad kyi rgyal po yin |*

27 *Mgon go zla 'od gzhon nus mdzad pa'i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 1, 336<sub>1-5</sub>: “Madhyamaka comprises the ‘Illusion-like’ (Māyopama) and the ‘Nonfoundational’ [or ‘Nonabiding’] (Apratiṣṭhāna). From the [latter derives] the scriptural traditions of Apratiṣṭhāna [in the sense] of Unity (*zung' jug rab tu mi gnas pa*) and Apratiṣṭhāna [in the sense] of Cessation (*rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa*). The Secret Mantra has many [subdivisions] such as the New (Gsar ma) and Old (Rnying ma), outer and inner, and Father tantras and Mother tantras. To summarize, there are two [paths]: a Path of Accumulation of the Perfections (Pāramitā) and a Path of Methods of Secret Mantra (Guhyamantra). Since the first of these takes a long time and its conduct is difficult to practice, I do not currently teach it. [As for the second,] based on the warmth of the teacher's blessing, perfect wisdom is recognized. One thus enters the gate of the Path of Methods of Secret Mantra, which makes one realize coemergent wisdom directly.” *dbu ma la sgyu ma lta bu dang rab tu mi gnas pa'o | | de las zung' jug rab tu mi gnas pa dang | rgyun chad rab tu mi gnas pa'i gzhung dang | gsang sngags la yang gsar ma dang | rnying*

When the teacher's blessing has permeated [us], all the supreme and ordinary accomplishments are realized without difficulty. For example, although a great treasure that eliminates the suffering of poverty for seven generations is [hidden] in the house of a poor man, as long as the treasure is not revealed, the suffering due to poverty [continues]. However, the moment it is discovered, [the man] is free from the suffering of poverty. We are just like the poor man in this example. Although the treasure-like connate mind as such is innately present in the mind stream of all sentient beings, as long as the teacher's blessing has not permeated [us]—which is akin to the treasure not being revealed—[we] don't take it up and we lack a method to attain the two types of accomplishment. When the teacher's blessing does permeate [us]—akin to opening the treasure—we recognize connate wisdom and attain the two types of accomplishment without any difficulty.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Gampopa illustrates his preferred siddha and/or tantric teaching method by way of the famous analogy of a poor man's discovery of a hidden treasure beneath his hut, an example reminiscent of Indian buddha nature classics such as the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Unlike the accounts found in these texts, however, Gampopa speaks about a personal teacher, not the buddha or a seer (*r̥ṣi*), who reveals the hidden treasure. Moreover, in specifying the referent of this analogy, Gampopa substitutes connate wisdom for buddha nature, thereby showing the siddha and/or tantric provenance of his teachings.

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*ma | phyi ma dang nang pa | pha rgyud dang ma rgyud la sogs mang du yod kyang | bsdu na gnyis | pha rol tu phyin pa tshogs kyi lam dang | gsang sngags thabs kyi lam mo | | de la yang dang po ni dus yun ring du 'gor zhing | spyod pa nyams su blang dka' bar 'dug pas da res de mi ston | bla ma'i byin rlabs kyi drod la brten nas yang dag pa'i ye shes ngos zin te | lhan cig skye pa'i ye shes mgnon sum du rtogs par byed pa'i gsang sngags thabs kyi lam gyi sgor zhugs nas ...*

28 Ibid., 337<sub>2</sub>–338<sub>1</sub>: *bla ma'i byin rlabs zhugs na mchog thun mong gi dngos grub thams cad tshegs med par 'grub ste | dper na mi dbul po'i khyim na mi rabs bdun rgyud du dbul ba'i sdug bsngal sel bar byed par byed pa'i gter chen gcig yod yang | gter kha ma phyed kyi bar du dbul ba'i sdug bsngal dang bcas la | kha phyed tsa na dbul ba'i sdug bsngal dang bral lo | | dpe de bzhin du mi dbul po dang 'dra ba'i 'o skol sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la | gter dang 'dra ba'i sems nyid lhan cig skyes pa de rang chas su yod kyang | gter kha ma phye pa dang 'dra ba'i bla ma'i byin rlabs ma zhugs na | de mi zin cing dngos grub rnam gnyis 'grub pa'i thabs med | gter kha phye ba dang 'dra ba'i bla ma'i byin rlabs zhugs na | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes ngos zin te | dngos grub rnam pa gnyis thob pa la tshegs med de | ...*

In surveying his corpus in the *Collected Works*, in particular the transcripts of his oral teachings, which make up the bulk portion of this collection, it becomes very clear that Gampopa made use of the terminology in line with the Indian siddha tradition and/or tantras and with the key instructions of his root teacher Milarepa, rather than the standard buddha nature terminology of *tathāgatagarbha* discourses as presented in sūtras and śāstras or philosophical treatises associated with the third wheel of Dharma. To be more precise, Gampopa usually spoke in distinctly positive terms about connate wisdom, mind as such (*sems nyid*), and natural awareness, rather than buddha nature; and, at the same time, he did not associate any ontological essence with buddha nature.

Another clear indication of Gampopa's affirming position can be found in his *Key Instructions of the Two Modes of Abiding and the Two Armors*, where he looks at the inherent qualities of mind's true nature:

The characteristic of [mind's] essence as such is that realization has always been spontaneously present within it as the four *kāyas*.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Gampopa's View That Sentient Beings and Buddha Share the Same Nature***

Moreover, Gampopa is very explicit in stating that sentient beings and buddhas share one and the same nature that is mind as such. To be more precise, he considers them to be of "one nature with different features."<sup>30</sup> The difference between sentient beings and buddhas is that the first are deluded by adventitious defilements while buddhas have relinquished these defilements and realized that the mind as such is unborn. In his *Eloquent Teachings to the Assembly*, for example, he says,

they have one essence [i.e., mind being unborn], but they have different features. ... In what way do the features differ? Buddhahood is specified by the realization of the truth that the mind as such is unborn. In this regard, the *Ātyayajñānasūtra* says, "When the mind is realized, this is wisdom. Therefore, cultivate the understanding that buddhahood should not be searched for elsewhere."<sup>31</sup>

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29 *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 3, 451<sub>2-3</sub>: *ngo bo nyid kyi mtshan nyid ni | rtogs pa gdod ma nas sku bzhir lhun gyi grub pa yin |*.

30 Tib.: *ngo bo gcig dang ldog pa tha dad*.

31 Kangyur D vol. 122, 153b.

Sentient beings are all those who are subsumed within the five or six types. In the mind stream of all of them the mind as such, natural purity, is inherently present [but] is obscured by the defilements of afflictions and cognitions. ... In this regard the *Hevajra*[*tantra*] <sup>32</sup> says, “Sentient beings are indeed buddhas. However, they are obscured by adventitious defilements.”<sup>33</sup>

All in all, Gampopa certainly gives special emphasis to the mind being empty and unborn. However, he affirms mind’s empty nature to be connate wisdom and endorses a cataphatic view with regard to it, even though he does not explicitly posit a buddha nature with inherent buddha qualities as is done by later Kagyü masters.

### *Gampopa’s Terminology of Concept-Dharmakāya*

It should also be highlighted that Gampopa connects this affirming view of mind’s true nature with his view of concept-*dharmakāya* (*rnam rtog chos sku*<sup>34</sup>), a term that he coined and that he used consistently in his meditation teachings. In the introductory part of his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa had already hinted at this view, without, however, using this particular term “concept-*dharmakāya*.” In this introduction, he first offers a concise definition of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, explaining that concepts or thoughts—which make for the entire delusion of *saṃsāra*—are naturally empty, whereas *nirvāṇa* or the *dharmakāya* is characterized by the absence of delusion. Since concepts and delusions are experienced nowhere but in mind, they are not different from mind itself, just as waves—being water—are not different from water. And since the nature of mind, mind itself, being unborn, is *dharmakāya*, what is experienced by the mind, i.e., concepts, also

32 *Hevajratāntra* (HT), 2.4.69 (Snellgrove 1959: Skt., 70; Tib., 71): *sattvā buddhā eva kiṃ tu āgantukamalāvṛtāḥ || tasyāpakarṣanāt sattvā buddhā eva na saṃśayaḥ ||*. **See another Tibetan version in H/Q 378b**, vol. 79, 366b<sub>4</sub>.

33 *Mgon go zla ’od gzhon nus mdzad pa’i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 1, 345<sub>4</sub>-347<sub>3</sub>: *ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad pa dang gsum mo || ... ngo bo gcig kyang ldog pa tha dad pas bsgrub dgos te | ldog pa ji ltar tha dad na | buddha ni sems nyid skye ba med pa’i don rtogs pas khyad par du byas pa yin | de ltar yang ’da’ ka ye shes las | sems rtogs na ye shes yin pas sangs rgyas gzhan nas mi tshol ba’i ’du shes rab tu bsgom par bya’o || zhes gsungs so || sems can ni rigs lnga’am drug gis bsdus pa thams cad do || de thams cad kyi rgyud la sems nyid rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa rang chas su yod pa nyon mongs pa’i sgrib pa dang shes bya’i sgrib pas bsgribs nasde ... ltar yang kyee rdo rje las | sems can rnams ni sangs rgyas nyid || ’on kyang glo bur dri mas bsgribs || zhes gsungs so ||*.

34 For more details on this view of concept-*dharmakāya* see also Draszczyk 2021.

does not exist independent of this *dharmakāya*. Mind itself is therefore comparable to the sky, which as such is neither affected by cloud formations—the adventitious processes of consciousness—gathering and dissipating, nor is it essentially different from them: the true nature of the adventitious processes of consciousness is not different from mind itself. Thus, ultimately nothing is to be relinquished: as concepts are empty by nature there is, in fact, nothing that could be relinquished. Likewise, there is nothing to be accomplished: as the actual nature of concepts is luminous *dharmakāya*, they are, in fact, nothing but mind’s nature at all times. The only thing to be done is to realize that concepts and delusion do not exist as anything other than luminous *dharmakāya*:

The outer [world] appearing as a variety of manifestations and the inner [world] arising as a variety of thoughts, which are memories and cognitions—all of these are but the luminous *dharmakāya*. ... As for all these phenomena of memories and experiences appearing as a variety of happiness and suffering, that which is to be relinquished and remedies, flaws, qualities, and so forth—all are but the nature of luminous *dharmakāya*. Therefore there is nothing to modify, increase, or decrease, refute or establish, relinquish or take up. As it is said in the *Ultimate Continuum*, “From there, there is nothing to be removed, and nothing to be added.”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, he explains in his *Responding to Questions of Dūsum Khyenpa*,

Buddhas and sentient beings are of one stream. Manifestations and mind as such are not separable from each other. The nature of the innate is suchness that immature people do not know. Thus they are confused as to the meaning of [buddha] nature.<sup>36</sup>

35 *Mgon go zla 'od gzhon nus mdzad pa'i tshogs chos legs mdzes ma*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 1, 484<sub>2</sub>-485<sub>3</sub>: *phyi rol dkar dmar gyi snang ba sna tshogs su snang ba dang | nang dran rig gi rtoqs pa sna tshogs su 'char ba 'di thams cad kyang 'od gsal chos kyi sku yin | ... (485<sub>2</sub>) dran snang gi chos thams cad la yang bde ba dang sdug pa | spang bya dang gnyen po | skyon dang yon tan la sogs pa sna tshogs su snang yang thams cad kyang 'od gsal chos kyi sku'i rang bzhin yin pas | bcas bcos dang | 'phel 'grib dang | dgag sgrub dang spang blang byar med de | rgyud bla ma las kyang | 'di la bsal bya ci yang med | bzhag par bya ba cung zad med | ces gsungs pas so |.*

36 *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhus lan*, in *G<sub>SB</sub>* vol. 2, 280<sub>1-2</sub>: *sangs rgyas dang sems can rgyud (text: rgyu) gcig | snang ba dang sems nyid tha mi dad | gnyug ma'i rang bzhin de kho na nyid de | byis pas ma shes snying po'i don la 'khrul ||.*

Gampopa's main point, that is, concept-*dharmakāya* or the inseparability of the two truths—as outlined in the quotes above—which is *the* backbone of Dakpo Mahāmudrā, continued to remain the central view of later Kagyü masters as well.

Some among them placed more and others less emphasis on mind's true nature being buddha nature with all its qualities, but none of them, at least to my knowledge, later shifted to the position represented by the Jonang masters who explicitly negate all conventional appearances and, in contradistinction to it, establish buddha nature to be the truly existing absolute.

Thus, those who later either directly or implicitly favored *zhentong*-like positions<sup>37</sup> did so within the framework of this view of the inseparability of the two truths. This holds true, for example, for the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339), for the Second Shamarpa, Khachö Wangpo (Mkha' spyod dbang po, 1350–1405), for the Fourth Shamarpa, Chödrak Yeshe (Chos grags ye shes, 1453–1524), for the Seventh Karmapa, Chödrak Gyatso (Chos grags rgya mtsho 1454–1506), for the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorjé (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507–1554), or much later for the First Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé, to name just a few well-known masters from within the Karma Kagyü tradition. The Third Karmapa, for example, plainly equates natural awareness with the “nature of the victors,” that is, with buddha nature, and maintains that the sixty-four qualities of buddhahood, that is, the thirty-two qualities of freedom and the thirty-two qualities of maturation, are inherent to buddha nature.

Just this natural awareness is called the *dharmadhātu*, the nature of the victors. It is not enhanced by the noble ones; it has not deteriorated in sentient beings. Although it is expressed in many terms, its meaning is not understood through expressions. Its unhindered manifestations [as] the sixty-four qualities is [merely] a coarse [description]; each one of them is said to comprise tens of millions [of qualities].<sup>38</sup>

37 Regarding an overview of *zhentong*-like positions in the Kagyü school, see Mathes 2019: 115–44.

38 *De bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bstan pa'i bstan bcos*, 56<sub>14–20</sub>: *tha mal shes pa de nyid la || chos dbyings rgyal ba'i snying po zer || bzang du 'phags pas btang ba med || ngan du sems can gyis ma btang || tha snyad du ma brjod mod kyang || brjod pas de yi don mi shes || de nyid ma 'gags rol pa la || yon tan drug cu rtsa bzhi po || rag pa yin te re re la'ang || bye ba phrag rer gsungs pa yin ||.*

### Layagpa Jangchup Ngödrub's View on Buddha Nature

While Gampopa hardly ever uses the term *buddha nature*, his direct students and successors started to equate this siddha terminology with the buddha nature terminology of *tathāgatagarbha* discourses. As an early example, Layagpa Jangchup Ngödrub (La yag pa byang chub dngos grub, twelfth century), one of Gampopa's direct students, explicitly identifies buddha nature with the mind as such, natural luminosity, and wisdom that is endowed with qualities. He says in his commentary on Gampopa's *Four Dharmas*,<sup>39</sup>

Buddha nature in the mind streams of all sentient beings is the mind as such; it is natural luminosity, free from an arising and ceasing, and the complete pacification of all proliferations. [Thus, sentient beings] are endowed with wisdom that is inseparable from inconceivable buddha qualities.<sup>40</sup>

A little further down in the same commentary, Layagpa equates buddha nature also with connate wisdom:

That which is called buddha nature or connate wisdom is mind as such that is naturally luminous and utterly pure.<sup>41</sup>

Specifying the meaning of his teacher Gampopa's identification of buddha nature with the *dharmakāya* as an all-pervading natural purity, Layagpa says also in this commentary:

The *dharmakāya* is moreover the nonduality of the expanse and wisdom that has the nature of being endowed with inconceivable buddha qualities.<sup>42</sup>

39 Tib.: *dwags po chos bzhi*.

40 *Mnyam med dwags po'i chos bzhir grags pa'i gzchung gi 'grel pa snying po gsal ba'i rgyan*, 189<sub>5-7</sub>: *sems can thams cad kyi rgyud la de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po gang sems nyid rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba skye 'gag med cing spros pa thams cad nyer bar zhi ba | sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa rnams dang ma bral ba'i ye shes can yin ||*.

41 Ibid., 210<sub>6-7</sub>: *gang de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'am | lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes zhes bya ba sems nyid rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal zhing rnam par dag pa . . .*

42 Ibid., 148<sub>2-3</sub>: *chos kyi sku yang dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su med pa sangs rgyas kyi chos bsam gyis mi khyab pa thams cad dang ldan pa'i bdag nyid yin |*.



### Phagmo Drupa Dorjé Gyalpo's View on Buddha Nature

Another of Gampopa's main and direct disciples was the influential Phagmo Drupa Dorjé Gyalpo<sup>43</sup> (Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po, 1110–1170), from whom the so-called eight secondary Dakpo Kagyü traditions unfolded. In his *Five Instructions of the Essential Meaning*, he interprets Gampopa's concept-*dharmakāya* teaching in line with buddha nature by using the famous example of sesame oil that is naturally and fully contained in the sesame seed:

In the *Ātyayajñānasūtra* it is said, "Realizing the mind, one is a buddha." As for the realization endowed with a view, when the meaning of the view is realized, one becomes enlightened. Realization endowed with the view is twofold:

(1) As for the realization that buddhahood and sentient beings are one continuum, [they both are] the concepts of mind. The initial nonarising of concepts is the *dharmakāya*. At the end, [concepts] do not cease, which is the *sambhogakāya*, and at present, they are not identifiable, which is the *nirmāṇakāya*. [Thus,] at the very time when a concept arises, the concept as such abides as the three *kāyas*.

Therefore, buddhahood and sentient beings are of one continuum. This is, similar to the analogy of sesame and sesame oil in that, [with respect to] the two, sesame and oil, the sesame is not earlier and the oil not later, but are [both] sesame and oil. The sesame has never contaminated the oil. However, as long as an expert has not extracted the oil from the seed, a beneficial usage of butter-lamps, deep-fried [foods], and so on does not come about. After the oil is extracted, it will not return into the lees. Just as in this example, when by way of the instructions of an authentic teacher concepts are understood as *dharmakāya*, one does not return into saṃsāra.<sup>44</sup>

43 In 1158, Phagmo Drupa built a hermitage at Phagmo Drupa ("Sow's Ferry Crossing") in a juniper forest in Nedong above the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river valley. Later, as his fame spread and disciples gathered, this site developed into the major monastic seat of Densa Thel, which was the center of the Phagdrü Kagyü school, one of the four great Dakpo Kagyü schools.

44 *Snying po don gyi gdams pa sogs kyi skor la cho tshan dgu*, 456<sub>1</sub>–462<sub>5</sub>: 'da' ka ye shes las | sems rtogs na sangs rgyas yin pas zhes gsungs so || rtogs pa lta ba dang ldan pa ni | lta ba'i don de rtogs pas sangs rgya ba ni | rtogs pa dang lta ba dang ldan pa ste | de la gnyis | sangs rgyas dang sems can rgyud gcig tu rtogs pa ni | sems kyi rnam rtog yin la | rnam rtog dang por skye ba med pa chos sku | tha mar 'gag pa med pa longs sku | da ltar ngos bzung med pa sprul sku | rnam rtog skye ba'i

In his famous *Mahāmudrā, the Practice of the Connate*,<sup>45</sup> he emphasizes that mahāmudrā is, at all times, mind’s true nature with its qualities:

In general, *mahāmudrā* is endowed with four [aspects], which are pervasiveness, formlessness, freedom from coming and going, and its presence in the three times. ... Regarding its presence in the three times, at the time of sentient beings these three [i.e., joy, clarity, and non-conceptualization] are present, and they are also present at the time of buddhahood. If they weren’t present [in the] three [times], then due to the lack of joy the *sambhogakāya* that benefits others won’t come to be. Due to the lack of clarity, there wouldn’t occur the *nirmāṇakāya* benefiting others, and due to the lack of non-conceptualization, there wouldn’t occur the *dharmakāya* benefiting oneself.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

The extant corpus of Gampopa’s teachings—glimpses of them were provided above—convey a clear and consistent picture. His focus was to support his students in their meditative processes aiming at a direct realization of mind’s true nature. In his view, mind itself, while being empty and unborn, is connate wisdom, luminosity inseparable from qualities. In this regard, he spoke of natural awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), positively affirming mind’s nature without associating with it any ontological quality. While Gampopa makes consistent use of this terminology, Layagpa, one of his direct students, started to equate the terms *connate wisdom* and *natural awareness* with buddha nature and its inconceivable buddha qualities. Thus, these early masters set the stage for a particular type of terminology that later Kagyü masters continued to use with their intention to affirm buddha nature as both the basis and result of the Buddhist path without reifying it into an entity with real properties.

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*dus nyid na rnam rtog nyid sku gsum du gnas pas | sangs rgyas dang sems can rgyud gcig pa'o ||  
de yang dper na | ril dang til mar lta bu ste | til dang til mar gnyis til mi snga | til mar mi phyi | til  
dang til mar ro || til gyis til mar la gos ma myong | 'on kyang kha mkhan gyis til la mar nag ma |  
bton gyi bar du mar me dang khur ba la sogs pa gzhan gyi don mi 'ong | mar nag btsir nas 'ba' char  
slar mi ldog | dpe de bzhin du bla ma dam pa'i gdam ngag gis rnam rtog chos skur shes nas 'khor  
bar mi ldog go ||.*

45 Tib.: *Phyag chen lhan cig skyes sbyor*.

46 *Phyag chen lhan cig skyes sbyor*, 539<sub>5</sub>–540<sub>5</sub>: *spyir phyag rgya chen po bzhi dang ldan te | khyab pa | gzugs can ma yin pa | 'gro 'ong dang bral ba | dus thams cad du gnas pa'o | ... dus thams cad du gnas pa ni | sems can gyi dus su yang gsum po de gnas la | de nyid sangs rgyas pa'i dus su yang yod pa'o || gsum po de med na ni bde ba med na gzhan don longs sku mi 'byung la | gsal ba med na gzhan don sprul sku mi 'byung | mi rtog pa med na rang don chos sku mi 'byung |.*

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- D Derge edition of the Kangyur and Tengyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Taipei Edition. Taipei, Taiwan: SMC Publishing, 1991.
- G<sub>SB</sub> Gsung 'bum Gampopa Bsod nams rin chen, s.v. Gampopa Bsod nams rin chen.
- HT *Hevajratantra*, s.v. *Hevajratantra*.
- RGV *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, s.v. *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra/Ratnagoṭravibhāga*.

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