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Shakya Chokden's Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga: “Contemplative” or “Dialectical”?

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Abstract

This reconciliation of the dialectical and contemplative approaches to the buddha-essence is related to and closely resembles Shakchok's reconciliation of the two approaches to ultimate reality advocated respectively by Niḥsvabhāvavāda (*ngo bo nyid med par smra ba*, “Proponents of Entitylessness”) system of Madhyamaka and Alīkākaravāda (*rnam rdzun pa*, “False Aspectarians”) system of Yogācāra. These approaches in turn are connected respectively to the explicit teachings (*ngos bstan*) of the second dharmacakra (*chos 'khor*, “Wheel of Dharma”) and the definitive teachings (*nges don*, *nītārtha*) of the third dharmacakra that he also presents in a reconciliatory manner. In the same way as the teachings of the last two dharmacakras, as well as the Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alīkākaravāda systems that derive from them, come to the same point, the dialectical and contemplative traditions also come to the same point. This point is the above-mentioned naturally pure primordial mind luminous by nature, the ultimate reality. In Shakchok's opinion, application of non-affirming negations is a powerful tool for accessing direct realization of that reality, while its identification as primordial mind (*ye shes*, *jñāna*) is important for maintaining that realization and turning it into the basis of unfolding positive qualities on the path to buddhahood. When in the passage above Shakchok says that the two traditions are not contradictory, and when he reconciles the two last dharmacakras together with Alīkākaravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda, he is not arguing that their *words* are non-contradictory. They obviously are! Nevertheless, those systems *are* non-contradictory in terms of complementing each other in getting access to and maintaining realization of the ultimate reality of primordial mind.

Keywords: Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist epistemology, Tibetan Buddhism, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Buddhist theories of reality, Buddha-nature, 15th century Tibetan Buddhist thought

In this paper, I focus on the interpretation of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, also known as the *Sublime Continuum* (*Uttaratantra*, *Rgyud bla ma*),¹ teachings on the buddha-essence (*sangs rgyas kyi snying po*, *buddhagarbha*)² by a seminal Tibetan thinker Serdok Penchen Shakya Chokden (*gser mdog panò chen shākya mchog ldan*, 1428-1507), usually referred to by Tibetans simply as “Shakchok” (*shāk mchog*). This ecumenical 15th century writer developed a novel and in many respects unusual approach to the key systems of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice. In his works written from 1489 on, during the period of crystallization of his unique views on those systems,³ he undertakes a detailed analysis of important differences in positions on the nature of reality, meditative insights, and other key topics explored by rival Yogācāra and Madhyamaka thinkers. At the same time, he presents those positions as non-contradictory in terms of their core meaning, and attempts to reconcile them despite their explicit polemics against each other. This approach promotes a nuanced understanding of rival systems of Buddhist thought and practice, while also contributing to a more encompassing and harmonious understanding of Buddhism. In my discussion of Shakchok’s position on the buddha-essence taught in the *Sublime Continuum*, I take this reconciliatory view as both the foundation and objective of his philosophical output. Concentrating on his position against this background, I raise the following question: where does Shakchok’s own interpretation of the buddha-essence as taught in the *Sublime Continuum* fit among divergent views on the buddha-essence that he himself attempts to reconcile? Before proceeding to his own interpretation, therefore, let us take a brief look at dichotomous positions that he refers to and the focal point where he attempts to bring them together.

Shakchok acknowledges the existence since the 11th century of two different approaches to the *Sublime Continuum*. They are known as the “dialectical tradition” (*mtshan nyid kyi lugs*) and the “contemplative tradition” (*sgom lugs*), and derive respectively from Ngok Loden Sherap (*rngog blo ldan shes rab*, 1059-1109) and Yarlungpa Tsen Khawoché (*yar lung pa bt-san kha bo che*, born in 1021). In the following passage from his *Wish Fulfilling Meru: Discourse on the History of Madhyamaka*, Shakchok summarizes differences between the two traditions, and immediately proposes their reconciliation:

The opinion of the great translator [Ngok Loden Sherap] is that the meaning taught in the [first] four Dharmas of Maitreya⁴ is interpretive and the meaning taught in the

1. *Sublime Continuum of Mahāyāna* (*Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra*, *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma*), D4024, sems tsam, phi, 54b-73a. (Hereafter, *Sublime Continuum*.) Translated in Jikido Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagoṭravibhāga* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966. (Hereafter, *A Study*.)
2. It is also interchangeably called “sugata-essence” (*bde gshegs snying po*, *sugatagarbha*), and “tathāgata-essence” (*de bshin gshegs pa’i snying po*, *tathāgatagarbha*).
3. For details, see my “Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity: Two Texts by Shakya Chokden on the Buddha-Essence,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 6 (2006), 523 note 2. (Hereafter, *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*.) For a more detailed treatment of the issue of change in Shakchok’s views, see my “Echoes of Empty Luminosity: Reevaluation and Unique Interpretation of Yogācāra and Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka by the Fifteenth Century Tibetan Thinker Śākya Mchog Ldan,” Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Virginia, 2007), 291-301. (Hereafter, *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*.) That study explores in detail his approach to the systems of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra that I will not go into detail here.
4. 1. *Ornament of Clear Realizations* (*Abhisamayālaṅkāranāmaprajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakārikā*, *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa’i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa’i rgyan zhes bya ba’i tshig le’ur byas pa*), D3786, mdo ’grel, ka, 1a-13a; 2. *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras* (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, *Theg pa chen po mdo sde’i rgyan*), D4020, sems tsam, phi, 1a-39a., 3. *Differentiation of the Middle and Extremes*

Sublime Continuum is definitive. This [definitive meaning] is the one that bears the name of the sugata-essence. It is further identified as the aspect of natural purity of all phenomena that embraces all knowables. It is also a space-like non-affirming negation (*med par dgag pa nam mkha' lta bu*). It is that which is taught by the words [of the *Sublime Continuum*]: “There is nothing to eliminate here...,” etc.⁵

[A scholar] known as Yarlungpa Tsen Khawoché received the Dharmas of Maitreya when he was 60 years old. According to successors in his lineage, [he identified] the definitive meaning obtained from [those texts] as the naturally pure primordial mind luminous by nature (*rang bzhin rnam dag gi ye shes / rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba*), pervading [everyone] from buddhas to sentient beings, that he taught to be the sugata-essence.

In earlier times this [difference in approaches] was known as the “difference between the explanation of the Dharmas of Maitreya as the dialectical tradition and the contemplative tradition.” But in both cases there is no contradiction, because the first approach is more profound at the time of eliminating grasping at signs, while the second approach is needed in order to make [the view] into the basis of positive qualities.⁶

(*Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Dbus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa*), D4021, sems tsam, phi, 40b-45a; 4. *Differentiation of Phenomena and the Nature of Phenomena* (*Dharmatadharmaṭāvibhaṅga*, *chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa*), D4022, sems tsam, phi 46b1-49a6; and 5. *Sublime Continuum of Mahāyāna*.

5. This is the first line of a seminal passage that can be found in verses 154-155 (following the enumeration given in *A Study*) of the first chapter of the *Sublime Continuum*: “There is nothing to eliminate here, // Nothing at all to establish. // Reality is to be viewed as reality. // Having seen [it], one is liberated. // The element is empty of the adventitious [defilements] // Which have the character of being separable [from it]. // It is not empty of unsurpassed [qualities] // Which have the character of not being separable [from it]” (“di la bsal bya ci yang med // gzhag par bya ba cung zad med // yang dag nyid la yang dag lta // yang dag mthong na rnam par grol // rnam dbye bcas pa'i mtshan nyid can // glo bur dag gis khams stong gi // rnam dbye med pa'i mtshan nyid can // bla med chos kyis stong ma yin). *Sublime Continuum*, 61b. My translation of the verses of the *Sublime Continuum* was greatly aided by an unpublished manuscript of an English translation of its first chapter by Jeffrey Hopkins that I use almost verbatim.
6. de yang lo chen ni / byams pa'i chos bzhi po'i bstan bya'i don drang don dang / rgyud bla'i bstan bya'i don ni nges pa'i don te / bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po'i ming can de'o / 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 zhig ste / ji skad du / 'di la bsal bya ci yang med / ces sogs kyis bstan pa de'o zhes bzhed / yang yar lung pa btsan kha bo cher grags pas / 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 / khong nas rgyud pa dag 'chad la / 'di la sngon gyi dus su byams chos mtshan nyid kyi lugs su 'chad pa dang / sgom lugs su 'chad pa'i khyad par ro zhes grags mod / gnyis ka ltar yang 'gal ba med de / mtshan 'dzin sel ba'i tshe ni snga ma ltar zab la / yon tan gyi rten du byed pa la ni phyi ma ltar dgos pas so. *Dbu ma'i byung tshul rnam par bshad pa'i gdam yid bzhin lhun po*, Collected Works, vol. 4, 239-240. The whole text is translated in Yaroslav Komarovski (trans. and introduction), *Three Texts on Madhyamaka by Shakya Chokden* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2000). (Hereafter, *Three Texts on Madhyamaka*.) My translations in that text are slightly different. For further details on the dialectical and meditative traditions, see Klaus-Dieter Mathes, *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within: Gö Lotsāwa's Mahāmudrā Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 2 ff. (Hereafter, *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within*.) Mathes translates them respectively as “analytical tradition” and “meditation tradition.”

This reconciliation of the dialectical and contemplative approaches to the buddha-essence is related to and closely resembles Shakchok's reconciliation of the two approaches to ultimate reality advocated respectively by Niḥsvabhāvavāda (*ngo bo nyid med par smra ba*, "Proponents of Entitylessness") system of Madhyamaka and Alīkākaravāda (*rnam rdzun pa*, "False Aspectarians") system of Yogācāra. These approaches in turn are connected respectively to the explicit teachings (*dnegos bstan*) of the second dharmacakra (*chos 'khor*, "Wheel of Dharma") and the definitive teachings (*nges don, nīārtha*) of the third dharmacakra that he also presents in a reconciliatory manner.⁷ In the same way as the teachings of the last two dharmacakras, as well as the Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alīkākaravāda systems that derive from them, come to the same point, the dialectical and contemplative traditions also come to the same point. This point is the above-mentioned naturally pure primordial mind luminous by nature, the ultimate reality. In Shakchok's opinion, application of non-affirming negations is a powerful tool for accessing direct realization of that reality, while its identification as primordial mind (*ye shes, jñāna*) is important for maintaining that realization and turning it into the basis of unfolding positive qualities on the path to buddhahood. When in the passage above Shakchok says that the two traditions are not contradictory, and when he reconciles the two last dharmacakras together with Alīkākaravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda, he is not arguing that their *words* are non-contradictory. They obviously are! Nevertheless, those systems *are* non-contradictory in terms of complementing each other in getting access to and maintaining realization of the ultimate reality of primordial mind.

General correlations between the above-mentioned sets of teachings can be depicted as follows:⁸

Explicit teachings of the second dharmacakra	Definitive teachings of the third dharmacakra
Niḥsvabhāvavāda view of ultimate reality	Alīkākaravāda view of ultimate reality
Dialectical tradition's interpretation of the buddha-essence	Contemplative tradition's interpretation of the buddha-essence

Nevertheless, these correlations are much more complex than they appear to be on the surface. For example, the view that the buddha-essence pervades everyone from buddhas to sentient beings is *not* the view of the *Sublime Continuum* or the Alīkākaravāda system as Shakchok understands it.⁹ Thus, the three members of the second column are only partially in agreement. Similar logic applies to the members of the first column. For example, the dialectical tradition's identification of the buddha-essence and ultimate reality as a non-affirming nega-

7. I discuss this issue below. For a detailed discussion, see the second section of the third chapter of my *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*.

8. This scheme is highly simplified, because it does not take into account different approaches to the ultimate advocated within the Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka itself. See my *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*, 191 ff. and 280-284 for details. There are also many more differences within the subsets of each column. But they are irrelevant in the present context.

9. See below.

tion agrees with Niḥsvabhāvavāda only partially, because the latter accepts this only provisionally, while its final position is that the ultimate is inexpressible.¹⁰

With these preliminary remarks in mind, let us now move to Shakchok's interpretation of the buddha-essence. In his works written during the aforementioned crystallization period in general, and in his interpretation of the *Sublime Continuum* during that period in particular, Shakchok addresses several types of the buddha-essence. Building upon my previous research on his interpretation of the buddha-essence,¹¹ below I outline his position based on such later works and on earlier works that agree with and complement them.

In general, Shakchok argues that Pāramitāyāna teaches two types of essence, as described in the second and third dharmacakras. The first type is the non-affirming negation (*med dgag*, *prasajyapratishedha*) of all extremes of proliferations (*spros pa 'i mtha'*, *prapañcānta*). This essence pervades all beings: ordinary sentient beings, ārya bodhisattvas (*byang sems 'phags pa*), and buddhas. This type of essence is not a real buddha-essence, only an imputed one. Those commentaries that agree with this description of the essence—such as non-tantric Madhyamaka writings of Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka—do not teach the real buddha-essence.¹² In some texts he explains that such Niḥsvabhāvavāda writings treat it only temporarily as a non-affirming negation, but finally treat it simply as unidentifiable.¹³ Notice that in Shakchok's opinion, neither the temporary nor the final Niḥsvabhāvavāda position provides a correct identification of the buddha-essence. This helps understand why he disagrees with the interpretation of the buddha-essence by the dialectical tradition.

The third dharmacakra contains two types of teachings on the buddha-essence. Some of its sūtras explain that the buddha-essence endowed with all positive qualities of a buddha is present in all sentient beings. Other sūtras take this explanation as having a veiled intent (*dgongs pa can*), as non-literal. Following the latter type of sūtras, Shakchok argues that the basis of intent of the third dharmacakra's teachings on the buddha-essence is the natural luminosity (*rang bzhin 'od gsal*, *prakṛtiprabhāsvara*) free from all extremes of proliferations, the object of experience of the individually self-cognizing primordial mind (*so so(r) rang gis rig pa 'i ye shes*), an affirming negation (*ma yin dgag*, *pariyudāsapratishedha*). According to him, this is precisely how the *Sublime Continuum* interprets the first type of sūtras: it explains that the teaching of the buddha-essence pervading all sentient beings has a veiled intent (*dgongs gzhi*)

10. See below. It is unclear whether in Shakchok's opinion, Ngok also identifies the buddha-essence as a non-affirming negation only provisionally (see note 26 below). See also *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within*, 25-32, that suggests an alternative interpretation of Ngok's position on the buddha-essence.

11. See my *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*.

12. *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*, 531.

13. He further argues that this approach agrees with Nāgārjuna's words in the *Wisdom: Root Stanzas on the Middle* (*Prajñānāmamūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Dbu ma rtsa ba 'i tshig le 'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba*), D3824, dbu ma, tsa, 13b: "That which is the nature of tathāgata // Is the nature of these migrants. // The nature of tathāgata does not exist" (de bzhin gshegs pa 'i rang bzhin gang // 'gro ba 'di yi rang bzhin yin // de bzhin gshegs pa 'i rang bzhin med). *Rain of Ambrosia: Extensive [Auto-] Commentary on the 'Profound Thunder amidst the Clouds of the Ocean of Definitive Meaning'* (*Nges don rgya mtsho sprin gyi 'brug sgra zab mo 'i rgyas 'grel bdud rtsi 'i char 'bebs*), in *Two Controversial Mādhyamika Treatises*, 319-499 (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1996), 399. Hereafter, *Rain of Ambrosia*.

and is to be interpreted. He further argues that the *Sublime Continuum*'s explanation of the basis of intent in teaching the buddha-essence by such sūtras was misunderstood by Tibetan thinkers as an explanation of the actual buddha-essence.¹⁴ This point helps understand where his position differs from that of the contemplative tradition as he understands it.

In his early and later writings, Shakchok showed great respect for the *Sublime Continuum*, and presented it as a treatise of definitive meaning (*nges don, nīārtha*).¹⁵ In his works written from 1489 on, he also treats the *Sublime Continuum* with its commentary by Asaṅga¹⁶—and for that matter all the Five Dharmas of Maitreya (*byams chos sde lnga*)—as the works of Alīkākāravāda, arguing that this system is both Yogācāra and Madhyamaka.¹⁷ He further explains that these teachings accord with the interpretation of the second dharmacakra by the third dharmacakra. Objecting to rival interpretations of the Five Dharmas, he writes:

I accept that [from looking at] the explanatory style of the texts themselves it is directly established that [along with the middle three] both the first and last of Maitreya's texts make their main topic the Madhyamaka [which is] the interpretation of the intent of the *Prajñāpāramita* sūtras by the third dharmacakra.¹⁸

According to Shakchok, the Alīkākāravāda system describes the ultimate reality, the thoroughly established nature (*yongs grub, pariṇiṣpanna*), as primordial mind, and treats it as the main topic not only of the third dharmacakra, but the second dharmacakra as well. In the *Profound Thunder amidst the Clouds of the Ocean of Definitive Meaning: Differentiation of the Two Systems of the Great Middle Deriving from the Two Great Chariot Ways*, he writes:

14. *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*, 531.

15. *Rain of Ambrosia*, 419. Details of Shakchok's approach to the *Sublime Continuum* can be found in the *Rain of Ambrosia*. See also the *Essence of Sūtras and Tantras: Explanation of the Buddha-Essence* (*Sangs rgyas kyi snying po'i rnam bshad mdo rgyud snying po*), vol. 13, 124-136 (hereafter, *Essence of Sūtras and Tantras*) and the *Previously Unseen Sun: The Definitive Meaning of the 'Sublime Continuum' Treatise* (*Rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi nges don sngon med nyi ma*), vol. 13, 113-124 (hereafter, *Previously Unseen Sun*), both translated in their entirety in my *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*. (The latter of the two texts is translated there under a slightly different name: *The Sun Unseen Before: The Definitive Meaning of the 'Sublime Continuum' Treatise*). Furthermore, almost all commentaries written by Shakchok on Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realizations* heavily rely on the *Sublime Continuum* when commenting on the buddha-essence and related topics.

16. *Explanation of [Maitreya's] 'Sublime Continuum of Mahāyāna'* (*Mahāyānottaratantraśāstravyākhyā, Theg pa chen po'i rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi rnam par bshad pa*), D4025, sems tsam, phi, 74b-129a.

17. It should not be confused with the Yogācāra Madhyamaka on the Niḥsvabhāvavāda side, which is usually addressed nowadays as "Yogācāra Svātantrika Madhyamaka." For details, see chapter 2 section 5 of my *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*.

18. kho bo cag ni / byams pa'i gzhung thog mtha' gnyis kyang sher phyin gyi mdo'i dgongs pa 'khor lo gsum pas bkral ba de nyid kyi dbu ma bstan bya'i gts'o bo nyid du mdzad par gzhung nyid kyi bshad tshul mngon sum gyis grub par khas len to. *Wish Fulfilling Meru*, 225. For further details, see the *Three Texts on Madhyamaka*, 15 ff.

Honorable Asaṅga explained as the definitive meaning of the [last] two dharmacakras
 Non-dual primordial mind free from all proliferations
 The self-illuminating self-cognition,
 The final ultimate [truth], the “buddha-essence.”¹⁹

In the *Rain of Ambrosia*, which is the auto-commentary on this text, he elaborates:

[Alīkākaravāda] Yogācāras explain that the definitive meaning of the explicit teachings of the last pronouncement is that very primordial mind [characterized by] dependent natures (*gzhan dbang, paratantra*) being empty of imaginary natures (*kun btags, parikalpita*). They also explain that this [primordial mind] itself is taught by the truly perfect Buddha himself as the main topic of the middle pronouncement.²⁰

Although this non-dual primordial mind is the main topic of both dharmacakras, in the third dharmacakra it is taught explicitly and literally, while in the second dharmacakra it is taught only implicitly and in a non-literal way.²¹

According to the *Sublime Continuum* as Shakchok understands it, nobody below the first bodhisattva ground (*byang chub sems pa'i sa, bodhisattavabhūmi*) has the buddha-essence—neither a complete nor a partial one. In his explanation of the *Sublime Continuum*, he utilizes the categories of the three levels found in that text: the impure (*ma dag, aśuddha*), impure-pure (*ma dag dag pa, aśuddhaśuddha*, i.e., partially pure) and very pure (*shin tu rnam dag, suviśuddha*) levels that correspond respectively to the categories of sentient beings, bodhisattvas (understood as ārya bodhisattvas in this context), and tathāgatas. He argues that one becomes a possessor of the buddha-essence free from adventitious stains only on the impure-pure level. In other words, when bodhisattvas enter the Mahāyāna path of seeing (*mthong lam, darśanamārga*) simultaneously with the attainment of the first bodhisattva ground of utmost joy (*rab tu dga' ba, pramuditā*), they become ārya bodhisattvas, directly realize ultimate truth (*don dam bden pa, paramārthasatyā*), and thereby for the first time generate an antidote to obscurations of knowables (*shes sgrib, jñeyāvaraṇa*). They start gradually removing them, and thereby actually see at least a partial purification of stains “covering” the buddha-essence, and its inseparability from at least some positive qualities of a buddha. Such is not possible for anyone below that level, including non-Mahāyāna arhats (i.e., śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas). Therefore, only Mahāyāna āryas have the buddha-essence characterized by the purity from adventitious stains; ārya bodhisattvas have only a

19. thogs med zhabs kiyis spros pa kun bral ba'i // gnyis med ye shes rang rig rang gsal ba // don dam mthar thug sangs rgyas snying po zhes // chos 'khor gnyis kyi nges don yin par bkral. *Shing rta'i srol chen gnyis las 'byung ba'i dbu ma chen po'i lugs gnyis rnam par dbye ba / nges don rgya msho'i sprin gyi 'brug sgra zab mo*, in *Two Controversial Mādhyamika Treatises* (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1996), 310.

20. rnal 'byor spyod pa pas ni / bka' tha ba'i [sic] dngos bstan gyi nges don ni gzhan dbang kun btags kiyis stong pa'i ye shes de nyid yin la / de nyid bka' bar ba'i bstan bya'i gtso bo nyid du yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas nyid kiyis gsungs so. *Rain of Ambrosia*, 336.

21. *Rain of Ambrosia*, 390-391, 398.

part of it, while buddhas have it completely.²² Here, it is important to notice that having primordial mind is not equivalent to having the buddha-essence. Although everyone, including ordinary beings, has primordial mind, only those who manifest it, that is to say, directly realize ultimate reality, these being Mahāyāna āryas, have the buddha-essence. In this respect, Shakchok's position differs from that of the contemplative tradition described above.

Overall, Shakchok argues against identifying the buddha-essence as a mere natural purity (*rang bzhin rnam dag*), i.e., the state of natural freedom from obscurations as it is taught in the explicit teachings of the second dharmacakra and their commentaries. In his opinion, the buddha-essence has to be posited as the state of inseparability from positive qualities (*yon tan, guṇa*) of a buddha. He approaches the buddha-essence inseparable from positive qualities of a buddha in two ways. In some texts dealing with the *Sublime Continuum*, he argues that the buddha-essence has to be identified only as purity from adventitious stains (*glo bur rnam dag*), i.e., the removal of all or some negative qualities that prevent one from directly seeing the buddha-essence. In other texts, he interprets it as the purity from adventitious stains and the natural purity as it is taught in some sūtras of the third dharmacakra and their commentaries. That type of natural purity is understood as the state of natural freedom from all obscurations inseparable from positive qualities of a buddha. In this second type of text, Shakchok arrives at positing two types of the buddha-essence: the relative essence (*kun rdzob pa'i snying po*) and the ultimate essence (*don dam pa'i snying po*). The former is described as the purity from adventitious stains, while the latter as the natural purity. Importantly, both types of the buddha-essence are necessarily inseparable from positive qualities of a buddha, because the states of being pure of even some stains and having at least some positive qualities of a Buddha are necessarily interrelated. The ultimate buddha-essence has all positive qualities of a buddha, while the relative buddha-essence has only some of them until the complete buddhahood is achieved.²³

The relative essence and the relative buddha have the same meaning, and they are identified as the state of freedom from all faults and the perfection of all positive qualities as they appear to those beings who are not fully enlightened. The ultimate essence, the ultimate buddha, and ultimate sentient beings in their turn also have the same meaning, which is the state of natural purity from all objects of abandonment and natural accomplishment of all positive qualities. In other words, it is the ultimate reality that is inseparable from all positive qualities of a buddha and free from all obscurations. Precisely because it is “naturally pure of all its objects of abandonment, it [also] has to have all positive qualities naturally accomplished.”²⁴

Ultimate sentient beings therefore do not just have the ultimate buddha-essence—they are the ultimate buddha-essence. As for relative sentient beings, i.e., beings of six types such as humans, animals, etc., Shakchok argues against all of them having the relative essence.²⁵ This is because to become a possessor of the buddha-essence, one has to acquire at least some positive qualities of a buddha. We know already that according to the *Sublime Continuum*, such

22. *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*, 526.

23. *Ibid.*, 525.

24. *Previously Unseen Sun*, 115.

25. *Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity*, 536.

happens only from the first bodhisattva-ground. Thus, only Mahāyāna āryas have the relative buddha-essence.

In summary, the three types of the buddha-essence and sources of their teachings are addressed by Shakchok are as follows:

A. buddha-essence as a mere natural purity

(imputed buddha-essence)

taught in the explicit/interpretive teachings of the second dharmacakra as they are interpreted by the third dharmacakra, as well as in the Niḥsvabhavavāda system outlined in Nagārjuna's Collection of Reasonings (*rigs tshogs*) with their commentaries by Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka

B. buddha-essence as the purity from adventitious stains

(actual buddha-essence)

= relative buddha-essence within the twofold division into the relative and ultimate buddha-essence taught in the Alikākāravāda system of Maitreya and Aṣaṅga, the third dharmacakra, and implicit/definitive teachings of the second dharmacakra as they are interpreted by the third dharmacakra

C. buddha-essence as the natural purity inseparable from buddha qualities

(actual buddha-essence)

= ultimate buddha-essence within the twofold division into the relative and ultimate buddha-essence taught in the Alikākāravāda system of Maitreya and Aṣaṅga and the third dharmacakra

We can now address the question of where Shakchok's interpretation of the buddha-essence fits among different views on the buddha-essence that he reconciles. It is clear from the preceding discussion that Shakchok does not accept the dialectical and contemplative traditions mentioned above as equally valid in their interpretation of the buddha-essence. Nevertheless, he treats both of those traditions as *practically* valid and non-contradictory in terms of being able to bring about the direct realization of ultimate reality and maintain it. That in turn allows their followers to manifest—or acquire—the buddha-essence partially free from adventitious stains, and fully develop it. Nevertheless, his own position differs significantly from both traditions. While respecting Ngok as a thinker, he also levels criticisms at his interpretation of the buddha-essence. He writes:

The great translator [Ngok Loden Sherap] took the emptiness of mind with stains as [the meaning of] the essence. This is not good, because the identification of the essence has to be made in terms of the factor of positive qualities, while for emptiness alone (*stong pa nyid rkyang pa*) that identification is not suitable.²⁶

26. lo tstsha (sic) ba chen po dri ma dang bcas pa'i sems kyi stong pa nyid snying por byas pa ni legs pa may in te / snying po'i ngos 'dzin ni yon tan gyi cha nas 'chad dgos kyi / stong pa nyid rkyang pa la ngos 'dzin de mi rung ba'i phyir. *Previously Unseen Sun*, 122. Interestingly, Shakchok does not criticize Ngok here for describing the buddha-essence as a non-affirming negation. It is possible that according to Shakchok, Ngok identified it so only temporarily, similar to Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka. Ngok's position, therefore, might correctly express the position of the second dharmacakra as Shakchok understands it.

In other words, Ngok did not identify the buddha-essence correctly despite the fact that his approach is practically effective, outlining the most effective means of getting access to the direct realization of that very essence.

Shakchok’s own position is definitely closer to the contemplative tradition that focuses on the primordial mind. But it is clear from the above discussion that he does not agree with the view of that tradition either, because he does not accept that the buddha-essence pervades all beings. Even when he splits the essence into the relative and ultimate types, this essence still cannot be said to pervade all beings because the ultimate type pervades only ultimate sentient beings who are buddhas and thus are *not* sentient beings, while the relative essence pervades only Mahāyāna āryas.

Shakchok’s approach to the buddha-essence can be depicted as follows:²⁷

	Actual essence?	Relative beings			Ultimate beings	
		1.ordinary beings	2. ārya bodhi-sattvas	3. buddhas	4.sentient beings	5. buddhas
A. mere natural purity	NO	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
B. relative essence (purity from adventitious stains)	YES	NO	YES partially	YES completely	NA	NA
C. ultimate essence (natural purity inseparable from buddha qualities)	YES	NA	NA	NA	YES=	YES=

This grid demonstrates that the problem with fitting Shakchok’s view into the meditative or dialectical traditions mentioned above is that the dialectical tradition accepts that 1-3 possess A which is not the actual buddha-essence (thus, NA). The contemplative tradition, on the other hand, accepts that all 1-3 possess B. It is unclear whether he thinks that according to the contemplative tradition, 1-3 possess C. But even if they did, neither this nor the preceding option would work for the reasons provided above. The only two correct possibilities that Shakchok’s interpretations of the *Sublime Continuum* allow are 2-3 possessing B, and 4-5 possessing—or actually being equal to—C.

This leads me to a conclusion that Shakchok’s interpretation of the buddha-essence does not fall under the rubrics of either dialectical or contemplative tradition. This is similar to

27. Notice that the division of sentient beings into ordinary beings and ārya bodhisattvas applies only in the context of discussion of the relative buddha-essence, and is neither relevant nor used by Shakchok in the context of discussion of the ultimate buddha-essence.

his overall system of thought not neatly falling under such rubrics as Niḥsvabhāvavāda or Alikākāravāda, teachings of the second or third dharmacakras, and so forth. This being said, it is clear that he used elements developed by both the dialectical and contemplative traditions when he was advocating their reconciliation and emphasizing their practicality for realizing the buddha-essence; nevertheless, in his own identification of the buddha-essence he did not side with either of the two.

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