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# “There Are No Dharmas Apart from the Dharma-Sphere”

## *Shakya Chokden’s Interpretation of the Dharma-Sphere*

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As is well known to contemporary scholarship and demonstrated by the works contained in the present volume,\* the Tibetan term *zhen-tong* (*gzhan stong*, being empty of other) refers not to any one unanimous view or system of thought but to a wide variety of philosophical theories formed primarily in India and Tibet. Those theories are often contrasted with rival *rangtong* (*rang stong*, being empty of self)<sup>1</sup> theories in their interpretations of reality, buddhahood, path, and other elements of the Buddhist worldview. While many of those elements are equally open to the *zhen-tong* and *rangtong* interpretations, some suit one better than the other. According to the important but largely forgotten Tibetan thinker Shakya Chokden (1428–1507) whose views will be discussed in this chapter, the *dharma-sphere* (*chos dbyings*)—ultimate reality and source of all dharmas—is a concept that, similar to such related concepts as the *buddha-nature* (*de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po*), tends to better fit the *zhen-tong* interpretations.

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The dharma-sphere figures prominently in Shakya Chokden's works, where its analysis is not limited to only those texts, such as Nāgārjuna's *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*,<sup>2</sup> that explicitly explore this concept but extended to multiple writings, teachings, and traditions that do not necessarily address the dharma-sphere directly, but which in his opinion refer to it via cognate ideas and categories. Although Shakya Chokden also provides accounts of the rangtong interpretations of the dharma-sphere, it is in the zhentong context that he delves into this topic in minute detail. His interpretation of the dharma-sphere, therefore, can serve as a window for exploring details of his broader position on zhentong.<sup>3</sup>

The dharma-sphere is given particular attention in texts written by Shakya Chokden during the period when he openly articulated and voiced support of the zhentong philosophy—a philosophy that he presented as an authentic Madhyamaka view shared by leading thinkers of the Yogācāra, Tantra, and even Niḥsvabhāvavāda systems.<sup>4</sup> Providing complementary arguments and targeting diverse but related ideas, these texts present a broad, multifaceted, and shared vision of the dharma-sphere.<sup>5</sup>

An exhaustive study of Shakya Chokden's position on the dharma-sphere would exceed the limitations of a single book chapter, even a long one. I will therefore limit myself to discussing only those elements essential to understanding his approach. First, I will briefly discuss the place Shakya Chokden assigns to the dharma-sphere in the Mahāyāna teachings. Second, I will address his claim that nothing exists apart from the dharma-sphere. Third, I will explain his approach to the nature and function of the dharma-sphere and its relationship to other dharmas. Fourth, I will outline his position on how the dharma-sphere is utilized and manifested on the path. Fifth, and finally, I will focus on his perspective on differences and similarities between the dharma-sphere and other closely related categories.

### **The Dharma-Sphere in the Mahāyāna Teachings**

Shakya Chokden attaches great significance to the correct understanding of the dharma-sphere, arguing in *Opening a Hundred Doors* that it allows us to easily comprehend such seminal topics of Buddhist teachings as the ultimate and conventional realities, clarity and emptiness, appearance and emptiness, bliss and emptiness, among others.<sup>6</sup> In his

opinion, numerous Mahāyāna traditions share the same basic vision of the dharma-sphere and make it the main focus of their teachings. His basic strategy, exhibited in a number of writings, is to interpret the dharma-sphere as primordial mind (*ye shes*), treat it as ultimate reality, and present that reality as the focus of multiple Mahāyāna texts and traditions that refer to it by different names but share similar understanding of its nature. In *Reply to Lodro Zangpo*, for example, he identifies the dharma-sphere as primordial mind, also calling it “primordial mind of the dharma-sphere” (*chos dbyings ye shes*), and then argues that this primordial mind is the focal point of Mahāyāna teachings, both tantric and nontantric, where it is referred to by such names as “all-creating king” (*kun byed rgyal po*), “unmixed complete perfection” (*ma ’dres yongs rdzogs*), “spontaneity” (*lhun grub*), “revelation of the hidden” (*gab pa mngon du phyung pa*), “great perfection” (*rdzogs pa chen po*), “great seal” (*phyag rgya chen po*), and “pacifier of sufferings” (*sdug bsngal zhi byed*).<sup>7</sup> In *Appearance of the Sun*,<sup>8</sup> he argues that this primordial mind is presented as ultimate reality in the teachings of the third dharmacakra, Tantra, and Yogācāra, including Dharmakīrti’s *Seven Works* (*sde bdun*), as well as Asan . ga’s *Summary of Mahāyāna*<sup>9</sup> and *Explanation of [Maitreya’s] “Sublime Continuum of the Mahāyāna.”*<sup>10</sup>

He does acknowledge important differences in the philosophical positions of such texts as Maitreya’s *Sublime Continuum*<sup>11</sup> and Nāgārjuna’s *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*. According to him, the former follows the zhentong approach while the latter follows a mixed rangtong / zhentong approach. Nevertheless, he insists that the main elements of their approach to the dharma-sphere are the same, since, he argues, whenever the genuine ultimate reality is taught, it is either explicitly or implicitly conceived as primordial mind. Because the dharma-sphere is ultimate reality, it has to be primordial mind too. This allows him to freely cross-fertilize its interpretation in *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* with passages and ideas from *Sublime Continuum* and other works of Maitreya.

Overall, Shākya Chokden identifies two groups of Mahāyāna thinkers: the majority, who teach the dharma-sphere and agree among themselves in its identification; and the minority, who do not accept the actual dharma-sphere at all. In *Opening a Hundred Doors*, he posits three major types of Madhyamaka— Niḥsvabhāvavāda, Alīkākaravāda Yogācāra,<sup>12</sup> and Tantric Madhyamaka. In his opinion, the “mainstream” Niḥsvabhāvavāda—that approaches reality in terms of rangtong—does

not accept the existence of anything apart from the emptiness as non-affirming negation (*med par dgag pa'i stong nyid*) and simply calls that emptiness “dharma-sphere.” Because all nonaffirming negations are exclusively conventional realities, this type of the dharma-sphere too is a conventional reality. Because conventional dharmas do not exist, it does not exist either.<sup>13</sup> In effect, he argues that the mainstream Niḥsvabhāvavāda—advocated by such thinkers as Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka—posits neither the efficient ultimate reality nor the actual dharma-sphere. Alīkākaravāda and Tantra, on the other hand, approach reality in terms of zhentong and agree in their identification of the dharma-sphere as primordial mind—the continuum that persists through all the levels of the basis, path, and result (*gzhi lam 'bras bu*).<sup>14</sup> This primordial mind is ultimate reality; it—and only it—exists.<sup>15</sup>

According to Shakya Chokden, not all Mahāyāna thinkers interpret the dharma-sphere exclusively in terms of rangtong or zhentong. This is demonstrated by his interpretation of the two collections of Nāgārjuna in *Rain of Ambrosia*, where he argues that as its final position, *Collection of Reasonings* (*rigs tshogs*) accepts neither an illustration of ultimate reality nor its direct realization, treating everything that is suitable to be an object of sounds and concepts—be it called “emptiness,” “natural nirvāṇa,” or “dharma-sphere”—as exclusively a conventional reality because nothing can withstand analysis inquiring into the ultimate.<sup>16</sup> *Collection of Praises* (*bstod tshogs*), in contrast, accepts the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere and posits it as the basis of purification on the impure level of sentient beings, as the purifier on the level of the *ārya* path, and as the fundamentally transformed primordial mind (*gnas gyur gyi ye shes*) on the level of pure nirvāṇa.<sup>17</sup> This ultimate primordial mind of reality (*chos nyid don dam pa'i ye shes*) is the basis of all dharmas of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. It is experienced by the individually self-cognizing primordial mind (*so sor rang gis rig pa'i ye shes*), and it becomes the primordial mind of a buddha upon the fundamental transformation (*gnas yongs su gyur pa*). On the conventional level, this primordial mind has to be accepted as the actual ultimate reality because it is experienced by the yogic direct perception of āryas, and also because it is identified as the dharma-sphere, disposition of the *sugataessence* (*kham bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po*), and *mind-vajra* (*sems kyi rdo rje*).<sup>18</sup>

Because Shakya Chokden claims that the mainstream Niḥsvabhāvavāda rangtong system does not posit the actual dharma-sphere, in his works on the topic he focuses primarily on the zhentong inter-

pretation of the dharma-sphere shared by Alikākāravāda, Tantra, and those writings of Niḥsvabhāvavādins—such as Nāgārjuna’s *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*—that agree with it. He refers to the mainstream Niḥsvabhāvavāda position mostly for contrast, and I am following his lead in this chapter.

### **Why and How Only the Dharma-Sphere Exists**

In *Opening a Hundred Doors*, alluding to such statements from the *Dharmas of Maitreya* as

There are no dharmas  
Except for the dharma-sphere.<sup>19</sup>

Shakya Chokden writes that all three types of Madhyamaka agree that no other dharmas exist apart from the dharma-sphere. Realization of this fact is vital, he says, because it “opens hundreds of doors of the wondrous Dharma treasury.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, it leads to understanding numerous seminal points of Buddhist teachings.

What is the logic behind his claim of the exclusive existence of the dharmasphere? In the same text, he writes that not only the three types of Madhyamaka but in fact *all* Buddhist tenets—including Vaibhāsika, Sautrāntika, and Cittamātra—are in consensus that conventional or relative reality does not exist.<sup>21</sup> To exist, he insists, means to exist truly and really, and the only dharma that exists in such a way—according to the zhentong systems that, in contrast to the systems of rangtong, do accept true existence—is the dharma-sphere, ultimate reality itself.<sup>22</sup> Outlining the zhentong perspective on the dharma-sphere, in *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* he also writes that from its final perspective, except for the dharma-sphere, no conventional dharmas at all are established by valid cognition<sup>23</sup>—which amounts to saying that none of them exist. Shakya Chokden’s position, therefore, is that whether they accept the actual dharma-sphere or not, all Madhyamaka systems share the same view that no other dharmas exist apart from it. In the case of the zhentong systems, this entails that whatever is subsumed under the category of the dharma-sphere is automatically accepted as existent in reality; in the case of the rangtong systems, this entails that even that which is subsumed under the category of the dharma-sphere does not exist. Note

that the claim of the exclusive existence of the dharma-sphere does not imply that this category includes no other dharmas at all. As we will see later, for example, Shakya Chokden argues that according to the zhen-tong systems, this category can encompass positive qualities of a buddha as well.<sup>24</sup>

The exclusive existence of the dharma-sphere can also be understood in terms of what appears to a buddha's awakened mind and therefore exists in reality, in contrast to what does not really exist and is only believed to exist by deluded minds. In *Opening a Hundred Doors*, Shakya Chokden writes that the definitive meaning expressed by all such teachings as the Great Seal (*phyag rgya chen po*), Thorough Pacifier of Sufferings (*sdug bsngal rab tu zhi byed*), Revelation of the Hidden (*gab pa mngon du phyung ba*), Severance (*gcod*), and the *Dohās* is that nothing exists apart from that which appears to the mind of a perfect buddha.<sup>25</sup> All that buddhas see is exclusively the dharma-sphere, and what appears to a buddha's mind is none other than that mind itself. In other words, a buddha's mind is the dharma-sphere, which in turn is all that buddhas perceive. Because buddhas are omniscient and know all existents, it follows that only the dharma-sphere exists.

In the same text, he also argues that while all Mādhyamikas accept that the buddhas' mode of seeing (*gzigs tshul*) is free from the subject-object division, Alīkākāravāda in particular understands the nondual primordial mind as self-experiencing and calls it "individual self-cognition" (*so so rang rig*).<sup>26</sup> In a buddha's case, there is nothing that does not appear to this mirrorlike primordial mind (*me long lta bu'i ye shes*), and thus it is said that the mind of a perfect buddha knows all multiplicity (*ji snyed pa kun*). What appears to it is exclusively the dharma-sphere and perfect buddhahood, because whatever appears to it is subsumed under (*bsdus*) the buddha mind itself.<sup>27</sup> Only endless purity (*dag pa rab 'byams*) exists in buddhas' own appearance (*rang snang*), and only buddhas—not sentient beings—exist from buddhas' perspective (*gzigs ngo*).<sup>28</sup> In other words, because a buddha's mind is both omniscient and self-experiencing, because appearances of the buddha mind are none other than the buddha mind itself, and because that mind is none other than the dharma-sphere, the dharma-sphere is all that exists.<sup>29</sup>

Shakya Chokden does not feel uncomfortable about claiming the exclusive existence of the dharma-sphere, on the one hand, and on the other—often in the same text and even on the same page—discussing afflictions and other stains covering it, elaborating on the processes of

purification of those stains, and addressing other conventional dharmas. This is because he stresses the varying modes or perspectives from which respective observers see things. As an example, we can look at *Opening a Hundred Doors* where he addresses the following question: If all dharma-spheres (*chos dbyings ji snyed pa*, i.e., dharma-spheres of all beings) are primordially free from all stains, will it not follow that they primordially possess all buddha-qualities, such as powers and so forth? He rejects this position, arguing that such statements found in sūtric and tantric traditions as “There is nothing at all to eliminate or establish here”<sup>30</sup>—statements indicating that one side (of positive qualities) is primordially established while the other (of stains) is primordially nonexistent— are made in terms of the perspective of a perfect buddha. Only a buddha sees the buddha-nature fully<sup>31</sup>—as stainless and possessing all buddha-qualities. From the perspective of a person who is still on the path to buddhahood, there are things to eliminate and establish, because that person experiences through his own self-cognition (*rang rig*) that he has stains covering the dharma-sphere, while the positive qualities of a buddha are still hidden (*lkog gyur*) from him.<sup>32</sup>

Based on that reasoning, Shakya Chokden argues that the view (*lta ba*, i.e., the view of ultimate reality) has to be presented in accordance with the perspective of buddhas, while action (*spyod pa*, i.e., Buddhist practice) has to be presented in accordance with the perspective of sentient beings, distinguishing thereby between those contexts where the elimination and establishment are made and where they are not. Distinguishing between these two perspectives is similar to distinguishing between the two realities, he writes.<sup>33</sup> He also characterizes these two contexts as that of the view on the one hand and action and meditation (*spyod [pa] dang sgom pa*) on the other. Warning against confusing them, he argues that whenever one encounters scriptural statements about all sentient beings being possessors of the buddha-essence (*sangs rgyas kyi snying po can*), it should be understood that they are made in terms of the primordial buddhahood—not in terms of grounds and paths (*sa lam*). Ultimately (*don dam par*), no sentient beings, among others, exist, and thus no stains have to be eliminated, while buddha-powers and other positive qualities exist primordially as the dharma-sphere itself and do not have to be newly established in it. Yet, in terms of the sentient beings’ perspective, the dharmas of saṃsāra, no matter how much we are accustomed to them, cannot become inseparable from the dharma-sphere and therefore have to be eliminated. Emptiness whose nature is

compassion (*stong nyid snying rje'i snying po [can]*) and the other dharmas of nirvāṇa, when accustomed to, become inseparable from the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere (*chos dbyings ye shes*), and therefore have to be established.<sup>34</sup>

The emphasis on modes or perspectives allows Shakya Chokden not only to exclude from existence any dharma that is not subsumed under the dharma-sphere but, paradoxically, to include into this category even conventional dharmas and claim that they all are the dharma-sphere. In *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, he articulates this position with the help of the categories of the modes of being (*gnas tshul*) and appearance (*snang tshul*). When the mode of being is emphasized, he writes, all knowables, including such conventional dharmas as eyes, for example, are posited exclusively as the dharma-sphere, primordial mind. Nevertheless, this entails neither that all knowables exist nor that they all are ultimate reality. Dharmas' conventional "parts" (*kun rdzob kyī cha*) and mode of appearance do not become ultimate reality merely because their mode of being is ultimate reality. Because provisionally the two realities are ascertained in separate ways, their individual illustrations too have to be explained separately.<sup>35</sup>

Shakya Chokden clearly assigns more weight to the ultimate perspective than the conventional, to the mode of being than the mode of appearance, and to the perspective of buddhas than that of sentient beings. Nevertheless, he takes into account both perspectives and stresses the need of paying due attention to contexts in which different textual statements are made. This emphasis on perspectives plays an important role in his approach to the "intersection" of the ultimate and conventional dharmas, when the dharma-sphere and other dharmas are put side-by-side and the arising of the latter from the former, as well as transformation of mind, elimination of afflictions, and so forth, are addressed. The next section explores further the nature and function of the dharma-sphere, focusing on this issue in more detail.

### **The Dharma-Sphere versus Other Dharmas**

Shakya Chokden interprets the etymology of "dharma-sphere" in several ways, depending on what text or tradition he is commenting on. Usually, he unpacks it as a cause or source of dharmas. In *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, for example, commenting on the opening verse of

*Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, he writes that “dharma” refers to the nonabiding nirvāṇa of a buddha, and “sphere” to its cause—primordial mind that pervades all levels of the basis, path, and result.<sup>36</sup> A slightly different interpretation is given in *Golden Lancet* where he writes that in *Dharmas of Maitreya*, the nondual primordial mind (*gnyis med kyi ye shes*) is called the dharma-sphere because it serves as the cause of all ārya dharmas. Thus, “dharma” there is expanded to ārya dharmas and “sphere” to their cause.<sup>37</sup> This being said, we should note that interpretations of a term—especially contextually bound ones—do not exhaust all meanings that the term might bear. This is particularly true in the case of the dharma-sphere that, as we will see later, is treated by Shakya Chokden as the source of all dharmas of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

Shakya Chokden views the dharma-sphere—the only existent dharma, primordial mind—as becoming enmeshed in, coexistent with, and eventually disentangled from conventional, nonexistent, dharmas. While the dharma-sphere does not change its nature, it can be referred to by different names when addressed together with other dharmas. In *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* he writes that the dharma-sphere of a mind bound by conceptualization is called “saṃsāra” because it serves as the basis of the imputation “sentient being.” The dharmasphere at the time of liberation from all conceptualization is called “liberation from saṃsāra” because it serves as the basis of the imputation “buddha.”<sup>38</sup> Commenting on verses 74–76 of *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, he further specifies that according to that treatise, the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere on the level where it has not been purified of any afflictions is called “sentient being”; on the level of being partially purified of afflictions, yet without the aspiring bodhicitta (*smon pa byang chub kyi sems*) being produced, it is called śrāvaka or pratyekabuddha;<sup>39</sup> on the level where aspiring bodhicitta has been produced and the dharma-sphere realized by mere faith, not directly, it is called “person aspiring for the supreme vehicle” (*theg pa mchog la mos pa'i gang zag*). Starting from the level of partial elimination of the obscurations of knowables (*shes bya'i sgrib pa*) obscuring the dharma-sphere and until its final purification of all obscurations, it is called “bodhisattva”; on the level of elimination of all stains it is called “truly perfect Buddha.”<sup>40</sup>

In a similar manner, in *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* he writes that on the level of the basis the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere is called “ultimate sentient being”; on the level of the path “ultimate bodhisattva”; and on the level of the result “ultimate buddha.”<sup>41</sup> He proceeds to clarify

the nature and function of the dharma-sphere in terms of the aforementioned modes of being and appearance, arguing that on the level of buddhahood the two are the same, while on the level of sentient beings they are discordant. On the latter level, the dharma-sphere's mode of appearance is saṃsāra, which is comprised of adventitious stains and is the object of abandonment. Its mode of being is nirvāṇa, which is accompanied—but not damaged—by stains, because stains are not inherent in its entity or nature. Only the positive qualities of a Buddha can inseparably be born in it on the level of Mahāyāna āryas, starting from the first bodhisattva ground.<sup>42</sup> As we have just seen, in his view all that appears to a buddha's mind is that mind itself, and that mind is none other than the dharma-sphere. This is one of the reasons why the mode of appearance and the mode of being on the level of buddhahood are the same. Below that level the two are different, and what appears to deluded minds is not the really existent dharma-sphere but the nonexistent stains of saṃsāra, while the dharma-sphere itself manifests only from the first bodhisattva ground, which is characterized by an initial direct realization of ultimate reality.

Approaching the topic from a slightly different angle, Shakya Chokden argues that the dharma-sphere has two “parts” (*cha*): consciousness (*rnam shes*) and primordial mind (*ye shes*). The former is called so from the perspective of saṃsāra, the latter from the perspective of nirvāṇa. The former is abandoned at the fundamental transformation, while the latter cannot be abandoned and is posited in terms of different levels as the basis, path, and result.<sup>43</sup> Shakya Chokden clearly treats the two parts of the dharma-sphere as the two aforementioned modes on the level prior to buddhahood. It has the saṃsāric part of consciousness only in terms of its mode of appearance on the level prior to buddhahood, when the modes of being and appearance are different. This part is not inherent in the dharma-sphere and is abandoned at the fundamental transformation, while the dharma-sphere—identified as primordial mind—is not. This interpretation is supported by other passages in his works, such as *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere's* comment on verse 59 of *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere* that the dharma-sphere is the life or life-force of all afflicted and purified dharmas, but while the latter are possessed by the dharmasphere in terms of being inseparable from it, the former dwell in it in the way of being separable.<sup>44</sup>

Although the modes of being and appearance remain discordant until one achieves final awakening, they are far from being unrelated: the

mode of being serves as the very foundation for the emergence of pure and impure appearances as well as purification of the latter and cultivation of the former on the path to buddhahood. As Shakya Chokden puts it in *Reply to Lodro Zangpo*, the dharmasphere is the basis for planting seeds of all afflicted and purified dharmas, that is, all dharmas of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa arise from it, and thus it is also called “universal basis” (*kun gzhi*).<sup>45</sup> In *Appearance of the Sun*, he provides details of this process of arising, emphasizing the dichotomy between such categories as consciousness and primordial mind, the universal basis and consciousness of the universal basis (*kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa*), and so forth. He writes that consciousness of the universal basis emerges from the complete ripening of predispositions of the afflicted side (*kun nas nyon mongs phyogs kyi bag chags*) smeared on the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere. That consciousness has no beginning but has an end. It gives rise to grasping at itself as “I,” and that grasping leads to the emergence of all dharmas of saṃsāra. Predispositions of the purified side (*rnam par byang ba'i phyogs kyi bag chags*)—also called “stainless seeds” (*zag pa med pa'i sa bon*)—are accumulated on that primordial mind of the dharma-sphere but have neither beginning nor end. Their nourishment (*gsos btab pa*)—by hearing discourses of a buddha, meeting buddhas, and so on—leads to the emergence of all dharmas of the purified side. That root primordial mind (*rtsa ba'i ye shes*) which is the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere, is also called “disposition of buddha-essence” “buddha of natural purity” (*rang bzhin rnam dag gi sangs rgyas*), “causal continuum” (*rgyu yi rgyud*), and “universal basis.” It is not called “consciousness of the universal basis,” one of the reasons being that primordial mind and consciousness are contradictory. Primordial mind and consciousness have coexisted since beginningless time because neither saṃsāra nor primordial mind have a beginning, and because there can exist no consciousness that is not connected to primordial mind. However, the two are not destined to coexist forever, because consciousness is suitable for separation from primordial mind and will eventually undergo the fundamental transformation (*gnas yongs su gyur pa*).<sup>46</sup>

This line of reasoning demonstrates the dynamic connection between the dharma-sphere and other dharmas. The dharma-sphere is the basis, foundation, and support of everything, because all purified and afflicted dharmas depend on, arise from, and coexist with it. The very foundation of saṃsāra—the consciousness of the universal basis together with its seeds—has continuously coexisted with, and on, this

basis since beginningless time. This is also true for the seeds of liberation from saṃsāra, as well as other positive dharmas related to nirvāṇa. Yet, the afflicted and purified dharmas are connected to the dharma-sphere in very different ways: while the former can be said to develop *on* it, the latter develop *within* it. The former are not subsumed under the category of primordial mind and are destined to eventually disappear. The latter, being the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere itself, will never cease to exist.<sup>47</sup> Shakya Chokden's interpretation of the nature and function of the dharma-sphere is summarized in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Nature and function of the dharma-sphere

dharma-sphere, universal basis, primordial mind, primordial mind of the dharma-sphere, inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, all-creating king, unmixed complete perfection, spontaneity, revelation of the hidden, great perfection, great seal, pacifier of sufferings, disposition of the buddha-nature, buddha of natural purity, causal continuum, universal basis		terms by which the dharma-sphere is addressed in different teachings
truly perfect buddha (all obscurations are eliminated) bodhisattva (obscurations of knowables are eliminated only partially) person aspiring for the supreme path (aspiring bodhicitta is produced, the dharma-sphere is realized by mere faith) śrāvaka or pratyekabuddha (afflictions are partly purified, aspiring bodhicitta is not produced) sentient being (no afflictions are purified)		how the dharma-sphere is posited on five levels
ultimate buddha, result continuum ultimate bodhisattva, path continuum ultimate sentient being, basis continuum		how it is posited on three levels
nirvāṇa saṃsāra		how it is posited on two levels
nirvāṇa part—primordial mind (impossible to eliminate)	saṃsāra part—consciousness (eliminated at the fundamental transformation)	parts
mode of being—nirvāṇa (on the ārya level all positive qualities are inseparably born in it)	mode of appearance—saṃsāra (consists of adventitious stains, object of abandonment)	two modes when in continua of sentient beings

Note that the parts and modes outlined in the left column are none other than the nature or entity of the dharma-sphere—primordial mind. Those in the right column refer to mistaken appearances of sentient beings. Thus, the two parts, similar to the two modes, refer not to different parts of a whole but to real, existent dharmas on the one hand and unreal, nonexistent dharmas on the other. I should also reiterate that according to Shakya Chokden the very division into such bipolar categories as saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, afflicted and purified dharmas, and so on, is possible only from the perspective of those for whom the modes of appearance and being are different. There is no planting of seeds within the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere, no arising of saṃsāra from it, no purification of stains, no development of primordial mind, and not even any fundamental transformation from the perspective of a buddha whose two modes are the same. Only the dharma-sphere in all its perfection and completeness exists from that perspective—nothing else.

But if for a person who is still on the path to buddhahood there are stains to purify and positive qualities to acquire, then what does this process consist of? In other words, how is the dharma-sphere purified and manifested on the path? We will explore this topic in the next section.

### **How the Dharma-Sphere Is Utilized on the Path**

In *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness*, Shakya Chokden addresses several approaches to the path that purifies stains of the dharma-sphere, characterizing them as those of zhentong and rangtong. He subdivides the former into two: those of Mantrayāna and Pāramitāyāna. He explains that according to Mantrayāna, the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere with stains (*dri ma dang bcas pa'i chos dbyings ye shes*) is taken as the basis of purification that is purified by the path of the two stages (*rim pa gnyis*); as a result, one manifests the body of union (*zung 'jug gi sku*).<sup>48</sup> Outlining the Pāramitāyāna approach, he refers to two texts of Maitreya: *Sublime Continuum* and *Differentiation of the Middle and Extremes*. The former posits the suchness with stains (*dri ma dang bcas pa'i de bzhin nyid*) as the basis of purification that occurs by the aspiration toward Mahāyāna teachings, great compassion, contemplation, and wisdom realizing selflessness. This results in directly seeing buddha-essence, gradually accustoming oneself to that vision—thereby purifying stains of the seven impure and three pure grounds—and eventually attaining

the final result of purification— transcendence to the other shore of genuine purity, bliss, permanence, and self (*gtsang ba dang / bde ba dang / rtag pa dang / bdag dam pa*).<sup>49</sup> In his opinion, *Differentiation of the Middle and Extremes* shares the same basic position, but presents it from a slightly different angle: the basis of purification is the dharma-sphere with stains, which is purified of afflictive obscurations and obscurations of knowables by the purifier, identified as primordial mind directly seeing the two types of selflessness (*bdag med pa gnyis mngon sum du mthong ba'i ye shes*).<sup>50</sup>

Outlining the rangtong approach, Shakyā Chokden addresses three positions: those of Śāntaraksita and Kamalaśīla, Candrakīrti, and *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*. He argues that Śāntaraksita and Kamalaśīla's identification of the dharma-sphere accords with the basic Yogācāra position—outlined in such texts as the intermediate *Dharmas of Maitreya*—that only the dharma-sphere exists, while Candrakīrti's approach best represents the final Niḥsvabhāvavāda position that nothing exists, even the dharma-sphere.<sup>51</sup> *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere* follows a mixed rangtong / zhentong approach,<sup>52</sup> explaining the dharma-sphere first in terms of zhentong and then in terms of rangtong. More specifically, it interprets the entity (*ngo bo*) or nature of buddhahood as purity, bliss, permanence, and self (*gtsang bde rtag bdag*), but afterward it negates the existence of any dharma whatsoever.<sup>53</sup>

Aside from this major difference in the final interpretation of the ultimate status of the dharma-sphere, Shakyā Chokden presents *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere's* approach to the dharma-sphere in the context of the path as being in agreement with the zhentong approach. The entity of the dharma-sphere is posited in that text as primordial mind free from the duality of apprehended and apprehender. What obscures it is explained primarily as afflictive obscurations. What purifies it is presented as wisdom realizing the selflessness of persons (*gang zag gi bdag med rtogs pa'i shes rab*) and primordial mind realizing the selflessness of dharmas (*chos kyi bdag med rtogs pa'i ye shes*). The results of purification are the awakenings of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, as well as dharma-bodies from the first bodhisattva ground, up to and including buddhahood.<sup>54</sup> Śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas can directly see only one part (*phyogs gcig*)<sup>55</sup> of the dharma-sphere, and their nirvāṇas are explained as having the entity of the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere.<sup>56</sup>

Shakya Chokden's perspective on different approaches to the purification of the dharma-sphere demonstrates that while admitting differences in the methods or paths of purification advocated by tantric and nontantric zhentong systems, he believes that the basis—the dharma-sphere itself—is approached by them similarly. When they accept the existence of the dharma-sphere—as do Śāntaraksita, Kamalaśīla, and provisionally Nāgārjuna in his *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*—followers of rangtong also agree about its identification and the major points of the method of its purification. When they, like Candrakīrti, do not assert the existence of any dharmas, followers of rangtong do not accept the dharma-sphere and its identification as primordial mind.

Let us look closer at *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, which provides further details of the purification of the dharma-sphere on the Mahāyāna path by the practice of the ten perfections (generosity, morality, patience, etc.). Here we read that due to the practice of the first three perfections, the collection of positive qualities (*bsod nams kyi tshogs*) develops (*rgyas pa*) within the disposition of the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere (*kham s chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes*). In the process, one temporarily sees the form-body (*gzugs kyi sku*) and eventually accomplishes it. Due to the practice of the next three perfections, the disposition of awakening (*byang chub kyi kham s*) develops through the collection of primordial mind (*ye shes kyi tshogs*). This results in temporarily seeing in one's mental continuum the dharma-body purified of adventitious stains (*glo bur rnam dag gi chos sku*) and eventually accomplishing the ultimate body (*don dam pa'i sku*). Due to the practice of the last four perfections, the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere develops through the collection of powers (*nus pa'i tshogs*). As a result, temporarily one is not discouraged from benefiting others and eventually accomplishes perfect awakened activities (*phrin las phun sum tshogs pa*). These ten perfections are called “developmental potential” (*rgyas 'gyur gyi rigs*) because they develop the naturally abiding potential (*rang bzhin du gnas pa'i rigs*).<sup>57</sup>

Note that here “disposition of the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere,” “disposition of awakening,” and “primordial mind of the dharma-sphere” refer to the same dharma-sphere, addressing it from different angles. It indicates that to those who have not yet reached the end of the path to buddhahood—and whose modes of appearance and being are therefore different—the dharma-sphere itself appears to

undergo developmental changes.<sup>58</sup> The dharma-body too is perceived in a similar manner. Shakya Chokden writes that prior to reaching the bodhisattva levels, as a result of faith in the positive qualities of a buddha one can see the dharma-body via a generic image (*don spyi*). Having attained the grounds, one sees it directly, as gradually evolving (*rim gyis rim gyis 'phel bar mthong*). On the eleventh ground, the state of buddhahood, one sees it as perfect and clear, like the full moon.<sup>59</sup>

When discussing the dharma-sphere in the context of the path, Shakya Chokden also resorts to the familiar strategy of separating the perspectives of sentient being and buddhas, as demonstrated by his elaborations in *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* on how form-bodies of a buddha appear to different types of beings. When the emanation-body (*sprul sku*) appears to a śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, or an ordinary being, the part of the appearance of a buddha's physical body and speech belongs to their minds' dharma-sphere<sup>60</sup> that has developed (*rgyas pa*) due to their positive qualities (*bsod nams*) and is therefore subsumed under their own mind. A buddha's dharma-sphere merely serves as the empowering condition (*bdag po'i rkyen*) for displaying such appearance. The part of the appearance of the enjoymentbody (*longs sku*), together with the pure land in which it dwells, is subsumed under the nature of the primordial mind of a person with that appearance. It appears as increasing and decreasing (*rgya chad*) because that primordial mind has not yet been purified of predispositions (*bag chags*) to dualistic appearances. Although the causal condition (*rgyu'i rkyen*) of that appearance is the person's primordial mind, its empowering condition (*bdag po'i rkyen*) is the primordial mind of a buddha. While various manifestations of form-bodies can appear to sentient beings due to their aspirational prayers, the ultimate body (*don dam pa'i sku*) on the level of buddhahood does not have any divisions; on the eleventh ground, a person's primordial mind and primordial minds of all buddhas are "blended into one" (*gcig tu 'dres pa*).<sup>61</sup>

Shakya Chokden's interpretation of the dharma-sphere in the context of the path should be understood similarly to his interpretation of the dharma-sphere in relation to other dharmas outlined in the previous section: whether he addresses the dharma-sphere as the basis of emergence of pure and impure phenomena, as the focus of the Mahāyāna path nourishing the former and purifying the latter, or as the conduit by which appearances of nirvāṇa spill into the world of saṃsāra—in all those cases he either explicitly or implicitly maintains emphasis on

different perspectives. From the perspective of a buddha whose modes of being and appearance are not different, the dharma-sphere undergoes no such changes as purification, development, and so forth; no buddha-bodies appear except for the dharma-body, which is none other than the dharma-sphere itself. Not even distinctions between one's own primordial mind and other buddhas' primordial minds or dharma-spheres exist—they all are “blended into one.”<sup>62</sup> In contrast to that, from the perspective of those below the level of buddhahood, for whom the two modes are different, the dharma-sphere is seen as evolving, becoming increasingly purified of adventitious stains and imbued with more and more positive qualities. The two form-bodies appear and disappear as well, but those appearances belong only to the practitioner's own mind—not to the mental continuum of a buddha. Manifestations of buddha-bodies and the development of the dharma-sphere are caused by the practices of the ten perfections. Yet, those practices too do not transcend the mode of appearance and do not belong to the entity of the dharma-sphere—its mode of being. This being said, the dharma-spheres of both buddhas and sentient beings are what ultimately allows practices of the path to take place and bear fruits of visions of buddha-bodies; while buddhas' dharma-spheres serve as mere conditions for such processes, sentient beings' dharma-spheres contain their seeds and provide their foundation.

### **Differences between the Dharma-Sphere, the Dharma-Body, the Buddha-Nature, and the Disposition**

In his writings on the dharma-sphere, Shakya Chokden often refers to several concepts—most notably “disposition” (*kham*s), “buddha-nature,” and “dharma-body” (*chos sku*)—that are closely related to the dharma-sphere but are not necessarily synonymous or interchangeable with it. These categories have already been mentioned in this chapter, and their discussion here will serve as a foil for clarifying his position on the dharma-sphere.<sup>63</sup>

Shakya Chokden interprets the disposition as the source or cause of buddhas and sentient beings, as the following passage from *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* demonstrates: “Explanation of the dharma-sphere as the disposition of both buddhas and sentient beings also intends that it is the cause of both.”<sup>64</sup> This passage further demonstrates

that he essentially equates the disposition with the dharmasphere. The major difference, perhaps, being that he tends to use the former category more narrowly as a source of awakened and unawakened states and beings, and the latter more broadly, as a source of all dharmas in general. By extension, he equates the disposition with the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere, also using such elaborate terms as “disposition of the primordial mind of the dharmasphere.”<sup>65</sup> Little wonder—after all, both *khams* and *dbyings* are two Tibetan words used for translating the same Sanskrit word *dhātu*, a fact that Shakya Chokden, as a Sanskrit specialist,<sup>66</sup> was no doubt aware of.

Similar to the dharma-sphere, he interprets the disposition as the source and cause of buddhahood, and he argues that it persists in the state of buddhahood, too. He makes it clear in *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* when answering the question about whether the disposition is eliminated by antidotes as a means of achieving buddhahood. Commenting on verses 18–22 of *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, he writes that antidotes eliminate stains (*dri ma*) of the disposition but do not destroy the disposition itself.<sup>67</sup> Commenting on the next verse, he writes that the entity of the dharma-sphere is primordial mind, and because that entity is not the object of abandonment, it does not have to be eliminated.<sup>68</sup> It is safe to argue, then, that for Shakya Chokden the following equation holds true: disposition = dharma-sphere = primordial mind.

In contrast to this relatively straightforward take on the disposition, his interpretation of the buddha-nature, which he also calls “buddha-essence” (*sangs rgyas kyi snying po*) and “*sugata-essence*” (*bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po*) is more complex. His trademark claim regarding the buddha-nature—articulated in several texts including *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*—is that nobody but Mahāyāna āryas have it.<sup>69</sup> As he succinctly puts it in *Essence of Sūtras and Tantras: Explanation of the Buddha-Essence* when addressing the interpretation of the buddha-nature by *Sublime Continuum*:

In brief, all Mahāyāna āryas  
Possess buddha-essence.  
Because sentient beings other than them  
Do have the suchness (*de bzhin nyid*) and the potential (*rigs*),  
They possess buddha-essence metaphorically.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, he accepts that buddhas and bodhisattvas on the ten grounds, starting from the path of seeing, possess the buddha-nature, but he does not believe that anyone else below the first level does.

In *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, commenting on verses 14–17 of *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, he also argues against all beings having buddha-essence. Supporting his position with the example of a banana tree given in the root text, he writes that although a banana tree does not have a pith or essence (*snying po*), it produces a sweet fruit because it has its disposition; likewise, although sentient beings<sup>71</sup> do not have buddha-essence, they have its disposition—primordial mind—that allows the fruit of buddhahood to be produced. In his opinion, this example shows a sweet fruit not as the essence of the banana tree but as its result. Likewise, buddhahood is not the essence of saṃsāra but its result. Saṃsāra has no essence. Although a banana tree has no essence, the existence in it of the disposition of the sweet fruit can be regarded as its essence. Likewise, although saṃsāra has no essence, existence in it of the disposition of a buddha is explained as its essence. Juxtaposing the categories of the disposition and the essence, he writes that although it is taught that sentient beings have the buddha-disposition (*sangs rgyas kyi khams*), buddhahood itself is not explained as the essence of sentient beings.<sup>72</sup>

As I have mentioned, Shakya Chokden argues that from the perspective of those whose modes of being and appearance are different, positive qualities of a buddha can inseparably be born in the dharma-sphere on the level of Mahāyāna āryas, starting from the first bodhisattva ground. He also argues that one can be posited as a possessor of the essence (*snying po can*) only when he sees the essence directly, that is, starting from the first ground. This is because from that moment on, the reality (*chos nyid*) of his mind can be posited as tathāgata and the dharma-body.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the dharma-sphere becomes buddha-essence only starting from the Mahāyāna path of seeing. Shakya Chokden also insists that the direct realization of the dharma-sphere is necessarily accompanied by the removal or purification of obscurations or “stains” that cover it. Nevertheless, in his opinion it is not enough to merely remove some obscurations to become a possessor of buddha-essence. Otherwise, non-Mahāyāna āryas would possess it too. Together with the partial freedom from afflictions, one also has to develop qualities unique to the Mahāyāna path, such as bodhicitta.<sup>74</sup>

To put it differently, the direct realization of the dharma-sphere necessarily involves its vision as pure of at least some obscurations and imbued with at least some buddha-qualities. Only when this vision has been achieved can the dharmasphere be treated as the buddha-nature. Because this is impossible for anyone before the first ground, only Mahāyāna āryas have buddha-essence. Thus, in contrast to the dharma-sphere—which is the basis of all pure and impure visions and does not have to be seen for a person to possess it—the buddha-nature has to be directly realized or seen for that to happen. We can say that according to Shakya Chokden the equation buddha-nature = dharma-sphere holds true starting only from the first bodhisattva ground.

Shakya Chokden's position on the dharma-body is even more complex. In *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* he writes that one is called "bodhisattva" when one has obtained one part of the dharma-body (*chos kyi sku'i cha shes gcig thob pa*).<sup>75</sup> Similar to being posited as buddha-essence, to be posited as a part of the dharma-body, it is not enough to be merely purified of one part of afflictions; one needs *both* partial freedom from afflictions and also generation of bodhicitta. Without these two conditions being fulfilled, the disposition cannot be posited as the buddha-nature, and, by extension, a part of the dharma-body.<sup>76</sup> One also has to be at least partially purified of the obscurations of knowables. Although saṃsāra is destroyed through the abandonment of afflictions, without at least partial removal of the obscurations of knowables one will not be able to see the dharma-sphere, and without it being seen, the dharma-sphere cannot be posited as the dharma-body.<sup>77</sup> In other words, he argues that similar to obtaining the buddha-nature only starting from the first ground, one obtains one part of the dharma-body also starting from that level only.

This being said, in *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, commenting on verses 89 and 90 of the root text, Shakya Chokden writes that the dharma-sphere is not realized by any consciousness, including mental consciousness. Prior to the first ground it is realized or seen by faith, and starting from the first ground it is directly seen by the individual self-cognition. Referring to verse 74, he also adds that both ways of seeing the dharma-sphere apply to the dharma-body as well.<sup>78</sup> Thus, we are led to think that in his opinion, one has the dharma-body both prior to and after the first ground. This could be further supported by his reference to

the following *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras* passage: “Without the body, having the body, having obtained the body,”<sup>79</sup> that he explains as meaning that one has (*bcas*) the dharma-body on the paths of accumulation and preparation.<sup>80</sup> But here he makes a subtle distinction between having (*bcas*) the dharma-body and having obtained (*thob*) it, indicating that while one has the dharma-body starting from the path of accumulation, only from the first bodhisattva ground does one obtain—and thus come into possession of—the dharma-body. This distinction between having and possessing is applied neither to the dharma-sphere nor to the disposition or the buddha-nature: one always has the dharma-sphere and the disposition, and one obtains (i.e., has) the buddha-nature starting from the first bodhisattva ground.

If we take these differences into account, can we at least say that according to Shakya Chokden, starting from the first ground one equally has the dharma-body and the buddha-nature together with the dharma-sphere? After all, one cannot stop *having* the dharma-body after having *obtained* it! While it is tempting to answer this question affirmatively, the matter is complicated by the fact that according to Shakya Chokden, having parts of the dharma-body does not qualify as having the actual dharma-body. In *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, elaborating on the meaning of verses 75–76 of the root text, he writes that although on each of the ten grounds there exist parts of the dharma-body, tathāgata and buddha, because they are not fully complete (*yongs su ma rdzogs pa*), it is difficult to posit them as the actual (*mtshan nyid pa*) dharma-body, and so on. For example, he says, although on the first day of the month there exists one part of the moon, because not all fifteen parts are complete it cannot be posited as the moon disc.<sup>81</sup> This makes it clear that for Shakya Chokden, the dharma-body that one obtains on the first ground and continues to have on the next nine grounds is not the actual dharma-body.<sup>82</sup> Because this logic does not apply to the buddha-nature, we can conclude that according to him the actual dharma-body only overlaps with the buddha-nature and the dharma-sphere on the eleventh ground—the state of buddhahood. Similarities and differences between the dharma-sphere, disposition, buddha-nature, and dharma-body are summarized in **Table 2**.

<b>Table 2.</b> Similarities and differences between the dharma-sphere, disposition, buddha-nature, and dharma-body				
<i>Levels</i>	<i>Dharma-Sphere</i>	<i>Disposition</i>	<i>Buddha-Nature</i>	<i>Dharma-Body</i>
ordinary beings, śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas	yes	yes	no	no; have it but do not possess it
ārya bodhisattvas	yes	yes	yes	no; have/possess only its parts
buddhas	yes	yes	yes	yes

## Conclusion

Shakya Chokden's later works demonstrate that in general he is supportive of both rangtong and zhentong systems, tending not to take sides with either one.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, when targeting such specific categories as the dharma-sphere, he clearly gives preference to the zhentong interpretation where the dharma-sphere is treated as the only dharma existent in reality, while the existence of all other dharmas that do not belong to that category is negated. He believes that this approach is accepted wholesale by Alīkākarāvāda thinkers, while Niḥsvabhāvavādins either entirely reject the actual dharma-sphere or accept its zhentong interpretation to various degrees.

The claim of the exclusive existence of the dharma-sphere makes problematic its interpretation side by side with other dharmas, such as the Buddhist path with attendant categories of afflictions, antidotes, and so forth. Shakya Chokden's response to this challenge is to emphasize the specific contexts in which different dharmas are addressed. He likens this approach to utilizing the categories of the two truths but goes further than simply claiming that dharmas exist on the conventional level, while on the ultimate level nothing exists except for the ultimate itself. He emphasizes the importance of separating the perspectives of buddhas and sentient beings, the contexts of view and action, and the modes of being and appearance. Linking what exists with what is perceived, he argues that relative dharmas exist only for deluded minds, while all that an awakened mind of a buddha perceives is exclusively the dharma-sphere—ultimate reality itself. Arguing that for buddhas the modes of

being and appearance are the same, but for sentient beings different, he relegates the analysis of the dharma-sphere alongside other dharmas to the latter context. Only on the level where the two modes are different can one develop positive qualities, remove obscurations, purify the dharma-sphere, see its development, and so forth. And only on that level can one articulate differences between the dharma-sphere and other related dharmas, such as buddha-essence.

Shakya Chokden equates the dharma-sphere with ultimate reality, primordial mind, and treats it as the source and underlying reality of all dharmas. When discussing it in the context of the path, he utilizes the standard model of the ten stages and five paths according to which the ultimate is directly realized starting from the first bodhisattva ground. Following Nāgārjuna, he argues that similar to seeing the waxing moon, one sees the dharma-sphere only partially within the ten grounds and fully in the state of buddhahood. But he does not deny that it or its cognate category of the disposition exist on the level of ordinary beings and non-Mahāyāna āryas. In contrast to that, he argues that the buddha-nature has to be directly realized for one to have it. As for the dharma-body, even that alone is not sufficient—to obtain it one has to see it completely, and this happens only in the state of buddhahood.

These distinctions notwithstanding, it bears repeating that they pertain only to the perspective of sentient beings for whom the modes of being and appearance of the dharma-sphere are different. From the perspective of a buddha, who sees things as they really are, free from any differences in the two modes, none of these distinctions apply. From that perspective, there is nothing at all to eliminate or establish—there are no dharmas apart from the dharma-sphere.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise specified, all italicized terms in parentheses are Tibetan.
2. *Dharmadhātustotra*, *Chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa*, D1118, bstod tshogs, ka, 63b–67b. Translated in Brunnholz, “*In Praise of Dharmadhātu*” 117–129.
3. For a detailed study of Shakya Chokden’s views, see my *Visions of Unity*.
4. For details of this period—that started around 1477 and continued until the end of Shakya Chokden’s life, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* 38ff.
5. Among those texts, of particular notice is *Opening a Hundred Doors*, a work that focuses on the dharma-sphere but is not tied to any one treatise on the topic. *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, on the other hand, is Shakya Chokden’s major

commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, although it is far from being tied to that text only. The position of *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere* is also analyzed in a short nameless text that I will be referring to as *Reply to Lodro Zangpo*. This short text was written in response to an inquiry by a tantric adept, Lodro Zangpo (*blo gros bzang po*). *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness*, which focuses on varying interpretations of ultimate reality and related topics by rangtong and zhen-tong systems, also discusses different perspectives on the dharma-sphere in significant detail. The dharma-sphere is addressed in *Appearance of the Sun*, whose main focus is the historical and philosophical analysis of the works on Buddhist logic and epistemology. Helpful information on the dharma-sphere is provided in *Ocean of Scriptural Statements and Reasoning*, which explores major themes of Mahāyāna philosophy according to different systems of Madhyamaka. Important questions regarding the dharma-sphere are addressed in *Golden Lancet*, which analyzes a panoply of problematic issues in Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen's (1182–1251) *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows*. The dharma-sphere is likewise discussed in *Rain of Ambrosia*, whose main objective is to demonstrate compatibility and shared vision of the rival Alīkākaravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda systems. For details, Komarovski, *Visions of Unity*, which explores that perspective on Alīkākaravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda as its main topic.

6. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 157.
7. Shakya Chokden, *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* 36–37.
8. Shakya Chokden, *Appearance of the Sun* 114–116.
9. *Mahāyānasamgraha*, *Theg pa chen po bsdu pa*, D4048, sems tsam, ri, 1a–43a.
10. *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstravyākhyā*, *Theg pa chen po'i rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos kyi rnam par bshad pa*, D4025, sems tsam, phi, 74b–129a.
11. *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra*, *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma*, D4024, sems tsam, phi, 54b–73a. Sanskrit of this text with Asan . ga's commentary is edited in Johnston, *Ratnagotravibhāga*.
12. In contrast to the widespread interpretation of Madhyamaka as synonymous with Niḥsvabhāvavāda, and Yogācāra as synonymous with Cittamātra, Shakya Chokden treats only one of the two types of Yogācāra—Satyākāravāda—as synonymous with Cittamātra, and he treats the other type—Alīkākaravāda—as a subdivision of Madhyamaka. He applies the term “Yogācāra Madhyamaka” (*rnal 'byor spyod (pa) pa'i dbu ma*) to both Alīkākaravāda and the Niḥsvabhāvavāda system advocated by Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla. To avoid confusion, I refer to the former system only as Alīkākaravāda or Alīkākaravāda Yogācāra. For details of Shakya Chokden's approach to divisions of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity*, chapters 3 and 4.
13. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 147. The claim of the nonexistence of the dharma-sphere does not entail the extreme of nihilism; according to Niḥsvabhāvavāda, as Shakya Chokden understands it, although it does not exist, it does not *not exist* either (Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 148).
14. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 147.
15. This approach is found in many of Shakya Chokden's works, such as *Rain of Ambrosia* 326ff. For more details of different perspectives on existence and nonexistence,

- acceptance and nonacceptance of ultimate reality, and related issues, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* 214ff.
16. Shakya Chokden, *Rain of Ambrosia* 328.
  17. Shakya Chokden, *Rain of Ambrosia* 329.
  18. Shakya Chokden, *Rain of Ambrosia* 330. The term “disposition of the sugata-essence” refers to the disposition (*khams*), not sugata-essence (*bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po*). For the differences between these two categories, see the last section of this chapter.
  19. *chos kyi dbyings las ma gtogs pa'i / chos gzhan med*, Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 147. Compare: “Because there are no dharmas, Except for the dharma-sphere” (*chos kyi dbyings las ma gtogs pa / gang phyir chos med de yi phyir*) from Maitreya, *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras* (*Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra*, *Theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan*), D4020, sems tsam, phi, 18a. Skt.: *dharmadhātu vinirmukto yasmād dharmo na vidyate*. Levi, *Expose* 87. Also, “Thus, except for the dharma-sphere; There are no dharmas” (*chos kyi dbyings ni ma gtogs par / 'di ltar chos yod ma yin te*) from Maitreya, *Differentiation of the Middle and Extremes* (*Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Dbus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa*), D4021, sems tsam, phi, 44b. The Sanskrit version of this passage, provided in Nagao's *Madhyāntavibhāga-Bhāṣ. ya* 67, is virtually identical to the one from *Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras*.
  20. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 147.
  21. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 149.
  22. Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* 94, 241, 249.
  23. Shakya Chokden, *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* 36.
  24. This can be viewed in a way similar to such statements as “only mind exists”—an expression that negates those phenomena that are not mind, but not those that are subsumed under the category of mind.
  25. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 157.
  26. For details of experiencing versus cognizing, and so forth, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* chapter 5, section 3.
  27. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 153. Because according to Shakya Chokden only ultimate—not conventional—reality appears to a buddha's mind, *ji snyed pa* in this context does not refer to and is not synonymous with conventional reality, as it is often understood (its counterpart *ji lta ba* or “discerned” usually being taken as synonymous with ultimate reality). Here, *ji snyed pa* too refers to ultimate reality because it refers to primordial mind, the dharma-sphere.
  28. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 154. Shakya Chokden argues that Mādhyamikas disagree on whether buddhas have appearances, writing that according to such thinkers as Śāntideva they do, while according to Candrakīrti they do not. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 153.
  29. See Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 344, where he writes that in the state of buddhahood, the entity of the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere free from all obscurations is the object of functioning of primordial mind itself. Thus, it is the object of experience (*myong bya*) of only the individually self-cognizing primordial mind and entirely transcends all objects of sounds and concepts.

30. 'di la bsal dang bzhag bya ba / cung zad med, Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 155. Compare, for example, Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realizations* (*Abhisamayālaṃ-kāranāmaprajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakārikā*, *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, shes phyin, ka 10a: 'di las 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.
31. On the differences between the dharma-sphere and buddha-nature, see the last section of this chapter.
32. In the same text (*Opening a Hundred Doors* 156) Shakya Chokden also specifies that while Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasons that stains cannot be eliminated and positive qualities cannot be established because the two are established in dependence (*ltos nas grub pa*), this reasoning does not apply here, in the zhentong context, where conventional, relative dharmas are not accepted as established or existent but ultimate reality is. As for a buddha's positive qualities, they manifest only partially on the ten bodhisattva grounds and become fully manifest only in the state of buddhahood.
33. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 154–155.
34. Shakya Chokden, *Opening a Hundred Doors* 155–156.
35. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 319–321.
36. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 306. Hereafter, verse numbering is based on Brunnholz's "In Praise of Dharmadhātu." To save space, I am not providing translation of *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere's* verses in this chapter.
37. Shakya Chokden, *Golden Lancet* 517. This position is contrasted with the interpretation of the dharma-sphere in terms of rangtong, where "dharma" refers to all knowables and "sphere" to their emptiness of reality (517).
38. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 322.
39. Here, śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha refer not only to those who have attained the śrāvaka or pratyekabuddha arhatship, and thus are completely free from afflictions, but also to those āryas who are still on the path to arhatship and thus only partially free from afflictions.
40. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 333–334.
41. Shakya Chokden, *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* 36.
42. Shakya Chokden, *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* 36.
43. Shakya Chokden, *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* 36. An alternative, but less literal, translation of *cha* here can be "dimensions." For more details of Shakya Chokden's distinction between consciousness and primordial mind, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* 158ff. and 239ff.
44. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 328.
45. Shakya Chokden, *Reply to Lodro Zangpo* 36.
46. Shakya Chokden, *Appearance of the Sun* 116–117. For more details on the relationship between primordial mind and consciousness, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* chapter 5, section 3.
47. Note that predispositions of the purified side are none other than the

dharma-sphere itself—not something merely existent in or placed on it. See *Golden Lancet* 517, where Shakya Chokden describes stainless predispositions (*zag med kyi bag chags*) as stainless knowing (*zag med kyi shes pa*), also treating them as stainless seeds, using the nondual primordial mind as their illustration (*mtshan gzhi*) and identifying it with the dharma-sphere.

48. Shakya Chokden, *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 180.
49. Shakya Chokden, *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 181.
50. Shakya Chokden, *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 185.
51. Shakya Chokden, *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 196.
52. It should be noted that in *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness*, Shakya Chokden outlines *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere's* position in the section on the rangtong approach, and in general treats Nāgārjuna as a Niḥsvabhāvavādin. For further details, see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity* chapter 4, section 3, in particular 197.
53. Shakya Chokden, *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 194. It is interesting to note that in support of this claim Shakya Chokden first (*Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 194–195) refers to the following passage: *gang phyir sangs rgyas mya ngan 'das / gtsang ba rtag pa bde ba'i gzhi* (*Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, D1118, bstod tshogs, ka, 66a; the root text reads *dge ba* instead of *bde ba* and is read accordingly in *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere*, 330), which is in fact the first two lines of verse 65, and thus follows after—rather than precedes—the passages he cites next. Then (*Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 195) he cites *sangs rgyas rtag pa'i chos nyid can / ji ltar ri bong mgo yi rwa / btags pa nyid de med pa ltar / de bzhin chos rnams thams cad kyang / btags pa nyid de yod ma yin / phra rab rdul gyi ngo bo yis / glang gi rwa yang dmigs ma yin* (*Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, 64b, the root text giving *brtags pa* instead of *btags pa*), which are the last line of verse 29, the whole verse 30, and the first two lines of verse 31. Finally (*Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 195), he cites verse 32: *rten nas 'byung bar 'gyur ba dang / rten nas 'gag par 'gyur bas na / gcig kyang yod pa ma yin na / byis pa ji ltar rtogs par byed* (*Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, 65a, the root text reading *brten nas 'byung bar gyur ba dang / brten nas 'gag par 'gyur bas na / gcig kyang yod pa ma yin na / byis pa ji ltar rtog par byed*). See *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 313–315, for Shakya Chokden's commentary on these passages.
54. For details of Shakya Chokden's approach to the dharma-body, see the last section of this chapter.
55. *phyogs gcig* here expresses the same idea as *nyi tshe ba* in n. 77 in this chapter.
56. Shakya Chokden, *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 193–194. Note that in contrast to this position, in Shakya Chokden's opinion Hīnayāna arhats have neither the dharma-body nor the buddha-nature (see the last section).
57. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 330–331.
58. Note that Nāgārjuna's root text on which Shakya Chokden comments (*Praise of the Dharma-Sphere*, D1118, bstod tshogs, ka, 66a) also uses such terms as “development of the disposition” (*kham rgyas 'gyur*, verse 66), “making awakening develop” (*byang chub rgyas byed*, verse 67), and “four dharmas that develop the disposition” (*kham rgyas byed pa'i chos bzhi*, verse 68).

59. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 332–333.
60. I take it as meaning that it belongs to their dharma-spheres only in terms of the mode of appearance—not the mode of being.
61. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 326–327. In the same text (313) he likewise argues that buddhas' aspirational prayers and form-bodies, together with various buddha-fields (*zhing khams*) that emerge through the power of those prayers, do not manifest within buddhas' own appearances (*sangs rgyas rang snang la snang ba med*).
62. To better understand this “blending into one,” we should recall Shakya Chokden's position on the perception of a buddha: all that a buddha's mind perceives, and all that buddhahood consists of, is the buddha's mind, which is a type of primordial mind and ultimate reality. In the state of buddhahood, the perceived, perceiver, and process of perception comprise one and the same indivisible entity that transcends all differences. Thus, the “blending into one” can be understood as referring not to the blending of several things into one but to the final disappearance of dualistic, manifold visions, accompanied by the full manifestation of ultimate reality that transcends them. It can also be taken as indicating that no differences exist anymore between one's own and all buddhas' primordial minds: they all are now the same in terms of being completely free from obscurations and fully realizing the state of buddhahood.
63. Details of Shakya Chokden's position on the disposition and the dharma-body have to await further research. As for his position on the buddha-nature, I have explored it in my “Reburying the Treasure” and “Shakya Chokden's Interpretation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.”
64. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 323.
65. Compare the discussion of the dharma-sphere in the previous section, where the disposition was treated as the primordial mind of the dharma-sphere itself. But note that as has been mentioned in n. 18, when using the term “disposition of the sugata-essence,” Shakya Chokden does not equate the disposition with the sugata-essence.
66. Komarovski, *Visions of Unity*, 29.
67. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 310–311.
68. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 311.
69. See also Komarovski, “Reburying the Treasure” for a detailed discussion of this complex topic.
70. *mdor na theg chen 'phags pa kun / bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po can / de las gzhan pa'i sems can la / de bzhin nyid dang rigs yod phyir / bde gshegs snying po can du btags. Essence of Sūtras and Tantras* 127. For the complete translation of *Essence of Sūtras and Tantras*, see Komarovski, “Reburying the Treasure.”
71. Here, Shakya Chokden refers to sentient beings other than Mahāyāna āryas.
72. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 309–310.
73. As will soon become apparent, this does not mean that it becomes an actual dharma-body.
74. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 334.

75. Here, Shakya Chokden is referring to an ārya bodhisattva—a bodhisattva who, as in Candrakīrti's *Engaging in the Middle (Madhyamakāvatāra)*, is posited starting from the first bodhisattva ground, when the ultimate bodhicitta is initially generated, in contrast to Śāntideva's *Engaging in Bodhisattva Deeds (Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra)*, where a bodhisattva is posited starting from the first of the five paths (the path of accumulation) when the conventional bodhicitta is initially generated.
76. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 334.
77. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 344. Similarly, in *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* (181) he writes that one sees the partial (*nyi tshe ba*) dharma-sphere when afflictive obscurations have been abandoned. Nevertheless, this does not imply that ārya śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas directly see the buddha-nature, he adds, because the dharma-sphere they see is not suitable as the dharma-body.
78. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 341.
79. *sku med pa dang bcas dang sku thob dang*. See *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra, Theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan*, D4020, sems tsam, phi, 16a that provides a slightly different version: *sku med pa dang sku bcas sku thob dang*. The passage continues: "Body being fully complete . . ." (*sku yongs rdzogs*). *asakāyā labdhakāyā prapūrṇakāyā ca*. Levi, *Expose* 75, with the emendation of *laghukāyā* as *labdhakāyā* in Nagao, *Index to the Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra* xvi. I want to thank Dr. Alberto Todeschini for drawing my attention to differences between the Tibetan and Sanskrit versions of the passage, as well as Nagao's attempt to bring both versions into agreement.
80. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 341.
81. Shakya Chokden, *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 336. See *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness* 181–185, for further details.
82. We should not be misled by such passages found in *Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* as: "In brief, the entity of the ten grounds is the dharma-body pure of partial adventitious stains. The entity of that [dharma-body] is the dharma-sphere" (*mdor bsdu na sa bcu'i ngo bo ni / blo bur gyi dri ma phyogs res dag pa'i chos kyi sku yin la / de'i ngo bo yang chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes so*, 340), or in *Essence of Sūtras and Tantras* where he argues that in *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere* "[w]ith the example of gradually increasing // Parts of the new moon, [Nāgārjuna] explained that // The dharma-body exists from the ground of Utmost Joy [i.e., the first ground] // Through to the buddha-ground (*chos sku rab dga'i sa nas ni / sangs rgyas sa yi bar dag la / tshes kyi zla ba'i cha shas rnam / rims par 'phel ba'i dpe yis bsnad* 129). Based on what has been said previously, it is safe to argue that according to Shakya Chokden the dharma-body pure of partial adventitious stains mentioned in the former passage is not the actual dharma-body, while Nāgārjuna's statement mentioned in the latter passage was made without distinguishing between the partial—and thus only imputed—dharma-body and the actual dharma-body that exists only in the buddha-ground. This applies to other passages as well. For example, commenting on *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere's* passages related to each of the ten grounds, Shakya Chokden uses such expressions as "identifying the dharma-body of the first ground" (*sa dang po'i chos sku ngos bzung ba*), and so on. He likewise writes that on the first ground the dharma-sphere is realized as the dharma-body

pure of one part of stains (*dri ma phyogs gcig gis dag pa'i chos sku*), and one thereby generates uncommon joy from being close to the dharma-body (*chos kyi sku dang nye ba*), and so on. When discussing the fourth ground he writes about its dharma-sphere having become the dharma-body (*sa 'di'i chos dbyings chos kyi skur gyur pa*), and so forth (*Ascertainment of the Dharma-Sphere* 337). Such passages do indicate that he interprets the grounds in terms of both the dharma-sphere and the dharma-body, but when he addresses these two concepts in more detail, it becomes clear that while having no issues with the former, he has issues with identifying the latter as the actual dharma-body unless it is the dharma-body of the eleventh ground—buddhahood.

83. For details see Komarovski, *Visions of Unity*, especially chapter 4, section 4.

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