

Common Originating Philosophy of Zen and Vajrayana *Buddha Nature or Tathāgatagarbha*

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Abstract

Tathāgatagarbha in Sanskrit is commonly translated as Buddha Nature in English. Realization of Tathāgatagarbha in Vajrayana is equivalent to seeing the original nature of the Buddha in Zen Buddhism. The meaning of Tathāgatagarbha or Buddha Nature as the objective of enlightenment can be found in the teachings of both Zen and Vajrayana though superficially the practices, the monks and the temples look different. The practice of Zen adopts a direct simple method while Vajrayana follows a more systematic approach. Appearance of costumes and architecture just conforms to the local culture. Zen emphasizing on ordinary daily life is similar to Vajrayana playing attention to everyday conduct. It is a knowledgeable study to see these two schools though miles apart are in fact from the same originating philosophy.

Keywords: Tathāgatagarbha, Buddha Nature, Zen, Vajrayana

1. Introduction to Zen and Vajrayana

As the founder of Buddhism, the Buddha Sakyamuni initiated various schools of teaching including Zen and Vajrayana. The famous Zen *koan*² of flower sermon³ recorded Sakyamuni was nipping a lotus blossom at the sermon and only Kasyapa understood and replied with a smile. On Vajrayana, Sakyamuni appeared at Vulture Peak a year after his enlightenment expounded the Kalachakra Tantra⁴ upon the request of King Suchandra from Shambhala. Although these schools were not so named at the time of Sakyamuni, yet the meanings of the teaching are obvious in the doctrinal turning.

The Zen School was formally started by the Indian Monk, Bodhidharma, who came to China in the fifth century as the first Chinese patriarch. Later the teaching spread to Japan initially through the Japanese Monk Dosho⁵ who studied meditation from Hui-man, a disciple of the second Chinese patriarch Hui-k'o, and after his return from China built the first Zen meditation hall in Gango-ji of Nara.

The Vajrayana School is thus designated in respect of its characteristic terminology and liturgy different from the other schools of Hinayana and Mahayana. It is called Mantrayana or Tantrayana of practices as distinct from Paramitayana of sutra studies.

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²Koan is a case study in Zen Buddhism set up by the teacher to inspire students for intuitive understanding.

³H. Dumoulin, 2005, "Zen Buddhism: A History Volume 1, India and China", Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, pg. 8.

⁴Namgyal Tantric College, "History of the Kalachakra Tantra" online resource: <https://www.namgyalmonastery.org/the-kalachakra-tantra/history-of-kalachakra/>

⁵H. Dumoulin, 2005, "Zen Buddhism: A History Volume 2, Japan", Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, pg. 5.

It is also named Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet due to the secret instructions of the teacher to the students. Padmasambhava⁶, the first teacher, transmitted the Great Perfection from India to Tibet in the eighth century and built the Samye Monastery.

Early masters⁷ of the Great Perfection⁸ from the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism such as Garab Dorje, Manjusrimitra, Vimalamitra⁹, Jnanasutra and dpalgyi Sengge practiced and attained enlightenment at Wutai (Five-platform) Mountain in Han Land (China). Another Nyingma master, Srisinha, was actually Chinese. This historical evidence can be seen as the relationship between Vajrayana and China.

On the other hand, when Buddhism was first introduced into the Zen land of Japan in the seventh century, Prince Shōtoku(574-622CE) taught and wrote commentaries on the Lotus Sutra, Srimala Sutra and Vimalakirti Sutra. The Lotus Sutra affirms all beings have the potential to become the Buddha. The Srimala Sutra gives definition of Tathāgatagarbha as the wisdom of the Buddha together with worldly defilements¹⁰. The Vimalakirti Sutra, a popular Zen text, tells the seed of the Tathagata (the Buddha) is in every conventional thing whether it is remarked as good or bad by the mundane. These sutras also direct to the important characteristic of equality in the practice and realization of Buddha Nature or Tathāgatagarbha.

2. The Meaning of Tathāgatagarbha or Buddha Nature

Tathāgatagarbha is the garbha of the Tathāgata. “Garbha” can mean womb, store or potential while “Tathāgata” is one of the designations of the Buddha to mean coming or appearing as just it is.

This has to be explained from the dependent origination through mutual obstruction¹¹ which states that everything comes into being by adapting to its limitations or conditions. Say a bird does not come into being only because of the egg which it was born, but it has to adapt to skills of life and survival, adapt to the ecological cycle of prey and being prey, adapt to its senses and most subtle to this world of three-dimensional space and one-directional time. Hence, life and death of the bird is three-dimensional. The growth and maturity of the bird follows one-dimensional time.

When the obstruction becomes no obstruction, the dependent origination through mutual obstruction will be transcended. That means things can be seen to come into being through adaptation to the limitations or conditions without effort. This is called spontaneous accomplishment. Like pouring water into a glass vessel, the water will just take the shape of the glass vessel without any effort.

⁶ E.M. Dargyay, 1977, 1998, “The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet”, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, pg.54-59.

⁷ Henry Shui, “Investigation of the Common Origin of Zen and Esoteric Buddhism” (禪密同源初探), The Sino-Tibetan Buddhist studies Association in North America. Online resource: http://www.stbsa.org/zh/association/zh_ztsamesource9.aspx

⁸ LonchenRabjam explained, “The great Perfection (DzogpaChenpo) is the path of luminous absorption, the essence of the ultimate definitive meaning, and the summit of the teachings of sutras and tantras: this is the meaning of the instructions on the direct approach to the ultimate nature, the Buddha-essence as it is.” in the Epigraphs on “The Practice of Dzogchen” translated by TulkuThondup (1989, Snow Lion).

⁹ Khenpo Sodarye Rinpoche, “The Characteristics and Essential Ideology of Tibetan Buddhism” <http://www.khenposodarye.org/2013/03/the-characteristics-and-essential-ideology-of-tibetan-buddhism/>

¹⁰ Mark W. Dennis, 2011, “Prince Shotoku’s Commentary on the Srimala Sutra”, (Taisho Volume 56, Number 2185) BukkyoDendoKyokai America, Inc., pg.107-111.

¹¹ Wong Wah Sang, 2015, “The meaning of Fourfold Dependent Origination in Nagarjuna’s Teachings”, Maha Bodhi Journal, 2559th Buddha Jayanti Issue, pg. 22-36.

Likewise, one who can perceive the formless water itself sees the Buddha Nature or Tathāgatagarbha just it is while those who only look and grasp at the form of glass vessel live in the world of conceptuality and discrimination. Hence the wisdom of Tathāgatagarbha is the potential of spontaneous effortless accomplishment of things conforming to conditions.

The Lankavatara Sutra, a common text for both Zen and Vajrayana, also describes the terminology of the “Tathāgatagarbha known as the Alayavijnana¹²”. This is the state of the holy wisdom manifested as the state of conventional consciousness. Following the conditions of the conventional world, different beings and phenomena manifest based on the pristine potential of spontaneous accomplishment of the holy wisdom or Dharmakaya. Or we can say, following worldly conditions, the Buddha Nature appears as the conventional mind itself.

Hence Bodhidharma, the Zen patriarch, says in the Bloodstream Sermon¹³, “Through endless kalpas without beginning, whatever you do, wherever you are, that’s your real mind, that’s your real Buddha. *This mind is the Buddha* says the same thing. Beyond this mind you’ll never find another Buddha. To search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. The reality of your own self-nature, the absence of cause and effect, is what’s meant by mind. Your mind is nirvana. You might think you can find a Buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond the mind, but such a place doesn’t exist.”

This describes the Buddha Nature within the Ordinary mind. Similar meaning can be sought in Vajrayana text. Longchen Rabjam (1308-1364), the Nyingma teacher, says in the Seven Treasuries¹⁴, “Even the naturally occurring timeless awareness of all ordinary beings is unmade and unsought, and spontaneously present as Dharmakaya¹⁵, so do not react with rejection or acceptance, but rest in this context of basic space!” This explains the Buddha nature is also natural wisdom as it is “naturally occurring” and pristine awareness as it is “timeless awareness”. This is similar to “through endless kalpas without beginning” in the previous text. It is “spontaneously present” which is similar to the previous “whatever you do, wherever you are”. “Do not react with rejection or acceptance” is like “to search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible”. “Rest in this context of basic space” because “your mind is nirvana”.

More reference for Tathāgatagarbha can be found in the Lankavatara Sutra¹⁶ as the Buddha says, “By tranquillity is meant oneness (*ekagra*) and oneness gives birth to the highest Samadhi, which is gained by entering into the womb of Tathagatahood, which is the realm of noble wisdom realized in one’s inmost self.” This explains Tathāgatagarbha is the inner self-realization wisdom of the Buddha. Furthermore, “oneness” is the mental state achieved through the dharma door of non-duality. An interesting account is said in the Vimalakirti Sutra¹⁷ as a Zen *koan*: After the various Bodhisattvas had explained how they entered into the dharma door of non-duality, the crown prince Manjusri requested Licchavi Vimalakirti to elucidate the teaching.

¹²Alayavijnana is the store-consciousness that contain all our mental activities as well as defilements. The Tathagatagarbha known as Alayavijnana can be referred to the Lankavatara Sutra. Reference: D.T.Suzuki, 1932, 1999, “The Lankavatara Sutra, A Mahayana Text”, MotilalBanarsidass, pg. 206.

¹³Red Pine, 1987, “The Zen teaching of Bodhidharma”, North Point Press, pg.9.

¹⁴Translated by Richard Barron,2001, “The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena LongchenRabjam”, Padma Publishing, pg. 57.

¹⁵ The Srimala Sutra defines Tathagatagarbha as the Dharmakaya not separate from worldly defilement.

¹⁶D.T.Suzuki, 1932, 1999, “The Lankavatara Sutra, A Mahayana Text”, MotilalBanarsidass, pg. 21.

¹⁷Robert A.F. Thurman, 1991, “The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti” MotilalBanarsidass, pg.77.

The sutra says, "Thereupon, the Licchavivimalakirti kept his silence, saying nothing at all. The crown prince Manjusri applauded the Licchavi Vimalakirti: 'Excellent! Excellent, noble sir! This is indeed the entrance into the non-duality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds and ideas.'" Free from words and conception and even without the idea of space-time is the entry into oneness. Hence it is said to be "the naturally occurring timeless awareness". Hence whether it is called Tathāgatagarbha or Buddha Nature, it is the common philosophy for both Vajrayana and Zen.

3. Practice and Realization

The Zen master Bodhidharma taught on the outline as the twofold entrance to the Tao or Path of enlightenment –Entrance by Reason and Entrance by Conduct. Suzuki¹⁸, the Japanese Zen scholar, remarked that these can also be designated as Entrance by Higher Intuition and Entrance by Practical Living respectively. Suzuki explains, "By 'Entrance by Reason' we mean the realization of the spirit of Buddhism by the aid of the scriptural teaching. We then come to have a deep faith in the True Nature which is the same in all sentient beings. The reason why it does not manifest itself is due to the overwrapping of external objects and false thoughts. When a man, abandoning the false and embracing the true, in singleness of thought practises the *Pi-kuan* (wall-gazing meditation) he finds that there is neither self nor other, that he masses and the worthies are of one essence, and he firmly holds on to this belief and never moves away therefrom. He will not then be a slave to words, for he is in silent communion with the Reason itself, free from conceptual discrimination; he is serene and not-acting. This is Entrance by Reason."

Hence higher intuition relies not only with learning from scriptures but on meditation as well. "Singleness" of meditation refers to the level of stability of "one-pointed mind" in Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings whereby it is stated as an advanced technique of meditation in the eighth level of the nine levels of stability of meditation. The Middle-way Meditation Instructions of Mipham Rinpoche¹⁹ says, "As we become more and more familiar with tranquillity, it will develop further and become very stable. This stability of mind helps us see the essence of mind very clearly." In the previous text, this is "in silent communion with the Reason itself, free from conceptual discrimination".

Suzuki further relates Bodhidharma, "By 'Entrance by Conduct' is meant the four acts in which all other acts are included. What are the four? 1. To know how to requite hatred; 2. To be obedient to karma; 3. Not to crave anything; and 4. To be in accord with the Dharma." Point 1 according to Suzuki is for "He who disciplines himself in the Path should think thus when he has to struggle with adverse conditions." This is similar to the practice of removal or purification of obscuration in Vajrayana. From the teaching of Vajrayana, Longchen Rabjam²⁰ says, "The foundation, awakened mind, dispels the darkness of extremes. With nothing having to be renounced, the potential for error is cut through as a matter of course." With the mind awakened to be free from discrimination, "There is no division into outer and inner and no disturbance due to thoughts arising and subsiding." And hence there is "nothing to be renounced". Or we can say, without discrimination, everything is pristinely pure through the awakened mind Point 2 is explained, "There is no self in whatever beings are produced by the interplay of karmic conditions." Longchen Rabjam²¹ further says, "Within the timelessly abiding, omnipresent state – the true nature of phenomena – there are no concepts of self or other."

¹⁸D.T.Suzuki, 1935, "Manual of Zen Buddhism", Grove Press New York, pg.73-76.

¹⁹Thrangu Rinpoche, 2000, "The Middle-Way Meditation Instructions of Mipham Rinpoche" Nammo Buddha Seminar.

²⁰Translated by Richard Barron, 2001, "The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena LongchenRabjam", Padma Publishing, pg.31.

²¹Translated by Richard Barron, 2001, "The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena LongchenRabjam", Padma Publishing, pg.31.

Everything are natural manifestation of the nature of phenomena as spontaneous accomplishment in accordance with conditions. If there is a self, it is the great self of the nature of phenomena that produces everything. Point 3 is explained with a quote, "Wherever there is a craving, there is pain; cease from craving and you are blessed." Free from pain is the experience of bliss. Hence Longchen Rabjam²² says, "All that permeates the realm of basic space as a continuous display arises due to dynamic energy, wither in light of realization or its absence. There is simply realization or its lack within the realm of the basic space of phenomena. For those with realization, who have reached a state of bliss, there is pure perception." Those with realization see the positive side of things and perceive the omnipresent vitality. This is the experience of bliss.

Point 4 is explained, "As there is in the essence of the Dharma²³ no desire to possess, the wise are ever ready to practise charity with their body, life and property... their will to cleanse all beings of their stains." This continuous action of the wise ones or Bodhisattvas is compatible with the permanent action in the ultimate universe or dharmadhatu that facilitates life to occur. Longchen Rabjam²⁴ says, "Unchanging and ever-present, the embodiment of the kayas and timeless awareness is the conferral of the supreme, naturally occurring empowerment, like the investiture of a royal heir. Since the universe of appearances and possibilities is timelessly and spontaneously present, there is no need for concerted effort, for it is spontaneously present by nature." This is the permanent action of the Dharmakaya.

These four points have implied the four attributes of Tathāgatagarbha—purity, self, bliss and permanence. In the Sutra, Queen Srimala says, "Because the Dharmakaya of the Tathagata has the perfection of permanence, the perfection of pleasure, the perfection of self, and the perfection of purity. Whatever sentient beings see the Dharmakaya of the Tathagata that way, see correctly."²⁵

4. Final Remarks

This article has covered the basic philosophy of Buddha Nature or Tathāgatagarbha that is the common origin for Zen and Vajrayana. The basis of view, the path of practice and realization of the two schools are actually based on the fruition of Buddha Nature or Tathāgatagarbha. Understanding the mind seeing into the original nature is the practice of coalescence of the states of wisdom and consciousness. This is the dharma of non-duality leading to the Buddha's inner self-realization wisdom, the ultimate nirvana. Both schools emphasize on everyday life. Quoting the reference from Suzuki²⁶ on Zen, "When Joshu was asked what the Tao (or the truth of Zen) was, he answered, 'Your everyday life, that is the Tao.' In other words, a quiet, self-confident, and trustful existence of your own – this is the truth of Zen." And to conclude this article, quoting from Dudjom Rinpoche's Essential Advice for Solitary Meditation Practice²⁷: The great master Guru Rinpoche has said,

My view is higher than the sky;

My attention toward karma and its consequences is finer than flour.

²²Translated by Richard Barron,2001, "The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena Longchen Rabjam", Padma Publishing, pg.33.

²³The word "dharma" has double meaning. It can mean the Buddha's teaching or phenomena.

²⁴Translated by Richard Barron,2001, "The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena LongchenRabjam", Padma Publishing, pg.57.

²⁵ Alex and Hideko Wayman, 1974,1990,"The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala", MotilalBanarsidass, pg. 102.

²⁶ D.T.Suzuki, 1964, "An Introduction to Zen Buddhism", Grove press New York, pg.74.

²⁷ Translated by Ron Garry, 2005, "Wisdom Nectar Dudjom Rinpoche's Heart Advice", pg. 54.