

# The Tathāgatagarbha Theory Reconsidered

## Reflections on Some Recent Issues in Japanese Buddhist Studies

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*The Tathāgatagarbha theory is an influential yet controversial part of the Buddhist tradition. This essay examines some of the issues related to this tradition that have been discussed recently by Buddhist scholars: the dhātu-vāda thesis and the critique of "original enlightenment," the relationship between the terms tathāgatagarbha and padmagarbha, the interpretation of dependent origination in the Ratnagotravibhāga, the role of relics worship in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, and the Tathāgatagarbha theory in Tibetan Buddhism.*

**Keywords:** Tathāgatagarbha — Ratnagotravibhāga — padmagarbha — dhātu — Buddha nature — relics — Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra

NEARLY FIFTY YEARS HAVE PASSED since the publication of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the earliest and most basic Sanskrit text of the Tathāgatagarbha theory. Since then many studies of this text and the Tathāgatagarbha theory have been published, including my English translation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (TAKASAKI 1966), my work in Japanese on the formation of the Tathāgatagarbha theory in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism (1974), and D. SEYFORTH RUEGG's works on the Tathāgatagarbha theory in Tibetan Buddhism (1969, 1989). Recent notable publications on this topic include S. K. HOOKHAM's *Buddha Within* (1991) and SHIMODA Masahiro's work on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (1997), indicating that the Tathāgatagarbha theory is a continuing (and continually controversial) topic of interest among Buddhist scholars.

In the 1980s voices of criticism were raised against the Tathāgata-

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garbha theory, claiming that it contradicted the Buddha's teaching of *anātma-vāda*. The objection was first raised by MATSUMOTO Shirō (1989), who characterized the Tathāgatagarbha theory as a *dhātu-vāda*, a theory that admits the existence of something basic (*dhātu*) as the ground of all ephemeral phenomena. Matsumoto maintained that this *dhātu-vāda* is akin to the *ātma-vāda* of the “heretics” and contradicts the Buddhist *śūnya-vāda* or theory of coarising, thus claiming that the Tathāgatagarbha theory is not Buddhist at all. This position was also promoted by HAKAMAYA Noriaki (1989, 1990), and is gradually being echoed by Buddhist scholars of the younger generation, leading to waves of “critical” studies of Buddhism along this line.<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion, the *dhātu-vāda* hypothesis—as denoting a current of doctrine within folk Buddhism and common to both Tathāgatagarbha theory and *viññāna-vāda* in contrast to *śūnya-vāda*—is quite useful. It covers all Buddhist thought that takes a monistic view with regard to dharmas, including esoteric Buddhism—the *dharmakāya* of Tathāgatagarbha theory and esoteric Buddhism, *dharmadhātu* of the *viññāna-vāda*, and even *śūnyatā* of the Mādhyamika. The development of such a monistic view in Buddhism may have been influenced by Hinduism; it is a topic worthy of further investigation. In any case, such topics must be tackled before deciding whether such theories should be considered “within” or “outside” of Buddhism.

Among the criticisms of the Tathāgatagarbha theory there has been a critique of the doctrine of “original enlightenment” (*hongaku* 本覺) in Japanese Buddhism. This critique has sweeping implications; in effect it calls for a reevaluation of Japanese Buddhism in general and in comparison with Buddhism in other regions of the world. It cannot be denied that Buddhism in Japan, and in East Asia in general, were and continue to be strongly influenced by Tathāgatagarbha thought. The topic has been debated at length among Japanese scholars in Buddhist studies, not least because of its implications for understanding Buddhism in Japan. As the scholarship has been largely confined to Japanese publications, I would like to address the topic in English, and in the process advance the debate by discussing some of the important recent works on the topic, including those that criticize my work. To my regret, until now I have not yet publicly addressed these criticisms in detail. I find the fundamentalistic opinions of “Critical Buddhism” problematic in many ways, and yet they offer valuable suggestions worthy of acceptance and/or discussion. In this essay I shall highlight these suggestions and examine their significance.

<sup>1</sup> A collection of studies related to this issue was published recently as *Pruning the Bodhi Tree* (HUBBARD and SWANSON 1997).

*Tathāgatagarbha and Padmagarbha*

Among various points raised by Matsumoto Shirō, I will first take up his valuable suggestion concerning the original meaning of the term Tathāgatagarbha in the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* and its relation to the term *padmagarbha*, which he offered in an essay entitled “*Padmagarbha and Tathāgatagarbha: Thoughts on the Formation of Tathāgatagarbha Thought*” (如来蔵と蓮華蔵—如来蔵思想の成立に関する一考察).<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of his essay reflects his intention to prove that this way of thinking is basically an adoption of *ātma-vāda*. In this article his arguments are philologically sound as he investigates the original use of the term *padmagarbha* (“lotus-womb”) in relation to the concept or idea of a buddha sitting in *padma* or *padmagarbha*, or born from a *padma*. He investigates similar examples of a miracle performed by the Buddha at the beginning of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* and also found in the sūtras belonging to the *Avatamsaka* group, and concludes that the original use of the term is the one found in the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*, while the examples found in the *Gandhavyūha* are derivations. He also points out an example found in the present Sanskrit edition of the *Daśa-bhūmika* that is a later interpolation, as it is not found in the old Chinese editions of the same text.<sup>3</sup> As for the previous history of the concepts, he thinks that the direct influence came from the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, especially from the chapter on the “rising of bodhisattvas from the earth,”<sup>4</sup> though he admits that there may have been some influence from the Pure Land sūtras.

Matsumoto’s hypothesis is directly connected with the question as to the first or earliest use of the term *tathāgatagarbha*. In my early work (TAKASAKI 1974, p. 520) I suggested that the term, appearing in the *Gandhavyūha* as an epithet for Sudana, was used without any connection to the doctrinal background of later Tathāgatagarbha theory, and that this use provided a clue for identifying the author of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*. Matsumoto argues against my theory and suggests that use of the term *tathāgatagarbha* as an epithet for Sudana without any explanation means that the term was already known in the Buddhist circles of those days. His suggestion is most reasonable and worthy of being considered in further investigations on the history of the

<sup>2</sup> This lengthy essay can be found in chapter 4 of MATSUMOTO 1993, pp. 411–543.

<sup>3</sup> The present Sanskrit edition and the Chinese translation of the *Avatamsaka* have a series of names of bodhisattvas who are attending the Buddha’s preaching. Among these we find the name of Padmagarbha (see the Rahder ed., p. 2, 1.5). However, this series of names is not found in the oldest Chinese edition translated by Dharmarakṣa (see T no. 285, 10.458a).

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 15 of the Kumārajīva version of the *Lotus Sutra*.

formation of the Tathāgatagarbha theory.<sup>5</sup>

As for the original meaning of the term *tathāgatagarbha* in the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*, Matsumoto and I are in fundamental agreement in that it was used as a kind of epithet for a *sattva* or all *sattvas*, denoting the idea that the Tathāgata dwells inside of beings, and not as a technical term fixed in later works (such as the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*) denoting some potential that makes a *sattva* become a buddha, and always used in the masculine singular. One difference is that Matsumoto newly suggests the meaning of “container” or “receptacle” for *garbha* in the sense that all *sattvas* are “containers” for the Tathāgata, while I translated the term as a *bahuvrīhi* compound to mean “one who bears a Tathāgata in the inside.” As this Tathāgata is hidden under the sheeth of defilements, I interpreted the meaning to have gradually shifted to “one who is possessed of the embryo of Tathāgata.” This interpretation was influenced by the Tibetan translation of *tathāgatagarbha* as *de bshin gśegs paḥi sñiñ po can*. With this translation, however, I faced a difficulty in translating the first sentence given in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as one of the threefold meanings of *tathāgatagarbha*. My English translation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* was complicated, and after receiving critical suggestions from Professor L. Schmithausen, I changed the translation in my Japanese translation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* into simply “embryo of the Tathāgata.” Matsumoto indicated that this translation is wrong in the case of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*, and suggests the term “receptacle” instead.

This suggestion is acceptable in the light of the Chinese translation *ji lai tsang* 如来藏, a “storehouse” of the Tathāgata. At the same time I feel a certain uneasiness about limiting the meaning simply to “storehouse,” in comparison to the term *kośa*, which is used only in the sense of “store” or “sheeth.” The term *garbha* is truly ambiguous, but this point was not fully utilized by the followers of the Tathāgatagarbha theory. In light of this point, further efforts are needed to find a more suitable translation.<sup>6</sup>

As for the textual reading of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*, I recently received information that in old manuscripts such as those at the Newark Museum,<sup>7</sup> there is no use of the suffix “*can*” at the end of *de*

<sup>5</sup> I still think that the term *tathāgatagarbha* as an epithet for Sudana is a synonym of *buddha-putra* or *jina-putra*, denoting a bodhisattva, and not an epithet for an ordinary being as used in general in the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*. In any case, as far as we know from the extant Sanskrit texts, this is the only example of the term being used as an epithet for a single person.

<sup>6</sup> “Embryo” is not unfit, being a term relating to the concept of *putra* (“child”). “Womb” is also acceptable as a literal meaning of *garbha*.

<sup>7</sup> These manuscripts are a Kanjur, originally found in Batang and now kept at the Newark Museum in New Jersey, USA.

*bshin gśegs paḥi sn̄in̄ ḥo*, and that one doubtful passage in the fifth illustration where the term *tathāgatagarbha* is used (in the light of the Chinese equivalent, the term should actually be *tathāgata-jñāna*), the Newark edition clearly shows the term *de bshin gśegs paḥi ye shes*.<sup>8</sup> This information supports my opinion, though the term *sn̄in̄ ḥo* has a sense of something like a kernel, as used elsewhere to translate the Sanskrit *hṛdaya* or *sāra*.

Finally, as for the significance of the idea of the penetration of the Tathāgata, or the wisdom of the Tathāgata, into all *sattvas*, I will merely say that this idea is exactly the same as the idea of the all-pervadingness of Brahman into individuals in the form of *ātman*. The simile of *ākāśa* (space, or ether) is commonly used for this idea in both Hinduism and Buddhism. (In this sense, *sattvas* are instead in the inside of the Tathāgata as embryos.) I do not deny the influence on Buddhism of this rather common way of thinking in Hinduism in the days when Tathāgatagarbha thought was developing.

#### *The Doctrine of Dependent Origination in Tathāgatagarbha Theory*

The denial or neglect of the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is another reason for branding Tathāgatagarbha theory as a *dhātu-vāda*, or regarding it as non-Buddhist. This blame is based on the admittance of a single *dhātu*, *dharmadhātu*, or *buddhadhātu*, as a non-causal basis on which the dependent origination of phenomena occurs.

Doctrinally speaking, however, the term *dharmadhātu* is used and interpreted by the Yogācāra as the cause of phenomenal dharmas, in the sense that it is the truth of *pratītyasamutpāda* realized by the Buddha which cause the rise of *āryadharmas* or the holy teachings of the Buddha. This principle of *pratītyasamutpāda* penetrates all dependently-arising (*pratītyasamutpanna*) phenomenal and ephemeral dharmas. In this sense, *dharmadhātu* is the unchanging nature (*dharmatā*) of all dharmas. This unchangeability is here called *asaṃskṛta* (unconditioned), in contrast to *samskṛta* (conditioned), or *pratītyasamutpanna* (dependently originated). This interpretation is the same as that of Nāgārjuna, although he did not use the term *dharmadhātu* in this sense. He identified *dharmatā* with *śūnyatā*, and furthermore added another definition to it as being conditioned verbal expression (*prajñaptir upādāya*) in order to avoid the idea that *śūnyatā* is something

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Michael Zimmermann, a student of Professor Schmithausen at Hamburg, for pointing out this information. Zimmermann is preparing a critical edition of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* as a part of his doctoral thesis to be submitted to the University of Hamburg.

that exists outside of all dharmas that are *śūnya*, empty of independent existence of their own (*niḥsvabhāva*).

In the case of the Tathāgatagarbha theory, much more attention was paid to the soteriological problem, and the *dhātu* is often expressed with the term *dharmakāya* as denoting the Buddha or Tathāgata in the sense of “the one whose body is Dharma,” or “the one who has become one with the *dharmadhātu* or *dharmatā* through its realization.” The same *dharmakāya* is called *tathāgatagarbha* or *buddhadhātu* when hypothetically admitted in all *sattvas* as the potentiality and postulate of their enlightenment. In this soteriological sense, *dharmakāya* or *buddhadhātu* cannot remain simply as *asaṃskṛta*, that is, “it” or “he” (or “she”) has powers and activity towards, or that lead to, enlightenment. These virtuous powers are called *anāsravadharmas*: that is, dharmas that are without the “flow” or pollution of defilements, and the *dhātu* itself is also referred to as *anāsravadhātu*. Concerning these *anāsravadharmas*, the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* explains their dependent origination, in comparison with the usual twelfold chain of causation, as also characterized as *sāsrava*, accompanied by defilements. Actually, however, this dependent origination of “flowless” dharmas is presented in order to explain how bodhisattvas, who are free from the flow of defilements, can remain in the world of *samsāra* (or *bhava*) for the altruistic purpose based on compassion, and whose practice is the realization of non-abiding *nirvāṇa* (*apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*).

The process of this dependent origination of “flowless” dharmas referred to in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* is based on the doctrines taught in the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*. It begins with the *avidyāvasabhūmi* (dwelling base of ignorance) which causes the *anāsravakarman* (flowless action). The latter results in the birth of the form of bodhisattvas (and other *āryas* of the two vehicles) as *manomayakāya* (body made of mind) and their deaths as inconceivable transformations (*acintyā pārīṇāmikī cyuti*). The *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* applies this process of dependent origination to the system of three divisions of that which is defiled (*saṃkleśa*): that in the form of defilement (*kleśa-saṃkleśa*), that in the form of action or force (*karma-saṃkleśa*), and that in the form of birth (*janma-saṃkleśa*). This last form represents the repetition of birth and death in *samsāra*, characterized as suffering (*dukkha*). The term *saṃkleśa* was originally used for denoting those dharmas belonging to the truth of suffering and the truth of the origination (of suffering), in contrast to those dharmas belonging to the truth of extinction (of suffering) and the truth of the way (toward extinction), which are called purification (*vyavadāna*), or “the purified.” Therefore the application of the term *saṃkleśa* for

*anāsravadharmas* is inconsistent from the standpoint of the Abhidharma system of doctrines. Besides attaching powers to the *asaṃskṛta-dhātu*, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* has dared to violate Abhidharmic rules for the sake its own doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

Recently I received a paper on this subject entitled “Theories of the immaculate dependent origination in Tathāgatagarbha thought” from the author Kubota Chikara.<sup>10</sup> In this article Kubota analyzes in detail the passage of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* referred to above and indicates a certain kind of doctrinal contradiction caused by combining the four kinds of impediments with the three stages of *saṃkleśa*. According to his argument, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* violated the system of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination by inserting *sāsrava-/anāsrava-karman* before *bhava/manomayakāya*, which is included in the *janma-saṃkleśa*. At the same time, he suggests that the *Ratnagotravibhāga* intended to emphasize a bodhisattva’s altruistic action in this world (as I summarized above), but the explanation he provides is not complete, especially in regards to the character of the *manomayakāya*. He emphasizes the double role of the *manomayakāya*: the defiled side shown as impediments for the attainment of the supreme qualities of the Tathāgata, and the pure side shown as the result of a bodhisattva’s altruistic intention. He finds the most elevated figure of the latter in the description of the *manomayakāya* in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* (see KUBOTA 1998). As for the bodhisattva’s altruistic intentions, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* expresses it in a more positive way in the section on the pure and impure state of the bodhisattva in terms of *sancintya-bhavôpatti* (“intentional birth in the world of migration”).<sup>11</sup>

*The Significance of Buddha Nature (buddhadhātu)  
in Relation to the Worship of Relics in the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*

In addition to *garbha* there are other terms used synonymously as key words to express the meaning of “kernel” in the Tathāgatagarbha theory, such as *dhātu*, *gotra*, and *prakṛti*. Each of these terms has its own

<sup>9</sup> The passage where this process of the *anāsrava* actions is taught is in the section on the supreme virtues (*guṇapāramitā*) of the Tathāgata, and, in comparison to them, the shortcoming of the bodhisattvas’ qualities characterized by four kinds of impediments. See TAKASAKI 1966, pp. 214–21; T #1611, 31.830b–c.

<sup>10</sup> The author is a graduate of Tohoku University and at present teaching at the Tohoku University of Art and Design in Yamagata. See KUBOTA 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See TAKASAKI 1966, pp. 248–46; T 31, 833b–c. The *Ratnagotravibhāga* uses the term *bhava* always as synonymous with *saṃsāra*, but not in the sense of the power or *karman* that causes future existence, as in the Sarvāstivāda.

range of equivocal meanings associated with each other, and, combining these terms, the Tathāgatagarbha theory established its system of “pregnant” thought centering around the *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha nature.

The term *buddhadhātu*, usually translated as “Buddha nature,” is a term used for the first time in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* to denote the concept equivalent to *tathāgatagarbha* in the sense of the nature or essence of the Buddha existent inside every *sattva* or sentient being, such as in the formula *asti buddhadhātuḥ sarvasattveṣu* (or *sarvasattvakāyeṣu*: that is, “all beings have Buddha nature”). At the same time, there is the use of this term in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* used in the sense of the Buddha’s relics worshiped in the stūpas.

Recently SHIMODA Masahiro has published a mammoth work entitled “A study of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, with a focus on the methodology of the study of Mahāyāna sūtras” (1997), investigating how and why the term *buddhadhātu*, which originally referred to the relics (*śarīradhātu*), came to be used in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* in place of the concept of *tathāgatagarbha*. He concludes that the author (or authors) of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* were originally leaders and advocates of stūpa worship. Wishing to reform their religious group into a more morally rigorous community, and armed with doctrine suitable to their purpose, they introduced or accepted the teaching of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* and reshaped the significance of *dhātu* worship from that of the physical relics of the Buddha to that of the inner Buddha as a principle of salvation.

Shimoda attempts to prove this process through an examination of the textual formation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. He shows that the early or basic sections are equivalent to the first Chinese translation in 6 volumes (T #376), translated by Fa chien in 418. He divides the text into two diachronic stages, the first stage including chapters 1–4, 6, and 7 of the sūtra, and the second stage including chapters 5 and 8–18, the latter being divided again into chapters 8 and 9–18. Of these, the first expresses faith in the body of the Buddha as the eternal *dharmakāya*, instead of the physical body, while the second part expresses mainly the *tathāgatagarbha* theory in which it is taught that the Buddha within the body of each *sattva* is the eternal *ātman*. The first portion of the second part shows a transitional stage in teaching and in the formation of a new order. Shimoda characterizes this transition as a shift from the worship of the outer stūpa to that of the inner stūpa.

The aim of Shimoda’s work is not to clarify the history of Tathāgata-

garbha theory per se, but to investigate the formation of Mahāyāna sūtras with a new methodology and using the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* as an example. This is not the place to give a full survey of his whole work, but I wish to add one point by introducing his interpretation of the significance of stūpa worship as the expression of prayer for the eternity of the Buddha throughout the history of Buddhism, after the Buddha's *mahāparinirvāṇa*, by both mendicants and lay believers. Shimoda thus denies the hypothesis that Mahāyāna Buddhism was a new movement caused by the existence of groups of lay believers. As for the process of the formation of Mahāyāna scriptures (which is itself nothing but the formation of Mahāyāna Buddhism), he seems to suggest the need for investigating the connection or relation of the composer with one of the traditional Buddhist sects. He also suggests the importance of making clear the continuity and discontinuity of Mahāyāna Buddhism with the Buddhism of the traditional sects.

In light of Shimoda's work, it can be said that Tathāgatagarbha theory is an expression of this rather emotional prayer of all Buddhists necessary for Buddhism as a religion, in addition to the hermeneutics of doctrine based on the confidence in the eternity of the Dharma. Shimoda's work also suggests further questions: if the Tathāgatagarbha theory was imposed on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* from the outside, how should we consider the formation of the Tathāgatagarbha theory itself? Can we connect the concept of the rise of the Buddha from the lotus in the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* to the concept of the stūpa of Prabhūtaratna rising up out of the earth in the *Lotus Sutra*? Again, these are issues in need of further consideration.

*Is the Tathāgatagarbha Theory a Teaching  
of Ultimate Meaning or Conventional Meaning?*

As a final point I would like to refer to the significance of the work of S. HOOKHAM on *Buddha Within* (1991), specifically the question of whether the Tathāgatagarbha theory is a teaching of ultimate meaning (*nītārtha*) or conventional meaning (*neyārtha*), as stated in the debate in Tibet between the school claiming the doctrine of the emptiness of others (*gshan ston pa*) and that claiming the doctrine of self-emptiness (*ran ston pa*). The main efforts of Hookham were dedicated to finding out the source materials on the Tathāgatagarbha theory, which was accepted positively in the Buddhist tradition of Tibet. Hookham sought for materials in the works of the Jo nang pa and others, materials that are characterized as belonging to Shen tong pa tradition in contrast to the Ran tong pa (to which belong the Ge lugs pa

school). Consequently Hookham revealed that the pioneering work of Seyfort Ruegg on the Tibetan tradition of interpreting the Tathāgata-garbha theory was based solely on materials belonging to the Ran tong pa, which interprets Tathāgata-garbha theory as of convenient character, leading to the ultimate truth of self-emptiness. In contrast, the Shen tong pa claims the ultimate character of the Tathāgata-garbha theory, regarding the *śūnyavāda* as incomplete and provisional, and hence of conventional meaning. This work by Hookham seems to recover the ultimate position of Tathāgata-garbha theory as declared in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as *uttaratantra* (ultimate), the term interpreted by the Shen tong pa as signifying the theory and contents of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra* as the third (and final) promotion of the wheel of the Dharma.

Upon further consideration, however, it seems to me that the debate between the Ran tong pa and the Shen tong pa concerns the point of whether to put ultimate value in the Dharma or in the person of the Buddha, whether on the self-realization of the Dharma or on the salvation by the Buddha, and not on the question of which is ultimate or not, much less on the question of which is right or not. Both sides complement each other, and are necessary for Buddhism as a religion. Again I would emphasize that the follower of the Tathāgata-garbha theory would be content with the evaluation of this teaching as “conventional,” because any teaching of the Buddha is, after all, a convention or means for the sake of deliverance or religious awakening.<sup>12</sup>

### Summary

I have briefly discussed a few points with regard to the Tathāgata-garbha theory that have recently become issues of debate among Buddhist scholars. These points indicate that there is still much to be discussed and clarified concerning the Tathāgata-garbha theory, and that the issue is one of continuing controversy and interest among Buddhist scholars both in Japan and abroad.

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<sup>12</sup> In a personal correspondence, Professor Yamaguchi Zuihō informed me that Bu ston was a Ran tong pa who was eager to discuss this point.

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