

# In Defense of His Guru: Dratsepa's Rebuttal to the Challenges Articulated by the Proponents of the Other-Emptiness Doctrine

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**Abstract** The buddha-nature literature has a significant place within the Indian Mahāyāna tradition and Tibetan Buddhism. While it is usually included in the so-called Last Wheel of the Buddha's teachings, many Tibetan thinkers began to cast doubts about the textual significance of buddha-nature discourse in fourteenth-century Tibet. In this article, I will examine one particular case where there is apparent tension between multiple Tibetan masters over the importance of buddha-nature teachings. This paper primarily analyzes Dratsepa's commentary to the *Ornament* (*mdzes rgyan*) written by his teacher, Buton. Dratsepa construes the *Ornament* as a work critiquing Dolpopa's interpretation of the buddha-nature literature. He levels a barrage of criticisms against Dolpopa by referring to Indian śāstras and sūtras that are equally important to both of them, and also by tracing his own assessment of the tathāgata-essence teachings to early Tibetan scholars. In contradistinction to Dolpopa's claims, Dratsepa offers several nuanced readings of the buddha-nature literature and complicates the notion of what it means to have tathāgata-essence, what a definitive or provisional meaning entails, and the relationship between the Middle Wheel and the Last Wheel teachings. In brief, Dratsepa's text sheds light on one of the earliest discourses on the tension between self-emptiness and other-emptiness presentations.

**Keywords** Buddha-nature · Dolpopa · Other-emptiness · Self-emptiness · Dratsepa · Buton

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## Introduction

The buddha-nature literature is a central corpus for Mahāyāna theory and practice, yet it is interpreted in vastly different ways by disparate Buddhist thinkers. Some Buddhist scholars argue that the buddha-nature literature teaches an inherent potential to achieve enlightenment that exists within all sentient beings, while others claim that it describes a fully enlightened buddhahood that abides within all beings, albeit one that is temporarily obscured by mental defilements. The former argues that sentient beings do not have a fully enlightened nature within them, whereas the latter asserts that there is an inherent buddha that is completely enlightened within all beings. Furthermore, some contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhists use this body of buddha-nature literature to assert their sectarian pride because they believe that the Theravāda Buddhism and Christianity do not uphold the doctrinal view that their respective ultimate religious goals are accessible to all beings. Since these Buddhists assert that the buddha-nature teachings are more inclusive in that sense, they think that these treatises surpass the teachings found in the other two religious systems. Concurrently, these same Buddhists might also undermine the importance of the buddha-nature literature by subordinating it to another set of Mahāyāna literature that primarily emphasizes the emptiness of all phenomena, the notion that phenomena do not exist inherently, since the buddha-nature topic, for them, does not necessarily require high intellectual acumen to comprehend.

The multidimensionality of the buddha-nature literature helped shape debates and challenges for “traditional” Buddhist scholars within the history of Buddhism in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular. While this article engages the discussion on buddha-nature in general, it is more specifically concerned with how Dratsepa (*sgra tshad pa rin chen nam rgyal*, 1318–1388)<sup>1</sup> responds to, and challenges, the interpretation of the buddha-nature literature that had been articulated by his contemporary, Dolpopa (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292–1361),<sup>2</sup> who remains a highly controversial interpreter of Mahāyāna scriptures in Tibetan Buddhist history. In the first part of this article, I will give a brief background to the textual history of the *Uttaratantra*,<sup>3</sup> a seminal Indian treatise on buddha-nature, beginning with its origin in India up to the era of Dolpopa and Dratsepa. I will then devote a whole section on why and how these two Tibetan thinkers discussed the buddha-nature issue. In particular, I will examine how Dratsepa responds to the

<sup>1</sup> For Dratsepa’s life story, see Shakya Pel (*sha kya dpal*, 1355–1432) (No publication date given).

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent book in English on Dolpopa’s life and legacy, see Stearns (1999).

<sup>3</sup> In the Tibetan tradition, the *Uttaratantra* is attributed to Maitreya. However, Tibetans are not alone in making this assertion, as Takasaki states: “This [that is, crediting the quotes from the *Uttaratantra* in the fragment Sāka script to Maitreya] shows that Maitreya was regarded as the author of the Ratna [i.e. the *Uttaratantra*] not only in Tibet but also in Central Asia, and probably in India.” See Takasaki (1966, p. 7). However, in the Chinese Buddhist literature, the authorship of the *Uttaratantra* is credited to Sāramati. See Takasaki (1966, p. 9). There is also a disagreement over whether the root text of the *Uttaratantra* and the prose commentary are by the same author. In the Chinese tradition, both the root text and the commentary are attributed to Sāramati, and it is very likely that that was the case in India in that time period. However, in the Tibetan tradition, the root text and the prose commentary are attributed to Maitreya and Asaṅga respectively.

criticisms leveled against Buton's (*bu ston rin chen grub*, 1290–1364)<sup>4</sup> interpretation of tathāgata-essence literature by Dolpopa and his followers of the Jonang School of Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, both Dratsepa and his teacher, Buton delineate tathāgata-essence within the context of emptiness of inherent existence.

### Textual Historical Background of the *Uttaratantra*

The *Uttaratantra*, which is at the center of the fourteenth century discourse on buddha-nature in Tibet, belongs to the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism that is practiced in countries such as China, Japan, Tibet, and others.<sup>5</sup> The root text, in the Tibetan tradition, is attributed to Maitreya and the prose commentary that accompanies the root text is credited to Asaṅga.<sup>6</sup> The theme of buddha-nature or tathāgata-essence,<sup>7</sup> which is the central focus of both the root text and the prose commentary and particularly that of the fourth chapter of the treatise,<sup>8</sup> is discussed widely in the so-called Third Wheel or the Last Wheel of the Buddha's teachings, as opposed to the Middle Wheel or the Second Wheel, within the Mahāyāna tradition.<sup>9</sup> The Middle Wheel of the Buddha's teachings includes the classic Mahāyāna scriptures, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*, which primarily teach that every phenomenon is empty of inherent existence, like an illusion. To represent the emptiness of inherent existence, the sūtras employ transitory and unstable metaphors such as dreams,

<sup>4</sup> See Ruegg (1966) for Buton's life story.

<sup>5</sup> Generally, Tibet, Bhutan, and other Himalayan regions are included in the category of Vajrayāna, which is the newest of the three traditions of Buddhism: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. However, since the Vajrayāna tradition is asserted as a sub-sect of Mahāyāna by Tibetan thinkers and insofar as Mahāyāna classics are studied by Tibetan Buddhists, I have included Tibet in the Mahāyāna category.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 3 for more information about their authorship.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'tathāgata-essence' (*tathāgatagarbha*; *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*) is used more frequently than its other counterparts, such as buddha-nature, (*buddhagotra*; *sangs rgyas kyi rigs*), buddha-element (*buddhadhātu*; *sangs rgyas kyi kham*), and so forth in most of the Tibetan commentaries on the *Uttaratantra* that I have seen. So, I will use this term in general, unless otherwise noted. However, when it comes to the study of the Tibetan commentaries on the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, the term buddha-nature is preferable to other corresponding terms mentioned above.

<sup>8</sup> Altogether, the seminal treatise consists of seven chapters: the first three chapters are on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha respectively. These three chapters are primarily concerned with the external causal factors for achieving enlightenment; the fourth chapter is on tathāgata-essence, which generally deals with sentient beings' internal causal factor for achieving enlightenment; and the last three chapters are on enlightenment, enlightened qualities, and enlightened activities respectively, and they mainly discuss the resultant state of enlightenment that is achieved through the first four causal factors. In essence, the treatise delineates how individuals can achieve enlightenment within a Mahāyāna system through the realization of the three objects of Mahāyāna refuge and tathāgata-essence.

<sup>9</sup> The Buddha's teachings can be categorized into three sets of discourse: 1. the First Dharma Wheel, which teaches the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence, selflessness, etc., that are significant for Theravāda followers; 2. the Middle Dharma Wheel, which primarily teaches the emptiness of inherent existence of all phenomena; 3. the Last Dharma Wheel, which teaches some phenomena as empty of inherent existence and some as ultimately existent or inherently existent. The last two are Mahāyāna sūtras. Gregory's articulation of the three functions—hermeneutical, sectarian, and soteriological—for the doctrinal classification in the Chinese Buddhist tradition can be applied to Buddhist doctrinal classifications in general. See Gregory (1995, pp. 4–8).

magical illusions, and others that are rather negative and deconstructive in tone.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Last Wheel of the Buddha's teachings consists of *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, *Tathāgatarbhasūtra*, *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, and many other sūtras. The proponents of these two sets of teachings often disagree over what ultimate truth is, what constitutes a definitive or ultimate teaching of the Buddha, and what a provisional or temporary teaching of the Buddha entails. Furthermore, there is no homogeneity within the group of the proponents of Middle Wheel teachings, nor is there any cohesive congruity within the group of the interpreters of the Last Wheel teachings.

The *Uttaratantra* is generally asserted as a treatise delineating the meaning of the Last Wheel teachings, such as the *Tathāgatarbhasūtra*, *Śrīmāladevisūtra*, and others<sup>11</sup> that historically came after the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. Although the *Uttaratantra* and its prose commentary originated in India, they did not gain much scholarly attention in India for the first several hundred years after their inception, which was most likely the end of the fifth century.<sup>12</sup> However, later in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Indian thinkers and masters began to write short commentaries on the treatise and taught the treatise to their new-found seekers of the *Uttaratantra* from India's neighboring region to the north, Tibet. The text captured the hearts and minds of Tibetan translators and scholars of the time period and it was immediately translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit for the first time. Within less than a century after its initial entry into Tibet, approximately four different Tibetan translations of the treatise were produced<sup>13</sup> and two more translations were made over the next couple of centuries.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, many Tibetan scholars also wrote exhaustive commentaries to the *Uttaratantra* and its prose commentary in this time period.<sup>15</sup>

Irrespective of the multiple agents involved in the dissemination of the *Uttaratantra* teachings, the *Uttaratantra* remained basically unquestioned for its textual authority and its significance within the Mahāyāna doctrine over the next two

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that these scriptures are merely deconstructionist in a post-modern sense. See Jackson (1989), who shows that Buddhism speaks of both deconstruction and foundationalism.

<sup>11</sup> *Asaṅga's Uttaratantra* commentary cites from many of these sūtras. See Obermiller (1931, p. 91) for the identification of these sūtras.

<sup>12</sup> Ratnamati had completed the Chinese translation of the *Uttaratantra* from Sanskrit by the beginning of the sixth century.

<sup>13</sup> The four translations were made by: Atiśa (980–1054) and Nagtsho Lotsawa (*nag 'tsho lo tsā ba tshul khriṃs rgyal ba*, b. 1011), Ngok (*ngog blo ldan shes rab*, 1050–1105) and Sajjana (eleventh century), Patsab (*pa tshab nyi ma grags*, b. 1055), and Marpa Dopa Choekyi Wangchuk (*mar pa do pa chos kyi dbang phyug*, 1042–1136).

<sup>14</sup> See Roerich (1976, p. 359). It mentions that Yarlung Lotsawa (*yar klung lo tsā ba grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1242–1346) and Jonang Lotsawa Losang Lodro Pel (*jo nang lo tsā ba blo bzang blo gros dpal*, 1299–1353) translated the treatise in Tibetan as well.

<sup>15</sup> Ngok, Chapa (*phywa pa chos kyi seng ge*, 1109–1169), Tsen Khawoche (*btsan kha bo che*, b. 1021), and Zu Gawai Dorje (*gzu dga' ba'i rdo rje*, eleventh century) each wrote a commentary to the treatise. The first two commentaries are still available, but the last two are not extant. For more on the last two, see Roerich (1976, pp. 347–348).

hundred years in Tibet, that is, until the fourteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Tibetan thinkers until then generally asserted that the text explained the ultimate or the definitive view of extremely heterogeneous Mahāyāna teachings and they propagated it as a crucial text for the exposition of the Mahāyāna philosophy of ultimate truth. However, Buton, one of the most influential Tibetan thinkers of the fourteenth century, questioned the textual hierarchy that placed the *Uttaratantra* on the uppermost pedestal of Mahāyāna scriptures, and proceeded to undermine the significance of the text within Mahāyāna doctrinal framework.<sup>17</sup> Later in his life, Buton wrote a text called *Ornament that Illuminates the Sugata-Essence* (*bde gshegs snying po gsal ba'i rgyan*; henceforth, *Ornament*) wherein he gives a favorable evaluation of the buddha-nature literature, albeit he does it in contradistinction to Dolpopa's interpretation of the same material.

Buton's classification and presentation of the *Uttaratantra* and tathāgata-essence teachings exasperated his contemporaries, such as Rinchen Yeshe (*rin chen ye shes*),<sup>18</sup> Dolpopa, and others,<sup>19</sup> who penned criticisms against Buton's assessment of the tathāgata-essence teachings. Dolpopa, arguably the fourteenth century's most-outspoken proponent of the tathāgata-essence teachings in Tibet, strongly challenged Buton by claiming that the Last Wheel teachings, such as *Tathāgata-garbhasūtra*, *Śrīmāladevisūtra*, and others taught other-emptiness, the ultimate meaning of the Mahāyāna tradition in his estimation. Furthermore, Dolpopa argues that the Middle Wheel teachings primarily explicate the meaning of emptiness of inherent existence and therefore they do not explicitly teach the ultimate truth. Moreover, he argues that buddha-nature is none other than other-emptiness and it is endowed with enlightened qualities, free from all defilements. In his texts, Dolpopa also claims that Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamaka, which is viewed by his contemporaries as the highest school of Indian Mahāyāna philosophy, is not the ultimate interpretation of Mahāyāna doctrine,<sup>20</sup> rather the Middle Way with Appearance (*snang bcas dbu ma*) should be recognized as the ultimate view of Mahāyāna philosophy. In a nutshell, Dolpopa's writings justifying the authority of the *Uttaratantra* and the

<sup>16</sup> One of the exceptions during this early period is Sapeṇ (*sa skya paṇḍi ta kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, 1182–1251), who questioned the literal meaning of certain passages found in the *Uttaratantra*. Sapeṇ argues that the sūtras and the *Uttaratantra* that teach that the tathāgata-essence is analogous to a precious jewel wrapped in dirty clothes should be understood as teachings requiring interpretation. See Sapeṇ (1993, p. 17). Furthermore, Sapeṇ states that Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* also claim that such texts are interpretable. See *ibid.* For an excellent English translation of Sapeṇ's *Distinguishing the Three Vows*, see Rhoton (2002).

<sup>17</sup> Buton lists the *Uttaratantra* as a Mind-Only text in his *Catalog of Translated Treatises*. See Buton (2000, pp. 604–605).

<sup>18</sup> See Buton (1971a, pp. 186–216).

<sup>19</sup> Nyaon Kunga Pel (*nya dbon kun dga' dpal*, 1285–1379), a disciple of Dolpopa, critiques those who assert that the last four texts of the *Five Treatises of Maitreya* are Mind-Only texts. It is very likely that Nyaon Kunga Pel is critiquing scholars such as Buton and others who claimed that the last four texts of the *Five Treatises of Maitreya* were Mind-Only texts. See Nyaon Kunga Pel, *'od gsal gyi rgyan yid kyi mun sel*, pp. 85–86. Szazang, another disciple of Dolpopa, also criticizes a similar view. See Szazang (1994, p. 16).

<sup>20</sup> For a history of the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamaka in Tibet, see Vose (2009).

tathāgata-essence teachings were applauded by many of his peers and carried on by his devout disciples.<sup>21</sup> Yet, many other Tibetan monks were prohibited from reading Dolpopa's books.<sup>22</sup> He was even referred to as "an evil teacher" (*bshes gnyen ngan pa*)<sup>23</sup> and "overwhelmed by the force of a great demon" (*gdon chen gyis zin pa*)<sup>24</sup> by his scholastic antagonists. One of his opponents was Dratsepa, a devoted disciple of Buton. It is Dratsepa's challenges to Dolpopa and his Jonang School's arguments against Buton's interpretation of the tathāgata-essence teachings that I will examine now.

### Dratsepa: "Pacifying the Demons"<sup>25</sup>

Let me begin this section with a quote from Dratsepa's text, which is examined in this article for his view of buddha-nature literature, to give readers a taste of his enthusiasm and the passion with which he composed the work:

Overwhelmed by the force of a great demon that holds onto reality due to degenerated views,  
Certain unwise people lose their wisdom and denigrate Candrakīrti, the  
greatest of the greatest, at the cost of self-failure. . .<sup>26</sup>

The target of Dratsepa's ire, as it will become clear later, is none other than Dolpopa, who demonstrates the centrality of the tathāgata-essence teachings for his Jonang School by generously quoting from them in his major works. To highlight what I mentioned in the previous section, Dolpopa vehemently argues that: (1) the tathāgata-essence teachings are definitive; (2) they belong to the Great Middle Way or the Middle Way with Appearance, which is superior to the Middle Way or the Middle Way without Appearance (*snang med dbu ma*) that only holds emptiness of inherent existence as the ultimate truth; (3) the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* do not primarily teach ultimate truth, rather they mainly elucidate self-emptiness; (4) self-emptiness is not ultimate truth, other-emptiness is the ultimate truth; (5) all sentient beings have an inherent tathāgata-essence endowed with enlightened qualities. In response to Dolpopa's presentation of Mahāyāna literature based on his reading of

<sup>21</sup> Dolpopa's doctrinal influence is clearly seen in Sazang's commentary on the *Uttaratantra* and Nyaon Kunga Pel's commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra*.

<sup>22</sup> The *Blue Annals* reports that Dolpopa's texts permeated throughout Central and Western Tibet and that Gelug monks were prohibited from keeping Dolpopa's *Ocean of Definitive Meaning* and the *Fourth Council*. For more on this, see Roerich (1976, p. 777).

<sup>23</sup> See Rendawa (2003, p. 170).

<sup>24</sup> See Dratsepa (1971, pp. 163–164).

<sup>25</sup> 'byung po'i gdon rnam zhi ba. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 164). Dratsepa obviously uses this phrase to refer to the "mistaken" views that Dolpopa and his followers hold with respect to ultimate reality.

<sup>26</sup> "'di na mi mkhas gang dag lta ban yams pas dngos la zhen pa'i gdon chen gyis, zin pa'i dbang gis blo gros nyams pas che ba'i che ba bla grags la sogs pa, smod par byed kyang bdag nyid phung pa 'ba' zhig bhed du bzad pa de dag gi. . ." See Dratsepa (1971, pp. 163–164).

the tathāgata-essence literature, several fourteenth-century scholars such as Buton, Dratsepa, Rendawa (*red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros*, 1349–1412),<sup>27</sup> and Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419)<sup>28</sup> leveled a series of strong criticisms against Dolpopa's perspective, although without necessarily mentioning him by name. Buton, Rendawa, and Tsongkhapa even sometimes argued in their texts that the *Uttaratantra*, which is quoted liberally in Dolpopa's seminal work, the *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*,<sup>29</sup> was a treatise belonging to the Mind-Only School<sup>30</sup>; this strategy was used to undermine the textual authority that Dolpopa had credited to the *Uttaratantra*, since the Mind-Only School is generally understood to be subordinate to the Middle Way School in Tibet.<sup>31</sup> In Dratsepa's fundamental work on buddha-nature literature, he criticizes the manner with which Dolpopa and his Jonang School explain the *Uttaratantra*, though he does so without subsuming the text under the auspices of the Mind-Only School.

The seminal text in which Dratsepa levels a series of arguments against Dolpopa's interpretation is called *Ornament to the Ornament that Embellishes the Tathāgata-Essence* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i mdzes rgyan gyi rgyan*). It is a commentary to, and an explanation of, Buton's *Ornament*, which was completed in 1356. In this paper, I will refer to Dratsepa's text as "*Ornament to the Ornament*," which he completed in 1369. Despite the fact that Buton, Dratsepa's teacher, does not explicitly mention his opponents or their texts in his *Ornament*, Dratsepa shows

<sup>27</sup> Stearns states, "[Rendawa] was viewed by Jonang tradition as a vicious opponent of the teachings of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*, *nges don*) which had been spread so successfully by Dolpopa." See Stearns, (1999, p. 56). Much of Rendawa's criticism against Dolpopa is found in Rendawa's commentary on Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*. For a short biography of Rendawa, see Stoter-Tillmann and Tsering (1997, pp. ix–xviii). Also see Sangye Tsemo (*sangs rgyas rtse mo*, b. 14th century), *A Biography of Rendawa*. (No publisher and publication date).

<sup>28</sup> See Tsongkhapa (1992) and Thurman (1984) for Tsongkhapa's critique against Jonang's positions. See Thurman (1982, pp. 4–40) for Tsongkhapa's life.

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent English translation of the *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, see Hopkins (2006).

<sup>30</sup> Khedrup, in his *Presentation of the General Tantra*, claims: "Lama Je [that is, Rendawa] asserts that [the *Uttaratantra*] is a commentarial work on Last Wheel scriptures, explicating the view of the Mind-Only School." *bla ma rjes bka' tha ma'i dgongs 'grel, lta ba sems tsam ston par bzhed*. See Khedrup (1980, pp. 495–496). Also see Roerich (1976, p. 349) where it is mentioned that Rendawa believed that the *Uttaratantra* was a Mind-Only work. See Tsongkhapa (2000, pp. 339–340) where he makes such a suggestion. See Buton (2000, pp. 604–605).

<sup>31</sup> Of course, this is not to suggest that these Tibetan thinkers do not have any textual or doctrinal justification for their claims. For instance, Rendawa appears to interpret tathāgata-essence within the context of all-basis-consciousness. Although the term "all-basis-consciousness" is not used at all in either the *Uttaratantra* or Asaṅga's commentary, the synonymy of the all-basis-consciousness and the tathāgata-essence is found in sūtras, such as the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*. Furthermore, it is very likely that Rendawa uses the stanza, "The element which has no beginning..." (*thog ma med dus can gyi kham...*) from the *Mahāyānābhīdharmasūtra* that is cited in both Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* and Asaṅga's *Uttaratantra* commentary to refer to all-basis-consciousness and tathāgata-essence respectively, as a textual source to justify that all-basis-consciousness and the tathāgata-essence are the same. Unlike Rendawa, who seems to tie tathāgata-essence with all-basis-consciousness to justify his claim for including the *Uttaratantra* into a Mind-Only text, Tsongkhapa appears to have linked the *Uttaratantra* with the Mind-Only School because, for Tsongkhapa, the tathāgata-essence explicated in the *Uttaratantra* is "truly existent" (*bden par yod pa*) or "fundamentally established on its own at all times" (*gshis la rang gi ngo bos dus thams cad du grub*). He does not show that the buddha-nature is associated with all-basis-consciousness. See Tsongkhapa (2000, pp. 339–340).



no tentativeness in identifying his primary opponent in the *Ornament to the Ornament*. He construes Buton's *Ornament* as a text leveling a series of arguments against Dolpopa and the latter's *Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, which had been completed by 1333. Dratsepa mentions the title of Dolpopa's text by its Tibetan contraction, *nges rgyam* (*Ocean of Definitive Meaning*), at least eleven times.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the *Ornament to the Ornament* is arguably the earliest Tibetan work explicitly critiquing Dolpopa's *Ocean of Definitive Meaning* in great detail, particularly on the issues related to the tathāgata-essence teachings.

Drawing from Dratsepa's *Ornament to the Ornament*, I show that: (1) in opposition to Dolpopa's formulation of the tathāgata-essence teachings such as the *Uttaratantra*, *Nirvāṇasūtra*, and others as purely definitive, Dratsepa argues that they are a mixture of definitive and interpretable teachings<sup>33</sup>; (2) in opposition to Dolpopa's claim that all sentient beings have the tathāgata-essence, Dratsepa maintains that not a single sentient being has the tathāgata-essence; (3) in opposition to Dolpopa's assertion that purely definitive teachings require a superior intellect to realize the ultimate meaning, Dratsepa demonstrates that the teachings that contain a mixture of definitive and interpretable meanings require a superior intellect to decipher the definitive from the interpretable meaning; (4) in opposition to Dolpopa's statement that other-emptiness is the ultimate truth and self-emptiness is a conventional truth, Dratsepa contends that other-emptiness is a conventional truth and self-emptiness is the ultimate truth.

How does Dratsepa show that the tathāgata-essence teachings are a mixture of definitive and interpretable teachings? It is not uncommon for the Tibetan scholars of the fourteenth century to claim that the tathāgata-essence scriptures, such as the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* and *Nirvāṇasūtra* that teach the tathāgata-essence as a permanent, stable, and enduring Self (*rtag brtan ther zug gi bdag*) are interpretable, since Buddhist scriptures generally do not endorse a concept of *ātma* or Self found in Hindu literature. Therefore, Dratsepa, following the general Mahāyāna belief that the Self does not exist, repeatedly argues that the scriptural passages that clearly demonstrate that tathāgata-essence is a permanent, stable, and enduring Self are interpretable. Furthermore, Dratsepa demonstrates that the teachings that show that all sentient beings have tathāgata-essence are also interpretable. As Dratsepa strongly proclaims, "Therefore, all sūtras and their commentarial works that teach the existence of tathāgata-essence in all sentient beings since beginningless time are interpretable with an intention, [they] are not definitive."<sup>34</sup> Quoting from sūtric texts, tantric texts, and Indian and Tibetan commentarial texts that are equally

<sup>32</sup> See Dratsepa (1971, pp. 167–170, 182, 184, 191–192, 220, 233).

<sup>33</sup> Dratsepa argues, "The later [discourses such as the tathāgata-essence teachings] teach more than the Middle [Wheel discourse, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*] because they teach a mixture of interpretable and definitive meanings, which is comprehended only by sharp disciples with great intellect, whereas the Middle [Wheel] discourse teaches definitive meaning only." *phyi mas bar pa las lhag par ston te, drang nges 'dres ma ston cing, gdul bya drang ba'i don du drang dgos pa can dbang po rmon po ma gtogs pas rtogs par dka' ba rnam ston gyi, bar pa las nges don 'ba' zhig gtso bor ston no*. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 211).

<sup>34</sup> *des na de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po sems can thams cad la thog ma med pa nas yod par ston pa'i mdo 'grel thams cad drang don dgongs pa can yin gyi, nges don min no*. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 237).



important for Dolpopa and that are cited in Dolpopa's works liberally, Dratsepa argues that not a single sentient being is tathāgata-essence.

Ironically, Dratsepa also shows that these tathāgata-essence scriptures are definitive insofar as they teach that the tathāgata-essence is none other than the dharma-body (*chos sku*; *dharmakāya*), which is only realized when an ordinary individual becomes fully enlightened. Dratsepa argues, "The actual sugata-essence is the dharma-body of the complete buddha. This never exists in the big corporeal body of sentient beings."<sup>35</sup> The tathāgata-essence that is the same as the dharma-body is definitive, it exists only in buddhas, the enlightened beings, and it does not exist in sentient beings, the unenlightened ones. Therefore, Dratsepa clearly articulates that tathāgata-essence must not be understood as a potential to achieve enlightenment or as an empty reality that exists in all beings, as many Tibetan thinkers assert, rather he argues that tathāgata-essence is the ultimate result of enlightenment that manifests only at the end when one's potential to achieve buddhahood has reached its ultimate climax.

Hence, Dratsepa concludes that these tathāgata-essence scriptures are a mixture of interpretable and definitive meanings because: (1) these scriptures teach that all sentient beings have the tathāgata-essence and also that the tathāgata-essence is a permanent, stable, and enduring Self, neither of which, for Dratsepa, can be accepted literally for the reasons mentioned above; (2) they teach that the tathāgata-essence is equivalent to the dharma-body of enlightened beings, which is literally acceptable and is definitive, according to Dratsepa. By making the rather nuanced claim that these teachings are a mixture of both definitive and interpretable meanings, Dratsepa not only argues against Dolpopa's wholesale portrayal of the tathāgata-essence teachings as *only* definitive, but he also challenges Dolpopa for the latter's assertion that the permanent, stable, and enduring tathāgata-essence exists in all sentient beings.

Here, one may wonder, if sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence, how does Dratsepa argue that all sentient beings have a potential to achieve enlightenment? How does he interpret the *Uttaratantra* verse that is a paradigmatic quote for many Tibetan thinkers to substantiate that all sentient beings have tathāgata-essence in the Middle Way School?<sup>36</sup> Dratsepa criticizes the more literal and common interpretation of the verse (which is that all sentient beings have tathāgata-essence, therefore they can achieve enlightenment) and argues that the literal meaning of the verse is interpretable, in so far as sentient beings are not enlightened. In order to support his claim, he cites the works of some formidable Indian and Tibetan

<sup>35</sup> See Dratsepa (1971, p. 206). See also Dratsepa (1971, pp. 206–209) where he shows how dharma-body, sugata-essence, tathāgata-essence, and the emptiness-gnosis are the same and they exist only in buddhas.

<sup>36</sup> This significant quote is from the *Uttaratantra*: 1. Because the buddha-body pervades [to all beings], 2. because the suchness [of the buddha] and the suchness [of sentient beings] are indivisible, 3. because [all beings] have [buddha]-nature, therefore all beings always have tathāgata-essence. (Translation mine) It is verse # 27 of the *Uttaratantra* that appears in Obermiller's English translation of the Tibetan text (1931, pp. 156–157) and Johnston's Sanskrit version (1950, p. 26).

scholars, such as Asaṅga,<sup>37</sup> Kamalaśīla (ninth century),<sup>38</sup> Candrakīrti (seventh century),<sup>39</sup> Ngok (*rngog blo ldan shes rab*, 1059–1109),<sup>40</sup> and Sapaṇ (*sa skya paṇ ḍi ta kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, 1182–1251),<sup>41</sup> although none of these scholars, in this context, explicitly claim that sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence. It is likely that Dratsepa was also aware that these masters did not explicitly make such a statement, but he seems to have been reading these scholars' works through the lens of the tathāgata-essence texts where tathāgata-essence and dharma-body are explained interchangeably. The interchangeability of dharma-body and tathāgata-essence found in Mahāyāna literature is employed to justify Dratsepa's claim that the main point of the *Uttaratantra* verse mentioned above is interpretable because no sentient being has the dharma-body of enlightened beings, which is none other than tathāgata-essence.

For Dratsepa, since tathāgata-essence is equivalent to dharma-body, which exists only in enlightened beings, there is a clear distinction between tathāgata-essence and buddha-nature, as the former exists only in enlightened beings. On the other hand, quoting from the *Uttaratantra*, he shows that buddha-nature exists in all sentient beings: "The five metaphors demonstrate that since sentient beings have tathāgata-element and the buddha-nature for generating the three buddha-bodies..."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Dratsepa demonstrates that buddha-nature exists only on the causal level of pre-enlightenment state and tathāgata-essence is achieved only on the resultant level of post-enlightenment. Hence, he concludes that all sentient beings can achieve enlightenment because they have buddha-nature.

While Dratsepa strongly proclaims that the tathāgata-essence scriptures are a mixture of interpretable and definitive meanings and that sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence, ironically both he and Dolpopa agree that the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence teachings are higher than, or superior to, the Middle Wheel *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. For instance, Dratsepa states, "Someone says, 'in response to [Buton's] claim in [the latter's] *Ornament* that the third wheel teachings that primarily teach sugata-essence are the foremost, or superior, amongst Mahāyāna

<sup>37</sup> Dratsepa claims that Asaṅga in his *Uttaratantra* commentary cites sūtras to show that sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 207).

<sup>38</sup> Dratsepa cites from Kamalaśīla's *ishad ma stong phrag bco bgyad pa* to argue that sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence, rather they only have a potential to achieve enlightenment. See Dratsepa (1971, pp. 247–248, p. 262).

<sup>39</sup> Dratsepa cites a verse from Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* to argue that the tathāgata-essence teachings are interpretable. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 254).

<sup>40</sup> Dratsepa cites a passage from Ngok's *Uttaratantra* commentary to show that the tathāgata-essence teachings are interpretable. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 201).

<sup>41</sup> Dratsepa cites verses from Sapaṇ's *Distinguishing the Three Vows* to show that sentient beings do not have tathāgata-essence. See Dratsepa (1971, pp. 253–254).

<sup>42</sup> See Dratsepa (1971, p. 200). Dratsepa asserts that tathāgata-element (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i kham*) is not the same as tathāgata-essence (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*), as the former exists in all sentient beings, whereas the latter exists only in enlightened beings. The five metaphors that he refers to here are found in verses # 147–150 of the *Uttaratantra* and they are (1) a treasure, (2) a fruit tree, (3) a precious image, (4) a universal monarch, and (5) a golden image. For Dratsepa, these five metaphors show that all sentient beings have a precious causal factor, notably buddha-nature, that will eventually mature into a fully enlightened entity through Mahāyāna path.

scriptures, in the same way that the later teachings on medicine [are superior].”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, both Buton and Dratsepa demonstrate that the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence teachings are ranked higher than the Middle Wheel teachings. Nonetheless, Dratsepa and Dolpopa differ greatly in terms of how they explain that the tathāgata-essence teachings are superior to the Middle Wheel teachings. As Dratsepa carefully explains:

The later [discourses such as the tathāgata-essence teachings] teach more than the Middle [Wheel discourse, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*] because they teach a mixture of interpretable and definitive meanings, which is comprehended only by sharp disciples with great intellect, whereas the Middle [Wheel] discourse teaches definitive meaning only. [However], [the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence teachings] do not teach a superior definitive meaning [that is not taught in the Middle Wheel] because a definitive meaning that is greater than [the one taught in the Middle Wheel teachings] does not exist.<sup>44</sup>

According to Dratsepa, since the definitive meaning is mixed in with the interpretable meaning in the tathāgata-essence teachings, such as *Lankāvatārasūtra*, *Nirvāṇasūtra*, and others, these teachings require a higher intellect to decipher definitive meaning from interpretable meaning. On the other hand, the purely definitive Middle Wheel scriptures do not require such a higher level of intellect to decipher the meaning of the teachings, since the definitive meaning is clearly articulated without mixing in with the interpretable meaning. Therefore, according to Dratsepa, the tathāgata-essence teachings are superior in terms of how the definitive meaning is taught, not in terms of the definitive content itself, since the definitive meaning that is taught in both the Middle Wheel and the tathāgata-essence teachings is exactly the same.

In contrast, Dolpopa generally argues that the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence teachings primarily teach definitive meaning of ultimate truth, whereas the Middle Wheel scriptures primarily teach interpretable meaning. Furthermore, he maintains that the Last Wheel teachings explain the definitive meaning clearly, whereas the Middle Wheel scriptures delineate definitive meaning along with interpretable meaning.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the reasons that Dolpopa uses to show that the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence discourses are supreme and the Middle Wheel teachings are not

<sup>43</sup> *mdzes rgyan nas bder snying gtso bor ston pa'i mdo bka' 'khor lo gsum pa rnam sman dpyad kyi rgyud phyi ma dang 'dra bar theg pa chen po'i rgyud bla ma'm gong ma yin zhes dam bcas pa la...* See Dratsepa (1971, pp. 210–211). See Hopkins (2006, pp. 581–582) for Dolpopa's claim.

<sup>44</sup> *phyi mas bar pa las lhag par ston te, drang nges 'dres ma ston cing, gdul bya drang ba'i don du drang dgos pa can dbang po rmon po ma gtogs pas rtogs par dka' ba rnam ston gyi, bar pa las nges don 'ba' zhig gtso bor ston no. bar pas bstan pa las lhag pa'i nges don mi ston te, de bas lhag pa'i nges don mi srid pa'i phyir ro.* See Dratsepa (1971, p. 211).

<sup>45</sup> “Moreover, having primarily explained the object of negation, the conventional self-emptiness that is not beyond dependent arising, in the Middle Wheel, the ultimate other-emptiness—the basis for purification and beyond dependent arising—is primarily taught in the Last Wheel. However, it is not the case that the basis for purification [that is ultimate truth] is not explained in the Middle Wheel.” *de yang 'khor lo bar pa yang dgag bya'i chos kun rdzob rang stong dang, rten 'brel las ma 'das pa gtso cher bstan nas dgag pa'i gzhi don dam gzhan stong rten 'brel las 'das pa ni 'khor lo tha mar gtso cher bstan te, 'khor lo bar pa yang dgag bya'i gzhi ma bstan pa yang ma yin no.* See Dolpopa (1992a, p. 390). See Hopkins (2006, pp. 196–197) for a similar statement. Also, see Kapstein (2001, p. 301).

supreme are inverted in Dratsepa's critique of Dolpopa's presentation. Although both Dratsepa and Dolpopa agree that the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence teachings teach definitive meaning of ultimate truth and that these scriptures are higher on the pedestal than the Middle Wheel teachings, they strongly disagree over the importance of the Last Wheel sūtra, *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, within the Mahāyāna textual corpus.

In response to a challenger (most likely a proponent of Dolpopa's presentation), who cites the passage from the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* that demonstrates that the Middle Wheel is interpretable and the Last Wheel is definitive,<sup>46</sup> Dratsepa states, "This [referring to the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*] is a real basis for dispute; therefore it is not suitable to be a treatise for distinguishing interpretable and definitive meanings."<sup>47</sup> Hence, Dratsepa is convinced that the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* does not qualify as a legitimate Mahāyāna scripture that clearly differentiates the distinction between what constitutes a definitive meaning and what constitutes an interpretable meaning, since it belongs to the Mind-Only School, the lower school of Indian Mahāyāna tradition. Therefore, Dratsepa claims that the sūtra does not belong to the Middle-Way School, the higher school of Indian Mahāyāna tradition. As Dratsepa argues:

Since the Middle Wheel [referring to the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*] teaches the correct meaning of the absence of elaborations, it is a Middle Way [text]; since the Last Wheel [referring to the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*] teaches the correct meaning as a non-dual consciousness it is a Mind Only text. Therefore the Middle Wheel is definitive and the Last Wheel is interpretable. . . .<sup>48</sup>

So, Dratsepa argues that the primary difference between the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* and the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* in regards to its respective explanation of ultimate truth is that the former teaches absence of elaborations as ultimate truth, whereas the latter describes non-dual consciousness as ultimate truth. Furthermore, one of the main differences between the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence teachings, such as the *Uttaratantra*, and the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* is that the former delineates ultimate truth alongside interpretable meaning, whereas the latter teaches only interpretable meaning.

Dratsepa, following in the footsteps of many other Tibetan thinkers, aggressively seeks to demonstrate that the last wheel *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* is a Mind-Only scripture. Dolpopa, on the other hand, boldly challenges this rather conventional belief and avers that the sūtra belongs to the Great Middle Way School, which, for

<sup>46</sup> For the passage from the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* cited in the *Ornament to the Ornament*, see Dratsepa (1971, pp. 183–184). The passage is often cited in the debate courtyard of Tibetan monasteries.

<sup>47</sup> 'di ni rtsod pa'i gchi dngos yin pas drang nges 'byed pa'i gzhung du mi rigs te. . . . See Dratsepa (1971, p. 184).

<sup>48</sup> 'khor lo bar pas yang dag pa'i don spros bral ston pas dbu ma yin zhing, tha mas yang dag pa'i don gzung 'dzin gnyis med kyi shes pa rang rig rang gsal sogs su ston pas sems tsam yin no. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 184).

Dolpopa, is undoubtedly ranked higher than the Consciousness-Only School.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, while Dolpopa does not make any distinction between the last wheel tathāgata-essence teachings and the Last Wheel *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* in terms of content, since both primarily teach definitive meaning of ultimate truth, Dratsepa argues that there is a profound difference between the Last wheel tathāgata-essence teachings and the last wheel *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* in terms of content. For Dratsepa, the tathāgata-essence teachings present the philosophical view of the Middle Way School explained earlier in the quote, whereas the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* explicates the teaching of the Mind-Only School, whose voice cannot be regarded as authoritative for the explication of ultimate self-emptiness. This distinction between the last wheel tathāgata-essence teachings and the last wheel *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* would later become crucial for Gelug pioneers, such as Gyaltsab (*rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen*, 1364–1432)<sup>50</sup> and Khedrup (*mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang*, 1385–1438),<sup>51</sup> for systematizing the huge corpus of Mahāyāna literature.

The *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, the tathāgata-essence teachings, and others become the foundational scriptures for Dolpopa's presentation of other-emptiness.<sup>52</sup> Based on these foundational Mahāyāna texts, Dolpopa argues that all sentient beings have an actual buddha endowed with all enlightened qualities within them, albeit it is

<sup>49</sup> Dolpopa makes the distinction between Consciousness-Only School (which is equivalent to the “Conventional Mind-Only”) and the Ultimate Mind-Only School, which is equivalent to his Great Middle Way School. For more on this and other related issues, see my forthcoming article, Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan on the Mahāyāna Doxography: Rethinking the Distinction between Cittamātra and Mādhyamaka in Fourteenth-Century Tibet, in a special volume of the *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies*.

<sup>50</sup> See Gyaltsab, *Uttaratantra Commentary*, pp. 48–49. In the text, Gyaltsab makes a distinction between the Last Wheel teachings and the Last Wheel teachings according to the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*. Since the tathāgata-essence sūtras such as *Tathāgatarbhasūtra*, *Śrīmāladevisūtra*, and others primarily teach ultimate truth that is taught in the Middle Wheel *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*, Gyaltsab argues that they are not the Last Wheel teachings according to the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, albeit they are Last Wheel teachings.

<sup>51</sup> See Khedrup (1980, pp. 461–463). Khedrup argues that the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* are the “actual Middle Wheel sūtras” (*bka' bar pa'i mdo dngos*), while the tathāgata-essence teachings, such as the *Dhāraṇīśvararājasūtra*, *Vajracchedikasūtra*, *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, and so forth are sūtras “that are included within the Middle Wheel” (*'khor lo bar pa'i mdo r gto*gs) because the meaning of these sūtras is similar to the actual Middle Wheel, the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. On the other hand, he lists the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* as an “actual Last Wheel sūtra” (*'khor lo tha ma'i mdo dngos*), but he does not list any sūtras that could be asserted as scriptures “included within the Last Wheel” (*'khor lo tha ma'i mdo r gto*gs).

<sup>52</sup> Dolpopa lists ten tathāgata-essence sūtras in his *slob ma la spring ba skur 'debs dang sgro 'dogs spang ba*. They are: *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i mdo*, *nam par mi rtog pa la 'jug pa'i gzhung, mdo sde dpal 'phreng, mnga bo che, sor mo'i 'phreng ba, stong nyid chen po'i mdo*, *de bzhin gshegs pa'i thugs rje chen po bstan pa'i mdo*, *de bzhin gshegs pa'i yon tan dang ye shes bsam gyis mi khyab pa bstan pa'i mdo*, *sprin chen po'i mdo rgyas pa*, and *myang 'das chen po'i mdo rgyas bsdus gsum gcig tu byas pa*. See Dolpopa (1992b, p. 285). Sometimes Dolpopa makes reference to the five tathāgata-essence sūtras, in that case he excludes the last five sūtras from the category. Furthermore, he lists ten definitive sūtras in the same text and they are: *sher phyin lnga brgya pa*, *byang chub sems dpa'i bslab pa rab tu bsdus dbye ba'i le'u cha bcu gnyis byams zhus su'ang grags pa gnyis gcig tu bsdus pa*, *rgyan stug po'i mdo*, *rab tu zhi ba nam par nges pa'i chos 'phrul gyi ting nge 'dzin gyi mdo*, *dkon mchog sprin gyi mdo*, *gser 'do dum chen, dgongs pa nges 'grel, lang kar gshegs pa, ye shes snang ba rgyan gyi mdo*, and *mdo sde phal chen*. See *ibid.*, pp. 285–286. Sometimes Dolpopa makes reference to the five definitive sūtras, in that case the last five sūtras from the category are taken out. These scriptures become the foundational texts for his presentation of the Jonang system.

temporarily covered by impure defilements. The enlightened entity that exists in all beings is buddha-nature and it is other-emptiness, since it is empty of other phenomena, such as conventional reality and defilements. Dolpopa uses metaphors such as the sun covered by the clouds, or pure gold covered with dust, and others found in Mahāyāna classics, to speak of the other-emptiness. Furthermore, Dolpopa argues that buddha-nature and its other equivalent nomenclatures such as tathāgata-essence, buddha-element, etc., are the supreme Self, which, according to Dolpopa, is not to be confused with the concept of Self or *Brahman* found in Hindu literature.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, Dolpopa finds the “essence” of Mahāyāna system in the Last Wheel texts, not in the Middle Wheel teachings, as is normally the case for Tibetan thinkers in the history of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism. It is for his bold propagation of other-emptiness view as the ultimate view of Mahāyāna tradition that Dolpopa’s presentation is considered controversial.

Dratsepa, on the other hand, challenges the presentation of other-emptiness on several different points and concludes by arguing that other-emptiness is the lowest form of emptiness and therefore it is not the ultimate truth. He claims:

Although I fervently assert that other-emptiness exists conventionally and self-emptiness exists ultimately, I do not claim in the way that you do that the ultimate other-emptiness exists and conventional self-emptiness does not exist. Furthermore, since other-emptiness is the lowest of emptiness, it does not qualify for the ultimate emptiness.<sup>54</sup>

For Dratsepa, it is other-emptiness, being none other than the emptiness that is one-being-empty-of-the-other (*gcig gis gcig stong pa'i stong nyid*; *itaretarāśūnyatā*), that is labeled as the lowest emptiness in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*.<sup>55</sup> An example for the lowest emptiness mentioned in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* would be a house being empty of snakes, which Dolpopa does not assert as the ultimate other-emptiness.<sup>56</sup> While Dratsepa does not assert other-emptiness as ultimate truth, he does not completely reject the concept of other-emptiness, rather he argues that the other-emptiness that Dolpopa propagates is nothing but a conventional phenomenon.

Furthermore, Dratsepa strongly believes that there is not a single reliable source that clearly and literally vindicates Dolpopa’s notion of other-emptiness, since he demands such a quote:

Bring a clear citation that states that one must meditate on other-emptiness, known as the basis for pure gnosis, which is sugata-essence that is permanent,

<sup>53</sup> See Hopkins (2006, p. 116).

<sup>54</sup> *kun rdzob tu gzhan stong dang don dam du rang stong khas shin tu yang blangs kyang, khyed 'dod pa bzhin don dam gzhan stong dang kun rdzob rang stong gzhi ma grub de 'dra mi 'dod cing, gzhan stong stong nyid tha shal yin pas don dam stong pa'i go mi chod do*. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 266).

<sup>55</sup> Dratsepa quotes from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* in his *Ornament to the Ornament*: “The Great Wise One, the one-being-empty-of-other is the lowest of all [emptinesses], you must completely abandon this [view].” (*blo gros chen po gcig gis gcig stong pa 'di ni kun gyi tha shal te, de ni khod kyis yongs su spang bar bya'o*). See Dratsepa (1971, p. 264).

<sup>56</sup> For information on how Dolpopa explains the emptiness that is the one-being-empty-of-the-other (*gcig gis gcig stong pa'i stong nyid*) delineated in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, see Hopkins (2006, p. 228). Also, see Dratsepa (1971, pp. 188–189) for a response from a Jonang proponent to such a critique.



stable, static, and free from the other referring to the phenomena of cyclic existence that is to be abandoned, and which is free from conventional self-emptiness that is inherently endowed with all qualities of abandonment and realization since beginningless.”<sup>57</sup>

Here it is not simply the case that if Dolpopa or a follower of the Jonang School were to supply a clear quote, Dratsepa would gladly and easily embrace other-emptiness viewpoint, rather for Dratsepa, it is to demonstrate that the self-emptiness viewpoint is taught in reliable treatises as ultimate, and it is not taught as a conventional phenomenon.<sup>58</sup>

Since Dratsepa does not assert other-emptiness as the ultimate truth, he argues that self-emptiness is the ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Dratsepa concludes, “Therefore, in our Middle Way School, self-emptiness refers to the fact that the phenomena that merely exist on the conventional level and emptiness are indivisible and that it is ultimately free from elaborations. Self-emptiness does not refer to [non-existent phenomena] such as rabbit’s horns, barren women’s sons, and others.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, he claims:

Therefore, the abandonment of all dualities with respect to existence and non-existence, permanence and impermanence, cyclic existence and liberation, self and other, negative and positive phenomena, empty and non-empty, and others in all phenomena and all phenomena being empty of its own self and being ultimately free from all dualistic elaborations is the view of Middle Way. Those that teach [such a view] are Middle Way treatises.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, Dratsepa argues that the emptiness that is the ultimate truth is empty of inherent existence, which does not exist separately from conventional phenomena, but rather it exists indivisibly from conventional phenomena. Furthermore, self-emptiness, for Dratsepa, is also beyond any dualistic appearances of an inherent subject and object, self and other, enemies and friends, and others. Hence, Dratsepa strongly challenges the existence of other-emptiness that is defined as a phenomenon that exists in separation from conventional phenomena.

To sum up the section: (1) in contrast to Dolpopa’s claim that the Middle Wheel sūtras primarily teach interpretable meaning and the Last Wheel teachings mainly teach definitive meaning, Dratsepa argues that the Last Wheel tathāgata-essence

<sup>57</sup> *dad pa ye shes kyi kun gzhi zhes bya ba bde gshegs snying po rtag pa brtan pa theg zug pa gyung drung gzhan spang bya 'khor ba'i chos kyi stong pa'i gzhan stong, don dam pa gdod ma nas spangs rtogs kyi yon tan thams cad rang chas su ldan pa kun rdzob rang stong dang bral ba bsgom par bya'o zer ba'i lung gtsang ma zhig khyer la shog.* See Dratsepa (1971, p. 267).

<sup>58</sup> Dolpopa would completely disagree with Dratsepa. He would say that his position is justified based on the Buddha’s and highly realized bodhisattvas’ teachings.

<sup>59</sup> *des na kho bo cag dbu ma pa'i lugs la rang stong gi ngos 'dzin tha snyad tsam du snang ba'i chos de nyid dang, stong pa nyid don gzhan du brjod du med la, don dam par spros pa'i mtha' bral la byed kyi, rang stong zhes bya ba ri bong ra dang mo gsham gyi bu lta bu la zer ba min.* See Dratsepa (1971, p. 191).

<sup>60</sup> *des na 'dir yod med rtag chad 'khor 'das rang gzhan dgag sgrub stong mi stong gzung 'dzin la sogs gnyis thams cad spangs shing, chos thams cad rang rang gi ngo bos stong pa don dam par gnyis chos kyi spros pa'i mtha' thams cad dang bral ba dbu ma'i lta ba yin cing, de ston pa dbu ma'i gzhung yin te. . .* See Dratsepa (1971, p. 186).



teachings are a mixture of definitive and interpretable meanings and that the Middle Wheel teachings explicate only definitive meaning; (2) contrary to Dolpopa's assertion that all sentient beings have tathāgata-essence within them, Dratsepa demonstrates that none of them have it; (3) in opposition to Dolpopa's argument that purely definitive teachings are superior, Dratsepa states that the teachings that are a mixture of definitive and interpretable meanings are superior; (4) in contradistinction to Dolpopa's affirmation that self-emptiness is a conventional truth and other emptiness is an ultimate truth, Dratsepa argues that other-emptiness is a conventional truth and self-emptiness is an ultimate truth.

Therefore, given Dratsepa's positions vis-à-vis Dolpopa's viewpoints, we can better contextualize the former's indignation with respect to Dolpopa as evidenced by this quote:

Here someone [referring to Dolpopa], who is conceited, interprets the Buddha's teachings incorrectly. With his evil mind gratified with the poisonous water of biased mindset, he discards the nectar of the correct view. In such a bad time even if the truth is spoken, it is difficult to find people who will believe it. Therefore, I spoke a bit about the incorrigible view for the purpose of my own mental transformation.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

In a time when the fame and name of Dolpopa and his doctrinal presentation of other-emptiness teachings was spreading throughout central Tibet, overshadowing the teachings of self-emptiness taught by Buton and other fourteenth century Tibetan masters, Dratsepa's critique of Dolpopa's interpretation can be seen as another attempt to repudiate Dolpopa's presentation and to reaffirm the position of his teacher, Buton. It was not just Dolpopa and his followers who were propagating such an interpretation of Mahāyāna literature in central Tibet in the fourteenth century. Some other influential Tibetan scholars, in the earlier part of the fourteenth century, had also argued for a similar interpretation of Mahāyāna literature that Dolpopa later systematized. For instance, the *Uttaratantra* commentaries written by Tibetan scholars, such as Rigrel (*bcom ldan rig pa'i ral gri*, 1227–1305),<sup>62</sup> Sangphu Lodroe Tsungmey (*gsang phu blo gros mtshungs med*, 13th/14th centuries),<sup>63</sup> and Rinchen Yeshe clearly resonate with Dolpopa's interpretation of Mahāyāna treatise.

I argue that Dratsepa wrote the text in response to the spread of Dolpopa's presentation, which he thinks is “overwhelmed by the force of a great demon that

<sup>61</sup> 'di na kha cig mkhar par rlom yang thub pa'i gsung rab gzhan du 'chad, phyogs zhen dug chus blo ngan ngoms pas yang dag lta ba'i bdud rtsi 'dor, dus ngan 'di 'drar drang por smras kyang bden par 'dzin pa shin tu dka', *de phyir rang gi yid la goms phyir ma nor lta ba cung zad smras*. Dratsepa (1971, pp. 282–283). This quote appears at the end of Dratsepa's text.

<sup>62</sup> For a brief life story of Rigrel, see Roerich, (1976, pp. 336–339) Schaeffer and van der Kuijp, (2009, pp. 3–9); and van der Kuijp (1983, footnote 61, pp. 266–267).

<sup>63</sup> See Tsungmey (1974) for his position on buddha-nature issues.

holds onto reality,”<sup>64</sup> but to be more precise he wrote the text to critique those who had raised criticisms against his teacher’s view presented in Buton’s *Ornament*. Dratsepa structures his text into three main sections: the first section, which he calls, “refuting the misconception with respect to the Buddha-Dharma”<sup>65</sup> has around thirty pages; the second section, which he calls, “delineating the profound intention of the Buddha’s teachings”<sup>66</sup> consists of around sixteen pages; and the last section, which he entitles, “rebuttal to the criticisms by the opponents who harm the Buddha’s teachings with an intention motivated by wrong conceptions”<sup>67</sup> has around seventy pages. More than half of the text is devoted to the section where Dratsepa writes a rebuttal to the criticisms leveled by opponents against his teacher’s views explained in the *Ornament*.

While I doubt that Dratsepa’s arguments against Dolpopa’s presentation made any ardent followers of Dolpopa repudiate their doctrinal claims, even those who disagree with his positions may admit that his strategy for critiquing Dolpopa’s presentation was extremely skillful. Dratsepa, basically citing similar sūtras, tantras, and other commentarial works that are equally important to Dolpopa and his followers, twists the language that his opponents use and employs it to his advantage. In the end, although Dratsepa may not have succeeded in convincing any of Dolpopa’s followers with his scriptural citations and well-articulated reasoning in the *Ornament to the Ornament*, he certainly succeeded in demonstrating to his readers that he has mastered these Buddhist classics and that his faith in his guru, Buton, is unshakable. After all, in Dratsepa’s view, it is only through a perfect understanding of ultimate reality with the help of one’s guru that individuals can achieve enlightenment.

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<sup>64</sup> See footnote 26.

<sup>65</sup> *sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa la log par rtog pa dgag*. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 166).

<sup>66</sup> *bcom ldan ‘das kyi mdo’i dgongs pa zab mo bstan*. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 166).

<sup>67</sup> *phyin ci log gi rtog pas kun nas bslangs nas bstan pa dkrugs pa’i phyi rgon gyi rtod spang*. See Dratsepa (1971, p. 166).

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