

**Rong-zom-pa's Ontological Abyss: Where
the *Positivistic* Ontology of the
Tathāgatagarbha School and the *Negativistic*
Ontology of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda
School Meet**

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국문요약

몇 년 전, 나는 닝마파(rNying-ma school) 중진 학자들의 여래장 이론에 대한 다양한 해석을 발표하며, 사카파(Sa-skya school), 겔룩파(dGe-lugs school), 그리고 조낭파(Jo-nang school)와 같은 주류 학파 학자들의 여래장 해석과 비교·대조를 시도했다(Wangchuk 2004). 그 발표에서 나는 11세기 닝마파였던

롱솜빠(Rong-zom-pa)가 여래장 경전들로 인해 여래장 이론을 인식하고는 있었지만, 그 이론에 대해서 거의 침묵한 듯한 면모도 지적했었다. 뢰포파(Dol-po-pa)는 여래장의 입장에서 자기-발생적 인식(svayambhūjñāna)을 해석했지만, 롱솜빠는 오히려 자기-발생적 인식의 입장에서 여래장을 해석한 것으로 보인다.

이 논문에서 나는 어떻게 롱솜빠가 여래장 이론을 해석했는지 좀 더 들여다 보고자 한다. 논문은 네 부분으로 나뉜다. 첫 번째 부분은 여래장 이론에 대한 롱솜빠 해석의 간략한 교의적-해석적 배경을 제시하고자 한다. 두 번째 부분은 일체법부주론파(一切法不住論派, *Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda*) 존재론에 대한 롱솜빠의 이해를 다루고자 한다. 여기에서 존재론이라는 단어는 현상의 진정한 실체에 대한 이론이라는 의미로 사용되며, 일체법부주론파는 그 자체적으로 진정한 실체에 대한 이론을 가졌는데, 그 것은 롱솜빠에 따르면 “두 가지 실제(이제二諦)의 불가분성”이다. 세 번째 부분은 어떻게 롱솜빠가 여래장 존재론을 다뤘는지 간략히 탐구한다. 마지막으로, 네 번째 부분에서는 긍정적 존재론과 부정적 존재론이 롱솜빠에게서 조화될 수 있는지 없는지에 대한 질문에 답하고자 한다. 여래장 학파와 일체법부주론파의 전반적인 철학 교리는 다르지만, 공통적으로 한 핵심 지점이 있는듯 보인다. 즉 보성론(*Ratnagoṭravibhāga*) 1장 55-57계송에도 드러나 있는 ‘무기반성(substratumless-ness)’에 대한 아이디어이다. 따라서 ‘(형이상학적) 무기반성(groundlessness)과 무근거성(rootless-ness)’이라는 아이디어는 긍정적 존재론과 부정적 존재론을 조화시키는데 큰 역할을 할 것이다.

주제어: 롱솜빠, 여래장, 일체법부주론파, 보성론, 존재론, 자기-발생적 인식 (자연지), 무기반성

I. Prologue

With an intention to contribute a little to gaining a fuller and more accurate picture of the intellectual agenda and philosophical edifice of Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po (henceforth: Rong-zom-pa), an eleventh-century Tibetan scholar, I wish to address in this article merely one question, namely, how Rong-zom-pa interprets what we shall call the *positivistic* ontology of the Tathāgatagarbha school¹⁾ while he himself undoubtedly proposes a radically *negativistic* ontology of a Madhyamaka sub-school called Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda. To be sure, the word ontology is used here in the sense of the philosophical theory about the true or ultimate reality of phenomena (according to any given Buddhist system).²⁾ In

1) It was apparently Lambert Schmithausen who employed the term “Tathāgatagarbha school” (i.e. “Tathāgatagarbha-Schule”) for the first time. See, for example, Schmithausen 1969, 167–168. In a public lecture in 1998, however, he employed the term “Tathāgatagarbha-Richtung” with the explanation that at least in India, this strand of Mahāyāna Buddhism, unlike Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, does not seem to have devolved into a bigger and independent school. See Schmithausen 1998, 2; Schmithausen 1973, 132.

2) As a response to some points raised by the reviewers of this article, I wish to offer here some words of explanation. First, in a short article such as this, it has been impossible to either explain at length all the doctrinal backgrounds and arguments that have been presupposed by Rong-zom-pa or cite chunks of relevant Tibetan passages and critically edit and translate them. This will have to wait for another occasion. Second, insofar as every philosophical Buddhist system or sub-system would have its own conception of true reality, thereby using various terms (e.g. *śūnyatā*, *tathatā*, *dharmadhātu*, *bhūtakṛtī*, *samatā*, *dharmatā*, and so on), one can indeed speak of the ontology of any given Buddhist philosophical system, no matter whether it is positivistic or negativistic. The Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, too, has its own very distinct theory of true reality, which, according to Rong-zom-pa, is the “indivisibility of the two modes of reality” (*bden pa gnyis dbyer med pa*). In my view, the argument that

because Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda denies any (metaphysical) substratum, be it theistic or otherwise, one cannot even speak of “negativistic” ontology, for it is no ontology at all, does not hold. Such a claim is unfounded insofar as we are speaking here of a “negativistic” ontology of all saṃsāric and nirvāṇic phenomena. Third, it is true that the expression “the ontology of substratum-less-less” indeed sounds like an oxymoron, but we cannot deny that, in general, Mahāyāna sources abound in paradoxical statements, as exemplified by the idea of what are called the “eight [kinds of] profundity” (*zab mo brgyad*) (Mi-pham, *mKhas 'jug*, 238.1-241.4), which are said to be often misunderstood as contradictions, and a comprehension of them is said to be a realization (*abhisamaya: mngon par rtogs pa*) of a *bodhisattva* of the eighth stage. Fourth, one question that recurs when dealing with the Tathāgatagarbha theory is why emptiness, purity, or “substratum-less-ness” of rocks or vegetables cannot qualify to be *tathāgatagarbha* and why rocks and vegetables cannot become *buddhas*. There may be several explanations why the Tibetan tradition, to my knowledge, never came to accept that inanimate entities (such as rocks) and vegetative entities (such as plants) can become *buddhas*. I can think of three possible explanations. (a) They followed the Indian tradition, and as far as I am concerned, Indian Buddhism did not propose that entities such as rocks and vegetables can become *buddhas*. (b) Following the Tibetan (and certainly also Indian) Buddhist understanding of the trans/ultra-phenomenal reality (e.g. *tathatā*, *śūnyatā*, *dharmatā*, and *tathāgatagarbha*), it makes no sense whatsoever to speak as if there were multiple and separate *śūnyatās* or *tathāgatagarbhas*, for example, one confined to a piece of carrot and one to a rabbit. From the perspective of *dharmatā*, there is only one trans/ultra-phenomenal reality, although one does speak of, for example, sixteen kinds of *śūnyatā* merely on the basis of *dhamas/dharmas*. This *dharmatā*-based distinction of the various kinds of *dharmatā* is said to be true also in the case of the difference between the non-essentiality of persons (*pudgalanairātmya: gang zag gi bdag med pa*) and non-essentiality of phenomena (*dharmairātmya: chos kyi bdag med pa*). In other words, there is one *dharmatā* that underlies all *pudgalas* (e.g. rabbit) and *dhamas* (e.g. carrot), and whoever gains deep meditative insight into the *dharmatā* would become awakened. Theoretically, if a piece of rock or a piece of carrot were able to gain deep meditative insight into the *dharmatā*, they would become a *buddha*, but the Tibetan tradition (following the Indian one) did not accept the sentience of entities such as rocks and carrots, and hence for them it is ridiculous to speak of rocks or carrots becoming *buddhas*. (c) It appears that one of the reasons why it makes no sense to talk of the possibility of inanimate or insentient entities becoming *buddhas* is that the Tibetan tradition, no matter which school,

particular, the idea that the “root-less-ness” of the mind (or, the rootless mind) is the “root” of all phenomena, or ideas similar to it, is explicit in a number of textual sources that are *de facto* considered the literature of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda by Rong-zom-pa.³⁾

II. A Doctrinal-Historical Background

To give some doctrinal-historical background to the question, two related remarks may be made here. First, doctrinally speaking, Tibetans, from the very outset, inherited forms of Indian Buddhism that already presupposed an hierarchical doxographical scheme such as of the four religio-philosophical systems (*siddhānta: grub pa'i mtha'*), namely, Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka.⁴⁾ The former two would be customarily regarded as Hīnayānic and the latter two as Mahāyānic.⁵⁾ Second, the fixity and rigidity

seems to take one of the two kinds of Buddhist idealism as a point of departure, namely, what may be called the “idealism according to which there is no other creator (i.e. other than one’s mind)” (*byed pa po gzhan med pa'i sems tsam*) and “idealism according to which there is no external entities” (*phyi don med pa'i sems tsam*). Various scholars and systems may disagree about the ontological status of the mind. That is, for some, what underlies the mind as its true reality is *sūnyatā*, and for others what underlies the mind as its true reality is the innate gnosis. But all would agree that the principle point of departure is the mind.

- 3) See, for example, the **Guhyagarbhatantra* (Wangchuk 2007, 213, n. 72): *rtsa ba med pa'i sems nyid ni || chos rnam kun gyi rtsa ba yin ||*.
- 4) For references on the preeminence of the Madhyamaka system over the first three systems, see Seyfort Ruegg 2000, 2-3, n. 2; Seyfort Ruegg 1989, 130, n. 250; Wangchuk 2004, 180, n. 28; Wangchuk 2013, 1319, nn. 11 & 12.
- 5) That Yogācāra and Madhyamaka have been considered Mahāyānic has been made clear, for

of the four Buddhist religio-philosophical systems explicit in Vajragarbha's *Hevajrapañḍārthaṭīkā*⁶⁾ seem to have made it difficult for the Tibetan tradition to neatly classify the *positivistic* Indian Mahāyānic doctrine of the Tathāgatagarbha school into a systemic “drawer” or “box.” Any attempt to put it into the Yogācāra or Madhyamaka “box” inevitably would be subject to vehement objections. In the end, it seems that the *positivistic* doctrine of the Tathāgatagarbha school somehow came to be subsumed under, or absorbed into, what came to be known in Tibet as the “Three Great Ones” (*chen po gsum*), namely, the (1) Great Middle Way (*dbu ma chen po*), (2) Great Seal (*phyag rgya chen po*), and (3) Great Perfection (*rdzogs pa chen po*). To be sure, the Great Middle Way is to be understood either in the sense of Mega-Madhyamaka of Intrinsic Emptiness (*rang stong dbu ma chen po*) as proposed, for example, by the dGe-lugs scholar mKhas-grub-rje (1385-1438) or as Mega-Madhyamaka of Extrinsic Emptiness (*gzhan stong dbu ma chen po*) as proposed, for example, by Dol-po-pa (1292-1361). (2) Similarly, the Great Seal may be understood either in the sense of the unusual “Sūtric Mahāmudrā” (*mdo'i phyag rgya chen po*) professed by the bKa'-brgyud-cum-bKa'-gdams scholar sGam-po-pa (1079-1153) or in the sense of the usual “Mantric Mahāmudrā” (*sngags kyi phyag rgya chen po*). (3) Finally, the Great Perfection, too, can be understood either as proposed by the rNying-ma school or by the Bon religion.

example, by Rong-zom-pa in his *lTa phreng 'grel pa* (327.3-4): *theg pa' chen po'ang rnam pa gmyis te | rnal 'byor spyod pa dang dbu ma pa'o* l. For some more sources on this topic, see Wangchuk 2013, 1316, n. 1. For a discussion of the difficulty regarding the systemic affiliation of Sautrāntika, see Wangchuk 2013, 1318, n. 8.

6) For the pertinent Sanskrit text and Tibetan translation, see Wangchuk 2007, 120, n. 80. For some additional references, see Wangchuk 2013, 1318, n. 9.

III. Rong-zom-pa on the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda Ontology

Our understanding of Rong-zom-pa's allegiance to the Madhyamaka sub-school Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, his identity as a Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavādin, and his perception and depiction of this sub-school's philosophy seems to be crucial for understanding his overall intellectual project and philosophical edifice. In this particular context, it seems important to bear four points in mind. First, Orna Almogi's findings have revealed beyond doubt that Rong-zom-pa was a Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavādin.⁷⁾ Second, for Rong-zom-pa, Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda is a "system of the special Mahāyāna" (*theg pa chen po thun mong ma yin pa'i tshul*)⁸⁾ due to the five special stands it proposes, namely, (1) a special ontology (i.e. here "theory of being or true reality"), (2) a special soteriology (i.e. here "theory of being or becoming free from saṃsāric bondage"), (3) a special gnoseology (i.e. here "theory of liberating insight"), (4) a special cosmology (i.e. here "the theory about the nature of the world-systems") or perhaps a special phenomenology, and (5) a special psychology (i.e. here "cognitional, emotional, and conational factors that govern those persons' decisions and actions"). Of all these defining characteristics of Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, the one that pertains to special ontology seems to be the most fundamental and decisive, namely, the doctrine of the indivisibility of the twofold truth/reality (*bden pa gnyis*

7) Almogi 2009, 16, 225-232 (Rong-zom-pa's Madhyamaka affiliation); Almogi 2010, 135; Almogi 2013, 1330, n. 1.

8) Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (Almogi 2009, 415). See also Almogi 2009, 28, 38-39, 210, 294, 414-415, 417, 421-423; Wangchuk 2009, 226-227.

dbyer med pa) which is essentially or inextricably linked with or rooted in the idea that phenomena, be they saṃsāric or nirvāṇic, have no metaphysical substratum of any kind whatsoever, be it theistic or non-theistic.⁹⁾

Third, the systemic range of Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda for Rong-zom-pa extends from the Sūtric system that proposes the indivisibility of the two-fold truth/reality (*bden pa gnyis dbyer med pa*) all the way through all the Mantric systems, culminating in the Atiyoga (or rDzogs-chen) system.¹⁰⁾ In other words, for Rong-zom-pa, Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda does not represent a single system in the doxographical hierarchy but rather a broad spectrum of it. A greater section of the spectral range of Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, however, falls within the Mantric system.¹¹⁾

Fourth, we also know that Rong-zom-pa's conception of the ontology of

9) For Rong-zom-pa's emphasis on the ontology of substratum-less-ness, see Almogi 2009, 39-41 & 226-231; Almogi 2010, 135.

10) Rong-zom-pa, *Theg chen tshul 'jug* (502.17-19): *gsang sngags kyi nang gi bye brag 'di dag kyang | bden pa gnyis dbyer myed par 'dod pa'i dang po kri ya nas brtsams nas | rdzogs pa chen por mthar phyin to* || (cited in Almogi 2009, 231, n. 143).

11) The way Rong-zom-pa's uses the expression dBu-ma'i-tshul ("Madhyamic system") in relation to his Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, gSang-sngags-kyi-tshul ("Mantric system"), rDzogs-pa-chen-po'i-tshul ("rDzogs-chen system"), and what have later come to be known as Svātantrika-Madhyamaka and Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka seem worth noting here. In his *Theg chen tshul 'jug* (476.17-477.12), it becomes contextually clear that his "Madhyamic system" actually includes only what has later come to be known as Svātantrika-Madhyamaka. His Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda is represented, though not fully, by "Mantric system" and "rDzogs-chen system." The lowest and Sūtric stratum of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda system is occasionally (i.e. as in this context) not represented. It can be, however, surmised that his Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda actually spans from the Sūtric-Mahāyānic system that teaches the *nītārtha* doctrine of the indivisibility of the two truths or modes of reality to the Atiyoga or rDzogs-chen system that is said to teach nothing but *nītārtha* teachings.

Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda—as is clearly reflected, for example, in his conception of Buddhology—is categorically and consistently “negativistic.” That is, according to this stance, there is neither a substratum, nor a core, nor an essence of any kind, either beyond, beneath, behind, or within the myriad phenomena of mere appearances (*pratibhāsamātra: snang ba tsam*). For example, “mirage-water” may appear to arise, exist, and cease, but even as it appears to arise, exist, and cease, it has in actuality never arisen, existed, and ceased, and all the while there has been nothing more than the spatial domain in which the phenomenon of “mirage-water” occurs. Similarly, even when saṃsāric and nirvāṇic phenomena appear to arise, exist, and cease, they have in actuality never arisen, existed, and ceased, and there has never been anything other than the “mere sphere of reality” (**dharmadhātuviśuddhimātra: chos kyi dbyings rnam par dag pa tsam*).¹² It in fact becomes even obvious that the only difference between a nihilistic conception of ontology and the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda’s “negativistic” conception of it is that the latter would never deny the possibility of mirage-water-like mere appearances (*snang ba tsam*) of mundane and supramundane phenomena that are proposed to operate according to the principle of origination-in-dependence (*pratītyasamutpāda: rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*).

IV. Rong-zom-pa on the Tathāgatagarbha Ontology

Let us now turn to the question of how Rong-zom-pa dealt with what we

12) Wangchuk 2012, 26.

shall call the *positivistic* ontology of the Tathāgatagarbha school by considering four points. First, we should be able to *a priori* take for granted in general that the Tathāgatagarbha school of Mahāyāna Buddhism does propose a *positivistic* ontology, though certainly never in the sense of a *substantialistic* ontology.¹³⁾ I contend that also Indian scholars such as Candrakīrti and Kamalaśīla and Tibetan scholars such as those from the dGe-lugs and Sa-skya schools—even when they disagreed with their opponents’ interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha theory—neither categorically reject the Tathāgatagarbha theory *per se* as a false non-Buddhist theory nor regarded *tathāgatagarbha* as a *substantialistic* ontology (e.g. in the sense of an ontological entity or reality that is substantially existent). Second, a set of questions that need to be answered here is (a) whether Rong-zom-pa knew of the Tathāgatagarbha theory and its Indian sources, and if so (b) whether he, as a convinced proponent of Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, was at all interested in the Tathāgatagarbha theory and thus intellectually engage in it, and if he did (c) to what degree, and (d) in what manner. (a) Several years ago,¹⁴⁾ I pointed out that Rong-zom-pa was aware of the Tathāgatagarbha theory from the Tathāgatagarbha scriptures translated during the Period of Early Dissemination and also from other Tantric and non-Tantric sources that contained either the Tathāgatagarbha theory proper or terms and concepts that have close affinity with it such as the concept of self-occurring gnosis (*svayambhūjñāna: rang byung gyi ye shes*). What seems to be sure is that Rong-zom-pa could

13) For a discussion of the question whether the positive conception of the absolute by the Tathāgatagarbha school can be called “ontologistic” and “substantialistic,” see Schmithausen 1973, 132-138.

14) Wangchuk 2004.

not have known and indeed did not know the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the non-scriptural *magnum opus* that systematically presents the Tathāgatagarbha theory. (b) Even as a convinced proponent of Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, Rong-zom-pa did certainly intellectually engage in the Tathāgatagarbha theory proper (that is, the idea expressed by the term *tathāgatagarbha*). With regard to the extent of his engagement in the Tathāgatagarbha theory, as I pointed out on an earlier occasion, he seems to be somewhat reticent about it, as he only rarely commented on the term *tathāgatagarbha* explicitly. I have been able to find only one occasion where he explicitly mentions the term and concept of *tathāgatagarbha*, unambiguously explaining it as *bahuvrīhi* compound,¹⁵ that is, not in the sense of “all sentient beings are *tathāgatagarbha*” but rather of “all sentient beings possess *tathāgatagarbha*.” In addition, he also employs and explains the Tibetan term *bde bar gshegs pa'i snying po* (**sugatagarbha*), which occurs in the **Guhyagarbhatantra* as well as in several other rNying-ma Tantric scriptures and which has perhaps been a metrical variant for *tathāgatagarbha*.¹⁶ He also employs, albeit rarely, the expression *byang chub kyi snying po* (**bodhigarbha*), also

15) Rong-zom-pa, *Dam tshig mdo rgyas* (370.9-12): *de bzhin du mdo kha cig las || so so 'i skye bo 'i shes pa 'ang rang bzhin gyis rnam par byang ba can yin no zhe 'am | de bzhin gshegs pa 'i snying po can yin zhe 'am || zag pa med pa 'i sems can no zhes bya ba la sogs pa gsungs mod kyi | de dag tu ni mtshan ma 'i chos kyang shas cher 'dod la | 'dir sangs ma rgyas pa 'i chos rdul tsam yang mi 'dod do ||*.

16) Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (127.13-15). The expression *de bzhin gshegs pa 'i snying po* (113.3-4; 135.21-22) means something else (i.e. “syllabic seeds of the Tathāgatas”) and has nothing to do with the Tathāgatagarbha theory. The term *bde bar gshegs pa 'i snying po* in the phrase *bde bar gshegs pa 'i snying po 'i dbang* (177.9) is likewise irrelevant. For the occurrences of **sugatagarbha* and *buddhagarbha*, see Kano 2016, 92-94.

as a *bahuvrīhi* compound.¹⁷⁾ Although the word **bodhigarbha* does not seem to be attested in Sanskrit sources, its semantic proximity or affinity to the term *tathāgatagarbha* is all too obvious. Of course, *byang chub kyi snying po* would also render *bodhimaṇḍa*, a term which is well attested, but it is not quite sure whether it is only employed in the sense of a physical locality (i.e. “seat, or spot, of awakening”) or perhaps also in the sense of some metaphysical reality (i.e. as a synonym of *tathāgatagarbha*).¹⁸⁾ We can observe a discrepancy in Rong-zom-pa’s references to and emphasis on the terms *tathāgatagarbha* and *svayambhūjñāna*. While he profusely refers to the concept of *svayambhūjñāna*, he only rarely employs the term *tathāgatagarbha* (or its possible metrical variant **sugatagarbha*). (d) The manner in which he interprets the *tathāgatagarbha* is significant. When he had to (on rare occasions) explicitly explain the term *tathāgatagarbha*, he did so in the light of what may again be characterized as his *negativistic* interpretation of *svayambhūjñāna* or **svayambhūjñānagarbha* (*rang byung gyi ye shes kyi snying po*), which is also clearly understood by him as a *bahuvrīhi* compound.¹⁹⁾

17) Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (234.2-3): *sems can thams cad byang chub kyi snying po can* (“all sentient beings contain an embryo of awakening”); *Dam tshig mdo rgyas* (382.12): *sems can thams cad ni byang chub kyi snying po can yin la*; *gNang bkag yi ge* (107.1): *sems can thams cad byang chub kyi snying po can*; *Rab gnas cho ga* (181.19-20): *'gro ba ris drug tha mal pa thams cad ni | byang chub kyi snying po can gyi rang bzhin yin la*; *Grub mtha'i brjed byang* (220.8): *ye nas byang chub kyi snying po can* (in the context of explaining *dharma* in the compound *dharmakāya* as *gotra*).

18) See, however, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* (III.§54-60, 36-38) where the word *bodhimaṇḍa* has been clearly employed not in the sense of physical locality but rather of Buddhist spirituality.

19) Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (81.17-18): *sems can gyi sems rang byung gyi ye shes kyi snying po can* (“mind of a sentient being which possesses an embryo of self-occurring

In fact, Rong-zom-pa's employment of the concept of *svayambhūjñāna* seems to be comparable to the concept of *tathāgatajñāna* employed in the **Tathāgatopattisaṃbhavanirdeśa*, which is said to be a kind of precursor of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* and is one of the earliest sources to employ the term *tathāgatagarbha*.²⁰ Insofar as Rong-zom-pa does not interpret *svayambhūjñāna* as a cognitive or gnostic element and always equates it with **dharmadhātuvisuddhimātra* (*chos kyi dbyings nam par dag pa tsam*), his interpretation of *svayambhūjñāna* can be said to be *negativistic*. In this regard, Rong-zom-pa can be said to differ from Dol-po-pa, whose interpretation of *svayambhūjñāna* as a cognitive or gnostic element is always *positivistic*.

V. Are the *Positivistic* and *Negativistic* Ontologies Reconcilable?

The key question that this paper seeks to answer is whether the *positivistic* ontology proposed by the Tathāgatagarbha school is actually reconcilable with the radically *negativistic* ontology proposed by Rong-zom-pa's Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda. This question involves two issues that should not be confused or conflated. The first issue concerns the question whether Rong-

gnosis"). See also his *Rang byung ye shes* (111.22-23): *so so skye bo tha mal pa'i shes pa rang byung gyi ye shes can; ibid.* (113.13): *so so skye bo'i shes pa ni rang byung gyi ye shes can; ibid.* (116.16-17, 117.16, 119.6): *so so skye bo'i tha mal pa'i shes pa'ang rang byung gyi ye shes can; ibid.* (123.23): *snang ba thams cad rang byung gi ye shes rang snang ba'i dkyil 'khor.*

20) Schmithausen 2014, 640. For some allusions to the **Tathāgatopattisaṃbhavanirdeśa*, see Kano 2016, 3, n. 8; 93; 120, n. 99; 303.

zom-pa himself sees the absolute reality proposed by the Tathāgatagarbha school and the one proposed by Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda to be compatible, equatable, or identical, and thus harmonizable or reconcilable. The second issue concerns the question whether the proposed reconcilability of the two apparently opposed or juxtaposed *positivistic* and *negativistic* ontologies is also justifiable based on authoritative sources of the Tathāgatagarbha school.

First, from Rong-zom-pa's perspective, there seems to be no doubt whatsoever that the referent of the term *tathāgatagarbha* and its various synonyms and quasi-synonyms employed by the sources of the Tathāgatagarbha school and the referent of the concept of the indivisibility of the twofold truth/reality—or, in other words, the substratum-less-ness of all saṃsāric and nirvāṇic phenomena, or the concept that “all phenomena are awakened *ab initio*” (*chos thams cad ye nas sangs rgyas pa*),²¹⁾ which plays a far more significant role in Rong-zom-pa's thought and which is the hallmark of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school—are the one and the same, so that the two apparently different concepts are reconcilable.

Second, regarding the question of the justifiability of the supposed reconcilability of the two apparently opposed ontologies, if *tathāgatagarbha* itself is posited to be a metaphysical substratum, the ontological position of the Tathāgatagarbha school and that of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school would be irreconcilable. As far as the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school is concerned, ordinary sentient beings and awakened beings, and all phenomena, be they saṃsāric or nirvāṇic, have no metaphysical substratum.

21) Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (200.5-6, 229.22-23, 568.1-6); *Rang byung ye shes* (125.23).

They are groundless, baseless, rootless, substratum-less. But what about the Tathāgatagarbha sources themselves? Do they see *tathāgatagarbha* as a metaphysical or ontological substratum? Or, do they, too, like the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school, propose that ultimately there is nothing which has a metaphysical substratum and that thus *tathāgatagarbha* itself is not a metaphysical substratum and has no metaphysical substrate of any kind? As I mentioned above, Rong-zom-pa does not seem to have known the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*. But it (i.e. *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* 1.55-57) seems to precisely teach the core philosophy of “(metaphysical) groundless-ness and root-less-ness” (*gzhi med rtsa braḷ*), namely, that although the purity of the mind is the substratum of all, it itself is without any substratum.²² It should be unmistakably made clear that I neither presuppose nor propose that the overall philosophical doctrines, approaches, and accentuations of the Tathāgatagarbha school (as represented by the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*) and Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school are identical. All I wish to emphasize here is that despite many differences between the two, there seems to be one crucial point of commonality, namely, the idea of “substratum-less-ness,” which one can neither ignore nor deny, regardless of how one may wish to interpret it. If our understanding that the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* and the school of thought it represents do propose or presuppose the ontology of metaphysical groundless-ness and root-less-ness holds, it can indeed be argued that the reconcilability of the two apparently opposed *negativistic* and *positivistic*

22) See Wangchuk 2007, 212, where the Sanskrit text of *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* 1.55-57 along with an English rendering can be found. An English translation is also found in Takasaki 1966, 236.

ontologies is not only a mere creative or inclusivistic interpretation of Rong-zom-pa but is in fact also justifiable on the basis of Tathāgatagarbha sources.

Indeed, from Rong-zom-pa's standpoint, it would have made no sense to distinguish between the ontology of the Tathāgatagarbha school and that of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school, insofar as he would have subsumed the Tathāgatagarbha system and sources under what he regarded as the system and sources of "special Mahāyāna," and thus by default of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school. The Tathāgatagarbha school itself would represent for him one of the lowest Sūtric strands in the spectrum of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school. In other words, for Rong-zom-pa, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*—owing to the ontology of substratum-less-ness that it professes—would belong to the group of sources of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school, which include, for example, the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*,²³⁾ *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*,²⁴⁾ *Guhyasamājatantra*,²⁵⁾ and **Guhyagarbhatantra*.²⁶⁾

How then is one to explain, from his point of view, the obvious *positivistic* and *negativistic* doctrinal tendencies found in various strands and strata of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school? The difference between the *negativistic* and *positivistic* doctrinal tendencies of various strands of "special Mahāyāna" could be explained as a difference of emphasis on the *negativistic* space-like

23) For the Sanskrit text of *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* 20.5 along with an English translation of it, see Wangchuk 2007, 212-213.

24) For the Sanskrit text of the pertinent passage from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* along with an English translation of it, see Wangchuk 2007, 212.

25) See Wangchuk 2007, 213, n. 72.

26) See Wangchuk 2007, 213, n. 73.

sphere of reality and on the *positivistic* heavenly-bodies-like inherent qualities. While all strands and strata of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school propose the metaphysical substratum-less-ness of all saṃsāric and nirvāṇic phenomena, the type and degree of emphasis would differ. Likewise, while Rong-zom-pa himself emphasizes the *negativistic* space-like sphere of reality, he cannot be seen as opposed to those who emphasize heavenly-bodies-like inherent qualities as long as these qualities are seen as mere appearances (*snang ba tsam*) and as long as neither theistic nor non-theistic metaphysical substratum is posited.

VI. Epilogue

By way of conclusion, I would like to restate the main point I have tried to make in this article. Rong-zom-pa, the eleventh-century Tibetan scholar, is known to have proposed a radically *negativistic* ontology according to the school of Madhyamaka called Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda. He has, however, also interpreted the ontology of the Tathāgatagarbha school, which is known to be *positivistic*. He has interpreted the Tathāgatagarbha ontology in the light of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda ontology by reducing both to the ontological reality of the indivisibility of the twofold truth/reality, which is essentially the substratum-less-ness of all saṃsāric and nirvāṇic phenomena. This seems to be justified also on the basis of Tathāgatagarbha sources such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.

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27) Note that all short titles in the bibliography have been arranged according to the Latin alphabetical order.

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Abstract

Rong-zom-pa's Ontological Abyss: Where the *Positivist* Ontology of the Tathāgatagarbha School and the *Negativistic* Ontology of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda School Meet

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Several years ago, I have made an attempt to present the various interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha theory by leading scholars of the rNying-ma school, and by comparing and contrasting them with the interpretations of it offered by those scholars from the main-stream Sa-skya, dGe-lugs, and Jo-nang schools (Wangchuk 2004). There I also pointed out that although Rong-zom-pa, an eleventh-century rNying-ma scholar, was aware of the Tathāgatagarbha theory from the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtric scriptures, seems to be quite reticent about the theory. He does not interpret *svayambhūjjñāna* in the light of *tathāgatagarbha* (as Dol-po-pa is wont to do) but seems to interpret the latter in the light of the former.

In this paper, I wish to take a closer look at how Rong-zom-pa interprets the Tathāgatagarbha theory. My paper is divided into four sections. Section one attempts to provide a brief doctrinal-historical background to Rong-zom-pa's interpretation of the Tathāgatagarbha theory. Section two deals with his understanding of the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda ontology. The word ontology is used here in the sense of the theory about the true reality of phenomena, and the Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, too, has its own theory of true reality, which, according to Rong-zom-pa, is the “indivisibility of the two modes of reality.” Section three examines briefly how Rong-zom-pa deals with the Tathāgatagarbha ontology. Finally, section four is devoted to answering the question as to whether the *positivistic* and *negativistic* ontologies can be reconcilable for Rong-zom-pa. I contend that although the overall philosophical doctrines of the Tathāgatagarbha school and Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda school are different, there seems to be one crucial point of commonality, namely, the idea of “substratum-less-ness,” also expressed by *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1.55-57. It thus appears that the idea of “(metaphysical) groundless-ness and root-less-ness” would play pivotal role in reconciling the positivistic and negativistic ontologies.

Keywords: Rong-zom-pa, Tathāgatagarbha, Sarvadharmāpratiṣṭhānavāda, *Ratnagotravibhāga*, ontology, *svayaṃbhūjñāna*, substratum-less-ness

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