

Affirmation of Eternal Self in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to widespread academic and public opinion, there does exist a positive stratum of affirmative teaching on a True Self within Buddhism, specifically in the Mahayana *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* and in the declarations of some notable Buddhist monks – Dolpopa of Tibet and Maha Boowa of Thailand. The article seeks to redress the balance regarding the ‘non-Self’ doctrine, specifically relative to the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*.

บทคัดย่อ

ในขณะที่นักวิชาการและสาธารณะชนทั่วไปเชื่อว่า ศาสนาพุทธเน้นความไม่มีตัวตน (Non-Self) แต่ศาสนาพุทธนิกายมหายาน และพระภิกษุที่มีชื่อเสียงบางรูป เช่น พระทิเบต ชื่อ Dolpopa และท่านหลวงตามหาบัว ญาณสัมปันโน เชื่อว่าศาสนาพุทธได้มีการกล่าวถึงการมีตัวตนที่แท้จริง (True Self) และบทความนี้พยายามชี้ให้เห็นว่า ความเชื่อเรื่องความมีตัวตนนั้นมีอยู่

Key words: Buddha; *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*; Self; *ātman*; *tathāgata-garbha*; Buddha nature; Dolpopa; Maha Boowa.

1. Introduction

The prevailing view within scholarship on the reality of any ‘Self’ in the Buddha’s teachings (both Theravada and Mahayana) may be summarized as follows: The Buddha denied the Self or Soul (the *ātman*) and any enduring essence (*svabhāva*). He utterly rejected and refuted all notions of a permanent Self or essence, both in the Pāli suttas and in the Mahāyāna scriptures. For the Buddha, man is composed solely of the five *skandhas* (constituent elements) of body, feeling, cognition, volition, and consciousness. That is the totality of man or any other being.

Is such a blanket denial of Selfhood within Buddhism, however, justified? Is it in fact accurate to claim that Buddhism denies, *tout court*, an imminent and eternal Self? Is there not at least one major Mahayana scripture which speaks affirmatively of the reality of the Self?

I suggest that there is, and that this scripture is the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*. Teachings by the Tibetan monk, Dolpopa, and the present-day Thai forest monk, Maha Boowa, also contain affirmative statements on the Self. In this study, we shall look briefly at both.

2. The *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*

The *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* presents itself as the final Mahāyāna teachings of the Buddha, delivered on the last day and night of his physical life upon earth. As such, it constitutes an alleged final and definitive summation of the Buddha’s Dharma from a Mahāyāna perspective.

The sūtra survives in its Sanskrit form only in some ten fragmentary pages. Fortunately, the sūtra was translated into Tibetan and Chinese. The shortest and earliest extant translated version is the translation into Chinese by Faxian and Buddhahadra in six juan (418CE); the next in terms of scriptural development is the Tibetan version (c790CE) by Jinamitra, Jñānagarbha and Devacandra; and the lengthiest version of all is what is known as the “Northern version” in 40 juan by Dharmakṣema (422CE). I shall quote from all three versions in this paper, using both Kosho Yamamoto’s English translation of the Dharmakṣema, as well as the as-yet unpublished English translations by my friend and scholarly colleague, Stephen Hodge, of the entire Tibetan version – a translation which I myself commissioned – and of parts of the Fa-xian. Stephen Hodge has generously supplied these translations for my specific use in research articles such as this.

Early in the sūtra (Tibetan version), in Chapter Three, ‘Grief’, the Buddha is confronted by a number of zealous Buddhist monks who are keen practitioners of what we might term “absolutist non-Self Buddhism” – i.e., the frequent meditative cultivation of the notion that absolutely everything is impermanent, characterised by suffering and is “non-Self” (*anātman*). To our surprise, the Buddha does not praise his enthusiastic followers for their non-Self-ism, but rather castigates them for “extremism”. He even dismisses as “mistaken and worthless” their proud non-Self meditations and chides them for not understanding that meditation upon impermanence, suffering and non-Self is “highly contingent” and needs to be safeguarded from misapplication.

According to the Buddha, the monks have grasped merely the outer letters, the externalities, of his doctrine, but not its essential spirit or inner meaning. They have fallen victim to an extreme and inverted form of meditative practice in which they view that which is Eternal as impermanent, that which is truly the Self as that which is non-Self, that which is utterly Blissful as suffering, and that which is truly Pure as that which is impure. They have failed to distinguish between what is of samsāra (the changeful, reincarnational round) and what is of Great Nirvāna (*mahā-nirvāna* or *mahā-parinirvāna*). Samsāra is non-Self-thus far the monks are right. But they have committed a serious metaphysical blunder-the Buddha indicates-by ascribing samsaric qualities and characteristics to the non-samsaric, to unconditioned Nirvana, indeed to the Buddha himself. For while everything samsaric is rightly labelled as “non-Self”, the Buddha reveals in the course of the sūtra that he, as the Dharmakāya (body of Truth), is nothing less than eternal Self (*ātman*) itself. In the “Grief” chapter, the Buddha explicates what he means by ‘Self’, eternity, happiness, and purity:

The Self signifies the Buddha; ‘eternal’ signifies the *dharmakāya* [ultimate Body of Truth]; ‘happiness’ signifies Nirvana; and ‘pure’ is a synonym for the Dharma. (Hodge, 2006, p. 39)

The Buddha declares that it is in fact untrue to say that *all* dharmas [phenomena] are non-Self, and, in the Dharmakṣema translation, he declares that “in truth there is the Self [*ātman*] in all dharmas” (Yamamoto/Page, 1999, Vol. 1, p.46). Offering a rare characterisation of what this Self in fact is, the Buddha states:

The Self (*ātman*) is reality (*tattva*), the Self is permanent (*nitya*), the Self is virtue (*guna*), the Self is eternal (*śāśvatā*), the Self is stable (*dhruva*), the Self is peace (*siva*). (Hodge, 2006, Chapter Four, “Grief”, p. 40).

In the Faxian and Dharmakṣema versions, another quality is found listed here: that the Self is “sovereign”, “self-governing” or “autonomous” (*aiśvarya*). Furthermore, Faxian includes the adjective “unchanging”/“untransforming”/“non-mutating” (*aviparināma*), while Dharmakṣema also adds that the Self is “true” (*satya*).

It is sometimes claimed by scholars who comment on the doctrine of the Self in the *Nirvāna Sūtra* that when the Buddha speaks of the *ātman*, he is only doing so in a concessionary manner, as a provisional, tactical manoeuvre for those students who are not yet ready to face up to the frightening enormity of the non-Self and Emptiness doctrines, and that what he really wishes to say is that there actually exists no Self at all. We shall come back to the question of whether this text views itself as provisional or ultimate in its doctrines a little later, but for now, it needs to be emphasised that for the Buddha to assert something to be *satya* and *tattva* (both adjectives appear alongside one another in the Dharmakṣema text) is tantamount to his insisting that it truly is Real - not just seemingly real or deceptively authentic. The term, *tattva*, embedded in such a metaphysical verbal environment as the present context - where rectification of a misapprehended non-Self doctrine is centre-stage of discussion – would seem to suggest a genuine, ultimate Reality, rather than some provisional, metaphorical notion or accommodating make-shift simulacrum of Truth.

Let us consider a number of the other epithets applied to the True Self in the passage just quoted. First is the notion of the “eternity” or “permanence” of the Buddha (who is, we must remember, the True Self, according to this scripture). The Sanskrit term, *nitya*, forcefully expresses the idea of eternal continuance and perpetual persistence throughout all time and beyond. The Self that is *nitya* is not just real for a million years or even a million *kalpas* (aeons). It is real and lasting *always*.

So central is this concept of the *nityatā* or eternity of the Buddha in the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* that the Buddha at one point refers to this scripture as “the great sūtra of the Buddha’s eternity” (*nityatā*) (Hodge, 2006, p. 141, Chapter 17, “The Bodhisattva”). Perpetual Buddhic Reality lies at the heart of the message which this sūtra seeks to communicate, as an antidote to the prevalent Buddhist notion of universal change, flux and death. Buddhas, by contrast, know of no cessation: “the Tathāgata [Buddha] has no death” (Hodge, 2006, Chapter 16, “The Analogy of the Moon”, p. 131); and “do not harbour the idea that Tathāgata-Arhat-Samyak-Sambuddhas [utterly perfect buddhas] ever reach an end! ... You should understand that the Tathāgata [i.e. Buddha] is unchanging, stable and eternal” the Buddha insists (Hodge, 2006, Chapter Five, “Long Life”, p. 48.) The Buddha’s physical form will die, that is true; but that physically manifested body is in any case deceptive and impermanent, the

Buddha says. He himself, in contrast, as the True Self will not reach any end or expiration.

Closely linked to the concept of *nityatā* are the ideas of immovable, unshakeable fixedness or firmness (*dhruva*) and “unchangingness” (*aviparināma*). The notion of *aviparināma* is found in both Faxian and Dharmakṣema in the passage we are considering. Whereas Faxian uses it in its naked and unmodified form, however, the Dharmakṣema text combines it with the term, *āśraya* (“basis”, “ground”, “body” or “foundation”), to create the compound, *āśraya-aviparināma*. Thus the “foundational body” which is the Self is here asserted to be changeless – in other words, the opposite of virtually all else known to mankind, which is subject to modification and mutation. The *ātman* never transforms. It is present within all *dharmas* (so the Dharmakṣema text tells us) - a base which never transmutes into something else. Self is - we might say – always and unchangingly itself. It is the irreducible, untransforming foundation or essence of Reality. This is the teaching of the Buddha in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*. And it is a teaching that is never revoked.

If the Self does not mutate or transform, then it is impossible for it to be killed, since it cannot undergo the transformation inevitably wrought by death. Accordingly, in the Faxian version of the sūtra, we find the expressive epithet “un-rubbed-out” used of the *ātman*. The likely Sanskrit term underlying this is *aparimardana*, which means “not rubbed out”, not obliterated, not broken up or destroyed. We are perhaps reminded here of the colloquial English expression of “wiping someone out” or “rubbing someone out” to convey the idea of killing them. But unlike what the Buddha calls the “lie” of the worldly ego, made up of its five transforming and transient *skandhas* (mutable components), all doomed to death, the true *ātman* can never be “rubbed out” or erased. It endures - undiminished and unperishing - forever.

Finally in this section, let us consider an adjective found both in Faxian and Dharmakṣema to characterise the Self: “sovereign” or “autonomous” (*aiśvarya* in Sanskrit). Not only do we encounter the term in the present passage, but also scattered across the Dharmakṣema text as a whole. For example, we read that “... on the morning of Buddhahood, he [the Bodhisattva] obtains the sovereign Self” (Yamamoto/Page, 2000, Vol. 5, “On Pure Actions”, p. 60), and on the all-pervasive presence of the Buddha, who cannot truly be seen and yet can cause all to see him, the Buddha comments that “Such sovereignty is termed ‘the Great Self’ (*mahātman*)” (Yamamoto/Page, 2000, Vol. 7, “Bodhisattva Highly Virtuous King”, p. 29). This word, *aiśvarya*, is important for two reasons: first, it attests the complete self-governance and freedom of the Self - it is not subject to the tyranny of undesirable internal or external forces (unlike the mundane ego comprised of the conditioned and labile *skandhas*); and second, it hints at a controlling, regulating intelligence: a

knowing and utterly free mind, the “transcendental awareness” - *lokkottara-jñāna* – which the Buddha elsewhere in the sūtra links to the Self.

So the True Self is revealed by the Buddha in this important excursus on authentic Selfhood to be that totally self-governing, sovereign foundation or ground of Reality which is untrammelled by change and unmarked by mutation and which endures eternally, utterly unassailable by death. The sūtra also (in its somewhat later chapters) intimately links this Buddhist Reality to the *Tathāgata-dhātu*, *Buddha-dhātu*, or *Tathāgata-garbha*, the ‘Buddha-Womb’ as the immanent essence of Buddhahood. And to this we must now turn.

In the chapter entitled, “The *Tathāgata-garbha*”, the Buddha declares to Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva Kāśyapa (I quote from Faxian, Hodge, 2005, p.1):

The True Self is the *tathāgata-dhātu* [Buddha Principle, Buddha Element, Buddha Factor]. You should know that all beings do have it, but it is not apparent, since those beings are enveloped by immeasurable *kleśas* [defects of mind, morality and character]

The keen young Bodhisattva will have none of this, however, and mounts a vehement, verbal assault on the Buddha in an attempt to shore up the validity of the general non-Self doctrine, attempting to argue for the total illogicality and impossibility of a real Self.

Does the Buddha at this point then modify or even withdraw his revelation that the True Self is the indwelling Buddha-Principle within all beings? No. He strengthens it - by telling the tale of a rather witless wrestler who mistakenly believes he has lost a precious jewel, which he always wore fastened to his forehead, when in fact it has merely been driven under his flesh by the force of his engagement in a bout with a wrestling rival. The Buddha states (Faxian):

All beings are also like this. Each one of them has the *tathāgata-dhātu*, but, through having recourse to evil acquaintances, they give rise to attachment, hatred and stupidity and fall into the three miserable states ..., adopting various kinds of bodies throughout the twenty-five modes of existence. The precious jewel that is the *tathāgata-dhātu* is buried within the wound of the *kleśas* of attachment, hatred and stupidity, so that they are unaware of its presence there. Engaging in the notion that there is no Self with regard to the mundane self, they do not understand the skilful words of implicational purport of the Tathāgata ...

They have the notion that there is no Self and are unable to know the True Self. Regarding this, the Tathāgata ... utilises skilful means: he causes them to extinguish the raging fires of the countless *kleśas*, revealing and elucidating the *tathāgata-dhātu* to them ... (Hodge, 2005, p. 2)

At this point, the Tibetan version adds (Hodge, 2006):

“The *tathāgata-garbha* is the intrinsic nature [*svabhāva*] of beings.”

The Faxian text continues:

The *tathāgata-dhātu* cannot be killed. Those who die are said to be short-lived, while the *tathāgata-dhātu* is said to be true life. It cannot be severed or destroyed right up to the attainment of Buddhahood. The *tathāgata-dhātu* can neither be harmed nor killed, but only nurtures / sustains the person ...

Furthermore, noble son, it is like a person who digs the earth searching for diamonds. Holding a sharp pickaxe in his hands, he digs into the ground and rocks, able to pulverise them all. Diamonds alone he cannot shatter. The *tathāgata-garbha* is like this, for it cannot be harmed by the sharp weapons of the devas and maras (gods and devils). It only nurtures the person, and anything that can be harmed or damaged is not the *tathāgata-dhātu*. Hence, you should know that the *tathāgata-dhātu* cannot be harmed or killed. (Hodge, 2005, p. 3).

Moreover, the application of the notion of non-Self and a dogged application of the idea of Emptiness to the *tathāgata-dhātu* is firmly counselled against by the Buddha earlier in the sūtra, where he declares in very striking terms (I quote from the Tibetan text, from Chapter 11, “The Four Truths”):

By having cultivated non-Self with reference to the *tathāgata-dhātu* and having continually cultivated Emptiness, suffering will not be eradicated, *but one will become like a moth in the flame of a lamp*. (Hodge, 2006, p. 107; emphasis added)

We need to extract a number of key points from all of this:

1) As with the earlier situation, in which the Buddha had been challenged by a group of absolutist non-Self monastics, he is here being sceptically probed by a great Bodhisattva on the validity of the Self notion. But the Buddha stands firm: there *is* a Self, and that Self is the Buddha.

2) There is not a shred of evidence in these key encounters - nor indeed in the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* as a whole – that the Buddha *only* spoke of a True Self in order to win over those who dearly and desperately wanted to believe in an everlasting *ātman* – as is claimed by some commentators on this sūtra. Quite the reverse is the case. While on one occasion he does speak of the Self to a group of wandering non-Buddhist ascetics, he overwhelmingly speaks in this scripture of the True Self to his own advanced monks and high-level bodhisattvas.

3) It is shown as a deficiency in comprehension on the part of the Buddha’s would-be followers (and by implication, equally those of today) when they take his non-Self teachings as all-inclusive in their sphere of reference; instead, such persons should understand that the non-Self doctrine has certain limits and an implicit counter-pole to it (at least within this particular scripture) which the Buddha affirms - namely, that of the True Self. It should be noted, however, that Sallie B. King (King 1997, p. 190) argues that the Buddha Nature (*tathāgata-garbha*) is merely a ‘skilful means’ to encourage students to practise more vigorously; it is simply a ‘soteriological device and is ontologically neutral’, she contends. Yet this claim is not particularly meaningful or accurate. Its first part resolves itself, on further consideration, into a trite truism, since *all* of the Buddha’s teachings can ultimately be viewed as a methodology for salvation, as skillfully constructed means towards liberation. Its second contention – that the Buddha Nature has no explicit ontology to it – is contradicted by such statements of the Buddha’s as ‘the *tathāgata-garbha* is the *svabhava* [core essence] of beings’ (Hodge, 2006, p.); “The *Buddha-dhātu* of beings abides within the five *skandhas*.” (i.e. is distinct from the constitutive elements of the non-Self), ‘...you should henceforth bear in mind that the Tathāgata’s body is indestructible and solid like a diamond’ (Hodge, 2006, p. 50), and “The *Buddha-dhātu* is the True Self and, like a diamond, for example, it cannot be destroyed” (Yamamoto/Page, 1999, Vol. 3, p. 3). We might further note that in the original Sanskrit version of the text (preserved in fragments), the adjective *acala* is applied to the Buddha (Habata 2007, p. 87). This word means ‘unmoving’, ‘immovable’, and when used as a noun betokens ‘mountain’. A strong indicator, this, of the Buddha’s decidedly ontic and unshakeable presence.

Heng-Ching Shih takes a somewhat similar line to King's and argues: "The 'tathagatagarbha' symbolizes the potential for enlightenment (a principle) rather than a material "essence" of ultimate truth" and "the 'tathagatagarbha' is based on the framework of the 'Mahayana' doctrine of '*śūnyata-pratītyasamutpāda* [i.e. emptiness and conditionality]". (Heng-Ching Shih, 1998, p. 10). The opposite of this is actually the case. The Buddha repeatedly makes it clear that the Self or *tathāgata-garbha* is a real, uncreated, *unconditioned*, sovereign and unfabricated element (*akṛta-dhātu*, says the Tibetans *Nirvāna Sūtra* in its "Tathāgatagarbha" chapter), the *svabhāva* (essence) of eternal Truth within each being, not *merely* a negatively construed 'emptiness' or a mere potential (although it of course enshrines that power too). The Buddha also on occasion speaks of his own '*Buddha-dhātu*' (Yamamoto/Page, 1999, Vol. 6, p. 27) which he still possesses. Quite obviously he cannot be referring here to any 'potential' of his own to become a Buddha, since he already is one! In this passage he tells of what is *not* present, not existent, in the Buddha's Nature:

The *Buddha-dhātu* of the Tathāgata has two aspects: one is existence and the second non-existence ... Regarding non-existence, this is the causal and resultant aspects of the Tathāgata's past wholesome, unwholesome and neutral karma, the kleshas, the five skandhas, and twelvefold interdependent arising.

It is evident from this that interdependent arising or conditionality is *not* a feature of this *Buddha-dhātu*, despite what Heng-Ching Shi might claim.

Nor can the *tathāgata-garbha* simply be dismissed as 'emptiness', since the Buddha castigates those who view the *tathāgata-garbha* as emptiness, saying that they are like moths perishing in the flame of a lamp. He again and again (as we have seen) likens the *tathāgata-garbha* to a jewel or diamond within the body of the being – scarcely an appropriate image for a substanceless vacuity! After narrating the parable about the wrestler who imagines that he has 'lost' a precious diamond, when it is in fact solid and present within his own body, the Buddha draws the moral:

Just as the wrestler had the idea - due to his impaired thinking - that he had lost the diamond, even though it was lodged in his body, similarly worldly beings do not comprehend the Self's Reality (*ātma-tattva*); they fall under the sway of unwholesome friends and do not understand the [Tathāgata's] utterances with underlying meaning; they meditatively cultivate the notion

that they lack the Self, even though there is the Self. (Hodge, 2006, p. 37).

Furthermore, the Buddha denounces as twisted doctrine the perceiving of the non-Self as Self and equally the envisaging of the Self as non-Self: '...To regard the non-Self as the Self and to regard the Self as non-Self is perverse Dharma.' he forcefully states (Yamamoto/Page, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 42).

It is evident, from the perspective of this scripture, that the non-Self doctrine needs to be understood as bearing the underlying implication that there actually is a *real* Self (which is what the non-Self by definition is *not*) and that the various terms used for the Buddha Nature do not denote an absence of Self, but rather point to the indestructible nature of the Self which is to be found deep within all beings, indeed all Buddhas.

4) This revelation of the Buddha's on the reality of a True Self is not presented by the Buddha in the form of reasoned debate, syllogisms, analysis, or argumentation; rather, it is presented as *revelation*. It is given as unvarnished, apodeictic fact - a fact which all beings (so we later learn in the *sūtra*) can only fully discern when they themselves become Buddhas.

5) The *tathāgata-dhātu* is utterly invulnerable to all assault and harm, and cannot be made to expire. Indeed, it is the immanent life-principle (the *jīva*) itself.

6) It is inappropriate to meditate upon the immanent *tathāgata-dhātu* as though it were non-Self, just as it is equally inappropriate repeatedly to meditate upon it as though it were Emptiness - as though it were a vacuous nothingness and did not inherently exist. To regard the *garbha* in that fashion would be tantamount to committing painful spiritual suicide (that is what the image of the moth burning in the flame of the lamp connotes) – and the whole *raison-d'être* of Buddhism is to eradicate pain, not to invoke it.

7) Whatever the type of being concerned, the indwelling *tathāgata-dhātu* remains unassailed, inviolate and deathless. It is utterly immortal – just as the Buddha himself, the *tathāgata-dhātu* made manifest, is never actually shown to die in any of the three major versions of the *Nirvāna Sūtra*. Outer narrative movement thus reflects and enacts inner metaphysical meaning.

8) The *tathāgata-dhātu* is not a destructive phenomenon. Rather, it functions as a nurturing, sustaining force within every sentient being and accompanies him or her up to and into Buddhahood itself.

But is all this to be understood as an ultimate teaching? Is all such talk of an eternal, immanent yet transcendent Self or *tathāgata-dhātu* not just a ruse or skilful tactic to attract people who might otherwise be put off by the Buddha's general teachings on non-Self and Emptiness?

We have noted that this certainly does not apply to the major examples at which we have looked, but we need to consider how this sūtra views itself and how it wants its auditors and readers to see it. Is it provisional in its doctrines and requiring of corrective ‘interpretation’ (as the Gelukpas, for example, would claim), or is it to be viewed as a direct, unmediated metaphysical revelation of eternal Truth?

On the specific question of the supramundane or nirvanic Self, it is apparent that the sūtra does assert an eternally abiding entity or *dharmā* – what we might call the “Buddha-Self”, since the Buddha utters the equation ‘Self = Buddha’ - as an ever-enduring reality of the highest order. That Buddha-Self is one with Nirvāna. In the Dharmakṣema *Nirvāna Sūtra*, the Buddha is asked by Mañjuśrī, “What is the meaning of this ‘real truth’ that you have mentioned?” The Buddha’s reply is instructive and unequivocal:

Noble son, the real truth is the true Dharma. Noble son, if the Dharma is not true, then it cannot be called the ‘real truth’. Noble son, the real truth is devoid of distortions ...the real truth is free from falsity. If it were not free from falsity, it would not be called the ‘real truth’... Noble son, that which is endowed with the Eternal, Bliss, the Self and Purity is stated to be the meaning of the ‘real truth’. (Yamamoto/Page, 2000, Vol. 4, “On Holy Actions”, p. 48).

This definition of authentic Dharmic Truth is not only intrinsically clear and eloquent, but is given added weight by the fact that the answer is addressed to a question posed by none other than Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of supreme Buddhist insight and understanding. In this connection, we might also interestingly note that the teachings of this entire sūtra (in its Tibetan form) are significantly entrusted precisely to Mañjuśrī at the very end of the scripture, which can be taken as a symbolic sign of the sūtra’s high significance.

On the broader question of whether the sūtra as a whole wishes to be seen as high-level teaching or as a concessionary adaptation of Dharma for those of more rudimentary spiritual grasp, we should note the fact that the opening of the Tibetan version tells of how the Buddha will herein give the “final explanation” of his Dharma, and will do so in “... words which expressed his meaning with exhaustive thoroughness.” (Hodge, 2006, p. 1). The Buddha himself later tells a female follower of how on the day of his Parinirvāna, he will give the essential meaning of all his secret Dharma. He says:

... when I am making preparations to pass into Parinirvāna, I shall then speak of the Tathāgata’s various secret

words of implicational meaning in their entirety to the *śrāvakas* [disciples]. On that day, I shall impart the intended gist to my sons. [Hodge, 2006, Chapter 8, “The Four Methods of Teaching”, p. 60].

That day has, of course, now come. We should note that, contrary to the implications of some scholars, such as Williams (1989, p.100), the Buddha overwhelmingly does *not* direct these teachings at those (such as non-Buddhist ascetics) who desperately want to believe in a Self – but to those who are well-versed in and familiar with his non-Self teachings (i.e. his monks and great bodhisattvas). Thus these teachings go beyond “non-Self” and are transmitted as the Buddha’s final, definitive elucidation of the entire corpus of his teachings.

The colophon of the Tibetan text clearly indicates the centrality of these final doctrines when it declares that the sūtra constitutes “... the essence of all scriptures of the authentic Dharma” (Hodge, 2006, p. 161) and moreover is equal to an *uttara-tantra* - that is to say, to the final empowering instructions at the end of a medical treatise, which enable the doctor to make his mantras and remedies truly efficacious.

The reference to an *uttara-tantra* is not confined to the colophon. The Buddha himself has recourse to this image on several occasions, not least in intensified form when telling of the supremacy of this sūtra’s doctrines. In Chapter 14, “The Letters”, he affirms (Tibetan version):

... the very ultimate (*uttarottara*) of the meaning of all sūtras is taught by this sūtra. Not one single syllable or title has been taught [herein] that has previously been heard by any *śrāvaka* and pratyekabuddha. This sūtra is supremely excellent [*varottama*]. For example, just as the people of Uttarakuru in the north are virtuous, likewise those who have listened to this great sūtra have become supramundane - you should know that they are Bodhisattva-mahāsattvas [great Bodhisattvas]. Therefore, this signifies that [this sūtra] is a great *uttara-tantra*. (Hodge, 2006, p. 124)

Finally in this section, we might usefully look at what Chapter 7, “The Name and Virtues of the Sūtra” (Tibetan version) says on the relative merit of this scripture when measured against all other enunciations of Dharma and the meditations with which they are linked. The Buddha states:

... for example, the various sciences such as medicine and the three sciences are gathered up in their respective

uttara-tantras; similarly, all the various secret Dharma-gates, the words of implicit intention [*sandhā-vacana*] uttered by the Tathagatas are gathered up in this *Mahāparinirvāna[-Sūtra]*. ... This *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* is stated to be the best, the most excellent, the foremost of all ... samādhis in those sūtras ... the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* is stated to be the best, the most excellent, the foremost of all sūtras.” (Hodge, 2006, p. 57)

While scholars such as Sallie B. King and Heng-Ching Shih try, on somewhat flimsy evidential grounds, to re-interpret and re-configure the essentialist teachings of this *sūtra* into the opposite of what they repeatedly state, some notable Buddhist masters have understood such doctrines in their simple and straightforward form and sought to communicate that understanding. One such prominent individual was the 14th-century Tibetan Dharma master, Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen.

3. Dolpopa

The mediaeval Tibetan scholar-monk, Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen, popularly styled “the Buddha of Dolpo”, insists that the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* and other *tathāgata-garbha* texts should be taken at their word as definitive and cataphatic revelations, not as documents requiring modifying ‘interpretation’. Dolpopa seeks to present what the Buddha actually says accurately and fairly, and states that according to the sutras (such as the *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra*, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sutra*, and the *Angulimāliya Sutra*), there truly does exist a spiritual essence within all persons and things – the essence of Buddhahood – which is unshakeable, timeless and deathless. Dolpopa rejects what he sees as the pernicious views of those who would palm off Buddhahood as a non-existent, or manufactured, causatively engendered or composite phenomenon. Dolpopa in *The Fourth Council* declares:

I cannot defer to those who accept that in reality there is no buddhahood, who do not accept a noncomposite Buddhahood, and who do not accept a permanent, stable, and eternal Buddhahood, and so I join my palms together and offer an appeal.

Please look at those statements in the Krtayuga [Dharma] which say that absolute truth, indivisible space and intrinsic awareness is the primal Buddha, the ground buddhahood, permanent, stable, eternal, everlasting, all-pervasive thusness [essence of reality],

and the enlightenment of the Buddha. (Stearns, 1999, p. 165).

Dolpopa frequently uses the term ‘Self’ or analogous phrases to refer to this Ultimate Reality abiding in all beings. He also quotes numerous sutras and tantras in support of his doctrinal stance. Thus, he quotes from the *Great Seal Drop Tantra* on the genuine reality of the Self or spiritual essence, when he states: ‘A self pervading all things does indeed exist. If self did not exist, then all transmigrators would be like a tree whose roots are cut.’ (Hopkins, 2006, p. 133)

Clearly, the Self envisaged here is the very ‘root’ of all beings – the supplier and sustainer of life itself. Dolpopa further enumerates ‘Self’-phrases when he speaks of Ultimate Reality in the Buddhist scripture, *The Expression of Manjushri’s Ultimate Names (Mañjuśrī-nāma-sangīti)*. Here are some of the coinages encountered in this context, giving expression to a truly real and lordly Over-Self:

Buddha-I or Self;
Beginningless self;
Non-proliferative self;
Self of thusness;
Self of primordial purity;
Supreme omnipresence;
Singular self;
Solid and hard self;
Diamond self;
Lord of space;
Supreme self of all creatures;
Holy immovable self;
Holy very clear self, holding the full buddha enlightenment (Hopkins, 2006, pp. 279-294).

The reader at this juncture might ask: ‘Just what is this Buddha-Self? What is the Buddha’s nature?’ Dolpopa responds:

Buddha - an *essence* of immeasurable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, excellent exalted body, wisdom, qualities, and activities extremely wondrous and fantastic – is vast like space and the holy source giving rise to all that is wished by sentient beings like a wish-granting jewel (Hopkins, 2006, p. 424; my emphasis).

We note the reference to ‘body’. The Buddha is not ‘unsubstantial’, not without a body. He has in fact an ‘excellent exalted body’. Indeed, in developed Mahāyāna theory, he possesses three bodies (the *trikāya* doctrine)! So any claim that the Buddha (who represents perfected being) is substance-less and is not an ‘entity’ needs to be modified in the light of this teaching.

When we come to present-day Buddhist masters, such as the Thai forest monk, Maha Boowa, we find

an even more streamlined definition of what the ultimate or core essence of beings is. It is inner Dharma – the immortal ‘heart’ (*citta*).

4. Maha Boowa

Maha Boowa is a famed Thai Buddhist meditation master who belongs to the Forest Monk tradition of Thai Theravada Buddhism. His teachings are notable for being more affirmative of a positive, enduring Reality than is often found in Theravada Buddhism. He calls this deathless essence in all people and creatures the indwelling Dhamma (Truth) or *citta* – the heart or mind. Reminiscent of *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine, Maha Boowa tells of how this heart is led astray by *kilesas* (mental defilements), and of how we thus fail to be what we in fact are – our ‘true self’. Maha Boowa comments:

Our real problem, our one fundamental problem—which is also the *citta*’s fundamental problem—is that we lack the power needed to be our own true self. Instead, we have always taken counterfeit things to be the essence of who we really are, so that the *citta*’s behavior is never in harmony with its true nature. (Maha Boowa, 2005 <http://www.forestdhammabooks.com/book/3/Arahattamagga.pdf>)

True Self? True nature? This has a decidedly essentialist ring to it. Yet Maha Boowa is here standing in a long Buddhist tradition stretching back to the ‘luminous / shining mind’ of the Pali Canon, extending through the *Nirvāna Sūtra* and the *tathāgata-garbha* sūtras, through to Dolpopa and beyond. This species of Buddhism does not shy away from a recognition of a deathless, immutable core – the Self or Essence – within all beings, which is one with Dharma – ultimate Truth – and one with the Buddha. Maha Boowa tells of how this *citta* is ultimately free from the domain of the impermanent, the painful, and the non-Self. It is utterly insoluble, independent, free and Knowing— just as the Buddha declared of the Buddha-Self in the *Mahā-parinirvāna Sūtra*. Maha Boowa states of the *citta*:

Although all conditioned phenomena without exception are governed by the three universal laws of anicca [impermanence], dukkha [suffering], and anattā [non-Self], the *citta*’s true nature is not subject to these laws ... the true power of the *citta*’s own nature is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is a quality that lies beyond disintegration. Being beyond

disintegration, it also lies beyond the range of anicca, dukkha, and anattā and the universal laws of nature ... (Maha Boowa, <http://www.forestdhamma-books.com/book/3/Arahattamagga.pdf>)

Maha Boowa draws a distinction (as do the *tathāgata-garbha* sutras) between the physical body and its attendant elements and the *citta* or *manodhātu* (the mental sphere). The body knows nothing, but the *citta* Knows. Interestingly, the *Mahāyāna Angulimaliya Sutra* declares that the pure *manas* (mind) is the *tathagata-garbha*. Maha Boowa clearly brings out the difference between transitory body and knowing, deathless Mind when he comments:

The body is physical matter—how can it be likened to the *citta*? The *citta* is a mental phenomenon, an awareness that knows.... earth, water, wind and fire elements know nothing; only the mental element—the *manodhātu*—knows. This being the case, how can the *citta*’s essential knowing nature and the body’s physical elements possibly be equated. They are obviously separate realities. (Maha Boowa, <http://www.forestdhamma-books.com/book/3/Arahattamagga.pdf>)

Maha Boowa calls this *essential*, indwelling and indestructible Awareness – distinct from our physical being – “the knowing presence”. (Maha Boowa, 2005, p. 17). This is reminiscent of the Buddha’s words in the *Nirvāna Sutra*, where he states: ‘the constant presence of the Tathagata [Buddha] is the Self.’

5. Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing declarations by the Buddha in the *Nirvāna Sutra*, buttressed, as it were, by statements from Dolpopa and Maha Boowa, we might sensibly modify our understanding of a certain stream of Buddhist teaching, and note that it *does* allow for the reality of a true and enduring essence or Self. While all that is impermanent, painful and conditioned falls under the rubric of the non-Self (the sphere of the worldly *skandhas*), that which lies beyond the *skandhas*, beyond suffering and impermanence can (at least within this particular tradition of Buddhist discourse) be termed the essence of the being or the True Self. From the perspective of such a Buddhist vision, universally and absolutely to apply the formula of emptiness and non-Self – even to the sphere of the *tathāgatagarbha* - may be deemed dangerously misguided. As the Buddha in the *Nirvāna Sutra* warns:

By having cultivated the absence of self (*anātman*) in connection with the *tathāgata-garbha* and having continually cultivated Emptiness, suffering will not be eradicated - but one will become like a moth in the flame of a lamp. (Hodge 2006, p. 107).

And who amongst us would wish for a fate such as this?

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