

Reading Course: The Three Aspects of Buddha Nature in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its Commentary (verses I.144-152)

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According to the Tibetan tradition, the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) *Mahāyānottaratantra* belongs to the “five treatises of Maitreya,” though its earliest parts had probably already been composed by Sāramati in the third or fourth century. It was not quoted in India until centuries later, and the only safe *terminus ante quem* for it is 508 c.e., the year in which Ratnamati, who translated the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* (RGVV) into Chinese, arrived in China from Madhyadeśa (India). The future Buddha Maitreya is said (again according to the Tibetan tradition) to have taught the *Ratnagotravibhāga* to Asaṅga in the Tuṣita heaven. Asaṅga then composed also the commentary *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*. It quotes a number of sūtras that teach that all sentient beings possess the nature of a buddha, doubtlessly in the sense that they are already complete buddhas but do not know and actualize their true being because of their adventitious stains or spiritual defilements. But the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and its *vyākhyā* also contain passages that try to embed the teaching of buddha nature within mainstream Mahāyāna and relate it, for example, with suchness, and thus only with the cause or seed of buddhahood.

Based on that, three reasons are given in RGV I.27 for the presence of buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) in sentient beings: (1) the presence of the Buddha’s wisdom in all sentient beings; (2) sentient beings and the Buddhas do not differ in terms of their suchness (i.e., emptiness); (3) the buddha nature’s fruit has been metaphorically applied to the buddha potential. In line with these three reasons, three aspects of buddha nature are distinguished: *dharmakāya*, suchness, and potential.

We are going to read the detailed explanation of these three aspects in the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā* on verses I.144-152. The Sanskrit text is on pages 70-73 in Johnston’s edition. The Tibetan translation of these verses is on pages 135-143 in Nakamura’s edition. There is also a Chinese translation in the Taisho 1611 (starting with Rm-Zs 838b12-14).

Bibliography

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