

Dhammakāya, Tathāgatagarbha and Other-emptiness: A Comparison between Luang Pho Sot's Thammakai Meditation System and Tibetan Shentong Tradition

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to show two systems of thought that developed in different countries and different Buddhist traditions during different periods of time and relying on different scriptural sources, sharing similar views on the nature of absolute reality. These two views are both founded upon a meditative and an intuitive understanding of reality and aim at presenting its nature exactly as it appears to the meditator's awareness. This article is divided into five parts, the first part talks about the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, the second about the Tibetan emptiness-of-other (*shentong/gzhan stong*) tradition and its views, the third talks about *thammakai* meditation system and its views as taught by Luang Pho Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkhon Thepmuni (Sot Candasaro) หลวงพ่อวัดปากน้ำพระมงคลเทพมุนี (สด จนฺทสโร), the fourth part is a doctrinal comparison between the *shentong* and *thammakai* systems followed by a brief conclusion.

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This essay attempts to raise questions regarding the Buddhist understanding of the nature of reality, the dividing line between wrong and right views and the role of meditative intuition and conceptualization in Buddhist practice. The author hopes that further academic studies on this topic would arrive at a better understanding of the variety, the complexity, and the over-lapping features of Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions and raise further interests in the academic study of Luang Pho Sot's teaching.

Introduction

This article is a development of a section of my MPhil thesis², in which I made an attempt to contextualize the recent Thai *nibbāna* controversy within the history of Buddhist thought. I first came across the Tibetan *rangtong-shentong* (*rang stong* and *gzan stong*) dispute in Paul Williams' book³, then, having read a very reliable book on the *shentong* interpretation of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine by S. K. Hookham⁴, I have decided to incorporate the dispute into my thesis. For this article, I have done more research especially on the Tibetan side. I have also decided to present the *thammakai* system as taught by Luang Pho Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkhon Thepmuni (Sot Candasaro) หลวงพ่อวัดปากน้ำ ภาษีเจริญ (สด จนทสโร) as there is very little academic research done on this important figure who left a significant body of teaching. The presentation is done with the help of works by Phra Rajyanvisith (Sermchai Jayamangalo).

² Nibbāna as self or not self: some contemporary Thai discussions (unpublished masters thesis, University of Bristol, 2007).

³ Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989) 105-109.

⁴ S.K. Hookham, *The Buddha Within* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

This article is divided into five parts, the first part talks about the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, the second about the Tibetan emptiness-of-other (*shentong/gzhan stong*) tradition and its views, the third talks about *thammakai* meditation system and its views, the fourth part is a doctrinal comparison between *shentong* and *thammakai* systems followed by a brief conclusion. The aim of this essay is to show two systems of thought, which developed in different countries, different Buddhist traditions, during different periods of time and relying on different scriptural sources, sharing similar views on the nature of absolute reality. These two views are both founded upon a meditative and an intuitive understanding of reality and aims at presenting its nature exactly as it appears to the meditator's awareness.

Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine

Tathāgatagarbha is one of the important streams of thought or philosophical trends in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its various aspects are found in scriptural sources such as *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, *Śrīmālādevīsīmaṇāda Sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, *Aṅgulimālīya Sūtra*, *Anūratvāpūrṇatvanideśaparivarta* and *Mahābherīhāraka Sūtra*. A comprehensive presentation and commentary of the doctrine in the *sūtras* can be found in the treatise *Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra Śāstra)*. Other *sūtras* such as *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, *Ghanavyūha Sūtra* etc. also mention *tathāgatagarbha*, but are not included in the standard list of *tathāgatagarbha* scriptures.⁵

Its basic teaching is the presence of *tathāgatagarbha* (embryo/matrix of the *tathāgata*) in all beings, which is their innate qualities and potential to attain Buddhahood. In the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*⁶, this potential is taught through nine examples of something valuable that

⁵ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā : A Buddhist Scripture on the Tathāgatagarbha Theory*, trans. Alex Wayman and Hideko Wayman (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990) 45.

⁶ William. H. Grosnick, "The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra," *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 92-112.

is contained within something that has little value. It is done in order to show that no matter how defiled a being might be, in the vision of the Buddha, it possesses the qualities of the *tathāgata*. Those qualities, however, are covered by adventitious defilements, like clouds covering the sky, but one day through the removal of the defilements that being will attain Buddhahood. The most striking example for this essay is the golden Buddha statue wrapped in rags that is cast aside by a traveller.⁷ It is left in a field, unidentified by the ordinary person, but for someone who has pure vision, that person will see the precious Buddha statue within the rags, uncover it to discover the statue and pay homage to it.⁸ In the same way, the Buddha sees the *tathāgatagarbha* within every being, teaches them so that they could rid themselves of defilements, practise and accumulate merits and perfections to attain Buddhahood.

In the *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra*, and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the doctrine is developed further so that *tathāgatagarbha* is described as having the qualities of an absolute reality. The *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* sees *tathāgatagarbha* as permanent, steadfast, eternal, the support, holder and base of Buddha natures and ‘external constructed natures’.⁹ The *tathāgatagarbha* is also said to be empty. However, this emptiness is not the emptiness of inherent existence, as taught by Madhyamaka, but it is the emptiness of all the ‘defilement-stores’, the non-emptiness of the ‘Buddha *dharmas*’, which is called two kinds of emptiness.¹⁰ The *tathāgatagarbha* therefore is unspoiled by the defilements and intrinsically endowed with numerous Buddha qualities even in ordinary beings.

Moreover, the *sūtra* links this mystical *tathāgatagarbha* with *dharmakāya*, a term found in the earliest Buddhist sources, so that *dharmakāya* is the same as *tathāgatagarbha* when liberated from all

⁷ *Buddhism in Practice* 100-101.

⁸ *Buddhism in Practice* 100-101.

⁹ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* 105.

¹⁰ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* 99.

the defilement-stores.¹¹ *Dharmakāya*, which is equated with terms such as the cessation of suffering, enlightenment, nirvāṇa-realm, *dharmadhātu* and one-vehicle (*ekayāna*)¹², is described as beginningless, uncreated, unborn, undying, free from death, permanent, steadfast, eternal, intrinsically pure and accompanied by numerous inconceivable Buddha natures.¹³ When it is *tathāgatagarbha* and covered by defilements, it is 'neither self nor sentient being, nor soul, nor personality', but when it is liberated from the defilements, it becomes *dharmakāya*, which has the qualities of perfection, of transcendental permanence, pleasure, self and purity.¹⁴

The four qualities of permanence, pleasure, self and purity are my interests here. In the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, it is explained that the four qualities are corrections to the mistakes of those who wrongly apply the Buddha's four remedies of impermanence, suffering, non-self and impurity to the *dharmakāya*, when the *dharmakāya* has the opposite qualities. Furthermore, the quality of 'true self' of the *dharmakāya* is a non-conceptual quality and it is explained as 'all conceptual elaboration in terms of self and non-self is totally stilled'.¹⁵ The *dharmakāya* is unchanging, a refuge, absent of thought, '*dharmatā* (true nature) free from duality', immutable and indestructible.¹⁶

¹¹ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* 96.

¹² *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* teaches another important Mahayāna doctrine of One Vehicle, which holds that the vehicles of the disciple and the solitary Buddha are not complete vehicles but part of the Mahayāna, the vehicle of the Buddha. Nirvāṇas of the disciple and the solitary Buddha are only partial, whereas the nirvāṇa of the Buddha is complete.

¹³ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* 92 and 98.

¹⁴ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* 102 and 106.

¹⁵ Arya Maitreya, Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, *Buddha Nature, The Mahayana Uttarantra Shastra with Commentary*, trans. Rosemarie Fuchs (New York: Snow Lion, 2000) 24.

¹⁶ *Buddha Nature, The Mahayana Uttarantra Shastra with Commentary* 30.

Shentong Tradition

In Tibet, for many centuries, there had been a tension between teachers and schools who took the *tathāgatagarbha* literature as the final teaching of the Buddha, and those teachers and schools who viewed it as a provisional teaching, taught with a specific purpose and requiring further explanation. Their views on emptiness of phenomena, therefore, are different according to whether they take the interpretation of emptiness according to the *tathāgatagarbha* literature or according to the Perfection of Wisdom and Madhyamaka. The tradition which derives their understanding of emptiness from the *tathāgatagarbha* literature view emptiness of all things in two different ways, similarly to the two kinds of emptiness mentioned above. All realities have the quality of emptiness, relative reality is described as self-empty, but absolute reality is described as empty-of-other. This means that the emptiness of relative phenomena is understood to mean non-existent, but the emptiness of absolute reality is empty of relative phenomena only, but not empty of its own essence. In Tibet, the tradition which holds the view of emptiness-of-other (*shentong/gzhan stong*) emerged during the fourteenth century in the Jonangpa lineage; its most prominent figure, and also one of the most influential figure in Tibet during that century, is Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen. Dolpopa wrote *Mountain Doctrine: Ocean of Definitive Meaning, A General Commentary on the Doctrine and The Fourth Council*¹⁷, in which he formulated the *shentong* view into a philosophical system quoting from many *tathāgatagarbha* sources, especially, *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanāda Sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, and *Āṅgulimālīya Sūtra*. Dolpopa not only relies on *tathāgatagarbha* literature to formulate his system but also on tantric sources, especially, the *Kālacakra tantra*, from which he

¹⁷ Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo: A Study of the Life and Thought of the Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002) and Dol-bo-ba Shay-rap-gyel-tsen, *Mountain Doctrine: Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha-Matrix*, trans. Jeffery Hopkins (New York: Snow Lion: 2006).

derives his practice of the Six-branch Yoga, *Hevajra tantra*, *Cakkrasamvara tantra* and their commentaries.

After Dolpopa, the Jonangpa remained influential in Tibet for another three hundred years, until the seventeenth century. After the time of another great Jonang figure Tāranātha¹⁸, the lineage was suppressed by the Gelugpa lineage, its monasteries closed down, converted to Gelugpa, and its books banned. However, the *shentong* view has continued to be transmitted through the Sakya, Nyingma and Kagyu lineages to the present day. Some contemporary lamas who hold *shentong* views include Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche¹⁹, Gendun Rinpoche and Thrangu Rinpoche. It is also taken up by the non-sectarian Rimé movement, among those who follow Dolpopa's view include Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye²⁰.

The *shentong* tradition views the existence of an absolute reality. That reality is the Buddha wisdom mind (*buddhajñāna*), which is synonymous with *tathāgatagarbha*, *dharmakāya*, ultimate Buddha, ultimate liberation, great nirvāṇa, *dharmadhātu*, absolute *dharmatā*, *tathatā*, *gotra*, *paramarthasatya*, clear light nature of mind, *shentong* etc.²¹, in the sense that they are different aspects of the same reality, for example, the same reality when obscured in ordinary being is called *tathāgatagarbha* and when fully manifested in the Buddha is called *dharmakāya*. Another synonym that is important to this essay is *nirvāṇadhātu*, absolute form, absolute deity and absolute *maṇḍala*.

This absolute reality is empty, but empty of all fault, limiting factors conceptually constructed phenomena, and not empty of reality.²² When the Perfection of Wisdom says that all *dharmas* are empty of self-nature, *shentongpas* take this to mean all relative *dharmas* are empty of self-nature. The reason the Perfection of Wisdom refers to absolute

¹⁸ The author of *The Essence of Other-Emptiness and History of Buddhism in India*.

¹⁹ The author of *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*.

²⁰ The compiler of the *Five Great Treasuries*.

²¹ Hookham 95.

²² Hookham 16.

dhammas as empty is in order to get rid of an attempt to conceptually grasp absolute reality, which is beyond ordinary consciousness. It is, therefore, negating the existence of conceptual constructs of reality in ordinary consciousness, but never negating that reality.²³ Applying emptiness to absolute reality is a mistake, just as it is a mistake applying impermanence, suffering, not-self and impurity to it, when it is not subject to causes and conditions, dependent origination and therefore does not have these characteristics, but in fact has the opposite characteristics. When *shentongpas* refer to apparent reality as self-empty, unlike *rangtongpas* (self-empty school), they mean it does not exist at all, like a horn of a rabbit, it only appears to the ordinary person's consciousness as existing. However, each apparent reality, although non-existent, has an absolute non-compounded counterpart, for example, form that is seen by an ordinary consciousness is self-empty i.e. non-existent, but when it is experienced by the enlightened mind without conceptualisation, it becomes an absolute unconditioned form, which is not self-empty.

This absolute reality is unconditioned and has four 'transcendental' qualities, as described as the four perfections above: transcendental purity, self, bliss and permanence. It is taught that even if one has not realized these qualities, just having faith in them can remove many veils.²⁴ The transcendental self, as understood by *shentong*, is the 'vajra body' 'mantra body', 'self of thusness', 'pure self', 'the sole *vajradhara*', 'vajasattva', 'exalted body in which knower and known are the same', 'androgynous state in which emptiness and compassion, method and wisdom are mixed into one'²⁵, but they are also very assertive that it is not the self of non-Buddhists because it is non-conceptual, and also empty of the self of the person and self of *dhammas*.

It would be interesting to do more research on the practices of the proponents of *shentong* on whether any similarities exist between their practises and *thammakai* meditation. I should start off by looking at the

²³ Hookham 25.

²⁴ Hookham 202.

²⁵ *Mountain Doctrine* 33.

Six Branch Yoga and the practice of the *Kālacakra tantra*, of which method Dolpopa was an accomplished practitioner. Dolpopa holds that enlightenment occurs when the body's vital winds (*vāyu*) through the practice of yoga, are drawn into the central channel (*avadhūti*). Absolute reality is not accessible when the winds are still circulating in the right and left channels (*nadī*) and not drawn into the central channel or stopped.²⁶

Luang Pho Sot and Thammakai Meditation System

I now present the *thammakai* meditation system and views, which was first established in the Thai Theravāda tradition by Luang Pho Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkhon Thepmuni (Sot Candasaro) or as he is generally known Luang Pho/Pu Sot (Venerable father/grandfather Sot), a Mahanikai monk who lived from 1884 to 1959 and was the abbot of Wat Paknam, Phasicharoen, Thonburi, Thailand from 1916 to the end of his life.

It is claimed that Luang Pho Sot re-discovered the *thammakai* meditation method after it was lost around 500 B.E. Luang Pho Sot sat down in meditation one night during the full-moon of the tenth and made a vow that if he did not see the *dhmma* in that very meditation he would not get up from his seat even if his life ended. That night was the first night Luang Pho Sot reached a meditative state called *thammakai* (*dhmmakāya*). Luang Pho Sot believes that this is the very *thammakai* that the Buddha taught in the *Aggañña Sutta*.²⁷

During his lifetime, the meditation technique of Luang Pho Sot became popular and his teaching received much praise, even more so when he became widely known through helping local people during the Second World War and the miracles surrounding his amulets. At the same time, many criticisms were directed at the *thammakai* meditation system and his teaching. After he died his immediate students carried

²⁶ Stearns 99-100.

²⁷ D III 84 (PTS edition).

on teaching *thammakai* meditation and together with their students, went on to establish temples specializing in this meditation method, for example, 1. Wat Phra Thammakai (Dhammakaya Foundaiton) in Pathum Thani, founded by Khun Yay Chandra Khonnokyoong, a direct student disciple of Luang Pho Sot and her students, Phra Rajabhavanavisudh (Dhammajayo) and Phra Bhavanaviriyakhun (Dattajivo); 2. Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram in Ratchaburi, founded by Phra Rajyanvisith (Sermchai Jayamanggalo), a student of Luang Pho Sot's student, Phra Ratchaphromathera (Wira Khanuttamo), the current deputy abbot of Wat Paknam; and 3. Wat Chantharangsi in Ang Thong, founded by Phra Tham Rattanakon (Sa-ngat Ansumali), Luang Pho Sot's student and the current Assistant Abbot of Wat Paknam, who placed one of his students, Phra Khru Banditanurak (Taem Bandito), as the abbot of the temple.

Thammakai meditation incorporates three methods of meditation directed at the centre of the body. The three methods are: meditating on an object of visualisation (*kasiṇa*), the recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*) and mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānassati*), all of which are applied simultaneously at the centre of the body two finger breadths above the navel.²⁸

The *thammakai* object of visualisation is the light sphere (*āloka-kasiṇa*), usually a luminous sphere or a translucent Buddha statue. The recollection of the Buddha is cultivated by a mantra of *sammā araham* which signifies the Buddha's wisdom and purity. The meditator repeats the mantra at the same time as visualising the object at the centre of the body.

Once the sphere is visualised with proper concentration, a bright sphere will appear at the centre of the body. The bright sphere that the meditator sees is the meditator's own mind or what is called the sphere of '*paṭhama-magga*' or the '*dhamma* sphere'. Each body

²⁸ Phra Ajahn Maha Sermchai Jayamanggalo, *The Heart of Dhammakāya Meditation*, 2nd ed., (Bangkok: Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Foundation, 1997) 23.

including the *dhammakāya* has this sphere at the centre of the body. From this point, there exists internal spheres which lead to internal bodies within the human body, each crude body has a refined body within it. They are as follows: 1. Crude human body, 2. Refined human body, 3. Crude celestial body, 4. Refined celestial body, 5. Crude Brahma body, 6. Refined Brahma Bodies, 7. Crude formless Brahma body, 8. Refined formless Brahma body. These purer and more refined bodies appear as a result of the mind becoming purer, clearer and more refined. Luang Pho Sot explained that going through each sphere and each body is equivalent to practising the eightfold noble path as more defilements are abandoned, at the same time morality, concentration and wisdom are developed.

The eight bodies so far are mundane (*lokīya*) bodies, are dependently originated and conditioned. However, when the mind reaches beyond the formless Brahma body, *dhamma* body (*dhammakāya*) will appear. 'It looks like a transparent Buddha statue with a lotus-bud upon the head.'²⁹ It is luminous, radiant and as clear as diamond. As the meditator concentrates at the centre of the body, more and more refined inner *dhamma* bodies will appear as the mind becomes even purer and more refined. These are 9. *dhammakāya gotrabhū* (one who is between the state of the worldly and that of the noble), 10. Refined *dhammakāya gotrabhū*, 11. *dhammakāya sotāpanna* (stream-winner), 12. Refined *dhammakāya sotāpanna*, 13. *dhammakāya sakadāgāmī* (once-returner), 14. Refined *dhammakāya sakadāgāmī*, 15. *dhammakāya anāgāmī* (non-returner), 16. Refined *dhammakāya anāgāmī*, 17. *dhammakāya arahatta* (perfect one), 18. Refined *dhammakāya arahatta*.

The remaining ten bodies are *dhammakāya*, which is clear like a mirror, bright and has the appearance of a Buddha statue. These *dhamma* bodies are supramundane (*lokuttara*), not dependently originated and unconditioned.

²⁹ Phra Ajahn Maha Sermchai Jayamangalo 30.

The follow quotations are from Luang Pho Sot's sermons. I shall provide my rough translation:

ธรรมกายมีสีใสเหมือนแก้วจริงๆ จึงได้ชื่อว่า พุทธรัตนะ

ธรรมทั้งหลายที่กลั่นออกมาจากหัวใจธรรมกาย จึงได้ชื่อว่าธรรมรัตนะ
ธรรมรัตนะคือหัวใจธรรมกายนั่นเอง

ดวงจิตของธรรมกายนั้นได้ชื่อว่าสังฆรัตนะ นี่แหละที่ว่าพุทธรัตนะ ธรรมรัตนะ
สังฆรัตนะ ทั้ง ๓ ประการนี้เกี่ยวเนื่องเป็นอันเดียว³⁰

Dhammakāya is clear like crystal, so it is named *Buddharatana*.

The *dhamma* that comes from the heart of *dhammakāya* is named *dhammaratana*. *Dhammaratana* is the heart of *dhammakāya*.

The *citta* sphere of *dhammakāya* is called *saṅgharatana*. This is what they say *Buddharatana*, *dhammaratana* and *saṅgharatana*, all three gems are linked together like this as one.

พุทธรัตนะ ธรรมรัตนะ สังฆรัตนะ ทั้ง ๓ นี้อยู่ที่ไหน? อยู่ในตัวของเรานี้เอง [...] พระพุทธเจ้าอยู่ตรงกลางกาย เรามีกกลางมีศูนย์ตรงสะดือนั้นเป็นศูนย์ นั่นเรียกว่ากลางกาย [...] ให้เอาใจไปหยุดนิ่งอยู่ตรงนั้น พอใจหยุดนิ่งก็เข้ากลางของใจ ที่หยุดนิ่งนั้นทีเดียว ที่เขาว่าสวรค์ในอภรณ์ในใจ พระก็อยู่ในใจ³¹

Where are the three *Buddharatana*, *dhammaratana* and *saṅgharatana*? They are within [each of] us [...] the Buddha is at the centre of the body. The spot at the navel called centre of the body [...] place your mind there, when the mind stops still, enter the centre of that still mind. When they say 'heaven and hell are in the mind', the Buddha is also in the mind.

พวกที่ทำธรรมกายเป็น เข้าถึงธรรมกายเป็นละก้อ นั้นแหละเป็นความบังเกิดของพระพุทธเจ้าทีเดียว³²

³⁰ Phra Saman Kusalacitto, ed., *ชีวประวัติและผลงานของหลวงพ่อดอกปากน้ำพระมงคลเทพมุนี (สด จนฺทสโร) [Biography and Works of Luang Pho Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkhon Thepmuni (Sot Candasaro)]* (Bangkok: HTP Press, 2000) 81-82.

³¹ *Biography and Works* 87.

³² *Biography and Works* 180.

Those who can make and reach *dhammakāya*, these are actually the appearances of the Buddha.

ธรรมกายที่เป็นกายที่ ๕ นั้นเป็นกายสำคัญที่สุดในพระพุทธศาสนา ผู้ใดทำกายนี้ให้เป็นขึ้นได้ ผู้นั้นก็ถือว่าเป็นพระพุทธเจ้า ชื่อว่าอนุพุทธเจ้า เป็นพระพุทธเจ้าตามเสด็จพระพุทธเจ้า³³

Dhammakāya that is the fifth body is the most important body in Buddhism. One who becomes this body is named Buddha, named *anubuddha* who is a Buddha that follows the Buddha.

In the *thammakai* system, the lower eight mundane bodies are made up of the five aggregates and are impermanent, suffering and not-self (*aniccam, dukkham, anattā*). They are called self, but only conventional self. Whereas, the ten supra-mundane *dhammakāyas* have the opposite characteristics of permanent, happy and self (*niccam, sukham, attā*). They are made up not of five aggregates, but *dhammakhandha*. These bodies are not conventional self but are ‘true self’ (ตนแท้) or ‘liberated self’ (อิตตาวิมุตติ)³⁴. However, only *dhammakāya arahatta* is totally liberated, all the *dhammakāya* below it are not totally liberated as they still have defilements to get rid of.³⁵

The scripture says all *dhammas* are not-self.³⁶ All *dhammas* in this case refer to all conditioned *dhammas* (*sarīkhatadhamma*) and do not refer to the unconditioned *dhammakāya*. All *dhammas* also refer to *dhamma* spheres within the centre of all mundane bodies. It is taught by Luang Pho Sot that when all conditioned *dhammas* are impermanent, suffering and not-self, one lets go of them, then, one’s mind becomes empty of those conditioned *dhammas*.³⁷

³³ *Biography and Works* 75.

³⁴ *Biography and Works* 234.

³⁵ *Biography and Works* 234.

³⁶ For example, Dhp 277-280 and S III 134.

³⁷ *Biography and Works* 228.

ใจมันไม่ติดในสังขารเหล่านั้น ปุญญาภิสังขาร อปุญญาภิสังขาร อนัญญาภิสังขาร [...] ไม่เกาะไม่ติด เมื่อไม่ติดแล้ว ใจไม่เกาะอะไรเลย ใจมันก็ว่างจากสังขารเหล่านั้น ไม่เกี่ยวเกาะสังขารเหล่านั้น [...] ไม่มีสิ่งหนึ่งสิ่งใด ใจที่ว่างนั้นแหละเป็นหนทางหมดจด³⁸

The mind is not attached to those *saṅkhāra*, namely, *puññābhisaṅkhāra*, *apuññābhisaṅkhāra*, *añeñjābhisaṅkhāra*. It is neither attached nor clings to them. When it does not cling, the mind is not attached to anything. The mind, then, is empty of those *saṅkhāra*, does not hang on to those *saṅkhāra* [...] not one thing. That mind is the path to purity.

When one reaches *dhammakāya*, one realizes that it is self, a true self that one can take refuge in. What is specifically self, as taught by Luang Pho Sot, is the *dhamma* sphere within the centre of the *dhammakāya*. Impermanence, suffering and not-self is, therefore, taught in order to let go and abandon the conditioned *dhammas* and also to point to permanence, happiness and self of the ultimate *dhammakāya*, which is the true refuge. This is how Luang Pho Sot understands and interprets the following statement: ‘Monks, you must be ones who have self as refuge, self as shelter, nothing else as shelter. You must be ones who have *dhamma* as refuge, *dhamma* as shelter, nothing else as shelter.’³⁹

Dhammakāya arahatta is also *nibbāna*. When an enlightened person dies, his five aggregates are broken up, but his *dhammakāya* is then drawn to *āyatana nibbāna*, an unconditioned place beyond the three realms where *dhammakāya* of the Buddhas and *arahants* dwell.

One of the most reliable books, which is both a commentary to and a development of Luang Pho Sot’s teaching of *nibbāna* and *dhammakāya*, is by Phra Rajyanvisith (Sermchai Jayamanggalo) or Luang Pa. In his book, หลักพิจารณาพระนิพพานธาตุ ตามแนวพระพุทธดำรัสและอรรถกถา *The Principle of Examination of Nibbāna-dhātu according to*

³⁸ *Biography and Works* 228.

³⁹ *attadīpā bhikkhave viharatha attasaraṇā anaññāsaraṇā dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññāsaraṇā* D III 77 and also see D II 100.

*the Words of the Buddha and the Aṭṭhakathā*⁴⁰, written under the pen name of Phutthathamprathip, Jayamanggalo Bhikkhu explains that *dhammakāya arahatta*, which is taught by Luang Pho Sot to be *nibbāna*, is specifically *nibbāna-dhātu*, the holder of the state of *nibbāna*. The state of *nibbāna* is the state of supreme happiness, void of conditioned *dhammas* etc.; that state, just like the cleanness of water or the pureness of air, which has to exist within water and air, must exist within something, which holds it. The state of *nibbāna* exists-within *nibbānadhātu*. *Nibbāna*, in the *thammakai* thought as summarized by Jayamanggalo Bhikkhu, can then be divided into three aspects: 1. the state of *nibbāna*, a state that is without defilements, unconditioned, eternal, supremely happy etc.; 2. the holder of that state, *nibbāna-dhātu*, which is equated with *dhammakāya*; 3. the place where the holder dwells which is *āyatana nibbāna*, an unconditioned place, beyond the worldly realms.⁴¹

Citing many passages from the Pāli canon, including the *Arahatta Sutta*⁴² and the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*⁴³, Jayamanggalo Bhikkhu argues that impermanence, suffering and not-self are inseparable qualities, if something is one, it is all three. The same as permanence, happiness and self, if something is permanent and happy it is also self. He asserts that self, taught by Luang Pho Sot, is not the ego-clinging self, which is a worldly self, but self in the sense of having the ‘substance and essence in being the true self’ (มีแก่นสารสาระในความเป็นตัวตนแท้), a self that does not become sick.⁴⁴ *Dhammakāya* is self, and everything else apart from it is not-self including conditioned *dhamma* (*sarikhataadhamma*) and designated *dhammas* (*paññattidhamma*), which include self according

⁴⁰ Phutthathamprathip, หลักพิจารณาพระนิพพานธาตุ ตามแนวพระพุทธดำรัสและอรรถกถา [*The Principle of Examination of Nibbāna-dhātu according to the Words of the Buddha and the Aṭṭhakathā*].

⁴¹ Phutthathamprathip 2-3.

⁴² S III 22.

⁴³ Vin I 13.

⁴⁴ Phutthathamprathip [6].

to the designation of the followers other religions, for example, self as the creator/actor (ผู้สร้าง/ผู้ทำ), the experiencer (ผู้เสวย), the possessor of own power (ผู้มีอำนาจเอง), all of which are designated selves.⁴⁵

Doctrinal Comparison

It is very interesting to find certain significant similarities between the two systems of thought as they come from two different Buddhist traditions and relying on different sources. First of all, they both posit similar kinds of absolute reality, for *shentongpas* it is *buddhajñāna*, the Buddha wisdom mind, which is synonymous with *tathāgatagarbha*, *dharmakāya*, *nirvāṇadhātu*, clear light nature of mind, Buddha, liberation etc., as they all are the same reality seen from different angles. For Luang Pho Sot, it is the *dhammakāya* that has attained *arahatta-phala*, which is equal to *nibbānadhatu*, Buddha, the clear radiant *dhamma* sphere, also the same reality from different angles. Although Luang Pho Sot does not mention *tathāgatagarbha*, as such term is not found in the Pāli canon, the potentiality or innate qualities that each being has to become a Buddha is indicated through out his teachings. The *dhammakāya* that is within each individual is similar to the description in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* of a Buddha statue covered in rags, for the rags in *thammakai* thought are the mundane defiled bodies, once these are removed the shining Buddha statue, the *dhammakāya* appears. Therefore, they are similar in the sense that the absolute reality is explained as covered or hidden by defilements, but when defilements are removed the absolute reality becomes manifested.

Moreover, these absolute realities have similar attributes. They are given the qualities of unconditioned, permanent, happiness, self, purity and refuge. For *shentongpas*, it is called the *tathatā* self, pure self, true self, *vajra* self, *vajrakāya*, *mantrakāya*, supreme master of all the Buddhas. In *thammakai* thought, it is called the true self, supramundane self and self liberated from defilements. Both selves

⁴⁵ Phutthathamprathip 3-4.

are beyond conceptualization, can only be known through meditative awareness, and not through ordinary consciousness. For *shentongpas*, it is beyond the concepts of self and not-self, for *thammakai* it is beyond conventional, designated and worldly *attā*. They are also different from the selves of other religions because they are beyond the selves of person and *dhammas* according to the *shentongpas* and not the designated or worldly selves according to *thammakai*.

They similarly understand and interpret statements that all *dharmas* are empty of self-nature or are not-self to include all conventional/relative *dhammas*, but not include the absolute reality itself. For *shentong*, the purpose of teaching it is for the meditator not to mistakenly apply the qualities of conventional reality to negate the absolute when he/she reaches it. For Luang Pho Sot, impermanence, suffering and not-self is contemplated to abandon clinging to the conditioned *dhammas* and also to direct the meditator to permanence, happiness and self of the ultimate *dhammakāya*, which is the true refuge.

One main difference is their understanding of conventional/relative reality on what they mean by impermanent, suffering, not-self and empty *dharmas*. In the *thammakai* system *saṅkhārādhamma* have these qualities, but they exist at the conventional level, what does not exist at all is designated (*paññatti*) *dhamma*, which are only concepts. However, *shentong* views conventional reality as non-existent, like a horn of a rabbit, but having an absolute unconditioned counterpart, which can only be seen by the enlightened mind. Relying on tantric sources, it holds that each of the twelve links of the dependent ordination has an absolute unconditioned counterpart.

Most of the differences mainly stem from the differences in traditions, where *shentong* describes its reality by terms and ideas found exclusively in Mahāyāna and tantric traditions. For example, terms such as *dharmatā*, *tathatā*, *gotra*, the sole *vajradhara*, *vajrasattva*, androgynous state etc. are not found in the *thammakai* system. Other differences include Luang Pho Sot's description of *dhammakāya* having an appearance of a Buddha statue and the idea of *āyatana nibbāna* being an unconditioned place where *dhammakāya* of Buddhas and *arahants* dwell. These ideas are not found in *shentong* doctrines.

However, it comes close to positing similar ideas in understanding the following terms literally: absolute form, absolute deity, absolute *maṇḍala*, the ultimate nirvāṇa-realm and also in its description of the inner nature of the body and mind. The following statement is by Jamgon Kongtrul:

The basic nature of existence (bhava) has two [aspects], the body and the mind. Of these two the inner nature of the mind is Tathāgatagarbha or the simultaneously arising Jnana and the inner nature of the body is the marks and signs (of a Buddha) that shine from its own light which are known as the “Other Vajra Body”.⁴⁶

This essay concentrates on the doctrinal comparison and not a comparison of practices, as I have not done enough research. However, from what I could observe, although there are differences, some similarities do exist, for example, *thammakai* meditation focuses on stopping still at the centre of the body where the *dhamma* sphere or the mind resides. This is similar to the practice of the Six Branch Yoga of bringing the wind to stop or enter the centre of the body as the way to achieve enlightenment.

Conclusion

In Buddhism, there are two wrong views of eternalism and annihilationism. The dividing line between those views and the right view has often been the point of debate in Buddhism through out its history. This essay raises many interesting questions. At which point does negation of something that is not real end? At which point does it become a negation of something that is real? At which point should meditative intuition take over conceptualization?

The two systems of thought in this article posit similar conceptionless absolute realities, of which views are founded upon a meditative and intuitive understanding exactly as it appears to the undefiled awareness, as oppose to an intellectual understanding

⁴⁶ Cited in Hookham 160.

established through reasoning. They represent another important tradition in Buddhism. As oppose to leaving a question mark and being silent when it comes to the nature of the absolute, in affirming its ultimate nature, these people see their understanding as associated with not over-negating and denying the existence of reality, but pointing to it and affirming it; not relying on intellectual reasoning alone, but also practicing the path to enlightenment, and also inspiring faith and confidence in the Buddha and his message.

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