

The *Tathagata-garbha* and the Self-emptiness Versus Other-emptiness Debate

This Tibetan debate on the nature of 'emptiness' is of particular relevance to the *Tathagata-garbha*.

Those of the other-emptiness view see the other-empty pure reality as the *Tathagata-garbha*, interpreted as a pre-existent reality that just needs uncovering: it is a radiance that is empty of defilements.

Those of the self-emptiness view regard talk of '*Tathagata-garbha*' as simply a way of saying that emptiness of inherent nature of the minds of beings means that they are capable of ultimate change, so that they can become Buddhas.

The latter view downplays the idea of the radiance of the mind, uncovered in meditation, as the specific seed of future Buddhahood, whereas the other-emptiness view is contentious in holding that the *Tathagata-garbha* does not and need not change, being an already present perfect Buddhahood that only needs to be uncovered.

In Tibet, the other-emptiness approach is seen, for example, in the approach of *Dzogch'en*, as found in the Nyingmapa school. This 'Great Perfection' practice is seen by its adepts as a wholly self-sufficient 'spontaneously perfect' way leading to a sudden realization of one's primordial perfection and wisdom. The approach is seen as one of simply allowing radiant clarity, the true nature of mind, to manifest itself. This involves allowing thoughts to come and go as they will, without attachment for – or rejection of – them or their objects, so as to be able to focus on the radiance in the thought-flow itself. By such a practice, the adept develops the ability to let his flow of thought-trains gradually and naturally slow down.

At a certain point in this development, the flow suddenly stops, as true non-attraction and non-aversion to thought arises in a spontaneous instant, with the mind resting in a state of pure awareness (*rigpa*), thusness, empty of constructing 'objects', motionless. This is seen as the sudden attainment of enlightenment, the unproduced spontaneous perfection of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra, personification of the '*Dharma*-body' – or at least a foretaste of this.

The *self*-emptiness approach to enlightenment, though, is a more gradualist one.

Source: Taken, with minor edits, from Harvey, P. (2013) *An introduction to Buddhism: teachings, history and practices*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Page 144.)