

Affiliation: *bodhisattva gotra*

(Short Notes on *gotra* Theory

in Yog c ra Buddhism)

Vladimir Korobov

Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University

The article continues discussion on ontological entities in Yog c ra Buddhism, originally initiated by Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki. Analyzing teachings presented within the frameworks of Yog c ra school of Buddhism, some modern Buddhologists find there traces of ontology which originally conflicts with basic Buddhist doctrines of no-self and dependent arising. According to the position of these Buddhologists, such concepts as gotra and tath gatagarbha represent a “generative monism” or a “foundational realism” in Yog c ra Buddhism. The author of the article argues that all the attempts to find an ontological basis for enlightenment are no more than efforts to place Buddhist practical epistemology into the limits of Western philosophy.

A. Although the very term *gotra* (*rigs*) in Yog c ra Buddhism does not seem difficult to understand and interpret and lately there have appeared several papers where this term was discussed in detail,¹ in the light of the polemic on “Critical Buddhism” I feel the need to discuss this term once again.

“Critical Buddhism” is a neologism invented by Hakamaya Noriaki, Professor at Komazawa Junior College and author of *The Hermeneutics of Vijñaptimātratā* (Shunjōsha, 1994), *An Annotated Translation of Mahāyānaśāstra* (co-translator, Daizō Shuppan, 1993), and other writings. In a series of articles² he and his colleague Matsumoto Shirō, Professor in the Faculty of Buddhism at Kamazawa University,

¹ See, for example, D. Seyfort Rugg, “The Meaning of the Term “Gotra” and the Textual History of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39, 2 (1976): 341–63. Useful materials for understanding of the “gotra” term may be found in James Apple, “Twenty Varieties of the Saṅgha: A Typology of Noble Beings (arya) in Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31 (2003): 503–92; 32 (2004): 211–79. See also John J. Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources and Controversy in India and Tibet*, New York, 1997.

² See collection of critical essays by Hakamaya Noriaki *Hongaku shisō hihan* [*Critiques of the doctrine of original enlightenment*] (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1989), *Hihan Bukkyō* [*Critical Buddhism*] (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1990). See also critical essays written by Matsumoto Shiro and collected in *Zen shisō no hihan* [*Critical studies on Zen Thought*] (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1993), *Engi to kō: Nyorai no shisō hihan* [*Pratītyasamutpāda and emptiness: Critiques of the doctrine of tathāgata-garbha*] (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1989).

made a distinction between “not true” Buddhism which is based on monism and positive ontology and “true” Buddhism based on the doctrines of no-self and dependent arising (*prat tyasamutp da*) only.³

According to Matsumoto, *dh tu* and *gotra* theories in *Mah y nas tr lamk ra*, *Mah parinirv na S tra*, *Bodhisattvabh mi* and *Abhisamay lamk ra* represent monistic tendencies in Buddhism and cause social discrimination “ultimately affirming the differences of an actual phenomenon (dharma) and spiritual lineages (*gotras*) among people”.⁴ To describe this phenomenon, Matsumoto have introduced the *dh tu-v da* concept. *Dh tu-v da*, or the “theory of locus” has according to Matsumoto the following defining characteristics:

1. ‘Locus’ is the basis for ‘super-loci’.
2. ‘Locus’ gives rise to ‘super-loci’.
3. ‘Locus’ is one, ‘super-loci’ are many.
4. ‘Locus’ is real, ‘super-loci’ are not real.
5. ‘Locus’ is the essential nature (atman) of “super-loci”.

6. ‘Super-loci’ are not ultimately real, but have some reality in that they have arisen from the ‘locus’ and share its nature”.⁵ Summarizing, Matsumoto writes: “[...] the basic structure of *dh tu-v da* is that of a singular, real locus (*dh tu*) that gives rise to a plurality of phenomena. We may also speak of it as a ‘generative monism’ or a ‘foundational realism’”.⁶ Setting apart the obvious Platonic complexion of these defining characteristics, let us take a close look at what is called *gotra*.

B. In his analysis of the text of *Ratnagotravibh ga* Ruegg writes: “The word *gotra* is frequently used in the literature of Mah y na Buddhism to denote categories of persons classified according to their psychological, intellectual, and spiritual types. The chief types usually mentioned in this kind of classification are the Auditors making up the *r vaka-gotra*, the Individual Buddhas making up the *pratyekabuddha-gotra*, and the Bodhisattvas making up the *bodhisattva-gotra*. In the *Samdhinirmocanas tra* these three types constitute altogether different *gotras*, which thus coincide with the three separate Vehicles (*y nas*) as recognized by Yog c rin / Vijñaptim trat school. To these three some sources add the further category of the undetermined (*aniyatagotra*), which is made up of persons not yet definitively attached to one of the three preceding classes; and the non-*gotra* (*agotra*), that is the category made up of persons who cannot

³ Matsumoto Shiro: “I choose to believe [...] that Buddhism is the teaching of dependent arising, and there is no “awakening” or “enlightenment” other than reflecting on or considering (*manasik ra*) dependent arising. If this is true, then it is clear that any “Zen thought” that teaches “cessation of thinking” (*amanasik ra, asamjñ*) is anti-Buddhist” (“The Meaning of Zen”, in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The storm over critical Buddhism*, Honolulu, 1997, 250).

⁴ Matsumoto Shiro, “Tath gata-Garbha is not Buddhist”, in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 172.

⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁶ Ibid., 171.

be assigned to any spiritual class. Each of the first three categories is thus comprised of persons capable of achieving a particular kind of maturity and spiritual perfection in accordance with their specific type or class, the Auditor then attaching the Awakening (*bodhi*) characteristic of the *r vaka* and so on. Especially remarkable in this connection, and somewhat anomalous as *gotra*, is non-*gotra*, i.e. that category of persons who seem to have been considered, at least by certain Yog c rin authorities, as spiritual ‘outcastes’ lacking the capacity for attaining spiritual perfection or Awakening of any kind; since they therefore achieve neither *bodhi* nor *nirv ṇa*, they represent the same type as *icchantikas* to the extent that the latter also are considered to lack this capacity”.⁷

He also suggests two ways of understanding the term *gotra*:

The word *gotra* thus either designates *extensionally* a (soteriological and gnoseological) category or class; or it designates *intensionally* the factor or capacity that determines classification in such a category or class. In these meanings the term *gotra* is evidently related to the concept of a lineage, clan, or family, or of a genus; and its meanings are associated with a socio-biological metaphor (*gotra* = *kula*, *vaṃ a* ‘family’, etc.) and a biological or botanical metaphor (*gotra* = *b ja*, ‘seed, germ’).⁸

Samḍhinirmocanas tra in connection with the spiritual element of living beings (*sattva-dh tu*) speaks of three different classes: *nyan thos kyi theg pa’i rigs can* (*r vaka-y na-gotraka*) – “those who are of the Hearers’ lineage”, *rang sang rgyas kyi theg pa’i rigs can* (*pratyekabuddha-y na-gotraka*) – “those who are in the lineage of Solitary Realizers (Individual Buddhas) and *de bzhin gshegs pa’i rigs can* (*tath gata-gotraka*) – “those who are in the lineage of Tath gata”.

In *Laṅk vat ras tra* two additional categories are included: *aniyata-gotra* “those whose lineage is undetermined” and *a-gotra* – “persons who are of no lineage at all”.⁹

In *K yapaparivarta rya-gotra* (*phag pa’i rigs*) is mentioned. It is stainless (*vimala*), real (*satya*), indestructible (*akṣaya*) and permanent (*nitya*). It is *an tman* and doesn’t belong to an object (*anupalambha*).¹⁰ In *Gotra* Chapter of *Mah y na-s tr laṅk ra* 3.2 this term is described as follows: “Existence of *gotra* is ascertained in the diversity of *dh tu*, of freedom, of knowledge, of obtainment of fruits.

⁷ D. Seyfort Ruegg, “The Meaning of the Term ‘Gotra’ and the Textual History of the *Ratnagotravibh ga*”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39, 2 (1976): 341.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 341–42.

⁹ See David Seyfort Ruegg, *La Théorie du Tath gatagarbha et du Gotra. Études sur la Sotériologie et la Gnoséologie du Bouddhisme*, Publications de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient LXX, Paris, 1969, 73. The very term *gotra* Ruegg translates as “lignée spirituelle”. It is remarkable that L. Schmithausen translates this term by the German “Heilsanlage” (see his *Der Nirv ṇa-Abschnitt in der Vini cayasamgrahaṇ der Yog c rabh miḥ*, Wien, 1969), while Gustav Roth translates it as “innate spiritual predisposition” (see his article “Observations on the First Chapter of Asaṅga’s *Bodhisattvabh mi*”, *Indologica Taurinensia* 3–4 (1975–76): 403–12).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109–15.

Commentary:

By reason of the multiplicity of the *dh tu* of beings, the classification of *dh tu* does not have a limit; as is said in the *Akṣar īs tra*. After admitting that the diversion of *dh tu* is based on similar knowledge, the result of the *gotra* is diverse in the three vehicles (*y n s*). The diversity of the illumination is ascertained in the beings. At first such and such a belief in such and such a *y na* brings illumination; hence it cannot be produced without the diversity of *gotra*. When illumination is provoked by an experience, one ascertains the diversity of the knowledge, one advances, one does not advance; it is not produced without the diversity of the *gotra*. The diversity of a fruit is also ascertained; the illumination is inferior, mediocre or superior; it is not produced without diversity of *gotra* as the fruit corresponds to the seed”.¹¹

In *gotra-paṭala* of *Bodhisattvabh mi gotra* together with the primary cultivation of an enlightened attitude (*dang po sems bskyed*) and a range of conductive aspects of enlightenment (*byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos thams cad*) make up the “ground” (*gzhi*).¹² The following definition of *gotra* is suggested:

De la ni rigs gang zhe na/ mdor na nram pa gnyis te/ ran bzhin gyis gnas pa dang/ yang dag par bsgrubs pa'o/ de la ran bzhin gyis gnas pa'i rigs ni byang chub sems dpa' rnam kyi skye mched drug gi khyad par gang yin pa ste/ de ni gcig nas gcig tu bryud de 'ongs pa thog ma med pa'i dus can chos nyid kyis thob pa de lta bu yin no/ de la yang dag par bsgrubs pa'i rigs ni ngon dge ba'i rtsa ba goms par byas pa las thob pa gang yin pa ste/ don gyi skabs 'dir ni nram pa gnyi ga yang 'dod do/ rigs de ni sa bon zhes kyang bya/ khams de ni rang bzhin zhes kyang bya'o/

“What is *gotra*? Briefly, there are two divisions [of *gotra*]. One existing naturally and [the other] attained. The naturally existing *gotra* is a specific state of the six sense bases (*ayatana*) of bodhisattvas. [This state] is successively transmitted from the beginningless past [to the present] and is similar to the possession of *dharmata* (*chos nyid*). The attained *gotra* is a possession of roots of virtuous deeds [accomplished] in former [lives]. Both divisions [of *gotra*] are asserted here [with reference] to the preliminary context. The *gotra* is also called ‘potentiality’ (*sa bon*) and the *dh tu* (*khams*) in turn is called ‘self-nature’ (*rang bzhin*)”.¹³

Further in the *rigs* Chapter of *Bodhisattvabh mi* there are discussed differences between *gotras* and the superiority of the bodhisattvas’ *gotra* is established. Regarding two hindrances – afflictive hindrance (*nyon mong pa'i sgrib pa, kle varana*) and intellectual hindrance (*shes bya'i sgrib pa, jñey varana*) – *ravakas* (*nyan thos*) and *pratyekabuddhas* (*rang sangs rgyas*) are able to get rid of the first only, whereas

¹¹ *Mah y nas tr lamk ra* by *Asanga*, ed. and trans. Surekha Vijay Limaye, Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series 94, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992, 34.

¹² “De la gzhi gang zhe na/ 'di la byang chub sems dpa'i rang gi rigs dang/ dang po sems bskyed pa dang/ byang chub kyi phyogs kyi chos thams cad ni gzhi zhes bya'o” from *Byang chub semsm pa'i sa/mdzad pa po/phags pa thogs med/*, Taipei, 2003, 1.

¹³ *Byang chub semsm pa'i sa/mdzad pa po/phags pa thogs med/*, Taipei, 2003, 2–3.

bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dpa*) dispose of the both and on the score of this they are called *unexcelled superiors* (*khyad par du 'phags pa bla na med pa*).

Then *bodhisattvas*' advantages over *ravakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* are established in connection with four aspects: 1) as resulting from power (*dbang po las gyur pa*) – *bodhisattva* naturally has the highest powers (*rang bzhin gyis dbang po rno ba yin*); 2) as resulting from practical benefits (*sgrub pa las gyur pa*) – *bodhisattva* acts and lives for the benefit of others; 3) as resulting from discernmental skills (*mkhas pa las gyur pa*) – *bodhisattva* knows more and is experienced in other sciences than *ravakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, (*rig pa'i gnas gzhan thams cad la yang mkhas par byed*), and 4) as resulting from the outcome ('*bras bu las gyur pa*) – *bodhisattva* attains the fruit of the highest, pure and perfect enlightenment (*bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub*).¹⁴

C. As we can see from the texts of *Mah y nas tr lamk ra* and *Bodhisattvabh mi*, there is established an evident differentiation between *bothisattvas*' and other *gotras*. The question is: what is the basis of this differentiation?

Matsumoto's answer obviously implies a Plato-like model of ontology: "[...] I find Yogacara theory of *gotra* to be based on monism [...]"¹⁵ And Hakamaya writes: "The mind cannot be separate from its thoughts which constantly arise and perish, but if there is an "origin of the mind" behind the mind, then this can be identified as an eternal and unchanging "thusness" (Skt. *tathat* , Jpn. *shinnyo*) that sustains all phenomena".¹⁶

The issue of differentiation between *gotras* is brought up in *Abhisamay lamk ra* 1.39:

Since there are no any distinctions in *dharmadh tu*, then the differentiation among *gotras* isn't tenable. [But because] of dependency *dharmas* have [their] peculiarities. That is why the classification [of *gotras*] is proclaimed.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 3–4.

¹⁵ I would like to make some notes on Matsumoto's translation of *rang bzhin gyis gnas pa* as '[the *gotra*] located on *prakṛti*'. In his response to the critical article written by Yamabe Nobuyoshi (see "Critical Exchange on the Idea of *Dh tu-v da*", in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 206) he argued that traditional translation of this phrase as '[the *gotra*] existing by nature' or 'naturally existing [*gotra*]' is a fault and we should translate it as it was mentioned above – '[the *gotra*] located on *prakṛti*' or '[the *gotra*] existing on *prakṛti*'. It should be stated that it is hardly possible for the same phrase to have a different lexical meaning within one short segment of text. The phrase *rang bzhin gyis* appears at least twice at the same page of the *Gotra* Chapter of *Bodhisattvabh mi*: *rang bzhin gyis dbang po* and *rang bzhin gyis sbyin pa*. The translation is obvious: 'naturally'; 'naturally [has] powers' and 'natural generosity'. The same method of translation must be applied also to the phrase *rang bzhin gyis gnas pa* – 'naturally abides' or '[is] presented naturally'.

¹⁶ Hakamaya Noriaki, *Hongaku shis hihan* [Critiques of the Doctrine of Original Enlightenment], Tokyo: Daiz Shuppan, 1989, 5.

¹⁷ "chos kyi dbyings la dbyer med phyir/rigs ni tha dad rung ma yin/brten pa'i chos kyi bye brag gis/de yi dbye ba yongs su brjod//", from *Abhisamay lamk ra-Prajñ p ramit -Upade a- stra*, *The work of Bodhisattva Maitreya*, ed. Th. Stcherbatsky and E. Obermiller, St. Petersburg, 1929.

Commenting on this fragment, *mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang* writes:

In this case, the basis for the perception (*dmigs rten*), [that is, the object,] is called the *basis* (*rten*). It is not [a distinction between the] “basis (*rten*) and what is a based [or dependent = *brten pa*] phenomenon” in the sense of “what is caused and the cause” [but instead in the sense of the “object perceived and the perceiver”]. Therefore, even though the division of the *ryan* beings of the three vehicles into different lineages is not made in regard to reality qua the perceived basis or perceived object (*dmigs yul*) of their respective gnoses [as these are all identical, in each case being reality], the division into the three lineages of the three vehicles is made with regard to reality in so far as the three gnoses, which are the dependent [phenomena, i. e. “based” = *brten pa*], the perceivers that take reality as their object. When meditated on, these act as the causes of the different *ryan* states, hence the division into three lineages. This is the meaning.¹⁸

As we can clearly see, differentiation between *gotras* is presented here as an epistemological and not an ontological problem. References to different abstract entities (*tathat*, *dharmadh tu*, *tath gatagarbha*, etc.) in Buddhist texts do not necessarily imply an ontological background. *Gotra* gradation corresponds to different levels of involvement into the understanding of *thatness* and in that way speaks about self-awareness irrespective of any “locus”. The level of involvement depends on the personal will, attempts and cognitive situation but not on any a priori given metaphysical support. Moreover, this gradation corresponds to the path (*lam*), i.e. all *gotra* categories are not ascertained once and for all, because knowledge and awareness themselves all the time are in progress. Pro tanto the background for *gotra* gradation may be understood in terms of the Aristotelian teaching on *telos* which is a union of the final goal and result. On the one hand, it is possible to understand *telos* as ‘assiduity’, because a goal requires some attempts to reach it (as in the case of ‘attained *gotra*’ – *dag par bsgrubs pa’i rigs*). On the other hand, it already potentially presents as a result (as in the case with ‘naturally existing *gotra*’ – *ran bzhin gyis gnas pa’i rigs*). Both they formally (with no regard to the Aristotelian theory of soul) compose the background which may be called *tath gatagarbha* – embryo-essence, a spiritual germ (*gotrata I*) or generative matrix, the cause and the goal. As the union of the goal and result, *telos* is not an ontological entity, it is an inner power, and a person may be aware of this power and concerned with it in different ways. In this connection, I remember the theory of consciousness presented by Kierkegaard in his *Sickness Unto Death*. According to this theory, we all have consciousness to different degrees: “The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is no self, but the more will he has, the more consciousness of self he has also”.¹⁹ This disposition described by

¹⁸ *A Dose of Emptiness*, An Annotated Translation of the *sTong thun chen mo* of *mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang* by José Ignacio Cabezón, Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series 125, Delhi, 1993, 221.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, Princeton, 1968, 162.

Kierkegaard resembles the structure of *gotras*, particularly in case of *a-gotraḥ* persons who have no will accordingly have no consciousness and hence cannot aspire to enlightenment.

D. It seems to me that Buddhism in general and Yogic Buddhism in particular builds its epistemology on the basis of self-awareness and existential responsibility rather than on admission of Absolute Reality that denudes a person of the option and designates strata for different living beings. Dan Lusthaus says: “*Gotra*, which means ‘family’ or line of descent, has since the earliest Buddhist texts been used to counter caste-consciousness by means of substituting a functional meaning for the term rather than an essential or ontological meaning. Simply, one is what one does (*karmaka*), rather than what one claims to be (*ātman*)”.²⁰ mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang writes: “[...] we are thinking of a lineage during the time [that person is on] the path [and not something possessed by all beings]”.²¹ And carya Haribhadra commenting *Abhisamay lamkara* 1.39 in his *Abhisamay lamkaravṛttiḥ sputartha* writes: “If pure *dharmadhātu* is a cause of the realization of *arya* qualities (*‘phags pa’i chos rtogs par gyur ba’i rgyu*), then those [possessing this cause] supreme bodhisattvas automatically (*de bzhin du*) may be reckoned among the lineage of the highest enlightenment. However, as regards the affiliation (*gnas pa*) with [this lineage], such pure (ideal, *khona*) bodhisattvas do not exist [...]. Likewise it is perceived in the stages of the *ravaka* vehicle, for the purpose of realization of *arya* qualities, *dharmadhātu* is considered as being existential cause. From this point of view the lineages are designated”. He continues with an illustration: “Just as in pots which are made from the same clay and burnt on the same fire may be stored both honey and sugar, the same way the three vehicles in which *dharma* is stored must be recognized to be different”.²²

So, it seems to me that concerning *gotra*, it is useful to take into account that:

- 1) the classification of three types of *arya* beings has an epistemological and not an ontological ground. *Tathāgatagarbha* being a goal and a cause concurrently is an epistemological entity. Suffice it to say that in the first chapters of *Abhisamay lamkara* three types of *arya* being are described on the grounds of three types of knowledge: *sarvākārajñāta* (*rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa nyid*) – total omniscience of Buddhas, *mārgajñāta* (*lam shes nyid*) – knowledge of the path peculiar to *bodhisattvas*, and *sarvajñāta* (*thams cad shes pa nyid*) – all-knowledge, conforming to the state of *ravaka* and *pratyekabuddha arya*. In all the above texts, classification of *arya* beings is discussed in terms of

²⁰ Dan Lusthaus, “Returning to the Sources”, in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 48.

²¹ *A Dose of Emptiness*, An Annotated Translation of the *sTong thun chen mo* of mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang by José Ignacio Cabezón, Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series 125, Delhi, 1993, 222.

²² *Abhisamay lamkaravṛttiḥ sputartha* by carya Haribhadra, restored and ed. Ramshankar Tripathi, Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1993, 32 (of Tibetan text).

knowledge, realization and cognition (*rtogs pa, shes pa*). There is no any trace of ontology or monism here;

- 2) besides, it is necessary to take into account that all the terms that provoke looking for ontology in Buddhism (*tathat , tath gatagarbha, svabhava*, etc.) are related to the path and not used generally. All these concepts are useful not on their own as metaphysical or ontological concepts, but simply as handy practical models.

All the attempts to find ontology in Buddhism are nothing but a try to insert dharma into Western intellectual paradigms. Finally it becomes clear that it is impossible. Fortunately, there are things that are incompatible.

I would like to conclude these short notes with the words of recently passed away Professor Herbert V. Guenther who devoted all his life to analysis and interpretation of Tibetan texts: “[...] the use of Western categories in connection with Eastern patterns of thought is extremely misleading and in most cases reveals a considerable lack of understanding on the part of him who uses these categories”.²³

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²³ Herbert V. Guenther, “Mentalism and beyond in Buddhist Philosophy”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 86, 3 (Jul.–Sept., 1966): 298.

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Vladimir KOROBOV, Ph.D. (kanjur@delfi.lt), Lecturer of Tibetan Studies and Comparative Philosophy, Center of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University