

rNying-ma interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha theory

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Several studies have been made of the Tathāgatagarbha theory in India, including most recently Michael Zimmermann's excellent study of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*. On the Indo-Tibetan front, David Seyfort Ruegg has through a series of publications greatly contributed to the understanding of the Tathāgatagarbha theory, particularly that of the dGe-lugs-pa tradition. A study of the Tathāgatagarbha theory from the perspective of the exponents of extrinsic emptiness (*gzhan stong*) Madhyamaka in Tibet was ventured by S. K. Hookham. However, much remains to be explored in other traditions, authors and texts from different periods of Tibetan history.

One important Tibetan interpretations of Tathāgatagarbha that has been mostly ignored so far is that of the rNying-ma school. Even authors such as Hookham who touched upon the theme in passing have over-simplistically described the rNying-ma position – or specifically rDzogs-chen, which contains the Tathāgatagarbha theory – as “*gzhan stong*-type” teachings. The actual situation, however, is much more complex, and certainly there are more than one interpretation of the Tathāgatagarbha theory in the rNying-ma tradition. Yet I would maintain that the position of the main rNying-ma scholars, in spite of its complexity, was nevertheless explicit, well-defined and relatively consistent throughout the history of their school.

In my paper I try to describe as accurately as possible the rNying-ma “interpretation” of the Tathāgatagarbha theory as it was maintained by rNying-ma authors whose authority was acknowledged within their tradition. Hence, I will mainly draw on works of three rNying-ma scholars, namely, Rong-zom-pa (11th century), Klong-chen-pa (1308–1363) and Mi-pham (1846–1912), all of whom are considered authoritative. It is not, however, my intention to examine whether the interpretation of these three authors conforms the original purport of the Tathāgatagarbha theory in Indian Buddhism.