

Clear Light, Tranquil Light. The Nature of Luminosity in Mahāyāna Forms of Buddhism.

James B. Apple

Light is an important metaphor and literal actuality among religions of the world. Light often serves as a metaphor for life, prosperity, and perfection. The metaphors and reality of light also have great purport among Buddhist traditions. This paper compares the reality of light as described in the esoteric Buddhist thought of Nāgārjuna and the Indian Buddhist paṇḍita from Bengal, Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982-1054 CE), with the doctrines of the Tiantai master Zhiyi (538-597 CE). Specifically, the paper examines the “mind of clear light” (prabhāsvaracitta) found among Indian Buddhist masters, such as Nāgārjuna and Atiśa, with the idea of the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light (常寂光土) in the thought of Zhiyi. The paper compares and contrasts these two understandings of light to gain insight into important similarities and distinctions between Indian Buddhist and East Asia Buddhist soteriology.

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Introduction

Light has long served as a powerful symbol across the world's religious traditions, representing life, wisdom, purity, and transcendence. In Buddhism, light functions not only as a metaphor but also as a profound expression of the nature of mind and reality.¹ This paper explores the significance of light in Mahāyāna Buddhist thought by comparing two distinct yet resonant traditions: the Indian Mahāyāna and esoteric Buddhist teachings of Nāgārjuna and Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna, and the East Asian Tiantai tradition as articulated by the Chinese master Zhiyi. Central to this comparison is the concept of the “mind of clear light” (*prabhāsvaracitta*)²—a luminous, untainted awareness emphasized in Indian Buddhist philosophy—and the Tiantai vision of the “Land of Eternally Tranquil Light” (常寂光土), a realm of ultimate purity and awakening. By examining how these traditions conceptualize light in relation to mind, reality, and liberation, this study highlights both shared soteriological aims and distinct doctrinal frameworks. Through this comparative lens, the paper seeks to illuminate how Indian and East Asian Mahāyāna traditions articulate the path to awakening through the imagery and reality of light.

Atiśa, the Grand Synthesizer of Indic Forms of Buddhism

Atiśa was a grand synthesizer of late Indian Buddhism who integrated his heritage of Buddhist doctrine and discipline into his pedigree of thought and practice. Namely, Atiśa upheld a Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage and the Mahāyāna based vocational pursuit of the bodhisattva path to Buddhahood.³ He also followed the Madhyamaka “middle way” methods of reasoning and insight, as well as the esoteric Buddhist cultivations of Mahāmudrā, the “Great Seal.” These strands of Atiśa's Buddhist heritage shaped his orientation

towards the mind of clear light.

Atiśa upheld a Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage as a fully ordained *bhikṣu*. The Mahāsāṃghika, according to the earliest available textual sources, such as Vasumitra⁴ in the first or second century CE, had numerous understandings of the Buddha's teaching and precepts of training that were distinct from other ordination lineages. Among these distinct understandings of the Buddha's teaching is that of the natural luminosity, or clear light, nature of the mind. According to Bareau's study of mainstream ordination lineages (*nikāya*), the Mahāsāṃghikas claim that "the own-nature of the mind (*cittasvabhāva*) is originally clear (*prabhāsvara*). It is the adventitious (*āgantukopakleśa*) that sully it."⁵ The Buddha is recorded in the Nikāya/Āgama literature as teaching the luminosity of the mind sporadically throughout these texts.⁶ However, the Buddha's statements on the topic became a point of controversy among the diverse ordination lineages as exhibited, for instance, in the Kuṣāna era Spitzer Manuscript.⁷ The Spitzer Manuscript, considered the oldest philosophical document preserved in Sanskrit, records a condemnation of the doctrine that mind is naturally luminous, a heresy associated with the Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage (*nikāya*). Notable in the Mahāsāṃghika interpretation of the mind of clear light is that clear light constitutes the mind's nature and is included, in some accounts, as among things that are unconditioned.⁸

The vocational pursuit of the bodhisattva path is found in the Prajñāpāramitā and numerous Mahāyāna scriptures, where the concept of *clear light* (or luminous mind) is presented as a central expression of the mind's ultimate nature and its intimate connection with reality (*dharmatā*) (Ruegg 1969, 411-418). The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* famously declares, "That mind is not mind, the nature of mind is clear light,"⁹ emphasizing that the true nature of mind transcends ordinary conceptual understanding. The clear light nature of mind is not a fixed or graspable entity but a luminous, empty awareness that defies dualistic categorization. Similarly, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Skorupski 2012, 51) describes this luminosity as the mind's natural, unaltered purity—untainted by defilements or conceptual elaborations. This purity is not something added to the mind but is its original condition, revealed through deep meditative insight.

Ruegg's analysis (1969, 417) underscores the equivalence between this

luminous nature of mind (*citta*), its non-conceptual quality, and the nature of reality itself (*dharmatā*). In the *Prajñāpāramitā*, clear light is not merely a metaphor but a direct experiential quality of awakened awareness. It represents the union of emptiness and clarity—mind as empty of inherent existence yet vividly aware. Thus, in *Prajñāpāramitā* and the Mahāyāna scriptures influenced by it, the realization of clear light is synonymous with realizing the ultimate nature of both mind and reality, a foundational insight on the path to awakening.

Atiśa also identified himself as a follower of the Middle Way (*dbu ma pa*) from the lineage and teachings of Ārya Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti (Apple 2018; Apple 2019). Nāgārjuna, in Atiśa's eyes, was a Mahāyāna Buddhist figure equivalent to the Buddha, one who is placed at the beginning of numerous lineage lists encompassing the way of the perfections, the way of mantras, and the lineage of Madhyamaka.

The works of Nāgārjuna that Atiśa regarded as essential to understanding Madhyamaka, texts such as the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* (Toh. 1801), *Bhāvanākrama* (Toh. 3908), and *Acintyastava* (Toh. 1128) differ from works attributable to Nāgārjuna by modern scholarship. Atiśa understood Nāgārjuna's devotional praises, such as the *Praise to the Realm of Reality* (*Dharmadhātustava*), as complementary to Nāgārjuna's works emphasizing reasoning, such as the *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning* (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*). Nāgārjuna was the principal master of Atiśa's holistic and inclusive way of Madhyamaka interpretation.

Nāgārjuna's *Praise to the Realm of Reality* (*Dharmadhātustava*)¹⁰ was formative for Atiśa's understanding of the mind of clear light and its connection to the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*). Atiśa himself composed a song glorifying the realm of reality incorporating nineteen verses from Nāgārjuna's Praise (Apple 2019, 133; see below). Nāgārjuna's *Praise to the Realm of Reality* presents a profound vision of the *dharmadhātu*—the realm of reality—as inherently pure, luminous, and ever-present, though obscured by afflictions (*kleśas*). The text emphasizes that this realm exists within all sentient beings and is not something to be created or attained, but rather revealed through purification. When obscured by mental defilements, the *dharmadhātu* remains hidden, much like clarified butter (ghee) mixed with milk or a lamp enclosed in a vase (verses 4, 5). However, when the afflictions are removed—through meditative concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom

(*jñāna*)—the innate luminosity of the *dharmadhātu* radiates boundlessly.

Nāgārjuna uses vivid metaphors to illustrate this: just as light emerges from a lamp when the vase is broken, or as the moon and sun are hidden by clouds and dust, the clear and radiant mind is veiled by desire, anger, sloth, arrogance, and doubt.¹¹ Yet, like a gemstone within rock or water deep underground, the mind's luminous nature remains untouched by these impurities. The fire of wisdom burns away the defilements without harming the radiant essence itself.¹²

Ultimately, Nāgārjuna affirms that the *dharmadhātu*, or realm of reality, is unborn, unceasing, and stainless from beginning to end. The realization of this clear light nature—identical with the nature of reality (*dharmatā*)—is the goal of the Mahāyāna path in Nāgārjuna's *Praise*. Emptiness teachings serve to remove the obscurations, not to negate the luminous nature, which remains ever-pure and indestructible within saṃsāric appearances.

Atiśa was also influenced by the *Jewel Lamp of the Middle Way*¹³ attributed to Bhāviveka, a work that Atiśa would utilize to introduce his students to Madhyamaka (Apple 2018, 8). In the *Jewel Lamp of the Middle Way*, the nature of mind, clear light, and the *dharmakāya* (truth body) are presented as inseparable aspects of ultimate reality. Drawing on Nāgārjuna's teachings, the text asserts that consciousness itself is of the nature of clear light, and that nirvāṇa is complete emptiness.¹⁴ The *dharmakāya*—the enlightened body of the Buddha—is described as the realization of this luminous, empty nature. The mind, which is empty yet luminous, is portrayed as beyond time, form, and conceptual elaboration. It is likened to an illusion (*māyā*), appearing as phenomena but ultimately devoid of inherent existence. Despite its illusory nature, the mind is naturally clear light—pure, formless, and unoriginated. This luminous quality is not something added to the mind but is its nature, obscured only by conceptual grasping. Citing the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (X.256-258), the text emphasizes the progression from reliance on mind-only to the transcendence of even that, culminating in non-appearance and the direct realization of the Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*).¹⁵ In this realization, all appearances—internal and external—are seen as projections of the mind, which itself is clear light. The *dharmakāya* is thus not a separate entity but the full realization of the mind's luminous emptiness, free from subject-object duality and conceptual construction.

In brief, based on Mahāyāna sūtras, technical digests (śāstra), and the

works of Nāgārjuna, Atiśa’s articulation of the luminous clear light mind is related to his program of advanced meditation practices oriented toward realizing the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*).

Atiśa’s Reality of Clear Light

Atiśa’s *Song with a Vision for the Realm of Reality*¹⁶ presents a luminous metaphysics rooted in the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of the *dharmadhātu*—the ultimate realm of reality—as inherently radiant, pure, and free from conceptual elaboration. In verse 2, Atiśa describes this realm as “profound, peaceful, suchness free from reference points,” emphasizing its unconditioned and luminous nature. This luminosity is not considered a frequency of physical light but the innate clarity and purity of reality, which is “unborn, unceasing, and primordially pure.” Its very nature is *nirvāṇa*, suggesting that liberation is not something newly created but the recognition of what has always been present. Atiśa emphasizes that the luminous realm of reality is beheld with subtle nonconceptual mental eyes, without conceptual proliferation’s blur of dullness and agitation.

Verses 7 through 9 of Atiśa’s *Song*, drawing on Nāgārjuna’s imagery, develop a powerful metaphor: the realm of reality is like a lamp hidden inside a vase. When obscured by afflictions (*kleśas*), its light cannot shine. However, when cracks appear—symbolizing moments of insight or spiritual practice—the light begins to emerge. Ultimately, when the “concentration thunderbolt” (*samādhivajra*) shatters the vase entirely, the light of the *dharmadhātu* radiates boundlessly, illuminating all of space. This imagery conveys the idea that the luminous nature of reality is ever-present but obscured by mental defilements. Through meditative realization, these obscurations are removed, allowing the inherent clarity of mind and reality to shine forth. Atiśa thus presents luminosity not as an external phenomenon but as the intrinsic, liberating quality of awakened awareness—revealed through the dissolution of ignorance and the cultivation of deep meditative non-conceptual insight.

Atiśa’s *Open Basket of Jewels*¹⁷ presents a contemplative vision of the *dharmadhātu*—the realm of reality—as the ultimate ground of experience, intimately linked to the nature of mind and clear light. The instructions begin with ethical and motivational foundations for meditation, emphasizing renunciation and compassion rooted in the recognition of beings’ past

kindness (Apple 2018, 70). This compassionate motivation leads into a deeper realization: all phenomena, including body and mind, are marked by false appearances. In this work, Atiśa teaches that the mind, though appearing active and real, is in fact without color, form, or inherent existence. It is “by its own nature clear light,” meaning it is fundamentally luminous, unarising, and pure from the beginning. This clear light is not a sensory light but the mind’s innate clarity and non-dual awareness. Through the wisdom of individual analysis (*so sor rtog pa’i shes rab*), one realizes that even consciousness itself is unproduced, unestablished, and devoid of any fixed nature. In this way, Atiśa’s understanding of the realm of reality is one of radical emptiness and luminous clarity. The *dharmadhātu* is not a thing but the ungraspable, non-conceptual expanse revealed when all elaborations are pacified and the mind’s true nature—clear light—is directly known.

Atiśa’s *Special Instructions on the Middle Way*¹⁸ presents a nuanced understanding of the mind and the realm of reality, emphasizing their ungraspable yet luminous nature. He describes the mind as lacking color, shape, unity, and multiplicity—qualities that would make it conceptually definable. Instead, it is likened to space: unproduced, unestablished, and ultimately beyond conceptual elaboration. Despite this emptiness of inherent existence, Atiśa affirms that the mind possesses a “luminous nature,” a quality that points to its innate clarity and capacity for radiance.

This presentation aligns with Atiśa’s teachings in *Open Basket of Jewels*, where he similarly describes the mind as “by its own nature clear light,” emphasizing its beginningless, unarising purity. Importantly, Atiśa extends this insight to wisdom itself, stating that even wisdom—though luminous and without appearance—is not established with any inherent nature (Apple 2018, 70). Thus, both mind and wisdom are empty of self-nature yet radiant in their clarity.

Atiśa’s synthesis reflects his Middle Way approach, one which rejects both nihilism and eternalism. The realm of reality is not a fixed substance but a luminous, empty expanse realized through deep analysis and meditative insight. Clear light, in this context, is not a thing but the unimpeded, non-dual awareness that reveals the true nature of all phenomena.

*The Essential Condensed Summary on the Special Instructions of Coemergent Union*¹⁹ (hereafter *Coemergent Union*) is a brief compilation on Atiśa’s oral instructions on coemergent union (*lhan cig skyes byor*), or

coemergent yoga, a special form of advanced meditation bestowed to his Tibetan disciple Gönpawa. Atiśa's *Coemergent Union* instructs that the coemergent mind is the dharma body and that any appearances that arise are derived from the dharma body. The text initially clarifies that the mind in its coemergent essence, nature, and character is free from limitations and is naturally clear when in a state of nonconceptuality. The text outlines a set of four yogas that gradually appear in the practice of this meditation and are found in later literature on Mahāmudrā (Apple 2017, 26).

Atiśa's teachings in this passage present a deeply integrated view of the *dharmadhātu* (realm of reality) as the luminous, unarising nature of mind, realized through meditative insight and experiential familiarity. When one recognizes the mind as the dharma body, the afflictive fires of ignorance and emotional disturbances are pacified, and virtuous qualities naturally arise. This realization reveals the mind's essence as radiant, concept-free, and beyond production, cessation, or abiding.

Atiśa emphasizes that all dualistic constructs—*saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, and conceptual characteristics—are mere appearances (*snang ba tsam*; Apple 2022, 601). Through the progressive practice of the four yogas, one comes to directly realize the unarisen mind as the *dharma body*. However, due to karmically conditioned embodiment, suffering may still arise, just as a lion or garuḍa bird remains enveloped in the womb or egg despite their innate power.

At death, the dissolution of elements culminates in the merging of wind and mind into the body's central channel, where the natural clear light and the meditative clear light unite. If recognized, this leads to the realization of the Great Seal (*Mahāmudrā*). If not, fear and grasping arise, perpetuating *saṃsāra*. Thus, Atiśa urges unwavering meditation and devotional practices to stabilize this recognition, enabling one to manifest a deity's body and benefit others from the state of empty clear light.

Atiśa's understanding of the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*) is deeply tied to the experience of clear light (*'od gsal* $\approx$ *prabhāsvara*), which he presents as the innate, luminous nature of the mind. In *Coemergent Union* he emphasizes that through sustained meditative practice, a practitioner becomes familiar with this natural clarity. At the moment of death or deep realization, when the *natural clear light*²⁰—the mind's intrinsic, unconditioned radiance—meets the *clear light of meditation*²¹—the cultivated awareness developed through

practice—a profound recognition occurs.

This union leads to the realization of the *Great Seal* (*Mahāmudrā*), the ultimate accomplishment in Atiśa's system. It signifies the direct, non-dual experience of reality as it is: empty of inherent existence yet luminous and aware. The meeting of these two aspects of clear light is not a merging of separate entities, but the recognition that the mind's true nature has always been this luminous emptiness. Meditation serves to familiarize the practitioner with this reality so that, when the natural clear light arises spontaneously (such as at death), it is recognized rather than feared or misunderstood. In this way, Atiśa presents the realm of reality and its connection to the clear light nature of mind, as not something to be attained, but something to be recognized—an ever-present, luminous awareness revealed through meditative realization.

Zhiyi's Land of Eternally Tranquil Light

Zhiyi (538–597), revered as “the great master of Tiantai,” was the foundational figure of the Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhism. A brilliant systematiser, Zhiyi developed a comprehensive framework that unified diverse Buddhist teachings into a coherent whole.

Zhiyi's seminal work, the *Great Cessation-and-Contemplation* (摩訶止觀 *Mohezhi-guan*), opens with a notable declaration: “The luminous quiescence of cessation-and-contemplation was unknown in former ages.”²² This statement underscores the originality and depth of Zhiyi's meditative philosophy, which centers on the integrated practice of *zhi* (止, cessation) and *guan* (觀, contemplation). Far more than a method of meditation, Zhiyi's *zhiguan* reflects his vision of reality itself.

As Donner and Stevenson (2018, p. 7) observe, *zhiguan* is not merely descriptive of the practitioner's experience but of the nature of ultimate reality. Zhiyi regularly glosses *zhiguan* as “quiescence and illumination,” suggesting a dynamic interplay between stillness and insight. In this view, cessation represents the calming of mental disturbances and attachment, while contemplation illuminates the true nature of phenomena through wisdom. The luminous quiescence that Zhiyi describes is thus both a meditative state and a metaphysical principle—an expression of the profound clarity and tranquility that arises when one perceives reality.

One of the frameworks through which Zhiyi outlines his soteriological

system of luminous quiescence is through the category of four lands. Zhiyi's doctrine of the Four Lands (四種淨土) offers a profound cosmological framework within Tiantai Buddhism, illustrating the gradations of spiritual realization and the nature of Pure Lands. These four lands are not separate realms but interpenetrating dimensions of reality, reflecting the depth of one's spiritual insight and karmic purification.

Zhiyi outlines in his commentaries four kinds (四種) of Pure Land (淨土): The Land Where Ordinary Beings and Sages Dwell Together (凡聖同居土), The Land of Expedient Means with Remainder (方便有餘土), The Land of True Reward, Free from Obstructions (實報無障礙土), and the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light (常寂光土). Zhiyi's conception of "Land of Eternally Tranquil Light" has its beginnings in the "The Sutra Expounded by the Buddha on Practice of the Way through Contemplation of the Bodhisattva All-Embracing Goodness" (T. 277; Kubo and Logan 2017). This discourse, in part, provides the following description of the "Land of Eternally Tranquil Light,"

Śākyamuni Buddha is Vairocana—the One Who Is Present in All Places. Where this buddha abides is called Perpetual Tranquil Light—where perpetuity is perfectly achieved, where the perfect truth of self is constituted, where perfect purity casts off the aspects of existence, where perfect happiness is no longer a characteristic that occupies body and mind, where phenomena are no longer perceived as having or not having aspects, where likewise there is serene liberation as well as perfect wisdom. As these are features of the ever-abiding Dharma, you must accordingly contemplate the buddhas of the ten directions!²³

Zhiyi's commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, as McMullen (2025, 397) notes, provides "perhaps one of the most extensive treatments of the buddha land concept" in medieval Chinese Buddhism. In his *Profound Commentary on the Vimalakīrti Sutra* (維摩經玄疏), Zhiyi further explains the luminous land of tranquil light,

The fourth [point] illuminates the Land of Tranquil Light: The principle of the realm of thusness, cognized by the most profound and ultimate wisdom is called a land. Only the Dharma-nature (*dharmatā*) of the

Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*) is precisely the true, tranquil nature of wisdom. It is not the same as the partial truth understood by the Two Vehicles. Therefore, the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* says: “Emptiness in its ultimate meaning is called wisdom.” Like this sūtra states, knowing the nature of ignorance is itself enlightenment. As such, everything is the meaning of the eternally still and luminous because the inconceivable ultimate wisdom resides there, it is called tranquil light.²⁴

Zhiyi’s discussion of the Four Lands culminates in his *Profound Commentary on the Vimalakīrti Sutra* on the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light (常寂光土), which serves as the ontological foundation for all other lands. This ultimate realm is not a distant paradise but the ever-present, unchanging ground of reality itself. As Zhiyi explains,

Now, although the four kinds of lands that arise dependently on conditions are defiled and pure, they are not unequal. They are all based on the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light and therefore capable of transformation based on conditions to teach others. The Land of Eternally Tranquil Light also pervades lands of skillful means. Apart from lands of skillful means, there is no separate tranquil light. Therefore, the sūtra says: “The Buddha’s dwelling place is called the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.” It pervades all places; there is no place where it does not exist. All dharmas observed by the highest wisdom are nothing but dharma-nature. Therefore, it is known that Dharma-nature is called eternal peace. The sūtra says ignorance and enlightenment are called the ultimate emptiness. Ultimate emptiness is itself the nature of ignorance and this nature is enlightenment, thus it is called tranquil light. Permanently abiding and unchanging it is called eternal. Therefore, it is the same as space, without any variety.²⁵

As the quoted passage explains, all conditioned lands—whether defiled or pure—are rooted in this luminous, quiescent base. The Land of Eternally Tranquil Light pervades all realms of skillful means and is inseparable from them, revealing that enlightenment is not apart from the world but immanent within it. This land represents Dharma-nature—the true nature of all phenomena—described as “eternal peace,” “ultimate emptiness,” and

“luminous.” It is beyond duality, like space, without variation or obstruction. In Zhiyi’s Tiantai Buddhism, this land is not only the goal of the path but also its ever-present ground, affirming that awakening is accessible here and now through deep realization of the nature of mind and reality.

Conclusion

Atiśa and Zhiyi offer two similar, yet distinct, visions of light within their Mahāyāna Buddhist systems of thought and practice. Each one is grounded in their respective cultural and doctrinal contexts. Atiśa’s understanding of the luminous clear light mind is rooted in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist and esoteric Buddhist traditions, emphasizing advanced meditative realization of the *dharmadhātu*—the realm of reality—as the ultimate goal. For Atiśa, clear light is the innate purity and clarity of mind, which becomes fully manifest when obscurations are removed through the disciplined practice of meditation. This clear light is not only the nature of mind but also the gateway to realizing the *dharmakāya*, the truth body of the Buddha. Tiantai Zhiyi’s vision, by contrast, presents the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light as both the goal and the immanent ground of awakening. This luminous realm is not separate from the world but pervades all phenomena, revealing enlightenment as accessible in every moment.

Both Atiśa and Zhiyi share a commitment to light, whether clear or eternally tranquil, for awakening and purity, yet they diverge in their soteriological frameworks. Despite their differences, their Mahāyāna Buddhist perspectives are complementary. As Gethin (1998, 119) notes from his studies of early forms of Buddhism cosmology, a fulcrum point for the understanding of Buddhism “lies in the principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology.” Based on this principle, Atiśa’s psychological state of clear light mind parallel’s Zhiyi’s cosmological state of the land of eternally tranquil light. In this way, Atiśa’s luminous mind and Zhiyi’s luminous land reflect this equivalence offering complementary perspectives on light as both the path and the realization within cosmographic formations of Mahāyāna awakening.

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- Zhiyi (智顗, 538–597). *Weimo jing xuanshu* 維摩經玄疏, T1778.

Notes

- 1 On light or luminosity in the study of Buddhism see Kemp (2016) for a bibliographic survey and Brunnholz (2007, 57-68) for an overview. Ānalayo (2017, 2022) examines the Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka orthodox understanding of luminous mind among Buddhist ordination lineages (*nikāya*).
- 2 The Sanskrit term *prabhāsvara* in recent scholarship has been translated as “luminosity.” However, *prabhāsvara* may also be translated as “clear light” based on the late eighth century Tibetan translation ’od gsal. This equivalence is also found in the Sanskrit non-Buddhist commentary to Abhinavagupta’s *Tantraloka* by Jayaratha which characterizes a Buddhist Yogācāra opponent’s view by stating, *prabhāsvaram idaṃ cittam prakṛtyāgantavo malāḥ / teṣām apāye sarvārtham taj jyotir avinaśvaram* // “This mind is luminous by nature; impurities are adventitious. When they cease, that light, which is the goal of all, is imperishable” (De Jong 1962, 62). In this passage *prabhāsvara* is equated with *jyotis* (“light”), in agreement with the Tibetan translation of *prabhāsvara* as the noun, ’od gsal, “clear light” (Reigle 2015).
- 3 On the bodhisattva path as a vocational pursuit see Nattier (2003, 84-86).
- 4 Vasumitra’s *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* (c. first to second centuries CE; Buswell and Lopez 2014, 324), T. 2031 (translated by Xuanzang), T. 2032 (translated by Paramārtha), T. 2033 (translated by Paramārtha), Tib. *Gzhung lugs kyi bye brag bkod pa’i ’khor lo*. Toh. no. 4138, Tr. by Dharmākara and Bzang skyong. Masuda 1925.
- 5 Bareau 1955, French; 2013, pp. 53-54, English translation Sara Boin-Webb. See also Masuda 1925, 30; Dessein 2009, 50.
- 6 See Harvey (1995), Kemp (2016), Skorupski (2012), Anālayo (2017).
- 7 Franco 2000.
- 8 Walleiser 1927, 27. The Tibetan translation of the *Samayabhedavyūhacakra* (*Gzhung lugs kyi bye brag bkod pa’i ’khor lo*) D4138, 143b1 states: *sems rang bzhin gyis ’od gsal ba ni ’dus ma byas kyi dngos po dgu’o*, “The naturally clear light mind is the ninth unconditioned dharma.”
- 9 *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, (Mitra 1888, p. 5, line 14): *taccittam acittam / prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā* /. Cf. *Open Basket of Jewels* (Apple 2010, 128; Apple 2017, 10; Apple 2018, 72).
- 10 *Dharmadhātustava* (*Chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa*), Toh. 1118; see Brunnhölzl (2007) for English translation and commentaries, Ruegg (2010 [1971], pp. 113-143) for overview and analysis in French, and Liu (2014) for Sanskrit critical edition.
- 11 *Dharmadhātustava* (*Chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa*), verses 4-7.
- 12 *Dharmadhātustava* (*Chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa*), verse 20-21, Ruegg 2010, 136. See Apple (2018) for Atiśa’s understanding of how wisdom dissolves conceptual reification based on the thought of Nāgārjuna.
- 13 *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa* (Toh 3854) attributed to Bhāviveka or Bhavya. On this text in relation to Atiśa’s thought see Apple (2018, 8, 172, 273-4).
- 14 *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa*, 272a5, 280a2, 281b; See also Del Toso 2019, 106.
- 15 See Apple 2018, 211; 399, note 593 for citation and references.
- 16 *The Song with a Vision for the Realm of Reality* (*Dharmadhātudarśanagīti*, *Chos kyi dbyings lta ba’i glu*. Toh. no. 2314 (also, 4475). Dergé Tanjur, vol. zhi, ff. 254b7–260b5. Hereafter Song. See Apple (2019, 133-158) for English translation.
- 17 The full title is *Ratnakaraṇḍodghāṭamadhyamakopadeśa*, Tib. *Dbu ma’i man ngag rin po che’i za ma tog kha phyee ba*. Toh 3930, for Tibetan edition, see Miyazaki 2007; Apple (2018, 63-113) for English Translation.

- 18 *Madhyamakopadeśa*, Tib. *Dbu ma'i man ngag* (Toh 3929 (also 4468), vol. ki, 95b1–96a7); See Apple (2018, 269-278) for English translation.
- 19 *Essential Condensed Summary on the Special Instructions of Coemergent Union*. *Jo bo rjes dgon pa ba la gnang ba'i phyag chen*. See Apple 2018 for Tibetan edition and English translation. Also Apple 2019, 245-250.
- 20 *rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba* (Apple 2017, 34).
- 21 *bsgoms pa'i 'od gsal* (Apple 2017, 34).
- 22 See Swanson (2018, 74). The passage is attributed to Zhiyi's disciple Guanding 灌頂 (561–632 CE).
- 23 *Fo shuo guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* 佛說觀普賢菩薩行法經 (T.277, 9.392c15-20): 釋迦牟尼名毘盧遮那遍一切處。其佛住處名常寂光。常波羅蜜所攝成處。我波羅蜜所安立處。淨波羅蜜滅有相處。樂波羅蜜不住身心相處。不見有無諸法相處。如寂解脫。乃至般若波羅蜜。是色常住法故 ; English translation Kubo and Logan 2017, 69.
- 24 *Weimojing xuanshu* T1778, 565a04-08: 四明寂光土者。妙覺極智所照如如法界之理名之爲國。但大乘法性即是真寂智性。不同二乘偏真之理。故涅槃云。第一義空名爲智慧。此經云若知無明性即是明。如此皆是常寂光義。不思議極智所居故云寂光。
- 25 *Weimojing xuanshu* T1778, 701a02-a10: 今四種隨緣之土雖復垢淨不等。皆約常寂光土故有隨緣化他。常寂光土亦遍方便之國。離方便國無別寂光。故經云其佛住處名常寂光。遍一切處無處不有。極智所觀觀一切法無非法性。故知法性名爲常寂。經言無明明者名畢竟空。畢竟空即是無明之性此性明故名爲寂光。常住不變名之爲常。是故同虛空無有若干。