

CAN ALL BEINGS POTENTIALLY ATTAIN AWAKENING?  
GOTRA-THEORY IN THE MAHĀYĀNASŪTRĀLAṂKĀRA

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The Mahāyāna has sometimes been associated with the doctrine that all sentient beings will attain complete awakening, a doctrine which is often linked to some conception of the “embryo of the Tathāgata” (*tathāgata-garbha*)<sup>1</sup>. However, according to an alternate Mahāyāna doctrine, only some sentient beings will attain the complete awakening of a buddha — and some may even be excluded from attaining any form of awakening at all. In this paper, I will examine just such a doctrine, as it is found in an Indian Yogācāra treatise, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* (“Ornament to the Mahāyāna Sūtras”; abbr., MSA), a Sanskrit verse-text, and its prose commentary, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra-bhāṣya* (MSABh)<sup>2</sup>. Particular Tibetan and Chinese sources attribute the composition of the MSA to the bodhisattva Maitreya<sup>3</sup>, which gives us some indication of the importance this text was understood to have within certain traditions. Nevertheless, the authorship and date of

<sup>1</sup> A concise introduction to this doctrine, and the Mahāyāna sūtras to which it is related, may be found in Williams 1989, Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> When referring to both the verse-text and the prose commentary together, I will use the abbreviation MSA/Bh. By the term “the text” I mean the MSA and the MSABh taken together, by “the verse-text” I mean the MSA, and by “the commentary” I mean the MSABh. Throughout this paper, for the Sanskrit I will quote from Lévi’s edition of the MSA/Bh (1907); I have also consulted the editions of Bagchi (1970; based on Lévi’s edition) and Funahashi (1985; select chapters based on mss. from Nepal). All translations are my own. The Tibetan canon contains the following relevant works: the MSA (verse-text): DT 4020; the MSA/Bh (verse-text along with prose commentary): DT 4026; the MSAVBh (Sthiramati’s subcommentary to the text): DT 4034; and the MSAT (Asvabhāva’s subcommentary to the text): DT 4029. The MSA/Bh also appears in the Chinese canon (Taishō 1604), although with some differences from the Sanskrit version; on this, see Nagao 1961: vi.

<sup>3</sup> The colophon of the Derge edition of the MSA states that the verse-text was composed by Maitreya. Bu ston (1290-1364) includes the MSA as one of the five Maitreya-texts; see Obermiller 1987: 53-54. Ui (1928: 221) identifies a Chinese tradition of the “five treatises of Maitreya,” which differs from the Tibetan list of texts, but which also includes the MSA. Xuanzang (seventh century CE) writes that Asaṅga received the MSA and other texts from Maitreya; see Beal 1906, vol. 1: 226.

the verse-text and its commentary are not certain; I hypothesize that the MSA/Bh may be dated to the fourth century CE (perhaps c. 350 CE)<sup>4</sup>. It is my hope that an examination of such a source may contribute to the study of the various ways in which the contours of the Mahāyāna have been drawn from a doctrinal perspective. In the MSA/Bh, one way in which the limits of the Mahāyāna are defined is through the employment of the *gotra*-theory, a theory which identifies the soteriological potentialities of individuals through reference to their spiritual “family” or “lineage.” So in order to understand this text’s discursive construction of the category “Mahāyāna,” we must understand its concept of *gotra*.

In the context of discussions of Buddhism, the term *gotra* has been variously translated as “family” (Edgerton 1970, vol. 2: 216), “basis, source, cause, seed” (ibid.), “kind, class, category” (ibid.), “species” (Wayman 1961: 58), or “spiritual lineage” (Ruegg 1968: 303, Griffiths 1990b: 49)<sup>5</sup>. Again, in the MSA/Bh, *gotra* represents the soteriological category to which a particular sentient being belongs: an individual’s *gotra* is taken to be indicative of that individual’s soteriological possibilities, i.e., what type of — or even whether — awakening can be attained. So if a particular being is said to belong to the bodhisattva-*gotra*, then that being has the potentiality for the awakening of a buddha, and if a particular being is classified as “without *gotra*” (*agotraka*), this indicates that, at least for the present, that being does not have the “seed” to attain any form of awakening at all.

<sup>4</sup> My working hypothesis is that earlier strata of the MSA were compiled, redacted, added to, and commented upon by one person, and I take the result of this process to be the received text of the MSA/Bh. An extended introduction to the MSA/Bh — its editions and translations, structure and contents, authorship, date, and relation to a larger corpus of texts — may be found in Chapter 2 of my PhD dissertation (D’Amato 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Ruegg (1976: 354) offers the following meanings of *gotra* in Buddhist usage: i. “mine, matrix”; ii. “family, clan, lineage”; iii. “germ, seed”; and (iv.) “class, category.” He also offers a preliminary discussion of the relation of the term *gotra* to other possible cognate terms in Iranian languages; his provisional hypothesis is that it might be possible to derive the various meanings of the cognate terms — including the Vedic meaning “cattle-pen” — from a root meaning “origin, source” (ibid., 354-356). In the context of the MSA/Bh, the translation “spiritual lineage” is perhaps most appropriate. “Spiritual lineage,” however, should not be confused with the notion of a lineage of transmission or tradition (*paramparā*). In any case, in this paper when using the term *gotra*, I will leave it untranslated and unitalicized.

Given that for the MSA/Bh gotra is indicative of a sentient being's soteriological potentiality, an important issue is whether gotra is able to be acquired by every sentient being or whether there are some beings who are excluded from ever acquiring a gotra; and furthermore if some beings are excluded, in what sense they are excluded<sup>6</sup>. It will be necessary to understand these issues in order to address the question of whether, from the perspective of the MSA/Bh, all sentient beings can potentially attain awakening<sup>7</sup>. And so I will begin by discussing the meanings of the term *gotra* in the MSA/Bh—including its relations to other important terms and concepts. Then I will turn to a presentation of the various categories or subdivisions of gotra according to the text. Following this, I will consider the text's gotra-theory in relation to some related doctrines in the MSA/Bh. I will then conclude with a response to the question of whether all sentient beings can potentially attain awakening.

### *Gotra defined*

As I stated above, a number of translations have been offered for the term *gotra*. The MSA/Bh itself offers an interesting interpretation of the term. In explaining the use of the phrase *guṇottāraṇatā* ("having the characteristic of increasing virtues") in 3.4, the commentary states:

guṇottāraṇārthena gotraṃ veditavyaṃ guṇā uttaranty asmād udbhavanūti kṛtvā/

Gotra should be known as that which increases virtues, since virtues arise and increase because of it<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> For example, according to the *Buddhabhūmyupadeśa* certain beings are excluded in a predetermined sense: "From the beginningless beginning all sentient beings are divided into five kinds of lineages (*gotra*).... the first four of the above will ultimately attain final cessation... But the fifth lineage... will never reach a time of final cessation" (Keenan 1980: 494). For other references to gotra as a predetermined category in Buddhist literature, see Lamotte 1976: 304.

<sup>7</sup> In my general formulation of this question, I have benefited from Ruegg's work on the gotra-theory, especially 1968, 1969: 73-107, and 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Mano (1967: 970) points out that this etymological interpretation (*nirukta*) is also given by Haribhadra (end of the eighth c. CE) in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāṛāloka* (the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* [AA] is considered by Bu ston to be another of the five Maitreya-texts), as well as by both Ārya-Vimuktisena and Bhadanta-Vimuktisena in their earlier commentaries to the AA.

From this we may see that for the MSA/Bh, acquiring a gotra means acquiring the ability to increase virtues. And this ability is of no small importance according to the text, because the development of a number of virtues is understood as necessary for the attainment of particular soteriological goals. More specifically, gotra is posited as the cause of differences in inclination towards a particular vehicle (*adhimukti*) — that is to say, which soteriological vehicle one will be inclined to follow; religious practice (*pratipatti*); and awakening itself (*bodhi*) (MSA 3.2). It is said to be the basis of knowledge (*jñāna*), purification from the afflictions (*kleśa-nairmalya*), and the supernormal powers, such as the higher knowledges (*abhijñā*) (MSABh ad 3.9). It is said to be the cause of great awakening, great knowledge, concentration (*samādhi*), and the maturation of sentient beings (MSA 3.10). Gotra is also identified as one cause for the production of the thought of awakening (*cittotpāda*) (MSABh ad 4.7), compassion (ad 17.34), the practice of the perfections (ad 16.16), and the specific perfection of patience (ad 8.6). Indeed at MSA 19.61 gotra is identified as the first of the ten aspects of the Mahāyāna, thus it is understood to be the foundation upon which the practice of the Mahāyāna is based<sup>9</sup>. According to the MSA/Bh, then, having a gotra is foundational to attaining any specific Buddhist soteriological goal.

Having considered the MSA/Bh's explanation of the term *gotra*, we now turn to terms that are used as equivalent to it in the text. One such equivalent term used by the text is *dhātu*. In fact, there are two places in the text in which *gotra* and *dhātu* are used interchangeably<sup>10</sup>. The first is at 11.8, where the verse-text uses the term *tridhātuka*. Here the commentary states:

tatra dhātu-niyato yaḥ śrāvakādi-gotra-niyataḥ/

There [in the previous line of the text] a definite *dhātu* is a definite gotra, such as śrāvaka.

Although the term *dhātu* has a number of meanings in this and other texts, in this instance, “stage” or “level of attainment” seems to be the

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 19 of the MSA/Bh is specifically devoted to the topic of the *guṇas*; furthermore, at MSA/Bh 19.59-61, all of the virtues referred to in this paragraph are either explicitly mentioned or implicitly contained in the lists that occur there.

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as Ruegg (1969: 85) points out, in a number of places the Tibetan text of the MSA/Bh has *rigs* (normally *gotra*) for *kham*s (normally *dhātu*).

most appropriate. In another context (at 11.43) the verse-text uses the term *ārya-gotra*, the “noble gotra,” which the commentary glosses with *anāsrava-dhātu*, the “undefiled realm” — i.e., the realm or level of attainment in which there is no longer the influx of afflictions which bind one to saṃsāra. Here, then, we may infer that gotra is understood in terms of a spiritual stage or level of attainment<sup>11</sup>.

The term *gotra* is also used twice in the commentary as a gloss for *prakṛti*, or “nature.” The commentary to 8.5 glosses *svaparakṛtyā* — “by one’s nature” or “according to one’s nature” — with *gotreṇa* — an instrumental form of the term meaning “by gotra” or “according to gotra.” Also, the commentary to 18.19-21 glosses the term *prakṛtyā* with *gotrataḥ*, an ablative form of the term meaning “due to one’s gotra.” So here the term *gotra* refers to one’s “nature.”<sup>12</sup>

While the term *gotra* has been equated with spiritual stage or level of attainment (*dhātu*) and nature (*prakṛti*)<sup>13</sup>, it is so far unclear whether this stage or nature represents something predetermined or something acquired. That is to say, if the development of certain capacities or virtues is due to one’s nature — or due to one’s gotra — then does gotra represent a predetermined and predetermining category, or does it represent an acquirable and alterable category of spiritual potentiality? And if it is acquirable, is it acquirable by all? These are questions that I will return to below. In any case, belonging to a certain gotra means having the potentiality for reaching specific soteriological goals. The next step in understanding gotra, then, is understanding the different categories or subdivisions of gotra according to the text.

### *Categories of gotra*

In Indian Buddhist literature, a list of the following five gotras may be found: śrāvaka-gotra, pratyekabuddha-gotra, bodhisattva-gotra, indefinite

<sup>11</sup> In this connection, according to Ruegg (1974: 204), the *Visuddhimagga* equates *ariya-gotta* with *ariya-bhūmi*, which Ruegg translates as “spiritual stage of the saint.”

<sup>12</sup> However, note that at neither of these locations does the text posit that one’s nature (*prakṛti*) is to be understood as beginningless or unalterable.

<sup>13</sup> These synonyms for *gotra* are also found in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Sanskrit edition, Dutt 1966: 2); a third synonym given in that text is *bīja*, “seed.”

gotra (*aniyata-gotra*), and without gotra (*agotraka*)<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes this list of five is shortened to just the first three members<sup>15</sup>, which the MSA/Bh then aligns with the three vehicles: those of the śrāvaka-gotra go by the śrāvakayāna, etc. But such a shortening of the list need not reflect any serious philosophical differences. Only the first three gotras result in particular Buddhist soteriological goals, since only the first three gotras correspond to particular Buddhist soteriological vehicles. Furthermore, being classified under the category of indefinite gotra may be understood as a liminal state: when one's gotra becomes definite, it will be in terms of one of the three standard gotras of śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, or bodhisattva. And the category "without gotra," after all, is not properly an element of the list of categories of gotra. Therefore, the lists of five and three gotras may be seen as having different conceptual emphases, rather than different theoretical bases.

While the MSA/Bh offers no specific list of gotras that corresponds to those given above, each member of the list of five is either explicitly mentioned or implicitly referred to<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, it is clear that the

<sup>14</sup> For example, the *Mahāvvyutpatti* contains the following fivefold list of gotras (1261-1265): *śrāvaka-yānābhisamaya-gotraḥ*, *pratyekabuddha-yānābhisamaya-gotraḥ*, *tathāgata-yānābhisamaya-gotraḥ* (gotra for the realization of the vehicle of śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and tathāgatas, respectively), *aniyata-gotraḥ* (indefinite gotra), *agotrakaḥ* (without gotra); see Sakaki 1926. The *Mahāvvyutpatti* is a compilation of lists of Sanskrit Buddhist terms, along with their Tibetan translations, that dates to the early ninth century CE, centuries after the time of the MSA/Bh. Nevertheless, when a particular list is found in the *Mahāvvyutpatti*, this suggests that the list was important to Indian Buddhist thought at the time. The fivefold list of gotras is also significant for our purposes since Sthiramati offers the same one in his subcommentary to the MSA/Bh (DT sems tsam MI 48a3-4).

<sup>15</sup> The three gotras are referred to in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* (SNS); Lamotte 1935: 73-74 and 198-199 offers the Tibetan text and French translation, respectively; cf. Powers 1995: 110-115. The SNS is considered to be one of the earliest Yogācāra sūtras (along with the *Mahāyānābhidharma-sūtra*, which is no longer extant). Although the MSABh does not explicitly refer to or quote the SNS, Schmithausen (1976: 240, note 2) makes the convincing point that MSA 19.44ab presupposes SNS 8.20.2 in its discussion of the seven types of thusness (*tathatā*). The *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* ad 6.23cd also identifies the three gotras (Sanskrit edition, Pradhan 1967: 348). Other lists of gotras appear in Indian Buddhist literature. For example, the *Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra* mentions six different gotras; but even in this case the principal gotras of the Vaibhāṣikas are the standard three identified here; see Davidson 1985: 94-95.

<sup>16</sup> The bodhisattva-gotra is mentioned in various places, e.g., MSABh ad 3.5, 3.7, 3.8, etc.; the verse-text refers to it as the "foremost-gotra" (MSA 3.13: *agra-gotra*) or "noble-gotra" (MSA 11.43: *ārya-gotra*). The śrāvaka-gotra is mentioned at MSABh ad 11.8,

MSA/Bh posits the superiority of the bodhisattva-gotra: in linking gotra to the roots of virtue (*kuśala-mūla*), the commentary to 3.3 states that the roots of virtue of the bodhisattva-gotra are far superior to those of the śrāvaka-gotra — those of the śrāvaka-gotra, for example, lack the special powers of a buddha. And in 11.43 the commentary states that the noble gotra of buddhas — i.e., the bodhisattva-gotra<sup>17</sup> — is distinct from those of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha for five reasons: (1) it is purified from the impregnating afflictions (*savāsana-kleśa*), (2) it purifies a buddha-field, and (3-5) it attains the three buddha-bodies.

The MSA/Bh explicitly aligns each of the first three gotras with one of the soteriological vehicles (*yānas*). The commentary to 3.2 states that there is a difference in gotra with respect to the three vehicles — the three vehicles here being the śrāvakayāna, pratyekabuddhayāna, and bodhisattvayāna<sup>18</sup>. The commentary also goes on to distinguish three types of awakening (inferior, middling, or superior), stating that each corresponds to a particular gotra in the way that a fruit corresponds to its seed<sup>19</sup>. And at 5.4-5 the commentary states that there are three gotras: again, inferior, middling, or superior. Thus the MSA/Bh posits the following threefold structure:

<i>spiritual category</i>	<i>soteriological vehicle</i>	<i>form of awakening</i>
śrāvaka-gotra	śrāvakayāna	inferior
pratyekabuddha-gotra	pratyekabuddhayāna	middling
bodhisattva-gotra	bodhisattvayāna	superior

It is clear, then, that the category of gotra is of importance to the MSA/Bh's soteriological scheme because different gotras lead to different

11.53, etc. The pratyekabuddha-gotra is implicitly referred to in the phrase *śrāvakādī-gotra*, "the gotra of śrāvakas, etc." [i.e., pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas] at MSABh ad 11.8. The indefinite gotra is mentioned at MSA 3.6, etc., and the category "without gotra" is mentioned at MSA 1.14, etc. Again, Sthiramati's subcommentary does offer the specific list of five gotras; see note 14.

<sup>17</sup> It is quite clear that *buddha-gotra* is another term for *bodhisattva-gotra*, and not a separate category. MSABh ad 3.2 states there are three forms of awakening, and that each form corresponds to a gotra as a fruit corresponds to its seed: thus the awakening of a buddha corresponds to the bodhisattva-gotra. Then MSABh ad 3.4 states that gotra does not exist along with its fruit; so when the awakening of a buddha is attained, no gotra exists.

<sup>18</sup> While the first two vehicles are specifically mentioned in the text (see, e.g., MSABh ad 19.44), the third is not; the term *mahāyāna* is used rather than *bodhisattvayāna*.

<sup>19</sup> Here we see gotra understood in terms of a seed, as in definition iii. offered by Ruegg; see note 5.

soteriological goals. To trace this out a bit further, we may mention the following points: (1) the first two gotras belong to the Hīnayāna, while the third gotra belongs to the Mahāyāna<sup>20</sup>; (2) the Hīnayāna is said to bring about the termination of the afflictive obstructions (*kleśāvaraṇa*), while the Mahāyāna is said to bring about the termination of both the afflictive and the cognitive obstructions (*jñeyāvaraṇa*)<sup>21</sup>; (3) the Hīnayāna leads to lesser forms of awakening, and ultimately to nirvāṇa without residual conditioning (*nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*) — which the text interprets as a form of extinction<sup>22</sup>; (4) the Mahāyāna leads to a superior form of awakening — the complete awakening of a buddha, an awareness of all objects of knowledge and all modes of appearance (*sarva-jñeya-sarvākāra-jñāna*), viz., omniscience — which is a state of being coextensive with reality (thusness, *tathatā*) itself, since the text posits that ultimately there is no distinction between subject and object<sup>23</sup>; furthermore, the Mahāyāna does not lead to the extinction of nirvāṇa without residual conditioning, but rather to non-abiding nirvāṇa (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*) — an attainment which allows for continued manifestations in the world in order to aid sentient beings<sup>24</sup>. So the MSA/Bh's gotra-theory is of central importance to the text's soteriological theory, since the first two gotras lead to lesser forms of awakening which ultimately terminate in extinction (non-existence), while the third gotra leads to complete awakening which is nothing less than omniscience (coextension with reality itself).

While the preceding gives us a sense of the MSA/Bh's presentation of the gotras of śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva, in order to understand

<sup>20</sup> MSA 15.4 refers to the "twofold Hīnayāna" (*nihīnayāna-dvividha*), viz., the *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddha-yāna*. There is further textual evidence for identifying the *śrāvaka*- and *pratyekabuddhayānas* with the *hīnayāna*; on this, see D'Amato 2000: 177-178.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., MSABh ad 17.4-5 and MSA/Bh 20-21.44.

<sup>22</sup> See MSABh ad 3.3, 16.50, etc. In every place where the term *nirupadhiśeṣa*- or *anupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* is used in the text, some form of the term *kṣaya* ("loss, destruction, end, termination") is also used.

<sup>23</sup> While this is by no means the standard account of omniscience offered in Buddhist traditions, it is the one that I believe is most defensible as a reading of the MSA/Bh; see MSA/Bh 20-21.58, Griffiths 1990a: 106-108, and D'Amato 2000: 130-131, 141-146, and 152-154.

<sup>24</sup> See MSA/Bh 17.32, 19.61-62, etc. On both forms of nirvāṇa in the text, see D'Amato 2000, Chapter 5.



the text's gotra-theory more fully, we must also consider the latter two gotras in our initial fivefold list: indefinite gotra and without gotra. Regarding the indefinite gotra, we may begin with a consideration of MSA 3.6, where the verse-text introduces a fourfold classification of gotras:

niyatāniyataṃ gotraṃ ahāryaṃ hāryaṃ eva ca/  
pratyayair gotra-bhedo 'yaṃ samāsenā catur-vidhaḥ//

Gotra can be definite or indefinite, incapable of being lost or able to be lost. In sum, according to conditions, the distinctions of gotra are fourfold.

While the verse seems to set up a fourfold classification system (definite-incapable of being lost, definite-able to be lost, etc.), the commentary reduces this to a twofold system: "definite" corresponding only to "incapable of being lost," and "indefinite" corresponding only to "able to be lost."<sup>25</sup> The commentary's move here is supported by the fact that while the term "indefinite" (*aniyata*) is again used by the text in connection with the term *gotra* (at MSA/Bh 11.54), neither term of the pair "incapable of being lost/able to be lost" (*ahārya/hārya*) is again linked to it. Furthermore, Sthiramati's subcommentary agrees with the MSABh in specifying that "definite" corresponds to "incapable of being lost" and "indefinite" corresponds to "able to be lost."<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the classification definite/indefinite, it is significant that for the MSA/Bh indefinite gotra does not represent a fourth gotra alongside the three standard gotras. Rather, any sentient being belonging to one of the three specific gotras may be further classified according to whether that specific gotra is definite or indefinite. If the gotra is definite that means it is fixed and will not be lost, but if the gotra is indefinite that means it is not fixed and there is the possibility that it can be lost or changed after it has been acquired.

The text further discusses the indefinite gotra in a section devoted to the analysis of the *ekayāna* (a doctrine which the MSA/Bh does not

<sup>25</sup> MSABh ad 3.6: samāsenā caturvidhaṃ gotraṃ niyatāniyataṃ tad eva yathā-kramam pratyayair ahāryaṃ hāryaṃ ceti/.

<sup>26</sup> MSABh ad 3.6 (DT sems tsam MI 45b4-5): de bas na rigs ñes pa nams ni rkyen gyis mi 'phrog pa zes bya ste/... rigs ma ñes pa nams ni rkyen gyis 'phrog pa zes bya ste/.

consider to be definitive, but rather in need of interpretation). At 11.54, the verse-text states:

ākaraṣaṇārtham ekeṣām anya-saṃdhāraṇāya ca/  
deśitānīyatānām hi saṃbuddhair ekayānatā//

For the purpose of attracting some, and for supporting others, the fully awakened ones taught the fact of one vehicle for those who are indefinite.

The commentary goes on to specify that those who are attracted are those with an indefinite śrāvaka-gotra and those who are supported are those with an indefinite bodhisattva-gotra. Also, in discussing the function of buddhahood as a refuge, the commentary to 9.8 states:

hīnayāna-paritrāṇatvam aniyata-gotrāṇām mahāyānaikāyanī-karaṇāt/  
[Buddhahood] protects those of an indefinite gotra from the Hīnayāna by constructing the uniform path of the Mahāyāna.

Although this comment refers to the indefinite gotra without linking it to one of the three specific gotras, it seems reasonable to read it in terms of 11.54: buddhas teach the unity of vehicles in order to lure those of an indefinite śrāvaka-gotra away from the Hīnayāna, and in order to keep those of an indefinite bodhisattva-gotra from entering the Hīnayāna. Furthermore, in discussing the ten types of sentient beings towards whom bodhisattvas are compassionate (MSA/Bh 17.29-30), the verse-text refers to one type as those who have gone astray, which the commentary specifies as those who are indefinite in adhering to the Hīnayāna — a reference to the indefinite śrāvaka- and pratyekabuddha-gotras<sup>27</sup>.

In the commentary to verse 11.53 the MSABh mentions the indefinite śrāvaka-gotra, stating that those of this gotra may attain final liberation through the Mahāyāna<sup>28</sup>. Thus there is the possibility for one of an indefinite śrāvaka-gotra to acquire the bodhisattva-gotra. Furthermore, if as

<sup>27</sup> MSABh ad 17.29-30: utpatha-prasthitā hīnayāna-prayuktā aniyatāh/. Again, *hīnayāna* refers to the *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddhayāna*. While the indefinite pratyekabuddha-gotra is not specifically mentioned in the MSA/Bh, it is mentioned in Sthiramati's sub-commentary. In fact, Sthiramati specifies that each of the three specific gotras may be definite or indefinite; see MSABh ad 3.6 (DT sems tsam MI 45a6-7).

<sup>28</sup> MSABh ad 11.53: aniyata-śrāvaka-gotrāṇām mahāyānena niryāṇād yānti tena yānam iti kṛtvā/.

11.54 states some bodhisattvas are in need of support, this implies that one of an indefinite bodhisattva-gotra has the possibility of losing that gotra. So for one of an indefinite gotra there is the possibility of losing one's gotra and transferring to another<sup>29</sup>.

The final classification to consider is that of being without gotra, a category that is the topic of MSA/Bh 3.11. Here, the verse-text and commentary state:

aikāntiko duṣcarite 'sti kaścit kaścit samudghātita-śukla-dharmā/  
amokṣa-bhāgīya-śubho 'sti kaścin nihīna-śuklo 'sty api hetu-hīnaḥ/<sup>30</sup>

aparinirvāṇa-dharmaka etasminn agotrastho 'bhipretaḥ/ sa ca samāsato  
dvividhaḥ/ tat-kālāparinirvāṇa-dharmā atyantam ca/ tat-kālāparinirvāṇa-  
dharmā caturvidhaḥ/... atyantāparinirvāṇa-dharmā tu hetu-hīno yasya  
parinirvāṇa-gotram eva nāsti/

Some have solely ill conduct, some have pure qualities that have been destroyed, some have purity that is not associated with liberation, or an inferior purity, and some also lack the cause.

This [verse] refers to those who are without gotra, those who lack the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa. And this is concisely in two ways: lacking the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa at the present time and for ever (or “absolutely”; *atyantam*). Lacking the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa at the present time can be in four ways.... But those who for ever (or “absolutely”; *atyanta*) lack the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa — those who lack the cause — simply do not have the parinirvāṇa gotra.

So according to the text, being without gotra means lacking the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa (*aparinirvāṇa-dharmaka*)<sup>31</sup>. And there are two ways in which this might occur: lacking the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa at the present time (*tat-kāla*) and lacking them for ever or absolutely (*atyantam*). The first option — lacking the qualities at the present time (*tat-kāla*) — is explained with reference to the

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of this issue in the *Buddhabhūmyupadeśa*, see Keenan 1980: 678-684; briefly, those of an indefinite gotra may attain nirvāṇa either through the Mahāyāna or through one of the other vehicles.

<sup>30</sup> Following the commentary, I do not interpret this verse in terms of the standard four *padas*; I read the last *pada* as identifying two elements in a list, rather than one.

<sup>31</sup> The term *aparinirvāṇa-dharmāṇaḥ* is used at MSABh ad 17.29-30: it refers to those do not have the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa because they have never put an end to *saṃsāra* (*saṃsāra-vartmātyantānupacchedāt*). The context here is a discussion of the types of beings towards whom a bodhisattva should be compassionate.

first four reasons stated in the verse: having solely ill conduct, having cut-off roots of virtue (*samucchinna-kuśala-mūla*)<sup>32</sup>, having roots of virtue unrelated to liberation (*amokṣa-bhāgīya-kuśala-mūla*), and having inferior roots of virtue (*hīna-kuśala-mūla*). So sentient beings belonging to this category are without gotra because of some deficiency in roots of virtue. However, they are understood to be without gotra only for the present, with the implication that they can acquire a gotra at some point in time through accumulating an adequate store of the appropriate roots of virtue.

The second option — lacking the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa for ever or absolutely (*atyantam*) — makes reference to the fifth reason stated in the verse: lacking the cause, which ostensibly means lacking any roots of virtue whatsoever. So here we see that there is a certain category of sentient beings who are excluded from acquiring a gotra. But there is some difficulty in determining in precisely what sense they are excluded, a difficulty which hinges on the way in which the term *atyantam* is translated in this context, a term which has a semantic range which includes both “for ever” and “absolutely.”<sup>33</sup>

Translators have dealt with the term *atyantam* in different ways in this context. While Ruegg (1969: 80ff.) translates it as *absolument*, Lévi (1911: 30) suggests *indéfiniment* (although this is not included as one of the meanings of the term in the standard dictionaries). The Tibetan translation (DT sems tsam PHI, 138b3) gives *gtan* [*du*], which Das’s dictionary defines as “always, continually, for ever.” The Chinese translation (Taishō vol. 31, no. 1604, p. 595a25) renders it as *bijing*, which according to the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* has the basic meaning of “absolute[ly],” but also has the senses of “finally, in the long run.”<sup>34</sup> Hence there has not been a consensus on the meaning of *atyantam* in this

<sup>32</sup> See Davidson 1985: 98-99 regarding *samucchinna-kuśala-mūla* in the Vaibhāṣika tradition.

<sup>33</sup> The standard Sanskrit-English dictionaries include both of these senses of the term *atyantam*. Monier-Williams has “in perpetuity” and “absolutely, completely”; Apte lists “for ever” and “absolutely”; and the Poona dictionary (edited by Ghatage) also gives “for ever” and “absolutely.”

<sup>34</sup> My thanks to Peter Gregory for providing me with the reference to the Chinese translation of the MSA/Bh. The term *bijing*, according to Muller’s *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, also includes the senses of “positively, decidedly” and “necessarily.”

context. However, since the term is used in MSABh ad 3.11 in opposition to *tat-kāla* (lit., “that time”; “immediately, the present time”), I think there is some reason to understand *atyantam* here in a temporal sense (viz., as “for ever”). Furthermore, there is evidence that the term *atyantam* is used in its temporal sense in other locations in the text. For example, at 8.22 the verse-text states that the bodhisattva instructs beings for as long as the world exists, which the commentary explains as follows:

yāval lokasya bhāvas tat-samānayā gatyā atyantam ity arthaḥ/

For as long as the world exists — with that same duration — means “for ever” (*atyantam*).

And the commentary to 18.44 states that the practice of bodhisattvas goes on “for ever” (*atyantam*) because it does not end in nirvāṇa without residual conditioning (*nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇe 'pi tad-akṣayāt*). Furthermore, in the commentary to the *Madhyāntavibhāga* (a text referred to in the MSABh), the term *atyanta* is used to gloss *sadā* (“always”)<sup>35</sup>. Thus it can be seen that the term *atyantam* does mean “for ever” in certain contexts. In any case, it is clear that sentient beings belonging to this category — those who are *atyantāparinirvāṇa-dharmā* — are without roots of virtue, without gotra, and hence excluded from attaining any form of awakening.

It should be emphasized that according to 3.11 roots of virtue (*kuśala-mūla*) are understood to be the cause of gotra: gotra is acquired through amassing an adequate store of the appropriate roots of virtue. This is not so unusual a claim for the MSA/Bh to make, since obtaining roots of virtue has traditionally been understood as a necessary aspect of the path to awakening<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, Sthiramati’s subcommentary to the *Madhyāntavibhāga* states that one standard definition of *gotra* is “roots of

<sup>35</sup> MAV 1.18b states: *sadā sattva-hitāya ca/* “And for the benefit of sentient beings always.” MAVBh ad 1.18b then glosses with: *atyanta-sattva-hitārthaṃ/* “For the sake of the benefit of sentient beings for ever (*atyanta*).” See Sanskrit ed., Nagao 1964: 25.

<sup>36</sup> On the importance of the *kuśala-mūla* to Buddhist conceptions of the path, see Buswell 1992; he identifies one basic classification of the *kuśala-mūla* as nongreed (*alobha*), nonhatred (*adveśa*), and nonignorance (*amoha*). The MSA/Bh is not the only text that links the roots of virtue to gotra; for a discussion of the relation between these two in the context of the *Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra* and the *Abhidharmakośa*, see Davidson 1985: 92-100.

virtue.”<sup>37</sup> But the MSA/Bh also posits that when the bodhisattva-gotra is acquired, it in turn becomes a source of further roots of virtue. At 3.3 the verse-text states that the pre-eminence of the [bodhisattva-]gotra is indicated by the vastness, totality, greatness of purpose, and imperishability of its purity (*śubha*) — and here the commentary identifies purity with the roots of virtue. And in 3.9, when the verse-text compares gotra to a mine of gold<sup>38</sup>, the commentary states that the bodhisattva-gotra is like a source of abundant gold since it is the basis of unlimited roots of virtue. So for the MSA/Bh, acquiring roots of virtue is a necessary condition for acquiring a gotra (3.11), but when the bodhisattva-gotra is acquired, it becomes a source of unlimited roots of virtue (3.9).

To conclude this section, it is necessary to consider one further characterization of gotra in the text. At 3.4, the verse-text states:

prakṛtyā paripuṣṭam ca āśrayaś cāśritaṃ ca tat/  
sad asac caiva vijñeyaṃ guṇottāraṇatārthataḥ//

By nature, nourished, support and supported, existing and not existing, it should truly be known as that which increases virtues.

First we should note that this verse does not offer an addition to the fivefold list of gotras discussed above; rather, it is introduced by the commentary as a verse on the characteristics (*lakṣaṇas*) of gotras in general. The commentary identifies the following four characteristics of gotra: (1) gotra is natural (*prkṛtistha*) insofar as it has the nature (*svabhāva*) of a support, (2) it is attained (*samudānīta*, a gloss for *paripuṣṭam* — “nourished” — in the verse) insofar as it has the nature of being supported, (3) it exists along with its cause (*hetu*), (4) but it does not exist along with its fruit. From this we can see that gotra can be attained — at least by some sentient beings — and that it has a cause. And again, according to MSA/Bh 3.11, the cause of gotra — the condition for its acquisition — is the roots of virtue: gotra is acquired when adequate roots of virtue of the appropriate kind are accumulated. But we must also remember that, according to MSA/Bh 3.9, when the bodhisattva-gotra is

<sup>37</sup> Sanskrit ed., Yamaguchi 1934: 188.

<sup>38</sup> As stated in note 5, one of the meanings of the term *gotra* is “mine” (as in “a mine of gems or ores”; see Edgerton 1970, vol. 2: 216, def. 2), thus here the MSA/Bh is playing off that definition of the term.

acquired, it serves as a basis for further roots of virtue. It is in this sense that we should read characteristic (1) according to the verse above: gotra is natural insofar as it is a support or basis for further roots of virtue<sup>39</sup>.

From all that has been said above, we may summarize the MSA/Bh's gotra-theory as follows: (1) having a gotra is a prerequisite for attaining any form of awakening; (2) there are three specific gotras: the śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha-, and bodhisattva-gotras; (3) the first two gotras lead to lesser forms of awakening, and ultimately to the Hīnayāna goal of nirvāṇa without residual conditioning — understood as extinction — while the bodhisattva-gotra leads to complete awakening, the Mahāyāna goal of buddhahood — understood as omniscience; (4) some sentient beings are of an indefinite gotra: they are able to lose their gotra and acquire a different one; (5) some beings are presently without gotra, but can acquire one through amassing roots of virtue; and (6) some beings are excluded from acquiring any gotra. Considering these points we are now in a better position to attempt to address the question of whether all sentient beings can potentially attain awakening.

<sup>39</sup> The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* ([BBh] the fifteenth section of the first division of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, which contains in parts some of the oldest Yogācāra materials [Schmithausen 1969]) also makes use of the classification of *prākṛtistha-gotra* and *samudānīta-gotra*. Yamabe (1997: 195ff.) offers a discussion of the BBh's interpretation of these categories; according to that text, the *prākṛtistha-gotra* is beginningless (*anādikālika*), while the *samudānīta-gotra* is acquired through the accumulation of roots of virtue. While the MSA/Bh is closely related to the BBh in the selection and order of topics that it addresses, the two texts do not always address those topics in the same way. For example, the MSA/Bh does not define gotra in terms of the *ṣaḍāyatana-viśeṣa* ("distinct state of the six sense bases"). Furthermore, the MSA/Bh does not use the term *anādikālika* ("beginningless") in connection with the topic of gotra at all. Thus the two texts differ in their treatments of gotra. For the BBh, a gotra is *prākṛtistha* if it is beginningless (viz., predetermined in some way), whereas for the MSA/Bh a gotra is *prākṛtistha* only in the sense that it serves as a causal basis for the further accumulation of roots of virtue. [Here note that one meaning of the term *prākṛti* is "cause," so *prākṛtistha* may be interpreted as "existing/operating as a cause."] The MSA/Bh's interpretation of *prākṛtistha* may also be seen at 3.12, where the text states that the bodhisattva-gotra possesses virtues both naturally (*prākṛtyā*) and by nourishment (*paripuṣṭasya*); thus a bodhisattva-gotra is *in one sense* natural (or causal), and *in another sense* attained (or caused). Finally, both Ruegg (1969: 476-477) and Davidson (1985: 100) state that the *prākṛtistha/samudānīta* distinction seems to be strikingly similar to two types of roots of virtue in the Vaibhāṣika tradition — those that are congenital (*upapattilābhika*) and those due to application (*prāyogika*).

*Can all beings potentially attain awakening?*

Before responding to this question, we must first consider a few relevant doctrines in the MSA/Bh that have not been addressed thus far. The first, and most significant for our purposes, is that of the *tathāgatagarbha*, the “embryo of the Tathāgata.” The MSA contains one reference to the *tathāgatagarbha*, which is found at 9.37. This verse and its commentary state:

sarveṣāṃ aviśiṣṭāpi tathatā śuddhim āgatā/  
tathāgatatvaṃ tasmāc ca tad-garbhāḥ sarva-dehinaḥ//

sarveṣāṃ nirviśiṣṭā tathatā tad-viśuddhi-svabhāvaś ca tathāgataḥ/ ataḥ sarve  
sattvās tathāgata-garbhā ity ucyate/

Although thusness is in all [living beings] without distinction, when it is pure it is the nature of the Tathāgata; thus all living beings have its embryo.

Thusness is in all [living beings] without distinction, and the Tathāgata has the nature of the purity of that. Hence it is said that all sentient beings have the embryo of the Tathāgata.

This verse states that all sentient beings have the embryo of the Tathāgata (*tathāgatagarbha*) since all sentient beings have the nature of thusness (*tathatā*). It should be noted that it is possible to interpret this verse as stating that all beings “are” the embryo of the Tathāgata, rather than all beings “have” the embryo<sup>40</sup>. The former would imply, however, that all sentient beings will attain buddhahood, a claim that the MSA/Bh does not seem inclined to make. In fact, as we have already seen in the material on gotra, the text states quite clearly that different beings belong to different gotras and that different gotras lead to different forms of awakening<sup>41</sup>; thus not all sentient beings attain buddhahood. Nevertheless, the text does here claim that all sentient beings have the potentiality for attaining buddhahood, even if this potentiality is not actually realized.

The claim that all sentient beings have the potentiality for attaining buddhahood is not such a strange one for the MSA/Bh to make given its

<sup>40</sup> For more on this see Griffiths 1990b: 62-63. Here I am following Griffiths’ translation.

<sup>41</sup> Compare this to Haribhadra’s theory of gotra as found in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāṛ-āloka*, where from the ultimate point of view gotra is seen as non-distinct in all sentient beings; see Ruegg 1968, especially: 316-317, and Mano 1967.



affirmation of mind as fundamentally pure in nature. The first half of 13.19 states:

matam ca cittam prakṛti-prabhāsvaraṃ sadā tad āgantuka-doṣa-dūṣitam/

Mind should properly be thought of as always luminous by nature; it is impure due to adventitious defilements.

The commentary further states that mind is like space, or like water that is pure in itself but made impure by pollutants; and like water, mind can be purified through removing the defilements. Thus from the perspective of the text, insofar as sentient beings have (or just *are*) minds, they may attain the state of fundamental purity through the removal of adventitious defilements<sup>42</sup>.

The theme of purity is also discussed at 11.13-14, although here it is the nature of reality that is fundamentally pure. MSA 11.13 states:

tattvaṃ yat satataṃ dvayena rahitaṃ bhrāntēś ca saṃnīśrayaḥ  
śakyam naiva ca sarvathābhilapitum yac cāprapañcātmakam/  
jñeyam heyam atho viśodhyam amalam yac ca prakṛtyā matam  
yasyākāśa-suvarṇa-vāri-sadrśī kleśād viśuddhir matā//

Reality — which is always without duality, is the basis of error, and is entirely inexpressible — does not have the nature of discursivity. It is to be known, abandoned, and purified. It should properly be thought of as naturally immaculate, since it is purified from defilements, as are space, gold, and water.

As in the commentary to 13.19, the nature of reality — like the nature of mind — is said to be similar to that of space and water: they are naturally pure and defiled only adventitiously. The next verse goes on to state that there is nothing else in the world besides this fundamentally pure reality. Thus at an ontological level the MSA/Bh posits that, even though it serves as the basis of error, reality is fundamentally pure.

This brief excursus into the domain of the MSA/Bh's ontological discourse is to be understood in relation to our original question. The moves towards understanding the MSA/Bh's position on the *tathāgatagarbha*-theory and the MSA/Bh's doctrine of the fundamental purity of mind and reality were, I think, necessary in order to more fully consider a response

<sup>42</sup> The theme of the fundamental purity of mind and the adventitious nature of defilements may also be found in certain passages in the nikāyas/āgamas; see Keenan (1980: 21-22) on passages from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and *Majjhima-nikāya* that posit the fundamental purity of mind.

to the question of whether all sentient beings can potentially attain awakening. According to the passages discussed here we see that

- (1) All sentient beings have the potentiality for attaining complete awakening (i.e., all beings have the embryo of the Tathāgata; MSA/Bh 9.37), and all beings have the potentiality for purifying their minds, since mind — like reality itself — is fundamentally pure by nature (MSA/Bh 13.19 and 11.13).

However, we must also consider this claim in relation to the MSA/Bh's discourse on *gotra*, according to which

- (2) Having a *gotra* is a prerequisite for attaining any form of awakening, but some beings are excluded from acquiring a *gotra* (MSA/Bh 3.11).

Considering these claims together, we may note a degree of tension between (1) and (2). More specifically, according to (1) all sentient beings have the potentiality for complete awakening, while the implication of (2) is that some beings are excluded from the attainment of any form of awakening at all, in that they are excluded from acquiring the “seed” (*gotra*) necessary for awakening. The issue here is in what sense we should understand the state of being excluded — and, more specifically, in what sense we should understand the term *atyantam* in the commentary to 3.11. Are sentient beings of this category — those who are *atyantāparinirvāṇa-dharmā* — excluded “absolutely”? “For ever”? Does anything hinge on deciding one way or the other?

I would argue that something does indeed hinge on such a decision, that it is not philosophically insignificant whether *atyantam* is translated as “absolutely” or “for ever” in this context. To say that some beings are “absolutely” without the qualities associated with *parinirvāṇa* — absolutely without *gotra* — implies that some beings are “unconditionally” in this state<sup>43</sup>: it implies that these sentient beings unconditionally lack *gotra* — hence they simply do not attain any form of awakening, without reference to any other conditions or qualifications. This would pose a problem in interpreting the text consistently, in that we have already seen that *gotra* is not unconditional: the condition for its acquisition is the

<sup>43</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers one definition of “absolutely” as “without condition or limitation; unconditionally.”

roots of virtue. Furthermore, understanding *atyantam* here as “absolutely” intensifies the tension between (1) and (2): it would imply the problematic conclusion that although all beings have the potentiality for complete awakening, some beings are absolutely unable to attain any form of awakening at all. On the other hand, saying that some beings are “for ever” without the qualities associated with parinirvāṇa — for ever without gotra — does not imply that any beings are unconditionally in this category. Rather, it implies that some beings simply always remain in this category due to a conditional lack in roots of virtue. And translating *atyantam* here as “for ever” would significantly reduce the tension between (1) and (2): it would allow that while all beings have the potentiality for complete awakening, some beings simply never actualize this potentiality. In fact, according to the text there is always a surplus or remainder of sentient beings who have not been ripened to awakening, since the world is infinite<sup>44</sup>.

I would propose that a more perspicuous means of clarifying and addressing the tension between (1) and (2) — between a doctrine of universal potentiality for buddhahood and the exclusion of certain sentient beings from attaining awakening — may be found through introducing the modal concepts of necessity, possibility, and contingency. It should first be noted that the MSA/Bh does not employ these concepts in this or any other context; in fact, to my knowledge, the concepts of modal logic are not fully articulated anywhere in the history of Indian Buddhist thought. What I propose then is of the nature of a rational reconstruction. Briefly, Haack specifies the distinction between necessary and contingent truths as follows: “a necessary truth is one which could not be otherwise, a contingent truth one which could; or, the negation of a necessary truth is impossible or contradictory, the negation of a contingent truth possible or consistent; or, a necessary truth is true in all possible worlds, a contingent truth is true in the actual but not in all possible worlds” (1978: 170). To this we may add that a possible truth is one whose negation is not necessary. I would argue that a reconstruction of (1) and (2) employing modal concepts allows for a clarification of the claims at MSA/Bh 9.37 and 3.11, and the elimination of the tension between them. Through introducing the

<sup>44</sup> MSABh ad 9.49: na ca niḥśeṣaṃ lokasyānantatvāt/.

concepts of possibility and contingency, we might restate propositions (1) and (2) in the following terms:

(1') For all  $x$  such that  $x$  is a sentient being, it is possible that  $x$  will attain complete awakening.

(2') For some  $x$  such that  $x$  is a sentient being, it is contingent that  $x$  is without gotra, and hence without any form of awakening.

These two propositions are consistent with one another, since there is no contradiction in stating that awakening is possible for all beings even though some beings do not in fact attain it. Note, however, that if we were to translate *atyantam* as “absolutely” at MSABh ad 3.11, then (2') would be restated as follows:

(2'') For some  $x$  such that  $x$  is a sentient being, it is necessary that  $x$  is without gotra, and hence without any form of awakening.

Such a proposition would be inconsistent with (1'), since it is contradictory to state that it is possible for all beings to attain awakening but necessary that some do not. Thus my reconstruction of (2) entails interpreting *atyantam* as a term implying contingency rather than necessity<sup>45</sup>. And so I propose that the claims at MSA/Bh 9.37 and 3.11 be read in terms of propositions (1') and (2'), respectively.

The tension which I raise between (1) and (2) is one which has been noticed by Tibetan and Indian Buddhist traditions. In his study of the theories of *tathāgatagarbha* and gotra, Ruegg (1969: 82) states that the apparent contradiction between MSA/Bh 9.37 and 3.11 has divided Tibetan commentators, and that certain Tibetan commentators have argued that the *tathāgatagarbha*-verse (9.37) is to be understood as having a *sens intentionnel* in this context — that its claim is not definitive for the MSA/Bh. Also notable is the fact that in the subcommentary to the *Madhyāntavibhāga* (again, a text cited in the MSABh), Sthiramati offers two rather conflicting interpretations of gotra<sup>46</sup>: according to the first interpretation, different gotras are “inherent” (*svābhāvikam*) and “beginningless” (*anādikālikam*) in different individuals — for example, some have the śrāvaka-gotra and

<sup>45</sup> My thanks to Jay Garfield for suggesting this way of stating the point to me in conversation.

<sup>46</sup> See Sanskrit ed., Yamaguchi 1934: 55-56.

others the buddha-gotra — a view that implies a theory of predetermined and distinct “seeds” of awakening. According to the second interpretation, however, all beings have the tathāgata-gotra — a view that implies a theory of universal potentiality for buddhahood. And Sthiramati does not indicate which interpretation is to be understood as definitive. Thus we can see that even in the Indian context there was some debate over whether all beings have the *tathāgatagarbha* or whether different beings just have different gotras, with some beings excluded from the attainment of complete awakening, and others — those who are inherently without gotra — excluded from the attainment of any form of awakening at all. We might speculate that had the modal concepts of necessity, possibility, and contingency been developed in a rigorous fashion and employed in the context of a controversy between the theories of *tathāgatagarbha* and gotra, any inconsistency between the two theories — at least as they occur in the MSA/Bh — could have been resolved. Again, the reconstruction which I propose involves the two steps of interpreting *atyantam* at MSABh ad 3.11 as “for ever” — a step supported by both internal and external evidence — and interpreting (1) as a statement of possibility and (2) as a statement of contingency.

To conclude, in response to our initial question of whether all sentient beings can potentially attain awakening, we may state the following: in the terms of the MSA/Bh itself, while all beings have the embryo of the Tathāgata, some beings are simply for ever without the “seed” (*gotra*) of awakening. And in the terms of my proposed reconstruction: while all sentient beings can potentially attaining awakening, it is contingently the case that some beings will never actually do so<sup>47</sup>.

### Abbreviations

AA:	<i>Abhisamayālaṃkāra</i>
BBh:	<i>Bodhisattvabhūmi</i>
DT:	<i>Derge Tanjur</i> (Sde dge bstan 'gyur)
MAV:	<i>Madhyāntavibhāga</i>

<sup>47</sup> It may be interesting to consider this interpretation in relation to *Aṅguttara-nikāya* V: 193-195, where, after a discussion of the fourteen restricted points, the Buddha remains silent in response to the question of whether the whole world will attain deliverance.

- MAVBh: *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya*  
 MSA: *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (verse-text)  
 MSABh: *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra-bhāṣya* (commentary)  
 MSA/Bh: *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra-bhāṣya*  
 MSAT: *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra-ṭīkā* (Asvabhāva's subcommentary)  
 MSAVBh: *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra-vṛtti-bhāṣya* (Sthiramati's subcommentary)  
 SNS: *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*

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I would like to thank the members of the Five College Buddhist Studies Seminar (Jay Garfield, Peter Gregory, Jamie Hubbard, Marilyn M. Rhie, Young H. Rhie, Andrew Rotman, and Taitetsu Unno) for reading an earlier draft of this paper and participating in a helpful discussion on it. While I have greatly benefited from their comments, I alone am responsible for any errors or deficiencies that remain.