

The Tathagatagarbha Doctrine

Introduction

The Tathagatagarbha doctrine is an influential Mahayana Buddhist teaching that proposes that all beings contain within themselves the virtues and wisdom of a Tathagata (a Buddha-nature), if not the Buddha himself.¹ In the associated Tathagatagarbha Sutra, this presence is referred to as tathagatagarbha. This inner tathagatagarbha remains concealed by defilements (negative mental states, moral taints, and so on) in unenlightened beings and cannot be discerned by them. But because all beings contain tathagatagarbha, they all have the potential to realize enlightenment (to become Buddhas), if and when the defilements are dissolved. While only a moderately successful teaching in India, the tathagatagarbha concept became extremely important in East Asian Buddhism (where it is more commonly referred to as Buddha-nature), especially in the Zen (Chan) school. Today, it is a central concept (if often not explicitly recognized) in all practice traditions of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.

This primer summarizes the doctrine's origin, the doctrine itself in India, its impact on and transformation in East Asian Buddhism, and Dogen's and Katagiri's thoughts on Buddha-nature. Notes and a bibliography are included for those interested in learning more about this doctrine and its influence on their Zen practice.

Origin

Like early tathagatagarbha sutras, the Tathagatagarbha doctrine is said by scholars to be the work of members of the Mahasamghika sect of Buddhism in the Andhra region of southeastern India, though this attribution is debated.² The doctrine was taken from teachings in the sutras, most of which were likely written down in the third-century C.E. The list of tathagatagarbha sutras includes the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, the Śrīmālā Sutra, the Ananatva-Apurnatva-Nipades-Sutra, the Manglimaliya Sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, and the Mahayana Mahaperinirvana (Nirvana) Sutra.³ The doctrine was summarized and clarified several centuries later in commentarial treatises, most notably in the *Ratnagotravibhaga* in India and the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* in China.

Development and Main Teachings in India

The word 'tathagatagarbha' has a wide variety of meanings in the sutras, including womb (*garbha*) of the Buddha, Buddha-nature, Buddha Matrix, and Buddha Embryo, as well as True Self and Essence of the Self within all sentient beings. The tathagatagarbha is even regarded at times as a fully formed Buddha sitting cross-legged in the lotus position in each one of us. It is described variously as a seed, embryo, matrix, potentiality for becoming a Buddha, the treasure-store, and the Tathagata (Buddha), and its qualities as unconditioned, boundless, sustaining,

deathless, and diamond-like, among many other names and qualities. But most basically, the tathagatagarbha is the potential in every sentient being to attain Buddhahood (to become a Buddha) because she or he has a tathagatagarbha within them as their essence, core, or essential inner nature.

The proposal of a Buddha-within all beings was likely a response to the Madhyamaka doctrine which held that phenomena are empty of self-essence and thus have no independent existence. According to that proposal, phenomena appear distinctive only as we are taught to “see” them in our mind. The Tathagatagarbha doctrine proposes instead that there *is* a permanent existence in all beings, the tathagatagarbha.

This basic idea was developed and elaborated upon in the tathagatagarbha sutras. The first of the sutras to specifically teach the Tathagatagarbha doctrine was the Tathagatagarbha Sutra itself, which dates perhaps to the second half of the third-century C.E. A Relatively short sutra, it consists almost entirely of nine examples of the manner in which a Tathagata is hidden within us.⁴ The intent of the sutra was “to answer the question how it is possible for all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, to stress that all sentient beings are included in the family of the buddhas [for they all contain tathagatagarbha], and, likely, to promote the superiority of the Mahayana over other spiritual rivals” [for it explains why it is possible for all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood and how to go about doing that, unlike other spiritual traditions].⁵

The concept of the tathagatagarbha was developed from that simple description in later writings such as the Śrīmālā Sutra. While reiterating that the tathagatagarbha refers to an inner potential of all sentient beings to become a Buddha, the Śrīmālā elaborates on the nature of the tathagatagarbha and its virtues. For example: the sutra maintains that were it not for the tathagatagarbha (the Buddha-within) beings would be unable to feel aversion for suffering or to seek nirvana, and it identifies the tathagatagarbha with the *dharmakaya*, the Buddha’s celestial body that pervades all things in the universe.⁶

A third example is the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana (Nirvana) Sutra which is particularly important, for in addition to teaching core Tathagatagarbha doctrinal teachings, it maintains as well the assertion that the tathagatagarbha is nothing other than a Self (*atman*). The Nirvana Sutra is considered the most influential of these sutras, for the Buddha is said to have delivered this teaching on his deathbed (since it is his final teaching, it is assumed that it is his ultimate and true teaching). But in this sutra the tathagatagarbha is viewed in a more abstract, less explicitly personalized manner.

Still, from a skeptic’s point of view, calling the tathagatagarbha a ‘Self’ may be nothing more than a strategy (a skillful means) to convert non-Buddhists who would likely reject the notion of not having a self. On the other hand, from a traditional perspective, all tathagatagarbha sutras agree that the tathagatagarbha is an immortal, inherent, transcendent essence that resides in

a concealed state in every being (but one could argue from the skeptic's point of view that it is their duty as tathagatagarbha sutras, of course, to say this).

The Ratnagotravibhaga is a fifth-century Indian summary of and commentary on the Tathagatagarbha doctrine. Among its somewhat dense conclusions are: (1) Although there are two types of Suchness (the ultimate way of being) – the tainted Suchness of the tathagatagarbha and the untainted Suchness of the *dharmakaya* – they are really the same thing; (2) What we are talking about here is consciousness, 'radiant by nature, pure, and nondual'; (3) In reality there is no defilement element to be removed, since the *dharmakaya* is inherent in sentient beings as the tathagatagarbha; (4) While beings may become 'empty' of defilements, what remains is the 'True Self'; and (5) What the Self in the tathagatagarbha really means is just another name for 'non-Self,' for the Buddha is said to have a True Self which is beyond being and nonbeing.⁷

The Tathagatagarbha in East Asian Buddhism

In East Asian Buddhism tathagatagarbha was more often called Buddha-nature. To add to the confusion, many of the supposedly Indian sources for a study of Buddha-nature in East Asia were likely composed in China, if not necessarily written by Chinese scholars. For instance, scholars have concluded that two of the most important of these sources, the *Dasheng qixinlun*, attributed to Aśhvaghosha, and the *Foxinglun*, attributed to Vasubhandu, were composed in China in the sixth-century C.E., most likely by Paramārtha (499-569 C.E.), a transplanted scholar from central India.⁸ The most prominent treatise in this regard in China was the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, which combines elements of Yogacara and Tathagatagarbha.

Unlike the Indo-Tibetan concept of Buddha-nature, which was an essence within sentient beings that enable them to become enlightened (and thus soteriological or aimed at salvation), the concept in the *Awakening of Faith* and in East Asian Buddhism is cosmological. From a cosmological perspective, Buddha-nature is the true nature of the universe around us (see below).

Tathagatagarbha in Zen. The notion of the tathagatagarbha in Zen/Chan is closely tied to how that concept was developed in the Lankavatara Sutra. According to legend Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Zen/Chan in China, carried the Lankavatara Sutra with him when he came from India to China and considered it the source of his primary teaching. So closely were the early Zen/Chan teachers in the lineage of Bodhidharma's school associated with the sutra, they became known as the 'Lankavatara Masters.'⁹ The Lankavatara Sutra presents the Chan/Zen Buddhist view of the tathagatagarbha as follows:

[The Buddha said] Now, Mahāmati, what is perfect knowledge? It is realized when one casts aside the discriminating notions of form, name, reality, and character; it is the inner realization by noble wisdom. This perfect knowledge, Mahāmati, is the essence of the Tathagata-garbha.¹⁰

The sutra is famous too for maintaining that the tathagatagarbha is identical to the alaya-vijnana, which is known prior to awakening as the storehouse consciousness, or the eighth consciousness.¹¹ The association of the storehouse consciousness with a level of vijnana (consciousness, life force) is significant because vijnana is a sort of pure, direct awareness not marked by thought or concept. This is important, for it means that an intellectual understanding of Buddha-nature (the tathagatagarbha) is insufficient. Rather, Buddha-nature must be experienced directly in one's entire mind and body together. Enlightenment thus becomes the direct experience of the Buddha-nature of one's own mind (which in Zen is traditionally understood to be emptiness or *sunyata*).¹² As a consequence, Chan/Zen masters, including Huineng in China and Hakuin in Japan, taught that the process of awakening begins with the light of the mind turning around within the eighth consciousness (the alaya-vijnana or tathagatagarbha).

Dogen and Katagiri on Buddha-nature. Although Dogen (1200-1253), the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, emphasized sustained zazen (sitting meditation or Shikantaza) as Soto Zen's main practice, he devoted an important section of his major work, the *Shobogenzo*, to Buddha-nature. In typical Dogen rhetoric, traditional phrases are turned upside-down to make an insightful point. Thus for Dogen, it is insufficient to say that all sentient beings *have* the Buddha-nature (or indeed contain a tathagatagarbha). From his perspective, the phrase 'sentient being' refers to everything in the universe and everything in the universe is Buddha-nature. All beings, sentient and insentient, literally are Buddha-nature. Dogen says: 'Grass, trees, and lands are mind; thus they are sentient beings. Because they are sentient beings they are Buddha-nature. Sun, moon, and stars are mind; thus they are sentient beings; thus they are Buddha-nature.'¹³

For Dogen, then, as in East Asian Zen/Chan more generally, Buddha-nature is not an essence 'hidden' in things, as in India, but the vast world of phenomena, of Reality itself. This means that all 'things' including you and me are already enlightened, for we are none other than indistinguishable parts of that vast world of phenomena. As a consequence, there can be no basis for any Buddhist practice. Since there is nothing to attain, just sit! (sound familiar) As Dogen phrases it:

To think that practice and enlightenment are not identical is a non-Buddhist view. ... Therefore, even though you are instructed to practice, do not think that there is any attainment outside of practice itself, because practice must be considered to point directly to intrinsic realization.¹⁴

In the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, this view of tathagatagarbha is most directly expressed in Katagiri Roshi's book, *The Light That Shines through Infinity: Zen and the Energy of Life*. Here are a few quotations:

"The functioning energy of the whole world *is* the light of the self. Because light is working from moment to moment, the whole world constantly manifests itself as the human world. At that time, the whole world is *within* the light of the self." (p. 34)

“When your body and mind are perfectly tranquil in zazen, your life touches the source of the human world with your whole body and mind. At that time you experience your life as nothing but flowing process, flowing practice, flowing activity, energy that is gushing out like spring water, constantly gushing up from the ground.” (p. 102)

“So from beginning to end, just sit down. Accept zazen as a source of energy, and just sit down. Day by day, all we have to do is live like this.” (p. 77)

And thus ends our discourse on the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, a doctrine that underlies our Zen practice, thought seldom recognized as such.

Notes

1. For introductions to the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, see Williams (2009: 103-28), Grosnick (2004), Tam (2018), and Anon. (*Wikipedia*). For a variety of scholarly (and often painfully dense) studies of the doctrine and Buddha-nature more generally, see Hookham (1991), Hurley (2004), Liu (1985, 1989), Shuman (2014), Sharf (2017), Brown (1994), Takasaki (2000, 2014), King (1989, 1991), Grosnick (1981), and Wayman and Wayman (1974).
2. Barber (2009).
3. For the tathagatagarbha sutras, see Radich (2015).
4. For the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, see the primer in this series.
5. Williams (2009: 104-05).
6. For the Śrīmālā Sutra, see the primer in this series. Since the sutra’s teachings seem to contradict such fundamental Buddhist doctrines as impermanence (*anitya*), non-self (*anatman*), and the prevalence of suffering in sentient beings (*dukkha*), it was criticized and ignored by many who preferred the teachings of the first and/or second turning of the wheel of the dharma. For the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma, see the primer of that name in this series.
7. This is dense and needs unpacking. For accessible overviews of the Ratnagotra, see Williams (2009: 109-12) and the Ratnagotravibhaga entry in *Wikipedia*. If you prefer dense readings, see Takasaki (1966), Mathes (2008), Hookham (1991: 165-288), and Brown (1991: 43-67).
8. For the early development of the Buddha-nature doctrine in China, see Liu (1989). For Paramārtha, see Paul (1982) and Funayama (2010).
9. Ferguson (2011: 31).
10. Suzuki (1932: 60).
11. Suzuki (1932: 191). Also see Ejsmont (n.d.), Mei (2008), and the Yogacara primer in this series.
12. Thus the Zen tradition often uses paradox to try to explain/realize one’s Buddha-nature. According to one story, a monk approached Zen Master Chao-chao and asked him, ‘Does a dog possess Buddha-nature or not?’ Chao-chao replied with the one word answer ‘wei’ (moo in Japanese). His response indicated that the question could not be answered with a straightforward assertion or negation. Rather, through the contemplation of the question, or the absorbing of it, one may perhaps gain an experience of Buddha-nature directly.
13. Dogen (1983: IV, 134).
14. Cook (1983: 17).

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