The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra

Introduction

The Tathagatagarbha Sutra is a relatively short but important Mahayana text that introduces the tathagatagarbha doctrine and the term tathagatagarbha itself. The doctrine that under the name of Buddha-nature was influential in the development of Zen (Chan) Buddhism in China.¹ According to the sutra, an eternal and unchanging tathagatagarbha (Buddha-Matrix, Buddha-Embryo, Buddha-Essence; literally “the womb of the thus-come–one”) exists within each person’s being. Although covered by klesas (unwholesome mental mannerisms), the tathagatagarbha contains the potential for enlightenment for every being once the klesas are dissolved. Between an introductory prologue and a concluding epilogue, the body of the sutra contains a series of nine images for what the tathagatagarbha is and the manner in which it is hidden from view. While introduced in this sutra, the notion of tathagatagarbha was developed more fully in later sutras and treatises, such as the Lankavatara Sutra, the Lion’s Roar of Queen Śrīmālā Sutra (Śrīmālādevī Simhanāda Sūtra), the Nirvana Sutra (Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra), and the Ratnagotravibhāga compendium of tathagatagarbha literature. As in other Mahayana sutras, part of the alluring power of the text is its mythical context (e.g., ‘with his supernatural powers the Buddha put on a miraculous display in the sky’ near the beginning of the sutra).

The intended purpose of the Tathagatagarbha Sutra was to encourage persons to strive to attain enlightenment, to explain why and how this was possible (for all beings already contain the potential for enlightenment within themselves), and to promote the Mahayana (for it is the one true path to enlightenment that informs us about the tathagatagarbha within).

This primer describes the origin of the sutra, its storyline and main teachings, and a brief account of the further development of the tathagatagarbha concept. Notes and further readings are included for those who would like to learn more about this influential Buddhist sutra.

Origin and Brief History

Like other early tathagatagarbha sutras, the Tathagatagarbha Sutra may have been the work of adherents of the Mahāsāṃghika sect of Buddhism in the Andhra region of southeastern India in the third-century C.E.² Although the Sanskrit text is no longer extant, it is preserved in two Chinese versions and two Tibetan versions. Buddhhabhatra (358–429) of Eastern Tsin is said to have translated a shorter version into Chinese in 420 and Amoghavajra (705–774) of T’ang a longer, more detailed version in the middle of the eighth century. While one Tibetan version is considered an apocryphal (at least partially made-up) text, the other, which was translated around 800, is regarded as the “canonical” Tibetan translation. William H. Grosnick translated
Buddhabhatra’s text into English in 1995 and Michael Zimmerman the canonical Tibetan version into English in 2002.\(^3\)

**The Storyline and Main Teachings**

The sutra opens with the classic “Thus have I heard,” and a description of the many-tiered teaching pavilion on Vulture Peak near Rajagaha that the Buddha was staying at. It also describes the “assembly of hundreds and thousands of great monks and a throng of bodhisattvas and great beings sixty times the number of sands in the Ganges River” that awaited his teaching.\(^4\) At that time, the Buddha put on a miraculous display of “a countless number of thousand-petaled lotus flowers as large as chariot wheels.” In the center of each flower was “a conjured image of a Buddha,” with “each flower giving forth countless rays of light.” Perplexed, the Bodhisattva Vairamat asked the Buddha, “[W]hy are there conjured Buddha images in all of the innumerable flowers?” and “Why did you display this conjured vision?”

The Buddha responded, saying, “[T]here is a great vaipulya-sutra [extensive Mahayana sutra] called the ‘Tathagatagarbha.’ It was because I wanted to explain it to you that I showed you these signs. You should all listen attentively and ponder it well.” The Buddha then explained that within all beings there is an eternally unsullied tathagatagarbha hidden within the *klesas* of greed, desire, anger, stupidity, and ignorance. The bulk of the sutra is a description of the nine images the Buddha then uses to indicate what it means to say that an indwelling tathagatagarbha in sentient beings is hidden by *klesas*: (1) “the bodies of tathagatas seated in the lotus posture inside” flowers whose petals are not yet unfurled (which is in the first chapter); (2) pure honey protected by bees; (3) “a kernel of wheat that has not yet had its husk removed”; (4) “genuine gold that has fallen into a pit of waste and been submerged and not seen for years”; (5) “a store of treasure hidden beneath an impoverished household”; (6) the pit (a seed) inside a mango fruit that does not decay; (7) a statue of pure gold wrapped in a worn-out rag discarded in an open field; (8) a noble son in the womb of a vile, ugly, impoverished woman; and (9) a statue of pure gold in a burned and blackened earthen mold. The Buddha describes each image in prose followed by a verse that summarizes his prose description (see the Appendix for an example).

Along the way, the Buddha describes the nature of tathagatagarbha using words such as “eternally unsullied,” “eternal and unchanging,” a “limitless Tathagata vision,” “It does not hear and it is not aware of the addiction and delusions of the five desires,” “the profound quiescence of nirvana,” and “indestructible.” The tathagatagarbha within all beings is named variously as well. Examples are: the Dharma store of the tathagata, the buddha nature, the buddhagarbha, the wondrous garbha of the Tathagata, the Tathagata nature, and the Tathagata's treasure store. According to the sutra, it is the task of buddhas (tathagatas) to use their Buddha eye to see the
tathagatagarbha inside sentient beings. They are also to expound the sutras and the Dharma “in order to destroy klesas and reveal the buddha nature.”

The sutra ends with the Buddha urging those present to “accept, recite, copy, revere, and widely expound this ‘Tathagatagarbha Sutra’ for the benefit of others.” Their task is to explain the nature of the Buddha within and the formation of the Tathagatagarbha Sutra itself.

Some confusion resulted from the different meanings of the word *garbha* in the sutra, which includes a womb, store, calyx, husk, and seed. Likewise, the tathagatagarbha is likened to a matrix, womb, embryo, germ, and treasure-store of the Tathagata. Later sutras more clearly define just what the tathagatagarbha is.

**Is the Tathagatagarbha a Self?**

A persistent debate arose around the nature of tathagatagarbha. Is it a self, as we commonly understand the word, or something more nebulous or improvisational, such as a skillful means to aid practitioners along the path? Since the Buddha stated that sentient beings lack a true self (an *atman*), some scholars have charged that the tathagatagarbha doctrine is not Buddhist. However, the Tathagatagarbha Sutra seems to explicitly say that the tathagatagarbha is a “virtual Buddha-homunculus, a fully wisdom-endowed Buddha, inviolate, seated majestically in the lotus posture with the body of each being, clearly visible only to a perfect Buddha with his supernatural vision.”

However, again, is this a ‘self’ as we might normally understand a substantial self? Some scholars have insisted that the term represents a positive language of emptiness (*sunyata*) and represents the potentiality to realize buddhahood through Buddhist practice; the intent of the teaching is thus soteriological (aimed at salvation) rather than theoretical or ontological (aimed at the nature of reality). Others, like Michael Zimmermann, a specialist on the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, maintain that “the existence of an eternal, imperishable self, that is, buddhahood, is definitely the basic point of the Tathagatagarbha Sutra.”

Buddhist scholar Jamie Hubbard raises another problematic issue in the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, the issue of monism (an issue that Japanese scholar Matsumoto strongly considers non-Buddhist). Monism asserts that a variety of existing things can be explained in terms of a single reality, although many things may be made up of the reality such as matter or mind. In Mahayana Buddhism it often refers to “emptiness” (*sunyata*), but here it refers to tathagatagarbha.

Hubbard comments: “Matsumoto [calls] attention to the similarity between the extremely positive language and causal structure of enlightenment found in the tathagatagarbha literature and that of the substantial monism found in the atman/Brahman tradition. Matsumoto, of course, is not the only one to have noted this resemblance. Takasaki Jikito, for example, the preeminent scholar of the tathagatagarbha tradition, sees monism in the doctrine of the tathagatagarbha and
the Mahayana in general …. Obermiller wedded this notion of a monistic Absolute to the
tathagatagarbha literature in his translation and commentary to the Ratnagotra, which he aptly
subtitled “A Manual of Buddhist Monism” … Lamotte and Frauwallner have seen the
tathagatagarbha doctrine as diametrically opposed to the Madhyamaka and representing
something akin to ‘the monism of the atman/Brahman strain ….”

All of the above comments are included in a MZMC primer to stress that Mahayana
Buddhism, of which Soto Zen is a part, was and continues to be an evolving spiritual tradition
that at times has contentious relationships with other schools, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist.
Buddhist sutras and commentaries should be understood within this context, and within their
place and time of origin. As the Śrimālā and other sutras conclude, the path to enlightenment
requires a clear understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, as diverse and contradictory, as they
seem at times.10

Notes
Asia, this topic became paramount for a broad range of Chinese and Japanese writers, with Chan [Zen]
writers appearing particularly interested in developing this notion along several tracks.” For
tathagatagarbha sutras in general, see Radich (2015)
3. Grosnick (1995), Zimmermann (2002). Unless stated otherwise, the quotes in the primer are from
Grosnick’s translation.
4. For commentaries on the structure and content of the sutra, see Cole (2005) and Zimmermann (1999).
The sutra says that this teaching occurred ten years after the Buddha’s enlightenment.
5. See, for example, Swanson (1993) and King (1995).
10. As often repeated, the Buddha’s aim was to save all beings from suffering, not to create a philosophy
or internally consistent program of curing. As a result, he quite often used skillful means (upaya) for
this purpose, skillful means that often contradicted one another.

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**Appendix**

“Or, good sons, it is like a kernel of wheat that has not yet had its husk removed. Someone who is impoverished might foolishly disdain it, and consider it to be something that should be discarded. But when it is cleaned, the kernel can always be used. In like fashion, good sons, when I observe sentient beings with my Buddha eye, I see that the husk of klesas covers their limitless Tathagata vision. So with appropriate skilful means I expound the Dharma, to enable them to remove those klesas, purify their universal wisdom, and to attain in all worlds the highest true enlightenment.” Thereupon, the World-honored One expressed this in verses, saying:

“It is just like what happens when all the kernels, The husks of which have not yet been washed away, Are disdained by someone who is impoverished, And said to be something to be discarded. But although the outside seems like something useless, The inside is genuine and not to be destroyed. After the husks are removed, It becomes food fit for a king. I see that all kinds of beings Have a buddhagarbha hidden by klesas. I preach the removal of those things To enable them to attain universal wisdom. Just as I have a Tathagata nature, So do all beings. When they develop it and purify it, They quickly attain the highest path.