

# VARIOUS INTERPETATIONS OF TATHĀGATAGARBHA IN MAHĀYĀNA MAHĀPARINIRVĀṆA SŪTRA



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the different concepts of tathāgatagarbha in the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra and to analyze the suitability of those concepts. Buddhadhātu is closely related in meaning to the term tathāgatagarbha in Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, which affirms that all sentient beings have *buddhadhātu* (buddha nature). Furthermore, the Buddha-Nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) is the Self, but sentient beings cannot see it because it is covered by delusion. However, *buddhadhātu* is the embryo of a *tathāgata* as the potential to realize enlightenment which we all possess or as perfect enlightenment itself.

*Keywords:* tathāgatagarbha, Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, Buddhadhātu, Self

## INTRODUCTION

Tathāgatagarbha is one of the most important theories of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which affirms that every sentient being has the potency for attaining the buddhahood<sup>1</sup> because each has the tathāgatagarbha. In Mahāyāna texts the term Tathāgatagarbha is known under so many different names as it is viewed in so many different aspects of its manifestation. Tathāgatagarbha is *bhutatathata* (Suchness) when it constitutes the reason of buddhahood or the essence of Buddha; tathāgatagarbha is *nirvāna*, when it brings eternal peace to a heart troubled with egoism and its vile passions; tathāgatagarbha is *dharmakāya*, when it is religiously considered as the fountainhead of love and wisdom; tathāgatagarbha is *bodhicitta*, when it is the awakener of religions consciousness; tathāgatagarbha is *prajña*; when it intelligently direct the course of nature; tathāgatagarbha is *bodhi* when it is the source of intelligence; tathāgatagarbha is *buddhadhātu*, when it is considered the possibility of the attainment of buddhahood. The appearance of different names of tathāgatagarbha is due to the different usages in the sūtras and the different interpretation of different Buddhist sects. Because of this problem, it leads to confusion about the meaning of tathāgatagarbha. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to look for the suitable interpretation of tathāgatagarbha for a better understanding.

There is a tendency among scholars to deem the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra as the center doctrine of tathāgatagarbha. Rather, the sūtra has typically been characterized as a text that presents a Buddha-Nature doctrine (*buddhadhātu*). Therefore, the text is, at the best, to propound the suitable interpretation of tathāgatagarbha.

## THE FIRST CONCEPT OF TATHĀGATAGARBHA

The first concept of tathāgatagarbha can be found in the Pāli sūtras which attributed to the Buddha as the “Luminous Mind”.<sup>2</sup>The term tathāgatagarbha first appeared in the

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<sup>1</sup>Buddhahood: The state of awakening that a Buddha has attained. The word enlightenment is often used synonymously with Buddhahood. Buddhahood is regarded as a state of perfect freedom, in which one is awakened to the eternal and ultimate truth that is the reality of all things. This supreme state of life is characterized by boundless wisdom and infinite compassion. The Lotus Sutra reveals that Buddhahood is a potential in the lives of all beings. See also Daisaku Ikeda, **Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth & Death: . . . And Everything in Between, A Buddhist View Life**, (USA: Middle Press, 1988), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup>Shunko Katsumata, **Research into the Theories of Mind and Consciousness in Buddhism**, (Tokyo: SankiboBusshorin, 1988), p.465.

Mahāyāna texts composed in India between approximately 200 and 350 C.E.<sup>3</sup> The concept of the luminous mind developed along within the Mahāsaṅghika and Sarvastivāda tradition.<sup>4</sup> The term “tathāgatagarbha” did not appear in the early teachings of Buddha. The Buddha taught the luminous mind refers to the underlying radiant or luminous intrinsic nature of the mind, especially when it is free from the cover of defilement. The luminous mind is identified by the Buddha in the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, the Buddha states:

This mind, monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by taints that come from without. But this uneducated manyfolk understands not as it really is. Wherefore for the uneducated manyfolk there is no cultivation of the mind, I declare That mind, monks, is luminous, but it is cleansed of taints that come from without. This the educated Ariyan disciple understands as it really is. Wherefore for the educated Ariyan disciple there is cultivation of the mind, I declare.<sup>5</sup>

This discourse indicates that the nature of mind is itself radiant, although it is clouded by defilements it becomes clear through the practice of meditation.

In the following excerpt continues the idea of the purification of the mind in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*.

Whosoever have escaped, are escaping or will escape from the world, all of them, by abandoning the five hindrances, those defilements of the heart which cause the weakening of insight – all of them with thoughts well established in the four arising of mindfulness, by making to grow in very truth the seven limbs of wisdom – all of them have escaped, are escaping or will escape by so doing.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of luminous mind is expressed clearly through the best example of *Āṅgulimāla* who was an unwholesome person. However, he could be converted to a worthy one by the Buddha. The Buddha knew that *Āṅgulimāla* was born a virtuous, noble child

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<sup>3</sup>Sallie, B. King, **Buddha Nature**, (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Bibhu Padhi Minakshi Padhi, **Indian Philosophy and Religion: A Reader's Guide** (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd, 2005), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Woodward, F. L. (tr.), **The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Āṅguttaranikāya)**, vol 1, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>Woodward, F. L. (tr.), **The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Āṅguttaranikāya)**, vol 5, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994), p. 134.

and had the potential innate virtues (tathāgatagarbha) due to his past wholesome kamma to attain *nirvāṇa* in this life. He saw that Āṅgulimāla had sufficient innate virtues as well as the potential to enter the Bhikkhu Saṅgha and attain arhant hood or sainthood.<sup>7</sup> The Āṅgulimāla Sūtra is the tathāgatagarbha class which teaches that the luminous mind (tathāgatagarbha, or the buddha nature) is real and immanent within all beings and all phenomena.

Therefore, in early teaching of the Buddha, the tathāgatagarbha is luminous mind and it is covered by the defilements. When practitioners know the nature of mind, they develop the mind to the stage of the primal mind; in doing this all defilements are destroyed. Therefore, its nature is pure. By developing the mindfulness or removing the hindrances, the nature of luminous mind will be manifested.

From the idea of the luminous mind emerged an idea that the awakened mind is a pure, undefiled mind. In the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras it is this pure consciousness that is regarded to be the seed from which buddhahood grows:

When this intrinsically pure consciousness came to be regarded as an element capable of growing into buddhahood, there was the “embryo (garbha) of the Tathāgata (=Buddha)” doctrine, whether or not this term is employed.<sup>8</sup>

According to Peter Gregory, the origin of tathāgatagarbha doctrine means the natural and true state of the mind:

The implication of this doctrine [...] is that enlightenment is the natural and true state of the mind.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of luminous mind is further developed and more popular in later Mahāyāna texts such as the Lotus Sūtra and the Avataṃsaka Sūtra. The tenth chapter of Lotus Sūtra teaches that everyone can be liberated. All living beings can become a *buddha*, not only monks and nuns, but also laypeople, *śrāvakas*, *bodhisattvas*, and non-human creatures;

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<sup>7</sup>Horner I. B. (tr.), **The Collection of the Middle Length Saying (Majjhimanikāya)**, vol 2, (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994), p. 284.

<sup>8</sup>Alex and Hideko Wayman, **The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Peter Gregory N., **Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1991), pp. 288-289.

The twelfth chapter of Lotus Sūtra details that buddha nature is universal among all people, even the historical Devadatta who also had the potential to become a *buddha*. The story of Devadatta is followed by another story about a dragon princess who is both *anāga* and a female, whom the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī proclaims will reach enlightenment immediately, in her present form.<sup>10</sup>

According to Alex Wayman, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra was the next step in the development of the concept of tathāgatagarbha after the concept of the luminous mind:

Where it is taught that the Buddha's divine knowledge pervades sentient beings, and that its representation in an individual being is the substratum consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra does not contain a singular discussion of the concept, but the idea of a universal penetration of sentient beings by the wisdom of the *buddha* was complementary to the concept of the *buddha* womb.

As mentioned above, the early teachings of the *buddha* does not mention anything about the tathāgatagarbha concept and only mention to the luminous mind. The statement that all sentient beings have the *buddha* element first appears in the Mahāyāna version of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra.

## MEANINGS OF TATHĀGATAGARBHA

According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is believed that all human beings possess the buddha nature that is tathāgatagarbha: the embryo of the buddhahood in all beings. The idea that all living beings possess Buddha-Nature is mainly advocated by the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra and Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra. In the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra, the Buddha explains as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> Gene Reeves, *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic*, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2008), p.5.

<sup>11</sup> Alex and Hideko Wayman, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

All the living beings, though they are among the defilements of hatred, anger and ignorance, have the Buddha's wisdom, Buddha's Eye, Buddha's Body sitting firmly in the form of meditation. – Thus, in spite of their being covered with defilements, transmigrating from one path . . . to another, they are possessed of the Matrix of the Tathāgata [tathāgatagarbha 'contain a Tathāgata'], endowed with virtues, always pure, and hence are not different from me. – Having thus observed, the Buddha preached the doctrine in order to remove the defilements and manifest the Buddha-nature (within the living beings).<sup>12</sup>

This teaching explains that all living beings have latent buddhahood and is different from the Buddha's tathāgatagarbha. It is the true nature of things and whether Buddhas appear or do not appear the tathāgatagarbha of beings are eternal and unchanging.

The idea that all human beings have latent buddhahood is mainly advocated by explaining that the human mind is essentially identical with the *tathāgata*. The essence of human mind is transparently luminous. The luminous mind is covered by defilement, when the defilement has been removed, the pure mind becomes apparent.

In the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the meaning of tathāgatagarbha is defined as the buddha nature and Self or True Self. The concept of *tathāgatagarbha* in this Sūtra has a different meaning from Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras. The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra states that all human beings have latent buddhahood, but it does not mean that all human beings have the potential of the Buddha-Nature giving them the possibility to become the Buddha in the future as Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra describes. All beings have the Buddha-Nature.<sup>13</sup>

In this sūtra, the Chapter on the Nature of Tathāgata explains tathāgatagarbha as Self:

“Self” means a Tathāgata embryo. All sentient beings have Buddha-nature. This means the self. This meaning of the self has been covered up by immeasurable delusion since the beginning. That is why sentient beings cannot see it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Williams, **Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations**, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Kosho Yamamoto (tr.), Tony Page Dr. (ed.), “Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra”, **Mahāyāna Sūtra Piṭaka (Taisho Tripiṭaka vol 12, no. 374)**, (USA: FLepine Publishing, 2008), p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

The *tathāgatagarbha*'s various interpretations have appeared in later ages. But its original meaning seems to be the embryo that conceived the *tathāgata*, nurtured it, and gave birth to it. To sum up, a sentient being (*tathāgatagarbha*) means one that possesses Buddha-Nature and is a member of the *buddha* family. This Buddha-Nature is passed from birth.<sup>15</sup>

## VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF TATHĀGATAGARBHA IN MAHĀPARINIRVĀṆA SŪTRA.

The main theme of Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra is about the permanence and transcendence of the *buddha*. The key technical term in this portion of the text is the *buddhadhātu*. The *buddhadhātu* is described as a Self or True Self. These two concepts (*buddhadhātu* and *Self*) have a strongly association with the *tathāgatagarbha* concept.

This Sūtra is particularly noteworthy in our present context for two reasons. First, *buddhadhātu* is particularly fully developed in the forty volume versions of the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra and the Sūtra contains the well-known phrase, "All sentient beings have Buddha-Nature."<sup>16</sup>

This means that everyone has the potential to achieve the Buddha-Nature (*buddhadhātu*) or full enlightenment. The *buddhadhātu* idea affirms that the goal of Buddhism is open to all, there is no one inherently incapable of achieving perfect wisdom and freedom.

Second, it is affirmed in a particularly direct way that the *buddhadhātu* (buddha essence or Buddha-Nature) is present in each and every sentient being, and it is nothing other than the Self. This is in contrast with some other Sūtras which are very careful to avoid the use of such a term as "Self" in connection with the *tathāgatagarbha*. According to the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the Buddha stated that *tathāgatagarbha* is Self, it is the embryo of the Buddha. Buddha nature is the Self, but sentient beings cannot see it because it is covered by delusion.

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<sup>15</sup> Gadgin M. Nagao, *Madhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies*, (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication, 1992), p.117.

<sup>16</sup> Kosho Yamamoto (tr.), Tony Page Dr. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 102.

Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra:

“Self” means a Tathāgata embryo. All sentient beings have Buddha-nature. This means the self. This meaning of the self has been covered up by immeasurable delusion since the beginning. That is why sentient beings cannot see it.<sup>17</sup>

From this statement, it can be said that the *buddhadhātu* is identified with tathāgatagarbha. Tathāgatagarbha means either a womb of the *buddha* or embryonic *buddha*. In other words, it can be seen either as the potential to realize enlightenment which all beings possess, or as the perfect enlightenment itself. Moreover, it is said that tathāgatagarbha everyone possesses is covered up by defilements. The defilements hide the reality of tathāgatagarbha and conceal it. Thus, only once we know ourselves as the greedy, angry, ignorant, people we are, can we be liberated. However, these defilements, unlike the tathāgatagarbha, are not really real; ultimately, it is said, they do not exist. Buddha-Nature is identified with the tathāgatagarbha and thus represents our originally given, perfectly enlightened nature. In other words, the reality is that all human beings are all already enlightened, but they are under the illusion that they are unwise or ignorant. This delusion itself is what makes them ignorant. However, there is nothing essential about it. If they can just free themselves out of this delusion, they will realize that we are and always have been, in reality, enlightened. This is the basic idea of Buddha-Nature.

The early teachings of the Buddha is known for the “non-self” teaching. This teaching is central to both the doctrine and the practice from the beginning. However, the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra is one of the most famous texts devoting to the positive affirmation of the eternal Self or True Self as opposed to impermanent non-self. It is important to answer the question as to why does the Buddha teach this concept to his followers. According to the chapter three of the sūtra, “On Grief”, the Buddha clearly states that “all things have no Self and nothing belonging to Self”.<sup>18</sup> It is different from the statement started in the chapter twelve that “Every being has the Buddha-Nature. This is Self”.<sup>19</sup>

Tony Page explains that in chapter three of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the Buddha is confronted by a number of zealous Buddhist who are keen practitioners of what we might

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.



term as “absolutist non-self Buddhism”. This means the frequent meditative cultivation of the notion that everything is absolutely impermanent, suffering and non-self. The Buddha does not praise his enthusiastic followers for their non-selfism, but rather warns them of extremism. He even dismisses their mistaken and useless non-self meditation as pride and blames them for not understanding that meditation upon impermanent, suffering and non-self is highly risky and needs to be safeguarded from misapplication.<sup>20</sup>

The Buddha understands that monks have grasped merely the outer letters, the externalities of his doctrine, but not the essential spirit or inner meaning. As such they are victim of extremism and invent a form of meditative practice in which they view the external as impermanent, the Self as non-self, blissful as suffering, pure as impure.

The Buddha:

Bhiksus, why is it said that one who has the idea of a Self is arrogant and haughty, traversing round saṃsāra? Bhiksus, although you might say, we also cultivate impermanence, suffering, and non-Self, these three kinds of cultivation have no real value/ meaning. I shall now explain the excellent three ways of cultivating dharma.

To think of suffering as Bliss and to think of Bliss as suffering, is perverse Dharma; to think of the impermanent as the Eternal and to think of the Eternal as impermanent is perverse dharma; to think of the non-Self [anatman] as the Self [atman] and to think of the Self [atman] as non-Self [anatman] is perverse dharma; to think of the impure as the Pure and to think of the Pure as impure is perverse dharma.<sup>21</sup>

However, they have failed to distinguish between what saṃsāra and nirvāna are. Saṃsāra is non-Self so the monks are right. But they have committed a serious metaphysical mistake. The Buddha points out that they are ascribing samsaric qualities and characteristics to the non-samsaric, to unconditioned nirvāna. For while everything samsaric is rightly labelled as “non-Self” that is not so for the unconditioned.

The Buddha reveals that there is Self, such as the Self of as the dharmakāya (body of Truth), which is nothing less than eternal Self (ātman):

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<sup>20</sup> Tony Page Dr., **Affirmation of Eternal Self in the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra**, viewed 31 December 2015 <[http://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/epaper/jan\\_june2010/pdf/Page\\_47.pdf](http://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/epaper/jan_june2010/pdf/Page_47.pdf)>.

<sup>21</sup> Kosho Yamamoto (tr.), Tony Page Dr. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 29.

The Self’ signifies the Buddha; ‘eternal’ signifies the dharmakāya [ultimate Body of Truth]; ‘happiness’ signifies nirvāṇa; and ‘pure’ is a synonym for the dharma.<sup>22</sup>

The Buddha declares that truly there is a Self in all dharmas. Offering a rare characterization of what this Self is, the Buddha states that the Self is sovereign, self-governing or autonomous:

What is this Self? Any phenomenon [dharma] that is true [satya], real [tattva], eternal [nitya], sovereign/ autonomous/ self-governing [aisvarya], and whose ground/ foundation is unchanging [asraya-aviparinama], is termed ‘the Self’ [atman]. This is as in the case of the great Doctor who well understands the milk medicine. The same is the case with the tathāgata. For the sake of beings, he says “there is the Self in all things”<sup>23</sup>

In chapter twelve of “On the Nature of Tathāgata” The Buddha states the equality between Self and tathāgatagarbha, as thus:

The Buddha said: “O good man!”Self” means “tathāgatagarbha” [Buddha-Womb, Buddha-Embryo, and Buddha-Nature]. Every being has Buddha-Nature. This is the Self. Such Self has, from the very beginning, been under cover of innumerable defilements.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of the Self being equated to the tathāgatagarbha is not only found in Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, but also in Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra.<sup>25</sup> The Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra clearly defines what belongs to the realm of selflessness and what possesses the True Self, as the sūtra stated:

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Zimmermann, **A Buddha Within: The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra: The Earliest Exposition of the Buddha Nature Teaching in India**, vol 6, (Tokyo: Soka University, 2002), p. 83.

“Non-Self is saṃsāra, the Self is the tathāgata; impermanence is the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, the eternal is the tathāgata’s dharmakāya; suffering is all tirthikas, bliss is nirvāṇa; the impure is all compounded [saṃskṛta] dharmas, the Pure is the true dharma that the Buddha and Bodhisattvas have”<sup>26</sup>

Of course, this statement leads to some confusions of the Buddha’s followers who were previously trained by the Buddha while they were practicing the contemplation on non-self. They further expressed their confusions and questioned the Buddha.

The answer which was given by the Blessed One is definitive:

Even though he has said that all phenomena [dharmas] are devoid of the Self, it is not that they are completely/truly devoid of the Self. What is this Self? Any phenomenon [dharma] that is true [satya], real [tattva], eternal [nitya], sovereign/autonomous/self-governing [aisvarya], and whose ground/foundation is unchanging [asraya-aviparinama], is termed ‘the Self’ [atman].<sup>27</sup>

The answer seems to have no gap for any other interpretation but the literal interpretation. The Buddha alerts his followers not to fall into a one sided view of seeing only emptiness and suffering in all phenomenon.

The Blessed One has used an example of taking stones for gems to enhance his disciples understanding:

People go bathing in a big pond. They are enjoying themselves, sailing in a boat, when they drop a gem of beryl into the depths of the water, after which it can no longer be seen. Then they all get into the water and search for this gem. They competitively scoop up all such rubbish as tiles, stones, bits of wood, and gravel, and say that they have the beryl. They are glad and take the things out, and see that what they hold in their hands is not true. The gem is still in the water. By the power of the gem itself, the water becomes clear and transparent. As a result, the people see that the gem is still in the water, as clearly as when they look up and see the form of the moon in the sky. At that time, there is a wise man there who, working out a power, slowly gets into the water and gains the gem.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kosho Yamamoto (tr.), Tony Page Dr. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

Then the Buddha further instructs on the method of studying, acting, going and meditating on the Self, the external, the blissful and pure:

O you Bhiksus! Do not abide in the thought of the non-Eternal, Suffering, non-Self, and the not-Pure and be in the situation of those people who take stones, bits of wood, and gravel to be the true gem. You must study well the Way, how to act, wherever you go, and “meditate on the Self, the Eternal, Bliss, and the Pure”. Know that the outer forms of the four items which you have learnt up to now are inversions and that anyone who desires to practise the Way should act like the wise man who deftly gets hold of the gem. This refers to the so-called thought of Self, and that of the Eternal, Bliss, and Pure.”<sup>29</sup>

In order to explain more about the meaning of this idea, the Buddha teaches the simile of the King and the Skillful Doctor. This simile talks about the skillfulness of a doctor who first prohibited the cure all sicknesses with medicine made of milk, because of the practice of an unskilled doctor before him. However, later on when the King himself got ill, the doctor prescribed him the milk medicine since he saw that it can help the King. In the same way, the Buddha first wanted to subdue those who hold the concept of non-self as the unskilled doctor.

The Blessed One says non-self to them.

There is no self, no man, no being, no life, no nurturing, no knowing, none that does, and none that receives.<sup>30</sup>

A significant speech by the Buddha right after that is why the Buddha taught the doctrine of non-self:

O Bhiksus! Know that what the tirthikas say is like the case of a worm that eats upon [a piece of] wood, from which, by chance, there appears what looks like a letter. Because of this, the Tathāgata teaches and says no-self. This is to adjust beings and because he is aware of the occasion.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

Therefore, the Buddha teaches the idea of non-self just as skillful means to adjust to the level of understanding of his disciples. This is explained in the Chapter twelve “On the nature of *tathāgata*” as follows:

Engaging in the notion that there is no Self with regard to the mundane self, they do not understand the skillful words of implicational purport of the *tathāgata* ... They have the notion that there is no Self and are unable to know the True Self.<sup>32</sup>

The Buddha continues to explain to his followers of the wrong view of practicing the characteristics of impermanent *Samṣāra* to the eternal part of the Buddha in chapter ten entitled “on the Four Truths”:

Any person who says that the Three Treasures are non-eternal and holds this view of life, and then this is a false way of practice and is not the noble truth of the Way.<sup>33</sup>

In Yamamoto’s view a person annuls what is right and won’t allow it to live. On account of this is that the person does not know “*dharmatā*” (essence of Reality). Not knowing this, he repeats birth and death and suffers it greatly.<sup>34</sup>

Based on what the research has discussed above, we can understand that the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* has a most important part of the concept of Self.

To conclude this part, this article will use the statement of Paul Williams as follows:

“What exactly that Self is in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, however, is not determined beyond its being that within each sentient being which enables him or her to become a Buddha. One thing anyway is clear. The *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* teaches a really existing, permanent element in sentient beings. It is this element which enables sentient beings to become Buddhas. It is beyond egoistic self-grasping – indeed the very opposite of self-grasping”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tony Page Dr., **Affirmation of Eternal Self in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra***, view 31 December 2015 < [http://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/epaper/jan\\_june\\_2010/pdf/Page\\_4.pdf](http://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/epaper/jan_june_2010/pdf/Page_4.pdf)>.

<sup>33</sup> Kosho Yamamoto (tr.), Tony Page Dr. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Williams, ***Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations***, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 108.

## THE SUITABLE CONCEPT OF TATHĀGARBHA

According to the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the term *buddhadhātu* is synonymous with tathāgatagarbha. It describes the inherent potential of all sentient beings to achieve buddhahood. The term is also widely used in Buddhist Sanskrit with the sense of *buddha* relic. The term *buddhadhātu* first appeared in the Mahāyāna recension of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, which states that all sentient beings have the *buddha* element.

According to Shimodo, that in the Mahāparinirvāṇa the *buddhadhātu* is called Buddha-Nature and it may be connected in an attempt to elaborate a substitute for *buddha* relics (likewise, *dhātu*). In other words, the statement encapsulated the term *buddhadhātu* and associated with doctrine of buddhahood which is present internally to the practitioner, in opposite to the idea that it is externally present in the relic of the *stūpa*.<sup>36</sup>

Michael Radich has argued that the term tathāgatagarbha is used interchangeably with *buddhadhātu*. Thus, we should consider the possibility that, like the *dhātu*, the term *garbha* is connected to the cult of the relic and the *stūpa*. Some evidence for such a connection can be found in a passage in the Aṣṭa. The text extols the merit that will be generated by study, preaching, worship and other activities that take the text itself as an object saying that this merit will be far greater than that generated by worship of *stūpa*.

The *stūpa* is described as *tathāgatadhātugarbha*:

“Even if a gentleman or gentlewoman were to make from the seven precious substances *stūpas* containing the relic of the tathāgata (*tathāgatadhātugarbhānṣṭūpān*) by the myriad, for the purpose of worshipping the ArhatSamyaksambuddha Tathāgata who has entered *parinirvāṇa*, and then, so long as life should last, were to respect, honour...and reverence those [*stūpas*] with heavenly flowers, incense, perfumes... and rows of lamps all around...much greater would be the merit generated by a gentleman or gentlewoman who had faith in... listened to...preached...studied...and

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<sup>36</sup> A *stūpa* is a structure, originally in the shape of a hemispherical mound, that contains the relics or possessions of the Buddha or a saint, often contained within a reliquary container. In the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the Buddha says that after he had passed away, his relics should be enshrined in a *stūpa* erected at a crossroads, and that the *stūpa* should be honored with garlands, incense, and sandalwood paste. See also Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, **The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism**, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 2100.

promulgated this *prajñāpāramitā*, or put it in a book and kept it and stored it away, in order that the true dharma might last a long time”.<sup>37</sup>

The characterization of the *stūpa* as having the relic in its *garbha* can be found in a number of other texts such as in the *Caityavandanāstotra*, the *Aśokāvadāna*, the *Divyāvadāna*, the *Kaṭhināvadāna*, the *Mahākarmavibhaṅga*, the *Manuśrīmūlakalpa*, the *Visuddhajanavilāsini* (*Apadāna-aṭṭhakathā*), the *Mahāvamsa*, and the *Paramatthajotikā I* (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā*).

The terms *garbha* and *dhātu* both are used in *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Let’s look at the *garbha* first. The *garbha* in the compound *dhātugarbha* merely means inside. The most common expression in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* is the doctrine that “there is a *tathāgatagarbha* in all sentient beings”. The *sūtra* seems to envisage *tathāgatagarbha* as a separate entity within the sentient being. However, the *garbha* can also mean chamber. This chamber or *garbha* is understood as a *stūpa*- that is the *dhātugarbha*. In other words, the *dhātugarbha* is analogous to a *stūpa* or a relic chamber where the relic or *dhātu* resides in. Thus, when the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* would like to state that a sentient being is like *stūpa*, this means that one has a *dhātu* of the *tathāgata* inside oneself, or one has a *garbha* or a chamber for a *tathāgata* inside.

In the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, it states that “these sentient beings always contain a *tathāgata*”. Where the *stūpa* is said to be *tathāgatagarbha*, it means a place to contain the relic of a *tathāgata*. In this sense, the sentient being simply contains a *tathāgata*. Therefore, when the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* says simply *tathāgatagarbha*, omitting the relic (*dhātu*) from that formula, the locus of the presence of buddhahood within the sentient being is assumed becomes of the *garbha* itself. But, if there is a *garbha* as a separate entity within a sentient being, it is most natural to think that a *garbha* is a womb. Hence, this explanation is rendered as a *garbha* that is a locus for future buddhahood.

For the term *dhātu*, in the context of the relic cult, *dhātu* means a vestige of buddhahood. However, it is better to understand that the relic is the presence of the Buddha or be treated as living; the basic understanding is the epicenter of the buddhahood instantiated by the relic laying in the past. According to Michael Radich, when *dhātu* is equated with *garbha* “the two are functionally equivalent, other resonances among the rich semantic resources of the term *dhātu* begin to resound: “raw material”, “component element”, “cause”. Thus, *dhātu* is

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-Mahāsūtra and the Emergence of Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine*, (Germany: Hamburg University Press, 2015), p. 161.

transformed from a remnant of past buddhahood (the erstwhile existence of a single, exceptional and surpassingly rare being) into the promise of future buddhahood (in and for all)”.

This sūtra provides us the major meaning of the *buddhadhātu* concept, just as it does for tathāgatagarbha. The sūtra proposes that the object of highest religious value is not an external buddha relic, but an internal Buddha-Nature (*buddhadhātu*); this *dhātu* is within the *garbha* of the body of the sentient being which is like an element or raw material (*dhātu*) from which a new buddhahood can spring.

## CONCLUSION

According to the above investigations, tathāgatagarbha originally means Luminous Mind in the early Buddha’s teaching. Later one, it is developed as a major concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Many different names of the term tathāgatagarbha have manifested, such as *nirvāṇa*, *dharmakāya*, *dharmadhatu*, *bhutatathata*, *Śūnyatā*, *tathāgatadhātu*, *buddhadhātu* etc. This is because the term tathāgatagarbha contains all aspects of these manifestations itself. They have less or more differences in the side of meaning, but they are the same in the side of becoming a Buddha. However, the term *buddhadhātu* is the closest meaning to the term tathāgatagarbha. Firstly, because *buddhadhātu* can bear the completed meaning of tathāgatagarbha since it describes the inherent potential of all sentient beings to achieve buddhahood. Secondly, both the term tathāgatagarbha and the term *buddhadhātu* have a connection to the cult of the relic and the *stūpa*. Due to these similarities, the term *buddhadhātu* is supposed to be a suitable conceptualization of tathāgatagarbha.



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