

The Tathagatagarbha Sutra



Introduction: This Buddha-Garbha (Buddha Matrix or Essence) is revealed by the Buddha to his more advanced students as the unchanging and peaceful Buddha Quintessence within each being, but which also actively functions as the seed of all positive spiritual qualities. Its presence underlies the thirst for Enlightenment and makes the attaining of Enlightenment possible (since Enlightenment, through the Tathagatagarbha, is already resident within our mind).

When considering Tathagatagarbha, one must at all times be mindful of the caveat that it is ultimately incomprehensible and inexplicable to the un-awakened mind -- so to define it as mere "Emptiness" or as merely a function of Buddhist practice (rather than as a truly real, sustaining internal presence), is to fail to do justice to this transcendental essence. The fact is that whatever one says about the Tathagatagarbha cannot fully capture its plenitude of mystery and perfection; words are ultimately inadequate and there is nothing in the world that can truly be compared to it.

Tathagatagarbha constitutes the realm or sphere of the perfect, all-knowing Buddhas themselves and nurtures each person in whom it is found (i.e., every single being). Only when seen and truly known by inward introspection and purified spiritual vision can it be fully understood. And then -- one has become a Buddha!

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying on the Vulture Peak near Rajagrha in the lecture hall of a many-tiered pavilion built of fragrant sandalwood. He had attained buddhahood ten years previously and was accompanied by an 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. All had perfected their zeal and had formerly made offerings to hundreds of thousands of myriad legions of buddhas. All could turn the irreversible wheel of the dharma.

There were also present bodhisattvas and great beings just like them from countless Buddha lands, whose number equaled sixty times the number of sands in the Ganges River. Together with an uncountable number of gods, nagas, yaksas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kinnaras, and mahoragas, they all gathered to pay their respects and make offerings.

At that time, the Buddha sat up straight in meditation in the sandalwood pavilion and, with his supernatural powers, put on a miraculous display. There appeared in the sky a countless number of thousand-petaled lotus flowers as large as chariot wheels, filled with colors and fragrances that one could not begin to enumerate. In the center of each flower was a conjured image of a Buddha. The flowers rose and covered the heavens like a jeweled banner, each flower giving forth countless rays of light. The petals all simultaneously unfolded their splendor and then, through the Buddha's miraculous powers, all withered in an instant.

Within the flowers all the Buddha images sat cross-legged in the lotus position, and each issued forth countless hundreds of thousands of rays of light. The adornment of the spot at the time was so extraordinary that the whole assembly rejoiced and danced ecstatically. In fact, it was so very strange and extraordinary that all began to wonder why all the countless wonderful flowers should suddenly be destroyed. As they withered and darkened, the smell they gave off was foul and loathsome.

But at that point the World-honored One realized why the bodhisattvas were perplexed, so he addressed Vajramati, saying, 'O good son. If there is anything in the Buddha's teaching that perplexes you, feel free to ask about it.'

Bodhisattva Vajramati knew that everyone in the whole assembly was perplexed, and so addressed the Buddha, saying, 'O World-honored One, why are there conjured Buddha images in all of the innumerable flowers? And for what reason

did they ascend into the heavens and cover the world? And why did the Buddha images each issue forth countless hundreds of thousands of rays of light?' Everyone in the assembly looked on and then joined his hands together in respect. At that point, Bodhisattva Vajramati spoke in verses, saying:

'Never ever have I witnessed
A miraculous display like today's.
To see hundreds of thousands and millions of buddhas
Seated in the calyxes of lotus flowers,
Each emitting countless streams of light,
Filling all the fields,
Scattering the dirt of false teachers,
Adorning all the worlds!
The lotuses suddenly wilted;
There was not one which was not disgusting.
Now tell us, why did you display this conjured vision?
We see buddhas more numerous than the sands of the Ganges.'

At that time the World-honored One spoke to Vajramati and the other bodhisattvas, saying, 'Good sons, there is a great essence called the "Tathagatagarbha". It was because I wanted to expound it to you that I showed you these signs. You should all listen attentively and ponder it well.' All said, 'Excellent. We very much wish to hear it.'

The Buddha said, 'Good sons, there is a comparison that can be drawn between the countless flowers conjured up by the Buddha that suddenly withered and the innumerable conjured buddha images with their many adornments, seated in the lotus position within the flowers, who cast forth light so exceedingly rare that there was no one in the assembly who did not show reverence.

'In a similar fashion, good sons, when I regard all beings with my buddha eye, I see that hidden within the kleshas [negative mental traits] of greed, desire, anger, and stupidity there is seated augustly and unmovingly the tathagata's wisdom, the tathagata's vision, and the tathagata's body. Good sons, all beings, though they find themselves with all sorts of kleshas, have a tathagatagarbha that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own.

‘Moreover, good sons, it is just like a person with supernatural vision who can see the bodies of tathagatas seated in the lotus position inside the flowers, even though the petals are not yet unfurled; whereas after the wilted petals have been removed, those tathagatas are manifested for all to see. In similar fashion, the Buddha can really see the tathagatagarbhas of sentient beings. And because he wants to disclose the tathagatagarbha to them, he expounds the sutras and the Dharma, in order to destroy kleshas and reveal the buddha nature.

‘Good sons, such is the Dharma of all the buddhas. Whether or not buddhas appear in the world, the tathagatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging. It is just that they are covered by sentient beings' kleshas. When the Tathagata appears in the world, he expounds the Dharma far and wide to remove their ignorance and tribulation and to purify their universal wisdom. Good sons, if there is a bodhisattva who has faith in this teaching and who practices it single-mindedly, he will attain liberation and true, universal enlightenment, and for the sake of the world he will perform buddha deeds far and wide.

‘Or good sons, it is like pure honey in a cave or a tree, surrounded and protected by a countless swarm of bees. It may happen that a person comes along who knows some clever techniques. He first gets rid of the bees and takes the honey, and then does as he will with it, eating it or giving it away far and wide. Similarly, good sons, all sentient beings have the tathagatagarbha. It is like pure honey in a cave or tree, but it is covered by kleshas, which, like a swarm of bees, keep one from getting to it. With my Buddha eye I see it clearly, and with appropriate skilful techniques I expound the Dharma, in order to destroy kleshas and reveal the Buddha vision.

‘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 kleshas covers their limitless Tathagata vision. So with appropriate skilful means I expound the Dharma, to enable them to remove those kleshas, purify their universal wisdom, and to attain in all worlds the highest true enlightenment.

‘Or, good sons, it is like the genuine gold that has fallen into a pit of waste and been submerged and not seen for years. The pure gold does not decay, yet no one knows that it is there. But suppose there came along someone with supernatural vision, who told people, ‘Within the impure waste there is a genuine gold trinket. You should get it out and do with it as you please.’ Similarly, good sons, the impure waste is your innumerable kleshas. The genuine gold trinket is your tathagatagarbha. For this reason, the Tathagata widely expounds the Dharma to enable all beings to destroy their kleshas, attain true enlightenment, and perform Buddha deeds.

‘Or, good sons, it is like the pit inside a mango [“amra”] fruit which does not decay. When you plant it in the ground, it grows into the largest and most regal of trees. In the same manner, good sons, when I look at sentient beings with my Buddha vision, I see that the tathagatagarbha is surrounded by a husk of ignorance, just as the seeds of a fruit are only found at its core. Good sons, that tathagatagarbha is cold and unripe. It is the profound quiescence of nirvana that is brought about by great wisdom. It is called the truly enlightened one, the Tathagata, the arhat, and so on. Good sons, after the Tathagata has observed sentient beings, he reveals this message in order to purify the wisdom of bodhisattvas and great beings.

‘Or, good sons, it is like a woman who is impoverished, vile, ugly, and hated by others, who bears a noble son in her womb. He will become a sage king, a ruler of all the four directions. But she does not know his future history, and constantly thinks of him as a base-born, impoverished child. In like fashion, good sons, the Tathagata sees that all sentient beings are carried around by the wheel of samsara, receiving suffering and poison, but their bodies possess the tathagata’s treasure store. Just like that woman, they do not realize this. This is why the Tathagata everywhere expounds the Dharma, saying, ‘Good sons, do not consider yourselves inferior or base. You all personally possess the Buddha nature.’ If you exert yourselves and destroy your past evils, then you will receive the title of bodhisattvas or world-honored ones, and convert and save countless sentient beings.

‘Or, good sons, it is like a master foundryman casting a statue of pure gold. After casting is complete, it is inverted and placed on the ground. Although the outside is scorched and blackened, the inside is unchanged. When it is opened and the statue taken out, the golden color is radiant and dazzling. Similarly, good sons, when the Tathagata observes all sentient beings, he sees that the buddhagarbha is inside their bodies replete with all its many virtues. After seeing this, he reveals far and wide that all beings will obtain relief. He removes kleshas with his wisdom, and reveals the Buddha body like a person uncovering a golden statue.’

At that point, the World-honored One spoke to Vajramati and the other bodhisattvas and great beings, saying, ‘Whether you are monks or laypersons, goods sons and daughters, you should accept, recite, copy, revere, and widely expound this “Tathagatagarbha Sutra” for the benefit of others. The virtues that you will derive from it are inestimable.’

Then, when the World-honored One had finished expounding this sutra, Vajramati, together with the four groups of bodhisattvas, the gods, the gandharvas, the asuras, and the rest, rejoiced at what they had heard the Buddha explain, and they practiced it as they had been told.

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Nāga, a group of serpent deities in Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

Yaksha is the name of a broad class of nature-spirits, usually benevolent, who are caretakers of the natural treasures hidden in the earth and tree roots. They appear in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology.

In Buddhist mythology, the garudas are enormous predatory birds with intelligence and social organization. Like the Nagas, they combine the characteristics of animals and divine beings, and may be considered to be among the lowest devas.

In Buddhist mythology and Hindu mythology, a kinnara is a lover, a celestial musician, half-human and half-horse (India)

Maboraga - a class of subterranean serpents who, it is said, lie on their sides and rotate in the earth.