

The *Tathāgata-garbha*/Buddha-nature and the 'Self'

Question: How is the *Tathāgata-garbha*/Buddha-nature different from the 'Self' which earlier Buddhism did not accept?

Differences Between the <i>Tathāgata-garbha</i>/Buddha-nature and the 'Self' in Earlier Buddhism	
<i>Descriptions of the Tathāgata-garbha/Buddha-nature</i>	<i>Differences in Relation to the 'Self' (Ātman) in Earlier Buddhism</i>
In the Indian Mahāyāna, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is the factor within each sentient being which enables them to become a fully enlightened Buddha.	The <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is the absence of Self itself – 'the Tathāgata has spoken of not-self as self, in reality there is no self'. (<i>Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra</i>)
In the Indian context, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> concept was not related to ontology.	However, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is a name for the Yogācāra substratum consciousness – and is permanent in sentient beings. (<i>Lankāvatāra Sūtra</i>)
From earliest sources, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> had more to do with religious issues of spiritual potential, exhortation, and encouragement. (<i>Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra</i>)	Nonetheless, if the nature of the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is understood, then referring to it as a Self is not compromising Buddhism.
In Indian Mahāyāna, if the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> (the Buddha-nature) is in all sentient beings, then all sentient beings should in the end follow the path to supreme Buddhahood.	All beings have unrealized spiritual potential – or even an actuality already achieved. (<i>Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra</i>)
If samsāra is impermanent, suffering, not-Self, and impure, then Buddhahood (i.e. the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i>) is permanent, bliss, Self, and purity.	Hidden within the defilements are the <i>tathāgata</i> 's wisdom, vision, and body – replete with the Buddha's virtues. (<i>Tathāgata-garbha Sūtra</i>)
The term <i>ātman</i> , Self, has been used for the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> , perhaps to explain the ontology, and to reassure non-Buddhists that Buddhism is not spiritual nihilism. (<i>Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra</i>)	A Buddhist may affirm <i>ātman</i> , if correct understanding is kept with no compromise of Buddhist tenets – and to realize that the Self referred to is actually not at all a <i>Self</i> .
The <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> can be linked with the concept of the natural luminosity of the mind – the mind in its own nature is never defiled; defilements are adventitious to it. This primeval innate purity of the mind enables Buddhahood to occur.	The mind, gnosis, and wisdom of a Buddha is present – although unrealized – in each sentient being. (<i>Avatamsaka Sūtra</i>)

The <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> could be the pure dependent nature in Yogācāra terms. (<i>Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra</i>)	The permanent nature of the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> need not entail compromise with the Buddhist teaching of not-Self.
In Mādhyamika thinking, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> becomes emptiness itself, when applied to the mental continuum.	In using the term <i>ātman</i> , it need <i>not</i> be thought of as an unchanging, independent, inherently existing, ontologically real, and eternally enlightened True Self.
An association of the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> with the <i>dharmakāya</i> exists. The <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> refers to unenlightened beings who are not free from the store of defilement. (<i>Śrīmālādevīsīmaṇāda Sūtra</i>)	The <i>dharmakāya</i> is beginningless, uncreated, unborn, undying, calm, steadfast, eternal, permanent, and intrinsically pure. The <i>dharmakāya</i> has the 'perfection of self'. (<i>Śrīmālādevīsīmaṇāda Sūtra</i>)
The <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is empty inasmuch as it is intrinsically free of defilements. (<i>Śrīmālā Sūtra</i>)	Equally, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is <i>not</i> empty because it intrinsically possesses all the qualities of the Buddha. Yet, the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> is not a Self. (<i>Śrīmālā Sūtra</i>)
The true way of things ('Suchness', 'Thusness', <i>tathatā</i>) is tainted and called the <i>tathāgata-garbha</i> . The impurities that taint the mind and entail the state of unenlightenment (<i>samsāra</i>) are adventitious. (<i>Ratnagotravibhāga [Uttaratantra]</i>)	When the <i>tathatā</i> is immaculate, it is the <i>dharmakāya</i> – unchangeable, sublime, and pure. (<i>Ratnagotravibhāga</i>)
<p>Sources:</p> <p>Williams, P., Tribe, A., Wynne, A. (2012) <i>Buddhist thought: a complete introduction to the Indian tradition</i> 2nd edn. London: Routledge. (pp. 118-122.)</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Alexander Peck (9 May 2015)</p>	