

## The Tathagata-garbha: Overview

The first word in the term *Tathagata-garbha* literally means 'Thus-gone' or 'Thus-come', a term for a Buddha as one who is attuned to reality, while the second basically means either an embryo, or a womb or other container.

Tibetan translations are based on the first meaning of *garbha*, while Chinese ones are based on the second.

*Tathagata-garbha* thus means something like 'embryonic Buddha' or 'matrix of a Buddha', though the earliest meaning may have been a reference to beings as 'containing a Buddha'.

This 'embryo' is seen as existing within all living beings, indicating that, however deluded or defiled they are, they can mature into Buddhas. The *Tathagata-garbha*, then, represents the 'Buddha-potential' within all beings.

In the *Tathagata-garbha Sutra*, it is affirmed by the Buddha to be 'complete with virtues and not different from myself'. It is an emptiness which is itself full of possibilities; it is resplendent with the qualities of Buddhahood, beginningless, unchanging and permanent (*Ratnagotravibhaga* [Rv] vv. 51, 84). It is beyond duality, having the nature of thought and the intrinsic purity of a jewel, space or water (Rv. 28, 30, 49). It is brightly shining with lucid clarity (Rv. v. 170) and is 'by nature brightly shining and pure' (*Lanka*. 77).

Beings are seen as ignorant of this great inner treasure, but the Buddha reveals it to them so as to encourage them in spiritual development. Moreover, it is the *Tathagata-garbha* which responds to spiritual teachings and aspires for *Nirvana* (*Srim.* ch. 13; *EB*. 4.3.5). In some ways, this approach can be seen as an echo of the early idea of seeing *Nirvana* as 'the aim-free' or 'wishless': if one already has the supreme, what more could one wish for?

Source: Taken, with minor edits, from Harvey, P. (2013) *An introduction to Buddhism: teachings, history and practices*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Page 139.)