

The *Tathāgatagarbha* – An Overview

There is suffering, and the root defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion cause beings suffering in all its forms. The cessation of these defilements brings about the cessation of all that suffering. This is a statement of the first three of the four noble truths—a statement in primarily negative terms.

But, we can state the matter in more positive terms: it is not only the cessation of greed, aversion, and delusion that bring about the cessation of suffering but the positive cultivation of wisdom, loving kindness, and generosity. And this is the fourth noble truth: it is the development of such qualities that constitutes the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

Another way of talking about the process of the arising of suffering and its cessation is in terms of the formula of dependent arising; again the usual statement is couched in negative terms: the progressive cessation of the various links in the chain ends in the cessation of suffering, but this could be stated positively in terms of the progressive arising of various qualities beginning with faith and ending in knowledge and freedom.

For the ordinary unawakened person the root causes of suffering, the defilements (*kleśa/ kilesa*) of greed, aversion, and delusion, do battle with the root causes of awakening, the good qualities of wisdom, loving kindness, and generosity: we are internally in conflict. But this does not mean that we should conceive of ourselves as merely a battleground for a conflict that may go either way.

For, although this may be how things appear in the short term, it is, according to the teaching of the Buddha as presented in the Nikāyas/ Āgamas, our better nature that reflects our true nature: the mind is naturally radiant but becomes defiled by adventitious defilements.

This can be explained as follows: According to a cardinal principle of Buddhist psychology our minds are fundamentally clear and pure; they have become stained by the operation of adventitious defilements (*kleśa/ kilesa*).

Radiant is the mind, monks, but sometimes it is defiled by defilements that come from without. The ordinary man without understanding does not know it as it truly is. (*Anguttara Nikāya* i. 10)

The goal of Buddhist practice is to bring to an end the operation of these defilements. The basic method is to restore to the mind something of its fundamental state of clarity and stillness. This clarity of mind provides the opportunity for seeing into the operation of the defilements and the mind's true nature, for seeing things as they really are, for fully awakening.

The way of returning the mind to its state of clarity is by the use of the techniques of calm meditation, which can temporarily suppress or block the immediate defilements that disturb the mind; the way of seeing clearly into the nature of the mind is by the methods of insight meditation, which, in association with calm, can finally eradicate those defilements.

The way of Buddhist meditation is, then, to look deep into ourselves to see the very nature of our minds. The principal immediate mental defilements that constitute the obstacles to the path are known as the five 'hindrances' (*nīvarana*): sensual desire, ill-will, tiredness and sleepiness, excitement and depression, and doubt.

An ancient simile compares the mind that is continually prey to the five hindrances to a bowl of water disturbed or contaminated in five ways: mixed with red dye, steaming hot, full of moss and leaves, ruffled by the wind, muddied and in a dark place. If someone should look down into a bowl of water contaminated in any one of these five ways, then he would not be able to see a clear and true reflection of himself.

On the other hand, if one were to look down into a bowl of water that is free of such contaminations, one would see a clear and true reflection. Likewise, the mind that is disturbed by the hindrances will never succeed in coming to know its true nature.

This then is the basic theory of Buddhist meditation stated in the terms of the oldest texts. While later schools and traditions may change and adapt the terminology used, while they may elaborate the stages and techniques in a number of different ways, while they may give distinctive technical accounts of the content of the knowledge gained in insight meditation, the basic principle for the most part holds good: one stills and clears the mind and then turns it towards investigation and insight.

Now returning to our train of thought: At heart we are not Maras but buddhas, and this is true of the being that is Mara himself. This way of thinking is part of the common heritage of all Buddhism, but in Mahāyāna sutras it finds expression and is developed in the notion of the *tathāgatagarbha*: the 'womb' or 'embryo' (the Sanskrit *garbha* connotes both) of the Tathagata. Thus in the Mahayana *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, the Buddha observes:

[W]hen I regard all beings with my buddha eye, I see that hidden within the *kleśas* of greed, desire, anger and stupidity there is seated augustly and unmovingly the tathāgata's wisdom, the tathāgata's vision, and the tathāgata's body ... [A]ll beings, though they find themselves with all sorts of *kleśas*, have a tathāgatagarbha that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own. (*Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* 96)

The basic treatise of the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition of thought is the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* (also known as the *Uttaratantra*) attributed to Maitreya/Asanga. The *tathāgatagarbha* is an element of Buddhahood (*buddha-dhātu*) at the heart of our being, our intrinsic 'buddha nature'. Although some Mahāyānist writings acknowledged the possibility of beings who are eternally cut off from the possibility of buddhahood, the prevailing tradition, particularly important in East Asian Buddhism and reaching its most developed statement in Dōgen's Zen, is that all beings are intrinsically Buddhas.

Talk of the *tathāgatagarbha* as our eternal and true nature in contrast to illusory and ultimately unreal defilements leads to a tendency to conceive of it as an ultimate absolutely existing thing. The Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*, especially influential in East Asian Buddhist thought, goes so far as to speak of it as our true self (*ātman*). Its precise metaphysical and ontological status is, however, open to interpretation in the terms of different Mahāyāna philosophical schools; for the Mādhyamikas it must be empty of its own existence like everything else; for the Yogācārins, following the *Lankāvatāra*, it can be identified with store consciousness, as the receptacle of the seeds of awakening.

Yet, the problem of the metaphysics of the *tathāgatagarbha* persisted and is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the *rang-stong/gzhan-stong* debate in Tibet.

Here is a brief review of the debate: Tibetan Buddhism has not developed distinctively Tibetan traditions of Buddhist philosophy quite in the manner of Chinese T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen. Generally the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness is regarded as the highest and final philosophical statement of Buddhist teaching, though ideas and teachings associated with the Yogācāra remain influential, and the precise interpretation of Madhyamaka is nuanced in various ways.

The most significant philosophical debate centred on the question of whether behind appearances there is some reality that can be characterized as ultimately existing or not, a true 'Absolute'.

The view that there is such an ultimately existing reality is known as 'empty of what is other' (*gzhan stong*); that is to say, true reality is empty in so far as it is empty of everything other than itself. The view was expounded by Dol-po-pa Shes-rab rGyal-mtshan (1292–1361) and has found considerable support within Tibetan Buddhism.

The more mainstream Madhyamaka view is known as 'empty of itself' (*rang stong*), emphasizing that ultimate truth about the nature of reality is that it is empty even of its own existence.

This is a discussion that once more reflects the problems Buddhist thought has had in arriving at a proper statement of the middle between the two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism.

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