

The doctrinal transformation of twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism: Master Yinshun's interpretation of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine

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By the early to mid-twentieth century, progressive Buddhist intellectuals in China like Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無 (1871–1943) and Taixu 太虛 (1889–1947) shared the conviction that Chinese Buddhism had declined significantly. They claimed, for instance, that the monastic educational system no longer provided adequate training for monks and nuns because it ignored doctrinal exposition and textual analysis, and instead focused on the memorization of texts for ritual purposes. Moreover, they often railed against the common practice among monks of conducting funeral rites for money since it fostered superstitious beliefs about ghosts among the people and encouraged greed as it became the primary source of income for many monasteries (Welch 1967). In response to these circumstances, many Buddhist thinkers worked actively to reform Chinese Buddhist institutions, practices, and doctrines.

The scholar-monk Master Yinshun 印順 (b. 1906) was one such thinker. He suggested that the positive transformation of Chinese Buddhism required a critical reassessment of its fundamental teachings, indicating that the crisis faced by the tradition in terms of institutional design and religious praxis had its genesis in the erroneous interpretation of doctrine. Therefore, in his re-evaluation of Buddhist teachings, Yinshun focused his critical attention on the doctrinal foundation of traditional Chinese Buddhism, namely the theory of the *tathāgatagarbha*.

Since at least the eighth century in China, Buddhist sects such as the Huayan school have regarded the *tathāgatagarbha* as the authoritative expression of truth. According to Yinshun, however, their interpretations of this doctrine contradict the basic Buddhist teachings of no-self and dependent origination by suggesting the existence of both a permanent, underlying ground to reality and a stable, unchanging aspect of sentient nature. Yinshun argues that these views lead to misguided practice and thus interfere with the practitioner's ability to attain enlightenment because they encourage attachment to the self or ego—the root of unhappiness and suffering. Instead, he contends that the doctrine of emptiness is the definitive articulation of ultimate truth for it effectively

deconstructs all notions of permanence, underscores the ephemeral nature of the self, and thereby indicates the futility of ‘ego-attachment.’ In his opinion, only by insight into this teaching can practitioners attain liberation.

In this paper, I examine Yinshun’s interpretation of the *tathāgatagarbha* (*rulaizang* 如來藏) and its relationship to the following concepts: the Buddha’s epithet ‘the thus come one’ (Skt. *tathāgata*; Chn. *rulai* 如來) and the theory of ‘the selfhood of the *tathāgatagarbha*’ (*rulaizangwo* 如來藏我). Yinshun regards these two ideas as playing substantial roles in the evolution of the *tathāgatagarbha* theory. His conception of their connection to the theory clarifies what I contend has been and continues to be Yinshun’s doctrinal agenda; namely, re-asserting the doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *sūnyatā*; Chn. *kong* 空) as the definitive expression of Buddhist truth and relegating the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching to the category of expedient means. I base the following discussion primarily on Yinshun’s text *A Study of the Tathāgatagarbha* (*Rulaizang Zhi Yanjiu* 如來藏之研究), for it serves as his most exhaustive statement about the *tathāgatagarbha* and related doctrines. Finally, the interpretation of the relationship between the *tathāgatagarbha* and the doctrine of emptiness has been and continues to be a contested issue in the Buddhist tradition. Therefore, before turning to Yinshun’s explanation of its connection to the aforementioned concepts, I first place his interpretation of the *tathāgatagarbha* within the context of this on-going dispute.

The controversy: the relationship between the doctrine of emptiness and the *tathāgatagarbha*

The doctrine of emptiness has always played a central role in Indian and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its foremost proponent, Nāgārjuna (circa 150–250 CE), regarded in both India and China as the founder of the Indian Mādhyamika School, gave this doctrine deft and full expression in what many believe is his most important work: the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter referred to as the *Kārikā*). In this work, Nāgārjuna explicates emptiness in three distinct, yet related ways.

In the first distinction, he defines emptiness as the negation of *svabhāva* (self-nature). According to Nāgārjuna, individual entities do not possess a separate, independent existence—they are devoid of own-being. They have no permanent, unchanging nature because they exist only in dependence on other things, conditions, and circumstances that are themselves composite and constantly changing. Another designation for emptiness understood in this way is dependent origination (Skt. *pratīyasamutpāda*; Chn. *yinyuan* 因緣).

Second, emptiness can be used to negate false views. In the *Kārikā*, Nāgārjuna refutes all concepts and conceptualization through his delineation of the ‘eight nos’:

[Therein, every event is ‘marked’ by:] non-origination, non-extinction, non-destruction, non-permanence, non-identity, non-differentiation, non-coming [into being], non-going [out of being]. (Ng 1993)

He proffers these ‘eight negations’ as the means for avoiding the two extreme views of ‘being’ and ‘nothingness.’ The former describes entities or events as existing in an enduring, unchanging form, whereas the latter indicates that they do not have any existence at all. Although they espouse contradictory perspectives, fundamental to both of these views is the notion of permanence. Holding the extreme view of ‘being’ in relation to a thing (or event) indicates that we perceive that thing as possessing some kind of permanent existence. Similarly, utilizing the opposite extreme, ‘nothingness’, to characterize an entity means that we understand that entity as permanently and definitely not existing. The doctrine of emptiness as explicated by Nāgārjuna confutes both views. Things/events exist, although causally, being dependent upon various conditions for their ‘origination’. At the same time, things/events do not exist if by this we intend that they possess own-being or an enduring self-nature (Ng 1993).

Finally, the third distinction is the ‘emptiness of emptiness’. Emptiness serves practical ends: it helps the practitioner sever attachments to entities and eliminate false views by establishing their lack of self-nature. However, once the adept has transcended his/her attachments to things, he/she must further relinquish even the concept of emptiness (Ng 1993). To remain attached to this doctrine can lead to a nihilist perception of reality, a dangerous view for the Buddhist because it undermines the necessity of the religious life. Therefore, one must realize that even the doctrine of emptiness is itself empty of any kind of permanent existence or stable referent.

Śūnyatā made a great impact on early Buddhist philosophical thinking in China. In the fourth century, for example, we see it deliberated by literati and monks in the context of ‘pure talk’ (*qingtan* 清談) discussions (Zurcher 1972). Such thinkers as Zhi Mindu 支愨度, Zhidun 支遁, and Huiyuan 慧遠 (d. 433) interpreted the concept of emptiness as it appeared in translations of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature in terms of a contemporary trend of thought known as ‘dark learning’ (*xuanxue* 玄學), which emphasized the relationship between ‘fundamental non-being’ (*benwu* 本無) and ‘final being’ (*moyou* 末有) (Zurcher 1972). A more perfect understanding of Nāgārjuna’s exposition of emptiness did not occur in China, however, until the beginning of the fifth century with the appearance of the great Kuchean translator, Kumārajīva (344–413 CE), who was a proponent of Mādhyamika thought. Among Kumārajīva’s disciples were those like Sengzhao 僧肇 (b. 374 CE) who demonstrated in his various doctrinal expositions, namely *Prajñā Has No Knowing*, *Emptiness of the Non-Absolute*, and *Things Do Not Shift*, a complete understanding of the ‘orthodox’ or Indian and Central Asian interpretations of emptiness and dependent origination (Robinson 1978).

Despite the influence of the emptiness doctrine on the development of Buddhist philosophical speculation in China, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries we discover a fundamental shift in emphasis as evidenced by the appearance of uniquely Chinese schools of Buddhism—that is, schools that have creatively adapted Indian and Central Asian Buddhist ideas to a Chinese worldview. Here, I am referring to both the Tiantai 天台 and Huayan 華嚴 traditions.

This shift is a move away from the negative dialectic of Nāgārjuna's *Kārikā*, wherein the focus is on deconstructing false views and proving that all things lack own-being, and a move toward the development of positive language for describing reality and truth. Such thinkers as Tiantai's Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597 CE) and Huayan's Fazang 法藏 (643–712 CE) adopted, albeit in fundamentally different ways, the concept of the *tathāgatagarbha* (literally, 'womb or embryo of the Tathāgata') as an aspect of their philosophical exposition. In early *tathāgatagarbha* texts (e.g., the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*), the concept signified the inherent capacity of sentient beings to attain Buddhahood. Later, it came to refer to an original pure essence intrinsic to all beings. This essence, otherwise known as Buddha Nature, becomes polluted by defilements. Enlightenment occurs by eliminating these defilements and thereby uncovering the pure Buddha Nature (Ruegg 1969).

In China, with the text the *Mahayana Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論), the *tathāgatagarbha* takes on cosmological dimensions: it functions as the substratum of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. Thus, in its identification with the *Awakening of Faith*'s 'One Mind,' the *tathāgatagarbha* encompasses all facets of both the phenomenal and transcendental worlds. The emphasis in China on the cosmological aspects of the theory resonates with indigenous Chinese religious and philosophical discourse, including, for example, Taoist ideas such as the 'original pure essence' and Confucian concepts like the 'innate goodness of man' (Williams 1989).

Through the merging of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine with certain Chinese philosophical predispositions (a process that did not necessarily develop consciously), we find emerging in the sixth and seventh centuries an array of positive discourses for describing reality and truth: theories like the Middle Way–Buddha Nature (*Zhongdao foxing* 理事無礙) of Tiantai and the 'non-obstruction of principles and phenomena' (*lishi wuai* 理事無礙) of Huayan. In its more hypertrophic expressions, such positive language perhaps led to the Japanese Buddhist theory of 'original enlightenment' (*hongaku shiso* 本覺思想), which insisted on the inherent (uncultivated and uncultivable) enlightenment of all things.

Tathāgatagarbha thought underwent a number of challenges between the sixth to the eighth centuries in China before it became fully accepted as a definitive articulation of truth. One could argue that at this time some of the most important discussions regarding *tathāgatagarbha* theory took place within the context of Yogācāra Buddhism. The opponents of the theory, represented in the sixth century by Bodhiruci 菩提流支 (d. 527), advocated the 'orthodox' interpretation of Yogācāra, regarding themselves as the inheritors of the Mādhyamika tradition's understanding of emptiness. These figures postulated a storehouse consciousness (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*; Chn. *alaiye shi* 阿賴耶識) that acts as a repository of karmic seeds or impressions generated by past actions. The seeds subsequently influence the engendering of new experiences. This consciousness, however, although fundamental to experience, is in a state of constant flux, continually re-producing itself in response to constantly changing conditions. Thus, it lacks or is empty of an independent, unchanging self.

Because the storehouse consciousness is the basis for continual rebirth in the realm of suffering, one has to eliminate it in order to attain enlightenment. On the other hand, proponents of the *tathāgatagarbha*, represented by Ratnamati 勒那摩提 (fl. 508), combined the concepts of the *ālayavijñāna* and the *tathāgatagarbha*, arguing that enlightenment consisted in purifying the *ālayavijñāna* rather than eliminating it. As with the *tathāgatagarbha*, one attains enlightenment by removing the defilements from the storehouse consciousness in order to uncover its pure and original nature, much like one would remove dust from a mirror, thereby exposing its clean, reflective surface.

Moving into the later sixth and seventh centuries, one can ascertain two major doctrinal trends within Chinese Buddhist thought: the first being ‘the substantialistic non-dual metaphysic whose eternalistic ground was variously labeled Buddha Nature, mind, *tathāgatagarbha*, *Dharma-dhātu*, and Suchness (Skt. *tahatā*; Ch. *rulai*)’ epitomized, for example, by Fazang and Ratnamati’s ideas (Lusthaus 2001); the second being ‘an anti-substantialistic critique that eschewed any form of metaphysical reification, emphasizing emptiness as the absence of permanent selfhood or independent essence in anything’ represented by Bodhiruci’s views (Lusthaus 2001). By the eighth century, however, the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition in its various forms (e.g., Buddha Nature theory) had become the normative expression of Buddhist truth and the philosophical foundation of Buddhist doctrine and practice in East Asia. Mādhyamika philosophy, along with its teachings about emptiness and dependent origination, was subsumed under and thereby reinterpreted by means of *tathāgatagarbha* thought. For instance, the fifth Huayan patriarch Zongmi 宗密 (780–841 CE), following the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, perceived the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as the definitive teaching of Buddhism. Because it did not emphasize the positive qualities of the *tathāgata* and instead utilized negative language to refer to the absolute, Zongmi considered the doctrine of emptiness presented in the *Perfection of Wisdom* scriptures to be only provisional and therefore incomplete. For him, the *tathāgatagarbha* (a synonym for the absolute) described in the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* as both empty of defilements and full of Buddha Dharmas, proffered a more perfect and complete expression of truth.

Nevertheless, despite the privileged status held by this teaching in East Asia after the eighth century, *tathāgatagarbha* thought continued to face challenges in, for example, the debates that took place in Japan in the ninth century between Saicho and Tokuitsu over whether or not all beings are destined for enlightenment (Swanson 1997). Challenges are today being made by scholars in Japan in a controversial movement known as Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkyo* 批判佛教), championed by the highly respected Buddhologists, Hakamaya Noriaki (Swanson 1997) and Matsumoto Shirō (1997). These scholars argue that *tathāgatagarbha* thought advocates the existence of an objectively and substantively real fundament—variously termed *dharmadhātu*, *dharmakāya*, *tathāgatagarbha*, or Buddha Nature—which generates the plurality of experience. Matsumoto refers to this fundament as the ‘locus’ and the various phenomena of experience as the ‘super-loci’ or *dharmas*. In addition to having real existence, the ‘locus’ is further described as a singular reality (as opposed

to a bifurcated one), functioning as the essential nature of all the *dharma*s. Matsumoto states that religious traditions that posit a basic substrate from which arise all the particulars of conventional reality operate according to his ‘theory of locus.’ Both Matsumoto and Hakamaya regard such traditions as espousing tenets fundamentally opposed to the Buddha’s teachings of no-self and dependent origination (Swanson 1997). They insist that the true Buddhist teachings are those that Śākyamuni Buddha actually taught, although the Mādhyamika presentation of emptiness is acceptable as well. Such concepts as the *tathāgatagarbha*, they contend, constitute the object of the Buddha’s criticism and therefore should be rejected (Matsumoto 1997).

Little known (at least outside of Taiwan), however, is that the questions central to this indigenous Japanese movement were anticipated decades earlier by the thought and ideas of the scholar-monk Master Yinshun, who, unlike the proponents of Critical Buddhism, has managed to raise similar issues about *tathāgatagarbha* theory without entirely abandoning it. Much like Hakamaya and Matsumoto, Yinshun has taken a critical stance toward the *tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha Nature teachings in his scholarly writings. He has found inspiration for such critiques from his in-depth studies of Indian Buddhism, being particularly influenced by Mādhyamika philosophy and the doctrine of emptiness as interpreted by Candrakīrti. Thus, he advocates the Mādhyamika teaching of the ‘fundamental emptiness of all things’ as the definitive expression of Buddhist truth: ‘It (Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) certifies dependent origination, emptiness, and the Middle Path as the basic and profound meaning of the Buddhist teachings ... It takes the orthodox view of the Buddha Dharma and establishes it as the foundation for dependent origination and the Middle Way’ (Yinshun and Xu 1992). However, unlike the critical Buddhism scholars, Yinshun does not reject the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine outright. Instead he explains that it is a useful provisional teaching—an expedient device (Skt. *upāya*; Chn. *fangbian* 方便). According to the doctrine of expediency, the Buddha determined what he taught his disciples based on their relative level of spiritual maturity and their capacity to understand his teachings. Only the most exceptional practitioners could comprehend Truth in its fullest expression. Since the vast majority could not, the Buddha instead taught them provisional truths, which would guide their practice until their mental and spiritual capacities developed sufficiently to understand the ultimate Truth of his message.

Yinshun contends that the Buddha, realizing its practical efficacy, taught that the *tathāgatagarbha* resides in all sentient beings in order to ease their fear and concerns about emptiness and to encourage them to practice the Buddhist path (Yinshun 1998). In this way, *tathāgatagarbha* theory is an expedient device used to correct a specific problem encountered by certain types of practitioners. For many, the doctrine of emptiness can be a daunting view of reality—so much so that some people become paralyzed with fear or discouragement, believing that they lack the capacity to attain enlightenment. The *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine provides hope for these people because it allows that everyone has the potential for achieving Buddhahood (Yinshun 1992). The *tathāgatagarbha* functions, then, as a means to an end. It helps the adherent to gain insight into

the ultimate truth of emptiness. From this we can see that Yinshun's position on *tathāgatagarbha* theory differs from traditional Chinese interpretations. Instead of subordinating *sūnyatā* to the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching (as, for example, did Zongmi), Yinshun does the opposite and interprets *tathāgatagarbha* theory in terms of the emptiness critique.

The *tathāgata* and the selfhood of the *tathāgatagarbha*

The *tathāgatagarbha* theory teaches that all sentient beings inherently possess the essential nature of the *tathāgata* (*zhongsheng benyou rulai tixing* 眾生本有如來體性). Proponents of the theory define the *tathāgatagarbha* as 'the womb (*taizang* 胎藏) of the *Tathāgata*', and argue that, because it exists within the bodies and minds of sentient beings, it functions as the causal condition (*yinwei* 因位) for praxis, serving as the means by which sentient beings can practice and ultimately attain enlightenment. Yinshun notes that the practical import of this teaching—that is, its expedient value—lies in the ease with which the common person can readily understand it, and therefore with confidence embark on the Buddhist path.

Tathāgata and *tathāgatagarbha*

Yinshun indicates a number of terms that serve as synonyms for the ultimate: 'the *tathāgata* (*rulai* 如來), *parinirvāna* (*ban niepan* 般涅槃), *vimukta* (*jietuo* 解脫), *dharmakāya* (*fashen* 法身), and *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* (*wushang puti* 無上菩提) are all related in one lineage to the Buddha's fruit (*foguo* 佛果)' (Yinshun 1992). The 'Buddha's fruit' refers to the result of the Buddhist path; that is, it signifies Buddhahood or enlightenment. These terms describe truth from the perspective of awakening and thus represent the ultimate.

In his treatment of these concepts, Yinshun explicates the meaning of the *tathāgata*'s *nirvāna*, distinguishing it from the *nirvāna* of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles. He points out that some early Buddhist sects, such as the *Sūtravāda*, described *nirvāna* as being without form (*wuti* 無體) while others, like the *Sarvāstivāda*, regarded it as 'unconditioned existence' (*wuweishifa* 無為實法). No matter how they defined it, all agreed that *nirvāna* is characterized by goodness and is a permanent condition (Yinshun 1992). Moreover, they insisted that when a *tathāgata* enters *nirvāna* it no longer possesses a body or wisdom and thus cannot participate in the activity of helping sentient beings along the path to enlightenment: 'Although *nirvāna* is good and is permanent, the *tathāgata* which enters *nirvāna* has neither a body nor wisdom. It is called "the ashen body and extinguished wisdom" (*huishen minzhi* 灰身泯智). [Thus], the *tathāgata* no longer [engages in] the activity of benefiting sentient beings' (Yinshun 1992). The *Āgamas* also support this view, making the point that Śākyamuni Buddha's body, being subject to impermanence, was cremated, and thus is no longer available to practitioners for help and guidance.

On the other hand, Yinshun notes that the Mahāsaṅghika sect, another pre-Mahāyāna school, described the tathāgata's body differently: 'The tathāgata's body is truly without boundaries ... the lives of all the Buddhas are also without boundaries' (Yinshun 1992). Those who espoused this view did not regard the Buddha's body as subject to the limits of birth and death, but rather saw it as remaining constant and unchanging. Such a view had important ramifications for practice, for it suggested that Buddhas are forever available to sentient beings as an aid in the cultivation of enlightenment. Yinshun points out that the *tathāgatagarbha* theory inherited this pre-Mahāyāna interpretation of the Buddha's body and combined it with the notion that the tathāgata and its *nirvāna* permanently abide (*changzhu* 常住), exist (*you* 有), and are not empty (*bukong* 不空). This conception of the tathāgata and *nirvāna* arose in reaction to the Sarvāstivādin and Sūtravādin position, which stressed that the Buddha no longer exists in the world—a position that Yinshun argues was extremely difficult for the common person of India at the time to accept (Yinshun 1992). The *tathāgatagarbha* view, however, espoused a far more tangible Buddha who was forever present to benefit all beings. This view provided comfort and, according to Yinshun, approached more closely to the religious *waultenschaung* held by the people of the Indian subcontinent because it resembled a concept that has pervaded Indian religious and philosophical speculation since the sixth century BCE, known as Brahman, an eternal monistic entity that inheres in and underlies all of existence (Yinshun 1992).

Yinshun suggests that because Mahāyāna Buddhism in such texts as the *Huayan Sūtra* and the *Nivāna Sūtra* presented the *tathāgatagarbha* as having a meaning very similar to that of Brahman, those influenced by the Brahman concept felt a natural affinity for the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, thereby allowing them to comfortably adhere to Buddhist practice and reflect on Buddhist ideology. Indicating its practical efficacy then, Yinshun makes it clear that the *tathāgatagarbha* was always meant to be an expedient means, a way to get the people of the Indian subcontinent to reflect seriously about the ideas and practices of Buddhism. Later, of course, after they had taken up the Buddhist path, they would be introduced to the definitive truth of emptiness.

Yinshun explains that the texts that espouse the *tathāgatagarbha* theory list four attributes of the tathāgata: permanence (*chang* 常), blissfulness (*le* 樂), self-hood (*wo* 我), and purity (*jing* 淨). One such text, the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, writes:

When sentient beings have faith in the Tathāgata and those sentient beings conceive [him] with permanence, pleasure, self, and purity, they do not go astray. Those sentient beings have the right view. Why so? Because the Dharmakāya of the Tathāgata has the perfection of permanence, the perfection of pleasure, the perfection of self, the perfection of purity. Whichever sentient being sees the Dharmakāya of the Tathāgata that way, sees it correctly. (Wayman and Wayman 1974)

These four characteristics, traditionally known as the four inverted views (*diandao* 顛倒), appear in pre-Mahāyāna sources in which they have the opposite meaning. In these sources, the four views constitute ignorance:

Beings suffered in samsara because they mistakenly grasped after what was impermanent as if it were permanent, what caused suffering as if it could lead to bliss, what lacked any substantial self as if it had such a self, and what was impure as if it were pure. (Gregory 1991)

In this schema, liberation occurs when the practitioner realizes that all things are characterized by impermanence, suffering, no-self, and impurity. Any doctrine that attributed permanence, blissfulness, self-hood, and purity to an aspect of reality was to be rejected as utterly false (Gregory 1991). The *tathāgatagarbha* tradition accepts this interpretation of the four inverted views when it is applied to mundane existence. Conventionally constructed reality is impermanent, leads to suffering, lacks an identifiable self, and is impure. However, these attributes do not pertain to the ultimate, because the *Dharmakāya* and the *tathāgata* represent ‘the perfection of permanence, the perfection of bliss, the perfection of self, and the perfection of purity’.

In his explanation of these four characteristics as perfections found in his *A Study of the Tathāgatagarbha*, Yinshun focuses his attention on permanence and self-hood. He begins his discussion by presenting the interpretations of permanence and impermanence held by pre-Mahāyāna sects. Proponents of these sects, he notes, taught that sentient beings are characterized by impermanence. They constantly change as they move through the cycle of birth and death. When one eliminates the various afflictions, he escapes from this cycle of rebirth and enters ultimate *nirvāna* (*jiujing niepan* 究竟涅槃), which is not subject to the transformations that occur in birth and death. In this way, *nirvāna* permanently abides (*niepan changzhu* 涅槃常住) while samsaric existence is characterized by constant flux. Advocates of Mahāyāna Buddhism, seeing *nirvāna* from the perspective of the *tathāgata*, referred to it as that which transcends time—past, present, and future. Although Mahāyāna texts use the phrase ‘benefiting sentient beings to the end of all time’ (*jin weilai ji de liyi zhongsheng* 盡未來際的利益眾生), a phrase that suggests time flows from the past to the present and then to the future, in reality no time exists and thus there is no real change over time. Yinshun explains:

What is permanence? Permanence transcends time. There is no time that can be spoken of. From [the notion of] benefiting sentient beings to the end of all time, it appears as [if there is] the flowing of time, but there is [in fact] no change [that occurs]. This is called permanence. For example, the *Sūtra of No Increase and No Decrease* (*buzeng bujian jing* 不增不減經) says: to the end of all time is the same as constancy and existence (*youfa* 有法). (Yinshun 1992)

Implied here is the idea that time and expressions of time operate in the context of the conventional world. In terms of Buddhist praxis, they function as expedient devices used for encouraging sentient beings along the path to enlightenment. The recognition of time allows practitioners to see and experience their own advancement as well as that of others, progressing from a state of delusion and ignorance to states of more enlightened understanding. How-

ever, from the perspective of the ultimate, because time does not exist, progressive change does not truly exist either.

Both the tathāgata and *nirvāna*, then, are permanent and eternal, remaining unaffected by conceptions of time. Yinshun notes that the *Nirvāna Sūtra* describes Śākyamuni Buddha as having attained enlightenment a long time ago, residing in *nirvāna* for time immeasurable. Although the important events in his life, such as his birth, enlightenment, and *parinirvāna*, appeared to have occurred over time, in fact they were only expedient manifestations and thereby were ultimately unreal. Moreover, according to the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, Śākyamuni Buddha is no different in essence from Vairocana—typically regarded in Mahāyāna Buddhism as the cosmic and eternal Buddha. For proponents of the Mahāyāna, Yinshun argues, these examples demonstrate that Śākyamuni Buddha who possesses the eternal nature of the cosmic Buddha is fundamentally the same as the permanent and unchanging tathāgata. That is, the tathāgata functions ultimately as the underlying essence of Śākyamuni. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, and the *Nirvāna Sūtra* both also suggest that just like Śākyamuni, all sentient beings have the nature of the unchanging tathāgata within them and therefore are no different in essence from the eternal Buddha.

Furthermore, Yinshun explains that the notion of an unchanging, permanently abiding *tathāgatagarbha* is related to the belief during the early development of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine that the *Dharmakāya* and the tathāgata's *nirvāna*—both synonyms for the *tathāgatagarbha*—have a physical body. According to early *tathāgatagarbha* teachings, such as those found in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, the permanently abiding and unchanging tathāgata applies not only to an unchanging principle (*lixing* 理性) nor merely to the wisdom that one attains upon achieving enlightenment, but also to the bodily characteristics of the tathāgata—namely, the immeasurable major and minor adornments (*wuliang xianghao zhuangyan* 無量相好莊嚴). The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* states: 'In a similar fashion within the klesas 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' (Grosnick 1995). Since sentient beings possess within them the eternal tathāgata, they also possess, in addition to its wisdom and essence, its physical characteristics. Yinshun writes:

The *tathāgatagarbha* teaching is the theory that the *Dharmakāya* has a body. From [the perspective of] the unchanging, eternal, and permanent tathāgata, this teaching discusses sentient beings' causal conditions (*yinwei* 因位): [saying] that the bodies of sentient beings possess the *tathāgatagarbha*. The tathāgata's *nirvāna* (or *Dharmakāya*) has a body; thus, the *tathāgatagarbha*, of course, also possesses physical characteristics. (Yinshun 1992)

To say that sentient beings possess the tathāgata's wisdom, essence, and physical characteristics is the same as saying that they have within their physical bodies the body of the *tathāgatagarbha*. This *tathāgatagarbha* serves as the causal condition for their enlightenment. In other words, the body and wisdom of the tathāgata provide sentient beings with the means to attain

liberation. Without it, they would not have the ability to cultivate themselves. For Yinshun, herein lies the *tathāgatagarbha*'s expedient value. Knowing that the *tathāgatagarbha* exists within them gives practitioners confidence that they already possess the pure causes necessary for achieving Buddhahood. Recognizing their inherent potential for enlightenment gives them courage to take up the practice of the Buddhist path despite any difficulties that they might encounter along the way.

However, Yinshun acknowledges that Chinese Buddhism since the Tang dynasty (618–906) has espoused the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as the definitive expression of Buddhist truth, viewing all other teachings as merely expedient means (Yinshun 1992). Based on this doctrine, one now only has to look within to uncover his/her inherent enlightenment instead of relying on causes external to the mind and body:

‘All sentient beings having the *tathāgatagarbha*’ in theory indicates that sentient beings originally have the pure causes ... In the cultivation process, it is not necessary to seek [enlightenment] outside. Rely on the three jewel natures of your own body—as for the *tathāgata* nature, cultivate it with effort in order to seek its true manifestation. (Yinshun 1992)

For proponents, then, the permanent and ubiquitous *tathāgata* with all of its major and minor marks served both as the inspiration for self-cultivation and as the goal of realization.

The self-hood of the tathāgatagarbha

Of the various virtues associated with the *tathāgatagarbha*, ‘self-hood’ presents a serious conundrum for the Buddhist tradition. The doctrine of no-self—the view that no self, soul, or ego exists in any permanent and unchanging manner—is attributed to the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha. According to this view, sentient beings exist as nothing more than an amalgamation of the five aggregates, which can be divided into the broad categories of mind and matter, but more specifically include form, feeling, perception, impulse and consciousness. All sentient existence is based on the ever-changing relationship of these aggregates that themselves arise and perish from moment to moment. Thus, one cannot find an eternal, independent self that obtains outside of these aggregates nor can one find a permanently abiding self in any one of them or in the composite of all of them together. Reflecting on the teaching of no-self is an important aspect of Buddhist praxis that helps the practitioner eliminate attachment to the ego and, ultimately, attain enlightenment. Many schools that developed from the third to the first centuries BCE elaborated on this doctrine, establishing it as the distinguishing feature that separated Buddhism from such heterodox teachings as those advocated by Brahmanical Sāṃkhya the school of philosophy that espoused the existence of Brahman and the eternal nature of the self.

Yinshun argues that the controversy surrounding the issue of ‘self-hood’ did not originate with Mahāyāna Buddhism in the context of its connection to the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine nor did it only arise in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism as a point of contention between Buddhist sects and other religious traditions. In fact, this issue was hotly debated among various sects within Buddhism as early as the third century BCE, appearing most poignantly with the emergence of the doctrine proffered by the followers of Vātsīputra (later known as the Vātsīputrīya school), which stated that the *ātman* or person did in some sense exist as a reality. The Vātsīputrīya rejected the orthodox view of the no-self doctrine and the five aggregates outlined earlier, arguing that since the self can be cognized by the six kinds of consciousness (*liushi* 六識; namely, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, skin, and reasoning consciousnesses), and transmigrates from one composite of the five aggregates to the next, it must have some kind of ‘real’ existence. But what the nature of the self actually is the Vātsīputrīya could not say, contending that no predicate can be applied to it (i.e., one cannot say that the self is permanent or impermanent, for example (Warder 2000)).

Because of its understanding of the self, this sect was later scorned for espousing non-Buddhist views. However, Yinshun notes that even this unorthodox sect rejected the Brahmanical concept of an eternal soul, advocating a ‘pseudo-self’ in order to explain the question of what is reborn from lifetime to lifetime. Yinshun writes:

The Vātsīputrīya and the Samkrantivada established the self (*ātman*), discussing its purpose for the sake of establishing the continuity of birth and death and the connection [that allows one] to move from *samsāra* to liberation. But Vātsīputrīya does not take ‘selfhood’ as the true principle, as the content of liberation. (Yinshun 1992)

Thus, the Vātsīputrīya sect espoused the view of ‘self-hood’ only as a means to explain the cycle of rebirth, while at the same time rejecting any notion of a permanent self in an ultimate sense. In this way, it avoided the ‘eternalism’ of Brahmanical Sāmkhya.

However, Yinshun points out that the ‘self-hood’ of the *tathāgatagarbha*, at least superficially, shares many similarities with the doctrines advocated by non-Buddhist schools in India, especially those that derive their ideas from one of the appendices to the Vedic corpus known as the *Upanishads*. Although the texts that constitute this appendix are by no means homogenous in content, one can ascertain important philosophical trends that connect many of them together. The one most relevant to Yinshun’s discussion and that deeply influenced the development of religious thought before and after the time of the Buddha is the belief in the essential unity of Brahman and *ātman*.

Brahman is the invisible but pervasive, generative, and connective force that binds the universe into a single whole. Defined in terms of Vedic practices and beliefs, it is the hidden power of the cosmos that manifests as the efficacy of the Vedic rituals, the mystical force of the sounds that constitute the hymns utilized in the rituals, and the power and essence of the Vedic gods. *Ātman* is the self or soul—the living essence—of all sentient beings. The goal of

liberation as presented in the *Upanishads* consists in the experiential knowledge that *ātman* and Brahman are in reality identical and changeless. The *ātman* of each living entity is, from the ultimate perspective, nothing other than the single totality of all things, and therefore is eternal and all encompassing. Upon liberation the practitioner realizes that he is indistinguishable from this underlying unity of things and that the appearance of change, multiplicity, and diversity in the world is merely an illusion.

Yinshun notes that those who championed the *tathāgatagarbha* theory discussed the virtue of self-hood in terms of the eight powers (*bazizai* 八自在), which include the following:

1. to manifest one body as many bodies
2. to manifest a minute body to fill a chiliocosm
3. to make this chiliocosm-filling body so light that it can soar like a feather
4. to constantly manifest countless forms in one and the same place
5. to use one sensory organ in place of another
6. to obtain all phenomena as if they are nothing
7. to expound the meaning of a single verse through countless eons
8. to penetrate all places as if they are empty space. (Muller 2001)

Upon achieving Buddhahood, a being—a Buddha—realizes the virtue of self-hood and thus attains the eight powers. These powers demonstrate that Buddhas have the ability to function in the universe without impediment. The reason a Buddha can perform such tasks is not because he has developed great personal power, but because he has realized the world to be completely interconnected. Thus, the unimpeded function of a Buddha is only an expression of the reality of the universe.

However, remaining consistent with the intent of much of *tathāgatagarbha* theory, Yinshun indicates that since all sentient beings, deluded or awakened, possess the *tathāgatagarbha*, they too have the characteristic of ‘self-hood’ and thus the capacity to perform the eight powers. Furthermore, according to the *Nirvāna Sūtra*, the *tathāgata* nature (Skt. *tathāgatadhātu*; Chn. *rulaixing*), another name for the ultimate reality that underlies all of existence, is equivalent to ‘self-hood’ or *ātman*. Paraphrasing this *Sūtra*, Yinshun writes: ‘*tathāgatagarbha*, Buddha Nature, and selfhood are all the same. In conventional parlance, selfhood and sentient beings are the same expressions. Therefore, the realm of sentient beings (Chn. *zhongshengjie*) and the *tathāgatagarbha* are equivalent in meaning’ (Yinshun 1992). Here the *Nirvāna Sūtra* indicates the equivalence of the *tathāgatagarbha* and self-hood, and self-hood and sentient beings in order to demonstrate that sentient beings are in essence no different from the *tathāgatagarbha*. Yinshun argues that the relationship between self-hood and the *tathāgatagarbha*, and therefore between sentient beings and the *tathāgatagarbha*, is similar to the relationship between *ātman* and Brahman. Because each sentient being possesses a self-hood that is fundamentally the same as the *tathāgatagarbha*, he/she is a part of the ultimate; namely, the *tathāgata* nature. In terms of self-cultivation, then, an individual’s awakening consists in uncovering his/her already pure and enlightened nature,

and realizing that from the beginning he/she was already a Buddha. This view of enlightenment bears striking resemblance to that of the *Upanishads* wherein the realization of the unity of *ātman* and Brahman results in liberation.

In his discussion of the relationship between ultimate reality expressed as the *Dharmakāya* and mundane reality defined as the realm of sentient beings found in his *A Study of the Tathāgatagarbha*, Yinshun further underscores the similarities of these views. Again referring to the *Nirvāna Sūtra*, he argues that the *Dharmakāya*, when understood from the mundane perspective, is nothing other than the realm of sentient beings; from the viewpoint of the *bodhisattva*, it is equivalent to the realm of the *bodhisattvas*; and from the standpoint of the fully enlightened after all the afflictions have been eradicated, it is called the realm of the tathāgata. No difference exists between sentient beings, *bodhisattvas*, and tathāgata, for all of them have as their essential characteristic the self-hood of the *tathāgatagarbha*. Yinshun writes:

It can be seen that the self (*wo* 我) and the realm of the self (*wojie* 我界), sentient beings and the realm of sentient beings are all different names for the *tathāgatagarbha*, *tathāgatadhātu* (both *rulaijie* 如來界 and *rulaixing* 如來性), *buddhagarbha* (*fozang* 佛藏), and *Buddhadhātu* (*foxing* 佛性). (Yinshun 1992)

The equality of self-hood, sentient beings, and the *tathāgatagarbha* is the main purport of the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings. The *tathāgatagarbha* then, as both the *Dharmakāya* and the realm of sentient beings, serves as the fundamental basis of *nirvāna* and *samsāra*—delusion and enlightenment—much as Brahman (and by extension *ātman*) functions as the underlying fundament of reality in *Upanishadic* thought.

The fact that sentient beings have within them the *tathāgatagarbha* indicates that they possess the tathāgata's virtuous nature and wisdom. These qualities provide all living entities with the inner potential for attaining Buddhahood. However, because of its association with the concept of self-hood, the *tathāgatagarbha* seems to refer to more than just potential. The self as the *tathāgatagarbha* and as a synonym for the tathāgata not only provides individuals with the ability to become buddhas, but also serves as the fundamental basis of their existence just like *ātman* by virtue of its equality with Brahman operates as the underlying basis of all reality.

Providing another example of the similarity between the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine and the theory of the identity of *ātman* and Brahman, Yinshun points out the connection between the Buddhist concept *jie* 界 (Skt. *dhātu*; literally 'sphere' or 'realm'), and the teaching that stresses the equality of sentient beings and the tathāgata. He first notes that *jie* has the meaning of 'essence' or 'original nature' as in the compounds *jiezang* 界藏 or *jiexing* 界性, both of which refer specifically to the hidden and unmanifest nature of a thing. He explains:

Jie has the same meaning as *jiezang* or *jiexing*. Like in gold ore, there is the nature of gold or in silver ore there is the nature of silver. It [*jie*] is

originally expressed like this. It is a hidden storehouse that has not [yet] manifested. When it passes through the smelting process, it then is revealed. (Yinshun 1992)

Here, Yinshun uses the metaphor of gold and gold ore to illustrate the relationship between the deluded being and his 'original nature.' The 'original nature' is like the gold (or silver) found in ore. Just as pure gold remains hidden in the ore, surrounded by worthless metals and dirt, so too does the 'original nature' lie concealed behind the spiritual hindrances and moral impurities characteristic of a person's deluded existence. Like the smelting process that reveals the pure gold within the ore, Buddhist practice allows a person to eliminate his/her attachments to illusory existence and sense pleasures, and thereby manifest the 'original nature' (*jie*, *jiexing*).

In the context of *tathāgatagarbha* thought, *jie* is another name for the self-hood of the *tathāgatagarbha*. Moreover, the *jiexing* of sentient beings and the *jiexing* of the *tathāgata* are equivalent in meaning. Therefore, when one becomes enlightened, one becomes a *tathāgata*, but nothing is lost or gained in the process. It is not as if one destroys the sentient being within him/her and replaces it with a Buddha. The nature of sentient beings and the nature of the *tathāgata* are one and the same:

The *tathāgatagarbha* ... is [a case of] the non-duality and non-differentiation of the nature of sentient beings, the *tathāgata*'s nature, and the *dhātu* nature ... However, from the perspective of the nature of sentient beings it is called the realm of sentient beings. From the perspective of the theory of the *tathāgata* nature within sentient beings, it is called the *tathāgata* realm. (Yinshun 1992)

Following the *Sūtra of No Increase and No Decrease*, Yinshun describes the realm of sentient beings as having the quality of boundless purity (*wubian jingming* 無邊淨明). However, when the immeasurable afflictions obscure this purity, the *Sūtra* refers to it as the sphere in which 'living creatures revolve through birth and death' (*shengsi liuzhuan de zhongsheng* 生死流轉的眾生). The name changes based only on whether one views 'the original nature' from the perspective of ignorance or from enlightenment. When ignorance prevails, then the hindrances cover over and hide 'the original nature.' When awakening occurs, then it is revealed. In either case, the *jiexing* remains pure. The underlying natures of deluded sentient beings, *bodhisattvas*, or fully awakened *tathāgatas* are indistinguishable (Yinshun 1992). The fundamental aspect shared by these beings—known variously as *jiexing*, the self-hood of the *tathāgatagarbha*, or the *Dharmakāya*—binds them together making them ultimately indistinct. The fact that the self-hood of the *tathāgatagarbha* exists in unadulterated form within enlightened and unenlightened beings implies that it serves as the foundation of both *samsāric* existence and ultimate reality. As such, it has been called the Inconceivable Self (*bu siyi wo* 不思議我), the Great Self (*dawo* 大我), and the True Self (*zhenwo* 真我)—appellations that bring to mind the *ātman* and the role it plays in the philosophy of the *Upanishads*.

Yinshun not only recognizes the likeness of the Brahman/*ātman* teaching and the *tathāgatagarbha* theory, but even suggests that their similarities are deliberate. He argues that the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching was established for the sake of those who already believed in the existence of the *ātman*. Therefore, he does not want to disregard it like the Critical Buddhism scholars do. In fact, he sees it as an important part of the Buddhist teachings, playing a critically important role in the dissemination of the Buddha Dharma. Despite the fact that the texts that champion this theory present it as ultimate truth, the *tathāgatagarbha* with its various attributes, Yinshun contends, was never meant as a definitive expression of truth as is the case with the *ātman*/Brahman ideology, but rather as an expedient means. To forthrightly tell people who believed in an *ātman* that there is no self would only frighten them. To explain that they possess the *tathāgatagarbha*, which has similar qualities to the *ātman*, would instead comfort them. The purpose of the *tathāgatagarbha*, then, was to gently guide practitioners to an awareness of ultimate truth, which for Yinshun, of course, consists in the emptiness of all things (Yinshun 1992).

Conclusion

That Yinshun defines ultimate truth as the doctrine of emptiness is not new to Chinese Buddhism. Kumārajīva and Sengzhao championed this teaching as early as the fourth century. But by the time of the Tang dynasty in China, an alternative interpretation appeared espousing the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine as the ultimate and emptiness as merely an expedient means. According to this interpretation, emptiness applied only to the moral and spiritual hindrances and not to the *tathāgatagarbha* itself. That is to say, the defilements were regarded as empty of any permanent and independent existence, and therefore were merely adventitious to the *tathāgatagarbha*, which possessed the qualities of purity, permanence, blissfulness, and self-hood. The goal of practice, then, was to eliminate these defilements in order to uncover the unadulterated *tathāgatagarbha*. Subsequent to the Tang dynasty, this view of Buddhist truth became the dominant paradigm for Chinese Buddhism and governed the formulation of much of Buddhist doctrine.

Based on classical Buddhist hermeneutics, Yinshun distinguishes between definitive (Skt. *nītārtha*; Chn. *liāoyi* 了義) and non-definitive (Skt. *neyārtha*; Chn. *buliāoyi* 不了義) truth when discussing the relationship between the *tathāgatagarbha* and emptiness. Definitive teachings and texts are those that present ultimate truth directly and precisely. Further elaboration is unnecessary. On the other hand, non-definitive teachings do not express ultimate truth explicitly. They are useful for helping the adept overcome views that obstruct his/her ability to progress along the Buddhist path, and thereby prepare him/her for a more direct encounter with ultimate truth. Once they have served their purpose, they are discarded. In Yinshun's opinion, the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is a non-definitive teaching designed to assuage people's fears about emptiness. However, he accepts the fact that important Buddhist texts including the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, and the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* present

the *tathāgatagarbha* as undefiled and immutable. Indeed, he never refutes the teachings that indicate the *tathāgatagarbha*'s permanence and self-hood. Instead, he undermines the view that these teachings are definitive expressions of truth.

Yinshun's understanding of the *tathāgatagarbha* differs not only from that of the Chinese Buddhist tradition common since the Tang dynasty, but also from that of the Critical Buddhism scholars, who seem, at least at first glance, to be Yinshun's ideological counterparts in Japan. While Yinshun agrees that the emphasis on *tathāgatagarbha* theory as the definitive expression of Buddhist truth has serious problems and adamantly opposes any attempt to construe it as the ontological ground of phenomena, he is unwilling to regard it as a heterodox teaching. Rather, he only wishes to assert what he considers to be the appropriate interpretation of the doctrine, thereby focusing on its soteriological significance as a way for liberating beings incapable of understanding the doctrine of emptiness as taught in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* and *Mādhyamika* treatises.

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