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Tathāgatagarbha and Ātman: Self Where There is No-Self

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Tathāgatagarbha and Ātman: Self Where There is No-Self

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Stephen Jenkins

Tathāgatagarbha and Ātman: Self Where There is No-Self

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Humans have long grappled with the question of the nature of our Self, defined here as the ultimate reality inherent to our individual being. Religious traditions can be a great place to look when attempting to understand this aspect of our humanity. Broadly speaking, when contemplating ideas of Self in Buddhism and Hinduism, the relationship between the Buddhist notion of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) and the Hindu notion of Self (*ātman*), is an intriguing one: How can we understand them to be similar or different? How do the Buddhist concepts of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and mind-only (*cittamātra*) relate to the concepts of *tathāgatagarbha* and *ātman*? Is emptiness contrary to these ideas? Are *tathāgatagarbha* and the Hindu teaching that *ātman* is equal to brahman (ultimate reality), both expressions of a non-dualistic state of mind? Although it is commonly taught that Hinduism and Buddhism differ in their understanding of Self, one thing that becomes apparent is that these are not simple questions, perhaps mainly because their answers are contextual. There are many answers that come from many different types of Hindus and Buddhists in various places. For this paper, I will be looking at commentary on the Buddhist text the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* and its use of the concept of a permanent Self and how this relates to emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and skillful means (*upāya*). This paper seeks to support my claim that, through skillful means, *ātman* and *anātman* (no-Self) are both saying something quite similar—despite the apparent paradoxical nature of this statement—and will look at Buddha-nature in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* as a way to understand and help articulate this thought.

I would like to make clear at the onset that I do not wish to claim an authoritative understanding of these concepts for Buddhists and Hindus (or anyone for that matter); these observations come from my own context and are

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not meant to speak for the traditions which I am observing. I am not a Buddhist nor a Hindu but I am intrigued by these concepts and wish to better understand myself and the worlds from which they come. This brings me to a question that has arisen for me during my research: why is Buddha-nature and *ātman* important to consider? I believe that the implications of these ideas have very tangible consequences in the world and can change how we think of concepts such as compassion. They can shape the way we contextualize ourselves in the world.

We must become comfortable with paradox when considering these ideas. Ultimately, we are using words as a means to an end (that perhaps is not to be thought of as an end exactly) that does not necessarily reflect the means. In other words, describing states of mind and ontology through words in these traditions results in contradiction, because words are limiting boxes that cannot completely contain or reflect reality. Yet, is it not these contradictions that bring us into a deeper interaction with these Buddhist teachings? Externalizing our search for understanding with words such as “deeper” help to illustrate this tension when looking at Buddha-nature; is there a “deeper” or “True” permanent Self, or is there no essential substantial Self in existence? Perhaps there is both. When speaking of the Buddha as seen in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, Paul Williams says, “He has taught Self where there is really no-Self, and no-Self where there is really

Self. This is not false but skillful means. Here the Buddha-nature is really no-Self, but it is said to be Self in a manner of speaking” (99).

The difficulty in using language to describe the tension between Self and no-Self can be seen in the *Nirvāna Sūtra* (as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* has been referred to) when it asserts that the “core nature of each individual is that of a buddha, but mental afflictions (kléa) prevent most from realizing it” (Blum, 605). The semantic nature of using words such as Self and no-Self could be seen to be “mental afflictions” that prevent us from seeing that there can be a “core nature” and no core nature at the same time. Each of these teachings, Buddha-nature or *ātman* and emptiness or *anātman*, can steer people towards different attachments. When one does not see Buddha-nature it could be that attachment to the idea of an *ātman* could ultimately deter them from realizing their inherent Buddha-nature. Yet, this goes both ways; sometimes the best way to teach could be to teach of Self, in order to lead one in the most beneficial direction. Scholar Takasaki Jikidō reminds us that teachings are a means to liberation, “I would emphasize that the follower of the *Tathāgatagarbha* theory would be content with the evaluation of this teaching as “conventional,” because any teaching of the Buddha is, after all, a convention or means for the sake of deliverance or religious awakening” (82). A conventional teaching may not reveal the precise ontological distinctions unique to each group of Buddhists that allows a Self to exist in a worldview that is empty of Self, but it shows that some Buddhists believe in the benefit to teaching Self, despite their apparent foundational idea of *anātman*.

One does not have to look too far into the traditions of Hinduism to see teachings that reflect the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist idea of the existence of a core nature and no core nature at the same time. When the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* speaks of our core Buddha-nature and the Hindu texts the *Upaniṣads* speak of *ātman*, there are parallels between the two. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, there is a story about a king who seeks the sound of a lute. The king futilely attempts to find the sound in a lute by breaking it apart until a minister explains to him that this is not the way to get to the sound. In *The Doctrine of the Buddha-Nature in the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-Sūtra* by Ming-Wood Liu, the author explains the themes in this story as they relate to Buddha-nature, “The central theme of the story is summed up in the concluding declaration that the Buddha-nature “abides nowhere,” i.e., is not immanent in some form in sentient beings, just as sound is

not immanent in any part of the lute. In the same manner as sound is produced when all necessary conditions are satisfied, the Buddha-nature will reveal itself to sentient beings when they practice in earnest the way to enlightenment prescribed by the *tathagata*” (Liu, 82). This story resonates strongly with one from the *Chandogya Upaniṣad*. In this story, Śvetaketu is being taught by his father about the nature of *ātman* and *brahman*. The father asks Śvetaketu to divide a fig, and then a seed from the fig, and when Śvetaketu says that he sees nothing by dividing the seed, the father says, as quoted in *A Survey of Hinduism*, “My dear, that subtle essence which you do not perceive, that is the source of this mighty Nyagrodha tree. That which is so tiny is the *ātman* of all. This is the true, the self, that you are, Śvetaketu” (Klostermaier, 169). Both stories could be seen to speak of a self that does not exist inside of things, and cannot be found by breaking things down. Yet, it is the breaking down of the lute and the fig that aid in the acknowledgement of the ideas of *ātman* and Buddha-nature because there is something else there that has yet to reveal itself. The essence that cannot be seen is that which is doing the seeing; the unseen seer or *ātman* and buddha womb or *tathāgatagarbha*, could be understood through these stories to be consciousness itself.

Both Hindus and Buddhists have described our core nature, or Self, as an unadulterated state of consciousness. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* describes Buddha-nature as the pure, inherent element within everyone that is the potential for one to attain buddhahood, which could be interpreted as to imply that it is consciousness. Later *sūtras*, such as the *Śrīmālā sūtra* describe *tathāgatagarbha* as “intrinsically pure radiant consciousness (pp. 106–7)” (Williams, 102). *Ātman* is described in the same way. According to *A Survey of Hinduism*, “*Ātman* is pure consciousness” (Klostermaier, 357). Consciousness is a universal phenomenon through which a myriad of manifestations has expressed themselves throughout time; it is quite possible, from my perspective, that many of the arguments and distinctions between Buddhist conceptions of no-Self and Hindu conceptions of Self have been the result of getting caught up in words because semantics can get sticky; words are messy, impermanent, and hold the power to nudge towards enlightenment but also confuse and separate people. Through the eyes of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, the Buddha did not care enough about the doctrine of no-Self to defend it needlessly; when accused of nihilism by Hindu *Brahmins* he responded by affirming his teachings as describing a Self. This portrays a value

for flexibility over rigidity as well as a sense of skillful means and a compassionate, enlightened perspective.

It has been argued in Buddhist *sūtras*, such as the *Śrīmālā sūtra*, that it takes an enlightened perspective to accurately speak of Self in a reality of no-Self. The *Śrīmālā sūtra* states that, “it is difficult to understand the meaning of the intrinsically pure consciousness in a condition of defilement” (Williams, 102). This seems to be at the crux of the apparent issue between *ātman*, *anātman*, and Buddha-nature; Buddha-nature is not in the descriptions of it, but in the pervasive sound that coalesces from an understanding free of descriptions. This train of thought—which is really a kind of no-thought—can be seen to go back to the *Upaniṣads*, as quoted in *A Survey of Hinduism*, “This Self cannot be attained by instruction, nor by much thought nor by listening to many scripture readings: the Self is only attained by one who is chosen: to such a one the *ātman* reveals itself” (Klostermaier, 172). Much like in the story of the king and the lute, Buddha-nature reveals itself when one is, in a way, chosen or ready to see that which is waiting to be revealed. Hindus and Buddhists have both understood the Self in an empty way; the Self is revealed when one finds their way out of the endless vortex of descriptions that try to describe itself. The Self exists within a context of no-Self.

By looking at the story of Yājñavalkya and Gārgī Vacaknavī in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* one can see how Self can exist within a context of no-Self. Through this story we can see how the idea of *ātman* and brahman could be seen to exist in emptiness, which could mean that *ātman* does not have to be at odds with *anātman*. At one point, Gārgī questions Yājñavalkya about what the world is woven on warp and woof, in other words, what are the frame and threads that make up the fabric of our reality. Eventually, after going from water, to wind, to creation and so on, her questioning arrives at *brahman*, which she also questions, asking for its source as well. Yājñavalkya stops Gārgī’s questioning here saying, “Gārgī do not question too much lest your head fall off. You are questioning too much about the divine being, about which we are not to question too much” (Klostermaier, 167). To me, this story implies that one could keep questioning and breaking things down to further realize the extent of emptiness, but Yājñavalkya recognizes this as unhelpful. Using skillful means, he stops her questioning at *brahman*; this not only affirms that *brahman* is the level of reality that Gārgī (at this juncture in her understanding) should be concerned with, but also affirms the ambiguous nature

of this teaching. The teacher uses skillful means in this story to end the questioning mind of someone perhaps not ready to contemplate the extent of emptiness. Much like the affirmation of mind in *Yogācāra* Buddhism in the face of emptiness, *ātman* affirms a quality much like Buddha-nature in the face of the knowledge that there is always more to dissolve under analysis. The question becomes what is the use, or skillful means of dissolving everything? What is the need or benefit of going beyond *ātman*? If the danger in *ātman* is attachment to the idea of a Self, which is ultimately an illusion or egoistic self, how different is it to be attached to the notion of Buddha-nature or *anātman*? One answer is as follows, “The theories of *ātman* and *anātman* are both “skillful ways” (*upāyah*) to save ordinary men from errors. Neither *ātman* nor *anātman* are the truth” (Ishigami-Iagolnitzer, Mitchiko, 5). My interpretation of this quote tells me that we should appreciate the deep ambiguity of these notions and their ability to adapt to the needs of the one investigating them.

The Hindu notion of brahman portrays this deep ambiguity, which is characteristic of the conventional teachings we have explored within Buddhism. Since brahman is understood to be beyond even creation itself, it can be said that one could conceive of it as a no-thing that is empty of our conception of it. The name brahman could be understood as a conventional means of explaining something beyond words. As quoted in *A Survey of Hinduism*, the *Upaniṣads* say, “Where words do not reach and the mind cannot grasp, there is the brahman full of bliss” (Klostermaier, 168). Scholars and *Mahāyāna* Buddhists have recognized the similarity here to Buddha-nature thought. “It seems to be a return to the *ātman* (or *Brahman*), but this Great Self, for *Mahāyāna* Buddhists, is only a conventional name, given to reality void of substance, which is Vacuity and *Nirvāṇa*” (Ishigami-Iagolnitzer, Mitchiko, 5). Both traditions are pointing towards a unifying substance with no substance; a consciousness free of deluded consciousness described by words that are empty of ultimate meaning or truth, in order to indicate a suchness in nothingness.

I find it important to note at this point in the paper the fact that religious traditions change, and our perception of them should keep this in mind. Ideas develop as time passes and outside influences affect the traditions and ideas within them. Buddhism has responded to itself and attempted to reconcile seemingly contradictory ideas, such as the emptiness described by *Madhyama-ka* teachings with the mind-only teachings of *Yogācāra*

and *anātman* with Buddha-nature. In the lengthy paper entitled *A Study of Yogācāric Influence on Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine as Found in Lankavatārasūtra*, by Mei Hsiao, this change is examined in detail:

“Finally, having thoroughly examined *tathagata-nairatmya-garbha* in the *Lankavatārasūtra*, it was found that the doctrines of *tathāgatagarbha* and *pudgala-nairatmya* were aligned with each other but only under a certain condition—that is, only when the *ātman* proposed by other religions was denied. However, from the viewpoint of the metaphysical aspect of the *Lankavatārasūtra*, the *tathāgatagarbha* can be considered to be the genuine *Ātman*, but one which is very different from the absolute *an-ātman* declared in Primitive Buddhism. Actually, there is a noticeable inconsistency between the views of Primitive Buddhism and the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition” (Hsiao, 69).

While my paper is generally in disagreement with the notion that the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition is inconsistent with the *anātman* of so-called “Primitive Buddhism,” I find, as discussed throughout this paper, that through the example of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* one can see how these ideas are saying something similar as a form of paradox. It is important to make note of the fact that there are many ways people have viewed this problem. The focus of my paper is not to detail the historical setting that influenced the development of these ideas; there are many social and political factors that have greatly affected the development of Buddhism and Buddha-nature and they are all important to consider. But, I believe there is a way to see a connection between Buddha-nature, *ātman*, and *anātman*, and a text such as the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is a great place to observe this train of thought. Hsiao sees this as well as a clearly popular trend among later *Mahāyāna* Buddhists, and states that “In the ideological trend of later *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the doctrine of ‘real and eternal mind-only’ became all influential and dominant” (Hsiao, 81).

When reading through *A Study of Yogācāric Influence on Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine as Found in Lankavatārasūtra*, it became clear that there has been much justification of Buddha-nature thought by Buddhists, some that accept *ātman* within their tradition and some that do not. The philosophy of *ātman* was considered by some to be heretical, “The compound “*tathagata-nairatmya-garbha*,”

according to the context from which it is extracted, aims to indicate that the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha* is entirely different from the theory of *ātman* held by the heretical philosophers” (Hsiao, 42). There are many reasons as to why this may have been the case and among them could be that there is a lot at stake (socially, philosophically, politically, and so on) in maintaining the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism, which can hinge upon the distinction between *anātman* and *ātman*. Part of my claim, and support for a text such as the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, is that this goes against an understanding of skillful means. As a result of acting within the world, these Buddhists may be attempting to hold onto their traditions and identities as forms of attachment (for good, valid reasons maybe), but this, perhaps, leads one away from the ideals of Buddha-nature. My claim here is not some sort of ultimate truth however, and I am in no way saying I am righter than Buddhists (and non-Buddhists) who follow this thought pattern or that this thought is not valid or correct from some perspectives. The world is incredibly complex and this is simply an opinion based on my own relative understanding.

Although there may not be one true way to conceive of the Self through the lens of Buddhism and Hinduism, I believe there is great benefit in placing these ideas within a context of compassion. In the dissertation by Kiseong Shin called *The Concept of Self and its Implication for Salvation in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity*, when discussing the implication of the ideas of self in *Advaita Vedānta* the author states, “Harmony and balance of the universe is intrinsic because all things are united together in one true self” (Shin, 184). This is certainly one way we can take the teachings of *ātman* and *brahman*. It is important to note, however, that historically speaking this is not the only way these teachings have been taken. If *ātman* is eternally pure and cannot be defiled then one could conclude that death, whether inflicted towards oneself or another may not, in a sense, be significant. That being said, this is not the only necessary conclusion either. My point here is that the realization of Self in the form of *ātman* or Buddha-nature is not inherently compassionate. Many times in Hindu mythology yogis receive great destructive power from deep realization and as seen in the recent conflict in Myanmar, Buddhists are certainly capable of violence as well. Yet, conceiving of Self in the ways understood through this paper can be an incredibly compassionate ideal, as Buddhists have shown through their teachings. Shin sees similarities between Buddhist

and Hindu thought and concludes in one section of the paper on Buddhism that, “Compassion is essential in the realization of co-origination of everything because everything is interconnected with everything else. Bowers argues that everything in the world is co-originated, and self and other are non-differentiated, then ‘loving the other means loving the self’” (Shin, 187). When considering this within my own context, I share the same sensibilities and find the careful exploration of these ideas to be a valid and thorough way of fostering a compassionate state of mind that can directly influence one’s behavior in the world.

Throughout the process of writing and researching for this paper, I have found the theory of Buddha-nature as Self to be a beautiful idea. Maybe this could be explained because I have an attachment to the idea of a Self and this is ultimately a hindrance on my own potential path to a less deluded realization of reality. Perhaps Self for me could be a beneficial convention to deepen my own understanding. I stand open to the possibility of abandoning my own affinity for a pure, permanent form of (or experience of) consciousness that is the nature of one’s Self and true reality (that cannot be truly reached through language). However at this point, for my personal understanding, I prefer to find a similar beauty in the theories of Buddha-nature and *ātman* without saying they are or must be considered identical. I find this beauty to be an important and valuable thought; one that can help the world by helping to invigorate a sense of beauty, acceptance, and compassion.

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