

The Attributes of the Tathagatagarbha

The purpose of this section is to elaborate on the attributes of the Tathagatagarbha—the basis of Mahayana Buddhism (The Great Vehicle Bodhi) to help the readers gain an accurate knowledge and understanding of it. As a matter of fact, each of us possesses a perfect and complete Mind of reality—the Tathagatagarbha, also known as eighth consciousness or *ālaya* consciousness. Since the Tathagatagarbha is the basis of Mahayana Buddhism, finding and realizing it is definitely the foundation to the practice of Mahayana Buddhism through which one can progress step by step on the Path to Buddhahood.

What then is the Path to Buddhahood, also called the Bodhi of the Great Vehicle or the Great Bodhi? In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha uses the sheep cart, deer cart and the big white ox cart to allegorize the Three-Vehicle Bodhi. The word “vehicle” here stands for “carriage”, meaning that all the three vehicles can carry sentient beings to the shore of liberation. Since the Sound-Hearer Bodhi and Solitary-Realizer Bodhi in the Two-Vehicle Bodhi can only carry a smaller number of sentient beings, they are allegorized by the World-Honored One as the deer cart and sheep cart, respectively. On the other hand, since the Great-Vehicle Bodhi is able to transport a larger number of sentient beings, the World-Honored One allegorized it as the white ox cart. It is also called the Buddha Bodhi because it enables sentient beings to attain Buddhahood on the other shore.

Compared to the Buddha Bodhi, the practice and realization of the Two-Vehicle Bodhi are very limited in scope. In fact, the practice and attainment of the Path to Buddhahood comprise both the liberation wisdom of the Two-Vehicle Bodhi and the prajna wisdom of the Buddha Bodhi. Therefore, the Bodhi of the Great Vehicle subsumes the Two-Vehicle Bodhi; the practice and attainment of the Two-Vehicle Bodhi are part of the contents of the Great-Vehicle Bodhi. The fruitions and wisdom pertaining to the Sound-Hearer and Solitary-Realizer are both based on observing and contemplating the mundane noble truth about the five aggregates, twelve sense-fields, and eighteen elements, followed by the actual realization that the phenomenal world is only dependent arising without any intrinsic nature, impermanent, changing, devoid of a true self, and illusory. Through the Two-Vehicle Bodhi, practitioners can eradicate their greed for and attachment to the aggregates, sense-fields, and elements and eventually attain liberation. At the end of their current lives, they will no longer pursue the state of intermediate existence and can hence transcend the cycle of birth and death and disappear from the three realms. They will no longer be controlled by ignorance and

karma, and will not suffer from birth, aging, sickness and death. Such is the practice of the Two-Vehicle Bodhi—the Path to Liberation.

The levels of attainment in the Path to Liberation consist of five stages in total, which include the first to the fourth fruits of the Sound-Hearer Vehicle and the Solitary Realizer. That is to say, those diligent practitioners of the Two Vehicles with sharp capacity are able to eradicate the determinative birth and death and achieve arhatship in one lifetime. Even the dullest and the most languid will take only seven cycles of rebirth between the human and heaven realms to reach the edge of all sufferings and become arhats. However, their achievements of cultivation are insufficient to attaining Buddhahood. They have to give up the small vehicle for the great vehicle, complete the fifty-two stages of attainment within the Buddha Bodhi in the right sequence, and perfect the knowledge-of-all-aspects before they can reap the supreme Bodhi fruit of the Buddha ground.

How does one practice and realize the Path to Buddhahood? Let us start with the story about the birth of Buddha Sakyamuni in India about twenty-five hundred years ago. There were many auspicious signs upon His birth, including the six kinds of shaking of the earth, omnipresent clear light, and so forth. According to the sutra, immediately after birth, the new born Prince Siddhartha stood up on his own without the help of others, walked seven steps in each of the four cardinal directions of east, west, north, and south, pointed one hand to the heaven and the other to the earth, and firmly proclaimed: “In heavens above and worlds below, I alone am the honored one.” This phrase refers to the Tathagatagarbha, which each and every one of us primordially possesses!

What is the evidence that every one of us possesses the Tathagatagarbha? Let us take the example of a couple who have given birth to multiple children. One may reason that since the children all come from the same gene pool, they should all look identical, just like products coming out of a same production line. However, we can all see that it is not the case in reality. Each sibling has different physical appearance, personality, habits, interests, health condition, fortune, intelligence, and views. Why is that so? That is because everyone’s Tathagatagarbha contains and stores one’s own karmic seeds collected from countless lifetimes, which result in one’s unique appearance and characteristics in this lifetime. For example, some people are gentle and kind while some are irritable and mean; some live a long and healthy life while some are born sickly or even with disabilities. Examples like these are so prevalent and innumerable.

People with wholesome root will reflect, “What is the true reason for all these differences?” Others will just moan and groan, “God is unfair to me,” and will always feel victimized and complain cynically. In reality, these are the results of the karmic power of cause-and-effect due to the actions committed by these individuals over their innumerable past lifetimes. For instance, those who were compassionate, refrained from killing, and cared for other sentient beings in past lives will be rewarded with health, longevity, love, and respect from others in the present life. Those who had good relationships with other people in past lives will receive helps from benefactors frequently in this life. Those who were generous in charitable giving in past lives will enjoy abundant material wealth in the present life. Those who were honest and did not utter false speech in past lives will be trustable and convincing in this life.

Where are these causes-and-effects stored? They are all stored in the Tathagatagarbha; it stores the seeds of all of our physical, verbal and mental actions from our countless past lives. When the conditions are ripe in this lifetime, these seeds will manifest and enable us to receive the corresponding retributions of pain or happiness. This eighth consciousness—the Tathagatagarbha—exists primordially in all sentient beings. It does not come into being through practice. Although its primordial nature is pure, it contains all kinds of tainted seeds. It is only through practice that one can purify these tainted seeds and further bring forth the prajna wisdom. The prajna wisdom here refers to the wisdom obtained from personally realizing the eighth consciousness and experiencing its numerous attributes. Hence, it is vital for Mahayana practitioners to have correct knowledge and understanding of the various attributes of the Tathagatagarbha.

The Tathagatagarbha has many different attributes. The first is being “neither ceasing nor permanent.” The mind entity of the Tathagatagarbha has existed since countless times and will continue to exist for countless future times. Its name will be changed into “true suchness” when one attains Buddhahood. This mind entity is inextinguishable so it will never cease to exist. However, this mind entity of the Tathagatagarbha possesses the maturational nature of karmic seeds, which causes us to undergo, life after life, the fruits of various retributions that result from our past wholesome and unwholesome deeds. Because of the maturation of the retributive fruits, there must be retributive rebirths that cause the seeds to continue to flow out, thus enabling the eight consciousnesses along with their mental factors to continue to operate. Therefore, the Tathagatagarbha is said to be not permanent.

The second attribute is being “neither empty nor existent.” The Tathagatagarbha has its true intrinsic nature; however, it is invisible to the sentient beings who are hindered by their ignorance. They are only aware of and live within the seeing, hearing, feeling, or knowing functions of the six consciousnesses and are totally oblivious to the meritorious functions and benevolence of the Tathagatagarbha. Because it has a real essence, it is said to be non-empty. However, it does not have a concrete shape or form, just like the infinite space, and is therefore said to be not existent.

The third attribute is being “neither arising nor ceasing.” The essence of the Tathagatagarbha has always existed, is inextinguishable, will never age or die, and is, therefore, unborn—hence, the attribute of being “neither arising nor ceasing.” This is exactly the meaning of “neither arising nor ceasing, neither defiled nor immaculate” described in the renowned Heart Sutra. It is because of this neither arising nor ceasing nature of the Tathagatagarbha that we are able to be born incessantly from the Tathagatagarbha life after life. When one dies, one’s Tathagatagarbha will generate an intermediate body; as one holds onto the fertilized egg of one’s future parents, the next round of rebirth begins. It is because of the neither arising nor ceasing nature of the Tathagatagarbha that sentient beings undergo births and deaths.

The forth attribute is being “neither identical nor different.” Although our five aggregates are generated by our Tathagatagarbha, we cannot say that the five aggregates are the Tathagatagarbha. If the five aggregates were the Tathagatagarbha, then when we die, this Tathagatagarbha would also die and cease to exist. In reality, it will not and hence they are not identical. Yet, apart from the five aggregates, the Tathagatagarbha is nowhere to be found. For instance, in the Chan school, enlightenment is referred to having found the Tathagatagarbha in our own five aggregates. Therefore, the Tathagatagarbha and our five aggregates exist like one. Thus, they are called neither identical nor different from each other.

The fifth attribute is being “neither mutable nor immutable.” The mind entity of the Tathagatagarbha is changeless and its nature is forever pure and clean. It is pure when we are reborn in the heavens; it is still pure when we fall into the three evil realms and experience painful retributions. Therefore, it is changeless in its intrinsic nature. However, within this unchangeable entity, there are wholesome and unwholesome, pure and tainted, flawed and flawless dharma seeds that are constantly arising and ceasing, increasing and decreasing. Therefore, it is said to be not unchangeable. It is precisely because the Tathagatagarbha is not unchangeable that we can and need to practice. If the

tainted seeds stored in our Tathagatagarbha could never be purified despite our diligent practice, then all practices would be futile; then who would want to practice?

The sixth attribute is being “neither functional nor non-functional.” The Tathagatagarbha does not see, hear, feel, or discern any of the six sense objects—it does not discriminate the six sense objects—hence, it is said to be not functional. On the other hand, the Tathagatagarbha continuously and tirelessly helps us at all times, whether we are awake or asleep. Therefore, it is not non-functional.

Due to its attributes of being neither ceasing nor permanent, neither empty nor existent, neither arising nor ceasing, neither identical nor different, and so forth, the Tathagatagarbha is called “the middle way.” In fact, all enlightened Mahayana practitioners are able to elicit their prajna wisdoms and cultivate the Path to Buddhahood step by step only because they have realized the Mind of reality—the eighth consciousness. In the tripitaka and the twelve divisions of scriptures, the World Honored One established various names for the Tathagatagarbha based on its different attributes. Some of the names are specified as follows:

(1) Mind

All our wholesome, unwholesome, tainted and pure actions are collected and stored by the mind entity of the Tathagatagarbha, thus instilling the seeds that are stored in it; the Tathagatagarbha is hence called a mind. Because of this mind, there are sentient beings in the three realms and six paths of rebirth, and because of this mind, the material world undergoes the cycle of formation, dwelling, disintegrating, and vacating. For instance, when one performs wholesome actions, one will be reborn into the desire heavens to enjoy happiness; on the other hand, when one performs unwholesome deeds, or defamed the Dharma or sangha, one will be reborn into the three evil paths to suffer. All these are appropriately established due to the presence of the Tathagatagarbha.

(2) Basis of the Object Known

The six evolving consciousnesses of sentient beings, which perform the functions of seeing, hearing, feeling and knowing, and the seventh consciousness *manas*, which continuously examines, assesses, and makes

decisions, all depend on the eighth consciousness—Tathagatagarbha—to exist. All the dharmas that are known to and perceived by the seven evolving consciousnesses also rely on the Tathagatagarbha. Without the Tathagatagarbha, nothing would work, and a person would be as good as dead. This is why the Tathagatagarbha is also named the “basis of the object known,” the basis of the seven evolving consciousnesses.

(3) The Seed Consciousness

The mind entity of the Tathagatagarbha does not discriminate or select. It just automatically and universally stores the karmic seeds of all our defiled mundane dharma and transmundane dharma. This is why it is called the seed consciousness. If the eighth consciousness could discriminate and choose among the seeds, it would only want to keep the wholesome karmic seeds and discard the unwholesome ones. If this were the case, then there would only be the three good paths and the three evil paths would not exist. But the reality is that there are the six paths of rebirth, each corresponding to specific karmic retribution. This is due to the non-discriminating, non-selecting, all-inclusive natures of the Tathagatagarbha that stores all our karmic seeds from all of our past actions. Hence, the Tathagatagarbha is called the seed consciousness.

(4) Appropriating Consciousness (*ādāna* consciousness)

From the stage of an ordinary being to the stage of Buddhahood, the Tathagatagarbha holds and stores every individual’s karmic seeds and the physical body so that they will not be lost, scattered or destroyed. Hence, it is also called the *ādāna* Consciousness.

(5) *Ālaya* Consciousness

In the causal ground, the Tathagatagarbha has the attributes and functions of being able to store, being the storage, and grasping for the self. It stores all the defiled dharma seeds so they will not be lost, thus inducing flawed karmic seeds of determinative birth and death and therefore causing sentient beings to incessantly undergo cyclic existence within the three realms. For all sentient beings ranging from ordinary beings through the nobles of the three vehicles, except the arhats, the eighth consciousness

still possesses the *ālaya* nature, which causes cyclic karmic rebirths, and hence it is called the *ālaya* consciousness.

(6) Maturational Consciousness

For all ordinary beings, arhats, solitary-realizers, and bodhisattvas, whether they have already eliminated their determinative birth and death or not, the mind entity of their Tathagatagarbha still stores the maturational karmic seeds of wholesome and unwholesome deeds. These seeds will induce future retributive fruits, hence the name of maturational consciousness.

(7) Immaculate Consciousness or True-suchness of the Buddha ground

Having completed the fifty-two stages of practice on the Path to Buddhahood, Buddhist disciples have transformed all the flawed dharma seeds in their Tathagatagarbha of the ordinary ground into flawless, pure dharma seeds and eradicated both the determinative birth and death and the transfigurational birth and death. That is to say, the seeds stored in the Tathagatagarbha will no longer change; the Tathagatagarbha becomes the eighth consciousness of the Buddha ground, which is also called the true-suchness or immaculate consciousness.

This Mind of reality—eighth consciousness—has always been with us at all times, starting at the causal ground to the stage of attaining Buddhahood. Although the Buddha has established various names for the True Mind according to the stages of our attainment and the extent to which the defilements and vexations are eliminated, it is nevertheless the same True Mind—the eighth consciousness, the Tathagatagarbha. Similar to the situation of a person throughout his whole life from birth to old age to death, he can play different roles and be addressed differently. He is his parents' son when he was young, becomes someone's husband when he is married, becomes someone's father when he has children, and eventually becomes someone's grandfather. Although he is addressed differently, he is nevertheless the same person. Similarly, although the Tathagatagarbha goes by various names in the sutra, they do not refer to different minds. There is only one mind—the eighth consciousness, the Tathagatagarbha—the Mind of reality.