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The Buddha as I: Selfhood and Identity in *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-sūtra*

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Abstract

This article undertakes the issue of the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of *tathāgatagarbha*, seen as a form of selfhood. Its task lies in outlining the methods employed to disclose *tathāgatagarbha* as a "true" and "original" – but also utterly Buddhist – form of self. In the first part of the article I demonstrate the stance of *sūtras* from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group, in which *tathāgatagarbha* is bluntly termed *ātman*, and which posit that all ideas of selfhood are derivatives of the notion of *tathāgatagarbha*. In the second part, where the *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra* is taken under consideration, I introduce an interpretative strategy that shows how this scripture establishes *tathāgatagarbha* as an enduring self. This is done mainly by assigning the *tathāgatagarbha* a function of sustaining the diachronic coherence of sentient beings in *saṃsāra*. Consequently, *tathāgatagarbha* can be viewed as a "prototype" for the idea of "base consciousness" (*ālayavijñāna*). The final part of the article is built around the question of why *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra* warns against ascribing the label *ātman* to *tathāgatagarbha*.

Key words: Buddhism, Mahāyāna, self, buddha nature, *ātman*, *tathāgatagarbha*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra*
Słowa kluczowe: buddyzm, mahajana, jaźń, natura buddy, *ātman*, *tathāgatagarbha*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, *Śrīmālādevī-sūtra*

1. Introduction*

According to a widely accepted classification, the most important *sūtras* of the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition can be assigned to two main groups. The first consists of the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* (TGS), the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* (AAN),

* I would like to express my gratitude to Chris V. Jones from the University of Oxford for sending me his unpublished conference paper (*The Term Ātman in Mahāyāna Tathāgatagarbha Thought*). Parts 2 & 3 of this article follow his research presented therein. (An expanded version of Jones's paper, entitled *The Self-Aggrandizing Vehicle: Tathāgatagarbha, Tīrthikas, and the True Self*, "Journal of International

and the *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-sūtra* (ŚMS). It is assumed that they were created in this very order.[1] The second group of the *tathāgatagarbha* "canon" is named after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (MPNS), and also contains the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (MMS), the **Mahābherīhārakasūtra* (MBhS), and the *Aṅgulimālīyasūtra* (AMS). These scriptures share a number of doctrinal similarities and are bound by a prophecy made 700 years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. It concerns a number of *tathāgatagarbha* scriptures that are said to have emerged 40 years after the passing of Śākyamuni and then disappeared, only to come to light again 80 years before the 700-year mark in the southern part of India, at the time of the Śātavāhana dynasty (48–181 CE).[2]

There are several topics discussed frequently, but in varying proportions, in the *sūtras* of the MPNS group. Among them we can include the notion of the eternity of the Buddha, the secret teachings on the *parinirvāṇa*, and the prophecy connected with it, a discussion on the *icchantikas*, the recognising of Mahākāśyapa as the true heir to the Dharma, and the promotion of faith (*xin* 信) as a means indispensable for achieving liberation.[3] The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* group also shares with many Mahāyāna *sūtras* a general depreciation of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. However, its most striking doctrinal component must be the identification of *tathāgatagarbha* or **buddhadhātu* with *ātman* (*wo* 我) / *ātmadhātu* (*wojie* 我界).[4] The TGS group represents a less unambiguous approach to this matter. This issue will be treated in more detail below.

It must be noted that both groups share a set of ideas that are fundamental, although not exclusive, to the *tathāgatagarbha* "canon." These are the notion of the decline of Dharma (MPNS group, ŚMS, AAN), the idea of *sattvadhātu* (the sphere of living beings equal to *dharmakāya*, AAN, MBhS, AMS), *ekadhātu* (reality as a single realm, AAN, AMS), *ekayāna* (one vehicle leading to enlightenment, MBhS, ŚMS), and the notion of *prakṛtipariśuddhacitta* – an inherently pure mind covered by adventitious defilements (*āgantukakleśa*) (AAN, ŚMS).[5]

Until recently, all claims regarding the chronology of the texts in question were based on the research of Takasaki (1975), who considered TGS, ŚMS, and AAN to be not only closely related, but also the oldest of all *tathāgatagarbha sūtras*. Their relationship seems to be confirmed by *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV), the main *śāstra* of the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition, which quotes them extensively, and in fact builds many of its doctrinal themes around notions drawn from ŚMS. The views of Takasaki were

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Association of Buddhist Studies" 2017, vol. 39, pp. 115–170, appeared when the present study was already completed). I am also very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for many highly valuable remarks and emendations.

[1] According to J.A. Silk, the manner of presentation of crucial ideas (*sattvadhātu*, *tathāgatagarbha*, *dharmakāya*) in the AAN validates placing this *sūtra* chronologically after TGS and ŚMS (*idem*, *Buddhist Cosmic Unity*, Hamburg 2015, pp. 10–13).

[2] M. Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra and the Emergence of Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine*, Hamburg 2015, p. 75.

[3] This is also a strong notion in the ŚMS and RGV (see fn. 40).

[4] M. Radich, *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras* [in:] *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism, vol. 1: Literature and Languages*, J. Silk et al. (eds.), Leiden 2015, p. 269.

[5] *Ibidem*, pp. 269–270.

held up by M. Zimmermann in his influential study of the TGS (2002), in which he argued that this text might be the first to put forward the idea of *tathāgatagarbha* as "buddha within." However, according to the latest research of S. Hodge (2012) and M. Radich (2015), the status of the oldest *tathāgatagarbha* text should be assigned to MPNS. There is strong evidence that enables us to place the creation of the oldest strata of the MPNS at the beginning of the first millennium under the rule of the late Śātavāhana dynasty. This, most definitely, puts MPNS well before any of the texts from the TGS group.[6]

The two bodies of texts are best differentiated by their approach to the notion of *tathāgatagarbha* and by relating this notion to the idea of a subjective principle usually termed *ātman*. In TGS, *tathāgatagarbha* should be read as a *bahuvrīhi* compound denoting living beings having a *tathāgata*, or in fact being nothing other than a buddha. However, in texts which equate *tathāgatagarbha* with **buddhadhātu*, this expression is best read as a *tatpuruṣa* compound denoting living beings in possession of a buddha-embryo, i.e. a separate entity inside beings.[7] The recognition of *tathāgatagarbha* as *ātman* in the MPNS group not only constitutes a substantial departure from the usual Buddhist *anātmavāda* approach, but also differentiates this text from the TGS group, in which such equation is absent. In a *sūtra* as rudimentary as TGS, no explicit mentions of *tathāgatagarbha* as a self are made. The same can be said about AAN. Nevertheless, the question of *tathāgatagarbha* being a kind of *ātman*-like principle is tackled by ŚMS, albeit in a manner different from that introduced by MPNS.

2. *Tathāgatagarbha* as a true self in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* and **Mahābherīhāraka-sūtra*

In MPNS, the idea of "buddha within" (buddha nature) is expressed with the term **buddhadhātu*, which is equivalent to *tathāgatagarbha*.[8] This stresses the connection

[6] The date of TGS was set as some time before 350 CE by M. Zimmermann (*A Buddha Within: The Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, Tokyo 2002, pp. 77–84). According to A. Wayman, ŚMS was composed around the third century CE (A. Wayman, H. Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā*, Delhi 1990, p. 3).

[7] M. Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra...*, pp. 25–27; C.V. Jones, *Beings, Non-Beings, and Buddhas: Contrasting Notions of Tathāgatagarbha in the Anu natvāpūrṇatvamrdeśaparivarta and *Mahābherī Sūtra*, "Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies" 2016, vol. 10, pp. 53–54.

[8] In MPNS the concept of buddha nature was formed partly under the influence of the MMS. It was a process also connected with the change of the authorship of MPNS. In the first phase, the initial group of authors (*dharmakathikas* ["dharma preachers"]) defined the notion of *ātman* as simply the *tathāgata*'s *dharmakāya*, and gave it the characteristics of being eternal, almighty, and unconditioned. According to the theory of Suzuki Takayasu, at that point the *tathāgata* was not yet treated as an individual self. MMS defined *ātman* in the same manner, but added the attribute of "non-emptiness" (cf. *tathāgatagarbha* as *śūnya-aśūnya* in ŚMS). Inspired by MMS, the second group of MPNS authors (*bodhisattvas*), having accepted this quality, characterised the *tathāgata-ātman* further as embodied and immanent. Only then was it possible to internalise the tathāgata (or, more precisely, the *tathāgata's* relics) as *tathāgatagarbha* / **buddhadhātu* (see note below), T. Suzuki, *The Recompilation of the Mahāparinirvaṇasūtra Under the Influence of the Mahāmeghasūtra*, "Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies" 2001, vol. 49, no. 2; see

of the said concept with the idea of buddha relics (**buddhadhātu* = *śarīradhātu*).[9] In MPNS,[10] we find an explicit passage that may be regarded as the purest example of assigning the character and function of self to buddha nature. It is a clear reference to the omnipresent topos of *tathāgatagarbha* present in all beings, but covered with various mental stains, i.e. being available, but not (yet) manifested.

> The Buddha addressed Kāśyapa: the true (*zhenshi* 眞實) self (*wo* 我) is the buddha nature (*rulai xing* 如來性). It should be understood that all living beings have it, but in those beings covered with immeasurable afflictions (*fannao* 煩惱), it is not visible.[11]

The pedagogical stance of the *sūtra* is revealed when it explains how the **buddhadhātu* teachings fit into the scheme of the skill-in-means method. It turns out, that – contrary to what might seem intuitive – it is the "orthodox" teachings of no-self (*anātman*) that should be regarded as skill-in-means (*upāya*). It is said that the practice (*xiu* 修) of cultivating non-self (*wuwo* 無我) of all the dharmas was taught by the Buddha in order to teach and guide (*you* 誘) sentient beings (T376_12:0883c02–4). This particular *upāya* is efficient in leading beings to enlightenment, because when practising non-self, they are able to enter *nirvāṇa* (883c04–5). It is then explicitly stated that the doctrine of non-self is an *upāya*, because the concept of *anātman* is named a skilful (*fangbian* 方便) and secret (*mi* 密) teaching, exposed in order to remove the notion of a "worldly self" (*suwo* 俗我). Only after revealing this teaching was the Buddha able to expound the nature of the *tathāgata* (*rulai xing* 如來性); it is this very nature that is termed a true (*zhen* 眞) and transcendent (*lishi* 離世) self (883c05–6).

One may observe here that the "orthodox" view of non-self is helpful insofar as it removes the erroneous notions of a mundane self (i.e. the non-Buddhist *ātman*) and leads to *nirvāṇa*. But for the complete understanding of what (or who) actually enjoys enlightenment it is indispensable to know the true nature of all beings. It can also be inferred that on the *saṃsāric* plane there exists only a false idea of self that must be countered with the teachings of *anātman*. However, on the supramundane level there is a pure form of selfhood: a *tathāgata* enjoying the bliss of liberation. This being so, we must underline that in MPNS the term *ātman* is used to denote both notions of false and true selfhood. Here one must avoid the simplistic conclusion that the tendency to use this term constitutes a kind of "Brahmanic bent" of the MPNS.

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also *idem*, *The Buddhology in the Mahābherīsūtra Inherited from the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, "Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies" 2002, vol. 50, no. 2, p. 1015.

[9] According to the now widely accepted theory of Shimoda Masahiro, the veneration of the buddha relics ([*śarīra*]*dhātu*) in a *stūpa* was reworked by the authors of the MPNS into a reverence for the buddha-principle or nature (*buddhdhātu / tathāgatagarbha*) within all living beings. Some aspects of Shimoda's theory in English are available in S. Sasaki, *The Mahāparinirvaṇa Sūtra and the Origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, "Japanese Journal of Religious Studies" 1999, vol. 26, no. 1–2, pp. 192–193; see also J. Takasaki, *The Tathāgatagarbha Theory Reconsidered*, "Japanese Journal of Religious Studies" 2000, vol. 27, no. 1–2, pp. 79–81; M. Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra...*, pp. 94–95, 159–168.

[10] Faxian's and Buddhabhadra's translation from c. 416–418 CE (*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* [T] vol. 12, no. 376).

[11] MPNS T376_12:883b15–17: 佛告迦葉。眞實我者是如來性。當知一切衆生悉有。但彼衆生無量煩惱覆蔽不現。

It is rather the effect of a conscious strategy of redefining the origins and history of the concept *and* the term *ātman* that enabled authors of MPNS to use it freely. This matter will be discussed below. But first let us turn briefly to another *sūtra* from the MPNS group in order to illustrate a slightly different approach to the idea of *tathāgatagarbha* as *ātman*.

In MBhS, terms like *sattvadhātu*, *tathāgatagarbha*, and *ātman* are used to indicate the nature of all living beings equal in essence to that of a buddha. The meaning of *sattvadhātu* in this *sūtra* is restricted to an essential component (*dhātu*) in beings, and lacks the interpretation as "sphere of beings" so characteristic of AAN.[12] It is therefore not surprising that one of the focal points of MBhS is *bodhi*, understood as the emancipation of a self. MBhS holds that enlightenment constitutes a state of supremacy or sovereignty (*zi zai* 自在) impossible to attain in *saṃsāra*, and subsequently posits that being able to experience such supremacy means having a permanent (*chang* 常) self that undergoes liberation "with a form" (*youse* 有色) (T270_12:296c06–10).[13] This liberation with supremacy always pertains to the true form of self, i.e. *tathāgatagarbha*, which has to be distinguished from a false self bound by *saṃsāra*, and therefore devoid of supremacy. MBhS explicitly states that, as long as beings wander in *saṃsāra*, the self does not attain sovereignty, and for that reason the teaching of *anātman* is needed to underline the lack of a permanent self in the cycle of transmigration (296b22–24, 296c18–20).[14] We can see that this *sūtra*, just like the MPNS, acknowledges the need to posit a permanent self identical to *tathāgatagarbha* and an illusory self which represents the false idea of what selfhood really is, i.e. the buddha (or buddha-embryo) within. Nonetheless, for both texts the *ātman* remains a proper term for designating every kind of self.

3. Mistaken notions of self in *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* and *Aṅgulimālīya-sūtra*

Having already established the proper notion of self and the notion of non-self as skilful means, MPNS goes on to elaborate on the misapprehension of the true self by non-Buddhists. Again it is said that Buddha expounded the doctrine of *anātman* in order to wean people away from the mistaken teachings of the *tīrthikas* (*waidao* 外道) (non-Buddhist thinkers), who accepted the wrong notions of a mundane self (*ātman*, *sattva*, *jīva*) (T376_12:863a7–9). In a parable, the behaviour of *tīrthikas* is likened to that of a woodworm accidentally leaving a trail which resembles real letters (862c15–17). Those who posit an erroneous notion of self are like that worm. By accident they stumbled upon something valuable – the buddha nature, a proper self – but mistook it for something else, i.e. the notion of *ātman*.

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[12] C.V. Jones, *Beings, Non-Beings...*, p. 66. For the idea of *sattvadhātu* as "realm of beings" and its implications see J.A. Silk, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–51.

[13] Translation of Guṇabhadra (T vol. 12, no. 270).

[14] C.V. Jones, *Beings, Non-Beings...*, pp. 69–71.

The latter part of the *sūtra* states that Buddha's original teachings on self were not understood by his audiences. The deluded listeners (*tīrthikas*) misinterpreted these original teachings and gave rise to notions of *sattva*, *ātman*, *pudgala*, and *jīva*, or a self that is like a lamp the size of a thumb resident in the heart (887c9–12). Here it is clear that the teachings uttered by the Buddha were distorted over the course of time. The effect of this distortion encompasses various Brahmanic notions of selfhood, including the ideas of self found in the Upaniṣads. In AMS, **buddhadhātu* is often substituted by the term *ātmadhātu*, *svadhātu*, or simply *dhātu*. The scripture lists many mistaken notions of self: empirical ones (*sattvadhātu*, *ātman*, *jīva*, *pudgala*, *manuja*, *mānava*) as well as more subtle ones (self the size of a thumb, the size of a millet grain, the size of a hem or sesame seed, self as a heart of a lamp).[15]

AMS also presents a parable on the possible origin of all these wrong notions. It involves the son of Buddha Gautama, Rāhula, inspecting water for insects. Looking into the water, he sees something, but is not entirely sure if it is insects or tiny particles of some sort. His behaviour is compared to that of a bodhisattva on the tenth *bhūmi*, who is scrutinising his own nature, and, while trying to understand what he sees, generates many different views. This supports the idea that for the unenlightened beings there is no proper notion of a self, i.e. right comprehension of *tathāgatagarbha*, which is hard to realise (*nanru* 難入) and attainable only for a fully awakened buddha (T120_2:525b24–28).[16] In this parable, we see an alternative source for the various conceptions of self. They are apparently the works of bodhisattvas who try to grasp the idea of *tathāgatagarbha* and teach it to others, but do so incorrectly. All the same, just like in the MPNS, the source of these many notions of self lies within the Mahāyāna. In this way, all the mistaken models of salvation surrounding the various notions of self present themselves as distorted versions of *buddhadharma*.

In the end, investigating the aforementioned *sūtras* leaves us with two conclusions that are valuable for further research. First of all, the concept of self (*ātman*) is an invention of Buddhist *tathāgatagarbha* scriptures. Their authors adopted a highly specific heuristic strategy which assumes that, when it comes to the notion of a permanent self, all non-Buddhist (and even some Buddhist) thinkers are wrong, but ultimately derive their deformed conceptions from the only correct teaching of *tathāgatagarbha*.[17] Secondly, it is impossible for unenlightened beings in *saṃsāra* to recognise a self. The experience of selfhood is available only for those who attain enlightenment. For that reason, i.e. to guide worldly beings to *nirvāṇa* and make them discard all ideas of a mundane self, Buddha taught the doctrine of *anātman* as a skill-in-means.

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[15] *Idem*, *The Term Ātman...*, p. 8.

[16] Translation of Guṇabhadra (T vol. 2, no. 120).

[17] C.V. Jones, *The Term Ātman...*, pp. 9–10. We are dealing here with a kind of revisionism aimed at demonstrating the supremacy of MPNS over competing texts and systems of thought. While the idea of self in living beings is generally upheld, the notion of *ātman* is discarded when seen as something taught by non-Buddhist thinkers, but accepted after being redefined as *tathāgatagarbha* – an original Buddhist invention.

4. The idea of self in *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-sūtra*

As we shall see, the authors of ŚMS are more cautious in applying the term *ātman* to *tathāgatagarbha*, and in this *sūtra* we never encounter a simple equation of the idea of self and the buddha nature, nor an explicit claim that *tathāgatagarbha* is a true self. This, however, does not mean that the theory of self is absent from this *sūtra*. Just the opposite – ŚMS, just like *sūtras* form the MPNS group, posits a self, but does it in a more roundabout way. In this process, ŚMS reveals its distinct character: it upholds the general notion of *tathāgatagarbha* as self, but does so by choosing a different rhetoric and a distinctive pedagogical approach, especially concerning the notion of *ātman*.

To prove the above points, we shall now employ an interpretative strategy that will allow us to read the ŚMS in a manner consistent with the idea of *tathāgatagarbha* as a self. This will be done by analysing and coordinating five separate features of the *sūtra.*

4.1. *Tathāgatagarbha* is the dharma body of buddha covered in defilements

Because of the said reluctance of the *sūtra* to equate *tathāgatagarbha* with *ātman*, we have to base our investigation on the straightforward identification of *tathāgatagarbha* with the buddha's dharma body (*dharmakāya*).[18]

> O Lord, it is so that the dharma body of the tathāgata when it is not free from afflictions is called the *tathāgatagarbha*.[19]

The *sūtra* does not rest with this statement. Elsewhere the *dharmakāya* is given four "perfect qualities" or "perfections of qualities" (*guṇapāramitā*). They are the perfection of purity (*śubhapāramitā*), pleasure (*sukhapāramitā*), permanence (*nityapāramitā*), and self (*wo boluomi* 我波羅蜜, *ātmapāramitā*) (T353_12:222a23–24).[20] At the same time, *tathāgatagarbha* is described as *garbha* of the *dharmakāya* (*fashen zang* 法身藏)

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[18] The English renderings of ŚMS are modified versions of D. Paul's translations (*The Sūtra of Queen Śrimālā of the Lion's Roar* [in:] D. Paul, J.R. McRae, *The Sūtra of Queen Śrimālā of the Lion's & The Vinalakīrti Sūtra*, Berkeley 2004).

[19] Guṇabhadra's translation from 435 CE (T vol. 12, no. 353), 221c10–11: 世尊。如是如來法身不離煩惱藏名如來藏。 D. Paul, *The Sūtra of Queen Śrimālā...*, p. 44. This passage is quoted in RGVV 12.14: *bhagavaṃs tathāgatadharmakāyo 'vinirmuktakleśakośas tathāgatagarbhaḥ sūcyate*. Cf. A. Wayman, H. Wayman, *op. cit.*, p. 98. For Bodhiruci's translation (703–716 CE), being a part of *Ratnakūṭasūtra*, see G.C.C. Chang (ed.), *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, University Park & London 1983, p. 378.

[20] In earlier Buddhist tradition, these four qualities were "distortions" (*viparyāsa*) associated with wrong views. For deluded beings it is a mistake to look for purity, pleasure, permanence, and self in *saṃsāra*. The correct view lies in cultivating the exact opposite notions (*viparyāsaviparyaya*), i.e. the lack of purity, pleasure etc. However, for *tathāgatagarbha* literature the *viparyāsas* are the correct attributes of *dharmakāya*, and as such indicate right views. See RGV I, 35–36 and the subsequent commentary (RGVV 30.9–18). The MPNS also uses the four *viparyāsas*, but ascribes them directly to the *tathāgatagarbha*, which is not surprising (C.V. Jones, *Beings, Non-Beings...*, p. 56).

and the inherently pure *garbha* (*zixing qingjing zang* 自性清淨藏) (222b22–23). Here the two most popular readings of *garbha* are applicable. If it is read as "womb," then the whole compound denotes a living being having a (developed) buddha, and if it is read as "embryo," it denotes a being with the buddha body *in potentia*. Nevertheless, we know for sure that *tathāgatagarbha* is veiled in defilements of an extrinsic nature (222b23–24), so its enlightened features – including the characteristic of selfhood – are not (yet) manifested. Thus the *tathāgatagarbha*, as it constitutes the *saṃsāric* "mode" of the enlightened buddha body, cannot represent a permanent and true self *par excellence*. For that very reason, it is not termed *ātman*, and, by the same token, only that which possesses the quality of self (and functions as such) is characterised as having the "perfection of self." Here, just as with the canonical set of six or ten perfections, *pāramitā* must indicate an utterly refined quality. And just as *prajñāpāramitā* means a perfect wisdom resulting in enlightenment, so *ātmapāramitā* must mean excellence or – to recall the MBhS – supremacy of a permanent (*nitya*) selfhood that enables the enjoyment of deliverance. In this way, by applying the *guṇapāramitās* to *dharmakāya* and avoiding classifying *tathāgatagarbha* as *ātman*, ŚMS on the one hand conforms to the "law" that no self-principle can be recognised in the domain of *saṃsāra*, but on the other distinguishes itself from the *sūtras* of the MPNS group.

Because the first argument presented above is central to the whole fivefold interpretative scheme, it is now necessary to summarise the whole chain of reasoning contained in it. As indicated, ŚMS equates the *dharmakāya*, not free from afflictions, with *tathāgatagarbha*, and also calls the *tathāgatagarbha* a *garbha* of the *dharmakāya*. The *sūtra* predicates *ātmapāramitā* only of the (transcendent) *dharmakāya*, but considering the essential equality between the two, we are warranted in inferring that the text would countenance the predication of *ātmapāramitā* of (phenomenal) *tathāgatagarbha* as well, providing that this "perfection" would be understood as not apparent. That being said, it has to be noted that the *sūtra*'s treatment of the idea of self cannot be apprehended without referring to its description of the paradoxical pure-but-impure nature of *tathāgatagarbha* (222b23–24). This in turn must be understood in the light of a distinction between the ontological and epistemological levels. Thus it is essential to clarify that on the ontological level, ŚMS presupposes the existence of *one* real principle ("buddha nature").[21] Only when we turn to the domain of epistemology may the differentiation of this principle into its transcendent/*nirvāṇic* (pure) and phenomenal/*saṃsāric* (impure) aspect take place. Thus the *tathāgatagarbha-cum-dharmakāya* is pure and equipped with *ātmapāramitā* only when *perceived* by enlightened beings, but when the unenlightened beings – without resorting to faith[22] – try to grasp it, they see nothing at all, or mistake their buddha nature for a mundane self – impure and deprived of *ātmapāramitā*. It must be added that all remarks hinting at this seeming duality of the real principle appearing in the pages below should be read according to this logic.

[21] See paragraph 4.2 below.

[22] See paragraph 4.5 and fn. 39.

4.2. *Tathāgatagarbha* is the basis for phenomenal reality

The next step in promoting the idea of self in ŚMS lies in assigning a crucial metaphysical function to the *dharmakāya-tathāgatagarbha* – that of a substratum underpinning phenomenal reality.

> *Tathāgatagarbha* is separated (*li* 離) from the characteristic (*xiang* 相) of the conditioned (*youwei* 有爲). It is eternal (*chang zhu* 常住), unchanging (*bubian* 不變), and for that reason it is the basis (*yi* 依), the support (*chi* 持), and the foundation (*jianli* 建立). O Lord, the *tathāgatagarbha* is not separate, not severed, and not liberated from the inconceivable dharmas of the buddha. O Lord, it is a basis, support, and foundation for the conditioned dharmas that are severed, separate, and different from the dharmas of the buddha.[23]

Here the *sūtra* uses the term *tathāgatagarbha*, but it is clear that – since it is considered unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) and has the many qualities of a buddha – it must still denote the *tathāgatagarbha-cum*-enlightened dharma body. In this passage, *tathāgatagarbha* is established as support for all phenomenal reality: every aspect of the conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) sphere, including living beings, is based on it. The above passage needs to be read together with a different statement according to which all conditioned phenomena are impermanent (*wu chang* 無常) and of a false (*xu* 虛) and deceptive (*wang* 妄) nature, and therefore are not to be considered real (*fei di* 非諦) (221c25–28). Thus, because only *dharmakāya*, being the "sphere of *nirvāṇa*" (*niepan jie* 涅槃界), is truly unconditioned, we must conclude that, according to ŚMS, the *dharmakāya* constitutes the only permanent and true reality. This view seems to have its roots in the thought of the Lokottaravāda branch of the Mahāsāṃghika school. Lokottaravādins were the only school that posited unconditioned or transcendent (*lokottara*) dharmas as the sole truly existing reality. This is important inasmuch as Mahāsāṃghikas from the Āndhra region are the most likely candidates for the authorship of ŚMS and other *tathāgatagarbha sūtras*.[24]

4.3. *Tathāgatagarbha* is the basis for *saṃsāra*. Diachronic factor (I)

Next, the *sūtra* expounds that *tathāgatagarbha-dharmakāya* serves as a kind of platform for the cycle of birth and death of living beings.

> O World Honored One, the cycle of birth and death (*shengsi* 生死) rests (*yi* 依) upon the *tathāgatagarbha*, because the *tathāgatagarbha* is the original reality [enlightenment] (*benji*

[23] ŚMS T353_12:222b10–14: 非如來藏有生有死。如來藏者離有爲相。如來藏常住不變。 是故如來藏。是依是持是建立。世尊。不離不斷不脫不異不思議佛法。世尊。斷脫異外有爲法依持建立者。是如來藏。For this and two other passages translated below see D. Paul, *The Sūtra of Queen Śrimālā...*, p. 53; cf. A. Wayman, H. Wayman, *op. cit.*, pp. 104–105; G.C.C. Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

[24] A. Wayman, H. Wayman, *op. cit*., pp. 1–3; A. Wayman, *The Mahāsāṃghika and the Tathāgatagarbha*, "Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies" 1978, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 42–43; S. Hodge, *On the Eschatology of the Mahāparinirvaṇa-Sūtra and Related Matters*, Lecture held at University of London, SOAS, 2006, http://www.nirvanasutra.net/historicalbackground2.htm [accessed: 16 January 2017]; A.W. Barber, *Two Mahāyāna Developments along the Krishna River* [in:] *Buddhism in the Krishna River Valley of Andhra*, S. Padma, A.W. Barber (eds.), New York 2008, pp. 151–167.

> 本際), which is unknowable. [...] O Lord, *saṃsāra* is the extinction (*mo* 沒) of senses and in the next phase the arising (*qi* 起) of unexperienced senses. This is called the cycle of birth and death. O Lord, the two dharmas of birth (*sheng* 生) and death (*si* 死) are the *tathāgatagarbha*. It is only a convention to say that there is death and birth. Death is the extinction of senses, birth is the arising of new ones. But the *tathāgatagarbha* is not born and does not die.[25]

While the *saṃsāra* consist of a constant repetition of arising and extinction of dharmas, the *tathāgatagarbha* is something that simultaneously participates in phenomenal reality ("Birth and death are the *tathāgatagarbha*") and transcends it ("The *tathāgatagarbha* is not born and does not die"). In other words, it serves as an alternative designation for the whole reality, perceived here in two aspects, i.e. the cycle of birth and death and *nirvāṇa*. Naturally, the view expressed in the above passage is one of the existence of a sole permanent principle: the buddha. From the standpoint of the ultimate (*paramārtha*) – and when we bear in mind the duality of conditioned (unreal) and unconditioned (real) – the participation of *tathāgatagarbha* in the transmigratory cycle is just as illusory as that cycle itself, and appears as something performed only for the sake of beings entrapped in it. However, for those beings who believe in it, *tathāgatagarbha* is the buddha-element within that serves as a platform for the process of renewing of sense organs in repeated existences. This allows us to call *tathāgatagarbha* a diachronic principle sustaining the identity of living beings in the transmigratory cycle.

4.4. *Tathāgatagarbha* is that which strives for *nirvāṇa*. Diachronic factor (II)

In order to keep a balanced account of the *tathāgatagarbha* as a self, the *sūtra* also accentuates its psychological side.

> If there were no *tathāgatagarbha*, there would be no detest (*yan* 厭) for pain and pleasure (*kule* 苦樂), nor a wish (*qiu* 求) for *nirvāṇa*.[26]

Here we find justification for positing *tathāgatagarbha* as an element upon which world weariness and desire for salvation is imprinted. Its existence is necessary because the mental components of a living being are of momentary nature and it is impossible for them to be sufficiently affected with suffering. These mental elements are listed as seven dharmas (*qi fa* 七法): six sense consciousnesses (*liushi* 六識) and the accompanying knowledge of the mental phenomena (*xinfa zhi* 心法智) (222b16–17). It turns out that *tathāgatagarbha* fulfils the function of self not only

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[25] ŚMS T353_12:222b05–10: 世尊。生死者依如來藏。以如來藏故。說本際不可知。世尊。[...] 世尊。生死。生死者。諸受根沒。次第不受根起。是名生死。世尊。死生者此二法是如來藏。世間言說故。有死有生。死者謂根壞。生者新諸根起。非如來藏有生有死。

[26] ŚMS T535_12:222b14–15: 若無如來藏者。不得厭苦樂求涅槃。Quoted in RGVV 36.1–2, but the *śāstra* is more elaborate. It says that without the *tathāgatagarbha* there would be no desire (*icchā*) and no wish (*prārthanā*) for *nirvāṇa*, nor a vow (*praṇidhi*) for it. It also clarifies that "desire" denotes here the "lack of cowardliness" (*asaṃkoca*) in attaining the intended object, "wish" means "searching for" (*parimārgaṇa*), and "vow" stands for "will" (*cetanā*) of the mind (36.5–7).

in the way discussed above, but also as a principle consciously striving for a way to end suffering.

From the previous analysis (4.1–4.4), we can conclude the following. On the ontological level, *tathāgatagarbha* constitutes all reality in two aspects. This entails its diachronic function as a factor not only supporting the cycle of rebirth, but also making it possible to keep the identity of beings in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. On the psychological level, *tathāgatagarbha* is responsible for seeking enlightenment and carrying the incentive of further practice into the next life. In other words, it is the buddha *in potentia* that strives to attain the developed form of *dharmakāya*.

As a permanent factor, *tathāgatagarbha* seems to operate beyond the five *skandhas*, and as such has no counterpart in the thought of early Buddhism. However, on the *saṃsāric* level it could be interpreted as assuming the diachronic function of mind (*citta*) or consciousness (*vijñāna*). Such a function of consciousness was known already in the early Buddhist *nikāyas*. In the context of the law of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), it is sometimes stated that "name and form" (*nāmarūpa*) and *viññāṇa* condition each other, and as such constitute a basis for the subsequent existence (SN II, 104).[27] Elsewhere it is said that *viññāṇa* is a factor connecting the previous life to a present one, because by entering the mother's womb it causes *nāmarūpa* to be reborn (DN II, 63).[28] In the same vein, SN II, 65 explicitly states that renewed existence in the future is caused by an established consciousness.[29] A similar diachronic function is given to *citta*. In SN V, 369–370 a certain Mahānāma is reassured by the Buddha that his mind, refined by practice, will "go to distinction" after his death.[30] These two factors, however, have a feature that differentiates them from *tathāgatagarbha*. Even if they are responsible for future rebirths, *viññāṇa* and *citta* are dependent on *nāmarūpa*, and are thus devoid of permanence. Being subjected to constant change, they are not to be identified with a stable transmigrating principle, such as *ātman*.[31] As we have seen, the *tathāgatagarbha* – unconditioned, equipped with perfections of permanence and self – escapes such limitations.

In AAN, a different *sūtra* from the TGS group, the diachronic function of *tathāgatagarbha* is presented in a much simpler and direct way. AAN directly equates *tathāgatagarbha* with the enlightened body of the buddha,[32] and declares that when the *dharmakāya* in a state of defilement comes and goes through life and death (往來生死, *gaticyutyupapattiṣu saṃcaran*) from beginningless (*anavarāgra*) times, it is termed (living) beings (*sattvadhātu*) (T668_16:467b06–08).[33] The further part of this passage, which concerns *tathāgatagarbha* in beings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas, is cited in full by RGVV 40.16–41.5, but not commented upon. It seems that RGV

[27] B. Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston 2000, p. 602.

[28] M. Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston 1995, pp. 225–226.

[29] B. Bodhi, *op. cit*., p. 576.

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 1808.

[31] Tse-fu Kuan, *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism*, London & New York 2008, pp. 123–124.

[32] In Bodhiruci's translation (T vol. 16, no. 668), AAN 467a18–19: 如來藏者即是法身。 "*Tathāgatagarbha* is precisely the dharma body" (quoted in RGVV 2.11–13); see J.A. Silk, *op. cit*., p. 94.

[33] Quoted in RGVV 40.16–18, see *ibidem*, pp. 103–104.

in general is not especially concerned with the issue at hand. However, it does cite another passage with a similar overtone. It comes from a certain *Ṣadāyatanasūtra*, now lost. This text mentions a germ (*gotra*)[34] which from beginningless times (*anādikālika*) moves through *saṃsāra*, assuming different forms of living beings with six sense organs (55.16–17).

Since the *tathāgatagarbha* in ŚMS works as a self responsible for the continuity of existence, it clearly shares some features with the Yogācāra concept of "storehouse consciousness" (*ālayavijñāna*). *Tathāgatagarbha*'s function as the foundation for conditioned dharmas resembles *ālayavijñāna* as a "storehouse" of sensory input and karmic dispositions that serve as a source for the projection of phenomenal reality. This fact is well illustrated in a much later *sūtra*, the *Laṅkāvatāra*, a scripture that famously conflates the two ideas in question. The said process is reflected in the Chinese translation of this text, which uses *zang* 藏 for both *tathāgatagarbha* (*rulaizang* 如來藏) and *ālayavijñāna* (*shizang* 識藏).[35] However, taking only the early Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha scriptures (*Yogācārabhūmi*, *Saṃdhinirmocana*, RGV) into consideration, these two concepts can be differentiated in clear terms.[36] *Tathāgatagarbha* is unconditioned, inherently pure, and serves as a basis for all phenomenal reality. *Ālaya*, while serving as a similar kind of foundation, is nevertheless dependent on the remaining seven consciousnesses and inherently stained. Its purification, known as the "transformation of the basis" (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*), means a radical change of *ālaya*'s character, while in the context of *tathāgatagarbha āśrayaparivṛtti* it indicates only a refinement of the very same permanent principle (RGVV 21.9–10).[37] Moreover, whereas in the early buddha nature literature the diachronic function of *tathāgatagarbha* adds to its overall characteristic as a self, in the context of Yogācāra interpreting *ālayavijñāna* as self is considered a serious error of the distorted mind (*kliṣṭamanas*). This feature is a good touchstone for differentiating both systems of thought in the era before the fourth or fifth centuries CE, when they were first synthesised in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*.

4.5. *Tathāgatagarbha* is not a mundane self

We must now turn to the last step in the proposed fivefold strategy, which allows us to interpret *tathāgatagarbha* as self in ŚMS. Having characterised it as a permanent world-weary and enlightenment-seeking principle, the *sūtra* warns against recognising *tathāgatagarbha* as a notion equal to various conceptions of selfhood, such as *ātman* (*wo* 我), living being (*zhongsheng* 衆生), soul (*ming* 命), and person (*ren* 人)

[34] In RGV the term *gotra* is often used to mean "cause" (*hetu*), e.g. in I, 150 where it is said to be the element from which the three bodies of the buddha are obtained. In this aspect, *gotra* clearly corresponds with (*tathāgata*)*garbha* as *hetu* of future buddhahood, e.g. in I, 27–28.

[35] D. Paul, *The Concept of Tathāgatagarbha in the Śrīmālādevī Sūtra (Sheng-man Ching)*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society" 1979, vol. 99, no. 2, p. 192.

[36] For an account of the early sources on *ālayavijñāna* see W.S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious*, London 2003, pp. 91–127.

[37] Cf. J. Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga* (*Uttaratantra*), Rome 1966, p. 187, fn. 6.

(T353_12:222b19–20). It could be argued that the sole fact of correlating the wrong notions of selfhood, especially *ātman*, with the *tathāgatagarbha* may imply that there must be a fundamental similarity (of function) between them. Thus a warning against the possibility of confusing them. Of course, it has to be asked why ŚMS negates *tathāgatagarbha* the quality of *ātman*, while assigning the perfection of self to the enlightened buddha body.

As we have seen, MPNS and MBhS state that there is a "Buddhist self," and are in agreement that this self is transcendent, which means that it is of purely *nirvāṇic* character and is to be recognised only by enlightened beings. Therefore, according to MPNS, the Buddha taught the principle of *anātman* as an *upāya* in order to wean people away from the notion of a false worldly self, and only when they were able to accept the higher teachings did he expound the doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* as the true *ātman*. We have observed that MPNS accepts both the notion of a (true) self and the term *ātman* to denote it. But this particular strategy is effective only because in this *sūtra* the term *ātman* was redefined to indicate the correct notion of selfhood, i.e. *tathāgatagarbha*. According to MPNS, the idea of *ātman* was *designed* to mean "buddha nature," but over the course of time it was distorted by the *tīrthikas*, so returning to the use of this term as an indicator of the true notion of self must have felt a fully justified step. However, in the ŚMS – a *sūtra* stemming from a different strand of Indian *tathāgatagarbha* thought – *ātman* remains an iconic example of a mistaken notion of selfhood, i.e. a mundane self. It is an utterly erroneous concept giving a false sense of identity and generating attachment. For this reason, *tathāgatagarbha* is denied the status of *ātman*, and even the enlightened body of the buddha is not termed as such, but is given the *perfection* of self. It seems that this move was dictated just as much by the necessity to underline the transcendence of the true self (*dharmakāya*) as by the need to avoid the use of the term *ātman* for *any* entity. It is therefore justified to conclude that, on a philosophical level, ŚMS conforms to the MPNS notion of the "buddha within" as the true self of living beings, but chooses a distinct pedagogical approach resulting in different use of categories.

This attitude is very much in tune with the *sutra*'s overall inclination towards presenting its essentially non-dualistic teaching through antithetical categories. This strategy primarily uses the opposition between impure and pure. The impure is always bonded with the *saṃsāric*, whereas the pure is always *nirvāṇic*. And so ŚMS contrasts the conditioned, impermanent and false with the unconditioned, permanent and true,[38] the latent state of ignorance (*wuming zhudi* 無明住地, *avidyāvāsabhūmi*) with the buddha's wisdom (220a12–15), the ultimate refuge (Buddha) with the limited refuges (Dharma and Saṅgha) (221a02–18),[39] and the lack of self with the perfection of self. A special case is made of the pair *tathāgatagarbha* / *dharmakāya*: both are inherently pure, and differentiated only by the unreal adventitious defilements[40]

[38] In the context of the only unconditioned and thus permanent & true Noble Truth of the extinction of suffering: ŚMS T353_12:221c25–28, 222a01–03.

[39] See also RGV I, 20–21 and commentary.

[40] The inability of unenlightened beings to understand this paradox is a strong notion running through ŚMS and RGV. See ŚMS T353_12:222c03–07 (also RGV I, 25 and subsequent commentary [RGVV

which assign them to the pure or impure realm. Thus the *dharmakāya* working (as *tathāgatagarbha*) within *saṃsāra* is not-self, but its full form of a permanent self can be revealed through the destruction of taints.

The last step in our fivefold interpretative strategy is closely related to the first. ŚMS warns against equating *tathāgatagarbha* with different notions of self (including *ātman*), but the reason for this is, of course, not the *sūtra*'s denial of a true self, but its insistence on the fact that although the true self is always present, it is unrecognisable on the level of mundane existence by unenlightened beings. Enlightenment, however, which is not a destruction of dharmas, but the gaining of *dharmakāya* (221c07–11),[41] seems to be a realised state of selfhood (*ātmapāramitā*) that enjoys the many buddha qualities. This very state is also the realisation of the wisdom of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in a model proposed by the *sūtra* itself, where *tathāgatagarbha* is interpreted as being free from defilements (*śūnya*), but full of enlightened attributes (*aśūnya*) (221c12–23).

5. Conclusions

While the Indian *tathāgatagarbha sūtras* belonging to the MPNS group are the main exponents of the idea of buddha nature as a true self, ŚMS, coming from a different offshoot of *tathāgatagarbha* texts, can also be interpreted as successfully supporting this claim. Working with slightly different categories and applying distinct hermeneutics to the Buddhist tradition, ŚMS combines the theory of a "Buddhist self" with a more sensitive approach to the conventional *anātmavāda* position.

To "extract" the discourse on self from the *sūtra* it was necessary to introduce a five-step interpretative strategy. First of all (4.1), we have established that ŚMS proposes a fundamental equality between the enlightened body of the buddha, having the perfection of self with the notion of "buddha within" (*tathāgatagarbha*), being a "mode" of the buddha body in *saṃsāra*. This, however, does not mean that *tathāgatagarbha* constitutes a mundane self in the phenomenal realm, because its equivalence with the *dharmakāya* on an ontological level is somewhat "nullified" by the cognitive (epistemic) discrepancies between buddhas and unenlightened beings. For this reason, the *tathāgatagarbha* cannot be recognised as wielding the quality of *ātmapāramitā* by beings still trapped in *saṃsāra*. For them, the only way to get in contact with the true self is through faith in buddha's words.

The second and third step entailed constituting *tathāgatagarbha* as a basis for the conditioned phenomenal reality (4.2) and cycle of rebirth (4.3). This choice was something the authors of the ŚMS inherited from their Mahāsāṃghika background. Every aspect of phenomenal, *saṃsāric* reality rests upon the unconditioned and *nirvāṇic*. If what is *asaṃskṛta* is permanent and real, and if the realm of *nirvāṇa* is only a different designation for the dharma body of the buddha, this means that the

21.17–22.4]) where it is said that only tathāgatas and highly developed bodhisattvas can understand this issue. The rest must resort to faith (*xin* 信).

[41] See also RGVV 12.10–14 starting with *na khalu bhagavan dharmavināśo duḥkhanirodhaḥ.*

tathāgatagarbha-cum-dharmakāya constitutes the only permanent reality. This unconditioned principle sustains the conditioned sphere of all phenomena and provides continuation for the illusory human experience as long as it is necessary for the "buddha within" to gain full selfhood.

The fourth step (4.4) of our method established the said principle as that which detests *saṃsāra* and strives for *nirvāṇa*. By combining this idea with previous arguments it was possible to disclose *tathāgatagarbha* as a stable principle asserting the diachronic continuity of a living being and its original identity of a changeless buddha.

The fifth step (4.5) confirmed that in the ŚMS there can be no equivalence between *tathāgatagarbha* as a true self and the idea of a mundane self (*ātman*). What's more, as indicated earlier (4.1), in ŚMS the label "*ātman*" may be used only as a part of the compound *ātmapāramitā*, denoting the fully enlightened buddha body. Thus, while ŚMS recognises the absence of a worldly self just as the *sūtras* from MPNS group, it also denies *tathāgatagarbha* the right to wield the label "*ātman*." This reveals that the *sūtra* regards both the notion of a mundane self and the term indicating it as invalid. Such an attitude, clearly more conservative than the one presented by MPNS, might have been a natural development in the alternative, independent strain of Indian *tathāgatagarbha* thought represented by ŚMS, but it is also possible that the authors of the *sūtra* knew of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine in MPNS[42] and consciously decided not to draw on solutions that seemed too unorthodox.

Finally, something remains to be said about the narrative strategy of ŚMS, which, simultaneously, influences and reflects its pedagogical stance. The *sūtra*'s viewpoint is that of ultimate reality, i.e. *dharmakāya*; this entails a strong notion of "automatism," in which living beings are objectified as "areas of work" for the buddha-principle rather than treated as autonomous subjects.[43] A great effort on their part, except for having faith, is not needed for the plan of salvation to work. This is in conformity with the *sūtra*'s teachings on "one vehicle" (*ekayāna*), according to which all beings possessing *tathāgatagarbha* will surely reach *nirvāṇa* (220c19–26). For this reason, the text may give an impression that ultimately it is the "buddha within" that provides an incentive to undertake practice, strives for enlightenment, while sustaining the identity of beings in consecutive rebirths, reaches maturity by acquiring the dharma body, and overcomes the illusion of phenomenal reality. Such perspective might suggest that beings are deprived of personal karmic responsibilities, but – in the light of the above discussion – it would be better seen as a by-product of the buddha-oriented perspective influencing the *sūtra*'s dominant soteriological and pedagogical import that promotes the certainty of enlightenment for all and the ultimate equality of Buddha and the "I."

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[42] See C.V. Jones, *Beings, Non-Beings...*, p. 57.

[43] Cf. M. Zimmermann, *The Process of Awakening in Early Texts on Buddha-Nature in India* [in:] *A Distant Mirror*, L. Chen-kuo, M. Radich (eds.), Hamburg 2014, pp. 525–527.

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