The use of, and controversy surrounding, the term *ātman* in the Indian Buddhist *tathāgatagarbha* literature.

1.   Introduction

I introduce the *tathāgatagarbha* corpus, together with a brief discussion of how this term – referring to the potential possessed by all sentient beings to attain awakening – has been understood in previous scholarship. I present an overview of teachings concerning the self (*ātman*) in Indian religious discourse, including upaniṣadic and Jain sources, and contrast these with the absence of self (*anātman*) as taught in Indian Buddhist literature. In light of such a contrast, this study is concerned with understanding how some Mahāyānist authors of the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition felt it appropriate to depart from the *anātman* position of wider Buddhism, and declare that the *tathāgatagarbha* can be considered the *ātman* of sentient beings.

My sources are Indian works surviving in Sanskrit, and/or in Chinese and/or Tibetan translation, and I present editions and translations of relevant passages throughout. In each chapter I consider some text that discusses the *tathāgatagarbha* as *ātman*, and assess what each tells us about the development of the relationship between these terms.

2.   The *Tathāgatagarbha-Sūtra* (*TGS*)

The text survives in two Chinese and two Tibetan translations, together with quotations in Sanskrit works. Though the *TGS* does not refer to the *tathāgatagarbha* as a self directly, its recensions reflect broad and diverse accounts of what the 'Buddha-nature' of sentient beings is, and deserves attention as a likely forerunner to discussion of the *tathāgatagarbha* as *ātman* in other sources.

3.   The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-Mahāsūtra* (*MPMS*)

The *MPMS* is the text most associated with teaching that the *tathāgatagarbha* is the 'true self' of sentient beings. Discrete forms of the text, all of which are considered here, are one Tibetan and two Chinese versions, together with several Sanskrit fragments. Following the work of Shimoda Masahiro, I address what may be the earlier stratum of the text's composition, which states that the Buddha himself can be called *ātman*. Later contributions to the text explain how the *tathāgatagarbha* – also here **buddhadhātu* – is in fact the *ātman*, and defend this position against objections that are likely to have been voiced by skeptical audiences. Ultimately the *MPMS* teaches that the doctrine of *anātman* was intended to undermine false notions of selfhood, and reveals that the *tathāgatagarbha* is the self that is manifested at awakening.

4.   The *Aṅgulimālīya-Sūtra* (*AMS*)

The text survives in one Chinese and one Tibetan translation. Virtually unstudied (outside of recent work by Kazuo Kanō), the *AMS* is the doctrinal successor to the *MPMS*. It teaches that the *tathāgatagarbha* is the essence of one's self (**ātmadhātu*), though accepts also that this is the *ātman* as taught by the Buddha. The text calls this the secret import of previous Buddhist teachings, and – with reference to language found in the *upaniṣad*s – that the existence of the *tathāgatagarbha* does not permit 'worldly' ideas of the self. The *AMS* also uses the term **ātmadhātu* to advocate vegetarianism, and contends that its existence does not legitimize laxity in the pursuit of awakening.

5.   The *Mahābherī-Sūtra* (*MBhS*)

Another text heavily influenced by the *MPNS*, the *MBhS* is almost totally unstudied in any Western language, and survives in one Chinese and one Tibetan translation. Strongly influenced by the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra* (*SPS*), the *MBhS* emphasizes that the self of sentient beings is the unrealized presence of a Buddha. Chief among its ideas is that this *ātman* possesses mastery (*aiśvarya*) over the conditions of its existence: a position very much in accord with the presentation of the Buddha in the *SPS*, but in tension with teachings of *anātman*. The *MBhS* is also adamant among *tathāgatagarbha* works that *sūtra*s concerning emptiness are of only provisional value, and articulates that the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha is a blissful state enjoyed by some 'self'.

6.   The *Śrīmālādevīsiṃhanāda-Sūtra* (*ŚDS*) & *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*LAS*)

The *ŚDS* survives in two Chinese and one Tibetan translation, as well as in several Sanskrit fragments. I focus on the available Sanskrit form of the *LAS*, but refer also to its Chinese and Tibetan translations. Both texts respond to confusion of the *tathāgatagarbha* with notions of selfhood, and show knowledge of the *MPMS* and – in particular – its kind of '*ātmavādin*' *tathāgatagarbha* as discussed in early chapters. Whereas the *ŚDS* qualifies that selfhood is proper not to the *tathāgatagarbha*, but only in a perfected form (*ātmapāramitā*) to the *dharmakāya*, the *LAS* contends that the *tathāgatagarbha* couched as the self is only ever a means to appeal to the interests of worldly persons, and in particular teachers from other systems (*tīrthikara*s)

7.   Śāstric Treatments of the *Tathāgatagarbha* as Self

Having surveyed *sūtra* sources concerned with the *tathāgatagarbha*, this chapter addresses the *Ratnagotravibhāga-Śāstra* (with *vyākhyā*: *RGV*): the *śāstric* compendium of *tathāgatagarbha* ideas which shaped reception of this doctrine in India, Tibet, and in much modern scholarship. I rely upon the surviving Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan versions of the text. The *RGV* follows the language of the *ŚDS*: stating that the *dharmakāya* can be called the perfection of self (*ātmapāramitā*), but also – similar to the *LAS* – that the proper character of this 'selfhood' is absence of self (*nairātmya*).

I address also reference to the *tathāgatagarbha* in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and its surviving commentaries, and then the mention of this doctrine in works by Bhāviveka and Kamalaśīla. It is clear that the radical '*ātmavādin*' position of texts like the *MPMS*, though of influence upon *sūtra*s discussed in chapter 6, was either unknown to, or rejected by, later Indian masters.

8.   Conclusions

After summarizing my findings in chapters 3-7, I draw attention to key themes in the development of the *tathāgatagarbha* as *ātman*: in particular repeated opposition to non-Buddhist systems associated with so-called '*tīrthika*s'. With reference to some final, revealing passages drawn from the *MPMS* and *AMS*, I show that the intent of the authors of these works – likely influenced by the *SPS* – was to expand the parameters of the Buddhist *dharma* to account for wider religious discourse concerning liberation, here in terms of the *ātman*. Though this does not explain the origins and intentions of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine *per se*, it does show that authors of this tradition were outward-looking, and that some of them promoted a doctrine couched in the terms of non-Buddhist systems – i.e. of the true self – in order to better compete with ideas that were perhaps growing in influence across the Indian religious landscape during the first half of the first millennium CE.

        Appendix – Designators for Significant Content in the *TGS*

I here present all designators for the significant content of sentient beings (i.e. their *tathāgatagarbha*, or otherwise qualities of a *tathāgata*) found across the four extant versions of the *TGS*. This is for reference when considering how each simile of the text – in both prose and verse forms – in every version of it refers to the precious content of sentient beings (in contrast always to mental afflictions): e.g. *tathāgata*, *tathāgatagarbha*, *tathāgatajñāna*, *jina*, *svayaṃbhūtva*, and many more.

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Note: my publications subsequent to completing this thesis have attended to the important argument of Michael Radich (2015: *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra and the Emergence of Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine*, Hamburg University Press), published at the time of my examination, that the *MPNS* likely constitutes the earliest source of any *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine available to us. Radich's position complements the findings of my thesis, which – apart from knowledge of his imminent monograph – traced the use of the language of selfhood 1) from the *MPNS*, through 2) development by the *AMS* and *MBhS*, into 3) critical qualification by the *ŚDS*, and eventually into 4) a doctrinally sanitized notion of selfhood – in the sense of precisely the absence of self – which we encounter in the *RGV*.