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“All Living Beings Have Buddha-Nature”
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On October 7, 2019, Dr. Michael Zimmermann delivered a lecture at the University of British Columbia titled “‘All Living Beings Have Buddha-Nature’—the Genesis of the Concept of Universal Buddhahood.” Dr. Zimmermann is a Professor of Indian Buddhism at the Asien-Afrika-Institut of Hamburg University. He also worked on a manuscript project of the German Research Foundation at universities in Kyoto and Tokyo for several years and is a co-director of the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies at Hamburg University. The Numata Center has published numerous papers on various aspects of research in Buddhist Studies, which are available for free as PDFs on their website: (www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de).



Figure 1. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission

Dr. Zimmermann's lecture provided an introductory discussion on the concept of Buddha-nature, its prehistory, and the possibility of this as an old Indian idea. His discussion included texts in translation, which provide a first-hand impression of how the concept first manifested, with special attention to the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* in particular.

Zimmermann pointed out that, despite the lack of Indian language sources, it is very possible that buddha-nature originated in India. Two Sanskrit terms that appear in early Buddhist literature closely parallel the idea of buddha-nature: *tathāgatagarbha* and *buddha-dhātu*. There are various interpretations of the term *tathāgatagarbha*. It can be interpreted as a buddha embryo, which suggests the need to continue growing; as a Buddha womb, which suggests a place to grow a buddha; or as a fully fleshed Buddha that is hosted inside all sentient beings and does not require further growth. On the other hand, *buddhadhātu* can be interpreted either as an element of buddha, the buddha mind or a mind of buddha qualities, or as a relic of the Buddha.

Based on the use of these terms, the early evidence of the “buddha-nature” conception have three main characteristics: 1) All sentient beings have some sort of precious element within them, 2) yet they do not know about it and, 3) someone needs to point it out for you so that you can start working on it. Zimmermann explained that this line of thought has two important dimensions: quality and quantity. Quality meaning that you either already are a buddha or have the ability to become a buddha, and quantity meaning that this concept is universal, and all sentient beings are included.

The Buddha did not teach this from the beginning, as evidenced by the absence of these terms in the Pali canon, rather, these ideas came from the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Zimmermann noted that religion itself is never static and must adapt to the needs of the times in order to succeed. Furthermore, new progress in Buddhist studies has provided evidence of buddha-nature philosophy in Theravāda Buddhism. Zimmermann cited a number of recent and upcoming publications on this topic, including Michael Radich’s *The Mahāparinirvāna-mahasutra and the Emergence of Tathagatagarbha* (2015) and Christopher Jones’ *The Buddhist Self: On Tathāgatagarbha and Ātman* (forthcoming November, 2020).

Most religions attempt to address the question of how beings connect to the broader scope of nature and the universe. The 1990s saw a critical movement towards buddha-nature thought. Scholars claimed this was originally a Hindu concept that “crept into” Buddhism. Although “critical Buddhists” is no longer an active movement, this caused other scholars to consider the origins of buddha-nature thought in greater depth. Zimmermann identified a number of sources from the Pali canon, the only Buddhist canon preserved almost completely, that may provide evidence of early thought that was later interpreted as buddha-nature by Mahāyāna Buddhists.



Figure 2. Photo by Carol Lee/UBC FROGBEAR. Reprinted with permission

The *Lotus Sutra* is emphasized as a predecessor of buddha-nature thought. It maintains a paternalistic stance conceiving of the Buddha as a father, a caretaker of all beings, and as someone who never truly dies despite the physical death of his body. Mahāyāna Buddhists explained this as *upāya*, “skillful means.” The Buddha could not tell beings the full truth at the beginning because it would be too shocking for them to grasp. Rather, he introduced various concepts that would later point them to the One Vehicle, that sentient beings can only become buddhas and that *arhatship* is an illusion; a step on the road to true enlightenment. The idea of buddha-nature was later used as an explanation for how all beings could become buddhas, as the *Lotus Sutra* suggests.

Zimmermann focused specifically on chapter eight of the *Lotus Sutra*, and the metaphor of the hidden gem, to further clarify this argument. He briefly discussed the story of the poor man who had a priceless gem hidden inside the stitching of his clothing. This metaphor highlights that the Buddha placed within us the wish to be awakened, we are just unaware of its possibility. Although there is no explicit mention of bud-

buddha-nature, it is evident that this stream of thinking was present. Why would a Buddhist stop at becoming an *arhat* when there is more they could achieve?

Zimmermann then moved on from the pre-history of buddha-nature to discuss it more explicitly in its iterations in the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*. This sutra is thought to represent the earliest exposition of buddha-nature thought. There are nine similes in this text that explain to the practitioner how we are all buddhas; it is just that we are covered by defilements and do not understand the true nature within. For example, there is the simile of the “disgusting lotus” whose petals have not opened, but it requires a person with special vision to see past this ugliness on the outside and realize the beauty and potential hidden within the petals. Each simile emphasizes a different aspect of the *tathāgata-garbha*. Over the years, these ideas developed into a more sophisticated philosophical outlook that we see today. Zimmermann also discussed a number of other similes proposed in the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra* to further explicate the intersections between this sutra and earlier sutras in the Pali canon.

After explicating these points, Zimmermann finished his lecture by highlighting new efforts by scholars, demonstrating that the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra* may not be the oldest text that explicitly proposes these ideas, as most scholars had previously accepted. Radich argues the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* most likely came before the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra* in his 2015 publication. In this book, Radich explains that buddha-nature was “elaborated as a type of soteriologically-oriented, positive substitute for the idea that Buddhas could have their genesis in

an ordinary, fleshly human womb.”¹ As further advances are made on this topic, it is exciting to consider where this research may lead.

Zimmermann’s lecture was followed by a lively discussion with the audience who asked questions concerning the use of the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra* in Mahāyāna studies, instantaneous versus gradual enlightenment as applicable to buddha-nature thought, the reception of buddha-nature in Tibetan philosophy, the ambiguous aspects of buddha-nature, variations of the *Lotus Sutra* in translation, and the lack of homogeneity in the Mahāyāna strand of Buddhism.

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¹ Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, 13.