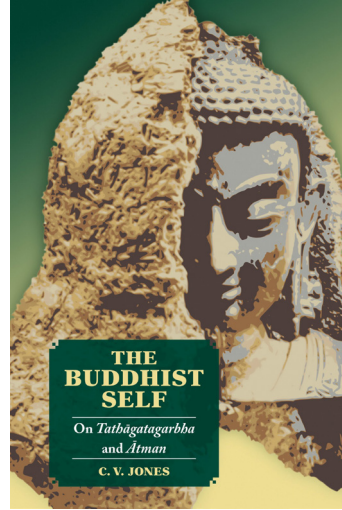


Book Review

C. V. Jones. *The Buddhist Self. On Tathāgatagarbha and Ātman*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2021. xvii + 296 pp.



Buddhist teachings about the self and not-self are part of a struggle to articulate what it is that endures across the life (and over the successive lives) of a sentient being, when Buddhism generally teaches that all things are impermanent (*anitya*), and that nothing should be considered a stable, unchanging core of one's own identity. (2)

With this statement, the introductory chapter (Chapter One) to the present work articulates one of the essential questions of Buddhist thinking, a question that has been debated within Śrāvakayāna and Bodhisattvayāna (Mahāyāna) schools alike, and that goes back to the following fundamental statement by Śākyamuni Buddha that is, among others, included in the *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli canon:

‘Material form, monks, is not self. [...] inasmuch, monks, as material form is not self, therefore material form tends to sickness [...]. Feeling is not self [...]. Perception is not self [...]. Consciousness is not self [...]. What do you think about this, monks? Is material form permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Lord.’

‘But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?’

‘Painful, Lord’

‘But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent, painful, of a nature to change, as ‘This is mine, this am I, this is my Self?’

‘It is not Lord’.¹

rūpaṃ bhikkhave anatta [...] yasmā ca kbo bhikkhave rūpaṃ anatta, tasmā rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattati [...] yasmā ca kbo bhikkhave vedanā anatta [...] saññā anatta [...] viññāṇaṃ anatta [...] taṃ kiṃ maññatha bhikkhave, rūpaṃ niccaṃ vā aniccaṃ vā ’ti. aniccaṃ bhante. yaṃ panāniccaṃ, dukkhaṃ vā taṃ sukhaṃ vā ’ti. dukkhaṃ bhante. yaṃ panāniccaṃ dukkaṃ viparināmadhammaṃ, kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassituṃ etaṃ mama, eso ’ham asmi, eso me attā ’ti. no h’etaṃ bhante.’²

Against the background of other Indian traditions that advocated the existence of an enduring self (ātman), the gist of this statement explains why theories of a ‘self’ were brought into the Buddhist doctrine. It is also explained by the continued doubt that existed concerning the question of the existence of something called a ‘self’, caused by the Buddha’s reluctance to give any definite answer to this question³ as one of the so-called *avyākṛtavastus*.⁴ Already in early Buddhism, in a context in which Buddhist authors had ‘developed a terminology that accounts for transmigration without recourse to the notion of an enduring, unchanging subject’ (4), the Pudgalavādins, ‘adherents of the doctrine that there is a person’, e.g., concluded that the person (*pudgala*) belongs to a special category of neither caused nor uncaused dharmas. Their doctrinal position can be understood as ‘an attempt not to completely break off contact with everyday reality. It is the person who makes mistakes, whose

¹ Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* (Vinaya-Pitaka). Vol. IV. *Mahāvagga*, 20–21. Note that Horner translates *rūpa* as ‘body’.

² Oldenberg, *Vinaya Piṭakaṃ*, 13–14.

³ See, e.g., *Atthattasutta*, SN.IV.400.

⁴ See Oetke, ‘Die “unbeantworteten Fragen”’.

activities evoke retribution, and who ultimately keeps the cycle of reincarnation going'.⁵ This position is in line with the remark made by Stephen Collins quoted in the Introduction to the present work (6) that the early Buddhist model is 'a kind of pragmatic agnosticism, in which the self is not so much denied as declared inconceivable'.⁶ It is in the same doctrinal context of doubt about the true nature of personhood and the question how, when a present factor (dharma) disappears, it becomes connected to the next moment of an 'individual's' life-stream, that the Sarvāstivādins also formulated their peculiar interpretations of the workings of karmic activity (*kārita*) and its relation to personhood.⁷ Also, the development of the *tathāgatarbha* theory, the theory to which the present excellently researched and philologically substantiated book is dedicated, is part of this fundamental debate.

Building on the seminal works of Michael Zimmermann⁸ and Michael Radich,⁹ and on the overview work of Michael Radich,¹⁰ the present study asserts that 'we should [...] understand the *tathāgatarbha* tradition to have begun its life as a Buddhist account of something that deserved to be called *ātman*, and that the early history of *tathāgatarbha* teaching in India entailed an attempt by Buddhist authors to present, and then explain, a Mahāyānist account of what was an enduring concern for Indian religious teachers and adepts in general: the pursuit and liberation of that which could be called the self' (14).

In his approach, C. V. Jones discerns different groups of texts that deal with the *tathāgatarbha* doctrine. One important such group is the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group, texts of which exist in Chinese and Tibetan translations. These texts, most likely our oldest

⁵ Bronhorst, 'Die buddhistische Lehre', 93.

⁶ Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 10.

⁷ Dessein, 'Of Seeds and Sprouts'.

⁸ Zimmerman, *A Buddha Within*.

⁹ Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*.

¹⁰ Radich, 'Tathāgatarbha Sūtras'.

literary sources to study the tathāgatagarbha, are analyzed in Chapter Two. The author shows how, in these texts, ‘the Buddha revealed some account of what deserves to be called the self’ (33). The texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group more concretely reflect that the *dhātu* of the Buddha (the ‘essence’ of an awakened being) abides in sentient beings, and show ‘a preponderance of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* over *buddhadhātu*’, whereby ‘if *buddhadhātu* denotes the Buddha’s abiding relic, and if *tathāgatagarbha* is an epithet of this, then the expression *tathāgatagarbha* most naturally refers to the chamber (*garbha*) for a Buddha (*tathāgata*): the space at the center of a *stūpa*, where lies hidden that which is essential to a Buddha and most precious to the world after his (apparent) departure from it’ (19). That is to say that the expression tathāgatagarbha developed as a complement to the idea of an internalized *buddhadhātu* in sentient beings themselves. This unseen treasure within sentient beings can be called their ‘true self’ (43). This has been interpreted as that the Buddha is permanent (*nitya*) and remains influential in the world. As a corollary of this, the Buddha’s abiding relic merely symbolises the Buddha who continues to be active in this world. The significance of this is that the texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group present an account of the departure of the Buddha from the world, but omit his actual death. In the East Asian context, the impact of this interpretation is, e.g., visible in the Wofoyuan 臥佛院 (Grove of the Reclining Buddha), an important iconographic site in Ziyang City, Anyue County in the eastern part of Sichuan Province, China. As remarked by Mark L. Blum,¹¹ ‘The story of the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa* is consistently described with him lying on his right side, but at the Grove, he lies on his left’. This suggests that when crafting the iconography of Wofoyuan, it was depicted that the Buddha’s death was in fact not a real death, but merely a performance whereby the Buddha’s material body is used ‘as an expedient means to present his Dharma body essence’. The texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group likewise suggest that the Buddha’s teaching about non-self (anātman) was an expedient

¹¹ Blum, ‘The Nirvana Sutra’, 60.

means ‘for the sake of eventually revealing a correct doctrine of the self that must be distinguished from the ātmavādin teachings of rival religio-philosophical systems’ (39). It is the presence of this ‘true self’ Buddha-nature that, in Mahāyāna thinking, explains why sentient beings can, themselves, attain to the status of bodhisattva-hood—Buddha-nature is the necessary condition for awakening. This understanding of the tathāgatagarbha in the texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group is further developed in the *Āṅgulimālasūtra*, a text that is the focus of analysis of Chapter Three of the present work. The *Āṅgulimālasūtra* understands the path of the bodhisattva to be the ‘cleansing and discovery of the *tathāgatagarbha*’ (73). The Buddha-nature is, in the *Āṅgulimālasūtra* presented ‘as the counterintuitive content of teachings about absence of self, which somehow alludes to the truth that something superlatively precious does, imperceptibly, exist’ (82). For the *Āṅgulimālasūtra*, the internalized essence of the Buddha no longer needs the physical stūpa, but is present ‘within’ the body of a bodhisattva (95). In Chapter Four, the liberation of the self as presented in the *Mahābherihārakasūtra* is discussed. It is found that, according to this sūtra, ‘as much as the Buddha himself can be considered a kind of permanent, awakened subject, so too must the Buddha-nature of sentient beings be considered their true self, their ātman, which might someday know this same liberated state’ (99–100). This concludes the first part of this book (chapters two to four), ‘Buddha-Nature, the Self’.

The second part of this book (chapters five to eight) deals with ‘Buddha-nature, Not Self’. Chapter Five discusses the *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanādasūtra*. In this text, the expression tathāgatagarbha no longer evokes the sacred chamber (*garbha*) that was thought to preserve the essence of a Buddha after his bodily demise (123), but it is understood as ‘the naturally pure basis to [sentient beings’] cognitive activities and, moreover, the experience of transmigration’ (128), the ‘substratum that functions unaffected beneath the events of successive moments of consciousness, across one life and those that succeed it’ (136). For the *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanādasūtra*, Buddha-nature is hence ‘nothing “within” a sentient being: it is the enduring basis for the existence of a sentient being that is already, were it not for the presence of afflictions, the “womb” (*garbha*)’

wherein one can find, and from which can emerge, the qualities of a Buddha' (137). In Chapter Six, other tathāgatagarbha sources are discussed. These, more precisely, are the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśapari-varta*, the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, and the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*. In these sources, the tathāgatagarbha is presented as a metaphysical (or 'metapsychological') continuum that underpins successive births and, eventually, liberation (142). Chapter Seven focuses on the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, a text which appears to contain 'a unique collection of thoughts about Buddha-nature', among which 'the sense that the nature of a Buddha, proper to all sentient beings, refers to the mind and its intrinsic purity' (166). It is this understanding of the tathāgatagarbha as conceptualized 'in terms of a ("higher") notion of the self' (177) that becomes the dominant one in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. The eighth and final chapter of the second part of this work deals with the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, a text that is aware 'that tathāgatagarbha has been taught by the Buddha in such a fashion that it resembles the ātman of non-Buddhist systems and finds this to be in need of explanation: such a thing could only have been taught in order to lure "self-obsessed" non-Buddhists into the Buddha's teaching, so that they might later be educated regarding absence of self with respect to all phenomena' (187), a position which is radically different from the position we read in the texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group.

The third part (chapters nine and ten), 'Buddha-nature Reconsidered', first deals with recurring themes and motifs in the discussions on the tathāgatagarbha (Chapter Nine). One such important theme is the complementariness of the concepts of tathāgatagarbha and of the 'one vehicle' (*ekayāna*), concepts that have been intertwined in the development of Mahāyāna literature. The philological analysis of the texts mentioned above allows C. V. Jones to, in Chapter Ten, establish a relative chronology of texts within the tathāgatagarbha tradition. This chronology 'is shaped by the hypothesis that teaching about tathāgatagarbha began as nothing less than a Buddhist account of the self, but in time came to be divorced from its "ātmavādin" form and was reinvented to better accord with other aspects of Buddhist teaching' (229).

Throughout this work, the evolution of the notion of the Bud-

dhist self is explained as a development that started in the texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* group, accepting the presence of the *buddhadhātu* that evokes what was commonly held to reside at a stūpa. The self does here not yet refer to anything about sentient beings themselves so much as ‘the enduring, enjoyable state of liberation that is known to a Buddha’ (230). The Buddha’s teaching of the absence of self is, according to these texts, a means to lead sentient beings away from erroneous notions of worldly selfhood. A logical outcome of this position is that each sentient being must possess ‘some enduring, indestructible nature that already possesses the characteristics of liberated existence but is concealed by a wealth of afflictions that prevent it from being “seen”’ (230). The *Āṅgulimālasūtra* and the *Mahābherihāraśāstra* develop this idea further. For the *Āṅgulimālasūtra*, the tathāgatagarbha is some enduring essence (*dhātu*) that exists ‘within’ one’s constitution; for the *Mahābherihāraśāstra*, the *tathāgatagarbha* survives throughout transmigration and enjoys a state of enduring freedom once cleansed of adventitious afflictions. For all these texts, the *ekayāna* is the instrument through which all sentient beings can attain liberation. On the other side of the spectrum, the *Śrīmālādevīsīmaṇādasūtra* does not refer to an enduring essence, but sees the tathāgatagarbha as a beginningless foundation that underpins both transmigration and a liberated status beyond it (233); it is ‘the mind that is intrinsically pure’ and ‘sits “beneath” the modes of consciousness that account for the entirety of normal worldly experience’ (233). The *Ratnago-travibhāga* can be considered as the definitive treatise on teaching about tathāgatagarbha.

Throughout the above summarized development, it is important to notice, Mahāyānist authors ‘engaged creatively with the range and popularity of ideas and practices from across the Indian religious landscape’ (260). The development of tathāgatagarbha teachings can, in this respect, be seen as an important outcome of the famous saying of the Buddha at the point of his entering parinirvāṇa in Kuśinagara: ‘subject to decay are compound things; strive with earnestness’.¹²

¹² Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, 153.

Striving with (philological) earnestness is also the quality of this thought-provoking scholarly work that situates the development of tathāgatarbha teachings against the background of developments within other Indian systems of thinking, and complements our knowledge of developments within Śrāvakayāna and Bodhisattvayāna thinking, as well as within developments in Buddhist iconography.

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