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# Before the Prajñā Schools: The Earliest Chinese Commentary on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*

by *Whalen Lai*

The earliest Mahayana sūtra probably is the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñā-pāramitā* (The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines; henceforth *Aṣṭa*). The earliest Chinese Buddhist “schools” speculating on the meaning of the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) described by the *Prajñā-pāramitā sūtras* are the so-called “six Prajñā Schools” of the fourth century. They flourished around the time of Shih Tao-an<sup>a</sup> (312–385). These schools’ speculations were informed by concurrent Neo-Taoist elaborations on the significance of nothingness (*wu*)<sup>b</sup>. This led to a fusion of native and foreign ideas, known then as *ko-i*<sup>c</sup> or concept-matching Buddhism. The shortcomings of that approach became evident when Kumārajīva introduced the Mādhyamika dialectics of Nāgārjuna. Accordingly, Seng-jui,<sup>d</sup> in his preface to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* translated by his master, noted:

The matching of (Buddhist and Taoist) concepts flourished, but that also corrupted the meaning (of the scriptures); the six (Prajñā) schools were all biased in their reading (of the middle path) and they could not realize the true import of identity (*chi*:<sup>e</sup> form being identical with emptiness). The principle of *hsing-k’ung*<sup>f</sup> (*svabhāva-śūnya*: absence of self-nature) has not been clarified up to now.<sup>1</sup>

It would be clarified by Seng-chao,<sup>g</sup> a fellow student judged to be the first to master the Mādhyamika critique.

Yet, before the development of the six Prajñā schools, there already existed a Chinese commentary on the *Aṣṭa*, or, to be exact, a running commentary on the first chapter of the *Aṣṭa*,

rendered into Chinese as the *Ta-ming-tu-ching*<sup>h</sup> (The Great Wisdom Ferrying-Beyond, henceforth abbreviated as *TMTC* or *Ming-tu*). The commentary predated *ko-i* Buddhism. The latter was dependent on Neo-Taoism, which took form in the Cheng-shih<sup>i</sup> era (240–248) when the youthful Wang Pi<sup>j</sup> (226–249) discovered the mystique of *wu*. To Wang Pi, *wu* (nothingness, nonbeing) was the basis of all realities, the hidden substance behind all active functions. Following in his footsteps half a century later, the first of the six Prajñā schools, that of Chu Ch'ien (Tao-ch'ien,<sup>k</sup> alias Fa-shen:<sup>l</sup> 286–374) evolved. The *Ming-tu* commentary, however, predated even Wang Pi, and, unlike the Prajñā schools, has survived fairly intact. As such, it should be invaluable for understanding the earliest Chinese appreciation of the emptiness philosophy. Although the existence of this piece is well known and its importance well acknowledged,<sup>2</sup> it has escaped even the most comprehensive coverage of the Prajñā tradition to date. Professor Hirai Shun'ei's<sup>m</sup> *Chūgoku hanyū shisōshi kenkyū*<sup>n</sup> (1976).<sup>3</sup> Though the *Ming-tu* commentary should best be studied along with a full analysis of this first chapter of the *TMTC* and both in relation to the various recensions of the *Aṣṭa*, the historic importance of the commentary for Chinese Buddhism might justify this preliminary and somewhat delimited examination.

Some of the textual problems have been studied by Professor Lewis Lancaster at Berkeley, who drew attention to the *TMTC* as possibly being the earliest surviving text of the *Aṣṭa*.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, the *TMTC* is said to be Chih Ch'ien's<sup>o</sup> translation of the *Aṣṭa* that had been previously rendered into Chinese by Chih Ch'an,<sup>p</sup> as the *Tao-hsing P'o-jo ching*,<sup>q</sup> during Later Han. Chih Ch'ien supposedly worked on this around 222–229 in the South, in the kingdom of Wu,<sup>r</sup> during the Three Kingdoms period. It has been suggested that this *Wu* translation deviated somewhat from Chih Ch'ien's usual style because he was adjusting himself to his southern audience. Lancaster's investigation has shown, however, that the *TMTC* is stylistically not homogeneous. If one puts aside the first chapter, the *TMTC* style is very different from other of Chih Ch'ien's works. Chih Ch'ien usually preferred to translate technical Sanskrit phonetically, but the main body of the *TMTC* settled on translating by meaning instead. Lancaster discovers that stylistically, the text is

much closer to the works of An Hsüan,<sup>5</sup> who was a contemporary of the famous An Shih-kao' (fl. AD. 150). This would push it back beyond the *Tao-hsing ching*, and make it the earliest surviving *Aṣṭa* we have.

Thus, it was not the *Tao-hsing-ching* but an earlier text that Chih Ch'ien reworked. And, Chih Ch'ien never went beyond rewriting the first, stylistically quite distinct, chapter. Now Chih Ch'ien was the first translator to introduce exclusively Mahāyāna works (excepting his rewording of another extant Chinese *Dharmapada*).<sup>5</sup> Unlike earlier translators, Chih Ch'ien was also fully versed in Chinese and was familiar with the philosophic concerns of the time. Thus, he was probably trying to standardize and explain the rather terse and unorthodox translation that is now the *TMTC* proper (minus the reworded chapter one). Chapter one now includes a running commentary, explanatory remarks in smaller print between the lines of the text. Chih Ch'ien's personal remarks on the occasion were probably those sections designated as "(My) master says: . . . etc." within the running commentary. Previously, some had thought that that refers to K'ang Seng-hui,<sup>6</sup> but, considering just the fact that the recorder-disciple also referred to three other texts translated/reworded by Chih Ch'ien, the "master" should refer to Chih Ch'ien himself.<sup>7</sup> Assuming that Chih Ch'ien indeed worked on the text in Wu during 222–229 and that the commentary was interpolated during or soon after that project, it would place the latter before the Cheng-shih era, when Wang Pi made a name for himself. In 229, Wang Pi would only have been three years old. There is no possibility for Neo-Taoism to influence this early reading of emptiness. If anything, it would have to be the other way around. This would rekindle the whole debate on whether the concept of *sūnyatā* (the Indian zero) did or did not affect the new reading of *wu*—up to that time never taken absolutely nihilistically, or as nonbeing (or zero)—by Wang Pi. That, however, is not our immediate concern.

The intellectual clientele Chih Ch'ien and his disciple (i.e., whoever wrote that commentary) were addressing was not Neo-Taoists but the Han Taoist tradition that was interested then in the art of, to cite T'ang Yung-t'ung,<sup>v</sup> *yang-sheng nien-shen*,<sup>w</sup> nurturing life and refining the spirit:

Han Buddhist thought focused on the matter of returning to the source, *kuei-pen*;<sup>x</sup> it locates that source in the mind, *hsin*.<sup>y</sup> Wei-Chin Buddhists and neo-Taoists speculated instead on the principle of original nonbeing, *pen-wu*,<sup>z</sup> as that which preceded all subsequent existents, *mo-yu*.<sup>aa8</sup>

Indeed, when we examine the *Ming-tu* commentary's understanding of emptiness, it seems to steer somewhere in between the old Han psychologism (used since the time of An Shih-kao) and the yet-to-emerge negative ontology (used by the *ko-i* metaphysicians). The intrusion of the former, Hīnayānist, tradition does not compromise in the end its understanding of Mahāyāna emptiness.

Since the *Ming-tu* commentary predated the six Prajñā schools, did it in some sense anticipate those future speculative theses? As we will see, the answer is both "yes" and "no": yes, if we stay with the one-dimensional reading of the Prajñā schools that is still current; no, if we understand the actual new departure initiated by the Hsin-wu (Mind-as-Empty) school. To this we will return after a preliminary analysis of the commentary. The following abbreviations, added to the body of the text, will be used:

T	for the text of the <i>TMTC</i>
C	for the running commentary
—	for any interruption of the text
(p. x)	for the page location 'x' in the Taishō <sup>ab</sup> text (T. 8, no. 225, p. x)

The text is sometimes corrupted; the Taishō punctuation is sometimes wanting. The more important emendations are explained in the notes. I am however grateful to Professor Takasaki (University of Tokyo) for some crucial suggestions and corrections that have been incorporated into this final draft.

## A Preliminary Analysis of the *Ming-Tu* Commentary

### *I. The Concept of Mahāyāna*

The Perfection of Wisdom, which declares the Bodhisattva career to be the Great Vehicle and loftiest of all paths was supposedly taught by Śākyamuni through the medium of his disciple Subhūti, a mountain ascetic, and against the less knowledgeable Śāriputra, who is made to represent the Hinayāna elders' understanding. This legitimation myth was employed by the *Aṣṭa* to ground in the historical Buddha himself what, by objective standards, is a later teaching. The rhetoric here is important, and the point was not lost to the commentary:

T: Śāriputra says, "Well said, well said. The Buddha calls you (Subhūti) the Virtuous One and has noted how the foremost of all paths is laid in mountains and lakes (the homestead of the ascetic). The Bodhisattva so receives this highest of teachings.

C: Subhūti could intuit the subtle (teaching), being versed in the empty and pure path, while abiding in mountains and lakes. It was for that that he was so praised by the Buddha.

T: He would never backslide.

C: The Bodhisattva, upon receiving the teaching, would never sway (from the path); he is said to be abiding in the seventh *bhūmi*.

T: He meditates without ever ceasing. The boundless Transcendental Wisdom is just like that.

C: Ceaseless meditation refers to the intention of the sūtra (teaching); the will (of the true ascetic) never suffers fatigue. (p. 479a3–7)

This reading of the origin of Mahāyāna gives due credit to the ascetic and meditative tradition. The master further noted that the teaching was intended for Śāriputra, too, but he was not equipped to understand it, as shown now by his "regrettably" dumb questions to Subhūti (p. 481a27–28).

The meaning of Mahāyāna as the Great Vehicle ferrying all is explained by the text, the translator/master and the commentator:

T: Subhūti asks, "How do we know that the Bodhisattva indeed rides the Great Vehicle?"

C: My master says: the Great Vehicle refers to the Great Way.

T: "What is Mahāyāna? What vehicle aspires so go?" (sic)



C: It should read: What goal does the vehicle aspire for?  
T: "As the Vehicle is so established, what is it (built) out of?" The Buddha answers, "The vehicle that is the Great Vehicle is the carrier of the infinite. This is because there are infinite sentient beings."

C: The Bodhisattvic will is so grand (in design) that it can so ferry infinite beings.

T: "As to why, this is because there are infinite beings. Therefore, the Bodhisattva arouses his great compassion for their sake, in so preparing the great carrier. Because the Sage, (having transcended) the Three Realms, can know all there is, he can so build the Great Vehicle. The vehicle comes out of nothing (emptiness itself). Why? Because if there is birth and outcome (to its being), that would constitute (a finite) dharma (liable to similar death and dissolution). If there is neither the arising nor the arriving (to its being), then there is no dharma that can be so attained (i.e. so grasped). Therefore, it is said that it is born of nothing and comes out of nothing." (p. 481a 11–18)

The Great Way is empty. It is great precisely because it is empty.

The superiority of the *Bodhisattvayāna* is explained as follows:

T: Śāriputra says, ". . . If one wants to acquire the stage of the disciple (Śrāvaka), he should, upon hearing the sūtra honour and worship it."

C: The (Hīnayāna) disciple aspires for emptiness, desirelessness, and marklessness (*animitta*),<sup>9</sup> but in attaining nirvāṇa, he would strive no further. He has thus failed to look forward to the way of expediency (*upāya*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) that is the Buddha's.

T: "If one wants to acquire the status of the solitarily enlightened (Pratyekabuddha) —

C: The solitarily enlightened is one who aspires for Buddhahood without, however, perfecting compassion or endowing himself with the skilful means.

T: — or if one wants to acquire the status of the Buddha, he should, upon hearing this sūtra —

C: The one who walks the Buddha-path should show broad compassion and render universal help to all; he should not seek enlightenment en route.<sup>10</sup>

T: — choose to honour it." (p. 479a7–10)

The *Triyāna* (Three Vehicles) are apparently regarded serially.

This is because the commentary earlier (p. 479a6) placed the Bodhisattva at the seventh of the ten *bhūmis*, leaving the Arhant below and the Pratyekabuddha and Buddha above the seventh. This classificatory scheme was later employed by Chih Tao-lin (Chih Tun)<sup>10c</sup> to resolve the tension of the Three Vehicles.

## II. The Meaning of Pen-Wu<sup>ad</sup> (Original Nothingness)

If one has to categorize the commentary's understanding of emptiness, one would have to recognize the predominance of the theme of *pen-wu*, a term that characterizes one of the six Prajñā schools to come. Yet, since this text predated Wang Pi's ontological nihilism, this *pen-wu* should be read in terms of returning to what is temporally prior to being, not in terms of what is ontologically antithetical. The term *pen-wu* was used by Chih Ch'ien himself to render *sūnya*, but the psychologism of inward withdrawal is the key exegetical theme:

T: Subhūti knows the Buddha's intention and says, "... As the Buddha has taught the Dharma, there is the learning of it. Sons and daughters of good families, he or she who can understand the meaning of the teaching is verified (in wisdom)."

C: Dharma-learning is learning the Dharma. Understanding the teaching is realizing emptiness, desirelessness, and marklessness. Cessational trance<sup>11</sup> means attaining the meaning of the Dharma. When the defiled outflows are checked, the bondages untied and the Way is gained, that is verification. By saying verification is completed,<sup>12</sup> then one would duly revert to original nothingness. (p. 478c1-3)

Further on, the commentator explains, by way of breaking up *ju-lai*<sup>10c</sup> (for *tatha-agata*: Thus-come), the means to revert to that original nothingness:

C: By *ju* (thus) is meant the thus-ness that is the being (basis) of men (*ju jen-pen*).<sup>13</sup> By *lai* (come) is meant whence (all) come. Man is originally empty and is the same as nirvāṇa itself. The Buddha is he who attains the three dharmas (truths): the emptying of the Three Realms, the cessation of desires, and (the cessation) of

marks. The *Ānapāna Sūtra* states, "What is meant by returning? It is when the five skandhas are reverted, when all (egoistic) views (*dr̥ṣṭi*) are terminated. This is what is meant by the term Tathāgata." The Buddha preaches the pure Dharma only in delight of this original nothingness. The quiescent Dharma is the gift of Dharma. (p. 478c6–8)

The *An-pan shou-i ching*<sup>18</sup> cited here is a basic and popular Hīnayāna treatise on contemplating breaths. It was easily adapted to the Han Taoist meditation vocabulary, so much so that the text itself aligned *an-pan shou-i* word-for-word with *ch'ing-ch'ing wu-wei*<sup>18</sup> (pure, quiet, non-action).

The introduction of that Hīnayāna contemplation here eventually leads to a reduction of emptiness (*pen-wu*) to a peculiar mode of psychic regression. The following at first seems orthodox enough:

T: Subhūti says, "... By 'bodhi' is meant embodying the way, *t'i-tao*;<sup>41</sup> it is empty vacuity, *k'ung-hsü*.<sup>41</sup> The way that is bodhi is likewise empty."

C: My master says, "The mind of the Bodhisattva treads the Great Way. If one hopes to embody the way, both mind and way must be formless. Thus, they are said to be empty and vacuous. By way is meant the empty, the desireless, the markless."

T: What are the dharma-characteristics of a Bodhisattva? It is in seeing that the Buddha Dharma is no Dharma. That is the Bodhisattva.

C: The Bodhisattva is he who, following the scripture's teaching, no longer sees the five skandhas, the six faculties, or the twelve *pratītya-samutpāda*. (p. 478c9–11)

However, in using the twelve *nidānas* to explicate this art of returning to the origin, the commentator employs a schema popularly used at the time to explain the transmigration of the soul.

The immortal soul (*shen pu-mieh*)<sup>42</sup> doctrine had then this rationale, namely that at death the *vijñāna* would survive as the *shih-shen*<sup>41</sup> (conscious spirit; consciousness), which would seek out, by virtue of the leftover karmic impulse (*hsing*<sup>43</sup> for *samskāra*), the next body (*nāmarūpa*), to resume life (*bhava*) again. This schema seems to be implied in the following discussion:

T: The Bodhisattva, in practicing the boundless perfection of wisdom, does not abide in form.

C: He does not rely on the *rūpakāya* (form-body) as his basis.

T: He does not rely on or abide in consciousness while (being involved) in perception, conception, or will (*saṃskāra*).

C: He takes no pride in his *nāmarūpa* (name-body), either.

T: Why? It is because, had he arrested himself in form, he would have generated physical karmic impulses (*se-hsing*:<sup>411</sup> a combination of *rūpa* and *saṃskāra*).

C: At this point, there is the initial germination of life (*bhava*), but not yet body-karma as such (*hsin-yeh*).<sup>410</sup>

T: If further arrests himself in perception, conception, and will, then he will have generated consciousness.

C: He would then further initiate desires and works of evil. Once there is this psychic karmic impulse (*shih chih hsing*:<sup>412</sup> the *vijñāna*'s *saṃskāra*), there is now sentient existence.

T: Such would not be the proper perception of phenomena.

C: This is perception not in accordance with the nature of reality.

T: The boundless perfection of wisdom does not so generate karmic impulses that would require the perception.

C: When consciousness does not generate any physical karmic impulse, it will be receptive to the perfection of wisdom.

T: If such perception is incomplete with regards to the perfection of wisdom, then one does not gain omniscience.

C: If, in the process, there is a hair-breadth of an evil will-to-deed (*hsiang-hsing*),<sup>413</sup> then it is incomplete and one does not attain Buddhahood. (p. 479a23–29)

This seems to be saying that a normal person is reliant on and trapped by his *nāmarūpakāya* but the contemplative may be able to break the chain of rebirth (i.e., return to original nothingness) by severing the karmic will-to-be from the transmigrating consciousness. The doctrine of emptiness in the guise of *pen-wu* was read primarily in terms of a psychic retrogression.

### III. The Understanding of *Hsin-Wu*<sup>414</sup> (Mind-as-Empty)

*Pen-wu* in the *TMTC* was not understood in terms of Wang Pi's ontological nihilism. Similarly, although we find *hsin-wu*

(mind as empty) ideas in the *TMTC*, they should not be attributed to the Hsin-wu branch within the six Prajñā schools. However, many have taken that Hsin-wu school to mean simply “the emptying of the perceiving mind (to effect the emptying of the object-world).” If we follow that simplification, we will miss the import of this school, its innovation in its time, and its basic difference from the naive “mind as empty” doctrine in the *Ming-tu* commentary. The essential contribution of the Hsin-wu thesis is this: it was the first major Chinese school to accept Buddhist *anātmavāda*, when all others implicitly or explicitly accepted an entity called mind, soul, or spirit. T’ang Yung-t’ung puts it succinctly:

(Because of the custom of tracing all to mind,) many Buddhists after the Han would discourse on form as empty (*se-k’ung*),<sup>as</sup> but few would regard the mind itself as empty (*k’ung-hsin*).<sup>at</sup> Note: at the time, the Chinese translation of *anātmān* was by way of Lao-tzu’s phrase, *fei-shen*<sup>au</sup> (“not of the body”). This implies that one should disassociate oneself (i.e. one’s spirit) from the body. This explains the repeated attacks on the Hsin-wu school by all major spokesmen of the time.<sup>13</sup>

The Hsin-wu school was, to wit, “the self (mind) as nonexistent” school. It was ahead of its contemporaries and was, as I have shown elsewhere, the basic antithesis that, in tension with the basic *Pen-wu* thesis, touched off a series of redefinitions of the emptiness *problematik* that resulted in the six-pointed dialectics of the six Prajñā schools.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, when we look at the *TMTC* and the running commentary closely, we find that all poetic relapse notwithstanding, neither the master nor the student would dispense with the suggestion of a psychic core in man (however nebulous that core might be). For example, care is taken to disassociate the good and the bad mind, so as not to destroy the notion of there being a mind. Following a tradition long established by the *An-pan shou-i ching* translation itself, the negative element was assigned to the *i*,<sup>ar</sup> an ambiguous term (covering the Sanskrit *manas*, but possibly here the *cetanā*, or the karmic drive in the mind), in a usage colored very much by a Taoist relegation of *i* (active intention) to secondary status, below the idle passivity of

*hsin*, mind. One would denounce the *i* but preserve the mind. Compare, for example, the *Ming-tu* passage below with the corresponding one in the *Tao-hsing* translation:

a) *Ming-tu*:

Subhūti says, "The Bodhisattva *mahāsattva* courses in this boundless perfection of wisdom and perceives (the Truth) as such. To so perceive it, he would not think that he indeed so understands the *i* of the Way. Why? This is because the *i* is not an *i*. It is a pure *i* that is all-illuminating." The elder Śāriputra asks, "What is meant by there being a *i* that is not *i*?" (p. 478c19–22)

b) *Tao-hsing*:

Subhūti says, "The Bodhisattva practices with the thought in mind; he abides in accordance with that thought. As he practices with that thought, he does not entertain in his mind the idea that he is practicing to be a Bodhisattva. Why? Because as there is mind, there is also no mind." Śāriputra asks, "What is meant by having a mind that is also no-mind?" (p. 425c22–25)

The *Ming-tu* avoids the suggestion of a no-mind mind. In order to salvage a positive psychic entity, it distinguishes a good *i* and a bad *i*. At first glance, this is harmless enough. Even the explanation immediately following the above passage reads very acceptably:

T: Subhūti counters, "If (the *i*) is not a *i*, does it fall under being or nonbeing?"

C: My master says, "The student should know that the *i* is not an *i*. Knowing that, he would no more entertain abandoning it. Then the *i* would become pure and all illuminating, there being no more defilements or darkness." (p. 478c22–23)

It is not that Chih Ch'ien did not know of the no-mind doctrine; he probably had the *Tao-hsing-ching* before him. It is, rather, that Chih Ch'ien, here as well as in another crucial text, proved himself too good an apologist and accomodator to prevalent Chinese taste.<sup>15</sup>

When the rationale implies the use of a certain matrix of words, then one has to wonder if the psychology is not more Taoist than Buddhist:

T: "Can it be attained?"

C: The "it" refers to *i*. That is, can one get at the locus of this *i*?

T: "No, it cannot be."

C: That which is spoken of as cannot be (attained) may not be said to be non-existent; but that may not be said to have a set locus, either.

T: Subhūti says, "If it is not an *i*, then one can ascertain neither its being nor nonbeing. It is not to be gained; it cannot be understood. However, for one who is (psychically) corresponding to it, has he not that *i*, the *i* that is no-*i*?" Sāriputra asks, "If so, what is this non-*i*?"

Subhūti says, "It is *wu-wei*."<sup>aw</sup>

C: By *yu-wei*<sup>ax</sup> (activity, *saṃskṛta*) is meant the mind of life and death. The skandhas give rise to *nien*<sup>ay</sup> (thought). If a person can abandon that one *nien*, he will at once abide in (*wu-wei* that is) *wu-pu-wei*<sup>av</sup> (the nonaction that activates all). By the absence of *i* we mean therefore the abandoning of the thought (*hsiang*)<sup>ba</sup> of life and death. Therefore, it is called non-*i*.

T: "Because there is no more extraneous *nien*."<sup>16</sup>

C: By extraneous thought is meant allowing thoughts (*hsiang*) to be arrested at times in the object realm and at times in the (subject) five skandhas.<sup>17</sup> The *i* that is not fixed on a single point is the "extraneous thought." However, if one were contemplatively fixed on emptiness as such, no longer letting the five skandhas rise, then there would be no more extraneous thought. (p. 478c23–479a3).

The psychology is in part derived from the pre-Buddhist or religious Taoist understanding of *shou-i*, keeping to the one (related to but not to be confused with the homophonic *shou-i*, guarding the intent).<sup>18</sup>

In this Taoist psychology, certain aggregates of terms suggestive of deviation from the passivity of the ideal, innermost mind are treated as negative, as *yin*,<sup>bb</sup> as activating and burdened by the world of *yu* (existents, beings). We find these terms used: *nien*, *i*, *hsiang*—by themselves, in compounds, or in close juxtaposition. Their negation, i.e. *wu-nien*,<sup>bl</sup> *fei-i*,<sup>bc</sup> *wu-hsiang*,<sup>bl</sup> is deemed the preferred state. The fact that they over-

lap with possible Sanskrit counterparts in Chinese translation (i.e. *avikalpa* for *wu-nien* or *wu-wang-nien*,<sup>18</sup> *acitta*, or no-mind, for *fei-i*, and *animitta* for *wu-hsiang* or *wu-hsiang*) complicates matters. However, I believe the sinitic connotations of the terms always managed to surface in the Chinese commentary tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Observe, for example, the fluidity in the commentary's use of *hsiang* (thought, here technically not *samjñā* of the skandhas) and *nien* (which in Chinese usage also means thought):

T: Śāriputra asks, "Thus the Bodhisattva in practicing the career of a man of the Way would arouse nil with regards to the dharmas of the all-knowing (Buddha) or the common (person). Is it by approximating this unaroused (unborn) Dharma that he so attains the all-knowing (omniscience)?"

C: By the common dharma is meant that of life and death (*samsāra*). By nonarousal is meant the quietude of thought (*hsiang*). By approximating is meant to be about to. What gives rise to the born is thought (*nien*).

T: Subhūti answers, "The unborn Dharma is that which has no desire for essence. The unaroused thought (*nien*) is also not a dharma—

C: The unaroused dharma is the thought (*hsiang*) that desires nothing that it might (normally) hope to gain.

T: —that can be preferred either."

As the *Awakening of Faith* would later agree, the *nien* is what gives birth to the born and the *wu-nien* (no-thought) what recovers (sic) the Unborn.

#### IV. The Ming-tu Commentary and Other Prajñā Schools

If we forget for the moment how the Hsin-wu school broke with tradition in accepting *anātman* (no-self/mind/psyche), and also forget how the *fei-i* (no-intent/mentation) doctrine in the *TMTC* and the *Ming-tu* commentary here does not as such deny some subtle self (the pure *i*), then we may liberally trace the other four Prajñā schools' positions in this commentary. Those other schools are

Huan-hua<sup>bi</sup> all is illusion



Shih-han <sup>bj</sup>	all reality is a function of consciousness
Chi-se <sup>bk</sup>	emptiness in the midst of form
Yüan-hui <sup>bl</sup>	reality is just a confluence of conditions

The basic idealist position (that would include Hsin-wu, Huan-hua, and Shih-han) is spelled out in this longest of comments:

T: The Buddha says, “. . . (The foolish people) who follow the thinking of dharma have desire or are obsessed with name and form. Because they are so obsessed, they do not know this wisdom teaching that cannot be so used . . .”

C: “Following the dharma” means following the *citta-dharma*. By “name” is meant perception, conception, will, and consciousness; by “form” is meant earth, water, fire and wind. Those who follow their desires are obsessed with these five skandhas. Their mind runs about in the Three Realms, forever being reborn and unable to erase the root that is the deviate consciousness (*shih: vijñāna*). The *Fa-chu-ching*<sup>bm</sup> (*Dharmapada*) says, “The basis is the *citta-dharma*; all good and evil retributions are due to the mind.” The karmic impulse (*hsing: saṃskāra*) being ill-disposed, the retributory consciousness suffers rebirth. The five skandhas being flawed, the person cannot see the dharma of no-thought (*wu-nien*). This is the wisdom dharma that is without a source.<sup>20</sup> It may win the *samādhi* of no-thought (*wu-hsiang*).<sup>21</sup> This is not the same as (karmic) good and evil.<sup>22</sup> Then the twelve *nidānas* themselves would cease; the various faculties would be quieted down. In so abhorring life and death, the spirit (*shen*)<sup>bn</sup> reverts to the essence.<sup>23</sup> The *Jen-pen chun-chen ching*<sup>bo</sup> says, “The mind (*hsin*) enters nirvāṇa, and, following its essence, becomes quiescent.”

However, that (Hīnayāna) cessation has not yet realized the (Mahāyāna) Four Negations.<sup>24</sup> It still keeps to guarding the *i* (intention) and the *chih*<sup>bp</sup> (will), thus (foolishly) arousing empty thoughts in the midst of emptiness. For doing that it actually only attains rebirth in heaven as a god; the person will still return to life and death and taste endless suffering. Better, the *Hui-yin-ching*<sup>bq</sup> says, “If the person still regards the nirvāṇic reality to be permanent while regarding the six corruptables<sup>25</sup> and the Four Equanimities of Mind as mutable, he is said to have failed to enter nirvāṇa (Mahāyāna style), emptying the empty and abiding in (true) quietude itself.” (p. 480a27–b5.)

As the mind is emptied, reality is emptied (Hsin-wu); all realities are results of a deluded consciousness (Shih-han).

If the theme of illusion (Huan-hua) is not evident above, it is in the following:

T: (Subhūti answers,) “. . . Form is illusion, as are perception, conception, will, and consciousness . . . All six faculties are alike here. Why? Because the illusion (created by) the *i* is (none other than) the Three Realms. The Three Realms are (none other than) the six faculties and the five skandhas.”

C: If consciousness is illusory, the six faculties will be likewise. When the deluded *i* undergoes change, it allows the Three Realms to come into being. (p. 480b17–22.)

If one cares to distinguish between the two variations of the *pen-wu* school, crediting the better of the pair to Tao-an, who did not “reduce being to its opposite,” as he accepted the “suchness or naturalness of things themselves,”<sup>26</sup> we also can find that more enlightened understanding in the *Ming-tu* commentary. The student reports this:

C: My master says, “All men are as such *tzu-jan*<sup>br</sup> and without activity. Even life and death are empty. The path is also empty. Suchness too is empty. There never was a man who attained nirvāṇa from out of saṃsāra. The Buddha, the Dharma too, is empty. No one ever left behind the various dharmas. All beings are originally empty. There never was any activity, any sentient being.” (p. 481, 9–11.)

The *Pen-wu* is not something other than the real. If we read the *Ming-tu* commentary for shades of the later Prajñā schools, we will indeed find them there. However, as noted earlier, such a search for origins overlooks actual historic developments. The *Ming-tu* commentary came before the realization of the meaning of *anātmavāda* was brought home to the Chinese by the Hsin-wu school. It belongs to a different era and contains the legacy from a still earlier tradition.

Truth, however, is timeless, and despite the shortcomings of the medium and the relative depth of sophistication in understanding, the core message still shines through. We would close therefore with this brisk but unmistakable passage, from

the "master" himself, concerning the import of the Bodhisattva's career:

C: (My teacher says,) ". . . The *mahāsattva* courses (in the perfection of wisdom) and sees that as being identical with life and death. Saṃsāra and the (nirvāṇic) Way are the same. All dharmas being empty, all things are equal. This path of equality is one that would not abandon the ill of sentient existence in an aspiration only for the originally pure. Rather, it is to bear the pain of life and death in order to guide others on to the Great Way so that the path of the Buddha can continue with no end. (p. 482a[4–15].)

*That* is neither Hīnayāna psychology nor Taoist philosophy, and can never be reduced to them.

#### NOTES

1. *Taishō Daizōkyō* (henceforth, T.) 55, p. 59a1–3.
2. For example, by Eric Zürcher in his *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), vol. 1, p. 54, where it is listed along with two other "oldest Chinese Buddhist commentaries."
3. Published in Tokyo by Shunjūsha.
4. See his "The Earliest Mahāyāna Sūtra: Its Significance to the Study of Buddhist Development," *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1975), pp. 30–41.
5. This is the *Fa-chu-ching*; see Charles Willemsen, *The Chinese Udānavarga* (Brussels: 1978).
6. Zürcher, for example, pp. 53–54; he so places this and the other two commentaries as works whose ideas were continuous with "the Northern school of An Shih-kao, An Hsüan and Yen Fou-t'iao."<sup>13a</sup> The continuity is there.
7. The three are the *Hui-yin-ching* (*Tathāgata-jñāna mudrā-samādhi sūtra*: Taishō no. 632), the *Liao-pen sheng-ssu ching*<sup>13b</sup> (*Sūtra Resolving the Basis of Life and Death*: Taishō no. 708) and the already mentioned *Fu-chu-ching* (Taishō no. 210). So we will follow Ui Hakuju in considering the "master" to be Chih Ch'ien.
8. T'ang, *Han-Wei liang-Chin Nan-pei-chao Fo-chiao-shih*<sup>13c</sup> (Peking: Chung-hua reissue, 1955), p. 275.
9. Emending *wu-hsiang* (as in "thought") into *wu-hsiang*<sup>13d</sup> (as in "form"), an alternative noted in note 33 on p. 478. Both scripts, corrupted or not, have been used for *animitta*, the absence of "marks," or "figures."
10. *Chung-tao*<sup>13e</sup> is "on the way," unless it is interchangeable with *chung-t'u*<sup>13f</sup> for "half-way." At any rate, it means that the Buddha should not seek

personal enlightenment and deliverance prior to the completion of the salvific task.

11. *Mo-ting*:<sup>by</sup> *śānti* or *nirōdha samāpatti* has been suggested.

12. The meaning is not clear. It may be saying that when verbal verification is exhausted, then (in ways beyond words) . . .

13. T'ang, p. 275. This follows the last quote cited.

14. See my forthcoming "The Early Prajñā Schools: Especially Hsin-Wu Reconsidered," *Philosophy East and West*, 33, no. 1 (1983), pp. 61–77.

15. Chapter 37 of the *Fu-chu-ching* reworked by him celebrates the immortal soul (see T. 4, p. 564a: titled "On Saṃsāra: on the soul of man or how when the body dies, the spirit continues to exist, being reborn according to its deeds or karmic impulse, *hsing*: *saṃskāra*"). This and chapter 36 are the two that Willemen (pp. XIV–XV) can find no Sanskrit/Pali source for.

16. *tsa-nien*:<sup>bz</sup> literally, mixed or miscellaneous thought; but since this is used in opposition to the pure or unadulterated thought, I would render it as "extraneous," with the understanding that it implies a mind divided and less than single-minded.

17. Text corrupted; emending *ch'ieh* . . . *ch'ieh*<sup>ca</sup> ("still . . . still") for the preferable *tan* . . . *tan*<sup>cb</sup> ("at times . . . at times") and changing *ching*<sup>cd</sup> (for *sūtra*: which makes little sense here unless it stands for the literal meanings of the scripture) into *ching*<sup>cd</sup> (for "object-realm": paired with subject-skandhas).

18. On this Taoist tradition based on the *Lao-tzu* and developed by the *T'ai-p'ing-ching*,<sup>cc</sup> see T'ang Yung-t'ung, pp. 110–112.

19. See a critical example shown in my "A Clue to the Authorship of the *Awakening of Faith*: Sikṣananda's Redaction of the Word *Nien*," *JiABS*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1981), pp. 34–52, and the sequel, "Suddenly a Thought Rose: Chinese Understanding of Mind and Consciousness," *JiABS*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1981), pp. 42–59. It is in the *Ming-tu* commentary here (p. 479a1) that I find the earliest use of and assumption about "the skandhas by themselves give rise to *nien*"—a dictum assumed by the *Awakening of Faith* (Paramārtha text) and disallowed by the Sikṣananda text, as well as by the *Platform Sūtra*. The latter correctly notes that only the mind, not the other skandhas, can give rise to "thought;" *rūpa* should not be involved with *nien* by strict Buddhist standards.

20. Compare the "beginningless deluded thought" in the *Awakening of Faith*.

21. Given the context here, this could not mean the trance state corresponding to the *arūpyadhātu*.

22. Text unclear; I am taking it to mean that the attainment of no-thought (or *animitta*) rises above karmic retribution still trapped in form or thought.

23. The immortal soul rejoins the cosmic *Geist*.

24. *Shih-fei*,<sup>cd</sup> which I take to be the four-cornered dialectical denials.

25. The text gives "great sorrow" but this seems to be a corruption of "six corruptables," i.e., the six faculties.

26. The distinction is in my opinion made in deference to Tao-an's standing in the Buddhist community. T'ang Yung-t'ung accepts this as valid and cites this from Tao-an to show the better of *pen-wu* understanding: The

basis of expedient transformation comes out of *tzu-jan* (natural, *tathatā*) itself. Nature is simply self-be. It is not that there is a creator. From this we can infer that when Nonbeing is said to be prior to the primal transformation, or, that Emptiness is the beginning of all forms, i.e. *pen-wu*, we do not mean that the myriad existents were born out of some empty vacuity itself. (Cited by T'ang, p. 247.)

## GLOSSARY

a 釋道安	aa 末有	ba 想	ca 且…且
b 無	ab 大正 (大藏經)	bb 陰	cb 且…且
c 格義	ac 支道林 遁	bc 有	cc 經
d 僧叡	ad 本無	bd 無念	cd 境
e 卽	ae 如來	be 非意	ce 太平經
f 性空	af 如人本	bf 無想	cf 四非
g 僧肇	ag 安般守意經	bg 無妄念	
h 大明度經	ah 清淨無爲	bh 無相	
i 正始	ai 體道	bi 幻化	
j 王弼	aj 空虛	bj 識含	
k 竺道潛	ak 神不滅	bk 卽色	
l 法琛	al 識神	bl 緣會	
m 平井俊榮	am 行 (衍)	bm 法句經	
n 中國般若思想史研究	an 色行	bn 神	
o 支謙	ao 身業	bo 人本純真經	
p 支識	ap 識之行	bp 志	
q 道行般若經	aq 想行	bq 慧印經	
r 吳	ar 心無	br 自然	
s 安玄	as 色空	bs 嚴淨調	
t 安世高	at 空心	bt 了本生死經	
u 康僧會	au 非身	bu 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史	
v 湯用彤	av 意	bv 無想→無相	
w 養生鍊神	aw 無爲	bw 中道	
x 歸本	ax 有爲	bx 中途	
y 心	ay 念	by 寂定	
z 本無	az 無不爲	bz 雜念	