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CONTENTS

I. ARTICLES

1. Padma dKar-po on the Two *Satyas*, by Michael Broido 7
2. "No-Thought" in Pao T'ang Ch'an and Early Ati-Yoga,
by A. W. Hanson-Barber 61
3. Wōnhyo (Yüan Hsiao) on the Nirvāṇa School:
Summation Under the "One Mind" Doctrine,
by Whalen Lai 75
4. The Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda, by Shanta
Ratnayaka 85
5. Nature in Dōgen's Philosophy and Poetry, by
Miranda Shaw 111

II. BOOK REVIEWS

1. *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion
and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism*, by Martin
Southwold
(George D. Bond) 133
2. *Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist
Interpretations: A Study of a Religious Concept*,
by John Ross Carter
(Harry M. Buck) 135
3. *Matrix of Mystery: Scientific and Humanistic Aspects of
rDzogs-Chen Thought*, by Herbert V. Guenther
(A. W. Hanson-Barber) 138
4. *The Sutra of the Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeas-
urable Life*, by the Ryukoku University Trans-
lation Center
(Minoru Kiyota) 140

5.	<i>The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish (mdo bdzaris blun), or, the Ocean of Narratives (üliger-ün dalai), translated by Stanley Frye (John R. Krueger)</i>	143
6.	<i>Tibetan Buddhist Medicine and Psychiatry: The Diamond Healing, by Terry Clifford (Todd Fenner)</i>	145
	OBITUARIES	149
	LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	157

Wōnhyo (Yüan Hsiao) on the Nirvāṇa School: Summation Under the “One Mind” Doctrine

by Whalen Lai

The Nirvāṇa School was an important Chinese Buddhist tradition that flourished during the Southern Dynasties (430-589).¹ The school later was eclipsed as an independent tradition. Three retrospective summaries of the positions held by members of this school exist. They serve to recall but, more importantly, to criticize the Nirvāṇa school. The translation below is from the one made by the Korean monk Wōnhyo^a (617-686). Though not as important as the pioneering effort of Chi-tsang^b of the San-lun^c (Mādhyamika) school in Sui, or as thorough as the one made by the monk Chun-cheng,^{2d} Wōnhyo's short summation is nonetheless noteworthy. This is because whereas Chi-tsang's *prasaṅga* (negative dialectics) deliberately exposed the fallacy of the Nirvāṇa School and stressed the emptiness of *prajñā* as the true Buddha-nature, Wōnhyo was more interested in subsuming the various opinions of this school as partial truths under the positive doctrine of the One Mind. This doctrine has been espoused by the *Awakening of Faith* as follows:

The revelation of the true meaning [of the principle of Mahāyāna can be achieved] by [unfolding the doctrine] that the principle of One Mind has two aspects. One is the aspect of Mind in terms of the Absolute (*tathatā*; Suchness), and the other is the aspect of Mind in terms of phenomena (*saṃsāra*; birth and death). . . .

The Mind in terms of the Absolute is the one World of Reality (*dharmadhātu*) and the essence of all phases of existence

in their totality. (Suchness is then seen as being both empty and not-empty). . . .

The Mind as phenomena (saṃsāra) is grounded on the tathāgatagarbha. What is called the Storehouse Consciousness is that in which “neither birth nor death (nirvāṇa)” diffuses harmoniously with “birth and death (saṃsāra),” and yet in which both are neither identical nor different. This Consciousness has two aspects . . .

(These are the enlightened and the nonenlightened aspect; under the former are found original or *a priori* enlightenment and incipient enlightenment—in the end though, these too are not two either)³

Since, as is well known, Wōnhyo’s reading of the *Awakening of Faith* influenced Fa-tsang^e of the Hua-yen^f school, his summary of the Nirvāṇa school deserves our attention.⁴

I. Translation From the Nieh-pan tsung-yao^g of Wōnhyo⁵

There had been in the past various interpretations (of what Buddha-nature is). Although these theories criss-cross and overlap with one another, basically there are not more than six positions.⁶

The master of the first school locates the substance of Buddha-nature in men’s eventual enlightenment. Now the *Lion’s Roar* chapter of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* has said that although the *icchāntika* (earlier said to be destitute of the seed of enlightenment)⁷ are at present without the good (roots, *kuśala-mūla*, conducive to enlightenment), now the Buddha says:

As they are (nonetheless) destined for future enlightenment, they are therefore replete with Buddha-nature . . . It is only that their mental defilements are such that they now lack the good roots. By virtue of their future enlightenability, these good roots will eventually sprout.⁸

Because of that, it is said that the basis of Buddha-nature lies in such existent potential for future enlightenment. Why? Be-

cause the arousing of the thought of ignorance notwithstanding, there is *a priori* the (pure) mind.⁹ This mind is the basis of future enlightenment. Therefore one should cultivate good deeds in order to eradicate the present ignorance and thereupon nurture the fruition to come. Potential enlightenment is then said to be the cause (of actual enlightenment).¹⁰ This option is held by the Dharma master Ai^h of the White Horse temple following in the footsteps of Tao-shengⁱ himself.

The master of the second school says that sentient beings as such are Buddha-nature. Why? Because its role is to oversee the mind and its nature is to take on form everywhere. Therefore, sentient beings are themselves the root cause of enlightenment. The *Lion's Roar* chapter says, "The Buddha-nature of sentient beings has two aspects; the causal aspect is sentient beings themselves."¹¹ This is the opinion of Dharma master [Seng-ming]^j of the Chuang-yen^k temple.

The master of the third school says that, since the mind of sentient beings is unlike wood or stone, it would desire bliss and abhor suffering.¹² On the basis of this aspiration, a person who cultivates various good deeds will attain the bliss of supreme enlightenment. Thus the (same) sūtra says, "All sentient beings possess mind. Beings with mind will in time attain the highest enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*)."¹³ Here the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* concurs, "If there is no *tathāgatagarbha* (embryonic Buddha), there would not be the desire to seek nirvāṇa or the abhorrence of pain and pleasure (in *samsāra*)."¹⁴ This is the opinion of master (Fa-)yun^l of Kuang-tse^m temple.

The master of the fourth school says that the mind has the immortal spirit. The immortal spirit is in the body and is unlike nonsentient wood or stone. From this the fruit of enlightenment would evolve. Therefore the psychic spirit is the substance of the root cause (of enlightenment). The *Buddha-nature* chapter in the sūtra says, "The self (*ātman*) is what is meant by the *tathāgatagarbha*. (The dictum that) all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature is what is meant by the self."¹⁵ The *Lion's Roar* chapter says, "Things devoid of Buddha-nature are nonsentient things like tiles and stones. Aside from such, all beings have Buddha-nature."¹⁶ This is the opinion of Emperor Hsiao(-yen)ⁿ of the Liang^o dynasty.¹⁷



The master of the fifth school says that the seeds (*bījas*)¹⁸ affiliated with the good dharmas within the storehouse consciousness, *ālayavijñāna*, are the substance of Buddha-nature. The sūtra says, "By Buddha-nature is meant the seeds (*gotra*) of the highest enlightenment into the Middle Path."¹⁹ The *Yogācāra Śāstra* says, "The *a priori* seed (*prakṛtiśtha-gotra*)²⁰ is the six faculties of a superior quality which possesses the form of Suchness transmitted from beginningless time in compliance with the nature of Dharma (*dharmatā*)."²¹ This is the opinion of the new masters [of the Wei-shih^p school].²²

The master of the sixth school says that the untainted consciousness, the *amala-vijñāna*, and the liberated Suchness essence form the substance of Buddha-nature.²³ The sūtra says, "Buddha-nature is the emptiness as of the highest truth (*paramārtha-satya*), which is also known as wisdom (*prajñā*)."²⁴ The *Ratnagotra Vibhāga* says, "The Suchness essence as taught by the *Sūtra of the Six Faculties*²⁵ says: 'The six faculties are transmitted from beginningless time, being ultimately of the nature of the various dharmas.'"²⁶

The above are the six schools. In evaluating them, I find them to be both right and wrong. Why? Because Buddha-nature is neither thus nor not thus. As it is not thus, all six positions are flawed. As it is not not-thus, all of them are correct.

What does that mean?

It means that the six masters' opinions can be further subsumed under two headings. The first master emphasizes the "ought in the future," or *de jure* enlightenment, while the other five underline the present *de facto* given as the root cause of enlightenment. Within the latter, there are also two sub-groups. The sixth master addresses himself to the highest truth or the absolute aspect. The other four rest content with the worldly or the relative truth (*samvṛti-satya*). Within that latter group, there are those who discourse from the standpoint of the person and those who elaborate upon the finer elements (within that person). The second master holds the idea that the person as such (is Buddha-nature); the other three locate the same in the finer elements. Among the latter, their differences may be a matter of degrees. The (fifth master) selects the seed (in the mind) as Buddha-nature; the other two focus on the mind as

such. Within the latter, they are divided over the matter of emphasis. One (the fourth master) would underline the substance (i.e., the spirit) while the other (the third master) its function (in aspiring after bliss).

The truth is this: the substance of Buddha-nature is the One Mind. This One Mind avoids all extremes. Because it does, it cannot be identified with any one of the six positions. Being not confined by any one, it can accommodate all.

If we discourse on the Mind in itself, it is neither cause nor effect, neither absolute nor relative, neither subject nor object, neither substance nor function. If we discourse on the Mind in its causal mode, then it is both origination and cessation, both subject and object, both absolute and relative, both cause and effect. Because the Mind is said to be neither one nor the other, the six schools are all neither right nor wrong. This Middle Path notwithstanding, there are distinctions (that can still be made).

There are two aspects to the One Mind. It is "tainted and yet not tainted, not tainted and yet tainted."²⁷ "Tainted and yet not tainted" is saying that it is passive and above change; "Not tainted and yet tainted" is saying that it is involved in the six paths of rebirth. The sūtra has said, "The herb of the one taste manifests itself in many tastes depending on where it is grown, but the real one taste rests in the mountain."²⁸ The *Śrīmālā Sūtra* says, "The innately pure mind is incomprehensibly mysterious. That it is somehow tainted by mental defilements is equally beyond our ken."²⁹ The *Awakening of Faith* addresses itself to this (ambivalence). This is the position of Paramārtha (the alleged translator and leader of the She-lun⁹ school).

Thus, the sixth master is the one who realizes the Suchness Buddha-nature and intuits the "tainted and yet untainted" aspect (of the One Mind), while the others see only the tainted aspect. But why (would the pure be tainted by activity)? Because the mind once tainted cannot sustain any longer its original purity. When confronted with the conditions (of phenomena) it would look naturally ahead to the result and thereby bring the changes upon itself. In its ability to sprout (pure seeds) prior to its being perfumed (by the defilements), it generates the seeds (in the storehouse consciousness) which are rooted in the nature of things. This is the position of the fifth master. Now although

the mind is tainted by defilements and is involved in *samsāra*, it can still retain a sublime and spirited wisdom that would promote the return to the (nirvāṇic) origin. This is the position of the fourth master. Now the mind has been thoroughly tainted. Yet it can count on the “internal perfuming” (by Suchness upon *avidyā*)³⁰ to produce two types of karmic causes: the desire for bliss and the abhorrence of suffering. These two are rooted in the (mind’s) pointing back to the ultimate goal. So stated, this is the opinion of the third master. As the One Mind further turns (transforms), then depending on where it may end up [in the six paths of rebirth], it will take hold of reality and incorporate sentient existence.³¹ The result is what is the opinion of the second master. Finally, according to the doctrine of *a priori* enlightenment (*pen-chüeh*),^r all such sentient beings will one day attain or regain enlightenment. To so speak of the present potentiality in terms of its future end is the aim of the first master.

Thus, we see how the six masters all fail in understanding fully what Buddha-nature is. They can see only one part of it. Thus we read, “How similar it is to the blind men (groping to comprehend what an elephant is). They do not know what it is like but what they say (it is like) is not unrelated (to the truth) either.”³² The six masters’ opinions are comparable to the blind men’s. Ultimately, Buddha-nature is neither in nor not in the six dharmas (the five skandhas plus the false whole, *puḍgala*, i.e., the constituents of reality). The six schools are as such seemingly full of contradictions.

End of Discourse on Locating the Whereabouts of the Buddha-Nature

II. Analysis

What Wōnhyo did, in so summarizing the six positions, is to subsume all of them under the emanation of the “One Mind” into sentient existence. Each of the six positions then falls somewhere in that spectrum, depending on how intensive or extensive it perceives the Buddha-nature to be. The following is a diagram summary of this technique.

Diagram Summary of The Structure of Wōnhyo's Thesis

Position on Buddha-nature	The person holding it	Position analyzed subjectively and objectively
Buddha-nature <i>is amala</i>	She-lun Paramārtha	PARAMĀRTHA : <i>pen-yu'</i> Suchness One Mind
seeds in the <i>ālaya</i>	New school Hsüan-tsang	SAMVṚTI-SATYA : <i>shih-yu'</i> Tainted Mind with pure seeds
the immortal soul	Emperor Wu of Liang	Substance: seeds of spirited wisdom within the mind
the desire for nirvāṇa	Fa-yung of Liang	Function: the mind with the perfumed aspirations
sentient beings	Seng-ming of Liang	Experiency of the body/self or the assumption of life
future enlight- enability	Master Ai (Tao-sheng)	SAMVṚTI (cont.): <i>de jure</i> temporal delay added

Arranged from the One Mind “downward”, we have this:

The Emanation of the One Mind

The One Mind both absolute and relative in the <i>Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna</i>	substance and function as one
1) The absolute or pure aspect, <i>the amalavijñāna</i> in She-lun	<i>paramārtha-satya</i> substance
2-i) The relative or tainted aspect	<i>samvṛti</i> , de facto
a) with pure seeds: Hsüan-tsang	of seminal mind
b) with spirited wisdom: Liang Wu	of mind
c) with desire for bliss: Fa-yun	of mental hope
d) with sentient life: Seng-ming	of body
2-ii) to be achieved: Master Ai	<i>samvṛti</i> , de jure

This extremely neat attempt to categorize all six options under the emanation of the One Mind led to a kind of philosophical monism. In so doing, Wōnhyo brought the original Indian concept of Buddha-nature one step closer to the traditional Taoist conception of the One as the basis (*pen*: root) of the All as the ends (*mo^u*: tips of branches).

NOTES

1. An older classic study on this is Tokiwa Daijō, *Busshō no Kenkyū* (Kyoto: Meiji, 1944); the most thorough historical analysis is Fuse Kōgaku, *Nehanshū no Kenkyū* in two vol. (Tōkyō: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1976 reissue). In English, the Mādhyamika critique of the Nirvāṇa School is presented in most detail by Aaron Koseki in his doctoral dissertation (University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1977), "Chi-tsang's *Ta-ch'eng hsiian-lun*: The Two Truths and Buddha-nature." See his essay, "Prajñāpāramitā and the Buddhahood of the Non-sentient World: The San-lun Assimilation of Buddha-nature and the Middle Path," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 2.1 (1980), pp. 16–33. My own attempt is in "Sinitic Speculation on Buddha-nature: The Nirvāṇa School," *Philosophy East and West* 32.2 (1982), pp. 135–149. I am especially thankful to comments and corrections from the JIABS reviewer and from Liu Ming-Wood (University of Hong Kong), who is working on this tradition and will for some time; see his "The Doctrine of the Buddha-Nature in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-Sūtra*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1982), pp. 63–94.

2. T'ang Yung-t'ung, in his *Han-Wei liang-Chin Nan-pei-chao Fo-chiao-shih* (Peking: Chung-hua reissue, 1955), makes good use of the latter on pp. 677–717; Hirai Shun'ei analyzed Chi-tsang's in his *Chūgoku hanya shisōshi ni kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1976); see Koseki, *op. cit.*

3. Yoshito Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith attributed to Śvaghosa* (New York: Columbia University, 1967), pp. 31–46. The text, incidentally, never uses the expression *fo-hsing* (Buddha-nature).

4. On a future occasion, I will translate Fa-tsang's summation of the Buddha-nature doctrine (from his *Wu-chiao-chang* [*Treatise on the Five Teachings*]). Fa-tsang's review is supposed to be the "last word" on this issue.

5. "Essentials of the Nirvāṇa School," from the Taishō Daizōkyō (henceforth T.), vol. 38, p. 249.

6. The identification of the figures behind the six schools targeted by Wōnhyo is indebted to T'ang Yung-t'ung's reconstruction of the authors of such opinions in his *Han-Wei liang-Chin Nan-pei-cha Fo-chiao-shih*, *ibid.*

7. T. 12, pp. 425bc–426a.

8. T. 12, p. 491b; also pp. 493b–494a, 505c.

9. So says the *Awakening of Faith* concerning the *wu-ming wang-nien*⁴ (the deluded thought of ignorance) and the *pen-chüeh* (original enlightenment) of the Suchness Mind; Hakeda's trans., pp. 55–56.

10. *Pen-chüeh* and *shih-chüeh*^w (incipient enlightenment) are ultimately nondual; Hakeda's trans., p. 38.

11. T. 12, p. 530c.

12. T. 12, p. 581a.

13. T. 12, p. 524b.

14. T. 12, p. 222b; in English, see the translation by Alex and Hideko Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* (New York: Columbia, 1974), p. 108.

15. T. 12, p. 407b.

16. T. 12, p. 581a.

17. On this, see my "Emperor Wu of Liang on the Immortal Soul," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101.2 (1981), pp. 167–175.

18. The *bīja* theory is in the *Yogācāra*; it was not known to the Nirvāṇa School of the Six Dynasties. However, the same Chinese word for *bīja* was used to translate *gotra* such that there might be a confusion or free cross-reference made here.

19. It is not that we are as such Buddhas; it is only that we may in time become so. T. 12, p. 523c.

20. *Hsing chung-hsing*^x (seed-nature that is innate), as contrasted with *hsing* [for practice] *chung-hsing*,^y which is acquired *a posteriori* through cultivation.

21. Specific source unknown.

22. The "new" school referred then to Hsüan-tsang's.

23. The *amala* consciousness is often called the "ninth consciousness," following an exegetical tradition of the She-lun (Samgraha) school. On this, see Diana Paul's *Philosophy of Mind in Sixth-Century China*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 1984).

24. T. 12, p. 523b.

25. T. 31, p. 835c.

26. This is the same phrase as the one in the *Yogācāra Śāstra*, the interpretation of which divided the *ālayavijñāna* strand from the *tathāgatagarbha* strand.

27. A Chinese paraphrase of the "innately Pure Mind that is adventitious-ly polluted," i.e., the *tathāgatagarbha*, in the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*. Wōnhyo might be the first so to paraphrase it (see T. 12, p. 222b). The expression is often used by Fa-tsang.

28. A metaphor describing the unity of the Dharma and the multiple manifestations of *upāya*.

29. T. 12, p. 222b; Waymans, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

30. The term is again an innovation apparently of Wōnhyo.

31. This refers to the *tathāgatagarbha* as the basis of all births in *samsāra*.

32. A well known analogy; source unknown to me.

Chinese Terms

a. 元曉
b. 古藏
c. 三論
d. 均正
e. 法藏
f. 華嚴
g. 涅槃宗要
h. 變法即
i. 道生
j. 僧足
k. 莊嚴

l. 法雲
m. 元色
n. 藏通
o. 染
p. 唯識
q. 三論
r. 本覺
s. 本有
t. 始有
u. 末
v. 無明妄念

w. 始覺
x. 性體性
y. 行體性