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The Tendai philosophy of perfect harmony.

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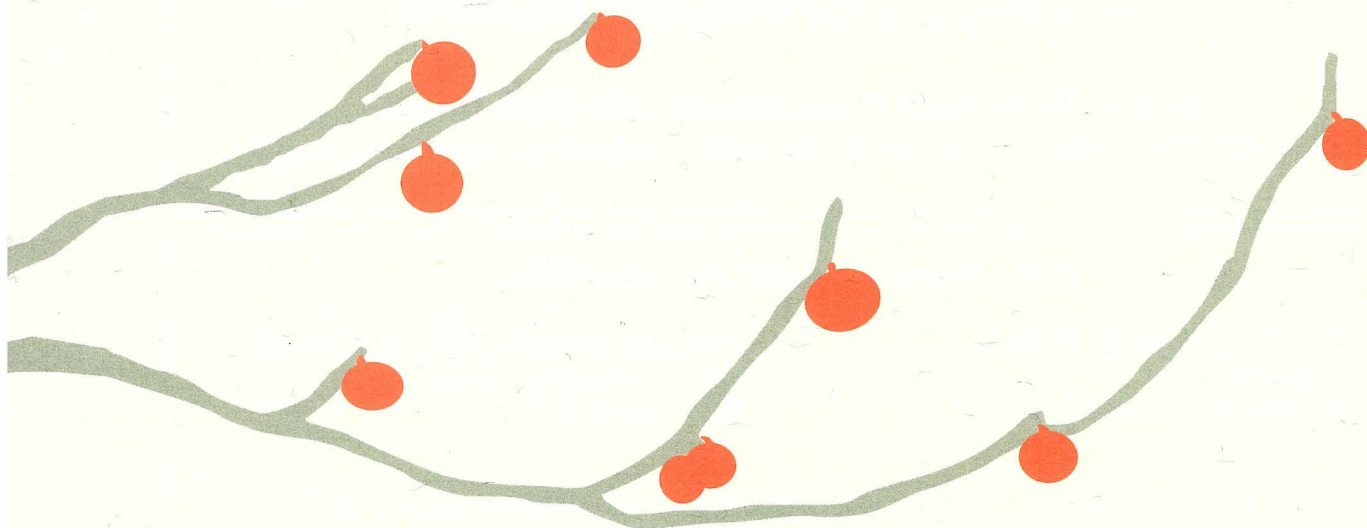
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Abstract

This article explores the nondual nature of the Chinese Tiantai/Tendai philosophical school of Mahāyāna Buddhism which was founded in the sixth century CE and subsequently transmitted to Japan. It raises experiential or phenomenological questions about how we paint and conceive the world, our existential status, and the path to authentic living through the intuitive knowledge that world reality is open, one, and free from inner constraints.

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Hayo Krombach

The Tendai Philosophy of Perfect Harmony

Dr Hayo Krombach, former lecturer at the London School of Economics, is currently working on a project entitled 'Historical Interculturalism East-West.' His book *Hegelian Reflections on the Idea of Nuclear War* was published in Japan as *Kaku Jidai no Hegel*.

The Tiantai/Tendai philosophical School of Mahāyāna Buddhism was founded in China in the sixth century, as a reaction to Indian scholastic Buddhism which reduced all things to analytically simple and fixed abstractions called 'dharmas.' Initiated by Huiwen (550-577) and developed further by Huisi (515-577), its real founder and systematizer was Zhiyi or Chih-i (538-597). Zhiyi taught in the Tiantai (Heavenly Terrace) Mountain in Zhejiang Province during the Sui Dynasty. Tiantai Buddhism is also called the Lotus School, being based on the *Lotus Sūtra*. In 805 Chinese Tiantai Buddhism was brought to Japan by Saichō (Dengyō Daishi) (767-822), where as the Tendai School it became in the following centuries the most powerful and influential school of Japanese Buddhism.

Although Saichō introduced elements of Chan/Zen, Tantric, Shingon, and Shinto teachings into the Japanese Tendai School, this syncretism does not obscure its basis in Chinese doctrinal sources. In Zhiyi's writings we find two themes concerning nondualism that lend themselves to a phenomenological and holistic description. One is a philosophical account of how reality is perceived; the other is a soteriological understanding of the path into *nirvāna*.

The Philosophical Perception of Reality as Oneness

The most distinctive feature of the Tiantai/Tendai worldview is that there is only one reality, only one world, or only one and therefore nondual world reality. Zhiyi formulates the core teaching of the school in several related ways: (1) the 'unity of the ten dharma realms'; (2) the thesis that 'one thought

contains three thousand worlds'; (3) the 'threefold truth in unity' expressed in terms of suchness or thusness; (4) the claim that the ten dharma realms are mutually implied in one ultimate reality; and (5) in terms of the relationship between Buddha-nature, Buddhahood, and the human mind.

As to the first point: Indian Theravāda Buddhism divides the unreal phenomenal world and the real *nirvāna* state of existence; they are mutually exclusive. By contrast, a major thesis of Tendai is that the phenomenal world *is nirvāna* and *nirvāna is* the phenomenal world. There is no ontological difference between them. There is only one reality, not two. As Zhiyi puts it: 'A single, unalloyed reality is all there is – no entities whatever exist outside of it' (Donner/Stevenson, 113). Or, as one of his students states: 'There is no duality, no difference between them; the phenomenal as it stands, is the real' (127). This one reality, which is the world of the *Lotus Sūtra*, is differentiated into ten dharma realms: hell beings, hungry ghosts, beings of animal nature, asuras (demons), human beings, gods and heavenly creatures, shravakas (voice-hearers), pratyekabuddhas (self-awakened ones), bodhisattvas, and finally, Buddha. While the first six sets of beings belong to the cycle of life and death, the last four can overcome this cycle and reach *nirvāna*. And while the voice-hearers and the self-awakened ones are the arhats in Theravāda, both the bodhisattvas and Buddhas have the highest form of attainment for the Mahāyāna school. And thirdly, while the bodhisattvas choose not to enter *nirvāna* out of compassion for all sentient beings that have not yet entered this state, it is the teaching of the Tiantai/Tendai that everyone should aim to become a Buddha.

As regards the second point, that is, the relationship between these levels of existence, Zhiyi says that 'all reality is included within these ten dharmas' (Swanson, 181), which is to say that they entail each other. Each single realm is at the same time the totality of all ten, none exists apart from the others: all are one and one is all. As Zhiyi again writes: 'These ten dharma realms are all identical...and include all of reality. All of reality is included in hell and... the same is true for all destinies up to and including the Buddha realm' (182). All ten dharma realms penetrate each other since they are all part of the one and only one experiential world reality, with no separations between them. The implication of this nondualist thinking is that, unlike in early Buddhism, there is no distinction between this phenomenal world and *nirvāna*: 'There is no ebb or flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction' (Watson, 226). And Zhiyi elaborates: 'Since cyclic birth and death itself is identical with emptiness, how could it ever be discarded? Since *nirvāna* itself is identical with emptiness, how could it ever be attained?' (Donner/Stevenson, 188).

Another approach Zhiyi takes to understand the view that there is only one reality is through the relationship between the world and the mind which conceives it or a thought which mentally perceives it. For instance, he writes that 'one thought [or one mind] contains the ten dharma realms. Each dharma realm also contains the ten dharma realms, [so there are] one hundred

dharma realms. Each dharma realm contains thirty worlds; so one hundred dharma realms contain three thousand worlds. These three thousand worlds are contained in one thought' (Swanson, 131). That one thought contains three thousand worlds—also referred to as the 'trischiliocosm in a moment of consciousness' – can be taken as the central theme of the Tiantai/Tendai School.

While *sense* perception does not allow for the perception of the totality of reality, that is, the three thousand worlds, *mental* perception understood as what the mind or consciousness is capable of conceiving poses no such problems. And it is ultimately the mind of Buddhas that conceives all dharmas, that overcomes all cravings and attachments, and that no longer separates the phenomenal world and *nirvāna* into two distinct realms. In this they realize that all dharmas are conventionally existent, empty and in this manifest the 'middle way.' They can therefore recognize that all dharmas and dharma realms are in one unified reality. What this means is that the kind of dharma existence one lives depends on the perceptual power of the mind which can bring one down to the level of hell as well as up to that of the Buddhas. Zhiyi expresses this in an analogy: 'By going back and overturning this [deluded] mind, one produces understanding – just as the painter first washes away the previous forms, applies white plaster, [and is then able to] paint anew' (Donner/Stevenson, 190). We can see that it is the same canvas and the same world; what changes is the way we paint or perceive the world. Furthermore, the question raised is not the metaphysical and ontological one which asks 'what' the canvas and what the world are. The question as always is an experiential phenomenological one in that it asks *how* we paint and *how* we conceive the world, because our existential status and the way we live – either bound by objects of attachment or released from such cravings – depend entirely on us and the manner of authentic living, that is, on the intuitive knowledge that world reality is open, one, and free from inner constraints.

The third approach Zhiyi takes to understand the perception of the world as constituting one reality is the structure of the three-fold truth as it is unified in suchness (*tathatā*). The idea of the three-fold truth is another defining characteristic of the Tiantai/Tendai School but has its source in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MK): 'Whatever dharma arises through causes and conditions [dependent origination], that I declare to be identical to emptiness. It is also a provisional [conventional, temporal] designation. This, furthermore, is the meaning of the middle way' (MK 24.18, trans. J. Garfield). Unlike Zhiyi Nāgārjuna advocates a two-truths theory: a conventional truth or reality which takes all existing dharmas in the phenomenal world as dependently originated, while at the level of ultimate truth or reality all things are empty. For Nāgārjuna, emptiness means to be devoid of self-nature and a manifold of phenomena. Things neither exist nor not exist; they are simply empty. And this is his understanding of the middle way.

The difference between the Indian and Chinese view of the middle way is that while Nāgārjuna stresses the aspect of 'emptiness,' Zhiyi emphasizes that of 'existence' or 'subtle dharma', which is an element of existence in that, while for Nāgārjuna things are empty because they are only dependently arisen, for Tiantai/Tendai things do exist if only in provisional, temporal or conventional dependence. Zhiyi therefore affirms the reality of the phenomenal world. In the context of the threefold truth, which includes emptiness, conventional existence and the middle way, the latter refers to the avoidance of the extremes of being and emptiness and their respective schools we referred to previously. Or, the designation of reality, chosen to indicate the complete lack of contradiction between emptiness and being, is the middle. Or again, in Zhiyi's own words: 'The reality of nonduality is called the Middle' (Swanson, 153), which is to say that reality and the middle are interchangeable.

The truth of the middle way states that all dharmas are both temporally existent and empty of self-nature and that there is no other realm outside this phenomenal world reality. In other words, Zhiyi's understanding of the middle way overcomes the dichotomy between the phenomenal world and *nirvāna*; both states of existence are the same. There is neither a spatial 'here or there' nor a temporal 'now or then'. What one actually experiences is always only the melting of these extremes into the oneness of the perennial 'here and now'. From a phenomenological point of view, the three truths can thus be seen as three perspectives of the same reality. As Zhiyi puts it: 'Though these [three aspects of reality] are an integrated unity, they are called threefold; though they are threefold, they are called a unity' (Swanson, 176). This is Tiantai/Tendai's well known idea of the threefold truth in unity, that is, of the identity of emptiness with conventional existence and the middle: 'the threefold truth is perfectly integrated; one in three and three in one' (152).

Zhiyi now also thinks that the ten dharma realms themselves manifest the threefold truth, because, even though reality is conventionally divided into ten realms there is no real separation between them. All ten dharma realms are at the same time empty, temporal, and manifesting the middle way. Following the *Lotus Sūtra*, Zhiyi describes the integration of the three perspectives of the ten dharmas simply in terms of 'suchness' or 'suchlike characteristics.' The ten dharmas embrace all of reality, that is, all dharmas are of suchlike appearance, suchlike nature, suchlike essence, suchlike power, suchlike function, suchlike causes, suchlike conditions, suchlike results, suchlike retributions, and suchlike beginning and end. Ultimately all dharmas are the same. The upshot of this state of affairs is that not only is there no need to look for another reality there and then, behind or beyond this world reality we live in simply because there is no other reality. But equally important is the realization that Buddhas do not need to denounce this reality of human existence in order to attain *nirvāna*.

Since sameness admits of no alternative, it is not possible to reject one thing in favor of another, for that implies a difference. But it is precisely difference which does not exist, since all phenomena are the same. This

circularity of argument, however, is none other than the circle of experience itself in which assumed separations are sublated and all phenomena come together in unity. Like phenomenologists, Tendai Buddhists neither reduce one thing to another nor for this reason neglect any aspect of our experience; instead they intend to describe all phenomena in their possible full concreteness. They call this epistemological attitude and synthetic approach 'round teaching' (*yuan-chiao*). *Yuan* here means completeness, totality, all-penetrating, and all-pervading. This 'round' approach is thus fundamentally different from analytical or 'discriminative teaching' (*pei-chiao*).

The fourth point we wish to make as regards Tendai's reality apprehension is that for Zhiyi the ten dharma realms are mutually implied in one ultimate reality, which is identical with the Buddha realm itself. The *Lotus Sūtra* describes the Buddha as an eternal but world-immanent being. All other past, present and future Buddhas are personifications of this everlasting Buddha: 'After this Buddha had finished bringing great benefit to living beings, he passed into extinction... After his correct law and counterfeit law had come to an end, another Buddha appeared in the same land... This process continued until twenty thousand million Buddhas had appeared one after the other, all bearing the same name' (Watson, 266). This sounds as if the Buddha had been turned into an immortal god. And indeed we see that in the *Lotus Sūtra* the Buddha, who had earlier been viewed as a historical personality, that is, as Sākyamuni, is now conceived as an extra-mundane being, who exists over and above all boundaries within the human and phenomenal world.

For the Tiantai/Tendai School, however, the Buddha does not exist as a personified god but rather as a principle that pervades all of world reality; as such the principle 'Buddha' is not only realized in other Buddhas, but in all beings, sentient and inanimate ones alike. As Zhiyi says: 'The essence [of true reality] pervades all places' (Swanson, 176). Thus the terms Buddha, Buddhahood, Buddha-Dharma, or Buddha-realm are synonymous with reality itself. The Buddha-realm is the last of the ten dharma realms listed above, but since all dharma realms imply each other, the Buddha-realm contains all other nine dharma realms, which makes them all identical. In other words, the Buddha realm and the other dharma realms refer to one and the same reality. Zhiyi confirms that 'various terms name one ultimate [reality]. Only one ultimate [reality] is given many names' (167). Other Buddhist schools associate this reality-as-it-is with true suchness or thusness (*tathatā*).

If the terms 'Buddha' and 'Buddhahood' refer to that which world-immanently pervades and keeps in unity all that is in the reality we live in, Tendai Buddhism cannot be said to advocate an *explanatory* two-world metaphysical and in the Western sense dualistic and monotheistic *religious* understanding of the universe. For Tiantai/Tendai 'all truth cannot be explained... The one truth is [actually] no [truth]; all truth is at rest. Each and every [truth] is [ultimately] inexpressible' (254-5). Instead it proposes that we

comprehend the world in its *spiritual*, that is, nondual unity whose experiential holistic structure can be *described* in phenomenological terms.

It is not an idealist, abstract and dichotomous theory but a practical tool and method that allows for a more realistic perception of world reality in its *concrete* sameness and self-becoming. As Hegel would say, 'the true is always concrete.' The world as we know it is the only one there is. As Zhiyi argues, 'to seek reality apart from dharmas of the ordinary is like leaving empty space in one place to look for it in another. The dharmas of the ordinary are themselves the dharma of ultimate reality. There is no need to renounce the ordinary or turn toward the saintly' (Donner/Stevenson, 166). The path towards liberating oneself from illusions is to be taken within this phenomenal world, wherein one recognizes that in the end *samsāra* is identical with *nirvāna*. There is no ontological difference between the two, for all and everything is empty.

The Soteriological Function of *Nirvāna*

This brings us finally to the question of the relationship between Buddha-nature, Buddhahood and the human mind. If the phenomenal world is the same reality as *nirvāna*, then to free oneself from delusions does not mean to exit this world and enter another one, but rather to change one's perception of the one and the same reality. This change is possible to all sentient beings – and non-sentient ones as well in fact – are endowed with and indeed innately *are* all-embracing Buddha-nature. Hence, strictly speaking, 'nature' for Zhiyi does not refer to something added from without to whatever else one may also be, something one could therefore possess like an object. Much more significantly for the subject qua selfhood is that it is 'that which has its point of reference internally... The wisdom [of the inherent Buddha-nature] as the complete cause [of Buddhahood] is the Buddha's "nature" (Swanson, 190). It is this reality-immanent source of Buddha-nature which, according to the *Lotus Sūtra*, makes it possible to take the path towards attaining Buddhahood. Zhiyi therefore says that '[the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* concerning] the essence [of Buddhahood] is that one is endowed with all virtues and is completely endowed with all good qualities' (169). The subject is self-sufficient; all otherness is its own internal differentiation and not appropriated from an external source.

But if we are already and from time immemorial Buddha-nature, why is it still necessary to take a soteriological path towards Buddhahood? This is because of ignorance, but unlike in early Indian Buddhism where ignorance came to be mentioned first in the causal chain of twelve interdependently conditioning factors, Zhiyi does not treat ignorance as the original state of our existence. He gives an analogy: 'Suppose there is a pauper with a cache of treasure around her house of which she is totally unaware. A friend shows her where it is buried, whereupon she comes to know of its existence. She *clears away the weeds and trash and begins to dig it out*. Gradually she gets closer

and closer, until, on reaching it, she opens the cache of treasure, takes it all out, and puts it to use' (Donner/Stevenson, 214; italics added). To 'clear away the weeds and trash' until one has reached the source and dug out the treasure is the Tiantai/Tendai equivalent to Husserl's phenomenological method to 'return to the facts themselves' and also of Heidegger's destructuring of centuries of alienating two-world metaphysical philosophies until the origin of authentic thinking is reached.

For Zhiyi Buddha-nature is our original state of existence, and all we need to do is to clear away or dismantle our conceptual and judgmental delusions about reality so that we may regain access to this primordial Buddha-nature. Tiantai/Tendai calls this the method of *chi-kuan*, whereby *chi* refers to learning that 'all things, from the very beginning, have no nature of their own' (Chan, 398) and *kuan* to the way one enters into the things as they really are and thus obtain the unattached insight into their suchness or *tathatā*. In concentrating on the mind one becomes aware that 'this mind is the same as the mind of... Buddha-nature' (399). 'Like the moon, which may be hidden but is never harmed by clouds, the dharma-nature is perceived the instant the afflictions are cleared away' (Donner/Stevenson, 164). Here we see clearly the affinity between the Buddhist attitude towards reality and that of the earlier Daoists Laozi and Zhuangzi and therewith also the historical continuity of Chinese thinking.

But according to the Tiantai/Tendai School we are not only endowed with goodness; we can also be evil and defiled. In fact, good and evil are both part of Buddha-nature. Defilement is for Zhiyi 'like water when it freezes to form ice – there is no ice apart from the water' (165). There is only one human nature, whose reality is identical with Buddha-nature which is the same for all human beings. But if, as stated above, not only sentient but also non-sentient beings are Buddha-nature, if all world phenomena inherently contain the nature of the Buddha qua world-pervading principle, then all things in the phenomenal world ultimately merge with the Buddha itself. *Nirvāna*, as pointed out, is not to be sought outside the life-world but within it and that means within our minds that are responsible for taking the right view on reality. And so we read that 'the instant one realizes that suffering and the origin of suffering are [inherently] devoid of suffering and any arising of suffering, one comes to merge with the dharma-nature' (165).

Since the phenomenal world, that is, *samsara*, and *nirvāna* are the same, and since our minds are identical with that of the Buddha principle, the origin of our suffering is then also the soteriological source of our salvation. The potential for being either good or bad has its source in our mind, in our way of thinking. In other words, 'nescience, when turned around, itself transforms into illumination, just as ice becomes water when it melts. Awakening is not something distantly removed, nor does it come from some other place. It is completely present in each and every moment of thought' (198). Suffering and salvation are inseparable. Defilements and evil are not to be annihilated, but to be overcome through the right soteriological path of thinking in this

phenomenal world, which is the foundation upon which *nirvāna* can be realized. All it requires is an internal phenomenological or nondual transformation, a perspectival shift in thinking, not an invocation of some external saving power. When one has done this one has awakened to the fact that nothing has changed. One has not become Buddha, one on reflection is Buddha, always has been, and always will be Buddha. The difference is that at first one was not aware of it, whereas now one is. This internal transformation is the accomplishment of the mind.

Zhiyi says of the mind that it is the function of 'cognitive reflection' or the 'sentient awareness of objects that distinguishes us from trees and stones'; it is the power 'to make discursive evaluations' (140, 272). In other words, the difference between ignorance and awakening is inherent in the mind: 'Know, therefore, that your own mind here and now contains replete within it the whole of the Buddha's dharma' (195). This ability is inherent in ordinary people, because one's mind is 'equal to the mind of the Buddha' (Swanson, 177). Hence, it should be known, Zhiyi says, 'that the Buddha's knowledge and insight dwells [inherently] within sentient beings' (178). As we read elsewhere: 'Although this mind has been obscured from time immemorial by contaminating dharmas based on ignorance, yet its nature of purity has never changed' (Chan, 399).

Once we have awakened we are said to be in the state of 'calming and contemplation.' 'Contemplation is the unaroused yet unimpeded [vision of this thought of awakening]. Calming is the quiescent extinction that is its essential nature. Calming and contemplation are themselves identical to awakening (*bodhi*), and awakening is identical to calming-and-contemplation' (Donner/Stevenson, 204). To change one's perspective on reality is to move away from an established way of life and towards an awakened existence. 'How calm, still, and pure! How deep, stable and quiet! How pure and clear the inner silence! It functions without the character of functioning, and acts without the character of acting' (Chan, 404). Through this transformation the true nondual state of all things can be apprehended and the entire universe is seen as the harmonious manifestation of the one unified mind or true suchness (*bhūtatathatā*).

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