

Is Critical Buddhism Really Critical?

Peter N. GREGORY

OVER THE PAST DECADE, Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki have raised the banner of “Critical Buddhism” in a continuing series of books and articles. Matsumoto has focused his criticism on the Indian Buddhist doctrine of the *tathāgata-garbha*, which he charges goes against the original antisubstantialist insight of the Buddha’s enlightenment as embodied in the teachings of no-self (anatman) and the twelvefold chain of interdependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*)—hence he claims that the *tathāgata-garbha* is “not Buddhism.” Hakamaya has extended Matsumoto’s criticism to the theory of “original” or “intrinsic” enlightenment (*hongaku shisō*), an East Asian development of the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine. Hakamaya has gone on to charge that *hongaku shisō* is to blame for many problems afflicting contemporary Japan.

While I have reservations about Matsumoto and Hakamaya’s work from an academic point of view, I believe that the controversy they have instigated is valuable in highlighting some of the differences between the way scholarship is done in Japan and in the West. It is simply unimaginable, for example, that this debate could ever have arisen within an American academic setting. The different institutional and social context in which Buddhist studies is done in America and in Japan should give all of us on both sides of the Pacific pause to reflect on what is now called the sociology of knowledge: how the institutional structures and academic culture within which we pursue our careers of scholarship shape the ways in which we delimit our fields of inquiry, the types of questions we ask, how we pursue our research, and the kinds of conclusions we draw—how, that is, the setting within which we work constitutes the very “Buddhism” that we study. Awareness of such differences should help make both sides more aware of their limitations, what they stand to gain from

one another, and the nature of the premises on which their different perspectives are based. So, in the spirit of dialogue and open debate called for by Matsumoto and Hakamaya, I would like to put forth my own criticism of their criticism in the hope that it will further dialogue between Japanese and Western scholars of Buddhism.

Let me begin by saying that I certainly agree with Matsumoto and Hakamaya that the development of *hongaku shisō* marked a profound shift in the history of Buddhist thought. Wherever we stand on the issue of whether or not *hongaku shisō* should still be considered Buddhist, I think we have to agree that *hongaku* is problematic, and Matsumoto and Hakamaya have surely made an important contribution to Buddhist studies by reproblematising *hongaku shisō*. It is in how we deal with the problematic character of *hongaku shisō* that I part company with Matsumoto and Hakamaya.

The issues and problems raised by Matsumoto and Hakamaya's criticism of the *tathāgata-garbha* and *hongaku shisō* bear directly on my own research, which has focused on the medieval Chinese Hua-yen and Ch'an figure Kuei-feng Tsung-mi (780–841). Indeed, Tsung-mi's thought is a good test case for assessing Matsumoto and Hakamaya's critique because it seems to fit Matsumoto's description of *dhātu-vāda* to a T. To a striking degree Tsung-mi's language even matches the terms with which Matsumoto characterizes *dhātu-vāda*. It fits it so well, in fact, that it would be easy to paint Tsung-mi as an arch villain in the revisionist view of the history of East Asian Buddhism proffered by Matsumoto and Hakamaya.

Tsung-mi's thought emphasizes the underlying ontological ground on which all phenomenal appearances (*hsiang* 相) are based, which he variously refers to as the nature (*hsing* 性), the one mind (*i-hsin* 一心) of the *Awakening of Mahayana Faith* (*Ta-sheng ch'i-hsin lun*), the marvelous mind of perfect enlightenment (*yüan-chüeh miao-hsin* 圓覺妙心) of the *Scripture of Perfect Enlightenment* (*Yüan-chüeh ching*), the one *dharmadhātu* (*i fa-chieh* 一法界) of the *Avatamsaka*, the mind ground (*hsin-ti* 心地), or Shen-hui's single word awareness (*chih chih i-tzu* 知之一字)—all of which are synonyms for the *tathāgata-garbha*. All phenomena are manifestations of this ground; they thus have no reality of their own (this is what it means to say that they are “empty”). This underlying ontological ground is, moreover, unitary and whole, whereas phenomena are multiform and diverse. Tsung-mi's thought thus seems to be best charac-

terized as a kind of generative ontological monism. Indeed, his whole system can be seen as being based on a cosmogony that explains how phenomenal appearances arise from the nature (*hsing-ch'i* 性起).

The structure of Tsung-mi's thought, moreover, is based on a model that owes far more to indigenous Chinese thought than to Indian Buddhist theories—that of essence and function (*t'i-yung* 体用). The underlying ontological ground is the “essence” or “substance” (*t'i* 体), whereas the myriad phenomenal appearances are merely its “functioning” (*yung* 用). This model is expressed by a series of interchangeable polarities: principle (*li* 理) and phenomena (*shih* 事), nature (*hsing* 性) and phenomenal appearances (*hsiang* 相), and root (*pen* 本) and branches (*mo* 末). Whereas essence refers to what is primary, absolute, unchanging, unconditioned, eternal, and profound, function refers to what is derivative, relative, variable, conditioned, transient, and superficial. Tsung-mi's understanding of Buddhism thus seems to be hopelessly tainted by indigenous thought (*dochaku shisō*), one of the characteristics of *hongaku shisō* strongly criticized by Hakamaya. But if we are content to stop here, dismissing Tsung-mi as someone who contributed to the East Asian bastardization of Buddhism, we will miss what is truly interesting about Tsung-mi, and in the process we will lose an opportunity to understand how and why a religion like Buddhism changes in the course of its historical development and cultural diffusion.

As an intellectual historian of Chinese Buddhism, I am not concerned with the question of whether the development of *hongaku shisō* so radically diverged from the fundamental tenets of the Buddha's “original” teachings that the result should no longer be considered “Buddhism.” Rather I am fascinated with trying to understand how and why such a change took place by trying to determine what cultural and historical factors were involved. In other words, I find the fact that such a teaching could be considered non-Buddhist very interesting, but the question of whether it is “really” Buddhist or not in some normative sense strikes me as somewhat misconceived. In the final analysis, the question of “true Buddhism” (so important to Matsumoto and Hakamaya's mission) is theological and cannot be settled by historical scholarship. To me the most interesting aspect of the current debate, and the one that I feel I understand the least as an outsider, is what it reveals about the current state of Sōtō Zen in particular and Japanese Buddhism in general.

THE CASE FOR DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT

In terms of my own research on medieval Chinese Buddhism and Tsung-mi, my basic objection to Matsumoto and Hakamaya's critique of *hongaku shisō* is that it oversimplifies complex doctrinal and historical developments, that *hongaku* had a different meaning in Chinese Buddhism than Matsumoto and Hakamaya claim that it had in Japan, and that this fact should give Matsumoto and Hakamaya pause to rethink the focus of their criticism. In support of this contention, I would like to make three main points, albeit in a highly condensed manner.

First, for Tsung-mi and the textual and doctrinal tradition from which he drew, *hongaku* was tied to a positive valuation of language and thus cannot simply be understood as entailing an authoritarian denial of the validity of words and concepts as Hakamaya charges. Simply put, I would contend that the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine can best be understood as arising out of a need to affirm the positive role of language in the face of its radical critique found in the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures and the Madhyamika treatises.¹ Thus the development of the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine cannot simply be understood as the intrusion of indigenous thought; it was also a response to a perceived inadequacy within Buddhist doctrine. In his classification of Buddhist teachings Tsung-mi emphasizes the point that the teaching of the *tathāgata-garbha* supersedes that of emptiness precisely because it reveals the true nature of ultimate reality.²

My second main point is that for Tsung-mi this positive valuation of language was connected with the importance of *hongaku* in laying an ontological foundation for ethical and religious endeavor in the face of the antinomian challenges posed by some radical Ch'an movements in the late T'ang—especially the Hung-chou and P'ao-t'ang lines of Ch'an current in Szechwan during the second half of the eighth century and the first half of the ninth. Tsung-mi's granting pride of place to the teaching of the *tathāgata-garbha* in his classification of the teachings represents a striking revision of the fivefold classification of Fa-tsang. Tsung-mi's classification of the teachings is based on a cosmogony he reads out of the *Awakening of Mahayana Faith*. Thus the order of the teachings reverses the various steps according to which the originally pure mind becomes covered over by defilements and enmeshed in karma. This cosmogony provides a map for Buddhist practice and so reaffirms the need for continual practice after an initial experience of enlightenment, thereby countering the antinomian tendency of the Hung-chou and P'ao-t'ang interpretations of Ch'an.³

My third main point is that Tsung-mi's appropriation of *hongaku* carried within it a tension between ontological monism and ethical dualism and that this tension kept it from being drained of ethical import in the way that Hakamaya claims that it was in Japan. Tsung-mi charges that the Hung-chou line reduces all activities (whether good or bad) to the functioning of the Buddha-nature and maintains that there is no essence apart from such functioning. It thereby effaces any criterion by which to distinguish between good or bad, enlightened or unenlightened. In his criticism, Tsung-mi not only acknowledges the inseparability of the essence and the functioning of the mind as but different aspects of the same reality, but he also stresses their difference. Their inseparability is what makes religious cultivation possible, and their difference is what makes religious cultivation necessary. Tsung-mi thus uses the essence/function paradigm to preserve an ethically critical duality within a larger ontological unity. Whereas Hakamaya condemns *hongaku shisō* for undermining the possibility of taking an independent moral stance, Tsung-mi championed *hongaku shisō* precisely because he saw it as providing a solid ontological foundation for Buddhist moral and religious practice.⁴

These three points thus lead to the following objection: if the presuppositions embodied in *hongaku shisō* can serve as the basis for diametrically different ethical positions, then Matsumoto and Hakamaya cannot simply make *hongaku shisō* the scapegoat for the various social problems with which they are concerned. Just because *hongaku* could be used to rationalize the status quo with all of its inherent inequality does not mean that the injustice of social discrimination was a necessary consequence of *hongaku*—a point that is highlighted by the fact that in a different historical and cultural context *hongaku* was used as a basis for affirming some of the very things that Matsumoto and Hakamaya claim that it undermined in Japan. It is not *hongaku shisō* alone that is the problem. The problem, rather, is how it was, and is, interpreted.

To put the point more generally, I would contend that doctrines never have a simple and straightforward singular meaning but are always multivalent and complexly nuanced formulations that are susceptible to a wide range of interpretive possibilities. Of course, the range within which any given doctrine can be plausibly interpreted is circumscribed, although even here we cannot draw hard lines. The parameters of plausible interpretation are set by the way the doctrine itself is formulated as well as by the entire field of doctrines within which that doctrine is located. As the

constellation of the doctrinal field changes, so do the parameters within which any doctrine in that field can be interpreted. Doctrines have no meaning outside of the interpretive contexts in which they are embedded just as ideas have no reality independent of the minds that think them. This is why it seems meaningless to me to try to understand doctrines outside of their context because outside of their context they have no meaning.

The blame for contemporary social problems cannot simply be laid at the feet of *hongaku shisō*. The way in which doctrines become appropriated as social ideologies is complex, and what needs to be examined is the entire process by which this occurs and the various historical, social, psychological, epistemic, cultural, and other factors that make the process work in the way that it does. Repudiating *hongaku shisō* will do nothing to resolve the problems that face contemporary Japan. Casting the blame on *hongaku shisō* is like blaming social disturbances on “outside agitators”—neither tactic gets at the roots of those problems, which are far more complex and insidious.

As I see it, the question that consequently needs to be addressed is: what factors were involved in the Japanese case that led to *hongaku* being interpreted in the way that its contemporary critics claim that it was. This question once again brings to the fore the importance of the historical and cultural context in which *hongaku shisō* was, and is, understood and the context in which we, as modern interpreters of Buddhism, understand that context. And this awareness of our own historical context is the starting point for what I think it means to be critical. While being critical involves a constant effort to step back from and to recognize the coordinates of our own perspective, we can never escape the fact that we can only see something from a certain viewpoint. The eye, as Zen texts frequently remind us, cannot see itself. Awareness of this epistemological predicament, however, can have the salutary effect of freeing us from the self-righteousness that comes from the belief that we are in the privileged possession of the “truth.” Indeed, the spectre of “truth” as an absolute standard by which to discriminate right from wrong (and consequently the question of “true Buddhism”) carries within itself an authoritarian ideological potential that is apt to send shivers down the spine of anyone familiar with the history of religion in the West.

THE CASE FOR ACCULTURATION

As an intellectual historian interested in trying to understand the process of the acculturation of Buddhism in China, I must also object to the oversimplified treatment of indigenous thought in Hakamaya's revisionist interpretation of East Asian Buddhism. Hakamaya sees a close connection between *hongaku shisō* and indigenous thought, and in places he even defines *hongaku shisō* in terms of indigenous thought. To begin with, he contends that the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine represents an intrusion of the indigenous Upaniṣadic idea of a substantial and perduring atman into Buddhism, a development that went against the original critical spirit of Buddhism, which criticized all forms of substantialist and essentialist thinking. Hakamaya suggests that because this kind of critical thinking challenged accepted attitudes and could therefore be perceived as threatening, it became overlaid with indigenous substantialist notions to make it more palatable. Moreover, as Buddhism spread throughout East Asia, the original antisubstantialist emphasis of the Buddha became further obscured by the indigenous thought in the particular cultures it encountered, especially the "naturalism" of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu in China. The history of Buddhism in East Asia is thus largely the story of how the Buddha's original critical and antisubstantialist insight became overlaid by successive layers of indigenous thought, the end product of which is the fully developed theory of intrinsic enlightenment found in Japanese Buddhism. Hakamaya singles out two major exceptions to this sorry tale, Chih-i (538–597) in China and Dōgen (1200–1253) in Japan. Both of these figures were critical of *hongaku shisō* and sought to rescue Buddhism from the clutches of indigenous thought, but their efforts were ultimately subverted by their disciples and subsequent generations of followers.

This picture of Buddhism is "theological" in the sense that it is concerned with wielding a normative conception of "true Buddhism" to pass critical judgment on the development of Buddhism in East Asia. It seeks to uncover what went wrong with Buddhism in the course of its acculturation in China and Japan. What I find most striking in Hakamaya's "critical" approach to the history of Buddhism in East Asia is that the language and metaphors in which it is couched are based on the imagery at the very core of the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine. As exemplified in the nine analogies of the *Tathāgata-garbha Sutra*,⁵ the core imagery of the *tathāgata-garbha* holds that there is an originally pure and immutable essence that is covered over and obscured from view by adventitious

defilements. Hakamaya's discussion of the Buddha's enlightenment, Chih-i, and Dōgen seems to presuppose the idea that there is a pure, unchanging essence (i.e., true Buddhism) that gets covered over by indigenous thought just as the *dharmakāya* is covered over by defilements. The terms in which Hakamaya conceives Buddhism thus seem to be imbued with the imagery of the very doctrine he wants most to reject as non-Buddhist. Is not the very idea of "true Buddhism" essentialistic? Matsumoto and Hakamaya therefore seem to slip into the very substantialist fallacy they are intent on refuting by hypostatizing a certain conception of "true Buddhism."

For the intellectual historian, Matsumoto and Hakamaya's approach rides roughshod over the most interesting and important issues that need to be studied in detail and appreciated in terms of their subtle shades of nuance. For the theologian intent on arriving at critical judgments on the nature of true Buddhism, however, such concerns are largely beside the point. Our differences in regard to the issue of indigenous thought are thus to a large extent a function of our different standpoints and agendas. But they also reflect fundamental disagreements over the nature of religion and a different reading of "Buddhism."

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

The difference in our approaches to the study of Buddhism reflects a different understanding of religion, and it is in terms of this issue that the gap between Japanese and Western scholarship seems to be greatest—and, I would hazard, it seems to be getting wider. Insofar as the debate over *hongaku shisō* is a measure of general currents within Japanese Buddhist scholarship, I would even say that Japanese and Western scholars seem to be moving in opposite directions. That is, in their quest for "true Buddhism" Matsumoto and Hakamaya seem to be embracing the very kind of model of religion that Western scholars have recently been struggling to leave behind. The irony of the situation is that the model presupposed by Matsumoto and Hakamaya seems to owe more to the Western (and ultimately Protestant) notion of religion that was imported during the Meiji period than it does to either Buddhist or traditional Japanese conceptions. The litmus test for "true Buddhism" is thus defined in terms of faithfulness to a doctrine instead of, say, a community, an institution, a lifestyle, the performance of specified ritual actions, moral

and religious practice, or psychological transformation.

In the last decade or so, however, Western scholars of Buddhism have been moving away from such a textually and doctrinally oriented approach to Buddhism. In the United States at least, they typically find themselves housed in religious studies departments, and in both their teaching and research they have not been able to avoid addressing some of the broader intellectual trends that have impacted on the field of religious studies as a whole. Prominent among these is the growing recognition of the important contributions that the social sciences, especially anthropology, have made in understanding religion. The wide-ranging impact that literary criticism and deconstruction have had on the humanities has also gradually come to be felt even in the remote corners of the academy occupied by Buddhist studies. In various ways, these trends have made the study of texts problematical, and I would suspect that most Western scholars today would agree that, as a religion, Buddhism cannot be understood solely or primarily as a body of dogma. Dogma or doctrine is only one aspect (and not necessarily one to be privileged) of the complex and many-faceted phenomenon that we refer to as “Buddhism.” Doctrinal formulations, that is, must be understood within the broader context of Buddhism as a religion.

Western scholars would also be extremely reluctant to grant Matsu-moto and Hakamaya the central article of faith on which they stake their understanding of “true Buddhism”—namely, that the *Mahāvagga*’s account of the Buddha’s enlightenment in terms of his discovery of the twelvefold chain of conditioned origination can be taken at face value as a report of historical fact. Lambert Schmithausen, for instance, has argued persuasively that the earliest accounts of the Buddha’s enlightenment in the Pali Canon describe it in terms of the four noble truths and not in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*.⁶ There are, of course, enormously complicated textual and historical difficulties involved in using the Pali Canon to reconstruct “early,” “primitive,” or “original” Buddhism—not to mention the problematical character of the very conception of the project itself. Although the Pali Canon may, as a whole, be closer to the Buddha’s “words” than any other extant textual corpus, it is still mediated by the collective memory of the community that compiled, codified, redacted, and transmitted it orally for hundreds of years before ever committing it to writing, and, even when finally put into writing, it did not remain static but continued to be modified by the tradition over the ensuing centuries.

As we have it today it is thus far removed from the Buddha, and we have no way of gauging how close or how distant any given statement is to the words of the Buddha. It is thus impossible for us to reconstruct with any degree of certitude the content of the Buddha's enlightenment or what the Buddha "originally" taught. Nor does the Pali Canon present a complete picture of "early" Buddhism. From its inception in the collective memory of the early monastic community, the Pali Canon never represented a full account of the Buddha's teaching. Rather, it was and still is a selective version of the Buddha's teaching preserved by one segment of the sangha, and we can only presume that some of the Buddha's teachings addressed to other groups were never included. These are only some of the many issues that must be dealt with by any scholarship purporting to be critical.

Any reconstruction of "original" Buddhism is therefore problematic, if only from a text-historical point of view. The blunt fact is that the Buddha's enlightenment is inaccessible to us; all we have are competing traditions about it. There are also larger conceptual problems in the very phrasing of the issue of "true Buddhism." Behind Matsumoto and Hakamaya's discussion of true Buddhism I sense an obsession with origins and purity—an obsession that seems to pervade Japanese scholarship on Zen as a whole.⁷ But why is what is "original" better or somehow more "pure"? Doesn't the assumption that "what is original is best" mask a whole mythology of history as a fall away from and corruption of what was originally pure? Don't we see here, again, another and more subtle instance of *tathāgata-garbha*-type thinking and, in a different guise, another form of essentialism? I, for one, would reject the assumption that Buddhism ever was originally simple or pure. In any case, such assumptions must be examined critically and spelled out rationally if Buddhist scholarship is to move beyond the realm of mythology and to live up to its billing as "critical."

I would also contend that the issue of "true Buddhism," and the privileging of doctrine on which it is based, is problematic from the point of view of Buddhism. The early texts, of course, are not univocal, and they are susceptible to different readings. But there is much in the early tradition that would call such a dogmatic construction of Buddhism into question. The parable of the raft or the simile of the dharma as medicine, for example, imply a pragmatic approach to truth according to which doctrines have only a provisional status. Certainly the designation of a certain

doctrine (such as *pratītyasamutpāda*) as true, and using that as a criterion to judge all others, not only is dubious methodologically but also is problematic from the point of view of the early texts themselves. Luis Gómez, for instance, has shown that the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, which belongs to the earliest strata of the *Suttanipāta*, itself one of the oldest Pali texts, criticizes all views as the basis of attachment and rejects the notion that there is a right view at all.⁸ The *Aṭṭhakavagga*'s critique of all views also denies that "truth" can ever be formulated in propositional form. Hakamaya's contention that early Buddhism affirms language is simply not true as stated. The early textual tradition already contains a variety of discourses and speaks with several voices, and we must be wary of taking any one of those voices to speak for all. I would thus make a plea for a more liberal and open reading of Buddhism, one that regarded all doctrines as *upāya* (including the very idea of ultimate truth itself). As a religion Buddhism cannot be reduced to a mere body of doctrine or a series of propositions making truth claims about reality; rather, it must be understood on its own terms as a practice (*bhāvana*), a path (*mārga*), or a way of life, in which doctrine plays its part. Doctrine, that is, must be understood within the broader soteriological vision of Buddhism.

Yet, such objections aside, I have great sympathy for Matsumoto and Hakamaya's emphasis on the importance of the critical spirit in Buddhism. Although this may not be the only voice with which the tradition speaks, it is certainly an important one and one that I think is particularly relevant for Buddhists today. My main criticism of "Critical Buddhism," then, is that it is not yet fully critical. As Matsumoto and Hakamaya point out, this critical spirit is embodied in such teachings as no-self, conditioned origination, and emptiness, which undermine the belief in an unchanging essence or substance. But this critique is not only directed against the "self"; it is also aimed at the identifications in terms of which the "self" is defined as a self. Insofar as we identify with something called "Buddhism," "Buddhism" (or "true Buddhism") is also a construction of the ideology of the self, and in that sense it too must be "emptied." Hence, in some sense at least, we cannot escape the paradox of being Buddhists. Can we then conclude, in the spirit of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, that someone can only be called a Buddhist if he or she realizes that there is nothing that can be grasped as Buddhism?

What I take to be the critical element in Buddhism is its critique of the inherent psychological tendency of human beings to give substance to

ideas—this tendency is the basis of clinging and, as such, the root of conflict and suffering. This critical spirit is above all else an injunction for us to look within at the source of our attachments. It is also a caution that one of the most dangerous of all attachments is the attachment to the idea of truth, which blinds us toward our own grasping and leads to self-righteousness and intolerance. Thus the call to critical Buddhism, as I understand it, demands that we be self-critical, both as scholars and as Buddhists. Among other things, being critical means becoming aware of the assumptions on which our discussion of critical Buddhism is based. Critical Buddhism must therefore come to terms with history—especially its own history, its own historical context, and its own historical position within the history of Buddhism. Such awareness is part and parcel of what it means to be critical.

Only when we acknowledge that Buddhism lacks any defining, unalterable essence (an atman, so to speak) and is itself the product of a complex set of interdependent and ever-changing conditions (*pratītya-samutpāda*), will we have a proper framework for understanding the process of its historical and cultural transformation and recognizing our own location within that stream we could call the “tradition.” To say that there is nothing else is, for me, the very meaning of *pratītyasamutpāda*.