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Nonduality of the Two Truths in Sinitic Mādhyamika: Origin of the ‘Third Truth’

by Whalen W. Lai

The teaching of the Buddha concerning Reality has recourse to Two Truths: the Mundane and the Highest Truth.

Without the knowledge of the distinction between the two, one does not know the profound point in the Teaching.

The Highest Truth cannot be taught apart from the Mundane, but without understanding the former, one does not apprehend *nirvāṇa*.

Mādhyamika-kārikā XXIV, 8-10.

The distinction of the Two Truths is central to Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika. It grew out of necessity in his attack on his opponents, the Sarvāstivādins. Simply put, the Sarvāstivādins were rationalists who assumed a natural correspondence between idea, *eidōs*, and reality, *logos*. For them, reality could be analyzed into a finite number of entities, *dharma*s, each with its own discrete *raison d'être* (*svabhāva*, "self-nature"). Nāgārjuna opposed this assumption and succeeded in showing the antinomies innate to such reasoning. Reality, *dharmatā*, being in flux, cannot be frozen into such neat categories. In so disputing the symmetry between reason and reality, Nāgārjuna set up the distinction of the Two Truths: the nondiscursive Highest Truth and the everyday, expedient Mundane Truth. Since the Buddha cannot stay forever in silence concerning the former, he must have recourse to the latter to evoke it. However, the two perspectives—the intuitive and the analytical—being different, there should not be any confusion.

Chinese masters of the Two Truths theory, however, thought that the Two Truths should be united in a Third Truth. This postulation of

a Third Truth was the result of the need to go beyond the perceived dichotomy of *Two Truths*. The dichotomy was so perceived because the Chinese mistook the Two Truths to be two realities paralleling nirvanic Emptiness and samsaric being. Since the *sūtras* clearly stated that *nirvāna* is *samsāra* and *samsāra* is *nirvāna*, the Chinese felt justified in saying that the Higher Truth is the Mundane Truth and the Mundane Truth is the Higher Truth. How that happened historically is the object of the present investigation.

The interest in a third truth that would synthesize the Two Truths came probably from within the Ch'eng-shih circle. This circle of southern scholars in the fifth and sixth century specialized in the *Ch'eng-shih-lun*^a (*Satyasiddhi?*) of Harivarman. The *Ch'eng-shih-lun* was declared Hinayānist in the Sui Dynasty, and the school as such eventually disintegrated. However, it left behind the heritage of a Three Truths system to all the major schools. The Three Truths appeared in T'ien-t'ai^b as "The Three Truths of the One Mind" (*san-ti i-hsin*),^c in San-lun^d as "The Threefold Two Truths" (*san-chung erh-ti*)^e and in Hua-yen^f as "The Inseparable Three Truths" (*san-hsing pu-li*).^g However, since none of the schools would have liked to acknowledge its debt to a Hinayānist school, they helped to obscure the historical continuity. T'ien-t'ai justified its theory with reference to obscure *sūtras*; San-lun accused Ch'eng-shih of stealing its theory; Hua-yen based itself on the *Awakening of Faith*. There is no reason to believe that Ch'eng-shih stole the Three Truths from San-lun, even though Hirai Shun'e^h defended this charge.¹ The Three Truths were native to Ch'eng-shih. It had also nothing to do with the *trivabhāva* (Three Truths or Natures) in Indic Yogācara. Even Fa-tsang'sⁱ *trivabhāva* theory was structured according to the native set. To understand truly what happened in history, we must accept the Ch'eng-shih contribution to Chinese speculation on the Two Truths.²

Poetic License in the Sinitic Two Truths

The Chinese innovation was not without cause. China learned Mādhyamika from Kumārajīva's translation of Nāgārjuna.³ The Chinese were told that "*samsāra* is *nirvāna*; form is emptiness." Now they were being shown the Higher Truth and the Mundane Truth. It was natural that they drew a correlation. There are enough vague passages in the *sūtras* and the *śāstras* to suggest that Emptiness pertained

to the Higher Truth while forms pertained to samsaric realities. Furthermore, it was said that the Buddha (in *nirvāṇa*) knows the Higher Truth and common people (in *samsāra*) know only the Mundane Truth.⁴ The Two Truths appeared so much like the personal property of two types of beings, a theme that resonated with the native Taoist tradition and its interest in "subjectiveness" (*shutaisei* in Japanese⁵). The Sage Truth looks from the perspective of the Tao (*i-tao yen-chih*)^k; the Common Truth looks at the same thing from the perspective of differentiated realities themselves (*i-wu yen-chih*)^z.⁶ Such unconscious blending with Taoist outlooks was not necessarily flawed. The danger lay rather in the easy confusion of the Two Truths with the two realities of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, or forms and emptiness. If so, then since the two realities are identical, the Chinese would assume that the Higher and the Mundane Truth too had to be identical. In short, that was the mistake made by the Ch'eng-shih masters.

We must empathize with their situation and what was thrown before them at the time. Buddhist philosophy had come a long way since the unsystematic discourses of the Buddha in the *sūtras*. First, the *abhidharma* philosophers codified the *dharmas* (teachings of the Buddha) into their "superior teaching," *abhidharma* and higher truth, *paramārtha*. Then the Emptiness *sūtras* came to empty all the *abhidharmic* distinctions so made. Then Nāgārjuna came to codify the Emptiness philosophy and rationally show the limits of conceptualized (*abhidharma*) thinking practised by the Sarvāstivādins. Here are four levels of reflection, each reflecting upon the predecessor. It takes some sorting out even for the modern intellectual historian. The Chinese Buddhists did not have a solid native tradition of ontology, epistemology and critical philosophy. The last persons really to delve into the structure of human knowledge had been the Mohists. The Chinese were given these Buddhist traditions in a batch, at random, with little logical sequence, and they had to struggle with the many levels of discourse without knowing their differences at all well. The result was a repeated relapse into more primitive modes of discourse while supposedly pursuing Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika philosophy.

Without a solid *Abhidharma* background, the gentry Buddhists jumped into the *Prajñā-pāramitā sūtras*, because the Emptiness doctrine reminded them so much of Wang Pi's^m "nonbeing," *wu*. The line "form is emptiness" was read easily in terms of Wang Pi's "Being comes from nonbeing." The former was directed originally at voiding the conceptualism of the *abhidharmist*; the latter was simple ontological

nihilism, a celebration of the mystery of the void. The fact that Chih Chienⁿ often used the term *pen-wu*^o ("original, basic nothingness") to render *śūnyatā* did not help matters much.⁷ Fortunately, Kumārjīva had, more recently, settled on *chi-kung*^p ("as such empty") instead. He even intentionally interpolated *shih*^q ("concrete," as in *shih-hsiang*^r for *dharmatā*) to safeguard the non-nihilistic implication of this philosophy. Slowly, the Chinese came to recognize that both being and non-being are likewise empty (*yu-wu chieh-k'ung*^s),⁸ that *k'ung* has nothing to do with the Taoist *hsü* ("vacuity" as in *T'ai-hsü*,^t "the great empty space"⁹) and that emptiness is none other than the *real* form of the various realities, *chü-fa shih-hsiang*.^u

Indian causative analysis posed an even greater handicap. When Seng Chao^v read that "*Dharmas* do not come from anywhere nor go anywhere," he could easily mistake that to mean that "things do not move." That would be an ontological reading. The original meaning, however, is that "coming" and "going" as concepts (for realities) are unreal. Causality as a system is itself full of antinomies. The Emptiness philosophy strives to liberate us from the confines of such language conventions. (As we shall see, even Seng Chao was not too clear on this.) Things do come and go. Their impermanence was what the Buddha saw. To prove this impermanence to a rationalist's satisfaction, the abhidharmist tried to dissect reality into discrete but changing components, the *dharmas*. In so doing, he created his own downfall, for Nāgārjuna would dialectically demonstrate the inner contradictions involved in any ontological attempt to freeze the flux of transient phenomena. Neither the Buddha, nor the Sarvāstivādin, nor the Śūnyavādin thought that things do not move. The Buddha saw that they did; the Sarvāstivādin proved how fleetingly they did; the Śūnyavādin showed the futility of such presumptuous proofs. It is concepts that are emptied as mere constructs, *vikalpa*. It was the abhidharmist assumption of a symmetry between ideas and reality which was faulted. The *vikalpa* constructs are precisely what prevent us from seeing *dharmatā*, the nature of things. If we do not see the facade of words, we can never attain the wisdom necessary for "comprehending *nirvāṇa*." Failing to see the full import of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, even Seng Chao fell short in his attempt to refute the thesis that things moved.

After Seng Chao, there was an even more obvious confusion of the various issues. The Two Truths were regarded as two realities descriptive of an objectifiable principle, *li*,^w in the object itself. The *li*

had to be justly paradoxical, because the mystery of the coincidence of opposites (*samsāra* is *nirvāṇa*) was embedded in it. By aligning being with the Mundane Truth and nonbeing with the Higher Truth, the Chinese had to postulate some still Higher Truth where being would be immediately nonbeing. Such piling up of being and nonbeing snow-balled, until some of the serial negations in the writings of these masters appear like tongue-twisters. *Fei-fei-fei-yu*^x (literally, not-not-not-being) reads “Not that not-being is not being” etc. It sounds like Mādhyamika dialectics, but I suspect its more direct ancestor is chapter two of *Chuang-tzu*,^y where there are endless paradoxical speculations on the origin of origins of origins.¹⁰ In short, the Indic interest in the epistemological was short-changed in the Chinese delight in cosmogony. The Chinese liberal use of the logic of identity would raise many an Indian eyebrow, for it puts all kinds of incompatible opposites together in the same space. Being is nonbeing; part is whole; Higher Truth is Mundane Truth, etc.

The Chinese would not have ventured into speculations on a Third Truth had they heeded the distinction made later by Chi-tsang.¹¹² Chi-tsang knew that the Two Truths were not meant to be descriptive of *li*, principle; the Two Truths were only two ways of discourse, *chiao*.^{12 aa} The Chinese should also have stayed with the reticence of Seng Chao:

Therefore the scripture says: “Are the Higher and Mundane Truth different? The answer is no.” The *sūtra* elucidates the Higher Truth directly to show that things are not existent, and the Mundane Truth likewise to show how they are not nonexistent. Does it mean to say that because there are two levels of Truths, there are two realities?¹³

The Source of Innovation: Seng Chao on Motion and Rest

There are Two Truths (perspectives) but only one reality; so said Seng Chao. However, even his prudence could not stop a curiosity: if there is only one reality, why are there two different pictures of it? The proper answer would have been that one is true and unclouded by thought-constructs, and the other is simply the false convention necessary for our daily life. Seng Chao, however, felt compelled to locate the concurrence of the two opposite views in the paradoxical *li*, principle, out there in the “object” itself. He attempted to prove this in the most controversial of his essays, “Things do not move.”¹⁴

This essay has usually been judged as a misunderstanding or malapplication of the Mādhyamika dialectics. Without denying the fallacies involved, I would nonetheless show how Seng Chao's real intention was not to show that "things do not move" but how "movement and passivity are the same." Furthermore, Seng Chao located this paradox in the pair of negations found in the *kārikā*: "(things) neither come nor go." He hoped that with this, he could account for how the Common Truth (of commoners) saw movement when the Sage Truth (of he himself) could recognize the opposite. This essay of his is a classic demonstration of a *limited prāsaṅgika*. Because the people in China commonly thought that things moved, Seng Chao was justified to show only how things could not possibly move.

Indeed, Seng Chao has so defined the problem from the start:

That all things move on like a current is the ordinary belief of men. But I [representing the higher perspective] think this is not the case. . . . There is no *dharma* that goes or comes, or moves or changes its position.¹⁵

Movement is thus given as the Common Truth and immutability the Higher Truth. However, Seng Chao recognizes that the latter does not mean the old Taoist passivity: escaping from change to the changeless.¹⁶

No, rest must be sought right in motion. As rest must be sought in motion, therefore there is eternal rest in spite of motion; and as motion is not to be cast aside in order to seek rest, therefore although there is rest, it is never separate from motion. This being the case, motion and rest are from the beginning not different. Only deluded people consider them to be dissimilar.¹⁷

As *samsāra* is *nirvāna*, or form is emptiness, so—argues Seng Chao—motion is rest. His thesis is not that things do not move; it is rather that *moving* things are at *rest*. "The raging storm is tranquil; the rushing water is still; the toppling heaven is at rest;" so he eulogizes. There the nouns (storm, water, heaven) are accidental; the contrasting adjectives are the key. All movements are as such nonmovement.

Seng Chao then wants to demonstrate how this coincidence of opposites can rationally be accounted for. He finds his clue in an analysis of the principle that "(things) neither come nor go." The following passage combines two sections in the original text:

What people mean by motion is that because past things do not reach the present, things are said to have moved and are not at rest. What I mean by rest is that, precisely (so), things are at rest and have not moved. [Why do we differ?]

(In their case), things have moved and are not still because things have not come down to the present. [Time moves but things themselves do not.] (In my case,) things are still and have not moved because they have not gone. [Going off would constitute movement.] The phenomenon (we look at) is the same, but our perspectives are different.¹⁸

The phenomenon in question is “Things do not come and do not go.” The common people have seen the “not coming”; Seng Chao has seen the “not going.” Thus, there are two perspectives (Truths) but one common reality.

By such sophistry, Seng Chao thought he had accounted for the seeming paradox and somehow united the Two Truths. This is the mistake that would inspire the Ch'eng-shih masters to come. This is taking the Two Truths as pertaining to an objective principle, *li*. However, in all fairness, Seng Chao was also cognizant of the Two Truths simply as *chiao*, teaching. “The *tathāgata* (Buddha) exercises his true mind that transcends all dualities¹⁹. . .and preaches in *upāya* different doctrines in consideration of the audience's capacities.”²⁰

Therefore, when the Sage said that things go, he did not mean that they really go; he merely wanted to prevent ordinary thoughts. And when he said things remain in the same state, he did not mean that they really remain; he merely wanted to discard what ordinary people call the passing of things.²¹ . . . (Contrary teachings so given) are intended to lead the common folk to enlightenment. The two different teachings aim at the same reality. Shall we say that just because they differ in language, they are contrary in objective?²²

In this manner did Seng Chao guard himself from ontologizing the Two Truths.

The Origin of the Three Truths: Chou Yung^{ab}

After Seng Chao, the Chinese looked for more leads to understanding the Two Truths. In their confusion, they turned to a confused

authority, Harivarman's *Ch'eng-shih-lun*. How seemingly elucidating is this neat distinction in Harivarman!

There are two gates: the Mundane Truth and the Higher Truth. The former establishes the truth of being, the latter the truth of absence of the self. Therein lies the Middle Path.²³

The *Ch'eng-shih-lun* is, however, a Hīnayānist work co-opting Mādhyamika. It is structured according to the Four Noble Truths, but it selects out the third, *nirodha*, to be the One Truth of *nirvāna* that transcends *samsāra*. Just by coincidence, the Mahāyāna *sūtra* loved by the southerners—the *Mahāparinirvāna sūtra*—also endorsed a One Truth which is the *mahānirvāna* of the eternal Buddha-nature.²⁴ Blending these two separate traditions together, the Ch'eng-shih *qua Nirvāna sūtra* masters felt justified in finding a One Truth (above the Two Truths). In their rather complicated reinterpretation of the *kārikā*, they arbitrarily selected out the first pair of the standard Eight Negations—“neither born nor destroyed” (*pu-sheng pu-mieh*^{ac})—as the so-called Middle Path of the Higher Truth. The other three pairs were considered to be the Middle Path of the Lower Truth. This is because *pu-sheng pu-mieh* happened to read like the permanence of Buddha-nature and the opposite of *sheng-mieh*^{ad} (“born-destroyed, life-death”), one standard term to render *samsāra*! So, unknowingly, the Ch'eng-shih tradition re-introduced an ontological distinction between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, misapplied this to the Two Truths (*samsaric* being and *nirvanic* nonbeing) and was misled into seeking out a still higher One Truth in which *samsāra* could be *nirvāna*, being could be nonbeing.

There were several schools of Two Truths then, and a critical observer, Chou Yung, recorded their positions in terms of *san-tsung*,^{ae} three major school-lineages. All three tried to handle the ambivalence of how reality could be simultaneously being (mundane truth) and nonbeing (higher truth). Since I have reconstructed this treatise of Chou Yung elsewhere, I would simply report the basic findings:

1. The first school “did not negate provisional reality”: it assumed an inner/outer distinction. Reality is at heart empty but in appearance real (provisionally real). This position is compared to a chestnut gnawed by a rodent: seemingly a solid chestnut but, in fact, there is nothing inside.
2. The second school did “negate provisional reality”: it applied a causative analysis, as it were, to the chestnut *in toto* (with no inner/outer) sophistry. Reality is caused, therefore it is not

unreal. Causes, however, are impermanent and will disperse; therefore, reality is not real either. This position is criticized as “bobbing a melon in water,” i.e. pushing the melon (reality) in and out of the liquid. One moment, it is there; the next, it is gone. Although more clever, this school still left behind two temporally separate and different impressions.

3. The third school is neatly labelled the “provisional reality is as such empty” school: simply, it identified the real as the empty. Being is nonbeing. *Samsāra* is *nirvāna*. This is the preferred final, if somewhat dogmatic, position on the Two Truths.

Is it not necessary to trace these three back to India and then judge their relative validity?²⁵ To the Chinese, the third one was the best. Later, Chi-tsang suggested his own series, using similar clever punning in the Chinese language that cannot be rendered into English or Sanskrit without doing violence to the language on both sides. (However, for interest, his three are: *k'ung-pen-hsing*^{af} or “emptying the *svabhāva*”; *pen-hsing-k'ung*^{ag} or “*svabhāva-sūnya*”; and *hsing-pen-k'ung*^{ah} which is something like “*svabhāva qua sūnyatā*.” For what it is worth, the third was again the best.)

Chou Yung probably did not intend his own criticism of the three schools to become another stepping stone to further Ch'eng-shih speculations, but that was the fate in store for his treatise. This is because he was remembered precisely for so setting up a new sequence:

Chou Yung (observing his contemporaries) thereby authored the *San-tsung-lun*, setting up, first, the “Not negating provisional reality” school. Then, to negate that, he enlisted the “Negating provisional reality” school. Then, to undermine both, he posited the “Provisional reality self-negates” school.²⁶

In this so-called third school or position is the germ of the Third Truth. The question is whether the third school or position or truth synthesized the two previous options or whether it simply negated and transcended them. The Ch'eng-shih master Chih-tsang took the former as his guide.

The Synthetical Third Middle Path: Chih-tsang^{ai}

Who started using the “Three Truths” category remains a mystery. Chou Yung did not use the term, but, by the Liang dynasty, it

was commonly assumed. Prince Chao-ming^{aj} recorded that there were “some people” who then thought that the Mundane Truth was “two” (dualistic) and the Higher Truth was “one” (monistic). Together, “two” and “one” made “three.” However, even this layman prince disputed the use of a Three Truths system.²⁷ The first person we know for sure who used a “Threefold Middle Path” was Chih-tsang, a contemporary of the prince. Later San-lun (Mādhyamika) spokesmen charged Chih-tsang with the theft of this idea from their camp. The San-lun masters Seng-lang^{ak} and Seng-ch’üan^{al} might have reintroduced the proper understanding of the Middle Path (as a nonaffirmative Neither/Nor) and thereby challenged the improper—often compartmentalized—use of being and nonbeing among the Ch’eng-shih group (more interested in the Both/And). However, I still see no proof that Chih-tsang stole a San-lun doctrine, for the scheme of the Three Truths was already suggested by Chou Yung’s classification of the Three Schools.

Chih-tsang followed Chou Yung’s suggestion and found a synthetical third Middle Path between the Mundane and Higher Truth:

As the various *dharmas* are produced, that means they are not in tune with *dharmatā* [the Unproduced]. Yet, precisely so, they exist [individually]. However, their being is deluded being, for truly they are empty. This constitutes the Mundane Truth.

(Now,) since they are said to be in substance vacuous (empty), that means that they are without form. (Since) formlessness is an attribute of the (absolute) Truth, therefore (this aspect) is the Higher Truth.

The Real (Higher) Truth is characterized by the nonbeing of “neither being nor nonbeing,” because it is not deluded being (like the mundane). The Mundane Truth is the being of “neither being nor nonbeing,” because it is only provisionally real. (In other words,) reality is *in toto* Real because it is not being, and *in toto* Mundane because it is not nonexistent either. This constitutes the Middle Path of the Mundane and the Real Truth (synthesized as one).

The Real Truth is formless and therefore is also “neither being nor nonbeing”; this is the Middle Path of the Real Truth.

Mundane Truth is caused by the false, and as cause is not result, it has no being. Yet as cause is not without the power to create a result, therefore it is not nonbeing. This (“being and nonbeing”) constitutes the Middle Path of the Mundane Truth.²⁸

Chih-tsang was “bobbing the melon” here: reality is both real and unreal *in toto*. By juggling with the ambiguous terms “real” and “unreal,”

Chih-tsang could come up with a Higher Truth which is “Real yet Empty,” and a Mundane Truth which is “empty yet real.” (He was using the same terms in ‘capitalized’ and ‘uncapitalized’ form all too freely.) Each of these two paradoxes constitutes one Middle Path. Where they meet is the Middle Path uniting the Two Truths. This third unites the Real and the Mundane.

Chih-tsang was only following Chou Yung. Chou Yung named three schools—the realist, the nihilist and the “real is nil” school. The third school postulated the unity of emptiness and provisional reality. Likewise, then, Chih-tsang postulated the unity of the Higher and the Mundane Truths in his “Third Truth.” If we want to go further back, then the seminal form was present already in Seng Chao. Seng Chao identified the common view as movement, the sage view as rest. Seng Chao even assumed one paradox called “seeing rest in motion” (the Taoist) and another paradox of “seeing motion in rest” (his own). All these perspectives finally met in the supreme paradox: *rest is motion*, for ultimately things neither come nor go. If we simply substitute for the rest/motion categories those of nonbeing/being, we will find that Seng Chao too endorsed a union of the Two Truths (of rest and motion) in a Third Middle Path (rest is motion). Seng Chao, however, was prudent to posit Two Truths and One Reality. The Ch’eng-shih masters were less careful, for when they openly confused the Two Truths with two realities, they were forced to call the One Reality the Third Truth.

The confusion of the Two Truths with two realities created problems. In the first place, it led to a violation of Nāgārjuna’s insistence that the distinction between the Two Truths was crucial to the Buddha’s teachings. It is legitimate to say that *samsāra* is *nirvāna*, but it is not legitimate to say that the Higher Truth is the Mundane Truth. The latter, however, did appear sometimes as license in the *sūtras*, and, later, the *Shih-lun hsüan-i*^{am} would have to add this rider: “To say that the Two Truths are identical is being extravagant; to say that form is emptiness and *vice versa* is precise.”²⁹ The Ch’eng-shih masters lacked this precision. There was also the additional logical problem: if indeed the Two Truths were two realities, how should their ‘substance’ (*t’i*)^{an} be conceived? Seng-fang,³⁰ a student, faulted Chih-tsang for so identifying one substance for the Two Truths:

If (they are the same), then to burn (harm) the Mundane is to harm the Higher Truth, and changes in the Mundane (*samsāra*) would affect *nirvāna*. . . . Surely, this polluted world is not the Pure Land.³⁹

Seng-fang offered his own solution: the interdependence of the Two Truths with different substances. It was still a mistake, because the Two Truths were never things with substances in the first place. If anything is to be regarded as the substance of reality, it would have to be the Middle Path or emptiness itself. (That is Chi-tsang's position.)

The Mundane Truth is no *yin*^{ap} and the Higher Truth is no *yang*^{aq} and they should not have come together as one (Taoist) harmony. However, since the mistake was made and was a *fait accompli*, the task of a true *prāsāṅgika* dialectician was not to introduce an alien Indian or pristine system, but to supply the necessary critique on the bases provided by the misguided thinkers themselves. This, I hold, was the genius of Chi-tsang.

The Non-thetical Three Truths: Chi-tsang

The aim of the Emptiness philosophy, says Chi-tsang, is not to affirm but to reveal the true by a systematic destruction of the false. The true can ultimately never be spoken of, but it may be pointed to indirectly as a finger points to the moon. Chih-tsang had followed Chou Yung in positing a third synthetical Truth reuniting the Real and the Mundane. Chi-tsang however followed Chou Yung in another, more orthodox, direction, namely to “posit a third position only in order to negate the first two.” Since Chih-tsang had set up the Threefold Middle Path, Chi-tsang would now use the very same vocabulary but turn it against the user (Chih-tsang) himself.

The three kinds of Two Truths represent the principle of serial negation, like building a scaffold from the ground up. As the ordinary people think that reality is seemingly real, not knowing that it is not, the Buddha propounded the doctrine that reality is essentially empty. That reality is real is the common opinion; this is the Mundane Truth, the Common Truth. The sage knows that it is empty; this is the Higher Truth, the Sage Truth. This (first) set is taught in order that men would advance from the mundane to the transmundane, and renounce the common in order to embrace the sage wisdom. This is the first level of the Two Truths.

A common person might hear this and, touched, would strive for liberation. However, in so doing, he might easily be misled into thinking that there is a *nirvāṇa* distinct from *saṃsāra*. He might think

that being and nonbeing are real and final categories pertaining to samsaric reality and nirvanic emptiness. If so, Chi-tsang would remind him thus:

Next: being and nonbeing now constitute the Mundane Truth. Neither being nor nonbeing is the new Higher Truth. This is because people, when given "being" and "nonbeing," impermanence and permanence, *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, regard them as opposites on two ends. Because they so regard the Mundane and the Higher Truth (as) *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, it is necessary to set up the nonduality, the Middle Path (avoiding both extremes) of "neither the Mundane nor the Higher, neither *samsāra* nor *nirvāna*" as the new Higher Truth.

A person may, however, be trapped in the poetics of ideas; therefore, as a final step, Shi-tsang further insists:

Next: in the third level, both duality and nonduality would be set up as the Mundane Truth, while "neither duality nor nonduality" will be seen as the Higher Truth.³¹

In this way Chi-tsang sought to liberate the Ch'eng-shih masters from their obsession with words and paradoxes, by trying to get them to leave the "language game" they played. There is no synthesis of Two Truths in Chi-tsang, just a nagging reminder that words are just words and the Truth forever lies beyond. In his threefold Two Truths, the first level liberates man from fixation with being, the second frees him from a leftover dualism ("*nirvāna* is not *samsāra*") and the third asks him to drop even such "dualities and nondualities."

Chi-tsang was, in the end, too foreign for most Chinese, and his warnings went often unheeded. A far more influential figure was his contemporary, the T'ien-t'ai master Chih-i,^{ar} whose Three Truths theory combined the best of the two worlds—India and China.

The Three Truths in Perfect Harmony: Chih-i

Chih-i derived his theory of the Three Truths from his reading of the *kārikā*:

| | |
|--|-------------|
| The <i>realities</i> produced by causes and conditions | (= Reality) |
| Is what I mean by <i>Emptiness</i> | (= Empty) |
| Also known as Provisional <i>Reality</i> | (= Real) |
| The same as the meaning of the <i>Middle Path</i> | (= Middle) |

Chih-i's unique reading for the four lines means: "Reality / is Empty / yet Real; (Empty yet Real) is the Middle." Sectarian legends tell of this as a new insight; T'ien-t'ai scholarship justifies it on the basis of an obscure line in the *Ying-lo-ching*^{32as} and a One Truth doctrine in the *Ta-chih-tu-lun*.^{at} From where we stand, it is not difficult to see his synthetical Middle—uniting the Empty and the Real—as continuous with Chih-tsang and Chou Yung.³³

Chih-i, however, was a superb dialectician who well guarded his position. For him, it is not that the "Empty" and the "Real" meet in the "Middle" unilaterally. The three are *yüing-yüan*^{au}, in total harmony. Everything is immediately empty, immediately real, and immediately middle (*chi k'ung, chi chia, chi chung*^{av}), in a perfect circle that knows no beginning and no end. The "pyramidal" is superseded by this "round" teaching. Although Chih-i did assume the Three Truths to be aspects of reality, i.e., pertaining to *li*, he built a system called the correlation between the Three Aspects and the One Mind (*i-hsin san-ti*) that effectively guarded itself against being labelled as subjective idealist or as objective realist. "The chiliocosm (3,000 words) is replete in the mind (*i-hsin*^{aw})," says Chih-i. But:

Are the 3,000 born of the passing away (*mieh*)^{ax} of a thought (*nien*)^{ay}? A perishing thought cannot even give rise to one *dharma*. How can it give rise to 3,000? Are the 3,000 then born out the perishing and nonperishing mind? Perishing and nonperishing are opposites like fire and water, that contradict one another. How can such conflicting substance give rise to 3,000? Is it the "neither perishing nor nonperishing" mind that gives birth to the 3,000? But such an entity cannot be the actor-subject nor the object-acted-upon. How can it give rise to the 3,000?³⁴

The mind and reality, *citta* and *rüpa*, cross and re-cross one another in a warp and woof fashion in T'ien-t'ai ideology. However, in the end, that harmonious matrix defies all words.

The doctrine of the 3,000 (in one moment of thought) cannot be attained by the cross nor the re-cross, or by neither the cross nor the re-cross. Words end abruptly. The mind suddenly comes to a stand still. That is the realm of the incomprehensible (mystery).³⁵

Pushed to explain what this mystery is, Chih-i would resort to a favorite Taoist phrase: *miao-yu chen-k'ung*.^{a2} It is mysteriously something though truly empty and *vice versa*.³⁶ And it is best left as such, undefined.

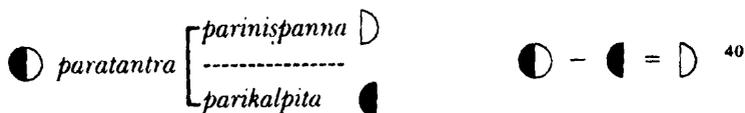
The Merging of Yogācāra Trisvabhāva and Three Truths: Fa-tsang

The interest in a Third Truth in China was promoted by internal necessity and originally had nothing to do with the forthcoming *trisvabhāva* of Yogācāra. The *trisvabhāva* (*san-hsing* or *san-ti*) pertains to the three perspectives toward reality: *pariniṣpanna* or the apprehension of reality-as-it-is (suchness, *tathatā*); *paratantra* or the normal subject-object consciousness that discriminates; and *parikalpita* or misguided perception due to deluded thought-coverings. Seeing a rope as empty is the first or enlightened consciousness; seeing a rope as a rope is the everyday consciousness; mistaking a rope for a snake is the third, deluded, consciousness.

Hui-yüan,^{ba} an early student of the Yogācāra system in China, was influenced by the *Ti-lun*^{bb} (*Daśabhumikā*) and the *She-lun*^{bc} (*Samgraha*) traditions; he blended this *trisvabhāva* idea with the natively-developed Three Truths system. Following the *yin-yang* logic implicit in the latter, Hui-yüan defines the *pariniṣpanna* as the pure consciousness, the pure essence in itself; it is by itself passive and uncontaminable. The *paratantra* is a mixed consciousness, pure and impure, able to generate the "revolving" consciousness within itself. The *parikalpita* is the impure or discriminatory consciousness, trapped in a foolish monologue; it has forsaken the true altogether. In other words, there is a *yin* and a *yang* consciousness, and a third which is a union of *yin* and *yang*. This third, the *paratantra*, is the most dynamic, for everything comes out of it (*chen-wang yüan-ch'i*,^{bd} causality due to interaction between the true and the false). The picture one gets is that of the Taoist *yin-yang* intercourse giving birth to the myriad things. However, Hui-yüan interpreted the *paratantra* consciousness—called "dependent upon others," *i-ta-hsing*^{be}—as a consciousness dependent

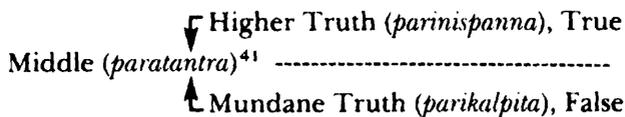
(i), not on illusions in our subject-object mind (the standard interpretation), but on the True itself, the *tathatā* or the *pariniṣpanna*. The True evolves or revolves within the mixed consciousness, reacting with the deluded to create all things.³⁷

The *trīsvabhāva* doctrine says that all three natures are empty.³⁸ It also states that the three consciousnesses are intimately related: *pariniṣpanna* is just *paratantra* minus *parikalpita*. Enlightened consciousness is only our everyday consciousness when the superimposed misconceptions are removed. This originally Indian idea was interpreted in a Chinese framework by Hui-yüan and later by Fa-tsang. Fa-tsang called it the “inseparable Three Truths” (*san-hsing pu-li*). A classic defense of this involves a prototype of the *yin-yang* circles.³⁹ Miraculously, the logic then becomes self-explanatory:



The *paratantra*, being a combination of the pure and the impure, will be *pariniṣpanna* itself once the impure *parikalpita* is removed (see above). The explanation seems ingeniously simple and faithful to the original Indian intentions.

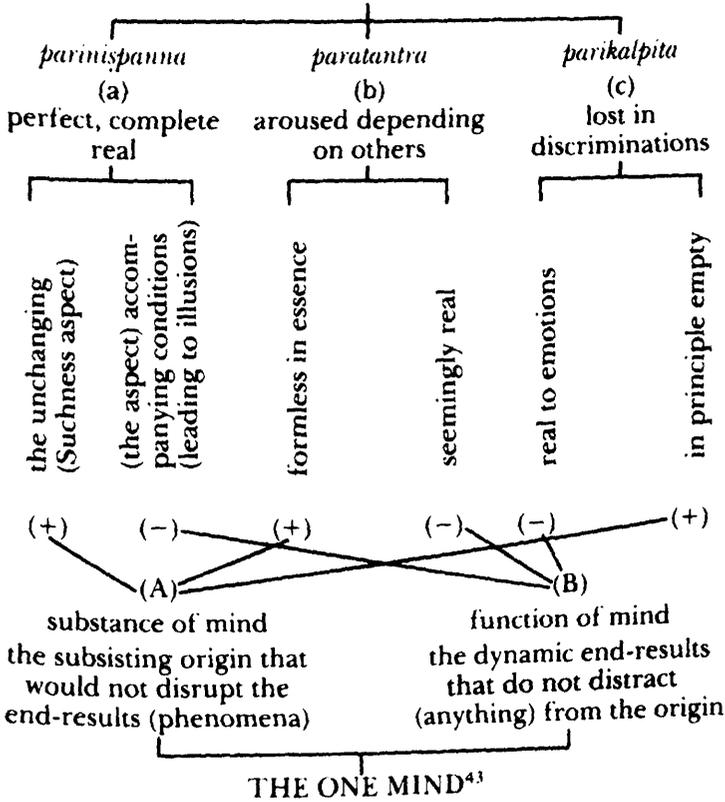
However, the structure of the *trīsvabhāva* above was already anticipated by Chih-tsang. The structure is the old Three Truths, with the third mediating the Higher Truth and the Mundane Truth. The labels had been changed; the attributes were “pure”, “deluded” and the mixed “pure yet deluded,” instead of the earlier “nonbeing,” “being” and “paradoxically being yet nonbeing.”



Hua-yen philosopher Fa-tsang justified his scheme upon the *Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* (itself a China-fabricated text). When we break down his understanding of the Three Natures (*trīsvabhāva*), we will find, however, only another elaboration of *yin-yang*-esque logic.⁴² The following diagram is a standard one used within the Hua-yen tradition.

Fa-tsang's Demonstration of the Mind/Natures Unity

THE THREE NATURES



What the above summary shows is that the Three Natures are correlates of the Mind, just as Chih-i stated for his own case ("The Three Truths are of the Mind"). The three are (a) the perfect, (b) the relative and (c) the biased, each having two sub-aspects (listed above). The substance of the mind (A) monopolizes the positive (+) aspects: the unchanging suchness, the emptiness of the relative and the ontic illusion of the biased. The function of the mind (B) takes hold of the remaining negative (-) three: the suchness misled into created reality, the seeming appearance of things, and the emotional attachments to non-realities. The schema is not without some Indic precedences,⁴⁴ but the Sinitic elements are decidedly stronger. The Hua-yen doctrine of the *trisvabhāva*, upon scrutiny, is Chih-tsang's paradoxical Three Truths resurrected.⁴⁵

Conclusion: Sinitic Three Truths

The Sinicization of Mādhyamika in China was crucial to the doctrinal independence of the various schools. In the above analysis, we saw how Nāgārjuna originally intended the Two Truths to be two distinct ways of knowledge. In China, however, because of short-handed understanding, the Two Truths were confused with Two Realities. Seng Chao was, as a whole, cautious, but his attempt to provide a rationale as to why the Commoner and the Sage could see differently initiated the search for an objective principle, *li*, in reality itself. The Ch'eng-shih masters, as I argued, were an indispensable link in the chain of Sinitic Two Truths speculations. Mistaking the Two Truths to be Two Realities and working on the assumptions that (a) there is a principle out there to account for it, and (b) there must be a union of the Two Truths *alias saṃsāra and nirvāṇa* [sic], they produced a Third Truth. Chou Yung, the critic, typed Three Schools as the Real, the Empty and the Middle. This triad then influenced all subsequent thinking. Chih-tsang produced a Third Middle Path that would unite the Mundane and the Real, but he was faulted by Chi-tsang for mistaking the Two Truths to be referring to *li*. Chi-tsang himself revived the emphasis on the Two Truths as *chiao*, didactics and ways of knowledge. He set up a Threefold Two Truths to undermine the biases of the ontologists. Chi-tsang was, however, not popular among the Chinese. Instead, the system of Chih-i that emphasized the harmony of the Three Truths and the dialectics of mind (knowing) and object (known) won popular approval. A contemporary of Chih-i, Hui-yüan, utilized a *yin-yang* scheme to interpret the *trisvabhāva* doctrine in Yogācāra. This scheme, along with Chih-i's, was inherited by Fa-tsang. Fa-tsang then fashioned the final synthesis, bringing Mādhyamika and Yogācāra in their Sinitic form together and providing the most stable solution to the long Two Truths controversy in China.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

| | | | | | |
|---|------|----|-------|----|--------|
| a | 成實論 | t | 太虛 | am | 四諦玄義 |
| b | 天台 | u | 諸法實相 | an | 休 |
| c | 三諦一心 | v | 僧肇 | ao | 僧緯 |
| d | 三論 | w | 理 | ap | 陰 |
| e | 三重二諦 | x | 非非非有 | aq | 陽 |
| f | 華嚴 | y | 莊子 | ar | 智顛 |
| g | 三性不離 | z | 吉藏 | as | 理路理 |
| h | 平井俊榮 | aa | 教 | at | 大智度論 |
| i | 法藏 | ab | 周顛 | au | 融圓 |
| j | 主体性 | ac | 不生不滅 | av | 即空即假即中 |
| k | 以道言之 | ad | 生滅 | aw | 心 |
| l | 以物言之 | ae | 三宗(論) | ax | 滅 |
| m | 玉樹 | af | 空本性 | ay | 念 |
| n | 支謙 | ag | 本性空 | az | 妙有真空 |
| o | 本無 | ah | 性本空 | ba | 慧遠 |
| p | 即空 | ai | 智藏 | bb | 地論 |
| q | 實 | aj | 昭明 | bc | 攝論 |
| r | 實相 | ak | 僧朗 | bd | 真妄緣起 |
| s | 有無皆空 | al | 僧詮 | be | 依他性 |

NOTES

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1. *Chūgoku hanya shisōshi kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shūnjūsha, 1976), part 11-1.
2. Following "Sinitic Development of the Two Truth Theory: Ontological Gnosticism in the Thoughts of Prince Chao-ming," and "Further Development . . . : Toward a Reconstruction of Chou Yung's *San-tsung-lun*," in *Philosophy East and West*, 28, no. 3 (1978) and forthcoming, *ibid*.
3. An early classic, Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977).
4. See my first essay cited in 2, from the Prince's *Erh-ti-lun*.
5. Kajiyama Yuichi, "*Joron ni okeru Chūdō shisō*," in Tsukamoto Zenryū ed. *Joron kenkyū* (Kyoto: Jimbun kagaku kenkyūsho, 1955).
6. From the perspective of things, things are different; from the perspective of the Tao, all differences vanish.
7. Thus we read, "Buddhas are *pen-wu* (originally nothing)." Chi Chien used *k'ung* sometimes and preferred *tzu-jan* for *tathatā*.
8. Said to be made by Yao Hsing to the approval of Kumārajīva.
9. *T'ai-hsü* is one of the Origins in Chinese cosmology.
10. *Chuang-tzu*, ch. 2, on the origin of being *ad infinitum*.
11. *Erh-ti-chang* (T. 45, p. 15a).
12. Like the finger pointing to the moon; this metaphor was first used by Tao-liang *alias* Liang fa-shih of Canton (*Zokuzō*, 12.2.3.260 upper left). It was passed on to Chi-tsang and later Ch'an.
13. *Chao-lun*, T. 45, pp. 152-53. "Emptiness of the Unreal."
14. See Walter Liebenthal, *Chao-lun: The Treatise of Seng Chao* (rev.; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1968).
15. T. 45, p. 151; based on Wing-tsit Ch'an, *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton, 1963), pp. 344f. With some changes.
16. *Ibid.*; the Taoist is implied.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Chan trans., pp. 346, 350. Synthesis mine.
19. My trans., with interpolation; see Chan, pp. 346 and 349.
20. This is the "Highest" management of the Two Truths.
21. Ch'an trans., p. 347; slight modifications.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 347-8; bracketted portion added.
23. T. 23, p. 248a. For an interesting introduction, see C. D. C. Priestley, "Emptiness in the *Satyasiddhi*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1 (1970), pp. 30-39.
24. See note 1 above.
25. Leon Hurvitz's analysis shows the poetic license of the third, see his "The First Systematization of Buddhist Thought in China," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2, no. 4 (Sept., 1975), pp. 361-88; see 1 above.
26. *Nan Chi shu* account, after corrections made by T'ang Yung-t'ung; see 1.
27. See note 1 above; I overlooked this point in my original analysis.
28. From the *Ta-ch'eng hsüan-lun* as cited by Sakaino Kōyō in his "Jōjitsu Daijōgi," in *Tokiwa Daijō kanreki kinenshu* (Tokyo, 1933), p. 129.
29. See Hirai, *op. cit.*; translation mine from Chinese in footnote 22 on p. 588

(Zōkuzō, 1.1.74.1.27, upper left). Chi-tsang, according to Hirai (*ibid.*) made a similar charge against the extravagant *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, but for saying the Mundane is the Highest and not vice versa.

30. Sakaino, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*

31. *Erh-ti-chang*, T. 45, pp. 90-91; see Ch'an's trans., p. 360.

32. *Ying-lo-ching*, T. 24, p. 1014b; also *Jen-wang-ching*, T. 8, pp. 829b, 833b.

33. The sectarian lore of how the *san-kuan* was transmitted is analyzed in Ochō Enchi, *Hokke shisō no kenkyū* (Kyoto; Heirakuji, 1972).

34. *Mo-ho-shih-kuan*, T. 46, p. 54b.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Term also used by Chi-tsang though.

37. *Ta-ch'eng i-chang*, T. 44, p. 528a; On Three Truths, section 2:I.a.i.

38. Illusions are empty; phenomena are also empty; *tathatā* too is empty.

39. Diagram of a later date than Fa-tsang, who did not resort to either pictures or graphs; the practice began with Tsung-mi.

40. The diagram should be self-explanatory. The ☉ circle is akin to ☯ the *yin-yang* (alias *li-kan*) circle used to depict the "revolving" psyche.

41. Paratantra is in the middle of the Real (*parimiṣpanna* in the sense of the ultimate *chen-ti*, Real Truth) and the Empty (*parikalpita* in the sense of the illusory Common Truth).

42. See Whalen Lai, "The *I Ching* and the Formation of the Hua-yen Philosophy," forthcoming, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.

43. See qualification in 39; diagram taken from Ishii Kyōdō, *Kegon kyōgaku seiritsu kenkyū* (Kyoto: 1956), p. 387. I do think this Fa-tsang scheme was indirectly a defense of Chih-i's *i-hsin san-ti* which has nothing to do with the Yogācārin understanding of the *ālayavijñāna*.

44. Closer to Vedānta's Three Truths, I think. There, the Vedāntin also uses a middle Truth as a compromise between Reality and *māyā*.

45. For an example of the mentality involved in the solution of seeming contradictions, see Yoshito S. Hakeda trans. *The Awakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia, 1967), p. 76, interpolated comments citing Fa-tsang's commentary.