

Innate Enlightenment and No-thought: A Response to the Critical Buddhist Position on Zen

Charles Muller
Toyo Gakuen University

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General Observations

Prof. Matsumoto Shiro, who has already presented for us at this conference, and his colleague, Prof. Hakamaya Noriaki, have together produced a number of lengthy essays on a theme called *hihan bukkyo* (批判佛教), in English, “Critical Buddhism.”(1) Under this broad title, they have written on a wide range of issues, including those that are sociological, historical, philological as well as philosophical in nature. At the core of their project is the conviction that the concepts of *Tathāgatagarbha* and innate enlightenment (本覺思想) are alien to Buddhism, due to the fact that those concepts imply a belief in a hypostasized self– a type of *atman*, which Buddhism originally and distinctively sought to refute through the conceptual framework of *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination).

They claim, therefore, that the only texts to be considered as authentically Buddhist are works from the early Pali tradition and from Maadhyamika that limit themselves to apprehensions of the Buddhist reality that (1) can be treated in and through language, and (2) can be treated in and through the language of a strictly delimited model of dependent origination. Any discourse that extends to the treatment of an “other” beyond the two aforementioned frameworks is regarded as non-Buddhist. Under this interpretation, most of the schools of Buddhism that developed in East Asia, most importantly Ch’an and Hua-yen, cannot be considered Buddhist, as it is in these schools where the conception of innate enlightenment was prioritized, serving as the basis for the “faith” that empowers practice. Since Ch’an and its descendant schools in Korea and Japan are understood as having centered their teachings on a kind of mindlessness that ignores or disparages the role of language in religious cultivation, these schools are especially singled out as epitomizing the aberrant tendencies of East Asian false Buddhist schools.

Prof. Hakamaya takes the incorporation of emphasis on the trans-conceptual in East Asian Buddhism to be in great part the result of influence from Chuang-Lao Taoism, which, according to him, is representative of a “topical” philosophy that prioritizes subjective religious experience over objective rational inquiry. This topical philosophy, in the Buddhist context, is said to support a belief in *dhātus*, or inherently existent entities, a belief that is foreign to Buddhism, but that, according to Hakamaya, is characteristic of Taoism. Prof. Hakamaya sees the Taoist tendency to focus on a mysterious, experiential, unnamable Tao as having infected East Asian Buddhism, and especially Ch’an, which thenceforth produced literature that mimicked the *dhātu*-vadic tendency of Taoism.

The Critical Buddhist project has a markedly Japanese orientation, which is understandable, as it originated in the course of an effort to identify the source of ideology within the Japanese Soto Zen establishment that has led the leaders of that sect to condone government policies that are socially discriminatory, and to search out possible Buddhist-related causes for attitudes of indifference on these matters on the part of the Japanese Buddhist intellectual establishment. Most

notorious here are leading exponents of the Kyoto school such as Nishida Kitaro and Nishitani Keiji, whose topically-oriented writings have provided much support to Japanese theories of cultural superiority.

The vast majority of Japanese Buddhist scholars during the past century have devoted their energies to issues of philology and have not engaged in any sort of serious inquiry into the role and policies of the modern Buddhist establishment in the history of Japan since the Meiji Restoration. In this context, the protagonists of the Critical Buddhist movement, who are themselves part of the Tokyo Buddhist academic circle, should be accorded due praise, being the first in a long time to step outside of the Japanese Buddhist monolithic scholarly establishment and dare to call to task its lack of critical attitude.

Unfortunately however, the insularly Japanese context of their argument has limited the exposure of the work of the Critical Buddhists to the confines of the Japanese Buddhological academy, and a handful of foreign scholars who have enough awareness of their situation and their work to take an interest. Also limiting, however, are constraints derived from their distinctive way of reading of the texts of East Asian Buddhism in particular, and their way of understanding East Asian philosophy in general. There is a significant degree to which their conceptions of innate enlightenment and Zen doctrine as a whole are distinctively Japanese interpretations— and more narrowly, Soto-based interpretations. This is approach can be accepted if it is clearly indicated that the critique is being made only against Japanese Zen. But the fact is that the critique is being made toward the East Asian meditative schools in general, with no acknowledgment being made regarding the significant differences observable in the character of the various streams of Ch’an/Son/Zen in China, Korea and Japan.

A prominent example of the kind of problem that can be created by this non-discriminating approach will be obvious to those with a background in Korean Buddhism. With the strongly *pon’gak sasang* oriented content of the writings of such influential figures as Wonhyo, Chinul and Kihwa, Korean Buddhism can be argued to have been even more profoundly imbued by the notion of innate enlightenment than Japanese Buddhism. Yet the philosophical character of Korean Buddhism, and its conduct in regard to support of questionable government policies has been radically different from that of Japan, demonstrating almost none of the negative “original enlightenment”-influenced effects identified by the Critical Buddhists in its Japanese manifestation. The Korean Son tradition has also not shown the aversion to critical philosophical discourse that is characteristic of the Japanese Zen as understood by the Critical Buddhists. Korean Son scholars have been extremely sensitive to the matter of the relationship between the worded and wordless aspects of the Buddhist doctrine, such that the exposition of this issue has often constituted a segment of their writings. Are such differences the result of a distance between the Japanese and Korean interpretations of innate enlightenment? Or are they derived from differences between Japanese and Korean indigenous thought? Or some combination of both?

The Main Issues

In treating the interpretations made by the Critical Buddhists of East Asian philosophical texts, I will focus on a few main, overlapping arguments. First, I will question the characterization of innate enlightenment thought as being “topical,” along with the assertion that it is equivalent to a topicalized Taoist perception of reality. My main theme in this discussion will be the importance of the recognition of the central place of the essence-function paradigm in East Asian religious thought. I will then question the Critical Buddhist’s understanding of the Ch’an usage of the concept of “innate enlightenment” through the examination of one of the most prominent of the “innate enlightenment” Ch’an texts, to show the extent to which the Ch’an authors tried to avoid referring to innate enlightenment in a hypostasized manner. I will argue the misunderstanding derives from reading Buddhist texts from a perspective that assumes a purpose of mere ontological and metaphysical description, rather than the performative soteriological intent with which they were actually written. The next part of my argument will be an examination of the concept of “no-thought,” which Prof. Matsumoto takes, as the basis of Zen, to mean “absence of thinking.” I will assert here that there is no major Ch’an text in which no-thought, or no-mind, is defined as absence of thought, but that instead, the concept means “non-attached thought.” I will refer, in this argument, to seminal passages in both the *Platform Sutra* and *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*. Finally, I will give some examples of how the most influential thinkers in Korean Son were deeply involved in the exposition of the paradoxical relationship between the worded and wordless teachings, and how they attempted to resolve this paradox.

I would like to start by drawing attention to two perspicuous responses to Critical Buddhism already crafted by two leading specialists in East Asian *Tathāgatagarbha*/original enlightenment thought, that did much to help me orient my point of departure for this essay: Sallie King and Peter Gregory. Dr. King, in her article “Buddha-Nature is Impeccably Buddhist” has argued, based on a close reading of the *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, that a major point of that seminal treatise is to demonstrate that the term “Buddha-nature” is nothing but another way of expressing the meaning of “thusness,” which is, she argues, rather than being an ontological category, an ecstatic, experiential apprehension of reality as-it-is. She says: “[Thusness] is not an ontological theory; [it] is an experience. And if there is an ontological theory implicit in this experience, it is certainly not monism.”(2) She believes that it is erroneous to read Buddhist texts as attempting solely to establish epistemological or ontological positions. Such texts need, instead, to be seen in their role as soteriological devices. This approach is corroborated by the allusions made throughout the Buddhist corpus, such as the parable of the raft, or of the arrow, which, as Peter Gregory points out, clearly “imply a pragmatic approach to truth according to which doctrines only have provisional status.”(3)

Indigenous East Asian Thought: Essence and Function

In terms of a general understanding of Chinese philosophy, there are serious problems with the analysis of East Asian philosophical thought provided by Prof. Hakamaya, especially regarding his characterizations of Confucianism and Chuang-Lao Taoism, of which the latter stands accused as the major corrupter of the imported Buddhist religion in East Asia. This is, as Hakamaya understands, because the Tao of the *Tao te ching* “precludes conventional naming and denies language.”(4) The first problem with this assessment, is that it is made based only on a couple of isolated passages from the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang tzu*. If we examine these two texts thoroughly and in a manner that takes into account their overall message, we can see that in almost every chapter, the authors have stayed far from projecting a simple monistic worldview, attempting instead to demonstrate the inseparability of the Tao from the world of phenomena and discursive thought.

Prof. Hakamaya makes this characterization of Taoism by citing only the first four lines of the first chapter of the *Tao te ching*, which Jamie Hubbard has translated for us as:

The ways that can be walked are not the eternal Way;
The names that can be named are not the eternal name.
The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures;
The named is the mother of the myriad creatures.

Putting aside for the moment the matter of whether Prof. Hakamaya’s interpretation warrants the positing of the Tao as a kind of atman, or whether or not the rest of the eighty-one chapters of the text corroborate such an interpretation, if we merely go down to the bottom of the same chapter we read:

These two are the same—
When they appear they are named differently.
Their sameness is the mystery,
Mystery within mystery;
The door to all marvels.

If there is a distinction being made between the worded and the wordless, why are they, immediately below, declared to be the same? And how can someone who is making such an assertion ignore the immediately following passage of such a short chapter?

One might want to maintain here that this sameness is indicative of monism. But it is not so simple, as the two are also named differently, and the mode of their sameness is mysterious. Furthermore, anyone who *does* want to argue for monism here should be aware that there is an extensive tradition of Chinese scholarship that will argue against such an interpretation. The named and the nameless do

have a well-defined relationship in the context of neither sameness nor difference, which I will now explain.

Rather than being examples of a simple monism, the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang tzu* conduct a wide variety of articulations of the indigenous East Asian concept of essence-function (*t'i-yung*), among which, that of the first chapter of the *Tao te ching* is quintessential. *T'i* 體 originally means body or substance, and refers to the more internal, more essential, hidden, important aspects of a thing. *Yung* 用 refers to the more external, superficial, obvious, functional aspects of something. But these must be clearly understood to be *aspects*—ways of seeing a single thing, and not two separate existences. Therefore, the essence-function construction is always relative in its usage, and *t'i* is not the Chinese analog of atman, or *dhātu*.(5) In properly understood *t'i-yung* logic, a dichotomized or polarized notion of the pair is impossible. *T'i* can only be seen, apprehended, expressed, and indeed—exist, through the presence of *yung*. In other words, *t'i* is dependently arisen from *yung*, and *yung* is dependently arisen from *t'i*.

The *t'i-yung* principle, which has its origins deep in the recesses of early Chou thought in such seminal texts as the *Book of Odes*, *Analects*, *I ching* and *Tao te ching*, became formally defined and used with regularity in the exegetical writings of Confucian/Neo-Taoist scholars of the Latter Han and afterward. Scholars of the pre-Buddhist Chinese classics had utilized *t'i-yung* and its earlier equivalents, such as *pen-mo* (本末 “roots and branches”) in Confucianism and *hei-pai* (黑白 “black and white”) of Taoism to explain the relationship of inherent human goodness and spiritual harmony with its not-always-manifest permutations. The Confucian concept of inherent goodness is intimated in the early Chou works, and fully articulated in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. Of central importance in these texts is the basic human quality of *jen* (仁 “humanity,” “benevolence”) that expresses itself in various “functions” such as propriety (*li* 禮) and filial piety (*hsiao* 孝).

Although Confucianism and Taoism differ in terms of the respective emphases of their discourses, with Taoism taking a more naturalistic approach to human cultivation and Confucianism advocating a more rules-oriented stance, in terms of basic worldview, there is great overlap and deep connection between them, most importantly in terms of their sharing in the same *t'i-yung* paradigm. In view of the depth of this sharedness, when it comes to making the kind of hard and fast distinction between the two traditions that Prof. Hakamaya wants to make, categorizing one as “critical” and the other as “topical” it cannot be permissible to do so based only on a couple of fragmentary citations from the *Analects*, *Tao te ching* and *Chuang tzu*, while giving almost no consideration to the way that these texts are understood in their entirety by specialists in the area. The only Confucian specialist to whom Hakamaya refers is Ito Jinsai.(6) But even when we read the Ito citation, there is nothing said about the *Analects* other than that it contains “clear argumentation” and “sound reasoning.” There is nothing whatsoever in the passage to offer any support to Confucian-as-critical/Taoist-as-topical distinction.

Essence-Function and Innate Enlightenment

The Buddhist religion, as it was exported from India, did not contain a sustained and overt discussion of the concept of innate Buddhahood. But East Asians perceived within the Buddhist doctrine the potentiality for human perfection, which they naturally described in their native framework of *t'i-yung*. However, with innate and actualized enlightenment as manifestations of the essence-function model, innate enlightenment was not hypostasized as a “locus” but was instead understood as an experiential and enhanceable potentiality. In terms of basic constitution, in the process of enlightenment, the the human mind and body have nothing added or subtracted. This is a basic premise taught in innate enlightenment texts such as the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* (*Yan cheh ching* 圓覺經) and the *Awakening of Faith* (*Ta-sheng ch'i-hsin lun* 大乘起信論), where innate and actualized enlightenment are described not as static ontological categories, but as a way of looking at existence that allows for a workable prescription toward practice.(7)

In most of the private discussions that I have had with my colleagues who specialize in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, I have been told that that East Asian Buddhism shows virtually no new philosophical insights beyond the articulation of the theories of *pratītya-samutpāda* and *uunyataa* that are contained in Maadhyamika and Yogaacaara. I understand why they believe this, since the East Asian concepts of emptiness (*k'ung* 空) and mutual interpenetration of phenomena (*shih-shih wu-ai* 事事無碍) are indeed deeply informed by their Indian predecessors. But from here, there is one sense in which the critical Buddhists and I are in agreement in perceiving that there certainly is some sort of significant philosophical transformation that occurs in the Buddhist doctrine once it is assimilated in East Asia. The difference between us, however, is that where the Critical Buddhists would characterize this transformation as a corruption by the reification of the concept of buddha-nature, I would regard the major Chinese reinterpretation of Buddhism to be first and foremost that of the recasting of the doctrine in terms of essence-function, which, rather than bringing harm, was highly beneficial in the degree to which it helped to more deeply bind the philosophical dimension of the buddhadharma with the practical aspect.

Practicing Non-Abiding

Beyond this philosophical development, the most important contributions made by the Ch'an movement are, rather than doctrinal, of a practical nature, in that the Ch'an masters showed a special level of sensitivity to the tendency of the human mind to become enmeshed in conceptual positions. For them, the main obstruction to the attainment of enlightenment had nothing to do with either a lack, or excess of knowledge of the doctrine, the problem being that of the propensity of the mind to become conditioned and attached to concepts. Regardless of the extent of one's doctrinal mastery, such expertise, if not handled properly, will soon turn into an impediment. Therefore Ch'an masters to this day

are cautious as to their wording when they discuss the matter of enlightenment, knowing how easy it is for students to get stuck on words, especially the terminology usually associated with awakening.

But since human beings must inevitably discuss things in the course of teaching and learning, concepts will be established, reified, and clung to. Therefore the need of methods to break such attachments. One of the primary remedies used in this work, is to subject such concepts to an analysis that shows them, just like all the objects to which they refer, to be dependently-originated, and therefore, lacking in self-nature. For the scholar, this view of dependent origination is noted, and categorized as a seminal aspect of the Buddhist doctrine. For the Buddhist meditator, the purpose is quite different. The merely learning of such a metaphysical theory in itself will do little to help him in his fundamental task of overcoming his habituated, mistaken perception of reality. Therefore he engages himself in the practice of meditation, where the observation of the dependently-originated nature of things is sustained for long periods of time, is deepened and enhanced, such that it begins to affect his worldview and actions even while not engaged in formal sitting meditation. Buddhist texts tell us that the result of such a sustained contemplation can be, if the power of the contemplation is strong enough, a major rupture of the habituated discursive process, which allows the disclosure of deeper aspects of the consciousness.

When the Critical Buddhists discuss the analysis of dependent origination, they seem to assume that its point is only a matter for the development of metaphysical positions within the domain of circumscribed by language. If a meditator wanted to participate in such an understanding, she would have to halt her *pratītya-samutpāda*-based *vipayanā* (observing meditation) with an intellectual grasp of anatman, and desist from going on to focus the same meditative tool on the conceptual objects, or “dharmas.” If this kind of limitation is enforced, it cannot but end up privileging the status of language, as the meditator is denied recourse to the analysis of linguistic constructs. However, the so-called “emptiness of dharmas,” one of the cornerstones of Mahāyāna doctrine, includes the fact that all linguistic constructs are dependently originated, and therefore any conceptually grounded insights, while of use in certain applications, cannot be seen to be outside the purview of the analysis of dependent origination. While certain Buddhist thinkers according to the situation may relax on the thoroughness of this contemplation in order to allow for the creation of introductory-level instruction, or for the purposes of construction of a coherent system, the usage of this analysis in the formal exercise of meditation is quite another matter.

Therefore the guided contemplation exercises contained in Ch’an sutras, while often starting out by alluding to the existence of an ordinary mode of enlightenment, invariably conclude such discussions by refuting the same concepts on the basis on the lack of inherent nature in linguistic formulations. The *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* contains numerous examples of this kind of practice, as although apparently-ontological statements are offered concerning the presence of something called innate (or “perfect”) enlightenment, this is done

only for the purpose of creating a provisional object of faith, such that practitioners may confirm their will to practice in the face of the strong negative aspects of the emptiness-oriented Mahāyāna doctrine. The perfect enlightenment being described is not intended to be posited as one's eternal capacity for total awareness, unobstructed by prejudices and misconceptions derived from one's misunderstanding of the existence of self and objects. The *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* is especially suitable for examination of this problem, since it is considered to be a quintessential “innate enlightenment” scripture— a foundational text of the Ch'an school that remains influential in the Chinese and Korean meditative traditions to the present day.

Let us look at a well-known passage from the second chapter of the sutra:

善男子, 一切衆生種種幻化皆生如來圓覺妙心, 猶如空華從空而有. 幻華雖滅, 空性不壞. 衆生幻心還依幻滅, 諸幻盡滅, 覺心不動. 依幻說覺亦名爲幻. 若說有覺, 猶未離幻. 說無覺者, 亦復如是. 是故幻滅名爲不動.

Good sons, all sentient beings' various illusions are born from the perfectly enlightened marvelous mind of the Tathāgata, just like the sky-flowers come to exist in the sky. Even though the illusory flowers vanish, the nature of the sky is indestructible. The illusory mind of sentient beings also vanishes based on illusion, and while all illusions are utterly erased, the enlightened mind is unchanged. The use of illusion to speak of enlightenment is also called illusion. If you say there is enlightenment, you are not yet free from illusion. If you say there is no enlightenment, this is the same thing. Therefore, the cessation of illusion is called ‘unchanging.’(8)

The first line, which says “all sentient beings' various illusions are born from the perfectly enlightened marvelous mind of the Tathāgata,” is typical of the characterizations of the “perfect enlightenment” found in this sutra. The fact that it is a “source” from which “all illusions” arise could well lead to the assumption that some sort of dhātu is being hypostasized. But, interestingly, while we might expect, in a dhātu-vadistic framework, for perfect enlightenment to be the source for manifest enlightenment, it is instead the source of “all illusions,” which immediately problematizes the “topical” interpretation. This is of course is a characteristic implementation of the *t'i-yung* framework. *T'i*, as the basic enlightened aspect of the human mind may manifest itself poorly (as delusion) or correctly (as manifest enlightenment), within the same individual, depending on the circumstances, and depending on the perceiver.

The “perfectly enlightened marvelous mind of the Tathāgata” is best not interpreted as either an ontological or epistemological category: it is a description of an experiential condition of the mind unfettered by mistaken views and attachments/aversions. It is a psychological state that sentient beings have the potential to experience, according to their basic constitution. In the case of the Buddha, this harmonious condition appears naturally, and is called

“enlightenment.” In the case of sentient beings, it does not appear naturally, and is called “illusion” or “enlightenment” according to its degree of actualization.

The next line of the sutra says “The illusory mind of sentient beings also vanishes based on illusion, and while all illusions are utterly erased, the enlightened mind is unchanged.” Here, the illusory mind does not disappear based upon its “source,” but as the result of (dependently arisen) causes and conditions. Despite the disappearance of illusion, nothing has actually changed— nothing has been added or subtracted. Aware of the *svabhāva*-taste of this description (“the enlightened mind is unchanged”) the author immediately adds: “The use of illusion to speak of enlightenment is also called illusion. If you say there is enlightenment, you are not yet free from illusion.” This tells us that the prior hypostasized notion of enlightenment has no constant validity— that it is a dependently arisen notion— a provisional device to orient the practice of contemplation. The object being abided in and the subjective abiding are both overturned. Finally, the natural tendency that most people have – that once a position is negated, to assume its opposite to be true – is also cut off directly with the next phrase, that states “If you say there is no enlightenment, this is the same thing.”

The Meaning of No-Thought

What has been described above is a basic motif found in all major Ch’an/Son/Zen canonical texts: the teaching of the method of avoidance of abiding in set thought patterns. Although this practice is commonly referred to as no-thought (*wu-hsin*, *wu-nien* 無心 無念), it is a serious mistake to understand Zen to refer merely to the “denial” or “cessation” of “conceptual thinking.”(9) Even if the etymology of the Sanskrit term *dhyāna* can be shown to have no-thought connotations, we cannot ignore all the semantic development undergone by the Chinese term *ch’an* in the course of the production of the Ch’an texts in East Asia. *Rather than referring to an absence of thought, no-mind refers to the condition of not being trapped in thoughts, not adhering to a certain conceptual habit or position.*

The error of interpretation made by many scholars (and by Zen practitioners as well) is in taking this term to refer to an ongoing absence of thought. Yet while this assumption is routinely made, it is impossible to corroborate it in the Ch’an canon. If we study the seminal texts carefully, we do find a description of the experience of the severing of thought that occurs in the course of a thoroughgoing pursuit of a Buddhist meditative exercise. But nowhere in the *Platform Sutra*, *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, *Diamond Sutra*, or any other major Ch’an text, is the term “no-mind” explained to be a *permanent incapacitation of the thinking faculty or the permanent cessation of all conceptual activity*. It is rather the case that the interruption of the discursive process at a sufficiently deep level allows for an experiential vision of a different aspect of the mind. The view of one’s self and world through this other aspect is radically different from the former. It is not that thought no longer occurs. The conceptualizing faculty still functions quite well— in fact, even better than before, since, now, under the influence of the

deeper dimension of the mind it no longer has to operate in a rigid, constricted, and clinging manner. It is now possible to see things as they really are, unfiltered by one's own massive depository of presuppositions. This is what is meant by the term "suchness."

When the Ch'an texts talk about no-thought, or no-mind, it is this state of non-clinging or freedom from mistaken conceptualization to which they are referring, rather than the permanent cessation of thinking that some imagine. The deeper, immeasurably more clear aspect of the mind that they experience in the course of this irruption of the discursive flow, they call "enlightenment." Realizing now, that this potential of the mind was always with them, they call it "innate."

The locus classicus for the concept of no-thought is the *Platform Sutra*, which says:

無念者於念而不念。無住者。爲人本性。念念不住。前念念後念。
念念相續無有斷絕。若一念斷絕法身即是離色身。念念時中。於一切法上無住。
一念若住念念即住名繫縛。於一切法上念念不住即無縛也。無住爲本。

"No-thought" means "no-thought within thought." Non-abiding is man's original nature. Thoughts do not stop from moment to moment. The prior thought is succeeded in each moment by the subsequent thought, and thoughts continue one after another without cease. If, for one thought-moment, there is a break, the dharma-body separates from the physical body, and in the midst of successive thoughts there will be no attachment to any kind of matter. If, for one thought-moment, there is abiding, then there will be abiding in all successive thoughts, and this is called clinging. If, in regard to all matters there is no abiding from thought-moment to thought-moment, then there is no clinging. Non-abiding is the basis.(10)

Nowhere is there a mention of any kind of disappearance of, or absence of thought. "No-thought" refers distinctly to an absence of abiding, or clinging. According to this explanation of the concept, any reading of *wu-nien* as an "absence of thought" is a misinterpretation.

Returning to the *Sutra of the Perfect Enlightenment*, we should make it clear that the first passage that we cited from that text is by no means some odd exception to an otherwise *svabhāva*-centric discourse. The pattern repeats itself over and over: the initial reference to an intrinsic capacity for enlightenment based on a *t'i-yung* model, followed by an exercise in the practice of non-abiding in conceptions— a combination of basic Mahāyāna doctrinal grounding, which is further invariably followed with an effacement of provisionally-established conceptual structures. Again, in a subsequent passage of the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* we read:

善男子, 一切菩薩及末世衆生應當遠離一切幻化虛妄境界。
由堅執持遠離心故, 心如幻者亦復遠離。遠離爲幻亦復遠離。
遠離離幻亦復遠離。得無所離卽除諸幻。比如鑽火兩木相因。
火出木盡灰飛烟滅。以幻修幻亦復如是。諸幻雖盡不入斷滅。善男子,
知幻卽離, 不作方便。離幻卽覺亦無漸次。

Good sons, all bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the degenerate age should separate from all illusory and false realms. By firmly abiding in separation from thought, you also separate from the thought of ‘illusion.’ As this separation becomes illusion, you again separate from it. You again separate from this separation from separation from illusion, until you reach “nothing to be separated from,” which is the removal of all illusion. It is like making a fire with two sticks. The fire blazes and the wood is consumed; the ashes fly away and the smoke vanishes. Using illusion to remedy illusion is exactly like this. Yet even though all illusions are extinguished, you do not enter into nothingness. Good sons, awareness of illusion is none other than freedom [from it], without devising expedient means. Freedom from illusion is none other than enlightenment, and there are no stages.(11)

Again, this is an instruction on, and a guided exercise through, the non-abiding in conceptual constructs, where the point is for the practitioner to learn that illusion is none other than the habit of adherence to reified thought constructs. The metaphor, as we can see, is *pratītya-samutpāda* through and through. We can also see the author’s distaste for attaching a baggage-laden name, such as “enlightenment” to the resultant state. But he nonetheless wants to add a note of encouragement to make it clear that the resulting state is not a void. Where, from this kind of passage, do we get the message that the individual is henceforth incapable of thought? And where is enlightenment hypostasized?

Again, in a later chapter of the sutra:

善男子, 彼之衆生幻身滅故, 幻心亦滅。幻心滅故, 幻塵亦滅。幻塵滅故,
幻滅亦滅。幻滅滅故, 非幻不滅。比如磨鏡, 垢盡明現。善男子,
當知身心皆爲幻垢。垢相永滅十方清淨。

Good sons, since the illusory body of this sentient being vanishes, the illusory mind also vanishes. Since the illusory mind vanishes, illusory objects also vanish. Since illusory objects vanish, illusory vanishing also vanishes. Since illusory vanishing vanishes, non-illusion does not vanish. It is like polishing a mirror: when the filth is gone, its brightness naturally appears. Good sons, you should understand both body and mind to be illusory filth. When the defiled aspects are permanently extinguished, the entire universe becomes pure.(12)

Here we have a movement of negation that proceeds from the subjective body and mind, out to the objects. In terms of standard Mahāyāna doctrine, that is, in itself, a sufficient descriptive account of the enlightened condition. However, the author

is not content to offer only a doctrinal description. He also wants the reader to be repeatedly removed from the concept of vanishing. The result is an experiential condition of the mind of the practitioner unfettered by illusion. When defilement is extirpated, the purity of the entire universe is visible. Nowhere is it stated that the attainment of enlightenment implies the loss of the ability to think.

The Korean Son Perspective

Critical Buddhist arguments against innate enlightenment and no-thought are unlikely to gain a great deal of currency within Korean Buddhist scholarship. But this is not because the argument would be seen as foreign or difficult to identify with. Rather, because the question of the relationship of innate and actualized enlightenment, and the relationship between the wordless and the worded expressions of the buddhadharma have already received sustained, extensive and sophisticated treatment by the most prominent thinkers in the Korean tradition. The dialog on this topic was already well-developed as early as in the twelfth century, and continued for several centuries. Any modern scholar who can read literary Chinese, and wants to investigate the treatment of this topic can readily find more than enough material in the writings of such figures as Wonhyo (元曉 617-686), Chinul (知訥 1158-1210), Kihwa (己和 1376-1433) or Hyujong (休靜 1520-1604). All four of these men wrote extensively on the matter of the relationship between innate and actualized enlightenment, and the latter three delved deeply into the relationship between the doctrinal (linguistic) transmission and the so-called “mind-to-mind” transmission. The predominant unifying factor in the Korean Son discourse on these topics is that it is thoroughly essence-function oriented, and is based mainly on the content of the formational Ch’an texts: the *Platform Sutra*, *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, *Awakening of Faith*, *Diamond Sutra*, *Vajrasamādhi-sūtra*, etc.

The first major Son figure to take up the matter of the relationship between the worded and wordless teachings as major project was Chinul. Aided by the analysis of the *Hua-yen ching* provided by the Li T’ung-hsan (李通玄 635-730),(13) Chinul utilized Hua-yen philosophy to support Son soteriological views. In discussing this matter in his commentary on Li’s work, Chinul utilized the essence-function construction to explain the relationship of the Hua-yen theory of interpenetration to the Son awakening experience, saying:

The diligent practitioner who is cultivating his mind should first, by means of the path of the patriarchs, become cognizant of the fact that the fundamental subtlety of his own mind cannot be defined in words and letters. Then, using the texts, he should discern that the essence and function of his mind are none other than the nature and characteristics of the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*). Then the virtuous power of [the actualization of] the interpenetration of phenomena with phenomena, and the efficacious function of the wisdom and compassion [that are gained from an awareness of] the sameness in essence [of all things] will no longer be external concerns (i.e., merely conceptual theories).(14)

While the trans-conceptual aspect of the teaching is obviously prioritized, Chinul is quick to follow up by pointing out the need to re-integrate this experience with the world of conceptual understanding.

The matter of the relationship between these aspects is discussed in the writings of many of Chinul's descendants, but the most extensive work is done on the topic about two centuries after Chinul, by the monk Kihwa.(15) Kihwa addressed in his writings a wide variety of Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious themes, but one of his favorite topics was the renewal of Chinul's argument for the essence-function relationship of Son and Kyo, which he did primarily within the context of the *Kumgang panyaparamilgyong o ka hae sorui* (*Combined Commentaries of Five Masters on the Diamond Sutra* 金剛般若波羅蜜經五家解說誼)(16) and his commentary on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, (*Won'gakkyong hae sorui* 圓覺經解說誼).

Since the *Diamond Sutra* is a text that deals directly with the problems of the relationship of language to reality, it was the perfect vehicle through which Kihwa could express his understanding of this intrinsic unity as reflected in the two opposite movements of: (1) the necessity of the practice of meditation for a proper realization of that which to which the scriptures refer, and (2) the viability of scriptural study as a means towards the attainment of the Son goal of enlightenment. While Kihwa was clearly in favor of an informed usage of scriptural study in Buddhist cultivation, he at the same time upheld Ch'an's strict admonition regarding the possible pitfalls of language. He says early in the *O ka hae*:

An ancient said: "The Three Vehicles and Twelve Divisions of the Teaching embody the principle and grasp the mystery." This being the case, what is the special significance of the ancestral teacher's coming from the West? And the separately transmitted teaching should also not be found outside of the scriptures. But since that which is contained in the worded teaching has remained hidden and undisclosed, now the patriarchs reveal and spread its truth, and not only is the meaning of the doctrine made clear, but the "separately transmitted teaching" is also fully disclosed. Since there has been something designated as "the transmission of direct pointing," how could this be something that is contained in the doctrinal teaching? If we merely reflect on the story of Ts'ao-chi of Huangmei,(17) this can readily be seen!(18)

We should make sure, here, to understand that in the context of our above meeting with the *Platform Sutra*, that we do not take its "formless" teaching, to be some sort of blankness, or nothingness, but as the teaching of non-abiding in constructs. Here, although Kihwa first intimates that the Ch'an of the patriarchs and the sermons of the Buddha manifest the same reality, and that one cannot stick to an "anti-language" position, he subsequently places a strong emphasis on the privilege of the wordless transmission. Below, he offers a view of the issue that tends in the other direction, pointing out the usefulness of the worded teaching, while at the same time maintaining his warning against attachment to it:

The dharma that the Buddha has taught is absolute and is relative. Since it is relative, liberation is none other than written language. Since what was taught in the east and taught in the west for forty-nine years(19) is absolute, written language is none other than liberation;(20) yet in over three hundred sermons, Sākyamuni never explained a single word. If you are attached to the words, then you see branches of the stream but miss their source. If you do away with words, you observe the source but are ignorant of its branching streams. When you are confused about neither the source nor its streams, then you enter the ocean of the dharma-nature. Having entered the ocean of the dharma-nature, the no-thought wisdom is directly manifested. The no-thought wisdom being directly manifested, whatever is faced is no impediment, and you penetrate wherever you touch.(21)

Although one should not be attached to words, words also are not to be denied. Here, the essence-function framework can be seen in the source-streams simile. Kihwa first counsels regarding the serious pitfall which has been warned against throughout the Buddhist tradition, and which became a main concern of the Ch’an tradition– that an imbalanced attachment to words (*yung*) can lead to an obstruction of the very essence (*t’i*) of Buddhist practice. Yet to forget words and become absorbed in the wordless is to forget the phenomenal world and be attached to the essence. According to Kihwa, this is also not an acceptable Buddhist position. What remains is the “middle path,” which means continuous avoidance of abiding in exclusivist views. This is “entering the ocean of the dharma-nature,” which results in the manifestation of no-thought wisdom. No-thought wisdom penetrates everything with which it comes in contact.

Below, in a related passage, Kihwa makes the same point in a slightly different way. The Buddha is speaking to Subhūti, the arhat-interlocutor of the *Diamond Sutra*:

“Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Tathāgata have a dharma to be explained or not?”

Subhūti answered the Buddha, saying, “World-honored one, the Tathāgata has no dharma to be explained.”(22)

Tao-ch’uan, (one of the five commentators) says: “Quietly, quietly.”

Kihwa adds: “The Buddha has nothing to explain; this is definitely true. But ‘saying nothing’ is also not the Buddha’s original intention. That is why Tao-ch’uan says ‘quietly, quietly.’ One should not claim one-sidedly that there is ‘nothing to be said.’”

A bit further on he adds: “. . . therefore it is said, ‘even though you do not rely on the path of verbal teaching, you should also not be attached to the position which fully rejects verbal explanation.’”(23)

Kihwa considers the *Diamond Sutra* to be so valuable exactly because he understands “non-abiding” to be the key of all Buddhist practices. Again relying on the essence-function framework, he says:

“Non-abiding is the great essence of the myriad practices, and the myriad practices are all the great function of non-abiding. The teaching of the compassionate saint [the Buddha] takes non-abiding as its abode. With the great essence shining, one cannot but be aware of the great function.(24)

Concerning the relationship of the *Diamond Sutra* with the practice of non-abiding, Kihwa says:

Prajñā’s divine source is vast, lacking all kinds of characteristics. It is extensive, yet lacks an abode. It is empty and not existing; it is profound and unknown. Now this single sutra takes *this* as its core teaching and as its essence. Although there is no awareness, there is nothing that it does not know. Although there is no abiding, there is no place where it does not abide. Although lacking characteristics, it does not obstruct any characteristics. This is the function of marvelous existence. What all buddhas have realized is exactly the realization of this. What all the patriarchs have transmitted is exactly the transmission of this. Their means of awakening people is also exactly through this.(25)

In the *Diamond Sutra*, non-abiding is equated with the lack of attachment to any characteristic (*hsiang/sang* 相). Therefore, the *Diamond Sutra*’s teaching of No-Aspects (*wu-hsiang/musang* 無相) is synonymous with non-abiding. The *Diamond Sutra*’s discussion, as is the case with the other texts of the *prajñāpāramitā* genre, carries out a systematic refutation of the abiding in characteristics, and most importantly, the abiding in characteristics of selfhood and thinghood. The same then, applies for abiding in either of the positions of “words” or “wordlessness.”

In summary, Kihwa is strongly opposed to exclusivist positions either for or against the role of written language in the cultivation of the dharma. But since his articulation of the polarity is through essence and function, we can say that while Kihwa accepts the validity of both approaches, it is clear that the “wordless” teaching, being the essence, has priority, and the textual approach is secondary. But once again, “primary” and “secondary” in this sense cannot be understood in an either-or manner. The secondary is just as necessary to the primary as is the primary to the secondary. You can’t have one without the other. We find both Chinul’s and Kihwa’s positions reiterated throughout the subsequent Korean tradition, in subtle detail. The leading Son master of the later Choson, Hyujong, also discussed this matter at great length in his writings.(26)

By contrast, we have seen the *Diamond Sutra* cited in the Critical Buddhist project in an attempt to support the thesis that Ch’an materials advocate “no-thought” understood as a kind of mental blankness, together with selected citations from Mo-ho-yen, who, although well-known to scholars of Tibetan

Buddhism for his defeat in the famous sudden-gradual debate, is a decidedly minor figure in the history of the development of Ch'an. Here Mo-ho-yen is cited as stating that "conceptualizing is a defect," supported by a quote from the *Diamond Sutra* to the effect that: "The *Diamond Sutra* says, 'One who is free from all conceptions is called *Buddha*.'"(27) Based on our above discussion, however, we can know that this phrase "free from all conception," should be taken, rather than referring to some sort of permanent incapacitation of the faculty of thought, to mean exactly what it says: namely "freedom from conceptions," which is none other than the ability to be unattached to one's concepts, to be able to stand away from the never-ending flow of discursive consciousness. This line from the *Diamond Sutra* is in perfect agreement with what we have seen above in the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *Platform Sutra*. I would further point out that the *Diamond Sutra*, as a text whose theme is nothing but the investigation of, and countering of, the tendency to reify and attach to conceptual constructs has no line in it that asserts, that "conceptualizing" [in itself] "is a defect."(28)

Ch'an as Buddhism

Although it does seem that the art of instruction on methods of engagement into the practice of non-abiding may have reached a new peak in the birth of Ch'an, I see neither a firm basis nor a special need to claim that the notion of unattached thought is the unique creation of the Ch'an movement. On the contrary, I would hold that even the earliest Indian forms of contemplation on *pratītya-samutpāda* had a similar purpose, as they sought to sever attachment to the notion of the ego, which they conceived to be a basic cause in the production of *duḥkha*. Indeed, from the time of the earliest origins of Indian Buddhism, the concept of dependent origination was not merely a philosophical argument to be used against the non-Buddhist sects. Dependent origination was the object of *vipāśyanā*, "observing" meditation, the point of which was the attainment of a permanent freedom from initiative thinking, characterized at that time by *atman-ism*. We should not be determined to confine Buddhism strictly within the domain of philosophical-linguistic discourse, and ignore the fact of its primary purpose as a soteriological system aimed at bringing about liberation.

If we accept dependent origination as a basic strategy to be used in meditation, which is aimed at liberation, how can it be permissible to set limits to the extent of that meditation, and say "it is OK to use *pratītya-samutpāda* to deconstruct *ātma-vāda*, but you should stop there, and not proceed to the deconstruction of the *dhātu* of thought constructs." According to the bulk of the materials presented in the Buddhist tradition, this is the key to the attainment of wisdom. And once we come to this point, how can it be impermissible to speak of the enlightenment experience? Or to speak of what quality it is that sentient beings possess that makes the enlightenment experience possible?

Footnotes

1) Western access to this debate has been greatly enhanced by the recent publication of the book *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism*, edited by Jamie Hubbard and Paul Swanson (University of Hawaii Press, 1998). This book contains English translations of several of the most important essays by Profs. Hakamaya and Matsumoto, along with several other articles by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars that argue for various positions within the context of this debate. Most of the citations in this article have been made from this extremely valuable work.

2) *Pruning*, King, p. 187.

3) *Pruning*, “Is Critical Buddhism Really Critical?” p. 295.

4) *Pruning*, “Critical Philosophy versus Topical Philosophy,” p. 72.

5) For a more thorough discussion of the meaning and usage of the t’i-yung framework, see my articles entitled “The Composition of Self-Transformation Thought in Classical East Asian Philosophy and Religion” (*Toyo Gakuen Kiyo*, vol. 4 (March, 1996), pp. 141-152.) and “East Asia’s Unexplored Pivot of Metaphysics and Hermeneutics: Essence-Function/Interpenetration” (paper presented at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, available on the WWW at <http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller/articles/>

[indigenoushermeneutics.htm](#). The latter work is a revised expansion of the former.

6) *Ibid*, p. 73. Hakamaya claims here, without explanation, that Ito somehow understood the *Analects* better than almost any Chinese scholar.

7) It is true that one can isolate phrases and passages in such works as the *Awakening of Faith*, *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *Platform Sutra* (Liu-tsu Tan-ching 六祖壇經) that seem to refer to a hypostatic, ātman-like enlightenment, as there are passages in these works which suggest innate, or perfect enlightenment as the “source” for manifest events, such as actualized enlightenment, or the myriad phenomena. But we should consider the Chinese concept used to denote this concept of “source,” is that of a spring (yan 源) that is integrally connected to its branch streams— a direct analog of t’i.

8) T 842.17.914a10.

9) See Matsumoto, *Pruning*, “The Meaning of ‘Zen’”, p. 244.

10) T 2007.48.338c5-10.

- 11) T 842.17.914a15-19
- 12) T 842.17.914c2.
- 13) Li wrote a famous commentary to the Hua-yen ching entitled Hsin Hua-yen ching lun 新華嚴經論
- 14) Hanguk pulgyo chonso 4.768a.
- 15) For details regarding Kihwa's life and works, please see My Ph.D. dissertation "Hamho Kihwa: A Study of his Major Works" (SUNY Stony Brook, 1993)
- 16) Commonly referred to in Korea as the O ka hae. This is Kihwa's further annotation to the anonymous redaction of five separate commentaries to the Diamond Sutra. These commentators include Tsung-mi (宗密 780-841), Hui-neng (慧能 638-713), Shuang-lin fu (雙林傳, Fu Ta-shih 傅大士 497-569), Yeh-fu Tao-ch'uan (冶父道川) and Y-chang Tsung-ching (豫章宗鏡).
- 17) More commonly known as Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch. Thus Kihwa is referring to the content of the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.
- 18) Hanguk pulgyochonso 7.12.c5-10.
- 19) The length of Śākyamuni's teaching career.
- 20) In the above two sentences Kihwa is alluding to the famous dictum from the Heart Sutra, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form."
- 21) Hanguk pulgyo chonso 7.42c21-43a5.
- 22) T 235.8.750a.15-16.
- 23) Hanguk pulgyo chonso 7.56b.24-c.10.
- 24) Hanguk pulgyo chonso 7.36.a.10-13.
- 25) Hanguk pulgyo chonso 7.14a.15-22.
- 26) See especially, his Son'ga kwigam
- 27) Matsumoto, "The Meaning of Zen," Ibid, p. 244. Unfortunately, a source for this citation has not been provided to allow us to see the original Chinese text, or its context.
- 28) Ibid., p. 244.