

## Why Did Bodhidharma Go to the East? Buddhism's Struggle with the Mind in the World

If someone asks the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West,  
It is that the handle of a wooden ladle is long, and the mountain torrents run deep;  
If you want to know the boundless meaning of this,  
Wait for the wind blowing in the pines to drown out the sound of koto strings. [Koan 18, tr Heine]

This question—why did Bodhidharma come from the West?—is ubiquitous in Chinese Ch'an Buddhist literature. Though some see it as an arbitrary question intended merely as an opener to obscure puzzles, I think it represents a genuine intellectual puzzle: Why did Bodhidharma come from the *West*—that is, from *India*? Why couldn't *China* with its rich literary and philosophical tradition have given rise to Buddhism? We will approach that question, but I prefer to do so backwards. I want to ask instead, “why was it so fortuitous for the development of Buddhist philosophy that Bodhidharma went *East*?” I will argue that by doing so he gave a trajectory to Buddhist thought about the mind and knowledge that allows certain issues that are obscure in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, despite their centrality to the Buddhist critique of Indian orthodoxy, to come into sharper relief, and hence to complete a project begun, but not completable, in that Indo-European context.

### 1. China and India on mind and world

Why did Bodhidharma go to China? This koan is an old one, and I am sure that the answer I will give would disturb even the most realized roshi. I intend a very broad-brush examination of the trajectory of Buddhist thought about the mind grounded in

the hermeneutical principle that it is often best to read texts not simply against the horizon of their composers and initial readers but against the horizon the tradition they engender. In the present case I will argue that by looking at a surprising endpoint, the Ch'an/Zen tradition in China and Japan, and in particular at the natural reformulation of some Buddhist ideas about the philosophy of mind when Buddhism entered China, we can see in sharper relief some of the conceptual innovation towards which earlier Indian Buddhist philosophers were groping—innovations of which it is fair to say they were not entirely aware. Buddhism from the start was striving, I will argue for the transcendence of a representational model of thought, and this required transcending Indian ways of thinking about thought.

As I say, in this essay I paint with a very broad brush indeed, and will not be pursuing the close textual approach I favor. That will follow. The picture I am after, in its broadest outlines is this: Buddhist philosophy of mind developed in an Indian milieu in which many of the background assumptions about the relationship between language, thought and the objects of language and thought are much like those that inform most of Western philosophy. On the other hand, the outlook regarding the self, the mind and the nature of knowledge that develops in the Buddhist tradition is in important respects antithetical to that conceptual matrix. That antithesis makes it hard for Buddhism to articulate its new vision, and results in a certain amount of obscurity. On the other hand, when Buddhism enters China, it encounters a conceptual matrix that is in some respects more conducive to its own vision of these matters, and the translation of Buddhism into the Chinese language and conceptual environment clarifies some of what Buddhist philosophers were attempting to say.

Here I am relying on Chad Hansen's (1992) idea that there is a fundamental difference between the way that Chinese philosophers saw the role of language in human life and the way that Western philosophers see that role, as well as his view that this difference entails a dramatic difference in the way in which the mind and the explanation of behavior are conceived in the two traditions. Briefly (and

dogmatically, for now—see Hansen’s book for the details) because the classical Chinese scholars saw language principally as a *written* medium that could support different pronunciations, in which the written characters directly represent the world, they did not take representation to be the mode through which the mind normally engages the world. *Language*, to use Hansen’s metaphor, on this understanding, *guides* human behavior and *itself* represents the world. But importantly, language on this view does not have the role of conveying, or of representing *thought*, and the representational function is conceived as entirely external—in the graphs—not internal to the mind. (Hansen 1992, pp 32-40)

As a consequence, classical Chinese thought as it was developed prior to the advent of Buddhism in China, was preoccupied not with the relation between an inner and an outer world, nor with the nature of mental states, nor with problems about truth or the nature of reality. Instead the preoccupation was with the status of Taos—guiding discourses. And a Tao is *any* sequence of graphs, from a single graph to a lengthy text. There is no privileged unit of discourse such as a sentence. So truth does not emerge as the major question to ask about texts. Rather the Chinese tend to ask, are they successful or unsuccessful, constant or variable, universal or relative? Minds and propositional attitudes, and in particular mental representations are strikingly absent from Chinese philosophical discussion, as is logic or theory of inference.

All of this suggests that Roger Ames’ maxim that the real divide between East and West is not the Tigris or Euphrates, but the Himalayas has more than a grain of truth. While Buddhist philosophy has a decidedly critical edge, and often sets itself in sharp opposition to the tenets and frameworks of the orthodox Indian philosophical schools, Buddhist philosophy as it developed on India and later in Tibet was saturated with a broadly Indian (and hence a familiarly Indo-European) way of taking up with the world: the sentence was the unit of discourse; truth was

hence at center stage. Writing was important to be sure, but in classical India, writing was phonetic, and was taken to represent speech, which in turn was taken to express thought. This brought in train the view that linguistic meaning is parasitic on that of thought, and that the mind's relationship to the world is one of representation. All of this forces questions about the accuracy of the mind's representation of the world, about the truth of ideas, about justification, and about the relation of the mental to the physical. Does all of this sound familiar? Could this be why Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is such a comfortable step for those of us who want to venture beyond our own tradition, while the East Asian traditions seem a bit forbidding?

But herein lies the tension that intrigues me now: Buddhist thought, as I have indicated, is self-consciously critical of that milieu, and often its critiques are maddeningly obscure. I think that part of the reason for that is that the insights to which Indian and Tibetan philosophers were trying to give voice were just too un-Indian, too un-Tibetan to be expressed clearly in the available philosophical idioms. We can see things improving as Bodhidharma goes East and finds a tradition coming to the world with presuppositions surprisingly close to those of Buddhist high theory.

## **2. Direct Perception and Inference**

Buddhist epistemology, especially as it develops in the work of such figures as Dharmakīrti and Dignāga, but also as it emerges in the more refined work of the Madhyamaka tradition as it assimilates their framework, draws a sharp distinction between the status of the deliverances of perception and those of inference. Perception, for Buddhist epistemologists, is a source of authoritative cognition, while inference—while it might be a useful conventional instrument—is never fully

authoritative. If I see a fire in the kitchen, I *know* that there is a fire in the kitchen; if I see *smoke*, I may *surmise*, but do not *know*.

We must immediately temper and explain this claim. For it is well known to any scholar of the epistemological tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti—the tradition that dominates Buddhist epistemology both in India and in Tibet—that Buddhist epistemologists accept *two* warrants for knowledge, viz., perception and inference. By what warrant am *I* reducing that number to one? Let me be more precise: Indeed inference is considered by Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and by the majority (though not all) of their Tibetan exegetes and followers to be a source of authoritative cognition. But it is considered authoritative for a very different reason and in a much more limited sense than is perception. Perception is authoritative in this tradition because it gives us access to real entities, and these will turn out to be particulars. And perception is a warrant both for ordinary beings and for enlightened beings. More of this below.

Inference, on the other hand, is a warrant *despite* the fact that its object—the universal—is, for any Buddhist philosopher, non-existent, and despite the fact that inference is always characterized as *deceptive*. The reason that inference is countenanced as an epistemic warrant is simply that it is *pragmatically* useful; that using it gets us to our epistemic goals and supports legitimate activity. It is never taken to deliver the *truth*, and it must be abandoned by enlightened beings. It is very much a second-rate patch to cover for the limitations on our perception. For this reason it is fair to say that although each of perception and inference is authoritative in *some* sense, only perception is authoritative in a *full* sense. (Dreyfus 1997, esp pp 299-315)

All of this hinges not on skeptical worries about the fallibility of inference, as one might expect if one grew up on a diet of Western skepticism, but rather on a nominalist construal of universals, and a theory of the role of universals as mediators

of inference. One way of appreciating this point is that the withholding of full authority to inference in this framework (despite important nods to its conventional utility and indeed indispensability as a provisional tool for ordinary human beings, including sophisticated philosophers) applies not only to *inductive*, but to *deductive* inference as well. (*Ibid.*, 142-153, Tillemans 1999, pp 117-150)

Consider the following inference: All produced phenomena are impermanent; this pot is produced; therefore it is impermanent. Why is it a relatively defective way of knowing the impermanence of the pot? Precisely because it depends upon the fact that the universal of impermanence contains as a subordinate universal that of produced phenomena; and that the universal of produced phenomena comprises, *inter alia*, this pot. The logic is conceived of as categorical. If universals, and the relations among them were *real*, as, for instance, many of the Indian Buddhists' interlocutors, such as the Nyāya held, these inferences could count as fully authoritative, for then one could in fact perceive the actual categorical relations that mediate them. On the other hand, if these universals turn out not to be real, then of course the relevant relations that mediate the inference in question are also unreal, and hence cannot be perceived.

Universals, however, are all, from a Buddhist standpoint, unreal, for they are mere conceptual, or linguistic imputations based upon the arbitrary aggregation of particulars; they have no causal powers. We can quickly get into arcane doxography here, as we worry about the status of particulars, and I would prefer not to. Some Buddhist schools reject the independent status of particulars, while some take them for granted. The general point remains: No matter what you think about the status of particulars, from a Buddhist framework, universals are nonexistent in reality, and the fact that they appear real to a mind performing inference means that they are inherently deceptive, and hence can never mediate knowledge in the full sense. Hence, whether inference is inductive or deductive, it can never be fully

authoritative. At best it can be a useful expedient to guide worthwhile cognitive activity.

The object of perception, on the other hand, according to all Buddhist epistemologists, is particular. Hence, for *veridical* perception (and here again, to get things precise, an extensive doxographic interlude would be necessary), there is in fact a genuine object of perception contact with which guarantees the epistemic authority of the cognitive state. And indeed, a Buddha *sees* the particular impermanence of the pot.

It is important to see just how restrictive this standard of highest epistemic authority is: Particulars are momentary. Continua, including continua of mind or of physical objects, are, strictly speaking, universals comprising innumerable particular moments. They are never perceived. This is why so much of our ordinary experience is deceptive according to this philosophical framework. We think that we see enduring pots, tables and human beings. But inasmuch as there are no such things, we are deceived. On the other hand, we do authoritatively perceive moments of such things. We just don't know it; typically, for those of us who are not fully enlightened, the experience to which we have access fails to be truly authoritative; our truly authoritative experience is beyond our access. We go through life believing that we are perceiving when in fact we are inferring.

What, then, do we make of the extensive Buddhist literature on inference, and on the extensive use of principles of logical inference in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature? Here we enter the realm of *upāya*—of skilful means—in its epistemological home. Some of us are not fully enlightened. We need a ladder to get us to that stage where our knowledge is all constituted by direct perception of reality. That ladder is inference. Through inference we can cultivate a preliminary understanding of the character of the object of enlightened direct perception. Then we'll know it when we see it, instead of being deceived into believing that we are seeing the real thing

when in fact we are fabricating it through conception. For this reason, despite its ultimately deceptive character, inference properly performed is a necessary expedient on the path, but an expedient that, like the raft, is to be discarded when it serves the purpose of leading us to the ground of direct perception. And, just as when one is choosing a ladder or a raft, it is essential—even if the tool will be but a temporary expedient—to be able to tell the difference between a sound and a shaky ladder or between a seaworthy and a leaky raft, it is essential in doing philosophy to be able to tell the difference between valid and invalid inference.

Thus we see an initial epistemic tension built into the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist epistemological framework: a theory of inference is needed to sort out invalid from valid inference; the only candidate theory is a categorical logic that is indeed embraced. But the categorical logic in turn runs afoul of Buddhist ontology, and must ultimately be rejected. The grounds for its rejection are inferential, and that inference must be rejected. Epistemic consistency is difficult to achieve. But we see Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers groping—beginning with an epistemology that takes for granted an account of the meaningfulness and utility of inference and of general terms that demands either universals or linguistic devices—for some way both to transcend those demands, and to justify their transcendence using those very devices. Bodhidharma could be forgiven a bit of perplexity.

### **3. Non-conceptual thought vs conceptual thought**

Parallel motivations and tensions emerge when we examine Buddhist critiques of conceptuality. Repeatedly in Mahāyāna literature we encounter admonitions that conceptual thought fabricates its objects; that it falsifies reality. The cognitive states of enlightened beings are regularly contrasted with those of unenlightened beings along this axis: we unenlightened beings conceptualize, and thus fabricate, or falsify

our objects. The insight of buddhas is non-conceptual. What does this mean, and why is it so important?

I think the key word here is *fabrication*. (*prapañca, spros pa*) Buddhist epistemology is grounded in the idea that the goal of epistemic practice is the realization of truth, and truth is a correspondence between the knowing cognitive state and the object it knows. The immediate object of conceptual thought is always, as we have seen, a universal, an aspect under which something is conceived. To put the point in contemporary epistemological terms, for an unenlightened being, seeing is always seeing-as. But to see-as is to see falsely—to assign a character to the object of thought that it must lack, precisely because no such characteristics are found in reality.

But Buddhas know things. After all, they are omniscient. So they must know non-conceptually, and indeed this is how their knowledge is characterized in all Buddhist treatises on the subject. But omniscience requires that they know all objects of knowledge, including the epistemic states of unenlightened sentient beings. That, after all, is a prerequisite for their compassionate and skilful intervention in order to facilitate the enlightenment of all sentient beings. But that requires that they know *that p*, for all true *p*, and that means that they must know that things are... are, what?

Here is the second major tension. For Indian and Tibetan epistemology, developing in the orthodox matrix of Sanskrit thought, the proper content of knowledge claims are propositions, and a proposition consists in the attribution of a property to an object or sequence of objects; and it is hard to see how that can be done without appeal to concepts, and hence to universals. But Buddhas must be able to do so. And so we end up with a rhetoric of inconceivability when we look for any account of the immediate, non-conceptual knowledge of matters of fact. And of course this is doubly unsatisfactory, for here the enterprise is simply to characterize *conceptually*, for beings like *us*, what our own epistemic goal is. But unlike the case

with perception vs inference, we can't even claim that our cognitive activity can present us with an *indirect* grasp of its own goal. Not only can a Buddha not say directly what he knows, but we cannot even say indirectly what he knows, or what we are trying to achieve. We can begin to see why Bodhidharma may have been consulting a travel agent.

#### 4. Non-duality and duality

Closely connected to these issues is the distinction we find throughout Madhyamaka and Yogācāra texts on the philosophy of mind and epistemology between dualistic and non-dualistic awareness. Again, this distinction divides mundane from enlightened consciousness. Ordinary minds cognize their objects dualistically, distinguishing subject from object, object from its complement in the objective domain, and characterized basis from characteristic. The mind of an enlightened being is free from these dualistic appearances. A buddha's mind does not represent the object as distinct from itself; a buddha's mind does not represent objects as distinct from all else—that is, it does not *objectify*; a buddha's mind does not distinguish characterized from characteristic.

We can see why this must be so, and so we can trace both the roots of and the nature of the error embodied by dualistic awareness as it is understood from this perspective. Once again, we can, if we wish, distinguish a number of different approaches taken to spelling out the nature of these dualities in various Buddhist philosophical systems. But in the end, the major contours will be congruent enough for present purposes. The key term here is *objectification* (*dmigs pa, ālambana*). When we ordinary folk see a pot we take the object of our consciousness to be a thing that exists externally to our mind, and that to be a relatively enduring thing, cognized by a mental episode whose temporal duration might be quite brief, and whose fundamental nature is very different (mental, vs physical, for instance, hence the

distinction between *it* and *me*. (We also, on this view, objectify the *self*, and the same story could be told from the subjective side). In fact, the pot we *see* is a momentary pot stage; and in fact, we see it *as* a continuing pot. But that is a purely psychological construct, and so exists not externally to us, but in our minds. The basis of the distinction we draw vanishes on this view. A buddha, objectifying neither pot nor self, merely is aware (non-conceptually, of course) of a momentary pot-stage in a moment of pot-perception.

We distinguish the pot from the cloth on which it rests. That distinction is drawn on the grounds that the pot and the cloth are different kinds of things—that they are distinct continua. But neither continuum has any independent reality, and any joints at which we carve the world we experience depend upon the application of falsifying concepts. So such dualities are illusory. This is not to say that the buddha sees a seamless reality—this is not some kind of mystical monism—rather that among the myriad particulars, no kinds appear to a buddha as more than merely conventional.

We say that the pot is blue. When we do so, we distinguish the particular pot from the universal blueness that it instantiates. That is, after all, the basis on which we can cognize, and utter, the conventional truth, “this pot is blue.” But upon analysis, we have a hard time maintaining this distinction. The pot cannot be posited coherently as a bare particular; the universal cannot be discovered apart from its instances. Part of what it is to be *this* pot is to be *this instance of blueness*; part of what it is to be *blue* is to be the color of *this pot*. That non-duality is non-dually cognized by a Buddha.

All of this is orthodoxy, and to anyone who has spent time on Buddhist epistemology, these points are pedestrian. Nonetheless, none of it is easy to say, or to make coherent. What does it really mean for a mind to be one with its object; for a thing to be one with its complement; for a particular to be one with a universal (especially for an existent particular to be one with a non-existent universal)? It is no wonder that in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, when Mañjuśrī is asked to comment on

the many bodhisattva's accounts of the nature of non-duality he faults them all for trying to express the inexpressible, and less wonder that Vimilakīrti, when asked to comment on that comments, remains silent. Silence on this matter is recommended. But the recommendation is far from silent. The tensions mount. Bodhidharma books a place in a caravan.

### 5. Awareness vs representation

Let us consider one last slice between benighted and awakened consciousness, that between the non-representational awareness of a Buddha and the representations of an ordinary being. This dichotomy is often used to explain all of the rest we have scouted; and it will provide, I think, a way to understand the insights Buddhist philosophy of mind is striving to articulate in India and Tibet, as well as the reasons for the difficulties in articulating them. It will also provide the pivot point for seeing why these insights were more available, and perhaps even prosaic, to Chinese appropriators of Buddhism and those they in turn influenced.

The world of ordinary experience is often characterized in this literature as conditioned by representations, (*rnam pa, ākāra; tshad nyid, nimitta*) and the world of a buddha, by contrast, as beyond representation. The point is straightforward, and indeed is revolutionary in Indian philosophical thought. It is even difficult for some Western philosophers to wrap their minds around, though it is gaining a certain currency in these post-modern times. When ordinary beings perceive or conceive the world, we do so, on this view, through the mediation of mental episodes or processes that are representational in character. These episodes take reality and represent it; our minds engage directly with these mediating representations, and not with the represented. The representations are taken to be real, to be external, to be mind-independent; but they are not, and they veil the real objects from the mind.

This representational theory of mind and the problems it raises should sound familiar, but there are, as we have seen, a few twists. While *mediation*, per se, is a problem in the Indian and Tibetan context, as it is in early modern Western philosophy, in the Indian context, it is precisely the fact that this mediation is *conceptual* that is taken as problematic, for the concepts come from the subjective side, and it is taken that no representation is possible without conceptualization. But the other side of the coin is this: while most early modern philosophers, despite the concern for the distorting or distancing potential of a mediate view of access to the world reckoned this an inescapable predicament of cognition, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophers regard it as a soluble predicament. Since a buddha sees reality as it is, and since that is impossible through representation, a buddha has non-representational cognition.

And so we are back to conundrum. For despite the repeated scriptural assurances that reality is beyond representation, and that an enlightened cognition of reality is non-representational, there is no account of just what non-representational cognitive access to anything could be. This, of course, is not surprising. For from the standpoint of Indian or Tibetan Buddhist philosophers, thought is a paradigm of the representational. For that which is beyond representation to be conceivable would be straightforwardly contradictory.

## **6. Transformation of the basis**

Buddhist soteriological concerns reflect the tensions we have been exploring. By the Fifth Century of the Common Era, well into the heyday of Mahāyāna philosophical activity, Vasubandhu and his brother Asanga, at least with the mediation of Sthiramati a century or so later, launched the Yogācāra movement. This idealist Buddhist philosophical system can best be seen, as refracted by the current sets of concerns, as an attempt both to resolve some of the apparent paradoxes of

Madhyamaka metaphysics through the application of the logic and epistemology developing through the interaction of Buddhist and orthodox Indian schools, and to develop an account of practice and soteriology that could make sense of the path from ordinary cognition and subjectivity to the subjectivity and epistemic states of a buddha.

The advent of Yogācāra, at the very time when Buddhism was being carried into China, marks an intriguing moment in the forked history of Buddhist philosophy. In India, an extended debate began, sparked by Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka reply to Yogācāra, between the two schools. This debate and the subsequent doxography, defines the landscape of Tibetan Buddhist scholarship and its philosophical and hermeneutical problematic when Buddhism crossed the Himalaya into Tibet beginning in the Ninth Century. On the other hand, as Buddhism moved north into China well before these debates crystallized, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra were seen in China not as rival philosophical schools, but as complementary aspects of a unified philosophical viewpoint. So, while in India and Tibet, Yogācāra and its approach to these problems was eventually denigrated as a second-best framework—what to do until one is mature enough to tolerate the depth and paradox of Madhyamaka—in China, and subsequently in the East Asian traditions that originate in China, such as those of Korea and Japan, Yogācāra ideas flourished and took center stage as complementary to and as consistent with Madhyamaka (again, there is much more nuance to this doctrinal history than I am acknowledging here, but this is close enough to right for present purposes).

Here we must be content to note a few salient features of the Yogācāra metaphysics, epistemology and soteriology necessary for present purposes. First, all phenomena have three natures: At the coarsest level, they have an *imagined* nature; their nature as they are imagined to be by ordinary people. That imagined nature includes their character as existing external to the mind in space and time, and their being distinct

from—that is dual, with respect to—the mind. These properties are, however, according to this idealist school, *imaginary*. Second, phenomena have a *dependent* nature. That is, phenomena exist only in dependence upon the mind—they are, from this perspective, real things, but their reality is the reality of hallucinations, things that exist only in dependence upon the mind. Realization of this nature is, of course, a more advanced cognitive state that which only takes things as they are imagined to be. Third, and finally, things have a *consummate* nature, the nature they are seen to have from the standpoint of enlightened awareness. This is their nature as non-different from the mind, usually put as the fact that the dependent—that is the hallucinatory—is empty of the imagined—that is, of external reality. When one sees the consummate nature of things, one sees that all is mental, subject-object duality vanishes, and with it conceptualization and representation. From the metaphysical side, the Yogācāra argue that all things have these three natures; from the epistemological side, the goal of practice is to realize the consummate.

Before we leave the three natures for other central features of the Yogācāra vision that prove so influential in Chinese Mahāyāna, it is important to focus for a moment in the special role of the second of these three natures—the dependent. It has a dual character, facing on the one hand the imagined, and on the other the consummate. It hence plays an important pivot role from the standpoint of ontology, epistemology and soteriology. On the one hand, the dependent nature is dualistic: the fact that external phenomena are dependent on my own mind requires the distinction between the hallucination that is my cognitive object and the mind that is its subject; on the other hand, once the distinction between subject and object is drawn within the domain of the dependent, that very duality collapses into the unity that is a mind comprising a mental process. On the one hand, when I come to understand the dependent character of phenomena, I come to see them as representations of which I am aware, knowing them as objects, and myself as subject; on the other hand, when I know them in this way, I know them as aspects of my own mind, and duality and

representation vanish. On the one hand, to have realized the dependent is to have realized yet another conventional aspect of phenomena, one shot through with representation, conceptual thought, duality, etc; on the other, since it is *true* that all phenomena have this character, unlike the imagined, and since the consummate *just is* the absence of imagined in the dependent; to have understood the dependent is already an aspect of enlightened consciousness. This special role of the middle nature is hence central to understanding the Yogācāra analysis of the possibility of the transcendence of the mundane.

The second important Yogācāra innovation is the reconstruction of the Madhyamaka notion of emptiness. While for Nāgārjuna and his followers, the ultimate truth about phenomena is their emptiness of essence—a fact that grounds their transcendence of conceptual thought—for the Yogācāra their emptiness is simply their emptiness of subject-object duality, and the emptiness of the dependent nature of the imagined. Realization of ultimate truth is hence realization of consummate nature, and that in turn, as we have seen, is an aspect of the realization of the dependent. This reconfiguration of emptiness has profound implications, and is a crucial part of the Yogācāra solution to the Madhyamaka paradoxes. It replaces the notion of essencelessness with an analysis in terms of several essences, and hence replaces a problem about how we can know objects that ultimately do not exist with a problem about how we can know objects that exist ultimately in ways other than that in which they appear to exist. A gulf that the Yogācārins may well have seen as unbridgeable within the framework of Madhyamaka becomes more tractable when seen as akin to far more familiar appearance-reality problem.

A third conceptual innovation in Yogācāra is the introduction of a foundation consciousness or transcendental subjectivity that underlies all experience, including introspective experience of the evolving and constantly changing stream of mental episodes and processes, from which it is distinguished. This foundation forms the

basis of all awareness, personal identity, the preservation of memory, the accumulation of karma, etc. It is always subject and never object. In empirical self-consciousness, according to Yogācārins, even our own awareness of ourselves is dualistic, with the foundation consciousness acting as subject, and the stream of mental events as object. The empirical mind is as subject to three-nature theory as any other empirical object, and is equally imaginary, dependent, and ultimately non-dually related to the foundation consciousness.

The foundation consciousness is in many ways the central philosophical innovation of this tradition. While madhyamaka philosophers in India and Tibet criticize it savagely as a return to the substantial self or ātman of the orthodox Indian schools, the Yogācārins and those in East Asia who assimilated their doctrines treated it as a necessary posit in order to solve a host of problems, including those we have in front of us. *Why* do we see things erroneously? Potentials carried by the foundation consciousness? *Why* does the past determine the future? Potentials carried by the foundation consciousness? *Why* can we transform our awareness? Potentials carried by the foundation consciousness. *Why* do we have any experience at all? The nature of the foundation consciousness is pure subjectivity.

But there is a world of difference between the experience of a deluded, defiled foundation consciousness and that of a buddha, and our whole problem has been to explain what that difference is, and how to get from here to there. And here the Yogācārins introduce a further important conceptual construct—the transformation of the basis. The idea is this: so long as karmic potentials reside in the foundation consciousness, they will ripen in the form of conscious experience, which experience will be ineliminably representational, conceptual, dualistic, deluded. But through hard practice, including not only proper conduct whose purpose is to purge these potentials, but also the cultivation of an awareness of the three natures, and hence a conceptual apprehension of the falsity of experience and of the true nature of reality,

these potentials can be exhausted. At that point, there is a fundamental transformation of the nature of the foundation consciousness. It is no longer the repository of the potential for representation. But its nature as pure subjectivity remains, despite its having no objects. Since all objects are illusory, a consciousness without objects is an accurate consciousness, but one of a different order—a non-representational consciousness immediately aware of the fundamental nature of reality. And that is enlightenment.

This allows us to approach the fourth and final conceptual innovation in this idealistic system, one that was a kind of footnote to Buddhist philosophy in India, but which assumed a central place in China and indeed in certain Tibetan schools—the idea of Buddha-nature, or the innate potential for enlightenment, often referred to as the seed or matrix of Buddhahood. The very nature of the foundation consciousness is pure subjectivity. Its objects, we have seen, are, while illusory, adventitious. Since they are adventitious, they can be eliminated. Their elimination is the achievement of buddhahood. We hence all have the seed of buddhahood in us at the start. This is our buddha-nature. Most radically, this is put as the fact that all sentient beings are primordially enlightened, but this fact is occluded by the ignorance we have been surveying. The achievement of buddhahood is not so much a transformation as a recovery or rediscovery of that which is already present.

Here is another way to put this surprising point: Buddhahood is the elimination of all error and all conditioned ignorance. Error is the mistaking of that which is nondually related to the mind for dualistically perceived objects, or the superimposition of conceptual construction on that which is in its own nature unconceptualized. We erroneously take the minds we experience in introspection and the object of perception and ideation to be real, and the latter to be distinct from the former, which we take to be their subjects. All of that, though, is wrong; our genuine experience is merely the subjectivity of our foundation consciousness, which is by nature non-dual, non-conceptual, non-representational. We just don't know it.

When we recognize that fact and experience ourselves through that recognition, we recognize our own enlightenment.

All of this Yogācāra theory of experience and reality is meant to provide a cogent account of the insights that are so difficult to capture from a Madhyamaka perspective: inference is delusional precisely because inference always proceeds through representations, and representations always mediate between a subject and an object; inasmuch as all objects are illusory, all representation is misrepresentation, and so all inference misleading. Perception requires a slightly different treatment for a Yogācāra. We need here to distinguish between perception contaminated by dualistic representation—the perception that ordinary deluded folks like us experience—and perception that is free from it. The point is that what is generally taken for perception is not purely perceptual at all, but is conceptualized and mediated. True perception is immediate, nonconceptual, non-dual. Once again, the deeper point that the Yogācāra are after is that in reality our perceptual experience is already like that. We just don't allow ourselves to know it.

As I noted, in India and Tibet, this system was regarded by most Buddhist philosophers as only a stepping stone to a more profound view. We can see why. For one thing, there is the reinstatement of a foundation consciousness that appears to function as a non-empty self; for another, the madhyamaka insistence on the reality of the conventional world seems to be undermined by the Yogācāra idealism. And for another, ordinary perception loses its status as authoritative. (Though this point, again, must be made with some delicacy, given the close association of Dharmakīrti's epistemology that in fact privileges the authority of perception with Yogācāra metaphysics. Exploring this Madhyamaka critique would, however, take us far afield.)

A deeper reason for Madhyamaka dissatisfaction with Yogācāra epistemology in India and Tibet, however, is this: it appears that the central idea that our awareness is

already genuinely non-conceptual, non-dual, non-representational was inconceivable to a paradigmatically Indian way of understanding human experience. The whole problematic of Indian epistemology—Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike—was to understand how it is that our inner mental states can afford knowledge of the world, and to determine how our concepts could grasp a world that from its side is nonconceptual. So, Bodhidharma simply had to go elsewhere.

### **7. Not thinking, thinking, without-thinking**

When the Mahāyāna went East, it was thus a system that incorporated not only the problematic of Madhyamaka and its relentlessly analytic approach to understanding reality, but also the idealistic phenomenology of Yogācāra and its fumbling towards a solution to the problems that appeared insoluble within the Madhyamaka framework. But when it hit China, suddenly these problems are transformed. As we have seen, Buddhist philosophy was striving for something that within the Indian framework was radical indeed: a total transformation of thinking about the relationship between mind and world, and indeed about the nature of mind and world themselves; a replacement of the orthodox model of an independent, continuous knower of an independent, continuous known, with knowledge achieved through the mediation of a set of representations with a model of direct, non-dual apprehension of an essenceless, constantly changing reality by an essenceless constantly changing continuum of mental states. The problem was that while Buddhist philosophers had this revolution in mind, the very framework they were striving to transcend made the formulation of the transcendence difficult.

But Chinese thinkers never thought of the relation between knower and object in such representational terms. For them, the function of language was captured by the notion of a Tao—a guiding discourse; the relevant evaluative categories for language and for thought were effectiveness *vs* ineffectiveness, constancy *vs* inconstancy (both

culturally and temporally), not truth *vs* falsity. The problems that concerned them were problems about the justification of choice of Tao. Buddhism emerged as a foreign Tao from the West, and at that a most peculiar one. Indeed when we look at the Chinese assimilation of Buddhism we are struck by the difficulty of translating Sanskrit texts and Sanskrit ideas into Chinese, and the degree to which the Buddhist critique of orthodoxy in India comes to look like the Taoist critique of Confucian orthodoxy. This is sometimes represented as a distortion of Buddhism as it is Sinified. But we might tell a different story.

Chinese Buddhist philosophers certainly assumed the preoccupation of Buddhist philosophy of mind and epistemology with the role of signs in mediating engagement with the world. This, as I have been emphasizing, is a central concern of classical Chinese philosophy as much as it is a concern of classical Indian philosophy, even though the specific model of mediation is very different. And Chinese Buddhist philosophers agreed with their Indian progenitors that a critique of that mediation is necessary—that immediate experience is to be preferred to mediated experience. But of course their reasons were different. The concern in China was that every Tao—even a Buddhist Tao—is conventional, arbitrary, constricting; that the world and effective engagement in it is too complex, too variable, requires too much spontaneity of the virtuoso human, to be captured in a finite Tao—a discourse of signs. Taoist and Chinese Buddhist philosophers agreed that while this much could be stated by a Tao, any Tao, like any raft, must be discarded if life is to be lived appropriately.

Now, here, too, is a paradox: as L'ao Tzu put it, no speakable Tao is a constant Tao. [1] Even this one. And Chinese Buddhist thinkers, particularly in the Ch'an tradition, were happy to adopt this paradox. The *Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, which was so influential in Ch'an Buddhism, and so celebrated by Hui Neng, after all, happily tells us that all “truth is uncontainable and inexpressible,” [7] presumably including

this one. The second chapter of *Tao Te Ching* emphasizes the artificiality, relativity and unreality of conceptual categories, as does the ninth chapter of the *Platform Sutra*. Five colors make one blind; five tones deaf. And the pursuit of Tao, unlike that of learning, requires decrease day by day. The *Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā* also tells us that “bodhisattvas should leave behind all phenomenal distinctions and awaken... by not allowing the mind to depend on notions evoked by sounds, odors, flavors, touch or any qualities...” [14] Now the *Vajracchedika*, to be sure, is an Indian text. But it is a text that had curiously little influence in India. Its real blossoming as an important text in the Buddhist tradition occurs when it is transmitted to China and taken up by Hui Neng in the *Platform Sūtra*.

But while there is an air of paradox about all of this, there is, we must acknowledge, greater clarity about just what this self-undermining discourse is doing than could be achieved in the Indian context: Our Buddha-nature, the seed of enlightenment within each of this, on this view, lies in the fact that the precondition of our following any system of signs is something beyond signs—a capacity for spontaneous engagement that must lie within our mind as we learn signs, on pain of regress. This, as Tsung Mi would put it is root; all of the signs; all of our conceptual activity is mere branch. Awakening is a return to the root, not so much through a pruning of the branches, but through a recognition of their secondary status. (Gregory 1995, p 67)

As we learn signs—as we are socialized into concepts—these come to mediate our experience by *guiding us*, constricting our range of cognitive possibilities even as they makes others possible. We come to see the world in terms of them—superimposing a conceptual structure over a reality that is not inherently conceptualized. In doing so, we create a subject-object dichotomy that places us on one side of the guiding discourse, and the objects to which it is directed on the other. No mystery there. But how are we to conceptualize liberation? And how, as Tsung-Mi, was to ask, can we

solve what Peter Gregory has called the Buddhist problem of theodicy—the problem concerning how we can be deluded if we are primordially enlightened, and how, if delusion is part of the nature of a sentient being, we can eliminate it. (*Ibid.* 196)

Here is the Ch’an innovation: the distinction between action with no thinking, action with thinking, and action without thinking. As Dōgen puts it, “to study the dharma is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by all things.” (*Genjōkōan 4*) This device enables the mysteries and obscurities of the Indian Mahāyāna to be shed. When we first approach a new domain, we do not know how to think about it. We act ignorantly and ineffectively because we act with no thinking: we have no Tao, no signs, to guide us. This is not enlightened action; it is not even action acceptable at a mundane level. By learning a guiding discourse, we come to learn a way of acting. But when we act through this kind of explicit guidance, our actions will be, while generally correct and effective, hardly expert. They will be studied, restricted. As we gain expertise and practice, we can leave the discourse behind, we can improvise, and attain the spontaneity in a domain that is the goal of practice. This sequence is familiar to anyone who has mastered a language, an art, a sport, a skill. And this is the metaphor that guides much Chinese theory about the transcendence of language.

Nothing in this picture is, strictly speaking, antithetical to the Indian Buddhist theory that preceded it. Indeed, I think that it represents a startling completion of the project begun in India. But note the enormous difference. Here the story can be told shorn of worries about the status of universals; shorn of a representational model of mind; shorn of worries about the reality of subject and object. The intuition that a truly enlightened way of engaging with the world both requires the use of language and its transcendence is vindicated in a way that also reveals the insight that a representational model of subjectivity was wrong all along. But

because that model was never presupposed in the first place, the road is smoother and the paradoxes less daunting.

We can also see why Yogācāra ideas that seem a bit mad in the Indian context seem prosaic in the Chinese context: The transformation of the basis is simply the transcendence of the need for a recipe; the imagined nature is the nature that things have according to any Tao taken as definitive, a focus on the branch as primary; their dependent nature is the fact that any character they are experienced as having depends on some Tao—some framework—and seeing that these things are so dependent on our conventions allows us to transcend those conventions and to see things as consummated, to return to the root. When we do that, we transcend signs, we transcend objectification, and we do not experience ourselves as subjects opposed to our objects. This is the immediacy of experience in the context of effective perception and action that constitutes liberation, the affirmation by all things because of our effective, practiced engagement with them.

And of course in a perfectly ordinary sense this kind of engagement is perceptual, not inferential, and so, from a revised Indian Buddhist perspective, driven by authoritative, rather than by deluded, or obscured, cognition; it is not mediated by representations, but rather direct; it is non-dual. All of these desiderata so hard to articulate from within the Indian context fall out very nicely when the role of language and of signs is seen from the Chinese perspective.

## **8. Selflessness and the reworking of the narrative of consciousness**

A central tenet of Buddhist philosophy is that there is no self. This doctrine is generally and most directly interpreted as the thesis that there is no substantial ego underlying our experience—that we are nothing but a sequence of causally linked psychological and physical events and processes. And this is both highly plausible and an important contribution of Buddhist philosophy. But the current investigation

allows us to push the doctrine of no-self even further. To be sure, the ontological dimension of self that is the target of this idea is the substantial ego. But there is also an epistemological dimension, and this dimension is also illuminated as we look at the Indian Buddhist critique of the self from the vantagepoint of the East.

One way of contrasting the belief in a self with the attitude of selflessness is in terms of self-awareness, or as it is put in the Buddhist tradition, self-grasping. In this sense to have a self is simply to grasp oneself as an entity, as a subject standing opposed to an object. So in an important sense the goal of the realization of selflessness can be conceived as the goal of achieving a state of consciousness in which the awareness of oneself as a distinct subject no longer figures. Non-duality in this sense is simply non-dual awareness, that is, action without-thinking. Just as action without thinking is an achievement depending on prior thought, selflessness in this sense is an achievement depending on careful cultivation of self.

We hence see a reconfiguring of the entire narrative of self-consciousness when Buddhism moves to East Asia, but a reconfiguration that represents not so much a deviation from the trajectory of Buddhist thought in India and Tibet; rather it is a completion of that trajectory that would have been difficult or impossible in the Indo-Tibetan context. For in order to complete the Buddhist response to the Indian representational, conceptual account of epistemic subjectivity and action it was necessary to find a way of talking about subjectivity and action that never presupposed that very paradigm as a background, a way of talking about subjectivity in which representation and conception are not seen as inextricable from even relatively normal cognition, and in which language is seen *ab initio* as an external guiding device. And that required Bodhidharma to travel to the East. The flip side of this record, of course, is that given this conceptual milieu, the problematic of Buddhist philosophy could never have originated in China. The right puzzles would

never have risen to salience. For Buddhism to come to China, Bodhidharma had to come from the West.

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