

NG Yu-Kwan, *T'ien-t'ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika*. Honolulu: Tendai Institute of Hawaii, distributed by University of Hawaii Press, 1993. xviii + 254 pp. ISBN 0-8248-1560-2 (cloth); ISBN 0-8248-1561-0 (paperback).

Few theses could have a meatier topic: a comparative study of Chih-i (538-597) and Nāgārjuna (c.150-250) on the subject of truth and emptiness.

Ng believes that students of T'ien-t'ai (especially SWANSON 1989) have concentrated too much on the threefold truth—emptiness, provisionality, and the middle way—and ignored the Buddha Nature, which Ng sees as the key concept in Chih-i's system: the threefold truth is methodological, but the Buddha Nature (or Dharma-body) is the Truth itself.

Chih-i understood Nāgārjuna's position to be that since emptiness is the emptiness of worldly entities, it can be attained only if these entities are maintained in their conventional existence; thus “the transcendent [is realized] right in the conventional nature of entities” (quoted, p. 43). But Chih-i was dissatisfied with Nāgārjuna's stress on emptiness, which he saw as negative, static, and transcendent, focusing on ultimate truth only as nonsubstantiality and transcendence of the extremes of being and nothingness. Instead, Chih-i—especially in later texts—identified the middle way with a positive, functional, dynamic, and immanent Buddha Nature.

This has a practical upshot, Ng says, encouraging us to “enter the provisional” in order to benefit others (p. 68). Only the idea of the Buddha Nature grounds this dynamic conception of saving truth. Though the Truth is nothing other than “the authentic nature of the phenomenal world” (p. 4), it is not a static philosophical absolute, but it moves, functions, and acts in regard to the phenomenal world, so as to cause the transformation of sentient beings (pp. x–xi). What this means is that the bodhisattva—the personality who has attained Truth—initiates actions (p. 73). This emphasis is the most fetching aspect of Ng's study. He notes also the pragmatic function of emptiness in Nāgārjuna, though perhaps he underestimates its ontological import by suggesting that its sole function is to erase delusive attachments: “When the latter are erased, Emptiness will have no object to work upon and thus should not be made to persist any longer.... To decide whether or not one should make Emptiness persist is, indeed, a matter of wisdom and experience” (p. 28).

Does the dynamism of Chih-i's thought depend as centrally and intrinsically on the notion of Buddha Nature as Ng claims? An identification of the middle way with the Buddha Nature—described as “ever-abiding” and as “a body or substance” (p. 64)—could imply a regression from Nāgārjuna's refinement to a form of substantialism, of the sort that increasingly prevailed in later T'ien-t'ai (see SWANSON 1994). In the Chih-i corpus this regression is held at bay only by the prior demonstration that the middle way restores conventional existence without undoing the truth of emptiness. If one rushes to talk of the middle way in terms of Buddha Nature one risks losing this fundamental insight. When Chih-i says, “The wise sees Emptiness. He should also see No-emptiness” (quoted, p. 53), isn't the primary reference to this restoration of the conventional as a “wondrous existence” rather than to Buddha Nature? Might the Buddha Nature language be no more than a translation into familiar religious terms of a vision already fully established in terms of the middle way as “the synthesis of Emptiness and conventional existence of things” (p. 200)? For Ng, the language of synthesis is insufficient. He quotes texts in which Chih-i identifies No-emptiness not only as “a wondrous existence” but as the *tathāgatagarbha* (p. 54). In Chih-i's fourfold arrangement,

according to Ng, Nāgārjuna corresponds to the second stage, the middle way as synthesis à la Swanson is the third stage (the Gradual Doctrine), and only the insight into Buddha Nature as the middle way is the Perfect Doctrine.

For Ng the difference between Nāgārjuna and Chih-i is essentially one between the middle way as avoidance of extremes and the middle way as the Buddha Nature. He seems, however, to be pushing his thesis about the Buddha Nature too far, to the point of edging out any independent place for the understanding of the middle as wondrous restoration of conventional existence. Thus he sees Chih-i's criticisms of Nāgārjuna as "based on the Middle Way as related to Buddha Nature" (p. 61), whereas in fact they seem to have a sufficient basis in the middle as restoration of conventional existence. Could it be that the language of Buddhahood merely denotes the middle as grasped in its ethico-religious aspect as a code for bodhisattva living, and that there is no substantive philosophical difference between describing the middle as synthesis of emptiness and conventional existence and describing it as Buddha Nature?

Ng quotes a comprehensive passage in which Chih-i expounds his middle path with no reference to the Buddha Nature (pp. 75–76). Here the Gradual Doctrine is described as "merely the Middle Way as the Principle" whereas the absolute Middle Way "embraces the Buddhist *dharma*s fully." Ng takes this to refer to "the Middle Way as identical to the Buddha Nature" (p. 76). His discussion of this embrace reveals unsuspected dimensions of rich warmth in Chih-i's thought. But the term "Buddha Nature" seems to be introduced unnecessarily. Chih-i uses various soteriological expressions to describe the full significance of the middle way; "Buddha Nature" may not even be the most important of these. DONNER and STEVENSON (1993) refer unself-consciously to "the perfect holism of the middle—the intrinsic and all-embracing reality of Buddhahood" (p. 13) and "the middle truth of Buddhahood" (p. 15). They agree that at the highest level "the perfect vision of the inconceivable middle truth is presented "all at once," without the mediation of the provisional and gradualistic expedients" of the first three levels (DONNER and STEVENSON 1993, pp. 15–16). But they do not oppose the threefold truth as merely methodological to Buddhahood as the Truth itself.

Chih-i appreciated the educational function of Nāgārjuna's tetralemma (superbly discussed by Ng), as it moves through affirmation, negation, synthesis, and transcendence, allowing "penetration of the Way *via* four doors" (quoted, p. 108), the doors of being, Emptiness, both, and neither. The Gradual Doctrine is the door of both being and Emptiness and the Perfect Doctrine is the door of neither being nor Emptiness. The negative form of the tetralemma (neither is, nor is not, nor both, nor neither) frees the mind from all doctrines for a straightforward apprehension of the Truth in *prajñā*-awareness. But the negative of the tetralemma is still an insufficient method for realizing the Truth. In the Threefold Contemplation (of emptiness, the provisional, and the middle), "the wisdom is the object and the object is the wisdom, both penetrating each other without any obstruction" (p. 143). How can the three aspects be grasped simultaneously in a single Mind? Ng thinks this presents a problem that can be solved only by invoking the Middle

Way–Buddha Nature, which embraces all three. Is the Buddha Nature really so central to the functioning of Threefold Contemplation? I suspect that it concerns the soteriological upshot of the contemplation rather than its basic structure.

This lively, readable book shows an erudite familiarity with the sources and a fresh, vivid grasp of Buddhist spirituality. It is a distinguished addition to the literature on T'ien-t'ai.

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