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## THE BUDDHA NATURE: TRUE SELF AS ACTION

Buddhism, and especially early Buddhism, is known for the *anātman* (no self) teaching. By any account, this teaching is central to both doctrine and practice from the beginning. Zen Buddhism (Chinese Ch'an), in contrast, is known for its teaching that the single most important thing in life is to discover the 'true self'. Is there a real, or only an apparent, conflict between these two versions of Buddhism? Certainly there is at the least a radical change in the linguistic formulation of the teaching. Examining the two teachings on the linguistic level, we note that the use of the term 'true' in the phrase 'true self' may indicate that we have here a conscious reformation of the place of the term 'self' in the tradition, or perhaps that the use of this phrase in Zen is the product of such a conscious formulation. Thus we may expect, upon investigation, to find an evolution from one teaching to the other, rather than a true doctrinal disparity. The apparent, or linguistic, conflict between the two, however, remains; hence we must also expect to find a doctrinal formulation at some point in this evolution in which the apparent conflict is consciously apprehended and resolved.

That is, Buddhism embraces both the teaching that there is no self and the teaching that the goal of life is to discover the true self. Not only does Buddhism embrace these two formulations, but each in its own context is the central pivot of the teachings of the school or community concerned. Two questions arise here. (1) How can a single tradition affirm both no self and true self? How can the two ideas be reconciled? (This is the philosophical question.) (2) In linking early Buddhism and Zen we are discussing two religious movements separated by approximately 12 centuries and by their development in two vastly different cultures, the Indian and the Chinese. What is there in the course of this development that could account for the transition from talk of no self to talk of true self? (This is the question of intellectual history.) In the present essay I will attempt to show that it is by examining the Buddha nature (*fo hsing* 佛性) concept and understanding it as a term representing certain actions that these questions may be answered.

The Buddha taught that nowhere in the human being can one find a permanent, unchanging self or soul (*ātman*). Instead, our identity is constituted by a constantly changing compound of several psychophysical factors: *rūpa* – form, *vedanā* – sensation, *saṃjñā* – perception, *saṃskārā* – impulses and

*vijñāna* – consciousness. There is no self because we are compound entities. Each element constantly changes. Therefore the aggregate is not a permanent, changeless self. Nor is any element permanent or changeless.

This, of course, does not imply that there is no personality in the Buddhist view. Proximately, we deal with each other as persons and we perceive individual, characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, appearance, behaviour, etc. The Buddhist, however, recognizes that these patterns are themselves conditioned and that a given thought is what it is because of the conditioning influence of other thoughts, emotions, memories, etc. and that the thought in question likewise conditions future thoughts, emotions, behaviours, etc. Beyond this, there is no underlying substratum or self which thinks the thought or feels the feeling. Again, the *anātman* teaching does not imply that there is no continuity in human life and experience. On the contrary, the understanding of human experience as a net of mutual conditioning emphasizes the causal inseparability of one moment's experience, and preceding and subsequent experience. This teaching of continuity is crucial to Buddhism as the Middle Path between eternalism and annihilationism. Though there is no eternal soul, we must inevitably live out the future consequences of present action, in this lifetime or in a future life. Thus, though there is personality and continuity, there is no underlying thing or substance which is the basis or support of these phenomena. Likewise, there is no essence which may be identified as the referent of the word 'I', a deep, unchanging core of 'my' being.

The religious significance of this teaching of no self is as follows. Life, and especially human life, in the Buddhist view, is constant change. Unfortunately, all human beings have a very deeply rooted desire for security and self-preservation. We wish so strongly to find something permanent in us that we invent the idea of a self. However, once we have invented the idea of a self we still don't feel secure, because the reality is that we are constantly changing. Now we fear all the threats to the invented self: death, sickness, accidents, old age. Thus we suffer from what we perceive as threats to the self and this suffering colours our entire lives. However, all of this suffering is based on the fundamental illusion that 'I' exist as a self, and on my emotional attachment to this 'I' or self which I have invented. But this suffering is completely unnecessary because no self really exists which can be threatened by death, etc. All that exists is constantly changing.

It is clear that the idea of no self is absolutely essential in early Buddhism. Everything hinges on whether one is deluded by the belief in self and therefore suffers, or whether one is free of this illusion and therefore is tranquil. Buddhist practice is designed to effect this change.

Zen Buddhism, in contrast to this, is focused on the imperative to practise Zen in order to discover the 'true self'. For example, the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen says,

The mind of a sentient being is destined to desire to know its own self. However, one whose eyes see his true self is exceedingly rare indeed; Buddha alone sees it.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the tenth-century Chinese master Yün-men says,

To follow the intentions and vagaries of your mind is to be separated from your Self as far as the earth from the sky. But if you have already found your true self, then you can pass through fire without being burned . . . and speak a whole day without really moving your lips and teeth and without really having uttered a single word.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, to know the true self is unspeakably marvellous. Zen claims to direct us toward this realization.

### I. THE BUDDHA NATURE CONCEPT

The idea of Buddha nature originated in a number of texts, some of which were originally Indian and some of which were originally Chinese, but the entire group of which was very important in the development of indigenous Chinese Buddhist thought. These texts were written over the period of approximately 200–550 C.E. In the following, I will draw most heavily from the *Buddha Nature Treatise* (*Fo Hsing Lun* 佛性論), traditionally attributed to Vasubandhu and translated into Chinese by Paramārtha.<sup>3</sup> This text is exclusively devoted to a discussion of the Buddha nature concept and occupies a historically significant position in the Sino-Japanese ‘Buddha nature controversy’. The latter was an important and sustained controversy concerning the ‘existence’ of Buddha nature, that is, whether all beings or only some possess the Buddha nature and are thereby assured of the attainment of Buddhahood. The *Buddha Nature Treatise* ‘received serious consideration in China and Japan as a representative text arguing for the existence in all beings of Buddha nature and against the Consciousness-only view recognizing no Buddha nature’.<sup>4</sup>

At the simplest level, Buddha nature thought may be summed up in the phrase, ‘all sentient beings possess the Buddha nature’.<sup>5</sup> This means that everyone has the potential to achieve Buddhahood or full enlightenment. Buddha nature thought, then, affirms that the goal of Buddhism is open to

<sup>1</sup> Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen Kigen – Mystical Realist* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1975), p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (Taipei: The National War College in co-operation with the Committee on the Compilation of the Chinese Library, 1967), pp. 219 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Fo Hsing Lun*, attributed to Vasubandhu, translated into Chinese by Paramārtha. *Taishō Daizōkyō*, xxxi (1610), 787–813. The *Buddha Nature Treatise* will be cited in these notes hereafter as *BNT*.

While the *BNT* is attributed to Vasubandhu (fourth century) and said to have been translated into Chinese by Paramārtha (sixth century), only the Chinese translation is extant; neither a Tibetan translation nor a Sanskrit original survives. There is a considerable degree of doubt as to whether Vasubandhu actually wrote the text. No record of the date and place of translation is found on the manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> Takasaki Jikidō, ‘Busshōron’. In *Buttenkaidaijiten*, 2nd edn (edited by Mizuno *et al.*), p. 144 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1977). My translation. <sup>5</sup> *BNT*, p. 788c.

all; there is no one inherently incapable of achieving perfect wisdom and freedom.

On another level, the Buddha nature is identified with the *tathāgatagarbha* (*ju lai tsang* 如來藏). As *garbha* may mean either womb or embryo, *tathāgatagarbha* may stand for either womb of the Buddhas or embryonic Buddha. In other words, it can be seen either as the potential to realize enlightenment which we all possess or as perfect enlightenment itself. It is said that everyone possesses the *tathāgatagarbha* (just as everyone is said to possess the Buddha nature). In *tathāgatagarbha* theory as such, however, we encounter the additional notion that the *tathāgatagarbha* is covered up by ‘adventitious defilements’ (*āgantukakleśa*, *k’o ch’en* 客塵). These defilements are such things as greed, anger, ignorance, etc. and it is they that account for our ignorance and suffering. They cover up the reality of the *tathāgatagarbha*, which is enlightenment, and conceal it so that we only know ourselves as greedy, angry, ignorant, etc. However, these defilements, unlike the *tathāgatagarbha*, are not really real; ultimately, it is said, they do not exist. Buddha nature is identified with the *tathāgatagarbha* and thus represents our originally given, perfectly enlightened nature.

In other words, the reality is that we are all already enlightened, but we are under the illusion that we are unwise or ignorant. This delusion itself is what makes us ignorant. However, there is nothing essential about it. If we can just free ourselves of this delusion, we will realize that we are and always have been, in reality, enlightened. This is basic Buddha nature thought.

## II. BUDDHA NATURE AND ANĀTMAN

How is the Buddha nature concept to be reconciled with the *anātman*, no self, idea? Buddha nature seems at first very much like a self. It is called the pure mind, the pure own nature, and even, literally, the ‘perfection of selfhood’. It is said to be eternal. It is said never to change.<sup>1</sup> Recall that it was precisely the self as a permanent, changeless entity which the Buddha said does not exist. How can these two concepts be reconciled? The key to this reconciliation is to recognize that Buddha nature represents actions, rather than an entity.

In the *Buddha Nature Treatise*, the Buddha nature is identified with the ‘transformation of the basis’ (*parāvṛtti āśraya*, *chuan i* 轉依). The latter is explained as being of multiple meanings, representing Buddhist practice in four stages: (1) it is the basis of the Buddha Way, i.e. it is Buddhist practice itself; (2) it represents the ultimate non-existence of all delusions and ignorant habits (from the perspective of delusion this is seen as the destruction of those delusions and habits); (3) it is the fruition of practice, ‘the cultivation of the knowledge of Thusness’; and (4) it is the very end of Buddhist practice, ‘the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 802 a, 801 b, 798 c and 809 a.

attaining of the not-to-be attained principle of Thusness' (*chen ju li* 真如理).<sup>1</sup> Thus in these four meanings, the transformation of the basis represents Buddhist practice from its beginnings, through its negative and positive aspects, to its culmination. As such, it is consistently portrayed as being of an active character. Hence, here where there is talk of a 'basis' – which sounds like a substantive entity – we find that the 'basis' only stands for the path to enlightenment and the practices of the person on that path. These are the 'basis' of the transformation of the Buddhist practitioner from ignorance and suffering to wisdom and ultimate liberation. We do not have a substantive basis or an entity, but a group of actions – the overcoming of delusion and the engendering of enlightenment. This is what Buddha nature represents.

Elsewhere in the text, the Buddha nature is identified with the *dharmakāya* (*fa shen* 法身). This *dharmakāya* is characterized by four 'perfections', the perfections of purity, self, bliss and eternity. Here we encounter the term 'self' (*ātman*, *wo* 我) used in connection with the Buddha nature. How was this literal identification of the Buddha nature with the much denied *ātman* possible in the Buddhist context?

This talk of 'perfection of self' can only be understood by examining the specific instances in which it occurs. The *Buddha Nature Treatise* speaks of the perfection of self as follows.

All the heterodox, in their various ways, conceive and grasp a self (*wo* 我) in those things which lack self, namely the five *skandhas* – form, etc. Yet these things such as form, etc. differ from what one grasps as the mark of self; therefore, they are eternally lacking in self. [However,] with the wisdom of Thusness (*chen ju chih* 真如智), all Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* realize the perfection of not-self (*anātman pāramitā*, (無我波羅蜜) of all things. Since this perfection of not-self and that which is seen as the mark of not-self are not different, the Tathāgata says that this mark of the eternal not-self is the true, essential nature (*chen t'i hsing* 真體性) of all things. Therefore it is said that the perfection of not-self is self. As the *sūtra* verse says,

Already the twin emptiness [of person and thing] is pure;

[In this] is realized the not-self,

the supreme self.

Since the Buddha realizes the pure nature (*hsing* 性)

Not-self turns on itself (*chuan* 轉) and becomes self.

All the heterodox perceive and grasp a self within the five *skandhas*. Overturning that attachment to self as vacuous and cultivating *prajñāpāramitā*, one realizes the supreme not-self which is identical to the self-*pāramitā*. This is the fruit [of practice of *prajñāpāramitā*] which you should know.<sup>2</sup>

The essential points of this passage are summarized in the chart below.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 801b.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 798c.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg, *La Théorie du Tathāgatagarbha et du Gotra* (Paris: École Française d'extrême orient, 1969), p. 368, for a Sanskrit version of this chart.

| Person type      | Obstacle                           | Cure/cause   | Fruit (Pāramitā)                         |
|------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1 Icchantika     | Disregard and hate of the Mahāyāna | Faith and pleasure in Mahāyāna                     | Purity ( <i>śubha</i> , 淨 <i>ching</i> ) |
| 2 Heterodox      | Adherence to self view             | <i>prajñā</i>                                      | Self ( <i>ātman</i> , 我)                 |
| 3 Śrāvaka        | Fear of <i>samsāra</i>             | The <i>samādhi</i> which overcomes false emptiness | Bliss ( <i>sukha</i> , 樂)                |
| 4 Pratyekabuddha | Disregard for welfare of others    | Compassion ( <i>karuṇā</i> )                       | Eternity ( <i>nitya</i> , 常)             |

heterodox are said to be hindered from attaining enlightenment by their belief in the existence of a self. This belief prevents them from seeing reality as it is and thus causes them to suffer. This obstacle may be overcome on the Buddhist path by the practice of cultivating wisdom (*prajñā*). This wisdom *specifically* refers to the deep realization of the Buddhist teaching that there is no self and nothing permanent to be found anywhere in life. Thus it is this wisdom which cures the obstacle to enlightenment of belief in a self. In addition to its function in curing this obstacle, this wisdom is also said to be the cause of the perfection of self. This surprising conclusion is reached in the following manner. The text points out that the heterodox conceive of the existence of self where there is none: in persons and in all of ordinary reality. It completely agrees with the *anātman* teaching that there is no self to be found in these things. However, it continues, it is the true, essential, eternal nature of things to lack a self. Therefore this lack of self is real; it *is* the real nature of things. Therefore it may be called ‘self’. In order to distinguish it from the ideas of self that the unenlightened non-Buddhists hold, it is called ‘perfection of self’.

In other words, the perfection of self is no different from the lack of self. In realizing that all things lack self, one realizes their true nature – or what they are in themselves. Thus the idea of the perfection of self is not in conflict with the old *anātman* teaching, but is said to be the fulfilment of it. The very lack of self, when thoroughly comprehended, is the perfection of self. Thus when it is said that the Buddha nature is the perfection of self, there is no conflict with the *anātman* teachings.

Perhaps even more significant is the pivotal role played in the chart by the third column items, in this case wisdom. Each of these – faith, wisdom, *samādhi*, compassion – is an action. In each case it is this action which is identical with, or better, constitutes, the perfection. We saw this above in the case of wisdom. It is the wisdom of realizing the lack of self in all things which constitutes the perfection of self. The same principle applies in the case of each of the four perfections. Consider the fourth perfection, eternity. Like self, this is also denied by the Buddha to be found in the world since



everything in the world is transient. Here eternity is affirmed as one of the perfections found in the Buddha nature. The perfection of eternity is constituted by the act of compassion. As indicated in the chart, the *pratyekabuddha* is said to be prevented from becoming a Buddha by his disregard for the welfare of others, i.e. his disinclination to teach others. This obstacle may be overcome, obviously, by the cultivation of compassion. The suffering and delusion of sentient beings, however, is endless. Thus the compassion required of a Buddha must also be endless, or eternal. It is this limitlessness of a Buddha's compassion that constitutes the Buddha nature's perfection of eternity. It is *nothing but* infinite compassion. There is no eternal 'thing', Buddha nature or other. There is simply an unrelenting act. Similarly, there is no substantial, or entity-like self which is the Buddha nature, but utter penetration of emptiness. Early Buddhism denied the possibility of finding purity, self, bliss or eternity in the world of *samsāra*. Buddha nature thought agrees, but adds that these can be found in Buddha nature. This is only possible in the sense that each of the four perfections is demonstrated to be, in fact, a particular kind of act performed by an enlightened person.

One may well wonder why the author of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* went to all this trouble to speak so cleverly of self, eternity, etc. in a way technically acceptable within Buddhism, but certainly contrary to preceding custom. Is this just sophistry? The author gives us a clue to his intentions in the closing words of the treatise, where he states why he wrote the text. He says that he attempted to do three things in writing the treatise:

(1) to manifest the inconceivable, aboriginally existent realm; (2) to show what can be attained by the cultivation and practice of the Way; and (3) to reveal that the attainment of the Way results in infinite merits and ultimate perfection.<sup>1</sup>

Here he indicates that he wanted to give a more positive account of Buddhist practice and the Buddhist goal than had previously been customary. Usually Buddhism spoke negatively: there is no purity, bliss, eternity in the world; the goal is to put an end to suffering. Psychologically, it was felt, this might be poor motivation. Consequently, the author felt the need to speak positively. He wanted to articulate the goal in terms of the four perfections and to speak of Buddha nature to affirm that the goal could be reached by all.

One may surmise that the author also wanted to shake people up who had become too accustomed to the standard Buddhist language. Certainly the Buddha shook people up when he proclaimed that there was no self, nothing in the world which could absolutely be relied upon to secure happiness. The *prajñāpāramitā* theorists adjusted this language to their own purposes when

<sup>1</sup> *BNT*, pp. 812c-813a.



they denied that there were such things as the Four Noble Truths, Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, etc. They explicitly acknowledged the shock value of this move with such statements as the following. ‘Most wonderfully blest will be those beings who, on hearing this Sutra, will not tremble, nor be frightened, or terrified.’<sup>1</sup> Buddha nature theorists were perhaps carrying on in this time-honoured tradition when they moved from the traditional *via negativa* to the use of positive language. Evidence that this is the case comes from the author of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* who announces that he wishes to ‘refute the biased views of beginners on the Mahāyāna path’.<sup>2</sup> The particular biased view in question is a serious misunderstanding of the emptiness teachings. These Mahāyāna beginners believed that ‘according to worldly truth all things exist (*yu* 有); according to supreme truth all things do not exist (*wu* 無)’.<sup>3</sup> It is particularly the misunderstanding of supreme truth, or emptiness, in a nihilistic manner that is troublesome to the author. Thus the *via negativa* is perceived as having become a new sources of attachment to deluded views and is ripe for replacement with another pattern of language use.

Given that the use of a positive form of language is desired by the Buddha nature theorists, the chief problem becomes avoiding the semblance of an *astika* (‘being-ful’) position while using this positive language. As we have seen, the author of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* accomplishes this by consistently speaking of the Buddha nature in terms of actions. He equally consistently avoids speaking of the Buddha nature in terms of what it ‘is’, or in terms of essences. Three examples will help confirm our interpretation.

The term ‘self’ is used again in the *Buddha Nature Treatise* in a passage in which sixteen illustrations of the ‘purity of the *dharmakāyadhātu*’ (*fa shen chieh ch’ing ching* 法身界滿淨) are being given. One of these illustrations is: ‘The meaning of “self” (*wo* 我) is non-attachment, as in *bodhi*’ (*wo i wu chu ju chueh* 我義無著如覺).<sup>4</sup> The word ‘self’ stands for nothing but the non-attachment of the enlightened. Buddha nature theorists negate both the self view and the not-self view (in so far as it is a view). What results is an equation of the meaning of ‘self’ and the practice or act of not grasping or non-attachment. Thus, the ‘perfection of self’ consists in the act of non-attachment. (Technically, this is perhaps better expressed as the non-committal of certain acts – as of grasping. Yet it still consists of behaving in a non-attached manner.) In ontological language, this self-removal is expressed as ‘the perfection of not-self is self’, epistemologically, as ‘the meaning of “self” is non-attachment’. Since the meaning of the perfection of not-self is *prajñā*, there is no intrinsic difference between these two statements. Again the avoidance of establishing a metaphysical essence lurking behind the term ‘self’ is demonstrated.

Our second example involves the use of the term ‘mind’, in particular,

<sup>1</sup> Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> *BNT*, p. 793c.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 810a–b.

the mind as *cittaprakṛti*, the originally and eternally ‘pure’ mind. The text reads as follows:

Seeing the twin emptiness [of people and things] is what is called the quality of tranquillity. The own-nature, pure mind (*tzu hsing ch'ing ching hsin* 自性清淨心,) is called the Noble Truth of Path. The non-grasping of the pure mind in which delusion never arises is called the Noble Truth of Cessation.<sup>1</sup>

This is one of the very rare references in this text to something called ‘mind.’ However, this ‘mind’ is immediately identified, in the first sentence, with the fourth Noble Truth, Path. This Truth is equated elsewhere in the text with the ‘cause of separation from desire’, i.e. the cause of realization. Since this cause of realization is linked with the fourth Noble Truth, we may know that this ‘Mind’, as cause, is cause in the sense that it represents effort, or the treading of the Path itself. Thus, this ‘mind’, as cause, is the activity involved in realization. From the Buddha’s day on, the Path is not a thing to be tread, but a way to behave, a compendium of attitudes, endeavours and behaviours. Hence the ‘mind’ of this context is clearly not a substance in any sense, but a way of being, i.e. the way a person ‘is’ who is on the Path.

This reading is confirmed by the following sentence, where the third Noble Truth, Cessation (earlier identified with ‘separation from desire’) is identified, not with ‘mind’ this time, but with what is equivalent, a certain action or disposition of the mind, negatively stated as ‘non-grasping’. Thus ‘cessation’ is realized by the cessation of a certain behaviour, grasping. Again, the analysis centres on ways of being or acting, and this is characteristic. The reference to the ‘pure mind’ is really quite superfluous. The term ‘mind’ does not represent a static substantive base for subjectivity but a set of characteristic behaviours or actions. Again, a golden opportunity for the intrusion of metaphysical essences is allowed to pass. Clearly, the author of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* does not understand the Buddha nature in this way.

Our final example is found in the *Buddha Nature Treatise*’s treatment of what it calls the ‘own-nature’ (*tzu hsing* 自性) of Buddha nature. This is an obvious place to suspect the presence of a hidden, metaphysical entity. However, in the *Buddha Nature Treatise*, the own-nature of Buddha nature is characterized by (a) resemblance to a wish-fulfilling jewel (in that realization fulfils the true desire of all), (b) non-differentiation (in that ordinary persons, saints and Buddhas are all basically alike), and (c) the ‘moist’ quality of infinite compassion for all.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, none of these indicates the presence of a substantive self or mind. On the contrary, the first shows that the Buddha nature has to do with realization, the second that all beings equally share the potential for Buddhahood, and the third, that it is manifested in acts of compassion. Hence the own-nature of Buddha as described here is concerned

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 802 a.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 796 b–c.

purely with realization, its potential, and its fruits. Moreover, these three characteristics are said to indicate, respectively, (1) the inconceivability of the Buddha nature (or realization), (2) that one should realize it, and (3) the infinity of its virtues.<sup>1</sup> Thus the three attributes do not indicate substantial qualities which the Buddha nature as such possesses. The nonsubstantiality of the own-nature is based on an understanding of the Buddha nature as a path which a person may choose to follow. The Buddha nature concept serves both to entice people to engage in Buddhist practice, and to represent the potential, activity and fruition of that practice itself. In representing the essence of Buddha nature, the 'own-nature' of Buddha nature manifests the essentials of Buddhist practice. The latter, of course, is constituted by a particular set of actions.

We have considered three instances in which the Buddha nature is associated with terms – self, pure mind and own-nature – potentially connotative of a hidden, metaphysical essence constituting the unchanging identity of a person. In each case, however, the author very carefully specifies a meaning for each term which centres on action, rather than essence. One gets the impression that he is aware that he is treading a dangerous path in his affirmation of the Buddha nature and, anticipating the objections of more traditionally orthodox Buddhists, he embraces the very terms with which they would accuse him and empties them of their objectionable qualities. One may no longer suspect the Buddha Nature teaching of 'un-Buddhist' implications if his translations of these terms into categories of actions are found acceptable.

### III. BUDDHA NATURE AND ZEN

We have seen how the Buddha nature concept is reconciled with the *anātman* teaching in the *Buddha Nature Treatise*. Now we shall look at Zen in the light of this understanding.

A key element in Buddha nature thought, as mentioned above, is the idea that the *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha nature is real, while the defilements (ignorance, greed, hatred, etc.) which encase and conceal it are utterly unreal and non-existent. Since the defilements are unreal, there is no question of having to destroy them; they don't exist, therefore there is nothing to be destroyed. The understanding of practice is formulated accordingly. Since the defilements don't really exist, the only thing necessary is to become aware of one's own true and pure Buddha nature which is already enlightened, but concealed by the unreal defilements.

Consider the poems by Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng, traditionally said to have been associated with Hui-neng's investiture as patriarch.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 797a.

SHEN HSIU. The body is the *Bodhi* tree,  
 The mind is like a clear mirror.  
 At all times we must strive to polish it,  
 And must not let the dust collect.

HUI-NENG. *Bodhi* originally has no tree,  
 The mirror also has no stand,  
 Buddha nature is always clean and pure;  
 Where is there room for dust?<sup>1</sup>

According to the traditional account, Hui-neng's poem was considered the superior one and occasioned his investiture as patriarch. Reading these poems from the perspective of Buddha nature thought, we note that Shen-hsiu's poem shows that he is still working on his practice. He evidently views things through the eyes of delusion since he still believes there is some reality to the dust or defilements which obscure the purity of his mind. Hui-neng, on the other hand, expresses an understanding which shows that he has realized the Buddha nature. He no longer accords any reality to the dust or defilements and will speak positively only of the 'clean and pure' Buddha nature. What we see expressed in Hui-neng's poem is virtually identical to Buddha nature thought. While the historicity of this account is certainly questionable, what is significant in the present context is that a poem as doctrinally close to Buddha nature thought as this is given in the Zen tradition as representative of profound Zen realization.

Moreover, the Zen emphasis on the all-importance of realization is also quite reminiscent of Buddha nature thought. Some in the past and present<sup>2</sup> have feared that the Buddha nature doctrine would result in an attitude of disregard for Buddhist practice, the feared attitude being that since one already is Buddha (or possesses the Buddha nature) there is no need for practice. However, this attitude is not possible in a context in which the teachings of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* are understood. The Buddha nature is identical with Buddhist practice and, to say the same thing in other words, the on-going act of realization. The Buddha nature concept is meaningless outside the context of Buddhist practice. Thus it would seem the Zen school was a natural place for the continuation of this tradition.

Again, the Zen saying that everyday mind or ordinary mind is Buddha mind closely fits the Buddha nature theory pattern. For example, the 8th century Chinese Master Ma-tsu says, 'All or you should realize that your own mind is Buddha; that is, this mind is Buddha's mind.'<sup>3</sup> As in Buddha

<sup>1</sup> Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 130 and 132. There are two versions of Hui-neng's poem.

<sup>2</sup> See Gadjin M. Nagao, 'Amarerumono', *Indogakubukkyōgakukenyū* xli (1968), 23-7. An English version of this article is "What Remains" in *Śūnyatā: A Yogācāra Interpretation of Emptiness*. In *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice* (edited by Minoru Kiyota), pp. 66-82. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978.)

<sup>3</sup> Chang Chang-Yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 149.

nature thought, since the defilements are not real, there is nothing to inhibit the immediate identification of the present, deluded mind – just as it is – with the perfectly enlightened mind of the Buddha. Let it be noted, however, that this mind is Buddha – or Buddha nature – not as a thing which sees and knows, but exclusively in the seeing and knowing – i.e. the acts – themselves. Again, Ma-tsu:

Those who seek for the Truth should realize that there is nothing to seek. There is no Buddha but Mind; there is no Mind but Buddha. . . Thoughts perpetually change and cannot be grasped because they possess no self-nature. The Triple World is nothing more than one's mind. . . What are seen as forms are the reflections of the mind. The mind does not exist by itself; its existence is manifested through forms.<sup>1</sup>

The mind or Buddha nature is not a thing which perceives, but the act of perceiving itself.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

We have seen that the Buddha nature concept as presented in the *Buddha Nature Treatise* is able to provide an answer to the two questions with which we began. It represents a crucial moment of transformation in the development of Buddhism from an emphasis on the non-existence of self in early Buddhism to insistence on realization of the true self in Zen. It is able to link these two teachings because, as we have seen, the non-existence of self is identical with the perfection of self. In other words, true self is identical to no self. There is a well-known poem by the famous eighteenth-century Japanese Zen master Hakuin, one stanza of which reads:

He who turns within  
And realizes his true nature,  
That true self is no-self –  
He has transcended vain words.<sup>2</sup>

Note here that it is the *act* of turning within, the *act* of realizing that there is no self, which constitutes the true self. In Zen as in Buddha nature thought, the words ‘true self’ sound as if they refer to some kind of entity, but in fact indicate nothing but the acts of realization and wisdom.

The author of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* argues that though there is no such *thing* as a Buddha nature (no self; no such entity), one may rightly say that the not-self is the perfection of self. It is in the very *reality* of not-self or emptiness that we find the key to the perfection of self, or realization. The truth of not-self is real: it must be realized. Hence the crucial role of practice in both the *Buddha Nature Treatise* and Zen. If there were mere emptiness,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the translation of Amakuki Sessan, ‘Hakuin’s “Song of Meditation”’, in Trevor Leggett, trans. *A First Zen Reader* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 1960), p. 67.

understood (wrongly) in a purely negative sense, realization would not matter. But emptiness is the truth; it is reality. Hence it should be realized. This subtle, final step in Buddha nature logic is the heart of the proof of the importance of practice, so central in both the *Buddha Nature Treatise* and Zen. It is in the active (and in this sense positive) realizing of the emptiness of self that is found the perfection of self or Buddha nature. The act of realization is the crucial step which accords the *Buddha Nature Treatise* its positive tone and affirms the value of the Buddha Way. There *is* this realization; that is why we may speak of a Buddha nature.

The perspective of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* may perhaps be summarized in this quotation:

Buddha nature is the Thusness revealed by the twin emptiness of person and things... If one does not speak of Buddha nature, then one does not understand emptiness.<sup>1</sup>

How could it be, the author argues, that the *absence* of own-nature, the *cessation* of wrong views, could constitute the fullness of supreme truth? He rejects the understanding of supreme truth as functioning in an exclusively negative or destructive manner and replaces it with the insight that the supreme truth is positive inasmuch as it constructively reveals the real nature of things, namely, their emptiness. The author believes that the positive language of Buddha nature is not only superior to that of *śūnyavāda* in so far as it is more apt to attract converts, but also that it is more in accord with the true nature of things than the heavily negative language of that school. For, he argues, it is 'in accordance with principle' (*tao li* 道理) to realize that everyone has the potential to attain Buddhahood. We may summarize the gist of his position as follows. This is the true nature of things: practice is a reality and realization is a reality. Practice and realization are the central truths which Buddhism affirms. They are the acts which constitute Buddha nature. The author of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* asserts that one should build one's teachings on this basis.

<sup>1</sup> *BNT*, p. 787b.