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Zongmi's *Yuanren lun* (*Inquiry into the Origin of the Human Condition*)

The Hermeneutics of Doctrinal Classification

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This selection translates the second and third sections of *Inquiry into the Origin of the Human Condition* (*Yuanren lun*) (in four sections), by the Huayan and Chan scholar Gueifeng Zongmi (780–841). Zongmi's essay exemplifies one of the most characteristic hermeneutical strategies devised by Chinese Buddhists, known as “doctrinal classification” (*panjiao*). It presents a systematic classification of the Buddha's teachings within the framework of two of the most influential traditions of Chinese Buddhism, Huayan and Chan.

Doctrinal classification provided a broad and flexible methodology for dealing with a range of interrelated issues and was used by Chinese Buddhists to serve several different purposes. First of all, it provided them with a hermeneutical method for organizing into a coherent and internally consistent doctrinal framework the diverse corpus of sacred scriptures to which they were heir. From the beginning of the fifth century on, as an increasing number of texts became available in Chinese translations from Sanskrit and other Indic languages, one of the most vexing problems Chinese Buddhists faced was hermeneutical: how to account for the discrepancies, and sometimes even outright contradictions, found within the sacred body of scriptures believed to have been taught by the Buddha. As the Buddha's sacred word, these teachings could not be false. Some framework thus had to be devised to explain how the conflict among different teachings contained within the canon was merely apparent, and not real,

and how their differences therefore did not undermine the truth or integrity of the tradition as a whole.

To help deal with this hermeneutical problem, Chinese Buddhists turned to the doctrine of expedient means (*upāya*). This doctrine held that the differences in the teachings that the Buddha delivered in the course of his forty-nine-year ministry were the result of the different audiences he addressed. Expedient means was thus a context-based hermeneutic—that is, it held that a teaching could only be properly understood by understanding its context and intent. The doctrine of expedient means enabled Chinese Buddhists to arrange the teachings in such a way that each teaching served as an expedient measure to overcome the particular shortcoming of the teaching that preceded it while, at the same time, pointing to the teaching that was to supersede it. In this fashion a hierarchical progression of teachings could be constructed, starting with the most elementary and leading to the most profound.

But doctrinal classification was not a neutral methodology. Nor did the rubric of expedient means offer any basis on which to decide the order in which the various teachings were to be classified. The order in which the teachings were ranked was a matter of interpretation that called for value judgments in regard to which scripture or scriptural corpus was to be taken as authoritative. Hence the point of view from which the teachings were ranked was determined by the doctrinal orientation of the different traditions of Chinese Buddhism. Thus, in addition to providing a hermeneutical method by which the diverse teachings put forward in different scriptures could be harmonized, doctrinal classification also furnished the means by which the different traditions of Chinese Buddhism advanced their own sectarian claims for being recognized as the true, ultimate, or most relevant teaching of Buddhism. Different traditions defined themselves vis-à-vis one another in terms of their classification of doctrines, and doctrinal classification was thus an integral part of the polemical discourse engaged in by Chinese Buddhists.

The hermeneutical and polemical functions of doctrinal classification reflect its dual character: it provided a framework that tended to fix sectarian differences at the same time that it claimed to harmonize doctrinal differences. On the one hand, it served as a critical tool by which different teachings could be evaluated and put in their place, thereby establishing a hierarchical grading of teachings that could be used for polemical purposes to justify the sectarian claims of different traditions. On the other hand, the very means that it used to subordinate some teachings to others at the same time created a framework in which those teachings could be subsumed, and thereby validated, within a broader vision of Buddhism. Doctrinal classification thus also had a synthetic function built into its critical framework. The logic by which these two functions worked together was dialectical and is most accurately denoted by the term “sublation” (*aufheben*). For Zongmi,

the value of such a dialectical logic was that it provided an approach to conflicting points of view that avoided absolute judgments of right and wrong. Different teachings are not so much wrong as they are limited or partial. There is thus a gradient of truth along which all teachings can be arranged. And the way one supersedes the other is dialectical, each teaching overcoming in turn the particular limitation or partiality of the one that preceded it. The supreme teaching, of course, is the one that succeeds in offering the most comprehensive point of view in which all other teachings can be harmoniously sublated. The highest teaching was therefore often referred to as *yuan* (literally, “round,” i.e., having no sides or partiality, not leaning in any direction), the perfect teaching in which all the others were consummated.

Doctrinal classification also served a third function, one that plays an especially prominent role in the fourth and concluding section of Zongmi’s *Inquiry*: it provided a map of the Buddhist path, and in this sense it could be said to have a soteriological function in addition to its hermeneutical and polemical functions. The arrangement of Buddhist teachings as a graded progress moving from the most elementary to the most profound mirrored the deepening stages of understanding through which Buddhist adepts moved in their advancement along the path. The ordered progression of teachings can thus be thought of as forming a curriculum of study—that is, the order of the teachings reverses the process by which the world of delusion and suffering comes into being and is perpetuated to arrive at the ultimate origin of the human condition, which is the intrinsically pure and enlightened mind.

The doctrinal perspective in terms of which Zongmi organizes his classification of the Buddha’s teachings is provided by the *tathāgatagarbha* (the “embryo” or “womb” of Buddhahood) doctrine, an idea Chinese Buddhists identified with the Buddha nature, which they interpreted in terms of intrinsic enlightenment (*benjue*), a Chinese elaboration of the Indian Buddhist idea of the potentiality for enlightenment inherent in all sentient beings. This doctrine was developed in the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng qixin lun*), an apocryphal work most likely composed in China during the third quarter of the sixth century—a text that occupied a central place in Huayan and Chan thought.

Zongmi’s *Inquiry into the Origin of the Human Condition* is organized around the question of the ultimate origin of the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). Zongmi’s inquiry is twofold. In the first three sections of this work, he uses the doctrine of expedient means to organize the various teachings into a hierarchical structure according to the superficiality or profundity with which they address the question of the origin of human existence. The highest teaching reveals that the ultimate origin is the intrinsically enlightened mind possessed by all sentient beings. Enlightenment is based on and consists in insight into this mind. The order of the teachings in the first

three parts of the *Inquiry* thus outlines a sequence of soteriological progress that traces the process of rebirth from its farthest effects back to its ultimate origin. The concluding section of the essay moves in the opposite direction, showing how the process of rebirth begins from a unity principle, whose division ultimately leads to the continual round of rebirth in which beings are bound.

The most elementary category of teaching in Zongmi's scheme is that of Humans and Gods. It consists in the simple moral teaching of karmic retribution, which enables beings to gain a favorable rebirth as either human beings or gods. Since the basic import of the Teaching of Humans and Gods hinges on the doctrine of rebirth, it naively assumes that there is, in fact, something that is reborn. It is thus superseded by the Teaching of the Lesser Vehicle (*Hīnayāna*), whose doctrine of no-self (*anātman*) refutes the belief in a permanent, unchanging self. This teaching develops a sophisticated psychological vocabulary of dharmas (here designating the basic categories into which all experience can be analyzed) in order to break down the conceit of self into an ever-changing concatenation of impersonal constituents, none of which can be grasped as a substantial entity.

In its psychological analysis, however, the Teaching of the Lesser Vehicle talks as if these dharmas were real. It is accordingly superseded by the third category of teaching, which deconstructs the reality of the dharmas by showing that they, like the conceit of self, are nothing but mental constructions. This category, referred to as the Teaching of the Phenomenal Appearances of the Dharmas (*faxiang jiao*), is represented by the brand of Yogācāra introduced into China by Xuanzang (600–664). It demonstrates that since both the conceptions of self and the dharmas are merely the projections of an underlying consciousness (the *ālayavijñāna*), they are therefore equally unreal.

Yet this teaching is not final. Even though it clarifies how deluded thought arises, it still does not reveal its ultimate basis. Zongmi argues that the Teaching of the Phenomenal Appearances of the Dharmas fails to discern that the projecting consciousness and the projected objects are interdependent and hence equally unreal. This teaching is thus superseded by that which Zongmi refers to as the Teaching that Refutes Phenomenal Appearances (*poxiang jiao*), which demonstrates the emptiness of both the projecting consciousness and the projected objects. This teaching is represented by the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures and Madhyamaka treatises.

While this fourth level of teaching succeeds in determining what ultimate reality is not, it still does not reveal what it is, and it is therefore superseded by the next and final teaching, that which Reveals the Nature (*xianxing jiao*). By clarifying that the underlying projecting consciousness, the *ālayavijñāna*, is based on the intrinsically enlightened pure mind, the

tathāgatagarbha, this teaching reveals the ultimate source on which both delusion and enlightenment are based.¹

Translation

The Buddha's teachings proceed from the superficial to the profound. Altogether there are five categories: (1) the Teaching of Humans and Gods, (2) the Teaching of the Lesser Vehicle, (3) the Teaching of the Phenomenal Appearances of the Dharmas within the Great Vehicle, (4) the Teaching That Refutes the Phenomenal Appearances within the Great Vehicle, and (5) the Teaching of the One Vehicle That Reveals the Nature.

1. The Teaching of Humans and Gods

The Buddha, for the sake of beginners, at first set forth the karmic retribution of the three periods of time [i.e., past, present, and future] and the causes and effects of good and bad [deeds]. That is to say, [one who] commits the ten evils in their highest degree falls into hell upon death, [one who commits the ten evils] in their lesser degree becomes a hungry ghost, and [one who commits the ten evils] in their lowest degree becomes an animal. Therefore, the Buddha grouped [the five precepts] with the five constant virtues of the worldly teaching and caused [beginners] to maintain the five precepts, to succeed in avoiding the three [woeful] destinies, and to be born into the human realm. [One who] cultivates the ten good deeds in their highest degree as well as bestowing alms, maintaining the precepts, and so forth is born into [one of] the six heavens of [the realm of] desire. [One who] cultivates the four stages of meditative absorption and the eight attainments is born into [one of] the heavens of the realm of form or the realm of formlessness. Therefore, [this teaching] is called the Teaching of Humans and Gods. According to this teaching, karma constitutes the origin of bodily existence.

Now I will assess [this teaching] critically. Granted that we receive a bodily existence in [one of] the five destinies as a result of our having generated karma, it is still not clear who generates karma and who experiences its retribution. If the eyes, ears, hands, and feet are able to generate karma, then why, while the eyes, ears, hands, and feet of a person who has just died are still intact, do they not see, hear, function, and move? If one says that it is the mind that generates [karma], what is meant by the mind? If one says that it is the corporeal mind, then the corporeal mind has material substance and is embedded within the body. How, then, does it suddenly enter the eyes

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and ears and discern what is and what is not of externals? If what is and what is not are not known [by the mind], then by means of what does one discriminate them? Moreover, since the mind is blocked off from the eyes, ears, hands, and feet by material substance, how, then, can they pass in and out of one another, function in response to one another, and generate karmic conditions together? If one were to say that it is just joy, anger, love, and hate that activate the body and mouth and cause them to generate karma, then, since the feelings of joy, anger, and so forth abruptly arise one moment and abruptly perish the next and are of themselves without substance, what can we take as constituting the controlling agent and generating karma?

If one were to say that the investigation should not be pursued in a disconnected fashion like this, but that it is our body-and-mind as a whole that is able to generate karma, then, once this body has died, who experiences the retribution of pain and pleasure? If one says that after death one has another body, then how can the commission of evil or the cultivation of merit in the present body-and-mind cause the experiencing of pain and pleasure in another body-and-mind in a future life? If we base ourselves on this [teaching], then one who cultivates merit should be extremely disheartened and one who commits evil should be extremely joyful. How can the holy principle be so unjust? Therefore we know that those who merely study this teaching, even though they believe in karmic conditioning, have not yet reached the origin of their bodily existence.

2. The Teaching of the Lesser Vehicle

The Teaching of the Lesser Vehicle holds that from [time] without beginning, bodily form and cognitive mind, because of the force of causes and conditions, arise and perish from moment to moment, continuing in a series without cease, like the trickling of water or the flame of a lamp. The body and mind come together contingently, seeming to be one and seeming to be permanent. Ignorant beings in their unenlightenment cling to them as a self. Because they value this self, they give rise to the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion. The three poisons arouse thought, activating body and speech and generating all karma. Once karma has come into being, it is difficult to escape. Thus [beings] receive a bodily existence of pain and pleasure in the five destinies and a position of superior or inferior in the three realms. In regard to the bodily existence that they receive, no sooner do [beings] cling to it as a self than they at once give rise to greed and so forth, generate karma, and experience its retribution. In the case of bodily existence, there is birth, old age, sickness, and death; [beings] die and are born again. In the case of a world, there is formation, continuation, destruction, and emptiness; [worlds] are empty and are formed again.

Kalpa after kalpa, birth after birth, the cycle does not cease; it is without end and without beginning, like a well wheel drawing up [water]. All this comes about from [beings] not understanding that the body is from the very outset

not the self. "Is not the self" refers to the fact that the body originally takes on phenomenal appearance because of the coming together of form and mind.

If we now push our analysis further, form is comprised of the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, whereas mind is comprised of the four aggregates of sensation, conceptualization, impulses, and consciousness. If each of these were a self, then they would amount to eight selves. How much more numerous would [the selves] be among the earthly element! That is to say, each one of the three hundred sixty bones is distinct from the others; skin, hair, muscles, flesh, liver, heart, spleen, and kidneys are each not the other. Each of the various mental functions are also not the same; seeing is not hearing, joy is not anger, and so on and so forth to the eighty-four thousand defilements. Since there are so many things, we do not know what to choose as the self. If each of them were a self, then there would be hundreds upon thousands of selves, and there would be the utter confusion of many controlling agents within a single body. Furthermore, there is nothing else outside of these [components]. When one investigates them inside and out, a self cannot be found in any of them. One then realizes that the body is just the phenomenal appearance of the seeming combination of various conditions and that there has never been a self.

On whose account does one have greed and anger? On whose account does one kill, steal, give [alms], and maintain the precepts? Then, when one does not obstruct the mind in good and bad [deeds] that have outflows in the three realms and only cultivates the wisdom of the view of no-self, one thereby cuts off greed and so forth, puts a stop to all karma, realizes the reality of the emptiness of self, until eventually one attains arhatship: as soon as one makes his body as ashes and extinguishes thought, one cuts off all suffering. According to this teaching, the two dharmas of form and mind, as well as greed, anger, and delusion, constitute the origin of the body of senses and the receptacle world. There has never been nor will ever be anything else that constitutes the origin.

Now I will assess [this teaching] critically. That which constitutes the source of bodily existence in the experiencing of repeated births and the accumulation of numerous life-times must, in itself, be without interruption. [However], the present five [sense] consciousnesses do not arise in the absence of conditions, there are times when consciousness does not operate, and the gods in the realm of formlessness are not comprised of the four great elements. How, then, do we hold on to this bodily existence life-time after life-time without ceasing? Therefore we know that those who are devoted to this teaching have also not yet reached the origin of bodily existence.

3. The Teaching of the Phenomenal Appearances of the Dharmas

The Teaching of the Phenomenal Appearances of the Dharmas within the Great Vehicle holds that all sentient beings from [time] without beginning

inherently have eight kinds of consciousness. Of these, the eighth—the *ālayavijñāna*—is the fundamental basis. It instantaneously evolves into the body of the senses, the receptacle world, and the seeds, and transforms, generating the [other] seven consciousnesses. All [eight consciousnesses] evolve and manifest their own perceiving subject and perceived objects, none of which are substantial entities.

How do they evolve? [*The Treatise Establishing Consciousness-Only*] says: “Because of the influence of the karmically conditioned predispositions of the discrimination of self and things [in the *ālayavijñāna*], when the consciousnesses are engendered [from the *ālayavijñāna*], they evolve into the semblance of a self and things.” The sixth and seventh consciousness, because they are obscured by ignorance, “consequently cling to [their subjective and objective manifestations] as a substantial self and substantial things.”

“It is like the case of being ill or dreaming. Because of the influence of the illness or dream, the mind manifests itself in the semblance of the phenomenal appearance of a variety of external objects.” When one is dreaming, one clings to them as substantially existing external things, but, as soon as one awakens, one realizes that they were merely the transformations of the dream. One’s own bodily existence is also like this: it is merely the transformation of consciousness. Because [beings] are deluded, they cling to [these transformations] as existing self and objects, and, as a result of this, generate delusion and create karma, and birth-and-death is without end. As soon as one realizes this principle, one understands that our bodily existence is merely the transformation of consciousness and that consciousness constitutes the root of bodily existence.

4. The Teaching That Refutes Phenomenal Appearances

The Teaching of the Great Vehicle That Refutes Phenomenal Appearances refutes the attachment to the phenomenal appearances of the dharmas in the previous [teachings of] the Greater and Lesser Vehicles and intimates the principle of the emptiness and tranquility of the true nature in the later [teaching].

Wishing to refute [the Teaching of the Phenomenal Appearances of the Dharmas], I will first assess [the previous teaching] critically. Granted that the object that has evolved is illusory, how, then, can the consciousness that evolves be real? If one says that one exists and the other does not, then the activity of dreaming and the things seen [in the dream] should be different. If they are different, then the dream not being the things [seen in the dream] and the things [seen in the dream] not being the dream, when one awakens and the dream is over, the things [seen in the dream] should remain. Again, the things [seen in the dream], if they are not the dream, must be real things, but how does the dream, if it is not the things

[seen in the dream], assume phenomenal appearance? Therefore we know that when one dreams, the activity of dreaming and the things seen in the dream resemble the dichotomy of seeing and seen. Logically, then, they are equally unreal and altogether lack existence. The various consciousnesses are also like this because they all provisionally rely on sundry causes and conditions and are devoid of a nature of their own. Therefore the *Middle Stanzas* says: “There has never been a single thing that has not been born from causes and conditions. Therefore there is nothing that is not empty.” And further: “Things born by causes and conditions I declare to be empty.” The *Awakening of Faith* says: “It is only on the basis of deluded thinking that all things have differentiations. If one is free from thinking, then there are no phenomenal appearances of any objects.” The *[Diamond] Sūtra* says: “All phenomenal appearances are illusory.” Those who are free from all phenomenal appearances are called Buddhas. Thus we know that mind and objects both being empty is precisely the true principle of the Great Vehicle. If we inquire into the origin of bodily existence in terms of this [teaching], then bodily existence is from the beginning empty, and emptiness itself is its basis.

Now I will also assess this Teaching [That Refutes Phenomenal Appearances] critically. If the mind and its objects are both nonexistent, then who is it that knows they do not exist? Again, if there are no real things whatsoever, then on the basis of what are the illusions made to appear? Moreover, there has never been a case of the illusory things in the world before us being able to arise without being based on something real. If there were no water whose wet nature were unchanging, how could there be the waves of illusory, provisional phenomenal appearances? If there were no mirror whose pure brightness were unchanging, how could there be the reflections of a variety of unreal phenomena? Again, while the earlier statement that the activity of dreaming and the dream object are equally unreal is indeed true, the dream that is illusory must still be based on someone who is sleeping. Now, granted that the mind and its objects are both empty, it is still not clear on what the illusory manifestations are based. Therefore we know that this teaching merely destroys feelings of attachment but does not yet clearly reveal the nature that is true and numinous. Therefore the *Great Dharma Drum Sūtra* says: “All emptiness sūtras are expositions that have a remainder.” The *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* says: “Emptiness is the first gate of the Great Vehicle.”

When the above four teachings are compared with one another in turn, the earlier will be seen to be superficial and the later profound. If someone studies [a teaching] for a time, and oneself realizes that it is not yet ultimate, [that teaching] is said to be superficial. But if one clings to [such a teaching] as ultimate, then one is said to be partial. Therefore it is in terms of the people who study them that [the teachings] are spoken of as partial and superficial.

5. The Teaching That Reveals the Nature

The Teaching of the One Vehicle That Reveals the Nature holds that all sentient beings without exception have the intrinsically enlightened, true mind. From [time] without beginning it is permanently abiding and immaculate. It is shining, unobscured, clear and bright ever-present awareness. It is also called the Buddha-nature and it is also called the *tathāgatagarbha*. From time without beginning deluded thoughts cover it, and [sentient beings] by themselves are not aware of it. Because they only recognize their inferior qualities, they become indulgently attached, enmeshed in karma, and experience the suffering of birth-and-death. The great enlightened one took pity on them and taught that everything without exception is empty. He further revealed that the purity of the numinous enlightened true mind is wholly identical with all Buddhas.

Therefore the *Garland Sūtra* says: “Oh sons of the Buddha, there is not a single sentient being that is not fully endowed with the wisdom of the Tathāgata. It is only on account of their deluded thinking and attachments that they do not succeed in realizing it. When they become free from deluded thinking, the all-comprehending wisdom, the spontaneous wisdom, and the unobstructed wisdom will then be manifest before them.” [The *sūtra*] then offers the analogy of a single speck of dust containing a *sūtra* roll [as vast as] the great chiliocosm. The speck of dust represents sentient beings, and the *sūtra* represents the wisdom of the Buddha. [The *Garland Sūtra*] then goes on to say: “At that time the Tathāgata universally beheld all sentient beings throughout the universe and said: ‘How amazing! How amazing! How can it be that these sentient beings are fully endowed with the wisdom of the Tathāgata and yet, being ignorant and confused, do not know it and do not see it? I must teach them the noble path enabling them to be forever free from deluded thinking and to achieve for themselves the seeing of the broad and vast wisdom of the Tathāgata within themselves and so be no different from the Buddhas.’”

[I will now] elaborate on [this teaching]. Because for numerous kalpas we have not encountered the true teaching, we have not known how to turn back and find the [true] origin of our bodily existence but have just clung to illusory phenomenal appearances, heedlessly recognizing [only] our unenlightened nature, being born sometimes as an animal and sometimes as a human. When we now seek our origin in terms of the consummate teaching, we will immediately realize that from the very outset we are the Buddha. Therefore, we should base our actions on the Buddha’s action and identify our minds with Buddha’s mind, return to the origin and revert to the source, and cut off our residue of ignorance, reducing it and further reducing it until we have reached the [state of being] unconditioned. Then our activity in response [to other beings] will naturally be [as manifold as] the sands of the Ganges—that is called Buddhahood. You should realize that delusion and enlightenment alike are [manifestations of] the one true mind. How great the

marvelous gate! Our inquiry into the origin of the human condition has here come to an end.

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