

The Three Truths as Madhyamaka Exegesis: Tiantai and its Relationship to the Thought of Nāgārjuna*

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Abstract: The approach to Buddhist thought and practice developed by the Sui (581–618) dynasty exegete and meditation master Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顓 (538–598) has long drawn the attention of scholars for its philosophical sophistication. A key element in Zhiyi’s system that has been used to represent his distinctive approach is the notion of the three truths (Ch. *sandi* 三諦), comprised of the conventional truth of the provisional (*jia* 假), the ultimate truth of emptiness (*kong* 空), and the truth of the middle (*zhong* 中) that affirms the perfect identity between the prior two. While this paradigm has been

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interpreted by some as superseding the two truths (*erdi* 二諦, Skt. *satyadvaya*) as inherited from Indic texts, I argue that such an assessment rests upon problematic assumptions concerning the role of the two truths in the thought of Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250), and that without these assumptions, Zhiyi's notion of the three truths can be seen as recovering and building upon important implications already present within Indian Madhyamaka.

Keywords: Madhyamaka, Tiantai, Two Truths, Three Truths, Zhiyi, Nāgārjuna, MMK 24.18

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1. Introduction

The fundamental problems in the study of the reception of Madhyamaka thought in Chinese Buddhism were raised long ago in *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* by Richard Robinson; namely, to what extent and in what manner did Chinese Buddhists understand the Indic texts that had been translated, and in what respects was the resulting form of Buddhism Indian or Chinese in character?¹ While Robinson took as his subject the early representatives of the so-called Sanlun School (Jp. Sanronshū 三論宗), the basic issues that he raised concerning the reception and adaptation of Madhyamaka in China have also provided much of the framing for the study of Tiantai 天台 (Tendai) in Anglophone scholarship. Having been considered by many to be the first approach to Buddhist thought and practice developed organically on Chinese soil, Tiantai has long occupied a special position in the study of East Asian Buddhism.² One line of argument pursued in modern schol-

¹ Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika*, 5.

² The formation of Tiantai as a distinct tradition of Chinese Buddhism with

arship on Tiantai, represented by those such as Ng Yu-Kwan and Brook Ziporyn, accordingly emphasizes how Zhiyi 智顓 (538–598), the tradition's de facto founder, was not fully satisfied with Indian Madhyamaka and the writings of Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250), and therefore forged a uniquely Chinese system that supplanted what was found in Indic sources. Ziporyn, for instance, appraises Tiantai as '[t]he earliest attempt at a thoroughgoing Sinitic reworking of the Indian Buddhist tradition',³ thereby emphasizing the uniquely 'Sinitic' character of Tiantai on the one hand, and downplaying its basis in Indic texts on the other. Another line of interpretation represented by Paul Swanson, however, emphasizes the cogency of Zhiyi's thought, especially his notion of the three truths (Ch. *sandi* 三諦), with Indian Madhyamaka, and further asserts that his interpretation served as a corrective to misleading assumptions inherited from Chinese philosophy.⁴ While these two perspectives are largely opposed in respect to whether the system developed by Zhiyi represents a sound interpretation of or an emphatic departure from Indian Buddhism, and Madhyamaka in particular, they both agree in practice that crucial to understanding the philosophical character of Tiantai is its relationship to the thought of Nāgārjuna. While such a framing is not necessary in order to understand Tiantai specifically as a school

a particular patriarchal lineage was a multi-generational process that post-dates Zhiyi. Especially significant are the activities of Guanding 灌頂 (561–632), Zhiyi's disciple and the principal editor of his texts, and Zhanran 湛然 (711–782), who wrote the most important commentaries to Zhiyi's works and thereby consolidated his literary legacy. For more on the roles of Guanding and Zhanran in fashioning a distinct Tiantai identity, see Penkower, 'In the Beginning'; and *idem*, 'Making and Remaking Tradition' respectively.

³ Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, ix. How specialists in Tiantai situate this tradition in the broader history of Chinese Buddhism seems to have changed little from the preceding generation of scholars. Chappell, for instance, echoes a similar sentiment in his foreword to Swanson's study, saying that Tiantai, '[a]s the first major school of Buddhism in East Asia...marked a watershed in Chinese philosophy'. Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*, vii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

of Chinese Buddhism, we are not taking Zhiyi seriously as a Buddhist exegete if we do not attempt to critique his interpretation against the comparative background of sources available to us in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. In light of a reassessment of verse 24.18 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* [Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way] (MMK) and its treatment in traditional commentaries, this article illustrates, in agreement with Swanson, that Zhiyi's introduction of a third truth does not present us with a radical innovation in Madhyamaka philosophy, but rather recovers important implications within the Indic texts themselves that had become obscured in the exegetical writings of Chinese Buddhists.

In order to illustrate the cogency of Zhiyi's interpretation of Indian Madhyamaka, this article takes as its subject matter the notion of the three truths, which has been forefront in several studies of Tiantai Buddhism as one of its most critical features. Zhiyi's positing of the truth of the middle or centre (Ch. *zhong* 中) that affirms the perfect identity between the conventional truth of the provisional (*jià* 假) and the ultimate truth of emptiness (*kong* 空) has been taken by some modern scholars as the hallmark of Tiantai exegesis, and a uniquely Chinese expression of the two truths (Skt. *satyadvaya*) as inherited from Indian Buddhism.⁵ I argue to the contrary, however, that the three truths do not represent a radical departure from the Indic material, but rather function as a sensitive reconstruction that captures many of the philosophical implications within the Indic texts themselves, in particular the identity of emptiness and dependently designated phenomena.

2. Zhiyi and the Three Truths

As Paul Swanson notes, although the three truths receive little direct attention in the texts attributed to Zhiyi, this is rather because they represent the hidden structure of his approach to Buddhist thought and practice in general.⁶ As such, the three truths occupy a crucial

⁵ E.g., Donner and Stevenson, *The Great Calming and Contemplation*, 9.

⁶ Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*, 154.

role in Tiantai philosophy, and any treatment of its system cannot fail to take up this topic in detail. Nonetheless, its central position at the heart of what many have perceived to be a pivotally important tradition of Chinese Buddhism has led some modern scholars to overemphasize its novelty, thereby setting up the Indian tradition simply as the backdrop to the supposed uniqueness of Tiantai philosophy. Therefore, in addition to laying out the basic framework of the three truths, this section also lays bare those assumptions concerning the Indian tradition that have led some modern scholars to assert the innovativeness of Tiantai at the expense of Indo-Tibetan Madhyamaka.

By way of introduction, the three truths are the truth of the provisional, being the conventionally posited entities of normal life; the truth of emptiness, being the ultimate lack of substantial reality on the part of such entities; and the truth of the middle or centre, being the affirmation of the perfect and complete identity of the prior two. The truth of the provisional is often equated with the worldly conventional truth as inherited from Indian Madhyamaka (Ch. *sushi di* 俗世諦, Skt. *lokasamvṛtisatya*), or else the truth of existence (Ch. *youdi* 有諦). The truth of emptiness, moreover, is accordingly identified with the ultimate truth (*diyiyi di* 第一義諦, Skt. *paramārthasatya*) on one hand, and the truth of nonexistence (Ch. *wudi* 無諦) on the other.⁷ The distinctively Tiantai move is to identify these three truths as being facets of a single, integrated reality, wherein each is perfectly identical to the other two, so that the whole triad is fully expressed by any individual member. As Zhiyi states succinctly in one of his commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義 [The Abstruse Meaning of the Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma]:

⁷ On the identification of the provisional with conventional truth and emptiness with the ultimate truth, see *Guanyin xuanyi*, T no. 1726, 34: 885a1–885a4. On the identification of existence with conventional truth and nonexistence with ultimate truth, see Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*, 33–37. See also *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi*, T no. 1716, 33: 707a16–707a18 and *Fabua xuanlun*, T no. 1720, 34: 403b25–403b28.

As for the perfect three truths, it is not only the middle way that fully includes all the dharmas of a buddha, but the ultimate and conventional do as well. The three truths perfectly subsume one another, being three as one and one as three. 圓三諦者, 非但中道具足佛法, 真俗亦然。三諦圓融, 一三三一。⁸

From the highest perspective in Zhiyi's system, emptiness fully expresses the reality of a buddha in the same fashion as the provisional, the identity of emptiness and the provisional, and vice versa. To be empty, for instance, is to be provisional, is to be emptiness qua provisionality, provisionality qua emptiness, and so forth. As Ziporyn summarizes:

The Three Truths are conventional truth, the ultimate truth, and *the Center*. The Center is the non-duality between conventional and ultimate truth, their intersubsumption, their synonymity. The Center means that conventional truth is also ultimate truth, that ultimate truth is also conventional truth—that the very distinction between them is itself only conventional, and yet, since by this very move the conventional is not merely conventional but also ultimate, this very distinction is itself also therefore ultimate.⁹

The seductiveness of such a doctrine is difficult to ignore, and the appeal of such a system in which many of the philosophical issues faced by Buddhist thinkers throughout the ages, such as the dichotomy between appearance and reality, are so confidently resolved is readily understandable. Since the provisional and conventional are so completely identified with the ultimate, any finite entity or experience, no matter how mundane and trivial, is fully identical to the complete reality of a buddha. As Zhiyi's disciple and editor Guanding 灌頂 (561–632) elegantly states in his preface to the *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 [Great Calming and Contemplation], 'there

⁸ *Miaofa lianbua jing xuanyi*, T no. 1716, 33: 705a5–705a7. All translations in this article are my own.

⁹ Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 145. Emphasis original.

is not a single sight or smell that is not the middle way' (一色一香無非中道).¹⁰

Swanson lays out much of the intellectual background for Zhiyi's formulation of the three truths, including both teachings unique to Zhiyi's particular lineage as well as the influence of Chinese 'apocryphal' sūtras.¹¹ One source, however, that is especially prominent in scholarship on Tiantai and the three truths is MMK 24.18, which Swanson calls the 'the basis' for Zhiyi's concept of the three truths. The Chinese translation of this verse is found both in the Chinese translation of the *kārikās* of Nāgārjuna together with the commentary of Qingmu 青目 (d.u.) translated by Kumārajīva (Ch. Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什, ca. 344–413) (i.e., the *Zhonglun* 中論 [Skt. **Madhyamakāśāstra*, Treatise on the Middle Way]),¹³ as well as in the voluminous *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 [Skt. **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, Commentary on the Larger *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra*], a text occupying a prominent role in Tiantai's internal mythology.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Mobe zbiguan*, T no. 1911, 46: 1c24–1c25. While this famous line is often presented as an encapsulation of Tiantai philosophy, a remarkably similar statement is found in the *Erdi yi* 二諦義 [The Meaning of the Two Truths] by Guanding's elder contemporary Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), where the latter writes, 'Each sight and each scent serves to reveal the middle way' (一色一香皆為顯中道). See *Erdi yi*, T no. 1854, 45: 94c15–94c16. For more on the relationship between Guanding and Jizang, see Penkower, 'In the Beginning'.

¹¹ See chapters 3 and 8 of Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³ In his preface to this text Sengrui 僧叡 (353/355–419/421) records that Qingmu's name in Sanskrit was *binjialuo* 寶伽羅 (*Zhonglun*, T no. 1564, 30: 1a26–1a28), usually understood to correspond to 'Piṅgala'. Huntington, however, concurs with Bocking that a more likely candidate is 'Vimalākṣa', the apparent name of Kumārajīva's vinaya master. See Huntington, 'The Akutobhayā and Early Indian Madhyamaka', 171–88. Ultimately, however, who Qingmu was as might be reflected in Indic records is a moot point, for which reason I refer to him by his Chinese name.

¹⁴ The quasi-mythic founder of the Tiantai tradition, Huiwen 慧文 (d.u.), is said to have attained awakening when coming across this verse in the *Da zhidu lun*

The verse itself in Chinese, understood in light of Qingmu's comments,¹⁵ reads as follows:

We explain that dharmas arisen from a multitude of causes and conditions are identical to emptiness. Emptiness is also a provisional designation. It is also the meaning of the middle way.

衆因緣生法 我說即是空
亦為是假名 亦是中道義。¹⁶

The verse as paraphrased in the *Da zhidu lun* is as follows:

Dharmas arisen from causes and conditions are called the mark of emptiness. They are also called provisional designations. They are also called the middle way. 因緣生法, 是名空相, 亦名假名, 亦名中道。¹⁷

While this famous verse can and has been interpreted in a multitude of ways by Buddhist thinkers across Asia, at the most basic level it presents the four items of dependently originated dharmas, emptiness, provisional designation, and the middle way and asserts that the four are identified with each other. Zhiyi frequently evokes this verse in connection with the three truths, as when discussing the 'complete and immediate calming and contemplation' (Ch. *yuandun zhiguan* 圓頓止觀) in the *Mohē zhiguan*:

(Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*, 116). While this article focuses more on the MMK and its translations, it is important to remember that for Tiantai thinkers, and for Chinese Buddhist exegetes in general, Nāgārjuna is just as noteworthy for his supposed authorship of the *Da zhidu lun* as he is for his authorship of the *Zhonglun*.

¹⁵ Qingmu's commentary is presented in the following section as well as the appendix.

¹⁶ *Zhonglun*, T no. 1564, 30: 33b11–33b12. On whether or not the second quarter should end with *wu* 無 or *kong* 空, see Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*, 260, note 12.

¹⁷ *Da zhidu lun*, T no. 1506, 25: 107a11–107a12.

Contemplating an object [according to the threefold contemplation] is like [the three eyes on the single face of Maheśvara]. One contemplates that they are three as one, and gives rise [to an object of contemplation] that is one as three. This is inconceivable, being neither real nor provisional, neither superior nor inferior, neither anterior nor posterior, neither together nor distinct, and neither great nor small. Therefore, the *Zhonglun* says, ‘dharmas arisen from causes and conditions are identical to emptiness, identical to the provisional, and identical to the middle’. 觀境亦如是, 觀三即一發一即三. 不可思議, 不權不實, 不優不劣, 不前不後, 不並不別, 不大不小. 故中論云, 因緣所生法, 即空即假即中.¹⁸

And likewise in his commentary on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the *Weimojing xuanshu* 維摩經玄疏 [Abstruse Commentary on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*]:

A verse from the *Zhonglun* says, ‘We explain that those dharmas that arise from causes and conditions are identical to emptiness’. This elucidates the ultimate truth. ‘They are also called provisional designations’. This elucidates the conventional truth. ‘They are also called the meaning of the middle way’. This elucidates the truth of ultimate meaning as the middle way. This verse, therefore, precisely explains the Mahāyāna, and elucidates the principle of the three truths. 中論偈云, 因緣所生法, 我說即是空. 此即詮真諦. 亦名為假名. 即詮俗諦也. 亦名中道義. 即詮中道第一義諦也. 此偈即是申摩訶衍, 詮三諦理.¹⁹

At the very least, it is evident from these citations that Zhiyi understands MMK 24.18 as affirming the simultaneous identity of emptiness as it appears in the second quarter, provisional designation as it appears in the third quarter, and finally the middle way as it appears in the last quarter. The primary subject, therefore, appears to be ‘dharmas that arise from causes and conditions’ that are simul-

¹⁸ *Mobe zbiguan*, T no. 1911, 46: 25b14–25b18.

¹⁹ *Weimojing xuanshu*, T no. 1777, 38: 535a11–535a14.

taneously qualified as being empty, provisionally designated, and the middle way. While this differs from the interpretation provided in the commentary of Qingmu as well as the surface-level meaning in the Sanskrit, as far as the Chinese verse itself is concerned, Zhiyi's reading would appear to be quite straightforward: dependently originated dharmas are simultaneously empty, provisionally designated, and the middle way, as they are both empty of intrinsic nature and conventionally existent. His only major innovation, therefore, would seem to be his labelling of the three predicates of dependently originated dharmas as 'truths' (Ch. *di* 諦). While identifying these items as 'three truths' is unique, the philosophical implications of this reading resonate quite closely with its basic meaning as is reflected in the thought of Nāgārjuna and his most authoritative Indian commentators. In other words, Zhiyi's reading does not supplant Nāgārjuna, but rather functions as a straightforward and uncomplicated reading of the Indian Madhyamaka materials that Zhiyi had available to him.

In asserting the novelty of Zhiyi's formulation of the three truths, scholars are quick to point out that whereas Nāgārjuna supposedly only speaks of the standard two truths in MMK 24.18, Zhiyi understands there to be three.²⁰ However, despite its arithmetic interest, what is perhaps more worthy of attention is the unquestioned assumption that Nāgārjuna is speaking of the two truths at all in verse 24.18. While this assumption is so pervasive as to seem ridiculous to question, no major Indic commentary presents 24.18 as a direct affirmation of the identity of the two truths, and one can advance clear and precise arguments that Nāgārjuna would *not* have identified dependent origination with the conventional truth or emptiness with the ultimate truth, casting significant doubt on the viability of such an interpretation even independent of the commentaries. Zhiyi's innovation, in this case, would not be that he posits *three* truths in connection with verse 24.18, but that he posits three *truths* including the conventional and the ultimate. The assumption, however, that dependent origination in verse 24.18 refers to the conventional truth and that emptiness correspondingly refers to the ultimate truth

²⁰ E.g., Donner and Stevenson, *The Great Calming and Contemplation*, 11.

was pervasive in Zhiyi's own context, and is found ubiquitously, for instance, in the writings of his younger contemporary Jizang 吉藏 (549–623),²¹ meaning at the very least that such an understanding is not Zhiyi's own innovation, but was a shared facet of Buddhist scholasticism in China during his lifetime.

Closely connected with this issue is the assumption that emptiness as the lack of intrinsic nature (Skt. *svabhāva*, Ch. *zixing* 自性), being the ultimate truth, represents a privileged state of entities and the real state of affairs for Nāgārjuna. Ng Yu-Kwan, for instance, when rehearsing the outlines of Indian Madhyamaka in his study of Tiantai philosophy, asserts that 'we conclude that Emptiness is, for Nāgārjuna and his followers, the true state of entities as such, free from all human fabrications'.²² This leads him to assume that for Nāgārjuna:

The doctrine of Emptiness basically reveals the true situation or state of entities: the lack of permanent Self Nature. This state is revealed in a negative manner, rather than a positive one. That is, it does not convey what the entities are, but what the entities are not: namely, they are not in possession of Self Nature.²³

Ng's negative assessment of Nāgārjuna plays a key role in his study, as it presents a perfect foil for what in his interpretation is Zhiyi's uniquely positive and dynamic conception of the 'Truth' as the 'Middle Way-Buddha Nature' (Ch. *foxing zhongdao* 佛性中道), which is by contrast characterized as permanent, functional, and embracing all phenomena.²⁴ From this perspective, that which is reflected in the truth of the middle, the simultaneous affirmation of emptiness and provisional existence, seems to be sorely lacking in the thought of Nāgārjuna, who in Ng's reading seems to establish emptiness as a true redescription of the nature of entities that supplants

²¹ See, for instance, *Zhongguanlun shu*, T no. 1824, 42: 152b2; and *Erdi yi*, T no. 1854, 45: 82c11ff.

²² Ng, *T'ien-t'ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika*, 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 185–88.

their provisional existence. This assessment, however, is based on an incomplete reading of Nāgārjuna that is rooted in the problematic assumption that emptiness is the ultimate truth. Both the assumption that emptiness as the lack of intrinsic nature represents the true state of entities, and the assumption that verse 24.18 is concerned with the doctrine of the two truths, have little basis in the Indian commentarial literature or the writings of Nāgārjuna himself, and as such are not a suitable basis from which to assert the unique character of Zhiyi's interpretation of Buddhist thought and practice.

In summation, the three truths as the mutual intersubsumption of emptiness, the provisional, and the middle that affirms the identity of the prior two, are understood to occupy a pivotal position in the philosophical edifice of Tiantai Buddhism. Essential support for Zhiyi's formulation of this device comes from verse 24.18 in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Zhiyi's interpretation that the predicates 'emptiness', 'provisional designation', and 'the middle way' all apply simultaneously to dependently originated dharmas is, prima facie, a straightforward reading of the Chinese verse itself. Scholars, however, focus on Zhiyi's assertion that the verse reflects three 'truths' and, based on the assumption that Nāgārjuna only referred to the standard two truths in verse 24.18, they propose that this reflects a philosophical innovation.²⁵ This assumption should be reassessed. Moreover, when examined purely in terms of its philosophical import, the work done by the truth of the middle serves precisely to overcome the dichotomy imposed by this assumption on verse 24.18. As a result, the three truths do not represent a revolutionary interpretation of Madhyamaka thought, but rather recapture the intent already present within the Indic texts themselves.

3. MMK 24.18 Reconsidered

In order to demonstrate that verse 24.18 is not concerned with the two truths and that emptiness is not the ultimate truth for Nāgār-

²⁵ E.g., Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 145.

juna, I rely on the works of Nāgārjuna, his immediate followers, as well as the major Indic commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. These include the two most famous Indian commentaries, the *Prasannapadā* [In Clear Words] of Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650) and the *Prajñāpradīpa* [The Lamp of Wisdom] of Bhāviveka (ca. 500–570), which are taken in Tibetan Buddhism to represent two rival schools of Madhyamaka exegesis.²⁶ I also present the relevant portions of earlier commentaries, specifically that of Buddhapālita (ca. 470–540), which as far as chapter 24 is concerned is identical to the earliest known commentary on the verses of Nāgārjuna, the *Akutobhayā* [Free of All Fear], as well as Qingmu’s commentary as preserved in the *Zhonglun*, though it was heavily edited by Kumārajīva.²⁷ This evidence demonstrates that Zhiyi’s interpretation of MMK 24.18 based upon the notion of the three truths does not represent a radical philosophical innovation, but rather functions as a compelling reading of Nāgārjuna himself.

As is widely known, chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* begins in the voice of a hypothetical opponent who criticizes the doctrine of emptiness for supposedly undermining the goals of Buddhist practice, claiming that were all things empty, without arising or cessation, then the four noble truths, which consist of the arising of suffering from desire and its cessation with the eightfold path, would be impossible. Nāgārjuna then responds that his opponent does not understand the point (Skt. *prayojana*) of emptiness before famously laying out the two truths in verses 24.8–10, the only point in the text where the topic is directly addressed. After some entertaining

²⁶ The interested reader may consult Dreyfus and McClintok, eds., *The Svātantrika-Prāsāngika Distinction*.

²⁷ Sengrui records the editing process in his preface to the *Zhonglun*: ‘Although Qingmu had a faithful understanding of the profound Dharma, his phrasing was neither elegant nor accurate. The Dharma Master Kumārajīva removed and corrected all of its errors and redundancies so that the principles were fully interpreted in accordance with the scriptures. At times, however, the text is not entirely perfect’ (其人雖信解深法，而辭不雅中。其中乖闕煩重者，法師皆裁而裨之，於經通之理盡矣。文或左右未盡善也)。 *Zhonglun*, T no. 1564, 30: 1a28–1b1.

mocking of his opponent, Nāgārjuna then asserts in verses 16 and 17 that if were one to assume that entities truly existed on account of an intrinsic nature, then one would necessarily regard them as not dependent upon causes and conditions, and as such, one could not account for the arising or cessation of phenomena such as suffering. In other words, Nāgārjuna, in characteristically ironic fashion, turns the tables on his hypothetical opponent and claims that it is in fact the one who presupposes that things actually exist with an intrinsic nature who undermines the viability of the four noble truths. It is in this context that Nāgārjuna offers verse 24.18:

We declare that dependent origination is emptiness. Emptiness is dependent designation. Emptiness alone is the middle way.
yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmāhe |
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā ||²⁸

Nāgārjuna thus declares that the mechanism that seemingly accounts for the arising and cessation of phenomena such as suffering, namely, dependent origination, is identical to the emptiness of intrinsic nature. This is necessarily the case, as the arising and cessation of entities that exist with an intrinsic nature—a nature that precludes the possibility of them entering into causal relations with other entities since they are wholly self-determined—is impossible. As is apparent from the feminine gender of the demonstrative pronoun *sā*, the grammatical subject of the second half is emptiness, which is subsequently identified with dependent designation²⁹ and the middle way, with the restrictive particle *eva* emphasizing that it is this emptiness qua dependent origination *precisely* that is the middle way between existence, nonexistence, and other such dichotomies.

The assumption that the first line of this verse asserts the identity of the two truths rests upon the further assumption that dependent

²⁸ MMK 24.18, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 426.

²⁹ On the absolute construction, see Salvini, ‘Upādāyaprajñaptiḥ and the Meaning of Absolutes’. Also note Ng’s misunderstanding of this construction in reading the verse in Ng, *T’ien-t’ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika*, 30–31.

origination functions as the conventional truth while emptiness functions as the ultimate truth. There is no direct evidence in the verses themselves that this is warranted, and it is perhaps from the brief presentation of the two truths in verses 24.8–10 that scholars make this identification. This is not an assumption, however, that is shared by the traditional commentators, none of whom interpret verse 24.18 in this fashion. The earliest commentary, the *Akutobhayā*, copied virtually word for word in the *Buddhapālita-mūlamadhyama-kavṛtti* [Commentary on the Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way by Buddhapālita], provides little interpretation beyond the verse itself, and as such, neither of the two truths is mentioned.³⁰ A more substantial interpretation is provided by Qingmu, who writes:

We explain that dharmas arise from a multitude of causes and conditions are identical to emptiness. How so? It is when the requisite causes and conditions come together that an entity arises. Since such an entity is dependent upon a multitude of causes and conditions, it lacks an intrinsic nature. Since it lacks an intrinsic nature, it is empty. But this emptiness is also empty, and it is only for the sake of guiding sentient beings that it is taught as a provisional designation. Because it transcends the two extremes of existence and nonexistence, it is called the middle way. Since such dharmas lack an intrinsic nature, one cannot say that they exist. Moreover, since their emptiness also does not exist, neither can one say that they do not exist. 衆因緣生法, 我說即是空. 何以故. 衆緣具足和合而物生. 是物屬衆因緣故無自性. 無自性故空. 空亦復空, 但爲引導衆生故, 以假名說. 離有無二邊故名爲中道. 是法無性故不得言有. 亦無空故不得言無.³¹

The two truths are not directly mentioned, and if Qingmu or Kumārajīva understood verse 24.18 as having any bearing on the relationship between the two truths, then such a reading rests upon the same interpretative assumption addressed above, that dependent origination is the conventional truth and that emptiness is the ulti-

³⁰ The Tibetan text and an English translation are presented in the appendix.

³¹ *Zhonglun*, T no. 1564, 30: 33b15–33b19.

mate truth. One may, however, look to the comments of Bhāviveka where the distinction between the two truths is invoked, who begins his commentary by stating:

As for whether the intrinsic nature of entities exists, does not exist, or both exists and does not exist in its conditions, or whether it is the same as, different from, or neither the same nor different from its conditions, in terms of the ultimate truth, nothing depending upon conditions arises with an intrinsic nature. The arising of the visual faculty and so forth is something that is based in conventional truth.

*dngos po rkyen rnams la rang gi dngos po yod pa dang | med pa dang
| yod med dang | gzhan dang | gzhan ma yin pa dang | gnyis kar yod
pa ma yin pa ni | don dam par rkyen rnams las rten cing 'brel par ngo
bo nyid kyis 'byung ba med de | mig la sogs pa'i skye ba ni tha snyad
kyi bden pa la brten pa yin no ||*³²

Bhāviveka thus appears to speak of the occurrence of entities in terms of the conventional truth and their non-occurrence, perhaps even emptiness, in terms of the ultimate truth. However, the habit of qualifying statements as either concerned with conventional truth or ultimate truth is a constant feature of Bhāviveka's innovative interpretation of Madhyamaka. Iida notes that Bhāviveka qualifies 'every argument' by specifying whether it is from the perspective of the conventional or ultimate truth,³³ so it is unwarranted to take this distinction as a particular feature of verse 24.18 in Bhāviveka's assessment. Furthermore, although Candrakīrti closely read Bhāviveka's commentary, and in fact cites the same scriptural sources in his comments on this verse, he does not follow Bhāviveka in qualifying any feature of this verse as being concerned with the two truths. He rather analytically and precisely lays out the logic for which reason dependent origination and emptiness have the same meaning, stating that:

Dependent origination, the appearance of cognitions, sprouts, and

³² *Dbu ma'i rtsa ba'i 'grel pa shes rab sgron ma*, BG vol. 57, 1380.

³³ Iida, *Reason and Emptiness*, ii.

the like in dependence upon causes and conditions, is non-origination with an intrinsic nature, and the non-origination of entities with an intrinsic nature is their emptiness. *yo 'yaṃ pratītyasamutpādo hetupratyayān apeksyāṅkuravijñānādīnāṃ prādurbhāvaḥ sa svabhāvenānutpādaḥ | yaś ca svabhāvenānutpādo bhāvānāṃ sāsūnyatā* ||³⁴

The first line of verse 24.18 for Candrakīrti has no direct bearing on the distinction between the two truths. Mādhyamikas refer to dependent origination as emptiness simply because the two terms mean the exact same thing: non-origination with an intrinsic nature (*svabhāvenānutpāda*). Hence, as for the five commentaries included in this article, it is only Bhāviveka's that alludes to the two truths. Moreover, given that Bhāviveka constantly evokes the distinction between the two truths, this is simply a standard feature of his exegetical style and not a comment on the specific content of verse 24.18.³⁵ It thus appears that it is a specific interpretative move on the part of Chinese Buddhists pre-dating Zhiyi, on the one hand, and of modern scholars on the other that this verse affirms the identity between the two truths. This is therefore an assumption that should be treated with caution in the interpretation of Madhyamaka thought.

In addition to the lack of robust commentarial support, there are specific philosophical reasons to argue that for Nāgārjuna and his commentators, dependent origination is not the conventional truth, and emptiness is not the ultimate truth. First and foremost is that dependent origination does not offer a constructive account of how provisional entities emerge in relations of interdependence, as it is understood in furnishing a description of conventional existence, but it rather provides a critical account of how such entities do not arise

³⁴ *Prasannapadā* on MMK 24.18, cited from de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, 503.12–13.

³⁵ Ye illustrates that the two truths are not a crucial feature in Nāgārjuna's formulation of the middle way, and that it is precisely Bhāviveka himself who is responsible for the forefronting of the two truths in later Indian Madhyamaka exegesis. See Ye, 'To Establish the Middle Position on One or Two Truths'.

in the first place to serve as isolatable subjects that can subsequently be predicated of existing or not existing. One may recall that dependent origination is identified in the first verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* with ‘non-origination’ (*anutpāda*, Ch. *busheng* 不生), and that the first chapter offers a rigorous argument for why ‘entities’ (Skt. *bhāva*) cannot arise in relations of dependence. One may argue that this is simply with reference to entities construed as existing in terms of an intrinsic nature, and that these portions of the MMK do not preclude the possibility of conventional entities existing in relations of mutual conditionship. To exist for Nāgārjuna, however, means to exist intrinsically as an isolatable subject, meaning he does not acknowledge the existence of entities lacking an intrinsic nature, as is made clear in an oft-cited verse from the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* [Sixty Verses on Reasoning]:

That which arises depending on this or that is not arisen with an intrinsic nature. And how is that which is not arisen with an intrinsic nature arisen at all?

tat tat prāpya yad utpannam notpannam tat svabhāvataḥ |
*yat svabhāvena notpannam utpannam nāma tat katham ||*³⁶

As Eviatar Shulman states, for Nāgārjuna, ‘What exists in dependence cannot exist.’³⁷ and as such, dependent origination in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* does not provide an account of conventional existence in juxtaposition to emptiness, but is fully synonymous with emptiness from the start as Candrakīrti’s comments reiterate. The affirmation of the identity between emptiness and dependent origination at this particular juncture, therefore, is not a

³⁶ *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* 19, cited from Li and Ye, *Liushi ruli song*, 38.

³⁷ Shulman, ‘Creative Ignorance’, 149. One may object that this sets too high a bar on what it means to exist, but in the very act of saying, ‘*x* exists’ or ‘*x* does not exist’, we have already conceived of *x* as an isolatable subject; that is, as something existing intrinsically with *svabhāva*. What Nāgārjuna illustrates through his analysis of conventional categories via the logic of dependent origination are precisely the contradictions implicit in the positing of any subject.

philosophical revelation, but functions rather as a reminder of the ironic crux of Nāgārjuna's project, namely, that dependent origination precisely denotes non-origination.³⁸

One may still be hesitant to relinquish the notion that dependent origination refers to the apparent arising and cessation of conventional phenomena given that Nāgārjuna offers verse 24.18 in the context of criticizing his hypothetical opponent for undermining the possibility of phenomena arising and ceasing by presupposing that they exist with intrinsic nature. Such hesitancy may be rooted in the interpretation that Nāgārjuna highlights dependent origination in chapter 24 in order to provide an alternative account of how such arising and cessation can actually occur. However, this reading runs directly counter to the critical manner in which Nāgārjuna employs the doctrine of dependent origination, meaning another reading of chapter 24 as a whole must be supplied. In brief, Nāgārjuna's investigation of the four noble truths, like nearly every other chapter in the MMK, is first and foremost a critique of its primary topic, in this case that of the four noble truths themselves. It is apparent from chapter 12 of this text on the topic of suffering (*duḥkha*, Ch. *ku* 苦) that Nāgārjuna has no positive account of the arising or cessation of suffering, and hence no positive account of the four noble truths in general. It should also be noted that in the second half of chapter 24, Nāgārjuna does not provide his own redescription of the four noble truths based upon the doctrine of dependent origination, but merely responds to the charges of his hypothetical opponent by illustrating that one who criticizes the notion of emptiness for undermining the viability of Buddhist practice simply contradicts himself, a fault Nāgārjuna avoids because he is not committed to the real existence of the four noble truths in the first place. With this in mind, while Nāgārjuna's deployment of the two truths in verses 8, 9, and 10 does partly function as an affirmation of the practical viability of Buddhist doctrine for being conventionally *true*, its primary purpose is to critique his hypothetical opponent for presupposing that the four

³⁸ For more on Nāgārjuna's innovative use of dependent origination and its consequences, see Macor, 'Not Even Absent'.

noble truths could be anything other than merely *conventionally* true. In other words, given that Nāgārjuna is clear that what arises in dependence does not arise, as with Nāgasena's allusion to the two truths in the *Milindapañha* [The Questions of Milinda], where there the Buddhist monk deploys the two truths to illustrate that the proper noun 'Nāgasena' is just a 'mere name' (P. *nāmamatta*) and that ultimately no such person can be apprehended (*paramatthato pan' ettha puggalo nūpalabbhati*),³⁹ the emphasis in MMK 24.8–10 is not on the conventional truth of the four noble truths, but rather on their ultimate *falsity*. Hence, when Nāgārjuna states in the final verse of the chapter that one who 'sees' (Skt. *paśyati*, Ch. *jian* 見)⁴⁰ dependent origination 'sees' suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, this claim can only be understood as being entirely ironic: one who sees dependent origination properly as non-origination *does not see* the four noble truths.⁴¹

If the reader at this stage is not convinced that MMK 24.18 is not concerned with the two truths, then it should be noted that emptiness for Nāgārjuna does not function as the ultimate truth, or per Ng's comments cited above, 'the true state of entities'. Any reader of Nāgārjuna will know that for him, nothing exists with an intrinsic nature, for which reason all phenomena are described as empty and without essence (Skt. *niḥsvabhāva*). He makes this point explicitly in verse 24.19, where he states:

No phenomenon exists that arises independently, for which reason
no phenomenon that is not empty exists either.

apratītyasamutpanno dharmah kaścīn na vidyate |
*yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo 'pi dharmah kaścīn na vidyate ||*⁴²

³⁹ The Pali text is cited from Trenckner, *The Milindapañho*, 28.

⁴⁰ MMK 24.40, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 440–41.

⁴¹ This is similar to the critique provided by Bhāviveka in the *Tarkajvālā* [The Flame of Logic], for which see Eckel, *Bhāviveka and His Buddhist Opponents*, 189–98. See, also, MacDonald, 'Knowing Nothing'.

⁴² MMK 24.19, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 426. The concessive particle *api* in the third quarter is philosophically significant, for it suggests that it is

It is important to note the negative construction of both assertions. Nāgārjuna does not say here that all dharmas arise in dependence and that all are empty, but that *none* does not arise in dependence and *none* is not empty. This is significant, because for Nāgārjuna, in line with verse 19 from the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, what arises in dependence does not arise, meaning nothing exists that can be characterized as empty. This is made clear in MMK 13.7:

If there were something that was not empty, then there would also be something that is empty. But there is nothing that is not empty. So how could anything be empty?

*yady aśūnyam bhavet kiṃcid syāc chūnyam api kiṃcana |
na kiṃcid asty aśūnyam ca kutaḥ śūnyam bhaviṣyati ||*⁴³

Since emptiness is only meaningful in juxtaposition to non-emptiness, when nothing that is not empty exists, nothing that is empty can meaningfully exist either. As such, emptiness does not describe ‘the true state of entities’, for which reason it is not the ultimate truth. Therefore, the available evidence from Indic materials is strongly in favour of the conclusion that verse 24.18 is *not* about the two truths, as even if one were to try and maintain that dependent origination may be obliquely referring to conventional truth, there is scant evidence that emptiness refers to the actual state of putative entities.

As is evidenced by the Indian Madhyamaka material that forms the essential background of Zhiyi’s formulation of the three truths, it is apparent that the core assumptions that lead scholars to assert Zhiyi’s novelty—namely that verse 24.18 is concerned with the two truths and that emptiness is the ultimate truth for Nāgārjuna—are both largely unsupported by the source material in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese. The two truths are mentioned only in the commentary of Bhāviveka, who qualifies nearly all his assertions relative to the two truths, and there are strong arguments that Nāgārjuna would not

already a foregone conclusion that empty entities, i.e., those that arise by virtue of dependent origination, do not exist.

⁴³ MMK 13.7, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 214.

have identified dependent origination as the conventional truth and emptiness as the ultimate truth. It is therefore necessary to reassess what 24.18 may mean in the absence of such presuppositions before concluding that Zhiyi's system represents an innovative or uniquely 'Sinitic' interpretation of Indian Madhyamaka.

The supposed novelty of Zhiyi's three truths is the positing of the middle that affirms the identity of emptiness and provisional existence. However, Nāgārjuna also affirms in the first half of 24.18 that dependent origination and emptiness are the same in meaning, because, per Candrakīrti's comments, both simply denote the lack of arising with an intrinsic nature. Furthermore, emptiness is itself identified with dependent designation (*upādāyaprajñapti*, Ch. *jiaming* 假名), and while some traditional commentaries and modern translators take this to be an assertion about the word 'emptiness' itself as a term of art in Nāgārjuna's thought, given that there is nothing in the verse to directly suggest that it is specifically the lexical item 'emptiness' rather than the concept so denoted that is identified with dependent designation, it is better to follow Candrakīrti who understands this as a blanket statement meaning that to be empty is to be provisionally designated and vice versa.⁴⁴ As he comments upon the third quarter:

Moreover, the emptiness of intrinsic nature is dependent designation, and so it is established in the verse that this very emptiness is dependent designation. A chariot is so designated in dependence upon the parts of a chariot such as the wheels and so forth. Its being so designated in dependence upon its parts is its non-origination with an intrinsic nature, and its non-origination with an intrinsic nature is its emptiness. *yā ceyam svabhāvasūnyatā sā prajñaptir upādāya | saiva sūnyatā upādāya prajñaptir iti vyavasthāpyate | cakrādīny upādāya rathāṅgāni rathaḥ prajñapyate | tasya yā svāṅgāny upādāya prajñaptiḥ sā svabhāvenānutpattiḥ | yā ca svabhāvenānutpattiḥ sā sūnyatā* ||⁴⁵

⁴⁴ For more on how the aforementioned commentaries address this ambiguity, see notes 77 and 81 in the appendix.

⁴⁵ *Prasannapadā* on MMK 24.18, cited from de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, 504.8–10.

As Claus Oetke notes,⁴⁶ Candrakīrti's illustration of dependent designation with the famous example of the chariot, known widely from the *Milindapañha*, shows that he understood emptiness and dependent designation to be fully synonymous descriptions of the same thing: dependent origination as non-origination with an intrinsic nature. On this interpretation then, Nāgārjuna's verse itself asserts the perfect identity of emptiness and the provisional. There is, moreover, no dialectical tension between the two, and as such, no need to posit a 'middle' that affirms their identity. Both emptiness and dependent designation, as expressions of dependent origination, are the middle way because what arises in dependence cannot arise, and as such does not exist. For the same reason, it cannot be destroyed, meaning its absence cannot be meaningfully posited either. As Bhāviveka's comments make clear:

That itself is the middle way, because the middle way dispels the dualistic extremes of arising and non-arising, and of existence and nonexistence. In this way, it is neither arising nor non-arising, neither existence nor nonexistence, neither permanent nor impermanent, and neither empty nor not empty. Therefore, as it says in the Perfection of Wisdom Scriptures, 'As for the cultivation of the middle way, one does not conceptualize that the visual faculty and objects exist, nor that they do not exist'. *de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin te | dbu ma ni skye ba dang | skye ba med pa dang | yod pa dang | med pa'i mtha' gnyis spangs pa'i phyir | 'di lta ste | skyes pa yang ma yin | ma skyes pa yang ma yin | yod pa yang ma yin | med pa yang ma yin | rtag pa yang ma yin | mi rtag pa yang ma yin | stong pa yang ma yin | mi stong pa yang ma yin pas | de'i phyir shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa las | ji skad du | dbu ma'i lam bsgom ni mig dngos po yod ces bya bar yongs su mi rtog | med ces bya bar yongs su mi rtog go ||*⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Oetke, 'On MMK 24.18', 8–9.

⁴⁷ *Dbu ma'i rtsa ba'i 'grel pa shes rab sgron ma*, BG vol. 57, 1381. Note the negation of both arising and non-arising as well as the negation of emptiness and non-emptiness. What 'non-arising' thus means for Mādhyamikas is the complete absence of a subject, even that whose non-arising can meaningfully be posited.

This is a middle way that in its negativity is certainly distinct from Zhiyi's positive assertion of the identity of emptiness and the provisional. However, as far as the Indic material is concerned, this positive assertion of their identity located in a third 'truth' is philosophically redundant given that this identity is already implicit in the very notion of dependent origination. What makes this identity appear novel from the perspective of the Chinese material is precisely the assumption addressed above that dependent origination and dependent designation refer to the conventional truth and that emptiness refers to the ultimate truth, thereby placing the two in a dialectical tension in need of resolution. This tension is not strongly attested in the writings of Nāgārjuna or his commentators, meaning Zhiyi's positing of the truth of the middle affirming the identity of the ultimate truth qua emptiness and the conventional truth qua provisional designation resolves a tension that was never present in the Indic texts. Therefore, while Zhiyi's interpretation of Madhyamaka and the Indian Buddhist tradition is certainly innovative within the perspective of Chinese Buddhism, from a transcultural perspective, there is nothing especially revolutionary about the notion of the three truths. It rather represents a viable reading of Nāgārjuna within the immediate limitations of Zhiyi's discursive context that resonates closely with Indic sources.

4. Contrasting Tiantai and Indian Madhyamaka

Those such as Ziporyn and Ng who aim to demonstrate the philosophical novelty of Zhiyi's thought may object, however, that it is precisely because Zhiyi inherits a problematic interpretation of Madhyamaka—wherein dependent origination qua provisional existence and conventional truth does indeed stand in dialectical tension with emptiness qua nonexistence and the ultimate truth—that he is in a position to assert something Nāgārjuna could not in positing their identity. In other words, it is because MMK 24.18 is understood in the Chinese context as asserting the identity between the two truths that something is gained in Tiantai that is inaccessible to the Indian tradition where the verse is merely understood as asserting the trivial

synonymity between certain terms of art. Nāgārjuna, in fact, stresses the importance of recognizing the ‘difference’ (Skt. *vibhāga*, Ch. *fenbie* 分別)⁴⁸ between the two truths, and along with his commentators consistently describes the middle way as neither existence nor nonexistence, neither arising nor non-arising, and neither emptiness nor non-emptiness, rather than as an affirmation of the identity of such contradictory descriptions. From the perspective of the Tiantai *panjiao* 判教 system then, Nāgārjuna’s middle way may be understood as corresponding to the ‘exclusive middle’ (*danzhong* 但中) of the penultimate separate teaching (*biejiao* 別教), so called because it is the middle by virtue of excluding the extremes, and not the ‘non-exclusive middle’ (*budan zhong* 不但中) of the perfect teaching (*yuanjiao* 圓教) that affirms the identity of the extremes as it does in the three truths.⁴⁹ While Nāgārjuna does affirm the identity between dependent origination, dependent designation, emptiness, and the middle way, one may argue that he does not do so for the two truths as expressions of the provisional existence and ultimate emptiness of phenomena. However, such a criticism fails to appreciate the fact that two truths are doing radically different philosophical work for Nāgārjuna and Zhiyi respectively as this article shows, and that to assert their identity for the prior would completely undermine his critique of Ābhidharmika realism with no obvious benefit. It is necessary to step back and appreciate what is actually being identified in the three truths for Zhiyi, and if it is understood to be provisional existence and emptiness, then this is precisely what is implicit within Nāgārjuna’s entire project from the very beginning and spelled out explicitly in MMK 24.18.

One may further object, however, that even though emptiness and provisional existence do not stand in dialectical tension for Nāgārjuna, the fact that they are identified with the two truths in Zhiyi’s own context, and therefore construed as contrasting opposites, shows that the move to assert their identity in the three truths is systematically

⁴⁸ MMK 24.9, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 420–21.

⁴⁹ The origin of this terminology is the passage from the *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi* cited in note 8.

distinct from the assertion of their mere synonymy in Indian Madhyamaka. The view that emptiness and provisional existence are not identical as strict synonyms both denoting the lack of intrinsic nature for Zhiyi, as they are for Indian Mādhyamikas, lends support to the dialetheic reading of Tiantai philosophy endorsed by Deguchi.⁵⁰ However, such an approach has at least two major weaknesses. First, it is not obvious whether Zhiyi understood emptiness and provisional existence as strictly contradictory concepts, or as complementary aspects with which to actively contemplate phenomena. Much of Deguchi's argument is predicated on the same problematic assumptions concerning the thought of Nāgārjuna rejected in the previous sections of this article, and the most direct evidence he produces in support of the view that Zhiyi understood the three truths as contradicting each other is a single passage from the *Mohe zhiyuan*.⁵¹ Given that the *Mohe zhiyuan* is just as occupied with meditative practice as it is with purely theoretical concerns, and that the relevant passage specifically uses the term 'contemplation' (*guan* 觀), it is more straightforward to understand this portion of the text as describing a procedure for deliberately and subjectively distinguishing the different aspects of the three truths, and not as making declarative statements about the nature of reality. Thus, Deguchi does not sufficiently demonstrate that Zhiyi regarded the three truths as being objectively contradictory rather than as simply being useful to clearly distinguish in the course of meditative practice. Second, as Ziporyn argues, Tiantai thought does not limit itself to affirming the truth of just one self-contained contradiction in the identity of emptiness and provisional existence, but it rather affirms the contradictory reality of any and all phenomena. To paraphrase his reasoning, in Tiantai, all states of affairs, since they embody their own contrastive opposite, are inherently contradictory, and as such, all lead beyond themselves as objects of attachment, for which reason all can serve as expedient means (Skt. *upāya*, Ch. *fangbian* 方便) in the teaching of sentient

⁵⁰ Deguchi, 'Non-dualism of the Two Truths'.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 77–78. The passages cited is *Mohe zhiyuan*, T no. 1911, 46: 55b15–55b17.

beings meaning all, not just some, are, according to the pragmatic definition of ‘truth’ Ziporyn endorses in the Buddhist context, absolutely true and always valid.⁵² As far as Ziporyn’s understanding is concerned, Tiantai philosophy is not a form of dialetheism, but rather a thoroughgoing form of trivialism, in which all statements, regardless of their content and logical structure, are true in all circumstances.

Ziporyn’s interpretation of Tiantai philosophy, while indeed radical, has the benefit of being able to swiftly account for the strongly affirmative stance taken at the level of the perfect teaching that seemingly distinguishes Tiantai from Indian Madhyamaka. Indeed, while Nāgārjuna himself demonstrates in the MMK and elsewhere that any x , as a supposedly isolated entity that is in fact only meaningful in contradistinction to some not- x , is inherently contradictory, what he and his followers deduce from this point is not that all x are universally true, but rather that they are all ultimately false. We have, then, a distinction between absolute, unconditional affirmation in Tiantai and absolute, unconditional denial in Indian Madhyamaka both predicated on the same basic observation. This stark distinction, however, is not one of philosophical substance, but of discursive mode. Specifically, the absolute affirmation Ziporyn attributes to Tiantai is made in the context of a buddha’s or bodhisattva’s teaching of sentient beings, meaning the absolute nature of entities in Tiantai does not refer to the crude realism of Abhidharma that Nāgārjuna shows is incoherent, but rather to the omni-availability of any entity or state of affairs to a buddha or bodhisattva in the course of instruction. That Nāgārjuna rarely makes this move, therefore, is not due to a deficiency in his thought, but rather due to the simple fact that he rarely discusses how an understanding of emptiness is to be used in practical terms. Nonetheless, hints of how Nāgārjuna and Indian Mādhyamikas understand a buddha’s pedagogical practices and his free use of expedient means in teaching sentient beings can be found in Indic texts, as is vividly demonstrated in one of Nāgārjuna’s more dizzying verses in the MMK:

⁵² Ziporyn, ‘A Comment on “The Way of the Dialetheist”’.

Everything is real. Everything is unreal. Everything is both real and unreal. Everything is neither real nor unreal. This is the teaching of the buddhas.

*sarvaṃ tathyaṃ na vā tathyaṃ tathyaṃ cātathyaṃ eva ca |
naivātathyaṃ naiva tathyaṃ etad buddhānusānam ||*⁵³

What is especially noteworthy about this verse is that whereas the tetralemma (Skt. *catuṣkoṭi*, Ch. *siju* 四句) is usually deployed by Nāgārjuna in the process of negating a logically complete set of four alternatives regarding some predicate to show that that predicate does not apply either positively or negatively in any way whatsoever to a given subject, here, when discussing a buddha's method of teaching, it is rather utilized in precisely the opposite manner in order to affirm all four alternatives, in this case, whether anything is real or not. This provides a decisive response to the critique that Nāgārjuna's thought only reaches the level of the separate teaching in Tiantai, as when we consider Nāgārjuna's writings from the perspective of how a buddha teaches sentient beings, the same perspective from which Ziporyn formulates his conception of 'truth' in Tiantai thought, Nāgārjuna offers complete affirmation. So long as it accords with the particular needs of his audience, a buddha can and will say anything. As Candrakīrti elaborates:

All the teachings of the blessed buddhas, who are endowed with the knowledge of expedient means rooted in profound compassion, are administered because such teachings serve as expedient means for leading sentient beings to the realization of the deathless nectar of reality. For it is not the case that the tathāgatas propound statements, even if true, that do not serve as expedient means for leading sentient beings to the realization of the deathless nectar of reality. Rather, it is with a desire to be gracious and accommodating to the needs of those beings in need of instruction that they teach the Dharma that befits the situation, like one providing medicine that suits a particular illness.
sarvāś' caitā deśanā buddhānāṃ bhagavatāṃ mahākaruṇopāy-

⁵³ MMK 18.8, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 304.

*ajñānavatām tattvāmṛtāvatāropāyatvena vyavasthitāḥ | na hi
tathāgatās tattvāmṛtāvatārānupāyabhūtavākyaṃ udāharanti |
vyādhyānurūpabhaiṣajyopasaṃhāravat te vineyajanānujighṛkṣayā
yathānurūpaṃ dharmam deśayanti ||*⁵⁴

While one may quibble over the epistemological status of a ‘true statement’ (Skt. *bhūtavākya*) for Candrakīrti,⁵⁵ it is clear that for him, the content of a buddha’s statements is determined by nothing other than the needs of sentient beings, and that a buddha may freely craft his teachings according to the situation based on his knowledge of expedient means (*upāyajñāna*), situations that demand that a buddha teach, on occasion, that all things, even the self, are real. A buddha will, of course, teach that nothing is real to a different audience at a different stage of spiritual development. Nonetheless, the basic point shared by Indian Madhyamaka and Tiantai is that when entities are fundamentally devoid of any sort of ultimately valid ontological or epistemological status, they can appear anywhere at any time in the course of a buddha’s teaching.

This brings us to the final difference between Tiantai and Indian Madhyamaka to negotiate, namely, the philosophical mechanics by virtue of which all presentations of phenomena are simultaneously available to a buddha or a bodhisattva in the course of teaching sentient beings. In other words, what rational license is there for a buddha or skilled bodhisattva to identify any putative entity or situation as having any possible epistemological or ontological status? In Tiantai doctrinal vocabulary, this omni-availability of states of affairs is often called ‘the inherent entailment of all modes of existence’ (Ch. *xingju sanqian* 性具三千) or ‘all modes of existence in a single moment of thought’ (*yinian sanqian* 一念三千), both of which

⁵⁴ *Prasannapadā* commenting on MMK 24.18, cited from de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, 372.1–3.

⁵⁵ Given that chapter 18 in the Sanskrit is on the topic of the self (Skt. *ātmaparīkṣā*), what Candrakīrti likely means by a ‘true statement’ here is one conforming to the Buddhist doctrine of not-self (*anātman*, Ch. *wuwo* 無我), and hence to the conventional truths of Buddhist doctrine more generally.

reflect what Ziporyn terms ‘intersubsumption’, or the complete and mutual inclusion of all aspects of reality within any other.⁵⁶ Some of the most explicit formulations of the intersubsumption of all phenomena within each other are provided by the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) Tiantai exegete Zhili 知禮 (960–1028), who states in his commentary on the *Shi buer men* 十不二門 [Ten Gates of Non-duality]⁵⁷ by Zhanran 湛然 (711–782) that, ‘It is because the three thousand dharmas share in the same single nature that when they become the manifold dharmas according to conditions, we can select any one at random so as to collectively subsume them all’ (以三千法同一性故, 隨緣為萬法時, 趣舉一法總攝一切也).⁵⁸ He goes on to elaborate, ‘It is because this single nature is the lack of nature that we establish the three thousand aspects of existence as both principles and phenomena. Thus, both as principles and phenomena, the three thousand aspects of existence all reside together in a single moment of thought’ (由一性無立性理事三千故. 故兩重三千同居一念也).⁵⁹ At first glance, these two statements seem to suggest that it is because all aspects of existence, calculated as being three thousand according to the passage from the *Mobe zbiguan* on which the figure is based,⁶⁰ share in a single, unified nature that any single one subsumes them all as an exemplar of that very nature. Moreover, using the same language as Zhanran, Zhili describes this single nature as just ‘the lack of nature’ (*wuxing* 無性),⁶¹ which seems to suggest that the singular nature of which Zhili speaks is none other than emptiness as the lack

⁵⁶ The following discussion is based on the materials and analysis presented in Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference*, 293–305.

⁵⁷ While the *Shi buer men* is presented as an independent text in the Taishō canon, it is in fact an extract from Zhanran’s subcommentary on the *Miaofa lianbua jing xuanyi*, the *Fabua xuanyi shiqian* 法華玄義釋籤 [Annotated Commentary on the Abstruse Meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra*]. The relevant portion is *Fabua xuanyi shiqian*, T no. 1717, 33: 918a13–920a8.

⁵⁸ *Shi buer men zhiyao chao*, T no. 1928, 46: 710a17–710a19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 710a28–710a29

⁶⁰ *Mobe zbiguan*, T no. 1911, 46: 54a5–54a8.

⁶¹ The original passage is *Shi buer men*, T no. 1927, 46: 703a24–703a25.

of intrinsic nature common to all Mādhyamikas. On this understanding, Zhili would be saying nothing different from Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva (ca. 170–270), who says in verse 8.16 of the *Catuhśataka* [In Four Hundred Verses]:

One who sees a single entity is described as one who sees all entities, for the emptiness of any one thing is identical to the emptiness of all things.

bhāvasyaikasya yo draṣṭā draṣṭā sarvasya sa smṛtaḥ |
*ekasya śūnyatā yaiva saiva sarvasya śūnyatā ||*⁶²

As Candrakīrti elaborates in his commentary on this verse, when one understands that no dharma arises with an intrinsic nature, since this is a characteristic common to all phenomena, one simultaneously penetrates this lack of intrinsic nature shared by all dharmas. Drawing upon a common simile, he summarizes the point by saying, 'It is like drinking a drop of water from the ocean. Because it is all of a single flavour, if one tastes the flavour of any one portion of the ocean, then one has tasted the flavour of the ocean in its entirety'.⁶³ Even more in line with Zhanran's statement that the nature shared by all phenomena is just their lack of an intrinsic nature, Nāgārjuna himself famously states in MMK 22.16:

The intrinsic nature of the world is the intrinsic nature of the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata lacks an intrinsic nature, and the world lacks an intrinsic nature.

tathāgato yatsvabhāvas tatsvabhāvam idaṃ jagat |
*tathāgato niḥsvabhāvo niḥsvabhāvam idaṃ jagat ||*⁶⁴

⁶² Lang, *Āryadeva's Catuhśataka*, 82. This verse is also cited by Candrakīrti in his commentary on MMK 4.9, for which see de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyama-kakārikās*, 128.3–4.

⁶³ Candrakīrti's comments on this verse are preserved only in Tibetan, for which see *Byang chub sems dpa'i rnal 'byor spyod pa bzhi brgya pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa*, BG vol. 60, 1263–264.

⁶⁴ MMK 22.16, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 378.

These statements by Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, and Zhili thus present us with a notion of intersubsumption common to all Mādhyamikas: all phenomena share the same characteristic of being empty of an intrinsic nature, such that to penetrate the nature of any entity is to penetrate the nature of all entities which is, ironically, precisely their lack of any such nature. Hence, as Zhili says, any can be taken up at random to subsume them all as embodying this universal essencelessness.

Zhili, however, resists this most straightforward notion of intersubsumption, in which all phenomena are reduced to a single ‘ordering principle’ (*li* 理), and while Zhili’s main object of critique is the notion that it is the mind (*xin* 心) that is this single principle subsuming all phenomena,⁶⁵ a similar critique can be leveled against the stance that emptiness serves as the sole mediator unifying seemingly discrete states of affairs. In language that seems to directly contradict the basic tenets of Madhyamaka, Zhili states elsewhere in his commentary on the *Shi buer men* that when individual dharmas are subsumed by some unifying whole, ‘none loses its essence’ (*bushi ziti* 不失自體)⁶⁶ in the process, for which reason he states later in the text that, ‘not a single mental or physical aspect of the three thousand aspects of existence can be altered, for which reason each is said to comprise a nature’ (三千色心, 一不可改, 故名為性).⁶⁷ Moreover, he additionally specifies that the notions of essence and nature that he employs in these passages do not refer to some single, overriding nature, but rather to the individual natures of the three thousand aspects of existence themselves.⁶⁸ On the face of it, Zhili simply seems to be contradicting himself in stressing (1) that it is because discrete phenomena share in the same singular nature that they subsume each other and (2) that this singular nature is none other than the individual natures of the three thousand aspects of existence. However, if we understand Zhanran’s statement not as saying that the

⁶⁵ Some of the polemical background motivating Zhili’s critique can be found in Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference*, 261–93.

⁶⁶ *Shi buer men zhiyao chao*, T no. 1928, 46: 708b29–708c2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 710b7–710b8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 712c20–712c21: 又此性體非謂一性。蓋三千性也。

single nature unifying all phenomena is their determinate lack of any nature whatsoever, but rather *their lack of any particular nature*, then a coherent vision of Zhili's notion of intersubsumption comes into focus. Specifically, Zhili can be understood as playing with the ambiguity that to lack any particular nature is to be replete with any and all natures to the exclusion of none. It is for this reason that any discrete phenomena can be taken up at random to subsume all others, for lacking any determinate nature, it can take on any nature, and since any individual nature is in this way present in any other, all natures are omnipresent and eternal, constantly available and implicit within any given situation. It is in this fashion, ironically, that particular conditioned events dependent upon a unique set of causes and conditions come to be, precisely by virtue of their lack of an intrinsic nature, unconditioned, absolute, and intrinsic in the nature of reality itself. Utilizing the same imagery Candrakīrti uses in his commentary on *Catuhśataka* 8.16, to taste the flavour of the ocean is, in Tiantai, not to taste just one flavour, but to taste all flavours, and it is this simultaneity of unity qua emptiness and diversity qua provisional phenomena each retaining their individual essences that is reflected in the truth of the middle that affirms the non-trivial identity between the two truths construed as emptiness and provisional existence.

The attention Zhili gives to the maintenance of diversity in the process of intersubsumption is indeed distinct from the way Indian Mādhyamikas describe the ultimate nature of reality. Nāgārjuna explicitly asserts that the 'indicative mark of reality' (Skt. *tattvasya lakṣaṇam*, Ch. *shixiang* 實相) is 'without multiplicity' (*anānartham*, *wuyi* 無異) and 'devoid of conceptual elaboration' (*prapañcāir aprapañcitam*, *wu xilun* 無戲論),⁶⁹ which starkly contrasts Zhili's statements that all aspects of existence construed as both ordering principles and phenomena dwell together in a single moment of thought each retaining its own unique 'essence'. Indian Mādhyamikas, to the contrary, prefer to describe omniscience not as the simultaneous perception of all modes of reality, but rather as a form of non-perception and non-seeing, for one who understands empti-

⁶⁹ MMK 18.9, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 304–05.

ness embodies the awareness, or more accurately the non-awareness, that there is no entity to be apprehended either in its presence or absence.⁷⁰ That Indian Madhyamaka and Tiantai seem to fall on polar opposite ends of the spectrum on the matter of whether ultimate reality is characterized as an infinity or a zero, however, is no coincidence, and again reflects the fact that Indian Madhyamaka is fundamentally a critical philosophy in constant debate with rival Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions whereas Tiantai coalesced as a tradition focused on meditation and the practices of a bodhisattva. Moreover, while Zhili claims that individual phenomena retain their ‘essence’ in the process of subsuming and being subsumed by other phenomena, this essence can only be understood as a *provisional essence*; that is, its essence as a provisional posit. Were we to understand this essence according to the notion of *svabhāva* that Nāgārjuna shows is incoherent, Zhili’s entire argument would collapse. Indeed, since to exist with *svabhāva* is to exist intrinsically, independently, and without reference to anything else, phenomena taken as existing in such a manner could not relate to each other in any way, much less subsume and be subsumed by each other. In addition, since a phenomenon existing with *svabhāva* cannot change and is as such mind-independent, it would appear as one thing monolithically to any and all observers, meaning not even a buddha could read into it the infinite identities upon which his skillful teachings of sentient beings is based. The entire Tiantai system, in short, would be defunct. Unless we want to attribute such a gross philosophical error to Zhili, this ‘essence’ must be understood to be its phenomenal qualities as a provisional posit. These qualities are indeed constantly available and readable into any situation, *but only because all phenomena share in the same single nature that is just their lack of any particular nature*. Thus, the philosophical mechanics that provide rational support for Zhili’s vision of Tiantai thought and practice rooted in the notions of intersubsumption and omni-availability is none other than the universal emptiness of phenomena. Moreover, given that we are not dealing with *real* existence, but *provisional* existence from the very

⁷⁰ See, for instance, MacDonald, ‘Knowing Nothing’.

beginning, the tension perceived between emptiness and provisionality in the three truths as modalities for contemplating phenomena can only be apparent.

Lastly, the concern that in elevating the importance of emptiness to facilitate the intersubsumption of phenomena we are elevating one phenomenon above all others as the sole mediator of their interpenetration is entirely misplaced, and based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the notion of emptiness in both Tiantai and Indian Madhyamaka. Nāgārjuna himself states that one who conceives of emptiness as a determinate absence that could be held as providing an ultimately true redescription of phenomena is ‘incurable’ (*asādhya*, *bubua* 不化),⁷¹ meaning that we are in fundamental error to understand emptiness as some independent mediator that stands alone as the one true nature to which all entities converge. More specific to the Tiantai context, when Zhili and other Tiantai thinkers describe all aspects of existence as each comprising an ‘ordering principle’, or per Ziporyn’s interpretation, as each simultaneously comprising the orientating centre by virtue of which all phenomena come to take on their own particular identities,⁷² they are specifically referring to the ‘three thousand aspects of existence’, a figure calculated as the product of the ten realms (Ch. *shijie* 十界)⁷³ squared multiplied by the ten suchnesses (*shi rushi* 十如是)⁷⁴ and the three types of worlds, namely, those of sentient beings, their environments, and the psychophysical factors comprising sentient

⁷¹ MMK 13.8, cited from Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 214–15.

⁷² Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference*, 210–11

⁷³ These are the ten planes of sentient existence comprising hell-beings, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, humans, gods, śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas.

⁷⁴ These are the so-called ‘ten suchnesses’ listed in the second chapter of Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* and comprise a dharma’s characteristics (*xiang* 相), nature (*xing* 性), essence (*ti* 體), power (*li* 力), function (*zuo* 作), cause (*yin* 因), conditions (*yuan* 緣), result (*guo* 果), recompense (*bao* 報), and the absolute equality of the previous nine (*benmo jiujiing deng* 本末究竟等). See *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T no. 262, 9: 5c10–5c13.

beings. This list does not include emptiness *per se*,⁷⁵ meaning the way in which the three thousand are construed as *li* is systematically different from the way emptiness is construed as *li*. In other words, emptiness is not a *li* as one of the three thousand aspects of existence toward which all converge, but rather an ordering principle implicit within each one as one of the members of the three truths. The three truths do not stand in parallel with phenomena, but serve as aspects under which to contemplate phenomena.⁷⁶ To conflate the mediating role of emptiness, or for that matter of provisionality and the middle, with something like the mind that, according to some, enjoys a uniquely privileged status among phenomena is, therefore, a simple category mistake. Emptiness in Tiantai is not the sole nature to which all things reduce, but rather the necessary precondition for the thoroughgoing vision of intersubsumption that is one of its most distinctive features as a tradition of Buddhist thought and practice.

5. Conclusions

In summarizing the foregoing arguments, the three truths as found in the writings of Zhiyi do not represent a significant departure from the Indic material, in particular the Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna, in

⁷⁵ The item among the three thousand aspects of existence that comes closest to being identifiable with emptiness as such is the tenth of the ten suchnesses, the ‘absolute equality from beginning to end’ (*benmo jiuqing deng* 本末究竟等), which is justified in a threefold manner according to each of the three truths. In short, because the previous nine items from characteristics up to recompense are all empty, they are, in terms of their emptiness, all ‘equal’. They are also ‘equal’ as provisional posits, and ‘equal’ in terms of the middle. (See *Mobe zhiquan*, T no. 1911, 46: 53b26–53c6.) Thus, while this item is closely tied to emptiness and the three truths, it is not identical with them. The three truths rather provide the rational basis for the ‘equality’ of the first nine suchnesses, and it is that equality itself that is the tenth suchness.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi*, T no. 1716, 33: 693b9–693b26.

terms of its overall philosophical implications. The strong identity between emptiness as the lack of intrinsic nature and provisional designation as the conventional existence of entities lies at the heart of Madhyamaka whether Indian or Chinese, and the far-reaching implications of this realization were felt by its advocates on both sides of the Himālayas. While the vocabulary Zhiyi employs and his precise understanding of the four items in MMK 24.18 are different from what is found in the Indic materials, his reading of the verse itself is quite straightforward, and closely resembles that of Candrakīrti in particular wherein emptiness, provisional designation, and the middle way all serve as equivalent synonyms for dependent origination and what arises in dependence.

This is not to say that Tiantai and the thought of Zhiyi are identical to or can be reduced to Indian Madhyamaka, nor do I mean to negate the massive influence Zhiyi's thought had on subsequent periods of Chinese and East Asian Buddhism. As a tradition rooted in meditative practice, ritual performance, and the interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, at most, Madhyamaka sources provide the philosophical bedrock for the elaborate system-building seen in the texts attributed to Zhiyi and his followers. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this article makes clear that Tiantai represents a viable and coherent interpretation and application of Madhyamaka thought, and that many of its distinctive moves have close precursors and parallels in Indic texts. My contention is that the three truths in particular, when considered from a transcultural perspective, do not introduce any fundamentally new philosophical moves into Madhyamaka discourse, but rather recover and build upon insights already present in the writings of Nāgārjuna. Such a position admittedly represents a deflationary reading of Tiantai philosophy that aims to bring it into closer conversation with parallel traditions of exegesis in China and beyond. It is, I believe, by studying Tiantai in closer connection with its historical contemporaries in China and its philosophical parallels in India and Tibet that a more accurate vision of this unique and complex tradition of Buddhist thought and practice will come into focus.

Appendix: Indic Commentaries on MMK 24.18

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 24.18

Ye, *Zhonglun song*, 426–27, etc.

Sanskrit

yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmabe |
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā ||

We declare that dependent origination is emptiness. Emptiness is dependent designation. Emptiness alone is the middle way.

Chinese

衆因緣生法 我說即是空
亦為是假名 亦是中道義

We explain that dharmas arisen from a multitude of causes and conditions are identical to emptiness. Emptiness is also a provisional designation. It is also the meaning of the middle way.

Tibetan

rten cing 'brel 'byung gang yin pa ||
de ni stong pa nyid du bshad ||
de ni brten nas gdags pa ste ||
de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin no ||

Dependent origination is described as emptiness. That is dependent designation. That itself is the middle way.

Akutobhayā – anonymous = *Buddhapālita-mūlamadhyamakavṛtti*
– *Buddhapālita*

Huntington, 'The Akutobhayā and Early Indian Madhyamaka', 524;
and Saito, 'A Study of the Buddhapālita-mūlamadhyamaka-vṛtti', 341.

kho bo ni rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba gang yin pa de ni | stong pa nyid du
'chad de | de ni brten nas gdags pa yin te | de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin no ||

We explain origination in dependence upon conditions as emptiness. That is dependent designation. That itself is the middle way.

Zhonglun 中論 – Qingmu 青目, Kumārajīva, et al.
Zhonglun, T no. 1564, 30: 33b15–33b18.

衆因緣生法, 我說即是空. 何以故. 衆緣具足和合而物生. 是物屬衆因緣故無自性. 無自性故空. 空亦復空, 但爲引導衆生故, 以假名說. 離有無二邊故名爲中道. 是法無性故不得言有. 亦無空故不得言無.

We explain that dharmas arisen from a multitude of causes and conditions are identical to emptiness. How so? It is when the requisite causes and conditions come together that an entity arises. Since such an entity is dependent upon a multitude of causes and conditions, it lacks an intrinsic nature. Since it lacks an intrinsic nature, it is empty. But this emptiness is also empty, and it is only for the sake of guiding sentient beings that it is taught as a provisional designation.⁷⁷ Because it transcends the two extremes of existence and nonexistence, it is called the middle way. Since such dharmas lack an intrinsic nature, one cannot say that they exist. Moreover, since their emptiness also does not exist, neither can one say that they do not exist.

⁷⁷ The first phrase of this sentence expressing that emptiness is itself also empty serves to relativize the notion of emptiness, which as the final sentence of the commentary suggests, is necessary in order to avoid the extreme of nonexistence. Given that emptiness is now the topic, the second phrase expressing that it is taught as a provisional designation for the sake of sentient beings should be understood as applying specifically to the notion of emptiness, and thereby justifying its propaedeutic value despite being empty and not ultimately real itself. Read as part of the *Zhonglun* then, it is most apposite to understand the third quarter of verse 24.18, wherein emptiness is identified with provisional designation, as a comment specifically on the notion of emptiness. While this interpretation runs counter to that expressed by Candrakīrti, which I myself endorse as the best reading of the Sanskrit itself, any attempt to read the *Zhonglun* as saying something else results in a very forced reading of the Chinese, as is evidenced in Oetke, ‘On MMK 24.18’, 10–11.

Prajñāpradīpa – Bhāviveka

Dbu ma'i rtsa ba'i 'grel pa shes rab sgron ma, BG vol. 57, 1380–1381.⁷⁸

*rten cing 'brel 'byung gang yin pa || de ni stong pa nyid du bshad ||
 dngos po rkyen rnams la rang gi dngos po yod pa dang | med pa dang |
 yod med dang | gzhan dang | gzhan ma yin pa dang | gnyis kar yod pa
 ma yin pa ni | don dam par rkyen rnams las rten cing 'brel par ngo bo
 nyid kyis 'byung ba med de | mig la sogs pa'i skye ba ni tha snyad kyi
 bden pa la brten pa yin no || de stong pa nyid du bshad pa ni | ngo bo
 nyid dang bral ba'i phyir te | ji skad du | gang zbig rkyen las skyes pa
 de ma skyes || de la ngo bo nyid kyis skye ba med || gang zbig rkyen la
 ltos pa de stong gsungs | gang gis stong nyid shes de bag yod yin || zhes
 gsungs pa dang | de bzhin du blo gros chen po ngo bo nyid kyis skye ba
 med pa la dgongs nas | chos thams cad stong par bshad do zhes gsungs
 pa lta bu'o || de ni brten nas gdags pa ste || de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin
 no || rten cing 'brel par 'byung ba zhes bya ba | stong pa nyid gang yin
 pa de ni brten nas gdags pa ste | 'jig rten pa dang | 'jig rten las 'das pa'i
 tha snyad 'dod pas nye bar len pa dag la brten nas gdags pa yin no ||
 de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin te | dbu ma ni skye ba dang | skye ba med pa
 dang | yod pa dang | med pa'i mtha' gnyis spangs pa'i phyir | 'di lta ste
 | skyes pa yang ma yin | ma skyes pa yang ma yin | yod pa yang ma yin
 | med pa yang ma yin | rtag pa yang ma yin | mi rtag pa yang ma yin
 | stong pa yang ma yin | mi stong pa yang ma yin pas | de'i phyir shes
 rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa las | ji skad du | dbu ma'i lam bsgom ni
 mig dngos po yod ces bya bar yongs su mi rtog | med ces bya bar yongs
 su mi rtog go zhes bya ba la sogs pa gsungs pa dang | 'phags pa dkon
 mchog brtsegs pa'i mdo las | 'od srungs yod ces bya ba 'di ni mtha' gcig
 go || med ces bya ba 'di ni mtha' gnyis so || mtha' de gnyis kyi bar gang
 yin pa de ni gzugs can ma yin pa bstan du med pa | thogs pa med pa |*

⁷⁸ A parallel recension of the *Prajñāpradīpa* is also preserved in Chinese, namely the *Boredeng lunshi* 般若燈論釋 translated by Prabhākaramitra (Ch. Boluopomiduoluo 波羅頗蜜多羅; 565–633). However, since the quality of this translation is not held in high regard by scholars of Indian Buddhism (see, for instance, Ames, 'Bhāvaviveka's *Prajñāpradīpa*', 211), I rely here upon the Tibetan translation.

*mi gnas pa | snang ba ma yin pa | rnam par rig pa ma yin pa | gnas
med pa'o zhes gsungs pa de dag grub po || lam ni thob pa'i thabs zhes
bya ba'i tha tshig go ||*

18ab. *Dependent origination is described as emptiness.*

As for whether the intrinsic nature of entities exists, does not exist, or both exists and does not exist in its conditions, or whether it is the same as, different from, or neither the same nor different from its conditions, in terms of the ultimate truth, nothing depending upon conditions arises with an intrinsic nature. The arising of the visual faculty and so forth is something that is based in conventional truth.

That is described as emptiness, because it is devoid of intrinsic nature. Hence, it is said:

That which arises from conditions is unarisen.
There is no arising of an intrinsic nature therein.
That which relies upon conditions is said to be empty.
He who understands emptiness is one who is attentive.⁷⁹

Likewise, 'Mahāmati, it is with regard to the non-arising of intrinsic nature that I have described all dharmas as empty'.⁸⁰

18cd. *That is dependent designation. That itself is the middle way.*

As for what is called origination in dependence upon conditions, it is this very emptiness that is itself dependent designation, as the

⁷⁹ This verse from the *Anavataptabradāpasamkramaṇa Sūtra*, also cited by Candrakīrti, appears to have been a favorite verse of both Mādhyamika exegetes. Candrakīrti cites it at least four times in the *Prasannapadā*, and three times in chapter 24 alone (de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, 239.10–13, 491.11–14, 500.7–10, and 504.1–4). Bhāviveka also cites it in the *Tarkajvālā* (Eckel, *Bhāviveka and His Buddhist Opponents*, 275–76, and 275, note 91).

⁸⁰ From the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, also cited by Candrakīrti.

conventions of this world and the world beyond are designations that depend upon appropriation as a result of desire.⁸¹ That itself is the middle way, because the middle way dispels the dualistic extremes of arising and non-arising, and of existence and nonexistence. In this way, it is neither arising nor non-arising, neither existence nor nonexistence, neither permanent nor impermanent, and neither empty nor not empty. Therefore, as it says in the Perfection of Wisdom Scriptures, ‘As for the cultivation of the middle way, one does not conceptualize that the visual faculty and objects exist, nor that they do not exist’, and so forth. As it says in the *Āryaratnakūṭa Sūtra*,

Kāśyapa, what is called ‘existence’ is one extreme, and what is called ‘nonexistence’ is another extreme. As for what is between these two extremes, it is without form and cannot be indicated. It is unobstructed and has no fixed abode. It has no appearance, cannot be perceived, and resides nowhere.

So it is established. As for the ‘Way’, this is a term denoting the means of attainment.

⁸¹ It is possible to understand Bhāviveka’s comments on the third quarter of MMK 24.18 both as a comment on emptiness itself as a term of art, in line with the *Zhonglun*, or else as a general statement about the nature of dependent designation, as seen in Candrakīrti. I opt for the latter here given that the justification provided in the following sentence seems to be universal in scope, applying to all concepts, including, but not limited to, emptiness. While other interpretations are certainly possible, perhaps the best way to paraphrase the point being made is that all the items of conventional discourse depend upon some form of appropriation (Skt. *upādāna*), in particular that of the five skandhas, and as such are another example of dependent origination. The focus would therefore seem to be on the equivalence between dependent origination and dependent designation, with the reference to emptiness serving primarily as a pivot.

*Prasannapadā – Candrakīrti*de la Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, 503.12–504.15

*yo 'yam pratītyasamutpādo hetupratyayān apeksyāṅkuravijñānādīnām
prādurbhāvaḥ sa svabhāvenānutpādaḥ | yas' ca svabhāvenānutpādo
bhāvānām sā śūnyatā || yathā bhagavatoktaṃ*

*yaḥ pratyayair jāyati sa hy ajāto
na tasya utpādu svabhāvato⁸² 'sti |
yaḥ pratyayādhīnu sa śūnya ukto
yaḥ śūnyatām jānati so 'pramattaḥ || iti |*

*tathāryalankāvatāre | svabhāvānutpattiṃ samdhāya mahāmate
sarvadharmāḥ śūnyā iti mayā deśitā iti vistareṇoktam |*

ardhaśatikāyāṃ śūnyāḥ sarvadharmāḥ niḥsvabhāvayogeneti ||

*yā ceyam svabhāvasūnyatā sā prajñaptir upādāya | saiva śūnyatā
upādāya prajñaptir iti vyavasthāpyate | cakrādīny upādāya rathāṅgāni
rathaḥ prajñapyate | tasya yā svāṅgāny upādāya prajñaptiḥ sā
svabhāvenānutpattiḥ | yā ca svabhāvenānutpattiḥ sā śūnyatā ||
saiva svabhāvānutpattilakṣaṇā śūnyatā madhyamā pratipad iti
vyavasthāpyate | yasya hi svabhāvenānutpattiḥ tasyāstitvābhāvaḥ |
svabhāvena cānutpannasya vīgamābhāvān nāstitvābhāva iti | ato
bhāvābhāvāntadvayarahitavāt sarvasvabhāvānutpattilakṣaṇā
śūnyatā madhyamā pratipad madhyamo mārga ity ucyate || tad
evaṃ pratītyasamutpādasyaivaitā viśeṣasamjñāḥ śūnyatā upādāya
prajñaptir madhyamā pratipad iti ||*

Dependent origination, the appearance of cognitions, sprouts, and the like in dependence upon causes and conditions, is non-origination with an intrinsic nature, and the non-origination of entities with an intrinsic nature is their emptiness. As the Blessed One said,

⁸² Should read *sabhāvato* to fit the metre (*upajāti*), *sabhāvo* being a Middle Indic equivalent for *svabhāva*.

For that which arises according to conditions is unarisen.
 It does not arise with an intrinsic nature.
 That which relies upon conditions is called empty,
 And he is attentive who understands emptiness.

As is said the *Laṅkāvatāra*, 'It is with reference to non-origination with an intrinsic nature, Mahāmati, that I have taught that all dharmas are empty', and so forth. And as in the *Ardhaśatikā*, 'All dharmas are empty on account of their lack of an intrinsic nature'.

Moreover, the emptiness of intrinsic nature is dependent designation, and so it is established in the verse that this very emptiness is dependent designation. A chariot is so designated in dependence upon the parts of a chariot such as the wheels and so forth. Its being so designated in dependence upon its parts is its non-origination with an intrinsic nature, and its non-origination with an intrinsic nature is its emptiness.

It is established that this very emptiness, characterized as non-origination with an intrinsic nature, is the middle way, for what does not originate with an intrinsic nature is without existence, and because what does not originate with an intrinsic nature does not cease to exist, its nonexistence also does not exist. Hence, because it is devoid of the two extremes of existence and nonexistence, it is said that emptiness characterized as the complete non-origination of anything with an intrinsic nature is the middle way, that is, the middle path. In this way, 'emptiness', 'dependent designation', and the 'middle way' are all just particular appellations for dependent origination.

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Abbreviations

- BG *Bstan 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*. Secondary Sources, Krung go'i bod rig pa zhib 'jug lte gnas kyi bka' bstan dpe sdur khang, ed.
- MMK *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Secondary Sources, Ye, ed.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. See Secondary Source, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.

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