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T'ien-t'ai Chih-i's Concept of Threefold Buddha Nature—A Synergy of Reality, Wisdom, and Practice

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The idea of Buddha Nature, that all beings have the innate potential to become Buddhas, was an important topic of debate in later T'ien-t'ai thought, and led to some fascinating speculations. Prominent among these was Chan-jan's^a (711-782) advocacy of Buddha Nature in all things, even in inanimate objects such as plants, trees, rocks and mountains, an idea which came to dominate Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.¹ Unlike later T'ien-t'ai thought, however, it would appear that the term "Buddha Nature" itself is not prominent in the writings of Chih-i, the founder of T'ien-t'ai philosophy.² It is not a topic dealt with explicitly at any length in his major works such as the *Fa-hua hsüan-i* or *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. Much as the three-

1 See especially his *Chin kang pei*^b, Taishō 46, 781-786. See also the essay by Heng-ching Shih in this volume.

2 For a quite different opinion, see Yu-kwan Ng's "Chih-i and Mādhyamika," Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University. Ng argues that what he calls "Middle Way-Buddha Nature" is the central concept in Chih-i's philosophy. There are some Japanese scholars who argue, on the other hand, that much of the material on Buddha Nature attributed to Chih-i is later, attributable especially to Chih-i's disciple Kuan-ting in response to the competition from San-lun scholarship. See Hakamaya Noriaki, *Hongaku shisō hihan* (Tokyo, 1989), especially 16-20. For textual studies showing the later accretions to Chih-i's work, especially in the *Fa-hua wen-chū*, see Hirai Shun'ei, *Hokke mongu no seiritsu ni kansuru kenkyū*.

fold truth (emptiness, conventional existence, and the Middle) provides the structure and basic pattern for Chih'i's massive system of Buddhist practice and philosophy without being expressly treated at any length, Buddha Nature is not so much explained as assumed.³ And yet, like the threefold truth, it is an important concept in Chih-i's T'ien-t'ai philosophy and practice in the sense that Buddha Nature is synonymous with the *ekayāna* principle of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the highest expression of the Buddha dharma. The concept of Buddha Nature, in this sense, is part of the assumed structure of Chih-i's T'ien-t'ai Buddhism.

The question then is, what does Buddha Nature mean and what is its significance for the theory and practice of the Buddha dharma? I intend to show that for Chih-i Buddha Nature is not a static entity but an active threefold process which involves the way reality is, the wisdom to see reality as it is, and the practice required to attain this wisdom. Buddha Nature is threefold: the three aspects of reality, wisdom, and practice are interdependent—one aspect does not make any sense without the others. In other words, the three aspect of reality, wisdom, and practice must be taken as a synergistic whole; they support each other and cannot be meaningful on their own. The "way things are" is realized (and Buddhahood achieved) through the attainment of wisdom, by following certain practices.

One of the few explicit discussions of Buddha Nature by Chih-i, and one that fits into the basic structure of his philosophy as a whole, is his formulation of the threefold Buddha Nature in the *Fa-hua hsüan-i*. Even this explanation is only a short part of a longer section on "threefold reality".⁴ The concept of threefold Buddha Nature is thus part of a general pattern in which various Buddhist concepts—*viññāna*, *prajñā*, *trikāya*, *triratna*, and so forth—are interpreted in a threefold pattern: the synergy of reality, wisdom, and practice. I will thus discuss Chih-i's concept of the threefold Buddha Nature in the context of this threefold pattern of reality, wisdom, and practice.

Threefold Reality Illustrated in Ten Categories

At the risk of straying too far from the subject of Buddha Nature, I will first present the ten Buddhist themes which Chih-i interprets in a threefold manner. It is within this context that Chih-i presents his idea of threefold Buddha Nature, and in order to understand Chih-i's threefold Buddha Nature it is useful to see how this pattern is applied on an extended level.

Chih-i's discussion of this threefold pattern begins with what he calls the three (or threefold) "tracks"^c. Chih-i uses the term "tracks" because these are the

3 On the threefold truth see my *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Buddhism: The Flowering of the Two Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism* (Berkeley, 1989).

4 Taishō 33, 741b-746c.

three aspects of the way things are; in a sense reality is "set" in a certain pattern. This basic pattern is illustrated through a discussion of ten Buddhist concepts, all of which are interpreted in terms of both their unity and diversity.⁵

The three "tracks" are: (1) the true nature^d of reality, i.e., the way things are whether or not one is aware or awakened to it; (2) the wisdom, or "illumination through insight"^e, which destroys one's delusions and through which the true nature of reality is revealed; and (3) one's inherent disposition^f or potential (and, implicitly, the practices necessary) to realize this wisdom.

Note that Chih-i emphasizes both the unity and diversity of these elements. As Chih-i is wont to say, they are three in one, one yet three. In technical T'ien-t'ai terminology:

There is only one Buddha vehicle. This single Buddha vehicle involves a threefold reality. This is also called the truth of supreme meaning, the supreme meaning of emptiness, and the *tathāgatagarbha*. These three [aspects] are not a fixed three; there are three yet they are one. The one is not a fixed one; there is one yet it is three. This is beyond conceptual understanding; these are neither in a straight row [the same] nor distinct, like the [Sanskrit] letter ∴ or the eyes of *īśvara* (𑖦).⁶



Chih-i then quotes the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* that "Buddha Nature is ... both one and not one, neither one nor not one."⁷ He explains that Buddha Nature is "one" because "all sentient beings [participate in] the single vehicle (*ekayāna*; i.e., all sentient beings are destined to eventually attain Buddhahood), and this expresses the truth of supreme meaning (*paramārthasatya*)."⁸ For Buddha Nature to be "not one" means that "there are numerous dharmas (i.e., the diversity of provisional reality); this expresses *tathāgatagarbha*."⁹ Buddha Nature is "neither one nor not

5 Taishō 33, 741b11.

6 Taishō 33, 741b13-17. These images are often used by Chih-i to illustrate the unity and diversity of the three-in-one, one-yet-three formulation. The Sanskrit vowel 'i' and the three eyes of *īśvara* are arranged in such a way, like a triangle, that they illustrate how three elements can be taken as a single unit. The three eyes of *īśvara*, for example, with two eyes lined up as in the ordinary human face and one extra eye in the middle of the forehead, can be taken as a single unity (unity), yet as three eyes (diversity). The two analogies are from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (Taishō 12, 616b11-17).

7 Taishō 12, 770b20-25. The full quotation from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is: "Good sons, Buddha Nature is both *rūpa* and not *rūpa*, neither *rūpa* nor not *rūpa*. It both has marks and does not have marks, neither has marks nor does not have marks. It is both one and not one, neither one nor not one. It is not eternal nor is it cut off; it is neither noneternal nor not cut off. It is both existent and non-existent; it is neither existent nor non-existent. It is both perishing and non-perishing; it is neither perishing nor non-perishing. It has both cause and effect; it has neither cause nor effect. It has meaning and no meaning; it neither has meaning nor no meaning. It is both verbal and nonverbal; it is neither verbal nor nonverbal."

8 Taishō 33, 741b18-19.

9 Taishō 33, 741b19-20.

one”; it is neither a fixed unity nor a fixed diversity; there is one reality with three “names.”¹⁰ It is not that there are three “realities,” but that there are three aspects to the way things are. This threefold pattern, and the three-in-one yet one-as-three motif, is related to Chih-i’s concept of the threefold truth, and also holds true for the remaining threefold categories (for which refer to the chart on page 176).

What then are these ten categories of threefold reality and their content? Chih-i lists them, and gives the reasons for their choice and order, as follows:

(1) The threefold path of cyclic *samsāra* is the basic dharma, therefore it comes first. If one wishes to reverse the flow of *samsāra*, one should understand (2) threefold consciousness, know (3) threefold Buddha Nature, awaken (4) threefold wisdom, arouse (5) threefold *bodhi*-mind, practice (6) the threefold Mahāyāna, illumine (7) the threefold body (*trikāya*), and perfect/attain (8) threefold nirvāṇa. (9) The three jewels (*tri-ratna*—Dharma, Buddha, Saṅgha) benefit all [beings] and when their [task of] transforming and leading [others] is exhausted, they will enter (10) the threefold virtue/reward and dwell in the secret storehouse [of Buddhahood].¹¹

The “threefold path,” the first of the ten sets of three, refers to the cycle of *samsāra* as suffering, passions, and karma. There is suffering (the way things are), which leads to passionate attachment and delusion (the opposite of wisdom), which in turn leads to karmic activity, leading again to further suffering in an endless cycle. This is the human condition. The themes which follow consist of those matters which need to be realized or perfected in order to overcome this human condition and attain the perfection of a Buddha.

The second of set of three is threefold consciousness: *amala-vijñāna*, *ālaya-vijñāna*, *āḍāna-vijñāna*, the threefold consciousness beyond the five senses, and ordinary consciousness (*mano-vijñāna*). At this point, Chih-i relies upon the “nine *vijñāna*” theory of the She-lun school rather than the traditional “eight *vijñāna*” theory of the Ti-lun school.¹² *Amala-vijñāna*, pure or undefiled consciousness, corresponds to the aspect of “true nature,” *ālaya-vijñāna*, the “store” consciousness, corresponds to the aspect of wisdom, and *āḍāna-vijñāna*, which holds the “seeds” for both defilement and enlightenment, corresponds to the aspect of practice or

10 Taishō 33, 741b20-22.

11 Taishō 33, 744a24-28.

12 Chih-i is aware of the fact that there are various interpretations of these “upper levels” of consciousness. See the *Fa-hua hsüan-i* [Taishō 33, 744b-c] and his commentary on the *Vimalakīrtisūtra* [Taishō 38, 553a]. This is a very complicated subject which cannot be dealt with in this paper. For a good summary see Stanley Weinstein, “The Concept of *ālaya-vijñāna* in Pre-T’ang Chinese Buddhism,” in *Yūki kyōju shōju kinen: bukkyō shisōshi ronshū* (Tokyo, 1964), 33-50.

activity.¹³ Chih-i takes pains to point out, however, that these "three" are actually aspects of a single consciousness; these *viññāna* are three in one, one yet three, as explained above.

The third of the sets of three is threefold Buddha Nature; this is explained in the next section

The fourth of the sets of three is threefold *prajñā* wisdom: the "real aspects" of *prajñā* refer to "all things" (*sarvadharma*) as correctly perceived through *prajñā* wisdom: *prajñā* illuminated through insight/contemplation refers to the wisdom itself which illuminates reality as it is; "verbal" *prajñā* refers to the texts and verbal expressions of *prajñā*, as well as other upāyic expressions of *prajñā*.¹⁴

The fifth of the sets of three is threefold *bodhi*-wisdom: the "real aspects" of *bodhi* refer to reality as correctly perceived through *bodhi*-wisdom; *bodhi* as "real wisdom" refers to the wisdom itself which perceives reality as it is; *bodhi* as skilful means (*upāya*) refers to activity and working out of *bodhi*-wisdom in the mundane world, such as Śākyamuni's career and attainment of *samyaksambodhi*.¹⁵

The sixth of the sets of three is threefold Mahāyāna ["great vehicle"]: the vehicle as reality (*tathatā*); the vehicle in accordance with wisdom; the vehicle as attainment, i.e., practice as the vehicle for attaining wisdom. In more technical terms, and with reference to a passage from the *Lotus Sūtra*,¹⁶ the three aspects of reality refer to the "vehicle as reality", the great vehicle on which the Buddha himself dwells; the "vehicle in accordance", that adorned with samādhi and wisdom; and the "vehicle of attainment", the dharmas which are attained through practice.¹⁷

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- 13 It is interesting to note that Chih-i was familiar with but did not make much of these Yogācāra concepts. In fact, he seems to have considered the Yogācāra tradition, or at least the *Mahāyānasāṅgraha*, to be inadequate since it was (as far as he knew) too academic and did not teach the concrete practices needed to attain the fine state of Buddhahood expounded in the text. He once compared the teachings of the *Mahāyānasāṅgraha*, especially the sections detailing the qualities of a Buddha, to a poor man counting his master's treasure. See *Fa-hua hsüan-i*, Taishō 33, 704c13.
- 14 Taishō 33, 744c27-745a4. This classification is based on a gloss found in the *Ta chih tu lun* (Taishō 44, 669a-c).
- 15 Taishō 33, 745a14-17. This classification seems to be based on a passage in the *Saddharmapundarīkasūtropadeśa* which presents three kinds of "Buddha-bodhi" based on the *trikāya* theory. See Taishō 26, 9b11-19.
- 16 See Taishō 9, 8a23-24. Leon Hurvitz translates: "the Buddha himself dwells in the Greater Vehicle; whatever dharmas he acquires, adorned with the strength of concentration and wisdom" *The Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York, 1976), 34.
- 17 Taishō 33, 745a26-28. This terminology seems to be borrowed from a threefold classification of Mahāyāna in the *Mahāyānasāṅgrahabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu's commentary to the *Mahāyānasāṅgraha* as translated by Paramārtha. See Taishō 31, 234c21-24.

CHIH-I'S ANALYSIS OF THREEFOLD REALITY

basic pattern	reality 理	wisdom 智	行 practice 願
"tracks" 三軌	true nature itself 真性軌	the wisdom which illuminates the true nature 觀照軌	practice which perfects inherent disposition for wisdom 資成軌
threefold truth 三諦	middle 中	emptiness 空	conventional existence 假
1. cyclic path 三道	path of suffering 苦道	path of passions 煩惱道	path of karma 業道
2. consciousness (<i>vijñāna</i>) 三識	<i>amala-vijñāna</i> 菴摩羅識	<i>ālaya-vijñāna</i> 阿黎耶識	<i>ādāna-vijñāna</i> 阿陀那識
3. Buddha Nature 三佛性	direct cause of Buddhahood 正因性	complete cause of Buddhahood 了因性	conditional causes of Buddhahood 緣因性
4. <i>prajñā</i> 三般若	the real aspects of <i>prajñā</i> 實相	<i>prajñā</i> illuminated through insight- contemplation 觀照	verbal <i>prajñā</i> 文字
5. <i>bodhi</i> -wisdom 三菩提	the real aspects of <i>bodhi</i> 實相	<i>bodhi</i> as real wisdom 實智	<i>bodhi</i> as skilful means (<i>upāya</i>) 方便
6. Mahāyāna 三大乘	the vehicle as reality 理乘	the vehicle in accordance with [wisdom] 隨乘	the vehicle as attainment 得乘
7. <i>trikāya</i> 三身	<i>dharmakāya</i> 法身	<i>sambhogakāya</i> 報身	<i>nirmānakāya</i> 應身
8. nirvāṇa 三涅槃	nirvāṇa as pure by nature 性淨	nirvāṇa as perfect- complete unity 圓淨	nirvāṇa as pure in skilful means 方便
9. <i>triratna</i> 三寶	Dharma 法	Buddha 佛	Saṅgha 僧
10. virtues/rewards 三德	<i>dharmakāya</i> 法身	<i>prajñā</i> -wisdom 般若	liberation 解脫

The seventh of the sets of three is the threefold body (*trikāya*) of the Buddha: the *dharmakāya*—body of dharma; the *sambhogakāya*—reward body, the wisdom of a Buddha as a reward for the practice of a bodhisattva; and *nirmāṇakāya*—transformation body, the appearance activity of a Buddha in this world.

The eighth of the sets of three is threefold nirvāṇa: nirvāṇa as pure by nature, i.e., "the nature of reality", i.e., nirvāṇa as the complete and perfect result of perfecting wisdom and Buddhahood; and nirvāṇa as pure in skilful means, i.e., the attainment of nirvāṇa while still being active (though undefiled) to save other beings in this world, as "when firewood has been exhausted and the fire extinguished."¹⁸

The ninth of the sets of three is the three jewels (*triratna*): the Dharma, reality as it is; the Buddha, or those who have attained wisdom; and the Saṅgha, the assembly of those who practice the Buddhist path.

The tenth and last of the sets of three is threefold virtue, the reward which accompanies the attainment of Buddhahood: dharmakāya, *prajñā*-wisdom, and liberation.¹⁹ Once again, dharmakāya refers to reality as it is; *prajñā* to the wisdom which correctly perceives this reality; and liberation to the attainment of this wisdom.

Threefold Buddha Nature

Threefold Buddha Nature consists of: (1) Buddha Nature as the direct cause of attaining Buddhahood, which corresponds to the aspect of "true nature"; (2) Buddha Nature as the complete cause of attaining Buddhahood, which corresponds to the aspect of wisdom; and (3) Buddha Nature as the conditional causes of attaining Buddhahood, which corresponds to the aspect of practice.

Buddha Nature as direct cause refers to the innate potential in all sentient beings to become a Buddha;²⁰ Chih-i illustrates this aspect of Buddha Nature by quoting the passage from the *Lotus Sūtra* in which the rich father announces to everyone the true nature of his "lost" son: "You are truly my son; I am truly your father."²¹ This passage illustrates the aspect of Buddha Nature as reality. Since all beings have within them the potential to become a Buddha, this is the "direct cause" for attaining Buddhahood.

The other two aspects of Buddha Nature are illustrated by a quotation from the parable of the priceless jewel sewn into the friend's garment: "I, from the past,

18 Taishō 33, 745b27-c2.

19 Based on a passage in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. See Taishō 12, 616b11-17.

20 Taishō 744b12-13.

21 See the parable of the lost son in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Taishō 9, 17b13-14. See Hurvitz, *Scripture*, 88.

have taught you the supreme path, therefore ... the vow [to attain] all wisdom persists without being lost.”²² Chih-i takes the word “wisdom” in this proof-text to illustrate Buddha Nature as the complete cause, i.e., the wisdom which illumines the true nature of reality, and the word “vow” to illustrate Buddha Nature as conditional causes, i.e., the practices necessary to attain wisdom.

Chih-i quotes further from the *Lotus Sūtra* to illustrate the threefold Buddha Nature: the pronouncement of the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging that “I do not hold [any of] you in contempt, because all of you will become Buddhas” is said to illustrate Buddha Nature as the direct cause of Buddhahood, i.e., that everyone has within them the innate potential to become a Buddha. The four assemblies of monks and lay people, who at first mocked the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging, later reformed their ways and chanted the sūtras and so forth, and so attained the Buddha’s wisdom. This illustrates Buddha Nature as complete cause. The various virtues and rewards gained by these figures illustrate Buddha Nature as conditional causes.²³

This threefold classification and the terms Chih-i uses are traditionally attributed to passages from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.²⁴ The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, however, speaks of a twofold Buddha Nature, and the inspiration for a threefold pattern seems to come from Chih-i himself. A passage on Buddha Nature in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* says:

World Honored One! As the Buddha explains, there are two types of causes, [direct] causes and conditional causes. Which [kind of] cause is the Buddha Nature of sentient beings?

Good sons! There are also two types of causes for the Buddha Nature of sentient beings. The first is correct [direct] causes and the second is conditional causes. “Correct causes”^g refers to all sentient beings [themselves], and “conditional causes”^h refers to [the practice of] the six perfections.²⁵

At this point we have only two of the three parts of Chih-i’s threefold Buddha Nature. Later on in the same passage of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, however, we find that “conditional causes” are equated with “complete causes”ⁱ.²⁶ Here, the three individual terms are found in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, but the threefold structure and explanation of these terms is original with Chih-i.

22 The second half of this phrase corresponds to Taishō 9, 29a18-19. Hurvitz translates, “though the vow concerning All-Knowledge, still there, had never lost its effect” (*Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, 165).

23 *Lotus Sūtra*, Taishō 9, 50c-51b; *ibid.*, 280-282.

24 See, for example, Taishō 12, 775-776.

25 Taishō 12, 775b26-29.

26 Taishō 12, 776b4.

What, then, is Chih-i's intention in proposing a threefold Buddha Nature? Some of his illustrations seem rather imaginative, but his intent is clear. He is concerned to identify Buddha Nature with the *ekayāna* principle of the *Lotus Sūtra*, that all sentient beings are destined to attain Buddhahood. Buddha Nature is seen to have three aspects: first, the way things are, i.e., the innate potential in all beings to attain Buddhahood, whether it is realized or not; second, the wisdom which is the content of the Buddha's enlightenment and the goal of practice; and third, the practices or activity required to realize this wisdom. Buddha Nature is not a static entity but an active process—a synergistic trinity of reality, wisdom, and practice.²⁷ Otherwise, Buddha Nature reverts to being a kind of substantial ātman, an idea which is antithetical to the very foundations of Buddhist thought.

Further, these three aspects of Buddha Nature are dependent on each other; they have no meaning on their own. There is no independent "potential" for Buddhahood or wisdom without practice; practice has no meaning without the promise of attaining Buddhahood. The potential is there, but it must be realized. They are three in one, one yet three.

Conclusion

We have seen how Chih-i presented his concept of a threefold Buddha Nature in the context of interpreting a number of traditional Buddhist concepts in terms of threefold dharmas. The basic threefold pattern—reality, wisdom, practice—and the synergistic relationship that obtains among them is, in a sense, a way to avoid a simplistic treatment of the question whether Buddha Nature "exists" or "does not exist." To Chih-i, Buddha Nature, synonymous with the *ekayāna* principle of the promise of Buddhahood for all beings, is not a static entity, and yet one cannot say that it does not exist. Buddha Nature is part of a larger world of experience which includes the other threefold dharmas and involves three aspects: the way things are, the wisdom to perceive them correctly, and the practice required to attain this wisdom.

It may not be appropriate to ask how Chih-i would have responded to the famous Zen query "Does a dog have Buddha Nature?" After all, this question arose much later under quite different social and historical circumstances. But to venture a guess, he may have taken the "middle" way and answered "Yes and no," and if in a talkative mood would have continued with the standard Mādhyamika response, "Well, actually, yes, no, both yes and no, and neither yes nor no. In your case follow such-and-such a practice, and strive to realize the wonderful and subtle

27 Can this pattern be carried further into Christian theology and the idea of the Trinity: the father as reality, the son as incarnate wisdom, the holy spirit as the carrying out of activity in our daily lives? I leave that question for another occasion.

dharma of the Buddha.” Or, in terms of the threefold truth he may have answered, “There is no Buddha Nature because everything is empty of svabhāvic-being and is subject to dependent coarising, yet there is Buddha Nature in the conventional sense that all beings have the potential to become Buddhas and (according to the *Lotus Sūtra*) are destined to do so; to realize the truth of both these statements is the Middle Way.” Wordy and pedantic, perhaps, and not as striking as simply barking out *WU*, but it covers all the bases. And it draws one’s attention back to the importance of correct *practice* to realize one’s inherent/potential *Buddha Nature*.

Chinese Characters

- a 湛然
- b 金剛 金剛
- c 三軌
- d 真性
- e 觀性
- f 資成
- g 正因
- h 緣因
- i 了因

BUDDHA NATURE

