

Responding to an Inquiry on Buddhism¹

Buddhism is difficult to discuss; there are too many schools of thought and too many written works. If, however, one wants to seek the original meaning of Shakyamuni then one should base oneself on the “Agamas” [阿含 revealed discourses]. Among the four Agamas, the *Miscellaneous Agama* [雜阿含] is the most important. The twenty sects of the Theravadin gradually split into two schools of thought: the schools of emptiness and existence.² The Theravadin School of Emptiness developed to Nagarjuna and Deva [c. 2nd century CE] becoming the Mahayana School of Emptiness [the Madhyamaka] while the Theravadin School of Existence developed to Asanga and Vasubandhu [c. 4th century CE] becoming the Mahayana School of Existence [the Yogacara]. The fundamental text of the Mahayana School of Emptiness are the four treatises: *Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom* [大智度論], the *Middle Treatise* [中論], the *Hundred Treatises* [百論], and the *Twelve Gate Treatise* [十二門論].³ The great scripture [of the Madhyamaka School] is the *Perfection of Wisdom* [般若波羅蜜靜]. The fundamental texts of the Mahayana School of Existence are six scriptures and eleven treatises, as recounted in Kui Ji’s “*Narrated Notes [on Xuan Zang’s Translation of Vasubandhu’s] Thirty Verses*” [窺基 “三十述記”].

For this reason, the Mahayana School of Emptiness collected all the achievements of the Theravada’s discussions of emptiness, while the Mahayana School of Existence collected all the achievements of the Theravada’s discussions of existence. Accordingly, [Buddhist] thought after the “Agamas,” sought thoroughly to study the two schools of the Mahayana, the Schools of Emptiness and Existence, that were the theories of Nagarjuna and Deva, and Asanga and Vasubandhu. For this reason, the evolution of Buddhist thought, even though it is long and complicated, we may assume that the *Miscellaneous Agama* and the other three primary Agamas are the genesis of Buddhist thought. Nagarjuna and Deva of the Mahayana School of Emptiness, and Asanga and Vasubandhu of the Mahayana School of Existence all represent a later, new and developing Buddhist thought. Relying on the *Miscellaneous Agama* and other works to find original Buddhist

¹ A translation of a letter from Xiong Shili to an unnamed correspondent (答客問) originally published by Beiping (now Beijing) University in 1935. The letter can be found on pp. 27-28 of the first fascicle of *The Essential Sayings of Xiong Shili* (十力語要) republished by the Shanghai Bookstore Publishers in 2007 as Volume 15 in *The Collected Works of Xiong Shili* (十力全集), Hubei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2001, digital version.

² In Chinese, the School of Existence is 有宗 while the School of Emptiness is 空宗. Existence here is not to be confused with naïve realism while emptiness is not to be confused with nihilism.

³ Kumarajiva translated these last three treatises, referred to as the Three Treatises, in 408-409. They are the foundational documents of the Three Treatise School, also known as the Madhyamaka School.

thought, I have said that in this original period, Buddhist thought is only a theory of life (人生論). Once the Mahayana Schools of Emptiness and Existence matured separately, however, the Mahayana School of Existence then began to discuss cosmology while the Mahayana School of Emptiness began to discuss ontology. Both represented newly emerging Buddhist thinking.

The *Perfection of Wisdom* and the four *Agama* treatises specifically block and deflect all attachments (執) hoping to make people see their attachments as empty and thus see the ultimate truth. Ultimate truth here is just another term for the fundamental reality (本體). The same holds for future uses of the term. The ultimate truth is beyond rational understanding - the mind's path is cut off, language fails to express it, and it cannot be directly described. Thus, because of peoples' delusions and obsessions, they cannot see the ultimate truth themselves. Instead, they use all kinds of conveniences to break their delusional attachments. They then see that what they grasp is merely empty, while the truth speaks for itself in silence. Here truth is a synonym for the fundamental reality. It's like pushing through the clouds and mist and then seeing blue sky. Of those who discuss fundamental reality (本體), of all the philosophies and metaphysics both east and west, both old and new, only the Mahayana School of Emptiness departs from frivolous discourse (戲論), and this is a momentous event.

The Mahayana School of Existence initially discussed the five aggregates (五蘊).⁴ The twelve places [of entrance for the senses: the six sense organs and the data that enter for discrimination] and the eighteen realms [of the senses: the six organs, their objects, and perceptions] just take the five aggregates' physical and mental dharmas and arranges them differently. The Mahayana School of Existence analyses mental and material phenomena to make clear that there is no atman (無我) [i.e. no soul] and uses this to refute the unorthodox schools' (外道) arguments that the atman is divine, and this [Mahayana School of Existence's] idea of non-atman hews closely to that held by the School of Emptiness. Asanga produced the *Mahayana Compendium* (攝大乘論) that established the Eighth or Alaya consciousness and [used the *Compendium*] to instruct Vasubandhu who in turn produced the *Hundred Treatises*, the *Twenty Verses*, the *Thirty Verses*, and as a result firmly established the Alaya consciousness in which the dependent arising of seeds and their manifestations takes place. In reality, however, the alaya was merely a universe constructed according to Asanga's own imaginings. My work, the *Refutation of the Refutation of the New Treatise on the Uniqueness of*

⁴ The Buddha himself taught the five aggregates that form the illusion of a permanent self: 色 *rūpa* form, materiality, corporality; 受 *vedanā* feelings, sensations; 想 *saṃjñā* perceptions, impulses, habit patterns; 行 *samskāras* volition, intent; 識 *viññāna* consciousness.

Consciousness (破破新唯識論) refutes [this interpretation of the Alaya] in detail. Although the Theravada had a specific school of thought that discussed existence, it was not until the Mahayana Masters Asanga and Vasubandhu that [the school of existence's] cosmology was fully articulated. Yet however rigorous and refined the theories [of Asanga and Vasubandhu] may have been, they strayed significantly from the essential purport of the School of Emptiness.

The Buddhist thinking about life, from original Buddhism down to the later Mahayana, advocated (主) transcending the sea of life and death. From the Agamas to the scriptures (經) and treatises (論) of the Mahayana Schools of Existence and Emptiness, all have this same, consistent spirit [to transcend life and death]. The Mahayana has a “no dwelling in nirvana”⁵ teaching, a teaching relatively more advanced than original Buddhism. (The teaching) rightly opposes original Buddhism's self-righteousness that does not permit one to enter “nirvana without remainder,”⁶ or make one's own plans, but rather one must pursue the supreme Bodhi [enlightenment necessary to the attainment of Buddhahood], develop great compassion, and walk the path of the Bodhisattva. [No dwelling in nirvana] does not stop at birth and death, and it also does not stop at nirvana. One must help all sentient beings [to cross the sea of life and death] and, if there is a group of sentient beings that have not been awakened [to Buddhahood], then that situation prevents one from becoming enlightened. This is a distinctive feature of the Mahayana: it is necessary to liberate all sentient beings and allow them to escape from the sea of life and death as that is the final ideal. Regardless of whether this ideal can be accomplished or not, the purpose of liberating sentient beings from life and death is after all the reason [a Bodhisattva] returns to the world and nirvana, and this [concept of liberating sentient beings from life and death] may be unique to the Indian people, and we need not discuss whether it is right or wrong.

⁵ The “no dwelling in nirvana teaching” means an enlightened person does not passively remain in nirvana but uses their wisdom actively to help other suffering beings.

⁶ “Nirvana without remainder” is the final, complete liberation in Buddhism, achieved at death, where the cycle of rebirth (samsara) ends because all karmic fuel (desire, ignorance, attachment) is extinguished, leaving no trace or potential for future existence.