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Philosophy East and West, Volume 63, Number 2, April 2013, pp. 153-175
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2013.0018](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2013.0018)

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 63 - Number 2

University of Hawai'i Press

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WHAT IT MEANS TO INTERPRET: A STANDARD FORMULATION AND ITS IMPLICIT COROLLARIES IN CHINESE BUDDHISM

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Introduction

In the study of the Buddhist practice of scriptural interpretation, an inevitable subject of inquiry, apart from the content of interpretation, is the act of interpretation itself. Such an inquiry may naturally go in two different directions, looking at either the theories *of* interpretation or the theories *about* interpretation. The theories *of* interpretation guide the understanding and retrieval of meaning, and the theories *about* interpretation explore instead the nature or, more specifically, the role of interpretation in the transmission of truth. In other words, of these two directions the former asks how one interprets and the latter what it means to interpret.

In Western studies of Buddhism over the past few decades, theories of interpretation have increasingly been attracting attention under the name of “Buddhist hermeneutics,”¹ and this trend in the first direction has been creating repercussions in buddhological circles in East Asia.² Theories about interpretation, as its natural counterpart, however, have remained largely unexplored; it is thus the purpose of the present article, going in the second direction, to investigate Buddhist views about the nature of interpretation.

The present article will address its problem through a case study in Chinese Buddhism. It will focus primarily on the Buddhist commentaries, translations, and biographies of eminent Buddhist monks³—those of exegetes and translators in particular—with emphasis placed on their theoretical reflections on the issues of language, its relationship with truth, its access and presentation, and the methods thereof. As a tentative solution to the problem, I will present, first, a standard formulation of a general understanding of interpretation among Chinese Buddhists, and then its implicit corollaries—those supplementary but unformulated theoretical reflections that help to justify and sustain this standard formulation.⁴

Truth (Li 理), Teaching (Jiao 教), and Interpretation (Jie 解): A Standard Formulation

A good example of the Chinese response to such a problem can be found in a short sixth-century essay that concludes a group of biographies for eminent Buddhist exegetes.⁵ Reflecting on the practice of scriptural interpretation, the essay offers a basic

structure of truth, teaching, and interpretation, a structure that explains how Buddhists generally view the role of interpretation in the transmission of truth.

The essay begins with a brief discussion of the Buddhist truth as resistant and impermeable to any form of intellection:⁶

The supreme truth (*zhili* 至理) is wordless, and the abstruse principle (*xuanzhi* 玄致) is quiescent. Quiescent, the mind ceases in its activities, and, wordless, the path of language is cut off. Cutting off the path of language [implies that] the use of words will harm their purport, and the cessation of mental activities [entails that] any attempt at conceptualization causes the loss of truth. It is for this reason that Vimalakīrti remains silent in his chamber,⁷ and Śākyamuni hesitates between the twin *śāla* trees.⁸ Apparently, since the essence of truth is its unfathomable quiescence, sages choose to avoid the use of words.⁹

This is, apparently, a clichéd theory to the Buddhists—that truth is ineffable, and that this ineffability means, positively, that truth is beyond intellection or its specific form of words, or, negatively, that truth is obscured whenever intellect is employed to gain access to and express it. In short, truth, the sacred, is irremediably separated from and denied to intellect, the profane/secular.

This situation is remediable, however—at least so the Buddhists claim—and the remedy, equally clichéd, is found in the Buddha's teaching, which is meant to intervene on behalf of sentient beings by bridging the sacred and the profane. The essay goes on to say:

However, since our realm of dreams is set vastly apart from the principle, how will we the multitude ever be awakened [to the principle] without the teaching (*jiao* 教) of the Buddha? Thus, the sage [i.e., the Buddha] draws on the inconceivable to adaptively [address the needs of] sentient beings, and experiences the quiescent in his resonance with the divine. [In short, the Buddha] conveys the Dao in his subtle words, and presents reality with forms and images.¹⁰

The truth, labeled variously as “principle” (*li* 理), “Dao,” and “reality” (*zhen* 真), can be reached by the Buddha through his direct meditative experience (i.e., *ti mingji* 體冥寂, his experience of the quiescent), and presented to the “multitude” of sentient beings through the medium of the intellect, such as “words” (*yan* 言), “forms” (*xing* 形), and “images” (*xiang* 像)—such media, as the remedy to the ineffability of truth, represent the teaching of the Buddha in its different forms.

In view of the reliance of teaching on intellection, however, the essay, as would other Buddhist writings, hastens to emphasize the provisional and thus imperfect nature of teaching, using a language full of stock metaphors:

Therefore it is said: “As instruments of evil, arms are only used when forced by circumstances, and, without access to reality, language is invoked only as the last resort.” [Thus the Buddha] began [his teaching career] at the Deer Park, where he first used words in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, and concluded at the grove of *śāla* trees, [where his teaching] culminated in [the doctrine of the simultaneous attainment of] three things.¹¹ In between, the teachings of the Buddha given at various places exceed eight hundred million in number—[so numerous] that even elephants cannot carry them all, and an over-

flowed dragon palace cannot store them all! [As important as they are, such teachings are only] meant as a trap for the hunting of hares, or a finger for pointing at the moon, and, [at the same time, it must be noted that] the finger may become dispensable after the moon is seen, and the trap can be forgotten after the hare is caught—precisely what is meant in the scripture when it cautions: “rely on the meaning, but not on the letter!”¹²

The metaphors—“arms” as a necessary evil, hare’s “trap” as a hunting device, and “finger” as a pointer at the moon—are so well known that the point of the passage is straightforward, familiar, and in that sense also clichéd: the teaching of the Buddha, in the form of words, is, although necessary, only an imperfect and dispensable medium for the transmission of truth! When the scripture asserts that one must “rely on the meaning, but not on the letter,” it means “teaching” by the word “letter,” and further means that “teaching” should be sacrificed for the sake of “meaning” (*yi* 義), that is, the truth conveyed through teaching!¹³

This perception about the imperfect nature of teaching brings the essay naturally and logically to a conclusion that dwells upon the role of interpretation in the transmission of truth:

However, those who adhere to teaching think that the supreme Dao is exhaustively [revealed in] writings, and those who cling to forms believe that the essence-body [of Buddha] is the same as a sixteen-foot-tall statue (*zhangliu* 丈六). For that reason, one should thoroughly penetrate [the cover of words and forms] in order to reach the hidden purport (*youzhi* 幽旨), and discover [the truth] outside words (*yanwai* 言外) in an inconceivable way. [One should], then, with unimpeded eloquence and [moral] adornment, extensively explain [the truth] to sentient beings. [In short,] [all such tasks of explanation]—to illustrate, to instruct, to benefit, and to encourage—lie [ultimately] with the masters of Dharma (*fashi* 法師)!¹⁴

Teaching is an imperfect medium of truth, for it is ultimately just a product of intellection in the form of “writings”—here teaching is analogously compared to “a sixteen-foot-tall” statue, which, as a crafted physical form and thus ultimately also a product of intellection, is only an imperfect representation of the essence-body of the Buddha. However, teachings such as “writings” are often mistaken for truth itself in the same way that forms such as “a sixteen-foot-tall” statue are often mistaken for the essence-body of the Buddha. Thus, the essay emphatically points out the role of interpretation: exegetes, that is, the “masters of Dharma,” must go beyond the words or other obstacles created by the intellection in teaching, reach the truth either deeply “hidden” in or simply “outside” words, and then bring it to sentient beings, the audience of their interpretation.

In thus delineating the transmission of truth from its ineffability, through its provisional but imperfect medium of teaching, eventually to the interpretation of the exegetes, this essay presents interpretation as the last resort in the safeguarding of a successful process in the transmission of truth. The role of this last resort, or the meaning of interpretation, is thus succinctly but emphatically explained in its positioning in a formulation that highlights the three essential components of the process, namely truth, teaching, and interpretation.

Such a formulation is certainly not the creation of this sixth-century essay alone—the very fact that it is expressed with such facility and with such clarity suggests that this view of interpretation had already become widely accepted by the time this essay was written. Indeed, in the earliest Chinese Buddhist reflections on interpretation, the attention to truth, teaching, and interpretation as a related triad, although not necessarily expressed the same way, was already quite visible. A third-century exegete offered the following remarks on the significance of his own work:

The meaning (*yi* 義) of this text is rich and abysmally unfathomable. It surpasses the clear sky if planted vertically, and permeates the eight extremities [of the earth] when placed horizontally—it is, [in short,] vast, endless, and unrivaled. Holding [the text] and examining the elaborations (*liu* 流) [of its meaning], I [am sometimes so absorbed in the text as to] forget hunger. Thus, finding time during a sackcloth mourning, I appended explanations of meaning (*zhuyi* 注義) to this text. By taking it apart and explaining each entry one after another, the commentary is able to clarify the doubts in chapters and sentences, thus enabling those unenlightened to cleanse their senses and gradually improve in their understanding.¹⁵

The word “meaning” refers to the thematic content of the scripture to be explained in this commentary, that is, the content of teaching; and the content of teaching, in this case, apparently refers to what the author himself believes to be the content of truth,¹⁶ or simply the truth itself—for, otherwise, what else deserves to be described as “surpassing” the sky, “permeating” the world, and “unrivaled”? “Held,” “examined,” and containing “chapters and sentences,” the “elaborations” of truth apparently refer to the scripture and, in that sense, to teaching.

To “append explanations of meaning” to the text is, needless to say, to interpret it. A similar example can be found in a fourth-century discussion of interpretation:

With words (*yan* 言) archaic and writings (*wen* 文) rich in reference, the meaning [of the scripture] appears mysterious and the truth inconceivable—it would be rare to appreciate [such mystery and inconceivability, as it would be rare to appreciate the hidden] beauty in the deep recesses of a mansion and the sophistication of a courtyard garden!¹⁷ So absorbed [am I] whenever the text is in my hand that I simply cannot part with it ... and therefore in my spare time I venture to put together explanations (*cuozhu* 撮注) to this scripture.¹⁸

The “words” and “writings” refer to teaching; paralleled with “words” and “writings” as their content, “meaning” is paired with and apparently refers to “truth”;¹⁹ and the effort to “put together explanations” in order to make the “beauty” and “sophistication” accessible to his audience is obviously interpretation.

Such a formulation perhaps originally resulted from the need to justify interpretation—the task of transmitting the sacred truth by the lowly hands of exegetes—a need that can be clearly felt in the apologetic and self-effacing understanding of one’s role as an interpreter of scripture:

With the [dim] light of fireflies and candles,²⁰ [I venture to] contribute to [the brightness] of the sun in the sky.²¹

This need may disappear over time—if more and more people are doing the same thing, then less and less the need is felt to ask about its significance—but the attention to the triad of truth, teaching, and interpretation, with a focus on the role of interpretation, may gradually be taking hold in the minds of these Buddhists and eventually become consolidated into a common knowledge or, in other words, a standard formulation.

This standardization is self-evident in the sense that the model of truth, teaching, and interpretation appears as a formulaic expression in many Buddhist reflections on interpretation. Daoxun 道宣 (596–667), for example, who had also written biographies for famous exegetes, says:

Then, teaching (*jiao* 教) is the medium of truth, and truth (*li* 理) reveals itself in teaching—thus, to uncover the truth through [the explanation of] teaching, that is, to expound this [hidden truth, is a task that] lies with man (*ren* 人)!²²

The relationship of truth, teaching, and interpretation is explicitly and succinctly delineated here—with “man” referring to interpreters, as opposed to Buddha the teacher.

Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001), for another example, has a slightly more complex formulation:

Besides, a scripture (*jing* 經) is the words of the Buddha, and a treatise (*lun* 論) expatiates the teachings of a scripture. [To be more specific], a scripture depends on a treatise for its elucidation, a treatise depends on commentary (*shu* 疏) for its exposition, and a commentary, encompassing various topics, depends on commentators for their explanation.²³

With truth implied as the common objective of scripture, treatise, and commentary, with scripture as teaching, and with the addition of treatise to commentary, Zanning expands the triad to a fourfold model of “truth, teaching, treatise, and commentary”—but this expansion does not change the basic threefold structure, for the addition of treatise does not add a new element, but only doubles the work of interpretation.

Zanning, in fact, emphatically outlines this standard threefold formulation at the beginning of the same essay:

The mysterious quiescence (*xuanmo* 玄默) sends down manifestations, which the sages bend over and examine. The Yellow River and the River Luo, [for example], bring forth instructions [from that mysterious quiescence], which, in the forms of the [Yellow] River Chart (*hetu* 河圖) and Luo Writings (*luoshu* 雒書), set examples for men to model. Yu received such [heavenly] writings, and illustrated their relationship of weft and warp.²⁴ Originally consisting of a little over sixty words, the Luo Writings explains [the heavenly principle]. It was further elaborated under the title of “Great Paradigm” (*hongfan* 洪範), where the great paradigm for man is extensively discussed—hence the method of rulership is splendidly presented.

If even [the indigenous Chinese, who] follow the example [of their ancestors,] should elaborate on their traditions, how could it be possible that the transmission of the Buddhist Dao had not gone through a similar process? Thus, the arrival of the Buddha’s *teaching* from the West is like the [first appearance and thus] the initial examination of the

River Chart and the Luo Writings, and its increasing popularity resembles the further elaboration [of the two documents] during the Xia and Shang periods. [Following that,] lectures and exegeses (*jiang-xun* 講訓) complemented one another, and notes and commentaries (*zhen-jian* 籤箋) were written to explain each other: taking different approaches, each excels [in the explanation of] a special subject—they discriminate with sharp intellect, but they converge in their access to the ultimate truth.²⁵

In this comparative discussion of the origin of scriptural interpretation, Zanning parallels interpretation in indigenous Chinese culture and Buddhist interpretation, with the former designed to introduce the latter. The parallel between the two is made possible by the same model of truth, teaching, and interpretation. In other words, Zanning sees the model of truth, teaching, and interpretation as the basic and common format in the transmission of truth in all cultural traditions. In the case of indigenous Chinese culture, the “mysterious quiescence” is truth; the River Chart and the Lo Writings are teaching; and the “Great Paradigm,” composed (based on these two documents) by the cultural hero Yu as instructions for good government, apparently refers to interpretation.²⁶ With this preparation, Zanning lists the three elements of the Buddhist approach, namely “the Buddhist Dao” as truth, the teaching that arrived from the West, and interpretation that takes the form of “lecture and exegesis” and “notes and commentaries.”

In short, in their effort to justify the work of scriptural interpretation, the Chinese Buddhists inquire into the meaning or the role of interpretation. This approach necessarily links interpretation with truth, and, since teaching is an unavoidable intermediary between truth and interpretation, the formation of the triad—truth, teaching, and interpretation—became a Chinese response to the question of interpretation, and eventually became a widely accepted and, in that sense, standard formulation.

The Implicit Corollaries of the Standard Formulation

This standard formulation of truth, teaching, and interpretation is, however, inherently inconsistent. According to this formulation, truth is ineffable and beyond the reach of the intellect; teaching, meant to be its medium, actually obstructs its transmission as a form of intellection; and interpretation is designed to recover the truth that is covered by the intellection in teaching. If, then, the very reason why teaching requires interpretation lies in the intellection in teaching, how can interpretation, which is at least equally based on intellection, accomplish a task (i.e., the transmission of truth) in a way in which teaching fails?

Such inconsistency asks us to think about possible Buddhist solutions; that is, it asks how the Buddhists would rationalize to themselves such an inherently flawed “standard” formulation. They obviously cannot avoid or escape from this inconsistency; they are, after all, believers rather than scholars of Buddhism, and, in that sense, they are duty-bound to spread the teaching of the Buddha through interpretation (i.e., intellection), and what is interpreted is duty-bound to be truth (i.e., free from intellection)²⁷—whether or not it makes sense to insist on the ineffability of

truth and its interpretability at the same time. But how would they manage to ignore or live with this obvious and glaring inconsistency, allowing themselves to think that they are actually transmitting the Buddhist truth through interpretation?

What follows is an attempt to explore possible Buddhist responses to such a problem. It is argued here that there are theoretical reflections in Buddhist writings that can somehow reduce the tension created by this inconsistency, and that can help the Buddhists continue to uphold their slogan about the ineffability of truth and, in the meantime, to smuggle some intellection into their work. Scattered in the discussion of various other topics, such reflections are not consciously and systematically formulated to specifically address this problem, but in the meantime they do create a general intellectual atmosphere that would supplement and, in that sense, justify and sustain the obviously flawed formulation. As will be explained below in the next three sections, they ameliorate the ineffability of truth and make it more accessible to intellect; they divert our attention away from the imperfection of teaching; and, last but not least, they identify interpretation with teaching (i.e., in the sense that teaching is assumed perfect). Thus, unformulated but supplementary, such theoretical reflections constitute the implicit corollaries of the standard formulation!

Truth as Accessed through Its Attributes (Yi 義)

The Buddhist belief that truth is inaccessible through intellection essentially rules out any chance of its interpretation in the sense that interpretation itself is a form of intellection. Thus, any attempt to justify scriptural interpretation would require either that interpretation not be a form of intellection or that truth can be accessed through the use of intellect. While neither is apparently theoretically possible, the Chinese Buddhist practice that treats the concept of *yi* 義 as of a dual nature, that is, as at once both of and free from intellection, allows truth to be seen as accessible through the work of the intellect.

Related to its meaning as “meaning,” *yi* is sometimes used in Buddhist writings to stand for the attributes of truth,²⁸ that is, the ways in which truth exists and manifests itself. Such attributes of truth are variously formulated as the “manifestations” (*de* 德) of “essence” (*ti* 體), metaphorically as the “tributaries” (*liu* 流) of “fountain-head” (*ben* 本), and philologically as the “names” (*ming* 名) of “substance” (*shi* 實)—to name just a few examples that will be encountered immediately below.²⁹

Such *yi* attributes can be of two different types to the Buddhists. On the one hand, they are the result of analysis and differentiation, which necessarily entail the use of intellect. On the other hand, they are always claimed to be inseparable and undifferentiated from each other; that is, they are free from intellection. The tie with intellect through differentiation allows truth to be accessible through its attributes, and the denial of differentiation and thus of that tie allows whatever is accessed to be truth—hence the access of truth through intellection!

A sixth-century discussion of the enlightened state of *nirvāṇa*, that is, truth, well demonstrates the understanding of this dual nature of the *yi* attributes. It first differentiates and analyzes the attributes of truth:

Therefore, [the author] places it [i.e., *nirvāṇa*] at the beginning of the scripture as [its] title, for it is [at once] the name of the essence and its manifestations. The name [i.e., *nirvāṇa*] names the essence, and the essence naturally entails manifestations. The essence is the fountainhead of the sublime perfection and wondrous existence, and the manifestations refer to insight, liberation, and (other) tributaries (of the essence). The manifestation is multifarious, but the essence is (marked by) oneness. [Put differently,] names may be various, but substance remains invariable.³⁰ Embodied [simultaneously in the same] perfect essence is the Dharma-body that regulates, the insight that illumines indiscriminately, and the liberation that frees one from all defilements.³¹

As the name of truth, *nirvāṇa* is identified as “essence,” and this essence is analyzed into its three major attributes, or “manifestations,” namely Dharma-body (*fashen* 法身, or Dharmakāya), insight or illumination (*boruo* 般若, or *prajñā*), and liberation (*jietuo* 解脫, or *nirvāṇa*). In the sense that truth represents the fundamental pattern of the world and thus “regulates” the latter, it is presented as the essence of the Buddha Dharma in the form of “Dharma-body”; in the sense that by nature truth dispels the cloud of ignorance, it “illumines” the minds of the unenlightened and is thus seen as the supreme wisdom or the unadulterated insight into reality; and, in the sense that truth is the enlightened state itself, it is seen as the ultimate spiritual attainment of “liberation.” These three attributes of truth thus differentiate and “manifest” truth into its nature, its spiritual function, and eventually its religious goal. In the sense that attributes make differentiations, they are the work of intellection, and are thus accessible to the intellection of interpretation.

The author, however, does not stop at the differentiation of such attributes, but hastens to point out that such differentiated attributes are in fact not differentiable from each other. He outlines a circular relationship among these three attributes:

Thus, the essence³² that is liberated illumines, and the illuminating essence liberates—for the variation of attributes does not entail the plurality of essence itself.³³

That is, in the sense that truth, in its essence, represents the state of liberation, it illumines; in the sense that truth, in its essence, represents the state of illumination (i.e., the attainment of insight into reality), it liberates; and, liberated and illuminating, truth shows itself in its essence. In other words, be it essence, illumination, or liberation, it is the same truth in action, or, it is the same truth that manifests itself in its three attributes, rather than three different truths that appear in their respective ways. As the author continues to say:

For that reason, *nirvāṇa* is used as a general name to encompass all the various attributes—it is called “general” because the name signifies essence in its perfection. That essence is perfect means that it is simultaneously endowed with all its various attributes.³⁴

Here *nirvāṇa* is truth itself, and truth in its perfection is an integration of all these three (and certainly innumerable other) attributes—there is thus no differentiation or intellection, even though a plurality of attributes is the topic!

Another discussion of truth, labeled here as “the inconceivable” (*busiyi* 不思議), presents the same dual nature of the *yi* attributes, although its rejection of differentiation takes a slightly different form.

The differentiation in the *yi* attributes is here presented in a rather formulaic description. With the same format of “essence (*ti*) and manifestations (*de*),” the author introduces first the “inconceivable” truth, and then its *yi* attributes as “manifestations.” Thus, first, the “inconceivable”:

[In the title] *The Sūtra on Vimalakīrti's Inconceivable Liberation*,³⁵ [the word “inconceivable”] names [the state of liberation in which] the subtlest is exhaustively exposed and the cosmic transformation is thoroughly revealed—a state that exceeds all the conceivable imaginations. The purport of the scripture is unfathomable and abstruse, so much so that it is beyond the access of words and images, and its Dao transcends with its three levels of emptiness, so that it resists the conceptualizations typical of those Small-Vehicle adherents. That which is inconceivable transcends various concepts, and escapes the sphere of mental activities—it is boundless and thus seems to be specialized in nothing, although [as a matter of fact] there is nothing it is not capable of achieving, and, [similarly], without obvious reasons for its coming into being, it comes into being in its own accord.³⁶

And then its “manifestations,” that is, this “inconceivable” truth, are analyzed and differentiated into its various attributes, namely “sagely wisdom” (*shengzhi* 聖智), the “Dharma-body” (*fashen* 法身), the “sublime tune” (*zhiyun* 至韻), and the “mysterious expedient” (*mingquan* 冥權):

How should we understand this? The sagely wisdom is without knowledge but shines upon [i.e., knows] the ten thousand things; the Dharma-body is without a form but indiscriminately corresponds to various forms; the sublime tune is without words but texts of such a tune are abundantly distributed; and the mysterious expedient is without calculations but its every move accords with what happens naturally. In other words, this “inconceivable” responds to the needs from various directions and accomplishes accordingly—it does not seem to have acted, but it has benefited the whole world!³⁷

These four attributes elaborate on truth in its four different aspects, namely the “sagely wisdom” as truth in its act of illumination, the “Dharma-body” as truth in its ubiquity, the “sublime tune” as truth in its profound [i.e., not relying on words] teaching, and the “mysterious expedient” as truth in its all-responsive function.

Having thus elaborated on the differentiated attributes of truth, this author, like the previous one, also quickly steps forward to deny differentiation in such attributes. Unlike the previous one, however, who rejects differentiation through a circular and thus mutual identification, the author here emphasizes the supramundane nature of these attributes and the philosophical implications of such a supramundane nature. “Wisdom” is “sagely” in the sense that it is without knowledge (*wuzhi* 無知); the “body” is a “Dharma-body” in the sense that it is without form (*wuxiang* 無象); the “tune” is “sublime” in the sense that it is without words (*wuyan* 無言); and the “expedient” is “mysterious” in the sense that it is unplanned and artless (*wumou* 無謀)—“knowledge” (*zhi* 知), “form” (*xiang* 象), “words” (*yan* 言), and “calculation” (*mou* 謀) are apparently presented as the work of intellection, and their absence insures

that the four attributes of the “inconceivable” truth are in fact undifferentiated and, in that sense, not in any way related to intellection. Hence the contrast between the four attributes and their mundane and thus inferior counterparts:

Those unenlightened, when witnessing the illumination [of the sagely wisdom], mistake it for knowledge (*zhi* 智); when observing the transformation of Dharma-body in response to [the needs of sentient beings], mistake it for physical forms (*shen* 身); when reading those abstruse scriptures, mistake them for words (*yan* 言); and, when seeing [those spontaneous and uncalculated] moves, mistake them for schemes (*quan* 權)—how can the perfect state of Dao, however, be expressed in such [inferior] categories as forms, words, schemes, and knowledge!³⁸

In other words, the “inconceivable” truth appears in its attributes of sagely wisdom, Dharma-body, sublime tune, and the mysterious expedient. Despite being the appearance, these attributes are perceived as free from intellection—they are emphatically presented as without knowledge, without form, without words, and unplanned and artless—and are in that sense distinguished from their inferior counterparts of wisdom, body/form, words, and schemes, which belong to the realm of intellection.

Thus, to conclude on *yi* attributes, we may perhaps say that the Chinese emphasis on the dual nature of such attributes ultimately opens a two-way passage for truth. That is, the rejection of differentiations for truth, on the one hand, lets truth remain inaccessible and in that sense the absolute, but the analysis and differentiation of the attributes of truth, on the other hand, allow it to be accessed through the medium of its attributes—and the simultaneous identity of this dual nature allows both the access to and the retaining of its absoluteness. In other words, such a perception makes it possible to connive in the obviously contradictory belief that what is accessed through intellect can be truth itself. It is perhaps for this reason that the *yi* attributes are often equated to truth; that is, the *yi* is sometimes presented as truth itself:

With the words archaic and the writing rich in reference, the meaning (*yi* 義) appears mysterious and the truth (*li* 理) inconceivable.³⁹

And:

The purport (*zhi* 旨)⁴⁰ of the scripture is unfathomable and abstruse, so much so that it is beyond the access of words and images, and its Dao transcends with its three levels of emptiness, so that it resists the conceptualizations typical of those Small-Vehicle adherents.⁴¹

Note the paralleling of *yi* and truth in the pairs *yi/li* and *zhi*/Dao. Such parallelism equates *yi* and *zhi* to *li* and Dao, and, together with the description that *yi* and *zhi* are “beyond the access of words and images,” identifies these two concepts with truth itself. Think also of this comment on *yi*:

The meaning (*yi* 義) of this text is rich and abysmally unfathomable. It surpasses the clear sky if planted vertically, and permeates the eight extremities (of the earth) when placed horizontally—it is, [in short,] vast, endless, and unrivaled.⁴²

What else, other than truth itself, deserves such a characterization?

Teaching as Assumed Perfect

The ineffability of truth necessarily entails that teaching is an imperfect medium of truth, an understanding that constitutes the basis for the parable of the raft (*fayu* 筏喻) in the Indian origin of Buddhism,⁴³ and the call to “cut off the path of language and annihilate the locus of mental functioning” (言語道斷心行處滅) in Buddhism’s East Asian ramifications.⁴⁴ In other words, Buddhism understands that teaching cannot do justice to truth, and that teaching not only falls short of truth, but also tends to obstruct its attainment, a reason for which teaching is sometimes considered dispensable for the sake of truth.

Be that as it may, however, Buddhists sometimes do assume the existence of a perfect teaching. They may not be consciously aware of such an assumption, for to assume so would make them directly contradict themselves, but this assumption does exist, and occasionally becomes visible, especially when the nature of teaching is not the subject in question.⁴⁵ Such an assumption is perhaps the result of a confusion of truth as content and teaching as its method of conveyance—since teaching is supposedly the medium of truth, it is quite natural that people mistake the medium for its content, or, using a well-known Buddhist metaphor, mistake the finger that points at the moon for the moon itself (*zhi yue* 指月).⁴⁶ Despite the possibility that this assumption is only a “confusion,” however, the effort to solve the hermeneutical problem in the transmission of Buddhism, in such examples as “expedient means” (*upāya* 方便), two truths (*er di* 二諦), and doctrinal classification (*panjiao* 判教), is ultimately derived from such an assumption—for only when there exists a perfect teaching can it be possible and necessary to relegate other teachings as inferior or secondary.

A good example of such an assumption can be found in the Buddhist discussion of “ultimate name” and its various other formulations. A name, like words and teaching, is the product of intellection and, in that sense, cannot in any way be equated to truth. For that reason, a name does not deserve the appellation of “ultimate,” a superlative reserved only for truth. To call a name “ultimate” thus, on the one hand, contradicts the fundamental Buddhist teaching that all forms of intellection are imperfect, and, on the other hand, betrays a somewhat unconscious effort to raise the name—and, by extension, also words and teaching—above the level of intellection. In other words, to define a name as “ultimate” is to suggest and assume that a name, as well as words and teaching, is perfect and, thus, identifiable with truth.

In his commentary on the *Awakening of Faith*, Fazang thus discusses the concept of “suchness” as the “ultimate name” for truth:

“That which is called ‘suchness’ is the limit (*ji* 極) of speech.” This means that there can be no other names beyond this name, and it is [in that sense] the *last* of all names [for truth]. For that reason, “suchness” is the tenth of the ten names [of truth] enumerated in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*, that is, the ultimate name (*jiujingming* 究竟名)—hence [it is called] the “limit.”⁴⁷

Fazang repeatedly explains this one and the same meaning of “limit”: it is “the last,” “the tenth” of the ten, “the ultimate”; to be more specific, this “limit”-ness means that

“there can be no other names beyond this name.” This is not a very difficult meaning to understand, and its explanation apparently does not need much repetition; thus, Fazang’s emphatic reiteration of this simple meaning can only be understood as meant to set this name far apart from, or far above, all other names—it is an “ultimate” rather than a regular name, and this “ultimate”-ness, in the sense that all names [i.e., regular names] are products of intellection, apparently refers to this name’s transcendence of intellection.⁴⁸

In a similar way, the assumption of a perfect teaching is also seen in the Buddhist characterization of scripture (and thus teaching) as “permanent” (*chang* 常) and “normative” (i.e., as *fa* 法 or “Dharma”—thus as normative as Dharma), the two attributes usually associated with truth. In his discussion of the nature of scripture, Fayun 法雲 (467–529) elaborates on these two characteristics:

“Scripture” is the common name for the teaching of the Buddha, or a different title for the words of the holy ones. As the basis of meanings [i.e., giving content and thus teaching], “scripture” is explained as “permanent” and “Dharma,” with “permanent” meaning “indestructible” and “Dharma” meaning “normative.” To emphasize that teaching is unchangeable—that is, no space between the earlier and later sages alters its length, and neither Mara nor heretics can harm this teaching and thus impede [the transmission] of truth—[the concept of “scripture”] is described as “permanent”; and, [in the sense that] those who follow scriptures leave evil ways and practice good, [eventually ascending] from the status of ordinary beings to that of the holy ones, “scripture” is described as “Dharma.”⁴⁹

The apparent goal of interpretation in this passage is the concept of “scripture” (*jing* 經), or teaching, but what the author really has in mind is truth, for it is only truth that can be described as “permanent” and “normative.” As Fayun explains, truth is “permanent” in the sense that it is indestructible, that is, completely free of error, and it is at the same time also “normative” in the sense that it provides rules (i.e., Dharma) to follow in the quest of enlightenment. Here the author obviously mixes (if intentionally) or confuses (if unintentionally) teaching and truth in the explanation of the term “scripture” (*jing*), for the term seems to mean different things at the same time—ostensibly, “scripture” refers to the collected words of Buddha, namely “teaching,” but subconsciously, the term quite unmistakably points at truth itself. In other words, with attention oscillating between teaching and truth, the author seems to have somehow assumed an interchangeability, and thus identity, between the two—hence an assumption of a perfect teaching.

The assumption of a perfect teaching is also echoed in a discussion that consciously identifies two apparently opposite characteristics that can be ascribed to teaching:

Therefore the Tathāgata incarnates (*tuosheng* 託生) to fulfill his original vow, transforming himself in response [to the needs of sentient beings] (*yinghua* 應化) with the power of his compassion—he establishes his teaching without resorting to words (*liwenzi* 離文字), and transmits the truth without relying on intellection (*wangxinxiang* 忘心相).⁵⁰

For the Tathāgata to carry out his task, he needs to “incarnate” and “transform in response” to the needs of sentient beings. In the sense that it depends on tangible, specific, and thus intellectually differentiated manifestations for the communication of truth, his teaching involves the use of intellect. On the other hand, however, such teaching is “without resorting to words” and, in that sense, “without relying on intellection,” for only the absence of words and other forms of intellection allows for the communication of truth. Thus, this discussion of teaching suggests the identity of both the use of intellect and its absence, and, in doing so, betrays an assumption of a perfect teaching.

This assumption is sometimes quite clearly enunciated in the Buddhist reflections on the nature of teaching. Some Buddhists simply present teaching as an exact replica of truth:

Truth (*li* 理) is that which imprints, and writings (*wen* 文) are its imprint.⁵¹

“Writings” apparently refers to scripture and thus teaching. There is certainly an implied difference between truth and teaching when the author describes the relationship between the two as the two sides of a replication, that is, the former as “that which imprints” and the latter as that which is imprinted, but the sense of the sameness between the two, in terms of this replication, is simply unmistakable. Sameness allows for an assumption of identity, and such an assumption easily overrules the accepted wisdom that teaching is only an imperfect medium of truth. Extending that line of thought, some others present the entire phenomenal world, including all its dharmas, as necessary forms of teaching:

Each of the ten thousand dharmas is without exception a scripture.⁵²

In other words, each and every dharma is in itself the teaching of truth, and, to reverse the expression of this idea, truth manifests and expresses itself in each and every dharma, that is, in all conceivable ways—in short, truth teaches itself, and, in that sense, truth is identical to its teaching.⁵³ Perhaps the most powerful expression of such an identification is the well-known Zen remark:

Luxuriantly green, each and every bamboo is the essence-body (Fashen 法身, Dharmakāya) itself; and, splendidly yellow, petals of flowers with no exception shine with the [illuminating] wisdom (*boruo* 般若, *prajñā*).⁵⁴

Borrowed from Daosheng 道生 (?–434),⁵⁵ this remark was originally designed to emphasize the universal Buddha-nature among all sentient beings, but the very idea that Buddha-nature permeates and exists in every single dharma suggests that Buddha-nature, or truth, manifests itself universally to all sentient beings—in short, truth itself is the teaching.

While Buddhism has never wavered in its assertion that teaching is by nature imperfect, there are, as we have seen so far, certainly places where it flirts with the idea that teaching may, in one way or another, be associated with some kind of “perfection,” such as in the ideas of an “ultimate name,” a “permanent” and “normative”

scripture, and the nature of teaching. Such an idea of “perfect” teaching can only be inferred from these examples, which are designed to address other issues, but it supplies a good rationale for the exegetes to press on with their effort to retrieve truth from teaching, be this rationale reasonable or not.

Interpretation as Elevated to Teaching

Religiously and intellectually, interpretation is considered inferior to teaching, the former being the profane and secondary, and the latter the sacred⁵⁶ and primary. In actual practice, however, interpretation is not infrequently identified with teaching, although perhaps only unconsciously. In the sense that teaching is sometimes assumed to be perfect—that is, teaching is allowed the right to gain access to truth—the perception of the identity between teaching and interpretation elevates the status of the latter, granting it the equal right to access to truth.

The Buddhist perception of this identity manifests itself when we compare the respective roles of teaching and interpretation in the transmission of truth. As we have already seen in the previous section, the role of interpretation is often expressed, with some minor variations, in the standard threefold formulation of truth, teaching, and interpretation, such as summarized below:

1. Huijiao⁵⁷
 - (a) Hidden purport (*youzhi* 幽旨),
or that which is beyond words (*yanwai* 言外)
 - (b) Words (*yan* 言)
 - (c) Dharma master (*fashi* 法師, i.e., exegete)
2. Daoxuan⁵⁸
 - (a) Principle (*li* 理)
 - (b) Teaching (*jiao* 教)
 - (c) Man (*ren* 人, i.e., exegete)
3. Zanning⁵⁹
 - (a) (Truth)
 - (b) Scripture (*jing* 經)
 - (c) Treatise (*lun* 論) and Commentary (*shu* 疏)

Despite the variation in expressions, these examples share the same basic structure with its three components, thus explaining the role of interpretation as interpreting the truth supposedly conveyed but actually hidden by teaching. The role of teaching, on the other hand, naturally does not share this threefold formulation—it is, rather, twofold, as quite clearly illustrated in Sengzhao’s 僧肇 (384–414) introductory remarks on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*:

How can Dao, in its perfection, ever be expressed in such [intellectual] categories as form, word, expedient, and knowledge! However, the long benighted sentient beings cannot be awakened without the use of words, for the truth does not operate by itself, and

its spread depends on man [and, by extension, on his intellection, such as words and teaching]. For that reason, the *Tathāgata* summons *Mañjuśrī* and *Vimalakīrti* from different places to gather at Vaiśālī and expound together this truth [of nonduality].⁶⁰

This twofold formulation, “Dao” and “man,” explains teaching as the interpretation of truth. More specifically, “Dao” is truth, and its transmission to sentient beings depends on the words of “man,” such as the Buddha and his two delegates in this scripture, namely, *Mañjuśrī* and *Vimalakīrti*.⁶¹ Such words of man are, in the case of a scripture, the teaching of a Buddha (or his delegates), but are at the same time also interpretation by nature. Thus, in terms of their respective roles, the threefold formulation of interpretation, namely,

truth—teaching—interpretation,

and the twofold formulation of teaching, namely,

truth—teaching

are essentially the same, for the apparent difference here is simply insignificant in the sense that teaching is ultimately just another form of interpretation, and, in that sense, the threefold formulation is just a somewhat more elaborate version of the twofold formulation. It is perhaps for this reason that both Daoxuan and Sengzhao name the transmitter of truth with the same word “man,” even though they have different men in their minds:

Sengzhao: Its [i.e., truth’s] spread depends on man!

Daoxuan: To expound the [truth is a task that] lies with man!⁶²

“Man” for Sengzhao refers to the Buddha, *Vimalakīrti*, and perhaps *Mañjuśrī*, that is, the teacher, whereas “man” for Daoxuan is the Buddhist exegete, that is, the interpreter. In short, to Buddhists, teaching is in itself interpretation, and, in that sense, interpretation is none other than teaching itself.

The identity of interpretation and teaching is also well illustrated in the description of the spiritual preparations with which the interpreter approaches truth. More specifically, interpreters are often portrayed as having qualifications that would allow them direct experience of truth, instead of intellectual grasping—an ability that characterizes one’s enlightenment or, in other words, equates the interpreter with the Buddha and thus the teacher himself. Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597), a sixth-century Buddhist scholar, was thus described:

There was a Master of Tiantai, whose Dharma-name is Zhiyi. The master was once in the presence of the Tathāgata and attended [the Tathāgata’s lecture on] the scripture [i.e., the *Lotus Sūtra*]. With the attainment of the fifth level (in practice), for which he was acclaimed in the two courts [of Chen and Sui], the master understood [the teaching of the ultimate One Vehicle, i.e.,] the Buddha Vehicle [in the *Lotus Sūtra*], unaided and without going to scriptural lectures.

Supported by the power in the chanting of *dhāraṇī*, the master enjoyed lecturing repeatedly on the scripture. He had once lectured on the *Wisdom Sūtra of Benevolent Kings*

at the Taiji Palace of the Chen ruler, a lecture that won the admiration of the emperor and made the entire court snap their fingers [in joy].

[One reason for this success is that his] interpretation, [based on] mind-contemplating meditation, simultaneously separates itself from [the conception] of being and nonbeing —[in other words, it] takes the true [and undifferentiated] nature as its object, and relies on [the indiscriminative] illumination as its approach. [Thus equipped, his interpretation] explains the name, the central tenet, [and three other aspects of scripture, a practice that is] different from that of the ancient masters, and [the interpretation through] all these five perspectives advances the sacred teaching [of Buddhism].⁶³

Several important qualifications are listed here. First of all, the master had once been present in the audience of the Buddha, that is, as a disciple of the Buddha himself; second, he has reached the fifth and highest level of spiritual attainment as a disciple of the Buddha; third, he has understood the Buddha's teaching by himself, that is, without the assistance of other interpreters; and, fourth, he has adopted the "mind-contemplation" method in his interpretation (*guanxinshi* 觀心釋), that is, he has resorted to direct experience in his access to and presentation of truth.⁶⁴

The first two of these qualifications present the interpreter as the disciple of the Buddha and, in that sense, as inferior to the teacher, but to place the interpreter among the audience before the Buddha and at the highest level of spiritual attainment for disciples already sets the interpreter far apart from and vastly superior to other practitioners—a status further elevated when "mind-contemplation" is mentioned as another qualification.

Whether it is the method of accessing truth or the method of presenting truth, it is a method that relies on the direct experience of truth, and the direct experience of truth qualifies one to be the Buddha himself. In other words, the interpreter is often portrayed as and, in that sense, believed to be identical with the teacher.

In another discussion of the qualifications of interpreters, emphasis is placed on the equilibrium, that is, the indiscriminative state, of mind, a mind of enlightenment and, thus, of the Buddha, the enlightened one:

The essence of all scriptures, in summary, does not exceed two major aspects (of truth), for the doctrine of "Buddha-nature" presents truth as the origin of existence, while the concept of "Nirvāṇa" sees in truth the ultimate destination of being. [The truth is, however,] neither cause nor effect, it neither arises nor ceases; its essence rises above all other goodness, its action is impermeable to all evils; and, to call it the "emptiness of emptiness" does not reveal its true aspect, and to describe it as the "mysterious of the mysterious" does not exhaust its inconceivability. Thus, if one has not yet equated all distinctions, or if one's mind has not ceased in all its activities, how would it be easy [for one] to penetrate the golden walls and jade chambers [of truth]?⁶⁵

As soon as one is able to "equate all distinctions," or one's mind has "ceased all its activities," one becomes and is a Buddha, that is, an awakened one, and the one that does not rely on intellection—thus, the interpreter is the teacher himself, whether or not such a presentation is consciously intended. In certain cases, however, Buddhists may even consciously identify the interpreter as the teacher:

In the chapter on the “Dharma Masters” [in the *Lotus Sūtra*], the Buddha says:

Those who wish to teach this scripture after I pass away should abide by three things, that is, one should enter the abode of the Tathāgata, wear the robe of the Tathāgata, and sit on the throne of the Tathāgata. The “abode of the Tathāgata” is the mind of compassion, the “robe of the Tathāgata” is the mind of gentleness and forbearance, and the “the throne of the Tathāgata” means the emptiness of all dharmas. Compassion protects and shields, and is thus compared to the abode of the Tathāgata; gentleness and forbearance cover [i.e., suppress ill feelings] and are thus compared to the robe of the Tathāgata; and the doctrine of emptiness pacifies [i.e., stabilizes] one’s mind and is thus compared to the throne of the Tathāgata.⁶⁶

The room, the clothes, and the throne of the Tathāgata are metaphors for the spiritual attainment expected and required of interpreters, and such metaphors link and, in that sense, spiritually equate interpreters with the teacher.

In short, interpretation in Chinese Buddhism is sometimes elevated to the status of teaching in the sense that interpretation is not infrequently assigned the same role as teaching in the transmission of truth, that interpretation is expected of the same direct experience as teaching in its transmission of truth, and that interpretation is sometimes simply identified with teaching. Such elevation of interpretation thus allows it, as indicated earlier, equal access to truth.

Conclusion

This article has asked two questions. First, how did Chinese Buddhists generally conceive of the nature of interpretation? Second, how did they address the issue of the obvious inconsistency in insisting on the ineffability of truth on the one hand and relying on words and intellection nonetheless on the other? The second supplements and develops the first, for it draws attention to the obvious flaws in the first, and thus invites a quest for a deeper understanding about how scriptural interpretation is understood in its actual practice in Chinese Buddhism.

The answer to the first is readily available, for the formulation of “truth, teaching, and interpretation” is so widely accepted that it has become a “standard formulation.” While there has never been an explicitly formulated answer to the second question, theoretical reflections on unrelated topics seem to have created a general intellectual atmosphere that would allow people to ignore or at least comfortably live with the obvious inconsistency, that is, an atmosphere that would supplement and, in that sense, justify and sustain the answer to the first question. More specifically, such reflections make the ineffable truth accessible, the imperfect teaching perfect and thus identifiable with truth, and interpretation elevated to teaching and thus granted equal right to access to truth. Thus unformulated but supplementary, such theoretical reflections constitute the implicit corollaries of the standard formulation.

This is, I propose, what it means “to interpret” for certain Chinese Buddhists. But what could this tentative answer mean to us? Or, more specifically, does this answer really tell us what it means to interpret? Why, or why not? And, to what extent could this answer be accepted as a “truth”? Such questions deserve a few further thoughts.

If Buddhism really believes that truth is beyond words and intellection, then the vast majority of its believers are doomed never to become enlightened,⁶⁷ for the fact that we are sentient beings, that is, beings with senses and, in that sense, with intellect,⁶⁸ is a malady woefully irremediable—it is both a nature we are born with and the way in which we exist! In other words, and put more precisely, truth certainly exists, but it is as certainly beyond our reach!

For that reason, the historical Buddha himself, being historical, is certainly not a “Buddha,” that is, he is certainly not an “awakened one.” Although claiming to be “awakened,” or claimed to be so, Siddhārtha Gautama himself apparently never achieved enlightenment—that is, he never awakened to truth! Thus what he teaches is certainly not truth, and, by a logical extension, the interpretation of his teaching has, as certainly, nothing to do with truth, either!

There is, thus, no truth, no teaching, and no interpretation. In that sense, the Chinese Buddhist understanding of the nature of interpretation—as expressed in the standard formulation and its implicit corollaries—has not told us much about what it means to interpret. In the sense that it positions and maintains interpretation as the last and thus the ultimate step in the process of “truth, teaching, and interpretation,” it tells us only about its role in the transmission of truth. But this is only an individual case, with the purpose of self-justification, and is therefore only a specific case—in other words, had others been reflecting on the same question, there certainly would have been a different answer about what it means to interpret.

Notes

- 1 – Donald Lopez, for example, in his introduction to the well-known *Buddhist Hermeneutics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988), unequivocally identifies theories of interpretation as hermeneutics: “For the purpose of this volume, hermeneutics will be broadly conceived as concerned with establishing principles for the retrieval of meaning, especially from a text.” Robert Thurman’s classic 1978 essay on the subject, also titled “Buddhist Hermeneutics” (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 [1978]: 19–39), similarly treats theories of interpretation as hermeneutics; Thurman uses the ancient Buddhist doctrine of “Four Reliances” to argue that “eastern thought” (or Buddhism, more specifically), as opposed to widely held views, is also capable of rational thinking, and such “reliances” are nothing but principles designed for the successful retrieval of meaning from a text, or theories of interpretation. For this Western interest in Buddhist interpretation as related to hermeneutics, see also John Maraldo, “Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism,” *Eastern Buddhist* 19, no. 1 (1986): 17–43.
- 2 – Among many others, Charles Wei-hsun Fu 傅偉勳 and Chung-ying Cheng 成中英 are the two best-known scholars introducing and developing this tradition in East Asia. Fu created what he calls “Creative Hermeneutics” in his *Cong*

chuangzao de quanshixue dao dasheng foxue 从创造的詮釋學到大乘佛學 (Taipei: Dongda Tushu Gonsi, 1990); Cheng developed an “Onto-Hermeneutics” in his *Benti yu quanshi* 本體與詮釋 (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2000). A more recent study that applies Western hermeneutical theories to the study of Buddhist interpretation is Lai Shen-chon 賴賢宗, *Fojiao chanshixue* 佛教闡釋學 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 2003).

- 3 – To document sources from the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, I remain consistent with the method I began to use in my 2009 *JABS* article – “The Formulation of Introductory Topics and the Writing of Exegesis in Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 30, nos. 1-2 (2007 [2009]), page 74 – which is reproduced below:

Citations of primary sources from the the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, the most widely used text collection today in East Asian Buddhism, are identified in conformity with the conventions employed in its electronic version, that is, the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA). Thus, the first line of Fazang’s commentary on *Qixinlun*, for example, is identified as T44n1846p240c19 (slightly modified from the original T44n1846p0240c19[00]), that is, *Taishō* volume number 44, serial number 1846, page 240, line 19 of the lower (i.e., c) section (as opposed to the upper [a] and middle [b] sections of that page).

- 4 – That is, “implicit” because these reflections are “unformulated,” and “corollaries” because they are secondary and “supplementary” to the “standard formulation”
- 5 – Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of eminent monks), *Yijie* 義解, *lun* 論, T50n2059p382c23–p383b5.
- 6 – Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are mine. I primarily rely on Charles Muller’s online *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* when considering the translation of Buddhist terms.
- 7 – That is, when he was approached with questions about truth.
- 8 – That is, whether or not to teach his Dharma to sentient beings.
- 9 – T50n2059p382c23–c27.
- 10 – T50n2059p382c27–p383a1.
- 11 – Namely “essence,” “wisdom,” and “liberation” in the same person.
- 12 – T50n2059p383a1–a7.
- 13 – For discussions of the possible relationship between *yi* and truth, see note 16 and Subsection A in Section 2, “Truth as Accessed through Its Attributes (*yi* 義).”
- 14 – T50n2059p383a8–a10.
- 15 – See Chen Hui 陳慧, T33n1694p9b18–b22.

- 16 – There seem to be two types of “meaning” as the meaning of *yi*—the philological and the philosophical—and the philological “meaning” is perhaps ultimately derived from the philosophical “meaning,” for the latter refers to the “attributes” of truth and, in that sense, supplies the content for the former.
- 17 – The “mansion” and the “courtyard garden” refer to the scripture, and thus their inaccessible “beauty” and “sophistication” are metaphors for the “meaning” and “truth” of the scripture, which are “mysterious” and “inconceivable” and are, in that sense, inaccessible, too.
- 18 – See Dao’an 道安 (314–385), T33n1693p1a16–a20.
- 19 – See note 16 above for a brief discussion of two possible meanings in the word “meaning” (*yi* 義). The relationship between the two—that is, the philosophical *yi* supplies the content for the philological *yi*—implies a possible identity between *yi* and truth in the sense that the philosophical *yi*, as the attributes of truth, is exactly how truth exists and manifests itself. Also see Subsection A in Section 2, “Truth as Accessed through Its Attributes (*yi* 義),” which contains a more extended discussion of the Buddhist views on *yi*, the attributes of truth, in its dual nature—views that would allow the assumption of the identification of *yi* with truth.
- 20 – That is, my inferior spiritual capacity—in other words, my scriptural interpretation.
- 21 – That is, the truth the interpreter intends to retrieve from the scripture—see T33n1694p9bb14.
- 22 – T50n2060p548b19–b20.
- 23 – See Zanning, T50n2061p753c19–c21.
- 24 – That is, the Luo Writings as the written elaboration of the more essential River Chart.
- 25 – T50n2061p753a3–a10.
- 26 – Logically, Yu’s work should represent teaching rather than interpretation, for he is the “sage,” the same as the Buddha, and it is the sage’s words to be explained by interpreters, as it is the Buddha’s words to be explained by the Buddhist exegetes. In this specific case, however, Zanning parallels the Buddha’s words (i.e., teaching) with the River Chart and the Lo Writings, and that leaves Yu’s “great paradigm” no other choice but to be the interpretation. The problem perhaps exists in the role of the River Chart and the Lo Writings—they are absent in the Buddhist case, and their presence in the Chinese case inevitably makes Yu’s work their interpretation, and themselves the teaching.
- 27 – For, otherwise, why were they there doing what they thought they were doing in the first place?

- 28 – This has been briefly touched upon in note 16 above.
- 29 – Other than *de*, *liu*, and *ming*, the concept of *yi* is also identified as *xiang* 相, that is, “characteristics,” for *xiang* shares with *yi* the same three characteristics or attributes of truth: “We now briefly speak of three characteristics in order to shed light on the divine Dao, namely, *prajñā*, Dharmakāya, and *nirvāṇa*.” See T37n1763p377c2–c3.
- 30 – T37n1763p379a17–a19.
- 31 – T37n1763p379a17–a21.
- 32 – Note that the “essence” of truth is truth itself—hence, in this passage, all “essences” refer to “truth”—while at the same time it must be noted that essence is also one of the three attributes of truth, namely essence, insight, and liberation. This is essence in its “essence/manifestations” relationship.
- 33 – T37n1763p379a22–23.
- 34 – T37n1763p379a23–a24.
- 35 – That is, *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*.
- 36 – T38n1775p327a14–a18.
- 37 – See Sengzhao, T38n1775p327a18–a21.
- 38 – See Sengzhao, T38n1775p327a22–a24.
- 39 – T33n1693p1a17.
- 40 – This is another expression of *yi*.
- 41 – T38n1775p327a15–a16.
- 42 – T33n1694p9b18–b20.
- 43 – See the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta*, no. 38 of *Majjhima Nikāya*.
- 44 – T47n1998An920c23 (translated from Muller’s online *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*).
- 45 – That is, when Buddhists seriously considered the nature of teaching, they could not accept the idea of a perfect teaching—the ineffability of truth is the obvious reason.
- 46 – See, for example, the *Śūramgama-sūtra* 首楞嚴經, at T19n945p111a8–a13.
- 47 – See Fazang, T44n1846p252c24–c27. In translating, I consulted Dirck Vorenkamp’s *An English Translation of Fa-tsang’s Commentary on the Awakening of Faith* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).
- 48 – Similar examples of the “ultimate name,” in its various other expressions, abound in a collective commentary on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, where its contributors discuss the term *nirvāṇa* as the name for truth:

1. Therefore *nirvāṇa*, as the supreme name (*zhihao* 至號), is rich and broad in meaning, and, when investigated, its exposition is extended and cannot be exhausted. (T37n1763p377c22)
2. The “great *nirvāṇa*” is the ultimate name (*jihao* 極號) for the divine Dao of the great sage and the general name (*duming* 都名) of its [*nirvāṇa*’s] eight characteristics—it is what the Buddha taught when he came close to the end of his life. (T37n1763p377c28–c29)
3. This is the general name (*duming* 都名) for [the spiritual attainment of] the cessation of worldly entanglements, and the ultimate title (*jicheng* 極稱) for all good deeds. (T37n1763p378b02)
4. Now *nie-pan* (i.e., *nirvāṇa*), so used for its pronunciation, is the overall name (*zongming* 總名) of the supra-mundane dharmas, the general title (*tonghao* 通號) that incorporates all virtues, the essential term (*yaomu* 要目) that denotes *saṃsāra*, and the ultimate expression (*jishuo* 極說) of the boundless good. (T37n1763p378c3–c5)
5. This (i.e., *nirvāṇa*) is the overall name (*zongming* 總名) for the perfection of the highest virtues. (T37n1763p379a10)

49 – T33n1715p573a9–a13.

50 – T37n1763p377a19–a20.

51 – T33n1696p65b18.

52 – T33n1696p65c3.

53 – For a discussion of the Buddhist understanding of the “essence of teaching” (*jiaoti* 教体), see Eunsu Cho, “From Buddha’s Speech to Buddha’s Essence: Philosophical Discussions of Buddha-vacana in India and China,” in *Asian Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2004): 255–276.

54 – T51n2076p441b22.

55 – See Daosheng at *Zuting shiyuan* 祖庭事苑, vol. 5, *Zuting shiyuan juanwu* 祖庭事苑卷五, at X64n1261p387b14: “Luxuriantly green, each and every bamboo is suchness itself; and, splendidly yellow, petals of flowers with no exception shine with [illuminating] wisdom.”

56 – While in theory teaching is seen as imperfect, in practice it is “assumed” to be perfect and, in that sense, sacred, as discussed in the previous subsection.

57 – See Huijiao at T50n2059p383a8–a10, as cited on pp. 3–4.

58 – See Daoxuan at T50n2060p548b19–b20, as cited on p. 5.

59 – See Zanning at T50n2061p753c19–c21, as cited on p. 6.

60 – T38n1775p327a24–a27.

61 – Sengzhao never explicitly pointed out who this “man” refers to, but the title of the scripture, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* (*Weimo jiesuo shuojing* 維摩詰所說經) clearly indicates that, in this case, Vimalakīrti himself is in the same status

as the Buddha, and, in that sense, this text represents teaching. And, in the sense that Mañjuśrī is Vimalakīrti's chief interlocutor and responsible for eliciting the latter's "thundering silence," Mañjuśrī should perhaps also be considered such a "man"—hence Sengzhao's emphasis on their work "together."

62 – See Daoxuan at T50n2060p548b19–b20, as cited on p. 5.

63 – T34n1718p1a18–a22.

64 – For a discussion of the hermeneutic significance of "mind-contemplation," see Kua Chao-shun 郭朝順, 天台智顛 '觀心法門' 的詮釋學意涵 (The hermeneutical meaning of 'Contemplating the Mind' in Zhiyi's Tiantai teaching), 華梵人文學報 (Huafan journal of humanities) 3 (June 2004): 35–74.

65 – T37n1763p377a27–b2.

66 – T34n1720p361a9–a14.

67 – If only a small handful of people can become enlightened—some will certainly dispute the categorical denial of enlightenment to all—what, then, is the use of religion?

68 – Intellect depends on the senses for its functioning, for even the most abstract reasoning requires empirical data for it to be carried out.