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The Deluded Mind as World and Truth: Epistemological Implications of Tiantai Doctrine and Praxis in the Works of Jingxi Zhanran (711-782)

By

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(Moderator: Dr. Loy Hui Chieh)

Abstract: Tiantai Buddhist doctrine is unique among Buddhist schools in holding that evil and delusion are ontologically inextricable, as expressed in its assertion that “Evil is inherently entailed even in Buddhahood,” and “the interentailment of the Three Thousand quiddities in each moment of experience,” where “Three Thousand” includes both enlightened and deluded views of all possible entities. This position is rooted in its doctrine of “The Three Truths,” which holds that to be an experienceable entity means to be locally coherent as globally incoherent as intersubsumptive, where “locally coherent” always involves a reference to some biased and distorted particular viewpoint. This is to be contrasted to an implicit and commonsensical notion of truth and its relation to falsehood that informs almost all other philosophical and religious systems, including the vast majority of Buddhist thought. This is that there is some part of our cognitive apparatus—“Reason,” or perhaps a capacity for unbiased awareness, or prajna as an insight into Emptiness or an experience of ultimate truth as such—to which unambiguously true claims can be directed, which can recognize and assess those claims accurately, and which can then reject and replace its previously held false beliefs. This model can gain no purchase in the Tiantai universe. It is not just that our mind is clouded over or misinformed by erroneous beliefs; it is
literally composed of biased and distorted habituations, to such a degree that every one of its actions and posits, including its positing of an objective truth that subverts or corrects its errors, is irrevocably tainted by its unbalanced existential position. “Truth,” however conceived by the deluded mind, is just one additional delusion, perhaps the most pernicious delusion of all. An objective and unbiased contemplation of the truth is effectively ruled out by these Tiantai premises—for any determinate position or stance is intrinsically biased. This would seem to rule out any hope of escape from the closed circle of delusion. And yet the above conceptions concerning epistemological and ontological matters are framed entirely within a soteriological context, and share the general Buddhist optimism about the possibility of liberation. Indeed, all possible assertions without exception are made only with reference to the bias of some particular biased viewpoint, and only for soteriological purposes. All statements and claims are by nature biased, situational, pragmatic and soteriological. What makes this coexistence of radical skepticism and radical epistemological optimism possible is the distinctive Tiantai form of Buddhist praxis, the practice of mind-contemplation, designed to lead to a liberating realization of these ideas. In the works of Jingxi Zhanran, the implicit approach to practice in Zhiyi’s works is streamlined and intensified. It is characterized, polemically, as the contemplation of and by the deluded, rather than the enlightened, mind. Here the Tiantai premises are used to find a practical way out of the vicious circle which it seems to posit, presenting a method for the self-overcoming of delusion. This has interesting implications for the conception of the relations between delusion and enlightenment, and sentience and insentience, which I will try to elucidate in this discussion.

The Speaker: Brook Ziporyn specializes in Chinese Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. He earned the Ph.D. in Chinese philosophy at the University of Michigan and has taught Buddhism and Chinese thought at the University of Michigan, Harvard University, the Chung-hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, Taiwan, and Northwestern University (since 1998). Ziporyn's research focuses on metaphysical, axiological and epistemological developments in Chinese thought and religion, and on comparative philosophical issues emerging from the encounter between Indo-European and Sinic thinking as evidenced in Chinese Buddhism, especially Tiantai, and the implications of this encounter for contemporary thought.

Ziporyn is currently working on an extended intellectual history of the concept of Li (principle, coherence) in Chinese thought from the classical period to the early Song Dynasty, and its implications for understanding the handling of concepts of universality, class-inclusion, and omnipresence in Chinese thought, a tradition that evolved in isolation from either philosophical theism or any Platonic conception of eternal forms, and lacked any two-tiered metaphysic that would underwrite a notion of substantial essences ontologically distinct from the empirical realm. He is also preparing a translation of the Taoist classic, Zhuangzi, with selections from traditional commentaries and explanatory glosses.

His published books in intellectual history, religion and philosophy are Evil and/or/as the Good: Intersubjectivity and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought (Harvard University Press, 2000); The Penumbra Unbound, the Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang (State University of New York Press, 2003); and Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism (Open Court Press, 2004). He has also published several novels.