

The Brilliance of Emptiness: T'an-luan as a Mystic of Light

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SAYING NOTHING MEANINGFULLY

The problem in teaching Buddhism is how to speak of reality as it truly is. Reality, simply, is Reality. But, if we knew that, we would not need to be told. We would be Buddhas. If we are not Buddhas, then whatever we see or hear is *about* Reality. It is a model, not Reality itself.

After Śākyamuni became a Buddha, it is said, he decided not to teach. It seemed that no-one would understand. "But," said the king of the gods, "there are beings with little dust on their eyes. They will listen, and be able to understand." And so, the Buddha spoke, using skilful means, saying one thing to one audience and another thing to another, like a wise physician adapting his treatment to different diseases.

This attempt to make the Dharma comprehensible to different beings at different times and places is open to misunderstanding. When medicine gets into the wrong hands, it may do more harm than good. When a method of teaching the Dharma which is effective for one being is heard by another it may lead, instead of to liberation, to further entrapment, particularly the entrapment in philosophies, that is, in conceptual models of reality.

Western scholars of Buddhism, who until recently have not themselves been Buddhists, have tended to get trapped in one of two models. The forms of Buddhism which use the skilful means of saying nothing (or very little) have been misunderstood as teaching moral *apatheia* and the philosophical nihilism of "The Void," and the forms of Buddhism which use the skilful means of saying something have been identified either as corrupt (a

necessary concession to human weakness in the face of "The Void") or as quasi-Christian, calling on God by names such as Amitābha.

In this essay I will examine the tension in Buddhism between teaching Dharma by saying nothing and teaching Dharma by saying something, and I will suggest that there are two sorts of Buddhist mysticism which correspond to "saying nothing" and "saying something": a mysticism of darkness or vacuity and a mysticism of light or fullness, and that Dharma Master T'an-luan, the third patriarch of Shin Buddhism, is a mystic of light. I will then argue that Pure Land Buddhism, according to the teachings of T'an-luan, is a way of saying something that incorporates and transforms the tendency of the mind to avoid Reality itself by constructing models of Reality. Sukhāvātī, according to T'an-luan, appears to be a prop for the mind, but, in fact, it transforms rather than supports dualistic mind: it is a "sacrament" of Emptiness. Finally, I will suggest that a study of T'an-luan's mysticism, and its development by Shinran, indicates a way of living vis à vis *samsāric* reality that has implications (which I cannot here elaborate) for the development of a Buddhist ecology.

THE PLACE OF IMAGES IN BUDDHISM

The physical center of any Buddhist practice is the shrine. How it is arranged says a lot about the form of Buddhism which is being followed. In Vajrayāna, there will be many images, and in Zen, there will be few. Why is there

this difference? It appears to stem from the teaching methods of either saying something or saying nothing about the Buddha.

It is now a commonplace to note that early Buddhism, though it had art, did not have human representations of the Buddha. The scenes of the Buddha's life center on an implied presence, illustrated by a symbol such as an empty chair, a pillar of fire, a wheel, or a pair of footprints. All around this symbol we usually see a lively and complex scene in which there is no noticeable restraint on artistic expression. Only the Buddha is "not there" although he is "there." With the rise of the Mahayana, however, the Buddha image (*rūpa*) comes into existence.

The reason for this difference is still not clearly understood, but it is often supposed to be related to doctrinal development. I wish to suggest, however, that it has to do not so much with a difference of *doctrine* but of *skillful means*.¹ For the purposes of my suggestion I shall pretend that early Buddhism was more like modern Theravāda than modern Mahayana. This is, be it noted, an *operational* assumption which passes no judgement on whether early Buddhism can actually be said to be like any modern form of Buddhism.

A Theravādin shrine will contain a Buddha image. It may, indeed, have a number of Buddha images.² There will not be any images of Bodhisattvas and, if there are any images of deities, they will normally be found in parts of the shrine, such as the doorway, that are clearly subordinate to the space reserved for the Buddha. The Buddha image will have been consecrated at a formal liturgy, and practitioners, on entering the shrine, will bow or prostrate before it.

A Theravādin Buddha image, however, is not a Buddha. The standard explanation seems to be in line with Nāgasena's statement that, following his *parinibbāna*, "the Buddha cannot be pointed to as being here or there, but he can be pointed to in his teaching (*dhamma*)."³ That is, when one contacts the *Dhamma* one contacts the other two facets of the Triple Jewel; and then, as Buddhaghosa says, by the

practice of "recollection of the Buddha" (*buddhānussati*) the meditator "comes to feel as if he were living in the Master's presence."⁴

This is a way of "saying nothing" about the present ontological status, nature, and location of the Buddha. It is in harmony with Pāli record of the Buddha's silence, or his response, "It is incoherent" (*nopeti*), when asked "Where does a Tathāgata go after death?" The answers, "He is dead (i.e., annihilated)" or "He still lives (in some heaven or other)" (than which there would seem to be no other options) are, he tells us, equally wrong. Therefore, Theravāda sets up an image of the Buddha (to teach that the Buddha is not dead) but does not regard the image as a Buddha (to teach that the Buddha is not alive).⁵

If, then, it is legitimate to interpret early Buddhism by extrapolation backwards from modern Theravāda, we might guess that it allowed *symbols* of the Buddha in order to teach that the Buddha was not dead, but disallowed *anthropomorphic* symbols in order to teach that the Buddha was not alive.

A Mahayanist shrine, especially a Tibetan one, is so full of images that the untrained eye can make little of it. The central and highest image, however, is usually Śākyamuni Buddha. Around him and beneath him, arranged somewhat in the manner of a royal court, are Bodhisattvas, other Buddhas, Tantric figures and various symbolic objects.

The consecration of a Mahayanist image is, like that of a Theravādin image, a liturgical ceremony, but its effects are somewhat more substantive. After the "enlivening" or "opening of the eyes," the image is regarded as *itself* a Buddha (or whatever other entity it represents) and it is worshipped as such.⁶ This is a way of "saying something" about the present ontological status, nature, and location of the Buddha. It is in harmony with the Mahayana teaching that the Buddhas have not gone into final nirvana for, if they had, they would have shown less than perfect compassion by leaving the rest of us to our own devices. There-

fore, contrary to Nāgasena's statement, the (Mahayana) Buddha can be pointed to.⁷ It is also consonant with Chapter 6 of the 20,000 line Perfection of Wisdom Sutra where Subhūti says "Whatever, Śāriputra, the Lord's Disciples teach, demonstrate, and expound, all that is to be known as the Tathāgata's work,"⁸ that is, for the Mahayana, a teacher of Dharma is the Buddha — for which reason, Tibetan lamas are accorded the respect due to the Buddha himself.

The difference between the Theravādin "saying nothing" through an image that is "not" the Buddha, and the Mahayanist "saying something" through an image that "is" the Buddha is a matter of skilful means. The Theravādin is afraid that the Buddha will be regarded as existing, and so denies that the image is a real Buddha. The Mahayanist is afraid that the Buddha will be regarded as non-existent, and so teaches that the image is a real Buddha.

The difference also indicates, I suggest, how Reality is differentially experienced and expressed (at the dualistic level necessary for teaching) in Buddhist mysticism.

TWO VARIETIES OF BUDDHIST MYSTICISM

As there are two ways of teaching Dharma, one through saying nothing and one through saying something, so there appear to be two ways of experiencing Dharma: a mysticism of darkness and a mysticism of light.

The Buddhist mysticism of darkness I will call "apohic", from the Sanskrit word *apoha*, "taking away." *Apoha* is one of the major dialectical techniques of Mādhyamika, in which a philosophical position (*dṛṣṭi*, viewpoint) is shown to be self-inconsistent and is therefore "taken away" and Reality as it truly is, *śūnyatā*, is exposed. Nothing, however, is said about *śūnyatā*. It is simply allowed to present itself.

This approach is clearly that of Zen, where the techniques of sitting and *kōan* are used to strip the practitioner of philosophical positions, or models of Reality, and allow *śūnyatā* to become manifest. One cannot speak about Reality as it truly is any more than a dumb man can describe the taste of a bitter cucumber he has eaten.⁹ It is also the approach of Theravāda. Although Theravāda does not have such picturesque techniques as Zen, it takes the apohic approach of the "undecided topics"¹⁰ quite seriously and strives, in the practice of "choiceless awareness"¹¹ to allow the mind to observe the mind, and so to see Reality as it truly is, but not to say anything about it.

Tuñh Ajahn Maha Boowa, a highly respected Thai teacher, writes of his practice in a manner resembling Rinzai Zen:

Sometimes I just threw everything I had into it: "Hm! If I die I die, this is the moment of decision." There was no turning back, only either to die or to break through. Like a drill, one has to drill, one has to drill till it breaks through, or like a person who is tangled in the brush, he must break through.¹² And now, he reports "I'm just as I am. What more can I say?"¹³

The Buddhist mysticism of light I will call "alamkari", from the Sanskrit *alamkāra*, "ornament." Whereas apohic mysticism can be thought of as supported by Mādhyamika, alamkari mysticism can be thought of as supported by Yogācāra and texts such as the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* and Fa-tang's "Essay on the Golden Lion." In this system, Emptiness is *spoken of* and it is described as full, brilliant, sparkling. This is the universe as seen by Vajrayāna; the

world as a *maṇḍala* of a deity; *samsāra*, viewed from what Vajrayāna calls "pure perspective," as nirvana:

Shunyata is ... an experience of bursting into openness which is rich, rather than a sense of throwing everything out until all that is left is a blank kind of nothing. So shunyata includes rather than excludes.¹⁴

The apohic and alamkaric mystical experiences are not indications of different doctrines. Mādhyamika and Yogācāra are, within Mahayana, different skilful means for the demonstration of Emptiness: in Central Asian Mahayana they are balanced, appearing as "wings" on either side of the Refuge Tree,¹⁵ and in Far Eastern Mahayana they are blended so that it is often impossible to say that a teacher is using one or the other system. Theravāda can be regarded, due to its reliance on the *nopeti* of the "undecided topics," as consonant with the Mādhyamika aspect of Mahayana.¹⁶

And, of course, if there is one aspect of Sukhāvātī which is beyond question, it is that it is full of *alamkāra*.¹⁷

THE ALAMKARIC MYSTICISM OF THE PURE LAND

It was fortunate fruiting of karma that, for the exercise known as the Ph.D. dissertation (a *rite de passage* admitting one into the professorial club), I happened upon T'an-luan's *Commentary on the Pure Land Discourse* (*Wang-shêng-lun Chu*).¹⁸ Instead of laboring away at a boring necessity, as do so many aspiring academics, I found myself, every time I wrestled with T'an-luan's not always straightforward Chinese, bathed in light. I was, perhaps, becoming an alamkaric mini-mystic.

T'an-luan's sutric base is what has become known as the "Triple Sutra of Pure Land Buddhism" (*Jōdo sambukyō*), that is, the larger

and smaller *Sukhāvativyūha* and the "Amitābha Visualization Sutra" (*Kuan-ching*), extant only in Chinese and given an invented Sanskrit title. A common element in these three sutras is the description of Sukhāvātī as *vyūha* and/or *alamkāra*, which T'an-luan renders as *chuang-yen*.¹⁹ *Vyūha* is a powerfully suggestive term in Sanskrit. In full, it means the sight of, and feeling of awe at, an army drawn up in battle formation on the horizon, with the sun glinting and sparkling on the weapons. The English word "array" is perhaps fairly close.

Except for the terror that such a scene might evoke, this word excellently described how a Pure Land practitioner begins to visualize Sukhāvātī. It is, as the Pāli texts say of nirvana, *chippassiko*, "come-and-see-ish." Glimpsing it, we want to approach and enter it. Once inside, however (having died here and been reborn there), we find that our wants have disappeared, and we even have no sense of having arrived there from somewhere else: dualistic ideas of "leaving," "travelling" and "arriving" are given up in "that Land of Non-Arising." T'an-luan says that this is like fire (our desires) meeting ice (the array of Sukhāvātī): fire converts the ice to water, the water puts out the fire, and the fire evaporates the water (T.40.839b3-7). From two "somethings" there arises a "nothing." Or, it is like a river flowing into the sea: the river takes on the sea's nature, not vice-versa (T.40.828c5-10).

Most importantly, T'an-luan, in two places, compares the array of Sukhāvātī to a *cintāmaṇi* or "wishing jewel." First, he says that the array of Sukhāvātī is "like a wishing-jewel whose nature resembles and accords with Dharma" (T.40.836b14-c5). That is, a wishing-jewel can grant the owner anything desired, so long as the thing desired is intra-samsaric. Sukhāvātī, however, grants what we truly desire: nirvana. This occurs, he then says (taking his cue from the 8,000 line Perfection of Wisdom Sutra²⁰) because of wishing-jewel thrown into muddy water cleanses it. So, the array of Sukhāvātī, especially the Name of Amitābha, being an extra-

samsaric wishing-jewel, when thrown into the impure mind of a sentient being, purifies it of the passions (*kleśa*) (T.40.839a21-b3).

A wishing-jewel is often pictured as emitting light, and it is, finally, the *light* of Sukhāvatī which does the transforming. It is not like physical light, which stops at the surface of an object. The light of Sukhāvatī penetrates, or suffuses, objects (so that, apparently, they seem to catch fire) and removes ignorance from the mind:

When that brilliance (*kuang-yao*) suffuses objects, it penetrates from the outside to the inside; when that brilliance suffuses the mind, it puts an end to ignorance. (T.40.837a19-20)

What has happened, then, is that our defiled mind's natural tendency to avoid Reality itself by constructing models and images of it has been, as it were, captivated by a skilful means. But instead of the straightforward "bait-and-switch" trick of the Parable of the Burning House in chapter 3 of the *Lotus Sutra* (where the children expect one object and get another) Amitābha gives us an image of an apparently intra-samsaric paradise which has a medicinal effect: rather than increasing our attachment (*rāga*), as an actual paradise (or *deva-loka*) would, it *transforms* our defiled mind and cures it. The object which we desire is the object we get, but its effect is to destroy the dualistic process of wanting it and getting it.

The joy of stroking [the feathers of the delightfully soft *Kācilindikam* bird] leads to craving (*tṛṣṇā*); but in this case [i.e., stroking the "soft jewels" in Sukhāvatī] it is a furtherance of the Way (*adhipati*). (T.40.837a24-5)

APPENDIX:

AN ALLEGORY FOR THE TIMES

While I was preparing this article my attention was directed to *Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky* (University Press of Kansas, 1986), a photo essay by Terry Evans.²¹ Folks back east perceive the prairie as dull and empty, and drive through it rapidly, with tapes playing, in order to get to Denver. Ms Evans, by her magnificent photographs and commentary, shows us that the prairie is actually full of life and diversity. Seen from a distance, the prairie appears barren. Seen close up, in minute detail, it reveals itself as fertile. I thought of T'an-luan saying that although Sukhāvatī is "without that which differentiates, it is not without differentiation" (T.40.829c5-6). That is, the inhabitants of Sukhāvatī are not divided into classes or castes, and the land is "as flat as the palm of a hand" (*ibid.*). Being "without that which differentiates" is an apohic symbol of *śūnyatā*. But, because *śūnyatā* is not "empty" in dualistic opposition to "full," Sukhāvatī can be said to be, alamkarically, "bursting into [an] openness which is rich," as Judith Lief puts it (see note 13): that is, it is not dull or "without differentiation."

As Sukhāvatī is, for T'an-luan, "the brilliance of Emptiness" the prairie is "the richness of spaciousness." When I contemplated the prairie I began to understand T'an-luan's description of Sukhāvatī better.

Further, what happened to the prairie became for me a symbol of what we do when we try to *earn* our liberation through what Shinran called *hakarai*, "calculation," actions which regard liberation from *samsāra* as an end of the same order as, and inevitably achieved by, *samsāric* means.

The prairie as it is, before human intervention, appears empty, but it is actually full. It is

a robust polyculture that produces and sustains itself. It is like Reality as it truly is, "bursting into rich openness" but which appears as "nothing" to cloudy mind. When humans destroy the prairie in order to sow the wheatlands, they appear to have converted a desert into a garden or to have created "something" out of "nothing," as cloudy mind constructs substantive images of Reality. They have, however, created a monoculture which is fragile (impermanent) and dependent upon humans as its slave. So, it would seem, cloudy mind appears to create a utopia (a Pure Land) but in fact creates *samsāra*.

What has happened to the prairie is now happening to the tropical rain forest and to other natural features of our planet. It is a commonplace to say that the devastation is caused by greed. But greed (*rāga*) is, in Buddhism, merely a symptom of confusion (*moha*). The confusion which is causing us to insult our planet is, I would suggest, the assumption that by *hakarai*, by forcing events, by the use of our own (deluded) power (*jiriki*) we can make a utopia, or a Pure Land, here within *samsāra*.

T'an-luan tells us that Sukhāvatī is a gift of Amitābha. Shinran explains that this gift cannot, in the nature of the case, be earned. We cannot use *hakarai* to obtain it.

There are implications here, I think, for a Buddhist ecology. But their examination will have to wait for a subsequent essay.

FOOTNOTES

1. It is suspiciously crypto-Christian to assume that doctrine is the *fundamental*, rather than secondary, or a consequential, issue. In Buddhism, doctrine is of course important, but it is rarely as *primary* as it is in Christianity.

2. These may be images of the Buddhas who preceded Śākyamuni, or they may just be multiple images of Śākyamuni which have been donated from time to time.

3. *Milindapañha* III, 5, 10. (cf. S. B. E. translation, part I, p. 113 ff.)

4. *Visuddhimagga*, VII: 67 (*The Path of Purification by Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli [Semage: Colombo, 2nd ed., 1964] p. 230 [italics added]).

5. We should note that this is a *Buddhist* explanation of the status of the image, and that to say (as some non-Buddhists have indeed said) that it is "merely a symbol" or "just a focus for meditation" would be an invalid *translation* of a Buddhist phenomenon into a non-Buddhist worldview such as modern western psychology.

6. This is explicitly taught in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and is commonly accepted by many Far East Asian Mahayana traditions. *Pacific World* readers should note that the teachings of Jōdo Shinshū on this point is closer to that of Theravāda than to that of general Mahayana; that is, Shinshū regards the image as a *symbol* of the Buddha, *not* as *itself* a Buddha.

7. Occasionally a Tibetan teacher will say, "The image is just a projection of our Buddha Nature." This appears to be a skilful means directed at western Buddhists who may regard the Buddha image as a "thing," whereas, according to the teaching of Emptiness, there are no "things" at all, whether Buddha images or violin cases.

8. *The Larger Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, translated by Edward Conze (University of California Press, 1975), p. 89.

9. From the *Zenrin Kushū*: "Asu kuka o kissu." A Zen Forest: Sayings of the Zen Masters, compiled and translated by Sōiku Shigematsu (New York: Weatherhill, 1981), pp. 35 (English) and 125 (Japanese).

10. That the universe is temporally or spatially either unbounded or bounded; that the mind and the body are the same or different; that something can be said about the postmortem condition of an Arhat. *Majjhima-Nikāya* 63 and elsewhere. For an English translation, see *Buddhism in Translations*; selected and translated by

Henry Clarke Warren (New York: Atheneum, 1962 and subsequently. Reprint of the Harvard University Press edition of 1896), pp. 117-128.

11. *Introduction to Insight Meditation* (Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire, England: Amaravati Buddhist Centre, 1988), p. 13ff.

12. "The Desire that Ends Desire," selected transcripts of talks by Tahn Ajahn Maha Boowa translated into English. *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, no. 7 (Jan. 1989).

13. *Ibid.*

14. Judith Lief, "Shunyata & Linguistics I," *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*, edited by Susan Walker (Paulist Press, 1987), p. 134ff.

15. Some lineages, such as Gelugpa, regard Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika as the "final teaching." But, again, the distinction is "upayic" (on the basis of skilful means) not doctrinal.

16. I have examined the similarity between Mahayana and Theravāda, and the confusion which results from identifying Theravāda with Hinayana, in "The Hermeneutics of Polemic: The Creation of 'Hinayana' and 'Old Testament'" (paper read at "Buddhism and Christianity: Towards the Human Future," Berkeley, Aug. 1987, unpublished). Although Theravādins do not explicitly teach that the dharmas are *śūnya*, *Dhammapada* 279 says *sabbe dhammā anattā* 'ti "all the dharmas are without inherent self" which, surely, is the same thing.

17. Some structural similarities between Pure Land Buddhism and Vajrayāna have been examined by me in "Pure Land and Pure Perspective: A Tantric Hermeneutic of *Sukhāvatī*" (paper read at the 4th Biennial Conference on the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, Honolulu, Aug. 1989).

18. *T'an-luan's Commentary on the Pure Land Discourse* (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1973). Available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.

19. For a discussion of the textual problems with this term, and the varying solutions proposed by myself and Professor Hisao Inagaki, see my dissertation (*op. cit.*), p. 111f, note 2.

20. *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*. Vaidya edition, p. 49, lines 25-30. I am indebted for this reference to Professor Yuichi Kjiyama.

21. I am indebted to Stephen Daney, who lives in Kansas on what remains of the true prairie, for this reference.