

# The Enduring Significance of T'an-luan

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T'AN-LUAN IS THE SLEEPER of Pure Land Buddhism, perhaps even the sleeper of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole. The official biographies record that he had lay disciples while he was alive, but no-one seems to continue his lineage. Tao-ch'ō regarded himself as T'an-luan's disciple but, if we accept his traditional dates (562–645), he was born twenty years after T'an-luan had died (476–542). Chia-ts'ai (c. 620–680) knew of T'an-luan, and reports miracles which were said to occur at his death, but he does not seem to be influenced by him. T'an-luan's writings are referred to by Shan-tao (613–682) and, to a lesser extent, by Ching-hsi Chan-jan (711–782). This spotty attention by his countrymen is repeated in Japan, until he bursts into prominence when Shinran, writing half a millennium after T'an-luan's death, quotes him extensively and regards him as so important that he adopts the second character of T'an-luan's name (pronounced *ran* in Japanese) as the second character of his own name.

It is not my intention here to investigate why T'an-luan has been so neglected or to attempt a summary of T'an-luan's writings,<sup>1</sup> but to select a limited number of aspects of his teachings from his major work, *Wang-shêng Lun Chu* (A Commentary on the Treatise on Birth [in Sukhāvati]) and attempt to demonstrate that he was one of the greatest Dharma Masters of the Mahāyāna and that his message endures to this day.

In order to do this I will go straight to T'an-luan himself and present him in his own light, as a Chinese of the fifth to sixth century CE.<sup>2</sup> Then I will seek to extract his teaching from its cultural context and suggest what elements of it might be relevant to us today, as the Dharma continues to become established in the west.

I believe that T'an-luan is of continuing importance first of all because of his Dharmological sophistication. His explanation of how the "easy practice" of trust in Amita Buddha<sup>3</sup> is consistent with the great philosophical systems of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra is intellectually satisfying and has yet to be surpassed.

Second, he records, apparently from his own experience, that the power of pure mind, manifested in Amita Buddha, is so great that we can trust it to work in us, we do not have to struggle and claw our way up the mountain of the Bodhisattva levels, as the Mahāyāna normally instructs.<sup>4</sup>

This teaching, which T'an-luan calls Other Power (C. *t'o-li*; J. *tariki*), a term which has been misunderstood in the West as quasi-theistic, is once again presented by T'an-luan in sophisticated dharmological terms.

Third, T'an-luan offers a comprehensive program of practice, involving the whole person in body, speech, and mind. Later Pure Land Buddhism, especially in Japan, not only concentrated on a single practice, that of invoking the name of Amita Buddha (*nembutsu*), it restricted itself to it. When this narrowing of the practice is unsupported by philosophical demonstration it may leave the reader with the mistaken impression that a grandly simple practice is merely simplistic.

Finally, T'an-luan's teaching about the double dharmakāya, compressed into a few densely argued lines, is a masterly insight which proposes a solution to the ultimate dilemma not only of Buddhism but, I believe, of all spiritual and religious systems. The dilemma is this: if the realm of liberation from suffering is the same as, or continuous with, the realm of suffering, there is no true liberation from suffering, only a temporary surcease. On the other hand, if the realm of liberation from suffering is different from this realm of suffering, there cannot be any liberation because there is no way to get from here to there. But if, as T'an-luan says, the two realms are non-dual, there is both the necessary connection and the necessary separation. Other dharma-masters, and teachers of other traditions, have said something like this, but none, I dare to claim, have said it in a way that so powerfully and neatly joins our ordinary world of suffering both to the world of uplifting myth and temporary bliss, and to the unconditioned reality of pure mind.

## DHARMOLOGICAL SOPHISTICATION

The two great philosophies, or explanatory systems, of Mahāyāna are Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. They developed separately, one after the other, and Tibetan Buddhism, especially the Gelugpa lineage, keeps them separate, balancing them as the systems relevant to, respectively, *prajñā* (wisdom) and *karuṇā* (compassion). Chinese Buddhism has favored a blending, although the connection of Mādhyamika and *prajñā*, and Yogācāra and *karuṇā*, is still discernible.

T'an-luan is thoroughly versed in Mādhyamika. His major commentarial source is the *Ta Chih Tu Lun* (J. *Daichido-ron*, S. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra*) and he makes frequent and intelligent use of the Chinese Mādhyamika Master Sêng-chao (374?–414).<sup>5</sup> His connection with Yogācāra is less clear. He does not seem to refer specifically to known Yogācāra texts. He does indeed regard the Treatise on Birth, the text on which his commentary is based and which is composed of verses (*gāthā*) with an

autocommentary in prose (*upadeśa*), as having been written by Vasubandhu—after, we are no doubt supposed to assume, his conversion to Yogācāra—yet the *gāthā* and *upadeśa*, whoever wrote them, do not strike us as Yogācārin. There are many allusions in his work that suggest that he was familiar with some of the central doctrines of Yogācāra such as the store consciousness (*S. alayavijñāna*), although one might perhaps just as well argue that he is thinking in terms of tathāgatagarbha theory.

Be that as it may, the point is that T'an-luan's commentary is not a treatise on blind faith and mushy sentimentality, as the Pure Land tradition has sometimes been misrepresented in Western scholarship. His devotion to Amita and his belief in the efficacy of rebirth in Amita's Pure Land is strong, but, whereas the sutras merely assert the power of Amita and Sukhāvati, T'an-luan explains and defends the power on rational grounds.

For example, the Bodhisattva Dharmākara, he says, made his forty-eight resolutions (*S. praṇidhāna*) when he had attained to the eighth level (*S. bhūmi*) in the ten-level scheme of the bodhisattva path. At that level, it is taught, the practitioner realizes that all phenomena are originally unarisen.<sup>6</sup> The view that all phenomena are originally unarisen (*S. anutpāda*) is a major teaching of Nāgārjuna and one of the foundations of Mādhyamika. In the full knowledge that nothing ever really arises, T'an-luan says, Dharmākara resolved to cause, as the fruit of his karmic activity, Sukhāvati to arise. T'an-luan sees this moment of consciousness as establishing the nature (*C. hsing*) of Sukhāvati as unarisen. Playing with the ambiguity of the Chinese character *shêng*, which can mean both the birth of a being as well as the arising of an object, he calls Sukhāvati the Realm of Non-Arising (*wu-shêng chih chieh*) and draws the conclusion that beings who go to birth there attain to no-birth, since the nature of Sukhāvati must, being consonant with pure mind and which therefore cannot be sullied, purify the impure mind of the practitioner. That is, beings in this world of suffering make an aspiration to be born in Sukhāvati, thinking that they will really be born there, but in fact, through the power of the nature of Dharmākara's consciousness at the time that he made the resolution, they are "not-born" and they lose all notions of coming and going, of leaving this world of suffering and arriving in the Pure Land. This is a very high realization, and it is attained by the Pure Land practitioner merely through concentrated faith.

In many similar ways T'an-luan shows how a simple practice has powerful results. The practitioner need know nothing about the mechanism of this liberation, just as the operator of a complicated machine need know nothing about the inner workings of the machine. It is sufficient to have learnt which buttons to push in order to have the machine perform various tasks. Many Buddhists are satisfied with this level of practice, of just saying the nembutsu, and at that level it certainly appears simplistic.

But if we want to open the box, as it were, and inspect the mechanism, T'an-luan shows us how it works. When we do, we find that the mechanism underlying the simple practice is anything but simplistic.

### ENLIGHTENING POWER

T'an-luan writes that merely by repeating the name AMITĀBHA the confusion and darkness of the practitioner's mind is cleared.<sup>7</sup> Wisdom comes into the practitioner's mind through the intrinsic power of the name, which not only means immeasurable light and wisdom but actually *is* immeasurable light and wisdom. "How could this be?" he allows himself to ask. T'an-luan imagines a questioner objecting that a name is just an arbitrary label for something and that it is powerless to do anything of itself. The questioner compares words to fingers pointing at the moon and accuses T'an-luan of claiming that it is the finger, not the moon, that gives light. T'an-luan's reply moves the question to a different level by offering a theory of language which recognizes the existence of what we might call efficient words or power words.

There are, he says, two sorts of names (words or nouns, *ming*)—those which are different from things (C. *ming i fa*) and those which are the same as things (C. *ming chi fa*). The first sort of names are found in language as we ordinarily use it. They are indeed merely indicators and can be compared to fingers pointing at the moon. But, he says, we know that there are other sorts of words, words which have power in themselves. Taoist texts such as the *Pao P'u-tzu* are full of spells which, T'an-luan reminds his Chinese audience, we have all used and found to be effective—and what is a spell but words which make something happen merely by being recited? Even more powerful than Taoist spells, which can at most relieve intrasamsaric troubles, are the Buddhist mantras which lead us to liberation. The names of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and therefore especially the name of Amita, is such an efficient name or power word.

We can, I think, appreciate the force of what T'an-luan is claiming without accepting his belief in the power of spells. The arbitrary nature of words is obvious, particularly when we acquire another language, in which we learn to use a new label for a familiar object. Whether we allude to a *dog* or *un chien*, our Anglophone or Francophone listeners will understand that a canine is in question. However, the arbitrary nature of words is not an adequate understanding of language as a whole, despite what we are told by many theorists. Poetry explicitly tries to break out of the univocal prison of plain, descriptive prose. It is meant to be evocative, calling up a feeling or a vision, often enough by the use of neologisms and onomatopoeia. Song, or poetry set to music, is even more evocative. Instrumental music is evocative without having any clear relationship to

words—we even call some pieces songs without words. Music can stimulate the emotions in many different ways, and it can make us think differently. Confucius knew this long ago, but now at last it has been proved by science and it has been given a trendy name—the Mozart Effect.

What T'an-luan seems to be saying is that mantras are closer to music than to descriptive prose. Mantras are, in any case, an irritation to grammarians. They seem to be on the verge of making sense but they are very bad Sanskrit. For example, the mantra of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion—OMANI PADME HŪṂ—is gibberish. It cannot mean, as many textbooks solemnly assure us, “Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus.”<sup>8</sup> However, when recited, it has a rippling, smooth sound with a calming effect that very well may, as it is claimed, resonate with, and therefore stimulate, the compassionate aspect of the practitioner's Buddha Mind.

This, then, is what the sound AMITĀBHA does. It is an *invocation* which is not only an *evocation* of the light and wisdom of the Buddha, it also *actualizes* it in the speaker.

T'an-luan goes further and attributes transformative power not only to the name of Amita but to Sukhāvātī in general for, as we saw above, being the non-product of the pure mind of non-production it has the nature of purity. The underlying assumptions are that pure mind cannot be defiled and that, further, pure mind is purifying. These assumptions, although often overlooked, are found in all Mahāyāna lineages (and even, to an extent, in Theravāda), and are given special emphasis in Vajrayāna lineages. In general Mahāyāna, pure mind has a unique and privileged status. It is intrinsically pure and totally unmixed with the defilements of saṃsāra, therefore, it can never be defiled. Even when it is taught that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are non-dual it is never said that pure mind, *bodhi* mind, or Buddha Mind (as it is variously called) is in any way mingled with the defilements of saṃsāra. Certain texts, such as the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* (*Ta-ch'êng ch'i-hsin Lun*) teach the “mysterious pervasion” (and therefore purification) of saṃsāra by the dharmadhātu (as it calls the realm of pure mind). Again, the doctrine of the triple body of the buddha (S. *trikāya*), which is taught in all lineages of the Mahāyāna, holds that the human manifestation of a buddha is an emanation of his essential purity.<sup>9</sup> In Vajrayāna lineages, the teaching on the purifying effect of the properly visualized *maṇḍala* or the correctly performed *sādhana* is so common it is almost a cliché.<sup>10</sup> For T'an-luan, these assumptions form a rational basis for the demonstration of other power.

## A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM OF PRACTICE

T'an-luan does not restrict his attention to the practice of the recitation of the name of Amita. Expanding on a structure in the *Treatise on Birth*, he

proposes a comprehensive program of practice called the Five Gates of *Nien* (C. *wu nien-mên*). *Nien* is a complex term which he explains as meaning meditation or mindfulness (corresponding to the Sanskrit term *smṛti*), recitation or invocation (corresponding to the Sanskrit term *japa*) and a very short interval of time (corresponding to the Sanskrit term *kṣāṇa*). Only the first two meanings are relevant to T'an-luan's Pure Land practice. I will here translate *nien* as *mindfulness* which, although not really satisfactory as a single equivalent for both *smṛti* and *japa*, seems to come closest to T'an-luan's general meaning. Gate (C. *mên*) means a teaching (as in the stock phrase "the Dharma Gates, i.e. the teachings, are numberless") but I keep the literal translation since T'an-luan explicitly plays with that meaning—the Five Mindfulness Gates are portals through which one approaches the Pure Land and then leaves it to re-enter *samsāra* so as to continue the bodhisattva practice of liberating all beings.

The Five Mindfulness Gates may be translated into English as nouns or, since they are activities, as verbs. Suitable noun equivalents might be: Worship, Praise, Resolution, Visualization, and Distribution (of merit). As verbs we might translate: Bowing, Chanting, Resolving, Visualizing, and Distributing (of merit). Because of a special meaning that T'an-luan gives to the word that normally means the distribution of merit, I translate the last practice, as explained below, as the Gate of Turning Towards.

The First Mindfulness Gate, Worship or Bowing (C. *li-pai*), relates to a practice of some antiquity that continues to the present day in most monasteries of the Mahāyāna tradition. Tibetans and those influenced by Tibetan culture tend to favor bowing as an individual practice and to perform full prostrations, whereas the Chinese (and therefore the Koreans and the Vietnamese) prefer communal bowing sessions and use a form of the kowtow, but in either case, the bowing is repetitious, prolonged, and strenuous. The Japanese are perhaps the only major Mahāyāna group in which bowing as a spiritual practice (rather than a social courtesy) has largely died out. The effect of so much bowing is to bring the body into the Way in no uncertain manner. The mind resists, the body protests, but, in time, body and mind accept each other and realize their interdependence.

The Second Mindfulness Gate, Praise or Chanting (C. *tsan-t'an*) is intimately connected with the First Gate. Whenever Buddhists use bowing as a practice they recite an appropriate text, phrase, or mantra. Chanting, whether or not connected with bowing, is common in all monasteries and temples, both Mahāyāna and Theravāda, and it survives in Japan. Chanting for T'an-luan means the recitation, or invocation, of the name of Amita. In his liturgical text, *Canticles to Amita Buddha*,<sup>11</sup> T'an-luan presents us with a series of stanzas with invocations of Amita under terms such as Immeasurable Light, Boundless Light, Unhindered Light. All of the stanzas contain some mention of bowing, either implicitly or explicitly. It seems

clear that he wrote the *Canticles* to be used in a combined practice of bowing and chanting, joining the First and Second Gates.

The Third and Fourth Mindfulness Gates, Resolution or Resolving (C. *tso-yüan*), and Visualization or Visualizing (C. *kuan-ch'a*), are given a special twist by being linked with the meditative practices of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. These terms, which we might translate into English as *calming* and *insight*, usually refer to stabilizing the mind and then using the stable mind to inspect and clearly see a selected phenomenon. In Chinese they are translated respectively by *chih* and *kuan*, characters which literally mean "stop" and "look," and which form a general word for Buddhist meditation when used together as a compound.

T'an-luan's explanation of *chih*, "stop," is distinctive—even, perhaps, unique. After dismissing its general meanings concerned with *śamatha* (calming or stabilizing meditation) as insufficient he says that, in Pure Land practice, *chih* refers to the power of Amita and Sukhāvati, which stops the impure actions of body, speech, and mind, along with the deficient aspiration for Hīnayāna liberation, i.e., liberation of oneself only without making the bodhisattva resolve to liberate all beings. He is able to make sense of *chih* as relating to the Gate of Resolving by emphasizing that the practitioner's resolution to be born in the Pure Land is done, as he shows in his *Canticles*, by singlemindedly and repeatedly calling on Amita and Sukhāvati, thus, as explained above, drawing their pure power into the practitioner's impure mind such that the purity stops, or overwhelms, the impurities of the ordinary mind.

T'an-luan's explanation of *kuan* is more traditional. He knows that it is used in general Buddhism to refer to analytic meditation on intra-samsaric phenomena, by means of which one can, for example, experientially realize that the body is marked by the four signs of being (impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and not-self) but, as in the case of *chih*, he says that such a meaning is incomplete. He wishes to redirect, or perhaps we can say restrict, its meaning in Pure Land practice to gazing on, or visualizing, the Pure Land and its inhabitants, Amita Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. Visualization is uncommon in Theravāda but is a prominent feature in many forms of Mahāyāna (with the notable exception of Zen) and it is even more prominent in Vajrayāna, with which Pure Land Buddhism has many similarities.<sup>12</sup> It is so important for T'an-luan that he devotes far more space to it than any other practice, so much so, in fact, that one could almost regard his *Commentary* as a treatise on visualization. He adds his own touch by dividing up the visualization practice into a "before" and an "after." Before one attains birth in the Pure Land one visualizes it and its inhabitants mentally, gains merit by the practice, and thus becomes assured of being born there. Having attained birth there, one sees Amita and the Bodhisattvas actually, no longer as mental representations (S. *nimitta*),

and as a result one reaches “the quiescence which is always-so” (C. *chi mieh p’ing têng*) along with Bodhisattvas of the highest attainment.

The Fifth Mindfulness Gate is called *hui-hsiang*. This is the Chinese term regularly used to translate *pariṇāma*, distributing (literally, turning over) any merit (S. *puṇya*) gained from a practice to aid in the welfare and the liberation of all beings. T’an-luan accepts this meaning, but only for practitioners in this life, before birth in Sukhāvati. After birth in Sukhāvati, he says, the meaning changes. Having been liberated oneself, one turns around and re-enters saṃsāra so as to aid all beings directly. He calls these two meanings the going (into Sukhāvati) and the returning (into saṃsāra) aspects of *hui-hsiang*. Because of the way he plays with the characters in Chinese, which mean, separately, *turn* and *towards*, an elegant English equivalent is difficult to find. I suggest the rather cumbersome and literalistic “turning towards” as a phrase that carries some of the richness of T’an-luan’s understanding of *hui-hsiang*.

Taken as a whole, the five practices are time consuming and are only really suitable for monastics and those laypeople who are relatively free of everyday duties. The rest of us might find ways that we could borrow some features of some of the practices, perhaps a little from each or a fair amount from two or three. If we are physically able, we could find a way to combine some sort of bowing with chanting the Name of Amita, perhaps using T’an-luan’s *Canticles*. The Gate of Resolution will take care of itself so long as we are persistent and concentrated in our practice. Instead of the detailed visualizations of every aspect of the Pure Land, Amita, and the Bodhisattvas, we might use a reproduction of a great work of Pure Land art and place it on our shrine as the focus of our chanting and bowing. The art work that we choose could range all the way from single figures of Amita and his attendant Bodhisattvas to complete representations of the Pure Land such as the Taima maṇḍala.<sup>13</sup> Gazing at these pictures combines the fourth practice with the “going” aspect of the fifth practice.

T’an-luan’s recommendations focus on meditation (*samādhi*), one element of the Triple Practice (S. *trīśikṣā*). The elements missing from the Five Gates are conduct (S. *śīla*) and study or wisdom (*prajñā*). Although T’an-luan does not discuss these he clearly expects them to be present. As a monk, he was required to control his conduct, and his writings show him to be a man of great learning. All three elements of the Triple Practice are assumed, and we need not omit them simply because of T’an-luan’s silence. Pure Land Buddhism has been accused, at various times, of antinomianism and anti-intellectualism, especially when it has concentrated on the invocation of Amita as the sole practice and as the only efficacious practice. When the invocation of Amita is central, but positioned explicitly in the context of T’an-luan’s other four practices, and within Buddhist practice as a whole, neither accusation has any force.



## A SOLUTION FOR THE ULTIMATE PROBLEM

Buddhism is one of a number of religions which hold that our present reality is profoundly problematic and that true happiness can only come by escaping from this reality. Such religions may be called soteriological (religions of salvation) or, to use a less Christian term, lysiological (Greek *lysis*, liberation).<sup>14</sup> Lysiological religions ask, and then proceed to answer in their different ways, three questions: What is the problem? What is the solution? What is the way from the problem to the solution? In Buddhism, these questions are formulated as *duḥkha* (suffering), *nirodha* (the extinction of suffering), and *mārga* (the path to the extinction of suffering). In the familiar set of the Four Noble Truths, *samudaya* (the arising or origin of suffering) is inserted between *duḥkha* and *nirodha*. This adds precision but does not affect the general threefold outline.

Early Buddhism seems to have taught a strict and real separation of *samsāra*, the realm of *duḥkha*, and *nirvāṇa*, the realm wherein *duḥkha* is extinguished. That *nirvāṇa* was regarded as in some sense a place is shown by the use in the Pāli texts of the term *nibbāna-dhātu* (realm of *nirvāṇa*). With the rise of the Mahāyāna, this separation was called into question. The extended and sophisticated critique can be summarized as follows. If a realm of no suffering exists it must have no admixture of suffering at all, and in order to have no admixture of suffering at all it must exist as a separate reality absolutely unconnected with the realm of suffering, but if there is no connection, how can beings leave the realm of suffering and go to the realm of no-suffering? If, on the other hand, there is a connection, a bridge between them, the realm of no-suffering is part of the realm of suffering and there can be no true liberation. The bold solution which the Mahāyāna advanced to solve this dilemma was to assert both propositions and their opposites—that the two realms are separate but not different, and that the two realms are the same but not identical. They must be separate for a place of true liberation to exist, but they cannot be different or there is no way to get from one to the other. They must be the same for it to be possible to go from one to the other, but they cannot be identical or there is no realm of liberation outside of the realm of suffering. This teaching was proclaimed as a middle truth (*S. madhyama-satya*) which simultaneously rejects and accepts the rival views of the identity and difference of the realms of suffering and liberation. The term “non-duality” is used to deny a separation (the philosophical view of dualism) without affirming an identity (the philosophical view of monism). Under the name emptiness (*S. śūnyatā*) this view became established as the foundation of all later Mahāyāna teaching.

Philosophically, the standard Mahāyāna teaching on emptiness (or transparency as I prefer to call it) is elegantly simple and logically compel-

ling, but it hardly stirs the blood. It has indeed often been mistaken, both inside and outside of Buddhism, for nihilism. In order to correct this mistake, some forms of Mahāyāna, especially in Tibet, have sought to balance the raw teaching on transparency, which they identify with the Mādhyamika school, with teachings on compassion, which they ascribe to the Yogācāra school. The buddha-mind in its fullness is completely wise and perfectly compassionate, and an overemphasis on transparency is criticized as an overemphasis on wisdom.

T'an-luan, as we have seen, is at home in both the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra schools, and he balances their teaching in a unique way in his short but very significant teaching on the double dharmakāya. Standard Mahāyāna maintains the doctrine of the trikāya or triple embodiment of the buddhas—the formless dharmakāya, the gigantic and glorious saṃbhogakāya, and the human nirmāṇakāya. T'an-luan is writing before the general acceptance of this formula and he seems to be aware of many different views on how the formless dharmakāya manifests in the world of suffering.<sup>15</sup> His most distinctive view is that all buddhas and bodhisattvas have a dharmakāya which is composed of an unmanifest aspect called the dharmatā dharmakāya (*fa hsing fa shên*), and a manifest aspect called the upāya dharmakāya (*fang pien fa shên*). "These two," he says, "are different but indivisible, one but not the same."

The dharmatā dharmakāya, which we might translate as the essential dharmakāya, is mentioned in the upadeśa of the *Treatise on Birth* as "the unconditioned dharmakāya of true knowledge" (*chên shih chih hui wu wei fa shên*) and so it is clearly associated with the wisdom aspect of buddha-mind. The upāya dharmakāya is not mentioned in the upadeśa and so, therefore, neither is the double dharmakāya. T'an-luan states his view without reference or support, as if it were well known, but we have no record of it elsewhere. The upāya dharmakāya appears to be related to the compassion aspect of buddha-mind. So far, so good, and, in fact, rather unremarkable. But then T'an-luan surprises us. It is best to quote him in full and then unpack his dense logic.

True knowledge is knowledge of the true marks. Because the true marks have no marks, true knowledge has no knowing. The unconditioned Dharmakāya is the Dharmatā Dharmakāya. Because Dharmatā is quiescent, the Dharmakāya has no marks. Because it has no marks, there is nothing which it does not mark. Therefore, the Dharmakāya is none other than that which is adorned with the Marks and Signs. Because it has no knowing, there is nothing which it does not know. Therefore, true knowledge is the same as omniscience. If knowledge is classified as true, it is clear that knowledge is neither created nor uncreated. If the Dharmakāya

is categorized as unconditioned it is clear that the Dharmakāya is neither with form nor formless.

The structure of T'an-luan's argument here is that of the Mādhyamika master Sêng-chao, but the content is Yogācāra, or at least quasi-Yogācāra.<sup>16</sup> First, following Sêng-chao, he establishes the nature of true knowledge, or wisdom. Things are known to be what they are because of certain distinguishing characteristics or marks (*lakṣaṇa*). The Abhidharma schools generated elaborate lists of such marks so that the practitioner could understand reality and escape from suffering. Mahāyāna, especially the Mādhyamika school, reduced all marks to one—transparency. The true marks are then no-marks, and when true knowledge inspects these no-marks it finds no inherently existing objects. Consequently, says Sêng-chao, because true knowledge knows nothing, there is nothing which it does not know. This is not verbal legerdemain. Ordinary, or false knowledge, knows things as they are conditioned by other things, and so it is restricted to particulars. Wisdom sees without conditions, and so its knowledge is unrestricted or universal.

T'an-luan then applies this epistemological structure to the ontological question of how Buddhas manifest in our suffering reality, that is, he moves from Mādhyamika to Yogācāra mode. If the dharmakāya is identified with unconditioned wisdom then it has no marks and, as a consequence, nothing which it does not mark. This means that the unmanifest dharmatā dharmakāya is the same as "that which is adorned with the Marks and Signs," i.e., the form body (*rūpakāya*) of the Buddhas which exhibits, by tradition, thirty-two major distinctive characteristics or marks (*lakṣaṇa*) and eighty minor distinctive characteristics or signs (*anuvyañjana*). Thus the dharmakāya can be neither formless (as traditionally taught) nor with form. It must, in fact, be both as well as neither, for it maintains a unity-in-difference with the upāya dharmakāya.

T'an-luan has established the non-duality of the wisdom and the compassion aspects of the buddha-mind, but he has one more trick up his sleeve. The dharmatā dharmakāya, he says, produces or generates (*shēng*) the upāya dharmakāya, while the dharmatā dharmakāya emerges from (*ch'u*) the upāya dharmakāya. T'an-luan relates the two aspects of the dharmakāya to a feature of the text on which he is commenting. The upadeśa states that the adornments of Sukhāvati and its inhabitants are "the marks of the wonderful realm of ultimate truth" which are "here explained one at a time in sixteen lines and one line." The "one line" is the stanza in the gāthās which runs:

Thus, I gaze on the marks of that Realm  
which surpasses the triple-world's Way.

In this stanza, the author (putatively Vasubandhu) is visualizing the distinguishing characteristics or marks (*lakṣaṇa*) of Sukhāvati which surpass, or transcend, the conditions or understanding (way, tao) of saṃsāra. Saṃsāra is conventionally referred to as the triple-world (*trailokya-dhātava*) since it is composed of the three realms of sensual desire (*kāma-dhātu*), form (*rūpa-dhātu*) and formlessness (*arūpya-dhātu*). “This couplet” says T’an-luan earlier in his commentary “concerns the most important point...the *purity* of the adornments. This purity is a feature of all [the adornments].” This, indeed, is why Sukhāvati is called the *Pure Land*. It is unmixed with any of the impurities of body, speech, and mind which are inescapable as long as we continue to be reborn within the triple-world.

This “one line” concerning the primary and universal feature of purity is then described in detail in the gāthā and upadeśa in “sixteen lines,” each concerned with a specific adornment of Sukhāvati, Amita Buddha, and the Bodhisattvas. Through all of this the patient reader has worked, and now we are told that this “line about purity” is a summary of the “sixteen lines” which are an amplification of the “one line.” The terms he uses for summary (*lüeh*) and amplification (*kuang*) make it fairly clear that he is thinking in terms of an important feature of indigenous Chinese cosmology, essence and manifestation, *t’i* and *yung*, according to which everything that a phenomenon (a text, a living being, or whatever) manifests is contained *in potentia* or *in parvo* in its essence. This is a thoroughly un-Buddhist notion but it is so basic to the Chinese worldview that it turns up in Chinese Buddhist texts quite frequently, albeit surrounded by caveats so as to remove the suspicion that a version of inherent existence is being taught. By relating the two dharmakāyas in this way T’an-luan subtly preserves the ontological primacy of the dharmatā dharmakāya without jeopardizing its identity with the upāya dharmakāya.

This densely argued philosophical point has a practical value. T’an-luan states that “if Bodhisattvas do not understand the mutuality of the Amplification and the Summary, they can neither benefit themselves nor others.”

This is to say, surely, that if Pure Land practitioners do not live in the conscious awareness of the unity-in-difference of wisdom and compassion, form and formlessness, suffering and liberation, their practice will be ineffective. The balance of wisdom and compassion is a general Buddhist teaching. T’an-luan’s distinctive contribution is that he not only makes them non-dual, he makes them non-dual as Amita Buddha. The universal buddha-mind thus has a particular face. T’an-luan gives us a way in which we can relate to the wisdom of the buddha-mind as a loving and compassionate parent who embraces each of us individually. This is a transparency which is not only philosophically satisfying but which stirs the blood.

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## NOTES

1. For that, see my "T'an-luan: The First Systematizer of Pure Land Buddhism," *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, edited by James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, number 3 (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, 1996), pp. 107–37.
2. In doing so I am of course setting aside the interpretations of him by Shinran and the various branches of Shinshū. Readers interested in this question may wish to consult my "Shinran's Proofs of True Buddhism," *Buddhist Hermeneutics* (Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism, 6), edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), pp. 273–289.
3. In this article I use the Sanskrit spelling, *Amita Buddha*, in preference to Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Vietnamese spellings, all of which are merely attempts to reproduce the sound of the Sanskrit syllables.
4. Mahāyāna in general, and East Asian Buddhism in particular, exhibits a tension between sudden and gradual teachings, or subitism and gradualism. According to gradualism, which is favored in Tibet, there is progress along a path, usually the ten stage or ten level path of the Bodhisattva, from suffering to liberation. Subitism regards such progress as wholly or partly illusory, and maintains that liberation is a sudden realization of our already existing nature. There is a great amount of literature in this topic.
5. For a detailed discussion of T'an-luan's textual sources see my "T'an-luan's Commentary on the Pure Land Discourse," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1973), pp. 43–46.
6. Technically, the practitioner attains *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, the "serene acceptance of non-arising."
7. For T'an-luan it is the *name* AMITA itself which is effective. The invocation formula *Nan-mo A-mi-t'o Fo* and its variants in Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, which have become standard, is not found in his writings.
8. For the serio-comic story of how this mantra has been richly misunderstood by Western researchers see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chapter four, "The Spell."

9. For a discussion of the implications of “mysterious pervasion,” the *trikāya*, and similar doctrines, see my “Self-Power Practice with Other-Power Attitude: An Interpretation of Mind in Shin Buddhism,” *The Pure Land*, n.s. 8 and 9 (December 1992): pp. 166–205.
10. I attempt to relate purification in Vajrayāna and Pure Land Buddhism in my “Pure Land and Pure Perspective: A Tantric Hermeneutic of Sukhāvati,” *The Pure Land*, n.s. 6 (December 1989): pp. 205–217.
11. For a translation, see my “T’an-luan’s Canticles to Amita Buddha,” *The Pure Land*, n.s. 6 (December 1989): pp. 262–278, and 7 (December 1990): pp. 124–137.
12. See, for example, my “Pure Land and Pure Perspective: A Tantric Hermeneutic of Sukhāvati.”
13. Much of this art is available cheaply in poster format or can be downloaded from the world wide web. For example, the magnificent sequence of images of the Pure Land maṇḍalas by Hisao Inagaki is available, with English or Japanese text, at [www.net0726.ne.jp/~horai](http://www.net0726.ne.jp/~horai).
14. Traditional religions (those which we used to call “primitive”) are, as a rule, more accepting of the world as we find it and less concerned, or entirely unconcerned, with release from it. The afterlife, for most traditional religions, is a more glorious continuation of this life.
15. See the discussion in my Ph.D. dissertation, pp. 61–65.
16. See Sêng-chao’s essay “Prajñā Has No Knowing” translated by Richard Robinson in *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 212–221.