

Buddhist Hermeneutics and East Asian Buddhist Interpreters

Buddhist Hermeneutics and East Asian Buddhist Interpreters:

Delivering Dharma of No Dharma

By

Sumi Lee

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



Buddhist Hermeneutics and East Asian Buddhist Interpreters:
Delivering Dharma of No Dharma

By Sumi Lee

This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2022 by Sumi Lee

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9189-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9189-9

This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies (KSPS) Grant funded by the Korean Government (MOE) (AKS-2012-AAZ-2102).

CONTENTS

Abbreviations	vi
Introduction	1
Part I. Possibilities and Problems	
Chapter 1	10
Two Hermeneutic Strategies in Buddhist Tradition	
Chapter 2	26
Investigation of Realism from Buddhist Perspective	
Chapter 3	42
A Critique of Historical Hermeneutics	
Part II. Hermeneutic Approaches in East Asian Buddhism	
Chapter 4	60
Language of Enlightenment and <i>Kanhua</i> Chan	
Chapter 5	71
Wŏnhyo's Understanding of the Non-Duality of Buddha-Nature	
Chapter 6	85
Kūkai's Esoteric Approach to Emptiness	

ABBREVIATIONS

C. terms in Chinese

J. terms in Japanese

K. terms in Korean

Skt. terms in Sanskrit

T: *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭, eds. 100 vols. Tokyo: Daizōkyōkai Shuppan, 1924–1932.

Citations from the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* are listed in the following manner: title; *T[aishō]*; *Taishō* serial number; *Taishō* volume number; page; register (a, b, or c); and line number(s). For example, 大般涅槃經 T374:12.5801b 04–16.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist teachings are often considered to be beyond our ordinary language. For instance, the statement that one must be free of all attachments in order to reach enlightenment has long been noted for its logical paradox. In order to attain enlightenment, one must abandon all attachments, but since these attachments include an attachment to enlightenment, one will eventually stop pursuing it. If, however, one has an attachment to enlightenment, one cannot reach enlightenment, because one is not free from all attachments. Ultimately, it leads to the paradoxical conclusion that one cannot reach enlightenment by either seeking it or not seeking it. Thus, the Buddhist goal of enlightenment, which cannot be pursued nor be not-pursued, is often described in a way that does not conform to the logic of everyday language, such as “enlightenment that is not enlightenment.” In fact, the concept of enlightenment has been described inconsistently, sometimes as bliss, annihilation, or beyond words. A question arises as to how enlightenment can be approached if it is outside the logic of language. Our understanding of objects is generally based on coherent usage of language. The question is: How can a coherent understanding of enlightenment and pursuit of enlightenment based on this understanding be possible when enlightenment is beyond everyday logic?

As a matter of fact, the limitations of language as a means of describing reality have been continuously pointed out in Buddhism. Although all beings are in the flow of change, we perceive them as fixed and constant while we refer to them in a linguistic system. As a result of conceptualizing an object and substantializing it, we have distorted perceptions of an eternal existence that does not exist. In the end, our obsession with these unchanging, fixed beings serves as a force to bind us to a world that is not real. With our incessant habit of conceptualizing, we perceive things as independent entities even in a world of flux where everything is dependent on conditions. The limits of language use have been clearly recognized and emphasized in Buddhism in this regard.

Nevertheless, we observe that language plays a significant role in the development of the Buddhist tradition. The majority of Buddhist teachings are contained in vast *sūtras*, which have been passed down from generation to generation in various languages. It is true that Buddhist teachings have also been delivered through meditation practices and nonverbal methods, but it is the linguistic theoretical systems that played the most crucial role in spreading Buddhism. The Buddhist canon, categorized into three divisions of the Buddha's sermons, monastic disciplines, and philosophical treatises, formed a fundamental cornerstone of Buddhist teachings. These Buddhist texts spread to different regions and were translated into the various languages of those regions, enabling Buddhist traditions to develop in new ways. Furthermore, new scriptures and genres also emerged reflecting the cultures and traditions of each region. As such, language has been essential for the development of Buddhist traditions and for transmitting the teachings. How can it be explained, then, that the Buddhist tradition, which has pointed out the limitations of language, also actively embraced them? It cannot be overlooked that language has been widely and actively used to deliver teachings in the Buddhist tradition despite the fundamental risk of epistemological distortion of the teachings.

To answer this question, one might consider the fact that language is an integral part of human society rather than looking at Buddhism itself. Regardless of its limitations, language is an indispensable element of human society that can never be ignored. As language has become the dominant means of human communication, if it had its drawbacks, it was unavoidable that Buddhist teachings should be transmitted in language. As such, language has a profound influence on human communities that far exceeds its limitations and therefore serves as the most effective means of conveying Buddhist teachings as well.

Although these explanations are not implausible, there is a more fundamental problem with the use of language in Buddhist teachings. Insofar as Buddhist teachings are expressed using language, they are also subject to the danger of substantialization, which is anathema to the essential Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anātman*). According to Buddhism, there is nothing that exists independently as an individual entity with unchanging properties. Everything arises from conditions; everything is

ever-changing in a constant state of flux. However, once this teaching is described in language, one cannot rule out the possibility that the teaching itself in turn becomes dogmatized as an unchanging truth. In fact, the problem of perceiving conceptualized objects as substantial entities is not what can be solved by simply paying attention to the language used. Rather, it represents that Buddhist teachings transmitted through language has a fundamental problem — the problem of substantializing the teaching of anti-substantializing.

In fact, the dilemma associated with the transmission of Buddhist teachings through language becomes apparent when we examine the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). This Buddhist teaching says that all beings exist in interdependent relationships, so nothing can exist with a constant nature; however, when the teaching is expressed as a theory of “dependent origination,” the teaching contradicts itself because this theory, which is conceptually fixed, and its content are at odds. In other words, the conceptualized theory of dependent origination cannot directly represent the reality of the constant flow of change. Moreover, the theory of dependent origination contains a dilemma, as is the case with the statement mentioned above that one must abandon *all* attachments in order to attain enlightenment. As we accept this theory of dependent origination, we are in turn led to deny its teaching, since everything that changes includes the theory itself. However, this does not lead to the conclusion that the teaching of dependent origination should be denied or ignored, just as the attachment to enlightenment cannot be abandoned. This is the reason why the teaching of dependent origination is sometimes depicted as “teaching that is not teaching” or “truth that is not truth,” just as enlightenment is described as “enlightenment that is not enlightenment.” The questions arise again, then: is it ever possible to approach Buddhist teachings, such as the doctrine of dependent origination, through the way that everyday language is used? Do the teachings not lend themselves to ordinary logic?

There is a common perception that Buddhist teachings, which are often described paradoxically, have mysterious implications that transcend empirical understanding. For instance, “enlightenment” or “*nirvāṇa*” is frequently construed as what belongs to supranatural realms beyond our

general experiences. The seemingly unreasonable expressions, such as “truth that is not truth,” also make them appear to be states of being that defy logical explanation. However, as soon as we conceptualize enlightenment or *nirvāṇa* as something “mystical,” the problem returns — the problem of solidifying the flux of being as an unchanging entity. By setting a new metaphysical state or object, the attempt to explain enlightenment’s or *nirvāṇa*’s paradoxical nature leads to a result that runs counter to dependent origination’s fundamental teaching that everything changes.

The problem is that concepts like “dependent origination” or “enlightenment,” or other paradoxical concepts derived from them, are necessarily deemed independent or individual objects. If enlightenment is perceived (or attached) as “enlightenment,” then it cannot be *true* enlightenment; if the teaching of dependent origination is considered as an unchanging truth, then it cannot be a *true* teaching. The same reasoning may apply to a metaphysical state, for example, that is neither enlightenment nor non-enlightenment; the state cannot be *true* enlightenment because it is considered *that* state. It seems then that no concept can directly convey the *true* message inherent in Buddhist teachings; rather, such concepts appear to even distort it. How can it be explained, then, that in the Buddhist tradition such a vast number of theoretical teachings have developed while forming their own precise systems of logic?

In fact, although the Buddhists were fully aware that language cannot capture the reality of change, they actively employed language in conveying their teachings. This suggests that the Buddhists did not simply choose language because it was convenient and indispensable for social communication, but also for another reason. It is notable in this regard that, for Buddhists, language is considered to be a skillful means (*upāya*) of transmitting teachings. Buddhist terms and concepts do not refer to specific objects; they are metaphors (*upacāra*) devised to convey the Buddha’s message that there is no immutable truth or independent object corresponding to such terms or concepts. There are only phenomena of constant change. In order to describe the incessant change itself, the traditional Buddhists resorted to using languages as provisional metaphors. A wealth of theoretical teachings, which have been passed down throughout

the whole Buddhist tradition, can be viewed as figurative expressions without specific referents. Depending on language without referents, Buddhists sought to convey the truth that there is no truth.

Metaphorical expressions are not just restricted to concepts or theories that are employed to illustrate Buddhist teachings. The concepts that we use to refer to objects in our daily life are also considered metaphors, because there is no perdurable object corresponding to the concept. Whether it is Buddhist truth or everyday objects, names and titles do not denote independent entities with unchanging properties. The important thing, however, is the fact that in real life we perceive objects, reflect on them and use them based on these concepts. In other words, even though the objects corresponding to the concepts do not exist as independent entities, the provisional existences can be still meaningful to us through the concepts and the metaphorical concepts can remain useful and efficient in our lives. In conceptualizing objects, the language we use may distort reality; on the other hand, when taken as a metaphor, it may play its significant role as a part of the reality of change. This means that even if language has inherent limitations, this does not justify abandoning it completely. There is nothing that is absolutely perfect or absolutely imperfect in this world, and therefore language as a metaphor can also have its own significance in accordance with the reality of change.

As a consequence of accepting language as a metaphor, we are now forced to ask a new question: How, or in what ways, can we use these metaphorical words to convey the teachings that cannot be captured in conceptual expressions? By accepting the metaphorical nature inherent in language, it may be possible to explain to some extent the above-mentioned problem of whether language can deliver Buddhist teachings that transcend language. However, figuring out how to use metaphorical language to convey Buddhist teachings that transcend linguistic barriers is another challenge. Here is where the significance of hermeneutics comes into play. It becomes crucial to understand how to interpret the Buddha's teachings in metaphorical language to unravel the true message, since metaphorical language may take a wide range of forms depending on the interlocutor's intent, which is usually related to the audience's capacity and/or condition. This is demonstrated by the fact that the teachings of the Buddha have been

developed into various theoretical and practical systems over the centuries. While early Buddhist teachings were described mainly through simple narrations, Abhidharma Buddhism established a tradition in which analytical arguments and systematic theories played a prominent role. Mahāyāna Buddhism, which rose later, developed a wide variety of theoretical and practical systems, both in terms of content and form, depending on the region and culture. For instance, the two major Mahāyāna schools, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, are well-known for their seemingly contrasting approaches to the crucial doctrine of emptiness (*śūnya*) — apophatic and kataphatic interpretations of emptiness. Such traditions as esoteric Buddhism and the Chan (K. Sōn, J. Zen 禪) school are known for their theories and practices that deviate from regular ritual customs or logical systems. However, despite of all the different forms of interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, these schools are considered as constituting Buddhist tradition as a whole. Given the fact that diverse Buddhist doctrinal and practical systems have been developed over a long period of time, it may be said that the Buddhist teachings have appeared in various ways depending on how they were interpreted using linguistic systems of metaphors.

Taking into account the possibility of Buddhist hermeneutics in this regard, this book explores how and in what ways the various interpretive approaches can have tenable validity in conveying Buddhist teachings — how it is possible for the Buddhist teachings to appear in various doctrinal forms and what meanings or significances they may have. These issues are discussed in two parts in this volume.

Part I addresses the possibilities and problems of hermeneutic approaches to Buddhism. Chapter 1 discusses a possible basis of Buddhist hermeneutics. This chapter observes the problem of how the essential Buddhist teachings, which are inexpressible by words, can be represented as various doctrinal systems; this issue is discussed by focusing on the two exegetic traditions in Indian Buddhism, namely, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Chapter 2 turns to interpretive problems involved with the realistic approach to Buddhism. Noting that realistic and anti-realistic perspectives are both based on a realistic view, an “open” interpretation to Buddhism is proposed. Chapter 3 looks at historicist interpretation of Buddhism in modern times. This chapter

also deals with the problem of whether Postmodernists' idea of incessant interpretation of changing phenomena can really represent "change" based on interdependent relations between phenomena.

In Part II, the possibilities of hermeneutic approaches to Buddhist teachings are observed through particular Buddhist doctrinal systems in East Asia. Chapter 4 examines Korean scholar-monk Wŏnhyo's 元曉 (617–686) view on non-duality of Buddha-nature. As the axial notion connecting sentient beings and the Buddha, Buddha-nature has implications of both delusion and enlightenment, or the conventional and the ultimate, thereby containing hermeneutical problems. This chapter observes how Wŏnhyo interprets the non-dual implication of Buddha-nature in the contemporary doctrinal context. Chapter 5 examines the Chinese meditative practice of *kanhua* 看話 ("keyword observing") Chan. In this chapter, the *kanhua* Chan approach, which employs logically inconsistent rhetoric, is observed as a hermeneutic way of getting through conceptual predicaments in conveying Buddhist teachings. Chapter 6 turns to Japanese esoteric monk Kūkai's 空海 (774–835) interpretation of emptiness. On the basis of the idea that in the light of emptiness, the conventional and the ultimate realms are not distinct from each other, Kūkai introduces an interpretive approach centered on this phenomenal world. The chapter analyzes Kūkai's practical doctrine of emptiness by examining his identification of the *dharmakāya* with the cosmic Buddha of Mahāvairocana.

While addressing the issue of Buddhist hermeneutics by taking into account its basis and limitations on the one hand and by observing particular interpretative approaches in East Asian Buddhism on the other, this volume explores the fundamental hermeneutic problem in Buddhism: how to deliver *dharma* of no *dharma*.

PART I.

POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS

CHAPTER 1

TWO HERMENEUTIC STRATEGIES IN BUDDHIST TRADITION

One of the main concerns in religious studies lies in hermeneutics: while interpreters of religion, as those in all other fields, are doomed to perform their task through the process of conceptualization of their subjects, religious reality has typically been considered as transcending conceptual categorization.¹ Such a dilemma imposed on the interpreters of religion explains the dualistic feature of the Western hermeneutic history of religion — the consistent attempts to describe and explain religious reality on the one hand and the successive reflective thinking on the limitation of human

*This article was originally presented at the 2nd International Association of Buddhist Universities Conference held at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand (May 31–June 2, 2012).

¹ In this article, I use the term “hermeneutics” in the broad and general sense of “principles of interpretation” in the act of understanding texts, even if there is an apparent connotation of historicity in the current use of the term. Historically, the meaning of the term has evolved: until the nineteenth century, when F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834) established the independent discipline of hermeneutics as “the art of understanding” that operated in all modes of human communication, not just in the activity of interpretation of written texts, hermeneutics had just referred to the principle or method of interpretation of religious texts, especially the Bible. In modern hermeneutics, since Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), this term has become intertwined with the notion of historicity: Heidegger, conceiving the act of understanding as the way of existence itself, claimed that our understanding is always determined within specific historical contexts, and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) also indicated the historical distance placed between ancient texts and modern readers or interpreters. For the issue of hermeneutics and historicity in the study of Buddhism, see John C. Maraldo, “Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 19, no. 1 (1986).

knowledge in understanding ultimate reality on the other hand.² Especially in the modern period, along with the emergence of the methodological reflection on religious studies, the presupposition that the “universally accepted” religious reality or “objectively reasoned” religious principle is always “over there” and may be eventually disclosed through refined scientific methods has become broadly questioned and criticized.

The apparent tension between the interpreter/interpretation and the object of interpretation in religious studies, however, does not seem to have undermined the traditional Buddhist exegetes’ eagerness for their work of expounding the Buddhist teachings: the Buddhist exegetes and commentators not only devised various types of systematic and elaborate literal frameworks such as logics, theories, styles and rhetoric, but also preserved the vast corpus of canonical literatures in order to transmit their religious teaching. The Buddhist interpreters’ enthusiastic attitude in the composition of the literal works needs more attention, because they were neither unaware of the difficulty of framing the religious reality into the mold of language nor forced to be complacent to the limited use of language about reality. In this article, I attempt to search for a possibility and/or adequacy of the intellectual activity of interpretation of religious/supra-intellectual sphere of Buddhism by investigating two exegetic strategies employed both in the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna tradition for this purpose.

Negative Induction: “Four Antinomies” and “Three Characteristics of Phenomena”

The first interpretive strategy that one may think of to explain the object beyond conceptualization should be to approach the object in a negative way: since the object is not something conceptualizable, the only way to describe it is to describe it through what the object is not. This negative approach, which I call “negative induction,” was employed by the early

² For a brief reference on Western religious history centered on the notion of “God,” see Francis S. Fiorenza and Gordon D. Kaufman, “God,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Buddhist interpreters. Since religious reality was not able to be directly presented by conceptual theorization, the early Buddhist exegetes, following the precedent of the Buddha, adopted the indirect method negating *all* possible conceptual formulations of the existential status of reality.³ For instance, in the dialectic form of the “four antinomies” (Skt. *catuṣkoṭī*), the status of Tathāgata after death is just described by negating all possible modes of the existence of Tathāgata: “It has not been declared by the Blessed One: ‘the Tathāgata exists after death’; ‘the Tathāgata does not exist after death’; ‘the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death’; ‘the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.’” We should note here that what the early Buddhists implied by negating the existential modes of reality was not simply the ineffability of religious reality, but the negation of the notion of existence itself — the notion that would have the risk of being reduced to an ontologically consistent entity. In other words, they warned the conceptualization itself, since the process of conceptualization tends to entail the false reading of ultimate reality as an ontological entity.

When we see that religious reality is something that cannot be caught in any form of ontological proposition, the interpretive dilemma in religious study appears confined not just to a methodological problem, but rather concerned with a more fundamental question — the question of how to approach reality or whether the interpretive method is an appropriate frame within which to represent the given object, and so on. As is well known, the broad reflection on the validity of methodology in academic fields, that is, “meta-methodological” discussion, has emerged as one of the main issues of the

³ One of the representative instances of the early Buddhist negative approach to reality is well presented in the list of “fourteen unanswered (Skt. *avyākṛta*) questions” to which the Buddha refused to reply. The questions are all concerned about metaphysical understanding of reality confining the object into one of the alternative existential modes. These questions are as follows: whether the world is permanent, impermanent, both permanent and impermanent, or neither permanent nor impermanent; whether the world is finite, infinite, both finite and infinite, or neither finite nor infinite; whether the Tathāgata exists after death, he does not, both exist and does not exist, or neither exist nor does not exist; whether one has the same body and spirit after death, or different.

postmodern period; the modern positivistic scholars' scientific methodology has been criticized in particular, along with their postulation of originally complete and wholesome objects of interpretation, which is believed by them to be finally discovered. For the modern positivistic scholars, the indubitable certitude of their objects did justice to their positivistic methodology, and the scientific rationality of their methodology in turn confirmed their eventual achievement of complete understanding of their objects. In this light, the methodological reflection again does not serve simply as a matter of a particular interpretive method, but directly leads to the theoretical problem of how we understand or define the interpretive object. The early Buddhists' exhaustive negation of the conceptualized modes of reality then may be seen as reflecting their denial of an ontological characterization of ultimate reality as an existentially identifiable entity.

We can find another instance of the early Buddhists' negative approach to ontological theorizing of reality among one of the main Buddhist doctrines—the doctrine of “three characteristics of phenomena” (Skt. *tridṛṣṭinamittamudrā*), i.e. “impermanence” (Skt. *anitya*), “suffering” (Skt. *duḥkhā*), and “no-self” (Skt. *anātman*). The first and the third characteristics, “impermanence” and “no-self,” imply that there is no such thing as inherent selfhood that keeps a persistent identity through time. What needs to be noted here is that both religious ultimate reality such as Tathāgata and the phenomena we experience daily are not able to be conceptualized on their ultimate level of reality: when conceptualized, each of the phenomena would be perceived as an individual static object with unchanging identity, and this illusory conceptualized image of the phenomenon is, in turn, identified with the phenomenon itself. Since there is no such existence that has an independent “self” — that is, a fixed and unchanging identity — the ultimate level of reality, whether the Buddha or daily experiences, cannot be grasped in the framework of conceptual language. But this does not mean that the conventional level of phenomena is not conceptually describable; even with no determinate and permanent identity, phenomena still may be expressed in concepts. This will be discussed further later.

Just as the negative connotation of “impermanence” and “no-self” implies that there exists nothing like a permanent “self,” the negation of ontological

interpretation of the “four antinomies” may be also viewed as being intended to prevent our arbitrary reduction of reality to such a permanent existence as unchanging metaphysical entity. Since the concept of “Tathāgata” or the “four antinomies” tends to be characterized as perfect and indubitable in its own right, “Tathāgata,” when taken on an ontological basis through such notions as “exist” or “non-exist,” is obliged to be rendered an ontologically immutable entity. Thus, it may be seen that the negative response to any ontological approach to the “four antinomies” was aimed at obstructing the illusory formation of an ontological “self.” The essential message of both the doctrine of “four antinomies” and that of “three characteristics of phenomena” may, then, be viewed as “selflessness” of all phenomena. This notion of “selflessness” became fully developed later in the Madhyamaka philosophy into another negative notion of “emptiness.”

Negative Induction of the Madhyamaka School

The early Buddhist interpretive strategy of “negative induction” may be said to have been developed into the Mahāyāna, especially Madhyamaka, doctrine of “emptiness” in terms of both its signification and style. Both the doctrine of “no-self” and that of “emptiness,” through their negative form of dialectic, have the implication that all phenomena are devoid of any sort of determinate identity. In his eminent *Madhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school, seeks to reveal the “emptiness” of various categories of conceptual propositions, such as “dependent origination” (Skt. *pratītyasamutpanna*), “self-nature” (Skt. *svabhāva*), “time” (Skt. *kāla*), or “Tathāgata,” attempting to prove the logical falsity of an ontological conceptualization of reality. Broadly negating ontologically antithetical categories such as “existence” and “non-existence,” “identical” and “different,” or “eternal” and “nihilistic,” Nāgārjuna indicates the fallacy of ontological understanding that is inherent in the process of conceptualization of reality. When one considers that the process of conceptualizing an object tends to substantialize the object, and that the substantialized object in turn solidifies back the conceptualizing process, all conceptual categories, including even Buddhist doctrinal concepts, Nāgārjuna argues, should be regarded as “empty.” The doctrine of

“emptiness” may be seen as the Mahāyāna version of “negative induction” strategy.

In the method of “negative induction,” however, the hermeneutical problem suggested before, still seems to remain intact and unsolved. If the indirect negative approach is the only way of interpreting reality, the attempt to express religious reality should just end up with ceaseless negations of what reality is not, while never reaching the direct meaning of it. Furthermore, what the interpreters of religious reality could do would be description of the mere “traces” of reality, not reality itself. The verification of reality, then, might seem to only belong to the individual or personal sphere of experiences, which would never be accurately comprehensible to others. Can we ever proceed forward out of the endless negative description of reality?

The “Middle Way” (Skt. *madhyamapratipad*), the important dimension of the doctrine of “emptiness,” needs to be noted, since it suggests the way to escape the circle of endless negation. Since the notion of “emptiness” does not refer to mere “nothing” or “non-existence” as the opposite meaning of the concepts of “being” or “existence,” but represents the status beyond such ontological alternatives, even “emptiness” should eventually be given up. Apparently, the negation of “emptiness,” as one may imagine, does not mean making up again a “selfhood” and clinging back to the illusory “self,” for the same reason that “emptiness” does not simply mean “nothingness” of reality. Rather, the negation of “emptiness” — or, in other words, the double negation of “self” — leads to a dynamic causal relationship between phenomena, providing us with the ground on which we can establish a new kind of understanding of existence, which is existence without “self.”⁴ On the basis of the realization of what “emptiness” really means, not adhering to the concept itself, we may probably start to discuss the hermeneutic possibilities of Buddhism. I will discuss this at the next section by

⁴ In the chapter of Analysis of the Noble Truths, Nāgārjuna himself clearly presents “emptiness” as the grounds of all existence by stating “Since there is the principle of emptiness, all phenomena are defined. If there were not the principle of emptiness, no phenomenon is possible” (T30.33a22ff).

inspecting another main doctrine of the early Buddhism: “four noble truths” (Skt. *catuḥsatya*).

Interdependent signification: “Four Noble Truths”

The approach of “negative induction” was not the only interpretive strategy for the Buddhist exegetes to present ultimate reality. In fact, “suffering,” the second notion of “three characteristics of phenomena,” is noteworthy at this point, because the term “suffering” is clearly an affirmative, not negative, concept unlike the other two concepts, “impermanence” and “no-self”; given that the persistent selfhood inherent in every phenomenon is negated, how is “suffering” (not “non-pleasure, for example) to be established again? In fact, this affirmative concept of “suffering” is, as is commonly known, one of the key notions of Buddhist teachings; we see the concept in not only the doctrine of “three characteristics of phenomena” but also the crucial doctrine of “four noble truths,” i.e. “the truth of suffering” (Skt. *duḥkhasatya*); “the cause of suffering” (Skt. *samudayasatya*); “the cessation of suffering” (Skt. *nirodhasatya*); “the path to the cessation of suffering” (Skt. *mārgasatya*). It is apparent that, in this doctrine of “four noble truths,” the notion of “suffering,” as one of the “noble truths,” constitutes ultimate truth in Buddhist tradition along with the other affirmative concepts of “the cause,” “the cessation” and “the path.” Then again, the questions in this respect would be: how should we understand the use of the direct affirmative concept of “suffering” when there is no persistent entity that is objectifiable? Can we find any logical explanation for the conceptualization of ultimately in-conceptualizable object? Insofar as what “suffering” of the “four noble truths” refers to is not considered a provisional or conventional truth, but ultimate reality, it appears that we need to find hermeneutic legitimacy to explain this appropriation of the concept “suffering” in Buddhism.

A possible explanation for this problem seems to be found by reflecting on what “suffering” means in the structure of “four noble truths.” The concept of “suffering” in the “four noble truths” has meaning only within the interdependent relationship with the other three truths. Likewise, it is only within the relationship with the other truths that each concept of the other three truths has its own validity. The point is that the reason that the term

“suffering” is conceived as what “suffering” commonly means is not because an object corresponding to the term “suffering” exists, but because the interdependent relationship exists. The relationship between each of the four truths is not a byproduct of the preexisting four truths, rather the existence of the four truths builds only upon their interdependent relationship. If the meaning of one of the four truths disappears, the meanings of the others would also disappear. It is only through their relationship that the four truths have their existential meanings. Viewed in this way, this affirmative method of describing reality appears to lead us to another interpretive strategy, which I call “interdependent signification.”

One thing that attracts our attention in relation to the interpretive model of “interdependent signification” is that, in different versions of the doctrine of “three characteristics of phenomena,” we read “*nirvāṇa*” in the place of the notion of “suffering.”⁵ The fact that the notion of “*nirvāṇa*” is found instead of “suffering” apparently suggests the close relationship between the two notions; moreover, when considering that each of the notions is commonly defined depending on the state of the other notion, the relationship between the two notions may be viewed as interdependent.⁶ Turning back to the problem that the notion of “suffering” in the doctrine of “three characteristics of phenomena,” unlike the other two, is affirmatively put, the difficulty of describing reality in affirmative way would then be explained thusly: even though concepts do not have their substantial referents, the affirmative use of concepts in describing ultimate reality is still to be legitimized because the concepts are able to maintain their valid

⁵ In the *Samyuktāgama*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinayavibhaṅga*, etc., the concept of “suffering” is found instead of “*nirvāṇa*,” while the *Anguttara nikāya* and the *Dhammapada* present the doctrine as “permanence,” “suffering,” and “no-self.” There is also the doctrine of “four characteristics of phenomena” in such literatures as the *Samyuttanikāya* and the *Pusa diqi jing* (Skt. *Bodhisattvabhūmisūtra*), listing all four in the order of “permanence,” “suffering,” “no-self,” and “*nirvāṇa*.”

⁶ Based on the common explanations in the scriptures on *nirvāṇa* and “suffering,” it may be generally said that *nirvāṇa* comes true only when one realizes the nature of “suffering” of life and overcomes it; if “suffering” remains in one’s way of cultivation, *nirvāṇa*, the goal of cultivation, is never to be reached.

meanings within the interdependent relationships between themselves. Since there is no such thing as substantial existence, the concepts, though seen as referring to it, do not indicate ontologically particular objects; since the relationship exists between the provisionally established concepts, the concepts do not have to be dismissed as nothing even without their referents. If the former negation of substantial existence is to be conceived of as “not-being,” while the latter affirmation of the relationship as “not-non-being,” we may associate these negations of two ontological extremes, “being” and “non-being,” with the Madhyamaka doctrine of Middle Way; it appears that we may find doctrinal consistency between the early Buddhist interpretive strategy of “interdependent signification” and the Mahāyāna approach of “negative induction.” When we are able to admit the validity of the affirmative description of reality in the interpretive activity of religion, we also might be able to expect a hermeneutical possibility of religious reality.

“Nature of Dependent Arising” of the Yogācāra School

The interpretive strategy of “interdependent signification” of early Buddhism was inherited by the Yogācāra school, one of the two main schools of Mahāyāna tradition along with Madhyamaka school. For instance, both doctrines of the “four noble truths” of the early Buddhism and the “three aspects of nature [of existence] (Skt. *tri-svabhāva*)” of the Yogācāra school — i.e. “nature of pervasive attachment [of illusory characterization of existence]” (Skt. *parikalpita-svabhāva*), “nature of dependent arising [of existence]” (Skt. *paratantra-svabhāva*), and “nature of perfect truthfulness [of existence]” (Skt. *pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*) — engage direct affirmative concepts in representing reality without assigning any ontological connotation to the concepts. The doctrine of “three aspects of nature,” even if designated as “nature” of reality, does not indicate something that exists independently with its own self-nature, rather it is a provisional/conventional concept to signify the selflessness of reality. This does not mean, however, that the inherent meaning of the concept makes no sense; the point is that the inherent meaning of “three aspects of nature,” which is the “selflessness” of reality, should be grasped without postulating any substantial existences corresponding to the concepts. This is exactly what is noted before regarding the Madhyamaka notion of “emptiness,”

which is a merely borrowed concept to represent “selflessness” of reality. Moreover, the provisional character of the designation of “nature” is also demonstrated by the fact that the doctrine of “three aspects of nature” is commonly presented in parallel with the doctrine of “three non-natures” (Skt. *tri-vidhāniḥsvabhāva*), i.e. “non-nature of characteristics” (Skt. *lakṣaṇa-niḥsvabhāvatā*), “non-nature of arising” (Skt. *utpatti-niḥsvabhāvatā*), and “non-nature of supreme truth” (Skt. *paramārtha-niḥsvabhāvatā*).⁷ More specifically, the fact that one single purpose is explicable through two seemingly contrasting doctrines of “three aspects of nature” and “three non-natures” — or, in other words, through the paradoxical structure of the “nature of non-nature” — induces us to notice that it is the inner purpose, not the literal meaning, that we should pay attention in these two intertwined doctrines. The double conceptualization of one single purpose appears to function as a kind of interpretive strategy to inhibit the one-sided understanding of reality antithetical to the Middle Way.

It is in the “nature of dependent arising [of existence],” the second of “three aspects of nature,” that the establishment of relationships between phenomena is plainly accepted, along with its meaningful validity in a positive tone. The “nature of dependent arising” means that causal relationship between phenomena can be established even though each of the phenomena has no independent substantial identity — the implication that is also displayed, as previously discussed, in the structure of the “interdependent signification” of the “four noble truths.”⁸ But, again, it is

⁷ The meaning of the doctrine of “three non-natures” is intrinsically identical with that of the doctrine of “three aspects of nature.” The signification of each “non-nature” in the light of the “three aspects of nature” is as follows: the “non-nature of characteristics” means that there is no such thing as nature in illusorily characterized existence; the “non-nature of arising” signifies that there is no such thing as nature in dependently arising existence; the “non-nature of supreme truth” indicates that there is no such thing as nature in supreme truth. While the “three aspects of nature” expresses “selflessness” using a positive term such as “nature,” the “three non-natures” displays the same purpose in a negative way.

⁸ That what the “four noble truths” implies is no other than the “nature of dependent arising [of existence]” may be verified through the Yogācāra theory of “four levels

only on the basis of the principle of “emptiness,” viz. the principle of no-principle, that this causal relationship has its valid meaning. “Emptiness” connotes the negation of itself as well as the others, and thus it does not allow ontological alternatives. The clue for resolving the hermeneutical problem of conceptualizing the object beyond conceptualization, then, appears to be found by reflecting on the “dependent arising” aspect of phenomena.

At this point, however, a new and practical problem arises — the problem of how to establish the relationship. In other words, the problem of interpretation itself. When it comes to the interpretation of a particular text, we should consider the fact that any interpretation is necessarily conditioned by a complex mix of factors such as socio-historical and environmental elements, the subjective mindset of the interpreter or the type of possible readers, and so on. We could reach different conclusions depending on what kind of conditions we consider, and to what extent and in what way we do so. But how different? This issue of fluidity of interpretation appears to not only be a problem of interpretation within Buddhist studies, but also one of the major issues in current postmodern scholarship at large. It is at this moment that such notions as “spiritual capacity” (Skt. *indriya*), “skillful means” (Skt. *upāya*), and “doctrinal classification” (C. *jiaopan* 教判) draw our attention as traditional devices that explain the existence of diverse or sometimes seemingly contradictory interpretations within the scriptures or doctrines of Buddhist schools. According to the traditional Buddhist explanation, the different levels of teaching are necessary as “skillful means” for the different spiritual levels of living beings. The early distinction of scriptural texts into two groups, the “scriptures with definitive meaning” (Skt. *nītārtha*) and “those with a meaning to be determined” (Skt. *neyārtha*), also serves as one of the hermeneutic schemes legitimizing the

of twofold truths (C. *sizhong erdi* 四重二諦),” or “four levels of the absolute truth (Skt. *paramārthasatya*) and the conventional truth (Skt. *saṃvṛtisatya*).” According to the theory, the doctrine of “four noble truths” is assigned to the second level of the “absolute truth” and the third level of the “conventional truth,” both of which conform to the “nature of dependent arising.”

activity of interpretation of the “scriptures with a meaning to be determined.”

The problem, however, is that such concepts of “spiritual capacity,” “skillful means,” and “doctrinal classification” may be used in considerably arbitrary ways. In fact, it has been indicated that Buddhist schools selectively used and interpreted the scriptures in such a way that they defended their own doctrinal positions as well as subsumed those of the rival schools.⁹ This hermeneutical contingency is sometimes taken as evidence that supports the New Historicists’ claim that all phenomena, including religions, should be understood within the socio-cultural context that they are placed in, or the phenomenological approach that our understanding of phenomena should be regarded as a reflection of our subjective consciousness on phenomena. Strictly speaking, we do not have any consensual criterion or definite standard to determine whether the diversity of Buddhist interpretation should be considered from the view of contingency (if going further, the anti-reductionist/relativistic view), or be regarded as one facet of the causal relationship between phenomena. One might even argue that the positions of Middle Way and “relativism” have no difference, not only in their style also in their basic tenet, because both views do not permit any universally applicable self-sufficient principle.

The difference between the “Buddhist/religious” understanding of the diversity of phenomena from the perspective of Middle Way and the “secularist” approach to it from the “relativistic” viewpoint, I would suggest, lies in the way in which both parties comprehend the relationship between phenomena. While the “relativistic” approach explains the causal relationship of phenomena through the notion of contingent uncertainty, the Middle Way position perceives it through the principle of no-principle — that is, “emptiness.” Therefore, while the former position inevitably ends up

⁹ For the double use of the notion of “skillful means” as an explanation for the difference of Buddhist teachings that are all ultimately appropriate on the one hand, and as an authoritative reason to advocate a particular school’s doctrinal position on the other hand, see Donald S. Lopez, “On the Interpretation of the Mahāyāna Sūtras,” in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1988).

with “endless narratives” regarding the causal relationship of phenomena, the latter pursues the principle itself (or, exactly speaking, the principle that there is no such thing as principle) which is beyond this relationship.

According to the traditional account, it is just on the level of the “nature of dependent arising” among the “three aspects of nature [of existence]” that such issues as the causal relationship of phenomena and the diversity of interpretation of phenomena make sense. Even if the causal relationship between phenomena provides the answer to the hermeneutical dilemma, this relationship, according to Buddhist philosophical scheme, is no more than provisional establishment. Even the Buddhist doctrines that explain the interdependent relationship, such as the “four noble truths,” belong to the provisional interpretation on the level of the “dependent arising,” not the direct description of “emptiness.” In other words, this relationship merely refers to the phenomena built upon the principle of “emptiness,” not straightforwardly revealing the principle of “emptiness” itself. Then, a similar, if not the same, question as the one that I raised in searching for the hermeneutic possibility of Buddhist interpretation will be put again now toward the last level of “three aspects of nature [of existence],” i.e. “nature of perfect truthfulness” — how can we understand the unconceptualizable principle of “emptiness”? To put it in another way, how are we able to see the moon, not the finger that points at the moon? It is in this context that Buddhism attempts to take the hermeneutical leap, or “non-logical hermeneutics,” to reach the “nature of perfect truthfulness,” which is beyond conceptual interpretation.

Non-logical Hermeneutics

The so-called “non-logical hermeneutics,” the hermeneutic method that was devised to immediately grasp the elusive notion of Middle Way, is well exemplified in the seemingly illogical or paradoxical Chan “public cases” (C. *gong'an* 公案). Strictly speaking, such “non-logical hermeneutic” strategies may not be categorized into the given issue of hermeneutics, since the scope of current hermeneutics is confined to the interpretive method by logical signification of a conceptual system. To mention a little for the sake of integrity, this “non-logical hermeneutic” strategy refers to the distinctive

Chan rhetoric that involves non-logical concepts in order to induce within the student an instant realization of the meaning of Middle Way that cannot be caught in the conceptual system.

In Chan *gong'an*, the concepts are used in such a way that the student cannot settle in a particular ontological stance, while being forcibly led to the condition of ontological suspension. For instance, “no” (C. *wu* 無), Zhaozhou’s (趙州, 778–897) response to his student’s question of whether dogs have Buddha-nature or not, may be considered as non-logical, or beyond logic, since Zhaozhou answered “no” even though he knew the doctrinally and logically correct answer, “yes”; the ontological tension that has been brought up due to the logical contradiction between Zhaozhou’s answer and the conventional answer inhibits the student from staying complacent about either of the two ontological alternatives.¹⁰ Zhaozhou’s dilemmatic situation of choosing between the two concepts with the opposite significations was able to be released by using this logical unconformity. In this regard, in Chan tradition, any type of theoretical explanation through conceptual meaning system is considered as “dead-word” (C. *siju* 死句), while the non-logical concepts to lead the student towards the raw meaning of “emptiness” is conceived as “live-word” (C. *huoju* 活句).¹¹ The initial realization instigated by this non-logical

¹⁰ Criticizing the popular tendency to regard *gong'an* merely as “illogical paradoxes or riddles,” Robert Sharf argues that, in some cases, the original meaning or doctrinal purport may be recovered. He claims that the “dog” *gong'an* works as a trap for those who seek to reify the notion of buddha-nature and that Zhaozhou’s “no” is not a denial of buddha-nature to dogs, but a rhetorical strategy to escape the conceptual trap on him. See Robert H. Sharf, “How to Think with Chan Gong'an,” in *Thinking with Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Charlotte Furth, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Ping-chen Hsiung (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

¹¹ Robert E. Buswell presents the notions of “live-word” and “dead-word” as one of Chan hermeneutical tools along with the notions of “three mysterious gates” (C. *sanxuanmen* 三玄門) and the circular graphic symbols. He indicates that, once interpreted in a theoretical description, even any “live-word” becomes a “dead-word” on the one hand and presents the case of Chinul (1128–1210) on the other hand, who, even as a Sōn (C. Chan) monk, regarded scholastic descriptions of

hermeneutic strategy, Chan teachers say, may culminate in meditative cultivation.

Concluding Remarks

The hermeneutic difficulty in Buddhism, as in the other fields of religious studies, comes from the supposition that the object of interpretation is beyond the methodological frame of interpretation — that is, conceptualization. The solution of the dilemma throughout early and later Mahāyāna Buddhism was obtained not by the transformation or replacement of particular methods, but by the fundamental understanding of the object of interpretation. Based on the understanding of the ontological “selflessness” of reality, the hermeneutic tradition in Buddhism may be divided into two groups: the emphasis on the lack of substantial existence entails the negative (apophatic) hermeneutics, i.e. “negative induction,” that excludes the affirmative conceptualization; this hermeneutic approach is traditionally displayed in the early Buddhists’ “no-self” theory through the Mahāyāna notion of “emptiness.” On the other hand, the exhaustive contemplation on this “selflessness” in turn legitimizes the positive (kataphatic) hermeneutics, i.e. “independent signification,” in which the causal relationship of reality may be interpreted; the “four noble truths” theory of the early Buddhism and the Yogācāra doctrine of “three aspects of phenomena” represents this approach of hermeneutics. What remains is the task of elucidation of the relationship, unraveling the entanglement of causes and effects of phenomena. This task is nothing new, however, at least in terms of its methodology. Whether one deals with the relationship from a comprehensive perspective of reality, or approaches it in a regional or parochial category, or whether one seeks the universal explanation of the causes and effects of phenomena, or investigates concrete aspects of the

Buddhist teaching as also vital for the process of cultivation. Chinul’s case that he obtained an enlightenment experience during reading the *Platform Sūtra* (C. *Tanjing 壇經*) demonstrates, Buswell claims, that “even the dead-words of the scriptures can come alive.” For more information, see Robert E. Buswell, “Ch’an Hermeneutics: A Korean View,” in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1988).