

## CONCEPTS OF 'LEVELS' OF DISCERNMENT OF *REALITY* IN DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF CHINESE MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

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The aim of this article is to briefly examine the main philosophical implications of the notion of different 'levels' or 'stages' of discernment of the *true* nature of the world by some schools of Chinese Buddhism. The postulations of the 'levels' and their explications by the representatives of the Chinese form of Indian Yogācāra – the Faxiang School, the Huayan School and Chan Buddhism will be analysed.

In this article I want to briefly present how some schools of Chinese Buddhism elaborated their notions on so-called 'levels' or 'positions' of discernment of *true reality*. Of course, since Buddhism as such could never have postulated any final or absolute *truth*, or any absolute claim of the *true nature* of our world (even in the soteriological aspect), we will understand the term *true reality* as an expression of such a kind of comprehending *reality* (our 'outer' world) that is deprived of 'false assumptions'. Again, 'false assumptions' cannot be defined as assumptions or notions that do not correspond with some kind of positively formulated *truth* – this would contradict the basic implication of Mahāyāna Buddhism as such, the notion of *emptiness* (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Chn. *kong* [1]). The theory of *emptiness*, systematized by the Indian Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna (2/3), primarily shows the 'ontological' and 'axiological' *emptiness* of all things – *reality* is only a net of mutually conditioned meanings which give existence to 'our' phenomena of which we (our *mind*) are inseparable and 'qualitatively equal' co-constituents. Seeing all the phenomena of our 'outer' world as dependent on conditions, logically, we should comprehend them as not having a nature by themselves (Skt. *svabhāva*) or a nature of depending on something else (Skt. *parabhāva*).<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter of Nāgārjuna's *Memorial Verses on*

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<sup>1</sup> Nāgārjuna in his work *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (chapter 1) states: "The self-nature of existents is not *evident* in the *conditions*, etc. In the absence of self-nature, other-nature too is not *evident*." (English translation according to Kalupahana, 1986: 107).

the *Middle Teaching* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) one of the most crucial points of the teaching is analysed – the notion of ‘conditioned arising’ (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*). Two terms are central in the analysis of ‘conditioned arising’: *cause* (Skt. *hetu*) and *condition* (Skt. *pratyaya*). Then Nāgārjuna shows the principal contradiction in any attempt to postulate the existence of any ‘ontological’ *cause*, saying that only different kinds of *conditions* can be appealed to when explaining our *experience* (of *reality*). *Cause*, as used by Nāgārjuna, is “an event or state that has in it *power* (Skt. *kriyā*)<sup>2</sup> to bring about its effect and has that *power* as part of its *essence* or nature (Skt. *svabhāva*)”.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, *condition* is “an event, state, or process that can be appealed to in explaining another event, state, or process without any metaphysical commitment to any occult connection between *explanandum* and *explanans*”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *causes* are rejected as being *svabhāva*. Then, the different kinds of *conditions* are examined in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, stressing that *conditions* are only ‘reference’ events, which can be appealed to when explaining ‘our’ phenomena, and are not the qualities on their own which cause or determine the nature of the things. Thus, according to the intentions of the theory of *emptiness*, we cannot postulate any ultimate or absolute state of things and we should comprehend *reality per se* as only a set of ‘conditioned meanings’ without any attributive or axiological structure. In our empirical experience we should give up any attempt to model any absolute reality, since, basically, no criteria, according to which we can judge whether this particular nature of the phenomenon is its absolute, independent nature or not, through the empirical experience can be confirmed.

Taking these notions as a basis, I want to examine some concepts of different schools of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism of ‘levels’ of discernment of *reality*. According to Buddhist teachings, the source of all distress and suffering of the human beings are ‘cognitive mistakes’: the ‘outer’ world (*reality*), that is principally determined, produced and limited by the cognitive abilities and dispositions of the individual, are considered by the individual to be a world of things not depending on the human *mind*, a world of events or relationships with their own inner self-nature. Thus, from this generally valid implication of the Buddhist thinking we can derive an important notion for our analysis of the ‘levels’

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<sup>2</sup> David Kalupahana in his translation and commentary on the text (1986: 108) argues that the term *kriyā*, used in philosophical discourse, can convey two meanings. First, it can refer to an inherent activity, a power of potentiality (Skt. *śakti*) in something to produce an effect (Skt. *artha*), and activity would then be an embodiment of a condition (Skt. *pratyayā kriyāvantaḥ*). In either case, the activity or the condition is said to produce the effect – this is again a substantialist interpretation of causation. Then Kalupahana says that if the philosophical explanation of experience is confined to these two alternatives, then the contrasting view would be that activity is not an embodiment of a condition (Skt. *apratyayavatī kriyā*) or that a condition is not an embodiment of activity (Skt. *pratyayā akriyāvantaḥ*). And Nāgārjuna says no to both extremes.

<sup>3</sup> Garfield (1995: 103).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 103–104.

of discernment of *reality*: only phenomena – ‘appearances’ – can be observed (or taken into consideration according to the teachings of *emptiness*), because no inner self-nature or independent causes of origination of the things can be *evident* (in Nāgārjuna’s terminology: *vidyate*)<sup>5</sup> in our experience of the ‘outer’ world.

The concepts of so-called ‘level’ discernment of *reality* in Mahāyāna Buddhism are rooted in these assumptions. The main concern in our essay is to examine the ways different Buddhist thinkers, whose teachings are rooted in different models of explaining *reality* – based on their schools – give us concepts of discernment of the world, as we experience it.

All of them suppose *reality* (the ‘state’ of our ‘outer’ world) to be just a net of phenomena (manifestations of *reality*) a comprehension of which, in one aspect, ‘depends’ on the meanings we give them, and, in another aspect, their *existence* is a set of *conditions* to which we can appeal to when explaining them. In our text we will examine three concepts of ‘levels’ elaborated by three different schools of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism: the representative of so-called *Consciousness Only* Schools,<sup>6</sup> the Huayan [2] School<sup>7</sup> and Chan [8] Buddhism. Before we start discussion on the particular masters, in my opinion, one very important implication of the whole theory should be stressed. All the masters postulate the ‘levels’ or ‘stages’ through which a human being can proceed in order to realize the *true* nature of *reality*, but, I think, what is of great importance here, is the assumption that these ‘levels’ should be primarily understood as ‘mutually pervaded without obstruction’ – one of the key aspects of *reality* mainly supported by the Huayan and some branches of the Chan Schools, which will be examined in more detail below. As far as I basically understand Buddhist concept (as especially explained by the Huayan School) of ‘mutual pervasion of all phenomena without obstruction’, it propagates ‘the mutual pervasion of all phenomena’, first of all, primarily based on the knowledge that every phenomena is absolutely devoid of self-nature. Of course, this notion of phenomena absolutely devoid of self-nature is not by our masters interpreted with ‘negativist’ connotations saying ‘nothing exists’, but it should be rather comprehended as a ‘positive’ formulation of the claim of the lack of self-nature in every phe-

<sup>5</sup> In chapter one in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* we read: “No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non cause” (trans. according to: Kalupahana, 1986: 105).

<sup>6</sup> *Consciousness Only* – the Indian Buddhist doctrine *Consciousness Only* has two aspects: ‘philosophical’ – named *vijñānavāda*, and ‘practical’ – *yogācāra* (Skt. lit. “application of *yōga*”).

<sup>7</sup> Huayan School – (Skt. *Avatamsaka*, lit. “Flower Garland”) School. One of the most important schools of Chinese Buddhism. Its name is derived from the title of the Chinese translation of the Indian *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*. According to the tradition, the first five patriarchs of the school were: Dushun [3] (557-640), Zhiyan [4] (602-668), Fazang [5] (643-712), Chengguan [6] (738-839), Guifeng Zongmi [7] (780-841).

nomenon and ourselves (as we could see in Nāgārjuna's theory). Thus, we can argue, fully corresponding with intentions of the theory of *emptiness*, that the notion that everything is absolutely devoid of self-nature can also convey the meaning that everything (every phenomenon and ourselves) can be pervaded by anything else which is not self-nature.<sup>8</sup> Of course, this claim as such is philosophically a bit fragile, but, if supported by the crucial implication of Mahāyāna Buddhism (or Buddhism as such) – 'dependent arising', it seems to be acceptable. If everything arises as a form of 'dependent arising' (everything in one aspect 'depends' on the meanings we give to it, and, in another aspect, its *existence* is a set of *conditions* to which we can appeal when explaining it – see above text on Nāgārjuna), we can say that everything is pervaded by 'dependant arising' – since the process of 'dependent arising' is principally in every school of Mahāyāna Buddhism comprehended as devoid of self-nature.<sup>9</sup> So, I think this kind of approach to our problem can be applied in our further text. In this context, even (universal) *principle(s)* can be postulated (whether labelled *li* [11] or *zheng* [12]), if they are referred as a kind of *essence* which can be manifested only as phenomena (or as possible objects of our cognition – *dharma*s – *fa* [13])<sup>10</sup> produced or originated through 'dependent arising'. The notion of the *principle* is widely analyzed in Huayan's 'levels', in the 'positions' of the Chan School the term is replaced by another Chinese philosophical term – *zheng* [12], with literal meanings "right", "proper" or "straight".<sup>11</sup> The third focus of our

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<sup>8</sup> This way of 'positive' formulation of *emptiness* seems to be widely valid in Mahāyāna Buddhism. For example, as Lang Eun Ra claims, in his book on the philosophy of the Tiantai [9] School (1989: 53), in Nāgārjuna's thought the term *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*) can be paraphrased as 'absolute inter-exclusiveness of ego [self-identity, self-existence, self-nature or substance] in all *dharma*s [things]'. This would mean that *emptiness* does not mean that all phenomena do not exist, but that they are in the state of excluding (being devoid of any) self-existent identity or fixed *essence* of any sort. Therefore, we can assert that a self-nature is excluded from every particular thing, absolutely and totally. Then Ra argues that 'exclusiveness' should not be the opposite of 'inclusiveness', but rather the ground of 'inclusiveness'. 'Exclusiveness' of something means 'inclusiveness' of some other things. The 'exclusiveness' of self-nature in every thing means the 'inclusiveness' of all others with no self-nature involved.

<sup>9</sup> For example, most important patriarchs of the Huayan School, Zhiyan, Fazang and Chengguan in their commentaries on the *Avataṃśaka-sūtra* state that the cardinal purport of the *sūtra* is the '*dharmadhātu* dependent arising' (*fajie yuanqi* [10]). For detail see Hamar (1998).

<sup>10</sup> The term *dharma(s)* (when used in plural) in Mahāyāna Buddhism should be understood as 'any manifestation of *reality*', thus manifestation of the general state of affairs; thing or phenomenon. In a more specific use can be comprehended having meanings like 'mental content', object of thought, idea-a reflection of a thing in the human mind. (According to *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, trans. by Michael H. Kohn; Boston: Shambhala, 1991: 54).

<sup>11</sup> Chang Chung-yuan (1965) translates this character directly as "universality" as opposed to "particularity" (*pian* [14]).

study, a representative of the *Consciousness Only* doctrine – Chinese follower of the Indian Yogācāra, the Faxiang School [15]; “Marks of *dharma*s” School),<sup>12</sup> seems to differ a bit in this respect, since its primary interest is not to directly stress the *due-to-dependent-arising-total-pervasion-of-all-the-existents* (and due to ‘nature origination’ as well)<sup>13</sup> identity of the *mind* and all phenomena (and, of course, of phenomena and phenomena), but it presents a kind of discernment of *reality*, where *reality* should be necessarily seen as *viññaptimātratā* (the world, as we experience it, is ‘nothing but cognitive construction’), especially stressing the aspect described by Alan Sponberg (1986: 32) as “one is to penetrate the *true* nature of *reality* by understanding the three aspects of existence [Skt. *trisvabhāva*, Chn. *san xing* [18]]<sup>14</sup> in five successive steps or stages.” It is not necessary to add that this school postulates the notion of the real existence of the human *mind*, however, of course, not as a kind of *substance*. Moreover, the ‘levels’ as elaborated by this school seem to mainly support the idea of the inter-dependent, correlative relationship between the intentional object and the perceiving awareness or between constituted object and constituting subject.

As a representative of the concept of ‘level’ discernment of *reality* of the Faxiang School, I have chosen a well known master of the school, master Kuiji. Then we will speak about the well known theory of the so-called ‘four *dharma*-*madhātus*’ (Chn. *fajie* [22]) as elaborated by the Huayan master Chengguan. In the final part of this article I want to write some remarks on the five ‘levels’ of comprehending the *real* state of the world as implicitly expressed in the ‘recorded sayings’ of the Chan master Dongshan Liangjie [23] (807-869) and in some commentaries on the texts. Of course, all masters more or less presuppose the practice of *meditation* implicit in the ‘stages’. As far as I understood the progressive ‘stages’ by different schools, here *meditation* is mainly regarded as a ‘means’ which can bring out altered modes of the ways of insights into *reality*. It can lead to permanent transformations (changes) of the ‘forms’ in which *reality* is *given* in our experience.

<sup>12</sup> The “Marks of *dharma*s” School of Chinese Buddhism continues the teachings of the Indian Yogācāra School and is based on the teachings of the Indian thinkers Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. It was founded by Xuanzang [16] (600-664) and his student Kuiji [17] (632-682) who systematized the teaching.

<sup>13</sup> See the text on Chengguan.

<sup>14</sup> According to the Yogācāra, phenomena are of threefold nature: the *parikalpita* (*bianji* [19]) nature – ‘pure imagination’, the ‘(mentally) constructed’, the perspective in which phenomena are wrongly seen as having real self-nature; the *paratantra* (*yita* [20]) nature – the ‘other dependent’, the mode of seeing phenomena as ‘conditionally arisen’; and the *pariṇiṣpanna* (*yuancheng* [21]) nature – ‘absolutely accomplished’, Harvey (1990: 111) describes this nature as: “this is the absolutely real level, devoid of the subject/object duality, in which knowledge is perfected due to directly knowing the world as ‘representation only’. While the ‘constructed’ is like the water in a mirage, and the ‘other-dependent’ is like the mirage itself, the ‘absolutely accomplished’ is like the complete lack of real water in the mirage.”

Master Kuiji is regarded as the first patriarch of the Chinese Buddhist “Marks of *dharmas*” School. As we have already mentioned above, the teachings of this doctrine are primarily based on the notions elaborated by the thinkers of Indian Yogācāra School. Kuiji himself is an important Chinese systemizer of the school, and an author of the doctrine of five ‘levels’ or ‘gates’ of discernment of *reality* by his school, which, according to Alen Sponberg, “are meant to mark the stages by which one can penetrate progressively deeper into the basic soteric truth of Yogācāra Buddhism: the view that the world, as we experience it, is nothing but a cognitive construction (Skt. *vijñapti*)”. This assumption can also be simply supported by the entitlings of Kuiji’s ‘stages’: “the five-level discernment of ‘*vijñaptimātratā*’ ” (*wu chong weishi guan* [24]; *vijñaptimātratā* – Chn. *weishi* [25]; meaning of the Sanskrit term should be like: “cognitive construction only”).

Kuiji’s elaborations on the topic are discussed in his two works *Commentary on the Heart-sūtra* (*Boreboluomituo xin jing youzan* [26])<sup>15</sup> and *Essay on Vijñaptimātra* (*Weishi zhang* [28]).<sup>16</sup>

The ‘levels’ are stated like follows:<sup>17</sup>

1. *qianxu cunshi* [29] – *dismissing the imaginary, preserving the real*

In this ‘level’ the three natures or aspects of existence are examined. The *parikalpita* aspect here is expressed as *suozhi* [30] (“that which one [wrongly] grasps [as really existing]” or “that which one clings to”) and, moreover, as having neither *essence* (*ti* [31]) nor *function* (*yong* [32]), thus being pure imagination. On the other hand, one is advised to contemplate the other two *paratantra* and *pariniṣpanna* aspects of existence as having *essence* and being *real*, since they are manifestations of *wisdom* (*zhi* [33]), which enables one to see things as only existing in the sphere of ‘objects of cognition’ (*jingjie* [34]), thus dependent on our *mind*.

2. *shelan liuchun* [35] – *relinquishing the diffuse, retaining the pure*

Though phenomena and *principle* are observed, they do not exist out of *consciousness*. This inner *consciousness* (*nei shi* [36]) implies ‘objects of cognition’ (*jing* [37]) and *mind* (*xin* [38]) as well. This is because when *mind* arises, it is necessarily produced in the sphere of the ‘objects of cognition’ (*jingjie* [34]).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Chinese text in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* [27] (*New compilation of Tripitaka from the Taishō era*), (hereafter T.), vol.33: 1710.

<sup>16</sup> T. vol. 45: 1861, pp. 258-259.

<sup>17</sup> T. vol. 33: 1710, pp. 526-527. English translations of the entitlings of the ‘levels’ are given (slightly amended) according to Sponberg (1986: 32-34).

<sup>18</sup> T. vol. 33: 1710, p. 527.



Here Kuiji seems to stress the aspect of *reality* which can be seen or observed through realizing of the 'fact' that our *mind* is necessarily a co-constituent of the 'outer' *reality*.

3. *shemo guiben* [39] – *gathering in the extension, returning to the source*

This stage Sponberg (1986: 33) comments saying that having recognized the interdependent, correlative *noema-noesis* relationship between the intentional object and the perceiving awareness, between constituted object and constituting subject (stage two), according to Kuiji, one must go yet deeper and bring in a notion dating from the scholastic period of Yogācāra thought, the doctrine of the *svasaṃvittibhāga* or self-verifying component of perception. Sponberg (1986: 33) explains *svasaṃvittibhāga* as follows: "The idea is that *meditative* discipline gives an experience of an underlying, unbifurcated mode of cognition that verifies the distinctive correlative relationship of what we take to be a separate subject and object in ordinary experience. The objective at the third gate ['level'] is to return to the source of the subject-object division, to gain direct awareness of unbifurcated cognition by means of the *svasaṃvittibhāga*."

4. *yinlie xiansheng* [40] – *hiding the subordinate, manifesting the superior*

In Kuiji's explanation of this 'level', the *mind* (*xin* [38]) is labelled as 'king' (*wang* [41]) or *essence* (*ti* [31]) and its transformations (here the subordinate mental states of the human *mind* (Skt. plur. *cittāḥ* are meant) as 'subordinate' (*lie* [42]). Their mutual relationships are analysed. However, I think, the point here is to support the idea that the notion of the human *mind* (=essence) and its transformations should be comprehended just as a permanent self-reflexive process of deautomatization of the *mind* which is mistakenly grasped as an independent *substance*, not in the intentions of postulating some kind of *aseit*<sup>19</sup> *substance*.

5. *qianxiang zhengxing* [43] – *dismissing the [phenomenal] marks, realizing the true nature*

This 'level' is, as we will also see in the works of other masters, formulated in a very obscure way, simply evoking the absolute, inexpressible aspect of *reality*. Anyway, in Kuiji's *Essay on Vijñaptimātra*, we read: "At the stage that one realizes the contemplation of *Thusness* (*zhen[ru] guan* [44]), conventional phenomena (*su shi* [45]) are made *evident* by understanding the ultimate universal *principle* (*zhen li* [46]). Once the universal *principle* and phenomenal existence have become *evident*, 'self' and 'things' cease to exist. It is precisely this that is the *essence* (*ti* [31]) of what was contemplated at the first level."<sup>20</sup> Thus, I think, this quotation also conveys the meaning that the *principle* discerned in all five 'levels' becomes *truly evident* in every 'stage', only the modes of discernment differ.

<sup>19</sup> *Aseity* – self-origination.

<sup>20</sup> T. vol. 45: 1861, p. 259a. English translation (slightly amended) by Sponberg (1986: 43).

The philosophy of the Chinese Buddhist Huayan School is based on the notions of total ‘mutual pervasion’ and ‘inter-inclusion’ of all phenomena. In the above part of the article I already tried to explicate some philosophical implications of the theory, especially those of the mutual pervasion of all things without obstruction. I also tried to indicate that this ‘pervasion’ is to be elucidated as ‘pervasion by a *principle*’, where the *principle* has its point of departure in a *principle* of ‘dependent arising’ and, I think, also in the *principle* of mutual inclusiveness of the phenomena by anything else that is not self-nature as well. Moreover, most important thinkers of the Huayan School described the *principle* as a Buddha nature (*foxing* [47]) or *Tathāgatagarbha*<sup>21</sup> – the philosophical system is deeply rooted in the teachings of the *One Mind* theory, supported by such important scriptures as the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng qixin lun* [49]).<sup>22</sup> So, here we can start our search for other implications of the *true principle* of the Huayan School. In the scope of this article it is not possible to go into deeper details of the philosophy of the school.<sup>23</sup> For the sake of retaining the clue of this study I will confine myself to elaboration of the ‘levels’ of discernment (= *dharmadhātus* – see below) by the great systematizer of classical Huayan theories – master Chengguan. He is regarded a synthesizer of two basic classical Huayan concepts: the ‘nature origination’ (*xingqi* [51]) and the ‘*dharmadhātu*’<sup>24</sup> dependent arising’ (*fajie yuanqi* [10]). Therefore, *reality* should be primarily seen as having two aspects: the aspect of the immutability of the (intrinsically pure) *One Mind*, which can also be identified with the Buddha nature or the *Tathāgatagarbha*, and at the same time the aspect of ‘(*dharmadhātu*) dependent arising’. The term ‘*dharmadhātu*’ (its name and essence) describes Chengguan in his *Manual of the Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (*Da huayan jing lüce* [52]):

<sup>21</sup> *Tathāgatagarbha* – Lit. matrix of ‘Thus Come’ (Chn. *rulaizang* [48]). *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanāda-sūtra*, the most important *sūtra* regarding the doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha*, defines *tathāgatagarbha* as: “buddha dharma body (*dharmakāya*), which is concealed by the defilements (*kleśa*).” T. vol.12 : p. 221c. Shih Heng-ching (1990: 153) points out that according to Indian *Tathāgatagarbha-vāda*, the term *tathāgatagarbha* designates “the fundamental nature of enlightenment in sentient beings”. See also Schmithausen (1990: 22). In this respect Imre Hamar (1998: 3) points out that in the process of origination nothing is to be originated that had not existed earlier, only something that was hidden becomes manifest in the world of phenomena.

<sup>22</sup> According to this very important work for Chinese Buddhists, the universe in its totality is regarded as consisting of One Absolute *Mind*, equated with (and directly named as) either *True Thusness* (Skt. *Bhūta-tathatā* Chn. *Zhenru* [50]; Lit. ‘Genuinely Thus’) or *Tathāgatagarbha*.

<sup>23</sup> On the detailed explanation of the four *dharmadhātus* see Garma C.C. Chang (1971).

<sup>24</sup> Lit. “realm of Dharma”.



Question: What is the *dharmadhātu*? What is the meaning of the *dharmadhātu*?

Answer: *Dharma* means the upholding law. The *dhātu* has two meanings: from the aspect of phenomena it means something that is divided (*fen* [53]), because phenomena are divided and different. On the other hand it means the nature (*xing* [54]) from the perspective of the *dharmadhātu* of *principle*, because the nature of the *dharmas* [things] is immutable. These two meanings intermingle, and thus the *dharmadhātu* of phenomena and *principle* comes into being. Phenomena are produced while attached to the *principle*, the *principle* is manifested through the phenomena. If the phenomena and the *principle* cease to exist together, then both the phenomena and the *principle* perish. If the phenomena and the *principle* arise together, then they are the permanent phenomena and the permanent *principle*. The forth [*dharmadhātu*] is the *dharmadhātu* of non-obstruction of phenomena, which means that the *principle* includes phenomena.<sup>25</sup>

Here many implications of the teaching can be detected. Especially the notion of the inseparability of the *principle* and phenomena – *principle* and phenomena cease to exist together and also arise together. This is a very distinctive point of the teaching and will be accentuated in the ‘levels’. *Principle* and phenomena exist only as mutually manifesting each other.<sup>26</sup> For the sake of the comprehensiveness of our excursion on the ‘levels’ of discernment here I want to add a general observance by Buddhist scholars, that the term *dharmadhātu*, can, expressed in a slightly simplified way, be used in a sense of mode of *true* experience with *reality* where phenomena and *principle*, and phenomena and phenomena, are mutually pervaded and mutually included, or the realm where insight pervades into the mutual inter-penetration of everything, seeing into the *true nature* of things.<sup>27</sup>

The four ‘levels’ or *dharmadhātus* are:<sup>28</sup>

1. *shi fajie* [56] – the *dharmadhātu* of phenomena

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<sup>25</sup> T. vol. 36: 1737, p. 707. English translation according to Hamar (1998: 4).

<sup>26</sup> Fazang explains his comprehending of the notion that *principle* and phenomena exist only as mutually manifesting each other in his famous work *Treatise on the Golden Lion* (*Jin shizi zhang* [55]; T. vol. 45, p. 663-667).

<sup>27</sup> Chang Chung-yuan (1965: 34) states: “Each particularity, besides being itself, penetrates all other particularities, and is, in turn, penetrated by them. This harmonious interplay between particularities and also between each particularity universality creates a luminous universe. This world of luminosity is absolutely free from spatial and temporal limitations, and yet it is no less the world of daily affairs. This is called *dharmadhātu*. In *dharmadhātu* the boundaries of each particularity melt away and the reality of each becomes infinitely inter-fused with every other being.”

<sup>28</sup> The commentaries of master Chengguan are very comprehensive, of course, it is beyond the scope of this short study to examine them deeply. Thus, I only choose a few of his comments on the *dharmadhātus*, just to give the reader an idea of the Chengguans basic approach.

Chengguan depicts this *dharmadhātu* [mode of discernment of reality where phenomena are seen] as conditioned (*congyuan* [57]), without true *essence* (*wu shiti* [58]) and nature (*wu xing* [59]),<sup>29</sup> with its [phenomenal] marks empty [unreal] (*qi xiang zi xu* [60]).<sup>30</sup>

2. *li fajie* [61] – the *dharmadhātu* of *principle*

Chengguan argues that *dharmadhātu* of *principle* [mode of discernment of reality where *principle*] is [seen] identical with *true* nature (*tong zhen xin* [62]). In every phenomena the *principle* can be observed.

3. *li shi wu ai fajie* [63] – the *dharmadhātu* of the non-obstruction of phenomena and *principle*

In Chengguan's *Manual of the Avataṃsaka-sūtra* we read:

Question: If phenomena are different in many ways and *principle* has only one flavour, why does the sūtra declare that *principle* and phenomena are non-obstructed and identical?

Answer: To seek for *principle* beyond phenomena is the partial deviation of two vehicles toward reality (*zhen* [64]). To understand the identity of *principle* and phenomena is the great enlightenment of the bodhisattvas. There is no *emptiness* beyond form, the whole form is *emptiness*; there is no form beyond *emptiness*, the whole *emptiness* is form. The conditionally originated *dharmas* [things] are called forms and the *principle* of their lack of self-nature is called *emptiness*. Being conditionally originated, possessing no self-nature, is identical with forms and phenomena: it is real *emptiness*. Possessing no-self nature, conditional origination, is identical with the *principle* of *emptiness*: these are forms and phenomena. These are two terms (*yi* [65]) but one *essence* *ti* [31]), so they are called phenomena and *principle*. They can be interfused because these are two terms but one *essence*.<sup>31</sup>

As we could see in this quotation, Chengguan accentuates here the notions we talked about in the introduction of this chapter: *principle* operates within the scope of 'dependent arising' and also in the sphere where "there is no *emptiness* beyond form, the whole form is *emptiness*; there is no form beyond *emptiness*, the whole *emptiness* is form". The whole existence is totally pervaded by the *principle*.

4. *shi shi wu ai fajie* [66] – the *dharmadhātu* of the non-obstruction of phenomena and phenomena

In the passage translated as a part of the definition of the term *dharmadhātu* by Chengguan (see above), the fourth *dharmadhātu* of non-obstruction of phenomena and phenomena was said to mean "the *principle* includes phenomena". Again, I think this note can also be explained as mutual inter-inclusiveness of all phenomena by their own nature, where 'nature' means anything which lacks self-nature. This is not to say that there is no difference between the manifested

<sup>29</sup> T. vol. 35: 1735, p. 668.

<sup>30</sup> T. vol. 36: 1735, p. 857.

<sup>31</sup> T. vol. 36, 1736, p. 707. English translation according to Hamar (1998: 9).

phenomena. Rather, it is to say that all things are mutually totally pervaded by anything else which is not self-nature, but none of them is manifested in one moment (of linear time) at the same place (of linear space) as the other.<sup>32</sup>

### CHAN BUDDHISM – DONGSHAN LIANGJIE

Dongshan's 'positions' are regarded to be derived (and usually are in this way explicated by scholars)<sup>33</sup> from the theory of the four *dharmadhātus* of the Huayan School. However, we can say, appealing to commentaries made on Dongshan's 'levels' by Buddhist commentators,<sup>34</sup> that, compared to those of the Huayan School, they are postulated in a more 'soteriological' way. This is not to say that Dongshan's 'levels' are intended to be some kind of 'soteric' text, but, the aspect of a 'progressive' Bodhisattva path (primarily in its aspect of helping all the sentient beings to break away from their 'cognitive mistakes') is accentuated, especially in the *Gāthā of the 'five positions' of 'merits'* (*Gongxun wu wei song* [70]), one of two main poems by Dongshan, where 'levels' are postulated.<sup>35</sup> I think, this implication is mainly substantiated by the notion in Dongshan's 'recorded sayings' texts, the notion of the Buddha-nature in all beings.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, if all the beings have the Buddha nature, and if the Buddha nature is devoid of independent self-nature, there must not exist any objective obstacle which can hinder a human being from becoming a perfect Buddha. The *Gāthā on 'five levels' of 'merits'* is a set of 'levels' which formally correspond to the basic set of 'levels' by Dongshan (rooted in Huayan four *dharmadhātus*), the 'levels' formulated in the *Gāthā of the 'five positions' – Lord and Vassals*. This *gāthā* gives us formulations of the 'levels' or 'positions' in

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<sup>32</sup> As exemplification of the *dharmadhātu*, the Tower of Buddha Vairocana (see Harvey, 1990: 118) or the Jewel-net of god Indra are most often introduced. The Jewel-net of god Indra is an image drawn from *Avatamsaka-sūtra*: in the net each jewel reflects every other one, including their reflections of each jewel, and so on to infinity.

<sup>33</sup> See Chang Chung-yuan (1965), Powell (1986).

<sup>34</sup> For example, an important commentator of Chan Buddhism texts – master Yongjue Yuanxian [67] (1578-1657) – in his *Commentaries on Dongshan's gāthā of 'five positions'* (*Dongshan wu wei song zhu* [68]). In: *The Continued Tripitaka (Xu zangjing* [69]; 150 volumes, Hong Kong: 1967), vol. 125, p. 356 – hereafter YX.

<sup>35</sup> The other one is the *Gāthā of the 'five positions' – Lord and Vassals (Wu wei jun chen song* [71]). Both *gāthās* see T. 1986B, p. 525. There exist many explications of Dongshan's 'positions' – commentaries by the medieval Chan masters (e.g., Caoshan Benji [72] (804-901), Dahui Zonggao [73] (1086-1163)) or by modern masters and scholars (e.g., see note 33). The scope of this article allows me only to write a few pages on the topic, and, it was not easy to find a way to explicate the meanings of the 'position'. In the end I decided to refer to the commentaries by Yongjue Yuanxian, who is stressing both the 'epistemological' and 'soteriological' aspects in his comments.

<sup>36</sup> According to Dongshan, even the non-sentient things have the Buddha nature. See Benická (2002).

a more 'epistemological' way, describing (not unlike the Huayan School) the 'progressive' modes of insight into *reality* (where 'the *principle* includes all phenomena'<sup>37</sup> and all phenomena are mutually 'inter-penetrated'). Unlike the Huayan, here the key terms – *principle* and phenomena – are replaced by the terms *zheng* [12] ("right") and *pian* [14] ("biased"). And, also the term *dharmadhātu* is not used when postulating 'levels'. Instead, the Chinese character *wei* [74] occurs, which should indicate, as Whalen W. Lai (1969: 231) suggests, that it evokes the meaning "occupying a proper position" (which can imply taking a proper position toward *reality*). What I want to stress in this respect, is the *meditative* practice which is presupposed in the 'positions', mainly regarded as a 'means' which can bring out altered modes of discernment of *reality*, which, as a result, can lead to permanent transformations (changes) of the 'forms' in which *reality* is *given* in our experience. Needless to say, Dongshan's Caodong [75] branch of Chan Buddhism is known as a school of 'sitting meditation' (*zuochan* [76]).

Dongshan's 'positions' are as follows:<sup>38</sup>

1. *zheng zhong pian* [79] – the *biased* within the *right*

At the beginning of the night's third watch, before there is moonlight,  
Don't be surprised to meet yet not recognize  
What is surely a familiar face from the past.

According to the commentary by Yongjue Yuanxian,<sup>39</sup> here "the *mind* awakens for the first time into (this) *principle*" (*chu wu ci li* [80]). The *principle* (the *right*) here, I think, is not unlike the *principle* suggested by the masters of Huayan, and this 'position' seems to correspond to the first *dharmadhātu* (the *dharmadhātu* of phenomena)<sup>40</sup> in its basic implication – describing the way of *true* insight into *reality* as (Chengguan – first *dharmadhātu*) "the [mode of discernment of *reality* where phenomena are seen] as conditioned, without true *essence* and nature" – the implications of the Huayan term *principle*, as comprehensible in the first *dharmadhātu*. Moreover, Yuanxian also depicts the *principle* seen in this 'position' as "the *principle* is not yet *true*, because though you meet [the *principle*], you do not recognize [it]". Thus, this quotation can also be interpreted in the connotations, in my opinion, that this mode of experience is regarded by the commentator as only temporary (within application of *meditation*?), just a transitional (unstable) state of *mind*, which can, however, lead to permanent alternation (of the mode of the *true* comprehending the *principle*).

<sup>37</sup> See Chengguan's forth *dharmadhātu*.

<sup>38</sup> Original text in: *The 'recorded sayings' of master Dongshan Liangjie of Ruizhou* (Ruizhou Dongshan Liangjie chanshi yulu) [77]; T. no. 1986: 519-526). This is the most important and comprehensive version of Dongshan's records, compilation attributed to Yufeng Yuanxin [78] (1571-1647). English translations of the verses according to Powell (1986: 61-62), English translations of the entitlings of the 'positions' are my own.

<sup>39</sup> XY, p. 356a.

<sup>40</sup> See Chang Chung-yuan (1965: 43).

2. *pian zhong zheng* [81] – the *right* within the *biased*

An old crone, having just awakened, comes upon an ancient mirror;  
That which is clearly reflected in front of her face is none other than her own likeness.

Do not lose sight of your face again and go chasing your shadow.

Yuanxian<sup>41</sup> suggests the symbol of ‘an old crone, having just awakened’ to represent the meaning of ‘the *biased* within the *right*’ and ‘an ancient mirror which is not clear’ to stand for the meaning “the *right* within the *biased*”. I think, what is accentuated here is the notion that every phenomena (old crone) is just a direct manifestation of the *principle* (clear mirror), however, this knowledge is not yet experienced as a permanent alternation of the way of seeing the phenomena (as in the first ‘position’). According to Chang Chung-yuan (1965:43), in his scheme comparing Chengguan’s and Dongshan’s ‘levels’, again (like the *biased* within the *right*) locates ‘the *right* within the *biased*’ within the scope of the ‘*dharmadhātu* of phenomena’.<sup>42</sup>

3. *zheng zhong lai* [82] – coming from within the *right*

Amidst nothingness there is a road far from the dust.

If you are simply able to avoid the reigning monarch’s personal name,

Then you will surpass the eloquence of previous dynasties.

In Yuanxian’s commentary we read that this ‘position’ means “to attain the [Buddha] Dharma-body (*fashen* [83])” and labels it as “the position of the *right*” (*zheng wei* [84]). This is a mode of experiencing *reality* as a Buddha does, but one important aspect is stressed (not only) in the commentary: in this ‘position’ though one attains the Buddha-like insight into *reality* [the *principle* (the *right*) is directly and permanently revealed (since Yuanxian states: “this ‘position’ cannot be offended” (*bu ke fan* [85]<sup>43</sup>), however, “[one] has not yet ‘entered into the ordinary’ (*ru su* [86]) and is still separated from the ‘earthly pollution’ (*chenai* [87])”]. This sentence can be explicated primarily in two meanings: one more ‘epistemological’, the other one more ‘soteriological’. In the first case I suggest appealing to the known theory of the Yogācāra School, the doctrine of ‘*tatprṣṭhalabdha-jñāna*’ (“the wisdom acquired subsequent to that [‘fundamental non-discriminative wisdom’ (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*)”]), that appears in the eight chapter of Asaṅga’s (forth century) *Compendium of Mahāyāna* (*Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*). This kind of wisdom is explained by (Nagao, 1991: 184) as “the wisdom that functions as the Buddha activity – Buddha’s wisdom that functions in this world”. It ‘comes from’ the ‘fundamental non-discriminative wisdom’ (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*) of the Buddha, since this fundamental wisdom

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<sup>41</sup> XY, p. 356b.

<sup>42</sup> Powell (1986: 11), for example, suggests that “metaphor and poetry are ideally suited to function in this way, and it is this capacity of poetry that may account for its frequent use in Chan literature”.

<sup>43</sup> YX, p. 356b.

is immovable; it does not function 'in this world'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, I think, in this 'position' also some kind of insight or a mode of discernment is suggested, which will be not just a Buddha-like wisdom out of 'earthly pollution', but will remain to be 'the *right*' while abiding within phenomena. The 'soteriological' meaning can be simply expressed as: a Bodhisattva (who has already acquired the mode of experiencing *reality* as a Buddha does), should go a step further and help all the sentient beings to realize *true reality*. Chang Chung-yuan (1965:43) finds the main philosophical implications of this 'position' to be comparable to the *dharmadhātu* of *principle*. Yes, the *principle* by which all the existents are pervaded is fully observed (the Buddha Dharma-body is attained) and reveals in every phenomena.

4. *jian zhong zhi* [88] – arriving at within together [*right* and *biased*]

Two crossed swords, neither permitting retreat;

Dexterously wielded, like lotus amidst fire.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, there is a natural determination to ascend the heavens.

Yuanxian in his commentary points out,<sup>46</sup> that "when the *biased* comes from the *right*" (*zheng ji lai pian* [91]), the *biased* necessarily unites in one with the *right* (*pian bi jian zheng* [92]). Thus, these 'two swords' – neither permitting retreat. This 'level' is also described as "he uses the [knowledge] attained in *samādhi*, goes through the [Buddha] Dharma-body and [becomes] a big sage."<sup>47</sup> This 'level' seems to indicate the aspect of *true reality* of the *dharmadhātu* of the non-obstruction of phenomena and *principle*, where the sage understands (Chengguan – see his third *dharmadhātu*) that "there is no *emptiness* beyond form, the whole form is *emptiness*; there is no form beyond *emptiness*, the whole *emptiness* is form", and having this kind of insight (which cannot be offended by anything) he acts within the world of ordinary beings.

5. *jian zhong dao* [93] – going within together [*right* and *biased*]

Falling into neither existence nor existence, who dares harmonize?

People fully desire to exit the constant flux;

But after bending and fitting, in the end still return to sit in the warmth of the coals.

<sup>44</sup> Of course this is a very rude simplification of the problem. The 'ontological' implication of the Yogācāra differ from those of *dharmadhātus* or Dongshan's 'positions', however, what I want to accentuate here is the implication that (Nagao, 1991: 184) states: "Non-discriminative wisdom [*nirvikalpa-jñāna*] does not act; it is immovable. The wisdom that functions is .... *tatprajñālabdha-jñāna*".

<sup>45</sup> "Lotus amidst fire" (*huo li lian* [89]) is an image in the *Vimālakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* (T : 475: 550b) representing the vow to practice *meditation* in the 'realm of desire' (Chn. *yu jie* [90], Skt. *kāmaloka*).

<sup>46</sup> YX, p. 356c.

<sup>47</sup> YX, p. 356c.



This is the realm of all existents seen as revealed without being an obstacle to all other phenomena to be fully revealed. But, Dongshan warns us this 'level' of discernment is still subject to being grasped at.

## CONCLUSION

All the 'levels' (modes of direct insight in the *true reality*) postulated by our masters of three different schools of Chinese Buddhism, though formulated as progressive, are meant as 'equally legitimate' modes of insight, which enable us to penetrate into the *true reality*. Their basic implication is the notion of a phenomenon comprehended in one aspect as depending on meanings we give to it and in another aspect as its *existence* being a set of *conditions* to which we can appeal when explaining it. Moreover, we can say that 'levels' have more or less 'ontological' connotations, since postulating a notion of (devoid of self-nature) *essence* (Buddha nature, *Tathāgatagarbha*), or even (Huayan) presupposing that in the process of origination nothing is to be originated that had not existed earlier, only something that was hidden becomes manifest in the world of phenomena.

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 [10]法界緣起 [11]理 [12]正 [13]法 [14]偏 [15]法相 [16]玄奘 [17]窺基 [18]三性  
 [19]遍計 [20]依他 [21]圓成 [22]法界 [23]洞山良價 [24]五重唯識觀 [25]唯識  
 [26]般若波羅密多心經幽贊 [27]大正新修大藏經 [28]唯識章 [29]遣虛存實  
 [30]所執 [31]體 [32]用 [33]智 [34]境界 [35]捨濫留純 [36]內識 [37]境 [38]心  
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