

CHAPTER 8



The Self in Chinese Buddhism

"Flowers in the air"

Buddhism came to China in the first century CE through contacts along the Silk Road. By the beginning of the sixth century it had grown to rival Daoism as one of China's leading religions. Philosophers of the Consciousness-Only School, influenced by idealist forms of Buddhism from India, argue that there is nothing independent of consciousness and that there is no such thing as a mind or self. There are only mental entities—*dharmas*—that are objects of consciousness and out of which we construct the world of experience. This no-self view shapes the attitude toward the self characteristic of Zen Buddhism, a highly influential Buddhist school starting in the ninth century.

8.1 CHINESE BUDDHISM: THE CONSCIOUSNESS-ONLY SCHOOL

Early Buddhist texts spell out a no-soul doctrine. They argue that, when we introspect, we find no self. We become aware only of particular thoughts, sensations, desires, and other mental states. The self cannot be identified with any object, part, or aspect of it nor with any combination of them.

The Chinese Consciousness-Only school develops this tradition. Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang, 596–664 CE) was born to a Buddhist family near the end of the fifth century. He entered a Buddhist monastery at 13; at 22, he began traveling to monasteries throughout China to study various doctrines. He then left China, against imperial order, to study in India for sixteen years. He spent much of his time at Nalanda University, one of the world's first universities—established in 450 CE and devastated in

1193 by Muslim invaders—which in the seventh century had an extensive library, about 2,000 faculty members, and 10,000 students from as far away as Korea, Indonesia, and Turkey.

At 49, Xuanzang returned to China with 657 Buddhist works previously unavailable there. The emperor, despite Xuanzang's disobedience, gave him a grand welcome and supported him and a large group of assistants. The emperor commissioned from them the largest translation project in Chinese history. When Xuanzang died at age 68, the emperor canceled all his meetings for three days to mourn.

Most of the texts Xuanzang and his assistants translated were of the Yogachara school of Buddhist idealism. Dharmapala (439–507 CE) wrote commentaries on the early Indian Yogacarin Vasabandhu that exerted great influence on Xuanzang's *Treatise on the Establishment of the Doctrine of Consciousness-Only*, which, together with the notes of his student Kwei Zhi (K'uei-chi), articulate a Chinese version of Buddhist idealism.

Xuanzang analyzes the mind into eight consciousnesses: the five senses (sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch), a sense-center consciousness that coordinates the senses and forms concepts, a thought-center consciousness that wills and reasons, and storehouse consciousness, that is, roughly, memory, which serves as a mental warehouse storing materials for later use. All eight are in constant flux. Storehouse consciousness receives sensations and thoughts from other consciousnesses and emits "manifestations," that is, memories, associations, and other thoughts. Thought-center consciousness interacts with storehouse consciousness, using its materials for purposes of intellectual deliberation. Sense-center consciousness combines the five senses into a coherent picture of the external world.

Laws of cause and effect govern these interactions. Objects (*dharma*s, here meaning not duties but objects of thought) are constructions from these eight forms of consciousness. Some *dharma*s—for example, qualities—are purely illusory or imaginary and do not exist. Some depend on other *dharma*s and so exist only temporarily. Some, finally, have their own independent natures and truly exist. Their "perfect reality" is the ultimate reality revealed in *nirvana* experience.

Xuanzang advocates the no-soul doctrine: "The self and *dharma*s are merely constructions based on false ideas and have no reality of their own." Why? "Because neither the real self nor the real *dharma* is possible."

Xuanzang critiques theories of the self that treat it as unified. Where is this unified self? There are only three possible answers. It may be universal, "as extensive as empty space," that is, existing outside the bounds of any particular body. It may be coextensive with the body. Or it may be within the body.

Suppose that the self (or soul) is transcendental, existing outside the bounds of any particular body. Then its interaction with the body becomes inexplicable. And we lack any compelling way to individuate selves: Why should we count people as different selves when they have different bodies? Why can't this old man and that young girl have or be the same self?

Suppose that the self is coextensive with the body. Aristotle, who construes the soul as the form of the body, might have sympathy with such a view. But Xuanzang finds it to be "like child's play." Say Jones gains weight. Does his soul expand? Say he cuts his hair; does he lose part of himself? Moreover, if the soul is coextensive with the body, it is divisible. But how, then, can it be *one* self?

Finally, suppose that the self is within the body. (For example, suppose one identifies the self with the brain, or the nervous system, or neural impulses.) Xuanzang finds it implausible that a small part of the body could cause the entire body to move. Moreover, he worries that the self, on this view, is neither one nor eternal, for there is no unity—on all these options, the self is divisible—and, being material, perishes. And if there is no unity, there is no self.

To summarize these arguments: If mind is separate from body, it cannot interact with the body. If mind is part or whole of the body, it lacks unity, and there is no self.

Next, consider the view that the self is an aggregate of matter, sensation, thought, disposition, and/or consciousness. Again, the self would be neither one nor eternal. The senses, furthermore, can be restricted (as by wearing a blindfold) or injured without changing who a person is. Thoughts and sensations are not continuous, but the self is. A person in a deep, dreamless sleep hardly ceases to exist. In general, all the components—matter, sensation, thought, etc.—depend on external causes. But the self does not. If the cat hadn't walked into the room, Smith would not have thought about feeding it. But we do not want to say that, if her cat hadn't walked into the room, she wouldn't have been herself.

Xuanzang raises other objections. Thought is *intentional*, in the sense that it is about things. A thought is a thought *of* something. But matter isn't *of* anything. So thought isn't matter. The self can take things as its objects; matter cannot. So the self cannot simply be matter.

8.1.1 Xuanzang, from *The Treatise on the Establishment of the Doctrine of Consciousness-Only*

1. The Nonexistence of the Self

1. Because the ideas of the self (*atman*) and *dhar-mas* are [constructions produced by causes and therefore] false,

Their characters of all kinds arise.

These characters are [constructions] based on the transformations of consciousness, which are of three kinds.

2a. They are the consciousness (the eighth, or storehouse, consciousness) whose fruits

(retribution) ripen at later times, the consciousness (the seventh or thought-center consciousness) that deliberates, and the consciousness (the sense-center consciousness and the five-sense consciousness) that discriminates spheres of objects.

The *Treatise* says:

Both the world and sacred doctrines declare that the self and *dhar-mas* are merely constructions based on false ideas and have no reality of their own. ... On what basis are [the self and *dhar-mas*] produced? Their characters are all constructions

Source: Hsüan-tsang, *The Treatise on the Establishment of the Doctrine of Consciousness-Only*, from Wing-Tsit Chan (ed.), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, 1991 renewed PUP. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

based on the evolution and transformation of consciousness....

How do we know that there is really no sphere of objects but only inner consciousness which produces what seem to be the external spheres of objects? Because neither the real self nor the real *dharma* is possible.

Why is the real self impossible? Theories of the self held by the various schools may be reduced to three kinds. The first holds that the substance of the self is eternal, universal, and as extensive as empty space. It acts anywhere and as a consequence enjoys happiness or suffers sorrow. The second holds that although the substance of the self is eternal, its extension is indeterminate, because it expands or contracts according to the size of the body. The third holds that the substance of the self is eternal and infinitesimal like an atom, lying deeply and moving around within the body and thus acts.

The first theory is contrary to reason. Why? If it is held that the self is eternal, universal, and as extensive as empty space, it should not enjoy happiness or suffer sorrow along with the body. Furthermore, being eternal and universal, it should be motionless. How can it act along with the body? Again, is the self so conceived the same or different among all sentient beings? If it is the same, when one being acts, receives the fruits of action, or achieves salvation, all beings should do the same. But this would of course be a great mistake. If it is different, then the selves of all sentient beings would universally penetrate one another and their substance would be mixed, and since the field of abode of all selves is the same, the acts of one being or the fruits of action received by him should be the act or fruits of all beings. If it is said that action and fruits belong to each being separately and there would not be the mistake just described, such a contention is also contrary to reason, because action, fruits, and body are identified with all selves and it is unreasonable for them to belong to one self but not to another. When one is saved, all should be saved, for the Dharma (truth)

practiced and realized would be identical with all selves.

The second theory is also contrary to reason. Why? If in substance the self always remains in the same state, it should not expand or contract along with the body. If it expands or contracts like wind in a bag or a pipe, it is not always remaining in the same state. Furthermore, if the self follows the body, it would be divisible. How can it be held that the substance of the self is one? What this school says is like child's play.

The last theory is also contrary to reason. Why? Since the self is infinitesimal like an atom, how can it cause the whole big body to move? If it is said that although it is small it goes through the body like a whirling wheel of fire so that the whole body seems to move, then the self so conceived is neither one nor eternal, for what comes and goes is neither eternal nor one.

Furthermore, there are three additional theories of the self. The first holds that the self is identical with the aggregates (namely, matter, sensation, thought, disposition, and consciousness). The second holds that it is separated from the aggregates. And the third holds that it is neither identical with nor separated from the aggregates. The first theory is contrary to reason, for the self would be like the aggregates and is therefore neither eternal nor one. Furthermore, the internal matters (the five senses) are surely not the real self, for they are physically obstructed (or restricted) like external matters. The mind and mental qualities are not the real self either, for they are not always continuous and depend on various causes to be produced. Other conditioned things and matters are also not the real self, for like empty space they are without intelligence.

The second theory is also contrary to reason, for the self would then be like empty space, which neither acts nor receives fruits of action.

The last theory is also contrary to reason. This theory allows that the self is based on the aggregates but is neither identical with nor separated from them. The self would then be like a vase [which depends on clay] and has no reality of its