

Response to Dr. Ki-Young Rhi's paper:

Ethics
"Hua-yen Philosophy and Bodhisattva_λ"

by David J. Kalupahana

Dr. Ki-Young Rhi's paper on "Hua-yen Philosophy and Bodhisattva^m Ethics" deals with an extremely significant document in Korean Buddhism, namely, Ui-Sang's famous diagram summarizing the ~~teachings~~^{teachings} of Buddhism. Indeed, the doctrinal point highlighted in this diagram consisting of 210 Chinese characters are central themes in the mainline Buddhist tradition and which are held together by what may be called the principle of dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda).

Unfortunately Dr. Rhi's major works on Ui-Sang's document as well as on other problems in Korean Buddhism are available in the Korean language, hence inaccessible to me. However, his explanation of Hua-yen Buddhism in relation to Ui-Sang's document as presented in this short paper appears to me like a mantra. Let me explain this.

As understood in the Buddhist ritualistic tradition, a mantra is a recitation of a text normally explaining the "continuity" in the Buddha's teachings, hence called tantra. The tantras, at least as far as the Buddhist versions are concerned, are not mystical treatises with hidden meanings. They are extremely sophisticated philosophical treatises. For this reason they make no sense at all to the ordinary pious devotee when these texts are recited by the Buddhist monks. It would be like reading a copy of Wittgenstein's Tractatus to a group of sixth graders, who can barely understand even the terminology used. However, recitation of the tantras by the educated monks who have been initiated into the intricacies of the doctrines is said to have a therapeutic effect on the listener even though he does not understand them. The psychological

explanation of this remarkable phenomenon is that even though the listener does not understand what is being recited he has faith that this is the deeper doctrine of the Buddha. Furthermore, the final statement in the tantra is always a rather appeasing statement such as: "may there be peace" (śivam astu), etc. The excitement with which the person listened to the doctrine is calmed and appeased. The sprinkling of sacred water at the end of the ritual symbolizes that calmness and appeasement.

I have experienced similar feelings when I read Ui-Sang's diagram as expounded by Dr. Rhi. Frankly, I experienced great difficulty in understanding it, but these difficulties are smoothed out in the end because I realize that ~~these~~ represent the deeper doctrines of the Buddha.

Let me explain briefly what my difficulties are. Fortunately, they are also problems for Dr. Rhi.

First, I have much less difficulty in understanding the Chinese characters in Ui-Sang's diagram as well as the Sanskrit words utilized by Dr. Rhi in explaining the Buddhist doctrine, not because I can claim any expertise on Hua-yen Buddhism, but because they occur in the Buddhist literature belonging to an earlier period with which I am a little familiar. However, I have great difficulty in understanding the English renderings of these Sanskrit and Chinese terms. For example, in the context of the Buddha's negative doctrine of non-substantiality (anātman), which represents a radical deconstruction of the conception of

a permanent and eternal ultimate reality underlying all experienced phenomena (dharma), and in the light of his more positive views such as "dependent arising" (pratītya-samutpāda) of experienced phenomena (dharma), it is not easy for me to understand the use of the term Ultimate Reality, especially when it is equated by Dr. Rhi with the Upaniṣadic conception of Brahman (p. 7). The Sanskrit term that comes anywhere close to it is paramārtha which, in the Buddhist context is totally different in meaning from the Hindu conception of paramātman. The term paramārtha is generally used in the sense of ultimate fruit, ultimate goal or ultimate ideal, rather than Ultimate Reality. In the sense of ultimate fruit it represents the happiness a human being can achieve as a result of adopting a moral life that avoids suffering for oneself as well as others. It is an ideal achieved by all the Buddhas and therefore also an ideal presented for other human beings. The relationship between the ordinary unenlightened human beings (= samsāra) and these who have attained freedom (= nirvāna) is clearly expressed even in the later Buddhist Tantric literature as follows:

1. body (= rūpa) - Vairocana - ethics
2. feeling (= vedanā) - Ratnasambhava - concentration
3. perception (saṃjñā) - Amitābha - appreciation
4. disposition (samskāra) - Amoghasiddhi - freedom
5. consciousness (viññāna) - Akṣobhya - vision in freedom.¹

The first five factors are the aggregates to which a human personality is analysed by the Buddha when he wanted to get rid of the

and is not a permanent and eternal truth or reality

Upaniṣadic notion of ātman. These five factors constitute the human personality that is normally grasped (upādāna) as the ātman. Such grasping is the result of craving (trṣṇā) which is the cause of bondage (samsāra). However, when grasping is abandoned as a result of the elimination of craving, these five aggregates do not disappear into thin air. Instead we have a human being who has attained freedom (nirvāna). Such persons are represented in the Tantric literature as different Buddhas. These different Buddha's are then taken to represent various aspects of the moral path. What is important is the relationship between bondage and freedom. The Tantra passage is no more than a symbolic representation of Nāgārjuna's statement:

The life-process has no thing that distinguishes it from freedom. Freedom has no thing that distinguishes it from life-process.²

These two rather puzzling statements in the Tantras and in Nagarjuna do not appear so problematic if we are to examine the implications of the Buddha's own statement:

Friend, I do not speak of ending suffering without reaching the end of the world. However, friend, it is in this very fathom-long body associated with perception and conception that I conceive of the world, its arising, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation.³

This seems a far cry from the Upanisadic notions of atman or brahman. The paradoxical statements in the Buddhist texts are to be understood, not as attempts to explain the ineffable, but rather as means of avoiding ontological commitment. Such paradoxical statements are available in plenty in the Prajnaparamita literature. For example, the Vajracchedikā has the following puzzle:

Personal existence, personal existence, as no existence that has been taught by the Tathagatas; for not, O Lord, is that existence non-existence? Therefore, it is called "personal existence."⁴

The puzzle is solved if we are to take the three statements in the following sense:

personal existence = ontological commitment.

no personal existence = deconstruction

"personal existence" (in quotes) = reconstruction or restatement without ontological commitment.

Such statements appear in the Hua-yen texts as well as the Tantras. However, Dr. Rhi wants to see similarities between Hua-yen Buddhism and the Upanisadic teaching of non-dualism (advaita). But immediately steps back saying; "Although similarities do exist, Mahāyāna is very different." Even though I am able to understand the puzzle in the Vajracchedikā, I am unable to resolve the identity and difference between the Upanisadic and Hua-yen teachings. That may be why the Hua-yen texts as explained here sounds like a mantra to me.

If the teachings of the Upanisads and the pre-Hua-yen forms of Buddhism are different, how can the two traditions remain together without coming into conflict. This brings us to the most important part of Dr. Rhi's paper, namely, the remarks on the unification of religions on the basis of the Hua-yen teachings, *as explained by Dr. Rhi.*

1. How can we all agree regarding the Dharma, the Reality of things. Not even the Buddhists have agreed upon what that Dharma is.
2. On what grounds do we reject another's set of conceptions or beliefs as Adharma or False Dharma?
3. Are the Hindu thinkers willing to abandon the conception of a permanent and eternal self and recognize the principle of dependence (pratītyasamutpāda)?
4. Are the other religious traditions prepared to adopt the Buddhist terminology in explaining ethics.

To me this is a rather dangerous way of attempting to bring about unity, for it is this very attempt to explain the content of one religion in terms of another that led to the eventual destruction of Buddhism in India, even though the two traditions remained together for more than 1000 years enriching each other as a result of their mutual criticisms. On the contrary, the more fruitful way of bringing about harmony among the different religious traditions is to abandon the notions of absolute or ultimate truths about which the greatest intellectual or spiritual leaders of humanity have not reached any agreement.

The success of Buddhism in not itself contributing to conflict, even though it has been often persecuted, lies in its rather philosophical approach to religious ideals, including its own.

The Buddha believed, and so it is stated in Nāgārjuna as well as in the Vajracchedikā, that even the ultimate moral ideal (dharma = paramārtha) has to be relinquished, let alone the evil, like a raft that one abandons after one has crossed over the flood. The avoidance of ontological commitment, that is, the abandoning ^{of conceptions} ~~notions~~ of ultimate or absolute truths, is the path to freedom from conflict and strife (arāna).⁵

1. See Herbert V. Guenther, The Tantric View of Life, Boulder: Shambhala, 1976, p. 105.
2. David J. Kalupahana, Nāgārjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way, Albany: The State University of New York, 1986, pp. 365-366.
3. Samyutta-nikāya, ed. Leon Feer, London: Pali Text Society, 1960, vol. 1, p.62.
4. Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā, ed. tr. by Edward Conze, Serie Orientale Roma 13, Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957, p. 32.
5. Majjhima-nikāya, ed. V. Trenckner, London: Pali Text Society, 1948, vol. 3, pp. 234 ff.