

ESSAYS OF SENGZHAO

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Translator's Introduction

Thematic Overview

The collection of texts translated here, four essays and an exchange of letters, plus an introductory chapter, attributed to the scholar-monk Sengzhao (374–414 C.E.) is perhaps best seen, in the most general terms, as an extended meditation on a perennial theme in Chinese religio-philosophical reflection, the theme of sagehood. As the *Essays* investigate the nature and attributes of the sage—the sage's cognition, his world, his activities, and his mode of being in time—they take up a broad range of religio-philosophical topics, from self-cultivation and charisma to ontology and language, action and power. While Sengzhao draws on Indian Buddhist religio-philosophical resources (mainly, the Madhyamaka critique of substantializing language and its distinction of two levels of truth), as well as on the native Chinese tradition of philosophical and aesthetic reflection (especially those associated with the “Daoist” classics, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*), the *Essays* resist simple reduction to either, nor can they be explained as a straightforward case of influence or adaptation. Instead, these writings present an original response to a set of concerns unique to Sengzhao, his community, and his times, and as such are an important voice in the religious speculation of early medieval China.

Among the issues explored in these *Essays* are such questions as who is a sage? How is the “sagely mind” different from the mind of the ordinary person? What are the properties of the world that the sage inhabits? If that world is empty (i.e., empty of “substantial being”), what happens in it to the reality of individual things, and what does it mean to say (as is said in the *Essays*) that in it “the power of myriad things is greatly amplified”? If emptiness is not a simple eradication of being, what, then, is it exactly—a state prior to the beingness of beings? An inherent quality of linguistic expression that can never reach any transcendental signifier? Or a mental attitude of withdrawal from engagement with things? Who is capable of becoming a sage? Is this a universal capacity or is it limited to a select few? And how does one attain sagehood? Is this attainment akin to “worldly” attainments

and thus it can be made into a human project? Is such attainment at all possible if all things are really empty, without anything to be attained? Assuming the possibility of sagehood, is it brought about by a process of practice and learning, or rather by letting go and unlearning? Or is it not a process at all but rather a sudden breakthrough? How does the extraordinary cognition of the sage, *prajñā* (transcendental wisdom), affect the functioning and applicability of language? Can the wisdom of *prajñā* be communicated in language or does it inevitably confound all attempts at linguistic expression, ultimately rendering one silent? On the emotive-active side, if for the sage individual desires have ceased, how is it that he or she is able to “respond to things and events with an inexhaustible acuity”? Finally, what about time: if in emptiness things do not display temporal extension (they neither pass away nor endure unchangingly but rather exist in an eternal “now”), does this not present the possibility of a unique type of immortality?

Language and Form

The core texts of the collection translated here, aside from the epistolary exchange and the introductory overview, represent the genre of *lun*, “expository essay” or “disquisition.” This genre started to gain popularity from the late Han period (late second century C.E.) and subsequently emerged as a favorite form of expository writing on political, aesthetic, and religious topics among the literary elites of the Northern and Southern dynasties (late third to sixth centuries). The language of *lun* is highly stylized, rich in tersely structured aesthetic devices such as allusion, alliteration, and parallelisms. *Lun* are as much a demonstration of the author’s literary skill as an expression of philosophical insight or moral integrity. Though often polemical, the rhetoric of *lun* is not primarily argumentative but rather persuasive: it does not rely on strict logical reasoning but instead on an aesthetic appeal designed to solicit the reader’s intellectual and emotional assent. All these characteristics are on ample display in Sengzhao’s *Essays*.

Other noteworthy features of the text are frequent references to Buddhist (mainly “Mahayana”) sutras and *śāstras*, which both structure the discussion and lend it an aura of antiquity and authority; the question-and-answer format (dialogue with a fictitious opponent); and the use of a highly structured pattern of exposition, referred to in scholarship as interlocking parallel structure, or chain-argument, in which two lines of argument are developed simultaneously and intertwined.

Historical Context

Sengzhao lived in a time of turmoil and innovation, referred to by historians as the “Northern and Southern dynasties” era (220–589 C.E.). It began with the fall of the Han empire, a momentous event that ushered in four centuries of political, military, and social upheaval and led to the redefinition of China’s geography, society, and power structures. After almost a century of civil war dominated by the Three Kingdoms (the Shu, Wu, and Wei), the Jin restored a short-lived period of peace (280–316). In 316 the ruling house collapsed, due to internal strife and “barbarian” revolt, and for the next three centuries the areas north of the Yangzi River came to be dominated by non-Han nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes (which established a rapid succession of polities known collectively as the Sixteen Kingdoms). War and catastrophic flooding forced Han populations out of their heartland in the Yellow River basin to the sparsely populated mountainous and forested areas south of the Yangzi.

This tumultuous era was also one of major cultural innovation. As the Han empire fell its imperial orthodoxy, the foundation of classics, historiography, and state-controlled ritual systems, were also brought down. When the dust settled a new open space of unprecedented autonomy in the realms of literature, cosmology, and religion was revealed. Already by the late second and early third centuries, thinkers such as Wang Chong, Wang Bi, and He Yan had launched innovative critiques of Confucian orthodoxy, which reevaluated the foundation of individual and social life by probing the relationships between being and nonbeing, language and reality, the one and the many, and active involvement and eremitic non-action. The intellectual tradition they initiated came to be known as *xuanxue*, “dark learning” or “study of the dark. The word “dark” is an allusion to such Daoist classics as the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Yijing*, in which the concept of darkness figures prominently, and which gained immense popularity in this time.

In the mid-third century, with the increasing alienation of intellectual elites from the structures of state power, a new form of eremitism emerged, epitomized by the so-called Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, a semi-legendary group of poet-recluses. Their works profess a disdain for established mores, political careerism, and literary orthodoxy and celebrate individualism, music, wine, and nature. The elites no longer defined themselves exclusively by hereditary inclusion

in the institutions of state power but through the autonomous cultivation of literary refinement. This is manifested in the emergence of new poetic genres (especially the lyric poem, which expresses individual feelings) and new collections of poetry, as well as in *qingtan*, “pure conversation,” a refined style of conversation rife with bon-mots, literary allusions, puns, and sharp repartée. In later centuries, especially in the south, the very meaning of textual authority came to be redefined in the composition of theoretical treatises on literature, often with strong *xuanxue* overtones, that departed from the traditional orthodox definition of the canon. All of these factors reverberate throughout the *Essays*, with its *xuanxue* vocabulary, its *qingtan* aesthetics, its appeal to the ideal of cultured withdrawal, and its novel approach to the literary canon.

Buddhism and Daoism, the first large-scale institutionalized religions in Chinese history, also emerged in this period. In the last decades of Han rule, in what is now Shandong and Sichuan, mass millenarian religions (mainly the Heavenly Masters, or Tianshi, sect of Daoism) empowered popular rebellions that carved out new social spaces outside of established societal and state structures. After the fall of the Western Jin and the division of China in 316, the southern elites were drawn to literary forms of Daoism, which offered techniques for attaining immortality through bodily and alchemical practices (e.g., Ge Hong and his text, *Master Who Embraces Simplicity*), as well as promising access to the spirits of deceased kin through shamanic revelation (the Shangqing, or Highest Clarity, tradition). Also in the south, around the turn of the fifth century, a new institutional form of Daoism, the Lingbao sect, appropriated the Buddhist doctrine of karma to develop elaborate rituals for the salvation of the dead. This institution was modeled on the Buddhist religion, which by then had become established as a significant presence in China.

Buddhism had been making inroads into China’s vast territory via the Silk Road routes since the turn of the eras. Its sophisticated analyses of the mind and meditation practices attracted members of the literary elite steeped in “dark learning” and “pure conversation.” The social spheres of the monk and the literatus interpenetrated. After China’s split into north and south, the two regions developed divergent models of state-Buddhism relations. In the south, state regulation of Buddhism was mild: rulers patronized the religion, building monasteries and stupas, sponsoring sutra recitation, and granting land for monastic institutions,

in order to accrue spiritual merit and cultural capital, but the ruling powers generally refrained from challenging Buddhism's self-professed autonomy vis-à-vis the state. A more assertive policy toward Buddhism developed in the northern kingdoms, whose nomadic and semi-nomadic non-Han rulers, while often genuinely devoted to the religion, also actively regulated it and used it for purposes of statecraft. For them, the charismatic monks, with their miracle-working powers, were a potent political asset, and Buddhist cosmology, with its ideal of the *cakravartin* ("wheel-turning king"), a model of kingship that is both transcendent and worldly, offered a powerful symbol of political authority.

One of the northern kingdoms, the Later Qin (384–417), fit this profile quite well. Its ruler, the Sinified proto-Tibetan Yao Xing (366–416, r. 393–416), established in his capital, Chang'an, what was to become one of the greatest centers of Buddhist translation and scholarship in history. He imported to Chang'an numerous Indian and Central Asian Buddhist masters and sponsored scripture translation projects on an unprecedented scale. In early 402 he brought to Chang'an the great Kuchean scholar Kumārajīva, lavishing great honors on him, and put him in charge of the translation academy with (according to some traditional accounts) some five hundred learned monks. One of Kumārajīva's chief disciples and colleagues was Sengzhao, then twenty-eight years old.

Biography of Sengzhao

According to Sengzhao's traditional biography, he was born to an impoverished family in 374 in the vicinity of Chang'an. As a young man he earned his living as a copyist, which exposed him to the literary canon of the day. He was especially fond of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, but ultimately found these texts unsatisfactory. An encounter with the *Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (in the old third-century translation by Zhi Qian of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) proved pivotal—he was captivated by the text and resolved to direct his efforts toward Buddhism. He studied various forms of Buddhist doctrine, including the Prajñāpāramitā literature and also Mainstream (non-Mahayana) texts. Word of his intellectual prowess and debating skills spread quickly throughout the Chang'an area. In 398 Sengzhao joined Kumārajīva in Guzang, far west of present-day Gansu province, and became his disciple. In early 402, when the king of the Later Qin, Yao Xing, brought Kumārajīva to his capital in Chang'an, Sengzhao accompanied the master to

the city. Kumārajīva was put in charge of the translation academy and Sengzhao joined the team that included Sengrui, Daorong, Sengdao, Tanying, and others, in time becoming one of Kumārajīva's chief intellectual collaborators.

The Text

Sengzhao composed his first essay, translated in the present volume as “*Prajñā* without Knowing,” around 405, following on Kumārajīva's retranslation, in 403–404, of the the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. In this essay Sengzhao attempts to distinguish from ordinary knowledge the special mode of cognition that is unique to the sage. In the introductory passage Sengzhao praises the king's patronage of Buddhism as well as the genius of Kumārajīva, and announces the essay's topic: wisdom (*prajñā*) that knows everything without being limited to the cognizance of individual things. A longer section follows in which this theme is developed over a series of nine objections from a fictitious opponent with nine responses by Sengzhao.

This essay was taken south to Huiyuan's community at Lushan by Daosheng (408), where it was read by many, including the literatus and lay devotee Liu Yimin, as well as the scholar-monk Huiyuan. In response Liu wrote a lengthy letter to Sengzhao; this letter, along with Sengzhao's subsequent reply (circa 410), forms the “Correspondence with Liu Yimin” translated in this volume. The polite greetings that open both letters contain valuable information about the history of this period. In the main part of the essay Liu expresses his own and Huiyuan's doubts about the coherence of Sengzhao's portrayal of the “sagely mind” as at once all-knowing yet being altogether without knowledge.

Likely between 408 and 411, Sengzhao wrote “Emptiness as Nonsubstantiality.” In the first part of this essay Sengzhao attacks three competing theories of emptiness current in his day: emptiness defined as “no mentation,” as “original nonbeing,” and as “form.” He denounces these positions as failing, in different ways, to capture the truth that emptiness, properly understood, is the defining characteristic of form as such—form is inherently “insubstantial.” In order to arrive at emptiness, therefore, one must not abandon form but, on the contrary, develop a unique intimacy with its essential nature. The remaining sections of the essay contain Sengzhao's elaboration of this view.

Sengzhao's next *lun*-essay, “Things Do Not Shift,” has a noticeably more technical ring, perhaps a reflection of his exposure to the *Zhonglun* (Nāgārjuna's

Madhyamaka-kārikā, T. 1564) translated by Kumārajīva in 408–409. In this essay Sengzhao attempts to argue against a “common person’s perception” of time. Usually people perceive that things arise, endure for some time, and then gradually cease to exist, but in reality the arising and ceasing of things are both empty. This position, far from leading Sengzhao into nihilism, allows him to assert in the closing sections of the essay that the “actions of the Tathāgata,” and perhaps by extension those of the sage, do not “wither away” but instead “abide forever, unmoving.”

Sengzhao wrote his final and longest essay, “Nirvana is Unnameable,” after Kumārajīva’s death, around 413–414. According to his own “Memorial to the King” placed at the beginning of the text, this essay is Sengzhao’s attempt to adjudicate on an exchange between King Yao Xing and his younger brother, Yao Song, regarding the nature of nirvana, and, in a related thread, on the character of sagehood, a topic important to the royal family for both religious and political reasons. Sengzhao sides with the Yao Xing but also offers important modifications to the king’s positions. The essay contains crucial evidence regarding the earliest formulations of a Sinitic Buddhist doctrine of subitism, the idea that if awakening is possible at all it must be sudden and complete, and, in some formulations, not dependent on prior study or effort. Sengzhao argues against this idea. Some scholars have doubted the authenticity of at least parts of this essay.

Initially the four essays and Sengzhao’s letters circulated independently. They appeared together for the first time in a commentary, *Zhaolun shu* (X. 866), by the late sixth-century exegete Huida. However, the sequence in which they appear in Huida’s commentary differs from that in the standard Taishō version, an arrangement first seen in the slightly later commentary, also titled *Zhaolun shu* (T. 1859) by Yuankang (fl. mid-seventh century). The introductory chapter of the *Essays*, “Main Doctrine,” is also first found in Yuankang’s work, and may have been authored by Yuankang himself. In this translation I make frequent use of Huida’s and Yuankang’s commentaries, as well as of a commentary by Wencai (1241–1302), the *Zhaolun xinshu* (T. 1860), for insight on particularly difficult passages, as well as for variant readings that I find preferable to those in T. 1858.

Other works authored by Sengzhao but not included in the present translation include *Commentary to the Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (written between 406–410); prefaces to the *Bailun* (*Śata-śāstra*, after 404), the *Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (406

or after), and the *Chang ahan jing* (*Dīrghāgama*, 412 or after); a postface to the *Lotus Sutra* (406 or after); and an obituary for Kumārajīva (some scholars question the authenticity of this text).

Sengzhao died in Chang'an in 414. His death became the stuff of legend in the later Chan tradition, and stories circulated of the Qin ruling house having executed him for some unspecified transgression.

Sengzhao's Reputation in Later Centuries

While it is common to see Sengzhao presented as one of the original “patriarchs” (*zu*) of the Sanlun (“Three Treatises”) “lineage” (*zong*) of Chinese Buddhism, such portrayals are not accurate. Sengzhao himself never claimed any sectarian affiliation. Indeed, the tendency to compartmentalize Chinese Buddhism into “sects” or “lineages” postdates Sengzhao in the history of the tradition by many centuries, and reflects less the realities on the ground and more the historian’s and bibliographer’s need for systematization. Furthermore, even after the invention of the “Sanlun” lineage Sengzhao’s name was not immediately included in it and was only added much later. On the other hand, already during the Sui and early Tang periods the great scholiast Jizang, in an attempt to secure his own position in a competitive doctrinal and institutional environment, presented himself as the heir to a hallowed exegetical tradition going back to Sengzhao, and further back to Kumārajīva and Nāgārjuna before him. Jizang’s construction of Sengzhao as the forefather of Chinese Madhyamaka shows the significance that he, and his *Essays*, held in later centuries.

A noteworthy expression of the significance of the *Essays* is the large number of commentaries written on the text in later eras. Between the Chen (557–589) and Ming (1368–1644) periods no fewer than ten large commentaries were composed. Remarkably, these texts come from representatives of various Buddhist schools of thought, attesting to the appeal of Sengzhao’s work across a broad spectrum of doctrinal orientations and sectarian affiliations. An equally telling sign of the lasting impact of the *Essays* are the countless references to it that show up in later Chinese Buddhist, especially Chan, literature. A humorous example is a passage from Hanshan Deqing’s (1546–1623) autobiography, which says that he first attained insight into the truth of emptiness when, during an

urgent stop at the outhouse, he recalled Sengzhao's words from "Things Do Not Shift" about the rivers that remain still while gushing forth!

Aside from references to Sengzhao, some authorial communities chose to present their own writings as Sengzhao's, appropriating some of his substantial cultural capital; for example, the important eighth-century text the *Treasure Trove Treatise* (*Baozang lun*, T. 1857), associated with the Ox-head lineage of Chan and with trends in Tang-era Daoist speculation. Finally, Sengzhao's essay translated here as "Things Do Not Shift" is at the heart of one of the main doctrinal debates in the Ming period, when a number of prominent intellectuals clashed over the essay's logical coherence and its doctrinal orthodoxy. This gives an indication of the enduring influence of Sengzhao's texts more than a millennium after their composition.

Note on the Translation

The present translation of Sengzhao's *Essays* is based on the standard Taishō shinshū daizōkyō edition of the text (Ch. *Zhaolun*, Jp. *Jōron*, T. 1858). It includes the entire text as it appears in T. 1858, with the exception of the preface written by Huida, which is worthy of translation and study in its own right. In translating technical terms I tried to remain consistent throughout, although in many cases I failed to find glosses that would function well for every instance of the original term. Chinese phonetic transcriptions of Sanskrit proper names and technical terms are retranscribed into Sanskrit and given with diacritics. I have rendered in English those Sanskrit terms translated in the *Essays* into Chinese (this applies mainly to titles of sutras), with the exception of such terms/names that are now well established in English usage, for example Śāriputra, Subhūti, etc. The same applies to Chinese proper names, which have been translated into English (e.g., Dashi Si = Large Stone Temple), with the exception of proper names in the original Chinese that are widely accepted in English (so Laozi is not rendered as "Old Master" or Chang'an as "Eternal Peace"). Readers interested in learning more about Sengzhao and his *Essays* are referred to the Bibliography, in which a few of the more important studies are listed.

Essays

by

Shi Sengzhao from Chang'an,
Later Qin Kingdom

I. Main Doctrine

“Original nonbeing,” “reality-mark,” “Dharma-nature,” “emptiness by nature,” “dependent origination”: all these are one doctrine. 150c15

How so? All dharmas arise through dependent origination: before they arise, they do not exist; when the conditions of their existence perish, they too cease to exist. Were they to exist substantially, then—once in existence—it would be impossible for them to perish. From this it follows that though they presently manifest as being, in nature they are always fundamentally empty. This is referred to as “emptiness by nature.” This empty nature is called “Dharma-nature.” Dharma-nature being thus, it is called “reality-mark.” Reality-mark is a nonbeing by itself—it is not made a nonbeing merely through analysis. Thus it is called “original nonbeing.”

Negations of being and nonbeing are not expressions of a belief in a substantial, eternal being and in an annihilationist, nihilistic nonbeing. To take being as being leads one to take nonbeing as nonbeing. But to perceive dharmas without attachment to nonbeing is to discern the reality-mark of dharmas: in this manner, though one perceives being, one does so without grasping to marks. Since the dharma-marks thus perceived are markless marks, the mind of the sage is established in that which has no location.

Beings in all three vehicles attain the Dao through insight into emptiness by nature. Emptiness by nature is called the reality-mark of dharmas. To see the reality-mark of dharmas is called correct contemplation; to see differently is called wrong contemplation. Whoever should think that beings of the two vehicles have no insight into this principle would be gravely mistaken. The Dharma perceived by all three is the same, what differs are merely the mental capacities of beings.

Upāya and *prajñā* are called “great wisdom.” To see the reality-mark of dharmas is called *prajñā*; to then not claim final liberation is the work of *upāya* (skillful means). To adapt to beings and transform them is called *upāya*; to not be tainted by karmic afflictions is the power of *prajñā*. Thus, the gate of *prajñā* is the contemplation of emptiness, the gate of *upāya* is immersion in being. In the midst of being vacuity is never lost, therefore one can dwell 151a

within being while not becoming polluted by it. Contemplation of emptiness does not reject being; thus while contemplating emptiness one can refrain from claiming final realization. In this way within one moment of thought both skillful means (*upāya*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) are fully activated. Reflect on this well, and you will understand fully.

The truth of nirvana, of cessation: once afflictions are eradicated, life and death are forever extinguished—“cessation” is only this, not some other place to be reached.

II. Things Do Not Shift

Life and death alternate, seasons come and go, all things are in flux: this is the common view. I say it is erroneous. Here is why.

It is said in the *Radiance*, “Dharmas neither come nor go, they do not move in any way.”¹ Is their motionless activity to be sought by discarding motion and instead pursuing stillness? No, it is within all movements that stillness is to be sought. Since stillness is to be sought within all movements, though moving, dharmas are constantly still. Since stillness is to be sought without discarding motion, though still, their motion never ceases. Indeed, motion and stillness are in no way distinct.

This unity eludes doubters, however. As a result, the true teaching becomes mired in disputations, and the road to understanding is distorted by their fixation on distinctions.

Truly, this ultimate, wherein stillness and movement are one, is not easy to capture in words. Why? Talk of the ultimate contradicts conventional beliefs, while conformity with the conventional does injustice to the ultimate. Words that oppose the ultimate lose sight of Nature and are powerless to convert beings. Words that disregard the conventional are bland, flavorless: hearing them, people of average faculties cannot tell what is real and what is not, while inferior types clap their hands in amusement and turn away.²

So close, yet unknowable—is this not the very nature of things? Yet I cannot remain silent. Once again I will vest my mind where motion and stillness meet and venture an imperfect intimation.

It is said in the *Dao Practice*, “Originally there is no ‘where’ from which dharmas come; when they go, there is no ‘where’ that they reach.”³ And in the *Middle Way Treatise*, “Seeing the place [of departure] we see the going, but the goer does not reach a place.”⁴ These passages assert that stillness is to be sought in identity with motion, from which it follows that things do not shift.

Now, that past things do not reach the present is what is commonly thought of as movement. People say, “things move, they are not still.” But the same

fact that past things do not reach the present is what I call stillness. I say, “things are still, not in motion.”

[Others claim that] since things do not come [from the past to the present], they move and are not still. [I claim that] since things do not depart [from the present to the past], they are still and do not move. What we speak of are not two realities but one, though we view it differently. Oppose this reality—you will be bogged down; align yourself with it—you will penetrate its depths. Once you understand, nothing will obstruct you.

151b Alas, for so long people have been trapped in delusion. Even though they are face to face with the ultimate, they do not wake up to it. They know that past things do not come [from the past to the present], yet they insist that present things can pass away [from the present to the past]. But since past things do not come [to the present], how could present things pass away [to the past]?

Allow me to explain. For a past thing, do you search in the past? In the past [such a thing] does not exist. Do you search for it in the present? In the present it does not exist. That past things do not exist in the present shows that they do not come [to it from the past]; that they do not exist in the past shows that they do not depart [from it to the present]. Now, as for present things: when in the present, they do not pass away. Hence, past things are by nature in the past—they do not reach it from the present; and present things are by nature in the present—they do not reach it from the past.

Confucius said, “Behold, Yan Hui, how swiftly things become new; in the twinkling of an eye they are no longer as before!”⁵

All this shows that things do not come or go [between moments in time]. Since there is not even the slightest trace of departing or returning, how could one assert “movement” of anything at all?

With this mind, why still doubt that while the whirlwind⁶ uproots the mountains⁷ it stays constantly still; while the great rivers roar crashing into the sea they do not flow; while the wild horses⁸ flutter in the sky they remain unmoving; and while the sun and moon travel the skies they are never in rotation?

But wait! The Sage said, “The passage of life is swift, swifter than the gushing torrents.”⁹ Thus one might object that through insight into impermanence do *śrāvakas* realize the Dao, and on awakening to the state free of conditions do *pratyekabuddhas* join with the ultimate. If indeed, as you say,

the movement of things does not involve real change, how could it be claimed that by responding to change these two groups attain progress on the Dao?

Yet, on careful investigation, the words of the Sage prove exceedingly subtle, deep, difficult to fathom. He asserts both that things, while seemingly in motion, are still; and that while seeming to depart they remain unmoving.

[This truth] can only be encountered with the spirit, it cannot be found amid ordinary affairs.

Allow me to explain. While things are said to “depart,” this is not to assert that they literally depart but merely to dispel people’s attachment to the idea of permanence. Though they are said to “remain,” this is not to argue that they literally remain but merely to counter people’s clinging to “passing away.” Surely, “departing” does not mean that things actually evanesce, nor does “remaining” mean that they perdure through time.

Accordingly, it is said in the *Complete Realization*, “The Bodhisattva dwells among those attached to permanence and teaches them impermanence.”¹⁰ And in the *Mahayana Treatise*, “All dharmas are ultimately unmoving; in them there is no trace of coming or going.”¹¹

Such teachings are devised to lead beings from all quarters to liberation. The words may be contradictory but the reality in which they converge is one. Surely variation among descriptions does not make incongruous their object.

Thus, though things may be said to be “constant” they do not remain. Though described as “departing” they do not shift [in time]. As things do not shift, while passing away they are constantly still; as things do not remain, while still they constantly pass away. In stillness things constantly pass away; thus, while passing away they never shift. In passing away things are constantly still; thus, while still, they never stay.

Zhuangzi speaks of hiding a mountain in a marsh and Confucius stands at the bank of the river [gazing at its gushing torrent]: both reflect on the inability to make passing things stay in the present. Surely they do not mean that things push away the present and pass away [into the past].¹²

Indeed, if one carefully examines the mind of the sage, one will understand that what the sage perceives differs from what the common person perceives. How so? People claim that, young or old, a human being is of one constant body and its substance perdures throughout a lifetime of a hundred years. They only know that the years pass, but do not realize that the body follows

suit. Take the story of the *brahmacārin* who left the householder's life [as a young man] and only returned home as a white-haired old man. When his former neighbors saw him, they said, "Could this be our former neighbor?" The *brahmacārin* said, "I may seem to be my former self but I am certainly not him." The neighbors were startled. It is just like in the allegory of the strong man [who sneaks up under cover of night] and carries away [the boat] on his shoulders, [while the owner,] fast asleep, knows nothing [of the theft].¹³

151c In order to dispel people's delusions, the Tathāgata uses words appropriate to their individual limitations; he rides the vehicle of the nondual ultimate mind, yet elaborates nonsingular diverse teachings. Words that even though contradictory do not impute incongruity to their object—such are the words of the Sage alone.

Hence, from the perspective of the ultimate, he teaches of "not-shifting"; in order to guide the common people, he speaks of things flowing through time. Even though he charts out a thousandfold paths, they all return to a common destination.

Yet, when those who cling to the evidence of texts hear the teaching of "not-shifting" they say that past things do not reach the present, but when they hear of "flow and motion" they say that present things can reach the past. However, once the terms "past" and "present" have been assigned [to their respective moments], why still insist on viewing things as "shifting" [from one to the other]? After all, when it is said that things "pass away," this is not to affirm that they literally pass away but only that things of the past and present persist constantly [in their respective moments]—they are not in motion. When it is asserted that things "depart," this is not to claim that things literally depart but only that things do not reach the past from the present—they do not come. They do not come: they do not gallop between the past and the present. They do not move; each thing, by nature, persists in just one[—its own particular—]time.

The myriad texts differ in their formulations, the hundred schools teach divergent doctrines, but once you arrive at where they all converge, their diversity will no longer confuse you.

Now, what others call "remaining" I refer to as "departing"; what they call "departing" I speak of as "remaining." Yet, though "remaining" and "departing"

II. Things Do Not Shift

differ in name, in reality they are one. It is not without reason that the classic says, “True words appear nonsensical.”¹⁴ Who would believe them?

How so? People search for past things in the present, and conclude that [things] do not remain. I seek for present [things] in the past and determine that they do not depart. If present [things] could reach the past, then the past should contain those present [things]. If past [things] could reach the present, then the present should contain those past [things]. But there are no past [things] in the present, which shows again that [things] do not come. And there are no present [things] in the past, which shows once more that [things] do not depart.

Since past [things] do not reach the present, nor do present [things] reach the past, therefore each event by nature remains in its own particular time. There is really nothing at all that can be described as either coming or going [in time].

Grasp this subtle meaning, and you will understand that even though the four seasons gallop like a windstorm and the Big Dipper whirls in the sky like thunder, in all their velocity they are forever unmoving.

The acts of the Tathāgata are efficacious throughout myriad generations yet they remain always still; his Dao penetrates a hundred eons yet it is all the more unmoving. Piling up a mound is as if complete with the first basket of dirt; reaching the destination of a long journey is accomplished with the first step.¹⁵ All this is because meritorious deeds truly do not wither away. That meritorious acts do not wither away means that the act remains in the past time and does not transform out of being. As such, it does not shift in time. It does not shift: it abides forever, unmoving. Thus it is.

Therefore it is said in scripture, “Should the triple deluge consume the world, my works will abide, unmoving.”¹⁶ True indeed.

How is this so? The result does not contain the cause, it is brought about by the cause. Since the result is brought about by the cause, in the past moment the cause is not-extinct. Since the result does not include the cause, the cause does not come [from the past] to the present. Neither is the cause extinct [in its own past moment], nor does it come [to the present]. This is further proof of the truth of “not shifting.”

With this understanding, can one continue to oscillate between “departing” and “staying,” dither between “motion” and “stillness”?

Essays of Sengzhao

Truly, should Heaven collapse and Earth topple over, I will not say things are not still. Should a great deluge submerge the world, I will not say things move. If you can tally your spirit with things in their reality, this truth will be within reach.

III. Emptiness as Nonsubstantiality

[Introduction]

The perfectly vacuous, the unborn: such is the wondrous object of *prajñā*'s 152a
mysterious mirroring, the unifying apex of existing things. If not through the
exceptional realization of sagely insight, how could one tally one's spirit
with the space between being and nonbeing?

Thus, the Perfected Person extends his spirit-mind to the limitless, yet
individual things cannot obstruct him. He exerts his ear and eye to the utmost,
yet sounds and forms have no power over him. Is it not because he has iden-
tified with the self-emptiness of all things that things cannot hamper his spir-
itual brilliance?

The sage rides the vehicle of the ultimate mind and yet aligns himself
with all principles; there are no obstructions he cannot penetrate. He inhabits
the Singular Pneuma and therefrom observes transformations; he moves in
accord with all he encounters. Since there are no obstructions he cannot pen-
etrate, he attains simplicity in the midst of complexity.¹⁷ Since he moves in
harmony with all that he encounters, he becomes one with whatever he
touches.

In this way, though the myriad images are individually discrete, their dis-
tinctiveness is not inherent to them. As such, images are not substantially
real images. Since they are not substantially real images, I say that images
are not images. Indeed, at the root things and I are one, affirmation and nega-
tion are the Singular Pneuma.

This doctrine is deep and subtle—beyond, I fear, the ken of conventional
understanding. Hence of late, whenever the topic of emptiness is raised in
debate, disagreements inevitably arise. Is it possible to arrive at agreement
when the [thing discussed] is [seen as] incongruous? Conflicting theories
proliferate¹⁸ and yield no agreement on the nature [of emptiness].

[Three Doctrines of Emptiness]

Why? The doctrine of “no mentation” defines emptiness as a state in which the mind no longer reaches out toward things, even though things themselves do not cease to exist. The merit of this doctrine is its valuation of the stillness of spirit; its flaw is its failure to understand that things themselves are empty.

The theory of “emptiness is form” rests on the claim that since forms are not self-produced, and despite being called forms, they are not forms. But the analysis of forms should not be limited to forms produced by a coming together of forms; the analysis should apply to forms as such, and should see them as what they are in themselves. This theory acknowledges merely that forms are not self-produced, but it has yet to grasp the truth that forms as such are not forms.

The teaching of “original nonbeing” is obsessed with the idea of nonbeing, which dominates the discussion throughout. It takes negations of being as assertions that being is actually nonexistent, and negations of nonbeing as claims that nonbeing likewise is actually nonexistent. However, if one were to investigate the original purport of the scriptures, one would understand that negations of being are merely a rejection of substantialized being, while negations of nonbeing are merely a refutation of substantialized nonbeing. Why insist that negations of being mean that this being is actually nonexistent, and that negations of nonbeing mean that nonbeing is likewise actually nonexistent? Such words reveal an infatuation with “nonbeing”; surely they cannot harmoniously enter the reality of events nor reach the true character of things.

[Argument]

If you conceptualize a thing as a thing, what you thus conceptualize can indeed be called a thing. But if you conceptualize a non-thing a thing, though you conceptualize it as a thing it is not a thing. For things do not derive their reality from names, and names are not brought about simply by virtue of there being things.

Thus ultimate truth dwells in sovereign stillness beyond the domain of ordinary naming;¹⁹ how could mere words and letters articulate it? Yet I cannot remain silent and will try to fashion for it an approximation in words.

It is said in the *Mahayana Treatise*, “Dharmas do not possess marks, nor do they lack marks.”²⁰ And in the *Middle Way Treatise*, “Dharmas do not exist, nor do they not exist.”²¹ This is the supreme ultimate truth.

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Now, on close examination, these assertions of “neither being nor non-being” cannot mean that ultimate truth is realized only when one has purged the mind of all things, shut the doors of seeing and hearing, and when the mind is still and empty. Indeed, ultimate truth is realized when one identifies with things and penetrates them harmoniously, for then things in their concrete reality do not oppose it; and when this very reality is rendered selfsame with the ultimate, for then empty Nature does alter their individual reality. Since Nature does not alter their reality, even though they are nonexistent, things do exist. Since things do not oppose [ultimate truth], even though they are existent, they do not exist. While nonexistent, things exist; hence “existence” does not capture them. While existent, they do not exist, hence “nonexistence” also does not apply. Thus, it is not that nothing exists; rather, things are not substantially real things. And since they are not substantially real things, what is there that could possibly be conceptualized as a thing?

Thus, when it is said in the sutra, “Emptiness is the nature of form, not an obliteration of form,” this is to demonstrate that the sagely mode of engaging things is to identify with their essential vacuity. Could the sage, in striving for the ultimate, have to “hack” his way there through forms?²²

Therefore [Vimalakīrti,] in his sickbed, teaches about insubstantiality; and Supreme Brightness speaks of the identity [of form] and vacuity. In all, though the teachings in the tripartite canon are diverse, what unifies them is one.

The *Radiance* proclaims, “From the standpoint of supreme ultimate truth there is no realization [of *bodhi*], no attainment; from the standpoint of relative truth there is realization and attainment.”²³ Now, “attainment” is but the relative name of nonattainment, and “nonattainment” is the ultimate name of attainment. In view of the ultimate name they are ultimate, yet they do not exist. In view of the relative name they are relative, yet they do not nonexistent. Thus, to call them “ultimate” is not to say that they exist; to call them “relative” is not to say that they nonexistent. These descriptions are mutually opposed, yet the principles behind them are not different.

Thus a sutra says, “Ultimate truth and relative truth: are they distinct? They are not.”²⁴ In this sutra ultimate truth is asserted only to refute “existence,”

and relative truth is asserted only to refute “nonexistence.” Just because there are two “truths,” must one impute two-ness to the reality of things?

Things have both an aspect of not-existing and an aspect of not-nonexisting. Under the aspect of not-existing, even though existent, things do not exist. Under the aspect of not-nonexisting, even though nonexistent, they do not nonexist. While nonexisting they do not nonexist, hence their nonexisting is not a one-sided emptiness. While existing they do not exist, hence their existing is not substantial being.

Since the being of things never becomes substantial being, and since their nonexistence is not just an erasure of traces, then even though their “being” and “nonbeing” are distinguished in name, in reality they are one.

Thus the youth exclaimed, “You teach that since things arise due to karmic conditions, they neither exist nor nonexist,”²⁵ and in the *Bodhisattva’s Diadem* it is written, “The turnings of the wheel of Dharma are neither turnings nor non-turnings: its very turnings are non-turnings.”²⁶ Such are the subtle words of all sutras.

Also, you wish to argue that things nonexist? Then you would fail to denounce the views of annihilationists. You wish to claim that things do exist? Then you would give sanction to the positions of eternalists. Yet, things do not nonexist, hence annihilationist beliefs are to be denounced. Things do not exist, hence eternalist views are also to be rejected. Negation of both being and nonbeing: verily, such are the words of ultimate truth.

Thus it is said in the *Dao Practice*, “Mind neither exists nor does not exist,”²⁷ and in the *Middle Way Verses*, “Since things arise from conditions, they do not exist; since they do arise, they do not nonexist.”²⁸ Consider this well, and you will see it is so.

Here is why. If being existed substantially, then it would exist of itself, constantly, and it would not depend on conditions in order to come into being. Similarly, substantial nonbeing exists by itself, perdures eternally as nonbeing, and would not depend on conditions in order to come about.

However, being is not being by and of itself; it becomes being depending on conditions—therefore, being does not exist substantially. Since being is not substantial being, even though it exists it cannot be called “being.”

Likewise nonbeing. The term “nonbeing” truly applies only to something perfectly quiescent, unchanging. If myriad things nonexisted in this manner,

it would be inconceivable that they would arise at all. Yet they do arise, hence “nonbeing” does not apply. But since it is through conditions that they arise, things do not nonexistent.

Thus it is said in the *Mahayana Treatise* that all dharmas, constituted as they are by all causes and conditions, should be considered existent; all dharmas, constituted as they are by all causes and conditions, should not be considered existent; all nonexistent dharmas, constituted as they are by all causes and conditions, should be considered existent; all existent dharmas, constituted as they are by all causes and conditions, should not be considered existent.²⁹ Are these pronouncements on being and nonbeing nothing but a futile exercise in contrariness?

If one were to take things as “being” in a real, substantial sense, then they could not be described as “nonbeing”; if one were to take them as “nonexistent” in a real, substantial sense, then “existence” would not apply. But when “being” is predicated of things, it is merely that the term “being” is used as expedient to refute claims of their “nonbeing.” Likewise, when “nonbeing” is asserted, it is just that the term “nonbeing” is applied provisionally in order to reject the assertions of their “being.”

The reality is one, even though the concepts are dualistic. The descriptions may be incongruous, but if one grasps the unified reality behind them no disagreement will be left unresolved.

From one perspective myriad things truly do not exist—they cannot be described as “being.” From another perspective they do not nonexistent—they cannot be taken as “nonbeing.” How so? Do you wish to claim that they exist? Even though they exist, they do not emerge into substantial being. Do you want to say that they nonexistent? Images of events are already formed in them, and with images already formed they cannot be simply nonexistent. Since their being is not substantial they do not really exist.

With this, emptiness as nonsubstantiality has been demonstrated.

Accordingly, it is said in the *Radiance*, “Dharmas, as merely conventional appellations, are not substantial. They are akin to a phantom. It is not that the phantom does not exist, rather, the phantom is not a substantial being.”³⁰

Now, if one uses names to consider the [respective] things, [one will find that] things lack the actuality corresponding to their names; if one uses things to consider their names, [one will find that] the names lack the power of

obtaining the things. That things lack the reality corresponding to their names means they are not “things.” That names lack the power of obtaining things means they are not “names.” Thus, names do not correspond to actuality, and actuality does not correspond to names. Since names and actuality do not correspond to each another, where are the “myriad things”?

Thus, it is said in the *Middle Way Treatise* that there is in things no distinction between “this” and “that,” it is just that people take “this” as “this” and “that” as “that.”³¹ “That” becomes “that” in relation to “this,” “this” becomes “this” in relation to “that.” Neither “this” nor “that” can be defined independently of the other. Yet the deluded take the duality as self-evident. Thus, though the division between “this” and “that” originally does not exist, they think that it has never been absent. However, should they attain insight into the fact that “this” and “that” do not exist, will there be any thing left for them that could be called “being”? From this it is known that truly things are not substantially real, they are only made to appear so by conventional designations.

153a This is why the *Complete Realization* describes the arbitrariness of names³² and why the master from Yuanlin Grove³³ uses the metaphors of the finger and the horse. Such profound teachings are everywhere to be found.

Thus again: the Sage rides the vehicle of the thousand transformations yet remains unchanged; he treads amid the myriad objects of delusion yet always penetrates them. This is because he has identified with the self-emptiness of things, instead of imputing vacuity to things through conventional concepts.

Thus it is said in the sutra, “How marvelous, World-honored One! Unmoved in the apex of reality, you establish all dharmas.”³⁴ Dharmas are not established outside of the ultimate, they are established as one with the ultimate.

Is the Dao beyond reach? Touch phenomena—they are the ultimate. Is sagacity beyond reach? Realize them—you will be a like a spirit.

IV. *Prajñā* without Knowing

[Statement of Topic]

Prajñā: vacuous, tenebrous, the unifying principle of the three vehicles. Truly, it is ultimate unity, free from all distinctions. Yet contentious debates about it have raged on and on.

The Indian *śramaṇa* Kumārajīva was still a youth when he trod into the Great Square³⁵ and set about investigating this mystery. Alone he reached beyond words and images, and wondrously tallied [his mind] with the realm of the Invisible and Inaudible.³⁶ He subdued the non-Buddhist teachers in Kapilavastu,³⁷ and with the wind of his virtue he filled the fans of the East. He would have carried his torch to yet other countries but he hid it in the land of the Liang,³⁸ the Dao does not respond without cause, it responds only when the conditions are ripe.

Hence, in the third year of the Hongshi era (402 C.E.), with the year-star in the second position, the king of Qin took Liang's intent to submit to the [Qin] kingdom as an opportunity to send troops there to bring Kumārajīva.³⁹ Then I thought, the age of the Northern Sky⁴⁰ has arrived.

The Heavenly King of the Great Qin, whose Dao tallies with the source of the hundred kings of antiquity and whose virtue will nourish a thousand generations to come, he who plays with his blade freely amidst the myriad affairs of state while tirelessly spreading the Dao, he is truly like Heaven for the pitiful beings in this age of decline, like a pillar for the Dharma bequeathed by Śākyamuni. He assembled over five hundred learned monks at the Hall of Free-and-Easy Wandering, and held the Qin text, setting down the correct meaning of the universal [Mahayana] scriptures alongside lord Kumārajīva. Does the path he blazed benefit only his own day and age? It is a bridge [across samsara] for countless ages to come.

Ignorant though I am, I had the privilege of taking part in that august assembly. It was then that I heard for the first time this doctrine so unique and profound. Truly, sagely wisdom is abstruse, subtle, difficult to fathom.

Free from marks and names, it cannot be captured in images or words. I can do no more than to purge my mind of all images and try to fashion a likeness for it in these my untamed words.⁴¹ Yet let no one think that the sagely mind can be captured in analysis!

It is said in the *Radiance*, “*Prajñā* perceives no marks of existence, no marks of arising or ceasing.”⁴² And in the *Dao Practice*, “*Prajñā* has no objects of knowing, no objects of seeing.”⁴³ These statements assert wisdom’s illuminative activity, even as they claim that there are in it no individuating marks and, accordingly, no knowledge. What do they mean? There must be a markless knowing, a knowledgeable illumination.⁴⁴

How is this so? For every thing that is known, there is a thing that is not known. But in the sagely mind, there is no thing that is known, thus there is nothing not known. This knowledgeable knowing is called “all-knowledge.” Thus, the words of the sutra true are: “In the sagely mind there is nothing known, nothing not known.”⁴⁵

153b In this way, the sage empties his mind and makes full his illumination. He cognizes constantly yet is always without knowing. Thus he can dim his brightness and conceal his glow, while mirroring mysteriously with a vacuous mind. He can shut down his intellect and turn off his cleverness, while solitarily realizing the mystery of mysteries.

In wisdom there is a mirroring that reaches the deepest depths, yet there is in it no knowledge. Spirit has the function of responding to and according [with events], yet it is free from deliberate effort. Since spirit is free from deliberate effort, it can reign sovereign beyond the world. Since wisdom is without knowledge, it can mysteriously illuminate beyond [conditioned] events. Yet, even though wisdom is beyond events it is never without them. Though the spirit is beyond the world it is always within its borders.

Therefore, as [the sage] contemplates [the earth] below and [the heavens] above and follows their transformations, he accords with phenomena and responds to them with an inexhaustible acuity, there are no depths to which his vision cannot reach, yet his illumination shines forth with no deliberate effort. This is how not-knowing knows, how sagely spirit accords with phenomena.

Now, as for *prajñā* in its objective aspect: it is actual yet not existent, vacuous yet not nonexistent, present yet beyond description. Is this not sagely wisdom itself? How so? You wish to claim that it is existent? Yet it lacks

form or name. You wish to claim that it is nonexistent? Yet the sage is numinous by its power. Since the sage is numinous by its power, even though it is vacuous it never forfeits its illuminative functioning. Since it lacks form or name, even though it is illuminating it never loses its vacuity. While illuminating it does not lose its vacuity; therefore it merges with things without being altered by them. Even though it is vacuous, it never ceases to illuminate; therefore its every movement meets gross phenomena.

In this way the functioning of sagely wisdom never ceases, but seek for it among shapes and marks and you will never find it.

Thus Ratnākara says, “The Buddha acts without conscious intention,”⁴⁶ while in the *Radiance* it is written, “Unmoved in perfect awakening he establishes all dharmas.”⁴⁷ Clearly, though the traces of the sage reach out in a myriad directions, what they all lead to is one.

Hence, *prajñā* can illuminate while remaining vacuous; ultimate truth can be known despite not being there. The myriad movements can be met in stillness, sagely response can nonexistent yet remain efficacious. Such is self-knowing without knowing, self-acting without action. “Action,” “knowing”—these words simply miss the mark.

[Nine Arguments]

[1]

Objection: The sage, his ultimate mind uniquely brilliant, illuminates each and every thing. His responsiveness unlimited, with every movement he accords with phenomena. Since he illuminates each and every thing, nothing eludes his knowing. Since with every movement he accords with phenomena, his responsiveness is never amiss. It is never amiss: he unfailingly accords with all that is to be accorded with. Nothing eludes his knowing: he unfailingly cognizes all that is to be known.

Now, since the sage cognizes all that is to be known, his knowing is surely not without content. Since he accords with all that is to be accorded with, his responsiveness is likewise not empty of content.

Since he thus both cognizes things and accords with them, why do you claim that he does neither? If by saying that the sage forgets knowledge and ceases to accord with things you mean only that his knowing and according are free from personal desires—and that for this very reason he is able to

fulfill his personal desires—then you can only say that the sage is not attached to his knowledge, but can you argue that he does not know at all?

Answer: The feats of the sage surpass those of the Two Principles,⁴⁸ yet he is not humane.⁴⁹ His brightness exceeds that of the sun and moon, yet this only deepens his darkness. Could one say that he is blind like stone or wood, that he lacks cognition altogether? Indeed, it is just that on account of what distinguishes him from a common person—his spiritual perspicacity—he is not defined by marks of conditioned events.

153c You, sir, would like to argue that while it is not for his own satisfaction that the sage possesses his knowledge, he is never devoid of it. Does this not misrepresent the sagely mind and miss the purport of the scriptures? After all, it is said in a sutra, “Ultimate *prajñā* is pure like empty space: not sullied by knowledge or perception, unproduced, unconditioned.”⁵⁰ That is, this knowledge is itself without knowledge. How could this knowledgelessness be said to result from a mere “turning back of the illumination”?⁵¹

If one were to call *prajñā* “pure” by arguing that while it does cognize, its objects are essentially empty, such a “*prajñā*” would not be distinguishable from conventional “wisdom.” Indeed, under this premise the three poisons⁵² and the four inverted views⁵³ would also have to be considered pure. Why then extol *prajñā* alone?

If you were to praise *prajñā* because of [the properties of] the objects of its knowing, remember: if it has objects, it is not *prajñā*. Though the objects be perfectly pure, such “*prajñā*” can never be considered pure and there is no reason to extol it as such.

Thus, when the sutras describe *prajñā* as pure, is it not because it is in essence ultimately pure, that is, fundamentally free from deluded grasping? Being fundamentally free from deluded grasping, it cannot be called knowledge at all. It is not only ordinary ignorance that can be called “not-knowing.” Indeed, [in *prajñā*] knowledge itself is without knowing.

Thus the sage with knowledgeless *prajñā* illuminates the markless ultimate truth. Ultimate truth is without limitations, like those of the “hare” and the “horse,”⁵⁴ *prajñā*’s mirroring leaves nothing unfathomed.

In this way, the sage accords [with individual things] without differentiating them, corresponds without affirming. Quiescent, bland, he does not know, yet there is nothing he does not know.

[2]

Objection: Things cannot communicate themselves; in order to render them communicable words are established. Even though things are distinct from names, in reality nameable things that correspond to names do exist. Therefore, for every given name it is possible to identify the thing to which it refers.

Yet you claim that “in the mind of the sage there is no knowing,” even as you assert that “there is in it nothing that it doesn’t know.”

Now, in my view, not-knowing can never be called “knowing,” and knowing can never be called “not-knowing.” My objection is in line with the doctrine of names, with the fundamental rules of establishing words.

You, however, insist that [knowing and not-knowing] are one in the sagely mind, and differentiated [only] in textual descriptions. When I try to follow your words to reach the reality they purport to describe, I do not see how they could correspond. How is this so? If “knowing” correctly describes the mind of the sage, then “not-knowing” cannot be correct. If “not-knowing” captures it, then “knowing” does not apply. If both miss the mark, it is pointless to continue the discussion.

Answer: It is said in scripture that *prajñā* is inexpressible, no name applies to it: neither existent nor nonexistent, neither full nor vacuous. Though vacuous it never ceases to illuminate; illuminating, it never loses its vacuity.⁵⁵ It is a nameless dharma—language cannot express it. However, if not for language, it could not be communicated. Thus, the sage speaks ceaselessly, never saying as much as a word.

Now listen on, as I shall attempt to intimate it for you in these, my untamed words.

The sagely mind is subtle, markless, and cannot be considered “existent.” Vastly generative in its activity, it cannot be called “nonexistent.” As not “nonexistent,” sagely wisdom endures in it. As not “existent,” the doctrine of names does not apply to it.

Thus, when “knowledge” is asserted of it, this is not predicated literally but merely to point to its [function of] mirroring. When “not-knowing” is asserted of it, it is not predicated literally but solely to indicate the [absence of] marks therein. To signal its [freedom from] marks is not to assert that it is nonexistent; to indicate its mirroring is not to assert that it is existent. As

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not “existent,” it knows, and is yet without knowing. As not “nonexistent,” it is without knowing, and yet it knows. Thus, not knowing is one with knowing. That the two are differentiated in words does not mean they are distinct in the sagely mind itself.

[3]

Question: Wisdom alone, profound and abstruse, can fathom ultimate truth. Thus is manifested the power of sagely wisdom. Accordingly it is said in the sutras, “Without the attainment of *prajñā*, ultimate truth cannot be seen.”⁵⁶ This means that ultimate truth is the condition of *prajñā*’s knowing. If wisdom is defined by conditions, this “wisdom” must be [mere] knowledge.

Answer: If we were to consider wisdom in terms of its conditions, we would see that wisdom is not [mere] knowledge. Why? In the *Radiance* it is said, “To produce consciousness not conditioned by form, this is called ‘to not see form’”⁵⁷ and “As the five aggregates (*skandhas*) are pure, *prajñā* is pure.”

Now, *prajñā* is the faculty of knowing, the five *skandhas* are the known. The known is the condition [of knowing]: now, knowing and the known can either exist in mutual codependence, or mutually nonexistent. When they mutually nonexistent, there is no thing at all that is existent; when they mutually exist, there is no thing at all that is nonexistent. When no thing is nonexistent, [knowledge] arises in response to conditions. When no thing is existent, [knowledge does not] arise in response to conditions. When [knowledge does not] arise dependently on conditions, it only illuminates them and never becomes “knowledge.” When it does arise dependently on conditions, knowledge and its conditions bring each other about. Thus, the distinction between knowing and non-knowing is defined by the [nature of the] object.

How so? If “wisdom” is of the type that knows objects or grasps marks, it is [mere] knowledge. But ultimate truth is markless; could ultimate wisdom then be [mere] knowledge?

Here is why. What is known is not what is known [by and of itself]. Rather, the known arises dependently on the knowing, and since the known arises dependently on the knowing, the knowing likewise arises dependently on the known. Since the known and the knowing bring each other about, they are conditioned dharmas. Because they are conditioned, they are not ultimate. Not being ultimate, they are not ultimate reality.⁵⁸ It is said in the *Middle Way*

Treatise, “Things that exist dependently on conditions are not ultimate. If they existed without dependence on conditions they would be ultimate.”⁵⁹ Now, ultimate reality is called “ultimate” precisely because it is not dependent on conditions. Because it is ultimate and thus not dependent on conditions, there is in it no thing produced from conditions. Of this the sutra says, “No existent dharma can be found that arose independently of conditions.”⁶⁰

Hence, ultimate wisdom’s contemplation of ultimate reality is never the grasping of an object. Since wisdom thus does not grasp objects, how could it be called “knowledge”? This is not to say that wisdom is altogether without knowledge; it is just that since ultimate reality is not an object, ultimate wisdom is not knowledge. Yet you claim, sir, that if we consider wisdom in terms of its conditions, it will prove to be mere knowledge. But since its conditions are itself not conditions, how could it be called “knowledge”?

[4]

Question: When you claim that [the sage] does not grasp, do you mean that he is altogether devoid of knowledge? Or that even though he does know he does not consequently grasp [that which he has cognized]? If his not grasping means that he is altogether without knowledge, the sage is like a traveler lost in the dark of night, unable to tell black from white. If his not grasping means that even though he does cognize, does not grasp subsequently, then [the sage] does have knowledge and thus cannot be without grasping.

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Answer: Neither do I claim that [the sage] is altogether without knowledge and in this sense does not grasp, nor do I argue that, though cognizing at first, he does not grasp subsequently. Rather, his knowing is in itself a non-grasping, and thus he is able to know yet be without grasping.

[5]

Objection: You argue that the sagely mind does not grasp, because indeed it is free from deluded grasping, in that it does not reify things. But “non-grasping” means lack of affirmation, and no affirmation means no corresponding [between the knowing and the known]. If so, what exactly is it that corresponds with the sagely mind so as to justify your description of it as all-knowing?

Answer: True, [the sagely mind] is without affirmation and without corresponding. But, as for this lack of affirmation and of corresponding: although

there is in it no corresponding, there is nothing with which it does not correspond. Though there is in it no affirmation, it leaves nothing unaffirmed. That it leaves nothing unaffirmed means that it affirms while not affirming; that there is nothing with which it does not correspond means that it corresponds while not corresponding. In the words of a sutra, “Seeing all dharmas, he sees not a thing.”⁶¹

[6]

Objection: It cannot be that the sagely mind does not affirm. Rather, it is precisely because it is devoid of affirmable things that even though devoid of them, it must be able to affirm that very absence of the affirmable. Accordingly, when it is said in scripture that “ultimate truth is without marks, *prajñā* is without knowledge,”⁶² this is indeed because *prajñā* is free from mark-perceiving knowledge. How could *prajñā*'s ultimacy be in any way compromised if it were to know that marklessness as the markless?

Answer: The sage does not have [knowledge of the] markless. If he were to take the markless as the markless, he would be turning the markless into a marked. To discard being and cling to nonbeing is like fleeing the mountain peak only to become trapped in a ravine: in neither situation is one safe. Accordingly, the Perfected Person establishes himself in existing while not existing, resides in nonbeing while not nonexisting. Not grasping either being or nonbeing, neither does he reject being or nonbeing. In this manner he can “harmonize his radiance with the dust and toil”⁶³ and travel freely among the five realms of rebirth.⁶⁴ Silently he goes, soundlessly he comes; bland, without deliberate action, there is nothing he does not accomplish.

[7]

Objection: Sagely mind may be without knowledge, yet in according with and responding to conditions the sage is infallible. It responds to that which calls for its response, and abides with that which does not. Therefore we can say that the sagely mind now arises [in activity], and then perishes. Can this be so?

Answer: Arising and perishing is the mind of arising and perishing. Since the sage is without mind, how could there be for him any arising or perishing? Yet it is not that he is altogether devoid of mind; rather, non-mind is [the very nature of his] mind. Also, it is not that he does not respond; rather, non-responding

is [the very nature of his] response—that is all. Indeed, the pattern of sagely response is infallible, just like the cycle of the four seasons. [The sagely mind,] in essence vacuous and nonexistent, cannot be described either as arising or perishing.

[8]

Objection: Both the wisdom of the sage and the deluded [ordinary] “wisdom” you speak of in terms of “nonbeing”—of the absence of arising and perishing. How should one distinguish [between the two]?

Answer: When asserted of sagely wisdom, “nonexistence” points to the absence [therein] of knowledge. When asserted of deluded “wisdom,” it refers to the fact that this knowledge knows “nonexistence.” Though “nonexistence” is asserted of both types of wisdom, it is used differently in each case.

Let me explain. Sagely mind, empty and still, has no knowledge of which it could be said that it [knows] nonbeing; thus we can say that it is a nonbeing of cognition, not that it cognizes nonbeing. Deluded wisdom does possess knowledge: there is in it a knowledge of which it can be said that it [knows] nonbeing, [which is why] I say that it knows nonbeing, not that it is a nonbeing of knowledge.

154c

Nonbeing of knowledge: this is the “nonbeing” predicated of *prajñā*. Knowledge of nonbeing: this is “nonbeing” [known as] ultimate truth.

Now, as for the relation between *prajñā* and ultimate truth, under the aspect of function they are differentiated in their unity; under the aspect of stillness they are unified in their differentiation. When unified, the mind is not purposely directed to this and that, subject and object; when differentiated, nothing of *prajñā*’s illuminative power is lost. Even though I may speak of their unity, it is unity within differentiation; even though I may assert their differentiation, it is differentiation within unity. Therefore, neither “differentiation” nor “unity” captures the nature of this relation.

Allow me to explain further. Within is the light of solitary mirroring; without is the reality of myriad dharmas. Though dharmas are real, it is only through illumination that they can be reached. The power of illumination is activated just when the inner and the outer enter into mutual relation. This is the aspect of function: [under this aspect even] the sage cannot make them one. Knowledgeless illumination within, markless reality without, the inner

and the outer are unagitated, mutually nonexistent. This is the aspect of stillness: [under this aspect even] the sage cannot make them different.

Thus when it is said in the sutra, “Dharmas are not differentiated,”⁶⁵ could this mean that in order to abolish distinctions one must “extend the duck’s legs” or “shorten the crane’s neck,” “level the hills and fill up the valleys”?⁶⁶ No. Here distinctions are not substantialized as distinctions; hence even though they are distinct, dharmas are not differentiated.

Thus a sutra says, “How marvelous, World-honored One! From within the dharma of nondifferentiation you teach that dharmas are distinct”⁶⁷ and also “*Prajñā* and dharmas are neither unified nor differentiated.”⁶⁸ So it is.

[9]

Objection: You say “differentiated under the aspect of function, unified under the aspect of stillness.” Do you mean that in *prajñā* functioning and stillness are distinct?

Answer: Its functioning is one with its stillness, its stillness is one with its functioning; the two are of one body, “one in origin, different in name.”⁶⁹ Truly, there is here no motionless stillness that could prevail over function. The darker the wisdom, the brighter its illumination; the quieter the spirit, the swifter its response. How could one claim that the bright and the dark, the active and the still, are here distinct?

[Concluding Statement]

Thus it is said in the *Complete Realization*, “[The Buddha] does not act, yet his actions are supreme.”⁷⁰ And Ratnakāra says, “Without discernment, without knowledge, he has total comprehension.” Such words speak of the perfect realization of spirit and the full activation of wisdom; they reach the apex beyond the realm of images. Follow these luminous words and knowledge of the sagely mind will be within your reach.

V. Correspondence with Liu Yimin

Liu's Letter

[Preface]

From Yimin, with obeisance.

I have longed to meet you, sir, since I first tasted of your exquisite renown. How is your health now that at year's end the winter frost has arrived? With communication severed I grow ever more concerned about your well-being. Here, the humid countryside has taken away my health; illness is my constant companion.⁷¹

Monk Huiming is setting off to the north, and so I have an opportunity to write you at length.

People of old never allowed mere physical distance to weaken their friendships; shared understanding always kept them close. Likewise, though we have never met, with endless rivers and vast mountain ranges between us, I have always cherished the edifying breeze of your virtue, and with your images and traces reflected in the mirror of my mind deep joy gathers up within me. Yet great distances still separate us and the conditions for us to meet never ripen. I gaze at the rosy-colored clouds and sigh in longing. 155a

Please take good care of yourself, in accordance with the seasons. I hope that travel may resume promptly so that I can write you more often. In the meantime I pray that your congregation thrives in harmony and that the foreign master is well.

Your insight and expert analysis, sir, fill this reservoir of wisdom; your exegesis allows one, in the words of the classic, "to bring the understanding past the midway point." Every time I reflect on the distances between us, my longing is all the more acute.

The mountain monks are pure and resolute in their practice. Single-minded in upholding the precepts, in addition to secluded meditation they devote themselves entirely to study and lecture. It brings me great joy to see them so faithful and dignified. I, too, guided by the promptings of my former lives,

have come along this noble path. For this I shall remain grateful as long as the sun and moon circle the skies.

Master Huiyuan is well.⁷² Ever refining his spiritual practice, he is “diligent night and day.”⁷³ Were it not for the deep undercurrent of the Dao coursing through him, and for the fact that his spirit is driven by the Principle, could he, at the advanced age of sixty, still possess a spirit so vast and indomitable? My gratitude to him deepens as I find here more and more peace and fulfillment.

It was at the end of last summer that Master Daosheng⁷⁴ introduced to me your essay, “*Prajñā* without Knowing.” It shows refined beauty of expression, profound points of doctrine, as well as subtlety and acuity in the explication of sagely writings. I savored it, captivated, unable to put it down. Truly you have bathed your mind in the ocean of the universal teachings [of the Mahayana] and have attained insight into the hall of transcendent darkness. Whoever uses [your essay] as a guide to understanding will witness the diverse currents of *prajñā* converge in wordless unity. What joy!

Now, words may become treacherous when applied to so subtle a principle; few will respond to a song that is so unlike any other. One who has not transcended words and images will inevitably cling to them and end up in error.

[Statement of Topic]

Your analysis of wisdom in terms of its conditions is exquisite, conclusive, superbly refined; its reasoning is without a single fissure. Yet, dull-witted as I am, I have difficulty comprehending it all at once and a handful of doubts still remain for me. I would like to lay them out for you, in the hope that you may respond at your leisure with a rough explanation.

In your essay you say that *prajñā* is in essence “neither existent nor non-existent, neither full nor vacuous. Though vacuous, it never ceases to illuminate; illuminating, it does not lose its vacuity. . . . [In the *Radiance*] it is said, ‘Unmoved in perfect awakening, he establishes all dharmas.’” Further, you assert, “Indeed, it is just that on account of what distinguishes [the sage] from a common person—his spiritual perspicacity—he is not defined by marks of conditioned events.” You also say that the functioning of the sagely mind “is one with its stillness, its stillness is one with its functioning . . . the quieter the spirit, the swifter its response.”

[You argue then that] the mind of the sage is quiescent, yet it reaches to the apex of Principle, which is one with nonbeing.⁷⁵ It is “swift without swiftness,

slow without slowness.”⁷⁶ Its knowing does not conflict with its stillness; its stillness does not oppose its knowing. Never is its stillness lost; never does its knowing cease. Thus, the pattern of the sage’s engaging with things, accomplishing his acts and transforming the world, is such that he remains within the realm of the nameable, all the while transcending it immensely, united with the nameless.

This mysterious doctrine, I confess, continues to elude me.

[Question]

Presently I should like to address these doubts regarding your outstanding essay. Specifically, I would like to inquire what it is precisely that makes the sagely mind different [from the mind of the ordinary person].

Does this difference consist in the sage’s thorough mastery of numen and his complete activation of the operations of mind, in wondrous comprehension and dark tallying? Or, rather, does it consist in the sagely mind being essentially self-so, self-enclosed, and self-sufficient, numinously silent in solitary self-apprehension?

155b

If it is the former case, then the terms “stillness” and “illumination” [with which you describe the sage] must be equivalent to “concentration” and “wisdom.” If the latter is the case, the sagely mind has by and large ceased responding to conditions.⁷⁷

You say, however, that even though the mind’s activities are obscured by the darkness of mystery, it remains extraordinarily active in its illuminating; and that even though the spirit dwells unsullied beyond the world of transformations, it shines the light of discernment with an unparalleled brilliance. To argue such a thesis you must have recourse to a deep realization indeed.

In my view, a knowledge that perceives change, responds to occasions, and accords with and responds to beings cannot be considered “nonexistent.” You write that the sagely mind is “fundamentally free” from falsely discriminating knowledge, but you do not demonstrate how the sagely mind can be without discrimination.

It may be advisable to first determine how exactly the sagely mind accords with and responds to things. Is it that it illuminates the markless alone? Or is it that it completely discerns the marked in all its transformations?

If it perceives [nothing but the marked in] its transformations, then this differs from [a perception of] the markless. If it illuminates the markless and

only the markless, it must be powerless to respond to conditions. You say that there is no phenomenon to which it reaches out, and at the same time that it has the power of according with beings. I do not fully understand this and I beg you to elucidate further.

You write that “though there is in [the sagely mind] no corresponding, there is nothing with which it does not correspond; though there is in it no affirmation, it leaves nothing unaffirmed. That it leaves nothing unaffirmed means that it affirms while not affirming; that there is nothing with which it does not correspond means that it corresponds while not corresponding.” Now, that there are no things with which it does not correspond, even while it does not correspond: this is perfect corresponding. That there are no things it does not affirm, even as it does not affirm: this is ultimate affirmation.

But how could there be an ultimate affirmation that would at the same time not be affirmation at all, or a perfect corresponding that would at the same time not be a corresponding, such that it would allow you to speak of “corresponding without corresponding” and “affirming without affirming”?

If what you mean is simply that perfect corresponding is not ordinary corresponding and that ultimate affirmation is not ordinary affirmation, then your words are just a way of referring to the fundamental distinction between insight and delusion, nothing more.

This is the point of your essay that I do not understand. I beg you to explain it once again and dispel my doubts.

The day your essay arrived, Master Huiyuan and I wasted no time in examining it closely. The Dharma master admired it just as I did. You and us lead each other in the pursuit of truth. It is just that our reasoning seems to be based on different principles, and so our understanding may not be identical to yours. Afterward your work was circulated among the community, and many pondered its crucial points. We only regret you cannot be with us now.

Response to Liu Yimin

[Preface]

“Never have we met”⁷⁸ and long have I yearned for an encounter—in vain. When Monk Huiming arrived, he gave me your letter dated the twelfth month of last year, including your inquiry. As I savored its words, reading

it repeatedly, in my enjoyment of it I felt as though, if only ever so briefly, you were present here in front of me.

The season of cold winds has arrived; how has your health been since you wrote? As for me, poor in virtue as I am, I have been struggling with exhaustion and have rarely been well.

The messenger makes ready for his journey back south, so I must be brief.

Fifteenth day of the eighth month. Sengzhao.

Though our garb differs, we are one in our pursuit of the wondrous truth. Separated by vast rivers and mountains, we are neighbors in a shared understanding. Thus, as I gaze off into the southbound road and my thoughts fly off toward you, a sense of homecoming fills the emptiness under my lapels.

Sir, you have now fulfilled your aspiration for noble solitude, beautifully transcending the mundane, and you dwell in secluded tranquility beyond the realm of worldly affairs; the square inch of your heart⁷⁹ is surely filled with joy. “Whenever you gather for debate”⁸⁰ we hear refined song not unlike that of the Bamboo Grove,⁸¹ lofty as it is effortless.

155c

You who are so pure and free, I do not know when at last we will meet! I only wish that you will take good care of your health, and that I may receive news from you whenever there is a messenger. I also hope that the monks on Lushan are in good health, and that the clergy and householders prosper in harmony.

News of Master Huiyuan’s well-being comforted me greatly. While I have yet to receive his pure tutelage, I have long revered his superior virtue and hoped eagerly to meet him. How wonderful that the noble Huiyuan, though now over sixty, is still so full of vigor, as he guides his disciples on secluded cliffs and gives himself to contemplation, guarding the One in the empty valley,⁸² while praises of his virtue are heard far and near. Often I extend my thoughts toward his corner of the earth, but they vanish on the hazy horizon. Unable to pay him my respects directly, I sigh deeply with regret.

But you, sir, are always in his pure presence. Your insight thus deepening, you must be brimming with elation!

[Situation in Chang’an]

The community here is as usual. Master Kumārajīva is in good health. The Qin king is a natural conduit for the Dao, endowed by Heaven with

extraordinary faculties. He is like a wall and moat guarding the Three Jewels, his mind set on propagating the Dao.

This has attracted monks of great renown, specialists in the wonderful scriptures, to come here from afar, and the edifying winds of Vulture Peak have been gathering force in this country.

The noble Ling's⁸³ far-off journey will be a ferry for a thousand generations to come: he brought back from the Western Regions more than two hundred new texts of the universal [Mahayana] teaching. The king also invited a master of Mahayana meditation, a master of the Tripiṭaka, and two masters of the *Vibhāṣā*.⁸⁴

Master Kumārajīva is translating the newly acquired scriptures in Large Stone Temple. This treasury of the Dharma is deep and vast and daily yields new wonders. The *dhyāna* master⁸⁵ teaches meditation at Tilers' Temple, surrounded by hundreds of disciples, who exert themselves tirelessly day and night in dignified harmony. This delights me greatly.

The master of the Tripiṭaka⁸⁶ is translating the *Rules of Discipline* in the Middle Monastery. His text is meticulous yet comprehensive, just as if it was the original text when first compiled.

The masters of the *Vibhāṣā* are working in Stone Ram Monastery on the Indian text of the *Śāriputra-abhidharma*.⁸⁷ Though they have not yet begun with the translation itself, whenever I inquire about their proceedings I hear new and remarkable things.

The greatest fortune in my insignificant life has been to take part in this splendid occasion, to encounter this magnificent transformative event. Regret, as I may, that I was not there in the Buddha's Jetavana assembly, my only other sorrow is that you, O sir of virtue and renown, cannot join us here in the present Dharma gathering.

Venerable [Dao]sheng was here with us for a number of years. Whenever we spoke he expressed deep admiration for you. Abruptly, he had to return south where you, sir, met him. I myself have not heard from him since, and this fills me with unspeakable worry.

When Monk Wei came from Mount Lu (Lushan), he brought with him your poems "In Praise of the Buddha-recollection *Samādhi*" along with Dharma master Huiyuan's own "In Praise of *Samādhi*" with preface. In both

content and form these compositions are exquisite; anyone with a taste for refined writing will recognize their beauty. So sings one who entered the door of sagacity, who knocked on the gate of mysteries. You, sir, and the master must have composed other writings. Why send so few?

In the year Wu (406 C.E.) Master Kumārajīva translated the *Teaching of Vimalakīrti*. I listened with deference to the translation proceedings, and in between sessions I wrote down all of the master's definitive explanations and compiled them into a commentary. Though its form is far from refined, its content rests firmly on the master's authority. I will have the messenger take a copy to the south, in hope that you, sir, may peruse it at your leisure.

156a

The questions you send me are subtle and penetrating, and I feel like that man from Ying, perplexed and humbled.⁸⁸ Now, my thoughts are not at all sophisticated and I am clumsy with the brush; moreover, the ultimate realm is beyond words, and any attempt to express it must fail. Endless, endless, is the flow of words, and in the end nothing is asserted. Nevertheless, I shall venture a reply to your letter in these, my untamed words.

[Answer]: [Part 1]

In your letter you quoted me, "The mind of the sage is quiescent, yet it reaches to the apex of Principle, which is one with nonbeing." You say that I assert that [although the sage] remains within the realm of the nameable, he nevertheless far transcends it, united with the nameless. And you added, "This mysterious doctrine, I confess, continues to elude me."

Now, to see things in this manner you must forget words and have inner realization, you must attain concentration in the square inch of the heart: the "uniqueness" of the sagely mind can never be understood in terms of any "uniqueness" that an ordinary person can reach.

You also wrote [that if the sage's "uniqueness" consists in his] "thorough mastery of numen and his complete activation of the operations of mind, in wondrous comprehension and dark tallying, . . . then the terms 'stillness' and 'illumination' [with which you describe the sage] must be equivalent to 'concentration' and 'wisdom.'" Conversely, if it means that the sagely mind is "essentially self-so, self-enclosed, and self-sufficient, numinously silent in its solitary self-apprehension," then it "has by and large ceased responding to conditions."⁸⁹

To this I reply, “wondrous comprehension and dark tallying” is not equivalent to “concentration and wisdom,” nor is “still numinosity in quiescent self-apprehension” tantamount to the “ceasing of the power of response.” The descriptions differ, but the wondrous function is always one. Where word-traces follow from the self, incongruence ensues, but in the sage there is no discrepancy.

Let me explain. “The mind of the sage illumines silently, yet it reaches to the apex of Principle, which is one with nonbeing.” Now, in that unity all things converge: once it is asserted that the sage has attained this apex-as-one-with-nonbeing, why distinguish between “concentration” and “insight”?

For do the terms “concentration” and “wisdom” not fall outside this unity? If these appellations were to emerge within the unity, their very presence would compromise the unity. But since they emerge outside of it, they have no bearing at all on the [sagely] self.

Furthermore, although the sagely mind is vacuous and sublime, it wondrously transcends all limited objects, responds to all stimuli, penetrates all that it encounters, its arcane mechanism operating mysteriously, its responsiveness inexhaustible—surely it cannot be said to have ceased responding to conditions.

Now, as for mind’s “being”: though one may substantialize being as being, being is not being in and of itself. Thus the sagely mind does not substantialize being. Since it does not substantialize being, [for the sage] being is without being. Since being is without being, it is also without nonbeing. Since it is also without nonbeing, there is for the sage neither “being” nor “nonbeing.” With neither being nor nonbeing, his spirit is vacuous.

How is this so? Being and nonbeing are but the mind’s shadow and echo. Words and images are but mental objects produced by contact with these shadows and echoes. When being and nonbeing are discarded, the mind’s shadows and echoes are no more. When shadows and echoes cease, words and symbols are nowhere to be found. When words and symbols are nowhere to be found, one will have transcended the world of limited things. When one has transcended, then, and only then, will one have attained “thorough mastery of numen and ultimate activation of the operations of mind.” This is what I call “wondrous comprehension.”

This “wondrous comprehension” rests on “the supportless.”

The “supportless” is in quiescence; when quiescence is attained, vacuity permeates all. “Wondrous comprehension” is in reaching the apex of things; when the apex is reached, each thing is responded to. When each thing is responded to, [the sage] accords with each and every event. When vacuity permeates all, his Dao transcends the realm of the nameable. It is because it transcends the realm of the nameable that I call it “nonexistent,” and because it accords with each and every event that I call it “existent.” To thus call it “existent” may seem to imply substantial existence, but this is just forcing a name on it. Could it really be thus? 156b

It is said in a sutra, “Sagely wisdom is without knowing, yet there is nothing it does not know; it is without purposeful activity, yet there is nothing it leaves undone.”⁹⁰

This wordless, markless Dao of quiescent cessation: can it be spoken of in terms of “being” as being or “nonbeing” as nonbeing, “motion” as opposed to “stillness” or “stillness” that nullifies function?

Yet today those who discuss it look to immobilize it in words—they seek corners in the Great Square,⁹¹ they force erudition on mystery and cling to their preconceptions as though they were the final truth. Thus, when they hear that “the sage knows” they think that the sagely mind is a deliberate one; when they hear that the sagely mind “has no knowledge” they imagine it as a vast hollow space. Such assertions of either being or nonbeing are the abode of one-sided views; surely they are not the middle path of nonduality.

There is more. Even though things are individually unique, their nature is always fundamentally one: neither can they be seen as things, nor can their thingness be denied. When things are substantialized as things, names and marks arise in profusion. When thingness is not imputed to things, each is identical with the ultimate.

The sage does not impute thingness to things, nor does he deny the thingness of things. Since he does not impute thingness to things, for him things do not exist. Since neither does he deny the thingness of things, for him things do not nonexistent. Since they do not exist, he does not cling to them; since they do not nonexistent, he does not reject them.

Since he does not reject them, things wondrously abide as one with the ultimate. Since he does not grasp them, names and forms no longer bring each other about. When there are no more names and forms, he cannot be

said to have knowledge. When things wondrously abide as one with the ultimate, he cannot be said to be without knowing. A sutra speaks of this, “As for *prajñā* and the dharmas: [the sagely mind] does not grasp them, nor does it reject them; it has no knowledge, nor is it without knowledge.”⁹² This is a realm beyond the cognition of objects, beyond the deliberate mind. Is it thus not preposterous to try to confine it to either “being” or “nonbeing”?

Allow me to speak now of this “being and nonbeing.” [Ordinary] wisdom arises completely within the realm of marks. Since dharmas are fundamentally markless, how could sagely wisdom be considered [mere] knowledge?

Yet when people speak of “not knowing,” they mean an insentient state, like that of a piece of wood, a rock, or a mere hollow space. Can this “not knowing” accurately describe that numinous mirror, that candle in the dark, that which was shaped before the beginning and from which nothing, however miniscule, can hide?

Now, not knowing arises in relation to knowing; neither not knowing nor knowing can be asserted [of the sagely mind].⁹³ Because there is in it no knowing, I speak of it as “not being”; because there is in it no not knowing, I call it “not nonbeing.”

Thus, even though vacuous, the sagely mind never ceases to illuminate; illuminating, it does not lose its vacuity. Nebulous, unperturbedly still, it is perfectly free from grasping and attachment. How could one claim that when active it is “existent” and when still it is “nonexistent”?

Thus it is said in a sutra, “Ultimate *prajñā* is neither being nor nonbeing, there is in it neither arising nor perishing; it cannot be communicated in words.”⁹⁴

Allow me to explain further. When I say it is not “being,” I merely reject assertions of it as being—I do not affirm it as nonbeing. When I say it is not nonbeing, I merely reject assertions of it as nonbeing—I do not affirm it as not-nonbeing. It is neither existent, nor nonexistent; neither nonexistent, nor not nonexistent.

156c This explains why while Subhūti discoursed on *prajñā* incessantly, he claimed never to have said anything. How could one ever communicate this Dao beyond all words?

I wish that you, sir, attuned as you are to sublime things, will understand it.

[Part 2]

You also said, “It may be advisable to first determine how exactly the sagely mind accords with and responds to things. Is it that it illuminates the markless alone? Or is it that it completely discerns the marked in all its transformations?”

It seems that you assume that “the markless” and “transformations” refer to separate entities. You see “discernment of transformations” as distinct from the “markless,” and “illumination of the markless” as at odds with reaching out to and responding to events. I fear that this obfuscates the truth of “identity [of emptiness] with the ultimate.”

It is said in a sutra, “Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form; form is identical with emptiness, emptiness is identical with form.”⁹⁵

If what you wrote in your letter was true, then when apprehending form and emptiness, one would have to see form with one mind and emptiness with another. Viewing form with one mind, one would see only form as not emptiness. Viewing emptiness with one mind, one would see only emptiness as not form. As a result, emptiness and form would be torn asunder and their common root would remain beyond reach.

Thus when the sutras speak of “not form,” they attribute non-formness to form itself, not merely to that which is already not form. Were they merely attributing non-formness to that which is already not form, this would be like asserting that a vast hollow is in fact vast and hollow: doing so would not advance our understanding. Since, however, they assign non-formness to form itself, they mean that form is not other than non-form, and saying that form is not other than non-form is saying that form and non-form are one and the same.

Thus we know that transformations are one with the markless, and the markless is one with transformations. Yet, this is not the common person’s perception of things—thus the conflicting doctrines.

If one were to examine closely the abstruse scriptures and rest one’s understanding on the original intent of the Sage, could one still insist that the ultimate and the relative require two separate minds, and that emptiness and being need different illuminations?

Thus as [the sagely mind] illuminates the markless, its power of reaching out to and according with phenomena does not diminish. As it observes the changing, it does not violate the principle of marklessness. When it encounters being, it does not contrast it with nonbeing. When it encounters nonbeing, it does not contrast it with being. Therefore it is said, “Unmoved in perfect awakening, he establishes all dharmas.”⁹⁶

It follows that stillness and function do not obstruct each other. How could one claim that there is a discrepancy between change-perceiving knowledge and markless illumination? You argue, heedlessly I fear, that emptiness and being require two minds, and that stillness and agitation involve disparate functions, which leads you to assert that change-perceiving knowledge cannot be described as “not being.”

However, if only you could give up your self-attachment within the realm of things and find the dark mechanism beyond the realm of conditioned events; if you could equalize all existents in one moment of vacuity and understand that this perfect vacuity is not [mere] nonbeing, then you would say that while the Perfected Person never ceases to accord with and respond to things, to move in harmony with them, to ride their movements in accord with their transformations, such a person is never confined to being.

The sagely mind being like this, could there be in it any discrimination? Yet you claim that I “do not demonstrate how it is that the sagely mind is without discrimination.”

You also say that the sagely mind “does not correspond: this is perfect corresponding. That there are no things it does not affirm: . . . this is ultimate affirmation.” These words are quite apt. If you could only affirm without a deliberate mind, and thus affirm in nonaffirming; if you could only correspond with things without a deliberate mind, and thus correspond in noncorresponding! Then you would be able to affirm inexhaustibly while not obstructing nonaffirmation, and to correspond inexhaustibly without compromising noncorresponding.

But beware of bringing substantial affirmation to nonaffirmation, and substantial corresponding to noncorresponding—this is the road to calamity.⁹⁷ Why? If your “ultimate affirmation” can affirm [in this way], and if your “ultimate corresponding” can correspond [in this way], names and marks will take shape, distinctions will arise between the beautiful and the ugly,

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and you will have to struggle through the cycle of rebirth, life after life, without end.⁹⁸

Thus the sage empties his breast and rids himself of discernment and knowing. He resides in the domain of movement and function, yet rests in the realm of non-action. He establishes himself within the nameable, yet dwells in the village beyond words. Quiescent, vacuous, he cannot be captured in shapes or names. Such is the sage.

To say that ultimate affirmation can be affirmed and that ultimate corresponding can be corresponded with is to show a lack of comprehension of the noble purport. I fear that while such “affirmation” and “corresponding” may apply to things, it certainly does not apply to the [sagely mind itself]. How could it?

[Concluding Comment]

When word-traces proliferate, conflicting doctrines thrive. But there is something that words cannot express, and something that traces cannot trace. Therefore, those who are skilled at speaking words seek that which words cannot express. Those skilled at tracing traces seek that which traces cannot trace.

The highest principle is vacuous and mysterious. The moment you try to represent it in the mind you will have missed the target. How much more so when you attempt to express it in words! It will then, I fear, recede even further into the distance.

I hope, O seeker of the truth, that we shall one day meet beyond words.

VI. Nirvana is Unnameable

Memorial to the Lord of Qin, Yao Xing, by Sengzhao

I have heard it said that by attaining the One the heavens become clear, the earth peaceful, and the lords of the land bring order to the world.⁹⁹

Now I stand humbly before you, your Highness, you whose wisdom is profound and resplendent, you whose spirit accords with the Dao, you who are wondrously in line with the center of the wheel,¹⁰⁰ who encompasses all principles, who effortlessly plays with the blade¹⁰¹ amid the myriad affairs of state while tirelessly propagating the Dao; you whose charisma shields beings like a cloak, and whose every written word becomes a standard for them to follow. Truly, four are the greats in the universe—the king is one of them.¹⁰²

Nirvana is the final destination of the three vehicles, the treasury of the universal [Mahayana] sutras. Vast like the ocean, beyond the realm of the visible and audible, tenebrous mystery—it is, I fear, not something that ordinary people can fathom.

Unworthy though I am, thanks to the boundless generosity of the king I was able to lead a tranquil scholarly life in the academy and to study under Master Kumārajīva for over a decade. While the myriad sutras vary in their subjects, each with its own central tenet, we inquired first and foremost about the problem of nirvana.¹⁰³

Yet my inferior intellect hampered my understanding, and though I was blessed with the finest instruction my mind remained shrouded in a thick fog of doubt. However, I worked tirelessly, exerting my meagre intellect, and at last, it seemed, I began to comprehend a little. However, without an authority to lead me in my understanding I dared not decide on my own. Alas, Master Kumārajīva had passed away and I had no one of whom to inquire. Therein was my boundless sorrow.

Yet, as it is said, O King, “Sagely virtue does not dwell alone.” You and Kumārajīva found spiritual kinship, “at first look you recognized the Dao”¹⁰⁴

present in each other, and took great delight in this newfound intimacy.¹⁰⁵ You fanned the transformative wind of his profound teaching and so brought understanding to beings in this time of decline.

Your Highness, some time ago I had the honor of reading your response to a letter from Yao Song,¹⁰⁶ the Marquis of Ancheng, who inquired about the final principle, the unconditioned. You wrote, “The reason beings wander on and on through the cycle of life and death is their attachment, their desires. If the desires in their minds were to stop, they would no longer be confined to life and death. No longer in life and death, their spirits would delve into recondite silence, their virtue would harmonize with the vacuous. This is nirvana. Nirvana being thus, how could it accept any name?”

This, I say, is the quintessence of the subtle teachings, words that reach the apex beyond images. Who else [but you], whose understanding equals that of Mañjuśrī and whose virtue matches that of Maitreya, could thus propagate the mysterious Dao, be the wall and moat for the Dharma, and again unroll the scroll of the great teaching so as to make manifest its once-forgotten recondite purport?¹⁰⁷ Your letter, filled with insight and delight, arrested my attention as I studied it intently, unable to put it down. The superior course it charts out—is it fit for our present age alone? No! It is a bridge across samsara for countless eons to come.

Yet, your sagely doctrine is abstruse, its principle subtle, its words precise, you are a master craftsman for the high monks, a conduit of liberation for erudite gentlemen—those who cling to verbal designations will, I fear, fail to fully comprehend it.

[For this reason,] and following the model of the “Ten Wings”¹⁰⁸ of the *Yijing*, I have undertaken to compose this essay, “Nirvana is Unnameable.” Mere proliferation of embellished words is not my intention; instead, my goal is to open up and propagate the profound purport of your teaching.

The essay consists of nine critical passages and ten responses. I quote broadly from the scriptures for evidence and illustration.

Your Highness, as I reverently take up for discussion your thesis of “namelessness,” I dare not pretend that I have been admitted for an audience with your spirit-mind or mastered the profundities of your teaching. At best, I can attempt a distant intimation of this gate of mystery, in the hope that my words might be of use to fellow students of the Way.

In concluding your letter you wrote, “When various exegetes speak of supreme truth, they all call it ‘vast, vacuous, and still,’ and claim ‘therein is no sage.’ Such views have always struck me as too extreme, too far removed from the aspirations of ordinary people. Moreover, if there was no sage, who would be there to know nothingness?” How true, how true are Your Majesty’s words! Indeed, while this Dao is obscure and unfathomable, the “vital essence resides therein.”¹⁰⁹ If there were no sage, who would be there to wander in harmony with the Dao?

Previously scholars flocked outside the gate of this Dao, disoriented, distressed, ridden with doubt, unable to see correctly. How fortunate they are now! Your lofty instruction has arrived and the doctrine is all at once made clear. Those who stood outside the gate are now admitted into the mysterious chamber and find peace. Indeed, with your teaching the wheel of Dharma turns again in Jambudvīpa,¹¹⁰ and the light of the Dao shines once more, as it will on a thousand generations to come.

In the present essay I discuss in depth nirvana’s nameless nature and put to rest the claim that, in its vastness, it is disengaged from the world.

Your Highness, I humbly present to you the following passages. If my essay succeeds in expressing but a fraction of your sagely teaching, I beg that you order it placed in the records. Should it fail to do so, I implore you to provide your generous corrections.

Sengzhao

(Three readings [for the term “nirvana”] are in use: *niyue*, *nihuan*, and *niepan*. This is because [the term] was translated at different times, reflecting differences [in pronunciation] between the central kingdoms and the peripheries. *Niepan* is the standard reading.)¹¹¹

Essay

1. Main Doctrine

Author: What is spoken of in the sutras as nirvana—“nirvana with remainder” and “nirvana without remainder”—in the idiom of the Qin is called “the unconditioned” or “cessation-passing across.” “The unconditioned” refers to the vacuous silence that defines nirvana, that wondrous freedom from all conditioned things. “Cessation-passing across” points to where “the great

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tribulation has completely ceased” and where the four streams¹¹² have been crossed over and left behind.

Indeed, [nirvana] is the place to which the images in the mirror all return, that recondite abode beyond words. “With remainder” and “without remainder” are mere conventional designations for the divergent modes in which the sage responds to things: reaching out to them and withdrawing from them.

I would like to discuss this in more detail. Nirvana: silent, vacuous, it cannot be captured in forms or names; subtle, markless, it cannot be known with a deliberate mind. Beyond all existents, it rises mysteriously above them; vast like the great void, it abides forever. Follow it, you will not find its traces; approach it, you will not see its face. Its existence is not contained in the six realms of rebirth, its substance is impervious to [time], that strong-armed thief.¹¹³ Vast and nebulous, it seems to effulge in and out of presence. The five types of vision¹¹⁴ cannot see its shape; the two types of hearing¹¹⁵ cannot hear its sound. Dark, inscrutable—could it ever be seen? Could it ever be known?

Nirvana is all-encompassing, omnipresent, yet it rises up solitarily beyond being and nonbeing. Therefore those who try to name it miss its reality; those who try to know it contradict its simplicity. They who say it exists oppose its nature, while those who say it does not exist violate its body.

This is why Śākyamuni shut himself off in a room in Magadha, why Vimalakīrti refused to speak in Vaiśālī, why Subhūti preached without speaking and so made manifest the Dao, and why Indra and the gods rained down flowers [in gratitude for the Dharma] even though they had heard nothing. The sages remained silent; this was because their spirit was driven by the Principle. But did they not preach at all? They preached a sermon on the inexpressible.

It is said in a sutra, “Ultimate liberation is freedom from the realm of nameable things. It is cessation, eternal peace, without beginning or end, neither dark nor bright, neither cold nor hot, deep like space, beyond description.”¹¹⁶ And in a *śāstra*, “In nirvana things are neither existent nor nonexistent; here words have no access, the mind’s activity is extinguished.”¹¹⁷ If we consider their foundation, the sutras and *śāstras* are surely not mere idle talk.

Indeed, under one aspect [nirvana] does not exist—it cannot be called simply existent; under another it is not nonexistent—it cannot be called simply nonexistent. How so? One may try to establish it in the realm of being

but [in nirvana] the five aggregates are forever extinguished. One may search for it in the village of nonbeing but [in nirvana] the recondite numen is never depleted of its power. With the recondite numen never depleted of its power, deep and still, [nirvana] embraces the One. With the five aggregates forever extinguished, the myriad afflictions are no more. With afflictions no more, it is merged through and through with the Dao. Deep and still, embracing the One, even though the spirit is active therein, it produces no karma. Active, yet producing no karma, perfect *karman* abides in it forever. Merged through and through with the Dao, it permeates all and yet remains unchanged. All-pervading yet unchanging, it cannot be considered existent. Perfect *karman* abiding in it forever, it cannot be considered nonexistent.

Thus it follows that considered from within, nirvana is neither existent nor nonexistent; viewed from without, language fails to approach it. Seeing and hearing do not reach it, and the four kinds of emptiness¹¹⁸ obscure it even further. It is tranquil yet awesome, plain yet grand. All nine classes of beings¹¹⁹ return to it, all sages mysteriously congregate in it. This is the realm of the Invisible and Inaudible and the village of great mystery.

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To try to discuss this spiritual Dao by labeling it as either “being” or “non-being,” by marking off its boundaries—is this not preposterous?

2. Analyzing the Essence

Opponent: Now, names do not arise in a vacuum, designations do not arise by themselves. The designations found in the sutras, “nirvana with remainder” and “nirvana without remainder,” must be, respectively, the true name for the return to the root and the wondrous designation for the way of spirit. Allow me to speak of these in turn.

[Nirvana] with Remainder

When the Tathāgata attained great awakening and his Dharma body was established, he bathed in the pure waters of the eight kinds of liberation and found repose in the verdant grove of the seven members of awakening.¹²⁰ After cultivating wholesome deeds for innumerable eons, he at last shook off the dust accumulated over time immemorial. The three illuminations¹²¹ mirrored within him, his spiritual glow illuminated without. Having at first armed himself with the bodhisattva’s resolve,¹²² finally, in universal compassion, he delved into the world of human distress.

Above, he held on to the root of mysteries; below, he reached out to lift the weak and the forlorn. He strode beyond the threefold world; he trod alone into the Great Square. He opened up the eightfold path, a road for the multitude, broad and gentle. He mounted the spirit-steed of the six supernatural powers¹²³ and rode the royal carriage comprised of the five vehicles.¹²⁴ At will he crossed the border between life and death, joining with beings as they wandered [in samsara], his Dao harmonized with all, his virtue reaching everywhere. He plunged to where the mother of transformations gives origin to beings, and fully activated the wondrous function of the mysterious mechanism. He draped the firmament of vacuity beyond all borders, and stoked the fire of *sarvajñatā*¹²⁵ to illumine the darkness. He was ready to erase his traces from the nine abodes of being¹²⁶ and immerse himself forever in great vacuity, yet there remained in him a residue of karmic conditions, traces not yet effaced. This residue lingered on like a cloud-soul, and his sagely wisdom endured.

This is nirvana with remainder.

In the words of scripture, “Myriad afflictions are no more, as though transmuted into pure gold, yet his numinous cognition alone abides.”¹²⁷

[Nirvana] without Remainder

When the Perfected Person (the Buddha) had taught what had to be taught, he extinguished forever his numinous illumination and vanished into the boundless and nonmanifest: this is nirvana without remainder.

Of all forms of disease, none is greater than that of having a body—he extinguished the body and returned to nothingness. Of all forms of torment, none is more severe than that of having a calculating mind—he erased it and submerged in the vacuous.¹²⁸ The mind is taxed by the body; the body is burdened by the intellect. The two pull each other, turning like a wheel on the endless road of misery. It is said in a sutra, “The intellect is poison, the body is shackles. Because of them the abysmal silence of liberation remains beyond reach; they are the cause of all tribulations.”¹²⁹

The Perfected Person turned his body into ashes and extinguished his intellect, he relinquished his form and discarded his reason. Within, he abandoned the stirrings of illumination; without, he put to rest the basis of misery.¹³⁰ Transcendent, perfectly free from all existents; boundless, he merged with the great vacuous. Tranquil, inaudible, bland, non-manifest,

mysteriously gone forever into a destination unknown. When a lamp goes out its flame is extinguished, the oil and the flame gone all at once.

This is nirvana without remainder. In the words of a sutra, “The five aggregates are no more, like a flame extinguished.”¹³¹

[Critique]

This being so, nirvana with remainder can indeed be called “the nameable,” while nirvana without remainder may be called “the nameless.” With non-nameability asserted, partisans of emptiness will be gratified to find sanction for their belief in that all-pervading silence; with nameability affirmed, those concerned about virtue and morals will have the Sage’s actions to look up to as their model. Such are the teachings imparted to us in the authoritative scriptures, the tracks laid down by the sages of old.

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And yet you say, “Considered from within, neither is it existent nor non-existent; viewed from without, language fails to approach it. Seeing and hearing do not reach it, the four kinds of formlessness obscure it even further.”

When lovers of virtue hear this doctrine they will despair; when proponents of emptiness hear it they will be left without a refuge. You describe a state no different from that of someone who, even though his eyes and ears are as obtuse as when he was still in the womb, and for whom the heavenly bodies are obscured beyond the most distant clouds, nevertheless attempts to pronounce on fine distinctions in musical notation and to discuss the diverse appearances [of astral phenomena]. You, sir, know only to banish the Perfected Person outside of being and nonbeing, to sing lofty praises of what is beyond forms and names. Yet all the while your words lead nowhere and block the recondite path, instead of revealing it. Though I ponder on them intently, they do not bring me peace. Are they really the light in the dark chamber, the wondrous sound that restores hearing to the deaf?

3. Essence Established

Author: The terms “with remainder” and “without remainder” are only external appellations for nirvana, conventional designations for the divergent modes of [the sage’s] responding to things. Those who cling to concepts will be bound by concepts; those who are attached to forms and images will be constrained by forms and images. Names reach no further than the definable; forms stop at the square and the round. But there are things that “square” and

“round” cannot capture, and things that concepts cannot convey. How could names express the unnameable, how could forms truly capture the formless?

You are correct to say that the terms “with remainder” and “without remainder” describe the two modes establishing the teaching, through skillful [action] and through quiescence, or the two modes of the Tathāgata’s supreme activity, the manifest and the hidden. But they do not refer to, on the one hand, any dark mysteriously quiescent principle beyond words, or, on the other, to some wondrous workings of the Perfected Person in the center of the circle. Have you never heard of “correct contemplation”? Vimalakīrti said, “The way I see the Buddha is as one with no beginning or end, one who has transcended the six senses, who has left the triple world behind, one who is neither somewhere nor nowhere, who neither acts nor does not act, one who can neither be cognized with consciousness nor known with knowledge, one beyond language, one whose mental operations are extinguished. To view in this manner is called to contemplate correctly; to view otherwise is to not see the Buddha.”¹³² And the *Radiance* says, “The Buddha is like empty space. He neither comes nor goes. He manifests in response to conditions, he dwells in no definite location.”¹³³

As for the sage’s position in the world: silent, vacuous, he does not grasp, he does not contend, he leads without asserting himself, he responds to each stimulus without fail, like an echo in a dark valley or images in a clear mirror. Face him, no one knows from where he came; follow him, no one knows where he goes. He emerges suddenly into being, suddenly he disappears. The more active he is, the more quiescent; the more hidden, the more manifest. From the darkness he emerges, to the darkness he returns; his transformations follow no predefined pattern.

As for these appellations, they are established to indicate the various modes of [sagely] response. When [the sage] manifests traces, we call this “arising”; when he makes them vanish, we call this “cessation.” His “arising” is referred to as nirvana “with remainder,” his “cessation” as nirvana “without remainder.” All along both appellations—“with” and “without remainder”—
158c remain rooted in the nameless. Surely the nameless Dao will take any name?

Thus, the Perfected Person becomes a square when he inhabits a square, a circle when he stops in a circle, a heavenly being when among *devas* (gods), a human being when among humans. To become a *deva* or a human being

in accordance with circumstance is surely not something that *devas* or humans could do. It is precisely because he is neither a *deva* nor a human that he can become one or the other.

As for his transformative rule, he merely responds, he does not act deliberately; he follows the causes, he is not being charitable. Not being charitable, his charity is perfect; not acting deliberately, his action is unsurpassed. He is unsurpassed in his action, yet he goes back to ordinary accomplishments. He is perfect in his charity, yet in the end he returns to the nameless.

It is said in scripture, “The Dao of *bodhi* cannot be measured; it has no top, no bottom, it is expansive, and deep without limit. Great, it envelops Heaven and Earth; miniscule, it penetrates into that which has no openings. Thus it is called ‘Dao.’”¹³⁴ Clearly “being” or “nonbeing” cannot capture the Dao of nirvana.

Yet when the deluded consider [the Buddha’s] extraordinary feats¹³⁵ in the world they assert his existence, and when they reflect on his passing into cessation they assert his nonexistence. Yet how could one, from within this realm of being and nonbeing, from this domain of delusive thought, adequately express his abstruse Dao and adjudicate on the sagely mind?

I say that the Perfected Person is quiescent, imperceptible, without any external form. The hidden and the manifest aspects of his being originate in one source. Although present, he does not “exist”; gone, he does not “nonexist.”

How so? The Buddha said, “There is no birth realm where I am not born, but I am never born. There is no form that I do not take on, but even while embodied I do not have a body.”¹³⁶ This means that though present, he does not “exist.” It is also said in a sutra, “The Bodhisattva entered limitless *samādhi* and saw all the buddhas of the past who had passed into cessation.”¹³⁷ Also, “He entered nirvana, yet did not [enter] *parinirvāṇa*.”¹³⁸ From this we know that, while vanishing, the Tathāgata does not simply nonexist. Not non-existent: while non-existent, he exists. Not existent: while existing, he does not exist. Existing, he is non-existent: therefore “being” cannot be attributed to him. Non-existent, he exists: thus “nonbeing” likewise does not apply.

Hence, we can conclude that nirvana transcends the domain of being and nonbeing, and leaves the path of names and images far behind.

Yet you say that the Sage saw the body as the source of the greatest distress, so he extinguished the body and returned to nothingness. He saw the unawakened

mind as the source of the greatest torment, so he eradicated it to submerge in the vacuous. Is this not a violation of the Sage's spiritual perfection, an injustice to his profound teaching?

It is said in a sutra, "The Dharma body is formless, in responding to things it takes on particular shapes. *Prajñā* has no knowledge, it just illuminates in response to objects."¹³⁹

As [the Sage] hastens to engage the myriad events, his spirit stays unperturbed; as he responds to each of a thousand exigencies, his mind remains unruffled. In movement, he is like wandering clouds; in repose, he is like the valley spirit.¹⁴⁰ Would he tangle his mind in discriminations between "this" and "that," or his emotions in the distinction between "movement" and "repose"?

Since he does not bring a deliberate mind to his movement or stillness, he does not show discrete forms in his coming and going. Since he does not impute a discrete form to his coming and going, there are no shapes that he cannot assume. Since he does not bring a deliberate mind to his movement or stillness, there are no stimuli to which he fails to respond,

159a What I mean is that [the Sage's] "mind" arises in response to the deliberate mind [of beings]; his "forms" emerge in response to the existing forms [in the world]. Since his forms do not emerge from his self, even if he were to tread on molten rock and metal he would not be burned.¹⁴¹ Since his mind arises not from his self, even though he delves into everyday affairs he remains unperturbed.¹⁴² Could the tangles of [conventional distinctions like that between] self and other constrain his self?

Thus the Sage's wisdom embraces all things yet it is never belabored; his bodily form fills the eight directions but this brings him no distress. If you add to him, he will not overflow; if you subtract from him, he will not be lessened.¹⁴³ How could anyone take literally the story that he contracted dysentery on the way [to Kuśinagara], that his life ended under the twin trees, that his spirit ceased in the regal casket, and that his body was cremated on a pyre?¹⁴⁴

Yet all the while the deluded, investigating the traces of his extraordinary responsiveness, cling to the evidence of their eyes and ears. Carpenter's square and ruler in hand, they go about trying to measure the Great Square: they want to find the Perfected Person belabored by knowledge and distressed

by bodily form. “He discarded being to delve into nonbeing,” they claim, and then assign to him corresponding names.

Surely what they do is not picking words of subtlety from the realm beyond speech, or pulling the root of mystery from the vacuous field.

4. [Question:] Examining Transcendence

Opponent: As the Primordial Chaos began to differentiate, the myriad existents divided among the triad [of Heaven, Earth, and humanity]. Then, in the wake of being, nonbeing ineludibly followed. Nonbeing is not self-caused; it depends on being, as is expressed in the saying, “High and low fulfill each other.”¹⁴⁵ This is a universal law, the pinnacle of all laws.

Thus, at the beginning, all that the mother of transformation gave birth to and nurtured, whether manifest or hidden, however strange or uncanny—all that was being. Subsequently, as beings began to transform out of existence, nonbeing ensued—all that was nonbeing. These two realms of being and nonbeing completely encompass all principles.

It is said in scripture that the two dharmas of being and nonbeing subsume the entirety of dharmas.¹⁴⁶ Also spoken of are the three unconditioned dharmas: empty space, extinguishing of afflictions by means of analytic meditation, and extinguishing without analytic meditation. The extinguishing of afflictions by means of analytic meditation is nirvana.¹⁴⁷

Yet you say, “beyond being and nonbeing there is a wondrous Dao, more wondrous yet than either being or nonbeing—nirvana.” I should like to get to the root of this “wondrous Dao.”

If it does exist, then, however wondrous, it cannot be called nonbeing; if, however wondrous, it cannot be called nonbeing, then it must belong to the realm of being. If it does not exist, then, as nonbeing, it is devoid of any distinctions; if, as nonbeing, it is devoid of any distinctions, then it belongs to the realm of nonbeing.

In sum, there cannot be anything that while other than being would not amount to nonbeing, or anything that while other than nonbeing would not amount to being.

Still you say, “beyond being and nonbeing there is a wondrous Dao, neither being nor nonbeing—nirvana.” Your words reach my ears but they do not enter my heart.

5. Above the Realm

Author: Indeed, the categories of being and nonbeing do encapsulate all dharmas, comprise all principles. However, that which they encompass is merely conventional truth. It is said in a sutra, “What is ultimate truth? The Dao of nirvana. What is conventional truth? The dharmas of being and nonbeing.”¹⁴⁸ Let me elucidate.

159b Being is possible only in relation to nonbeing, nonbeing only in relation to being. “Being” comes about by an assertion of nonbeing, and “nonbeing” by a negation of being. In this way, being is born of nonbeing and nonbeing is born of being: what is called “being” is the being of nonbeing, and what is called “nonbeing” is the nonbeing of being. Apart from being there is no nonbeing; apart from nonbeing there is no being. Being and nonbeing depend on each other, just as do high and low, for where there is high, there is low, and where there is low, there must be high.¹⁴⁹ Thus, even though being and nonbeing are distinct, they never escape the domain of being. Out of this [duality] words and images emerge and affirmation and negation arise. Could they capture the recondite apex, represent the spiritual Dao?

Accordingly, the reason I speak of nirvana as “transcendent”—beyond the realm of being and nonbeing—is indeed that the dharmas of being and nonbeing are confined to the realm of the six sense objects, and the realm of the six sense objects is not the abode of nirvana.¹⁵⁰ With “transcendence” I free nirvana from [these confines].

Seekers of the Dao, this subtle recondite path, should vest their minds in that transcendent domain, capture the meaning and discard the words, and realize its essence as neither being nor nonbeing. How could anyone claim that beyond being and nonbeing there exists yet another existent that could be named?

When the sutras speak of the three unconditioned dharmas [it is for this reason]: the endless tangles that bind the multitude are all produced by severe affliction, and of all the types of affliction none is more severe than [attachment to] being. Since no concept is farther from “being” than that of “nonbeing,” [the sutras] use it as an expedient to elucidate [nirvana’s] not being a being. They merely indicate that [nirvana] is not a being, they do not assert that it is a nonbeing.

6. Inquiring into Mystery

Opponent: You yourself say that nirvana exists neither beyond the realm

of being and nonbeing, nor within it. If it does not exist within it, it cannot be found within. If it does not exist beyond it, neither can it be sought beyond. If there is thus nowhere that it can be found, there is altogether no such thing. Yet it cannot be that this Dao simply does not exist. Since it cannot be non-existent, this recondite path can surely be found: the thousand sages followed it and did not return empty-handed. It must exist—yet you insist it is neither beyond the realm of being and nonbeing nor within it. Your assertion is extraordinary. I implore you to elucidate.

7. Wondrous Presence

Author: Now, speech is an expression of names, names arise in response to marks, marks depend on that which can be marked. The markless cannot be named. Without names there can be no speech, without speech there is nothing to hear. It is said in a sutra, “Nirvana is neither a dharma nor a non-dharma. Inaudible and inexpressible, it cannot be known by the [ordinary] mind.”¹⁵¹ How could I dare speak of it? And you, sir, how could you desire to hear about it? Yet Subhūti once said, “If the assembly can receive without a deliberate mind and hear without hearing, I am ready to speak without words.”¹⁵² Now you ask me to speak, so I will.

Vimalakīrti said, “To attain nirvana without leaving the realm of afflictions: this is correct meditation.”¹⁵³ The goddess said, “Enter the buddha field without leaving the realm of Māra.”¹⁵⁴

This is because the mysterious Dao resides in wondrous insight. Wondrous insight is unification with the ultimate. To unite with the ultimate is to view being and nonbeing as equal. In this equalizing vision, self and other are no longer two. Of this it is said, “I am of one root with Heaven and Earth, the myriad things and I are one body.” In this unity between self [and things] there is no longer any [duality between] being and nonbeing, but as long as [things and] self are separate perfect comprehension is impossible. Thus, [nirvana] is neither beyond nor within the realm of being and nonbeing—the Dao resides in the spaces between.¹⁵⁵

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The Perfected Person’s illumination is dim, his mind vacuous, yet there is nothing he does not encompass. He takes into his breast the entire world in the six directions, yet his numinous mirroring is never depleted of its power. In the square inch of the heart he mirrors all existents, yet his spirit remains vacuous. Indeed, he plucks the root of mysteries from the time before all time;

he unites with all movement with an unmoving mind. Tranquil, bland, silent like an abyss, wondrously he tallies with the self-so nature of things.

This is because even though he dwells in being, he is not of it; even though he resides in nonbeing, he is not of it. Not part of nonbeing, he does not substantialize it as nonbeing; not part of being, he does not substantialize it as being. In this way he can be not apart from the world, even as he is not a part of it.

Further, just as dharmas have no marks of being and nonbeing, so does the sage have no knowledge of being and nonbeing. That he has no knowledge of being and nonbeing is because he has no deliberate mentation within. That dharmas have no marks of being and nonbeing is because there are no discrete phenomena without. No discrete phenomena without, no deliberate mentation within; “this” and “that” mutually quiescent, extinguished, things and “I” darkly unified, nebulous, without traces—this is nirvana.

Nirvana being thus, all attempts to measure and define it must fail. How could you seek for it within the realm of being and nonbeing? How could you pursue it without?

8. Questioning the Distinctions

Opponent: You say that nirvana is not bound to the realm of the measurable and definable, hence it transcends the sphere of the six senses; it is neither within nor without, yet here the recondite Dao is singularly present. This is the ultimate Dao, the consummation of Principle and of Nature, wondrously unified, undivided. This may be true.

However, in the *Radiance* it is said, “The three vehicles differ with regard to the unconditioned.”¹⁵⁶ Also, the Buddha said, “In the past, when I was a bodhisattva by the name of Sumedha, I entered nirvana in the presence of Dipamkara Buddha.”¹⁵⁷ Sumedha Bodhisattva first attained the forbearance in the face of the nonarising of dharmas on the seventh stage, and continued to practice into three more stages.

Now, if nirvana is one and undivided, it should not allow for three more stages. If it does allow for three stages, it cannot be the ultimate. An ultimate Dao that allows of gradations? The sutras disagree.¹⁵⁸ Where can we look for a resolution?

9. Distinctions Defended

Author: You are correct, the ultimate Dao in principle is undivided. The

Lotus Sutra says, “The supreme great Dao cannot be twofold, but for the benefit of the indolent, where there is One Vehicle I teach that there are three.”¹⁵⁹ This is just as [in the parable of] the three carts [that the father uses to prompt his children] to leave the burning house. Since all [three vehicles] [get beings] out of life and death, in all cases can we speak of the “unconditioned.” It is just that what is used as the vehicle differs [among the three cases], so we use three distinct names.¹⁶⁰ All the while the final destination is certainly one and the same.

Further, in your question you say, [quoting scripture,] “The three vehicles differ with regard to the unconditioned.” This only means that since beings are of three types, there must be three ways of realizing the unconditioned, not that the unconditioned itself is of three different types.

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Accordingly, it is said in the *Radiance*, “Is nirvana differentiated? It is not. It is just that in the Tathāgata’s case karmic defilements have all been extinguished, while in the *śrāvaka* they have not.”¹⁶¹

Allow me to elucidate this abstruse point with an ordinary example. Suppose a man is cutting a log of wood. If he cuts off a foot-long piece, that foot-long piece is now no more. If he cuts off an inch, an inch [is no more]. The differences in the length [of the remaining material] are determined by how much has been cut off, not by the nonexistence [of the severed pieces] itself. Nirvana is like this. Beings, in their immense plurality of forms, differ in their spiritual potential, in the depth of their wisdom’s mirroring, in their propensity for virtuous conduct. Thus, though they all arrive at the other shore, there are between them differences of level. Could the other shore itself be differentiated? It is only the seekers that differ. Thus, while the scriptures contain different doctrines, what they all lead to is one.

10. Scrutinizing the Difference

Opponent: Since all [the children] leave the burning house, the freedom from suffering [they attain] is [in all cases] one. Since all [beings] leave life-and-death, the unconditioned they reach is [in all cases] one. Yet you say that the other shore is itself not differentiated and that differentiation pertains only to the “selves” of beings.

The “other shore” is the shore of the unconditioned. The “self” is that which realizes the unconditioned. Dare I ask, what is the relation between the “self” and the “other shore”? Are they one? Are they different?

If the self is one with the unconditioned, the unconditioned is also identical with the self, and thus we cannot say that while the unconditioned is not differentiated, there is differentiation that pertains to selves.

If the self is distinct from the unconditioned, then the self is simply not the unconditioned: the unconditioned always remains just the unconditioned, the self always remains just the conditioned, and the passage to their dark union is forever shut.

Therefore, if we see the self and the unconditioned as one, the doctrine of the three [vehicles] cannot hold. If we see them as distinct, the doctrine of the three [vehicles] cannot hold. Why speak of “three vehicles” at all?

11. Differences Unified

Author: If you stay on this side, you are of this side; once you reach the other side, you are of the other side. “If you accord with gain, gain makes you into gain; if you accord with loss, loss makes you into loss.”¹⁶² When the self reaches the unconditioned it is one with the unconditioned. However, although the unconditioned is one, this is no reason to object to the diversity [of the selves].

For example, [imagine that] three birds escape from a net and fly off into a place free from suffering. The freedom they gain is the same for all, yet each bird is different. That the birds differ does not imply that the freedom itself is differentiated; neither does the freedom’s sameness imply that the birds are the same. In short, the birds are one with freedom, freedom is one with the birds, but how could this mean that freedom itself is differentiated? Any differentiation pertains only to the birds.

By analogy, beings in the three vehicles all flee the cage of delusive thought, and they all reach the realm of the unconditioned. Although the unconditioned they reach is the same [for all], the vehicles [that brought them here] vary. That the vehicles vary does not mean that the unconditioned itself is differentiated; neither does the unity of the unconditioned mean a unity among the three vehicles. In short, the selves are one with the unconditioned, the unconditioned is one with the selves, but how could this mean that the unconditioned itself is differentiated? Any differentiation pertains only to the selves.

160b In sum, just as [the birds] differ in how far they fly into the open, even while the freedom [they attain] is the same, likewise, although the unconditioned is

one, the [three types of beings] differ in the depth of dark mirroring they attain. The unconditioned is one with the vehicles; the vehicles are one with the unconditioned. It is not that the selves are distinct from the unconditioned, only that not all realize it completely. Hence the doctrine of three vehicles.

12. Critique of Gradualism

Opponent: The tangles of affliction grow profusely¹⁶³ from the root that is delusion. As soon as delusion is severed, afflictions cease. Beings of the two vehicles attain the wisdom of eradication.¹⁶⁴ Bodhisattvas attain the wisdom of nonarising.¹⁶⁵ In that moment, [in both cases] delusion is completely eliminated, afflictions are wholly uprooted. When afflictions cease, the mind reaches the unconditioned. As the mind attains the unconditioned, the principle of nirvana stands in full view, without any leftover obstructions.

It is said in a sutra, “The various forms of sagely wisdom do not conflict with each other: they all neither depart nor dwell in the world of being and nonbeing, and are all in reality empty.”¹⁶⁶ Also, “The great Dao of the unconditioned is even, equal, not two.”¹⁶⁷

If it is indeed “without two,” then [if beings realize it] they cannot have different minds. If they do not realize it, let us stop the discussion here and now, but if you insist that beings can realize it, then they must all reach fully to the depths of that subtle wondrous Dao. Yet you say that even though they realize it, not all do so completely. I do not understand this.

13. Gradualism Demonstrated

Author: The unconditioned is without two, this much has been established. What has not been demonstrated is whether one can eliminate the afflictions, the accumulated karmic hindrances, suddenly and all at once.

It is said in scripture, “All three arrows hit the target; all three animals succeed in crossing the river.”¹⁶⁸ “Hitting the target” and “crossing the river” are in all cases the same, but there do remain differences of depth, resulting from the varying capacities [of those involved]. Likewise, beings in the three vehicles all cross the river of dependent origination, all attain insight into the “target” of the Four [Noble] Truths; they leave the relative behind, identify with the ultimate, and rise up into the unconditioned. And yet, all the while what is used as the vehicle differs, because the beings possess different capacities for understanding.

Many are the things in this world, but their number has a limit. Yet, even if one were as wise as Śāriputra or as eloquent as Maitrāyaṇīputra,¹⁶⁹ even though one may fully exert one's skill and wit, one will not be able to behold that limit. How much more so with regard to that vacuous dharma, the domain of twofold mystery: it is limitless! Do you insist that one can eradicate all afflictions and so realize it completely in an instant?

Is it not written in the book, "To study is to daily accrue; to practice the Dao is to daily diminish"?¹⁷⁰ "Practice of the Dao" is practice toward the unconditioned. Since progress toward the unconditioned consists in "daily diminishing," how could it be called "sudden attainment"? Diminish diligently, diminish again, until you have reached what can no longer be diminished. The allegory of the firefly and the sun,¹⁷¹ as found in scripture, captures well the [different grades of] wisdom.

14. Against Movement

Opponent: The sutras teach that after [Sumedha] attained the Dharma body and entered the realm of the unconditioned, his mind became unknowable to ordinary knowledge, his form unfathomable through ordinary perception. His body was purged of the aggregates and sense fields, and his mental functions were extinguished. But it is also said that "He continued on to progress through three more stages, accumulating stores of merit."¹⁷² Now, such further progress could only be the result of harboring aspirations, such accumulation of merit can only arise from the activation of desires. Aspirations cause clinging and aversion, desires trigger gain and loss.

[The Bodhisattva's] mind was thus defined by clinging and aversion, his body shaped by gain and loss, yet it is also said that his body was purged of the aggregates and sense fields and his mental functions were extinguished. Two inconsistent descriptions, two conflicting ideas, all directed at one person. A wayward traveler asks for the road, you point to the south and call it the north!¹⁷³

15. Movement and Stillness

Author: A sutra says, "The sage does not act, yet he leaves nothing undone." He does not act: although in motion, he is constantly still. He leaves nothing undone: although quiescent, he is constantly in motion. Still yet constantly in

motion, he never perceives things as one. In motion yet constantly still, he never perceives them as dual. Nondual: the more active he is, the more still. Not one: the more quiescent he is, the more active. Thus [for the sage] activity is identical with non-action, and non-action is identical with activity. While movement and stillness are distinguished [in words], [in reality] they are not distinct.

In the *Dao Practice* it is written, “His mind neither exists nor does it not exist.”¹⁷⁴ To say it does not exist means that it is not a deliberate mind. To say it does not nonexistent means it is not simply a lack of mind. How so? The deliberate mind is [limited to] the manifold beings; a lack of mind is a vast hollow space. The realm of beings is confined by delusive thought; the vast hollow cancels out numinous mirroring. How can you speak of the spiritual Dao, of the sagely mind, as limited by delusive thought and canceling out numinous mirroring?

Sagely mind does not exist, yet it cannot be called nonexistent. It does not nonexistent, yet it cannot be called existent. As it does not exist, within it thought has completely ceased. As it does not nonexistent, it tallies unfailingly with each individual principle. Since it tallies unfailingly with each principle, it greatly amplifies the power of myriad things. Since thought has completely ceased within it, even though it completes actions, they are not of the “I.” Thus [the sage’s] responsiveness to beings is unlimited, yet he never acts; he is still, motionless, though never without action. In the words of a sutra, “He engages his mind in no deliberate activity, yet there is nothing he does not act upon.”¹⁷⁵

Sumedha said, “In the past, eon after eon, I gave away to innumerable people the wealth of my kingdom and my life. But since I gave with a mind marred by delusive thought, it was not true giving. Now I offer to the Buddha these five flowers in full comprehension of the birthlessness [of dharmas]. Only this can be truly called ‘giving.’”¹⁷⁶ Also, after entering the gate of liberation through the realization of emptiness, Empty Practice Bodhisattva said, “My practice continues, this is not final realization.”¹⁷⁷

Hence, the more vacuous the sagely mind, the more expansive his action; he acts constantly but this never obstructs his non-action. Therefore the *Fortunate Eon* describes giving without there being anything to surrender,¹⁷⁸ the *Perfect Realization* praises activity without action,¹⁷⁹ the *Dhyāna Canon* extols objectless compassion;¹⁸⁰ and the *Viśeṣacinti* expounds on knowledgeless knowing.¹⁸¹

Mysterious is the sagely teaching: its formulations are diverse, while the reality behind them is one. It is just that descriptions of the sage's "action" cannot be taken to mean that he engages in deliberate activity, nor can speaking of his "non-action" be taken to mean that he simply does not act. [As is said in scripture,] "the bodhisattva establishes himself in the universal non-discriminating dharma gate of both eradication and noneradication of afflictions":¹⁸² neither does he eradicate activity, nor does he dwell in non-action. This explains our case. Your claim that [I confuse] north and south shows, I fear, that you do not quite understand.

16. Tracing the Source

161a Opponent: If not for beings, there would be no one to ride the three vehicles. Without the three vehicles, the attainment of nirvana would be impossible. It follows that beings must precede nirvana. This in turn means that nirvana must have a beginning in time—and whatever has a beginning must also have an end.

Yet a sutra says, "Nirvana has no beginning, no end, it is peaceful, akin to empty space."¹⁸³ If nirvana exists previously, then it cannot be something to be attained later, after a period of study.

17. The Perennial

Author: The Perfected Person is empty, devoid of all images, yet it is through his "self" that all things are established, and it is through his according with things that his own identity is perfected. Such is the Sage, none other.

How so? Without the Principle sagacity is impossible; without sagacity the Principle cannot be. When through [insight into] Principle one has become a sage, the sage is no different from Principle.¹⁸⁴

Thus, when the Ruler of Gods asked, "Where should one seek *prajñā*?", Subhūti answered, "One should not seek *prajñā* within form, nor should one seek it outside of form."¹⁸⁵ Elsewhere it is said, "To see dependent origination is to see the Dharma; to see the Dharma is to see the Buddha."¹⁸⁶ These passages confirm that [for the Sage] things and self are not distinct.

So the Perfected Person collects the mysterious mechanism [of his mind] in what is prior to all manifestation, and vests its recondite workings among things already transformed. He gathers together all [things present in the] six directions, and reflects them in the mirror of his mind. He unifies past

and future, thus establishing his body. Past and present interpenetrate, beginning and end are one. In perfect mastery of both root and branches, he never imputes any duality. Vast, expansive, perfectly equal—this is nirvana.

It is said in a sutra, “Attain nirvana without discarding dharmas.”¹⁸⁷ And “Dharmas being boundless, *bodhi* is boundless.”¹⁸⁸ These passages show that the way to nirvana leads through wondrous tallying; the gist of wondrous tallying is in recondite unity. Things are not distinct from the self, the self is not distinct from things; things and self mysteriously converge and together they return to the limitless. Seek its front, you will not find it; seek its back, it is not there. Ideas of “beginning” or “end” have no place here. The goddess said, “How much time has elapsed since the Elder attained liberation?”¹⁸⁹

18. Investigating Attainment

Opponent: It is said in scripture that the nature of sentient beings is defined entirely by the five aggregates.¹⁹⁰ It is also said that the attainment of nirvana is the eradication of the five aggregates, like extinguishing a lamp.

So [with the attainment of nirvana] the nature of beings is completely eradicated along with the five aggregates, the Dao of nirvana is established solitarily beyond the triple world of being. These two domains are separated by a chasm so vast that it should be impossible for beings to attain nirvana.

If you do insist that such attainment is possible, this can only be if the nature of beings is not defined by the five aggregates. Or, if it is so defined, then the five aggregates cannot be completely eradicated, for if they were completely eradicated who would be present to attain nirvana?

19. Attainment in Mystery

Author: Now, the ultimate arises from detachment; the relative is born of attachment. Attachment leads to “something attained”; detachment opens up to the nameless. Thus, one who models himself after the ultimate will unite with the ultimate; one who follows the limited will end up defined by the limited. You, sir, take attachment as “something attained,” and so you seek [for nirvana] among attainable things. I view attainment as “nothing attained” and so I speak of nirvana as attainable within nonattainment.

161b

When setting out an argument it is necessary to first establish its basic premise. If we want to speak of nirvana we need not do so from outside of it.

Yet if we were to try to speak of nirvana from within it, would there be any being left outside of nirvana wishing to attain it?

How is this so? Nirvana wondrously stops all conventional calculation, it fuses the Two Principles,¹⁹¹ it purges the myriad existents, it equalizes gods and humans, and it unifies the one and the many. Look within it and you will see no “self”; listen inwardly and you will hear no “me.” It is neither something attained nor something non-attained.

It is said in scripture that nirvana is neither identical with nor distinct from beings.¹⁹² Vimalakīrti said, “If Maitreya is able to attain liberation, all beings should also be able to attain it. Why? Because by nature all beings are always already in cessation, they do not need to attain cessation anew.”¹⁹³ This shows that cessation is attained in the cessationless.

Also, beings are not “beings,” so who could be the attainer? Nirvana is not “nirvana,” so what could be attained? The *Radiance* says, “Is *bodhi* attained from being?’ ‘No.’ ‘Is it attained from nonbeing?’ ‘No.’ ‘Is it attained from both being an nonbeing?’ ‘No.’ ‘Is it attained from neither being nor nonbeing?’ ‘No.’ ‘So is it not attained at all?’ ‘Not true. How so? To be without anything attained is attainment; one attains being without anything attained.’¹⁹⁴ Since to be without anything attained is attainment, could there be anyone unable to attain nirvana?

The recondite Dao resides in the transcendent realm: it is attained in not attaining. Wondrous wisdom is present beyond things: it is known in not knowing. The Great Image is concealed in the shapeless: it is seen in not seeing. The Great Sound¹⁹⁵ is hidden in the soundless: it is heard in not hearing.

Thus nirvana embraces all eternity, guides beings from all directions, cures them of their poison, it is “loosely woven, yet nothing slips by,”¹⁹⁶ vast, expansive like the ocean, there is nothing that does not proceed from it. The *brahmacārin* said, “I have heard that the Buddha’s teaching is vast, deep, boundless like the ocean, not a single being is not perfected by it, and not a single being is not delivered by it.”¹⁹⁷

With this, now, the roads of the three vehicles stand open, the ultimate and the relative are demarcated, the Dao of the sages is secured, and the unnameability of nirvana is demonstrated.¹⁹⁸

Notes

- ¹ T.221:32c19–20.
- ² Cf. *Laozi* 35.
- ³ T.224:475a19–21.
- ⁴ The commentators Yuankang and Wencai suggest that this refers to the general idea of the “Guan qulai pin” section of T.1564:3c6ff, which speaks of the interdependence and thus “emptiness” of the place from which movement proceeds, of the goer, and of going itself.
- ⁵ An allusion to a story from *Zhuangzi* 21.3. Confucius speaks to his disciple Yan Hui about the study of the Dao, “I have taught you all my life and now, as we stand shoulder to shoulder, you have forgotten everything: is this not sad?” Sengzhao departs from the wording and meaning of the original story, clearly influenced by the Guo Xiang commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, and transforms the passage into a reflection on the topic of time.
- ⁶ Likely a reference to Vairambha, the hurricane that occurs at the end of an eon.
- ⁷ Mount Meru, which stands at the center of our world.
- ⁸ Image from *Zhuangzi* 1.1, representing fickle springtime breezes.
- ⁹ Here the term “Sage” is traditionally interpreted as referring either to Confucius from *Lunyu* 9.17; or by Yuankang, controversially, to the Buddha from the *Da banniepan jing* (T.374:398c26).
- ¹⁰ T.630:451c25–26.
- ¹¹ T.1509:428a12–13.
- ¹² An allusion to an allegory from *Zhuangzi* 6.2. To keep his boat safe from thieves a man hides it in a gully inside a mountain, which in turn is hidden in the middle of marshland. A strong man sneaks up in the middle of the night, heaves the boat onto his back, and carries it off. Traditionally this has been read as expressing the vanity of our efforts to counter the transience of things. (*Zhuangzi*’s final injunction is to “hide the world in the world, so that nothing can be lost.”) The second image, of Confucius standing on the bank of the river, comes from *Lunyu* 9.17: “Standing by a river, Confucius sighed and said, ‘The passing away of things is like this. Day and night it never stops.’” Both images are used here as exemplifications of impermanence or, in the language of the essay, of the “shifting” of things.
- ¹³ See note 12.
- ¹⁴ *Laozi* 78.

- ¹⁵ The image of piling up a mound comes from *Lunyu* 9.19, where it is used as a metaphor for the incremental process of learning or self-cultivation: “It is like piling up a mound: if I stop just one basketful of dirt short of completing the task, I have stopped completely; it is also like leveling ground: even if I have dumped just one basketful of dirt, this is a step forward and I am making progress.” The *locus classicus* for “A journey of a thousand miles starts with one step” is *Laozi* 64.
- ¹⁶ Source unknown. There are resonances with *Yijing*, Xi Ci, I:4.
- ¹⁷ According to the commentator Yuankang, this is an allusion to a passage from *Zhuangzi* 2.12: “People busy about in agitation, the sage is slow and witless—he joins the ten thousand years into a singular purity. All things are for him in this way, he gathers them all into one.”
- ¹⁸ Historical evidence regarding these theories is scant and their polemical presentation in this text is descriptively unreliable. Traditionally six (or, in some sources, seven) theories were identified. In this text three are brought into focus. The theory of “original nothingness” is associated variously with the exegetes Daoqian (286–374 C.E.) or Dao’an (312 or 314–385 C.E.). *Śūnyatā* or *tathatā* is identified with the pre-Buddhist Chinese concept of *wu* (nothingness) as the primordial origin of all things. The theory of “no-mind” is usually linked with Zhi Mindu (fl. ca. 326 C.E.). It is sometimes thought of as a subjectivist-psychological response to the more objectivistic orientation of “original nothingness.” “Emptiness as form” is usually associated with Zhi Daolin (known also as Zhi Dun; 314–366 C.E.). The name of this theory is an allusion to the formula “form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” representative of much of the Prajñā-pāramitā literature immensely popular in Sengzhao’s period. The meager available evidence suggests that Zhi Dun’s conception of emptiness was largely similar to Sengzhao’s as formulated in this chapter. Sengzhao, however, portrays him as a believer in a world of composite and thus “empty” dharmas on the one hand, and indivisible and thus “non-empty” dharmas on the other, a position he denounces.
- ¹⁹ Literally, “beyond ‘the doctrine of names.’” The latter is a general reference to classical Chinese theories of language, which investigate the relationship between names (*ming*) and things or actualities (*shi*), often in a normative moral or political context. Here, more specifically, it is a polemical term for realist conceptions of language.
- ²⁰ T.1509:105a5–11?
- ²¹ T.1564:7c16–17? (Suggested by Yuankang.)
- ²² An allusion to a story from *Zhuangzi* 3.2. Cook Ding is so skilled at cutting up an ox that his cleaver needs no sharpening; after seventeen years of use it is still as sharp as if just taken off the whetstone. This is in contrast to the mediocre butcher who does not skilfully carve up an oxen but crudely “hacks” it apart.
- ²³ T.221:36c19–23.
- ²⁴ T.223:378c10–14.

- ²⁵ T.475:537c15. The “youth” is Ratnakāra, leader of a group of young nobles who, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, approach the Buddha and ask him how to purify the buddha field.
- ²⁶ T.656:109a1.
- ²⁷ T.224:425c27.
- ²⁸ Likely a reference to T.1564:33b3–7.
- ²⁹ Likely a reference to the verses in T.1509:105a5–10.
- ³⁰ Likely a summary of T.221:40a26–b10.
- ³¹ The source and scope of this reference are obscure. The content is reminiscent of the chapters “Guan wuyin pin” and “Guan ku pin.”
- ³² Likely a reference to T.630:454c2.
- ³³ The “master from Yuanlin Grove” is a reference to Zhuangzi. The “metaphors of finger and horse” are discussed in *Zhuangzi* 2.
- ³⁴ A reference to the *Radiance*; see T.221:140c15.
- ³⁵ Mahayana. This paragraph traces, in hagiographic mode, the narrative of Kumārajīva’s life.
- ³⁶ An allusion to *Laozi* 14.
- ³⁷ Traditionally regarded as Śākyamuni Buddha’s birthplace.
- ³⁸ The Later Liang kingdom (386–403 C.E.). The ruler Lü Long, under increasing pressure from the neighboring Northern Liang and Southern Liang territories, suffered a crucial defeat at the hands of the Later Qin general Yao Shuode in 401 C.E. The Later Qin forces besieged the Liang power base at Guzang, where Kumārajīva had been held since 385. To end the siege Lü Long, on the advice of his younger brother Lü Chao, agreed to offer nominal submission to the Later Qin. He sent to the Later Qin capital of Chang’an a number of his family members and prominent clans as hostages. Kumārajīva seems to have been included in this group, and he reached Chang’an in February of 402. Lü Long eventually submitted to the Later Qin formally in 403 C.E. and moved from Guzang to Chang’an.
- ³⁹ The commentators Yuankang and Wencai give a pious twist to the story so as to make it seem that the goal of Yao Shuode’s military mission to Guzang was strictly to fetch Kumārajīva and bring him to Chang’an.
- ⁴⁰ An allusion to a prophesy in the *Radiance*, according to which after the passing of the Buddha the Dharma would spread first to the south, then to the west, and finally to the north.
- ⁴¹ An allusion to *Zhuangzi* 22.7.
- ⁴² T.221:97c7–9; T.223:354a12–13.

- ⁴³ Cf. T. 224:428a17ff.
- ⁴⁴ “Markless knowing” and “knowledgeless illumination” can be understood as “understanding,” “insight.”
- ⁴⁵ Cf. T.586:39b11.
- ⁴⁶ T.474:519c21; cf. also T.475:537c18. See also note 25.
- ⁴⁷ T.221:140c15. See also note 32.
- ⁴⁸ The “Two Principles” are *yin* and *yang*, a pair of complementary opposites, such as light and dark, male and female, etc., whose configurations form all phenomena.
- ⁴⁹ An allusion to *Laozi* 5: “Heaven and Earth are not humane: they take the myriad things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane: he takes the common people as straw dogs.”
- ⁵⁰ Cf. T.223:262c24–25.
- ⁵¹ This is a polemic against positive valuations of the “reversal of intuition”—stopping or overturning ordinary ways of perceiving—as the primary mode of accessing the Dao. *Prajñā* is not accessed in this manner.
- ⁵² The “three poisons” are desire (or greed), anger (or hatred), and ignorance (or delusion).
- ⁵³ The four inverted views are seeing the impermanent as permanent, seeing non-self as self, seeing suffering as joy, and seeing the impure as pure.
- ⁵⁴ “Horse” and “hare” are metaphors for different degrees of understanding. The hare, which crosses the river of samsara by swimming frantically on the surface, represents the *śrāvaka* (hearer). The horse reaches deeper into the water with his hooves—this is the *pratyekabuddha* (solitary enlightened one). A third animal is often mentioned, the elephant, whose strength allows him to reach the very bottom. The elephant is the bodhisattva. Cf. T.186:488b20–26; T.1547:445c9–114. The allegory of the three animals crossing the river appears in “Nirvana is Unnameable,” section 13, p. 118.
- ⁵⁵ Source unknown.
- ⁵⁶ Source uncertain; Wencai refers to T.1509:190c20.
- ⁵⁷ T.223:326b9–10. Note that this is not from the *Radiance*.
- ⁵⁸ “Ultimate reality” can be understood as “ultimate truth.” Here Sengzhao seems to be trying to distinguish between two types of objects, or two types of “conditions” of knowing: ordinary conditioned objects, and unconditioned “ultimate” truth. Since *prajñā* perceives “ultimate truth,” it is not a kind of knowledge, since the latter by definition is restricted to conditioned things.
- ⁵⁹ This passage is not a literal quotation but a general paraphrase of a central idea of the *Middle Way Treatise* (T.1564). It has been speculated that if this treatise was published

in 409 C.E. and Sengzhao's essay was brought to Lushan in 408, Sengzhao must have seen a draft version of the translation of the *Middle Way Treatise* before publication of his completed essay.

- ⁶⁰ Possibly a reference to T.1564:33b3–7 and the verse at 33b13. Remarkably, Sengzhao seems to assume that there is such a thing as “ultimate truth” beyond conditioned dharmas, while the *Middle Way Treatise* consistently denies the existence of such a beyond, insisting that “the ultimate” is the ultimate truth about the conditioned, i.e., its emptiness.
- ⁶¹ Cf. T.221:53b18–22, 12c4–12.
- ⁶² Source unknown.
- ⁶³ An allusion to *Laozi* 4, 56.
- ⁶⁴ The five realms of rebirth are the realms of hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, and gods.
- ⁶⁵ Cf. T.223:382c23–24.
- ⁶⁶ An allusion to a passage from *Zhuangzi* 8.1, where such actions are portrayed as examples of an unnaturalness that violates the Dao.
- ⁶⁷ T.223:390a4.
- ⁶⁸ T.223:384c23–24.
- ⁶⁹ An allusion to *Laozi* 1.
- ⁷⁰ Cf. T.630:452b29.
- ⁷¹ The exchanges between Chang'an in the north and Lushan in the south, where Liu Yimin was stationed, were compromised as a consequence of the political and military turmoil that eventually led to the demise of the Later Qin in the north (417 C.E.) and the establishment of the Liu Song regime in the south (420 C.E.). Sengzhao sent his answer to Liu Yimin through a messenger, but Liu passed away before receiving it.
- ⁷² Huiyuan (334–416 C.E.) was an influential Buddhist monk who established the important Buddhist community at Lushan. In 402 he assembled one hundred and twenty-three followers in front of an image of Amitābha Buddha to vow to be reborn in his “pure land” Sukhāvātī, an event traditionally considered to mark the beginning of the Pure Land tradition. One of the most erudite Buddhist thinkers of his age, Huiyuan was renowned, among other things, for his tracts stipulating the proper relationship between the sangha and the state, and for his sophisticated correspondence with Kumārajīva, which has survived.
- ⁷³ A classical description of the ideal gentleman, with origins in the *Yijing*, Qian.
- ⁷⁴ Daosheng (355–434 C.E.) was active at Lushan from 397 to 405, when he joined Kumārajīva's community in Chang'an. There he took part in the translation activities,

and began writing his many texts in various genres, of which very few survive, unfortunately. In 408 he returned to Lushan, carrying Sengzhao's essay "*Prajñā* without Knowing." He traveled extensively and befriended the literatus Xie Lingyun. He was a proponent of an original doctrine of subitism as well as of the doctrine that buddhahood is inherent in all sentient beings, both of which became the object of much debate in the late 420s.

- ⁷⁵ The commentator Yuankang opines that this "Principle" refers to emptiness. However, the term could equally well be read in the plural, and with a lower case "p" ("principles"), in the sense that all individual things are defined by their own character, or principle. Liu Yimin was apparently troubled by what he saw as a logical contradiction in Sengzhao's description of the sagely mind: it is perfectly quiescent, yet it reaches the "apex" of reality.
- ⁷⁶ An allusion to *Yijing*, Xi Ci, I: 10. Alternatively, an allusion to *Zhuangzi* 13.9, where a wheelwright speaks to Prince Huan about the art of making wheels, and argues that the secret to making wheels is in working neither too leisurely, nor too hurriedly.
- ⁷⁷ Here Liu Yimin presents Sengzhao with two possible readings of the latter's exposition of "the power of sagely wisdom": *prajñā* can either be a form of extraordinarily powerful cognition accessed by a cessation of ordinary understanding, or it can be a solitary withdrawal into a type of spiritual self-absorption. In his response Sengzhao tries to complicate Liu's question.
- ⁷⁸ An allusion to T.474:525c3.
- ⁷⁹ The "square inch of the heart" is a literary expression for the human heart or mind.
- ⁸⁰ An allusion to a poem by Ruan Ji (210–263 C.E.), one of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove; see note 81.
- ⁸¹ "Bamboo Grove" alludes to a social, artistic, and philosophical trend of the late third century, traditionally known as the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, which was associated with the ideal of the poet-hermit seeking artistically elevated seclusion during times of political turmoil.
- ⁸² An allusion to *Laozi* 10, 22. "The One" (and "guarding" it) are important images in Daoist cosmological reflection. The One mediates between the origin of things in nonbeing and the world of being.
- ⁸³ Zhi Faling. He was a disciple of Huiyuan, on whose behest he traveled to Khotan in 392 C.E. and brought back a number of sutra texts, including the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* (*Flower Ornament Sutra*), later translated in 421 C.E. under Buddhahadra as the sixty-fascicle *Huayan jing* (T. 278).
- ⁸⁴ The "two masters" referred to here are most likely *Dharmayaśas and *Dharmagupta (see also note 87). *Vibhāṣā* is an abbreviation for a genre of Mainstream scholastic writing, most famously represented by the *Mahāvibhāṣā-sāstra*, a key compendium

of the Sarvāstivāda school from Kashmir translated under Saṃghadeva (var. Saṃghabhūti) in Chang'an in 383 C.E.

- ⁸⁵ Buddhahadra. He arrived in Chang'an around 406–408 C.E. and enjoyed great renown for his expertise on monastic rules and in *dhyāna*. Initially on good terms with Kumārajīva, according to tradition he was eventually expelled from the Chang'an community due to an altercation with its elders on matters of discipline (he was reportably critical of the harem kept by Kumārajīva). He moved to Lushan and joined Huiyuan's congregation, and died in the southern capital Jiankang in 429 C.E. Buddhahadra is credited with a number of important translations.
- ⁸⁶ Buddhayaśas. He was the teacher of Kumārajīva in Kashmir before Kumārajīva's "conversion" to Mahayana. Here "Tripiṭaka" refers to Mainstream (non-Mahayana) texts. In 408 C.E., at Kumārajīva's invitation, he went to Chang'an and became involved in the translation academy. Among other texts, Buddhayaśas oversaw the translation of the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* (T. 1428).
- ⁸⁷ The *Shelifu apitan lun* (Skt. *Śāriputra-abhidharma-śāstra*, T. 1548). Translated by *Dharmayaśas and *Dharmagupta 407–415 C.E.
- ⁸⁸ An allusion to a story from *Zhuangzi* 24.6. A "man from Ying" asks an artisan to remove—with an axe, no less!—a speck of mud from the tip of his nose. The artisan swings the axe "with such dexterity that it stirs up a wind" and removes the speck of mud, as the man from Ying stands there without flinching, and unharmed.
- ⁸⁹ Concentration and wisdom are two of the six *pāramitās*, or perfections. Liu Yimin suggests that Sengzhao's "*prajñā*," defined by the latter as still yet active, should be thought of in terms of the duality between concentration (meditation) and the wisdom to which it leads. Liu seems to assume that if the sage's insight is "uniquely penetrating," as Sengzhao's asserts, it is because the sage has modified, through the practice of concentration, his ordinary mode of cognition and has developed another type of cognition, or a cognition that gives him access to some other content.
- ⁹⁰ Cf. T.223:292c15–17, 302a19–21, 374b4–b8.
- ⁹¹ An allusion to *Laozi* 41.
- ⁹² Cf. T.221:6c2–7.
- ⁹³ I follow the variant recension in Huida's *Zhaolun shu*, X.866:71a13.
- ⁹⁴ Source uncertain; Yuankang suggests this refers to the general sense of T. 221.
- ⁹⁵ Cf. T.223:223a13–14.
- ⁹⁶ See also notes 32 and 45.
- ⁹⁷ See analysis in Yuankang's commentary, T.1859:189a24ff.
- ⁹⁸ Here Sengzhao critiques the view, expressed earlier by Liu Yimin, that the sagely

mind's "ultimate affirmation and corresponding" is merely a special type of cognition, extraordinary in its content, a "wisdom" attained through "concentration."

- ⁹⁹ This lengthy argument is a response to Liu Yimin's question from the final section of his letter about what specifically makes the sagely mind different from the mind of an ordinary person.
- ¹⁰⁰ An allusion to *Zhuangzi* 2.5.
- ¹⁰¹ An allusion to *Zhuangzi* 3.2.
- ¹⁰² An allusion to *Laozi* 25.
- ¹⁰³ This reference to nirvana has frequently been read as invoking the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra*. Given that this sutra was translated into Chinese only after Sengzhao's death (two translations were produced, one between 416–418 C.E. under Buddhahadra, and one begun in 421 under Dharmakṣema), commentators and scholars have speculated that this essay could only have been written after 416, and therefore its attribution to Sengzhao is at least in part spurious. Alternatively, it has been suggested that Sengzhao must have seen, and somehow understood, the Sanskrit original of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra* before publication of the first translation, but recent scholarship has weakened the force of such speculation. As the commentator Yuankang observes, the essay speaks only of the idea of nirvana and does not reference the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra* itself.
- ¹⁰⁴ An allusion to *Analects* 4.25.
- ¹⁰⁵ An allusion to story in *Zhuangzi* 21.2, which describes a meeting of two men whose minds are united in the Dao.
- ¹⁰⁶ Yao Song was the younger brother of the king, Yao Xing. Correspondence between the two on topics of Buddhist doctrine has been preserved in the *Guang hongming ji*, T.2103:228a–230a.
- ¹⁰⁷ Mañjuśrī and Maitreya are bodhisattvas who embody, respectively, wisdom and compassion.
- ¹⁰⁸ The "Ten Wings" is a set of early commentaries on the *Yijing*, traditionally, though spuriously, attributed to Confucius.
- ¹⁰⁹ An allusion to *Laozi* 21.
- ¹¹⁰ In Buddhist cosmology, Jambudvīpa is the southern of the four continents encircling Mount Meru, and is here a shorthand reference to our world.
- ¹¹¹ This parenthetical note was most likely added later by the editors of Sengzhao's *Essays*.
- ¹¹² The "four streams" of samsara: desire, ignorance, existence, and false views.
- ¹¹³ See note 13.

- ¹¹⁴ The five types of vision are the physical organ of the eyes, the eye of the gods, the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, and the buddha eye.
- ¹¹⁵ The two types of hearing are hearing with the physical organ of the human ear and the ear of the gods.
- ¹¹⁶ Source uncertain. Yuankang suggests the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra*, but this is doubtful.
- ¹¹⁷ Source uncertain. Yuankang sees this as reflecting the general meaning of the *Zhonglun*, or again of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra*.
- ¹¹⁸ The four kinds of emptiness, or four kinds of formlessness, associated with the four formless concentrations, i.e., limitless space, limitless consciousness, nothingness, and neither consciousness nor nonconsciousness.
- ¹¹⁹ In Mahayana sutras, “nine classes of beings” is a classification scheme grouping living beings in three main categories with three subcategories each, on the basis of the nature of their karmic endowment.
- ¹²⁰ “Eight factors of liberation” and “seven members of awakening” are two lists of elements of Buddhist practice conducive to liberation. Specific contents of the lists vary.
- ¹²¹ The “three illuminations” are divine vision, knowledge of previous lifetimes, and extinction of contamination.
- ¹²² “Resolve” refers to a bodhisattva’s vow to save all beings.
- ¹²³ The six supernatural powers are unhindered physical power, divine vision, divine hearing, awareness of the minds of others, cognizance of former lifetimes, and eradication of the afflictions.
- ¹²⁴ The five vehicles are five types of religious practice and their corresponding destinations or realms of rebirth as humans, gods, *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and buddhas.
- ¹²⁵ *Sarvajñatā* literally means “all-knowledge,” omniscience.
- ¹²⁶ The nine abodes of being span from the upper reaches of the realm of desire (Skt. *kāmadhātu*) below to the four *dhyānas* above.
- ¹²⁷ Source unknown.
- ¹²⁸ An allusion to *Laozi* 13.
- ¹²⁹ Source unknown.
- ¹³⁰ The “basis of misery” refers here to the body.
- ¹³¹ Source uncertain. The metaphor of extinguishing a lamp’s flame is common in both Mainstream and Mahayana texts.
- ¹³² Cf. T.475:555a1–24.

- ¹³³ Cf. T.221:145a12ff.
- ¹³⁴ Commentators trace this quotation to either the *Xiuxing daodi jing* (T. 606), Dharmarakṣa's translation of Saṃgharakṣa's **Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra*; or to the *Taizi ruiying benqi jing* (T.185:478c21–22), a third-century translation of a “biography” of the Buddha's previous lives.
- ¹³⁵ I.e., the Buddha's activities during his forty-five-year teaching career.
- ¹³⁶ Cf. T.221:123b8–9; T.1775:353a2–3.
- ¹³⁷ Source unknown; Wencai points to the *Huayan jing* (T. 278), but this is anachronistic.
- ¹³⁸ Source unknown.
- ¹³⁹ The commentator Hanshan Deqing refers to the general contents of chapter 32 of the *Huayan jing* (T.278:599b21ff).
- ¹⁴⁰ An allusion to *Laozi* 6.
- ¹⁴¹ An allusion to the description in *Zhuangzi* 1.5 of the transcendent beings that inhabit Mount Guye.
- ¹⁴² Cf. *Laozi* 6.
- ¹⁴³ An allusion to *Zhuangzi* 22.5.
- ¹⁴⁴ This passage gives the traditional account of Śākyamuni Buddha's last days and death.
- ¹⁴⁵ Cf. *Laozi* 2.
- ¹⁴⁶ Cf. T.1509:289b1–3.
- ¹⁴⁷ Extinguishing of afflictions by means of analytic meditation leads to a complete non-being of afflictions (for a standard exposition of this term, see T.1509:743a1–2). The opponent wants to define nirvana as a complete nonbeing, an idea rejected by Sengzhao.
- ¹⁴⁸ Source unclear; cf. T.223:378c9ff.
- ¹⁴⁹ Cf. *Laozi* 2.
- ¹⁵⁰ The six sense objects are the objects of the five physical senses (eye, ears, nose, tongue, and body) and of the mind.
- ¹⁵¹ Despite the traditional tracing of this passage to the *Da banniepan jing*, it more likely reflects the content of chapter 12 of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (T. 475).
- ¹⁵² Perhaps a reference to T.223:275b20ff.
- ¹⁵³ T.475:539c25.
- ¹⁵⁴ Source uncertain. Commentators suggest T.475:548a16–18 or T.339:471a.

- ¹⁵⁵ Possibly an allusion to a story from *Zhuangzi* 12.9, which conveys the idea that the Dao cannot be expressed in words and can be only learned through practice.
- ¹⁵⁶ T.221:114b10. Directly after the statement quoted here, in which the Buddha asserts that the three groups differ with regard to “the unconditioned,” the Buddha’s interlocutor Subhūti asks if this is really the case. The Buddha responds in the negative and says that the distinction between the three groups is merely a matter of a naming convention.
- ¹⁵⁷ This is the traditional presentation of Śākyamuni Buddha’s previous lives. Eons before his embodiment as Śākyamuni he was a brahman by the name of Sumedha (Sengzhao uses the alternative Chinese name, Rutong, for Mānava), who received from Dīpaṃkara, the buddha of that eon, the prediction that he too would one day become a buddha. Cf. T.420:932b.
- ¹⁵⁸ The phrase “the sutras disagree” is ambiguous, and I leave it as such. Yuankang takes it to mean that the content or meaning of the scriptures differs (T.1859:197c2); Wencai reads it as suggesting that the scriptural evidence conflicts with the position of the present author (X.970:212a20).
- ¹⁵⁹ Cf. T.262:26a20–22.
- ¹⁶⁰ The idea here is that according to standard presentations, especially in the mature texts of the Prajñāpāramitā tradition, followers of all three vehicles of *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and bodhisattvas all attain insight into emptiness at the seventh stage of the Buddhist path, but while *śrāvakas* stop there, bodhisattvas continue to practice until the tenth stage and then ideally attain buddhahood after that. Here the “author” argues that the emptiness realized by all categories of practitioners is the same for all, and any differences between them that do exist pertain only to their differing methods of practice. The standard view, echoed also by commentators, is that *śrāvakas* practice based on the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, *pratyekabuddhas* rely on the teaching of dependent origination (Skt. *pratīyasamutpāda*), while bodhisattvas use the six *pāramitās* as their guide.
- ¹⁶¹ T.221:114a30–b3; T.223:275c25ff. The passage addresses a point crucial to the problem of subitism and gradualism, namely, how is it possible that while beings in all three vehicles attain insight into “the unconditioned,” real differences remain between the depth and quality of their insight?
- ¹⁶² Cf. *Laozi* 23.
- ¹⁶³ Cf. *Laozi* 57.
- ¹⁶⁴ “Beings of the two vehicles” are *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. The “wisdom of eradication” (Skt. *kṣayajñāna*) is the wisdom arrived at by the arhat who has accomplished the complete and permanent elimination of the fetters (*saṃyojana*).
- ¹⁶⁵ The “wisdom of nonarising” (Skt. *anutpādayajñāna*) is the wisdom attained by the bodhisattva that consists of the understanding that the fetters have been eliminated and will never reemerge. Alternatively, it refers to insight into, and acceptance of,

the nonarising and nonceasing of dharmas, i.e., their emptiness. In this passage, as well as elsewhere throughout this chapter, when discussing the three vehicles and the problem of gradualism versus subitism, Sengzhao channels the vocabulary, current in his day, of the ten stages of religious practice as developed in Prajñāpāramitā texts (although not in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, generally considered to be the earliest representative of this category of texts). The first seven stages are common to the three vehicles and culminate in the elimination of the fetters (see note 167). This is followed by the stages of the *pratyekabuddha*, bodhisattva, and buddha. While the bodhisattva is “higher” than the arhat and *pratyekabuddha*, the three by and large share the same attainments of stages one to seven. The opponent in this passage emphasizes their commonality; in his response Sengzhao emphasizes the bodhisattva’s superiority.

¹⁶⁶ A paraphrase of T.221:5a27ff; see also T. 223, ch. 3. Śāriputra asks the Buddha: if the “wisdoms” attained by the *śrota-āpanna* (“steam-enterer,” the first stage of the Mainstream path), arhat, *pratyekabuddha*, bodhisattva, and buddha are all equally insights into emptiness, why insist that the bodhisattva’s wisdom is the highest? The Buddha answers that it is because of the bodhisattva’s vow to save other beings.

¹⁶⁷ Yuankang suggests that this is a nonliteral reference to the *Lotus Sutra*.

¹⁶⁸ Yuankang claims that this invokes the *Vibhāṣā*, T.1547:445c17–19. The metaphors of the three animals and three arrows as representing the three vehicles are present also in the surviving writings of Huiyuan, the leader of the Lushan community to which Liu Yimin belonged (T.1856:130c13–14). The image of the three animals also appeared previously in Sengzhao’s essay “*Prajñā* without Knowing,” p. 80.

¹⁶⁹ Śāriputra, along with Mahāmaudgalyāyana, was one of Śākyamuni Buddha’s two main disciples; he was renowned for his wisdom. Maitrāyaṇīputra, one of the Buddha’s ten principal disciples, was famous for his eloquence in preaching the Dharma.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. *Laozi* 8.

¹⁷¹ Likely an allusion to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. The Buddha instructs Maitrāyaṇīputra to visit with the ailing Vimalakīrti. The latter criticizes Maitrāyaṇīputra’s “Lesser Vehicle” teachings as being like a firefly in comparison to the “sun” of the Buddha. See T.475:541a2; cf. also T.221:5b16.

¹⁷² “Three more stages” refers to the standard scheme of ten stages in the Prajñāpāramitā literature; see note 160. For Sumedha, see note 157.

¹⁷³ The image of mixing up north and south appears also in the *Mouzi lihuo lun* (T.2102:6c20), composed certainly by 465 C.E. but likely much earlier. More pertinent, Xie Lingyun uses the image in the concluding statements of his *Bianzong lun* (T.2103:225c11–14).

¹⁷⁴ T.224:425c27.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. T.223:308b17ff.

- ¹⁷⁶ This story of Sumedha is found in T.1509:180a23–b5. See also note 157.
- ¹⁷⁷ Wencai points to chapter 20 in the *Radiance*, but a more fitting passage is found at T.221:94b24–28. Yuankang suggests that this is a reference to T.1509:592b2–6.
- ¹⁷⁸ Cf. especially T.425:16b20–22.
- ¹⁷⁹ Cf. T.630:452b29.
- ¹⁸⁰ Cf. T.586:39b10–20.
- ¹⁸¹ Cf. T.614:282c7–10.
- ¹⁸² Cf. T.475:554b3–6.
- ¹⁸³ Wencai suggests that this refers to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra*, T.374:487a22–23, but the overlap is minimal.
- ¹⁸⁴ The “principle” here is emptiness, which is not marked by a temporal beginning or end.
- ¹⁸⁵ Cf. T.223:278b25–29.
- ¹⁸⁶ Yuankang indicates that this idea is present in the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, and in the *Daji jing* (T. 397), without specifying the exact location. Wencai predictably points to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra*. Cf. also T.708:815b7–8.
- ¹⁸⁷ Cf. T.475:539c25.
- ¹⁸⁸ Cf. T.221:146b11–12.
- ¹⁸⁹ From a well-known exchange between a goddess and Śāriputra in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, T.475:548a9. In response to this question Śāriputra remains silent, which is traditionally read as meaning that awakening is not limited by time.
- ¹⁹⁰ Wencai sees a correspondence with T.374:536a11. Yuankang says that this expresses “the general meaning of scriptures.”
- ¹⁹¹ The “Two Principles” here refers to Heaven and Earth. See also note 48.
- ¹⁹² Yuankang suggests that this refers to the general meaning of the texts referred to so far. Wencai again points to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra*, T.374:495a1, 537a7–9.
- ¹⁹³ Cf. T.475:542b18–19.
- ¹⁹⁴ Cf. T.221:113a29–113b6.
- ¹⁹⁵ See *Laozi* 41 for “Great Image” and “Great Sound.”
- ¹⁹⁶ Cf. *Laozi* 73.
- ¹⁹⁷ Cf. *Foshuo bashi jing*, T.581:965a10–14.
- ¹⁹⁸ This final paragraph has traditionally been read either as a summary of this chapter or of all of Sengzhao’s essays taken together; see T.1859:200c20–23.