Searching for a Possibility of Buddhist Hermeneutics:
Two Exegetic Strategies in Buddhist Tradition

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One of the main concerns in religious studies lies in hermeneutics[1]: While interpreters of religion, as those in all other fields, are doomed to perform their work through the process of conceptualization of their subjects, religious reality has been typically considered as transcending conceptual categorization. Such a dilemma imposed on the interpreters of religion explains the dualistic feature of the Western hermeneutic history of religion--the consistent attempts to describe and explain religious reality on the one hand and the successive reflective thinking on the limitation of human knowledge in understanding ultimate reality on the other hand.[2] Especially in the modern period, along with the emergence of the methodological reflection on religious studies, the presupposition that the "universally accepted" religious reality or "objectively reasoned" religious principle is always "over there" and may be eventually disclosed through refined scientific methods has become broadly questioned and criticized.

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

Negative Induction: "Four Antinomies" and "Three Characteristics of Phenomena"

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

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

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

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

When we see that religious reality is something that cannot be caught in any form of ontological proposition, the interpretive dilemma in religious study appears not just confined to a methodological problem, but rather concerned with a more fundamental question--the question of how to approach reality or whether the interpretive method is an appropriate frame to represent the given object, and so on. As is well known, the broad reflection on the validity of methodology in academic fields, that is, "meta-methodological" discussion, has emerged as one of the main issues in the postmodern period; especially the modern positivistic scholars' scientific methodology has been criticized along with their postulation of originally complete and wholesome objects of interpretation, which is believed by them to be finally discovered. For the modern positivistic scholars, the indubitable certitude of their objects did justice to their positivistic methodology, and the scientific rationality of their methodology in turn confirmed their eventual achievement of complete understanding of their objects. In this light, the methodological reflection again does not serve simply as the matter of a particular interpretive method but directly leads to the theoretical problem of how we understand or define the interpretive object. The early Buddhists' exhaustive negation of the conceptualized modes of reality then may be seen as reflecting their denial of ontological characterization of ultimate reality as existentially identifiable entity.

We can find another instance of the early Buddhists' negative approach to ontological theorizing of reality among one of the main Buddhist doctrines--the doctrine of "three characteristics of phenomena" (Skt. *tridṛṣṭinamittamudrā*), i.e. "impermanence" (Skt. *anitya*), "suffering" (Skt. *duḥkhā*), and "no-self" (Skt. *anātman*). The first and the third characteristics, "impermanence" and "no-self," implies that there is no such thing as inherent selfhood that keeps its persistent identity through time. What needs to be noted here is that not only religious ultimate reality such as Tathāgata, but even our daily experienced phenomena are not able to be conceptualized on its ultimate level of reality: When conceptualized, each of the phenomena would be perceived as an individual static object with unchanging identity, and this illusory conceptualized image of the phenomenon is in turn identified with the phenomenon itself. Since there is no such existence that has independent "self," that is, a fixed and unchanging identity, ultimate

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

level of reality, whether Buddha or daily experiences, cannot be grasped in the conceptualized frame of language. But this does not mean that the conventional level of phenomena are not to be conceptually describable; Even with no determinate and permanent identity, phenomena still may be expressed in concepts. This will be more discussed later.

Just as the negative connotation of "impermanence" and "no-self" implies that there is nothing like permanent "self," the negation of ontological interpretation of the "four antinomies" may be also viewed as being intended to prevent our arbitrary reduction of reality to such a permanent existence as unchanging metaphysical entity: Since the concept of "Tathāgata" of the "four antinomies" tends to be characterized as perfect and indubitable in its own right, "Tathāgata," when taken on the ontological basis through such notions as "exist" or "non-exist," is obliged to be rendered ontologically immutable entity. Thus, it may be seen that the negative response to any ontological approach in the "four antinomies" was aimed to obstruct the illusory formation of ontological "self." The essential message of both doctrines of "four antinomies" and " three characteristics of phenomena" then may be viewed as "selflessness" of all phenomena. This notion of "selflessness" became fully developed later in the Madhyamaka philosophy into another negative notion of "emptiness."

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

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

"Middle way" (Skt. *madhyamapratipad*), the important dimension of the doctrine of "emptiness," needs to be noted since it suggests the way to escape the circle of endless negation: Since the notion of "emptiness" does not refer to mere "nothing" or "non-

existence" as the opposite meaning of concepts, "being" or "existence," but represents the status beyond such ontological alternatives, even the "emptiness" should eventually be given up. Apparently the negation of "emptiness," as one may imagine, does not mean making up again a "selfhood" and clinging back to the illusory "self," for the same reason that "emptiness" does not simply mean "nothingness" of reality. The negation of "emptiness," or, in other words, the double negation of "self," rather leads to dynamic causal relationship between phenomena, providing us with the ground on which we can establish a new kind of understanding of existence, which is existence without "self."[4] On the basis of the realization that what "emptiness" really means, not adhering to the concept itself, we may probably start to discuss the hermeneutic possibility of Buddhism. I will discuss this at the next section by inspecting another main doctrine of the early Buddhism--"four noble truths" (Skt. *catuḥsatya*).

Independent signification: "Four Noble Truths"

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

A possible explanation to this problem seems to be found by reflecting on the way in which "suffering" means in the structure of "four noble truths": The concept of "suffering" in the "four noble truths" has its meaningful sense only within the interdependent relationship with the other three truths. Likewise, it is only within the relationship with the other truths that each concept of the other three truths has its own validity. The point is that the reason that the term "suffering" is conceived as what "suffering" commonly means is not because an object corresponding to the term "suffering" exists, but because the interdependent relationship exists. The relationship between each of the four truths is not a byproduct of the preexisting four truths: Rather the existence of the four truths builds only upon their interdependent relationship. If the meaning of one of the four truths disappears, the meanings of the others would also disappear, since there is no such thing as individually existing referent of each of the

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[4] In the chapter of Analysis of the Noble Truths, Nāgārjuna himself clearly presents "emptiness" as the ground of all existence by stating "Since there is the principle of emptiness, all phenomena are defined. If there were not the principle of emptiness, no phenomenon is possible." (T 30. 33a22ff)

truths. It is only through the relationship that the four truths have their existential meanings. Viewed in this way, this affirmative way to describe reality appears to lead us to another interpretive strategy, which I would call "interdependent signification," besides the approach of "negative induction" mentioned before.

One thing that attracts our attention in relation with the interpretive model of "interdependent signification" is that, in different versions of the doctrine of "three characteristics of phenomena," we read "*nirvāṇa*" at the place of the notion of "suffering."[5] The fact that the notion of "*nirvāṇa*" are found instead of "suffering" apparently suggests the close relationship between the two notions; moreover, when considered that each of the notions is commonly defined depending on the state of the other notion[6], the causal relationship between the two notions may be viewed as interdependent. Turning back to the problem that the notion of "suffering" in the doctrine of "three characteristics of phenomena," unlike the other two, is affirmatively put, the difficulty of describing reality in affirmative way would then be explained this way: Even though concepts do not have their substantial referents, the affirmative use of concepts in describing ultimate reality is still to be legitimized because the concepts are able to maintain their valid meanings within the interdependent relationship between them. Since there is no such thing as substantial existence, the concepts, though seen as referring to it, do not indicate ontologically particular objects; since the relationship exists between the provisionally established concepts, the concepts do not have to be dismissed as nothing even without their referents. If the former negation of substantial existence is to be conceived as "not-being," while the latter affirmation of the relationship as "not-non-being," we may associate these negations of two ontological extremes, "being" and "non-being," with the Madhyamaka doctrine of "middle way"; it appears that we may find doctrinal consistency between the early Buddhist interpretive strategy of "interdependent signification" and the Mahayana approach of "negative induction." When we are able to admit the validity of the affirmative description of reality in the interpretive activity of religion, we also might be able to expect a hermeneutical possibility of religious reality.

"Nature of Dependent Arising" of the Yogācāra School

The interpretive strategy of "interdependent signification" of the early Buddhism was inherited to the Yogācāra school, one of the two main schools of Mahāyāna tradition along with Madhyamaka school; For instance, both doctrines of the "four noble truths" of the early Buddhism and the "three aspects of nature [of existence] (Skt. *tri-svabhāva*)" of the Yogācāra school, i.e. "nature of pervasive attachment [of illusory characterization of existence]" (Skt. *parikalpita-svabhāva*), "nature of dependent arising [of existence]" (Skt. *paratantra-svabhāva*), and "nature of perfect truthfulness [of existence]" (Skt. *pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*), engage direct affirmative concepts in representing reality without assigning any ontological connotation to the concepts. The doctrine of "three aspects of nature," even if designated as "nature" of reality, does not indicate something that exists independently with its own self-nature, but just provisional/conventional concept to signify the selflessness of reality. This does not mean, however, that the

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[5] In the *Saṃyuktāgama*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinayavibhaṅga*, etc., the concept of "suffering" is found instead of "*nirvāṇa*," while the *Aṅguttara nikāya* and the *Dhammapada* " present the doctrine as "permanence," "suffering," and "no-self." There is also the doctrine of "four characteristics of phenomena" in such literatures as the *Saṃyuttanikāya* and the *Pusa diqi jing* (Skt. *Bodhisattvabhūmisūtra*), listing all four in the order of "permanence," "suffering," "no-self," and " *nirvāṇa*."
[6] Based on the common explanations in the scriptures on *nirvāṇa* and "suffering," it may be generally said that *nirvāṇa* comes true only when one realizes the nature of "suffering" of life and overcomes it; if "suffering" remains in one's way of cultivation, *nirvāṇa*, the goal of cultivation, is never to be reached.

inherent meaning of the concept makes no sense just because of the provisionality of the concept; the point is that the inherent meaning of "three aspects of nature," which is, "selflessness" of reality, should be grasped without postulating any substantial existences corresponding to the concepts. This is exactly what is noted before in regards with the Madhyamaka notion of "emptiness," which is a merely borrowed concept to represent "selflessness" of reality. Moreover, such provisionality of the designation of "nature" is also demonstrated by the fact that the doctrine of "three aspects of nature" is commonly presented in parallel with the doctrine of "three non-natures" (Skt. *tri-vidhāniḥsvabhāva*), i.e. "non-nature of characteristics" (Skt. *lakṣaṇa-niḥsvabhāvatā*), "non-nature of arising" (Skt. *utpatti-niḥsvabhāvatā*), and "non-nature of supreme truth" (Skt. *paramārtha-niḥsvabhāvatā*)[7]; the fact that one single purpose is explicable through two seemingly contrasting doctrines of "three aspects of nature" and "three non-natures," or, in other words, through a paradoxical structure of "nature of non-nature," induces us to notice that it is the inner purpose, not the literal meaning, that we should pay attention in these two intertwined doctrines. The double conceptualization of one single purpose appears to function as a kind of another interpretive strategy to inhibit the one-sided, not middle-way, understanding of reality.

It is in the "nature of dependent arising [of existence]," the second of "three aspects of nature," that the establishment of relationship between phenomena is plainly accepted along with its meaningful validity in a positive tone: The "nature of dependent arising" means that causal relationship between phenomena can be established even though each of the phenomena has no independent substantial identity--the implication that is also displayed, as previously discussed, in the structure of the "interdependent signification" of the "four noble truths."[8] But, again, it is only on the basis of the principle of "emptiness," viz. the principle of no-principle, that this causal relationship has its valid meaning. "Emptiness" connotes the negation of itself as well as the others, and thus it does not allow residing at the one side of ontological alternatives. The clue to resolve the hermeneutical problem of conceptualizing the object beyond conceptualization then appears to be found by reflecting on the "dependent arising" aspect of phenomena.

At this point, however, arises a new and practical problem - the problem of how to establish the relationship, in other words, the problem of interpretation itself: When it comes to the interpretation of a particular text, we should consider the fact that any interpretation is necessarily conditioned by a complex mix of factors such as socio-historical environmental elements, the subjective mindset of the interpreter or the type of possible readers, and so on. We could reach different conclusions depending on what kind of conditions, to what extent and in what way we consider. But how different? This issue of fluidity of interpretation appears to be not only a problem of interpretation within Buddhist studies, but also one of the major issues in the current postmodern scholarship. It is at this moment that such notions as "spiritual capacity" (Skt. *indriya*), "skillful

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

[8] That what the "four noble truths" implies is no other than the "nature of dependent arising [of existence]" may be verified through the Yogācāra theory of "four levels of twofold truths (C. *sizhong erdi* 四重二諦)," or "four levels of the absolute truth (Skt. *paramārthasatya*) and the conventional truth (Skt. *saṃvṛtisatya*)." According to the theory, the doctrine of "four noble truths" is assigned to the second level of the "absolute truth" and the third level of the "conventional truth," both of which conforms to the "nature of dependent arising."

means" (Skt. *upāya*), and "doctrinal classification" (C. *jiaopan* 教判) draw our attention as traditional devices that explain the existence of diverse or sometimes seemingly contradictory interpretations within the scriptures or the doctrines of Buddhist schools: According to the Buddhist traditional explanation, the different levels of teaching are necessary as "skillful means" for the different spiritual levels of living beings. The early distinction of scriptural texts into two groups, the "scriptures with definitive meaning" (Skt. *nītārtha*) and "those with a meaning to be determined" (Skt. *neyārtha*), also serves as one of the hermeneutic schemes legitimizing the activity of interpretation of the "scriptures with a meaning to be determined."

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

The difference between the "Buddhist/religious" understanding of the diversity of phenomena from the perspective of "middle way" and the "secularist" approach to it from the "relativistic" viewpoint, I would suggest, lies in the way in which they comprehend the relationship of phenomena: While the "relativistic" approach explains the causal relationship of phenomena through the notion of contingent uncertainty, the "middle way" position perceives it through the principle of no-principle, that is, "emptiness." Therefore, while the former position inevitably ends up with "endless narratives" regarding the causal relationship of phenomena, the latter pursues to advance toward the principle itself (or, if exactly speaking, the principle that there is no such thing as principle) which is beyond this relationship.

According to the traditional account, it is just on the level of the "nature of dependent arising" among the "three aspects of nature [of existence]" that such issues as the causal relationship of phenomena and the diversity of interpretation of phenomena make its sense. Even if the causal relationship between phenomena provides the answer to the hermeneutical dilemma, however, this relationship, according to Buddhist philosophical scheme, is no more than provisional establishment. Even the Buddhist doctrines that explain the interdependent relationship, such as the "four noble truths," belongs to the provisional interpretation on the level of the "dependent arising," not the direct description of "emptiness." In other words, this relationship merely refers to the phenomena built upon the principle of "emptiness," not straightforwardly revealing the principle of "emptiness" itself. Then, a similar, if not the same, question with the one that

I raised in searching for the hermeneutic possibility of Buddhist interpretation will be put again now toward the last level of "three aspects of nature [of existence]," i.e. "nature of perfect truthfulness": How can we understand the inconceptualizable principle of "emptiness"? To put it in another way, how are we able to see the moon, not the finger that points at the moon? It is in this context that the Buddhism attempts to take the hermeneutical leap, or "non-logical hermeneutics," to reach the "nature of perfect truthfulness," which is beyond the conceptual interpretation.

Non-logical Hermeneutics

The so-called "non-logical hermeneutics," the hermeneutic method that was devised to immediately grasp the elusive notion of "middle way," is well exemplified in the seemingly illogical or paradoxical Chan "public cases" (C. *gong'an* 公案). Strictly speaking, such "non-logical hermeneutic" strategies may not be categorized into the given issue of hermeneutics since the scope of the current hermeneutics is confined to the interpretive method by logical signification of conceptual system. To mention a little for the sake of integrity, this "non-logical hermeneutic" strategy refers to the distinctive Chan rhetoric that involves non-logical concepts in order to induce the student to an instant realization of the meaning of "middle way" that cannot be caught in the conceptual system.

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

Conclusion

The hermeneutic difficulty in Buddhism, as in the other fields of religious studies, comes from the supposition that the object of interpretation is beyond the methodological

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

[11] Robert E. Buswell presents the notions of "live-word" and "dead-word" as one of Chan hermeneutical tools along with the notions of "three mysterious gates" (C. *sanxuanmen* 三玄門) and the circular graphic symbols. He indicates that, once interpreted in a theoretical description, even any "live-word" becomes a "dead-word" on the one hand and presents the case of Chinul (1128-1210) on the other hand, who, even as a Sŏn (C. Chan) monk, regarded scholastic descriptions of Buddhist teaching as also vital for the process of cultivation. Chinul's case that he obtained an enlightenment experience during reading the *Platform Sūtra* (C. *Tanjing* 壇經) demonstrates, Buswell claims, that "even the dead-words of the scriptures can come alive." For more information, see Robert E. Buswell, "Ch'an Hermeneutics: A Korean View," *Buddhist Hermeneutics* (1988).

frame of interpretation, that is, conceptualization. The solution of the dilemma throughout the early and later Mahāyāna Buddhism was obtained not by the transformation or replacement of the particular methods but by the fundamental understanding of the object of interpretation. Based on the understanding of the ontological "selflessness" of reality, the hermeneutic tradition in Buddhism may be divided into two groups: The emphasis on the lack of substantial existence entails the negative (apophatic) hermeneutics, i.e. "negative induction," that excludes the affirmative conceptualization; this hermeneutic approach is traditionally displayed in the early Buddhists' "no-self" theory through the Mahāyāna notion of "emptiness." On the other hand, the exhaustive contemplation on this "selflessness" in turn legitimizes the positive (cataphatic) hermeneutics, i.e. "independent signification," in which the causal relationship of reality may be interpreted; the "four noble truths" theory of the early Buddhism and the Yogācāra doctrine of "three aspects of phenomena" represents this approach of hermeneutics. What remains to us appears the task of elucidation of the relationship, unraveling the entanglement of causes and effects of phenomena. This task is nothing new, however, at least in terms of its methodology. Whether one deals with the relationship from a comprehensive perspective of reality or approaches it in a regional or parochial category, or whether one seeks for the universal explanation of the causes and effects of phenomena or investigates concrete aspects of the relationships in specific temporal and local conditions, the commonly applied purpose is to explain the causal relationship(s). Or, in the light of the current subject of the hermeneutic possibility of Buddhism, as discussed in this article, whether the effort to explain reality is directed toward the "ceaseless narratives" or considered as a part of the process of religious cultivation, the elucidation of the relationship has been Buddhist interpreters' responsibility, and will be in the future too.

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