

A Buddhist Student's Comment on Dr. H. Simoni-Wastila's Paper

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DR. H. Simoni-Wastila raises the problem of radical particularity or the problem of how a particular with a unique perspective can form intimate relationships with other particulars. This is, indeed, the fundamental problem of Buddhist philosophy. We may say that all Buddhist philosophies have attempted to answer this with its respective awakening insight. Therefore all Buddhist students must be able to answer it with his or her awakening insight. In my opinion, Buddhism has set forth the answer to this problem in its central truths that it postulates. First, a particular—radically or phenomenologically understood from the standpoint of Husserlian phenomenology—is nothing but conditioned origination or *pratītyasamutpāda*. Following the general tendency of Sino-Japanese Buddhist philosophy, *pratītyasamutpāda* has generally been misunderstood as universal inter-dependence, but it actually means, at least in Indian Buddhist philosophy, a particular existence originating temporarily, conditioned by its past existence and conditioning its future. Second, intimate relationships with other particulars are rooted in Emptiness or *śūnyatā* which, in my opinion, must be understood as the communal essence of communication among all Buddhas, bodhisattvas and sentient beings or that of I-thou relationships. Thus the question, “how is a particular existence or *pratītyasamutpāda* intimately related to other particulars or how is it rooted in the communal essence or *śūnyatā*,” is, indeed, the fundamental problem of any Buddhist philosophy. Here I cannot enter upon any further detailed exposition. Instead, let me just quote one episode from the life of the Chinese Zen master, Dong-shan Liang-chiai 洞山良价 (Tōzan

Ryōkai in Japanese, 807–869), which I think beautifully illustrates the awakening insight into this essential truth of Buddhism.

According to his biography, Tōzan seems to have attained awakening at least once previously, but his awakening insight was not yet ultimately penetrating. At the bedside of his dying teacher, Yun-yan Tan-cheng 雲巖曇晟 (Ungan Donjō in Japanese, 782–829 or 841), Tōzan asked the following final question, “After you have passed away, how shall I answer if I happen to be asked whether I have inherited the true portrait of my teacher (as proof of my awakening)?”

The teacher replied, “Answer that this one here is it.”

Tōzan was perplexed at his teacher’s words and fell into profound uncertainty. Having noticed that his disciple had fallen into perplexity, the teacher commented “This is such a problem that once it haunts you, it may easily consume thousands of your lives and tens of thousands of eons. If only you think of a concept thereupon, then you will be lost in grass meters high. If you think of a word thereupon, all the more so.”

No sooner had Donjō spoken than Tōzan replied, “Please don’t explain! So long as I have a human body, I will be concerned with this matter.”

Donjō died. Having observed the mourning period for his deceased teacher, Tōzan wandered around with his friend in search of a new teacher and came to a wide stream in a mountain. His friend crossed over first and Tōzan followed. In midstream, Tōzan saw his face reflected on the surface of the water and suddenly had the ultimate insight, which made him burst into laughter. His friend asked, “What’s the matter?” Tōzan replied, “I dare say to you, o friend! I have now understood my teacher’s masterly skill in refraining from teaching me.” His friend said, “If so, you should express it in words.”

On the spot, Tōzan composed the following poem:

Never, never should I search after Him outside!
 And yet far, far away He does transcend me.
 Now I am wandering around at my own will
 And yet everywhere I am meeting Him.
 Now He is my own identity here and now
 And yet now I myself am not He.
 In such a way should we be awakened,
 Only then do we live in true suchness.

If I may interpret this poem, not in terms of Christian theology, but directly in accordance with Zen experience, "I" stands for a particular with unique perspective. It is *pratīyasamutpāda* or "conditioned origination" which flows like a stream. "He" stands for the intimate relationships with other particulars. Here this especially refers to his master's true identity concretizing *śūnyatā* or "the communal essence" called either "God" or "Buddha," which is reflected as the disciple's true identity here and now, like Tōzan's face on the stream. Be also reminded that in the Buddhist tradition, a particular with a unique perspective (or *pratīyasamutpāda*) is often illustrated by water in a bowl or a pond, and that the communal essence (or *śūnyatā*) by the moon which is reflected on any body of water.

Heartily, I thank Dr. Simoni-Wastila for inspiring me to meditate upon this fundamental problem of Buddhism.