2+1=1

Response to Ziporyn*

Yasuo Deguchi#, Jay L Garfield ## and Graham Priest##

Kyoto University#

Smith College##

University of Melbourne##,###

Central University of Tibetan Studies##

City University of New York###

St Andrew’s University###

We thank Ziporyn for a creative and imaginative treatment of our view in a context we had not considered, that of Tiantai theory. Ziporyn’s main criticisms of our position can be summarized in the following two points.

(1) “[T]he question about whether the contradictory statements in Mahāyāna literature are meant to be true statements or are meant merely as therapeutic upāya to undermine attachments while making no claims about reality is, from a Tiantai point of view, wrongly constructed.” (p. 7)

(2) “The Tiantai view ... is not mere dialetheism, ‘the view that some contradictions are true,’ as Deguchi, Garfield and Priest put it. It claims all statements, claims, experiences, and entities are (implicitly)

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contradictions, and that therefore they are all true.” (p.8)

These criticisms are not a direct repudiation but rather mere qualification of our view, because Ziporyn restricts his claims only to a Tiantai “point of view,” and leaves the question regarding whether our view makes sense of other schools of Buddhist philosophy open. Nonetheless, we reject this qualification. Both criticisms are grounded in Ziporyn’s claim that, in the Tiantai system, the relation between conventional and ultimate truths (or realities, as it sometimes seems better to understand it) is simply identity. But this interpretation is erroneous. Tiantai theorists characterize the relation among the three truths as round fusion (圓融). This round fusion, we will argue, is not an identity relation. We conclude that Ziporyn’s critique is hence at least hermeneutically indefensible.

Let us first show how Ziporyn’s first criticism is based on his interpretation of this relation as identity. Ziporyn writes, “Conventional truth is what is conductive to the end of suffering.” (p.4). The criterion of conventional truths is “not that they correspond to an external reality or can be consistently unpacked without self-contradiction, but that speaking and acting in accordance with them is conductive to the ending of suffering.” (p.3) So conventional truth is defined pragmatically, and is nothing but that
which is conducive to the attainment of nirvana. On Ziporyn’s reading, conventional truths are not assertions about reality, contradictory or not.

Then how about ultimate truth? Ultimate truth, Ziporyn argues, is, in Tiantai, identical to conventional truth. In his own words, “conventional truth and ultimate truth are identical. They have exactly the same content. Whatever is conventional truth is also ultimate truth, and vice versa.” (p.5). Ziporyn then implicitly appeals to Leibniz’ law of identity: if two things are identical, they share all their properties. So, given that conventional truth is pragmatic, ultimate truth is also pragmatic. Therefore, according to Ziporyn, all truth in Buddhism is pragmatic. “Buddhism is, I claim, a thousand percent pragmatic in its approach to truth.” (p.1)

Ziporyn also seems to take upāya and pragmatic truth as synonymous. So there is no truth in Buddhism other than upāya. Therefore, he argues, DGP’s distinction between upāya and any other form of truth is unsustainable. So, he concludes, their question regarding whether apparent

1 Actually, this view would itself seem pretty implausible, by any standards, Buddhist or otherwise. It is (conventionally) true that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, but speaking or acting in accordance with this would seem to have absolutely nothing to do with achieving enlightenment. Moreover, in contexts such as the parable of the arrow, and in some accounts of the unanswerable questions, Buddhist texts themselves indicate that some truths are soteriologically inert.
contradictions in Buddhist texts are upāya or to be taken literally suffers from a false presupposition.

His denial of the distinction DGP draw between assertions that are merely upāya and those that are to be taken as true is based at least in part on his pragmatic view of ultimate truth. And it is to be noted that he never gives any independent and direct argument for that thesis. Rather, his pragmatic view of ultimate truth relies essentially on his claim to the identity of these two truths. Pragmatism flows from the conventional to the ultimate in virtue of this identity.

Ziporyn’s second criticism also depends directly on the identity claim. He claims that what is ultimately true is “ontological ambiguity,” i.e. the idea that reality itself is contradictory (pp. 3, 8). Since conventional truth is identical with ultimate truth, he argues, the former is also about ontological ambiguity, and therefore admits contradictions. Contradiction flows from ultimate truth to conventional truth. Consequently, Ziporyn argues, from a Tiantai perspective all truths are contradictory. Again it is noteworthy that he provides no other reason for the contradictory character of conventional truth.2 Thus the identity interpretation is the cornerstone of both criticisms.

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2 And again, the conclusions seem pretty implausible. The claim that Caesar crossed the Rubicon would appear to be as consistent as can be.
But Ziporyn is simply wrong about this: the Tiantai view of the relation between the two truths cannot be interpreted as *identity*. The relation between the *two* truths is explained in Tiantai by the relation among *three* truths (三諦). These are sometimes called *ultimate* truth (真心), *conventional* truth (俗諦), and the *middle* truth (中諦), but also sometimes *emptiness* (空), *the provisional* (假), and the *middle* (中). The founder of the Tiantai tradition, Zhiyi (智顗), characterized the relation as *round fusion among three truths* (三諦圓融).

法華玄義 (Fa Hua Xyan Yi), Taisho, vol.33, p.705.

The round doctrine of the three truths is that not only the middle, but also the ultimate and conventional truths constitute Buddha dharma. The three truths roundly fuse with one other. One is three, and three is one.

*Just what this round fusion (圓融) consists in, is a difficult question.* Zhiyi himself admitted that it is very difficult, even impossible, to grasp it conceptually.


The characteristics of these three truths are unthinkable. Since they don’t have any determinate nature, they are inexplicable indeed.
But he did his best to explicate it anyway. Here is an example.

非三而三三而不三。非合非常而合而散。非非合非常散不可一異而一
異。譬如明鏡。明喻即空。像喻即假。鏡喻即中。不合不散合散宛然。
不一二三三三無妨。 摩訶止観 (Mohe Zhiguan), Taisho, vol.46, p.8-9

[The three truths are] not three but three, three but not three;
neither integrated nor disintegrated, but both integrated and
disintegrated; neither non-integrated nor non-disintegrated;
neither one nor different, but both one and different. Let me use
the metaphor of clear mirror. Clear light is a metaphor of
emptiness. Vision is a metaphor of the provisional. The mirror is
a metaphor of the middle. They are neither integrated nor
disintegrated, and both integrated and disintegrated. There is no
difference between integration and disintegration. They are
neither one, two, nor three. And there is no obstruction between
two and three.

Even with this metaphor, we must acknowledge that it is difficult to
understand the relation among the three truths. But one thing is clear: it is
not identity. As Zhiyi explicitly states, it is “neither one nor different” and
“both one and different.”

Now, it might be tempting to read this last claim that the truths are
both identical and different as one more dialethia: the relation is identity,
and something else as well. But here we must proceed with caution. The
context makes it clear that Zhiyi is stating that the relation among the
truths is like identity in some respects, and like difference in others. Most
crucially, as we shall see, the relation does not support the mutual
substitutivity of identicals, and so is not literal identity.

The relation may well, in fact, be the same relation, a close cousin, or
at least an ancestor, of that of ji (即) as characterized in the Huayen tradition.
This expression typically occurs in the Huayen context in phrases such as
“One is/ji (即) all, and all is/ji (即) one.” Like among many other ancestors and
descendants, we can find some family resemblances between Zhiyi’s round
fusion and Huayen’s ji.

Huayen philosophers often distinguished two modes among ji:
interpenetration (相入)’ and mutual ji (相即). While Zhiyi does not draw this
distinction explicitly, nor use these terms, we can find a prototype of the
Huayen distinction in his texts. Huayen thinkers indeed distinguished two
modes of ji, but drew that distinction differently. For some Huayen theorists,
interpenetration is the reverse of the relation of containment (具), whereas it
is not so with respect to mutual ji. To put this another way, “A
interpenetrates B” can always be rephrased as “B contains A.” This, however,
is not the case with respect to mutual ji. (e.g., Chihyen (智儼), 華厳一乘十玄

In his characterization of round fusion, Zhiyi mentions containment in
some places but not in others. We cited already a phrase in which he does not
refer to containment, in the context of the discussion of the mirror metaphor.
(Taisho, vol.46, p.8-9) But in the following passage he explicitly characterizes round fusion in terms of containment:

但以空為名，具假中，悟空即悟假中，餘亦如是。摩訶止観（Mohe Zhiguan), Taisho, vol.46, p.7.

If one takes only emptiness to be ostensive, then it contains the provisional and the middle. [Hence] to enlighten emptiness is to enlighten the provisional and the middle. The rest is like this.

Zhiyi implies here that any one of the three truths contains the other two. This way of characterizing round fusion thus appears to be an archetype of the idea of interpenetration that turns up in Huayan, while the mirror metaphor may be an ancestor of mutual ji. It therefore may well be that Zhiyi sows seeds of the Huayan distinction between the two modes of ji, even though he does not explicitly thematize this distinction.

Now, we acknowledge, in the good company of Zhiyi, the difficulty of knowing whether we have got the understanding of Tiantai “identity” right, and also, indeed, the speculative character of this doctrinal history. In any case, however, it is clear that the relation among truths according to Tiantai doctrine is much more complicated and delicate than simple identity.

Another reason to think that this might be in the ballpark of a correct account of the round fusion relation among the three truths, and an explanation of why it cannot be taken simply as identity, derives from Zhiyi’s
repeated emphasis on the difference between the three truths, which typically refers to their cognitive dimensions. For example:

若謂即空即假即中者. 三種...各各異有. 摩訶止觀 (Mohe Zhiguan), Taisho, vol.46, p.7.

If one explains in the light of either emptiness, the provisional, or the middle, ... there is a difference among each of these three sorts of explanations.

Of course, this difference is just one aspect of the round fusion. But it is a real difference. And following Zhiyi, it had become an established view in the Tiantai tradition that the three truths are not simply identical with one another, but differ from one another in some respects. Consider this statement by Jingxi Zhanran (荆溪湛然), a well-known figure in the tradition, who elaborated Zhiyi’s idea of the round fusion among the three truths in his own way.


The three truths are innate abilities given by nature. The middle truth unifies all dharmas, the ultimate truth demolishes all dharmas, and the conventional truth establishes all dharmas.

It still remains difficult to see what the differences are among the three. But it is obvious at any rate that Zhanran tries to differentiate them
conceptually: the unifier, the demolisher, and the establisher of all dharmas. Thus both Zhiyi and Zhanran maintain that each of the three truths has different characteristics from the others, and that these characteristics are not interchangeable. We conclude that Ziporyn’s claim that identity holds between the three is foreign to the Tiantai tradition.

Let us sum up. In the Tiantai view, conventional and ultimate truths roundly fuse with one another. While it may not be entirely clear what round fusion is it is perfectly clear that it is not identity, for it does not satisfy the law of the substitutivity of identicals. In particular, it is clear that not every characteristic of any one of the truths also characterizes each of the others. So Ziporyn’s interpretation is wrong. Consequently, his two criticisms of our analysis cannot be supported by citing Tiantai texts, and are therefore at least doctrinally unfounded.

Let us make two further remarks. Tiantai’s view of the three truths may in fact support our dialetheic interpretation of Buddhism. In his attempt to conceptually characterize the round fusion among the truths, Zhiyi may well make contradictory claims. Recall the statement in his Mohe Ziguan which we cited above (Taisho, vol.46, p.8-9) where he refers to contradictions involving “being three,” “integration.” “disintegration,” etc. The contexts in which those contradictions appear are clearly neither metaphorical, nor upāya, nor reductio. So they appear to be dialetheias. It
might be suggested that some of these apparent contradictions can be
defused by parameterization, appealing to different aspects of the situation.
But whatever one says about the others, the contradiction regarding
integration and dis-integration hardly appears to be like this. How can one
have or lack aspects of integration? If this is so, we are happy to include this
new dialetheia in our list of contradictions that are meant to be taken
literally, to be accepted, and that are unambiguous. We thank Ziporyn for
calling our attention to it, and we hope to examine it with care on another
occasion.

Second remark: we are not tempted down the path of Ziporyn’s
endorsement of trivialism: all things are true. If this were so, Hindu views
would be just as true as Buddhist, as would the view that all things have
svabhāva, and so on. Most implausible. The extreme path of obstinate
clinging to consistency and the extreme path of trivialism each lead us back
to samsara. We choose the middle path of paraconsistency, the highway to
liberation.