

# Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana

## Introduction

The *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (Ch. *Dasheng qixin lun*) is a short, but advanced commentary from the fifth or sixth century on Mahayana Buddhist thought attributed to the Indian Buddhist poet and philosophy Aśvaghosa. By synthesizing major ideas of Mahayana thought in an innovative manner at a critical period in the development of Buddhism in China, the commentary is widely considered “one of the most influential texts in the history of East Asian Buddhism.”<sup>1</sup> “Its outline of the doctrines of buddha nature, buddha bodies, and one mind, among others, served from the medieval period onwards as one of the main foundations of East Asian Buddhist thought and practice,” including Zen (Ch. Chan). Though dense and philosophical in presentation, the *Awakening of Faith* is a religious work whose intent is to show practitioners the true path to enlightenment.

The primer reviews the history and development of the text, and its structure and key teachings; it also briefly probes into the problematic of apocryphal texts in the formation of Zen.

## History and Development

According to received tradition, Aśhvaghosha, a Mahayana philosopher who lived in the first to second centuries in India, wrote the *Awakening of Faith*. Paramartha (499-569), a famous Yogacara scholar and monk from Ujjayini in West India, who sailed to China as a missionary in 546, is said to have translated the text into Chinese in 550. Because it only exists in a Chinese version, and tireless searches for a Sanskrit original have not produced an original, it is widely accepted (many say accepted ‘without a doubt’) as a Chinese (apocryphal) work created by Paramartha or one of his students.<sup>2</sup> It seems likely then that the text was “composed by an Indian or Central Asian author already familiar with the culture and intellectual climate of sixth-century Chinese Buddhists.” The intent was to create at least in part a text particularly appealing to Chinese Buddhists during the critical period in which important Chinese schools of Buddhist thought, such as Huayan, Tiantai, Chan/Zen, were being created. Siksanda (652-710), a Khotanese monk and Tripitaka master, made a second ‘translation’ about 150 years after the first translation. His purpose was to clarify what to him seemed controversial passages in Paramartha’s translation.

As the importance of the text spread throughout East Asia, early Buddhist scholars made more than 170 commentaries on the text. The most important of these were by Fazang (643-712),

a Chinese Huayan monk, Jingying Huiyuan (523-598), and Wonkyo (617-686), a Korean monk.<sup>3</sup> Fazang, who we will return to in later sections of the primer, was the third patriarch of and the greatest systematizer of the Huayan school of Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth-century, the text was appropriated for a wide variety of causes, including “re-envisioning Chinese and East Asian Buddhist history and the place of Buddhism in modern society,” Asian nationalism, and the “occidental strategies” of Japanese Buddhism as it entered the modern world. “All of these uses of the text have produced conflicting interpretations of the original Buddhist text.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Structure of the Text**

The translation into English of the *Awakening of Faith* by Hakeda (1967) is short (60 pages or less) and has five parts.<sup>5</sup> The text opens with a standard Buddhist invocation (I take refuge in [the Buddha] .... And in [the Dharma] .... [and in the Sangha] .... May all sentient beings be made to discard their doubts, to cast aside their evil attachments, and to give rise to the correct faith in the Mahāyāna [the Absolute] ....; p. 31) and closes with a prayer that the intent of the book be fulfilled (Profound and comprehensive are the great principles of the Buddha ....; p. 97).<sup>6</sup> The text in-between the invocation and prayer is divided into five parts, with the first part added perhaps at a later time.

As explained in the text, “There is a teaching (dharma) which can awaken in us the root of faith in the Mahāyāna [the Absolute], and it should therefore be explained. The explanation is divided into five parts. They are (1) the Reason for Writing; (2) the Outline; (3) the Interpretation; (4) on Faith and Practice; (5) the Encouragement of Practice and the Benefit Thereof (p. 32).

In greater detail:

In Part 1 (two pages long, pp. 33-34), the author gives eight reasons for writing the *Awakening of Faith* (pp. 33-34). They are in order: to free all beings from suffering, to spread the true teaching, to support those on the path, to awaken faith in beginners, to show means for remaining free of bad influences, to teach proper methods of meditation, to present the advantages of reciting the name of Amitabha, to provide an introduction to Zen.

In Part 2 (three pages long, pp. 35-37), the author presents an outline that is to be developed and elaborated on in the discussion that follows, and introduces the concept of

One Mind. One writer (certainly among many) found that this fairly opaque part ‘made his head hurt.’

Part 3 (49 pages, pp. 38-87) takes up (if cryptically) the theoretical tenets of Mahāyāna doctrine which include (in the text) the threefold notion of the “essence of the mind,” enlightenment and non-enlightenment, ignorance, refutation of false teachings and preconceptions, the proper methods leading to enlightenment, and the merits and virtues of a bodhisattva. Two aspects of mind are used in the discussion to clarify the relationship between enlightenment and ignorance, nirvana and samsara, or the absolute and the phenomenal. The part is divided into three relatively lengthy sections, each with a number of chapters. The three main sections are: (1) Revelation of True Meaning (pp. 38-73), (2) Correction of Evil Attachments (pp. 73-79), and (3) Analysis of the Types of Aspiration for Enlightenment, or the Meanings of Yāna (pp. 79-87).

In Part 4 (8 pages, pp. 88-95), the author describes four faiths a man should have, which are in the *Ultimate Source*, in the numberless excellent qualities of the *buddhas*, in the great benefits of the *Dharma*, and in the *Sangha*. To enable him to perfect his faith, he should practice five ways. They are the practice of charity, [observance of the] precepts, patience, zeal, and cessation [of illusions] and clear observation (through *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* meditation). Part 4 is divided into two main sections, On Four Faiths and On Five Practices. The discussion in Part 4 is intended “for those who have not yet joined the group of beings who are dedicated to attain enlightenment,” (that is, for beginners).

Fazang, a sixth-century Chinese master, famously summarized the content of the text as a discourse on One Mind, Two Aspects, Three Greatnesses, Four Faiths, and Five Practices. His summary links up to the parts of the text as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Subjects of Discussion	Parts of the Text
	(theoretical)
One Mind	Part 2: Outline
Two aspects of One Mind	Part 3: Interpretation
Three Greatnesses of One Mind	
	(practical)
Four Faiths	Part 4: Faith
Five Practices	Practices

## Key Teachings

Part 2 of the text (The Outline) is particularly dense and chock full of undefined terms. Therefore, it has proven the most difficult of the Parts to understand without commentaries or an accomplished teacher. To ease readers' initial entrance into the teachings in the *Awakening of Faith*, this section of the primer provides a simplified overview of the teachings, with scholarly references added.<sup>8</sup>

Given the claim in the Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom (prajnaparamita) scriptures and in Nagarjuna's accompanying Madhyamika treatise of complete emptiness, it became unclear how enlightenment is possible, how beings become deluded in the first place, and whether there is a Path to salvation at all.<sup>9</sup> The *Awakening of Faith* sets out to resolve this dilemma by providing answers to the questions, What is the origin of enlightenment (given the deluded state in which people find themselves) and What is the origin of delusion (given the reality of peoples' intrinsically enlightened nature)? The text's answers are framed by combining together two very different conceptions (two aspects) of Mind (the One Mind).

The first, the Tathagatagarbha ('embryo' or womb of the Tathagata), sees the Mind as the focus of enlightenment because it is, in its true nature, intrinsically enlightened to begin with. The second conception of the Mind, the alayavijnana ('store consciousness'), sees it as the source of that activity by which beings construct the web of deluded conceptions by which they become bound in suffering.<sup>10</sup> While the first conception provides a solid ground (ontological basis) for Buddhist soteriology (salvation), the second offers a coherent explanation of the process by which delusion unfolds and is perpetrated. The intent of practice is to purge the alayavijnana of its delusions so that it becomes pure and identical with the tathagatagarbha (Dharmakaya, Absolute Reality) in its pure state (for the tathagatagarbha and the alayavijnana are but two aspects of One Mind).

The *Awakening of Faith* also argues that the view of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures is incomplete because it merely says what reality is not. According to the tathagatagarbha doctrines, the tathagatagarbha in its true form is not only empty of all defilements, but *not* empty of all the infinite Buddha qualities. This means that a series

of positive attributes can be ascribed to the Absolute, such as permanence, bliss, selfhood, and purity. This re-definition of emptiness now provides religious practitioners motivation to practice, for enlightenment *is* possible.

Part 3 (Interpretation) flushes out the outline. It explains in greater detail the two aspects of One Mind (at length), the essence itself and the attributes of Suchness, and how to enter into the realm of Suchness from the realm of samsara (the cycle of repeated birth and death). Since “the capacity and deeds of men today are no longer” what they were in the past (p. 34), it becomes incumbent on practitioners to thoroughly understand the teachings in Parts 2 and 3 before they engage in the practices in Part 4. To not do so will likely lead to frustration and continued life in samsara.

### **The Problematic of Apocryphal Texts in Zen**

Although the *Awakening of Faith* is one of the most influential texts in the history of East Asian Buddhism, it is almost certainly a Chinese apocryphal – and reactions vary widely, therefore, on its value as a text in Buddhism. As examples: the founders of the Critical Buddhism movement in Japan in the 1990s considered the tathagatagarbha doctrine not Buddhist.<sup>11</sup> Others considered the doctrine only an expedient means for those who need the comfort of a Path to follow to enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> And still others regard the teachings in the *Awakening of Faith* as useful as other teachings in Buddhism to move along the Path, for people respond better to some teachings than to others, so all teachings should be offered.<sup>13</sup> Are the teachings in the text useless or expedient means and not the true teaching of the Buddha? The answer of course is to study the teachings in the text assiduously, to sit on your meditation mat following its practices, and to wait and see if you become enlightened!

### **Notes**

1. Tarocco (2008:323). There are numerous other statements of the same nature in the literature, for the text is an established classic in Mahayana Buddhism. Its importance is attested to by the numerous early commentaries written on it in China, Korea, and Japan, as noted below. For overviews of the text, see Hakeda (2006: 1-15), Anon (Wikipedia), Buswell and Lopez (2013b), Hsieh (2004), Keown (2003), Tarocco (2008), Gregory (1986), and Master Chi Hoi (2008).
2. See, for example, Buswell (1990:1), Hsieh (2004:389), Tarocco (2008:323), and Muller (1998:64). For Chinese Buddhist apocrypha, see Buswell (1990), Buswell and Lopez Jr. (2013a:58), Tokuno (2004), and Muller (1998). For Paramartha, see Paul (1984:11-37) and Grosnick (1989), for Fazang, see Chen (2007) and Vorenkamp (2004), and for Wonkyo, see Park (2003) and Buswell (2017).

3. For the Huayan School, see the Huayan primer in this series.
4. See Tarocco (2007, 2008), Pittman (2010), and Welch (19680) for starters. At this writing, there are four English translations of the *Awakening of Faith*. D. T. Suzuki translated Sikshanana's translation in 1900, Rv. Timothy Richard produced a translation in 1907, and Bhihashu Wai-tao and Dwight Goddard again in 1937. The translation most commonly referred to today is by Yoshito Hakeda (1967). Suzuki and Hakeda's translations are considered the most reliable.
5. Hakeda's text of the commentary is interspersed with often-lengthy comments, which together with the text are 66 pages long. The page numbers in this section and in the rest of the primer (e.g., p. 31-33) refer to the pages in the Columbia University Press 2006 edition of Hakeda's book, and include both the text and comments.
6. The word Mahayana in the text does not refer to Mahayana vs. Hinayana, but to Mahayana as the Absolute (the One Vehicle). So the title should read 'Awakening of Faith in the Absolute (or One Vehicle)'
7. Hakeda (2006:7).
8. The interpretation given here follows Gregory (1986). For a sampling of scholarly studies of the text, see Shiu (2011), Kang (2018), and Zeuschnr (1978).
9. For Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka, see the Madhyamaka primer in this series.
10. For the alayavijnana, see the Yogacara primer in this series.
11. For the Critical Buddhism movement, see Hubbard and Swanson (1997), Matsumoto (1997), and Swanson (1997).
12. As an example, see Hurley (2004).
13. Thich Nhat Hanh's (1998) *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings* skillfully combines the various teachings attributed to the Buddha in an easily understood manner.

## Bibliography

- Anon. Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Accessed December 10, 2018.
- Buswell, Robert E. Jr., ed. 1990. *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Buswell, Robert E. Jr. 2017. Wōnhyo: Buddhist Commentator *Par Excellence*. *Journal of Korean Religions* 8: 131-60.
- Buswell, Robert Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. 2013a. Apocrypha. In *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Buswell, Robert Jr., and Donald S. Lopez, Jr. eds., p. 58. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Buswell, Robert Jr., and Donald S. Lopez, Jr. 2013b. Dasheng qixin lun. In *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Buswell, Robert Jr., and Donald S. Lopez, Jr. eds., pp. 221-22. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chen, Jinhua. 2007. *Philosopher, Practitioner, Politician: The Many Lives of Fazang (643-712)*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gregory, Peter N. 1986. The Problem of Theodicy in the *Awakening of Faith*. *Religious Studies* 22 (1): 63-78.
- Grosnick, William H. 1989. The Categories of T'I, Hsiang, and Yung: Evidence that Paramartha Composed the Awakening of Faith. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12 (1): 65-92.
- Hakeda, Yoshito, trans. and ed. 2006 (1967). *The Awakening of Faith, Attributed to Āśvaghosa*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hurley, Scott. 2004. The Doctrinal Transformation of Twentieth-Century Chinese Buddhism: Master Yin-hun's Interpretation of the *Tathāgatagarbha* Doctrine. *Contemporary Buddhism* 5(1): 29-46.
- Hsieh, Ding-hwa. 2004. Awakening of Faith (Dasheng Qixin Lun). *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. pp. 38-39. New York: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Kang, Byongchang. 2018. Unifying Opposites through Metaphor: A Cognitive Approach to the Buddhist Metaphors for the Mind in the Awakening of Faith Discourse. *Religions* 9: 1-20.
- Keown, Damien. 2003. Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sāstra. In *Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Damien Keown, pp. 168-69. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Master Chi Hoi. 2008. *Understanding the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, Vol.1, trans. Hui-nien, Hui-yee, Hui-hong, Hui-deng. San Francisco: Day of Enlightenment of Sakyamuni Buddha.

- Matsumoto, S. 1997. The Doctrine of *Tathāgata-garbha* is Not Buddhist, in Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (eds.), *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism*, 165-73. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Muller, Charles. 1998. East Asian Apocryphal Scriptures: Their Origin and Role in the Development of Sinitic Buddhism. *Bulletin of Toyo Gakuen University* 6: 63-76.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. 1998. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Park, Sung-bae. 2003. Wonhyo's Faith System, as seen in his Commentaries on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith. *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 2(2): 25-45.
- Paul, Diana Y. 1984. *Philosophy of Mind in Sixth-Century China: Paramartha's "Evolution of Consciousness."* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pittman, D. 2001. *Toward A Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Richard, T. 1907. *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana Doctrine: The New Buddhism*. Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, printed by the Methodist Publishing House.
- Shiu, Henry C. 2011. Nonsubstantialism of the Awakening of Faith in Mou Zongsan. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38(2): 223-37.
- Suzuki, D. T. 1900. *Asvaghosa's Discourse on the Wakening of Faith in the Mahayana*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Co.
- Swanson, Paul L. 1997. Why They Say Zen Is Not Buddhism, in Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (eds.), *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm Over Critical Buddhism*, 165-73. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Tarocco, Franceska. 2007. *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma*. London: Routledge.
- Tarocco, Franceska. 2008. Lost in Translation? The Treatise on the Mahayana Awakening of Faith (Dasheng qixin lun) and Its Modern Readings. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71 (20): 323-43.
- Tokuno, Kyoko. 2004. Apocrypha, in Robert E. Buswell (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 24-28. New York: Macmillan Reference Library.
- Vorenkamp, Dirch, trans. 2004. *An English Translation of Fu-Tsang's Commentary on the Awakening of Faith*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Welch, H. 1968. *The Buddhist Revival in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zeuschner, Robert B. 1978. The Understanding of Mind in the Northern Line of Chan (Zen). *Philosophy East and West* 28(1): 69-79.