

Is Žižek a Mahāyāna Buddhist? *śūnyatā* and *li* v Žižek's materialism

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Abstract

An intriguing interresonance plays out between various forms of Mahayana Buddhist ontology and Žižek's dialectical materialism. His disdainful critique of (Western) Buddhism is well-known. As a cultural critic, Žižek might be onto something in his contention that Western Buddhism functions as the perfect ideology for late capitalism. As an ontologist, however, he seems to be ambivalent regarding the parallels between the Buddhist Void (Absolute Nothingness-Formlessness-Emptiness), to which the Western Buddhists supposedly withdraw, and his elaboration of a new foundation of dialectical materialism. Žižek is one of the few contemporary continental philosophers who do not hesitate to engage Buddhism. My claim is that, notwithstanding his criticism, Žižek is much closer to Mahayana than he thinks. My aim therefore is to demonstrate how this is so. To do this, I will mainly focus on the following forms of Mahayana thought: *śūnyatā* (emptiness) in the context of Nāgārjuna's the Two-Truth doctrine, Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhist concept of *li* (coherence), and Nishida Kitarō's philosophy of *basho* ("place of nothingness"), which was heavily influenced by the Japanese Zen/Pure Land Buddhism. After going through some of the preliminary affinities among Mahayana forms and Žižek (e.g. nothingness as a generative void, self-relating negativity, irresolvable absolutely contradictory reality, materialism as affirming existence absolutely (immediately and without reservation) in its absolute contradiction, and materialism as the contradictory/paradoxical field conceived as an atheistic religious field, and so on), I will analyse each school of Mahayana mentioned above and point out the parallels between these and Žižek's own thought.

Keywords: Philosophy, Žižek, Buddhism, Coherence, Tiantai

Introduction

An intriguing interresonance plays out between various forms of Mahāyāna Buddhist ontology and Žižek's dialectical materialism. His disdainful critique of (New Age Western) Buddhism and various "Taos" is well-known (Žižek 2001). As a cultural critic, Žižek might be onto something in his contention that Western Buddhism, especially in its New Age forms, functions as the perfect ideology in its fetishist mode for late capitalism. In his own words: "although 'Western Buddhism' presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement" (Žižek 2001). Again: "Western Buddhism, this pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner distance and indifference towards the frantic pace of free-market competition, is arguably the most efficient way for us to participate fully in the capitalist dynamic, while retaining the appearance of mental sanity—in short, the paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism" (Žižek 2008b: 43). It is hard not to agree with him on this point, thus I will not dwell on this aspect too much. As an ontologist, however, he seems to be ambivalent regarding the parallels between the Buddhist Void—the field of nihilism, or absolute nothingness, formlessness, or emptiness—to which the (New Age Western) Buddhists supposedly withdraw, and his elaboration of the way towards a new foundation of dialectical materialism spelled out in *Less Than Nothing* (2013), his magnum opus, and *Absolute Recoil* (2014).

It should be pointed out however that the distinction between Žižek's disdainful view of Buddhism as a pop-cultural phenomenon versus his scathing critique of Buddhist ontology in general cannot be maintained for long simply because Žižek himself conflates the two. His criticism of the former goes hand in hand with the criticism of the latter.

I should add that it is no longer possible to oppose this Western Buddhism to its “authentic” Oriental version; the case of Japan delivers the conclusive evidence here. Not only do we have today, among top Japanese managers, the widespread “corporate Zen” phenomenon; over the whole of the last 150 years, Japan’s rapid industrialization and militarization, with their ethics of discipline and sacrifice, were sustained by the large majority of Zen thinkers – who today knows that D.T. Suzuki himself, the high guru of Zen in 1960s America, supported in his youth in Japan, in the 1930s, the spirit of rigid discipline and militaristic expansion? *There is no contradiction here, no manipulative perversion of the authentic compassionate insight: the attitude of total immersion in the selfless “now” of instant Enlightenment, in which all reflexive distance is lost and “I am what I do”, as C.S. Lewis put it - in short: in which absolute discipline coincides with total spontaneity - perfectly legitimizes subordination to the militaristic social machine. (Žižek 2008b: 43, emphasis added)*

In a way, it would be naïve to look for pure (“authentic”) Buddhism undefiled by messy historical processes, late capitalist dynamics being the most recent, as in the case of Heidegger, whose philosophy, on the one hand, and his short-lived but shocking engagement with National Socialism, on the other, inexorably create tensions in our understanding of his thinking. It is somewhat inadequate and misleading to claim to be able to separate the thought from the biography of the thinker. It turns out it is not that shocking after all that Heidegger was involved with National Socialism. As Žižek (2008) himself convincingly argues, Heidegger’s thought and his biography are integrally connected. The latter follows from the former. Similarly, when Žižek makes an analogous claim in the case of Buddhism as in the quotation above, we need to take him seriously. Historical forms of Buddhism and the core Buddhist principles cannot be unproblematically kept apart. Yet, as we will see in the main body of this paper, Buddhists are aware of this problem and they address it.

Žižek is one of the few contemporary continental philosophers who do not hesitate to engage Buddhism head-on. My claim is that, notwithstanding his criticism,

especially concerning the Imperial-Way (Zen) Buddhism (2008b), Žižek is much closer to Mahāyāna than he thinks. My aim therefore is to demonstrate how this is so. To do this, I will mainly focus on the following forms of Mahāyāna thought: *śūnyatā* (emptiness) in the context of Nāgārjuna's Two-Truth doctrine (Indian Mahāyāna) and Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhist concept of *li* (coherence).

I will initially go through some of the preliminary affinities among Mahāyāna forms and Žižek, and then I will analyse each school of Mahāyāna mentioned above and point out the parallels between them and Žižek's own thought. The basic tenor of the argument is that in terms both of content of his philosophical corpus and style of his writing and public lectures and persona, Žižek can be considered a Mahāyāna Buddhist/Zen master. This is not a whimsical claim. It constitutes the central axis of the argument presented in this paper. In this regard, the focus of the paper is the *pedagogical* core of both Mahāyāna and Žižek's respective ontologies. Claiming that Žižek is a Zen master is not so much about his theoretical engagements as his ability to unsettle people's relation to their understanding of reality. That is, he does not merely offer some theoretical "wisdom," the imbecility of which he mocks through his hilarious comical analysis of proverbs in his commentary on Shelling's *Ages of the World* (Žižek 2004). Rather, he masterfully employs *upāya* ("skillful means") to induce a *satori-like* sudden flash of awakening in his readers and interlocutors.

Basic familiarity with Žižek's vocabulary is assumed. I will however elaborate Buddhist ideas and concepts more systematically, especially in relation to Tiantai school of Chinese Buddhism since, it will be argued, the latter provides the most cogent expression of Buddhism as a whole.

Part I: Preliminary Affinities

There are three conspicuous characteristics common to both Mahāyāna and Žižek. To begin with, for both Mahāyāna and Žižek, the notions of *contradiction* and *negation* are central. The ontological issues, that is, accounts of reality, and conceptions of subjectivity, i.e., our place in reality, are always considered together: ontology is not merely a cerebral exercise; it is a subjective practice against the tendency/desire to

convert contradiction into reconciliation. At the most fundamental level, there is radical contradiction that cannot be resolved into a positive synthesis. Reality in-itself is something contradictory. It consists of irresolvable contradiction. Expressed in Tiantai idiom: despite the existence of local coherence, things are globally incoherent. The inaccessibility of the In-itself to our experience is not due to a limitation on our part (our inability to *know* the true state of affairs behind appearances), but is constitutive of reality in-itself. This is Žižek's typical Hegelian point where Kantian epistemological contradictions and impasses are ontologized. There are no noumena that are "in themselves' fully positive, the proper cause and foundation of phenomena" (Žižek 2013: 282). Rather, what we have is "the self-limitation of phenomena as such" (Žižek 2013: 282).

In this case, negativity is not a mirror-like effect of transcendent positivity (so that we can only grasp the transcendent In-itself in a negative way); on the contrary, every positive figure of the In-itself is a "positivization" of negativity, a fantasmatic formation we construct in order to fill in the gap of negativity. (Žižek 2013; 282)

Similarly, in Mahāyāna literature, any and all transcendent self-causing positivity is renounced. What is posited is nothing but phenomena that co-arise with every other phenomena in a bottomless groundless matrix. The latter characterizations of what Mahāyāna posits are necessarily misleading since they do not do justice to the thorough-going negativity that underlies the notion of emptiness in Mahāyāna thought. Nevertheless, they can be utilized as approximations for now. The point Mahāyāna is trying to arrive at is that no phenomenon has a single cause (neither self-caused nor other-caused) but comes into being through the workings of myriad other phenomena of different levels and modes. In other words, there is no proper cause and foundation of phenomena. There is only one sphere of objects: "there are only phenomena and their (self-) limitation, their negativity" (Žižek 2013: 282). In Mahāyānist vernacular, there is only dependently co-arisen phenomena.

In the face of such an ontology of contradiction and negativity, what Žižek counsels us to do is to remain/tarry with the contradiction to the very end. The pedagogical aspect of tarrying with the negative consists of the perpetual saying of “no” for a sustained critique of ideology (“fantasmatic formations”) so that we are not lured into a false sense of hope for a harmonic resolution of contradictions. Žižek’s main strategy is to keep things open rather than trying to close up gaps. We are asked to situate ourselves in contradiction, which usually is a painful practice. Ordinarily, humans want to resolve contradictions and reach a stable and content self-identity. And yet the claim is that there is no solution to contradiction; self-identity is absolutely contradictory. Thus, we can only live the absolute contradiction as such. Unlike the commonly misrecognized notion of nirvana, the Mahāyānists do not withdraw from the world of phenomena into the tranquillity of phenomenaless Void. Rather, they tarry with the negative simply by dropping the one-sided attachment to phenomena and embracing the all-pervasiveness of all phenomena in all their ambiguity. For instance, “Tiantai philosophy asserts emphatically that Buddhahood inherently includes every form of evil, that these evils can never be destroyed, and that they do not need to be destroyed” (Ziporyn 2016: 1). If that is the case, “the best way to overcome our own suffering, delusion, and evil is to dwell more deeply within them, that dwelling within them is itself a way of being liberated from them, that the deeper we dwell in them, the freer of them we become” (Ziporyn 2016: 2). In other words, the insight into emptiness—that things are devoid of self-nature for all phenomena dependently co-arise—is universalized interpervasively to include all phenomena (including the nauseating ones). Being free of evil does not eliminate evil. We are not transported into a realm where there is no more evil. There is one realm, which is full of all manners of evil, and yet our attitude shifts. This is a shift in how things appear to us. With this shift, we achieve a certain sense of stillness and serenity. Our grasping attitude towards phenomena drops. This is more like Hegel’s Absolute Knowing. It is not the special type of knowledge that bestows the knower a special type of access to a special type of realm (nirvana is not a different realm other to samsara, the world of suffering). Rather,

“Absolute Knowing” is the final recognition of a limitation which is “absolute” in the sense that it is not determinate or particular, not a “relative” limit or obstacle to our knowledge that we can clearly see and locate as such. It is invisible “as such” because it is the limitation of the entire field as such—that closure of the field which, from within the field itself (and we are always by definition within it, because in a way this field “is” ourselves) cannot but appear as its opposite, as the very openness of the field. (Žižek 2013: 388)

The second affinity concerns the notion of *materialism*: both Mahāyāna and Žižek affirm existence absolutely (immediately and without reservation and not just *ultimately*) in its absolute contradiction. Both subscribe to a one-world account of things. There is definitely no other-worldly redemptive orientation. For both, materialism as the contradictory/paradoxical field of existence is conceived as an absolutely atheistic religious field: the existence of God is not postulated yet the question of being has its religious register in the sense that the existence of evil constitutes a subjective and practical problem in the face of the affirmation of the being of this world—how can we affirm the most horrific most troubling aspects of this world? How can we say “evil immediately *is* Buddha” (Asakura 2011: 662)? Recall Žižek’s conclusion that “the only way to be an atheist is through Christianity.” That is to say, true atheism is possible only by relinquishing trust in any form of Big Other. For Nishida Kitarō, the founder of Kyoto School of philosophy in Japan, which was heavily influenced by the Japanese Zen/Pure Land Buddhism, for instance, the highest form of existence for human beings can only be religious. The latter, however, is understood in peculiarly non-theistic terms, whereby purposeless causation underlies a God-less universe that is constituted by infinite centers of agency acting without the benefit of a single purposive mind or consciousness causing the universe to exist the way it does. Moreover, materialism, or, all-encompassing affirmation of reality, is not a theoretical postulate but an actual ongoing practice. In Žižek, this practice takes the form of infinite (self-) criticism without rest. It consists of the attitude that sees reality qua absolute contradiction and absolute self-disruption. Philosophy in this sense is a painstaking practice of absolute critique. In

Mahāyāna, the practice of “skillful means” (*upāyas*) is the focus. This term refers to one’s deftness to utilize any thought or act as a means to always reveal a different side to the story that we have taken for granted to fight the constant tendency towards ossification of bodymind in one-sided awareness of things. Put differently, *upāyas* are statements or actions that are not ultimately true themselves but are meant to serve a therapeutic or pedagogical function to undermine the grasping attitude, that is the source of suffering for sentient beings (Ziporyn 2015: 254). Here, an attempt is made to undermine *all* representationalist models of knowledge and understanding. The necessity of misrecognition is taken advantage of. All representation is misrepresentation. Therefore, any representation can be used to point to its limitation (or fixity) to open up the field of awareness to infinity.

Finally, in terms of *style*, surprising reversals, perplexing paradoxes, and shocking contradictions are prevalent and are adeptly mobilized to expound the key ideas in both Mahāyāna and Žižek. Žižek’s fondness for the use of parables and “bad taste” jokes to get his obscure messages across and illustrate difficult concepts with ease and vividness very much parallels the basic style of Mahāyāna sutras, which, of course, are full of colorful and dramatic stories and parables. This, however, should not suggest that all Mahāyāna and Žižek do is to string one parable after another. The rigorous rational analyses are interspersed with these tales, jokes, and parables.

Having noted some of the preliminary affinities between Mahāyāna and Žižek, I now would like to delve more deeply into the forms of Mahāyāna mentioned above in order to bring to the fore the interresonances between them and Žižek. In this, I will largely rely on Brook Ziporyn’s masterful exposition of Tiantai Buddhism in his *Emptiness and Omnipresence* (2016), which provides an accessible interpretation of and commentary on one of the most intriguing and famous Mahāyāna scriptures, the *Lotus Sutra*. According to Ziporyn (2013: 104):

This text [Lotus Sutra] appears to be the product of some sectarian infighting, between a still relatively new Mahayana movement and the “Śrāvakas” or disciples of the “Hinayana” (a pejorative Mahayana term meaning “Small Vehicle”), aggressively selling the idea that, contrary to

the “Hinayana” claim, the goal of Buddhist practice is not the extinction of individual existence and suffering in Nirvana, thereby becoming an Arhat, but rather to be a Bodhisattva, to practice the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva path, to work toward eventually becoming a Buddha, which means to be endlessly engaged in the project of knowing, interacting with, relating to, guiding, educating, and liberating all sorts of sentient beings, coming up with lots of different ways of edifying them in accordance with their particular dispositions and desires.

Three central notions from Mahāyāna Buddhism will be the main focus of this exposition. These are: *conditioned co-arising*, *intersubsumption*, and *bodhisattva ideal*, all of which, when considered together, point to a *pedagogical* core in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this context, the claim that Žižek can be considered a Mahāyāna Buddhist/Zen master is not treated in a light-hearted manner. As an educational philosopher, I intend to highlight the pedagogical nature of both Buddhism and Žižek. Put differently, my main focus is on practical reason, which studies the question of being via pedagogical (or moral) practice. That is, discussions of ontological matters cannot be divorced from discussions of the highest good although both Žižek and Mahāyāna operate on amoral grounds. In this respect, the question of the existence of evil will be tackled to illustrate the concepts used in Mahāyāna literature. I contend that whatever their respective philosophical approaches might be, at their most fundamental level, both Žižek and Mahāyāna aim to transform our sense of self in a most practical manner. Being a Zen master is not about being in possession of some theory of existence. It is rather being able to practice a certain pedagogy, a method that helps people realize what self/subjectivity is all about. Now, onto the theory.

Part II: *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) in the Context of Nāgārjuna's Two-Truth Doctrine

Introductory Remarks

In this section, my aim is to go over some of the fundamental ideas in Buddhism in a somewhat conversational tone to avoid jargon-filled technicalities since my overall goal is to highlight the affinities between Mahāyāna and Žižek without getting bogged down in scholarly disputations and sectarian polemics, which happen rather frequently, especially in Mahāyāna; hence, opening this section with a discussion of the Four Noble Truths, the skeletal common framework of Buddhism.

The most basic and universal tenet of Buddhism in all its forms is that the existential condition of sentience, or experience in general, including the human condition, is suffering (the First Noble Truth). This is the case since, broadly speaking, experience is driven by and attached to the ability to control reality, to have the power to get a desired state or thing whenever it wills (the Second Noble Truth). “What we desire is control, to be the sole cause of what happens to us. What we desire is *selfhood*” (Ziporyn 2016: 10, emphasis original). Put differently, experience is driven by the gap or discordance between our desiring what is not the case and the reality of what is the case, and the false belief/hope that this gap can be eliminated by making reality conform to our desire. When this concordance fails to obtain, which it invariably does for reasons that will be explained below, frustration ensues and our response tends towards an attempt to control the situation in such a way that such frustration does not materialize ever. This tendency to exert control over the way reality unfolds so that the satisfaction we derive from it is constant is *selfhood*, which is always destined to fail for the simple reason that the self cannot be the sole cause of itself or the world. The basic Buddhist doctrine of causality maintains that all events in experience are devoid of a single cause; they are always co-conditioned, conditioned by multiple causes, and we cannot know all of them at once, so there is no way to completely control a given situation.

The possibility of liberation from suffering, that is, ending the desire to control reality, exists and is attainable by human beings for it is possible for us to see things more clearly (the Third Noble Truth). When things are seen more clearly, it is realized that “there simply is no such single-cause controller of our being or experience, nothing with the power to remain just what it is and determine what it undergoes through its own sole agency” (Ziporyn 2016: 15). That is, there is no self for there is nowhere to be found in the universe a single agency causing things to happen. Once this is realized, it is also realized that desiring what is not the case by contorting reality to submit to our project is futile since we are not singly in charge. We then let go of desire (to control reality), which paradoxically leads to immense satisfaction: “by eventually ending the desire to end suffering that suffering can be ended” (Ziporyn 2016: 5). In other words, “in the end, it is the *acceptance* of suffering, the recognition of suffering, the full realization of suffering that finally succeeds in ending suffering” (Ziporyn 2016: 5, emphasis original). The famous Mahāyānist formulation goes: “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” (samsara is nirvana, and nirvana is samsara). Both samsara (the realm of suffering) and nirvana (the cessation of suffering) have always already taken place, not separately but by virtue of each other. The recognition and acceptance of suffering (as nirvana) is the recognition and acceptance of the lack of single-cause controller of experience. Once this is achieved (with the help of Buddhist teachings and practice, that is, dharma), liberation is around the corner (the Fourth Noble Truth).

In short, Buddhist ontology is an ontology of suffering and the practice of liberation from suffering. It should be immediately noted that the aim is not the end of suffering per se. Rather, it is *liberation* from suffering. Suffering does not end, but we are liberated from it. We do not fuse with a void or return to nothingness when we are liberated. We fully remain in the world in absolute affirmation of the world. As Ziporyn (2016: 5) points out, “suffering is ineradicable, and enlightenment does not mean eliminating it or even reducing it, but in a certain sense just the opposite: fully accepting it as literally omnipresent, just as the First Noble Truth proclaims.” This nuance between the ending of something and being liberated from it will become clearer as the exposition unfolds. In Žižekian jargon, there is an ineradicable trauma at the core of existence, hence at the core of our own existence. It concerns the incompleteness of

existence. Existence is undermined by its own immanent antagonisms, which cannot be eliminated. That which cannot be eliminated, Žižek refers to as *subjectivity* proper. Reality is not an ontologically consistent and complete Whole. It is a Whole that is replete with immanent inconsistencies, i.e. the deadlock of subjectivity.

The Žižekian death drive is how humans experience the trauma of subjectivity, or subjective negativity. Life is a cycle of constant generation and destruction (the wheel of samsara). The death drive is the negation of this cycle (nirvana is the negation of samsara). It is not mere self-destruction or annihilation of this cycle (you cannot get rid of samsara). Rather, it is an attempt to bring imbalance to the Whole cycle of generation and destruction. It is the monstrous freedom, the very break with nature, the inhuman aspect of the human. This desire to negate the natural cycle can never be completely satisfied. Thus, it is constantly repeated, and only in this repetition is it satisfied (nirvana *is* the repetition of samsara, and nothing beyond this repetition). For Žižek, the death drive is the *blind* compulsion to repeat. For Buddhists, it is the *enlightened* compulsion to repeat. This is nirvana. In that sense, we are not condemned to a hopeless miserable meaningless life. Rather, we skillfully live through the trauma. We stay with the trauma until it is fully reevaluated. The trauma stays but our attitude towards it shifts. Death drive cannot be expelled; it needs to be embraced in the form of the negation of negation: nirvana is samsara.

Let's unpack these ideas a little further.

All experience, according to Buddhism, is *conditioned*, *impermanent*, and *nonself*. All these aspects of experience derive from a simple but profound principle in the Buddhist doctrine of causality: *things are devoid of single-causes*. All events in experience are co-conditioned. As Harvey (2013: 46) highlights, "the understanding of conditioned co-arising is so central to Buddhist practice and development that the Buddha's chief disciple, Sāriputta, said, 'Whoever sees Conditioned Co-arising sees *Dhamma* [Truth], whoever sees *Dhamma* sees Conditioned Co-arising.'" No event can make itself happen on its own. An event not only relies on something else to happen; more importantly, it requires *more than one condition* in order to happen. Put succinctly, "no single cause produces an effect; every effect results from a *combination* of causes

and conditions” (Ziporyn 2016: 11, emphasis original). To illustrate this principle in a logical fashion:

Assume that there is some single thing or state of affairs, X. Assume that X is the cause of the arising in experience of something else, called Y. If X alone were sufficient to bring about the arising of Y, then whenever there was X, there would also be Y. That would mean that there can never have been a beginning of X’s causing of Y; X and Y would always happen together. In that case, Y would really just be a part of X, an aspect or feature of X. X would always be XY. In that case, X could not account for the arising of Y at some particular time. There would be no possibility of X causing Y to arise at some time or place in particular. (Ziporyn 2016: 11-12)

What are the implications of this fundamental insight? It is clear from the above that for any event to arise, to begin, it cannot be unconditional since that would mean that regardless of any condition this event would take place anyway, which would prevent it from being an experience at all. An experience, by definition, needs to be circumscribed. It has to start and end. Otherwise, it would be omnipresent and eternal, and therefore, we would not be able to tell whether the experience in question is happening or not since there would be nothing to contrast it to. An all-pervasive eternal experience is no experience at all.

Moreover, no event or thing can have a single cause acting alone as was demonstrated above. To rephrase: “for if only one condition is necessary for a given thing’s existence, the condition and that conditioned thing should properly be considered two parts of a single entity, for at any time or place when the one is found, the other is also found, and that is the sole criterion for what counts as aspects of a single thing; they are not genuinely ontologically separable” (Ziporyn 2016: 18). The consequences therefore are: all experienced events are conditional and impermanent since none can be unconditional going on forever. This is the meaning of the denial of self in Buddhism. The self as something that remains constant and unchanged over

time is denied. The self as consciousness, or the body, is not denied. The 'I' as this body, or the 'I' as this observer of the flow of experiences arising and perishing in the stream of my consciousness are not denied. What is denied is the *constancy* of the self. "Constancy is tied, in the notion of self, to the notion of control. But control means simply what happens due to a *single cause*; if a single cause makes something happen, we say that single cause is the controller of that event" (Ziporyn 2016: 14, emphasis original). However, there is no such single cause controller of events to be found anywhere in reality.

At this juncture, I would like to point out an intriguing similarity between Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* and *Umwelt* and the Buddhist notion of lack of single-cause. As is well-known, *Dasein* is Heidegger's term for the human being in a state of a peculiar relationship with its environment wherein the human being is immersed in practical (as opposed to theoretical detached) engagement with its surroundings based on a thrown-possibility that derives its meaning from the temporality of its received past and projected future. What is peculiar about this relationship is that *Dasein* has a *circumspective* understanding of its reality. That is, before a distinct sense of self or 'I' emerges in the foreground of our consciousness, there is a sense of a world that is already there in the background to give meaning to this narrowly circumscribed sense of I, which we make the mistake of solely identifying with. It turns out that what we consider to be ourselves is merely a nodal point in an infinitely extending horizon of experience that we are always already immersed in. Similarly, what is denied in Buddhism is this narrow sense of self to be the center (and controller) of our experience. When the larger context of our *Umwelt* is taken into account, when we become more aware, what we think to be the agency behind our volitional life, our "self," is realized to be only a minor figure in the unfolding story of infinite life. Buddhism draws our attention to this infinite matrix of experience by its doctrine of nonself just like Heidegger draws our attention to *Dasein* and even further onto *Sein*, that groundless ground of immanent contingently unfolding epochs of existence. The authentic *Dasein* is the human being who has disidentified with the narrow sense of self (the controlling self that thinks it has absolute control over the events of the world) and has become aware

of the broader context of the life-world that is constituted by multiple heterogeneous conditions (devoid of single cause), or the *Umwelt* that is not self-determined.

Žižek's criticism of Heidegger, in which he claims that Heidegger recoiled when faced with "the abyss of radical subjectivity announced in Kantian transcendental imagination" (Žižek 2008: 22), does not, for our purposes, affect the validity of Heidegger's basic insight. If anything, it brings it closer to the Buddhist understanding of nonself, especially in its Tiantai forms, which are highly unorthodox in Buddhism. Žižek's basic contention is that what we can call "the force-field of imagination" is the fundamental dimension of subjectivity, which is prior to and independent of the synthetic activity of understanding: it is "neither passive-receptive nor conceptual" (Žižek 2008: 23). It is pre-cognitive spontaneity. This transcendental force-field has both a negative and a positive aspect. Typically, in Western philosophy, the former has been neglected at the expense of the latter. In its positive aspect, transcendental imagination is a force of synthesis at the zero-level of sensuous impressions (and not yet at the level of conceptual understanding). In its negative aspect, however, which Žižek wants to highlight, this force-field of imagination is the "night of the world," to use Hegelese. That is, imagination in its violent disruptive aspect tearing apart, or decontextualizing and hence setting free, any element out of its unified context in which it is embedded.

To 'imagine' means to imagine a partial object without its body, a colour without shape, a shape without a body: 'here a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition'. This 'night of the world' is thus transcendental imagination at its most elementary and violent – the unrestrained reign of the violence of imagination, of its 'empty freedom' which dissolves every objective link, every connection grounded in the thing itself. (Žižek 2008: 30)

The Buddhist idea of nonself/emptiness, which we will be going into more closely below, is strikingly similar to what Žižek is describing here. Say, I have disconnected my foot from my body by cutting it off (quite a violent act)! It soon ceases to be a *foot*; loses its prior identity as 'my foot,' and becomes something else (*meat* for worms, for instance). I

have decontextualized my foot (literally detached it from the rest of the body). It no longer belongs to my body, the Whole it is a part of, and becomes suspended, not belonging to any context, for a moment. This does not last very long, however. It is *recontextualized* and assumes a new identity: becomes meat for worms, or energy for that particular ecosystem. For Buddhism, nothing has a constant identity. All phenomena are composites, formed through the agency of multiple-causes, which cannot be pinned down once and for all since there is no inherently unified subterranean layer of connections waiting to be realized. Everything is constantly in a state of being decontextualized and recontextualized. Put differently, things are empty of persistent identities. Every unifying moment or activity of the subject is underlain by a disruptive force, and, Žižek argues, this force is the proper domain of subjectivity. The self can never be a stable unified Whole. It is constitutionally underlain by a disruptive force which it cannot control and master. Buddhists would concur to a certain extent. There is such a domain of subjectivity. It is just not absolutized. There is no question of primacy: disruption is as fundamental as synthesis. Incoherence is as fundamental as coherence. As we will see in our discussion of Tiantai Buddhism soon, subjectivity is the power or act of constant decontextualization (disruption) and recontextualization (synthesis) within an inconclusive abyssal matrix—what Buddhists call the world of samsara/nirvana without any external guarantee to resolve the inherent tension between the latter two, which really is not a *two* (nor is it a *one*—more on that later). There is no separate substantial stable self outside this dynamic matrix or field.

The Two-Truth Doctrine: The Ultimate Truth/Conventional Truth Structure of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism

Equipped with the guiding principle of conditioned co-arising of all phenomena, the fundamental attitude of Buddhism is practical and concerns doing those things that alleviate suffering. More precisely put, it is about doing things (any thing) skillfully so that suffering is alleviated. Buddhism does not prioritize engaging in morose metaphysical speculations, say, of the truth and falsity of finely nuanced metaphysical distinctions such as whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the body and soul are

of the same substance or of different substances, whether there is life after death or not, and so on—unless of course having these metaphysical discussions might prove to be conducive to the alleviation of suffering itself; in some circumstances, they actually do. Therefore, what is true in Buddhism is what is conducive to alleviating/ending suffering. Truth refers to any statement or practice that is justified solely in terms of its utility for the goal of diminishing suffering (Ziporyn 2013: 191). As Ziporyn (2013: 191) points out, this is the overriding soteriological aim of the entire Buddhist tradition:

Every statement and every practice are justified *solely* in terms of their utility for the goal of *diminishing suffering*. That means that both Buddhist epistemology and Buddhist ethics are thoroughly pragmatic: what is *true* is what is conducive to ending suffering, and what is *good* is action that is conducive to ending suffering. (emphases original)

Here the Buddha's famous "parable of the raft" is relevant: imagine you are standing on the shore of a mighty river. The shore you are on is dangerous and fearful, whereas the far shore seems to be safe and free of fear. You decide to cross it; however, there is no bridge or boat in sight so you resolve to build a makeshift raft with whatever you can gather together from the immediate environment. You somehow manage with great effort to cross to the safe shore. The question is what do you do once you reach the safety of the far shore? Do you leave the raft behind and continue your journey on the dry land, or do you somehow hold onto the raft in case you might need it later in your onward journey? Well, the Buddha would counsel to leave the raft behind since the dharma (Buddhist teachings and practices) is like a raft. It is useful for crossing over but not good if held onto. The lesson of the parable is clear: the dangerous and fearful near shore is the world of samsara, the world of suffering, the world of attachment. The makeshift raft is the Buddhist teachings and practices, which are simply garnered as a useful tool to be dispensed with once we arrive in the shore of nirvana (cessation of suffering).

In other words, "what helps one get across is good, is useful, is valid, is to be clung to for the duration of one's journey" (Ziporyn 2013: 191). Once on the other shore,

however, the raft is to be left behind. The Buddhist teachings and practices are merely means/vehicle by which to pass beyond itself. They should not be clung to once their utility expires. We need to observe a balance between attachment and renunciation of all attachment to dharma: “a raft must be clung to, committed to, depended on single-mindedly *at a certain time*—that is, while one is on the way across the river. If you were to invoke the principle of nonattachment while still crossing the river, and therefore ‘let go’ of the raft, you would drown and never reach the other shore. This parable gives a reason to be completely devoted to Buddhism, to accept its teachings and to practice accordingly, but also to be mentally prepared to drop it all eventually. It also tells us how we should regard these teachings: as tools, not as descriptions of truth” (Ziporyn 2016: 30, emphasis original)

In this sense, Buddhism has a pragmatic understanding of truth: truth is a tool the skillful use of which is justified to the extent that it leads to the cessation of suffering. Truth is not something that describes what is ultimately so in an absolute sense. Here lies the crux of the two-truth doctrine of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, articulated most perspicuously by the Indian sage Nāgārjuna. Any *thing* we think or say, any statement we make, is conventionally true to the extent that it is conducive to the alleviation of suffering. They are all rafts leading beyond themselves to the cessation of suffering, to the end of the grasping attitude. They would cease to be effective rafts as soon as they are clung to as if they were universally true in all places and at all times, that is, when they assume metaphysical status. Any description of what is really the case in an absolute sense is a form of attachment, a form of grasping, that does not help with the alleviation of suffering, and therefore needs to be jettisoned. And this is the ultimate truth: any and all views are empty (śūnya) of ultimate value/validity including this view itself. Every statement of truth is empty of absoluteness including this very view itself. Emptiness (śūnyatā) as a description of ultimate reality is only a conventional truth. It is a useful tool to be employed to get across the mighty river to the other shore. Once the river has been navigated successfully, it has to be left behind for “emptiness” is also empty.

Emptiness (Śūnyatā)

The notion of emptiness is an alternative way of referring to the notion of conditioned co-arising: “since all things arise only due to causes and conditions, no thing (or state, being, condition, experience, element, or reality) can ever exist independently” (Ziporyn 2016: 39). The implication is that “something self-existing and bearing its own unambiguous characteristics” does not exist. This idea is basically a reiteration of the doctrine of nonself. In other words, there is no ‘thing’ that “possesses some particular unambiguous identity” (Ziporyn 2016: 38). Emptiness of things therefore refers to their “ontological ambiguity” (Ziporyn 2016: 38). It is not that we simply don’t yet know what things truly are. They are themselves unclear in themselves. They are split within themselves. Another way to say the same thing is to state that it is not a matter of epistemological limitation on our part; it is ontologically so. In Žižekian terms, it is “the reversal of epistemological obstacle into ontological impossibility that characterizes the Thing itself: the very failure of my effort to grasp the Thing has to be (re)conceived as a feature of the Thing, as an impossibility inscribed into the very heart of the Real” (Žižek 2016: 2).

A parallel to the Badiou of *Theory of the Subject* might be helpful here. Badiou redefines the Hegelian dialectic in terms of the logic of scission, whereby “everything that exists is thus at the same time itself and itself-according-to-its-place” (Badiou 2013: 8). In other words, a *something*, an A, is always constitutively minimally divided between itself and its-being-placed in a structured space of placement, a Whole.

Now Hegel says that what *determines* the split term, what gives it the singularity of its existence, is not of course A, the generic term closed in on itself, indifferent to any dialectic. It is rather A_p , A according to the effect of the whole into which it is inscribed. (Badiou 2013: 8)

In Buddhist terms, this “effect of the whole into which something is inscribed” or placed is the matrix of co-dependent arising, which is the dynamic (dialectical, if you

will) field of emptiness that makes A empty of self-nature. It is always already divided/split in itself.

Thus, the notions of conditioned co-arising, nonself, emptiness, and ontological ambiguity can all be used interchangeably, and for our present purposes amount to the same thing. They are different ways of calling attention to the same insight: any set, A, is *necessarily* dependent on the set, non-A to be what it is; and non-A, the involvement of 'otherness' in what any thing is, is a combination of causes and conditions, that we cannot exhaustively master and control for there is no single-agent causality (Ziporyn 2016). Hence, suffering is the result of our *inattentiveness* to the role played by non-A in the constitution of A. We simply make a category mistake of dealing with A as if it were self-determined, a sole cause of itself, just itself and nothing else. Suffering is thus the result of ignorance: ignoring the constitutive role of non-A in the impermanent ambiguous identity of A. As the scope of our attention expands and our focus is broadened to consider A and non-A together, our realization of the emptiness of phenomena grows.

Emptiness can be considered an extreme version of *relationism*. As Karen Barad (2007: 136–7) notes, “the world is not populated with things that are more or less the same or different from one another. Relations do not follow relata, but the other way around.” However, this is misleading as well since emptiness cannot be associated with any particular view as the true view. *Relationism* is not the ultimate truth. All views are empty, that is, they all are conventionally true to the extent that they facilitate the alleviation of suffering. No view should be clung to as the ultimate truth. It turns out relationism cannot be ultimately true either since there are no relations as well! Ziporyn (2016: 39) puts it in the following manner:

There are no things without relations. The relations between all things are necessary relations. But if two things are necessarily related, such that they cannot exist without each other, then they are really not *two things*; they are *two parts* of one thing. There is only one thing there, with two parts. But a relation, by definition, is a relation between two things. Hence

there are no relations either! There are no individual things to be related.
(emphasis original)

Emptiness is not merely a view on what reality truly is like. That is, it is not simply a theory about reality. It is more like a therapeutic tool or pedagogical strategy to undermine any preexisting view as to how reality is. In this respect, the Buddhist ontology is always pedagogical. It might initially appear to be positing certain specific notions to refer to ultimate reality such as conditioned co-arising, nonself, emptiness, and so on, and to be indulging in metaphysical hair-splitting. However, the purpose, as always, is practical in the sense that the ultimate goal is ending suffering.

Notwithstanding Žižek's intimate engagement with the Hegelian and Lacanian schools of thought, which are arguably two of the most abstract and abstruse forms of theorizing known to the Western world, he maintains his practical attitude vis-à-vis human suffering, always with an eye toward opening up spaces to bring about the possibility of thinking more just social arrangements for human beings by his infinite criticism of ossified forms of thinking, including his own. In this regard, he constantly employs the emptiness strategy to point out the limitations of any given viewpoint.

A thorough employment of emptiness leads to nirvana, which can be characterized as "*neti, neti*": a thorough-going act of negation. It is neither this nor that. It is "not this, not that." It is a nondual awareness, whereby the dualistic thing-thinking of conventional truth has been superseded. In other words, it is "the pure negation of everything that might be said or thought about it" (Ziporyn 2016: 55). That is, nirvana is neither nondual, nor not nondual, nor both, nor neither; and this formula can be applied to any characteristic we can think of. Therefore, nirvana itself is empty. It is empty of self-nature. It is ambiguous. Like space, there is no such 'thing' as nirvana, but nirvana is allowing of all things, of all characteristics.

Part III: The Three-Truth Doctrine of the Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhism

The Bodhisattva

The notion of bodhisattva, which makes Žižek boil with anger (!)—“why delay becoming a Buddha?; this logic of delay bothers me” (Soundcloud 2012)—is a crucial idea that needs to be understood well before we can move on to the intricate and shocking details of the Tiantai Three-Truth Doctrine. The bodhisattva ideal (the “vow” to help all sentient beings realize Buddhahood) is based on the Buddhist idea of “momentariness of dharmas,” where “each moment of experience is genuinely separate from all others, that putative continuities in matter or mind are merely misperceived pluralities” (Ziporyn 2013: 189) and is related to *compassion*. To begin with, the Buddha is not only the one who has ended his own suffering. He is also, and more importantly, the one who has realized the *method* to end suffering (Ziporyn 2016: 79). This is crucial. The Buddha, at the end of the day, is a *teacher* of Dharma—not a messenger or son of a God—an adroit pedagogue, guiding people to enlightenment caring for them along the way by employing skillful means. That is, the Buddha is someone who constantly thinks about and learns how to explain things to other people from all walks of life and stages of development. He is a master communicator being able to reach out to all based on the constellation of the causal matrix they happen to be in. The Buddha closely associates with other beings so that he strengthens his power of skillful means to better understand and help out suffering sentient beings. A good teacher starts where the student is. ‘Bodhisattva’ then is the term used to refer to the Buddha in his aspect as a teacher. And we are all bodhisattvas, that is, we are all teachers to others in one way or another. We ordinarily do not realize this. And that’s exactly why we are all bodhisattvas, and not Buddhas.

The bodhisattva idea revolves around the following question: why care about our future selves, or someone else for that matter (and delay our entry into nirvanic bliss and become a proper Buddha)? It turns out the two are the same (my future self and someone else) if we take the Buddhist notion of “momentariness” seriously. Let’s assume that you are a different person every single moment, as the nonself doctrine

would imply for there is no substantial self that somehow connects these two disparate moments into a causal continuity. There are no universals only moments of experience separated by a gulf. There is an immense gap between the person that you are before blinking your eyes and the person that you are after blinking your eyes. The question is how do you, the person that you are before blinking your eyes, manage to care about the person that you are after blinking your eyes since the two persons are entirely different from each other? Each person momentarily arises, dwells for a while, and perishes without any lasting connection with the other. “No matter how short a span we may wish to focus on, there is always a relation of otherness, of time, in any action. Thus even the most selfish action is really always done for someone ‘else’; me in the very near future” (Ziporyn 2016: 76). This suggests that “selfishness . . . is really already a kind of very narrow compassion. . . . Compassion is unavoidable; it is a necessary condition of all living beings, of all action, of all life. It’s just a question of the range and criteria of its application” (Ziporyn 2016: 76). Since there is no self, all actions we do are for someone else. In other words, you cannot help but be a bodhisattva. All sentience is in a state of bodhisattvahood. You are always compassionate towards the others for there is nothing but others. The Buddha, who has realized nonself, sees these others as himself since he does not have a self. “Only the experience of the emptiness of selves allows one to see other selves as being as much oneself as one’s present self—or rather, as *little* oneself as one’s present self, for these now mean exactly the same thing” (Ziporyn 2016: 76-77, emphasis original).

There is really no delaying involved here. Bodhisattva is not delaying becoming a Buddha. Bodhisattva *is* a Buddha in his aspect as a teacher who teaches how to realize the end of suffering to others. In order to do this, he has to remain in the world to associate with others so that he can help them realize this insight. The Buddha never leaves the world. He does not go someplace else. What the Buddha does is to end his suffering; but suffering as such thereby is not eliminated, so there is no way for the Buddha to leave the world since the world is suffering. The Buddha’s job is perpetual. His teaching activity, his bodhisattvahood, is everlasting. Bodhisattva is the state of caring for someone else at present, seeing them as a version of ourselves. Only because our self is empty of self-nature can we expand our circle of care to others in a

larger context of infinite life. Ultimately and immediately, others are us; and we are them. Not in the sense of an identity but in the sense of being empty of self-nature. There is no identity because there is nothing of which we can speak of an identity.

To recapitulate, there is only this phenomenal world, and this world is a world of suffering: sentient beings are in a state of samsara, that is, in a state of dualistic thing-thinking. The Buddha is the one who has become enlightened: who has become aware of emptiness of things, that is, he has realized the nature of the conditioned co-arising of the causal matrix. The Buddha is the one who has dropped dualistic *thinging*. He has jettisoned the notion of the single-cause agency. Therefore, he has ended his suffering; he no longer grasps *things*, and now he teaches to others how to end this suffering, without however being able to eliminate it since there is *nothing* to eliminate. Nirvana therefore is not the leaving of samsara, a separate thing, a separate place, but samsara itself. Every action taking place in samsara is an aspect of nirvana. That is, enlightenment is the mastery of all skillful means in the world of samsara. That mastery is the pure joy in the involvement in the world of suffering. Put differently, enlightenment is the joy of teaching rather than mere cessation of suffering. Unbeknownst to us, we are always already in a state of teaching; we are all bodhisattvas, in the process of mastering the myriad ways to teach to various sentient beings, who are themselves bodhisattvas teaching us in their turn.

Why teach? Because “only a Buddha together with a Buddha knows the ultimate reality of all things” (Ziporyn 2016: 89). You cannot not teach since “the interaction of the Buddha and ourselves is the real Buddha” (Ziporyn 2016: 89).

[T]he real nature of things is always an overflowing, always a give-and-take, always an interchange between perspectives on that thing, and can never be closed off or totalized within any one perspective. There is more to know about a coffee cup than any one perspective, even the enlightened perspective, can ever know. But this perspective can know that there are other perspectives on this thing to be had. (Ziporyn 2016: 89)

In short, just like we cannot not be compassionate, we cannot not teach. In a somewhat parallel fashion to Heidegger ('fundamental ontology can only be done as phenomenology,' or 'phenomenology equals ontology' for short) and Badiou (mathematics *is* ontology—the science of being *qua* being), I would claim that ontology can only be done as pedagogy! This is the gist of Buddhahood in its aspect of bodhisattvahood. In the same way, Žižek is first and foremost a pedagogue as well in the sense that he does not offer a philosophy as “a great rendering of the basic structure of entire reality” (Žižek 2016: 2) but a *method*—a method (a pedagogy) by which “the immanent self-destruction and self-overcoming of every metaphysical claim” (Žižek 2016: 2) is undertaken. Žižek (2016) argues that it is impossible to offer a philosophy anyway (in the sense of an exhaustive description of the rational structure of the universe), and impossible to be a philosopher since Kant's critical turn, which involves the explicit self-reflexive engagement with the (im)possible conditions of philosophy itself. A bodhisattva is a teacher who uses skillful means to undermine any metaphysical fixation (any dogma) sentient beings grasp onto.

Similarly, we cannot not be Buddhas as well! To see how the latter works, we need to focus on retroactive workings of time.

The Structure of Time – Prospective Retrospection

The capacity to change the past retroactively is referred to as the retroactive power of *recontextualization* in the *Lotus Sutra*. Žižek (2013) recalls “Borges's precise formulation of the relationship between Kafka and his multitude of precursors, from ancient Chinese authors to Robert Browning:”

Kafka's idiosyncrasy, in greater or lesser degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist ... each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. (209; emphasis original)

Jumping from Kafka to Buddha: “To become a Buddha means that one has always been a Buddha. However, one must become a Buddha in order to have always been a Buddha” (Ziporyn 2016: 109). We have always already been Buddhas, we have been Buddhas in advance, but we can realize this only retroactively from the perspective of the present. In other words, the unity of Buddhahood is not given in-itself. It has to be endlessly reconstituted through interminable recontextualization, which is “a way of showing how the meaning and identity of things (persons, practices) is altered completely when these things are seen in a new, larger context” (Ziporyn 2016: 100). The causality does not merely work from the deep past into the present in a linear fashion. The present activity itself changes the past: “the present activity recontextualizes the past” (Ziporyn 2016: 102). As a bodhisattva, you are already Buddha. That is, your present moment is constituted in the present by the pastness of this present as bodhisattvahood and the futureness of it as Buddhahood.

What is more interesting, all dharmas are Buddha-dharmas. That is, all experiences, all acts, all thoughts, all levels, all modes are already Buddha-experiences, acts, thoughts, levels, and modes, but only so in the form of prospective retrospection. The idea of “singularity” posited by the futurist Ray Kurzweil (2006) and others points to the same conclusion: the entire universe, which at present we consider to be devoid of an over-arching intelligence, purpose and direction (devoid of God or divine intelligence), will, at some future point, be endowed with intelligence (in the form of nanorobots interlinked on a gigantic scale) in such a way that what we consider to be lifeless matter now would be understood to be the past-life memory (formative years) of a superior metaconnected intelligence looking back and putting things in perspective. Žižek would be sympathetic to this Hegelian idea, which, again, shows itself in a similar fashion in the science-fictional sounding notion, voiced by prominent physicists such as Rich Terrile, a scientist at Nasa’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, that we are living in a simulation (*à la* The Matrix) created by our future selves! (The Guardian 2016).

Intersubsumption

Everything we have discussed so far (the Two-Truth doctrine, emptiness, nonself, bodhisattvahood, prospective retrospection) has been leading up to an understanding of the Tiantai view of things, at the center of which we find the notion of *intersubsumption*. Ziporyn (2016: 143-144) puts it thus:

Every event, function, or characteristic occurring in experience is the action of all sentient and insentient beings working together. Every instant of experience is the whole of existential reality, manifesting in this particular form, as this particular entity or experience. But this “whole” is irreducibly multiple and irreducibly unified at once in the following way: all possible conflicting, contrasted, and axiologically varied aspects are irrevocably present—in the sense of “findable”—in each of these totality effects. Good and evil, delusion and enlightenment, Buddhahood and devilry, are all “inherently entailed” in each and every event. More important, however, these multiple entities are not “simply located” even virtually or conceptually; the “whole” that is the agent performing every experience is not a collection of these various “inherently entailed” entities or qualities arrayed side by side like pebbles in a bag. Rather, they are “intersubsumptive.” That is, any one of them subsumes all the others. Each part is the whole, each quality subsumes all other qualities, and yet none are ever eradicable.

Is not this understanding of the “Whole” cited above isomorphous with Žižek’s rendering of the notion of the “Thing itself,” where the inconsistencies, tensions, and constant oscillations between different determinations of the Thing are immanent, without any reconciliation, to the Thing itself thereby making it alive (Žižek 2013: 396)? We cannot talk about a unidirectional *Aufhebung* (sublation) here, wherein the spiritualization of immediate reality in the total notional deployment, that is, through the dialectic resolving all antagonisms in a higher synthesis, takes place. In Žižek’s reading of Hegel’s notion

of *Aufhebung*, antagonisms are not resolved; rather, they are recognized as such meaning they are *released* (Žižek 2013: 403).

What this means is that one should not equate externalization with alienation: the externalization which concludes a cycle of dialectical process is not alienation, it is the highest point of dis-alienation: one really reconciles oneself with some objective content not when one still has to strive to master and control it, but when one can afford the supreme sovereign gesture of letting this content go, of setting it free. (Žižek 2013: 405)

This is a *satori* moment, where the sense of self drops and the Whole of reality is left to follow its inherent path. To get a grip on how this Whole is constituted and how it is released, that is, how the concept of intersubsumption works, as a first approximation, we can start with how “concrete universality” functions in Žižek. Every viewpoint is partial and dependent on the viewer’s position. It is *provisionally posited* to be true. Indian Mahāyāna would say it is conventionally true. This, however, is not an impediment to accessing the universality of the truth of the viewpoint. On the contrary, it is an enabling condition to reach the ultimate truth. The viewer is not no-where. S/he necessarily takes up a position within the matrix of conditioned co-arising and she has to work through it to reach the universality of the truth revealed through this position. The engaged position of the viewer cannot be bypassed. Emptiness of the provisionally posited truth of the particular viewpoint means that there is no fixed universal In-itself untainted with any inconsistencies, tensions, or oscillations waiting to be grasped. There is no pure self-nature, no in-itself apart from the matrix of co-conditioned arising. Rather, emptiness encompasses the contingency of the particular. Emptiness, in Žižekian jargon, points to the falsity of *abstract* universality.

The true “concrete universality” of a great historical text like *Antigone* (or the Bible or a play by Shakespeare) lies in the very totality of its historically determined readings [the irreducibly multiple and unified whole

or matrix of co-conditioned arising]. The crucial feature to bear in mind here is how *concrete universality is not true concrete universality without including in itself the subjective position of its reader-interpreter as the particular and contingent point from which the universality is perceived.* (Žižek 2013: 359, emphasis original)

The unity of the particular and contingent point from which the universality is perceived and the latter's emptiness (that is, not mistaking abstract universality for concrete universality) is the meaning of Center in Tiantai thought. Therefore, there are three Truths, rather than just two, in Tiantai: Provisional Positioning, Emptiness, and the Center. The contingent subjective position constitutes the moment of provisional positioning. Not being misled by (or getting attached to) the idea of *abstract* universality is emptiness, and finally discerning the true concrete universality is the Center. For Tiantai, these three truths always mutually entail each other. There is no hierarchy among them. They are equally true no matter where you start. When you start with one, you immediately end up with the others. They, in other words, intersubsume.

I will now try to unpack the notion of intersubsumption by delving into its implications in the case of good and evil where what is considered to be good and what is considered to be irredeemably radical evil *intersubsume* in ways that might astonish even the most avant-garde thinker, for the claim basically boils down to: "evil is inherent in and ineradicable from Buddhahood" (Ziporyn 2016: 237). How so?

Suffering, in all its countless different forms including the extreme form of horrific incomprehensible evil, such as the Holocaust, is everywhere and ineradicable. As is universally recognized, this is the starting point for Buddhism (the First Noble Truth). Tiantai Buddhism, unlike the Two-Truth doctrine of Indian Mahāyāna (Nāgārjunian Emptiness doctrine), does *not* assert that in ultimate truth of emptiness, there is no good and evil. That good and evil are empty of self-nature. That ultimate truth is beyond good and evil. That it is non-dual. That only in conventional truth does it make sense to distinguish between the contrasts of good and evil. What Tiantai thought upholds rather is that conventional truth and ultimate truth are *identical*. More precisely put, they are intersubsumptive.

Let's take two sets of conventional (provisional) truths: Hitler's truth, in which the good is defined as the dominance of the master race and the extermination of the Jews and other impurities and undesirables such as Roma and homosexuals. This is the (provisional) truth as far as Hitler's perspective is concerned. There is also Sākyamuni Buddha's truth, where the good is defined as wisdom, compassion, and liberation of all beings. The issue, however, is not that in terms of ultimate truth both are equally empty, and at a conventional level, Sākyamuni is right (or more true) and Hitler is wrong (or less true). Rather, both Hitler and Sākyamuni's value systems belong in the realm of conventional truth. They are provisionally posited, and therefore they are provisionally true, which means there is always some context where adherence to such truths might assist the work of a bodhisattva to help bring enlightenment to sentient beings. They are just *rafts*, nothing more, nothing less. Admittedly, Sākyamuni's approach might be considered more encompassing, hence truer, but it is not necessarily so. It is conceivable to think of a context whereby Sākyamuni's approach might turn out to be counterproductive to alleviate suffering. Tiantai is not suggesting, unlike the Two-Truth doctrine of Indian Mahāyāna, that we should discard the conventional level in favor of the ultimate truth of emptiness, where there is neither wrong nor right. What it suggests, rather, is that both views should be made to *interpenetrate* to such a maximal degree that their identity is explicitly realized. That is, there is no hierarchy between the conventional and ultimate truths.

According to Tiantai thinking, the idea that two entities might be mutually implicative and dependent—not adventitiously, but in their nature—and yet not identical is logically impossible, because this would mean they have some “identity” other than their relation to each other, which is just what the doctrine of dependent co-arising qua Emptiness denies. It is not possible to make a hard-and-fast distinction between “the identity of X (i.e. what it is)” and “the implications and relations of X (i.e. how it is, what it does)” without thereby positing some self-nature, some substance of which these implications and relations are predicates. (Ziporyn 2016: 242)

The implications of the identity of the conventional and ultimate truths is that conventional truths are collapsed into being *upāya*, i.e. “skillful means.” The Buddha can, for purely soteriological reasons, utilize any conventional truth (the truth of Hitler, or the truth of emptiness) as the situation dictates to reach out to those according to their dispositions and desires. There are innumerable and potentially mutually contradictory conventional truths since there are innumerably varied sentient beings and their unique places and perspectives and needs. Yet the ultimate truth is the emptiness of all these conventional truths. This does not mean that all conventional truths are false. Emptiness is the *allowing* of all the infinitely many conventional truths, and not their sheer falsity. The latter are not merely false. They are all true to the extent that, pushed to their limits (by performing *reductio ad absurdum*s on them) they will eventually contradict and cancel themselves out, serving as rafts by which to pass beyond themselves (Ziporyn 2013: 197). Pushed to their limits, they will self-destruct, that is, their abstract universality will disintegrate opening up the space for concrete universality to be realized.

So the Buddha preaches self and non-self, not because one is conventional and the other is ultimate truth: *both* are conventional truths, meaning both can, in given circumstances, lead to the dropping of both views. Neither is intrinsically more true than the other (for to be “intrinsically” anything would be to have a self-nature). (Ziporyn 2013: 198, emphasis original)

Extending the parable of the raft we have seen before in the context of the Two-Truth doctrine, according to which we are supposed to drop the raft once we reach the other shore (the truth of enlightenment); that the raft is merely the conventional truth of Buddhist teachings and practices; that we are not supposed to hang on to them once we have safely completed our passage to the other shore. In the Three-Truth interpretation of the parable, however, there is a twist to the theory:

The Other Shore to which the raft rafts us, allowing us to renounce the raft, turns out to be another raft, which rafts us to an infinity of other rafts—and we ourselves, who are rafting on these rafts, are like all other entities only raft-rafter rafts. Conventional Truth is what you *get* when you reach Ultimate Truth. The content of the two is the same. Ultimate Truth is simply a name for the totality of conventional truths, and the virtuosic mastery of being able to move from one conventional truth to another unobstructedly, as the situation demands, the comprehension of the way they fit together or can function together, or the way in which they are each, as it were, “versions” of each other. (Ziporyn 2013: 198, emphasis original)

Ultimately, this is how we can characterize what Žižek is all about: in his ever-expanding corpus and public lectures, he is not predominantly articulating a system of philosophy brick by brick for the educated elite. Rather, he is being an ingenious pedagogue displaying a virtuosic mastery of being able to move from one conventional truth to another unobstructedly, and inviting and encouraging people (elite and non-elite alike) to do the same. In that sense, the difference between elite and non-elite collapses. Obviously, he proposes a theoretical edifice, a kind of ontology, a certain structure of reality based on “the ‘reactualization’ (as Žižek himself puts it) of Kantian and German idealist thought through the mediation of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic metapsychology” (Johnston 2008: xiv). Nevertheless, what distinguishes him is his remarkable ability to perform *upāya* (“skillful means”) on any object of culture, high or low, to reveal the concrete universality embodied in it.

Tiantai pays close attention to *upāya* and takes it to an altogether different level with their Three-Truth doctrine, which is the pedagogical core of their entire approach. In facing the problem of ‘how to teach’ (the truth of non-duality), they do not simply hold their tongues in silence, which is always possible. Instead, they resound at full strength in expressing the insight that each truth is an aspect of the others. The Three Truths of Tiantai are conventional truth, ultimate truth, and the Center, the absolute truth, which is “the non-duality between conventional and ultimate truth, their intersubsumption, their

synonymy” (Ziporyn 2016: 145). These three truths are three different ways of viewing any determinate thing, or any coherence. Anything that can be said or thought (or experienced) about any given determinate thing (or coherence) is conventionally true.

Conventional truth is the apprehension of some entity X as having a certain discernible, coherent identity. Ultimate truth, traditionally the experience of Emptiness, is the revelation that this coherent identity is only provisionally coherent, that it fails to be coherent in all contexts and from all points of view, and thus is globally incoherent. (Ziporyn 2016: 151)

A determinate entity, a coherence, is always dependently co-arisen: “No X is discoverable apart from the non-X elements, causes, antecedents, and contexts that are present here ‘as’ X.” That is, its coherence is dependent on other coherences as conditions. When all conditions are considered at the same time, the original coherence is lost. In other words, emptiness (ultimate truth) “just means that whatever is *locally* coherent is also *globally* incoherent. That is, when all factors are taken into consideration, the original way a thing appears is no longer unambiguously present” (Ziporyn 2016: 147). X is provisionally posited. That is, it is true in a local particular context. When it is placed in a universal context, however, it ceases to be consistent. It loses its clear noncontradictory identity. It becomes ontologically ambiguous, viz. empty of self-nature. It becomes globally incoherent. Things are unambiguous to the extent that the effect of the Whole into which they are inscribed is limited. Once this limitation is taken away, things become ambiguous. Emptiness is the ultimate truth in the sense that things are ontologically ambiguous; there is always more to them than can any limitation would be able to ascertain.

All identities are locally coherent/globally incoherent. They all are conditional and unconditional, conceivable and inconceivable at the same time. The view of “Emptiness” itself is also locally coherent/globally incoherent: “It appears in experience as something in particular (locally coherent as precisely Emptiness), but this, like every other local coherence, is haunted by its own more-to-it-ivity: there is more to it than the concept “Emptiness” can hold. . . . It appears not just as more-to-it-ivity but as specific identities:

marble, horn, round, sharp, something more, above and beyond, simple more-to-it-ivity” (Ziporyn 2016: 152).

This is what is meant by the Center: local coherence and global incoherence are synonymous. This follows directly from the doctrine of co-conditioned arising. X is provisionally posited as coherent (X subsumes all the non-X appearing as X). When attention shifts to non-X (when X is recontextualized), the original X becomes empty of its original coherence. All the while X has been the determining center of all other local coherences subsuming them and being subsumed by them: “Each entity not only is ambiguated by the presence of all other entities but also, by the same token, disambiguates these other entities in terms of itself” (Ziporyn 2016: 153).

All coherences (determinacies, quiddities, identities, that is, anything experienceable or conceivable) have a “fundamental triplicity” to them (Ziporyn 2000: 590). They are provisionally posited, and yet they are empty. To be empty is to be provisionally posited and vice versa. The identity between the latter two is called the Center. Provisional positing, emptiness, and the Center interfuse. The conventional truth, the ultimate truth, and the absolute truth interpermeate. That is, there is no hierarchy between these different ways of saying the same thing. Absolute truth of the Center is not more true than the ultimate truth of Emptiness, which, in turn, is not more true than the conventional truth of Provisional Positing.

The interfusion of the Three Truths here means that it is exactly as true to say that any one of these underlies the other two—that, say, Provisional Positing is the ultimately real level to which the others can be reduced, appearing sometimes as Emptiness and sometimes as the Center, or that Emptiness is the deepest level, appearing sometimes as Provisionally Positing and sometimes as the Center, and so on. When any one of the three appears, it is the other two appearing as this one; the mention of any one implies all three. (Ziporyn 2000: 585)

The role of the Center in this interfusion is pivotal. It is somewhat similar to Žižek’s use of Lacan’s *point de capiton* (“the quilting point” or the Master-Signifier). That’s exactly

how Ziporyn (2000) interprets the notion of the Center as well with direct reference to Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

In any system of terms, there will be one master term by reference to which all the other terms have their content fixed. For example, if I am a feminist, I may also support Marxist and ecological movements, because I see them as aspects of the general problem of patriarchy and as contributing to that struggle for equal rights for women; in that case, I would believe that, once the real problem, patriarchy, has been solved, the ecological crisis and capitalist exploitation will automatically also be solved, for the feminist problem is the real root of the others. "Feminism" in this case is the ultimate value, the "center" of my system. (Ziporyn 2000: 591)

Similarly, if you take ecology as the Center, then the meaning and significance of the feminist and Marxist identities are fixed around that center. Or again, if you take Marxism as the Center, the ambiguity surrounding the feminist and ecological standpoints is resolved based on the primacy of the class struggle, and so on. No standpoint stands on its own. They can only be disambiguated with the help of a Center. The Master-Signifier, however, is itself empty. That is, it is not unicentric: it is not foundational, having a special privileged status bestowing it the power to pontificate the overall meaning of the symbolic system fixing it once and for all. It is not like feminism is the grounding principle and that ecologism and Marxism "are merely parts, or partial, indirect expressions or forms of feminism" (Ziporyn 2000: 592). Rather, all three can be seen as the Center. Ziporyn (2000) contrasts the notion of "omnicentrism" in distinction to that of "unicentrism":

The second interpretation, which I will call "omnicentrism," holds on the contrary that we may in fact take the part for the whole, since any part, simply considered in itself, in its own characteristics, already implies the

whole of which it is a part. The part, in other words, is the whole, and any part can thus adequately stand for the whole. (Ziporyn 2000: 592)

Any aspect of the whole can be the unifying thread running through all the others. They do equally serve as the *determining* center in relation to which everything else acquires meaning. What is worth mentioning is that there is no centerlessness. The whole is omniscient, constituted with infinite centers centering. The Center is not the unambiguous foundational fixed ground. It is empty of self-nature itself.

[I]f “class struggle” is the center of my meaning system, it will seem as if all other particular issues get their meaning just from class struggle; they all end up to be nothing but particular expressions of class struggle. The meaning of class struggle seems to remain constant and prior, while the meaning of terms like “feminism” is transformed by the connection to this center. But if this mode of interpretation succeeds to the ultimate extent, it will come to explain everything as forms of class struggle, and when this happens, “class struggle” will turn out to be not the most meaningful term in the system but the one term that is completely devoid of meaning, since it means literally everything. It will have come to be so modified by its use as the one term that explains all these disparate phenomena, of which the others are various forms of expression, that it will end up being no more than a null point in the system with no specifiable content. When this happens, it is the dependent peripheral terms that actually provide the content and meaning for what had been the center. Thus, when any one of these centerings (interpretative systems) succeeds to the utmost point, the center in question comes to mean both nothing and everything. (Ziporyn 2000: 593)

Now, how is this related to our discussion of Hitler and Sākyamuni Buddha? Let us draw out the implications. Hitler’s truth based on his National Socialist morality already exists as a conventional truth. It is already within the matrix of conditioned co-arising. In other

words, it cannot be eradicated, or removed from the totality of interpenetrating phenomena no matter how hard we try. We simply cannot wish it away. All we can do is to *recontextualize* it by shifting the attention from the literal “Jew” to some metaphorical “Jew.” In other words, we follow the strategy of making everything mean “Jew.” That is, we see how emptiness and the center operate in the interpenetration of good and evil. The first thing to notice is that Hitler’s truth has never had the identity of evil *simpliciter* without at the same time entailing the good. “To realize the nature of X is to cut off its putative identity as only-X, or X that excludes non-X” (Ziporyn 2005: 333). To see how Hitler’s evil entails the good, all we need to do is to *expand* the reach of its evil to such an extent that it overcomes itself by cancelling itself out.

Assuming that [Hitler’s] anti-Semitism is unchangeable, we must then convert it to a “higher” metaphorical anti-Semitism. “Jew” for Hitler might mean many things; *the range of its connotation must be expanded to the point of altering its denotation*. “Jew” might mean for him evil parasite, defiler of the purity of blood, exploiter of the innocent, conspirator against the good. If this meaning can be expanded, to the point where it is seen everywhere, even in his own attempt to fight it, where the paranoid obsession with Jewish influence reaches its zenith, the nature of the case will have changed decisively. If Hitler can come to see the idea of amelioration of human civilization (one of his stated goals) as a vast Jewish conspiracy, or German nationalism as itself a devious ploy created by the Jews, or the concept of the national borders he wants to expand as a legalistic Jewish imposition on pastoral Aryan purity and natural relations to the land (or, conversely, his “blood and soil” ideology as a version of a twisted Zionist delusion), so that he can come to see his own project as itself a case of being an unwitting dupe of Jewish cunning, he will, in making himself a more extreme anti-Semite, have to abandon his original form of struggle against the Jews. Perhaps he can be made to believe that by martyring the Jews he will be contributing to their power, or that his interest in the Master Race shows his contamination by the Jewish

invention of the concept of race as derived from the concept of Chosen People. (Ziporyn 2005: 338-339, emphasis added)

What would be the consequence of such an expansion of the meaning of “Jew”?

... although the word “Jew” and the initial commitment to the Jew’s extermination would still be axiomatic for this person, the meaning would have changed to the point where his praxis and indeed the significance of his words and concepts were genuinely indistinguishable from the wisdom and compassion of a Buddha. It would provide a means of preaching to and converting all future anti-Semites in their own language. “Jew” would now mean precisely greed, anger, delusion, self-view, non-interpenetration, and so forth; “exterminate” would mean liberate (not only liberation from, but liberation of), and so on. Further, greed, anger, and delusion would be seen to be identical with Buddhahood, in accordance with precisely this Tiantai doctrine of the interpenetration of good and evil. Hence, the word “Jew” for this Hitler-Bodhisattva would have come to be synonymous with the word “Buddha”—by way of its identity with “demon.” The word would still denote in the same way, but the connotation of this denotation would have expanded to refer universally, such that the very distinction between denotation and connotation would necessarily be effaced. (Ziporyn 2005: 340-341)

Given this, the charge that there is no room to think about the possibility of real change in Buddhism is misguided. If you want real change in the world, Tiantai ethics basically offers the following dictum: don’t change it at all; simply recontextualize it! From the Tiantai perspective, Zizek’s unease with respect to the ethical stance of D.T. Suzuki’s Zen masters during Imperial-Way Zen is unfounded. Support for Japanese imperialism and militarism during the first half of the twentieth century is puzzling given that Buddhism in general, and Japanese Zen Buddhism in particular, are committed to non-violence and compassion for all sentient beings. On the surface, “becoming one with

things,' making one's mind like a mirror that reflects all things 'just as they are,' and 'accepting and according with circumstances'" (Ives 2009: 2) somehow is not in accord with "the actions and ideology of the most active Zen supporters of Japanese imperialism" (Ives 2009: 2). Commitment to non-violence on the one hand, and supporting violence, on the other. As we have seen, as far as Tiantai goes, both positions are provisionally posited to be true, and both are empty. Furthermore, they are identical. In other words, Imperial-Way Zen—"subordination to the militaristic social machine" as Žižek (2008b: 40) puts it—is not merely a perverted version of the authentic Zen experience. That is, we cannot claim that at its deepest, the real authentic Zen experience is ultimately true and that the people who claim to practice it somehow corrupt it. For both Tiantai and Žižek, there is no room for a conception of a serene harmonious Whole. The Absolute, for both, is at war with itself from the very beginning. Peace is not the eradication of war; rather, it is the recognition of the process of the self-relating negativity. However, when Žižek characterizes the basic Zen message as "liberation lies in losing one's Self, in immediately uniting with the primordial Void" (2008b: 42), he goes astray.

Conclusion

The idea of intersubsumption, which is ultimately based on the fundamental bedrock idea Buddhism relies on, that is, the notion of conditioned co-arising, can be rephrased as "every dharma inherently includes all the dharmas throughout the dharma-realm" (Ziporyn 2000: 587). Incidentally, Buddhists do not use the term 'Buddhism.' They use 'dhamma' or 'dharma' to refer to Buddha's teachings and practices. Buddha did not teach Buddhism, a metaphysical system of interlocking concepts. He taught Buddhadharma, the absolute truth about seeing reality in its suchness. The idea of intersubsumption, when formulated in this summary fashion, might lead to a misunderstanding. A common criticism of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that it easily lapses into a "mere confirmation and justification of the observed world . . . It would seem that the affirmation of being could easily degenerate into a mere convenient reconciliation with the existing world" (Asakura 2012: 672). Ultimately, we are told, all difference and

otherness is subsumed into the One of the self-mediating Dharma. After all, we all are always already Buddhas, which might suggest that we do not need to change anything. Based on our discussion it should be clear that the One (Buddha) is always one as one-many; and many is always many as many-one. In other words, there is no excluded middle. It is not a logic of either One or Many. The formation of third options is possible. The third option in question is at once a “neither/nor” and a “both/and” judgment on the conventional and ultimate truths. It is the Center, which is the nonexclusive mean. The center, which is the mutual penetration and interfusion of conventional and ultimate truths, is not any more real/true than the opposed terms: “the Mean [Center] is nothing but the identity between Emptiness and Provisional Positing, but likewise Emptiness is nothing but the identity between Provisional Positing and the Mean and, *mutatis mutandis*, for Provisional Positing” (Ziporyn 2000: 585). The provisional positing is negated in emptiness, which, in turn, is negated in the Center, which again is negated in provisional positing, and so on, continuously repeating without a traditionally-understood Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) realized. This is a “dialectical movement from nothing through nothing to nothing” (Hajdini 2015: 97). Where is the engine, the *less than nothing*, that drives this movement then? In Žižek, it is the objectal surplus, the *objet a*. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is the field of conditioned co-arising that is the engine. Ultimately, all sentient beings are teachers to each other. What is being taught is the myriad ways to be on the path towards realization that “heaven and earth are not necessarily humane,” as the title of Franklin Perkins’ book (2014) attests!

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