

The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna—The Simile of Wind and Water

Excerpt from the *Dasheng qixinlun*

The Dasheng qixinlun, “Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna,” was translated by the Indian monk Paramārtha, only recently arrived from India, around 550. The provenance of the Qixinlun (as it is commonly known) has long been the subject of controversy, for no mention of the work appears in any (surviving) Indian text, raising the suspicion that the treatise was actually composed in China, perhaps by Paramārtha himself. The text attempts to describe how it is that sentient beings, all of whom possess the inherent “seed” of enlightenment (the tathāgatagarbha, often referred to as the “Buddha nature”), nonetheless experience themselves as mired in saṃsāra and needful of “becoming” enlightened. The synthesis of these two states—the innate capacity in every one of us for enlightenment and the reality of our sorrowful journey through birth and death—the author refers to as the doctrine of “one mind with two aspects.” From the perspective of the buddhas, the minds of sentient beings are ever in a state of “original enlightenment” (benjue, a term coined in China). Yet from an ordinary, unenlightened perspective, the mind must be purified through meditative training, a process called “actualizing enlightenment” (shijue). But once actualized, the student realizes that the enlightenment achieved through cultivation is no different than the enlightenment that is innate. They are one and the same.

In one of its most famous passages, the treatise likens the effect of ignorance on the Mind to that of wind (ignorance) blowing over the ocean (Mind). Neither wind nor water has any shape by itself, so waves on the surface of the ocean are no more than the “shape” of the wind as it blows over the water. Analogously, ordinary consciousness (the waves), what the translator calls “modes of Mind,” is nothing more than the “shape” of ignorance acting upon Mind.

All modes of mind and consciousness (under the state of nonenlightenment) are (the products of) ignorance. Ignorance does not exist apart from enlightenment; therefore, it cannot be destroyed [because one cannot destroy something that does not really exist], and yet it cannot *not* be destroyed [insofar as it remains].

This is like the relationship that exists between the water of the ocean [i.e., enlightenment] and its waves [modes of Mind] stirred by the wind [ignorance]. Water and wind are inseparable, but water is not mobile by nature [that is, it does not move by itself], and if the wind stops, the movement (of the waves) ceases. But the wet nature (of the water) remains undestroyed.

Likewise, the Mind, pure in its own nature, is stirred by the wind of ignorance. Both Mind and ignorance have no particular forms of their own, and they are inseparable. Yet Mind is not mobile by nature, and if ignorance ceases, then the continuity [of deluded activities] ceases. But the essential nature of wisdom [i.e., the essence of Mind, like the wetness of water] remains undestroyed.

[translated by Yoshito S. Hakeda]