

SOME REMARKS TO MEDIEVAL COMMENTARIES
ON ‘LEVELS’ OF DISCERNMENT OF REALITY
OF THE TEXTS BY DONGSHAN LIANGJIE

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Dongshan Liangjie (807–869), the founder of the Caodong (Jap. Sōtō) Branch of Chinese Chan Buddhism, formed and elaborated the theory of “five positions”, or five levels of discernment of true reality. The main philosophical implications of the theory are believed to be rooted in the teachings of the Huayan tradition of Chinese Buddhism, especially in the theory of the “four *dharma-dhātus*”. Many mediaeval commentators of Dongshan’s positions seem to accentuate this aspect of his teachings, among many others, Dongshan’s direct disciple Cashan Benji and Chan master Yongjue Yuanxian.

Key words: Buddhism, Dongshan Liangjie, Caodong, “five positions”.

In this article I want to briefly introduce two (among many other) approaches of the elucidation of the so-called “five levels” or “five positions” (Chn. *wu wei* 五位) of discernment of “true reality” (Skt. *tathatā*, Chn. *zhenru* 真如), a theory explicitly elaborated by the master of Chinese Chan 禪 Buddhism – Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良價 (807–869).

Since Buddhism as such could have never postulated any final or absolute “truth”, or any absolute claim of the “true nature” of our world, the term “true reality” we will understand as an expression of such a kind of comprehending “reality” (our outer world) that is deprived of “false assumptions”. Again, “false assumptions” cannot be defined as assumptions or notions that do not correspond with some kind of positively formulated truth – this would contradict the basic implication of Mahāyāna Buddhism as such, the notion of “emptiness” (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Chn. *kong* 空). The theory of “emptiness”, systematised by the Indian Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna (2/3), primarily shows the “ontological” and “axiological” *emptiness* of all things – “reality” is a net of mutually conditioned meanings which give existence to our phenomena of which we (our minds) are inseparable and qualitatively equal co-constituents. Seeing all the phenomena of our outer world as dependent on conditions, we should

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comprehend them as not having a nature by themselves (Skt. *svabhāva*) or a nature of depending on something else (Skt. *parabhāva*).¹ And, we cannot postulate any ultimate or absolute state of things, since, basically, through the empirical experience no criteria, according to which we can judge whether this particular nature of the phenomenon is its absolute and independent nature or not, can be confirmed. There is nothing but phenomenal world.

The “five positions” of Dongshan Liangjie represent the modes or perspectives of the discernment of “reality”, based on the observations of the ways of comprehending of the mutual relationship between the principle and phenomena (thus all which is empirically experienceable), describing some aspects of the mutual relationship between the so-called “*zheng*” 正 (“the right” – principle) and “*pian*” 偏 (“the biased” – phenomena), the terms which are believed to correspond to the terms “*li*” 理 (principle) and “*shi*” 事 (phenomena) of the Huayan 華嚴 school of Chinese Buddhism.²

The “five positions” of the Caodong 曹洞 Branch of Chan Buddhism have always been a subject to commentaries, medieval or modern, by Buddhist monks or by scholars. For this article I have chosen two important Chinese Chan Buddhist commentators: Caoshan Benji 曹山本寂 (840–901), a direct disciple of Dongshan Liangjie, who also elaborated his own “five positions”,³ and a well-known commentator, Chan master Yongjue Yuanxian 永覺元賢 (1578–1657). The reason I decided to write about these two masters is the fact that they seem to accentuate the Huayan-like notions of the inseparability of the principle and phenomena in the theory of the “five positions”. In my opinion, this is one of the crucial philosophical implications not only in Huayan theory of “four *dharmadhātus*” but of Chan “five positions” too.⁴ In this respect, both masters use the term function (Chn. *yong* 用) in their explanations, the term which is elucidated in the mutual relationship to its traditional counterpart in Chinese philosophy, the essence (Chn. *ti* 體).⁵ And, of course, being the

¹ Nāgārjuna in his work *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (chapter 1) states: “The self-nature of existents is not *evident* in the *conditions*, etc. In the absence of self-nature, other-nature too is not *evident*.” (English translation according to Kalupahana 1986, p. 107).

² For Huayan terms “*li*” and “*shi*” see Chang (1971, pp. 141–169), Hamar (1998).

³ For Caoshan’s “five positions” see Lai (1969), Chang (1965).

⁴ Masters of Huayan school elaborate the so called “four *dharmadhātus*” (*dharmadhātu* – Chn. *fajie* 法界, lit. ‘realm of Dharma’). The term *dharmadhātu* implies many meanings in Buddhism. A general observance by Buddhist scholars, of course, expressed in a very simplified way, is that the term *dharmadhātu* can be used in a sense of mode of true experience with “reality” where phenomena and principle, and phenomena and phenomena, are mutually pervaded and mutually included. Or it is the realm where insight pervades into the mutual inter-penetration of everything, seeing into the true nature of things. For detail see Chang (1965), Hamar (1998). The “four *dharmadhātus*” are: 1. the *dharmadhātu* of phenomena; 2. the *dharmadhātu* of principle; 3. the *dharmadhātu* of the non-obstruction of phenomena and principle; 4. the *dharmadhātu* of the non-obstruction of phenomena and phenomena.

⁵ For the terms “*ti*” and “*yong*” in Buddhist philosophy see Grosnick (1989), Fang (1986). Fung (1953, p. 363) claims: “From the point of view of Buddhist terminology, ‘nature’ is equivalent to ‘*ti*’, i.e., the essence, inner body, or latent state of a thing. The external operations or applied activities of this ‘*ti*’ are called its ‘*yong*’ or functioning, and the phenomenal manifestations resulting from this functioning are termed ‘*shi*’, i.e., things and affairs.” In my analysis of the commen-

Chan Buddhism masters, the “power” of the spoken word is also discussed in the commentaries.

The teachings of the “five positions” philosophy are found mainly in three texts usually appended to the “recorded sayings” (Chn. *yulu* 語錄) of either Dongshan or Caoshan as independent treatises – *Gāthā on Five Positions (also called) Lords and Vasals* (*Wu wei jun chen song* 五位君臣頌),⁶ *Exoteric Explaining of Dongshan’s Five Positions* (*Dongshan wu wei xian jue* 洞山五位顯訣) (T 47, 1987A, 1987B) and *Precious Mirror Samādhi* (*Bao jing sanmei* 寶鏡三昧) (T 47, 1986B: 525c23–526a19).

The first text which will be briefly analysed here is the commentary on the *Exoteric Explaining of Dongshan’s Five Positions* – a text attached to the recorded sayings of the master Caoshan Benji. In Caoshan’s commentary on this text titled *Elucidation of the Exoteric Explaining of Dongshan’s Five Positions* (*Jieshi Dongshan wu wei xian jue* 解釋洞山五位顯訣, T 47, 1987: 541c14–542b15), the inseparability of the principle and phenomena is suggested and the Huayan-like notion of “phenomena are produced while attached to the principle, and the principle is manifested through the phenomena” is supported.

1. The first set of verses in the original text (*Exoteric Explaining of Dongshan’s Five Positions*) says:⁷

The right position is biased. When it is discerned within the biased, it is fulfillment of both meanings.

正位卻偏。就偏辨得。是圓兩意。

Caoshan’s commentary asserts:

The right position is biased, it is because it is not the opposite of any thing. But even it is not the opposite of any thing, nevertheless it is there ... When there is no function in the right, then it is biased. Total function is completeness. [Here, in my opinion, the word “even” can be added, thus saying: When there is no function in the right, even then it is biased. Total function is completeness.] (T 47, 1987B: 541c19–20)
正位卻偏者。爲不對物。雖不對物卻具。。。。正中無用爲偏。全用爲圓。

These remarks of Caoshan primarily point to the “empty” nature of phenomena and the principle, at the same time he points out to the inseparability of the principle and phenomena. He seems also to suggest the notion supported in the Huayan philosophy that all phenomena are mutually inter-penetrated by the principle, whereas

taries, however, I will try to apply a basic “philosophical” definition of the function which, I think, can be valid also in our texts: function means “to appear in some space when the principle sets it”.

⁶ *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (*New compilation of Tripitaka from the Taishō era*; hereafter T), vol. 47, 1986B: 525c1–8. For an explication of the “five positions” by Dongshan see Verdú (1974), Powell (1986), Lai (1969).

⁷ In the *Gāthā on Five Positions / Lords and Vasals*, this level is titled *zheng zhong pian* 正中偏 – the biased within the right.

principle is comprehended as including everything which is not *svabhāva*.⁸ Thus, in this respect we can say, phenomena appear without obstructions to the principle. Moreover, for example, Huayan master Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839), a great systematiser of the theory of the “four *dharmadhātus*”, in one of his definitions of the fourth *dharmadhātu*, found in his *Manual of the Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (*Da huayan jing lüce* 大華嚴經略), claims that the “non-obstruction of phenomena and phenomena” means that “the principle includes phenomena”.⁹ Again, I think this note can also be explained in the intentions of the “mutual inter-inclusiveness of all phenomena by their own nature”, where “nature” means anything which lacks self-nature. This is not to say that there is no difference between the manifested phenomena. Rather, it is to say that all things are mutually totally pervaded by anything else which is not self-nature, but none of them is manifested in one moment (of linear time) at the same place (of linear space) as the other.

What the master might mean in the last mentioned sentences, is the unity of function and “non-function”, because, as we will see in the next position, no aim is defined in the function; nevertheless, the function is “there”.

2. In the second stanza of the original text we read the following:

The biased position, though being biased, still fulfills both meanings.
Discernable within conditions, this is “the unspoken within the spoken”.¹⁰
偏位雖偏。亦圓兩意。緣中辨得。是有語中無語。

Caoshan says:

This is because no aim is defined in function. When no aim is defined, it means that it is not a fixed function. The biased position, though biased, still fulfills [both meanings in that] there is no thing and no attachment in the function. (T 47, 1987B: 541c24–25)
爲用處不立的。不立的則真不常用也。偏位雖偏亦圓者。用中無物不觸。

I think, this is to say that “the principle is phenomena”, because phenomena are discerned as sets of conditions to which we appeal when explaining them, without

⁸ This is a way of “positive” formulation of “emptiness”, which seems to be widely valid in Mahāyāna Buddhism. For example, as Lang Eun Ra claims in his book on the philosophy of the Tiantai 天台 School (1989, p. 53), in Nāgārjuna’s thought the term “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) can be paraphrased as “absolute inter-exclusiveness of ego [self-identity, self-existence, self-nature or essence] in all *dharmas* [things]”. This would convey that “emptiness” does not mean that all phenomena do not exist, but that they are in the state of excluding (being devoid of any) self-existent identity or fixed essence of any sort. Therefore, we can assert that a self-nature is excluded from every particular thing, absolutely and totally. Ra also argues that “exclusiveness” should not be the opposite of “inclusiveness”, but rather a ground of “inclusiveness”. “Exclusiveness” of something means “inclusiveness” of some other things. The “exclusiveness” of self-nature in every thing means the “inclusiveness” of all others with no self-nature involved.

⁹ T 36, 1736: 707b3–9. English translation according to Hamar (1998, p. 9).

¹⁰ *Gāthā on Five Positions / Lords and Vasals* labels this position as *pian zhong zheng* 偏中正 – the right within the biased.

any aim or cause defined in the function; nevertheless, the function is “there”. Since, according to the teachings of the Huayan philosophy, in the process of origination nothing is to be originated that had not existed earlier, only something that was hidden becomes manifest in the world of phenomena. The word “thing” here represents “a set of meanings or aims we ascribe to the phenomena”. When we avoid ascribing the meanings or definitions to the phenomena, this is also “the unspoken within the spoken”, but, on the other hand, there is no unspoken without the spoken.

3. The third position of the original text says:

There may be “coming from within the right position”. This is “the spoken within the unspoken”.¹¹
或有正位中來者。是無語有語。

Caoshan explains it as follows:

... “Coming from the right position” makes it clear that the right position is not involved in conditions ... There is also borrowing phenomena [for temporary use]. The position of “coming from within the right position” [also implies that] the one who answers [the questions or kōans] must clarify [the comprehension of] the essence of things within the biased position. One cannot clarify it while plunged into the right position. (T 47, 1987B: 542a1 and 542a2–3)

正位來。明正位不涉緣。。。。又有借事。正位中來者。
此一位 答家。須向偏位中。明其體物。不得入正位明也。

The first part of the commentary, I think, is to say that the right position cannot become evident through the knowledge of conditions to which we appeal when explaining phenomena.

Thus, this position presupposes both attitudes: one already apprehends phenomena as being sets of conditions to which we appeal when explaining them and at the same time as “all phenomena being mutually inter-penetrated by the principle which includes everything which is not *svabhāva*”; on the other hand, through the examination of the conditions one cannot make the regulative principle evident. The kōans (labelled as “speaking of the unspoken”) can help indirectly initiate the unspoken revealed directly.

4. The fourth stanza claims that:

There may be “coming from within the biased position”. This is “the unspoken within the spoken”.¹²
或有偏位中來者。是有語中無語。

¹¹ *Gāthā on Five Positions / Lords and Vasals*, the third position: *zheng zhong lai* 正中來 – coming from within the right. Original text in T 47, 1987B: 541c27.

¹² *Gāthā on Five Positions / Lords and Vasals*, the fourth one is titled: *jian zhong zhi* 兼中至 – arriving at within together [right and biased].

Caoshan's commentary states:

[When it is] "coming from within the biased position", then it includes conditions.¹³ As in the saying: "What can we call that which is right now?" Since there was no answer, the former master [Dongshan] himself said: "It cannot be attained but attain it." ... "Coming from within the biased position" is clarifying the essence within the things.¹⁴ (T 47, 1987B: 542a8–9 and 542a11)

偏位中來者。則兼緣。如曰。即今底呼作什麼即得。無對。先師自代曰。不得不得。。。。偏位中來者。就物明體。

Thus, I shall assume, the fourth position presupposes the level of discernment of the previous position, and goes a step further – one deliberately applies some kind of idea on the phenomena in order to clarify the "true reality" to other beings. Caoshan gives us examples of *kōans* which correspond to this position: "When mind and objects are both forgotten, then what is this?", or "What has come thus?" (T 47, 1987B: 542a11). Moreover, Caoshan directly says this category of sayings refers to accumulating of "merits" (*gong* 功)¹⁵, using *upāya*¹⁶, especially a kind of just mentioned *kōans*.

5. The last position is described as:

There may be mutual integration. Here we don't say there is the spoken or the unspoken. Here we must simply proceed directly. Here it is necessary to be perfectly fluid; things must be perfectly fluid.¹⁷

或有相兼帶來者。這裡不說有語不語。這裡不直須正面而去。這裡不得不圓轉。事須圓轉。

Caoshan says:

With mutual integration [of the principle and phenomena], the force of words is neither biased nor right, implying neither being nor nonbeing. They seem complete when not being complete, seem incomplete when not being incomplete ... (T 47, 1987B: 542a21).

相兼帶來者。爲語勢不偏不正。不存不無。如全不全。似虧不虧。

¹³ In the previous position, the right position was not involved in the conditions.

¹⁴ In the previous position we read that one who answers (the questions or *kōans*) must clarify (the comprehension of) the essence of things within the biased, because one cannot clarify it while plunged into the right position.

¹⁵ On the meaning of the term "merit" in Buddhism see Harvey (1990, p. 42).

¹⁶ *Upāya* (Chn. *fangbian* 方便); skillful means or method. The ability of the bodhisattva to guide other beings to liberation; the ability of teaching the Dharma.

¹⁷ In the *Gāthā on Five Positions / Lords and Vasals* we read that this level means: *jian zhong dao* 兼中到 – going within together [right and biased].

Master Caoshan Benji used the term function when explicating the first two positions in the just mentioned text, thus taking function as one of important terms on which explanation of his further commentaries was built.

Yongjue Yuanxian, one of the most important commentators of the “five positions”, also significantly, in my opinion, contributed to the “five-position’s” understanding of this traditional term in Chinese philosophy. Thus, here I have chosen a part of Yuanxian’s comments on the “five positions”, which explicitly point to the function, showing out another point of view on this term then we could see in Caoshan’s commentary.

First of all, in my understanding, function means “to appear in some space when the principle sets it” – this is the basic implication I will appeal to in my further text.¹⁸

The commentaries of Yongjue Yuanxian we find in the *Recorded Sayings of the Chan Master Yongjue Yuanxian* (*Yongjue Yuanxian Chanshi guang lu* 永覺元賢禪師廣錄), section *Dongshan’s five positions* (*Dongshan wu wei* 洞山五位) (*Xu Zang Jing* 續藏經 [hereafter XZJ], vol. 27: 355) and a section titled *Commentary on the Gāthā on Dongshan’s Five Positions* (*Dongshan wu wei song zhu* 洞山五位頌注) (XZJ, vol. 27: 356).

In the *Commentary on the Gāthā on Dongshan’s Five Positions*:

1. Concerning the first position, Yuanxian criticises other masters that they consider this position to express “function is initiated within essence” (*ti zhong fa yong* 體中發用) (XZJ, vol. 27: 356a18), whereby they convey the meaning, according the Yuanxian, that “phenomena are produced after the principle” (*zheng hou qi pian* 正後起偏) (XZJ, vol. 27: 356b1). He says the relationship between the biased (phenomena) and the right (principle) should be as “there is the biased in the right” (*zheng zhong bian you pian* 正中便有偏) (XZJ, vol. 27: 356a18).

These notes might convey two meanings: Yuanxian either accentuates the implication that the relationship between essence and function cannot be apprehended as the relationship between the ontologically prior substance and its function. Or, it is not unlikely that Yuanxian’s notes support the notion of the inseparability of phenomena and the principle, because “they come into being together and they cease together”.

2. In the comments of the second position we read the following:

The way that the masters often make this position [to mean] “transformation of function by returning to essence” is not a correct explanation. Because according to Dongshan’s meaning it is “the biased is there in the right”. It does not mean that “after [truly comprehending] the biased, one returns to the right”. (XZJ, vol. 27: 356b7–9)

此位師家多作轉用歸體釋者非是。以洞山意。是偏中便有正。非偏後歸正也。

¹⁸ See also note 5.

As we could have noticed in Caoshan's commentary (and in many other texts explaining the "five positions" as well) there are often notions of "returning to the right position" after attaining some kind of knowledge or mode of true discernment of "reality" within the phenomenal world. For example, Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1086–1163), a well-known master of Linji 鄰濟 Branch of Chan and a propagator of the kōan method, in the *Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma* (*Zheng fa yan zang* 正法眼藏) says: "... the previous four positions, all grasp the subtleties and return to the right position" (XZJ, vol. 118: 76b12). Yuanxian seems to be quite radical in stressing the inseparability of the principle and phenomena, mainly stressing the Huayan-like implication of nothing to be originated that had not existed earlier, phenomena just revealing themselves in the world of phenomena, in a concrete time and space.

3. In the Yuanxian's commentaries on the third position, I did not find the term function explicitly explained. Yuanxian simply claims that this is the right position (*zhengwei* 正位).

To see the way Yongjue Yuanxian further operates with the terms essence and function, a text titled *About the Diagrams of the five positions* (*Wu wei tu shuo* 五位圖說; XZJ, vol. 27: 355) can be taken as an illustration.

4. In the commentary on the fourth position we read notions like "the subtleties come smoothly (*miao yin dang feng* 妙印當風)" or "total essence is function (*quan ti ji yong* 全體即用) (XZJ, vol. 27: 355d2–3).

The statement that "the subtleties come smoothly" might indicate that this is a position of deliberate applications of some ideas on the phenomena in order to explicate the true state of the reality to other sentient beings.

In my opinion, the first part of the phrase may mean: the total essence is "to appear in some space when the principle sets it". And, we can add, the principle and phenomena "come into being together and cease together". Thus, I think, the mutual relationship between the principle and phenomena here is meant to be a process without any metaphysical commitment.

5. The fifth position states that "the subtleties are in their fullness and the merits are forgotten (*miao jin gong wang* 妙盡功忘)" or "total function is essence (*quan yong ji ti* 全用即體) (XZJ, vol. 27: 355d4–5).

In the fourth position "total essence was function" – thus allowing one (bodhi-sattva) to apply deliberately some idea or meaning when explaining phenomena (when expounding Dharma to the sentient beings); this position states that "total function is essence".

Thus, the "total function is essence" might mean: "To appear whenever in any space when the principle sets it" is the essence; the principle and phenomena "come into being together and cease together". This is the level of discernment of the final position. This notions can be also comprehended as supporting the notion that every phenomena is just a manifestation of what has already existed (hidden) before,

discerned as a direct manifestation of the regulative principle, the Buddha nature (Chn. *foxing* 佛性).

Conclusion

Since our Chan masters do not provide us with any concise treatises explaining the positions or relationships between the key terms, it is very difficult to find justifications for the claims presented. Anyway, I think the terms principle, phenomena, essence and function could have been explained in the connotations I introduced. Especially the notions based on the Huayan philosophy: the notion of the inseparability of the principle and phenomena, the notion that “the principle and phenomena cease together and come into being together”, or all phenomena being inter-penetrated by the principle which includes everything which is not *svabhāva*, are valid for the “five positions” as explained by the two commentators.

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