Chapter 1

Buddhist Subjectivity

Subjectivity—in the sense in which the term is used in existential philosophy—presents us with an important religious problem. How should the problem of subjectivity be treated specifically in a Buddhist context? It is this question that I would like to consider in this paper.

It would seem reasonable that something called "Buddhist subjectivity" is understood within a Buddhist context. However, it must be asked whether, in the total perspective of Buddhism, or in view of the inner relations within Buddhism as a whole, the idea of subjectivity has not been too readily affirmed. The basis for this query lies in the fact that the main tenet of Buddhism is after all "non-self" (*anātman*).

The idea of Buddhist subjectivity can be found, for example, in the so-called anthropology of Tsung-mi developed in *On the Original Man*. In this book, Tsung-mi discusses the moral nature of man from the viewpoint of Hua-yen school in reference to Confucianism; he comes to the conclusion that the true source of human nature is in the "True Mind" or Enlightenment. In contrast, in the Jōdo doctrine, the idea of human nature is centered around a "common man" or a most degenerate "Sinful Man" who acquires the self-consciousness. It is, indeed, the common man who is the "Real Guest" of Buddha's salvation. Through anthropological studies alone, these introspective conceptions that express the religio-existential awareness of self could not have been reached. Further, Lin-chi's "True Man residing nowhere" is to be regarded as an expression of human existence, because the "True Man" is a human being insofar as he is called the true man; but, because he has realized Buddhahood or Enlightenment, he is Buddha. For Lin-chi the "True Man" is a "human being" and a "Buddha being" simultaneously; therefore, the subjectivity of the True Man is not only "human subjectivity" but it is also "Buddha's subjectivity." Thus, the problem of Buddhist subjectivity must involve an investigation into the nature of Buddhahood as well as an examination of human nature. Although such terms as bodhisattva, transformed body (*nirmāṇa-kāya*), "True Man",

and so forth refer to "existence as human beings" within Buddhism, they are none other than a way of expressing the manifestation or the incarnation of Buddhahood.

Notwithstanding the fact that those expressions stand for a "subject," the doctrine of non-self (*anātman*) is fundamental and fixed in Buddhism; consequently, if Buddhism is to speak about an "existential subject," it cannot do so if the subject, be it in the sense of "Original Man" or "True Man," is placed within a doctrinal context of a "self." Thus Buddhism must establish religious subjectivity (i.e., an existential subject) while denying the self totally. Here lies a specifically Buddhist problem, a problem that cannot be approached in the manner of Western existentialism. If the doctrine of non-self is treated from merely its theoretical, logical aspect, without religious concerns, the result will be a mere denial of the self in which religious subjectivity tends to get lost. On the other hand, mere existentialism (i.e., existential philosophy that follows the Western thought, though religious) would deviate from Buddhistic thinking.

In addressing this problem, this short paper will allude to an instance of a Buddhist way of thinking that is based on a Sanskrit text belonging to the Vijñānavāda school.

To state the conclusion in advance, it will be argued that, in Buddhism, the "existential subject" originates interdependently, and that "dependent origination" (*pratītya-samutpāda*) is the ground or basis on which final deliverance takes place. Non-self or the denial of self is expressed by Mādhyamika teachers with the term "voidness" (śūnyatā), which implies "non-substantiveness because of dependent origination." When this idea of "dependent origination" is applied to the question of subjectivity, existence—that is religious subjectivity—is comprehended as something "dependently originating" and not as a substance or *ātman* (self). In Buddhism, therefore, the term existence is used in a different sense, and consequently is distinct in connotation from that in Western philosophy.

It goes without saying that 'ātman' was such an important concept in Indian philosophy that in its philosophical literature of old, many elaborate discussions on ātman are to be found; thus, it can be safely asserted that the awareness of self was provoked in the Indian minds from the very ancient times.[1] It must be noted, however, that the awareness of self of the ancient Indians can hardly be identified with the so-called self-consciousness considered by modern Western thinkers. The term "*ātman*" did not imply merely an individual human existence (*jīvātman*), but it implied, even stronger, the Universal Soul (*paramātman, brahmātman*). A distinguishing characteristic of Indian thought may be found here; however, it cannot be denied that the problem of an existential subject is liable to be neglected therein. The reason is that the existential subject must be purely individual, histor-

ical and temporal, and not universal and permanent. Existence is opposite to essence. The existential subject must be, by nature, anti-universal and anti-metaphysical.

It was the Buddha's doctrine of "non-self" that laid the foundation for subjectivity within Buddhism, because the theory of a Universal Soul that prevailed before the Buddha's time left no room for establishing a real, actual, individual existence due to the fact that the "self" was dissolved in the Universal. Even though the *ātman*-theory demonstrated a height in human thought, it did not have the depth of absolute subjectivity implied in the "True Man" or of existential self-consciousness implied in the "Sinful Man."

As is generally known, the self is revived in Mahāyāna literature through the expression "great self" (*māhātmya*), a term which undoubtedly had affinity to the Universal Soul of *ātman*-theory. The real awakening or the attainment of Buddhahood is explained as the annihilation of the "mean self" and the realization of "great self." However, the Mahāyāna conception of 'great self,' which once was initiated through the thought of non-self, should be distinguished from that of *brahmātman.*

There have been groping endeavors to search for an existential subject—negating the self some times, and establishing the great self at other times. Lin-chi's "True Man," for example, though having affinity with the Universal in one sense, is not a Universal that stands aloof from the world. It does not engage merely in intellectual contemplation, but it is ever active in this world, undergoing transmigration from one state to another, for it is not a substantive self. Transmigration in this world is possible only on the basis of a non-self theory. It is in this sense that one can speak about the Buddha's doctrine of non-self as the foundation for an existential subject. The "Sinful Man," who is enslaved by carnal desires also, may gain religious subjectivity only through the absolute denial of the self.

By replacing the secludedness of arhat by the bodhisattva ideal and by emphasizing the Buddhist practices of a layman instead of those of a monk, Mahāyāna Buddhism sought to establish the idea of Buddhist subjectivity, which was not so well-developed until then. In contrast to the Hīnayānic arhatship that aims at ascending and thus reaching sainthood, the Bodhisattvas and Buddhist laymen in the Mahāyāna aim at moving out and descending to the common or human level.[2]

It was in Vijñānavāda thought, more than in the Mādhyamika, that the problem of subjectivity was discussed most distinctly. Being constructed on the foundation of the *ālayavijñāna* (store-consciousness) theory, the philosophical system of the Vijñāna-vāda is deeply tinged with idealistic or spiritualistic notions regarding the view on an individual. The ideas of *manas* (mind or self-hood) or *ādāna* (seizing, appropriating) presented in this

school are similar to the "I" or "ego" of Western thinkers, but the Vijñānavāda came to these ideas through a more practice oriented method; thus, this school is duly known by its other name, "Yogācāra" (Yoga practice).

The Yogācāra school's consideration on the problem of subjectivity was developed by elucidating such concepts as 'great self,' 'Buddha-body' (*Buddha-kāya*) and so forth. In the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (Treatise On Three Natures),[3] a treatise of this school, there is expressed the idea of "appearer" (*khyātṛ*), which is none other than a "religiously oriented subject" at the turning point of going from defilement to enlightenment, from transmigrating existence to the great self of the Buddha.

Along with such terms as *ātman,* great self, and so forth which are related to the absolute or universal subject, we have in Sanskrit such words as "doer" (*kartṛ*), "goer" (*gantṛ*), and so forth that refer to a relative, phenomenal, daily subject. These words are formed by adding "tṛ" to the verb root, and such words are called "agent nouns" in grammar. The notions of a "doer" and so forth along with those of "doing" (*karman, kriyā*) and of the "instrument of doing" (*kāraṇa*) and so forth were utterly rejected by Nāgārjuna. Their non-substantiveness was demonstrated through his sharp dialectics, but Vasubandhu, on the contrary, used these agent nouns positively.

The second and third verses from Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (Treatise on Three Natures) mentioned above, reads as follows:

> That which appears (*yat khyāti*) is of the other-dependent (*paratantra*),
> And how it appears (*yathā khyāti*) is of the imaginary (*kalpita*),
> Because the former originates in dependence on conditions,
> And because the latter exists as imagination.
> The state where the "appearer" (*khyātṛ*) is devoid of "appearance" (*yathā khyānam*),
> Is to be comprehended as the consummated, because of its immutability.[4]

That which is of the other-dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*) is herein explained as "that which appears" or is called the "appearer." That which is of the imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) is explained as the state of "how it appears" or the "appearance"—that is, the result of the appearer's act of appearing. And when the former is absolutely devoid of the latter, the consummated nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*) is realized.

Close attention should be paid to the conception of the 'appearer,' which is foundational in the three-nature theory. As pointed out by Dr. S. Yamaguchi, the verb *khyā* means "to be known" (pass.) or "to make known" (caus.). Further, "to know" is a function of *vijñapti* (knowing), a

term which, in the compound "vijñapti-mātra" (knowing only), shows the fundamental tenet of the Vijñānavāda. Thus, the appearer, that is the agent noun *khyātṛ,* stands for the agent or the subject in the act of knowing. And since, according to the Vijñānavāda, all kinds of acts are represented by knowing, the appearer is regarded as the subject of all kinds of acts. In these verses, this appearer, the subject of every act, is defined as the "other-dependent nature;" this is to say that it exists only in the manner of "dependent origination," and not as an independently existent substance to which the act of appearing is attributed. Thus, it might be said rather, that the world crystallizes itself as an appearer and that human acts are none other than the function of this appearer.

According to the three-nature theory, the world turns around with the other-dependent nature (*paratantra*) as the axis or mediator. The other-dependent nature is the ground or the basis upon which the imaginary nature (*parikalpita*) or *saṃsāra* turns about and the consummated nature (*pariniṣpanna*) or *nirvāṇa* appears. And this ground itself is the appearer, a subjective existence.[5] The "-er" (*-tṛ*), which was totally denied in the Mādhyamika treatise, was thus revived in the Vijñānavāda treatise as a "subject," an assumption without which there would be no possibilities for an existence wherein a "turning around" from defilement to *nirvāṇa* could take place.

If the above discussion be accepted, it could be said further that the subjectivity of the appearer or the "transactor of linguistic conventions" (*vyavahārtṛ*) is the foundation on which the so-called religious existence or religious subjectivity stands. Both "appearing" and "transactional linguistic conventions" are aspects of "knowing"—that is, an act of the "knower" that is of the other-dependent nature. On the one hand, this knower produces a continuous ego-consciousness through the mediation of *manas* (self-hood) and on the other, attains Buddhahood through the "turn around" from knowing to wisdom. It is a matter of course that in Buddhism defilements based upon ego-consciousness are to be removed. The aim of this removal, however, is to elucidate, as Nāgārjuna had done, the dependent nature of the "doer," "goer" and so forth all of which are wrongly assumed to have independent and absolute existence. The subject that is freed from ego-consciousness and is of the other-dependent nature can attain the perfect enlightenment. As such, the appearer is distinguished from the consummated nature. The appearer is not the universal but is the individual and at the same time, it is distinguished from the imaginary nature, because the former is the knower (*paratantra*) itself, while the latter presupposes the dichotomized realities of a subject and an object. Although distinguished from the extremes of both the imagined and the consummated natures, the appearer functions as the mediator between the two and as such

includes both in itself. So far as it is captured by self-love (*ātma-sneha*) and self-attachment, the appearer must undergo transmigration and is accountable for it, because what is of the other-dependent nature is, after all, phenomenal (*saṃskṛta*) and must never be confused with what is of the consummated nature. But, when through the awakening to Buddhahood, the appearer becomes aware of the fact of being phenomenal, this is to be called the "other-dependent existence" originating in the light of the consummated.

Nāgārjuna denied *essentia,* so to say, but he did not elucidate *existentia* fully. It was the adherents of the Vijñāna-vāda who clarified the position of religous subjectivity and opened the way for existential thinking. In this paper, an instance of this was noted in the conception of the appearer, which is both individual and subjective, and which is the mediator for the "turning around" that enables one to go from the infected status of *saṃsāra* to the absolute purity of *nirvāṇa.*