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**Demonstration of the Buddha-nature of the Insentient
in Zhanran's *The Diamond Scalpel* Treatise**

Doctoral Dissertation

THESES

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I. Theme and objective of the research

The theme of the dissertation is the idea of Buddha-nature of the insentient (*wuqing youxing* 無情有性) as presented in the most prominent work of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) Tiantai 天台 monk, Zhanran 湛然 (711–782), *The Diamond Scalpel* (*Jin'gang bei* 金剛鐮; T46:1932) treatise. The objective of the dissertation is a new translation of *The Diamond Scalpel*, completed with translations from commentaries written to it, a thorough and detailed analysis and explanation of the text, including a definition of the notions and ideas presented in it, furthermore a study of the idea of Buddha-nature former to Zhanran, a definition of its role and interpretations in Chinese Buddhism, essential to understanding the treatise itself.

The dissertation includes four main chapters, these are: I. Zhanran's biography; II. The idea of Buddha-nature in Chinese Buddhism; III. Demonstration of the Buddha-nature of the insentient in Zhanran's *The Diamond Scalpel* treatise; IV. Summary.

In the first chapter Zhanran's life is presented through a translation, comparison and analysis of the chapters dealing with Zhanran's life from the biographies of monks written in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Biographies besides historical data also contain several miraculous elements, thus, this first chapter also provides a glimpse into the world of Buddhist biographies. This chapter also briefly introduces the reader into the history of Tiantai school before Zhanran, therefore this is placed at the beginning of the dissertation.

Because the main theme of Zhanran's treatise is the Buddha-nature of the insentient, the translation and analysis of the text is preceded by a chapter on the idea of Buddha-nature, focusing on its apparition, evolution and interpretations in Chinese Buddhism. This chapter is divided into two major parts, the first part gives a presentation of those *sūtras* and treatises, which had the greatest influence on the formation of Chinese interpretations of the notion. The second part deals with those Chinese traditions and schools, thinkers and ideas, which had great impact on the formation of the Chinese Buddha-nature theory. While presenting certain writings, schools and thinkers a greater emphasis is laid on those ideas, which appear in *The Diamond Scalpel*, or can be proven to have influenced Zhanran's philosophy. Thus, both the premises for Zhanran's conclusion and the ideas to be refuted clear out. The objective of this chapter is to place Zhanran's work in a greater context, and to determine those antecedents, that lead Zhanran towards the formulation of his ideas.

The third, most important and most extensive chapter is the translation of *The Diamond Scalpel*, complemented with translations from commentaries written to it, detailed analysis and

interpretation of the text divided into sixty separate chapters. One of the most important objectives is to grasp the main ideas, and provide this difficult text a clear and easily understandable interpretation.

The fourth chapter consists of a summary of the main ideas presented in *The Diamond Scalpel*, and an overall analysis of the text.

II. Methodology of the research

The Diamond Scalpel is a complex work, which includes a rich variety of diverse notions and ideas, contains a huge amount of quotations from, and allusions to a large spectrum of Chinese Buddhist literature, and different schools and traditions. Its language is difficult, and its style concise and brief. Fractional and inaccurate quotations are present in almost every paragraph. Without commentaries the text itself is almost impossible to interpret. Therefore the Tang and Song Dynasty commentaries were essential in translating and analysing the text.

The Diamond Scalpel – which I have fully translated – originally is one block of text. First of all I have divided this text into paragraphs according to the structure scheme (*kepan* 科判) devised by the Song Dynasty Jingjue Renyue 淨覺仁岳 (992–1064), entitled *Structure Scheme of The Diamond Scalpel* (*Jin'gang bei ke* 金剛鉷科; X933). The structure scheme provides titles and subtitles to the paragraphs alluding to its main content, therefore it is helpful both for the division and punctuation of the text and for the translation. I have translated the titles of this structure scheme entirely, and numbered them following Jingjue Renyue's original intention. I have inserted these lines before the specific paragraphs. The next step was to fully translate the earliest commentary, and to insert its paragraphs below the main text they refer to. Where it was necessary I also translated selected parts from other, later commentaries. After finishing with the translation work, I divided the main text plus titles and commentaries on basis of content into sixty chapters, and then commented each chapter separately. For these sixty chapters I have chosen titles alluding to the content, and grouped them around nine greater chapters. For the analysis and explanation of the chapters I have used the Tang and Song Dynasty commentaries, and secondary sources as well, and then commented them according to my own interpretation. Where the commentaries did not agree on a certain interpretation, I have chosen the most reasonable one, noting that other commentators had different opinions.

The earliest commentary to *The Diamond Scalpel* dates from the Tang Dynasty, the *Personal Notes to The Diamond Scalpel* (*Jin'gang bei lun siji* 金剛鉷論私記; X56: 932; one

fascicle) was written by Zhanran's disciple, Mingkuang 明曠. Mingkuang does not comment on every line of the text, but he selects certain fragment and notions, which he explains in detail. He often explains the meaning of certain rare or ambiguous characters, which is very useful for the translation. Because this is the earliest commentary, and later commentators probably all knew about, I have entirely translated it. If Mingkuang did not comment a certain paragraph, and thus its meaning remained unclear, or I have considered his explanation unacceptable, I have selected and translated the most suitable fragments from the following three Song Dynasty commentaries. (1.) *The Diamond Scalpel as a Register for Revealing the Buddha-nature* (*Jin'gang bei xian xing lu* 金剛鉈顯性錄; X56: 935) in four fascicles, written by Gushan Zhiyuan 孤山智圓 (976–1022), who belonged to the heterodox (*shanwai* 山外) line of the Song Dynasty Tiantai. (2.) *Explanations on the Meaning of The Diamond Scalpel* (*Jin'gang bei lun yijie* 金剛鉈論義解; X56: 936), in three fascicles, from which only the middle one is extant. The author is Boting Shanyue 柏庭善月 (1149–1241), who belonged to the orthodox (*shanjia* 山家) line of Tiantai. (3.) *Comments on the Text of The Diamond Scalpel* (*Jin'gang bei lun shi wen* 金剛鉈論釋文; X56: 937), in three fascicles, the author is Dingshan Shiju 鼎山時舉. Because of the difficulty of the main text, these commentaries were essential for both the translation and the analysis.

Appendix no. 4. is a list of the most important and most common terms, which appear in the main text, to which a brief explanation is added.

The second chapter was written mainly based on secondary sources, but also supported with lots of translated fragments from the primary sources. In the first chapter, Zhanran's life is presented mainly based on translation and analysis of primary sources, and relying also on secondary sources. The fourth chapter relies entirely on the results of the present study.

III. Results of the dissertation

1.

Tracing the evolution of the concept of Buddha-nature in Chinese Buddhism, we find that its interpretations are evolving towards acquiring a more and more universal meaning. After its apparition in Chinese Buddhism it was believed, that only a certain group of sentient beings have Buddha-nature. The inner evolution of Chinese Buddhism leads logically to the final interpretation of Buddha-nature as an omnipresent absolute principle. The enlarging tendency of interpretation roughly has the following stages: 1. only a certain group of sentient beings possess Buddha-nature; 2. every sentient being, including the most evil ones possess Buddha-nature; 3. plants (grasses and

trees) and everything else has Buddha-nature; 4. insentient things (tiles and stones) and everything else has Buddha-nature. The idea of the all inclusive, non obstructed and universal Buddha-nature becomes complete with Zhanran's work.

2.

There are lots of similarities between the Sanlun 三論 master, Jizang's 吉藏 (549–623) and Zhanran's philosophy. In the history of Chinese Buddhism Jizang is thought to be the first, who explicitly stated that the surrounding environment also has Buddha-nature. Zhanran in his work never mentions Jizang or his theories, moreover, the text of *The Diamond Scalpel* suggests, that Zhanran would be the first to draw this conclusion. Although Jizang's statement primarily refers to plants, and Zhanran's statement to insentient things, like tiles and stones – borrowing the enumeration from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* –, there are many similarities between the logic and thought of these two monks. First of all, their conclusion is rooted in the synthesis of an originally *madhyamaka* concept (in Jizang's case the middle path, in Zhanran's case the three truths theory is more prominent) and the concept of Buddha-nature originating in the *tathāgatagarbha* philosophy. In Zhanran's work can be noticed many ideas already present in Jizang's philosophy, for example the non-duality of Buddha-nature as cause and result, the idea that Buddha-nature cannot be limited inside the mind of sentient beings, the ultimate identity between the mind and the environment based on the mind-only theory, etc. Jizang although uses the terms grasses and trees, he sees Buddha-nature as a universal principle identical with the middle path. Therefore, Zhanran's merit is not the formulation of a new theory, but the thorough and solid argumentation of an already invented idea.

3.

The premises for Zhanran's conclusion can be found in Zhiyi's 智顗 (538–597) philosophy. Zhiyi – just like Jizang – identified Buddha-nature with the middle path, and also stated that there is nothing in the world, which is not identical to the middle path. Zhanran's conclusion logically follows these two statements. Thus the idea, that insentient things also possess Buddha-nature is not contrary to Zhiyi's philosophy, but it is based on it as a logical consequence. Therefore it can be said, that Zhanran completed Zhiyi's thought, and stated a conclusion that the founder of Tiantai philosophy left unsaid. Zhanran therefore re-establishes this doctrine once and for all, so that no one should ever doubt it.

4.

Zhanran expounds the idea of Buddha-nature in the light of the Tiantai paradigm of the inter-inclusive three truths. He reinterprets the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*'s teaching of Buddha-nature, according to Tiantai methodology. His aim is to clear out the doubts risen by the so called relative teachings (*upāya*) – from Tiantai perspective – which in his work primarily refers to that fragment from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* which explicitly states, that Buddha-nature does not refer to insentient things. The starting point (the quotation from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* which states, that Buddha-nature does not refer to insentient things) and the final result (Zhanran's conclusion that insentient things do possess Buddha-nature) are diametrically opposed. Nevertheless, Zhanran's reasoning is remarkably convincing, his way of thinking is clear, and his conclusions are logically correct. This treatise serves as a representative example of how the outstanding figures of sinicized Buddhism were able to authenticate their thought with the text of the *sūtras*, and at the same time radically transform the basic meaning of a *sūtra*.

5.

The Diamond Scalpel treatise contains a great variety of Buddhist notions and theories, the whole work is full of quotations from and allusions to a large spectrum of Buddhist texts. The greatest amount of quotations are from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, the *Lotus sūtra*, and the *Avataṃsaka sūtra*. This is in accordance with the Tiantai view, that these three *sūtras* contain Buddha's teachings in a most perfect way. In the first part of the treatise – where Zhanran deals with the fragment referring to the insentient things from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* – most of the quotations are from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*. In the middle – where among others Zhanran analyses some Huayan 華嚴 concepts – the majority of the quotations originate from the *Avataṃsaka sūtra*. At the end of the treatise – where Zhanran reformulates his theories according to the basic principles of Tiantai school – quotations from the *Lotus sūtra* are dominant.

6.

Zhanran presents his treatise as a philosophical debate between himself and an imaginary person he calls the guest, which took place in Zhanran's dream. I suppose that the motive behind writing this treatise was the spread of the idea, that only sentient beings have Buddha-nature, which arose once again in Zhanran's time. This must have come from an influential school of the middle Tang era. In order to find out who is Zhanran actually debating with, one key sentence is to be found in the treatise. At a certain point, the guest states, that the absolute in sentient beings should be called Buddha-nature, and in insentient things it should be called dharma-nature. Zhanran only says that

this comes from a treatise, but this idea can be found in one treatise of Fazang 法藏 (643–712), the third patriarch, and de facto founder of the Huayan school. From this we can draw the conclusion, that Zhanran is debating with those followers of the Huayan school, who based on Fazang's statement – and probably also referring to the above mentioned quotation from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, and just like the followers of the *Nirvāṇa* tradition, prosperous before the Tang Dynasty– believed and taught that only sentient beings have Buddha-nature. Zhanran entering in debate with them reinvents, reestablishes and completes the idea of Buddha-nature of the insentient already present in Jizang's and Zhiyi's thought.

7.

The idea that insentient things possess Buddha-nature in Zhanran's thought does not mean that one piece of stone or wood in particular would have Buddha-nature, and by consequence these would be able in the present or future to participate in the Buddhist path leading towards enlightenment. In order to avoid future misinterpretations, Zhanran explicitly states this. His theory briefly means that Buddha-nature as a universal, absolute and infinite category cannot be restricted, is non-dual, and permeates everything. It is because of this omnipresent reality of Buddha-nature, that the insentient environment partakes in the same Buddha-nature that the Buddhas have realized, and which is present in the mind of sentient beings.

8.

Zhanran probably addresses his treatise to an audience well versed in Buddhist studies and in the first place to his disciples, so that with the use of *The Diamond Scalpel* they would efficiently argue against those holding the opposite opinion. This assumption is supported by the incompleteness of most of the quotations – the author supposes that the reader is aware of the context –, and the great emphasis laid on the detailed and repeated exposition of the debate, the lengthy enumeration of both the opponent's, and his own arguments, and the ready formulated answers to all possible objection.

9.

Concerning the commentaries, there is a fundamental difference between Mingkuang's Tang Dynasty commentary and the Song Dynasty commentaries. Mingkuang's commentary is more like a collection of notes taken to *The Diamond Scalpel*. He selects certain ideas and terms, and explains them, in some cases he expands the text with lengthy elaboration on one theme, and sometimes specifies the meaning of some rare or ambiguous characters from the text. Mingkuang does not comment all the passages, or the text as a whole, and he leaves lots of phrases without comments.

Since Mingkuang was Zhanran's disciple it is likely that some of these explanations were made by the master himself. The Song Dynasty commentaries are much more lengthy, and they attempt to explain and comment all terms and phrases from the treatise. These are comprehensive works written to the main text as a whole. The fact that during the Song Dynasty more commentaries and structure schemes were composed, proves the importance credited to the treatise by the Song Dynasty Tiantai monks. The authors of these works were representatives of both the orthodox (*shanjia*), and the heterodox (*shanwai*) traditions, which leads to the conclusion, that *The Diamond Scalpel* was essential for both traditions. There are some passages in the main text to which the commentators credit different meanings, thus because of the briefness, and difficult style of the treatise, in some cases Zhanran's original intent remains uncertain, and different interpretations are plausible.

IV. Usability of the dissertation's results

The dissertation is a comprehensive and detailed study on *The Diamond Scalpel* treatise, therefore it can be a useful preliminary study for a research on the debates between the orthodox (*shanjia*) and the heterodox (*shanwai*) traditions of Tiantai, during the Song Dynasty. Zhanran and his works were highly appreciated by both traditions, and its representatives often cited from and relied on Zhanran's works and *The Diamond Scalpel* in particular. I believe that a research on the Song Dynasty debates cannot be complete without a thorough knowledge on Zhanran's thought and his most important and genuine work, *The Diamond Scalpel*.

The dissertation can also be useful for the research of Japanese Tendai school, because the "commentary" of *The Diamond Scalpel* credited to Saichō 最澄 (767–822), the founder of the Tendai school is in fact identical with Mingkuang's commentary, which is fully translated in the dissertation.

The topic of further research starting from Zhanran's treatise can be a study on the evolution, role and further interpretations of the theory of the Buddha-nature of the insentient in Chinese and / or Japanese Buddhism.