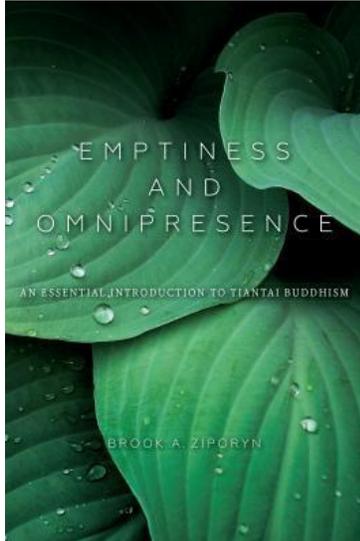


The World According to Radical Contextuality: A Review of Brook Ziporyn’s *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*

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Want radical? Deconstruction has got nothing on Tiantai Buddhism. Right upfront in this book we are warned: the philosophy of the Chinese Tiantai school can be shocking, wildly perplexing, conflicting and, at times, an affront to common sense, even to those who are seasoned students of the mind-twisting paradoxes of Buddhist thought. Tiantai (pinyin pronunciation “tee-en tai”, 天台) has been criticized for being at odds not only with basic Buddhism but also with general religion and ethics. This is not philosophy for the faint of heart but rather wild, challenging, sweeping, yet also profoundly meaningful philosophy.

Ziporyn’s presentation of Tiantai provides us with nearly 300 pages of spell-binding philosophical insights on the nature of the human condition, chock-full of Indian-cum-Chinese wisdom which, in Ziporyn’s expert hands, is deftly and at times humorously explained using contemporary language and cultural references. It’s a shame there aren’t already 500 reviews of this book here on GoodReads—Ziporyn’s work deserves a much larger readership and wider exposure. As a long-time student of Buddhism and East Asian philosophy, I spent the summer of 2016 slowly digesting this book soon after it came out. I continue to go back to it in order to more completely absorb its many insights. Only now do I feel ready to write this review (OK, I procrastinated a bit too).

As you’ve probably already guessed, *Emptiness and Omnipresence* is not an introductory book on Buddhism but rather best described as an introductory book on Chinese Tiantai for those already familiar with Buddhism. People new to Buddhism would be easily lost here. If you’re inclined towards original Hinayana-Theravada Buddhism, you best go elsewhere—this is Mahayana emptiness on steroids. If you’re a Zen or Tibetan Buddhist practitioner interested in learning about a different form of East Asian Buddhism, then this is a great place to start. If you’re interested in cross-cultural philosophy, you’ll learn how Tiantai is the distinctive synthesis of two very different cultural systems of thought: a) indigenous Chinese philosophy and b) Indian Mahayana Buddhism as read from one primary text, the *Lotus Sutra*. The Tiantai school is,

the most rigorous theoretical edifice in all of East Asian intellectual history, using modes of argumentation and praxis that are derived squarely from Indian Buddhism but in the service of ideals and metaphysical conclusions that are rooted deeply in the [Chinese] indigenous philosophical traditions. The result is a comprehensive system of thought that is utterly new, rarely understood, and, as it happens, still quite unique and unduplicated fifteen centuries later (preface pp. ix-x).

Author Brook Ziporyn, professor of Chinese religion, philosophy, and comparative thought at the University of Chicago, notes in the preface that Tiantai Buddhism is of particular interest to contemporary Westerners in that it is a rare example in world history when two radically different cultural systems of thought encountered each other and entered into a prolonged reconciliation and synthesis of their differences. It is of interest to us in this regard because of how we find ourselves in a similar situation wherein Western thought, struggling from decades of its own internal existential crisis, is confronted with increasing challenges from Asian cultural systems. The Tiantai synthesis of Chinese and Indian Buddhist philosophical systems stands as a model for the current Asian-Western encounter. The opportunities for cross-cultural fertilization are staggering as the postmodern West and the nondual East gradually interpenetrate.

Now to the contents:

On my reading, the book can be divided into three parts having to do with the consequences of adopting the philosophy of emptiness: 1) Chapters 1 to 4 deal with basic Mahayana Buddhist thought ending with **the emptiness of space—of things and of states**; 2) Chapters 5-7 deal with *the Lotus Sutra* and its unique teaching of **the emptiness of time, past and future**; 3) Chapters 8-10 present the Tiantai synthesis in the doctrine of **the Three Truths**: emptiness, provisional positing, and the center (aka: emptiness, dependent arising, and nonduality). The third truth of Tiantai, the center (pinyin *zhong*, 中), is thoroughly Chinese and a beautiful expansion of the Mahayana Two Truths doctrine.

Once again (for the second time), I am returning to edit this section of my review as my past two attempts to describe the Tiantai meaning of the word in the title **omnipresence** have been inaccurate. Before I described omnipresence as synonymous with the idea of *Buddhanature*, as a kind of “nondual presence” in contrast to “nondual absence” or *emptiness*, the two being the primary nondual dialectic of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. This dialectic notwithstanding, the Tiantai meaning of omnipresence represents the furthest possible reaches of the philosophy of emptiness and dependent origination as aided by the Tiantai concept of the center.

In relation to all phenomena, all possible coherences, any determinate thing, **omnipresence** means *all is present in each; each is present in all*. Each is the center, the basis for all others. Each is all others in disguise. Another way to describe the view of omnipresence is that each *subsumes* all others; not *reflects*, as in the Indra's Net of Huayen Buddhism, but subsumes, pervades, or entails. A synonym for omnipresence is thus *interpervasion* or *intersubsumption*, the most radical holism possible but without being fundamentalist holism. Dependent arising means *each arises as all* which means, each subsumes all and all subsumes each; each pervades all and all pervades each... this “reverse asness” as Ziporyn calls it, is emptiness as dependent arising in full completion. Omnipresence or intersubsumption is considered the perfect or most complete teaching in the Tiantai system.

The intro and the first four chapters present basic Buddhist thought from the Four Noble Truths, to *prajnaparamita* and *Madhyamaka*, up to Buddha-Nature.

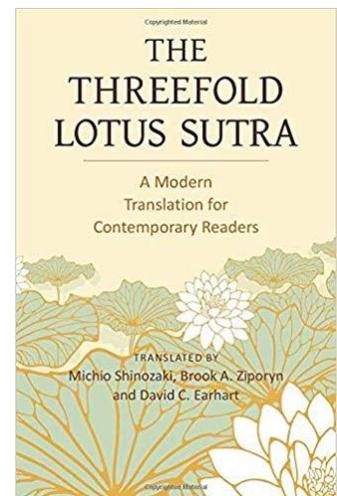
Chapters 1-2: The first two chapters examine original Buddhism's approach to suffering (*dukkha*) and the end of suffering (*nirvana*). Chapter one examines the paradox at the heart of original Buddhism—the desire to end suffering. By employing the parables of the Raft and the Arrow, chapter two shows how Buddhism leads to the doctrine of the Two Truths, conventional and ultimate truth. Chapter two begins with the enticing question: Does the end of suffering begin? These first two chapters are excellent summaries of the basic tenets of Buddhism.

Chapters 3-4: Chapters three and four introduce the central Mahayana concept of emptiness and how it expands the original Two Truths of early Buddhism. Chapter four adds the further development of emptiness in the concept of Buddha-Nature. Together, chapters three and four deconstruct our standard ideas of “things” and “states” in “space” (states as states of affairs, moments).

Chapter three is a fascinating examination of the exceedingly common idea of “a thing” which, in this explanation, lies at the heart of our samsaric confusion—we are unliberated because of how we think of “things”. Emptiness shows that our standard view that things persist through time, possess characteristics, have definite borders, or exist in and of themselves is deeply mistaken. The Two Truths model of Mahayana Buddhism is a way to “wean ourselves from this type of default ‘thing-thinking’ based on attachment, which inevitably leads to suffering” (p38). After a brief explanation of the concepts of emptiness and its corollary dependent origination, Ziporyn presents an excellent summary of six approaches to emptiness in relation to conventional ideas of what things are: 1-The whole/part approach, 2-The cause/effect approach, 3-The thing/characteristic approach, 4-The language approach, 5-Emptiness as the self-overcoming of both holism and reductionism, 6-The this/that approach.

Here Ziporyn also introduces another way to understand the Mahayana concept of emptiness in what he terms *ontological ambiguity*. This simply means that since all things arise only due to causes and conditions, no thing (no state, condition, experience, element, no phenomenon) can ever exist independently, definitively, *as-it-is-of-itself-apart-from-everything-else*. No thing has inherent is-ness (in Sanskrit, *svabhava*). This is the meaning of *pratitya-sammutpada*, the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising. Since no thing can exist in isolation as itself alone, “whatever you are seeing, touching, thinking, or feeling right now got there and to the way it is because of something else.” *Something else* is always necessarily involved in whatever you have before you now. Chapter four expands on chapter three and contains an extended analysis of our commonsense notions of **space** which, in Ziporyn’s hands, are as mind-bendingly weird as anything in modern physics.

Chapters 5-6-7: Chapters five through seven introduce the Tiantai interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* which focus on its unique teaching of the emptiness of **time**, of past and future, and the consequences thereof. By applying the previous analysis of the emptiness of things, Ziporyn shows how the *Lotus* radically reframes the doctrine of transmigration and the idea of rebirth through infinite lifetimes to show that all beings are on a path to Buddhahood—all beings are “buddhas in the making” over the course of infinite lifetimes. Ziporyn’s story of The Dolphin School is a beautiful illustration of the themes in chapter five. Chapter six presents new perspectives on the Middle Way offered by the parables in the Lotus Sutra, perspectives that constitute much of Tiantai philosophy. Chapter seven describes how “The *Lotus Sutra* provides a template with which to rethink how holders of one view can regard holders of another view. It is an idea about ideas and about what it means for different ideas to ‘contradict’ one another, or to ‘be included’ in a larger idea, or ‘be versions of’ or ‘extensions of’ one another” (p118). The latter part of this long chapter gets rather bogged down in my view. Much of chapter seven’s discussion of the interpervasion of views revolves around the meaning of Mahayana idea of “the One Vehicle.”



Also of note: a new translation of the *Lotus Sutra* was released in 2019 with an outstanding introduction by Ziporyn (<https://amzn.to/3xslwB2>), this translation by Michio Shinozaki, Brook Ziporyn, and David Earhart.

Chapters 8-9-10: Chapter eight presents the meat of Tiantai philosophy in the doctrine of the Three Truths. Ziporyn employs the Chinese philosophical concept of “coherence” (pinyin li, 理) and shows how it can be used to characterize any phenomena as a “local coherence,” an instance of dependent arising, but also emptiness as “global incoherence” which is another way of saying no one (local) context of meaning/truth satisfies all (global) contexts of meaning/truth. Local coherence is conventional truth. Global incoherence is ultimate truth. The third truth that links the Two Truths of (ultimate) emptiness and (conventional) dependent arising is the (nondual) Center. All phenomena arise *as* all three: ultimate, conventional, nondual (Ziporyn’s summary of these ideas is on p156-157). Chapter eight is so chock full of nondual insights that you’ll just have to read it yourself!

Chapter nine presents a number of Tiantai techniques and practices having to do with meditation and contemplation. I’ve yet to mention the scholar-sage responsible for establishing the Tiantai view – Zhiyi, (智顓, pronounced “Juh-yee”) the illustrious founder who lived in the mid- to late 6th century (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhiyi>). Zhiyi’s voluminous works were substantially supplemented by two subsequent Tiantai scholars, Zhanran (8th c.) and Zhili (late 10th c.). Nine is a very valuable chapter in that Ziporyn takes a number of these practices and walks us through performing them in the context of what has been presented. It makes what would be a book of abstract philosophy into a practical handbook of practices.



Chapter ten sets out to demonstrate the utility of Tiantai ethics by applying its insights to what is arguably the most complex and problematic scenario of ethical violations in human history, Hitler and the Holocaust. Ziporyn, who is from Jewish background, is well aware of the perils of so doing and addresses these upfront. Can Tiantai perspectives possibly shine any new light onto the long and labored history of Holocaust studies? My sense is that most people will not think so after reading this particularly since “getting” nondual Tiantai thought takes so much time and effort in the first place. Nevertheless, to the extent Tiantai philosophy is a fundamentally novel approach and so thoroughly non-Western, it has the potential to bring some new understandings to this great human tragedy. Judge for yourself.

Ziporyn ends with an epilogue, a lovely summary of Tiantai principles and practices as they apply to our contemporary lives. How are we to live as practitioners of Tiantai principles? It starts by quoting Zhiyi’s *One-Practice Samadhi*, a gorgeous pointing-out instruction that has the effect of a long and serene breathing-out into the knowing that *everything is alright*, completely and utterly the way it should be. Yet this is not traditional Tiantai but Tiantai Buddhism for current times brought to us through Ziporyn’s skillful presentation.

I could say so much more about this book. If you’re an open-minded student of Buddhism, by all means treat yourself to Tiantai philosophy and Professor Ziporyn’s works.

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