

The Awakening of Faith

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Introduction & Background

The *Awakening of Faith* [Hakeda, 2006], also translated as *Discourse On the Awakening of Faith In the Mahayana* [Suzuki, 1900] and as *Treatise on Awakening Mahayana Faith* [Jorgensen, Lusthaus, Makeham, & Strange, 2019], is an influential and significant sutra. It is the sutra that brought three important teaching points, substance (the absolute), truth and function, together. Substance, truth and function encapsulates the most important teachings of our lineage—their importance cannot be overstated. They are called the three gates in the sutra and are also referred to as the three greatnesses.

The sutra was attributed to the great Indian Buddhist and scholar Asvaghosha, although it is widely believed that it was written in China by someone else. It appeared in China in the sixth century, and by 1900 more than 300 commentaries had been written about it [Jorgensen, Lusthaus, Makeham, & Strange, 2019, p. 1]. The Sanskrit original has never been found (as could be expected if the original wasn't written in Sanskrit).

The sixth-century Chinese master Fazang summarized the Treatise as a discourse on One Mind, Two Aspects, Three Greatnesses, Four Faiths and Five Practices [MZMC]. This brief paper will not discuss all these topics, but will focus on One Mind, Two Aspects and the Three Greatnesses.

When the sutra title refers to Mahayana, it is not in the normally used sense of the word, i.e., as Mahayana contrasted with Hinayana. In this sutra, Mahayana designates Suchness or the Absolute. The title would probably be better translated as “Awakening of Faith in the Absolute” [Hakeda, 2006, p. 35].

Wonhyo

The Korean monk and brilliant scholar Wonhyo was famous for many things, insightful commentaries being one of them. His commentaries were well regarded in China and greatly influenced Chan throughout the region. His *Commentary on the Treatise of Awakening Mahayana Faith* was highly esteemed by Tang Clerics and ordinary people alike and they referred to him with honorifics. Wonhyo's Hua-yen philosophy influenced Fazang and Li Dongyuan, two great Chinese Buddhist scholars. [Yu, 2010, p. 15]

Wonhyo's enlightenment story has a very close connection to *The Awakening of Faith*. He was on a pilgrimage with his colleague Uisang to Tang China to study with a renowned master there, Hsuan-Tsang, who had returned to China from India after 17 years of Buddhist studies. [Soeng, 1991, p. 37] There are many versions of the story; here is one [Muller & Nguyen, 2012, p. 20]:

When Wonhyo and Uisang arrived at their port of embarkation, their ships departure was delayed by inclement weather. Caught in the rain without a place to stay, they took shelter in a nearby cave, where they found gourds from which to drink and so were able to get a descent nights sleep. In the light of the dawn, they realized that the cave in which they were staying was actually a tomb and that the “gourds” from which they had drunk were human skulls. The storm continued, delaying their departure for another day, and they were forced to spend another night in the same cave. During their second night in the cave they were unable to sleep, being plagued by ghosts and nightmares. As Wonhyo reflected on this experience, he suddenly became deeply aware of the extent to which his perception of the world was based on the limits of his own mind. He experienced a great awakening to the principle of consciousness-only, after which he decided that there was, after all, no need to go to China in search of the Dharma. He explained his experience thus “Because of the arising of thought, various phenomena arise; since thought ceases, a cave and a grave are not two.” (This is a reference to the verse in the *Awakening of Faith* that says, “When a thought arises, all dharmas arise, and when a thought ceases, all dharmas disappear.”)

Wonhyo realized that all things are created by mind alone and that a cave and a grave are not two. “Not two” is an important point in the *Awakening of Faith*, as will be seen below.

One Mind, Two Gates

Quoting from the sutra [Jorgensen, Lusthaus, Makeham, & Strange, 2019, p. 68]:

... there are two gateways based on the dharma of the One Mind. What are they?
The first is the gateway of the mind as suchness.
The second is the gateway of the mind as arising and ceasing.
Each of these two gateways contains all dharmas. Why? Because these two gateways are not separate from one another.

The gate of the mind as suchness is referring to what we call absolute world. The gate of the mind as arising and ceasing is referring to what we call relative world or phenomenal world. We can see the absolute world because the mind of arising and ceasing, the relative world, is not separate from the mind as suchness, the absolute world. They are not two.

However, do not think that these two gates exist. In truth, there are no gates to pass through.

How do we see suchness, the absolute? Sit (meditate) without conceptualizing the experience, without thought of this or that. Sit with don't know mind. Sit with spacious awareness of present moment reality. It is right here, right now. See. No need to look elsewhere for it. In fact, if you do, you won't find it.

In the Zen circle, the right half, from zero to 180 degrees, represents relative world while the left half, from 180 to 360 degrees, represents absolute world.

Substance, Truth and Function

The importance of substance, truth and function is indicated by various enlightenment stories that have been handed down to us. In some of these stories three different levels of enlightenment are described. These three levels correspond to a realization of substance, a realization of truth, and a realization of function. Zen Master Seung Sahn wrote that these levels of enlightenment are called first enlightenment, original enlightenment and final enlightenment. These are just names, so be careful. First enlightenment is attaining true emptiness. Original enlightenment is attaining truth. Final enlightenment is attaining function. However, don't think that final enlightenment is final! [Sahn, S., *The Compass of Zen*, 1997, p. 274]

In the sutra, substance, truth and function are called the three meanings of maha (great) of the Great Vehicle, the Mahayana. Quoting from the sutra [Jorgensen, Lusthaus, Makeham, & Strange, 2019, pp. 66-67]:

The meaning of Mahayana is disclosed on the basis of this mind. Why? Because the aspect of this mind as suchness directly reveals Mahayana's intrinsic reality; and because the aspect of this mind as the cause and condition of arising and ceasing is the revealer of Mahayana's own intrinsic reality (ziti), characteristics (xiang) and function (yong).

The reference to intrinsic reality (ziti) is referring to substance while the reference to characteristics (xiang) is referring to truth. Notice where it says "... because the aspect of this mind as the cause and condition of arising and ceasing is the revealer of Mahayana's own intrinsic reality (ziti), characteristics (xiang) and function (yong)." This is again saying that the mind of arising and ceasing, the relative world, the ordinary mind, reveals substance, the absolute world. Don't look for substance outside of ordinary mind. It is right here.

These are the three 'meanings' of [of maha-, 'great', in the word Mahayana, 'Great Vehicle']. What are they?

The first is that Mahayana's intrinsic reality is great because the suchness of all dharmas is uniform, neither increasing nor decreasing.

This is referring to substance.

The second is that its characteristics are great because the *tathagatagarbha* (Buddha nature) is replete with countless merits.

This is referring to truth.

The third is that its functions are great because it is the producer of all good causes and effects, both mundane and supramundane.

This is referring to function.

That is why the Mahayana [the "Great Vehicle"] is that on which all buddhas have always ridden and why all bodhisattvas ride on this Dharma until they arrive at the level of *tathagatas*.

These three meanings of maha "... is that on which all buddhas have always ridden and why all bodhisattvas ride on this Dharma until they arrive at the level of *tathagatas*." To fully wake up, these three, substance, truth and function, must *all* be realized.

Substance

Since substance is referring to the absolute, any concept of it will ultimately miss the mark, including classifying it as an "it". A master said that the closest thing to it is "don't know." Before thinking mind. Beginner's mind.

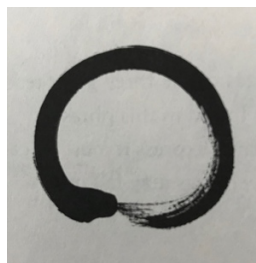
The very first entry of *The Mirror of Zen* is about substance [Sahn & Joeng, 2006, pp. 3-4]:

There is only one thing, from the very beginning, infinitely bright and mysterious by nature.

It was never born, and it never dies. It cannot be described or given a name.

Commentary

What is this "one thing"?



An eminent teacher wrote,

Even before the ancient Buddhas were born,
One thing was already perfectly complete.
Even Shakyamuni Buddha could not understand it.
How could he transmit it to Mahakashyapa?

There is one "thing" that is never born, and never dies. For this reason it cannot be named in any way, or expressed, or depicted.

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen once addressed the assembly thus: "I have something that has no name and no form. Do any of you see it?" Zen Master Shen-hui immediately replied, "It is the essence of all Buddhas, and also my buddha-nature." Due to this answer, Shen-hui cannot be considered a legitimate heir and descendant of the Sixth Patriarch.

Zen Master Nan-yueh came from Mount Seung Sahn to see the Sixth Patriarch, who asked, "What is it that comes here like this?" Nan-yueh was completely stuck, and could not answer anything. After eight years of practice, he finally attained enlightenment and said, "If you even call this a 'thing,' it is not correct." This answer is why Nan-yueh thus became the premier Dharma heir and successor of the Sixth Patriarch.

Gatha

The sages of the three great teachings
Can be found in this phrase
Who dare express it must be careful—
Your eyebrows may fall out!

In Asia there is a fable that your eyebrows will fall out as a consequence of lying, similar to the tale of Pinocchio's growing nose. Realize that you really cannot say a thing about the absolute. As the saying goes, if you open your mouth you are already mistaken. On the other hand, another saying goes, you have to say something.

There is a risk about attaching to the experience of substance, which is a big mistake. Many teachers have addressed this, as it is a significant hindrance. One teacher who addressed this is Wu-men, who at the end of *The Gateless Barrier* cautions [Wu-men & Aitken, 1995, p. 288]:

To maintain the mind in solitary depths is the specious Zen of quietism.

The definition of specious according to Merriam-Webster: "having a false look of truth or genuineness; having deceptive attraction or allure." We don't want that! Enjoy the experience while it lasts, then throw it away.

Substance is at 180 degrees on the Zen circle.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said that experience of substance occurs in two different ways which he called "without like this" and "become one like this" [Sahn S., *The Whole World is a Single Flower*, 1992, p. 219]. Without like this is complete stillness. The *Mahaparinirvana-sutra* says "when appearing and disappearing disappear, this stillness is bliss." This is a reference to "without like this." During interviews, a "without like this" answer is to sit in stillness. "Become one like this" is demonstrating substance. A "become one like this" answer would be hitting the floor or giving a Zen shout or drawing an enso.

What are we taught to do first when answering questions in the interview room? We normally start by hitting the floor. Returning to substance. Flashing the absolute. A grounding *here* is foundational to our practice. This isn't just for the interview room. In the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives there are lots of opportunities to "hit the reset button," to re-ground ourselves before continuing.

Truth

Truth is all that you see, hear, smell, taste and feel. This is not something special...it is ordinary mind. A key difference between deluded perception and the perception of truth is non-attachment. The great round mirror has no likes or dislikes. When white comes, it reflects white; when black comes, it reflects black. There is no picking and choosing. What is before us right now is the truth.

Not accepting what is before us, either by desiring something else, by rejecting what is here, or by trying to hold on to what has already left, pushes truth away and replaces it with ideas that fall short of reality.

Another difference between delusion and truth is conceptual thinking or discriminative consciousness. Truth is seen directly without limiting it by reducing it to a mere conception, by believing that it is what you conceive it to be. Salt is salty, sugar is sweet. You experience it directly when you taste it.

There is a famous saying by Qingyuan Weixin that is about realizing substance and truth [Watts, 1989, p. 126]:

Before I studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.

I hope he wasn't too much at rest. One more step is necessary. We must use truth to function in this world as Bodhisattvas. What is our job in this moment?

Zen Master Seung Sahn called truth "only like this" [Sahn S., *The Whole World is a Single Flower*, 1992, p. 219]. These days we call this "truth world."

Truth is at 360 degrees on the Zen circle. During interviews a truth answer would be "the kasa is brown."

Function

Attaining substance and truth are insufficient; our practice is incomplete if we stop there. One more step is needed. How do substance and truth function in this world moment by moment? A Bodhisattva uses the truth to save all beings from suffering. With wisdom and compassion, act or not act, in accordance with the situation. Perceive the situation, perceive your relationship to it, and then perform your correct function.

When the sutra was talking about the greatness of function it said "functions are great because it is the producer of all good causes and effects." Our function is to produce good causes and effects. To help. Follow the precepts if unsure what to do.

Zen Master Seung Sahn called function "just like this" [Sahn, S., *The Whole World is a Single Flower*, 1992, p. 219]. These days we call this "moment world."

Function is also at 360 degrees on the Zen circle. In the interview room, if asked "is this a bell?", a moment world (function) answer would be to take the bell and ring it.

Concluding Remarks

The key points of this paper are

- The mind of suchness, absolute world, and the mind of phenomena, relative world, are not two. You can attain them right here, right now, with ordinary mind.
- To fully wake up, these three, substance, truth, and function, must *all* be realized. These three empower us along the Bodhisattva path.

If you are interested in exploring the sutra further, the primer from the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center [MZMC] provides a short deconstruction of the *Awakening of Faith* [Hakeda, 2006] and references back to page numbers in the Hakeda translation, which itself has a good introduction. The Jorgensen et al. and the D.T. Suzuki translations also have extensive introductions, the former being quite recent (2019).

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