

Chien-hsing Ho

The Way of Nonacquisition:
Jizang's Philosophy of Ontic Indeterminacy
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in memoriam

John R. McRae (1947-2011)

The Way of Nonacquisition: Jizang's Philosophy of Ontic Indeterminacy¹

Chien-hsing Ho

1

Jizang (吉藏, 549–623) is the principal philosophical exponent of the Sanlun (三論) tradition of Chinese Buddhism and is the most creative and important Chinese Mādhyamika thinker. In developing his philosophy, he drew to a great extent on his reading of the works of Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250), the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Indian Buddhism, and some other Indian Mādhyamikas. His thinking was also shaped by the ideas and teachings of several Sanlun thinkers before him, chiefly Sengzhao (僧肇, 374?–414), Sengquan (僧詮, d.u., early fifth century), and Falang (法朗, 507–581). Most notable among these thinkers was Sengzhao. A key forerunner of the Sanlun tradition, Sengzhao set the tone for the development of Sanlun thought with his widely influential work, the *Zhao lun* (肇論). He was influenced in his philosophical thinking and phrasing by the contemporary current of thought known as “arcane learning” (*xuanxue* 玄學). Jizang, by contrast, may appear consciously to distance himself from non-Buddhist Chinese thought. However, inheriting a tradition of somewhat Sinicized Mādhyamika thought, Jizang's own philosophy remains different in a few aspects from that of Indian Madhyamaka.

¹ I would like to thank the following scholars for their critical comments and helpful suggestions on previous versions of this paper: Chen-kuo Lin, Dan Lusthaus, Shoryu Katsura, Hans-Rudolf Kantor, and Michael Radich.

According to Jizang, all things are empty of determinate form or nature. For him, much of what things are taken to be is such only relative to the current situation and the observer's conceptual scheme or perspective; there is no ultimate, perspective-free determination of things as they truly are. We may thus ascribe to Jizang the indeterminacy thesis, such that all things are ontologically indeterminate: given any x , no linguistic item can truly and conclusively be applied to x in the sense of positing a determinate form or nature therein.

Jizang's philosophy of ontic indeterminacy is connected closely with his views on the Way (*dao* 道) and nonacquisition (*wude* 無得).² In his construal of the Indian Mādhyamika doctrine of twofold truth, the conventional and supreme truths are actually two expedient teachings meant to make explicit the Way, which seems to be a kind of ineffable principle (*li* 理) of actuality. However, Jizang also equates the Way with nonacquisition, which is roughly a conscious state of freedom from any attachment and definite understanding whatsoever.³ The issue then becomes pressing as to how we are to understand Jizang's notion of the Way. Does it indicate some metaphysical principle or reality? Is it actually a skillful expedient to lead one to the consummate state of complete spiritual freedom? Again, how is this issue related to Jizang's conception of ontic indeterminacy? Unlike Nāgārjuna, whose works have been studied intensively by modern scholars, Jizang's philosophy has received only scant attention. Herein, I examine Jizang's key writings in an attempt to clarify his ontological position.

² Jizang's notion of nonacquisition will be explained in Section 3. Briefly, the terms "nonacquisition", "nonabidingness" (*wuzhu* 無住), "nonattachment" (*wuzhi* 無執), and "nondependence" (*wuyi* 無依) are, for him, interchangeable; see his *Bai lun shu* (百論疏), T42:1827.234c21–22. Given this interchangeability, and because Jizang occasionally couples "nonacquisition" with "correct intuition" (*zhengguan* 正觀), it would seem that the notion concerns a certain conscious state of mind.

³ Definite understanding (*jueding jie* 決定解) is basically people's conventional understanding that takes things as definitely such and such. Regarding the Mādhyamika notion of linguistic fabrication (*prapañca*) as a root cause of our being entangled in the cycle of rebirth, Jizang distinguishes between linguistic fabrication (*xilun* 戲論) based on craving and that based on understanding: the former concerns people's grasping attachment to things, the latter refers to people's definite understanding. See *Zhongguan lun shu* (中觀論疏), T42:1824.12b25–27.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I first elucidate briefly Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness, and then, in view of the remarkable resemblances between Sengzhao's and Jizang's Sanlun thought, I elaborate on Sengzhao's interpretation of the doctrine. In Section 3, I discuss and examine Jizang's philosophy in relation to nonacquisition and ontic indeterminacy. Section 4 deals with the central issue of this paper; here, I offer a sustained analysis of Jizang's notion of the Way, in order to clarify his ontological position. Section 5 concludes the paper with final remarks.

2

As noted above, Sengzhao had a tremendous influence on the subsequent development of the Sanlun tradition, so it is advisable in any investigation of Jizang's thought first to present Sengzhao's. Now, both Jizang's and Sengzhao's thought owe a great debt to the works of early Indian Mādhyamika thinkers, so we first review the doctrine of emptiness propounded by Nāgārjuna in his *magnum opus*, the *Mūlamadhyama-ka-kārikā*.

For Nāgārjuna, all things originate dependently (*pratītyasamutpanna*) in that their coming to be, changing, and perishing depend on various causes and conditions. The relationship of dependency includes not only sequential causal relations, and mereological relations between an object and its parts, but also relations of notional codependence.⁴ On the ground that they originate dependently, things are said to be empty (*śūnya*) in the sense of being devoid of self-nature (*svabhāva*) where by "self-nature" Nāgārjuna means, roughly, a self-existent, causally unconditioned, and unchanging nature or existence that a thing may be believed to possess. In his view, putative self-natures are conceptual constructs that are illicitly reified and embedded in the world.

Significantly, the dependent origination and consequential emptiness of a thing strips it of any unchanging, substantial ground, and allows its

⁴ Nagao (Nagao, 1989: 12, 40) takes the relationship to be mutual relativity and dependence (*parasparāpekṣā*). For a discussion of notional dependence, see Westerhoff, 2009: 26–29, 95–98.

deeply illusory character to be recognized. Thus, Nāgārjuna resorts to the analogies of a phantom, a dream, a reflection, bubbles, and so forth, to indicate the ultimately illusory character of things. However, he upholds a doctrine of twofold truth, which draws a thin line between supreme truth (*paramārthasatya*) and conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*). From the perspective of conventional truth, things in the world are (conventionally) real. It is only from the perspective of supreme truth that they are said to be illusory.

For Nāgārjuna, it seems, supreme truth is simply Suchness (*tattva*) as the true nature of things, the way things really are, the characteristics of which are indicated in MMK 18.7, 18.9 to be that they are ineffable, inconceivable, quiescent, and undifferentiated. Later Mādhyamikas equate Suchness with *emptiness*. However, Nāgārjuna also holds that emptiness is itself empty. This, above all, has led a number of contemporary scholars to interpret him as repudiating anything metaphysical and to contend on his behalf that the supreme truth is that there is no supreme truth, that there is no such thing as the way things really are (Siderits, 1989; Garfield, 2002; Westerhoff, 2009). This interpretation is in direct contrast to the metaphysical interpretation, adopted by some scholars, that takes Suchness to be an objective reality or principle, the intuition of which can bear one across the ocean of *saṃsāra*. However, I shall not discuss this intricate issue here (see Ho, 2012).

Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什, 344–413), a prestigious scholar and translator of Indian extraction, and a teacher of Sengzhao, translated into Chinese the MMK together with a commentary attributed to an Indian commentator named *Piṅgala (青目). The resultant work is known as the *Zhong lun* (中論), the *Middle Treatise*. Remarkably, Kumārajīva translates the Sanskrit term *svabhāva* in the MMK as “determinate nature” (*dingxing* 定性) as well as as “self-nature” (*zixing* 自性). In addition, he uses the term “determinate form” (*dingxiang* 定相) not infrequently in his translation of the commentary.⁵ Such usages must have influenced the direction of

⁵ The use of the term “determinate” to refer to things of self-nature may be Kumārajīva’s own idea. Both “determinate nature” and “determinate form” occur in his Chinese translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, the *Weimojie suoshuo jing* (維摩詰所說經). However, the corresponding passages in the extant Sanskrit text of the *sūtra* contain no

Chinese Mādhyamika thinking. For Sengzhao, the myriad things, when apprehended by the mind or intellect, appear to have various forms, which prompt people to use nominal words to designate them. However, they are codependent, nonsubstantial, and devoid of any determinate form or nature; they are then said to be empty and nonreal. A human face, for instance, is neither beautiful nor ugly in itself. It is through delusional conception that we apprehend in it a determinate form, cognize it as definitely beautiful or otherwise, and come to have an attachment thereto.⁶

In Sengzhao's system, there is no ready-made mind-independent world with a determinate structure that empirical investigation can reveal to us, a world that houses properly sliced *res* waiting to be labeled accurately by the corresponding words. The way the myriad things ordinarily appear to us is already saturated with concepts, which yet cannot accurately represent the way things really are. Following Indian Madhyamaka, Sengzhao emphasizes the notion of notional codependence. We know that many concepts are interdependent and complementary, forming such pairs as “long” and “short”, “something” and “nothing”, “life” and “death”, and so on. Indeed, given any word X, we can always coin a word, say, *non-X* to form a pair of codependents. Just as Nāgārjuna takes a father and a son to be interdependent, Sengzhao claims that there is no existence without nonexistence, and no nonexistence without existence.⁷ This claim probably derives from the idea that,

word that expresses the sense of determinacy. See T14:475.545a12, 548b25–27, and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, 2006: 50, 73.

⁶ Nowadays, many would think that being beautiful is not a property of objects, but merely the content of a subjective judgment that may vary from person to person. However, I use the example to retain the flavor of the original thought. See *Zhu Weimojie jing* (注維摩詰經), T38:1775.386b18–20, 389b21–22; *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.156b17–18, 159b20–21. Among the four essays in the *Zhao lun* that are traditionally attributed to Sengzhao, the authenticity of the essay “*Nirvāṇa* Is Nameless” has been questioned by a few contemporary scholars. I concur with many others that the essay was basically penned by Sengzhao himself.

⁷ Such a claim does not merely concern notional dependence; see *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.159a27–b3, and *Zhu Weimojie jing*, T38:1775.332c29–333a2, 348c13–16. Thus, it may appear to conflate existential dependence and notional dependence.

given the ubiquity of concepts in our daily experience, we cannot really bypass notional codependence and focus solely on existential causality in order to attend to things in the world. Thus, we can cognize something as existent, involving the concept of existence, only when we are aware of nonexistent items of which the concept of nonexistence can be predicated. Consequently, or so it seems, there is no *existence* without *nonexistence*, and *vice versa*.

It is presumably on such grounds, together with the thought that words cannot match anything real, that Sengzhao argues for the nonreality of all things:⁸

The *Zhong lun* says, “Things are neither this nor that.”⁹ Yet, one person takes this to be *this* and that to be *that*, while another takes this to be *that* and that to be *this*. This and that are not determined by one word [say, “this” or “that”], but deluded people think they must be so. Thus, *this* and *that* are originally nonexistent, whereas to the deluded they are existent from the beginning. Once we realize that *this* and *that* do not exist, then, is there anything that can be considered existent? Thus, we know that the myriad things are not real; they have always been provisional appellations!

A thing may be referred to by the demonstrative “this” and taken by the speaker as *this*. Yet, it would be the referent of “that” and taken as *that* in respect of another speaker some distance away. The thing is not fixed by “this” or “that”, not definitely *this* or *that*. Sengzhao can then apply this observation to all referential expressions and their intended referents. Things conventionally referred to by the word X are not to be determined by the word: they are not things endowed with a determinate X-form.

⁸ *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.152c23-28: 中觀云，物無彼此。而人以此為此，以彼為彼，彼亦以此為彼，以彼為此。此彼莫定乎一名，而惑者懷必然之志。然則，彼此初非有，惑者初非無。既悟彼此之非有，有何物而可有哉？故知萬物非真，假號久矣。 Incidentally, it is not my purpose here to examine the soundness of Sengzhao’s argumentation.

⁹ It is stated in Piṅgala’s commentary that “There is in the real nature of things neither this nor that;” see T30:1564.30c8: 諸法實相無有此彼。 However, the idea expressed here is rather reminiscent of a passage in the *Zhuangzi* (莊子); see *Zhuangzi yinde* 4/2/27-33.

They are not definitely so and so, and there cannot be any sharp demarcation between them and things referred to by the word *non-X*.

From the ontic indeterminacy of things, Sengzhao appears to conclude, rather hastily, their nonexistence. However, his overall philosophy does not support such a one-sided conclusion. For him, the myriad things are neither existent nor nonexistent, though they can be said provisionally to be existent and nonexistent. They can be said to be nonexistent on the grounds that they are codependent and empty of permanent and determinate nature. They can be said to be existent because they arise endowed with forms and are responsive to causal conditions. They are neither permanent entities nor sheer nothings (*Zhao lun*, T45: 1858.152b18-c20, 156b11-13; *Zhu Weimojie jing*, T38:1775.332c27-29). Therefore, we should read the above-quoted passage as primarily asserting the nonexistence of things *qua* linguistically determined. Since the myriad things, unlike the ineffable supreme truth discussed below, are properly expressible and so tend to be mistaken as determinate, they are here provisionally said to be not real.

Meanwhile, Sengzhao appears to acknowledge the completely quiescent true nature of the myriad things, which is typically termed supreme truth (*zhendi* 真諦). This supreme truth is characterized as formless, nameless, and real, which means that it is conceptually indeterminable. It is said that a sage's sacred mind illuminates formless supreme truth. Thus, we seem to arrive at *something* as how things really are, independent of the concepts we happen to employ. As the way things really are goes beyond the grip of concepts, it is simultaneously structureless, perhaps like an amorphous lump, to be carved up using our conceptual scheme into the things that we take to be constitutive of our world.

Significantly, Sengzhao's stance is to emphasize the nonduality of the way of supreme truth and the myriad things of conventional truth (*sudi* 俗諦). For him, the fact of there being two truths does not dictate that there be two types of thing. Equating the supreme and conventional truth respectively with nonacquisition and acquisition (*youde* 有得),¹⁰

¹⁰ In Sengzhao's writings, the word "acquisition" basically means the delusional-conceptual obtention of something that is taken as real and is an object of attachment. The

he contends that the two principles designated by the two terms, “non-acquisition” and “acquisition”, are not different.¹¹ This may explain why Sengzhao famously avers that people have the real (*zhen* 真) right before their eyes without their knowing it, and that the real is precisely where we are in contact with things (*Zhao lun*, T45:1858.151a27-28, 153a4-5).

As we just saw, Sengzhao seems to equate supreme truth with nonacquisition, and conventional truth with acquisition. He states, elsewhere, that the real arises by dint of nonattachment, whereas the unreal occurs on account of attachment. He repudiates any acquisition of nonacquisition. All this indicates that Sengzhao may deny the existence of any higher reality or objective truth, and affirm and find soteriological value only in the subjective state of freedom from any acquisition whatsoever. However, it is also implied in the *Zhao lun* that supreme truth is the ineffable and formless *principle*, the profoundly quiescent pinnacle of all things, which is to be illuminated by the sacred mind. This is a puzzling issue, similar to the one we mentioned at the beginning of the paper in respect of Jizang’s notion of the Way. The difficulty of resolving the issue lies in the fact that Sengzhao does not explain his notion of supreme truth in detail.

The best way to solve the problem, I believe, is by considering Sengzhao’s understanding of the notion of *nirvāṇa*, because the latter presumably concerns that which is considered ultimate in his philosophy. Indeed, he cites approvingly a line from a *sūtra* to the effect that supreme truth is the way of *nirvāṇa*.¹² Sengzhao discusses *nirvāṇa* fairly ex-

word “nonacquisition”, by contrast, signifies the absence of such obtention. See *Zhu Weimojie jing*, T38:1775.377c18-26, and *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.161b1-4.

¹¹ *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.152b12-18. It would seem that the two *truths* are two *principles*. In any case, I here use the word “truth” in a nonstandard sense such that supreme truth can be characterized as formless and nameless.

¹² *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.159a26-27. It is here said that conventional truth consists of existent and nonexistent things.

tensively, so we are in a position to ascertain his conception of supreme truth. In this context, the following passage is the most noteworthy:¹³

Things [in reality] have no form of existence or nonexistence. Sages have no knowing of existence or nonexistence...There is no figure outside [us], no [objectifying] mind in within. Both [exterior and interior] are quiescently ceased; both things and oneself are harmoniously one. Being tranquil and traceless, this state is termed *nirvāṇa*.

Clearly, Sengzhao takes *nirvāṇa* to be a state of quiescence in which oneself and things, heaven and earth, and even past and present, are undifferentially equal and harmoniously one. Here, presumably, the myriad things lose their identities; there is nothing to be acquired, not even nonacquisition itself.¹⁴

Arguably, Sengzhao's notion of supreme truth signifies such a nondual and indeterminable state of quiescence. If so, supreme truth is formless, without being an objective, higher reality. It can be characterized as nonacquisition, and yet is not purely mental or subjective. This observation provides us with a significant clue for interpreting Jizang's notion of the Way.

3

Just as Nāgārjuna sought to render explicit some implications of the Buddha's teaching about the causally conditioned state of things by emphasizing their emptiness, Jizang deepened Nāgārjuna's teaching about the emptiness of things by highlighting nonacquisition as the main intention behind all Mahāyāna scriptures.¹⁵ The term "nonacquisition"

¹³ *Zhao lun*, T45:1858.159c8-11: 法無有無之相，聖無有無之知...於外無數，於內無心。彼此寂滅，物我冥一，怕爾無朕，乃曰涅槃。See also T45:1858.161a17-19, 161b7-9.

¹⁴ However, given the nonduality of supreme truth and conventional truth, the identities of the myriad things are not really erased. Thus, Sengzhao speaks of a sage's mind mirroring all things as they are, while he also realizes the quiescent oneness of himself and the things; see *Zhu Weimojie jing*, T38:1775.372c19-24.

¹⁵ While, as hinted in MMK 24.18 and Lindtner, 1987: 65, v. 68, Nāgārjuna construes the Buddha's notion of dependent origination as *emptiness*, Jizang, in his *Erdi yi* (二諦義),

recurs in Kumārajīva's translations of Mahāyāna sūtras. There, it often implies that because all things are in reality empty and illusory, there is no real and substantial thing as such that can be conceptually apprehended, or even attained.¹⁶ In Jizang's thought, to have acquisition with respect to a thing is to take it as having a determinate and substantial nature such that one abides in its presumed determinate reality and depends on that reality in daily life, thereby becoming attached to it and losing one's spiritual freedom.¹⁷ Alternatively, to have acquisition with respect to a view is to affirm it as definitely true of reality and become attached to it. Jizang is emphatic that one must not abide in, or attach oneself to, anything in a spirit of acquisition.

For Jizang, just as for Sengzhao, the myriad things are ontologically indeterminate. One and the same thing can be existent for an ordinary unenlightened person, yet nonexistent for a sage. It may look impure and disgusting to a human, yet pure and attractive to an animal (*Erdi yi*, T45:1854.81b6–8; *Jingming xuan lun* [淨名玄論], T38:1780.897a14–29). Indeed, what one human being takes to be a tree may be just food for tree-eating bugs, a post ablaze for some meditating yogis, or a great mass of particles of indeterminate nature for a stubborn quantum physicist. Thus, much of what things are taken to be is such only relative to the

takes Nāgārjuna's notion of emptiness to be synonymous with *nonacquisition*. See T45:1854.106a18.

¹⁶ The Sanskrit words for “nonacquisition”, *anupalambha* and *anupalabधि*, generally mean non-perception or non-apprehension. In a passage of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, the word *anupalambha* signifies not having any view (*dr̥ṣṭi*) of oneself and other things; see *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, 2006: 50. Jizang understands the term “nonacquisition” somewhat differently. Commenting on the *Weimojie suoshuo jing*, and basing himself on Sengzhao's interpretation, he takes the term to mean the mind's nonobtention of all *dharma*s, especially delusional conception and external things. See *Weimo jing yishu* (維摩經義疏), T38:1781.959b4–10. Moreover, as noted above, the terms “nonacquisition”, “nonabidingness”, “nonattachment”, and “nondependence” are, for him, interchangeable. Here, Jizang might be influenced by the Indian Mādhyamika text, the *Dazhidu lun* (大智度論), wherein it is said, in T25:1509.501c4, that when the mind has no attachment to dual and nondual *dharma*s, this is called *nonacquisition*. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this issue.

¹⁷ The notion of dependence here is used not in the Nāgārjunian sense, but as indicating the opposite of spiritual freedom.

current situation and the observer's conceptual scheme or perspective; there is no ultimate, perspective-free and context-free determination of things as they truly are. Here, to take a thing to be determinate is to delineate it, setting it in opposition to other things, which results in harmful dualistic views about things. Meanwhile, Jizang's contention that what we take to be things are not really different from the ineffable, indeterminate middle Way also reinforces the indeterminacy thesis that we have ascribed to him.

Now, if the two truths in Nāgārjuna's doctrine are taken as singly determinate and mutually distinct principles of actuality, there is a strong temptation to treat them as objects of acquisition and become attached to them.¹⁸ For those who have not yet begun to follow the path to liberation, attachment to conventional truth is the *de facto* mode of being, whereas those who are already on the path will be tempted to attach themselves to supreme truth; meanwhile, those who *misconstrue* the doctrine may become attached to both of the truths. In order to counter acquisition and attachment, Jizang avers that the two *truths* are just two provisional, expedient teachings meant to make explicit the nondual middle Way, which is neither supreme nor conventional.¹⁹

The reason for taking the middle Way to be the *body* (*ti* 體) of the two truths is that the two truths are meant to make explicit the nondual principle. As when one points toward the moon with a finger, his intention is not to highlight the finger, but to let others see the moon, so also with the teaching of the twofold truth. The two truths are meant to make explicit the nondual; the intention is not in the duality,

¹⁸ *Erdi yi*, T45:1854.108c17–23; Jizang here quotes from a Buddhist *sūtra* a statement that equates a view of acquisition with a dualistic view. In his *Dasheng xuan lun* (大乘玄論), T45:1853.30a16–17, Jizang cites from a *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* to the effect that those who embrace duality follow acquisition, while those who embrace no duality follow nonacquisition.

¹⁹ *Erdi yi*, T45:1854.108b22–25: 所以明中道為二諦體者，二諦為表不二之理。如指指月，意不在指，意令得月，二諦教亦爾。二諦為表不二，意不在二，為令得於不二。是故，以不二為二諦體。Notably, Jizang also takes supreme and conventional truth to be two objective spheres of principle, namely, *emptiness* and *existence* respectively; see *Erdi yi*, T45:1854.97b4–13 and *Zhongguan lun shu*, T42:1824.28c28–29a3. The two principles are interdependent, and so are both provisional.

but to enable others to access the nondual. Thus, we take the nondual [principle] to be the body of the two truths.

Here, the Way is variously named the correct Way (*zhengdao* 正道), the nondual principle, the correct principle, the Real (*shixiang* 實相), and so forth. Significantly, it is also equated with nonabidingness, nonacquisition or the like.

In line with his emphasis on nonacquisition, Jizang proposes the doctrines of “three levels of the two truths” and “four levels of the two truths”. The main concern here is to oppose any definite understanding that views the referent of a term as determinate in nature and determinable by the term; such a referent is an object for acquisition and attachment. At the first level, Jizang takes *existence* and *emptiness* to be the conventional and supreme truths, respectively. To counter people’s probable determination and acquisition of *emptiness*, *duality of existence and emptiness* is regarded as the conventional truth at the second level, while *nonduality of existence and emptiness* is the supreme truth at this level. At this level, one may make the mistake of delineating *nonduality* from *duality*, treating it as determinate, and becoming attached to it. Against such a practice, Jizang takes *both duality and nonduality* to be the conventional truth at the third level and regards *neither duality nor nonduality* as the supreme truth at this level. Even so, one may come to have acquisition in respect of the supreme truth at this third level. Thus, finally, all the truths of the three levels are said to be the conventional truth at the fourth level, which indicates that they are expedient teachings for pedagogic and therapeutic purposes, while the supreme truth at this level is the state or principle of forgetting speech and ceasing thought (*yan wang lü jue* 言忘慮絕).

Jizang, it seems, is here distinguishing between teaching and principle. Whatever truth can be expressed in language belongs to the domain of *teaching*, which coincides with the conventional truth of the fourth level; by contrast, the supreme truth of this level, which lies beyond the reach of words, is the ineffable *principle* of nonacquisition. The distinction between teaching and principle, then, corresponds to that between what can be said using language and what cannot. A parallel

distinction holds between what Jizang refers to as the provisional (*jia* 假) and the middle (*zhong* 中).

For Jizang, the myriad things are codependent, indeterminate, and interrelated. He highlights the role that notional codependence plays in our understanding of things. Since the words *X* and *non-X* are notionally codependent, *X* and *non-X*, which are signified by these words, respectively, are not definitely *X* and *non-X*, that is, they are not what is demarcated and determined by the words when considered independently. For example, speech is speech only relative to silence (or nonspeech). It cannot be identified and fixed by the word “speech” independently, without regard to silence as signified by the word “silence”. It is not something fittingly determined by “speech” and definitely differentiated from silence. Thus, speech is not definitely speech and not definitely different from silence; and likewise for silence. Similarly, existence and emptiness, being notionally interdependent, are not definitely existence and emptiness. Rather, the one is provisional existence, the other provisional emptiness.²⁰

The notion of *the provisional* refers to that which is interdependent, nonreal, indeterminate, and conceptually differentiated. The provisional *X* is not definitely *X*, and the provisional *non-X* not definitely *non-X*; they are only provisionally said to be *X* and *non-X*. According to Jizang, however, they also point to a state that is neither *X* nor *non-X*, which is *the middle* as the ineffable, real, and ever-indeterminable Way.²¹

Now, we may approach the middle conceptually or nonconceptually. If we approach it conceptually, then the middle, being notionally dependent on the provisional, is simply provisional in character. Beyond this again, however, the middle and the provisional in turn point to a state that is neither middle nor provisional. So long as we are engaged in discussion like the present discussion, of course, we cannot really approach

²⁰ *Dasheng xuan lun*, T45:1853.24a9-14. As noted above, existence and emptiness can be regarded as conventional and supreme truth respectively. Here, the two truths are provisional in character.

²¹ *Zhongguan lun shu*, T42:1824.61c25: “Only this one principle [of the Real] is designated as real; all else is illusory” (唯此一理名之為實，自斯以外並皆虛妄). Yang (1989: 130) takes this statement to show that Jizang affirms the existence of an absolute truth.

the middle nonconceptually. However, we can at least assume that we are referring to the middle as such, taken precisely as the aforesaid state of forgetting speech and ceasing thought. Here, based on textual evidence such as MMK 24.18, Jizang proclaims the nonduality of the middle and the provisional, which amounts to the nonduality of the Real and the illusory, and of what cannot be said using language and what can be so said. Indeed, to draw a clear-cut distinction between the middle and the provisional is to delineate them and fall prey to a harmful dualistic thinking. Jizang's philosophical practice aims at transcending all types of dualistic thought. Just like Sengzhao, he dismisses as inadmissible any acquisition of nonacquisition.

4

We began this paper with the question of how to understand Jizang's notion of the Way. Does it indicate some metaphysical principle or reality? Or is it rather a useful expedient to lead one to the consummate state of complete nonacquisition? Apart from equating the Way with nonacquisition, Jizang appears to take the correct principle to be a state of mind in which any form of teaching, whether Buddhist or not, is quiescent. In addition, he refers to the Real as the complete nondependent state of the mind that is free from any judgment (*San lun xuanyi* [三論玄義], T45:1852.6c12–16; *Zhongguan lun shu*, T42:1824.124a4–5). All this suggests that he probably dispenses with any notion of higher reality and attends merely to the subjective state of complete freedom from any acquisition whatsoever. This explains his therapeutic use of words and his claim that once one has freed oneself from acquisition, nonacquisition must be relinquished as well.

According to Hsueh-li Cheng, the Mādhyamika notion of emptiness is mainly a soteriological device that is meant to empty the mind of cravings and to suggest that enlightenment is the abandonment of conceptual thinking. In his view, for Jizang and other Sanlun thinkers, no reality is really real, no truth is truly true. All truths taught by the Buddha are merely provisional instruments used to eradicate extreme views; they are pragmatic in nature and eventually must be dispensed with (Cheng, 1984: 53, 98–99). Endorsing a similar position, Ming-Wood Liu writes,

In thus making non-attachment the sole criterion of truth, [Jizang] empties the concept of truth of any determinate content. And if he still refers to some statements and beliefs as true, he makes it perfectly plain that his primary consideration is their efficacy in refuting false views and cultivating non-attachment (Liu, 1994: 103).

Liu points out that for Jizang, words such as “Way” and “principle” express only the spirit of nonacquisition, rather than any ineffable absolute Way or principle. Indeed, to think otherwise and to affirm the Way or principle as real would only contravene the spirit of nonacquisition itself.

Both Cheng and Liu rightly highlight the therapeutic and pragmatic dimensions of Jizang’s thought. Their stance somehow echoes that of a number of contemporary scholars of Indian Madhyamaka, who hold that Nāgārjuna’s insistence on the groundlessness of all things invalidates any positing of a higher metaphysical reality in the system. Nevertheless, Jizang usually refers approvingly to the Way without directly equating it with some subjective state, and for him, though words have a therapeutic use, they also function as an expedient device that can indicate the ineffable principle.²² He clearly characterizes the Way as real, and when he appears to repudiate the Way or the like, he may be repudiating the linguistic determination imposed thereon or any conceptual acquisition thereof. All this seems to indicate that he acknowledges the existence of some real ineffable principle. Thus, we face a problem similar to that which we encountered in Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao concerning the ontological status of supreme truth.

We saw in Section 2 that Sengzhao takes *nirvāṇa* to be an indeterminate nondual state of complete quiescence, wherein both oneself and things are undifferentially equal and harmoniously one, and this seems to be what he has in mind when speaking of supreme truth. This point provides us a valuable clue for resolving our problem.

²² I am referring to Jizang’s employment of the famous simile of a finger pointing to the moon. A related issue concerns how one can say of something, without contradiction, that it is unsayable. For discussion of these two issues, see Ho, 2008.

To begin with, Jizang occasionally refers, approvingly, to the above-quoted *Zhao lun* passage to explicate the notion of *nirvāṇa*, which he identifies with the Way. In addition, commenting on MMK 18.9, he appears to rephrase the passage to explain the notion of the Real:²³

By getting rid of the two kinds of linguistic fabrication, one knows that things [in reality] have no different forms of existence and non-existence, and the mind has no conception of existence and nonexistence. Thus...there is no [objectifying] mind within...no figure without. Both [interior and exterior] are quiescently ceased, and both alike attain to a great equality. This is named the Real.

It seems plausible that Jizang follows Sengzhao closely in taking the Real to be an ineffable nondual quiescence wherein both oneself and things are equal and conceptually undifferentiated.

In fact, Jizang's phrasing is much less Daoistic than Sengzhao's, and he does not stress the harmonious oneness of oneself and things as Sengzhao does. However, Jizang, like Sengzhao and other Sanlun thinkers before him, approaches the issue from the subject-object perspective. He frequently refers to a state in which both interior and exterior, apprehension and apprehended, have ceased, becoming quiescent. This, for him, is one significant point that distinguishes the Buddhist from the non-Buddhist teaching: "The outsiders [Confucians and Daoists] do not realize the abeyance of both object and cognition, while the insiders [Buddhists] have reached the quiescence of both the apprehended and apprehension."²⁴ Alternatively, he speaks of the nonduality of object and cognition.

²³ *Zhongguan lun shu*, T42:1824.128a8-11: 既無二種戲論，則知法無有無之異，心無有無分別...無心於內...無數於外。彼此已寂滅，浩然大均，名為實相。In his *Zhao lun* (T45: 1858.161a15), Sengzhao uses the phrase "both alike attain to a great equality" (浩然大均) to describe *nirvāṇa*.

²⁴ *San lun xuanyi*, T45:1852.2a13-14: 外未境智兩泯，內則緣觀俱寂。See also *Jingming xuan lun*, T38:1780.870a8-11, 871c12-21.

For Jizang, the notion of the middle requires that one transcend both the (one-sided) subjective and objective dimensions of human experience. Thus, he comments on MMK 1.8:²⁵

The real subtle *dharma* lies beyond object and cognition. As it lies beyond object, there is no object to be apprehended; as it lies beyond cognition, there is nothing that apprehends...being neither the apprehended nor apprehension...[the Real] is provisionally named the middle.

The fact is probably not that no reality is really real, but that the Real is nowhere apprehensible in a conceptual experience. Surely, what is transcended here is the cognitive mind, not the mind of nonacquisition. However, while the Way *can* be indicated as a nondependent mental state of nonacquisition, to reduce the former to the latter would be to fall one-sidedly on the subjective dimension, which does not tally well with Jizang's emphasis on the nonduality of subject and object.

The discussion so far may suggest that the Way is completely quiescent and negative. However, Jizang also holds that if one approaches the Way with an attitude of nonacquisition, it is virtually the same as the myriad things:²⁶

Because the great way of equality is ubiquitously nonabiding, all [its determinations] are to be negated. Because it is ubiquitously nonhindering, all things can be equated with it. If one views affirmation as affirmation, and negation as negation, all affirmations and negations are to be negated. If one knows that there is no affirmation or non-affirmation, no negation or non-negation, that they are only provisionally said to be so and so, then, all affirmations and negations are to be affirmed.

²⁵ *Zhongguan lun shu*, T42:1824.50c14-51a2: 真實微妙法者，此法絕於境智。以絕境故，無境可緣；絕於智故，無有能緣...非緣、非觀...強名為中。

²⁶ *Dasheng xuan lun*, T45:1853.42a28-b3: 平等大道無方無住故，一切並非，無方無礙故，一切並得。若以是為是、以非為非者，一切是非並皆是非也。若知無是無非是、無非無不非，假名為是非者，一切是非並皆是也。

As the Way is nonabiding, it is neither exclusively the exterior nor the interior, but both at once. It is quiescent and negative, primarily because all conceptual determinations have ceased or are negated in relation to it. Herein, the myriad things are not erased; rather, they are conceptually undifferentiated. This partially explains the aforesaid nonduality of the middle (the Way) and the provisional (the myriad things). In line with this nonduality, Jizang contends that, for a sage, the quiescence of both the apprehended and apprehension goes hand in hand with the apparent manifestation of object and cognition.²⁷

According to Jizang, the myriad things are ontologically indeterminate in that nothing is endowed with a determinate form or nature. Another aspect of his philosophy of ontic indeterminacy is that the ineffable Way is fully indeterminable, which reinforces our attribution of the indeterminacy thesis to Jizang. As the Way is indeterminable and nonabiding, all its conceptual determinations are to be negated; it cannot be determined as X or non-X, say, as empty or nonempty, as Buddha-nature or non-Buddha-nature. In addition, it cannot be confined to the subjective or objective dimension of human experience. It supposedly contains all things in an undifferentiated nondual state of quiescence. Once this is understood, one can indirectly and provisionally refer to the Way as empty or nonempty, and so forth. Presumably, this allows Jizang to speak of it sometimes objectively and sometimes subjectively, which makes it difficult to ascertain his genuine stance. We see here that Jizang's conception of ontic indeterminacy is closely related to the issue of the nature of the Way.

²⁷ The corresponding Chinese sentence is: 至人緣觀俱寂，而境智宛然；see *Jingming xuan lun*, T38:1780.867b15-16. Jizang then echoes a line from the *Zhao lun* by stating that “as [the sage’s] response gets more active, his spirit becomes more tranquil; as his cognition gets more quiescent, the illumination [of his mind] becomes more brilliant” (應愈動，神愈靜，智愈寂，照愈明). This reminds us of the *Dao de jing* (道德經) formula of “doing nothing and yet doing all things” (無為無不為).

5

In this paper, I have, in light of Sengzhao's discussion on *nirvāṇa*, interpreted Jizang's puzzling notion of the Way. In my opinion, Jizang's ontological system can roughly be said to consist of two interwoven layers: the layers of the middle and of the provisional. The middle is the conceptually indeterminable nondual quiescence of oneself and things, which is known, above all, as the Way. It is only revealed in fully nonconceptual experience and is indicated to be forgetting speech and ceasing thought. It harbors within itself the myriad things in their undifferentiated state. The middle is intimately interwoven with the provisional, which comprises the myriad things in their conceptually differentiated and interdependent mode. Though empty of determinate form and nature, the things are properly and directly expressible in provisional language.

Jizang does not clearly posit any nonempty metaphysical reality or principle. He does speak of the Way or the like as nonempty (as well as empty). Here, however, one of his purposes is to highlight that the Way cannot be determined as *empty*. Another is to indicate that the Way cannot be reduced to emptiness; after all, it contains within itself all things in their undifferentiated and quiescent state.²⁸ The Way is not any reality metaphysically higher than the myriad things. Although it is characterized as real, it is nothing more than the ineffable quiescence wherein both oneself and external things are conceptually undifferentiated.

On the other hand, while we should respect the practical spirit in Jizang's writing, his notion of the Way does not merely concern a conscious state of freedom from any acquisition whatsoever. It does not seem correct to hold that all his truth-claims are corrective and pragmatic instead of (indirectly) indicating the Way as well. The fact is that,

²⁸ Yang (1989: 153–155) accuses Jizang of deviating from Indian Madhyamaka by endorsing the view of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* that *nirvāṇa* is not empty. See *San lun xuanyi*, T45:1852.4b1–4. Cf. *Zhongguan lun shu*, T42:1824.160a8–11: “The middle way is also named *nirvāṇa*...because therein all encumbrances have ceased and all virtues are fulfilled...As all virtues are fulfilled, it is said to be nonempty; as all encumbrances have ceased, it is designated as empty” (中道亦名涅槃者，以...累無不寂，德無不圓...德無不圓，名為不空，累無不寂，稱之為空). Here, as elsewhere in Jizang's writing, the word “empty” also connotes the sense of nonexistence.

for him, the Way is only realized when one's mind ceases to approach things in a spirit of acquisition;²⁹ being beyond conceptual determination and attachment, it is accessible only to a mind of nonacquisition. Needless to say, the Way is also the preeminent source of soteriological value, the realization of which, according to Jizang, abolishes linguistic fabrication and the wheel of suffering.

There are merits in Jizang's notion of the Way as elucidated here, although it is hardly attractive to an analytical mind. In line with a philosophical reconstruction of his thought, we may take the notion to point to a pre-subjective, pre-objective experience of nonacquisition. This nondual experience is equally correlated with the mind and the world of things, yet irreducible to either. Being ineffable and conceptually undifferentiated, it is still nothing like our quotidian experience, but then, this follows inevitably from its putative soteriological functions. Meanwhile, Jizang's philosophy of ontic indeterminacy is intriguing and worthy of further investigation. However, exploring these issues would require a separate effort, which must wait for another occasion.

Abbreviations

- MMK *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. In La Vallée Poussin (1992).
 T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. In Takakusu and Watanabe (1924-1935).

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²⁹ *Weimo jing yishu*, T38:1781.962b19-23. Jizang has identified the Way with supreme wisdom (*bore* 般若, *prajñā*) and profound meditation (*sanmei* 三昧, *samādhi*), but this rather suggests the comprehensiveness of the notion of the Way.

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