CHAPTER FOUR

BUDDHISM AS THE TRUE RELIGION

Having discussed the basic principles of Liang’s religious typology in Chapter Two, and his understanding of Christianity as a social religion in Chapter Three, in this chapter, and in the next three, we shall deal with Liang’s understanding of Buddhism as a religion of pure transcendence. In the present chapter, we will first see how the religious drive for renouncing the world sprang from the fundamental experience of human suffering. Liang did not describe this experience entirely in Buddhist terms, but also in Confucian ones. However, the decision to renounce the world was entirely Buddhist and arose from a quest for radical transcendence. This is significant not only for the individual, but also for the whole history of humanity. In the second section of this chapter, we shall see how Liang moved away from an emotional understanding of religion towards the pursuit of academic research on the history of Indian Buddhism. We will also examine the more rational understanding of Buddhism he developed when he made an intellectual shift to Yogācāra.

Liang’s Buddhist Background

Liang was a self-taught Buddhist. He began reading sūtras in 1909, at the age of sixteen. From 1911, during his period of seclusion, he read them with increased intensity. He was also reading the monthly publication *Buddhist Miscellanies* (*Foxue congbao* 佛學叢報),¹ as well as the Buddhist sūtras published by the Jinling Sūtra-Publishing House (*Jinling kejingchu* 金陵刻經處) in Nanjing.

Liang was heavily influenced by the Buddhist writings of Zhang Taiyan. Zhang’s influence can be felt in Liang’s first essay, *Treatise on Finding the Foundation and Resolving the Doubt*, especially in the idea of

¹ This Buddhist monthly review started on October 1912 and lasted until June 1914, with a total of 12 issues. It was published by Youzhengshuju Press 有正書局出版社 in Shanghai.
the concomitant increase of joy and pain in the modern age. Liang also inherited from Zhang the idea that Yogācāra epistemology could compete with Western theories. Liang was also influenced by Zhang’s idea that Buddhism could have a positive role as a religion for modern times, as we have mentioned above. However, Liang expressed his disapproval of Zhang’s *Qiulunshi*, in which he used Yogācāra to interpret Chinese philosophy. Later on, Liang would consider Zhang to be an outsider (waihang 外行) to Buddhism, and distanced himself from his thinking.

Self-trained in Buddhism and without any proper academic supervision, Liang recognized that he was at loss when confronted by so many schools and theories. Yet his seminal essay, *Treatise on Finding the Foundation and Resolving the Doubt*, was noticed by Cai Yuanpei. This essay launched Liang into the academic world, beginning his career teaching Indian philosophy.

In this essay, Liang began by expounding the first Noble Truth—that of suffering—in its existential dimension. He explained there were two aspects to impermanence. These were life itself, and human will. The impermanence of life caused suffering because human beings must leave that which they are attached to, and because they are unable to find a state of permanency. At the level of human will, individuals were constantly switching to new desires and purposes, which were ultimately revealed to be empty, creating more anxiety and frustration. Most people were unable to retain set goals throughout their lives. Liang described the human condition as being comprised of exhausting “oscillations” (panghuang 仿徨). The first existential reality Buddhism dealt with was this continual feeling of frustration due to our own finitude and our will’s constant search for new aims. The solution, therefore, was not to find new purposes, but to go beyond purposes.

---


