

Numinous Awareness and Tracing Back the Radiance

One of the primary reasons for both Zongmi's and Chinul's interest in the Heze account of practice was its emphasis on "numinous awareness," (*yǒngji/lingzhi* 靈知) the sentience that is at the core of the mind. Insight into this core quality of sentience is said to occur by tracing back the radiance of the mind (*hoe'gwang panjo/huiguang fanzhao* 迴光返照) to its source. Knowing that numinous awareness through the initial sudden awakening would help the student place all of his or her experience into a proper context, framed now in terms of such valuable doctrinal binaries as essence and function, nature and characteristics, and so on. The clarity of mind generated by this sudden understanding-awakening would help to ensure that the gradual cultivation that followed this awakening was performed optimally, eventually leading to the realization-awakening that brought the final confirmation that one had attained buddhahood.

The concept of numinous awareness harkens back to a celebrated passage in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* where the Buddha declares that the mind is inherently luminous but dimmed by adventitious afflictions.⁶⁶ Heze called this luminous quality of mind "numinous awareness" or, more fully, "void and quiescent numinous awareness" (*kongjǒk yǒngji/kongji lingzhi* 空寂靈知). Numinous awareness was adopted by Zongmi and eventually Chinul to refer to the fundamental quality of sentience, which, not so figuratively, "shines" on sense-objects, illuminating them and allowing them to be cognized.⁶⁷ This view that the mind illuminates the sense-realms is found frequently in the writings of Sōn masters; note, for instance, the comments of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866): "You, O followers of the Way, are right now vividly illumining all things and taking the measure of the world; you give the names to the three realms of existence."⁶⁸ But this inherent radiance of the mind does not merely illuminate the world of sensory phenomena; as the mind's natural luminosity is restored through meditation practice, it comes virtually to shine *through* objects, rendering them transparent and exposing their inherent voidness (*śūnyatā*).⁶⁹ Hence, numinous awareness is the quality of sentience, common to all sentient beings, that demonstrates their inherent capacity for enlightenment;⁷⁰ it serves

as both the faculty that allows meditation to develop through “tracing back the radiance” and the quality of mind mastered through that meditation.

“Awareness” (*chi/zhi* 知) in this context refers to the capacity of the mind to remain aware of all sensory stimuli. Chinul provides various descriptions of this capacity, describing it variously as “that mind of outstanding purity and brilliance of all the buddhas of the three time-periods, ... that enlightened nature that is the original source of all sentient beings”;⁷¹ “the mind that has been transmitted successively from the Buddha through the patriarchs”;⁷² or simply “your original face.”⁷³ The precise denotation of this term has been at issue since the beginnings of Zen studies in the West.

In the famous debates between the Chinese exegete Hu Shih (1891–1962) and the Japanese Zen popularizer D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), these two scholars interpreted the term as “knowledge” and “prajñā-intuition,” respectively. I find both renderings wanting; neither translation properly conveys the sense that “awareness” is the fundamental quality of sentience through which all mental properties, be they “knowledge,” “intuition,” or otherwise, are made manifest.⁷⁴ This quality of awareness is itself formless and free of thoughts and, consequently, is able to adapt without limitation to the full range of human inclinations, whether toward greed and hatred or wisdom and compassion. In all such cases, sentience itself is forever unaffected and remains simply “aware.”⁷⁵ To describe the adaptability of this faculty, Chinul adopts a phrase that he learns from Zongmi and Heze but that ultimately derives from the Chinese classic the *Laozi*: “This one word ‘awareness’ is the source [alt. gateway] of all wonders.”⁷⁶ As the foundation of sentience, this awareness is fundamentally nondual but remains dynamic enough to manifest its “wonders” in an infinite number of different forms. In looking back on the radiance of the mind, one starts at the level of these wonders—the phenomenal manifestations of the nondual mind—and then traces back those manifestations to their perceptual source: sentience itself, or numinous awareness.

The concept of numinous awareness is closely associated with the meditative practice of tracing the radiance emanating from the mind back to its source. This concept is an essential element of the underlying processes governing all types of meditation practice, as Chinul interprets them. Chinul employs a variety of

complementary designations for this aspect of contemplation: “trace the radiance back to one’s own mind” (*panjo chasim* 返照自心); “trace the radiance back to one’s own nature” (*panjo chasōng* 返照自性); “in one thought-moment, trace the light back and see one’s own original nature” (*illyōm hoegwang kyōn chabonsōng* 一念迴光見自本性); “trace back and observe the qualities and functions of your own mind” (*pan’gwan chasim chi tōgyong* 返觀自心之德用); “to observe and reflect on your own mind” (*kwanjo chasim* 觀照自心); “reflect on and view your own mind” (*chogyōn chasim* 照見自心); “mirror your own mind” (*kyōng chasim* 鏡自心); or simply “trace back the radiance” (*panjo* 返照), “contemplative reflection” (*kwanjo* 觀照), or even “introspection” or “looking inward” (*naejo* 內照).⁷⁷ Although the term *hoegwang panjo* can be interpreted as “reflection,” “introspection,” “counter-illumination,” or even “meditation,” the more dynamic renderings I adopt here better convey, I believe, a sense of the gnoseological process involved.

Chinul’s Chosōn-dynasty commentator, Yōndam Yuil, has given a succinct and precise definition of the term.

To “trace back the radiance” means to use one’s own mind to trace the radiance back to the numinous awareness of one’s own mind; for this reason, it is called “trace back the radiance.” It is like seeing the radiance of the sun’s rays and following it back until you see the orb of the sun itself.⁷⁸

For Chinul, regardless of the specific meditation technique being developed, tracing back the radiance illuminates the path through which the discriminative mind can rediscover its original, nondual source, which is free of conceptualization.⁷⁹ In discussing Hwaōm contemplative practice, for example, Chinul describes its sole purpose as being to induce students “to look back on the radiance of the Way of this one true *dharmadhātu* that is their own mind’s fundamental Wisdom of Universal Radiance.”⁸⁰ In this context, to reflect or look back on one’s own mind refers to the immediate realization that one is originally a buddha and that ignorance and its concomitants are all the products of the tathāgatas’ Wisdom of Universal Radiance.

If they [ordinary persons of great aspiration] can follow back the light and

trace back the radiance, then the afflictions that have existed on the ground of ignorance for an immense number of kalpas are transformed into the Wisdom of Universal Radiance of all the buddhas. Since the afflictions, the ignorance, and the illusory guises of sentient beings have all arisen from the tathāgatas' Wisdom of Universal Radiance, if today [ordinary persons of great aspiration] trace back the radiance, they will find that these are all entirely their own essence and are originally not external things. They are like waves that billow up on still water: the waves are the water. They are like [phantom] flowers that appear in the sky: the flowers are nothing more than the sky.⁸¹

Tracing the radiance back to the mind's source plays a vital role in Chinul's description of Sŏn meditation as well. In Chinul's treatment of sudden awakening/gradual cultivation, for example, tracing back the radiance functions as the sudden-awakening constituent of the path, enabling practitioners to gain a personal insight into their own enlightened nature. As Chinul says in one of his most popular and widely read works, *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*; "If in one moment of thought he then follows back the light [of his mind to its source] and sees his own original nature, he will discover that the ground of this nature is innately free of afflictions (*kleśa*), and that he himself is originally endowed with the nature of wisdom that is free from the contaminants (*āsrava*), which is not a hair's breadth different from that of all the buddhas."⁸² After the recognition (or, perhaps more accurately, "re"-cognition) of that numinous awareness, students then must continue on to discipline their minds through gradual cultivation so that only salutary and beneficial manifestations of that awareness will appear. It is this process of tracing back the radiance that all specific meditation techniques will help to initiate.