

# Wŏnhyo's Theory of "One Mind": A Korean Way of Interpreting Mind

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## Abstract

This paper outlines Wŏnhyo's theory of the One Mind as it is presented in his over 20 extant works. According to Wŏnhyo, the One Mind manifests itself in two aspects: "true-thusness" and "arising-and-ceasing." In the first aspect, the One Mind is intrinsically pure and unchanging, able to see all things equally and without discrimination. However, in the second aspect the One Mind is subject to causality and manifests itself in various delusions, thereby appearing impure and ephemeral. Thus, the One Mind is the source of both enlightenment and delusion. We analyze the paradoxical relationship between these two aspects and how they open the path to enlightenment. Here Wŏnhyo distinguishes between original enlightenment, non-enlightenment and actualizing enlightenment. In the final section, we show what kind of subjective personhood is implied in Wŏnhyo's understanding of the One Mind and the various kinds of enlightenment.

The One Mind is the foundation, life and death is the end-state. When the diamond-like mind is attained through long practice, one surpasses life and death; the end-state returns to its source, the One Mind. Thus it is said that the phenomenal world arises, yet it will cease to exist.

*(Commentary to Sutra of the Diadem of Past Activities, HPC01.0522c12-HPC01.0522c14.)<sup>1</sup>*

Wŏnhyo (元曉, 617–686), a Silla scholar-monk, was a seminal thinker, writer, and commentator in the Korean Buddhist tradition.<sup>2</sup> His masterful command of Buddhist knowledge and the uniqueness of thought in his flowery prose have made him one of the most representative Buddhist thinkers in Korean history. A prolific writer (credited with over eighty works, of which twenty survive), the depth and breadth of the Buddhist theories and ideas he expounds on are second to none. He routinely references not only major Mahāyāna scriptures, but also writings of prior thinkers in the Sanlun tradition that dominated Chinese Buddhism such as Sengzhao (384–414?) or Jizang (549–623), as well as those outside Buddhism, such as the Daoist Laozi (580–500 BC) and Zhuangzi (370–287 BC). This breadth of thought highlights Wŏnhyo's scholastic attitude; he embraced not only Buddhist thought but also the whole spectrum of Asian thought with its roots in the Tang Dynasty. Buddhism was a religion as well as an intellectual discourse that dominated the

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culture and thoughts of the period. Wōnhyo thus absorbed and shaped the highest levels of intellectual discourse in a golden age of seventh century East Asian culture and scholasticism.

There has been much debate amongst scholars on what Wōnhyo's philosophical views are and what schools of thought Wōnhyo is affiliated with. The four major branches of thought in the landscape of East Asian Buddhist scholarship in the seventh century were Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Tathāgata garba, and Huayan. Wōnhyo straddles all of these theoretical divisions, as shown through his surviving works. In fact, Wōnhyo wrote commentaries on nearly all major Buddhist documents that had then passed into Silla. It is therefore difficult to define him in terms of belonging to any single one of these schools of thought.

Wōnhyo's philosophy is structured around the concept of "One Mind" (一心) – another term for the mind of all sentient beings, a mind intrinsically pure and unchanging, but appearing externally to be impure and ephemeral. Even though every deluded thought arises from the mind, it is that same mind that simultaneously provides the capacity to achieve enlightenment. Wōnhyo elucidates the concept of the One Mind, with over 200 references in his works. In particular, it is in his *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng* (金剛三昧經論, *Vajrasamādhi-sūtra*, or *Sūtra of Diamond-like Concentration*) and in his two commentaries to the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* (*Dasheng qixinlun*, 大乘起信論),<sup>3</sup> that Wōnhyo deals with the concept of One Mind in depth.

The *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* was the first text to introduce the idea of One Mind to East Asian Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> An important text in the development of doctrinal thought in Chinese Buddhism, the paradigm of the mind's structure presented in the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* served as the model for theories of the mind to come. The *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* is primarily an exegesis on the One Mind, systematizing Mahāyāna Buddhist thought in terms of this concept. Naturally, Wōnhyo's *Commentary* and *Expository Notes* also have the One Mind as their central thesis.

In this paper, I will explore the problem of the mind faced by Wōnhyo, focusing on the concept of One Mind illustrated in his *Commentary* and *Expository Notes* as well as in the *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*. I will further examine the significance and contributions of Wōnhyo's philosophy of the mind. Wōnhyo expounds his thoughts primarily through commentaries analyzing lines of scripture.<sup>5</sup> Because these scattered commentaries do not present a systematic theory, there is a need to reconstitute Wōnhyo's theory of the One Mind into a coherent whole. Furthermore, Wōnhyo's conception of the One Mind is extremely broad and expressed in his unique abstract and fragmentary rhetorical style. There are other difficulties: for example, he explains enlightenment with the expression of "returning to the original source of the mind." The word "source" used here refers to a location, inviting critical arguments that Wōnhyo's philosophy is a substantialist theory. However, I believe that these ambiguities can be overcome through examining Wōnhyo's theory of original enlightenment later in the text.

## The One Mind can be explained in terms of the two aspects

The mind is also called the "mind of sentient beings" or the "One Mind" in the *Awakening of Faith*. The mind is explained in terms of the One Mind and its two aspects, "the aspect of true thusness" and the "aspect of arising-and-ceasing." The first aspect of true thusness interprets the mind from the standpoint of thusness, a pure and changeless state. In the *Commentary* and in the *Expository Notes on the Awakening of Faith*, Wōnhyo states that "all dharmas (here meaning phenomena or elements of existence)<sup>6</sup> [when seen from the perspective of thusness, originally] neither arise nor cease; in other words, there is neither production nor destruction. It has been calm since the beginning and there is only the One Mind."<sup>7</sup> He calls the contemplation of the mind from this perspective the "aspect of true thusness."<sup>8</sup> "Thusness" (眞如) is the true form of all existence, and the

“thusness of the mind” is the mind of sentient beings as they are originally. However, it is said that this thusness of the mind cannot be understood through language, concepts, or thought.

To call all dharmas “One Mind” is to call attention to the relationship between mind and dharma – that is, between cognition and the objects of cognition – and to have as a premise that the objective world only exists as an object of cognition. For example, the words “objects of contemplation” are often repeated in the *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, meaning dharma as an object of observation, or the dharma that is revealed in the mind. The world is reflected in the mind, and the mind is therefore dharma. In the *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith*, Wōnhyo subordinates all existence to the mind, stating that “there is no special substance to all dharmas in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Therefore, the One Mind serves as its form.”<sup>9</sup> The objective world does not have substance in itself, but is rather reduced to the realm of the mind that perceives and judges it.

The second aspect is the aspect of arising-and-ceasing, viewing the mind from the perspective of arising and ceasing. The mind is constantly buffeted by the objective world due to the condition of ignorance. This is the form of the mind in everyday reality. According to Wōnhyo, “the original substance of the One Mind neither arises nor ceases, as it possesses the wisdom of original enlightenment. Only the condition of ignorance creates agitation in the mind, giving the appearance of arising and ceasing unfolding thence.”<sup>10</sup> However, awakening to this true nature of the One Mind allows the return to the origin of the One Mind, quelling the agitations in the mind and becoming eternally tranquil. Grasping the One Mind in this reversible state is the aspect of arising-and-ceasing; it is the dynamic system of the One Mind itself, arising and ceasing in the world of phenomena.

The division of the mind into the aspect of true thusness and the aspect of arising-and-ceasing signifies that the characteristics of the mind differ when viewed from different perspectives, leading also to a difference in what is revealed by the mind. Thus it is stated in the *Awakening of Faith* that “the aspect of true thusness only shows the essence of the mind of sentient beings; the appearance of arising and ceasing that comes from the condition of ignorance possesses substance (體, *ti*), characteristics (相, *xiang*), and function (用, *yong*).”<sup>11</sup>

## The One Mind contains both purity and pollution

On the other hand, Wōnhyo also comments on defining the mind from the aspect of true thusness and arising-and-ceasing in terms of purity and pollution.

The aspect of true thusness contains the general perspective of both pure [dharma] and polluted [dharma]. There is no other pollution or cleanliness outside of this general perspective. Thus, this aspect can subsume all the dharmas of purity and pollution. The aspect of arising and ceasing reveals pollution and purity separately. There is nothing that is not covered by the dharma of purity and pollution. Therefore this aspect can also include all the dharmas.<sup>12</sup>

The aspect of true thusness does not generally distinguish between pure and polluted. In contrast, pure and polluted are intertwined yet differentiated from the aspect of arising-and-ceasing. The aspect of true thusness is the form of the mind without discrimination between pure and pollution, being well versed in all dharmas; the aspect of arising-and-ceasing is a kind of phenomena in which purity and pollution are intermixed. In other words, the human mind is a combination of purity and pollution, good and evil.

The *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng* also states:

the One Mind serves as the comprehensive support for all maculated and pure dharmas. From the approach of original quiescence, that mind contains innumerable meritorious qualities; there is no pure dharma that does not reside within this mind. [...] It begins moving according to the rules of causality (dependent origination, or *pratītya-samutpāda*), creating endless polluted dharmas; there is indeed no polluted dharma that does not reside within this mind. Thus it is said that [the One Mind] contains all dharmas.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding the One Mind in these two perspectives of the aspect of true thusness and the aspect of arising-and-ceasing is of great significance not only in defining the characteristics of the One Mind, but also in clarifying the role the One Mind plays in religious practice. Further, it provides an important tool for explaining the fundamental principles of enlightenment that will be described later.

## The One Mind is a unified mind

The One Mind is an evolution and merger of the concepts of “*ālayavijñāna* (storehouse consciousness)” and “*tathāgatagarbha*, the womb of the Tathāgata (where the Buddha is carried).” It is a well-known fact that the *ālayavijñāna* and the *tathāgatagarbha* originate from different branches of Buddhist thought. The womb of the Tathāgata is a concept developed from the optimistic idea that any sentient being has the possibility of becoming a Buddha, a concept already described since early Buddhism as the “innately pure mind.”

The theory of only consciousness (Yogācāra) explains that the world of phenomena arises from consciousness, and describes *ālayavijñāna* as a store of experience, or a granary storing the seeds of the experiential world. These seeds then grow and manifest themselves into the world of phenomena, or in other words, create dharma. As a developmental stage of only consciousness thought, *ālayavijñāna* includes all true consciousness and deluded consciousness. It is a storehouse containing the experiences of truth, delusion, purity, and pollution; it is also the source of consciousness.

The *Awakening of Faith* describes the One Mind as the optimistic understanding of human fate set by the *tathāgatagarbha* bundled together onto *ālayavijñāna* theory. The One Mind is at times equivalent to *ālayavijñāna*, to the *tathāgatagarbha*, or to original enlightenment, but its characteristics contain the attributes of all. The One Mind represents an optimistic and all-encompassing philosophy of the mind, surpassing both *ālayavijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha*.

Additionally, the One Mind possesses the meanings of unity and concentration. Although the mind and consciousness are similar concepts in Buddhism, Wōnhyo in particular identifies individual cognitive acts as a function of consciousness, and the larger cognitive world and enlightenment as a function of the mind. To say that there is not two but *One Mind* implies absolute nonduality, a transcending of relative discrimination; therefore the One Mind is the source of the mind. One is not two, nor many. Thus the One Mind takes a place of superiority as the source of all the phenomena created by the mind and consciousness.

## The One Mind contains innumerable meritorious qualities

There are innumerable descriptions of the One Mind not only in the *Commentary* and the *Expository Notes to the Awakening of Faith*, but also in the *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*. For example, in the latter it is stated that “the single dharma realm (the one absolute realm of existence) means the One Mind.”<sup>14</sup> This is a phrase that is repeated in the *Awakening of Faith*. The dharma realm (*dharmadhātu*) is later used in Huayan philosophy to mean the world of truth that lay behind phenomena, or the source or principles that lay behind existence. Wōnhyo, however, defines the dharma realm as the experiential world or the world in which the laws of cause and effect are

active. Even in Wŏnhyo's *Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (涅槃宗要), it is stated that "though there are ten thousand merits at the level of the Buddha, they can be summarized in two aspects. But when those forms are cast aside, they return to the aspect of the One Mind."<sup>15</sup>

In the *Commentary on the Kūṃgang sammae kyōng*, Wŏnhyo states that "now, the fountainhead of the One Mind, which is distinct from existence and nonexistence, is independently pure. The sea of the three voidnesses (emptiness of self, emptiness of dharmas, and the emptiness of both), which subsumes the absolute and the conventional, is profoundly calm."<sup>16</sup> Though the One Mind is a clean and uncontaminated state of emptiness, it nevertheless contains both the absolute and the conventional, and is profoundly calm.

Moreover, this One Mind neither grasps nor is graspable. It is equal and universal, nor can it be interpreted as just one of existence or nonexistence, unity or difference. The *Commentary on the Kūṃgang sammae kyōng* states thus:

The essence of this one mind has, in brief, five characteristics. What are the five? (1) It remains far removed from the differentiated characteristics of the objects to which one clings. (2) It is liberated from the discriminative grasping of the clinging subject. (3) It pervades past, present, and future so that there is nothing with which it is not in equilibrium. (4) It is commensurate with the realm of empty space so that there is nothing that it does not pervade. (5) It does not fall into the extremes of existence and nonexistence, unity and difference; it passes between the loci of mental activities and surpasses the path of verbalization. It contains inherent meritorious qualities as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, the One Mind does not have one particular definition, nor is it bound by the attachment to defining differences. It is as vast as space, surpassing past, present, and future. Nor can it be defined as nihilism or eternalism, existence or nonexistence, pure or polluted. It further contains innumerable meritorious qualities.

## The manifestations of the mind are in fact the mind itself

As the following passage from the *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith* indicates, Wŏnhyo argues that the mind's stirring leads to the creation of the six destinies (of sentient beings undergone through rebirth: hell, hungry ghost, animal, asura, human, and god). Then, are the One Mind and the mind that generates the six destinies different? Wŏnhyo answers that the two are ultimately the same; only ignorance prevents the comprehension of the One Mind:

[The] dharma of the Mahāyāna perspective can be summarized as the One Mind; apart from the One Mind there are no other elements. Only because of ignorance are sentient beings deluded as to their own One Mind, which causes all sorts of illusions and transmigration through the six destinies to arise. Although the waves of the six destinies arise, they do not exist except in the sea of One Mind. Indeed, it is due to the movement of the One Mind that the six destinies are created. Therefore, it is possible to make the vow of saving all sentient beings. Also, the six destinies do not exist except in the One Mind; therefore, one can arouse the great compassion based on sameness in essence [realizing one's fundamental unity with sentient beings].<sup>18</sup>

Then, is the One Mind a discrete substance, distinct from each individual manifestation of the mind? Wŏnhyo states that these manifestations of the mind are in fact the mind itself, and he underlines the relationship between the essence of the mind and the thoughts in the mind.

*Question:* Though it is said that the essence of the mind abides permanently and the phenomenal aspects of the mind arise and cease, the essence and phenomenal aspects of the mind are not separate from each

other. Should those two together then be called one consciousness? Or should one say that the essence of the mind abides permanently at times and arises and ceases in others?

*Answer:* To those who have understood this, both of these meanings are acceptable. Why is this so? When we discuss the permanent abiding of mind, then it does not rely on anything else for its creation; this is called essence. However, when we discuss its impermanence, then it follows other conditions and arises and ceases; this is called the phenomenal aspect. Therefore, we can say that the essence is permanent, whereas its phenomenal aspects are impermanent.

However, with respect to the words “arising and ceasing,” it is called arising and ceasing because it is the genuine arising of the mind that genuinely does not arise; it is the true ceasing of the mind that truly does not cease. It is an arising that does not arise in its essence and a ceasing that does not cease in its essence. Since this is but the arising of the mind and the ceasing of the mind, it is called arising and ceasing. Hence we can say the essence of the mind arises and ceases. Though the motion of the sea is called waves, one cannot say the crashing of the waves occurs because the sea itself moves. The principle discussed above concerning the mind is exactly the same. [...]

As discussed above, the permanent mind is transformed into the impermanent mind due to the conditions arising from ignorance; yet its permanent nature, in itself, does not change. Thus, the One Mind is transformed into the many minds of sentient beings due to the conditions arising from ignorance; yet the One Mind, in itself, is not divided. As the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* says, “the medicine of a single flavor has many different effects depending on where it is used, yet the true flavor of this medicine remains in the mountains [where the medicine was extracted].” This illustrates exactly what we are discussing.<sup>19</sup>

By stating that the essence of the mind is not fixed and that the mind itself is not different from the activities of the mind, one can escape the error of assuming the existence of a substantive, fixed One Mind. If the essence of the mind and the actions of the mind are separate, it is difficult to explain the dynamic structure in which the mind contains the dharmas of both purity and pollution, yet can nonetheless return to the state of original purity. The mind lacks true substance; one’s character, the subjective self, and the mental processes of the subjective self are continuously formed through the experiences of interacting with the objective world. Such a definition of the essence of the mind negates the possibility of the One Mind theory violating the theory of non-self.

The One Mind changes according to causality, creating the various actions of the mind, or, in other words, the mind of sentient beings. However, these forms of the mind are identical to the pure mind when returning to the source of the One Mind. This is the meaning of “the One Mind, in itself, is not divided”, mentioned earlier.

This implies that the mind cannot be defined in terms of immutable good or evil. Humans are defined through their experiences, so there are no humans with fixed characters. Likewise, neither the self nor the mind is fixed. Instead, the present and future self is forged based on how one uses the mind.

## Enlightenment – returning to the source of the One Mind

The *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng* states that “this scripture’s reference to ‘one enlightenment’ means that all dharmas are only this one mind and all sentient beings are but this one original enlightenment.”<sup>20</sup> Enlightenment means understanding that all elements of existence are the One Mind (that is, the elements of existence exist within the mind); as the subject of the One Mind, humans are already enlightened.

This is also expressed as “returning to the original source of the One Mind”:

Sentient beings, using their six faculties, repudiate their own source and scatter, chasing after objects of the sensory world. Now, with one's whole life one commands these six faculties, returning them to their origin, which is the source of One Mind.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, it states “then at last [one] returns to the source of the mind and understands the whole of the Buddha-nature.” Enlightenment is the returning to the source of the One Mind, at which point one understands the Buddha-nature in its complete form. The *Commentary on the Kūṃgang sammae kyōng* describes the process of a sentient being returning to the One Mind after transmigration through birth and death.

“Those sentient beings who are capable of deliverance” means that there are none of the sentient beings proselytized by the Buddha who do not flow forth from the One Mind. “All explain the single taste” means that there are none of the doctrinal teachings of the Buddha that are not intended to prompt access to the taste of the one enlightenment. [This passage] seeks to clarify that the original one enlightenment of all sentient beings just flows forth from their ignorance and in accordance with their fantasies. None of those beings will fail to return to the source of the One Mind through the Buddha's teachings on the single taste; and when they return to the source of the mind, they will all be unascertainable. Hence it is said that the single taste is in fact the one vehicle [of enlightenment].<sup>22</sup>

Here, nothing special is obtained by returning to the source of the mind. “Nothing to be attained” is a concept that appears in many canons that espouse Madhyamaka philosophy, including the *Diamond Sūtra*. Enlightenment is not about obtaining special abilities or reaching a special level of existence.

Enlightenment is the goal of religious practice in Buddhism, the attainment of new understandings about the world and existence. In early Buddhism, this was referred to as “fully attaining the arhatship.” Early Buddhism teaches deep contemplation of the world of phenomena and the original nature of existence in order to gain new understanding on one's life and the world. Enlightenment is attained through the transformation of the mind, or, in other words, the transformation of cognition. Wōnhyo pays special attention to the applications and functions of the mind to explain this process of enlightenment.

## **The relationship between the mind and enlightenment: original enlightenment, non-enlightenment, and actualizing enlightenment**

If enlightenment is to return to the source of the One Mind, then how might one work towards enlightenment? Wōnhyo explains enlightenment as a threefold structure, as a co-relationship of three concepts: original enlightenment, actualizing enlightenment, and non-enlightenment. The state of enlightenment is portrayed in the course of explaining original enlightenment, the wisdom of enlightenment. The process by which to get there, that is, to become enlightened, is explained through actualizing enlightenment, and the direction of this process is delineated in light of the comparison with non-enlightenment.

Original enlightenment is the idea that the true nature of the mind is already originally enlightened. Only ignorance and delusion, both existential conditions and constraints of humanity, cloud the mind and create the suffering that characterizes the human condition. The origin of this ignorance, or in other words nescience, is described as “beginningless nescience” in the *Awakening of Faith*. There is no beginning to this ignorance, nor can its origin be learned. Wōnhyo also uses the expression “suddenly a thought arises,” explaining that “‘suddenly’ refers to the inability to grasp its origin; it is not a temporal expression of *when* ignorance appears, but its *manner*.”<sup>23</sup> In other

words, ignorance does not have substance. It is a continuing, fundamental nescience or absence of enlightenment. This state of digression from enlightenment is defined non-enlightenment.

The fundamental ignorance of humanity is a matter of great philosophical importance, comparable to theodicy, an important discussion in Western theology that attempts to reconcile the existence of evil in a world created by an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. The *Awakening of Faith* holds the view that though human existence lies inside the condition of non-enlightenment, the condition of non-enlightenment is without substance. The myriad of irrationalities and evils of the world are caused by the life of individual humans being mired in this state of non-enlightenment; the substantiality of evil itself is also denied.<sup>24</sup>

After explaining non-enlightenment and original enlightenment, Wōnhyo states that the two are in fact not different, using the famous analogy of the sea, wind, and the waves mentioned earlier. Though the wind blows upon the vast sea and generates waves, the sea and the wave are in fact one and the same. Here the “vast sea” is the originally enlightened mind, the “wind” is nescience, and the “waves” are the non-enlightened state. Because the sea itself does not have the nature of movement, if the wind ceases the waves will naturally subside. Nor does the unique nature of seawater – that it is, in fact, comprised of water – disappear with the subsiding of the waves. In other words, the state of non-enlightenment is contingent on the originally enlightened mind; if the wind of nescience ceases and one overcomes ignorance, the original enlightenment that lies within is revealed. Original enlightenment has only existed thus since the beginning. Non-enlightenment is a nonoriginal state caused by nescience. Therefore, the non-enlightened mind will naturally lose its basis of existence with the removal of nescience, returning to the mind of original enlightenment, or the One Mind, as a Buddha.

However, Wōnhyo does not simply equate human reality with nirvāṇa and the human form with the form of the Buddha. Even though the human mind originally has the same enlightenment as the Buddha, religious practice is required to shed the ignorance that has led the mind astray from the wisdom of enlightenment and created the world of phenomena. This is the concept of actualizing enlightenment, or the wisdom of enlightenment gradually revealed as defilements are eliminated:

The mind creates delusional thought because of the condition of ignorance; however, original enlightenment has its own power of influencing the mind, so that enlightenment is activated. When this activation reaches its maximum, it will return to original enlightenment and be identified with it, and thus it is called actualizing enlightenment.<sup>25</sup>

Not only is original enlightenment the basis for the possibility of enlightenment, but it is also the final state of enlightenment. Then, what is the catalyst by which the One Mind activates and actualizing enlightenment arises? Wōnhyo attributes this to original enlightenment’s power of influencing the mind. The powers of recovery latent within original enlightenment drive the return from non-enlightenment to original enlightenment: this is actualizing enlightenment. Actualizing enlightenment provides the active opportunity to shed the deluded existence that is human reality.

In detail, the process by which actualizing enlightenment occurs is explained thus. The four stages of the mind’s agitation – arising, abiding, changing, and extinction – are undergone in reverse order. Each stage is studied and one enlightens to the fact that deluded thoughts in fact do not exist. The practitioner ultimately reaches a stage when, focusing on the moment the mind first wells up from ignorance, they finally realize that nescience in fact has no substance and is merely the ignorance of the true nature of existence. At this stage, actualizing enlightenment naturally coincides with original enlightenment. The mind returns to its source, recovering its original form. Thus the process of actualizing enlightenment is the recovering of original enlightenment and understanding the insubstantiality of all defilements.



But if original enlightenment exists, or in other words, if sentient beings are already enlightened, what use is there for actualizing enlightenment? Wōnhyo poses these questions:

Do you call original enlightenment the absence of non-enlightenment in the mind?  
Or, do you call it the existence of an enlightenment that illuminates the mind?

Wōnhyo responds with these dialectical argument-pairs in a manner typical of his style:

If enlightenment is waking up from sleep, then there is enlightenment in actualizing enlightenment but not in original enlightenment.

If enlightenment is the state of being awake, then original enlightenment is enlightenment and actualizing enlightenment is not.

If elimination [of delusions] is the later disappearance of what existed previously, there is elimination in actualizing enlightenment but not in original enlightenment.

If elimination [of delusions] is being free from original defilements, then there is elimination in original enlightenment but not in actualizing enlightenment.

Because we are originally and intrinsically cut off from delusion, there are no such things as sentient beings. That is what is meant by the concept that all sentient beings are entered in nirvāṇa and abide in the world of truth intrinsically.

However, even though our knowledge of the existence of original enlightenment leads us to say that there are no sentient beings, until actualizing enlightenment appears, there would also be no problem in saying that there are sentient beings.

In other words, each of these argument-pairs logically contradicts each other. Wōnhyo therefore concludes that both original enlightenment and actualizing enlightenment are necessary concepts from a theoretical or practical standpoint.

If you claim there are no sentient beings because of the existence of original enlightenment, there would be no reason for the existence of actualizing enlightenment either. Hence, on what would you base your claim for the existence of sentient beings? Besides, if there are no sentient beings existing, original enlightenment cannot be revealed either. So based on what sort of original enlightenment would you claim that the sentient being does not exist anyway?<sup>26</sup>

The difference lies in the fact that original enlightenment reveals the enlightenment or wisdom that originally exists in the mind, whereas actualizing enlightenment emphasizes that process of enlightenment. It is the difference between viewing enlightenment itself as its original form that brings together Buddha and sentient being, or as something realized through religious practice. This interdependency is what Wōnhyo intends to illustrate by presenting these pairs of contradictory statements. Original and actualizing enlightenment are likewise interdependent; unless original enlightenment is revealed by actualizing enlightenment, it cannot be proved, while actualizing enlightenment cannot arise unless original enlightenment exists. Wōnhyo proclaims the differences between these two enlightenments, then attempts to reconcile them as mutually contingent and ultimately identical. Original enlightenment is both the basis of enlightenment and its final state.

The world of the Buddha and the world of phenomena are not different things. The world of the Buddha and the world of arising-and-ceasing are two aspects of the One Mind. The mind of thusness is therefore the mind of arising-and-ceasing; there is no principle (理, *li*) beyond phenomena (事, *shih*). Just before Wōnhyo falls into a substantialist interpretation of truth and existence, he retreats, arguing that they are empty and without substance. The relationship between Buddha and sentient beings, enlightenment and non-enlightenment are the same. Though the world of the Buddha is unfathomable, ultimately the world of the Buddha is the world of sentient beings, and sentient beings are none other than Buddha. The same holds true for defilements and enlightenment (*bodhi*): though at times defilements may be severed and disappear, ultimately defilements do not exist at all.

## Conclusion – The Proclamation of Subjective Personhood

Wōnhyo promotes a vast view of humanity in which sentient beings and the Buddha are one, and the absolute and conventional become one.

The fundamental concept of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is the non-dual true nature(s) of individual phenomena). The true nature is above the limitations of form or character. Because it transcends form there are no such things as cleanliness or filth. It can neither be a cause nor an effect. It is neither the same [as other natures] nor different. It is neither existent nor nonexistent. As it transcends character, it can become filthy or clean, be a cause or effect, become the same or different, and exist or not exist. Because it can become filthy or clean it is variously termed “sentient beings,” “life and death,” “the Buddha,” or the “dharma-body.” Because it is the cause or effect [of enlightenment], it is variously termed “Buddha-nature,” the “womb of the Tathāgata,” “enlightenment,” or “great nirvāṇa.” Because it can exist or not exist, it is also called the two truths (of absolute and conventional truth) or the middle way. Because it is not the same [as other natures] it conforms to various different teachings; because it is not different these teachings are called “one taste.”<sup>27</sup>

All beings in the world possess a true nature, neither polluted nor pure, neither formed nor formless, neither permanent nor impermanent, neither one nor two. This nature can also be called such things as nirvana, life and death, the Buddha, dharma-body, Buddha-nature, the womb of the Tathāgata, enlightenment, great nirvāṇa, two truths (of absolute and conventional truth), or the middle way.

The One Mind is a concept central to Wōnhyo’s philosophy of the mind. The One Mind, like cognition, has the ability of understanding and knowing. This is expressed as the character of “mysterious understanding.” Wōnhyo states in the *Preface with the Commentary to the Bodhisattvas’ Diadem Primary Activities Sutra* (菩薩瓔珞本業經疏) that “because the original human character is by nature mysteriously understanding, it is called ‘mind.’”<sup>28</sup> In the *Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, it also states: “Though the mind is led astray by delusions and creates the mind of arising-and-ceasing, in terms of cognition it never loses its characteristic of mysterious understanding. Therefore one is able to return to the source of the mind.”<sup>29</sup> This phrase also appears in the *Commentary* and the *Expository Notes to the Awakening of Faith*.

The One Mind contains a highly sophisticated religious idea, stating that through the One Mind one may return to the original source of the mind. The “original source of the One Mind” appears many times throughout Wōnhyo’s works. Humans possess an original nature of pure enlightenment. That nature is the One Mind, the womb of the Tathāgata, and original enlightenment. Wōnhyo’s One Mind is the origin of everything, equal and free of discrimination. It is beyond all unclean things, containing innumerable meritorious qualities.

However, the One Mind is also the mind of sentient beings. Therefore, Wŏnhyo exhorts one to return to the source of the One Mind through religious practice. Though the One Mind follows causality and manifests itself in myriad forms due to ignorance, just as the waves and the sea are one when the wind stops blowing, one is able to return to the One Mind.

Enlightenment to Wŏnhyo is the return to the source of the mind, while the One Mind is the basis of enlightenment. “Returning to the source of the One Mind” is understanding the mind each moment it arises and comprehending the principles of the mind manifesting dharma, and returning to that exact site.

Wŏnhyo’s One Mind is functional and all encompassing. The present mind of the sentient being is the goal (artha) of enlightenment or the mind’s aspect of true thusness, as well as the support which it relies upon.

The One Mind is a personhood or self that progresses towards perfection. Although Buddhism promotes the idea of non-self, this is meant to disavow the self that focuses on ego and possessions, not the self that independently works towards perfection by overcoming its own imperfections. Because the self contains the One Mind, it is able to endlessly change itself at will in its quest for perfection without being trapped by any one definition. This flexibility allows the self to ultimately attain enlightenment through the One Mind. The human that is revealed through the One Mind is an independent human that makes existential decisions and endlessly strives towards perfection.

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## Notes

1. All citations are taken from the *Han’guk Pulgyo Chŏnsŏ* (韓國佛教全書, Complete Works of Korean Buddhism. Seoul: Dongguk UP, 1986, hereafter abbreviated as HPC).
2. Buddhism was introduced to Korea through China around the third century CE, only one or two centuries after it had spread to China from India through Central Asia. Since its inception, it has enjoyed a broad base of support: it was the national religion throughout the periods of Unified Silla (668–935) and the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392). Though it was subsequently suppressed during the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1897), it has still survived to the present as the most important religious tradition in Korea. Wŏnhyo stands as a paragon of eloquence and philosophical sophistication within this tradition.
3. Wŏnhyo wrote two commentaries on the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*: the *Commentary* (起信論疏) and the *Expository Notes* (大乘起信論別記). It is presumed that the *Expository Notes* preceded the *Commentary* due to phrases from the former appearing in the latter. Though many other scholar-monks wrote commentaries on the *Awakening of Faith*, Wŏnhyo’s are some of the most renowned. It is well known that the *Dasheng qixinlun yiji* (大乘起信論義記), a commentary on the *Awakening of Faith* by the Chinese master of Buddhist theory Fazang, relies on the theories presented by Wŏnhyo’s *Commentary* and *Expository Notes*.
4. Though the traditional view states the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* was written by the Indian monk Aśvaghōṣa in the second century CE, translated in China and subsequently spread to the rest of East Asia, its doctrinal trends and the lack of a Sanskrit language original strongly suggest that it was in fact composed in China.
5. There may be some questions raised on the significance of commentary in the Eastern intellectual tradition, and why Eastern thinkers chose to write voluminous commentaries on others’ works rather than put their creative thoughts to their own writing. Commentary is a unique scholastic methodology that allows the expression of one’s own thought by analyzing others’, while simultaneously participating in a vast tradition of thought transmitted throughout the ages. In other words, it is a way of collaborating in a universal discourse while still revealing individual uniqueness of thought. In East Asia, many scholars

wrote commentaries on the classical texts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism; this constellation of literature formed an enormous system of intellectual discourse in the sinosphere.

6. Dharma is a concept that has many meanings: with a capital D, Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha or the truth of Buddhism. Here with a lowercase d, it means phenomena or the elements of existence.
7. *Expository Notes on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0679a22–b01.
8. Wōnhyo explains this phrase of the *Awakening of Faith* further in the *Commentary to the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0612a13–b05.
9. *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0704a08–14.
10. *Expository Notes on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0679b01–03.
11. *The Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, HPC01.0739c15–16; Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, T32.1667.0584b25–26.
12. *Commentary on the Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, HPC01.0705a21–24.
13. *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0615c.
14. *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0639c17.
15. *Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, HPC01.0533a03.
16. *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0604b.
17. *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0616a24–b04.
18. *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0736c18–24.
19. *Expository Notes on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0682a14–b07.
20. *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0610a13–15.
21. *Commentary on the Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, HPC01.0700a12–14.
22. *Commentary on the Kūmgang sammae kyōng*, HPC01.0610a17–b01.
23. *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0716c09–10.
24. The word ‘evil’ is not used in Buddhism. The term “unwholesome” is usually preferred instead.
25. *Expository Notes on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0748c.
26. *Expository Notes on the Awakening of Faith*, HPC01.0749a.
27. *Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, HPC01.0525c11–24.
28. *Commentary to the Bodhisattvas’ Diadem Primary Activities Sutra*, HPC01.0511a03.
29. *Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, HPC01.0538c19–21.