Detachment

A Trait-Reliabilist Virtue in Linji's Chan Buddhism

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1 Introduction

It has been forty years since Ernest Sosa published his landmark paper, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence vs. Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge" (1980), which heralded a new approach to epistemology, i.e. virtue epistemology (VE). The popularity of VE has been attributed to its unique ability to tackle difficult philosophical problems that are central to epistemology in contemporary analytic philosophy, e.g. coherentism, foundationalism, internalism, externalism, and, of course, the Gettier problem, etc.

This chapter is an attempt to bring the considerable conceptual resources developed in virtue epistemology to Chinese philosophy, especially Chinese Buddhist philosophy, in order to tread a new path in the study of the latter. In so doing, I also hope to complicate the landscape of contemporary virtue epistemology, which is divided between reliabilists and responsibilists. One important contribution of Sosa's approach to virtue and epistemology, for the purpose of this chapter, is his call to differentiate moral and intellectual virtues in his 1980 article:

> We need to consider more carefully the concept of a virtue and the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. In epistemology, there is reason to think that the most useful and illuminating notion of intellectual virtue will prove broader than our tradition would suggest and must give due weight not only to the subject and his intrinsic nature but also to his environment and to his epistemic community.
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> Sosa 1980: 23

Indeed, studies of virtue within the field of Chinese and Buddhist philosophies tend to be overwhelmingly focused on moral virtues without paying much attention to intellectual virtues. In this connection, engaging virtue epistemologists like Sosa has offered me an opportunity to read some texts through a different lens, especially the transformation of Buddhism from India to China, and to see the broader Buddhist

project from a new perspective in a way that is unexpected and constructive at the same time.

In this chapter, I will characterize the Chan/Zen Buddhist epistemology as a version of virtue epistemology, using some of the conceptual innovations developed in virtue epistemology to offer a new interpretation of the Chan project of enlightenment. More specifically, I will make the case that detachment, one of the key characteristics of enlightenment in Buddhism, should be understood as a reliabilist trait-virtue that is constitutive of the enlightened knowledge in Chan Buddhism, leading to the truth of emptiness celebrated in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. The chapter has two goals in mind: first, it brings a particular epistemic virtue, detachment, articulated and celebrated within the Buddhist tradition, to a broader discussion on epistemic virtues in contemporary philosophy; second, it calls into question the way epistemic virtues are framed by reliabilists and responsibilists in the contemporary discourse. My discussion will be anchored on a general contour of the Buddhist approaches to knowledge, with the *Linji lu* 臨劑錄, a Chan Buddhist text traditionally attributed to the famous ninth-century Chan master Linji 臨濟, as the locus.

2 Debate about two kinds of epistemic virtues

Virtue epistemology is an alternative to the traditional approach to the study of knowledge in contemporary analytic philosophy. Traditional epistemology is primarily concerned with propositional knowledge in the form of "*S* knows that *p*." Such a knowledge is understood as justified true belief (JTB) in that knowledge has three individually necessary and collectively sufficient components: belief, truth, and justification, namely *S* knows that *p* if and only if *p* is true and *S* is justified in believing that *p*. The traditional approach to epistemology is concerned with a subject's belief in examining whether it is true and justifiably so. Since the discovery of Gettier problems in the 1960s, epistemologists have attempted to offer an amended definition of knowledge, much of which has taken the form of JTB + X wherein X refers to whatever further condition or qualification is required to safeguard knowledge proper, although pinning down X still largely eludes the epistemic community. The Gettier-type problems have shaken the belief-based approach to epistemology, so much so that it is fair to say that epistemic luck presents one of the greatest, if not the single greatest, threat to knowledge in contemporary philosophical discussions.

Virtue epistemology seeks to provide an alternative approach to the study of knowledge. Sosa, the earliest proponent of VE, proposes that knowledge should be grounded in the epistemic virtues of the agent: "Here primary justification would apply to *intellectual* virtues, to stable dispositions for belief acquisition, through their greater contribution toward getting us to the truth. Secondary justification would then attach to particular beliefs in virtue of their source in intellectual virtues or other such justified dispositions" (Sosa 1980: 23). This means that, for Sosa, the primary object of evaluation should be intellectual virtues and vices of an agent, whereas individual belief, the basis of knowledge in traditional epistemology as we have seen previously,

should be relegated to secondary justification. Abrol Fairweather and Mark Alfano helpfully summarize the shift brought about by virtue epistemology:

> The essential shift in virtue epistemology is from belief-based epistemic norms to agent-based epistemic norms. The former confers epistemic good-making properties on agents due to the epistemic good-making properties of their beliefs, and the latter confers epistemic good-making properties on beliefs due to the epistemic good-making properties of the agent (their epistemic virtues). The direction of analysis where normative properties of agents confer normative properties on beliefs is essential to virtue epistemology. Some form of this virtue-theoretic direction of analysis is accepted by all virtue epistemologists.
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> Fairweather and Alfano 2017: 8–9

Sosa has been widely acknowledged as someone who stands at the very beginning of such a major shift in epistemology. He is the proponent of what has come to be characterized as virtue reliabilism, which uses the competently successful performance as the criterion to evaluate a subject's epistemic virtues and vices. The relationship between cognitive competence and successful performance determines the normative status of a performance, i.e. whether a particular performance is knowledge proper or not. In this effort, the nature of competence and the relationship between competence and performance are key to Sosa's virtue epistemology (Vargas 2016: 3–4). With respect to the nature of competence, Sosa has proposed what he calls the SSS (skill, shape, and situation) framework in order to determine the epistemic competence of an agent;[1] for the relationship between competence and performance, Sosa offers the AAA (accurate, adroit, and apt) framework to better understand the various normative relationships between the two.[2]

One area of dispute in VE is what kind of virtue should count as an epistemic virtue. In this respect, there are two competing camps among contemporary virtue epistemologists. Sosa's reliabilist virtue epistemology is often cast against what has come to be known as virtue responsibilism, with the former focusing on epistemic competence in perception, memory, and inductive and deductive reasoning, and the latter on the moral character or moral virtues in epistemic pursuits, such as curiosity, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage, etc. John Greco provides a helpful summary of the rationale behind Sosa's version of intellectual/epistemic virtue: "According to Sosa, an intellectual virtue is a reliable cognitive ability or power. Coherence-seeking reason is thus an intellectual virtue if reliable, but so are perception, memory, and introspection" (Greco 2002: 293). Since reliabilist virtues are cognitive faculties, they are often called faculty-virtues. In the following passage, Sosa lays out his case for touting the faculty-virtues:

> For example, it may be one's faculty of sight operating in good light that generates one's belief in the whiteness and roundness of a facing snowball. Is possession of such a faculty a "virtue"? Not in the narrow Aristotelian sense, of course, since it is no disposition to make deliberate choices. But there is a broader sense of "virtue," still Greek, in which anything with a function—natural or artificial—does have

virtues. The eye does, after all, have its virtues, and so does a knife. And if we include grasping the truth about one's environment among the proper ends of a human being, then the faculty of sight would seem in a broad sense a virtue in human beings; and if grasping the truth is an intellectual matter then that virtue is also in a straightforward sense an intellectual virtue.

<div align="right">Sosa 1991: 271</div>

Clearly, Sosa is using the term virtue in a sense that is broader than its moral usage. Virtue here includes function, ability, power, potency, or competence. Such an employment of the term virtue is precisely what has prompted criticism from philosophers who are more aligned with virtue in its Aristotelian use. For example, Linda Zagzebski, one of the most prominent voices advocating what has come to be characterized as virtue responsibilism, criticizes Sosa's use of the term virtue in this context:

> [Sosa] makes no attempt to integrate intellectual virtue into the broader context of a subject's psychic structure in the way that has been done by many philosophers for the moral virtues. What's more, Sosa's examples of intellectual virtues are faculties such as eyesight and memory, which are not virtues at all in traditional virtue theory. It turns out, then, that his plea for a turn to the concept of intellectual virtue actually has little to do with the concept of intellectual virtue *as* a virtue in the classical sense.

<div align="right">Zagzebski 1996: 8–9, original italics</div>

In fact, Zagzebski accuses Sosa of confusing the function of a cognitive faculty with its virtue (Zagzebski 1996: 9, fn. 4). For her, the reliabilist faculty-virtues do not provide any added value to knowledge besides their conduciveness to truth. According to Zagzebski, "knowledge is a more valuable state than true belief. It follows that the value of the knowing state is more than the value of the truth that is thereby possessed. So what knowledge has in addition to true belief has value" (Zagzebski 1996: 301). In other words, it is insufficient for knowledge to be produced by a reliable belief-producing apparatus since as such there would be no additional value to that belief state than its truth. Therefore, Zagzebski defines intellectual virtues as acquired character traits of the agent that consist of two components: they are reliably conducive to truth and they reflect the agent's virtuous motivation (Zagzebski 1996: 311). By contrast, "for Sosa the intellectual virtues are cognitive abilities rather than character traits, they need not be acquired, and their acquisition and use need not be under one's control" (Greco 2002: 295).

   At the heart of Zagzebski's critique of virtue reliabilism is her questioning of a strong distinction between intellectual and moral virtues, made by Aristotle. In fact, she argues that "[i]ntellectual virtues are best viewed as forms of moral virtue" (Zagzebski 1996: 139). By making intellectual virtues a subset of moral virtues, Zagzebski attempts to integrate intellectual and moral virtues into the agent's overall psychic structure, something she thinks Sosa's reliabilism fails to do.

   Sosa acknowledges the importance of trait-virtues favored by the responsibilists, e.g. curiosity, open-minded, intellectual courage, etc. However, as Sosa sees it, the

responsibilists do not differentiate the virtues that are constitutive of knowledge from those that are merely facilitative:

> It is such knowledge-constitutive competences that are of main interest to a Competence Virtue Epistemology aiming to explain human knowledge. Other epistemically important traits—such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, persistence, and even single-minded obsessiveness—are indeed of interest to a broader epistemology. They are of course worthy of serious study. But they are not in the charmed inner circle for traditional epistemology. They are only "auxiliary" intellectual virtues, by contrast with the "constitutive" intellectual virtues of central interest to virtue reliabilism.
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> Sosa 2015: 43

Put simply, the faculty-virtues belong to the charmed inner circle of traditional epistemology in that they are knowledge-constitutive competences, whereas the trait-virtues are only auxiliary intellectual virtues that can assist the epistemic effort but are not constitutive of such effort. Greco echoes such an assessment when adjudicating the reliabilist/responsibilist virtues in pointing out that a simple case of perceptual knowledge does not have to involve Zagzebski-type intellectual virtues (Greco 2002: 296).

However, there are important epistemic virtues that have largely remained outside the purview of the discussions between the reliabilists and the responsibilists. To make the case, I would like to look into how epistemic virtues are conceptualized within a very different intellectual context, namely that of Buddhism, especially Chan Buddhism in China. We will see that the way a core epistemic virtue, detachment, is articulated in Chan Buddhist philosophy does not fit the reliabilist-responsibilist framework; it is a reliabilist trait-virtue which takes on both reliabilist and responsibilist features. This implies that the trait-virtue of detachment does not settle into the auxiliary role within Chan Buddhist epistemology. Rather it is constitutive of a particular kind of knowledge, namely enlightened knowledge in Chan Buddhism. This trait-reliabilism, as opposed to faculty-reliabilism or trait-responsibilism, would complicate the disputation between virtue reliabilists and virtue responsibilists about what should count as a constitutive epistemic virtue and whether a reliabilist virtue can be a character trait instead of a faculty.

3 Detachment as a reliabilist virtue in Buddhist epistemology

Many, if not most, traditional Chinese philosophers can probably be characterized as virtue epistemologists in the sense that "normative properties of agents confer normative properties on beliefs" (Fairweather and Alfano 2017: 9). Zhuangzi's (late fourth-century to early third-century BCE) dictum "there is a true person, and afterwards there is true knowledge" is one of the most famous manifestos of such an orientation. Of course, questions about what is a true person and what is true knowledge in Zhuangzi's context would immediately arise. However, I will not get into the

Zhuangist ideas of a true person and true knowledge in this chapter. Rather my focus will be on a later development of these ideas in the context of Chan Buddhism.

The term "true person" is picked up by Chan Buddhist Linji (臨濟, d. 866), whose deliberations of true person represent his most vigorous effort to sketch out the relationship between knowledge and agent in his project of enlightenment. Much of the text attributed to Linji, the *Linji lu* (臨濟錄; *Recorded Sayings of Linji*), is devoted to the portrayal of true persons as well as how to become one. Linji personifies the climax of Chinese Chan Buddhism that has come to define later iconoclastic expressions of Chan in Chinese and other East Asian cultures. He has been revered as the last, arguably the most famous, and certainly the most colorful, Chan patriarch in the "orthodox" Hongzhou 洪州 lineage during the so-called "golden age" of Chan Buddhism in Tang dynasty (618–907). Linji is legendary for his blasphemous and iconoclastic teachings as well as unconventional teaching methods, such as shouting at his disciples and hitting them with a stick, all of which have now become part of the stock images of Chan enlightenment.

Chan Buddhists are privy to the intellectual legacies of both Buddhist and pre-Buddhist indigenous Chinese traditions.[3] While Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist epistemologists, most famously Dignāna (*c.* 480–540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (*c.* 600–660 CE), advocate some versions of coherentism and foundationalism, later Chinese Buddhists, especially Chan Buddhists like Linji, favor virtue epistemology of sort, likely due to influence of the broader orientation of the indigenous Chinese intellectual tradition mentioned earlier. This chapter will examine a character trait valorized in Buddhism, namely detachment, and investigate its place within the Buddhist project of enlightenment by exploring its epistemic qualities, inspired by the contemporary discourse on virtue epistemology.

I will construe Linji's Chan epistemology as one that is primarily geared toward cultivating the epistemic virtue of detachment, constitutive of the enlightened knowledge in Buddhism. More specifically, I will make the case that detachment is both a reliabilist virtue and a trait virtue in Linji's Chan epistemology. The case will be made in two steps: first, I argue that detachment is reliabilist in nature by situating Linji's thought within the broader context of Buddhist epistemology; second, I make the case that detachment is a character trait keenly cultivated in Linji's approach to enlightenment. This section is devoted to the first step while the next section will deal with the second.

3.1 Root ignorance and attachment

The primary motivation for Buddhist philosophers is how to overcome ignorance or illusion as the cause of suffering. Due to the critical role of ignorance and illusion in the Buddhist project of enlightenment, the Buddhists have devoted a significant amount of effort to investigating the nature of illusion and its causes. In this respect, they are mainly interested in two kinds of illusions: those due to faulty cognitive faculty or deceptive circumstances and those due to imputation of substance/essence to cognitive objects (empirical or mental). These two kinds can overlap under certain conditions, but they are treated as distinct cases here. Between the two kinds of illusion, the first is

the more obvious one as it is very much part of our everyday experience, for example when we mistake something (e.g. a rope) for something else (e.g. a snake) in darkness or see something that is not out there, for example due to cataracts in the eyes. Although such illusions are not necessarily easy to deal with, they are relatively easy to understand. However, due to their supposed obviousness as an error—at least in theory, if not in practice—they are often employed as an analogy to make sense of the second kind of illusion, which is far more difficult to appreciate, let alone to overcome.

Philosophically, the Buddhists are much more invested in the second kind of illusion. This kind of illusion does not reject the existence of empirical objects. Rather, it challenges our naïve views about the way of their existence. That is, the apparent existence of empirical objects tricks most of us into believing that they are substantive and independent of conditions *at their core*. In this sense, empirical objects are rather deceptive because they appear to be substantive and really out there on their own, independent of the conditions that make them possible. For the Buddhists, empirical objects are *thoroughly* dependent on conditions and causes, and outside such conditions and causes there is nothing in and of the objects themselves by way of substance or essence that is irreducible to the conditions and causes. Substance and essence—which are by definition, according to the Buddhists, unconditioned, uncaused, and cannot be reduced to anything else—are in fact illusory since their substantive existence cannot be empirically verified from the Buddhist perspective. In fact, the unconditioned and changeless substance and essence are anti-empirical since change and impermanence define empirical reality.

This second kind of ignorance and illusion is what the Buddhists refer to as the root delusion or ignorance. As Dale Wright acutely observes: "Buddhists envision a systematic distortion that pervades all human understanding. Rather than establishing a framework for the discrimination of truth and falsity, Buddhists entertain the possibility that the frameworks we employ for the process of securing truth are themselves subject to the distorting impacts of desire and ignorance" (Wright 1998: 137). Root ignorance or illusion is such a systematic distortion of reality that is embedded in the way our cognitive apparatus is structured and habituated. For the Buddhists, the cause of root delusion or ignorance is the pernicious and ubiquitous attachment that permeates all of our cognitive activities. That is, we impute substance and essence to empirical objects through the mechanism of reification and attachment that is deeply entrenched in our cognitive apparatus.

Reification is the culprit that distorts our cognition of the world whereas enlightenment is understood as a qualitatively different cognitive state wherein things and events are perceived without distortion or illusion. However, overcoming such a deeply entrenched reification and attachment in our conceptual and linguistic apparatus is an extraordinarily challenging endeavor and cannot be accomplished by a simple act of will. As Jay Garfield observes:

Simply by resolving to abandon attachment one cannot thereby succeed in shedding it. It is difficult to accomplish this. Attachment arises as a consequence of the persistent, pervasive psychological, verbal, and physical habits that together constitute what Buddhist philosophers call the "root delusion," the ignorance of

the true nature of things. That delusion consists in confusing existence with inherent existence and issues inevitably in one of the two extreme views—reification or nihilism. Only through extensive meditation on the nature of phenomena and on the nature of emptiness can these habits be abandoned, and only through an understanding of the ultimate nature of things can the fruit of actions done through abandonment—that is, liberation from the suffering of cyclic existence—be attained.

<div align="right">Garfield 1995: 236–237</div>

In order to overcome such a systematic distortion of reification and attachment, the Buddhists propose a solution that trains our mind through vigorous meditation practices. It is through such vigorous meditation that a practitioner's cognitive competence can be enhanced, enabling her to "see things as they are."

3.2 Detachment and emptiness

"See things as they are," a famous Buddhist dictum, is to see all forms of existents as impermanent, dependently arisen, and non-substantive. These attributes would be coalesced later into the notion of emptiness in the hands of Mahāyāna Buddhists, which maintains that every existent in the world is empty of self-nature since it is *thoroughly* dependent on others such that there is nothing in and of itself outside of such dependency. The radical aspect of this vision has to do with the Buddhist recognition that there is a profound disconnect between the emptiness of the world (truth) and our engagement with it (knowledge) that is inevitably mediated by our conceptual, linguistic, and other cognitive apparatus that reify objects by endowing them with essence and substance.

If knowledge can be broadly understood as the way to obtain truth, for the Buddhists the apparatus or instrument of knowledge we use in navigating the world is inadequate in achieving the enlightened knowledge that leads to realization of emptiness, the ultimate truth in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This means that for the Buddhists there is a fundamental disconnect between the ultimate truth of the emptiness of the world and our knowledge apparatus that hinders our realization of that truth.

We should point out that the Buddhists are not skeptics or agnostics, at least not the radical kind, when it comes to knowledge. As Garfield points out, "there is a *sense* in which Buddhist epistemologists do want to undermine some of the pretensions of ordinary perceptual knowledge, but they do not want to reject the entire framework of everyday knowledge" (Garfield 2015: 218, original italics). Indeed, one of the challenges for the Buddhists is how to accommodate the everyday knowledge that is necessary for living in the world. Mahāyāna Buddhists often resort to what is known as the two-truth strategy, reserving the ultimate truth for the realization of emptiness and cognitive transparency while relegating truth in the everyday activity to the conventional realm.

For the Buddhists, everyday knowledge, in their concrete particularities, is provisional at best. As Garfield explains, as he unpacks the notion of "convention" in the Buddhist philosophical discourse,

for one thing . . . it depends upon our biology, our conceptual apparatus and our language. For another, it does not deliver reality in a way that withstands analysis, reality as it is independent of how we engage with it. Analysis reveals the properties we take ourselves to register to be mere imputations. And finally, in virtue of this, conception is always *deceptive*. While it is . . . an instrument of knowledge, it is a second-rate instrument, standing behind perception as a guide to reality, simply in virtue of always presenting itself as engaging with that which is not real.

<div style="text-align: right">Garfield 2015: 222</div>

This means that for the Buddhists the Gettier-type problems that have shaken up contemporary epistemology will never be solved satisfactorily since they are embedded in the very way our cognitive apparatus, our biology, and our habits operate. Furthermore, such problems are features of the world that is infinitely conditioned and ultimately out of our control, and as a result we can never really know the various possible layers of conditions of a given phenomenon. In this sense, the Buddhists are fallibilists when it comes to everyday or conventional knowledge. However, their attitude toward enlightened knowledge, which leads to the ultimate truth of emptiness, is different.

At this juncture we need to take note of the fact that ultimate truth, especially the one formulated by Mahāyāna Buddhists, has very little to do with what are often considered the "big questions" in the history of philosophy and religion. In one of the most famous Buddhist parables, the Buddha remains silent when asked to shed light on questions like whether the universe has a beginning or not, whether it is finite or infinite, what happens to the Buddha after his death, etc. The Buddha brushes aside such questions, using a poisonous arrow parable to illustrate the irrelevance of such questions to the pressing problem of suffering that is central to the Buddhist project. As the Buddha narrates it, if someone is hit by a poisonous arrow, the most pressing need is to get the arrow out of the body, instead of wondering about the person who makes the shot (what that person is dressed in, what class he belongs to, what motivates the shooting, etc.). This is a clear indication that the Buddhists are primarily interested in the kind of knowledge that leads to enlightenment and the overcoming of suffering, not speculative knowledge that does not advance such a goal.

3.3 Mind versus belief

What distinguishes the Buddhists from many contemporary philosophers in their epistemological effort is that the Buddhists locate the source of the deception within the structure and activities of the mind whereas many contemporary philosophers locate it outside, often under the guise of a deceptive Cartesian demon. Buddhist enlightened knowledge, what I have called a state of cognitive transparency (Jiang 2014), is free from the Gettier-type problems. Gettier-type problems pose a challenge to any claim of knowledge in a particular setting. Due to the intractable nature of circumstances, our seemingly justified true belief is not necessarily the equivalent of knowledge. However, the challenge posed by Gettier-type problems is not really a

problem for the Buddhists since what Gettier does is to simply add another layer of conditioning, often deceptive and unbeknown to the agent involved. This additional layer of conditioning and unpredictability, in any given particular circumstance, does in no way invalidate the emptiness of any object, whether it is empirically real or illusory.

Although contemporary philosophers are still trying to come up with effective ways to deal with the challenges posed by the Gettier problem, the Buddhists have long moved on since they are fundamentally uninterested in the particularity of the intractable, therefore deceptive, empirical reality. What interests them is the deception that is caused by the deluded and ignorant mind. For the Buddhists, the stake about the deceptive empirical world, due to its infinite conditionality, is not as high as the deceptive mind that prevents us from enlightenment.

This brings us to another critical distinction between Buddhist theory of knowledge and epistemological theories in contemporary analytic philosophy. That is, for the Mahāyāna Buddhists, knowledge is a mental episode (Stoltz 2007: 404), what I have called "cognitive transparency" (Jiang 2014), which presents the truth about the world, i.e. its emptiness; on the other hand, for most contemporary analytic philosophers knowledge is based on belief (JTB +) and is not a mental episode even though belief is. Furthermore, the separation between justification and truth at the heart of contemporary epistemology is hard for the Buddhists to accept. Even if the Buddhists can be persuaded about the usefulness of this separation in matters pertaining to the conventional or empirical realm, they would not accept it when it comes to enlightened knowledge about the emptiness of all forms of existences because such a separation would mean that there is always a possibility for divergence between truth and justification (Stoltz 2007: 397). For the Buddhists, the challenge about justification is not primarily due to the challenges posted by unpredictable circumstances, e.g. epistemic luck, but rather due to the root delusion or ignorance as we have discussed previously.

So what kind of knowledge can get the Buddhists to the truth of emptiness? In this respect, they primarily rely on penetrating cognitions achieved in deep meditative states as that knowledge. In other words, cognitive transparency achieved in deep meditative states is the enlightened knowledge that avails a Buddhist practitioner of the ultimate truth of emptiness. Detachment is a constitutive component of such a cognitive state. Given the perniciousness of reification in almost every aspect of our cognitive activities, overcoming attachment becomes the central task in the Buddhist enlightenment project since detachment is a requirement for the cognitive transparency that leads to the truth of emptiness for the Buddhists.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that while early Indian Buddhist epistemologists are primarily concerned with cultivating cognitive transparency, a meditative cognition that penetrates things-events in the realization of their thorough conditionality, there is a subtle but significant shift to the training of a character that cultivates the competence of detachment in the hands of Chinese Chan Buddhists. That is, whereas detachment is treated as concomitant with enlightened cognition in much of the Indian Buddhist tradition, later Chinese Buddhists like Linji regard it more as a character trait required for the embodiment of enlightened knowledge.

Therefore, in the second step of my argument I will make the case that detachment is a trait virtue, by looking into the aspect of detachment as a character trait portrayed in one of the most important Chan Buddhist texts, the *Linji lu*.

4 Detachment as a cultivated character trait in the *Linji lu*[4]

The problem with attachment in Buddhism is often framed in terms of its objects, i.e., the (illusion of) self, sensuous pleasures, views/dogmas, etc. The reasoning is that attachment to those objects leads to suffering, as the Buddha's Second Noble Truth points out. However, later Mahāyāna Buddhism has expanded the notion of attachment to the dualistic mechanism of subject/object structure in the apparatus of our everyday cognition. The element of grasping is added to the subject/object cognitive apparatus such that the everyday cognition is no longer merely cognitive, but also reifying. This "cognition + reification" characterizes the later Buddhist approach to cognition that problematizes the embedded reification component in the everyday cognitive activity. In this way, attachment is rearticulated as cognitive reification, not just an emotive (either positive or negative) investment in particular objects by a cognitive agent.

Mahāyāna Buddhism promotes the cultivation of what are known as the six perfections: generosity or alms-giving (*dāna* 布施), moral behaviors in accordance with Buddhist precepts (*śīla* 持戒), tolerance or forbearance (*kṣānti* 忍辱), energy or vigor (*vīrya* 精進), meditative absorption (*dhyāna* 禪定), and wisdom (*prajñā* 般若). Although detachment is not listed as one of the six perfections, it is considered a critical component of wisdom. So what is wisdom within the Buddhist tradition? For Mahāyāna Buddhists, wisdom refers to a specific kind of cognition, the enlightened cognition that is the realization of the empty and thoroughly dependent nature of all forms of existence and has the transformative power to overcome attachment understood to be the root cause of suffering in Buddhism. For the purpose of this chapter, it is critically important that detachment is regarded as constitutive of enlightened cognition or wisdom.

Much of the Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse can be understood as directed at overcoming the reification component of the everyday cognition within the cognitive structure described above. What distinguishes the approaches proposed by Chan Buddhists like Linji is that they shift the focus of the Buddhist enlightenment project from enlightened cognition to enlightened character. The central character trait cultivated and celebrated in Linji's Chan practice is the trait of detachment. Such a trait consists of three components: courage, confidence, and freedom. Let us take a closer look at how detachment is understood in the *Linji lu*.

4.1 The hurdles to enlightenment in the *Linji lu*

Linji calls an enlightened person "a true person with no rank or position" (*wuwei zhenren* 無位真人). This is someone who enjoys genuine spiritual freedom (*ziyou* 自由, 自在, *zizai* or 解脫 *jietuo*), unfettered by various traps in both the mundane (*fan* 凡) and sacred (*sheng* 聖) realms. In the *Linji lu*, such a true person is someone who

realizes the ultimate truth of emptiness.[5] My focus here is on what Linji considers to be the biggest challenge to enlightenment, namely, entrapments of a practitioner by *jing* 境.

Jing is usually translated as circumstances, surroundings, environment, or objects in the Buddhist context, but in the *Linji lu* it takes on an outsized role, becoming an almost all-inclusive term that encompasses any situation or object, both mundane and sacred, that ensnares a Chan practitioner and prevents one from attaining enlightenment. It can be divided into two broad categories: past and present. Past *jing* refers to karma; it points to the fact that we are the products of karma and continue to be conditioned by the past (Sasaki trans.: 12). Present *jing*, which is the focus of the text, refers to the psychophysical constituent of the human existence:

> The grosser part of you is at the mercy of [the four elements:] earth, water, fire, and wind; the subtler part of you is at the mercy of the four phases: birth, being, decay, and death. Followers of the Way, you must right now apprehend the state in which the four elements [and four phases] are formless, so that you may avoid being buffeted about by *jing*.
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> <div align="right">Sasaki trans.: 14, with modifications</div>

The four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind are the traditional categories in the Buddhist discourse on the physical world. Here they refer to the constituents of the human body as well as its biological stages from birth to death. In the next passage, Linji expands the four elements to encapsulate mental activities by correlating them with specific mental phenomena: doubt with earth, lust with water, anger with fire, and joy with wind (Sasaki trans.: 14–15). The four elements are expanded to include both the physical and the psychological constituents of human beings. Therefore, *jing* in the *Linji lu* refers to both bodily and mental aspects of human existence. To overcome the entanglement by the four elements, a practitioner should strive to see their formlessness, synonymous with the famous Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness that points to the insubstantiality and the thoroughly conditioned nature of all existence, including human existence.

A more serious hurdle problematized in the *Linji lu* pertains to various forms of spiritual attachment in a Chan practitioner's practices, i.e. scriptural studies and meditation. With regards to scriptural studies, to be a Chan Buddhist obviously requires one to follow the examples set by the Buddha and the patriarchs as well as their teachings. However, those Buddhist icons and ideals can themselves be reified and become objects of attachment. From Linji's perspective, committed Chan followers can become slavish to Chan teachings, which is antithetical to the Buddhist project of enlightenment. Linji dismisses reified Buddhist teachings as "the words of some dead old guy" (Sasaki trans.: 27) and ridicules those who are attached to them as "blind idiots" (ibid.). Clearly, for Linji, rote learning and scholastic deftness are inadequate as far as achieving enlightenment is concerned. The cognitive and discursive approach to Buddhist teachings reifies those teachings by turning them into objects to be studied and memorized. Learning in such a fashion might enable a practitioner to engage in sophisticated conceptual games, but those games can become obstacles to reaching

enlightenment if one is attached to them. Overcoming such an attachment requires cultivating a strong character of detachment.

4.2 Cultivating the character of detachment

According to Linji, the key to overcoming such hurdles to enlightenment is to cultivate a strong character of detachment that can withstand our emotional volatility and to train one's mind to be so agile and detached that it is not ensnared in any state associated with the four elements or attached to revered Buddhist icons. A practitioner with a strong character and a nimble mind is a person of freedom—free to go or stay as one pleases—who does not reify or attach to any of those states and is in the state of formlessness (無相境). Linji devotes much of his teaching to training his disciples how to act spontaneously, rather than how to think things through. For Linji enlightenment is more than enlightened cognition. Rather, it requires an enlightened character of detachment, marked by courage, confidence, and freedom. An enlightened character is one that spontaneously manifests itself in a Chan practitioner's engagement with the world, especially under challenging circumstances.

Such a singular focus on the practitioners' character is also evident in Linji's teaching on meditation. The practice of meditation is widely recognized as being central to the Chan project of enlightenment. However, as Linji sees it, the misunderstanding of meditation is rampant among Chan practitioners. Accordingly, many people mistake all the prescribed postures of the seated meditation—sitting down cross-legged with one's back against a wall, tongue glued to the roof of one's mouth, completely still and motionless—as the quintessential practice of Chan. He dismisses all of them as misguided as they direct practitioners toward obsessing over the external form (Sasaki trans.: 24–25). For him, Chan practice is about transforming a practitioner's character, not the particular bodily posture or meditation-induced visions. Linji's emphasis on the cultivation of a set of forceful character traits through meditation is an interesting contrast with the traditional Buddhist teaching that focuses more on the cognitive aspect.

Focusing on the cognitive dimension of meditation in one's Chan practice, for Linji, can easily lead to the reification of various kinds of meditation-induced visions. Linji sternly warns Chan practitioners of the grave danger posed by various meditation-induced hallucinations (S. *māra*; C.魔). In certain advanced meditative states, a practitioner can sometimes have a powerful experience of catching a glimpse of Buddhist icons like the Buddha or Chan patriarchs. Given the intensely meaning-charged nature of these icons for a Chan Buddhist, a practitioner can easily mistake such experiences in a meditative state as signs of enlightenment whereas they are actually manifestations of subtler reification and attachment at a more advanced level of the spiritual journey.

Clearly, the extraordinarily demanding nature of Chan meditation practice means that it is not for those with a weak character of attachment and slavishness since they can be easily seduced and misled by certain images seen in meditation, especially those of the Buddha or Chan patriarchs, whereas all images should be dismissed as *māra*. This is critical in cultivating detachment to Buddhist icons that is at the heart of Linji's

teaching against attachment to Buddhist icons and images, a particularly potent kind of attachment for a committed Chan follower:

> Someone asked, "What is Buddha-*māra*?"
>
> The master said, "One thought of doubt in your mind is *māra*. But if you realize that the ten thousand *fa*s never come into being, that mind is like a phantom, that not a speck of dust nor a single thing exists, that there is no place that is not clean and pure—this is Buddha. Thus Buddha and *māra* are simply two states, one pure, the other impure.
>
> "In my view there is no Buddha, no sentient beings, no past, no present. Anything attained was already attained—no time is needed. There is nothing to practice, nothing to realize, nothing to gain, nothing to lose. Throughout all time there is no other *fa* than this. 'If one claims there's a *fa* surpassing this,' I say that it's like a dream, like a phantasm." This is all I have to teach.
>
> <div align="right">Sasaki trans.: 12–13, with modifications</div>

Interestingly, Linji appears to take two conflicting positions on the relationship between Buddha and *māra* here. In the first paragraph Linji characterizes the Buddha and the demon (*māra*) as two states of mind, pure and impure, respectively. On the other hand, he dismisses even the Buddha and argues that all is empty in the second paragraph. One way to account for the apparent inconsistency is, following Nāgārjuna's famous teaching of two truths (二諦) widely known to Chinese Buddhists, that the first passage explains Buddha versus *māra* from the conventional perspective which separates the Buddha from *māra*, whereas the second passage explains it from the ultimate perspective since both Buddha and *māra* are conventional constructs (all constructs are conventional) and are ultimately empty. In other words, any image experienced in meditative state is *māra* and only imagelessness and formlessness is the state of enlightenment wherein all reifications, gross and subtle, are overcome.

Such an interpretation is consistent with Linji's advice to cut off representations of enlightenment, i.e. the Buddha, the patriarchs, and arhats, as well as objects of mundane affection, i.e. parents and kinsmen. The following signature passage cements Linji as the ultimate iconoclast in the Buddhist tradition:

> Followers of the Way, if you want insight into *fa* as it is, just don't be taken in by the deluded views of others. Whatever you encounter, either within or without, slay it at once. On meeting a buddha slay the buddha, on meeting a patriarch slay the patriarch, on meeting an arhat slay the arhat, on meeting your parents slay your parents, on meeting your kinsman slay your kinsman, and you attain emancipation. By not cleaving to things, you freely pass through.
>
> <div align="right">Sasaki trans.: 22, with modifications</div>

In other words, attachments to both mundane and spiritual objects need to be overcome in order to attain enlightenment promised in Linji's Chan teachings. Given the centrality of meditation in Chan practice, misunderstanding meditative experiences is an easy trap to fall into. It is critically important for Chan practitioners to be

unwavering and resolute in the recognition that true enlightenment is formless and cannot be reified or attached to: "true buddha has no figure, true *fa* has no form" (Sasaki trans., 20, with modifications). The rather violent rhetoric in the above passage is obviously not to be taken literally, but should be taken as reflective of Linji's wariness of the seductiveness of meditation-induced hallucinations that can be easily reified and clung to as signs of enlightenment as well as his clear-eyed awareness of the challenge in cultivating the trait of detachment. As I have argued elsewhere:

> What is central to Linji's teaching is that true awakening is to transform this very *structure* of attachment, not just to substitute one set of attached objects for another. An attachment to "spiritual" objects does not, ultimately speaking, make the attachment better, since what is changed is simply the object of attachment while the underlying structure of attachment remains firmly entrenched and intact. Much of Linji's teaching, as recorded in the *Linji Lu*, is geared toward helping his devout disciples to transform this structure of attachment.
>
> Jiang 2011: 259

To overcome attachment to spiritual ideals and to transform the underlying structure of attachment have to be extraordinarily difficult for Buddhist practitioners since those Buddhist icons and ideals represent the very fabric and structure of the Buddhist spiritual universe that gives meaning to the Buddhist practices. Therefore, to transcend a practitioner's spiritual attachment and mundane affection requires a strong trait of detachment that can persevere in the course of the inevitably traumatic spiritual transformation, analogous to the overturning of one's world: "Heaven and earth could turn upside down and he wouldn't have a doubt; the buddhas of the ten directions could appear before him and he wouldn't feel an instant of joy; the three hells could suddenly yawn at his feet and he wouldn't feel an instant of fear" (Sasaki trans.: 20). Here Linji is pointing out that Chan practices are riddled with terrifying as well as seductive experiences wherein one's established sense of self and the world would be turned upside down. A strong character of detachment can provide a secure anchor for a practitioner to explore perilous aspects of spiritual practices that are unavoidable in one's spiritual journey. Clearly, the enlightened trait of detachment, characterized by courage, confidence, and freedom, is at the heart of Linji's project of enlightenment.

5 Conclusion: detachment as a trait-reliabilist virtue

In this chapter, I have used Sosa's virtue epistemology and the debate between virtue reliabilists and virtue responsibilists on epistemic virtues to frame an inquiry of a characteristically Buddhist trait, namely detachment, especially as it is portrayed in the *Linji lu*. I have argued that detachment can be fruitfully understood as a *trait*-virtue that is *constitutive* of the enlightened knowledge in Buddhism, leading to the realization of the truth of emptiness about all forms of existence. As such, detachment is both a reliabilist virtue, in that it is constitutive of enlightened knowledge that leads to the

ultimate truth of emptiness, and a responsibilist virtue, in that it is not a faculty virtue but a trait virtue, encapsulating the components of courage, confidence, and freedom, that needs to be cultivated and vigorously trained in Buddhist practices.

If my interpretation of the Buddhist detachment is plausible, it can provide a useful example of a trait-virtue that is reliabilist in nature, therefore blurring the line sharply drawn between reliabilist faculty-virtues versus responsibilist trait-virtues in the contemporary discourse on virtue epistemology.

Notes

1   Sosa often uses the example of driving to explain the SSS structure of competence:

> "[A] complete competence can be broken down into three components: the relevant Skill, Shape, and Situation. Consider such SSS competences, our concepts of these, and the induced SS and S correlates. Take, for example, our complete driving competence on a certain occasion, including (a) our basic driving skill (retained even when we sleep), along with (b) the shape we are in at the time (awake, sober, and so on), and (c) our situation (seated at the wheel, on a dry road, and so on). Drop the situation and you still have an inner SS competence. Drop both shape and situation and you still have an innermost S competence" (Sosa 2017: 131).

2   Sosa often uses archery as an example to illustrate the AAA structure: "A shot is *accurate* iff it hits the target. It is *adroit* iff it is an exercise of competence. It is *apt* iff it is accurate because adroit" (Sosa 2017: 72, Sosa's italics).

3   To what extent Chinese Buddhists were exposed to works by Indian Buddhist epistemologists is a complicated historical question that we cannot get into here. I am only claiming in this chapter that Chinese Buddhists were at least privy to the general contours of scholastic debates in India, including works by epistemologists like Dignāna, whose *opus*, *Pramāṇa-samuccaya* 集量論, was translated into Chinese in 711 by Yi Jing 義淨 but was supposedly lost rather quickly. More recent scholarship has started to demonstrate that important epistemological works were produced by Chinese Buddhists, which show striking similarities as well as intriguing differences with their Indian predecessors. Given the intended readership of this chapter and this book, I will not get into those fascinating but complicated historical questions.

4   My following discussion on Linji has utilized materials from an earlier article of mine, "Character Is the Way: The Path to Spiritual Freedom in the *Linji Lu*" (Jiang 2018), adapted for the current chapter.

5   Interested readers can refer to my 2014 article for a detailed discussion of emptiness (Jiang 2014): "Incommensurability of Two Conceptions of Reality: Dependent Origination and Emptiness in Nāgārjuna's *MMK*," in *Philosophy East & West* 64(1): 25–48.

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