

“Guiding to the Truth”:

A Comparison of the Concept of Self-Nature in the Platform Sūtra and the Spirit in the Johannine Farewell Discourses

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1. Introduction

The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch (The Platform Sūtra hereafter) is the most profound and representative scripture of Chinese Buddhism, and is the only one “Sūtra”¹ recorded teaching from a Chinese monk, namely Huineng (638-713 CE).² And therefore, it is often seen as the symbol of the completion of sinicised Buddhism under Chinese culture. It has successfully localised the complex Buddhist practice of multi-stage enlightenment into Chinese society, by promoting the experience and awareness of the self-nature (*zixing* 自性; literally “the essence in one’s own mind”, which refers to the separate unchangeable and untransformed nature inside everything). Such religious thought and methods made Chan quickly accepted by the indigenous society at that time, and gradually established a unique “Southern School”, which is an important milestone of the localisation of Buddhism in China.

On the other hand, Andreas Köstenberger once stated that, “John’s Gospel, together with the Book of Romans, may well be considered the enduring ‘twin towers’ of NT theology.”³ Matthew, Mark and Luke are considered the “Synoptic Gospels”, John has a rather different Christology, especially on affirmations of Jesus’ deity and of his human and divine natures. John is much more spiritual and informed by Greek philosophy for the concepts of unity with God and returning to God are highlighted. One of the most distinctive teachings of John apart from the Synoptics is Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit, also described as the Spirit of Truth (4:23-24; 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; cf. 1 John 4:6). In the text, Jesus provides a new promise of salvation, whereby the worship of the Father relies not on a specific geographical location like “God’s kingdom” but on the gift of the Spirit.⁴ Clement of Alexandria used the term “spiritual Gospel” to call John, for its inner meaning behind the reality and events, therefore, its truth must be spiritually discerned.

From this perspective, both Scriptures have revolutionary changes towards their theology. The

¹ Generally, Sūtra in Buddhism refers to the records of the oral teachings of Gautama Buddha.

² There are two versions of the Platform Sūtra recorded in the *tripitaka* collection: one is the earliest version discovered, namely Dunhuang version (c. 780 CE), and the other is the canonical Zongbao version (c. 1291 CE), which are recorded as n. 2007 and 2008 in the collection. This study will reference the Zongbao version as the main text, for it is more comprehensive and detailed in its eschatology.

³ Andreas Köstenberger, *John* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 1.

⁴ C.K. Barrett asserts that John 4:23 should be seen as the core goal of the writing of the Gospel, see Marianne Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 189-90.

reason I call them “revolutionary” is because both texts have necessarily bent historical fact for the sake of theological expediency, in purposes of indicating a direct way of worship and strengthen the faith of their followers. Moreover, their spiritual content all played a ground-breaking role in their respective religious developments in later history. Nowadays, one reason that blocks the conversation between religions is people’s attachment on the formalism and dogmatism in their belief. These two Scriptures – comparing to the previous doctrinal texts of their religion – pay more attention to the intrinsic and spiritual value of their own religion, emphasising inner experience and practicality rather than external speculation and expression, and hence, they have broken the tedious dogma with a clearer expression of faith.

A religion is consisted of four main categories – its doctrine, system, tradition and experience. Among them, religious experience is the most essential to maintain one’s faith. If we want more efficient communications between different faiths, it is necessary for every religious community to realise the commonalities in various types of religious experience. Previous Buddhist-Christian studies mostly focus on the differences between religious traditions and rituals, however, traditions and precepts can be viewed as expressions and the result of regional culture and that underneath they may share similar experience that would encourage interpreters to discuss. Wayne Teasdale stated that this *interspiritual* studies is found everywhere of this historic emergence in humanity’s consciousness, fundamentalism and tribalism.⁵ Some others have compared the link between the kenotic-Spirit-Christology and Buddhist autonomous selfhood, or discussed the similarities from a pneumatological aspect, but still was too broad to discuss in details.⁶ If the divinity of Jesus Christ points to God’s salvific intents which determined the soteriology of Christianity, then due to the absence of Jesus this is resisted and retarded. Specially, this paper provides Christians an opportunity to compare another *interspiritual* understanding from Buddhist philosophy. Hence, this paper will compare the spiritual content that relates to religious practice – the self-nature and the Holy Spirit – from the Platform Sūtra and the Gospel of John. Although it is difficult to find evidence of impact in terms of time of writing and location of the two Scriptures, it is more attractive that they share very similar content on human subjectivity and individual worship through the internal expression. Hopefully, this paper will support the possibility of Christian learning through a dialogue with Chan understanding of self-nature, understand as fresh learning through the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

2. The Uniqueness of Self-Nature

The importance of self-nature is shown in the Sutra by being placed right after the story of Huineng’s awakening: when the Fifth Patriarch Hongren called Huineng to his place and explained the Diamond Sūtra to him; Huineng was immediately enlightened after hearing it only once. Huineng then identified five characteristics to self-nature⁷: 1) It is originally self-purified, which means that the self-nature is pure and unpolluted; 2) it is neither produced nor destroyed, but an eternal essence that is beyond the cycle of life and death; 3) it is “completed”, which means that the self-nature

⁵ See Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions* (Novato: New World Library, 2001).

⁶ See Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 94.

⁷ T48, N.2008, 349a.

includes everything in itself, and Huineng further explains that “all the Buddhas of the three periods of time, and the twelve divisions of Sūtra texts as well, exist within the nature of people, originally complete within them”⁸; 4) it is without movement, which means that self-nature is undisturbed and peaceful; 5) it produces myriad principles. There are two relevant definitions: one is that the myriad principles are originally false, and they were created under the arising of dualistic thoughts from self-nature; the other is that the self-nature is clean as a mirror and that it reflects myriad things. I will briefly explain the first and the fifth feature based on the “threefold bodies (*trikāya*)” doctrine in the following section. The *trikāya* teaching is a key structural doctrine of Buddhism, which the *trikāya* represent the essence, form, and use of everything. In the Platform Sūtra, all three bodies are the manifestation of the self-nature, which its purity and creation of thoughts function as the essence and the form.

- **The “*trikāya*” of self-nature**

Trikāya doctrine is a theory from original Mahayana Buddhism, which presents the essence of reality and the Buddha. The theory declares that a Buddha has three different bodies, which are: 1) *Dharmakāya* (the truth-body), the unmanifested essence of truth and the Buddha-nature; 2) *Samṃbhogakāya* (the reward-body), normally with reference to the manifestations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in enlightened and completed forms; 3) *nirmāṇakāya* (the physical body), the incarnation of Buddhas or created body which manifests in time and space. The Platform Sūtra reinterprets the threefold body doctrine from the perspective of self-nature and does so on the basis of earlier doctrinal ideas:

“The threefold bodies of the Buddha exist within the self-nature of worldly people, but because they are confused, they do not see the nature within them and so seek the three bodies of the *Tathagata* outside themselves. They do not see that the three bodies of the Buddha are within their own bodies.”⁹

The threefold bodies are originally inside one’s self-nature: the clear, pure truth-body, which is the essence of self-nature; the perfect body with full of joy, which is the wisdom of self-nature; and the myriad transformation bodies, which are the conduct of self-nature.¹⁰ The relation between the three bodies, according to the Platform Sūtra, is that “[One] originally has the truth-body, [when] the phenomena arise from the self-nature, one will see them, that is the reward-body of the Buddha. [And they] awake and practice based on their own virtues, that is the physical-body of the Buddha.”¹¹ This can be described as the Buddhist Trinity doctrine: the *trikāya* are originally the same thing but can be seen from three perspectives. Originally, this is seen as three different aspects in the worshipping of the Buddha, however the Platform Sūtra views all three forms are all from the self-nature, but just shown in different processes:

“In my own physical body, I take refuge in the pure *dharmakāya* buddha.

⁸ *Ibid*, 351a.

⁹ *Ibid*, 354b.

¹⁰ Cf. T48, N.2008, 356a.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 354c.

In my own physical body, I take refuge in the perfect and complete *saṃbhogakāya* buddha.
In my own physical body, I take refuge in the thousand billion *nirmāṇakāya* buddhas.”¹²

Therefore, no matter which body that people worship of the transcendent Buddha, they are all embodied by the self-nature. The so-called “taking refuge” to the threefold body of the Buddha is to take refuge to their own nature. In order to understand the divinity that self-nature demonstrates, I will mainly focus on the purity of the self-nature as its essence, and its function of creating all forms of principles.

- **The purity of self-nature**

In the text it is claimed that the self-nature is originally “self-purified” and unpolluted. Because sentient beings have lost their self and are attached to the outer forms, they cannot see their true essence. The Platform Sūtra uses the metaphor of the sun and the moon covered by clouds to state that the truth is hard to reveal. However, when the wind blows the clouds away, the sun and the moon will appear again to the world.¹³ The Platform Sūtra records that when Huiming asked Huineng for the *dharma*, the latter replied: “With no thoughts of good and with no thoughts of evil, at just this moment, what is Superior One Huiming’s original face?”. Huiming was immediately awakened.¹⁴ The “original face” here refers to the self-nature of all beings. The Platform Sūtra deems that all beings are entangled and are obsessed with judging good and evil sides, which causes them to fail to see their pure self-nature. “Self-purified” is highlighted in the first few verses in the Platform Sūtra and also in the first chapter,¹⁵ indicating that once people realise and return to the purity of their self-nature, they will be able to gain enlightenment.

Prajñā is the highest figure in the Platform Sūtra and is praised in the text as follows:

“*Mahāprajñāpāramitā* is the most honoured, the supreme, the primary. It is without abiding [in the present], without going [into the past], and without coming [from the future]. It is from this that all the buddhas of the three periods of time emerge.”¹⁶

However, early *prajñā* studies teach that the five aggregates are all empty;¹⁷ since our self-nature is originally empty, so are all existing external forms.¹⁸ Here, form refers to a material phenomenon in the outer world. The Platform Sūtra talks about the emptiness feature of the self-nature. For example, it says:

¹² *Ibid*, 354b.

¹³ *Ibid*, 352b.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 349b. Most quoted translation of the Platform Sutra are adapted from John R. McRae, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Bdk English Tripitaka Translation Series, 2000).

¹⁵ cf. T48, N.2008, 347c28; 349a19; 351a11-12.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 350b.

¹⁷ The five aggregates are: form, feelings, perceptions, mental thoughts, and consciousness. See Andrew Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Windhorse, 2004), 91-92; Shi Huifeng, *Dependent Origination = Emptiness*—*Nāgārjuna’s Innovation? An Examination of the Early and Mainstream Sectarian Textual Sources*, 36.

¹⁸ “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form”, in the Heart Sūtra.

“The capacity of the mind is vast and great like empty space, and has no boundaries. It is not square or round, great or small... All Buddha-lands are ultimately the same as empty space. The wonderful nature of worldly people is originally empty, and there is not a single *dharma* which can be obtained. The true emptiness of the self-nature is also like this.”¹⁹

“The emptiness of the universe is able to contain the forms and shapes of the myriad things: the sun, moon, and stars; the mountains, rivers, and the great earth; the fountains, springs, streams, torrents, grasses, trees, thickets, and forests; good and evil people, good and evil *dharma*s, the heavens and the hells, all the great seas, *Sumeru*²⁰ and all mountains are all contained within emptiness. The emptiness of the self-nature among worldwide people is also like this.”²¹

The above text metaphors the capacity of the self-nature to the non-boundary void. The Platform Sūtra emphasises that the mind contains everything, and that all the *dharma*s are arisen from the mind (*xin* 心, literally: heart). It makes emptiness subjective towards human nature. The emptiness of self-nature in the Platform Sūtra is limited to a specific entity, i.e. the inner self of beings, rather than an abstract outer form or figure.

- **Self-nature contains and reflects all the *dharma*s**

In the debate between Huineng and Shenxiu in the qualification of the Sixth Patriarch, Shenxiu offers a stanza which compares the Mind to a mirror, which needs to be wiped often to prevent dirt. Huineng’s stanza, on the other hand, argues that if the mind is the mirror, it should originally be pure and without dirt.²² Both agree that the self-nature is like the mirror that reflects everything while itself has nothing inside. In the Sūtra it defines this characteristic as follows: “The ability of one’s own nature to contain the ten thousand *dharma*s is what is meant by ‘great’. The myriad *dharma*s are within the nature of all people”. This feature is named as “storehouse consciousness” in later chapters.²³ The “storehouse” here is mainly understood in terms of cognition. The storehouse function of self-nature is that all beings can recognise everything in the universe and attain Buddhahood.

Nevertheless, the purity and rise of myriad *dharma*s are not contradicted in describing the self-nature; it demonstrates the “Middle Way” ideology of Buddhism. If purity refers to the emptiness, which is non-existent, then the rise of *dharma* refers to the dependent origination, which does exist. If there is no self-nature, there is no existing *dharma*. Even when all thoughts and phenomena are created from self-nature, the self-nature itself is not attached to any of the result and hence no judgement is made; the self-nature will not be polluted and maintains its purity.

¹⁹ T48, N.2008, 350a.

²⁰ In Buddhist cosmology, *Sumeru* is the centre of the world, the highest mountain of all.

²¹ T48, N.2008, 350a-b.

²² This is from the Dunhuang version, in the later text the mirror metaphor of self-nature by Huineng was transformed into emptiness where “There was originally nothing.” cf. T48, N.2007, 337c-338a.

²³ cf. T48, N.2008, 360b.

We have identified the core and the use of the self-nature in early Chan Buddhism, in the next section we will look at the expression of the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel and its importance towards Johannine Christianity.

3. The Function and Significance of the Spirit in John

The first time for Jesus to mention the Spirit in the Farewell Discourse is in 14:16-18, where he asks the Father to give "another Paraclete" or "Advocate" (cf. NRSV) to abide him in the disciples forever. The word "another" indicates that Jesus himself is the first Paraclete or Advocate, and that the Spirit therefore shares some of the same functions as he fulfils. Hence Jesus, through the Spirit, is made present in the post-Easter period. When the Johannine Jesus consoles his disciples with the words "I will not leave them as orphans" and "I will come to you" (John 14:18), he is referring to his indwelling with them through the coming of the Spirit rather than his post-resurrection appearances or coming at the end time (cf. 14:3). This is especially the case when he notes that the Father and Jesus "will come to them [the disciples] and make our home with them" (v. 23). Therefore, this reinterpretation of the presence of Jesus offers another subtle insight into how the receiving of the Holy Spirit is the most important gift in the post-resurrection period; Jesus' resurrection and his abiding in and through the Spirit are mutually interpretative.²⁴

In 14:26 Jesus mentions the Spirit again, where it is called "the Holy Spirit" for the first time (and in 20:22). The word "holy" embodies the notion that this coming "Advocate" represents the Spirit of God. This descriptive word, 'holy' reflects the purity of life, thought and conduct.²⁵ The dwelling of the Spirit in believers not only strengthens their conviction of faith, even when they are persecuted or rejected by the world (15:18-21). Hence, the body of believers becomes the house of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus who received the Spirit and spoke what the God wants to say. In this case, Jesus and believers will be in a mutually abiding relationship, and reach the unified status that Jesus demands of them in order for them to be with him.

The main functions of the Spirit in the Johannine Farewell Discourses include four aspects:

- **Consolation** – The word *paraklêtos* in secular Greek involves a person who takes care of others, which could be rendered as an act of "comforting". In the Gospel of John the disciples are in fear and sadness that their teacher is about to leave them. Thus Jesus guarantees them of the coming of "another Advocate" who will be like his substitute, to continue his teaching and his mission works without depending on Jesus' bodily presence. The disciples will be less traumatised by the death of Jesus. This function may seem to be only reassured to the disciples who have seen Jesus face to face,²⁶ but could also offer a similar comfort to those among an isolated community.

²⁴ R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2nd version, 1982), 646.

²⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14-17* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), 71.

²⁶ Carson, *Farewell Discourse*, 72.

- **Teaching and reminding** – Jesus also clearly states the functions of the coming Spirit. It “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:26b). Because it is the Spirit of *Truth*, what it teaches is the truth, and by “everything”(*panta*) it reveals *all* the earthly and heavenly mysteries to the disciples.²⁷ It may not be able to cause them to gain knowledge on a new revelation that they did not know before; but it elucidates everything that confused them during Jesus’ earthly life and leads them to understand the meaning of the revelation brought by Jesus. Alternatively speaking, it unlocks revelation and transforms it from being accessible in the future to the present, to the lifetime of the disciples. Most importantly, its fundamental function is to remind the disciples about the teachings that Jesus has previously given them. Bultmann notes that teaching and reminding are not separate acts but refer to the same function of the Spirit. Moreover, the Paraclete will enable the disciples to understand the full meaning of Jesus’ teaching, which they did not understand when it was first uttered to them.²⁸ The dialogues in John often involve a misunderstanding of Jesus’ words; even his own disciples are not able to understand him. However, through the work of the Paraclete they will be able to recall what Jesus revealed to them. Such an example is the temple episode when Jesus says to ‘the Jews’: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). The narrator then comments: “he was speaking of the temple of his body” (2:21). He later adds: “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (2:22), and this to prove that the Spirit’s power to display the truth plainly behind Jesus’ narrative.

In the Farewell Discourses, Jesus does not clearly refer to his future resurrection; his disciples neither see the parousia of their teacher, nor foresee their future as a worldwide religious community. They may only take the surface meanings of Jesus’ expression as their present consolation (cf. 16:29-30), but when they receive the Paraclete it will help them remember his past teaching and unfold new understanding of its true significance. They will believe that what Jesus has said will even guide them in their own future circumstances (cf. 14:29).

- **Guiding** – The Paraclete will not only recall the disciples’ memories of Jesus, but will also help them deal with their own life events. However, the Paraclete does not have its own actions independent of Jesus or God; it “will speak whatever he hears” (16:13) in that it reflects Jesus’ prophetic words to them. It is the “successor” and “witness” of Jesus’ works (15:26), and by breathing the Spirit into the disciples they will be able to testify the truth as Jesus has already done (cf. 18:37). In short, the Paraclete will take over Jesus’ missionary role in this world through parting with the disciples. Hence both become witnesses to Jesus’ glorification (cf. also Acts 3:13-15).²⁹

- **Strengthening belief** – The action of promising the Paraclete, and even the whole speech of Jesus in the Farewell Discourses, embodies a strong message of believing in his words and actions. John brings out a potentiality for his community will be lasting for some time; he clearly wants to build a way of worshipping and practice for the ongoing community. The Paraclete also has another work, namely “convicting” the world for its sins because of their attitude of unbelief and views on righteousness (16:8). Those who does not accept Jesus’ teaching and believe in his works will not

²⁷ John Ashton, *Understanding John* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 310.

²⁸ Brown, *John*, 650.

²⁹ Andrew Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John* (NY: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2006), 394-95.

gain salvation and will be convicted by the Paraclete.

However, John is known for its ironic statements,³⁰ so frequently that its irony is even applied to the concept to discipleship.³¹ According to Carson, the verb 'to believe' (πιστεύω) in John also points to the people who do not believe in Jesus (cf. 2:23-25).³² If the boundary between belief and unbelief has become blurred in John, then due to the blurry standard, how can we judge the duality between righteousness and evil? Nevertheless, Scripture itself has emphasised several occasions where the Jews and Pharisees have seen Jesus' miracles (cf. 2:13-22; 5:16) but refused to confess or believe him, or have even wanted to kill him (7:19). The evil ones here would not just simply refer to people who do not believe in Jesus; but includes more emphasis on those who have heard the words of Jesus and still display hatred. Such false attitudes of unbelief must be judged by the Holy Spirit.

4. Comparison and discussion on the Texts

We have identified the main features of the self-nature and the Spirit; they are both a kind of essential strength that display the divine power, in order to help believers to reach their salvation. From the previous chapter, it can be discovered that they share many commonalities such as both being peaceful and pure, and they both offer the work of teaching and leading people to "be born again from heaven." This section will discuss the similarities and differences lie between the theologies of the two texts, on themes of their forms of the ultimate truth and the purpose of unity within their soteriology.

4.1 Inner and outer "paradise"

Chan Buddhism promotes the practice of "illuminating the Mind and seeing nature" to attain Buddhahood; this has created an easy way in comparison with previous Buddhist practical studies on different levels of enlightenment and complicated scriptures and rules. The ease of Chan Buddhism in this respect is credited to the practice of mindful enlightenment of oneness, namely that one's self-nature is the Buddha and that there is no Buddha to search outside one's internal nature. Such idealism has caused dissatisfaction among the followers of another major Buddhist sect in China, namely the Pure Land School which seeks for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This section will not focus too much on the debate between Chan and Pure Land in medieval China; nevertheless, due to similarities between the beliefs of Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity, some Pure Land terms which I found useful for my comparisons will be used in the following discussion.

In Mahayana Buddhism the Western Paradise (skt. *Sukhāvatī*, literally "ultimate bliss") is a paradise-like place that is also promoted by Pure Land Buddhism. According to the Sūtra of Immeasurable Life, the joyful Buddhaland is located in a billion Buddha-lands west of our current

³⁰ Cf. D. W. Wead, *The Literary Devices in John's Gospel* (Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1970), 47-68.

³¹ Wead, *The Literary Devices*, 66-68.

³² D.A. Carson, 'The Function of the Paraclete in John 16:7-11', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98-4 (1979), 559.

world, and there governs a Buddha called Amitabha.³³ All the sufferings in this world will disappear once one reaches that land, and those sufferings will never arise again; in this “ultimate bliss” buddha-land, the joy is of constant and pure joy of enlightenment rather than the impermanent happiness that will eventually disappear.

In the Platform Sūtra, a Magistrate asks Huineng how he views the believers of Pure Land’s liberative practice by reciting Amitabha’s name and wishing for rebirth in the Western Paradise. Huineng first answers the question by commenting on the distance, saying that the Land is “as far distant for those of inferior roots and as nearby for those of superior wisdom”.³⁴ This implies that the description of the Land is only for people who do not understand the true meaning of enlightenment. He further states:

“There are two kinds of people, not two kinds of *dharma*. Although deluded and enlightened [people] are different, [it is only that] there is slow and fast in seeing. The deluded person recites the Buddha’s [name] and seeks for rebirth in that other [location], while the enlightened person purifies his mind. Therefore the Buddha said, ‘As the mind is purified, so is the buddhaland purified.’³⁵”

“... Deluded people do not understand their self-natures and do not know that the Pure Land is within themselves. Thus, they make wishes for the East and wishes for the West. To enlightened people, all places are the same.”³⁶

After answering this question, Huineng makes an interesting interaction:

The Sixth Patriarch said, “Huineng and you all can move to the West in an instant, so that you may see it right before your eyes. Do you wish to witness it?”

The entire assembly bowed and said, “If [we] could see it here, why should [we] wish to be reborn [there]? [We] ask the Master in your compassion to make the Western Land appear, [that will be] great kindness!”

The Master said, “At this time you have just seen the West. If [you have] no doubts, [we] can disperse now.”

All audience were startled and did not know what happened.³⁷

The interaction of disciples asking for showing the scene of the Ultimate, and the Master reacted with an abstract demonstration of showing a co-existence of truth and himself is reminiscent of John 14:7-11: Philip asks Jesus to “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” (14:8) Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father

³³ There were two kinds of Pure Land worship in medieval China. One is with Buddha Amitabha, and the other is with Buddha Matreya, a “messianic” figure in Buddhism who will save all beings when he reincarnates into this world. However, the West Land worship used here only refers to the belief in Buddha Amitabha.

³⁴ T48, N.2008, 352a.

³⁵ Cf. Vimarakirti Sūtra, T14N475, 538c.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 352a-b.

³⁷ T48, N.2007, 341b.

and the Father is in me?” (14:9-10a).

What makes those religious teachers provide the same answer? God is already revealed in and through Jesus’ physical presence, and through his words and actions. Christian theologians regard this statement as proof of Jesus’ divine intimacy with the God, that he is the incarnation and revelation of God (cf. John 1:1; 4:34; 5:19, 30; 7:16; 12:49,50).³⁸ And yet he ‘became flesh’ (1:14) to become one with humanity. As a human, Jesus is absolutely dependent on God; yet this dependence is so complete that he behaves under the will of God and he acts with divine authority. Therefore, whoever has seen Jesus has seen God.³⁹ However, another possible explanation of Jesus’ statement can be understood in light of the second statement in the Platform Sūtra:

“Everyone’s form-body is a city [of the Buddhaland]. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin are the gates [of the city]. Externally there are five gates, and internally it is the gate of the sensory mind. ...Don’t seek for [the Buddha] outside your bodies. When one is deluded to the self-nature, the Buddha is a sentient being. When one is awakened of the self-nature, a sentient being is the Buddha.”⁴⁰

Huineng does not deny the existence of the paradise-place, and he even quotes an early textual proof that this place is not far; however, he rejects the methods of seeking the Buddha outside one’s self-nature. If we replace the West Land with heaven, it is also applicable. As the dharma-truth has no inequality, the way of practice was drawn for different people. No matter that the practice refers to meditation, reciting or praying, singing hymns; they require a strong and constant status of concentration which automatically purifies the self-nature and connect to the truth.⁴¹ If people cannot realise this and remain deluded even if they hold strong wishes, entering heaven or Buddhaland will be hard for them. But people who are awakened have already understood the ultimate truth; the place is a form of imagination that can be immediately displayed.

Similar sentiments can be found in the passages about the Spirit-Paraclete in the Johannine Farewell Discourses. Jesus, as a person with “superior wisdom”, is capable of illustrating God immediately. But instead, he brings up the coming of the Spirit afterwards, “This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (14:17). By highlighting the presence of the Paraclete, the author emphasises that salvation can also be present through the connection with the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Through the dwelling of God and Jesus, the disciples are truly resting in their “dwelling places” (14:2a). In the Synoptics the time when the disciples will encounter Jesus again is an afterlife event, while in John there is a shift from the future to the present; it also encourages believers to worship God in Spirit and truth (cf. 4:23) and to not let their hearts be troubled (14:1a). In other words, Jesus is someone who is in connection with God that whoever sees him sees the truth, and through the abiding of the Spirit Jesus is able to reside within one’s mind, and therefore the person who receives the Spirit (who is awakened, in analogy) is also able to see the Father. Instead of

³⁸ Carson, *The Farewell Discourse*, 34.

³⁹ Carson, *The Farewell Discourse*, 37-38.

⁴⁰ T48, N.2007, 341b-c. Translation adapted from Red Pine, *The Platform Sūtra: the Chan teaching of Hui-neng* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 200-201.

⁴¹ Cf. chapter 4, T48, N.2008.

searching the Father from outside, John encourages his readers to maintain the faith through their Spirit to Christ so that they will see and live in truth. From a perspective of Chan philosophy, that is the enlightenment and Buddhahood attained; so that one has the same authority that Jesus has because God is with him.

4.2 The unity of all

In chapter 2 of the Platform Sūtra, Huineng describes a relationship between the *prajñā* and the wisdom:

“In this teaching of ours eighty-four thousand wisdoms are generated from the one *prajñā*. Why? Because the people of this world have eighty-four thousand enervating defilements. If they were without these enervating defilements, wisdom would always be manifest and they would not depart from the self-natures. To be enlightened to this Dharma is to be without thought. To be without recollection, without attachment, to not activate the false and deceptive — this is to allow one’s self[-suchness]-nature to function.”⁴²

As I mentioned in section 2, the *prajñā* is the core and ultimate concept in the Platform Sūtra, while wisdom is the key to enlightenment that is symbiotic with concentration, and this is derived from the *prajñā*. In order to realise this, one has to abandon all thoughts, recollections and attachments, because they are viewed as delusions in the Platform Sūtra. He proceeds to offer a “figurative speech”:

“[People with great wisdom] then know that their original nature obtains the wisdom of *prajñā*. [They] use this wisdom constantly to contemplate and illuminate, [but they] do not rely on written words. Just like the rain water, it does not come from the sky. The truth is that the dragons cause it to fall, so that all sentient beings, all plants and trees, ones with and without feeling may receive their own moisture. [There are] hundreds of streams which have myriad paths, yet [they all] flow into the ocean and unites in one substance. The wisdom of the *prajñā* of the original nature of sentient beings is also like this.”⁴³

The above text points to two issues: first, because the *prajñā* is non-dual it has both objectivity and subjectivity within it. Objectivity lives inside one’s self-nature waiting to be awakened, and whoever awakes it can use it to contemplate and find illumination; subjectivity comes into every sentient being’s mind in order to “moisture” them, in this case, to give everyone a new life of enlightenment. Secondly, the wisdoms that the *prajñā* send into sentient beings will return and unite as one. The ocean and streams share the same water; it is also a case of mutual-dwelling between the transcendent divinity of *Tathagata* and the individual nature. However, the stream is not greater than the ocean, and that is why Buddhists should practice for *nirvāṇa*⁴⁴ – the return process to the truth.

⁴² T48, N.2008, 350c.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ According to Steven Collins, the word *nirvāṇa* has a synonym of “deathless”; which refers to a condition where

If we compare this to the Johannine emphasis on the Father-Son relationship, the most honoured *prajñā* would be the God figure in Chan philosophy; and if the self-nature resembles the Paraclete, the wisdom which links to truth resembles the Son's presence in the Paraclete. The only difference is that in Chan philosophy there are no forms or divinity to worship, for Chan advocates no-form as its principal substance.⁴⁵

The Johannine concept of unity is particularly prevalent in Jesus' final prayer. Andrew Lincoln notes that John 17 functions in terms of praying in Jesus' name, and also showing an example to his disciples of how to pray, just like the prayers in Matthew (6:9-15) and Luke (11:1-4). In the Johannine prayer, Jesus acts as a human who does not show any signs of separating himself from his disciples. Yet it still involves some separation given his distinctive connection with God.⁴⁶ In my opinion, if Jesus is teaching his disciples how to worship by Spirit, then what he says in the prayer displays what his Spirit was thinking. Although the Spirit itself is not mentioned in the chapter, it manifests the wish and the goal of salvation in Jesus' divine Spirit. Although the final prayer is said to be added into the Gospel afterwards, it is somehow connected to the previous farewell discourses. From the previous statements of the Spirit in chapter 14-16, Jesus' spiritual prayer in chapter 17 is providing a clear explanation on how the Spirit functions during praying.

In John 17:1-3 Jesus speaks in the third person by using the words "the Son" and "Jesus Christ"; this points to revelation between two abstract identities – the Son here does not *explicitly* point to Jesus Christ, otherwise why would Jesus mention his name separately? But Jesus is the Son of God, for his time has come and he will soon be glorified– through the death of his physical body he retrieved divinity which including the eternal life. And by knowing the name of God the disciples are able to gain eternal life, and the gift of the Spirit is also seen as granting eternal life; hence, to understand the existence of the Holy Spirit inside one's body is a way to remain eternal spiritually. In the Platform Sūtra, this soteriology is named as "realising the heart and seeing the Self-nature"; one will become the Buddha by discovering the existence of self-nature.

Jesus states that he has already revealed God to his disciples, reminding them that he has shown them the Father (cf. 14:9); the disciples have known, accepted and believed (17:7-8). Thus, they have established the fundamental of receiving the Spirit, just as how Jesus had received the Spirit (1:32-33). Through the Spirit Jesus offers living water; they are mutually dependent on each other, and it is the water that glorifies Jesus (17:10).

Jesus prays to God to protect his disciples so they can *be* one, like the unity between God and himself (17:11). This call for unity is the most important goal of Jesus' final prayer. He asks God to offer protection to his disciples from the "evil one" (17:15b). The word "one" (*hēn*) in Greek does not include the derivative of "becoming one". Carson views this as "not that they may progressively achieve unity, but simply that they may be a unity continuously."⁴⁷ In my opinion, this word emphasises that the connection between the disciples and God has already been established but is

no rebirth nor death will be caused. See Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38.

⁴⁵ T48, N.2008, 353a.

⁴⁶ Andrew Lincoln, *John*, 433.

⁴⁷ Carson, *The Farewell Discourse*, 188-89.

disrupted by the “evil one”. To be one is to reconnect this relationship; in other words, this unity with God and Jesus in Johannine community is not created by belief, but is awakened through belief. Jesus also mentions that “While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me” (17:12a). Jesus protects his disciples before his death, but he is now leaving this world, so he asks God to continue this protection after his departure.

I have two questions regarding 17:11-12: first, what protection has Jesus given his disciples? Apparently, it cannot be physical protection; he protects them with his identity – his character as the Son of God. When Jesus was with his disciples, he revealed God to them; and by following him they were kept from the evil one. The disciples are to imitate what Jesus has done, and what Jesus represents is the truth. Since Jesus is about to depart, the evil one will definitely return to haunt his disciples; yet the only revelation that comes after Jesus’ departure is the arrival of the Spirit-Paraclete. Several articles mention that Jesus does not need to pray, since he has all the authority of God; he prays rather on his followers’ behalf. However, this prayer – in my view – also conveys the idea of asking the Father to send the Spirit-Paraclete. The request to send the Paraclete is not done after but before Jesus’ death. If Jesus really has *all* authority, he would send the Paraclete by himself without asking for it from the “Holy Father”. He utters this prayer precisely because he *does not* have the authority to send it. He is not the Paraclete, although he will dwell in it; this abiding will only happen if the disciples *have* received the Paraclete. This leads to my second question: what could the “evil one” possibly be? The Paraclete is a Spirit and so the evil one is also probably spiritual. It could refer to Satan, but also to any of the negative thoughts that one has inside their mind – desire, lust, hatred, anger and so forth. In my speculation, by keeping Jesus’ commandment, i.e. to love each other, the disciples may be able to keep the negative mind away and receive the Spirit, for that they are protected. And that is why Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (15:10).

However, the disciples are not yet keeping his commandments, for they are still sad about Jesus’ departure. He therefore says to them, “*If you loved me*, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I” (14:28b); they are still sad because they wish to keep Jesus aside for their self-interest, so that they do not love Jesus in the way that Jesus wants them to be.⁴⁸ Similar circumstance to those described in the Farewell Discourses also occur in the Platform Sūtra as well; Huineng’s disciples are not awakened yet, because the attachment that they hold for their teacher is still there. And because of that, they are still deluded.

“Now you are crying. Crying for who? If you are worrying that I don’t know where I’m going, I know where I’m going. If I didn’t know where I’m going, I wouldn’t announce to you in advance. You all are crying is exactly because you don’t know where I am going; if you knew, you wouldn’t need to cry.”⁴⁹

The Johannine Jesus constantly places himself in the same position as his disciples during his prayer: neither he nor them belong to this world (vv. 14b, 16); he wishes that they can be united with God in the same way as he is (vv. 11, 22); he and his disciples are all hated by this world (v.14); they

⁴⁸ Carson, *Farewell Discourse*, 79-80.

⁴⁹ T48, N.2008, 360c.

have been sent to the world as Jesus had been sent (v.18); Jesus and the disciples are all loved in the same way by God (v. 23b). If what Jesus prays to God represents his true feelings, the reason why he discloses as a human during the prayer is because he *is* human; the difference is that he has known God before everyone else, thus he was sanctified by God (cf. 10:36). However, he sanctifies himself again by presenting himself as the Messiah to his disciples, so that they will be able to know and worship God in Spirit and be sanctified in truth. For this goal, he sanctifies himself as the manifestation of the transcendent truth, which provides an external object for worship purpose.

5. Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit in Johannine Christianity and the self-nature in the Platform Sūtra share a number of similarities. They are both peaceful in their presence; they do not have forms but reveal the presence of divinity, and that is why Buddhists always say “The Buddha is in your heart” or “May God be with you” in Christian perspective. To find the truth, one should seek from inside the heart. Thus, the ways to truth – salvation or liberation – both require the realisation of their internal essence. The Platform Sūtra rejects the method of seeking salvation from outside of one’s mind, indicating that one can only be saved through the inner mind; John transfers its eschatological expectations from the afterlife to the present, because Jesus will reveal himself through the Spirit and only the Spirit offers authentic worship. In order to do that, believers must first practice how to detach themselves from negative thoughts or influences. Although the forms of theological expression are different between the two texts, they both share the same purpose of unifying believers and the truth. This relation can be described in terms of living water, which they all share; they are originally one, and will become one again.

The difference, however, is that the Platform Sūtra does not approve any external forms of deity. The second body of the Buddhist Threefold Bodies doctrine is the manifested form of the Buddha, which has been largely seen as the external deity in Pure Land Buddhism. Chan doctrine rejects the distinction of outer forms, and believes that the Threefold Bodies are inside one’s own nature; worshipping the form is viewed as delusional attachment. In Christianity, Jesus is the Son, who is the second person in Christian theology, the object of worship and the link between God and human; because he is regarded as the incarnation of God, all worship will go through him and is directed to him.⁵⁰ It could be argued that, in the Farewell Discourse, the Johannine Jesus would prefer his disciples to worship God through their gifted Spirit-Paraclete rather than through himself, since he has stated that God is the only true one (17:3). Nevertheless, the disciples should also know and believe in him, as he is the God-sent one who reveals the way to heaven. However, because his disciples were not able to understand his true meaning, Jesus has sanctified himself in order to tell people to worship God spiritually, not simply obeying rules (e.g. chapter 4).

In my opinion, the core of every religion is the understanding between self-subject consciousness and transcendent soteriology, whether it is “self-nature” or “Spirit-Paraclete”, their essence all refer to a theoretical reflection and figurative expression of the unspeakable truth, that the religious leaders have used those terms to explain the transcendental existence of the truth and makes it

⁵⁰ Thompson, *The God*, 224-5.

understandable and spread through religious practices. For Christians, their self-understanding will not be contradictory, but it will expand towards unpredictable Christian commitments that they have believed in.⁵¹ And this view cannot remove the centrality that lives among Christians and Buddhists. When we do interreligious dialogue, we should not seek for dialogue in the purpose of a mission, but rather place the dialogue and mission as “non-dual”, a position that I think makes equal sense from both sides. If we keep holding our own centrality of faith and make religions like different schools that cannot bear each other, it would not be beneficial to intercultural communication either. Perhaps, it is time for us to stop attaching ourselves to different kinds of “lamp” and look rather at the same “electricity” inside them, because it is the same “electricity” that indicates the colourful “light.”

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⁵¹ Yong, *Pneumatology*, 250.