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From the "Distinction of Substance and Function" to "Perceiving Substance Through Function": Reconstructing Buddhist *Ganying* (感應) Thought in the Jin-Song (晉宋) Transitional Period

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Abstract

The *ti-yong* (體用, substance-and-function) dyad is one of the most fundamental theoretical patterns in Chinese philosophy. As the primary framework for articulating the relationship between noumenal ground and phenomenal manifestation, it runs continuously through the *Xuanxue* (玄學), Buddhist, and Neo-Confucian traditions, with the core presupposition that *ti* (substance) independently precedes and governs *yong* (function). When this presupposition entered the Buddhist context and encountered the Mahāyāna logic of dependent origination and emptiness (*yuanqi xingkong* 緣起性空), a deep structural tension was generated. Taking this tension as its point of departure, this article examines changes in Buddhist accounts of *ganying* (感應, stimulus-and-response) during the Jin-Song (晉宋) transitional period through the writings of Huiyuan (慧遠), Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什), and Daosheng (道生). Huiyuan's questions concerning the *dharmakāya* (法身) expose a persistent difficulty: How can that which is unchanging and beyond determinate form become perceptible and effective in responsive activity? Kumārajīva's discussions of "not-form" (*fei se* 非色), the pool-water analogy, and "responding without fixed mode" (*wu fang zhi ying* 無方之應) shift attention from identifying a fixed body of the *dharmakāya* to explaining the varied conditions of its manifestation. Daosheng's accounts of inherent *Buddha-nature* (*foxing benju* 佛性本具) and *ji* (機, capacity) further bring the recipient's capacity into the explanation of effective response. Read together, these positions show a shift in explanatory focus: from distinguishing an enduring source from responsive activity to asking how that source becomes accessible through activity. The expression *ji-yong-jian-ti* (即用見體, perceiving substance through function) names this disclosure of *ti* through *yong*: the ground is not produced by responsive activity but becomes perceptible and soteriologically effective through it. This development illuminates an important change in early Chinese Buddhist reflections on *dharmakāya*, manifestation, and the capacities of sentient beings.

Keywords: *ganying* (感應); *ti-yong* (體用); *dharmakāya* (法身); *Buddha-nature* (佛性); Huiyuan (慧遠); Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什); Daosheng (道生); Chinese Buddhist philosophy

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1. Introduction

In the seventeenth year of the Taiyuan reign period of the Eastern Jin (東晉) dynasty (392 CE), the *xuanxue* (玄學) scholar Yin Zhongkan (殷仲堪) passed through Mount Lu (廬山) and engaged in a discussion of *The Book of Changes* (易經, *Yijing*) with the eminent

monk Huiyuan (慧遠). Their exchange, recorded in the "Literature" (*wenxue* 文學) chapter of *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (*Shishuo Xinyu* 世說新語), runs as follows:

> Lord Yin of Jing (殷荊州) once asked the Venerable Yuan (遠公): "What does the *Book of Changes* (易經) take as its substance (ti, 體)?" He replied: "The *Book of Changes* (易經) takes *ganying* as its substance." Lord Yin said: "When the Copper Mountain collapses in the west and the spirit-bell resonates in the east—would that be the *Book of Changes* (易經)?" The Venerable Yuan smiled and gave no reply. 殷荊州曾問遠公：“《易》以何為體？”答曰：“《易》以感為體。”殷曰：“銅山西崩，靈鐘東應，便是《易》耶？”遠公笑而不答。 (Liu 1984, p. 132)

The Biographies of Eminent Monks (*Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳) further records that upon hearing this exchange, Yin Zhongkan sighed: "Profound understanding and genuine faith are truly difficult to achieve among ordinary people" (識信深明, 實難為庶) (T50n2059, 359b)[1].

This brief episode is more intellectually dense than its apparent simplicity suggests. Yin Zhongkan's counter-example invoked the Han dynasty (漢) theory of *ganying* through *qi* (氣) categories. The image of the collapsing copper mountain and the answering spirit-bell derives from the *Biography of Dongfang Shuo* (東方朔傳), which explains the correspondence as a resonance between mother and child sharing the same category of *qi* (Xiong 2017, p. 19). Kong Yingda's (孔穎達) *Correct Meaning of the Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi Zhengyi* 周易正義) likewise treats the collapse of the copper mountain and the answering of the Luo bell as a stock example of like-kind resonance (Kong 1980). As Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) articulated in the *Spring and Autumn Annals in Dew* (*Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露), *ganying* in this tradition is the natural mutual movement of homogeneous things through the common flow of *qi*, presupposing two mutually independent substances with *ganying* as the external correspondence between them (Dong 1992, p. 358). Yin Zhongkan's challenge was thus pointed. If *ganying* is the substance of the *Book of Changes*, and *ganying* amounts to nothing more than this mechanical external correlation, does the *Book of Changes* not reduce to something philosophically trivial? Huiyuan's "smile and no reply" signals that the two men were operating on entirely different conceptual levels.

The philosophical significance of this exchange, however, lies beyond the contrast between two conceptions of *ganying*. More fundamentally, it reveals the theoretical framework within which both positions were articulated and contested: the *ti-yong* (體用, substance-and-function) framework. The question "what does the *Book of Changes* take as its *ti*?" and the answer "*ganying* as its *ti*" both deploy the conceptual grammar of *ti* and *yong*. Yet this shared grammar conceals a deep structural problem. That problem provides the intellectual-historical point of departure for the reconstruction developed in this article.

Questions later expressed through the relation between *ti* (體, substance) and *yong* (用, function) had important antecedents in Wei-Jin discussions of root and branch, the one and the many, and stillness and activity. Wang Bi's commentaries, for example, repeatedly explain the many by reference to an underlying root, while also asking how that root becomes manifest in changing affairs (Wang 2011). Early Chinese Buddhist thinkers drew upon this broader conceptual field when considering the relation between the *dharmakāya* and its responsive activity. In what follows, "the distinction of *ti* and *yong*" refers to the recurrent separation of an enduring source from the activities through which it becomes manifest. Its central difficulty concerns the connection between the two: if the source remains unchanged, how can it enter into concrete response; and if responsive activity is detached from a stable source, what grounds its efficacy? Huiyuan's questions concerning the *dharmakāya* bring this difficulty into particularly sharp focus.

Discussions of *dharmakāya* and *ganying* in early medieval China drew upon overlapping Buddhist and Chinese vocabularies of source, form, activity, stillness, and response. Within these discussions, the decisive question was not simply whether the *dharmakāya* ex-

isted but how that which exceeded determinate form could nevertheless be seen, heard, and encountered in practice. If the *dharmakāya* were identified with a fixed body, it would be difficult to distinguish it from ordinary form. If it were removed entirely from concrete manifestation, its capacity to benefit sentient beings would become difficult to explain. Huiyuan's correspondence with Kumārajīva gives this problem a sustained and unusually precise formulation.

The arguments examined below gradually shift the center of explanation from the separation between source and activity to the conditions under which the source becomes manifest through activity. This shift may be described as a "disclosure model" (*ji-yong-jian-ti* 即用見體)[2]. Here, disclosure does not mean that *yong* produces *ti*. It means that *ti* becomes perceptible, meaningful, and soteriologically effective through responsive activity. Kumārajīva's account of multiple manifestations loosens the association between the *dharmakāya* and a single fixed form, while Daosheng's discussion of *ji* brings the recipient's capacity more clearly into view. Together, these developments deepen the question of how an enduring ground can be encountered in the differentiated activity of response.

Existing scholarship has not recognized this movement, and the reason is itself diagnostic. *Ganying* has never been interrogated as an independent doctrinal category structured by the *ti-yong* framework. On the one hand, the social history of religion and narrative studies have reduced it to a product of miracle tales and popular belief, rendering its philosophical dimensions largely invisible. Tang Yongtong's (湯用彤) foundational *History of Buddhism in the Han, Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties* (*Han Wei Liang Jin Nanbei Chao Fojiao Shi* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史) established the framework for studying Eastern Jin scholastic Buddhism, but *ganying* as a philosophical problem never received direct examination within that framework (Tang [1938] 1997).[3] On the other hand, doctrinal studies have treated *ganying* in a fragmented manner. Fang Litian's (方立天) *Huiyuan and His Buddhist Thought* (*Huiyuan ji qi foxue* 慧遠及其佛學) carefully analyzes the internal tensions in Huiyuan's dharma-nature theory (Fang 1984, pp. 136–52), and Lai Yonghai's (賴永海) *The Theory of Buddha-Nature in Chinese Buddhism* (*Zhongguo Foxing Lun* 中國佛性論) systematically surveys Daosheng's Buddha-nature theory (Lai 2010, pp. 90–120). Yet both keep their focus on *dharmakāya* or Buddha-nature as such. *Ganying*, as the structural category connecting both poles, remains without settled doctrinal standing. Japanese scholarship has contributed valuable individual studies, including Dobashi Michihide's (道端良秀) compilation of Six Dynasties *ganying* records, Kimura Nobusho's (木村宣彰) analysis of Daosheng's *dharmakāya* doctrine, and Kanno Hiroshi's (菅野博史) positioning of *ji* (機, capacity-trigger) (Dobashi 1957; Kimura 1989; Kanno 1983). In English-language scholarship, Liebenthal (1950) provided a foundational study of Huiyuan's Buddhism, Wagner (1971) analyzed the structure of the Huiyuan-Kumārajīva correspondence, and Nelson (2023) has recently examined emptiness and negation in Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao. These studies illuminate individual dimensions of this intellectual landscape but do not thematize the *ti-yong* dimension of *ganying*. The shared methodological limitation is this: by treating *ganying* either as a religious phenomenon or as a secondary concept within studies of *dharmakāya* or Buddha-nature, existing scholarship has not posed the structural question that drives the present reconstruction. How did Huiyuan, Kumārajīva, and Daosheng differently explain the relation among the *dharmakāya*, its responsive manifestations, and the capacities of sentient beings? What changes become visible when these accounts are read as successive responses to the problem of how an ultimate ground becomes effective in particular conditions?

Methodologically, this article offers a historically grounded philosophical reconstruction. The "bifurcation model" and "disclosure model" are modern analytical frameworks rather than categories explicitly formulated by Huiyuan, Kumārajīva, or Daosheng. They

are used to compare how historically connected texts address a shared problem: how an enduring ground becomes manifest and effective in responsive activity. The reconstruction is historical insofar as it follows documented intellectual contacts, textual attributions, and continuities of questioning; it is philosophical insofar as it makes explicit a structural problem and a shift in explanatory emphasis that the sources do not themselves formulate in these terms. The sequence proposed here should therefore not be read as a linear progression in which one thinker completes another's project. Section 2 examines how Huiyuan's questions bring the difficulty of the *dharmakāya*'s responsive activity into focus. Section 3 turns to Kumārajīva's accounts of "not-form," conditioned manifestation, and "responding without fixed mode," showing how they loosen the association between the *dharmakāya* and any single corporeal form. Section 4 considers how Daosheng's discussions of inherent *Buddha-nature* and *ji* bring the capacities and timing of recipients more fully into view. The conclusion draws these discussions together and considers what becomes visible when they are read through the proposed analytical framework.

2. The Dharmakāya Dilemma: Huiyuan's Doctrinal Aporia Within the Ti-Yong (體用) Bifurcation Framework

2.1. The Confluence of Intellectual Resources: Sarvāstivāda Realism and the Xuanxue Ti-Yong Framework

To understand why Huiyuan's questions about the *dharmakāya* took the form they did, one must first examine the convergence of intellectual traditions that structured his doctrinal presuppositions.

Huiyuan's Buddhist formation included sustained engagement with Abhidharma learning, commonly designated in early Chinese sources as *Pitan* (毗曇). These materials supplied detailed analyses of dharmas, causal continuity, the faculties, and the processes of cognition and practice. In Huiyuan's writings, such concerns appear alongside a persistent search for what remains stable through change. This background helps explain why his questions about the *dharmakāya* repeatedly move between an ultimate source and the faculties and activities through which it becomes perceptible. The point is not that a single *Sarvāstivāda* doctrine determined his position but that Abhidharma modes of analysis contributed to the form in which he posed the problem.

This Sarvāstivāda orientation found a structural ally in the *xuanxue* (玄學) tradition within which Huiyuan was equally at home. The opening of the *Great Meaning of Master Kumārajīva* describes him as one who "from youth observed Confucianism and Daoism, and was distinguished by his reputation for the analysis of hardness and whiteness," and praises him as "the Mount Sumeru of Jiangzuo" (T45n1856, 122b). *Xuanxue* thought organized concepts along the coordinates of "root and branch" (本末, *benmo*) and "substance and function" (體用, *ti-yong*), positing an unchanging substance that governs its functional expressions while remaining unaffected by them. Substance precedes function ontologically. Function is substance's external extension. The relationship between them is one of governance, not mutual constitution.

These two traditions were structurally homologous. Both posit something permanent and self-subsisting as ontologically prior to relational processes. In Huiyuan's thought, they did not merely coexist but reinforced one another, each supplying what the other required. The Sarvāstivāda real dharmas supplied the content, namely an ultimate metaphysical foundation. The *xuanxue ti-yong* framework supplied the structure, namely an ontological priority of substance over function. Chen Jian observed that this binary *ti-yong* framework is structurally distinct from the tripartite "substance-appearance-function" (體相用, *ti-xiang-yong*) scheme that Chinese Buddhism more properly derives from the *Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng Qixin Lun* 大乘起信論). On Chen's account, the binary frame-

work generates doctrinal tension when applied to Buddhist *dharmakāya* doctrine because it enforces a substance-prior ontology that the tripartite scheme does not require (J. Chen 2006). Huiyuan stood at the intersection of both traditions. The convergence of these two traditions produced what Zhang Fenglei identifies as the defining tendency of his thought: the pursuit of "something ultimate, unchanging, and absolutely substantial" as "the cornerstone of his entire Buddhist theory." (Zhang 2010, p. 70) Liebenthal's foundational study reaches the same characterization, tracing how Huiyuan's reading of Buddhist doctrine consistently grounds itself in an unchanging metaphysical principle underlying all conditioned phenomena (Liebenthal 1950).

The *Biographies of Eminent Monks* preserves a statement attributed to Huiyuan's *Treatise on Dharma-Nature*: "The ultimate extreme takes non-change as its nature; attaining this nature means taking the extreme as one's source" (至極以不變為性, 得性以體極為宗, T50n2059, 360a). The passage indicates Huiyuan's concern with a stable ultimate ground. His correspondence with Kumārajīva places this concern more directly within the problem of responsive activity. Huiyuan asks to "seek the source and investigate the root" (尋源求本), describes the faculties as being "in operation" (五根在用), and speaks of response as occurring "in accordance with stimulus" (隨感而應). These formulations distinguish the source, the faculties through which activity operates, and the response that becomes manifest under particular conditions. The difficulty is therefore not simply whether the *dharmakāya* exists but how its unchanging ground is connected with the differentiated activities through which it can be seen, heard, and encountered.

It is this structural presupposition, not any lack of philosophical sophistication, that rendered the *dharmakāya-ganying* problem irresolvable within Huiyuan's own terms. Fan Qinyong argued that Huiyuan's dialogue with Kumārajīva was driven not by abstract philosophical inquiry but by the practical demands of guiding religious cultivation on Mount Lu (Fan 2023, p. 123). As a practical consequence, the practitioners under his direction needed to know how to resonate with the *dharmakāya* in meditative practice. Yet Huiyuan's own framework had no coherent account to offer. The questions he directed to Kumārajīva, to which we now turn, are the direct doctrinal consequences of this structural impasse.

2.2. The Necessary Aporia: How the Ti-Yong Bifurcation Renders the Dharmakāya-Ganying Problem Irresolvable

The structural presupposition identified above generated specific doctrinal difficulties the moment it encountered the Buddhist account of *ganying*. These difficulties crystallized in the exchange between Huiyuan and Kumārajīva. Their correspondence was later compiled as the *Great Meaning of Master Kumārajīva* (*Kumarajiva Fashi Dayi* 鳩摩羅什法師大義), whose original structure is preserved in Sengyou's bibliographic record (T55n2145) and was analyzed in detail by Wagner (Wagner 1971). Huiyuan's questions across this correspondence share a common underlying logic. Each exposes a point where the *ti-yong* framework, brought into contact with *dharmakāya* doctrine, produces an irresolvable contradiction.

His opening question poses the difficulty in its starkest form. If the Buddha expounds sutras to bodhisattvas through the *dharmakāya* and the bodhisattvas can see and hear it, the *dharmakāya* must possess the four great elements and five sense organs. Yet the scripture says the *dharmakāya* has "no coming and no going, no arising and no ceasing, and is like nirvana in form" (法身無去無來, 無有起滅, 泥洹同像). "How then can it be seen, and how can it expound the Dharma?" (云何可見, 而復講說乎, T45n1856, 122b). That this question was not merely theoretical is attested to by Huiyuan's *Inscription on the Shadow of Ten Thousand Buddhas* (*Wanfo Ying Ming* 萬佛影銘), which reflects on how the Buddha shadow-image (*foying* 佛影) can be visibly present yet without fixed material form (T52n2103, 197c). This

is not mere logical puzzlement. It is the direct structural consequence of the *ti-yong* presupposition. If the *dharmakāya* is a pre-existent unchanging substance (*ti*) from which *ganying* proceeds as an external function (*yong*), the mechanism by which a changeless substance generates responsive engagement with beings cannot be coherently explained. Precisely because the substance does not change, it cannot enter genuinely into a responsive relationship. Yet precisely because *ganying* requires response, a substance that does not respond is soteriologically inert.

The second dimension of this impasse is soteriological rather than metaphysical, but it arises from the same structural source. Within the *ti-yong* framework, cause and fruit must belong to the same ontological sequence. Yet Huiyuan's framework generates two incommensurable sequences. The *dharmakāya* belongs to the sequence of emptiness, while practitioners during cultivation still possess karmic defilements, placing them firmly on the side of existence. Huiyuan's *Essay on the Clarity of Karmic Retribution* (*Mingbaoyinglun* 明報應論) attests to the doctrinal seriousness of this commitment: karmic cause and fruit operate across lifetimes with genuine ontological force, with no structural gap that exempts the cultivating subject from this sequence (T52n2102, 33a–34a). Huiyuan pressed this into a further question about the "dharma-nature-born body" (*faxing shensheng* 法性生身). If what occasions attainment accords with the true mark yet is not free of remaining defilements, it should not give rise to rebirth. Yet rebirth is precisely what the dharma-nature-born body involves (T45n1856, 123a). This is not simply a deepening of the first difficulty. It demonstrates that the structural impasse extends through the entire arc of cultivation, from its beginning to its soteriological fruit.

Both difficulties reduce to a single dilemma. If the *dharmakāya* is a substance in the *ti-yong* sense, it is no different from the form-body, and cultivation loses its orientation. If the *dharmakāya* is ultimately empty, *ganying* has no basis from which to arise, and practice loses its soteriological ground. There is no third possibility visible within this framework.

Some scholars have resisted reading Huiyuan's position as so thoroughly substantialist. Fang Litian argues that his conception of dharma-nature contains internal tensions pointing beyond simple substantialism. The notion of the "spirit-mind that neither arises nor ceases" (*shenming bu mie* 神明不滅) already gestures toward a non-substantial account of the cultivation subject, as elaborated upon in Huiyuan's *Essay on Why Monks Do Not Pay Homage to the King* (*Shamen bu jing Wangzhe Lun* 沙門不敬王者論), where the monk's transcendent cultivation is described as directed toward a spirit-mind that outlasts conditioned transformation (T52n2102, 29c–32b; Fang 1984, pp. 136–52). This reading is not without merit, but it does not dissolve the structural problem identified here. Even on the most sympathetic account, Huiyuan's *ji-gan* (寂感, stillness-resonance) model still presupposes that the meditating subject's capacity to resonate with the *dharmakāya* is an achievement of post-natal cultivation rather than an inherent reality. The temporal gap between substance and function remains constitutive of his framework, as does the gap between their respective ontological statuses. Flexibility in the content of the substance does not dissolve the structural priority of substance over function.[4]

Huiyuan's questions bring the relation between the *dharmakāya* and responsive activity into the center of doctrinal inquiry. A *dharmakāya* wholly identified with determinate form would be difficult to distinguish from the form-body; yet a *dharmakāya* entirely removed from manifestation could not readily explain how sentient beings see, hear, and benefit from it. This tension runs through his questions concerning the faculties, the transformation body, and the dharma-nature-born body. Kumārajīva's replies begin from the same difficulty but redirect the inquiry. Rather than seeking a single form adequate to the *dharmakāya*, they ask how the *dharmakāya* appears through forms that vary with the conditions of sentient beings.

3. The Dissolution of Ti-Yong Bifurcation: Kumārajīva's Deconstruction of the Substantialist Dharmakāya

3.1. The Methodological Clearing: "Not-Form" and the Dissolution of the Ti-Prior Presupposition

The aporia Huiyuan could not escape was structurally determined. His *ti-yong* framework left the *dharmakāya* with only two positions. Either it is a substantial body, in which case it differs from the form-body in degree but not in kind, or it is ultimately empty, in which case *ganying* has no basis and soteriological practice loses its ground. Kumārajīva did not choose between these two positions. He refused the framework that generated them. His task was not to answer Huiyuan's question from within the existing terms but to reset the terms themselves.

His first move was methodological. Responding to Huiyuan's pressing question about how the *dharmakāya* can be seen and can expound the Dharma, Kumārajīva declared that the *dharmakāya* "cannot be subjected to conceptual proliferation (*xilun* 戲論) as existent or non-existent," and immediately offered an analogy. The *dharmakāya* is like an image in a mirror, which "only expresses the good and bad marks of the face, and there is no need to further proliferate conceptually about the existence or non-existence of its reality" (T45n1856, 130a). The significance of this declaration extends well beyond a cautionary remark about language. Nelson (2023) has characterized the Madhyamaka[5] refusal of *xilun* as "a therapeutic suspension of assertion." On this reading, it is not a new theoretical claim that replaces the old one but a practical dissolution of reified views that opens space for a different understanding. The critical point is directional. Kumārajīva was not saying that we cannot know what the *dharmakāya* is in itself. He was changing the question. The relevant question shifts from "What is the *dharmakāya* prior to any relational event?" to "Under what conditions does the *dharmakāya* manifest and become available to beings?" The *dharmakāya* is no longer conceived of as a pre-given object awaiting cognitive access. Its mode of being is inseparable from the conditions of its manifestation. The methodological clearing was simultaneously a positive reframing.

With the ground cleared, Kumārajīva introduced a positive doctrinal concept to fill the space the clearing had opened. Starting from the name-and-principle (*mingli* 名理) path with which Huiyuan was familiar, he analyzed the constitutive elements of "form" (*se* 色): any material thing must comprise both form and tactility (*chu* 觸). From this, he inferred the existence of a doctrinal type that is "not-form" (*fei se* 非色). Like "an image in a mirror or the moon reflected in water," it has appearance without substance and is visible but not tangible. Kumārajīva states this explicitly: "A transformation body is also like this; the *dharmakāya* is also like this" (T45n1856, 122b). "Not-form" opens a possibility between substantial body and sheer absence. A mirror image is not a tangible object, yet it is genuinely visible when the conditions of reflection are present. The analogy therefore provides a way to speak of manifestation without assigning the *dharmakāya* a fixed material body. Its force lies in showing how an appearance can be effective and perceptible without being identical with a self-subsisting corporeal form. The *dharmakāya* can accordingly be encountered through conditioned appearances without being exhausted by them.

"Not-form" allows Kumārajīva to move beyond the alternative between a substantial body and sheer absence. Like an image in a mirror or the moon reflected in water, the *dharmakāya* can become perceptible without being reduced to tangible form. The question consequently shifts from what fixed body the *dharmakāya* possesses to the conditions under which it appears. Its manifestations are real in their capacity to be seen and to benefit sentient beings, yet no single manifestation exhausts the *dharmakāya* from which it proceeds. This distinction between source and appearance prepares the fuller account of responsive manifestation developed in the following section.

3.2. "Responding Without Fixed Mode": The Dharmakāya Constituted Within the Ganying Relationship

The relation between the *dharmakāya* and its manifestations becomes clearer in the pool-water analogy. Here, Kumārajīva turns from the visible character of "not-form" to the question of benefit: Under what conditions can what is present at the source become available to sentient beings? The analogy retains the distinction between the source and what flows from it, while placing their connection within a practical and soteriological setting:

> The clear water in that pool cannot be used by beings of little merit. Only when it flows out from the pool, spreading through the various regions, can it then be used. The Buddha's *dharmakāya* is also like this: when it stands alone in the boundless expanse of the profound, people receive no benefit from it; but when from that body countless transformation bodies emerge, all sentient beings then receive benefit. (T45n1856, 129b)

The pool analogy preserves the distinction between source and manifestation while changing the way their relation is understood. Kumārajīva states that when flowing water is traced to its origin, one must know that it has a source. Yet water concealed in a remote depth does not benefit living beings; it becomes useful when it flows outward through channels from which they can draw. The *dharmakāya* is likewise not produced by its transformation bodies. Its capacity to benefit sentient beings, however, becomes manifest through them. The analogy thus directs attention away from the isolated existence of the source and toward the conditions under which its efficacy becomes available.

This relational understanding reaches its most direct formulation in Kumārajīva's account of "responding without fixed mode" (*wu fang zhi ying* 無方之應):

> The Buddha-body is responding without fixed mode. Within a single assembly, some beings perceive the Buddha's body as golden; others as silver, clam shell, or agate. Some see a body no different from an ordinary person's. Some see sixteen feet; some thirty; some thousands of feet. Some see a form equal to Mount Sumeru; some see a body without limit or boundary. From a single voice, beings hear differently, each according to their own inclination. Each says to themselves: "He is teaching the Dharma to me." Such is the spiritual power of the *dharmakāya*: there is nothing it cannot accomplish. (T45n1856, 125b)

"Without fixed mode" indicates that the *dharmakāya* is not confined to a single determinate appearance. In the same assembly, sentient beings see different bodies and hear the same teaching in different ways according to their capacities and inclinations. None of these appearances exhausts the *dharmakāya*, yet each can communicate the Dharma effectively to the being who receives it. Responsive manifestation is therefore both varied and complete in its particular setting. The reality of the *dharmakāya* is not identified with one privileged form; it becomes accessible through forms adapted to different recipients.

Kumārajīva's theoretical synthesis of these arguments is concentrated in his distinction between "real dharmas" (*shifa* 實法) and "provisional names" (*jiaming* 假名). The *dharmakāya* "can be spoken of with provisional names, but cannot be sought by grasping at marks" (法身可以假名說, 不可以取相求). What the buddhas say "follows what sentient beings' minds and powers can understand, producing a dharma of benefit. There is no fixed mark, and they cannot be subjected to conceptual proliferation" (T45n1856, 127a). "Can be spoken of with provisional names" means that at the level of dharma-teaching, the *dharmakāya* has genuine speakability and can guide practitioners toward encounter. "Cannot be sought by grasping at marks" means that at the level of dharma-witnessing, the *dharmakāya* is not a substance with a fixed mark graspable as an object. As Xie (2011,

p. 51) summarized, Kumārajīva's denial of "real dharmas" means that the *dharmakāya* and dharma-nature "cannot be determinately distinguished as 'existent' or 'non-existent,' but can only be properly understood within the register of 'skillful provisional discourse.'"

Kumārajīva's account explains why the *dharmakāya* can appear in multiple forms without being confined to any one of them. It also makes the capacities of sentient beings increasingly important, since the Buddha is seen and heard differently according to what particular beings can receive. Sengzhao's discussion of "knowing through non-knowing" develops the responsive activity of the enlightened sage from another perspective: the sage responds to things without fixing the mind upon them. The capacities of ordinary beings who receive the teaching, however, remain less fully developed in these accounts. This recipient-side question becomes more prominent in Daosheng's discussions of inherent *Buddha-nature* and *ji*.

4. Ji-Yong-Jian-Ti (即用見體): Daosheng's Grounding of Ganying Through Inherent Buddha-Nature

Kumārajīva's account of "responding without fixed mode" makes differences among recipients important to the manifestation of the *dharmakāya*, but it does not offer a sustained account of the recipient's capacity. Daosheng's surviving materials bring that side of the problem more fully into view through two distinct lines of discussion. Passages on inherent *Buddha-nature* concern the possibility of awakening already present in sentient beings; passages on *ji* concern differences in disposition, receptivity, and the timing of instruction. These two lines should first be established independently before their philosophical relation is reconstructed. Read together, they make it possible to ask how an enduring ground becomes effective through a response suited to a particular recipient, without assuming that Daosheng himself formulated this question through the categories of the bifurcation and disclosure models.

Daosheng's biography provides a historical basis for placing his writings beside the preceding discussions. It records that he spent seven years on Mount Lu and later travelled to Chang'an to study under Kumārajīva; it also attributes to him a Treatise on the Formlessness of the *Dharmakāya* and a Treatise on Response as Conditioned (T50n2059, 366c). These facts establish his proximity to the intellectual settings in which *dharmakāya*, manifestation, and response were being discussed. They justify a historically grounded comparison, but they do not by themselves demonstrate that Daosheng inherited a single, fully formed problem from Huiyuan or consciously completed a trajectory begun by him.

4.1. The Sentient-Beings' Side: The Doctrinal Suspension of Ganying's Basis

Huiyuan placed the motive force of *ganying* within the spiritual state achieved through accumulated meditative practice. His *ji-gan* (寂感, stillness-resonance) model presents the bidirectional movement of feeling and response as something the cultivating subject reaches through practice: cultivation precedes and *ganying* follows. Fang Litian demonstrated that Huiyuan's understanding of dharma-nature was shaped by Sarvāstivāda influence and generated a persistent tension with the prajna teaching's account of dependent origination and emptiness (Fang 1984, pp. 136–52). Zhang Fenglei identifies the defining tendency this produced: Huiyuan's thought consistently pursued "something ultimate, unchanging, and absolutely substantial" as "the cornerstone of his entire Buddhist theory" (Zhang 2010, p. 70). The consequence for his account of *ganying* is direct. The structural priority of *ti* over *yong* persists. Sentient beings' capacity to resonate with the holy Way is an achievement of post-natal accumulated cultivation rather than an inherent reality. The temporal gap between substance and function remains constitutive of his framework, along with the corresponding gap between cultivation and *ganying*.

Sengzhao's approach moved further. In the *Essay on Prajna Having No Knowing*, he argued that the sage's mind responds freely to all phenomena precisely through "knowing of non-knowing":

> Because the sage's mind has no knowing, there is nothing it does not know. The knowing of non-knowing is called knowing all. (T45n1858, 153a)

The sage's non-grasping mind penetrates the ten thousand things without fixing on any of them. Xu Xiaoyue traced how Sengzhao's synthesis of Madhyamaka and Daoist thought produced a "substance-as-function" (*ji ti ji yong* 即體即用) orientation, marking a crucial moment in the Sinicization of Buddhist philosophy (Xu 1995). Yet Sengzhao's account remained entirely on the side of the enlightened sage. He described how one who has attained realization responds freely to all phenomena. He did not ask what basis ordinary sentient beings have for initiating *ganying* on their side. If sentient beings have no inner ground, their orientation toward the *dharmakāya* is a one-sided appeal rather than the genuinely bidirectional exchange that *ganying* requires. The sage's side has a mind capable of resonant response. The question of whether sentient beings have a nature capable of resonating back remains unanswered.

Against this background, Daosheng's distinctive contribution lies in connecting the possibility of response with what is already present in sentient beings. Practice does not create the possibility of awakening from nothing; it enables an inherent capacity to become manifest. This change gives the recipient a more substantial place in the explanation of *ganying*. It also raises a further question: How does an inherent possibility become receptive to a particular teaching at a particular moment? Daosheng's discussion of *ji* addresses this more concrete level of response.

4.2. Inherent Buddha-Nature: The Complete Internalization of Ganying's Basis

The theoretical core of Daosheng's thought is the claim that all sentient beings inherently possess Buddha-nature. This is not merely an assertion about the possibility of moral transformation. It is a structural claim about where *ganying*'s basis is to be located. If Buddha-nature is primordially present within sentient beings' existential structure, then the capacity for *ganying* is not something cultivation produces. It is something cultivation reveals: a ground that was always already there, awaiting disclosure.

A passage attributed to Daosheng in Baoliang's *Collected Explanations on the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* brings this understanding of *Buddha-nature* into focus:

> Earlier we said the "self" is the treasure-store of the Buddha; now we say Buddha-nature is the "self." This is a reciprocal exchange of language. (T37n1763, 448b)

The deployment of "self" (*wo* 我) to designate Buddha-nature is doctrinally precise. This is not the substantialist self of non-Buddhist doctrine. Rather, it uses the interiority and immediacy that "self" connotes to mark Buddha-nature's status for sentient beings: not something bestowed from outside, but the primordially present ground of buddhahood already within their own existence. Lai Yonghai argued that this "self" of Buddha-nature is "a unity of self and non-self" and "the original nature and original substance of sentient beings," being "neither the self within samsara nor the worldly self" (Lai 2010, pp. 58–59). The doctrinal weight of this formulation lies in its structural implication. Since Buddha-nature is already within sentient beings' existential structure, cultivation's function is not to create it but to disclose what was always already present.

Daosheng's surviving materials place two related but distinct considerations side by side. Passages attributed to him in Baoliang's Collected Explanations describe *Buddha-nature* as what sentient beings possess but fail to see (T37n1763, 448b); the *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra* explains the diversity of teaching through differences in *ji* and states that

"the capacities of beings stimulate the sage, and the sage can extend a response" (物機感聖, 聖能垂應; X27n0577, 1b). The texts do not explicitly identify *ji* as the activation of *Buddha-nature*. The connection proposed here is therefore reconstructive: *Buddha-nature* accounts for the universal possibility of awakening, whereas *ji* accounts for the differentiated conditions and timing under which a teaching becomes effective. *Ganying* names the timely meeting of the sage's response with the recipient's capacity; it does not produce *Buddha-nature* but provides an occasion on which what is inherent can become manifest and soteriologically effective.

4.3. Ganying as the Way's Self-Disclosure: The Doctrinal Instantiation of Ji-Yong-Jian-Ti (即用見體)

Daosheng's discussion shifts attention from the form of manifestation to the capacity of the being who receives it. Kumārajīva shows why the *dharmakāya* can appear differently without being exhausted by any single appearance; Daosheng shows why those appearances must also correspond to differences among sentient beings. *Ganying* consequently involves two coordinated conditions: the Buddha's response must take a form appropriate to the recipient, and the recipient must possess the *ji* through which that response can be received. Their correspondence makes the manifestation concrete and soteriologically effective.

Daosheng makes the reciprocal and temporal structure of response especially clear in his gloss on "at one time": "Time means that the capacities of beings stimulate the sage, the sage can extend a response, and the paths of ordinary beings and the sage intersect without missing the proper occasion" (時者, 物機感聖, 聖能垂應, 凡聖道交, 不失良機; X27n0577, 1b). This passage directly supports three limited claims: response involves both the recipient's *ji* and the sage's answering activity; their meeting depends upon an appropriate occasion; and teaching becomes effective through their correspondence. It does not, by itself, state that *Buddha-nature* and *ji* are identical or that the two poles of *ganying* are ontologically constituted by the relation.

The opening of Daosheng's *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra* gives this correspondence between response and recipient capacity a concise formulation:

> Truly, the *ji*-resonance of living beings is not uniform, and the means of awakening take ten thousand forms. Hence the great sage, while appearing to have several partial streams, manifests graduated teachings. (X27n0577, 1b)

Daosheng's statement that "the capacities and responses of living beings are not uniform" (蒼生機感不一) makes differences among recipients central to the explanation of the Buddha's teaching. Read together with his account of the "proper occasion," it shows that manifestation must be suited to the being who receives it. His passages on *Buddha-nature* add a distinct claim: the possibility of awakening is not bestowed upon sentient beings from outside. These materials do not show that Daosheng formulated a *ti-yong* theory of *ganying* or the expression *ji-yong-jian-ti*. Within the analytical framework of this article, however, their conjunction permits a further reconstruction: *ti* becomes accessible and soteriologically effective through responsive activity without being produced by that activity. Daosheng thus provides the strongest textual basis for the recipient side of the reconstruction, but he should not be described as having completed a linear doctrinal transformation from the bifurcation model to the disclosure model.

5. Conclusions: From Distinguishing Ti (體) and Yong (用) to Perceiving Ti (體) Through Yong (用)

The exchange between Yin Zhongkan and Huiyuan places *ganying* within a question concerning source, activity, and manifestation. Yin's example of the copper moun-

tain and spirit bell evokes the resonance of distinct things belonging to the same category. Huiyuan's answer gives *ganying* a more fundamental role, although the meaning of his "smile and no reply" remains open. His later questions concerning the *dharmakāya* make the underlying difficulty clearer: how can an ultimate ground that exceeds change and determinate form become available through responsive activity? This question provides the point of departure for the discussions examined in this article.

Huiyuan, Kumārajīva, and Daosheng approach this question from different directions. Huiyuan distinguishes an ultimate source from the faculties and activities involved in response, thereby exposing the difficulty of connecting an unchanging *dharmakāya* with concrete manifestation. Kumārajīva's discussions of "not-form," the pool-water analogy, and "responding without fixed mode" explain how the *dharmakāya* can appear through multiple forms without being exhausted by any one of them. Daosheng's accounts of inherent *Buddha-nature* and differentiated *ji* bring the recipient's capacity more fully into the explanation of effective response. The continuity among them lies in the problem they address; the differences lie in the aspects of that problem that are brought to the foreground.

The movement from "distinguishing *ti* and *yong*" to "perceiving *ti* through *yong*" can now be stated more precisely. In the former, explanation begins from the distinction between an enduring source and the activity that proceeds from it. In the latter, attention turns to the way that source becomes perceptible and effective through activity. Kumārajīva's analogies retain a source while denying that any single fixed form can exhaust it; Daosheng's account adds the recipient's *ji* as a condition of effective response. *Ti* is thus encountered through *yong*, not because *yong* brings *ti* into existence but because responsive activity is the medium through which its presence and efficacy become manifest.

Ganying consequently comes to involve more than an external correspondence between already determinate things. It describes the process through which the *dharmakāya* becomes present in forms suited to the capacities of sentient beings. The contrast with the copper mountain and spirit bell is therefore a contrast between two levels of explanation. Like-kind resonance explains why one thing answers another within a shared category; Buddhist accounts of *ganying* ask how a reality beyond determinate form becomes manifest in ways capable of transforming those who receive it. This shift gives *ganying* a distinctly soteriological significance and prepares questions that would receive further development, in different doctrinal settings, in later Chinese Buddhist traditions (Kang 2025).

The significance of these discussions lies in the new weight they give to manifestation and reception. Huiyuan makes the relation between an unchanging ground and responsive activity into a sustained doctrinal problem. Kumārajīva shows how the *dharmakāya* can become present through multiple forms without being confined to any of them. Daosheng shows why the efficacy of those forms also depends upon the capacities of the beings who receive them. Taken together, their writings trace a shift from asking what fixed form carries the reality of the *dharmakāya* to asking how that reality becomes accessible and transformative in particular acts of response. "Perceiving *ti* through *yong*" gives concise expression to this shift: the ground is encountered in the activity through which it becomes manifest and effective.

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Notes

[1] (S. Chen 2007) Chen distinguishes two types of "intellectual-historical events": events that exert historical influence on thought and events that possess intrinsic philosophical value. The latter, though not systematic treatises, contain rich meanings and can stimulate later thinkers. The exchange between Yin Zhongkan (殷仲堪) and Huiyuan (慧遠) belongs to this second type.

[2] The expression "perceiving *ti* through *yong*" (即用見體, *ji-yong-jian-ti*) emphasizes a direction of disclosure. It differs in emphasis from such formulations as "substance and function as one" (即體即用) or "the interpenetration of substance and function" (體用相即), which describe the non-duality of *ti* and *yong*. *Ji-yong-jian-ti* draws attention instead to the way *ti* becomes perceptible and effective through the activity of *ganying*. The expression does not imply that *yong* produces *ti*; it indicates that responsive activity is the medium through which *ti* can be encountered in concrete experience and practice.

[3] (Tang [1938] 1997) Chapters eleven through fifteen offer the most systematic account of the Eastern Jin scholastic Buddhist landscape and remain an indispensable foundational reference.

[4] (Fang 1984, pp. 136–52) Fang notes that Huiyuan's understanding of dharma-nature was influenced by Vatsiputriya (犢子部) thought, which generated a tension with the prajna teaching's "arising from conditions and empty in nature."

[5] Madhyamaka (中觀, Zhongguan) is the Buddhist philosophical tradition founded by Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE), which holds that all phenomena lack intrinsic, self-subsisting existence and are constituted solely through dependent relational arising. Because this logic denies that any entity—including the *dharmakāya*—possesses pre-given, self-subsisting substance, it stands in direct structural tension with the bifurcation model's "ti-first" presupposition. Kumārajīva was the primary transmitter of Madhyamaka thought to China, translating its foundational texts into Chinese.

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