



from

A history of Indian Buddhism : from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna /

Hirakawa Akira ; translated and edited by Paul Groner.

Chapter 13. *The Elimination of Defilements and the Path to Enlightenment*

defilement (*kleśa*) of
raving (*lobha*)

to be eliminated through
an understanding of

suffering (*duḥkha*)

in

the desire-realm (*kāma-dhātu*)



Foreword

First and foremost, I would like to touch upon the reasons behind my decision to dedicate this essay to the practice of a living artist whom I befriended personally during my time as a student. Within the framework of the assignment I had the liberty to choose an artist's publication made after 1960s to investigate in detail. The publication had to be available for personal physical consultation. Antwerp has several fascinating places where such a consultation could be possible, especially if my interest was calibrated towards the local art scene. My first instinct was to scout the local museum libraries for suitable publications available for loan. My second would be to move towards the Letterenhuis and the Heritage library at Conscienceplein.

While browsing within the digital catalogues I had an inclination to reduce the immediate availability circle to an even smaller periphery. Being a student at the Royal Academy, I am perceptive to the artistic activity of my fellow colleagues around me. The interest for self – publishing is strong within every department. Over the course of my study years I accumulated a very humble collection of artist's publications produced by students, many of whom are my friends. As such I stopped looking far and revisited my own prized possessions. An essay on them might be a more meaningful contribution from my part than on an artist already thoroughly studied by scholars.

Another reason for choosing an artist within my own environment is for the benefit of the truest availability that there can be. It is an availability that transcends just the physical existence of the publication itself; it is a joy to live out the contemporary to its fullest. Through years of friendship I observed, learned and witnessed enough to fill out beyond the necessary page requirement.

History of acquirement and first impression

This essay attempts to illuminate the artistic practice of Haoran Xu, specifically his project on 108 Defilements. Throughout I will give a brief personally interpreted overview of his oeuvre followed by an analysis of the publication *108 Defilements*.

During the Art Book Fair hosted by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp in 2023, Haoran has been selling his publications presented previously at the final jury. At the time, I had the chance to briefly witness the build-up at the Wintergarden. It consisted of an outdoor tent with a setup inside, instigating you to crawl in for further investigation. Outside the tent Haoran was balancing a tiny wooden construction on the floor that kept falling apart. Whether he succeeded in stabilizing it for his final presentation has remained a mystery to me. I myself tried to keep it in place but failed.

Haoran showed me a little booklet, slightly withered already at that time, with a bright yellow shape glaring on the cover. It was quite full with numerous pages for such a small book. It appeared used, but in no way fragile. Its timid size, no larger than 10 x 16 cm, fit snugly in my hand. The pages inside have been printed on a very thin paper with a grey tint, probably a newsprint paper. The pages have been sewn by hand and the cover glued at the spine. Upon rotation the back cover seemed to be similar to the front but that was just the first impression.

The first pages are viewed horizontally requiring the reader to turn the book. As there are no writings anywhere on the cover or the spine suggesting the proper holding direction and the image is breaching into abstraction, the turned text greets you with a feeling of slight surprise that seems to be unfounded. The very first page is nothing more than a source and the title of a chapter from that source. The chapter is then laid out over the following pages. This chapter, which in hindsight functions as an introduction into the topic, note not the publication or the project itself, is broken by a brief announcement and a photograph positioned over the full spread. After the introduction follow the actual 108 Defilements one page at a time.

At the time of the Art Book Fair we exchanged publications. Thus I obtained a booklet about the publication *108 Defilements*. Haoran later supplied me with the original publication to have a better understanding of his work. In this essay I will present the 108 Defilements as well as a general overview of his oeuvre.

Overview

When introducing the oeuvre of Xu Haoran (1997, Qiqihar), it is impossible not to mention his website.¹ This is the main source I will be using for this part of my analysis. For the first time visitor of his website the site might resemble a game or a simulation of a sort. The idea of a typical informative quality is almost non present: there is no biography, no cv and the actual portfolio is not obviously displayed. You enter a study filled chaotically with objects and its own fragmentations.

The objects are clickable and some are interactive. They are all a project by themselves represented by a symbol with an assigned place. By clicking on an object you are submersed into the project it relates to. The whole spectrum of his works are quite multifaceted – there are installations, animations, drawings, writings and made objects.

Intermezzo

By clicking on the tent within the house you are introduced to *Intermezzo*, an installation about the Bachelor project assignment of last year. Graphic design students are tasked with choosing a word from a provided list of topics and developing their project on the base of their choice. Haoran chose the word *Intermezzo* in a manner of a coincidence. As he relayed to me, shortly before making a choice, he listened to Brahms' third movement of *Intermezzi* op. 117, which he enjoyed very much. An *Intermezzo*, to explain briefly, is a shorter interlude between two other, more important pieces of an opera. Though *intermezzi* were intended as a form of a connection between two following parts in play, many of them hold their own significance and virtuosity. In this manner Haoran used his Premaster study as an *Intermezzo* to be filled by various interests and curiosities. On his website the *Intermezzo* is bound directly to his living space. For the jury the living space was moved briefly to the Wintergarden in the form of a tent.

In the center of the study I located an orange. This orange stands for a little box that Haoran made out of an actual orange peel as an element of his *Intermezzo*. The flesh of the orange was carefully extracted out of a small incision and the peel molded into the container and the lid. That way it dried. I attempted to replicate the process but failed.

Under the table is a framed photograph of a moth. This moth entered the space of the *Intermezzo* accidentally as a caterpillar on a plant and developed over the course of time into a moth which was released after its metamorphosis. What was left is a picture in a frame.

¹ See xoesan.com

Devaloka

For the presentation of the following project it is important to mention that Haoran is deeply involved with the teachings of Chan Buddhism, an area in which I possess no knowledge whatsoever. My descriptions are based on what I understand from our talks and the explanations he has given me.

One of the latest projects can be found on the website under the symbol of a blue cap. The term *Devaloka* originates from Sanskrit and means something akin to the definition of a realm, or a world. The *Devaloka* are categorized into three realms: the formless realm *Arupyadhatu*, the form realm *Rupadhatu* and the realm of desires *Kamadhatu*. These realms are themselves separated into sub-realms. I have taken a look at the source material that Haoran used to base his research on but the text is written in Mandarin, so I had to rely mainly on the brief introduction he has given me. Within these realms *devas* (deities, godly beings) are residing. The earthly realm is part of the realm of desires.

The design of the cap was developed from this exact perspective of the earthly realm with a satirical touch on human desires – it mimics the signature Balenciaga cap. Instead of the usual logo, in a similar manner to the original, the level of the *deva* is sewn unto the cap in Sanskrit. Inside the cap as a little insert that usually holds washing instructions and the material composition, Haoran included the information about the separate *deva* in a long scroll.

The understanding of the realms within Buddhism will be beneficial for the next part of the essay – the publication on 108 Defilements.

108 Defilements

To explain the meaning of the word defilement I will refer to the introduction provided by the publication 108 Defilements. This introduction is a chapter on the elimination of defilements taken out of A history of Indian Buddhism by Hiraakawa Akira, translated by Paul Groner. Defilements are afflictions of the body and mind that prevent tranquility. In the publication they are referred to as *klesa*, originating from Sanskrit root *klis* and meaning *to afflict*. The path to enlightenment is the elimination of these *klesas*.

The number 108 is the result of a very specific calculation arising from the classification of the defilements within Buddhism. A common way of classifying these afflictions is through the knowledge that eliminates them. Generally, this system of classification composes 98 proclivities from the above mentioned 108 and the resting 10 bonds. “When the ten proclivities are considered in terms of the realms in which they exist, the types of mind in which they function, and the manner in which they can be eliminated, a list of ninety-eight proclivities is produced.”² Haoran follows this exact system described in the quote taken from his main reference for the 108 Defilements. He writes out every element of the classification which is usually just gathered together in a calculated formula, one *klesa* at a time. The introduction begins with the 10 proclivities described as craving *lobha*, hatred *dvesa*, delusion *moha*, pride *mana*, wrong views *drsti*, doubt *vicikitsa*, torpor *styana*, and distraction *auddhatya*. The cravings are further divided into cravings for desirable objects and cravings for continued existence. The latter is separated into cravings for continued existence in the form-realm and the formless realm.

The wrong views are in themselves separated into another 5 proclivities: belief in a self, clinging to the extremes of eternalism or annihilation, disbelief in causation, clinging to wrong views, and the belief that rituals lead to salvation. For the system of classification that Haoran used the following ten proclivities are the foundation: *lobha*, *dvesa*, *moha*, *mana*, *vicikitsa* and the five subcategories of *drsti*.

“By classifying defilements according to the realm to which they pertain and how they are eliminated, a list of ninety-eight is produced.”² These ten defilements are then divided into the three realms they are sustained in. To understand the process of elimination of these afflictions it is important to mention the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. To summarize briefly, they are a framework for all Buddhist teachings which explain what suffering

² Taken directly from the introduction of the 108 Defilements and A history of Indian Buddhism, Hiraakawa Akira

duhkha is and how it can be overcome.³ In the publication of 108 Defilements Haoran takes out these Truths from the original text as understanding of suffering, cause of suffering, extinction of suffering, the way that leads to cessation of suffering, and elimination through practicing the path of meditation.

In the desire realm thirty-six proclivities can be found. Ten of them are eliminated by the understanding of suffering. Seven are cut off by the noble truth of the cause of suffering. The same seven are eliminated by extinction of suffering. Eight defilements are eliminated through the way that leads to cessation of suffering or also called the Truth of the path. And the last four of the desire realm are cut off through meditation.

The realms of form and the formless *dhatu* count thirty-one defilements each. Nine of the are eliminated by understanding of suffering, six by understanding the cause of suffering, another six by extinction of suffering. Seven by the way that leads to cessation of suffering and three by the path of meditation.

The last ten bonds are not specified in any way. Haoran did not give any particular information on how to eliminate them and in which realms they are found. This piece of information is not provided by the text he used as a source. These bonds are absence of shame, absence of embarrassment, jealousy, parsimony, remorse, drowsiness, distraction, torpor, anger, and concealment of wrongdoing.

$36+31+31+10 = 108$

³ https://www.tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Four_Noble_Truths

Composition and personal thoughts

The publication has initially been printed in a very small edition, but reprinted during the last months into an edition of 100 in Langfang, China. The intention behind the reprinting is to have enough copies to distribute or sell cheaply. The pages account to 108 plus the introduction chapter and bibliography. The cover shows a sticker used to catch flies around plants from both sides, its front on the front and its back on the back. The photography features zoom-ins of the sticker and one spread of the plants. The size is intended to imitate the book of psalms so commonly distributed by Christian organizations. The content of the defilements is clipped out directly out of A history of Indian Buddhism as a collage.

When I asked Haoran about the intent of making this book, he replied that never before has he seen the defilements written out one by one, all 108 of them. Considering the importance of this part in the teachings of Buddhism, he felt the need to rectify this inconsistency. He used the classification I described above to compose every proclivity and position each on one page. I, personally, almost see a checklist on the path towards enlightenment within this idea. It is a way of dividing a vast unachievable journey into small clearly defined steps. This zooming in is reflected in the motive of the flies who suffered by the afflictions of their desires. The image of their suffering is a telling accompaniment to the *klesa*. Haoran views this project in a satirical light.

Initially I was drawn to the book purely by its appearance. The format seemed very inviting and the book is satisfying to hold in your hand. As I had no previous knowledge about Buddhism, the text looked like a mystified chant. The provided introduction in the beginning of the book is enough of a guide to understand the concept of the classification even for a reader like me.

Haoran's work and interests merge into his way of living where one becomes inseparable from another. This gives a very personal feeling to his oeuvre. Many times I felt like an intruder when asking him to provide more explanation on the topic for this essay. Haoran is an artist who is very observational and aware. His works are often laced with his own comedic commentary about the circumstances he encounters. It was a pleasure to receive an insight into the making of his projects.





The images are taken directly from Haoran Xu's website. I feel the need to express my gratitude to Haoran for providing me his publications and answering my questions.