

THE SIX DHARMA GATES TO THE SUBLIME

六妙法門

By Śramaṇa Zhiyi (Chih-i)
From Tiantai Mountain's Dhyāna Cultivation Monastery

天台山修禪寺沙門智顓述

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

比丘恆授法友英譯

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The Great Master of Tiantai Mountain set forth these Dharma gates in this summary form at the Capital's Waguan Monastery.

Dhyāna Master Zhiyi's Preface

As for the "six gates to the sublime (*praṇīta*)," they constitute the very root of one's internal practice and the essential route to realization of the paths of the Three Vehicles.² Hence, when Shākyamuni first arrived at the Bodhi Tree³ and sat down in lotus posture on the cushion of grass, "He directed his thought inwardly to *ānāpāna*:⁴ first, counting (*gaṇanā*); second, following (*anugamaḥ*); third, stabilization (*sthānam*), fourth, contemplation (*upalakṣaṇā*); fifth, turning (*vivartanā*); and sixth, purification (*pariśuddhiḥ*)."⁵ It was because of this that the myriad practices⁶ opened forth and took effect, resulting in the subduing of the demons and the realization of the Path.

One should realize that the Buddha is the model for beings. Since he pointed out his own tracks in this fashion, how then could the orthodox personages of the Three Vehicles fail to all travel together along this road?

As for the "six," it is simply a dharma of enumeration. One explains dhyāna meditation by resort to a numerical formula. Hence we refer here to "six." This is just as when the Buddha sometimes discoursed on dhyāna according to a singular enumeration, namely the so-called "single-practice" samādhi, or did so according to a two-fold enumeration, namely first, calming (*śamatha*), and second, insight (*vipaśyanā*).

Sometimes he explained according to a threefold enumeration, namely the three samādhis. Sometimes, it was according to a four-fold enumeration, specifically, according to the four dhyānas. Sometimes it was according to a five-fold enumeration, the so-called "five-gate" dhyāna.⁷ Sometimes, it was according to a six-fold enumeration, namely these six gates to the sublime. Sometimes, it was according to a seven-fold enumeration, the so-called "seven dependable absorptions."⁸ Sometimes, it was according to an eight-fold enumeration, namely the eight liberations (*vimokṣa*). Sometimes, it was according to a nine-fold enumeration, namely according to

the nine sequential absorptions.⁹ Sometimes, it was according to a ten-fold enumeration, namely according to the ten branches of dhyāna.¹⁰ In a manner such as this, it may reach even to a hundred thousand myriads of *koṭīs* of *asaṃkhyeyas* of indescribably numerous gateways to samādhi.

All of these are instances of discussing the dhyānas according to numerical categories. Although the numerical categories may be either greater or lesser in number, when one exhausts all of the characteristic aspects of these dharmas, not a one of them fails to be mutually subsumed by the others. It is because of differences in the teaching opportunities presented by different beings and the differences in their levels of awakening that there is this increase and decrease in numerical discriminations set forth for their benefit.

Now, when we speak of “six,” it is simply a case of using a dharma of enumeration to title the topics discussed. As for “sublime” (*praṇīta*), its meanings are numerous. If one wishes to discuss its orthodox primary meaning, it is just the nirvāṇa associated with the truth of cessation. Hence, among the four “practice-aspects” associated with [the truth of] cessation, we speak of: cessation (*nirodha*); tranquility (*śānta*); the sublime (*praṇīta*); and abandonment (*niḥsaraṇa*).¹¹ It is not the case that “nirvāṇa” involves either an instance of “cutting off” or an instance of “permanence.” Though it might be [conceived of as] “existent,” it would thus be a difficult thing to mesh with. Though it might be [conceived of as] “non-existent,” it would thus be more easily realized. Hence it is described as “sublime.”

Because these six dharmas facilitate one’s ability to penetrate on through, they are therefore referred to as “gates.” Although there are six of these gates, they are no different in their ability to facilitate one’s encounter with the sublime. Thus the scriptures declare, “As for nirvāṇa, the true Dharma jewel, beings enter it through many different gates.”¹²

This is but a general explanation of the greater meaning of the six gates to the sublime. This treatment of the greater meaning of the six gates to the sublime shall consist of ten sections:

1. The six gates to the sublime in relation to the dhyāna absorptions.
2. The six gates to the sublime in terms of sequential development.
3. The six gates to the sublime in accordance with suitability.

4. The six gates to the sublime as means of counteraction.
5. The six gates to the sublime in terms of mutual inclusion.
6. The six gates to the sublime in terms of identities and differences. [549b]
7. The six gates to the sublime in accordance with the "reversed" orientation.
8. The six gates to the sublime according to contemplation of the mind.
9. The six gates to the sublime according to the perfect contemplation.
10. The six gates to the sublime in accordance with the signs of realization.