

THE ESSENTIALS of BUDDHIST MEDITATION

The Classic *Śamatha-Vipaśyanā* Meditation Manual:

*The Essentials for Practicing
Calming-and-Insight & Dhyāna Meditation*

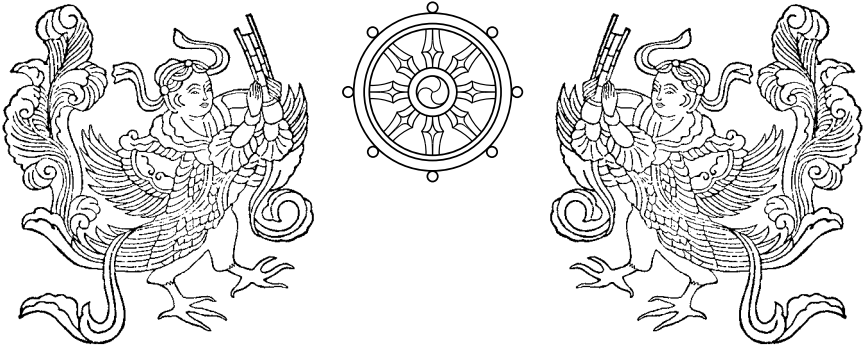
修習止觀坐禪法要

By the Great Tiantai Meditation Master & Exegete:

Śramaṇa Zhiyi (Chih-i)

(538–597 CE)

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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INTRODUCTION

The Nature and Present Import of This Text

Due to its clarity and comprehensiveness in describing the crucially important factors involved in understanding and practicing Buddhist meditation, this present work, *The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation*, is one of the most important introductory meditation manuals ever authored in the two millennia-long course of Sino-Buddhist history.

These very same qualities of clarity and comprehensiveness make this text by Master Zhiyi (Chih-i) a genuinely useful and reliable meditation-instruction resource for English-speaking students of the Buddha's Dharma. Although relatively short, *The Essentials* includes in condensed form the entire scope of teachings necessary for practicing what is right and avoiding what is wrong as one pursues the practice of Buddhist meditation. As such, it offers both the beginning student and the long-term Dharma practitioner immediate access to the essentials required for learning, enhancing, or rectifying Buddhist meditation practice.

This is equally true for traditions of practice not as readily identifiable with "calming-and-insight" training, as for example Ch'an meditation. Indeed, it is hard to envision how a practitioner of Ch'an meditation could make very meaningful progress in that radical and sudden approach to meditation without having first developed a solid understanding and practice of most of what is taught in Master Zhiyi's *Essentials of Buddhist Meditation*.

The Author and His Works on Meditation

The author of this text is the famous meditation master and exegete, Śramaṇa Zhiyi (538–597 CE), one of the most brilliant and widely-respected figures in the history of Chinese Buddhism, a monastic eminence well-known for textual exegesis on numerous works, for brilliance in refining and broadening the Tiantai teaching school's hermeneutic presentation, and for authoring Chinese Buddhism's four most important meditation texts explaining right practice of the calming-and-insight meditation discipline standard in Indian Buddhism. Specifically, those works are:

1. *The Great Calming-and-Insight* (摩訶止觀 / T46.1911.001–140)
2. *An Explanation of the Dharma Gateway of Dhyāna Pāramitā* (釋禪波羅蜜次第法門 / T46.1916.475–548)
3. *The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation* (修習止觀坐禪法要 / T46.1915.462–475)
4. *The Six Gates to the Sublime* (六妙法門 / T46.1917.549–555)

Of the above four texts, this translation is the third. (I have also translated the fourth and am publishing it under separate cover.)

The Circumstances Occasioning the Writing of this Text

The immediate personal cause for the writing of this text was Master Zhiyi's desire to produce a simple but comprehensive meditation text to help his brother break through life-threatening karmic obstacles.

The larger cause for writing this text was the wish to introduce a short and easily understood foundational meditation manual clarifying right meditation practice for wider use among Buddhist practitioners. This was done at a time still early in the history of Buddhism in China when right meditation practice was not always well understood by students of Dharma and when instruction in meditation was not universally available. Although deep understanding of meditation practice was probably quite common among the learned monastic elites, short, clear, and comprehensive texts addressing the needs of the larger Buddhist community were rare.

Primary Doctrinal Focus of this Text

The terms I render in the title and throughout the text as “calming-and-insight” are the standard Buddhist technical terms describing the primary aspects of traditional Indian Buddhist meditation (Sanskrit: *śamatha-vipaśyanā*; Pali: *samatha-vipassanā*). Modern Tibetan-tradition translations commonly render these primary meditation practice elements with such terms as “calm abiding and special insight” (*zhi gnas, lhag mthong*). Southern-tradition translations commonly refer to the former as “calming meditation” or “*samatha* meditation” (often linking it to breath-focused meditation or *ānāpāna*), while identifying the latter as “insight,” “insight meditation,” or “vipassana meditation.”

Given this common ground as a point of reference, we may realize that this short work provides training in the bases for correct understanding and practice of the most standard form of meditation

common to all Buddhist traditions. This work is in no way a text devoted to uniquely Sino-Buddhist forms of meditation. The roots of all teachings presented in *Essentials* are standard in classic Indian Buddhism. Although it would be easy enough to demonstrate how calming-and-contemplation meditation is fundamentally no different from Bodhidharma's Ch'an meditation (Sanskrit: *dhyaṇa*; Korean: *son*; Japanese: *zen*), this work not only does not teach "Ch'an" *per se*, it does not even mention it.

The Structure of the Text

I have included the preface written by the Song dynasty monk, Yuanzhao, half a millennium after Master Zhiyi passed on because it so well describes the text's content and significance.

The *Essentials* text proper begins with a brief prefatory discussion by Master Zhiyi himself in which he emphasizes the importance of balanced calming-and-insight practice which does not favor the stillness of "calming" over the development of wisdom realizations through analytic "insight" and does not favor "insight" over "calming." He compares the two primary elements of meditation practice to the two wheels of a cart or the two wings of a bird, two cases wherein "imbalance" is clearly untenable.

Master Zhiyi then segues into the text proper by listing the ten chapter titles. The chapters are arranged in a practical sequence proceeding from preliminaries to actual practice to important related topics. I now provide a brief content synopsis for each chapter:

Chapter One: "Fulfillment of Prerequisite Conditions." The concerns here are the prerequisite needs of: moral virtue and purification of bad karma; adequacy of clothing, food, and domicile; withdrawal from involvements; and proximity to spiritual guidance from a genuinely reliable source.

Chapter Two: "Renunciation of Desires." The topic here is facilitating focused meditation practice by withdrawal from the distractions inherent in attachment to sense-object data comprised by visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touchables.

Chapter Three: "Elimination of the Hindrances." The five hindrances discussed are: desire in the mind for the aforementioned sense objects; ill-will; "lethargy-and-sleepiness"; "excitedness-and-regretfulness"; and afflicted doubt in self, guru, or Dharma.

Chapter Four: "Making Adjustments." The primary topics here are: a) the necessary adjustments to food and sleep when not

actually seated in meditation; and b) the appropriate adjustments in body, breath, and mind when entering meditation, abiding in meditation, and emerging from meditation.

Chapter Five: "Implementation of Skillful Means." This is a very brief discussion of five essential factors as they apply to the practice of meditation, namely: zeal, vigor, mindfulness, wise discernment, and single-mindedness.

Chapter Six: "The Actual Cultivation." This very detailed chapter goes directly into the practice of calming-and-insight, giving particular focus to: countering mental coarseness and scatteredness; countering "sinking" and "floating" mind states; applying either calming or insight as best suited to exigent circumstances; countering "subtle" mind states conducive to attachment; and using calming-and-insight to achieve balance between meditative absorption and wisdom. Instruction is provided regarding the use of calming-and-contemplation at the gates of each of the sense gates of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellectual mind and also while sitting, standing, walking, lying down, talking, and doing things.

Chapter Seven: "Manifestation of Roots of Goodness." This chapter primarily covers mind states arising in meditation as effects from specific types of prior spiritual cultivation, in particular: cultivation of the internal energetics of meditation; contemplation of impurity; cultivation of kindness; contemplation of causality, cultivation of mindfulness of the Buddha. It then deals with the issue of distinguishing between signs of false meditative absorptions and signs of genuine meditative absorptions. The chapter concludes with an exhortation to pursue the establishment of yet more good karmic causes productive of auspicious future karmic effects.

Chapter Eight: "Recognition of the Work of Demons." This chapter deals with a topic little discussed in Western Buddhist circles, that of "demons," phenomena dismissed by many as ancient superstition. Here, the various categories of problematic ghosts, spirits, and demon-generated afflictions are catalogued along with the means of driving them away through calming, through insight, through rectification of mind, through mantras, through repentances, through precept recitation, through uncompromising ongoing karmic correctness, and through assistance of the guru.

Chapter Nine: "Treatment of Disorders." This chapter deals with traditional means of countering physical and mental disturbances arising through karmic obstacles or unskillful meditation practice.

Chapter Ten: “Realization of the Fruits.” The concerns here are in distinguishing between provisional and ultimate contemplations while also describing the nature of the high-level, later-stage meditation practice of those well advanced on the path to buddhahood. The discussion concludes with a clear statement of essential prerequisites for success in meditation practice.

Special Aspects of This Text

In reflecting on the matter, I have noticed that this particular work by Master Zhiyi possesses a number of important special aspects making it unique among Buddhist meditation texts so far available in English translation, among which are the following:

First, unlike most works dealing with calming-and-insight, even though its teachings are for the most part independent of any particular tradition, the doctrinal framing of this text is distinctly mahāyānistic. By this, I mean to say that the tenor of its discussions more-or-less assume that all practice is carried out in the context of the altruistic path devoted to universal spiritual liberation.

Concrete manifestations of this “mahāyānistic orientation” are found in a few of the teachings found in *The Essentials*. For instance: a) In the chapter on the prerequisites as it relates to purification of negative karma through repentances; b) In the chapter on dealing with demons, specifically in the recommendation of mantras as means to counter negative influences; and c) In the chapter on realization of the fruits of practice, specifically as regards distinguishing what is and is not an “ultimate” contemplation.

Second, this text also seems to be unique among meditation texts found in English translation in the unusual comprehensiveness of the topics it covers. That is to say, it does not simply describe the details of how to meditate. Rather it deals with everything of genuine importance related to the practice of meditation. Examples of these crucial related issues include specific instructions on:

1. Fulfilling crucial prerequisite conditions which are essential to entering deep meditation states.
2. Eliminating the five hindrances blocking all meaningful progress in cultivating meditation.
3. Making essential adjustments to food, sleep, body, breath, and mind.

4. Dealing with unbalanced development of calming (*śamatha*) versus insight (*vipāśyanā*) so as to ensure acquisition of not just meditative absorption, but also genuine wisdom.
5. Countering “floating” mind states and “sinking” mind states blocking entry into meditative absorption.
6. Distinguishing between false and deceptive meditation states leading away from the Path and genuinely beneficial meditation states serving progress on the Path.
7. Countering various types of meditation sickness and negative spiritual influences commonly encountered in the cultivation of meditative absorption.

Third, *The Essentials* may also be unique in describing “insight” (*vipāśyanā*) at the highest level of realization of emptiness of all encountered phenomena at each of the six sense gates and in all circumstances, whether walking, sitting, standing, lying down, doing things, or talking, while describing “calming” (*śamatha*) at the highest level of realization wherein cognition of reality silences discursive thought and enforces deep wakeful serenity.

As a side note, reflection on the above-mentioned definitions of “calming” and “insight” makes the rationale behind classic Chinese “Ch’an” practice much easier to grasp for those heretofore inured to more classic dogmas of what is and is not calming-and-insight meditation. In short, reflecting on this, one realizes that Ch’an practice is a radically direct methodology for achieving the very same aims of calming-and-contemplation and is no different from calming-and-insight practice. When correctly understood and practiced, Bodhidharma’s Ch’an meditation precipitates and enforces both complete “calming” and complete “insight.”

Having first studied the present text, the identity of Ch’an practice with the other more widely recognized traditions of Indian Buddhist meditation becomes yet more obvious when one proceeds next to study Master Zhiyi’s other short meditation text, *The Six Gates to the Sublime* which is also devoted to explaining a classic approach of early Indian Buddhist meditation practice.

Stylistic Factors Affecting this Translation

Although I don’t doubt there is room to improve the smoothness of this translation even while retaining precise accuracy, there nonetheless are some stylistic limitations and circumlocutional prolixity imposed by my default insistence on strictly literal translation. Also,

the translation style may seem archaic or formal. This is for the most part because the Chinese text itself is written in a somewhat archaic and formal style.

Although many outline headings originate with Master Baojing's outline of the text, most of the numerous and detailed outline headings found in the English translation originate with the translator. (These are enclosed in brackets.) I inserted these additional headings because I feel that complex texts are made much more accessible to the English reader through introduction of more detailed outlining. I do not pretend my structural analysis of the text is infallible. There is probably room for improvement in the outline as presented in "Directory to Chapter Subsections" and as interwoven with the translated text.

In Summation

I first produced a preliminary draft of this translation in 1992 and, owing to the importance of the work, I have allowed various copyrighted provisional drafts to be posted on the Kalavinka internet websites since then. Because the present version of the translation is immensely improved in accuracy over previous versions, it should in all cases be preferred as the definitive edition. It gives me great pleasure to be able to introduce such a potentially beneficial meditation text into the world of Western Buddhism, not least because confusion about right meditation practice is still so very widespread.

I would like to express particular gratitude to those who have reviewed the Chinese and English of the text, pointing out problems in earlier drafts of this work.

Due to the terseness of the language and the abstruseness of the concepts and practices treated, it is likely that there will be room for further refinement of aspects of this translation. I hope that specialists or practitioners encountering errors or infelicities will favor me with recommendations for improvement, forwarding such suggestions via the Kalavinka websites.

I especially hope that Buddhist practitioners may find this text useful in development of meditation practice and in advancement on the Path.

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