

THE ESSENTIALS
of
BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Tiantai Master Zhiyi's Classic Meditation Manual:

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

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

THE YUANZHAO PREFACE

By the Song Dynasty Monk, Yuanzhao (釋元照: 1048–1116 CE)

There are four calming-and-insight texts in the Tiantai tradition: The first, known as the “perfect and sudden,” was presented in the form of lectures by the Great Master at Yuquan (“Jade Spring”) Monastery in Jingzhou Prefecture. Zhang’an (章安) transcribed it in ten fascicles.

The second, known as the “gradual and sequential,” was lectured at Waguan (“Tiled House”) Monastery. Disciple Fashen (法慎) transcribed it. Originally comprising thirty fascicles, Zhang’an edited it into ten fascicles. It is what is known today as the *Dhyāna Pāramitā*.

The third, known as the “unfixed,” is the one which the Chen Dynasty Chief State Secretary (尚書令), Maoxi (毛喜), requested the Great Master to issue. It consists of a single fascicle known today as the *Six Gates to the Sublime*.

The fourth, known as the *Smaller Calming-and-Insight*, is this very text. The Great Master brought it forth for his elder brother, Chenzhen. Truly, this is a condensation of the large edition and a presentation of the very crux of the means for entering the Path.

As for what is described as “calming-and-insight,” or as “meditative absorption and wisdom,” or as “quiescence and illumination,” or as “luminous clarity and stillness”—these are all instances of different designations describing the very same concepts.

Now, as for what reaches to the very bottom of the myriad dharmas’ source and permits one to directly verify the cultivation and realization of the Buddhas, none compare to calming-and-insight. And as for what the Great Master of the Tiantai tradition personally received at Mount Gṛdhrakūṭa—he received calming-and-insight. As for the marvelous awakening of the great arousing, it is the awakening to calming-and-insight. As for what is cultivated in samādhi, it is calming-and-insight. As for what is described when eloquence is allowed to flourish, it is calming-and-insight.

Therefore, one may say that, when it comes to explicating those Dharma gateways of one’s own mind which are practiced, although the texts of the Tiantai teaching tradition are elaborate and numerous,

one should realize that the essentials to which they return do not go beyond calming-and-insight.

Were one to stray from calming-and-insight, one's abilities would be inadequate to clearly understand the Path as described in the Tiantai tradition and would be inadequate to even discuss the meaning of the Tiantai tradition's teachings. Therefore, one who would enter the Path simply cannot fail to study [calming-and-insight]. One who would study it cannot fail to cultivate it. How then could one, like the shallow learners of a decadent age, merely chase after reputation and profit, course in rigid attachments to mere designations, or indulge muddled relishing of only the dimmest sorts of meditative realizations?

Although the texts devoted to it remain extant, still, the path of calming-and-insight is but little heard of in the World these days. On realizing this, is it even possible to not experience an aching heart and pain-filled mind?

I write this preface now on the occasion of commissioning the carving of new woodblocks for the printing of this text. May this event cause all who hear it explained or lay eyes on it to plant the seeds of causal affinity with the Great Vehicle. How much the more so might this be the case where there are those who cultivate according to it or gain realizations based on it? Were this to occur, could the benefits issuing from it even be measurable?

Since I had to proofread this work [prior to releasing it for printing], I took that as an occasion to write this preface.

Preface by the Shakyam monk, Yuanzhao.

Composed in Yuhang Prefecture, in the second year of the Shaosheng reign period (1096 CE), on the first day of autumn's second lunar month.

TIANTAI MASTER ZHIYI'S PREFACE

I. INTRODUCTORY SECTION

A. CITING A QUATRAIN TO INDICATE THE GRAND DESIGN

To refrain from doing any manner of evil,
To respectfully perform all varieties of good,
To carry out the purification of one's own mind—
It is this which constitutes the teaching of all Buddhas.¹

B. INTRODUCTION PROPER: CONDITIONS OCCASIONING CREATION OF THIS TEXT

1. BRIEF INDICATION OF THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF CALMING AND INSIGHT

As for the dharma of nirvāṇa, there are many paths of entry into it. However, if we discuss those which are crucially essential, they do not go beyond the two dharmas of calming and insight.

2. COMMENDATION OF THE MARVELOUS FUNCTIONS OF CALMING AND INSIGHT

How is this so? Calming (*śamatha*) constitutes the initial method through which one is able to suppress the fetters (*saṃyojana*).² Insight (*vipaśyanā*) is the primary essential through which one is able to cut off the delusions. Calming then is the wholesome provision with which one kindly nurtures the mind and consciousness. Insight then is the marvelous technique which stimulates the development of spiritual understanding. Calming is the supreme cause for the manifestation of dhyāna absorption. Insight is the origin of wisdom.

3. CLARIFICATION OF THE SUPREME BENEFITS OF CALMING AND INSIGHT

a. CLARIFICATION PROPER

If a person perfects the two dharmas of meditative absorption and wisdom, then this amounts to the complete fulfillment of the dharma of benefiting both oneself and others.

b. SCRIPTURAL CITATION

Hence the *Dharma Blossom Sutra* states, "The Buddha himself abides in the Great Vehicle. Such dharmas as he has realized are adorned by the power of meditative absorption and wisdom. He employs these in delivering beings to liberation."²

4. UNDESIRABLE ASPECTS OF INEQUALITY IN CALMING AND INSIGHT

a. EXPLANATION PROPER

One should realize that these two dharmas are like the two wheels of a cart or like the two wings of a bird. If the cultivation of them becomes one-sided, one immediately falls into error-ridden inverted views.

b. SCRIPTURAL CITATION

Hence a sutra states, “If a person is one-sided in the cultivation of dhyāna absorption and merit and thus neglects the study of wisdom, this results in delusion. If one indulges in the one-sided study of wisdom and thus neglects the cultivation of dhyāna absorption and its meritorious qualities, this results in derangement.”⁴

Although there are some minor differences in the faults associated with delusion and derangement, still, the erroneous views developing from the two conditions are generally no different. If one fails to maintain even balance in this, then one’s practice deviates from what would be perfect. How then could one achieve a swift ascent to the most ultimate result?

5. THE NECESSITY OF EVENLY BALANCED CALMING AND INSIGHT

a. SCRIPTURAL CITATION ILLUSTRATING IMPORTANCE

Hence a sutra declares, “Because the Hearers (*śrāvaka*) are more developed in their powers of meditative absorption, they are unable to perceive the buddha nature. The bodhisattvas abiding on the ten grounds (*bhūmi*) are more developed in the power of wisdom. Although they do perceive the buddha nature, still, that perception has not developed into complete clarity. The powers of meditative absorption and wisdom are equally developed in the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones. Consequently, they possess absolute understanding and perception of the buddha nature.”⁵

Extrapolating from this, how could calming-and-insight not constitute the essential entryway into the great result of nirvāṇa, the supreme path for the cultivation of the practitioner, the common point of confluence for perfect fulfillment of the manifold virtues, and the very substance of the unsurpassed and ultimate result?

b. CLARIFYING THE RATIONALE IN THIS EXPLANATION OF CALMING-AND-INSIGHT

If one understands accordingly, then one will understand that this Dharma entryway of calming-and-insight is truly not a shallow one. When one wishes to draw in and lead along those who have only just begun to study—when one wishes to instruct the untutored

and muddle-headed that they might advance onto the Path—it is easy to discourse on the subject, but difficult for them to implement the practice. How then could one justify launching into extensive discussions of the abstruse and marvelous?

II. THE DOCTRINE PROPER

A. TEN CALMING-AND-INSIGHT CONCEPTS WITH ENCOURAGEMENT AND CAUTIONING

1. ENCOURAGEMENT

We shall now offer a general explanation of ten concepts in order to reveal to the novice practitioner the steps traversed in ascending along the orthodox Path as well as the stages involved in progressing toward entry into nirvāṇa. The investigator should adopt appropriate humility with regard to the difficulty of succeeding in cultivation and thus should not demean this text's shallowness and ready accessibility.

2. OFFERING CAUTIONARY ADVICE

If one's mind correctly gauges the import of these words, then, in the blink of an eye, one's qualities of wisdom and severance will become so great as to defy measurement and one's spiritual understanding will become unfathomably deep.

If, however, one disingenuously seizes on passages out of context or, due to personal sentiments, distorts the instructions of the text, then the months and years will be needlessly drawn out while actual realization will have no basis for development. One's circumstance then would be like that of the pauper who spends his time calculating the wealth of other men. What possible benefit could this have for oneself?

3. LISTING SECTIONS AND REVEALING THEIR AIMS

a. LISTING SECTION TITLES

First:	Fulfillment of Prerequisite Conditions
Second:	Renunciation of Desires
Third:	Elimination of the Hindrances
Fourth:	Making Adjustments
Fifth:	Implementation of Skillful Means
Sixth:	The Actual Cultivation
Seventh:	Manifestation of [Roots of] Goodness
Eighth:	Recognition of the Work of Demons
Ninth:	Treatment of Disorders
Tenth:	Realization of the Fruits

b. CLARIFYING THE AIM OF THE SECTIONS

Now, we shall briefly treat these ten concepts in order to instruct the practitioner of calming-and-insight. These are crucial essentials for the beginner's training in sitting meditation. If one is well able to grasp their intent and thus proceed to cultivate them, one will be able to settle the mind, avoid difficulties, manifest meditative absorption, develop understanding, and achieve realization of the non-outflow fruits of the Ārya.