

Discoveries Upon Translating the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*

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After embarking on a project, officially in 1990, to translate the entire *Mo-ho chih-kuan* into English,¹ it was only this past summer (2012) that I finally reached the end of a first draft of the text. If one includes earlier work on Chih-i's T'ien-t'ai Buddhism, I have struggled with this text for over thirty years. At this point I would like to merely point out a few interesting “discoveries”; some scattered comments (some very general and some very specific) on the text that may seem arbitrary and disconnected, but all of which reflect some aspect of this important text in the history of East Asian, and in particular Lotus Sutra, Buddhism.

1. The Appropriateness of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* as the Main Text for Training Tendai (*kengyō* 顯教) Monks

I recall that many years ago, at a time of youthful indiscretion, having a naïve and simplistic impression of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, a text which, from its title, implies that it is mainly about the meditational practice of “cessation and contemplation” (止觀, *śamatha-vipaśyanā*). Why would such a text on “practice/meditation” be chosen as the main textbook for the Tendai *kengyō* course, in which so many of the Tendai monks would train? One can understand immediately that the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (*Dainichikyō* 大日經) is fine for the course on *mikkyō*, but what about Buddhist doctrine for the *kengyō* trainees?

Having finished the full text I realize now, of course, that it is not “just a meditation manual” but a superb outline of Buddhist doctrine which covers the full scope of Buddhist practice and teachings. In fact, it would be appropriate if it had been entitled 『摩訶佛法』 (The Great Buddha Dharma, *Mahā-buddhadharma*). A person trained in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* would not only be exposed to the basics of a great variety of Buddhist practices—from sitting in meditation to chanting the Buddha's name to skillful use of dharani spells—, but also gain a broad knowledge and training in Buddhist teachings (from Abhidharma and the Āgamas to

Mahāyāna); know the main themes of central Mahāyāna sutras—a good grasp of the *Lotus Sutra*, be familiar with a great variety of stories and parables from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, have sufficient knowledge of the themes of the *Avataṃsaka*, *Vimalakīrti*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, etc., and have a good acquaintance with a large number of other sutras (*Śrīmāladevī*, Pure Land sutras, sections of the *Great Collection of Sutras*, a variety of “apocryphal” texts, and so forth—; have a good grasp of the Madhyamika dialectics of the *Middle Treatise*, and a deep knowledge of the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition through the *Ta chih tu lun*; gain a familiarity with the Yogācāra tradition; not to mention a training in the Tendai fourfold (or threefold) pattern of conditioned co-arising, emptiness, conventionality, and the Middle that serves as the basic pattern for organizing and making sense of the vast array of Buddhist doctrine and practice. What better training in the Buddha Dharma could one hope for?

2. Chih-i’s Use of Scriptural Quotation, and the Challenge of Identification

I have written previously about Chih-i’s use of scripture, and the challenge of identifying quotes and how to interpret some “creative” quotation, so I will not repeat the arguments here (see Swanson 1997). Instead I wish only to add a few comments on the great advantage we now have with the proliferation of digitized (and thus searchable) texts, and the availability of such material online (in particular the Taishō canon in the CBETA and SAT databases, the DDB dictionaries, and so forth). In the short span of only ten years (between 1998 and 2011) between my two sabbaticals (which were spent mainly on the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* translation project), the work of translation has been transformed. Tasks such as searching for original sources of quotes, for example, which used to consume hundreds of hours of drudgery (with the occasional exciting discovery), can now be conducted in a matter of seconds. I would like to share just one example of a discovery made possible by the availability of such tools.

Near the end of the seventh fascicle of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, Chih-i says that “A sūtra tells of ‘breaking the floating bag [of the precepts that keeps one afloat], and removing the beams of a bridge [of patience]’ so that one’s true concentration is forgotten and lost” 經云破壞浮囊發撤橋梁忘失正念。 The traditional commentaries say that this text has not been identified 文未檢。² A quick search of the SAT database, however, revealed that this exact phrase 破壞浮囊撥撤橋梁

appears in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, at T no. 374, 12.437a12. An interesting point is that this is the older “Northern version” translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖, included in the Taishō canon as text number 374, rather than the more frequently used translation (T no. 375, the “Southern version” revised by Huiyan 慧嚴). Chih-i almost always quotes from the newer “Southern version” of the sutra (T no. 375), which also contains references to the “floating bag” of the precepts at 12.674a3–4 and 673c19–22 (without mentioning the beams of a bridge). However, this example, as well as a few other references to the older “Northern” *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, indicates that Chih-i accessed both of these versions of the sutra, though he favored the newer revision. It seems likely that this reference was overlooked by the traditional commentaries because it is rather uncommon that the no. 374 text was used by Chih-i and other scholars of the day.

3. An “Old” Version of the *Ta chih tu lun*?

In the midst of translating the text, I stumbled across a curious passage referring to an “old version” of the *Ta chih tu lun*. My first (mistaken) impression was that this may refer to another version of the *Ta chih tu lun*, independent of the translation by Kumārajīva. This misconception was soon rectified through an intense online give-and-take with colleagues on H-Buddhism (another example of how scholarship has been transformed in recent years), and it soon became clear that this must refer to an earlier, pre-edited version of the *Ta chih tu lun*, modified over a period of ten years by Sengrui 僧叡. Here is the text:

古釋論本云。若觀極微色則有十八空。今本云。若觀一端疊則有十八空。
(T 46.90b11–13)

The old text of the *Ta chih tu lun* says, “If you contemplate **extremely minute forms**, there are eighteen types of emptiness.” The current text [of the *Ta chih tu lun*] says, “If you contemplate **a single fragment of a fine piece of cloth**, there are eighteen types of emptiness.”

One of the classical commentaries on this text (see the *Bukkyō Taikei* edition, vol. 4, p. 412), explains:

Question: There is only one text of the *Ta chih tu lun*. Why does this refer to both an “old” and “new” text?

Answer: Although there is only one text of the *Ta chih tu lun*, there are many variations in the fascicles and texts which are not the same. Presumably it was edited many times, and therefore the texts are not the same. A catalogue of the scriptures says that the *Ta chih tu lun* consists of one hundred fascicles, or of seventy fascicles. The first section of the *Commentary on the Vimalakīrti Sūtra* [by Chih-i] in interpreting the names of the bodhisattvas, says, “The old text [of the *Ta chih tu lun*] translates this like Kao-shih 高士.” The *Xian* 暹 says, “The ‘old text’ presumably refers to an older translation of the *Ta chih tu lun*.” Some person has said that “Mr. Yüan 遠公 [Hui-Yüan 慧遠] says that Kumārajīva [or, “Mr. Jī” 什公], in the seventh year of Hung-shih (AD 404 or 405), produced the *Ta chih tu lun* in one hundred and ten fascicles. Here and there were transliterations or interpretations in which the text was not easy [to understand]. This was edited for ten years into a one-hundred-fascicles [version] and a seventy-fascicles [version]. The former [one-hundred-fascicle version] is called the ‘old’ [text].”

However, the edition of the *Ta chih tu lun* in the Taishō canon consists of one hundred fascicles, and contains the variant reading that Chih-i refers to as the “new text”; thus, at least in this case, this one-hundred-fascicle version cannot be the “old text.” The “one-hundred-fascicles and seventy-fascicles versions” probably refer to a version that included both the commentary and the sutra text (in 100 fascicles) and a version that consisted of only the commentary (in 70 fascicles) [see studies by Yinshun 印順]. Most likely the “old text” here refers to an earlier edition that was later edited by Sengrui with extensive modifications of translation terms. This issue is worthy of further investigation, with an examination of Dunhuang manuscripts to see if any early, pre-edited versions are extant.³

As far as I know, these two texts (including the reference in the *Commentary on the Vimalakīrti Sūtra* by Chih-i referred to in the classical commentary) are the only concrete examples of the actual content of a pre-edited or early version of the *Ta chih tu lun*. Though not many general conclusions can be reached from this small sample, it indicates that Kumārajīva used accepted, old translation terms (such as those used by Kao-shih 高士), which were later edited into more eloquent Chinese, thus contributing greatly to Kumārajīva’s reputation as a master translator.⁴

4. Whether to Keep One's Eyes Open or Shut during Meditation

In a number of places,⁵ Chih-i teaches that one should keep the eyes (very lightly) shut during meditation. In the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (T 46.108c26–27) he says, “Next, gradually straighten the head and slowly close your eyes. Do not close your eyelids with great haste, but always [shutting out the light] as in a cage, then use your breathing...” 次漸平頭徐徐閉目。勿令眼臉太急。常使籠籠然後用息也。It seems that this instruction has been modified over the years, with a preference for keeping the eyes (slightly) open during meditation. Already in the traditional commentaries, the *Shiki* points out that in the Chan tradition of Baizhang 百丈禪師, “the eyes should stay open to avoid falling asleep. If you attain dhyāna-concentration, this power is most supreme. From of old it has been the practice of meditation among esteemed monks to always keep their eyes open during meditation” (see *Bukkyō taikēi*, volume 5, p. 103). Ikeda Rosan, in his notes to the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (*Kenkyūchūshaku* 1997, p. 425), points out that keeping one's eyes open during zazen meditation was a central tenet of Dōgen's instructions, and it is the most common practice in Japan today.

5. Chih-i's “Quote” from Hsüan-tsang's Translation of the *Heart Sutra*

As I have pointed out previously (see Swanson 1994), in the early part of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (T 46.5b20) there appears to be a quote from the *Heart Sutra*: “Form is emptiness, and likewise also for sensations, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness” 卽色是空 受想行識亦復如是. One's immediate instinct is to identify this familiar phrase as from the *Heart Sutra*; given Chih-i's preferences, one would expect it to be from the Kumārajīva translation (T no. 250, 8.847c14–15). The wording here in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, however, is not that of Kumārajīva, but exactly the same as that found in the “later” version of the *Heart Sutra* attributed to Hsüan-tsang (T #251, 8.848c8), which postdates Chih-i! This anomaly is easily overlooked and could quickly be brushed aside as a casual rephrasing by Chih-i—a not uncommon practice—or a later scribal “correction.” On closer inspection (including the fact that Chih-i does not identify the source), however, one realizes that the quote is not from the *Heart Sūtra* at all but from Kumārajīva's translation of the *Pañcaviṃśati Sūtra* (T 8. 221c1–2) or from the quotation of this sūtra passage in the *Ta chih tu lun* (T 25.327c22–23). One may well wonder why Chih-i would quote from the larger sūtra or commentary instead of using the wording of the more

convenient *Heart Sūtra* of Kumārajīva, if in fact he had the “*Heart Sutra*” available, especially since Chih-i used Kumārajīva’s translations for almost all of his major texts. This example buttresses Jan Nattier’s argument (see Nattier 1992) that “the so-called Kumārajīva version (T #250) of the *Heart Sūtra* was created [in China] on the basis of the *Ta chih tu lun*” (187), and that the “Hsüan-tsang version” is also an extract from the *Pañcaviṃśati Sūtra*: “that it was first classified simply as a Prajñā-pāramitā text, in all probability listed as ‘translator unknown,’ and that only later—through its close association with Hsüan-tsang and his activities in popularizing it—it came to be attributed to him” (190).

6. Sublime Summary of the Threefold Pattern

It is clear that the threefold pattern (emptiness 空, conventionality 假, the Middle 中) is the key to Chih-i’s analysis of Buddhist teachings and practice (see Swanson 1989). Over the years I have used a number of passages to illustrate this pattern, both from the *Fa-hua hsüan-i* and the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. I have recently discovered a new passage, at *Mo-ho chih-kuan* 104b18-22, which is perhaps the most sublime of them all. Chih-i often closes each section of his discourse with stock phrases and a summary in terms of this threefold pattern, but this passage appears without warning, as the content of the third mode of contemplation of “skillful means” in the section on “contemplating the objects of passionate afflictions.” I was immediately struck by its simplicity and yet thoroughness in presenting the threefold pattern, but it was only when I extracted it from the Taisho text and formatted it line by line was the exquisite balance of the Chinese revealed:

行之要者莫先止觀。
 四分煩惱體之即空。名體真止入空觀也。
 觀諸煩惱藥病等法。名隨緣止入假觀。
 觀諸煩惱同真際。名息二邊止入中道觀。
 善巧安心修此三止三觀成一心三眼三智也。

[Translation:] As for what is essential practice, there is nothing that takes precedence over cessation-and-contemplation 止觀. The four categories of passionate afflictions are empty in their essence 體. [The practice that is] called “cessation as realizing [or experiencing] the truth [of emptiness]” 體真

止 is to enter the contemplation of emptiness. To contemplate all passionate afflictions and the ways and medicines [to heal these] diseases is called “cessation as [the realization of conventional reality as that which] arises through conditions 隨緣止,” the contemplation of [re-]entering conventionality. To contemplate all passionate afflictions as being the same as reality-as-it-is 眞際, is called “cessation as putting an end to the two extremes” 息二邊止, and entering the contemplation of the realization of the Middle Path. Through good and skillful 善巧 [means and practices] one attains a peaceful mind; by cultivating this threefold cessation-and-contemplation, one realizes and perfects the three eyesights and the three wisdoms in a single thought.

The English rendering (sad to say) may be complicated and confusing, but in Chinese the balanced repetition makes for what could be called a poem. Note how the threefold pattern is reflected in the way the terms line up: the threefold truth itself 空,假,中, with a terse summary of their content at the opening of each line. The final line specifically names threefold cessation and threefold contemplation, with the crucial aspects of “skillful means” and a “peaceful mind,” as well as other threefold categories such as “three eyesights” and “three wisdoms” that are included “in a single thought” 一心 (another crucial term for Chih-i). In its terseness and balance, this summary can only be described as “poetic scholasticism.”

7. Final Reflections on the “Vanity” of Working on a Single Text for Thirty Years

Approaching the end of text, and finally feeling that I was beginning to see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, I ran across the following passage at *Mo-ho chih-kuan* 137a16–17, and it seemed that Chih-i was speaking directly to me (or someone in a similar state):

[A sutra says,] “A wise person rejects various [impractical] questions about a bridge.” People should be the same way. For the sake of the [academic] path of learning 學道 one cultivates [and studies the details concerning] the four gates [of teachings],⁶ spending thirty years making distinctions concerning one gate [or text] and not yet fully clarifying it. When your efforts begin to show a smidgen of results, [as a sutra says] “you are already old and can no longer partake in the three flavors [of

home-departing, reading and chanting (the sūtras), and sitting in meditation].” Birth is empty, death is empty, and one life has been thrown away in vain. This is like all those questions concerning a bridge; of what use is it all [if there are only questions and one does not cross the bridge]?

It is only fair to point out that in this context (as in many others)⁷ Chih-i is critical not only of the “Dharma masters” who are only concerned with learning and ignore their meditational practices, but also of the “Meditation Masters” who, to their detriment, concentrate only on sitting in meditation and ignore “learning.” However, although I am guilty of focusing on academic pursuits rather than meditational practice (except for what I call the “Translator’s Samādhi” 翻譯三昧), I must disagree with Chih-i and say that I do not regret, nor consider it in vain, to have devoted thirty years to this single text. Rather, it has been an honor and privilege, and I am not yet ready to cross the bridge to the other side.

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¹ For an overly ambitious report on the original goals of this project, see my “Report on the 10-year Project to Produce a Fully Annotated Translation of *the Mo ho chih kuan* in Western Languages,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 15 (1990): 13–20. At this point in time, the goal was to finish the entire 10-fascicle work in 10 years, at a pace of one fascicle per year. As I suspected at the time, this was somewhat optimistic.

² See, in particular, the 『止觀輔行講義』; see the *Bukkyō Taikai* 『仏教大系』 edition, volume 5, p. 76.

³ For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Chou 2004 and Shih 1981.

⁴ It is not my intent here to deny the genius of Kumārajīva as one of the greatest translators in the history of religious texts, but this information does underscore the value of a good editor.

⁵ See, for example, the *Smaller Meditation Manual* (天台小止觀, T 46.465c27): “you should close your eyes so that the light from the outside is barely shut out” 當閉眼纔令斷外光而已。

⁶ Here the “four gates” refers to the totality of Buddhist teachings: in T’ien-t’ai terms, the fourfold teachings of the Tripitaka, Shared, Distinct, and Perfect Teachings.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion on this issue of the two extremes of “practice-only” meditation masters and “learning-only” Dharma masters, and Chih-i’s criticism of “Zen Masters” 禪師, see my essay on “Ch’an and *Chih-kuan*: T’ien-t’ai Chih-i’s View of ‘Zen’ and the Practice of the Lotus Sutra.” 『天台學報』 [Special issue of the *Tendai Bulletin*], October (2007): 143–64 (also available on my online “Academia.edu” site).