

# SIX GATES *to* THE SUBLIME

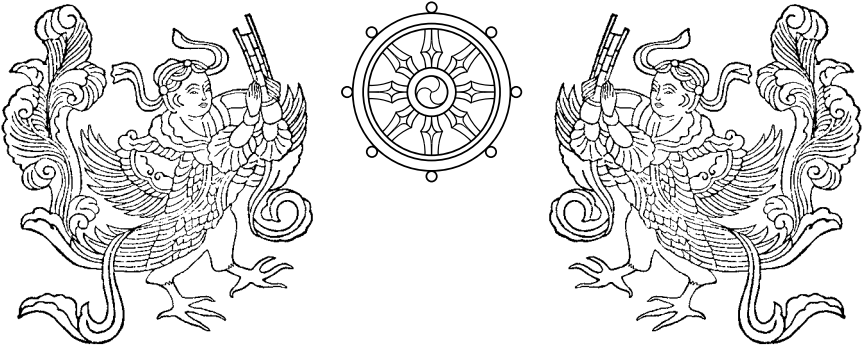
*The Six Dharma Gates to the Sublime*

A Classic Meditation Manual  
On Traditional Indian Buddhist Meditation

By the Great Tiantai Meditation Master & Exegete  
Śramaṇa Zhiyi (Chih-i)

(538–597 CE)

Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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## INTRODUCTION

### The Nature of the Text and the Rationale for Translating It

*The Six Dharma Gates to the Sublime* is a 1500-year-old Buddhist meditation manual devoted to explaining the practice of calming-and-insight meditation according to a classic Indian Buddhist formula known as “the six gates.” Although the actual content of this meditation practice formula is not confined to either Southern or Northern traditions, it is presented herein from a distinctly mahāyānistic standpoint assuming and encouraging bodhisattva path practice and the resolve to realize buddhahood.

Although I had long been aware of the existence of this text, I had never taken the time to study it closely and reflect upon its contents until I happened to be driving up the Oregon coast in the summer of 2001. I recall pulling over at an ocean overlook north of Newport, slowly reading it, and then deciding then and there to translate it. Consequently, I did just that, stopping at a rest stop and translating day-and-night for a few days, taking occasional brief breaks to stare out at the ocean or walk on the beach. Having finished the first draft, I then drove on back to Seattle with what I considered to be the perfect companion volume to my early-nineties translation of Master Zhiyi’s *Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation*. Indeed, these two short calming-and-insight meditation works by Master Zhiyi are closely related in content, so much so that the original-language editions are often bound together into a single volume to facilitate simultaneous study and reference.

I recall feeling at the time that this work could serve the Western Dharma community as an important resource for better understanding what is contained within the purview of “calming-and-insight” (*śamatha-vipaśyanā*) meditation practice. It seems particularly useful to release both of these meditation translations at this time when English-language meditation instruction is still generally not so very broad in its scope, and not so very deep in its profundity. In fact, as of this writing, it seems more the norm than the exception that Western Buddhists do not necessarily even understand or believe in the fact of reincarnation, and beyond that, are often more predisposed to use meditation practice as a means to pleurably

adapt to karma-bound worldly existence than to use it as a means to transcend domination by mundane priorities. My hope in publishing these meditation manual translations is that at least some small sector of serious Western Dharma practitioners will have yet more textual bases for realizing the greater aims of Buddhist meditation which indeed do go beyond the mere allaying of the angsts of day-to-day afflictions in the present lifetime.

### The Relationship of This Text to Other Zhiyi Meditation Texts

*The Six Gates to the Sublime* is one of four “calming-and-insight” meditation texts written by the illustrious Tiantai meditation master and exegete, Master Zhiyi (538–597 CE): In his preface to *Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation*, the Song Dynasty monk Yuanzhao describes the four meditation texts written by that famous meditation master:

There are four “calming-and-insight” texts in the Tiantai tradition:

The first, known as the “perfect and sudden” (*The Great Calming and Contemplation*) 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* [or *The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation*]... was brought forth by the Great Master for his elder brother, Chenzhen. Truly, it is a condensation of the large edition and a presentation of the very crux of the means for entering the Path. (T46.1915.462a)

### The Potential Usefulness of This Text for Western Buddhism

Of those four meditation texts described above, this present volume is the third, whereas my previously-translated *The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation* is the fourth. Of the two texts, *The Essentials* is marvelously complete, describing

virtually anything one would need to know to practice meditation correctly while also dealing effectively with any problems which might arise. Yuanzhao's judgment that it is in effect a condensation of Master Zhiyi's encyclopedically-complete *Great Calming-and-Contemplation* is indicative of its comprehensiveness.

This *Six Gates* text, however, greatly expands the breadth of our view and the depth of our understanding of what is actually involved in carrying on a mature "calming-and-insight" meditation practice. These qualities make it especially useful to the meditator who finds that his practice is "stuck" and does not show any particular advancement beyond the development of a light easefulness helpful in damping down the intensity of day-to-day mental afflictions. It is in this sense that the present text may be especially useful as an adjunct meditation text complementing its companion volume, *The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation*.

Both of these texts, being relatively short and straightforward, are particularly well suited for Western Dharma practitioners devoted to serious cultivation of Buddhist meditation.

### Textual History of Six-Gates "Calming-and-Insight" Practice

The "six gates" are: counting, following, stabilization, contemplation, turning, and purification. The "sublime" (*praṇīta*) of *The Six Gates to the Sublime* is a deliberate reference to the third of the four practice-aspects of the third of the four truths of the ārya, the truth of cessation (*nirodha*). (See note 11, page 143.)

Master Zhiyi attributes the historical basis for six-gates calming-and-insight meditation to Shakyamuni Buddha's reliance upon this method as he sat beneath the bodhi tree and gained the utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment in Sixth Century BCE India. To support this conclusion, he cites the detailed testimony to that effect in the *Origins Sutra on the Prince's Auspicious Response* (太子瑞應本起經 / To2.185.476c), a sutra translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Zhiqian between 223 and 253 CE, quoting that scripture as follows:

He directed his thought inwardly to *ānāpāna* (meditation on the breath): first, counting (*gaṇanā*); second, following (*anugamaḥ*); third, stabilization (*sthānam*), fourth, contemplation (*upalakṣaṇā*); fifth, turning (*vivartanā*); and sixth, purification (*parisuddhiḥ*). (These parenthetically-included Sanskrit antecedents for the six gates are as recorded in De la Vallée Poussin's translation of *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*.)

Further testimony for the early Indian history of this formula for engaging calming-and-insight practice is found in numerous locations in the Canon, for instance:

1) This same six-component formula is explained in precisely the same order in the *Abhidharma Vibhāṣā* of Kātyāyaniputra, an author dating to roughly 200 BCE (阿毘曇毘婆沙 / T28.1546.105b29–6a01).

2) The identically named and listed formula is also discussed at yet greater length in the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* of Vasumitra, an author dating to roughly 50 BCE (阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論 / T27.1545.134c26–5b20)

3) The formula is also treated in the early Fourth Century CE by Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣyam*. (See the Leo Pruden translation, pp. 922–3.)

4) Pruden refers us in turn to two Pali scripture locations: *Dīgha*, ii.291; *Majjhima*, i.425 (p. 1049, note 89).

5) Finally, Buddhagosa's later Pali-tradition commentary preserves the same list in an only slightly altered version, the sole differences being that one additional element is interpolated ("touching"), whilst "reviewing" is tacked on at the end as an eighth member of the list (*Path of Purification*, VIII: 189–225, p. 300–309). So we can see that Buddhagosa in fact presents us with a modified version of the same list. Not too surprising, as he is the latest of these authors.

As a consequence of reviewing the above, it should be clear to the reader that we deal here with a calming-and-insight meditation-instruction formula traditional in the very earliest period of Indian Buddhism. Hence there is no historical basis for concluding that, because the author is Chinese, the content is somehow typical of the priorities of Sino-Buddhist meditation traditions. That said, a seriously-engaged meditation practice linked to careful study of both *The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation* and *The Six Gates to the Sublime* will lead one to the inescapable conclusion that Ch'an is just a radical and sudden approach to perfecting all of the aspects of calming-and-insight practice described in those texts. In short, in terms of aims, essence, and results, the two approaches to awakening are, in the final analysis, not different at all.

#### The Doctrinal Content of this Text

As any student of Indian Buddhist meditation will certainly know, the essence of meditation practice lies in balanced development of the two fundamental endeavors of achieving the deep and wakeful

mental stillness of “calming” (*śamatha*) on the one hand and the wisdom realizations of analytic “insight” contemplation (*vipāśyanā*) on the other. The “six gates” (counting, following, stabilization, contemplation, turning, and purification) constitute a practice formula for achieving precisely those ends.

The manner in which these six techniques are actually employed in one’s meditation practice is not fixed. It may indeed be the case that one takes up these six practice techniques in a strictly serial sequence, beginning with the “counting” of the breaths as in standard *ānāpāna* breath-meditation practice and progressing on toward “purification.” However, where circumstances call for a less straightforward application of the techniques, they may instead be appropriately applied as required at each of the various levels of meditative absorption, may be employed as precisely tailored responses to the exigencies of individual circumstances, or may be employed as counteractive antidotes to specific hindrances interfering with meditative progress.

The text goes on to describe further permutations of the different ways in which the six techniques may be understood and may be applied. A slow and reflective reading of the text will allow the deeper meaning of the six gates to become more directly perceptible to the individual practitioner. The reader is encouraged to give particularly close attention to the implications of the later chapters starting with the “reversed” practice which turns back its focus on the emptiness of all phenomena to treat the implications involved in bodhisattva practice of the Path. Following on that chapter, we have the equally fascinating and useful chapters on “contemplation of mind,” “perfect contemplation,” and “signs of realization.”

### In Summation

As noted above, I first produced a preliminary draft of this translation in 2001. Owing to the importance of the work, I have allowed various copyrighted provisional drafts to be posted on Kalavinka 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 inevitable that there will be room for further refinement of aspects of this translation. I hope that any specialists or practitioners encountering such infelicities will favor me with recommendations for improvement, forwarding them via the Kalavinka Press website.

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

Bhikshu Dharmamitra  
Seattle, January 2nd, 2008