

## Zhiyi's Deep Imprint on East Asian Buddhism

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**Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight**  
by Paul L. Swanson  
University of Hawai'i Press  
2,256 pages (3 volumes); \$90

**C**lear Serenity, Quiet Insight is Paul Swanson's English translation of the *Mohe zhiyuan* (Jpn., *Maka shikan*; literally, "great calming and insight"), a massive compendium on Buddhist practice by the Tiantai master Zhiyi (538–597), compiled by his disciple Guanding. No single work, one might argue, has more profoundly shaped the development of East Asian Buddhism. The *Mohe zhiyuan* is not only foundational to the Tiantai (Kor., Cheontae; Jpn., Tendai) and Nichiren schools but has also influenced Chan (Zen), Huayan, Pure Land, and esoteric traditions. Its vastness and complexity, however, have long hindered appreciation of its content. Swanson's meticulous, readable, and superbly annotated translation, the product of some thirty years' labor, makes the whole of this magisterial work available for the first time in a Western language.

Zhiyi was a master of synthesis, celebrated for his holistic grasp of Buddhist teachings. Because Buddhist texts were introduced to China at random from India and Central Asia, as their translation and study advanced, inconsistencies, even contradictions, among them came to light. Today, we recognize these

OPPOSITE | Zhiyi  
Late Heian period  
Takistanji Temple  
Aichi Prefecture, Japan



discrepancies as the product of geographically distinct Buddhist communities producing scriptures over time. Chinese exegetes, however, regarded all sutras as the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, and they reasoned that differences among them must reflect skillful means the Buddha had compassionately employed to instruct people of varying dispositions and abilities. They accordingly sought to uncover underlying principles or frameworks that would make clear how the disparate teachings were interrelated and reveal the Buddha's unifying, salvific intent. The resulting systems of doctrinal classification (*pan-jiao*) brought about remarkable developments in Buddhist thought. Zhiyi's grand synthesis proved especially influential, not only because of its extraordinary scope but also because it encompassed both doctrine and practice. Both, Zhiyi stressed, are essential for achieving liberation, like the two wings of a bird or two wheels of a cart. He was as critical of dogmatic textualists who, he said, failed to internalize the doctrines they studied as he was of willfully ignorant meditators whose practice, uninformed by learning, he believed could readily go astray.

While mustering extensive doctrinal support, the *Mohe zhiguan* chiefly addresses practice. Swanson's title, *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, derives from the opening sentence of Guanding's introduction, which reads: "The luminous quiescence of cessation-and-contemplation was unknown in prior ages." The title offers a key to Zhiyi's inclusive vision. Earlier in his career, Zhiyi had employed the word *chan*, or "meditative concentration" (Jpn., zen; Sanskrit, dhyana), as a comprehensive term for Buddhist practice. Later, however,

he came to believe *chan* overemphasized quiescence and did not reflect the dynamic side of Buddhist practice. In its place, he adopted the term *zhiguan*, "cessation-and-contemplation" in Swanson's translation. *Zhiguan* is a literal rendering of samatha-vipassana, or "calming and insight," familiar terms for two paired modes of meditation. But for Zhiyi, the meaning of *zhiguan* extended far beyond these two traditional meditation categories and encompassed moral cultivation, meditation, and wisdom. In their introduction to Swanson's volume, Neal Donner and Daniel Stevenson, pioneer scholars of Tiantai Buddhism, explain that *zhiguan* may be understood on three levels. As practice, or the cause for awakening, it means cessation (or calming) and contemplation. As effect, or what is achieved through practice, it means tranquility and insight. And as an expression of the true nature of reality, it means quiescence and illumination.

Fundamental to the *Mohe zhiguan* is a principle known as the threefold truth of emptiness, conventional existence, and the middle, along with a corresponding threefold contemplation for discerning it. For Zhiyi, the threefold truth represented the "deep structure" of the Buddha's teachings, and he used this principle to systematize both doctrine and practice. The truth of emptiness means that all phenomena, arising through causes and conditions, are fleeting and lack independent self-essence. The contemplation that Zhiyi termed "entering emptiness from the conventional" collapses all categories, hierarchies, and divisions to reveal a realm of absolute equality, interpenetration, and non-differentiation, freeing the practitioner from attachments to desires and mistaken views.

Yet though empty of fixed or independent substance, phenomena nonetheless exist as elements of conventional reality. A reverse contemplation, “[re-]entering the conventional from emptiness,” in effect returns one to the world and reestablishes conceptual distinctions as features of empirical, commonsense experience, stripped of any false essentializing or clinging; it engenders the wisdom to carry out bodhisattva-like action in any situation. The middle is not a separate position, between or transcending the other two, but encompasses both poles of understanding without dissolving the tension between them: phenomena are neither one-sidedly empty nor conventionally existing but exhibit both aspects simultaneously. In Guanding’s words, “There is not a single sight or smell that is not the Middle Way.” The threefold truth represents Zhiyi’s unique interpretation of Nagarjuna’s famous two truths, conventional and ultimate. Contemplation of the middle encompasses and dynamically mediates the two, maintaining insight into both while obviating bias toward either.

In practice, the threefold contemplation can be cultivated in a sequential, gradual approach or in a “perfect and sudden” manner that apprehends all three simultaneously. The “perfect and sudden” cessation-and-contemplation is the *Mohe zhiyuan*’s chief focus. The first chapter, “Synopsis,” provides an overview. Here we encounter Zhiyi’s famous “four samadhis”: sitting, walking, both sitting and walking, and neither sitting nor walking (a “free-form” meditation practiced amid daily activities, wherever the mind is directed). Today we tend to overdraw the distinction between ritual or devotional practices, seen as external performance geared toward

merit-making, and meditation, seen as internal and aimed at liberative insight. Zhiyi’s discussion of the four samadhis, however, suggests that he understood both as integral aspects of cultivation.

Subsequent chapters establish the doctrinal bases for cessation-and-contemplation, distinguishing the sudden and perfect from the sequential and gradual methods of apprehending the threefold truth. The last two chapters discuss practice itself. In contrast to the four samadhis, which are grouped according to bodily posture and ritual format, the focus here is on mental attitude and technique. Zhiyi the systematizer is again in evidence, classifying a vast range of meditative approaches for different practitioners into ten categories of objects, arranged from general to specific, and ten modes of contemplating them, from subtle to coarse. For example, the combination of the first object and first mode is the contemplation of ordinary phenomena as “inconceivable”—that is, as identical to the threefold truth. Here we encounter Zhiyi’s famous statement of the “three thousand realms in a single thought,” which the Japanese teacher Nichiren (1222–1282) took as his doctrinal foundation. In essence, the smallest event (a “single thought”) and all phenomena (“three thousand realms”) are mutually encompassing: the one and the many, delusion and awakening, subject and object, self and other, and all sentient beings from hell dwellers, hungry ghosts, and animals up through buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as their corresponding insentient environments—indeed, all things in the entire cosmos—are inseparable from the mind at each moment. Some Chinese Buddhist thinkers postulated an original pure

mind that, on coming into contact with defilements, produces the phenomenal world. The goal of practice in that framework, then, is to return to the original pure mind. Zhiyi rejected this view. Between a single thought and all phenomena, he said, there is no before or after, no horizontal or vertical; the mind and its objects always arise simultaneously. “This [relationship] is mysterious and sublime, profound in the extreme, cannot be grasped conceptually, and cannot be verbalized. This is what is called [‘contemplating] objects as inconceivable.’”

For Zhiyi, dichotomies of self and other, subject and object, and so forth, while empty of fixed self-essence, are not illusions to be overcome but patterns by which the inconceivable relationship of mind and phenomena is manifested. “If there is even an ephemeral thought,” he said, “this includes three thousand [realms].” There is no primal purity to return to, no greater reality beneath, behind, or above the one we see; enlightenment lies nowhere apart from the impermanent, ever-shifting realities of the world we live in. Anything that comes within our field of consciousness can immediately serve as an object of contemplation; no situation is so impoverished or irredeemable that we cannot use it for liberative aims.

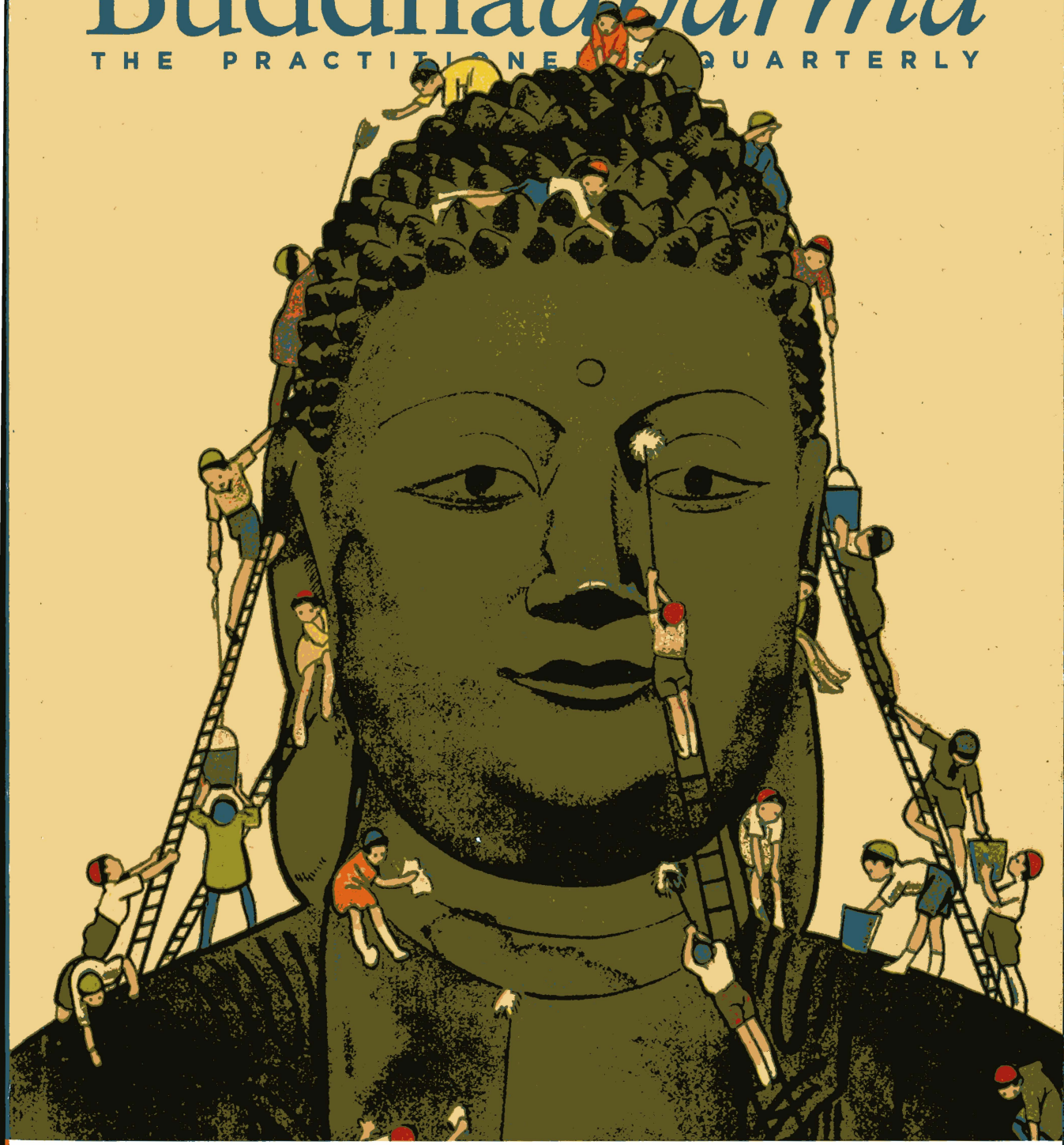
Given Zhiyi’s reputation as a consummate interpreter of the *Lotus Sutra*, some readers may be surprised to find little mention of it in the *Mohe zhiguan*. While he revered the *Lotus Sutra* as a perfect expression of the threefold truth, Zhiyi did not emphasize a hierarchy of sutras. Rather, he understood each one as suited to the capacities of particular persons, and thus as playing a unique soteriological role. However,

his later disciple Zhanran (711–782), faced with sectarian rivalries unknown in Zhiyi’s day, stressed the absolute supremacy of the *Lotus Sutra* and firmly welded it to Tiantai identity. (It was Zhanran who first grouped the *Mohe zhiguan* together with Zhiyi’s two *Lotus Sutra* commentaries as the “three major Tiantai works.”) In his translation, Swanson opted not to rely heavily on Zhanran’s commentaries, long deemed authoritative in the Tiantai tradition, but rather—insofar as possible—to approach Zhiyi directly. This both clarifies Zhiyi’s original stance and establishes a benchmark by which to recognize interpretive shifts in the later tradition.

*Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight* consists of three volumes comprising more than two thousand pages. Swanson’s “Translator’s Preface” illuminates issues in Buddhist translation beyond this single work. For example, Swanson argues persuasively that there is no single “right” or even “best” translation; the same expression may require different translations according to the context. For critical terms, he helpfully explains why he chose one possible English rendering over others. Swanson’s copious notes, arranged in a reader-friendly format, introduce decades of relevant Buddhist scholarship. Also included are Swanson’s translations of supplementary materials—relevant extracts from sutras and other works by Zhiyi—along with a glossary of Buddhist terms, a Chinese character index, charts, and a bibliography of Tiantai studies. This is a monumental work that one is meant to return to and reflect upon again and again. It has insights to offer practitioners of any tradition and belongs on the bookshelf of every serious student of East Asian Buddhism. *Bj*

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