

IN SEARCH OF CLARITY

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In Search of Clarity

Essays on Translation
and Tiantai Buddhism

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Preface

And water and air he knew, the humble, transparent things, on whose clarity, invisibility, life depended.

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Found and the Lost*

The essays in this collection were written over a period of almost forty years while I worked on translating Tiantai Zhiyi's *Mohē zhiguan* ("Great Cessation-and-Contemplation"), finally published as *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018). They first appeared in a variety of places, many in obscure sources, so they have been re-edited and updated to serve as a companion volume to *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*.

First, some comments on the idea of "clarity." Although the term "enlightenment" seems to have once been accepted by many as the goal of Buddhist practice, this expression has fallen out of favor in some circles. For example, a group of prominent Buddhist scholars who have been involved in a long-term project to translate the works of a major Japanese Zen figure recently announced at a conference that they were proud to say they have completed their voluminous translations without ever using the term "enlightenment." What, then, is the goal of Buddhism?

Such a long and complicated tradition cannot be reduced to simple generalizations, but I propose a simple reply: the purpose of Buddhism is clarity; it is a search for clarity. To feel clearly, so as to avoid damaging passionate attachments; to see clearly, so as to be able to respond to circumstances in a positive and healthy way; to think clearly, so as to act with wisdom and compassion. One should advance from darkness

to light, from debilitating attachments to true liberation, from ignorance (Skt. *avidya*; 無明) to a knowing wisdom (Skt. *bodhi*; 明), from blind selfishness to insightful compassion.

So, in this volume we have essays on the search for clarity. Buddhism is a search for clarity. The historical Buddha Śākyamuni sought to clarify the meaning of suffering and how to overcome it, and is said to have reached a clear awakening under the Bodhi tree. Zhiyi in his voluminous expositions that form the basis for Tiantai Buddhism attempted to clarify the practice and teachings of the Buddha, which he sees as offering “clear serenity and quiet insight.” Translation is a search for clarity—to find the right words and expressions to communicate the meaning, as much as possible, of one language into another. These are all, admittedly, almost hopeless tasks. The Buddha himself, in his “final temptation” under the Bodhi tree, is said to have wrestled with the challenge of trying to express to others his experience of clarity—that people would not understand even if he tried to explain his insight to others—and yet he arose and went out into the world to share his message. Zhiyi struggled with the idea that the Buddha Dharma is “beyond words” and “inexpressible,” and yet he strove to articulate it with admittedly limited words and concepts. As for translation, how can we hope to clearly articulate the implications and nuances of one language into another? How can we clearly articulate anything in any language? This is the underlying and common theme that runs through the essays in this volume.

I have claimed that Buddhism is a search for clarity. No doubt there are many aspects of Buddhism throughout history and cultures—funerals, memorial services for aborted fetuses or discarded dolls, prayer wheels, talismans for success in business, ritual prayers for rain, refuge for the socially and physically abused, blessings for automobiles and safe driving—that can hardly be described as an abstract search for clarity. But here I am dealing with Buddhism as an ideal, in terms of how it has been constructed and presented by some of the tradition’s preeminent scholars and practitioners.

The essays are arranged in roughly chronological order (except for the opening essay that provides a general introduction to the subject), from the essay on *jñeyāvaraṇa* written and published in the early 1980s while I was still working on my PhD dissertation, to the final (previously unpublished) essay on Bodhidharma. Almost all of these essays have appeared previously, some in obscure Japanese Tendai collections that are difficult to find or other collections no longer in print, and most have been posted in PDF form on my homepage and other places such as academia.edu. But each of these has been carefully reread and updated with some new content, with a new layout for this volume. Chinese transcriptions have been changed from Wade-Giles to Pinyin; some more recent publications that were not yet available when the essay was originally published have been added; terminology and style has been standardized, except that some essays have a list of references at the end—which I felt was useful for more technical chapters that may circulate independently—but essays of a more general nature (and fewer references) include bibliographical information only in the notes. The exceptions are the essay on consciousness and free will, composed as part of a Templeton project to study consciousness (which was never published), and the final essay on Bodhidharma and mixed binomes. This final essay has appeared in an earlier version in Japanese but is published here for the first time in English.

Most of the essays have to do with Zhiyi's Tiantai Buddhism, in particular the threefold pattern (threefold truth, threefold practice, and so forth) that provides the central structure of his vast system. Through the years I wrote essays expanding on this threefold structure—how it is expressed in specific issues such as *jñeyāvaraṇa*, Buddha nature, lotus symbolism, and Buddhist practice (Zen/Chan [*dhyāna*] and *zhiguan* [*śamatha-vipaśyanā*])—which provide more detail and exposition than was possible in the notes to the *Mohe zhiguan* translation. Some of this material was used (in summarized fashion) in my Introduction to *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, but it is my hope that this collection will clarify further the structure and contents of the

Mohe zhiguan, and provide the interested reader with further details and analysis of Zhiyi's Tiantai Buddhism, as well as encourage and provide fodder for the challenge of more translations.

In closing, I beg the reader's indulgence for some personal comments. At a young age I started with a personal religious interest in East Asian religions before pursuing academic study. After more than four decades of textual and philosophical studies (mixed with some "hands on" experience), the existential questions remain. Academic studies offer their own reward, such as intellectual stimulation and the joy of discovery, but does the Tiantai Buddhist tradition offer anything more to the modern world than dated ancient wisdom and a window into the past? I have found it to be so.

Surely moral, emotional, and intellectual clarity is as much in need now as in the past, perhaps even more so, as we struggle with matters such as artificial intelligence, human and animal consciousness, the possibility of extraterrestrial life, ecological destruction, cultural conflicts, end-of-life care, violence and poverty, social anomie, and the moral ambiguities and challenges these issues present. Zhiyi's analysis and Tiantai tradition offers perspectives to clarify human behavior, encouragement for moral choices, incentive to act with compassion, and insight into how the world works (or does not work). On the one hand, very few people will be able to participate in a traditional ninety-day ascetic regimen of "constant sitting" or "constant walking," such as that described in the *Mohe zhiguan*, but guidance in maintaining a concentrated clarity of mind (and matters of the heart) in daily life should prove healthy for anyone.

Again, some creative updating is necessary to make the Tiantai tradition widely relevant and accessible in modern life. Which parts of the tradition are no longer applicable, and which can provide improvements to the modern human condition? Is a celibate and ascetic life necessary or useful for following the path, and what is involved in pursuing the path as a lay person striving to maintain clarity within the

confusion of a mundane secular life? Are there incentives for social involvement? Does it help you get along better with your spouse and children and colleagues and other people you may encounter? Does it make you a better person? The answers may not be immediately clear or the same for everyone, but the Tiantai Buddhist tradition offers a rich source from which to learn. Readers are invited to consult these essays and the translation of the *Mohē zhiguan* to see if they can discover any clarity or insight that Tiantai Buddhism has to offer.

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