

EVEN THE TRANSLATOR SOMETIMES MUST HAVE TO STAND NAKED



Reading the English Translation of Tiantai Zhiyi's *Fahua xuanyi* for a Nanzan Seminar

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The first online “Nanzan Seminar for the Translation of Buddhist Texts” was held across six two-hour sessions in 2021 (21 April, 19 May, 16 June, 15 September, 20 October, 17 November), during which between thirty and forty participants joined us to read and discuss a new and on-going English translation of Tiantai Zhiyi’s Miaofa lianhuajing xuanyi 妙法蓮華經玄義 (“The Profound Meaning of the Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Sublime Dharma”).

After the successful publication of the translation and study of the *Mohezhiquan* 摩訶止觀 (*Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), and facing an imminent retirement, I decided to attempt a dual (fully annotated and non-annotated) English translation of Zhiyi's influential tome on the “profound meaning” of the *Lotus Sutra* as a companion set. A section of the *Xuanyi* was the focus of my PhD dissertation in the mid-1980s and had resulted in the publication of *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism* (Asian Humanities Press, 1989). I was intrigued with the possibility of updating, expanding, and correcting my translation from more than thirty-five years ago. With the first draft translation approaching the halfway point, my Nanzan colleague Matthew McMullen suggested sponsoring an online seminar to present the tentative results and receive feedback through discussion and suggestions. Here is a summary report on the proceedings.

The seminar proceeded by reading the English translation while participants kept an eye on the Chinese text (Taisho no. 1716, volume 33, pp. 681–814), followed by my comments on points of interest on the content, translation issues,

variant interpretations, further information in the notes, and so forth, then allowing for questions and comments by the participants. We did not read the Chinese text aloud, since I am unable to orally recite in Chinese, and reading aloud in the Japanese *yomikudashi* style would not be particularly helpful. After briefly summarizing the place and importance of Zhiyi and his Tiantai works in Chinese Buddhist history, we turned to examine the opening introductions. The “Private Notes on the History of the Lotus” by Zhiyi’s disciple Guanding (who transcribed and edited Zhiyi’s lectures) lists ten “highlights” and exceptional qualities of Zhiyi’s life and career, and comments on how the text came to be compiled and edited. Zhiyi’s own “Majestic Introduction” briefly presents the structure of the text, that is, an analysis of the components of the title of the *Lotus Sutra*, Kumarajīva’s *Miao fa lianhua jing* (Sublime Dharma Lotus Blossom Sutra). It opens with the famous statement that “sublime means inconceivable” 妙名不可思議, which captures the theme of this work in a nutshell. This is followed by a concise explanation of six variations of the symbolic meaning of the “lotus blossom.”

Although our main focus was to be the section on “Objects as Sublime,” in the second session we took a quick look at the preceding content in order to understand the context and flow of the argument. First, Zhiyi outlines the structure of his text in terms of “five layers of profound meaning”: 1. Explaining the name (that is, explaining the title of the *Lotus Sutra*, which takes up most of the content of the text), 2. Discerning the essence, 3. Clarifying the gist, 4. Discussing the function, and 5. Classifying the teachings. These themes were further dissected into “seven common hermeneutical perspectives”: 1. Interpreting the five themes, 2. Quoting scriptural proof, 3. Origins and arising of the five themes, 4. Exposing and merging, 5. Examination through questions and answers, 6. Contemplation of the mind, and 7. Merging differences (by classifying the teachings). At this point we took some time to look at Zhiyi’s use of the “four *siddhānta*” 四悉檀, or “methods of teaching (or accomplishment)” (worldly, individual, therapeutic, and of supreme meaning), a common trope in his analysis. One interesting point related to translation: Zhiyi decides to keep the transliteration 悉檀 instead of a translation of this term because of its various meanings that could not be expressed in a single Chinese term, and yet he also parses the term using the meaning of these characters, as “all” 悉 and “giving” 檀 (since this character was used to transliterate the Sanskrit *dāna*)! This example provided us with an example and warning to take care in choosing our translation terms when interpreting the text.

In the third session we finally began to read the long central section on the above-mentioned five themes, of which the first is “interpreting the name (or title of the *Lotus Sutra*), again of which the section on “sublime” is the most

detailed. Although in the title “sublime” comes before “Dharma,” Zhiyi begins with an analysis of “Dharma.” He begins by criticizing other scholars of his day, especially Fayun, and then presents his “correct” interpretation. This involves categories such as the “ten dharma realms” 十法界 (from hell to Buddhahood) and the “ten suchlike characteristics” 十如是 (also key themes in the *Mohezhi-guan*) whose interpenetration provide the basis for the influential idea of “three thousand realms in a single thought” 一念三千. It should be noted that these comments on “reality” (including the discussion on various “truths” that follows) are more epistemological than ontological. That is, Zhiyi is not trying to establish or describe in a scientific way exactly how “reality” exists outside of us, but focuses on how we experience and (mentally) interpret the world.

This was the beginning of the section I had translated and used as the basis for my PhD dissertation and for the book on *Foundation of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*. When I began to translate from the beginning of the *Xuanyi*, I was looking forward to reaching the section I had already worked on, thinking I could get through it rather quickly and easily. I discovered, however, that I had to considerably revise the translation and expand the notes, and that this section took as much time and effort as other, newly translated, sections. On a positive note, this reflected the advantage of having had thirty more years of experience dealing with Tiantai texts, as many of the sections that left me puzzled in the past were now clearer, and the advantages of increased digital access to information provided more assistance.

This takes us, in the fourth session and beyond, to the longest and most important section of the text, on the meaning of “sublime,” which occupied the final three sessions of the seminar. The bulk of the discussion consists of “ten aspects of sublime,” that is, objects (or reality), wisdom, practice, stages, threefold Dharmas, empathy and response, supranormal powers, preaching of the Dharma, attendants, and meritorious benefits. Again, the longest and most important section is on “objects (or reality) as sublime.” As mentioned above, this focuses on the epistemological meaning of truth or reality as we experience it, in terms of the ten suchlike characteristics, twelvefold causes and conditions, the four noble truths, the two truths, the threefold truth, one truth, and no truth. Unlike previous sessions, where we skipped through many passages, this section was read (almost) in its entirety, with close attention to the details, focusing on the logical progression and interweaving themes. As the argument progresses, the details are left behind and the focus clearer. That is, we experience the world in terms of four noble truths: of suffering, the causes of suffering, extinction of suffering, and the path to extinction. We experience the world in terms of worldly, mundane, conventional truth and of supreme, real truth. Again, in one of Zhiyi's most unique contributions, we experience the world as

three interpenetrating and simultaneous truths of emptiness, conventionality, and the Middle path, or a “threefold truth.” These “two truths” and “threefold truth” are actually one truth. But, to say “one truth” is still a verbalization, and to verbalize something is still a conventional means, so it must be said that there is “no truth.” And yet, we must use words and concepts, so there is threefold truth, two truths, four noble truths, and so forth, which again must be denied if one becomes attached to the verbal and conceptual expression of the objects of our experience. So concludes the section on “objects as sublime.”

This summarizes the readings in our final three sessions, but I should add that we often stopped to look more closely at some details, such as the use of scriptural quotation, particularly thorny translation issues, other topics (such as the fourfold classification system of the Tripitaka, Shared, Distinct, and Perfect teachings) and their interconnectedness, peculiar details (such as Zhiyi’s unusual reference to Paramārtha), questions raised by the audience, and so forth. In the end we mentioned briefly the sections that followed, how I found the section on “stages” of attainment rather tedious and irrelevant to current discourse, and looked ahead to two particularly interesting sections on “threefold Dharmas” and “empathy and response.” The section on threefold Dharmas listed ten such categories (such as threefold Buddha nature), which fit neatly into the threefold pattern (such as the threefold truth and threefold contemplation) that is the hallmark of Tiantai Buddhism. The section on “empathy and response” (the empathy of sentient beings reflected in their capacity, and the Buddha’s response to such capabilities) shows Zhiyi at his most creative, presenting a more distinctly “Chinese” development rather than trying to make sense of detailed scholastic Indian categories (such as in the section on “stages”).

The seminar came to an end, but my translation of the *Xuanyi* continues. The latter sections contain an important (but convoluted) presentation on the “original basis” (the long ago and far away awakening of the Buddha) identified *somehow* with reality itself (the Dharma body and Dharma nature) and expounded in the second half of the *Lotus Sutra*. This is in contrast to the phenomenal historical “traces” of the Buddha in our conventional world, expounded in the first half of the *Lotus Sutra*. This theme of the “basis and traces” requires careful parsing, as Zhiyi tries to explain the reality and relationship of the “ideal/real” with the “conventional,” similar in many ways to Christology in Christian theology that tries to explain the relationship between the Father/God (the “original basis”) and the incarnated son or Christ (the historical “traces”). Also coming up in later sections is a more detailed analysis of the “lotus blossom” as a symbol, a discussion of the term “sutra” (and whether or not this term should be translated), and a final detailed discussion of the

doctrinal classification of the Fourfold Teachings. Perhaps these sections and issues could be discussed in another online seminar in the coming years.

In closing, I found it a very encouraging and helpful experience to read and share my translation with many interested participants of different backgrounds and expertise. Some of the advantages of doing such a seminar were suggestions for possible alternate translations, pointing out some mistakes, discussion of ambiguous contents, confirmation of some translation choices, and so forth. For example, I received much help regarding Abhidharma matters, an area where my expertise is sorely lacking. I hope that this is only the first of many more online “zoominars” on the translation of Buddhist texts to be sponsored by the Nanzan Institute.