

Report on the 10-year Project
to Produce a Fully Annotated Translation
of the *Mo ho chih kuan* in Western Languages

Paul L. Swanson

The *Mo ho chih kuan* 摩訶止觀 (Great treatise on cessation and contemplation; T #1911) is one of the greatest and most influential works in the long history of Buddhist scholarship. It stands as one of the most important treatises of Sino-Japanese Buddhism, not only for the brilliant insight revealed therein, but also in its systematic and comprehensive treatment of both the teaching and practice of the Buddha-dharma.

The *Mo ho chih kuan* is considered one of the three great works of Chih-i (538–597), founder and systematizer of the T'ien-t'ai (Jpn. Tendai) school of Buddhism. The other two works in this triad are the *Fa hua hsüan i* 法華玄義 (Profound meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra*; T #1716), Chih-i's most important doctrinal work that contains his analysis of Buddhist teachings from the perspective of the centrality of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and *Fa hua wen chü* 法華文句 (The words of the *Lotus Sūtra*; T #1718), Chih-i's section by section commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*. The *Mo ho chih kuan* complements these two works by presenting these same teachings with respect to Buddhist practice, subsumed under the rubric of *chih-kuan*, “cessation” and “insight or contemplation,” the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *śamatha-vipaśyanā*.

Chih-i had earlier written numerous works on Buddhist practice in which he laid out the concrete steps required for proper Buddhist meditation and practice. These earlier works include the *Tz'u ti ch'an men* 次第禪門 (The gradual practice of meditation; T #1916) and the more famous *T'ien-t'ai hsiao chih-kuan* 天台小止觀 (The shorter T'ien-t'ai [method of] cessation and contemplation; T #1915). These texts give detailed step-by-step instructions on how to conduct Buddhist meditation. In the T'ien-t'ai tradition this method corresponds to a “gradual” and “progressive” method of contemplation, while the *Mo ho chih kuan*

teaches a more perfect and “sudden” method. It is significant that in his earlier years Chih-i preferred the term *ch’an/zen* for Buddhist meditation, but in his more mature works shifted to *chih-kuan* as more appropriate to express the full range of Buddhist practice. It seems that Chih-i turned away from the term *ch’an* with its implication of advancement along stages of meditation, and that *chih-kuan* implied a more “rounded” religious practice with the potential for immediate attainment of enlightenment. Interestingly, later developments in Chinese Buddhism saw a reversion to the use of the term *ch’an/zen*.

The *Mo ho chih kuan*, as well as the work of Chih-i in general, is significant for its synthesis of all the trends in Buddhist teachings and practice before the time of Chih-i. Buddhist texts, teachings, and practices were imported and introduced into China haphazardly from India and Central Asia, and one of the major tasks of Chinese Buddhist scholars was to make sense of the immense and sometimes contradictory offerings of “Buddhism.” Various “doctrinal classifications” (*p’an-chiao*) were created in an attempt to systematize or make sense of this vast corpus of Buddhist works, but none was more successful or more influential than that of Chih-i. Based on the *ekayāna* (“one-vehicle”) principle of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Chih-i attempted to give due credit to all branches of Buddhist endeavor while emphasizing the ultimate supremacy of the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The *Mo ho chih kuan* also teaches Chih-i’s cosmological concept of “the trichiliocosm in a single thought” 一念三千, the idea that each and every aspect of reality [“the three thousand worlds”] is contained at least potentially in even the shortest momentary thought of an ignorant person. This concept was made much of by Nichiren (1222–1282) in his efforts to reform Japanese Tendai [Nichiren considered Chih-i to be one of the few people in Sino-Japanese history to have correctly understood the Buddha-dharma], and is therefore a central part of the worldview taught in the Nichiren tradition.

With regard to practice, Chih-i’s many works (including the aforementioned *Tz’u ti ch’an men* and *T’ien-t’ai hsiao chih-kuan*) organized the various strands of Buddhist practice of his day into a manageable yet inclusive system. The *Mo ho chih kuan* was the culmination of Chih-i thought with regard to practice. It builds on and refers back to, rather than repeats, the concrete details given in his earlier works, and instead gives a comprehensive “philosophy of Buddhist practice.” These works had a great influence on subsequent Buddhist practice and the-

ory; the *T'ien-t'ai hsiao chih-kuan*, for example, was used as a handy manual for meditation without regard to sect, and was most certainly influential in the development of the Ch'an movement. However, the *Mo ho chih kuan* teaches that there are three ways of practicing contemplation: gradual and progressive; indeterminate [i.e. progressive but not necessarily from lower to higher stages]; and perfect and sudden. Chih-i's earlier manuals on the detailed, concrete steps of meditation were called the "gradual and progressive" method, and the *Mo ho chih kuan* claimed to present a superior way that involved a sudden and perfect contemplation of reality.

Also, the "four samādhis" explained in the *Mo ho chih kuan* as the four types of meditation that encompass all kinds of Buddhist practice include the "Constantly-Sitting Samādhi," a precursor to the "sitting-only" practice of the Ch'an/Zen tradition, and the "Constantly-Walking Samādhi," a precursor to the *nenbutsu* practices of the Pure Land tradition. Thus the *Mo ho chih kuan* in general has always been recognized by all Buddhist schools as a classic of Buddhist scholarship and a model for Buddhist practice.

In Japan the Tendai school carried on the T'ien-t'ai tradition. Its two main courses of study were the *shana-gyō*, for those who specialized in the esoteric tradition, and the *shikan-gyō*, for those who specialized in Tendai proper, centering on the *Mo ho chih kuan*. The Tendai school became the "womb" for many of the religious movements throughout Japanese history, as monks such as Eisai, Ippen, Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren, and Dōgen first studied Tendai and then became catalysts for the founding of new schools or movements.

Scholars have long recognized the influence of the *Mo ho chih kuan*, and yet it has never been fully translated into a Western language. The first two sections were translated by Neal Donner in his Ph.D. dissertation for the University of British Columbia, submitted in 1976, but this translation has not received the attention or circulation it deserves. Therefore it was an unexpected pleasure when, in the spring of last year, I was contacted by Mr. Sudoh Takashi, Director of the International Business Section of the Kōsei Shuppan publishing house, with a proposal to participate in a ten-year project to produce a fully annotated translation of the *Mo ho chih kuan* in English, French, German, and modern Japanese.

Kōsei Shuppan is the publishing arm of the Risshō Kōsei-kai, a lay Buddhist movement that emphasizes faith in the teachings of the *Lotus*

Sūtra and that has significant activities outside Japan. It already has an impressive list of publications, including an English translation of the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, a twenty-volume history of Buddhism in Asia (*Ajia bukkhyō shi*), and *Art of the Lotus Sūtra*. It is natural that they would have an interest in promoting research on Chih-i and the T'ien-t'ai tradition.

Mr. Sudoh, encouraged by Tamura Yoshirō, Nakamura Hajime, and other Japanese scholars, has long dreamed of sponsoring and publishing an annotated translation of the *Mo ho chih kuan* as the first of Chih-i's many important works. His contacts eventually led him to Jean-Noël Robert in Paris, who agreed to undertake the translation into French.¹ Dr. Robert introduced me to do the translation in English. We met with Mr. Sudoh and other members of the Kōsei Shuppan team last spring in Tokyo, where we discussed concrete details concerning, and made final commitments to go ahead with, the project. Eventually a German translation will be prepared by Peter Fischer.² Kyōdo Jikō of Taishō University has agreed to prepare the modern Japanese translation.³ A number of Japanese and Western scholars have joined the team to assist in checking the translations.

A year has passed since the project began. The *Mo ho chih kuan* consists of ten fascicles, and it is hoped that we can complete the translation at the rate of one fascicle per year, thus completing the project in about ten years. Although no final publication date is set, tentative plans call for publishing the first fascicle as soon as it is ready, with the rest following in turn at a regular rate.

The following is a sample of ongoing work, a tentative translation of the opening introduction to the *Mo ho chih kuan*. I have left out the notes, which in the current draft version already number almost a hundred and are many times longer than the text itself.

¹ Jean-Noël Robert has recently published *Les doctrines de l'École Japonaise Tendai au début du IX^e siècle: Gishin et le Hokke-shū gishū*, Paris: Editions Maisonneuve & Larose, 1990.

² Peter Fischer received his Ph.D. from Bochum University. His dissertation was published as *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Mappō-gedanken und zum Mappō-Tōmyō-ki*, Hamburg, 1976.

³ Kyōdo Jikō 京戸慈光 has published a biographical study of Chih-i, *Tendai Daishi no shōgai* 天台大師の生涯, Regulus Library #38, Tokyo: Daisan Bunmeisha, 1975.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *MO HO CHIH KUAN*

MO HO CHIH KUAN

[T 46.1a1-c1]

Taught by the great master T'ien-t'ai Chih-che [Chih-i] of the Sui
Recorded by Kuan-ting, a disciple

[Preface by Kuan-ting]

The luminous quiescence of cessation and contemplation was unknown in former ages. Chih-i elucidated this during one summer from the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month of K'ai-huang 14 [AD 594] of the Great Sui dynasty, at the Yü-ch'üan ssu in Ching-chou, pouring forth his compassion twice a day. Although his eloquence was boundless, he completed only [the section on] the objects of [false] views. Thus the dharma-wheel ceased turning, and he did not expound on the latter sections.

Yet in drawing water from a stream, one seeks its source, and scenting a fragrance, one seeks its origin. The *Ta chih tu lun* says, "I practiced without a teacher." A sūtra says, "I [Śākyamuni] received the prophecy [of attaining Buddhahood] from Dīpaṅkara." The *Analects* says, "One who is born with knowledge is superior; one who acquires it through study is next best." The Buddha-dharma is vast and sublime; it shines forth spontaneously with the truth of Heaven, like the blue from an indigo plant.

If a practicer hears [of the transmission] of the treasury of the dharma, he will know the essence of its foundation. [Śākyamuni,] the World-Honored-One who experienced Great Awakening, completed his religious practices through countless ages [in previous lives]. Then in six years [of ascetic discipline in this life as Śākyamuni] he overcame [mistaken] views [*dr̥ṣṭi*] and defeated Māra by raising a single finger [while meditating under the bodhi-tree and achieving his Great Awakening]. [He preached the Buddha-dharma] first at the Deer Park [in Benares], then at the Vulture Peak [near Rājagṛha], and finally at the Śāla Grove [near Śrāvastī, where he passed away into pari-nirvāṇa]. He transmitted the dharma to Mahākāśyapa.

1. Mahākāśyapa divided and distributed the [Buddha's] remains [*śarīra*] into eight portions, compiled the Tripiṭaka, and transmitted the dharma to Ānanda.
2. Ānanda entered the Wind Samādhi while in the middle of the [Ganges] River and divided his body into four parts, and transmitted the dharma to Śāṇavāsin.

[figures 3 to 22 abbreviated in this sample translation]

3. Simha was wounded by [order of] the [evil] King of Dammila, and when the sword cut [off his head], milk flowed forth [instead of blood].

Thus the treasury of the dharma was transmitted, first to Mahākāśyapa and finally to Simha, to twenty-three persons. Madhyāntika and Śāṇakavāsa [received the transmission] simultaneously, so actually there were twenty-four persons.

These masters are all [heirs to] the prophesies of the Golden Mouth [of the Buddha]; they were noble people, able to benefit many.

In the past there was a king who decided not to build a stable near a temple, but rather built the stable near a slaughterhouse [so that the animals therein would be influenced accordingly]. How much more so will human beings be goodly influenced upon encountering noble saints, and how can they not benefit [from this encounter]!

Again, there was a Brahman who was selling skulls, some of which could have a rod passed [fully] through the holes, some only half through, and some not at all. For those that a rod could pass through a stūpa was built and memorial services performed, and [as a result the original owners of the skulls] could attain rebirth in heaven. The essence of hearing the dharma can be compared to this merit; the Buddha, for the sake of this benefit, has transmitted the treasury of the dharma.

The Accomplishments of Chih-i

In this [treatise on] cessation and contemplation [*shih-kuan*], T'ien-t'ai Chih-che [Chih-i] explains the teachings ["dharma-gates"] that he has practiced in his own mind.

When Chih-i was born, light filled the room and double pupils appeared in his eyes. He practiced the confessions of the *Lotus Sūtra* and

articulated *dhāraṇī* [on Mt Ta-su under the tutelage of Hui-ssu]. Then in place of his dharma-master (Hui-ssu) he lectured on the golden-lettered *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. The two dynasties of the Chen [557–583] and the Sui [589–618] honored him as the “imperial teacher.” He passed into quiescence in a meditative position, having attained the stage of “the five levels [of a disciple].”

Therefore the *Lotus Sūtra* says, “The offerings of the seven treasures given for each person in four hundred myriads of millions of countries, and their conversion so that they attain the six supranormal powers, is not equal to a hundred-thousand-millionth part of the joy [from just hearing the dharma].” How much more so for the attainment of the fifth level [of the five levels of a disciple as attained by Chih-i]! The *Lotus Sūtra* also says, “[This person who preaches the *Lotus Sūtra*] is a messenger of the tathāgata, a servant of the tathāgata who performs the deeds of the tathāgata.” The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* speaks of “a bodhisattva on the first stage.” [Thus the level of Chih-i’s attainment is not insignificant.]

Chih-i’s teacher was Nan-yüeh [Hui-ssu, (515–577)]. Nan-yüeh’s meritorious practices were inconceivable. He did nothing but chant [sūtras] for ten years, and practiced the *Vaipulya Samādhi* for seven years and the constantly-sitting [samādhi] for nine periods [i.e., one summer retreat], and suddenly attained perfect/complete enlightenment. He was fully aware of, and had penetrating understanding of, both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna teachings.

Nan-yüeh studied under the meditation master Hui-wen, who was without equal in the area of the Yellow River and Huai River during the reign of Kao-tsu of the Northern Ch’i dynasty [550–589]. His teachings were not understood by the people of his day, as [people who] tread the earth and gaze at the sky do not know the [earth’s] depth nor the [sky’s] height. Hui-wen relied exclusively on the *Ta chih tu lun* for his mental discipline. This *Treatise* was taught by Nāgārjuna, the thirteenth in the line of the transmission of the treasury of the dharma. In his *Treatise on Contemplating the Mind* Chih-i says, “I entrust myself to the teacher Nāgārjuna.” Thus we know that Nāgārjuna was the highest teacher [and founder of the T’ien-t’ai lineage].

A skeptic may say, “The *Madhyamaka-sāstra* clears away, while cessation and contemplation builds up. How can they be considered the same?”

It should be known that there are about seventy Indian commen-

tators [to Nāgārjuna's *Kārikā*]; we should not rely only on that of Piṅgala [which emphasizes the negativistic side of Nāgārjuna's teachings] and reject the other commentators. The *Madhyamaka-śāstra* [itself] says,

All things that arise through conditioned co-arising,
I explain as emptiness;
Again, it is a conventional designation.
Again, it is the meaning of the Middle Path.

[end of Kuan-ting's introduction]