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Understanding Chih-i: Through a glass, darkly?

Neal Donner and Daniel B. Stevenson. 1993. *The Great Calming and Contemplation: A Study and Annotated Translation of the First Chapter of Chih-i's* Mo-ho chih-kuan. A Kuroda Institute Book. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. xx: 388 pp.

Ng Yu-Kwan. 1993. *T'ien-t'ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika.* Tendai Institute of Hawaii Buddhist Studies Program. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. xviii: 254 pp.

Recent Trends

The appearance of these two volumes in 1993 reflects the emergence of a strong core of T'ien-t'ai 天台[1] specialists in the West, and shows that T'ien-t'ai Buddhism is finally getting a fair and deserved hearing. After a long hiatus following the pioneering work of Leon Hurvitz (1960), we have seen in the last few years the publication of David Chappell's translation of the *T'ien-t'ai ssu-chiao-i* 天台四教儀 (1983), Paul Groner's study of Saichō (1984), and my study and partial translation (1989) of the *Fa-hua hsüan-i* 法華玄義 [*T.* #1716]; important articles on Chih-i by Donner (1987) and Stevenson (1986); and in French the study and translation of Gishin's 義真 *Tendai hokke shūgi shū* 天台法華宗義集 by Jean-Noël Robert (1990).[2] T'ien-ta'i was the theme of a

1. Or Tiantai; Jpn. Tendai. Henceforth, for simplicity's sake, the term "T'ien-t'ai" will be used to refer to the entire East Asian development of this tradition, including Korea and Japan.

2. The *Hokke shūgi shū* (Collected Teachings of the Tendai Lotus School) is a survey of T'ien-t'ai teachings by a Japanese Tendai monk in the 9th century. It consists mostly of excerpts from Chih-i's writings, and thus serves as a handy

major panel at the 1993 Annual Conference of the American Academy of Religion, on "Living Words: Scriptural Transformation and Meaning in Tiantai,"[3] and there appear to be graduate students majoring in T'ien-t'ai in the wings.[4] In the meantime Kōsei Publishing Co. in Tokyo has been sponsoring a project to translate the full text of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* 摩訶止觀 (*T.* 1911) (see Swanson 1991).[5] There has also been a spate of *Mo-ho chih-kuan* translations in modern Japanese recently—Muranaka Yūshō (1988) has translated the first three fascicles, and Nitta Masaaki (1989) just the first two fascicles. Kannō Hiroshi (1992) has published a short study and annotated translation of the first part of the fifth fascicle. Ikeda Rosan's complete translation in three volumes is scheduled for publication beginning in 1995. A complete index of all terms in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* has been published (see Yamada 1985), as well as an index to the texts quoted by Chih-i in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (see Chūgoku Bukkyō Kenkyūkai 1986).[6]

In this review article I will examine the contents of these two impressive books by Donner/Stevenson and Ng, and use this as an opportunity to reflect on the role of traditional T'ien-t'ai exegesis (especially that of Chan-jan 湛然, 711–782), in understanding Chih-i 智顗 (538–597), the founder of T'ien-t'ai Buddhism. In short, I will argue for attempting a more direct reading of Chih-i's work, in light of the possible pitfalls of relying too heavily on traditional commentaries and interpretations.[7]

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introduction to Chih-i's work. On this subject see Swanson 1985. My English translation of the *Hokke shūgi shū* is scheduled for publication by the Numata Center in 1995.

3. Chaired by Stanley Weinstein, with papers by Stevenson, Swanson, Linda Penkower, and Daniel Getz; with a response by David Chappell.

4. See, for example, the article by Brook Ziporyn (1994) in JIABS 17.1.

5. As of the fall of 1994, first drafts have been completed by Robert (French) and Swanson (English) for up to halfway through the fourth (of ten) fascicles, with plans for a limited publication upon completion of the fourth fascicle.

6. Significant recent Japanese publications on T'ien-t'ai *chih-kuan* include Yamauchi Shun'yū's study (1986) on T'ien-t'ai *chih-kuan* and the development of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, and Ōno Hideto's study (1994) on Chih-i's meditation manuals and the early development of *chih-kuan* practice.

7. My comments are directed also to recent modern Japanese translations of

Donner and Stevenson on the Mo-ho chih-kuan

First, *The Great Calming and Contemplation* is a substantial reworking by Daniel Stevenson of Neal Donner's already superb translation of the first two fascicles of Chih-i's *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (*T.* 1911, 46.1–140), submitted as a Ph. D. dissertation in 1976. The translation is preceded by three highly informative essays, all of great importance to T'ien-t'ai specialists and valuable also for scholars in East Asian Buddhism. The care and effort that go into a volume such as this, and especially to do it right, are immeasurable. Both authors are to be commended highly for this significant and handsome contribution. And one must not forget the editors, whose oft-overlooked work is crucial for bringing such a project to completion—it is clear that steady editorial hands guided this volume.

Chapter 1, "The text of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*," outlines the importance of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* as one of the central texts of T'ien-t'ai Buddhism, and puts it in its context with other texts by Chih-i. There is also a good discussion of the main themes of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*: the binome *chih-kuan* 止觀 (the Chinese translation of *śamatha-vipaśyanā*, but with additional nuances); the three truths and three discernments; and the four teachings and the perfect and sudden path. Finally, there is a summary of the contents of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, with a focus on the first two fascicles (traditionally known as "The Synopsis") that are translated in this volume.

Chapter 2, "The status of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* in the T'ien-t'ai tradition," is an insightful essay on how the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* has been understood and used historically in the T'ien-t'ai tradition. The essay rightly focuses on Chan-jan, the sixth T'ien-t'ai patriarch, whose leadership and commentaries on Chih-i's work set the course for subsequent T'ien-t'ai activity. As Stevenson points out, "Chan-jan's emphasis on the patriarchal vision and his identification of that vision with the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* recast the

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the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* such as Nitta 1989, Muranaka 1988, and the yet unpublished full translation by Ikeda Rosan (forthcoming; scheduled for 1995). Given Ikeda's strong advocacy of relying on Chan-jan for understanding the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* in previous publications (see Ikeda 1986), I assume that his translation will be strongly colored by traditional exegesis.

T'ien-t'ai spiritual enterprise in profoundly new ways.. . . Thus the hermeneutical principles and the view of text, canon, and tradition laid down by Chan-jan—epitomized above all in his monumental commentaries to Chih-i's 'three great texts on the *Lotus*'[8]—came to serve as the basis of later T'ien-t'ai orthodoxy" (1993, 48–51). The essay also traces the ritualized use of texts in Sung monastic life, concluding that "what this meant for the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* and other works of the sectarian canon was that access and interpretation were tightly controlled by the monastic elite. . . . This involved a lengthy tenure at the feet of an acknowledged master and was earned only through demonstrated mastery of the exegetical norms and attendant ethos of normative tradition. While this did not necessarily obviate individual growth and creativity, it did ensure that that innovation remained carefully ensconced within certain prescribed social and cultural contexts" (1993, 61). I will return to this point later.

Chapter 3, "The problematic of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* and T'ien-t'ai history," discusses problems in interpreting the "vexatious text" of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. It is structured on the T'ien-t'ai emphasis of a balance between teaching and practice, and shows how this balance shifted in terms of doctrines, ritual, and practice in the T'ien-t'ai tradition. It includes a perceptive discussion of the "home-mountain" 山家 and "off-mountain" 山外 debates of the Sung. To put it too simply, "the off-mountain position is characterized by the tendency to read Chih-i and Chan-jan from a strongly tathāgatagarbha-oriented perspective" (1993, 86), while Chih-li 智礼 (960–1028), the spokesman for the home-mountain, insisted on a greater regard "for patriarchal precedent set forth in such works as the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* and Chih-i's ritual manuals" (1993, 88).

The above summaries pick up only a few main points of these rich essays, which serve as strong supporting material for the core of this work which is, of course, the annotated translation of

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8. This is a traditional phrase used in the T'ien-t'ai school to refer to the three texts of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, *Fa-hua hsüan-i*, and *Fa-hua wen-chü* (*T.* 1718), but it is more accurate to refer to them as the "three great works of T'ien-t'ai." Strictly speaking, the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* is not a commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*, and it is a misrepresentation to refer to it as such.

the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. Let me say first concerning the translation that it is lucid and accurate, and the notes very useful (though sometimes, perhaps limited by publication restraints, too brief). This is a translation that is most suited to that hoary old book-review cliché that it "should be on the shelves of everyone in the field."

Of course there is more than one way to skin a cat, and, as every translator knows, more than one way a text can be properly rendered, especially a "vexatious" and notoriously ambiguous text like the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. To illustrate differences in style and vocabulary, I will give first Donner's original translation in his dissertation and then Stevenson's reworking, followed by other translations, of a passage from the early part of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (*T.* 46.2b12–17):

故舉龍王爲譬。竪遍六天橫亘四域。興種種雲震種種雷熾種種電降種種雨。龍於本宮不動不搖。而於一切施設不同。菩薩亦如是。內自通達即空即假即中不動法性。而令獲種種益得種種用。是名圓力用建立衆生。

Hence we cite the dragon-king (*nāga*) as an illustration. In height he compasses the six heavens (of the Realm of Desire), and in breadth reaches across the (above-mentioned) four continents. He raises all manner of clouds, wields all manner of thunder, flashes all manner of lightning and causes all manner of rain to fall, and (does it) without budging from his own palace. His activity appears different to everyone (who sees him). This is what a bodhisattva is like. Having attained internally and for himself full realization of (the Ultimate Truth which is simultaneously) identical to Emptiness, Provisionality and the Middle, he (is able), without disturbing the Dharma-nature (*dharmatā*), to (externally) cause (animate beings) to gain a variety of benefits and engage in a variety of activities (while enlightened). This is what is called "establishing animate beings (in the Dharma by means of his) perfect energy."

(Donner 1976, 50)

Hence we cite the dragon-king as an illustration. In height he encompasses the six heavens of the realm of desire and in breadth reaches across the four continents. He raises all manner of clouds, wields all manner of thunder, flashes all manner of lightning, and causes all manner of rain to fall, all without budging from his own palace. His activity appears different to everyone who sees him. This is what a bodhisattva is like. Having attained internally for himself full

> realization of the simultaneous identity of emptiness, provisionality, and the middle, he is able, without disturbing the dharma-nature, externally to cause animate beings to gain a variety of benefits and engage in a variety of activity [to effect their salvation]. This is what is called "establishing animate beings in the dharma by means of his perfect energy."
>
> (Stevenson 1993, 117)

One can see how Stevenson has smoothed out the prose, while compromising somewhat the technical need for brackets to indicate terms that are not explicitly in the text. Donner also contains more detailed notes to this passage that are not included by Stevenson, and he is more concerned with identifying technical terms, a style consistent with a doctoral dissertation. The result of Stevenson's reworking is a text that is lucid and flows naturally. Let us compare it with another translation:

> . . . [The Dragon King] makes various kinds of clouds, thunder, lightning, and rain. The Dragon stays in his own palace, yet he is able to make all of these without the slightest movement himself. The bodhisattva is likewise. Penetrating into the identity of Emptiness, the Provisional and the Middle Way, he enables [sentient beings] to obtain various kinds of benefit and acquire various kinds of abilities, yet with no effect on the Dharma Nature. This is called "putting sentient beings into correct places with the perfect function."
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> (Ng 1993, 70)

This translation suffers from stilted phrasing and overly literal translation of technical terms, and so does not convey the majestic cadence of the original.

I also have access to translations of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* now being prepared as part of a project to translate the complete text into Western languages (see Swanson 1991). Both are first drafts subject to revision before final publication:

> Therefore let us take up the analogy of the Dragon King: In height [his power] encompasses the six heavens [of the realms of desire], and in breadth [his power] spans the four continents. He arouses all manner of clouds, manipulates all manner of thunder, flashes all manner of lightning, and causes all manner of rain to fall. The Dragon [King does all this] while in his own palace, immobile and secure, and yet his activity appears different to all. The bodhisattva is also like this. Internally he has himself fully consummated [the truth

of] the identity of emptiness, conventionality, and the Middle, and [on the basis of] the unmoving nature of reality (*dharmatā*) he can lead [sentient beings] to acquire all manner of benefits and attain all manner of functions [that lead to Buddhahood]. This is called "perfect power that functions to establish sentient beings [in the truth]."

(trans. by Paul Swanson)

On pourra donc prendre pour exemple le roi des dragons: verticalement, il embrasse les cieux des six dieux, horizontalement, il s'étend aux quatre régions. Il suscite les nuées dans leur diversité, il provoque toutes les espèces de tonnerre, il fait luire toutes les sortes d'éclair, il fait tomber la grande variété des pluies. Or le dragon, dans son palais, ne se meut ni ne s'ébranle et cependant il dispense à tous des dons qui ne sont pas identiques. Il en va de même pour le bodhisattva. Il est intérieurement parvenu aux identifications à la vacuité, à la conditionnalité et à la médianité et, sans cependant s'ébranler de la nature de dharma, il permet de gagner toutes les sortes de bienfaits et d'obtenir toutes les sortes d'opérativités. C'est ce que l'on appelle la parfaite édification des êtres en force opérative.

(trans. by Jean-Noël Robert)

These translations also show a bent for technical precision, and I must admit that the Stevenson rendition reads the best (though I confess to a penchant for my own translations of technical terms). These different translations also support my conviction, honed over many years of translating various types of texts, that there is no single "correct" translation, and that differing translations can be equally "right" (or equally wrong). Stevenson and Donner's translation is superb, but there's room for remixing and new renditions.

Let us take a look at the opening passage of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (*T.* 46.1a1–7), one of the best known passages of this text. As above, I will first give Donner's original, then Stevenson's reworking, and then some other options:

Calming and contemplation (which mean, reversing their sequence), luminous understanding and tranquility, had not yet been heard of in former generations, when Chih-i, beginning on the 26th day of the 4th month of the 14th year of K'ai-huang (594 A. D.), at the Jade-spring monastery in Ching-chou, expounded (this work) twice a day throughout the summer, compassionately raining down (his wisdom). Although his desire to preach knew no bounds, he

only completed the (section on the) realm of false views, and thereupon brought to a halt the turning of the wheel of the Dharma, and did not discourse on the final portion (of the whole work).

Yet drawing water from a stream, one seeks its source, and scenting an aroma, one traces its origin. The *Treatise* says, "In my practice I have not had a teacher." And a sūtra says, "I (Śākyamuni) received the prophecy of Buddhahood from (the Buddha) Dīpaṅkara." A (secular) writing says, "It is best to have inherent knowledge, but to acquire it through study is next best." The Buddhist teachings are vast and subtle. Do they shine of themselves with the heavenly light of truth, or is their blue derived from an indigo plant?

(Donner 1976, 36)

Calming and contemplation as luminosity and tranquility: [this teaching] had not yet been heard of in former generations when Chih-i, beginning on the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month of the fourteenth year of K'ai-huang (594), at the Jade Spring Monastery (Yü-ch'üan ssu) in Ching-chou, expounded this work twice a day over the course of the summer, compassionately raining down [his wisdom]. Although his desire to preach knew no bounds, once he completed the section on the sphere of views, he brought to a halt the turning of the wheel of the dharma and did not discourse on the final sections of the work.

Yet drawing water from a stream, one seeks its source, and scenting an aroma, one traces its origin. The *Great Treatise* says, "In my practice I have not had a teacher." Yet a sūtra says, "I (Śākyamuni) received the prophecy of Buddhahood from the Buddha Dīpaṃkara." A [secular] writing says, "Those who are born with knowledge are the highest. Next come those who attain knowledge through study." The Buddhist teachings are a vast and subtle truth. Do they shine of themselves with the heavenly light of truth or is their blue derived from the indigo plant?

(Stevenson 1993, 100)

The following is, I suggest, another possible rendering of the same passage, often with an alternative reading deliberately chosen to illustrate possible options:

The luminous quiescence of cessation-and-contemplation was unknown in former ages. The Wise Master [Chih-i] elucidated this during one summer from the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month of K'ai-huang 14 [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 through [the section

on the contemplation of] 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 traces its origin. The *Ta chih tu lun* says, "I [the Buddha] practiced without a teacher."[9] Yet, a sūtra says, "I [Śākyamuni] received the prediction [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 Dharma teachings are vast and sublime; they shine forth spontaneously with the truth of Heaven, and [Chih-i's expositon of them] is like the blue from an indigo plant[, which is derived from, but bluer than, the plant itself].

Many of these phrases need extensive annotation to flush out their multivalent nuances. The first phrase of eight characters 止觀明靜前代未聞, for example, has traditionally been read in eight different ways, the subtle differences of which would be difficult to convey in any English translation![10] In a note Stevenson gives a translation of Chan-jan's interpretation.

Another key paragraph from the introduction, the "core" of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* that is often chanted in T'ien-t'ai temples, is a passage on the "perfect and sudden cessation-and-contemplation" (*T.* 46.1c23–2a2):

> The perfect and sudden calming-and-contemplation from the very beginning takes ultimate reality (*shih-hsiang*) as its object. No matter what the object of contemplation might be, it is seen to be identical to the middle. There is here nothing that is not true reality (*chen-shih*). When one fixes [the mind] on the dharmadhātu [as object] and unifies one's mindfulness with the dharmadhātu [as it is], then there is not a single sight nor smell that is not the middle way. The same goes for the realm of self, the realm of Buddha, and the realm of living beings. Since all aggregates (skandha) and sense-accesses (*āyatana*) [of body and mind] are thusness, there is no suffering to be cast away. Since nescience and the afflictions are themselves identical with enlightenment (bodhi), there is no origin of suffering to be eradicated. Since the two extreme views are the middle way and false

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9. Or, "My conduct does not require [the recognition of] a teacher."

10. See the extensive note by Sekiguchi Shindai, *Makashikan: Zen no shisō genri*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1966), 364–66.

views are the right view, there is no path to be cultivated. Since saṃsāra is identical with nirvāṇa, there is no cessation to be achieved. Because of the [intrinsic] inexistence of suffering and its origin, the mundane does not exist; because of the inexistence of the path and cessation, the supramundane does not exist. A single, unalloyed reality (*shih-hsiang*) is all there is—no entities whatever exist outside of it. That all entities are by nature quiescent (*chi*) is called "calming" (*chih*); that, though quiescent, this nature is ever luminous (*chao*), is called "contemplation" (*kuan*). Though a verbal distinction is made between earlier and later stages of practice, there is ultimately no duality, no distinction between them. This is what is called the "perfect and sudden calming and contemplation."

(Stevenson 1993, 112–14)

The flow of this translation is broken by the inclusion of numerous technical terms in parenthesis, a practice that Stevenson usually avoids. Here, however, it is necessary to identify and differentiate key terms, such as *shih-hsiang* 實相 and *chen-shih* 眞實 (both translated as "Ultimate Reality" in Donner's original). Once again, the following rendition presents possible alternatives:

The perfect and sudden [method of practicing cessation-and-contemplation] involves taking the true aspects [of reality] as the object from the very beginning. Whatever is made to be the object [of contemplation], it is the Middle; there is nothing that is not truly real. [When one attains the state of contemplation wherein] reality itself (*dharmadhātu*) is fixed as the object [of cognition and contemplation], and one's thoughts are integrated with reality itself, [then one realizes that] there is not a single color nor scent that is not the Middle Way. It is the same for the realm of the individual [mind], the realm of the Buddha, and the world at large [i. e., the "realm of sentient beings"]. All [phenomena experienced through the] aggregates and senses are thusness [i. e., reality as it is]; therefore there is no [substantial] suffering that needs to be removed. Since ignorance and the exhausting dust [of passionate afflictions] are indivisible with bodhi-wisdom, there is no origin [of suffering, i. e., craving] to be severed. Since the extreme [dualities] and false views are [indivisible with] the Middle and the right [views], there is no path to be cultivated. Since [this cyclic world of] saṃsāra is [indivisible with] nirvāṇa, there is no extinguishing [of craving] to be realized. Since there is no [substantial] suffering and cause [of suffering], there is no mundane world [to be transcended]; since there is no path and no extinction [of craving], there is no transcendent world [to be

> gained]. There is purely the single true aspects [of reality]; there are no separate things outside these true aspects. For things in themselves (*dharmatā*) to be quiescent is called "cessation"; to be quiescent yet ever luminous is called "contemplation." Though earlier and later [stages] are spoken of, they are neither two nor separate. This is called perfect and sudden cessation-and-contemplation.

A major difference in my rendering is to use the (admittedly awkward) term "indivisible" to soften the idea of "identity" 即 in this passage. (I will return to this topic later with regard to Ng's book.) Once again, most of Stevenson's notes in this section quote Chan-jan's interpretations of the passage.

If there is one point where I am uncomfortable with Stevenson's work or approach, it is in the danger of an over reliance on Chan-jan's commentary. A great many of Stevenson's notes begin with "Chan-jan says" or deal mostly with Chan-jan's explanation. All of these notes are informative and helpful, and it is to Stevenson's credit that he does not use Chan-jan's work uncritically. Also to his credit, Stevenson is aware of having taken this approach, and in fact has deliberately chosen it. In his preface he explains (xvi):

> There are two reasons for relying so heavily on [Chan-jan].. . . First, it is at best tenuous to attempt any systematic reconstruction of the *Moho chih-kuan* apart from Chan-jan's commentary, given the lack of early materials as well as the enormous impact that Chan-jan's work has had on shaping the current text. And second, since Chan-jan's version of the text and commentary became the normative one for virtually all of East Asia, adopting his reading at least puts us within the mainstream of later T'ien-t'ai exegetical discourse.

These are good reasons, and certainly this is a valid approach. Chan-jan's commentary is often quite useful, and sometimes even critical for understanding difficult passages.[11] However, it

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11. To give just one example, Chan-jan's commentary provides support for arguing against "the persistent tendency among Japanese scholars to render the four characters of *chi yüan fa-chieh* 緣法界 as 'fix (or identify) all mental objects/conditions in (or with) the dharmadhātu'," instead of "fix your mind on the dharmadhātu as the object [of meditation]" (Stevenson 1993, 226, note 32).

must be said that there are also problems with this approach. By relying so heavily on Chan-jan, there is the danger that we will see Chih-i only through his eyes, yet is it not preferable (as much as possible) to encounter Chih-i directly? Besides, quoting Chan-jan's (or another traditional) commentary sometimes lulls one into thinking that the ambiguity in Chih-i's texts has been clarified or adequately explained, when in fact some times it has not. It also becomes a habit that leads one away from wrestling directly with Chih-i's text itself.

Another unfortunate byproduct of this approach is that many of the subjective but fascinating notes in Donner's dissertation have been omitted. For example, a note by Donner (1976, 185) to what appears to be a quote from the *Heart Sūtra* (*T.* 46.5b20) has been omitted in Stevenson (1993, 158). The note reads, "Verbatim from the *Heart Sūtra* as translated by Kumārajīva (*T.* 251), though this passage happens to be identical to the better-known translation of Hsüan-tsang (*T.* 252), which postdates Chih-i." This anomaly is easily overlooked and could easily be brushed aside as a casual rewording by Chih-i (a not uncommon practice, I might add). But on a closer inspection one realizes that the quote is not from the *Heart Sūtra* at all but from Kumārajīva's translation of the *Pañcaviṃśati-sāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*T.* 223, 8.223a14), or from the quotation of this sūtra passage in the *Ta chih tu lun* (*T.* 25.327c22). One may well wonder why Chih-i would quote from the larger sūtra or treatise instead of the more convenient *Heart Sūtra* (if in fact he had the "*Heart Sūtra*" available), especially since Chih-i used Kumārajīva's translations for almost all of his major texts. This example buttresses Jan Nattier's argument (1992, 187) that "the so-called Kumārajīva version (*T.* 250) of the *Heart Sūtra* was created on the basis of the *Ta chih tu lun*," and that the "Hsüan-tsang version" is also an extract from the *Pañcaviṃśati-sāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*—"that it was first classified simply as a Prajñāpāramitā text, in all probability listed as 'translator unknown,' and that only later—through its close association with Hsüan-tsang and his activities in popularizing it—it came to be attributed to him" (1992, 190). But I digress.

To give another example of Donner's helpful notes just a few pages later, Stevenson (165, note 132) retains the information identifying the quote "The afflictions are identical with enlight-

enment; enlightenment is identical with the afflictions," as a passage from the *Viśeṣacintabrahma-paripṛcchā-sūtra*, but omits Donner's extensive comments on this subject, including an explanation of the traditional threefold T'ien-t'ai understanding of this "identity" (Donner, 191).

One final example: in a note on the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra* passage that "The defilements are the seeds of the Tathāgata" (Donner, 397; Stevenson, 316), Stevenson retains the explanation that "Mañjuśrī explains here that, just as lotus seeds must be planted in the mud and will never germinate in empty space, so the seeds of Buddhahood will flourish only when planted in the mire of worldly afflictions." However, he leaves out Donner's colorful (and suggestive) aside that "in truth, the metaphor would be improved to say that the defilements are the *manure* for the seeds of the Tathāgata."

Whether the omission of such notes was done for reasons of space or personal preference (more likely the former), the effect is the unhappy absence of much useful and stimulating modern commentary. Like Bob Dylan's unreleased or bootleg tapes, some of the best and most interesting of Donner's contributions were left out of the final published version. Thus, like Dylan freaks who collect unreleased versions of the master's work, dyed-in-the-wool Chih-i aficionados will have to get their own copy of Donner's dissertation from University Microfilms in order to have a truly complete T'ien-t'ai collection. Of course they must have the "official" published version, too. This is a work that sets a high standard, and paves the way for future work on Chih-i and the T'ien-t'ai tradition.

Ng on Mādhyamika and Chih-i

Let us now turn to the second book under review, Ng Yu-Kwan's *T'ien-t'ai Buddhism and Early Mādhyamika.* This is an intriguing, careful, and insightful study of Chih-i's ideas and their relationship to Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika ideas. Ng argues vociferously against many standard Japanese and Western interpretations of Chih-i's work (including my own, e.g., 1989), especially the idea that the threefold truth and threefold contemplation are the key concepts in Chih-i's work. Despite our differences of opinion I found Ng's work informative and challenging; as a result I have

modified some of my interpretations, but not others (especially with regard to buddha-nature). Let us take a look at the contents of Ng's work and discuss some of the issues raised therein.

In the Introduction (Chapter I) Ng outlines three critical questions for his study:

1. How does Chih-i understand and criticize Mādhyamika's concepts of emptiness and the middle way?
2. How does Chih-i's "Middle Way–Buddha Nature"[12] differ from Mādhyamika's middle way?
3. What are Chih-i's philosophical methods in relation to the realization of the Middle Way–Buddha Nature, and how can they be related to Mādhyamika?

We can see that one of Ng's major concerns is the question of buddha-nature, and he states repeatedly that it is a key part of Chih-i's Buddhism that modern scholars have failed to adequately address. (More on this later.) He then comments on the Mādhyamika and T'ien-t'ai sources he uses for his study. Particularly significant here is Ng's choice of a wide variety of Chih-i's work, especially the later commentaries in his own hand by Chih-i on the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra* such as the *Wei-mo-ching hsüan-shu* (*T.* 1777) and *Wei-mo-ching lüeh-shu* (*T.* 1778).

Chapter II, "Emptiness and the Middle Way in Mādhyamika," is a concise and clear discussion of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. One important conclusion Ng reaches is that "the endeavor to elevate the Middle Way to a level of a Truth higher than the Truth of Emptiness, as the T'ien-t'ai School does, cannot be justified from Nāgārjuna's standpoint" (1993, 31). The following Chapter III, "Chih-i on Mādhyamika," expands on this point. Ng argues (contra Swanson 1989, 6–8), for the difference between Nāgārjuna and Chih-i rather than their continuity, particularly with regard to the famous verse 24:18 of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*.[13] Although the Chinese translation of this

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12. Ng frequently uses capital letters for key terms such as Middle Way, Buddha Nature, Emptiness, and Truth.

13. The Sanskrit reads:

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe,
sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā.

verse easily lent itself to a threefold interpretation—that emptiness, conventional names, and the middle way refer back in a threefold way to causally-arisen dharmas (*pratītyasamutpāda*), Ng shows that in the Sanskrit original the last two phrases (on conventional names and the middle way) refer back to emptiness. Ng is correct to point out that Nāgārjuna and Chih-i are different. I plead guilty to having (in my book) unconsciously, and uncritically, considered Nāgārjuna the "orthodox position" or "standard" by which to measure others. However, my concern is (and was) to counteract the view that belittles Chih-i's, or other Chinese, interpretations because they "deviate" from a strict adherence to Sanskrit originals. The very fact that Nāgārjuna and Chih-i are separated by time, social background, language, and culture means that their understanding is necessarily different; the question is: in what way are they different? Do they "deviate" and disagree in a strikingly significant way, or are their commonalities more significant? Certainly Chih-i's threefold interpretation of *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 24:18 is different from Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit original, but not (I feel) so fundamentally as to make it a radical break. For Ng, however, the difference is critical. For him it is a prime example of the difference in interpretation of the middle way between Mādhyamika and Chih-i.

For Ng, this difference is best expressed by the phrase, as in the title of Chapter IV, "Middle Way–Buddha Nature as the Truth." Ng insistently repeats that "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" 中道佛性, as a positive expression of the middle way, goes beyond the middle way (identified with emptiness) of Mādhyamika and is the central tenet of Chih-i's Buddhism rather than the threefold truth. This position is outlined in his preface:

> How does Chih-i understand Buddha Nature? What are the characteristics of the Truth for Chih-i? After a long period of painstaking study, I concluded that Chih-i takes Buddha Nature to be ever-abiding, functional, and all-embracing. Consequently, the characteristics of the Truth for Chih-i are permanency, dynamism, and all-embracing

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The Chinese (*T.* 30.33b11) reads:

> 衆因緣生法 我說即是無 (空)
> 亦爲是假名 亦是中道義

> nature. Among these characteristics, dynamism is most emphasized and should deserve greatest attention. (x)

So far, so good. But then Ng continues:

> That the Truth is dynamic or functional indicates that the Truth can act. It can initiate actions. (x)

This claim gives me pause. Does this mean that truth is something apart from that on which it acts? Is it a "separate reality"? Is it "personal"? Ng continues:

> Towards what are these actions directed? For what purpose are they initiated? For Chih-i they are directed towards the actual phenomenal world so as to cause the cultivation and transformation of sentient beings. (x–xi)

But, as far as I understand Chih-i and basic Buddhist thought, "truth" and "buddha-nature" are not separate from phenomena, as independent agents to act on them. What does it mean to have "actions directed" by "the Truth"? Does Ng really mean to propose such a dualistic structure? Later he goes so far as to claim that truth "is established in terms of an indestructible spiritual substance or body, which Chih-i associates with the Dharma Body and Buddha Nature" (85). Why insist on such substantialist buddha-nature language to explain the positive aspects of ultimate reality, or the middle, when Chih-i himself uses so many other expressions even more frequently? Ng himself admits that the term "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" is not that common in Chih-i's work.

The closing part of the Synopsis of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* (*T.* 46.21a26–b5), for example, lists various ways to refer to ultimate reality:

> Such is the ultimate quiescence of the three qualities which represents the "returning of the purport." What words could possibly denote it? How is one to label it? Forced to give it a designation, we call it "the middle way," "reality," "the dharma body," "neither-quiescence-nor-luminosity." Or we use such terms as "omniscient wisdom of all modes," the "great wisdom of perfect equality," the "prajñāpāramitā," "insight or contemplation (*kuan*)"; or we force on it such labels as "*śūraṅgama-samādhi*," "*mahāparinirvāṇa*," "the inconceivable liberation," or "calm (*chih*)."
>
> (Stevenson 1993, 347)

No mention of buddha-nature here. Why not, if "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" is Chih-i's favored expression for ultimate reality? Additional terms are used throughout Chih-i's writings: wondrous existence (*miao-yu*); true, good, and wondrous form; ultimate emptiness; suchness; empty buddha-nature; and supreme truth. Why insist on "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" as the key concept in Chih-i's system of thought instead of these other terms? To his credit, Ng addresses exactly this question to summarize his argument. He gives three reasons:

> First, the main issues in Chih-i's system are the conception of the Truth and its realization.. . . The truth is permanent, functional and all-embracing, possessing the three characteristics of ever-abidingness, meritorious function and embracing various *dharmas*. These characteristics are mainly explicated in the context of the Buddha Nature.. . . The other terms or phrases enumerated above do not clearly convey these ideas.

Perhaps, but I am not convinced.

> Second, the compound term "Middle Way–Buddha Way" carries an important practical message, which does not seem to be manifest in other terms.

Once again, this is not completely convincing. Other terms can convey an important practical message as well as "buddha-nature," including the term "middle way" interpreted in the context of the threefold truth as the simultaneous integration of both emptiness and conventionality (which includes the bodhisattva's practical working in this world).

> Third, among the three characteristics of the Truth, the meritorious function is most striking and is emphasized by Chih-i more than other characteristics.. . . The Truth is not merely to be depicted, but also to be realized. (Ng 1993, 88–89)

Function and activity is certainly emphasized by Chih-i, but this does not require resorting to buddha-nature language. A middle way that is understood to embrace both emptiness and conventionality (i. e., the threefold truth) is sufficiently positive to show the differences between Chih-i and Nāgārjuna and convey the practical, all-embracing, functional nature of truth. Also, there seems to be a circular argument here: i. e., it is claimed that the

major characteristic of Chih-i's thought is the dynamism, permanence, and all-embracing nature of truth, *because* "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" is the central idea; on the other hand, it is claimed that "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" is the most appropriate term for Chih-i's central idea of the Truth *because* it best reflects the aspects of the dynamism, permanence, and all-embracing nature of the truth. Throughout the book the point is brought home by insistent repetition, which amounts to exhortation, not evidence.

Why, then, does Ng insist on using the term "Middle Way–Buddha Nature"? I suspect that it is more influenced by later T'ien-t'ai tradition, with the great importance buddha-nature ideas came to play, than by intrinsic necessity. Ng states that Japanese and Western scholars have "widely ignored" the crucial position of "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" in Chih-i's thought (1993, 64). On the contrary, massive tomes have been written on buddha-nature, *tathāgata-garbha*, and inherent enlightenment in Chih-i and T'ien't'ai Buddhism, as well as the wider Chinese and Japanese Buddhist tradition.[14] Scholars have not "ignored" the crucial position of "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" in Chih-i's thought, it just is not there—at least not in the way buddha-nature thought developed in later times.

A great strength of Ng's argument, it should be pointed out, is his extensive use of Chih-i's late commentaries on the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*. These commentaries are not only Chih-i's later (and arguably more "mature") work, but are also written in his own hand (unlike the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* and *Fa-hua hsüan-i*). As Ng points out, "the incidence of Buddha Nature or Middle Way–Buddha Nature is much greater in these commentaries than in the *Fa-hua hsüan-i*, *Fa-hua wen-chu*, and *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, manifesting a deeper concern with the Buddha Nature or Middle Way–Buddha Nature on Chih-i's part in his old age" (40). If, in fact, "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" is more central, more explicit, more developed in Chih-i's later commentaries on the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra* than in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, then this is a very significant finding. It would require the T'ien-t'ai tradition to reevaluate

14. I've even seen a pirated Chinese translation of Andō Toshio's *Tendai shōgu shisō ron* (1973).

Chih-i's late writings and reconsider the centrality of the so-called three major works of Chih-i that have historically been the main focus in T'ien-t'ai Buddhism since the time of Chan-jan. Ironically, my criticism of Ng's position is based on a greater familiarity with the earlier *Mo-ho chih-kuan* and *Fa-hua hsüan-i*, a traditional T'ien-t'ai approach, and I may have to eventually eat my words.

Ng continues in Chapter V, "Four alternatives in Mādhyamika and Chih-i," Chapter VI, "Epistemic-soteriological character of the Threefold Contemplation," and Chapter VII, "Practical significance of identification," to give meaty and helpful analysis of various aspects of Chih-i's thought. I would like to add one word of caution with regard to the concept of "identity" 即 (discussed in Chapter VII). This is certainly an accurate rendition in the case of "the identity of emptiness, conventionality, and the middle" 即空即假即中. However, there are many other cases in which this character is used, but in which I believe a mathematical or total identity is not intended. Perhaps the most important of these are the phrases "the identity of bodhi-wisdom and passionate afflictions" 菩提即煩惱 and "the identity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa" 生死即涅槃. In these cases, despite many passages that could easily be interpreted as such, Chih-i does not mean that there is no difference between the two opposites. Rather, using such paradoxical phrases as "neither one nor different" 不一不異, he argues that they are "indivisible"—they have no meaning apart from each other; they are not exactly overlapping equivalents of each other. In such cases, then, it is preferable to use the awkward yet more accurate rendition of "indivisibility" rather than "identity." An unbalanced emphasis on their "identity" can misrepresent Chih-i's teaching, which also involves their differences.

Ng returns in his Conclusion (Chapter VIII) to argue against the standard position that the threefold truth and threefold contemplation are most central in Chih-i's thought, saying that "only the Middle Way–Buddha Nature, with its characteristics, can account for the Threefold Contemplation and Threefold Truth" (188). On the contrary, I would go so far as to say that even if all references to "Middle Way–Buddha Nature" were excised from Chih-i's work, it would not be seriously affected—there are plenty of other terms that serve the same purpose; if, however, the

threefold truth were banished from T'ien-t'ai discourse and one could not apply the threefold pattern to Chih-i's argument, then the bulk of Chih-i's work would be reduced to nonsense.

In this review I have concentrated on Ng's handling of the issue of buddha-nature, not only because it is a central theme in his book but also because of its importance in East Asian Buddhist thought and practice. Our disagreements have been sharp, but this should in no way detract from my positive assessment of Ng's contribution. His work deserves close study that will be rewarded by many insights into Chih-i's work and Buddhist thought, and I look forward to further discussions and clarifications on these issues.

On the use of traditional commentaries

Earlier in this review I advocated the attempt to have a "direct encounter" with Chih-i rather than relying too much on the classical commentators or traditional interpretations. By advocating a direct encounter I am not claiming that this is easily done or even completely possible, as if one could pick up a phone and give Chih-i a ring. ("Excuse me, but could you clarify for your fans exactly what you meant by 'buddha-nature'?") One cannot even be sure which parts of the central texts attributed to Chih-i are his own words rather than those of his disciple and note-taker Kuan-ting 灌頂 (561–632). To complicate matters further, Hirai Shun'ei (1985) has shown that large portions of the *Fa-hua wen-chü* appear to have been lifted from the San-lun scholar Chi-tsang's commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*. Nor do I advocate completely ignoring the traditional commentaries. Rather, I am endorsing a reading of the text that wrestles with it nakedly before glancing over at the traditional commentaries to check what it says, which can be like cheating at a crossword puzzle by peeking at the answers in the back of the book (except that we cannot rely on the commentaries to always provide the "right" answers). It means checking in detail the sources that Chih-i quotes to see if they really say what he claims they say in support of his teachings, and if they do not, to speculate on what that may imply. It means admitting that the text is ambiguous or convoluted at places, and not always trying to force a translation. It can mean taking a forward rather than a backward look—to look

at Chih-i through the perspective of his predecessors (e. g., Hui-ssu), instead of looking at Chih-i through his successors (such as Chan-jan). It means cultivating an attitude that takes the later commentarial tradition (even Chan-jan) with a grain of salt—to cultivate an awareness that a traditional interpretation is, after all, one opinion, of which others are possible, and to be critically aware that the tradition colors Chih-i's statements in a certain way. One of the more significant ways in which Chih-i's position is "colored" by T'ien-t'ai tradition, I believe, is precisely on the question of buddha-nature, and that is why it is so important to be careful in our interpretation of Chih-i on this point.

From the time of Chan-jan and his advocacy of the buddha-nature of even non-sentient beings, to the remarkably influential role of the idea of inherent enlightenment (本覚, Jpn. *hongaku*) in Japanese Tendai, buddha-nature has been a seminal concept in the T'ien-t'ai tradition (as well as, for that matter, most of East Asian Buddhism). But what did Chih-i really advocate with regard to buddha-nature? It can certainly be argued that later developments were not only in accord with, but also natural developments based on, Chih-i's teachings. However, it can also be argued (and I take this view) that in handling the concept of buddha-nature, and in contrast to some later developments, Chih-i is very wary of possible substantialist (and thus mistaken) interpretations, and that he treads very gingerly around the subject. His use of buddha-nature language is much less frequent than many of his successors. His formulation of threefold buddha-nature in terms of a synergy of the nature of reality, wisdom, and practice (see Swanson 1990) was, I believe, a careful and deliberate way to circumvent the potential problems that could arise from positing a substantial, "pure" buddha-nature, and the dangers of buddha-nature language led him to avoid advocating buddha-nature as a central proposition in his theory and practice.[15] This studious avoidance can act as an important corrective to an overemphasis on, or substantialist interpretations of,

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15. I do not think it is accidental, for example, that the *Awakening of Faith* is never referred to in Chih-i's work, except for one occasion in the *T'ien-t'ai hsiao chih-kuan* 天台小止観, and this reference is probably a later addition not by Chih-i himself.

buddha-nature. One nagging difficulty I have with Ng's insistence that buddha-nature be accepted as *the* central tenet of Chih-i's Buddhism is that it vitiates Chih-i's potential role to counteract the excesses of buddha-nature thought in the later T'ien-t'ai and wider East Asian Buddhist tradition.

So let us try to encounter Chih-i directly. To use a Biblical image, must we view Chih-i "as through a glass, darkly"? Is it a chimera to hope that we can encounter him "face to face"? I see it as similar to the ideal of scholarly objectivity—no one can be sure (or even hope) to achieve it totally, but it is a goal worthy of pursuit. Surely there is the possibility that we will not be able to see or understand Chih-i clearly, or even "correctly." But at least it will be our own vision, and perhaps even lead to the birth of a new and vigorous tradition.

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