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# Chinese-Translated Dhyāna Scriptures and the Sinicization of Buddhism: The Chinese Traditional Cultural Significance and Philosophical Interpretation in the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra*[*]

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This paper examines the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra* as an early Chinese-translated dhyāna scripture and explores its significance in the Sinicization of Buddhism. Focusing on the Five Gates of Meditation and the distinction between the "expedient path" and the "superior path", it shows how earlier Buddhist meditation methods were translated, reorganized, and developed within the Chinese context. The five practices—mindfulness of breathing, contemplation of impurity, loving-kindness, dependent origination, and analysis of elements—formed a practical system for overcoming afflictions and cultivating meditation. The study argues that the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra* not only preserved Indian Buddhist meditative traditions, but also played an important role in the formation of early Chinese Chan thought and in the broader development of Chinese Buddhist culture.

*Keywords:* Sinicization of Buddhism, Chinese-translated dhyāna scriptures, *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra*

## Introduction

The *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra* (Sanskrit: *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra*) consists of two fascicles and was translated by Buddhabhadra (Sanskrit: *Buddhatrāta*, meaning "Awakened Worthy") during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The scripture is also known as *Xiuxing Fangbian Chan Jing* (Scripture on the Expedient Practice of Meditation), *Chanjing Xiuxing Fangbian* (Expedient Methods for the Practice of Meditation), *Xiuxingdi Bujingguan Jing* (Scripture on the Practice of Impurity Contemplation), *Bujingguan Jing* (Scripture on Impurity Contemplation), and *Gengqiezheluofumi*. "Gengqiezheluofumi" is a transliteration of a Sanskrit term, meaning "Stages of Practice", and is an old translation of "Yogācārabhūmi". "Xiuxing Fangbian" may also be rendered as "Expedient Path of Practice", while "fangbian" (expedient means) is an old translation of "preparatory practice" (*prayoga*). The scripture was compiled in the early fifth century. According to Huiyuan's *Preface to the Scripture on the Expedient Practice of Meditation Issued From Mount Lu*, it was jointly compiled by the Central Asian monk Dharmatrāta and Buddhasena (Sanskrit: *Buddhasena*). Because the scripture contains the essential meditation teachings of the Kashmiri monk Dharmatrāta, it came to be known as the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra*. In later generations, some mistakenly believed it to have been taught by Bodhidharma, the patriarch of Chan

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Buddhism. The portion concerning Dharmatrāta's meditation teachings has long been lost, and the extant text mainly preserves Buddhasena's gradual system of the Five Gates of Meditation (Buddhabhadra, 1924).

Buddhabhadra and Huiyuan of Mount Lu were renowned translators of the same period. In the sixth year of the Yixi era (410), Buddhabhadra led more than 40 disciples, including Huiguan, south to Mount Lu, where he expounded the essentials of meditation to the scholars residing there and won their deep admiration (Ren, 1985, p. 617). At Huiyuan's invitation, he translated the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra* between the seventh and eighth years of the Yixi era (411-412) (Chaofan, 1991, p. 91). Kumārajīva's *Zuochan Sanmei Jing* (*Sūtra of the Samādhi of Sitting Meditation*) came to be known as the "Guanzhong Meditation Scripture", whereas the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra* was called the "Lushan Meditation Scripture". Both texts integrate meditation methods drawn from both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna traditions.

## The Therapeutic Functions of the Five Gates of Meditation

The *Dharmatrāta Dhyāna Sūtra* is divided into two fascicles and presents a systematic and comprehensive account of the practices and stages associated with the Five Gates of Meditation. In its preface, the text advances the principle that "illumination is inseparable from quiescence, and quiescence is inseparable from illumination," emphasizing the equal importance of meditative concentration (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*).

The Five Gates of Meditation, also known as the Five Calming Contemplations (*pañca-sthāpanā*), the Five Pure Practices, or the Five Gates of Deliverance, refer to five methods of meditative cultivation employed in Buddhist practice. Their origins can be traced back to the time of the Buddha and were later further developed and elaborated within Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Five Gates consist of impurity contemplation, loving-kindness and compassion contemplation, contemplation of dependent origination, mindfulness of breathing, and contemplation of the elements. Each of these methods is directed toward practitioners with different dispositions and dominant afflictions, providing specific means to counter greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and other mental defilements.

More than three centuries before Bodhidharma's arrival in China, Buddhism had already spread widely throughout the country. During this period, meditation scriptures were actively translated and meditative teachings were extensively transmitted. Among the various meditation systems introduced into China, the Five Gates of Meditation occupied a central position (Paramārtha, 1924). They were also referred to as the Five Contemplations, the Five Recollections, the Five Calming Practices, the Five Gates of Contemplation, or the Five Gates of Deliverance. In his *Overview of the Five Gates of Meditation*, Master Daojian notes that there are two major interpretations of the composition of the Five Gates.

One tradition identifies the Five Gates as impurity contemplation, loving-kindness and compassion contemplation, contemplation of dependent origination, mindfulness of breathing, and Buddha recollection. This interpretation is found in texts such as the *Sūtra on the Samādhi of Sitting Meditation* translated by Kumārajīva and the *Essential Methods of the Five Gates of Meditation* translated by Dharmamitra. The second tradition replaces Buddha recollection with contemplation of the elements, resulting in the version found in Buddhabhadra's translation of the *Dharmatrāta Dhyāna Sūtra*.

Nāgārjuna explains the sequential relationship among these practices in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*. He states that the attainment of the first dhyāna requires the overcoming of the five sensual desires and the five hindrances, and that practices such as impurity contemplation and mindfulness of breathing serve as the means for accomplishing this goal (Faxian, 1924). In Mahāyāna literature, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* appears to be the earliest scripture to list impurity contemplation, loving-kindness contemplation, contemplation of dependent

origination, mindfulness of breathing, and contemplation of the elements together as a unified group. In texts such as the *Yogācārabhūmi* and the *Mahāyānābhidharma-samuccaya*, these practices are referred to as the Five Pure Practices, while in the Chinese Buddhist tradition they became known as the Five Calming Contemplations. Since these contemplations help calm and restrain greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt, they are described as methods that "stabilize the mind" (Sengyou, 1924). Within the framework of the Three Worthy Stages, they are traditionally cultivated prior to the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in order to pacify worldly desires and mental disturbances and establish a stable foundation for meditation.

## The Structure and Sequence of Practice in the Five Gates of Meditation

The preceding discussion shows the remedial function of each gate; the next question is how these gates form a practicable sequence. The structure and order of the Five Gates of Meditation clearly embody the gradual character of meditative cultivation. According to differences in practitioners' capacities, habitual tendencies, and afflictions, the Five Gates provide different methods of practice. Since the kinds and degrees of affliction vary from person to person, the Five Gates can help practitioners overcome obstacles in a targeted way. Practitioners must first identify their dominant afflictions and then choose the corresponding method. For example, if desire is strong, impurity contemplation can help cut off attachment; if anger is excessive, loving-kindness and compassion contemplation can dissolve hostility; if delusion is deep, contemplation of dependent origination can open wisdom; if the mind is scattered, breath-counting contemplation can stabilize it; and if pride and self-attachment are strong, analysis of the elements can help dismantle egocentric bias (Ding, 1922).

The starting point of practice lies in generating a mind of equality. Practitioners cultivate loving-kindness and compassion, and through this practice they quickly calm anger so that it temporarily ceases to arise. If anger cannot be pacified, progress becomes difficult. After afflictions have been temporarily calmed, practitioners must further rely on moral discipline to extinguish the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, thereby providing a foundation for the arising of samādhi, or meditative concentration. Once discipline is purified, concentration naturally arises on that basis and the mind becomes stable. After concentration arises, practitioners should carefully observe the thoughts and ideas that appear in the mind and discern whether they are appropriate or should arise at all. Through this observation, practitioners can clearly distinguish correct directions of practice and further adjust their cultivation. Once the proper direction has been established, practitioners should focus on it and settle the mind on the proper object. Through concentrated practice, the mind gradually becomes stable and no longer wavers because of external disturbance. When the practitioner's mind abides in the proper object, a sense of ease and joy arises; at this point the practitioner may enter right contemplation and, by observing the "wind sign," namely the breath, further deepen awareness of the breath's coming and going. The mind becomes more settled and concentration grows deeper. This sequence not only presents the layered progression of the Five Gates but also shows a complete path of practice extending from the initial subduing of afflictions to deep meditative concentration. It offers practitioners concrete guidance and demonstrates both the systematic character and flexibility of Buddhist cultivation.

Historically, however, the sequence of the Five Gates continued to change. In the Buddha's time, practitioners often began with impurity contemplation. Yet excessive cultivation of impurity contemplation could give rise to world-weariness, so the Buddha also taught breath-counting contemplation to help practitioners balance their minds and avoid excessive negativity. In Northern Buddhism, especially in Tiantai and Pure Land traditions, the contents of the Five Gates were also adjusted. Kumārajīva replaced analysis of the elements with

buddha-recollection, and Zhiyi of the Tiantai school also supported this view, arguing that buddha-recollection could replace analysis of the elements and possessed greater merit and benefit. Earlier forms of the Five Gates generally belonged to Hīnayāna meditation. After buddha-recollection was incorporated into the Five Gates, the system came to include both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna methods and better suited the Mahāyāna orientation of Chinese Buddhism.

## Conclusion

Among the early Chinese translations of *dhyāna* scriptures is the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra*; it treats the various techniques as part of a coherent, workable path of cultivation, and gives an account of an important phase in the Sinicization of Buddhism. As one of the first Chinese versions of a *dhyāna* scripture, it groups the methods in question under a gradual path of cultivation, thus describing a key stage in the Sinicization of Buddhism. Instead of regarding *ānāpānasmṛti* and impurity contemplation as entirely separate practices, the text classifies them in connection with the four stages—regression, stabilization, progress, and determination—and also sets out the expedient path and the superior path. Such an arrangement was helpful for Chinese Buddhism at an early stage, when people needed not only doctrine but also some kind of therapeutic guidance; it is necessary to have a definite sequence of cultivation—something workable in real life. With this idea in mind, the *Dharmatrāta-Dhyāna Sūtra* gives helpful evidence concerning the emergence of Buddhist meditation in China, and about its slow but steady transformation into an object of philosophical study. The initial translations of *dhyāna* texts were themselves a turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism. The importance of these texts does not end with the transmission of Indian Buddhist teachings. Continued reading, interpretation—and especially long-term practice—made it possible for them gradually to serve as foundations for varieties of meditation suited to the Chinese cultural situation. Scripture and practice evolved in concert, and their interplay yielded a form of Buddhist cultivation that is essentially Chinese. From this point of view, early translated *dhyāna* texts helped not merely to bring about the Sinicization of Buddhism, but also to integrate Buddhist contemplation into China's wider intellectual life and traditions, thus helping to shape and sustain its outstanding traditional culture in the field of philosophy.

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