

Chih-i **An Introduction to His Life and Work**

by Kamalashila

As some of you may know, I have been interested in Chih-i for many years. Not that I bothered to find out very much until about a month ago. But all the same, I was interested in Chih-i: for example, in the early days of the building work at Sukhavati, I can very clearly remember studying '*Dhyana for Beginners*'. I remember sitting there in my overalls amidst all the rubble. But the keenness of my interest was not, I don't think, much to do with Chih-i. Yet like many of us, I suppose, '*Dhyana for Beginners*' has very much coloured any impression I have of Chih-i. There is also the parallel which Bhante drew on the '*Dhyana for Beginners*' seminar – he said that in some respect there are similarities between the FWBO and T'ien t'ai, Chih-i's tradition. Then, just a few years ago, Bhante decided to place Chih-i on our refuge tree, as one of the great gurus of the past, as a spirit from the past which has come down to us, and affects us even today. But I don't imagine we are really much the wiser as to why he did that. So I hope my talk will at least provide a little background information for you to follow up if you feel interested.

Chih-i was born in what today is the Hunan province of China, in the year 538. According to tradition, supernatural light illuminated the sky, and monks appeared at the door saying that this child would grow up to be a monk. In fact even as a young child Chih-i felt reverence towards images of the Buddha, and would spontaneously worship them. He also, apparently, had a wonderful memory – at the age of seven, on visiting a temple one day, he was able to repeat the text of an entire sutra on hearing it just once. However what actually moved him to leave the household life was not his talent, or even his natural feeling for the Buddha, but an insight. As a youth, Chih-i had one of those deep, unforgettable experiences that transcend the boundaries of our ordinary lives. He witnessed a great library of rare books being destroyed by the army. He watched the soldiers destroying the specially constructed buildings, feeding the printed and hand-written texts into the flames, piling up the wooden printing blocks; watched the sparks shooting high into the evening sky, heard the crackling flames, smelt the black smoke, felt the heat. You can imagine how this might affect a sensitive, thoughtful, intense young man. That so many thoughts, so many considerations and insights of so many great writers, can just be lost, consumed forever in such a short time. How the best ideas of a whole civilisation, even, can be destroyed, can become ashes, become as though they never been at all. It must have struck him very forcibly how life is transitory, impermanent; how life cannot be how you want it. Life is necessarily mysterious, ungraspable, terrible. Chih-i no doubt saw that the only possible resolution of such mysteries could be in a spiritual life.

He was seventeen. He entered the monastic life. He went for refuge, was ordained, and after some years of study and meditation, went into retreat, where for twenty days he recited the '*Threefold Lotus Sutra*'. By the end of this period, he had realised the Lotus samadhi, one of the samadhis referred to in the '*White Lotus Sutra*'.

In 560, at the age of 22, he met Hui-ssu. Hui-ssu instructed him on how to meditate on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, instructed him on the conduct of a Bodhisattva, and eventually, after getting to know him thoroughly, named Chih-i as his Dharma Heir and successor. Chih-i then took on disciples. He taught them meditation, taught them the Lotus Sutra, taught them the Perfection of Wisdom.

Time passed in this way. Fifteen years later, after twenty years' training, Hui-ssu was not far from death. Chih-i was 37, in his prime, and it was now that he moved to the famous mountain range, T'ien T'ai, that gave its name to his school of Buddhism. He based himself there for the rest of his life, another 22 years.

Chih-i managed to get Royal support for his community. However he seems to have been mindful of any possible compromise this might involve, since later on we come across him admonishing the Emperor against state intervention in Sangha affairs – this is rather typical of Chih-i's ability to reconcile opposites.

His main method of teaching was to give lecture series. He spoke on the Vimalakirti Nirveda, the *'White Lotus Sutra'*, the Sutra of Golden Light, Nagarjuna, and meditation. All these lecture series were transcribed and later edited into books. (There's a familiar ring about all this somewhere.)

He died at the age of 59, in the year 597. He had founded 35 monasteries, ordained over 1000 monks, and produced many volumes of writing on Buddhist doctrine and meditation – the equivalent, in our writing, of 9,000 pages. Through all this he had established the distinctive character of the T'ien t'ai school on a much more broad and practical basis than before. Though Chih-i did not found the T'ien t'ai, his work so completely defined and established its doctrine that he is considered the virtual founder.

He is actually the Third Patriarch of the school. His teacher, Hui-ssu, was the Second Patriarch. The lineage begins with Hui-wen, who had the insight which marked the distinctively T'ien t'ai approach, that of effectively systematisation and assimilation of Indian Buddhist ideas into Chinese culture. Hui-wen's original insight was concerned with the meaning of this verse from Nagarjuna's commentary on the Prajnaparamita:

*'All things which arise through conditioned co-arising
I explain as Emptiness.
– Again, it is a conventional designation.
– Again, it is the meaning of the Middle Path.'*

I'll leave you to ponder that; we'll be coming back to it shortly. Hui-wen was the First Chinese Patriarch of the T'ien t'ai school, but because of the importance of that verse the school also traces its spiritual lineage back to Nagarjuna as its originator in India. It's perhaps interesting to note that with the drawing up of our own Refuge Tree we are doing something rather similar to this, though we don't call them Patriarchs. (Which might be rather risky.) We are tracing our influences back to Buddhism in the East – to Japan, China, Tibet, and finally to India and the Buddha himself.

I'm afraid all this doesn't give us all that much of a feeling for Chih-i's character. I've managed to find very little autobiographical material of a personal kind. I would have liked to have discovered myths and legends connected with Chih-i, but I haven't managed to unearth much. Yet by reading between the lines of what little we've heard so far, we can still get some idea of what kind of man he was. For example, if you remember he was instructed in the way of life of the Bodhisattva by Hui-ssu, his preceptor. Hui-ssu did this according to Chapter Fourteen of the *'White Lotus Sutra'*, where the Buddha instructs Manjusri in Bodhisattva practices of body, speech, mind – and vow. In terms of his vow or motivation, the Bodhisattva is encouraged not only to develop a spirit of great generosity towards all practitioners of the Dharma, whoever they are, whether laymen or monks, but in particular to develop a spirit of great compassion towards all those who have not yet become Bodhisattvas. The *'White Lotus Sutra'* admonishes us to reflect that those who have not yet become Bodhisattvas are suffering an enormous loss. They are missing a very great opportunity, and because of this the Bodhisattva should make a vow expressing his feeling for their situation:

'Though those people have not inquired... nor believed, ...nor understood, ...when I have attained Perfect Enlightenment, wherever I am, by my transcendental powers and powers of wisdom, I will lead them to abide in [the] Dharma'.

In this way Chih-i was instructed in both the principles and practicalities of compassion, and all the evidence is that he took them very much to heart. Chih-i lived as a Bodhisattva. We know for example that during his first few years on Mount T'ien T'ai, Chih-i managed to persuade the fishermen along the seashore to abandon their work. Which judging from the political viewpoint of our own times must have required considerable determination, not to mention tact – both typically Bodhisattva-like qualities. I don't know if he asked these fishermen to take up their nets and follow him, but he definitely managed to get them to adopt the doctrine of not killing living beings. He later bought up all the fishing rights along that seashore, and we know that his ban on fishing was still being observed two hundred years later.

So Chih-i was a man of great determination and compassion, qualities expressed in very skilful communication. Which brings me to the activities for which he is most remembered – his thought and his communication. Which brings me to the activities for which he is most remembered – his thought and his writing. Chih-i's main writings are his two works on the *'White Lotus Sutra'* – the *'Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra'* and the *'Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra'* – plus his main work on meditation, called *'The Great Samatha and Vipassana'*. The meditation text we draw inspiration from in the FWBO, *'Dhyana for Beginners'*, is one of his many shorter works: its title could as well be rendered *'The Lesser Samatha and Vipassana'*.

'Dhyana for Beginners', as I'll call it, was especially influential throughout East Asian Buddhism. It had a crucial influence on the development of the Ch'an school, for example. In the 8th century it was virtually copied by the Ch'an in an effort to strengthen a deteriorated practice of sitting meditation. At least one scholar believes that *'Dhyana*

for Beginners’ became the basis for all Ch’an and Zen meditation manuals thereafter, including those of Dogen. This was the kind of effect Chih-i had. The Ch’an school grew up under the massive shadow of Chih-i’s work and was forced either to react against or borrow from it. In the end what the Ch’an school borrowed were Chih-i’s principles of meditation, and what it reacted against was Chih-i’s interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. So what were these? What did Chih-i teach?

As we have seen, the main inspiration for Chih-i’s spiritual life came from the *‘White Lotus Sutra’* and of course the Lotus samadhi that he had realised. Chih-i in fact saw the *‘White Lotus Sutra’* as offering the fullest, most complete teaching of the Dharma. He was also living at a historical juncture with one characteristic similar to our own: the vital issue then, as now, was the assimilation of Buddhism into the prevailing culture. So many scriptures had been translated into Chinese. So many generations of people had diligently practised the Dharma. There were so many monasteries, so many study groups based around particular texts. Coming out of those interests were the beginnings of different Buddhist schools. But there had never been anyone with Chih-i’s intellectual and spiritual capacity, no-one with his ability to look at Buddhism as a whole. No-one else had had his encyclopaedic mind, his capability to read, contemplate and meditate upon all the translated literature that had become available. And not only that – not only to take it all in and test it out in practice – but also, most importantly – to re-vision it. Chih-i re-visioned the Dharma in China, and for the Far East in general. That is how his spirit parallels Bhante’s, and that is, I presume, why he is on our refuge tree. He *re-visioned* the Dharma: in other words saw the Buddha’s vision for himself, then promoted a new vision of the Buddha’s vision which could inspire people in a new way. That vision was fundamentally that of the *‘White Lotus Sutra’*, but what Chih-i did was to apply that vision, to integrate it with the rest of the Dharma that had come from India. The message of *‘White Lotus Sutra’* is that the Buddha is eternal. This does not mean that behind everything there is one great Buddha, who is in fact a kind of Creator God. The Buddha being eternal means not only that Enlightenment or Reality is beyond time, but that gaining Enlightenment does not put one beyond recall. In other words Enlightenment is not some kind of black hole of timelessness into which the Enlightened person disappears, never to be seen again.

There is a parable in *‘White Lotus Sutra’* about a physician who fakes his own death in order to bring his foolish sons to their senses sufficiently for them to take the medicine that will cure them of their foolishness. This is, of course, the medicine of the Dharma, and we are the foolish sons who have yet to swallow it – we who understand, theoretically, that the Buddha was Enlightened, but, being ourselves unenlightened, cannot really understand what that means. We therefore do not understand where the Buddha has ‘gone’. If we are not careful we may start thinking of the Buddha as being *dead*, just part of history. Even though we know that his death is no ordinary death, that it is a parinirvana, yet still for us he is ‘gone’ – we cannot help wondering where, if anywhere, he is. We cannot help wondering: if so many beings throughout history are supposed to have gained Enlightenment, where are they now? The Buddhas do not seem to us to be around, and the world seems as pain-filled as ever. Yet the White Lotus Sutra affirms that they have not gone away, like so many absent fathers. All

unenlightened beings create their own worlds of suffering. That is why the world appears as it does, and even Buddhas can do nothing about it. The Buddhas are not all-powerful; they are not Creator Gods; nor have they 'gone away'. The primordial Buddha is still here to be revealed in his stupa, as he has always been and always will be, just waiting for the '*White Lotus Sutra*' to be proclaimed. The nature of Enlightenment may be beyond our ordinary human understanding, but that does not mean it is non-existent, or that it is in some way beyond our ordinary human understanding, but that does not mean it is non-existent, or that it is in some way cut off or disconnected from the human realm. The spirit of Enlightenment exists as a positive force in the universe – not in any way that can be caught and measured quantitatively, but it's there, nonetheless. In fact it's there, at least potentially, in all of us. It's as though each of us had a precious jewel sewn into the hem of our garment quite unknowingly – it's as though each of us was desperately poor, unaware that we are in fact rich beyond our wildest dreams. The Buddha Nature is a potential that anyone can awaken – says the Lotus Sutra.

And the Lotus Sutra also says that the universe within which the Buddha Nature can be awakened – the universe that we see when we come to our senses, when we drink the medicine of the Great Physician, when we drink the elixir of eternal Buddhahood – this universe is one in which everything interpenetrates everything else. Everything is interconnected with and even contains everything else; everything is simultaneous with everything else. Everything that is happening anywhere and at any time is happening right here, and right now.

And since everything in the universe is of this nature, so also is the *Dharma* of this simultaneous, interconnected nature. According to Bhante's lectures on the '*White Lotus Sutra*', one cannot fully understand any one aspect of the Dharma without coming to understand the whole of it at once. Looking at it in another way, everything we hear that's new about the Dharma demands a review of *everything* we previously knew about the Dharma, and each new insight modifies *all* our previous insights.

In writing this talk it's been very interesting to discover how much Bhante's choices of subject for lecture series overlap with Chih-i's: '*The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*', and '*The Sutra of Golden Light*', as well of course as '*The White Lotus Sutra*', were all important for Chih-i. No doubt the overlappings are simply because both men have seen the importance of the same material for the full presentation of the Buddha-Dharma. Like the Tibetans, the Chinese were forever travelling back and forth from India, bringing back material for translation. Like the Tibetans – and us in the West too – Chih-i inherited the vast bulk of the Indian Tipitaka and commentaries. I'm not sure exactly how much of it he inherited, but clearly he was aware of a considerable range, and clearly he felt it necessary to offer some perspective on it all. Were all the sutras to be considered of equal importance, or were some more important than others? And important to whom? Were *all* the different teachings contained in all the different sutras to be considered equally useful to *all* practitioners of the Dharma?

Clearly they are not. Clearly, different practitioners have different aptitudes, they have different capacities for understanding, they possess different degrees of openness, they

differ in their ability to apply the Dharma in their own lives, they differ – in other words – with respect to the level at which they are Going for Refuge, and in their readiness to Go for Refuge at another, deeper, level. So Chih-i took all the material that was available, and he arranged it in accordance with criteria which compared the depth of the teaching concerned with the capacities of those for whom it was intended.

In this classification he considered the most complete, most developed, teachings of the Buddha to have been given in the *'White Lotus Sutra'*, and to a lesser extent in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. Chih-i's main interest in classifying the scriptures seems to have been in discovering what the Buddha was actually trying to communicate in these scriptures, and what their relevance was to the people of his day and age. We might say his approach was 'ultraistic', in that he felt constrained to include all the available material – whereas we can feel free to leave out of our system any part of the Buddhist legacy that seems inappropriate for our spiritual needs. However Chih-i did not merely stack teachings one on top of the other, but ordered and cross-ordered them in a subtle, very thorough, and also somewhat 'multidimensional' way. Chih-i seems to have been very aware of how different ideas can look when different people look at them from their different viewpoints. So in his classification of the Buddhist scriptures he seems to want to present everything the Buddha taught from every angle simultaneously, an idea which seems to be based on the framework of simultaneity and interconnectedness taught in the White Lotus and Avatamsaka Sutras. In other words he attempts to present the Dharma itself in terms of the way it is experienced. This approach is typical of the T'ien t'ai and Chih-i applies it to many other areas of the Dharma as well.

One very prominent example is that of the Triple truth. This is quite similar to the Yogachara notion of the three *svabhavas* or natures, but with a different emphasis. Very briefly, the triple truth is the synonymousness of *sunyata*, *pratityasamutpada*, and what Chih-i calls the Middle Way, which is the fact that Reality is both *pratityasamutpada* and *sunyata* at the same time – it's a kind of resolution or 'Dharma Door' coming out of the apparent dichotomy between *pratityasamutpada* and *sunyata*, or the relative and the absolute truth. By nature, any individual 'thing' is *sunya* – from the absolute point of view no thing has any permanency as a thing, since it is always a temporary product of changing causes and conditions. Yet at its current juncture of causes and conditions it does possess a kind of temporary, relative existence. That existence is temporary because of the *sunya* nature of all things. And *sunyata* is the nature of things because of their temporariness, their dependence on ever-changing conditions, their *pratityasamutpada* nature. *sunyata* is the generality of *pratityasamutpada*; *pratityasamutpada* is the particularity of *sunyata*. Both generality and particularity exist simultaneously, so that everything is void and at the same time temporary. This simultaneity of *pratityasamutpada* and *sunyata* is what Chih-i means by the Middle Way.

The Threefold truth makes an important connection between ultimate reality and the ordinary, misapprehended relative reality of unenlightened mind. It forms a basis both for the *'White Lotus Sutra's'* vision of the nature of beings and the nature of reality. All beings are potentially enlightened, and the nature of the reality within which all beings exist is that all is interconnected.

One way that Chih-i employed for reflection on the interconnectedness of reality was that of ‘*three thousand worlds in one instant of mind*’, a teaching which became one of the hallmarks of T’ien-t’ai meditation. This teaching states that one’s *skandhas* presently contain all of the three thousand dharmas of existence. We don’t need to go into details – the point is to reflect on the fact that in one instant of mind, so much is going on at the same time, so many influences are taking place. In one instant of mind, three thousand worlds. It’s an example of a very dynamic and graphic vision of *pratityasamutpada*, something we can fall into thinking of as a little static or circular.

This meditation can be found in Chih-i’s main work on meditation, the ‘*Mo-ho chih-kuan*’ or ‘*The Great Samatha and Vipassana*’, the mature composition in which he set his doctrinal ideas in the context of meditation practice. If we checked, I think most of us would find that we already know quite a lot about Chih-i’s approach to meditation, even if we have not studied Bhante’s seminar on ‘*Dhyana for Beginners*’. This has been our main source of inspiration for the principles of meditation, and much of what has come out of Vajraloka derives ultimately from Chih-i’s text, directly or indirectly. I think there is probably a good deal more useful material there.

I don’t have time to recapitulate the very thorough contents of ‘*Dhyana for Beginners*’, but those of you who have read it will surely have been impressed by the extensiveness, the encyclopaedic quality, of Chih-i’s mind. He really is quite phenomenal and, dare I say it, he even rivals Bhante in this respect. The more I read in preparation for this talk, the more impressed I became. The range of his interest and activity was extremely broad. Almost every time I opened a new book or started reading a new article about Chih-i it seemed that another completely new and vast aspect of this man’s work would open up. In whatever sphere of activity, it seems Chih-i never stopped working to establish the Dharma. Two years before his death in 597 he returned to the large community he had founded on Mount T’ien T’ai twenty years before. He had been away for ten years, teaching intensively in south and central China. We would consider ten years rather a long time to be away from one’s community. Still, no doubt on his return Chih-i had created enough distance from the situation to see clearly how his experiment had fared. Apparently the community had grown considerably larger during his absence but had declined in discipline and spiritual commitment. He needed to sort this out – so he sat down to write yet another book, perhaps his last [i]. It’s a particularly interesting document because it gives us an account both of the spiritual practices of the community on Mount T’ien T’ai and the principles behind them. Interesting also because, since it was a very large community – one has the impression of hundreds – a very broad range of activity was engaged in. It illustrates for us how Chih-i integrated his life’s work in a practical context of Sangha.

According to Daniel Stevenson, Chih-i strove to provide ‘an environment [not only] most conducive to realising their own personal spiritual goals, but also to engender a momentum and sense of common realising their own personal spiritual goals, but also to engender a momentum and sense of common commitment in the community that could, in turn, uplift everyone involved’. [ii] That momentum seems to have been created by a

very clear sense of the spirit in which things were to be done. Everyone was expected to co-operate. Chih-i says, '*Through yielding [on the part of the individual] there is harmony; from mutual acknowledgement, there is joining together [in co-operation].*'

Stevenson says that Chih-i's aim is 'to urge the student toward a genuine appreciation of the seriousness of both his own religious commitment and that of the community as a whole'. [iii] Community members engaged in three different kinds of activity. First there was a general daily programme of meditation, ritual, and listening to Dharma talks which seems to have been the principal focus for the whole community. Secondly, there was work, '*attending to the practical affairs of the community*'. Thirdly, there was solitary retreat. It's a pattern of spiritual life that seems very similar to our own. It's true we don't all live together in one vast community – perhaps it's a shame that we don't have our own Findhorn or Samyé Ling or Dharamsala! – but most of us do spend sizeable chunks of time in some kind of general retreat programme. Certainly we have done so in the past, and this Convention is a current example; also any involvement we may have in classes at the centre is of the same general kind. Then we have our work, our day-to-day practical responsibilities, and we have – assuming we are taking Bhante's advice – our annual solitary retreat.

Naturally, different Order members will tend to immerse themselves more in one or another of these kinds of activity – as also, it seems, did the community on T'ien T'ai Mountain. Some would specialise more in work, others in meditation, according to their needs. Others simply involved themselves in the general retreat programme. I imagine these were probably the newer people and those who were good at teaching them – rather as it is in our ordination processes and meditation centres. The ones who specialised in work were perhaps those more integrated and committed individuals who no longer needed to rely so much on the support of the regular teaching and practice in the meditation hall, but who, having understood the basic principles of the Dharma, could make work a spiritual practice. They may also partly have consisted of individuals who for the time being could not benefit from the retreat programme, or whose best option was simply to help out. Perhaps everyone, from time to time and to different degrees of intensity, took a solitary retreat.

According to Chih-i, on solitary retreat – or perhaps we should say more intensive retreat, because there were sometimes collective forms of more intensive practice too – one practised one of the Four Kinds of Samadhi of the T'ien T'ai. Samadhi here simply means meditation practice. These was a scheme of four approaches to meditation which set the standard and tone for the future of what became the T'ien T'ai School. The Four Kinds of Samadhi are:

1. The Constant Sitting;
2. The Constant Walking;
3. The Part Walking and Part Sitting;
- and 4. The Neither Walking nor Sitting.

1. Some of these titles do not tell us very much, but *The Constant Sitting* practice is accurate enough. It is also known as the 'one-practice' samadhi, translated from the Sanskrit *ekavyuha-samadhi*, from the Perfection of Wisdom. For ninety days, apart from

minimal periods of time spend eating and going to the toilet, the practitioner does little else apart from meditating in a crosslegged posture. He vows not to sleep, stand up or lie down during that whole period. And that's why it is called 'Constant Sitting'. The meditator has two approaches he can take to his practice – a radical approach, in which he directly contemplates the Dharmakaya, and a more expedient approach in which he contemplates the Buddha's Rupakaya. In the first, Chih-i says, he is to 'renounce all fallacious theories, cast aside all confused thinking, refrain from any random pondering, avoid seizing upon any characteristics, and simply absorb oneself completely in the direct experiencing of all objects as [identical to] the Dharmadhatu and in contemplating one's own [subjective] mind as [also] being uniform with the Dharmadhatu'. It's understood that one won't always be able to do this, so whenever one's ability to contemplate in this way becomes exhausted, the second form of practice is to be performed. One is then to face in the direction of the Buddha of one's choice and single mindedly evoke them, chanting their name, evoking a sense of shame concerning one's inability to practice as one ideally should, and entrusting oneself completely to that Buddha's influence. Both the practices – the identification with the Dharmadhatu and the evocation of the Buddha – were intended to support one another, and were both understood to convey the meditator to the same end. There are clearly certain parallels here with our own sadhana practices in the Western Buddhist Order, not only in the visualisation and mantra recitation but also with its resolution out of, and then back into, the 'open dimension' of *sunyata*.

2. *The Constant Walking* is also appropriately named since, for the entire 90-day period of its duration, one constantly circumambulates the Buddha Amitabha. This based on an early Mahayana Sutra known as the Pratyutpannasamadhi Sutra and its samadhi – the pratyutpanna samadhi – is called '*the samadhi wherein one finds oneself standing face to face with all the Buddhas of the present age*'. This is a strenuous practice and the meditator needs others to help him fulfil it – needs the help of an instructor, an attendant, and a fellow practitioner. Chih-i says the fellow practitioner should be '*stern in appearance and strict [in character] ...capable of inspiring the meditator to persevere*'. The visualisation of Amitabha is carried out in great detail while the meditator circumambulates the shrine and recites the name of Amitabha.

As he becomes more skilled at visualising, the orientation of the practice shifts and the visualised image becomes the basis for an investigation into the nature of mind and of thought. Chih-i says,

'Where does the Buddha that I am contemplating come from? [He does not come from somewhere else, and] I do not go off to reach him. Whatever [feature] I turn my mind to thereupon disappears. This Buddha is simply mind perceiving mind. Mind is the [visualised] Buddha [that is the object, likewise] mind is the [subjective] "I" [that sees the Buddha]. When it perceives the Buddha, mind is not itself aware of mind, nor does it itself perceive mind. When the mind gives rise to thoughts, then there is delusion. When it is free of thoughts, it is nirvana'.

There are three stages in approaching this vision. First one visualises Amitabha's *Rupakaya*, secondly one imagines his spiritual qualities, thirdly one contemplates

Amitabha as he really is in his essence. In Chih-i's words, *'He does not cling to the Rupakaya, nor does he cling to the Dharmakaya, but thoroughly realises that all phenomena are eternally quiescent just like empty space'*

Of course Amitabha is associated with the idea of being reborn in a Pure Land, and this is stated as being one of the benefits of the practice. However Chih-i is most concerned to express the principle of a thing, and here he states that Amitabha is only an expedient gateway to a vision of all the Buddhas, standing directly before him – *'As many stars as a person with keen eyesight can see on a clear night – that is how many Buddhas he sees!'*

3. The third samadhi of the T'ien T'ai, *The Part Walking and Part Sitting*, is identified especially with the practice of confession and repentance. There are two alternatives, first a special repentance practice, second a meditation called the Lotus Samadhi in which repentance also plays an important part. Chih-i first describes a very interesting kind of retreat, which can be collective or solitary, based around purification and Confession of Faults. It is to be done in a ritually purified chamber and prefaced by a week of preparation. The activities of the retreat, which can last anything from a week to several years, include offerings, prostrations, circumambulation, the recitation of dharanis, alternated by periods of sitting meditation – reminiscent of a procedure outlined in *'Dhyana for Beginners'*. He says one needs to vary the routine to suit one's mental state, and so it is important to understand how to work in meditation.

As with the practice of Constant Walking, after one is established in these confession and repentance practices, the orientation is shifted towards an investigation into the nature of mind and of thought. Chih-i says,

'[He is clearly aware that] in their essential nature [the multitude] of phenomena are perfectly uniform and are neither defiled or pure. This in itself [constitutes their] true nature. This true nature is not defiled by birth and death in the twenty-five states of nature. This true nature is not defiled by birth and death in the twenty-five states of [deluded] existence, nor is it purified by the myriad [Buddhist] practices. As such, defiled and pure are a single continuum... like empty space. This is known as "ultimate purity". It is also referred to as "the true suchness that is the very nature of mind [itself]"...it is the fundamental wellspring of all the Buddhas, the ultimate reality of all sentient beings'.

Not everyone will be able immediately to practice at this level, even though it is only at this level, the level of insight into the true nature of defilement and purity, that one can be fully liberated from samsaric habits. So Chih-i distinguishes two general approaches to this confession practice. The first, at which the practitioner is unable effectively to reflect on the ultimate nature of the defiled and purified consciousness, he calls the repentance based on phenomenal activities. The second he calls the repentance that accords with Principle. Both approaches can be utilised at different times and to different degrees, according to the meditator's ability.

The Lotus Samadhi is inspired by the *'White Lotus Sutra'* and it takes two forms, as described in the 28th and the 14th chapters of the Sutra. The first form of the practice is

based upon the ‘*Chapter on the Exhortations of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*’ and also on the ‘*Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*’, which is one of the two supplementary sutras often published along with the ‘*White Lotus Sutra*’. It is centred around intensive ritual worship of the Lotus Sutra and confession over a 21 day period. Six times a day, in the context of a puja quite similar to our own Sevenfold Puja, one confesses all the sins that one has accumulated over all one’s past lives due to the misuse of the six senses, continually visualising the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra above one’s head. While one is not performing the confession ritual, one alternates between slowly circumambulating the shrine reciting the ‘*White Lotus Sutra*’ and sitting in meditation.

As before, this can be done according to the activities of the practice or in accordance with the Principle. That is, depending on one’s ability, one can simply focus on the activity at hand, such as prostrating, reciting, repenting, and so forth, doing one’s best to prevent one’s mind from drifting away; or, in the practice that accords with the Principle, performing the same activities but also calling forth insight into the fundamental nature of mind and characteristics, subject and object. One can also do a ‘bit of both’, that is develop insight in this way to the extent one is able to do so.

The second form of *Lotus Samadhi* is called ‘*the featureless course of ease and bliss*’ and ‘*simply*’ concentrates on developing insight into the fact that ultimately neither mind nor phenomena can be said, in any meaningful sense, to arise. This is a practice advocated in one section of the 14th chapter of the ‘*White Lotus Sutra*’ and is likely to be the *Lotus Samadhi* Chih-i himself realised as a younger man.

If one is able to truly penetrate either of these Lotus samadhis, then Hui-ssu, Chih-i’s teacher, says that

‘The Bodhisattva’s mind becomes filled with great rapture, and he acquires vast spiritual powers. Sitting in the midst of empty space he perceives all the Buddhas of the ten directions and becomes endowed with all the wisdom of the Buddhas. In an instant of thought he totally know the minds of all the Buddhas of the ten directions and also knows the mental activities of every sentient being... in order to deliver sentient beings, his physical form and his insight [respond and take form] differently in accordance with the [varying] capacities [of beings]. In an instant of thought he manifests all [types of] forms. In a single moment of expounding the Dharma, with one sound he can create infinite voices. At one and the same moment countless beings thereby come to attain the Way’.

One presumes this was his actual experience.

4. The fourth samadhi is *The Neither Walking nor Sitting*, which is a misnomer, as even Chih-i acknowledges: it really applies to practices that utilise any and all activities, including both walking and sitting. It is divided into two. First is a kind of miscellaneous section, under which is included any practice that does not fit into the previous three samadhis; second is a special practice called ‘*the cultivation of samadhi wherever mind is directed*’.

The *miscellaneous* section includes another repentance practice, this time associated with Avalokitesvara, yet another associated with seven Buddhas and eight Bodhisattvas, and – last but not least – ‘*the practice of cleaning latrines for eight hundred days as taught by the Bodhisattva Akashagarbha*’, which I think speaks for itself.

According to Chih-i, the cultivation of samadhi wherever mind is directed is concerned with an insightful mindfulness of thoughts: he says, ‘*Wherever one’s mind happens to be directed, one always [strives] to remain thoroughly aware of it*’. So this is to be applied to structured meditation, as well as to both skilful and unskilful activities. The actual method used by Chih-i centres around what he calls the four phases of mental activity, which are:

1. Not yet thinking; 2. Being about to think; 3. Actually thinking; 4. Having thought.

For most of us it’s easy enough to be aware that we have just had a thought – “*Ah... I’ve just had a thought*”. It requires a little more awareness for us to be aware that we are having a thought actually at the time we are having it – “*Aha. I’m thinking*”. And it’s considerably more difficult for us to notice that we are about to think, or – even more subtly – that we are not thinking about anything ‘yet’. How often do we say to ourselves, “*I’m not thinking about anything – not yet... Ah yes. I do believe that shortly I’m going to think about something*”. Perhaps we don’t do that very often, if at all.

This would presumably be an excellent discipline for simply becoming more aware of one’s thinking process. In the T’ien T’ai system, however, the awareness of thoughts is a focus for the development of the samadhi known as the Surangamasamadhi, named after the ‘*Surangamasamadhi Sutra*’. This samadhi is developed through enquiring into the real nature of the states of ‘not yet thinking’ and ‘being about to think’. Once one realises that the mind that has ‘not yet thought’ cannot be said to arise or pass away, and that likewise the mind that is ‘*about to think*’ cannot be said to arise or pass away – or both arise and pass away, or neither arise nor pass away –

‘The genuine insight of the Middle Way will brilliantly open up, and [the meditator] will come to illumine both of the two truths [of emptiness and provisional reality] together at the same time. Thought after instant of thought, his mind will be quiescent and extinguished, and he will effortlessly flow into the ocean of the great nirvana.’

This vision of the two truths as part of one reality is equivalent to the T’ien T’ai vision of the Triple truth that I mentioned earlier. In fact all four samadhis of the T’ien T’ai serve to demonstrate the process of how Chih-i expressed his initial vision of the Lotus samadhi and other aspects of the Dharma in terms of doctrine, which he then very thoroughly practised and described so that others could also practice.

One could describe his as a great intellect put to work.

It seems very clear, now, why Chih-i is on our Refuge Tree. His extraordinary depth and

breadth of vision, combined with an unparalleled capacity for original thought, and his arrival in the world at that particular historical juncture, made him the man who above all others translated the Buddhadharma into Chinese and Far Eastern Buddhist culture. His is an archetype which we see and revere also in Bhante, and the note it strikes is very much part of the spirit of our movement.

Some of his teachings have already been assimilated into our approach, particularly to meditation. However in our meditation teaching we are a long way from a total synthesis. There is much more work to be done. We need to mature, we need to practice, so that as we realise the Dharma in meditation, we will become more able, like Chih-i, to formulate our realisations in doctrinal terms so that others may be led to similar realisations.

Notes

[i] Li chih-fa, '*Establishing the Regulations*', in the '*Kuo-ch'ing pai-lu*', or '*Record of One Hundred Items [pertaining to] Kuo-ch'ing [Monastery]*'.

[ii] Daniel B. Stevenson, '*The Four Kinds of Samadhi in early T'ien T'ai Buddhism*', in '*Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*', Ed. P. Gregory, Hawaii 1986

[iii] *ibid.*, p. 4611/22/2006

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