

The Pure Land Thought of Ling-chih Yüan-chao

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Ling-chih Yüan-chao 靈芝元照 (1048-1116) is famous as the person who revived the Nan-shan 南山 Vinaya school which was founded by Tao-hsüan 道宣 during the T'ang dynasty. From the late T'ang/Five Dynasties period to the Northern Sung period, all the school of the Vinaya sect were in decline. In particular, since the Ch'an sect was flourishing during this age, there was a general tendency to play down the importance of the precepts. It was Yüan-chao's great achievement to revive the Vinaya sect on the basis of the "perfect and sudden teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*" during this period. At the same time, Pure Land Buddhism was extremely popular among both monks and lay people during the Sung period. Yüan-chao too involved himself with this type of Buddhism and created his own Pure Land system based on the study of the *Meditation Sūtra*. In my paper, I will explore Yüan-chao's Pure Land Buddhist thought, especially as it relates to T'ien-t'ai Pure Land Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism of the Northern Sung period developed on the basis of the *Meditation Sūtra*. In the T'ien-t'ai sect, it was the *T'ien-t'ai kuan ching shu* 天台觀經疏 and the *Ching tu shih i lun* 淨土十疑論 which were of central importance. In his *Kuan ching shu miao tsung ch'ao* 觀經疏妙宗鈔, a commentary on the *T'ien-t'ai kuan ching shu*, Ssu-ming Chih-li 四明知禮 (960-1028) argued that the sixteen contemplations of the *Meditation Sūtra* are completely identical with the most profound types of traditional T'ien-t'ai meditations; he also claimed that the nembutsu described in the *Meditation Sūtra* refers to nembutsu based on contemplation of the principle. However, certain post-Chih-li T'ien-t'ai masters argued that the

Meditation Sūtra did not solely preach the difficult nembutsu based on contemplation of the principle. Citing the nembutsu found in the description of the lower grade of the lower rank in the *Meditation Sūtra*, they held that this sūtra also preached an easy method of Pure Land practice — specifically the recitative nembutsu for those foolish common beings bound by evil karma. Such a position is found among many T'ien-t'ai masters of Shen-chao Pen-ju's 神照本如 lineage who had as their leader Tz'u-yun Tsun-shih 慈雲遵式 (963-1032).

Such was the background of Yüan-chao's Pure Land Buddhist thought. He developed his Pure Land philosophy in his *Kuan ching i shu* 觀經義疏. Below I will consider the way in which his Pure Land thought differed from that of the T'ien-t'ai sect.

First, Yüan-chao accepts without question the position that "one's own nature is Amida Buddha, and the Pure Land is nothing but mind" which lies at the core of T'ien-t'ai Pure Land thought. However, it must be noted that Yüan-chao's understanding of "mind only" is fundamentally different from that of the T'ien-t'ai sect. Chih-li held that it is Hinayānistic to contemplate the Buddha as being outside of one's own mind. He maintained that Shan-tao's 善導 position, which conceived of the Pure Land as an actual place existing far off to the west, was mistaken. In contrast to Shan-tao, Chih-li insisted that Amida Buddha is nothing other than the practitioner's own nature, and that the Pure Land is "mind-only." At that time, a form of "mind-only" philosophy which considered the mind-dharma to be the creator, and the dharmas of Buddha and sentient beings to be objects created by the mind, was popular among the Ch'an and Hua-yen schools. In contrast, Chih-li upheld the traditional T'ien-t'ai interpretation deriving from Chih-i 智顛: that the Buddhist practitioner contemplates the mind because it is the most effective object of contemplation in conducting meditation.

However, Yüan-chao understands "mind-only" to mean that the mind is the ontological foundation of all dharmas. For him, the term "mind-only"

is identical with the “numinous knowing mind” of the Ch’an sect, the “single mind” of the *Awakening of Faith*, and the concept of “mind-only” of the Hua-yen sect. In his “mind-only” philosophy, the nature of the mind is considered the ultimate principle. Yüan-chao interpreted the *ch’ang chi kuang t’u* 常寂光土 (“Land of the Eternally Quiescent Light,” the highest of the four kinds of Pure Lands in T’ien-t’ai thought) to be the absolutely unique land of principle. However, his interpretation that “the Pure Land is nothing but the mind” is quite different from the traditional T’ien-t’ai interpretation.

Second, Yüan-chao clearly distinguished the sixteen types of contemplation found in the *Meditation Sūtra* from other types of contemplations, and declared that the contemplations described in the *Meditation Sūtra* were preached for a unique purpose. He distinguishes five types of Buddhist contemplations in terms of their objects. Among the five, he places greatest emphasis on “contemplation of the mind” and “contemplation of the Buddha.” As to the first “contemplation of the mind,” he states that this refers to the method of “entering the stages of the holy path in this world by destroying defilements and realizing the truth.” This corresponds to the meditations of the T’ien-t’ai, Hua-yen, Vinaya and Ch’an sects, and belongs to the path of self-power. However, the aim of the contemplation of the Buddha found in the *Meditation Sūtra* is to gain rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land in the west; in other words, it is a method which seeks “rebirth in a separate land by cultivating the cause (for rebirth) and gaining the result (of rebirth).” Therefore, although the *Meditation Sūtra* states that its contemplations are for beings of superior abilities, in fact its central aim is to preach a method of contemplation which even beings of middle and inferior capacities can undertake.

In this way Yüan-chao understands the contemplations of the *Meditation Sūtra* to be an easy Pure Land practice for beings of middle and inferior capacities. Such an understanding of the sūtra had been popular in China

since the T'ang period. Since the *Ching tu shih i lun* stresses the rebirth of common beings into the Pure Land, Northern Sung T'ien-t'ai masters also argued that the distinguishing feature of the contemplations of the *Meditation Sūtra* is to be found in the nembutsu *samādhi* featuring such activities as the recitation of Amida's Name. However, they argued that the sixteen contemplations of the *Meditation Sūtra* are identical in principle to the *śūrangama samādhi* belonging to the perfect and sudden cessation and insight based on the *Lotus Sūtra*. But Yüan-chao argued that the contemplations of the *Meditation Sūtra* are different from those of other scriptures. This is one important characteristic of his Pure Land thought.

Third, Yüan-chao employs the T'ien-t'ai theory of the three Buddha-bodies. Thus, concerning the question of whether Amida Buddha is a *sāmbhogakāya* or *nirmāṇakāya*, he takes the position that the Buddha appears to the practitioner either as a *sāmbhogakāya* or *nirmāṇakāya* depending on the practitioner's capacity. In other words, his position is that it is impossible to classify Amida Buddha as either one or the other.

Concerning Amida's Buddha Land, on basic points he follows the T'ien-t'ai interpretation. However he also emphasizes that Amida's Pure Land as depicted in the *Meditation Sūtra* is different from the Pure Lands described in other sūtras. Once again, this derives from his belief that the *Meditation Sūtra* is the only Buddhist scripture which preaches the rebirth of common beings into the Pure Land.

So far I have discussed the main points of Yüan-chao's Pure Land thought as found in his *Kuan ching i shu*, but now I would like to consider the characteristic features of his Pure Land thought.

In his analysis of the Buddha-contemplation of the *Meditation Sūtra*, Yüan-chao was heavily influenced by the T'ien-t'ai sect and its position that the contemplation of the Buddha found in the *Meditation Sūtra* is to be understood as contemplation of one's own mind. This interpretation ultimately derives from the *T'ien-t'ai kuan ching shu* but became central to the

T'ien-t'ai interpretation of Pure Land Buddhism since Chih-li wrote the *Kuan ching shu miao tsung ch'ao*. However, Yüan-chao argued that, whereas the aim of T'ien-t'ai mind-contemplation was to "attain realization in this land," the aim of the contemplations in the *Meditation Sūtra* was completely different: they are contemplations by which common beings can attain rebirth in the Pure Land. Such view owes more to Shan-tao than to T'ien-t'ai Buddhism.

Among T'ien-t'ai masters, it was Tz'u-yun Tsun-shih who exerted the greatest influence on Yüan-chao. Like Chih-li, Tsun-shih was a disciple of I-t'ung 義通. Although Tsun-shih and Chih-li were life-long friends, Tsun-shih, unlike Chih-li, was a nembutsu practitioner who sought to discover in the *Meditation Sūtra* the way for common beings to be reborn in the Pure Land. For this reason, Tsun-shih emphasized the position taken by the *Ching tu shih i lun*, and paid particular attention to the passage on the rebirth into the Pure Land of beings of the lower grade of the lower rank. He was also drawn to the possibility of attaining rebirth in the Pure Land through the easy practice of recitative nembutsu accompanied by profound repentance of one's past transgressions. During Yüan-chao's times, Tsun-shih's easy recitative nembutsu was more popular within T'ien-t'ai Buddhism than Chih-li's contemplative nembutsu. Thus Yüan-chao may have been drawn more to Tsun-shih's Pure Land teachings.

In this way, Yüan-chao's Pure Land Buddhism was influential during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. However, from the mid- to late twelfth centuries, there appeared T'ien-t'ai scholars critical of his Pure Land system. Although Yüan-chao's Pure Land thought has been evaluated differently by different T'ien-t'ai thinkers, it also helps us understand the evolution of T'ien-t'ai Pure Land thought.