

## Research Article

# Zhiyi on “One Thought”: Between Ordinary and Enlightened States

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## Abstract

This paper examines how Zhiyi (智顓) articulates the path to enlightenment based on his distinctive account of human ontology, as presented in *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, arguably the most authoritative text of Tiantai (天台, Tendai in Japanese) philosophy. In so doing, this study brings Zhiyi’s metaphysics and soteriology into closer alignment than has been achieved in previous scholarship. Among the schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Tiantai tradition occupies a particularly important position in the development of Japanese Buddhism. This is largely because it offers one of the most sophisticated philosophical foundations for the doctrine of sudden enlightenment, in contrast to the gradualist approaches that require a prolonged course of practice. This article focuses on several central concepts in Zhiyi’s philosophy, including “three thousand realms in a single thought-moment,” the “three wisdoms,” and the “four teachings,” through which he articulates a comprehensive vision of reality and practice. In brief, his teaching provides a framework for understanding the true nature of human existence. It presents a path by which enlightenment may be realized through a profound cognitive insight into that very nature. Zhiyi thought that human beings exist only in the immediacy of the present rather than as eternal entities, and that they remain subject to various forms of struggle, even after attaining enlightenment. Yet the very fact that we can recognize the nature of this condition provides the foundation for the possibility of attaining Buddhahood.

## Keywords

Tiantai Philosophy, Zhiyi, Sudden-Enlightenment

## 1. Introduction

As eminent ancient Greek philosophers made clear, the ultimate goal of human life may be aptly characterized as “happiness.” For instance, Aristotle famously observed that both the vulgar and the wise agree in identifying “the highest of all goods” with happiness (eudaimonia) [1]. This view, in turn, entails a normative claim that all persons, including the wise and the virtuous, ought to pursue happiness as the ultimate

goal of life. Accordingly, the central theme of *the Nicomachean Ethics* concerns how we ought to conduct our lives to approach this ultimate end by cultivating virtue. And a somewhat similar point is made by Buddhists as well: Since we were born human, we are supposed to endeavor to attain the most valuable thing, namely, enlightenment. This state of enlightenment, according to some practitioners, can be reached only after a fairly long course of practice. Not only

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did Theravāda monks, who devoted their lives to strict disciplinary practices to become an arhat, monks of the Yogācāra school, a major tradition within Mahāyāna Buddhism, likewise maintained that Buddhahood can be attained only by passing through numerous intermediate stages. Indeed, this kind of teaching recites a deep respect for an enlightened one: Her mental state is so extraordinary that ordinary practitioners have a very good reason to look her up. But a question arises: if one cannot spend a significant amount of time apart from work and family, how ought one to live? If any school of Mahāyāna could address this question by offering a more accessible path to enlightenment, it would indeed advance the central mission of Mahāyāna, namely, the salvation of as many beings as possible. The idea of sudden enlightenment emits a precious light on the question. According to this idea, we can acquire the highest state promptly, even before completing an enormous amount of Buddhist practices. Now, among the Buddhist schools that elaborate on sudden enlightenment, Tiantai (天台, Tendai in Japanese), is especially important for Japanese monks because it has provided the foundation for enlightenment for major sects of Zen, Pureland, and others. Thus, in this paper, I will examine how Zhiyi (智顓), probably the greatest monk of the Chinese Tiantai school, explained sudden enlightenment in *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*. To do so, in the following section, I explore Zhiyi's discussions of "One Thought," which provide original and meaningful insights into human ontology and serve as a key to enlightenment in Tiantai philosophy.

## 2. Just Any Thought

"One thought [一念]" is a key term in Zhiyi's philosophy, as well as in other masters of Tiantai and Zen monks. In an ordinary understanding, "thought" refers to a specific type of mental activity: A mental act that involves a conceptual understanding of an object. Hereby, it is associated with intelligence or understanding. It should be noted, however, that for Zhiyi the concept of "thought" is considerably broader, since any mental state whatsoever is subsumed under the category of a single thought. So, even if someone is extremely emotional and does not consciously utilize his conceptual understanding, he has "a thought" in Zhiyi's framework.

Zhiyi noted some fundamental features that all thoughts share. First, every thought is in the process of change. According to Zhiyi, "one thought of the mind" has three phases, namely those of arising, abiding, and perishing (CSQI, 467). This is a universal statement about thoughts, and thus it is true for every thought. Every thought is perishing since a new and different thought is about to show up, so insofar as one is alive, it is never the case that some thought perishes and no new thought comes about.

Zhiyi also suggested that a thought is "conventionally existent in itself" (CSQI, 205). One reason is that a thought, like other entities, is conditioned and arises through interactions

with others. Another is that there is no absolute boundary between thoughts, and thus, what we regard as two distinct thoughts are so conceived only by presupposing a boundary that separates them. For Zhiyi, in reality, there is no determinate point to divide and differentiate between two thoughts on a timeline. For instance, when you first take a look at a blue flower and then a red flower next to it, you may think that you have two successive thoughts. But these "two thoughts" are arbitrarily differentiated, and the boundary can be provided in another way.

Second, every thought conveys extremely rich information. This is so since every thought has some duration, and in a sense it includes many shorter thoughts:

"A sūtra says, "A single thought has six hundred arisings and perishings." Ch'eng-shih lun masters say that "There are sixty moments in a single thought." In any case, [the important thing is that] you enter [a realization of] emptiness from [the perspective of] conventionality in a single moment, and attain the eye of wisdom, are illuminated concerning the real truth, and attain the realization of Buddhahood." (CSQI 491)

Although Zhiyi's citations merely imply that one thought has 600 or 60 elements, we do not have to assume that these numbers are determinate, and the number of shorter thoughts cannot be more than 600. The most important point here is that even a short period of time is further divided, and thus, a thought, however short it is, can be resolved into many other thoughts as you want. So, if you think about it for one second, mathematically it can be divided by any finite number. Yet we can't be conscious of all the information that is ascribed to short thoughts that are contained in one conscious thought. If even a brief thought—conventionally obtained by dividing a conscious thought—contains a certain amount of information, then every conscious thought must, in fact, convey an extraordinarily rich content. Indeed, the quantity of information may be regarded as infinite, insofar as each such brief thought possesses features that distinguish it from every other.

Zhiyi even went further to argue that "three thousand worlds (三千世界)" exist in a single thought:

"[Thus] a single thought includes the ten dharma realms. A single dharma realm includes the other ten dharma realms, so there are one hundred dharma realms. One realm includes thirty types of worlds [that is, each of the ten dharma realms is included in each of the three types of worlds: the world of sentient beings, the world of the five skandhas, and various lands], multiplied by one hundred dharma realms. This results in the inclusion of three thousand types of worlds. These three thousand [worlds] exist in a single momentary thought." (CSQI 815)

In the translation, Paul L. Swanson carefully used the expression "three thousand types of worlds." This translation clearly demonstrates that the number of worlds in the passage is not literally 3000. As Brook Ziporyn interprets, "three thousand" is more than just a way of saying "everything" [2, 3]. Zhiyi appears to maintain that whatever exists, regardless of

its ontological status or the realm to which it belongs, is intrinsically connected to a single moment of thought, insofar as each such moment contains within itself what can be utilized for the constitution of all objects and all realms. Consider a concrete experience—say, one minute in duration. It typically comprises a variety of visual and auditory elements. Although these are not absolute, indivisible units in the sense posited by atomists, they nonetheless allow us to conceive of different combinations and arrangements. By reconfiguring them, we can construct alternative perceptions or experiences that are just as possible as the one presently given.

Third, preceding thoughts do not wholly determine a thought, and thus, even with complete knowledge of the present state, a plurality of possible future states remains open. From the discussions above, one might get the impression that every thought is causally connected to preceding thoughts, and thus the present thought is determined by past thoughts. But Zhiyi did not, in fact, adopt this deterministic view. Moreover, following Nagarjuna (CSQI, 503), Zhiyi argued that “there is actually no own-being (*svabhāva*), nor other-being, nor both together, nor absence of causes” (CSQI, 109). Let us clarify what Zhiyi thought.

(1) The subject or mind does not exclusively produce a thought. Zhiyi argued that “[m]ental activity does not rise by itself, but necessarily depends on arising through [the interplay of various] conditions (*prafītya-samutpāda*)” (CSQI, 195).

(2) A thought is not produced by entities that are different from the subject or mind. No entity, material, spiritual, or divine merely infuses us with thoughts as we experience.

(3) An interaction of the mind and other things does not bring about a thought. This point is probably the most difficult to comprehend. A group of philosophers of mind supposes that the physical state of a brain provides complete information about the mental state. But it is also true that no one in the present world can have such information about all the physical properties of a single human body and the surrounding physical objects, as well as their interactions. Zhiyi went even further and suggested that, even if one has such sufficient information, what will happen in the future is still unpredictable.

Zhiyi’s well-known claim that “a single thought-moment is neither [simply] vertical [= sequential] nor horizontal [= taken as a whole]” (CSQI, 211) suggests a rejection of strict determinism. More specifically, he implies that a given thought is not determined by preceding thoughts in temporal succession, and no future thought can be predicted solely based on prior ones. For Zhiyi, neither a thought nor a mind is something that occupies its place in space. He further implied that a future thought is not completely determined by currently coexisting items in the world (and thus is not horizontal). Therefore, even if we examine previous experiences attentively, what will happen to our minds is unpredictable. Zhiyi then argued that this fundamental feature of a thought is “beyond conceptual understanding [不可思議],” and even Buddha does not have sufficient understanding to explain why. Here, Zhiyi seems to

suggest that it is a fundamental feature of an actual existence that we need to accept in any case.

### 3. A Contemplation of One Thought

The aforementioned discussions are not only valuable for understanding human nature; for Zhiyi, they are important mainly because the ontology based on these features is a key to leading human minds to higher states. To be sure, the features mentioned in the discussions are held by the thoughts of all people. Even if one is ignorant or evil, these features are really ascribed to their mental states. However, Zhiyi thought there was a huge difference between recognizing the fundamental features and failing to recognize them. This difference is crucial since this recognition is a path to enlightenment. In the following, Zhiyi suggested how to attain an ideal mental state by grasping some important feature of a single thought:

“Identity in principle means that one single thought-moment is identical with the principle of the *tathāgata-garbha*. 如來藏理 It is identical with emptiness because of its suchness (*tatha*), identical with conventional existence because of its function as a treasure-house 藏 (*garbha*) [in appearing in the world in various forms], and identical with the Middle because of its [participation in the] principle 理 [of reality]. The three wisdoms are included in a single thought, though this is beyond conceptual understanding, as explained above.” (CSQI, 233)

Here, Zhiyi implied that a grasp of the fundamental features of one thought brings about “three wisdoms.” The three wisdoms are those of an arhat, a bodhisattva, and a Buddha. It may be superfluous to explain all of them and how one is distinguished from the others, but at least we can know from Zhiyi’s statement that the highest wisdom of Buddha is thought to be “included” in a single thought. This does not mean that, in reality, everyone has the wisdom, and Zhiyi suggested that we should attempt to grasp three aspects of a single thought so that we can attain such wisdom (CSQI, 219-220). First, every one thought is empty, since it is conditioned by many other items, and it is in the process of change. If someone desires to attain something and she gets it, then it will soon or later be apart from her. So, a wise person is supposed to awaken others if they excessively stick to the illusory desired objects. Second, every one thought has “conventional existence.” As mentioned previously, a thought does not have a rigid real boundary that distinguishes it from another thought. For instance, a thought is differentiated from a previous thought only by setting a time boundary arbitrarily. Nonetheless, it should be accepted as an entity, as a conventionally construed item. Third, every thought is “Middle,” or a thought has the first and second aspects. It is always in the process of change and seems to disappear. Yet it manifests the fundamental feature of any other thought. Zhiyi admonishes us not to stick to denying something. If someone takes the doctrine of emptiness too seriously and thus emphasizes that the entity

people are talking about is nothing, then his mind clings to nothing or denies something, and it does not fit with the middle state.

Zhiyi even recommended that we not adhere to conceiving of the three different aspects. Rather, he stated that they fused into a single truth, keeping their distinction:

“They are not three yet three; they are three yet not three 非三而三三而不三. They are neither fused [into one] nor dissociated [into three completely distinct truths], and yet they are both fused [into a single truth] and dissociated [into three distinct truths]. It is not possible to say they are either “one” — or “different” 異, yet they are both “one” and “different.” (CSQI, 210)

Although the passage above is quite complex, it at least indicates that, according to Zhiyi, one should not adhere rigidly to the distinction among the three aspects. Zhiyi argued that through the highest, most complete teaching, or the Perfect Teaching [円教], we should reach the state that is beyond many distinctions and conceptions:

“In the Perfect Teaching, both teachings and attestation [of enlightenment] are inconceivable. Why is this so? Ultimate reality cannot be expounded, and the four types of expounding are only responses to conditions. There are only conventional names, and the names of that which is conventionally named are non-arising – therefore both teachings and enlightenment are inconceivable.” (CSQI, 506)

The four types of expounding are “Tripiṭaka Teaching [藏教],” “Shared Teaching [通教],” “Distinct Teaching [別教],” and “Perfect Teaching” [4]. The Tripiṭaka Teaching represents the most elementary stage of Buddhist instruction and is broadly comparable to Theravāda. It prescribes numerous rules governing the daily lives of monks, through the observance of which they are expected to free themselves from attachment. The Shared Teaching introduces the doctrine of emptiness, which, for those who lack deeper insight, may lead to the mistaken assumption that worldly phenomena are devoid of value. The third teaching, in turn, affirms the reality of things, acknowledging their existence while maintaining that they are not wholly independent of one another. The Distinct Teaching already represents a relatively advanced doctrinal stage, insofar as it conveys the truth of the Middle. However, if one becomes attached to this truth and treats it as distinct from other truths, since the Distinct Teaching places particular emphasis on the notion of suchness, and in doing so, it tends to render the Middle Way into a privileged and isolated concept. This feature, while not without its own philosophical significance, may also unsettle the mind and risk diverging from the spirit of the Perfect Teaching, which affirms the complete interpenetration of all aspects of reality. By embracing the Perfect Teaching, one comes to appreciate not only the most sublime philosophical truths, but also any seemingly mundane—or even distressing—experience or event as an expression of that very teaching.

Zhiyi found a place for his way of attaining wisdom in the

tradition of sudden-enlightenment through the aforementioned contemplation:

“If we are to speak of [the attainment of] the eye of wisdom in a single thought 一心 [or “one mind”], however, this is not the same [as the gradual-and-successive attainment].” (CSQI, 473)

Zhiyi suggested that the gradual, successive mode of attainment is not the most effective, since it requires an extensive investment of time and effort. In contrast, the alternative path of sudden enlightenment enables practitioners to attain the highest state far more swiftly. Although Zhiyi presented a variety of Buddhist practices, many of which appear demanding and difficult to carry out, such as the “constantly walking samādhi” in which practitioners are required to undertake continuous walking meditation within the hall for three months (CSQI, 270), he did not explicitly claim that these practices are necessary for the attainment of enlightenment. Rather, as David W. Chappell argues, we can, or even should, figure out new methods to attain enlightenment [5]. In this respect, Zhiyi positioned his view in contrast to more gradualist approaches, such as those often associated with the Theravāda tradition. He thus underscored the distinctive Mahāyāna claim that the transformative power of a single thought surpasses the cumulative effect of ordinary practices and disciplined actions:

“The Buddha said, “If you arouse the thought of Mahāyāna and seek omniscience, even if you do not follow [the way of] the assembly, do not cultivate the proper deeds, and do not attain the [resulting] benefits, you can receive offerings.” (CSQI, 226-227)

Zhiyi’s idea is in some respects analogous to the Christian supersession of Jewish legalism. While the observance of precepts retains certain value, it is not the sole criterion of religious attainment. Moreover, if one becomes excessively proud of one’s adherence to precepts and thereby looks down upon others, one may in fact be further removed from the highest spiritual state.

“You should know that the ultimate fruit of the Hīnayāna does not compare to even the primary thought [bodhicitta] of Mahāyāna.” (CSQI, 227)

Zhiyi maintained that the very beginning of practice already lies within the way of attaining Buddhahood [6]. Through practice, the practitioner comes to recognize that her path is not mistaken. At the same time, she realizes that cultivation itself is without end and does not cease even upon attaining enlightenment. Enlightenment is sometimes described metaphorically as a diamond that is extremely hard and thus indestructible. At first glance, this metaphor may appear to be at odds with the doctrine of emptiness, according to which all mental states are subject to change. Yet the two can be reconciled, since the moment of enlightenment marks a standpoint that transcends the ordinary process of change, and accordingly, such enlightenment is not compromised by the flux of mental states.

Although Zhiyi thought that it was impossible to eliminate all desires, he argued that attachment to them intensifies them

to the point of uncontrollability, and that a single wrongful thought or action in a given moment can result in a fall into hell. However, Zhiyi did not intend to deny the possibility of recovery from such deeds, given that his point is that even a highly accomplished practitioner continually fluctuates between states analogous to the Pure Land and to hell. Thus, Zhiyi and his disciples held that wholesome and unwholesome afflictions are not ultimately distinct from one another, since they are not different from nirvāṇa itself.

## 4. Conclusions

Zhiyi's endeavor to pursue sudden enlightenment can be understood as an attempt to overcome the assumption that the highest spiritual state is attainable only by exceptionally gifted individuals who devote extensive time to Theravāda practices. Admittedly, Zhiyi's own teaching introduced a different form of rigorous discipline that, in turn, intimidated some Japanese monks. Nevertheless, his system provided an important philosophical foundation for understanding how the highest state might be attained. One difficulty in Zhiyi's philosophy lies in the apparent tension between his aim of making enlightenment accessible to as many people as possible and the fact that his teachings are highly complex, such that only particularly capable and intellectually trained individuals can fully grasp their core and thereby attain the state he recommends. Yet the methods he articulated are not intended to be the only possible paths to higher realization. By establishing an abstract yet robust philosophical foundation for enlightenment, Zhiyi opened up the possibility of attaining the highest state more broadly. In this respect, his thought became a significant driving force in the development of Japanese Buddhism, especially insofar as it contributed to the emergence of practices that approximate what he envisioned as an ideal religious condition for lay practitioners.

## Abbreviation

CSQI Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight

## Author Contributions

**Shohei Edamura:** Conceptualization, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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