A Comparative Approach to Śubhakarasimha’s (637–735) “Essentials of Meditation”: Meditation and Precepts in Eighth-Century China

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This chapter examines the procedure of precept conferral in Śubhakarasimha’s (637–735) Essentials of Meditation (Ch. Wuwei sanzang chan yao 無畏三藏禪要, T 917, 18: 942b–46a): repentance, proclamation of vows, dhāraṇī recitation, and meditation. An Esoteric practitioner must achieve and practice all these steps to receive bodhisattva precepts. I will also present, as the title of Śubhakarasimha’s manual suggests, an alternative analysis of this text that argues that its purpose was rather an initiation into this type of meditation.

To gain a better understanding of Śubhakarasimha’s perceptions in relation to contemporaneous Chinese Buddhism, I investigate other eighth-century texts with similar contents, including (a) Five Skillful Means of Mahāyāna; (b) Amoghavajra’s Manual of Receiving Bodhicitta Precepts; and (c) Zhanran’s Manual of Bodhisattva Precepts Conferral. In comparing Śubhakarasimha’s text with the others, similarities emerge among Tiantai, early Chan, and Esoteric Buddhism. The notions of “pure precepts” and “purified meditation” played essential roles in the precept-conferral ceremony across these texts. Moreover, the comparison yields the sense of a rather fluid religious environment in eighth-century China, in which different branches of Buddhist communities shared many doctrines.

First, I will examine the precept-conferral procedure itself. As Śubhakarasimha specified in his manual, an esoteric practitioner must complete each of the requisite steps in order to attain bodhisattva precepts. The whole procedure runs in chronological order: repentance, proclamation of vows, dhāraṇī recitation, and meditation. The combination of dhāraṇī and meditation features Esoteric and (Northern) Chan characteristics and deserves further investigation. However, systematic analysis of the texts makes it clear that each step of the procedure has an important function for practice, just as Śubhakarasimha explained in his text. These steps constitute crucial components of his esoteric praxis, which focuses on the theme of “purification of the mind.”

This set of procedures, however, was not necessarily exclusive to esoteric teachings in this place and at this time, and repentance and proclamation of
vows have been widely practiced in all Chinese Buddhist traditions. This leads to further questions, particularly regarding how the precept-conferral ritual procedures produced the purity of the practitioners. What functions did repentance play in the procedure? How was the idea of purity of mind manifested in early Chan, Tiantai, and Esoteric traditions? Daniel Stevenson, in his extensive research on the Tiantai Four Forms of *Samādhi*, argued that devotional practices in sixth- to eighth-century China were not as diverse as we may have imagined (1987, 249). He also insightfully noted that the shared patterns of devotional practice reflect the belief systems of a common soteriological vision (256). But there is still a need to reassess the implications of the commonly practiced devotional meditations and to determine the precise nature of the shared soteriological theory. Of particular interest are the doctrinal underpinnings of the connection between meditation and precepts in Śubhakarasimha’s manual, and how they compare to parallel doctrinal foundations in other texts.

**The Main Sources**

The four texts regarding the precept-conferral procedure that will be analyzed in this chapter are the following:


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1 The *Essentials of Meditation* was probably narrated by Šubhakarasimaṇha and was actually written by Jingxian 敬賢 (660–722) during 716–35 CE in Chang’an. For a concise introduction to these texts, see Ōno 1954, 431–35. Cf. Sharf’s chapter in this volume, note 33.
2 Cf. Sharf’s chapter in this volume, note 34.