AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF THE MEDITATION TRADITION IN CHINA: MEDITATION IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF DAOXUAN (596-667)*

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The early Tang Buddhist monk Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667) was a prolific vinaya master and an erudite monastic historian, bibliographer and biographer. While his commentaries on vinaya texts played an unrivalled role in the formation and transformation of various vinaya traditions in medieval East Asia, his works on Chinese monastic history, institutions, and bibliography have remained a major source for modern scholars of Chinese Buddhism. In contrast to his well-acknowledged status as a vinaya master and Buddhist historian, however, Daoxuan’s own training in meditation and his writings on the history of meditation in China have remained largely unexplored. Regarding his connections with meditation, scholars familiar with Daoxuan’s life might immediately think of his position as a third-generation disciple of the great meditation master Sengchou 僧稠 (480-560).1 But it turns out that Daoxuan’s ties with the Chinese meditation tradition ran far deeper than this. This article will discuss the role of meditation in Daoxuan’s career and reappraise some aspects of what we might call the pre-history of the Chan school.

Although Daoxuan did not leave any works exclusively devoted to theories of meditation,2 one of his treatises, the “Xichan lun” 習禅論,* The author wishes to thank James Benn and two anonymous readers for their insightful comments, which he has incorporated in this article.

1 As we will see below, one of Daoxuan’s principal teachers was a second-generation disciple of Sengchou.

2 It should be noted, however, that his Jingxin jieguan fa 淨心誡觀法 (Recommending Contemplation Methods for Purifying the Mind) refers to various forms of meditation and contemplation, a fact that fully attests to his expertise in meditation. Written for one of his disciples who had just entered the sangha, this two-juan manual aimed at providing some measures for keeping the precepts with the aid of meditation and contemplation. The work is included in the Taishô canon, no. 1893. See An 1988, Satô 1987.

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(Critical Discussion on the Practice of Meditation), included in his Xu gaoseng zhuan 續高僧傳 (A Continuation of the Biographies of Eminent Monks), is a historical document of crucial significance for our understanding of the Chinese meditation tradition. The Xu gaoseng zhuan is a biographical anthology that Daoxuan composed on “eminent” Buddhist monks active in China from the start of the sixth century until the middle of the seventh century. Composed of thirty juan, the work is divided into ten sections (such as “Translators” [yijing 譯經], “Exegetes” [yijie 義解], “Practitioners of meditation” [xichan 習禪], “Preceptors” [minglu 明律], “Defenders of Buddhism” [hufa 護法]), to each of which Daoxuan attached a synoptic treatise. One of these synoptic treatises, the “Xichan lun,” can be regarded as both an introduction and a conclusion to the xichan section in the Xu gaoseng zhuan. Not only does it elucidate Daoxuan’s own understanding of the practice of meditation, but also, if read in conjunction with the biographies in the xichan section, it yields the earliest and most reliable picture of the Chinese meditation tradition during this crucial period. Unfortunately, despite its importance scholars of Chinese Buddhist meditation, and historians of Chan in particular, have not paid sufficient attention to this document. To the best of my knowledge, the only systematic investigation of it has been made by Jan Yunhua 冉雲華 in one of his recent articles. Professor Jan’s study

1 T vol. 50, no. 2060, p.572c5-15. The “Xichan lun” is located at pp. 595c26-597b23. In the preface to his Xu gaoseng zhuan, Daoxuan makes it clear that his anthology covers the period of time from the early Liang dynasty (502-57) to Zhenguan 19 (645) (Xu gaoseng zhuan, T vol. 50, no. 2060, p. 425b21-22). The latter date obviously refers to the time when he finished the initial version of the anthology. However, it should be noted that after 645 Daoxuan continued to prepare new biographies of “eminent monks,” probably until his death in 667. While the Xu gaoseng zhuan biography of Fachong 法沖 (586/587 – after 664/665, p. 666b21) was prepared during the Linde era (664-665) (p. 666c23), another Xu gaoseng zhuan biography (of Tanguang 曇光 [d. before 665], a vinaya master) was written in Linde 2 (665) (p. 624b8-9), a mere two years before Daoxuan’s own death. For this reason, we may say that the Xu gaoseng zhuan covers a period of one and half centuries from the very beginning of the sixth century (coinciding with the beginning of Liang Wudi’s reign) to the middle of the seventh century, when Daoxuan was approaching the last years of his life.

2 The Xu gaoseng zhuan also circulated in editions of thirty-one or forty juan. For the complicated history of the different versions of the text, see Ibuki 1990. The other five sections are gantong 感通 (“Thaumaturges”), yishen 遺身 (“Self-immolators”), dusong 諸誦 (“Reciters”), xingfu 興福 (“Benefactors”), and zake 雜科 (“Miscellaneous”).