

BEYOND BINARY DISTINCTIONS:  
REAPPRAISING THE INTRICATE NATURE OF APOCRYPHA IN  
THE *SŪTRA OF PERFECT ENLIGHTENMENT*

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## ABSTRACT

This study reconsiders the historical and cultural complexity underlying the development of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* (*SPE*), a text previously categorized as a Chinese apocryphal scripture. With a broadened scope that transcends the conventional theories, the study explores the shared teachings and terminologies in the *SPE* and the *Śūraṅgama*, addressing their complex origins. The article proposes that the origins of such texts could involve multiple authors and a fusion of influences from Indian and Chinese thought, reflecting the spiritual and cultural contexts of their time. A pivotal focus is the detailed analysis of a unique four-stage meditation practice in the *SPE*, presenting compelling parallels with Indian Mahāyāna texts and suggesting a profound Indian lineage within this purportedly apocryphal Chinese scripture.

Keywords: Buddhist apocrypha, *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, *Śūraṅgama*, fourfold meditation, *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*, Zongmi

## INTRODUCTION

Despite its profound influence on the development of Huayen and Chan meditative practices in Chinese Buddhism, the *Yuanjuejin* (*Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, hereafter “*SPE*”) has been regarded by many scholars as a Chinese apocryphal text since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Japanese Buddhist scholar Mochizuki Shinkō proposed that the *sūtra* was forged in China with an identifiable doctrinal inclination found in another Chinese apocryphal Buddhist text, the *Dasheng qixin lun* (*Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, hereafter “*Awakening of Faith*”) (Mochizuki, 1946). This direction of locating spurious and pseudo-Buddhist texts was soon picked up in Chinese academia, when Liang Qichao and Hu Shih began to look further into the clues to prove that the *SPE*, the *Awakening of Faith*, and the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (*Lengyan jing*) were all Chinese composition in the guise of Indian Buddhist texts. Regarding

the *SPE*, Hu Shih speculates that the text was likely composed by Zongmi (748-841) who single-handedly popularized the text (Hu, 1970).

Lü Cheng, another very well-respected Buddhist scholar in China at the beginning of the 20th century, further proposed that the *SPE* was fabricated on the basis of other Chinese apocryphal texts, using the *Awakening of Faith* as the basis and enriched by the contents of the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* (Lü, 1985). In the West, James Benn also pointed out that “[o]ne might regard the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, which has only one fascicle, as opposed to the *Śūraṅgama*’s ten, as a précis of the essential points of the *Śūraṅgama*.” (Benn, 2008: 63). Benn’s suggestion that the *SPE* is a “précis” of the *Śūraṅgama* may have also implicitly proposed the chronology of the production of these texts: that the extensive ten-fascicle *Śūraṅgama* was written first before its précis was composed to summarize the essential points. This view, however, contradicts the understanding of the received tradition.

#### TRADITIONAL CLAIMS

The translation history of the *Śūraṅgama* is shrouded in obscurity due to the absence of official records, leading to uncertainty surrounding its provenance. Zhisheng (fl. 730) presents two contrasting accounts in relation to the chronology, geography, and translators involved. In the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* (Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures), compiled in 730, it is detailed that a Chinese monk named Huaidi (n.d.), alongside an unnamed Indian monk he encountered in the Guang Prefecture (Guangzhou), contributed to the sūtra’s translation (T55.2154, 603a). However, in the *Xu gujin yijing tuji* (Extended Record of an Illustration of Translations of Ancient and Modern Scriptures), also compiled in 730, Zhisheng proffers a more detailed scenario where the Indian monk is identified as Pāramiti from central India. As the story unfolds, Pāramiti is said to have brought the sūtra to China. This rendition was orally translated by Meghaśikhara, a monk from Oḍḍiyāna, with Huaidi validating its meaning and Fangrong (?-705) assuming the role of the scribe, in the Guang Prefecture in 705. Once the recitation was completed, Pāramiti set sail for India (T55.2152, 371c).

In regard to the *SPE*, Zhisheng in his *Xu gujin yijing tuji* attributes the translation to Buddhatrāta, albeit without defining a specific year. Later, Zongmi’s commentary on the sūtra suggests a translation date of 693 at Baiyun Monastery, relying on a now-lost commentary by Daoquan (T39.1795, 528b). Zongmi also professed to have examined a prior translation of the sūtra from 647, allegedly completed at the Baoyun Monastery (Z9.245, 537b). He further contends that an additional, now-lost commentary by Jianzhi corroborates the

same details regarding the translation's year and translator, with a minor disparity: Daoquan identifies Buddhatrāta as hailing from Jibin, while Jianzhi suggests the monk was from Kāśmīra. During the Tang dynasty, however, Jibin was synonymous with Kāśmīra. Unfortunately, no further evidence has been presented to validate these assertions. These documents thus seem to imply that the *SPE* was translated in 647, predating the translation of the *Śūraṅgama* in 705. However, the conjecture that the *SPE* predates the *Śūraṅgama* by over half a century raises doubts due to the lack of corroborative documentation, thereby calling its credibility into question. Zongmi's pronounced eagerness to establish the earlier translation of the *SPE* could paradoxically suggest the contrary, thereby reinforcing the theories put forth by Hu Shih and James Benn.

The controversy surrounding the *SPE* began almost immediately the moment it was first circulated within Buddhist circles in China. The *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* was the first catalogue that mentioned the *SPE*. But Zhisheng casts doubts on the time of its translation, saying that “such a text which appeared recently does not have the year of translation recorded anywhere.” (T55.2154, 565a) In addition, the record presented only very brief information on the translator Buddhatrāta, who seems to be unknown even to the Zhisheng and has translated no other Buddhist texts. Zongmi, on the other hand, claimed to have spent much effort locating four commentaries on the *SPE*, all composed towards the end of the seventh century, but none of them is extant. Allegedly, these commentaries include the one-fascicle interpretation by Weique from Baoguo Monastery, a two-fascicle commentary by Wushi of Xiantian Monastery, a three-fascicle interpretation by Daoquan from Zanghai Monastery, and a four-fascicle analysis by Jianzhi of Jianfu Monastery. Among the aforementioned commentators, only Weique is referenced in the *Song gaoseng zhuan* (The Song Dynasty Record of the Biographies of Eminent Monks), which features a succinct biography that associates him with the commentary on the *Śūraṅgama*, but makes no reference to the *SPE* (T50.2061, 738b-c). The remaining commentators, Wushi and Jianzhi, are in a master-disciple relationship and are both identified as adherents of the Southern Chan School's lineage of Shenhui. As for Daoquan, he remains an enigmatic figure with no known background.

While the circumstantial evidence seems to be all against the Indian origin of the *SPE*, a recent article by Yang Weizhong highlights textual evidence that has been overlooked completely but is important for considering whether the *SPE* was indeed translated from an Indian source. Yang suggested

that the translation of the *SPE* was “organized spontaneously in the form of ‘folk translation workplace’” but such an “unofficial” attempt was not properly recognized and hence did not enter into the scriptural records like the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* (Yang, 2016). In this article, Yang suggests that Fuli, a prominent figure in the translation of Buddhist scriptures during Emperor Gao’s reign, might have held the position of a “theory-prover” (*zhengyi*) in Buddhatrāta’s translation bureau. This speculation is derived from an astute examination of *Xu gujin yijing tuji*, which intriguingly hints at an unexplained gap in Fuli’s participation in any translation bureaus between the years 693 to 695. While Yang’s fresh perspective presents an intriguing angle, it does not adequately address numerous inquiries posed by contemporary scholars who connect this scripture with other Chinese apocryphal texts, including the *Śūraṅgama*.

### THE *SPE* AND THE *ŚŪRAṄGAMA*

In fact, the correlation between the *SPE* and the *Śūraṅgama* can be discerned directly from the titles of the two works. The *SPE*’s alternate titles, listed toward the end of the scripture, are worth noting. The scripture (T17.842, 921c) states:

Good men, this sūtra is taught by hundreds of thousands of billions of Buddhas like the sands of the Ganges, protected by the Tathāgatas of the three worlds, replied upon by the Bodhisattvas of the ten directions, and is the pure eye of the twelve divisions of the canon. This scripture is known as the *Dhāraṇī of the Mahāvaipulya Perfect Enlightenment*; it is also referred to as the *Sūtra of Definitive Meaning*; it is further called the *Samādhi of the Secret King*; it is alternatively named the *Tathāgata’s State of Certainty*; it is also termed the *Distinction of the Own-Nature of the Tathāgatagarbha*.

In parallel, the *Śūraṅgama* too offers a selection of alternative titles in the following passage (T19.945, 143a):

Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī then rose from his seat, bowed at the feet of the Buddha and asked, “What name should be given to this sūtra, and how should we and all sentient beings receive and practice it?” The Buddha replied, “This sūtra is named: *The Unsurpassed Seal of the Great Uṣṇīṣa Sitātapatra, the Pure Ocean-Eye of All Tathāgatas in the Ten Directions*; it is also referred to as *The Sūtra on the Protection and Deliverance of Ānanda and Bhikṣuṇīs of this Assembly for Them to*

*Realize the Bodhicitta to Enter into the Ocean of All Wisdom; it is alternatively named The Practice and Realization of the Definitive Meaning by means of the Tathāgata’s Esoteric Cause; it is further called The Mahāvaiṣṭya Lotus King, the Dhāraṇī-Mantra of all Buddha-Mothers in the Ten Directions; it is also referred to as The Bodhisattva’s Ten Thousand Practices of the Heroic Progress (Śūraṅgama) of the Abhiṣeka Division.*

When we juxtapose the two, it becomes unmistakably clear that there is some correspondence in the formulation of these auxiliary titles. Both scriptures share analogous terminology, such as “the pure eye,” the mention of “*Mahāvaiṣṭya*” and “*Dhāraṇī*,” the accentuation of “definitive meaning,” and both are presented as the realization of the Tathāgata. This symmetry cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence but rather points to a deeper kinship between the two scriptures. In terms of doctrine, the concept that binds the two scriptures together is the teaching of the *tathāgatagarbha*. Hypothetically, if Zongmi did contribute to the composition of the *SPE*, his objective may have been to delve into the principle of immediate embodiment and application of the *tathāgatagarbha* as articulated in the *Awakening of Faith*. This would thereby facilitate the delineation of the congruity between the Huayan school and the Southern School of the Chan tradition.

Those who cast doubts on the *SPE* as a spurious Chinese creation often ground their critique in the questionable roots of the “translation,” as well as the elucidation of *tathāgatagarbha* propounded in the text. It has been proposed that the teachings of the *SPE*, the *Śūraṅgama*, and the *Awakening of Faith* all embody a distinctly sinicized perspective of Buddhist doctrines, evolving the concept of an innate capacity for attaining Buddhahood into a “monistic ontology based on the mind as the ultimate ground of all experience.” (Gregory, 2005) In terms of terminologies, James Benn has offered an intriguing analysis of the *Śūraṅgama*, suggesting that specific portions of the sūtra’s lexicon and exemplifications may not have originated in India. Among these, the mention of “jellyfish” can be seen as unassailable proof of the *Śūraṅgama*’s Chinese composition, given the absence of any understanding in Indian Buddhist scriptures that jellyfish, being blind, depend on shrimp for survival—a notion frequently observed in Chinese literature. Benn advocates the viewpoint that the *Śūraṅgama* propounds a cosmology amalgamating Indian and Chinese elements, a perspective that may have resonated deeply with the literate and intellectual members of the monastic

fraternity. Moreover, the *Śūraṅgama*'s allusions to "earth owls" (*tuxiao*) and "broken-mirror birds" (*pojing niao*) are other instances that Benn considers to be grounded in China (Benn, 2008: 69-70).

## QUESTIONABLE TERMS FOUND IN THE *SPE*

Inspired by the methodology employed by Benn, I examined the *SPE*, paying attention to those terminologies that distinctly bear the characteristics of indigenous Chinese usage. A lone instance that may hint towards this can be found towards the conclusion of the scripture where the practice of "acupuncture and moxibustion" (*zhen'ai*) is referred to. This seemed to me initially an irrefutable affirmation of its Chinese authorship, until I chanced upon an analogous reference in the earliest Chinese rendition of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The version of interest was rendered into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu, 229-306), wherein it intriguingly makes mention of acupuncture and moxibustion within the context of the "Herbs" chapter (*Yaocao pin*). The conspicuity of this reference is heightened by its conspicuous absence in Kumārajīva's later translation of the same text. Motivated by this discrepancy, I sought to probe deeper into the matter, leading me to consult the original Sanskrit text from which these translations were derived. Therein, I managed to identify the corresponding segment from Dharmarakṣa's version. Specifically, within the Oṣadhī chapter, I encountered the Sanskrit expressions "*kāṃcicchālākayā śarīrasthānaṃ viddhvā dadyāt*" and "*kāṃcidagninā paridāhya dadyāt.*" These phrases translate, respectively, as "apply some [of the herbs] having pierced the places of the body with a slender piece," and "burn some [of the herbs] with fire and apply." It appears that the Sanskrit text does indeed allude to practices which, in the Chinese context, would be synonymous with those of acupuncture and moxibustion. Joseph S. Alter wrote about the ambivalence of the origin of the acupuncture practice, where he cites a celebrated work by Dr. Attar Singh, *Akyūpreśur: Prakrtic Upchār* (Acupressure: A Natural Therapy):

There are differences of opinion about how long ago and in which country acupuncture originated. One view is that acupressure, upon which acupuncture is based, originated in India approximately 6000 years ago. There is proof of this in the classical texts of Ayurveda. In ancient times, travelers from China came to India, learned the techniques and knowledge of acupressure and took it back with them to China, where it was put into practice and became very popular.

Practitioners of medicine in China recognized the wonderful advantages of this therapy and appropriated it. They have made great efforts to make it both popular and profitable. It is for this reason that today it is known the world over as a Chinese medical therapy. (Alter, 2005: 27)

Thus, the employment of the term *zhen'ai* (acupuncture and moxibustion) within the *SPE* may not unequivocally signify either an Indian or Chinese provenance for the text. On the other hand, the term “perfect enlightenment” (*yuanjue*) at the heart of the *SPE*’s title also deserves scrutiny, given that the concept of “perfect enlightenment” is typically recognized within academic circles as a creation of Chinese Buddhism. It has been postulated that the genesis of the term “perfect enlightenment” may be traced back to the following line found within the Dunhuang text *Chuanfa baoji* (The Precious Record of the Transmission of Dharma, P. 3559):

When the Buddha was still alive, he often preached the Dharma, which was recorded in written form as scriptures. Although the definitive understanding of perfect enlightenment is embedded within them, the ordinary and the enlightened cannot grasp it, distancing themselves from the truth. (Gregory, 1991: 56-7)

Although the proposition suggesting the genesis of the term “perfect enlightenment” from the *Chuanfa baoji* bears consideration, an alternative perspective may also be entertained. The term might be construed as an interpretive rendition of the Sanskrit phrase *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* (unsurpassed, correct, and perfect awakening). This perspective arises from the semantic richness of the Chinese character *yuan*, connoting not merely perfection, but also an essence of completeness. Thus, the concept of “perfect enlightenment” in the *SPE* may be imbued with layered meanings, reflective of the multifaceted philosophical profundity inherent in both the Sanskrit and Chinese traditions, following a direction that links the “perfect enlightenment” to the teaching of the *tathāgatagarbha*.

The *SPE*’s unique approach to the cultivation of *śamatha*, *dhyāna*, and *samāpatti* as an integral trio, whilst conspicuously excluding *vipaśyana*, may indeed serve as an intriguing hint towards its non-Indian roots. It appears plausible that the author of the *SPE* may have navigated an unconventional route, interpreting the Chinese equivalent for *dhyāna*, “*chanding*,” in a manner

that cleaves it into two independent entities, transforming into *chan* and *ding*. This divergence likely eventuated in the unorthodox pairing of *dhyāna* and *samāpatti*, subsequently augmented by *samatha* to construct the unusual trio. The potential deviation in interpretation could reflect cultural nuances and localized philosophical insights, further underscoring the complexity of tracing the *SPE*'s origins.

#### FOUR STAGES of MEDITATIVE PRACTICE

Is there any possibility that the *SPE* was not fabricated by the Chinese, at least not completely? What I find particularly indicative of the Indian origin of the scripture begins in the second chapter where the Buddha explained to Bodhisattva Samantabhadra “the expedient stages of practice.” The *SPE* states that:

Good men, all sentient beings, through various illusions, are born of the Tathāgata’s perfect enlightenment wondrous mind, just like a flower in the sky, born from emptiness. Although the illusory flower perishes, the nature of emptiness is indestructible. The illusory mind of sentient beings still relies on the illusion’s extinction. When all illusions are extinguished, the mind of enlightenment remains unmoved. Speaking of enlightenment based on illusion is also called an illusion. If one speaks of having enlightenment, it is still not free from illusion. Those who speak of no enlightenment are also like this. Therefore, the extinction of illusion is called immovable. Good men, all Bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the degenerate era should stay far away from all illusory and false realms, due to the firm abiding in the mind of disassociation. The mind, being like an illusion, should be disassociated; such a disassociation is itself an illusion, and this too must be disassociated; disassociating from the disassociation of illusion, even this must be disassociated; upon achieving a state from which nothing more can be disassociated, all illusions are eliminated. (T17.842, 914a)

The conceptualization of multiple illusions as being “born of the Tathāgata’s perfect enlightenment wondrous mind” undeniably reflects the theory of *tathāgatagarbha* as depicted in scriptures such as *Śrīmālādevī* and *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*. These were already translated into Chinese and circulating prior to the propagation of the *SPE* in China during the 7th century.



However, the element absent for Chinese Buddhists during this period was a well-articulated sequence of meditative stages leading to the “elimination of illusion”:

- 1) All Bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the degenerate era should stay far away from all illusory and false realms, due to the firm abiding in the mind of disassociation. The mind, being like an illusion, should be disassociated;
- 2) Such a disassociation is itself an illusion, and this too must be disassociated;
- 3) Disassociating from the disassociation of illusion, even this must be disassociated;
- 4) Upon achieving a state from which nothing more can be disassociated, all illusions are eliminated.

Four stages of meditation are mentioned here. First, one disassociates from the thought of the illusory and false realms; second, one disassociates from the illusion of disassociation; third, one disassociates from the disassociation of the “illusion of disassociation”; and lastly, one reaches the stage when there is nothing to be disassociated from. Precise instructions for each of these stages are not further elaborated in the scripture. They are presented more or less like a principle of the approach to the elimination of illusions. To the best of my understanding, there seems to be an absence of an analogous methodology in the indigenous Chinese meditative traditions. This is one that entails a sequential dissolution of attachments, from external to internal, and from gross to subtle. Neither in the Daoist meditation practice, nor in the eclectic Buddhist meditation schemas that were established in China, including the likes of Tiantai, Huayen, Pure Land, or Chan, can a comparable approach be identified. It is a practice that can be aptly described as possessing an “Indian” provenance, given its striking congruity with the strategies delineated in the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist texts.

Indeed, this four-stage meditation establishes the crux of the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* (Dhāraṇī of Entering into Nonconceptuality). However, this sūtra was only rendered into Chinese in the 11th century by Dānapāla, under the title *Foshuo wufenbie famen jing* (The Sūtra of the Dharma-Gate of Nonconceptuality Spoken by the Buddha). An earlier Chinese

translation, credited to an anonymous scholar and bearing the title *Ru wufenbie zongchi jing* (The Sūtra of Dhāraṇī of Entering Nonconceptuality), was discovered in Dunhuang. Regardless, this earlier translation does not appear to have gained widespread circulation within China, and even if it did, it came into existence subsequent to the *SPE*, no earlier than the 8<sup>th</sup> century. To delve further, let us examine the stages of entering nonconceptuality as delineated in the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*.

The scriptural discourse of the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* elucidates how Bodhisattvas abandon the marks of conceptuality in stages through the “correct application of the mind” (*samyakmanasikāra*). It is posited that the initial stride involves relinquishing the marks of conceptualization with respect to intrinsic existence of external phenomena. This notion bears resemblance to the inaugural stage delineated in the *SPE*, wherein an individual is instructed to disassociate themselves from the “illusory realms” through the firm abiding in the mind of disassociation:

The Blessed One said to them, “Here, noble sons, Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas, having heard this doctrine pertaining to non-conceptualization, direct the mind to non-conceptualization and eliminate all marks of conceptualization. This [process] begins as follows: all marks of conceptualization, those of object and subject, are eliminated. Here, the marks of conceptualization are the marks relating to the defiled phenomena. The defiled phenomena, moreover, are the five aggregates of attachment: namely, the aggregate of attachment to form, the aggregate of attachment to feeling, the aggregate of attachment to perception, the aggregate of attachment to volition, and the aggregate of attachment to consciousness. How, furthermore, do they eliminate those marks of conceptualization? By not applying their minds to the appearances that have become apparent through the power of manifestation. (Matsuda, 1996: 94)

The second stage of practice in the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* mandates the Bodhisattvas to relinquish the marks of the antidote to the conceptualization of inherent existence. This, in essence, signifies that what must be forsaken at this juncture are the techniques or practices deployed to efface the conceptualization of external phenomena. This is analogous to the parable of the raft, as found within early Buddhist teachings. These teachings serve as a metaphorical raft, an instrumental aid assisting one in traversing the

river of attachment to an illusory existence, yet they should not transform into objects of attachment. The raft, while crucial in the journey, should not be carried further once the river has been successfully crossed. Hence, the teachings, much like the raft, are to be employed for the journey and then let go, preventing them from becoming yet another layer of attachment. This is similar to the *SPE*'s explanation that one should disassociate from the purposeful "disassociation from the illusion of external phenomena." In the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*, it is explained that the means used to counteract the illusory attachment to inherent existence is also illusory and should, in turn, be relinquished:

As they sequentially eliminate these marks of conceptualization, other marks of conceptualization that examine antidotes come forth, become apparent and appear through the process of manifestation. These include the mark of conceptualization that examines giving, the mark of conceptualization that examines morality, the mark of conceptualization that examines patience, the mark of conceptualization that examines effort, the mark of conceptualization that examines meditation, and the mark of conceptualization that examines wisdom. Whether it be from the perspective of examining their own characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa*), their qualities (*guṇa*), or their essence (*sāra*), they also eliminate these marks of conceptualization that examine antidotes by not applying their minds to them. (Matsuda, 1996: 94-95)

Equipped with the proficiency to refrain from mentally engaging with the assumed external inherent existence, and the internal acknowledgement of the illusory essence of such existence, one resides in a state of "thusness" (*tathatā*). This condition is characteristically nondual, transcending the conventional dichotomy of subject and object. Within the *SPE*, the narrative is framed in such a manner as to encourage further dissociation from the dissociation of the illusory perception of external phenomena. When navigating the third stage in the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*, a note of caution is delivered to the Bodhisattvas. The text underscores the need to resist fixating their mind on the marks of "thusness." This entails fostering a detachment from any implicit reification of the very concept of thusness they have strived to grasp:

As they eliminate these, other marks of conceptualization that examine the reality come forth, become apparent and appear through the process of manifestation, such as the mark of conceptualization that examines

emptiness, the mark of conceptualization that examines thusness, the mark of conceptualization that examines the reality-limit, the mark of conceptualization that examines signlessness and ultimate realm of phenomena (*dharmadhātu*). Whether it be from the perspective of examining their own characteristics, their qualities, or their essences, they also eliminate these marks of conceptualization that examine reality by not applying their minds to them. (Matsuda, 1996: 95)

In its concluding phase, the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* directs the Bodhisattvas towards relinquishing the marks that signify their conceptualized attainment. They are guided to reside in the sphere of nonconceptualization. This domain is formless, undemonstratable, unsupported, devoid of appearances, absent of cognition, and without foundation — a well-known description of the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*), as articulated in the *Ratnakūṭasūtra*. The act of residing in this domain of reality, traversed through successive stages of mental detachment from illusory attachments or consciously refraining from engaging with various strata of conceptualization, is regarded as effortless and innate. To articulate this state using terminology deeply rooted in the Chinese philosophical tradition, it can be conceived as a “return” to the primordial condition of the mind. This “return” signifies a reversion to the mind’s original, unadulterated state, unencumbered by the layered constructs of conceptual thought, known in the *SPE* as the *yuanjue* (perfect enlightenment). The instruction of the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* for this stage reads as follow:

As they eliminate even these, other marks of conceptualization that examine attainments come forth, become apparent and appear through the process of manifestation. These include the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of the first stage, up to and including the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of the tenth stage, the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of the patience relating to non-arising, the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of prophecy, the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of the purification of the Buddha-field, the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of the maturation of sentient beings, the mark of conceptualization that examines the attainment of consecration (*abhiṣeka*), up to and including the mark of conceptualization that determines the attainment of omniscience. Whether it be from the perspective of examining their own characteristics, their qualities, or their essence, they also eliminate these marks of conceptualization that

examine attainments by not applying their minds to them. (Matsuda, 1996: 95)

The *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* further employs an analogy that draws upon the image of an unyielding seeker, laboriously delving into the core of the earth, unveiling an array of treasures in the process. These range from silver and gold to a medley of rare gemstones, culminating in the discovery of the wish-fulfilling jewel. The parable symbolically correlates the four kinds of treasures to the four successive stages of realization elucidated above. It offers a reminder to Buddhist practitioners not to become entranced by any initial discoveries, no matter how valuable they may seem. More significant treasures, rarer in their occurrence, still lay hidden, awaiting discovery. Furthermore, the parable underscores an essential Buddhist tenet: the ultimate goal of this metaphorical treasure hunt — the wish-fulfilling jewel — is ever-present. This mirrors the intrinsic state of enlightenment articulated within *tathāgatagarbha* theory. The entirety of the Buddhist practice thus becomes a journey of deconstructing our illusions, a journey that moves progressively from the palpable to the intricate. Consequently, after briefly outlining the four stages of mental “disassociation,” the *SPE* promptly proceeds with the ensuing explication:

Much like drilling fire, when two pieces of wood interact, fire emerges and wood exhausts, leaving only ashes to fly and smoke to extinguish. To cultivate illusion through illusion follows suit. Even though all illusions may cease, they do not plunge into utter annihilation. Good men, upon recognizing the illusory, liberate themselves without resorting to expedients; upon liberating from the illusory, they awaken without a progression of stages. All Bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the final era, through practicing in accordance with this, can thus achieve perpetual liberation from all illusions. (T17.842, 914a)

The conversation does not make any assumptions of a so-called “monistic ontology,” a feature often criticized by scholars as indicative of Chinese origin. The question is whether the architecture of this progressive refinement in the quest for enlightenment reflects, or derives from, any recognizably extant meditation system of the era. It would indeed stretch credulity to propose that Chinese scribes could contrive a meditative framework that so closely aligns with the tetradic structure exclusively identified within Indian Buddhist manuscripts.

This four-stage meditation system is distinctively characteristic of the Mahāyāna tradition within Indian Buddhism. The significance of the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* passage cannot be overstated. It inspired Vasubandhu to construct a more intricate and comprehensive explication of the fourfold system in his *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*. This is delineated as the “abandoning of marks” through the means of “correct practice” (*yang dag par sbyor ba*), a process that facilitates the journey towards nonconceptual wisdom. This notion is succinctly encapsulated within the passage of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, which declares:

The understanding of the abandoning of marks is through four aspects. It is through the abandoning of the marks of the factors of reality belonging to the nonconductive direction, the antidotes, thusness, and realization. In respective order these have taught the abandoning of marks that are coarse, intermediate, subtle, and far-ranging.

Understanding the correct practice is also fourfold; it is through the practice of apprehension, through the practice of nonapprehension, through the practice of the nonapprehension of apprehension, and through the practice of the apprehension of nonapprehension. (Robertson, 2007: 506-507)

The auto-commentary explains that:

Regarding these, abandoning the marks pertaining to the nonconductive direction means abandoning the marks of desire-attachment and so forth. Abandoning the marks pertaining to the antidotes means abandoning the marks of what is unpleasant and so forth. Abandoning the marks of thusness means abandoning even the effort for declaring “This is thusness.” Abandoning the marks of realization means abandoning the marks of attainment of that which is to be realized through having carried out meditation on the levels. ...

The approach involving correct practice has four aspects: It is through the practice of apprehension, meaning the practice of the apprehension of [phenomena as being] just perceptual process. It is through the practice of nonapprehension, meaning the nonapprehension of objects [as self-existent entities]. It is through the practice of nonapprehension of apprehension, meaning the nonapprehension of just perceptual operation if objects do not exist; for, if the object for a perceptual

operation does not exist, then perceptual operation is untenable. It is through the practice of apprehension of nonapprehension, meaning the apprehension of nonduality because of the nonapprehension of duality. (Robertson, 2008: 383-384)

The fourfold meditation, as elucidated in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgavṛtti*, finds correlation with the stages of the *prayogamārga* (Path of Preparation), *darśanamārga* (Path of Direct Seeing), *bhāvanāmārga* (Path of Meditation), and *āśaikṣamārga* (Path of No-more Learning). The ultimate attainment at the *āśaikṣamārga* is designated as the “complete transformation of basis” (*niṣṭhāraśrayaparāvṛtti*). This transformative state marks the culmination of the path — the actualization of Buddhahood or perfect enlightenment. At this terminal point of “complete transformation of basis,” even the dichotomous discrimination of *dharma* and *dharmatā* or *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* evaporates, thereby transcending the very constructs of relinquishment and attainment. The end result is an effortless, organic realization of the inherent, primordial wisdom embodied in the *tathāgatagarbha*.

A noteworthy point is that the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* and its auto-commentary were not accessible in Chinese translation until the advent of the 20th century. The presence of this identical fourfold system within the *SPE* raises intriguing questions. Why, for instance, would this system be included in the text? Moreover, how could the alleged forgers contrive a system so closely mirroring that found in the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* and the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, centuries before these texts were translated into Chinese? Yael Bentor has proposed that the fourfold meditation was likely informed by the renowned verse in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* X. 256-257 (Bentor, 2002: 44-45):

Having relied on mind-only, one would not conceptualize external objects.

Abiding in the support of thusness, one transcends even mind-only.

Having transcended mind-only, one transcends the non-appearances.

The yogi established in non-appearances beholds the Mahāyāna.

Although the *Laṅkāvatāra* was translated into Chinese on four separate occasions, it was only in the fourth iteration, translated by Śikṣānanda in 702 CE, that the *Sagāthakam* chapter (chapter 10) is included. With respect to this, it is important to consider that Fuli participated in Śikṣānanda’s rendition of

the *Laṅkāvatāra*. Furthermore, according to the hypothesis posited by Yang Weizhong, Fuli also contributed significantly to the translation of the *SPE*. Given these circumstances, it is plausible that the concept of the fourfold meditation was integrated into the *SPE* by Fuli, drawing from Śikṣānanda's *Laṅkāvatāra*. The latter stands as the only Buddhist text, accessible in Chinese translation, that references the fourfold system before the *SPE* was crafted. It is worth noting that another significant text, Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama I*, which also discusses this fourfold system, was not translated into Chinese until the early 11th century under the efforts of Dānapala.

Significantly, this fourfold meditation system bears no correlation to the other constituents of the *SPE*, displaying no linkage with the extensive discourse on the “twenty-five means of meditation practice,” which centers on the practices of *śamatha*, *dhyāna*, and *samāpatti*. This disparity suggests a likelihood that the *SPE* may be of multiple authorship. It appears to incorporate elements sourced from Indian Mahāyāna and an amalgamation of reinterpreted elements by Chinese practitioners. This blend of influences contributes to the unique complexity and richness of the text.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the proposition that the *SPE* was a fabrication by Zongmi in the ninth century—as suggested by Hu Shih—is contradicted by the fact that this scripture was acknowledged in Zhisheng's *Kaiyuan shijiao lu*, compiled in 730 CE. Conversely, if we were to subscribe to Benn's hypothesis that the *SPE* was devised as précis of the *Śūraṅgama*, it stands to reason that it could not have been in circulation significantly prior to 705, the purported year of the *Śūraṅgama*'s translation. However, if we were to liberate ourselves from the notion that the *SPE*'s sole purpose was to summarise the *Śūraṅgama*, its origins could date back further as proposed by Zongmi. Nonetheless, it remains irrefutable that both the *SPE* and the *Śūraṅgama* share an intimate correlation in their teachings as well as their utilization of specific terminologies. Certain characteristics of both the *SPE* and the *Śūraṅgama* are indisputably of Chinese origin, prompting contemporary academics to categorize them as “Chinese apocryphal texts.” This article strives to shed light on the intricate processes potentially underpinning the genesis of these so-called “apocryphal texts,” processes which may transcend the conventional scholarly presuppositions. It particularly challenges the prevalent notion that such texts are the product of single authorship, thereby broadening our understanding of their nuanced development.



The origins of some of these “apocryphal texts” may not fall neatly into a dichotomous division between Indian or Chinese. Given the long history of Indian monks journeying to China, as chronicled in historical records, it is plausible that some of them conveyed oral teachings that ultimately found form in these “apocryphal texts.” Consequently, these texts may be an amalgamation of Indian and Chinese influences, compiled in a manner that catered to the spiritual and cultural requirements of the populace, incorporating concepts that transcended purely Chinese thought. This process mirrors the “open canon” ethos of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. By re-examining the *SPE* through such a lens, a rejuvenating methodology may emerge, providing novel insights into the teachings it encapsulates.

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