



Chen Dynasty Monk Huisi of the Great Southern Peak Hengshan 陳南岳衡山釋慧思

Text Information

Author | Sengxiang

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Period | 8th Century

Genre |

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Collection |

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Transcription, translation and introduction by Julian Butterfield.

Introduction to the Text

Nanyue Huisi 南岳慧思 was an eminent Buddhist monk who lived in Southern China between 515 and 577CE. Traditionally regarded as the third patriarch of the Tiantai 天台 school of Chinese Buddhism, Huisi was the teacher of Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顗 (538-597CE), the brilliant scholar-monk responsible for distilling the core doctrinal and practical program of this influential Chinese Buddhist sect. Underlying his relationship with Zhiyi, Huisi's reputation as a key progenitor of Tiantai Buddhism is rooted in his rigorous, innovative teaching of what soon became the central scripture of Zhiyi's Tiantai tradition—the Mahāyāna Buddhist text known as the **Lotus Sūtra**.

In 756 CE, later Tiantai patriarch Zhanran 湛然 (711-782CE) included a condensed account of the Tiantai school's foundation and early history in his major commentarial work, *A Resolution to Assist and Promote the Practice of 'Concentration and Insight'*, especially emphasizing the authoritativeness of the institution's relationship to the *Lotus Sūtra*. The brief but vivid biography of Huisi embedded in this text recounts how—consistent with a promise made to devotees in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s final chapter and the closely related *Scripture on the Method for Visualizing the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*—this bodhisattva appeared to Huisi and imbued him with extraordinary powers of interpretation and meditative absorption.

Shortly after its completion, a monk named Sengxiang 僧祥 (dates unknown) gently redacted Zhanran's biography of Huisi and compiled it alongside a number of similarly wondrous tales in an anthology he titled **Records of the Transmission of the Lotus Sūtra**. This condensed, anthologized, likely more popular version is the text I have translated. Somewhat divorced from the elite, institution-building context of Zhanran's work, Huisi's hagiography takes on interestingly different flavours in Sengxiang's setting: aimed less at forwarding any sectarian, historiographic agenda, here the tale acts more as a general promotion of the numinous power of the **Lotus Sūtra**, particularly in its tendency to 'come true' through wondrous, miraculous events in the lives of its devotees. It aims to stir its audience's feelings with affectively charged language and abrupt supernatural interventions, which were likely played up to dramatic effect in oral retellings amongst both lay and monastic listeners.

Beyond its implicit historical data, explicit biographical data, immediately engaging storytelling style, and tacit promotion of Lotus-centered devotion, however, the tale implies important Buddhist notions of sacred textuality: for instance, it suggests that understanding the notoriously challenging, sacred language of the *Lotus Sūtra* lies well beyond ordinary semiosis, in both its process and its consequences. Moreover, the salvific process of scriptural interpretation is played out through (and upon) the interpreter's material body, which ultimately expresses their readerly and spiritual achievement in the purification of their sense-faculties and certain other, markedly fleshy transformations.

Introduction to the Source

As mentioned, Sengxiang's **Records of the Transmission of the Lotus Sūtra** redacts and compiles numerous tales, many of them drawn from Tiantai school texts, in a chronology of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s transmission from the cosmic Buddha-realms of its original teaching, through India, and into China throughout the 3rd to 8th centuries CE. The compilation is structured almost identically to the earlier *Records of the Transmission of the Flower Garland Scripture* by the third patriarch of the Huayan 華嚴 school, Fazang 法藏 (643-712CE). According to Tiantai perspective, the central scripture of the Huayan school, the *Flower Garland Scripture*, was taught immediately after the Buddha's enlightenment, whereas the *Lotus Sūtra*



was preached in the final years of his life and is accordingly the more perfect and profound. Following this doxography, Sengxiang's *Records* sits in competition with Fazang's compilation, even as it duplicates its central structure.

Mimicking Fazang's text, the *Records of the Transmission of the Lotus Sūtra* is arranged into 12 chapters, spanning 10 rolls or fascicles in total. Beginning with a focus on the scriptural classification and superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it moves on to chapters recounting the scripture's journey to China, its translation from Sanskrit, and its interpretation, before moving on to chapters illustrating the miraculous potentials of preaching, copying, reciting, and hearing the scripture. The biography of Huisi translated here is redacted from Zhanran's original text and inserted in chapter 8 (fascicle 3), which focuses on the spiritual and worldly benefits of reciting the *Lotus Sūtra*. Like many of its neighbours in the compilation, the tale exemplifies in lively fashion the Chinese concept of *ganying* 感應 or "numinous response" to pious action.

At the end of the final fascicle, there is a brief colophon by Monk Yuanzhi 圓智, who praises Sengxiang's project and identifies himself as the editor and scribe of the transmitted edition.

The text translated here is sourced from the *Taishō* edition of the Chinese Buddhist Canon or Tripitaka, produced by scholars in the 1920s and early 30s in Japan, and currently available in a digital edition through CBETA. It is filed (along with Fazang's *Records of the Transmission of the Flower Garland Scripture*) in volume 51 of the *Taishō* canon, which collects medieval Chinese histories of Buddhism. The *Taishō* critical edition of Sengxiang's *Records* is based on an edition in the collection of Ōtani University, Kyōto, and collated with a manuscript edition in the collection of Tōdaiji temple, Nara, whose variant characters it records.

About this Edition

Sengxiang's prose moves briskly and somewhat disjointedly, through a chain of increasingly dramatic scenarios, with a relatedly rapid succession of images and other affective cues. The text's emphasis on corporeality and affect establishes Huisi's body as its primary arena, and elicits from the reader and immediate, sympathetic response. Indeed, its cues (hunger, intense joy, fear, anguish, illness) call us into an awareness of our own bodies and provoke by turns our curiosity, disgust, and relief. Unlike the elevated, long-winded, ethereal characteristics of many Buddhist scriptures, the concision, rhythm, and vividness of Sengxiang's account of the progressive degradation of Huisi's body provides a ground against which Samantabhadra's miraculous appearance and the Buddhist terminology of the text's conclusion sits in true, astonishing contrast, and reinforces a readerly experience of wonder. I have tried to retain all these characteristics in my English-language translation.

Further Reading

Campany, Robert Ford. "Miracle Tales as Scripture Reception: A Case Study Involving the Lotus Sutra in China, 370-750CE" in *Early Medieval China* 24 (2018), 24-52.

- Overview of the reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* in medieval Chinese society with specific reference to miracle tales. Campany argues that most people saw such scriptures not just as "doctrine delivery devices" but as sources of devotion that oriented and gave life to lay and monastic Buddhist practices.

Dykstra, Yoshiko K. *Miraculous Tales of the Lotus Sutra from Ancient Japan: The Dainihonkoku Hokekyōkenki of Priest Chingen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983.

- Annotated translation of a similar compilation to Sengxiang's *Records* from medieval Japan. In her introduction, Dykstra emphasizes that such tales were likely delivered orally to lay audiences as a means of provoking faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Stevenson, Daniel B. & Hiroshi Kanno. *The Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra's Course of Ease and Bliss: An Annotated Translation and Study of Nanyue Huisi's (515-577) Fahua jing anlexing yi*. Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, 2006.

- Annotated translation of Huisi's commentary on Chapter 14 of the *Lotus Sūtra* ("Chapter on the Course of Ease and Bliss" 安樂行品 *Anle xing pin*), which lay the explicit foundations for the Tiantai practice of the *Lotus Samādhi*. Stevenson and Kanno provide a detailed overview of Huisi's biography, practical and doctrinal innovations, and significance to the Tiantai school and Chinese Buddhism at large.



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法華傳記

from Records of the Transmission of the Lotus Sūtra

釋慧思。姓俗李氏。項城武津人也。兒時因夢梵僧勸令入佛道。又夢數僧訓以齋戒日惟一食。不受別供。時見朋類。誦法華經。情深樂重。先未曾誦。日從他借經。於空塚中。獨自看之。無人教授。日夜悲泣。塚是非人所居。恐畏非一。移託古城。鑿穴居止。晝則乞食。夜不眠寢。向經流淚。頂禮不休。其年夏多雨。雨穴濕蒸。舉身浮腫。行止不能。而忽心對經。心力彌壯。忽覺消滅平服如故。夢普賢乘六牙白象。來摩頂而去。法華一部。曾未識文。自然解了。所摩之處。自然隱起如肉髻。凡十年之中。誦法華聲不輟。復悟法華三昧大乘法門。境界明了位至六根淨。出傳中。

Monk Huisi, whose lay surname was Li, was a person from Xiangcheng, in Wujin county. As a child he dreamed that an Indian monk urged him to take up the Buddhist path. In another dream, many monks trained him in the ways of renouncing food and drink. He ate just once a day, refusing other offerings. One time, observing his companions reciting the Lotus Sūtra¹, he felt profound emotions and intense joy. Until then he had never recited it. On that day he borrowed the scripture from someone and, alone among abandoned grave mounds, he read it. With no-one to teach it to him, he wept day and night. These tombs were home to inhuman creatures. His share of fears was not small. He therefore moved to the old city wall and carved out a hollow space to live within. In the day he begged for food. At night he did not sleep. Facing the scripture, shedding tears, he prostrated without rest. In the summer of that year it rained heavily. Rainwater made his hollow wet and steamy. His entire body became so swollen with dropsy that he could no longer move. Yet he turned his mind urgently toward the scripture and his mental power filled him with strength. All of a sudden, his condition evaporated and his health was restored, as before. He dreamed that Samantabhadra², riding a six-tusked white elephant, came to him, rubbed his head, and then left. Every part of the Lotus Sūtra whose words he once could not comprehend, he now freely understood. The place where Samantabhadra had touched him freely rose up, like a flesh topknot. For ten whole years he recited the Lotus Sūtra, the sound of his voice unceasing. Consequently, he realized the Lotus Samādhi, Gateway to the Dharma of the Great Vehicle³: the level of clear understanding, the stage which completely purifies the six sense faculties.

Taken from the records.

Critical Notes

- 1 Literally 法華 *fahua* or "Dharma Flower." Throughout his text, Sengxiang uses this common Chinese epithet for the Lotus Sūtra, whose full title in Chinese is 妙法蓮華經 *Miaofa lianhua jing* or *Scripture of the Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* (T 9 no. 26).
- 2 Samantabhadra (Ch. 普賢 *Puxian* or "Universal Worthy") is the bodhisattva of wisdom and a frequent presence in Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures. His imagery here is consistent with the final chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, "Encouragements of Samantabhadra" (普賢菩薩勸發品 *Puxian pusa quanfa pin*) in which he promises to appear to and assist the scripture's devotees, and this chapter's practical elaboration in the Scripture on the Method for Visualizing the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (佛說觀普賢菩薩行法經 *Fo shuo guan puxian pusa xingfa jing*, T 9 no. 277).
- 3 Huisi is traditionally remembered as the progenitor of the so-called Lotus Samādhi, a program of meditation based on the teaching of the Lotus Sūtra, which through the systemization efforts of his student Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顗 would become a central practice of the Tiantai 天台 school of Buddhism. Although the Lotus Samādhi has two possible modalities—one 'formless' and one based on extensive repentance and the visualization of Samantabhadra—the author of this text seems to emphasize the latter. This practice is privileged here as the entry point to the entire teaching of the 'Great Vehicle'—Mahāyāna Buddhism.