A Study of the Meditation Methods in the DESM and Other Early Chinese Texts

Ven. Dr. Yuanci
The Buddhist Academy of China

Introduction:

The Discourse on the Essential Secrets of Meditation (abbr.: DESM) 禪秘要法經 (T15, No. 603) is an oldest and interesting text dealing with various methods of meditation of the ancient Buddhist tradition. It is probably the earliest Indian text on the subject translated into Chinese, and as such important for the understanding of the development of dhyāna practices in Chinese Buddhism. It is our belief that the DESM has actually influenced the Tien Tai and early Chan School of China.

The value of this text lies in the fact that many of the meditation techniques and guidelines have hitherto never been exposed to the modern reader, and was composed long before these well-known texts such as the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga, the information concerns early meditation methods. Here, we try to make a study on them to find out what the different are the Buddhist traditions in practicing meditations.

The Discourse on the Essential Secrets of Meditation (=DESM, T15 No. 613) is a valuable work of the early Yogācāras. It was composed by certain Indian or Central Asian master(s) around the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. Its translation from Sanskrit into Chinese, influenced the development of the theory and practice of the existing traditions of Chinese Buddhist meditation, A slightly later dhyāna sūtra entitled The Dhyāna-samādhi Sūtra which presupposes our text, developed a dhyāna system which greatly influenced two Chinese Buddhist schools, Tien Tai and Chan.

It appears that this work belongs to the Dārśāntikas who were combined being popular preachers and meditators. The Dārśāntika is historically a very important school. So far, there is very little concerning this school or movement known to us. Only a few modern scholars (mostly Japanese) have discussed its history and doctrines. We therefore believe that it is worth making an in-depth study of the DESM, preserved now only in Chinese from the source.

1. The subjects of meditation in the DESM

This work is primarily a discourse on various meditation methods and the types of experiences that the meditators may expect during meditation. Along with the instructions, there is also other practical advice for meditators, such as the choice of congenial environment and ways of restoring vitality if in the course of meditation training one is weakened.

There are altogether thirty specific methods of meditation mentioned and detailed one by one. For each more than one names is given, Of these thirty, the fourteenth is repeated three times, and the twenty-eighth appears to be missing. Apart from these thirty methods, there are also a few others such as the “Four Apramāna”, mentioned only by name. These meditation or contemplation methods fall into three major divisions.

The first division consists of eighteen meditation subjects (from No. 1 to No. 18) [T15. P.242c-255a]. These are suitable for those who are intelligent and knowledgeable, but careless

---

1. The catalogues speak of “the sages of the West” - “the West” while usually implying “India” in the mind of the ancient Chinese Buddhists, may also include Central Asia.
(pramāda), arrogant (mada), and overwhelmed by sensual desire. Such persons have to learn and practice various aspects of the contemplation on the impurities of the body, on the dead person, on the nine stages of decay of a corpse, and on the white skeleton or bones. The eleventh object is to contemplate on the impurities. The twelfth to the seventeenth are further practices (with additional details) of contemplation on the impurities. These are explained in connection with meditation on the Four Great Elements, mindfulness of the body and soullessness (nairatmya). The eighteenth object further develops from the previous contemplations on the impurities. Also mentioned briefly is the contemplation on the Buddha and the fruit this practice brings.

The second division deals with only two meditation objects (No. 19 & No.20)[T15. P.255a-258b]. These are meant for those whose mind is distracted, (viksipta, asamāhitam), or those who have transgressed against the precepts (adhyācāra), or possess unwholesome karma. The nineteenth contemplation on the Buddha or Buddha-anusmṛti is regarded as the way of overcoming the unwholesome and can lead to mental calm and bliss. This practice is to concentrate on the Buddha’s thirty-two characteristics (laksanas), on his four respect-inspiring forms of demeanor in walking, standing, sitting and lying (四威儀), on the Buddha preaching the dharma, and on the Buddha making the consecration (abhisekara). The Twentieth contemplation is that of counting the breath. This makes up a deficiency in the nineteenth contemplation. This counting of the breath is based upon the contemplation on the impurities; thus, it is the medicine for curing the diseases of lust and the distracted mind. Both these contemplations are said to be able to yield the fruit of arhatship.

The third division deals with nine meditation objects (No.21 to No.30) [T15. P.259c-263a]. These are said to be for those who are not intelligent, or who are arrogant and conceited, or who are heedless, or who have a distracted mind. The contemplation on the white bones discussed earlier is further developed [to a higher level of practice] with the help of the contemplation on the Four Great Elements. From No.21 to No.25, the white skeleton is the main object for the practitioner to contemplate. Within this context also discussed is the contemplation on each of the Four Great Elements. The meditation experiences of ūsma-gata and Mūrdha, two stages of progress in meditation, are also explained. The 21st contemplation is named ūsma-gata-dharma. The 26th contemplation onwards includes the contemplations on the Four Great Elements explained according to the contemplation on the white bones; and then the steps and the procedure of the Four Stages as sroṭāpanna, sakṛdāgāmi, anāgāmin, arhat, and the Four Fruitions (catur-phala), are explained accordingly.

**Other subjects discussed in the DESM**

The final portion of the work begins with the last of the four occurrences of the phrase “Thus have I heard...”. In this part, the following problem is discussed: In some cases, a practitioner, through the practice of various dhutanga and dhyānas, may attain anāgamiship. But he may be stuck and incapable of progressing towards the final goal of arahatship. The Buddha in discussing this problem, explains that such practitioners should practice the following meditations: The contemplation on loving-kindness (maitri) and compassion (karuna), on the Buddha’s dharmakāya, on the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (Pratityasamutpāda), on counting the breath, on the Four Great Elements, on emptiness (śūnyatāsamādhi), on the absence of characteristics (ānimittasamādhi), and on the absence of intention (apranihita-samādhi).

In its concluding part, several alternative titles of the text are enumerated. Also emphasized are the four practices which conduce to the four fruits. These are: (i) non-transgression of precepts, (ii) dwelling in quietude, and practicing dhutangas, (iii) doing such
labor as cleaning the stūpa, etc., by way of repentance of wrong-doing, (iv) constantly sitting in meditation.

The text points out that there are people who pretend to be meditators for the sake of gain. In reality they are heedless and dishonest within. Such people and their activities are strongly condemned. Those who are honest and pure meditators, are advised to keep their meditation practice and experiences secret, not letting others know. The text here also praises highly the merits gained by practicing the contemplation on impurities and on other methods of meditation.

Finally, the text mentions that, the Buddha had long passed away, and the faculties (indriyas) of living beings are now weaker than during his lifetime. Therefore, the number of practitioners who could achieve emancipation by practicing contemplation on impermanence, has progressively decreased. The period of this progressive decrease is given as from the first hundred years up to 1500 years after the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa.

2. The structure of the DESM

The DESM comprises four parts. Each begins with “Thus have I heard”. This beginning phrase might indicate that the work was actually made up of four separate discourses united as one. These four parts are not just joined together there is a coherent continuity running from the first part to the fourth. The first part, beginning with “Thus have I heard”, deals with meditation objects from 1 to 18; the second part deals with objects 19 and 20; the third part deals with objects 21 to 30. In the last part, after all the 30 meditations are detailed, follows a discussion on other objects relevant in the meditator’s life and the problems encountered in his progress towards arhatship (e. g. how to deal with the problem of being stuck in anāgāmīship).

The first part (T15, P.242c-255a) is a teaching given to a bhiksu named Mahakakilananda in Rajagrha at Karandavenuvana. He was intelligent, knowledgeable, but conceited, and heedless (pramada). As such, he was unable to achieve any margasya-phalam (道果). The Buddha explained his previous life and also taught him the way of fixing the mind for emancipation. Then, the Buddha taught Ananda how, in future, practitioners could correct their heedlessness, arrogance, and wrong way of life. For this, the Buddha taught 18 kinds of contemplation on the impurities. Here, it says that by correcting the wrong way of life, and following the contemplation on the impurities, one can be reborn in the Tusita Heaven to meet Maitreya, and attain arhatship.

The second part of the text (T15, p. 255a-258b) is a teaching given to a bhiksu called Dhyānanandi on how to attain the arhatship. It was a discourse in Śravasti at Jetavana-anathapindasyavana. Here, a bhiksu called Dhyānaanandi who had already gained arhatship asked the Buddha as to how in future those who have accrued much unwholesome karma, can overcome this and purify themselves for the attainment of arhatship. For this, the Buddha taught Dhyānanandi and Ananda to give such people the contemplation on the Buddha (Buddha-anusmṛti) or on consecration (abhisekara), or on the Buddha’s image (which is given in detail). Here, the Buddha taught that through the contemplation on the Buddha, the bhiksu would be able to eradicate the defilements of craving and attachment. The contemplation on counting the breath and on the impurities are also taught. When the Buddha finished this discoursing Dhyānanandi and others who were listening, were greatly pleased. This second part of the text covers the 19th and 20th contemplation.

The third part of the text (T15, p258b-263a) is a teaching given in a village called Tala in Sravasti. There, the Buddha taught a pupil of Kātyāyana called Panthaka who was dull-witted
(mrdu), heedless (pramāda), unable to understand even a verse for years. The Buddha told him his previous life. He then taught him the contemplation on the white human bones and the contemplation of āsma-gata in order that he could attain arhatship. The Buddha went on to instruct Kātyāyana and Ananda to teach the contemplation on the impurities, on āsma-gata, on mūrdha, and on the Fire Element, for the sake of those who are dull-witted, ignorant and conceited, for the attainment of śrotāpatti-marga. The Buddha went on to discourse on the attainment of sakṛdāgami-marga through the contemplation on the Water Element, and the attainment of anāgāmi-ship through the contemplation on the Wind Element. The Buddha further spoke on the contemplation on the Fire Element for the attainment of arhatship. Thus, the Buddha taught in this third part, the contemplations from the 21st to the 30th.

The fourth part of the text (T15, p. 263a-269c) is, as in the case of the second part, given in Śrāvasti at Jetavana-anathapindasyavana. A pupil of Mahākāśyapa called Agnidatta who had gained anāgāmi-ship was unable to attain arhatship despite five years of practicing austerity. The Buddha explained that in the past life of Agnidatta he the Buddha had become a humble and patient prince. He then taught him the contemplation on maitri. Agnidatta immediately attained arhatship. The Buddha for the sake of beings in future discoursed on how to progress from anāgāmi-ship towards arhatship. The methods he taught are: the contemplation on the Buddhas (Buddhanusmṛti-samādhi), on compassion (maitri), on the aspects of Dependent Origination (pratitya-samutpāda), on counting the breath (ānāpānasamādhi), on the Four Great Elements, and on emptiness (sūnyatā-samādhi). Finally, the Buddha told Ananda that successful meditators would be born in the Tusita Heaven, where they could meet Maitreya, and gain emancipation, as in the teaching in the first Part of this text.

From the above description, one can see the unified structure of four parts organized into a single text. In all thirty different meditation subjects are given as the methods for attaining the arhatship.

There is a hint in the text as regards the order of meditation subjects. The Buddha says: “If you want to become a meditator, first of all, you should practice the contemplation that Kakilananda followed. Then practice Dhyānanandi’s contemplation, and [then] Panthaka’s contemplation” (see the 21st contemplation, T15, p.259b).” This same hint on order again recurs elsewhere from the mouth of Ananda: “The Tathāgata first discoursed on the contemplation on impurities for Kakilananda. Then he taught the contemplation on counting breath to bhiksu Dhyānanandi. Then he taught the contemplation on the Four Elements to bhiksu Agnidatta. These various subtle teachings [of meditation] were taught by the Buddha. How should we hold them in mind? Under what titles should they be proclaimed in the future? He taught that this text should be called ‘The Discourse on the Essential Secrets of Meditation, or The Ways of the Contemplation on the White Human Bones, or ‘The Gradual Way of the Nine stages of Contemplation on a Corpse. or ‘The methods of the Contemplation on Wandering Thoughts, or ‘Ānāpāna Contemplation, or ‘The Gradual Way of Contemplation Leading to the Attainment of the Four Fruits (catul-phala), or also ‘The Distinguishing of the Meditation Experience.’”

In this latter quotation can be seen, various alternative titles for the text. We could perhaps also look at the schematic structure of the whole text as follows: By starting each part with “Thus have I heard”, its editor intended to emphasize that the various meditation objects were transmitted by the Buddha himself (i.e. based on the sūtras and vinaya texts) under different circumstances, and to people of different types and needs.

We could even say that this text is made of different discussions taken as a kind of notes
from the four Āgamas and elaborated with relevant material from the Dārstantika meditational tradition. All the four parts of this text are about sitting meditation. The author of the text united the four parts into one continuous text. Accordingly, we have the DESM in three fascicles. It is quite probable that the first three discourses constitute the original compilation, because the 30 kinds of meditation objects were put forth in these three parts systematically. The fourth discourse was added to the main text later on to yield the present form of the DESM. This seems to be the case at the time of the last revision of the work. For further discussion on its original structure and subsequent reorganization, see the section below on “The history of translation of the DESM”.

3. The history of the translation of the DESM

Our findings concerning the history of the compilation and translation of the DESM as follows:

(1) The DESM was composed by certain Indian or Central Asian master(s) around the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. The period of its compilation can be inferred from the fact the first Chinese translation was made by Zhi Qian in the early part of the 3rd century A.D., A.D. and the second and third translation were made before 441 A. D.

(2) In the ‘Old Translation’ period (prior to the ‘New translation’ standards laid by Xuan Zang), the EDSM was highly respected, and regarded as an important meditation manual. It was translated three times within a period of two hundred years (A.D. 223-424). This also suggests that a group of Chinese people, both before and after Kumarajiva, were greatly interested in practicing meditation. We may say that we can judge the knowledge of the Chinese Buddhists on meditation; in that period of Chinese Buddhism, by the meditation methods prescribed in the DESM which contained the greatest number of meditation methods to date.

(3) The original of the DESM seems to be in Sanskrit. As such, it was more probably by an Indian rather than a Central Asian, since most of early Buddhist texts from Central Asia were in Prakrit or hybrid Sanskrit. With regard to its content, it should reflect some of the major trends of thoughts in Indian Buddhism around the 2nd or 3rd century. This reflection may be seen in the frequent discussion on emptiness (śūnyatā) - of the skandhas, and on pratitya-samutpāda. It was Nagarjuna of this period (around 3rd century A. D.) who rigorously developed the doctrine of śūnyatā on the basis of the Buddha’s teaching on pratitya-samutpāda. Subsequently, all Buddhist schools, in their doctrinal formulation, paid at least a lip service to the doctrine of śūnyatā. At the same time, the text also reflects - as it naturally should –the author’s own doctrinal attitude. This attitude is clearly seen to be one of being centred on the Buddha’s teaching in the early (non-Mahayana) sūtras. There is indeed nothing in the DESM - except possibly the stanza line apparently from the Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā - which is characteristically Mahayanic

4. Stūpas and the way of repenting evil deeds in the DESM

As the historical Buddha no longer exists, his stūpa has been conceived to represent him. According to Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, people’s hearts can be made peaceful by seeing or at the thought of four kinds of stūpas. After death they will go to a good destination and re-arise in a heavenly world. The following is a quotation from the sutta.

4 The catalogues speak of “the sages of the West” - “the West” while usually implying “India” in the mind of the ancient Chinese Buddhists, may also include Central Asia.

5 However, this stanza line, even if actually derived from the Vajracchedika, has nothing characteristically Mahayanic. Indeed, the content of the whole of the Vajracchedika can easily be seen to accord well with the standpoint of early Buddhism as found in the nikaya/agama.
There are four persons worthy of a stūpa. Tathagata, Arhat, perfectly enlightened One is one, a Pacceka Buddha is one, a disciple of the Tathagata is one, and a wheel-turning monarch is one. And why is each of these worthy of a stūpa? Because, at the thought: “This is the stūpa of the Tathagata, of a Pacceka Buddha, of a disciple of the Tathagata, of a wheel-turning monarch,” people’s hearts are made peaceful, and then, at the breaking-up of the body after death they go to a good destiny and rearise in a heavenly world. That is the reason, and those are the four who are worthy of a stūpa.6

Stūpas were built over the relics of the Buddha and by the time of Asoka had become the predominant way of paying homage to the departed Master. Worshipping a stūpa, eventually as qualified faith, produces the thought of enlightenment. One who pays homage to a stūpa is said to become ever-fortunate, alert and set on the path of virtue leading to enlightenment.7 This act of deep reverence would be accompanied by offerings of flowers, incense and perfume.8 By fixing network coverings to stūpas he becomes able to escape the net of Māra and gain the supreme status of the Buddha.9 Bodhisattvas are also instructed to pay homage to stūpas in all possible manners, such as removing withered flowers from those places, and offering fresh flowers, incense, and perfumes, etc. Any act of service in the name of the Buddha would certainly help them acquire enlightenment.

In brief, in the Mtu, the ritual obeisance and ceremonious homage paid to the Buddha’s relics and stūpas are emphasized as a sure path leading to heavenly abodes.10 This counts to be another instance where the DESM harmonizes with the old Buddhist texts, which also stresses this type of worship as being conducive to the attainment of heaven.11 The Avalokita-sūtra (ii. 257. 6ff) presents a detailed exposition of the efficacy of the worshipping of stūpas.

Stūpas in the DESM are important to meditators and ascetics, especially after the Buddha’s nirvāṇa. Because, the premier condition for any one to practice meditation is pure, without committing any evil both past and present. Many people have committed offences, and want to purify themselves here and now attain emancipation According to the DESM, to clean stupas and smear their ground is an effective way to overcome the meditators’ unwholesome deed done in the past. After this, the meditators can develop their samādhi to a higher level. For example, ‘If the meditator, under the rays and lights, sees each of the meditational experiences and spheres as impure and unclear (vyamisralambanatve), he should rise up to clean the stūpas, and smear their ground… They should practice various kind of repentance and confessions’ [T15.p.255c]. ‘If they hid and covered their sins they could see the lights as the color of a rotten wood. On seeing this they should realize that they had offended the precepts [in the past]. Then, they should feel shame, confess and blame themselves, and make themselves clean stūpas and smear their ground and do various kind of labor… [T15.p.257b]

“The Sūtra on the Secret Importance of Curing the (Mental) Disease of Those Who Engage in Contemplation12 also shows the way of saving the person who has committed an offence. In this text it is said if the meditator in practicing contemplations saw the Buddha in a
black color, or as the foot of a black elephant, or like an ashy person, these are the signs of having committed offences. He should take off his sanghāti (assembly robe), put on his antarvasaka, go to the pure place (e.g. the place of stūpa), or go to the wise. He should place his knees, elbows, and head on the ground, and confess his evil deeds with honest mind. He should carry out the duties of the sangha, do various kind of labor, and clean the toilets for 800 days. Then he should bathe his body, put on his sanghāti, and enter the stūpa, with one-pointedness of mind. Crossing his hands together he should contemplate on the lights emitting from the urnā of the Buddha… The wise should advise him to clean the stūpas, smear the grounds, contemplate on the Buddha or the seven past Buddhas. When the practitioner sees the Buddha’s golden body and lights he is suitable to be taught to contemplate on impurities.

The *Buddhadhyāna-samādhisagara-sūtra* says that the contemplation on the Buddha-samādhi is the way to reduce or alleviate serious transgressions. Therefore, the contemplation on the Buddha’s thirty-two characteristics or the Buddha’s image is regarded as the medicine for offenders, as a shelter for those who had broken the precepts, as a guide to those who have lost their way, as a lamp for those who are in the dark.

From this, we see not only the Gospel, but also the significance of the *Stūpas* and the Buddha’s image in the practice of meditation in the later Buddhism.

Early Buddhism taught various precepts based upon different human relationships, e.g. between parents and children, husband and wife, teacher and pupil, employer and employee, friend and comrade, religious preceptor and devotee, and so on. Those were finally systematized in the teaching for Sigal (*Sigalovada*), which has been regarded as the guiding principles for laity. Some of those aspects of teaching is given in the DESM in the form of offering to the needs of the teachers and parents in order to overcome the meditator’s past evil deeds. It says that the meditator should make offerings to his teachers, elders and parents, regarding them as the Buddha and have great respect for them. Infront of them, he should make the great vow and will, and have this saying: ‘I now make those offerings to the teachers and parents. By these meritorious deeds, may I, throughout the ages and lives, obtain purification.’ Having perfectly done the above, the meditator is able to see that the lights are clear and lovable as before.

5. The connection of the DESM with other dhyāna sūtras in the early (non-Mahāyana) Yogācāra

Methods of meditation in the dhyāna texts

In the period of *Abhidharma* development of the northern traditions, there are the Dārstānatikas some of whom were subsequently known as the (non-Mahāyana) yogācāra masters. These ācāyas seemed to be virtuous preachers and meditators. A good number of the meditationālas or texts which are preserved in China seem to have originated from them. There are at least seven such texts recognized as belonging to this tradition. They are:

(No.1) The *Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra*\(^\text{15}\)

---

\(^{13}\) The soft white hair that grows between the Buddha’s eyebrows, is one of the Budha's thirty-two characteristics.

\(^{14}\) *Taishao*, vol. XV, p.645. 觀佛三昧海經 Guan-fu-san-mei-hai-jing was translated by Buddhabhadra, of the Eastern Tsin dynasty (A.D. 317-420), 10 fasciculi; 12 chapters. Deist in Tibetan.

\(^{15}\) The *Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra*, whose Sanskrit text has been lost, sets forth the stages of meditation for yonins. This is virtually an anthology of passages relevant to meditation composed by Samgharaks, a well-known Yoga master, 700 years after the Buddha’s nirvāṇa. The *Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra* (修行道地經) translated by Dharmaraksa into Chinese in A.D.284, first came into existence in the form of one volume of 7 chapter, grew into a sūtra of 27 chapters and then the 28th chapter (第子三品修行品) and other chapters were added, to assume the present form of 7 volumes of 30 chapters in the Chinese version. The
We carefully examined the above mentioned meditation texts, and compared the methods of meditation contained therein with the forty subjects of \textit{Kammatthana} in the \textit{Visudhimaga}. We noticed that it was comparable to the latter in that the \textit{DESM} is like an encyclopedia of the methods of meditation, which were existing in the Northern Tradition of Buddhism at the time of its compilation and translation. This is because the 30 methods of contemplation or meditation in \textit{DESM} not only cover all kinds of meditation from the time Buddhism was being brought into China until the date of the \textit{DESM} being translated into Chinese, but also provide the basis and inspiration for the later meditators and translators of meditation texts to do further and more articulate translated works on the subject. The extent to which our \textit{DESM} is connected with the above mentioned meditation texts may be seen from the tabular comparison below:
Table A: The Methods of meditation contained in the above-mentioned meditation texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Number</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The Yogācārabhūmi -sūtra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The contemplation on the impermanence of the Five Aggregates and life;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Contemplation on impurities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Contemplation on the maitri;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Contemplation on the twelve links of Pratityasamutpada;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Contemplation on counting the breath;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Contemplation on the white bones;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Contemplation on the Buddhas (Buddha-samadhi);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Meditation for the ordinary worldlings;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Meditation for the Buddha’s sravaka;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Meditation for the bodhisattvas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The DESM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 methods of meditation (as given in this work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The dhyāna-Samādhi-sūtra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fivefold meditation: 1. Contemplation on impurities (asubha);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Contemplation on the maitri;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Contemplation on the twelve links of Pratityasamutpada;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Contemplation on counting the breath;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Contemplation on the Buddha.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>An Epitome of Meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ten kinds of meditation: 1. The contemplation on the four immeasurable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>minds; 2. The Contemplation on the impurities (asubha);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. The Contemplation on the white skeleton;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. The samadhi of Recollection of Buddha’s thirty-two characteristics;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. The contemplation on the physical body of the Buddha (rūpakāya);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. The contemplation on the Dharma-kaya of the Buddha;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. The contemplation on the Buddhas in the ten directions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. The contemplation on the Buddha of ‘immeasurable life;’ (Amitayu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Buddha); 9. The contemplation on the real nature of dharmas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. The method of meditation towards the trance of the Lotus of Good Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(sad-dharma-pundrikā). [the contemplation on the causes and conditions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and the contemplation on in and out-breathing are mentioned also].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Dharmatara - dhyāna-sūtra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seven kinds of meditation: 1. Contemplation on counting the breath;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Contemplation on impurities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Contemplation on the Dhātus;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Contemplation on the four immeasurable minds (catvary-apramana-cittani);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Contemplation on the five skandhas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Contemplation on the six Ayatanas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Contemplation on the twelve parts of dependent origination (Pratityasamutpada). (Translated by Buddhabhadra around 423 AD.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Buddha Dhyāna-samādhi Sagara-sūtra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Contemplation on the Buddha’s [thirty-one] characteristics. 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contemplation on the Buddha’s mind;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Contemplation on the four immeasurable minds;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Contemplation on the Buddha’s four respect-inspiring demeanour in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>walking standing, sitting, lying;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Contemplation on the Buddha’s private parts in a sheath as that of a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thoroughbred horse; 6. Contemplation on the Buddha’s image;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Contemplation on the seven Buddhas; 8. Contemplation on the Buddha’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the ten directions; 9. Contemplation on the Buddha in a secret manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The Great Discourse by the Buddha on the Mindfulness of Ānāpānna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counting the breathing with mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(The sixteen stages of its development are given therein)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also:

Table B (in chronological order), Sūtra Number referred in the above table A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sūtra Number</th>
<th>Time of Being Translated</th>
<th>Translator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A. D. 148-170</td>
<td>An Shi-kao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A. D. 284</td>
<td>Dharmaraksha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A. D. 405</td>
<td>Kumarajiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A. D. 223-253/401-413</td>
<td>Zhi Qian/Kumarajiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A. D. 407</td>
<td>Kumarajiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A. D. 317-420</td>
<td>Buddhabhadra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A. D. 413</td>
<td>Buddhabhadra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24. See T15. p.693 ff; the seven Buddhas are 㤭波尸佛, 尸棄佛, 㤭舍佛陀, 拘留孫佛, 拘那含牟尼佛, 迦葉佛, 釋迦牟尼佛 (Vipasynī, Śīklin, Visvabhū, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kasyapīya, Sakyamuni-buddha).
25. This contemplation says that “one who has achieved the contemplation on the Buddhas and seen the Buddhas in this Samādhi, and found oneself in their presence, should make the body, speech and mind to be secret. He should not have an immoral life; he should not be proud. If one is pride, if he leads an immoral life, one is a destroyer of the Buddhadharm, and the person who causes the immoral mind to rise in many people. He is one who causes the unit of samgha to become a divide he shows the power to cheat others. He is the follower of the Evil One (Māra), See T15, p.695 ff. This kind of advice is appearing in the DESM too.
The above two tables show that the most important meditation texts were translated into Chinese between the second century A.D. and the beginning of the fifth century A.D. Dharmaraksha and Buddhabhadra were both great dhyanā masters amongst the translators. An-shikao, Zhi-Qian and Kumarajiva were famous translators in China. As regards the methods of meditation, we can see that there are common topics appearing in their translations. There are five major methods of meditation commonly introduced in them. These five kinds of meditation are (1) the contemplation on impurities, (2) the contemplation on the counting the breath, (3) the contemplation on loving kindness, (4) the contemplation on the twelve links of Dependent Origination, (5) the Contemplation on the Buddha’s thirty-two Characteristics.

In addition to these five, the Contemplation on the dhātu (elements) in the DESM is seen in the above mentioned sūtra: No. 1; No. 4; and No.5 only. The Contemplation on the white bones is seen in sūtra: No. 1; No. 2; and No. 4. The contemplation on the emptiness of all dharmas in the DESM is seen in sūtra: No. 4 only.

The eighth contemplation on a fresh corpse, the sixteenth contemplation on the Four Great Elements and restoring vitality, and the remaining contemplations in the DESM are not seen in the other early Chinese dhāyaṇa sūtras. The bodhisattva’s meditation in sūtra No. 1 and the contemplation on the Amitayu-buddha in sūtra No. 4 are not in the DESM.

The characteristics of the methods of meditation in the DESM

One of the characteristics of the text is that it describes in detail the meditation experiences of the person who practices these meditation subjects. In particular, it gives in detail the mental phenomena occurring in the practice of the contemplation on the impurities. Every so often, it requires the practitioner to contemplate on one subject of meditation first; then, to contemplate on the whole of the same subject (e.g. the white bones) still to be gradually all over the Trisāhasra Universe. This has the characteristic of contemplating the ten universal spheres (dasa-kasināyatana)\(^{26}\). From the state of impurity up to the state of purification this text describes the methods as the contemplation on the impurities and emptiness that are followed by such a practitioner.

Another characteristic of the text is that it gives the different kinds of meditation to the different categories and characters of persons. For instance, (1) to the person who has the conceited and heedless character, the contemplation on the impurities is given; (2) to the person who has the character of having much evil tendency and karmic hindrances (pāpa-karma and antaraya), the contemplation on the Buddha is given as the medicine for curing that kind of disease; (3) to the person who has the character of having much craving, desires, and distraction (viksipta cittaka), the contemplation on counting the breaths is taught; (4) to the person who has the character of being conceited (māna) and dullness, the contemplation on white bones is introduced; (5) For the attainment of arhathood, the contemplations on compassion (maitrī), on the Buddha’s supreme qualities, on the twelve links of Dependent Origination, on counting the breath, on the Four Great Elements, on emptiness, on the absence of non-action, on the absence of characteristics (animitta) and on the absence of intention (apranihita), are taught as essential.

From the beginning to the end of the text, the contemplation on the impurities stands out as the fundamental key. On this basis the other contemplations are taken up and progressively completed. The various kinds of meditations mentioned above for various characters are more systematically developed in subsequent works as the five meditations for settling the mind and

\(^{26}\) 十遍處觀 Dasa-kasināyatana has been discussed by Paravahera vajiraṇāna mahā thear in his Buddhist Meditation, p.139ff (Malaysia 1978).
getting rid of the five errors: desire, hatred, ignorance, self-attainment, and distraction. It is to be observed that the various types of meditation given as medicines for curing the spiritual diseases (of rāga, etc.) in our text, had provided inspiration for later meditation masters, both with respect to their own practice as well as to guiding their pupils.

It is noteworthy that the text does not employ such terms as mentioned specially in the Abhidharmika texts. This text deals with the meditation topics in a very simple manner. Such technical details as the number and categories-characteristically given in the Abhidharmic texts - of klesa upaklesas abandoned at the different stages of progress are not to be found in our text.

Only a couple of Abhidharma terms like āsma-gata and Mūrdha, are given. For these achievements, various methods of meditation are mentioned, such as basing on the contemplation on the impurities.

Neither does our text not contain such details as sixteen aspects (akara) of the Four truths etc. All these are in contrast to the expositions on meditations given in the Abhidharma texts, such as the Abhidharmakosā.

This may be the deliberate intention of the compiler: to base himself mainly on the agama texts, rather than following the abhidharmika tradition. When the author says, “detail as given in the Abhidharma” (T15, p.267c), it shows unmistakably that he is familiar with the Abhidharma expositions. Yet he seems to virtually ignore them altogether.

Finally, our text also does not give any terms that remind us of Mahayana Buddhism. The closest to this is the mere mention of the terms:” six pāramitas”, “the noble lineage (arya-vamsa) of the three vehicles” (this threefold vehicle is not necessarily Mahayanic.), and “suchness”.

The frequent mention of śūnyatā once again is not necessarily Mahayanic. Rather, it seems to indicate certain influence from the śūnyatā doctrine prevalent in the period of the author-3rd century-which is the time of Nagarjuna. That Nagarjuna is not necessarily a Mahāyanist has already been convincingly argued by some scholars.

Yet another important feature of the text is that it deals conspicuously with the practical (as opposed to theoretical) aspects of meditation. Among the practical advice, one finds such instructions as the methods for restoring vitality after the body is weakened in the process of practicing the contemplation.

6. The methods of meditation in the DESM compared with those in the nikāya/āgama texts and such works as the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga

6.1 The subjects of meditation in Pali texts

The following discussion is a survey of major kinds of meditation practices preserved in the Pali tradition.

In the Pali scriptures, we come across some detailed descriptions of the numerous methods of meditation. Among them is the mention of nine successive stages of meditation (nava-anupubha-vihara) which culminate in trance. These are in the old scriptures as well as in the later works such as the Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa. They are: the four rūpa-jhāna, the arūpa-jhāna, and the ninth “suppression of consciousness and sensation (sahānā-vedayita-nirodha).” The first four are so called as they are attained with the help of rūpa subject (i.e.

---

27. There is only one place where it says, rather casually, “details as given in the Abhidharma”.
29. See Vis.
30. See Vis. XXIII, also ‘Path to Deliverance,’ Nyanatiloka. Lake House Bookshop, Colombo.
subject with form) of meditation. They are known respectively as the first, the second, the third
and the fourth jhāna. The next four are so called on account of the fact that they are induced by
using arūpa subjects (formless subjects) of meditation. They are named respectively as
ākāsānañcāyatana, viññāna-ñcāyatana, ākīnañcāyatana, and neva-saññā-nāsaññayatana.31

Venerable Dr. Rahula remarks that the treatment of the dhyanas found in the Mahāyāna
and Sarvastivāda Abhidharma is on the whole closer to the original Pali Suttas than that found in
the Theravāda Abhidhamma, particularly in the later Abhidhamma texts.32 He has also pointed
out that the list of five rūpāvacara-jhāna is not found in the original Pali suttas, and is a later
development in the Abhidhamma.

In the DESM, we have only the mere mention of asta-samāpatti (eight- attainments or
emancipations) (八解脱) attained by every arhat, i.e. four rūpadhyānas and four ārūpadhyānas.
But it is not clear of the factors in each dhyanas, as no details are given.

Details of the following are not found in the DESM. How to enter step by step, into the
nine stages of trance; how he who wishes to practice meditation should proceed, what objects for
meditation he should choose according to his taste and capacity. They are found in subsequent
meditation texts translated into Chinese.

In the Vimuttimagga and the DESM, it is said: he who wishes to practice meditation,
should first of all search for a good spiritual friend and well-wisher (kalyana-mitra). This “friend
and well-wisher” will be his guide. Like a friend, like a relative, he will look after him (the
novice). He (the kalyana-mitra) must be well-versed in all the sections of the scriptures and also
must have an insight into the Four Noble Truths.33

Without such a “friend and well-wisher” the novice may go fatally wrong as an elephant
without its driver or a chariot without a charioteer. In the Pali scriptures, specially in the
Visuddhi-magga, there are long discussions about the places which are suitable and those which
are unsuitable for meditation.34

One should practice meditation in a solitary place where there is the least possible
distraction for the mind. In this treatise it is said: “Sounds cause disturbance in meditation, like
entering a jungle of thorns”.35

The Pali commentary of the Satipatthana-sutta36 similarly advises a bhikkhu meditator
conditioned by sensual attachment to seek a secluded place to have his mind concentrated and
freed from such sense objects. The same kind of advice as to the need for spiritual guides and
solitude is given in the DESM (see the monks’ life in the DESM).

There are forty subjects mentioned in the Visuddhi-magga, by means of which, one may
practice meditation. They are as follows: ten “devices” (kasinas), ten “impurities” (asubhas), ten
“recollections” (anussatti), four kinds of “immeasurable minds” or “divine states,” four
“formless states,” one “perception,” and one “specification”.

Many among these forty are also to be found in the DESM, though often with
considerable differences in detail.

31. For the eight absorptions as objects for the development of insight (vipassanā), See samatha- vipassanā.— Full details in Vis.
VIII-X.
33. 阿含道論, The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimagga), by the Arahant Upatissa, translated into Chinese by Tipitaka Sanghapala (in
A.D.50, of the Lain dynasty, A.D.502-557), translated from the Chinese into English by the Rev, N. R. M. Ebara, Soma Thera and
We may note that the XII, XIII, XIVb, XIVc, XV, XVI, XXIX contemplations in the DESM correspond to the first four devices in the Visudhimagga.

Contemplation on impurities:
In the DESM, the contemplation on impurities stands out as the fundamental contemplation to be achieved by a meditator as a necessary foundation (cf. supra. V). We give below a description (taken from Nānamoli’s translation of the work).

In order to have aversion to the body or the physical beauty, the contemplation on impurities is practiced. The sage Bali practiced contemplation by means of the dead body of a woman which was swollen and rotten. First, he observed it minutely and very carefully. Afterwards, he concentrated thoughts on its image. At the end (of this contemplation), he saw his own body just like that without any difference. He attained the first trance with the help of this carcass.

Buddaghosa in his visuddhi-magga, has discussed elaborately this contemplation on the carcass.

This is the general rule regarding this contemplation that one should not practise it with the help of a fresh carcass. One should practice it by means of a dead body of one’s own sex. This is rule applying to ordinary practitioner. But one who has extraordinary merit (as this sage Bali) may do even the contrary.

It is said: one should approach such a carcass very carefully, because it may be guarded by ferocious animals. One should inform the other mendicants of the monastery, before going for such a purpose. One should go there with a stick, and not go too near, nor should one remain too far from it. One should not stand to the lee side (wind blowing side) of the corpse. If one goes too near, one may be frightened at the very beginning and thus one’s contemplation may be disturbed. If one stands to lee-ward, the excessive bad smell may disturb one’s contemplation. If one stands too far away, one is unable to see each part of the carcass clearly. one should observe it minutely with care. When it is impressed in one’s mind, when one can see it even closing one’s eyes, one should leave it and go to a suitable place to concentrate one’s thoughts on its image.37

This kind of contemplation is also given in the DESM. The important difference, regarding the way of getting the mental visualization, is that the DESM teaches the practitioner to imagine a part of one’s own body festering then developed this visualization to one’s whole body, and the others, finally the beings in the whole cosmos.

Contemplation on the skeleton:
In the DESM, there is a long discussion on the contemplation on a skeleton. As mentioned before, the aim of this contemplation is to cultivate aversion to the attachment of physical beauty. It may be practiced even by means of a single piece of bone.

He who has practiced it well, can see whenever he wishes --- his own body or others’ body, as a body of bones, without flesh and skin. So, physical beauty can not tempt him.

In the Visuddhimagga it is said: a young and a beautiful woman, beautifully decorated, was running away from her husband. On the way she met the Elder Mahātissa. Wishing to tempt him, she laughed aloud. The Elder Mahātissa, being startled by the sound of her laughter looked at her. As soon as he saw her teeth, they immediately, brought to his mind, the image of a skeleton---a body of bones.

After a while, the monk met the husband of that woman who asked: “Sir, have you seen a

woman passing by this way? The Elder replied:

“Whether it was a man or woman
That went by I noticed not;
But only that on this high road
There goes a group of bones.”

This kind of contemplation find parallels in the IX, X, and XI contemplations of the DESM. But once again, in the case of DESM, it teaches the meditator to start from a part of his body; then develope the visualization to his whole body, then to others, and then to cover the whole cosmos.

6.2. The methods of meditation in the DESM compared with those in the *Vimuttimagga* (Vim.) and the *Visuddhimagga* (Vis.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seven groups</th>
<th>Names of the</th>
<th>Groups of</th>
<th>Names of the subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>of the forty</td>
<td>Subjects of</td>
<td>thirty methods of</td>
<td>meditation in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the four</td>
<td>meditation in the</td>
<td>of meditation in the</td>
<td>DESM: ↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meditation in the</td>
<td>Visuddhimagga:</td>
<td>Visuddhimagga:</td>
<td>DESM: ↓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Vim. & Vis.:**

(i) The objects

1. Earth, (2) Kasinas: → The XXVII, XXIX, XXX

Called **Kasina:** → Water, (3) Fire, XXX contemplations in

(4) Air, (5) Blue-green, (6) Yellow,
(7) Red, (8) Fire-device and Wind or
White, (9) Light,
(10) Space, Earth, Water, Fire,
(11) Consciousness

(ii) **Asubhas,** (11) A Swollen

or objects of Corpse, (12) A of impurity: ↓ (IX) Complete

impurity: → Disclored (I) The initial [skeletal] body,
Corps, (13) A meditational (X) Breaking
Festering Corpse, experience in the up of the skeleton into
(14) A Fissured contemplation on disjointed bones; (XI)
Corpse, (15) A impurities; (II) [White] light emitting
Mangled Corpse, White Bones; (III) from the white bones;
(16) A dismembered Impurities of (XII) Four Great
dismembered Festering; (IV) Elements or the
Corpse, (17) A Swollen [Body, meditational
Cut and Full of] Pus, experiences of ninety-
Dismembered Blood, or and eight fetters; (XIII)
Corpse, (18) A ITS Variation; The Roots of the
Bleeding Corpse, (V) Thin Outer Fetters, or the Four
(19) A Worm- Skin; (VI) Great Elements,
Infested Corpse, Accumulation of (XIVa) Variation in
(20) A Skeleton; Worms Under the contemplation,
Inner Thick Skin, (XVI) Contemplation
(VII) Extremely on the Four Great
Red or Muddy or Elements – restoring
Turbid Skeletons vitality; (XVIII) The
Washing Skins; impurities of the ten
→ categories of ōupa

(iii) Ten (21) (iiii) **Anussatis** or (XIX) The

**Anussatis** Contemplation on Contemplation: Contemplations:
the virtue of the of the Ten Titles of the Thirty-two
Buddha, (22) of

---

39 Regarding the list of kasiṇas in the *Vimuttimagga* and the *Visuddhimagga*, there is a difference, as the *Vimuttimagga* takes the consciousness as one of the ten kasiṇas and *Visuddhimagga* takes the lighg. *The Path of Freedom (Vimutti-magga)* by the Arahant Upatissa, translated into Chinese (解脱道論) by Tipitaka Sanghapala (in A.D.50, of the Lain dynasty, A.D.502-557), translated from the Chinese into English by the Rev. N. R. M. Ehara, Soma Thera and Kheminda Thera, first BPS edition 1977, reprinted 1995, p.63.

(iv) Four Friendliness, (31) The Great Excellent Compassion, (32) Friendliness and (iv) Four Qualities Qualities (iv) Excellent (33) Sympathetic joy Qualities (34) Equanimity The Great Friendliness and (Brahmaviharas) within the XXVI contemplation on the attainment of Srotapatti-marga (T15, p.260c-261a-b), and Fascicle Three of the text (T15, p.263a-264a, p.264c-265a), The term of the Four Brahmanihas (四梵行) is given in the Fascicle Three of the text too (T15, p.269)

(V) Four Formless The Sphere (v) Four Formless The four formless Spheres: → of Infinite Space, Sphere:→ of the Asta-vimoksa, (35) The Sphere of Infinite and the nine degrees Consciousness, of Samadhi which are (36) the Sphere of Infinite (37) the sphere of Nothingness, (38) mentioned within the The Sphere of XXX Contemplation Neither Perception (v) The Perception of the Loathsomeness of Nutriment:→ Perception of the Loathsomeness of Nutriment:→ Loathsomeness of (39) The Perception of the Loathsomeness of Nutriment:→ Loathsomeness of (40) The Analysis of (7) The Analysis (XIVc) The External
The Four Great Elements:

Elements:→ Four Elements.

or the Contemplation on the Sunyata through gradual understanding, (XV)

Internal Four Great Elements; and the last part of the XIVb contemplation on the Earth Element;

Contemplation on the Earth in text,

The above comparative table shows that the subjects of meditation in the Vimuddhimagga and the Visuddhimagga are mostly found in the DESM. However, some descriptions of the subjects in the DESM are not as clear as in both the Vimuddhimagga and the Visuddhimagga while others are just mentioned by name in the DESM without any details. For instance, the contemplation on counting the breath is shortly described thus: “[The practitioner] should fix the mind on the navel or the middle of the waist to follow or pursue the exhaled breath and inhaled breath in such manner: first counting second following, or second counting third following, or third counting fourth following, or fourth counting fifth following, or fifth counting sixth following, or sixth.

Counting seventh following, or seventh counting eighth following, or eighth counting ninth following, or ninth counting tenth following; when he comes to end of the tenth following [the process of respiration] he should in the same way repeatedly pursue the exhaled breath and inhaled breath up to ten times, then he should give up counting the breaths, but concentrate. The practitioners may use the odd or even to count the breathing out or in. They may count quickly [or slowly count], according to their will.” While the terms of its sixteen stages of development is just mentioned thus: “This contemplation on counting the breaths consists of sixteen bases or divisions.”

Both the Visuddhimagga and the DESM have the contemplation on the Buddha. But in the former, one is asked to recollect the Buddha’s virtues as given in the phrase: “Iti pi so Bhagavā, arhant, sammā-sambuddho…”

In the DESM, the practitioners contemplate in detail on the thirty-two Mahā-purusa-laksanas of the Buddha. The so-called eighty secondary marks are also mentioned though only in name.

According to the DESM, the method of contemplation on the Buddha is of two kinds. One is for those who are not intelligent and other is for those who are intelligent. Those who are not intelligent should begin it with the help of the contemplation on a skeleton.

They should see an inch of space on their forehead as without flesh and skin. They should see only the naked bone and fix their thoughts on that object. After they have seen this, they should see, by gradually increasing the size of the bone, their whole body as skeleton. They should see it as white as white-snow-jade. After that, they should see it in blue colour. At the end again they have to see it as white.

When they see that the white skeleton is sending forth absolutely white and bright light, they will see in it, the “Sakyamuni-buddha”. The intelligent persons at the very beginning should

contemplate the bright and transparent light. When seeing it, they see in it the former seven Buddhas.

The XV the XVII and the first part of the XVIII contemplation in the DESM deal with the subject of meditation on the body. The contemplation on body in the Visuddhimagga is the meditation upon the thirty-two parts of the body. These thirty-parts are arranged in six groups. It is also said in the Visuddhimagga that, the disciple who wishes to attain Arhatship through the practice of this Kammatthana should approach a good teacher for instruction. The teacher should give him instruction in the subject, explaining the sevenfold method of study and the tenfold method of practice.

In the DESM, the contemplation on the body is the meditation upon the thirty-six parts of the body (as opposed to thirty-two in both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga.) but not all these parts are clearly explained. There is also no classification as in the Vis regarding these thirty-six parts. The sevenfold method of study and the tenfold method of practice as given in the Visuddhimagga are also not to be found.

The meditation on the Four Great Elements is the last of the forty subjects of samatha meditation as they are set forth in both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga. The main object of this meditation is to free the mind from the conception of individuality in regard to the physical body, and to realize its elemental nature with no thought of personal distinction.

These Four Great Elements are called “mahādhātu” The Mahā-rahulovada Sutta gives an additional element, space which is described as twofold: personal and impersonal. “Personal space” refers to the cavitary organs of the body such as the mouth, nostrils, ears, etc.

In the Dhātuvihanga Sutta, we find six elements described, the sixth, consciousness (Viññāna-dhātu) is given as a subject of meditation that deals with the immaterial objects (Arūpa-kammatthana). In the EDSM, too these six elements are given as subjects of contemplation.

It is said in the Visuddhimagga that the practitioner of sluggish intellect, who wishes to develop this subject of meditation, should study the four elements in detail from forty-two aspects after receiving instruction from his teacher. Living in a suitable dwelling, and having performed all his duties, he should retire into solitude and seclusion and develop the subject from aspects: (1) Synthetic contemplation on the constituents of the four elements; (2) Analytic contemplation on the constituents of the four elements; (3) Synthetic contemplation on heir characteristics; (4) Analytic contemplation on their characteristics. When these are done the elements manifest themselves to the practitioner without any individual conception, and the mind attains to access-concentration. Furthermore, the four elements should be contemplated according to eleven methods.

In the DESM, the meditation on the external four great elements is the XIVc contemplation; the meditation on the internal or personal four great elements is the XV contemplation, and the last part of the XIVb contemplation in the text. The following are some of the practical instructions given in the DESM:

“The body originated from the Four Great Elements. It is dwelling in the same village of the six entrances.” “The practitioner should not be finding pleasure in too much speech, but retire into solitude and seclusion to contemplate the emptiness of all the dharmas. Within the imposition of the bright and transparent light. When seeing it, they see in it the former seven Buddhas.

The XV the XVII and the first part of the XVIII contemplation in the DESM deal with the subject of meditation on the body. The contemplation on body in the Visuddhimagga is the meditation upon the thirty-two parts of the body. These thirty-parts are arranged in six groups. It is also said in the Visuddhimagga that, the disciple who wishes to attain Arhatship through the practice of this Kammatthana should approach a good teacher for instruction. The teacher should give him instruction in the subject, explaining the sevenfold method of study and the tenfold method of practice.

In the DESM, the contemplation on the body is the meditation upon the thirty-six parts of the body (as opposed to thirty-two in both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga.) but not all these parts are clearly explained. There is also no classification as in the Vis regarding these thirty-six parts. The sevenfold method of study and the tenfold method of practice as given in the Visuddhimagga are also not to be found.

The meditation on the Four Great Elements is the last of the forty subjects of samatha meditation as they are set forth in both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga. The main object of this meditation is to free the mind from the conception of individuality in regard to the physical body, and to realize its elemental nature with no thought of personal distinction.

These Four Great Elements are called “mahādhātu” The Mahā-rahulovada Sutta gives an additional element, space which is described as twofold: personal and impersonal. “Personal space” refers to the cavitary organs of the body such as the mouth, nostrils, ears, etc.

In the Dhātuvihanga Sutta, we find six elements described, the sixth, consciousness (Viññāna-dhātu) is given as a subject of meditation that deals with the immaterial objects (Arūpa-kammatthana). In the EDSM, too these six elements are given as subjects of contemplation.

It is said in the Visuddhimagga that the practitioner of sluggish intellect, who wishes to develop this subject of meditation, should study the four elements in detail from forty-two aspects after receiving instruction from his teacher. Living in a suitable dwelling, and having performed all his duties, he should retire into solitude and seclusion and develop the subject from aspects: (1) Synthetic contemplation on the constituents of the four elements; (2) Analytic contemplation on the constituents of the four elements; (3) Synthetic contemplation on heir characteristics; (4) Analytic contemplation on their characteristics. When these are done the elements manifest themselves to the practitioner without any individual conception, and the mind attains to access-concentration. Furthermore, the four elements should be contemplated according to eleven methods.

In the DESM, the meditation on the external four great elements is the XIVc contemplation; the meditation on the internal or personal four great elements is the XV contemplation, and the last part of the XIVb contemplation in the text. The following are some of the practical instructions given in the DESM:

“The body originated from the Four Great Elements. It is dwelling in the same village of the six entrances.” “The practitioner should not be finding pleasure in too much speech, but retire into solitude and seclusion to contemplate the emptiness of all the dharmas. Within the

---

43 See M. vol. i.
44 See M. 140.
emptiness of these dharmas, there is no earth, no water, no fire and wind. Rūpa-skandha is upside down, and arises from the illusions. Vedanā-skandha comprises causes and conditions; it arises from the deeds (karmas). Samjñā-skandha is upside down; it is not suspending. Vijñāna-skandha is not seen; it comprises the karmic causes and conditions; it produces the seeds of craving and attachment. In such ways, he meditates on the body. The earth element came to exist from the appearance of emptiness (空見); the appearance of emptiness is also empty. What is there solidity or hardness that could be considered as the earth element? In this way he can infer and analyze the earth element….”

While he contemplates thus upon the four elements, the concept of “I” or “mine,” “man” or “woman” will disappear. The mind will be become established in the thought that there are merely elements, without owner, without entity.

“Again, the practitioner should contemplate that the fires outside the body originate from the causes and conditions. When there are the necessary causes and conditions they arise; with the cessation or separation of these conditions they come to cease. When these fires are produced, they do not come from some other place; when they disappear, they are not going to be stored up in another place. They are illusory, decaying and never ceasing.”

“Again, the practitioner should contemplate on that ‘the external water elements of the body are the running waters in the rivers, in the oceans and lakes, so on. When those water and other are produced, they do not come from some other place; when they disappear, they are not going to be stored up in another place… The wind elements are united with the space (or atmosphere); the wind is originated from causes and conditions. The wind elements are neither in the body, nor outside of the body, and nor in the middle. Owing to the upside-down mind (or the perverted thought), they are seen.’ When one is thinking of this, the external wind elements do not arise.”

“The practitioner should contemplate the earth elements in the body. The earth elements in the body are the bones, teeth, nails, hairs, intestines, stomach, belly (or abdomen), liver, heart, lungs, so on; all those solid things are the earth elements.” The practitioner should know all the earth elements in the body. One should know that “the bones become having not been before; having become they cease to be;” so are the water elements, the fire elements, the wind elements in the body.

The practitioner also should know that: “The external Earth Elements are impermanent; so are the Earth Elements in the body. “The external fires without suspending; how can the warm of fires in the body be last long?” “The external water elements are impermanent; their force can not last long. The water elements in the body are also impermanent, because they are dependant on [the external water elements] as causes and conditions.”

“The external wind elements are impermanent; their force can not last long because they originate from causes and conditions; they come to cease when their causes and conditions come to cease. The wind elements in the body are compounded of unreal things; …When he is contemplating on these, all the wind elements in the body come to cease and disappear.” Having such a variety of contemplation and thought, where could the person, the earth elements, the water elements, the fire elements and the wind elements exist? They are the corruptible, unreal, impermanent and erroneous thoughts. The practitioner who devotes himself to this practice will soon realize the state of emptiness, and will eliminate the idea of individual existence, and will then be free from all attachments. Consequently, he concentrates on the body calmly, does not have the sense or characteristic of the body (不識身相); but both body and mind will be at rest, tranquil and happy.”
The Six Great Elements in the DESM are also described in the following words: “The practitioner should contemplate on the Six Great Elements. The Six Great Elements are the Earth Element, the Water Element, the Fire Element, the Wind Element, the Element of Space, and the Element of Consciousness. One should carefully infer and analyze them one by one in such a way: ‘Does the body belong to the earth elements? Does it belong to the water elements? Does it belong to the fire elements? Does it belong to the wind elements? Is it belonging to the element of consciousness? Is it belonging to the element of space?’ So one contemplates on them in such a manner: From which element has the body originated? From which element will it be separated? [Herein, one comprehends that] ‘the six elements have no controller; the body also has no self.’ ‘This body is compounded of the six elements, originated from the causes and conditions. When the six elements depart from each other, and come to cease; the body is also impermanent.’

The aspects and methods of developing the contemplation upon the four elements as given in the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga are not clearly seen in the DESM.

Another point worth mentioning is that whereas the Visuddhimagga divides meditational practices into two broad categories: samatha andvipassanā; there is no such division in the DESM. From this point of view, our text may be said to be more in conformity with the spirit of the nikāya andāgama texts.

Another important difference between the Vis. and the DESM is that the latter gives a considerable amount of advice on how to restore vitality of the weakened meditator. (For more details, cf. supra IV.). Finally, the contemplation on sunyatā, recurring many times in the DESM is not to be found in the Vis. (For more details, cf. infra VII.).

6.3. The methods befitting various character – types

The main object of our text, the DESM, is to induce the meditation students to achieve the arhatship. Accordingly, when the text was composed its author probably only laid stress on two main points: (1) the subjects of meditation, (2) the way of befitting character. The first point has already been discussed above. As regards the second point; as it seems to have inspired various practicable aspects of Buddhism in China, we discuss here in some detail.

The Visuddhimagga gives a long description as to how to judge a person’s character. The DESM has no such kind of description. We propose here to compare the way of befitting a certain character in the Visuddhimagga with that in the DESM.

According to the Visuddhimagga, the character (carita) of human beings is of six kinds: disposed to lust, to hate, to delusion, to faith, to intellectuality and to agitation. Although there are a great variety of dispositions, owing to the mixed nature of mental states, these six types are generally stated as predominant. The commentaries explain that the character of a person is the expression of his mentality and is determined by his previous kamma and by the condition of his physical elements. Human beings are also of different temperaments as determined by racial differences, geographical situation and climatic conditions. Just as there are many kinds of individual character, so there are many kinds of individual character, so there are many methods of meditation. The following table is the way of befitting character in the Visuddhimagga compared with that in the DESM. See a table in next page:

---

46. 六大散滅，身亦無常。See T15, p.247a.
48. Vis. III.
As can be seen from the above tabular comparison, according to the Visuddhimagga, eleven of these subjects of meditation; i.e. the ten Objects of Impurity and Mindfulness of the Body, are suitable for the person who is of a lustful nature. Eight of the subjects; i.e. the four Brahmaviharas, and the four color-kasinas, are suitable for him who is disposed to hatred. For him who is deluded or who is excitable, the only subject suitable is Mindfulness of Counting the Breaths. The first six Recollections are suitable for him who, by his disposition, is prone to faith. There are four subjects, Recollection or Mindfulness of Death, Mindfulness of Peace, the Perception of the Loathsomeness of Nutriment and the Analysis of the Four Elements, which are suitable for the intelligent. The remaining Kasinas and the four Formless Spheres are suitable for all kinds of dispositions.

On the other hand, the methods of meditation befitting character in the DESM, as seen in the above table, can also be roughly classified into six types, as given above.

**Conclusion:**

The DESM is, described in the Chinese Buddhist Catalogue, as one of “the Works of the Sages of the Western County (i.e. India).” It is a collection of meditation teachings based on those in the āgamas and the works of the Indian sages. As the author used the style of a Buddhist sūtra to compose the DESM; his name is hidden from us. His intention was not to forge a sūtra, but to stress that the teachings he compiled were those of the Sūtra-Pitaka. The text shows that meditation is the gateway to nirvana, the path for attaining arhatship and enlightenment. It is neither an Abhidharmic exposition, nor a polemics. The author was quite clearly a sutradhara,
and must have been a meditator as well as a preacher—the characteristics of a Dārśāntika. Judging by the content and the time the text was brought to China, the author was living around the 3rd century A.D.

The final goal of practicing meditation, as given in the text, as well as the doctrines contained therein; indicate that the author was not a follower of Mahāyana Buddhism. This contention is supported by the author’s expressed attitude towards meat-eating—a taboo for all traditional Mahāyānists. It is stated explicitly that the meditator, to regain his vitality after the body having been weakened in practicing meditation, may eat “meat of threefold purity” (i.e. meat may be taken under three circumstances). It seems reasonable to assume that the author belongs to the Dārśāntika-yogācāra lineage.

According to the catalogues of the Chinese translation of the Buddhist Tripitaka, there were in all three translations made from the original. However, two of the three have been lost. The present text was retranslated (or revised) by Kumarajiva in the early 5th century A.D. The original seems to have been in Sanskrit.

The DESM provided the Chinese people with much information on methods of meditation. It explained in graphic detail about 30 kinds of meditation. It served as a manual of Buddhist meditation in the Northern Tradition of Buddhism. It had inspired such eminent translators as An shi-kao, Zhi-qian, Kumarajiva, Tsu-khu Kin-shan and Dharmamitra, to subsequently translate more meditation texts into Chinese to remedy the deficiency of the DESM, to serve as supplementary material for the need of the Chinese practitioners.

There are many similarities between the DESM and Visuddhimagga. For instance, for attaining Arhatship and Nirvana, both texts stress the importance of virtue (戒), meditation (定) and wisdom (慧). Regarding wisdom, the text stresses insight into the Four Noble Truths. The subjects of meditation, unlike in both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga, are given in brief. This deficiency of details seemed to have been noted by Kumarajiva, who supplemented them by translating the following texts:

(1) The Buddhadhānā-samādhisagara-sūtra (觀佛三昧海經), (2) Sūtra spoken by Buddha on Overcoming Lust (佛說伏婬經), (3) Sūtra on the Emptiness of all the five skandhas (五陰皆空經), (4) Sūtra on the Secret Importance of Curing the (Heart) Disease of Those who Engage in Contemplation (治禪病秘要經), (5) Sūtra spoken by the Buddha on the Thirty-seven Articles of the Practice of Meditation (佛說禪行三十七道品經), (6) The Great Discourse by the Buddha on the Mindfulness of Ānāpāna (佛説大安般守意經), (7) Sūtra on Perception in the Law of Practice of Meditation‘ (禪行法想經), (8) the Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra (修行道地經), (9) The Dhyāna-samādhi Sūtra (坐禪三昧經), (10) Dharmatara-dhyāna- sūtra (達磨多羅禪經), Sūtra on the Important Explanation of the Law of Meditation (禪法要解經), (11) Sūtra on Blaming Human Desire or Lust, and on the Importance of the Meditation’ (禪要説欲經), (12) Vimuktimārga- sāstra (解脫道論), (13) Satysiddhi-sastra (成實論), (14) Abhidharma-kosabhāṣyam’ (阿毗達磨俱舍論), as well as many others.

The meditation methods given in our text, as well as translations in those of the Sarvastivada, must have influenced the Chinese meditation tradition.

Before the introduction of Buddhism into China, Chinese spiritual practitioners, particularly the Taoists, had been greatly interested in finding secret methods for longevity and gaining psychic power. We can well imagine how eager these Chinese practitioners must have been, to learn about the meditation techniques from the “Western Region” (India and Central Asia). Or these techniques provided for the transformation of consciousness as well as ways for
spiritual experiences and visions. The Buddhist method of ānāpānasmiti, in particular, must have attracted the Taoists interested in “Vital Energy” - even though the Buddhist method of teaching mindfulness of breathing differs from the latter. It is therefore no accident that some of the ealliest Buddhist works translated in China deal with the subject of meditation. An-Shikao, as esaly as 148 A.D., translated the Ānāpāna-anusmṛti-sūtra (An-ban-shou-yi-jing). Cheng-hui 陳慧, a scholar in the time of An Shi-Kao, did a commentary on the Ānāpāna-anusmṛti-sūtra. Kang Sheng-hui 康僧會, a pupil of Cheng-hui, using this commentary and his own understanding, wrote several important expositions on Samatha and Vipassana in the Collection of the Practices of the Six Perfections.

The earliest translation of our DESM must have been to fulfill this need. Other meditation texts translated in the early period of Chinese Buddhism include Sangharaksa’s Yogacara-bhūmi-sūtra (translated by Dhamaraksa in 284 A.D.), and several other works (see supra V) translated by Kumarajiva and others.

The clear expositions on samatha and vipasyana by Zhi-zhe (智者大師, A.D. 530-597), founder of the Tien Tai School, with the master’s stress on the gradual steps to be taken up systematically in meditation progress, must have been influenced by these above-mentioned translations. He combined samatha and vipasyana in the practice of the mindfulness of breathing, with detailed steps such as counting and following the breaths. This is clearly reminiscent of ānāpāna-anusmṛti described in the Indian Buddhist texts. Zhi-zhe’s also emphasises the need for selecting a competent kalyana-mitra as instructor, and for a conducive environment, indications of the influence of these translations.

The early Chinese Chan (a transliteration of dhyāna) School was closely connected with the Yogācāra tradition. The principal text of the school (until the time of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng (636-712) had been the Lankavatara Sūtra, a major Yogācāra text expounding the doctrine of Vijñāptimatrata. The earlier (non-Mahāyana) Yogācārinins appeared to have evolved from the Dārṣṭāntika meditators.

Discussions in the ancient Chinese meditation tradition on “Chan”:

Discussions can be seen in ancient Chinese meditation tradition on “Chan sickness”) (禪病) – i.e. What can go wrong in meditation practices, and how to deal with them-must have been inspired by the Restoration of the Health of the Meditators as found in our DESM. Similarly, a later work, entitled 禪病秘要經 (Sūtra on the Secret Importance of Curing the (Mental) Disease of those who Engage in Contemplation), should also be noted.

The earliest Indian sources of influence in the Chinese Buddhist meditation tradition, needs an in-depth study. It should be a topic of interest for the Buddhist historians. It is our hope that some competent scholars and meditators will in the near future enlighten us further in this field.

---

49 It was said to have been brought to China by Bodhidharma, until the time of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng (A.D 636-712),
ABBREVIATIONS

“T.” is used to indicate the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經).

All the references of the Pali canonical texts are to the Pali Text Society editions.

A.          = Anguttaranikāya
AKB        = Abhidharma-kosabhāsyam T29
AKB (E)     = English translation of Abhidharma-kosabhāsyam
Blmj       = Jin-gang-po-bo-lo-mi-jing T8, No. 235
Byj        = Zhi-chan-ping-bi-yao-jing T15 No. 620.
Chanjing   = Da-mo tuo-lo-chan-jing T15 No. 618.
Chu-ji, Or CST  = Sheng-yiu, Chu-san-tsang-chi-jì, T55, No. 2145
Da-zhou-lu  = Ming-quan, Da-zhou-kan-ding-zhong-jing-mu-lu, T55, No. 2153
DĀ         = Dirghāgama Tl No. 1
D          = Dighanikāya (figures: number of sutta)
DA.        = Dighanikāya Atthakathā (Sumangalavilāsini) (PTS)
DCBT.      = Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms
DESM       = The Discourse on the Essential Secrets of Meditation T15, No. 613
E[]        = Ekottarāgama T2 No. 125
Fxj        = Chan-xing-fa-xiang-jing T15 No. 605.
GPWT       = Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise, T, 1509
Gs         = Gradual Sayings
HKSC       = Xu-kao-seng-chuan, T, 2510.
Ilspm      = The Importance of the Law of Sitting in the Practice of Meditation （修習止觀坐禪法要）
Khai-yuan-lu = Zhi-sheng, Khai-yuan-shih-kian-lu, T55, No. 2154
KIK.       = Kokuyaku Issaikyō (figures: number of volume & part)
Ks.        = Kindred Sayings
KSC.       = Kao-seng-chuan, T, 2509
M.         = Majjhimanikāya (figures: number of sutta)
Milp       = Milindapañha
Mtu        = Mahāvastu
MVS        = Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāsā-sāstra T27
Ny.        = Abhidharma-Nyāyānusāra T29, No. 1562
PTS        = Pali Text Society
RMS        = Records as the Mirror of the (Dhyāna) Schools（宗鏡錄）, T48, No. 2016
S[]        = Samyuktāgama (figures: number of sūtra)
S          = Samyuttanikāya (figures: numbers of Samyutta and Sutta)
Sui-lu(1)   = Fa-jing, Sui-zhong-jing-mu-lu, T55, No. 2146
Sui-lu(2)   = Yian-Zhong, Sui-Zhong-jing-mu-lu, T55, No 2147
T          = Taisho Edn of the Chinese Tripitaka Ed. Takakusu J. et. al. (figures: number of volume)
Ta-than-lu  = Tao-xuan, Ta-than-nei-tien-lu, T55, No. 2149
Ta-ming-lu  = Ta-ming-san-shan-kiao-mu-lu
TbUdv(E)    = English tr. of the Tibetan version of the Udānavarga
Tdj        = Xiu-xing-tao-di-jing T15 No. 606.
Thu-ji = Ku-kin-i-kin-thu-ji, T55, No. 2151
Udv (C1) = Chu Yao Jing, t4, No. 212
Udv(C2) = Fa ji Yao Sung Jing, T4, No. 213
Vim = Vimuttimagga
Vin = Vinaya Pitaka
Vis = Visuddhimagga (figures: numbers of chapter & paragraphing in “The Path of Purification”, tr. by Bhikkhu Ānamoli publ. by the Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy)
Yf = Si-wei-lue-yao-fa T15 N0. 617.
Yjj = Chan-fa-yao-jie-jing T15 No. 616
Yrf = Wu-men-chan-jing-yao-rong-fa T15 No. 619.
Zen = R.H. Blyth, Zen and Zen Classics