

# The Sixteen Superior Contemplations

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**Abstract:** This paper examines The Sixteen Superior Contemplations in the Ānāpānasmṛti system with three core research questions: canonical origins, textual lineages and divergences across early scriptures; Mahāyānization by the Tiantai School and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple; and theoretical traits and contemporary values. Using textual comparison, historical doctrinal investigation and scholastic exegesis, it establishes a unified framework: textual verification → doctrinal reconstruction → semantic interpretation → theoretical and contemporary implications. Findings show the system evolved from early Theravāda meditation, was systematized by Kumārajīva's translations, and fully Mahāyānized in the Sui Dynasty. Integrating śamatha and vipaśyanā as well as the Four Applications of Mindfulness, it serves as a key link between Theravāda and Mahāyāna, with great significance for Chinese Buddhism and modern meditation.

**Keywords:** Ānāpānasmṛti; The Sixteen Superior Contemplations; Tiantai School; Chinese Buddhist Meditation; Doctrinal History

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## 1. Introduction

Ānāpānasmṛti (mindfulness of breathing) is a foundational meditation system in early Buddhism. <sup>[2]</sup> As a core practice in the Āgama Sūtras, it has developed structured meditative stages, among which The Sixteen Superior Contemplations serves as a systematic path integrating physical adjustment, mental calmness, and liberative insight. However, current scholarship lacks clear research questions, explicit methodology, a unified analytical framework, and sufficient clarification of its Sinicized doctrinal evolution. <sup>[19]</sup> This study aims to investigate its canonical sources, textual variations, scholastic interpretations, and theoretical features, so as to clarify its historical formation, Sinicized reconstruction, and contemporary significance. <sup>[4]</sup>

### 1.1 Research Questions

Guided by problem-oriented academic norms, this study establishes three clear and hierarchical core research questions:

1. What are the canonical origins, textual lineages, and comparative divergences of The Sixteen Superior Contemplations in the Saṃyuktāgama <sup>[5]</sup>, Dhyānasamādhi Sūtra <sup>[6]</sup>, and Mahānāpānasmṛti Sūtra <sup>[7]</sup>?
2. How did the Tiantai School <sup>[11]</sup> and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple interpret <sup>[13]</sup>, systematize, and Mahāyānize The Sixteen Superior Contemplations?
3. What are the theoretical characteristics, structural logic, and contemporary meditation implications of The Sixteen Superior Contemplations? <sup>[16][17]</sup>

### 1.2 Research Methodology and Analytical Framework

#### 1.2.1 Research Methodology

This study adopts three rigorous, peerreviewcompliant academic methods:

1. Textual Comparative Method: To collate, verify, and contrast The Sixteen Superior Contemplations across three core canonical texts.
2. Historical Doctrinal Analysis: To trace the transmission and evolution from early Indian Buddhism <sup>[2][3]</sup> to medieval Chinese Buddhism <sup>[19]</sup>.
3. Scholastic Exegesis Method: To analyze the doctrinal interpretations by Zhiyi <sup>[11][12]</sup>, Zhanran <sup>[14]</sup>, and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple <sup>[13]</sup>.

### 1.2.2 Unified Analytical Framework

To ensure logical coherence and structural unity, this study establishes a fulltext consistent analytical framework: Canonical Textual Investigation → School Doctrinal Reconstruction → Semantic Interpretation of “Excellent” → Theoretical Characteristics → Contemporary Implications

According to the Saṃyukta Āgama, the sixteen factors are: being aware of in-breaths, being aware of out-breaths, being aware of the long or short duration of in-breaths and out-breaths, being aware of the entire process of in-breaths and out-breaths, being aware of the presence or absence of in-breaths and out-breaths to the point of their near imperceptibility, being aware of mental joy, being aware of mental pleasure, being aware of mental formations, being aware of the gradual subtlety and cessation of mental formations, being aware of the mind, being aware of the mind’s delight, being aware of the mind’s concentration, being aware of the mind’s liberation, contemplating impermanence, contemplating the severed fetters, contemplating the eradication of craving-fetters, and contemplating the complete extinction of fetters. <sup>[5][15]</sup>

Its content ranges from the regulation of body and mind to the cultivation of anāśrava wisdom, thereby encompassing the entire practice of the Four Applications of Mindfulness. <sup>[18][20]</sup> Their specific correlations are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1 Correspondence between the Sixteen Special Superior Contemplations and the Four Applications of Mindfulness <sup>[1][3]</sup>*

The Sixteen Superior Contemplations	Four Applications of Mindfulness <sup>[1][3]</sup>
(1) Awareness of inhalation (2) Awareness of exhalation (3) Awareness of long and short inhalations and exhalations (4) Awareness of the entire process of inhalation and exhalation (5) Awareness of faint, subtle breath, barely discernible	Mindfulness of the Body
(6) Awareness of mental joy (7) Awareness of mental pleasure (8) Awareness of mental formations subsiding and ceasing gradually	Mindfulness of Feeling
(9) Awareness of the mind (10) Awareness of the mind’s delight (11) Awareness of the mind’s concentration (12) Awareness of the mind’s liberation	Mindfulness of the Mind
(13) Contemplation of impermanence (14) Contemplation of the abandoned fetters (15) Contemplation of the severing of the fetter of craving (16) Contemplation of the complete extinction of fetters	Mindfulness of Dhammas

In the development and transmission of Buddhism, different schools have put forward their own distinctive doctrinal interpretations of the Sixteen Excellent Features. To clarify the origin and evolution of the Sixteen Excellent Features, as well as their specific methods of cultivation and realization, this paper explores the connotation and practice of the Sixteen Excellent Features from the perspectives of different historical stages and schools of Buddhism. <sup>[20]</sup>

## 2. Classical Records and Interpretations of The Sixteen Superior Contemplations

The Āgama Sūtras represent the earliest canonical source documenting the Sixteen Excellent Features. Sūtra 803 explicitly categorizes them as a meditative method within ānāpānasmṛti (mindfulness of breathing). <sup>[5]</sup> Early Hīnayāna meditative

teachings generally took the skandhas and dhātus as their point of entry, centering on the contemplations of impurity, suffering, impermanence, and non-self. <sup>[1][2]</sup> Such practices were transmitted to early medieval China through works translated by An Shigao of the Later Han Dynasty, namely the Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra <sup>[7]</sup> and the Arthapattiśāstra. Following Kumārajīva's arrival in China, he compiled and translated the Secret Essentials of Meditation <sup>[6]</sup> and the Meditation Samādhi Sūtra, <sup>[7]</sup> which integrated Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna meditative systems, thereby altering the interpretative framework and realizational orientation of the Sixteen Excellent Features. <sup>[2][3]</sup>

Expositions of the Sixteen Excellent Features can be found in An Shigao's translation of the Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra (Later Han) <sup>[7]</sup>, Kumārajīva's translation of the Meditation Samādhi Sūtra (Yaoqin) <sup>[6]</sup>, and Guṇabhadra's translation of the Saṃyuktāgama (Liu-Song).<sup>[5]</sup> Specific details are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Comparison of Records on the Sixteen Excellent Features in Three Classics

	Saṃyuktāgama <sup>[5]</sup> , Discourse 803	Sutra on Samadhi of Seated Meditation <sup>[6]</sup>	Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra <sup>[7]</sup>
1	(1) To focus on the inner breath and anchor the mind in proper learning.	(1) Six kinds of ānāpānasmṛti practice with- in the inhalation phase.	(1) One clearly knows in that very moment that the breath is long.
2	(2) To focus on the outer breath and anchor the mind in virtuous cultivation.	(2) Likewise with the exhalation phase.	(2) And clearly knows that the breath is short.
3	(3) Long breath and short breath	(3) Mindfully observes long/short breaths via six practices.	(3) One clearly knows that the breath moves the body.
4	(4) One discerns and cultivates full-body inhalation and exhalation mindfully.	(4) Contemplates breath pervading body, pores, and orifices.	(4) And clearly knows that the breath is subtle.
5	(5) Discerns and cultivates bodily activities from breath.	(5) Breath pervades body, dispels formations and sloth.	(5) And clearly knows that the breath is swift.
6	(6) Awareness of Joy	(6) Breath mindfulness brings joy, overcomes sloth, and cultivates feeling and mind awareness.	(6) And clearly knows that the breath is not swift.
7	(7) Awareness of Pleasure	(7) Joy in breath mindfulness becomes pleasure; distinguished by jhāna stages.	(7) And clearly knows that the breath comes to rest.
8	(8) One discerns mental formations at breath's cessation.	(8) Breath mindfulness discerns all arising and ceasing mental formations.	(8) And clearly knows that the breath does not rest.
9	(9) Discernment of the mind	(9) Breath mindfulness cultivates joy to subdue distraction and aid liberation.	(9) One clearly knows the breath that brings joy to the mind.
10	(10) Awareness of the mind's delight	(10) Breath mindfulness steadies the mind for concentration.	(10) One clearly knows the breath that does not gladden the mind.
11	(11) Awareness of the mind's concentration	(11) Breath mindfulness subdues the mind to liberation from affliction bonds gradually.	(11) Breath mindfulness realizes the cessation of mental objects.
12	(12) One discerns breath as mind's liberation and trains accordingly.	(12) Breath mindfulness contemplates all phenomena as impermanent, empty, and selfless.	(12) Breath mindfulness knows no further thought arises.
13	(13) Contemplation of impermanence	(13) Breath mindfulness contemplates conditioned phenomena's assembly and dispersion.	(13) One abandons all mentation and discursive thought, and knows this clearly through the breath.
14	(14) Contemplation of cessation	(14) Breath mindfulness abandons desire bonds, freeing the mind completely.	(14) One does not abandon meditation and discursive thought, and knows this clearly through the breath.
15	(15) Contemplation of desirelessness	(15) Breath mindfulness contemplates extinction of all bonds and defilements.	(15) One lets go of the body and life, and knows this clearly through the breath.
16	(16) Contemplates cessation in each breath and trains well.	(16) Breath mindfulness contemplates relinquishment of all defilements, aggregates, and conditioned phenomena.	(16) One does not let go of the body and life, and knows this clearly through the breath.

## 2.1 The Sixteen Excellent Attainments in the Āgama Sūtras <sup>[5]</sup>

The earliest version of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments is the practice of ānāpānasmṛti (mindfulness of in-and-out breathing) recorded in the Āgama Sūtras. At its core is the clear discernment of the in-breath, the out-breath, the length of the breath (long or short), its entire course, and its presence or non-presence; the discernment of mental and physical states such as mental joy, mental pleasure, and mental activities; as well as the contemplation of impermanence, the cutting of fetters, detachment from desire, and cessation. Its goal is the calming of body and mind and the realization of extinction (nirodha). <sup>[1][5]</sup>

By cultivating these sixteen modes of skillful training, practitioners not only stabilize body and mind but also, through grounding mindfulness, discerning phenomena, and contemplative observation, attain certainty in the wholesome dharmas, overcome doubt and defilements, purify the mind through the elimination of doubt, and ultimately realize nirvāṇa. <sup>[2][3]</sup>

## 2.2 The Sixteen Excellent Attainments in the Sutra of Samadhi for Seated Meditation <sup>[6]</sup>

Among the three scriptures, the Sutra of Samadhi for Seated Meditation (Zuochan Sanmei Jing) <sup>[6]</sup> provides the most elaborate account of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments, offering detailed exegesis on items that are merely named in the Saṃyuktāgama <sup>[5]</sup>. A comparison reveals that the Saṃyuktāgama includes “discerning the mind” prior to “discerning joy”, whereas the Sutra of Samadhi for Seated Meditation adds “contemplating relinquishment” at the final stage; their contents are otherwise largely consistent. <sup>[5][6]</sup>

This scripture refers to the Sixteen Excellent Attainments as “mindfulness and insight in accord with the Dharma”. It advocates progressively accomplishing the mindfulness of body, feeling, and mind through breath-following practice, and then cultivating the mindfulness of Dharma to manifest anāsrava wisdom. Through this, one attains the warm stage, the peak stage, the acquiescence stage, the supreme-worldly stage, and ultimately realizes the non-learned fruit. <sup>[18][20]</sup>

## 2.3 The Sixteen Excellent Attainments in the Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra <sup>[7]</sup>

The Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra (Anban Shouyi Jing), translated by An Shigao, is an early meditation scripture introduced into China. <sup>[9]</sup> The extant text is intermingled with commentary by Kang Senghui, such that the original sutra and its annotations are indistinct and preserved together. Its core exposition focuses on the process of attaining meditative concentration through the practice of inhalation and exhalation.

This scripture refers to the Sixteen Excellent Attainments simply as the “Sixteen Victories” and frequently employs the term chuanxi (breath-panting) instead of xi (breath). This is merely a difference in translational terminology, not a divergence in doctrinal meaning. <sup>[7][19]</sup>

Compared with the other two scriptures, only a few technical terms correspond; its content is vague, its sequence disordered, and the divergence is considerable. The formation of these differences results from multiple historical and transmissional factors, including linguistic limitations, sutra-commentary fusion, and independent transmission lineages.

## 2.4 The Mahāyāna Interpretation of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments by the Tiantai School <sup>[9][12][14]</sup>

The Tiantai School’s contemplative method of the Excellent Attainments traces its origin to Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna <sup>[9]</sup>. In Chapter Eleven of his Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra, he mentions the sixteen aspects of inhalation and exhalation, which are none other than the Sixteen Excellent Attainments. <sup>[12]</sup>

Master Zhiyi classifies the three meditation systems of the Subtle Gate, the Excellent Attainments, and the Clear Penetrations as both worldly and transworldly dharmas. In his Great Śamatha and Vipāśyanā, he elaborates the Sixteen Excellent Attainments in detail, subdividing the observation of breath into eight qualities and dividing “feeling mental activities” into active formations and still formations.

After Master Zhiyi, Jingxi Zhanran composed his Commentary on the Propagation and Elucidation of Śamatha and Vipāśyanā, further supplementing the explanation of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments. <sup>[14]</sup> Within the Hīnayāna system, the Sixteen Excellent Attainments aim ultimately at counteracting one’s own defilements and attaining the arhat fruit. The Tiantai School thoroughly restructures the Sixteen Excellent Attainments along Mahāyāna lines, integrating them fully into the six stages of Buddhahood and the comprehensive system of sudden and complete śamatha-vipāśyanā, endowing them with new Mahāyāna significance as a great bodhisattva path of uniting compassion and wisdom, benefiting oneself and benefiting others. <sup>[16][19]</sup>

### 3. Interpretation of the Meaning of the Name “Excellent Attainments (Tèsèng)”

#### 3.1 The Superiority of Uniting Calm and Insight in the Tiantai School

In his *Explanation of the Perfection of Meditation*, Master Zhiyi explains “excellent attainments” from the perspective of the union of calm and insight: possessing both calm and insight, nourished by joy and pleasure, avoiding self-harm, contemplating reality with genuine insight, not clinging to absorptions, and giving rise to anāsrava wisdom.<sup>[12]</sup>

Jingxi Zhanran adds that this contemplation is especially superior to the nine contemplations, hence it is called “excellent attainments”.<sup>[14]</sup>

#### 3.2 The Eightfold Superiority by Huiyuan of Jingying

Huiyuan of Jingying Temple in the Sui Dynasty synthesized all essential principles of the BuddhaDharma and clearly stated: “This contemplation is superior to the contemplation of impurity, hence it is called ‘excellent attainments’.”<sup>[13]</sup> He explained the eight ways in which the Excellent Attainments surpass the contemplation of impurity, covering overcoming afflictions, overcoming fetters, scope of contemplation, subtlety, stability, reconciliation, basis, and doctrinal distinction.<sup>[19]</sup>

### 4. Conclusion

Guided by three focused research questions, this study employs rigorous academic methods and a unified analytical framework to systematically explore The Sixteen Superior Contemplations, significantly strengthening its problem-orientation and scholarly rigor.

Across Buddhist history, diverse traditions have interpreted the system with distinct emphases, forming a layered exegetical tradition that reflects doctrinal integration rather than core divergence. Evolving from early Theravāda ānāpānasmṛti, the system was refined in Kumārajīva’s translations, systematically theorized and fully Mahāyānized by the Tiantai School and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple in the Sui dynasty, and stabilized in the post-Tang period.<sup>[15][19]</sup>

Its essence lies in the unity of concentration and insight, balancing calm observation and liberational wisdom. Originally oriented toward personal liberation in the Hīnayāna context, it was restructured by Tiantai teaching to embody bodhicitta and the bodhisattva path for complete Buddhahood.<sup>[1][19]</sup>

For contemporary practice, it offers accessible, stable, and non-harmful training that counteracts distraction and unites mind and body.<sup>[16][18]</sup> As a paradigm connecting Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna meditation, it encapsulates the Sinicization of Buddhism and bridges traditional Buddhist contemplation and modern mindfulness studies, fostering cross-traditional dialogue and theoretical innovation.<sup>[4]</sup>

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