

# A Study of the Relationship between Single-Practice Samadhi and the Two Kinds of Birth-and-Death from the Perspective of Yogacara

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**Abstract:** Single-Practice Samadhi is an important contemplative method in Mahayana Buddhism, while segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death are key doctrinal categories through which Mahayana Yogacara explains the samsaric continuity of sentient beings and the still-incomplete state of saints before perfect awakening. Examining these three themes within one doctrinal framework helps clarify the inner relation among meditative practice, transformation of consciousness, and transcendence of birth-and-death. Drawing primarily on the Manjusri-pariprecha Prajnaparamita Sutra, the Cheng weishi lun, the Mahayanasamgraha, the Dasheng baifa mingmen lun, the Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, the Samdhinirmocana Sutra, the Yogacarabhumi, and the Zongjing lu, this paper first traces the scriptural origin of Single-Practice Samadhi and its basic meaning of “the one mark of the dharmadhatu” and “directing attention to the dharmadhatu.” It then interprets the mechanism of its cultivation in terms of the eight consciousnesses, the three natures and three kinds of non-self-nature, the two obstructions and two karmic modes, and the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. On this basis, it further analyzes the causes, nature, support, stages of elimination, and differences between segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death. The paper argues that Single-Practice Samadhi is not an isolated technique of concentration but a contemplation of reality that can be explained and supported by Yogacara theories of consciousness and practice. The two kinds of birth-and-death are not merely nominal classifications; rather, they constitute a soteriological framework closely connected with the afflictive obstruction, the cognitive obstruction, and the process of transformation of the basis. From a Yogacara perspective, Single-Practice Samadhi thus illuminates the Mahayana path from calming distraction and overcoming self-grasping to dissolving dharma-grasping and perfecting transformation of the basis. This study may also serve as a reference for understanding the structure of “correspondence between principle and practice” in Buddhist doctrinal learning and for teaching Yogacara, meditation, and Buddhist views of life and death in contemporary Buddhist colleges.

**Keywords:** Single-Practice Samadhi; Yogacara; Segmental Birth-and-Death; Transformational Birth-and-Death; Transformation of Consciousness into Wisdom; Two Obstructions; Alayavijnana

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## Introduction

Buddhist reflection on birth-and-death is not merely an explanation of physical death; it is a fundamental issue running

through the entire system of cultivation and realization. Why do sentient beings continue to transmigrate? How do afflictions persist? How is practice possible? How is liberation established? All of these questions must be understood through the relation between birth-and-death and consciousness. In Mahayana Buddhism especially, birth-and-death and nirvana are not two entirely separate realms. When deluded, the continuity of experience becomes samsaric birth-and-death; when awakened, transformation of the basis reveals nirvana. Buddhism therefore does not explain the predicament of life through external salvation, but through dependent arising, non-self, consciousness-only, and transformation of the basis.

Among the many theoretical systems of Mahayana Buddhism, Yogacara takes “all dharmas are consciousness-only” as its central principle. Through such categories as the eight consciousnesses, the three natures, the two obstructions, the two karmic modes, the interaction of seeds and manifestations, and the transformation of consciousness into wisdom, it provides a subtle analysis of both the samsaric continuity of sentient beings and the stages of saintly cultivation. The distinction between segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death is one important way in which Yogacara explains levels of samsara. Segmental birth-and-death refers primarily to the coarse retributive result in the three realms, brought about by afflictive obstructions and contaminated karma. Transformational birth-and-death refers to the subtle retributive state of saints who have severed coarse afflictions but still retain the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction, supported by uncontaminated yet still discriminating karma and the cognitive obstruction. Although the two differ in coarseness and subtlety, defilement and relative purity, ordinary and saintly status, and degree of freedom, both remain states of continuity before the complete transformation of the basis.

Single-Practice Samadhi is an important Mahayana contemplative practice combining concentration, insight, and orientation toward reality. The Manjusri-pariproccha Prajnaparamita Sutra defines it as “the one mark of the dharmadhatu” and “directing attention to the dharmadhatu,” showing that it is not a mere technique for calming the mind but a contemplation whose object is the reality of the dharmadhatu and whose orientation is non-discriminating wisdom. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, Single-Practice Samadhi was valued in Prajnaparamita, Tiantai, Chan, Pure Land, and even Yogacara contexts, and it received different interpretations in different doctrinal settings. From the standpoint of Yogacara, it is not merely a state of “one-pointedness of mind”; it may also be understood as a process of calming the first six consciousnesses, transforming the self-grasping of manas, purifying the seeds in alayavijnana, and moving toward the transformation of consciousness into wisdom.<sup>[1]</sup>

Previous studies of Single-Practice Samadhi have often emphasized its significance for Prajnaparamita thought, Tiantai calming-and-contemplation, or Chan history. Studies of the two kinds of birth-and-death, by contrast, have tended to focus on terminological distinctions and stages of realization. When the two topics are discussed separately, one easily falls into a split in which “meditation belongs to meditation” and “the theory of birth-and-death belongs to birth-and-death.” This paper uses Yogacara as an interpretive bridge and places Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-and-death within one structure of cultivation. On the one hand, it explains how Single-Practice Samadhi functions at the level of consciousness as calming, contemplation, and transformation of the basis. On the other hand, it explains how the two kinds of birth-and-death define the liberative meaning of that practice. This paper does not claim that Single-Practice Samadhi can replace all other practices. It argues only that, within a Mahayana Yogacara explanation, it is an important entry point for understanding the continuous structure of “meditative practice - transformation of consciousness - transcendence of birth-and-death.”

From the perspective of submission to Fayuan and of doctrinal research in Buddhist colleges, this paper also seeks to avoid writing in broad and unsupported assertions. It returns, as much as possible, to scriptural sources, terminological structures, and stages of practice. Buddhist doctrinal study, when detached from scriptural evidence, easily becomes generalized interpretation; when reduced to lists of terms without soteriological meaning, it cannot respond to the needs of contemporary Buddhist education for learning, teaching, practice, and application. For this reason, the paper follows the sequence of “scriptural basis - Yogacara interpretation - analysis of birth-and-death - integration of practice and realization - pedagogical implications,” so that the exposition remains grounded in verifiable texts and coherent doctrinal structures.

## 1. The Scriptural Basis and Doctrinal Meaning of Single-Practice Samadhi

The primary scriptural basis for Single-Practice Samadhi is the Manjusri-pariproccha Prajnaparamita Sutra. The scripture states: “The one mark of the dharmadhatu and directing attention to the dharmadhatu: this is called Single-Practice Samadhi.”

It further teaches that good men and good women who wish to enter Single-Practice Samadhi should dwell in a quiet place, abandon confused thoughts, refrain from grasping at appearances, concentrate the mind on one Buddha, single-mindedly recite that Buddha's name, face the Buddha's direction, and sustain remembrance of one Buddha from thought-moment to thought-moment. In that very remembrance they can see all Buddhas of the past, future, and present, because the merit of remembering one Buddha is immeasurable and not different from the inconceivable Buddha-dharmas of immeasurable Buddhas. In this way, one who enters Single-Practice Samadhi comes to know the undifferentiated mark of the dharmadhatu of countless Buddhas. This passage contains four interrelated dimensions: first, dwelling quietly and abandoning confused thought indicates the calming of distraction; second, not grasping at appearances indicates the breaking of attachment to marks; third, concentrating on one Buddha and reciting the name indicates using one thought to gather myriad thoughts; fourth, seeing the Buddhas of the three times without differentiation indicates entering the one mark of the dharmadhatu through one recollection.<sup>[1]</sup>

Viewed through the phrase "the one mark of the dharmadhatu," the object of Single-Practice Samadhi is not an ordinary external object, nor is it merely a psychological focus. Its object is the reality in which all dharmas are equal and non-differentiated. Viewed through "directing attention to the dharmadhatu," it is not abstract metaphysical speculation but a meditative practice with a clear contemplative orientation. "Single practice" may be understood as the practice of one reality or the practice of suchness: it turns away from discriminations such as existence and non-existence, arising and ceasing, annihilation and permanence, self and other, self of persons and self of dharmas. "Samadhi" means correct concentration: the mind is undistracted, abides in its object, and is free from dullness and agitation. Together, the phrase refers to gathering the mind through concentration and illuminating principle through wisdom, so that the observing mind and the principle observed gradually come into correspondence.

Single-Practice Samadhi differs from ordinary expedient meditations. Yongming Yanshou states in fascicle 81 of the *Zongjing Lu*: "Single-Practice Samadhi means directing attention to the dharmadhatu, one thought of the dharmadhatu, trusting that all dharmas are Buddhadharma, without before or after, without boundary or limit, dwelling where Buddhas dwell, abiding as Buddhas abide, and peacefully residing in the quiescent dharmadhatu and the secret treasury. In this way, principle lacks nothing in completeness and phenomena lack nothing in sufficiency." Hinayana meditations such as contemplation of impurity, mindfulness of breathing, loving-kindness meditation, and analysis of elements mainly function to subdue coarse afflictions and turn the mind away from greed, anger, and distraction. Mahayana Single-Practice Samadhi is not separate from this calming function, yet its core lies more deeply in contemplative insight into reality. It enters the one undifferentiated mark of the dharmadhatu through one thought of correct contemplation. Therefore, Single-Practice Samadhi should not be reduced to "only remembering one Buddha" or "only guarding one object." It should be understood as a comprehensive contemplation that gathers all objects through one object and enters the dharmadhatu through one mind.<sup>[2]</sup>

In Chinese Buddhism, Single-Practice Samadhi was absorbed and reinterpreted by different traditions. Tiantai integrated it into its system of calming-and-contemplation and related it to constant sitting, constant walking, and half-walking-half-sitting practices, emphasizing the threefold contemplation in one mind and the perfect interfusion of reality. Early Chan also valued Single-Practice Samadhi. From Daoxin and Hongren onward, the East Mountain teaching often used it to explain the Chan spirit of calming the mind, entering the Way, and guarding one without wavering. Yogacara did not make Single-Practice Samadhi the name of its school, but its analysis of consciousness, its doctrine of the two obstructions, and its theory of transformation of the basis provide a rigorous framework for understanding the inner mechanism of the practice.

From a Yogacara standpoint, the key to Single-Practice Samadhi does not lie in outward form but in the transformation of consciousness. The mental activities of ordinary beings usually involve the first six consciousnesses grasping at the six sense objects; the seventh manas constantly examines and clings to the eighth consciousness as an inner self; and the eighth alayavijnana stores contaminated seeds and produces karmic results. If practitioners can gather the six faculties, reduce grasping, contemplate that the perceived object is not apart from consciousness, and then dissolve self-grasping and dharmagrASPing, Single-Practice Samadhi becomes a practical path by which scattered consciousness is transformed into pure wisdom. In other words, it is not a search for a fixed entity outside the mind. It is a contemplation in which one realizes that

appearances are consciousness-only, that consciousness has no solid self-nature, and that the relinquishing of attachment reveals suchness.

### 1.1 The Unfolding of Single-Practice Samadhi in Different Doctrinal Traditions

The transmission of Single-Practice Samadhi in Chinese Buddhism is not merely an isolated history of a term. It reflects the important Chinese Mahayana concern to gather practice through mind and to verify principle through practice. Prajnaparamita scriptures emphasize the foundation of Single-Practice Samadhi in the reality of the dharmadhatu, stressing non-grasping at appearances and freedom from discrimination. Tiantai focuses on incorporating it into the practice of calming-and-contemplation, using the threefold contemplation in one mind and the interfusion of emptiness, provisional existence, and the middle to explain that a single thought includes the three truths. Early Chan often interprets it from the perspective of calming the mind and directly entering the Way, making it a bridge from scriptural teaching to meditative realization. Although the wording differs across traditions, their shared concern is how to lead practitioners from distracted discrimination back to the single mind of correct contemplation.

In the Prajnaparamita tradition, Single-Practice Samadhi highlights the spirit of non-attainment. Concentrating on one Buddha while knowing the non-differentiated mark of the dharmadhatu of countless Buddhas shows that “one” is not a narrow object in a numerical sense. It is the entry from one object into immeasurable objects, from one thought into the dharmadhatu. If one clings to “one Buddha,” “one dharma,” or “one mark” as substantially real, one already violates the meaning of Single-Practice Samadhi. In the Prajnaparamita perspective, therefore, its core is the breaking of marks, the relinquishment of attachment, and non-discrimination, all of which reveal the equality and non-difference of all dharmas.

In the Tiantai tradition, Single-Practice Samadhi is closely connected with calming-and-contemplation. Tiantai uses the four samadhis to organize practice. It recognizes forms such as constant sitting and constant walking while also integrating them into the perfect structure of the threefold contemplation in one mind. This tradition reminds us that Single-Practice Samadhi is neither merely sitting quietly nor a state of concentration without insight. It must manifest the reality of suchness through the simultaneous operation of calming and contemplation. With calming alone and no contemplation, one may stagnate in concentration; with contemplation alone and no calming, one may become scattered in conceptual understanding. Tiantai’s contribution lies in showing the correspondence between practice and doctrinal contemplation, thereby giving Single-Practice Samadhi a fuller practical organization.

In the Chan tradition, Single-Practice Samadhi is often understood as a central method for settling the mind and entering the Way. Early Chan emphasized “guarding one without wavering” and “abiding the mind and contemplating purity.” This did not mean clinging to a psychological object; rather, it sought to gather wandering thoughts and disclose the mind’s inherent purity. Later Chan emphasized “not establishing words and letters” and “directly pointing to the mind,” which can give the impression that it did not value scriptural stages. Yet the transmission of Single-Practice Samadhi shows that Chan practice did not depart from the foundation of Mahayana scriptures. It further stressed direct realization on the basis of scriptural contemplation.

Compared with Prajnaparamita, Tiantai, and Chan, Yogacara’s advantage in interpreting Single-Practice Samadhi lies in its ability to explain why cultivating the mind can transform birth-and-death. Prajnaparamita provides the basis in reality; Tiantai provides the organization of calming-and-contemplation; Chan emphasizes direct realization; Yogacara further explains how scattered mind arises through the interaction of seeds and manifestations, how attachment is formed by the constant self-grasping of manas, how the afflictive and cognitive obstructions respectively give rise to the two kinds of birth-and-death, and how cultivation of samadhi alters the seed-structure in alayavijnana through perfuming and transformation of the basis. Yogacara therefore does not negate the interpretations of other traditions; it supplies them with a refined theory of consciousness.

The “Yogacara perspective” adopted in this paper is thus not an exclusive attempt to assign Single-Practice Samadhi to the Yogacara school alone. Rather, it uses Yogacara terminology and its structure of cultivation to explain anew the function of Single-Practice Samadhi in the Mahayana path. From the standpoint of doctrinal integration, Prajnaparamita provides the ground of reality, Tiantai provides the organization of calming-and-contemplation, Chan provides the direction of personal

realization, and Yogacara provides the mechanism of consciousness. Together they reveal the characteristic Chinese Buddhist integration of doctrine and practice.

## 2. The Theoretical Basis for Interpreting Single-Practice Samadhi through Yogacara

To interpret Single-Practice Samadhi through Yogacara, one must begin with the doctrine of the eight consciousnesses. In the *Dasheng baifa mingmen lun*, Vasubandhu states that all dharmas may be summarized under five categories: mind dharmas, mental factors, material dharmas, dharmas not associated with mind, and unconditioned dharmas. The mind dharmas are eight: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, mental consciousness, manas, and alayavijnana. The *Yogacarabhumi* further defines these terms: “Mind” refers to alayavijnana, the support of all seeds, the basis of appropriation, and that which is included in maturation. “Manas” refers to the constantly functioning mind and the immediately preceding mind of the six consciousnesses. “Consciousness” refers to the present discrimination of objects. Among the eight consciousnesses, the first five know forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangibles; the sixth discriminates mental objects; the seventh manas constantly examines and clings; and the eighth alayavijnana stores seeds, holds the body and faculties, and manifests the world. Ordinary experience appears as self-attachment, dharma-attachment, craving, grasping, discrimination, and karmic action because the eight-consciousness system continues to function under the perfuming of ignorance. The “directing attention to one object” in Single-Practice Samadhi first counteracts the distracted grasping of the first six consciousnesses and gathers the mind back from the pursuit of many objects. It then uses such contemplations as non-self, non-mark, consciousness-only, and suchness to break the self-grasping function of the seventh consciousness. Finally, through sustained cultivation, contaminated seeds in the eighth consciousness gradually weaken, while uncontaminated seeds increase and come into manifestation.<sup>[3,4]</sup>

Single-Practice Samadhi may therefore be understood on three levels. The first is the level of calming the mind: through concentration, mindfulness, upright posture, and separation from conditions, the first six consciousnesses are subdued. Here the emphasis is on calming; the mind no longer follows objects. The second is the level of contemplation: one observes that all objects arise through consciousness and that apart from mind there is no substantial external object. One also observes that the observing mind itself is dependently arisen and lacks fixed self-nature. Here the emphasis is on insight; attachment gradually becomes thin. The third is the level of transformation of the basis: when concentration and insight correspond, the seeds stored in alayavijnana gradually change, bringing about a movement from consciousness toward wisdom. Here the emphasis is on realization: contemplative understanding moves toward actual severance of delusion.

The Yogacara doctrine of the three natures and the three kinds of non-self-nature provides Single-Practice Samadhi with a clear object of contemplation. The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* teaches that the characteristics of all dharmas are of three kinds: the imagined nature, the dependent nature, and the perfected nature. The imagined nature is the self-nature and distinctions established by names and conceptual designations; the dependent nature is the dependent arising of all dharmas, expressed in the formula “because this exists, that exists; because this arises, that arises”; and the perfected nature is the equal suchness of all dharmas, realized through courageous effort and correct reflection. The same scripture also explains the three kinds of non-self-nature: the non-self-nature of marks, the non-self-nature of arising, and the ultimate non-self-nature. The non-self-nature of marks corresponds to the imagined nature, which is established by names rather than by its own intrinsic mark. The non-self-nature of arising corresponds to the dependent nature, which exists through the power of conditions and not by itself. The ultimate non-self-nature corresponds to the perfected nature, the dharma-non-self of all dharmas, the ultimate truth revealed through the absence of self-nature. Ordinary beings falsely grasp real self and real dharmas upon dependently arisen phenomena, thereby producing imagined construction. When practitioners observe that all dharmas arise from causes and conditions, like illusion and transformation, they no longer cling to them as substantially existent and may enter the perfected nature through the dependent nature. In the practice of Single-Practice Samadhi, abandoning confused thoughts and not grasping appearances is the breaking of imagined construction. Contemplating the one mark of the dharmadhatu and the non-duality of mind and object is the recognition of non-self-nature in dependent arising. Finally, abiding in suchness and leaving behind subject-object discrimination is the manifestation of the perfected nature.<sup>[5,6]</sup>

This interpretation helps avoid two deviations. One deviation reduces Single-Practice Samadhi to mere psychological

concentration and ignores its Prajnaparamita and reality-oriented meaning. The other treats reality as abstract speculation detached from stages of practice and ignores the actual process of perfuming consciousness and gradually eliminating the two obstructions. The Lankavatara Sutra explains that the purification of the flow of one's own mind is gradual and not sudden, just as fruit ripens gradually, vessels are shaped gradually, the earth gradually produces things, and people gradually master arts such as music, writing, and painting. Yogacara's distinctive strength lies in neither denying the possibility of sudden correspondence with reality nor abandoning the gradual process of seed-perfuming, stages of severance, and transformation of the basis. From a Yogacara perspective, Single-Practice Samadhi therefore has the twofold quality of "sudden contemplation of reality" and "gradual purification of consciousness."<sup>[7]</sup>

The final aim of Single-Practice Samadhi in Yogacara language is the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. Classical Yogacara speaks of transforming the first five consciousnesses into the wisdom of accomplishing activities, the sixth consciousness into wondrous observing wisdom, the seventh consciousness into equality wisdom, and the eighth consciousness into great perfect mirror wisdom. Buddhahood does not mean annihilating the functions of consciousness; it means transforming their deluded mode so that they become uncontaminated wisdom. If Single-Practice Samadhi remains only at the level of calming the mind, it cannot be called ultimate. If, within concentration, contemplation arises, attachment is broken through contemplation, and transformation of the basis is brought about through that breaking of attachment, its meaning is elevated from ordinary meditation to a practical path of transforming consciousness into wisdom.

It should be noted that Yogacara does not encourage speaking of samadhi in isolation from the complete training of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Single-Practice Samadhi can indeed be an important contemplative practice, but it must be guided by right view, founded upon pure discipline, and function through the correspondence of concentration and wisdom. Without right view, meditative states easily become objects of attachment. Without discipline, samadhi is difficult to stabilize. Without wisdom, the pacification of distraction may only suppress delusion temporarily and not sever its roots. Thus, Single-Practice Samadhi, as discussed here, is not a single technique. It is a structure of practice corresponding to right view, right conduct, right concentration, and right wisdom within the Mahayana path.

### **3. The Practical Structure and Yogacara Features of Single-Practice Samadhi**

From the practical standpoint, Single-Practice Samadhi may be understood in terms of preparatory practice, proper practice, and fruition. Preparatory practice emphasizes upright body and correct intention, together with withdrawal from external conditions. Upright body does not refer only to correct posture; it also includes moderation in life, purity of discipline, restraint of speech, and dignified comportment. Correct intention means that the mind gradually returns from external grasping to mindfulness, no longer allowing likes and dislikes to move the three karmas of body, speech, and mind. If preparatory practice is unstable, proper practice cannot go deep. Although Single-Practice Samadhi has the meaning of directly corresponding to reality, it must still be grounded in purification of body and mind and in lawful daily conduct.

The key to proper practice is the simultaneous operation of "directing attention" and "contemplative insight." Directing the mind to one object is the aspect of calming; it prevents the mind from scattering. Contemplating the dharmadhatu is the aspect of wisdom; it prevents the mind from becoming attached. If there is only directing of attention without contemplation, the practice easily becomes a mere exercise in concentration. If there is only contemplation without the power of concentration, it easily becomes conceptual speculation without genuine transformation of body and mind. The phrase "the one mark of the dharmadhatu" requires practitioners to be one-pointed without solidifying one dharma and to contemplate without losing clarity of mind. Thus, the "practice" in Single-Practice Samadhi is not a mechanical act but an integrated cultivation involving body, speech, mind, view, concentration, and wisdom.

At the level of fruition, the practice is expressed as a transformation of the subject-object relation. Beginners still discriminate between "I who practice," "the object I contemplate," and "the concentration I attain." As practice deepens, one observes that the self that practices and the dharma that is contemplated both arise dependently and are not apart from consciousness. Going further, even the opposition between "the mind that contemplates" and "the reality contemplated" gradually fades. This is not a lapse into ignorance or blankness. It is the non-discriminating wisdom that sees dharmas as they are. Yogacara's term "transformation of the basis" explains this process well: consciousness is not abolished; its defiled and discriminating mode is

transformed into pure wisdom.

Compared with some meditative accounts that emphasize experience, the Yogacara interpretation of Single-Practice Samadhi has three evident features. First, it is analytical. Through categories such as the eight consciousnesses, mental factors, seeds, and manifestations, Yogacara explains where distraction comes from, how attachment is formed, how latent tendencies continue, and how cultivation perfumes consciousness. Second, it is sequential. Yogacara is not satisfied with a vague claim to “realize the mind and see nature”; it explains the depth and subtlety of severing afflictive and cognitive obstructions. The Cheng weishi lun states that awakening to consciousness-only proceeds through five stages: the stage of accumulation, in which one cultivates the Mahayana factors conducive to liberation; the stage of preparation, in which one cultivates the Mahayana factors conducive to decisive discernment; the stage of penetration, corresponding to the bodhisattva path of seeing; the stage of cultivation, corresponding to the bodhisattva path of cultivation; and the ultimate stage, abiding in unsurpassed, perfect awakening. These five stages show the rigor and subtlety of the Yogacara system. Third, it is verifiable. Whether practice is effective is not judged merely by temporary meditative states, but by whether afflictions decrease, attachment loosens, compassion increases, conduct becomes purer, and wisdom becomes clearer.<sup>[8]</sup>

Accordingly, Single-Practice Samadhi from a Yogacara perspective should not be understood as a technique detached from ethical life, nor as an abstract sudden awakening that ignores stages. It recognizes that contemplation of reality may point directly to the root, while also emphasizing that the perfuming of consciousness must accumulate over time. It values the direction of sudden awakening while not abandoning the process of gradual cultivation. This understanding avoids two errors: clinging to words and concepts while losing the mission of practice, and neglecting doctrinal stages while drifting into arbitrary interpretation.

This structure is especially important in Buddhist college education. When students study Yogacara terminology, the eight consciousnesses, three natures, two obstructions, and transformation of the basis may appear dense and difficult. When they study meditation, they may easily understand it merely as personal experience. If Single-Practice Samadhi is used as a practical thread and Yogacara terms are applied to the process of cultivating the mind, doctrine will not be separated from practice, and practice will not be separated from right view. This also helps embody the educational spirit of “equal emphasis on understanding and practice” in Buddhist education.

#### **4. The Doctrinal Structure of the Two Kinds of Birth-and-Death in Yogacara**

The center of the Yogacara view of birth-and-death lies in explaining samsaric continuity through consciousness, karma, and afflictions. Alayavijnana contains seeds; seeds meet conditions and manifest; manifestations in turn perfume seeds. This produces the continuous flow of life experience. When afflictive obstructions and contaminated karma function as causes and conditions, the coarse retributive result in the three realms is produced. When the afflictive obstruction has been severed but the cognitive obstruction has not been exhausted, saints still experience a subtle retributive state produced by uncontaminated yet still discriminating karma and subtle latent tendencies. Thus Yogacara uses segmental birth-and-death and transformational birth-and-death to explain different levels of unliberated continuity.

Fascicle 8 of the Cheng weishi lun defines the two kinds of birth-and-death clearly. First, “segmental birth-and-death” refers to the coarse maturation-result in the three realms brought about by various contaminated wholesome and unwholesome karmas, supported by the power of the afflictive obstruction. Since the length of body and life has fixed limits according to the power of causes and conditions, it is called “segmental.” “Segmental” means that sentient beings are born in the three realms according to karma; their body, lifespan, pain, pleasure, circumstances, and faculties have relative limits. The states of gods, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings differ, yet all are contaminated maturation-results produced through karma and dependent arising. All remain governed by birth, aging, illness, and death and lack true autonomy.<sup>[9]</sup>

The root of segmental birth-and-death lies in the afflictive obstruction. The afflictive obstruction centers on self-grasping and unfolds as greed, anger, delusion, pride, doubt, wrong views, and associated secondary afflictions. It obstructs liberation and nirvana. It supports contaminated wholesome and unwholesome karma; such karma perfumes seeds; when seeds mature, they produce the results of the three realms. Segmental birth-and-death is therefore not determined by external fate. It is jointly formed by consciousness, afflictions, karma, and conditions. Its nature is contaminated, conditioned, coarse, changing, and

oppressive; it appears as the continuous but constantly decaying stream of the five aggregates.

The Cheng weishi lun then defines “inconceivable transformational birth-and-death” as the superior subtle maturation-result produced by uncontaminated but discriminating karma, supported by the power of the cognitive obstruction. Through the power of compassion and vows, body and life are transformed and have no fixed limits; therefore it is called “transformational.” Because it is properly supported and produced by uncontaminated concentration and vows, and because its subtle function is difficult to fathom, it is called “inconceivable.” Compared with segmental birth-and-death, its subject is no longer the ordinary being sinking in the three realms but a saint who has severed coarse afflictions and possesses certain uncontaminated virtues. This state is not bound by ordinary karmic form; through compassion, vows, concentration, and wisdom, body and life are transformed so that the practitioner may continue cultivation, benefit beings, and perfect Buddhahood.<sup>[9]</sup>

The root of transformational birth-and-death lies in the cognitive obstruction. The cognitive obstruction centers on dharma-grasping and latent ignorance. It obstructs omniscient wisdom and perfect bodhi. Unlike coarse afflictions, it need not appear as obvious defilements such as greed and anger, yet it still leaves practitioners with subtle distinctions of subject and object, marks of wisdom, marks of dharmas, and subtle discrimination. Thus those who have severed afflictive obstructions may transcend segmental birth-and-death, but they do not necessarily perfect Buddhahood. If the cognitive obstruction remains, there is still transformational birth-and-death. Mahayana Yogacara therefore does not take “leaving the three realms” as the final point of practice. Its ultimate aim is the complete severance of the two obstructions, the complete ending of the two deaths, and the perfect transformation of consciousness into wisdom.

The difference between segmental and transformational birth-and-death may be grasped in five respects. First, with respect to causal conditions, segmental birth-and-death is produced by the afflictive obstruction supporting contaminated karma, whereas transformational birth-and-death is produced by the cognitive obstruction supporting uncontaminated yet discriminating karma. Second, with respect to life-state, segmental birth-and-death has fixed limits of body and life, whereas transformational birth-and-death may be altered through compassion and vows. Third, with respect to the form of suffering, segmental birth-and-death involves coarse oppression, whereas transformational birth-and-death is a subtle incompleteness. Fourth, with respect to the wisdom that severs it, segmental birth-and-death is primarily counteracted by the wisdom of selflessness of persons, whereas transformational birth-and-death requires the wisdom of selflessness of dharmas and non-discriminating wisdom. Fifth, with respect to the stages of realization, arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and advanced bodhisattvas may sever segmental birth-and-death, but only a Buddha ultimately exhausts transformational birth-and-death.

The Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra states: “There are two kinds of death. What are the two? They are segmental death and inconceivable transformational death. Segmental death belongs to false sentient beings. Inconceivable transformational death belongs to arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and great bodhisattvas with mind-made bodies, up to ultimate unsurpassed bodhi.” The formulation of the two kinds of birth-and-death makes the Mahayana theory of liberation more refined than a simpler view of samsara. The Hinayana path focuses on leaving the three realms, severing the afflictive obstruction, and realizing nirvana. Mahayana, on that basis, further points out that if the cognitive obstruction remains and bodhi-wisdom is not yet complete, one cannot be called a perfectly awakened Buddha. The Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra also explains from the standpoint of tathagatagarbha, Mahayana, and One Vehicle that arhats and pratyekabuddhas still have something not yet complete and must rely on the Buddha’s ultimate wisdom for perfection. It therefore states that the vehicles of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas enter the Mahayana, and that the Mahayana is the Buddha Vehicle; thus the three vehicles are in fact the One Vehicle. On this basis, Yogacara uses the two kinds of birth-and-death to respond to a central Mahayana concern and tightly connects the theory of birth-and-death with the bodhisattva path and the theory of Buddhahood.<sup>[10,11]</sup>

## **5. The Relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and the Counteraction of Segmental Birth-and-Death**

The direct manifestation of segmental birth-and-death is the karmic transmigration of sentient beings in the three realms, yet its root remains the mistaken cognition of consciousness. Ordinary beings take the five aggregates as self and the world of objects as real. They produce greed toward attractive objects, anger toward unpleasant objects, and delusion because they do not understand impermanence and non-self. The first six consciousnesses constantly grasp at objects; the seventh manas

clings to the eighth consciousness as self; and the eighth consciousness holds contaminated seeds. Thus the cycle of affliction, karma, and retribution continues. The first way in which Single-Practice Samadhi counteracts segmental birth-and-death is by gathering scattered consciousness so that the mind is no longer pulled along by the six sense objects.

The scriptural instruction to “abandon confused thoughts and not grasp appearances” is the first step in counteracting segmental birth-and-death. The reason sentient beings create karma often begins with grasping at appearances. When one grasps appearances, love and hatred arise; when love and hatred arise, karmic action occurs; when karmic action occurs, birth-and-death continues. Single-Practice Samadhi directs the mind toward the dharmadhatu through one thought, gathering the scattered mind from many objects back to one object. It also breaks substantial attachment to objects by not grasping at appearances, so that the mind no longer turns according to marks. This “calming” is not the repression of thoughts; it is the retreat of the mind from habitual grasping so that contemplation becomes possible.

In Yogacara, segmental birth-and-death is produced by the afflictive obstruction and contaminated karma, and the core of the afflictive obstruction is self-grasping. If Single-Practice Samadhi is truly to counteract segmental birth-and-death, it must further give rise to wisdom through concentration and break self-grasping through contemplation of non-self. In samadhi, practitioners contemplate the body and mind, the five aggregates, as arising from conditions and lacking any independent controller. They contemplate objects as produced by consciousness and lacking external substantiality. They contemplate the observing mind itself as arising and ceasing moment by moment, with nothing that can be grasped. In this way, coarse self-grasping gradually loosens, and the manifestations of greed, anger, delusion, and other afflictions weaken accordingly.

From the standpoint of karma, Single-Practice Samadhi does not directly “erase” already produced karmic results. Rather, by changing the way consciousness is perfumed, it reduces the creation of new contaminated karmic seeds and deprives old afflictive seeds of supporting conditions for manifestation. Yogacara emphasizes the mutual perfuming of seeds and manifestations. If ordinary beings constantly perfume alayavijnana with greed, anger, and delusion, afflictive seeds continue to grow. If they repeatedly perfume consciousness with samadhi, mindfulness, contemplation of non-self, and contemplation of reality, uncontaminated seeds gradually gain strength. Thus Single-Practice Samadhi acts on segmental birth-and-death by changing the causal structure of samsara at the depth of consciousness.

This also explains why Single-Practice Samadhi cannot be separated from discipline and right view. Without discipline, contaminated karma continues to be produced. Without right view, meditation may merely suppress afflictions temporarily without severing their roots. Only with the mutual support of discipline, concentration, and wisdom can Single-Practice Samadhi move from “subduing delusion” to “severing delusion,” and from “temporary mental purity” to “gradual elimination of the afflictive obstruction.” The Yogacarabhumi’s broad account of the stages of cultivation, including the mutual support of the training in discipline, mind, and wisdom, may also serve as an important basis for understanding the conditions required for Single-Practice Samadhi.

The logic by which Single-Practice Samadhi counteracts segmental birth-and-death may therefore be summarized as follows: gathering the six faculties reduces distraction; not grasping appearances reduces attachment to objects; wisdom of non-self breaks self-grasping; perfuming through concentration and wisdom purifies seeds; and as afflictions are gradually severed, contaminated karma loses its supporting conditions. Ultimately, the practitioner moves toward transcending coarse transmigration in the three realms. This process is not a search for mystical states apart from human life. It is a transformation of the way consciousness functions within the continuity of daily body and mind. Through it, ordinary beings may first gain calmness, then contemplation, and then gradually enter the path of severing delusion.

## **6. Single-Practice Samadhi and the Transcendence of Transformational Birth-and-Death**

If the key to segmental birth-and-death lies in self-grasping and the afflictive obstruction, then the key to transformational birth-and-death lies in dharma-grasping and the cognitive obstruction. Saints have already severed coarse afflictions and are no longer pulled by contaminated karma in the three realms. Yet if they still have subtle attachments to dharmas, wisdom, bodhi, sentient beings, Buddhahood, or other marks, the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction remain. Transformational birth-and-death is “subtle and difficult to fathom” precisely because it does not appear as coarse affliction,

yet it remains a state of incompleteness before ultimate perfection.

If Single-Practice Samadhi is used only to calm distraction and afflictive manifestations, its ultimate Mahayana meaning has not yet been fully explained. Its deeper function lies in using the one mark of the dharmadhatu and non-discriminating wisdom to counteract dharma-grasping. Practitioners first break self-grasping through contemplation of non-self, but they must also further contemplate the non-self-nature of all dharmas, recognizing that even bodhi, nirvana, wisdom, cultivation, realization, and Buddhist terminology cannot be grasped. If one still clings to “I who practice,” “what I realize,” or “a real dharma to be obtained,” then although one may have moved beyond coarse affliction, subtle subject-object discrimination remains.

The Cheng weishi lun explains the cognitive obstruction as beginning with the view of a real dharma in the imagined nature, together with doubt, ignorance, craving, anger, pride, and so forth, which cover the non-inverted nature of the knowable and obstruct bodhi. This obstruction need not be strongly defiled, but it obstructs awakening. What it obscures is not ordinary moral good or evil, but the perfect knowledge of the reality of the dharmadhatu. Thus, when Single-Practice Samadhi counteracts transformational birth-and-death, its emphasis is not on suppressing psychological afflictions but on breaking all subtle dharma-grasping so that the observing mind and the object observed are no longer opposed. “The disappearance of both subject and object,” in Yogacara, does not deny the function of cognition; it transforms defiled discrimination into non-discriminating wisdom and subsequently attained wisdom.<sup>[12]</sup>

Here one must avoid the simplistic claim that Single-Practice Samadhi quickly and independently transcends transformational birth-and-death. The severance of transformational birth-and-death belongs to an extremely advanced stage and cannot be completed by ordinary beginners merely through initial samadhi practice. A more careful formulation is this: the reality-contemplation, non-discriminating contemplation, and non-duality of concentration and wisdom contained in Single-Practice Samadhi provide an important direction for severing the cognitive obstruction and approaching perfect transformation of the basis. At the ordinary level, it mainly calms the mind and subdues delusion. In the bodhisattva path, it gradually deepens into a contemplation that breaks dharma-grasping, reveals suchness, and perfects the functioning of wisdom.

The Cheng weishi lun states that the seeds of the cognitive obstruction severed by seeing are first severed at the path of seeing in the first joyful ground; their manifestations have already been subdued before the grounds. The seeds severed by cultivation are gradually eliminated through the ten grounds, and only when vajra-like samadhi becomes present are they forever severed. From the standpoint of transforming consciousness into wisdom, transcending transformational birth-and-death returns to vajra-like samadhi, in which the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction are exhausted. The eighth consciousness becomes great perfect mirror wisdom; the seventh becomes equality wisdom; the sixth becomes wondrous observing wisdom; and the first five become the wisdom of accomplishing activities. This does not mean that no functions of consciousness remain. It means that the attachment, defilement, and obstructive character of consciousness are completely transformed. Great perfect mirror wisdom reflects like a clear mirror without clinging to images; equality wisdom leaves behind hierarchical self-dharma distinctions; wondrous observing wisdom knows the differences among dharmas skillfully; and the wisdom of accomplishing activities benefits beings according to conditions. If Single-Practice Samadhi is perfected, it should appear as the integration of concentration and wisdom, compassion and wisdom, ultimate and conventional truth, essence and function, not as stagnation in emptiness or quietism.<sup>[13]</sup>

The relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and transformational birth-and-death should therefore not be expressed simply as “using concentration to eliminate birth-and-death.” It should be expressed as “using non-discriminating wisdom to perfect transformation of the basis.” At the level of segmental birth-and-death, the emphasis is on breaking self-grasping and severing the afflictive obstruction. At the level of transformational birth-and-death, the emphasis is on breaking dharma-grasping and severing the cognitive obstruction. The two unfold continuously and form the complete Yogacara picture of the Mahayana path from ordinary being to Buddhahood.

## **7. Observing the Stages of Practice in the Two Kinds of Birth-and-Death through Single-Practice Samadhi**

From the standpoint of practice and realization, the relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-

and-death can be explained at four levels: the level of ordinary beings, the level of the two vehicles and newly resolved bodhisattvas, the level of advanced bodhisattvas, and the level of Buddhahood. This division is not meant to be mechanical. It clarifies how the same practice functions differently according to the capacity and stage of the practitioner.

At the level of ordinary beings, the main problems are distraction, grasping at appearances, and self-grasping. At this stage, Single-Practice Samadhi emphasizes upright posture, withdrawal from external conditions, gathering the six faculties, and directing attention to the proper object. Its effects first appear as a gradual calming of the mind, a reduction of affliction, greater regulation of conduct, and clearer awareness of the suffering of birth-and-death. Ordinary beings should not lightly speak of “perfect samadhi” or “suddenly transcending the two deaths.” They should first cultivate mindfulness and right view through samadhi, so that consciousness is no longer entirely led by external objects.

At the level of sravaka learners, non-learners, pratyekabuddhas, and newly resolved bodhisattvas, the focus is on severing the afflictive obstruction, realizing the wisdom of selflessness of persons, and transcending segmental birth-and-death. At this stage, Single-Practice Samadhi is not only a way to calm body and mind. It gives rise to contemplation of non-self and reality within deeper concentration, so that the seeds of the afflictive obstruction are gradually severed. From the Mahayana standpoint, the two vehicles may leave segmental birth-and-death, but if they have not generated the great compassionate vow and have not severed the cognitive obstruction, they are still not ultimate. Therefore, Single-Practice Samadhi must also be joined with bodhicitta, great vows of compassion, and the wisdom of dharma-emptiness.

At the level of advanced bodhisattvas, especially from the eighth ground onward, bodhisattvas have attained the patience of non-arising and coarse afflictions no longer manifest. The focus of practice turns toward the severance of the latent tendencies of the cognitive obstruction. At this stage, Single-Practice Samadhi appears more as the subtle contemplation of non-discriminating wisdom: not abiding in birth-and-death, not abiding in nirvana; not clinging to the mark of sentient beings, yet not abandoning the work of liberating them; not clinging to the mark of bodhi, yet not retreating from the bodhisattva path. Transformational birth-and-death at this stage is not ordinary suffering but a subtle life-state in which bodhisattvas continue to cultivate, manifest, and benefit others through compassion and vows. To transcend this level of birth-and-death, one must continuously purify dharma-grasping and attachment to the marks of wisdom.

At the level of Buddhahood, the two obstructions are forever severed, the two deaths are forever ended, and the transformation of consciousness into wisdom is complete. At this point, Single-Practice Samadhi is no longer an expedient to be cultivated; it becomes the ultimate expression of the Buddha’s virtues, in which concentration and wisdom are perfected, ultimate and conventional truth are unobstructed, and compassion and wisdom are non-dual. The Mahayanasamgraha states that when equal wisdom arises with regard to birth-and-death and nirvana, birth-and-death is realized as nirvana; one neither abandons nor does not abandon birth-and-death, and one neither attains nor does not attain nirvana. In Yogacara language, Buddhahood is perfect transformation of the basis. In the language of Single-Practice Samadhi, it is the complete manifestation of the one mark of the dharmadhatu without obstruction to immeasurable function.<sup>[14]</sup>

This sequence shows that Single-Practice Samadhi does not have the same function at every stage. For ordinary beings, it is the gate for calming the mind and entering the Way. For saints who are severing delusion, it is a practice for deepening the wisdom of emptiness. For bodhisattvas, it is a path for breaking the cognitive obstruction and perfecting compassion and wisdom. For Buddhahood, it appears as ultimate concentration, wisdom, and free functioning. The meaning of the two kinds of birth-and-death must also be understood within this hierarchy of stages. Segmental birth-and-death is a coarse obstruction, while transformational birth-and-death is a subtle incompleteness. Since their levels differ, the depth of the remedies also differs.

## 8. Theoretical Value and Implications for Contemporary Buddhist Education

Examining Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-and-death from the perspective of Yogacara first helps improve our understanding of Yogacara soteriology. Yogacara is often regarded as emphasizing terminology, analysis, and theory, whereas meditation is often regarded as emphasizing practice, experience, and direct intuition. If the two are separated, one easily falls into the error of “studying Yogacara without knowing practice” or “speaking of meditation without doctrinal grounding.” The discussion above shows that Yogacara is not a conceptual system detached from practice, and

Single-Practice Samadhi is not an experiential method detached from doctrine. Interpreting them together reveals the full Mahayana structure of correspondence between principle and practice.

Second, this study helps clarify the levels of the Mahayana view of birth-and-death. Modern discussions of life and death often focus only on physical death and psychological fear. Buddhist reflection on birth-and-death goes further and asks how attachment is formed, how karma continues, how afflictions and latent tendencies persist, and how consciousness continues. Segmental birth-and-death explains the coarse retribution ordinary beings receive through contaminated karma and affliction. Transformational birth-and-death explains the subtle incompleteness that remains before saints attain perfection. This distinction helps practitioners avoid two misunderstandings: first, the assumption that leaving coarse suffering is already ultimate; second, the assumption that the bodhisattva's manifestation in birth-and-death is the same as ordinary samsaric transmigration. Yogacara's refined classifications help Buddhist doctrinal education establish a clear sense of stages.

Third, a Yogacara interpretation of Single-Practice Samadhi helps regulate contemporary understandings of meditation. Today meditation is often simplified as relaxation, sitting quietly, concentration, or psychological adjustment. These may have some value in settling body and mind, but they do not represent the full meaning of Buddhist meditation. Buddhist meditation must be connected with right view, discipline, wisdom, and the goal of liberation. The emphases of Single-Practice Samadhi - "the one mark of the dharmadhatu," "not grasping appearances," and "the equal operation of concentration and wisdom" - remind practitioners that meditation is neither escape from reality nor pursuit of special sensations. It is a transformation of consciousness through which attachment is broken and wisdom grows.

For Buddhist colleges, the implication is that Yogacara teaching should not stop at memorizing terminology, nor should meditation teaching become mere description of experience. If Single-Practice Samadhi is used as a practical thread, the two kinds of birth-and-death as the liberative aim, and the eight consciousnesses, three natures, two obstructions, and transformation of the basis as theoretical tools, one can form a pedagogical structure of "scriptural basis - doctrinal analysis - stages of practice and realization - contemporary implications." Such teaching preserves the rigor of Buddhist doctrine while strengthening students' understanding of practice and realization. It thus better embodies the Buddhist college ideal of giving equal weight to study and cultivation.

Finally, from the standpoint of modern life education, the Yogacara theory of the two kinds of birth-and-death offers a deeper view of life. Birth-and-death is not merely a matter of life's endpoint; it is a question of how attachment is formed, how afflictions continue, and how consciousness can be transformed. Single-Practice Samadhi offers a path by which the mind moves from distraction to concentration, from attachment to contemplation, and from confusion to clarity. In relation to the anxiety, restlessness, and loss of meaning common in contemporary society, this teaching should not be reduced to psychology, but it can serve as an important resource for Buddhist life education and cultivation of the mind.

## Conclusion

Single-Practice Samadhi, Yogacara, and the two kinds of birth-and-death respectively represent a method of practice, a theoretical foundation, and a liberative goal in the Mahayana system of cultivation and realization. If treated separately, Single-Practice Samadhi may be reduced to a meditative technique, the two kinds of birth-and-death may remain a terminological classification, and Yogacara may appear to be an abstract and complex doctrinal system. When the three are integrated, however, one can see the complete Mahayana structure from the samsaric flow of consciousness to liberation through transformation of the basis.

This paper argues that the fundamental meaning of Single-Practice Samadhi lies in "the one mark of the dharmadhatu" and "directing attention to the dharmadhatu." Its Yogacara meaning lies in gathering the first six consciousnesses, transforming the self-grasping of manas, purifying the seeds in alayavijnana, and gradually moving toward the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. Segmental birth-and-death is produced by the afflictive obstruction and contaminated karma, while transformational birth-and-death is produced by the cognitive obstruction and uncontaminated yet discriminating karma. The two correspond respectively to self-grasping and dharma-grasping, coarse transmigration and subtle incompleteness. Therefore, the relation of Single-Practice Samadhi to the two kinds of birth-and-death may be summarized as follows: at the initial level, it calms distraction and counteracts affliction; at a deeper level, it breaks self-grasping and transcends segmental

birth-and-death; on the bodhisattva path, it breaks dharma-grasping and moves toward transcending transformational birth-and-death; at Buddhahood, it appears as the complete severance of the two obstructions, the ending of the two deaths, and the perfection of transforming consciousness into wisdom.

Of course, the present paper offers only a systematic doctrinal analysis and cannot replace the concrete practices of particular traditions or the guidance of qualified teachers. Discussion of the practice of Single-Practice Samadhi must still be connected with a foundation in discipline, instruction from good spiritual friends, scriptural study, and long-term cultivation. Future research may further compare Tiantai calming-and-contemplation, Chan methods for settling the mind, Pure Land nianfo samadhi, and Yogacara theories of transformation of the basis. Such comparison would help illuminate the shared concern of Chinese Buddhist traditions for the joint cultivation of concentration and wisdom and the correspondence between principle and practice.

In sum, studying the relation between Single-Practice Samadhi and the two kinds of birth-and-death from the perspective of Yogacara not only deepens the understanding of birth-and-death and liberation in Buddhist doctrine but also provides a relatively clear theoretical reference for doctrinal education, meditation education, and life education in contemporary Buddhist colleges. Its central insight is that birth-and-death continues because of deluded consciousness and attachment, while liberation becomes possible through contemplation and transformation of the basis. To move from delusion to awakening, from consciousness to wisdom, and from birth-and-death to the manifestation of nirvana is the fundamental spirit of the Mahayana Buddhist path.

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