

A Study on Master Shandao's Thought of the Karma of Right Assurance through Oral Invocation: Centered on Collecting the Mind via Sound and the Full Possession of the Three Minds

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Abstract: Master Shandao's (613–681) definition of oral invocation as the “Karma of Right Assurance” marks a pivotal shift in Pure Land Buddhism from visualization to vocal practice. However, contemporary practice and scholarship often overlook the intricate doctrinal structure underlying this concept, reducing invocation to mindless vocalization or over-mystifying Other-power salvation. Through a close reading of the Commentary on the Amitayurdhyana Sutra, this paper reconstructs the micro-interaction mechanism of invocation into a triadic structure of “sound-thought-aspiration,” summarized as “collecting the mind via sound” (yisheng shexin). It argues that the sound of the Name serves as a vital medium resonating with Amida Buddha's Primal Vow, while the “Three Minds” (sanxin) function not merely as provisions for rebirth but as internal cultivation norms. By examining contemporary deviations—such as prioritizing quantity over sincerity and misunderstanding “one-pointedness of mind”—this study redefines the latter as a directional rather than capability standard. Finally, it explores the implications of this doctrinal reconstruction for cultivating the monastic atmosphere (daofeng) in Buddhist academies, proposing that institutional discipline requires the internal support of the Three Minds to achieve lasting ethical efficacy.

Keywords: Master Shandao; Karma of Right Assurance; Collecting the Mind via Sound; Three Minds

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1. Introduction

Master Shandao's (613–681) definition of oral invocation (Chin. chengming) as the “Karma of Right Assurance” (Chin. zhengdingye) marks a paradigm shift in Pure Land Buddhism from visualization to vocal practice. However, this core doctrine currently faces a dual dilemma in its contemporary transmission. Practically, oral invocation risks being reduced to mindless vocalization, leading to the misconception of Other-power salvation (Chin. tali jiudu) as an automatic mechanism devoid of subjective commitment. Doctrinally, interpretations are often skewed by later sectarian syncretism—such as the convergence of Chan and Pure Land—or generalized as mere psychological comfort, thereby obscuring the ontological depth of invocation as a profound reconstruction of praxis rather than a degradation of convenience.

Existing scholarship on Shandao and the Pure Land tradition is extensive. International scholars such as Kenneth Tanaka and Julian Pas have significantly advanced our understanding of Shandao's role in the sinicization of Buddhism and the historical formation of the Pure Land school. Furthermore, contemporary studies on religious sound practices have highlighted the ritual and acoustic dimensions of Buddhist recitation. However, most of this research leans toward macro-intellectual history,

historical philology, or general ritual studies. The micro-interaction mechanism within the invocation process—specifically how sound, thought, and vow-power interact to bridge the practitioner’s capacity and the Buddha’s Vow—remains underexplored.

This paper addresses this gap by reconstructing the internal doctrinal structure of invocation into a triadic framework of “sound-thought-aspiration,” summarized as the core proposition of “collecting the mind via sound” (Chin. yisheng shexin). It is crucial to clarify the relationship between this reconstructive framework and Shandao’s original texts: while Shandao himself did not explicitly use the phrase “collecting the mind via sound”—a term crystallized by later masters like Yinguang as “listening attentively” (Chin. she-er-di-ting)—this paper argues that the mechanism it describes is deeply rooted in Shandao’s exegesis. By deriving this implicit logic from the Commentary on the Amitayurdhyana Sutra (hereafter the Commentary) and clarifying it through Yogacara epistemology, this study interprets “collecting the mind via sound” not as a mere acoustic or psychological technique, but as a soteriological medium where the practitioner’s faith resonates with Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow.

Methodologically, this study employs textual close reading combined with conceptual derivation. Rather than solely reconstructing historical context, it derives normative implications from Shandao’s doctrinal structure to address contemporary issues. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 traces the formation of the Karma of Right Assurance; Section 3 analyzes the triadic structure of invocation; Section 4 extends the “Three Minds” (Chin. sanxin) from provisions for rebirth to internal cultivation norms; Section 5 examines contemporary deviations using these norms; and Section 6 explores the implications for cultivating the monastic atmosphere (Chin. daofeng) in contemporary Buddhist academies, arguing that institutional discipline requires the internal support of doctrinal ethics to achieve lasting efficacy.

2. From Visualization to Oral Invocation: The Formation of Shandao’s Thought on the “Karma of Right Assurance”

2.1 The Tension between Visualization and Oral Invocation in the Amitayurdhyana Sutra

A fundamental structural tension exists within the text of the Sutra on the Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life (the Amitayurdhyana Sutra, hereafter Contemplation Sutra). Regarding the main body of the scripture, the Buddha proclaims the “Sixteen Visualizations” to Queen Vaidehi—progressing from the contemplation of the sun, water, and ice to the splendors of the jeweled trees, ponds, and the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. This sets visualization through the “mind’s eye” as the crucial pivot of practice, which presupposes that the practitioner possesses a foundation of meditative concentration (Skt. samadhi) to keep the mind focused without distraction.

However, in the chapter concerning the “Lowest Grade of the Lowest Level,” the scripture records a highly impactful case: a dying sinner who has committed the Five Grave Offenses and Ten Evil Acts is, in the extreme distress of his final moments, “too oppressed by suffering to practice mindfulness.” In this crisis, he is told to “keep the voice continuous and complete ten invocations.” Merely by invoking the name of Amida Buddha (Namo Amituofo), he attains rebirth (Contemplation Sutra, n.d.). The Sixteen Visualizations, which require sustained power of visualization as a prerequisite, and the Lowest Grade chapter, which requires only ten oral invocations, constitute a profound conflict regarding the conditions for salvation. If this tension is not explained through refined doctrine, it inevitably leads to two opposite misreadings in Buddhist history: first, measuring the Lowest Grade chapter by the elite standards of the “Path of the Sages” and viewing it as an “expedient means of different intent” rather than a true teaching; second, absolutizing and vulgarizing the Lowest Grade chapter, thereby dissolving the necessity of any cultivation or spiritual transformation.

2.2 From Tanluan and Daochuo to Shandao: The Evolution of the Interpretive Standpoint

Prior to Shandao, Pure Land intellectual history had already accumulated important theoretical foundations to resolve this tension. Tanluan (476–542) dispelled the delusion of relying solely on self-power to sever afflictions. He distinguished between the “Difficult Path” and the “Easy Path,” clearly identifying the fundamental difference between “relying on self-power” and “relying on Buddha-power,” and attributing the basis for rebirth to the Other-power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow (Tanluan, 476–542). Daochuo (562–645) inherited this idea, further establishing the “Gate of the Path of Sages” and the “Pure Land Gate” based on the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra. He pointed out that in the era of the Dharma’s Decline, the

spiritual capacities of sentient beings are shallow, and only one path remains viable: relying on Buddha-power to attain rebirth in the Pure Land (Daochuo, 562–645).

However, the mainstream Buddhist community at that time had not yet escaped the shackles of the “Path of the Sages” thinking. In particular, the Shelun School (Mahayana-samgraha), based on Yogacara logic, argued that Amida’s Pure Land belonged to the “Reward Land” (Sambhogakaya field), which only sages above the first Bhumi could enter (Yang, 2021). For instance, Huiyuan of Jingying Temple argued in his Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra that the Reward Land is “inhabited only by the Buddha... while ordinary beings and those of the Two Vehicles are excluded.” This elitist interpretation excluded the vast majority of ordinary beings (Chin. fanfu, Skt. prthagjana) burdened by afflictions—who are precisely the primary objects of Amida Buddha’s Vow—from the scope of the Pure Land gate, forcibly explaining the Lowest Grade chapter as a mere “expedient means of different intent” (Huiyuan, 523).

Master Shandao’s work of “establishing the definitive standard” was precisely his direct challenge to the Shelun School based on Daochuo’s “Two Gates” classification. In the “Section on the Essential Meaning” of his Commentary, he grasped the original cause of the Contemplation Sutra: Queen Vaidehi was not a liberated sage, but an ordinary being trapped in the suffering of the world. Using this as a catalyst, Shandao established the supreme interpretive principle of the “correspondence between the capacity (Chin. ji) and the Dharma (Chin. fa).” The focus of interpretation shifted profoundly from “what sentient beings can cultivate” to “how the Buddha’s Vow saves such beings” (Zhu, 2015; Chen J., 2024).

2.3 Following the Buddha’s Vow and the Establishment of the Karma of Right Assurance

Based on the interpretive standpoint of the “Ordinary Being,” Shandao defined oral invocation as the “Karma of Right Assurance” in the “Section on Non-Meditative Virtues” of the Commentary: “To single-mindedly and exclusively recite the name of Amida Buddha, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, regardless of the length of time, and without abandoning it thought after thought—this is called the Karma of Right Assurance, because it accords with that Buddha’s Vow” (Shandao, 613–681a).

The phrase “because it accords with that Buddha’s Vow” is the ultimate basis for the establishment of the Karma of Right Assurance. The Eighteenth Vow in the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra explicitly states the condition for rebirth through sincere entrusting (Larger Sutra, n.d.). Shandao further explained this vow in his Dharma Gate of the Samadhi: “For any sentient being who exclusively invokes Amida Buddha, that Buddha’s heart-light always shines upon them, embracing and protecting them without abandonment” (Shandao, 613–681d). Defining oral invocation rather than visualization as the “Karma of Right Assurance” was a deep reconstruction of the ontology of Pure Land practice. Invocation directly accesses the Buddha’s Vow, making it the most suitable “final channel of salvation” in extreme situations where the power of visualization cannot be generated (Yanjue, 2016).

3. “Collecting the Mind via Sound”: The Doctrinal Structure of Oral Invocation

Shandao’s designation of oral invocation as the “Karma of Right Assurance” was not an encouragement of unconscious, mindless chanting, but a practice embedded within an extremely rigorous doctrinal structure. This paper analyzes this structure through a triadic dimension: sound, thought, and vow-power.

3.1 The Dimension of Sound: Vocal Invocation, Aural Listening, and the Method of Collecting the Mind

In the Commentary, Shandao pointed out that practitioners should “always invoke the Buddha with the mouth and always practice mindfulness of the Buddha in the mind, without ceasing during walking, standing, sitting, or lying down” (Shandao, 613–681a). This statement reveals the internal logic of the “Sound Gate” of cultivation: “vocal invocation” is not an isolated external behavior, but the externalization of “mental thought”; “aural listening” is not passive perception, but an active mechanism for collecting and focusing the mind.

Viewing this through the explanatory framework of Yogacara, the mind of an ordinary being is constantly driven by the self-clinging of the Manas-vijnana, wandering among the six sensory objects. From the perspective of mental operations, Shandao’s invocation actually constructs a “focusing convenience” that directs the mind from scattered wandering to a single object of focus (Skt. alambana) via the concentration on the sound of the Buddha’s name. Unlike the visual concentration

on the “critical phrase” (Chin. *huatou*) in Chan or the internal contemplation of the “Three Contemplations in One Mind” in Tiantai, Shandao’s approach places the core mechanism of collecting the mind on the concentration of sound—what later masters described as “listening attentively to one’s own recitation.” It must be clarified that Shandao himself did not use Yogacara terminology, nor is “listening attentively” his original phrase; rather, it is a convenient summary by later generations. This paper uses this term to provide an interpretive reconstruction of the internal mechanism of “collecting the mind via sound” in Shandao’s invocation. This mechanism does not require pre-existing meditative power. Instead, it entrusts the task of “collecting the mind” to the perceptible object of sound, providing a concrete point of leverage for ordinary beings (Zhang, 2020).

However, a further distinction must be made: in Shandao’s context, the core salvific force is the “Luminous Name” as a whole. Shandao stated: “The World-Honored One Amida originally made deep and heavy vows to embrace and transform the ten quarters through the Luminous Name” (Shandao, 613–681c). The physical “sound” is merely the medium through which the Name manifests in the practitioner’s experience. The sound of the Name is not a simple acoustic wave but a concrete channel connecting the ordinary being with the Buddha’s Vow.

3.2 The Dimension of Thought: The Sincere Mind and Recognition of Faith

The “Sincere Mind” (Chin. *zhicheng xin*) ranks first among Shandao’s “Three Minds” and serves as the critical pivot for transforming invocation from a vocal act into a religious practice. In the Commentary, Shandao defined the Sincere Mind as “acting within a true and real heart,” requiring that practitioners “must not outwardly manifest a phase of worthiness, goodness, or diligence while inwardly harboring falsehood, greed, anger, or myriad forms of deceit and hypocrisy” (Shandao, 613–681a). This ethical requirement of internal and external consistency transforms invocation from an external lip movement into an internal recognition and acceptance of faith.

From the perspective of religious experience, the Sincere Mind embodies a profound structure of receptivity: the subject does not actively attain a transcendent state but, through the medium of faith and aspiration, allows the Buddha’s salvific power to act upon them. Shandao’s emphasis on “riding on the Buddha’s Vow-power” is a precise description of the passivity inherent in this active self-commitment. In his Hymns in Praise of Birth, Shandao cited the Contemplation Sutra: “If one invokes Amida Buddha even once, the heavy sins of birth and death for eighty billion kalpas can be eradicated” (Shandao, 613–681c). The sins are eradicated not due to the practitioner’s self-merit, but due to the vow-efficacy generated by the resonance between the invocation and the Buddha’s Vow. The absence of the Sincere Mind reduces cultivation to “mindless karma”—the Buddha’s name is recited, but the mind wanders elsewhere (Shandao, 613–681a).

3.3 The Dimension of Vow-Power: Resonance between Invocation and the Primal Vow

“According with that Buddha’s Vow” is the metaphysical foundation of the structure of “collecting the mind via sound.” Shandao elaborated on this in his Praise of Dharma Services: “All ordinary beings, whether good or evil, who attain birth do so by riding upon the great vow-power of Amida Buddha as the augmenting cause (Skt. *adhipati-pratyaya*)” (Shandao, 613–681b).

Shandao’s Other-power is not a simple binary opposition to self-power, nor is it a mechanical determinism that excludes the practitioner’s subjectivity. Within the framework of the “correspondence between the capacity and the Dharma,” vow-power is essentially the triggering and manifestation of the Buddha’s merit-transference within the sentient being’s consciousness. Shandao stripped the “self-power” of ordinary beings of its status as the “merit-power to sever afflictions and realize truth” and repositioned it as the “response-power to faithfully accept the Buddha’s Vow.” The full possession of the Three Minds makes invocation the intersection of the capacity and the Dharma at the level of vow-power. Sound is the medium, mind is the pivot, and the vow is the foundation. “Collecting the mind via sound” describes an integrated field of practice formed by the three-dimensional interaction of sound, thought, and vow-power.

4. The “Full Possession of the Three Minds” and Its Normative Significance for Pure Land Practice

In Shandao’s thought, the “Full Possession of the Three Minds” is not only the provision (Chin. *ziliang*) for rebirth but also a complete set of cultivation norms and a moral audit mechanism within the Pure Land School. Shandao explicitly stated: “Those

who possess the Three Minds will certainly be born in that land; if one is missing, rebirth will not be achieved” (Shandao, 613–681a).

4.1 The Sincere Mind: Establishing the Internal Norm of the “True Heart”

The requirement of the Sincere Mind constitutes a profound reflection on the formalistic tendencies in religious practice. Shandao severely criticized the orientation where “although the three karmas [of body, speech, and mind] arise, it is called goodness tainted by mixed poisons, or false practice” (Shandao, 613–681a). This emphasis contains a profound dimension of repentance—only through sincere reflection on past false actions can a true heart seeking salvation arise (Shibata, 2010). As an internal precept, the Sincere Mind requires practitioners to scrutinize the purity of their motivation in every invocation (Yinguang, n.d.; Chen Q., 2015).

4.2 The Deep Mind: Establishing the Faith and Aspiration of the “Ordinary Being”

Shandao interpreted the Deep Mind (Chin. *shenxin*) as: “Deeply believing that oneself is an ordinary being, and deeply believing that Amida’s Primal Vow is not in vain” (Shandao, 613–681a). The normative implication of the Deep Mind lies in its dialectical tension: “deeply believing oneself is a flawed ordinary being” and “deeply believing in Amida’s certain salvation” constitute a sublime structure of faith. Mixed practice is essentially “frequent interruption of the mind”—the oscillation of faith. As a mechanism for ensuring the stability of faith, the Deep Mind establishes a stable power of faith and aspiration for “exclusive invocation.”

4.3 The Mind of Aspiration for Rebirth and Merit-Transference: From Individual Rebirth to Communal Ethics

The Mind of Aspiration for Rebirth and Merit-transference (Chin. *huixiang fayuan xin*) breaks through closed, self-interested attachments. Shandao emphasized transferring the merit of invocation to all sentient beings for collective rebirth in the Land of Bliss (Shandao, 613–681a). The communal ethical function of the “Three Minds” stems from its internal logical structure: the Sincere Mind is a purification mechanism for motivation; the Deep Mind is a safeguard for stability; and the Mind of Aspiration is a transformation mechanism for externalizing faith into altruistic action. Together, they form a complete ethical closed-loop. When this loop operates, the development of the monastic atmosphere is no longer the result of institutional control but a natural manifestation of internalized doctrine.

5. A Doctrinal Examination of Contemporary Deviations in Pure Land Practice

Using “collecting the mind via sound” and the “full possession of the Three Minds” as normative benchmarks, several prominent deviations in contemporary Pure Land practice can be clearly examined.

5.1 Returning from Quantity to Sincerity

Based on the normative requirements of the Sincere Mind, if a practitioner focuses only on the quantity of invocations while ignoring the resonance of internal faith and aspiration, they easily fall into the “mindless karma” rebuked by Shandao. Cultivation should therefore return from an obsession with quantity to a focus on the “true heart” in every sound, placing qualitative sincerity above quantitative accumulation.

5.2 Distinguishing “Augmenting Responses” from “Response Worship”

A more subtle deviation is taking “spiritual responses” (Chin. *ganying*) as the goal of pursuit. Narrative accounts in the Contemplation Sutra, such as the “fires of hell turning into a cool breeze” (Contemplation Sutra, n.d.), belong to the category of “augmenting causes of response” in the Pure Land tradition (Shandao, 613–681a). However, if a practitioner takes seeking responses—such as seeing light or seeing the Buddha—as the purpose of cultivation, it is a reversal of root and branch, turning faith into a utilitarian pursuit.

5.3 Shifting from a Capability Standard to a Directional Standard

Another deep anxiety triggered by an unstable Deep Mind is the misplaced understanding of “one-pointedness of mind” (Chin. *yixin buluan*). This term originates from the Amitabha Sutra (Amitabha Sutra, n.d.) and is often misread as a profound state of meditative concentration. Returning to Shandao’s interpretive system, “one-pointedness” does not describe a capability state of “I can be thoughtless,” but defines a posture of faith: “I sincerely accept.” Based on Shandao’s principle of “exclusive invocation” (Shandao, 613–681a), this paper attempts a hierarchical reconstruction of “one-pointedness of mind,”

transforming it from a “capability standard” unattainable for ordinary beings into a “directional standard” for sustainable practice:

Level 1: Unidirectionality in External Practice (Foundational Dimension). “Listening attentively with one-pointed thought” requires maintaining a continuous stream of the Buddha’s name during formal sessions without being interrupted by external distractions.

Level 2: Mental Adjustment and Cognitive Transformation (Deepening Dimension). This requires the practitioner to raise the Buddha’s name to dissolve anxiety and distraction when emotions fluctuate, transforming the Buddha’s name from an “external tool” into an internal source of stability.

Level 3: Continuity of Life’s Underlying Texture (Ultimate Orientation). “Continuity thought after thought without interruption” requires internalizing invocation as the underlying texture of life. This level is the full realization of Shandao’s Karma of Right Assurance.

The correction of these contemporary deviations reveals a crucial dimension of Shandao’s thought: doctrinal structures inherently possess normative and ethical functions. The “Three Minds” are not merely internal psychological states ensuring individual rebirth; they constitute an ethical framework that regulates behavior and purifies motivation. It is precisely this transition—from the internalization of faith to the externalization of ethical norms—that bridges individual praxis and communal ethos. If invocation without the Sincere Mind degenerates into “mindless karma,” then a monastic community without the ethical infrastructure of the “Three Minds” inevitably degenerates into mere formalism. This ethical dimension provides the logical foundation for applying Shandao’s doctrine to the institutional and spiritual cultivation of contemporary Buddhist academies.

6. Implications of Shandao’s Thought for the Development of Monastic Atmosphere in Buddhist Academies

While the development of a monastic atmosphere requires institutional norms, it is difficult to form a lasting self-awareness in cultivation without the support of classical doctrine and internal aspiration. Only by exploring the paths through which doctrine is internalized into monastic character (Chin. *senge*) can enduring norms be established.

6.1 From Text to Right View: Nourishing the Foundation of Cultivation through Classical Doctrine

Currently, some students in Buddhist academies tend to hold a superficial understanding of Pure Land teachings. Institutions should incorporate Master Shandao’s “five works in nine fascicles” into their primary curriculum, laying the foundation for Right View through close textual reading. When students thoroughly understand the “position of the ordinary being” and the “decisiveness of the Buddha’s Vow” from a doctrinal perspective, they can more effectively resist the utilitarian and mystifying tendencies of folk beliefs.

6.2 From Regulation to the Body: Regulating Daily Practice through the Right Act of Invocation

A monastic atmosphere is manifested in daily life, and daily life is manifested in the body and speech. Communal regulations in temples should not merely stipulate the quantity of Buddha-name invocations but should follow Shandao’s legacy by emphasizing the collection of the mind, attentive listening, and clear articulation. By using the Right Act of invocation to collect the students’ body, speech, and mind, “collecting the mind via sound” ceases to be a conceptual term in books and becomes a real physical practice in morning and evening chanting.

6.3 From Individual Aspiration to Communal Ethics: Enhancing Monastic Character through the Three Minds

The core of monastic character formation lies in aspiration (Skt. *bodhicitta*). Shandao’s doctrine of the Three Minds can serve as an internal precept for students’ self-examination: using the Sincere Mind to counteract vanity; using the Deep Mind to counteract an unstable mind of the Way; and using the Mind of Aspiration and Merit-transference to broaden one’s mental capacity. When the ethical loop of the Three Minds operates within the Sangha, the development of the monastic atmosphere breaks through the “island” of individual practice and forms a powerful communal ethical field.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the contemporary dilemma of reducing oral invocation to either mindless vocalization or a mystical mechanism of automatic salvation. By reconstructing the internal doctrinal structure of invocation into the triadic framework of “sound-thought-aspiration”—summarized as “collecting the mind via sound”—this paper has demonstrated that Shandao’s Karma of Right Assurance is neither a mere acoustic exercise nor a passive reliance on Other-power. Rather, it is an integrated soteriological field where the practitioner’s capacity resonates with the Buddha’s Primal Vow. In doing so, the study clarifies the relationship between Shandao’s original texts and later interpretive frameworks: while the explicit phrasing of “collecting the mind via sound” was crystallized by later masters, its operational logic is deeply rooted in Shandao’s exegesis of the synchronous interaction between vocal sound, the Sincere Mind, and vow-power.

Furthermore, by extending the “Three Minds” from provisions for rebirth to internal cultivation norms, this paper provides a doctrinal corrective to contemporary deviations. Redefining “one-pointedness of mind” as a directional standard, rather than a capability standard, restores the accessibility and sustainability of Pure Land practice for ordinary beings. The transition from individual praxis to the communal ethics of the monastic atmosphere is not an external application but a logical extension of the text itself: the ethical closed-loop formed by the Three Minds provides the internal doctrinal support that pure institutional discipline lacks.

However, this study is primarily rooted in textual exegesis and conceptual derivation. While it clarifies the doctrinal mechanics of invocation, it does not empirically examine how contemporary practitioners or seminary students internally experience this triadic structure in their daily routines. Future research could employ ethnographic or psychological methodologies to investigate the lived experience of “collecting the mind via sound.” Additionally, comparative studies on the acoustic mechanisms of invocation across different Buddhist traditions could further contextualize Shandao’s unique contribution to the phenomenology of religious sound. Ultimately, returning to classical doctrines to regulate daily practice and nurturing monastic character through the Three Minds remains the vital heritage that Shandao’s thought offers to the contemporary Buddhist world.

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