

信心銘 – Inscription on the True Heart/Mind

Attributed to Sengcan, Third Chinese Patriarch of Zen Buddhism (around 600 AD)

Translated by Bruce R. Linnell, PhD (2011)

A comment on the title : due to the nature of Chinese, the title could mean any of the following : “Belief in (the) Mind”, “The Believing Mind”, “Trust in (the) Mind”, “Trusting Mind”, “True Mind”, “Truthful Mind”, “Faith in (the) Mind”, or “Faithful Mind”, and indeed many of these have been used by other translators (most often “Faith in Mind”). I chose “True Mind” because the entire inscription discusses how to get back to the original Buddha nature we all have (but have forgotten), and the phrase “true mind” (in English, not these particular Chinese symbols) is often used synonymously with this Buddha nature, Buddha mind, True Nature, Original Nature, etc.

My goals were to include every Chinese symbol in the English sentence, using an exact translation of each symbol, and with minimal additional words and paraphrasing. This results in sentences which are sometimes stilted in English, but hopefully provides a more literal translation. Interpreted meanings are as close to the exact meaning as possible. Exceptions to these guidelines are marked with footnotes.

Being : existence

Emptiness : negation of the belief in Being and non-Being

Awake, wise : enlightened

Foolish : not awake; unenlightened

Heart/mind : the Chinese symbol means both “heart” and “mind”; it seems misleading to use one or the other

Suchness : that which is constant and genuine; the true nature of things; reality-as-it-is; things just as they are

The Way, this wisdom : Buddha's way – the four noble truths, eightfold path, etc.

Entanglements : sensory pleasures, preferences, desires, aversions, love, hate, etc. (literally “conditions”)

Naturally, spontaneously : done by itself, that which is so of itself, done on its own, happens without forcing it

Cease to be, rejected, forgotten, eliminated, fade away : leave your awareness, no longer influence you

Things : the external world; objects, people, creatures, events

至道無難 Attaining the Way is not difficult,

唯嫌揀擇 If only you dislike picking and choosing.

但莫憎愛 Only when you do not “hate” and “love”

洞然明白 Will the Way thus be clearly and plainly revealed.

毫釐有差 If there exists the smallest distinction,

天地懸隔 Heaven and Earth become divided and out of balance.

欲得現前 If you want to have the Way appear in front of you,

莫存順逆 Do not remain “agreeable” or “opposed” to anything.

違順相爭 When “disagreeable” and “agreeable” compete with each other,

是爲心病 This makes your heart/mind sick.

不識玄旨 When you do not understand the deep and mysterious meaning of the Way,

徒勞念靜 It is useless to merely quiet your thoughts.

圓同太虛 The Way is perfect and complete, just like the greatest void –

無欠無餘 Nothing lacking, nothing extra.

良由取捨 It is precisely because you “select” and “reject”

所以不如 That you therefore do not perceive the Suchness of everything.

莫逐有緣 Do not pursue Being and entanglements;

勿住空忍 Do not dwell in Emptiness and sufferance.

一種平懷 When the mind is at peace in Oneness,

泯然自盡 Thus are these eliminated, and naturally fade away.

止動歸止 When you try to stop activity to return to stillness,
止更彌動 This stillness further increases activity.
唯滯兩邊 If you are always caught in one side or the other^A,
寧知一種 How can you know Oneness?

一種不通 When Oneness is not understood completely,
兩處失功 Both of these viewpoints lose their usefulness :
遣有沒有 To reject Being is to merely lose Being;
從空背空 To embrace Emptiness is to merely be burdened by Emptiness.

多言多慮 Too much talking, too much worrying,
轉不相應 And you fall out of harmony^B with the Way.
絕言絕慮 Be done with talking, be done with worrying,
無處不通 And nothing will be closed to you.^C

歸根得旨 Return to the source and you gain the meaning;
隨照失宗 Pursue enlightenment^D and you lose this wisdom.
須臾返照 But the moment you return to enlightenment^D,
勝卻前空 You go beyond and reject appearances and Emptiness.

前空轉變 Apparent changes in appearances and Emptiness
皆由妄見 Are all caused by foolish opinions.
不用求真 You need not seek what is true and real,
唯須息見 You must only stop having opinions.

二見不住 Do not dwell in dualistic opinions –
慎莫追尋 Be careful not to pursue them.
纔有是非 Not until “right” and “wrong” exist
紛然失心 Does your heart/mind thus become lost in confusion.

二由一有 Duality is caused by the One’s existence;
一亦莫守 But also do not dwell on the One.
一心不生 When your heart/mind is one, no thoughts arise;
萬法無咎 Then all things are without blame.

無咎無法 When there is no blame, there can be no things;
不生不心 When no thoughts arise, there can be no heart/mind.
能隨境滅 When things cease to be, mind follows;^E
境逐能沈 When mind settles, things are rejected.^E

境由能境 Things are caused by mind, but are things as well;^E

能由境能 Mind is caused by things, but is mind as well.^E

欲知兩段 If you want to know both halves,

元是一空 Their origin is One Emptiness.

一空同兩 Within One Emptiness both halves are the same,

齊含萬象 Each equally containing all forms.

不見精粗 When you do not perceive “refined” and “coarse”,

寧有偏黨 How can preferences exist?

大道體寬 The essence of the Great Way is vast –

無易無難 Nothing easy, nothing difficult.

小見狐疑 Those with petty opinions are full of doubt and suspicion;

轉急轉遲 When they become anxious, they get behind.

執之失度 Attachments lead to loss of inner freedom,

必入邪路 As you certainly enter the wrong path.

放之自然 Letting go leads to natural spontaneity,

體無去住 Where the essence of the Way is neither absent nor present.

任性合道 Allowing your inner nature to unite with the Way,

逍遙絕惱 Be free and done with aggravation.

繫念乖真 Restricted thinking is opposed to what is true and real,

昏沈不好 Sinking into darkness and confusion, which is not good.

不好勞神 It is not good to trouble your spirit –

何用疏親 So why see “distant” or “close” relationships?

欲取一乘 If you want to attain the Way,

勿惡六塵 Do not dislike your senses and thoughts.

六塵不惡 Not disliking your senses and thoughts

還同正覺 Is also the same as true Awakening.

智者無爲 The wise practice non-action,

愚人自縛 While the foolish restrict themselves.

法無異法 One thing is not different from another thing,

妄自愛著 But the foolish have their desires and attachments.

將心用心 To govern heart/mind by using heart/mind –
豈非大錯 How can that not be a great mistake?
迷生寂亂 Delusion produces peace and chaos,
悟無好惡 But the Awakened have no likes or dislikes.

一切二邊 All pairs of opposites
妄自斟酌 Come from your own foolish thinking.
夢幻虛華 They are like dreams, illusions, mirages –
何勞把捉 Why struggle to catch and hold them?

得失是非 “Gain” and “loss”, “right” and “wrong” –
一時放卻 Just for a moment, let go and reject them.

眼若不睡 If your eyes do not sleep,
諸夢自除 All dreams are naturally eliminated.
心若不異 If your heart/mind does not discriminate,
萬法一如 All things are of One Suchness.

一如體玄 Within the deep and mysterious essence of this One Suchness,
兀爾忘緣 You rise above entanglements, and thus they are forgotten.

萬法齊觀 When all things are perceived as equal,
歸復自然 You return again to your natural spontaneity.
泯其所以 Eliminate them and as a result,
不可方比 You cannot have any way to compare them.

止動無動 Stillness set in motion is not movement,
動止無止 Movement stopped is not stillness.
兩既不成 If both halves are actually incomplete,
一何有爾 How can the One exist like that?

究竟窮極 When you examine this exhaustively to its extreme conclusion,
不存軌則 No path or rule remains.
契心平等 Place your heart/mind in harmony with non-discrimination,
所作俱息 Which stops all mental activity.

狐疑盡淨 Doubts and suspicions fade completely;
正信調直 True faith is harmonious and straightforward.
一切不留 Nothing is held on to,
無可記憶 Nothing can be remembered.

虛明自照 You are empty, clear, naturally enlightened^D,
不勞心力 And make no effort to use the power of your heart/mind.
非思量處 Here no amount of thought can dwell;
識情難測 Knowledge and feelings are unable to comprehend.

眞如法界 Within the true and real Suchness of this absolute source of existence,
無他無自 There is no “other”, no “self”.
要急相應 If you want to come quickly into harmony with this realm,
唯言不二 Only say “no duality”.

不二皆同 In “no duality” everything is the same,
無不包容 Nothing is excluded.
十方智者 Wise people everywhere
皆入此宗 Have all entered this wisdom.

宗非促延 Entering this wisdom can not be hurried nor held back –
一念萬年 It could happen in one moment or take an eternity.^F
無在不在 The Way is neither present nor absent,
十方目前 Yet the Way is everywhere in front of your eyes.

極小同大 Extremely small is the same as extremely large,
忘絕境界 When boundaries are forgotten and done with.
極大同小 Extremely large is the same as extremely small,
不見邊表 When distinct opposites are not perceived.

有即是無 Being is simultaneously the same as non-Being;
無即是有 Non-Being is simultaneously the same as Being.
若不如此 If you are not like this,
必不須守 You certainly must not remain there.

一即一切 One is not separate from All;
一切即一 All is not separate from One.
但能如是 If only you can be like this,
何慮不畢 Why worry about not being perfect?

信心不二 The true heart/mind is non-dual;
不二信心 Non-dual is the true heart/mind.
言語道斷 Talking about the Way ends here,
非去來今 For the Way has no past or future or present.

A : literally, “only blocked in both sides”

B : literally, “turn to non-agreement”

C : literally, “nowhere will be blocked”

D : I believe what is meant by this symbol (“illumination”) is the Light of the Buddha, enlightenment, etc.; however, this is the only interpretation that is my personal opinion, and has no support from any other sources

E : the literal translations, “subject” and “object”, refer respectively to the mind and the things it perceives

F : I believe this line (literally, “one moment eternity”) refers to the “sudden vs. gradual” debate on whether enlightenment can happen quickly, or can only be achieved after many years (some say many lifetimes) of practice

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