

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

The biggest problem in translating Chinese is that each symbol can mean a multitude of different things. For example, according to various Chinese-to-English dictionaries on the web, the characters in the first line could mean any of the following (the “|” separates translations from different dictionaries) :

至 : arrive, most, to, until | reach, arrive at; utmost, perfect | reach, arrive; extremely, very | to reach (a destination), arrive at; extremely, very, to indicate the superlative degree, the most | arrive, to, extremely

道 : direction, way, method, road, path, principle, truth, reason, skill, method, tao (of Taoism), a measure word, to say, to speak, to talk | a way, road; the right path; principle, truth, reason, logos, cosmic energy; to lead; to say. the eightfold noble path | path, road, street; method, way | path, road, street; method, way; the way (in the metaphysical sense); Taoism, Taoist; say, speak; theory, doctrine; govern, lead; think, suppose; skill, art, craft | road, way, morals, art, the Tao, line, channel

無 : -less, not to have, no, none, not, to lack, un- | un-, in- in a negative sense; not no, none, non-existent | negative, no, not; lack, have no | negative, no, not, none; without, destitute of, wanting; lack, have not; no matter what (or how), not yet | not have, never mind, not | non-Being (Buddhism)

難 : difficult (to...), problem, difficulty, difficult, not good, disaster, distress, to scold | difficult, hard; distress, adversity | difficult, arduous, hard; unable | difficult, not easy, arduous, hard; unable, not in a position to; unpleasant, not good; disaster, calamity, misfortune; rebuke, reprove, reprimand | difficult, hard, troublesome; hardly possible, bad, unpleasant, nasty

Once the meanings of each word are known, the translator’s job is to pick one specific meaning for each symbol, and then arrange the words into a coherent, meaningful sentence. Sometimes that’s easy, sometimes not so much. Often, translators just try to get the general “feel” of what the Chinese is trying to say, and then write an English sentence that means about the same thing. What I tried to do (for no other reason than to see if it could be done) was to preserve as much of the original Chinese as possible by always using each symbol in the English sentence, and an exact translation of each symbol wherever possible. Occasionally more than one English meaning for a symbol fits equally well, and the translator must pick just one. However, I sometimes took both meanings and combined them into a single phrase, such as “heart/mind”, or “deep and mysterious”. I also often used a slightly different word than what was given in the dictionaries if it read better and didn’t change the meaning very much (like “smallest” instead of “very small”), or used a more common word instead of an obscure one (like “meaning” instead of “purport”). However, I always interpreted idioms (like “six dusts”, “one vehicle”, “sky flowers”) for clarity, since they mean nothing to the modern English reader.

What follows shows just how exact the translation for each line is. It shows every interpretation I made (and what the exact translation was), the alternate meanings, what extra words I added, where I combined multiple meanings into one phrase, and how solid a basis I had for the translation. The one thing it doesn’t show is all the possible meanings for each symbol, because that would make the document way too unwieldy.

The following key describes how to read what follows :

underline = exact translation of symbol

both = blended exact translations from one symbol

² = a two-symbol word

violet = not much support for translation

italics = interpreted translation of symbol; exact is in [brackets]
(words) = words added for clarity

green = equally likely alternate translation

orange = little agreement among other translators

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.*

The Perfect Way is...

[reaching/arriving]

[seen thru/known]

毫釐有差	If there <u>exists</u> the <i>smallest distinction</i> ,	[very small/least bit/slightest] [difference]
天地懸隔	<u>Heaven</u> and <u>Earth</u> become <u>divided</u> and <i>out of balance</i> .	[unresolved/unsettled]
欲得現前	If you <u>want</u> to <i>have</i> (the Way) <u>appear</u> in <u>front</u> of you,	[obtain/get]
莫存順逆	<u>Do not remain</u> “agreeable” or “opposed” (to anything).	
違順相爭	When “disagreeable” and “agreeable” ² <i>compete</i> with <u>each other</u> ,	[struggle/fight]
是為心病	<u>This makes</u> your <i>heart/mind</i> <u>sick</u> .	
不識玄旨	When you <u>do not understand</u> the <i>deep and mysterious meaning</i> (of the Way),	[know] [purport]
徒勞念靜	It is <i>useless</i> to (merely) <u>quiet</u> your <u>thoughts</u> .	[futile/in vain ²]
圓同太虛	(The Way is) <i>perfect and complete</i> , just like the <u>greatest void</u> –	
無欠無餘	<u>Nothing lacking</u> , <u>nothing extra</u> .	[surplus/excess]
良由取捨	It is <u>precisely because</u> ² you “select” and “reject”	
所以不如	That you <u>therefore</u> ² <u>do not</u> (perceive) the <u>Suchness</u> (of everything).	
莫逐有緣	<u>Do not pursue</u> <u>Being</u> and <i>entanglements</i> ;	[conditions]
勿住空忍	<u>Do not dwell</u> in <u>Emptiness</u> and <i>sufferance</i> .	[endure/tolerate]
一種平懷	When the <u>mind</u> is at <u>peace</u> in <u>Oeness</u> ² ,	
泯然自盡	<u>Thus</u> (are these) <u>eliminated</u> , and <u>naturally fade away</u> . (note there is no subject!)	[used up/exhausted]
止動歸止	When you try to <u>stop activity</u> to <u>return</u> to <u>stillness</u> ,	[movement/action]
止更彌動	<u>This stillness further increases activity</u> .	[even more] [movement/action]
唯滯兩邊	If you are (always) <i>caught</i> in <u>one side or the other</u> ^A ,	[blocked/obstructed] [only/alone both side/edge/border]
寧知一種	<u>How can you know</u> <u>Oeness</u> ² ?	
一種不通	When <u>Oeness</u> ² is <u>not understood completely</u> ,	[well known]
兩處失功	<u>Both</u> of these <i>viewpoints</i> <u>lose</u> their <u>usefulness</u> :	[(mental)position/place]
遣有沒有	To <u>reject</u> <u>Being</u> is to (merely) <u>lose</u> <u>Being</u> ;	[drive away/exile] [submerge/eliminate/disappear]
從空背空	To <u>embrace</u> <u>Emptiness</u> is to (merely) be <u>burdened</u> by <u>Emptiness</u> .	[follow/agree with]
多言多慮	<u>Too much talking</u> , <u>too much worrying/thinking</u> ,	
轉不相應	And you <i>fall out of harmony</i> ^B (with the Way).	[turn/change/become not correspondence/agreement ²]
絕言絕慮	<u>Be done with talking</u> , <u>be done with worrying/thinking</u> ,	
無處不通	And <i>nothing</i> will be <u>closed</u> to you. ^C	[nowhere ²] [blocked/obstructed ²]
歸根得旨	<u>Return to the source</u> and you <u>gain</u> the <i>meaning</i> ;	[purport]
隨照失宗	<u>Pursue enlightenment</u> ^D and you <u>lose</u> this <i>wisdom</i> .	[follow] [illumination] [main doctrine]
須臾返照	But the <u>moment</u> ² you <u>return</u> to <u>enlightenment</u> ^D ,	[illumination]
勝卻前空	You <u>go beyond</u> and <u>reject appearances</u> and <u>Emptiness</u> .	[surpass] [refuse/decline] [what's in front of you]
前空轉變	(Apparent) <u>changes</u> ² in <i>appearances</i> and <u>Emptiness</u>	[what's in front of you]
皆由妄見	Are <u>all caused by foolish opinions/false views (of reality)</u> ² .	
不用求真	You <u>need not</u> ² <u>seek</u> what is <i>true and real</i> ,	
唯須息見	You <u>must only stop</u> having <u>opinions</u> .	
二見不住	<u>Do not dwell</u> in <i>dualistic opinions</i> –	[two]
慎莫追尋	Be <u>careful not</u> to <u>pursue</u> ² them.	
纔有是非	<u>Not until</u> “right” and “wrong” ² <u>exist</u>	
紛然失心	Does your <i>heart/mind</i> <u>thus</u> become <u>lost</u> in <u>confusion</u> .	

二由一有	<i>Duality is <u>caused by</u> the <u>One's existence</u>;</i>	[two]
一亦莫守	But <u>also do not dwell on</u> the <u>One</u> .	[maintain/abide by]
一心不生	When your <i>heart/mind</i> is <u>one</u> , <u>no</u> (thoughts) <i>arise</i> ;	[produce/create/born]
萬法無咎	Then <u>all things</u> ² are <u>without blame</u> .	
無咎無法	When there is <u>no blame</u> , there can be <u>no things</u> ;	
不生不心	When <u>no</u> (thoughts) <i>arise</i> , there can be <u>no heart/mind</u> .	[produce/create/born]
能隨境滅	When <i>things cease to be</i> , <i>mind follows/submits</i> ; ^E	[object] [extinguish] [subject]
境逐能沈	When <i>mind settles</i> , <i>things are rejected</i> . ^E	[subject] [sink/submerge] [object] [expel/drive off]
境由能境	<i>Things are <u>caused by mind</u>, (but) are <i>things</i> (as well)</i> ; ^E	[object] [subject] [object]
能由境能	<i>Mind is <u>caused by things</u>, (but) is <i>mind</i> (as well)</i> . ^E	[subject] [object] [subject]
欲知兩段	If you <u>want</u> to <u>know both halves</u> ,	[sections/pieces]
元是一空	Their <u>origin is One Emptiness</u> .	
一空同兩	Within <u>One Emptiness both</u> (halves) are the <u>same</u> ,	
齊含萬象	Each <u>equally containing all forms</u> .	
不見精麤	When you <u>do not perceive</u> “refined” and “coarse”,	
寧有偏黨	<u>How can preferences exist?</u>	[partiality ²]
大道體寬	The <u>essence</u> of the <u>Great Way</u> is <u>vast</u> –	[broad/wide]
無易無難	<u>Nothing easy, nothing difficult</u> .	
小見狐疑	(Those with) <u>petty opinions</u> are (full of) <u>doubt and suspicion</u> ² ;	
轉急轉遲	When they <u>become anxious/hurried</u> , they <u>get behind</u> .	[turn/change] [turn/change] [late/delayed/slow]
執之失度	<u>Attachments lead to loss</u> of <u>inner freedom</u> ,	[go to/arrive at] [liberation]
必入邪路	As you <u>certainly enter</u> the <u>wrong path</u> .	
放之自然	<u>Letting go leads to natural spontaneity</u> ² ,	[go to/arrive at]
體無去住	Where the <u>essence</u> (of the Way) is <u>neither absent nor present</u> .	[leaves] [dwells]
任性合道	<u>Allowing</u> your (inner) <u>nature</u> to <u>unite</u> with the <u>Way</u> ,	
逍遙絕惱	<u>Be free</u> ² and <u>done with aggravation</u> .	[vexation/irritation/annoyance]
繫念乖真	<u>Restricted thinking</u> is <u>opposed</u> to what is <u>true and real</u> ,	[attached/tied] [go against/in conflict with]
昏沈不好	<u>Sinking into darkness and confusion</u> , which is <u>not good</u> .	
不好勞神	It is <u>not good</u> to <u>trouble</u> your <u>spirit</u> –	
何用疏親	So <u>why see</u> “distant” or “close” relationships?	(疏 and 親 imply “relationship”) [use/employ]
欲取一乘	If you <u>want</u> to <u>attain</u> the <u>Way</u> ,	[receive/obtain] [one vehicle]
勿惡六塵	<u>Do not dislike</u> your <u>senses and thoughts</u> .	[six dusts]
六塵不惡	<u>Not disliking</u> your <u>senses and thoughts</u>	[six dusts]
還同正覺	Is <u>also the same</u> as <u>true Awakening</u> .	[correct/proper]
智者無為	The <u>wise</u> (practice) <u>non-action</u> ² ,	[wise person ²]
愚人自縛	While the <u>foolish restrict themselves</u> .	[foolish people] [tie/bind]
法無異法	<u>One thing is not different</u> from another <u>thing</u> ,	
妄自愛著	But the <u>foolish</u> have <u>their desires</u> and <u>attachments</u> .	[loves]
將心用心	To <u>govern heart/mind</u> by <u>using heart/mind</u> –	[command/lead]
豈非大錯	<u>How can that not</u> be a <u>great mistake</u> ?	
迷生寂亂	<u>Delusion produces peace</u> and <u>chaos</u> ,	[still/calm]
悟無好惡	But the <u>Awakened</u> have <u>no likes</u> or <u>dislikes</u> .	

一切二邊	<u>All</u> ² <i>pairs of opposites</i>	[two] [side/edge/border]
良由斟酌	(Come from) <i>your own foolish thinking.</i>	[self] [consideration/deliberation ²]
夢幻虛華	They are like <u>dreams</u> , <u>illusions</u> , <u>mirages</u> –	[flowers in the air ²]
何勞把捉	<u>Why struggle to catch and hold</u> them?	[toil/labor]
得失是非	“Gain” and “loss” ² , “right” and “wrong” ² –	
一時放卻	Just <u>for a moment</u> ² , <u>let go</u> and <i>reject</i> them.	[refuse/decline]
眼若不睡	<u>If your eyes do not sleep</u> ,	
諸夢自除	<u>All dreams</u> are <u>naturally eliminated</u> .	
心若不異	<u>If your heart/mind does not discriminate</u> ,	
萬法一如	<u>All things</u> ² are of <u>One Suchness</u> ² .	
一如體玄	Within the <u>deep and mysterious essence</u> of this <u>One Suchness</u> ² ,	
兀爾忘緣	You <i>rise above entanglements</i> , and <u>thus</u> they are <u>forgotten</u> .	[rising to a height/towering] [conditions]
萬法齊觀	When <u>all things</u> ² are <u>perceived as equal</u> ,	[seen/beheld]
歸復自然	You <u>return again</u> to your <i>natural spontaneity</i> ² .	
泯其所以	<u>Eliminate these</u> and <u>as a result</u> ² ,	
不可方比	You <u>cannot</u> ² have any <u>way to compare</u> (them) :	
止動無動	<u>Stillness set in motion is not movement</u> ,	
動止無止	<u>Movement stopped is not stillness</u> .	
兩既不成	<u>If both</u> (halves) are <u>actually incomplete</u> ,	[not complete]
一何有爾	<u>How can the One exist like that?</u>	
究竟窮極	When you <u>examine this exhaustively</u> to its <u>extreme conclusion</u> ,	[finish/complete/end]
不存軌則	<u>No path/rule or rule/standard/norm/point of reference remains</u> .	
契心平等	Place your <u>heart/mind</u> in <i>harmony</i> with <i>non-discrimination</i> ,	[agreement] [equality ²]
所作俱息	<u>Which stops all</u> (mental) <i>activity</i> .	[arising]
狐疑盡淨	<u>Doubts and suspicions</u> ² <u>fade completely/and are cleansed/purified</u> ;	[used up/depleted/end]
正信調直	<u>True faith</u> is <u>harmonious</u> and <u>straightforward</u> .	[correct/proper]
一切不留	<u>Nothing is held on to</u> ,	[not everything ²] [kept/retained]
無可記憶	<u>Nothing can be remembered</u> ² .	
虛明自照	You are <u>empty, clear/bright, naturally enlightened</u> ^D ,	[illuminated]
不勞心力	And make <u>no effort</u> to use the <u>power</u> of your <u>heart/mind</u> .	[toil/labor]
非思量處	Here <u>no amount</u> of <u>thought</u> can <u>dwell</u> ;	[quantity/measure]
識情難測	<u>Knowledge</u> and <u>feelings</u> are <u>unable</u> to <i>comprehend</i> .	[measure/fathom]
眞如法界	Within the <u>true and real Suchness</u> of this <u>absolute source of existence</u> ² ,	
無他無自	There is <u>no “other”</u> , <u>no “self”</u> .	
要急相應	If you <u>want</u> to come <u>quickly</u> into <i>harmony</i> (with this realm),	[agreement/correspondence ²]
唯言不二	<u>Only say “no duality”</u> .	[two]
不二皆同	In “ <u>no duality</u> ” <i>everything</i> is the <u>same</u> ,	[two] [all/every]
無不包容	<u>Nothing</u> is <i>excluded</i> .	[not contained/held ²]
十方智者	<u>Wise people</u> ² <i>everywhere</i>	[ten directions]
皆入此宗	Have <u>all entered this wisdom</u> .	[main doctrine]

宗非促延 (Entering) this *wisdom* can not be *hurried* nor *held back* – [main doctrine] [rushed/hastened] [delayed/deferred]
一念萬年 (It could happen) in one moment² (or take) an eternity².^F
無在不在 (The Way) is neither present nor absent, [located at] [be out/away/not present²]
十方目前 (Yet the Way) is *everywhere* in front of your eyes. [ten directions]

極小同大 Extremely small is the same as (extremely) large,
忘絕境界 When boundaries² 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. [manifested/exposed/expressed] [side/edge/border]

有即是無 Being is simultaneously the same as non-Being; [is precisely/is none other than/identical/at the same time²]
無即是有 Non-Being is simultaneously the same as Being. [is precisely/is none other than/identical/at the same time²]
若不如此 If you are not like this,
必不須守 You certainly must not remain there. [maintain/abide by]

一即一切 One is not separate from All²;
一切即一 All² 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? [finished/completed]

信心不二 The true heart/mind is non-dual; [two]
不二信心 Non-dual is the true heart/mind. [two]
言語道斷 Talking² about the Way ends (here),
非去來今 For (the Way) has no past or future or present.

Footnotes

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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