

# **THE MYSTICAL TRADITIONS OF THE ORIENT**

**A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision**

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## I. The Taoist Sages

The vision of the Eternal was not confined merely to those living in India and the Middle East; we also find a few in ancient China who had experienced an identical realization, and who spoke of the same infinite and eternal Principle underlying the manifested world. However, *That* which the Indian sages called “Brahman” or “Purusha,” what some others call “God,” the Chinese sages called “Tao” (pronounced *Dow*). We must not imagine, as some ignorant people do, that because the languages of various countries are different that there is a difference also in the absolute Reality connoted by these languages. “Taoism” is simply the Chinese name for the one perennial philosophy of all mystics of all lands.

It is often seen that those who have only a cursory knowledge of mystical philosophy become confused by the many different terms used to connote the Absolute by peoples of differing languages, and fail to penetrate beyond linguistic differences to grasp the common significance of words like “Brahman,” “Purusha,” “Tao,” “Godhead,” etc. But, just as, in various languages, the words, *pani, jal, agua, eau, and water*, all signify one common reality, so do the above words of various linguistic origins connote one common invisible Principle. All of the mystics of whatever time or cultural tradition have experienced the same one, indivisible, Reality; yet, because language is infinitely variable, they have called this One by various appellations.

As we shall see, the sages of Taoism experienced and described the same mystical vision, which has been described by all other mystics; and have described the same mystical philosophy, which goes by the name of “Vedanta” in India, and by so many other names in other lands. As the 15<sup>th</sup> century Islamic saint, Dadu, put it, “All the enlightened have left one message; it is only those in the midst of their journey who hold diverse opinions.”

Taoism traces its roots in China to sages living as far back as 3000 B.C.E.; but we know of those ancients only from hearsay recorded much later. It was not until the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. that the precepts of Taoism were presented in a written form by that most famous of Taoists, Lao Tze, who is said to have been born in 601 B.C.E. We know of his life only the barest of details. It seems he served for some time as the Curator of the Imperial Library at K’au and was therefore a learned man. In later life, he found the burden of his duties and the decadence of city life incompatible with his spiritual needs, and he decided to withdraw from his duties and the city environs to a more peaceful existence in the countryside.

On his journey from the city, he rested for a short while at the pass of Hsien-ku, where he stayed with the Keeper of the pass, a Yin Hsi, who was himself a student of the spiritual life. Before Lao left to continue his journey, Yin Hsi persuaded him to leave for his instruction some writings on the spiritual path, and so Lao wrote a short book of maxims for him. It is this book, which has come down to us as the *Tao Teh Ching*. That is the last we hear of Lao's life; it is not known what became of him or where he died but legends indicate that he lived to a ripe old age.

Lao's little book, the *Tao Teh Ching*, is one of the major classics of Taoism. The word, *Tao*, in its title, refers to the Eternal aspect of reality—what we have already spoken of as Brahman, or Purusha. *Teh* is Its power of manifestation, identical with Maya or Prakrti. And the word, *Ching*, simply means “book.” So, we may interpret the title of the book as “The Book of The Eternal and Its Power of Manifestation.” Its simple and somewhat cryptic axioms regarding the Spirit, and on the way that a man who has realized It lives his life, has made this book a favorite introduction to the spiritual life for peoples of both East and West. To the beginning student, its apparent vagueness makes it easily digestible, yet as one learns to understand it more thoroughly, its vagueness disappears, and it reveals itself as a profound and explicit metaphysical guide.

Another great Taoist sage is the venerable Chuang Tze, who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. E. Very little is known of his life either; we have only the briefest of biographical information in a ‘History’ written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. by Sze-ma Khien, which states that Chuang Tze was born in the kingdom of Wei and held some sort of position in the city of Khi-yuan. He grew up in the same part of China as Lao Tze and had thoroughly studied and understood the writings of his great predecessor. At some time during his life, Chuang attained the realization of the Self, the vision of Truth, and began writing books explaining what he had realized. According to Khien's History, King Wei, having heard of Chuang Tze and perhaps having read some of his books, sent a messenger to Chuang with a quantity of silver and the offer of a position as chief minister at the king's court. Chuang Tze, reportedly, only laughed, and sent back this word:

“A thousand ounces of silver would be a great gain to me, and to be a high nobleman and minister is a most honorable position. But have you not seen the victim-ox for the ceremonial sacrifice? It is carefully fed for several years and robed with rich embroidery that it may be fit to enter the Grand Temple. Then, when the time comes for it to do so, it would prefer to be a little pig, but it cannot get to be so. So, go away, and do not soil me with your presence. I would rather amuse and enjoy myself in the midst of a filthy ditch than to be subject to the

rules and restrictions in the court of a king. I have determined never to take such an office but prefer the enjoyment of my own free will.”<sup>1</sup>

Chuang Tze, like Lao Tze, had seen the one Existence, and he lived his life in dedication to the freedom and joy of the Eternal. In his writings, he told of his vision, and his spiritual knowledge. What Lao Tze said in a cryptic and terse manner, Chuang Tze explained often in a lengthy, detailed manner, and sometimes in metaphorical and satirical stories. He wrote large volumes in clear, explanatory prose to clarify what had only been hinted at by Lao Tze. Much of what we know today as “Taoism” is derived from the combined writings of these two seers.

The understanding of the one Reality expressed by the authors of the Upanishads and the *Gita* is expressed in a remarkably similar manner by Lao Tze and Chuang Tze. This should not be surprising, however, since everyone who is graced with the transcendent vision experiences the same eternal Unity. What Lao Tze and Chuang Tze saw and wrote about is precisely what Kapila and the Upanishadic seers and all other mystics have seen and wrote about. Their language is different, but their meaning is the same. As Chuang Tze says, “Words are used to express meaning. When you understand the meaning, you can forget about the words.”

Lao Tze explains, in his *Tao Teh Ching*, that the eternal Reality is a Unity, which contains two aspects: The Eternal, which is the unmanifest *Tao*, and *Teh*, Its Power of manifestation. The *Tao* is the Absolute, devoid of all qualities; nothing can be predicated about It, since It is beyond name and form. Says Lao:

“Before heaven and earth existed, there was something unformed, silent, alone, unchanging, constant and eternal; It could be called ‘the Source of the Universe.’ I do not know Its name and simply call It “Tao.”<sup>2</sup>

“...The *Tao* that can be spoken of is not the absolute *Tao*. That Nameless [*Tao*] is the Father of heaven and earth; that which is named [*Teh*] is the Mother of all things.”<sup>3</sup>

Here we have the perennial vision of the mystic: the realization of the two-in-One. The unmanifested Source Lao refers to as the Father of all; and Its Power of world-manifestation he calls the Mother of all things. The two are the same One in Its dual aspects of Unmanifest and manifest. They are not really separate; they are inextricably One. But, in order to describe the One in both Its aspects, they must be given separate names:

“These two are the same; they are given different names in order to distinguish between them. Together, they constitute the Supreme Mystery.”<sup>4</sup>

Chuang Tze, from his own experience of Unity, corroborates what Lao Tze had said. In one of his stories, he puts these words in the mouth of Lao Tze, when he is asked, “What is the Tao?”

“If you want to know the *Tao*, said Lao, give a bath to your mind; wash your mind clean. Throw out all your sage wisdom! Tao is invisible, hard to hold, and difficult to describe. However, I will outline It for you: The visible world is born of the Invisible; the world of forms is born of the Formless. The creative Energy [*Teh*] is born from Tao, and all life forms are born of this creative Energy; thus, all creation evolves into various forms.

“...Life springs into existence without a visible source and is reabsorbed into that Infinite. The world exists in and on the infinite Void; how it comes into being, is sustained and once again is dissolved, cannot be seen. It is fathomless, like the Sea. Wondrously, the cycle of world-manifestation begins again after every completion. The Tao sustains all creation, but It is never exhausted. ...That which gives life to all creation, yet which is, Itself, never drawn upon—that is the *Tao*.”<sup>5</sup>

If we read for “Tao,” *Brahman* or *Purusha*, and read for “Teh” (the creative Energy), *Prakrti* or *Maya*, we see that the vision of the mystics is ever one. Lao Tze, in his own inimitable style, explained *Tao* and *Teh* in this way:

“The *Tao* is an empty cup, yet It is inexhaustible; It is the fathomless Fountainhead of all things. <sup>6</sup> That which gave birth to the universe may be regarded as the Mother of the universe [*Teh*]. <sup>7</sup> The Womb of creation is called the Mysterious Female; it is the root of heaven and earth.<sup>8</sup> The myriad objects of the world take form and rise to activity, but I have seen THAT to which they return, like the luxuriant growth of plants that return to the soil from which they spring.” <sup>9</sup>

“That ONE called *Tao* is subtle, beyond vision, yet latent in It are all forms. It is subtle, beyond vision, yet latent in It are all objects. It is dark and obscure, yet latent in It is the creative Power of life [*Teh*].” <sup>10</sup>

“From the ancient days till now Its manifestation has never ceased; it is because of this [*Teh*] that we perceive the Father of all. It is the

manifestation of forms that reveals to us the Father [*Tao*].<sup>11</sup> The *Tao* is never the doer, yet through It everything is done.<sup>12</sup> The *Tao* fathers, and the *Teh* brings everything forth as the world of form, time, and space.”<sup>13</sup>

Lao and Chuang extrapolate from this knowledge of the *Tao* the correct life for one who knows It. Thus, *Tao* is not only the Unmanifest, It is also the guiding Path for the sage to whom It is revealed. The *Tao* is both the Source of the universe and the eternal Soul of man; It is his life and the Way by which he lives. He lives as the *Tao* beyond the world, while living as the *Teh* in the midst of it. He identifies with and rests in the Eternal, even while living and acting in the temporal, ephemeral, world:

“He who holds to the Eternal [*Tao*] while acting in the transient [*Teh*]; he knows the primal Source from which all things manifest.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the sage may travel all day, yet he never leaves his store of provisions.<sup>15</sup> He who remains aware of the Male [*Tao*], while living as the Female [*Teh*], is a guide to all the people.”<sup>16</sup>

“The noble man dwells in the Foundation of the form, and not in the form; he dwells in the fruit, and not in the flowering; thus, he holds to the one, and ignores the other.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he is not vulnerable to weapons of war; the horns of the buffalo cannot touch him; the claws of the tiger cannot rip him; the sword cannot cut him. Why? Because he is beyond death.”<sup>18</sup>

As the Eternal, the *Tao*, gives birth to all things, “yet does not contain them,” the sage, doing likewise, “does nothing, yet all things are accomplished.” Says Lao:

“My teaching is very easy to understand and very easy to practice; yet no one understands it and no one practices it; [it is this:] the sage wears a tattered coat [*Teh*] and carries jade [*Tao*] within his breast.”<sup>19</sup>

Since the whole universe appears from the Unmoving, the Unchanging, by imitating or adopting the way of the universe, a man carries on his life in the most perfect manner. By retaining his center of inactivity, his center of changelessness, all his actions take place effortlessly of themselves. And, because he holds to the Unmoving, his energy is not dissipated, his mind is clear, and all that he does is done of a concentrated power and efficiency, and with great clarity of mind. Says Lao:

“Reach far enough toward the Void, hold fast enough to the Unmoving, and of the ten thousand things, none can resist you.”<sup>20</sup>

And Chuang Tze says:

“I guard my awareness of the One, and rest in harmony with externals. ... My light is the light of the Sun and the moon. My life is the life of heaven and earth. Before me is the Undifferentiated [*Teh*], and behind me is the Unknowable [*Tao*]. Men may all die, but I endure forever.”

<sup>21</sup>

“Keep correct your form, concentrate your vision, and the heavenly harmony will come to you. Control your mind, concentrate your attention, and the Spirit will reside in you. *Teh* is your clothing, and *Tao* is your sanctuary.”<sup>22</sup>

In the experience of Unity, one learns the nature of Reality, and at the same time, learns the nature of one’s own mind; for, in an inexplicable way, the two are integrally related. The mind, one discovers, creates thoughts and ideas in a way similar to the creation of waves on an ocean; they consist of contrary motions, so that for every wave, there’s a trough; for every motion, an equal and opposite motion. For example, if we love, in that very motion is contained its opposite, hatred. Or if we experience peace, its corollary, mental agitation, is waiting to manifest. Every movement of the mind contains its opposite, just as does the movement of a pendulum; thus, all that we think and all that we experience mentally is but a play of self-produced opposites. As Lao Tze put it:

“When people recognize beauty,  
Ugliness is also recognized.  
When people recognize good,  
Evil is also recognized.”<sup>23</sup>

It is only when this alteration, this dual motion of the mind, is stilled, that we can experience that pure Consciousness which is the source of all thought.

In the very same way, the physical world is produced by the universal Mind. It is produced by just such a movement of contrary impulses. It is, from this perspective, a mere mirage; for every form that we see is only an image produced by the vibratory motions of the elementary Energy. And when that cosmic Mind becomes stilled, the world-manifestation ceases, and Consciousness rests in Itself. Then, once again, It re-manifests the universe. In a continuous cycle, of world-

manifestation and de-manifestation, that one Consciousness lives forever, unmoved, unchanged.

Kapila had described this world-manifestation as a play of the *gunas* of *Prakrti*, which consist of two opposing motions, and a state of neutrality resulting from the balancing of the two. Lao Tze and Chuang Tze also recognize the nature of the creative Energy to be constituted of just such opposing movements; they are called by them *yang*, the positive, and *yin*, the negative. The balance of these two opposites is called the “natural” state. Here is how Chuang Tze describes this manifestory process:

“In the beginning, even nothing did not exist. There was only the Tao. Then something unnamed which did not yet have form came into existence from the Tao. This is Teh, from which all the world came into being. Things had not yet received their forms, but the division of the *yang* (positive) and the *yin* (negative) Principles, which are intimately related, had already appeared. This vibratory motion constitutes all creation. When the *yang* and the *yin* become active, all things come into being. It is in this way that Teh created all forms.”<sup>24</sup>

This cosmology is, of course, identical to Kapila’s if we substitute “Purusha” for *Tao*, “*Prakrti*” for *Teh*, and “*rajas*” and “*tamas*” for *yang* and *yin*. For Kapila, the balancing of *rajas* and *tamas* begets *sattva*, the state of repose, wherefrom one could enter into the realization of Purusha, the Eternal. For the two Chinese sages, the balancing of *yang* and *yin* begets the “natural” state of repose, wherefrom one might enter into Tao, the Eternal. The words are different, but the meaning is the same.

“The nature of water,” said Chuang Tze, “is that it becomes clear when left alone, and becomes still when undisturbed.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the wise man rests in silence, and allows the mind to become pure. In this way the mind reverts to its root, its Source. “To return to the root is repose,” said Lao Tze; “it is called ‘going back to one’s Origin.’” Going back to one’s Origin is to discover the Eternal. And to know the Eternal is to be enlightened.”<sup>26</sup>

“When water is still,” says Chuang, “it becomes so clear that a man can see every hair of his beard in it. ... If water is clear when it is still, how much more so the human spirit! When the mind of the sage is calm, it becomes the mirror of the universe wherein he can see everything.”<sup>27</sup>



“Repose brings good fortune. Without inner repose, your mind will be galloping about, even though you are sitting still. Withdraw your senses within and cease all activity of the mind.

Concentrate your will. Let your ears cease to hear; let your mind cease to imagine. Let your spirit be blank, passively receptive. In such receptivity, the *Tao* is revealed.”<sup>28</sup>

Lao Tze offers similar advice:

“The wise man shuts his senses, closes all doors, dulls his edges, unties all knots, softens his light, calms his turmoil—this is called the attainment of unity with the One.”<sup>29</sup>

In yet another passage from the *Tao Teh Ching*, Lao repeats this advice, in a slightly different way:

“If you would reveal your original Self, if you would attain union with your true Being, give up your ego, restrain your desires.<sup>30</sup> By renouncing of desire, one sees the Secret of all life; without renouncing of desires, one sees the world of manifested forms. Searching within for the ultimate Mystery of this mysterious life, one enters the gateway wherein is found the great Secret of all life.”<sup>31</sup>

In just a few simple words, Lao Tze gives the whole of mystical knowledge, and the path to the experience of it. His message is the message of all who have seen the Truth, the Secret of life: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” For only those who have understood the illusory nature of the world and have erased from their hearts all concern or desire for what it has to offer, can turn their hearts and minds wholeheartedly to the Source of the world. It is a simple matter of attention; so long as thoughts continue to be focused on the world of name and form, the mind is not free to dwell singly and purely on the Source of all this manifestation.

“He who holds fast to the *Tao* is able to manage very well in the world, for he knows how, from the beginning, all things manifest from the *Tao*.”<sup>32</sup>

“Thus, the sage manages things without acting; teaches the Truth without words. The world continues to arise before him, but he does not reject it. He knows he is the Life of all things, but he does not own any of them. Therefore, he continues to act, but he remains unattached to his actions. His

work is accomplished, but he lays no claim to it. The work is done, but he does not identify with it. Thus, his strength is never depleted.”<sup>33</sup>

How much this sounds like the teaching of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* regarding the path of karma yoga! If we search the words of Lao Tze and Chuang Tze, we realize that they taught all the aspects of yoga: *karma* (action), *bhakti* (devotion), *jnan* (discriminative knowledge), and *raja* (contemplation). Jnan yoga, the discrimination between the real and the unreal, the Eternal and the Noneternal, is very well represented by Chuang and Lao Tze:

“The pure man sees the One as One and the many as One. So long as he sees the Unity, he is God; when he sees the distinctions, he is man. What marks the pure man is the ability to distinguish between the human and the Divine.”<sup>34</sup>

“Do not ask whether the *Tao* is in this or in that; It is in all being. It is for this very reason that we apply to It the title of “Supreme,” “the Highest.” All that It has made is limited, but It is, Itself, unlimited, infinite. The *Tao* is the source of the activity of universal manifestation, but It is not this activity. It is the Author of causes and effects, but It is not the causes and effects. It is the Author of universal manifestation and dissolution, but It is not the manifestation or dissolution. Everything proceeds from It and is governed by It; It is in all things, but is not identical with things, for It is neither divided nor limited.”<sup>35</sup>

“Only he who can see the Formless in the formed arrives at the Truth.”<sup>36</sup> He rejoices in THAT which can never be lost, but endures forever.”<sup>37</sup>

The precepts of Lao Tze and Chuang Tze and all the later seers of the Tao are in perfect accord with the teachings of all men of spiritual vision. Theirs is but another expression of the perennial wisdom that stems from the mystical vision of Unity. They report what they have seen, and they offer advice on the means to attain that vision, and how to live in this world in accordance with it. They are not mere Quietists, as some would have it, but are illumined sages who had experienced the truth of which they speak and offer their insights as a guide to those who would follow in their footsteps. And their words, for all these centuries, have served to bring solace and understanding to countless generations of seekers after Truth.

**NOTES:**

1. Legge, James, *The Texts Of Taoism*, N.Y., Dover Books, 1962; pp. 37-38, Intro.
2. Lao Tze, *Tao Teh Ching*, 25
3. *Ibid.*, 1
4. *Ibid.*, 1
5. Chuang Tze, 22
6. Tao Teh ching, 4
7. *Ibid.*, 52
8. *Ibid.*, 6
9. *Ibid.*, 16
10. *Ibid.*, 21
11. *Ibid.*, 21
12. *Ibid.*, 37
13. *Ibid.*, 51
14. *Ibid.*, 14
15. *Ibid.*, 26
16. *Ibid.*, 28
17. *Ibid.*, 38
18. *Ibid.*, 50
19. *Ibid.*, 70
20. *Ibid.*, 16
21. *Chuang Tze*, Ch. 11
22. *Ibid.*, Ch. 22
23. *Tao Teh ching*, 2
24. *Chuang Tze*, Ch. 1
25. *Ibid.*, Ch. 5
26. *Tao Teh Ching*, 16
27. *Chuang Tze*, Ch. 13
28. *Ibid.*, Ch. 4
29. *Tao Teh Ching*, 56
30. *Ibid.*, 19
31. *Ibid.*, 1
32. *Ibid.*, 14
33. *Ibid.*, 2
34. *Chuang Tze*, Ch. 6
35. *Ibid.*, Ch. 8
36. *Ibid.*, Ch. 23
37. *Ibid.*, Ch. 6

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## II. The Ch'an And Zen Buddhists

Buddhism, having originated in India around 500 B.C.E., entered China in the first few centuries of the Current Era, and, for a number of centuries thereafter, vied with Taoism for popular acceptance. Buddhism eventually prevailed, due perhaps to the already decadent condition of Taoism, and the massive proselytizing efforts of the Buddhists. There was really little to choose between the two, however; for, while the Taoist and Buddhist terminologies were different, the realization of Truth which each taught was, of course, the same. In every mystical tradition, the ultimate goal is the attainment of enlightenment, the direct perception of the one Reality. In ancient India, this realization was called *nirvana*, or *samadhi*; when Buddhism was transplanted from India to China, this supramental experience was called, in Chinese, *chien-hsing*, and as Buddhism became established in Japan in later centuries, this experience was called *kensho* or *satori*. The words and the languages are different, but the experience is the same.

This experience of enlightenment, of the absolute, quiescent, Source of all existence, is described by one Chinese Buddhist in this way:

“In learning to be a Buddha, and in seeking the essence of the teaching of our school, man should purify his mind and allow his spirit to penetrate the depths. Thus, he will be able to wander silently within himself during contemplation, and he will see the Origin of all things, obscured by nothing.

“...His mind becomes boundless and formless, ...all-illuminating and bright, like moonlight pervading the darkness. During that absolute moment, the mind experiences illumination without darkness, clarity without stain. It becomes what it really is, absolutely tranquil, absolutely illuminating. Though this all-pervading Mind is tranquil, the world of cause and effect does not cease; though It illumines the world, the world is but Its reflection. It is pure Light and perfect Quiescence, which continues through endless time. It is motionless, and free from all activity; It is silent, and self-aware. ...That brilliant Light permeates every corner of the world. It is This we should become aware of and know.”<sup>1</sup>

Many of the early Buddhist philosophers of India called this absolute, all-

pervading Reality, *Dharmakaya*, “the Body of Truth.” Ashvagosha (2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.) called it *Sarvasattvachitta*, “the one pure Consciousness in all.” In China, It was called *Hsin*, “Consciousness”; and in Japan, It was *Kokoro*. According to Ashvagosha, there arises, in this one pure Consciousness, a spontaneous movement, from which all the phenomenal world is produced; this aspect of Reality, he calls *ekachittakshan*, “the movement of the one Consciousness.” In Chinese, it is *nien*; in Japanese, it is *nen*. Just see how many words there are for our old friends, Brahman and Maya, Purusha and Prakrti, Shiva and Shakti!

Similarly, in every mystical tradition, the means to the realization of the Divine Reality is the same; it is an in-turning of the mind in search of its root, its source; we call this process “meditation.” In India, the Sanskrit word for meditation is *dhyana*; in China, it is *ch’an*, and in Japan, it is *zen*. Ch’an, or Zen, then, is nothing but the practice of meditation toward the attainment of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the only goal of Zen; and it is meditation, or contemplation, alone which leads to it. For this reason, all the Ch’an and Zen masters incessantly point all sincere seekers of enlightenment to the meditative life. Here is an example of such pointing, from a Sermon by the Ch’an master, Szu-hsin Wu-hsin (1044-1115):

“O brothers, to be born as a human being is a rare event, and so is the opportunity to hear discourses on the Truth. If you fail to achieve liberation in this life, when do you expect to achieve it? While still alive, be therefore assiduous in practicing meditation. ...As your self-reflection grows deeper and deeper, the moment will surely come upon you when the spiritual flower will suddenly burst into bloom, illuminating the entire universe.

“...This is the moment when you can transform this vast earth into solid gold, and the great rivers into an ocean of milk. What a satisfaction this is then to your daily life! Since this is so, do not waste your time with words or phrases, or by searching for Truth in books; for the Truth is not to be found there. ...They consist of mere words, which will be of no use to you at the moment of your death.”<sup>2</sup>

This, throughout the centuries, has been the perennial call of the Ch’an and Zen masters. Their message is not different from that of all enlightened seers of the One. The early Ch’an masters of China, having realized the unchanging Absolute, acknowledged the unity of the One and the many, and grappled for some time with the expression of this paradox. Reiterating the old truth of the identity of *nirvana*

and *samsara*, they spoke of the Real, the unreal, and the unitive way, which embraces them both in an undivided awareness. But the Chinese had their own way of expressing this duality-in-unity, this unity-in-duality. Here, for example, is a conversation of the Ch'an master, Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi (840-901) and one of his disciples:

Monk: "Where is the Reality in appearance?"

Master: "Wherever there is appearance, there is Reality."

Monk: "How does It manifest Itself?"

Master: (The master silently lifted his saucer.)

Monk: "But where is the Reality in illusion?"

Master: "The origin of illusion is the Real."

Monk: "But how can Reality manifest Itself in illusion?"

Master: "Wherever there is illusion, there is the manifestation of Reality."

Monk: "Do you say, then, Reality can never be separated from illusion?"

Master: "Where can you possibly find the appearance of illusion?" <sup>3</sup>

At another time, this same Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi was asked by a wandering monk,

"What is your name?"

"My name is Pen-chi," he answered.

"Say something about ultimate Reality," demanded the monk.

"I will not say anything," [replied Pen-chi].

But the monk insisted; and Pen-chi said simply,

"It is not called Pen-chi." <sup>4</sup>

The difficulty of expressing the paradoxical nature of the absolute Reality, which is other than, but not other than, Its projected world-appearance is oftentimes illustrated in the utterances of the early Ch'an masters.

Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-896) said:

"I meet Him wherever I go.

He is the same as me,

Yet I am not He.

Only if you understand this,

Will you identify with the *Tathata* (the Truth, the Real)." <sup>5</sup>

Ch'an and Zen Buddhism is replete with the recognition of this paradoxicality, and brings this recognition into the most ordinary experiences of life, and the most ordinary of conversations, relying often, not on words, but on wordless symbols to get across their point:

The Master asked Pai-chang, his disciple, "What will you teach others?"

Pai-chang raised his staff aloft.

The Master remarked, "Is that all? Nothing else?"

Pai-chang threw his staff on the ground. <sup>6</sup>

Ummon (d. 996), holding up his staff before his disciples, asked, "What is this? If you say it is a staff, you go right to hell; but if it is not a staff, what is it?" And Tokusan (799-865), who was fond of giving blows with a stick to awaken his disciples, also used to ask a similar question of his disciples, and then say, "If you say 'yes,' thirty blows; if you say 'no,' thirty blows."

It is easy to see from these examples that, while the goal of enlightenment is the same in all mystical traditions, and the Truth experienced is always the same, the expression of that Truth is infinitely variable. What distinguishes the Ch'an and Zen Buddhist traditions from their Indian counterparts is their unique methods of teaching. They trace this "non-verbal" method of the transmission of knowledge to the Buddha himself, who, according to legend, gave his message to the gathered assemblage on the Mount of the Holy Vulture by simply raising aloft a single kumbhala flower which had been given to him by the god, Brahma. Only one disciple in the throng gave evidence of understanding the import of the Buddha's gesture: an old man named Mahakasyapa, who simply smiled in appreciation. With this, the Buddha is said to have immediately turned over the succession of Mastership to Mahakasyapa. From this legendary non-verbal transmission, the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists find a precedent for their own tradition.

The perpetuation of this special tradition is said to have been initiated in China by Bodhidharma, who came from India to China in 520 C.E. His influence is described in a 9<sup>th</sup> century work called "The Complete Explanation of The Source of Ch'an" by Kuei-feng Tsung-mi (780-841):

"When Bodhidharma came to China, he saw that most Chinese students did not grasp the truth of Buddhism. They merely sought it through interpretation of textual terminology and thought of the changing phenomena all around them as real

activity. Bodhidharma wished to make these eager students see that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. The Truth is nothing but one's own mind. Thus, he maintained that the real teaching must be transmitted directly from one mind to another, without the use of words." <sup>7</sup>

Bodhidharma and his followers rejected the necessity of the long-winded metaphysical formulations of the Indians as a means to enlightenment. They advocated instead a method of evoking an immediate perception of Truth, a sudden recognition of the nature of one's own mind, unfettered by mental formulations or expectations, "a special transmission outside the scriptures; no dependence upon words and letters, a direct pointing to the Soul of man; the seeing into one's own nature and thus the attainment of Buddhahood."

Whenever words are used, whether as tools of analysis, or to construct metaphors and analogies, they must invariably fall short of an adequate representation of the unitive Reality. To many enlightened men, the endless parade of word-pictures and attempted descriptions by the countless millions of seers over the ages appears a futile and self-defeating game. Such a recognition led the early Chinese and Japanese Buddhists to pursue a method of knowledge-awakening which transcended the impossible demands of language, which directly evoked the immediate Reality, and awakened the mind to its true nature. And over the centuries, this method has gradually become the special hallmark of the Ch'an and Zen Buddhist traditions.

Taking the rejection of metaphysical formulations as their starting point, they began to devise methods whereby they might turn, or startle, a disciple toward the direct perception of his own Self, his own Being. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" questioned the Master; and the disciple, deprived of a verbalized answer, had necessarily to peer into the silence of his own being for the comprehension of Nonduality. Thus, instead of hoping to awaken a disciple to enlightenment through such explanations as Shankara and the Vedantists offer, and thereby leading him to delve into his own mind to experience the Truth, the enlightened seers of China and Japan practiced a non-analytical method of awakening the disciple; a method which causes the disciple to grab directly and immediately, by wordless insight, at the living truth of his own existence.

When Ummon is asked, "What is Zen?" he stares the disciple fiercely in the face, and exclaims, "That's it! That's it!" This method of the famous Ch'an and Zen masters is a method of shock, a startling of the mind in order to suddenly knock



away the clouds of verbalized concepts in the mind of the seeker and awaken him to the immediate reality of consciousness in the here and now. But who can say whether this method is more effective than another? Who can say whether more men and women have been induced to know the Truth for themselves by Shankara's reasonings, or by Jesus' exhortations, or by the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*, or by Ummon's "That's it!" We can only observe that, in China and Japan, the intellectual method was rejected, and the "direct pointing to the Soul of man" was embraced as a method of instruction.

Teaching methods may vary; but the Truth remains one. And no one has ever realized It without an intense and arduous searching for It within themselves. In the last analysis, it is the determination and fitness of the disciple, which determines whether he will attain to the clear vision of Truth, and *that*, after all, is in the hands of God. Perhaps the most a teacher may do is to exhort and encourage a student to apply himself with all his might to the search for Truth within himself. With this purpose in mind, the famous Zen master, Hakuin (1683-1768), sang:

"Not knowing how near the Truth is,  
People seek It far away— what a pity!  
They are like one who, in the midst of water,  
Cries imploringly for a drink of water,  
Or like the son of a rich man  
Who wanders away among the poor.

"...Those who testify to the truth of the nature of the Self,  
Have found it by reflecting within themselves,  
And have gone beyond the realm of mere ideas.  
For them opens the gate of the oneness of cause and effect,  
And straight runs the path of Nonduality ...  
Abiding with the Undivided amidst the divided,  
Whether going or returning, they remain forever unmoved.

"Holding fast to, and remembering *That* which is beyond thought,  
In their every act, they hear the voice of the Truth.  
How limitless the sky of unbounded freedom!  
How pure the perfect moonlight of Wisdom!  
At that moment, what do they lack?  
As the eternally quiescent Truth reveals Itself to them,  
This very earth is the lotus-land of Purity,  
And this body is the body of the Buddha." <sup>8</sup>

The experience of *samadhi*, or *satori*, is self-revealing, self-illuminating; it effortlessly reveals the unitive Truth, and dispels all doubts. There is no difficulty of understanding involved in it whatsoever. What *is* difficult, however, is the subsequent adjustment to living the rest of one's life with the knowledge thus acquired. It takes a good deal of reflection and getting-used-to in order to recognize only the One in all phenomenal manifestations as well. Such an acquired habitual perspective no longer distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative but focuses singly on the awareness of Unity. Such a mind takes no interest in pursuing gratification in appearances but remains unswayed from Unity-awareness by either pleasant or unpleasant circumstances.

It is this adjustment, or resolution, to life on the relative plane which, therefore, claims much of the attention of the enlightened, and which constitutes much of the written material by the Self-realized sages of every mystical tradition. The writings of the early Ch'an Buddhists are particularly replete with declarations concerning this resolution, this final state of Unity-awareness. Though the language and teaching methods of the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists are unique to themselves, the goal of enlightenment and the attainment of a perfect and lasting Unity-awareness is the same for all. In many of the poems and utterances of the memorable saints of the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist tradition, we can hear something of that pure and simple state; we can hear the voice of the unfettered Self, released from all doubt and conflict.

In one of the earliest Buddhist treatises to come out of China, called *Hsin-hsin ming*, "Inscription on The Self of The Self," written by an obscure monk named Seng-ts'an (d. 606), we find an especially illuminating expression of this ultimate awareness. While it represents a movement toward the early China-izing, or simplifying, of Buddhist ideology, it is scarcely distinguishable from the Taoism which preceded it. Its author was, undoubtedly, an enlightened man, and a Buddhist; but he was also a Chinaman with a long heritage of Taoist phraseology. In this perfect gem of wisdom, we can actually see the transformation of Indian Buddhism into something distinctly Chinese, as Buddhism blends into Taoism, and the one perennial philosophy of Unity resurfaces once more, this time, under the name of Ch'an:

"The perfect Tao knows no difficulties.  
It only refuses to make preferences.  
When freed from hate and love,  
It reveals Itself fully and without disguise.

“A tenth of an inch’s difference,  
 And heaven and earth are set apart.  
 If you want to see It manifest,  
 Take no thought either for or against It.

“To set up what you like against what you dislike:  
 This is the disease of the mind.  
 When the profound Truth is not understood,  
 Peace of mind is disturbed, and nothing is gained.

“[The Truth is] perfect like the vastness of space,  
 With nothing wanting, nothing superfluous.  
 It is indeed due to making choices  
 That the One Reality is lost sight of.

“Pursue not the outer entanglements,  
 Dwell not in the inner Void.  
 When the mind rests serene in the oneness of things,  
 Dualism vanishes by itself.

“When oneness is not thoroughly understood,  
 In two ways loss may be sustained:  
 The denial of the world may lead to its absolute negation,  
 While the denying of the Void may result in the denying of your [true] Self.  
 Wordiness and intellection—The more with them the further astray we go.  
 “Away, therefore, with wordiness and intellection,  
 And there is no place where we cannot pass freely.

“When we return to the root, we gain the meaning.  
 When we pursue the external objects, we lose the purpose.  
 The moment we are enlightened within,  
 We go beyond the voidness of a world confronting us.

“Transformations going on in an empty world which confronts us  
 Appear real all because of ignorance.  
 Try not to seek after the Real.  
 Only cease to cherish opinions.

“Tarry not with dualism,  
 Carefully avoid pursuing it.

As soon as you have right and wrong,  
Confusion ensues, and the mind is lost.

“The two exist because of the One,  
But hold not even to this One.  
When the one Consciousness is not disturbed,  
The ten thousand things offer no offence.

“When no offence is offered by them, they are as if non-existent.  
When the mind is not disturbed, it is as if there is no mind.  
The subject is quieted as the object ceases.  
The object ceases as the subject is quieted.

“The object is an object for the subject.  
The subject is a subject for an object.  
Know that the relativity of the two  
Rests ultimately on the oneness of the Void.

“In the oneness of the Void, the two are one,  
And each of the two contains in itself all the ten thousand things.  
When no discrimination is made between this and that,  
How can a one-sided and prejudiced view arise?

“... In the higher realm of true Being,  
There is neither “other” nor “self”.  
When a direct identification is required,  
We can only say, “not two.”

“In being not two, all is the same.  
All that *is* is comprehended in it.  
The wise in all the ten quarters  
Enter into this same absolute Awareness.

“This absolute Awareness is beyond movement and rest.  
One instant is ten thousand years.  
No matter how things are regarded, whether as being or non-being,  
It is manifest everywhere before you.

“...One in all,  
All in One—

If only this is realized,  
No more worry about not being perfect!"<sup>9</sup>

About one hundred years later, another Ch'an master, by the name of Yung-chia Ta-shih (d. 713), wrote his *Cheng-tao Ke*, "Song of Enlightenment," which reiterates, in equally inspiring tones, this same knowledge, this same enlightened state of awareness:

"Do you know that leisurely sage who has gone beyond learning  
and who does not exert himself in anything?  
He neither endeavors to avoid idle thoughts nor seeks after the Truth.  
[For he knows that] ignorance is also the Reality,  
[And that] this empty, illusory, body is nothing but the absolute Reality  
(*Dharmakaya*).  
When one knows the Absolute, there are no longer any [independent]  
objects.

"The Source of all things is the absolute Self of all the enlightened.  
The five elements are like a cloud floating aimlessly here and there.  
And the three passions are like the foam which appears and disappears  
on the surface of the ocean.

"When the absolute Reality is known, it is seen to be without any  
individual selves, and devoid of any objective forms.  
All past [mental and physical] actions which lead to hell are instantly  
wiped away.

"... After the Awakening, there is only vast Emptiness.  
this vast universe of forms ceases to exist.  
Here, one sees neither sin nor bliss, neither loss nor gain.  
In the midst of the eternal Serenity, no questions arise.  
The dust of ignorance which has accumulated on the unpolished mirror  
for ages,  
Is now, and forever, cleared away in the vision of Truth.

"...The people do not know where to find this precious jewel  
Which lies deep within the creative Power (*Tathagata-garba*);  
The activity miraculously performed by the creative Power  
is an illusion and yet it is not an illusion,  
[Just as] the rays of light emanating from the one perfect Sun

belong to it and yet do not belong to it.

“Let us be thoroughgoing, not only in inner experience,  
but in its interpretation,  
And our lives will be perfect in meditation and in wisdom as well,  
not adhering one-sidedly to Emptiness (*Sunyata*) alone.  
It is not we alone who have come to this conclusion.  
All the enlightened, numerous as the sands of India, are of the same  
mind.

“I crossed seas and rivers, climbed mountains, and forded streams, In  
order to interview the Masters, to enquire after Truth, to delve into the  
secrets of Ch’an;  
But since I learned the true path from my Master [Hui-neng: 638-713],  
I know that birth-and-death is not what I need to be concerned with.  
For walking is Ch’an, sitting is Ch’an;  
Whether talking or remaining silent, whether moving or  
standing still, the Essence Itself is always at rest.  
Even when confronted by swords and spears, It never loses  
Its way of stillness.  
Not even poisonous drugs can perturb Its serenity.

“Ever since the realization—which came to me suddenly—  
that I have never been born,  
All vicissitudes of fate, good and bad, have lost their power over me.  
Far off, in the mountains, I live in a modest hut.  
The mountains are high, the shade-trees are broad, and under an old  
pine tree  
I sit quietly and contentedly in my monkish home.  
Here, perfect tranquility and rustic simplicity reign.  
[The sage] neither seeks the Truth, nor avoids the defilements.  
He clearly perceives that all dualities are empty and have no reality.  
And, since they have no reality, he is not one-sided,  
neither empty, nor not empty.

“This is the genuine state of sagehood.  
The one Mind, like a mirror, reflects everything brightly,  
and knows no limitations.  
It pervades the entire universe in even its minutest crevices.  
This world and all its contents, multitudinous in form, are

reflected in the one Mind,  
Which, shining like a perfect gem, has no “outer” or “inner.”

“If we hold exclusively to Emptiness, we deny the entire causal world.  
All is then attributed to chance, with no ruling principle,  
inviting evil to prevail.

The same error occurs when one holds exclusively to the  
manifested, denying the Emptiness.

That would be like throwing oneself into the flames in order  
to avoid being drowned in the water.

“...The Real need not be adhered to.

As for the non-real, there has never been any such thing.

When both Real and non-Real are put aside,

“non-real” becomes meaningless.

[Even] when the various means to [the attainment of]

Emptiness are abandoned,

The eternal Oneness of the sage remains as It has always  
been. “<sup>10</sup>

In the ongoing tradition of Ch’an and Zen Buddhism, many such declarations have  
been uttered; oftentimes they are but brief and simple declarations of isolation and  
profound contentment. And oftentimes, when we read the poems of the early  
Ch’an and Zen masters, such as this, by P’ang-yun (d. 811):

“How wondrously supernatural,  
And how miraculous this!  
I carry water, and I carry fuel.” <sup>11</sup>

Or this, by Pao-tzu Wen-ch’i (10<sup>th</sup> century):

“Drinking tea, eating rice,  
I pass my time as it comes.  
Looking down at the stream,  
Looking up at the mountain,  
How serene and relaxed I feel indeed!” <sup>12</sup>

Or this, by Hsue-tou (950-1052):

“What life can compare to this?  
 Sitting quietly by the window,  
 I watch the leaves fall and the flowers bloom,  
 As the seasons come and go.”<sup>13</sup>

...we may fail to recognize the connection of these Oriental Buddhists to their parent tradition, and lose sight of the long, arduous progression of understanding which led to the apparent simplicity of the enlightened Ch’an and Zen masters. Their simple poems may seem far removed from the reasonings of the early Buddhist Fathers on the complementarity of *nirvana* and *samsara*, but they represent the ultimate synthesis of centuries of metaphysics, and the final freedom of those who have realized that synthesis in their ordinary lives. How simple seem these Buddhist sages, yet their very simplicity is the simplicity of the blessed; it stands on the heads of the Buddhas of the past and reveals a consummation of the struggles of a thousand lifetimes.

#### NOTES:

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