



The Insider's Guide to

**The World's
Best and Worst
Spiritual Paths and
Practices**

By
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Dedication

For Lee Shu Mei

In honor of her hard work to pursue the dharma and preserve the dharma,
her efforts in assisting countless other people without expecting any return,
and her role in helping the youngest generation retrieve its culture.

Acknowledgements

This work would never have been written without the patient translation efforts of Pia Giammasi, whose skill in translating Nan Huai-Chin's words into English has been remarkable. Not many people can accurately translate Master Nan's words because of the difficult Chinese dialect and specialized vocabulary that he uses. Accordingly, the utmost thanks and appreciation go to her efforts.

These thanks must also be extended to Lee Shu Mei and Ken Pang, both of whom worked extremely hard to verify much of the draft materials in this text. Cheryl Lewis and Gerard de Condappa also have my gratitude for their editing services, as well as Valerie Stern, who in her corrections always seemed to craft those perfect sentences that captured my intended meaning. Her literary flair added a tremendous dimension to this text. Marshall Adair also deserves a round of applause for his devoted fact checking and rewriting. Without his contribution, this text would not be nearly as accurate or enjoyable for the reader either.

While Master Nan, through consultations and lessons, provided much of the core material for this text, much of the information constitutes my own thoughts on particular topics. Therefore because an extremely large proportion of the book's contents is my own material that went far beyond Master Nan's original lecture series, any mistakes included herein are to be considered only my own. None of the material within this book is intended to offend anyone, but to simply provide a spiritual cultivation practitioner's personal perspective on this little understood, and thus highly controversial topic. The important goal is to let you, the reader, see how various spiritual schools developed, what methods they used and principles they emphasized, and how they went astray.

Master Nan Huai-Chin, who is a recognized Chinese master of Zen, Confucianism, Esoteric Buddhism, and Taoism, is himself the author of nearly forty best-selling books on spiritual cultivation. While virtually unknown in the West, his works have breathed new life into the spiritual streams of Asia. It is rare to find a spiritual master whose enlightenment has been recognized by both the Zen school and school of Esoteric Buddhism, but that is what we have in this one individual.

As the famous spiritual translator Thomas Cleary said, "Although his comprehensive purview of Chinese, Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist thought was common to the greatest minds of China in the Tang dynasty, it is rare among scholars today." If there are any mistakes within this book, they are definitely mine and not his.

Bill Bodri

Preface

For many years I had been asking Zen and Esoteric master Nan Huai-Chin to give a series of lectures on the popular cultivation schools of the world, and to emphasize particularly the errors that had manifested in these schools over the long course of time. I wanted people to understand what constitute “good” spiritual practices, and in particular, what are useless, misleading, inefficient or “bad” ones.

My motivation for requesting this particular lecture series was that I had become quite cognizant of, and very disturbed about the various deviations that had developed and spread among the many paths of spiritual cultivation. These are the “booby traps” and “potholes” on the road of spiritual cultivation and religion that are still prevalent among us today. Many people at this very moment are falling into them rather than stepping over or going around them.

I did not want anybody ignorantly succumbing to this sort of danger, and felt it would be a great service if people could be warned about these various sinkholes. After all, if you are open to learning about the errors and mistakes of the past, then you are better prepared to avoid repeating them. I also felt if someone were to collect this sort of knowledge regarding the world’s most important topic of spiritual cultivation, then it was their duty and responsibility to make it available to others. I therefore wished to hear what an enlightened master of Zen, Esoteric Buddhism, and Taoism had to say about these matters, and I wanted to make this information available to you, so that you might thereby avoid the fate of becoming a “muddled meditator” yourself.

Many of today’s modern “spiritual teachers” have a good grasp of spiritual cultivation vocabulary, but cannot make intelligent distinctions between the many spiritual roads available to us, and cannot tell you what the different spiritual paths really entail because they usually only know about their own tradition. They cannot speak about the stages of the spiritual path or cross-correlate between the information offered by competing spiritual traditions, and they cannot even tell you about the great revisionist movements made by many spiritual leaders of the past, meaning that they cannot tell you how these paths have sometimes veered astray over time. Since they cannot do this, then they cannot warn you about the many pitfalls that await you, today, on the spiritual trail. If you follow them blindly, it is therefore quite possible to repeat these ancient mistakes and fall into a fruitless form of spiritual practice.

For instance, the New Age crowd has taken to continuously talking of kundalini and

samadhi attainments without recognizing that they are only the most minor achievements of the various stages of spiritual cultivation. Even though you can find lots of people who can readily articulate these technical terms, you can rarely find anyone who has actually experienced these phenomena and can describe how they should be properly regarded on the cultivation path. In short, people who know this vocabulary still do not understand the proper route of spiritual cultivation practice. Another example – many today are championing the practice of “Now,” which is to “be in the present moment,” but they do not recognize the danger of falling into a naturalistic cultivation scenario that repeats the errors of “dead tree Zen” and “sterile stillness” rejected ages ago.

In the world at large, China is currently exhibiting a strong fascination with the practice of chi-gong, which is simply the act of playing with our body's superficial energy streams. Chi-gong does not affect the real chi of our physical-spiritual nature, as is often claimed, but you cannot enlighten ardent practitioners to this fact. There is a fervent desire in China for any sort of spiritual practice at all, and to preserve China's dignity and reclaim some special ranking in the world, many of its people have grasped onto what they believe to be a home-grown spiritual path that has its roots in mother China. This enables modern day Chinese to say to foreigners, “See, we have something you do not have, so we are not as backwards as you (and we both) think!”

In actual fact, chi-gong was dismissed by a variety of spiritual masters ages ago due to its overly materialistic emphasis, but most modern adherents do not know this. Furthermore, the core of chi-gong practice stems from Indian yoga breathing exercises, and from the Indian teachings of Zen master Bodhidharma. Most practitioners do not know that it only touches upon the most superficial energy currents of your body, and is therefore to be regarded as little more than an advanced type of physical exercise and breath work. No matter how high you try to elevate chi-gong by adding all sorts of other virtuous teachings, frankly it still belongs at only the bottom rungs of the spiritual ladder.

Due to the widespread destruction caused by China's Cultural Revolution, only the most materialistic remnants of its spiritual cultivation heritage have survived. As China strives to throw off the vestiges of its destructive past, the Chinese people are searching for all sorts of spiritual answers, and this is the only school they have access to turn to. With chi-gong being the sole survivor still around – and with Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian cultivation having been largely destroyed by Communism – unfortunately this is what people now mistake for a road of genuine spiritual training. True spiritual cultivation, however, has very little to do with the body's energy currents and with our physical nature, because the ultimate emphasis of all spiritual training is on our mind and our behavior.

Zen as a spiritual practice is quite popular today as well, as the large number of titles displayed in most bookstores will attest. But compared to the days of old, the Zen school of current times lacks both qualified teachers and qualified students. As a result, in its state of weakness Zen has suffered from an intrusion of academics who have come to paint, and widely disseminate, their own picture of the school as being nothing more than a vehicle of psychological insight. Under their influence, the great affair of spiritual enlightenment into the ultimate source of matter and mind, or birth and death, has been reduced to some minor psychological "Eureka!"

The misinformed who have succumbed to this sort of misrepresentation do not even know that Zen also gives rise to, and squarely deals with, the various samadhi and gong-fu stages which are emphasized in Taoism, Hindu yoga, and even Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. Yes, all the superpowers, strange feats of gong-fu, and stages of physical transformation you read about in other spiritual schools are encompassed by Zen as well and experienced by Zen practitioners, but they are just not overly emphasized. The Zen school, in its teaching style, adopted the same reserve as Confucius, who also chose not to talk too much on these matters even though he had achieved them.

Because of this large gap in understanding, the overall greatness of the Zen school is nowhere recognized, and its true spiritual core can nowadays nowhere be found. The academics and intellectuals, who have written about Zen, have twisted its original shape and spirit out of all proportion with their commentaries. The unfortunate thing is that these opinions have become the accepted viewpoints even though they have been developed by people who lack any sort of cultivation attainment themselves. The popular picture that is presently painted of Zen is therefore far off the mark.

As regards the school of Esoteric Buddhism, or Tantra, it is proliferating wildly in the West. This has been partly due to a growing number of translated Tibetan texts in conjunction with society's normal attraction to the colorful and mysterious. While it seems an attractive path to many, most people who enter the doorways of this school become lost and confused and get diverted down a wrong road of cultivation, or worse, leave the path entirely. Even the monks within these schools, and "high adepts" as well, make terrible cultivation mistakes in this school of practice.

To say things clearly, Tantra is a dangerous cultivation school for the West, and so is Tibetan Buddhism. Neither school, as currently disseminated, is truly appropriate for Western culture, or most people for that matter since these schools usually wreak havoc wherever they land. The Consciousness-only and true Esoteric School are indeed appropriate for Western audiences, but not as they are currently understood or taught in the various Tibetan traditions. Tibetans who grow up in their own closed traditions cannot see this, and because of their own limited upbringing and

education, neither can they properly understand the deep cultural and spiritual history of the West. They might be qualified to teach Buddhism, but not necessarily in the West.

Ardent practitioners cannot seem to identify the core foundational principles of Esoteric Buddhism at all, nor understand even when told how these very same principles are openly embodied in a variety of other spiritual traditions, including Christianity. They simply prefer to believe that the Esoteric school is wonderfully unique and supreme, and the quickest pathway to spiritual enlightenment. Thus they tend to totally ignore the fact that the Esoteric school overly emphasizes the cultivation of our physical form, and that most of its practices involve the cardinal error of trying to bring consciousness into the body and restrain it there. The *real mind* is everywhere, so there is no reason to restrain or confine it. Yet this is exactly what most Tibetan practices entail.

As to Confucianism, the enlightenment emphasis of the school was lost ages ago, and the Communist teachings of China destroyed anything good that had survived regarding its original cultivation emphasis. And then there is Chinese Taoism, in which today's practitioners emphasize its esoteric sciences and the literary products of this school – such as Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu and Lieh Tzu – rather than its genuine methods of spiritual training. Even when they know about genuine Taoist cultivation teachings, they are apt to interpret them incorrectly because they do not have a good teacher to guide them. At the very worst, many are currently trying to revive various shadowy offshoots of Taoism that can actually be classified as tumors upon its pure objective. Some Westerners are even trying to turn Taoism into a new type of community Roman Catholicism! Whether this is being done in America or in Europe, is this not repeating the errors of the past?

I could go on and on, but you can already sense a little of my motivation for this work. The point is, no matter which spiritual school or path or practice they are following – and I have not even gotten into the Western traditions – people seem to have lost sight of the true principles and bedrock path of spiritual cultivation practice. And if you don't know the principles, you are bound to go astray.

Sometimes this confusion is because people do not correctly understand the original intent of these schools, the proper way to practice within these traditions, or the science behind their various spiritual methodologies. Sometimes it is because spiritual practitioners have lost sight of the history of these schools and how they have gradually become twisted over time due to political contamination and other sorts of interference. Sometimes it is because people lack a good teacher. The point is, that without a true beacon or road map to all these schools, people are apt to get lost ... and they do! They fall into the very worst sorts of spiritual practices and

traditions, and sometimes end up either hurting themselves or others, or waste their precious time along roads that offer no spiritual progress at all.

I have therefore produced this short work in hopes that by bringing light to bear on these issues, it will help to warn you away from many possible roads of error in your own spiritual pursuits. The information might amaze you, it might upset you, it might fascinate and delight you, it might entertain or even anger you. These are all possibilities, but I am hoping it will reveal various things you did not know, raise important issues for you to think about, and prompt appreciation rather than criticism that someone finally revealed all this insider information. I do not care what spiritual practice or path you follow, but simply hope that this information makes your efforts on your path that much more effective. That is the entire purpose of this and all my books – it is to assist you in your own spiritual progress.

The important thing for me is to help you gain an understanding of both the true and false practices of the spiritual cultivation trail – its exaggerations and understatements, excesses and deficiencies – so that you might be able to better guide yourself on the road of spiritual searching. It used to be that people only knew of one or two spiritual traditions at most, but with all of the contradictory information now bombarding us from every direction, you definitely need a roadmap of the best and worst in spiritual ways in order to navigate through these waters.

If people come to understand where and how various spiritual streams have veered astray over time due to bad influences, they will not readily fall into the abyss of making the same mistakes, and becoming muddled meditators themselves. Education, in terms of reviewing past experiences, is one way by which people learn to spiritually practice more effectively, and since people are at all sorts of different levels of development, more effective spiritual or religious practice is the only thing that counts.

1. Introduction

Everything in existence has its roots, and if we wish to understand the various cultivation methods and spiritual schools having world prominence today, we must first try to understand their historical roots. In seeking the origins of the world's present cultivation practices and schools, we can start in no better way than by examining the four civilizations of ancient India, Greece, Egypt and China that have spawned the majority of the cultivation traditions now in existence.

Of these four ancient civilizations, it is indisputable that the ancient Greek civilization has had the most influence on the Western hemisphere in terms of its philosophical culture and spiritual cultivation methods. The Chinese civilization has had its own similar impact throughout Asia. As to the ancient Egyptian civilization, although there is very little left of its previous grandeur, diluted portions of its previous attainments have been passed down to both the East and West through successive conquering civilizations.

More important than these other three, however, it is the Indian culture which must claim the focused spotlight of our initial attention if we seek to truly understand the foundations of the world's various spiritual traditions. The roots and very seeds of the spiritual techniques within these other cultures, or at least their highly concentrated form, can first be found in the ancient Indian "Vedic" civilization, which was naturally quite different from the Indian culture of today.

When we try to think of an individual who could serve as an archetypal example of ancient orthodox Indian culture, many people think of Gautama Shakyamuni, who was also known as the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha, however, was anything but a typical representative of the culture of his day because he was actually a revolutionary figure in the fields of Indian science, culture, and spiritual cultivation. His activities in India are comparable to those of Confucius in China, who brought together all the various Chinese schools of cultivation under one umbrella, added a critique, and thereby enabled this packaged essence to be transmitted to future generations. Both of these individuals can be considered revolutionary, rather than typical individuals.

When we compare Buddha and Confucius we will find that neither actually set out to create a religion, which was an organizational development fostered by subsequent generations. Nonetheless, each did indeed set about to collect, collate, analyze and edit the vast cultural content of their time. From this difficult work, they were both able to systematize the various cultivation practices of their era. Through their own

spiritual accomplishments, they became able to correctly reject unfavorable influences and erroneous spiritual teachings, and replaced them with pure and wholesome roots which could be safely passed on to posterity.

If we really wish to understand the world's present cultivation schools, we must also perform this same overall task of analysis, and must focus on the big picture as well as the minor details. To do this, we must turn our initial attention to the ancient Indian culture in which are found the earliest historical trends of the work involved in spiritual cultivation. This is the culture which has seeded much of both the good and bad we find today in spiritual practices, so it is our first stop in our investigation. To understand the present we must understand the past, and to understand the past we must start with the ancient Vedic spiritual culture.

Later in this book, we will definitely spend some time focusing on the work of Shakyamuni Buddha in detail because he already performed the great task of collating, analyzing and systematizing the tremendous variety of ancient Indian cultivation practices for us. Our emphasis on Buddhism is not to say or even to infer that Buddhism is supreme among all the religions and spiritual schools of the world. Rather, the strong emphasis only serves to acknowledge its great usefulness to the nature of our task, which is to understand the various cultivation schools and techniques used by mankind.

Most every cultivation school has an external aspect of popular religion, an inner esoteric set of cultivation principles and theory, and a whole host of recommended cultivation (spiritual) practices that people can use to advance in spiritual achievement. When we strip Buddhism clean of the exterior religious garments that have been draped over it through the centuries, we will find that it offers the clearest, best organized, most rational and comprehensive structure for explaining the principles, processes and practices of the spiritual path. Using Buddhism as a base, anyone can easily employ its classifications, principles and methods to make rational and fair comparisons with any other spiritual traditions in existence.

What makes Buddhism particularly great is the wonderful richness that it offers in terms of the details of cultivation theory, including the various stages and phenomena that appear along the spiritual path when you practice. It is also rich in an extremely wide variety of spiritual cultivation techniques, or meditation methods. No religious stamp can actually be found on Buddhist cultivation techniques saying that they are exclusively "Buddhist." Thus the basic techniques of Buddhism are found throughout all the other world religions because of their effectiveness and their non-denominational nature.

When someone finally understands the various divisions within the encompassing

realm of Buddhist cultivation – such as the spiritual schools developed by Nagarjuna or Tsong Khapa – they become well poised to also understand the world's other cultivation schools because of the parallel concepts they embody. This cross-denominational understanding becomes possible because of the wide variety of practices and concepts contained within the overall Buddhist framework. This comparative understanding becomes possible because Buddhism segments, and then presents progress on the spiritual path, in an organized manner accompanied by scientific explanations, step-by-step sequences of results to be expected, and various means for verifying their attainment.

To the great benefit of our purposes, Buddhism is no different than modern science in its techniques, and no other spiritual school can even come close to making this same claim or matching its comparable usefulness. Accordingly, it will be of great importance to us to eventually pay close attention to Buddhist practice methods if we really wish to both understand ancient Indian culture as well as the essence of many of the spiritual cultivation methods in the world today. Whatever practices you follow in your home, church, synagogue, mosque or temple, you will be able to understand them better once you understand the principles revealed by Shakyamuni Buddha.

In addition to Buddhism, we must also analyze several other spiritual cultivation schools, including the school of kundalini yoga. Kundalini is a common phenomenon which appears along all genuine higher spiritual paths, but rather than emphasize the phenomenon because it has some importance itself, we need to take a closer look at this particular school to correct the mistaken notions most cultivators have of kundalini as it is taught today.

Immortality Taoism is yet another spiritual path that we must investigate, for it contains a variety of practices that are quite different from those of either early Hinduism or Buddhism. The distinguishing factor about this school is its emphasis on transforming the physical body so that it can go on living forever. In time this idea had a great influence on Persian and Arabian thought, and through this stream of influence it eventually helped develop the concepts of European alchemy. For instance, Western alchemists did not actually practice to produce a physical gold that would appear in their crucibles, but to produce a permanent spiritual and physical transformation of the spirit that possessed the purity of “indestructible gold.” Many of our modern scientific concepts of physical rejuvenation can also trace their roots back to the ideas of this school as well.

To understand the variety of unusual practices people may use for cultivation today, we need to also examine the esoteric practices of both Tibet and Japan. Focusing on the Zen school of spiritual cultivation, which many people typically assume is of

Japanese origins although it is really of Chinese heritage, will aid in our revelations. Understanding how another culture has adopted and transformed a foreign cultivation stream to make the stream its own – as seen in Zen or Esoteric Buddhism – will enable us to gain an understanding of the great cultural mixing of cultivation techniques that we are seeing in the world today. With this mixing also comes a great variety of problems, and if one understands this overall process of interpenetration, they will be just that much more enabled to avoid the “potholes” within their own spiritual tradition.

Unfortunately, the ability to understand this mixing trend will require that we concentrate for the most part on Eastern rather than Western cultivation streams. We must carry out a focused study of Eastern cultivation streams because it is the Eastern streams that have actually provided the foundational patterns for most of the Western spiritual schools of today. Furthermore, we lack adequate historical information to get a clear picture of the earliest Western cultivation traditions. But in the end, there will be no way to get an overreaching understanding of this entire topic unless we do indeed analyze the Western cultivation stream. This includes the great spiritual cultivation tradition that was first spawned by Socrates.

To gain an understanding of the variety of cultivation schools in existence will require more than just a simple understanding of how they developed through the results of cultural mixing. We must also understand their different points of emphasis, and where they have gone astray over time. When we can understand this sort of material, we will become able to correct the errors in our own spiritual practices, and thwart the inevitable falsities that are bound to creep into, or which have already crept into, our own spiritual traditions over time. The revolutionaries, renovators, renewers and saviors of spiritual traditions are those with the clearest vision, and you can only develop this requisite degree of clarity and wisdom if you can first understand everything clearly. Hence, that is what we will attempt.

To navigate the deep waters of the world's spiritual practices therefore requires that we be able to classify and then re-classify these same practices and traditions in various categories and ways that recognize, differentiate and accent their varying characteristics, functions and intended effects. To use an analogy, we must learn how to cut up a single pie in many alternative ways, but all of which fit nicely together.

When an individual can reach the point where he or she immediately understands how and why a particular spiritual cultivation method works, how it is to be properly practiced, what attainments can be expected from its usage, and how it fits into the overall framework of a spiritual tradition and the non-denominational but progressive ladder of spiritual advancement, then he or she will have come a long way in demystifying the nuts and bolts of spiritual practice. No religious authority or

tradition will be able to cheat such a person anymore, or make them feel guilty for any independent acts for spiritual experience they may undertake.

You need to personally know this sort of information and develop this sort of understanding otherwise you will be subject to the blind faith and dogma that enshrouds countless religions, and which pollutes people's minds with all sorts of indoctrination. If you truly wish to avoid becoming a muddled meditator, avoid falling into a spiritual abyss, throw off the cloud of indoctrination imposed on you by religion, and achieve genuine spiritual awakening, you must come to know and understand all this material, and that is another of the many purposes behind this book.

With that, let us begin.

2. Mother India and Ancient Vedic Cultivation Principles

Ancient Indian culture revolved around a very unique and special spiritual tradition. Whether this tradition had anything to do with an even greater prior civilization is difficult to say, and it is useless to even speculate about this matter. However, one certainty is that the ancient Indian civilization played a most prominent role in the world's spiritual and cultural trends from about 2000 B.C. to 1000 A.D. Due to the ready availability of its historical records, our understanding of cultivation matters should therefore start with the ancient Indian culture and in particular, with Brahmanism which lies at its core.

Brahmanism, which is the root religion or philosophy underlying modern Hinduism and Vedic culture, is based upon four ancient religious scriptures called the *Vedas*. The four *Vedas* are said to be of divine origin in the sense that the knowledge they embody supposedly pre-existed the creation of mankind. The *Rig-veda* contains various chants and hymns of praise to be used in religious rituals that address various deities; the *Yajur-veda* contains priestly directions for conducting certain sacrificial rituals; the *Sama-veda* contains songs for various ceremonies; and the *Atharva-veda* contains prayers for averting evil and destruction in human affairs. The latter also contains various mantra formulas, rules for worshipping the planets, and other practical topics of spiritual instruction.

The four primary *Vedas*, taken together, portray a primitive concept of spiritual perfection that is not very thoroughly developed. They do not contain concepts of hell, or even of cause and effect (karma) as is found in modern Hinduism. Nevertheless they do promote a strong belief in the immortality of the soul. The four *Vedas* are also noted for the abundance of mantra, songs, prayers and ceremonies that they include to help human beings attract blessings and worship a great variety of higher gods and natural phenomena.

In essence, the rituals of the *Vedas* were designed to help man deal with nature, and help him channel his energies toward the divine. Since their emphasis on helping an individual satisfy his or her material desires (such as power and position) and on reaching the heavens after death can also be found in other ancient religions, we can say the four ancient *Vedas* have similarities with the primitive religious stirrings found throughout many world cultures.

Even though the four *Vedas* were polytheistic in their worship of many deities, they propounded the basic idea of a chief creator that ultimately developed into the idea of a chief God, "Brahman," who is the one ultimate reality. The four *Vedas* also put

forward the idea that every individual has a true self, or “Atman,” and that there is no difference between this true Atman self of the individual and the true self of the creator Brahman.

At the very beginning of our journey into a deep analysis of spiritual practices and traditions, we have already found a basic concept that we will encounter over and over again: there is a unity, or lack of ultimate difference, between man and the truly Supreme. We have also encountered the basic idea that the goal of spiritual striving is for man to recover or rediscover this state of union with his divine nature, and we will find that this same idea exists in many religious cultures. The Chinese Confucians expressed this idea by saying, “Heaven and human are essentially one.” According to Islam – and the practices of medieval monastic Christianity as well – the purpose of spiritual practice is to become similarly merged with Allah or God, the All-divine. Other religions may use terms different than these, but they commonly emphasize this same single objective.

A basic Vedic principle we must particularly recognize is the belief in the absence of any difference between Brahman and Atman, which means that there is no fundamental difference between the Absolute nature of the universe, and the personal self created of this fundamental nature. If we were to jump ahead and simplify matters, we might say that the highest goal of the many spiritual schools and yogic techniques surviving in India today still embodies this grand objective of reaching the realm where Atman and Brahman are reunited as one. In other words, the purpose and goal of your own spiritual striving is to reach the state where there is no duality between you – the individual – and the Supreme. At least that is how Vedic culture would word it.

As time went on, the ancient Indian culture developed yet other religious compositions to address the various needs of the people that had not been touched upon in the original four *Vedas*. The *Brahmanas*, or books regarding “pure conduct,” were therefore developed in order to help clarify various Vedic discussions and to help the Brahman priests perform certain Vedic rituals. The *Brahmanas* contain explanatory information on the reasons for performing these various ceremonies as well as other pertinent principles of Vedic theology. Essentially, the *Brahmanas* reaffirmed the preexisting Vedic sacrifices and songs that mankind could use to avert disasters and attract blessings, and provided quite a bit more form and structure to the ancient Vedic religion.

In the *Brahmanas*, we can also find the very first traces of the idea of reincarnation, as well as the idea of cause and effect (karma) operating in the lives of individuals and which follows them through ceaseless cycles of transmigration. The basic idea of karma and reincarnation is that individuals are stuck within an endless cycle of birth

and death because they have not yet become at one with Brahman, and that the varying degrees of suffering or pleasure they experience in this life are a result of the bad or good deeds they have performed in this life or in the past. Only when they regain perfect union with Brahman can they become free of all these things.

After the *Brahmanas*, next appeared the *Upanishads*. When translated literally, they refer to the act of devotedly sitting near a spiritual teacher (guru) in order to receive a transmission of spiritual wisdom. The *Upanishads* represent a further evolution of basic Vedic thought, and must be considered an extremely profound philosophical and intellectual outgrowth of Brahmanism that is centrally concerned with the continued spiritual progress of the individual. No one knows how many *Upanishads* originally existed. However, 108 have survived to the present and they are considered to be the full embodiment of the original intent and purpose of the *Vedas*.

The *Upanishads* teach that the Absolute – which is called Brahman – is the supreme, eternal, nonmaterial source of everything. Because Brahman is formless, he is also indescribable and incomprehensible through thought. According to the Vedic cultivation, an individual must strive to reach complete identification with Brahman, and this achievement is the Vedic meaning of self-realization. Furthermore, all the highest Vedic religious practices have the intent of leading people to achieve this final spiritual attainment.

There are four great statements in the *Upanishads* that embody this thought, known as the four Mahavakyas:

- “Pure Consciousness is Brahman”
- “That art Thou”
- “The Self is Brahman”
- “I am Brahman”

These statements give an idea of the overall Vedic cultivation path, as well as the cherished outcome of Vedic cultivation.

In general, the *Upanishads* serve to confirm the *Vedas* by asserting the non-duality between Brahman and Atman. However, they proceed a step further in that they consider the entire universe as nothing more than the transformation of this one great self of Brahman. The universe is actually considered to be an illusory transformation of Brahman – a magical transformation of Brahman referred to as “Maya” that has no particular purpose other than existence as the “play” or “sport” of the Absolute. Phenomena are therefore considered empty illusions lacking any real meaning, for only the one Atman-Brahman truly exists. This teaching reiterates the importance behind the need for becoming one with Brahman, and the importance of

abandoning the realm of Maya to achieve this. In essence, it says that material life is not that important.

The concept of the Atman, or individual spiritual self, arises from the Vedic belief that Brahman's nature can show two united but separate aspects – a fundamental nature, or unchanging basic essence, and an aspect that can enter the physical body to become the personal self. According to Vedic views, the Atman enters the body through the crown of the head and becomes entrapped within the physical body. The physical body, as well as the limiting strictures of normal mental consciousness, block it from going free and thereby prevent each person from achieving union with the divine.

For these reasons the purpose of the *Upanishads*, and Vedic cultivation in general, is to take the small true self of the individual, purify it, and enable it to return to the one true great self of Brahman. The process has often been compared to the fate of a single drop of water which, although initially separated, eventually returns to the great mother ocean from which it has come, and finally achieves indivisible unity with it. The ultimate goal of ancient Indian cultivation was therefore to enable people to return to the purity of Brahman, and the journey toward this end recognized the fact that the Atman was imprisoned within us by the barriers of both body and mind. In particular, the mental barrier was called ignorance, and ignorance was also known as the absence of spiritual illumination.

The methods of self-cultivation that are emphasized in the *Upanishads* for this task of spiritual return include yoga, meditative concentration, obtaining control over one's sensual desires, and the use of mantra. One key feature of ancient Brahmanism was that after fulfilling his layman's householder obligations after he got older, a man should enter the forest in seclusion and cultivate these various meditation methods to purify his body and mind, and thereby enable the Atman to reach union with Brahman. So, we must remember that the concept of leaving the world to purify the mind and body therefore had both a physical and mental aspect in ancient Indian culture.

When compared with the four *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* promulgate a much clearer and more detailed understanding of what ultimate reality is, as well as a more highly developed and systematized means of spiritual cultivation to help aspirants reach that particular goal. Nevertheless, they still contained various contradictions because they could not completely free themselves of the religious framework from which they sprang. Because of this deficiency, and because of a continuous stream of seekers asking questions and striving for the ultimate truth, there developed over time various separate schools of Indian religious philosophy whose goal was to resolve these various contradictions and address the unresolved issues of Vedic

religion.

The Six Schools of Indian Philosophy

When we examine Indian philosophy from the viewpoint of spiritual cultivation – and this is still in regards to pre-Buddhist times – it is customary to focus on six major philosophical schools, each of which has developed its own organized, detailed system of thought.

The Buddhist scriptures speak of almost a hundred competing schools at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, but these six schools of Indian philosophy are generally deemed the most important by cultivators and scholars alike. These six schools, which supported the early Vedic religion and whose exact dates of origin remain unknown, are the Samkhya, Vaisheshika, Nyaya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta schools.

Every one of these six philosophical schools is regarded as “orthodox” because each one accepts the authority of the *Vedas*. Three other Indian spiritual schools – namely Buddhism, Jainism and Carvaka (secular materialism) – are considered “unorthodox” because they do not accept the authority of the *Vedas* despite having been born out of the Vedic environment. Buddhism, however, is unique among this trio because orthodox Hinduism actually recognizes Buddha as an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. This mirrors a similar situation found in Islam wherein Jesus Christ – the founder of Christianity – is accepted not as the savior of the world, but simply as one of the prophets.

Anyone who wishes to study the modern philosophies in the world today must, out of necessity, first direct their initial research efforts to ancient India and study these six schools of thought. Within these ancient schools they are sure to find the germ, and sometimes the complete form, of what we currently consider our modern day concepts and schools of thought. For instance, it was the Vaisheshika philosophers who first originated the concept of atoms. The Indian concept of atoms pre-dates the early atomic theory of the Greeks, so it is by no means correct to say that the Greeks alone originated the theory of atoms.

Arabic numbers are yet another ancient Indian innovation whose origins continue to be overlooked because of the misleading name. Thus, these two small examples serve to illustrate the bad Western habit of assuming that the West has been the originator of most that is good and great in the world. Western culture also has assumed the bad habit of improperly confining itself to its own hemisphere when searching for the origins behind many phenomena, including philosophical matters as well.

If we take a scientific field such as medicine as an example, we can find that the Chinese had invented anesthetics well before Sir James Young Simpson (1847) in the West. Chinese medical doctors had also developed cures for a wide variety of illnesses (such as high blood pressure, goiter, venereal disease, and so on) well before their Western counterparts. Yet as discoveries, these “foreign firsts” still remain unrecognized. India, too, has produced an exceedingly large number of scientific discoveries well in advance of the West, but many of these discoveries are wrongly dismissed as well.

This tendency to confine one’s research horizons to one’s own backyard is not only arrogant and belittling to other cultures, but is actually a disservice to all of mankind. Keeping this in mind, it is not just small talk to say that the precursors for most of the modern Western philosophical schools can be found within one or another branch of ancient Vedic thought. To prove the point, all we must do is note that Vedic thought supplied a great philosophical impetus to such modern greats as Arthur Schopenhauer, Emerson and Thoreau.

What is more important than this issue of bypassing Indian origins is to recognize the basic or foundational difference between the Eastern philosophical schools and the Western philosophical tradition. These two traditions differ in one outstanding respect: The Eastern schools have always emphasized an experiential approach for investigating Truth, whereas the Western philosophical schools have always preferred a path of theory and argument for investigating ultimate Reality.

In other words, the Eastern schools have never relied solely on philosophical thought – which entails an excessive spinning of mental functions – in order to probe reality and fathom what it truly is. They have always combined a rational philosophical structure with a means to prove it through some type of authenticating personal experience. The intellectual body of each school was therefore used to provide explanations behind various meditative or spiritual realms that were considered the actual primary vehicles of spiritual discovery and self-realization. Hence each Indian philosophical school advocated a group of cultivation techniques, such as meditation and contemplation, for probing reality and reaching spiritual states that lead you progressively closer to ultimate realization. If you wanted to understand the nature of reality and achieve true spiritual liberation, you had to practice these cultivation techniques and achieve the spiritual states that they might engender.

Perhaps the most commendable facet of ancient Indian culture was this emphasis on the importance of seeking spiritual realization through personal experience rather than simply through intellectual arguments. This emphasis on the practicality of experience is why the ancient Indian culture was able to build up a map of

progressive meditative experiential realms. No school believed you could realize “Truth,” “Absolute Reality,” “enlightenment,” “spiritual liberation” or “self-realization” through just thought, logic, argument, philosophy or even through mathematics. Rather, you had to cultivate and then master various spiritual states that represented closer and closer approximations to the ultimate divine until you experienced that divine yourself.

The West, on the other hand, has relied primarily on analytical arguments throughout its history of the search for divine Truth. Unfortunately, this has only led to the development of more complicated mental and material realms over time, as well as deeper entanglements in the obfuscating realm of intellectualization. Just take one look at the field of psychology and you will see this. In this particular field, psychologists always say they are studying the mind, but they never penetrate through to the *real* level of the mind that is non-differentiated from the Godhead. Rather, they simply study the transient images that appear in the ordinary mind of mentation, and from this superficial sort of analysis say they are leading people to know themselves. How is this leading people to know their true nature?

This is a basic difference between the Eastern and Western cultures, and it is also one of the main reasons that the Western philosophical tradition has failed to produce a stream of “realized” sages as has appeared in the East. The important ingredient that the Western schools have been lacking is the Eastern acknowledgement of, and emphasis upon, various advanced meditative spiritual states which you can cultivate and personally experience along the path of searching for universal truth.

If you cannot incorporate and account for these states in modern philosophy, psychology or religion, then you cannot possibly say you are offering people a complete picture of the universe and true reality. The ancient Indian philosophical schools, however, readily incorporated all these various states into their theology, and it was paramount that spiritual practitioners cultivate to achieve them. In fact, the entire purpose of the philosophical schools was to provide a type of intellectual structure or analytical support for these spiritual experiences; the experiences were considered the primary vehicles of spiritual salvation whereas the philosophies were simply considered as helpful supports that explained these states and how to reach them.

Taking a look once again at the Vaisheshika atomic theory as our example, we must remember that the ultimate motivational aim behind the development of this theory was to enable a man to seek liberation from the material world rather than to create a materialistic philosophy of science. This is why the materialistic aspects of this theory were not developed to any great degree in ancient India.

China also preferred a humanistic system of thought over the development of a scientific viewpoint because it was the humanism, rather than the science, which was important. Hence the important point of the Vedic teaching on atoms was to help man realize that the world about him was simply the veil of Maya, or illusion. The purpose was simply to point out that the material world was, in fact, an elaborate illusion. The point was that if you could realize this point, then it would be easier to detach from the material world and spiritually awaken.

Modern students of classical Indian philosophy must understand this matter carefully. They must realize that you can never really fully understand these ancient philosophical schools until you understand their mindset concerning the final spiritual objective, as well as undertake and master the same meditative exercises which these schools advocated should be used in the search for spiritual truth. In other words, to understand these schools and their tenets, it is imperative that you attain these same states yourself. Otherwise, any type of study is just an exercise in intellectual word play and mentation rather than the heart and core of real learning.

For convenience sake and because of their internal similarities, the six traditional schools of Indian philosophy are typically reduced to three groups: The Vaisheshika and Nyaya schools become one group, the Samkhya and Yoga schools are combined together to become a second group, and the Mimamsa and Vedanta schools together become a third group.

When viewed in this new way, many of the various contradictions between the schools seems to melt away because the three groups can be interpreted as representing a series of progressive steps to ultimate truth. First there is worldly truth, next a practice truth, and then the highest truth about reality. Each school does indeed talk of truth, but a truth of a different level or from a different perspective of life and the universe. This is how the high and low get along together without bumping into contradictions; each represents a truth from a different level or angle.

For instance, the Vaisheshika school was known for discussing the materialistic qualities of existence, and the Nyaya school developed a system of logical thought for seeking knowledge. Together, these two schools could be described as preparing a seeker's mind for the study of higher philosophy, which was one type of truth.

The Samkhya school developed a dualistic cosmology and other metaphysical theories to differentiate between matter and spirit, and the Yoga school emphasized the experience of meditative practice. As a combined unit, they could be regarded as a further evolution in spiritual philosophy that built upon our previous basis. Their function as a unit enabled a practitioner to come into contact with the truth of

spiritual experience.

A step even higher brings us to the Mimamsa school, which served as a philosophical continuation of the *Brahmanas* because of its close relationship to Hindu law, and the higher philosophical system of the Vedanta school which elaborated upon the *Upanishads*. This was a sort of revelational truth.

Of these six schools, it will be quite fruitful for our purposes to spend the most time discussing the Yoga school in detail, because the Yoga school is the actual fore-father behind many of the spiritual cultivation exercises that we have in the world today. Every well informed aspirant seeking spiritual truth will at one time or another practice the methods first developed within the Yoga school. The practice methods within this school help aspirants to achieve the spiritual states of samadhi and dhyana, which are advanced meditative realms.

You must not think that the other five schools of Indian philosophy were not important to the spiritual path, nor that they failed to provide a beneficial contribution to spiritual seekers. For example, the Mimamsa school, which focuses on researching or solving matters by means of critical examination, can be credited with establishing the foundational basis of mantra yoga which is practiced in Esoteric Buddhism and other spiritual schools. We can say this because the Mimamsa school believes that the words and syllables of the *Vedas* were themselves divine inspirations whose sounds possessed a holy spiritual power.

As to the Vedanta School of philosophy, it has actually been the most influential of these six schools because it is considered the living basis of modern Hinduism today. Vedanta relies most heavily upon Vaishnaism, which is the worship of Sri Krishna and his expression through various incarnations such as Vishnu, Rama, Narayana, etc. Another school within Hinduism, which bases itself on the *Tantras* or *Agamas*, worships God in both a male and female aspect as Shiva and Shakti respectively, but in tracing through matters, we will stick to our major topic of the Vedanta.

To understand the Vedanta, you must understand the four *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Upanishads*, and additional Vedic literature such as the *Vedanta-sutras* and their commentaries. The *Vedanta-sutras*, which we have not yet touched upon, are a set of supplemental Vedic texts containing a series of abbreviated but systematized codes that explain the larger body of Vedic knowledge.

Since the purpose of the Vedanta school is to explain or elaborate upon the essence of the *Upanishads*, then whichever commentary you read on the *Vedanta-sutras* will make a big difference on how you interpret matters, and can therefore bias your spiritual cultivation. Some commentaries sway toward an impersonal understanding

of the Absolute, and some sway towards a personal God as a spiritual savior. This difference is actually enormous because a spiritual aspirant who lacks wisdom, by fixedly attaching to the concept of a personal God, may end up limiting their possibilities in spiritual attainment. This is a major problem that we see in the world today although even the Bible warned against it, for the Ten Commandments told us not to make any images of the divine – and that specifically includes mental images.

Though we are actually veering quite some distance from the pre-Buddhist era of ancient India, we must note that many influential commentaries were written on the *Vedanta-sutras* by such individuals as Ramanuja, Madhva, and Shankara, whose famous *Sariraka-Bhasya* commentary helped establish Vedanta as a non-dualistic spiritual stream. Commentaries on the *Vedanta-sutras* have also been produced by the Indian Saint Sri Caitanya, and by the more recent Hindu saint Sri Ramakrishna, whose story is well known to many in the West. All these commentaries can be considered part of the Vedanta school of philosophy.

There is yet another category of extra Vedic literature called the *Itihasas* which is also used to help explain the compressed philosophy of the *Vedanta-sutras*. The *Itihasas* are epics involving heavenly and human beings, and whose literary contents are accepted as true historical record fact. The two most famous of these historical epics include the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which is considered the longest poem in the world. These stories are so popular that whenever they appear on Indian television, all business comes to a halt because everyone rushes to watch them. Just as there is the saying, “If you cannot find it in New York, you cannot find it anywhere,” the content of the *Mahabharata* is so rich in terms of human emotions that there is also an equivalent saying: “If it is not in the *Mahabharata*, then it is not to be found.”

The *Bhagavad-gita*, which in the last fifty years has begun to attain a degree of prominence in the West, is actually a single section out of this monumental work. Because of all the focused attention, however, the *Bhagavad-gita* has become a virtually independent entity in itself. Because it embodies the essence of all Vedic literature, some even consider the *Bhagavad-gita* the Bible of India and the true guide to Vedanta.

While Vedanta is quite popular, it is still categorized as belonging to the Yoga school, which has impacted the form and structure of many of the spiritual cultivation techniques now in existence. The Yoga school itself is based on four types of yoga scriptures. The first type, called *Samadhi Pada*, explains the basic nature of meditative contemplation and the spiritual states of mental purity you can reach through meditation, called samadhi. The second type called *Sadhana Pada* explains the actual methods and practices for attaining samadhi. The third type, *Vibhuti Pada*,

deals with spiritual powers, psychic abilities and types of gong-fu, and the fourth type, *Kaivalya Pada*, explains the highest goal of the yogic system, which is spiritual emancipation or freedom. The basic philosophical thought of this *Kaivalya Pada* school is somewhat similar to that of the Samkhya school, but the Yoga school puts all its emphasis on the actual methods and cultivation practices for seeking realization.

A glimpse of the Yoga school can be gleaned from a recounting of its eight limbs, or stages, which we commonly find incorporated into various other spiritual schools as well in the foundational practice stages of those cultivation paths. Most every genuine religion, at its preparatory grounding stages of spiritual practice, especially emphasizes the need for morality, ethics and discipline as we find in the practice of Yoga. The eight major stages of Yoga therefore include:

- yama (disciplinary precepts of truthfulness, non-violence, non-misappropriation, celibacy and non-greediness)
- niyama (the requirement for pure conduct and self-discipline)
- asana (sitting postures and hand mudras)
- pranayama (methods for cultivating the breath and life-force)
- pratyahara (the control of the senses to curb mental confusion)
- dharana (a cutting off false thoughts to attain focus and concentration)
- dhyana (the stage of unified meditative concentration), and
- samadhi (a stage of profound meditation wherein the mind is calm and empty like space, yet retains its clear awareness).

To further understand these eight stages or disciplines required in yoga, one can read any of the fine translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* that are now commonly available. It is enough for us to know that the Indian spiritual path starts with a stage of study and moral provisioning, and then moves on to the practice of meditative techniques to develop a spiritual state of mind called "samadhi."

The eight-fold steps are sometimes summarized under the overall term of Raja yoga, meaning the royal (raja) way, but Raja yoga is not the only school of yoga in existence. There is also Hatha yoga, which is basically a subset of the asana and pranayama steps within Raja yoga. Karma yoga is another school of yoga, and is the road of working toward spiritual perfection by performing good actions such as religious ceremonies and charitable acts. Jnana yoga is a path to self-realization that relies on logic and the study of knowledge. Kundalini yoga and Laya yoga both involve cultivating the latent energy and esoteric structures of the physical body, such as chakras and energy channels. Kriya yoga is a more mystical form of spiritual practice and mantra yoga relies on the recitation of mantras. There is also the famous path of Bhakti yoga, which involves intense devotional worship for becoming

one with the divine.

Whereas the Samkhya school tends to be atheistic, the pure Yoga school posits a great transcendental spiritual stage or self called Ishvara. Ishvara is a state without thoughts, sentiments or desires and is equally beyond space, time and the reaches of karma. Spiritual aspirants can work toward reaching union with Ishvara by chanting the mantra "Ohm" (alternatively "Om" or "Aum"), but to achieve this spiritual liberation they must also learn how to cut off their sensual and material desires, and purify their mind to attain liberation.

Whether Ishvara is indeed the ultimate end of any search for true Reality, an expedient title to match with the dogma of the Vedic creeds, or just a code word to denote what is actually an incomplete stage of attainment along the way to true enlightenment, none of this is our present concern. What does concern us is the need to realize that the Yoga school methods, when properly used without any prior expectations or attachments to any fixed notions of a final end, will indeed help you make progress in the spiritual search no matter what religious creed or beliefs you follow.

The step-by-step scientific explanatory nature of the Yoga school methods is one of the characteristics that helps to make it so admirable, and this particular aspect of the school definitely fulfills the needs of our modern era. One of the primary requirements of modern day spiritual seekers is to uncover the universal spiritual cultivation principles and methods which are hidden beneath the ordinary religious garb of most spiritual schools. Studying the scientific structures of the Yoga school is one step which can definitely help in this direction.

None of the other schools in India is entirely independent of the Yoga school because it is the one school that offers the means to prove their tenets. Within the Vedic tradition, not only are there many different schools of philosophy and thought including various branches of science, mathematics, and so on, but there are also a large number of experiential means or spiritual exercises for seeking the truth, most of which owe their existence to the Yoga school and its various methods of contemplative meditation. These methods employ both the body and mind to seek for the truth of spiritual self-realization.

As stated, what really differentiates the earliest Vedic culture from other earthly cultures is exactly this great emphasis on the need to personally verify the truth of the spiritual path through actual attainment rather than faith or belief. The Vedic culture insisted on proving or authenticating the truth of spiritual claims through personal experience rather than through theoretical arguments arrived at through words and logic. The highest levels of religious practice encompassed a sort of step-

by-step meditation guide you had to follow in order to achieve the various spiritual realms mentioned in holy scriptures. People had to practice meditation and cultivate various spiritual states and realms in order to find the truth about ultimate reality, and Vedic society was so arranged to encourage this type of pursuit. This is a far cry from the blind faith advocated by many popular religions today.

One might wonder how these six, and so many other different philosophical schools, could possibly develop in India if they were all based on the same original teachings, emphasized the same principles of self-verification, employed the same cultivation methods of spiritual seeking, and were equally targeted toward the same ultimate truth. Did different schools arise because they did not in fact share the same vision of the “ultimate truth” and if not, how could a school develop a different “ultimate truth” from another if they all used the same methods for spiritual investigation and subscribed to the same high standards of personal verification?

These are extremely important questions, and true cultivation practitioners will definitely have to pursue this line of inquiry if they wish to make sense of the vast number of competing dogmas that are presently found throughout the world. In fact, then you reach the point where you can answer this sort of question, then you will have reached the stage where you can understand the reasons for any of the dogmas or teachings found within this or that religion. That knowledge will make you a very wise human being, but to the competing religions of the world and their absolutist claims, it will also make you a very unpopular or dangerous individual! Your truth will tend to liberate people, whereas their truth will keep people shackled.

The short answer is that it is natural to expect the world's cultivation schools to differ as to the form in which their teachings are revealed and passed down to later generations. Essentially, a teaching must assume whatever shape or form can be best absorbed by its audience, and the warping of the shape to fit these requirements must therefore factor in the local cultural traditions, cultural history, and educational level of the recipients.

This is one reason why religions have different forms in the world, and why not all spiritual truths are uniformly communicated in all religions. After all, no religion can say everything. This also explains why some spiritual truths are eventually dropped or altered over time in various religious and cultural streams. Nevertheless, one must still wonder how and why the final results of some spiritual schools (religions) can differ so dramatically if they are all based upon achieving the same experiential realms – if that is indeed the case.

It is therefore quite proper to ask: How and why does an individual spiritual tradition evolve into so many different sects? Does this variety come about due to the use of

different spiritual cultivation methods, or because of a difference in the highest realms of revelation that different individuals reach by using them? Or does it come about solely due to theoretical or intellectual arguments made by those having little or no level of cultivation attainment?

In other words, does a single school develop into different streams due to a difference in the level of meditative realms that are reached, or do these schools develop differently due to a difference in the interpretation of these realms once reached, or due to philosophical and intellectual arguments made by those who have never tasted any full or partial stages of self-realization?

Is it also possible that an initial bias in the starting conditions of spiritual investigation – such as a bias in initial conceptions or assumptions – can so bind or bias spiritual practitioners that they might never be able to free themselves from error even if they cultivated correctly? And if this is so, why wouldn't "properly cultivating toward the true" tend to overcome any initial bias which was inherently erroneous? Could it be that when someone holds on to any type of expectations or pre-conceived notions that this might possibly warp or limit the ultimate level of their spiritual attainments? Or can the differences between various offshoots of a single school be explained as the result of a lack of spiritual practice effort, as a failure in capability, or because individuals stopped at different incomplete stages of spiritual attainment?

These questions raise even more questions, and those questions raise further questions still. All we can presently say for sure is that the world's various cultivation schools and religions – and the teachings, dogma, statements and pronouncements that they issue – differ because of the ultimate depth of their spiritual realizations, because of the accuracy of their original and subsequent spiritual perceptions, because of the varying form or methods in which their teachings are transmitted, and because of an on-going policing of what can and cannot be said within these traditions that is maintained by those in power.

Whether these differences have originated due to inadequate levels of spiritual attainment by their founders or incorrect conclusions by subsequent followers, is a major issue that we must leave aside for the moment. As to whether this tradition or that one is higher than another, this is yet another topic we will not even get into. And as to the reason why various sects have tended to arise over time from the womb of one original teaching, we must try to think of this event as similar to sunspots which periodically move across the face of the sun. Even though the sunspots cause no damage to the overall light of the sun, one can still feel a sense of regret at seeing a flaw in something otherwise so pure.

What this diversity does confirm of the ancient Indian culture is that the culture held a great reverence for lofty contemplative pursuits, and the preference for mystical contemplation was to some extent a result of the country's warm climatic circumstances as well as other geographical factors. However, an examination of the ancient Indian culture also shows that this excessive preoccupation with lofty concerns and mystical imagination was not without its own set of problems. Because of this particular overemphasis on mystical imagination and other-worldly realms, the Indian culture was deficient in developing a rich intermediate level of humanistic thought and behavior to fill the large gap between the lofty concept of Atman returning to Brahma, and the mundane life of the ordinary individual.

This deficiency contributed to the maintenance of the rigid Indian caste system that enforced a never changing inequality of status between the high and low in society. Elsewhere, the Socratic teachings of the West or the Confucian teachings of China filled this humanistic void by teaching the people how to act as true human beings in the world. Within India, Buddhism refuted the idea that mankind was divided into castes by nature, and it also pointed out the means for refining and elevating the human being no matter what a person's background or occupation. Buddhism even taught the inherent spiritual equality between human beings and animals. However, Buddhism was ultimately rejected by India, and so its liberating influence was not sufficiently absorbed into society.

To some extent we can say that the *Bhagavad-gita* emphasized the social nature of human existence and the necessity of man's commitment to worldly affairs, but not to the extent that the ancient Indian culture could rise high enough to promote the concepts of equality and liberty in human relationships. So let this small point serve as a reminder to the vast number of film producers or writers of today's media who paint utopian pictures of societies committed solely to philosophical pursuits. Communism was portrayed as a utopian society by those intellectuals who did not truly understand human nature, and look at the disaster produced by this political system as well.

As Socrates and Confucius pointed out, man must indeed strive for spiritual perfection, but he must also learn how to become ethically engaged with others in the world. That means man must become thoroughly grounded in virtuous relationships with fellow beings and worldly circumstances. He is part of the whole, and cannot turn his back on his interpenetrative or dependent relationship with all the other parts of this whole. History has shown that when nations base themselves on utopian philosophies that ignore human nature and worldly realities, the results will be more destructive than one can imagine. Once again, Communism is a perfect example of this sort of catastrophe.

To understand the birth of various other cultivation schools throughout the world, we must once again emphasize the fact that Mother India's culture was characterized by a tendency to prove any spiritual truths through experiential means, and so spiritual truth had to be proven through the actual practice of self-cultivation. Putting aside this particular characteristic, India's great diversity of philosophical and religious thought also means that anyone who wants to establish a new category of spiritual study in the modern university – the comparison of world spiritual cultivation methods – must definitely understand the ancient Indian culture in detail, especially the various Vedic philosophical and cultivation schools that went into forming the popular Hinduism of today.

The Descendants of Ancient Vedic Culture

While Western culture has been arguing back and forth over the spiritualistic or materialistic view of the world for several centuries now, the main issues of this controversy were originally debated in ancient India, and the results of this debate were assimilated into India's culture ages ago. In the time of ancient India, however, the controversies between these various schools still remained and it took one individual, Shakyamuni Buddha, to investigate all the arguments as well as the various pathways each claimed as the supposed final solution for spiritual realization.

Through his own practice and process of spiritual verification, which involved mastering all of the philosophical teachings of his time as well as the highest experiential realms that each school took as the ultimate, Shakyamuni Buddha was able to take in all the ancient Indian schools, sift the false and detrimental paths from the true, and reaffirm what was good and helpful. He then organized the whole in such a manner that the new structure could be easily taught and transmitted to future generations.

Without getting into a detailed explanation of the tenets of Buddhism, which have been distorted in the last century due to a legacy of poor translations and misplaced focuses, we must emphasize the fact that Buddha was against any inequalities between human beings, against superstition, against blind faith, against spiritual practices, paths or teachings which lacked some sort of scientific reasoning and verification, and against the idea of an omnipotent God or super-being having the ultimate authority to control everything.

Buddha insisted that the true religious or spiritual path did not actually consist of rites and ceremonies, but in the task of working to experientially achieve self-realization of one's true fundamental nature. The whole core of the spiritual experience is the achievement of personal spiritual salvation or liberation. This

achieving of self-realization he called “enlightenment,” but in Buddhist terms this feat is also called “realizing the dharmakaya.” In Taoism it is called “seeing the Tao,” in Tibet it is called “seeing the clear light,” and it goes by a countless names in different religions and cultures.

Shakyamuni Buddha taught that body and mind must logically have the same ultimate origin, and so they must be parts of one single whole. All his teachings proceed from this basis that mind and matter have one ultimate source, and it was through the mind that one could eventually experience this ultimate source which Buddha called the fundamental nature or dharmakaya.

When Buddha started to teach this principle, however, he did not want to start a religion. Rather, he just wanted to talk about spiritual principles and practices and destroy human superstitions about anything erroneous along the road of spiritual effort. His attention was focused on that one fundamental thing common to all beings – our ultimate nature – and the means human beings could use to realize that one original, fundamental essence.

The heavenly and human must belong to one original nature, and so Shakyamuni revealed “that something” within humans that directly connects them with the Supreme. He taught that everything is born of karmic conditions, and that because of inescapable karma there is no God or other one thing that can ultimately dominate the universe. In fact, Shakyamuni taught that there are an incredibly large number of gods or deities that rule various celestial realms in the universe, and these realms and deities will be encountered when you attain various advanced states of meditation. So their existence is not a matter of belief or faith, but something you can prove for yourself, which is also why they feature in so many religions.

For instance, Hinduism talks of various heavenly realms with gods and goddesses, Christianity has various heavenly realms and denizens (such as angels, archangels, principalities, dominations, thrones, cherubim and seraphim), the Aztecs and Mayans recognized various spiritual realms, Taoism speaks of the various heavens you can visit when you attain an astral body, and so on it goes. Some sages, like Confucius or Socrates, did not mention that these heavenly realms and their beings existed, but they did not deny that they existed either. They just avoided discussing these issues because it was not important to what they were trying to teach, and might have influenced people to follow a useless road of worship rather than devote themselves to the practicalities of personal spiritual practice. The important point is that there are all sorts of beings and realms in the universe that are of a higher spiritual stage than human beings, and this is not a matter of argument, theory or speculation because you need only cultivate sufficiently to prove this for yourself. The fact that it is true is why so many spiritual schools speak of these things.

Many of these beings came to hear Shakyamuni's lectures in this world when he was teaching, for Shakyamuni was a fully enlightened sage. So there are indeed various ranks of these beings with merit, wisdom, knowledge and spiritual attainments far surpassing our own, but as to the existence of one supra-being responsible for all existence, Shakyamuni and these other rulers never found one. Nevertheless, speaking as if there is one being is an easy way to guide people, which is why a number of sages throughout time have chosen this route. However, being a fully enlightened being, Shakyamuni perceived and then explained how everything came to be without a being who was a "Creator." He also explained how everything was kept together because of karma, and how karma was responsible for various personal, worldly and universal cycles.

From the absolute standpoint of our original nature, even karma is essentially empty of true reality, which is why it can exist in the first place. But as to the provisional level of conventional reality, all beings are subject to the karmic process of cause and effect. Because of this they are caught in an endless recurring cycle of pain, misery and affliction until they learn how to break free from this cycle, and spiritually practice to master it rather than have it master them. Unfortunately, once beings fall from a higher state into a lower state within this never ending loop of transmigration and suffering, their spiritual wisdom decreases and they become subject to a type of mental ignorance which makes it hard for them to experientially realize their original nature anymore.

When someone through spiritual practice can realize their original nature, however, this is when they will achieve the truest and highest form of spiritual liberation. It is the highest type of spiritual achievement because it enables you to seamlessly connect with the source essence of all, and enables you to master the clutches of karma and the process of birth and death that defines the material realm. Anyone who successfully cultivates to enlightenment therefore joins the highest ranks of spiritual beings, for they have also reached this attainment.

Shakyamuni Buddha was born a prince, but he did not want to become a king even though he was given the chance because he felt that politics, economics and culture could not cure the pain of sentient beings. He believed that the only way to cure the unending cycle of pain we see in the world – and the universe at large – was to teach people how to discover their fundamental true nature. Hence he spent his entire life teaching how a person might become spiritually enlightened, and revealed countless teachings that help guide human beings towards achieving this goal.

Because of these teachings, we can accurately say that Buddha initiated a great new impetus in mankind's cultural development. In addition to his work on restructuring and revitalizing the many cultivation methods of old, he developed a variety of new

spiritual methods and categorization schemes which together formed the educational system known as Buddhism, and which eventually became a religion via the efforts of later generations. Because of his great compassion for saving the world, combined with his dignity as both a master spiritual teacher and guide, he is often respectfully called the “World Honored One” and “Enlightened Savior.”

For a variety of reasons, within just one thousand years the Buddhist teachings were not to be found in India anymore, as Shakyamuni Buddha had predicted. During this time, however, a complete set of Buddha’s teachings were transmitted to ancient China. It is actually China – rather than Thailand, Sri Lanka, or even Burma – which can be said to have fully absorbed and preserved the true heart of the Buddha’s teachings.

This does not mean that the Chinese accepted the Buddhist teachings entirely without modification, nor that the personality and culture of the Chinese was exactly the same as that of the Indians of Shakyamuni’s day. Without doubt, the information contained within Buddhism, including the methods and practices of its various cultivation schools, became influenced by those already existing within Chinese culture. The point is that it was within the bed of Chinese culture that Buddhism was to find a safe home, initiate the awakening of a series of enlightened adepts, and flourish in society at large.

We cannot necessarily say that the ancient Chinese understood the Buddha’s true intent and the real meaning of what he taught, but by traveling to China his teachings became preserved in an admirable active cultural vehicle. Since it is rare in any period of time to find someone who really knows the essence of a teaching or religion – such as a Mencius following a Confucius, a Nagarjuna following a Shakyamuni, or a Plato following a Socrates – we can say with some surety that the Buddhist religion we have today is just the outward form of Buddha’s true meaning, and that few actually understand its real heart.

On Indian soil there is no true Buddhist culture at the present time. After Buddha’s death, the ancient Vedic religion continued to survive, and was carried forward to develop the various branches of Hinduism and Vedic thought now existing. It is not as if Shakyamuni Buddha came and everybody just naturally converted to his message, for in the India of his time, it was only the best of men and highest classes who generally knew of him. From his life time onwards within India, the Vedic practices still continued to be passed down and Islam also eventually entered the country to create its own set of influences. We cannot go into tracing these particular trends, but only want to point out that the modern Hindu religion still retains much of the flavor of pre-Buddhist times.

An example of this can be seen in the modern Indian practice of japa, or mantra recitation. The essential principles of the earliest Vedic philosophy, science, spiritualism, and cultivation have all been boiled down into various mantra formula in the same way that the condensed essence of ancient Chinese culture has been distilled into the body of the *I-Ching (Book of Changes)*. Thus today you will find most Vedic cultivation schools are still relying on mantras for cultivation purposes. There are various Indian cultivation schools which also employ visualization methods that focus on the heavens and heavenly beings, as well as austerity practices, called tapas, which involve extreme suffering and self-sacrifice in an attempt to get rid of bad karma in exchange for a spiritual reward.

The idea behind engaging in such ascetic practices, which Shakyamuni Buddha ultimately rejected, is that the practitioner will thereby develop a more spiritual nature because he learned how to disregard the physical body and purify his sense desires. However, in weakening or even destroying the physical body, ascetics actually make it an unfit vehicle for spiritual cultivation and thereby often prevent the necessary joy and bliss of spiritual samadhi states from truly arising. Some Indian schools (such as the school of ayurvedic medicine and the rasayana rejuvenation school) are known for using special medicines in their cultivation of meditation yoga, and while this can be extremely helpful, drugs and medicines of any form cannot take you to a realization of the Tao either.

Overall, we can say that the different schools of Indian yoga have remained somewhat intact until today, and several lineages still exist although they are not as complete as in ancient times. In some cases, such as with kundalini yoga and hatha yoga, we are presently seeing a great resurgence of interest in these old practices primarily due to Westerners, rather than Easterners, who are dissatisfied with the spiritual routes open to them in the West, and who are therefore seeking a more experiential spiritual path.

This peculiar trend illustrates a common principle often seen throughout the world, which is that a native product is often locally ignored, and must first be acclaimed elsewhere before its true value is recognized in its homeland. In other words, a prophet is never honored in his own country but must go elsewhere to become recognized. From a psychological point of view, all people tend to respect the distant rather than the near, the ancient rather than the modern, the dead rather than the living, and the strange or secret rather than the familiar. Whenever someone therefore advocates or packages a concept with these characteristics, their message is more likely to be welcomed.

Even though there is this strong resurgence of interest in the ancient Eastern cultivation techniques and sciences – such as the Indian methods of yoga, astrology,

ayurveda (medicine), and so forth – we can only say that the modern day equivalents of these various schools represent only watered down versions of what they once were. Today it is almost impossible to retrieve even a bit of the original grandeur of these schools, which is lamentable but just the way things are.

To take just one example that compares India with its Chinese neighbor, we find that the early Brahmans of India developed the field of astronomy and astrology much earlier than did the Chinese, but they were not as scientifically oriented as in China since they leaned more to the side of spiritual mysticism. A perfect example was the Indian emphasis on the various constellations that appeared in the sky, called nakshatras, each of which represented a different celestial deity. In ancient Indian times the nakshatras were used for determining what type of activities might be inauspicious or succeed on a particular day, but most of this original knowledge and its application has been largely lost.

The ancient Chinese, on the other hand, were more scientific in terms of their astronomical observations. They eventually took India's special astronomical knowledge, combined it with their own observations of the heavens, and produced their own specialized branch of this knowledge which became incorporated into its time keeping and calendrical systems. From there it made its way into other branches of scientific and cultural knowledge.

During the last century, India has started to reclaim much of its lost heritage in this field because many ancient Sanskrit astronomical and astrological texts are now being translated and interpreted. But the fact remains that the greatness of this information has been lost over the centuries, especially in regards to how it was applied in daily life, otherwise this information would already be everywhere instituted by the general public. To some extent it is, but much of the material has been lost.

Astrology is just one small example that helps illustrate the bridge which eventually formed between the ancient Indian and Chinese cultures, and it is a useful discussion piece for illustrating what little remains of some of the great bodies of esoteric knowledge originated in ancient times. Much of the mystical knowledge from ancient times has deteriorated because it actually became "too mystical" in nature, or because teachers became too secretive and failed to pass down their hard-earned knowledge to those willing and deserving.

History also shows many cases where knowledge was destroyed as a result of the burning of manuscripts – such as the destruction of the library at Alexandria, the burning of the Aztec manuscripts by the Spanish, and the burning of the books by the first Emperor of China's Qin dynasty. This should prompt the far thinking to

encourage the widespread dissemination of information, as well as ponder ways to safeguard and preserve it. People must also discourage radical responses to either new or old knowledge, for you only need look to the recent destruction caused by China's Cultural Revolution to see how rash responses to bodies of knowledge can irreparably cripple a nation and destroy its great heritage.

There are, of course, many other reasons behind the gradual decline of an esoteric school of thought, for as noted, in many cases valuable information eventually became lost because teachers were unwilling to share what they had learned and did not teach it to able students. This has always been a particular problem in Chinese culture where the teachers have traditionally refused to teach all they have learned in fear of losing their livelihood or creating a student who might surpass them.

Through fault of pride, many talented individuals withheld passing on the valuable expertise they had developed in their field. The result was that less and less knowledge became available to subsequent generations, and largely because individuals wanted to retain the dignity of being teachers who could not be surpassed by their students. While this trend tended to cripple the development of science in India and China, America and Europe actually prospered along the lines of disseminating knowledge because they set up their educational systems in such a way as to resist this tendency. The great material and scientific developments we see today in the West are a direct result of setting up an intelligent system to encourage the transmission of knowledge so that it might become widespread and not be lost.

In the field of spirituality, this tendency to withhold teachings and information is actually an entirely selfish and improper attitude. In the spiritual field, it is actually considered a breach of discipline – of the highest sort – when you refuse to transmit teachings to qualified students, even if they do not request them. On the other hand, sometimes a perfectly willing and sincere teacher does not find any students with the requisite ability, understanding, interest and dedication to receive what the teacher has to impart, and so many branches of knowledge have also eventually died out in this manner.

Most people do not realize that what is really necessary for understanding a particular field of esoteric knowledge is transcendental wisdom, called "prajna," and this type of wisdom can only be attained by someone who correctly cultivates the spiritual meditative realms of samadhi (a quiet meditative realm of one-pointed concentration). However even if you do attain the state of internal mental quiet known as samadhi, without relying on the right sort of view there is no guarantee you will ever attain prajna transcendental wisdom. Without this transcendental wisdom, your spiritual achievements will be severely limited.

Thus there have always been (and still are) many spiritual masters who were simply professional meditators because they lacked the achievement of transcendental wisdom. Not only do these spiritual masters possess little understanding of the great transcendental view of enlightenment, but they are even ignorant of how to relate to others and perform the ordinary tasks of the world. Only if you develop transcendental wisdom can we say that you gain the correct “eye” of enlightenment, but most people on the spiritual trail do not even recognize this basic fact. If they are very talented they cultivate the samadhi realms of mental peacefulness and concentration, but only the premier of the talented end up cultivating prajna wisdom.

In discussing the various bodies of esoteric knowledge such as feng shui (geomancy), astrology or divination, we must always consider those branches of knowledge as simply a restricted condensation, at the limited level of intellect, of the transcendental understanding that develops out of samadhi and prajna wisdom attainments. This means that to really understand a certain branch of esoteric knowledge, you must be able to advance to the equivalent level of samadhi and transcendental wisdom that gave birth to that knowledge in the first place. Otherwise your understanding just amounts to an imperfect form of intellectual knowledge.

Naturally the attainment of samadhi and prajna wisdom will only be possible if someone practices meditation along the road of spiritual cultivation, which most people simply do not want to do. Nevertheless, we must insist that learning a branch of esoteric knowledge is not simply a matter of cleverness or intellect, for it requires a wisdom that is far beyond the capabilities of those who consider themselves smart or intelligent.

Many ancient sages did not codify the type of knowledge they obtained simply because they wanted people to use it, but so that by having a codified vehicle of understanding possible, the ardent practitioners of that school of knowledge might have a means or path whereby they might climb to that original level of samadhi and prajna insight understanding that spawned the knowledge in the first place. In other words, the tools of an esoteric school were meant to help you reach a level of spiritual understanding – from within the realms of samadhi and transcendental wisdom – which gave birth to the teachings in the first place.

It is interesting to note those who do attain a measure of transcendental wisdom usually lose any fascination they may have previously had with various esoteric branches of knowledge they may have previously studied; after they know how things work, they move on to the more important task of incorporating their spiritual insights into themselves, and perfecting themselves by transforming their behavior. This is why you will find great astrologers who never look at their charts anymore, or feng shui practitioners who end up not caring where they live or where their parents

are buried. After they understand everything, they say it is all karma anyway and so it is best to let karma naturally take its course, but to always try and change it into something better. Thus, they never fear fate, but simply focus on perfecting their behavioral responses to any karmic situations that arise in life.

Physical yoga is another example of a body of esoteric knowledge that originated in ancient times, but which has also suffered a great loss of much of its original teachings although many are slowly being recovered. For instance, in terms of genuine spiritual cultivation, the more advanced stages of Indian yoga are definitely related to your chi mai energy channels, through which your life force “prana” or “chi” flows, especially as taught in the school of kundalini yoga. The Yoga schools were the first to try and classify the effects of spiritual practice on these phenomena, and this is an important topic to examine on the road of spirituality.

Many people are familiar with these various facets of the spiritual path, such as the existence of acupuncture meridians, but a deeper understanding of teachings on this matter is almost nowhere to be found. In the next chapter we will touch upon these matters to correct some of the mistaken notions surrounding them in today’s “New Age” environment. But before we do, we must once again emphasize that the teachings on these matters were developed as a result of spiritual practice, and they were results you were meant to prove to yourself through attaining an equivalent level of spiritual achievement!

When people claim that yoga, astrology, feng shui and so forth do not work, it is simply because they have not studied them hard enough, and have not cultivated to the extent where they will directly experience them as truths because of a requisite stage of spiritual attainment. So when someone starts claiming such nonsense, you know they are just ignorant because their stage of spiritual wisdom and understanding is too low, and they just have not cultivated high enough.

3. Kundalini, Your Body's Internal Energy Channels, the Clear Light of Mind, and Cultivating Your Chakras

Esoteric tradition holds that the teachings known today as kundalini yoga actually originated from higher beings in the celestial heavens. To be specific, they came from the Paranirmita and Nirmanarati heavens situated at the top of the Realm of Desire.

According to Buddhism the entire celestial cosmos is most logically divided into three great realms – the Realm of Desire, Form, and Formlessness – and each of these realms can be further partitioned into a varying number of heavens. The beings living within the Desire Realm are the lowest level of beings on the universal scale. They belong to the Desire Realm because they still possess the desire for food and sex as well as for money, status, power and so on.

The beings of the Form Realm are of a more refined, higher spiritual nature than the beings of the Desire Realm because they no longer have these coarse desires anymore. This realm is best described as being of an energy rather than material nature.

When it comes to the Formless Realm, this is a great transcendental spiritual realm, and the beings within it are always engaged in the mental absorption of formlessness. The Form Realm, on the other hand, is cultivated through samadhi mental achievements that have some type of form based support.

While human beings are denizens of the Desire Realm, it is also home to various lower populations as well as higher celestial inhabitants. The lower inhabitants include animals, ghosts, and beings suffering in hell. The higher Desire Realm beings, above the human level, include heavenly inhabitants known as the asuras, or “angry gods,” and the devas which are often called angels.

There are six levels of cultivation attainment in the Desire Realm heavens. Legend says the kundalini yoga teachings came from the fifth and sixth heavens at the very top of this realm. As with various esoteric tantras, they were given to human beings so that we might have another spiritual technique to cultivate by which we might climb out of the Realm of Desire and experience the states of samadhi which characterize the Realm of Form.

Even though the practices of kundalini yoga are blessed with a celestial birthplace, this particular heavenly origin still belongs within the realm of Mara (delusion) since it is still included within the sphere of the Desire Realm. It is very difficult to trace the path and development of the kundalini yoga lineage clearly, but we can definitely say

that the school has its own independent system of chi mai (energy channel) cultivation, and involves a variety of external and internal breathing practices. The kundalini school is particularly known for these characteristic cultivation principles.

Basically, the method that kundalini yoga teaches is to open the body's energy channels, called "chi mai" in Chinese, and all its chakras. It is particularly important in this school to open the thousand-petal chakra on top of the head called the Sahasrara. After accomplishing this, a kundalini practitioner will feel as if he can connect with the entire universe at large, although this stage only corresponds to cultivating to the top of the Realm of Desire. It is a stage comparable to the first dhyana or first samadhi of the nine basic samadhi absorptions (meditative states) found in Indian yoga, and it is a necessary first step on the basic spiritual path but by no means is it the final solution.

The original kundalini school taught the existence of one God, and the teachings maintained that once you ascended to the top of the Desire Realm, you would be one with the creator. This meant that the school of kundalini yoga actually assumed that the Buddha's nirvana of perfect enlightenment is equal to this much lower stage of spiritual attainment. This is the first great problem with this school.

While it is both extremely difficult and highly commendable to be able to actually accomplish the feats encompassed within kundalini yoga, these attainments cannot be considered the ultimate spiritual accomplishments because they only entail reaching the top stage of the lowest celestial realm. Nonetheless, because the resulting level of attainment makes one feel as if they were like a small little bubble opening up and returning to the great ocean, many yogis mistakenly take this accomplishment as the ultimate union with Brahman.

Because of its methods of practice, the kundalini yoga school is very similar to the school of Chinese Taoism since the Tao school also uses similar methods of mantra, visualization, and the ingestion of various medicines to open up the body's chi mai, or energy channels. In fact, because of the limited scope of kundalini practices and because Taoism is that much larger, we can say that the practices of physical yoga and the kundalini school are all included within Chinese Taoism.

Another interesting point we should note is that the teachings of kundalini yoga, in conjunction with the larger variety of chi mai practices of the Chinese Tao school, together helped form the body of teachings known as Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. This particular cultivation school, which places considerable emphasis on cultivating the chi of the body, also contains kundalini yoga as a subset of its overall teachings.

From this one example, we can see that two separate cultures produced cultivation

schools with similar practices, though each culture employed different terminology in their teachings and explanations. The Tao school, for instance, uses four technical terms for kundalini that are unknown to India. Taoism refers to kundalini as the “zhuo huo” (clumsy fire or tumo fire), “ling neng” (spirit energy), “ling li” (spirit power), and “ling she” (spirit snake). In the Tao school one will also commonly encounter the phrase that “pre-heaven chi arises from emptiness.” This is also a direct reference to the kundalini phenomenon in a form that is not found in Vedic sources.

The Chinese and Indian cultures have different pictorial ways of representing the kundalini phenomenon as well. Chinese culture often uses the picture of a snake and turtle in sexual union, or the statue of a man holding a string with a coin dangling at its end. The coin is caught by a three-legged toad who has the coin in its mouth, and this scene also teaches about kundalini. For instance, the ugly toad represents a man's genital region, from which the kundalini arises, and the toad has three legs to symbolize the jing, chi and shen essences of Chinese medicine. These three essences are considered treasures, which is why a coin is used to “catch” the toad; one has to accumulate these resources, as a sort of investment, in order for the kundalini to rise up one's chi channels (the string).

The Indian culture typically uses the picture of a snake – in particular the cobra – to refer to kundalini. The cobra usually curls itself in a circle but can rise up just as the kundalini energy can rise up your chi channels. Hence the very same phenomenon is symbolized differently in various schools. In the Bible the kundalini path was represented by Jacob's ladder, and in the schools of Western cultivation it is alternatively symbolized as a shepherd's hook, a vine twisting upwards with flowers, a caduceus, and by other symbols that capture the general shape of the ascending chi channels that enter the brain.

The differences between the kundalini concepts used in the Indian and Chinese cultivation schools are actually due to the different medicinal systems found in each country. Indian chi mai practice holds an extremely close relationship with Indian ayurvedic medical practice, and the theoretical underpinnings of this medical system are quite different from those of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which developed in conjunction with the Taoism. As a result, the Chinese concepts for kundalini cultivation are different as well.

Even though India and China both talk about the chi mai energy channels within our bodies, their native medical traditions have influenced the respective kundalini practices to a major extent. One of the most noticeable differences is that the Indians typically focus on the central (sushumna), left (ida) and right (pingala) chi channels in their various cultivation schools, and virtually ignore the *tu mai* (back), *jen mai*

(front) and other channels emphasized by Chinese Taoism and Esoteric Buddhism.¹ But in terms of the energy channels to be emphasized along the cultivation trail, even the Tao school and Esoteric Buddhism differ somewhat in regards to which channels should serve as a focal point of spiritual emphasis.

There are other various differences between these two cultivation schools and their representation of kundalini. For example, the Indian spiritual schools discuss seven major chakras, or esoteric organs of the body, but fail to mention the higher sacred Heaven chakras illustrated in Esoteric Buddhism. These are a series of smaller chakras rising upwards above one's head which are often represented by a stream of Buddhas extending skywards onto infinity.

In the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West*, these chakras are actually referenced when the Monkey King Wu-kung agrees to a head cutting contest with an opponent. Every time the opponent slices off Wu-kung's head, another pops into place to demonstrate that he had successfully achieved this particular level of spiritual gong-fu. Unfortunately, kundalini texts do not mention the usage or even existence of these extra chakras, especially their unique rotations.

Opening the crown chakra on the top of the head is something that is definitely emphasized in the kundalini yoga school. In fact, this feat is a basic requirement in all the spiritual traditions and religions of every time and place, whether explicitly stated or not, and is something you want to happen in your own spiritual practice regardless as to whether your religion remains quiet on the issue. You can achieve this rather quickly when you cultivate both the gong-fu of meditation, and spiritual or virtuous merit. Accumulating merit is an essential requirement for spiritual progress of any type, and the way to cultivate merit is by decreasing bad thoughts, practicing virtuous behavior, and performing countless good deeds.

Even with gong-fu and merit, to progress past the peak of the Desire Realm and attain to the higher Realm of Form or Realm of Formlessness still requires great prajna wisdom, which is also known as transcendental wisdom. Prajna wisdom is the clear knowing function of our original nature that knows without knowing. The reason most individuals with meditation or spiritual gong-fu cannot attain supreme enlightenment is precisely because they lack this requirement of prajna. *It is because their wisdom is not great enough.* It is because they have not sufficiently cultivated prajna transcendental wisdom. This is why the schools in India before Shakyamuni failed to produce an enlightened Buddha. It took Shakyamuni Buddha to come along and open up the path of prajna cultivation to all the spiritual aspirants of the world.

Even though an individual can reach the extremely high samadhi stations known as "no-thought" or "neither thought nor no-thought" in the Realms of Form and

Formlessness – which were considered the highest spiritual accomplishments possible in Shakyamuni Buddha's day – these can still not be considered the ultimate stage of spiritual attainment. As can be seen in the enlightenment stories of the Taoist master Lu Ch'un-yang or the Chinese Zen master Fa-yung,² an awakening into the highest stages of spiritual attainment depends entirely on prajna wisdom and the correct use of mind.

This means that for those who follow the kundalini teachings, the most you might ever hope to accomplish through this route of practice is a minor taste of samadhi that is far from the highest state possible of spiritual achievements. After mastering kundalini cultivation – if one should choose to go down this spiritual path – an individual still needs to cultivate the higher ranks of samadhi in order to attain transcendental wisdom and awaken to true enlightenment.

Unfortunately, this issue is misunderstood by almost every student in nearly every cultivation school that exists. People, whether on the right or left or in the East or West, can all perfectly speak the words “kundalini,” “chi,” or “samadhi” and “chakras,” but they have absolutely no experiential knowledge of these matters at all, and yet they will instantly pass judgement on these matters or end up rushing down detrimental by-roads of spiritual practice that emphasize them.

In particular, practitioners do not know how to identify the true kundalini phenomenon experienced at the beginning stages of cultivation, nor do they know how it fits into the overall framework of the spiritual path of accomplishment. For instance, when the true kundalini really arises, your entire body will become warm, soft and blissful everywhere inside. It will become so full of chi that every cell will feel happy at every moment. Even if someone were to face death at this stage of spiritual achievement, they would still feel happy without sporting a sad face or depressed expression. Such is the genuine yang type of kundalini experience whose description differs markedly from the fierce painful yin type of kundalini experience commonly mentioned in autobiographical accounts.

A second point is that people rarely if ever remember that the kundalini phenomenon still belongs to the Realm of Desire where sentient beings are beset by the desires for food and sex. This means that anyone who wishes to surpass this stage of spiritual progress and advance to the higher spiritual Realm of Form must definitely reduce these two particular desires and others as well. Armed with just this tiny bit of information, it is easy to look around at various lamas, gurus and masters who pretend to be what they are not, and see through their particular pretense. If you still have a great desire for food, or sex, or power, money and fortune, you certainly have not achieved even an inkling of the kundalini attainment.

When you cultivate correctly and the kundalini energy really starts arising, it will initially seem like there is a fierce force pushing upwards within your body. Eventually the force will increase to such an extent that the feeling becomes quite uncomfortable, which is natural since it corresponds to the fact that all of your chi mai are being pushed open and cleared of internal blockages. When this uncomfortable feeling starts to occur, most ordinary individuals on the spiritual trail typically turn to sexual activities to “express this energy” and relieve themselves of this pressure. Thus they lose this potential transformative spiritual energy, along with the spiritual states and physical renewal that it engenders. As a result, they thereby doom themselves to continue the endless rounds of birth and death because if they do not pass through this stage of transformation, they will never be able to free themselves from the Realm of Desire.

If you cultivate the spiritual path but succumb to sexual inclinations whenever your internal energy stirs, you will never attain any notable spiritual progress. This obstacle of sexual desire is the chief problem faced by most spiritual practitioners. That is why we cannot reach any sort of samadhi attainment and stay imprisoned within the Desire Realm. But, if you can bear the feeling of the energy massing as it tries to push its way through your chi channels, it will finally start to make inroads into transforming your physical body, which may at times feel like it is being cut up with a hot butcher's knife. This is how painful it might initially feel when the various poisons are pushed from your body as your chi channels and internal obstructions are opened up from inside.

At this time, using the Zen school parlance we can say that you must practice being an unmoving “host” who views all this pain as a transient “guest” destined to leave. The guest is not you, so even if he causes you trouble you can just ignore or forget about him without becoming too involved with his situation. You must leave this guest alone without interfering or becoming entangled with him, and then gradually he will disappear, meaning that the problem will go away. The longer you refrain from cultivating emptiness because of attaching to the relevant sensations which arise, however, the longer will the process of transformation entail since discriminative thoughts will interfere with its completion. What this means is that effective spiritual cultivation requires forgetting that you have a body.

In other words, a spiritual cultivator – of whatever religion or spiritual school – must stay in the prajna wisdom state of the “one who knows” and simply watch any pain that arises on the spiritual path without becoming involved with the event. Naturally it will take some time for the body to rid itself of the poisons it has accumulated over the years, and some time to open any internal blockages which have developed over time. Therefore one has to remain detached for quite some while. However, this process of purification with its attendant effects is not anything mystical nor

mysterious. The phenomenological changes which occur because of spiritual cultivation are all natural changes. Their progressive development, like the growth of an embryo, is simply a matter of science. They can be classified, graded and summarized into general patterns just as can be done with any other natural process.

Unfortunately, there are no Western doctors who will be able to help you when you reach this stage of spiritual attainment because Western medical training does not recognize kundalini, chi channels and chakras. Western medicine is not even skilled at helping the body establish an internal balance and harmony among its internal organs, so it certainly does not understand the higher transformations of the spiritual path and the new type of equilibrium it seeks to establish within the physical nature. It is also the very rarest of the Eastern trained doctors who might – because of cultural familiarity – have some idea of what was happening if you initiated this spiritual transformation. While it may initially seem uncomfortable, the process is not something to worry about since in undergoing the process of transformation, the body knows what it is doing.

Even if a doctor were a cultivation practitioner himself, he would still lack the knowledge of how to help smoothen or quicken this transformative spiritual process. Therefore, you must have patience and faith when you reach this stage of kundalini spiritual transformation. You must abandon any worries about the correctness or incorrectness of the process, and recognize that during this series of natural purificatory transformations your body will automatically handle things in the correct and proper manner. The natural process of transformation connected with kundalini awakening is perfectly safe because it is a process of internal cleansing and healing, yet the process does require a definite amount of time to complete its course.

There is only one thing that can speed the completion of this purificatory process, and that is the continued cultivation of mental emptiness throughout the entire process of transformation. This is what enables or kicks off the whole process in the first place, and what will speed it through to its completion. The cardinal rule of spiritual cultivation is to always cultivate mental emptiness, or freedom from the attachment to thoughts, at each and every step of the way. If you cultivate mental emptiness – or the absence of discriminative thoughts – the kundalini energy will readily arise just as will various states of samadhi and spiritual gong-fu. Hence mental emptiness, or the resting from discriminative thinking, is the main principle within all sorts of spiritual practices.

When we read the accounts of those who previously experienced a kundalini awakening, we can readily identify those who suffered special problems because they did not cultivate emptiness on the cultivation path but rather, employed special

forceful breathing exercises to “ignite” the kundalini phenomenon. When you cultivate emptiness, the process of opening up the chi channels occurs as a natural event that does not need any external assistance, and the result is also less painful. Hence if you are lucky enough to activate your kundalini in the course of your spiritual cultivation, the most important thing to do is abandon clinging to thoughts and sensations and to cultivate mental emptiness. You must cultivate the role of being an internal watcher who does not participate in the thoughts or phenomena that arise in your mind, but who only observes, as a mental by-stander, the mental phenomena that come and go within it. And you should refrain from sexual desires that arise along this path in order to devote all your resources into spiritual transformation.

To state it another way, when a person cultivates correctly, his or her physical body will start to undergo a series of natural transformations.³ These transformations may initially seem a bit uncomfortable, but they entail a process of internal renewal and must in fact be defined as a natural healing process that pushes poisons out of your body in order to clean up all your chakras and energy channels. Adding any mental effort to help guide these physical transformations, however, just because you think you might know better, will just distort the entire process and interfere with the attainment of the results. These transformations do not require any guidance, nor any need for worry or concern.

Whenever there is any pain or discomfort which arise from cultivation matters, you must recognize that these are temporary phenomena that will always pass, and you should practice letting go of these sensations. These sensations are simply telling you that internal obstructions within the body are being done away with, which is itself a great sign of spiritual progress. A spiritual cultivator – whether Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu and so forth – should simply bear the transient phenomenon of pain encountered because of spiritual practice while continuing to maintain the empty mind of a third person observer. In time your chi channels will fully open up inside and the pain will disappear, just as any worries that occupied your thoughts a year ago now seem like a dream of the past. In fact, to view the feelings you experience during this transformation as a dream is an excellent means of cultivation. After the chi channels open you will achieve a constant state of physical bliss, so the goal is more than worthwhile.

Whenever any latent medical problems are revealed as a result of your meditation work, naturally you should resort to medical alternatives – such as deep tissue work and acupuncture or herbal therapies – to help cure these conditions. Wisdom necessitates that we never confuse the need to ignore the pain of our chi channels opening with the pain of an actual disease or sickness that requires medical attention. The bigger point, however, is to realize that latent problems discovered

through meditation were already existent before you started to meditate, and you were lucky that your cultivation efforts revealed them because this actually gives you the opportunity to treat them. If you did not know you had a problem, then you would not take any corrective healing actions and the hidden situation would imperceptibly grow into a much larger health concern over time.

Most meditation practitioners must become their own doctors to some extent because it is unlikely that they will find a skillful doctor who can help them adjust their bodies and deal with the transformative experiences caused by meditation. This is why many cultivators choose to learn herbal therapies, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine, to meet their medicinal needs. This has the great additional benefit of teaching you how to help others as well as yourself, and learning medicine is one of the requirements for becoming a true cultivation adept. If enough people started learning naturopathic solutions for health problems, then this could become the basis of the new healing paradigm appropriate for today that includes the use of bodywork, vitamins and minerals, and herbs for solving health issues.

Frankly speaking, people do not seem to have the time or the will to meditate as in the days of old, and their minds are much more complicated than in the past. Furthermore, science is creating new substances every year that can change the physical body. Thus it is inevitable that science will one day develop substances that will help people change their physical body so as to better prepare it for the spiritual path, which is why it is so extremely important to study these matters. But as the physical barriers and obstacles to meditation progress melt away, as a rule we will see a counterforce arise in that the mental barriers or obstacles to spiritual attainment will accordingly increase. With the speed of change in society exponentially increasing, as well as our thoughts and mental worries beginning to crowd our heads so that we never experience a moment's rest, that is what we are presently seeing today.

No matter what medicines one takes, they cannot do the work of transforming the mind as required on the path of true spiritual practice. A medicine in itself cannot generate or bring about the state of samadhi, for you must still cultivate the state of mental emptiness to develop insight into the real nature of the mind. This is why we said that mental emptiness is the key principle in spiritual practice at each and every step of the way. At the highest stages of physical gong-fu, there are actually no medicines or therapies that can help change your physical nature because the physical transformations are all a result of transformations of the mind. And only the kundalini energies within our bodies will be able to push through the poisonous obstructions that accumulate in our physical being to accomplish these necessary physical transformations.

On this subject, it is helpful to remember the story of the second Patriarch of the Chinese Zen school who had thought he would die from the pain he experienced when the kundalini energies (chi) reached his head. However, a voice in the sky announced, "Bear it awhile longer. Your skull bones are being transformed." Afterwards, five tiny bumps grew on his head and the protrusions indicated that the real spiritual chi of his body had finally been able to penetrate through his skull. This is why people say that a slight protrusion of the forehead, produced through meditation, scares away any ghosts and signifies long life and wisdom. The slight protrusion indicates that the yang chi can now run through the body's entire energy circulatory system without obstruction, and the fullness of yang chi gives off an invisible light that scares away any beings who like yin chi.

In the kundalini school, it is also common for people to talk about the gong-fu stage where you no longer show any sign of perceptible external breathing because of reaching a stage of deep meditation, but most people do not understand this state of gong-fu either. People usually believe they understand cultivation matters without really understanding, and then talk to others in a confident manner causing all sorts of confusion.

An even bigger problem results when people read a few books, study with a few "masters," learn a little bit about these matters and then set themselves up as experts, claiming all this information is a secret when it is simply spiritual bio-physical science. A fact to be considered is that if all the people who talked about kundalini actually understood it, then why do so many fail to show any signs of spiritual accomplishment?

In Buddhism there is a very simple meditation method for visualizing the white bones of your body's skeleton, after which you sit quietly and try to entirely forget your bones and this visualization. When you do this sort of visualization practice, it is your kundalini energy which eventually becomes activated even though Buddha never bothered to mention this explicitly. It actually becomes activated because of the transformation of jing to chi, or generative energy into life force.

The Zen school consistently refrains from talking about this sort of chi, your body's energy channels (mai), chakras and other spiritual phenomena even though it also recognizes the existence of all these phenomena. The Zen school does not ignore them because they do not exist, nor does it ignore them because Zen students never encounter these phenomena. Rather, these phenomena are not discussed because they are transient "guests" belonging to the phenomenological realm rather than the ultimate "host," which is the objective of spiritual seeking. The Zen school focuses on the host rather than its guests, so it reminds us that spiritual phenomena are not anything to which you should form attachments or pay attention. Anyone who tries

to force spiritual phenomena into manifesting will subsequently limit their cultivation gong-fu and wisdom.

If you discuss the various esoteric structures of the body and experiential realms too much, people will naturally start clinging onto expectations and subsequently spend an inordinate amount of time seeking these unusual phenomena which – precisely because they are longed for – will never materialize. You may desire them, but their arousal is actually blocked by your mental expectations and desires. Why? Because the true spiritual path is to cultivate a mind empty of thoughts, and the sticky clinging nature of expectations goes directly against this cultivation principle.

If you therefore look at all the troubles produced by “kundalini conversations” nowadays, you can understand all the trouble that the Zen school has wisely avoided by refusing to discuss these things. But do not make the mistake of thinking that these phenomena do not occur to Zen students at all, and that the students of other genuine spiritual traditions do not experience them either. In the other traditions, kundalini arousal simply goes by different names. Kundalini arousal is a non-denominational, non-sectarian phenomenon that is common to all true cultivation schools and spiritual adherents. Christianity also recognizes its existence but calls it “incendium amoris,” and other schools recognize it as the “divine fire” or “burning love of God.” In Sufism, the equivalent of kundalini arousal is called the “fire of separation.”

A big problem in the world today – in every country, religion and culture – is that people do not realize that the stages of the spiritual path are not privy to one particular school or sect, but are commonly shared phenomena belonging to every genuine school and tradition. In other words, the various stages of the spiritual path are common or “shared” phenomena experienced which are experienced in all true cultivation schools. If you wanted to compare and then standardize these common spiritual phenomena (gong-fu) that have appeared across all the world’s religious schools, the key point would be to recognize and then investigate the scientific principles underlying such phenomena. If you wanted to compare cultivation methods as well, you would also have to investigate and then categorize their underlying principles and effectiveness.

Actually, Buddha has already classified most of the phenomena of the spiritual path, which he revealed through a number of different cross-referenced classification schemes. He also classified all the small realization (“Hinayana”) cultivation vehicles that are used in the world’s spiritual practices, and grouped them into ten large categories which we will encounter in a later chapter. In Shakyamuni Buddha’s scheme, kundalini cultivation belongs to the set of practices for cultivating the breath, but this is not the most important of all the spiritual training techniques. The

last of his ten categories entails using the mindfulness of death as a form of spiritual practice. This mindfulness of death practice should actually be the first and foremost category of spiritual practice because it encompasses all the crucial elements of a spiritual exercise that will lead to true attainment.

If a spiritual meditator just sits there or lies there and gives up absolutely everything as if they were dead – with no remaining attachment concerns for their body or mind – he or she will eventually become able to achieve a bit of mental emptiness, and eventually the state of spiritual samadhi. It is so easy to do this sort of spiritual exercise, but few are willing to practice it because most everyone is afraid to die.

It sounds so silly when you hear that people are afraid to pretend that they can give up everything, but it is true. Yet if you can master this particular method of spiritual practice, it is one of the quickest roads to the highest stages of spiritual attainment, as well as all the gong-fu this normally entails. Perhaps this would be a more popular practice if it were termed “mindfulness of total relaxation,” for the meaning of this practice is essentially the same thing.

You do not actually engage your imagination in this sort of practice by “imagining” you are dead, for that would be the equivalent of holding onto a conceptual image as is done in mandala or visualization exercises. Rather, you just sit or lie there discarding your body and mind altogether and ignoring all the mental and physical changes that end up occurring because they no longer belong to you and are not relevant anymore. After all, you are dead, so you do not need to pay any attention to these things for any reason. You are now free of the physical body and your past life of concerns and worries, so they no longer matter. In practicing that you are dead, you can freely abandon everything without retaining any attachments!

This is actually a very scientific pathway of spiritual cultivation practice because it does not involve any preconceptions of God, karma, chakras, or even right and wrong. We can say that it is an ontologically authentic practice because it does not involve any artificial creations, or presuppose any type of knowledge, but simply entails doing nothing but resting and remaining natural. You just mentally drop everything, absolutely everything, and see what everything turns out to be! Without any preconceptions, you abandon everything so as to ultimately arrive at the Truth. In fact, this is the one correct road of spiritual striving and cultivation practice.

When a person can actually accomplish this, and abandon holding onto absolutely everything that is in their mind, they will soon experience their kundalini arising and their chakras opening and all the other special changes categorized as spiritual “gong-fu.” They will experience all this gong-fu without ever having to have resorted to special mantras or hand mudras, forced micro-cosmic circulations, special

ceremonies, secret prayers and supplications, strange postures and other external manipulations or forceful techniques. Meditation does not mean sitting in a special posture, but means concentrating the mind by emptying the mind. Meditation means totally resting the mind by relinquishing everything it clings to while maintaining its original awareness. No one may have ever told you this, but this is true meditation. This is true spiritual or religious practice.

When you can accomplish this, you can easily achieve the mental emptiness – which Christianity calls the stage of selflessness or non-ego – required of the spiritual path, and you will also start to progress through the various stages of spiritual cultivation. Nevertheless afterwards, you must still set yourself to the task of cultivating prajna transcendental wisdom and insight. You should therefore avoid making the mistake of thinking that cultivating kundalini is the ultimate event, or the final end result in itself of the spiritual cultivation trail. Kundalini activation is just an initial transformative experience on the spiritual path and kundalini yoga is not the only way to spiritually practice, *but just a convenient way to practice*. In terms of the Buddhist description of the path, in fact it only corresponds to the spiritual stage of “warming” which means getting close to a true sort of attainment.

Even experienced spiritual adepts, and minor spiritual masters, get confused at the point when they master kundalini cultivation and reach the top of the Desire Realm heavens. In fact, this is why many masters ultimately fail to reach full enlightenment. Because their wisdom is not great enough, the world has many Hindu, Tibetan and other gurus who have attained samadhi and superpowers, but who do not realize (or wish to acknowledge) that the stage of attainment which they have reached is just a minor rank along the path.

Many also stop at various other premature points along the spiritual trail, and mistakenly identify them as the ultimate stage of attainment as well. When people therefore think an individual is enlightened because he can display a stage of samadhi or demonstrate various superpowers, or because he comes from India, Tibet, Egypt, China or some other place that holds a rich history of spiritual cultivation, they may become prisoner to as much self-deception as held by their guru.

The Kundalini Path Within Other Spiritual Traditions

If we compare the kundalini yoga school with Esoteric Buddhism, we will find that both schools discuss the thousand petal crown chakra, typically represented by a large lotus flower on top of the head (symbolized by the large flat hats used in Esoteric Buddhism). The Esoteric school, however, also discusses several extra forehead chakras such as the soma chakra, the twelve pair of antennae-like nerves

from the brain that can act like a sort of spiritual radar, and the sacred Heaven chakras. Both schools jointly recognize the Muladhara (four petal root chakra), Svadhisthana (six petal genital chakra), Manipura (ten petal navel chakra), Anahata (twelve petal heart chakra), Visuddha (sixteen petal throat chakras), Ajna (the third eye, pineal gland or brow chakra), and Sahasrara (the thousand petal crown chakra, or Brahman chakra) chakras. However, the most complete descriptions of these chakras is only found in Esoteric Buddhism. Unfortunately, most of the modern Tibetan texts written on these matters are just regurgitations of old material rather than new texts with insights written by modern masters. Regardless, this discussion once again alerts us to the fact that kundalini yoga is not a particular practice or body of knowledge limited solely to India.

As regards the Tao school of China, it has never chosen to fixate on the phenomenon of kundalini, but simply describes it as the state of “hsi” which occurs when your breath stops moving because of advanced meditation. When you meditate correctly you will eventually reach a stage where your external breathing seemingly comes to a halt and an internal (“embryo”) breathing inside “ignites” or becomes activated. This stage of internal embryo breathing, which can be described as a type of internal chi flow, together with the cessation of external breathing corresponds to the initial stages of the kundalini phenomenon.

This stage of “hsi” marks the initial transformation of chi into shen, or of energy into spirit. Since hsi arises when there is a gap between the in-breath and out-breath of respiration, meaning the point between our breaths when everything comes to a rest, *this* is the key to all real kundalini cultivation. In other words, to get your kundalini to arise, you have to reach a point where your external breathing seemingly ceases. To cultivate this stage of spiritual transformation, you must so relax yourself that you can calm the breath and mind to the extent that they both become one, and they relax themselves into a unified state of cessation. This is when the kundalini phenomenon will arise.

From this one fact alone you can understand the basic intent behind the various anapana (pranayama) practices in existence, such as rhythmical breathing and kumbhaka breath retention exercises found in yoga. They are designed to lead practitioners to the point where the outward breath stops and the inherent chi circulations within the body are activated and assume a broader, fuller and more free flowing circulation. If you practice holding your breath for longer and longer periods of time while remaining in a state of total relaxation, this is a good type of preparatory spiritual exercise because it will help clear the tiny energy channels in your body and make it easier for you to finally reach this necessary stage of attainment.

Unfortunately, many people engage in breathing practices without ever becoming aware of their actual purpose. They do not recognize that they are supposed to reach the point where their breath and their mind both combine into one, and together reach a unified state of cessation. For instance, many people nowadays are told to count their breaths as a type of Zen meditation, and so they sit there silently counting thousands and thousands of respirations of the breath. The purpose behind this sort of practice is not one of accounting, but to so calm the mind and relax the breath to the point that they both naturally calm down, after which mind and breath can become one.

In the Esoteric school, this is the state of hsi which is actually the initiatory stage of kundalini, but it is only considered a very minor stage of spiritual “warming” on the spiritual path. Neither the Tao school nor Esoteric Buddhism consider it anything special in itself because it is just the start of the intensified practices necessary on the spiritual path, and it is certainly not worth the emphasis that is placed upon it today. In short, it is just an introductory stage of attainment, but not the whole path in itself.

Naturally these original teachings on kundalini took some time to become fully expressed within Buddhism, and it was awhile before the Indian kundalini practices combined with the practices of Chinese Taoism. To go deeply into this school and all of its ramifications would require a book in itself, so our discussion is being limited to general information rather than a plentitude of specifics. Only a condensed history of these trends is being presented here. Nevertheless there is so much misinformation about kundalini today, and there are so many people who use the term without any accurate knowledge of the phenomenon, that we must spend some time to correct the most prevalent erroneous notions. It is also hoped that by so doing, people will no longer look for guidance from individuals who have only experienced a bit of kundalini accomplishment without really understanding its place in the entire sequence and process of spiritual cultivation.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle we have standing in the way of the advancement of cultivation matters today is that the various mai (chi channels) – which are spoken of within the Chinese, Tibetan and the Hindu yoga schools – are not presently accepted by Western medicine and science. We could stretch the explanation of these channels a bit and say they are phenomena which appear in the first and second levels of samadhi meditation, but we must remember that they are different from the meridians and chi_channels of acupuncture that can be somewhat physically established through electrical, magnetic and temperature gradient measurements, as well as by the fact that – proven or not – they seem to work in clinical practice!

If we turn our discussion to the seven major chakras of the body, which is getting

even more specific, even these are easier for people to accept than the existence of the three mai and other chi channels. The crown chakra, for instance, is related to the pituitary gland and nerve endings in the head while the heart chakra is related to the heart and circulatory system. The navel chakra is related to the adrenals while the root chakra is related to the genitals and reproductive system. All the major chakras can be paired with important organ systems.

Because they have a physiological correspondence that everyone readily understands, the existence of the various chakras is relatively easy for many people to accept. But the overall concept of the various channels, especially the three mai, is much harder for even dedicated spiritual practitioners to swallow unless they actually experience them. This is why the Yoga school always emphasized proof through actual experience. Once you have this sort of proof, no “unbiased” scientist can dissuade you with his ignorant arguments.

In order for the three mai to manifest, it is essential – absolutely necessary in fact – to be able to attain a basic level of samadhi. Before this becomes possible, all your internal organs must become transformed and your digestive track must become cleansed and purified. Thus the practice of fasting, and various methods of cleaning the stomach and intestines, has been accordingly emphasized by most cultivation schools. In fact, most genuine schools start out by emphasizing you should reduce your food intake (or eat cleaner foods) and conserve your sexual energy precisely because this conservation of energy will help transform your physical body. If you always have food in your belly or consistently lose your seminal energy through sexual activities, there will be little energy left over for the task of opening up your chi channels.

This does not mean that a cultivator should starve himself or enter the path of deep ascetic practices like the famous Tibetan Milarepa,⁴ for the middle path of balance is always the proper one to follow in cultivation matters. As the saying goes, it does no good to tune a guitar too loosely, nor too tightly. But since the manifestation of the energy channels is partially dependent upon having a clean digestive tract, this means that cultivating the chi mai so that they manifest is within the material realm!

The fact that the chi channels and chakras manifest at all signifies that a transformation has occurred involving the water, earth, fire, space and wind elements of your physical nature, so when they do finally manifest you *cannot* interpret this as the Tao. Their appearance is still just one particular phase of spiritual gong-fu that manifests along the spiritual path, and certainly not the end goal of spiritual practice. They are only effects that appear in the material realm.

On the other hand, if you do not attain this level of gong-fu, you will never be able to

attain the spiritual state of samadhi and you will always be stuck in the Realm of Desire. Consequently, within the school of Taoism and Esoteric Buddhism after China's Tang and Sung dynasties, the various phenomena involving the body's energy channels (which are depicted in the alchemical prints of Medieval Europe) started to become included as part of spiritual path discussions despite their rather unimportant status. Their addition to the material descriptions of spiritual gong-fu created a problem with later practitioners who, in reading the accounts of their predecessors, took the descriptions of these phenomena as a guidepost and tried to force the phenomena into appearing, rather than letting them naturally appear.

The end results of this mistake are the many problems which we have today, especially in the Western New Age schools which chase after these phenomena and teach people to imitate the opening of the chi channels by visualizing microcosmic energy circulations within the body. This sounds so logical, but actually it is just plain nonsense.

Currently in China, chi-gong practitioners also repeat this mistaken activity of trying to force special microcosmic chi circulations into being initiated. Accordingly, practitioners become preoccupied with mental imaginations and physical sensations all day long. They end up mistakenly believing they are opening this and that channel or chakra when they are only playing with the sensations of internal wind in their bodies. The Western New Age movement is particularly lamentable on this account, for one can see countless books and workshops openly advertising that they will help you to "open your chakras" and your microcosmic circulations, and there are people who actually believe they can achieve this feat through reading the instructions of a book or attending an expensive seminar.

Although these doctrines were not emphasized before the Tang and Sung dynasties in China, can it be said that the opening of the chakras and chi channels did not occur before this time, or that the people prior to these dynasties did not know about them? Of course not! So the schools which concentrate on this aspect alone are only seeing one tiny part of the big picture. Their emphasis is certainly not complete, and their methods of focusing to open up or develop these esoteric structures is not correct either.

Any school or teaching that tries to open the chakras or channels using a forceful application of the mind or body certainly will not accomplish anything at all. The chakras are like flower buds that can only open naturally when provided with the fertilizer of emptiness, which is the absence of discriminative, imaginative thought that engenders enlivening chi flows. One must also note that there is an additional requirement as well, which is that merit is necessary for attaining this sort of spiritual achievement! In fact, any true advancement along the spiritual path can

never be achieved without an accompanying increase in mental virtue and good deeds. Your mind must become virtuous and pure, and your deeds must become virtuous and pure, and you must go out of your way to compassionately help others if you ever want to succeed in spiritual cultivation.

Enlightenment does not lie along the road of mental imagination, such as through visualization practices, for the act of mental imagination only furthers delusions. This is why all genuine cultivation schools point practitioners in the direction of mental “emptiness” and the absence of discriminative thought when they really wish to make spiritual progress, whereas playing with thoughts or believing that the vibrational sounds of a mantra are going to open up chi channels or chakras is seductive but illusory.

Even if these practices could forcefully produce some desired effects along these lines, the results could be compared to the “professional” or “artificial” chickens that are now produced in the factory farms of today. Whereas in the past chickens were strong and healthy, today you can only buy sickly chickens scientifically matured in only a short while. While their maturation period has decreased, they cannot even support their own weight, are quite sickly, and they do not taste very good either.

If forcing matters to quickly transpire were actually possible, this is the type of warped flower that would result. The futility of such efforts, especially by people who genuinely wish to cultivate, is why masters have always directed people to cultivate emptiness while holding no expectations in mind, for this is the only way to achieve anything substantial in terms of either the spiritual gong-fu or transcendental wisdom that people need on the spiritual path. Unfortunately, people have the tendency to become attracted to complicated or colorful machinations whereas the best results on the road of spirituality are usually achieved when people stick to the “boring” basics.

The Clear Light of Awakening

The chi channels are not the only misinterpreted spiritual phenomena which serve as a cause of confusion to spiritual practitioners today. Sometimes people are meditating and for a brief moment of time can see a light within their own bodies, or sometimes they can see their own bones and internal organs inside. This internal illumination is actually due to the frictional massing of chi at certain locations within the body, yet people commonly misinterpret this sort of phenomenon as being something else entirely.

This phenomenon in particular has nothing to do with the Tibetan “clear light” attainment, which is akin to “realizing the dharmakaya” or “awakening to

enlightenment.” Rather, this phenomenon is just a form-light within the Realm of Desire. It is just a phenomenological manifestation that is ultimately dependent upon your cultivation gong-fu – in particular your chi cultivation – and has nothing to do with the “light of your original nature.” However, some people become confused on this point because they equate this form-light physical illumination with the “clear light” awareness. This errant conclusion is due to the fact that we have used the same word but applied it to two entirely different situations.

Over the past decade or so, various movies and television documentaries have depicted individuals experiencing a bright physical light after their death, which has further complicated this misunderstanding. When people who return from a near-death experience mention that they saw a bright light, the first point to remember is that this is still a form realm phenomenon produced from the interaction of the four elements. People’s minds are ordinarily quite limited due to the lack of any sort of spiritual emptiness cultivation, so of course most people will experience a great expanse of light when they free themselves from their body and their normally limited range of consciousness.

The most important point to recognize is that the people who return and tell of their near-death adventures never really died in the first place. The four elements in their bodies did not actually disintegrate, and they did not leave completely because they “came back.” Therefore these people never experienced the real “primordial light of mind” that is mentioned in various Tibetan bardo instructions. They simply experienced what the Confucians, in their investigations, correctly classified as a “false death;” otherwise they would not return to life. You or I cannot see what these people saw unless we have some supernormal abilities, but the physical light they experienced in their near-death experiences is simply a physical phenomenon corresponding to a non-death stage of spiritual attainment.

When an ordinary person truly dies, then they cannot return to life anymore because their deepest consciousness (what Buddhism calls the eighth or alaya consciousness that contains the seeds of all possible experiences) detaches from the body entirely. Real death will also produce a permanent physical change in the chi channels and bones of the throat, which gradually tighten as people get older. While a woman’s pelvic bones open when she delivers a baby, the throat region will close or collapse when a person dies.

Because of this principle, we can understand a famous story about Chinese Zen master Tung Shan. Master Tung Shan bid farewell to his pupils, and then passed away. He was dead for awhile, but the students made such a ruckus that he then returned to his body to stay with them for several more days until their emotions calmed down. Regular people who have a near-death experience suffer false deaths

when they “return from the dead,” but this Zen master had truly actually died. When he came back and re-entered his body, he had to spend a few minutes silently sitting there adjusting the chakra, chi channels, and bones of his throat so that he could continue using his body once again.

In the real death experience – when the individual cannot come back to life – the “clear light” that is spoken of in many Tibetan texts refers to our original nature or fundamental source of mind. Sometimes they refer to this empty original nature, and sometimes to its function as prajna wisdom, or the clear light of awareness which has no physical component. The best way we can describe it is to refer to it as a vast, open, universal awareness of spotless, pristine clarity that is our real mind, and which is empty of thoughts itself. Thoughts are simply things which arise within it. There are no better words for the dharmakaya, which is what Buddha called it, so the Tibetans have simply used the term “clear light” in their various religious texts. Because it has the capacity for awareness, the Zen school just calls it “Mind.”

There is no physical light actually involved with the stage of clear light; it is the awareness function of our empty illumined nature that makes it possible for us to know physical light, or to know anything for that matter. This original awareness always functions no matter where you go, so whether you are dead or alive, or recognize it or not, it is always present. For instance, when a room is pitch black and lacks any physical light, you know you are seeing a black color because of this clear awareness. When you are confused, the fact you know you are confused is also evidence of this clear awareness. Recognize that it is this clear knowing that you are muddled or confused which one seeks in spiritual practice, rather than the event of clearing up confusion, though of course that is something you always want.

Our fundamental nature, which is the source of the illumined light of original knowing, is the realization objective of the “intermediate (bardo) stage” between death and rebirth mentioned in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.⁵ One particular Tibetan cultivation path teaches spiritual practitioners to cultivate awareness of the clear light when they finally die and arrive at the state between death and a rebirth. Perceiving the essence of mind at this time is called realizing the dharmakaya, and seeing the dharmakaya means attaining enlightenment. The Tibetans, however, simply call this seeing the clear light, whereas the Tao school calls this seeing the Tao, and Buddha called it awakening to your original nature. One of the original Vedic practices required Brahmans to salute the sunlight in the morning, and this practice also had the intent of reminding people of their true mind.

Within the sphere between death and rebirth (called the bardo stage), the self-light mentioned in various tantras and sutras is not a visibly outward event. We must remember that this “clear light” has no physical color, sparkle, or form component of

any kind that we can see. "Light" is just referring to the empty true mind, that ultimate clear formlessness which knows and gives birth to consciousness. In a like manner, whenever people talk about the light of prajna wisdom, this also refers to the knowing mind, the emptiness of our original nature that does not use words but which directly knows. Prajna is the "host" of the phenomenal "guests" which arise within its horizons yet prajna, too, is in turn a guest or function of our fundamental essence, although one with it. It is the wordless functioning awareness that lets you know you are angry, happy or sad and which will accompany you everywhere throughout the Three Realms.

When a person starts to spiritually cultivate, they must therefore be extremely careful that they do not become confused by all sorts of various light phenomena that may arise, such as taking the shining nature of the tumo fire as the illuminated light of the universe. Cultivation schools use the term "light" to describe various phenomena or experiences only because they lack better words. "Light" is not the best descriptive term available, so sometimes the words "illuminated," "awareness," "shining," "clear," "empty," "pristine," or "bright" will be substituted. These terms, however, are all lacking in one manner or another.

We can see from this overall discussion on kundalini, the mai, chakras and the clear light just how very easy it is to go astray in cultivation matters. It is because the field of spiritual striving has become less secretive, more popular and accessible that many of the gross distortions that we now see today have arisen. With greater popularity comes a greater degree of misunderstanding since the masses tend to simplify things and thereby get them wrong. This is one reason why perfectly useful cultivation methods eventually degrade over time, or become buried beneath a heap of misleading dogma so that their original purpose becomes obscured and forgotten all together.

A Short History of the Esoteric Tradition

The overall conclusion on these matters is that the chi channels, chakras, kundalini phenomenon and so on are also contained within the schools of Taoism and Esoteric Buddhism, as well as Hinduism. Although we cannot go into the details, they are also found in the Christian, Judaic, Islamic and Hopi Indian spiritual traditions as well, among others. The particular problem with Esoteric Buddhism, which places undue focus on these things, is that it is like a sausage that is stuffed full of everything, and this "everything" includes both the good and the bad. As a result, people can sometimes ingest the bad stuff by interpreting this information incorrectly, and thus end up severely harming their own spiritual cultivation practice.

The Bodhisattva Nagarjuna was actually the original founder of Esoteric Buddhism,

for he unlocked the teachings of the Esoteric school given by Shakyamuni Buddha that had been sealed in a southern Indian stupa by protective mantras. People often say that Padmasambhava started the Esoteric school of Tibet, but as a technical point, he only brought the teachings to Tibet and then popularized them.

There is also a historical controversy surrounding Padmasambhava. Some say he had already cultivated to a high stage in India and then brought the esoteric teachings to Tibet while others say he was actually a projection body (known as a "nirmanakaya" or "hua-shen") of Shakyamuni Buddha, and was born in a lotus flower in Tibet in order to bring the country the esoteric teachings. Because of these different accounts, people have to approach the issue of Padmasambhava quite carefully.

The various teachings of Nagarjuna can be exceedingly useful to spiritual cultivators regardless of their ultimate allegiance and school of practice. He is often considered the second Buddha in that he was a master of all the Indian schools of his time. He was also the lineage holder of the eight Buddhist schools which were in existence at that time. Truly he was a master of tremendous spiritual attainments, for he was very familiar with many different styles of spiritual cultivation practices and cultivation doctrines, and mastered a variety of alternative ways to express the supreme truth.

Sometimes when Nagarjuna publicly taught the dharma, the people would only see a great light in place of his body. He got his name because he often visited the land of the Nagas (hence the name "Nagarjuna") to study the sutras stored there. The Nagas are a group of beings above the human level, although they have serpent hoods, who also invisibly live in this world and have preserved some of the greater teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. The King of the Nagas allowed the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna to bring back one sutra to this world, and Nagarjuna therefore chose the *Hua Yen Sutra* (also known as the *Avatamsaka* or *Flower Adornment Sutra*)⁶ which he helped translate into human language. But the *Hua Yen Sutra* we have today is just a small fraction of the actual *Hua Yen Sutra* introduced to Nagarjuna in the Naga kingdom, for the original work actually consisted of several thousand volumes. When Nagarjuna translated the *Hua Yen Sutra*, he simply condensed the material into an abbreviated text which his assistants compiled from his dictation.

The main chi mai practices that are practiced today in China and Tibet, such as the "nine bottled wind,"⁷ all originated as offshoots of the original teachings of Nagarjuna. Unfortunately many people who practice these methods are starting to equate them with the end goal of the spiritual path, which puts these misled people in the same class as the adherents of kundalini. These methods are actually very far from the actual intent of the Buddhist or even Hindu schools, which is to search for the ultimate reality.

Another set of Desire Realm practices that create problems are the methods of sexual yoga, and some people are taking these as the end goal of practice as well. Shakyamuni Buddha chose never to teach these practices, despite the fact that he had many enlightened students who had pure minds and could handle the technique, and despite the fact that the yoga schools already contained related sexual teachings. If people therefore wish to study these practices and believe they can handle them, they must reflect quite carefully.

Consider that Shakyamuni Buddha must have had some very good reasons for not teaching sexual cultivation practices. Shakyamuni had students with extremely high samadhi and wisdom attainments, and it is even recorded that some of his students attained enlightenment in as little as a week! Even so, he refused to teach these practices. Examining history and reviewing the effect of these techniques, Shakyamuni Buddha's wisdom becomes evident because the sexual cultivation practices have actually proved quite destructive wherever they have been used. An example is when the sexual practices entered China during the Yuan dynasty whereupon they greatly hurt the nation, and they certainly weakened the country of Tibet.

Over time, what was originally incomplete in the teachings of Indian sexual yoga was filled in by the "left-door" practices of Taoist sexual practice, and much of this went over to Tibet to become incorporated as part of Tibetan Esoteric tradition. But one will not find any of the genuine sexual cultivation teachings in the *Kama Sutra*, *Perfumed Garden*, *Koka Shastra*, *Sutra of the Plain Girl* or in the Tantric teachings that are taught publicly today, whether one studies with one or even two dozen masters who claim a secret lineage or authority in these matters. Of course if one wants to learn a little about sexual yoga, valuable information can be found in various translated texts.⁸

Many people who try to use these practices are actually after sex rather than cultivation, and they fail to recognize that there is no way to spiritualize lust. As Shakyamuni Buddha told his cousin Ananda, someone who cultivates samadhi in wishing for spiritual enlightenment but who retains sexual desire is like a man who bakes sand to make rice; although he may heat the sand for thousands of years, in the end it will still only be hot gravel. Hence to even begin discussing these practices safely would require a basic foundation in strict Hinayana discipline, samadhi attainments, and substantial merit. If pressed to measure the amount of merit required, the traditional Esoteric school says that you need the merit of a king or queen to be introduced to the true sexual cultivation teachings, and you also need this high degree of merit to be able to succeed in using them. But since someone who attains samadhi has more merit than any earthly king or queen, there are indeed some people who can succeed using these techniques.

To summarize our discussion of physically related cultivation matters, we can only say that the practices of kundalini cultivation and even sexual yoga can – at their very best – at most take you to the top of the Realm of Desire, and no higher. So they are not the ultimate means of cultivating to enlightenment because they can only take you to the top of the Desire Realm heavens. And whether you open up this or that chakra or chi channel on the road of spiritual cultivation, this too can only be considered a preparation for the spiritual path, rather than the actual attainment of the path. Nevertheless, people of all spiritual persuasions must learn about these things through personal experience because the act of opening the chi channels and chakras, and finally seeing the clear light of the mind, is a non-denominational affair that will happen to anyone who cultivates with sincerity.

These are just some of the phenomenological or technological stages that occur along the spiritual path, and these stages of gong-fu are something every ardent spiritual practitioner must pass through. Whether you are Christian or Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu, whenever you cultivate correctly you are sure to experience these various purificatory transformations of the physical body. If you do not experience the transformations, it is not because they do not exist. It is simply because your practice is wrong or is not yet good enough, and you have not yet reached that particular stage of spiritual attainment.

All great spiritual attainments are achieved through emptiness cultivation, so for the people who fail to make progress in their practice, it is probably because they end up thinking too much and cannot quiet their thoughts or give up their ego. Many people who do not understand the true meaning of emptiness or selflessness try to block or suppress their thoughts to reach this spiritual state, but blocking or suppressing thoughts will not achieve spiritual attainments either.

The only way to attain the real stages of physical transformation that correspond to the spiritual trail is to cultivate the transcendental wisdom of direct knowing, to accumulate merit from acts of virtue and compassion, and to emphasize the mental emptiness which “does not separate you from God” at each and every step of the spiritual path. While people like to talk of the physiological changes of the path involving chi channels, chakras, bright lights and so forth, it is actually more appropriate to measure your overall spiritual progress in terms of the purity of your mental realm, and its reflection in your outward behavior. In the end, despite all these high experiential realms, progress on the spiritual trail all comes down to your everyday thoughts and behavior.

¹ See: *Tao and Longevity*, Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1991).

2 See: *The Story of Chinese Zen*, Nan Huai-Chin, trans. by Thomas Cleary, (Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland: Vermont, 1995).

3 See: *Tao and Longevity*, Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1991).

4 See: *The Life of Milarepa*, trans. by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, (Arkana Books, New York, 1992).

5 See: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. by Robert Thurman, (Bantam Books, New York, 1994); *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. by Walter Evans-Wentz, trans. by Kazi Dawa Samdup, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960); *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, Chogyam Trungpa and Francesca Fremantle, (Shambhala Publications, Berkeley, 1975).

6 See: *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka-sutra*, trans. by Thomas Cleary, (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1993); *Flower Adornment (Avatamsaka) Sutra*, Hsuan Hua, (Buddhist Text Translation Society, Burlingame: CA); *Manifestation of the Tathagata: Buddhahood According to the Avatamsaka Sutra*, Cheng Chien Bhiksu, (Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1993).

7 See: *Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation: A Handbook for Entering Samadhi*, William Bodri and Lee Shu Mei, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1998).

8 See: *Art of the Bedchamber*, Douglas Wile, (SUNY Press, NY, 1992); *The Tao of Love and Sex*, Jolan Chang, (E. P. Dutton, New York, 1997); *The Tao of Sexology*, Stephen Chang, (Tao Publishing, San Francisco, 1986).

4. The Secrets to How the Seers Cultivated Immortal Bodies

There are many roads of spiritual practice you might pursue after you begin to correctly cultivate your chi and mai and initiate the kundalini phenomenon. Some of these roads of practice can be considered proper, and others can be considered inappropriate or improper. One particular path that will become open to you is the path of physical immortality that was a trademark of early Chinese Taoism.

In the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra*, which recorded a number of interesting dialogues between Shakyamuni Buddha and several of his students, there is a chapter that mentions ten types of Indian seers (rishis) or “immortals” who can live extremely long physical lives, even as long as several thousand years. These practitioners usually achieved their super-longevity through a particular set of cultivation practices that involved one or more of the following:

- special diets
- special herbs and medicines
- special mineral substances
- special breathing practices
- cultivating the hormones of the body
- absorbing the planetary essences of the sun and moon
- special mantras
- special mental practices
- certain types of sexual practice
- application of secret types of heavenly and earthly transformations

Even though these immortals can perpetuate their life in the human realm for incredibly long periods of time, and while the cultivation practices they use can sometimes lead beyond the Desire Realm, they only produce phenomenological results rather than lead to the goal of enlightenment.

In effect, the adepts or seers known as “long-lived Immortals” achieved their longevity because they mastered a special form of one-pointed concentration. However, Buddha said that their spiritual practice is actually improper because they become fixed, or actually “stuck” in concentrating upon some particular delusion, and fixedly hold onto this thought with single-minded devotion. In other words, they cultivate samadhi incorrectly because they cling to the samadhi realm they reach. Nonetheless this single-mindedness of mental fixation, after their energy channels

have been transformed, is actually strong enough to pull them through hundreds or even thousands of years of life.

This is an example of how powerful the mind can be, especially when the powers of the mind are connected to our chi, or life force. In other words, you can cultivate your mind to the stage where you can live almost forever in a physical form, but Shakyamuni did not say that this was the right type of samadhi you should be cultivating. He said it was not right because these Immortals cultivated samadhi incorrectly. This means there is a right way to cultivate samadhi, and a wrong way to do it.

Modern medicine will never be able to extend our life spans to the extent of the Immortals, but life extension is a definite possibility on the road of spiritual cultivation. To accomplish this physical immortality, spiritual practitioners must refrain from losing their jing (seminal essence) and chi, and must open up all the body's chi channels clear to the bottom of their feet. They must also clean their small and large intestines so that they become empty of putrefied material. Furthermore, they must also accumulate the merit necessary for being able to live a long life, and must master the required level of one-pointed samadhi concentration.

These are all the requirements for super life extension, but you absolutely can achieve this sort of gong-fu with practice. However, that does not mean that this constitutes the correct road of spiritual practice. Rather, it is simply another of the many by-roads that branch off the one direct trail of pure spiritual cultivation.

Buddha mentioned that many of the Indian Immortals resorted to special herbs, minerals, mantra and mystical practices to lengthen their lives, but the most important point was that they all had to master a certain type of one-pointed samadhi concentration. This is actually why the long lived elders of most cultures are always mentioned in conjunction with a particular spiritual religion. In other words, if you want to cultivate health and longevity then you have to go about it by cultivating samadhi, and that sort of practice falls under the province of religious (spiritual) striving. This is why the long lived elders of most cultures are usually mentioned in conjunction with spiritual streams that emphasize samadhi attainments.

China, like India, also had a tradition of immortality seekers in Taoism, and these people are roughly equivalent to the class of Indian seers mentioned by Shakyamuni. The Chinese, who called them "Immortals," classified these individuals differently than the Hindus and recognized five different classes or stages of these beings: Ghost Immortals, Human Immortals, Earthly Immortals, Heavenly Immortals, and Great Golden Immortals.

Most of these individuals were very advanced in their spiritual cultivation practice, but they lived apart from the human world so that they were not bothered by human beings and other human concerns. Other countries, such as Egypt, also have legendary accounts of immortality seekers. Modern day Burma still has a cultivation tradition of deathless immortals that is called the weikza-lam, which means that the individuals within this tradition follow “a path of occult knowledge.”

Whether an Immortal has achieved single-pointed concentration through mantra practice, visualization exercises, through cultivating their chi and mai (chi channels), or some other meditative method is not really the important thing. It does not matter because in settling for the cultivation of physical immortality, it indicates they have not achieved any great stage of transcendental wisdom. In fact, there is even a stage of immortality that is physically attainable by the great Arhats of Buddhism who have actually reached a very high stage of spiritual enlightenment, but it, too, is considered an “outside path” to the true enlightenment way.

The practices of the Immortals can definitely enable them to live very long lives, which is why they are classified as “Immortals” in the first place. In fact their special designation – this special accomplishment – indicates they should not be considered as either mortals, heavenly beings, or even asuras. Although they can be considered a special class of human beings above the ordinary rank, the Immortals definitely cannot be considered enlightened. In fact, most of these individuals remain stuck within the Realm of Desire because they still cannot attain to the Realm of Form with their meditative accomplishments.

To attain a stage of samadhi that reaches into the Realm of Form, it is necessary to rid oneself of any overt or even secret hidden desires for food and sex. This is one of the requirements for being able to mentally free oneself from the Desire Realm, as is the idea of being or possessing a physical body. You can understand that achieving samadhi is not an easy feat to attain, and because the continuity of its spiritual transmission is quite fragile, samadhi cultivation usually becomes a protected practice enveloped or enshrouded by an outer coating of religion for the masses.

On an esoteric level, samadhi not only requires a transformation of your chi, and the ability to detach from your body and sexual desire, but we can also say you cannot accomplish a samadhi attainment unless you open up the heart chakra to some extent. Thus if someone tells you that you have opened your heart chakra but you still have not been able to enter samadhi and meditatively attain to the Realm of Form, they are just deceiving you, or you are just cheating yourself.

In particular, if you cannot attain to the Realm of Form in meditative cultivation, you are not yet capable of becoming enlightened, nor of even generating an Enjoyment

body (sambhogakaya or bao-shen) from transforming your energies as mentioned in Esoteric Buddhism. This is why the Zen masters, who seek enlightenment as directly as possible, many times advise practitioners to recite the Zhunti mantra¹ in their cultivation. This is one of the two mantras that can help open up your heart chakra and enable you to access prajna transcendental wisdom.

Even though most Immortals remain within the Realm of Desire, because they have highly developed their powers of one-pointed concentration for such a long period of time, it is possible that they can become enlightened in an instant if they are shown the correct path of cultivation and given a chance to reach the proper sort of awakening. If they are lucky enough to meet a good teacher, and all the right circumstances come together, they can become enlightened immediately.

This was the case of the Taoist immortal Lu Ch'un-yang, who was author of the "Hundred Word Inscription" which describes the cultivation practices that will bring about the stage of the Immortals and yet higher spiritual attainments. This poem collapses the entire road of spiritual cultivation into just a few words, and has been used to train countless generations of spiritual adepts.

Lu Ch'un-yang's story is a very instructive one.² For years he had cultivated his internal chi energy to the point where he had reached the stage of the Immortals. He could live forever in the world without dying, and had attained many spiritual powers such as making himself invisible and projecting a double of his physical self. Because of his internal energy, like the Tibetan adept Milarepa he could even fly through the air. One day he was actually flying through the sky and noticed a particularly auspicious aura around a mountain. When he dropped down to investigate the source of the aura, all he could find was what appeared to be an unimpressive old monk, Zen master Huang-lung Nan, lecturing to a group of students.

When the monk found out that the visitor was Lu Ch'un-yang, he insulted his famous visitor by saying, "I thought from your reputation that you were someone special, only now I see you are just a ghost guarding a corpse." In other words, "You have cultivated this body of yours so that it might go on living forever, but since this is not the real you, you are just clinging to a dead material shell."

Lu Ch'un-yang shot back: "The true man possesses the elixir of immortality inside. What is that useless body of yours worth compared to this?" but Zen master Huang-lung Nan calmly countered, "Even if you can drag your corpse through eternity without dying, in the end this is of little significance."

Lu Ch'un-yang became very angry at this slight and drawing upon his superpowers, threw his sword at the Zen master to frighten the old monk. The sword sliced

through the air headed at the master but surprisingly, stopped in front of the monk, reversed itself, and then started to fly back toward Lu Ch'un-yang! Lu Ch'un-yang was incredulous at this turn of events. How was this counter-feat possible from an old bald-headed monk who did not exhibit any signs of superpowers at all? Lu Ch'un-yang never imagined that a Zen monk could be so powerful.

Lu Ch'un-yang relaxed his defenses and opened up a little at this event, and then started to engage the old monk in dialogue to see what he had to say. Zen master Huang-lung Nan challenged him to reveal what he had learned through his many years of cultivating his physical nature. Master Huang-lung Nan said, "You do not have to resort to this sort of technique. Just a moment ago you said you had some real ability. Tell me what spiritual truth you have realized."

Because of the subsequent conversation, Lu Ch'un-yang realized that he had been holding tightly onto the view of an inherent ego, and clinging to his physical body rather than cultivating emptiness. When Master Huang-lung Nan taught him that Zen meant emptying the mind of concepts, judgements, opinions and ego, Lu Ch'un-yang finally awakened in enlightenment, and later wrote a verse to commemorate his realization:

I throw away the gourd and drop the zither,
I don't long for the gold in the mercury any longer.
After I saw Master Huang-lung just once,
I finally realized that I had always been wrongly using my mind.

There are many stories like this which all show that enlightenment requires adherence to consistent and determined spiritual practice, and continually working until the right circumstances come together for an awakening. From this story we can also see that laying a correct spiritual foundation through consistent training and practice can result in instantaneous enlightenment when one is prompted correctly.

Simply "practicing the physical nature," which includes cultivating your body's energy channels and chi, will not result in spiritual enlightenment. However, it can indeed banish sickness and help prolong life. These results correspond to a physical purification that can in turn help you to progress on the spiritual path. The ultimate inadequacy, however, of cultivating your physical form is the big problem we have been trying to emphasize for those who practice yoga, Taoism, Tantra and Esoteric Buddhism. As an ancient saying tells us:

Merely to cultivate your physical body in order to prolong life, but not to practice to realize your self-nature, is the first type of cultivation mistake.
But to practice only to realize the self-nature, while neglecting to support

the alchemical transformations within the human body, will result in you cultivating for aeons without becoming enlightened.

This can be restated in another way so that the message is even clearer: The practice of cultivating your internal energies and esoteric substances for health and longevity purposes alone is definitely not the correct path of spiritual awakening. On the other hand, to say it is wrong or even be fearful that physical transformations appear on the spiritual path is mistaken as well. Anyone who succeeds in enlightenment must also experience various physical transformations that should not be blocked or interfered with, for these are also part of the spiritual path.

The important point is not to focus on the materialistic results of spiritual gong-fu, but rather spiritual results instead. You should be going after the bigger game, which is enlightenment, rather than getting sidetracked by trivial pursuits. To just focus on material aims – like health and longevity – is like a robber who spends years of effort working on robbing a bank, and when he finally succeeds he only takes away the pennies and ignores the dollars; he wasted his time because his target was so small.

There are many other forms of esoteric practice – other than those of kundalini yoga or sexual cultivation – which also originated from the Desire Realm heavens and involve cultivating your chi and mai to produce similar spectacular results. Nevertheless, if they do not ultimately focus on purifying and liberating the mind through the purity of mental emptiness, they cannot be considered the ultimate way either.

Most of these techniques, even if they can bring everlasting immortality, are to be considered only a crutch that can help move you a step higher on the spiritual trail by helping you transform your physical body into a more fit vehicle for spiritual cultivation. Unfortunately there are many who attain some proficiency with these methods and then, because they obtain some type of unusual spiritual result, like Lu Ch'un-yang they mistakenly believe they have attained the ultimate. But as Shakyamuni pointed out, who is to say that this unusual spiritual result denotes the correct spiritual trail? It is just a possible materialistic effect of cultivation, but not the grand transcendental objective that we must all aim for.

Some of these methods in existence, especially those found in the Tibet school, Taoism and the Indian Aghora sect, are even asura (angry god) practices. Being an “asura practice” does not necessarily mean that they are bad. For example, many asuras from the Desire Realm heavens have actually aided this world by providing very beneficial cultivation teachings to help us. On the other hand, certain other asura methods have been introduced that have the effect of controlling rather than spiritually liberating people, and keeping them under subjugation. Unfortunately,

most practitioners who go down these trails do not have sufficient prajna transcendental wisdom to know this.

One of the cultivation secrets in the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra* is that even the angry gods of the Desire Realm, which are sometimes known as demons or devils when they turn evil, can also awaken to self-realization in one instant if they realize Buddha's Tao, after which they become enlightened asuras. This is why the Zen school has the saying that there is only a hair's breadth of difference between being a Buddha and asura, for it is not a matter of your form of being. It is all a matter of whether you awaken, and what you ultimately exhibit through your behavior.

Now that you know this secret, you must not go around saying that Immortals and asuras are all Buddhas, for while this is true, the Buddha prajna realm of perfect enlightenment is very hard to attain. The key point in all this discussion is that there are many ways to cultivate the internal energies inherent within your physical structure. While many marvelous results thereby become possible, this can ultimately give rise to many mistaken cultivation trails. The real sort of genuine or worthwhile spiritual practice has to do with purifying your mind and behavior, for your actions are your thoughts expressed. This is a different sort of, but more worthwhile achievement than simply cultivating the body and its energy channels.

When you can purify your mind to the extent that your mind is quite empty and yet always ready to give birth to thoughts when required, and when you no longer act due to impulsive habit energies and you have developed the egoless or selfless view of emptiness, this is getting closer to the spiritual enlightenment of the Buddhas. This is very hard to understand without the actual experience itself, but the correct sort of cultivation path will become much clearer when we investigate the twists and turns of the major Chinese cultivation practices.

¹ See: *Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation: A Handbook for Entering Samadhi*, William Bodri and Lee Shu Mei, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1998).

² See: *To Realize Enlightenment: Practice of the Cultivation Path*, Nan Huai-Chin, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1994).

5. Hard Lessons from China's Forgotten Spiritual Schools and Techniques

In a discussion of cultivation matters, it is not possible to limit ourselves to only the ancient Indian culture, and so we have already started to touch upon some of the cultivation techniques from ancient China, for China had also produced its own unique set of world influencing cultivation traditions. In order to comprehend how many of the world's present cultivation practices came about, we must actually examine how these two root cultures interacted with one another to produce a synthesis of new spiritual understanding.

The early exchanges that inevitably developed between the Indian and Chinese cultures was not limited to the influences of Shakyamuni Buddha. Since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, however, we can safely say that nothing revolutionary has developed in the field of new Indian cultivation techniques. Whatever was later considered a "new" development was simply a timely rejuvenation of the old in the hopes of revitalizing a flagging spirit, as is often seen in most long-lived spiritual traditions.

To understand the cultivation methods and schools in the world today, it is necessary to switch our focus from the ancient Indian to ancient Chinese culture. We must examine China's own particular cultivation techniques and understand how they were influenced by Mother India. By shifting our focus to China, you must not infer that we are dismissing or even belittling the cultivation schools of India. To attain the gong-fu stages they elucidate is already a quite difficult feat. What we must do, however, is open up the discussion so that it eventually addresses all the world's other major cultivation traditions as well.

From the period of China's Qin dynasty (221 B.C.) and onward, the neighboring countries of India and China gradually increased their level of social and commercial interaction, but due to the poor transportation and communication links of this time, the initial extent of these interactions was actually quite limited. Nonetheless, the existence of this interaction was not as restricted as some once believed. Within the annals of Chinese history there are records of various Indian visitors making their way to China, although it is not clear whether they were Hindus, Brahmins or Buddhists.

In one particular account from the Qin dynasty, the Indian visitors were described as possessing a number of superpowers and the Chinese, being slightly awed by these strangers and not knowing what to do with them, locked them up in prison. Of course this proved to be a useless course of action because the Indians would simply walk

out of their cells given their paranormal abilities. Not content at staying locked up, once liberated they traveled around the country freely. They thereby influenced the Chinese a great deal, for there were many in the spiritual field who paid close attention to these unusual visitors.

By the period of China's Han dynasty, the Chinese had become very interested in spiritual cultivation matters for even the emperor was pursuing the methods of mind-body cultivation. As a result, there were a great many scholars and laymen who practiced "Immortality Taoism" in hopes of achieving the stage of physical immortality. These people cultivated all sorts of different techniques – some of which Shakyamuni Buddha had mentioned – because a clear path of spiritual cultivation had not yet been generally worked out in China. To explain, the high stage sages who are born into particular cultural streams may end up understanding everything because of their high wisdom. However, sometimes it is just not appropriate or opportune to teach things that would lay out a spiritual tradition, and sometimes the cultural environment is just so low that the proper teachings never take root.

At this early time, China was not yet aware of all the methods we now have for cultivating the meditative realms of samadhi. The individuals who were interested in spiritual cultivation relied predominantly upon the method of ingesting medicines, called external "elixirs," in order to replenish their bodies and transform their chi channels. The practitioners of this type of cultivation developed the school called wai-dan (external alchemy) and became known as the fang-shih,¹ meaning "masters (doctors) of the prescription" in reference to the many medicines they used. At this time there was no actual Taoism in China as we know it today, however the lineage of the fang-shih and their practices stretched back well over one thousand years.

Just as Indian spiritual cultivation can be characterized by an interest in lofty concerns and a propensity for proving the truth of any matter through experiential verification, the major characteristic differentiating the Chinese cultivation culture from others was a belief held long before the Zhou dynasty that this physical body of ours, if we simply use the right cultivation methods, could become immortal and attain a purified stage equal in rank to that of celestial and heavenly beings. Originally, reaching this stage of immortality was called "getting Tao," but what is actually involved in the "getting Tao"? The enlightenment of getting Tao (or realizing one's original nature) is not a simple matter to explain, for this is the cardinal question around which all spiritual practices revolve.

During China's Warring States period (480-220 B.C.), Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu eventually put forth many theories on getting the Tao. These ideas are not necessary for us to recount, for a great deal of information is readily available to the modern reader on this subject. What we must note, however, is that the Indian culture

differed drastically from the Chinese culture on the definitions of what the Tao might be. The Vedic sages, for instance, believed in attaining immortality on a purely spiritual level by becoming one with Brahman. They believed in achieving a timeless spiritual state, which was something apart from this flesh and blood body provided by our parents. All spiritual seeking was presumably directed toward this end.

The earliest Chinese practitioners, on the other hand, believed that this body of ours could be turned into an immortal vehicle with the power to live on forever, and this was the major goal behind most of the Chinese cultivation efforts. Hence at this very basic level, the Indian and Chinese thought differed dramatically.

One culture was seeking a purely spiritual existence, while tending to ignore material being and human matters, and the other was trying to refine the human body to a more perfect level in tune with the spiritual realms. The Western idea of spirituality, which developed through yet other cultural streams and cultivation concepts, held that an individual already possessed an immortal soul that goes on to live forever after death. Because this immortal soul (rather than the physical body) will go on living to eternity, the Western notions are different from those of Chinese Taoism as well.

While the cultivation practitioners in China were initially very partial to the use of medicines for attaining the Tao, and while the Indians focused on meditative investigations and austerity practices in their spiritual cultivation practices, there were indeed areas where the two cultures held parallel views regarding spiritual cultivation. It is also quite likely that the earliest fang-shih of China were able to make some contact with the cultivation teachings of Indian Brahmanism and yoga because of various people migrating back and forth between the two countries. However, it is almost impossible to find the historical information that would substantiate this trend.

From about the time of the Later Han dynasty, Indian Buddhism started to make great headway in China by infiltrating the popular culture. It was during this roughly two hundred year period that some of the beliefs of the fang-shih started to transform because of this new influence. China's Silk road was completed during this time, and it became a conduit for the entry into China of many foreign cultural influences. The Silk road brought visitors from Egypt, Rome, Iran, Turkey, and Persia and this facilitated the introduction of quite a few religions into the land such as early Judaism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. A variety of Nestorian, Christian, Manichaean and Buddhist temples were built all along the Silk road, and many of these still exist today. These influences, in addition to those from the Indian culture, had their own impact on Chinese culture and its cultivation practices.

To illustrate how this type of cultural synthesis came about, at one point in time a Manichaen religious work became mixed in with the Buddhist sutras, and this comingling has been transmitted forwards even to our modern era. Because of this mistake, in southern Taiwan there is a Buddhist temple with the statue of a child, curled up on a leaf, who is actually one of the celestial gods worshipped by the Manichaens. According to the Manichaen practices, if you recited the proper mantras in the correct fashion, this god would come to you and then you had to immediately and fiercely shout out whatever you wanted – whether it be riches, superpowers, or so on – and then the god would help you to acquire them.

In Taiwan, quite a few strange practices have emerged due to the influence of this sutra. For instance, one peculiarity to these practices is that you could not hear a chicken, duck or a dog cry out while practicing your sadhana. If you did then you had to continue practicing for an additional one hundred, two hundred or three hundred days, etc. depending upon how many times this happened. Because of this unusual requirement, individuals who wished to cultivate this sadhana imitated the Taoists and went far into the wilds to practice. They also copied the Taoist custom of secluding themselves within deep mountain caves so as to insulate themselves from the external sounds that might interfere with their practice.

It is not our concern whether this sort of practice really works, or whether it is the true path to spiritual salvation. It is just one example that illustrates how a Manichaen (Egyptian-Babylonian) cultivation practice became incorporated into a Buddhist stream, and picked up some Taoist flavoring along the way. Although just a small example, this process demonstrates how basic cultivation influences and principles end up spreading everywhere over time, and eventually evolve into forms that are shaped by the particular cultural environment in which they land.

During China's Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), the emphasis in Chinese cultivation started to gradually switch from the use of external alchemical substances to internal medicines. In other words, there was a gradual switch from the practice of wai-dan to nei-dan, which constituted a change in emphasis from "external" to "internal" alchemy.

The nei-dan practices of "internal medicine" involve cultivating your chakras, chi, energy channels and other esoteric substances that are all already within your physical nature. In particular, the Chinese focused upon transforming the triumvirate of jing, chi and shen (or seminal essence, life energy, and spirit) which forms the basis of Chinese medical theory. In telling people that they should cultivate their jing, chi and shen to open their chi channels, chakras, experience kundalini and so forth, this is a form of spiritual cultivation that we have already covered.

The particular cultivation methodology of jing, chi and shen used during this time period was summarized in a path breaking book called the *Can Tong Qi (Different Things Combined with Unity)*² written by Wei Bo-yang. In this book, Wei Bo-yang reviewed the theories of the *I-Ching*, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, dan-Tao (using medicinal or internal substances), five elements theory, and whatever other Chinese cultivation methods were in popular usage at the time. He worked out the commonalities, identified all their good points, and explained how you could synthesize all these streams and put them into one coherent structure of cultivation practice.

The *Can Tong Qi* was a breakthrough text, and we might say it was as important as Aristotle's work was for ancient Classical thought, or as Thomas Aquinas' work was for the Catholic Church. As a result of his efforts, Wei Bo-yang was able to explain the process of personal transformation from a multi-disciplinary perspective, and he arranged all the traditional classical teachings from ancient times into an immensely useful format that showed how human cultivation was capable of reaching the realm of Tao.

A special characteristic of the *Can Tong Qi* was its treatment of astronomy where each of the five major planets (Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Venus and Mercury) was matched with one of the five great elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water) that make up the physical world, and the orbits of these planets were given meanings that corresponded to the chi energy circulations within our human body. This type of cosmological system is found in Medieval European alchemy, but is somewhat imperfectly duplicated. It can be understood, however, by studying the original Chinese system.

The ancient Indian culture also viewed the physical universe and human bodies as being composed of five fundamental elements. However, they called the fifth element "Ether" rather than "Metal," which was the term used by the Chinese. But since the Chinese meaning of the Metal element is Heaven, or emptiness, this has the same meaning as the Ether of Indian philosophy. The Chinese used the term Metal because Metal is so strong that it can break anything, and emptiness is so strong that it can destroy (outlast) everything as well. Given enough time, emptiness will see the destruction of everything, and in time it can give birth to everything. Thus when people think that emptiness means "nothing" they are wrong, for emptiness gives rise to everything, and it brings about the eventual destruction of everything. Viewing this in yet another way, you can say, "Emptiness is never born and never dies."

In terms of a physical analogy, emptiness is often compared to a woman's womb. A woman's uterus is empty, and yet this emptiness can absorb a man's energy and deplete him, or give birth to a new life. This is the idea behind emptiness, as well as

the idea that yin gives birth to yang and yang gives birth to yin. If we applied the same principles that Wei Bo-yang taught centuries ago to a topic in modern science, we could easily correct the initial astronomical theory that black holes in the heavens just suck everything in without giving anything back, for it would violate these principles. A black hole must also be linked with some form of radiation since there can be no such thing as a pure yang or a pure yin source in the universe.

Black holes, which are described as a source of pure yin, therefore cannot exist as originally described. They cannot be just a phenomenon that gobbles everything up without also giving something back, for there is no such thing as a pure yin or pure yang source in the universe. They must be somehow involved with some sort of outward flowing or yang radiation because there is always yang within yin and yin within yang. Mathematicians, physicists and astronomers have recently corrected their initial conjectures on black holes with the acknowledgement of Hawking radiation, but this example illustrates how you can use Tao school concepts to arrive at the same conclusion as the astronomers and physicists, yet without requiring all the advanced mathematics and physics. It offers a simpler way to view things, and through it you might catch details that could be overlooked by science.

From this single example of the black hole, we can therefore understand how the Taoists were able to take simple principles and apply them to make accurate predictions of all sorts of phenomena. While some may feel that the ideas of yin and yang and the five elements theory are too simplistic, they are actually quite robust and scientific. In the hands of someone quite skilled, a tool like this can be very useful.

For instance, using the same type of reasoning you can also modify the idea of an ultimate one time Big Bang explosive origin of the universe. The Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist teachings – revealed by a variety of sages through their samadhi superpower investigations – consistently say that we are actually populating an oscillating universe that experiences cyclical expansions and contractions over vast periods of time. What we presently measure and attribute to a Big Bang “Creation” are therefore just lingering phenomenal remnants from the commencement of the last expansion, but what about before that? Our measurements cannot yet reach before that to investigate the previous contraction and expansion, so before we solidify our conclusions about the origins of the universe, we have to humble ourselves and remember that there will eventually be 22nd century science, 23rd century science, and so forth which may overturn many of our current conclusions.

Unfortunately, it will take quite some time before scientists and mathematicians develop the appropriate equipment, measurements, and models to describe this cosmic variability of oscillation, which the sages can see through samadhi

investigations, but it will come in time. Already some scientists have started to propose this model of an oscillating universe³ since it, too, can also account for the scientific observations that legitimize the idea of a Big Bang.

The reason why Wei Bo-yang provided an overview of astronomy in his book and discussed the way in which the solar system worked is because he wanted to demonstrate how our physical body is actually a microcosmic miniature of the greater universe. He wanted cultivation practitioners to realize how the forces of the five elements and other macrocosmic influences worked inside the human body, and mirrored the natural processes that occur outside it. Wei Bo-yang wanted to demonstrate that this knowledge could be used to benefit a spiritual cultivator.

Wei Bo-yang's book was like a Bible for the earliest cultivation practitioners of China, and it is considered the ancestor of all alchemical texts. This book's influence spread far and wide, even to Arabia and medieval Europe. In fact, this idea of the microcosmic reflection of the macrocosm can be found in quite a few other cultures and spiritual traditions. Of course anyone who cultivates to a certain level does not need this book because they will discover all these correspondences quite naturally on their own.

Wei Bo-yang said that there were three things moving in the universe, and they can be symbolized by the earth, moon and sun. The *I-Ching* states the same thing. These three bodies can be taken to represent our physical body's jing (vitality), chi (energy) and shen (spirit) that are refined during the course of spiritual cultivation. In terms of Buddhist notions, they correspond to the psychological realms of the sixth consciousness of discriminative thinking, the seventh or ego-consciousness, and the seed consciousness known as the universal alaya or eighth consciousness. Taoism expressed the idea of this triumvirate through its famous phrase,

The one gave birth to the two.
The two gave birth to three.
The three gave birth to all the rest.

In this famous stanza, "Tao" is actually the other name for the original nature, so it is the "one." When the one moves there has to be a reflection, so that is the "two." In other words, there is indeed only One, but when the power of the One comes out, then you definitely get two opposites – the subjective and objective, or yin and yang.

Proceeding further, when yin and yang combine, they always give birth to another, and that is the "three." Think of it in the sense that empty fundamental essence gives birth to a functioning aspect, which is of the same nature as itself, and then because of this a third factor of empty appearance emerges. The original nature never

changes, and so none of its transient manifestations can be considered “real” in relation to this unchanging original nature. They cannot be considered real if they are to match with its essence. Thus the original nature is empty, but it is also full of manifestations that are empty of reality, which is why they can exist in the first place.

Now if you know a little about the yin and yang terminology of the *I-Ching* or five elements theory, you can recognize that yin can give birth to yang, or yang to yin. After you have the two principles of yin and yang, you can produce all sorts of other elements, but you should not automatically jump to the conclusion that yin and yang coming together refers to a man and woman having intercourse to produce a baby. The idea of yin and yang combining refers to a universal principle that when two opposites meet, a different or third force will be produced as a result. This is the principle behind the “two” producing a “third,” and everything continues onwards from there. We can also see the reflection of this principle in human life.

As to how we represent a microcosmic reflection of the universe, Wei Bo-yang pointed out that the rising or setting movements of the sun are similar to our spirit becoming fuller or weaker, and that the moon's waxing and waning periods are akin to the movements of our blood and chi, which also rise and fall according to certain patterns within our bodies. Since human growth requires vital energy to rise up through the spine, and since the circulation of this energy through the spinal and other channels is related to the orbits of the planets, the correspondences he made in his book are all quite fascinating to study.

While Wei Bo-yang noted that the physical transformations of spiritual cultivation follow a common pattern that corresponds to the changes within the heavens, earth and universe, he also allowed for deviations from the standard pattern because of the individual human condition. One of the other microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence he noted is the fact that a woman's menstrual period lasts approximately the length of a lunar month, but the reason the menstruation cycle does not occur at the same time for every woman is because each woman is her own little universe.

Wei Bo-yang pointed out that there are definite correspondences between the body's minor- and macro-cosmic chi channel circulations and the lunar and solar cycles of the solar system, but he did not say we had to imitate these things. Many people today are told to play around with these internal chi circulations using visualization techniques, so they end up pushing various sensations of wind this way and that way within their bodies. However, this sort of mistaken practice will not even blow out a candle, let alone truly open your chi channel meridians. It is just an exercise in imagination and delusion.

As Wei Bo-yang pointed out, all these circulations are natural occurrences that do not have to be forced into transpiring. Just as the orbits of the planets are natural phenomena, when you cultivate to a certain stage of spiritual progress the meridians with their proper chi flows will also manifest naturally. You therefore do not need to do anything to cause them to appear, and you will certainly never be able to open your energy channels by using the imagination to force the issue.

When the *Can Tong Qi* appeared, three groups of Chinese cultivation practitioners immediately started using the text. The first group, which followed the route of ingesting earthly-dan or medicinal substances, was cultivating the spiritual path by eating herbs and other special materials. These were mostly the wai-dan practitioners. The second group, which was cultivating human-dan or internal human essences, concentrated on cultivating the body's jing-chi-shen complex inherent to our physical nature in order to make cultivation progress. This was the nei-dan or internal alchemy practitioners. A third group, called the heavenly-dan or school of celestial aspirants, were seeking the Tao by asking for heavenly blessings and assistance. To understand how these separate groups each used the material in this book, we must first review some necessary background material.

According to Taoist (and Chinese medical) explanations, the human body is developed through a cooperative interplay of jing (seminal essence), chi (energy), and shen (spirit). The special property of a living body is that it can continually replenish these three essences. In other words, as a healthy person's jing, chi and shen become depleted, they naturally become replenished and thus an individual can keep on living. When these essences deteriorate to a state from which they can no longer be replenished, however, then a person will die.

According to the Taoist principles on transforming the physical body, if you could somehow gain control over this process of replenishment and perpetuate it forever, then theoretically you could attain immortality. This concept is the foundation behind the Taoist pathway for becoming an Immortal, and making the physical body immune to death. And through their cultivation techniques, this is what some of the Taoist Immortals actually accomplished.

Using its tremendous research capabilities, Western science is now making some headway in better understanding the aging process. Some researchers actually seek this same goal of healthy immortality through chemical or biochemical manipulations, but relatively little research has been performed on how to actually replenish the physical body as envisioned by the Tao school. Any scientific progress made in this direction is usually along the lines of inventing stimulatory substances, but when you emphasize yang (stimulatory substances) without balancing it with yin, you will eventually produce a state of over-extension that will lead to decline and

even death. So the Western notions on life extension are fundamentally flawed because they only concentrate on increasing yang, and do not incorporate any concepts of balance. When yang is stimulated it will naturally reach an extreme, and out of necessity this extreme will produce yin, or death.

This particular deficiency of neglecting homeostatic balance can readily be seen in the medical field. Whereas the Western doctor may be far ahead of the Chinese doctor in terms of advanced surgical techniques and medical apparatus, his approach to the task of healing is far from holistic. While a Western doctor might concentrate on disinfecting a wound, a Chinese doctor will go further in using various non-toxic medicines to promote speedy healing as well as to eliminate the poisons involved with the infection.

Chinese medicine does not simply aim at destroying diseases with magic bullets, but goes further. When it addresses a situation, it strengthens and replenishes the entire physical organism so as to eliminate and cure the problems that caused disease to arise in the first place. Its goal of reestablishing a harmonious balance among the body's internal organs reflects the Taoist philosophy of replenishing the body and establishing internal harmony rather than striving for magic bullets with bad side effects. When you really think about this, it is really a great approach.

As to how various individuals made use of Wei Bo-yang's material, when the internal alchemy (human-dan) practitioners felt their bodies were in decline because their jing, chi or shen had become depleted, they turned to the wai-dan earthly medicine practitioners for assistance as these practitioners knew about all sorts of medicines for helping to replenish the body. When their cultivation just was not progressing despite all their efforts, they sometimes turned to the heavenly-dan practitioners for advice as to their practice. When the earthly-dan practitioners encountered phenomena that they did not understand, they also turned to the human and heavenly-dan practitioners. And when the heavenly-dan practitioners felt they were not making as much progress as they would like, they turned to the techniques of these other two schools as well. Each of these schools referenced Wei Bo-yang's material, and benefited from one another.

The early Taoists used all sorts of different substances to help replenish their bodies, balance their organ systems, and restore their internal energies. While some of the materials included gold and various herbs, they also included cinnabar, mercury, sulfur and various poisons. Thus, sometimes practitioners ingesting these strange materials would hurt themselves. This was particularly the case when practitioners tried to kill all the germs in the body, which they referred to as "worms," using substances such as arsenic. You could ingest arsenic safely if you had reached a certain stage of cultivation and followed a proven protocol, but if you did not you

were risking death.

In many cases, the proponents of the wai-dan school ingested stimulatory substances to the extent that they felt so energetic that they abandoned their spiritual practice and delved into excessive eating and sexual binges. Quite a few notable greats in the Tao school, and even some Chinese emperors who had the merit to obtain these substances, died in this manner. They perished due to the over consumption of, or over consumption resultantly caused by the ingestion of too many stimulatory substances. Hence the idea of excessively using nutritional substances to extend life has many faults. While the substances may work for ordinary people to some extent, they can greatly damage the bodies of advanced cultivation practitioners whose bodies become transformed along the spiritual path. A spiritual practitioner therefore has to be careful of both the food and medicine he takes.

Sometimes the internal alchemy practitioners in Wei Bo-yang's day – because they tried to forcefully produce spiritual progress – ended up creating all sorts of physical and mental problems as well. For instance the Zen master Hakuin of Japan, because he over-extended himself in strenuous and scattered concentration exercises, produced an incurable condition that is described and cautioned against in the Tibetan Buddhism and yoga.⁴ His chi became unbalanced to the extent that he felt as if his lungs were on fire, his legs were as cold as ice, he always had headaches, and in his ears he always heard a rushing sound. Hakuin finally cured himself by abandoning his previous forceful cultivation practices, and started cultivating a harmonizing, balancing meditation instead.

Even if an individual could practice both of these two schools rather well – the wai-dan and nei-dan, or external alchemy and internal alchemy schools of earthly-dan and human-dan – it was still very hard to succeed as the third type of practitioner and accomplish the heavenly-dan practice. You still needed something beyond earthly or human substances to achieve success on this third road of practice, and the key ingredient most practitioners were lacking was merit. They did not make progress on the spiritual trail because their merit was not great enough.

Individuals achieve merit through spiritual cultivation, performing good deeds and virtuous acts, thinking good thoughts and saying helpful things. Individuals who meditate also accumulate merit, and if they accumulate enough merit through good deeds and virtuous acts, and if their vows are big enough, then they can indeed receive the blessing of heavenly beings who will help them with their cultivation efforts.

Merit, although often ignored, is a key ingredient necessary for success in almost any type of endeavor, which explains the emphasis most schools place on the

importance of discipline, virtue and pure conduct for generating merit. You absolutely cannot succeed in spiritual cultivation without accumulating virtue and merit. Merit is what allows you to be reborn in the heavens, or to rise to the stage of spiritual achievement that matches with these heavens. While the march of scientific research and discovery is often criticized for being absent of virtue, virtue and merit are essential ingredients for attaining progress on the spiritual path.

When you consider matters in this fashion, it helps you understand that you cannot attain certain samadhi realms of spiritual achievement unless you also cultivate the merit that matches those realms. To become reborn in a higher spiritual realm is the reward of accumulated merit, and if you want to attain the samadhi state that matches those realms and their denizens, you must also cultivate the merit which corresponds to that realm and its stage of samadhi.

The Tibetan school of Esoteric Buddhism simulates the necessary accumulation of merit and receipt of heavenly help through its various ceremonies of initiation and empowerment (akin in some cases to Christian Baptism). However, a blessing is something you receive naturally when your gong-fu, merit and vows are good enough. Because Chinese Taoism, in particular the heavenly-dan school, also teaches the necessity of heavenly help, this is one example of how Taoism is actually linked with Tibetan esoteric practice. The teachings of both schools emphasize the importance of practicing virtue and accumulating merit for progress along the spiritual path.

Most people are not aware that accumulating merit is a requirement for achieving success on the spiritual path. Rather, they mistakenly believe that everything must simply be a matter of hard work and effort, or just following the proper road of meditative practice. They are not aware that virtue and merit are necessary active ingredients for those who wish to succeed on the road of spiritual progress. Because they themselves lack the merit necessary to receive this type of blessing, it is difficult to even discuss this topic with them.

According to Taoist philosophy (and the teachings of most any other genuine cultivation school), a person who is to succeed in cultivating their jing, chi and shen must also do a great number of good deeds in addition to practicing virtuous thoughts and behavior, otherwise success will always be forever out of their reach. Lacking sufficient merit, the most one could hope to accomplish would be a slight transformation of the human body, but not very much.

Whether you try to transform your physical nature by ingesting earthly substances, by cultivating your chi and mai, or by appealing for heavenly help, if you do not have sufficient merit then your efforts will be in vain. In fact, as will be discussed later in

this book, some ancient cultures – because of their barbaric practices – had so little merit that they needed great spiritual teachers to arise and institute strict religious rules of discipline in society in order that the people might thereby slowly accumulate a degree of merit that would permit spiritual progress. People today interpret these early rules as strict behavioral injunctions that must be enforced absolutely, but they are entirely unaware of their original purpose. In many cases it was only because cultural standards were so low that religious restrictions were originally instituted with great harshness, and hence their absolute nature should in many cases be called into question.

Taoist cultivation almost always concentrates on perfecting the human body, and the human body is a very complicated mechanism. In the body, the energy of cultivation rises up through the spine that has seven cervical vertebrae, twelve thoracic vertebrae and five lumbar vertebrae. The Taoists consider that the neck region (or esophagus) is comprised of twelve soft segments, which cultivators refer to as the twelve stairs or steps of a stupa. In ancient times the Chinese also divided the skull into eight large bones. Thus in the earliest Taoist eras, the twenty four partitions of the Chinese calendar (the twelve solar months and their midpoints) were reflected in the twenty-four spinal vertebrae; the eight trigrams of the *I-Ching* could be seen in the bones of the head; and the twelve months of the year could be seen in the body's chi mai energy meridians. The body's intestinal tract was even compared with the Yangtze River which flows out to the sea. Thus when someone said that "the fish returned to the great ocean," this referred to the act of going to the toilet after which everything would return to where it was supposed to be!

According to this ancient way of looking at things, as popularized by Wei Bo-yang, our bodies therefore have everything necessary inside them – yin and yang, the five elements, the orbits of the planets, the six different weather patterns mentioned in the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (cold, windy, damp, dry, hot and very hot weather), and so forth. This *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*⁵ is extremely important for spiritual practitioners of all cultivation schools because if anyone wishes to understand the effect that the seasons will have on their physical body and their cultivation progress, they can find all the basics within this book.

The higher you spiritually cultivate, the more sensitive your physical body will become, and you cannot get around this because it is an unavoidable natural consequence. You will become able to sense the chi flows in nature or other people, and will even know what is wrong with their cultivation practice. Sometimes an uncomfortable feeling in your body will not be a result of illness but just a sensitive response to sitting next to someone with unpurified chi, or the result of different chi-fronts in the body interacting in a turbulent manner just as when high and low pressure weather systems collide to produce storms. All these things you will come

to know when you make genuine progress in spiritual achievement.

Even if you cultivate to a high stage of samadhi, the physical body will always retain a karmic connection with the earth from which it was produced. As a result, it will continue to respond to changes in the seasons, the weather and other earthly or atmospheric disturbances. While the functions and state of your physical nature are connected to your thoughts, the body also has a karma of its own that is somewhat independent of your thoughts, and so while sickness and health are closely tied to the karma of your present day attitudes, they are often independent of current circumstances, but due to past life karma as well. Thus at times the various sages who are born in this world will still become sick due to the karma of countless ages past, rather than due to their current thoughts. Therefore the idea that it is only one's attitude that causes sickness is far from totally correct.

One of the natural functions of the body is to be sensitive to the changes of the seasons. However, with cultivation achievement the body's sensitivity will increase dramatically and through meditation, this internal weather vane can even be perfected. Since a true cultivation practitioner's body will definitely become more sensitive as its chi channels become purified – to the extent that he or she will become able to feel others' sickness and even their personalities because of their chi flows – an expert meditator will need to understand the possible reactions that will also occur due to seasonal earthly phenomena. All of these are explained in the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*.

Our bodies have all sorts of chi flows going on all the time, just as the planets continually travel along their own orbits. When we contemplate that the various planets are spinning around while traveling in these orbits, that our solar system is itself rotating and traveling at an incredible speed on its own independent trajectory, that there are millions of such solar systems within every galaxy and that the galaxies can be combined into even greater systems of super clusters, it becomes mind-boggling. When we then forget about the larger systems and instead look at tinier systems involving molecules and atoms with their own individual movements – the whole matter becomes inconceivable!

Despite this vast complexity, there is no one manager in charge of everything. It is simply the laws of physics, or we should say the interdependence of karma, which continually keeps things running the way they do. Since the natural laws of physics control everything, we do not have to worry about whether things are going right or wrong, or even whether they are proper or improper. Everything is regulated by an automatic process of continual adjustment that is seeking a state of equilibrium or balance. Within our bodies, we therefore do not have to worry about any of these chi flows and whether they are “doing the right thing” by following the correct course of

circulation.

If we take this holistic framework and apply it to our own physical nature, we can realize that the blood and chi flows within our bodies are also natural processes. Therefore – and this is the important point – it is not necessary to worry about any transformations you experience that are naturally brought about because of proper spiritual practices. All the changes that transpire along the path of proper spiritual cultivation – which emphasizes the emptiness of mind and body rather than the fact that you have to artificially create anything to “make a Tao” – will happen in accordance with natural laws. Since the path is essentially one of mental resting, you do not have to worry about any results that mental resting might bring about.

All the substances within our bodies are circulate naturally as they should and follow the laws they need to follow, so we do not need to help them in this effort. All we need to do is quiet our thoughts, and then the chi and blood circulations, which are optimal to our health and spiritual well being, will naturally reassert themselves. All we must do is just give them the chance to assume their proper courses without the intrusion of mental interference, for it is our mental habits and mental restrictions that bias our chi flows in an unnatural fashion.

In other words, we do not have to use our minds to guide the circulation of the chi or blood. We do not have to add any special energy to their system dynamics or attempt to build some particular result we have in our minds. We do not have to “make a Tao” or make some artificial creation. After all, spiritual progress – if it is to be a genuine ontological result – is anything but an artificial creation. With this explanation as a background, when any spiritual school tells students how to “guide their chi” and use mental imagery to internally open up their chakras and energy meridians – how can this be viewed as “natural”?

Whatever physical changes transpire because of cultivation must represent a totally natural process, otherwise the path you are following is not true spiritual cultivation. Rather, it would be an outside path, or abnormal deviation from what is true. The only true spiritual pathway to Tao is to relax and let go of any self-produced mental restrictions or biases or attachments so that your mental and physical energies can return to their perfect original state. This is true spiritual practice: to mentally let go of holding onto things so that your original nature might reassert itself in its purity. By letting go of thoughts your internal chi flows become harmonized, by becoming harmonized the mental state becomes pacified, by becoming pacified clarity reaches its zenith, and then samadhi and prajna wisdom can both be born.

It is actually the strain of mental holding that alters internal chi flows and creates strictures and obstructions in the body so as to inhibit the optimal from manifesting.

This is why this explanation of cultivation instructions, although in Taoist terms, holds true regardless of your particular religion or school of cultivation practice. All the spiritual practices in the world's religions are just assistants to help you cultivate and thereby reach this state.

In short, the key to attaining Tao is to cultivate merit, wisdom, and emptiness (which means relaxation). You just drop holding onto everything you have self-created, and through this relinquishing you will make contact with your "God-nature," which we call the "Tao." This dropping is actually a form of supreme relaxation without artificialities, and is a method of no-method that exponentially increases spiritual awareness.

Unfortunately, things have developed to the situation we find today where people try to circulate their chi this way and that, and try to constantly run chi up and down the internal microcosmic orbits of their internal energy meridians (chi mai). This seems like a nice practice in theory, but these folks are just wasting their energies. Because of the added friction they generate, they are actually damaging their bodies and wearing them out just a little bit earlier with their efforts.

Another mistake that Taoist practitioners now commonly make is to believe they should never let any energies whatsoever escape from their bodies, and so there are even misguided individuals out there who refuse to fart for fear of "losing their chi." These sorts of folks fall into another trap of poisoning themselves to death without even knowing it!

The correct method of spiritual cultivation practice – regardless of one's religious background – is to learn how to quiet one's thoughts without pushing them around or holding them tight through clinging or suppression. As a result of this sort of no-method practice, your chi will naturally flow as it should, and will automatically correct any habitual deviations that have developed over time due to the wrong use of your mind.

This core concept is common to all the world's genuine cultivation and religious schools, but the Taoists were the first to explain it using physical science. If you follow this route of practice while maintaining the open field of mental awareness, as is done in Zen or Mahamudra, then all the physical changes that will resultantly occur in the body will be things you will never have to worry about. All the manifestations of gong-fu that you might read about in books will naturally appear, just as do the stages of puberty when it is appropriate, and you will pass through them without any efforts. But when you try to force any particular result into manifesting, it is like producing an artificial Frankenstein or "professional chicken." A pressurized effort to produce speedy results will not fail to produce anything but an

artificial result, and the attainment of the Tao is not an artificial creation.

In one of the Buddhist sutras, there is a dialogue between Shakyamuni Buddha and his cousin Ananda where the two discuss how the stages of cultivation gong-fu – the changes of the physical body resulting from cultivation – actually mimic the changes that an embryo undergoes as it develops in the mother's womb. During the first seven days changes occur to the embryo that correspond to stages of cultivation, the next seven days something else will happen to the embryo corresponding to another cultivation development, and so on. It is all a quite fascinating natural process, and the embryo does not have to do anything to guide or propel the process forward. This is the way authentic spiritual cultivation is meant to be.

Even though it is very scientific to be able to understand what is happening in the womb and match it with the possible developments of cultivation gong-fu, it is much more difficult to explain how the mind ties in with this development, especially if it is a natural development. To understand the mental aspects of cultivation, many systems have been proposed over time, and the early Tao school had a variety of explanatory methods. Nevertheless, the best system that entered China was the skandha of consciousness system proposed by Buddhism.

Historically speaking, it was near the end of the Three Kingdoms period (3rd and 4th centuries A.D.) when Buddhism became established in China. Buddhism had a tremendous influence on the country, especially when it came in contact with the Taoist fang-shih practices that had already been in existence for over one thousand years. Of course, India also benefited from its exposure to various Chinese Taoist practices, and thus the two cultures ended up greatly influencing one another in this field. Many people mistakenly believe that the Esoteric Buddhism that arose in Tibet was born from its own soil, but it, too, was an outgrowth of this tremendous cultural mixing.

It was not Mahayana or Hinayana Buddhism that initially came over to China from India, for the first stages of spiritual contact between the two cultures consisted of visits by individuals who had attained some measure of paranormal abilities from cultivating samadhi states of concentration. There were, however, two complete cultivation methods that did come over from India: the anapana breathing method (which like yogic pranayama, uses the breathing exercises in order to focus the mind and enable it to enter samadhi) and the white skeleton visualization method, which involves visualizing the white bones of the body's skeleton while contemplating the impurity of the physical body so as to learn detachment.

When the anapana methods came over to China, the Taoists in the Warring States period who were practicing the internal cultivation method of "refining the chi"

immediately seized upon this practice, and quickly assimilated it as their own. As a result, eventually a Buddhist monk became known as a “fa shih,” or “Teacher of the Dharma” while a Taoist became known as a “lian shih,” or “Teacher of the Refining.” This title referred to the chi practice they engaged in which was called “refining the internal elixir,” which was the heart of the nei-dan practices for transforming one’s jing, chi and shen. Refining referred to the fact that transformations of jing, chi and shen had to occur, and a practitioner had to keep cultivating higher and higher levels of purification until they attained samadhi and ultimately spiritual realization.

After the Three Kingdoms period, the Hinayana school of Buddhism started to penetrate into China with full force, and the T’ien-t’ai (Tendai) school of Buddhism, which also concentrates on breathing methods, also started to become popular. The T’ien-t’ai school took the practice of anapana and broke it down into six stages (including three kinds of cessation and three kinds of contemplation), but the practice of anapana was not really exclusive to the T’ien-t’ai school. In fact, many of the breathing practices we have today actually came from Zen master Bodhidharma’s original teachings,⁶ who also introduced a number of yoga stretching exercises and martial arts practices to the monks of China.

In any case, the ancient Chinese who wanted to practice at that time used both the skeleton visualization method and various breathing methods in their cultivation. Both Buddhists and Taoists used these practices, and because both groups practiced wholeheartedly with determination and consistency, many people received the fruits of the spiritual path.

In order to practice the skeleton method correctly, people also had to practice anapana breathing exercises, and in order to practice anapana they had to simultaneously practice the skeleton method visualization. These two methods, when combined with the Hinayana Buddhist teachings, later became the chi and meridian practices that we currently find in Tibetan Buddhism. Used together, they constitute a formidable cultivation package that anyone can attempt because they are not contravened by any sort of religious teachings. They rely strictly on a scientific approach to cultivation that relies upon basic cultivation principles.

During this time, the travel back and forth between China and India rapidly increased, and the two cultures began to share a lot more trade and cultural information. Some influences which have passed down from India to our Western culture originated from this period of interaction. The method of counting numbers used in hypnosis is one such legacy. The bottom rung practices of chi-gong that are popular today in China are also leftovers from this time. Unfortunately the modern day practitioners of this school do not know this history or understand what the “chi” in “chi-gong” really stands for.

Chi-gong was originally brought to China by Bodhidharma, whose Zen talks taught practitioners the basis of breathing practices. Most chi-gong practitioners, and others for that matter, do not know that spiritual breathing practices means emphasizing the resting period between your breaths. We previously identified that cessational period as the state of his, and the initiation of internal embryo breathing. Many people the world over mistakenly believe that genuine breathing cultivation methods involve counting the breaths in some form. Thus they put all their energy of awareness into following moving things – which are transient phenomena that are born and die – rather than trying to cultivate the period of mental cessation in the middle of the in-breath and out-breath.

An explanation of this resting period of cessation, when the shen (spirit) and chi stop moving and the breathing and pulse reach a state of rest, is described in Wei Bo-yang's *Can Tong Qi* where he wrote,

The sun and moon rest together.
Heaven and earth have the same longevity.

Unfortunately, people always miss this essential teaching about cessation when it is actually the very crux of the matter!

Several hundred years after the Three Kingdoms period, around the time of the Western and Eastern Jin dynasties (3rd to 5th centuries A.D.), quite a few Buddhist sutras had already reached China from India, but not all of them. A lot of material was still absent, and therefore unavailable to answer people's questions on spiritual cultivation. One particular Chinese spiritual practitioner, Hui-yuan, had studied Confucianism in depth and worked hard on Taoist cultivation practices. However, he decided it did not make sense to cultivate a physical thing that could live forever, so he became a Buddhist monk to search for an spiritual solution that was above the Taoist practices of his time.

Hui-yuan eventually founded the Chinese Pure Land school of spiritual practice. This school, which cultivates to spiritual realization through the practice of remembering and reciting Amitofo Buddha's name, has had a tremendous influence on Chinese culture, and its principles are now readily found in many other religious traditions. In terms of technique, a Pure Land practitioner continually recites "Namo Amitofo" wherever they are while listening to the sounds within. They keep chanting until their internal dialogue tires and dies down, and they thereby reach the state of samadhi, or mental quietude, that we call discriminative cessation.

This method of practice, which Hui-yuan originally taught, had the stated objective of helping practitioners to be reborn in Amitofo's Western Buddhaland (a heavenly

paradise) after their death. Knowing the difficulties that people would face in seeking realization, Hui-yuan advocated this simple practice because it had an easily understood objective, and it could be mastered by people of all levels of wisdom and from all walks of life.

After several dynasties, the chanting of Amitofo's name as a spiritual practice eventually combined with Zen Buddhism and became an even more spiritualized practice. You need not wait for death to visit Amitofo's Land, but could reach the Pure Land of Amitofo in this very instant, in this very world of here and now. If you so recited the name to achieve the quietude of spiritual samadhi, and from this state cultivated prajna transcendental wisdom, then Hui-yuan's mindfulness technique became a method for realizing enlightenment in the immediate present.

As stated, to practice this technique all you have to do is chant Amitofo's name silently or aloud, and listen within. In time your normal internal dialogue will die down and then cease, and you will thereby reach a natural form (rather than suppressed form) of mental silence. You will have entered samadhi and will be able to cultivate prajna wisdom from simply having recited "Namo Amitofo" continuously in your mind. Of course when you reach that state of natural stillness, you must stop giving energy to your chanting.

In this early period, the chanting of Amitofo's name was held in high esteem whereas today some people use "Amitofo" as a scornful remark or even as a curse. Regrettably, most people do not understand the power of genuine mantras, which represent the supremely concentrated, boiled down essence of some great matter. The highest mantras, which belong to great Buddhas like Amitofo, as opposed to those which address mere heavenly beings, are like a secret code directly linking to the heart and mind. "Amitofo" in particular is a marvelous mantra that has many secrets contained within it.

You can gain some idea of how special the name "Amitofo" is by the fact that the "Ah" sound of this mantra is the most prevalent sound found within the mantras and prayers of religious traditions. You need only take note of the words "Amen," "Alleluia," "Jehovah," "Allah", "Brahma," "Adonis," to get an idea of this point.

The first sound made by any living being who opens its mouth after birth is the "Ah" sound. "Ah" is a universal syllable and all the religions of the world are never outside of the "Ah" sound. In terms of what the syllables stand for, the "Ah" sound in "Amitofo" represents endlessness or limitlessness, the "Mi" sound represents endless life and infinite time, and the "To" sound represents endless light. As to the "Fo" syllable, this is the Chinese word for "Buddha," enlightenment, or self-realization.

The “light” represented by the “To” syllable in Amitofo’s name does not mean the light we see with our eyes, for this is just a physical form of light. The light we see with our eyes is just a phenomenon having a physical appearance. The light we can see with our eyes is just a physical manifestation in the world of form that outwardly indicates or demonstrates the power of light. For instance, darkness is also a type of form-light because we can consider darkness as a color seen with the mind’s awareness. Thus even darkness is stage wherein the true energy behind light has already been transformed into form. When people are told to meditate on light, or you read “that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” in the Bible (*1 John 1:5*), this is not a reference to this second generational form-light at all. It is a reference to something much higher, which is a state of spiritual realization.

The phrase “God is light” refers to the illumination of awareness that is not visible – a clear original awareness that extends everywhere in the universe even where there is absolute darkness. This is why you can go everywhere in the universe and never be afraid or alone, because you will always have this awareness no matter whether you end up in Heaven or hell. From this point of view, the New Testament saying that “God is light” is one hundred percent accurate. The purpose of the spiritual path is to get you to the practice stage where you can experientially realize this truth for yourself, and not have to take this on faith.

The statement that “God is light” is actually a very high stage Form Realm realization, and thus through this abbreviated discussion you can see how the construction of a mantra such as “Amitofo” is very scientific and full of deep meaning, just as are the “Ohm Ah Hon,” “Ohm Ah Bee Lah Hung Chit,” or “Ohm Mani Padme Hon” Mantras. Powerful mantras typically emphasize similar sounds, and the way you use them is typically the same as well. You can choose to recite any of these mantra as a form of spiritual practice, but the important point is not the recitation but the aspect of listening within and eventually quieting your discriminative mind of mental chatter. If you can reach that stage of attainment wherein your mind is quiet and free of clutter, then spiritual progress will proceed onwards from there.

During the period of the Eastern and Western Jin (Chin) dynasties, China suffered tremendous turmoil because of the internal political situation and foreign invasions. However as often seen in history, the time when a country suffers greatly can be a period of revolutionary developments in religious culture and spiritual striving. These troubled times became a period of great cultural study directed towards the pursuit of higher spiritual realms (in order to escape the immediate reality of suffering). Due to the work of the Buddhist translation monk Kumarajiva, Buddhism in particular started to bloom and to blossom.

The Chinese intelligentsia could not stand to see the country in such bad shape at

this time, so they veered towards a spiritual way of life as a means of mental escape in much the same manner that a great scientist, despairing that his research has been misused for less than honorable purposes, stops inventing things or flees to an entirely new field of exploration and discovery. This type of response gave an extra impetus to the spiritual impulses of the Chinese culture, and the country experienced many wonderful developments.

At this time in Chinese history, studies of Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu, and the *I-Ching* all reached their heights, and because of the upheaval in the country and its political problems, everyone started talking about emptiness and prajna transcendental wisdom. It was during this period that Buddhist studies in China moved from the “small” Hinayana road of personal salvation to more of a “Great Vehicle” Mahayana emphasis on the necessity of bringing about universal salvation. The Hinayana road of practice focuses on spiritually saving only oneself, whereas the Mahayana road of practice involves spiritually cultivating in the world while trying to save others.

Buddhism became so popular that people began choosing Buddhist names for themselves such as “Bodhisattva,” “Asura,” or “Vajra.” It was considered very chic to have a Buddhist name, just as Asians are commonly taking on Western first names today. By this time, the “cultural invasion” of India into China could finally be considered a dynamic international process of two parties mutually interacting and beneficially learning from one another. In a similar way, the West through its science and business management philosophy is currently influencing China and the East, but the present process is transpiring on an entirely different level. In this previous era, the interaction was based on cultural appreciation and learning, whereas today the interaction is more a function of postwar power struggles and economic competition, with countries trying to gain influence over each other rather than trying to learn from one another.

Also at this time, Buddhism within India was declining rapidly and the first Patriarch of the Zen school, Bodhidharma, left India for China because he knew the Mahayana teachings could flourish there. He first landed in the southern part of China in Guangdong, but his final resting place came to be in Northern China at the famous Shaolin Temple. The cultivation method he brought to China was the Zen direct method of self-realization. It was the “method of no method,” or the method of direct insight into reality which dispenses with artificial techniques in order to become a Buddha. In introducing this method to China, Bodhidharma became the founder of the Chinese Zen school.

The Zen school basically gets rid of all the philosophical ramblings and scholastic explanations of reality that we find in so many other schools. While it indeed relies upon Buddhist theory and meditative practice, it quickly orients you directly to the

heart of the matter without any intercessory dogma. Zen dispenses with non-essentials and gets immediately to the point of spiritual training because only the authenticated truth of the matter is important, and certainly not the endless discussions that forever obfuscate the truth.

When Bodhidharma entered China, the nation's intelligentsia were always talking theory and spouting flowery words. Since their standing and reputation derived from this sort of useless talk, it is natural that they did not particularly welcome this new master of no-method and no-theory. This is one of the reasons why Zen could at first only be transmitted to just a few students. Not only was Zen initially unpopular in terms of the trends of the time, but the successful transmission of this school of direct pointing, which did not rely on words or letters, required a student of the highest caliber in order to receive it. Under these conditions, a great master like Bodhidharma would not bother to take on many students or provide much public instruction because most people were just not qualified to hear the teachings. The full flower of Zen therefore had to wait several generations before it could blossom.

Briefly summarizing China's cultivation heritage, we can say that the earliest cultivators based their practice on the idea of attaining physical immortality. In time, the Indian breathing practices and other methods of cultivation entered China and had a tremendous impact on the methods of the Tao school, which initially emphasized the use of external elixirs (medicines) and then the cultivation of internal elixirs to attain higher spiritual experiences. The earliest Chinese spiritual practitioners ended up cultivating their breath, jing, chi and shen, and eating various medicinal substances, in order to attain their definition of the Tao.

In time, the inadequacies of the Tao school led to the Chinese creation of the Buddhist Pure Land school, which abandoned the technique of refining an "internal elixir," and emphasized instead the internal cultivation of the mind. The Pure Land school of Buddhism became popular and reaffirmed the fact that cultivating your mind would produce a spiritual reward, and that it was also the way to ultimately achieve enlightenment. The Zen school, or school of direct realization, also entered China from India and affirmed the method of looking into the mind directly to achieve self-realization. This introduction of Zen into China was another watershed event in the history of Chinese spiritual practice.

China in this ancient period was like a big pot of stew that could accept everything added to it. By the time of China's Tang dynasty, the Tao school had assumed an important role of state, the Confucian school of introspection-contemplation was flourishing, and at least ten sects of Buddhism prospered in the country. The idea of cultivating the physical body through medical substances had been broadly rejected in preference for the idea of cultivating the body's internal essences. This, too, was

eventually eclipsed by an even better spiritual path, which was to cultivate towards spiritual salvation by using the mind. Finally came the idea of cultivating to reach self-realization in the immediate present, which we find in Zen.

If we look for an overall lesson from this long period of spiritual development, we will find that while spiritual practice produces mind-body phenomena, it is the path of cultivating the mind, rather than the body, which results in the truest and surest form of spiritual progress. True spiritual cultivation is a mind-practice whose results are eventually exhibited through behavior. You cultivate good behavior to succeed on the path, and success means that you can exhibit spiritual attainment through virtuous behavior as well.

While the body is important on the path, you do not need to take any steps to cultivate your body on the road of spirituality, but only need to cultivate your mind and then your body will naturally adjust itself. Thus various transformations of your physical nature will indeed occur and are to be expected on the spiritual path, but all in all, these changes are not anything you should become overly concerned about. The key point of spiritual practice, as evidenced in the long history of Chinese cultivation techniques, is how you cultivate the mind. Whether you use a mantra technique to quiet the mind and attain samadhi, or cultivate samadhi and wisdom directly through Zen practice, spiritual cultivation all comes down to how you purify your mind and your behavior.

1 See: *Doctors, Diviners, and Magicians of Ancient China: Biographies of the Fang Shih*, trans. by Kenneth DeWoskin, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1983).

2 See: *The Secret of Everlasting Life: The First Translation of the Ancient Chinese Text on Immortality*, trans. by Richard Bertschinger, (HarperCollins, London, 1995).

3 See: "The Cyclic Universe: An Informal Introduction," P.J. Steinhardt and N. Turok, Princeton University Department of Physics and DAMPT Centre for Mathematical Sciences.

4 See: *A Second Zen Reader*, Trevor Leggett, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964).

5 See: *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine*, trans. by Nelson Liansheng Wu and Andrew Qi Wu, (China Science and Technology Press, Beijing, 1997); *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*, trans. by Zhu Ming, (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2001); *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*, trans. by Maoshing Ni, (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1995); *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, trans. by Ilza Veith, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1966).

6 See: *The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma*, trans. by Red Pine, (North Point Press, New York, 1996); *The Bodhidharma Anthology*, Jeffrey Broughton, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999).

6. The Big Pros and Cons of Tantric Cultivation Techniques

Turning away from the cultivation practices of China, the next set of spiritual practices meriting our attention are the esoteric practices of Tibet. Tibet was considered the “vulgar outback” during China’s Tang dynasty, and even though China had tremendous political connections with Tibet at this time, for the most part China’s political stance was not to get too involved with the region. During this period, Tibet had no written language and was agriculturally quite primitive, but because of the harsh climate and difficult life, most Tibetans grew up to be tough and hardy.

The Tibetan King of this period, Srongtsen Gampo (Srong-btsan sgam-po) was quite respectful of Chinese culture, and he asked the Chinese Emperor for a princess bride in order to establish a matrimonial bond with the imperial house. In response, the Chinese Emperor Tang Taizong sent him a niece to marry, Princess Wen Cheng, because he wanted to maintain peaceful relations with the Tibetans.

When Princess Wen Cheng went to Tibet to marry the King, she took with her a wide variety of books on agriculture, medicine and other subjects as well as a small group of Taoist priests, Buddhist monks, Confucian scholars and others. In some Tibetan places you can still see her picture or statue being honored because of the great work she did in helping to modernize the country. Many felt she was a living Bodhisattva because of the tremendous role she played in assisting the Tibetan people.

After Princess Wen Cheng had been in Tibet for awhile and had learned more about Tibetan culture, she sent a message asking Emperor Tang Taizong to send some more scholars in order to provide the Tibetans with further schooling in Chinese culture. Because of the faulty advice of his state minister, who believed such teachings would dangerously strengthen the Tibetans, the Emperor declined this request. This decision is the source of many of the political problems between China and Tibet today. It is all as a result of this one political mistake that the Emperor made hundreds of years ago.

The far-sighted King Srongtsen Gampo also sent a second request to Nepal asking its ruler for a Nepalese princess bride as well. This Nepalese princess brought with her various Buddhist monks and Indian pundits (since Nepal was actually within India at the time), and so this introduced a second foreign cultural influence into Tibet that also helped to shape the country. During King Srongtsen Gampo’s reign a written language was developed for Tibet but it was based on the Indian, rather than Chinese

language, because of Emperor Tang Taizong's oversight. This has resulted in many other social and political influences that have distanced Tibet from China.

Although this is a book centered on spiritual cultivation, this particular lapse in political judgement deserves a comment. It teaches us that people who occupy positions of power must be careful not to make decisions with only a short time horizon in mind. Rather than view the possible impact of a decision on just the upcoming quarter or even a twenty year period, they must consider the results of their actions in terms of the coming centuries. As further justification for this admonition, we need only cite the fact that many countries in the world still remember and refer to infractions committed by their neighbors that took place several hundred years earlier! The United States in particular has to beware of this danger. While it is at the peak of its power, various interfering transgressions, such as the imposition of its will on other countries, will have definite consequences. At some future time the tables may turn and the U.S. may have to pay back in kind for its past mistakes and infractions.

As the Tibetans developed their own writing system, they started to translate the Buddhist sutras en masse. The neighboring Mongolians and Manchurians saw these developments in Tibet and followed suit by developing their own writing systems. Hence the reason these people all have similar writing systems is because they were based on similar roots, and the similarity of the writing systems also helped establish a general commonality in religious practices. In general, this whole region picked up the teachings of Buddhism which became amalgamated with the local shamanistic and tribal practices.

Because of the influence of the two princesses, the availability of Buddhist sutras, and the isolated nature of the country, Buddhist culture in Tibet grew rapidly and prospered. But we must remember that what grew in Tibetan soil was not the Buddhist culture of Shakyamuni's time, but the thousand year old Buddhist culture that had developed since Shakyamuni Buddha's death. The purity of original Buddhism had already assimilated quite a few other cultivation influences such as new mantra practices and unusual methods of chi mai cultivation found in the Tao school and yoga. The two separate streams of Indian and Chinese culture, combining with the native Tibetan Bon religion of magical practices, plus the inevitable mistranslations of original spiritual texts and other influences, created a variety of different ideas on Buddhist theology in the region.

These are just several brief highlights of important events as most of the information needed to support a clear picture of these trends could produce more than a dozen PhD's. Basically the main principle for our discussion is the fact that Buddhist culture which arose in Tibet was the product of many different foreign and native influences.

It was not the pure Buddhism of Shakyamuni's teachings, but evolved through a variety of cultural mixings.

Now to connect this information with another chapter of history, we must remember that Padmasambhava (8th century) was the one who originally brought Esoteric Buddhism to Tibet and started the Nyingma school, which later split into the Kagyudpa and Sakyapa schools of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. The famous Gelugpa sect, which was started by Lama Tsong Khapa and which is the dominant sect in Tibet today, appeared much later during China's Ming dynasty. Together the Nyingma, Kagyudpa, Sakyapa and Gelugpa sects form the basis of what we now call Tibetan Buddhism.

These were several special aspects of the original Tibetan Buddhism that were characteristic of this ancient era including the fact that it relied almost entirely on mantras, hand mudras and visualization techniques for its cultivation practices. The Tibetans also relied on mandalas, yantras, visualization practices involving male and female Buddhas, special meditation postures (asanas), and other spiritual cultivation exercises. It advocated absolute dedication to one's lama or guru for spiritual guidance, and was polytheistic in the sense that various Buddhas (instead of just Shakyamuni) were honored and a variety of different mantras were recited. Despite all these techniques, the Tibetans recognized the prajna wisdom teachings as Buddhism's highest teachings, so the Consciousness-only prajna school prevailed as the authority over either Mahayana or Hinayana Buddhism.

Another important feature of this early period was the tradition that not everyone needed to become a monk in order to devote themselves to the path of spiritual cultivation practice. There were many common men, who practiced from the vantage of a householder's life, and who also succeeded in realization. The popularity of the layman practitioner's situation had implications for the growth in popularity of sexual cultivation practices, for they were originally absent in Orthodox Buddhist teachings as well as in Nagarjuna's Esoteric Buddhism. What is also notable about these early eras is that the Tibetans started to analyze the path to enlightenment, and thereby slowly developed a structural idea of the step-by-step processes necessary for spiritual awakening and the experiential realization of one's original nature.

Three other special features are to be noted of the Tibetan practices of this time. First, the Tibetans started to place a special emphasis on cultivating the chi mai energy channels of the body. Second, as already mentioned, sexual cultivation practices became accepted and incorporated as part of the path. Lastly, people started to commonly acknowledge that the highest cultivation practice you could undertake was Mahamudra, which was very similar to Zen and the school of

Consciousness-only.

The reasons behind the insistence that sexual practices be incorporated into the spiritual path was the fact that a lot of laymen were cultivating, and since even a layman could become enlightened, the Tibetans reasoned that there must be some way to incorporate these activities into the path. Although the real spirit of Esoteric Buddhism is to transcend the world, the justification behind the “dual practices” of sexual intercourse was that Buddhism’s methods do not totally ignore the world, but link human life with the path to Buddhahood. Therefore, the Tibetans convinced themselves that sexual cultivation could and should become part of Buddhist practice.

The Mahamudra practices of Tibet were not purely a take-off of Chinese Zen. They also included various prajna and Consciousness-only teachings and incorporated a step-by-step path of spiritual accomplishment. However, they did mimic many of the practice principles established by Zen, but we cannot say that these methods are exactly the same.

It would take an entire book in itself to clearly differentiate between the schools of Mahamudra and Zen, but a few words are still in order. The teaching method of the Zen school directly points to our fundamental mind source. The Zen approach is to study the traditional sutras and theory but jump out of them, and considers that formalities and ceremonies are simply a means to an end – spiritual enlightenment. This does not mean that Zen students do not need to meditate or study the Buddhist scriptures, for like anyone else they need to prepare their minds for spiritual awakening, and meditation is the only way to bring about this purified spiritual readiness. With this as a preparation, however, a Zen student becomes qualified for higher spiritual knowledge.

The crux of a Zen teacher’s direct pointing to the source of the mind depends upon his skillful use of opportune circumstances to stir the enlightened potential of this type of prepared student. In stirring this potential, he thereby helps students achieve an awakening into their true nature. A student has to do all the meditative practice work themselves, and then the guidance or prompting of a Zen master only helps jostle them into the awakening of self-realization.

Mahamudra, like Zen, involves the goal of “seeing the path” or “seeing the Tao,” and this means to experientially understand emptiness by realizing or awakening to the inherent emptiness of your being. Whether you practice Zen or Mahamudra or Christianity or Judaism or whatever, if you do not experientially recognize the emptiness of the self, which we call “seeing the path” or “achieving selflessness,” then you will never know the correct way of spiritual practice no matter how brilliant

you are, how many prayers you make, or how many holy books you study. This is why the Fifth Patriarch of the Zen school said to his successor, "If you fail to realize the Tao, then all your cultivation work amounts to nothing."

What the Fifth Patriarch of Zen meant is that if you do not taste emptiness and realize the absence of a self through a true experiential understanding, you can practice for a million aeons without getting anywhere. Attaining samadhi, for instance, is attaining stillness of the mind, but stillness is not a state of true selflessness or emptiness. However, if you see the Tao, recognize what true selflessness and formlessness means, realize your original nature, see the clear light, transform spirit into emptiness or recognize that your original mind is empty but reflects everything like a mirror, then you will have "seen the path" and will then know how to properly conduct yourself in spiritual practice. This is when you will truly become qualified to cultivate the spiritual path, or teach it.

We can say that this is the purpose and target of both Zen and Mahamudra, but they use slightly different cultivation techniques and emphasize different matters to arrive at this same end goal. In both schools you must first come to recognize the primordial state of mind, or the mind's natural condition, which is seeing the Tao. Afterwards you work on deepening your capacity to know that state so that you never lose it, and work to integrate all your activities with this non-dual comprehension.

It took about six to seven hundred years, or approximately three Chinese dynasties, for the Kagyudpa and Sakyapa sects to evolve from the original Nyingma sect of Tibet. When you compare Tibetan history with the history of other self-contained countries such as Japan, it becomes easy to understand how the influences isolated within Tibet over this time could develop special characteristics and generate unique problems. In fact, many of Tibet's social problems can be traced back to the sexual cultivation practices that had been introduced into the country. As a result of these practices, the relationships between men and women had become somewhat chaotic. Of course this was not the only type of problem that plagued the country, for other deviations arose in Tibet as a result of misunderstandings regarding the highest levels of cultivation practice.

A big misconception that developed in Tibet was the belief that reaching the state of having no thoughts was actually the Buddha's nirvana of enlightenment – the highest level of spiritual attainment. Thus, many people tried to attain this state which had been mastered and then clearly rejected by Shakyamuni Buddha ages ago. You can imagine the difficulties this country had where people were engaging in all sorts of deviant sexual conduct, and then would try to enter the state of no-thought by attempting to forget about everything. At the time, people believed no-thought was

the highest attainment level of the Tao, but it is actually only the highest level of the “outside paths.”

About the time of the Ming dynasty, the great Tibetan Tsong Khapa (1357-1419 A.D.), was born in an outer region of Tibet which is now the Chinese province of Qinghai. Only after becoming a monk did he enter into inner Tibet where he saw all the corruptions that had developed in the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Tsong Khapa first studied all these schools thoroughly and then investigated the Buddhist sutras themselves to become clear on every matter of doctrine. He then wrote down how one should proceed in spiritual cultivation starting from the stage of an ordinary human and progressing upwards to the divine. Starting from within the Hinayana path, he taught how an individual could move upwards to the Mahayana path, and then progress even further to enlightened Buddhahood.

Tsong Khapa wanted to differentiate his school from the others of the time, so he insisted on strict discipline and had the monks of his Gelugpa sect wear yellow robes as in Shakyamuni's day. His *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* revealed the steps one must follow to attain enlightenment. This work, however, owed a great deal to the work of a great spiritual master named Atisha, especially his *Lamp for the Enlightenment Path*.

In Tsong Khapa's *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, he criticized the prevailing wisdom of his era, and corrected many errant notions of Buddhist thought. In particular he criticized the view that reaching the state of no-thought was the highest stage of Tao, and emphasized that the state of no-thought is definitely not the stage of enlightenment nor the path to enlightenment. There is a famous story about a Buddha called Triumph of Great Pervasive Wisdom, who prior to becoming a Buddha, sat in meditation for ten great aeons without achieving enlightenment. The reason he did not achieve self-realization during this time was because he cultivated the samadhi of no-thought in hopes of becoming a Buddha, but no-thought is not the way to Tao. Despite his ardent practice, that is why he never became enlightened, so no-thought is not the way. As the *Diamond Sutra*¹ says, the proper practice is that “you must let your mind be born without dwelling.” You must let thoughts arise, such as not to suppress them or block them, but you should not abide in them.

The correct path to enlightenment requires not only mastery of great samadhi concentration, but great transcendental wisdom or direct spiritual knowing as well. You must learn how to let your mind be freely born without attachments such that it does not rely on any support nor abide in any realm of being. No-thought does not allow for this because it involves deadening the mind through a type of forced suppression, so it is only an incorrect realm of concentration rather than the achievement of spiritual enlightenment.

It is okay for thoughts to arise in your mind because that is their natural function, but you must always remain clear by never dropping into them by becoming attached. They appear as if they are on an empty picture screen, so you should not let them impel you to action, but simply use your wisdom to decide which course of action to follow out of the alternatives they present. This is what we mean by not dwelling or not abiding, and letting the mind be freely born or generated in response to situations. And whenever you are finished with your need for using thoughts, you must always return to rest in the purity of your original nature once again.

Lama Tsong Khapa, as skillful means simply in order to counter many of the religious problems of his day, also stated that it was impossible to become enlightened instantly as proposed by the Zen school, and instead maintained that three aeons were required in order to become a Buddha, which was a view much in line with the orthodox Buddhist teachings. While the Zen school says you can become enlightened in this very life – in this very instant if you can drop mentally holding onto everything – orthodox Buddhism says that it requires three aeons of diligent effort. The Zen school queries in response, “Who is to say that these three aeons are not already up?”

When we read about Tsong Khapa's life and his teachings, we must realize that much of what he said was actually targeted toward correcting the ills of the time, including the great lapses that had occurred in monastic discipline and the subsequent decline which had resultantly occurred in cultivation practice. Because of his injunctions, Lama Tsong Khapa changed the atmosphere of Tibetan Buddhism completely, upgrading not only its standards of conduct, but standards of training as well. In fact the standards he set, including those of sexual conduct, were even stricter than those in Roman Catholicism. Whether or not he felt he could elevate Tibetan Buddhism to a higher level is not clear, but he did somewhat arrest its decline.

Lama Tsong Khapa also tried to correct the false notions that the Tibetans had developed regarding Zen, for a number of major misunderstandings had arisen. These misunderstandings had two basic causes: poor translations of Chinese texts, and the absence of any direct dialogue with the Chinese Zen school to straighten out problems. In general, Tsong Khapa emphasized that the stage of no-thought is not Tao (enlightenment), and he criticized the instantaneous enlightenment teachings of the Zen school. He worked fervently at combining the Consciousness-only school of Buddhism with the Esoteric school of practice. This is why he formulated his teachings on the graduated steps to attainment, called the “lamrim” or “stages of the path.”

With regard to Zen, it had taken the Tibetans several hundred years to develop the mistaken notion that the Zen school held no-thought as the ultimate goal of

enlightenment. This mistaken concept was really the result of various poor translations, and so Lama Tsong Khapa made criticisms of the idea that no-thought is Tao. Lama Tsong Khapa was not the only one pointing out this error, for the Sixth Patriarch of the Zen school, Zen master Hui-neng, criticized no-thought as well.

Most of this misunderstanding came from a Chinese phrase which, due to a lack of punctuation, could be incorrectly interpreted as: “No-thought is the correct path.” Lama Tsong Khapa corrected this by directly saying, “This is not correct. This is not Tao.” The Sixth Patriarch clarified the misunderstanding by going back to the original Chinese phrase and correcting the punctuation. As a result the phrase properly read, “The pure clean mind of dharmakaya (from moment-to-moment) is the correct path.” In other words, when the mind is universally clear and aware of all the thoughts arising without attachment, that is the right way. That is the “Middle path.”

As far as the Mahamudra and Great Perfection (Dzogchen) practices in Tibet, Tsong Khapa did not criticize these practices directly, but actually side-stepped the issue. In essence, his extensive rehabilitation efforts can be viewed as those of a doctor prescribing medicine for the ills of his time. When you understand his use of skillful means, you will realize that he was not worried about those individuals who were cultivating correctly and were making definite headway toward enlightenment, for these people were not causing any problems to society and they did not need anyone to correct them. Calling the Tao “Mind” or calling it “No-mind” was of no consequence to these folks, for they knew the correct path just the same.

Lama Tsong Khapa was actually focusing on the many ignorant and misguided individuals who were running around in Tibet and mistakenly engaging in all sorts of crazy, undisciplined practices. These people were excusing themselves of improper conduct and the responsibilities for their actions by saying they were pursuing the Buddha’s teachings. Tsong Khapa’s “gradual path of attainment” was therefore a perfect taming cure for their ills. In establishing a gradual path to enlightenment, and throwing away the idea of instant enlightenment through crazy behavior, he established a most suitable method for harnessing wild horses.

Lama Tsong Khapa also did a great service by writing a lesser known work on the stages of practice in Esoteric Buddhism (Tantra). He left a tremendous number of writings, and was an extraordinary spiritual giant. He was a revolutionary figure who was able to make a clear and complete system out of esotericism, Mahayana, and Hinayana cultivation in Buddhism. It is even said that he told his four greatest students – who included the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama of that time – to stay in this world life after life and continue teaching the Dharma.

Shakyamuni Buddha had previously told four of his students – including

Mahakasyapa, Rahula, Pindola and Kundupada – to maintain their physical forms in the world and protect the dharma as well, just as Zen master Huang-lung Nan had told Lu Ch'un-yang to stay in the world and protect the dharma. Because of the changes that Tsong Khapa instituted, the Gelugpa eventually became the most powerful sect in Tibet although the other three schools of Tibetan Buddhism still actively continue their lineages.

Today Tibetan Buddhism is once again in great disarray. The sects within Tibetan Buddhism have lost many of their original teachings, and the popularity of the religion has actually warped the various lineages. Crowds of people now attend Tibetan ceremonies asking for blessings and empowerments. They say a few prayers, get water sprinkled over their heads, and then go home thinking this is the real practice of Buddhism and the way of spiritual achievement. Ever since Tibet opened its borders and established contact with the outer world, foreigners have naturally come to ask for the higher teachings that were originally considered secret esoteric lessons. Unfortunately, a large portion of these teachings are now given to unqualified individuals in exchange for donations, which has created its own set of special problems.

Modern students of the Esoteric school often forget that in prior Tibetan times, one had to pass through all sorts of instruction, training, and practice for decades – sometimes starting as early as eight or ten years old – before being permitted to study these higher teachings. To become a Rinpoche lama was the equivalent of studying for a PhD. In addition to your scholastic achievements, however, you had to achieve a certain level of gong-fu and attain practical experience with various meditative states in order to become qualified for these special teachings. People today want the higher teachings all for free without making any sort of determined cultivation effort at all. Do you really think this is reasonable, especially when it concerns esoteric matters?

If we want to understand how the situation has become so twisted, we must first realize that the Tibetan emphasis on mantra, mudra and visualization practices has grown excessive over time. One result of this excessive emphasis is that many practitioners, and especially foreigners, now mistakenly believe that these colorful methods are the top practices of Buddhism! There are also many people who mistakenly believe that successfully visualizing some mandala or deity means you have actually succeeded in a particular stage of spiritual attainment.

To compound the matter, many Tibetan lamas, like the intellectuals and academics in many cultures around the world, prefer to concentrate on commentaries, and on commentaries of commentaries on cultivation yoga texts rather than study the original sutras of Buddhism. Thus, over time the school has veered further and

further from its original sources, and even the educational training system within Tibet is now out of sync with the times.

You must not think that just because someone is a Tibetan monk that they truly understand cultivation practice in general, or even just Tibetan cultivation practice, or even Buddhism. If you adopt this notion, you will be greatly disappointed. For instance most foreign practitioners, and even some Tibetan lamas, do not realize that the correct accomplishment of a visualization attainment means that you lose any personal identity of the self and become one with your selected visualization. It means that you achieve one-pointed concentration and can reach a stage of emptiness, selflessness, samadhi or whatever else you may choose to call his stage of spiritual achievement. In some special visualizations, you, your guru and the Buddha are all supposed to become one without any separateness whatsoever and this can only be achieved if you reach a stage of samadhi cultivation. Then, once you reach that stage, you have to practice prajna wisdom.

In other cases where you are told to visualize complicated mandalas, the correct measure of success is once again whether or not you achieve one-pointed concentration rather than whether you can actually visualize the mandala. Attaining samadhi is the purpose of the practice, so the stage of samadhi concentration is the mental state you want to reach. The task of concentrating on a mandala, ritual, mantra or deity is just a means to help you get there. As soon as you achieve samadhi, you can forget about the mandala or any other practices you used.

Technically speaking, visualization accomplishment is not one of the standard four meditative concentrations (the four dhyana) common to all cultivation schools. However, one can say that the proper result of visualization practice results in a samadhi meditative state of infinite consciousness somewhat related to the four. Of the nine samadhi concentrations common to all spiritual schools, the samadhi of infinite consciousness is a formless absorption rather than a Form Realm absorption having a mental support.²

Another major problem that has arisen, because of the current popularity of Tibetan teachings, is that some people now believe that when their head is fuzzy and they have no thoughts, that this is either the Tao or this is the way to Tao. Sometimes in cultivation work – especially as a result of certain practices – you can reach a state of mental lethargy where the mind is not completely clear and bright anymore and yet you seem to know things or can even exhibit some minor psychic abilities. Sadly, many people have started to mistake this as the self-realization pathway and some practitioners even mistake this for having reached the ultimate.

This incorrect belief existed even at the time of Shakyamuni, who commented upon

these effects and stated clearly that they were not the way to enlightenment, and were not even a spiritual path because they cultivated ignorance. This particular road of practice is just one big gigantic mistake, but there are many people who like this sort of fuzzy feeling and its results, so it is natural that they want to continue deceiving themselves.

Yet another problem, which can also be found in schools other than the Tibetan, is that spiritual practitioners now commonly believe that any unusual sensations which do arise because of cultivation practice are the result of their chi mai (chi channels) becoming opened, whereas in many cases such sensations are actually indicative of the opposite. Whenever you feel sensations in the body, it actually indicates that there are various frictional blockages in your chi mai that are causing obstruction. But some people, who seek the strange and unusual and hope for outward signs of some level of spiritual progress, actually go so far as to mistake opposites for one another.

This is such a big problem that it entirely permeates the Chinese chi-gong school, the kundalini school, the Tao school, the yoga schools, and the current Western New Age movement. Many people today, as a result of too much esoteric information, believe they have opened a chakra and this or that chi channel when all they are doing is emphasizing physical sensations of internal wind, and feeding upon their own personal hopes and misconceptions. You cannot open the chakras or energy channels through imagination and when they actually do open, the experience will be quite different from any internal sensations of energy running around in the body which you might normally feel. However, if you amplify certain psychological beliefs, there are all sorts of thoughts that will come up.

Another problem that is now entering the West in a big way, is mistaking the art of making love for sexual cultivation practice. This almost destroyed Tibet, and Lama Tsong Khapa was very strict on this matter and forbid sexual cultivation practices in the Gelugpa sect. Like Shakyamuni Buddha and Nagarjuna, he did not approve of sexual cultivation practices because of all the harm they could and consistently did cause. However, one of the main reasons why people make the mistake of jumping into these practices can be found in some of the Tibetan teachings themselves.

There are two major problems confronting Desire Realm inhabitants who wish to cultivate and reach enlightenment – the desire for food and the desire for sex. It is a very clear rule of discipline that celibate monks and nuns cannot have sex, but as human beings and Desire Realm inhabitants, at times they feel the urges of sexual desire. The Tibetan school of Tantra originally permitted sexual cultivation activities at certain times to deal with this problem, but this was a strictly regulated affair. Even when it was permitted, you already had to have achieved some stage of gong-fu

attainment to be allowed to undertake these practices, and you certainly had to have mastered the sutras first. If you did not have the requisite stage of gong-fu because of your cultivation achievements, then you were not qualified for these practices at all.

One such road of Tantric sexual cultivation allowed individuals with sufficient gong-fu to practice sexual activities at the very beginning of intensified cultivation so that they could jump out of sexual desires completely by immediately achieving the first Form Realm samadhi. Another road was to permit sexual cultivation in the middle of intensive cultivation practice if and only if an individual needed that extra push to help him make the jump to samadhi. The third and final road of practice was for practitioners who had already succeeded in attaining samadhi – perhaps as a result of anapana, mantra or skeleton visualization method practice – but could not seem to progress any further in their level of cultivation attainment.

Without arguing about which was best, or whether any one of these roads was appropriate or useful, we can conclude that lust and sexual desire are very powerful forces. They can be a gigantic obstacle in spiritual cultivation that keeps people locked in the Desire Realm as well as the never ending cycle of reincarnation. If used properly, however, they can be a tool to help people jump out of the top of the Desire Realm by attaining the first Form Realm samadhi called the “first dhyana.” Nevertheless, the tool is a dangerous one to use for the uncultivated.

The beginning of life for a human being starts from a single thought of sexual desire. If this type of desire can be transformed, your spirit can be liberated and can transcend your body and the material world so as to enter a mental realm of serene extinction. But, because the sexual methods of dual cultivation touch upon our obsession with human and animal instincts, they can easily be taken wrongly and lead people astray. Therefore it is very hard to succeed using sexual cultivation practices. To succeed in these practices not only requires a basic proficiency in cultivation ability, but prajna wisdom as well as the merit equivalent to being a king or queen. This degree of royal merit is something most people definitely lack.

The three roads of practice we have mentioned are from the old school of Tibetan Tantric thinking which, like the genuine Zen school, has already disappeared. In a sense the paths do not really exist anymore. Rather, today you just find individuals who are looking for an excuse to procure sexual partners, and the fact that someone is a lama or guru is no guarantee that they have not succumbed to this temptation, so do not be cheated. As the Latin phrase “Caveat emptor” warns, let the buyer beware, especially if her teacher is from an economically impoverished country wherein that teacher would not be treated as anybody special.

Shakyamuni knew ahead of time what would happen if he took this course of action

and taught any sexual cultivation, despite the fact that his students were of the highest quality and could attain enlightenment almost immediately. Hence he did not teach any sexual cultivation practices, and neither did Nagarjuna. As to Lama Tsong Khapa, with a heavy heart he surveyed all the damage that had been caused by the undisciplined proponents of this school, and he basically had no choice but to forbid sexual cultivation in the Gelugpa sect. But in the Gelugpa school, if someone does not achieve enlightenment during this lifetime, there are still cultivation methods you can practice in the bardo intermediate state between death and rebirth. Thus there is yet another chance for achieving the Tao. But as to what these practices actually entail, we must wait for the stage between lives in order to find out.

From this short discussion we can see that Tibetan Buddhism has developed all sorts of problems that make it very difficult for practitioners to correctly navigate its muddy waters. In the next chapter, we will look at the original Esoteric Buddhist school from which Tibetan Tantra developed. This original school was known for one great outstanding characteristic: It emphasized meditative contemplation on the mean between emptiness and dependent existence, and you had to accomplish this mental view by cultivating prajna transcendental wisdom. This was the Middle Way or Middle Path of Nagarjuna. It involved cultivating the mental nirvana of the Buddhas while staying in the world dealing with illusive phenomena, and working for the welfare of all sentient beings while mentally transcending the world of phenomena.

Therefore if someone today wishes to understand the pure Esoteric school and the substance of its teachings and methods, they must definitely turn to study the original teachings of Nagarjuna and Maitreya in conjunction with the practices of Indian yoga and the teachings of Consciousness-only. Rather than delve in Tibetan Buddhism, this is the proper way to get a firm understanding of the pure Esoteric tradition.

1 See: *The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui-neng*, trans. by A.F. Price and Wong Mou-lan, (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1990); *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. by Mu Soeng, (Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000); *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom*, trans. by Red Pine, (Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., 2001); *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Diamond Sutra*, Thich Nhat Nanh, (Parallax Press, Berkeley: CA, 1992). The internet posts many other translations of the *Diamond Sutra* which have not yet been formally published. Look for my own free translation, soon to be posted on www.MeditationExpert.com, and a new translation of Nan Huai-Chin's commentary on *The Diamond Sutra* translated by Pia Giammasi.

2 See: *The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience*, William Bodri, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).

7. Zen and the Pure Esoteric School

The cultivation practices of Tibet evolved from the spiritual traditions of both India and China. The spiritual practices of other countries have also often been shaped by foreign imports. In the case of Japan, its spiritual history has many parallels to that of Tibet but to understand this country's cultivation practices, we must look to China rather than India for the roots of foreign influences. In particular, we must investigate the cultural influences of China's Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) since it was this period of Chinese history that had the greatest impact on Japan's spiritual schools.

China's Tang dynasty can be described as a great mixing period when Indian, Japanese, Korean and Tibetan cultural trends interacted with China at their fullest. The most obvious proof of even earlier foreign interaction is the fact that the word "China" comes from the Ch'in dynasty, when foreigners mistook the name of the dynasty for the name of the country. Anyway, the Tang dynasty itself was a period of continuous and concentrated contact between various countries and Mainland China.

During China's Tang dynasty, there were three main pillars of Chinese society and culture: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The Buddhism of this period had by now developed into ten different schools of study, but the central sect in Chinese Buddhism was the Zen school established by Bodhidharma. It was because of Bodhidharma's pilgrimage from India that the Indian form of Zen had entered China. After its initial introduction, the Zen transmission continued through five successive Patriarchs until Zen finally became fully assimilated into Chinese culture.

Bodhidharma and his five successors, including the famous monk Hui-neng,¹ were called "Patriarchs" because they had all attained enlightenment. They could not be called "Buddhas" as they would be delineated as the second Buddha, the third Buddha and so on.² They were the founders of the Chinese Zen school who had achieved enlightenment and greatly influenced Chinese culture, and this is why they were therefore honored with the title of "Patriarch."

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Hui-neng, was an illiterate peasant before he became enlightened. The very fact that an individual who could not read became the Sixth Patriarch says much about the Zen school and the nature of the times. The Sixth Patriarch dispensed with much of the religious trappings of Buddhism that had developed over the years, and his way of explaining spiritual teachings to the people was very down to earth. Zen therefore became quite popular because it touched the people's hearts and minds, and became embodied in a form of expression that the

common man could understand. As a result of this development, Buddhism's impact on the politics and culture of the times became so substantial that it ended up transforming the co-existing schools of Confucianism and Taoism as well.

In the Tang dynasty, the Chinese cultural influences, such as Zen, spread all over Asia, and even reached distant regions. America today is considered a superpower and wants to exert this type of influence, but it has never seen its culture infiltrate Europe nor the Orient in the same way that Tang China established a presence throughout Asia. While United States has definitely influenced the world, the transmission of its influence has not been due to a world-wide recognition of American life as representing "high culture."

During the Tang dynasty, many scholars came to China from Japan and Korea because they respected the Tang culture and wanted to learn everything that it possibly had to offer. The Chinese Emperor built a gigantic complex in Xian for all these visiting scholars. He welcomed them to stay for as long as they liked and allowed them to leave whenever they desired. There was no pressure on these visiting scholars, and many stayed in China to become citizens or even court officials. Others took what they learned back to their home countries, thus influencing their native cultures.

When you go to another country, one of the first things that usually impresses you is the environment, particularly the architectural structure of the buildings and layout of the land. At that time, the Tang architecture was perhaps the best in the world, hence it was imitated in other countries and was one of the ways in which Tang culture made a big impact on other nations. The visiting scholars from other countries also closely observed China's arts, its political system, the people's clothing and every other facet of Chinese culture, including the cultivation concepts of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. In the world today, Japan and Korea are the only two remaining places that have preserved any of the highest cultural developments of the Tang dynasty, for in China itself, practically nothing is left. But both Japan and Korea are also quickly losing what is left of their Tang dynasty heritage.

At the beginning of the Tang dynasty, since Emperor Tang Taizong's family name was Li, he started searching for a great religious master of the same name among the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian schools of the time. The official state religion ended up becoming Taoism, rather than Buddhism, simply because of this emphasis on the last name; the founder of Taoism was Lao Tzu, who was also known as Li Lao-chun. Because of this similarity of names, Taoists priests during the Tang dynasty were accorded a slightly higher rank than Buddhist monks although both spiritual groups were greatly respected. Due to the imperial patronage, it was also during this period

that Taoism finally congealed into a more formalized religion. Thus from the Tang dynasty on through to the Sung dynasty, Taoism became the official religion of the state.

Beneath the surface, most people felt that this was right because Buddhism was a cultural import whereas Taoism was “home-grown.” However, the practice of Taoism in the Tang dynasty was entirely different from the original Taoism of the Han dynasty since anapana, the skeleton visualization method, Zen and many other features of Buddhist cultivation had already entered into it and become assimilated into its body of knowledge. In fact, one could say that Taoism had become a second Buddhism. As an example, when two Buddhists bumped into each other they would extend greetings by saying, “Amitofo.” The Taoists, on the other hand, would say, “Wu liang shou fo,” which meant, “The Buddha of Infinite Life.” In fact, this was simply Amitofo’s name translated into Taoist terms.

Buddhism by the period of the Tang dynasty had filled in most of the teaching gaps left by the lack of original Indian material. The Mahayana and Hinayana schools of Buddhism therefore existed side-by-side together due to the fact that a lot of the original source material had already been transmitted to China from India. The famous monk Xuan Zang (Hsuan-tsang) also returned from his studies in India during the reign of Emperor Tang Taizong. The Emperor so respected him that he had a team of nearly a thousand scholars assembled to help translate the Buddhist materials that Xuan Zang had brought back. All sorts of people helped in this translation project – Taoists, Confucians, even Manichaeists – and the result was a body of work that had a tremendous, almost immeasurable impact on Chinese culture. Because of this translation effort, the Consciousness-only prajna teachings of Maitreya Buddha (which form the Yogacara tradition) finally became available in Chinese, and this made the set of Chinese Buddhist translations virtually complete.

Manichaeism, which had a portion of its roots in Egypt and ancient Babylonia, also came over to China during this period, and Islam entered the country as well. Hence China continued to absorb various importations of foreign spiritual practices during this period and the Tang dynasty can be considered a great mixing period when a huge variety of peoples, culture, knowledge and information all intermingled.

As to the country of Japan, the first set of teachings to reach the Japanese from China were of the Buddhist T’ien-t’ai sect, but this sect was not an original Buddhist sect of Indian origins. T’ien-t’ai was a wholly Chinese invention founded by Master Chih-i during the Sui dynasty (581-617 A.D.), and it developed into a separate Buddhist sect itself on the fertile Chinese soil. Chih-i had set about to organize and categorize the entire set of Buddhist scriptures that had come to China, had added a relevant commentary, and paid particular homage to the *Lotus Sutra* as one of the central

essences of this tradition. The *Lotus Sutra*³ became so popular with this patronage that today there is even a Buddhist sect in Japan (the Nichiren Shoshu tradition) that believes spiritual salvation lies in simply repeating the phrase “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo,” which pays homage to the *Lotus Sutra*.

T'ien-t'ai was really the first Buddhist import into Japan from China, and created the Japanese Tendai sect, whereas the introduction of Zen was a later development. Still later, eventually the Esoteric Buddhism of China was also brought to Japan where it became the Shingon sect (the name Shingon comes from the Chinese word “chen-yen,” which means mantra or mystic syllable). Hence the Japan of ancient times was like a mini-model of China, or like a greenhouse that received the best seeds or aspects of Chinese culture.

As a bit of background, the Chinese Zen school reached the peak of its development during the Tang dynasty. During this dynasty, Chinese Esoteric Buddhism also reached the peak of its development due to the influence of three great esoteric masters (Subhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra). One of the disciples of these masters was Zen master I-Hsing who liked to study various Taoist matters such as the *I-Ching*, feng shui, astrology, and other esoteric sciences. He was not only a monk but a great astronomer and astrologer as well. Because of his teachings, many of the esoteric sciences in China all have a strong connection with this master.

Without even entering into a deeper discussion about the Taoism and Confucianism of this era, we can already see that the Tang dynasty was a very active period of intellectual, cultural, philosophical and religious development. But while this flourishing of Buddhist culture was happening in China, Buddhism was on its last legs in India, and was just about ready to die. Fortunately, most of the Buddhist sutras had by now made their way into China and were being preserved there.

The Esoteric Buddhism of this period was known by a number of different names such as the Tantrayana (Tantric Buddhism, or Tantra), Mantrayana (the Mantra Vehicle) and Vajrayana (the Diamond Vehicle, or Vajra Vehicle) school. The term “Tantrayana” comes from the fact that it is based on the Buddhist Tantras, “Mantrayana” follows from the school's heavy use of mantra in its cultivation practices, and “Vajrayana” was often used because the thunderbolt (vajra) featured as a key symbol in the school. Sometimes it was known simply as the Tantric tradition.

During the Tang dynasty, Esoteric Buddhism became quite popular in China because of its strong religious flavor. The colorful draperies of religion are what typically appeals to the common man rather than the strict injunction that you have to get out there and meditate in order to earn your own personal spiritual progress. Esoteric

Buddhism also became popular among the intellectuals who enjoyed studying it because of its rich liturgy.

Esoteric Buddhism is essentially based on the *Mahavairocana Sutra* that talks about the primordial Buddha Vairocana, who is also called the Great Sun Tathagata. The school emphasizes the five elements, along with cognition, and says that realization can be attained by cultivating the body (through postures, mudras and signs), the voice (through mantra), and mind (through meditation). While Chinese Esoteric Buddhism can be partitioned into three or four main sects, such as the Vajra and Lotus-Womb Treasury sects, the partitions it uses are different from those used by the Esoteric school in Tibet. Nonetheless, this is the material you must study to know all the esoteric teachings that Nagarjuna brought directly from India.

If a person truly wanted to assimilate the real Esoteric School of Buddhism, they would do well to consult the original teachings of Nagarjuna, Maitreya and the *Surangama Sutra*. Readers who feel that the Tibet school is the be-all and end-all of Esoteric Buddhism should be cautioned that, more than any other cultivation school, this school in particular has developed a colorful coating which often deceives students into believing that a set of unusual artificial techniques must represent the highest teachings of spiritual attainment. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you want to truly understand the true Esoteric school of Buddhism, you need not go to Tibet and roll around in all the extraneous religious flavorings, for this will no doubt mislead you and make you quite confused. Cultivation schools and techniques all develop an outer garb of religious coloring after some time, and the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet is no exception to this rule. To really understand true Esoteric Buddhism and esoteric teachings, you must discard all these extraneous colorful garments and approach cultivation issues free of superstition. You must attempt to peel away their outer veneer to see what they really represent, and you must adopt a scientific, analytical approach to your study efforts.

To understand how much Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism has changed over time, we need only remember that the first esoteric Buddhist teachings that originated in India did not contain any chi mai practices or even sexual cultivation practices. While the original Esoteric Buddhism teachings do show pictures of various Buddhas together with their consorts, there were no actual teachings on sexual yoga because the pictures symbolized the harmonization of the yin and yang chi flows within your physical body.

The actual methods used by the original Esoteric school included mantras, mandala visualizations and various other techniques for cultivating samadhi and various psychic abilities. Hence the originally pure esoteric teachings were quite different

than those later advocated by the Tibetan sects in that there was no such thing as chi mai practice, charms or special ceremonies to obtain specific results, Mahamudra, nor even sexual cultivation practices as we now find.

To expound upon the sexual cultivation practices that developed in Tibet, the various statues of the Buddhas embracing their consorts, so important to the Tibetan sexual cultivation practices, originally came from Esoteric Buddhism. They represented the fact that the human body embraces the potential of harmonizing its internal yin and yang chi energies. Most people though, when they do not engage in a strict practice schedule of spiritual cultivation, cannot harmonize their yin-yang chi energies by themselves. Thus in their cultivation or in regular life they often slacken their efforts and give in to lust when these energies arise.

If you are able to harmonize your body's twin chi during your life, then "Heaven and earth will find their place; All the life forms will be born." This is when you will become able to transcend the ordinary world and enter the genuine realms of real spiritual accomplishment. If you cannot accomplish this, you will remain the same as any other sentient being within the Desire Realm. You will continue to be born into a physical body due to lustful desires, and will die with lustful desires that keep on propagating this endless cycle. You will never learn how to either control or escape the rounds of birth and death, which only becomes possible upon self-realization.

In China, the teachings on these matters took a different form than in Tibet. In China a male Buddha was called a "Buddha Father" (Enlightened King) while a female Buddha consort was called a "Buddha Mother" (Enlightened Queen). In Tibet, however, a female Buddha was given a name that meant something like "Emptiness Wisdom Woman." A lot of people misinterpreted that name as meaning that a female consort would come flying out of the sky (Emptiness) in order to help you with sexual cultivation practices.

This misconception tells us how important it is to translate spiritual terms correctly, for the general wisdom level of every spiritual school tends to decline over time. An inevitable result in most cultivation schools is that later generations, lacking good teachers, will usually tend toward the literal rather than heart meaning of original cultivation texts, and thus their true message is eventually lost. Even now there are still professionals trying to reconstruct the real meaning of the Bible by correcting the mistranslations that have crept into it over the centuries.

Sexual yoga was not the only deviation first seeded by the Esoteric school. It is actually due to the widespread practice of Esoteric Buddhism during the Tang and Yuan dynasties that so many strange superpower practices exist in China today. Some examples include being able to chew up someone's business card and have it

reassemble into a complete card once again, or to be able to silently summon snakes into a room, or burn holes in a cloth from a distance. One cannot say these practices are really Taoist or Buddhist, but only that they are indeed “outside paths” or deviant outgrowths of schools that were spawned by various esoteric practices. They do not amount to very much, but it is important to recognize their existence and initial origins.

As widespread and as popular as Esoteric Buddhism was in China, the intelligentsia rarely wrote about it. Instead, the upper levels of society devoted most of their time to writing about the Zen school, the Mahayana path, prajna transcendental wisdom, Consciousness-only teachings, and other lofty concepts. Esoteric Buddhism actually had its greatest support among the peasantry who liked its rich religious flavor. At one level it was an integral part of the popular culture and at yet it was not part of the culture at all.

During the Yuan dynasty (1280-1360) the Tibetan form of Esoteric Buddhism, including the Nyingma and Sakyapa teachings, entered China. This form was entirely different than the form of Esoteric Buddhism that had developed within China. During this dynasty, China was ruled by the invading Mongolians who, together with Tibetan lamas, assumed political posts through the land. Stationed all over the country, the lamas became the Emperor's eyes and ears and worked to help him consolidate his power. But this dynasty did not last long—essentially because it lacked sufficient merit. The lamas greatly abused their powers throughout China and were responsible for many terrible deeds. For instance, at a wedding ceremony a couple had to normally be blessed by the lama, and in many cases the bride was forced to sleep with the lama the night before.

Unfortunately, religious rule is rarely saintly, but is often cruel and stifling. This is evident from the slavery instituted in Tibet by the lamas, the persecutions conducted by the Christian Jesuits, and the merciless rule of the Moslems. No matter how pure and “godly” people would like to believe religions are, the top levels of most any religion are usually deeply immersed in political affairs, which are a wholly secular concern. Religions normally demand conformity with the status quo and faith without questions, so they have been responsible time and again for all sorts of terrible persecutions all over the world. America's insistence on a strict separation of Church and State is therefore highly commendable, for if you try to run a country according to religious concepts while ignoring the true practicalities of human nature and power politics, history has shown that a country will be on a road to ruin.

When the Mongols conquered China to establish the Yuan dynasty, the Han Chinese of the north (Chinese as an ethnic group are called the “Han” people) were the first to surrender while the Han Chinese of south China surrendered last. When the

Mongolian rulers established various ranks of society, the Mongolians therefore became the first class citizens, foreigners the second class citizens, next came the servants of the Mongolians, then the northern Han, and finally the southern Han Chinese at the bottom of the social ladder.

The Mongolians even stratified the society into ten classes of people starting with the emperor and followed by the officials, the lamas, Taoists, doctors, artisans, skilled workers, and prostitutes. Only after the prostitutes came the scholars (intelligentsia) and then the beggars. Because of their cruelty and the way in which society was structured, it is quite natural that the whole country – especially the country's intelligentsia – turned against the government. China had become a Mongolian monastic country and the people hated the treatment they received, so everyone started looking for a way to overthrow these invaders.

Over time there were many attempts at revolution as certain groups would try to rise up and overthrow the government. One of the uprisings finally succeeded, led by Chu Yuan-chang, who had at one time been a Buddhist monk and who subsequently became the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty. Since Emperor Chu Yuan-chang had called upon the native religious sentiments in the country to help overthrow the Mongolians, he was very mindful of his dealings with religious organizations as well as his relationship with Tibet. Eventually Esoteric Buddhism was outlawed in China during the Ming dynasty, and so we cannot find it in contemporary China anymore. However, it has been retained in Japan through the Shingon sect.

The Shingon sect Esoteric Buddhism that went over to Japan from China is called "Eastern Esoteric Buddhism" as opposed to the "Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism" found in Tibet. The difference in names reflects a great difference between the two schools. In Japan, the sect was initially headquartered on Mount Koya and by tradition, women were forbidden from joining the men in practice. However, once a woman who was refused entry up the mountain made a camp at its base and succeeded in her cultivation, proving that ordinary females could also become Wisdom Knowledge Women (reach enlightenment). Thereafter the monks changed the rules and allowed women to ascend the mountain to study for a time.

While Shingon (Eastern Esoteric Buddhism) has not influenced the West very much, the Japanese version of Zen has greatly influenced the Western concepts of spiritual cultivation. Ironically, Westerners have tended to overlook the original source of the Zen teachings and typically credit Zen as being a purely Japanese invention. They also credit Esoteric Buddhism as a purely Tibetan invention whereas the source of both these schools can be traced back to China, and from there to India. For the most part, over time Japan has retained the outward form of these cultivation schools, but we can also say that it has lost any true understanding of their inner content and

meaning. Likewise, what Japan has exported to others is just the outward form rather than the true heart or substance of spiritual cultivation. Now it is mostly show that lacks real content.

Because of Tang dynasty influences, China's impact on Japan can be seen in many areas, but two in particular. The first was the Japanese political system, whose original structure was based upon the Chinese imperial system and whose theoretical underpinnings were based upon Confucian ideals. The second area, which is more relevant to our study, was the spread of Buddhism in Japan.

When Buddhism initially arrived in Japan, it gradually assumed a great level of importance to the common people just as Buddhism holds in Thailand today. But even though Buddhism became the official religion of the state, the strongest feelings amongst the Japanese people revolved around the native Shinto sect, which is a local deity religion that also prizes sacred places of natural beauty.

To this day, Shinto is what most strongly matches the Japanese mind and spirit. However, if we were to research matters carefully, we will even find that the influences that shaped Shinto – which emphasizes that man, nature and Heaven are one – had a good portion of their roots in the Chinese Taoism of ancient times as well, and many Shintoists follow the moral codes of Chinese Confucianism. Nonetheless, in terms of understanding how various cultivation schools developed in Japan, we must reiterate that the Buddhism which most influenced the Japanese was the T'ien-t'ai school, which focused upon the *Lotus Sutra*.

The Zen School

The Buddhist Zen school (the Chinese name is Ch'an) was imported into Japan during the period of the Tang dynasty. By the end of the dynasty, it had split into five main sects which are the Lin-chi (Rinzai), Ts'ao-tung (Soto), Kuei-yang (Igyo), Yun-men (Ummon) and Fa-yen (Hogen) schools of Zen. What is left over in Japan right now is a little of the Lin-chi sect and some of the Ts'ao-tung school, but both are just a mere shadow of what they once were.

This is also the case in China, for in the period after Zen's division into the five different sects, it is not only in Japan where the real Zen became absent, but everywhere else as well. The people who claim to be of a certain sect today know the right words to say and the proper outward forms of the school, but everywhere the real heart of the matter is lacking.

Most people, when they speak of Zen today, are just engaging in empty talk and word play. Of course this is not the real Zen, for it is just an imitation of how the Zen

masters recorded their experiences or made use of the sharp point of spiritual potential to help awaken qualified students.⁴ Nevertheless, this is just the shadow of the shadow of the bright light of Chinese Zen which once existed.

Quite a few colorful terms were once used to classify the teaching methods of the five Zen sects. We have the Lin-chi sect, which is known for its teaching method of the "Four positions of host and guest" or "Four selections (chosen ingredients)." The Ts'ao-tung (Soto) school is known for its "Five positions of lord and minister." The Kuei-yang (Igyo) school has its "Ninety-six Circular diagrams," the Yun-men school has its "Looking, Examining (Looking at yourself with introspection) and Sighing," and the Fa-yen school has its "Nine belts."

If we take the Yun-men school's "Looking, Examining, Sighing," it can be understood in the following manner. A student goes looking for his master to ask him, "What is the Tao?" The teacher looks straight at the student with eyes wide open and asks, "Do you see clearly? Do you understand?" Then, because the student does not catch his great spiritual meaning, the teacher just sighs in disappointment. Thus, we have our "looking, reflecting and sighing."

In the Zen school, the masters were always very strict in watching the students and were constantly examining their walking, their eating, their deportment and various ways of doing things. The teachers also insisted that the students be looking at themselves during each and every activity they performed. This school was therefore very similar to the Confucian school in that you would always be checking up on yourself through introspection as if you continuously had a mirror set in front of you. You would always be watching your mind and correcting your personal behavior.

In the Yun-men school, when you looked at yourself and saw what things were not quite right, we can say that you would acknowledge your observation with a bit of disappointment (a sigh). Of course you would correct yourself, but the sigh served as some acknowledgment that you had discovered a fault. That was one way of describing the "looking, reflecting and sighing."

Yun-men was a very strict master in instituting the practice of looking into the mind because he came from the Buddhist Vinaya school of discipline. When he walked around and found a student at some activity, he would shout, "Look!" to remind him to be mindful; practicing mindfulness was a specific meditation technique of Buddhism. When the students did not understand his meaning, Zen master Yun-men would often just sigh to himself in response. The Zen school was fierce and direct in its cultivation techniques, and it required students of high caliber to be able to follow this path and reach any sort of spiritual understanding or attainment.

As for the Lin-chi school, it was known for its teaching method of the “Four ranks,” which were also called the “Four positions of host and guest” or “Four selections.” Most people who know a little of Zen are able to match the four positions with various relationships between the subjective and objective view. But there is a real esoteric secret of this school that most people do not know. It starts with the fact that in all cultivation work, the chi mai and the physical body are all considered “guests.” In other words, the five elements of the physical body, as well as the various experiential realms of samadhi, are all considered to be guests. The true mind of original nature, not the thoughts but that which knows, is the “host.” This is the meaning behind Lin-chi’s four positions of guest and host.

Whenever we are engaged in spiritual practice, we encounter two types of feelings. The first type are the regular physiological sensations of our physical body, and are definitely transient guests that come and go. Another type of feeling, which is a realization like a wordless “I know this,” can also be considered a guest. However, that which ultimately stands behind these acts of knowing and realizing is the host.

The Consciousness-only or Mind-only school of Buddhism has similar terminology for this. It also declares that the thoughts produced, or that which can be known, are guests while that which can know them is the host. This is easy enough to understand, but the Zen school goes further, teaching that not only the things which can be known are guests, but the ability to know is a guest, too! This is the big esoteric secret of the Zen school. Furthermore, the things to know, the knowing quality and what knows them are all of the same “substance” or “fundamental essence.” As to who is the actual host, you have to see this for yourself to understand, for this is the whole purpose or point of spiritual practice. When you realize the true host, that means you have succeeded in attaining enlightenment, seeing the Tao, or realizing the fundamental essence.

The Zen teachings say we are all originally Buddhas, that we are all originally enlightened and always exhibiting that original enlightenment, but we cover our realization of this intrinsic enlightenment through ignorance because we have become unclear. In other words, Buddhas as well as ordinary people are fundamentally the same because they share the same base of perception. Furthermore, the moment when ordinary people see the effortless empty awareness of our original being is called the beginning of spiritual awareness.

In the Zen school, the ability to know things is still considered a guest rather than the ultimate master because it is still just a function of the original nature, which is itself the ultimate host. It is just a function of the master, so it is still a guest of the absolute host. As to who the host is behind the ability to perceive or know, once again that is for you to find out, and Zen practice is what points you in that direction.

When through the practice of spiritual meditation you can clear your thoughts enough to recognize and activate the nature of your transcendental wisdom awareness which is always present, then you will have made great progress on the road of spiritual practice and genuine spiritual accomplishment will become within your reach. However there is still a thin line between becoming enlightened or remaining an ordinary individual at this stage of attainment because this direct knowing is still a guest of the original nature.

This is the great secret of the Zen school – the primordial wisdom nature of direct knowing is still considered a projection of the original nature. As Yung-chia said, “Mind is the sense, and phenomena are the object. Both are like flaws in a mirror. When the flaws and dirt are gone, only then does the light show. When mind and phenomena are both forgotten, essential nature is real.”

If this is the case, we have to then ask ourselves, where is the host? Well the host is also the guest, or there is only one big host and no one knows what it is, or there is not any host because it, too, is ultimately empty. Get it? Not really, because only a person who becomes awakened can ultimately understand. That is why when Emperor Wu first interviewed the first Zen master Bodhidharma and asked, “Who is it that stands in front of me?” the enlightened Bodhidharma replied, “I don’t know.” Zen master Bodhidharma was not playing tricks or cheating the emperor. In fact he was telling him the truth and giving him a tremendously high level teaching at the same time, but the emperor could not fathom it and so Bodhidharma went on his way.

In discussing the four positions of host and guest, sometimes the host becomes a guest, sometimes the guest becomes a host, sometimes the guest remains a guest, and sometimes the host remains solely the host. The guest being a guest refers to examples of people meditating and getting samadhi. But sometimes the guest turns into the host, and sometimes the host solitarily shines. For example, Shakyamuni Buddha’s famous phrase that he uttered when he was born – “throughout Heaven and earth only I am the honored one” – is an example of only host. We must be very careful when classifying various experiential states in this manner, however, because many of the stages of cultivation, especially as regards the Hindu Mahavakyas such as “I am Brahman,” are still only a state of guest rather than a state of only host.

Whether or not these positions of host and guest come and go is not really the important matter, for what is really important is your wisdom as to how to use them. How skillful you function is what matters. In other words, what you do with your mental states and environment and how you use them is what counts. That is why Lin-chi’s method is also called the method of the “Four selections,” because you have to choose what to do with your awareness, the spiritual experiences, and meditational gong-fu that are available to you.

For instance, sometimes you might need to cultivate samadhi to transform your physical body. When your body needs sleep, as another example, you should just let the guest become the master and take the rest you need. The true mind ground is definitely the ultimate master or host, and your gong-fu is definitely a transient guest, so which one you emphasize under the special circumstances of place and time is all up to you and your wisdom. Before realization, and after self-realization, spiritual cultivation is all about how you use your wisdom and express it through phenomenal behavior.

How to cultivate correctly is the process of juggling master and guest and responding properly to the situations that arise in the world. To put it another way, how you employ the great functioning of your essential nature is all up to you, and is the same decision though couched in different words. As Zen master Kuei-shan said to his student Yang-shan, "All that is important is that your eye (perception of the Tao) is correct, and so I won't talk about your practice (because managing affairs is up to you)."

The "selection process" that Lin-chi mentioned can therefore be compared to the Taoist simile of boiling rice, which entails making constant adjustments to a fire underneath a rice pot to cook the rice without burning. If the heat is too high under a pot of rice, you must turn down the fire while if the heat is too low, you must turn up the fire. Everything comes down to how to transform the situation into something better, and that all comes down to how to skillfully use what you have.

This is another way of saying that once you become enlightened and realize your original essence of being, everything ultimately boils down to your behavior. It all comes down to what you choose to do with your thoughts and actions. What you do with your thoughts, your outward behavior, your gong-fu and so on is all a matter of your own wisdom. That is how you express the Tao, which are your options of "great functioning."

People ordinarily think that enlightenment means sitting quietly and attaining a state of mental peace, but true enlightenment actually means being able to function in the world without dropping into or becoming deceived by money, fame or whatever else comes your way. When you can play with all these leaves which blow your way, then they also fall within the categories of the four selections. But if you become attached to them, for instance if you drop into love or sexual desire, you become totally guest once again because they entrap you. If you can see them and skillfully play with them as illusory things, then they will never touch you at all.

From this discussion we can realize that a true Zen awakening is not what most

people think it is. It is not a case where a master says something witty and you simply awaken without any relation to any previous work that has gone before. Realization comes about because of your previous long term personal work in developing wisdom and cultivating spiritual gong-fu. Even after you become enlightened the realm of karma and interdependent phenomena are still there. Hence once you become enlightened, there is always the question of how to act and what you choose to do within this fray. It does not matter whether what has arrived is the host or guest, but everything will always come down to your wisdom, which is revealed in how you respond to matters.

Only you can decide what you are going to do with your functioning abilities that originate from this fundamental nature of ours, just as only you will ultimately know how to adjust yourself on the spiritual path. A master can help guide you and answer some of your questions, but it is you who must ultimately put everything into play. Only you can save yourself by awakening, because no one can do it for you.

No one – no master, God, Buddha nor deity – can take your place and become enlightened for you. This is true no matter what beliefs you have, what school you belong to, nor what supplications you make. You have to cultivate spiritual practice, and awaken yourself. People can teach you, but you must save yourself. A spiritual master can only guide you rather than actually liberate you (otherwise we would not need to cultivate in the first place), and if you do not cultivate then there is no such thing as spiritual liberation. Some people do not want to hear this, but that's the gist of the story.

You must personally work on increasing your wisdom stores if you want to spiritually awaken, for the act of liberation will come down to the efforts you make yourself. You are the one who has to row the boat across to the other shore because other people cannot row the boat for you. The funny thing is that you are already on the other side (since we are all fundamentally enlightened) but because of ignorance and delusion – which is the wrong use of your mind – you are not aware of this. You are fundamentally enlightened but cannot recognize this inherent enlightenment because you cling to self-imposed ignorant mental habits.

Because the Zen school is built upon these principles, the Tibetans say this is real esotericism, that this is the real esoteric school. It is not as if you awaken to some profound realization of intellectual insight and then do not have anything to do anymore. You have to awaken to the Tao by experientially realizing your original nature, and then you must still continue to work hard at your cultivation to dissolve the lingering habit energies that can intrude upon this enlightenment now and then. It is just that after you become enlightened and keep working at spiritual practice, the doing and the effort become effortless.

Unfortunately this is all very hard to understand, otherwise we would have many enlightened Zen students in the world today, or the enlightened of other schools as well. All our guests – all the dust or phenomena we encounter in our minds – are the root of our frustrations, but they are also the roots of enlightenment. These dusty guests are also great jewels for if we did not have them, everything would just be inert emptiness lacking life and awareness.

Once you understand this, you can be in charge of a powerful army, become a great statesman, manage a giant multinational firm, write great literature or paint wonderful paintings. You can do anything you like while following the true road of spiritual attainment. You can go to heaven or hell and still be saved. To achieve spiritual realization, the path ultimately comes down to how you cultivate, practice, increase and use your inherent wisdom nature.

The Zen school is extremely profound, and if you suspect that the Zen masters were difficult to fathom, then you would be absolutely correct. For example, Master Te-shan would ask you something and tap you with a cane. Lin-chi would shout at you, or just shout. Yun-men would hold up some item at dinner and ask, “What is it?” Zen master Chao-chou would say, “Have some tea, have some tea.” Everybody had a different method of directly pointing to the inherent fundamental essence of your mind, and each had their own method of encouraging their students to work hard at cultivating the spiritual path for self-realization.

Sometimes it was very confusing for Zen students. Lin-chi used a stick, and sometimes he hit you if you were right, sometimes he hit you if you were wrong, and sometimes he hit you just to test you and see how you would react. The Zen masters did not all use a stick; some of them would just swear. Whether you were right, wrong or something else, they would curse at you all the same. Hence it is not very easy for modern people to understand the teaching methodologies of the ancient Zen teachers, or even the true meaning behind many popular Zen stories. People have enough of a difficult time trying to understand one another, so imagine the difficulty in trying to interpret stories of a transcendental nature, written in an ancient language, from a foreign country, that had an entirely different culture.

Zen master Lin-chi is a particularly difficult figure to understand because he used crazy, playful methods throughout his life. Before passing away, he recited a simple gatha to his disciples, which explained everything quite clearly. Just before dying, he sat up in the lotus posture, asked for a pen and paper, wrote down his poem, threw away the pen, and then instantly departed. The gatha read:

The continuous flow of thoughts in the mind does not stop, what

can you do about it?

True boundless awareness can be said to resemble It.

Beyond name and form, people cannot realize It.

After splitting a hair, hone the sword at once!

In other words, the flow of thoughts in the mind is never ending ... (out of exasperation) what can be done about this flow? That which can perceive – that boundless awareness which can watch the stream of thoughts – if it can take itself out of the stream and just watch the flow of thoughts go by, then when you are in that state and observe this without getting attached, this is almost the host. It is almost the host, and still not the host because it is still just one of its functions.

There are no words nor language to describe this ultimate one, there is no experiential realm one can mention. That ultimate thing is something none can describe because it has nothing to do with name and form. After you use your mind and complete some particular activity in the ordinary world, you must quickly return to that original state of emptiness once again. You let thoughts be born when you need them, and then after the task is done, return your functioning to the state of silent potential that is at one with your original nature. Naturally the final line was also referring to the fact that Lin-chi was now leaving, and so he passed away.

In the Ts'ao-tung sect, the explanation of the “Five positions of Prince and Minister” became popular and was quite similar to Lin-chi's “Four positions of host and guest.” For example, sometimes the minister would advise the Prince, sometimes the prince would not listen to him at all, and so on. Zen master Ts'ao-tung's method was very similar to Lin-chi's method, but the way in which these two masters ran their temples was very different. Lin-chi was very open, had a lot of style and pizzazz whereas Ts'ao-tung was very strict with his temple. The two schools had similar ideas, but their teaching styles were very different.

Rather than speak of spiritual cultivation teachings in Buddhist terms, Ts'ao-tung liked to use the terminology of the *I-Ching* in addition to employing his analogies of the prince and minister. For instance, the Li trigram of the *I-Ching* can be used to represent the sun, and so Zen master Ts'ao-tung used it to represent the great mirror wisdom of our original nature. Carrying this example further, the Li trigram has two yin lines wedged in the center of its yang lines. The yin within can be taken to represent scattered thoughts, body sensations, or one's practice not going well. The yang lines surrounding the yin lines can be used to represent the vast formlessness attained in samadhi. Ts'ao-tung used many *I-Ching* concepts in this way, and through these skillful efforts he attracted Taoists and others to the path who also used his metaphysical explanations to probe Chinese cultural teachings at deeper levels than hitherto possible.

Even though masters Lin-chi and Ts'ao-tung used very simple direct pointing methods in their teaching, later scholars needed reams and reams of paper to try and explain the essence of Zen and how to realize your fundamental nature. However, even with this voluminous output, many still could not arrive at a clear conception of spiritual cultivation or communicate its essence with any accuracy. Sometimes they made matters worse by interjecting even more confusion into the fray.

There are many places in Japan that currently claim they are the pure lineage transmission of ancient Zen schools, but this does not mean these practitioners have actually achieved any genuine Zen awakening. In fact there is virtually no place in the world where people really understand the enlightened essence of the original Zen schools. You can find the Japanese Zen students laughing at China and saying it is empty of Zen, but actually, the entire world is empty of Zen, and Japan is no exception to this rule. Japan only exhibits the outward form of Zen today and lacks the heart of the matter.

There was a famous Zen master called Ta-hui who had personally investigated the situation in most of the Chinese Zen halls during the Sung dynasty. He uncovered the fact that the Zen tradition had already remarkably degraded. He said that people were now practicing "the misguided Zen of silent illumination." It was not true Zen, but just the practice of silent sitting. Today the situation is even worse.

At that time and even now, people think that meditating to achieve samadhi is Zen. Of course this is wrong, for samadhi is just a state of concentration and is only part of the whole spiritual picture. It is only a particular practice vehicle or practice station to help you learn how to cultivate mental purity. You cultivate samadhi as an intermediate step so that your mind becomes clear, your wisdom nature shines and through its illumination you can begin to recognize your fundamental nature. If you do not need to cultivate the intercessory training stages of samadhi because you can achieve the Tao directly, as the *Surangama Sutra* and *Complete Enlightenment Sutra*⁵ teach, then you do not have to bother cultivating them as is done on the Hinayana trails. However, this direct cognition requires great prajna wisdom.

If you think that keeping the mind quiet is the way to self-realization, as some people who teach "transcendental meditation" proclaim, this is making a big mistake. It hearkens back to the mistaken notion that "no-thought is the path." Even in Ta-hui's time, Zen had degraded to such an extent that the practice of submerging thought to attain silence within mistakenly became the common road of spiritual practice. This is despite the fact that the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra* reminds us,

Preserving vacant silence within is still a shadow phenomenon

of discrimination belonging to the dust of the Dharma.

Since this decline in Zen had already taken place as early as the Sung dynasty, and since people are still employing these same mistaken spiritual cultivation methods today, do not expect to see a resurgence in true Zen for quite some time. Perhaps one or two individuals might try to re-institute the school of direct pointing to the true mind, but in our current situation, there would hardly be any qualified students. For the real Zen school to emerge, we must first see an increase in the general practice of spiritual training techniques and methods, and a greater understanding of the path.

Even people who try to preserve the outward forms of Zen make mistakes instituting what they believe to be the old Zen traditions. For instance, Te-shan's cane was originally used, in the manner of Yun-men's sigh, to make a light gesture symbolizing reward or punishment, but in today's world the Zen cane is often mistakenly used in a more heavy handed fashion. As to other misinterpretations of the old traditions, let us not even go into them.

Modern Zen masters like to teach that "sitting in meditation is Zen," so practitioners sit there mimicking an outward silence while playing with their internal thoughts. Whether you use the cultivation methods of India, China, Tibet, or the West, most people make this same mistake of playing around with their mental chatter during their meditation period. This is the major problem within all spiritual schools and one of the major reasons people cannot make any genuine spiritual progress. In truth, you can go to Church, or to the temple or mosque or synagogue every day, but if you do not know how to correctly practice spiritual exercises, there is really little benefit to these efforts other than to accumulate a little merit.

The Zen school is also famous for the method of the koan (kung-an or hua-t'ou in Chinese), which was originally developed to help counter our normal tendency to play with our thoughts in meditation, but people typically take even this medicine incorrectly. It is very important to understand the koan technique, which was originally just a tiny method in Zen whose actual importance has been magnified out of all proportion.

Actually, the koan was first mentioned by Wei Bo-yang who used this method of investigation in the process of cultivating, understanding and awakening to the Tao. It has become a popular research topic for scholars because it gives them something to translate and write about. It has also become a core feature in the modern Japanese and Western schools which try to institute Zen practice. Thus it perfectly illustrates the decline of Zen in that such a low level technique has become a prominent center of cultivation attention.

The history behind the development of the koan technique is quite instructive. Many

years after the Sung dynasty, the Zen teachers noted that the roots of wisdom of the Zen students in China were not as good as before. Essentially, students had started to cling to the mind and body of the immediate present as the Zen potential, so the Zen school had begun to deteriorate.

Up to this point we have covered many possible errors or pitfalls on the road of spiritual practice, but not this one. We have found that just concentrating on freeing yourself from this world while neglecting the quality of interactions with other human beings will produce a warped society, and so it is not a correct spiritual path. We have found that you can actually cultivate a stage of samadhi to go on living forever, but clinging onto samadhi is not correct spiritual practice, and cultivating the physical body is incorrect as well.

Other mistaken forms of physical cultivation include cultivating your internal chi channels and chakras or ingesting herbs and minerals in order to reach various spiritual realms. The act of trying to use other human beings and their energy streams through sexual cultivation also is not correct, nor are quite a few other spiritual approaches we have examined. Now we finally come to a current problem that is starting to plague society, which is the idea that cultivating the reality or awareness of the immediate present is the spiritual path.

The problem with this sort of technique is subtle but extremely important: It does not differentiate between ordinary mind and intrinsic spiritual awareness. You can indeed produce a realm of mental stillness and purity through this sort of devoted practice, but it will be a stagnant state of false clarity, or dry wisdom. It will not produce the natural physical transformations required of the spiritual path, and cannot penetrate into the various spiritual realms. Neither will it ultimately free you from the realm of birth and death.

To just cultivate the present moment of awareness is to naturally go along with the rise and fall of mental phenomena. The problem is, this means to ultimately go along with birth or death when they come, and so this path does not ultimately free you from the rounds of birth and death or teach you how to master this endless cycle. Perhaps you can achieve a stable state of unimpeded consciousness through this sort of not-dwelling, but certainly not a state of spiritual liberation, salvation or omniscience as in enlightenment. This practice is deficient because it lacks the accompaniment of meditation effort, and without this accompanying effort, you will never experience the physical transformation of the path or attain to the various spiritual realms of attainment.

In short, the spiritual path is not one of just being clear or present. It is not just a matter of realizing the "Now!" To keep dwelling in immediate awareness is still the

same as delusion because it only seeks being natural without doing any real meditation work. The subtlety behind this mistaken path is hard to catch, for as a famous Zen proverb warns us, "The field of equanimity is littered with the skulls of the dead, for only the able can navigate through the forest of thorny problems." In short, this is not the correct road of spiritual practice because this naturalism leads nowhere.

Let us put it yet another way: Naturalism is not the correct road of spiritual practice, being present in the immediate moment is not the correct road, and simply cultivating silent awareness is not correct either. The problem of cultivating a stage of stale, sterile or dry but clear emptiness was an inevitable decline seen in the Zen school, and so the Zen masters had to invent some technique to free people from this sort of stillness. This is why the koan was invented, for within the state of mental stillness, there is still a question which everyone has to resolve and cannot yet answer.

To concentrate upon a koan, you focus all your thoughts on a particular saying. You let your thoughts get all tangled up in the matter until through mental concentration, you finally break through to a level of mental clarity and emptiness never experienced before. From there you can begin correctly contemplating the mind. In other words, you use your concentration on a koan to somehow enter into the one-pointed clarity of samadhi and when samadhi mental stillness is reached, you use that stage of emptiness to cultivate prajna transcendental wisdom. You use this stage of silence to contemplate the real mind, for the silence is still a mental creation, and not the ultimate stage of emptiness, formless or selfless that constitutes the Tao.

The phrase, "contemplate the mind," is similar in meaning to the cessation and contemplation practices of the T'ien-t'ai school. While the koan may help you break through normal mental chatter to reach some stage of mental emptiness, you must still rely on prajna wisdom to investigate the source of that emptiness. Where does it come from? How do you know it? What is this mind that knows it, from where is this awareness that knows it coming? What prepositionally stands behind it, and behind your knowing it, and behind both of them?

The koan does not involve solving a riddle in a psychological sense, but involves experientially arriving at the answer to these sorts of questions in the sense that you reach a mental stage where your wisdom finally breaks forth. However, because of the increasingly academic interest in Zen, people have come to view it from a purely materialistic, psychological angle. If they did not view it from this angle, then the academics would not have much to write about! Remember that the academics are not paid to spiritually practice or break through to ultimate reality. Rather, they just want to exercise their intellectual functions, secure their tenure, and say they

understand everything without ever having achieved a rank of spiritual attainment themselves. To be able to analyze matters is one thing, and to actually attain that state of spiritual realization is another.

A problem related to the interpretation of koans and public Zen cases is that people who study these old cases begin to truly believe they understand their meaning without ever having engaged in cultivation practice and having reached those same mental stages themselves. It is like a priest giving advice to couples on how to handle their marriage when he has never been married himself, or like a person who imagines what ocean water is like without ever having tasted it.

Scholars are not the only ones who deceive themselves into believing that they understand these matters or other esoteric knowledge. Actually, the only true sort of understanding comes from cultivating those same states yourself, and this requires an enormous amount of cultivation practice which people would like to dispense with or be excused from. People do not like to hear that many masters only saw the Tao after meditating for twenty or thirty years at the rate of eight to ten hours or more per day! They would rather learn to speak the attractive language of Zen, and once they become fluent at speaking “lip service Zen,” it is easy to cheat themselves and feel as if they understand everything.

To correct such errors, the great masters have always warned people that they must both study spiritual cultivation theory and engage in meditation practice so that the two might be mixed together like water and flour, for one without the other is useless. In particular, the Zen masters warned that when people attempted to study Zen without a thorough knowledge of and grounding in the Buddhist scriptures and teachings, it was like trying to run before learning how to walk.

There were two types of koan that were basically employed in Zen instruction and it is useful to know this because of what it teaches us. The first type had an actual meaning such as, “Who is the one that remembers Buddha? Who is it that thinks?” or “Who stands behind the thinker?” Even though this first type of koan has an answer, you are not supposed to think about the question and come to a logical solution, but rather to use the questioning mood generated by the koan to achieve some form of mental breakthrough.

You do not want an intellectual answer when “investigating” a koan because what you are really after is to enter a particular mental realm. Investigating the koan to the stage of one-pointedness helps you get there by tying up all your extraneous thought chatter. You basically engage the mind in a particular fashion, designed to halt your normal incessant voluminous outpouring of thoughts, so as to create a clearing impact on your mind beyond your normal level of intellectual comprehension. This is

the point where prajna wisdom can be born because the regular scope of your mind becomes clear. Upon the birth of quiet observation you can then fathom or investigate the true nature of your mind and arrive at a realization of your original nature. In short, the spiritual path always requires that you investigate any stage of stillness or emptiness you mentally reach. You do this with transcendental wisdom to fathom its ultimate origins.

The second type of koan has no logical meaning at all, such as, "What is Buddha? – A dry piece of shit." In this type of koan, the mind gets totally tangled up in befuddlement trying to fathom the meaning of the koan. It gets wrapped around the koan like a piece of wire that someone winds around an egg, and progressively pulls tighter and tighter, until the egg finally breaks. But after the egg breaks, which means after the mind finally jumps out of its normal state of confusion and mental chatter so as to reach a profound realm of mental clearing, you still have to mix the egg. That is, you still have to use contemplation to look into what was produced. Using the wordless clarity knowing awareness of your original mind, or function of prajna wisdom, you must investigate this state of emptiness and try to fathom the origins of this emptiness and awareness.

The Zen school says that you should break an egg, use it to make a cake, and then eat the cake, but people today do not even know how to take the first step of breaking the egg. They just cannot seem to arrive at any realm of mental emptiness, or quietude. They just cup the egg tightly in their hands and hold onto it until a chicken is hatched, which produces another chicken and then another and then another and so on. They analyze things by producing an endless stream of thoughts, and thereby never reach any state of mental peace that we might term even the shadow of samadhi. This is why they never reach any type of mental breakthrough or definitive stage of spiritual transformation. They just spin thought-form after thought-form rather than achieve higher and higher stages of emptiness that approximate the Tao.

In pursuing a koan or public Zen case, you are to focus your mind to an extreme extent of one-pointed concentration, and then stay in that state until you go beyond and totally abandon any normal state of mentation. Once you make the breakthrough to a stage of emptiness, you must stay in that state of non-dual awareness, for that perseverance or saturation is true spiritual training. That is true spiritual practice. You must remain in this pollution-free mental state, investigate it, and integrate with it so that it becomes your constant state of awareness. You have to somehow generate a state of samadhi and then carry it around with you always, ever working to make it more and more pure.

Thus when people say that Zen is the cultivation route for today, they are ignoring the questions: Where is the real Zen, where are the genuine teachers, and where are

the qualified students? Today you have to approach cultivation strictly in collaboration logic and the modern disciplines of science and medicine and experiential proof. The faith requirement of religion is dead because it just does not work anymore for most people, and it was not necessary in the first place. The educational level of the general culture has greatly increased over the last two thousand years, and since this is what society now demands then this is the new way in which you will have to present spiritual teachings. You have to understand all these various topics, and then combine them all skillfully into a single cultivation path that can be your guide throughout the Three Realms, and through life and death.

Like Shakyamuni Buddha, Confucius, Wei Bo-yang, Lama Tsong Khapa, Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, you have to make sense out of everything that is in front of you and organize it into one comprehensive structural whole. You cannot just discard something because it does not appeal to you or follow your limited pattern, but you must strive to understand how it fits into the entire scheme of things. All the different teachings of the world's spiritual schools and all the things which arise in front of you – including every possible spiritual scenario – are all guests. So, paraphrasing Lin-chi, we might say that sometimes you should use this guest and sometimes another to make spiritual progress and arrive at an awakening. All the guests are welcomed by the host, for it is how you deal with them which matters. This is the real exhibition of genuine spiritual achievement.

1 See: *The Sutra of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen*, trans. by Thomas Cleary, (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1998); *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. by Philip Yampolsky, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1967); *Ch'an and Zen Teaching: Third Series*, Lu K'uan Yu, (Rider and Company, London, 1969), pp. 14-102; *The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui-neng*, trans. by A.F. Price and Wong Mou-lan, (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1990); *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. by John McRae, (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, Berkeley, 2000).

2 *Ch'an and Zen Teaching: First Series*, Lu K'uan Yu, (Rider and Company, London, 1969).

3 See: *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. by Burton Watson, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993); *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law*, trans. by W. E. Soothill, (Curzon Press, London, 1987); *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. by Kubo Tsugunari and Yuyama Akira, (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, Berkeley, 1993); *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, trans. by Leon Hurvitz, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1976); *The Lotus of the True Law*, trans. by H. Kern, (Dover Publications, New York, 1963); *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, trans. by Bunno Kato, Yoshiro Tamura and Kojiro Miyasaka, (Kosei Publishing Company, Tokyo, 1988); *A Guide to the Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Nikkyo Niwano, (Kosei Publishing Company, Tokyo, 1988).

4 See: *The Story of Chinese Zen*, Nan Huai-Chin, trans. by Thomas Cleary, (Charles Tuttle, Boston, 1995).

5 See: *Complete Enlightenment*, Ch'an Master Sheng-yen, (Dharma Drum Publications, Elmhurst: New York, 1997); *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation*, trans. by A. Charles Muller, (SUNY Press, Albany: New York, 1999); *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, Vol. 3, Lu K'uan Yu, (Rider, London, 1976), pp. 147-278; *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice*, "The Scripture on Fully Perfected Enlightenment," trans. by Hubert Nearman, (Shasta Abbey, Mount Shasta: California, 1994).

8. The “Science of Life” and Western Spiritual Directions

In examining the Eastern cultivation cultures and spiritual practice techniques of India, China, Japan and Tibet, we have laid a good foundation for understanding the origins of many cultivation practices in the world. We have also seen several possible ways by which genuine spiritual aspirations can cause practitioners to wrongly apply their energies. Most importantly, however, we have established that many of the world’s spiritual exercises are to be credited to either ancient India or China.

Some may argue that this short synopsis explains much regarding the Eastern cultivation cultures, but says little about the cultivation practices of the West. Nevertheless, many of the Western spiritual traditions have been greatly influenced by the Eastern cultures and their practices. It is just that, due to a lack of records, it is difficult to clearly trace these Eastern to Western influence streams. What this really means is that in order to understand the development of various Western religions and their spiritual practices, it is essential that we first strive to understand Eastern cultivation traditions, which is the path we have just undertaken.

This book is essentially concerned with man’s search for “ultimate reality,” the various forms which this search has taken, the practices used, and how the practices have succeeded or gone askew. This search for the fundamental reality behind matter and consciousness is more than just “religion.” Religion is associated with the search, but is more the outward, organizational support that structures and packages the search.

We should think of religions as the external shell societies wrap around man’s search for ultimate reality, and their inner content should be considered an organization of our thoughts on this great matter. Usually this inner content entails a road of personal spiritual practice that relies upon particular cultivation techniques. If you want to truly understand religions and their spiritual truths, you must peel away their outer veneer and peek within their shells to see what practices they embody, and what they entail. If you can do this and then practice these cultivation methods in your own life, then this – rather than attending congregational ceremonies – is the truest form of spiritual practice.

In the most basic sense, the spiritual practices we have described are not only protected by religion, but go further. They are truly scientific in that they require actually experiencing the process of spiritual attainment rather than just speculating about it. They also advocate a reporting back of the knowledge gained for the benefit of others. They constitute the “science of life” that looks into the deeper questions of

humanity such as what it means to be human, what it means to be conscious and alive. They try to answer the question, "What is life all about?"

When we stand back and examine the many cultures, religions and philosophies which have come and gone in the world, we can accurately say that most have shared this "science of life" goal of searching for the underlying "ultimate reality." Whether in the East or West, most spiritual streams have valiantly striven to probe man's origins, and advocated ways to find it.

In our present day world, there are more than a hundred different religions, and the biggest or most influential include Hinduism, Taoism and Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Because these religions still exist in our modern times, we know from first hand experience that their adherents pose the same questions about human nature and share the same goal of searching for God, Allah, Brahman, Tao, fundamental nature or however they wish to call the underlying reality.

In attempting to understand these various religions, one important fact stands out that we should recognize: No matter where we find these religions, where they eventually go, or in what form we find them, most of the sages who founded or helped structure these schools came from the East, visited the East, or studied Eastern spiritual teachings. This fact once again helps support the conclusion that in order to understand the spiritual practices of the world, you must certainly understand the root spiritual cultures of the East and how they eventually developed. This is something we have emphasized again and again.

In the past, many Westerners would say that there was no real religion in the East and that Oriental people were all heathens. However, the Indians and Chinese would hear this and just laugh knowing that much of Western religious practice actually came over to the West through influences similar to what we have presented. For instance, the following example for cultivating the Prayer of the Heart, shows how Byzantine Christians were instructed to perform the mantra practices developed in the East, but which were adapted for the Western consciousness:

You know, brother, how we breathe, we breathe the air in and out. On this is based the life of the body and on this depends its warmth. So, sitting down in your cell, collect your mind, lead it into the path of the breath along which the air enters in, constrain it to enter the heart altogether with inhaled air, and keep it there. Keep it there, but do not leave it silent and idle, instead give it the following prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me." Let this be its constant occupation, never to be abandoned. For this work, by keeping the mind free from dreaming,

renders it unassailable to suggestions of the enemy and leads it to Divine desire and love.¹

Islam has similar mantra instructions, for as the Sufis instruct:

Let the worshipper reduce his heart to a state in which the existence of anything and its non-existence are the same to him. Then let him sit alone in some corner, limiting his religious duties to what is absolutely necessary, and not occupying himself either with reciting the Koran or considering its meaning or with books of religious traditions or with anything of the sort. And let him see to it that nothing save God most High enters his mind. Then, as he sits in solitude, let him not cease saying continuously with his tongue, "Allah, Allah," keeping his thought on it. At last he will reach a state when the motion of his tongue will cease, and it will seem as though the word flowed from it. Let him persevere in this until all trace of motion is removed from his tongue, and he finds his heart persevering in the thought. Let him still persevere until the form of the word, its letters and shape, is removed from his heart, and there remains the idea alone, as though clinging to his heart, inseparable from it. So far, all is dependent on his will and choice; but to bring the mercy of God does not stand in his will or choice. He has now laid himself bare to the breathings of that mercy, and nothing remains but to wait what God will open to him, as God has done after this manner to prophets and saints. If he follows the above course, he may be sure that the light of the Real will shine out in his heart.²

Of course, Judaism also has relevant mantra instructions and descriptions of appropriate spiritual experiences as well. One of the lessons presented in this book is that the influence of various spiritual streams and practices have passed from one country or culture to another, and the West has certainly benefited from the East in this fashion.

We usually think of Western culture as being more scientifically rooted than Eastern culture. This characterization, however, is more accurate for the last few centuries of human history than for the preceding ones. One important reason that Eastern influences are so important in spiritual traditions today, and which helps us better understand the East of ancient times than the West of ancient times, is that the Asians left many more written records for posterity. Comparatively speaking, far fewer historical records of the earliest Western civilizations have been handed down to us in the West. In order to reconstruct Western history, we have had to rely on the oral legends that eventually made it into print, such as the poetry of Homer or the saga of Beowulf.

Another factor that contributed to ancient Asia's broader and more coherent development in the field of spiritual seeking was the commonality of language. In China only one language prevailed, which made it much easier to trace its particular story, and in India most of the religious texts were written in the root language, Sanskrit. The prevalence of one or two dominant languages in Asia made it easier for knowledge to be passed down and shared – a key requirement for scientific endeavor that has enabled us to trace the heritage, lineages and transmissions of spiritual science as we have been doing. In the West, there were many different languages spoken over a wide variety of regions, and this complicates the efforts to accurately trace the history of various spiritual traditions in the Western hemisphere.

Now that we have started focusing upon the culture of the West which has been influenced by the Assyrian, Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian and then Greco-Roman civilizations, we must ask ourselves whether these prior civilizations had their own forms of “human being science”? Is it possible that they did not ask these same questions about the origins of matter and life? Of course they did! It is just that very few records from these civilizations have come down to us enabling us to get a firm picture on the ways in which they approached these issues. Nevertheless, we can be sure that the universal spiritual search gripped the people within these cultures as well, and that these cultures also developed various means to cultivate stages of spiritual realization.

If we recall the story of Shakyamuni Buddha, we know that he sat under the bodhi tree and attained self-realization through his own efforts. Because he became enlightened we call him a “Buddha.” But Shakyamuni himself put forward the question, “Am I really the first Buddha?” He realized that the Tao has always been here, and that he simply awakened to it without creating anything. Actually, anybody can attain the Tao – can awaken to it – because all beings have the Tao and are part of it. The only thing preventing people from awakening to their Buddha nature is clinging to self-imposed mental ignorance. Shakyamuni Buddha reasoned that throughout the aeons previous to his, there must therefore have been others who also had attained the Tao completely.

Searching the past, Shakyamuni discovered three other Buddhas with complete enlightenment who had preceded him in this aeon. This made him the fourth completely enlightened Buddha to appear in this world and take up the mantle of teaching. He also mentioned the names of several other Buddhas who appeared in the aeon previous to this one, and Shakyamuni saw numerous other sages who had appeared in this world although with varying stages of realization. In contemplating the future through his samadhi attainments, Shakyamuni said that one thousand Buddhas will come in this aeon, and the next to be expected will be the Buddha Maitreya. According to Buddhist prophecy, the earth will undergo many

catastrophes, people will build up civilization again, and then Maitreya will finally appear. Shakyamuni Buddha's student Mahakasyapa is said to be residing in a deathless state of samadhi, like a Taoist Immortal, inside Ji Zhu Shan (Chicken-Foot Mountain) in China, and he will come out of his cave at that time to attest to the new Buddha.

As a result, in each era of civilization there will definitely be people who attain enlightenment and awaken to the Tao – to the Real thing that has always been there – and who will decide to teach the spiritual pathway to others. Typically, they are always criticized, persecuted and even crucified by others for upsetting the status quo, but that is another story.

The point is that the Tao is already there – it is always here – and so anyone can awaken to spiritual liberation if they just work hard enough to find the source of their mind. That origin is the same single source behind matter, life and the universe, and so investigating the mind is the way to investigate all these things. To awaken to the Tao is just like discovering something which has always been behind everything such as gravity, electricity or magnetism. These things are not new inventions. The title of being their “discoverer” simply means that someone was the first to introduce into common knowledge something that already existed. They did not really create it. They just pointed out what has always been there since the beginning. In terms of the Tao, we can say it has been here since beginninglessness.

Thus the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, prophets, saints and sages will continue to appear in the future and point to what has always been here. However, they will teach spiritual truths in the particular way humanity happens to need at that moment. Some cultures need a strict path of religious discipline, others need a personal savior, and some can accept naked truth without embellishments. The teaching vehicle or injunctions that initially address a culture's needs are not necessarily what is needed several hundred years later, for all cultures are destined to change through growth or decline. So after skillfully teaching about the Tao that always is – in a way that matches society's needs – realized teachers perform their self-appointed task and then go on their way.

This process of coming and going to fulfill society's needs can be compared to the building of an orphanage. At first, someone notices there are orphans, who need a home, and so they set about to build an orphanage. After the project is completed and the orphans can occupy the place, the builders move on to the next project they feel it wise to sponsor. They see a need, they come to perform the work they have decided to do, and then they depart for their next project. It is as simple as that.

In one sense, this is how we get a multitude of spiritual streams and lineages. It is all

the same basic material, but molded this way and that, and delivered in bits and pieces to suit the needs of the time unless an audience is mature enough to handle the whole. As to the sages, they come, see what is needed, deliver their enlightening influence, and then go. Those who come after, when they cannot reach the same level of realization, spend much intellectual time trying to iron out some of the inconsistencies of the sage's words and actions when many were simply the skillful, expedient responses of the moment.

As the Zen masters might say, "If saying to someone, 'kill the Buddha,' will help them awaken, then it is the same as saying, 'praise the Buddha,' if that will help them awaken. The same holds for saying 'the Mind is Buddha' or 'no-Mind is Buddha.' Whatever saying will help an individual awaken is the proper one to use. However, this means that any response is an expedient means for the moment, and not to be used in every case nor for every individual or circumstance. For instance, if you say 'kill the Buddha' to someone who is not too smart, they may take your teaching the wrong way."

This false assumption that an expedient response is the fixed answer for every circumstance explains how the fixed dogma of various traditions has sometimes been wrongly created, and how it has often become a solidified representation of "the Truth" while missing the mark entirely. It usually takes several hundred years to create all the self-reflexive, self-justifying dogma that corrects the apparent deficiencies or inconsistencies within a spiritual stream so that the stream can be completely defended from external criticism and have ready, unassailable answers for every type of challenge, including questions about expedient responses that had been turned into dogma. By the time this intellectual edifice is completed and all its gaps have been filled in, the dogma of each religion becomes so self-justified that none allow for any substantial truth to exist in other religions to the extent that it would be okay for people to leave that religion for another.

Thus every religion ends up having "all the answers" in its fabricated system of solutions, and because of the indoctrination system adherents are born into and exposed to, they view all things from a prejudiced mindset and rarely leave one congregational fold for another spiritual sect. People tend to see and hear exactly what they expect to see and hear, because of indoctrinated religious upbringing, even if it differs from their actual perceptions. This is called "set thinking" because our upbringing habituates the mind to perceive what it is set to perceive, and cognitive dissonance also has us rejecting actual facts and personal experiences, or anomalies and exceptions that throw our world view out of order, when they go against our impregnated belief systems.

Thus you will rarely find a Christian becoming a Jew, a Jew becoming a Moslem, a

Buddhist becoming a Hindu, and so on. This is not really due to the fact that one religious system is superior to the others, but due to the inertia of people preferring to stay where they are and remain with what they have become accustomed to believing. It is also because people are born into these groups and exposed to complete dogma systems that profess to have answers for every situation, so how could another path be right if the one you are in holds all the answers? People of one religion do not bother to realize that every religion has evolved its own self-contained methods of justification, so they are all equal in this respect.

It is simply a matter of “fate” or karma that someone is born into one particular religion rather than the religion of the neighbors across the street, but people rarely think about the deep implications of this. The religion is not actually the important thing, but whether you actively cultivate towards your own personal self-realization. Karma tends to place you in different religions as you collect more and more lives, but since people unfortunately fall into the trap of believing that the one they have been born into is the only legitimate one, they tend to ignore the actual heart of cultivation even though this is what matters.

Another point about religions is that each evolves answers structured in such a way that they cannot be attacked using the reference frames of that particular system. For example, when Christians cannot deal with challenging questions or evidence that might threaten major Christian beliefs, they can usually dismiss these challenges with self-justified excuses such as “That isn’t in the Bible,” “It is evil,” “You just have to believe and have faith,” or “It is caused by the devil.”

These replies are not answers at all, and yet while unacceptable to normal logical criteria and a wisdom mindset, they are accepted as perfectly valid responses to the religious mindset. The problem is, every religion has a set of answers like this to defend and justify its own self-reflexive dogma against outside notions, and that is what people always fail to realize. The Jews have answers like this, the Moslems have answers, and so on it goes without people ever realizing the larger implications of this situation.

To understand religion, you have to understand that someone who spiritually cultivates, if he attains the same spiritual stage as another aspirant, will have access to the same level of spiritual realization, and will be able to teach to the extent of his wisdom. However, he will also most likely edit or adapt his teachings to the cultural environment of the times, which will create visibly apparent differences between one religion and the next. For instance, you would not expect to find Medieval Christian saints articulating what they had spiritually learned or experienced in Taoist or Islamic language. Although the stages of spiritual cultivation are common phenomena shared across all genuine spiritual schools, the practitioners in each school will tend

to clothe their description of these experiences in the particular vernacular of their own religion, just as you would expect. This is why the commonality of shared spiritual phenomena often escapes popular recognition by society.

Two examples from Christianity can readily illustrate this point. This first example is from John of St. Thomas, who described the kundalini phenomenon as follows:

'Fire', he says (quoting St. Bernard), 'goes forth from Him, and yet He Himself is the fire'. With this difference, however, the fire which precedes Him brings pain but does not torment, nor does it vex. It moves, but it does not accomplish the work. It is sent in advance only to arouse, to prepare and to recall to mind what the soul is by itself so that it may appreciate what it will be by the grace of God. The fire which is God Himself [the kundalini phenomenon] consumes, but does not cause suffering. It burns pleasantly and cauterizes with joy, for it is a very devastating ember which attacks vices, ... Hence souls understand that the Lord is present in the power by which they are transformed, and in the love by which they are inflamed.³

The second example, from Saint Teresa, illustrates how samadhi experiences were described according to Christian vernacular as well:

In the orison of union, the soul is fully awake as regards God [in the state of samadhi the mind retains awareness], but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of herself [the mind withdraws from the senses]. During the short time the union lasts, she is as it were deprived of every feeling, and even if she would, she could not think of any single thing. Thus she needs to employ no artifice to arrest the use of her understanding: it remains so stricken with inactivity that she neither knows what she loves, nor in what manner she loves, nor what she wills. In short, she is utterly dead to the things of the world and lives solely in God. ... I do not even know whether in this state she has enough life left to breathe [a state of breath cessation]. It seems to me she has not; or at least if she does breathe, she is unaware of it. Her intellect would fain understand something of what is going on within her, but it has so little force now that it can act in no way whatsoever.⁴

Whenever someone spiritually awakened in the past, it is unlikely that you would find them openly teaching in such a way that deviated too much from the orthodox religious dogma of the times – even if the conventional spiritual teachings were in some way lacking and needed to be revamped. That particular approach could result in their persecution. Furthermore, a spiritual adept would hesitate to make radical

introductions into a spiritual stream unless their own wisdom was high enough and the timing was auspicious for those corrections to be introduced; otherwise they could suffer severe sanction, even death.

Galileo's persecution, for something that people could readily prove for themselves simply by opening their eyes and peering through a telescope, is one simple example of the close-mindedness that often reigns in human affairs. More recently, the persecution of scientists and intellectuals under Stalin and Mao illustrate this as well. Thus individuals with samadhi and wisdom attainments would say whatever they could within the boundaries of a close-minded, persecution-prone environment, yet in such a way as to attempt to uplift and elevate a spiritual tradition.

The situation is similar to that of a company employee who cannot become a whistle blower because of what might happen, but who still does what he can to correct things and make them right within the confines of the existing structure. If he is talking to outsiders and forbidden to say anything, at most he will just hint about certain topics without revealing anything specific. It is up to you, as the recipient of these hints and taking the background situation into account, to rely upon your own wisdom to read between the lines and determine what was really going on.

This is a synopsis of just one of the wisdom ways in which the great sages operate. They arise in the world to teach a particular race or culture in a manner that is socially acceptable, and when their mission is accomplished (or karma finished) they leave. When people do not have the strength to lift heavy weights, they give them lighter weights to carry, and reveal partial truths rather than complete truths. Because people vary greatly in terms of merit and wisdom, they tell the masses only limited truths about the structure of true reality because most people are just not ready for the whole thing.

If the sages cannot be direct for fear of persecution, they borrow from whatever cultural analogies are available to clothe their spiritual teachings and communicate with the times. As to the intellectual edifices created by the subsequent generations, those are created by people who do not reach any stage of realization themselves or even tread that path looking to confirm things by personal experience, but who put all their time instead into intellectual interpretations.

Only in rare situations, such as Shakyamuni Buddha's audience of hundreds of monks with samadhi attainments, could sages even begin to speak of the highest spiritual truths. Even in Shakyamuni's case, some of his students walked out of his lectures when he told them there were spiritual stages past the initial stage of seeing the Tao. This meant that there was more cultivation work to do, and these students, although quite advanced, did not want to hear that message and accept the fact that they had

to keep improving upon their initial stage of realization.

The *Lotus Sutra* reports that hundreds of Hinayana practitioners, interested solely in personal salvation rather than the commitment to keep perfecting themselves and help others reach enlightenment, walked out of Buddha's lecture. Even Mahakasyapa, Buddha's initial successor, initially balked at hearing the requirements of the Mahayana path when he realized how much sacrifice they entailed.

The point is that the sages embody the realizations they have reached in their teachings – which are ultimately dependent upon their level of Tao attainment – and they frame their teachings in a way that is suitable for society's current state of cultural development. That is all. If what the saints or sages have to say cannot be accepted, then these great ones with samadhi attainments do not bother to teach it, or they frame it in a diluted version that can be better digested. This is one reason why all religions do not share the same dogmas or teachings. The initial situation did not allow it, and various teachers differed as to their ultimate stage of realization as well, which became reflected in their teachings.

The general pattern is that a person who awakens to the Tao – if he truly achieves a state of selflessness and mind of compassion – ends up teaching humanity in a way that is compatible with the cultural milieu and call of the times. After they pass away, then if a culture and society is lucky yet another enlightened individual will eventually arrive to repeat the process and message.

Whether a successor ultimately arrives to reiterate the original teachings, such as a Mencius following a Confucius, will all depend upon whether a cultural stream has enough merit, and whether it can keep a pure cultivation tradition alive so that someone within it can awaken. And the reason why almost all the great founders of spiritual movements studied in the East is because the East has historically provided the necessary fertile ground for this type of spiritual quest.

If you have not already achieved the level of spiritual achievement whereby you can control your own birth, then it is luckiest to be reborn in a culture, country, race or tradition that has living enlightened masters, or which allows you ready access to an inspired lineage so that you might learn and make use of available cultivation methods. Dogma is not as important as the existence of cultivation techniques, and theory is not as important as personal cultivation practice and experience.

Since personal experience proves whether dogma and theory are relevant or irrelevant, then you do not have to worry whether religious dogma is correct or not. Your only concern should be whether you can cultivate to reach the various spiritual states that prove and authenticate the truth of the spiritual path. It all comes down to

whether you know about the spiritual exercises and practices that prepare you for self-realization, and whether or not you make the effort that can bring you some degree of personal realization.

A spiritual lineage can only be correctly passed on from master to master or from accomplished one to accomplished one. Thus every master hopes that he has students who can catch the Tao and continue the lineage tradition that keeps the true path of spirituality alive in the world. Alone, without a teacher or living lineage, it is very hard to awaken, although occasionally it is possible for a great individual to do so by themselves. As the story of the Sixth Zen Patriarch illustrates, self-realization without the benefit of a teacher can be achieved by certain highly talented individuals. However, this is rare. Self-enlightenment without a teacher is the exception rather than the rule.

Death and deterioration mark all phenomenal things, so in time even strong traditions of saints and prophets should be expected to eventually decline until at a propitious moment a really great enlightened adept is reborn who does not require the existence of other enlightened teachers to help him awaken. This is what happens when someone like Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu or Socrates arises and breathes life into the spiritual streams of the time. But even these individuals had teachers who introduced them to spiritual practice and helped them get oriented again and pass through the lower stages of the path. When no masters are present in a tradition, however – as we now find in Christianity and Judaism and countless other religions – that spiritual path will be incapable of realizing its fullest potential.

This discussion has important implications that most people cannot immediately recognize. It signifies that what is central in all the spiritual paths and religions of the world is therefore something nameless, formless, empty and indescribable that has always been there. There is no time when the ultimate reality behind everything has been absent, and it is just that people have not cultivated sufficiently or properly to realize it. That, however, is what the saints and sages succeed in doing and *you* are an unawakened saint or sage until you start to personally cultivate. We all share in the same Tao, so this capability of awakening is your birthright as well.

We need only cultivate to realize the Tao, just as Shakyamuni Buddha did, and then it is fully ours once again without blemish even though it has never left us. Depending upon our own spiritual efforts and the stage of cultivation we resultantly reach, our understanding of the spiritual path and the extent of the virtuous influence we can then effect in society will vary. If you think you can bring peace and love to society by just preaching it then you are mistaken, but if you get people to start cultivating and achieving the various stages of spiritual attainment, then you can eventually raise the general wisdom level and capabilities of the sleeping heroes in society who can

subsequently work to make some definite headway in these directions. This is what the spiritual path is ultimately all about.

The ever present nature of the Tao reminds us that religious revelations are not really “new.” What is *real*, what is *true*, what transcendentally *is* must have always been here since nothing changes in the ultimate sense. But in terms of history, culture, time and place, it is a wonderful new cultural and spiritual impulse for mankind when someone pierces through the veil of religious debris accumulated over the ages and reveals the genuine spiritual cultivation pathway to the Tao because they have realized their self-nature.

Each of the world's cultures, because Truth is everywhere, has therefore produced its own saints and sages who have awakened. The East has produced its sages and the West has its sages as well. They have only differed as to the relative depth of their realizations, the accuracy of their perceptions, and the cultural forms in which they have transmitted their subsequent teachings. Some have chosen to say certain things, and others have not, and some have had to let a little pollution into the brew so that the overall good could be accepted. The sages were very flexible themselves, but as to the dogmatic Pharisees who came after them to interpret their message – that is another story.

The dogma which becomes wrapped around these teachings over time – as a form of tribal dressing or cultural flavor – can be viewed as a function of political, economic, racial and other sorts of influences. It can be compared to the barnacles which grow on the bottoms of ships, or the dust which settles on everything after awhile. Hence you must recognize that some spiritual teachings, including many given by religious founders themselves, were never absolute truths not to be questioned. Rather, in many cases these teachings were just expedient devices used to achieve order out of the chaos of the times.

Sometimes these teachings were given in regards to particular instances, and sometimes in regards to the general case, and in most instances they were meant to be applied flexibly and with wisdom. For instance, the injunction not to kill certainly holds true, but if a terrorist has his finger on the trigger of an atom bomb that would kill millions, then it is proper to stop him. However, in killing him one would karmically incur the debt for taking his life, for karma is unavoidable, but one would also earn an overwhelming amount of merit for saving the lives of millions. You cannot avoid karma, but then the point is not to fear unfortunate karma that might be incurred on account of doing a good deed, and thereby not perform it. The point is recognizing that you must always do the right thing, and to do it. When bad karma arises, you just always act so as to transform it. That's the right mindset.

The Western Path of Spiritual Attainment

Now if we want to examine what the West has to offer for the path of spiritual striving, we must turn to the sages of ancient Greece. Prior to that, there are not enough historical records available for us to build a clear and coherent picture of what really happened. Of course there must have been attempts to inquire about the highest reality in Western cultures prior to the Greeks, but what they called the Tao in those cultures, and the methods they used to attain it, are facts we do not know. As we saw in reviewing the history of Chinese cultivation traditions, the final objectives of various spiritual streams can shape-shift over time.

In focusing upon ancient Greece and the Hellenic heritage, we must remember that the city state of Athens was one of the leading cultural centers of the Western world. Some of the greatest accomplishments of the early Greeks included developments in the arts and philosophy. The early Grecian philosophers, however, were quite different than our modern philosophers who tend to speak of “linguistic modes of meaning,” mathematical logic, and other subjects highly divorced from regular life. In those early times, the Greek philosophers were trying to tackle the issue of where life and the greater universe came from, and in examining this question they looked into the basic elements of the universe.

Some early Greek philosophers tried to describe the composition of the universe using what was materially known about the physical world, and argued that its basic elements were fire, water or earth. It is interesting that these ideas regarding the elements were very similar to those found in ancient Indian and Chinese culture, but they were limited since they only referred to the material realm. Putting the theories of these early Western philosophers aside, we can characterize these ages by saying that it was a period of great philosophical investigation similar to China's Xia and Zhou dynasties.

The early Greeks emphasized the spiritual side of man and nature to a certain degree, but they were unique in emphasizing physical science as a way to analyze the material world. This is one of the reasons why the Western world eventually developed a greater emphasis on science than did the East, which remained focused on the spiritual salvation of man.

In the early ages of the West we can also find polytheism, the worshipping of objects, and monotheism, as was found in the East, for these were natural sociological developments that occurred all over the world. Nonetheless the history of the Western search for meaning shows a big departure from the route taken by its Eastern counterpart. Men, who had not developed an experiential spiritual path, could no longer be fully satisfied with the “faith” aspect of religion, and they

eventually sought for answers in other ways. This is what gave rise to the beginnings of philosophical thought, and then the scientific search for answers.

From religion men developed philosophy as a means to answer their deeper questions about life and the universe. But while logic and philosophy helped structure questions and answers, they still did not deliver any definite, solid, reliable answers to these deep issues. Thus men eventually began testing things and conducting experiments, which slowly became the field we now know as science. The original motivation behind scientific research was this same original longing to discover something about the ultimate ontological foundations of the world and mankind. However, the functional role that science plays today has greatly veered from its original purposes.

One can of course point out that several spiritual cultivation streams, such as Buddhism, contain philosophies and methods of cultivating realization that are similar in structure to Western science. However, these are also unlike the methods of science as they have to be pursued by individuals within themselves. Hence while we can say that Buddhism is truly like a science – a science of life to be exact – the problem is that its authentication once again comes down to the proof of personal experience rather than seeing the results of attainment in someone else, and therefore Buddhism once again emphasizes the need to personally cultivate meditation practice. The hallmark of the Greek civilization is that, while it had the ingredients of an experiential spiritual path, it eventually favored the road of non-experiential religion, philosophy and science to seek answers to mankind's ever-present questions about life and the universe.

In this early quest for spiritual knowledge and a way in which to understand man and the universe, the East and West had many similarities. And when contemporary Asians want to particularly see what the West had to offer during this early period, they turn to the Greek philosopher Socrates to seek out these similarities.

Socrates was similar to the Eastern sages in many respects, one of which was in teaching that man's purpose was to work for the enlightenment of his soul rather than to pursue materialism and the senses. When we look at the history of religion, philosophy and cultivation in the world, the golden age that stands out is the time of Lao Tzu and Confucius in China, Shakyamuni Buddha in India, and Socrates in Greece. And because of Socrates, no one can say that the West never produced an enlightened sage.

From the records of Plato's dialogues, we can easily find evidence that Socrates had attained some measure of spiritual realization. At times he would enter into a state of samadhi, wherever he might be standing, especially when he was concentrating on

some important matter. On one occasion he even stood barefoot on the ice, deep in samadhi, and oblivious to the freezing cold while everyone else was shivering indoors underneath blankets. At other times, Socrates would even forewarn his friends about taking certain courses of action, demonstrating that he had achieved future vision because of his samadhi attainments.⁵

It is hard to identify, using any Eastern classification scheme, exactly what level of samadhi Socrates had attained. However, his teachings, character and bearing in ordinary life, and the noble manner in which he faced death, indicate that he had reached a great level of spiritual attainment. Socrates' teaching and practice methodologies were not like Taoism, which explains how to manipulate the phenomena of the natural world. They were much more similar to the spiritual instructions of Buddhism and Confucianism, which teach men how to be human beings and virtuously act as part of society rather than how to escape from the earthly plane. Through his example, Socrates taught us how to live in the world while rising above it, and his spiritual exercises entailed purifying the mind and sense desires.

After Socrates came Plato, who also taught the meaning of humanity and how people should act within the world. These two, the teacher Socrates and his student Plato, were like Confucius and Mencius in China, one coming shortly after the other but each preferring a different teaching style. Plato, as we can see through his philosophical writings, must have also attained a measure of Hinayana samadhi if he was able to reach a stage where he could see the beauty of thought forms. However, it is certain that he failed to progress through thoughts to reach some stage of true emptiness. The result of Plato's incomplete level of spiritual realization, that became reflected in his works, is that Western society has traveled down a path of form, rather than spirit, for two millennia.

By the time we come to Aristotle, who followed Plato, we are already only speaking of dry intellectual logic – scholastic or academic endeavor – rather than genuine spiritual attainments. Even so, we can surmise that Aristotle must have achieved some measure of literary samadhi to be able to write all the works he did. However, without another outstanding teacher who could reach an even partial stage of self-realization, the trajectory of the Western cultivation path had been sealed. It became a path of science and intellectual theorization focused on physical phenomena rather than on states of spiritual attainment.

Therefore in speaking of the Western cultural stream of European heritage, it started to make great spiritual inroads through the cultivation practices revealed by Socrates and Plato. However, it failed to support this spiritual path, as happened in Asia, because the enlightened influences within this stream did not penetrate and

proceed far enough. The Western cultural heritage shied away from this journey due to a resultant fixation with phenomenal form.

Several hundred years before the early Greek philosophers, Moses appeared in Egypt and played a major influence structuring Judaism. He was definitely an accomplished cultivator who had reached a certain stage of spiritual accomplishment. We can see from the contests recorded in the Bible that Moses' cultivation stage was much higher than that of the Egyptian priests of his time. However, it is also clear from his weaknesses, and the methods he used, that he had not yet attained the Tao. Much of what Moses accomplished had to do with low level samadhi attainments, and depended upon receiving help from various Desire Realm deities.

From the story of Passover we can surmise that mantra played an important role in Moses' cultivation practices. Many of his other "miracles" or superpowers are indicative of the lower samadhi-dhyana. Hence this Western cultural stream was founded by a spiritual cultivator, as most cultural streams are, and within this stream appeared other eventual sages or "prophets" who were the equivalents of the spiritual adepts of the East. The only difference was that the Jewish prophets arose within this particular cultural stream rather than in India or China, but they were indeed able to cultivate the same lower states of samadhi realization.

There were definite overlaps in the spiritual states of attainment reached by the Eastern masters and their Western counterparts at this time. However, because each group belonged to a different cultural tradition, their accomplishments lay in the development of *that* particular tradition and culture, which is to be expected. This is why each spiritual stream provides prophecies regarding the future of that stream, and tends to ignore the others. Unfortunately, people within particular traditions tend to focus only upon the messages pertaining to that cultural stream and tradition, and fail to widen their horizons to recognize that they are born into all sorts of cultural streams over time.

Given the maturity of the Western culture and the necessities of self-preservation, there was only so much that could readily be revealed by the Jewish sages. For a variety of reasons, it was more expedient to introduce the idea of a single creator God to help lead the Western people rather than to talk about Tao and all the spiritual realms that exist in the cosmos. When you speak of all the spiritual realms and their rulers, people tend to selectively worship certain of these beings rather than stick to the path of spiritual cultivation which can uplift you to their same rank. Hence the positing of a single creator God above all is a very expedient and virtue-inducing means of teaching for those lacking in spiritual attainment and wisdom themselves. Furthermore, it helps to differentiate a particular people and its culture from any surrounding traditions that refer to multiple gods and celestial influences.

Taking everything together, while we can say that the West definitely developed its own sages, it is highly debatable whether any reached the very highest attainment levels discerned in the East. What the Western sages taught to the public can only be considered a skillful distillation of various spiritual truths that the people could accept, but which helped to guide and elevate them while preserving that particular tradition. Most of this spiritual guidance took the form of religious instruction, in terms of codes of discipline, in order to help order society, establish peace within it, and purge it of bad habits. Thus, eventually the “letter of the law” became superior to the “spirit of the law,” even though various spiritual instructions had been delivered simply as expedient means to help skillfully guide the people.

At a much later date Jesus appeared in this same cultural stream, which was within two or three hundred years of the time Nagarjuna appeared in India. It was finally after this period, due to the groundwork laid by the Roman Empire and the subsequent spread of Christianity, that Europe fully entered upon the road of religion.

Just as China was able to absorb a variety of foreign cultural influences because of the Silk Road, a major factor behind the spread of religion in the West was due to the communication and transportation networks established by the Roman Empire, for the administrative methods of the Romans required a large number of roads and communication links. Much of the civilizing cultural influences in Europe can therefore be attributed to the Roman Empire, just as similar influences can be credited to the conquests of Alexander the Great, Charlemagne and Napoleon. However, in the earliest days of Europe, the difficulty of transportation and the existence of many different writing systems and languages resulted in a different type of cultural mixing than that which occurred between China and ancient India.

As to Jesus, some people today like to speculate about what he did during the many years when he was away from home. Some say he went East and visited India or even Tibet because he wore his clothes like the Brahmans, and because of numerous other correspondences in his teachings. If he did stay in Eastern monasteries, then after returning and being confronted with the task of translating his understanding into Jewish terminology, it makes sense that he would prefer the terms of the Esoteric school in his teachings. This school concentrates on the fullness (or existence) aspect of phenomena rather than emptiness, and this accenting of conventional existence rather than emptiness is what closest matched the Jewish mindset of his times. Various books have been written on Jesus’ supposed travels, yet this is something people cannot prove, but only talk about.

Regardless of the theories as to where Jesus actually went, it is clear that Jesus had reached a state of spiritual attainment that was much higher than Moses’ stage of

spiritual realization. The virgin birth of Jesus is also something that could definitely have happened because it becomes possible when a high spiritual being impregnates himself or herself into a woman through the projection of his or her chi. This type of event has been witnessed and recorded in many spiritual traditions. An accomplished spiritual adept can definitely act so as to be reborn in this manner, and so it is not an unknown cultivation phenomenon. While some people think this was a singular event, it has happened time and again, and is not unique.

Dying on the cross, being taken down and then rising again three days later is also another plausible event. It is another easily recognizable stage of cultivation gong-fu that been observed by many cultivation schools. As just one example from among many, Zen master Bodhidharma was seen traveling on the road wearing only one sandal after he had died and been buried. When they opened up Bodhidharma's grave to see whether the story was true, all they could find inside was an empty coffin containing the other sandal!

An account of the "resurrection" of the Hindu master Sri Yukteswar, as recorded in Paramhansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*,⁶ also refers to a similar but lesser event. This master had completed the attainment of a yang shen projection body, which the Tao school often instructs us to cultivate, and thus Sri Yukteswar could be seen, heard and touched after his death. When Sri Yukteswar appeared to Yogananda after his death, he said:

My new body is a perfect copy of the old one. I materialize or dematerialize this form any time at will, much more frequently than I did while on earth. By quick dematerialization, I now travel instantly by light express from planet to planet or, indeed, from astral to causal or to physical cosmos. ... Now my finer fleshly body – which you behold and are even now embracing rather closely! – is resurrected on another finer dream-planet of God. Someday that finer dream-body and finer dream-planet will pass away; they too are not forever. All dream-bubbles must eventually burst at a final wakeful touch. Differentiate, my son Yogananda, between dreams and Reality!⁷

What people of all religions often fail to take into account is that Jesus' resurrection was probably a true event, but not a singular occurrence. Recently, several polls have revealed that many Christians, including priests, did not truly believe in Jesus' virgin birth or resurrection, but all of these things are standard cultivation attainments that probably happened. It is just that people do not understand the relevant cultivation science behind these attainments because they have not yet reached similar stages of attainment themselves, or studied enough to know how they are possible.

Regardless, one could safely make the argument that Jesus was a great Bodhisattva who had seen the Tao and who chose this method of sacrifice to teach the people of his time. Whether this was a particular path he chose, or really his own karma, or just a highly effective pattern that the enlightened choose to duplicate in various cultural streams because of its uplifting effectiveness (such as the crucifixion of Odin), is a subject for another time. Nevertheless, we must come to recognize that all the “miraculous” phenomena surrounding his life can be explained by the standard gong-fu phenomena achievable within the framework of cultivation science.

The early Christian church even raged in debate over whether Jesus was the only son of God, just a great teacher who was not divine, or a representative example of how every man could spiritually uplift himself and realize the light within, meaning man's connection with God that we call the self-realization of the Tao. If you believe that Jesus' stage of cultivation had been matched and even surpassed by many other spiritual masters, then this last interpretation would probably appeal to you the most.

According to this last view, Jesus was a great spiritual teacher who had cultivated and discovered that within him there was a light, and this light was the light of the world, and that it is also in each one of us. As the *Gospel of Thomas* reported, Jesus' disciples once asked about his stage of spiritual attainment that they might seek to reach it, and he replied, “Anyone with two ears better listen! There is light within a person of light [someone who has achieved self-realization], and it illuminates the whole world. If it does not shine, there is darkness [ignorance].” This type of response is in perfect agreement with traditional enlightenment teachings; we all have the light of awareness within us, and must simply cultivate to realize it.

Zen master Yun-men accordingly said, “In the universe, within time and space, there is a treasure hidden in the mountain of form. It cognizes things, emptily shining.” All who cultivate sufficiently can discover this light through his or her own spiritual efforts, and can identify with this light, as did Krishna who therefore accordingly said, “Even those devotees who, endowed with faith, worship other gods, worship me alone.”

People who reach self-realization attain the state of egolessness and selflessness where they can say such things with legitimacy. Their words become true because at their stage of selflessness realization they do not cling to any idea of being an ego anymore, and so they are not actually referring to themselves. For instance, Saint Catherine of Genoa said, “My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except my God Himself,” to describe her own stage of spiritual realization. We can also refer to similar words by the Islamic saint al-Hallaj in order to make the same point.

There is a whole field of study on the issue of Jesus' divinity, called Christology, and some of the theological differences on this question are responsible for there being more than 20,800 Christian denominations in existence, as reported by David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia*. The view stipulating that Jesus was the only one who attained the spiritual enlightenment of being one with the Father finally won out in Catholicism between 300-400 A.D. at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, but it was not the original view of Christianity.

A variety of scholarly books discuss the purely political reasons for this decision, but the important point is that most people are ignorant of how these various doctrines evolved, and do not think through the implications that there could even have been such a debate in the first place! They do not think through the ramifications of these issues, such as the fact that the earliest Church fathers did not consider Jesus a uniquely divine God-man, that it was largely a political decision which forged current Christian dogma, and that this happened at a relatively late date. They do not even realize that even reincarnation was once a Christian doctrine that was abolished for political reasons.

The biggest point is that they do not consider that the exceedingly large number of Christian denominations in existence suggests that there is ample room for differing interpretations of Christian doctrines and disagreements over important issues. In fact, this large number of denominations leaves open the door to the legitimate interjection of cultivation science findings into this fray, which would certainly validate or invalidate a number of contentious issues.

When people so vehemently disagree amongst themselves that they must break away to form a new religious denomination, and if the fact that dogma can change dramatically over time has legitimacy, this has much to say about the inadequacy of a faith interpretation for various religious dogma; it leaves open the door for people to believe in anything they want without it necessarily being true. For instance, Baptists believe that God speaks to them directly, whereas Catholics believe that God speaks to them through the Pope, and both groups consider themselves Christians and correct in their beliefs. The application of cultivation science to these issues would certainly help to rationalize the intellectual or political conclusions that have spawned all these divisions.

Many of the stories in the Bible are very beautiful and very deep. However, the material has undergone so many changes and revisions over the years that much of the original writing has been edited so that it no longer retains its original meaning. For instance, Moses' staff did not turn into a "snake" in front of the Egyptian priests, but into something that must be more accurately translated from the Bible as "crocodile" or "lizard." Someone who knows even a little about true cultivation affairs

will immediately recognize that lizard is probably the better translation, but scholars are clueless regarding these subtleties and the spiritual phenomena they refer to.

Sometimes just changing a single word, or looking at it differently, will cause the lessons of the Bible to match perfectly with standard enlightenment teachings. For instance, instead of saying we are born with original sin, if we say we are born with a karma that brought us into the world, the matter becomes perfectly understandable to Eastern audiences. Several Psalms can also be interpreted as teachings on spiritual cultivation matters, and if we said that “Tao is everywhere” rather than “God is everywhere,” these spiritual traditions will match once again. Many of the events within the Bible, such as Jesus saying that John the Baptist was the reborn Elijah, can also be neatly explained by reference to reincarnation and standard enlightenment teachings.

A primary need in spiritual practice is to replace with word “God” by “Tao,” and transcend the image of God as an elderly white-haired robed figure on a cloud. This act, which is more accurate anyway since it points to formlessness or emptiness, is actually the only option in accord with the Ten Commandments since they tell us not to make any images of the divine – even mental ones. It will also start elevating the Western traditions and have them more closely matching the teachings of the East. Unfortunately, people like to envision a personal creator – along the lines represented by Michelangelo’s Sistene Chapel ceiling – although the Bible warns us against this.

If people try to cultivate formlessness instead, then they will be able to match their accounts with other traditions and better understand the teachings of their own saints. The formless, nameless, indescribable emptiness of the original nature is how the Christian saints with samadhi attainment referred to God, as did the Islamic and Jewish mystics. If you finally adopt this sort of view rather than think of God as a person, then you will immediately begin to understand many difficult points of theology, and all sorts of cultivation stages of attainment. Genuine spiritual teachings almost always become tremendously twisted over time in order to correspond with various intellectual structures that non-cultivators develop. When you start to restore them in this manner, you can throw off the errors of ages.

As another comparison, we already know that the Zen school tells us that the true Pure Land is here, at this very moment in this very world. It is here because the Pure Land refers to cultivating one’s mind, and realizing the emptiness of one’s original nature, which is immaculate and pure. The Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* also reminds us not to wait with expectation for the Kingdom of God to arrive on Earth, for mirroring the teachings of the East it says, “The Kingdom of the Father is already spread upon the Earth but men do not see it.” People simply do not see the Pure

Land, or Kingdom of God, because they do not cultivate the necessary samadhi and prajna transcendental wisdom that would open their minds. If people cultivated samadhi and prajna wisdom, they would realize the true nature of the universe and the fact that through interdependent origination, all phenomena are everywhere equal. What is here *is* therefore the Kingdom of God. It is a purified realm and yet men do not see it.

To explain this, we can refer to a story of Shakyamuni Buddha recorded in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. At one time, Buddha was teaching an assembly of advanced students and touched the earth with his big toe. Through his superpowers, suddenly the world seemed transformed, and Buddha's students all saw it as a marvelous purified realm of precious jewels and energies in magnificent array. The Buddha explained to this students that this world is always this splendorous and pure, but ordinarily people do not see it. Then the Buddha withdrew his superpowers, and then the world appeared as before. Hence Buddha also showed that "The Kingdom of the Father is already spread upon the Earth but men do not see it;" the earth is a purified realm, but men simply do not realize it, and that ignorance is their own spiritual poverty.

Another interesting passage from the *Gospel of Thomas*, which accords with the standard enlightenment philosophy of the East, records Jesus saying the following:

If those who led you to say, "See, the Kingdom [of God] is in the sky," then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.⁸

There are also a vast number of similarities between the practices of early Christianity and Esoteric Buddhism. If we were to examine matters carefully, even the Bible's *Book of Revelation* could be classified as a teaching belonging to the Esoteric school sect (the pure school of Esoteric Buddhism rather than the polluted school of Tibetan Tantra), but once again this topic is beyond our scope. Nevertheless, we can that the similarities between Esoteric Buddhism and certain aspects of Christian practice are so close that these traditions can learn from one another.

As to the Jewish faith and Islam, we also find within them many overlaps with Eastern practices that can be used to further understand their contents. Once again this only confirms the great importance of looking towards the East as a way of understanding the West. The standard forms of meditation and stages of spiritual samadhi

realization have already been charted and minutely categorized within the Eastern traditions, but due to a wide variety of historical and religious factors, the Western schools have barely scratched the surface of these matters.

A Comparison of East and West

Western culture is just starting to make scientific inroads into this cultivation stages, practices and phenomena today. It must turn to the Eastern cultivation schools and their teachings if it wants to quickly catch up and fully understand these things. But Western culture must also beware of all the twists and turns, or tumorous offshoots, that we have encountered along these paths. There are good and bad practices, or best and worst teachings, in every spiritual tradition.

If we can without prejudice put aside the liturgy and dogma, and strip bare the outer covering of most Western religious traditions, we can see that the flowers of spiritual cultivation techniques in this garden are far fewer than the wide variety that have germinated in the East. But that does not mean that the West has lacked its own cultivation methods and techniques. In European Christianity, much of the genuine cultivation techniques were practiced in monasteries and nunneries, especially during the Renaissance and Middle Ages. Within these cultivation sanctuaries, individuals were taught to quietly contemplate God or Jesus and to imagine that they became one with Him through a type of samadhi attainment. They were taught to imagine that they were then blessed with grace, just as we find within the Esoteric school.

Even though we are talking about Christian cultivation, to really achieve an understanding of this sort of practice and how someone might go astray in its application, you must again return to the works of Nagarjuna and the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra*. The *Surangama Sutra* guides you through countless possible experiences that you will encounter within cultivation practice as well as what errors must be avoided on the road of religious attainment. Since this is one of the purposes to this book, the *Surangama Sutra* cannot be emphasized enough.⁹

Once again the spiritual errors to avoid on the road of religious practice have nothing to do with whether you are a Christian, Jew, Moslem, Buddhist, Jain, Taoist, or atheist. The possible mistakes you might make, or by-roads you might take, will be the same no matter what your religious following. If you research this profound source material, you will become able to understand what is really required in many Western cultivation techniques, and you will then be able to safely proceed along the road of spiritual cultivation practice without the need for blind faith, and with a decreased probability of falling into error. This is what correct spiritual study is all about.

By studying the classification schemes of Indian yoga and Buddhism, you will also be able to gain some idea of the various levels of attainment which can result from cultivation practice, and you can apply this understanding to evaluate the various religious experiences of Western cultivation practitioners. For instance, during the Dark Ages many Europeans successfully cultivated to certain advanced levels of spiritual attainment. Although limited information is available to us about the stages of attainment they reached, we do know many of the spiritual exercises they used and the fact they subsequently were able to see visions of God wearing white robes, having long eyebrows and issuing light from his forehead. We can also safely conclude from these reports that they became able to see a Bodhisattva ruler from one of the Desire Realm or Form Realm heavens.

What various individuals could see and the various stages they reached naturally depended upon their differing levels of cultivation attainment, but to clearly identify their level of attainment necessitates going back to the scientific classification schemes offered by the East. In general, we can say that at no point did the Western schools produce experiential realms different from those in the East, or incomprehensible to the schools of the East. Whether in the East or West, spiritual practitioners are both qualified to reach the same levels of spiritual attainment. However, if the teachings and environment in one area are more fertile and conducive to the end result than in another, it is logical that we will see higher attainments grow in the better soil.

Europe even had a period of roaming doctors, such as Paracelsus, who were similar to the fang-shih of China. The Medieval alchemists in their quest for immortality used methods similar to the external alchemy and internal alchemy (wai-dan and nei-dan) practitioners of China. We still have many of the books written by genuine alchemists¹⁰ who had achieved spiritual attainments equivalent to the Taoists and Tantric Buddhists. However, a person who has not achieved a certain amount of cultivation gong-fu will not be able to correctly interpret the meaning of these works. Many people think these writings were all nonsense when in fact, they were the perfect equivalents to various Tao school texts.

One problem with the Medieval alchemists was that they sometimes recorded their work very cryptically, using astrological symbols and strange allegories. This was not so much because of the need to escape persecution, but because their hearts were not big enough to share their findings. Thus this problem of selfishness has plagued both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions. As we found in China and India, in many cases a master refused to transfer the requisite information to qualified students, and sometimes they just could not find individuals qualified to receive this sort of knowledge.

About the time of the Renaissance, the West finally broke away from a purely religious and scriptural view of the world. It shifted gears to the path of science and started to use objective observation to probe the world and address the deeper questions about life and the universe. Today, the East is still slowly absorbing the West's scientific discoveries in the same way that the West is finally starting to undertake a spiritual investigation of the mind, and is reconfirming the cultivation findings of the East. The recognition of the existence of acupuncture meridians and their efficacy, which has taken decades despite the exponential pace by which society now progresses, is just one small example of this sort of knowledge that is being rediscovered and validated by Western science.

If we compare our contemporary landscape with ancient history, it is similar to the period when the Chinese and Indian cultural streams were undergoing a great mixing. Only now the mixing involves science and spirituality with contributions coming from both East and West. The leaders of society must come to recognize that this is not a process that can be completed within a very short time frame, for it will undoubtedly take several hundred years before a new synthesis of science and spirituality is born.

During this process, there will be an inordinate amount of misplaced focus upon the mind and its connection with physical transformations, such as the chi flows within our bodies and how they cooperate to produce various psychic and supernormal abilities. We will definitely see this sort of skewed emphasis, which corresponds to the lowest stages of spiritual attainment, since this low level of spiritual progress is easy to duplicate and measure.

This inevitable mixing of scientific and spiritual streams, and the application of modern science to spiritual investigation, has very profound implications for our modern world. As we become increasingly oriented toward science, it is inevitable that the blind faith component required by many religions will lead to the eventual downfall of many spiritual schools. The necessity for scientific proof will penetrate religion, and the need for objectification will eventually lead people to prove the existence of samadhi states along with the supernormal abilities attainable when someone reaches these states.

Samadhi attainments are the methodology behind how past saints and sages exhibited "the power of God" to others. Their "miracles" were simply the product of personal samadhi attainments, and their attribution to God was simply a form of skillful camouflage to lead the masses. This explains why you cannot produce these same miracles yourself, and why they are not normally seen in the world unless due to some living saint or sage; if people have not attained those same samadhi achievements, then they cannot manifest these same "miracles." But if you spiritually cultivate and reach those same high spiritual states, the ability to generate "miracles"

will also become yours.

“Miracles” are not produced by God, but are just the standard functional possibilities of samadhi attainments. Even the modern schools of positive thinking, affirmations and visualization have yet to realize that these practices only have power to the extent of someone’s samadhi capabilities, which is the extent of their ability to maintain one-pointedness in concentration. Of course, sometimes miracles do occur due to the intercession of heavenly beings who take interest in a worthy case, but always this is due to the fact that the recipients have the appropriate karma and merits. Without sufficient merit, you can pray all you want and heavenly help will not be forthcoming.

There is always a cause behind any event, and if people do not understand the cause, it is simply because their science or wisdom is not yet high enough; it is just not sufficiently elevated to the level necessary for true comprehension. But that does not mean people have to toss logic out of the window and start believing in superstition or crazy explanations when they cannot explain something transcendental. Effects always have causes, and a proper understanding of transcendental affairs always includes scientific explanations, although the science referenced might be cultivation rather than physical science.

Miraculous abilities all have an inherent science behind them, and this cause-and-effect relationship can become known to those who cultivate spiritual achievement. It is all a function of samadhi attainments rather than the work of a god sitting on a throne in heaven, but this image of a wise ruler interceding in a personal situation is what people without attainments prefer to believe. For certain, there are countless celestial realms with rulers at all states of spiritual achievement, and sometimes they do intercede to help in human affairs, but there is no one being in charge of it all. This information, and the ability to travel to these realms (as Sri Yukteswar stated), becomes readily available to those who succeed on the spiritual path, so cultivation adepts become the ones who are not subject to superstition.

Naturally, knowledge of this sort of information will eventually destroy many incorrect spiritual dogmas and superstitions. This is why Buddha, who despised ignorance, superstition, and falsity, spoke of these matters at length. Shakyamuni Buddha said, “Do not believe me about these things, but prove what I say. Do not believe anything simply because it is been handed down for many generations, or because it is found written in religious books, or on the authority of your teachers and elders. Cultivate and prove that what I have told you is so. This is the only proof that counts.”

The propagation of this sort of knowledge, and the behavioral road of proving things,

will actually revolutionize religious understanding but sadly, this is threatening to many top religious officials. They believe it is actually a challenge to their power and position if people themselves can achieve the spiritual states that are mentioned in the Western scriptures, for people might thereby become free of the need for their guidance. But we are at the point where these trends can no longer be thwarted or turned back, so if the heads of religion do not accept them and try to match with them, they may be dooming their spiritual streams to extinction. No spiritual stream is granted the boon of perpetuity because of the principle of impermanence, so if a tradition does not learn to match with the spirit of the times, it will be sealing its own fate.

The proper route of spiritual cultivation required for our modern era must definitely include science and scientific explanations. Otherwise the two spheres of science and spirituality will forever separate, and the true spiritual path will be in danger of disappearing all together. Already people are either turning away from religion because it does not seem scientific, or cutting off their wisdom life by putting logic aside and delving into the type of religion that champions faith and belief without offering any means of experientially proving its dogma.

Spiritual cultivation practice offers the means of proving or disproving the tenets of every religion. It also informs you of the kung-fu outcomes of meditative practice which you might fail to believe in, but which will manifest when you make sufficient cultivation efforts, and thereby prove the standard principles of cultivation science. Whether of the East or West, if you exercise your muscles they will grow bigger; whether of the East or West, if you properly meditate you will experience these states given enough time, patience and effort.

Science will not elevate people, and a spiritual focus that is dismissed, discarded or discredited will not elevate people either. So if the two streams of science and religion do not become welded together to support one another in a new renaissance of understanding, people will end up saying that religion and spiritual practice are all superstition, as has happened in those countries which have adopted materialistic Communism. Already many scientists are atheists, which simply means that they have never achieved any spiritual states of attainment themselves, possibly because they are unaware of any genuine paths of spiritual practice. Buddhist or Taoist spiritual practice, which readily produce all sorts of measurable physical-spiritual results, may be a cure for their ills.

Rather than ignoring religion entirely, people must make the effort today to strip bare the outer clothing of religion to expose the scientific cultivation teachings inherent within. Then they must follow them. They have to engage in the proper form of meditative practice, and achieve the various levels of spiritual attainment laid out by

the Eastern schools in order to prove and authenticate the spiritual path. In this way, religion will eventually find a sounder footing in the world, and a stronger application to society.

In the coming centuries, this will be the only way for religion to save itself; religion must encompass the findings of science, the cultivation path of meditation, and must emphasize the personal experiential results of spiritual practice. People who look closely and think deeply can rediscover their own religion's true cultivation emphasis and heritage buried under useless or false arguments and dogma, and that is their own task to undertake. This original emphasis can be retrieved and used to rejuvenate any worthwhile tradition, but it all comes down to instituting the proper type of spiritual practice within a religion.

On the one hand, this approach duplicates the cardinal principle of ancient Vedic culture which insisted on the need to investigate and prove spiritual matters through personal experience, rather than just to accept things according to blind faith. You can also say this perfectly embodies the Western scientific approach to investigation. It can be said that this approach embodies the Taoist or esoteric path, which involves investigating (cultivating) the physical body (the world of form) to make headway towards Tao.

This approach also embodies Zen, for any genuine path will ultimately end up investigating mind to find its original source. It is also a Buddhist approach, for the original body of Buddhist teachings are a scientifically organized set of cultivation findings, free of superstition, dogma and religion. To summarize, this inherently non-denominational structure, which was created in response to the blind faith and religious or ceremonial requirements of early Brahmanism, make Buddhism a most suitable structure for helping to analyze the spiritual path of religion and personal cultivation.

Whether we choose to talk about Shakyamuni, or Confucius or Lao Tzu, however, we find exactly the same story. These individuals did not initially set out to create a religion, but simply wanted to teach the spiritual pathway to Tao. But as always happens, their pure teachings developed into formalized religions through the efforts of later generations. This development reoccurs throughout history, and can be seen in the case of Saint Paul who formalized and spread the teachings of Jesus. It is the later followers who typically transform a set of spiritual techniques into a creed with a specialized vocabulary and dogma.

In one sense it cannot be said that the formation of any religion is bad, for without a protective structure to preserve and pass on the various levels of spiritual truth, the knowledge of spiritual cultivation techniques and exercises would surely become

extinguished. The problem is that most people tend to rely on the dogma of religion for salvation rather than actually practice meditation or other spiritual exercises that would lead to a genuine state of spiritual attainment or liberation. "Leave that work to someone else," they think, "I don't have to do anything other than to attend weekly ceremonies, and be a good person, and then I will be saved."

People are attracted to the appealing dogma that they can rely on someone else for their salvation, for this relieves them of much of the personal responsibility for spiritual cultivation, and this idea strengthens the exclusivity claim by many religions that only their members will be saved. This also helps to absolve individuals of any personal responsibility for making spiritual progress. However, only the determined course of personal cultivation will let you access the various states of spiritual liberation. The devoted and consistent effort of personal spiritual practice – through the practice of various forms of meditation that free the mind of selfish or egocentric thoughts that cover the Tao – is the only valid approach to the spiritual path.

Unfortunately, the majority of people in the world choose inactivity rather than spend energy practicing the spiritual exercises of meditation. They make no efforts to reach a stage where they can match a founding teacher's stage of spiritual vision. They just want to understand dogma instead, and believe this is sufficient. They certainly put more energy into their daily concerns – pursuing sex or fame or money – than they do into cultivating any spiritual states of self-realization. With this type of attitude, how do they expect their spiritual life to be uplifted? If you keep doing the same thing and expect the result to eventually be different, that is just utter nonsense.

As a consequence of all this, the inner cultivation teachings and road of genuine spiritual practices – which are the original heart of any religion – tend to die over time. They become ignored, become obscured, and are bypassed for intellectual expressions of spiritual principles since they are the easiest thing for people to comment upon or talk about. The intellectual understanding of a path, as happened in Zen, becomes the normal focus of attention rather than the true heart of devoted spiritual practice. All good (and bad) things come to an end eventually, and when the actual cultivation practices of a spiritual path disappear, the lineage of spiritual masters within a tradition also crumbles.

Even when genuine spiritual cultivation practices do continue to survive, it is inevitable that dust will settle on them as it does on everything else after a while. Thus it takes an extraordinary individual, such as a Saint Francis of Assisi in Christianity or a Sri Caitanya in Hinduism, to put life back into the original cultivation emphasis of a religion. Sometimes this will involve reinterpreting dogma, as did Martin Luther, and sometimes this rejuvenation may require the institution of stricter

discipline in spiritual practice. In some cases, great teachers have responded to the common man's preference for a simple means of salvation where you do not have to understand or do very much. This is one of the reasons that Hui-yuan founded the Pure Land school of Buddhism, which emphasizes the recitation of the Amitofo mantra. All you have to do is remain mindful of reciting "namo Amitofo" within your mind, and then listen within as your thoughts quiet down. That is how you will reach the state of samadhi.

The laziness that dissuades people from cultivating meditation is another argument for establishing the scientific basis of spiritual cultivation. Only with scientific proof will it be possible to convince people that spiritual progress is not just an intangible, random gift of grace from above, and that they must do some work to get spiritual results. When this viewpoint is finally adopted because of the eventual weight of proof, people will look back upon this era and the previous ones as periods of tremendous spiritual ignorance.

If you add samadhi states of attainment and transcendental wisdom to the findings of science, you can create all sorts of effective spiritual cultivation paths and practices, and expand upon the proof that will convince people that these paths are worthwhile to follow. Those who meditate according to the most basic of spiritual cultivation principles will be able to validate the road of spirituality because they will be able to achieve superpowers and various extraordinary states of gong-fu. The problem is that everyone will be tempted to believe that this is the correct way to cultivate simply because the results produced will be so extraordinarily strange and unusual – extra-human, so to speak. Unfortunately, the ready availability of superpowers and strange phenomena is what produced all the unorthodox deviations seen within the yoga school, Taoism and Tantric Buddhism.

This is precisely the danger that awaits us over the next few hundred years. It will become easier to produce certain low level types of spiritual gong-fu when cultivation science is combined with ordinary science, and thus all sorts of tumorous outgrowths of the pure spiritual path will be born. People will start to cultivate strange superpowers and supernormal abilities, and this will divert them from the true mind-only path to the Tao that looks with disfavor upon these phenomena since they distract people from the true path, and are actually a seductive impediment to higher practice.

In the future, people will learn how to blend science and the mystical arts. They will neglect the real samadhi realms of true spiritual cultivation simply because they will be able to obtain some sort of materialistic results with their contaminated practices. They will cultivate their chi and shen on a low level and create all sorts of strange superpowers and psychic abilities, where thoughts affect matter, like the fang shih

did in ancient China. That is when we will need several great masters to arise, as Lama Tsong Khapa did in Tibet, who can clean up the mess and clarify the real way to spiritually practice.

A Summary of Competing Cultivation Standards

In closing, it is useful to say once again that there is a great need to return to a study of ancient India where we can find the roots of many cultivation methods and schools. It is especially important to analyze the Vedic school of meditation yoga. Yet it is even more important to examine the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha because he had previously done the work of mastering all these various Indian schools for us, and spent a great deal of time collecting various teachings and organizing them while discarding what was useless, distracting, false and even unwholesome.

In addition to revealing and explaining a wide variety of genuine cultivation techniques, Shakyamuni developed an accurate and comprehensive method for understanding the nature and stages of the cultivation path that was free of dogma, superstition, excessive religious coloring, and the contradictions found in the various Vedic schools. It was a purely scientific path that had surveyed all the possible roads in spirituality, laid out the goal of self-realization as the highest objective, and established various alternative methods for attaining it. It must also be recognized that an incredibly large number of Shakyamuni's students attained spiritual realization during his lifetime. This is a great testament to the effectiveness of his teachings and his own spiritual accomplishments.

There are a variety of ways to classify the various ranks of spiritual achievement. The basic nine samadhi absorptions shared by all cultivation schools, whose descriptions are amply delineated in Buddhism, could be referred to as one classification scheme. The attainment levels and stages of gong-fu could also be classified in reference to purifying the various skandhas (aggregates) of form, sensation, conception, volition (impulses) and consciousness which Buddhism has specifically developed for this purpose. The purification of various levels of consciousness, which Shakyamuni Buddha also discussed, is another means of classifying attainment levels.

Cultivation matters could also be further examined in terms of the Chinese Tao school's notions of transforming jing into chi, chi into shen or returning shen to emptiness, which Buddhism describes using the terms physical body, wind element and mind. The Esoteric school refers to the end results of transforming our jing, chi, and shen essences when it speaks of the stages of bliss, illumination and no-thought. Whenever an individual's jing becomes full they do not desire (think of) sex, when their chi becomes full they do not feel hungry, and when their shen becomes full they do not need to sleep. When jing becomes full meditators can experience the physical

bliss of samadhi, when their chi becomes full they can see an internal light within their physical body, and when shen becomes full they can achieve a stage of emptiness realization.

Cultivation attainment levels could also be classified in terms of whether meditation practitioners can reach to the Realms of Desire, Form or Formlessness in their samadhi meditations. These capabilities correspond to the transformations of jing, chi and shen, whether an individual has opened up their root, heart, throat or crown chakras, and whether a person has opened up their *tu mai*, *jen mai*, or *zhong mai* (central) energy channels. It is easy to see that you could classify spiritual cultivation attainments from many different angles, and this illustrates how science will one day match with spiritual teachings.

Unfortunately, most all of these classification schemes are inadequate as they only refer to various phenomenal forms and appearances (“form phenomena”). Thus, they reflect only the lowest stages of the spiritual path. This is what science will eventually turn to, however, precisely because the coarsest or lowest stages of spiritual progress deal primarily with form. Because these stages constitute “low hanging fruit,” science will inevitably end up focusing upon these stages because they are the easiest to demonstrate and prove.

Unfortunately, these are also the stages in which cultivators most readily go astray because there are so many possible detours at these levels of lower achievement. That is why people need to study texts like the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra*, and not overemphasize these things. If spiritual practitioners do not study these texts, they can readily fall into repeating the mistakes of the yoga schools of India whose methods can produce all sorts of strange mystical effects that have nothing to do with genuine spiritual realization.

If we wish to speak of classifications of the stages of spiritual gong-fu such as this, you must recognize that even the furniture in front of you, this book, the sky above and everything else you see are *your* spiritual gong-fu. Because you can experience them, they are what you have earned, they are your *merit*, they are your *karma*, they are your *gong-fu*. Thus it is misleading to classify cultivation matters solely in terms of gong-fu because this sort of emphasis deals with form rather than the mind. Unfortunately, even though this sort of emphasis can be misleading, the stages of gong-fu we can chart are relevant to understanding the cultivation path, but their relevance is quite difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend.

The central point is that there are many ways to view cultivation matters, and measure spiritual progress. An aspiring practitioner must strive to understand all these alternative measuring systems and classification schemes, and all the various

dharma doors to enlightenment. It is ridiculous to stick your head in the sand and refuse to look at other spiritual traditions, or to believe that the spiritual teachings (indoctrination) of your own religious upbringing are the only valid ones. It is biased, prejudicial, foolish and illogical. Unfortunately in religion, rationality often goes out the window.

People today are typically attracted to the very lowest stages of spiritual phenomena because of the colorful stories about the gong-fu of opening your chakras and chi channels and so on. When seeking guidance to the stages of spiritual attainment that occur along the path to awakening and liberation, people become attracted to the biographical accounts of individuals who did not understand these processes at all.

Regrettably, people currently seem to think that the ultimate attainment in spirituality is awakening their kundalini, or the ability to perform astral projection, or opening all the chakras, or becoming able to read the Akashic chronicle (like the psychic Edgar Cayce), or achieving the state of nirvikalpa samadhi of yoga. All these things are quite materialistic in orientation, and are limited to the Desire Realm and the very lowest stages of the cultivation path. With this sort of materialistic emphasis, how can spiritual adherents ever hope to make real progress?

To understand the true path of spirituality one must really be able to understand all these various alternative ways of classifying matters, and one should also be able to readily correlate the stages of one spiritual system with the stages of another.

Each of these particular accomplishments is still a minor result of cultivation and can only be considered, at most, as establishing a good basis for the path. In themselves, they are not typical of any real spiritual accomplishment. Even if you were able to open all your chakras and chi channels and could astral project and go in and out of all sorts of samadhi, this still would not be the Tao. As Shakyamuni Buddha explained to his cousin Ananda, "Right at this very moment, even if you can attain all the possible samadhi you will still not end your mental defilements and achieve enlightenment." Even if you can reach all these advanced spiritual stages, if you cannot find the ultimate host who is experiencing all these things, you are still considered lost because you have not seen the Tao.

This is important information. In fact, this is revolutionary information, or "revelationary," since we are revealing all these secrets. The path of spiritual training has the one objective of enabling you to discover your original fundamental nature, your source essence, your real nature, your intrinsic source of mind. This is what the spiritual path is all about, and all the rest is just the scenery experienced along the way. You can call this source the Father, Jehovah, Buddha-nature, Allah, or whatever, but the important point is to cultivate away egoity – by cultivating emptiness – so

that only this original essence remains solitarily shining brightly through all your actions and efforts. That stage of selflessness, or union with God, is the “seeing the Tao” which we call “realizing our self-nature.”

If you cultivate and reach all sorts of samadhi realms and heavens but do not discover who is the ultimate host or master, who is the one standing prepositionally behind all the doing and seeing and experiencing, then you have not awakened and these other attainments are useless. You have to awaken to that fundamental one. To see the Tao and achieve a self-realization into your true self-nature is the one spiritual objective you should be seeking, so forget about any supposed ultimateness of samadhi realms and heavens and superpowers!

Whether you call this seeking becoming one with God, seeing the Tao, awakening to God's face, realizing the self-nature, attaining the dharmakaya or whatever, recognize that this objective is what the spiritual path is all about. This is the purpose of the path of spiritual training, and of all the schools in existence, the Zen school tells you this the most clearly.¹¹ Thus with all these possible by-roads you can take in spiritual practice, the question arises as to the most appropriate or valid means to cultivate for ultimately achieving this final objective.

¹ *The Relaxation Response*, Herbert Benson, (Avon Books, New York, 1976), p. 123.

² *The Relaxation Response*, Herbert Benson, (Avon Books, New York, 1976), pp. 131-132.

³ *Triadic Mysticism: The Mystical Theology of the Saivism of Kashmir*, Paul E. Murphy, (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi: India, 1986), p. 117.

⁴ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James, (Penguin Books, New York, 1985), pp. 408-409.

⁵ See: *Socrates and the Enlightenment Path*, William Bodri, (Red Wheel /Weiser, Boston, 2001).

⁶ See: *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramhansa Yogananda, (Crystal Clarity Publishers, Nevada City: California, 1995).

⁷ *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramhansa Yogananda, (Crystal Clarity Publishers, Nevada City: California, 1995), pp. 414-415.

⁸ *The Message That Comes From Everywhere*, Gary Beckwith, (The Harmony Institute, Huntington: Vermont, 2001), pp. 107.

9 See: *The Surangama Sutra*, trans. by Lu K'uan Yu, (B.I. Publications, New Delhi, India, 1978); *The Shurangama Sutra: The Fifty Skandha-Demon States*, Hsuan Hua, trans. by the Buddhist Text Translation Society, (Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, Burlingame: CA, 1996).

10 See, for example, the prints of Michael Maier within: *The Golden Game: Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century*, Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, (Thames and Hudson, London, 1988); *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens: Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems*, H.M.E. de Jong, (Nicholas-Hays, York Beach: Maine, 2002).

11 See, for instance: *Zen Teaching of Instantaneous Awakening*, Hui Hai, trans. by John Blofeld, (Buddhist Publishing Group, Devon: England, 1995); *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po on the Transmission of Mind*, trans. by John Blofeld, (Grove Press, New York, 1958); *The Transmission of the Mind Outside the Teaching*, trans. by Charles Luk, (Grove Press, New York, 1974).

9. A Few Legitimate Roads of Spiritual Practice

To help you choose amongst all the various cultivation practices of the world, it would be useful to review the ten broad classes of cultivation methods outlined by Shakyamuni as being inherent in the world's various spiritual traditions. These paths can help you achieve samadhi, but not complete enlightenment unless you also cultivate prajna transcendental wisdom.

You cultivate prajna by looking into the mind that is produced by the samadhi achievements, and cultivating the clarity of empty (nonsticking) awareness. In any spiritual state, you must always seek the seeker to find out who or what is doing the experiencing of that state. In other words, after you attain the stillness or emptiness of samadhi, you must still contemplate or investigate this mental state you have attained in order to eventually realize its ultimate origins.

Even though spiritual practitioners can attain the various cultivation ranks of samadhi which enable them to reach the Desire, Form and Formless Realms with ease, this still does not guarantee they have attained prajna wisdom. Cultivating prajna wisdom is the key to achieving complete enlightenment. This is what differentiates the practice of Buddhism from most other religions, and why the practice of Zen cannot be included within these ten Hinayana paths. Zen is the path of great prajna transcendental insight into the fundamental nature of the mind. It is the path of direct pointing and direct seeing into the true nature of mind and phenomena. It uses the method of no-method to penetrate directly into the Source.

As to the other spiritual schools of the world, Shakyamuni said that they commonly employed ten great roads of spiritual practice that can be used to help you progress towards the spiritual heights. These paths include the following:

- (1) Mindfulness of the Buddha practice, which like bhakti yoga, involves concentrating on a divine form such as Jesus, Buddha, Krishna or some other great virtuous deity, and then so identifying with the contemplation on a moment-by-moment basis that one enters into samadhi. "Mindfulness of the Buddha" is not a method restricted to Buddhism, but simply the name of the technique of mindfulness which uses the example of Buddha-focus as a means of spurring practice to one-pointed concentration. It is a method of mentally honoring and imitating an enlightened being, and seeking what he achieved from mind-moment to mind-moment, until one finally achieves that ultimate attainment himself.

- (2) Mindfulness of the Dharma (Teaching) practice, which like jnana yoga, involves arriving at samadhi through the road of logical analysis and mental investigation. Success in Dharma practice involves realizing that all teachings are but expedient means, and uses the road of understanding spiritual teachings to help you arrive at samadhi. When you can fathom the true nature of some spiritual teaching through insight analysis, and combine the results of your contemplation with your stage of meditative realization, this is Dharma practice, or Dharma mindfulness. It is to be aware of the dharma at every moment in time, such as to always recognize the inherent selflessness of phenomena, the emptiness of the ego, and the illusive nature of reality. This recognition will lead to detachment, and detachment leads to realization. Putting oneself in line with the Tao is Dharma practice, and eventually leads to self-realization.
- (3) Mindfulness of the Sangha practice, which involves relying upon an individual with spiritual attainment, as done in guru yoga, for cultivation instruction and guidance to reach an initial state of spiritual attainment. One derivative of Sangha mindfulness is to model oneself on an enlightened individual's behavior in order to try and match their stage of attainment. The ancient Indian story of the man who learned archery by imagining that he was one with his teacher illustrates this technique, as does the modern practice of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Neither can be correctly considered mindfulness of the Sangha practice, but since they involve changing or perfecting outward behavior through intense imitation of a powerful model, this merging of mind with a visualized model can be considered a form of regular person's samadhi. Mindfulness of the Sangha not only entails asking someone to help you achieve the Tao, but to imitate their stage of mental realization in hopes of achieving what they have achieved.
- (4) Mindfulness of Discipline and Virtue practice, such as that emphasized by the Confucian school and the early Greeks. This involves a constant introspection of one's mind and motivations so as to cut off mental faults and thereby attain samadhi. This spiritual road can also be called the Mindfulness of Morality practice. The practice of cessation and contemplation is also a form of morality mindfulness, and the Confucian practice of self-correction (so as to avoid moral mistakes and hurting others) falls within this category as well.
- (5) Mindfulness of Giving and Generosity practice, which like karma yoga and action yoga, entails the performance of good deeds and acts of charity in order to attain samadhi. You can attain the samadhi of mental peacefulness

by giving everything away – especially your thoughts – and through this route you can reach the stage of selfless charity that exhibits the Tao. This road of practice is particularly championed in Christianity, though it must also be accompanied by determined meditation efforts if an individual truly wishes to reach samadhi and the spiritual realms through this road. The practice of constant selflessness and renunciation through charity and giving is definitely a genuine spiritual path, but you must remember that it applies to the realm of the mind otherwise its application in the physical realm will only produce material rewards.

- (6) Mindfulness of Heaven (also known as Mindfulness of Deities) practice, as seen in Hinduism and Christian mysticism, which entails the use of good conduct and personal purification to rise to higher states of being. Once an individual becomes an inhabitant of the higher heavenly worlds, he or she then uses this more fortuitous stage of spiritual attainment to make upward progress in their cultivation. To reach this stage a person must cultivate purity of mind and outer virtue, so mindfulness of heaven is to some extent a samadhi practice.
- (7) Mindfulness of Breathing practice, such as anapana and pranayama, which involves entering the state of samadhi through breath control and breathing exercises. The most important aspect of this practice is to cultivate the state where your breathing naturally stops, and to then maintain this state for as long as possible to prepare the body for kundalini arousal. This is when your mind and breath will dissolve into one. This practice relies on the scientifically confirmed, physiological relationship between your breath and thoughts, which means that your chi and consciousness are linked (at least at the lowest stages of the path). Countless masters have achieved samadhi and superpowers through this road of practice because it is so quick and powerful. The Tibetan practice of tumo heat is one type of breathing practice that cultivates the wind element of the body. In fact, nearly all the esoteric techniques have breathing practices as their basis.
- (8) Mindfulness of Peacefulness or Relaxation practice, which basically involves resting yourself into the state of samadhi by perfectly relaxing both body and mind. You attain samadhi through this practice by imitating the peaceful nature of Nirvana enlightenment. To perform this sort of exercise, a person who makes himself comfortable watching television, and then forgets both mind and body, can even use this as a cultivation vehicle. This is not actually mindfulness of peace practice, but simply an example that demonstrates it is possible to make use of any available time

for making cultivation progress.

- (9) Mindfulness of the Body practice, which involves meditating on the unattractiveness or uncleanness of the body in order to attain the state of detachment that can lead to samadhi. This particular route is the basis of Hinayana Buddhism, and includes the famous shining white skeleton method of contemplation wherein you internally visualize that you are just a collection of shiny white bones. After this white bone visualization becomes stable, you must imagine that the bones become dust that blows away so that only emptiness remains. When you reach this stage of emptiness after attaining the one-pointedness, that is a true stage of spiritual attainment.

Finally, there is (10) Mindfulness of Death practice, which involves abandoning absolutely everything you cling to and thereby entering samadhi. Being mindful of the inevitability of death (as a spur to the practice maintaining awareness and letting go of everything) is an adjunct form of this type of cultivation. The after death bardo practices of Tibet are also a related form of this practice to be used by those who are passing away.

Whether you adopt this particular scheme for classifying cultivation exercises, or whether you belong to this or that particular religion or school of spiritual practice, is not the important point. It is useless to argue about any of these matters unless you practice meditation, and achieve some stage of samadhi realization and some degree of prajna wisdom.

To achieve this, the first thing you must do is cultivate spiritual practice, and here are ten great roads of practice to choose from which you can adapt to nearly any tradition. These practice roads all entail some form of meditation because meditation is the core method behind all spiritual achievement. If you are not practicing meditation, it is unfortunate but true that you will not be able to climb to any of the genuine ranks of spiritual attainment.

No matter what people or religions may claim as spiritual truth, the real, actual, genuine, authentic truth of spiritual matters will become personally known to you after you progress on the road of cultivation practice. You will not need a priest, rabbi, monk, guru or whatever as an intercessor or interpreter of the spiritual realms because you will discover the truth or falsity of dogma yourself through direct spiritual experience. This is what all the religious holy scriptures want you to accomplish. While some people may claim that direct experience of spiritual attainment is not necessary, they cannot honestly say that this final outcome is somehow wrong.

When you personally experience spiritual states of attainment, no one will be able to cheat you anymore for you will have developed the personal experiential perception that accompanies accomplishment on the ranks of cultivation. As you make progress in spiritual cultivation by mastering samadhi and transcendental insight, you will become able to discern which religious dogmas or injunctions are actually cultural relics, “skillful” or “expedient” teachings, non-denominational truths, errors of interpretation, or just plain nonsense. This knowledge and capability will paint you as a very dangerous person to the orthodoxy. However, you will shine as a beacon and spiritual light to those seeking sure guidance on the road to spiritual advancement.

At this point you will also understand what you can or cannot say to people on these matters. The honest truth will make some audiences uncomfortable, and can even land you in hot water yourself. If you sabotage your own ability to teach the truth by saying too much, this is not the exhibition of true spiritual wisdom at all. Many ancients realized this, which is why they did not say very much or expand the borders of established dogma when they were active within certain religious traditions. As to those revolutionaries who spoke of things as they were, we should note that Jesus was crucified, al-Hallaj was tortured, Milarepa and Bodhidharma were poisoned, Shakyamuni's life was threatened several times, Socrates was executed ... and on and on it goes.

People are not rational when it comes to spirituality or religion. They throw logic out of the window in this one area even while they demand it in all other areas of life. They want to believe what they are told rather than have to do the work of testing matters, and prefer the lazy road of blind faith which absolves them of the responsibility of cultivation practice.

We also know that people will carefully protect the frailty of order within their world view by persecuting “heretics,” and as someone with knowledge will represent a threat to their tidy situation, a realized practitioner will have to exercise caution about what he or she does – especially if they threaten or simply challenge the establishment sources of adulation, income or power. If you cultivate prajna wisdom you will readily understand these principles of human behavior, and you will also understand what you can reveal to others in the world and how you should act so as not to become a target of elimination.

On the path of spiritual practice – no matter what your religious sect or training – you must be especially careful to avoid holding onto some pre-conceived notions when you encounter a meditative experiential realm. Not abandoning these notions will bias your search for truth and inhibit the possible attainment of higher realization. As the Zen school instructs us, “Just drop everything and see what it all turns out to be!” This is always the correct way to practice spiritual cultivation.

In fact when you think about it, what other practice can be more ontologically valid than this one? Abandoning preconceptions and resting the mind is actually the only valid, scientific path there is. If something is really so, abandoning your preconceptions will not change what is true and so you can put aside your fears that you will end up disturbing things or creating a falsity through mental resting. If you do discover some new truth through this sort of practice, it will give you a chance to correct any misconceptions you had succumbed to, which is what you would want to do in the first place. This form of learning and self-correction constitutes the normal process of growing, and so this type of relinquishment and moving forward is not something that we can criticize. It is an authentic means of spiritual practice.

In olden times, people would never explain things in this fashion. They would skip these topics entirely, and simply emphasize that your mind should remain natural and rest without developing expectations. Those instructions might have been sufficient enough in the past. Today, however, we have too many competing paths in front of us, and too much confusion. Thus we need to shed some clarity on these matters.

Today we must say that what is “really so” must in the ultimate sense exist without any preconceived notions, especially since dogmas did not even exist prior to the founding of religion – including *your* religion! The Tao should exist whether we recognize it or not, and since all are of the Tao, all should be able to achieve it. There should not be any partiality in terms of the potential of spiritual liberation, other than the fact that people can choose to, or choose not to spiritually cultivate, and it is the ones who practice who will ultimately succeed in realizing the Tao. But it is nonsense to believe that only a particular group is destined for “spiritual salvation” by virtue of membership within that group, for spiritual ascendancy all comes down to your own cultivation efforts.

Stop and think about this for a moment. If a particular dogma was not known prior to the founding of a religion, was it propositionally existent? If everyone and everything shares in the same original nature or “God-stuff,” is it not logical that they all have the same potential for spiritual liberation, and that it cannot be the privy of one particular group? People accept the revelations of one religion (usually the one they are born into) as the truth, but does that make the revelations of other spiritual paths less truthful? Are not spiritual transmissions better explained as the expedient, or skillful teachings of sages who awaken, rather than ultimate messages from above (which is why not everyone can receive these things)? What makes a religion ontologically valid in the first place? And if people think that their religion is the navel of the world or universe, and the one ultimate truth, how long would this type of assumption last if civilized life on other planets was discovered with its own advanced forms of spiritual practice?

The real essence of spiritual cultivation is to cultivate emptiness of discrimination, and thereby climb the ranks of samadhi and wisdom by “just seeing what everything turns out to be.” This non-denominational, non-sectarian, non-assumptive approach is an authentic ontological path that does not assume any particular end results. Therefore, it can and will ultimately arrive at what is really so. It is the only valid way of arriving at the Truth we call God, Tao, dharmakaya, Brahman or Heaven. When you meditate, you must therefore drop holding onto your thoughts and instead just watch them as if you were a third person outside observer. Eventually your mind will calm down and open from this sort of detachment practice, and you will eventually be able to “contemplate mind.” This, therefore, is a quite proper road of spiritual practice.

As some final advice, you must remember that true cultivation is not limited to meditation, for its ultimate relevance appears only in the world of behavior. This does not just refer to the fact that your stage of spiritual realization is only expressed in your everyday affairs, which means bringing the results of your meditation into your post meditation state. Rather, it means that Buddhas are only Buddhas because, out of compassion, they voluntarily step into the uncomfortable human condition to undertake difficult tasks for the welfare of humanity. If they did not choose to teach and interact with others, they would simply be professional meditators who would achieve the Tao and then abandon the human realm forever. Why would they choose to come down to this low level Desire Realm world, and suffer on behalf of people, if this was not the enlightenment path?

Cultivation means you have to go out and participate in the world with virtue, and try to establish beneficial effects in society. You must exhibit compassion and undertake difficult or troublesome acts of charity to help other beings – the things that need to be done that no one wants to do. This is the relevance of the spiritual path and spiritual cultivation, for cultivation enables you to accomplish this by giving you the energy, power and wisdom to succeed in these affairs. Spiritual cultivation ensures that your actions achieve positive results, and are more effective than usual.

Someone who believes they have achieved the highest states of samadhi and wisdom, but who has not altered their outward actions and behavior, has not really achieved anything at all. The only true proof of deep and lasting spiritual achievement is when someone changes their behavior. This is why there are many “professional meditators” in the world, stationed in forests and caves, who are afraid to enter the world and who are absolutely useless when it comes to mundane matters. They can neither be a king nor a commoner since they do not know how to “cook the rice” of mundane affairs in every day life. Even though we may call them “masters,” their behavior indicates they have not achieved enlightenment.

The Tao is always here and will always be here, but it is how we put it into effect – it is how we use the functioning aspect of the original nature – that makes us either a hero or a shallow individual. How individuals use their transcendental wisdom in the positions of guest or host is the key to being able to help humanity, as well as the key for reaching the highest states of cultivation attainment. This is what sets the enlightened apart from others, and distinguishes a “saint” from a “sinner.”

Sometimes the world requires individuals who are saints without blemishes, and sometimes it requires realized individuals who are a combination of Buddha, Mafia boss, hero and thief. This may seem like an unusual combination, but at times the Mafioso and thief are the only ones who will be able to save the world by getting things done. Sometimes a country needs an enlightened king as a ruler, sometimes it needs just an ordinary individual, sometimes it needs a politician who knows how to broker deals and compromises. Sometimes it might even need a dictator, so who can say that only one way is right? Because of karma, people usually get what they deserve or need. This principle works for nations as well.

With this in mind, do not slight the different religions and paths of the world because of the variances in their inner dogmas or outward appearances. Appreciate them all because each fulfills a unique need for individuals with certain types of karma. Since religions and spiritual paths are all designed to help people progress in their personal cultivation, then as long as they champion virtue, purity of mind, and the absence of desire, they are all useful – as long as they embody the principle of balance. But you should suspect that things are not right when you encounter strangeness and eccentricity. When a people adopts ideas such as that killing others is a religious deed, this is actually not a religious path. This type of deviation is a function of political machinations rather than of balanced spiritual practice and self-realization.

According an equal respect to the various spiritual paths of the world is the correct way to approach this great matter of the science of life, which is the search for enlightenment and spiritual self-realization. There are so many paths available to you. In all of them, however, you must cultivate virtue and merit which are demonstrated (reflected) in your thoughts and behavior. And, you must cultivate samadhi and wisdom to search for the origin of your mind and life. That origin is the same as the origin of the universe since matter and mind have the same fundamental source. Essentially, it is *This One* you want to find on the spiritual path no matter whether you call it God, Brahman, Allah, the Tao, dharmakaya, Source nature, First Principle or whatever. Spiritual cultivation is just a way to help you realize *This One*, and to discard the blemishes that prevent you from a full living union with the source.

If you succeed in finding this ultimate thing – this ultimate host or master – then you will have achieved some degree of spiritual salvation or liberation. This is the meaning of enlightenment, getting the Tao, or self-realization. There are many stages to this spiritual striving that we have described in other books, so you must also recognize that there are various possible degrees of this realization. This is one thing that has separated the various saints and sages. The objective of this book has not been to go into these matters, but to review the various cultivation paths, and the ways in which you might go astray on these paths. There are a variety of good and bad practices among the world's various spiritual traditions, and in becoming familiar with all this material you are better qualified to avoid becoming a muddled meditator.

Beware of these deviations. If you fall into spiritual potholes, the result will be that you will end up as a confused spiritual practitioner. Hence if you need some guidance and lack a good teacher, look to the Tao school to explain the inner gong-fu of the path. Islam can remind you of the daily discipline required of spiritual cultivation practice, and Christianity and Confucianism offer admirable examples of virtuous behavior and good deeds to emulate. Buddhism can teach you the path of prajna wisdom and clearly guide you through the experiential realms of spiritual attainment. In short, all the religious paths have something good to offer.

The scientific attitude of Vedic culture – to prove things through personal experience – is also a core principle of the spiritual path and spiritual practice. All this commentary comes down to your own personal spiritual liberation achieved through your own experiential tasting. It is all about attaining the *personal experience* of enlightened realization by cultivating the steps of spiritual practice yourself.

As this commentary has tried to demonstrate, attaining personal enlightenment is a function of cultivating the steps of spiritual practice and virtuous behavior. By avoiding deviant pathways, discarding religious preconceptions, and clearing your mind, you will be better positioned to attain the objective of enlightenment. Now you know some of the things you should do, and some of the things you must avoid, to attain this greatest of all objectives. You now know some of the world's best and worst spiritual paths and practices.

Other Books of Interest

If you enjoyed this short text, you might be interested in other related works by the authors:

Translated Works of Zen and Esoteric Master Nan Huai-Chin:

- Grass Mountain: A Seven Day Intensive in Ch'an Training with Master Nan Huai-Chin***, trans. by Margaret Yuan and Janis Walker, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1986).
- Tao and Longevity***, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1991).
- Working Toward Enlightenment***, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1993).
- To Realize Enlightenment***, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1994).
- The Story of Chinese Zen***, trans. by Thomas Cleary, (Charles E. Tuttle, Boston, 1995).
- Basic Buddhism: Exploring Buddhism and Zen***, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1997).
- The Insider's Guide to the Best and Worst Spiritual Paths and Practices***, co-author William Bodri, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
- The Story of Chinese Taoism***, trans. by William Brown, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).

Books by William Bodri:

- Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation: A Handbook for Entering Samadhi***, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1998).
- Socrates and the Enlightenment Path***, (Red Wheel/Weiser, Boston, 2001).
- Kuan Tzu's Supreme Secrets for the Global CEO***, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
- The Insider's Guide to the Best and Worst Spiritual Paths and Practices***, co-author Nan Huai-Chin, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
- The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience***, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
- How to Measure and Deepen Your Spiritual Realization: A Short Multi-disciplinary Course on Evaluating and Elevating Your Meditation Progress and Spiritual Experiences***, co-author Nan Huai-Chin, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).

If we had to recommend just two books for getting started on the path of spiritual practice, we would recommend ***Tao and Longevity*** and ***Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation*** from this list. The first book explains the relevant terminology of the spiritual path, as well as the various stages of spiritual practice and the gong-fu that you will experience as you make spiritual progress. The second book explains twenty-five different meditation methods, along with why and how they work, which you might use to get started on the spiritual path. Both works are absolutely, without compare, the most advanced texts of their type in the world.

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