THE CONTEMPLATIVE IDIOM IN CHAN BUDDHIST RHETORIC AND INDIAN AND CHINESE ALCHEMY

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ABSTRACT

The first chapter is an analysis of the rhetorical and transformative functions of language in Chan Buddhist rhetoric. It begins with a critique of the traditional category of “mysticism” as used to describe religious traditions defined by a focus upon “mystical experience” as an extraordinary psychological state that is phenomenologically similar across traditions. It proposes a different typology for identifying these types of traditions that refers to their similar rhetorical idiom of contemplation and transformation of consciousness. The case of Chan Buddhism is examined to illustrate how this contemplative idiom functions rhetorically to create and contest authority, and how it works to frame an alternate conception of reality and lead the practitioner to instantiate that conception by transforming his apprehension of reality.

The second chapter is an exposition and examination of the religious phenomenon of alchemy, specifically as manifested in the traditions of India and China. It argues that alchemy is not a single, continuous global phenomenon, but rather a peculiar set of instances of contemplative language applied to certain commonly observed material processes. It concludes that each case of alchemy is an independent use of a peculiar idiom to express specific cultural values, but that the parallel material processes involved necessarily produce certain similarities in each instance.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matthew Lee Duperon was born December 24, 1980 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion from The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia in May 2003. He will receive his Master of Arts degree from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York in August 2006, and begin work on his PhD in Religious Studies from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island in September 2006. On August 13, 2005 he and Jennifer M. Filanowski married one another in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CONTEMPLATIVE IDIOM AND CHAN BUDDHIST RHETORIC

Introduction

The study of mysticism is dominated by questions about the constitution of the mystical experience. These questions are further divided by preoccupations with what is truly mystical and what is the nature of experience. Most theorists assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that the *sine qua non* of mysticism is the relatively rare event in which individual consciousness appears to merge in radical unity with some absolute principle of the universe.

The problem with this approach is that it places undue emphasis on what is really only one part of very rich traditions of religious expression. In locating the "essence" of mysticism (or even religion in general) in private experience, unapproachable by the outside observer, the external social and cultural facets of the tradition are obscured. In this essay I hope to convey a sense of "mystical experience" as the total socio-cultural process of contemplation and transformation lived by the mystic. This process takes place entirely within the social, cultural and political matrix of the mystic's tradition and may or may not include a climactic experience of unitive consciousness. It certainly does include the total life experience and amalgam of factors that inform and transform the practitioner's apprehension and appreciation of reality, as well as the substantive effects that flow out into the world of human relationships from the values articulated by that process of change.

Because the idiom of contemplation and transformation of the adept's conception of reality plays a significant role in the articulation of many cultural values in these traditions, I will adopt the convention of calling them contemplative traditions

rather than mystical. I use the term contemplation to mean a sustained and intentional process of mental organization that seeks to reorient the practitioner's mind to a particular apprehension of reality that is presented as qualitatively different from his or her mundane understanding of the world.[1] This moniker is descriptive of the more salient socio-cultural features of the tradition, while at the same time avoiding the narrowly conceived and often pejorative denotations of mysticism.

We have come to use the word mysticism to describe this class of traditions because the word mystery—from which the term mysticism is derived—denotes a concept that seems to defy intellectual understanding or even positive definition—much the same as the so-called "mystical experience." Working from the account given by Michel de Certeau, Richard King notes that the Greek root *mūstikos* in the context of early and medieval Christian theology was a multivalent term referring to the hidden revelation of God in scripture, liturgy, and contemplation.[2] The Protestant ideals of the transparency and literal truth of scripture eventually gave rise to the notion of the mystical as a separate genre of allegorical literature.[3] As empirical, objective science defined itself against subjective religious speculation, the mystical became wholly associated with the religious sphere.[4] In the modern era, defined as it is by Enlightenment values, this distinction—between religious (mystical) and scientific, subjective and objective, public and private—was deepened and adopted in the power dynamics that excluded religion from the public sphere.[5] Located squarely within the realm of the private, mysticism subsequently became associated almost

[1] That is, reality with a small *r*. If there is a Reality, it is not my place here to prove what it is, and I am concerned only with reality as constructed by cultural consensus (which may, incidentally, be *presented* as Reality).
[2] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East,'* (London: Routledge, 1999), 14-15.
[3] Ibid., 15.
[4] Ibid., 17-18 and *passim*.
[5] Ibid., 20-24.

exclusively with the private experience of extraordinary states of consciousness. Subsequent scholars have therefore focused on the "mystical event" itself, variously defined, as the most interesting aspect of contemplative traditions.

King mounts a powerful and persuasive campaign against our privileging the phenomenology of private experience in the study of religion. There is no way for a scholar to know the character of any individual's private inner experience except his own, so King's point is well taken. The way scholars of mysticism have used the term experience is also problematic. Robert Sharf notes that private awareness of some sensation or mental phenomenon is only one possible definition of experience, and just as valid a definition is the simple fact of participating in or living through some situation.[6] In this sense, the experience of an individual could be the sum of her lived interactions with material and social situations. Experience thus defined does not privilege private introspective states, but rather recognizes the various social and cultural realities in a given context. It recognizes that the quality of experience is a product of both the material realities of the socio-historical complex and the system of cultural valences that brings meaning and coherence to those realities. I will therefore use this definition of experience throughout this essay. I will also argue that this more public understanding of experience can still be accurately characterized as transcendent in many of the same ways that private experience can be.

At this point we should ask if experience—however it be defined—is an appropriate concept to use in analyzing contemplative traditions? It is true that even in the more comprehensive meaning of broad experience given above, the experiencer has some private inner sensation of what her participation in or living through an event *is like*. This sensation, however, need not be individually accounted for to give an

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[6] Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 47 (1995): 265. See also Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, 94-116 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

adequate understanding of the experience. Further, even though the experiencer is, theoretically, an individual, he or she is not a *unique* individual, but only the abstraction of any given individual existing within a given context. Since the theoretical experiencer could really be any person existing in the context under examination, and because the subjective sensual quality of the experience is not under examination, the experience is eminently public, and cannot therefore, "[elude] public scrutiny."[7]

By using this broad definition of experience I do not deny the fact that certain individuals may encounter extraordinary inner states, but rather I avoid making those inaccessible states the focus of my inquiry. I will characterize the contemplative project in general as a process of transforming experience from a mode informed by the adept's socio-cultural "webs of significance" (to use Weber's terminology) to one informed by the webs of significance generated and sustained by the rhetoric, ritual and doctrine of his tradition. The realms of meaning and value associated with this new mode of experience may be (and indeed usually are) very different from the adept's original conventional mode of experience—even to the point of making him seem to be operating on a different plane of reality than his unenlightened fellows. In fact, if the values and meanings imparted by the tradition's conception of enlightenment or spiritual awakening are constructed specifically and conscientiously as transcending conventional modes of awareness, and if the contemplative adept succeeds in integrating these values and meanings as ordering principles of his experience, then we can reasonably say that the new experience is indeed transcendent.

I should also note that I do not assume that every person involved in a contemplative tradition is necessarily engaged directly with the "contemplative project." I define a contemplative tradition as such only by its use of the idiom of

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[7] Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 265.

contemplative transformation, as well as the general cultural resonance of such an idiom. In order for this idiom to be invested with such deep significance, however, I contend that there must also be a certain consensus within the tradition that these practices are "real"—that is, that transformation can and does (or at least did at some point) happen, that it can be sought, and that it is an ideal that commands a high social or cultural value. In this respect it is important to understand how a tradition conceives of the potential for transformation, the means by which transformation can be effected, and the meaning and effects of that transformation. These values are often articulated in terms of personal consciousness, so it will often be necessary to examine them on those terms.

A contemplative tradition itself defines the pattern of meaning and value that orders transformed experience, and the tradition also defines the scope of authority accorded to those who are verified as having succeeded in the transformation. The articulation of these definitions is thus an important site for contesting and creating authority. Because these are public methods of authorization, the most important factor in determining an individual's level of attainment is public consensus that he is so accomplished. This is why Robert Sharf notes that, "in traditional Chinese Buddhist literature, [terms analogous to Japanese *satori* or *kensho*] are used to denote the full comprehension and appreciation of central Buddhist tenets such as emptiness, Buddha-nature, or dependent origination."[8] This appraisal of terms that were understood in previous scholarly literature as denoting extraordinary inner experience requires only that the adept fully understand the implications of Buddhist doctrine, and not that he have some private experience that provides empirical verification of that doctrine.

[8] Ibid., 249.

Sharf also characterizes what was once conceived of as meditative practice in terms of ritual instead. He asserts that, "traditional Chan and Zen practice was oriented not towards engendering 'enlightenment' experiences, but rather to perfecting the ritual performance of Buddhahood."[9] It is important to note that Sharf does not seek to portray traditional Buddhist monastic practice as "hollow" or "degenerate" ritualization of the Buddha's actual contemplative endeavor. Instead, he allows that the ritual recitation of prescriptive meditation texts served as an "instantiation of Buddhahood."[10] If Sharf accurately describes such ritual as instantiation, ritual is then the representation of an actual instance of Buddhahood.[11] While this may not necessarily entail an extraordinary personal experience, it does entail an articulation of Buddhist soteriology. In a contemplative tradition as I have defined it—like Buddhism for example—this soteriology is understood in terms of the rhetoric of transformation.

Doctrine and practice—the effective means by which a tradition articulates its definition of transformation—must, therefore, be appreciated in light of the dynamics of power within the tradition. Likewise, the rhetoric of transcendence, ineffability, and noesis that sculpt the features and significance of transformed experience must also be seen in this light. By moving away from subjective sensual experience as the locus of religion we are accepting religion as an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of lived experience, and recognizing that it affects many other aspects of that experience just as it is itself so affected.

The class of traditions to be labeled contemplative are best conceived as ones whose ostensive goals are broad experiences of reality ordered in a way that is qualitatively different than that of ordinary experience. This difference allows a new

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[9] Ibid., 243.
[10] Ibid., 258.
[11] *Oxford New American Dictionary*, s.v. "Instantiation."

mode of understanding and is also beyond the scope of ordinary conceptualization (though, as we will see, not beyond the scope of conceptualization in general). The experience is therefore accurately characterized by its noetic and ineffable qualities. The traditions which seek these transformations all represent established technologies by which normal modes of conceptualization are deconstructed and replaced with modes that the traditions themselves effectively shape and inform. The articulation of the meaning of transformation itself as well as the ordering principles of transformed experience are malleable, contestable issues that admit to evaluation in terms of their total socio-cultural significance. We can rightfully group these traditions together because of the similar rhetorical and practical trope of contemplative transformation. The private mental experience of individuals within these traditions may or may not be phenomenally similar to the experience of participants in other traditions, but the issue of their psycho-physical similarity is irrelevant to discussions of cultural significance.[12] The issue of these psycho-physical effects is of great relevance to our understanding of the brain and the processes of cognition in general, but for that very reason it belongs more to the disciplines of neurobiology, psychology, and philosophy of mind than to the history of religions.

It is my goal in this essay, therefore, to provide a characterization of the contemplative project that can appreciate its goals and methods as an elegant, congruous whole, rather than a baffling mystery. I will apply this scheme to some features of Chan Buddhism to illustrate how Chan can be fruitfully understood as a contemplative tradition. I will begin by presenting a brief review of the most

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[12] Irrelevant, that is, until claims of identity or authority are made on the basis of purported similarity between private experiences. These discussions, like many discussions that locate religion purely within the realm of personal experience, are essentially theological and therefore represent subjects for analysis by scholars of religion, but are not themselves instances of such scholarly analysis. For more on this point, see Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

important Western scholarly literature on mysticism, and extract from it the features most salient to the discussion. As Richard King and others have shown, much of the work in this area is problematic, but if we approach it critically, armed with a less value-laden concept of experience, the material can provide useful information. I will then analyze the contemplative project in terms of its rhetorical features of transformation and ineffability, and draw appropriate examples from the case of Chan Buddhism.

The Jamesian Paradigm

Much of the important Western philosophical work done on mysticism begins with reference to the account William James gives in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. James, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the basis of religion could be found in the individual's experience thereof. To be fair, James centered his work on *varieties* of religious experience for a reason. He held that there is not one distinctly and uniquely religious emotion or feeling, nor is there one distinctly and uniquely religious object of such an emotion.[13] He also acknowledged the exterior world of religious institutions, but for the purposes of the lectures which make up the *Varieties* confines himself to a definition of religion as, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider to be the divine."[14] The divine, furthermore, is not necessarily understood as a personal deity, but rather the general placeholder for that which prompts the aforementioned feelings, acts, and experiences.

[13] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Edition*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 27.
[14] Ibid., 29-30.

More recent scholarship in the field has shown us that this focus on individual experience is more the product of Western Protestant prerogatives of personal conviction than of phenomenological actuality. Proudfoot, Sharf and King especially have been active in disabusing scholars of this outmoded primacy of individual experience.[15] As I noted above, Richard King has called into question the validity of the very category of mysticism on these grounds. He and other scholars have successfully illustrated the way in which Christianity retroactively constructed a mystical tradition by applying the typology of transcendent inner awareness to an array of saints and Church fathers, now regarded as the "great mystics."[16] It is therefore very problematic to appropriate ideas about mysticism into a discussion of contemplative traditions.

It would be irresponsible to simply throw out all of the scholarship conducted on mysticism, and there is much that can be confidently drawn from a cautious reading of this work. For instance, although figures like Meister Eckhardt and St. Theresa of Avila may not have self-consciously belonged to a cohesive Christian contemplative tradition, the fact remains that the literature they produced made use of a contemplative idiom, and that is enough to qualify them for membership in such an analytic typology. Furthermore, this category is merely an interpretive tool, used to understand how these traditions articulated meaning and value in broadly similar ways. It is not part of a rhetoric of marginalization or devaluation as was often the case with the category of mysticism. Scholarship on mysticism that cites the examples of Meister Eckhardt or St. Theresa of Avila, then, can still be utilized in so far as it elucidates these figures' use or understanding of contemplative tropes. What will not

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[15] See Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985); Sharf and King, op. cit.
[16] King, *Orientalism*, 17-18, citing Certeau.

be useful in such accounts is any evaluation made of the quality of Eckhardt's or Theresa's interior mental states.

Furthermore, although religious traditions are not reducible to private mental states, religious traditions are nevertheless composed of individuals—and those individuals do have private mental states. In order to understand the cultural situation and historical trajectory of a tradition or the multifarious significance of a certain religious phenomenon, it is often necessary to understand the "moods and motivations" (to use Geertz's terminology) of individuals. This is not to say that one must account for the emotions and desires of any particular individual, only that one must account for the significance of the phenomenon under investigation in terms of its function and significance vis-à-vis the moods and motivations of individuals in general, insofar as those moods and motivations constitute the lived reality of the tradition. Although this terminology and orientation is taken from the work of Clifford Geertz[17], my methodological stance is more closely informed by the work of Jonathan Z. Smith.

Smith describes religion as a, "mode of constructing worlds of meaning," and religious studies as the humanistic project of interpreting those worlds of meaning.[18] What I have termed contemplative traditions possess two distinct worlds of meaning: the conventional world experienced in terms of contextual socio-cultural meaning, and the "transcendent" world experienced in terms of the values instantiated by doctrine and practice. Since the transcendent world is exalted as a soteriological goal, the transformation from one perspective to the other is a mark of religious authority. The two worlds of meaning also coexist within the same material context and as such the concepts that define each will necessarily be interconnected. The doctrine and

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[17] See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
[18] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 290.

practice of the contemplative tradition serves to draw the boundaries between these two worlds of meaning, but the form and development of that tradition is necessarily influenced by (and indeed influences) its socio-cultural context. As we will see, however, this fact does not preclude the transcendent world from being practically transcendent.

The individualist nature of James' study leads him to search for, "the essence of religious experiences . . . in those religious experiences which are most one-sided, exaggerated, and intense."[19] He eventually comes to regard the mystical experience as the religious experience par excellence for these very reasons. He identifies four essential characteristics of all mystical experiences: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. Although James' project is informed by the problematic notions of religion as personal feeling and a cohesive mystical tradition, his observation of the primary qualities of noesis and ineffability in mystical experience is apt. There is indeed rhetoric of ineffability and noetic quality in contemplative discourse, but we must examine these features as cultural and linguistic elements rather than phenomenological descriptions.

Although James did not consider himself a mystic, and indeed remarks, "my own constitution shuts me out from their [mystical states'] enjoyment almost entirely,"[20] he did have some vaguely similar experiences with nitrous oxide. These experiences led him to the unswerving conviction that, "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different."[21] He also characterizes this potential form of consciousness as producing a feeling, an insight, "as if the opposites

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[19] James, *Varieties*, 40.
[20] Ibid., 294.
[21] Ibid., 300.

of the world . . . were melted into unity."[22] This characterization is significant because it belies much of what is important for understanding the function of the transcendent state. James tends to think of altered states of consciousness as distinctly different worlds, but there is really no need for such a strict ontological division. What James perceives as a different form of consciousness—one that is somehow ontologically different than normal consciousness—is simply a different way of experiencing the world using the same consciousness. In his case, this may be due to a change in neural function due to the effects of nitrous oxide, or in the case of a contemplative practitioner it could be due to a change in the structure of her entire conceptual apparatus. James' case, however, does not bear directly on this discussion because it is purely an interior, chemically induced state—whereas the contemplative case is an example of broad, identifiable changes in patterns of signification. What is important to take from James is the notion that the transcendent world of meaning is indeed different from the mundane world of meaning, and that it is different in such a way as to be justifiably described in terms of its noetic content and ineffability. That is, if the transformative project of a contemplative tradition is specifically oriented towards instantiating systems of significance that are incompatible—logically or otherwise—with ordinary systems of significance, then such a mode of experience would have to escape the grasp of ordinary, logically consistent language. Likewise, it naturally would engender a feeling of special insight because the adept's transformed apprehension or appreciation of reality would be fundamentally different than it previously was.

James effectively set the modern standard for what is to be considered mysticism or mystical experience, and most subsequent work was devoted to further classifying mysticism so defined into various types or "genres." Scholars like Evelyn

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[22] Ibid., 301.

Underhill, Rudolph Otto and R. C. Zaehner[23] followed this pattern and as such I will not engage their work directly other than to note their place in the scholarly tradition of ascribing the essence of mysticism to narrow experience. The work of W. T. Stace[24] has been very influential in the study of mysticism, and although much of it has now been discredited, most recent studies in mysticism at least make reference to his conception of mysticism. Stace's enduring legacy would seem to be his classification of mysticism into the two typologies of introvertive or extrovertive mysticism. These categories refer to the differences in phenomenal quality Stace perceives in different accounts of extraordinary personal experiences. Although this typology has been very influential, it does not help us understand the contextual reality of contemplation, so it is not necessary to explore the argument at length. More recent efforts of scholars in religious studies will be more helpful.

Language and Its Use in Contemplative Traditions

Much of the recent debate amongst scholars of mysticism centers on the epistemological status of the so-called mystical event. The major bone of contention is the question of whether the experience of a mystical event is mediated or unmediated by the mystic's previous sociolinguistic background, conceptual framework, and religious intentions. The brunt of this debate focuses on the phenomenological character of mystical states of consciousness, and is thus subject to the same criticism of such a focus on narrow experience raised by scholars like Richard King and Robert Sharf. Fortunately, this area of scholarship does engage

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[23] See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness,* (New York: Meridian, 1955); Rudolph Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, (New York: Collier, 1962); and R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961).
[24] See Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1960).

more fully with the contextual reality of mystical traditions, even if its focus on private experience is misplaced. As such, it has many implications for the role of language in contemplative traditions, so it is here that I will begin my analysis.

The two rival factions in the heated debate over mediation are the contextualists and the decontextualists.[25] The contextualists, whose most outspoken proponent is Steven Katz, hold that there is a plurality of mystical experiences and that each is constructed within the socio-cultural milieu of the mystic. The mystic's relevant contextual circumstances can be literally any and all experiences she has had prior to the experience of the mystical state, but the most important are her tradition's conception of reality and its soteriological doctrines, all of which function linguistically.[26] The decontextualists, whose most outspoken proponent is Robert Forman, hold that the key event of mystical consciousness (often referred to as the Pure Consciousness Event or PCE) is absolutely devoid of all mental objects and therefore cannot be mediated in any way. Additionally, because the nature of consciousness itself is presumably an identical characteristic of all human minds, the experience of pure consciousness must also be identical in every occurrence, thus reviving the perennialist position of Huxley and others.

The main thesis of the contextualist school is argued most forcefully in Steven Katz's 1979 essay, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." Katz characterizes this essay as a, "plea for the recognition of differences," and attempts to bring into greater relief the important contextual differences among the several traditions

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[25] These groups of scholars are also popularly referred to as the constructivists and perennial philosophers, respectively. I use the terms with which Steven Katz and Robert Forman self identify (Katz, *Mysticism and Language*, 5, 34 n. 9; Forman, *The Innate Capacity*, 1998, 3). Forman also endorses the term, "perennial psychology," but I prefer the symmetry of contextualism/decontextualism (Forman, *The Innate Capacity*, 6).
[26] Steven Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 62 and *passim*. For a discussion of some possible *pre*-linguistic mediating factors see Robert Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999), 55-79.

commonly lumped together as mystical.[27] This is a worthwhile project in that it begins to address the need for contextual detail in the study of such traditions, but unfortunately Katz's focus still rests squarely on the narrow experience of mystics. By emphasizing the constructed nature of that experience, however, Katz opens the door for a more general theory of broad experience in contemplative traditions.

Katz's main complaint against the previous treatments of mysticism is that they do not make a clear enough distinction between interpretation and experience. Katz holds the strong Neo-Kantian epistemological stance that the very nature of experience is that it is interpreted:

> *"There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, nor any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways."[28]

This is a strong statement, and one for which Katz has received due criticism. As elaborated in his essay, Katz's approach leads to the conclusion that individual instances of mystical consciousness are not only formed by the "starting problems" and spiritual goals of the mystic's religious tradition, but that the experience itself is completely shaped by the interpretive mechanism of the mystic's mind. This account, however, is problematic.

Katz unqualifiedly states that the data drawn from mystics' reports of their experiences give no indication, "nor any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated." As Richard King and Donald Rothberg have noted, this approach is problematic because it imposes a modern Neo-Kantian view of knowledge and the

[27] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 25.
[28] Ibid., 26.

mind onto traditions quite distant in both space and time.[29] Although Katz finds no grounds for believing any experience is unmediated, he also provides no evidence for believing that his epistemology is universally standard. As Richard King notes, the rise of post-Kantian epistemologies in the West has its own historical causes, and is just as much a product of cultural power dynamics as any other conceptual category.[30] According to the tenets of social constructivism, moreover, our modern post-Kantian conception of knowledge and reality is just as constructed as any other—and therefore just as contingent and relative.

The decontextualists, however, argue that there is in fact good reason to believe that the mystics' experiences are unmediated. Robert Forman does not reject a Neo-Kantian epistemology in general, but describes the common process among mystics of deconstructing their automated interpretive responses and systematically "forgetting" linguistic structures that order their perception.[31] If we believe that our ordinary consciousness is fundamentally ordered by these structures (à la Katz's account), then it stands to reason that their removal would yield a supernormal consciousness void of all such distinctions. In Forman's account, such a contentless experience could only result in one thing: an experience of consciousness *per se*, the PCE.[32]

Some twenty years earlier, Katz commented on this issue by saying this process was more accurately described as a *re*construction rather than a *de*construction of consciousness.[33] The meaning Katz had in mind seems to be that the deconstructive process *seems* to deconstruct the mediating apparatus, but because he holds that there

[29] King, *Orientalism*, 171-175; and Donald Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. Robert Forman, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 172-175.
[30] King, *Orientalism*, 169-182.
[31] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 95-107.
[32] Forman, *The Innate Capacity*, 7.
[33] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 57.

can be no experience without such mediation, in reality a new apparatus must be constructed out of the religious aspirations and expectations of the adept. The problem with this account is that it assumes a ubiquitous and inescapable epistemology of mediation, which many contemplative traditions specifically reject. Donald Evans has argued that, because scholars do not have access to the private mental phenomena of mystics, it is impossible for them to either confirm or deny the possibility of a "pure" or unmediated experience of consciousness.[34] Katz himself uses the inaccessibility of interior mental states to argue that mystics cannot legitimately confirm the immediacy of other mystics' experiences, and that it is thus unreasonable to make cross-cultural identifications of mystical phenomena.[35] Katz does concede, however, that the mystic's reconstructed consciousness is a, "new, unusual, and perhaps altogether more interesting form of conditioned-contextual consciousness."[36] Because Katz simply assumes that there are no unmediated experiences, he can dogmatically proclaim that this transformed consciousness is still governed in some way by mediating categories. I contend, however, along with a great many of Katz's critics, that there is no reason to privilege a culturally-conditioned neo-Kantian epistemology to the complete exclusion of other epistemologies, especially when contemplative traditions often go to great lengths to articulate their own theories of knowledge. However, the epistemological status of "mystical consciousness" is not what is at issue in this essay. Instead, I suggest that we can use Katz's description of the mystical program as reconstruction more effectively if we remove it from his given context of narrow experience. This yields a picture of the contemplative project not as reconstruction but as transformation from a

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[34] Donald Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do? A Critique of Steven Katz," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 55.
[35] Steven Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, edited by Steven Katz, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 4-6.
[36] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 57.

conditioned-contextual apprehension of reality to a different kind of apprehension that is defined by context.[37] This assessment leaves open the possibility that any given practitioner of such a contemplative path may have a personal experience of pure consciousness, but does not assert a need for such a narrow experience. Instead, the practitioner needs only to integrate his tradition's practical and doctrinal conception of transcendent reality (be it mediated or unmediated) into his own apprehension of reality.

If the new appreciation of reality is built on the beliefs and concepts of the adept's tradition, and if these beliefs and concepts are themselves conventional linguistic structures, how could they possibly give rise to a transcendental ordering of consciousness? The answer is that transcendence need not be absolute, but can simply be transcendence as conceived by the heritage of the tradition. Each tradition articulates its own definition of transcendence, as well as its own methods for achieving that goal and the criteria for acknowledging who has achieved it. Robert Forman points to the apparent commonality of performative language in mystical traditions as affecting the deconstruction of cognitive mechanisms.[38] This may be the case in some instances, but the issue is really one for cognitive science. Performative language in this context does not have to deconstruct cognitive mechanisms to be performative; it really only needs to articulate the features of a tradition's conception of transcendent reality, as well as all the marks of the person who has realized it. This kind of language can be called performative in the sense that it performs a certain function, but that function does not need to be as radical as Forman's concept of cognitive deconstruction.

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[37] If the contextual definition of such an apprehension includes elements of immediacy, I will not deny that the resultant experience is in fact unmediated. The question of whether it is or is not actually mediated, however, is not directly relevant here.
[38] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 101.

Frederick Streng argues that it is a mistake to assume that mystical language is always meant to describe some subjective state or objective referent, and that this language often has a transformative function, as well. That is, it functions to "purify" the mind of the adept, or to, "evoke a change in the attitudes and mechanisms of apprehension."[39] The changes evoked by such language, furthermore, do not necessarily entail a complete rejection or invalidation of concepts *per se*, but do evoke important changes in fundamental concepts:

> "The deepest significance of the mystical transformation is that it is not only a psychological or epistemological shift, but an ontological shift. When one is united with the very Being of life, or when one attains the suchness of all things, a person purifies one's perception, will, and intention to the point that the religious community recognizes a new person."[40]

Streng makes it clear in the beginning of his essay that he believes there is some sort of "spiritual realm,"[41] so his conception of being "united with the very Being of life," is certainly different from my conception of the contemplative transformation as a shift in culturally constructed patterns of significance. Nonetheless, his description here belies an important aspect of that transformation: namely, one who is so transformed affects change in perception, will, and intention in such a way that the change is made manifest in his behavior and confirmed by his community. Although we do not have access to the phenomenological character of such an adept's inner experience, we do have access to the public evidence of the community's judgment of him. The religious community's standards for what constitutes contemplative achievement are the practical definition for what contemplative transformation *is*. The

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[39] Frederick Streng, "Language and Mystical Awareness," in Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 166.
[40] Ibid., 163.
[41] Ibid., 142.

community's articulation of this definition, moreover, encompasses not only the descriptive use of language, but also the transformative or performative use.

Ninian Smart occupies an interesting role in the contextualist/deconstextualist debate. He has contributed articles to all four of Katz's edited volumes, but he often makes statements that are decidedly perennialist in tone.[42] His comments on mystical language, therefore, provide an insightful hybrid view of the issues.

In his article, "The Purification of Consciousness," in Katz's second edited volume, Smart discusses how the mystical *via negativa* allows the mystic to replace his normal inner flow of consciousness with a sort of blank slate, devoid of conscious content. Such a state is inherently not describable simply because there is nothing in it to be described. Nevertheless, "to say that a mental state is blank and thus not to be described is to describe it."[43] He also stresses, however, that the blank is a, "blank in context," and not necessarily *only* blank.[44] Furthermore, "even the empty can be analyzed, since its context and meaning are not themselves opaque and simple."[45] Smart engages in a more detailed discussion of this topic in his earlier work *The Philosophy of Religion* where he adds the potential sense of mystical language as indicative in the same way that the phrase, "look at that," accompanied by a pointing finger is indicative:

> it might be plausible to think of religious activities, and symbols, as functioning rather like complex fingers—pointing towards the religious

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[42] Indeed, Katz even mentions in "Language Epistemology and Mysticism," that Smart occasionally "lapses" into the less sophisticated view that, "all mystical experiences are the same but the mystics' reports about their experiences are culturally bound" (24-25, 67 n. 11). Perhaps Smart's influence is behind Katz's decision to take on the less-controversial contextualist moniker. It should be noted, however, that Smart also explicitly distances himself from perennial philosophy in his article, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," in *Religious Studies* 1 (1965): 75-87.
[43] Ninian Smart, "The Purification of Consciousness and the Negative Path," in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 118; see also Ninian Smart, "What Would Buddhaghosa Have Made of *The Cloud of Unknowing*?" in Katz, *Mysticism and Language*, 103-121.
[44] Smart, "Purification of Consciousness," 119.
[45] Ibid., 117.

> ultimate . . . Taking this simile very rigorously, it might then be possible to have a reference for religious language and activity without allowing that that which is referred to is describable.[46]

In this account Smart includes more than just language, but that is not problematic. The mystic's total religious experience—including activity as well as language—would come to bear on the formation of a transformed apprehension of reality. The new consciousness would also necessarily be completely capable of utilizing language in a conventional sense, but the meaning of language for the mystic would presumably be very different because his context would also be different. Frederick Streng discusses this issue at length in his article in the first Katz volume and notes that, "the shift from conventional to mystical awareness . . . expresses a new attitude or temperament which is more than, but inclusive of, intellect and ideas."[47] Nevertheless, if the tradition's conception of transcendent awareness is designed to transcend the conceptual patterns of language, the linguistic devices that the mystic uses to describe his experiences will be difficult to understand in a mundane context. It is completely reasonable then, that he may describe his experiences as ineffable or paradoxical. As we have learned from Ninian Smart, however, these confusing utterances can actually be very meaningful. Paradox is an especially complex rhetorical feature that can have many different valences in a given context.

At this point we may ask: why is it important to establish the legitimacy of the contemplative transformation as an actual process rather than mere rhetoric? Although we need not be concerned with the phenomenal character of an individual's narrow experience of such a transformation, it is important to note that such a transformation can, at least theoretically, take place. In order to analyze the meaning of the idiom of contemplative transformation and to avoid ideological bankruptcy, we

[46] Ninian Smart, *The Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Random House, 1970), 48-49.
[47] Streng, "Language and Mystical Awareness," 143.

must admit that a tradition can reasonably consider such a transformation a viable reality, even if it maintains that it is a near-impossible goal. Robert Sharf criticizes the idea of valorizing extraordinary interior states by citing ethnographic evidence that practicing Buddhists are rarely able to perform the psychic feats often attributed to meditation virtuosos—nor do they realistically expect to do so.[48] He also notes, however, that many of the informants maintain that such feats are indeed possible, but that only the most venerated of their teachers or religious forebears were able to accomplish them. Although these informants may, as Sharf claims, "ignore the disjunction between the textual ideal on the one hand, and the lived contingencies of religious practice on the other,"[49] such contemplative ability is still treated as a mark of authority and valorized as an ideal. To deny the very possibility of the fruits of mental discipline and reduce the contemplative idiom to mere rhetoric is to do violence to the traditions in which it plays an integral role.

In a response to Steven Katz's argument discussed above, Sallie King notes that, "the assumption that there are no unmediated experiences also negates the very foundation of yoga, most of Buddhism, large segments of Hinduism, and philosophical Taoism."[50] The epistemic status of experience is not Sharf's issue, but his criticism is similarly threatening to Buddhism. While Sharf admirably seeks to undermine the naïve assumption that Buddhism is all about altered states of consciousness, he also comes dangerously close to distorting the significance of the contemplative idiom within the tradition. To be sure, the rhetoric of ineffability and transcendence is used in many ways that are more closely related to issues of authority, power and legitimacy than traditional treatments of mysticism would admit, but it

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[48] Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism," 244-45.
[49] Ibid., 245.
[50] Sallie King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *JAAR* 56.2 (Summer 1988), 263.

would be imprudent to overcompensate for this lack by completely rejecting the possibility of a real transformative use of this language. Sharf may be quite right in asserting that, in most Buddhist contexts, meditative or transformative rhetoric does not function ostensibly, but this is not to deny that it functions ostensibly at all, or that it derives its cultural currency from its ostensive function.

In evaluating contemplative traditions, we must therefore explore all of the possible meanings the rhetoric of ineffability and paradox may have. When it functions as a site for disputations of authority, that should not obscure any other function it may have in transforming the way in which practitioners interact with the world, and vice versa. Indeed, contemplative transformation is often the context of meaning within which these utterances have value in terms of authority and community in the first place. Ineffability and paradox are perhaps most difficult to understand in their transformative or performative uses. In this context, one must allow for the possibility of an understanding of reality that is not framed by the modern Western worldview.

Because much of this type of language is quite confusing, mysticism has been accused of irrationalism. Frits Staal argues that Western culture and scholarship came to regard mysticism as the realm of the irrational because of a greater trend toward couching religion and spirituality in general in terms of the irrational.[51] He summarizes the development of these attitudes:

> "Among the great religions of mankind, Christianity stresses faith and irrationalism to an extent that the others (including Islam) never even considered. During the middle ages, Christian philosophers produced valiant attempts to give a rational account of the Christian articles of faith. But on the whole, in the area of Western religion, irrationalism prevailed. And so the modern Western opinion with regard to religion,

[51] Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), 17-31 and *passim.*

> whether friendly or unfriendly, is that it squarely falls within the domain of the irrational."[52]

Staal further argues that mysticism in particular (and the humanities in general) is a completely appropriate area for rational inquiry, and that there is no need to appeal to alleged irrationality in order to understand the complex issues of mysticism.[53] Usually those who argue for the existence of some kind of realm of irrationality in which to locate religion are theologians interested either in defending religion against rational secular critique or who perhaps somehow still regard the quest for rational knowledge as sinful pride.[54] Staal conceives of mysticism as a process of rational inquiry in the same vein as empirical science in that it is concerned with separating appearance from reality.[55] That is, science seeks to explain how things work, not just how they appear, and Staal believes that mysticism is the same way, but that the social sciences (and social scientific approaches to religion) tend to be concerned with appearance alone. The point of all this is that we can indeed approach language which is said to be "beyond reason" in a rational way.

While engaging with such conceptually difficult language, Walter Stace argued that the mystics' use of paradoxical language is not necessarily problematic, and is indeed entirely applicable to their experiences. He takes this kind of language at face value and insists, "that the paradoxes are flat logical contradictions."[56] He then suggests and subsequently refutes several theories of how the mystics' language of paradox could be explained to become sensible. G. K. Pletcher restates them:

> (1) The theory that the paradoxes are merely verbal, used by the mystic to enhance his writings;

[52] Ibid., 23.
[53] Ibid., 19.
[54] Ibid., 26.
[55] Ibid., 54-58.
[56] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 253.

(2) The theory that the mystic is misdescribing his experience unintentionally, thus needlessly couching the description in contradictory terms;
(3) The theory that the contradictory predicates are really applicable each to a different thing in the experience, but not to the same thing, as the mystic says;
(4) The theory that when the mystic says both X and not-X characterize his experience, the word 'X' applies in a different sense in each case.[57]

It is not necessary to reproduce Stace's refutations here, but it is interesting to note that he merely rejects each proposition as unlikely given the preponderance of mystics who insist that their paradoxical descriptions, though contradictory, are entirely accurate. He does not provide a strong proof against these propositions, but attempts instead to show how it is much simpler for us to accept that the mystics' descriptions are accurate and that "flat logical contradictions" are perfectly suitable descriptions of mystical phenomena. This essentially unsupported conclusion directly supports Stace's own agenda of legitimizing a perennial monistic mystical experience. While I cannot endorse that claim, I can recognize that Stace makes a good point in refusing to explain away the apparent contradictions in mystical language. There is no reason to believe that the authors of such accounts—whether they are reporting first hand or not—do not take the same care and consideration in composing their literature as the authors of any other genre. We must therefore unpack the meaning of the language in context, understanding it in light of its full possible range of meanings.

As John McRae states in one of his rules of Zen studies, "romanticism breeds cynicism."[58] I would contend that this rule is commutative, so cynicism also breeds romanticism—and both can seriously obscure our view of contemplative traditions. McRae is specifically referring to the distortion produced by romanticizing the supposed "golden age" of Tang dynasty Chan, and the implicit cynical attitude toward

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[57] Galen K. Pletcher, "Mysticism, Contradiction, and Ineffability," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10.3 (July 1973), 201.
[58] McRae 2003: xx

its subsequent "degeneration," but this kind of distortion is operative anywhere that either romanticism or cynicism is practiced. We must therefore be willing to acknowledge all possible levels of meaning in contemplative discourse, even (and perhaps especially) those of ostensive meaning, and avoid privileging any one level of meaning over another. If we accept the possibility (as I contend we must) that the rhetoric of contemplation and transformation correlates on some level with an actual process of change in the appreciation of reality through systems of meaning and signification, then we must account for this level of meaning in contemplative rhetoric. I will therefore examine how the rhetorical feature of paradox can perform this function even while performing more practical functions within the tradition's dynamic of power.

As an example of the transformative use of paradox I will briefly examine an important rhetorical device in the formation of the Chan tradition: the Mādhyamika *catuṣkoṭi*, or tetralemma, as expounded by the logician Nāgārjuna. The seemingly impenetrable *catuṣkoṭi* is sometimes used as an example of Buddhist rhetoric that negates the use of logic and illustrates the irrationality of emptiness. In refuting this interpretation Frits Staal formulates the most basic criteria of irrationality as being logically inconsistent—that is, violating the rule of noncontradiction by affirming that two mutually exclusive propositions are both true in the same respect.[59] The *catuṣkoṭi*, as presented by Staal, reads as follows: "Everything is such as it is, not such as it is, both such as it is and not such as it is, and neither such as it is nor such as it is not. That is the Buddha's teaching" (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 18.8).[60] The apparently contradictory phrase is the third term in the tetralemma, "both such as it is and not such as it is." In the conventional sense, the phrase is indeed contradictory, but the

[59] Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 4-6, 25-26.
[60] Ibid., 36.

Mādhyamika doctrine of two truths (conventional and absolute) provides two respects in which to apply the statement. Since the rule of noncontradiction requires only that two mutually exclusive propositions not be held in the same respect, Nāgārjuna is able to make such a statement without being logically inconsistent.

The last phrase of the tetralemma, "neither such as it is nor such as it is not," is interpreted as a summary rejection of all previous views, and a recapitulation of the Mādhyamika project of demonstrating the inapplicability of all views to the reality of emptiness.[61] In this respect, the language of the tetralemma serves not only as, "a more comprehensive and emphatic way of denying all forms of own-being," but also as a pedagogical or therapeutic device.[62] If an adept completely internalized and digested Nāgārjuna's refutation of all views that admit some form of own-being, and arrived at the pervasive, affective conviction of the veracity of the doctrine of no-self, such a realization would be tantamount to a new and different apprehension of reality. The language of the *catuṣkoṭi* can therefore rightfully be described as in some sense transformative.

Although the rhetorical feature of the *catuṣkoṭi* was influential in the formation of later Chan thought, a more distinctive example of the tradition's multivalent use of language is found in its characteristic *gong'an* tradition. The evolution of this tradition as both text and practice begins with early records of encounter dialogues and culminates in the Song practice of *kan hua* or "viewing the [critical] phrase,"[63] which continues to be an important element in Sŏn and Zen practice today. As a major factor in defining the Chan tradition it is bound up in issues of ideology and practice, as well

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[61] Ibid., 43-44;
[62] Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China*, (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 55-56.
[63] According to the account given in John McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003).

as lineage and transmission of authority. It is therefore a rich example of both the transformative and rhetorical uses of language in Chan.

The Significance of the "Encounter Paradigm" in Chan Buddhism

The history of the *gong'an* as a literary genre is intimately connected with the formation of a distinctive Chan identity in the Song dynasty that referenced an idealized "golden age" of Chan in the Tang. John McRae has shown how the formation of this identity and the *gong'an* textual tradition grew out of the Chan focus on a genealogical model of authority in the "transmission of the lamp" texts.[64] The focus in these texts was on establishing a history for the linear transmission of authority between Chan patriarchs, extending back to and deriving authority from Śākyamuni and the seven Buddhas of the past. The model for the transmission of authority was therefore expressed in the encounter between teacher and student where the teacher would confirm that the quality of the student's realization was equal to the master's—and by extension, equal to all previous masters in the lineage. Subsequent Chan practice was then informed by this genealogical model of transmission, with masters seeking to develop in their students the same realization of enlightenment that their own master had aroused in them. McRae describes Chan in general as, "fundamentally genealogical," and genealogy would come to inform not only the institutional and social structures of the Chan establishment in the "climax paradigm" of the Song dynasty, but the articulation of its doctrine and the form of its practice, as well.

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[64] The following discussion of the history of the "encounter dialogue" genre is based on John McRae's accounts in *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Chan Buddhism*, (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1986), and McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*.

Although the genealogical model was extant in the early period of Chan's history, and was invoked in the, "hallmark and culminating text of early Chan,"[65] *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (c. 780), it was not completely systematized until, at the latest, the advent of *The Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall* in 952, which is also the first full-blown compilation of encounter dialogue. *The Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall* is interesting in that it appears, "in effect, as a sudden apparition," and purports to contain transcriptions of actual encounters between famous Chan masters and their disciples, in colloquial format, as, "a highly elaborated written demonstration of the Chan genealogical schema."[66] This distinctive literary format had its antecedents in both Chinese culture and previous Chan tradition,[67] but it is here that it emerges as a self-conscious style. One of the most important and distinctive features of the new style is the incorporation of students' voices into the exposition so that the previous "back room" style of oral exchange could be systematized and incorporated into public discourse. The process of systematization is also important in that texts like *Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall* and *Transmission of the Lamp*, while purportedly capturing the spontaneity and authenticity of the original master-student exchanges, actually capture the Chan tradition's idealization of those exchanges. As another of McRae's rules of Zen Studies notes, "it's not true, and therefore it's more important."[68] These idealized encounter dialogues would come to be a crucial linguistic feature of the tradition both in their transformative use in meditative and ritual practice and their rhetorical use in modeling the genealogical transmission of authority.

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[65] McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*, 18.
[66] Ibid., 79.
[67] See ibid., 83-98.
[68] Ibid., xix, 6.

Later on in the Song dynasty the individual encounters found in the "transmission of the lamp" anthologies came to be known by the legal term *gong'an* or "public cases" of enlightenment. As Dale Wright notes, "just as the records of the legal tradition place into the public domain cases manifesting the criteria and principles of justice, the 'public records' of the Chan tradition announce the criteria and principles of 'awakening.'"[69] Because *gong'an* were seen to encapsulate (as it were) authentic enlightenment experiences, they could be used as examples for study and meditation. The most influential practice of this kind was the method of *kan hua* or "viewing the [critical] phrase" meditation formulated by the Song master Dahui Zhonggao.

In *kan hua* meditation the teacher gives the student a *gong'an* to imagine and then instructs the student to ruminate upon the *huatou* or "critical phrase"—usually the bizarre or disconcerting response of the master at the end of the *gong'an* exchange. Dahui's teacher Yuanwu, who compiled the renowned *gong'an* anthology *Biyan Lu* (*Blue Cliff Record*), also propagated the idea that *gong'an* were actually linguistic manifestations of Chan masters' enlightened minds, and hence that all cases were equivalent in meaning and even a single phrase (e.g., the *huatou*) was sufficient to lead the student to awakening.[70] Because the *huatou* is taken as a kind of emanation from the enlightened mind of the master, by meditating upon it the student can "trace back" this emanation to find the mind's source and thereby, "know the intent (*yi*) with which [the master] made his response—and, by extension, the enlightened mind that framed that intent—and . . . consummate in himself the very same state of enlightenment."[71]

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[69] Dale S. Wright, "Kōan History: Transformative Language in Chinese Buddhist Thought," in *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, edited by Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 200.
[70] Robert E. Buswell, "The 'Short-cut' Approach of *K'an-hua* Meditation: The Evolution of a Practical Subitism in Chinese Ch'an Buddhism," in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, edited by Peter N. Gregory, (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1987), 346.
[71] Buswell, "The 'Short-cut' Approach of *K'an-hua* Meditation," 347.

In this way the student is made to emulate his teacher and the previous masters before him. This is significant because the *gong'an* rhetoric works not only to effect a change in attitudes and behavior in the student, but also to systematize and regulate the process by which he is confirmed as an accomplished practitioner capable of instructing pupils himself.

In later Chan and Zen contexts this master-disciple *gong'an* (J. *kōan*) exchange would become even more highly ritualized, with the marks of accomplishment coming not only from apparent understanding of the patriarchs' insights, but also from the acquisition of the literary acumen needed for ritualized commentarial exchanges.[72] Bernard Faure describes this literary aspect of the *kōan* tradition as a kind of game, with the standard rules of style in the genre providing the rules of the game in which the interlocutors vie for the upper hand.[73] Faure is here suggesting that these encounters could and did function on a performative but practical level of demonstrating the authority of a teacher over his students, or of increasing an individual teacher's prestige. This is not to say that Yuanwu was lying or deluding himself when he expounded the deeper significance of the *huatou*, or that the guided contemplation thereof could not have a genuinely therapeutic or transformative effect on the student, but merely that with systematization there eventually came other more practical uses of *kōan* language.

The account Robert Buswell gives of contemporary Korean Sŏn *hwadu* (C. *huatou*) meditation is not significantly different than the *kan hua* practice advocated by Dahui[74], although the monks that undertake the meditation regimen are relatively

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[72] T. Griffith Foulk, "The Form and Function of Koan Literature: A Historical Overview," in Heine and Wright, *The Kōan*, 40-41.
[73] Bernard Faure, "Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen," in Katz, *Mysticism and Language*, 173. For a similar discussion see also Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 195-216.
[74] Robert E Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), 149-160.

few. Buswell estimates that less than five percent of Korean Sŏn monks adopt meditation as a vocation,[75] but that these dedicated practitioners are highly regarded and, "are treated as the elite vanguard of the monastery."[76] It is therefore reasonable—at least in the case of Korean Sŏn—to take the ostensive meaning of the tradition's contemplative rhetoric seriously and recognize its actual use in the transformation of a meditator's apprehension of the world. What it is not reasonable to do, however, is to take the transformative significance of contemplative rhetoric as the only or most important level of significance operative in the lives of Chan Buddhists. Buswell's account of the Korean case provides an excellent example of the relative insignificance of the transformative use of Chan/Sŏn doctrine/rhetoric and its actual significance in providing a disciplined life for adherents.[77]

The distinctive Chan rhetoric developed in the Song dynasty is also important to the ordering of the tradition. Albert Welter argues that the Song period saw not only the rise of *gong'an* discourse but also the canonization of the Chan concept of its identity as a, "separate transmission outside the teaching."[78] This distinctive phrase is one of the four axioms or slogans of Chan, said to have originated with Bodhidharma. Welter argues, however, that the textual provenance of these four phrases being presented together as axioms of Chan dates to a time well into the Song, and that the first slogan of, "a special transmission outside the teaching," is apparently the latest to appear.[79] He also posits the invention of the story of the Buddha's silent transmission of the dharma eye to Mahākāsyapa as a tactic aimed at providing scriptural support to the Chan claim of special transmission. This story came to be included in *gong'an*

[75] Ibid., 167.
[76] Ibid., 161.
[77] Ibid., 219.
[78] See Albert Welter, "Mahākāsyapa's Smile: Silent Transmission and the Kung-an (Kōan) Tradition," in Heine and Wright, *The Kōan*.
[79] Ibid., 79-80.

anthologies like the *Wumen Guan* (*Gateless Barrier*), and cited as the historical beginning of Chan lineage transmission.[80] This use of *gong'an* accounts to authenticate Chan lineage is taken up by John McRae as one of the important organizational uses of Chan rhetoric.

McRae characterizes the Chan lineage scheme with its attendant mythology of a, "separate transmission outside the teachings," as a, "polemical move, meant to establish the superiority of Chan over all other schools."[81] As such, we may also read Chan contemplative rhetoric as validation and reinforcement of the institutional structures that sustained Chan's value on the medieval Chinese Buddhist market (so to speak). Also, by formulating the characteristic "encounter paradigm" for authenticating lineage transmissions, the Chan tradition created a mechanism for establishing, maintaining, and transmitting the very highest doctrinal authority—emanating as it did from the Buddha himself.[82] McRae points out how this leveling of authority, which placed the Chinese patriarchs at the same theoretical level of status as the Buddhas of the past, would be a particularly effective polemical tool in China, where Buddhism was originally an Indian import. The means by which the Chan genealogical structure was articulated was the novel genre of encounter dialogue, which came to dominate Chan rhetoric and practice.

McRae stresses how the records of encounter dialogues were formulated and presented in such a way as to be taken as actual transcriptions of real conversations—and not to be taken metaphorically at all.[83] He also notes how the rhetorical style of encounter dialogues, "eschews the straightforward exchange of ideas," and suggests that this style reinforces the Chan doctrine of the inherently enlightened nature of the

[80] Ibid., 98.
[81] McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*, 5.
[82] Ibid., 6-7.
[83] Ibid., 77-78.

human mind.[84] The sudden awakening idealized in Chan essentially consists of the student's realizing that he is really already enlightened. McRae suggests that the disjunctive style of Chan encounter dialogue serves to radically collapse the traditional Buddhist *mārga* scheme—presumably held by the student in the encounter dialogue who seeks help in advancing along the "gradualist" path—into the subitist position of sudden enlightenment.[85] The greater point, however, is that the seemingly incoherent behavior of the master in such an encounter is a rhetorical representation of the ineffability of enlightenment, and as such a mark of the profoundly penetrating insight he possesses.

As the genealogical structure of Chan proliferated throughout the Song, new "transmission of the lamp" anthologies were created to record the various branches of genealogical relationships flowing out from the main trunk of the linear succession of patriarchs.[86] These diversified lineages played a central role in determining eligibility for appointments within the monastic administration, where specific lineage affiliation was often a prerequisite. For this reason, and because of their sheer variety, McRae posits that the Chan lineage schema, "provided a framework within which to negotiate the distribution of power within the monastic institution."[87]

In practice, the genealogical structure is reinforced, as we have seen, by Dahui's innovative *kan hua* style of meditation. While Dahui's language certainly functions transformatively in Chan's subitist rhetoric, McRae insists that, "more important than any subitist rhetorical imperative was the genealogical framework of 'viewing the phrase' Chan—the formulation of the practice in terms of the student's

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[84] Ibid., 78.
[85] For a full discussion, see John McRae, "Encounter Dialogue and the Transformation of the Spiritual Path in Chinese Ch'an," in *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, edited by Robert E. Buswell and Robert Gimello, (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1992), 339-369.
[86] McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*, 114.
[87] Ibid., 117.

examination of models of enlightened behavior within his own ancestral lineage."[88] This observation, coupled with the idea that through *kan hua* meditation and subsequent responses to *gong'an* cases the practitioner is meant to emulate the enlightened patriarchs in both mind and action, leads to a picture of Chan practice that encompasses both the transformative and practical uses of contemplative rhetoric.

In the transformative use the adept is meant to actually effect a change in his attitudes and apprehension of reality, even while reinforcing the doctrinal and genealogical structures that provide a context for socio-cultural relationships and historical innovation. The transformative use of the contemplative idiom here is "real" in the sense that it is actually meant to change the participant in some way, but both because of and in spite of this use it necessarily impacts the social and material reality of the tradition by reinforcing traditional patterns of significance. Along these lines, Robert Gimello makes a good point in characterizing Buddhist enlightenment ["mystical experience" as it were] as a, "psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values."[89] At the same time, and as Gimello cautions, it would be inappropriate to characterize enlightenment as some sort of delusion. Even though the tradition frames the context and determines the conditions and effects of enlightenment, this fact should not be taken as evidence that enlightenment does not in fact represent an actual qualitative shift in the personality of the practitioner. The appreciation of the contemplative endeavor as both a genuine impetus to personal change and dynamic expression and reinforcement of traditional socio-cultural values has been the goal of this essay, and the rich contemplative tradition of Chan Buddhism serves as an excellent representation thereof.

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[88] Ibid., 131.
[89] Robert Gimello, "Mysticism in Its Contexts," in Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 85.

Conclusion

In his insightful article, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," Daniel Brown identifies a common thread of psychological development evident across contemplative traditions. This process of development consists of discrete stages that effect a transformation of consciousness in the practitioner. Brown discerns specific psychological effects associated with each stage, but notes that the practitioner's subjective experience of them varies across traditions. While the common psychological events are entirely describable in Western scientific parlance, the Hindu and Buddhist practitioners' experience and subsequent expression of these events is entirely colored by their individual doctrinal perspectives. These varying interpretations are entirely consistent with the psychological facts, but also produce profound differences in enlightenment experiences between the traditions. Brown concludes, therefore, that cross-culturally among contemplative traditions, "there is one path which leads to different ends."[90]

While I do think that Brown is on to something, and that the various methods of meditation, mindfulness, and prayer found in the traditions I have termed "contemplative" probably do produce very similar subjective psycho-physical experiences in practitioners, the discussion of their similarity will have to wait for another time. What is interesting about Brown's survey in the context set by this essay is that it represents a possible parallel in cognitive science to the humanistic approach of examining cultural patterns of significance connected to the idea and process of personal transformation. Such a parallel, while interesting, is certainly not necessary to legitimate the analytic category of contemplative traditions. In terms of

[90] Daniel Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Transformations of Consciousness and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, edited by Ken Wilber, Jack Engler and Daniel Brown, (Boston: Shambala, 1986), 220.

the humanistic study of religion, it simply does not matter whether people of different socio-cultural milieus actually experience similar or identical psycho-physical phenomenon. What matters is that at least some of those people use similar styles of language and religious practice to articulate the intricate webs of meaning that make up their socio-cultural milieu. Advances in cognitive science and transpersonal psychology will likely help us understand why specific referents of contemplative language or patterns of practice command the value that they do, but this understanding will not change the nature of the comparative project in the cultural study of contemplative traditions.

As we have seen with the examples drawn from Chan Buddhism, whatever subjective psycho-physical effects contemplation is shown to have, it will not diminish the material and social force of rhetoric connected with the idiom of contemplation. For instance, even though we will never actually know the quality or epistemological status of Dahui Zhonggao's "mystical" experiences, we will be able to draw ever-better maps for understanding medieval Chinese Buddhism by examining the multiple functions and impacts his *kan hua* meditation had on the historical trajectory of Buddhism. By appreciating the multiple realms of meaning the contemplative idiom may command, including the legitimately transformative and transcendent, we can better apprehend the richness and complexity of contemplative traditions.

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CHAPTER TWO

INDIAN AND CHINESE ALCHEMICAL TRADITIONS

Introduction

The Western conception of alchemy usually revolves around the quest for a substance that can transmute base metals into pure gold and grant eternal life: the Philosopher's Stone. It is little wonder that the processes of creating gold and immortality are linked, since gold itself, which is brilliant and never tarnishes, seems to embody eternal vigor and incorruptibility. Indeed, man has always been drawn to its rarity and lustrous properties, and valued it more highly than other metals. The goal of preserving life and even conquering death is likewise a common aim throughout history.

Although people of every area of the world have shared these common conceptual concerns, the majority of Westerners do not often associate the art of alchemy with cultures or periods outside of medieval and renaissance Europe. However, each of the centers of civilization in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China have their own alchemical traditions, and all of them share similar goals of aurifaction (gold production) and immortality. The constellation of alchemical concepts and valences that I refer to as the alchemical idiom, moreover, has in each case lent itself to use by contemplative traditions as a powerful set of symbols integrated into the greater contemplative project of personal transformation.

It is not clear whether all of these systems of alchemy arose independently, or whether there was some cross-cultural influence, but their similarities are often remarkable. All of the traditions use similar apparatus for working with metals and minerals, and besides base metals and gold, all of the traditions use mercury as the

vital constituent in transmutation. They also all share a conception of the human person as a microcosm of the universal macrocosm, and the concomitant idea that changes affected in one can be manifested in the other. In all of the great centers of civilization, metallurgy, glass-making, and other technologies of material manufacture were developed relatively early, and it is likely from the techniques of these artisan traditions that the practices associated with alchemy arose. Furthermore, it is only after harnessing these techniques to a worldview that allowed a theoretical discovery and manipulation of fundamental matter or primal cosmic forces that the dream of changing the very nature of substances and transmuting metal to gold and mortal bodies to immortal ones becomes plausible.

There is some debate about when and where alchemy first appeared, but something like it seems to have been present in both Egypt and China from a very early date.[1] H. H. Dubs makes an interesting argument for China as the origin of alchemy proper, citing the apparent paucity of gold (and therefore also of methods for assaying its purity) as a condition for China's relatively forgiving attitude toward aurifaction, and subsequent acceptance of alchemical practices that elsewhere may have been more easily dismissed as fraud.[2] In this fertile environment, Dubs argues that proto-alchemical metallurgic technology could be wedded to a more abstract philosophical system and thereby become more durable and acceptable as a spiritual art over and above the dubious enterprise of mere gold-making. While an interesting speculation, Dubs' argument is not supported by any strong evidence across traditions that would indicate China as the clear universal origin of the alchemical project. It also commits the fallacy that I wish to address in this essay that all alchemical traditions are necessarily linked by some real historical cross-cultural influence.

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[1] E. J. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1957), 23; F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 27, 63.
[2] Homer H. Dubs, "The Beginnings of Alchemy," *Isis* 38.1 (November 1947), 81-85.

The study of alchemy is often marred by the same kinds of fallacious connections that plague the study of so-called mystical traditions. As I have argued elsewhere, a more fruitful approach to mysticism, and to alchemy, is to approach these traditions not as instances of a recurring cross-cultural and perennial phenomenon, but as instances of analytically distinguishable uses of a particular kind of cultural idiom. In the present case we do not need to establish any kind of material or historical link between widely divergent regions and eras to account for the qualitative similarities in alchemical language, but only to note that such similarities exist and constitute a valid typology that scholars of religion may use to understand how such alchemical language is used to articulate cultural value. The history of the origins and development of the alchemical idiom is a question more for the history of ideas, and although it is a very interesting question, it is not one that is necessary to ask in order to illustrate the basic character of the alchemical idiom.

C. G. Jung took a particular interest in alchemy as he believed that it symbolized the process of confronting and transmuting the primal power of the unconscious mind into a more refined and completed form of consciousness. It is not necessary to recount Jung's entire theory of the collective unconscious, but only to note his approach to alchemy as a symbolic system serving the contemplative aims of certain spiritual traditions. He believed that the symbolic aspects of the alchemical work, and not its actual chemical experiments were the true *sine qua non* of alchemy. Walter Pagel summarizes Jung's approach:

> 'Meditation' (i.e., an internal dialogue with one's own unconscious self) and 'imagination' (i.e., the action of the 'celestial' in man, his 'astrum') will, in the alchemist's opinion, set free the forces which enable him to alter matter. The process of liberation of the soul from its bodily cage (including the unconscious self) that takes place in dreams, visions and phantasies appears to be the 'Philosopher's Stone'; for the alchemist believes that this process, while progressing in his own unconscious

> self, engenders a similar process of liberation of the 'spiritual' in matter. The process has become an 'autonomous complex.'[3]

What is interesting here is that Jung offers an explanation of alchemy that focuses on the tradition as a contemplative or spiritual art, rather than a technical one. Pagel also notes that many previous conceptions of alchemy ultimately seem unsatisfying because they view alchemy essentially only as a kind of "proto-chemistry," concerned solely with chemically manipulating substances to miraculously produce fantastic riches. Unfortunately, as we know now (and as the alchemists, who were no fools, certainly knew), mundane chemical process will not and cannot produce gold. The view of alchemy as the misguided precursor to enlightened modern chemistry, therefore, reduces alchemy to essential folly, while valorizing and legitimizing modern science.[4] The significance of the alchemical *magnum opus* must be found somewhere deeper than its outward appearance of laboratory experiments bent toward aurifaction. As Jung suggests, it can be better understood as a symbolic system dealing with a contemplative work rather than a purely physical one. Jung, however, also tends to reduce the work of alchemists to the psychology of purely subjective interior states, obscuring the wider cultural and intellectual importance of alchemical symbolism.

In his work on alchemy, Titus Burckhardt illuminates the symbolic idiom of alchemy and its contemplative project. While making occasional reference to Indian and Chinese systems, Burckhardt's study focuses mainly on the European and Middle Eastern Hermetic traditions of alchemy. While my concern in this essay is not the Hermetic traditions, Burckhardt's approach provides an example of how the

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[3] Walter Pagel, "Jung's Views on Alchemy," *Isis* 38.1/2 (May 1948), 45.

[4] Notably, this is the general approach taken in Holmyard, *Alchemy* and Taylor, *The Alchemists*. Both authors separate alchemy into discrete exoteric and esoteric genres—a distinction that serves mainly, in my estimation, to insulate alchemy as noble pre-science from alchemy as superstitious hokum. Holmyard does at least insist that the two strands are inextricably linked (*Alchemy*, 13-14), but I see no reason to make such an absolute distinction in the first place.

significance of alchemical language and symbolism can be located in the contemplative project. Burckhardt argues that Western alchemy was driven by the goal of sublimating the alchemist's soul and discovering therein the Aristotelian *materia prima*, which could then receive the imprint of the universal Spirit or Divine Intellect.[5] The outward process of transmuting base metals into gold or silver was but the, "metallurgical expression," of this greater spiritual work.[6]

As his subtitle suggests, Burckhardt characterizes the alchemical work as an essentially cosmological one (as opposed to theological, ethical, etc.) The meaning is that the principles which give shape to the alchemical work—its forms and processes—derive from the patterns of signification and correspondence that the alchemist finds in the world and in himself. In all cases, the alchemical idiom has power and significance because the practitioner conceives the cosmos as a basically congruous whole—and one into which he is entirely integrated. Cartesian dualism, so important to Western Enlightenment prerogatives, tends to hinder our understanding of this kind of integrated worldview. The point Burckhardt makes is that, "alchemy acts like a science or art of nature, because for it all states of inward consciousness are but ways to the one and only 'Nature', which encompasses both the outward, visible and corporeal forms, and the inward and invisible forms of the soul."[7] This means that in alchemical traditions, it is not unreasonable to say that, because the cosmic principles associated with certain metals and materials correspond to the same principles within the mind (or soul) of the alchemist, changes wrought in one will necessarily correspond to changes in the other. In this way it is entirely accurate to call alchemy a kind of contemplative tradition; it offers the practitioner a method of

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[5] Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, (London: Stuart and Watkins, 1967), 35-36.
[6] Ibid., 9.
[7] Ibid., 27.

ordering and transforming consciousness based on a coherent overarching system of cosmology and belief.

It is this correspondence of cosmology and contemplative practice within alchemy upon which I will focus my presentation of Indian and Chinese alchemical traditions. In so doing, I will show that these two traditions are similar enough in goals and practices to justify the use of alchemy as a typological category, but that the idea of alchemy as a perennial phenomenon is not justified. For both examples I will give an account of the major cultural, cosmological and philosophical underpinnings of the alchemical traditions, and then explore how these ideas are expressed in the practices of alchemy. Finally, I will argue that the alchemical idiom represents a strategy for assigning contemplative meaning to certain tangible processes of chemical and physical change, and the fact that these processes are necessarily identical the world over suggests that a high degree of similarity should be evident even where cultural situations are otherwise quite distinct and unrelated. This similarity, however, does not require or even imply any kind of causal or material link between disparate alchemical traditions.

Indian Cosmology and Soteriology

The tantric genius that arose in India around the sixth century CE was, in many ways, an innovative extension of orthodox Hindu belief. The Vedic religion that informs all subsequent Hindu belief puts sacrifice at the theoretical and practical center of the religious world, and the idiom of sacrifice continues to inform the basic vocabulary of all strains of Hindu theology. The world of the Vedas gave sacrifice primacy because it was through the medium of sacrifice that man could interact with the world of the gods.

Sacrifice itself is a system of mutual relationship in that it is only by directing sacrifice to the gods that man can accrue benefit from such an act.[8] The ideal oblation offered in sacrifice, furthermore, is *soma*, the ambrosia of immortality enjoyed by the gods, which, "sustains the gods and maintains their immortality."[9] Moreover, the sacrificer, by the act of sacrificing, enjoys for himself a share of that immortality in the form of good fortune and long life.[10] Thus it is the fluid oblation, abstractly identified as *soma*, that took the most important place in sustaining life, and fluid (*rasa*) that would take on many other valences in Hindu thought. Besides this fluid element, the actual working of the sacrifice also included the elements of fire (*agni*) and wind (*vāyu*). Fire was what transformed the sacrifice into a form suitable for the gods, and wind was what carried it to them.[11] This mode of sacrifice can also be extrapolated out to the rest of the cosmos to represent the microcosm of the human being, the mesocosm of the mediating sacrifice, and the macrocosm of the rest of the universe. These two sets of conceptual categories, "serve as the framework of the entire sweep of Indian symbol systems."[12]

This statement by David Gordon White, on whose exhaustive work on Indian alchemy I will rely throughout this discussion[13], is interesting in that it identifies a relatively simple set of triads as the basis for three thousand years of religious innovation. The evidence supporting such a statement is vast, and we will see how these valences are born out in the later Hindu alchemical traditions. He goes on to describe how the *Brāhmanas* carried the sacrificial ideal even further to assert that the

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[8] David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 11-12.
[12] Ibid., 12.
[13] This is due to the lack of any other significant English-language works on the topic of Indian alchemy, as specifically distinguished from chemistry.

sacrifice was, "all that truly matters in the universe."[14] With this kind of early theoretical emphasis, it is only natural that later innovations would share the same preoccupations and concerns. The movement embodied in the *Upanishads* was concerned with how the sacrifice connected the worlds of the human and the divine, and found that the entire universe was an emanation of the divine, and that all creation could somehow participate in the same Reality, thus condensing the system into One.[15] By simply realizing the ultimate equivalence of the human and divine realms, this shift into monism explains how a sacrificial action in one realm can be immediately realized as action in the other.

The sacrifice too is internalized in the *Upanishads*. Because it is the link between the human microcosm and universal macrocosm, it becomes the means by which the two can be merged as one—namely through the building up of the internal sacrificial fire of *tapas*.[16] We will see later how the heat of *tapas* is used to effect the realization of the Absolute. The identification in the *Upanishads* of the individual soul (*ātman*) with *bráhman*, the universal or divine soul, implies that there should be some mesocosm between its divinity and the humanity of the person's physical body. This connecting factor is the subtle body[17], which will become the space in which the sacrifice takes place.

Two more Indian thought systems that will become important to the discussion of alchemy are Āyurveda and yoga. Āyurveda is the system of Indian medicine based on the ordering principles of microcosm and macrocosm. In this system, because the microcosm of the human body is made up of the same five constituent elements as the universal macrocosm, any discord between the relative compositions of the two results

[14] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 16.
[15] Ibid., 17-18.
[16] Ibid., 18.
[17] Ibid.

in health problems in the body. Both the bodily microcosm and the environmental macrocosm, moreover, are governed by three principles which can be correlated to the Vedic principles of *rasa*, *agni*, and *vāyu*: the three bodily humors of phlegm (water, *śleṣma*), bile (fire, *pitta*), and wind (*vāta*), and the macrocosmic forces of moon (*rasa*), sun (*agni*), and wind (*vāyu*).

The body's three humors (*dosas*) are also described as motile, fiery, and placid, and each governs bodily processes and constituents related to these properties: for instance, *pitta* is the cause of body heat and allows perception of radiant energy, *śleṣma* is cooling and provides for the coalescence of semen and other tissues, and *vāyu* courses through the body relating the humors to one another.[18] Āyurveda holds that when the body is in the womb, in a non-manifest state, the *dosas* are completely balanced, but when the body is subjected to the imbalances of the outside world they can become disordered. This is because the macrocosmic universe is also composed of three homologous "strands" (*gunas*), which are similarly in a state of equilibrium before the universe becomes manifest through divine consciousness and disorder arises.[19] We can see from these examples how the three humors are related to the three parts of the Vedic sacrifice, as well. *Pitta* is equated with *agni*, and is the means by which food can be, "cooked," by the heat of digestion into *rasa*, and transformed via *śleṣma* into the various bodily constituents, eventually yielding semen, while *vāyu* provides the intermediate element and makes the process run. These conceptual elements of the Vedic sacrifice will become important later on, but it is the process of refinement that is of most immediate application to alchemy.

In the process of digestion, the food one consumes is transformed by the actions of the *dosas* into seven increasingly refined bodily constituents (*dhatus*), of

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[18] D. M. Bose, ed., *A Concise History of Science in India,* (New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 1971), 240.
[19] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 21.

which *rasa* is the first and most raw and semen (or uterine blood, in women) the last and finest.[20] In this way the raw material of all kinds of food and drink and medicine and whatever else one eats is transformed into potent sexual fluid. As we have seen before, sexual fluid is afforded great importance in Indian thought, and is equated with *soma*, the gods' ambrosia of immortality. Āyurveda is therefore also preoccupied with the promotion of semen's wellbeing.

Because it takes a long time and much raw material to produce even a single drop of semen[21], Āyurveda is concerned with conserving semen and preventing its loss. Yoga, meanwhile, is concerned with the conservation of semen because it is, "the *sine qua non* of yogic practice: semen is the raw material and fuel of every psychochemical transformation the yogin, alchemist, or tantric practitioner undergoes."[22] In the *hatha yoga* system, semen (*rasa*) is collected in the cranial vault—the microcosmic moon and center of male cooling power—and in the process transformed into liberating nectar (*amṛta*). Meanwhile, in the lower abdomen, there is the female, solar, center which provides the heat that drives yogic practice. This bipolar system is a homologue of the macrocosmic system of sun and moon, light and dark, hot and cold, male and female, etc. and informs all of the tantric systems we will see. It is also important to note that bipolarity is completely consistent with the primacy placed on the Vedic triad of *rasa*, *agni* and *vāyu*, in that *rasa* and *agni* occupy opposite poles in this symbol system, as well.

The sun and moon also play opposite roles in the temporal cycle of the year. Since the sun represents *agni* and the moon *rasa*, the hot, dry season is dominated by the desiccating action of the sun, and the cooler wet season is dominated by the

[20] Bose, *A Concise History of Science in India*, 242.
[21] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 25-26.
[22] Ibid., 27.

"wetness" of the moon.[23] The desiccation and re-moistening of the macrocosm caused by the sun and moon directly impact *rasa* in the microcosm, and this duality impacts Āyurveda because it represents a systematic disorder of the macrocosm that affects the bodily microcosm and must be counteracted accordingly. Similarly, in yoga the female principle is capable of drying out and destroying the male semen, so there is an emphasis on retaining semen, even in sexual practice. This fact gives some context as to why the erotic practices of tantra were seen as dangerous. Because the moon is associated with *rasa*/*soma*/semen, which is the sustaining force of immortality, the cycles of the moon also play a large role in the yogic system.

The lunar cycle is divided into sixteen *kalas*, or digits, representing the fifteen nights of a lunar fortnight, plus one extra *kala* to represent the whole and to, "perfect," the number.[24] The *kala* is a measure of both substance and time, and is a kind of unit for parts of a whole. The number sixteen appears in the yogic notion of the subtle body as two sets of sixteen digits: one associated with the sun and one associated with the moon.[25] Normally the solar digits, which are distributed in the abdomen and up the central channel (*suṣumnā*) are dominant and work in a temporal cycle that "cooks" the body, thus aging it. Yoga seeks to use the semen concentrated in the abdomen and its opposing cycle as a counteragent to these fires, moving it up the central channel, piercing the six *cakras* which represent elements of coarse existence, thus producing heat and "cooking" or purifying the semen into *amṛta* (nectar), which fills the cranial vault to its full capacity of sixteen lunar digits, and effectively reverses time and cheats death.[26] Tantric traditions made the innovation of using the female energy

[23] Ibid., 23-24, and figure 2.2, 31.
[24] Ibid., 36-37.
[25] Ibid., 39.
[26] Ibid., 40-41.

itself, the *kuṇḍalinī*, to do the piercing on its way up the central channel to union with its consort Śiva, the microcosmic moon in the cranial vault.

Indian religion maintains a vast body of symbolism with a dizzying array of valences, making a definitive account of all the levels of meaning relevant to alchemy practically impossible. The wide range of interpenetrating thought systems also makes it difficult to make universal assertions about cosmology and philosophy. The broad range of ideas outlined above, however, can be taken as a preliminary sketch of the cultural episteme that the Indian alchemical tradition inhabits. The alchemical idiom in India draws on these well-established themes to offer its own understanding and commentary on the cosmos and the contemplative project.

Indian Alchemy

Alchemy rose to the height of its popularity in India in the medieval period in close association with Tantrism.[27] Up until that era, there was little evidence to suggest that alchemy was anything more than a mythical tradition of magical elixirs and superhuman powers.[28] The medieval period also saw the blossoming of the tantric traditions, and it was the *tantrikas* that became the largest proponents of alchemy. Ultimately, alchemy became the domain of the Siddhas, that group of tantric mystics who claim lineage from the various perfected beings of yore.[29] Because alchemical practices were not the sole heritage of any one group in India, however, it is difficult to systematize an account of them. Furthermore, some scholars suggest that the reason

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[27] P. Ray, ed., *History of Chemistry in Ancient and Medieval India*, (Calcutta: Indian Chemical Society, 1956), 113-115.
[28] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 53.
[29] Ibid., 56-58. Although the Siddha title is most common in Buddhistic traditions, White seems to use it to refer most often to the Nath Siddhas, and more generally to any human who has become a "perfected" being.

alchemy began its rise in textual popularity in the period between the third and seventh centuries CE was due to the increased amount of cultural exchange with China, whose alchemical tradition was already well established by that point.[30] David Gordon White, however, finds that, "the Indian material is so specifically Indian . . . as to preclude any possibility of this being a matter of wholesale borrowing."[31] White is here referring to the tenth-century flourishing of tantric alchemy proper, and notes later that in the seventh century, there is actually evidence of Chinese interest in acquiring Indian alchemical knowledge.[32] It seems as though the exchange more than likely went both ways, and it is more to the point to examine how Indian alchemy was so, "specifically Indian," namely in its contemplative significance.

Since both are primarily within the domain of tantric ascetics, the practices of alchemy and *hatha yoga* are best seen as, "parallel and interpenetrating systems."[33] Both practices are informed by the same cosmologies and soteriological goals, share much of the same terminology and are often similar in practice. Indeed, the *Rasarnava*, of which White makes extensive use as a prime example of a tantric alchemical text, states, "As in metal, so in the body . . . By means of the Work, a stable body is attained. Mercury and breath [control] are known as the Work in two parts (*karmayogo dvidhā*)."[34] Both parts of the Work are mesocosmic systems through which the practitioner interfaces with the divine, eventually merging with it and attaining perfection and immortality. The focus of the present investigation, however, is alchemy in particular. Therefore, I will examine one extensive alchemical

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[30] See Bose, *A Concise History of Science in India*, 317 and Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
[31] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 54-55.
[32] Ibid., 62.
[33] Ibid., 264.
[34] Ibid.

process—the purification of mercury through the series of alchemical *saṃskāras*—to illustrate the shared themes of both traditions.

The alchemical *saṃskāras* (purifications or "perfectionings") are analogous to the yogic *sādhanas* (realizations), and prepare the mercury for its goal of transforming base metal into gold and of transforming the alchemist's gross body into a perfected alchemical one, just as the *sādhanas* prepare the yogin for perfection of the subtle body and integration into ultimate Reality. There are different numbers of *sādhanas* and *saṃskāras*, and indeed different textual traditions identify many different sets, but White breaks the process for both into four general categories of actions: purification, immobilization, reversal, and transformation.[35] This compartmentalization makes it easy to compare similar themes, so I will retain and reproduce it here, as well.

The first category of purification involves the processes of cleaning and preparing the mercury that will be used in the alchemical operations (both physically and chemically), and also cleansing and preparing the body of the alchemist to properly receive the end product of his work.[36] This purification regimen has its roots in the Vedic fire sacrifice, in preparation for which the venue of sacrifice would be ritually purified. This was done to return the space to a primordial state of wholeness so that it could act as mesocosm in the action of the fire sacrifice itself.[37] The purification process of mercury ensures that the material used for the ensuing transformation will be the same substance originally created in the earth as the seed of Śiva, and thus capable of properly undergoing alchemical processes. Likewise, in the Āyurvedic tradition, in preparation for rejunvenative therapy, the patient would first be purged of the offending substances that caused an imbalance in humors, so that the

[35] Ibid., 264.
[36] Ibid., 266. Only the chemical purification of mercury counts as a *saṃskāra*—physical purification of the metal and the body are simply preparatory measures.
[37] Ibid., 269.

restorative therapy could be efficacious.[38] In yoga and alchemy the gross body of the practitioner is purified in similar ways to ensure a properly working reflective mesocosmic medium.[39] By purifying the body, the yogin cleans the channels of the subtle body so that he can freely circulate the vital breaths through them, and the alchemist removes any impurities that could adversely affect the laboriously prepared mercurial elixir he will ingest.[40]

The next stage of immobilization includes all of the alchemical processes of, "swooning," "binding," and, "killing," the purified mercury. It is not necessary to examine each one in great detail, but it will suffice to say that White's categorization of these processes as, "immobilization," is entirely apt. In different ways, each of the three processes stops mercury from being volatile so that it can be further manipulated. In many ways, this is the most difficult alchemical process to achieve, and the rest of the processes follow rather naturally once it has been done.[41] White notes that several alchemical texts (and one yogic text) contain the same key phrase, "Swooned, *rasa*, like breath, drives away diseases, killed it revives itself, bound it affords the power of flight."[42] This points to the importance of this principle in both alchemy and yoga; the difference between the two is the meaning of *rasa* as mercury and semen, respectively.[43] In both contexts, the benefits of immobilizing *rasa* are the same as those of immobilizing breath. Both alchemical and *hathayogic* traditions emphasize the immobilization of breath and *rasa* as essentially interchangeable, since it is only

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[38] Ibid., 270-271. Bose, *A Concise History of Science in India*, 249.
[39] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 272.
[40] Ibid., 272.
[41] Ibid., 274.
[42] Ibid. The reference is to a phrase found in similar form in the *Rasārnava, Rasahrdaya Tantra, Rasendra Mangala, Bhūtiprakarana, Rasendracūdāmani, and Rasaratnasamuccaya*, as well as the *Hathayogapradīpikā.*
[43] Ibid., 274-275.

by achieving stillness of breath that the alchemist's procedures will be effective and the yogin will still his semen.[44]

The necessity of immobilization is directly related to the concepts microcosmic and macrocosmic cycles. As we saw before, solar and lunar cycles are the macrocosmic embodiment of the disorder caused when the universe became manifest, and in Āyurveda are seen to cause disorders of the human microcosm. Similarly, in yoga, it is the participation of semen in the destructive cycle dominated by the solar polarity in the body that causes aging. For the yogin to work against this cycle and implement a new, constructive lunar cycle for his semen, he must first halt the progression in the destructive cycle by immobilizing breath/*rasa*. The alchemist must do the same thing to mercury by halting its progression toward volatility and preparing it for constructive transformation. It is at this point in the alchemical process that mercury is really entirely purified as a mesocosmic medium. Only by immobilization is it made truly pure in its original state of potential.

Because the three modes of immobilization of mercury are all different, they produce mercury in different forms. Swooned mercury is often combined with sulfur, and bound mercury can be bound together with other components.[45] The results of all of these concoctions are useful medicinal compounds, but the most potent result comes from killing mercury, which reduces it to ashes. In Āyurvedic pharmacology, killing metals is the most common way of administering them because it is believed they are more easily absorbed by the body that way.[46] Furthermore, because ashes are the end product of the sacrificial combination of *rasa*, *agni*, and *vāyu*, and because mercury is the semen of Śiva, the *rasa par excellance*, "the reduction of mercury . . . to ash is tantamount to the recovery of a primordial perfection, of the absolute before

[44] Ibid., 275.
[45] Ibid., 266-267.
[46] Ibid., 267, and Bose, *A Concise History of Science in India*, 253-254.

its fall into nature, into manifestation."[47] The ash thereby produced is a potent elixir in itself, since it is charged with primal energy. The primacy of ash is a common theme in tantric traditions because of the traditional importance placed on it by Śiva himself, who smears it on his body and reduces the world to ash in his purificatory dance of destruction with Śakti.

The next category of alchemical transformation, reversal, involves several *saṃskāras*, culminating with the process of *jarana*, "assimilation," in which twelve successively large amounts of sulfur or mica (the mineral Śakti to mercury's Śiva) are, "swallowed," by the alchemical mercury, resulting in mercury, "possessed of fantastic powers of transmutation."[48] This process is the alchemical equivalent of the yogic practice of raising the semen through the central channel and piercing the *cakras*, which collapses each successively subtle constituent of the human microcosm into the next, finally collapsing all into the mind, and the mind into the Absolute.[49] The yogic raising of the *kuṇḍalinī* has a similar operation, except that the *cakras* and constituent parts of the universe are identified as sounds, and they are collapsed into Śiva-consciousness, the source of all vibration.[50] Mercury prepared in this way only has to undergo a few more processes, namely the addition of some grains of gold, silver, or gemstones before it is ready to transmute base metals into gold. Once the threshold of saturation is reached, the mercury will automatically reach the final alchemical stage of *vedha*, where it "pierces" the base metal it has consumed and instantly transforms it into gold.[51]

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[47] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 283.
[48] Ibid., 292.
[49] Ibid., 293.
[50] Lilian Silburn, *Kundalinī: The Energy of the Depths*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5-7 and *passim*.
[51] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 314.

The *saṃskāra* of *vedha*, along with the formal terminus of *sarira-yoga* ("body Work," which is simply the ingestion of the product of the last stage by the alchemist), constitute the transformation category. Once the alchemical mercury pierces the base metal, all of its base constituents are obliterated, leaving only pure gold. This is similar to what happens to the human body when the same alchemical pill is ingested (or, more commonly, simply held in the mouth). Here, the mercury does the same work as yogic austerities and, "implodes," all of the successive base elements, represented by the *cakras*, and leaves only the fifth, most subtle element of ether.[52] The presence of ether alone creates a space of emptiness and pure potentiality, where the only other thing left is the *ātman*, principle of the Absolute, which can then spontaneously come forth to constitute the new alchemical or perfected body.[53] The perfected *rasa* of the alchemical mercury replaces the gross *rasa* of the physical body. This is the same process that occurs at the culmination of *hatha yoga* and the raising of the *kuṇḍalinī*, except that the perfected *rasa* in that case is the nectar produced when the refined seed fills the cranial vault or when *kuṇḍalinī* reunites with the male principle at that same locus.[54] Thus the culmination of the alchemist's art is the same as that of the tantric yogin.

As is clear from the preceding description of the alchemical process, the project is only one part of the "Work in two parts." Yogic discipline and contemplation are integral and necessary parts of the alchemical process. The cosmological and soteriological concepts from which the alchemical idiom draws its meaning were already well established in India by the time alchemy became popular in the medieval period. It also rose to prominence within the religious climate of medieval tantrism, which can further account for the religious currency afforded to

[52] Ibid., 319.
[53] Ibid., 320.
[54] Ibid.

many of its symbols. Although alchemy in India had much in common with the more "objective" or "empirical" pursuits of medicine and metallurgy, it would be irresponsible to impose upon medieval India modern concepts of what is "scientific" and what is "unscientific." Alchemy, therefore, should be seen in light of the cultural values it would actually have commanded in its most prominent eras. It is clear from its close conceptual proximity with tantric yoga that alchemy was a specific genre of theory and practice within the greater Indian contemplative world. Its features of chemical transformation are directly allied with the soteriological goals of personal transformation and manipulation of the subtle parts of the universe, which are the common property of Indian contemplative traditions in general.

Daoist Cosmology and Soteriology

Daoist cosmology and soteriology is based in large part on greater philosophical currents common to all Chinese culture, but because Daoism nonetheless developed in this milieu, I will treat them as part of the Daoist system. There are many concepts at work in the Daoist system that are similar to those of the Indian traditions, and these should be fairly obvious. Since my project here is to characterize Chinese alchemy as a particular idiom in use within the Daoist contemplative milieu, however, I will simply present a brief description of the system in this light.[55]

To understand Daoist cosmology we must begin at the beginning: the Dao. The Dao is the ineffable principle of primal existence. As such, it is present in everything, but completely and definitely elusive as an ontological reality. The word

[55] For a more extensive comparative analysis of Indian and Chinese alchemy, see Needham, *Science and Civilisation*, v.5 pt.5: 257-288.

dao means, "way," and it is in this sense of a path that it is often understood as the principle upon which the universe is conducted. The Dao *is*, in a sense, an ordering principle, but not merely an ordering principle. As Kristofer Schipper puts it, the Dao is:

> "something underlying the change and transformation of all beings, the spontaneous process regulating the natural cycle of the universe. It is in this process, along this way, that the world as we see it, the creation of which we are an integral part, finds its unity."[56]

He goes on to admonish the reader not to take the Dao itself as unitary. "The Dao may make the whole, but is not itself the Whole."[57] This is a significant distinction because it differentiates the cosmology of Daoism on a fundamental level from that of theistic systems like tantric Hinduism. The universe in Daoism is seen as a Whole that is ultimately caused by differentiation from the primal unity of the Dao, but that ensuing universe is not what makes up the Dao. What is the universe made of then? This question is answered by the common cosmological view shared by all systems of early Chinese thought.[58]

Chinese metaphysics is fundamentally concerned with time, and more specifically cyclical time.[59] The temporal cycles of all things commonly encountered in the world, like life, growth and death, the seasons, day and night, etc. were seen as parts of the greater whole of astronomical time, which was also clearly cyclical. All of these varying scales of temporal cycles fit inside each other, "nested" in a cohesive way.[60] Thus it is implied that the regulation of the universe, the macrocosm, was

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[56] Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3-4.
[57] Ibid., 4.
[58] Thomas Michael discusses a slightly different cosmogony apparently adopted by some Confucian traditions in *The Pristine Dao: Metaphysics in Early Daoist Discourse*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 13-15.
[59] Nathan Sivin, "The Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy," in Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 222.
[60] Ibid.

directly analogous to the human lifespan or any other discrete cyclical system, the microcosm. The principle that imparted regularity to the cosmos, furthermore, must then impart the same kind of order to the human microcosm. As Eva Wong puts it, "there is a macroscopic/microscopic relationship between the Dao in nature and the Dao in humanity. This is because all things originate from the same source (the Dao) and follow the same principles."[61] The Daoist myth of cosmic origins is relatively simple, and although it is not shared by every school of thought in ancient China, it does use the same system of explaining the physical interaction of the constituents of the phenomenal universe.

The first chapter of the *Daodejing* has it that, "the Dao gives birth to the One, the One to the Two, the Two to the Three, and the Three to the Ten Thousand Beings." The Ten Thousand Beings (*wanwu*) here are all the constituents of manifest reality. Traditional Chinese metaphysics fleshes out this idea to explain that the universe was originally made up of Primordial Chaos (*hundun*), an undifferentiated matrix of potential *qi* (breaths, energies, constituents of matter) that was subject to the action of the Dao.[62] When this action happened, the Primordial Chaos differentiated into separate *qi*, which then coalesced into Heaven (made of the lighter, transparent *qi*) and Earth (made of the heavier, opaque *qi*), and joined at the Center, which makes up the third element in the system.[63] The system of Three, as alluded to above, forms myriad differentiated *qi*, which make up all of the substances in the material world. All the while the Dao is active in guiding change in cyclical time, and the constitution of the system is governed by the dynamic of change that is the Dao.

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[61] Eva Wong, *Nourishing the Essence of Life: The Outer, Inner, and Secret Teachings of Taoism*, (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2004), 6.
[62] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 34.
[63] Ibid.

As Schipper puts it, "the two fundamental phases of the Dao's action are *yin* and *yang*, graphically . . . the shady side and the sunny side of the mountain."[64] *Yin* and *yang* are thus polar opposites in the spectrum of the Dao's action. They correspond conceptually to all diametrically opposed pairs, but metaphysically are likened specifically to the, "repose" (*yin*), and, "movement" (*yang*) of the power/action (*de*) of the Dao.[65] This power fluctuates between the two poles, and leads to the first of the so-called, "laws," of ancient Chinese cosmology/physics: "any maximum state of a variable is inherently unstable."[66] The meaning here is that, in the spectrum of *yin* and *yang*, when one reaches its apogee, it necessarily reverts to its opposite, which results in a wave-like continuum of *yin* and *yang* that has five distinct segments: two apogees of *yin* and *yang*, two states of flux, and one equilibrium.[67] These five points of the wave-like flux of *yin* and *yang* correspond to the five constituent elements of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth.

Schipper continues, "the five phases are found in everything, and their alternation is the second physical law. The phases lead from one to the other."[68] The cycle of phases alluded to is the cyclical motion of the *yin-yang* polarity, and there are both constructive and destructive cycles, depending on the direction of flux. Everything in the material world is composed of a certain distribution of these elements, which changes according to the grand cyclical time of the Dao, thus changing the composition of the things. Things which share the same elemental disposition, moreover, are subject to, "symbolic correlation,"[69] where change in one is

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[64] Ibid., 35.

[65] Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr., (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 57.

[66] This phraseology was apparently coined by Nathan Sivin (see Sivin, "Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy," 226) and appears in a few different places, notably Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 35.

[67] See Sivin, "Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy," 226 for a very handy chart.

[68] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 35.

[69] Sivin, "Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy," 227.

able to affect change in the other. This is most applicable to alchemy in the movements of the planets, which each correspond to a different element and can affect change in metals and other earthly materials correlated to their element.[70] This principle also reiterates the primacy of the macrocosm/microcosm dynamic in Chinese cosmology.[71]

The five elements are really more accurately called phases, because they are actually just phases in the flux of the Dao, manifested by *yin* and *yang*. The actual physical building blocks of the material world are the *qi*. In this context, *qi* is both a physical material constituent and an energetic one. Everything in the world is made up of *qi*, including the human body and the human spiritual element, as well as all other spiritual beings. In practice, these *qi* are equated with spirits or essences, which to a large degree have a life of their own. The human governing *qi*, *hun*, can leave the body while it is asleep, travel to heaven, etc., while the *po*, which make up the skeleton and other heavy body parts, conspire to keep the person tied to earth.[72] The spiritual components of humans are thus not ontologically different from that of the gods—the only difference is in the level of refinement and power of their constituent *qi* (which in this case is called *shen*). Because all of the *qi* are subject to change, the human spirit can, in theory become empowered (or diminished). This leads us to the third, "law," of ancient Chinese physics: "that every body that goes through a prolonged and repeated cyclical action is transmuted and purified."[73] This effect is directly applicable to alchemy, both exterior and interior, and it will become very important later.

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[70] For another account of celestial influences in Daoism, see Ching-lang Hou, "The Chinese Belief in Baleful Stars," in *Facets of Taoism*, edited by Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 193-228.

[71] For a more extensive discussion of yin-yang cosmology in Daoism, see Michael Saso, *Taoism and the Rite of Cosmic Renewal*, (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1990), 15-41.

[72] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 36.

[73] Ibid., 41.

Finally, the goal of Daoist alchemy, and Daoist soteriology in general, is also bound up in the tradition's cyclical cosmology. Thomas Michael characterizes the Daoist soteriological goal as, "a return to the original wholeness, necessitating a reverse progress backward through the sequences [of cosmic differentiation]."[74] Returning to an original state of simplicity and spontaneity is indeed the broad soteriological goal of Daoism in general.[75] The Daoist contemplative idiom works toward this goal by creating systems of meaning in which this goal may be realized. As we will see, the Daoist alchemical project is one specific subset of this contemplative language that serves the same soteriological ends.

Daoist Alchemy

Alchemy in Daoism is denoted simply by the word for cinnabar, *dan*, and is divided into the two strains of outer alchemy (*wai dan*) and inner alchemy (*nei dan*).[76] The two branches of the alchemical tradition have most likely shared a similarly long tradition, but up until about the eleventh century CE, outer alchemy commanded more popularity, and afterwards inner alchemy dominated.[77] Because much of the terminology and theory of interior alchemy grew out of the exterior tradition, let us first examine *wai dan*.[78]

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[74] Michael, *The Pristine Dao*, 33-34.
[75] Norman Girardot argues that soteriology is a legitimate term to use when speaking about Daoism, despite the lack of "salvation" per se, because there is still a specific concern with, "healing human life in relation to the culturally perceived meaning and structure of the world." Norman Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 7.
[76] These two strands, which are a classification adopted by the Daoist tradition itself, should not be confused with the exoteric/esoteric division imposed on alchemy by Western scholars. See above, n. 4.
[77] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 175.
[78] Kristofer Schipper considers the early Daoist practices associated with "keeping the One" to be the forerunner to interior alchemy, and believes that the developing *wai dan* tradition was in turn shaped by these practices. Nevertheless, as he also notes, "everything here seems connected," so the problem of which side of the tradition came first is really a moot point when examining the system as a congruous whole. Ibid., 179. Girardot comes to a similar conclusion that, "a distinction between an inner and outer alchemy is finally moot," *Myth and Meaning*, 292.

Outer alchemy, like all alchemical traditions, was interested in discovering the method for transmuting base metals into gold, and for brewing the elixir of immortality. However, Chinese alchemy's method does not necessarily seek to do anything counter to nature or even specifically artificial. Rather, it seeks to work with the natural cyclical order to purify and sublimate various materials.[79] The third "law" of ancient Chinese physics mentioned above implies that if one could find a way to speed up cyclical time, one could perfect and transmute materials much more efficiently. Indeed, the aim of Chinese alchemy is to, "refine raw ingredients found in nature and thus to discover the ultimate and fundamental element, the seminal essence of the world."[80]

Minerals in general in Chinese cosmology, including metals, had the same theoretical, "life-cycle," as all other beings, which consisted of changes in composition over long periods of time.[81] The alchemical process, then, was a microcosmic condensation of time by orders of magnitude.[82] The alchemist could do the work that would take nature thousands of years in a matter of days. Because of the principle of symbolic correspondence mentioned above, the alchemist was also himself symbolically living out that enormous lifespan, so that when his cyclical transmutation of cinnabar into pure *yang* energy was complete, he could use the accumulated efficacy to gain immortality.[83] The *yang* side of the energy equation is important here because life, beginning with one's conception as a fetus, was the *yang*

[79] Interestingly, in his recent study on the Great Clarity (Taiqing) tradition of alchemy Fabrizio Pregadio argues that Taiqing alchemy was essentially based on ritual alone, and not on the principle of correlative cosmology that informed the alchemical traditions that occupy the rest of this discussion. Taiqing alchemy did, however, share the common alchemical goal of revealing, "the original state of the cosmos," and partaking of the, "'essence' issued from the Dao, from which the entire existence evolves," which was the most important aspect of the adepts' work. Fabrizio Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 14.
[80] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 175.
[81] See Sivin, "Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy, " 231-242.
[82] Ibid., 232.
[83] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 178-179.

part of a dualistic cycle, which peaked at maturity and descended into the *yin* side at death. Thus, in order to stay in this life indefinitely, one would have to be immune from the effects of waning *yang* energy, hence the need for an elixir to reestablish and maintain it. There is, however, another option, the same one that Heaven uses to remain immortally constant: the attainment of, "a perfectly balanced internal phasing which attunes [one] to the Dao's recurrent pattern."[84] The perfection of this balance, and the generation of the resulting perfected body of immortality, is the work of interior alchemy, which Russell Kirkland describes as, "a method of moral and spiritual self-refinement: through the proper knowledge and action, one could pare away the grosser elements of one's being and eventually ascend to a higher plane of existence."[85]

The theories and practices of inner alchemy are closely related to what Kristofer Schipper translates as, "Keeping the One." This is a traditional phraseology, and the practices it describes include various breathing, dietary, and exercise regimens like *qigong*, abstention from grains, and *taijiquan* to promote and maintain a healthy balance of *qi* in the body and prolonging the life of the practitioner. The second-third century classic *Book of the Yellow Court* (*Huangting Jing*) describes these methods for Keeping the One, and also provides an overview of the interior landscape of the human microcosm. This landscape is rich and varied, and finds in the human body all the structures homologous to the outside world—mountains, rivers, palaces, etc. The One referred to in Keeping the One, Schipper asserts, is the true self that resides in the country of the bodily microcosm.[86] *The Book of the Yellow Court* also describes the sexual practice of the Union of *Qi*, which is one of many Daoist sexual practices. Although more advanced than the basic principles of diet and breath control, sexual

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[84] Sivin, "Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy," 236.
[85] Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 87.
[86] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 131.

practice is still considered a preliminary in the practice of Keeping the One, since it also acts to, "bring order and equilibrium to the body."[87]

The more advanced state of union with the Dao is experienced through Chaos rather than well-regulated order. This is the process involved in Inner Alchemy proper, which is, "a synthesis of all the earlier rituals."[88] *Nei dan* does, in fact, parlay breathing into its preliminary practice, and as the medieval era progressed and *wai dan* declined, the focus became transmuting the energies of the body through continuous cycles of, "orbiting," *qi*.[89] The inner alchemy Schipper describes, however, is more focused on the return to the origin of the Dao through the obliteration of duality.

The work of inner alchemy is essentially focused on giving oneself over to the pure potentiality of primordial chaos, and creating formless unity within the bodily microcosm through processes analogous to those of alchemy. The "reagents" of inner alchemy are the *yin* and *yang* or the elements of water and fire, and the elixir produced from the alchemical process is the embryonic body of the One—the true transcendent self. The reagents are united at the center of the microcosm to produce a unity that becomes all-pervasive.[90] This marriage of, "true lead," and, "true mercury," within the alchemical apparatus of the practitioner's body forms the, "mysterious pearl," of the immortal embryo, which grows as it's *yang* power waxes (as it does with all embryos), and transmutes the practitioner into an Immortal.[91] In this way, sexual union, which is embodied by the union of *yin* and *yang*, "is united at the Center and from this Center it radiates and spreads through the whole body. Love thus engages the body as a whole, merging all the organs and all the functions."[92] In this way the

[87] Ibid., 151.
[88] Ibid., 152.
[89] For an interesting late account of this practice, see Lu K'uan Yu, *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality,* (London: Rider & Co., 1970).
[90] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 154.
[91] Holmes Welch, *Taoism: Parting the Way, Revised Edition,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 131.
[92] Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 154.

cosmic flux of the Dao can manifest itself in the entire being of the practitioner, creating an experience of Chaos, beyond all notions of subject and object, which changes the dynamic of sexual union to one of gestation, and forms the embryo of the true self, the One.

In this process we see the principle of return, or backward motion through time. As mentioned earlier, because life is itself a fluid cycle of *yin* and *yang*, the moment of conception is a point of equilibrium between the two phases.[93] Thus the return to the origin that takes place after mystical union is achieved can be seen as a return to this state of primordial equilibrium.[94] In inner alchemy, this return is also effected by a practice called, "embryonic breathing," which seeks to reverse the flow of breath in the body (the normal cycle of which leads towards death), and thereby reverse cyclical time back to the embryonic equilibrium.

No matter what the language used to describe this return, it is a fundamentally contemplative process in that it involves the radical re-ordering of normal conceptual processes. It is also the culmination of the Daoist path, alchemical or otherwise. The alchemical idiom serves the purposes of articulating these soteriological values, while reinforcing Daoist notions of cosmology and shaping contemplative practice.

Conclusion

The alchemical project is a unique and intriguing feature of premodern societies. Alchemical methods of transmuting metals and minerals involve precise laboratory work under carefully controlled conditions, and these methods are meant to

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[93] This is not to say that the embryo itself possesses some inherent equilibrium, only that it represents the temporal point of equilibrium in the *yin-yang* life cycle.

[94] This would also imply that the nexus between life and death at the other end of life can be similarly useful, but I do not see any mention of this, unless the "pseudo-" death by poisoning experienced by many alchemists when ingesting their creations is a case of it.

be repeatable and their results are meant to be empirical manifestations of the fundamental properties of the physical universe. For these reasons, many interpreters of the alchemical traditions have found in alchemy the institutional seeds of modern experimental chemistry. At the same time, the alchemists themselves did not seem to revise their conception of fundamental physical properties as they accumulated empirical data. Rather, alchemy continued to be grounded in the metaphysics and cosmology formulated in religio-philosophical spheres, even in spite of seemingly overwhelming proof that its project was fundamentally flawed—namely, the fact that many of its elixirs are in fact deadly poisons. In this respect alchemy is fundamentally un-scientific. Indeed, it is anachronistic to assume any kind of conceptual divide existed in premodern societies between so-called "rational" (i.e. scientific or proto-scientific) investigation, and philosophical or contemplative speculation.

Alchemical traditions must, therefore, be approached from within the socio-cultural milieu that created them and from which they draw their cultural currency. In taking this approach it is plain to see that alchemy is not a perennial phenomenon, but rather that it is a peculiarly similar way for contemplative traditions to concretize very abstract religious or cultural values by attaching them to tangible physical materials and processes.

In the Indian and Chinese cultural spheres, religious and philosophical innovations provided worldviews that were conducive to the project of alchemy. As we have seen, these two traditions share many similar concepts and practices, but I propose that their similarities are mostly coincidental. For instance, both traditions have concepts of paired opposites that affect the dynamics of alchemical systems, and these pairs are often the same: fire and water, sun and moon, cold and hot, etc. However, the symbol systems associated with the polar opposites are not nearly the same in both traditions. For instance, Indian and Chinese alchemy both deal with

lunar and solar cycles, but the Indian system equates the moon with the male principle and the sun with the female; the Chinese system is exactly opposite. Very basic differences like these cannot be simply swept away by appealing to their superficial similarities. Even where all of the alchemical traditions (including Hermetic ones) seem to share near-identical symbolism, the meaning and cultural resonance of that symbolism is still radically different across traditions.

For instance, in all cases the final alchemical product can roughly be described as the undifferentiated stuff of primordial existence (*materia prima, śakti, hundun*), but that "stuff" can carry very different meaning depending on the context. The understanding of the *materia prima* of the Hermetic traditions conjures images of a hierarchical universe of forms, culminating in the perfect form-giving Divine Intellect. The *prakriti* of the Indian milieu is tied to a view of the universe as a concentric series of emanations from the godhead in the form of sound or vibration. The understanding of *hundun* in the Chinese context connotes primordial chaos to which the Dao brings rhythmic order. Each tradition is fundamentally different in its cosmological ordering of the universe, which affects how the alchemical project is pursued.

The Indian metaphysical perspective is concentric, while the Chinese is cyclical. In the Hindu cosmology we have seen associated with both alchemy and *hatha yoga*, the manifest world is seen as an emanation from the godhead. I call this arrangement concentric because reality is seen to proceed outward in concentric levels of subtlety from the central ordering principle of divinity. In this kind of system, a return to the original unity of divine consciousness entails a retraction of the concentric levels against their outward emanation. This concept is what produces the alchemical and yogic process of, "collapsing," successive levels of gross reality to achieve unity with the divine. In the Daoist system, the universe is fundamentally ordered by cyclical time and by extension, cyclical systems of matter/energy. Here,

the soteriological aim is to merge completely with the principle of this cyclic change itself, the Dao, not to transcend it. This concept is what yields the alchemical process of microcosmic manipulation of time, and the contemplative inner alchemical process of returning to the One.

As the Daoist inner alchemical tradition progresses, especially into the modern era, its techniques of breathing and circulating breath become increasingly, "yogic."[95] While there are indigenous Chinese systems of breath control, and a medical tradition of charting out the channels of breath, the practice itself at some point begins to take on a qualitatively more Indian flavor. In the modern period, when communication between India and China was much more extensive, this influence seems natural, if not inevitable. As mentioned earlier, there is also evidence of alchemical conversations between India and China beginning in the early part of the first millennium CE. Furthermore, India most likely received the majority her mercury for alchemical processes from China, where the mineral wealth of mercurial ores was much greater.[96] Because of this and other economic exchanges in allied practical fields like metallurgy, it seems more reasonable that the majority of applicable intellectual exchange was in technical not philosophical knowledge. This kind of exchange would allow both cultures to utilize the physical technology of the time to pursue their own alchemical projects, which would be entirely grounded in the native intellectual tradition. Regardless of the level of practical interaction, the fact that similar methods and materials were used in both Indian and Chinese alchemy necessarily means that there will be a high degree of similarity.

Mercury, whether it is located in India, China, Egypt or Europe, is still mercury. Likewise, sulfur is still sulfur and gold is still gold. Gold, when purified by

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[95] See Yu, *Daoist Yoga*, as well as Ming Dao Deng, *The Wandering Taoist*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 180-183.
[96] White, *The Alchemical Body*, 61-62.

a goldsmith is just as lustrous in the West as it is in the East, and the chemical fact remains that mercury is one of the few substances that easily reacts with gold. All early metallurgists and other such craftsmen must have observed exactly the same physical and chemical properties of minerals, regardless of their geographic location or philosophical attitudes. What was certainly quite different across the globe, however, was the deeper meaning they took from these identical processes. The physical-chemical starting conditions for every example of alchemy would have been the same, so it is only natural that each culture's interpretation of those conditions would bear certain similarities with one another. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these similarities must necessarily be linked together, either by esoteric communication of alchemical secrets across vast distances or by some perennial alchemical affinity in man.

The more reasonable approach to the curious phenomenon of alchemy is to treat it as a peculiar way of investing meaning—usually within the context of contemplative discourse—in concrete physical phenomena. Interestingly, once these physical phenomena were invested with such meaning, they could eventually become new symbols for other levels of significance. The trend in India and China toward "interiorizing" alchemical processes may be the result of just such a process. Alchemy itself became a rich context of contemplative meaning and formed a new kind of idiom which contemplative traditions could use to formulate doctrine and practice.

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