How to Measure and Deepen Your Spiritual Realization:

A Short Multi-disciplinary Course on Evaluating and Elevating Your Meditation Progress and Spiritual Experiences

by

Huai-Chin Nan
William Bodri

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Top Shape Publishing, LLC
1135 Terminal Way Suite 209
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Preface

This work has taken several years to come to fruition. While the public arena contains an excess of information on spiritual cultivation, much of it is rather useless when it comes to helping you understand your own stage of meditation or the various spiritual experiences that can happen to people. Very few books actually teach you how to rank your stage of meditation, or explain the variety of spiritual experiences that can occur to you in life. Neither do they take this information, and embody it into the relevant instructions that tell you how to make progress on the spiritual path.

Any of the present materials available, which can tell you how to rank or rate your stage of meditation, are usually not broad enough in scope to be able to rank spiritual progress from the aspect of more than one spiritual school or measuring system. In fact, until now, no one has linked all the information we have on these topics into a single cohesive whole, and presented it in a logical, orderly fashion. Furthermore, to date no one has yet presented any information on how to cross-correlate the various stages of the spiritual experience from one tradition to another.

To fill these gaps, I asked Zen and Esoteric master Nan Huai-Chin to go over a number of cases of spiritual practitioners, particularly those mentioned in Lee Sannella's *The Kundalini Experience*, and to explain the meditative experiences of these practitioners and the spiritual phenomena that each person had encountered. I hoped this would provide a corrective as well as motivational guide for typical meditators, and show them how to understand and evaluate their own spiritual experiences and spiritual progress. People need an expert teacher for these matters, and I have done my best to make this teacher available through this volume.

When the commentary upon these initial cases were done, I then presented the cases of more advanced cultivation practitioners—such as Yeshe Tsogyel, Milarepa, Gampopa, and Machig Labdron—so that people might see the vast difference in kung-fu experienced by the neophyte and accomplished spiritual adept. I specifically included the cases of Yeshe Tsogyel and Machig Labdron into the discussion so that women might have some female models for comparison. Most books focus on men travelling the spiritual path, whereas this book focuses on both men and women.

In addition to these cases, I eventually added the stories of a variety of Zen, Taoist, Hindu and other spiritual masters, and then linked not only their stages of cultivation to various established spiritual frameworks, but showed how some of them went astray in their practice. Since the whole purpose of the spiritual experience is the positive transformation of personal behavior, the

last chapter of this volume also contains an explanation of the Confucian ideal of cultivation, which goes into how personal spiritual practice links with the idea of saving or improving the world, and how this same idea is embodied in Christianity and the ideals of Buddhism. To me, this is perhaps the most important chapter, for it contains the insights and rationale for how your own personal cultivation can help transform the world.

Eventually, as the cases we covered grew in quantity, so did the relevant teachings delivered by Master Nan Huai-Chin on these matters. The problem then became one of linking all this piecemeal information into one seamless coherent whole, as Master Nan rarely stays on a single line of thought when discussing an issue. This tendency to roam in content, and therefore touch upon a wider variety of topics, required much bridging information and filler discussions on all sorts of subjects for this text. The final result is this present volume, which draws heavily on Nan Huai-Chin's lectures and the source materials found specifically in *To Realize Enlightenment*, *Working Toward Enlightenment*, and *Tao and Longevity*. If you like this sort of information, an even more complete treatment of the topic—with far more cases and advanced detail—is found in my own work, *The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience*, which goes far beyond this initial text in scope and explanatory power.

Within all these works you will, for the first time, learn how to rank, rate, evaluate, interpret, and fully understand the spiritual stages of various spiritual traditions. Needless to say, this will clear away a tremendous amount of confusion about the spiritual path, and about religions and religious claims in general. You will also learn how to match the stages of one tradition with another, such as matching the stages of Buddhist cultivation with Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, as well as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Furthermore, you will learn how to attain those same states yourself, and how to use this information to elevate your own stage of spiritual achievement. If this information did not circle back to focus upon your own spiritual efforts and stage of attainment, of what use would it be?

Frankly, this is path breaking material, and the first text that actually presents all these linking schemes. It is information that countless different types of people have been seeking. If you want to go far beyond this work and understand the details, you are advised to study the texts previously mentioned, especially *The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience*. If you have never seen this type of material before, absolutely the best work to orient you on the spiritual path is *Tao and Longevity*, by Nan Huai-Chin. This book is an overlooked standard—absolutely a required essential—for anyone pursuing meditation, yoga or any other type of spiritual practice. It is only because Nan Huai-Chin does not speak English that only a few people know of this text, which has sold millions of copies in Asia.

I would have to estimate that roughly half of the material in this work came from Master Nan, and half (or even more) from myself. While he focused on Zen, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, I was responsible for most of the material relating to Hinduism, yoga, Tantra,

Christianity, Islam, Judaism, alchemy, and other Western spiritual traditions. While he focuses on the East and I focus on the West, it is hard to say exactly where his teachings leave off and mine begin since we both comment upon the other's areas of expertise, so it is difficult to separate his opinions from my own. I personally consider this a drawback, as his insights are far more valuable and relevant than mine. However, a text with just his words alone simply could not be produced, and without my additions encompassing other cultures and spiritual roads, this work would not be nearly as far ranging and complete as it is.

Needless to say, if there are any errors inside, they definitely fall on my side rather than Master Nan's, and are most probably due to mistranslations, the requirement of writing bridging or filler material to link all these lessons together, or my own "mistaken take" on various subjects. But this is a collaborative effort, so this is how things must be even although many might have preferred a text by Master Nan himself.

In any case, the overall gist of the material is correct, and should provide you with a new way of looking at how to evaluate your own spiritual experiences, and the progress of many spiritual greats. Now you will be able to verify the truth of the spiritual path by linking many different traditions together, and discovering that they all point to the same stages of spiritual attainment. Trust me when I tell you, there is nothing like this out there, but you will have to prove this to yourself.

Most important of all is that this work teaches you how to understand the nondenominational, nonsectarian nature of the spiritual experience, which is a common road of experience. There is no exclusivity on spiritual salvation, as some sects claim, but there are indeed impartial degrees or stages of cultivation attainment, so some roads of spiritual liberation definitely proceed farther than others.

The spiritual road is the same essential path regardless of the tradition, but it is described differently across these traditions, and some traditions and individuals have proceeded further along this path than others. Now you finally have the background material, and measuring sticks, to prove this is so. My own hopes are that this work will help revolutionize an understanding of the spiritual path, and even help to legitimize it by making it more scientific.

Globalization, international trade flows, and instant worldwide communication are linking the different parts of the world ever closer, and this new global community desperately needs this spiritual information—this new integrated way of viewing things as we have presented. Because of globalization you need a new type of spiritual understanding that can encompass all, and I believe that the groundwork for this type of understanding can be found in this work. Since the world needs an accurate nonsectarian yet scientific explanatory means to view the spiritual path, this is one reason why I have worked so hard to show the correspondences that link the various spiritual paths of the world together.

This information will not only legitimize, and thereby help save the spiritual path from extinction, but will also help draw the various religions of the world closer together because it will validate many of their teachings, and show that many religious schools describe the very same phenomena but simply differ in the words that they use. Pointing out these commonalities can serve as a primary vehicle for reducing the frictional conflict between various religions and cultures, and can open up lines of communication that will enable them to better appreciate one another. From this aspect alone, this type of trans-denominational work should be supported.

While there is presently an international push to support economic, political and monetary union worldwide, this type of trans-religious view is absolutely necessary in order to help minimize possible conflict in the new world community. In fact, this need is even greater than that of economic and political union, for world conflict often arises due to the cultural differences that are an outcome of religion. Hence I present this work to you, for which I have done my best, and hope you can personally benefit from it as well as use the information to help your family, community, and nation.

Bill Bodri

Chapter 1:
The Challenge of Correctly Measuring and Interpreting Spiritual Progress

Spiritual cultivation is more popular today than ever. But despite the fact that large numbers of people now meditate, or devote themselves to other specialized spiritual cultivation techniques (*sadhana*), almost no one knows how to properly interpret the body-mind changes which result from these practices.

First, modern society does not generally recognize that spiritual cultivation practices will absolutely produce unique physical and psychological changes, called "*kung-fu*," in spiritual cultivation practitioners. Second, even people who do accept this fact do not know that there are also accurate measuring methods you can apply to this kung-fu in order to determine someone's level of spiritual cultivation accomplishments. Most people are unaware that the various levels of meditation and spiritual attainment have been ranked, and even those who are aware of this fact do not know how to apply these classical grading systems to anyone's spiritual attainments.

Due to the fact that this type of knowledge is not widespread, spiritual aspirants usually misinterpret their own stage of cultivation attainment, and they become totally lost when they attempt to understand the spiritual accomplishments of others. Many people know the stories of accomplished masters such as Milarepa, Ramakrishna, Confucius, Jesus, and Socrates, but have absolutely no clue as to who was the greater or lesser in terms of their ultimate success in spiritual attainment. They are completely ignorant of the traditional measuring systems available for gaining an answer to this type of question, as well as how these systems can be used to help them evaluate their own level of meditation yoga.

Unfortunately, the public seems the most impressed with displays of superpowers and physical kung-fu which have very little to do with real spiritual attainments. Since such sights easily dazzle people, they hold scant appreciation for what really matters—the accomplishment of *prajna* transcendental wisdom, which marks true cultivation attainment. Attaining prajna wisdom means that you can attain an awakening into the true nature of the mind, and ultimately achieve the spiritual enlightenment we call self-realization, or getting the Tao.

In valuing the visible effects of spiritual practice rather than the invisible, society has lost its ability to distinguish between minor cultivation adepts, who might display superpowers and psychic abilities in abundance, and the great sages who may never publicly exhibit any such abilities at all. More often than not, the men who have climbed to the highest spiritual heights, such as Confucius or Socrates, lead perfectly ordinary lives without ever exhibiting any unusual outward display. Instead, the only thing that may have distinguished these masters from others was their extremely wise, noble and virtuous behavior.

To complicate matters, New Age cultivation schools are currently sprouting up everywhere, but instead of promoting clarity in these matters, they are simply creating more confusion. This increase in the availability of various spiritual paths has therefore created a corresponding need for a comprehensive guide map that can help spiritual practitioners navigate all these waters. Cultivators need clear guidance by which they cannot only understand their own level of meditative accomplishment, but by which they can understand the sometimes fantastic stories of masters such as Milarepa, Lao Tzu, St. Francis of Assisi, Mohammed or Hui-neng. Of course, we must also learn how to evaluate contemporary individuals as well, such as the many meditation gurus of India, and the African messiah Simeon Toko.

In today's modern world of skepticism and science, people must therefore become familiar with all the possible stages of spiritual cultivation kung-fu. Furthermore, since spiritual striving is what is basic in human life, it is imperative that people reach a high common denominator of understanding with regards to spiritual matters rather than just settle for a very low-grade level of general cultural understanding. Modern people must learn how to match the various spiritual stages we can attain with the findings of science, and must come to recognize to what levels these stages correspond on the overall spiritual path.

Not only must we be able to understand why our own body may shake or perspire or get warm during meditation, or why we may see lights or hear particular sounds in our minds, but we must learn to know which of these is a higher or lower cultivation phenomenon, and what it ultimately represents. We must also become able to understand why some people can fly through the air, leave their hand imprints in stone, see objects at a distance, emanate body doubles you can see and touch, or even foretell the future. We must become able to understand why a Tibetan master might die exhibiting a rainbow body of light, why a yogic master might leave this world by reducing his or her body to ashes, and why a Zen master will just pass away without any "special effects" at all.

Who out of these examples has achieved the higher level of attainment? Which of these things is just a superficial cultivation accomplishment? Countless stories from all world's myriad spiritual traditions are now converging upon us, but in all these stories, who is the advanced spiritual practitioner, who is exhibiting only minor spiritual attainments, and who is walking a road which is truly outside the genuine spiritual path? Important questions indeed!

Our modern world has highly advanced systems of medicine, biochemistry, physics, and psychology and insists on rigorous logic and an absence of superstition, so it is impossible to put these branches of knowledge aside when we start interpreting these matters. When we try to answer questions about the effects of spiritual practices such as meditation, we must also incorporate what these modern fields have to say because they are the new contributors to modern cultivation science.

No matter how we choose to look at it, a review of the classical standards used in judging spiritual progress is essential for today's modern world. Without this knowledge, it is inevitable that people will become increasingly confused over time because science alone cannot interpret these matters. The detours and errors one can make in spiritual cultivation are many, and it is time to provide some clear answers to cover the vast amount of information now reaching us. Luckily, since the genuine principles of spiritual cultivation do not belong to any one religion, it is entirely possible to create a fully nonsectarian and holistic guide map that can explain most all cultivation schools and phenomena.

Avoiding Self-Delusion on the Spiritual Trail

A warning to the practitioner is in order, however. In cultivation matters, one must be particularly careful of pride and self-deception, for in this case, a little bit of information is truly a dangerous thing. It is easy to take some of this knowledge and extrapolate it into thinking you understand the whole picture when you have not even scratched the surface of this topic. There are already far too many ways you can cheat yourself in cultivation, so do not add this one to your problem list.

Just look around for awhile and you will find there are already many people who mistakenly believe they are enlightened with complete self-realization, and if people can readily make this sort of big mistake, then consider that smaller mistakes are much more common. It is therefore essential to avoid the mistake of believing you fully understand this topic and to refrain from using this information to feed your ego or to cheat others. Even though we will be conducting high-level discussions of cultivation kung-fu, and how to rank someone's level of spiritual attainment, you should not immediately make pronouncements on these matters beyond your own personal experience.

There is a general rule in spiritual cultivation that the more advanced practitioner will understand the kung-fu of those below him, but those practitioners on the levels below cannot truly understand the kung-fu of the practitioners above. In other words, a *Bodhisattva* of the first degree cannot truly understand what the Bodhisattva of the second degree is experiencing, just as students do not always understand the actions or emphasis of their teachers. This lack of proper understanding, despite any commonly recognized level of intellectual brilliance one may possess, typically holds until a practitioner finally reaches those higher spiritual stages themselves. In other words, the understanding of a spiritual accomplishment comes only with mastery of it.

As another example, you can intellectually understand that seawater tastes "salty," but until you actually swallow a gulp yourself you will never *really* comprehend the meaning behind these words! Naturally, the same principle holds true with regards to understanding the stages of true cultivation attainment, and to complicate matters there are even various "semblance" stages of attainment which can easily trick spiritual practitioners into believing they have reached

attainments which they are lacking.

The emphasis on a direct personal experience of cultivation in order to attain true understanding does not mean we can discard the theoretical aspect of cultivation. If you do not know the principles and theory of cultivation practice, you will not know what stage you have attained through your efforts and you will always continue to remain in the dark. Thus, the actual accomplishment of spiritual attainment is just as important as theory, but the two have to be mixed together just as flour and water must be mixed together to produce dough. Spiritual theory and dogma needs practice for the proof of authentication, and practice needs theory for guidance.

Taking everything together, we can say that if you cannot already attain the nine *samadhi* concentration states in your meditation practice, see all the beings in the ten directions, travel the universe at will, see from your ears and hear through your nose, or produce all sorts of supernatural transformations, you had better refrain from publicly claiming to know who has attained certain levels of attainment and who has not. What we are revealing is to help you make further progress on the path rather than to supply you with any ammunition for criticizing others. Worry about yourself and whether you are continuing to make cultivation progress rather than spend any time criticizing or ranking someone else.

We therefore hope our readers avoid this serious mistake and devote all their energies towards making personal progress along the lines of spiritual attainment. Examine your own behavior to choose what is good and shun what is evil, and refrain from criticizing others. That is the first rule in spiritual cultivation practice, and the place where everything starts.

Chapter 2:
An Introduction to the Five Skandhas Ranking System

In order to understand someone else's stage of cultivation accomplishment, or your own, it is very important to understand what the ancient Indians termed the five *skandhas*. The five skandhas can be translated from the Sanskrit in several ways: the five aggregates, collections, groupings, piles, heaps, elements, classes or clusters. In Chinese, the five aggregates are known as the five *yun*, which means the five shadows or coverings, and in Tibetan they are known as the *phung-po nga*. They are a means for describing the entire path and step-by-step process of cultivation progress.

In technical terms, the five skandhas are an analytical means for describing the total psycho-physical personality that we call the self, yet without the need of postulating an internal soul or individual. In other words, the five aggregates are the true component factors which "make up the individual." They describe the nature of the individual human existence, so we can colloquially say that they make up the self. All the experiences we can possibly encounter—forms, sensations, impulses, concepts, and even consciousness—all these things are classified by the five skandhas under the appropriate skandha category. Since the five skandhas embrace every type of experience we can possibly encounter—including every experience we are encountering at this very moment—they are a classification system that describes the composition of our experiential being.

To put it differently, what we call the "self" is actually an agglomeration of five different event types, or skandhas. There is no real ego or true self within these event types, for there are only the skandhas operating without any "real person" inside them. The world of ever-flowing skandha experiences is sort of like a big soup of chemical reactions automatically evolving back and forth, or like a big net of feedback linked causes and effects. What happens is that pure awareness locks onto these skandha events, ignorantly imputes an isolated and limited self within them through a form of polluted fascination, and becomes so enamored of the falsity it has created that awareness turns away from its original pure nature.

This is a simple explanation for how sentient beings "lose" their original spiritual enlightenment while never truly leaving it. At this point we cannot go into this much further, but a detailed explanation can be found in an ancient text by Asvaghosha called *The Awakening of Faith*.

Actually there is no person or ego or individual self experiencing the skandhas at all, for even the mental self-definition of being an "I" or individual being is a thought development that is also just another component of the skandhas the "I" is just a stream of thoughts. In other words, while we think we are independent beings having separate "I-identities" from everything else, that "I-

sense" is an interdependent product of the skandhas lacking reality. What seems to be our personal mind of mentation, which spins our thoughts, is an interdependent component within the skandhas that is also produced by the skandhas through an endless stream of cause and effect. This is what is meant by the emptiness of the ego. The ego is not a self-so creation.

Nevertheless there is a fundamental awareness which prepositionally stands behind all these thoughts and experiences, and to discover the source of *That One* is the ultimate goal of spiritual cultivation. Hence no matter how hard that false "I-belief" inside us tries to make itself into a separate real being, it can never turn an emptiness into a something, or a falsity into a reality. No matter how often we spin thoughts over and over again reiterating that we are a separate ego or independent being, we will never be able to make this so.

While we may think that our discriminative mind and our thoughts are independent of this interlinked net of mutual co-definitions, they are part of this system even though they seem to be independent entities. As part of this interdependent net, they are created by and endless stream of cause and effect conditions and are part of this stream. They falsely impute an ego within this set of interactions, and it is only due to spiritual ignorance that higher awareness keeps fruitlessly clinging to these thought conceptions like a dog who keeps chasing his own tail. While we create the false idea of an inherent self, this imputation is really only another example of this mutual interaction of selfless causes and conditions reacting with one another. What we call "our personal thoughts" are just part of this set of egoless, chemical reaction type conditions, which are not attached to any true person within them.

We all like to think of our conscious personality as a stable and constant medium, but in fact it is merely an agglomeration of different, ever changing events with which awareness temporarily self-identifies. Inside these events there is no permanent true self or soul or ego because that thing we cling to or imagine to be a permanent ego or soul or entity is also a conditional cause and effect production of the skandhas. It is not something independently outside of the skandhas that we can use to define the skandhas. This is a key principle to understand about spiritual cultivation.

Each set of the skandha event types we can experience is extremely large and encompasses a lengthy host of component factors, but it is this overall macro set of five aggregates which we mistakenly take as our real self. The path of spiritual cultivation practice in each and every true religion is to learn how to detach from these factors comprising the false self of the skandhas to discover what is our *true* self, for our true fundamental being is not this set of interpenetrative, co-defined transient phenomena. The way to discover this true self is to cultivate the direct knowing of prajna transcendental wisdom which allows us to know the skandhas, but which does not identify with them.

Buddhism says there are twenty possible ways in which we might imagine our self to be related

to the skandhas: we can take the skandhas as being our true self, the skandhas as being possessed by the self, the skandhas as existing in the self, the skandhas being where the self resides, and so on. Although we may identify the self with the skandhas in twenty various ways, these identification schemes are *all* incorrect because no true self can be found in the skandhas in any way whatsoever. This already gives us a clue that in order to "realize true selflessness or egolessness," which is the commonly stated goal of most religious striving, we must free ourselves from any identification with the five skandhas no matter what religion or spiritual practice we follow.

The true meaning of religious *practice*, regardless of one's religion, is to become selfless through realizing the absence of a real ego. We know this is an authentic spiritual goal because most every genuine religion tells us to become selfless and to forget about the ego in order to "become more spiritual." However, ordinary people commonly ignore this injunction because the task seems way too difficult. As a result, people identify with their physical bodies or with their thoughts or other experiences and mistakenly take this "other" as their true self.

Actually, it is *That One* which knows these things and prepositionally stands behind them as a knower, which is the *True One*. But people are so clouded by ignorance and confusion that they cannot recognize the nature of *This One* behind the ever-changing experiences of the skandhas. Thus, accordingly, people impute a false self bound to the five skandhas even though there is no real self to be found within them.

The second reason people cannot become selfless, even if they understand things properly and believe in these classical teachings, is because they do not know how to detach from the seductive pull of skandhas. Not understanding the process of purifying or breaking away from the skandhas, they are at a loss when it comes to the actual task of spiritual cultivation. In not knowing how to proceed correctly, who then can make progress in their spiritual efforts at self-perfection and self-realization?

Although people mistakenly take mental and physical phenomena as their true self, when they analyze matters using the categories of the five aggregates, they quickly discover that there is no *real* self within these phenomena. The various factors that are included in the skandhas cannot construct a self at all, so when you come to the point where you realize that "the skandhas are empty" of a spiritual being and true reality, then we can say you are making progress in genuine spiritual understanding.

In addition, when you realize the empty nature of the skandhas you will become able to detach from them. This will increase your free energy since any self-identification you make with the five aggregates certainly consumes a lot of unnecessary effort. When you finally let go of this incessant mental clinging with your awareness, your energy level will certainly rise as will your clarity and ability to accomplish things in the world. This is one reason why people who meditate

get healthier and look younger; they let go to relax and free themselves a bit from the skandhas, and thus, their inherent energy accordingly arises to help rejuvenate them.

Since progressing higher and higher in meditation actually means to free oneself from the aggregates, which resultantly transforms or purifies their nature, *one's degree of liberation from the aggregates is a valid measure of one's cultivation progress and attainments*. In other words, how far an individual has progressed in surmounting or detaching from each of the five skandhas is a true measure of a cultivator's spiritual accomplishments. When you hear spiritual teachers telling students to learn detachment, this is what they are talking about only this is the detailed explanation.

To realize the nature of the skandhas is spiritual accomplishment, to purify the skandhas is spiritual accomplishment, and to free oneself from the pull of the skandhas is spiritual accomplishment. So your progress in detaching from, breaking through or purifying the skandhas represents one of the first measurement schemes possible in grading your degree of spiritual attainment. In short, your progress in purifying (detaching from) the skandhas is a means to rank your overall level of spiritual accomplishment. It is one way of measuring your progress in meditative attainment.

THE SKANDHAS

First Skandha of Form

Of the five aggregates, the first skandha of form refers to the material and appearance aspect of the physical world, which is characterized in terms of four basic elements: earth, water, fire and wind. These four great elements symbolically represent the physical states, respectively, of solidity and support, fluidity and dissolution, heat (energy) and transformation, and movement or motion. All of these four elements are found throughout physical nature, so the skandha of form is basically the material and energetic dimensions of the universe around us.

The four great elements not only interact to produce our physical bodies and their sense organs, but they are the component factors making up anything which appears to the senses such as appearances, sounds, smells, tastes, and the tactile findings of touch. All these phenomena belong to the aggregate of form even though most people just consider the physical body as the form skandha. Actually, a better view would be to consider the *body experience* as the form skandha.

Second Skandha of Sensation

The second aggregate, which is the skandha of sensation, includes the three-fold nature of sensations which arise in our bodies and minds; that is, whether sensations are of a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral character. Sensations or emotions arise when there is contact between a

particular sense consciousness and a sense object. For example, when we hear the sound of a bird (the sense object), we might produce a subjective liking, disliking or neutral response towards this experience. The subjective response, which arises, is a component of the sensation skandha. Thus, we can say that *the form aggregate represents the way in which an object appears to the mind, while the sensation aggregate is our qualitative evaluation of that perception as either good, bad or neutral*.

Third Skandha of Conception

While the sensation aggregate refers to the qualitative evaluation of a perception, it is the conception aggregate that embodies our quantitative evaluation of some perception. This skandha refers to our ability to recognize an object by grasping its characteristics, such as the fact whether it is red, long, female and so on, and we call this recognition the process of perception. In other words, the conception skandha refers to the *deliberate mental discriminations we make of objects perceived through contact*. So the differentiations or discriminations we make in processing sensory and mental objects, so as to mentally classify and label them, are what make up the conception (perception) skandha.

Fourth Skandha of Volition

The fourth skandha is called the "volition" aggregate. The volition skandha encompasses factors good and bad, both within and outside of the mind, that impel us or direct us in particular ways. They are "stirring" or *impulsive* forces which maneuver our mind and body to extend themselves in a certain direction, and so this aggregate also includes the factor we normally call the "will." Gravity is also force that impels us, while the internal motivational factors of interest, anger or greed impel us as well. Since these things—as well as habits, intentions and reactions—all belong to the volition aggregate, we can say that the volition or impulse aggregate is responsible for producing our karma.

Basically, the factors belonging to the volition skandha are those elements—other than the members already covered within the form, sensation and conception skandhas—which end up *impelling our behavior, compounding our karma and influencing the content of our future mental states*.

Fifth Skandha of Consciousness

The fifth aggregate is the consciousness skandha, and consciousness is that factor which enables us to cognize things. This skandha is divided into eight divisions, and on the path of spiritual cultivation you must purify all these eight forms of consciousness.

Whether you are following a true path to enlightenment, an outside path, or even the "devil's

way," these five aggregates, which we will discuss in more detail later on, are the fundamental categories to consider when you are first trying to comprehend the various methods and stages of spiritual cultivation. If you cannot determine what you are experiencing in your meditation using the categories of the five skandhas in your analysis—since they fully classify all your possible experiences in the universe—you will remain at a loss regarding the various stages of cultivation accomplishment. If you cannot understand the skandhas, you will never be able to measure your own stage of spiritual attainment.

Whether you are a Christian or Muslim who wants to become one with God, a Taoist who wishes to find Tao and become a spiritual Immortal, a Hinayana Buddhist seeking to attain various samadhi meditative states, a Confucian working to recover his "bright virtue," a Hindu who wants his Atman to return to Brahman, a Tibetan who wants to generate an illusory body and perceive the clear light, or a Mahayanist seeking great prajna transcendental wisdom, you will need to know of the five skandhas when trying to measure your degree of spiritual progress. Though different disciplines use different words, the fundamental analysis techniques for determining one's level of spiritual attainment, for most all the genuine cultivation schools, will usually reference the five skandhas in some form or another.

Shakyamuni Buddha taught us that what we term the self—this body and life of ours—is composed entirely of the five aggregates and only the five aggregates. In other words, the five skandhas are the actual components that make up what we term the person. However, there is no actual "I" entity in this collection of component factors, for a cardinal tenet we hear over and over again in all genuine religions is that we should be egoless and selfless because "there is only God," there is only Tao. "God is everywhere," so we are only God-stuff. There is no such thing as an individual self, and the genuine path of spiritual striving is to get you to reach a state of oneness with the supreme wherein you abandon the false idea of a small ego and become one with All.

You often hear these words, but you cannot understand their meaning unless you move forward by breaking away from the coverings of the five skandhas. When you can detach from the obstructive influence of the skandhas, then you can come to recognize that there is no such thing as an individual self independent and separate from everything else in Creation. There is only empty interdependent origination tied together in one giant net of interdimensional phenomena. Behind this false reality, however, is true God-stuff or the fundamental nature. Behind this false veneer is Truth or Ultimate Reality—what you ultimately are. In learning how to realize true selflessness or absence of the ego, you can come to recognize *That One* which we call the Tao.

Of course, to actually reach this type of realization is not easy, and going to church on Sundays or attending spiritual retreats and services is not going to take any of us very far in the direction of egolessness or selflessness. If going to church meetings or other religious services automatically led to perfection, you certainly would not see all of the war and injustice common

in today's world. To actually attain the goal of selflessness, we must engage in meditative practice that produces profound changes in both our bodies and minds. What specifically must we change? Our attachment to the skandhas, for these are the compositional factors which comprise what we perceive as our entity or reality of existence. If we change how we relate to these factors, then we scale the ranks of spiritual accomplishment.

In short, what we actually consider as our individual being is only a combination of five types of transient aggregates that arise and cease over many continued existences. Because of causes and conditions these factors come together, and when the relevant causes and conditions cease they depart. All this time, there is nothing real within them that we can call a person, being, ego or life, for the thought of that is also just a component of the skandha aggregates.

Since it is the aggregates that arise and cease over our many incarnations, any spiritual path of cultivation *must have the target of transforming and purifying these aggregates*. The aggregates consist of both mental and material factors, so cultivation paths always work on changing both the body and the mind. You cannot cultivate one without cultivating the other, and a fully enlightened individual cultivates them both to perfection.

The idea that we hold of ourselves—as being personal limited beings—arises because we keep focusing upon the five skandhas and taking them as ourselves. It arises because we cling to various portions of these aggregates and mistake them for our true self whereas they are simply transient constructions rather than our true nature of pure, empty awareness. They are simply impermanent phenomena, subject to constant change like everything else in the universe, and in no tiniest moment of time can we ever find anything in them that is real and unchanging. A changing form goes through countless birth and death extinctions since nothing remains the same from moment-to-moment, and thus any type of form cannot be taken as our fundamental nature. The original essence is beyond the extremes of birth and death, creation and extinction. As the *Bhagavid Gita* says, the true self or original nature

> is never born, nor does It ever die. Nor having once been, does It ever cease to be. Unborn, eternal, everlasting, beginningless, It is not slain when the body is slain. Weapons cannot cleave It, nor fire burn It. Water cannot wet It, nor wind drive It away. It is eternal, all-pervading, constant, immovable. It is ever the same. It is described as unmanifest, unthinkable, unchangeable.

When we cultivate properly, we will progressively break through each of the five aggregates, freeing ourselves from any prior false identification with the skandhas as our true self until we finally arrive at this immaculate state, which is called the experience of perfect selflessness.

This perfect egolessness or selflessness, which is sometimes referred to as the "experience of emptiness," is pure spirituality. It is the genuine transcendental nature because it is formless

("empty" of form) and does not fall into the dualities of either movement or lack of movement, which are both forms of movement. Since this original nature of ours is a pure formlessness, giving it the name of "spirituality" tends to be misleading in itself, so people commonly call it the "Tao." When you reach the Tao this spiritual accomplishment is called "enlightenment" or "self-realization," and "realizing the Tao" represents the highest apex of spiritual achievement in the universe.

The process of spiritual attainment is Thus, in essence, very simple. Someone who starts to cultivate first discovers that the true self is not in material form, it is not this physical body of ours. Hence, it is not in the skandha of form. When an individual cultivates further, her or she discovers that the true self—what a person really is—is not in feelings or sensations either. He or she cultivates further and finds that the true self is not in thoughts, nor concepts, nor internal or external impulses, nor even in consciousness.

What is real? What is True? Your fundamental face or true Self is beyond all that, for it is the fundamental nature behind all constructions. This genuine essence of being is "empty" because it is formless and not tangible, but being empty, it exhibits a primordial awareness that shines through the skandhas. The skandhas are just an unreal vehicle of cause and effect constructions through which *It* shines. What is *this thing*? You must cultivate toward realization to find out!

"*It*" is characterized as emptiness because its formless and transcendental nature make it impossible to describe, which is why we sometimes simply say that "It" is inexpressible. We also use the word "transcendental" because "It" does not fall into the realm of phenomena which we conveniently partition into the five separate skandhas. And this Emptiness, or Tao, or God, or First Principle, or Truth, Brahman, *dharmakaya*, *shunyata*, Buddha nature, Allah or whatever else we wish to call it, is what we really are. So how do you arrive at a realization of this state? By progressively purifying, detaching from, or breaking through the layers of experience represented by the five skandhas. We can describe this process in many different ways, but it involves surmounting any attachment to the skandhas, and ceasing to mistake them for our true self.

Cultivation is therefore a process of breaking through the skandhas, which define our total realm of experiences. In so doing we can arrive at the true formless nature of All-That-Is which gives birth to the false existence of which we are part. We call this worldly existence of ours "false" because there is nothing within it that stays fixed so that we can call it "real," and yet we call this realm an "existence" because it seems to operate according to fixed laws even though there is not anything changeless within this realm. And in this cultivation process of spiritual purification and refinement of the skandhas, not only can you use an understanding of the skandhas as a yardstick for measuring your spiritual progress, but you can also use an understanding of the skandhas as a means of cultivation in itself!

The five skandhas themselves are known in English by a variety of different names, some of which are more accurate or appropriate than others. Some of the more familiar translations you will encounter for these terms include the following:

VARIOUS TERMS FOR THE FIVE SKANDHAS

ENGLISH	SANSKRIT	ALTERNATIVE TITLES
1. **Form**	rupa	Materiality
2. **Sensation**	vedana	Feeling, Receptiveness
3. **Conception**	samjna	Cognition, Conceptualization, Ideation, Perception, Discrimination
4. **Volition**	samskara	Synthesis, Karmic formations, Mental volitions, Motivating dispositions, Formation, Compositional factors, Predispositions, Impulses
5. **Consciousness**	vijnana	

We have already noted that the Chinese translate the five skandhas as the five "shadows" or "coverings," which have a *yin* or negative connotation. The reason the Chinese have biased their translation in this manner, rather than employ the concept of "aggregates," "heaps" or "clusters" found in English, is because the five aggregates are said to *cover, hide or obscure* our true fundamental nature. Thus, they prevent us from seeing the universe as it truly is. In other words, because of the covering of the five skandhas, we cannot see the dharmakaya, we cannot attain the Tao.

Although we are fundamentally enlightened, the five skandha layers enshroud our experiences and we mistakenly take them for fundamental reality. Thus we can only see the shadow of Tao rather than awaken to its true essence, which is empty of all phenomena such as the skandhas. According to cultivation theory, our experience of the universe's infinite dimensions is limited by our irrational attachment to the aggregates. Because of an improper mental fixation, we only experience what *is* the aggregates or what is *available through* the aggregates, so we can say that they "cover" our experience of Reality. In effect, they are all we can or do know of "Reality" before we work at religious practice and finally attain a degree of spiritual enlightenment. The more you can free yourself from clinging to the aggregates, the more you can enlarge your

experiential realm. So as you progress in spiritual attainment, your worldview will actually become larger.

This material is only a basic introduction but the other material you will encounter in this book will tap into the intimate secrets of cultivation. You have already showing merit in choosing to come into contact with this material, so we hope you will treasure these explanations and refrain from abusing them. Do not just read this material and then put it to the side with the knowledge you gain placed on your left, and your actual cultivation practice left alone on the right. You must mix your understanding of principles with your actual cultivation practice, like mixing water and flour to produce dough, for this is the only way to increase your wisdom and insight which you will need on the spiritual path.

The *Vishnu-Purana* of Hinduism makes a wonderful comment on this matter, stating: "From study one should proceed to Yoga [cultivation or meditation practice], and from Yoga to study. By perfection in study and Yoga the supreme Self becomes evident. Study is one eye for beholding That, and Yoga is the other."

This means is that if you do not mix your understanding of cultivation theory with any actual attainment gained from cultivation practice, you will not be able to gain any benefit from this material at all. Study can only produce academics and intellectuals, but cultivation practice can produce spiritual accomplishment, and study and practice combined together can produce the full flower of self-realization. That is the path in spiritual cultivation that all people must follow.

For instance, there is a famous meditation method used across the world known as "tranquility and insight," though it is also called "cessation and contemplation" or "stopping (resting) and introspection" practice. In Chinese this method is known as *chih-kuan* and in Sanskrit this popular meditative practice is known as *shamatha-vipashyana*. Practitioners of this form of meditation strive to reach a point of mental cessation—at which time their internal mental dialogue ceases or dies down—and then contemplate the mind that is revealed by this state. However, no one ever tells you what you should be observing when your thoughts have stopped and you have reached this realm of calm abiding. They never tell you what you should be inwardly observing when your mind has reached some stage of empty mental clarity because of your meditation. If you reach a point in your meditation where the mind is clear and empty of thoughts, what is it that you should be watching?

The Zen school often tells us that in order to reach the highest realms of cultivation, we must let go of absolutely everything at once. To do so, however, is simply too difficult for most people. And because our modern world now places a strong emphasis on scientific investigation with its various graduations, many people will never be able to "just let go" because they are mentally dependent upon the step-by-step explanations which science today requires. Not understanding, they do not believe … not believing, they do not practice … not practicing they attain no level of

realization … lacking any degree of cultivation attainment, they are critical of these matters when they actually know nothing about them at all. All this is indicative of the world we live in today—people have too many opinions on these matters, but no degree of spiritual accomplishment themselves.

Actually, "just drop everything" is an extremely direct, scientific route to spiritual enlightenment, but many people ignorantly require an enlightenment which comes in stages. We therefore need a graduated means to help these people detach from their discriminative mentation, which they can only do if they have some form of analysis to depend upon. *The method of analysis they should employ would be to use the knowledge of the skandhas when observing the mind during meditation sessions*.

Without a means of analytical wisdom for discriminating the various entities of our mental experience, there can be no way for these people to extinguish their mental afflictions. Unable to just drop everything at once, their mental habits force them to first identify the factors that constrain them. Only after doing so can such people let go of their internal mental clinging. It is this mental clinging which causes suffering and prevents the realization of the Tao, so not only will using the skandhas as a form of analysis help these people to attain the emptiness required for meditation, but the skandhas can also be used to explain the kung-fu they will accordingly experience. This is a great boon for the scientific-mind because it helps to "legitimize" the cultivation path. Even so, the best and highest form of spiritual practice is to just drop everything at once, and not worry about the skandhas at all. This is the most direct route to the Tao, which does not require any intercessory stages.

If we take as our example the simple practice of mental cessation and contemplation, which is the basic practice of the Chinese Tien-tai school which has filtered out across the world over the centuries, the five skandhas become a tool you can use when you are engaged in the practice of contemplation. You do not *have to* use the skandhas as an object of observation, for it is better to just say "observe the mind." However, the aggregates can be used as a means of categorical analysis to help you to detach from whatever meditative realm and experiences you encounter. Thus, they help you progress further on the path because they can help you sharpen your prajna wisdom. But what learning to do this entails is another question entirely.

This dialogue does not mean that you should be attaching yourself to the five aggregates when you are sitting in meditation employing your natural wordless wisdom insight to view your state of mental calm. Rather, when you are engaged in meditation and you notice that this or that particular mental factor moves—that this or that factor will not be there if you are not meditating—then you can detach from that experience to advance further in your cultivation progress. When during meditation you can identify this or that mental event as just the transient skandha of form, sensation, conception, volition or whatever else might be operating, then you can learn to stop clinging to that experience and thus achieve an even greater stage of mental

purity and spiritual achievement.

The Four Cultivation Truths

There is another pertinent example of how one can match cultivation theory of the skandhas with actual cultivation practice. A preliminary training step in Buddhism is that people learn to understand four basic truths about reality, that:

> All phenomena are impure and unclean.
> All phenomena involve suffering.
> All phenomena are impermanent.
> All phenomena lack their own self-nature.

Most people take this as simply theory or dogma without realizing that these are cultivation practices in their own right, each of which addresses one of the skandhas.

If you can master contemplation on the body as being impure and unclean, you can transform the body, detach from the body, and actually break free of the skandha of form.

If you contemplate all feelings as suffering, you can triumph over the sensation skandha by learning detachment.

If you can witness the impermanence of thoughts through mental cessation-contemplation practice, you can penetrate through the skandha of conception.

And if you contemplate all phenomena (*dharmas*) as having no self, you can eventually become independent of the volition skandha. So once again, with more cultivation knowledge and practice under your belt, you can use your knowledge of the skandhas to create appropriate meditation practices and develop your own stage of transcendental wisdom.

For now, all of this information is still in the realm of principle and theory, but in time we will understand the five skandhas in detail. We will see how they can be an important tool for the cultivation path no matter which school you belong to or which mode of spiritual practice you choose to follow. We will also see how they can identify your level of meditation attainment.

Later, we will introduce even more techniques for measuring your stage of cultivation accomplishment, such as the nine samadhi states of meditative concentration, the stages of opening up the body's central energy meridian (called the *sushumna*), and various other milestones of the spiritual path which can be measured according to many different dimensions.

However, without an initial basic understanding of the five skandhas, we cannot proceed to any of these more complicated methods of analysis.

In fact, without a basic understanding of the five aggregates and our fundamental sentient nature, you will lack an adequate terminology to even *begin* to discuss true cultivation attainment. In this case, you cannot even hope to understand the superpowers of a Milarepa or the supreme sagely teachings of a Confucius. *Hence, if you do not thoroughly understand the five skandhas, you will not be able to comprehend the mental stages of cultivation, the measuring techniques for cultivation, nor the stages of physical cultivation kung-fu that arise from spiritual practice.* Without such knowledge, how will you be able to guide yourself on the meditation path?

There are countless books on meditation, but very few of these books discuss the skandhas and their application to the cultivation process. Nevertheless, knowledge of the skandhas is vital because it explains the proper principles and sequences behind meditation *no matter which cultivation school you follow*. They can be used as a yardstick for measuring progress on the path, and they can be used as a type of contemplation technique in themselves. Furthermore, they provide an independent, nondenominational scientific framework, as required by today's society, for evaluating the process of cultivation. With all these advantages, there is no way we can talk about measuring meditation without delving into the five skandhas.

Chapter 3:
The Taoist Time Requirements for Spiritual Kung-Fu and the Consecutive Stages of Spiritual Attainment

While we have established the importance of the five skandhas, they are not the only classification scheme that can be employed in spiritual cultivation. We can, for instance, also use the classification scheme of the "five elements" when we are discussing the simplest levels of spiritual attainment.

The sciences of ancient times were not as advanced as those of today in that they employed what we now call rudimentary methods for describing physical phenomena. This is the reason that we have the categorization scheme of the five elements. Nevertheless, this does not mean those early methods were not effective nor that the ancients were any less logical than we are. While their explanatory systems were simple, they were logically sound and effective for their purposes.

The five elements classification scheme of ancient science, which we will use in our discussion of cultivation, divides the physical universe into four great elements: earth, fire, water and air (wind), as well as a fifth element of space. Although ancient Vedic, Greek, Arabic and Chinese cultures held differing ideas on how many and what types of elements constituted the physical universe, they all supported this notion that the universe could be divided into basic elemental categories.

To clarify, when we talk of fire, it does not mean the fire of a match. Rather, it stands for the broader principle of the element of heat, warmth, ripening, fruition and maturation that pervades the cosmos. Fire is a symbol for heat and growth with a tendency to flare upward. In the same fashion, the earth element refers to the solidity aspect of matter while the water element represents the nature of fluidity and moisture. The wind element represents the characteristics of movement such as expansion and growth. When people talk of the wind element they are actually referring to movement.

These elements do not just refer to absolute physical characteristics of matter, but to the mentality that arises in our minds when we come into contact with form characteristics such as texture, appearance and so on. Using this scheme of representation, we can logically say that the universe is comprised of different physical states called the elements even though we currently say that the universe is only composed of energy and atoms. This is our own modern way of describing the "physical states" of the cosmos. Who knows how it will change as science progresses?

In addition to the basic four great elements, we also have a fifth element, space. This element refers to the physical separation between two objects rather than the wisdom emptiness that

people typically speak of in cultivation matters. Therefore the space element is a physical emptiness with form. Space can also be described as a "conditional element" because it only exists in relation to the other four elements; it is a fifth element dependent on the existence of other material bodies for its own existence.

Thus, depending upon how we classify matter, we can say that our physical world of form is comprised of the four great elements fire, water, wind and earth, or we can say it is composed of the five great elements when we include physical space.
Do not get too particular on whether we are using the number four or five when discussing the elements. The number of four or five is typically used loosely and interchangeably in various cultivation discussions.

We know that the forms of the physical universe, including our physical bodies, are somehow composed of these five elements. In many schools of cultivation, they are used to describe the basic constituents of energy, form and appearance. However, we must expand upon this definition by pointing out that anything our senses present to us is also a type of form phenomenon, and so our sense impressions also involve the five elements. Our senses, for instance, function within definite limits to produce bounded sense impressions, so they have boundaries of form. What we see with our eyes is called "the boundary of vision," and what we hear with our ears is "the boundary of hearing." Our senses function over a limited range and produce a limited picture of the world—a picture with definite form boundaries. Since all our sense impressions are forms, they themselves are also categorized as belonging to the skandha of form.

Even the mind sense, which is responsible for our mental processes of ideation, acts as a means to imprison us in form. Therefore, since the six basic senses always operate in contact with some resistance (the mind sense, or process of conceptual mentation, operates in contact with "solid" concepts) to produce shapes and bounded experiences of form, their results must be classified as constituents of the form skandha. In other words, sense experiences belong to the form aggregate because they define our world of form; they establish the phenomena of form that we experience. The form skandha thus includes physical matter *as well as the mentality engendered in response to the form elements*.

Ordinary people are typically bound by their six sense impressions, and this very limitation inhibits all forms of spiritual progress. For instance, if you cling to all the thoughts, smells, sights, and other impressions that your senses produce, you are binding yourself to the world of form and the mentality produced by your senses. How can you possibly find self-realization amidst a strong fixation to such pollution and chatter? This is what we mean by the veil of the skandhas covering realization of your fundamental nature.

If you take your coarse sense experiences as the real world, you are looking in the wrong

direction. By clinging to any sense experiences that arise rather than letting them flow freely, you are covering over your inherent wisdom-knowing so as to blind yourself to true reality. However, when you are angry or happy or sad, *That One* behind the knowing that you are angry or happy or sad is what you are really after. *That One* who knows, who is aware of the sense impressions, is what you have to find through the process of cultivation. That is the ultimate one, which you can discover through prajna wisdom. Hence, if you stop using the sixth consciousness and just let "*That One*" operate, you will make tremendous progress along the ranks of spiritual attainment. Spiritual cultivation may seem complicated, but it is all about this task in one form or another.

Thus, from one angle the path of cultivation, in terms of dropping any attachments to thoughts or sense perceptions, can be seen as a path that frees us from self-imposed limitations. The six senses are all derived from the five aggregates. The Buddhist *Heart Sutra* says these five aggregates are all empty, but to reach the stage where you actually experience this is easier said than done.

All the things people experience during their meditation practice, no matter what cultivation methods they employ, always fall within the range of the five skandhas. Special lights and sounds, ecstatic feelings, tranquility, devotional states, heightened vigor, happiness and bliss, clear vision, equanimity, heightened awareness and other inner experiences can all be encountered through cultivation, but they are not the stage of enlightenment. They are not the fundamental reality but rather various manifestations of the five skandhas. Furthermore, such experiences will be particularly prevalent for beginning spiritual practitioners, especially those experiences that belong to the form and sensation skandhas.

For instance, when we talk about *chakras*, *kundalini*, *chi*, *mai* and other esoteric physical structures, these all belong to the sensation and form aggregates. We might think these phenomena are quite profound spiritual occurrences, but they actually represent only minor transformations of materiality, and are quite low on the ranks of cultivation attainments. Sometimes these kung-fu manifestations are coarse and sometimes subtle or refined, but they correspond to changes in gross materiality nonetheless. As the Zen school says, these phenomena should be viewed as "guests" rather than as the "host," so why should you bother hankering after these things which will not stay?

All the eight major body sensations typically experienced by cultivators—pain (irritation), cold, heat, weightlessness (buoyancy), heaviness, itching or inner body movements, roughness and smoothness—are also members of the form and sensation skandhas as well. Today many people tend to neglect this eight-fold classification scheme in favor of Ramakrishna's recounting that when his chi moved, it alternatively felt like "an ant, a fish, a monkey, a bird or a serpent." Hatha yoga simply says that as you cultivate your chi, the body will at first perspire, and then tremble. The *Gherand Samhita* states, "The first stage of pranayama gives heat, the middle stage gives rise to tremor, particularly in the spinal column, whilst the final stage of pranayama leads to

levitation." This all sounds very profound, but it only applies to the most rudimentary stages of spiritual practice wherein you are mainly involved with purifying your chi channels.

In light of these various descriptions for describing what beginning cultivators sometimes experience, it seems that the eight major physical sensations identified by Buddhism and Taoism seem to be the most scientific and refined descriptions available for classifying these phenomena. But what we must *really* consider in evaluating such matters is that when a meditation practitioner feels these things, it means that their cultivation level hasn't gone past the skandhas of form or sensation! That is the important point when you are starting to evaluate various stages of attainment. If you are still feeling these things, you have not yet attained samadhi.

On the other hand, if you sit peacefully in meditation and feel absolutely wonderful and believe this is self-realization or freedom from the form and sensation aggregates, you are wrong again. The reason ordinary people cannot become liberated is because they get transfixed by this sort of feeling and mentally attach to experiences they feel are pleasurable or indicative of attainment. For instance, many minor yogis will reach the state where their chi becomes full and then cling to even this experience as something ultimate, mistakenly identifying it as the union of Atman with Brahman. To you this may sound foolish, but it happens all the time at the very lowest stages of spiritual cultivation. In fact, this particular experience is a preliminary stage every cultivator must pass through and it represents only a very minor experiential realm within the skandha of form.

Cultivating the Physical Body

There are many barriers to escaping from the form skandha, such as abandoning the seductive delusion that this particular realm is the core of reality, and we will later discuss this topic in much detail. What is more important to note at this point is that it is extremely difficult to jump out of the form skandha because of the existence of sexual desire. Hence, if you do not learn how to detach from the view of being a body, and detach from its attendant physical states such as hunger and sexual desire, you will never be able to climb to the high ranks of cultivation attainment. Abandoning the view of the body is one of the first tasks in cultivation as it is the first major obstacle to progress in spirituality.

To explain this in detail, we must borrow some terminology from Buddhism, which has expediently partitioned the entire cosmos into three separate realms: a Realm of Desire, a Realm of Form and a Realm of Formlessness. Human beings—and there are many such "humanoids" throughout the greater universe—are denizens of the Desire Realm which is also inhabited by various other types of beings. These other beings include several heavens of devas (gods) and asuras (angry gods or titans), and much lower beings including animals, hungry ghosts and hell denizens. All these beings hold one thing in common—a strong preoccupation with sexual desire, which is the origin of this realm's particular name.

From a cultivation viewpoint, each of these three cosmic realms has a strong connection with a different portion of our body. For instance, the lower Realm of Desire is related to the lower portion of our physical bodies where our sexual feelings are most strongly concentrated. Any physical transformations of our bodies starting at the level of the navel and running down to the soles of our feet must therefore be particularly viewed in light of the Realm of Desire. This region contains such items as our *tan-tien*, the root chakra, and our sexual organs.

Cultivation attainment which reaches to the higher Realm of Form is related to cultivation accomplishment in the body stretching from the navel upwards to the brow of the forehead. This region includes most of our internal organs as well as our heart chakra.

Finally, cultivation accomplishment leading to attainment in the Realm of Formlessness involves changes in the physical body from the brow up. This region includes the highest chakras spoken of in the various esoteric schools.

The knowledge of these partitions is important, not as academic knowledge, but because it illuminates the methods used in spiritual training as well as many of the experiences that will occur on the spiritual path. For instance, in Esoteric Buddhism the traditional road of practice starts with an individual first cultivating his or her chi, and next the energy meridians (which the Hindus call *nadis*) and then finally the kundalini. Cultivating the chi means transforming one's *jing* (semenal or generative essence) into chi, or as Mencius might have said, cultivating one's chi so that it becomes full. Mencius also said, "The will is the commander of the chi," and he said that we should cultivate our chi so that it envelops the space between heaven and earth. It is commonly thought that Confucianism only deals with proper behavior, but it contains many esoteric cultivation teachings such as this, and it definitely talks about cultivating your chi and samadhi.

Jing, chi and *shen* are the three principles that Taoism uses to explain the process of spiritual cultivation. A full discussion of their properties can be found in Huai-Chin Nan's *Tao and Longevity*, but in short: jing basically corresponds to the generative essence of the body including the hormones, blood, endocrine secretions and semen; chi corresponds to the life force of the body, which is often called its "wind element;" shen corresponds to the human spirit.

In Hinduism this triumvirate of jing, chi and shen roughly corresponds to the three *gunas*: the *tamas* (inertia), *rajas* (dynamic) and *sattva* (luminosity) principles. Hence, they correspond to what underlies matter, life and the mind. In Vedanta they also correspond to *ananda* (bliss), *chit* (consciousness) and *sat* (being) while in Esoteric Buddhism, they correspond to bliss, illumination and no-thought. In physics these three correspond to heat, force and light; and in terms of the earthly realm, they correspond to water, air and sunshine.

Most every genuine cultivation school has its own spiritual terminology, but there are usually

correspondences to jing, chi and shen in most of them. Hence, to learn cultivation, you have to learn about these three essences, how they relate to one another, and especially how they transform through the process of cultivation. At the final states of spiritual achievement, we can also say they are related to the *nirmanakaya* (projection body), *sambhogakaya* (enjoyment body) and *dharmakaya* (truth body) of the Buddhist spiritual cultivation path and these, in turn, match with the principles of great function (*yung*), appearance (*xiang*) and fundamental essence (*ti*) taught in Chinese philosophy. In Christianity they also correspond to the Son, Holy Spirit and Father principles, which further demonstrates that this trinity of principles is found in countless cultivation schools.

As to our jing, although every cell of our body possesses jing, this generative essence is most highly concentrated in the region of our sexual organs, which, as we have seen, corresponds to the Realm of Desire. Thus, the ability to successfully cultivate the chi, as Mencius suggests, requires a degree of sexual restraint, or *brachmacharya*, so that you do not lose your jing. If jing accumulates, then it can be transformed or transmuted into higher substances necessary on the spiritual path. Without sufficient jing to be transformed into chi during the process of cultivation, there will be nothing available to initiate even the most rudimentary physical transformations necessary on the spiritual trail.

If your jing becomes full because of disciplined restraint, however, then you can experience a state of physical bliss reachable through cultivation exercises. And if you can transform your jing into chi, which Hinduism calls transforming a tamastic nature into a rajastic nature, then you can reach a stage where you see an internal light or internal lumination within your physical body which occurs right before the initiation of samadhi. As we will later explain in detail when we arrive at an exposition of the Esoteric school, chi and consciousness are interlinked, and so cultivating your chi will produce not just physical changes but transformations in your consciousness as well.

We will fill in the details later, but from this one example alone we can understand why many religions prize chastity and sexual abstinence (including refraining from masturbation and lustful thoughts). After all, abstinence is related to the cultivation of your chi and thus ultimately, freedom from the Realm of Desire. If you do not practice sexual restraint, you will never be able to transform your jing into chi, which is a necessary foundation for achieving the higher stages of spiritual cultivation.

This is one very important reason that monks and priests are advised to remain celibate. Otherwise they will lose whatever jing they have through the outlet of sexual activity so as to waste this essential energy and make physical transformation and spiritual development virtually impossible. This is the most important among many reasons for celibacy when walking the spiritual trail: you need to accumulate your jing so that it can transform into chi and bring about the physical and spiritual changes necessary on the spiritual path. When you can begin to

understand simple principles such as this, it helps make sense out of an entire range of other cultivation doctrines.

Now let us return to the form skandha and the topic of the physical body in cultivation. Using the ancient classification scheme developed for cultivation science, we can say that our physical body is composed of the four great elements of earth, water, fire and wind, and that we must transform these elements through sadhana (spiritual practices, or cultivation exercises) so that their coarse nature no longer presents obstacles on the spiritual path. Since mind and matter are interlinked, it is reasonable to expect that cultivating the mind will also result in the cultivation of the body. It is also reasonable to expect that cultivating the body successfully will make it that much easier to cultivate the mind. Both of these conclusions are true.

You can choose a cultivation route that ignores the body entirely and directly cultivates the mind through the path of prajna wisdom. The Zen school and Tibetan Mahamudra, for instance, follow this mind-only path. Alternatively you can also choose a route which emphasizes body cultivation, as is done in the Hindu yoga schools, Taoism and in Esoteric Buddhism. The only purpose here is to transform the physical nature just enough so that the body no longer throws up obstacles to the task of cultivating the mind. In these three "form schools," after you reach the point of purifying the physical nature to a certain extent, you do not waste any more time concentrating on physical form but switch immediately to pure mind-only cultivation. So do not get the idea that cultivating the physical body is the way to Tao or you will never achieve any sort of genuine cultivation achievement. The cultivation of the body is only used to assist the cultivation of your mind and behavior.

Cultivating the physical body directly—such as practicing yoga, the martial arts, ingesting special substances or concentrating on chakras and chi channels—is only a preliminary, ancillary means in cultivation. The inherent goal in this type of path is to purify and optimally tune the body, transforming its four elements so that they pose no obstacles to your mind cultivation. Yet to transform your jing and chi, which belong to the realm of form, you cannot rely on physical sensations because they are transient and ever changing. Since physical sensations involve the process of movement rather than stillness, basing oneself on sensations is an undependable, unreliable, entirely fictitious route that will not lead to Tao.

You will never get to Tao by relying on thoughts, and certainly not on sensations or emotions. However, since the awareness which "knows" chi is not based on chi, this already tells you on that which you should cultivate during any sort of religious or spiritual practice. The exercise of prajna wisdom, in fact, is to see or recognize *That One*, and an overall analysis of correct spiritual practice is just this simple.

Every moment your body is changing, your chi is changing, your thoughts are constantly emptying, and the four elements of your body are involved in a ceaseless process of

transformation. The only thing that remains constant through these changes is what *knows* the changes, and that is the true mind or empty fundamental nature. That is what you try to awaken to—the empty basis of awareness. You cultivate to find this ultimate one which knows.

The truth is that in the Tao school, Esoteric school and various schools of Indian yoga, a spiritual practitioner first cultivates the physical body until the chi and hormones reach a state of optimal balance. Through various practices such as yoga, breathing practices, the ingestion of special herbal medicines, and so on, the physical nature is manipulated so that all its poisonous substances, internal obstructions and inefficiencies are gradually eliminated. We say "manipulated" because a true "transformation" at the cellular level only really occurs when you cultivate emptiness and prajna wisdom, which is why so few people attain Tao. But here, you first achieve some progress in *cleaning the physical body*, which in turn gives rise to the development of internal esoteric transformations. But after this preliminary phase of purification, you switch over entirely to pure cultivation of the mind because true enlightenment is not found in the physical nature.

The Transformational Sequence of the Five Elements

A big secret in cultivation is that the earth element of our physical body is the hardest of the five elements for us to transform along this road. In other words, our hair, bones, fingernails and the other earth elements of our physical nature are the hardest to transform during the process of spiritual attainment because of their great density. Their density means that they are the last items to disintegrate after we die, and some of the hardest substances to change when we are living. This is why few cultivation methods aim at transforming the earth element of our bodies at the initial stages of the cultivation path.

The easiest element to transform in our physical nature is our wind element, which corresponds to our chi or *prana*, simply because it is the most flexible. Since our chi, or prana, corresponds to the wind element of the physical nature, this is the very reason that most successful cultivators start with some form of *anapana* or *pranayama* breathing methods in their spiritual practice, for these are the methods which most directly work on cultivating the chi or wind element. If a practitioner knows what he or she is doing, these are also the methods that can help to reduce sexual desire or even increase it if he or she is not careful. For this reason, it is important to pay particular attention to the use of relevant breathing practices on the spiritual path.

The next major step in physical cultivation is to transform the water element of the body, which corresponds to our energy channels, blood, hormones, and nerves. After the chi and mai (wind and water elements) have been transformed, a spiritual cultivator is free to then work on transforming the fire element of the body, which corresponds to the kundalini or warmth element of the physical nature.

After these three elements are transformed, one can then start work on transforming the earth element of the body, which includes the bones, nails, and densest levels of physical matter. In fact, the earth element refers to the whole body in general, which is why to cultivate emptiness so as to become liberated from form is the major method of cultivation. It is to be expected that transforming the hardest substances of the body will naturally require the greatest amount of time. If mental emptiness is not cultivated, a spiritual practitioner's chi cannot freely flow and the subsequent transformation of these elements is impossible.

With the proper combination of merit and wisdom along with following the correct principles of cultivation science, one can indeed accomplish this sequence of transformations, but it will require the proper method, time and disciplined effort. Thus, one of the big secrets of cultivation practice is the knowledge that *people progressively cultivate the wind, water, fire and then earth elements of the physical body in spiritual practice, and this corresponds to their chi, hormones and mai (chi channels), kundalini, and bodily form*. This knowledge explains the proper sequence of cultivation practice and also helps you comprehend why certain cultivation schools emphasize particular cultivation steps and techniques. If you know this sequence together with the teachings and practices of various spiritual schools, then with a little wisdom you can comprehend what they are actually trying to accomplish.

When we hear that someone has successfully cultivated their kundalini (and the definition of "successful" is another issue entirely), we must realize that they have already previously expended a lot of work—in fact, a tremendous amount—into transforming their chi and mai. Otherwise their kundalini could not be activated. And if an individual hasn't manifested the proper signs indicating such transformations have occurred, they are just kidding themselves in believing they are working on their kundalini. In these cases, at most they are simply generating minor sensations of physical warmth within their body.

Even when someone starts successfully cultivating their kundalini energies, they are still only working at a very low stage of cultivation attainment because the stage of kundalini cultivation still lies within the very first skandha—the skandha of form. Arousing the kundalini energies, which the Chinese call the state of "*hsi*," constitutes a good first step in cultivation practice. However kundalini cultivation is only a small first step on the cultivation path because a spiritual practitioner at this stage has not even broken away from the first skandha of form, and there are four others to go!

The Chinese Tao school, because it takes the detour of concentrating on the physical body before wholeheartedly cultivating true mind, has categorized this sequential process of physical transformation very clearly. People think they can just sit in a cross-legged position and reach samadhi and someday *presto*, they've got Tao. Unfortunately, spiritual practice does not work this way. The process of spiritual cultivation is not as easy, nor as instantaneous as people would like to think. You have to completely transform the physical body *and* the skandhas before you

can achieve the Tao, and these tasks require substantial time and practice effort.

For instance, the transformation of the wind, water and fire elements within the body, when someone is first cultivating the skandha of form, follows a certain particular sequence. Completing these transformations also requires certain minimum periods of time, which the Tao school has identified as follows:

- After one year of practice, the chi will be transformed.
- After two years of practice, one's blood will be transformed.
- After three years, the mai channels will be transformed.
- After four years, one's muscles (flesh) will be transformed.
- After five years, the marrow will be transformed.
- After six years, one's sinews and tendons will be transformed.
- After seven years, the bones will be transformed.
- After eight years, the hair will be transformed.
- After nine years of cultivation, the body's form (shape) will be transformed.

This is the actual sequence of transformation to be expected of the physical body on the cultivation trail. However, the Tao school also talks about another sequence:

Transforming jing into chi,
Transforming chi into shen,
Transforming shen into emptiness, and then
Cultivating emptiness, returning to the Tao.

This sequence, which corresponds to transformations of the esoteric substances of the body, takes approximately thirteen years to complete so that in general, the whole process of changing the physical nature, for a practitioner who takes no detours and makes no mistakes, requires many years of continual cultivation practice. It is not just a one day, one month or a one year type affair.

The Jing-Chi-Shen Taoist Sequences of Transformation

The first hundred days of this total practice sequence is called "laying the foundation" for transforming jing into chi, and requires strict sexual abstinence while simultaneously relaxing the body and cultivating mental emptiness.

If successful, this stage is followed by a stage of "pregnancy for ten months" wherein one's chi is transmuted into shen.

The next three years of practice are called "suckling the baby" wherein one's shen is transmuted into emptiness.

The subsequent nine years of practice are called "facing the wall." This is a stage of mastering no-thought, which means cultivating emptiness such that even emptiness becomes emptied and you do not even have any subtle notions of emptiness anymore. When you can reach the stage where emptiness becomes empty, where emptiness is no longer known and there is just free functioning without restraint, then we can say you are returning to the Tao.

In the Tao school, these various sequences of cultivating the jing, chi, shen and emptiness are definite spiritual achievements beyond the ordinary ken, but they only correspond to the lower fruits of Hinayana spiritual attainment. One must continue cultivating *past these stages* in order to reach the yet higher Mahayana fruit of spiritual attainment in service of others, which means attaining the real enlightenment we refer to as complete Buddhahood. When emptiness is no longer present, and you have no knowledge of this absence or even a knowing of this nonknowing, then you can reach the Tathagata Storehouse of True Suchness, or True Reality. This is when you can know *That One*, which is the ultimate host.

Hence in terms of body specifics, successfully transforming the physical body on the spiritual trail starts with cultivation of the breath. Next one transforms their blood, then the blood vessels, nerves and mai, then the flesh and muscles, next the marrow of the bones, then the sinews and tendons, next the bones themselves, then the hair on the head, and finally the whole body. We are incredibly fortunate to have these secret findings of the Tao school available to us.

As stated, to achieve these transformations (including the transformations of jing into chi, chi into shen, and then shen into emptiness), the Tao school, yoga school and Esoteric school practitioners devote themselves to a variety of cultivation techniques including breathing exercises, the ingestion of special herbs, visualization practices, mantras, emptiness meditation, and so on. The purpose of these practices is to help kick off the initiation of these transformations, and set the relevant processes of transmutation into high gear. But ultimately, all spiritual practice comes down to the mind. Even with these other basic practices, they cannot work unless someone also cultivates mental emptiness to some extent.

Some successful spiritual practitioners, after reaching a certain stage of physical accomplishment, go into retreat and cultivate through fasting by living on chi alone in order to help achieve these spiritual cultivation transformations. They do not eat anything solid during this time but live purely on air and water. At higher stages of attainment, they do not even drink water, nor do they have bodily excretions. Cases in which practitioners engage in this practice are well documented

even in the Catholic Church where it is called "*inedia*," but of course this type of information rarely reaches the world at large or if it does, rarely makes a dent in worldly consciousness. Nevertheless it is a common, nondenominational stage of cultivation attainment, which is why aspirants in a variety of religions often achieve it.

Swami Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* mentions that the Catholic nun Therese Neumann reached this stage of spiritual cultivation. This minor stage of accomplishment has been witnessed in many Indian adepts as well, such as Pawahari Baba, Giri Bala, and Devaraha Baba. In Christianity we also have St. Lidwina of Schiedam who ate nothing for 28 years, Venerable Domenica dal Paradiso for 20 years, Blessed Nicholas Von Flue for 19 years, Louise Lateau for 12 years. The list goes on.

That these people engaged in inedia does not mean that they achieved the Tao, but that they were able to reach the stage of jing transforming to chi and able to live off this chi. Unfortunately, almost none of the Christian saints were able to go extremely far on the spiritual path and see the Tao for lack of good teachers. Nevertheless if you wish to learn of special abilities like this, Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, or Swami Rama's *Living with the Himalayan Masters*, recount many similar such stories in detail.

Fasting Cultivation Practice and its Stages of Transformation

We must point out that this type of fasting practice is not the ordinary type of water or juice fasting recommended by today's natural health practitioners. In fact, any ordinary individual would certainly die if they fasted too long, which is why many people die in fasting protests. Even individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, despite a multitude of modest attempts at cultivation, would die from starvation after one to three months of fasting if they had not reached the requisite preliminary stage of chi and mai cultivation.

To understand this stage of cultivation, it is best to review what we know about the ordinary practice of extended water fasting. During fasting you might feel hungry, but remember that hunger is not the same as starvation because the body is well equipped to go without food for long periods of time, including several weeks. People's body tissues typically contain enough nutrients within to allow fasts for one to two months with few problems; however, water must always be amply consumed during this period.

The beauty of fasting is that it a process of detoxification that actually gives the body a chance to rid itself of internal poisons, and then heal itself. Animals, for instance, instinctively fast whenever they are sick or injured, and the therapeutic effect of fasting has been well documented in Europe, the United States and Asia. When the body does not have to use its energies for digesting food, it can divert those same energies to pulling out toxins, and then flush them out of the system. Fasting itself is not a cure, but simply allows the body time to heal itself. There are

many people who have gotten themselves off of the need for medications, and cured themselves of chronic disease through the practice of fasting alone.

During fasting, only unwanted fat and nonfunctional tissues are cannibalized by the body to provide energy, and fat cells are the first thing to go. Skeletal muscles are cannibalized next, through a process called autolysis, but the body always protects vital organs such as the brain, nerves, heart and lungs, so they are always the last things to be affected. Since our fat cells are normally used to store toxins, fasting releases these toxins into the blood where they can be discharged from the body. Microbes within body tissues are also pulled out and attacked by the immune system, and since the toxins and bacteria normally accompanying food into the body are absent, the immune system can focus on cleaning up the garbage that it finds.

In short, fasting has a rejuvenating effect because during that time, the body can channel more energy into healing. Short-term water fasting has such a beneficial effect that it can make you feel like a new person, and many people report that fasting makes their senses sharper, their heads clearer, and their bodies feel lighter. Many people therefore do it several times per year, or even just once a week. The Taoist injunction never to eat until you are full, but to always keep the stomach about 10-25% empty, can be considered a type of fasting practice that will extend your life. The Buddhist injunction that monks should only eat one meal a day, which is a custom shared by the American Indians and many primitive African tribes, is a type of fasting practice as well, which also serves to cut down the problem of sexual desire.

You should eat no food when fasting, but always drink lots of water. If your stomach starts to grumble during a fast, you should drink some water instead. Some people fast with water that has a bit of sea salt added, or lemon juice, so that they do not become mineral deficient during this period. When water no longer quenches your thirst and you lose the desire to drink, that is a sign that you have become mineral depleted and that your body is suppressing the desire to drink in order to prevent a further leaching of salt and minerals. Because sea salt contains many more trace minerals than regular salt, it is often taken several times a day during an extended fast to prevent mineral deficiency and to cut down on fasting discomfort.

When you begin a fast, you will generally feel hungry for the first few days, and then surprisingly, your hunger will progressively get less and less. For most people, they will typically lose their desire for food at about the third or fourth day of the fast. So the first three or four days of the fast are the worst, but after that the craving for food diminishes almost completely. The first day of the fast is toughest, since the stomach tends to grumble, but the second day is easier, and the third day easier still. Fasting gets easier with each passing day, and after a while fasting is no longer difficult because the desire for food is minimal and you feel very little discomfort.

People can fast for weeks like this, although a three day up to two week fast is about the right amount of time for the inexperienced, and a thirty to forty day fast is possible for experienced

fasters. You know you are finally drawing near to the danger of starvation, when you should definitely break a fast, when your energy reserves become so depleted that you start feeling an intense hunger which is even greater than that of the first few days of the fast. Whereas you will generally not feel hungry during the middle of a fast, you should never continue fasting when hunger arises again, although you should not confuse this hunger with the temptation brought on by smells and thoughts of eating. Most people can safely fast for three weeks (twenty-one days) without any dangers at all, but when hunger reappears with a passion, that is the time to end the fast.

During a normal fast you will have less energy than usual, so you should avoid strenuous activity and get plenty of rest. If you are not eating you will have very few bowel movements, but sometimes you will experience a bowel evacuation in the middle of a fast that will have a foul smell and be rubbery or stringy in texture. This is usually feces that has encrusted the colon wall for years, slowly putrefying and poisoning the body, and the fasting has forced it loose so it could be eliminated. As the body cleans itself, it will eliminate toxins from every orifice of the body and channel of elimination including the skin, nasal passages, urine and feces. Sometimes the purging of this material will appear as if you have a cold or flu, but it is usually just the effect of the heavy eliminations going on.

When you are fasting, your tongue will also tend to become heavily coated and the breath will become offensive. As the body gets rid of more and more material, the breath—which reflects the digestive tract inside—will get worse and worse, as will your body odor since toxins are being released through the skin and sweat glands. The urine will also become progressively darker although this will be less noticeable if you drink a lot of water.

After a time, eventually the coating on the tongue will get lighter and the breath will start to improve until it smells fresh again and the tongue once again appears pink. At this stage, which usually arrives after a few weeks, your body has done about as much detoxification as it can handle, and that is a good time to naturally end the fast. You always want to end a fast naturally rather than take it to a point of starvation, and you want to prepare for long fasts by undertaking a series of shorter fasts that give you experience.

Whenever breaking a fast, you should do so gently by eating only soups, juices, fresh fruits, or (preferably steamed) vegetables in moderation. Give your body time to slowly get used to food again, and stay away from meats, greasy foods, sugar and grains (like wheat). While you will be hungry for a few days after breaking a fast, do not succumb to the tendency to eat too much but just give yourself a couple days to return to normal.

Those who choose to undertake a very extended fasting practice should only do so under the supervision of a doctor, and as regards the spiritual fasting we mentioned by cultivation individuals, you must remember that you can only attempt this if you have already attained a

degree of stable samadhi from cultivating your jing, chi and shen. From this foundational set of accomplishments, you will have naturally brought yourself to the stage of not having to eat—because your chi is full—which you can then skillfully extend for years at a time if you so choose.

To do this, you must also learn the Taoist practice of "eating air," which entails learning to initially swallow it like a fish. After a while you can survive without eating at all by reaching a cultivation stage the Chinese call "*bigu*," whereas ordinary individuals would certainly perish from starvation. In essence, this food-free practice is quite possible, but do not kid yourself as to its ease. Even advanced cultivators might come close to death during this practice if they are not careful nor qualified for the effort. As a result, it is wise to seek the blessings of an enlightened master when attempting such efforts. Otherwise, the potential for harm will always exist.

If you can reach the stage in your cultivation where your chi, mai and kundalini have already been transformed to a certain extent, and a realized master says you can undertake this meditation-fasting method of cultivation practice, the following hitherto secret sequence of physical transformations are what you can expect:

- During the first ten days of fasting, your energy will feel weak, and your skin color will tend to turn yellowish (basically, an unhealthy color tone).

- During the second ten days, you will feel woozy or faint if you move, your joints will feel tight, and it may become difficult for you to defecate. The color of your urine will usually turn a dark yellowish brown and some will experience diarrhea. The first part of any defecated stool will seem hard, whereas the second half might seem sticky or watery.

- During the third ten days of fasting-meditation, your body will become very thin from loss of weight and it will become difficult to walk because you will feel weak and heavy. Of course this is due to the fasting rather than to sickness, so a cultivator should not worry if this happens. If it is necessary, they can use some medicine to help adjust their body at this point.

- In the fourth set of ten days of practice, your complexion will improve. Because of the constant meditation and lower level of nutrition, you will not experience so many thoughts and desires anymore. Thus, the mind will become relatively peaceful and calm.

- In the fifth set of ten days, you will feel that all your internal organs are becoming balanced and harmonized, and jing and chi will start to accumulate in the body. Naturally, you cannot reach any of these stages unless you have continually conserved your jing up to this point, nor will you continue to

make progress if you let your jing leak away through sexual temptations during this time.

• During the sixth set of ten days, a practitioner's health will fully recover and they will no longer feel weak. All the organ systems of the body will now harmonize and feel active. You will begin to experience physical bliss.

• In the seventh set of ten days, your mind will begin to hate external noises and you will harbor the wish to avoid any distractions or disturbances. The mind will feel so clean that it can be likened to a bird which wishes to fly out of its cage; the desire for peace and quiet will impel you to try and avoid the afflictions of the human world. This is the point, since the mind is clear, that you have to set your will to do great and noble things for the world.

• In the eighth set of ten days, a practitioner will become completely calm and quiet, and can enjoy living alone. However, the dread of being disturbed by people and society will also have disappeared, and you will be able to deal with worldly disturbances because your prajna wisdom will have begun to open. Now you will truly trust the Tao and start to have all sorts of understanding and knowledge of topics like medicine, astronomy, music, weather and so on. It is not that you will know everything, for you will still have to study, but because your wisdom will have opened up you will begin to understand or comprehend things much easier, sometimes at first glance. Various psychic abilities (superpowers) may also arise.

• By the ninth set of ten days, the practitioner's appearance will now have become quite beautiful or handsome. Their skin will have become shiny and smooth like a baby's, and in general they will feel like a flower in springtime where life is budding all over. This is all due to the fact that the body has become clean, the chi has become harmonized, and because the wisdom has started to open. At this point, a man's voice will become rich and full like a large bell, and a woman's voice will become very sweet and melodious: smooth and delightful to hear.

• In the next ten days of meditation, the practitioner's real *yang* chi will finally begin to arise. The effects will be strong and obvious, and the individual by this time, because of his or her continued practice, will have actually lengthened his or her apportioned life span.

In completing these one hundred days of fasting-meditation, a cultivation practitioner can lay a good foundation for even greater cultivation progress. But it is important during this whole

process that you are always engaged in emptiness meditation and never lose your jing, otherwise there will be insufficient chi to produce the physical transformations recounted. If you lose your jing during this period, this fault might even be deadly. The important point is to be cultivating your chi during this period, for you need to reach the stage where your chi becomes full, and hopefully you can start transforming it into shen.

After these preliminary stages of transformation, the effects of continued fasting will start to come quickly without cease. Thus, if an individual has the merit to continue in this effort, he or she can then expect to encounter even further progress as follows:

- After three years of continued practice, by meditating and relying on air and water alone, all the diseases within the body will have disappeared. Any internal obstacles or obstructions will have vanished, and the individual will appear shiny and bright. By this time the practice has become so easy that the practitioner will not even desire food anymore.

- At the six year mark, the bone marrow will become so full that if the practitioner were stabbed with a knife, a milky white liquid would come out instead of blood. By this time the intestinal system will have become extremely clean and strong. A practitioner who reaches this stage will also know when he or she will die. Therefore, if he or she desires a longer life, he or she can also determine at this point which other practices they must undertake.

- At the nine year mark, the practitioner will become able to command the ghosts and spirits. If the practitioner is a male, female *dakinis* will come to serve him. If she is female, male *dakas* will come to serve her. By now mind and brain will have been transformed. The side flanks of the body will have become filled with chi so that no one will be able to harm them. Thus, the practitioner will have fully changed his or her body and can live as long as desired. This, in Chinese Tao school terminology, is the perfected physical equivalent to the state of the "true man" or "real individual."

This description of the various stages of fasting cultivation has remained relatively unknown for a long time. They are principles handed down from the Tao school, which places particular emphasis on cultivating the physical body, so it is natural that the Taoists have recorded these particular phenomena. However, if you actually "see Tao" or "see the path" because you have cultivated the emptiness of prajna transcendental wisdom, the time required for these changes, and their particular order of manifestation, will not be limited to these indications. There are always alterations and permutations of these basic kung-fu principles, and these deviations will depend upon your practice, effort and merits. Nevertheless, what we are describing is the general road of practice along with the sequential progress to be expected.

Thus, this sequence of transformation is merely a general guide for those adepts who are concentrating on cultivating their chi, mai and kundalini. You *must* cultivate some degree of emptiness in order to be able to produce these transformations, but achieving them does not necessarily mean you are following the path of cultivating prajna wisdom as done in the Zen school.

On the other hand, even if you should succeed in self-realization by just cultivating prajna wisdom and correctly ignoring your physical nature—as done in Zen—you must still complete the task of transforming your physical body after you succeed in awakening. The task will be much easier to accomplish than for practitioners who are working at lower levels of cultivation practice, nonetheless you must still work to complete the physical transformation of your body after enlightenment. Otherwise your kung-fu attainments will never remain stable.

You might ask yourself whether it is actually possible to live such a long time without eating, or whether this is just science fiction nonsense? This is definitely an achievable process (and we will encounter people who have done so) when you have successfully cultivate your chi and mai—but only advanced meditation practitioners can accomplish this feat. Only those who have already attained a certain stage of samadhi and opened their *tu ma*i (back) and *jen mai* (front) energy channels can even attempt this type of practice, for any run-of-the-mill meditator would surely die at this sort of effort.

As a result, you must first attain samadhi and the blessings of a realized master before you should ever attempt this practice, and even then you might still fail if you do not have the requisite merit and required level of attainment. For this and a variety of other reasons, you will not hear of many success stories on this particular road of cultivation. Yet this road does exist and you do need to know about it.

Jesus is a perfect example of an individual who succeeded in practicing fasting for forty days. Many Islamic saints have performed this feat as well; if you want to read about individuals who succeeded in fasting-meditation for longer periods of time, you can turn to the Tibetan stories of Milarepa and Lady Yeshe Tsogyel recounted later in this book. Both of these individuals spent years in fasting practice, and both came very close to dying. However, both survived and ultimately succeeded in enlightenment to become male and female heroes of the Tibetan cultivation schools.

You should not jump to the conclusion that the enlightenment of Milarepa and Lady Yeshe Tsogyel resulted from cultivating the physical body in this or any other way, nor that this path necessarily leads to the Tao. Nor should you imagine that these two practitioners attained prajna wisdom through this particular path. These are different issues entirely. The important lesson to bring away from these practices is the sequence of body transformations that occur on the road of spiritual striving during prolonged periods of cultivation, and the principles behind these

transformations.

The Cultivation Stage of the "Immortals"

According to the Tao school, if you succeed in this practice of fasting-meditation you can live an almost endless life without dying, perhaps for hundreds or thousands of years. Someone who achieves this reaches the stage of an "Immortal" who attain seemingly boundless human life because:

(1) his or her intestines have become entirely empty and clean
(2) his or her chi channels have all completely opened through, including to the bottom of the feet
(3) his or her chi and hormones have reached a state of fullness and equilibrium
(4) he or she has cultivated a stable level of intense one-pointed concentration (samadhi)
(5) his or her merit is sufficient

Even if you achieve this accomplishment of tremendous health and longevity, however, you must remember that this still is not Tao! It does not rank as one of the ten Bodhisattva stations, nor as the stage of a Buddhist *Arhat* either. This particular type of kung-fu establishes a good basis for cultivation progress, but there is still much more cultivation work that lies ahead before one attains ultimate enlightenment. If a practitioner clings to this accomplishment as being something special, it is already as wrong as clinging to thoughts.

Chinese Taoism established five stages of Taoist Immortals to rank a person's particular level of cultivation progress along the lines of this super longevity. They were: Ghost Immortals, Human Immortals, Earthly Immortals, Heavenly Immortals, and Great Golden Immortals akin to the Buddhist Arhats.

Ghost Immortals

The stage of the Ghost Immortal corresponds to those spirits who achieve samadhi concentration after death. Because of karma they were to be reborn as a ghost rather than once again become human or progress to other higher realms, but because of their cultivation attainment of samadhi, they became a long lived leader of ghosts with special supernatural powers.

Sometimes people can tell the future because some type of ghost deity will come into their bodies and tell them things. Some occult magicians can even learn how to create objects out of empty space if the Ghost Immortals assist them in these efforts, but the humans who can perform these tricks usually suffer from some type of mental problem. It is because they have some type of mental instability that they can connect with these ghost powers in the first place, but upon

seeing their psychic abilities people usually think they are advanced spiritual individuals when they are nothing of the sort. Their abilities are actually the result of a type of mental instability, craziness or schizophrenia and yet people do not understand enough of cultivation principles to know this.

The Ghost Immortals, or ghost deities, have exalted status over ordinary ghosts because they have cultivated a very strong degree of one-pointed concentration. As an interesting side note, in history you can sometimes find the stories of great generals who died in battle, but who had such strong concentration that they could continue holding onto their body after death and keep it standing there in the midst of battle. Because of such concentration, sometimes they could be reborn in one of the higher Desire Realm heavens we will discuss later, such as the Heaven of the Four Deva Kings, and this is why they are sometimes honored as guardian deities or protector gods for communities.

Using the terminology of the Tibet school, if you can realize the death clear light in the bardo stage while having the karma to be reborn as a ghost, you can actually become one of these ghost kings, or Ghost Immortals. This is not a bardo stage incarnation, but an actual high status incarnation within the realm of ghosts. Of course it is only the ghosts who successfully cultivate samadhi who are the ones able to attain this status.

Human Immortals

The Tao school stage of the Human Immortals are those who could attain an extremely long life—with super abundant health absent of sickness or other major afflictions—while remaining in the human world. Of course, they can achieve this stage by cultivating a variety of different methods, but the vital ingredient in all these techniques is that they also cultivate a strong one-pointed concentration.

Human beings who attain the stage of deathless longevity from their cultivation efforts, wherein they no longer need food but can live on chi alone and attain some small measure of superpowers (such as not being affected by the cold or heat, and not fearing water or fire), are ones who have attained the achievement level of the Earthly Immortal.

Earthly Immortals

The Earth Immortals can live even longer than Human Immortals. They usually isolate themselves from society and go into the forests or caves to meditate. They do not like to mix with the human world so they typically refrain from human contact while cultivating their bodies and life essence. Earthly Immortals are still effected by gravity but can walk above the ground without touching their feet to the earth. The have not attained the level of kung-fu, however, that allows them to fly.

Heavenly Immortals

The next level of attainment includes the Heavenly Immortals who can fly through the air, disappear at will, live forever, and possess various types of more advanced supernatural powers. If you have ever seen a flash of light streak through the air, you may have seen a Heavenly Immortal pass. But this stage of attainment still is not the highest stage of Taoist Immortality.

Spiritual Immortals

As to the great Spiritual Immortals, their level of cultivation achievement is quite extraordinary. They are liberated without bonds and are not limited to birth and death in the world. These Celestial Immortals can disperse their form into primordial chi at will, and can congeal it to take on form to dwell in the heavens or among men. They have a level of achievement equivalent to the Buddhist great Arhats, and yet they still are not enlightened; they have not reached the realm of complete self-realization.

Of course Taoism is not the only spiritual path which features the stages of Immortals who have control over their life span. The Egyptians had this practice to some extent, and Shakyamuni Buddha talked about several classes of Indian Immortals as well. Hence, the Immortals constitute a class of spiritual attainment that is distinct from the human and heavenly realms. As Buddha told his cousin Ananda in the *Surangama Sutra*,

> There are people who do not cultivate samadhi correctly, but cultivate in some special way that is based on strongly holding onto false thoughts. As a result, they can perpetuate their physical bodies and roam in the mountains, forests and in other places where people do not go. There are ten kinds of such immortals:
>
> Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution cultivate through eating special foods and perfecting the diet of what they eat. When they have perfected this method of cultivation, they are known as earth-bound immortals.
>
> Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution ingest grasses and medicinal herbs to preserve their bodies and live a long life. When they have perfected this method of cultivation, they are known as flying immortals.
>
> Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution ingest special minerals and stones [such as calcium and mercury] to preserve their bodies and live long lives. When they have perfected this method of alchemy, they are known as roaming immortals.
>
> Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution cultivate themselves by mastering their breathing [pranayama]. When they have perfected their chi and jing, they are known as immaterial [space] immortals.
>
> Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution cultivate their saliva [the pituitary hormones which descend from the brain known as the "sweet dew" or "nectar of immortality"] and perfect the way of internal lubrication. When they have perfected this method, they are known as

heavenly immortals.

Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution make themselves strong by absorbing the essence of the sun and moon. When they have perfected the inhalation of this purity, they are known as [unimpeded] penetrating immortals.

Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution use mantras and special dharma techniques to preserve their bodies. When they have perfected this means of cultivation, they are known as immortals of the lesser way.

Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution master mental concentration and perfect the way of meditation to preserve their bodies. When they have perfected their method of mental concentration, they are known as illuminating immortals.

Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution cultivate through sexual union to preserve their bodies and live a long life. When they have perfected this method of cultivation to achieve harmonization, they are known as jing [sexual energy] immortals.

Some of these practitioners with unflagging resolution cultivate the understanding of heavenly and earthly transformations which they apply to their bodies. When they have perfected their spiritual cultivation, they are known as immortals of the highest order [absolute immortals].

These people all regulate their minds, but do not cultivate the right *bodhi* [the enlightenment mind]. They cultivate some special principle of life and can live for thousands, or tens of thousands of years. They retire deep into the mountains, or live on deserted islands in the sea and cut themselves off from the human realm. However, their states of attainment still belong to the realm of false thinking rather than to genuine samadhi. When the longevity of life which is their reward is finished, they are condemned to return again to the lower planes of existence.

In addition, the Buddhist sutras often use the phrase, "keeping one's physical form to dwell in the world," which refers to a similar although more advanced cultivation process. Buddha even ordered his four students Mahakashyapa, Rahula, Pindola and Kundupada to remain in the world without dying until the next Buddha came. But these individuals reached the attainment level of the Arhats, rather than the lower level of the Immortals, so they are already liberated and through this practice are simply exercising a form of discipline.

Buddha also told his cousin Ananda that he had a method of staying in the world and living an extended life but Ananda was so choked up that he could not reply to the Buddha when Shakyamuni mentioned this three times. As a result, Shakyamuni Buddha said that the karmic moment of opportunity had passed and he chose not to remain in his physical form. What this also tells us is that the longevity of the Immortals, Arhats and Buddhas can be achieved in different ways, but it is always the result of cultivation attainment. This is why the long-lived elders of most cultures are always mentioned in conjunction with religious streams and traditions.

THE *I-CHING* AND OTHER RELEVANT CLASSIFICATION SCHEMES

To analyze the overall road of meditation practice that makes this type of longevity outcome

possible, it requires an advanced discussion that we can only approach slowly. The best way to do this is to first analyze some of the physical transformations experienced by ordinary meditators, and then work upwards. But before we do this, it is instructive to call to mind another spiritual classification scheme by noting that much of this information we have gone over has already been encoded into the symbolism of the *I-Ching*. The *I-Ching*, or Chinese *Book of Changes*, therefore offers us a further means to study this type of material.

For instance, our discussion has been centered on transforming the four great elements of earth, fire, water and wind (chi) in the body. If we consider the symbolism of the wind element being placed on top of the water element in the *I-Ching*, this could be taken to represent the cultivation process of jing transforming into chi that happens because of meditation. The *I-Ching* represents this transformation in hexagram #59, called "Dispersal," wherein the *tui* trigram is placed on top of the *kan* trigram. Because of the progress involved in this type of spiritual transformation, this hexagram symbolizes all the sweat, water and pus coming out of the body due to progress in meditation.

If we switch the trigrams around to show the water element on top of the wind element, we come up with the "Well" hexagram #48, which shows the harmful dirty water elements accumulating inside the body without being dispersed. Deep reflection upon the classical commentary on this hexagram reveals that the well rope described for this hexagram can refer to the body's energy meridians, or mai. Thus, the *I-Ching* describes a certain stage of attainment, and gives us an alternative way of viewing the levels we have been discussing.

When we place the wind (chi) element over the fire element, we get the *I-Ching* "Family" hexagram #37, which symbolizes proper spiritual cultivation. This hexagram shows that the chi is circulating throughout the body's chi channels, and the kundalini is ready to be initiated. If we have the fire element over the wind element, we get the "Cauldron" hexagram #50, which indicates that we begin to feel warmth in the tan-tien area of the body. This is not the actual kundalini phenomenon, but it does indicate that we have many things now "cooking" or percolating inside us. It indicates that we can now transform many physical experiences because it is as if they were in a hot chemical oven, which is the usual symbolism that the Tao school uses for kundalini.

The *I-Ching* hexagram #20 stands for "Observation" or "Contemplation," and has the element wind standing on top of the earth element. This refers to a state of cultivation where your wisdom opens up, and your mind expands so that you extend yourself to teach culture and civilization. When we have hexagram #46, called "Ascending," this represents the stage where your *jen mai* has opened, while hexagram #24, "Return," represents the opening of your *tu mai* spinal chi channel.

When the wind element stands over the mountain (earth) element, this means that the *tu mai* (of

the spine) is beginning to open because the body's chi is ascending due to meditation practice. The opposite of this, hexagram #18 called "Deterioration," shows the wind element stuck in the *tu mai* because of various obstacles, and only when the chi has surmounted these obstacles can we make further progress in cultivation attainment.

This may seem a bit of a departure from our main topic, but it is useful to study the *I-Ching* when you wish to begin the process of cultivation. The *I-Ching* is not just a book for divination, but contains many instructions on moral development, virtuous behavior and even strategy, as well as cultivation principles dealing with various matters of physical transformation.

In actual fact, to be able to fully understand cultivation matters, one must be fluent in several alternative descriptive and analytical systems, such as:

- *I-Ching* transformations
- the Taoist triumvirate of jing, chi and shen
- the three gunas of Hinduism
- the Buddhist Realms of Desire, Form and Formlessness
- cultivating the chi, mai and kundalini
- the water, wind, earth, fire and space elements and their sequential purification process
- the chakras of the human body
- the five skandhas
- the six sense consciousness, the seventh consciousness and the eighth *alaya* storehouse consciousness
- the four stages of *prayoga* intensified meditation practice
- the nine samadhi common to all cultivation schools
- the fifty skandha mara paths wherein cultivation efforts go astray
- the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya bodies
- the stages of opening the sushumna central channel
- the principles of great essence, appearance, and function
- the seven Confucian stages of cultivation
- the ten stages (*bhumis*) of the Bodhisattvas
- and so on

In time we will enter into almost all of these various means for describing spiritual matters, including how these various classification schemes all interrelate and correspond with one another. However, our starting point for this discussion must remain with the five skandhas and the various experiences normally encountered by ordinary cultivation practitioners. After all, the typical experiences of ordinary meditation—whether analyzed in terms of jing, chi and shen, or the mai, chakras and kundalini—almost always involve the form and sensation skandhas. Thus,

the skandhas are the proper introductory topic for much higher cultivation matters.

In almost one hundred out of one hundred cases, when people cultivate today, they mistakenly interpret the kung-fu they experience as being of a much higher stage then it actually is. As an example, some people have heard the word "kundalini" and ardently hope to experience this phenomenon, so they tend to attribute any warmth phenomenon that arises to kundalini's domain. However, the various sensations and physical changes people experience usually are not even the stage of cultivating the body's inherent chi but rather, constitute sensations of "wind" or friction in the body. In striving to build a greater understanding of cultivation phenomena and measuring systems layer by layer, this is the major topic that remains for our next chapter.

For further information on various Taoist sequences of transformation, please see:

Tao and Longevity: Mind-Body Transformation
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1984.

Cultivating Stillness
Trans. by Eva Wong
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1992.

Vitality, Energy, Spirit: A Taoist Sourcebook
Trans. by Thomas Cleary
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1991.

The Jade Emperor's Mind Seal Classic
Trans. by Stuart Olsen
Dragon Door Publications, Minneapolis, 1992.

The Secret of Everlasting Life
Richard Bertschinger
Element Books, Great Britain, 1994.

The Secret of the Golden Flower
Trans. by Thomas Cleary
Harper San Francisco, California, 1991.

The Primordial Breath: Volume I
Trans. by Jane Huang and Michael Wurmbrand
Original Books, Torrance, California, 1987.

The Primordial Breath: Volume II
Trans. by Jane Huang
Original Books, Torrance, California, 1990.

For the interesting biographical accounts of two Taoist practitioners, although they do not correspond to self-realization, please see:

Tranquil Sitting
Yin Shih Tzu, trans. by Shi Fu Hwang and Cheney Crow
Dragon Door Publications, Minnesota, 1994.

Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality
Trans. by Lu K'uan Yu
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1973.

Chapter 4:
Twelve Enlightening Case Studies: An Analysis of the Spiritual Progress and Problems Faced by People Practicing Meditation

This chapter will start to use the information that we have already covered on the skandhas and Taoist concepts and apply it to categorizing your meditative experiences. By the end of our discussion, we will end up dealing with the very highest levels of spiritual accomplishment which only the liberated attain. But frankly speaking, the experiences of most ordinary spiritual practitioners can usually be explained without having to resort to anything other than the two skandhas of form and sensation. Most meditators, and even some spiritual adepts like the Immortals, remain bound within these two realms.

In other words, no matter how profound or unusual the experiences of most hard working meditators, the vast majority of the experiences they will encounter from their practice will be very limited. In most cases they will not go beyond simple changes in the physical body, the experience of various feelings or sensations, and a minor calming of superficial psychological states.

These are all changes which belong solely to the form and sensation aggregates. And since sensations are relatively easy to understand, it is the form skandha we must analyze if we really wish to comprehend this. As we already know, the form aggregate involves the five elements of the physical body as well as the form impressions produced by the senses. The sensation aggregate, on the other hand, includes our various reactions to these impressions, namely whether we like them or dislike them or have no particular feelings towards them at all.

It helps to note that the various physical phenomena we refer to as chi (prana), the mai (nadi or energy channels), chakras, and even kundalini (*tumo* or *shakti* spiritual energy) are all phenomena belonging to the skandha of form. In other words, their manifestation only corresponds to the level of form skandha phenomena. These are not imaginary structures, but esoteric physical phenomena that *do* exist, although their existence involves refined energies or subtle materiality. The sensations we experience as these phenomena manifest are properly classified as belonging to the sensation and form skandhas as well. The physical sensations themselves are a characteristic of the form skandha, and our emotional reactions of like or dislike to these impressions belong to the skandha of sensation.

Nearly everyone who starts to meditate correctly will eventually feel various feelings or sensations in the body. This is absolutely inevitable and unavoidable. Unfortunately, many people will jump to the conclusion that these sensations are high stage experiences whereas they are usually just the movement of internal “body wind” activated by cultivation. Thus, before we can progress to investigate the ranks of outstanding cultivation practitioners, we must clarify such

situations in detail.

To be specific, we must familiarize ourselves with the broad spectrum of the initial experiences you can encounter upon first entering the cultivation path. In this way, we will not confuse these minor events with any of the higher stages of cultivation accomplishment. Otherwise, people who experience this or that phenomenon will immediately mistake it for a more advanced stage of practice, as this is the natural tendency of those hoping for spiritual progress. Hence, before we fully enter into a discussion of the form and other aggregates, we must first analyze the common experiences of today's modern practitioners.

To give shape to our discussion, there is a marvelous book by Dr. Lee Sannella, called *The Kundalini Experience*, which has gathered together an excellent collection of cases summarizing the various phenomena experienced by noviate meditation practitioners. This collection reveals a broad spectrum of kung-fu experiences (physical reactions and mental experiential realms) which can occur at the lowest, beginning stages of meditation practice. If we examine these cases recorded by Dr. Sannella, we will be in a much better position to understand the much higher levels of cultivation accomplishment.

To understand the experiences of most cultivators as they cultivate their chi and open up the energy channels and chakras, an individual also needs to match their spiritual experiences with traditional cultivation teachings, including the details of spiritual and physical stages revealed within Nan Huai-Chin's *Tao and Longevity* (Samuel Weiser, York Beach, Maine, 1985). This is the only text available which describes the "what" and "wherefore" behind the experiences encountered by practitioners on the meditation path. While the descriptions in this book are purposely limited to the opening of the *tu mai* channel in the back of the body, they are still sufficient to cover most the experiences encountered by beginning cultivation practitioners.

From this book, a reader will begin to understand terms such as yin and yang, jing, chi, shen, the chi channels (mainly the *tu mai*, *jen mai*, *zhong mai*, *ida*, *pingala* and sushumna channels), chakras and kung-fu—all of which constitute the necessary vocabulary you must know to knowledgeably discuss the world's spiritual cultivation schools and practices. To talk about the physical changes of cultivation in an intelligent fashion, it is absolutely essential that you develop a basic fluency with this vocabulary.

Because of this requirement, familiarity with *Tao and Longevity* is almost a prerequisite for understanding the cultivation path; more references at the end of this chapter can help fill in other details. For us to be able to condense this work as much as possible, it will be assumed that the reader already has some basic familiarity with these concepts so that we can proceed to analyze the following cases from Lee Sannella's book:

CASE 1: Male Professor in the Humanities

This sixty-nine-year-old man, who had many psychic experiences as a child, awoke from a nap one day in 1963 to discover a three-inch blister on his thigh where his hand had been resting. This extraordinary experience stimulated his interest in the powers of the mind. Within two years he was meditating regularly, though without expert guidance. Then, in 1967, he began formal Zen meditation.

After a few months, during a sitting, he became engulfed by a bright golden light that lasted several minutes. He had a recurrent experience a few weeks later.

During many sittings he noticed prickling and itching sensations moving up the inside of his legs to his groin, in his arms and chest, up his back and over his head to his brows. From there the sensations moved to his cheeks, the outside of his nostrils, and sometimes to his chin. Later he experienced tingling and itching in his throat during meditation. ...

Today, ten years later and several years into his retirement, the professor no longer experiences any dramatic manifestations ... He is, however, able to encourage energy flows starting in the pelvis and spreading upwards. These flows, he feels, revitalize him and have even cured him of lower back pain. Occasionally he feels an energy blockage in his throat, which is the precise location where the kundalini energy seemed to have been arrested when I first saw him.

Nevertheless, he reports many interesting physical changes in recent years. Doing only mild aerobic exercises, he feels ten years younger. His shoulders and chest have increased in size by several inches, while his waist has shrunk by as much. He is fifteen pounds lighter. His hands still get very hot at times. He hears sounds of bells, and sometimes he is awakened by a loud zzzing sound.

In analyzing this first case which Dr. Sannella has recorded, we must try to understand what has happened to this practitioner. The relevant question is: what is this meditator's particular stage of attainment such that it has caused all these experiences?

To start, we must note that absolutely none of the phenomena reported are the results of kundalini although many people would tend to mistakenly identify them as such. None of the experiences are the manifestation of kundalini, indicative of kundalini, nor even related to kundalini.

Rather, in terms of the stages of cultivating the wind, water and fire elements of the physical body, these experiences are all *precursors* to actually cultivating the body's chi energies. This man has not actually started to cultivate the wind element of the physical nature, but is just beginning to activate its outskirts which the Chinese *chi-gong* and Tao schools call "*fan chi*." When the *yuan chi* (original chi) does appear, which corresponds to the genuine kundalini phenomenon, its characteristics are quite different from any of these indications. This meditator's

kung-fu experiences are only the "wind chi" of the body whose resemblance to "real chi" tends to confuse most cultivation practitioners.

Meditators who have a weak physical nature often easily experience sensations similar to this professor's. For instance, it is especially easy to feel the chi running up or down the insides of the legs to the big toes. In fact, a common practice in many cultivation schools is to lightly draw the energy up from the toes along this route when you feel weak or tired, and to lightly send energy down these meridian lines to the toes when you feel you have an excess of vital energy. When doing so it is important to never forcefully push these sensations.

From the description of his experiences, we can also surmise that this practitioner probably had some type of liver weakness which his meditation uncovered. This internal weakness involved his liver chi, and it is this disequilibrium which became highlighted when he first started on the road of practice. If he continued meditating, in time this particular imbalance would have adjusted itself naturally and in fixing this potentially debilitating problem, he would have increased his overall health.

If this practitioner had never started meditating, however, this unknown problem would have grown into something much more serious that may later have required drugs and surgery to correct. It is truly a blessing to discover the body's ailments through meditation and to fix them with gentle methods before they become so severe that harmful intervention is necessary. This is one of the unspoken benefits of meditation.

As to the sensations one sometimes feels in their legs and groin when first meditating, *Tao and Longevity* points out that

> Because the *ch'i* cannot flow freely between the blood vessels, muscles and tendons, one sometimes experiences numbness, aches and swelling in the legs [when one sits cross-legged and first begins to meditate]. These sensations indicate that there are obstacles in the *ch'i* routes of *Yin Ch'iao* and *Yang Ch'iao* [energy meridians]. When one can no longer endure this feeling, he can loosen the legs. After awhile he will experience fresh, unfamiliar, comfortable feelings. When one has advanced to a certain stage in meditation, no matter whether he crosses his legs or not, he will always experience these fresh and wonderful euphoric feelings. At this stage, a person will be able to cross his legs to meditate for long periods without feeling any obstructions.1

Explaining the importance of opening the leg meridians through meditation would require an entire chapter or even book of explanations, but we must certainly draw attention to the fact that our life force runs through our legs. For instance when we watch an infant in a crib, we can see that they kick their legs much more than they wave their hands. As a child grows older, they always crawl about, and then run around everywhere, continuously keeping their legs active.

They just cannot sit still because of all the active chi in their bodies.

One of the reasons behind this disposition toward movement is because the life force is coursing through the legs, and as an adult you must open up the energy meridians in the legs through the process of cultivation so that chi inside can flow freely. When this finally happens, you will experience an indescribable bliss. There are an entire host of reasons why people should sit in a cross-legged position while meditating, and one of the reasons is to help bring the body itself into samadhi so that the leg meridians open up.

When we initially start sitting in a cross-legged position, we sometimes feel pain. Despite this pain, *it is impossible for meditation to become the cause of any type of physical illness*, for meditation is simply a state of resting the body and mind. However, when the vital energy currents of the body start circulating because of meditation and subsequently encounter obstructions, we can correctly say that meditation has revealed a latent weakness. This is the type of thing which may have silently hidden itself in the body while growing in strength and destructive capabilities. As *Tao and Longevity* again reminds us,

> "Everyone should realize that latent diseases may be discovered, but are not actually caused by meditation. *In other words, meditation increases inner vitality and begins to heal the body.* By persistent meditation and appropriate medical treatment, one can recover one's health."2

Disease and illness are sometimes blessings in disguise because while they can interrupt your life, they may also cause you to rethink your past behavior and enter into a more worthwhile life pathway. They sometimes give you pause to consider, and correct, the way you live. In this way they are sometimes considered a blessing.

Meditation is particularly beneficial to your health because the indications it provides give you a chance to identify and correct any health problems before they cause major interruptions. It often alerts you that you must transform deteriorating conditions before they invisibly accumulate to cause cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, heart disease, mental illness or other serious health problems. Furthermore, meditation involves renewing or unleashing your natural vital energies and letting them flow freely throughout the body, so the path of meditation is often the remedy of cure for many "incurable" illnesses. The fact that this meditator could have such experiences at all indicates he had achieved a degree of cultivation accomplishment in a previous life which had laid a foundation for the speedy results in this one.

Nonetheless, we must be firm in recognizing that this man's set of experiences are not Tao, nor real chi, nor even the kundalini phenomenon most people commonly talk about today. However,

if people like this practitioner know the true principles of spiritual practice, they can make great progress in these directions, although they must certainly not mistake any of these experiences for the real chi of the body.

What this man experienced were simply the results of internal wind running along his energy meridians. At this level of practice, it would be a gigantic mistake to conclude that the meridians have been totally cleared of obstructions, but to discuss this in detail will require more than we can handle at present. What we can say is that in cultivation, a meditator first starts to cultivate their chi and mai before they can activate the kundalini phenomenon, and cultivating the chi and mai requires a good deal of time and effort which he had not yet undertaken.

As to the golden light experienced by this meditator, this was actually a phenomenon caused by the interaction of his chi with his mental condition. Chi and consciousness are interrelated in the sense that thoughts "ride" on or with chi, and when the chi accumulates and concentrates in a certain region, the compression of friction can cause the experience of seeing internal lights in the body. This is called a physical stage of internal lumination and since chi and thoughts are related, this interrelationship always reveals itself in special mental states.

At this level of explanation, we should simply say that because this practitioner had made progress in his meditation, this light manifested as a result of the friction between his physiological and psychological states. It was not a "light from wisdom" attainment. Nor was it the "light of wisdom," "clear light" or any other type of holy light experience. Rather, it was simply a "frictional" light of the form realm produced by the interaction of the four elements of the body (earth, wind, fire, water) in conjunction with changes in the mind (the sixth consciousness). It was an internal light caused by the massing of chi at a particular point or area inside. Even the mental state we speak of at this point is "mind" at the level of form—the sixth consciousness of ordinary mentation which deals with the form skandha. Hence his experiences never went beyond the simple skandha of form.

As to our last bit analysis for this case, the reason why this practitioner's fan chi seemed to stop in the throat is because it is impossible to open up this region of the body until one reaches very advanced stages of cultivation practice. When Jesus was hanging on the cross in incredible pain, yet exhibited the compassion to forgive his tormentors by saying, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do," this selfless behavior was a bit of evidence that he had *truly* opened up the chi channels and chakra in his throat region.

As for this particular meditator, however, we certainly should not believe that he opened the chi channels in his throat, or that the chi channels in his legs actually opened, either. When these happen there will be certain unmistakable experiences involving jing and chi which are far different than what this individual experienced.

CASE 2: Female High School Teacher

This middle-aged teacher of Spanish has been practicing Yoga and meditation for many years. In 1980 she started to have a variety of symptoms, such as headaches, tingling in her face and nose, pains and spasms of the throat, cardiac area, and abdomen, with popping sensations all over the body. These symptoms became accentuated whenever she would meditate. She also had sensations of emptiness and of her voice not being generated by herself.

In November 1985 a dramatic change occurred. In the midst of a thirty-day meditation period, she became aware of strong flows of energy washing over her entire body. There was also a loss of sensation, except for sensory perceptions in her head. She felt the kundalini energy pushing and pulling in her face and at the top of her head. There was a bumping, jerking sensation in the chakras of the throat, the heart, and the abdomen. These sensations were predictably intensified during the most concentrated meditations. Each area also felt greatly heated up in turn. Then she started to hear machinery-like noises in her head that became continuous over the next few weeks. With her eyes closed, she could see white light streaming from her face and head.

These symptoms subsided somewhat after three months but were triggered again after a period of intense meditation and lasted for several weeks. The kundalini energy resumed its flow up the spine and down the face and trunk. She experienced great rapture and ecstatic orgasmic sensations until she began to tire of this hyperstimulation of her nervous system.

Shortly afterward she developed laryngeal spasms, which were accompanied by the fear of choking to death. Then the symptoms returned in full and for several weeks she experienced "heart attacks". As soon as these symptoms started to subside she began to suffer from sudden acute sciatica, which was clinically typical and later diagnosed by NMR scan as a ruptured disc pressing on the nerve. After three months of therapy, which did not alleviate her painful condition, she agreed to have surgery. By that time she had developed pronounced foot drop. There was intense pain extending from her lower back to her left big toe. She suffered from numbness of the sciatic distribution and great stiffness. Then, nearly as dramatically, there was a sudden subsidence of sciatica, and within three days she could walk with only a slight limp. Now, six months later, she only suffers a slight residual weakness of the lower left leg.

Her impression is that she must have had some weakness in her back that did not show until the intense kundalini energy became active in that area and precipitated the actual pathology. She looks upon her practically instantaneous healing as a gift of grace. All of her symptoms have disappeared, even though she continues to meditate.

As with our first case study, this practitioner's experiences cannot be classified as kundalini either. Once again, these experiences do not constitute an actual awakening of any type, but are simply the initial manifestations of fan chi—the ordinary chi of the body (not the real chi)—being stimulated through meditation practice. It is unfortunate when people jump to conclusions and mistakenly take this as kundalini, for the characteristics of the real kundalini phenomenon are entirely different.

The reason why this woman practitioner experienced headaches from her meditation is because she undoubtedly suffered from some sort of spinal dislocation whose effects impinged upon her throat region. Later she discovered that she had a disc problem in her back, confirming this diagnosis, and she decided to correct this condition through surgery.

Whenever someone's meditation reveals a problem such as this, it might be wise to first resort to osteopathic manipulations, chiropractic adjustments, various deep tissue massage or bodywork therapies (such as Rolfing, Integrative Manual Therapy, etc.) or acupuncture before submitting to radical, invasive surgery on the back. In many cases, back operations never fix the problems they are meant to address, and the results are often unsatisfactory. Furthermore, once bones are fused because of operations, the results can never be undone. Chinese meditation and gong-fu practitioners, when they discover they have a similar problem (revealed through their cultivation), first try all sorts of noninvasive techniques before ever submitting to surgery. Sometimes they use a method called "shuffling the bones" which uses the body's own chi to help move the spinal bones back into their proper places.

This practitioner was particularly perceptive in that she realized her meditation did not cause the medical problems, but simply revealed what was already there. In indicating a latent weakness, it gave her an opportunity to heal the situation before it became worse. As *Tao and Longevity* states,

> Meditation does not *cause* ... undesirable effects. They are due to old illnesses. [If for instance] the nerves and *ch'i* routes around the renal and waist areas constitute obstacles to the *ch'i* that is generated during meditation, ... [it must] work to open and pass these areas. If one understands this principle and has instruction from a good master about suitable remedies, these problems can all be overcome, and one will eventually recover health ...
>
> [As another example, people who are old or weak may have illnesses which] include lung disease, gastric and hepatic disorders, cardiac diseases and various other latent conditions. If a person has these diseases, at a certain stage of meditation he will feel aching and heaviness like a strong pressure on the back, flaccidity and lack of strength or aching around the waist. Cramps or convulsive contractions may occur in the back, or congestion may occur in the shoulder, or aching may occur causing one to perspire, feel chills and fever.

> If these phenomena should occur, one should understand that this trouble is not produced by meditation. The quiet in meditation is, after all, a means of rest. No one is apt to get sick from merely taking rest. One should be glad, however, because without the test of meditation, one might not have realized that one already had some sort of disease. The pains one feels show the self-healing effect of increased vitality and indicate that the disease is still curable and has not progressed to the extent that there is no remedying it. For example, a man may not initially feel any pain from a very serious wound and yet when the wound begins to heal, he will. Similarly, when a man first catches a common cold, the germs of the cold are still latent; there are no symptoms. When the symptoms of the cold are evident, the cold is already going away.
>
> If these phenomena appear in the course of meditation practice, one should take medical treatments in addition to the healing involved in meditation. So long as one has the will to persist through these crises, the crises can lead to a healthier condition.3

Thus, if this woman had not discovered her spinal problem through meditation, it is likely to have degraded even more as she got older. Who knows what other problems it was causing inside her body? If you go to an osteopath or chiropractor and ask about the possible complications which can result from spinal misadjustments (subluxations), you could sit there for hours listening to their reply. For the road of serious meditation, it is indeed useful to have a yearly adjustment of your bones and joints to make sure that your spine is in good condition.

It is generally true that meditation usually makes people more sensitive to external environmental factors such as wind, weather, odors, people, and so on, but correspondingly, when spiritual cultivation practitioners get sick they know it right away and can immediately take the appropriate measures (i.e., medicine) to adjust their bodies. Normal people get sick without knowing it and therefore do not do anything to heal themselves. As a result, illnesses find no outlet of release and are driven deeper into their bodies, quietly accumulating over time so as to develop into cancer, arthritis and all sorts of other afflictions.

When such people discover a problem, it is often nearly too late. They must resort to fixing matters with radical cures such as surgery, rather than changes in lifestyle or just a few herbs together with nutriceutical supplements. As a result, those ignorant of meditation often go on compounding the errors which produced their condition in the first place! By old age (if they reach it), people with these problems are really in a mess, whereas meditators have a means to both prevent and cure these types of conditions. One great benefit of meditation practice is that it is the basis of longevity, and of preventative as well as curative health care.

In China's Sung dynasty there was once a Zen master called Ta-hui, who lamented that there was no one with the understanding to teach Zen anymore, to teach the practice of directly pointing to

the original mind of enlightenment. It wasn't that there was no Zen anymore, for the Tao always exists, but that there were no talented Zen masters anymore. Ta-hui's story reminds us of the fact that there are few talented teachers today who can properly explain this information.

Many modern teachers do not know how to guide people through all these situations, but refer to them with fancy words like kundalini when they do not really apply to the situation at all. Perhaps today's teachers might correctly use some proper words of explanation, and yet they still might not be able to comprehend what they are talking about either because they know very little about anatomy, biology, psychology, science, kung-fu and medicine. They are like a blind cat bumping into a dead mouse! Such teachers might even label all of a practitioner's experiences as *mara* (delusions), or tell practitioners to ignore everything that occurs when the symptoms might be indicating a great need for medical intervention. It is indeed difficult to find a skilled master nowadays!

In particular, this case is not indicative of the real chi of the body, which typically floods the body like a curtain of rain that travels down a street. This case shows us another example of internal wind rather than chi, but since cultivating the chi is the very first step in the normal sequence of meditation, it is acceptable to refer to these phenomena as "chi" in order to simplify our explanation, as well as to further encourage people along the path. This type of encouragement, by calling the lesser something much greater for the practitioner's benefit, is called "an exercise in skillful means." When a practitioner progresses, they later awaken to the fact that what they thought was chi was initially just the stirring of internal wind, and they recognize that it was initially helpful to make this mistake of considering this as great spiritual progress.

"Wind chi" can also be called "semblance chi" or a "semblance dharma (kung-fu)" because it "looks the same" and closely resembles chi, but is not *really* the chi phenomenon in question. Nevertheless, calling something "chi" when it is only wind is sometimes an excellent means to teach and motivate others in their meditation practice. It not only encourages them to work hard at their spiritual practice, but it enables them to better understand the meditation classics which discuss such matters in detail.

We can also use this case to note that some individuals who meditate originally had a nervous problem to begin with, and will Thus, experience symptoms similar to this woman's case. For some such people, the effects from meditation might be the result of this sort of mental imbalance rather than indicative of progress in spiritual kung-fu. So you really must be like a skilled doctor to know what is actually going on when you are trying to help guide people in their meditative practice. You must be very careful not to "mistake fish eyes for pearls" by mistaking one phenomenon for another.

All the experiences of this female practitioner are manifestations of "post-natal" chi, and occurred because of the interaction of the physical body with psychological states of mind. The

experiences were an effect of the interaction of the four elements, so they were not the manifestation of the original chi or kundalini of the body. They absolutely were *not* the pre-natal chi, which the yogis of India and Tibet call kundalini.

This woman was simply cultivating her body's internal wind in advance of cultivating her real chi, meaning she had not yet touched the real chi, mai, or kundalini phenomenon. Thus, we have a typical beginner's practice report which shows some of the initial results from transformations within the skandha of form.

CASE 3: Female Artist-Teacher

I first saw this forty-five-year-old woman ten years ago. At the time, she had been doing automatic paintings for fourteen years. For the past two years she has been creating spontaneous paintings of her inner states, usually foreshadowing imminent experiences.

This cycle started when she blacked out during a painting session. When she regained consciousness, she found herself lying on the floor, with her body shaking violently and filling with great energy. This condition lasted for about half an hour and recurred the next night. The blast of energy and the trembling returned the following morning while she was doing her Yoga practices. It was then that she created her first spontaneous painting.

She immediately went on to the second painting in this series. All the while she was experiencing intense waves of energy and inner heat. She was also unaware of who or where she was. She began to worry about going insane. This was followed by free-floating anxiety and headaches. Then she worked on her third spontaneous painting while hallucinating patterns of force.

It was at this point she fell apart. Depression set in, and she felt like dying. She hurt all over and cried a lot. Painting number four was created. She called it "Fractured," because it reflected her inner chaos.

Then, over a two-day period, she painted her own face with a snake encircling it. At night, on the day of completion, she awoke trembling all over. She saw a strange reddish being with an elephant face. "He" put his fingers on her forehead. Then she fell asleep again. She dreamt of painting eyes that came alive under her brush. Next morning she started work on a painting of the blue-red man. In a subsequent painting she depicted that man healing her broken head. A baby was born from that man and then grew up, which was captured in another painting.

In another crisis she did a painting of a red octopus. Then, while in an ecstatic state, she created a painting of a head superimposed on a black head. Following this painting, she felt reborn.

Her ordeal resumed with painting number thirty-three. Overcome by a mood of depression, she felt as if she was imprisoned in a concentration camp, which is

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reflected in the gloomy scenes of several of her paintings. These spontaneous creations were followed by a painting of a egg with a wavy person emerging. At the end of this series, she felt alive and whole.

The next incident was fierce burning in her legs, which then spread into her chest and arms. She suffered hot and cold fevers and was unable to eat. She experienced pain on both sides of her head and behind her eyes as well as violent palpitations. Her blood pressure was found to be elevated.

Just prior to my interview with her, she experienced a cramping pain in her left big toe, as if a nail had been driven through it. My examination revealed a very red toenail, which was not due to bleeding. At this time she was also unnerved by a complete loss of hearing, which lasted for about an hour, and she believed she was going to die. She then consulted a physician, who found nothing wrong with her.

Since my interview, she has reported feeling a "throat opening" sensation, but also breathing difficulties and pressure in the head. These experiences and states seem to be associated with her Yoga practice and artistic creativity. Her teaching work seems to exert a stabilizing influence on her, and she admitted to feeling generally much better since taking it up.

This particular set of experiences is quite different from the previous two. From a cultivation standpoint, we should suspect that this practitioner was somewhat mentally unstable before she even started to meditate, and so, from a psychological point of view, she lacked a balanced state of consciousness at the start of her cultivation practice. This possibility explains some of her mental experiences.

Many people today mistakenly believe that some people are locked away in mental hospitals because they are suffering from the kundalini experience gone astray, but this idea results from a great ignorance about the true nature of the kundalini phenomenon. Nonetheless, this case gives us pause to announce that the great diseases people will fear in the twenty-first century will be forms of mental illness rather than diseases such as cancer or heart disease, and only meditation or life style changes will end up providing effective cures for these coming conditions. While this woman may not be as mentally secure as most ordinary individuals, meditation has indeed helped her to a great extent, and so is useful in the sense of serving as a helpful cure. Nevertheless, the experiences she describes are certainly not the result of kundalini, for once again they are only manifestations of chi.

In explaining this case, we must first understand a little of the system of psychology used in cultivation matters. Naturally, the psychological mappings used in spiritual schools differ from those employed by psychology, such as Freudian, Jungian, or the more modern views of Erikson or Maslow. All one has to do is peruse a book like Xuan Zang's *Doctrine of Mere Consciousness*, upon which one will immediately notice that modern psychology is child's play compared to cultivation science. The psychological categories used in cultivation are extremely

precise and more elaborate since realized masters, employing samadhi-insight discernment, have been able to map all the various levels of the mind.

Modern psychology and psychiatry study thoughts, but neither studies the gap between thoughts. Yet it is this gap, this emptiness which is initially the core focus on the path of spiritual development. If you want to truly study the mind, *this* is what you have to focus on! The coming and going of thoughts are like the two sides of birth and death while the real Reality rests just between these two aspects. This is why someone who wants to know the mind must come to investigate the mental quiet state between thoughts, and extend this state until it envelops the mind in total.

Therapists today are also fond of teaching visualization methods for stress reduction and relaxation, but if you want to reduce stress, this gap between thoughts should once again become the targeted focus of relaxed attention. Individuals in relaxation classes are instructed to follow their breath, but this is entirely wrong as well: what they have to pursue is the cessational gap of no-breath between the breaths. This is the important thing! If modern psychiatry and psychology were built upon studying these gaps, rather than categorizing false thoughts into standardized patterns (a never ending task), they could finally get somewhere in terms of helping solve the problems of the human condition, and by extension, the world.

The schools of cultivation psychology, on the other hand, are based on the true fabric of the mind rather than on some random temporary coloring of the mind. Cultivation psychology therefore involves mental levels of which ordinary psychology will never be aware. For example, how many psychologists have ever reached the samadhi of no-thought? Not knowing of these realms, they can never understand what it truly means to be mentally healthy.

The teachings of cultivation psychology, or mapping the mind, had their first origins in the ancient Vedic cultivation schools. They later flowered under the Buddhist school of Mind-only, called Yogacara or Madhyamika, whose teachings provided elaborate structural details about the many layered levels of the mind. The aspect of psychology we must investigate in this particular case deals with the sixth consciousness of ordinary mind, as opposed to the higher seventh consciousness of egocentric being and the eighth consciousness (called the alaya or seed consciousness), which we will discuss later. All these levels of the mind can be found in Yogacara teachings.

In Buddhist psychology, the ordinary everyday mind of mentation, or “sixth consciousness,” discriminates objects and combines together the various impressions of our senses (smells, sounds, etc.). In other words, it enables us to judge and evaluate things. Since everything in existence has both a positive and negative aspect, a yin nature and yang nature, the sixth consciousness cannot escape this principle either. Hence, it has a bright, clear side of discrimination, and also a shadow side as well.

The bright or clarity side of the sixth consciousness takes in all of the information provided by the senses, and makes sense of it. The shadow side of the sixth consciousness, on the other hand, operates in its own independent realm, and does not rely on the eyes, ears, nose and so on in order to operate. Since this flip side of the sixth consciousness can operate by itself, it is called the "solitary consciousness."

This shadow side, or yin-aspect of the sixth consciousness, which is also called the *du-yin* ("solitary shadow") consciousness, produces the pictures and sensations of whatever we experience within our dreams, among other things. Dreams are the operational province of the solitary consciousness, and so are cases of insanity. In many cases our real personality and behavioral traits are only revealed during our dreams, so true spiritual cultivators use these indicators to spot the faults and bad habits they should change.

In general, the du-yin can operate under several circumstances:

(1) During *dreaming*. Dreams can be powerful because the du-yin, free of the confines of space and time, can sometimes tap into information about the past or future.

(2) During *sickness* and *incoherence*.

(3) During *mental illness* or *insanity*, such as when an individual starts to ramble incoherently, taking their hallucinations as something real. Some of the mentally ill functioning under the influence of the du-yin can even develop supernormal abilities which we do not normally possess; however, this does not mean that they are more spiritually advanced than we are, for their minds are not calm or clear, nor do they have control over themselves.

(4) During *certain stages of meditation*, such as when you mistakenly believe you see the sun and moon, gods, the future, etc., or believe you have developed superpowers. Other cases include when you actually attain samadhi and go beyond the realms of time and space so that you are not influenced by normal sensory input, and whereby various superpowers can manifest. We can say that this is similar to insanity or mental illness, but the difference is that the individual with samadhi has complete control over their mental powers or psychic manifestations, whereas the mentally ill might use the du-yin to tap into the past or future and extrasensory powers, but cannot control their mental states.

Western psychology tends to group these possibilities under the rubric of the "subconscious," but

the psychological classification as the du-yin shadow side of the discriminatory consciousness is much more appropriate.

Some forms of daydreaming can also be classified as the operation of the du-yin, such as when we lose ourselves inside some personal mental scenario with which we are playing. A perfect example is when we eat all the food on our plate without noticing because we are absorbed in some particular mental scenario. Sometimes when we are awake the findings of the five senses also cannot penetrate through to us because we are deeply absorbed in some scenario. This is how the du-yin can even function when we are awake and alert.

Since the solitary consciousness is not restricted by space or time, sometimes mentally ill people will have the uncanny ability know certain things about us, or sometimes we will personally experience ESP in our dreams or exhibit superpowers as well. But if we are really careful about the matter, we should also realize that ESP and superpowers in these cases have a definite connection with mental illness. Going a bit further, we can also say that if you are too intelligent or too dumb, both these extremes can be forms of mental illness as well, so you have to be careful how you interpret matters.

The point is, cultivation practitioners and ordinary people who experience things like this artist will become confused when the du-yin is operating. Through lack of clarity, they will not comprehend what is really going on. Sometimes they will mistakenly believe that they know things about the future or believe they have developed various psychic abilities when their experiences are just the operation of the du-yin shadow side of the sixth consciousness, the shadow side of the ordinary mind. This usually corresponds to the chi not being able to pass through the hind region of the brain. Regardless, this demonstrates that a person must become very aware of their own psyche, no matter what school or sect they follow on the road of cultivation.

Although the following description from *Tao and Longevity* does not perfectly apply to this woman practitioner, whose mental instability had complicated matters, her case provides a perfect opportunity to introduce the special reactions which may occur when an individual's chi, because of various sadhana, may actually bring the chi to the state where it is impinging upon and trying to penetrate through the back of the head:

> If one has enough bodily strength and the *ch'i* ascends to the back of the head, one may notice darkness in front of the eyes when half asleep. Gradually a dreamlike state occurs, and images eventually appear. This happens because *ch'i* affects the nerves at the back of the head, which then affects the optic nerves. Many people have dream images accompanied by feelings of love and joy or sadness and dread. These images and feelings match subconscious functions which give rise to one's mental states, thoughts and concepts. States of *Mara*, or demonic delusion, may

occur at this stage. These states depend upon one's wisdom, thought, personality, psychological propensities, and physiological condition. They are very complicated. Without the guidance of a very perceptive master, and in the absence of self-confidence, healthy intelligence, and correct thinking, a person may be led down the wrong road.

When a person understands this, he can ignore phenomena of this sort, knowing that light follows the darkness. After passing through this stage one feels somewhat more awake. Points of light, like a fluorescent star, may appear in front of your eyes, sparkling in different shapes and colors. These colors and lights are connected with your physiology and will be discussed later in more detail. ...

When *ch'i* reaches the back of the head, a person might hear wonderful inner sounds or experience ringing or pressure in his ears. This phenomenon is produced by *ch'i* working to open the *ch'i* route in the brain. The vibration or trembling of *ch'i* causes some brain wave activity. If one's intelligence is not clear and bright enough, then illusions deep inside the subconscious will result.

One who has deep religious beliefs may have illusions of hearing the voice of God or Buddha. Often the voice will speak of the past or future, and this *a priori* information may be quite correct, at least in small things. Thus, one might believe he has clairaudience. Whatever is heard is actually just a big assembly; it is a mixing of previous experience—what has been seen, heard, thought and known before. This kind of clairaudience could be used to predict small matters, but it will not work on big events at all. If one clings to the idea that these voices are real, he will fall into a state of *Mara*, or illusion. This shows that the mind is receptive to impressions but this is not a genuine instance of clairaudience. A person should not be puzzled or moved by this reaction. Instead, he should sometimes swallow the saliva and release the feelings in his head. This requires a strong mind and persistent will. By guiding the *ch'i* downward one will pass this stage and enter the next.

Ideally, one should use the Taoist's internal *Kung Fu*, employ the special body exercises and adjustments of yoga and esoteric Buddhism and have required medical treatments when necessary.4

Because it is very easy to be misled in all this, the Zen masters have a saying: "Those people who practice kung-fu but do not know the theory—when they open their mouths, only nonsense comes out. Those people who only know the theory but who have never had the real experience—these people are like the blind."

To summarize, we can say that this female practitioner was not fully mentally stable from the start. We can phrase matters another way by saying that her nervous system was weak which is why she engaged in automatic painting. Her problem was not very large or very serious, but she would definitely have benefited from some form of psychological guidance or counseling. Furthermore, the description of her meditation experiences suggests that she also had an

obstruction (subluxation) in the back of the neck which could have and should have been treated by one or two chiropractic or osteopathic adjustments.

CASE 4: Female Psychologist

As a child, following a vacation spent in a religiously oriented summer camp, this middle-aged woman experienced feelings of oneness with God and Nature for about a year. As an adult she suffered several episodes of severe depression, and was hospitalized during one of these. In 1960 and 1970, respectively, she made two attempts at suicide and was unconscious for days each time.

In 1972 she was initiated in Transcendental Meditation, which helped her bear the tragedy of her daughter's premature death. It also cured her asthma. She practiced this form of meditation for about six months and then did not meditate for a similar period of time. When she resumed her meditation practice, she switched over to the Buddhist technique of *vipassana*, watching her breathing, body sensations, and thoughts.

She gradually increased the time spent in meditation. By the summer of 1974, she was meditating between three and four hours daily. It was then that she found her meditations deepening. During one of her sittings she experienced a strong feeling of disorientation, of not being located in space, which instilled some fear in her. Then, without warning, there was a sudden sharp pain at the base of her left big toe, which was quickly followed by a painful ripping sensation traveling up her leg. Then her lower pelvis and perineum felt as if they were swollen. When this sensation had spread to her waist, her torso suddenly was twisted violently to the right. (She would feel the pain in her left big toe whenever a new energy center was opening up further.)

In her abdomen she distinctly felt, "I must save all sentient beings." This was followed by a cold sensation pouring down over the crown of her head, shoulders, and arms into her chest, with the accompanying words, "I am not ready yet." All this occurred about an hour into her meditation and lasted between ten and thirty minutes.

During an intensive meditation retreat several months later, she again felt her whole body being pushed and pulled by a massive energy. Then she saw/felt a fountain of light erupting from the pelvic area into her head. At the same time she had a sense that there was a wide split in the middle of her body.

In 1975 she switched to Tibetan visualization techniques to correct what a Tibetan meditation master had diagnosed as a lopsided energy flow. She started to experience closing and opening of the energy centers of her body, without reason or order. There was also a low-pitched buzzing in her head and throat during meditation and occasionally during the day. She continued to have spontaneous body movements and energy rushes and pains. However, by the end of that year she was again able to sleep three to four hours every night.

Subsequently she went to Swami Muktananda for spiritual guidance, after having seen him in dreams. He gave her a mantra and asked her to focus on her head, not her body, as in vipassana. She started to have more spontaneous body movements but the pain and fear lessened and feelings of ecstasy and bliss increased during meditation. She also experienced more tingling sensations and heat phenomena, particularly in her lower back and hands.

She began to see how there was a strong part of herself that was negative toward her own growth and spiritual maturation. But it was not until 1987 that she began to consciously work through the problems of her childhood that had proven formidable obstructions in her psyche.

In a recent follow-up interview, she reported her old kundalini headaches are persisting but the energetic disturbances have gone. She is now experiencing many spiritual connections with living and dead teachers. Psychic phenomena are occurring more frequently, and in particular she has developed the ability to heal instantly on occasion.

Let us examine how this case differs from our previous examples. For instance, there are very clear signs that this individual, who spontaneously repeated the vows of a Buddhist to "save all sentient beings," had practiced spiritual cultivation in a previous life. It is unfortunate that she was unaware of the principle of emptiness which would have enabled her to make substantial progress in her present cultivation practice.

If this woman had known about the principle of emptiness—attaining a state absent or empty of discriminative thought by just letting everything go without mentally attaching to it—she could have made tremendous progress in cultivating her chi and mai. However, this possibility would have depended upon whether she had enough merit to progress in practicing the traditional prajna-emptiness teachings of most spiritual schools.

As to her physical condition, her experiences suggest that she needed chiropractic adjustments in her neck and in the region of her pelvis. As to the cultivation instructions given her by various teachers, let us refrain from commenting too much. Just note that the Zen school always says that there is a gate of no-gate which does not use any practice at all, so why should you put another head on top of the one you already have? It is just too bad that this practitioner did not encounter someone who could teach her about the prajna wisdom path of forgetting both mind and body. As the text *Tao and Longevity* points out, a cultivator may sometimes

> have the feeling that there is a strong force moving with difficulty along the spinal cord which is prevented from pushing upward. One may also hope that these forces will push through the obstruction so that one can finally feel relaxed and comfortable. In Taoism, this phenomenon is called the River Chariot which rolls to the location of the *Chia Chih*. This occurs during the process of opening the *Tu Mai*. This is the

stage where the *ch'i* starts to reach the Huang Yang point.

If one cannot release his mind and attain the state of forgetting the body, the pressure will become stronger and stronger. Whenever this phenomenon occurs, a person's attention will automatically focus on the back and one may attempt to use the force of consciousness or imagination to push the pressure upward. Because of the concentration of attention here, the brain and stomach nerves will become tighter and tighter. The heart will contract and the uncomfortable feeling in the back will be increased.

Some schools of Taoism teach one to guide the *ch'i* with consciousness, to push it through or to drive it. Students are to imagine the progression of the River Chariot and engage in taking deep, long, but tiny breaths (6 x 6, thirty-six deep breaths; or 9 x 9, eighty-one deep breaths) which numerically match the Big and Small circulations of heaven. Or they are to use some Taoism or yoga exercises to guide the passage of *ch'i* through this location.

Although these direction exercises have a temporary effect and make one feel that something passes through the *Chia Chih* to rush up to *Yu Chen* (i.e., the back of the head), it is only the mental force that changes the physical feeling, but *it is definitely not the phenomenon of ch'i passing through the Chia Chih*.

If one can attain the state of "forgetting his own body," or apply his wisdom in an attempt to forget his feelings and remain quiet without taking any mental action, then there will be a moment when suddenly, like a switch making a contact, all the tension is gone and the mind and body are loose and at ease. From this turning point one will experience the state of breadth and brightness of mind and fullness of spirit. A person whose back is humped at this stage will naturally straighten his waist and back, stretch his chest, and his breath will become smoother. For those who are born with advanced scoliosis or who have it as a result of an external wound, this is a difficult situation.

At this stage a person will be so charged that he will not fall asleep easily. Since he may be used to sleeping at a fixed time, he might assume that he has insomnia and feel frightened. It should be understood that this is not the insomnia of ordinary people. One should let nature take its course. If one cannot fall asleep, just don't go to bed.5

What about the practitioner who sits quietly and never has any special sensations? Not having any special reactions from meditation practice can be due to the fact that you do not have any serious illnesses inside, or that you simply have not put in enough of the correct form or effort. In most cases it is due to a lack of progress due to infrequent or improper practice because when you truly start to make progress in cultivation, you will feel all the vital energies within the body. It is hard to comment on these matters and put forth general principles because each case is an individual matter.

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Actually, not having any sensations is already a sensation. The *Diamond Sutra* also says: "Whoever seeks me in appearance, or seeks me in sound is going astray and missing the Tao," Hence, there is nothing to worry about when you sit in meditation and nothing special occurs. Just remember that this is also correct. But you should also remember that you will eventually begin to feel your chi inside after start making genuine progress in igniting the vital energies of your physical nature through meditation progress.

CASE 5: Male Computer Scientist

This man is now in his mid-twenties. At age nine he suddenly developed shooting pains in his genitals and lower abdomen. When in bed at night, he would feel a strong force pushing its way down his throat. This was accompanied by perceptual distortions. A physician tentatively diagnosed hypoglycemia.

In his early teens, he and his friends experimented with hypnosis, and he discovered that he could easily dissociate from reality. One day, in his sixteenth year, while sitting quietly, he suddenly started to tremble uncontrollably, and his body became very hot. His abdominal pains returned with full force, accompanied by nausea. After a bowel movement these symptoms subsided. The next day, again while sitting quietly, he had an out-of-body experience (OBE). He had undergone a marginal OBE state when he was younger. On this occasion, however, he was able to move around the room very easily and to view his resting body very clearly. He became alarmed and by moving his arm was able to slip back into the body. For several weeks after this incident his world was collapsed and he felt he was going insane. He dissociated many times in school.

Later, during the fifth session in a Rolfing series in which his psoas muscle was being worked on, he had a strong emotional discharge, with a lot of crying and violent shaking. He felt the immediate need to ground himself. Suddenly there was a terrific energy, which felt to him like a fire hose that was being forced into his perineum and up his spine. When it reached his head there was a feeling of infinite space all around him and inside his skull. He also felt a sensation of a hole being bored into his forehead. All the while there was a display of colored lights around and inside his head. Upon the "penetration" of the forehead, he felt a great current of air rushing through the opening. This was followed by an infinite peace in infinite space.

Subsequently he suffered, as he sees it now, from the delusion that he was enlightened and that this infinite space and otherworldly focus were the only truths for him. A Zen master later told him that during that time he had been in a satori [samadhi] state.

At age eighteen he developed debilitating pains in his solar plexus. These were alleviated whenever he allowed his body to spontaneously assume various postures. Only later did he learn that these were yogic *asanas*. It was then that he started a program of yogic practices, including breath control, that he still follows every day

for at least two hours. He was hoping all this would speed up his regaining the condition of satori. He also began to read spiritual literature.

Five years later he discovered the writings of Da Love-Ananda (Da Free John). In the midst of his study of these works he noticed a remarkable fullness in his abdomen and then his belly felt on fire for hours. To his surprise he noted that his girth had increased by four inches, without any gain in weight.

Soon afterward he became a student of Da Love-Ananda. He began to realize that his intense yogic practice was born out of the terror of dying and an attempt to remove himself from the stresses of life. He no longer suffered from the delusions of being enlightened and also saw how he had not the slightest inclination toward surrendering the stronghold of the ego, which is the single most important precondition for enlightenment.

Then he had his first formal "sitting" with Da Love-Ananda. Upon looking at his teacher, who was seated before hundreds of people, this young man was suddenly possessed by the demonic urge to utterly destroy this being. He found it incredibly difficult to restrain himself from attempting a violent assault. While he was struggling with this irrational impulse, Da Love-Ananda made eye contact with him, and he was immediately thrust into his familiar state of blissfulness and infinity. But this time he was not alone. There was a complete merging with the teacher in an enclosure of love. This was the first time he had ever had such an ecstatic experience of being in this space of love and unity with another being. At this moment the though arose in him, "I can't wait to tell my wife this." That very second it all stopped.

Gradually he became more open to this new relationship and learned to trust it. But time and again, he would rupture this by claiming credit for his condition. For a period he became acutely conscious of playing with his energy flows, as if he were masturbating with his nervous system. At other times he would enter into out-of-body states and immediately feel that this too was only an indulgence. He is now dealing with his residual resistances creatively, always reminding himself to return to the naturalness of the spiritual relationship with the teacher. Occasionally his old fears arise, but they are no longer as severe, and he is now more capable of allowing them while simultaneously locating within himself the bliss and equanimity that lies beyond fear.

This particular case represents a great advance in spiritual progress over our previous four. This cultivator's foundation, perhaps due to work done in a previous life, is much stronger than the others. In fact, this is the first case in which we encounter anything similar to the real kundalini phenomenon; however, it still not the true kundalini.

The active nature of this practitioner's vitality was the reason why he felt pains in his genitals at age nine, and the reason he could have various unusual experiences by age sixteen. It is most probable that much of this progress was due to the fact that he was a "chaste youth" who rarely

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lost his semen through wet dreams or masturbation. As we will later see in the cases of Han Shan and Ramakrishna, brachmacharya, or "no leakage" (celibacy) is an extremely important contributing factor to progress in spiritual cultivation, for as the *Surangama Sutra* says, "Trying to cultivate samadhi without cutting off lust is like cooking sand trying to make rice. It cannot be done." In regards to the doctor's mis-diagnosis of his cultivation experiences as hypoglycemia, this also demonstrates how little Western medicine understands of cultivation kung-fu. Unfortunately this lack of understanding will still hold for perhaps a hundred or more years to come.

Despite the experiences described, this individual certainly did *not* yet open his *jen mai* or *tu mai* chi channels, nor did he actually succeed in cultivating his physical chi either. Even so, because of his strong vitality, his meditative experience was close to matching the infinite space samadhi, which is a high state of mental concentration known to many spiritual traditions. The Zen teacher he consulted acted in a most excellent manner by revealing that this experience was not enlightenment, but was simply a particular type of samadhi. Unfortunately, this practitioner's karma with his teacher was not so good; otherwise, he might have been guided to a stable stage of samadhi at an even higher stage of realization.

All the other sensations this individual experienced were undoubtedly a result of his strong vitality, which generated symptoms similar to the real kundalini phenomenon. If this practitioner had enough wisdom and the proper guidance, his progress suggests that he could reach a much higher level of samadhi and possibly attain enlightenment. This is because the infinite space samadhi properly belongs to the Realm of Formlessness, and is very difficult to attain. Any individual who can reach this realm so easily shows that he has tremendous merit and cultivation roots.

While none of these cases so far have talked about the practitioners' sexual behavior, this is an extremely important topic in cultivation matters. While Westerners now teach young children that it is okay to masturbate and lose their jing by doing so, there is no teaching more destructive nor misleading than this on the path to spiritual attainment. This is not something you want to encourage.

Yes, the habitual pulls of sexual desire are strong and deep, but you should not encourage these habits if you want people to have healthy bodies or make spiritual progress. It is only when the vital energy of the body accumulates, through the practice of nonleakage and restraint, that it becomes strong enough to open up the obstructed chi channels within the body. In fact, most individuals have trouble attaining the first dhyana of cultivation even when they do not lose their jing through sexual activities, so to lose this energy makes the situation even worse. The improperness or properness of this has many dimensions, one of which has nothing so much to do with naturalness or desire and whether it is right or wrong, but which is a matter of losing spiritual energy.

Unfortunately, ordinary people often do not know better than to squander their normal build-up of sexual energy, especially young adults who are advised to masturbate rather than transform their jing into chi for the benefits of health and spiritual progress! Thus, few seem to make genuine progress in spiritual cultivation these days, and everyone wonders why. Even if someone were to become a monk, priest, nun, or rabbi, *their spiritual striving will amount to little unless they can refrain from losing their jing, and transform it into chi by cultivating the mental emptiness of discriminative mentation*. From the point of view of attaining samadhi and spiritual progress, unless you can accomplish this necessary transformation of jing to chi by cultivating emptiness, then celibacy for spiritual purposes is practically useless.

There is also an interesting point from this case which keeps popping up time and time again, which is the fact that several practitioners have felt sensations in their left big toe, which often manifested as pain or swelling. Shakyamuni Buddha commented on this phenomenon thousands of years ago, telling people that when performing visualization practices on their skeleton, they should always start their visualization concentrations by focusing on the left big toe (see the *Chan Mi Yao Fa Sutra*).

The reason behind these instructions is that the left big toe has an extremely strong relationship with the brain. Obviously, the brain is a vital area in cultivation. Furthermore, the chi routes down the insides of the legs and reaching to the toes are some of the hardest chi channel meridians to open. Opening them requires this extra bit of cultivation concentration. Another reason we concentrate on the left big toe in visualization practice is because one of the most important of the primary mai terminates there. For instance, you can only become a Taoist Immortal if you open the chi routes to the bottom of the feet.

The sensations within the toes also have to do with the termination points of certain major chi channels within the physical body. The Esoteric school often teaches that there are twenty-four major mai in the body, grouped into three sets of eight. These twenty-four major mai each sub-divide into three minor branches to produce a total of seventy-two minor mai, and each of these in turn sub-divides into 1,000 mai. Thus, figuratively speaking, we have a total of 72,000 mai, or nadi, within the body. Hatha yoga uses the same figurative number as well, although the *Shiva Samhita* of Hinduism says there are 350,000 nadis in the body, while the *Prapanchasara Tantra* says 300,000; all you have to know is that there are a lot of these tiny energy channels since they span everything like nerves and blood vessels.

The modern practice of foot Reflexology also confirms the relationship between the left big toes and the brain, especially the pituitary and pineal glands in the head. The fact that these meditation practitioners in our cases always mention this toe simply complements what Shakyamuni said ages ago. As to the reason these meditators first experienced sensations on the left side of their bodies, it was due to the fact that the left side corresponds to the chi portion of the body, whereas the right side corresponds to the blood. The functions of the left and right chi channels,

or ida and pingala energy meridians which run through the body, are responsible for this attribution. Hence, it is normal, as a general rule, for chi to first become activated on the left side of the body, since the nature of yang is arousal or movement. Thus, we have the usual emphasis on the "left side and big toe" as Buddha stressed.

It is another matter entirely when various practitioners feel that this or that chakra or energy center is opening or has opened. This experience is normally just a phenomenal sensation and not the actual opening of the chakras. When the elements of the physical body are not properly attuned, and the body is not in good shape, it is normal for the chi channels to make the body to shake or experience other sensations. Some people may experience spontaneous movements, or want to cough or burp to release their discomfort as the chi opens up obstructed passageways. In general, people with internal diseases or large obstructions experience large reactions, while people who are healthy and have unobstructed chi meridians experience slight reactions or none at all.

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* tried to summarize all these matters by saying, in regards to pranayama (breath cultivation) practices, "At the first stage perspiration breaks out, at the second stage the body trembles, and at the third stage the prana reaches the head." Of course the process is more complicated than this, and there are many variations as explained in *Tao and Longevity*, but you can see how, generally speaking, this information is correct.

To suppress any of these experiences is not good for your health, for trying to tighten yourself or push these phenomena away only impedes the development of spiritual progress and the transformations necessary on the spiritual path. You experience these things in the first place because the body is trying to clear blockages and internal obstructions to the flow of vital energy. The more you let go of the body, the quicker the work will become finished and then these phenomena will disappear. If you ignore your body through detachment, or go even further and forget that you even have a body because of emptiness meditation, these phenomena will arise and then quickly go away. After the body is properly attuned, which will happen naturally through perfect relaxation, such experiences will disappear entirely.

When the body's chi channels and chakras open, and I mean *really* open, it is usually accompanied by tremendous pain. Why? Because throughout our growth we accumulate so many poisons in our bodies, and the strong force that is required to push through these obstructions and eject them from our physical nature causes discomfort during the spiritual stage of physical purification. This explains the great pain genuine cultivators feel when their mai and chakras finally start to truly open on the spiritual path. For instance, when the heart chakra is opening up, you might even feel like you are having a heart attack. As another example, the Second Patriarch of Chinese Zen thought he would die when the chi was trying to penetrate his skull because the pain was so terrible, but a voice from the sky said to bear it a little longer because the chi was only penetrating through and subsequently transforming the bones of his

skull.

All of the ancient masters lived in an era where natural foods were the norm. It was an era without chemicals, pesticides, herbicides or food additives, and yet they still had to go through intensive detoxification, involving painful eliminations, so that poisons in their bodies were eliminated. So do not believe that eating organic produce will solve this problem. Even babies born to organic-eating vegetarian parents will have inherited poisons and obstructions in their body as a result of the fact that they have inherited a human birth.

The process of clearing the mai will arise for everyone. Only the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and high stage adepts who are born into this world through a flower will have clean mai to start with, but this type of birth is a very rare occurrence. For other ordinary beings like us, we can exercise, do breathing practices, ingest certain internal detoxification and cleansing supplements like glutathione, alpha-lipoic acid and N-acetyl-cysteine, while using meditation to help transform and purify our physical bodies. Every little bit helps.

The force which arises to clear obstructions in the body does not come from chemicals, but is generated naturally when we accumulate our jing and chi. Unlike what New Age cultivation schools try to teach, we cannot produce this force artificially nor should we try to mentally construct or guide it. After all, the mai are so incredibly thin that despite what many cultivation schools tell you, the chance of grabbing them correctly, and guiding chi through them, is absolutely nil. The only thing a practitioner can do is *forget the body entirely and then things will proceed naturally and perfectly without need of outside interference or intercession*. The force necessary to clear any obstructions will, because of cultivating an emptiness of discriminative thought, arise naturally and then act on its own. All we need to do is have faith in the process. Nature is not wrong in what it tries to accomplish, especially when the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are helping us.

This is a particular point of dispute between the Zen school and school of Esoteric Buddhism, whose methods represent a mixture of Taoist teachings and the teachings from various schools of Indian yoga. The proponents within the school of Tibetan esotericism like to laugh at the Zen school, saying, “How can you achieve enlightenment if you do not transform your body? This is what you are missing, and that is why our school is much higher than yours.”

The Zen school, on the other hand, simply tells people to match their thoughts with their breath, because in doing so, the central channel will open naturally. By calming your breath and matching this calm with emptied thoughts, the central sushumna channel (*zhong mai* in Chinese or avadhuti in Tibetan) will open naturally and your body will be transformed without having to resort to all the artificially contrived practices of the esoteric schools. But *the process is so simple that people do not believe it*, which is why the Tibet school, Indian yoga and Taoism have invented all their strange techniques and methods. So who should be laughing at whom?

Another misconception to correct is that the real kundalini energy is not hot like fire, but is more akin to a feeling of blissful, peaceful warmth in each and every cell. Thus, the genuine, real and true kundalini phenomenon can be compared to *the natural warmth of a healthy young baby*. When you feel that your chi is hot, that is partially because your yang chi is naturally warm, but the extra degree of hotness *represents a frictional force (or infection) involving the four elements in the body, or it may be due to a blockage in that region's energy meridians*. Hence, when you read stories of meditators getting very hot, in most cases this is not the real kundalini phenomenon but just the *frictional heat* generated as your real chi struggles to push through internal obstructions.

As another example, Indian yogis sometimes eat bitter herbs during their cultivation practice because they help cool down the heat generated through their use of artificial, forceful techniques (such as *kumbhaka*) to ignite the chi energies of the physical nature. Several Christian mystics were also known to use buckets of water in order to cool themselves from the results of their spiritual practice, for the transformations of *incendium amoris*, or kundalini, can really be that warming.

This is a good time to explain a little of the actual kundalini phenomenon, which we will discuss in great detail much later. *The Kundalini Experience* has summarized four of the classical characteristics of kundalini for us, as mentioned by Swami Narayanananda:

(1) There is a strong burning, first along the back and then over the whole body.

(2) The kundalini's entrance into the central spinal canal, called sushumna, is attendant with pain. Swami Narayanananda makes a special point of mentioning that this and any of the other disturbing phenomena should not be taken as a sign of disease.

(3) When the kundalini reaches the heart, one may experience palpitations.

(4) One feels a creeping sensation from the toes, and sometimes the whole body starts to shake. The rising sensation may feel like an ant crawling slowly up the body toward the head, a snake wiggling along, a bird hopping from place to place, like a fish darting through calm water, or like a monkey leaping to far branch.

To understand these comments, and the cases before us, we must first recognize that these descriptions are a bit incomplete. For instance, according to the Tao school and school of Esoteric Buddhism, an actual kundalini arousal can be of two types—a yin type or yang type. The correct yang type of kundalini phenomenon, which is born from emptiness, feels warm and peaceful. The yin type, which produces burning sensations, is usually due to abnormal

awakenings that are forced and which do not involve a true mastering of mental emptiness. For instance, Chinese medicine typically refers to fevers as internal yin fire, and this accounts for some types of "kundalini experience." On this point, we must note that Chinese culture calls the Emperor a "yang fire" while his officials are called "yin fire," meaning yin fire experiences are not the real kundalini phenomenon.

Generally speaking, people who meditate are typically entertaining some scenario in their minds, and so they only experience the yin type of awakening. The yang type of experience can be identified from the fact that it makes every cell of the body feel as if they are experiencing a warm, peaceful and cozy summer day. This is the correct and genuine kundalini phenomenon. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that kundalini arousal will always be hot or be accompanied by burning sensations, for in most cases this is just one's latent vitality working to clear the chi channels of their obstructions. The hotness is just a sign of friction from internal blockages.

Nevertheless, because most people who cultivate have been influenced by teachings in the yoga schools, they try to raise their kundalini artificially by forcing its initiation. They do not cultivate true emptiness and prajna wisdom, whereby it will arise naturally. So they cultivate force, from force they get friction, and from friction they experience heat rather than comfort. Even the Tibetans have translated the term for kundalini incorrectly by using the term "fire" rather than warmth, so this is a common mistake that people have been making for ages. Because of this mistranslation, many people misunderstand the nature of this phenomenon entirely.

Technically speaking, we must also note that the kundalini phenomenon does not originate from the back of the spine, but rather from the region of the perineum. To think that cultivation kung-fu originates from the head rather than from below, as is claimed by another spiritual school called Anthroposophy, is also just plain nonsense and imagination. The kindest thing we can say for this view is that is just examining the results that have occurred because of preliminary transformations on the spiritual path.

Cultivation kung-fu can be compared to the circulation of the weather in the following analogy: the sun shines on a body of still water, the water evaporates and ascends into the sky forming clouds, the clouds collect and form rain, and the rain water falls and returns to its home in the earth. Thus, we have jing transforming into chi, the chi ascending through the *tu mai* to reactivate the pituitary gland hormones, the hormones descending through the *jen mai* energy channel, and the pattern cycling all over again. This is the nature of the kundalini activation, and you can clearly see that it does not start in the head.

Pain will usually accompany the progression of the chi as it initially enters and starts to clear any of the genuine chi channels that are most responsible for spiritual progress, such as the central, left, right, front and back chi channels. The pain we feel results because our bodies are not perfectly healthy, so before the central channel opens we will feel aching and discomfort as

various poisons and blockages are removed. Buddhism describes eight possible feelings which can arise from the movements of chi, including pain, itching, coldness, warmth, weightlessness, heaviness, roughness and smoothness. These eight are not all-inclusive descriptions, but rather general guideline indications.

When the chi actually progresses enough to reach the center of the heart chakra, an individual will typically feel anxious or nervous, and the heart may experience palpitations. If the heart chakra is really opening, a healthy practitioner may even fear they are about to die from a heart attack. If they can forget the body at that point, and give everything up, there will be a loud explosion in the room as the chi finally passes through this difficult region, after which the practitioner will be able to individually feel all eight petals of this chakra like little tongues one can move and exercise. Since it is said that six of the eight mai running from this region are usually blocked for human beings, the opening of the heart chakra will correspond to great progress in cultivation. It is a big accomplishment that is related to the attainment of prajna wisdom.

If you do not open the heart chakra, not only is it impossible to correctly engage in various cultivation practices (like the Taoist method of absorbing the essence of the moon), but more importantly, you will never experience your inherent great transcendental prajna wisdom. So, opening the heart chakra is not an easy affair. In fact, it only happens at very advanced levels of sustained meditation achievement, whereas the symptoms most people think of as chi passing through this region typically represent only a “semblance dharma” of attainment. They are not the actual opening of the heart chakra itself. Rather, they correspond to stimulation of the tiny subsidiary channels surrounding this region, which not the actual the heart chakra or central channel.

Low-stage practitioners as well as high stage cultivators, often deceive themselves when experiencing semblance dharma, or semblance kung-fu, and it is almost impossible to convince the stubborn or ignorant that their conclusions are incorrect. If you tell someone who has been working hard and who is fervently desiring progress that their experiences are not what they imagine, you are only going to be met with disbelief, denial and sometimes even hatred. If you tell people they are wrong, sometimes in response they will cling to mistaken notions with even stronger zeal. Even experienced Zen masters experience such troubles when teaching talented students, although talented students will usually thank their masters later for being so frank when they finally recognize their own mistakes.

When someone reads the description of a particular stage of cultivation, they will first try to match the symptoms reported with their own experiences, and then conclude they have attained that same stage, when they have only achieved a slight resemblance. It is like the experience of young doctors and psychologists-to-be who are studying the descriptions of various illnesses in medical school. Sometimes these students will match these descriptions with their own

experiences and then fear they have contracted all of these terrible diseases themselves.

Thus, there are countless people who think they have cleared their chi channels, opened the supreme bliss chakra at the top of the head, activated their kundalini, achieved the Taoist yang-shen transformation-body, or even attained ultimate realization! People can believe they have attained all sorts of high cultivation stages when they have no level of attainment whatsoever. Unfortunately, most of these individuals are only cheating themselves because they are experiencing sensations of wind coupled together with great hopes and self-delusion. We cannot even begin to count how many people believe that they have opened their head chakra because some teacher said so, but yet are a little bit wiser and come asking for confirmation. We tell you truthfully: be careful, be careful!

Many people nowadays even employ the correct cultivation jargon within this net of self-delusion, which is the result of their having been exposed to cultivation information, and which helps them to validate their own conclusions. One of the reasons for this book is to help clear up these misconceptions. There are even individuals who will use such information to deceive others, claiming they are a master because such-and-such an experience happened which they only learned about from the descriptions in some book!

In a case of semblance kung-fu, an individual's personal experiences will closely resemble an actual stage of cultivation although they will not reflect the genuine phenomenon in question. The most that can be said is that with a great deal of wisdom, merit and continued effort, the experiences of the practitioner can serve as a precursor to the actual phenomenon, which will manifest in the future. Thus, there are many continual "refinings" of a particular kung-fu experience which must be experienced over and over again before the genuine stage of accomplishment is finally achieved. However, a practitioner's hard work and merit will earn them an analogous taste of the final experience ahead of time.

Thus, even though one may experience pain concentrated in the area of the heart, accompanied by feelings of anxiety and palpations as one would expect with the opening of the heart center, this may just be the chi wind blowing around the region of the heart chakra and not the heart chakra or central channel itself. It might even be a medical problem such as a heart attack, so one must be careful of succumbing to misconceptions.

There are many people, in various cultivation schools, who feel they have opened the heart chakra and central mai because they previously experienced difficulties in this region which have now disappeared. However, this usually only indicates that a trickle of chi has been able to excite the subsidiary (minor) energy channels in this region, and even these channels have not yet opened completely. So to believe that you have opened a region because you experienced semblance kung-fu is an understandable misconception, but to believe you can open the chakras or mai through visualizations, music and concentration—as the New Age crowd suggests—is a

giant illusion indeed. It is absolutely, unequivocally impossible to open the esoteric structures of the body by focusing on physiological feelings. Imagination leads to delusion, and never to self-awakening. As Lao Tzu said,

> One who possesses abundant virtue resembles a newborn babe. Poisonous insects will not sting it, nor fierce beasts seize it, nor birds of prey maul it. Its bones are supple and its sinews soft, yet its grip is firm. It does not yet know of the union of male and female, yet its male member can stir. This is because it is full of virility. It can cry all day without its throat becoming hoarse. This is because it is full of breath. To know how to breathe is called being constant, and to know the constant is called insight. To try to add to one's vitality is ominous. To have the mind control the chi is called forcing. To become overgrown is to decay, and this is going against the Tao. That which goes against the Tao will face an early end.

Generally speaking, there are a variety of different chi sensations you can experience through meditation. Some practitioners will feel coolness coming out of their body, which happens when the body is too warm inside and relieves itself of what traditional Chinese medicine calls "internal heat" or "fever." Then again, you can feel chilly when the body is purifying itself by expelling internal "chill" and "wetness." All these reactions can be understood by studying Chinese medicine.

The reactions of meditation can also cause you to feel hot, bloated, itchy, or smooth. Sometimes you can feel soreness and sometimes tingling, lightness (such as the sensation of floating), or even heaviness. As the body starts to adjust itself to a state of more optimum health, some people can even have the experience of feeling like they are getting bigger or smaller. When you are expelling sickness chi, those with stomach, intestinal or liver problems may burp or feel nauseous, while lung and throat problems will sometimes give rise to coughing as they are being corrected.

To understand these various interactions, you really must understand the phenomenal interrelationship of chi and physical states outlined in Chinese medicine, because this field of medicine was developed based on an investigation of chi rather than the intrusiveness of clinical anatomy. For a first look at this goal, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* will prove especially helpful. Indian ayurvedic medicine may also provide some helpful insights, but Chinese medicine's usefulness is foremost in this particular arena.

Hearing sounds in the head, as we have seen in several cases so far, is explained very clearly in various texts of Taoism. When the chi, or chi wind starts going through the head mai, it is common to hear these sounds as the mai clear themselves of obstructions. The Hatha Yoga text of *Hatharatnavali*, written by Srinivasabhatta Mahayogindra, says that after certain pranayama exercises, one should listen "with the right ear to welcome internally aroused sounds of crickets,

flute, thunder, cymbals, a black bee, bell, gong, trumpet, drum" so we know that the wind chi inside the ear mai can make all sorts of sounds.

Some people mistakenly try to concentrate on these sounds, believing they are something special and meaningful or even the basis of *nada* or sound yoga. However, this is just unnecessary concentration on the realm of sensations which leads nowhere. As *Tao and Longevity* explains,

> when the *ch'i* is really passing through the head there will be sounds like "Pi Pi Pai Pai" in the head. This is the reaction of the nerves induced by the *ch'i* working to open up the paths. The sound is nothing strange; it is like the sound one hears when he covers his ears with his palms and hears his own heart and the circulation of blood. However, if one's attention is absorbed by these sounds or if there is some latent disease in [the] Upper Warmer, then one will want to shake his head quite often. If a person does not know the treatment for this, or if he cannot deflect his attention from it, it will become a kind of sick state. On the other hand, if the meditator knows how to be calm and quiet and can ignore this feeling, then he will naturally attain [the state of] *Ching An* [which is a stage of lightness and calm which precursors the onset of samadhi] ... There are some people who experience this phenomenon in their youth without practicing meditation. One might think of it as a kind of neurosis but if it is not stimulated by other factors, it is not a disease.6

The various phenomena which practitioners experience through cultivation, as seen in this explanation, always have a scientific basis behind them. They just *seem* strange and fantastical because people are not familiar with them. We know, for instance, that when people are really frightened, their hair can stand on end. Although this rarely happens, we are not mystified when it occurs because it has been explained through science and medicine. Cultivation kung-fu is no different in that there is always a scientific explanation behind the manifestation of various kung-fu phenomena. But while science will insist on labeling things in terms of blood, hormones or internal biochemistry, cultivators must also add to this list an understanding in terms of jing, chi, shen, mai, chakras, *bindus*, mental states and kundalini.

Thus, when we read of the famous story of the demon of lust that attacked St. Francis of Assisi during the winter, knowing of cultivation theory we can recognize the scientific reasons behind the eventual departure of his erotic desires. St. Francis cured his lust by going out into the cold and making "wife" and "children" snowmen. He then stood in the cold pointing to the snowmen, and started talking to himself about all the problems that would arise if he took a family. When his lust finally abated, he felt it was because his conversation had befuddled the lust demon so that it departed.

In actual fact, his lust did not depart because of a demon leaving him. Rather, it abated because his exposure to the cold had chilled his body and thus affected his chi mai, just as when we "take

a cold shower." Thus, his level of sexual desire had naturally decreased due to this change in temperature together with his physical exercise. If you understand cultivation matters and the science involved, you can easily understand such stories and develop the type of understanding behind jing, chi, mai and chakras which we need today.

A knowledge of various supernormal powers can also be obtained in the same manner by matching what you know of science with the insight you gain from achieving spiritual kung-fu. For instance, there is the famous story of a *mantrayana* practitioner who stopped a raging elephant in its tracks—as the story goes—by reciting *mantras* over a blade of grass while blowing over the grass in the elephant's direction. If one can match the scientific properties of certain plant substances with what can be accomplish through various mantras, you will immediately surmise that the "blade of grass" was actually poppy leaves. The mantras amplified the potency of the poppies and caused the elephant to sleep.

In the Old Testament story of the Passover, the angel of death was said to have "passed over" homes where sheep's blood marked the doors, and killed the first born sons in homes where there was no blood. Without describing the actual methods behind this event and the samadhi-mantra supplications which can cause it to occur, the important thing is to focus upon the sheep's blood. The strong yang nature of sheep's blood can be known from the fact that sheep are called "yang" in Chinese, and yang chi is what repels ghosts and yin influences such as death.

The Tao school uses a black dog's blood for warding off ghosts and other yin beings because sheep are too expensive and not available, but the principle of using the blood of a black dog is the same. Although your personal cultivation may not have reached the stage where you can duplicate these phenomena yourself, when you can connect the pieces of information such as this, you can begin to understand the scientific basis underlying such phenomena.

CASE 6: Female Artist

This woman, now in her late fifties, had practiced Transcendental Meditation for five years when she began to experience occasional tingling in her arms and heat in her hands. Next she was unable to sleep for days, with energy surging through her whole body. She also had several dreams of having her consciousness separated from her body. A continuous loud sound started to appear inside her head. Soon there were cramps in her big toes, followed by vibratory sensations in her legs. Overnight, her big toenails darkened, as if hit by a hammer, and eventually partially separated from the flesh. The tissue in her legs felt torn by vibratory sensations. The vibrations spread to her lower back and from there swept over her body up to her head, causing a sensation of a band around her head, just above the eyebrows. Then her head started to move spontaneously. Later her whole body would move sinuously, and her tongue would automatically press against the roof of her mouth.

Both phenomena are well known in yogic circles. The cleaving of the tongue against the palate is counted among the most secret practices of Yoga. It bears the technical designation of *khecari-mudra* or the "space-walking gesture." The "space" here is the inner space (*kha*) of consciousness. All kinds of psychic powers are attributed to yogis who have mastered this technique. In the case of this woman, the *mudra* or "gesture" of inverting the tongue occurred involuntarily.

She would also sense a strong sounding of "om"—the most sacred syllable in the Hindu tradition—emanating from within her head. The tingling sensations spread to her neck, upward over the head, down to the forehead and face. Both nostrils were stimulated, causing a feeling of elongation of the nose. At times her eyes seemed to move separately, and the pupils felt like holes that bored into her head and met in the center. Then she felt tremendous pressure at the back of her head, at the crown, and across the forehead. This pressure would become especially severe during reading, resulting in acute discomfort around the eyes and in a pulsing sensation at the top of the head.

This was followed by the experience of a brilliant light and of bliss and laughter.

The tingling sensation spread further down to the mouth and chin. It was then that she began to have dreams of heavenly music. Then the sensations traveled to her throat, chest and abdomen, and eventually she felt as if there was a closing of the circuit in the shape of an egg: The energy was moving up through the spine and down through the front of the body. As it developed, the circuit activated particular energy centers on its way—starting in the lower abdomen and proceeding to the navel, the solar plexus, the heart, the head, and finally the throat. After this closure she experienced a continuous feeling of energy pouring into her body through the navel area. This feeling stopped after the circuit was completed. The whole experience had strong sexual overtones. It was also accompanied by spontaneous yogic breathing (faint and controlled).

The greater part of this kundalini activity occurred over several months. Subsequently she experienced only occasional kundalini phenomena, mostly during meditation or when relaxing in bed. Throughout the protracted experience, this woman understood that she was undergoing a kundalini awakening, since she had read about this phenomenon before. In the beginning she felt relaxed about what was happening to her and simply allowed the process to unfold as it might. But eventually she became perturbed and had difficulty integrating her experiences with her daily activities. The inflow of energy prevented normal sleep for months, and, since it continued during the day as well, she found herself incapable of efficient work. She felt herself thrown into the position of a detached observer of her own activities. In due course she brought the situation under control.

The general effect of this kundalini arousal was positive. There has been steady progress toward an ever greater sense of connectedness with what this woman calls her "higher self"—a sense of being in touch with an unshakeable core, a center, that

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> is unaffected by all the ups and downs of everyday life. In my follow-up interview with her, she remarked ... that, with the exception of pressure in the head, all physical sensations have ceased.

This artist is different from the practitioner in our previous case in that this practitioner has experienced the correct awakening of the chi and partially opened the *tu mai* and *jen mai* chi channel energy meridians. However, this woman's central channel has still not opened yet. She did not open the crown chakra on the top of her head yet either, which is why she felt the sensation of pressure there. A relevant passage from *Tao and Longevity*, which provides some insight into this case (and which can be applied in a general sense to the experiences of several of our practitioners) runs as follows:

> Taoists call the top of the head *Ni Huang Palace* and yogis call it *The Crown*. Some Taoists believe that this is the phenomenon of opening up the *Tu Mai* completely. But, this is not the case. These are merely changes along the *Tu Mai* that accompany the initial opening of the central nervous system. This is followed by stimulating the function of the top of the head to enhance the uniform distribution of endocrine secretions. However, at this step some people will have temporary pain or a heavy sensation at the top of the head, as though it were being pressed by something, or they may feel extreme tightness. This is due to the fact that the *ch'i* route in the head is not completely open, or because one's attention is unduly attracted to feelings and sensations and one is preoccupied with them. If one can divert his attention and forget his head and let it be natural, then a very comfortable and refreshing feeling will gradually be generated and will move downward from the top of the head.7

The fact that this woman could not sleep, an affliction we have encountered previously, is actually a good sign or progress because when you practice Tao, you want to lessen the desire for sex and sleep. The five barriers to attaining Tao include fortune, wealth, name (fame), sleep and sex. People all say they want to become free of these factors, but when they start to lose a single one they become frightened and lose their sense of composure.

This particular meditator did not need much sleep anymore because she had reached the stage where her chi was actually starting to transform into shen. As the Tao school says, "when one is full of shen there is little desire for sleep," so this is a positive phenomenon one should not fear. This is what was actually happening in this case.

The Tao school has many sayings summarizing the general sequence of cultivation progress. Most of these sayings actually refer to attainments (transformations) within the form and sensation skandhas. Thus, we have the three famous sayings from Taoism:

> When you are full of jing, there is no desire for sex.
> When you are full of chi, there is no desire for food.
> When you are full of shen, there is no desire for sleep.

Accordingly, this female artist actually experienced a bit of this last stage of transformation, whereas noncultivators with sleep problems usually have them because of stress. Or because their bodies are very weak. As a Chinese medical book called *The Classic of Difficulties* states, "Old people suffer from a debilitation of their blood and chi, and their passageways for their flows are rough and choppy. Therefore during the day they are not sharp while at night they do not sleep. Thus you should understand why the elderly cannot sleep."

As to various other points in this case study, we once again discover the importance of the big toes as well as sensations on the inside of the legs where the chi mai run to the feet. This woman's spontaneous body movements indicate that her chi was encountering obstructions to its free circulation, and these various reactions manifested as it worked to clear the mai of their blockages. In so doing, this practitioner (and any other) would eventually rid herself of any hidden illnesses and extend her normal life span while increasing the quality of her life.

When taken in conjunction with the other phenomena, such as her tongue naturally curling backwards during meditation indicated that her *jen mai* was being opened. This is a practice, well known in the yoga schools, which indeed does help to prolong a person's longevity. If the front *jen mai* channel, which the Taoists call the "red sparrow," opens all the way, the tongue will curl back even farther, and sometimes even recede into the throat a bit.

Why did this practitioner feel she was a separate consciousness? This experience resembles one of the first stages of the Tao where you feel, because of cultivation progress, that you are separate from the physical body. This is learning how to detach from the physical body. At an even higher stage of attainment, you might feel like you have no body at all.

Any familiarity you can develop with this stage can prepare you to cultivate during the time after death, which is the basis of Tibetan *bardo* yoga teachings. Unfortunately, this practitioner's wisdom was not high enough and she was unaware of the correct principles and theory of cultivation practice. Otherwise, she could have used that auspicious timing to have made much more progress with her cultivation attainments.

Naturally, it took her some time to become accustomed to these physical and mental changes, just as it takes some time to get used to living in a new apartment. In time, though, all the various sensations ceased, just as expected, since the obstructions in the mai eventually cleared because as we have seen, transient phenomenal realms cannot endure for very long.

The physical benefits to this practitioner, at just this earliest stage of cultivation, certainly include a longer life, a more beautiful figure and complexion, and freedom from certain illnesses that were destined to erupt with age (and perhaps cause her death). Spiritually, if this woman were to keep working hard, it is probable from this basis that she would definitely achieve some measure of spiritual attainment.

CASE 7: Male Scientist

This person, now in his sixties, began Transcendental Meditation in 1967. After about five years he suddenly started to have gross thrashing body movements during meditation and at night in bed. After a few weeks these involuntary movements subsided. Several months later, on going to bed, he felt a tingling sensation in his lower legs, followed by cramping in his big toes. The cramping extended to other muscles before it gradually faded. The tingling sensation spread to his lower back, and he "saw" a reddish light there. The light solidified into a rod, which he then sensed and "saw" being pushed up his spine. Next it extended forward to the umbilical area, accompanied by many tingling, vibrating sensations. Step by step it moved up the spine to the level of the heart and then extended forward to stimulate the cardiac plexus.

When it reached his head, he "saw" floods of white light, as if his skull were lit up from inside. Then the light seemed to sprout out the top of his head as a solid beam. Some time later he felt a vibration in his right arm and wrist and also in his left leg. As soon as he attended to these sensations, they disappeared. He also experienced energy currents running through his shoulders and arms in waves of three or four per second, later increasing to seven and more per second. At one time, when he focused on the center in his head, violent and uncontrollable spasms occurred.

At various times this kundalini activity was accompanied by a variety of internal sounds, mostly high-pitched whistling and hissing. At other times, he heard flutelike musical tones. Frequently he would experience peace and bliss.

Then his sleep began to be disturbed again by automatic movements of the body. Sometimes he would awaken to find himself doing spontaneous yogic breathing and assuming a variety of Hatha Yoga postures. After several nights of this, the tingling sensation traveled to his forehead, nostrils, cheeks, mouth, and chin. This whole process was accompanied by ecstatic feelings, and he experienced sexual arousal when the activity centered in the pelvic area. Then all these effects ceased, returning only from time to time when he relaxed at night in bed, and he could shut these off by turning on his side.

About a year later, pressure developed in his head at night and started to move downward. Simultaneously, a tingling sensation moved upward from the stomach. He experienced all this activity as if from a distance. The two stimuli met at the throat, and he felt as if a hole appeared where they joined. He further experienced,

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> still from a detached witnessing disposition, all manner of purely spontaneous sounds being emitted from that hole in the throat. Approximately six months later, the stimulus moved down from the throat to the abdomen, where it remained for a few months before moving down into the pelvic area.
>
> This scientist had an inherently sensitive nervous system. Yet his awareness that he was undergoing a kundalini arousal and his knowledge of what to expect, together with the stabilizing effect of a meditative discipline, made him less susceptible to the disorganizing aspects of the kundalini cycle ... and so he was not beset by anxiety during the process

This is a typical case to be expected of a meditation practitioner. As already revealed, the vibrations in the body (such as feelings along the spine) and the sounds in the head originate when the chi encounters obstructions within the body. These obstacles make it impossible for the rising prana in the body to complete a full circuit and return to its original position.

This individual could hear high-pitched noises during meditation because his chi could not fully penetrate through the small *nadi* channels located around the region of the ear: noncultivators who catch a cold or "get wind in the head" might sometimes experience this same phenomenon. When people start to hear sounds in the head because of meditation, we have to remember that it is nothing holy or supernatural, and we should tell others this; otherwise they will go down the road of misconceptions. Rather, it is simply the phenomenon of jing or chi working to open up obstructed passageways and causing vibrations as a result of the process which, because chi and consciousness are linked, interact with the mental state.

Why did this man feel that various activities seemed as if they were happening from a distance? This was not unusual considering his advanced age, which means that he had probably lost most of his jing over the years due his cumulative sexual activities. Even so, if he practiced meditation at this stage, he could still reach at least the first *dhyana* of peacefulness and bliss.

From the description of his experiences, it would seem that this meditator was experiencing all the yin characteristics of his stage of accomplishment and none of the positive yang experiences. This is something you would expect in a case of decreased vitality. To make progress in his cultivation, it is essential, imperative in fact, that he first restore his lost vitality through medicine, meditation and self-restraint before he can achieve higher states of attainment. *Meditation with self-restraint will never fail to restore any man's lost vitality*.

As regards the factor of his yogic sleeping postures, you must remember that the original yoga postures in India were positions people naturally found themselves in without being taught, just as in this case, after which the positions were formulated into the classical standardized teachings. This man's body discovered these postures naturally, just as without ever being taught a cat naturally discovers how it should stretch its own muscles for maximum benefit. Thus, these

postures are not a past life legacy nor do they constitute anything particularly mysterious. His body simply found out what it should do in response to the activity of the chi. Since these reactions were completely natural, like yawning or stretching, they did not constitute anything special that should have provoked worry or concern.

In the fifth and sixth meditation cases we reviewed, we can say that the kung-fu of the practitioners was very good, but would have been even better had they understood the spiritual teachings on prajna wisdom attainments, and emptiness and been able to skillfully apply them. But overall, these various experiences are some of the initial phenomena you might naturally encounter when you become engaged in the process of searching for the Tao. It is wrong to think you absolutely must experience these same phenomena, but it is perfectly proper and natural if they do indeed manifest. Therefore, they are nothing to fear unless you have perhaps artificially forced them into manifestation. If they happen naturally, it is because they *are* natural: *the body knows what it is doing* so you do not have to worry about it.

CASE 8: Actress

This woman, now in her early forties, had many psychic experiences in her childhood. As an adolescent she suffered from recurring migraine headaches, mental disorganization, and impulsive disruptive behavior. She received psychotherapy for these symptoms for several years, was diagnosed schizophrenic, but was never hospitalized. When she was twenty-four years old she began to meditate, using various techniques. About a year later, her headaches became worse. But then, within a few weeks, her head pains, mental disorganization, and disruptive behavior suddenly ceased.

Within a year, tingling sensations started in her legs, then spread to her arms and chest. After a few weeks they extended to her neck and the back of her head, and soon down to her forehead. They were more noticeable during meditation. At intervals her entire body, but especially her hands, would become very hot. During meditation she was troubled by swaying and jerking of her body, and by anxiety. ...

Sometime later the physio-kundalini cycle started again. During one long meditation she became aware of her throat in a new way. She felt as if her head had become separated and floated above her trunk; her throat started to produce sounds on its own, and she became aware of a separate observer-self. Most of her kundalini symptoms ceased after this experience, which was a typical "throat opening."

Since then her meditations have been quiet and peaceful. She reports that her productivity and contentment have greatly increased.

In this connection it is helpful to recall the experience of the British psychic Matthew Manning (1975), who was plagued by poltergeist phenomena from an early age. These persisted until he discovered that he could do automatic writing. Soon he found that he could paint in the style of several great painters, completing a

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> work in ten to twenty minutes. This then turned out to be his most fruitful channel of expression. Once the bulk of his energy could be Thus, expressed, the poltergeist activities ceased.

To understand this particular case, we must recognize that this girl's body was originally sick inside, and the existence of internal illness explains many of her case symptoms. It would have been preferable if she had been advised to go to a Chinese doctor, who through pulse diagnosis might have noted any internal organ imbalances and treated them with relevant herbal medicines. It is quite probable that she suffered from some type of chronic infection, or had experienced past problems (which never really healed) involving her bronchial tubes or lungs.

With regards to the specific experience she encountered, the reason this practitioner felt she was floating in the sky was because her chi was stuck in the region of the neck, and could neither ascend nor descend. Many people sometimes dream at night they are flying, and this often happens when the free chi in the body ascends into the head during sleep. Thus, rising chi can cause the flying sensation. Though sometimes flying or floating can be the symbolic dream language for some other situation rather than reflect the condition of the physical nature, this is often the reason that people experience the sensation of floating or flying in their dreams.

As to the man experiencing the poltergeist phenomena, in many cases, chi externally manifesting itself accounts for poltergeist experiences. When adolescents have frequent and sudden mood swings that involve chi fluctuations, this also has tie-ins with various poltergeist cases. There are indeed some cases where the poltergeist phenomena are genuinely connected with external entities, but these are very rare. In the USA there are many more cases of "poltergeists" than in Asia, because of the nature of America's climate, geographical magnetism, electrical surroundings and so on. From a scientific basis, the possible occurrence of such phenomena is often related to the electrical conditions in an area.

In addition, we can guess from this description that this man's visual cortex, located in the back of the skull near the "jade pillow" region of the hind brain, was probably not able to reach its normal functioning equilibrium. However, when this man took up painting, which shunted more energy to different areas of the brain, he averted or alleviated some of this particular problem.

CASE 9: Female Psychologist

> In 1973 this woman, then in her forty-first year, noted the onset of heat in her head and chest, with tingling sensations over her body and head during meditation. She had been engaged in various intensive group and meditation disciplines for a number of years. Another curious phenomenon occurred during that time. Whenever she would do the tongue-and-palate exercise she had been taught during a meditation retreat, she would experience orgasm like waves rippling through her body.

She felt hot much of the time, particularly in her chest and throat, yet sensations of coldness were mixed in. She felt shaped like an egg, and her whole being felt unified. Vibrations started in the pelvic area and from there moved up her back to her neck. Her chest felt soft and open. She heard brilliant bird song inside her head and felt a tingling in her throat. Once, three years earlier, she had felt like a giant heart while meditating. At the time, she experienced a prickly itching heat all over her body, but she was not troubled because she believed that these sensations indicated successful and centered meditations and a flow between herself and others. She assumed that she was experiencing a kundalini awakening, which she believed to be dangerous unless the "higher mind" was in control.

A few months after the kundalini symptoms started in 1973, she felt, during meditation, as if she were two feet taller than her normal self and as if her eyes were looking out from above her head. At this time she was sure that she knew what people were thinking, and many of her impressions were confirmed.

Soon after this, her feet began to hurt and headaches started. The headaches grew worse whenever she attempted to stop the rippling sensations she was experiencing in her body. She noted that the headaches came when she tried to regulate the rush of energy passing through her. Massage helped the pain in her feet, but it was still so severe that she could walk only with difficulty and was unable to drive. She ate very little, her sleep was fitful, and she suffered some nausea. It was hard for her to talk with people. At times, she questioned the reality of her experiences, wondering if they were just a crazy episode.

She felt heat on one side of her back and was convinced that, unless it spread to both sides, she would be in danger. Once she succeeded in spreading it, this crisis passed. Then a tingling sensation started to move from her pelvis up her back and to her neck. She began to see light inside her skull. She was amazed to find that she could see this light all the way down her spine as well. The energy and tingling moved over her forehead and became focused under her chin. She felt as if there were a hole in the top of her head. Sleep became very difficult for her, and for the next six weeks, meditation was the only thing that helped her. She felt that if she did not meditate, the heat flowing in her body would grow so intense as to damage her system. Other people could feel excessive heat when they touched her lower back.

Although she felt "strange" at times, she was determined to avoid psychiatric help during her trouble, because she feared that she would be labeled and treated as insane. When her symptoms were more than she could bear alone, she worked with various meditation teachers.

Then she began to experience rippling sensations and shaking of her body, and she felt as though she was being cleansed and balanced. Shortly afterward, she felt a prickling in her cheeks and under her chin. Then all unpleasant phenomena ceased, and she had no further difficulty, although she continued her meditation practice. She underwent this physio-kundalini cycle in the span of a year. She later started a

successful center for personal growth and was able to help others who experienced difficulties in the kundalini process.

Most of the comments we can make about this case have been made in earlier cases, so a review of these explanations should enable you to understand the origin of many of this woman's experiences. However, there are three new points for this case which we should note:

(1) From the Chinese medical point of view, this woman's physical body is of a particularly damp (wet) condition inside, which is the reason she experienced so many of the various heat phenomena.

(2) This woman had studied psychology, and so she had developed the tendency to over-analyze situations. People who continually use their minds (such as PhD's, scholars, and so on) tend to keep on using it during their cultivation practice, and this tendency toward mentation definitely contributed to this woman's symptoms. We can also say that this practitioner was originally a nervous, anxious individual, and that this natural tendency had also biased her experiences. People who use their minds too much tend to bias themselves toward this nature.

(3) This practitioner actually generated many of these phenomena through the use of her own mind, and then guided herself accordingly. In other words, because of her own subconscious thinking and planning, she created many of the external phenomena herself (such as the big heart, egg, etc.), which she then used to help guide herself to make further progress in practice.

As with Chinese medicine, when you analyze someone's cultivation experiences, you must take into account a variety of factors, such as the individual's age, their sex, occupation, living conditions, education, whether or not they are sexually active, and so on. While the transformations due to cultivation follow a general form and pattern, the pattern will be influenced by all of these attendant factors. Just as in medical science, only when you take into account these other factors will you be qualified to understand an individual's cultivation situation.

A last point to note is the fact that this woman once felt two feet taller due to changes in her chi mai which generated this illusory feeling. Sometimes, because of meditation, people may actually feel they are smaller or larger, sometimes even as large as the universe. Naturally, these are feelings rather than reality; they do not correspond to any esoteric existence in the literal sense. Such feelings are due to movements and transformations of the chi mai and must not be confused with similar results from when one attains genuine samadhi attainments. Hence, in this practitioner's particular case, the feelings were entirely illusory.

CASE 10: Female Librarian

This woman, now in her mid-fifties, had been a meditator in her own style for many years. One day, in 1968, she lost awareness while meditating with her hands on a table. She awoke to find char marks on the table corresponding to her hand prints. She had the table refinished before I could examine it. No heat manifestation of any kind ever happened again. Because she did not show a regular progression of symptoms, I regarded her as a possible case of arrested physio-kundalini.

The reason we have included this case is to explain the phenomenon of the char marks, which some people might mistakenly assume is a manifestation of kundalini heat. Actually, the reason this individual could generate char marks on the table is because—using Chinese medicinal classifications—her internal physical body was in an *extremely damp condition*. As a result of this excessive internal dampness, a problem often addressed in Chinese medicine with herbal remedies, this individual might already be suffering from arthritis or rheumatism, (types of "wet" diseases) or will suffer so in the future.

Sometimes meditation will generate a feeling of cold, rather than heat in the body. No matter what feelings develop, all of these sensations depend upon the interaction of the four elements within the body and are eventually eliminated through further meditation. While meditation is a cure for many ills, the availability of Chinese or ayurvedic herbal remedies is also a real help to quicken the balancing process that must occur in spiritual practice.

CASE 11: Housewife

In 1972 this woman, who was then in her mid-fifties, experienced the onset of an intense and disturbing process. She suddenly felt that something was descending over her head. Indira Devi (see Roy and Devi 1974) described in almost identical words this experience, which happened during her first meditation and which was soon followed by a spontaneous kundalini awakening. In the case of our woman, this feeling or sensation was followed by a fainting spell. This pattern recurred several times. Remarkably, she was never groggy after regaining awareness, as might be expected with a convulsive disorder. Physicians were unable to give her any relief.

Then, one time, she heard a voice saying inside her head: "Are you ready?" Later she heard internal music. One day she was feeling well until late in the afternoon when the base of her left big toe started to ache. Soon the pain extended up her shin, and she could feel the working of her knee joint. The pain was intermittent but disabling. She spent a few days in bed, where she spontaneously assumed many yogic poses.

Several days later her body felt "worked on" from the toes up to the back in segments. This process was accompanied by pain on both sides of her nose and by

waves of energy and tingling sensations up her neck and down her face. There was also the sensation of intense heat in her back, and she experienced severe viselike pressure around her head. During some of these energy flows she was forced to breathe in a sighing manner. Occasionally there were torsional whipping movements of her head and neck, and once the energy moved down into her head, causing her scalp to get cold and her face to get hot.

Over a period of about three years, she slowly became convinced that she had been selected by God to be born anew as an advanced human being. Thus, she yielded to the tendency that Jung (1975) had warned against: that of claiming this impersonal force as her own ego creation and, as a result, of falling into the trap of ego inflation and false superiority. She expected others to understand exactly what she was speaking about and to accept her word unquestioningly, and she grew distrustful of anyone who disagreed with her interpretations.

This is a very simple case to analyze. First of all, we must note the likelihood that some of this woman's neck vertebrae were out of place, which accounted for her various head movements, such as the swaying. The way to fix this problem, as we saw before, would be to go to a chiropractor or osteopath for necessary spinal adjustments. These minor adjustments can be very useful and must thought of as a proper way to adjust the spine and vertebrae.

Secondly, this women's older age helps us understand this case. She had probably already gone through menopause or was going through it. When women go through menopause, their personalities can change greatly; a similar phase occurs in men as they get older.

Oriental medicine and the Tao school tell us that female bodies change in seven year cycles, while male bodies change in eight year cycles. Therefore, a woman typically experiences her first menstruation around age fourteen (2 x 7) and experiences menopause at around age forty-nine (7 x 7). Of course, the increasing prevalence of pseudo-estrogens in the environment (from plastics, pesticides and pollution), means that some women may experience their first menstruation early than age fourteen. In fact, Shakyamuni Buddha predicted long ago that the child bearing age would eventually get down to five years of age because of society degrading.

Men start to experience their manhood at around sixteen (2 x 8) years of age, and by age fifty-six (7 x 8) their prenatal chi has gradually become exhausted. According to Taoist principles, reaching these ages marks the beginning of a new life; it does not mean you are declining, as emphasized in the West, though people often associate age with deterioration. The whole problem is that people do not know how to rejuvenate themselves during these periods.

At this age, one can still indeed reach Tao (achieve enlightenment) but must proceed in practice as follows: if you are a woman and practice before menopause, you must reach the stage where your menstrual period stops, called "returning to the state of a virgin," in order to make further

progress in cultivation advancement. If you start your cultivation practice after the onset of menopause, you must first practice well enough so that your menstrual period returns. This indicates a return of youthful vitality and which flushes the accumulated poisons and toxins out of the body. Then you must work even harder so that it stops once again.

In other words, you must work a little harder at your cultivation than those who are younger, but you can still succeed. In fact, at this stage in life, you will generally have more time available to devote yourself to this effort and far less distractions, so your chances of success can be higher than for those much younger. Physically speaking, getting older is the beginning of a new life, but people do not realize this and develop problems in their psychological outlook.

Surprisingly enough, a naturally calm and quiet person, such as the one in this case, can spontaneously exhibit all these symptoms after menopause without meditating at all. In fact, they can occur with more ease than before menopause! Her symptoms are similar to a kundalini arousal, but they represent the natural reactions of the physical body in conjunction with the results of a quiet mind. This is why some older people can have "spontaneous" spiritual experiences.

The point is that the phenomena in this case constitute a natural reaction which sometimes spontaneously occurs to people of a calm, quiet nature, and they can occur more readily after menopause. This woman, unfortunately, combined her experiences with delusional concepts of God and religion, and thus diverted her own spiritual progress. This is an unfortunate deviation due to *mara* and self-deception, and it is a pity to see because it represents an obstacle on the path.

CASE 12: Male Psychiatrist

This colleague of mine, now in his early forties, had been meditating regularly for three years and also had served as a subject in our research with the magnetic stimulator when, in 1975, he experienced a kundalini awakening. It is worth noting that he was born with a spinal defect for which he had surgery that left him with chronic lower back pain since his teens.

In December 1975 this psychiatrist attended a weekend at the school of the late Swami Muktananda in Oakland, California. Upon being touched by the Swami, he went into a deep meditation. Within ten minutes, his mouth automatically opened widely, and his tongue protruded. After a few minutes, he experienced a blissful calm and many inner visions, in which Swami Muktananda appeared to him and helped him experience a fusion with the guru. A few minutes later, he "saw" the interior of his abdomen, chest and throat light up with a golden energy. Then his lower back began to ache severely. At the onset of the pain, a white light in his head became more and more intense. The back pain disappeared toward the end of the

meditation and did not return.

Following this remarkable experience, his meditations at home became very productive. Emotional problems and unfinished incidents seemed to find solutions very rapidly and at great depth during his meditations.

Then, in the middle of January 1976, he developed a rash that formed a curved line. It began at his lower back, crossed his spine twice, and veered off to his left shoulder. He was wondering whether it might have a symbolic significance, rather like the stigmata of some Christian mystics. At about this time, he also noticed a return of the high-pitched sounds and scratching noises during meditation that he had experienced earlier, after being stimulated many times over a period of several months with the magnetic device.

In January he participated in a second weekend intensive during which he was again touched by Swami Muktananda. Immediately he felt painful tingling and hot and cold sensations spreading over his upper back and neck. His throat burned, and there were automatic movements of head and neck. Then he felt inner peace and blissfulness. Later his head started to spin, and he felt vibrations in his hands. Next his knees began to burn and he felt a buzzing up his spine that ended in feelings of light and energy in his head. Throughout these experiences his breathing was irregular—at times rapid and shallow, at other times slow and deep. Everything seemed to be breaking loose inside him, and he felt as though he were in labor.

Toward the end of this meditation, he experienced great inner peace and a deep knowing if his inmost self, followed by a total sense of freedom and of "coming home." The next day he had difficulty returning to his usual state. He was uncoordinated and unable to concentrate. For several days he felt physically exhausted.

His meditation, however, continued to deepen. Then, for a few days, he experienced intense pain in his left big toe and left foot, which spread to his lower leg. He also had an ache on the left side of the back of his head. The pain extended to his left eye, which would occasionally close automatically. After a few days, this intermittent pain disappeared. The pain in his leg, which had resisted all treatment, cleared at about the same time.

In his day-to-day life, family and friends experienced him as more relaxed. A physical therapist, whom he saw regularly, confirmed that my friend felt more relaxed and integrated since this kundalini awakening. His sense of having "come home" grew into a feeling of at-oneness with the world.

Then, during meditation, itching developed on his forehead and occasionally on his cheeks, indicating a further progression of the physio-kundalini cycle.

Toward the end of 1976, he visited Swami Muktananda's hermitage in Ganeshpuri, India. He meditated three times a day for a total of four hours. Another two to three hours were spent chanting. During most of his meditations, he experienced ecstatic love-bliss, and he would frequently "merge with the blue light of consciousness." This intense spiritual discipline stimulated the kundalini energy in the region of the

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first and second chakras. As a result he experienced powerful surges of energy that sent his uro-genital system into orgiastic spasms. He felt his semen flow upward through the body's central channel (traditionally known as *sushumna-nadi*).

He later understood that this experience was associated with the "piercing of the first knot." He spontaneously entered a period of complete celibacy. He witnessed the baby toenails on both his feet falling off the same night.

After his return from India, he spent several years integrating his spiritual experiences with the practicalities of daily life, achieving a rare attunement and balance. Other meditative experiences followed, indicating the "piercing of the second knot." During one of his evening meditations, back again at the Ganeshpuri ashram, the kundalini energy became intensely focused in the subtle center between the eyebrows. Swami Muktananda spontaneously walked over to him and immediately began to work his fingers over the space between the sixth center and the center at the crown of the head. Streams of kundalini energy started to flow in a V-shaped pattern toward the crown center. Since that time, he reports, the kundalini energy has rarely left the crown center.

In this meditator's case, there are lots of physical feelings and sensations being reported, but none of them are due to the attainment of samadhi. This man, for instance, felt that his vital energy had reached the semenal area, and he describes symptoms similar to the Tao school's categorization of jing transforming to chi. Whether he actually achieved this transformation is a point on which we have to refrain from comment because there simply is not enough information presented here to make a conclusion. However, this practitioner definitely did not reach the stage of transforming his chi to shen.

As to his belief that he opened the central channel of the body, which the Hindus call the sushumna nadi and the Chinese call the *zhong mai*, he actually experienced an opening of the *jen mai* channel in the front of the body instead. In their cultivation and medical schools, the Hindus (and Tibetans to some extent) tend to emphasize the central, right and left energy channels in the body whereas the Chinese emphasize the central, front and back channels (*tu mai* and *jen mai*). This explains some of the differences between these cultivation schools.

Naturally the Chinese also recognize the existence of the left and right channels (the left is called the "blue dragon" and the right is called the "white tiger" channel), although Chinese cultivation schools of all types do not place too much importance on them because they will open naturally once the *jen mai* and *tu mai* channels are opened. The *jen mai* and *tu mai* channels also open automatically when someone cultivates emptiness of mind, whereas the artificial physical exercises of the yoga schools are specifically designed to forcibly open the chi channels through artificial efforts. If a practitioner is not prepared, this can then cause all sorts of problems. This practitioner has worked hard at their cultivation but because they knew a little too much, had mistakenly assumed that they had opened the central channel when they were quite far from this

stage of accomplishment.

When one really opens the central channel, they will see a dark blue light comparable to the color of the sky at twilight, and this signifies the correct completion of this stage. That is the point where the chi is in the central channel, and in conjunction with the *tumo* heat of the dan-tien, will cause the jing hormones in the body to descend and bring about a state of supreme bodily bliss. When the chi first enters the central channel, the practitioner will also feel like they can see all the stars, moon and planets even with their eyes closed. But when people such as this practitioner see the "blue light of consciousness," it is more often an effect of mental visualization rather than from the real thing, though one would have to inspect the student in person to know for sure.

Sometimes, during or after cultivation practice sessions, meditators will see a tiny but brilliant blue dot of light floating about, which sparkles like a diamond. This is because they are able to see some chi which has escaped from the body's mai. This should not be confused with opening the central channel, which is a much greater accomplishment.

As to the strange rash, which zigged and zagged across the practitioner's back, this was stimulated by a problem in the neck bones and spinal vertebrae. The reason the back pain eventually subsided is not because the chi actually penetrated through the troubled areas, but because it found an alternate route around the problem! As we have recommended before, this person should also visit a chiropractor or osteopath to determine whether any spinal manipulations can help, and should also visit deep tissue therapists. At times, such adjustments will not only improve a practitioner's health, but the quality of their meditation as well.

SUMMARY AND REVIEW

Thus ends our brief analysis of the accounts of twelve ordinary cultivation practitioners. If we had been able to meet these individuals in person, we could have added much more to our commentary, but this is a good level of analysis given the available case information.

In reviewing these cases, however, the first thing to discover is that while everyone thinks that the various kung-fu phenomena they experience is indicative of kundalini, none of these practitioners had reached the level of completely cultivating the real chi, let alone their mai and tumo fire. Furthermore, none of our case study practitioners have exhibited the ability to reach any level of stable samadhi either. The vast majority of sensations we have encountered result from the initial reaction of the chi wind as it excites the outside of, or makes its way through, the inside of the body's tiny nadi energy channels. In other words,

> most of what we have reviewed are physiological reactions which occur naturally due to quiet psychological states.

When the real chi phenomenon is finally experienced, it will manifest itself quite differently from the wind chi. True chi produces a flood of warm fullness that will be experienced in every cell of the body at once. This produces a state of physical bliss which is peaceful and calm, and much more full and enjoyable than sexual orgasm. But to get to this stage, you must meditate often, must not let your jing or chi leak, must cultivate merit, and allow your jing to transform into chi by engaging in emptiness meditation. The book *Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation* details many of the methods one can use on this road of practice.

From these cases we have also found that an lot of people have unfortunate experiences due to the fact that their bodies need some type of physical adjustments. Sometimes these experiences appear due to latent illnesses, weaknesses in the internal organs, or from an internal homeostatic biochemical imbalance, all of which can to some extent be adjusted through Chinese or Indian ayurvedic herbal medicine. On this note we can once again reference Nan Huai-Chin's *Tao and Longevity*, which notes that the colors meditator's see often reveal where a health problem may lie:

> Seeing uncertain and changing colors, either in visions or dreams, may be due to latent disease in the viscera. If the kidneys and related genital nerves deteriorate or are weakened and diseased, this will be reflected by the phenomena of light seen in the form of black points or solid black. If the liver is diseased, the color will appear to be blue; if the heart is diseased, the color seen will be red; if the lungs are not healthy, the color one sees will be white; if the spleen or stomach are diseased, the color seen will be yellow; if the gallbladder is diseased the color seen will be green.
>
> From the standpoint of Chinese mystics, seeing black in dreams, visions or hallucinations usually indicates trouble and disaster. The color blue indicates sadness, grief or sorrow, and green indicates hindrance from hallucinations, or Mara. Red indicates inauspiciousness. Yellow and white are auspicious, indicating calm persons and smooth situations. However, these are not fixed rules.8

Meditation can therefore be considered a type of super X-raying process, more efficient than MRIs, PETs or CT scans, that often reveals hidden illnesses which will only worsen in time if they remain uncorrected. Meditation is *Thus, our own best diagnostic doctor as well as a means of spiritual progress and healing*. As science will later prove, resting the body and mind is certain to contribute towards optimum health. In meditation practice, one always takes this proper course of action by letting go of any thoughts and sensations which arise, which is "cultivating emptiness."

We have not yet covered the one type of case which runs counter to this injunction: the case of those practitioners who violate the basic principles of rest and ease in their spiritual practice. When anyone subjects themselves to excessive mental "pushing" or strain during meditation, and tries to force things into manifestation, there are bound to be undesirable results.

Such was the case of the Japanese Zen adept Hakuin, whose story is found in *A Second Zen Reader* (retitled *The Tiger's Cave*), by Trevor Leggett. As a Zen student, Hakuin in his fervor had over-exerted himself in strenuous and scattered concentration exercises and found himself in dire straights. His forceful meditation style, which had little to do with "emptiness," resulted in the chi ascending to his head so that his ears constantly heard a rushing sound, his lungs felt as if they were on fire, and his legs felt as cold as ice.

No matter which remedy Hakuin tried in order to solve his self-induced ills, and no matter which meditation master he consulted, no one could explain nor cure his ailment. Naturally, this would also be his case today if he were to go to see most doctors, for as we have seen in several much simpler cases, mis-diagnosis is the inevitable result.

Searching everywhere for a cure, Hakuin was lucky enough to hear of a Taoist mountain hermit, named Master Hakuyu. Hakuyu taught Hakuin the following remedy which people can use to help cure chi imbalances within their physical nature. He said:

> Your condition is pitiable. By contemplating on truth too strenuously, you have lost the rhythm of spiritual advance, and that has finally brought on a grievous malady. And it is something very hard to cure, this Zen illness of yours [caused by over-exerted concentration on a *koan*]. Though the sages of medicine frown over your case and put forth all their skill with needle and cautery and drugs, yet would they be helpless. ...
>
> From the mounting of the heart-fire your grievous illness has arisen. If you do not take it down you will never recover, though you learn and practice all the healing remedies human and divine. Now it may be that as my outward appearance is that of a Taoist, you fancy that my teaching is far from Buddhism. But this is Zen. One day, when you break through, you will see how laughable were your former ideas.
>
> This contemplation attains right contemplation by no-contemplation. Many-pointed contemplation is wrong contemplation. Hitherto your contemplation has been many- pointed and so you have contracted this grave malady. Is it not then proper to cure it by no-contemplation? If you now control the fire of heart and will and put it in the Tanden [tan-tien] and right down to the soles of the feet, your breast will of itself become cool, without a thought of calculation, without a ripple of passion. This is true contemplation, pure contemplation. Do not call it dropping your Zen contemplation, for the Buddha himself says: "Hold your heart [mind] down in the soles of the feet and you heal a hundred and one ills." Further the Agama scriptures speak of the use of the So cream in curing mental exhaustion. The Tendai [Tien-tai school] meditation classic called "Stopping and Contemplation" deals in detail with illnesses and their causes, and describes the methods of treatment. It gives twelve different ways of breathing to cure various forms of illness, and it prescribes the method of visualizing a bean at the navel. The main point is always that the heart-fire must be taken down and kept at the Tanden and down to the soles, and this not only cures illness but very much helps Zen contemplation. ...
>
> If the student finds in his meditation that the four great elements are out of harmony, and body

and mind are fatigued, he should rouse himself and make this meditation. Let him visualize placed on the crown of his head that celestial So ointment, about as much as a duck's egg, pure in color and fragrance. Let him feel its exquisite essence and flavor melting and filtering down through his head, its flow permeating downwards, slowly laving the shoulders and elbows, the sides of the breast and within the chest, the lungs, liver, stomach and internal organs, the back and spine and hip bones. All the old ailments and adhesions and pains in the five organs and six auxiliaries follow the mind downwards. There is a sound as of the trickling of water. Percolating through the whole body, the flow goes gently down the legs, stopping at the soles of the feet.

Then let him make this meditation: that the elixir having permeated and filtered down through him, its abundance fills up the lower half of his body. It becomes warm, and he is saturated in it. Just as a skillful physician collects herbs of rare fragrance and puts them in a pan to boil, so the student feels that from the navel down he is simmering in the So elixir. When this meditation is being done there will be psychological experiences, of a sudden indescribable fragrance at the nose-tip, of a gentle and exquisite sensation in the body. Mind and body become harmonized and far surpass their condition at the peak of youth. Adhesions and obstructions are cleared away, the organs are tranquilized and insensibly the skin begins to glow. If the practice is carried on without relapse, what illness will not be healed, what power will not be acquired, what perfection will not be attained, what Way will not be fulfilled? The arrival of the result depends only on how the student performs the practices.9

The fact that we also wish to pass on this remedy, as well as warn people to avoid scattered and over-strenuous mental activities, is the whole reason for recounting this case.

We must note that this is a Taoist technique for cultivating the physical body only, meaning that it does not lead to enlightenment or any type of advanced mental or spiritual attainment. It simply works on adjusting the imbalances within the physical body, and from this balance, helps to bring about corrections in mental and physical health. If you are following a road of practice and find you need it, then by all means use it, even if it is not the way to Tao itself! On the road of spiritual practice there are no denominations and you must use any remedy that works, whether it comes from America, or Germany or Russia, whether it comes from Buddhism, Taoism, or Christianity. This is the *rule of discipline* in cultivation: do not worry about the origins of a technique and sectarian claims of ownership, but simply use what works!

The cultivators who are not likely to succeed in their practice are those who are afraid to try new things or borrow from various different religious schools and traditions, for they are the ones who are already firmly stuck in dogma and tend to cling to claims of religious pre-eminence. You should only care about the effectiveness and veracity of various teachings and techniques, which is the right way to practice in our gigantic universe of multiple beings and teachings. This is also a "scientific" attitude in that it focused on producing the results of spiritual cultivation without a sectarian bias.

Hence, this "So Cream Meditation" is a powerful technique that can help successfully cure many severe illnesses such as arthritis, cancer and even tumors. It can also help return equilibrium to much simpler imbalances in your chi circulation resulting in cold and clammy hands, skin problems, and other related conditions. This method has such a wide variety of effective uses, such as extending one's longevity and banishing illness. Hakuin employed this method until his death. In fact, he attributed his great vitality and longevity to the daily use of this practice. It is something we can all imitate.

From these initial cases, one might reflect upon the usefulness of the four elements in analyzing a person's body, such as noting that a person who is excessively "damp" inside will likely produce excessive heat from meditation when their body is imbalanced. We have also discovered that few practitioners cultivate their true chi at the initial stages of their practice, and instead feel only the sensation of wind chi during their spiritual exercises.

We have also discovered that many ancient cultivation schools have correctly categorized various stages and aspects of cultivation, as we found when we revealed that Shakyamuni Buddha advised people to concentrate on the left big toe during visualization practices. Many of these practitioners independently verified such teachings and injunctions through their own personal experiences. If you cultivate correctly, that is always what will happen because *cultivation is a science*, and its results can be known beforehand.

Although we are getting ahead of ourselves, the basic understanding you have already obtained of some simple cultivation kung-fu will soon allow us to move onto more complicated phenomena, such as investigating the stories of Lady Yeshe Tsogyel, Milarepa, Gampopa, and Machig Labdron, all of whom succeeded through the path of kundalini cultivation. But there is still more to learn before we can fully turn to a detailed discussion of kundalini cultivation or the kung-fu of those who actually succeeded in enlightenment.

Our present descriptions of the four elements, the five skandhas, the nine realms of samadhi concentration, and the eight consciousnesses are still inadequate for fully evaluating these cases, and so in the following chapters we must continue to go deeper into these matters.

For further preparatory background on kundalini, the chakras, the mai, chi, jing, and shen and the lowest stages of cultivation kung-fu, the reader is advised to reference the materials in various books such as the following and those recommended for Chapter 3:

The Kundalini Experience
Lee Sannella, M.D.
Integral Publishing, California, 1992.

Tao and Longevity: Mind-Body Transformation
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1984.

Working Toward Enlightenment
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by J.C. Cleary
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1993.

To Realize Enlightenment
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by J.C. Cleary
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1994.

The Tiger's Cave and Translations of Other Zen Writings
Trevor Leggett
Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland: Vermont, 1995.

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1 Huai-Chin Nan, *Tao and Longevity* (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: ME, 1991), p. 37.

2 *Tao and Longevity*, pp. 45-46.

3 *Tao and Longevity*, pp. 38-41.

4 *Tao and Longevity*, pp. 45-47.

5 *Tao and Longevity*, pp. 42-43.

6 *Tao and Longevity*, p. 51.

7 *Tao and Longevity*, p. 50.

8 *Tao and Longevity*, pp. 48-49.

9 Trevor Leggett, *The Tiger's Cave and Translations of Other Zen Writings* (Charles E Tuttle, Rutland: Vermont, 1995), pp. 144-154.

Chapter 5:
The Five Aggregates Schema and the Various Levels of Consciousness

When we look over these cases of ordinary practitioners with a discerning eye, we find that most cultivators, who were lucky enough to become aware of the changes in their bodies due to the practice of meditation, only experienced simple transformations of the aggregate of form, which prompted reactions belonging to the skandha of sensation. Unfortunately, both form and feeling reactions are inadequate yardsticks for accurately measuring the degree of someone's cultivation progress. As we have seen, since they can correspond to misleading phenomena their own usefulness may be in error.

According to Chinese medical theory and the principles of Taoism, the human body's internal activities can be seen as a ceaseless interaction of jing and chi, all of which belong to the material realm. Jing and chi are components of the form skandha, for the form aggregate includes the elements of water, wind, fire, earth and space which compose these esoteric substances. When a spiritual meditator in the early stages of cultivation first starts to transform the physical body, the sensations they experience all result from changes within the form aggregate such as due to the transformation of jing into chi, or the formation of the chakras and cleansing of the chi mai.

These transformations always produce feelings, and there is no way to avoid these sensations. They are as ephemeral as the wind, so they do not amount to much in themselves, yet people always get caught up in these matters because they feel something happening inside, rather than outside of them. As a result, people attach to these sensations as they do to their thoughts, and come to believe this is their being or who they are. While this could not be further from the truth, this reaction always occurs. You indeed experience these things, but what experiences them and the experiences themselves are two different matters entirely.

If you cultivate meditation you will certainly experience a variety of different physical sensations over time, and their nature will change as your kung-fu accordingly progresses. There is no way to avoid these responses. Yet there is one important principle to remember along the road of spiritual cultivation: just let these things transpire without adding any extra concern or effort to the process.

The outside world transforms while you pay it no mind, so you should let the body transform along the spiritual pathway to Tao, paying no mind to its transformations either. As your body begins to transform due to your efforts in spiritual practice, it is actually becoming "cleaner" and more purified. Accordingly, it becomes a more fit vehicle for the support of spiritual cultivation and for the normal activities of our daily life. Since all these transformations come about simply from the activity of resting, it does not make sense to worry about them.

The problem is that most beginning practitioners, due to unfamiliarity, get worried about these simple transformations between jing, chi and shen. These transformations happen naturally, like the changes which occur during puberty or the running of the seasons, but everyone fears that something is wrong when their body starts to register transformations. Some people even mistake the feelings from these rudimentary transformations for much higher stages of cultivation attainment which is a response we find repeated over and over again. For instance, in all the cases we just reviewed no one had yet reached the level where they were really cultivating their chi, mai or kundalini, yet this was the most prevalent assumption.

Another common mistake was that although the experiences recounted were extremely typical, many of the individuals believed their experiences to be unique. They felt their experiences were somehow special or different, rather than the typical results of passing through a process that naturally accompanies all genuine cultivation aspirants. In focusing upon the belief of exclusivity, they failed to see the general pattern behind all such experiences.

Actually, if you were to randomly select someone off the street and correctly teach them how to practice meditation, time and effort at the practice would certainly bring these transformations about in your student; they are nothing extraordinary because they are to be expected. In fact, one reason that many of the various reported phenomena arose in the first place is because some practitioners were sick, or needed some type of manipulative adjustments. Meditation simply revealed these afflictions. In other cases, various phenomena arose because the practitioner was unfamiliar with the concept of emptiness and had emphasized some unimportant sensation so as to amplify it out of proportion. In time, even this type of phenomenon would have passed.

The guiding principle in all spiritual cultivation is to develop prajna wisdom and the view of emptiness. This is easy to understand from the intellectual standpoint, but hard to turn into an actual experience. To experientially see *true* emptiness is the meaning of "seeing the path," "seeing the truth," or "seeing Tao" after which a meditator who really wants to make progress will definitely know how to cultivate properly. Traditionally speaking, it typically requires great merit and great effort along a path of devoted meditative preparation before a practitioner is able to recognize the true meaning of emptiness. After one realizes the authentic meaning of "seeing the Path" because of the personal experience of selflessness, their cultivation practice will finally rest on a sure footing.

Hence, what we have previously reviewed are simply the manifestations of low-level, cultivation kung-fu phenomena. They recount some of the first introductory changes you can expect to experience in the physical body when first entering upon the cultivation path. To mistakenly classify any of these meditation cases as the actual cultivation of chi, mai or kundalini would constitute a great error in spiritual understanding. However, from the point of view of skillful means—which means encouraging people to cultivate or just finding some teaching foothold for being able to speak about the true phenomena of the trail—it is sometimes proper to refer to

these experiences as the actual transformation of jing to chi (and so on) even though they are only "semblance dharma" resembling the true transformations. The true transformations will eventually be achieved but only after the lower level phenomena are repeated over and over again, each time at a higher level of attainment. Real kung-fu is achieved only after you experience "multiple refinings."

What is one then to do? You should never become worried about the physical changes occurring in your body due to cultivation efforts, because they are natural. The body knows what it is doing, so why should you become worried when it decides to provoke a response to mental resting? Does it not make sense that this response is probably along the lines of being helpful?

In cultivation you are simply giving your mind and body a rest, and the body will use this time to undergo various transformations to repair itself. The subsequent rise in vitality you experience because of spiritual cultivation will produce all sorts of transformations as your vitality works to adjust your physical nature to a better condition. The body is not going to kill or harm itself but only make itself better, so you need not worry about what it wants to do because of the process of resting. As long as you are not artificially forcing some matter, like trying to grow a third arm or leg, there really is nothing to worry about.

If we want to understand these preliminary meditation cases in more depth, or be able to proceed onto discussing more complicated states of kung-fu, there are many choices available to us. For instance, we can study the Tao school's sequence of cultivation—the transformation of jing to chi, chi to shen and shen to *kung* (emptiness). We could talk about cultivating the chi (prana), mai (nadis), bindus and kundalini, as is discussed in Indian yoga and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. We could adopt the route of modern medical science and discuss changes in blood pressure and blood circulation, breathing patterns, brain waves, endocrine secretions and so on. But no matter which route we choose, descriptive terms such as these are all confined to the skandhas of form and sensation. *They are all contained within just the first two skandhas!*

Stepping away from all these individual ways of describing matters, we can ascend to a much higher vantage point if we approach this issue through a detailed understanding of the five skandhas themselves. We have already obtained some understanding of various minor cases of kung-fu, so we can use this level of understanding as a springboard for finally entering into more advanced topics. This approach makes sense since it is absolutely fundamental to understand the five skandhas before you practice dharma. It is a necessity. And to develop this understanding, we must start by understanding the nature of the human being.

Human beings are said to have two natures: physical and psychological. Among the six classes of beings within the Realm of Desire—including heavenly beings (devas), asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell denizens—humans are the class in which these two aspects are the most visible. This is one of the reasons why the human realm is much more suited for cultivation than

the pleasant heavens, for it is much easier in this realm to work at cultivating the body and mind. If the environment is too pleasant, such as in the heavens, people lack the requisite motivation to work at cultivation. Furthermore, living in pleasant circumstances, they do not usually come into contact with their worst forms of bad behavior.

To start with, we must first examine the form skandha, which describes the constitution of the physical universe. The Tao school has a saying that this human body of ours is like a little universe, and that the universe is like a human body. Western Mysticism speaks of this same principle for it talks of the macrocosm and microcosm reflecting one another. While you can discover the truth of this fact by climbing the ranks of cultivation yourself, modern society prefers to investigate matters through theory.

Scientifically speaking, we say that the world possesses dimensionality, form and appearance, and that it is supported by an invisible omnipresent energy. The laws of physics rule the outer universe. Our human bodies, which will change during the process of cultivation, are subject to the laws of biophysics or biochemistry as well. In order to understand the skandha of form and how it relates to cultivation, we therefore must understand these aspects.

Anyone wishing to study the form skandha in detail, or any other skandha for that matter, must rely upon a famous work by the Bodhisattva Vasubandhu called *Pancaskandhaka-Prakarana*, or *A Discussion of the Five Aggregates*. Vasubandhu and his older brother Asanga were born in ancient India at a time when the Buddha dharma had waned. Their mother said, “The great Abhidharma teachings of the Buddha have declined, and sentient beings are now deprived of their light and plunged into darkness, with no great ones to illuminate the teachings. I am only a woman who can do little myself, but I will give birth to sons who will cause the teachings to flourish.”

Because of her prayers and preparations, Asanga and his younger brother Vasubandhu were born. In order to foster the children’s intelligence, their mother provided everything she could in terms of special education and diet. When they were grown, she told them to neglect the householder’s life, instead devoting all their efforts to restoring the Buddhist Abhidharma teachings.

Vasubandhu went to Western India to study the Abhidharma teachings and became a great sutra master. His brother Asanga went to southern India and achieved enlightenment through meditating in a cave. Later, their experiences were combined and the brothers, one a scholar and one an accomplished meditator, co-founded the Buddhist school of Mind-Only.

Asanga, who understood the way to liberation as a type of yoga (meditation), gave this school the name of Yogacara, meaning “the practice of Yoga.” Through the name Yogacara, he emphasized the practical importance of meditation in spiritual practice, for meditation is the means to enlightenment. Vasubandhu, on the other hand, was more of a theoretician, scholar and

debater, and because he worked to establish the intellectual principles and framework of this school, he gave it the name of Vijnanavada (Consciousness-Only doctrine). This name explains the major principle of the school, which is that all existence is mind-only.

When Asanga and the younger Vasubandhu departed from each other at a young age, Asanga at first entered a monastery where he studied for five years. From his studies he came to feel that the Buddhist doctrines were easy to understand, but the meaning of the various stages of realization mentioned in the texts was very hard to comprehend. He felt that in order to understand the Buddha's teachings, it was necessary to gain personal realization of these states rather than just devote himself to academic study. Thus, he choose to devote himself to meditation practice, and went into meditative retreat. Feeling that he needed the direct blessing of a Buddha for his success, he dedicated his retreat to the Buddha Maitreya, the next Buddha to come, and asked for his blessing and a vision of his person.

After three years of continuous meditation, Asanga still had not gained enlightenment nor attained any vision of Maitreya. Discouraged, he decided to leave his cave and give up his quest. But when he came out of the cave he saw drops of water falling from one rock onto another, and which had thereby created a small depression. This made him reconsider, "Nothing is more gentle than water nor harder than rock. Yet with time, the water has worn away the rock. I have not practiced for a very long time, so rather than leaving, let me return to my meditation practice."

After another three years of devoted practice, Asanga still had not attained enlightenment nor did he receive a vision of Maitreya. He came out of the cave again in order to quit his practice, whereupon he saw a pigeon's nest lodged in a different rock face. Asanga thought, "The pigeon only comes out in the morning and returns at night, and yet the rock has become smooth from this constant coming and going. Nothing is softer than a bird's feather, nor harder than rock, but it seems that soft feather can wear away rock given enough time. Thus, it seems my departure is a bit hasty. I'll return to the cave and meditate for another three years."

After a further three years, Asanga found he still had no success, so he left the cave once again, whereupon he met an old man whittling down an iron slab by rubbing it with sand. Asanga asked, "What are you doing?" and the man replied, "I am turning this hunk of iron into a needle." Asanga asked, "Is that really possible?" The old man replied, "Of course it is possible. This is my living." With this lesson of patient perseverance in mind, Asanga returned to his cave once again.

After three more years of constant meditation, frustrated without any result, Asanga abandoned his quest. After a total of twelve years, he felt he had still not attained self-realization, and had not had a vision or even a dream of Maitreya. Thus, he decided to leave his cave once and for all. After leaving his retreat, he came upon a sick dog suffering terribly from a wound infested with maggots. Out of compassion, Asanga sliced off a piece of his own flesh, put the dog on his lap, and started to use his tongue (so as not to hurt the maggots) to transfer the maggots onto his

own meat so that they could still live, yet no longer hurt the dog. At that moment the dog disappeared, and the Bodhisattva Maitreya stood in his place.

Asanga said to Maitreya, "It seems you did not have much compassion for me, as you took over twelve years to appear," but Maitreya replied, "I was there all along, but you did not see me because of your obscurations. If you doubt my word, hoist me on your shoulders and show me to the people of the town."

Asanga then carried Maitreya on his shoulders into the local marketplace, but no one could see him. The only person to notice anything was an old woman with pure karma. She thought she saw a puppy on Asanga's back, and she became tremendously wealthy thereafter. But because no one saw Maitreya on Asanga's back, he had to concur that what Maitreya had said was true.

Now this single act of genuine compassion for the dog and the maggots, in conjunction with Asanga's twelve years of prior meditation practice, had purified his negative karma and obstructive delusions. After his obstructions had finally cleared, Asanga became able to achieve various samadhi realms and perceive all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. As a result, in his meditations he developed the ability to spiritually ascend to the Heavens where he received five works from Maitreya, which formed the basis of the Yogacara school.

What is the inherent idea of Yogacara? It is the idea that people do not perceive the phenomenal world as it truly is, but project ideas and labels upon what they experience and in turn take these projections as reality itself. The modern idea that linguistics, language, and cultural conditioning shape perception is basically a take-off of the Yogacara principles, though of course Yogacara goes much deeper into these matters.

Vasubandhu chose a different route from Asanga, and followed the road of scholastic study rather than meditative effort. At one time, he even posed as a lunatic just so that he could hear various dialectic arguments that he was not permitted to study. He eventually became a very famous debater and wrote a text on orthodox Abhidharma theory that has become a standard work in Buddhist philosophy. It is as popular as a grammar school reader in that it serves as a basic textbook in the school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Vasubandhu initially criticized his older brother, thinking he had spent twelve years meditating without achieving samadhi, but when he heard the works Asanga had composed from the teachings of Maitreya, he so repented of his earlier criticism of the Mahayana path that he wanted to cut off his own tongue. His brother Asanga urged him, however, to show his true repentance by employing his superior mental abilities to interpret and spread Maitreya's Mahayana doctrine. Thus, Vasubandhu used his great intellectual understanding to become a prolific exponent of the Mahayana path.

To understand the different approach between the brothers a little better, we can cite the story of a time when another family invited both Asanga and Vasubandhu to their home to predict what type of calf was to be born to their cow. Asanga used his spiritual powers of clairvoyance to see inside the womb, and answered that the calf would be born with a white tail. Vasubandhu, however, gave an answer based on reasoning and said the calf would either be born with a white tail or white mark on his forehead.

When it was born, the calf indeed had a white spot on its forehead. Vasubandhu understood the knowledge of phenomena, and knew that when a calf is inside the womb, it is positioned such that its tail is curled so as to touch the top of the forehead. Thus, he realized that the white spot Asanga had seen could be either the tip of the tail or the forehead, and he won the contest without having psychic abilities himself.

The point is that while Asanga had great psychic abilities due to his samadhi attainments, logical reasoning is just as important as spiritual work on the path of cultivation. These are the two streams which combined together to produce the Yogacara tradition—robust theory and meditative accomplishment. If you want to climb the ranks of spiritual attainment in following a form-based path, you need to understand the intellectual structure of the Mind-only school, which deals with these things.

Hence, though the Mahayana is the great path of cultivation that espouses behavioral conduct for improving the welfare of all sentient beings, and while the Hinayana path is geared towards the salvation of the individual, we cannot say that the Mahayana path is not based on the groundwork laid by the Hinayana. Abhidharma study, which is the basis of the Hinayana search for enlightenment, is important for both the Hinayana *and* Mahayana paths, as it details the structure of phenomena and ranks of cultivation. We can study the kung-fu stages of a practitioner using Taoism or alternatively through employing the definitions of the Abhidharma. What we know of the five skandhas of Abhidharma analysis finds its most organized form in Vasubandhu's *A Discussion of the Five Aggregates*.

I. THE FORM SKANDHA

In order to analyze the five skandhas, we must start with a complete description of the first, the skandha of form. When we mention form, we must remember that form can be either visible or invisible (imperceptible) to the eye, yet all form is still composed of the four great elements in conjunction with the fifth element of space. The four great elements—earth, wind, water and fire—are the fundamental forces comprising matter. Thus, they enter into the composition of all material substances from the minutest particle of subtle energy to the largest planet of densest matter.

As to the element of space, this naturally refers to a materialistic space rather than to a mental emptiness. It refers to a space having form because the space element is what *exists* between objects. We sometimes define form as something that offers resistance and takes up space. Thus, form provides an obstacle to other forms which try to occupy the same space. The space element is therefore that element which divides or separates form.

In ancient times people did not have the highly developed scientific system we have today with periodic elements and phase transition states and so on, so they just classified the material realm in terms of the four fundamental elements and the element of space. Even though this conceptual framework seems quite simplistic, the five elements can be a quite powerful classification scheme when used in cultivation analysis. In fact, it actually corresponds to a realm of fundamental, primordial physics of which science is yet unaware. Why did Buddha talk of all matter being made up of these five elements? Cultivate to a high state of samadhi so as to see the essence of these elements, and then you will know.

All form has some type of dimensionality, meaning shape or configuration, but the visible aspect of form also has appearance characteristics such as color. The universe is basically composed of a physical aspect we can see and an invisible aspect of form which exists but which we cannot see unless we cultivate. Part of this unseen aspect includes an energetic structure which underlies the form realm and maintains its composite structure. Since every moment this world of form is changing, so with every moment it becomes (or *is*) completely different, and these transformations are all produced in conjunction with this invisible energy aspect underlying everything. One of the very purest forms of this energy aspect, which science has not yet discovered, can be labeled as the five elements.

From the highest standpoint, both the mind and the material realm share some common properties: both come from the same ultimate source, and neither will ever cease to exist. Due to the work of Albert Einstein, people have found that matter can be transformed into pure energy and energy into matter—which is one of the laws of the form realm—and the total energy involved in these transformations is always conserved and remains forever. So modern man has already gained a small insight into some spiritual principles through the reasonings of science and physics.

By nature from the very beginning, the original primordial awareness of mind and the phenomenal world are both uncreated. But let us first focus on the phenomenal world. You cannot say that its form is either a true or false existence as it is more like the substanceless image of the moon reflected in a pond. It is more like an illusive appearance or display rather than a true thing that sits there and never changes. This is why we say it is uncreated, for it exists in the nature of a dream or illusion that cannot be grasped, and so is not a true thing that has been created. It seems to be real and unchanging but it is not, and yet on the other hand, you cannot deny that something is there.

In lacking any fixed true nature of its own we say form is not real, but in seeming to exist in a consistently logical way subject to an inviolable, unfailing, interlinked process of cause and effect, we can indeed say that form indeed has a conventional existence. Nevertheless, it lacks an independent self-so nature wherein it does not exist as a real thing, but as an illusory existence, and so its status as a real thing is unproduced. This is why you cannot really say that form is real, or unreal.

Therefore while neither the mind nor the essence of form will ever disappear, you cannot say that the world of form is real, and you cannot say it is nonexistent. On a conventional level things seem real because they are a display which follows the a consistent interdependence of cause and effect, but they are empty because reality does not remain fixed for even the tiniest moment of time; you can never grasp them for a single moment and hold them in that state without change.

Whether you analyze substance down to its smallest part or time down to its smallest unit, there is nothing you can dependably call fixed or real! The universe is one gigantic, functional but substanceless illusion. It is a shimmering dream world display that is functionally valid because of infinitely interlinked laws of causality, but which does not possess any true self-nature of its own. Hence, what we refer to as "phenomena" are just arbitrary names and labels for transient configurations of quantum soup that we try to segment out of this whole. There is no ultimate truth to any of these selected formats at all.

The universe is always moving and always changing, never to be destroyed or annihilated. In ontological terms, form will always continue to seem to exist, and will always be characterized by this ongoing process of ephemeral transformation. It will always exist in the nature of an illusion. Form is empty of true substance or being, not physical emptiness—if the entire universe were suddenly converted into one big empty vacuous space, quantum electrodynamics shows that this space gives birth to various types of form. The void of physical space would still give birth to virtual particles, such as photons, which would keep popping into existence and then disappearing. So physical voidness, or physical emptiness, is still a type of form.

Thus, we have our proof of a cultivation principle expressed ages ago: the universe, which is always changing, *is empty of an unchanging nature*. And yet the phenomena of the universe follow the illusion-like process of cause and effect which gives the universe a semblance of concrete existence. So we cannot say that the universe is real or not real, existent or nonexistent, a truth or a falsity. Neither extreme can be taken as the truth because it can always be countered with the opposite extreme. It is only when you awaken to Tao that you will finally perceive what is really and ultimately so, what is prepositionally behind both these extremes. You will finally experience what is the truth of Suchness beyond both these dualities.

From the ultimate perspective of our unchanging fundamental nature, even the "purity" of the various samadhi mental states is a gross mental projection. We always consider these states as

more subtle and refined than conventional consciousness, and thus closer in resemblance to the Tao, but the most refined state is still not Tao; it is still as far away from Tao as the coarsest state. Because of this there is a Zen saying: "If you are off by as much as an atom, the difference is as between night and day."

In other words, you are either totally right or totally wrong in terms of the fundamental nature. There is no approximation or resemblance, for you either realize it or you don't. However, in terms of the path of spiritual cultivation, within our conventional realm of illusion there is indeed a gradual process of purification which takes us through more and more refined states of mind until our prajna wisdom allows us to jump out of this mind frame and recognize the unborn original nature behind everything.

This is what we call "turning around within" to see the true nature of the mind. In spiritual cultivation you do not try to actually cultivate form since it is always changing, but to cultivate your inherent prajna wisdom. You practice clearing the way for its ever-present clarity to shine and see the true nature. All these words are inadequate to actually describe matters to the extent you may need and produce for you an awakening, but we hope our words will be like a finger pointing at the moon, and that you will concentrate not on the finger, but become targeted or focused on that to which it is pointing.

People who practice spiritual cultivation are always told to forget about form. They are told to forget about their physical bodies and cultivate their inherent mind instead, however, there are indeed points where you still have to take form into consideration. For instance, the truly enlightened must master the entire realm of *samsara* or illusion, which is the realm of form, to understand this aspect of primordial ignorance and save the beings trapped within, otherwise one's cultivation and understanding will only be half complete.

Emptiness (mind) and existence (form or appearance) co-exist, and to be enlightened you must fully understand both sides of the one whole. It is absolutely true that if you only emphasize form as the route of spiritual cultivation you will get nowhere in terms of true samadhi and spiritual development. Nevertheless, you simply cannot ignore the realm of seeming existence entirely, for if you do, then like the Arhats, you will never reach perfect and complete self-realization. Thus, we have the two sides of the one great matter.

We typically say that mind and matter (form) are opposites, and then again they are not at all since they are two parts of one nature, two intertwined aspects which belong to one final unity. Since they share the same root nature, they are perfectly interpenetrative. When Shakyamuni Buddha talked of cultivation and said, "become liberated, be free," he was instructing spiritual cultivation practitioners to first free themselves from any mental bondage to the material realm of form characterized by material distractions and sensations. The first task on the road of cultivation is to free yourself from this bondage and the view of having, or being a body.

As an individual progressively succeeds in cultivating this mind-only path, their physical body will naturally begin to transform. After all, form is always changing so it is reasonable to expect it to change during the process of spiritual cultivation, but along the lines which represent a more evolved human being since that is inherent within spiritual cultivation. And because the body will naturally change as you purify your mind, it is unnecessary to make any forceful efforts to transform it if you are on the route to a true, nonartificial Tao. Yet without making a concerted effort to bring physical changes about, you must *allow* the internal alchemical changes of form to naturally transpire without trying to block them.

As to the greater aspect of environmental form that surrounds you, an enlightened individual is one who fully devotes himself or herself to transforming this material nature. We call this involvement their exhibition of "skillful means," or their "vow" to help sentient beings. This involvement to "change phenomenal form" is their compassionate involvement in society, namely the world of conventional existence.

Thus, people attain samadhi in order to develop wisdom and attain enlightenment, but after their enlightenment, they must still work on purifying their vehicle of form. The Taoists during China's Ming and Ch'ing dynasties said:

> Cultivating life without cultivating true nature is the first error of practice. But if one only cultivates the fundamental nature and does not practice internal alchemy [transforming the body], then it will be difficult to realize sagehood even in ten thousand kalpas.

Your physical body will be transformed on the spiritual path to self-realization, and you must allow this to happen without becoming overtly concerned. After all, the body, like samadhi, is just an ephemeral, impermanent construction rather than the real you. In fact, were someone to solely concentrate on trying to transform their physical nature (such as is done in science) without trying to purify their mind, they would waste their life without achieving any significant spiritual achievements at all. It should not become the focus of your concern.

The Tao school, yoga sects, and school of Esoteric Buddhism all emphasize the route of cultivating form to some extent. They also emphasize that the spiritual path is ultimately one of cultivating mind. Hence, they only emphasize the act of transforming form *to the extent of making it a more efficient vehicle for the spiritual path*, but people usually forget this when they drop into these schools. They forget that the ultimate emphasis of the form schools still squarely rests on cultivating the emptiness of mental discrimination. That is, their target is to naturally decrease the amount of thought chatter within the mind so that a spiritual aspirant can reach a state we call mental emptiness.

Thus it is that after the Sixth Zen Patriarch attained enlightenment, he spent fifteen years in

seclusion in order to strengthen his realization and let his physical body complete some stages of spiritual transformation. Most people who succeed in Tao never bother to work at this sort of task in order to "finish the course completely" because they do not understand the necessity of transforming the physical nature even after the breakthrough to enlightenment. But you have to transform the physical nature otherwise your realization will not be stable. Furthermore, you have to accomplish the perfection of the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies which become possible at various stages of spiritual realization.

To be frank, in the last 2,500 years since Shakyamuni, and despite all the wonderful testimonials that have been made about the world's various saints and sages, perhaps only a half-dozen or so individuals in the human realm have actually completed the full course of successfully attaining their complete dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies! Yet this is the world in which you must lay a foundation for these accomplishments.

The Four Great Elements and Space

In terms of form or matter, we have mentioned that all material things are composed of the four great essential elements, plus space. Earth represents the solidity of form and its tendency towards containment, while space represents its divisibility. Water represents moisture, fluidity and agglomerative tendencies, fire represents heat or warmth energy, and the wind element represents gaseousness, the tendency to spread out and grow, and movement.

Although they generally represent material qualities, these five elemental categories are so useful that you can use them to analyze mental factors as well. As Zen master Lin-chi once mentioned,

> If you give rise to the thought of love in your mind, you will be drowned by water. If you give rise to the thought of anger, you will be burned by fire. If you give rise to the thought of doubt, you will be obstructed by earth. If you give rise to the thought of joy, you will be whirled away by wind.

The only reason we mention these analogies is to show that the elements are much more useful than they appear at face value, and can be employed in quite a variety of ways.

Now the four primary elements are called "great" because they are the fundamental agents which combine to produce all other form, or "resultant form." They can be considered the most basic elements of form in the sense that they bear their own intrinsic natures that are not further composed of other elemental forces. Thus each one is responsible for some specific characteristics of matter. Let us go into some of these characteristics.

The earth element, for instance, functions as the basis of material phenomena in providing them with the characteristic of hardness. Like the earth, it serves as the support or foundation for

coexisting material phenomena. Since it functions as the solid basis for holding things in place, we say that the earth element represents the principle of extension. In general, it is the solid "ground" for all material phenomena.

We experience the earth element through the hardness or softness of a phenomenon. When the body feels heavy and our limbs feel slack as we are dying, this is also because the earth element within our bodies is undergoing dissolution. As the earth element disintegrates during death, the power of the water element in the body becomes relatively stronger, which is why the dying sometimes see the shimmering, mirage-like visions. These are caused by a relative overabundance of the water element.

The function of the water element in the universe is cohesion or agglomeration, for it represents the force which makes different particles of matter cohere. Another way of thinking about this is to remember that water has the ability to freeze. Since the water element thus prevents matter from spreading about, it cannot always be materially sensed but must be known inferentially from observing the cohesion of matter. For this reason, many forms of energy bear the attraction and cohesion aspects of the water element.

When people are dying and become thirsty, or stop speaking clearly because their tongue has become dry, this is due to the dissolution of the physical body's water element during the death process. As the water element dissolves, the fire element becomes relatively stronger and thus, those who are dying sometimes see manifestations of this in the form of smoke.

The fire element has the characteristic of heat that matures, ripens and transforms material phenomena. During meditation we sometimes have feelings of hot or cold, and these are due to the fire element within our physical nature. The warmth nature inherent in life—for all life is accompanied by warmth—is the fire element as well.

When the fire element departs from the physical nature upon our deaths, the sign of its dissolution is the dissipation of the body's physical warmth. As this happens, people who are dying often see the appearance of sparks or fireflies due to the increasing strength of the wind element still remaining. Another interesting fact is that the last region of our physical bodies to remain warm after death, because of the lingering presence of the fire element, also gives an indication of our next realm of rebirth.

The wind element in the universe represents motion, pressure and dispersal. The function of the wind element is to cause motion in other material phenomena, and so we say it is characterized by distention, expansion, mobility or displacement. Take the physical wind of the weather as an example: it moves unceasingly, but it never attaches itself to the objects it touches. When something moves, or is conveyed from one place to another, this is the manifestation of the wind element that is physically experienced as a tangible pressure.

Most body sensations, which arise through meditation, can be attributed to the wind element. A person's last breath at death is also the wind element, or chi leaving the body. Most of the psychic abilities and superpowers you see in the world are obtained through cultivating the body's wind element. Specifically, the low-level psychic abilities and superpowers are attained by gaining control over specific chi currents within the body. For instance, you can attain eye clairvoyance by cultivating the chi that flows through the door of the eyes and supports eye-consciousness. If you master a specific wind element or chi flow of the body, you can master a corresponding kung-fu attainment. However, we must point out that these are not the *real* superpowers of cultivation, for they only usually correspond to just chi and shen transformations.

Together, these four great elements comprise the fundamental "causal form" while everything derived from these basic building blocks is called "resultant form," and resultant form includes the most subtle, refined and sensitive forms of matter. Since the four elements are the "causal ground state" components of resultant form, the elements are responsible for producing a wide variety of attributes and we can use them to exhaustively describe all the aspects or characteristics of matter.

Thus, the four great elements each have their own specific intrinsic properties and their own separate realms or spheres of influence within which they operate. Nevertheless they can be combined together. Through their cooperative agglomeration, the elements combine to produce this physical world of ours and all the phenomenal, appearance states in the universe. Hence, the four great elements and space are indeed the underlying phenomenal basis of form.

The big question to ask is, what is ultimately behind the four elements if they are the fundamental building blocks of matter? What is their own ground state fundamental nature? That ground state is the thing which you strive to realize in spiritual cultivation because that is God, or Allah, or dharmakaya, Brahman or the Tao. The four elements are themselves unreal, but this is where they come from.

While the four elements stand behind all material states, they are not the ultimate thing in the universe. Since form is unreal, they are ultimately unreal as well. It is their original nature, which is also the original nature of our mind, which is the real thing, and it is that which you seek through spiritual cultivation. Find *That One*, recognize it or awaken to it, and we say you achieve enlightenment.

As to the materialistic aspect of physics, however, the *Surangama Sutra* summarizes matters by saying that the four elements each have different properties or domains, and thus independent natures or spheres within which they operate. Yet despite this mutual exclusivity, they can still combine together to produce our physical form-body, as well as the world and the greater universe. Hence, when we wish to analyze the universe and its various form states, we typically refer to the fundamental constituents of form which are these four great elements and space.

The Agglomeration of Form

The agglomeration of form, this cooperative putting together of separate form elements without interference between them is nothing less than a miracle. It is quite magical because it is practically impossible to describe how different form-dharmas can cooperate and interpenetrate without interfering with each other's natures. As Nagarjuna said, "It is even more amazing than the amazing, and even more marvelous than the marvelous." All we can say is that the four elements combine because the "highest and freest" miracle nature has this as just the way things are.

On the dimensional plane we can call this force "karma" if we want, which is the force of dependence in arising or "co-dependent production," but Vasubandhu labeled the ultimate cause behind everything as the "highest and freest" because it is the original nature which ultimately makes things so. Thus, he called the absolute nature the *parinispanna* or perfected (accomplished or consummated) truth-nature, which is beyond all means of conceptual determination. It is the transcendental or ontological ground of all phenomena, and this is what we aim to realize through prajna wisdom. It is immutable in that it can remain purely itself despite the fact that it appears to us as conditioned phenomena. It is empty but appears full because this fullness is composed of things that are ultimately empty or unreal.

From the point of view of an ordinary person looking upwards from the mundane to the transcendental, the binding force of the conventional world is seen as inescapable karma, or unfailing interdependent origination that produces a reality that obeys conditions. From the point of view of an enlightened sage looking downward, this "accomplished nature" of conventional impurity is seen as perfectly pure, clean and free. We can say that it is pure and clean because it does not exist in the real sense, and thus in being perfectly absent of purity and impurity, is stainlessly clean and pure.

As regards the conventional sphere, we can refer to the world of forms as having a *paratantra* and *parikalpita* nature. The paratantra aspect of phenomena signifies that phenomenal existence is a dependent existence, an existence of simultaneous co-arising characterized by a net of infinitely interlinked causes and conditions. In other words, it is a nature without an essence of its own because everything is co-dependently defined.

The fact that our experience of this realm is characterized by wholly illusory thoughts and notions—names and labels imposed upon things which lack any actual basis in fact—is the parikalpita nature of existence from which we aim to free ourselves through the path of spiritual cultivation. This is a false conceptual nature that we impress or project onto phenomena through the incorrect use of our minds. One of the first jobs in spiritual cultivation is to recognize and then purify this type of mental imposition be detaching from it, and directly perceiving things as they truly are.

All of phenomenal reality is a dependent reality, and we are unenlightened because we screen our experience of this interdependent existence with parikalpita false imagination. We mentally discriminate and then attach to the thoughts produced so as to see things where there are no things, like seeing a stick as a snake or imagining flowers in the sky. We project qualities of like or dislike onto this world when it is inherently free of such qualities, and perfectly pure. In cultivation, we have to learn how to abandon, transform or purify this self-created parikalpita nature. It seems to exist to us internally, but it does not exist in reality.

The interdependent origination nature of paratantra is also not ultimate existence because the nature of true existence is empty or formless. From the standpoint of the fundamental nature, even the existence of the paratantra nature is also considered a play of awareness in imagination and thus, is absolutely nonexistent. But since the absolute nature and the phenomenal world cannot be outside each other, it is no less true than parinispanna ontological truth; it is one with the original nature even though it has no ontological status.

Tsong Khapa expressed this difficult issue, saying, "Emptiness has the meaning of dependent-arising," and there have been many ways in which religions have tried to communicate this matter. For instance, the *Surangama Sutra* states,

> The self-nature of wind is emptiness.
> This fundamental emptiness [the fundamental nature] can give birth to wind.
> Fundamentally pure and clean, it [the absolute nature] pervades the entire universe.
> It [the fundamental nature] manifests in accord with the minds of living beings, and responds to their knowledge.
> It is experienced to whatever extent is dictated by the law of karma.
>
> The self-nature of fire is emptiness.
> This fundamental emptiness can give birth to fire.
> Fundamentally pure and clean, it pervades the entire universe.
> It manifests in accord with the minds of living beings, and responds to their knowledge.
> It is experienced to whatever extent is dictated by the law of karma.
>
> The self-nature of water is emptiness.
> This fundamental emptiness can give birth to water.
> Fundamentally pure and clean, it pervades the entire universe.
> It manifests in accord with the minds of living beings, and responds to their knowledge.
> It is experienced to whatever extent is dictated by the law of karma.
>
> The self-nature of wind is emptiness.
> This fundamental emptiness can give birth to water.
> Fundamentally pure and clean, it pervades the entire universe.

> It manifests in accord with the minds of living beings, and responds to their knowledge.
> It is experienced to whatever extent is dictated by the law of karma.

In other words, the fundamental nature of wind is emptiness; emptiness is the underlying real nature of all appearances. When you reach the true emptiness of Tao, beyond the realm of form or the skandhas and samadhi, there you will find the fundamental nature of the wind. Of course it is also the fundamental nature of fire, water, earth and space as well because it is the fundamental nature of everything.

Using the fire element as another example, our fundamental self-nature is empty and formless but contains the potential ability to produce the fire element. If it did not have the capability to produce the fire or water or other elements then it would just be an inert fundamental nature, and nothing would exist. But the fact that everything does exist illustrates that there is an appearance and functional aspect of the fundamental nature. Nevertheless, all its projections are ultimately empty, otherwise they would not be of the same nature as itself. All the appearances and functions of the original nature are likewise empty, otherwise they could not exist.

The functioning aspect of the original self-nature results in the fire element, which is not truth itself, but just one of its dreamlike projective displays. Hence, if you worship fire because you trace it back to its original existence as the pure fire element, which Hindus call *agni*, and think fire is something ontologically fundamental or ontologically valid, you are wrong. Its true nature is void. The self-nature is originally pure and pervades the whole universe, giving birth to the fire element wherever and whenever appropriate, namely according to dependent conditions. Hence, the empty fundamental essence is the true nature of fire, and this true nature is pure, pervading the entire dharma realm. This is that to which the enlightened awaken.

In short, the fundamental nature of the whole universe is actually crystal clear, calm, quiet, and serene. That is the real nature itself, what it really is. That is the fundamental nature to begin with—it is not something we have to create. It is empty, void and absent of form. This fundamental nature is also the ground state of knowing awareness, and having this ability is why it can give birth to the aspect of form. Vasubandhu called the absolute nature the parinispanna nature, or "truest, highest and freest" miracle nature. He called it miraculous because this emptiness is not inert, for it gives birth to all phenomena. Yet these phenomena are themselves empty because they lack any inherent, independent self-existing nature. All forms rise together in an interwoven tangle that lacks substantiality, and this entire arising is empty. It is empty because form is actually a type of solidified false thought, a form of solidified consciousness that is not real.

As to the conventional material aspect of reality, we can say it is composed of the five elements, but they are also fundamentally clean because their true nature is emptiness. Before it moves the material universe is empty, and when it moves form becomes born. But of course this form is

always one with its origins, so in not existing (as Reality) we say it is unproduced. Birth and death follow each other in ceaseless succession in the material universe, and it is this paratantra nature which characterizes all Three Realms of existence.

In terms of the absolute self, forms are basically a projected display or empty manifestation of the wonderful brightness of unsurpassed *bodhi*, which is the pure, perfect, enlightened true mind. However, these manifestations are not ultimately real, just interdependent empty displays. This is how they can exist along with the never changing true nature without ever conflicting with it. As to the senses, such as hearing and seeing, they are also produced through a conglomeration of causes and conditions all affecting one another, and ultimately imagined into being. As to how they come about, it is said,

> "When the mind moves, form arises (transforms)."

It is also stated,

> All dharmas arise from the mind,
> All dharmas are extinguished by the mind.
> When the mind arises, all dharmas arise;
> When the mind is extinguished, all dharmas are extinguished.

Thus, all things that exist in the world are actually the wonderful, bright, inherent original mind of enlightenment. Phenomena are an incidental event of the functioning of awareness, the false nature of primordial ignorance which accompanies primordial awareness in the same way that staring at a light produces illusions as an incidental by-product. Yet these two aspects are mutually inclusive, for the temporal phenomenal order is not outside of the Absolute nature, and the Absolute nature perfumes the temporal nature with a one-to-one correspondence.

This is how we have mutual co-penetration, mutual definition, or mutual identity. The essence of true Mind is free from all productions, including thoughts, and yet on the unreal level thoughts do seem to exist. But we know they are not the true nature because they never stay, and what is "true" must remain ever constant and everlasting. Even for the moment they exist, they have no names or labels, so how can they be real? Ultimately, they are all unborn, they are all in the state of nonproduction.

Since the true fundamental nature of the four elements is inherently empty, a person who masters enlightenment can actually point their finger in the air and have water, or fire or wind or earth appear if they want. They might even be able to do this even if they did not yet break through the skandha of form, for your mind can transform matter if you develop the appropriate level of one-

pointed concentration.

When individuals possess this ability it does not mean that they are enlightened, so you must be careful in interpreting matters if you ever see such displays of cultivation kung-fu. Furthermore, you must understand that the degree to which you can understand and master this depends entirely upon the extent of your prajna wisdom. Since prajna wisdom knows both matter and mind, it is the true measure of someone's genuine cultivation accomplishment. When we talk about "measuring meditation," it all comes down to judging the level of someone's prajna or bodhi. It all comes down to the extent top which they realize the nature of the fundamental ground state of being.

When you therefore read stories of masters flying through the air, walking through walls or leaving hand imprints in stone, you must recognize that all this has nothing to do with the Tao—these are all still effects in the realm of form which anyone can cultivate to master. On the other hand, prajna wisdom supersedes form because it transcends both matter and consciousness. Prajna is that knowing ability of the fundamental nature that lets us recognize the thoughts that we are thinking. It is still a guest of the original nature rather than the host, but it is as close to the original nature as you can get before arriving at the true enlightenment of no-mind. People of this world cannot see prajna, but they can see these other material effects. Thus, they often easily mistake the material effects as the important thing, which is like mistaking the worthless smoke of a candle for its light.

In cultivation, we can link the four elements to our bodies: the wind element is related to the body's chi and breathing, the water element with the body's jing, blood, hormones, nerves, vessels and mai, the fire element with the kundalini phenomenon and body heat, the earth element with our nails and bones, and the space element with all the spaces between the cells, body joints and other cavities. *The proper sequence in cultivation is to first work on transforming the most pliable factors of the body, and to progressively move onto factors which are harder to transform. In order from most to least pliable, we have the wind, water, fire, earth and then space elements; this defines the sequence of cultivation accomplishment.*

Thus, a typical cultivation sequence is to first work on transforming the body's wind, then water, and then fire elements, meaning the chi and prana, the nadis and hormones, and then kundalini. Someone who can achieve various superpowers, such as those we have mentioned, may attain a certain degree of mastery of these elements within the skandha of form, but their possession of these powers does not necessarily mean they have freed themselves from either the form skandha or from the other four skandhas of sensation, conception, volition and consciousness! To achieve this freedom you need to develop your prajna wisdom, which is the only way you can ever develop real cultivation accomplishment. True spiritual attainment means cultivating merit, samadhi and prajna transcendental wisdom.

Your understanding and mastery of the marvelous parinispanna "truest, highest and freest" miracle nature permeating the realm of phenomena will indeed be limited by the extent of your prajna wisdom. We can say that a meditation practitioner who is able to emit bright lights from their body might understand this to a greater degree than the ordinary man on the street, but that still does not mean they have reached self-realization. Thus, it is important for you to know that it is easy to learn various superpowers if you put enough time and effort into practicing the appropriate techniques, yet superpowers are no true measure of someone's level of spiritual attainment—despite what any movie or television show might lead you to believe. You can even master all sorts of samadhi attainments, but without cultivating prajna transcendental wisdom, you will never see the Tao and recognize your fundamental nature.

Being able to perform paranormal tricks does not imply that you are a genuine cultivator, that you are firmly treading the cultivation path, or that you are even a moral or spiritual person! Remember that even demons and ghosts have various superpowers, and no one can say that they are virtuous nor enlightened. The important point is that your understanding of all these matters, and thus, your ability to be clear or be confused will be limited by your own level of prajna wisdom. On the road of spiritual attainment, it is prajna wisdom that you must cultivate. This is why all the Buddhas themselves praise the transcendental prajna wisdom of direct knowing, which is clear through and through from beginning to end, and the mother of enlightenment.

Here's a very simple example to help us understand this principle. Suppose you have a friend suffering stomach pains. If you have never suffered stomach pains yourself, or if you have never suffered to the extent they are suffering, it is possible that you cannot imagine what their pain is actually like. In other words, if you try to understand matters from a limited frame of reference, you will not be able to comprehend what is really going on. Thus, in the same way, the extent of your prajna wisdom will limit your understanding of cultivation in general, including your cultivation kung-fu. It will limit your ability to have fire or water appear wherever you want, for mastering matter in this way means ultimately comprehending the nature of emptiness, and that means mastering the mind.

As another example, a group of students might be listening to their teacher and yet everyone will hear different things because of their varying levels of understanding. Even the great Bodhisattvas and Arhats will be limited by the extent of their prajna wisdom. In fact, they will fall short of complete enlightenment to the extent that they cripple their transcendental wisdom through subtle attachments to ignorance. One such self-imposing limitation occurs when their realization only recognizes the emptiness of the self, while failing to fully embrace the emptiness of form. That is the problem with the Arhats even though they achieve the enlightenment of selflessness. They reach the stage wherein they recognize the emptiness of the self, but do not proceed further with their cultivation and master the emptiness of phenomena.

Perceptible Form

According to the Buddhist classification scheme of Abhidharma analysis, there are eleven types of resultant form making up material existence. First we have five special sense faculties—such as the eyes and ears—which are form phenomena capable of perceiving form. Then we have the sense objects themselves, which are also a type of resultant form.

In other words, the five sense fields which serve as the objective supports for our senses are merely different classes of resultant form comprised of the five elements. Sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and visible objects (appearances) are the phenomenal form objects within the form skandha. The objective material phenomena that impinge upon our sense bases belong to the skandha aggregate of form as well. To understand the skandha of form completely, we must investigate each of these categories in turn.

Sounds, for instance, are a kind of form that is an object of hearing perception. They are "form objects" perceived by the ear. Sound is something caused by the primary elements and thus, even though we cannot see sound, it still belongs to the form skandha.

As with all the members of the form realm, we can say that the true fundamental nature of sound is emptiness, for sound comes and goes without staying. If you analyze sound down to the tiniest slice of time, you will not find any sound at all but just empty silence. As people we easily become attached to sounds, and typically focus on this attachment. If you spiritually cultivate but continue attaching to sounds, this behavior indicates you are still bound within the realm of form.

In Abhidharma theory, there are three types of sounds, which are classified by their cause and function, or means of generation:

- The first type of sounds are caused by consciousness. These are sounds associated with a sentient being like an individual's voice, the snapping of the fingers, and so on.

- The second type of sounds are inarticulate sounds, like the sound of the wind blowing through the forest or the sound of running water. Such sounds are produced through the interaction of the four elements without the intercession of any sentient being. In other words, the second category of sounds are those not produced by sentient beings, but through the interactions of the four elements.

- The third type of sounds are produced through the cooperation of a sentient being and an insentient object, like a drum and a drummer. In this case, the drum does not produce any sound unless a sentient being strikes it.

You can also classify sounds in a variety of other different ways, such as whether they are pleasant, neutral or unpleasant, or whether they are meaningless or meaningful. As always, the most important thing regarding these various classification schemes is to consider the nature of sounds in regards to the purposes and practices of cultivation. That is what is ultimately important. The best type of classification scheme is the one that will lead you onwards to spiritual enlightenment.

As to smells—which are the objects of the smelling consciousness—there are also three primary types: pleasant smells, unpleasant smells, and neutral smells. The pleasant smells are those which make us feel comfortable when we come into contact with them, while unpleasant smells are ones which create discomfort when we make contact with them. As for neutral smells, they give rise to neither pleasant nor unpleasant reactions. We also have the categories of inherent smells and compound smells. The pure, natural smell of an object, such as lavender, is an inherent smell while the concocted smell of a perfumed fragrance consisting of multiple components is a compound smell.

As to tastes, the sense objects of the tongue and taste consciousness, we have the six categories of bitter, salty, sour, sweet, pungent or astringent flavors. We also have the trio of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral tastes, which is another way to classify these sensations in the form aggregate.

As to tangible objects, or tactile objects identified by the sense of touch, basically there are seven types of contact sensations in the form skandha: smoothness (softness), roughness, heaviness, lightness, coldness, hunger, and thirst. Hunger and thirst are included in the list of tangible sensations because when you feel hungry you want to eat and when you feel thirsty you want to drink. The hunger and thirst that a Buddha experiences, however, are to give cultivation teachings and to see dharma practitioners getting along together harmoniously. A Buddha desires to see people being good friends, speaking kindly to one another, and cultivating together while mutually sharing their benefits and accepting joyfully the hardships of spiritual cultivation.

If we take these basic seven touch-objects, and combine them with the tangible contact sensations from the four primary elements (the wetness of the water element, the warmth of the fire element, the movement nature of the wind element, and the solidity of the earth element) we arrive at a total of eleven external touch sensations in the form skandha. There are also the inner tangible experiences of the body which can be considered secondary tangible sensations: suppleness, tightness, relaxation (slackness), satiation (satisfaction), refreshment, being possessed of physical courage, and feelings of illness, aging, or death.

Lastly, we have the visible objects of the form skandha, which are the easiest of the five sense objects to understand. Visible, or “perceptible” forms, are those visible objects that have both color and dimensionality (shape or configuration). In addition to color, we also have visible

characteristics such as degrees of cloudiness and smokiness, dustiness and mistiness, lightness and darkness, and so on. Shape, another visible characteristic, has its own variations. As with the other sense objects, we have pleasant, unpleasant and neutral shapes. Visible forms include things like reflections, even though they are not tangible objects. When you therefore attach to appearances in cultivation, you are being bound by the skandha of form.

One of the additional sub-categories of form includes the "unmanifest action," which is an action of the body that does not share the usual characteristics of sense objects because it is not directly perceptible. For instance, we see forms and hear sounds, so these events constitute perceptible, manifest actions. In the case of an unmanifest action, however, the action is not directly perceptible. Perhaps a mosquito will come to bite you when you are sleeping and you automatically swat it without even knowing it (since you are asleep). This is an example of the body-consciousness operating without the necessity of the sixth consciousness, so you do not perceive the action as you do other sense objects. To understand spiritual cultivation you do not need to get into this type of detail, but Abhidharma analysis classifies this as a type of unmanifest action that also belongs in the skandha of form. The point is that the form skandha not only includes things that we notice, but things that we do not notice as well.

Imperceptible Form

Thus, we have the five sense objects belonging to the skandha of form: sounds, smells, touch objects, tastes and visible appearances. Mental objects, or dharmas (objects of mind), constitute a sixth category of sense objects belonging to the form skandha. They are the forms experienced by the discriminative aspect of mind we term the sixth-consciousness. These particular form objects are called mind objects, and since they do not appear to the external senses, we classify them as imperceptible objects of form. These are very important, so let us explain them in more detail.

After any sounds or smells or sights (any of the objects of sense perception) have passed us by, they leave an impression in the mind. In other words, after they are gone, they have left a type of sensory shadow trace in the mind stream. Let us say for a moment that you saw the color blue one hour ago. Even after the color is gone and nowhere in sight, meaning it is currently imperceptible, its trace still remains in the mind-consciousness otherwise you couldn't remember it. This trace thus enables you to remember the shade of blue in your mind, and hence, we have a mind dharma, or mind object.

These are the types of mental objects that belong to the form skandha, and you must master detachment from these objects on the pathway to enlightenment. These mental forms are what we always take to be the reality "out there," but they only exist in the mind. Learning how to detach from this type of form, and stop taking it to be reality or what is real, is the gist of all schools of spiritual cultivation. The various samadhi realms, which are derived from a progressive level of detachment from thoughts and thought objects, help you to learn how to do

this until you achieve the Tao completely.

As another example, you may see a red apple, smell it and taste it, but after it is eaten, the apple is gone. However, even though the apple is no longer there, the shadow of the apple experience is still left in the mind. When you try to pair yourself with the original apple sense-impressions, you naturally find that they no longer exist, but yet you can't really say that they do not exist because they are still retrievable in your mind-consciousness. Hence, there is still something there which matches with what went before. The shadow impressions exist, but there is no way to match these discriminative impressions with their genuine character. Hence, the shadows of the first five sense consciousnesses are called (non-complementary, imperceptible) invisible forms. They are invisible because they are not perceptible from outside.

The very smallest parts of the atom, which are imperceptible to any of the senses or scientific instruments, are also considered form objects. They are classified as mind objects since they can only be known through mental analysis but not seen.

Forms belonging to space, such as intangible reflections and mirages, can also be classified as mind objects (or visible objects). The forms produced wholly by the imagination, such as hallucinations and dreams, also fall into the category of mind objects as well because they are created through the power of the mind alone. To be specific, these are referred to as the category of "non-complementary, imperceptible form." They are "non-complementary" in the sense that what generates this type of form may no longer exist in the outside world, but the form remains in your mind-consciousness like the shadow impressions of the senses. These objects are termed "imperceptible" because they are invisible to the external senses. They are imperceptible to everything but the mind, but they are still objects of form.

There are even invisible mind-objects that can only be seen while you are in the state of samadhi, and these are forms that only arise through superior meditative power. Why aren't these forms something you can see directly? Just as an insane person sees things we cannot see, so there are various types of forms that can only be seen in unusual states. This type of form represents an energy aspect of materiality which instruments cannot measure, but which you can definitely perceive once you attain a transcendental state of meditation. For instance, once a Zen master was practicing dhyana and started crying because he saw a giant snake. He quickly realized this was the outward representation of his not being able to detach from hostility. It was actually a karmic force he had created from his past actions, and could only be seen because he had entered samadhi. This type of phenomenon is an example of the category of invisible form, or imperceptible form.

Making a great vow will also create a type of imperceptible form. Making a vow or promise will indeed create an invisible form which is linked to the four elements, and that is why one has to be careful about these things. A vow therefore has a materialistic aspect, which is why a vow can

have great karmic consequences. Buddha's great vows of compassion, for instance, are actually linked to the four great elements and space, and this is why a Buddha's vows can be achieved by manifesting in materiality. From the time you take a vow until you relinquish it, a special type of form is created and sustained. This aspect of form, however, is so difficult to understand that even second level Bodhisattvas may not comprehend all the details clearly. We are only making a special note of classifying the vow form because its substance affects your karma, your body and speech and because we want to tell you that making a vow is a serious affair.

This side excursion has allowed us to show that while form is usually visible to the senses, the form aggregate also includes aspects which we cannot perceive directly but which we can only observe when we reach a state of samadhi. Ordinary people have a hard time understanding this type of form since it is beyond their normal range of experience, but it is an integral part of the form skandha. The big point is that when you cultivate for spiritual progress, you have to learn how to become liberated from this type of invisible form as well. You will indeed encounter such forms if your cultivation is high enough, and so we cannot ignore this category of form phenomena. In the end, cultivators have to master detachment from every type of form and phenomena in existence and must not be misled by appearances. This therefore includes the imperceptible, invisible category of form that cannot show up through scientific instruments, but only appears in a state of advanced meditation.

Of course, ordinary people practicing meditation never reach genuine samadhi or dhyana, so they do not normally meet this type of mind dharma. It arises as a reflection of all the virtuous or nonvirtuous karmic forces you have accumulated, and only appears to you under exceptional circumstances, such as when you cultivate some stage of dhyana. Since this type of form is driven by karmic force, we say it is a reflection of karmic forces such as our own virtuous and nonvirtuous actions.

Another name for this type of form is a "seed," a seed you planted in previous lives that will manifest into outward form in this life. A seed is an action of thought or deed you plant which, if conditions allow, will sprout in the future. What you plant in this life will be the seed for future lives to come.

The Five Sense Organs of Form

The four great elements and space comprise all objective material phenomena, but how is it that consciousness can perceive these objects of form in the first place? What is the process behind that? The answer is that we can perceive form because we have sense organs such as eyes, ears, taste buds and so on. Our bodies use instruments made of form to sense form, and somehow these form instruments—namely our sense organs—provide impressions that ultimately have some way to link with consciousness. Otherwise, we would have no way for mind and matter to interact, and we would have no way to make any of these distinctions.

Since the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin (organ of touch) are our form instruments enabling us to sense the world of form, they are purposely accorded a special classification in the form skandha. The sense organs are unique because they are the seats of five respective types of sense-consciousness, which is why they are listed separately as a special type of form skandha component. They are separately classified as members of this skandha because of the work they perform in helping us to perceive the components of the form skandha.

When Abhidharma separately mentions the sense organs in this manner, it is emphasizing their participatory role in the overall process of "dependent arising," and this separate classification scheme makes it particularly easy for us to ultimately analyze how form and consciousness interlink. To understand how this works, we must first know that each sense organ is the functional instrument of a specific consciousness such as the eye-consciousness, nose-consciousness, ear-consciousness, and so on which are all various differentiations of a single consciousness rubric. But this separation of consciousness into different types is not the main issue. The important issue is how the physical material of the eyes, ears, nose and so on actually interfaces with its respective consciousness; this is something only accomplished cultivators can truly understand.

In actual fact, all our body cells and sense organs are permeated with a form of "conscious matter" called *ching-se*. It is this ching-se "sentient matter" which permeates living tissue and allows it to function in conjunction with the appropriate sense consciousness. Science has not yet discovered the existence of ching-se, for it is something even more fundamental than the red or white *bodhicitta* (fundamental jing essence) mentioned in the Tibet school, and is even more fundamental than genes and DNA. It is a purified form of the five elements that can interface with consciousness, and so this is the crucial material component of sensory or conscious perception.

In their translations of the Abhidharma material, the Chinese use the term ching-se because it means "pure clear form," but we can also translate it as "sentient matter," "conscious materiality" or "sentient form." Other alternatives have included "the basic root sentient substance" of the body and sense organs, "subtle sense form" or the "inner subtle form of a sense organ." There is no such thing as a perfect term, especially when you are trying to create a new vocabulary to present difficult spiritual cultivation concepts, so we will continue to use "conscious matter" or ching-se. Ching-se, or "sentient matter," is the same as any other matter in that the five elements, as well as electricity, magnetism and so on, make up its structure. However, this is matter specifically found in living organisms, for it is the material substance that allows our physical matter to link with mind.

In a sense, ching-se is the most refined stage of living matter and is responsible for the ability of our body's sense organs, such as our eyes, to link with consciousness. If there was no ching-se in the organ of the eye, the eye could not function in conjunction with the ever-present eye-

consciousness, which is always present whether you are missing your eyes, or whether your eyes are defective so that you are blind. Our physical bodies are not just some mechanical instrument or robotic structure, for without this "sentient matter" the various sense systems could not communicate with mind. This material, which you can perceive when you reach the states of samadhi, is thus the materialistic link between consciousness and matter.

In time science will discover this purified form of the five elements, but for now, only those individuals who attain a high state of samadhi can become aware of this material. For instance, when cultivators attain the samadhi of bliss so as to feel happiness in every living cell of the body, they are actually experiencing all the ching-se being activated at this low stage of cultivation. The fact that ching-se exists is the reason that every pore, every cell of a Buddha can become a separate Buddha in itself, a feat demonstrated several times in the Buddhist sutras. Unfortunately, during Buddha's time the level of science was not very developed, so Buddha had to describe everything using simple terms, and thus, we have few teachings on this matter, especially as it applies to the realm of form. Thus, the concepts of ching-se, cells, atoms and consciousness got mixed together over time by people who did not achieve the requisite level of spiritual attainment and understanding. This is a typical event in the transmission of any body of knowledge over time.

We can gain a much better idea of this sentient matter if we use the analogy of milk. When you refine whole milk you will progressively get clarified milk, then curds, then butter and then ghee. In the same fashion, when you examine the material body in terms of layers of refinement, you will ultimately arrive at a very refined layer of sentient matter, or ching-se, which allows matter to link with consciousness. Since ching-se is living matter, it can age and die just like the rest of the physical body.

Since the eyes, optic nerves, visual cortex and other regions of the brain work to create vision in conjunction with the accompanying ching-se, these things must all cooperate together for us to see. Abhidharma defines the "sense organ and sensory base of the eye" as this entire complex of eye material, including the sentient materiality which allows it to interconnect with consciousness. The "eye base" includes the eye and its relevant nerve complex, but it is the ching-se sentient matter of the eye system that actually allows us to know the results of seeing. So we can say that eye-consciousness will or will not arise, or it can or cannot arise, depending upon whether the ching-se is still allowing it to connect with the physics of perception. Since this sentient matter can interact with consciousness, it functions as *the buffer or transition (transmission) or interface material between regular living matter and mind.*

Buddha once asked his cousin Ananda, "Does a blind person still see? Since a blind man will answer that only blackness meets his gaze, how can we consider his 'seeing' to be lost?" By this Buddha meant that a blind man still has the capability of seeing because he has not lost the function of the seeing consciousness. However, he only sees darkness because his eye-

consciousness cannot interface with the eye or some other part of the eye base. The eye-consciousness is always operating whether people are blind or not because the eye-consciousness is always present while we are alive and cannot be destroyed. If we are missing a working instrument through which it can operate, or the ching-se dies off, that is when the seeing of external things gets shut off and yet the potential consciousness of seeing still remains.

In other words, the eye-consciousness is still present in those who are blind, but the physical body lacks some functional physical components, which in turn causes the loss of sight. As illustrations, you can go blind if you lack an eye or if the ching-se in the "eye base system" dies. When we get old, our vision also sometimes deteriorates because either the ching-se dies or because the eye base itself deteriorates (ex. cataracts form or the brain's visual cortex is damaged). The important point is that if you are missing the eye ching-se, you will not be able to see because you will not be able to bridge the results of physical perception with consciousness.

As people get older, some of the ching-se in their bodies will start to die, which explains why the sense of touch in the elderly is not as sensitive as in their younger years. As to our sense of taste, sometimes we become sick and taste in our mouth because obstructions arise between all the little ching-se in the taste bud cells, which accordingly does not allow them to function properly for awhile. Thus, the health of the ching-se is a crucial factor in being able to form proper sense impressions, and you make it healthier through the process of meditation. Scientists today are always wondering about the mind-body connection, and this is one of the crucial, but as yet unknown, components in the link between mind and matter. The problem is, you will only be able to investigate this type of subtle form if you become a cultivator yourself and attain some proficiency in samadhi.

Ching-se is the purest aspect of the physical body. It is the bridge between consciousness and the sense organs which only cultivators having samadhi can investigate. One of the big secrets in cultivation—which even the Tibet school does not mention—is that the sambhogakaya Enjoyment body is a transformation achievement of the ching-se sentient matter. To attain the sambhogakaya—a purified sentient form of the five elements—you need to understand how to transform all your cells into ching-se. In other words, you must be able to transform your entire body into ching-se in order to attain the sambhogakaya. When a Buddha reveals thousands of tiny Buddhas in every pore of his body, this is possible only because he has transformed these cells into purified ching-se. Of course, this only corresponds to a very high level of cultivation.

The nose organ system with its ching-se allows the nose-system to function in conjunction with smell-consciousness. Similarly, the tongue organ system, along with the tongue organ system ching-se, allows the tongue to function together with taste-consciousness to perceive the sense objects of tastes. This line of explanation holds accordingly for the other senses as well.

Thus, together in the form skandha, we have the four elemental forms of earth, water, wind and

fire, and the element of space, which delineates or separates objects and phenomena. Next we have the objective phenomena of visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes and tangibles, which are all resultant forms or derived matter. And finally we have the sense organs that are specified separately because of their ching-se, a type of sentient material that bridges the gap between matter and consciousness. These are all the various classes of form. So you have the various types of fundamental causal form, and then the various types of resultant form.

The Three Natures of Reality

When describing the nature of experience, Vasubandhu further stated that our sense, or experiential impressions, are created through the combination of three layers known as the three natures. In fact, Asanga, Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna all wrote of these three natures. These are very difficult to discuss, but we have already introduced to some extent during the discussion of the agglomeration of form.

To recap this discussion, the highest principle which ultimately stands behind the senses and sense consciousnesses is called the "highest and purest;" it is also referred to as the "inexpressible." This is the parinispanna nature, which is another word for the highest truth or absolute nature. This is our fundamental self, that ultimate thing you try to awaken to when on the path of spiritual cultivation. All of the world's religions recognize the "accomplished nature" as the experiential goal of spiritual striving, although they call it by different words. Here we are using technical terms to make our discussion that much more clear and free of emotions.

The parinispanna nature is that crystal clear formlessness which extends everywhere as the dharmakaya, the comprehension of which is limited by the extent of your prajna wisdom. If you cultivate prajna you will eventually be able to recognize it, but if you just stick to attending ceremonies or studying books you will never realize it at all. The parinispanna nature is what makes realization possible in the first place because it is that absolute ground state of being.

We can say the parinispanna nature is similar to the alaya storehouse consciousness or even karma, but Vasubandhu simply called it the "highest and purest and freest" to signify that in the ultimate analysis, this is the only Real thing. In the ultimate stage of the parinispanna, or accomplished nature, there is no difference between subject and object or the knower and known, and so it is inexpressible or indescribable, as it is beyond conceptual, discriminating mentation. It is the absolute perfected nature imminent in the phenomenal world of birth and death although we do not realize it before we are awakened. It is the ontological, true nature of everything, and is not apart from the phenomena within it. They are born of its essence but do not exist as real objects or phenomena since its real essence is empty of change and transformation.

The next two natures of the universe are the parikalpita, or purely (unfounded) nature, and the paratantra, or dependent nature. Parikalpita refers to conceptions unfounded in reality, such as

our belief in the existence of independent, substantial objects. This idea is just plain wrong, for from the conventional level it denies the principle of karma, or interdependent origination. Thus, it refers to a state of affairs that has no existential basis in fact but exists only as unfounded conceptions. This is why the parikalpita nature is considered a discriminating nature established on the basis of verbal expression. Basically, it is a realm of illusion that we mentally create and superimpose upon the direct experience of reality, as in the instance of seeing a rope and assuming it is a snake.

The parikalpita nature refers to our mental realm of ignorant delusion. It refers to our thought world of false conception, which is a collection of purely imagined existences that we must try to purify through the practice of spiritual cultivation. It is how we actually see the world before enlightenment. So it is the nature which arises from assigning names, a nature of false designations rather than the essential nature of reality. That is, it is an imputed nature arising from falsely imputing names upon phenomena, a nature of mere names or erroneous conception. This naming activity, which creates the parikalpita nature, is mere imagination.

Sometimes when he was trying to explain how the things we imagined were unreal, Buddha said they were as "illusive as the horns on a rabbit," or like "a flower in the sky." These phrases all refer to the parikalpita nature. Another big example of the parikalpita nature is our belief in being an independent ego; while we believe it is there, it really does not exist but is just a false conception. Returning to Buddha's first example, if you saw a flower in the sky you would say to yourself, "Flowers do not exist in the sky ... therefore it is an illusion even though it seems to be real." Horns on a rabbit, flowers in the sky, an ego in an individual: all are examples of the parikalpita nature.

These are rather obvious examples, whereas the parikalpita imaginary nature that we "invisibly" project everywhere upon the phenomenal world, and by which we filter our experience of the paratantra and parinispanna natures, is very hard to actually realize. We are always mentally discriminating things; the false reality we build in this way through our thoughts is pure imagination, pure mental fabrication. It is pure parikalpita nature, a false reality merely of names and labels that have no inherent, truthful existence … yet this is what we project or impose upon true reality and take to be true reality. Of course it does not bother us if we do not attach to this type of thought world construction. That is why spiritual cultivation involves learning detachment and cessation, and then contemplation or prajna wisdom to see things as they really are. Only in this way can one achieve enlightenment.

We can think of the paratantra, or dependent nature, as that part of the experiential system that stands between the wholly imagined nature of parikalpita and the absolute parinispanna nature. It is actually that aspect of the absolute nature that we take as the realm of interdependent origination. It is basically a designation for the realm of dependent phenomena or conditioned things. It is the realm of empty but interdependent origination that we call simultaneous arising,

but it is this naked world without our mental names and labels and other mental impressions projected onto it. It is therefore the middle ground, so to speak, between the wholly real and totally unreal natures. It is the appearance or display nature of reality, and it is sometimes called the "relative nature" because it has the nature of conditioned origination. When we discriminate the existence of individual phenomena, this is what serves as the basis or ground for the discriminated parikalpita nature.

Defined through mutual intercausality, the paratantra dependent nature refers to the characteristics that an arising object exhibits due to its arising dependence on other conditions. But it is this clean nature without our involvement of interpretive mental impressions thrust upon it. The parikalpita nature, on the other hand, is a mental superposition on paratantra and this is what accounts for our personal subjective views. We superimpose the false parikalpita nature when we label things with false attributes and characteristics, for things are pure just as they are. This is the mental habit you learn to must purify or abandon on the road of spiritual cultivation. This parikalpita nature *does not possess reality nor represent reality*, so you cannot attain reality from it. You can never attain reality from conceptions, thoughts, words, names, phrases or labels. Even dharmas are just names and words, and that is why we only refer to them as expedient, skillful means.

All this dialogue has been building up to the following explanation. As we previously saw, the physical eye system for generating the sense impressions of sight connects with the eye-consciousness. The "eye root" is defined as the physical aspects of the eye system (including the accompanying ching-se), while the eye-consciousness is a special discriminatory consciousness we have for the sense of sight, and this is one of five sense consciousnesses because there is one for each of the senses. Here's how things operate.

The-consciousness feeds information to our consciousness of discrimination, which is called the sixth consciousness since it is like a sixth sense. Then an ego consciousness, called the seventh consciousness, in turn colors the conceptions produced by the sixth consciousness of discrimination, and in turn connects them with an eighth consciousness, called the alaya consciousness, which accesses ultimate reality. This is how consciousness colors our pure sense impressions layer by layer, and pollutes the possibility of direct knowing or the direct accessing of reality which becomes possible through prajna wisdom. Initially this sounds very confusing and complicated, but we will have time to explain this in detail, and must say that this can all be proved as you climb the various ranks of cultivation.

When the parinispanna, paratantra and parikalpita truths are all taken together, they indicate the ways in which reality presents itself to people as well as they way in which people experience reality. To be specific, these three natures taken together are responsible for creating the six sense impressions of the conventional world called the aggregate of form. There is a paratantra world out there called a conventional reality of interdependence, somehow born of the parinispanna

condition. We construct or impose a world of parikalpita truth on top of this because of the sixth and seventh consciousness mental dialogue, but we can cultivate so as to eventually bypass this dialogue and experience a direct knowing of the parinispanna nature that is free of all such mental pollution.

This is a complicated way of saying things, but this story must be told since no one ever tells you these things in books about meditation or spiritual cultivation, and you need this knowledge to be able to hold a scientific dialogue. By discussing the three natures, we are analyzing the fundamental components of the form skandha and laying out their relationship to the overall process of spiritual cultivation and enlightenment. We have also briefly examined a rare topic: how the form skandha relates to the higher realms of metaphysics.

The "highest and purest," the "dependent nature," and the components of the "purely conceptual nature" are the forces which together create our experiential awareness. Parikalpita is of course wholly false and unreal, unestablished by fact by any system we may use. It characterizes a deluded person, for delusion is defined as a false experiential reality created through language. Of course we must also say that this discriminatory nature has some degree of conventional reality or truth to it, in terms of a conventional existence, but these words which create this world are really just names and labels.

The parinispanna and paratantra natures are not two different truths. Ultimately they are not different from each other. After all, what Buddha awakened to upon enlightenment was the equivalence of emptiness *with* interdependent origination. Thus, fundamental nature and fundamental ignorance are ultimately one; samsara and nirvana are no different from one another because there is mutual identity and mutual interpenetration (containment) between the two.

The parinispanna nature gives birth to the paratantra nature that must, by definition, be one with it, and of it without varying from its essence. Hence, the relative or dependent paratantra nature is actually a pure realm. While the parinispanna nature can be called the true essence, or Suchness, the paratantra nature can be called the appearance, or Thusness nature. The essence of Suchness can be described as "So it is," whereas the nature of Thusness is, "Thus it comes."

As to the impure nature, or parikalpita imagined nature, it comes into being on the basis of discrimination. The absolute nature, or parinispanna, is the essence of all nature and upon realization of prajna wisdom, you can discard the parikalpita and paratantra bodies to realize the dharmakaya—the parinispanna ultimate truth we also call God, Suchness, the Tao, original nature. It is only owing to the perfuming infection of ignorance that the highest and purest is seen as parikalpita in the first place.

This is a very complicated topic which gets into the origins of fundamental ignorance, and thus, nonenlightenment. We have gone into this topic a bit is to explain about the world of forms, in

specific the form aggregate and how the way in which we see the world can be experienced in an entirely delusory, partially delusory or fully enlightened fashion.

We have also hinted to the fact that if you are going to see phenomena, it is more "proper" to see reality in terms of the pure realm of the paratantra conditioned nature than in terms of parikalpita names and labels, and yet this is still a delusional view when compared with the final Truth of parinispanna absolute nature. Nevertheless, paratantra is the go-between or mediator state between the realms of parinispanna, complete enlightenment, and parikalpita, or complete delusion. The imagination of the parikalpita nature is the way in which the paratantra nature appears to us, and is itself one-to-one with the parinispanna nature.

If you want to go further in understanding all this, you have to read the writing of Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu as well as the *Surangama Sutra* and *The Awakening of Faith* by Asvaghosha. Even then it will be difficult to deal with these matters correctly, so we have tried to provide a little understanding of this matter as it relates to our experiences of the form aggregate.

However, in summarizing the more rudimentary concepts we can say that the form aggregate can be divided into (1) the causal form of the four great elements and space, and (2) the resultant forms of the five sense objects and sentient materiality, and that (3) while the form realm can be experienced directly without the imposition of names and labels upon it, that is not how we normally view it. This somewhat relates to the fact that there are also imperceptible forms that belong to the form skandha, and these stand for certain objects of the mind. Those include atomic forms, imagined forms, vow forms and so on:

The Skandha of Form

Elements	Five Sense Objects	Five Sense Organs
Earth	Visibles	Eyes
Water	Sounds	Ears
Fire	Smells	Nose
Wind	Tastes	Tongue
Space	Tangibles	Body
	(Certain) Mind objects	

You must liberate yourself from clinging to these form skandha elements if you wish to cultivate towards ultimate realization. When you look at the form skandha carefully, you will notice that it not only represents the material aspect of objective phenomena, *but also the shadow mentality engendered after we have observed the outer appearance of things*, such as appearances, smells,

tastes and so on. If you want to detach from the form skandha, you have to detach from any subtle attachments to these mental phenomena as well.

Learning to detach from form and appearances, including the shadow impressions of the sense consciousnesses, means you are still only cultivating through the skandha of form! To understand this better, you must realize that the entirety of the form skandha is actually composed of solidified false thoughts, and when we can exhaust the skandha of form through our cultivation, it means we are finally breaking free from our attachments to solidified false thoughts. Nevertheless these are only the coarsest type of thoughts we must dissolve. Many more subtle forms of false thought cover over the realization of enlightenment as well. From the ontological sense, each proceeding skandha represents a more subtle and refined thought realm from which we must also become liberated.

While it may have been faster to skip these details, someone in the initial stages of samadhi can now use these detailed categories to determine where their attachments lie, and this knowledge may help them free themselves from the skandha of form. That is the ultimate purpose of spiritual practice, and the reason we have gone into such detail here. Our explanations only have meaning if they are linked back to the path and process of spiritual cultivation, which is why we bother to point out these things. If you do not clearly understand the boundaries of the form aggregate as we have indicated, it is very difficult to cultivate correctly.

It is not unusual to find that someone who is working on transforming the skandha of form can hear things far away, see things within their own body or at a great distance, or even begin to perceive various colors or phenomena in the universe that they never knew existed. The ability to see things within their own body, for instance, is a much higher version of the stage of "inner luminosity" mentioned in various cultivation schools. The attainment of an internal light is due to the fact that you have cultivated your chi and mai. Because jing has transformed into chi and the chi has become concentrated in certain locations, it produces this frictional light within.

The various supernormal capabilities that can arise when people are in the midst of cultivating the skandha of form can be explained in the following way. To have healthy physical sense organs is a pre-condition for the proper functioning of the respective sense-consciousness, and if we transform the sense organs that belong to the form skandha, the sense-consciousnesses can function more effectively. This is why they can show all sorts of supernormal abilities.

If you nonchalantly interpret various supernormal abilities as meaning that someone has passed through the form skandha due to their cultivation, you can easily become deceived. For instance, many individuals can readily develop various superpowers involving the five elements without having mastered the form skandha, and paranormal abilities can also arise when you master a strong degree of one-pointed concentration without piercing through the skandha of form. In other words, it is possible to master the five elements to some extent even though you have not

cultivated through the form skandha.

As an example, someone can cultivate a certain mastery of the earth element by using it as the field (objective support) of focus in their meditation (ex. the "earth *kasina*"). If they attain the corresponding earth element samadhi, they will achieve the superpower of becoming able to sit in the sky by having the earth element appear wherever they want, namely underneath their feet. This is how someone is able to walk on water; it is not due to levitation, but because of mastering the earth element samadhi. Mastering the earth element samadhi will also enable them to make visible (non-living) replicas of themselves.

Someone who masters the water visualization samadhi will develop the ability to create rivers and lakes, make the earth and buildings quake, and have water appear wherever they want. Mastering the fire element samadhi visualization is the basis for such powers as being able to burn other objects, burning one's body at the time of death, countering fire with fire, and so on. The wind samadhi contemplation is the basis for being able to walk with the speed of wind and causing windstorms. Mastering the space contemplation enables an individual to walk through walls and earth, create space inside rocks and mountains, or see hidden objects. Then we even have the light, red, blue, white and yellow samadhi visualization accomplishments. For instance, the yellow kasina is the basis for being able to create yellow forms, or having something turn into gold.

You can attain all these superpowers just by developing a very strong samadhi, a very strong one-pointed concentration. If your concentration is strong enough, the mind can definitely alter matter, since mind and matter are linked by having the same source. However, this level of concentration does not mean a concentration that compresses, compacts, reiterates or stresses thoughts, for "concentration" means developing a field of mental emptiness. You are concentrated in the sense that there is only one thought that is so subtle, that it is almost nonexistent, and of course all other thoughts are definitely nonexistent. This type of concentration is not developed through a pressurized blocking of the mind. So even if you attain this state of samadhi, it does not mean that you have eliminated mental afflictions and destroyed the perception of being an independent self. This type of samadhi is commendable and you can attain superpowers by developing it, but it does not mean you are yet liberated.

Buddha once told Ananda that there are individuals in the world who can realize all nine states of samadhi in the universe, yet who do not become liberated because they still attach to false thinking and never turn awareness around to find the ultimate source of these states and recognize what is truly real. The point here is that even though an individual can gain control over the five elements of the form skandha, it does not mean they are yet liberated from it. Some people can even perform various supernormal manifestations involving the form skandha's five elements because they borrow upon the power of high-stage ghost Immortals who do the work for them. So it is easy to become cheated if you do not have a level of wisdom and cultivation

attainment yourself and understand the nature of these things, such as all the various possibilities behind a stage of attainment.

In its broadest sense, the form skandha refers to the entire undulating universe of quantum states, with the cosmos composed of a gigantic interlinked network of vibrations that are continuously oscillating in an infinite variety of rhythms and frequencies. Our physical bodies are part of this undulating whole, an arbitrary pattern we mentally cut out of this gargantuan entirety even though our body cannot be thought of as having any definite boundary since it is linked to everything else in existence. That particular delusion is our own parikalpita-type illusory thinking. Our body is actually like a single molecule within a bucket of glue that is bound to all other molecules through infinite bonds, and yet thinks itself separately defined. It is like a small bubble in the vastness of the ocean, which cannot be separated apart from all the water around it.

Our thoughts and emotions are also not *essentially* different from the physical things within this net, either, for you can view them as just "different frequencies" within this one same whole. They, too, are other types of phenomena within the infinite net of interdependent origination. So logically, it is invalid to use our minds to stamp arbitrary patterns out of this universal wholeness and call it our body or self. Even the thoughts of having a body or being a self are part of this net, and therefore ultimately unreal. Using them to define ourselves is ultimate invalid.

Our real "body" is actually formlessness or emptiness that has omniscient awareness, which is one reason why we must learn to detach from the physical nature. To achieve the Tao, the first objective is to abandon the view of being a body. This does not just mean the physical body, but the astral body, etheric body, mental body or whatever, for these are all just ways of exchanging one body for another.

None of these bodies are valid, none are the real you. Thus in spiritual cultivation we must refrain from clinging to spiritual bodies and our physical bodies, including the entire cosmos as a unitary body itself. In cultivation, even spiritual states and experiential realms must be viewed as ephemeral constructions lacking any true reality, for there is no truth in the triple realm. In attaching to bodies, we are just ignoring these truths and trying to freeze awareness into a solid, stable something when there is nothing stable in the entire realm of conventional existence. It is all a realm of impermanence, which is why we call it maya.

By putting effort into this type of mental clinging, we actually affix ourselves within a realm of mental ignorance called nonenlightenment even though we are intrinsically enlightened all the while. We use awareness wrongly, and turn from the real way things are to an artificial mindset that lacks reality. We thereby limit our spiritual potential and actually go against science, logic, religion, and philosophy because of mental attachments. In effect, what we call the "I," using the vocabulary of these limiting definitions, are just causes and conditions coming together and departing in ever changing patterns that we have tried to define as an unchanging unit. Inside this

"I" there is really no self-existing ego or independent being. What we think is an independent being is just another ongoing stream of dependent, delusive mentation that is part of this networked whole.

Scientists have finally progressed to the point where they think of the individual body in terms of the ceaseless oscillations of matter and energy, which is just one alternative view of the form skandha. However, they still have not begun to think of thoughts, including the I-concept, being defined in this way as part of an interlinked web of infinite cause and effect. Nevertheless, the new view of ephemeral form is a huge evolution in thought over many old conceptions because it finally matches with standard cultivation doctrine. However, this view is still very incomplete. It has to be expanded so that what we call an individual is also considered a cooperative conglomeration of various causes and conditions of all types coming together, and the entire summation of these categories of conditions should be called the five skandhas. When awareness can break free of the prison of the five skandhas, this is when someone can return to, or win back their intrinsic enlightenment.

In trying to mentally congeal something fixed, solid and unchanging out of the swishing ephemeral quantum soup of the universe, we simply cannot succeed in accomplishing anything other than waste a lot of internal energy through the process of mental attachment. So what should you do, and how should you behave? Just remain free with your mind and let things flow, and you will not be imposing limitations where there are actually none. In fact, this is what you learn to do, and is the essence of spiritual cultivation. While this does not change the outside world, this internal freedom will release energies within you that will end up purifying your physical body, and make it a more fit vehicle for the path of spiritual realization.

The situation of determining what is "conventional reality" is akin to the game of connecting the dots where there are an infinite variety of patterns we could choose to connect. Of all these alternative patterns, which is the correct one? In fact, there is none! Even if there were one, any pattern we might choose would not last for an infinitesimal moment since all of its parts are marked by constant change. Even the vibration of a single electron shakes the entire universe, so what phenomenon stays the same for even an instant? There is never any single moment of stability in this giant quantum net of interconnectedness, and yet we cannot even call it "giant" or "small" since there is nothing outside of this "giant" looped net of a universe which it can be compared to. Everything that is it, is inside it or "of it," so there is nothing with which it can be compared because it already encompasses that object of comparison.

The only legitimate solution to the lack of a fixed pattern is to mentally detach from everything—every material body, mental state and experiential realm. Another way of saying this is that you must learn how to detach from all the skandhas in order to succeed in your spiritual cultivation toward the Tao. Resting in nothing, you must learn how to let functioning freely operate. This is how your thoughts will die down, how you will attain samadhi and unshackle your inherent

omniscient prajna awareness knowing, and climb the ranks of spiritual attainment.

This is an unusual way to describe the spiritual path but you will find that we can describe it from all sorts of angles, and that while they are equally different, they always prove its ultimate validity from their own unique perspectives. It is not just fair to say this is so, this is right, this is the way it is. In teaching you how to rank and measure these things, you have to see their validity from a whole number of different angles. This is something that no one else will ever tell you.

The True Nature of Reality

Think about this carefully for a moment, for this first descriptive mechanism explains the validity behind the process of cultivation. The true mind is empty, so we say it abides nowhere. Abiding nowhere, you should not try to freeze it into any form or pattern. Rather, you should spontaneously function with mental freedom in accord with conventionality, which is the realm of cause and effect. Yet you should do this without any clinging or mental stress. This is hard to explain, so we will explain this route and results of spiritual cultivation in stages, and you will learn that this is the way in which you will be able to "realize God" and attain the Tao.

Speaking like an Einsteinian physicist, we can say that our larger identity—in being linked to all existence—means that we are every moment of the entire space-time continuum, and nothing can happen outside of ourselves. In other words, there is no other maya outside of maya. There is no separate dimension somehow separated from all other dimensions, for even if there were somehow a separate entity, that separate entity would also be part of the All-That-Is by definition.

Since all events in the universe are included as part of our larger identity, we should mentally relax so as to accept and encompass everything. We should do everything we should in terms of our duties, but we do not put any energy into mental clinging or rejection of things that come to pass. We should be mentally free in all our functioning, and yet maintain a consistent determination to accomplish all the tasks that we may set out to do. All the meanwhile we should abide in our original fundamental nature, and function out of its free essence. This is one of the meanings of spontaneous functioning.

Taking these several principles together, we can use them to philosophically understand so-called "psychic abilities," "superpowers," and "miracles." These principles essentially confirm the possibility that mind can affect matter at a distance since all matter is ultimately linked to us, since everything *is* us including all the possible states of samadhi realization. You may not presently know the mechanism for how you can turn water into gold and so forth, but since mind and matter share the same root source, mind can affect matter. In other words, superpowers involving the material realm can indeed exist, and it is through spiritual cultivation that you can learn how to perform such things.

This capability follows from the principle of oneness, which also explains why those who break through the form skandha can see realms of existence extending incredible distances away, an encompassing what we call "other dimensions." Because of the principles of oneness we can transform matter just as easily as we can move our arms, when we learn the appropriate method or technique.

There are all sorts of possibilities like this which are sometimes exhibited by an accomplished spiritual practitioner, but you should not make any big deal out of it. It does not signify some form of "God status" or enlightenment. It simply indicates a certain kung-fu accomplishment pertaining to the realm of form, and thus it involves the first of the five skandhas. Being able to ice-skate beautifully is another such similar attainment. Some people find this particular skill hard to master, but the rule of cultivation is that practice with repetitive effort will in time produce accomplishment. This is a standard rule, which explains why you can ultimately succeed in spiritual attainment.

These principles also explain why an accomplished master can actually dematerialize their body, pass through walls unimpeded, and perform certain other unusual feats of form. They can do this because the body is mostly empty anyway. From the standpoint of physics, we can say that our bodies are composed of atoms, which are in turn about 99.9999% empty space. To master this emptiness aspect of the form nature, someone who can walk through walls needs to master the opposite aspect of the same source, which is the mind, and they must transform their body so that it corresponds to mental realms that would permit this type of attainment. To do something at this level of attainment, you need to attain the single-mindedness of samadhi, and you have to let your body transform into a more purified form that would support this samadhi attainment.

In short, many seemingly miraculous cultivation feats may indicate that an individual has understood *some* of the scientific principles of the form skandha and mastered some degree of one-pointed concentration, but not necessarily the form skandha itself. To master any of these principles, you need to cultivate an advanced stage of samadhi, and master your mind.

II. THE SENSATION SKANDHA

The sensation aggregate is sometimes referred to as the skandha of feeling, although "sensation" and "feeling" are both a bit inadequate to accurately describe the phenomena encompassed by this skandha. This skandha refers to the sensations we experience, mentally and physically, when the four great elements combine together in a certain way. Hence, the sensation aggregate is entwined with the process of *contact* with the realm of form; if there is no contact, there is no sensation.

In order to have sensations, we first need a physical body, and thus the sensation and form

skandhas are somewhat interrelated. However, since sensations are more akin to our psychological state than to the physical body, the two skandhas are distinct, although they still interconnect.

The Chinese describe the sensation skandha as something that touches your heart or "imprints your mind," so it actually refers to a combination of physical and psychological states. For example, when you were young you may have had many painful experiences that you can still remember, and so we can say that they have had a sorrowful impact on your being. This process of actually knowing the pleasure or pain of a situation is the operation of the skandha of sensation.

The fact that we are born into this world is due to karmic forces, and the fact that you can attain samadhi is also a karmic force. Karmic force is responsible for having these sensations arise, and so even in cultivation, sensations or emotions are something we have no way to avoid. They are separate from the perceptions of the senses since they are formed within us, and thus the skandha of sensation is separate from the skandha of form.

There are three basic ways of categorizing the experiences of the sensation skandha. None require great explanation. We experience:

- pleasant feelings,
- unpleasant feelings, and
- neutral feelings.

Pleasant feelings are those you wish would return after they are gone, and so they tend to generate attachment. Unpleasant feelings are those you want to escape from or avoid because of their attendant pain or suffering, and so they typically engender a response of rejection. Neutral mental sensations, such as the feeling of equanimity, tend not to generate any particular reactions at all.

All these feelings arise on the basis of contact. That is, they arise on the basis of a sense organ, consciousness and an object making contact. Since we have six organs and three types of sensation, therefore there are a total of eighteen types of feeling or sensation. Why are there eighteen types of sensation? First we have the six-fold division of sensation because we have six sense consciousnesses—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touch and mental consciousnesses. Since each sense organ and sense consciousness can connect with an object to produce three different types of sensations—pleasant, unpleasant or neutral—six multiplied by three produces a total of eighteen types of sensation.

Feelings, or sensations, can also be classified as to whether they arise dependent upon (1) the mental consciousness or (2) sensory consciousness. In other words, yet another way to partition

the sensation skandha is to break it into two parts: mental feelings and physical feelings (which arise due to the senses). For instance, when as spiritual cultivators we finally arrive at the point of cultivating the realms of samadhi and dhyana, we will find that two major feelings appear which are termed "joy" and "bliss."

This mental joy and physical bliss are two separate types of sensation: joy arises in the mind, while bliss is a physical sensation felt in the body. Hence, when you finally cultivate the lower dhyana and experience their attendant levels of joy and bliss, then while you have attained a state of samadhi, you are still not yet free of the skandha of sensation! So you can see how this categorization scheme is not just a bit of intellectual knowledge, but is useful for spiritual practice. Time and again, everything we tell you must be brought back into the path and practice of spiritual cultivation. Otherwise it is just useless intellectual baggage.

Another classification scheme for the sensation skandha involves establishing five different categories of sensation: sensations of physical pain or pleasure, mental pleasure or pain, and indifference (or neutral feelings). The state of indifference would normally be partitioned into mental and physical neutrality, but since these are the same in this case (mental equanimity is not different from neutral bodily sensation), we have only five categories.

Yet another means of classifying sensations includes the divisional categories of (1) disturbed, (2) undisturbed, (3) clinging and (4) nonclinging sensations. You can also divide sensations into whether they relate to material things, or are cravings independent of material things. Hence, there are many alternative ways to categorize the entire body of phenomena encompassed within the sensation skandha, just as there are many alternative ways to classify the components of the form dimension. However, any particular classification scheme should be more important than another if it directly relates to the path of cultivation, or better helps people in their cultivation efforts.

For example, in the four-part classification scheme we have just mentioned, clinging feelings are a special category of sensation which involve the fostering of attachments. This category of sensation therefore keeps us addicted to the Desire Realm because it involves clinging to phenomena. Nonclinging, on the other hand, supports meditative states because the renunciate nature of detachment leads to mental quiet. As to disturbed feelings, they arise when you take the five skandhas as an individual self, whereas undisturbed feelings arise when you attain the experience of no-self. Of course when you are trying to attain samadhi, you may not be clinging to sensations and yet they may still disturb you, so these categories can become intertwined. Nevertheless, we have this particular method of categorizing the sensation skandha to help you make progress in meditation and realize your prajna wisdom.

The reason we go to the effort of specifying the various skandha, and their qualities, is to help you tread the path of spiritual cultivation. It is to help you recognize and understand the

functions of the mind, and the sources of attachment and ignorance that blind you from its true nature. The skandhas are not the real thing, but we always mistake them for our true self even though they are just a screen which covers our true nature. Of course, this mistake does not mean we should try to eliminate them, for phenomena will always be here. Rather you must detach from them, and through this detachment they will naturally become purified. This is how you break through the pull of the skandhas.

What you have to realize is that forms and sensations are impermanent phenomena, and so clinging to them is useless in the first place, even though this is how we try to define our reality, because they cannot possibly stay, not even for a moment. Even if we think they are staying, what we are actually experiencing from moment to moment is something entirely new, something completely transformed.

Since the skandha of sensation is impermanent, happiness and suffering are also impermanent; therefore, we should stop hoping for pleasurable sensations and clinging to what is impermanent. We should not attach to anything pleasurable, but we should not reject it, either, which is a mistake cultivators often make. We should also stop trying to reject unpleasurable sensations and just let them die out, too. Through this process of being natural, neither attaching to nor rejecting, the skandhas will *naturally* be purified and we will make progress in our spiritual striving. This is the proper way, the Zen school way to spiritual progress.

The *Heart Sutra* tells us that the form, sensation, conception, volition and consciousness skandhas are all empty. However, ordinary people are confused and ignorant, so they attach to these skandhas and take them to be real, and to be their true self. Even many gurus and yogis fail to achieve more than a partial liberation from one or two of the lower skandhas because they cannot master complete detachment. They do not master prajna transcendental wisdom so as to be able to realize what a skandha is, what the real "you" is. Enlightenment can only be achieved when you liberate yourself from all five aggregates, including the skandha of consciousness. Even then, there are still ten different grades of enlightenment (called bhumis, or the levels of the Bodhisattvas) to cultivate until an awakening into the Tao is complete and perfect.

Unfortunately, there are countless masters, gurus and yogis who believe they have achieved liberation and attained *nirvikalpa samadhi* (ultimate enlightenment) when they have only freed themselves a little bit from the form or sensation skandhas. For instance, unless they really see the Tao, what they consider as "emptiness" is usually only a temporary opening conjured up by their false thoughts. Typically, it still is a false thought, a refined image of emptiness rather than the true voidness of *shunyata*. And what they experience as physical bliss and mental joy are not the ultimate state of nirvanic bliss, but rather just minor realms you can attain from cultivating your chi and mai. Remember that if a practitioner is still experiencing joy and bliss, such as in the lower realms of samadhi, they are still within the skandha of sensation! Hence though many spiritual experiences may seem utterly profound, they are usually just indicative that your false

thoughts are still acting up, and are not the sign of enlightenment. They are not the ultimate attunement to that original, signless true nature of ours.

You may think this explanation is impossible or unlikely, but this teaching is more of a rule than an exception. The frequent but erroneous claim that someone is enlightened is one of the reasons the Zen school requires a master to confirm your realization. Most of the time the great masters just laugh at you and send you back to work at more meditation to free your mind! Hence, the way to guide yourself so this does not happen, is to master the knowledge of the various samadhi and the skandhas. In this way you will never deceive yourself that you are enlightened.

Because it is difficult to make true progress in cultivation when you do not fully follow the correct cultivation principles, it is not too surprising that ordinary practitioners hardly ever gain freedom from the lowest form and sensation aggregates. We saw this in our previous chapter when we analyzed the kung-fu reports of various meditation practitioners. Later, when we turn to more accomplished individuals and read stories of masters radiating light or going through all sorts of hardships, these feats will usually be classified within the lower levels of the first two or three skandhas as well.

To be precise, the skandha of sensation is related to the impressions you automatically impress upon your mind. In other words, feeling is related to *nien*, or mindfulness. For example, having a person "on your mind" may bring you pleasant feelings, even though you are not always thinking about them. This is caused by the operation of the skandha of sensation. Or let us say that you have the thought of scaling a cliff, which causes your feet to tingle or your body to shake. Having that thought will cause these feelings to arise which will affect your body and compel you in a certain way. This is also the sensation skandha in operation. As another instance, if someone continually recites a mantra, then after a long time the mantra will be there without any effort on your part. We can say that this, too, is a result belonging to the sensation aggregate because the impression becomes imprinted on your mind.

The best way to summarize the sensation skandha is to therefore say that it represents the responses of the body and mind—whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral—when they come into contact with any situation. Why does it exist in the first place? The *Surangama Sutra* tells us that it arises as an empty reflection of your false thinking. It is a type of response with no actual true existence, but just arises in response to contact with your false thinking.

When a person cultivates to the point where they finally detach from this skandha, they can attain the ability for the mind to separate from and leave the physical body. In other words, they can generate a thought-borne body that is free of the physical nature. Of course this is similar to the *yin shen* attainment of the Tao school, and to what the Tibetan school calls an illusory body. It is not a real body, just a solidified form of false thought that you can finally achieve by detaching from the form and sensation skandhas. And just as our physical body cannot be considered real,

this type of body cannot be considered real, either.

If you can reach this stage of freeing yourself from the form and sensation skandhas, you will experience an indescribable feeling of comfort and joy which people describe as merging with the universe, or merging with space. We use the terms "merging with space," but of course it is not true emptiness or formlessness yet. While the form skandha has to do with form (or shape, appearance, etc.) and its opposite, which is emptiness, the sensation skandha has to do with contact and its opposite, which is separation. So conquering this skandha means you are able to master some degree of *separating yourself from sensations*. Only if you can separate yourself from the clinging pulls of the sensations can we say that you feel as free as a bird who has just escaped from the imprisonment of a cage.

This is why the individual liberated from the sensation skandha can attain a "body produced by intent," which can roam freely without obstruction. Sometimes in the West people experience a related phenomenon called the astral body or astral double, but it is not exactly the same thing. And because those who experience an astral projection rarely cultivate meditation, they rarely achieve the full measure of the thought-borne body's capabilities.

In Paramhansa Yogananda's autobiography, he spoke of his master, Sri Yukteswar, appearing to him in a tangible body after death much like Jesus' resurrection body. This body materialization attainment was actually more advanced than this stage of the thought-borne body since it could be seen and touched. We can rank Sri Yukteswar's body double as a type of *yang shen* projection or emanation body described in Taoism, rather than invisible and intangible yin shen bodies that Taoism also mentions. Sri Yukteswar said,

> My new body is a perfect copy of the old one. I materialize or dematerialize this form any time at will, much more frequently than I did while on earth. By quick dematerialization, I now travel instantly by light express from planet to planet or, indeed, from astral to causal or to physical cosmos. ... Now my finer fleshly body—which you behold and are even now embracing rather closely!—is resurrected on another finer dream-planet of God. Someday that finer dream-body and finer dream-planet will pass away; they too are not forever. All dream-bubbles must eventually burst at a final wakeful touch. Differentiate, my son Yogananda, between dreams and Reality!1

Sri Yukteswar's attainment, while being similar to the yang shen attainment in Taoism, is also similar to the clean or purified illusory body attainment of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism also has a "coarse," "unclean," or "impure" illusory body attainment that is similar to the yin shen attainment of Taoism, so the schools often speak of similar stages of attainment. Esoteric Buddhism describes the illusory body by saying that it arises in the stage of generation due to a combination of the mind (thoughts) and chi. This means that the skandhas of form and

sensation are still involved with the stage of generation in Tibetan Tantra.

Esoteric Buddhism explains the nature of the illusory, thought-borne body using twelve analogies, saying it is like an illusion, the reflection of the moon, a shadow, a mirage, like a dream body, an echo, a spirit town, a hallucination, the colors of the rainbow, lightening, like bubbles bursting forth from a body of water, and like the reflection of an image in a mirror. All of these analogies stress the fact that it is an unreal creation, just like our regular physical nature. So you must not think that when you generate this spiritual attainment that it is your real body or spiritual being.

Deviant Developments

In the Tibetan school, the cultivation path employs a very particular kind of technology to generate this illusory body, and then tries to purify it so that it becomes yang in nature whereby ordinary people can see and touch it. You are absolutely wrong if you think that this body *has* to appear, or that you must produce it in order to spiritually cultivate. It is just a particular technology, a particular way to cultivate used by the Tibetan Esoteric school, and other schools will use entirely different methods of spiritual cultivation. Sometimes the technology used in a particular school, and the resultant kung-fu achieved, can even be an impediment rather than a help on the cultivation path.

More often than not, people who think they have to cultivate and attain this form body are already too attached, and thus likely to tread mistaken cultivation trails. This is the typical problem with all the form-based esoteric schools such as Taoism, Tantra and yoga. The practitioners in these schools form these subtle attachments and misconceptions, and it ends up distracting them for life after life after life. It is almost better not to describe these paths in the first place because of all the calamities they usually produce. After all, a turtle may be slower than a hare, but if the hare starts playing around in these realms or gets overly attached to this type of technology, the turtle will win the race.

Of course you must not think you can get to this stage and attain this body if you let your jing or chi leak away. As the Taoists say, first there are one hundred days of "laying the foundation," ten months of "pregnancy," and then three years of "suckling the baby" before you can attain this spiritual accomplishment. Several spiritual schools, after their students have successfully laid the proper preparatory foundation in cultivating their chi and mai, have them go into retreat for three years with the purpose of producing this yang shen attainment. They cannot speed up the time required for this attainment to stabilize, but they can eliminate the worldly distractions that would prove a detriment to its achievement. Thus you have to let things proceed at their own speed and yet protect the process of transformation, for everything has its own natural period of proper gestation.

If you planted a garden and tried to pull up the shoots everyday in order to make your plants grow quicker, you would certainly destroy all hopes of producing a fine crop. Thus, unlike what some people propose in the Tao school, where they today teach students to force a microcosmic circulation of their internal chi energies, there is nothing artificial you can do in cultivation that will speed your progress other than to cultivate merit, emptiness and prajna wisdom, and then let things proceed naturally. If the yin shen appears, like a fish that suddenly jumps out of still waters, then so be it. If it does not appear, that is all right, too. In fact, that's probably better when you lack the requisite wisdom to be your own master. No one tells you this, but playing with the yin shen can lead to unfortunate rebirths in the cosmos.

In general, the point is that your mind can attain the ability to separate from the physical body when you transcend the sensation skandha, and you can compare the experience to a bird who finally escapes from its cage. This is an ability that is still playing with the mind, so it is not a correct road of cultivation in itself. You must not ever think that you should try to cultivate out-of-the-body experiences like "astral projection" (which is a yin body), for this is not the road to Tao. In fact*, it is very easy to become mentally unstable by cultivating these phenomena, or to plant the seeds of instability in lives to come, or to be reborn as an asura*.

You should not run after any of these things and hope they happen. In mentioning the ability to separate from the physical body like a bird flying out of a cage, the *Surangama Sutra* is actually talking about *a mental freedom* rather than the attainment of another body of form, for that body still is not the real you. The only reason we have delivered this tiny discourse is to try to link these projective thought attainments with other stages of the cultivation path.

People who are cultivating through the skandha of sensation must be on guard against certain deviations like this, which can easily develop and do often occur. Another type of deviation is to reach a realm of cultivation where your chi and mai are full, upon which you become unbearably sad at seeing even the tiniest insect getting crushed or plant being killed. This may happen if a practitioner reaches a particular stage of chi mai cultivation, but overexerts themselves in their cultivation efforts in order to suppress the mind. Another possibility excess within the sensation skandha is becoming too anxious to excel in cultivation such that you make the courageous, impetuous resolve to surpass all the Buddhas in the very next moment. With your little bit of attainment, you think you can leap the Three Realms in one instant, and become better than all the Buddhas.

Another deviant development is to become excessively proud, haughty, arrogant or self-satisfied with one's cultivation achievements, or to experience such boundless joy that one cannot hold it in check. By giving into such emotions you lose the capability of controlling your own mind. Such people can easily fall into a swoon or start dancing ecstatically in the street. We may think these are saintly states or imagine such people are liberated—and they may also think so themselves—but they are actually demonstrating a deviation from the path which results from a

lack of prajna wisdom when purifying the sensation skandha. Such experiences may also be related to physiological changes in the body, but they are mostly due to mental-emotional problems at this stage of attainment rather than internal organ imbalances. They are due to our thoughts rather than our body, as one might guess from a knowledge of Chinese medicine.

Hindus and Christians practicing *bhakti* yoga (a fervent type of emotional devotional worship) can sometimes explain their momentary experiences of ecstasy as an activation of the skandha of sensation. Another possible explanation is because they *almost* experience the bliss that results from cultivating the first dhyana. But in most cases, *the individuals have simply worked themselves into an emotional fervor without attaining any real stage of spiritual accomplishment*. That is usually what you see. They are individuals who in a passionate state of emotional fervor have lost control over their minds. The actual purpose of the joy of bhakti yoga is to help match with the joy of the first dhyana, and to help transform the sexual desire that arises into the first dhyana state of physical bliss. But if you do not know these principles and just drop into emotions, you end up becoming useless to the world. If you call that spiritual cultivation, how useful is that?

No matter what experiential realm people land in from cultivating the sensation skandha, to identify any of these stages as a real level of accomplishment is a large mistake indeed. You have to remember that reaching enlightenment requires great skill, great wisdom, and great merit, and that it is *a very refined affair*. If you really achieve enlightenment, you can equally function either as a king or even as an army general, but people who lose control of themselves in this type of emotional excess indicate they lack this sort of attainment. They are simply attached to their own emotional realm that they doubtlessly feel is correct, although it doubtless represents a state of mental imbalance.

The *Surangama Sutra* details all sorts of deviant roads you can tread as you try to progress through the skandha of sensation. If an individual who cultivates falls into any of these realms, but does not consider these possible developments as either sainthood or the ultimate end itself, and instead continues practicing with a level head, then they have already banished most of the problem and will continue to make even further cultivation progress. After all, this is only the skandha of sensation; there are three more skandhas to go.

III. THE CONCEPTION SKANDHA

The skandha of conception is also known as the cognition, recognition or perception skandha because it has to do with determined mentation, or effortful thought. It represents conscious thinking which is purposely constructed, no matter whether the mentation be partly coarse or partly fine.

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Another way of saying it, is that the conception skandha represents our mental activity of willfully discriminating matters. The mind is always receiving data from thoughts and the senses. The skandha of cognition is that activity of when the mind categorizes this information into distinctive features. Thus, it represents our mental habit of grasping at characteristics, and so it shares a big part of the responsibility behind our clinging to the false realm of samsara.

Some people say that the conception aggregate is simply the process of recognizing or perceiving an object—such as whether it is blue, long or short. However, this misses the fact that the conception skandha properly involves perception with some extra effort, for the process of mental discrimination of which we are speaking is not a purely passive occurrence. The conception skandha refers to an active *grasping* of characteristics or attributes, so it is the actual mental taking hold of things whether they are thoughts, memories, images, or abstract concepts.

"Thoughts of involvement" describes this skandha well, but thoughts that just come and go without any effort on your part more properly belong to the skandha of volition. This distinction is important, and we will return to it later. To finally awaken to the Tao involves getting rid of excessive mental clinging, and so to awaken to enlightenment we must learn how to free ourselves from the conception skandha.

A perfect example of the conception skandha is the case of cultivation practices used by the Buddhist Pure Land sect—and in Judaism, Islam and Christianity—where people pray with full hearts and minds by putting great energy into their efforts. Sometimes people try to visualize a particular Buddha like Zhunti or Kuan Yin in their cultivation practices, and when you really succeed in visualizing a Buddha or other deity so that the visualized image is as clear as the real thing—meaning you have achieved the visualization attainment—this is an example of the thought strengthening, bolstering and amplification effect represented by the cognition skandha.

On the other hand, if you just sit there and extremely subtle thoughts just fly in and out without effort on your part, this type of mental activity is an example of the skandha of volition. Conception skandha activity is more akin to a coarse pervasiveness rather than the subtle, concealed type of floating thoughts characterized by the skandha of volition.

When an individual finally detaches from the skandha of conception, it means they have made fantastic progress in their meditation such that they might be able to finally "see the Tao," but they have not yet cultivated the entire road to complete awakening. All such aspirants are still operating within the realm of consciousness, and so their false thoughts, although decreased in number, are still moving.

This is how Buddha would characterize the conception skandha: as false thoughts that are still stirring. When we are awake we have the active thinking mind, and when we are asleep we still have our uncontrollable dreams. These are both types of "false thinking." No matter what state

you are in, it is pervaded by the thinking mind and this is the skandha of conception.

Buddha says that someone who has freed themselves from the form and sensation skandhas, but still operating within the conception skandha, can be compared to someone talking in their sleep. When you are talking in your sleep you are still operating with thought. Bystanders sitting by your side can understand what you are saying and doing, but you are not the complete master of your state since you do not actually know what is going on. Although you are at an advanced stage of attainment, you still are not in control of the situation like a master!

If you can break free of the conception skandha, your dreamlike thoughts will dissolve, and your mind will remain the same whether you are awake or asleep. Thus, we sometimes describe this stage by saying you will know no crudities in your mind when you sleep. You cannot accurately say that "dreams will disappear" at this stage, which is what you often hear. Rather, it is more proper to say that whether you are asleep or awake, your mental realm will always remain the same. If you dream you will still remain so clear that you can even make decisions. A Chinese saying runs, "Sages have no dreams, and dullards have no dreams," and the phrase that "sages have no dreams" refers to the fact that there mind is always clear even during the state of sleep.

From this point of view, people say that you no longer dream anymore; everything will seem clear whether you are awake or asleep. While this is not a perfect match of realms, we can begin to understand that Chuang Tzu also knew of this stage of cultivation, for he wrote:

> He does not dream while asleep,
> does not worry while awake,
> does not take satisfaction in eating,
> and his breathing is deep.

Chuang Tzu also wrote this passage, which partially corresponds to other skandhas as well:

> He knows nothing of taking joy in birth nor anything about despising death. He emerges without delight, and returns without a fuss. He comes briskly and he goes briskly, and nothing more. He does not forget where he began nor where he ends. He receives and takes pleasure in it. He forgets about it and hands it back again. This is called not using the mind to repel the Way, and not using the mind to help Heaven.

In the *Surangama Sutra*, Buddha said that the skandha of conception is established by the two great functions of remembering and forgetting; remembering refers to the concreteness of conception, while forgetting means that you can no longer concretely recall a certain thing, which is the absence of a firm discriminative perception. In forgetting, a concept or image of definitive attributes has been replaced by a vague or indefinite form, which is why it is one of the borders of

the skandha of conception. When you can be free of this vagueness you will have finally made even more progress in your cultivation.

You can say that one exhausts or breaks free of the conception skandha when they dissolve away the false thoughts that form its basis. You can see the Tao when this happens, and it will seem as if there are no thoughts moving in the mind, which becomes as empty and pure as a boundless, cloudless sky. The Zen school describes this with the phrase "10,000 miles of clear, cloudless sky," and compares the mind at this stage to a bright, shining mirror.

Since the mind is as clear as a mirror and floating thoughts have been dissolved away, the point of "seeing the Tao," or "seeing the Path" is the point where you can realize the "clear light" described in Tantra. Thus, if you have the requisite prajna, it is akin to the stage of "seeing Truth." When you cultivate the various dhyana with proficiency and then one day turn around within and break through the conception skandha to see their ultimate origins, that's seeing the Tao. If you can do this, after that you will be in the realm of *real* cultivation practice.

Someone who sees the Tao does not get rid of all types of thought in one blow. They still have to purify more subtle and hidden types of false thinking later when they work on purifying the skandha of volition. Cultivating through the conception skandha means the coarse crudities of floating ideas and miscellaneous concepts have disappeared, but the hidden habits of various subtle thought streams still exist, and after awakening to the Tao one must work on purifying these thoughts from the skandha of volition. In other words, after you see the Tao and achieve enlightenment, there is still more cultivation work to go.

When you break through or purify the skandha of conception, your mind will seem extremely clean and you will reach a mental realm wherein it is as if there is no more dust and dirt on the mind. A similar result can be attained from cultivating the various dhyana, but this realm is really pure. Nevertheless, this state of emptiness achievement is not yet the stage of ultimate illumination. As the First Panchem Lama warned:

> The mind that is free from conceptualization
> Is merely a level of deceptive mind;
> It is not the mind's ultimate nature.
> Therefore seek instruction from qualified masters.

You are not finally free of mental afflictions, nor have you totally finished with false thought when you break through the conception skandha to see the Tao and realize a stage of enlightenment. It only means that your superficial false thoughts have been dissolved away. In other words, the realm of coarse thinking we call floating conceptions has been dissolved away or become purified. The resultant realm is so clean compared to our ordinary mentality that many people mistake it for the complete Tao and take this seemingly stainless mind, which is still only a

minor stage of emptiness, as the realm of complete enlightenment.

We can call this a stage of Hinayana attainment, and it is akin to the Taoist sequence of transforming shen into emptiness because the mind has finally reached a realm of profound emptiness. But remember that this accomplishment—the Hinayana enlightenment—is not the whole journey, because even the Tao school says you have to break this realm of emptiness and return it to the Tao.

It is natural to mistake this realm for complete enlightenment because Buddhahood is so often described as stainless, empty and pure. However, at this point you still cannot entirely rid yourself of mental afflictions—which still arise because the volition skandha is not yet purified—nor can you escape the rounds of transmigration. You are not completely stainless, empty and pure because there is still some remainder. Thus, you cannot act the complete master of birth and death. This realm of emptiness is quite an accomplishment beyond what most saints and sages ever attain, and yet it is not yet the complete spiritual attainment.

Nevertheless, at this point you might gain the ability to know which realm you will land in after your death, whether you will be reborn as a human, heavenly being, Form Realm inhabitant, and so on, and you will attain the ability to see some of your past lives. Of course, the extent to which you will be able to view the past will be limited because your attainment is limited, but as you progress even further with spiritual practice and spiritual progress, you will be able to investigate things so extensively that you can view your lives through numerous eons.

When we say that you will know where you will be reborn next, this actually means that you will be able to (a limited degree) determine, dependent upon your own will, where you will go to be reborn next. If you have a very strong mind, you might be able to gain a little bit of control over your entry points in the ceaseless stream of birth and death, anyway. But you will not yet have a complete or very fluid control over the entire process. Upon breaking through the conception skandha, you will attain a great extent of control, but not complete control over the process.

At this stage you will also be presented with various temptations such as indulging in superpowers, dropping into sexual desire once again, or adopting the view that everything is meaningless. These temptations might lead to you breaking the normal disciplinary rules of conduct, and then retrogressing from this high stage of attainment. The temptations to accept a false school of thinking and start down a deviant road of practice, because of visitations from asuras and other beings wishing to lead you astray, grows extremely large at this stage; all sorts of beings will come to bother you because they do not want you to succeed.

Consider that if you finally succeed in awakening, then they will lose their hold over you. Furthermore, they will lose their dominion over any other beings you will attempt to lead to spiritual liberation because of any vows of compassion. Therefore, you must continue to cultivate

prajna wisdom and merit even at this advanced stage of spiritual attainment. In cultivation you must always cultivate both samadhi and wisdom in equal amounts; samadhi without prajna wisdom will end up leading you astray. Thus, you must not take this stage as the ultimate nor tread a forked spiritual path that will lead to your own cultivation downfall. At this stage of accomplishment, so many beings in the universe have their hopes depending upon you.

IV. THE VOLITION SKANDHA

None of the names used to designate the "volition" skandha are very appropriate for indicating its full meaning, and so we have a whole list of alternative titles including the aggregate of impulses, motivational dispositions, formation, synthesis, compositional factors, habitual impulses, impulsive forces, karmic formations, mental volitions, and so forth. Perhaps someone can come up with an even better descriptive title for the fourth aggregate, which would be a boon for cultivation understanding, but for now we will adopt the route of simplicity and use the term "volition."

The volition skandha is perhaps the most difficult of all the skandhas to fully comprehend because of the diverse nature of its composition and the subtleties of the phenomena it encompasses. In general, we can say there are approximately one hundred factors, or dharmas, which are distributed among the form, sensation, conception, volition and consciousness skandhas. Maitreya Bodhisattva originally summarized Shakyamuni's teachings into 660 such categories, which can be found in the *Yogacarabhumi Sastra*. Since this number was too unwieldy, Vasubandhu and Asanga reduced this to a more manageable number of dharmas. If you had to enumerate all these factors, you'd find most of them falling within the skandha of volition. These are also the most difficult factors to explain.

How can we properly describe this skandha? The volition skandha represents forces that bring about activity, so its major characteristic is that it includes *factors and forces that impel us to action*. Hence, it includes conditions of deep "psychic stirring," factors that impel the mind and body to act and thereby further complicate the on-going net of karma. While this aggregate largely includes conditions that are similar to mind, there are also some component factors of this skandha that are involved with the material world. Thus, the components of the volition skandha are not entirely of a single type, and yet they share the common characteristic that they may impel you, which is to further enmesh you within the net of karma. This is why the volition skandha is often called the aggregate of impulse.

A common way to describe the volition aggregate is to say that it represents all the deep habitual traits that create and perpetuate our motivations and conscious impulses. Most of the various mental events associated with the skandha of volitional forces satisfy this description, although the skandha includes special physical principles, like time and momentum, which the human mind

has no way to control. In total, there are approximately fifty-one mental states or occurrences belonging to this skandha, and it also includes the basic characteristics of attention and memory.

There are various categories into which we can separate the mental events associated with the volition skandha. The *Abhidharmakosabhasya*, for instance, divides them into the categories of omnipresent, virtuous, nonvirtuous, emotionally afflicted, lesser emotional and variable mental factors. According to the Mahayana school of Abhidharma, the same events can be divided into omnipresent, object-determining, virtuous, basic emotional, proximate emotional and variable mental factors.

We do not need to memorize these various categories, but must simply note that there are different ways in which we can group the same mental factors of the volition skandha just as we saw different possibilities for categorizing the component factors within the skandha of sensation. As we saw earlier, there are always a variety of different ways in which you can cut the same cake, meaning that there are alternate means for classifying the same material.

Now when people say that you are a dharma practitioner or cultivator, this does not mean that you are a meditator, but actually means that you are cultivating your behavior. Being a cultivator means you are trying to watch your thoughts, words and actions and trying to improve them so that they become purely virtuous. This is what spiritual cultivation ultimately comes down to.

Naturally you can only practice improving your behavior if you practice watching your thoughts, for it is your thoughts which give rise to your behavior. Since thoughts often arise from habit, sometimes it is the habit stream behind your thoughts that needs to be policed or purified. Even so, it is the mind (or psychological aspect) which gives birth to your actions, *so this is what you must ultimately cultivate in order to become a better human being*. You do not cultivate religion to become a better human being; you cultivate your mind and behavior.

Another way of saying this is that you must cultivate the sense of presence on the path of spirituality, which is another word for the clarity of mental awareness that exists without ignorance or confusion. If you have presence of mind then you can catch yourself like a third person observer, and cease any bad thoughts or actions before they go too far. So this is another way, although quite abbreviated and simplified, to describe the spiritual path of cultivation.

Whatever you call it or however you describe it, you must remember that the mind is the origin of our behavior. In other words,

> Behavior is thoughts that are expressed.

Thus, the true meaning of "practicing dharma" or "cultivating spiritual practice" means correcting your behavior, which in turn means first correcting your thoughts and conceptual impulses. To correct your actions, you have to correct what motivates your behavior in the first place, so spiritual cultivation comes down to purifying the mind. If the mind becomes purified then the behavior that depends upon it will become purified as well. This is the purpose of samadhi and prajna wisdom—in effect, to help you attain a presence of mind, called emptiness or selflessness, which will in turn help you transform your behavior.

The volition skandha refers to the impulsive or habitual factors you must correct in order to perfect your mind and behavior, and the extensive list of such factors brings to light the need for a great vow on the cultivation path. When you make the vow to cultivate and change yourself, and to help save others, then with the effort of cultivation (which includes policing yourself), your behavior will automatically start to line up in the direction of your vow. The Buddhas always help people who are sincere in establishing virtuous vows, therefore you need a vow at the beginning of your cultivation practice to set the standards for your behavior to follow. After all, the purpose of the spiritual path is to enable you to perfect yourself and become a true human being.

As we will see in several cases, making a vow has been responsible for the ultimate success of many people on the cultivation path who would otherwise have quit practicing, and it can therefore be cited as the ultimate reason for their success. Without the determination required to discharge a vow, most people will definitely slacken in their cultivation efforts. Yet even when you succeed in cultivation, you still need a vow to keep working for the benefit of others because the task is so troublesome. In fact, you can only become a Buddha if you make the vow to liberate others rather than just focus on liberating yourself.

The volition skandha, which is translated as "sying" in Chinese, means "a force that can move things." This is why we say it is the skandha of impulses or "motivational dispositions." But this concept of movement does not just refer to the mind, for it also refers to physical matter as well. For example, the stars, atoms, the earth, electricity and everything else in the universe are constantly moving. The first hexagram of the *I-Ching* is the image of pure yang ("Heaven"), which represents this fact, and so this first hexagram teaches us that the entire universe is in constant motion. From a very high viewpoint, even nonmotion is considered a special phenomenon of motion, for it is just a type of relatively slower motion when compared to the fundamental nature that never moves. This is how you have to view the factors belonging to the skandha of volition: they are all involved with motion.

If there were actually no motion in the universe, it would be destroyed in an instant. Since it is not dead, we can surmise that the cosmos is moving everywhere. That is also why we cannot identify with any part of the universe as being our true self, for our true or real self is a real realm that by definition never moves or changes. Since a state which changes has already become

extinct (what it was before has become “empty”), changing states can never be our fundamental nature, otherwise that sort of fundamental nature would be subject to extinction.

Wherever there is change there is movement, and wherever there is movement there is change, so a primary goal in cultivation is to try and detach from transient phenomena and their changes to find that real thing which does not move, that real thing which is beyond movement and nonmovement. That original fundamental thing without motion or impurity is what we awaken to when we reach self-realization. Since all of the skandhas involve movement, Thus, they cannot be that True Self. Nothing that moves can be the True self, so as Buddha often said, you must not put any faith in any of the aggregates. They are not the real you, they are not the true fundamental self. They themselves are just dependent constructions.

When you make the decision to tread the spiritual path, you must realize that the path of spiritual cultivation first starts with behavior. The Mahayana stage of Study and Merit Accumulation, which is the first leg of the path, starts from the task of improving your behavior to generate merit and then progresses to involve meditation and other cultivation methods for purifying and investigating mind. All along the way you must cultivate your behavior, but once a practitioner breaks through to realize our original mind or dharmakaya, do you think you can dispense with this emphasis on behavior?

The cultivation path is behavior all along the way, and even after awakening to enlightenment there is nothing to do but continue perfecting this behavior and its ability to be skillfully expressed. After all, once you reach enlightenment there is no Fourth Realm you can go to in order to take an absolute rest, so the challenge ahead is to perfectly bring that enlightenment into all your infinite forms of functioning, and in such a way that these expressions also enlighten all other sentient beings. Since you will always be functioning in this universe, the ideal is to perfect your functioning behavior since this is what ultimately exhibits the Tao. If you think someone is a true cultivator, go and watch his or her behavior!

Phenomena are never going to disappear in the universe, even though phenomena are unreal creations. Even though they are unreal in the sense of being unproduced, they will always continue to be, and so you must learn to accept this aspect of the Tao and deal with it. If you are really a Buddha you will not stay in emptiness after Enlightenment, but devote yourself to skillfully expressing the Tao through your behavior in this world of empty forms and phenomena, trying to help beings that also do not really exist in the ultimate sense.

Karma and interdependent origination will always be here, so you have to master this aspect of false existence as well as the aspect of true emptiness. The two together make “Tao,” not just emptiness alone. Hence, in mastering the existence aspect of the Tao, your behavior must exhibit what we call “skillful means,” which is the exercise of boundless helpful enlightening compassion.

The path of spiritual cultivation is therefore a perfect circle without seams: it first starts with better behavior and it ends with even better behavior. The beginning is the ending, and the journey in-between is virtuous behavior as well, so in actual fact there is no beginning and ending! The fruit of the path is the process of the path, and this *is* the path! Using the analogy of the circle once again, imagine an arbitrary point on a circle's circumference becoming the same ending point of a path traveled on that same circumference. This case, of opposites becoming one another, can represent the path of cultivation that starts with behavior, is accomplished through behavior, and ends as a path of exhibiting behavior.

On the side of conventional existence, sentient beings and the realm of interdependent arising will always exist, so you have to learn how to exercise your great functioning in this illusory realm of false existence. In employing skillful means to accomplish great deeds, it may seem to others that you are acting in certain strange and complicated ways when trying to transform the momentum of complicated situations for the better. Your behavior will sometimes seem foolish, extraordinary, crazy or incomprehensible to others who lack prajna wisdom and cannot see the larger picture, but this is why enlightened behavior is sometimes called incomprehensible "skillful means."

The Emptiness of Phenomena

The task of someone who is working towards enlightenment, or exhibiting enlightenment, is how to skillfully deal with the world of phenomena. This is a strange task considering that phenomena are empty of true existence, but this task must be done because the conventional realm of interdependent origination—defined through karma—always is, and this is the realm where your functioning operates. This realm will always be in some form or another, but always it will be empty of true existence, and we can understand this emptiness through multiple means.

As an example, the earth is moving through space at an incredibly fast rate, and it is simultaneously rotating at an incredible speed as well. However, you cannot feel any of these incredibly fast motions at all. Hence, in effect, the greatest motion actually appears as if there is no motion at all! This state of "non-motion" is therefore actually a type of motion, so the two are basically the same. Let us remember this example, and put it to the side. It will help us understand how seemingly solid form is actually the same as emptiness.

If we take moving phenomena down to the tiniest unit of time, we can also find that motion does not really exist either. Only emptiness exists rather than a moving phenomena, which upon analysis lacks any true signs of motion. You can find this when you analyze motion using time slices so small that no motion can exist. How can these slices of nonmotion add up to produce a realm of motion?

Another way to prove the emptiness of motion is to consider the entire universe as a whole. If we

consider the universe as a shimmering whole, everything is moving within it. But if we are actually considering the cosmos as a whole, then what is *it* moving in relation to? We cannot compare it to any fixed frame of reference outside of itself, so we can say that there is no ultimate motion. If we consider it as a whole, we cannot even say that it is large or small, because if you say it is large or small, it is large or small in comparison to *what*? That "what" is already included within it since you are talking about everything, so there is nothing outside of it to make the comparison! From these perspectives, we can say motion is really nonmotion, that form is emptiness, and both are ultimately empty.

The *Heart Sutra* tells us that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form, form is no different than emptiness and emptiness is no different than form." This teaching is trying to help us realize this same principle, and to penetrate to that ultimate substrate or foundational essence which prepositionally stands behind form and emptiness. The extreme of form appears as if it is emptiness, and the extreme of emptiness seems as if it is form. So the greatest emptiness can ultimately become wondrous existence, even though wondrous existence is an empty maya appearance display without any true substantial reality! It is just a display without any true essence or substance, and that is our conventional world and how advanced spiritual cultivators view it.

The purpose of this discussion is to tell you that you should not go grabbing hold of some experiential realm in cultivation because you think that it is Tao, or that some state of samadhi is true enlightenment. All the mental experiential realms are just similar maya constructions lacking any true reality. They are all the realms of falsity which seem to be real things, but which are not. When you achieve Tao you are outside of the Three Realms, and yet you have to cultivate the Middle Way, which accepts the phenomenal world. The mind does not attach to the emptiness of the dharmakaya, and it does not abide in the phenomenal realm as well. It does not repose or abide anywhere, and thus *it does not even know itself*. The ultimate host, or master, cannot itself be known!

These principles can be explained through the example of a pin pushed to penetrate through the layers of an onion to its center. As the pin progresses inwards, the onion layers become thinner and thinner. This thinning is akin to experiencing higher and higher levels of samadhi, or more refined states of matter and existence. When you finally reach the center of the onion, however, there is nothing there except emptiness! There is only emptiness rather than any layers of form (meaning states of consciousness), and so the extreme of form is emptiness *and this emptiness is the ground state support of form*. Push past the empty center of an onion just a little bit, which is akin to abandoning true emptiness for any experiential realm, and you end up with form again. It can be subtle or refined form, but it is form nonetheless; emptiness becomes form just as form became emptiness, and hence the two must ultimately be the same.

Thus, the extreme of emptiness is actually form, and the extreme of form is emptiness. The two

are not inversions of each other but are actually mutually inclusive. What we have discussed only hints at the true nature of the relationship. In fact, the exact principle we are trying to get at belongs to the realm of metaphysics, and is related to how the true nature can give birth to an unreal maya realm of illusion that seems real. But of course, that emptiness is not the duality emptiness of form indicated here.

Buddhism contains many principles like this which modern science has not yet reached. This is another reason why Buddhism, free of the religious overtones people have put upon it, should be considered a science rather than a religion. The challenge for scientists is the need to cultivate samadhi and prajna wisdom to be able to comprehend Buddhism's highest teachings, and until that happens, they will simply have to keep investigating the world of form and step-by-step confirm all these principles which Buddhism has elucidated.

According to the principle of dualistic extremes, in the ultimate stage we can say that motion is the same as nonmotion, and nonmotion is the same as motion. We have already seen that form is the same as emptiness and emptiness is the same as form, but in a more supernal sense, the same goes for the skandhas of sensation, conception, consciousness and volition.

In other words, sensation is no different than emptiness and emptiness is the true ultimate nature of sensation, conception is the same as emptiness and emptiness is the fundamental essence of conception, volition is the same as emptiness and emptiness is the true fundamental nature of volition. Even consciousness is ultimately the same as emptiness just as emptiness is the true fundamental nature of consciousness; true emptiness gives birth to consciousness, which itself is a false projection of primordial, empty awareness. This is why the Zen school says that prajna wisdom is still considered a guest of the fundamental nature, and not the ultimate host. In short, the skandhas all originate from emptiness just as the four elements originate from emptiness, for emptiness (voidness) is our best description of the true fundamental nature.

When many people cultivate, however, they forget that everything is fundamentally empty or void. Rather than let delusion depart naturally, they assume that ignorance is real and try to somehow erase it, or replace one illusory realm for another. They do not know how to let go of everything. Hence, they foolishly cultivate with the idea of somehow erasing their thoughts, such as trying to forcefully cleanse the central skandha of conception.

People always set out to free themselves from transient coarse thoughts in order to realize some stage of mental emptiness, but until they see the Tao, the way they choose to do so is always incorrect. It is always incorrect because it involves the effort of creating something, and it is only when you reach the state of seeing your true nature called "seeing the Tao," that you will finally know what the true path of mindlessness or emptiness actually means. So when even a high stage practitioner attains samadhi and thinks their mind is not moving, they are really just kidding themselves, since their mind is simply moving slower than they can detect. This is not the real

emptiness of Tao, the true dharmakaya realization. It is just a more refined phenomenal realm of stillness or peace according to the conventional world, and this nonmotion is still a form of motion.

In the same manner, when we think there is silence, or "the absence of sound," it is actually just subtle sound. It is the sound of no sound, which is also a type of sound, and not the emptiness of sound. Both these extremes remain within the realm of dualities, but Tao is outside of all that. Tao is that fundamental, empty formlessness which is truly empty and clear, and therefore is capable of knowing there is sound or no sound! Nevertheless, even though sound and no sound are both unreal, we can use the silence of no sound as an expedient focal point of our cultivation since it phenomenologically "resembles" the Tao.

This is a valid approach in cultivation as long as we do not forget this principle as well as what we are ultimately trying to do. We can use mental silence as a means to attain samadhi, which although being another equivalent falsity, enables us to have enough presence of mind to use our prajna wisdom to turn around and realize our true nature. So there is nothing wrong with using the false to cultivate the real, just as long as you remember what you are doing!

We can use either silence or sound in our practice of spiritual cultivation. We can either as an expedient means, an expedient stepping-stone to help us make further progress on the spiritual path. It is true that even this so-called "progress" is a fiction because you *are* already enlightened, so you cannot become closer to this intrinsic enlightenment from an ontological sense because you already have it. In fact you can never lose it, but just refuse to realize it.

Thus we have the conventional sphere of ignorance, and a road of gradual practice that will someday lead to a revolution in your mind wherein you can abandon this unreal ignorance that screens true reality, and then awaken to realize who's actually doing all this knowing. This is when you will be able to jump out of this triple realm characterized by birth and death, which is also known as dependent arising. This is when you will "see the Tao" or see true nature and know how you should properly function.

These principle of an extreme becoming its opposite, such as a yin becoming a yang or even enlightenment becoming nonenlightenment, holds throughout the universe. And this principle is something we can use to our advantage in spiritual cultivation. For instance, if you can detach from mental and physical suffering, you may be able to reach its opposite, which is mental joy and physical bliss.

Mental joy and bliss support the attainment of samadhi, so cultivating these positive aspects of existence can help on the road of spiritual cultivation. But until you reach enlightenment, joy and bliss are also considered impediments on the spiritual path for which one must learn detachment. This is the very reason they are abandoned in favor of yet higher tranquility and equanimity

(peace and calm) when you are trying to reach the highest realms of samadhi. If you try to hold onto joy and bliss because of incomplete or improper spiritual teachings—and remember that this *does indeed happen* in the case of many sages or saints—you are just keeping yourself trapped at a lower stage of spiritual attainment. It is really that simple.

Aside from what is included in the form, sensation, and conception aggregates, the volition skandha is the aggregate that is comprised of all the other psychological events we experience, as well as any other unaccounted for phenomenal factors such as consciousness, which do not correspond to mind. For instance, the earth and the stars are continually moving; this movement is an independent phenomenon that does not correspond to the mind, and so speed and momentum belong to the volition skandha because they are independent phenomena that do not correspond to the mind.

When you reach the stage of a Buddha, you can actually change some of these factors "not associated with mind;" however, this type of change is beyond our normal comprehension. It is not the change brought about by superpowers and psychic abilities like you see in the movies, for that's small potatoes compared to the real thing. Nor does this refer to time travel or other cases of science fiction nonsense. This type of ability is so incomprehensible that we cannot even go into it. If you want to get a taste for it, you should read the *Vimalakirti Sutra* or *Flower Ornament Sutra*.

Thus, the volition aggregate is comprised of some nonmental events, and an entire list of psychological forces that can either be good or bad, virtuous or nonvirtuous. In particular, the volition skandha includes the tiny and almost invisible flashing random thoughts of mind, which incessantly come and go, moving by themselves without any effort on our part. The Zen school typically speaks of random or illusory thoughts, but this usually refers to thoughts of a more concrete nature, such as those belonging to the sixth consciousness or the skandha of conception. Thus, you can already understand that the mental factors within the skandha of volition are of a very fine and subtle nature, and therefore hard to purify through cultivation, especially since most of them correspond to habitual energy streams that are hard to grab hold of at the root.

You can take the thoughts within the skandha of conception and make them into something virtuous, good, wholesome and positive, or you can make them into something evil, bad and unwholesome. However, this is much harder to do with the skandha of volition because you cannot always be clear about what is going within the deep layers of your mind. Nevertheless, the volitional factors of subtle mentation can be classified as either good or bad as well. Just as you can use your false thoughts of mind to practice a particular visualization and arrive at samadhi, a positive state, you can let your subtle thoughts control you and do something terrible in life, or even go insane.

The Mahayana Abhidharma of Vasubandhu specifies the following factors of the volition

skandha. First, there are "ten omnipresent mental events" accompanying all states of mind. These are *always-present mental events that occur in every moment of mental activity* (*citta*). All conscious states have these omnipresent mental factors present, but their proportion and strength depends on your particular state of consciousness. The Abhidharma teachings even say there are as many as eighty-nine varieties of consciousness!

People are fond of recalling Abraham Maslow's list of essential needs for an individual's survival, or Joseph Campbell's list of basic human motives (the drive to eat, the drive to procreate, the impulse to conquer, and compassion) and other systems of classification, and they speculate that these motives underlie all human endeavors. However, these omnipresent mental factors *are the real underlying strata of motivation, for these are the factors present in every state of mind*.

Even in high stages of meditation, it is sometimes difficult to spot the presence or discern the exact sequence of these subtle omnipresent factors, yet they are always there. In fact, the teachings about these factors which we are revealing has resulted from a degree of insightful analysis more refined and profound than anything modern psychology can ever possibly come up with. The fact that these mental factors are always present, but hard to distinguish, does not negate the truth of their existence, because the situation is akin to a soup having one final taste. The soup may have one taste, yet its flavor represents a complex blend of many different, separate ingredients.

While a common man might not be able to tell what is in a soup from the taste alone, there are indeed some people who not only can recognize all of the soup's individual ingredients, but also their exact proportions in the mixture as well! For instance, the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna could at one taste recognize the seventy separate ingredients, and their exact proportions, in an Indian formula for producing invisibility—that's how great was his degree of insight. Thus, if one is extremely attentive with insight analysis and proficient at samadhi attainments, they will be able to ultimately distinguish the subtle mental factors which make up the real psychology of the individual, which is how all these factors were identified in the first place. They were not created by academics trying to think things up, but were noticed by individuals with samadhi and wisdom attainments who revealed what their observations had discovered.

If you want to investigate the mind, you will have to develop samadhi and prajna wisdom to perform any sort of advanced or accurate investigations. So if people in the fields of psychology and psychiatry want to study the mind, they should strive to study the Buddhist classification scheme and match these findings with their own *personal meditative attainments*. One glance at Xuan Zang's *Doctrine of Mere Consciousness* quickly shows that what modern psychology thinks it has discovered is but child's play compared to what cultivation science can determine. Therefore if you want to accomplish all sorts of valuable investigations involving the mind, it is mandatory that you cultivate to attain both samadhi and prajna wisdom.

The Ten Omnipresent Factors

When we analyze the ten omnipresent mental factors that accompany all states of mind and belong to the skandha of volition, we find that they can be divided into two groups of five: the (1) basic omnipresent factors and (2) object-determining events (mental states which determine an object). The five basic omnipresent events which are present no matter what activity the mind is involved with, include:

(1) attention, mental engagement, or intentional action (concentration)
(2) contact
(3) feeling, or sensation
(4) perception, cognition or discrimination
(5) intention, or volition (also called penetration)

Contact

Since these are omnipresent events which accompany every state of mind, and since spiritual cultivation involves liberating ourselves from attachment to various mental states, we should explain a little of the nature of these five omnipresent factors. For instance, *contact* is an awareness bringing mind and objects together in such a way that mental functions "touch" the object. So *contact* is the phenomenon of connecting the mind to an object, but in such a way that prevents other thoughts from disturbing the process of cognition. For a physical rather than mental example, when you hold something and the awareness of touch arises, that's contact. It is when you have an object, touch, and awareness coming together.

Sensation

Contact forms the basis for *sensation*, another of the basic five omnipresent mental factors. *Sensation* is the distinguishing that arises when the sense organs of your body, the outside world (some objective sense field), and the corresponding sense-consciousness all come together.

You are always involved in sensation of some type, and at the very earliest stages of cultivation it is very difficult to free yourself from attachment to the deeper aspects of this omnipresent factor. But this is one of the cultivation tasks confronting you after you have seen the Tao and reached the level of cultivation where you are breaking free from, and thereby "purifying" the skandha of volition.

While contact is the result of a sense organ linking together an object and the mind, *sensation* is the internal *feeling* or inner mental state that arises because of this contact. The type of feeling we are distinguishing here is different than the external physical states arising from contact—such as hotness or coldness—for the feeling here is an internal mental state. As to the coarse physical

states of contact, you have largely freed yourself from this type of stimulation when you have detached from the physical body and purified yourself from the pulls of the form and sensation skandhas. Here we are talking about mental states even more subtle than involved with these skandhas or even the skandha of conception, and as you become more independent of such forces, imagine the true mental freedom you will experience as the corresponding mental attachments melt away.

As stated, this omnipresent factor of sensation represents a very subtle, internal mental state, like when you experience a certain situation until it produces a sort of invisible happy or unhappy undertone. The three basic sensations that can be produced include painfulness or suffering or unhappiness, pleasantness or joyfulness or happiness, or plain neutrality (neither suffering nor pleasant). The lesson about the many possible divisions of the sensation skandha also applies here in that there are many ways to subdivide the omnipresent factor of feeling or sensation. Using sight as our example, we can understand that contact means that the eye, a visible object, and the eye-consciousness come together. Contact depends upon three elements coming together, and then gives rise to the factor of feeling or sensation that can be painful, pleasant or neutral.

Discrimination

Perception or *cognition* is yet another omnipresent factor that refers to the process of grasping the signs of a sense-object. With perception you are one-pointedly grasping at what is offered to you through the senses. Hence, perception is the factor of *discrimination*, the process of apprehending experience through the six senses, and it has parallels to the functions of the conception skandha. This omnipresent factor allows your mind to realize something concrete, which means to know something. Basically, discrimination is that activity which allows you to conceptualize the feelings of the mind.

The contact you make, the perception that is generated, and the sensations that arise—all of these things are driven by your karma. Karmic force is responsible for bringing you in touch with certain situations and for generating all the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings you perceive. Karma is omnipresent, and so these factors are omnipresent as well. Spiritual cultivation can thus be interpreted from this aspect rarely mentioned—as a means of purifying your karma so that you can detach from, or purify all these factors.

Since these omnipresent factors are mental phenomena, cultivation essentially means purifying these deep-rooted bases of your mental activities and behavior. Therefore, you must not ever mistake spiritual cultivation for the process of attaining superpowers and samadhi. Rather, *this* effort of purifying your mental and physical behavior at their deepest roots is the *real* process of spiritual cultivation. The spiritual path is as ordinary as this, and it is as hard as this. We have only described the process in a different manner from what you are used to hearing by going into these "microscopic details," but this detailed explanation is nonetheless valid. If the spiritual path

is a genuine authentic affair, in fact you should and must be able to describe it from many angles such as this rather than just take things on faith alone as is preached in many religions.

All the meditation methods you can practice can be used to help you accomplish the great task of spiritual cultivation, and if you complete this task you will function at oneness with the Tao. If you cultivate fully and correctly, you can abandon primordial ignorance, become free of birth and death, and achieve seamless union with your original nature because from mind-moment to mind-moment you will be pure, clear and absent of thoughts—such as even the notion of being an independent ego. You have never left the original nature for one instant, however, so "becoming one with it" is just a figure of speech. The fact that "each mind-moment will become fully virtuous through and through" can also be taken as a description of this great achievement, and in the same manner this describes the process of cultivation but can be taken as a figure of speech as well.

Ordinary people may say they want to become better beings and change their thoughts and behavior when they go to weekly religious services and even various self-development seminars, but in no way do their efforts reach the depths presented here unless they are actively involved with meditation. In fact, most people are usually abiding in either one of two states: the thinking mentation of coarse discrimination, or sleeping. Thus, the process of discrimination we find represented in the skandha of volition is a kind of extremely strong, subtle habit energy that people carry around with them no matter what type of spiritual practices they follow.

Discrimination is like a river of rushing waters whose flow you cannot seem to break. You could try to drink alcohol in an attempt to "drown" or forget your sorrows as well, but they wouldn't go away from such an attempt either. So discrimination is a pervasive factor you find within consciousness, and only through the process of deep spiritual cultivation can you begin to make a dent in freeing yourself from the deep habitual attachment to this omnipresent factor of mind. How do you accomplish this? Through cultivating samadhi and prajna transcendental wisdom.

We always say in spiritual training that we want to stop our thoughts and become peaceful inside, or that we want to experience serenity. All sentient beings want to experience peace and calm, but they always feel that they have no way to stop their mental afflictions to get there. First, they are mistaken in assuming that stopping thoughts is the correct method for attaining mental peace and secondly, they are lying to themselves that their thoughts will not go away because their thoughts are always disappearing without effort.

We do not have to worry whether or not thoughts will arise and then leave; all we have to do is stop attaching to them and they will depart, because this is what always happens. That is the nature of the triple world: everything within is impermanent, so thoughts must go. Therefore if you do not give thoughts any energy then they will subsequently die down. Then your prajna wisdom will shine and without distractions will be free to realize the true nature of the mind.

All the world's cultivation schools always talk about emptiness, selflessness and nonego, and people who meditate sometimes reach a point where they say they feel pure, empty, clean and clear. This is a thought, too, so this is not being empty. Remember that true emptiness is being empty of everything, including the notion of emptiness!

If you therefore want to get rid of thoughts, you must get rid of this thought of emptiness and clarity, too! You even have to get to the stage where there is not a "you" experiencing anything, for this is true emptiness or selflessness. Hence, the path of cultivation does not require you to crush or expel the thoughts that come to you, for they will be gone the next moment and empty themselves! All you have to do is watch them, as a bystander or third person observer who does not become involved with them, and then they will naturally depart.

In spiritual cultivation, all you have to do is continue shining prajna observational awareness on your thoughts without becoming involved, and they will all naturally die out to leave you empty, pure, calm and peaceful. This is the method of being in tune with the true mind called "preserving well the moment of mind." Whether you practice Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Jainism, Shintoism and so forth, this is the proper way of moment-by-moment spiritual practice. This is the Way, this is it. All that spiritual methods do is help train you to do this better and better so that one day you will no longer have any false divisions between yourself and the fundamental nature. That's the day you spiritually "awaken."

When you think about it carefully, thoughts come to you and then they leave for good. Once they are gone and you think about them again, you can then say they are back. First, you have a thought and then it leaves. When it leaves, you are empty. So you are empty but then you think, "Oh, I had *that* thought," and at that very moment, you have brought it about so that the thought returns again. Thoughts were there and then departed, but then you retrieved them. Of course, afterwards they will depart once again. Thus, they only return because you have kept an attachment to them and called them into being.

It is okay if thoughts arise—for they always will and you need them—but you should not attach to them. You should not abide in them, which is why we say that in the process of cultivation you have to forget thoughts and then forget your awareness of emptiness. You do not want anything left but the stainlessness of awareness, and you cannot reach the purity of Tao if you are always interjecting the pollution of attachment.

From these principles you should also know that there is something ultimate behind thoughts and awareness that has never left you even though your thoughts all come and go. That thing that never moves knows thoughts are there, and knows when thoughts are gone. *This is the ultimate thing you are trying to find in spiritual cultivation*. That is what you are trying to recognize. This is the foundational essence that is empty by nature and yet has the ability to manifest all these thoughts. That empty formlessness is the true nature of the mind.

Spiritual cultivation—of each and every genuine religion—is the process of trying to find that fundamental, ultimate source which we call the original nature, or Mind. We call it Mind because it gives birth to awareness and prepositionally stands behind thoughts and this awareness. Cultivation does not try to analyze thoughts with discrimination, like psychology or psychiatry, but tries to find that thing which has the capacity to know and be aware. It tries to find that ultimate one which gives birth to thoughts. This is what is behind existence and nonexistence, birth and death, being and nonbeing, or life and the cosmos. Cultivation tries to find that original nature which gives birth to all of this, and we say it is empty or formless because it is none of these things and yet stands behind them all. Your job on the path of spiritual cultivation is to find that *one single* original enlightened essence.

What does discrimination have to do with all this? The omnipresent factor of discrimination grasps the signs of a sense-object and apprehends experience. While in cultivation you must cultivate the awareness aspect of discrimination, you must not cultivate the grasping aspect that holds you or binds you in thought. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, "you must cultivate a mind that abides nowhere."

Attention

Attention is the next omnipresent mental factor and we can define it as the "entering into" done by the mind, such as the entering into of a thought. Since it is the movement of the mind toward an object, or the arousing of the mind that directs it towards an object, *attention* is a form of intentional *mental engagement*. This is a quite different factor than consciousness itself, because *mental engagement* refers to what is done with your mental attention. It is mental attention on an object, or basic mental engagement.

Volition

To finish up with these initial five omnipresent mental factors, we can describe the fifth factor of *volition* or *intention* as a form of penetrative "psychic stirring." The force of volition operating is when you do not have to force yourself to think about something because a thought is already there by itself. Hence, we can call it a form of mindfulness or penetrative thinking that operates by itself, like when a loved one is always on your mind without any conscious effort on your part.

When babies are young and the bones in their head have not yet closed up, their sixth consciousness may not be operative, but they are always operating in this state of volition. We think of "spaced out" adults as unthinking adults, but they, too, are in this state of penetration as well, but are occupied by some particular mental scenario that is still operating. And when the philosopher Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am," this statement only carried the meaning of existence or being because of its reference to this type of omnipresent, ongoing mental volition. He was only referring to a process of continual mental stirring.

Getting technical, we can say that *volition* is mental action that impels or maneuvers the mind towards our common trio of good, bad, or neutral phenomenal states. In other words, we can say that it urges the mind forward to what is virtuous, nonvirtuous, or neutral. This omnipresent mental activity is unlike the intentional act of mental engagement because it occurs without effort on our part, so naturally the omnipresent factor of volition is related to the skandha of volition.

The factor of *volition* is also related to the seventh consciousness, which is a consciousness that is always grasping onto, or revolving around the thought of being an inherent self. We will fully describe the seventh consciousness later, but for now you should consider it a deep conscious mind that is always focused upon and preoccupied with the notion that we are a self. When you cultivate you are trying to get rid of this notion of self-ego to attain a pure experience of emptiness without any contaminations, and this ultimately means that you are trying to purify the seventh consciousness. If you can attain the "emptiness of self," wherein you abandon the concept of possessing a self-ego, then we can say you have attained the status of a sage or saint because this is the stage of enlightenment that is awakening to the Tao.

Ordinary people find it difficult to clearly see their own mental states or determine which level of consciousness is normally functioning. But the saints and men of high wisdom can see what is going on within their own mind, and sometimes they can know what is in another's mind, as well. Thus, as your prajna wisdom increases, you will be able to clearly observe and understand both yourself and others. In the meantime, we really are just like people in a coma; day and night we are preoccupied with our views of being a self-ego, so we are always grasping onto the idea of a self that obscures our original nature. We cannot see things clearly and do not understand that the self is empty because we obscure our prajna wisdom through clinging, attachment, and rejection.

A self is not really there because it does not exist; what we call the self is just an onrushing stream of thoughts reiterating the concept of a self, and these thoughts lack any validity. During the overall process of spiritual cultivation, you are always trying to get rid of a number of serious mental pollutions that stand in the way of self-realization. If you can realize the state of selfless or nonego, we say that the seventh consciousness becomes purified and that you can see the Tao.

In the past, the Zen school used the method of concentrating on koans, or *hua-tou* meditation sayings, in order to tie up the omnipresent mental activities of *discrimination* (perception, or cognition) and *attention*. The Zen students did this by focusing on koans, which are questions or stories with no logical rationale. In mindfully holding to the koan, they would naturally cultivate mental cessation because concentrating on a koan would tie up the omnipresent mental activities of *contact* and *sensation*. As a result, Zen practitioners focused their intent, and when their intent became solid and stable, they would naturally attain cessation.

In other words, the methods of the later Zen school, when the Zen school started slipping into decline, made use of the koan as a focus for concentration. The purpose of this practice worked

directly at suspending the activities of the sixth and seventh consciousnesses in order to break their spell and let the practitioner ascend to a higher level of clear awareness. People do not normally explain how koan practice works, or even explain it using the component details of the volition skandha, but this high-level explanation allows you to understand some of the underlying "physics" behind various cultivation methods and techniques.

The second set of five mental factors are called "independent" mental events, or "object-determining" mental states, because they occur in conjunction with objects of sense. They are determinative in regard to objects, meaning they are responsible for determining objects. These five mental factors include:

(6) zest, interest or aspiration
(7) determination, resolution or resolve
(8) mindfulness, or recollection
(9) concentration, one-pointedness, samadhi or stabilization
(10) discernment, insight, wisdom or prajna

Zest

Zest is desire towards a range of events. It is interest in a specific range of events such that the interest provides a basis for action. Therefore, zest supports the willingness to act. It is the internal interest factor behind the force of intention, or the desire behind fulfilling an intention.

Determination

Determination is the act of staying with something. It is the activity of remaining firm with something you have selected for investigation because of your interest. In many regimes the government goes about punishing people for having "wrong thoughts;" this is ludicrous since absolutely everyone sports incorrect or nonvirtuous thoughts.

What you really have to worry about, such as when you are trying to teach your children, is the case of *afflicted determination, which is wrong resolve. You do not have to worry about random wrong thoughts, but wrong thoughts held with determination*. *Determination* is basically the activity of holding onto a particular thing without allowing the mind to be stolen by something else.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an extremely important factor for cultivators to understand. It is the act of not forgetting an object once you have become familiar with it. It means attentiveness to an object—not mentally wobbling or floating away from an object. Mindfulness, therefore, has the function

of not letting you become distracted or forgetful, thus, preventing the mind from becoming scattered, distracted or forgetful of the purpose at hand.

Technically, mindfulness can be described as the "non-forgetting of a range of events" while afflicted mindfulness can be described as confusion or forgetting. Mindfulness is the basis of many spiritual cultivation techniques*, for it is the practice of mindfulness that enables you to enter into one-pointed concentration.*

The Chinese translate mindfulness as "*nien*," meaning a mental behavior with the characteristic of a habit; it is something you are always doing with your mind. Nien is the state where something is always on your mind, but the mindfulness of nien is a state of focus rather than agitation. For instance, there is a famous cultivation practice of "*nien Fo*," known as practicing "mindfulness of the Buddha." Ordinary people do not normally carry Buddha in their mind all the time, so the name of the practice explains the practice methodology, which is to be thinking about Buddha wholeheartedly every mind-moment. Many spiritual methods from across the world are based on this principle, such as Krishna mindfulness, Christ mindfulness, Allah mindfulness and so on. They are all based on nien, or mindfulness.

"Practicing dharma" means focusing on nien of some type, for one must always maintain mindfulness in meditation practice. Upon starting down the road of cultivation and beginning to feel the sensations caused by the body's changing kung-fu, people usually think this is the important thing. However, this is similar to focusing on the smoke from a candle rather than its light: neither your thoughts, nor your body, nor your emotions or sensations are the real you. They are not the real you, so why give them any special attention? If you focus on these factors because of spiritual practice, *you are becoming mindful of the wrong thing*.

In cultivating the dharma, you must focus your mind on a cultivation method and *stay with that method while ignoring all other distractions*. You must grab hold of a method and not let it go, which is *mindfulness*. If you do this, and carry that method around with you all day and at all times, then the concentration you develop will eventually enable you to reach a stage of samadhi concentration.

Concentration

As to the omnipresent mental factor called *concentration*, it is the practice of observing various objects with a focused mind. It is a one-pointed mind towards an examined object or event. *Meditational concentration*, then, is having the mind's full attention on a specific object or series of events. The culmination of this type of concentration is samadhi, or one-pointedness of mind focused completely on one object alone. In actual fact, we are always in the state of samadhi without being able to realize it, for it is an omnipresent mental factor that supports knowing. Afflicted concentration, on the other hand, is what we commonly call "distraction."

Many researchers today have studied Olympic athletes and term the state of concentration they achieve "flow" or "being in the groove." This is nothing more than another way of expressing the ordinary person's samadhi. When you are completely absorbed in the sensation of rubbing your ear, this too is a type of samadhi concentration that often goes unrecognized. It is a mundane form of samadhi, but it is still a samadhi of cessation.

A major difference between this type of concentration and the concentration arising from meditation is the absence of prajna transcendental wisdom. Without the transcendental wisdom of mental emptiness, mental concentration of any type will never lead to spiritual attainment. But if you become properly focused in meditational concentration so that you let go of the false concept of being an ego and attain some degree of emptiness, and if you can observe everything very clearly in that state without clinging, then samadhi and prajna wisdom will both eventually arise. When you are in a state of agitation, however, you will not be able to see things very clearly. In a state of samadhi concentration you will be clear-minded and focused whereas when you are agitated you will flit between this and that thought.

Insight

Insight, or *discernment*, is akin to the prajna wisdom prized in cultivation. One way to describe this factor is to say it is the exact knowledge of an object of perception. In other words, it is the mental understanding of examined phenomena. Thus, it is a mental factor that discriminates between different objects, or between characteristics of the same object. Hence, it is *discernment*, or *insight*, which is used to analyze and understand the experiential realms you achieve during meditation.

Insight is not conscious thought, however, for it is far more refined than our course conscious thinking. It is not something you do deliberately, for it just comes. This is why we say when you cultivate, your wisdom "opens up" or "bursts forth." Your wisdom knowing is always there, but you cover it over by attaching to thoughts and sensations.

As an example, when you commit some act and you automatically know whether it is good or bad, this is an example of your *insight discernment* at work. Just as iron is attracted to magnets without any effort on iron's part, insight represents a certain natural knowing or natural comprehension of an object of perception. We can therefore say that the function of *insight* is to remove or dispel doubts about the nature of an object whereas the opposite of insight—afflicted discernment—would mean incorrect or inexact understanding.

Human beings are typically oblivious of these ten subtle but universal factors of mind, and usually lump them together under the overall rubric of "thought." However, you must be extremely careful about such details when it comes to the highest levels of samadhi and cultivation. Here we are in the volition skandha, and these are the factors we are now working on purifying! These

are extremely subtle mental factors, and so we need to go into all this detail that modern psychology and psychiatry have barely touched.

While a beginning practitioner need not worry about these tiny details, it is difficult to judge your cultivation at the higher ranks of samadhi unless you thoroughly understand these matters. Your teacher may understand your level of attainment, but if you really want to make progress, you must understand all these cultivation matters yourself. That is why many ancient Zen masters first became experts in the Consciousness-Only school and in the teachings of Abhidharma as grounding for their spiritual practice.

Spiritual cultivation is the science of the body and mind, so to master spiritual cultivation you must know and understand all these subtle mental factors. You do not have to memorize anything in a sutra, or other sacred writing, which would be akin to swallowing dogma. Just understand these principles of the mind in order to help with your own spiritual progress. Understanding is the first step towards change, and towards the progress of purifying the mind stream of the pollutions that separate you from realizing the Tao. If you do not develop an understanding of basic cultivation matters, your practice will not rest on secure foundations.

Therefore, these are the ten deep psychological states associated with the ever-moving volition skandha, and they are present in every mental moment. The pervasive nature of these omnipresent mental factors is one reason why it is so difficult to realize our true mind, for we become obscured by these ever operating mental factors that can buffet us this way and that. When people cultivate, they sometimes feel that they reach a stage of emptiness and clarity where there are no such mental factors present. However, Shakyamuni once warned his cousin Ananda about such a mistake, saying:

> Ananda, you should know that this state of clarity is not real. It is like rapidly flowing water that appears to be still on the surface. Due to its speed you cannot perceive the flow, but that does not mean it is not flowing. If this were not the source of thinking, then how could one be subject to false habits?

Thus, the volition skandha may *seem* empty when you start purifying it, however, it is always moving. Buddha therefore explained that it contains very subtle and hidden forms of false thinking. He said that even if you empty this skandha by putting to an end all sorts of production and destruction that "make up" movement, it is still difficult to perfect the subtle wonder of ultimate serenity.

This means that when you reach the volition skandha, you have to re-double your efforts at cultivation, otherwise, you might settle for this incomplete stage as the supreme enlightened attainment. A poem by Lin Chiao Hsien (Master Yu Hsien of the Sung dynasty) also comments on this matter, saying:

In the Yangtze River the waves are deepest.
Travelers all hesitate arriving there.
If you reach the river at a calm place someday,
You must still be just as cautious.

Thus, you can understand that the task of transforming the volition skandha is very difficult indeed, as its moving components are all extremely subtle. You are close to reaching complete enlightenment when you cultivate the volition skandha, but there is still much work to be done.

The Eleven Virtuous Mental Factors

As previously stated, the mental factors within the skandha of volition can either be good or bad. We have already covered ten mental factors, but within the volition skandha's fifty-one mental factors are also eleven "virtuous" mental states, so-named because they define or accompany virtuous states of mind. These states include:

(1) faith, or trust
(2) carefulness, or conscientiousness
(3) tranquility, or peacefulness (quieting down of disturbances)
(4) equanimity, or neutrality of mind
(5) inner shame, moral shame or disgust at misconduct
(6) dread of blame, moral dread or fear of wrongdoing
(7) lack of greed, or nonattachment
(8) lack of hostility, or nonaversion and nonhatred (lack of hatred)
(9) vigor, or effort (diligence)
(10) attitude of nonharming, or nonviolence (harmlessness)
(11) nonconfusion, which is lack of confusion or stupidity

We must note three of these eleven virtuous mental events in particular: nonattachment, nonaversion and nonconfusion. Taken together, these states are what Buddhism calls the "absence of the three poisons."

The Six Root Afflictions

Of the fifty-one volitional factors, we have already introduced twenty-one. There are also six root mental afflictions within this skandha, which are the main cause of our wandering in cyclic existence. These factors are not afflictions that depend upon other states, but are basic emotional defilements themselves. Because they are root afflictions supported by our psyche, the incessant trouble they cause us seems to have no end. These six root afflictions include:

(1) desire, also known as greed, attachment, or covetousness

(2) anger (hatred)
(3) pride, also known as arrogance, ego inflation, or conceit
(4) ignorance, also known as delusion or stupidity
(5) doubt, known as lack of faith or lack of belief
(6) erroneous views, which are deviant or erroneous perspectives

You can become very particular in Abhidharma theory and enumerate over one hundred and twenty different mental afflictions, or *klesas*, but in a sense, they all boil down to these six fundamental, basic root afflictions. Naturally other traditions may describe a different set of root afflictions, but the idea of there being root afflictions will remain the same and there will definitely be some overlap of definitions.

For example, the *Tantraraja Tantra* of Hinduism, and various Hatha Yoga texts, mention that there are six obstacles to yoga or spiritual cultivation: lust or desire (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), pride (*abhimana*), greed (*lobha*), arrogance (*mada*) and infatuation (*moha*). In Christianity, we also have the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth. Both of these sample lists show an overlap in root afflictions, so the question to ask is why anyone should prefer one spiritual school's classification scheme over another?

Here's the answer. The important point about the Buddhist classification scheme being introduced is that it can be used as a type of elementary mathematics to decompose unwholesome mental states into various basic building blocks. Thus, the mindset of annoyance finds its roots in the basic affliction of anger, and the desire for existence has its roots in desire itself. All the mental afflictions we suffer in existence can be broken down and traced back to the component pieces of these six root afflictions specified in Abhidharma, and that's the power of this system.

Anger

It is hard to recognize these root afflictions clearly, but you must be very honest with yourself in cultivation and constantly perform this type of self-inspection. That is what the road of Confucian cultivation entails, and the Greek maxim "Know thyself" carries this connotation as well. For instance, many people say they do not have *anger*, which is the desire to hurt other beings, but you cannot say it really is not absent. Rather it is that they just never dare to show it. Put people who say they never get angry in a high position, however, and their submerged anger and irritation will usually reveal itself. Or sometimes you may say you have forgiven someone of a slight that they have committed, but your hidden impulses react when you finally get a chance to get even. That, too, is an illustration of *anger*.

These are examples of the deep, hidden seeds of anger that you carry within yourself and have not yet transformed. All of us have these things, and you really must be honest and practice clear

self-inspection to identify these evil seeds of behavior. Furthermore, as a spiritual cultivator you must vow to purify and transform these root afflictions.

That is the essential process or task of spiritual cultivation, and you can finally arrive at the realm of possible transformation when you reach the volition skandha. True cultivation involves nothing but working on this task so that your mind stream becomes empty, which is to be "virtuous through and through." In the universe, the only worthwhile challenge or purpose is to engage in this constant process of perfection, and then use your perfected excellences to help uplift others. To achieve this perfection requires introspection so that errors may be caught and corrected, and this self-inspection requires an analysis of your mind stream down to its deepest levels.

In spiritual cultivation, you have to come to recognize all the seeds of behavior which exist in the depths of your mind stream. You must come to know and understand everything. As an example, Confucians practice introspection and investigation as a rule in their cultivation. They are also taught to know everything about the world and if there is something a Confucian does not know about, he will feel ashamed. Buddhists carry the same type of obligation; they must trace all the dharmas back to their source. This means they must also trace all mental phenomena back to these subtle mental factors because they must try to fully understand thoughts and their results.

Ignorance

Of course, this "mastery of dharmas" is the opposite of *ignorance* and when you are developing great prajna wisdom, you are tying to get rid of *ignorance*. Hence, we say that through cultivation your mind becomes like a clear mirror, which is the "great mirror wisdom" corresponding to the end of ignorance.

If you can really abandon *ignorance* through the process of spiritual cultivation, you will awaken to primordial Tao. Then whatever happens, you will spontaneously respond immediately, but when the situation and response are over, they will be completely gone without a trace. After reaching the Tao you will always be functioning in a state of presence and will not cling to anything, so ignorance will evaporate. Your mind will function like a mirror in that when something is there its presence will be reflected, and when its gone the mental mirror will be as empty and spotless as it was before. Come what may, you respond perfectly; when what was, is gone, then naught will remain.

Desire

When we try to hold onto matters, this is due to the functioning of *desire*, which causes our grasping and clinging to the aggregates and the triple realm. We always talk about clinging, desire, grasping and attachment in cultivation, and the level where you start to make fundamental

inroads into truly freeing yourself from this factor is here, all the way into the skandha of volition. Ignorance leads to desire, and because of desire we have all the sufferings of existence.

Pride

As to *pride* or *ego*, it is that attitude of inflated thinking that lets you feel you are superior or better than others are. Even though you may be able to admit when you have made a mistake in life, if a couple minutes later you find yourself making excuses it is because of pride. Pride is an emotional affliction that wraps itself around the identity of the self causing us to disrespect others and be unhappy ourselves.

Doubt

Doubt, on the other hand, is when we think we believe in something, yet have two minds on the matter. In fact, we humans tend to doubt everyone, including ourselves, and it is this lack of trust in ourselves that ultimately leads to difficulty in cultivation. People travel everywhere searching for one esoteric technique after another; they jump to Tao school methods, and then yoga methods and so on. They do this because they doubt the truth of their practice, or their ability to succeed with a certain spiritual practice technique. All this jumping is due to doubt.

The root afflictions of anger, pride, desire, ignorance and doubt are like a knot continually tightening on itself. *The real path of cultivation is to free yourself from these entanglements of mental states*, and you are wholly devoted to this as your primary road of spiritual cultivation when you reach the *bhavanamarga* Path of Meditative Cultivation and are trying to purify the skandha of volition. As the *Vijnanabhairava Tantra* states,

> Having observed a desire [mental affliction or pollution] that has sprung up, the [cultivation] aspirant should put an end to it immediately. [Then] It will be absorbed in that very place from which it arose. When a desire or knowledge of it appears, the aspirant should, with the mind withdrawn from all objects, fix his mind on the desire as the Self. Then he will have the realization of the essential reality. If one succeeds in immobilizing his mind [through one-pointedness], when under the sway of desire, anger, greed, infatuation, arrogance or envy, the reality underlying these states alone subsists.2

This is one method for getting rid of the basic root afflictions: simply shine prajna nondual awareness on them without reacting to their arising, and they will return to emptiness from whence they came.

Delusive Views and Perspectives

The sixth basic affliction of *erroneous, delusive* or *deviant views* includes five famous incorrect

perspectives: (1) holding onto the view of being a body, (2) holding one-sided extreme views, (3) holding wrong, deviant or misguided views, (4) holding subjective views (being opinionated, or holding views that cling to self-views), and (5) holding views of improper discipline. In detail, these five deviant views or perspectives are:

(1) The perspective of *taking the body (or any of the skandhas) as the real self*. This means thinking your physical body is the real you. It is also the false notion of being a body at all, which is holding onto a body as a self. The perspective of possessing a body, to which you cling, is the incorrect notion of holding onto the perspective of form.

To hold the notion of "I" and "mine" is entertaining the view of a personal independent existence. This view is "belief in a self," a fundamentally mistaken notion which is actually centered around the perishable false aggregates. The *Heart Sutra* says that the five aggregates are no different than emptiness, and if you can accomplish that realization, you can truly be rid of the view of the self.

Since this is hard to accomplish, most sentient beings mistakenly believe they have a self because they cling to the view of having a body. In clinging to the idea of being a body, they never even attain the first samadhi. That is why Buddha told people to offer their body to others through charity work, for in so doing one can learn how to be selfless and empty, and thereby can make real progress in getting rid of this mental entanglement.

(2) Entertaining *views that are one-sided or extreme*. This perspective should be called the *perspective of limitation* because it refers to an edge, demarcation, or parameter that you establish with your thoughts. For instance if you were to believe that the skandhas exist permanently, you would be holding a one-sided view that postulates an extreme.

When, through cultivation, you free yourself from this perspective of limitation, your mind will become open and infinite. When you really achieve this level of emptiness, the kung-fu that matches with it will even allow you to walk through a mountain. People usually achieve some minor experiential realm of emptiness through meditation and say, "I'm really clear," but this is usually a false emptiness because they are still just experiencing a concept of emptiness that is defined by the perspective of one-sidedness. Real emptiness is infinite, whereas any concept of emptiness is still subject to the perspective of one-sided limitation.

Black people, white people, Frenchmen, Germans—all these ways of labeling people also constitute the entanglement or perspective of parameters and one-

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sided extremes. Humans, for instance, think they are the highest beings in the world, and this viewpoint is being one-sided as well. Look at the cruelty and indifference with which we treat the animals that work for us—we take their milk, eat their meat, wear their skins … look how we behave! We talk about human rights, but how about animal rights? The view of one-sided extremes is seeing and attaching to only one side of an issue, such as the human side, and most all philosophical thinking falls into this category because it involves the perspective of limitation.

As another example, we always say we are working for mankind, but what about the other beings in the world? Buddha worked for the benefit of all sentient beings, so he did not hold to ideas of culture, race, humanity, caste or sex—he broke down all these barriers for the benefit of all life. The Buddha taught that all beings are equal, not just that humans are equal, and so he was free of this one-sided perspective. When you become free of one-sided views you can achieve the Middle Way.

(3) Holding *misguided, false, deviant, inverted or perverse views*. In other words, this is denying what is authentic and real, which is *holding the opposite view from the truth*. Believing in superstitions is an example of false or errant views, and this error has to do with doubt and pride. The answer for why people jump from one cultivation school to another also lies here. They doubt teachings, and they doubt teachings because they do not have a clear perspective. They do not have clear perspective in turn because they lack correct perception.

Let us look at a more complicated example. Some Christian sects claim that a person must believe to be saved. If you do not believe, does that mean you have no hope? If that's the case, are you saying this is God? The Bodhisattvas say that the good people need to be saved but even more so, the bad people need to be saved, too. If your purpose is only to save the good who are going to be saved anyway, then why bother? Christians are supposed to help the people that need the most help, not the least. This type of illogical dogma is an example of perverted views that are astray.

(4) *Holding your own views as supreme. This entails clinging to your own perspectives* because of self-cherishment. In other words, it is the *entanglement of clinging onto one's own subjective perspective*.

You can also call this *opinionatedness*, which is being opinionated or clinging to your own subjective views because you consider them the best or the most excellent. Whether it is because of your scholastic achievements, your

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experiences in life, or due to your cultural upbringing, this fourth affliction entails fallaciously insisting (holding) that some particular view of yours is the truth against which all other things should be measured.

People grasp onto all sorts of mental models as the truth or supreme view. Whether they cling to democracy, Communism, Keynesianism, Judaism, industrialization, globalization, or any other pre-formed set of beliefs, people take their views as if they are the one truth. Actually, these opinions are all just reactions created in response to situations, and it cannot be that any one of these views is supreme. Thus, the view of *holding onto self-views* is just holding onto whatever perspective people think is right. For example: some people might insist that it is absolutely necessary to wash your face twice a day. They might be so certain of their definition that they view people as dirty who do not exactly follow their notions.

Generally, religion and politics are the two strongest opinionated perspectives people get stuck in. They say, "I am a Republican while you are not. This makes me better than you because my set of beliefs is better than any other." Or, "I am a Christian and you are not. This means that I am better and will be saved because my religion is true, while you have no hope since you do not share the same beliefs." Or, "I'm studying Tantra and you are not, and since this is the most supreme way to cultivate practice, I feel sorry for you." This perspective of holding your own views as supreme therefore means holding the idea that everyone else is wrong, and your view is correct. This is the perspective of *holding onto views.*

(5) The *perspective of grasping onto rituals and rules* means clinging to rules of morality, conduct or discipline and taking them as supreme when they are just expedient constructions without any absolutist universal standing. They were simply invented because of someone's skillful means, but if we erroneously take them as absolutes then we have the view of *holding conduct based on them as supreme*.

Common people often mistakenly hold onto religious rules and codes of conduct as being holy or ultimate when they have no standing in the ultimate reality. They are not actually the spiritual path, for the cultivation path ultimately rests in the mind. Nevertheless, some people will insist that Friday is the holy day, others Saturday and yet others Sunday, and an insistence that this day must be conducted in a certain way, or that one is in error and destined to be punished, is the perspective of grasping onto rules and regulations.

For instance, a vegetarian might say that a person who eats meat is not a real Buddhist, or even a good person. They do not realize that vegetarianism has to do with the diet, and not Tao! People who refuse the medical treatment they need to save their lives, because it goes against their beliefs, are also grasping onto rules and rituals rather than seeing everything as expedient function and guiding themselves by prajna wisdom.

If you pray to Allah five times a day and think that not doing it means you will not go to heaven, this is also the perspective of grasping onto rituals and rules. If you think you have violated some religious ultimate because you turned a light switch on during the Sabbath, you have also tied yourself up in artificial rules and regulations. Where's the original mind in all this, where's the original nature?

Life is always moving and changing, so every moment is a new situation to which you must respond. If you learn to respond with adaptability and full awareness, this is what is important. You must not let external rules and regulations rule you but simply help guide you when you need guidance, for a course of action has to come out a situation itself, not some prefabricated book of conduct. Even to act out of habits is a form of conditioned response rather than the true freedom of spiritual liberation.

If you do not let go of these self-imposed veils—even though they might come from religion—you will never cultivate the prajna wisdom that leads to enlightenment. But if you attain the necessary wisdom, then you can outwardly abide by all these rules and regulations yet be internally free of all these artificial things. You can become free of them and yet still follow them without their controlling you, and no external authority will be the wiser. It is an exercise in skillful means to conform to society in this way, rather than ranting against it or even ostracizing yourself because of rebellious behavior. This is what a Bodhisattva does: they adapt to local conditions and accord with virtuous norms in society while going about their enlightening function. They practice spontaneous accord with conditions and conventions.

All of these erroneous perspectives represent entanglements, barriers and byword paths on the road of spiritual cultivation. They represent adhesive entanglements that must be abandoned as you climb the spiritual ladder.

People tend to think that spiritual cultivation is sitting there meditating, practicing yoga, or striving to attain the nine samadhi absorptions and various states of kung-fu. Don't kid yourself! The actual process of cultivation is the work of purifying these defiling behavioral patterns that

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are entrenched in the thought streams of your mind. You were not in a position to purify them completely until you broke through the skandha of conception; now you can see them very clearly and must clear these obstructions from your conceptual habit energies. The path of cultivation is the task of trying to purify these habitual energy streams so that they are always clear, compassionate and virtuous.

Ultimately, that is all there really is in the universe—the job of changing your behavior to a more perfect state. If you sink into all the transformational changes talked about by the Esoteric school, and become attached to secret supernatural teachings of miracles and marvels, you have poisoned the real path of spiritual cultivation work. Mysterious and mystical cultivation schools appeal to people, but these people succumb to the false notion that this is true cultivation, and miss the point of the spiritual path entirely. The sages were so kind to give all these teachings on kung-fu, skandhas, samadhi, elements, and so on, but *this job of changing your deep-seated habitual afflictions is the true and actual spiritual path!*

Hence, the stage where you finally break through the conception skandha because you have cultivated wisdom, samadhi and kung-fu is called "seeing Tao," "seeing the path." In Tantric Buddhism this is called "attaining the clear light," but no matter the name, what is in front of you is the challenge of changing your behavior; abandoning your bad habits and choosing virtuous acts at all times.

Don't get confused by all the experiential realms you encounter in meditation while you try to get to this point, for *this* is the path of cultivation. It is the effort of trying to become a real human being, trying to transform your mental behavior and activity in society. When you are working on your everyday, every moment behavior, this is the path of cultivation—not when you sit in motionless meditation.

True cultivation is to be without greed, anger, ignorance or any of the other six root afflictions in your mind and behavior. It is to be in the present moment and to act properly and compassionately in response to sentient beings and events.

When can you finally reach this point in its truest sense, which is when you are *really* practicing the Tao? When you finally reach the volition skandha and see all these hidden impulses behind your behavior. Working on purifying these impulses is the path of cultivation, and there is no way around this definition. If we turn to Confucius, we can find that he always described the cultivation path as one of purifying your behavior for *that's the real process of cultivation*.

Cultivation is not apart from the world but is connected to it, and so it must involve perfecting your behavior because that's purifying your relationship with the world. Normally the mind is caught up in unusual entanglements and strange perspectives, and so you have to free yourself from these things, and all the bad behaviors that have become your deep-seated habits, if you

want to succeed in this and accomplish the Tao. This is the actual work of the path; this is the path of perfection on which you have to work every day.

In terms of measuring cultivation progress, people always wonder at which stage they are transforming the sixth, seventh and eighth consciousnesses, and here we have an indication of the answer. Since the view of a personality, or "ego factor," lies within the skandha of volition, this means that working on the volition skandha is the stage at which you can really start to transform the egocentric seventh consciousness.

The seventh consciousness is a deceptive consciousness behind the sixth that grasps the alaya consciousness as a subject and tries to make it into an ego. Since the view of being an ego or personality belongs to the skandha of volition, the feat of transforming the seventh consciousness assumes primary importance when you reach this stage of cultivation. So the big task of cultivation, when you reach the skandha of volition, is transforming the seventh consciousness of ego-notions along with the energy streams that normally arise from habit and intertwine so as to produce the deceptive fiction of being an ego. It is not until your cultivation reaches the consciousness skandha that you can finally start working on transforming the eighth, or alaya consciousness.

Now the various religions of the world also have extensive lists of good and bad factors such as the ones we have reviewed here, and the virtues or sins catalogued by Roman Catholicism are a ready example of this point. But the lists we are reviewing are different in a special way. They were created by sages who used their samadhi wisdom to investigate, examine and evaluate all the various mental states of the mind. Thus, these lists are not just lengthy recountings of positive and negative mental factors put together by boards of intellectuals, but represent a partitioning of mental states into discrete categories as a result of a high level prajna investigation of the mind. This is an important distinction to make. Even so, a worthwhile study would be to compare the lists of virtues and deviations made by each of the world various religions, for this would certainly shed some insight on the path of perfection and what people believe are the undercurrents of the mind.

While it is not important to memorize all these mental factors, you must understand that they embody a deep logical organization that has come out of prajna wisdom discernment. This is the factor which separates these lists from the findings of psychology we have today, for our modern schools can hardly investigate these factors at all. Psychology is always trying to put thoughts into categories, but it never bothers to investigate the gap between thoughts that exists whenever they depart. If it investigated that gap and discovered the existence of samadhi, then it could discover these subtle hidden factors as a mental substratum of the mind. These are factors related to the deep motive forces of life.

The Twenty Secondary Afflictions

The realized masters of old catalogued twenty secondary emotional afflictions that properly belong to the volition skandha as well. The interesting thing is that the inherent natures of these secondary afflictions are all based upon the six root afflictions. For instance, fury, enmity, jealousy, envy, harmfulness and vexation are all forms of anger. Pride, craving, defilement, stinginess, fraudulence, restlessness are all forms of desire. Doubt and unbelief, and stupor and forgetfulness are all examples of ignorance. Human psychology has all sorts of unwholesome mental states, and we can find their basic nature in this list of six fundamental building blocks as well. In studying these factors as we have laid out, it puts a sort of psychological arithmetic at our disposal.

Sometimes the difference between these various mental factors may seem quite subtle, so how you describe these twenty secondary afflictions may differ slightly according to whether you follow the Tibetan, Chinese, Pali or English translations of the original Indian Abhidharma material. Modern psychology offers its own interpretations of these mental states, and the important thing in cultivation is to purify them by ridding yourself of emotional affliction. Prajna wisdom cuts through the entanglements of the five perspectives, but the entanglement of afflictive mental states cannot be discarded at one stroke, and must slowly be dissolved away. Only time and effort can break through these afflictions because one cannot simply cut off an energy stream but must purify it slowly.

The more you work to purify the afflictions and the more skill you develop at untangling yourself from them, the higher will be the state of spiritual attainment you can achieve and the sweeter the karmic fruits you will reap. Liberation from the cycle of birth and death is one such result of spiritual cultivation, and you achieve this by working on purifying your entanglements, a process which constitutes the heart of the process of cultivation. In fact, this is what all cultivation boils down to. All the other yogic practices and meditations and superpowers are just a trick to hook you into the path, but this is what it is all about. If you get lost in all the various experiential realms and discussions of chakras, mai, kundalini and so forth, this is actually straying from the true road of spirituality.

Unfortunately, people are not interested in hearing this, or they can only acknowledge the importance of purifying behavior as the path in its most simplistic form, which, because of diluted renderings, has hardly any true cultivation bearing. Yet from all these details it should be clear by now that the true cultivation path is overwhelmingly profound and because of this, at times the only way to be attracted into its door is by sweet trickery. That is why the *Lotus Sutra* tells us the "skillful means" story. In it, children who are inside a dangerous burning building are lured to safety with the promise of beautiful carts to play with outside. When the children come out, they are given the promised carts, but they had to be promised useless things in order to leave a realm of danger and attain what is ultimately valuable.

This is similar to the story of the prodigal son who leaves his father and falls on hard times. Ironically, the father, before the son left, sewed a precious gem into the son's clothing, but the son, unaware of this fact, is forced to live miserably in order to survive. The father misses the son terribly and sends out servants to find him and bring him back, but the son is so self absorbed that he does not recognize his own father and heritage. Realizing that the son has fallen so low, the father first gives him a job as a field laborer to build up his confidence. Next the father promotes him to the stables. Step-by-step the son is promoted until he becomes the manager of the house. The son works for years to build himself, and eventually, his father is very old and dying. The father tells the household that this servant is his son, then tells his son, "The priceless jewel that is your birthright has been with you all along."

The story is a beautiful metaphor for all the various methods the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas use to bring you back to the Tao, and all the partial stages of spiritual attainment. In the story, the jewel is your own immaculate fundamental nature that you always have, but simply do not recognize. In terms of their teaching methods, because people are not all strong enough to lift heavy weights, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas give people lighter weights to carry, and slowly bring them up to speed on the spiritual trail. They make it a practice of introducing people to the path gradually in skillful ways because most people lack merit and wisdom, and thus would have a hard time accepting the truth all at once.

Rather than risk this and have people turn away from the path in fear or disbelief, that is why so many religions in the world are created based upon varying stages of realization. Sometimes inferior paths were established simply because people's understanding or merit was simply not great enough to accept the whole picture. People are born into those streams because of their relative degrees of karmic merit, but even with their deficiencies or inadequacies, these paths were still designed to help lead people upwards.

One sure commonality is that none of these spiritual streams say that playing with your sensations is the practice of cultivation. In fact, if you keep playing with your body sensations while you are meditating, you will form the karmic seeds of being reborn as an animal with dull sensations. In the story of the Indian adept Maharaj, the master would often travel meeting other sadhus who could assume the forms of leopards or tigers and roam around for sport.

Unfortunately, these adepts were ignorantly playing with seeds that could form a habitual basis for a lower rebirth. Hence, playing with sensations is an especially big problem in the esoteric schools where people play with their chi and mai all day long, all the while accumulating the karma of being reborn in a lower realm. People usually think such games are extending their life span, but this type of frictional playing only decreases it.

The actual reason you do sitting meditation is to empty the factors of contact and sensation rather than to emphasize or amplify them in any way whatsoever. Meditation is a way to get rid

of the perspective of the body because if you do not, the perspective of possessing a physical body will tie you up all the time. In cultivation, the idea of being or possessing a body is one of the first things to go, and all the proper meditation techniques are simply a way to *get you oriented into the right path of formlessness*. Only if you can free yourself from the afflictions and five perspectives, by attaining a measure of true formlessness, can you attain the spirituality of the Tao.

The purpose of cultivation is Thus, to purify both your inner mental and outward behavior. We talk of the samadhi concentration states, and jing transforming to chi, and all sorts of other explanations of the spiritual path. Because of all this interesting scenery, people miss this one and only purpose of self-purification. But someone like Confucius, who phrased the path in terms of behavior from the start, was right on the mark, yet people today do not even recognize that he had the Tao and was even talking about spiritual cultivation.

When you talk about behavior, it is easy to fall into conventional things and lose sight of samadhi even though it is the crucial tool of practice if you want to perceive your behavior clearly enough to transform it. Confucius talked about samadhi and prajna all the time, but the scholars who came after him did not even realize it because they rarely reached those accomplishments themselves. Modern men know Confucius was a "sage," but haven't a clue as to the deeper meaning of this title, which makes them totally oblivious to his real message as well.

The point is this: do not go slighting the schools which talk about the cultivation path in aspects other than the path you now follow, for they all tend to reinforce one another and are all part of the same jig-saw puzzle. The various spiritual paths may not use words like samadhi, chi, skandhas and superpowers, but if they are genuine then they all refer to the same thing. Usually they do indeed discuss how to purify behavior, but it is rare that they get into such detail as provided by Buddhism, especially with its explanations of all the factors within the skandha of volition.

As to the twenty secondary afflictions comprising the mental components of the volition skandha, they can be divided into ten small mental afflictions, two middle-sized afflictions, and eight large subsidiary afflictions. Since the names of these factors are pretty self-explanatory, the details of these factors are left to the reader's personal investigations:

(1) belligerence, upset, fury (as in an irritated face)
(2) resentment, enmity, hostility or hatred (a deep strong feeling harbored in the mind born of anger)
(3) annoyance, frustration, vexation or irritation (some people call this spite)
(4) harmfulness, malice (hostility) or the attitude of harming
(5) jealousy or envy
(6) deceitfulness, dishonesty, or deception (misleading others), faking or feigning

pretense
(7) guile, deceit, fraudulence, dissimulation or duplicity especially through flattery or undue adulation
(8) hypocrisy, or concealment (hiding one's offenses can put you into a constant state of affliction often worse than the original wrong)
(9) miserliness, stinginess, avarice, parsimony, selfishness
(10) haughtiness, arrogance, pride, vanity, or conceit (this also refers to flirtiness)
(11) shamelessness, or lack of internal shame, absence of self-respect, lack of guilt, nonshame
(12) lack of dread of blame, or lack of the sense of being condemned by others, lack of conscience, the absence of propriety (fearlessness of wrong), nonembarrassment
(13) torpid-mindedness, or mental fogginess, drowsiness or mental dullness, lethargy
(14) restlessness, or disquietude, mental excitedness, or restless inattention, agitation
(15) unbelief, or lack of faith (disbelief), nonfaith
(16) indolence, idleness, laziness or sloth
(17) negligence, or carelessness, nonconscientiousness, laxity, idleness
(18) forgetfulness, or loss of mindfulness
(19) distraction, which is distractedness or inattentiveness
(20) non-discernment, or incorrect knowing, lack of recognition, which is nonintrospection or losing the correct perspective

Though we could enumerate countless other subsidiary factors whose roots can be found in the six basic root afflictions, Abhidharma teachings say they all are essentially included in these twenty. The point is that cultivation does not merely involve sitting with your legs crossed, but involves the great matter of transforming these various afflictions so as to produce an affliction-free mindstream.

The Four Variable Events

Finally, there are four variable mental events in the volition skandha that are changeable, meaning they can function as either afflictions or beneficial factors of the mind. We must pay special attention to these factors because they strongly affect our habit energies, and are difficult to transform whether we are on the cultivation trail or not. These factors include:

(1) regret, or remorse
(2) torpor, or sleepiness (drowsiness)
(3) investigation, seeking, searching or initial mental application (vitarka)
(4) analysis, observation, or subsequent discursive thought (vicara)

Torpor

In the state of torpor, your mind becomes fuzzy and unclear, so we say you are unfree because torpor causes ignorance. You are not considered "free" because you have no control over yourself. Entire books have been devoted to discussing torpor as an enemy of meditative calm, and the other enemy identified in these discussions is excitedness or agitation. Since it is instructive to learn how to deal with torpor in meditation, we can review the words of *Tao and Longevity* that explains:

> Coarse torpor is sleep whereas fine torpor is lethargy.
>
> Whenever the mind or body is tired, one wants to sleep. Whenever a person needs sleep, he should not force himself to meditate. One should have sufficient sleep before beginning meditation since otherwise, he may form the habit of sleeping *during* meditation. A person who does this will never succeed.
>
> When a person is in a state of drowsiness, his mind seems to be quiet. He neither concentrates on a single thing nor harbors coarse thoughts but he is just in the state of slumber. Although he may have no awareness of his mind or body, he is in a state of sleep rather than in a meditative state.
>
> People who are cultivating *samadhi* can easily fall into a state of torpor. If one does not understand it and mistakes it for a kind of *samadhi*, it will result in a very pitiable failure. [Lama Tsong Khapa], the founder of the Yellow sect [of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism], said that if a person mistakes this sort of torpor for *samadhi*, after his death he will reincarnate into an animal. Thus, a person should be very careful about this.
>
> Visualization might be used in order to overcome states of torpor. For example, one could visualize a bright red point inside one's navel, and imagine it rushing upward. When this bright red point reaches the top of one's head, it will disperse. Another technique is the use of all of one's strength to shout "PEI!" Or, further, one might press his nostrils together to stop the breath until it becomes unbearable and then let the trapped air out rapidly. Finally one could take a bath in cold water or do some appropriate exercises. People who practice breathing exercises may not fall into states of torpor very easily. Torpor is often believed to be *Wang Kong*, this is, stupidity or emptiness. However, this is incorrect. *Wang Kong* refers to an idiot or simpleton who is without clarity of thought.3

Though it is usually associated with faults, *torpor* can be virtuous, nonvirtuous or neutral in character. Its presence, as with all the mental factors, is actually due to our karma from previous lives. For instance, many people who reach a high stage of meditation can free themselves from this karma and find they do not actually need to sleep, but ordinary people cannot escape the sleep habit due to their heavy, unpurified karma. Sleep is just a habit, and as the Yellow Emperor warned, "Too much sleep will affect your chi, standing too long affects the bones, sitting too long affects the muscles, and walking too long affects the tendons." Thus, torpor can originate from either physical or psychological habits.

The important question is, how can torpor become a virtuous mental state? Well, if you want to go out and kill someone but you instead go to sleep, wake up, and forget about your evil intentions, then torpor has become a virtuous mental event. As another example, torpor is a virtuous thing if you cultivate to a high state of kung-fu and thereby recognize that your body needs the rest of sleep to repair itself, or for some other reason. As to its nonvirtuous possibilities, torpor is a nonvirtuous state when it prevents you from doing something beneficial. For most people torpor is a neutral state, though it can actually be either beneficial or harmful, virtuous or nonvirtuous.

Regret

Regret or *remorse* is something we feel when we recognize the faults and disadvantages of unwholesome, nonvirtuous actions and behavior. It is a mind which feels sorrow regarding our past actions. Because you may generate regret and worry about the future karma you may incur because of your actions, regret is a factor which helps you purify your negative actions and make progress on the path.

Positive regret is to regret our nonvirtuous actions, while negative regret is to regret some positive thing we have done, such as making offerings to a Buddha or sage. When we do some good deed like this and then regret it, this type of regret actually reduces our karmic reward.

Vitarka, or Initial Mental Application

Initial mental application, or *investigation*, is a type of searching inquiry performed by the mind. It is a type of yearning discernment that involves indistinct rather than clear discriminatory thought. In many cultivation schools it is called *vitarka*, which is a crudity of discriminatory mind not yet fixed on its object, a type of indistinct mental inquiry that entails the mind still searching after its object. We can therefore characterize vitarka as a type of coarse or imprecise examination such as when you first blindly grope a vase with your fingers before closely examining it.

In meditation practice, when you first set yourself to the task of trying to visualize a Buddha, mandala or some other deity or figure, you may search hard in your mind trying to form a visualization and yet the image may not appear. The funny thing is, if you do not put a lot of effort into it and do not try so hard to manifest it, then sometimes the image will just naturally pop into your mind.

The initial effort of investigation, where everything is indistinct at first, is the state of vitarka we are talking about. It is like when you want to say something and the words will not come out; something indistinct is right at the tip of your tongue and that's vitarka. Sometimes we say it is associated with waiting for something to happen because you are sitting there in meditation

looking for emptiness, waiting for emptiness to come. This is also the mental factor of vitarka.

Vitarka is associated with discrimination. When you buy a car, for instance, you search for the right one because you do not yet know exactly what you want, and this searching is an act of discrimination. Even during meditation, most people are usually seeking something, which is why their thoughts keep on spinning inside. At the higher stages of cultivation, however, they are no longer seeking and there is no mental re-examination either.

Sometimes in life we seek pain or joy, or we even seek to be shocked or frightened. For instance, we may go for a ride on a roller coaster or go to a scary movie because we want a certain type of stimulation. Modern psychology has noted that many people are attracted to stimulation which helps complete their life: those who go to action movies often have sit-down jobs, suspenseful thrillers often attract those with routine jobs, and violent movies often attract those who feel the need to constantly love others. Therefore, people seek to connect with those feelings that their jobs do not normally allow. In seeking stimulation of some type without knowing what it is we are seeking, this can be likened to a form of vitarka as well.

Vicara, or Subsequent Discursive Thought

In the initial mental application phase of vitarka, you are therefore deliberately seeking and waiting for an outcome. After this, you might enter a state of *analysis* or *subsequent discursive thought* where you are done with your seeking and finally start to investigate an object carefully and precisely. This is the stage called *vicara* where you have grabbed an object in mind, and now you are applying careful analysis and precise discriminative examination to what you have got.

Previously you were actively seeking in the process of vitarka, but now you just sit there watching, observing or contemplating your topic of concern with vicara. Vicara is a type of examination or investigation as before, but this time it is more precise because you are able to fix on your object. Buddhism says the first and second dhyana involve various degrees of vitarka and vicara, and the classical yoga schools of Hinduism call these two dhyana the *vitarka-samadhi* and *vicara-samadhi*.

To better illustrate these two aspects of mental investigation, a bird flapping its wings to get off the ground refers to the vitarka *initial effort of investigation*. But once it gets into the air, the refined adjustments that it makes to direct its flight might be labeled as vicara *subsequent discursive thought*.

As another example, a hunting dog might go out looking everywhere for a fowl to flush, but when he spots it he stands there with tail pointed, observing the targeted prey. This is the difference between vitarka and vicara once again. As another example, maybe you lost your keys and so you go about looking for them everywhere but cannot find them. Then you take a

different tack, sit down and calm yourself, look up and then see them. When you finally locate them precisely, this is vicara *observation*, or *subsequent discursive thought* reaching its target.

Zen master Hsueh-tou Ch'ung-hsien described these two mental factors in a poem by writing:

> A rabbit lies across an ancient road;
> A hawk sees it at a glance and captures it alive.
> What a pity the hunting dog is not too keen;
> All it does is sniff around a withered tree stump.

The hawk in this case is practicing observation, or vicara, while the dog is still at the stage of meditative seeking, or vitarka.

Another famous poem concerning vitarka and vicara refers to the story of the monk Shen Tsan who left his first dharma teacher for further study and became enlightened under the famous Zen master Pai Chang.

After he attained enlightenment, Shen Tsan traveled throughout China and then returned to his former (unenlightened) master. His old master asked him, "After you left me, what did you acquire at the other places you visited?" Shen Tsan correspondingly answered, "I acquired nothing." Since his old master did not understand that this replied referred to becoming enlightened into true emptiness, Shen Tsan knew he had to wait for a more auspicious moment in order to help awaken his teacher and repay his debt.

One day, Shen Tsan was in a room with his master, who was sitting under a window reading sutras. A fly came in the room and knocked against the window paper, struggling to exit. Seizing the opportune moment, Shen Tsan spoke the following words to the fly, knowing that his master would overhear them:

> The universe is so vast and you do not want to get out. If you want to pierce old paper [the window was made of paper], you will never be able to do it.

Shen Tsan was actually saying that if his teacher wanted to get enlightened by reading books (paper sutras) rather than practicing meditation, he'd never achieve the goal. He'd just be cheating himself through the use of his very own eyes, just as the fly prevented his own liberation by trying to pass through a papered window.

In order to help his teacher, Shen Tsan skillfully seized the chance to recite the following poem:

> It refuses to get out through the empty door
> And knocks against the window stupidly.

To pierce old paper will take a hundred years.
Oh when will it succeed in getting out?

This story, too, illustrates the mental factors of both vitarka and vicara, or imprecise seeking and attainment.

Nonassociated Motivational Factors (Impulsive Forces)

As we previously mentioned, there are also various factors in the skandha of volition called "nonassociated motivational factors" because they neither correspond to the conscious mind, nor are members of the form skandha, either. They are impulse generating factors that are not affected by the mind. Even though they are phenomena that do not correspond to the mind, meaning they are not subject to the control of the sixth consciousness, some of these factors can be affected when you become a Buddha.

The first of these factors is the *life force*, which is that force which powers the continuity of an individual's life, and which is seen in meditation as a shimmering haze.

The basic birth and death characteristics of phenomena also belong to this skandha, including *production* (birth), *continuity* (non-interruption), *decay* (aging) and *impermanence* (lack of duration). Birth causes something to pass from the future into the present, continuity causes it to last, decay causes it to pass from the present into the past, and impermanence is responsible for its annihilation. These processes are all included within the skandha of volition because this skandha has a large part in defining the never-ending process of birth and death.

There are also the factors of *space* (spatiality), *time* (the order of events, sequentiality and temporality), *countability*, and *speed* (rapidity) in the volition skandha, among others.

The factors behind naming and labeling, such as *syllables* (consonants and vowels), *words* (names) and *phrases*, are another component of the volition skandha. The fact that these sounds are found within this skandha has implications for the many religions that talk about primordial sounds known as "mother" vibrations or *matrika*. Hinduism says that these matrika were revealed, through yogic states of attainment, to the rishis and yogis of the remote past, who therefrom formulated the language of "manifest-matrika" which became Sanskrit.

Many mantras are therefore an outcome of supernatural hearing; Hinduism says they are sound-formulae constructed by carefully stringing together selected primordial vibrations (*bija*) according to a natural cosmological relationship. According to these teachings, a properly activated mantra acts on the universe according to the make-up of its structure. How did various mantras originally develop? Enlightened beings discovered the great mantras in the universe through their own cultivation efforts. Therefore, the mantras of the great Buddhas can be

powerful indeed.

As to the origins of *names* and *labels*, people perceived various phenomena and gave them names according to their level of understanding, meaning that names and labels came about because of subtle discrimination. If you can experience true emptiness, however, you will achieve direct perception and be able to experience things without the needing the names. After all, each moment of mind is stainless, and things originally have no names or labels.

We already know that the true Tao has no names, sounds or labels, so the "primordial" sounds claimed in various religions are not actually primordial because Tao is beyond emptiness and existence, silence (no sound) and no-silence (sound). Sounds, vibrations or movements can only be traced back to the level of the volition skandha of constant motion, which is even less refined than the skandha of consciousness, which in turn is also an empty projection of the Tao. Thus there is truly no such thing as an ultimate primordial sound.

This has great implications for the ultimate nature of mantras and mantra practice, which are only to be seen as expedient means in the long process of cultivation. Since mantras involve movement, we typically say they are of the nature of the wind element. And even though they are expressed as sound, they can be written down as form.

The States of No-Mind

While we have not yet explored the various types of samadhi you can encounter in cultivation, the volition skandha of movement also contains three particular samadhi where we say there is a state of no mind. Of course they are not real stages of emptiness since they are a part of the volition skandha which entails movement, so these states of no-mind are still states of consciousness. In these three samadhi states, however, the mind and mental events seem arrested like a river being blocked by a dam. The three no-mind samadhi are:

- the samadhi of cessation, or extinction
- the samadhi of no-thought (the samadhi of nonperception)
- the samadhi of the heaven of no-thought (in the Form Realm)

There are several other states where we encounter the situation of no thought which we can call "no-mind," "nonperception," or "mindlessness." For instance, mindless sleep and mindless unconsciousness (such as in fainting or coma) are nonmeditative states without cognition as well. The Bodhisattva realm of nirvana without remainder is another such realm, and we will get to a detailed explanation of these realms much later.

To be sure, understanding all the factors within the skandha of volition is not an easy task in one reading, and all the subtle differences between the various phenomena may be difficult to

comprehend. However, although it may have given you a headache just to review this material, the worst is over and you are even to be rewarded with an ancient story enjoyed by those who have previously studied these matters:

> Once a mischievous old man approached a famous dharma master to ask him what he taught. When the master replied, "Abhidharma theory," the stranger tried to trip up the master by asking, "Yesterday it was raining, but today it is sunny. What is this dharma now?" The master started to sweat because he was stumped and could not answer this unusual question, and if he could only speak of beautiful theories but could not address such a mundane situation, he would lose face in front of all his students. Suddenly the answer dawned upon him, and he replied: "This is a dharma that does not correspond to the mental force," meaning the skandha of volition.

Silly as it may be, such is the teaching method of the ancient cultivation schools to help you remember such matters. When modern physicists ask where this or that newly discovered force or factor may belong, then when you cannot think of a solution, this helps you remember that the answer may be the volition skandha of constant movement.

The Boundaries of the Skandhas

The four skandhas we have so far explained—the skandhas of form, sensation, conception and volition—can each be characterized by two great opposing functions. For instance, the boundaries of the form skandha include the opposites of form and emptiness, for if you examine form and evaluate it down to its most subtle aspects (such as atoms and then beyond), you will find they are partless and empty. Thus, the boundary of form is emptiness.

For the sensation skandha, the boundaries are contact and separation because without contact, no sensations can arise.

The boundaries of the conception skandha are remembering and forgetting; forgetting is a type of clarity that is opposed by an indistinctness or vagueness. And in the volition skandha, we have the two great opposing forces of birth and death, which are the forces of formation (production) and destruction (dissolution).

Since birth and death are cyclical factors within the aggregate of volition, most cultivation methods involve concentrating on some resting point between these two extremes, for the resting point does not change and provides a good support for focus. It is a point of extinction that is sort of free of dualistic extremes. If you can cultivate a point of cessation correctly, you can ultimately break through this skandha and arrive at the skandha of consciousness.

In other words, the gap between the in-breath and out-breath, the gap between two thoughts,

and the gap between the state of sleeping and wakefulness are all points of stillness, or nonmotion, which you can use as a preliminary focus point for your spiritual cultivation. They all revolve around the composition of the volition skandha. However, concentrating on the phenomena of birth and death—phenomena that move and cause the mind to move—will certainly not lead to a spiritual awakening. This is why studying religious scriptures will never, by itself, lead you to the Tao. Rather, the guiding principles in most forms of spiritual cultivation include first reaching some sort of mental quiet or cessation, and then applying contemplation. You need them both in order to tread the spiritual path, for when mastered they become samadhi and prajna observation.

Buddha said that when a person starts cultivating the volition skandha they will finally see the basis for life that all the beings in the universe share in common. The *Surangama Sutra* says this life-basis is seen as "a wavering haze, glittering and swirling about." Only when a person can dissolve all their miscellaneous hidden false thoughts will this shimmering and fluctuating life force become clear and calm down. This is the point when the individual will have exhausted the skandha of volition, for then the life force will return to its fundamental true nature.

Shakyamuni Buddha also taught us that the ever-moving volition skandha is generated because of deep, subtle, and hidden false thinking. Hence, he identified that the basis of the volition skandha is hidden false thoughts. When an individual exhaustively investigates and settles this fourth skandha, it will finally return to its root source which is the consciousness aggregate. However, at this point you still will not be completely enlightened. You still will not completely realize your true nature, but you *will* be very, very close to this possibility.

All true spiritual cultivation involves stopping and resting, so if the skandha of volition does not stop its movements, then the psychological and physical natures will not be able to rest, either. Thus the cultivation message is clear: without emptying out the aggregate of volition, it will be impossible for you to completely return to the root source of mind, which means to fully realize the fundamental nature. You can attain a stage of partial realization, but if your do not pacify or purify the volition skandha, this realization will still be incomplete.

No matter what spiritual school or practice you follow, to truly reach enlightenment means you will have to transcend the skandha of volition and become free from production and destruction, which is the birth and death of transient phenomena. It is not just that you must *cultivate* to free yourself from the process of birth and death, but in cultivation you *have to free yourself* from the process of birth and death. You free yourself by cultivating to the empty source of birth and death—the fundamental nature of birth and death—and then you always rest in *That One*.

The basic course of training behind this accomplishment is the cessation and contemplation practice found embedded in most cultivation techniques, for *cessation* refers to halting the movements of the mind and *contemplation* refers to shining prajna wisdom or insight observation

on what is produced. So how do you cultivate cessation and contemplation? The best guides to this task are the principles laid out in the *Surangama Sutra*, *Sandhinirmocana Sutra* and *Complete Enlightenment Sutra*.

It does not much matter what religion, spiritual school, creed or sect you belong to, for if you correctly follow the proper principles of spiritual practice, the journey and relevant procedures will always remain the same. After all, cultivation is essentially a nondenominational affair so the requirements of the path, and what is experienced on the path, do not vary across religions. It is just that some particular paths do not reach as far as others do, or exhibit as much comprehension of the path as others do, and this accounts for much of their differences.

V. THE CONSCIOUSNESS SKANDHA AND THE VARIOUS LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The consciousness skandha means pure consciousness itself unmolded by the projections of conceptions, sensations, forms or anything else. Pure consciousness is the pure awareness of an object-of-consciousness without any other sort of elaboration. It is the naked grasping of an impression.

When we distinguish special qualities of objects through discrimination, this is termed a "mental event." Mental events, such as the mental factors falling within the skandhas of volition and conception, are phenomena that ultimately arise out of transformations of consciousness. In other words, consciousness is a projection of the original nature, and mental events are further down-the-line projections or transformations of consciousness. They are second and third level projections, so to speak. They are subsidiary to their projective base, the consciousness skandha, and therefore represent different levels, or subtleties of thought.

When we say that the "mirror of consciousness" is occupied by an image, that means our attention is being occupied by some particular content within consciousness. This happens when we lose sight of the pure essence of consciousness itself. In essence, if we fixate our awareness upon some mental event rather than employ prajna wisdom as our base of awareness-functioning, we deprive ourselves of our enlightened birthright by fixating on the images appearing in consciousness. This is the definition of ignorance, or confusion.

The enlightened mind, the enlightened self-nature is always there, but we lose sight of it by attaching to its own projections. We try to make these other things as something "real" when no amount of mental clinging or habitual mental reinforcement will ever be able to do so. Our primordial wisdom-awareness thus becomes obscured through delusive attachment to the shadows that appear from its shining.

In light of this, the process of cultivation is not to freeze thoughts, which creates yet another experiential realm of consciousness, but to turn attention inward so that the object of consciousness is only consciousness itself. Actually, consciousness itself is a construction, so we want primordial awareness to become the only thing nakedly functioning; right-knowing is to have the mind repose nowhere. We want to reach the stage where there is no longer any subject and object, for these two extremes represent a realm of mental duality. We want to get to the realm where only primordial knowing is operating and there is only direct perception. Then we want to reach the state where our primordial knowing is even considered a guest rather than the host, and so even the host cannot be known. Thus, the *Surangama Sutra* describes Kuan Yin's method of tracing the hearing consciousness back to its roots in the consciousness skandha, and from there to become aware of the fundamental nature.

If we use the best categorization scheme possible out of all the cultivation schools in existence, the consciousness aggregate includes not only the individual consciousnesses for each of the five sense organs, but a sixth, seventh and eighth layer of consciousness as well. This eighth consciousness, called the alaya consciousness, is the root of the other forms of consciousness. The Hindu sage Sri Aurobindo wrote that we "have not learned to distinguish the different parts of our being; for these are usually lumped together simply as 'mind.'" In cultivation science, this "lumping" just is not good enough which is why we are going to go into all the details.

To discuss the mind with some precision and detail, we cannot be satisfied with the typical Vedic partitioning of consciousness into wakeful states, dream-filled sleep states, deep (dreamless) sleep, and super-consciousness (or "God consciousness") states. To be as scientific as possible, we cannot use the categories of co-emergent emptiness and bliss consciousness which you can find in Tibetan tantra, nor can we rely on the nine samadhi partitionings of Orthodox Buddhism either. Rather, we must be extremely fine and explicit in our analysis, thus requiring the use of Buddhist Abhidharma and Yogacara (Mind-Only) studies which partition consciousness into eight different types:

- the eye-consciousness
- the ear-consciousness
- the nose-consciousness
- the tongue-consciousness
- the body-consciousness
- the mind-consciousness, or sixth consciousness
- the seventh consciousness (*manas*), or defiling mind consciousness
- the eighth (alaya) consciousness, or storehouse-consciousness

In examining this list, we can see that the consciousness aggregate performs the function of recognition or discrimination, which is being able to tell the difference between things. Consciousness can be divided into many types, although they all have the same function—the

cognizing of an object. This is why people generally refer to the consciousness aggregate as the "mind" because the mind can cognize objects and accumulate all the experiences that have happened to us. But the original nature, with its aspect of unborn wordless knowing (prajna), is called the "true mind" because it stands behind the ordinary mind of mentation. It is the real power of awareness, whereas what we conventionally refer to as the ordinary mind is just a fabricated mental realm that it can see. You must therefore be careful when you see the word "mind."

In terms of cultivation explanations, the fundamental ground of consciousness (and the other skandhas) is the alaya consciousness, which can store all the different "seeds" of experience as well as all the residual impressions from past aggregate-experiential moments. It is therefore the basis of all consciousness, the conditional ground of all the other evolving consciousnesses. The alaya is "that to which all dharmas meet back," the "storehouse," or support for all the seeds of experience. All the other consciousnesses have their birth as projections of the alaya.

The alaya storehouse is described as having three main characteristics: the potential to store contents, the stored contents themselves or "seeds," and the fact that the "seeds" serve as objects of attachment. We also have the fact that these seeds are constantly interacting with one another, affecting one another in turn through a miraculous process of turning and transformation.

The alaya is the consciousness-ground in which the seeds of past and future experience are stored and contained, and these seeds will sprout in the future when conditions allow. Thus, it is the basis for the realm of co-dependent arising, or karmic interdependence. It stores the potential of all our virtuous or evil states, and from this potential, determines what eventually manifests which also, in turn, becomes stored in the alaya. We can therefore say that the alaya consciousness is the storehouse of all our karma, in fact, of everything because of interdependent arising. The alaya has the potential to generate things, and life is one such manifestation that exists when all the right conditions come together. The various realms of consciousness are other such manifestations.

We say that the seeds of the alaya consciousness are in a continuous process of transformation since each conscious moment we experience becomes an impression for the next moment in the series, each feeding off the other in turn. This must be so because the phenomenal realm of forms is always engaged in a ceaseless process of transformation, and it must be this way because of its underlying stratum, the alaya. But it is incorrect to think that the alaya consciousness is a real thing. It, too, is an empty falsity, and Buddha warned people from making the mistake of taking it as a true being, or true self, or true something at all. It is so seductive to fall into this delusion that Buddha rarely even discussed the matter.

The seeds of the alaya are subject to a ceaseless, inconceivably subtle perfuming, similar to the way in which meat is slowly smoked so as to gradually change its color, taste, smell, and texture.

This process of change is so subtle that we say it is "inconceivable." When the correct conditions arise, the proper seeds within the alaya germinate and become a sprout, meaning that we encounter some type of experiential realm. This means that the various samadhi all have karmic seeds, as do the events that occur to us in everyday existence. All we have to do is activate the appropriate seeds by building the right conditions. All experiences we encounter can be traced back to seeds within the alaya that we ourselves have laid down and are responsible for. This is why Zen master Huai-jang said to his student Ma-tsu:

> Your study of the mind-ground is like planting seeds, while my explanation of the essentials of the Dharma is like the sky sending down rain. Now that casual conditions are meet for you, you will naturally see the Way.

In saying this, he was explaining that reaching the highest realms of self-cultivation is not some random or spontaneous affair, but requires the seeds of cultivation effort. Without the seeds of cultivation effort and practice, there can be no eventual fruit of cultivation attainment. Yet the seeds of the fruits of attainment are already within the alaya, and you must simply activate them through your own efforts at cultivation practice.

Some seeds will germinate quickly, and others more slowly, but you can rest assured that the seeds of spiritual attainment will always manifest when conditions are right because that is the way the universe is structured. But without cultivation practice, there will be no spiritual attainment because the seeds need the right conditions to grow, and meditation is the only thing that can create the proper conditions. As another example of necessary requirements, without provisions of merit, individuals will lack the ancillary conditions and power of fulfillment that can germinate their cultivation seeds. To accumulate merit you must therefore

> Encourage virtuous seeds to sprout, and
> Continue supporting all virtuous sprouts that have arisen;
> Cut off bad sprouts when they manifest, and
> Prevent bad seeds from germinating in the first place.

Accumulating merit comes down to perfecting virtuous behavior. Without this, you cannot succeed at self-realization.

In life, you can choose to cover over a seed of bad behavior by cementing yourself within in a tight suit of regulated discipline. However, there is an inherent flaw in this course of action—all dams have finite lifetimes and will one day break. To block bad behavior is to simply defer it without ever transforming it. This is not getting rid of bad habits, desires and impulses, but simply delaying their outward expression. This is not purifying the seeds of the alaya at their root.

The best way to purify these seeds at their roots is to cultivate self-realization! When an individual cultivates, their mind becomes clear and they can naturally watch their internal thoughts, which becomes the practice of introspection. In so doing, a person can discover their bad behavior, try to find its root causes, and work to transform it through this new understanding. And when an individual can trace their bad seeds all the way through to their origins end, they will find they are ultimately empty and this will also bring a tremendous release and potential for change and transformation. After reaching this type of realization, they can slowly transform these seeds and purify their impure nature.

Thus, embedded in Zen master Huai-jang's words is the whole idea of the spiritual cultivation path toward enlightenment. It is a path of purifying mental and physical habits, purifying the seeds of mental states and functioning behavior. That is the process of spiritual cultivation. Confucius said, "In vain I have looked for a single man capable of seeing his own faults and bringing the charge home against himself." Socrates said, "know thyself" and "the unexamined life is not worth living." This is true cultivation; it is not anything else.

Remember, you have to work hard to achieve any sort of spiritual attainment. You cannot just claim you are already saved, as some religions tell you to do, and then make no spiritual efforts at liberation. Ontologically, it is perfectly true that you are liberated and saved (enlightened) from the beginning, and has always been so, so there is no need to say anything in the first place. Nevertheless, even so you will still suffer the karmic rounds of ceaseless birth and death which you cannot control, and which will plunge you into all sorts of pain, troubles, suffering and affliction. If you do not make an effort to become master of your fate and your mind, then just knowing you are fundamentally Tao does nothing at all.

Such people who claim they are saved and then do nothing in terms of spiritual cultivation will never find the root source of matter and mind, and they will never be able to dissolve suffering and affliction or learn how to transform it for the better. They will never learn how to truly become a really great force for good in the world. It is true that every sentient being is already fundamentally enlightened, but people who adopt the route of nonchalance or naturally going with the flow will just continue following along the course of birth and death, suffering infinite lives of pain without respite, and possessing not the slightest control over the process. Even rocks are "saved" if you adopt this mind set, but how is that going to help the rocks from being destroyed, or help you in terms of the problems of aging, sickness, suffering, and death? If you cannot control these processes, you are just another deluded prisoner suffering from your own illusions. And if you are not even striving to perfect yourself and become a better person, what kind of excuse is all this?

When we take these principles and apply them to the larger picture of the path, we can then recognize that even if you are successful in attaining the samadhi of no-thought—wherein you will not be cognizant of experiencing anything—it means you will only be able to just

temporarily control things so that you have no thoughts. Furthermore, this state is itself just a delusional creation. When the appropriate karma arises, you will even lose that state of samadhi because your other seeds will manifest, and they *have to manifest* because they are still there waiting to do so. They are still waiting because you have not purified them at their source, so it is inevitable that you will eventually drop out of samadhi.

This is not so bad if you can control the process, if you can act the ultimate master. But can you? We are all fundamentally saved or liberated by virtue of being at one with the original nature, but can any of us control birth and death, or pain and suffering, if we do not cultivate? You can always lose the state of samadhi but you can never lose *That One* behind the samadhi, so all of spiritual cultivation is to find *That One* rather than pursue the transitory realms that arise and depart within its purview. You cannot just say you are liberated by virtue of *That One*, but must cultivate to experience it, prove it, be at one with it, and fully exhibit it without obstruction.

Through cultivation, you can learn to accept any situation that comes your way because of the karma that is due you, and you can learn how to respond to it such that you create only good karma for the future. You can learn how to become much more skillful in dealing with the world of phenomena, and this means you will become extremely skillful in learning how to deal with karma. Thus, the work of perfecting your behavior and purifying your seeds of conduct is the major task involved in becoming a Buddha, and it is the major activity of being a Buddha. In the universe, what else is there that is worthwhile but the constant struggle for ever greater merit and perfection, which we can call "skillful means"? What other task is more worthwhile and challenging than learning how to transform things for the better?

Do not think of the "original fundamental nature" we always talk about as a thing. The "original nature" is just a name, as is the alternative term of "Tathagata Storehouse" that we give to the "alaya" consciousness. Fundamental nature, by its essence, has the power to manifest, give birth, or to engender things. That's just the way it is. But what it gives rise to is an empty reality, a false existence which cannot stay. That is why it can give birth to things that do not conflict with its never changing reality in the first place. These things must be of its own nature, which does not change, and hence they must themselves be empty and unproduced. Otherwise, they could not exist. This is how and why a false realm can co-exist with the *Real*, for it is not really existent. That, in turn, is why it is called a maya or falsity or illusion.

Our fundamental nature, which we call mind, or Mind, also has the capability of knowing. This Mind is not the "mind" of Western psychology, for that is a sub-projection of the original nature. That mind is a projection born from consciousness which is itself a constructed projection. Sometimes we mix these two terms of "mind" and "Mind" because we do not put in the capitalization, but the search for our original nature is the search for fundamental Mind. Since the emptiness of fundamental mind gives birth to the prajna wisdom that powers our ability of knowing, that is why we call it Mind in the first place. But there is one more secret here we have

not yet mentioned—the original fundamental nature is like a host, and the capacity to know is considered its guest! The great Zen masters all knew this, which is why they ultimately awakened.

Consciousness is not the ontological ground state of reality, for it is actually a projection of the original nature. In other words, consciousness is born from Mind. And as we know, the consciousness within Mind is further subdivided into eight categories, or eight separate types, and that is what we will soon be dealing with.

Consciousness is not separate from the physical phenomena of universe, for consciousness and phenomena are of one body, one whole. As the Buddhist sutras tell us, "All things originate from the Mind." The *Surangama Sutra* even tells us, "This physical body of ours, as well as the external mountains, rivers, space and the great earth itself are all but phenomena within the wondrous bright true mind." The alaya storehouse, or eighth consciousness, has the capacity to generate things, and the various realms of consciousness are just some of its various manifestations. Life is another such manifestation, as are the four elements. They are all ultimately built upon consciousness, which is itself a projection of the original nature.

All over the world, there are cultivation schools which never say this clearly, but mind and phenomena are of one single whole, one common source. They share the same ground state of being, and neither will ever be destroyed. While you must approach the search for our true nature through the mind, you should not abandon the world of suffering beings even though in the absolute sense it does not truly exist. From the conventional sense sentient beings are seen to be suffering ignorance and pain in the world of interdependent origination, and so in exercising one's enlightening function it is proper to help improve this realm. You have to recognize the inherent Mind, and then let it operate through compassionate behavior in the Three Realms. But how do you recognize your inherent Mind, the original nature? You have to approach this search by investigating or purifying consciousness.

To understand the eight categories of consciousness, we must start with the first five sense consciousnesses. Our eyes can see, our nose can smell, the body can feel, etc.—the specific senses each have their own specific consciousnesses behind them. Yet behind these five senses, and making use of the information they provide, is the sixth consciousness. That consciousness collates and interprets all the information from the senses. In cultivation, the first task is to pacify or purify or tie up the sixth consciousness so that you reach a relative realm of mental quiet.

Say for instance that you are concentrating very hard on some matter, and you hear a noise or see something in your line of sight. If you are concentrating so hard then you will be tying up the sixth consciousness of discrimination. When that happens, you will know when you see something move or when you hear something in the room, but you will not know exactly what it is because your sixth consciousness will be totally engaged in what it is doing. As Confucius said,

"When you are only thinking of the one you love, food has no taste," and that explains the state of the sixth consciousness being tied up.

So at that time of intensive concentration, you can be aware of the input from the five individual sense consciousnesses, but you will not be able to interpret them until the sixth consciousness focuses on their output. To be able to interpret what the sense consciousnesses feed you is due to the collating processes of the sixth consciousness. In cultivation you how to become aware of the nature of these consciousnesses, but even if you become so clear that you realize the nature of all these separate consciousnesses, you still will not know where the original mind is. Becoming clear about them does not mean you will recognize the primordial Mind of Tao.

So let us summarize this so far. The pure sense impressions, without commentary, are work of the five sense consciousnesses. What collects and receives the five sense impressions is the sixth consciousness, so the subsequent analysis of the pure sense collections as, "This is red, it is also long and ..." is the sixth consciousness doing its job. This is something that should be clear by now.

In conventional slang we often call the sixth consciousness the thinking mind, and the first stage of cultivation is to bring this mind of miscellaneous thoughts to a condition of peaceful stillness, or cessation, so that we can begin to recognize the mind's true substance. This is the key to introductory spiritual practice, and you can find all sorts of religious exercises in the world's traditions that are geared toward bringing about this state. First you cultivate cessation, and from within the state of cessation you cultivate prajna wordless knowing which can sense the mind's true nature.

While the sixth consciousness helps us interpret the output of the senses, it has its own roots in what is called the seventh consciousness, which is an even deeper layer of consciousness which grasps onto the idea of a self. Of course there is no such thing as an inherent self, for the notion we hold of being a self is just an ever-running unbroken stream of thoughts. The self is just a stream of thoughts—that is all!

All religions teach us to abandon selfishness to become selfless. They tell us to abandon the idea of a small ego to experience the big ego of no-ego, and this is their way of referring to the task of purifying the seventh consciousness. When someone reaches the stage of selflessness and nonego in cultivation, we say they "become a saint" because they have purified the realm of the seventh consciousness.

To understand this from another angle, you need to first realize that our universe is just a temporal affair, and within it there are only transient causes and conditions coming together and which temporarily form appearances that are always changing. There is nothing permanent in the realm of phenomena, so the idea of an inherent ego is actually the notion of trying to

"permanentize" this intrinsic instability. The seventh consciousness tries to grasp at these impermanent constructions and make them into a permanent self. But no matter how strong it attaches to these impermanences, no matter how often the mind keeps spinning reinforcing thoughts in attempt to try to make the false ego into a reality, it can never happen.

The seventh consciousness of egoity itself has a root consciousness, which is the eighth consciousness, or substrate consciousness called the alaya. The alaya has the capacity to generate things, and these various consciousnesses are its manifestations. The alaya consciousness is therefore the root source of the seventh consciousness just as the seventh consciousness is the ground state of the sixth consciousness. The seventh consciousness functions by grabbing onto the alaya and trying to make it into a self. So it is always trying to define itself by circular references to self-belief, self-delusion, self-conceit, and self-love.

This explains a bit about the anatomy of consciousness, but it does not explain how the physical world originally came about. It does not explain the evolution of the physical nature. Actually, since, as we have discussed, all phenomena are "empty," nothing has a self-nature of its own. Phenomena simply appear due to co-dependent conditions, so nothing is self-defined. Since things lack their own independent self-nature, it means they are inconstant and subject to incessant change down to the tiniest moment of time. That is why they do not represent a fixed reality.

Of course we understand that nothing is eternal or forever because the physical or phenomenal world is always engaged in the process of change and transformation. Nevertheless, as a whole it will not ever be destroyed, annihilated, or extinguished; it will just always continue to be transformed. Mind and material are both of the same undying source, they are of one ultimate undivided substance, and so they are interdependent and can influence each other. Consciousness and phenomena are linked, they are both of the same single source, and there is a continual interchange between the two such that they always affect each other.

Modern science is finally accepting the existence of a mind-body connection although it has ignored the consistent claims of enlightened adepts throughout history that this is so. Science is starting to finally accept the notion that chi and consciousness are linked. That is the most direct linkage it can notice, but if scientists really want to understand things, they will have to go all the way back to the inconceivable, perfuming, transformative aspect of the seeds within the alaya.

Shakyamuni Buddha taught for over forty years, but even near the end of his life he still did not want to talk too much about the alaya consciousness for fear that people would consider it another self, or take it as another God. How did Buddha explain the alaya? He said,

> The storehouse consciousness [alaya] is very deep and subtle;
> All its seeds are like a torrential flow.

I do not explain it to the ignorant,
For fear they will cling to it and consider it a self.

Thus, the source of consciousness and life is like a huge flowing river. We see its smooth surface and think it is still, but constantly, indiscernible changes are actually taking place all the time. They are just so subtle that we do not notice them, and yet they comprise an infinite, miraculous process of transformation.

It is the alaya consciousness that gives birth to the physical universe, including our life, our body, our minds, and all of these factors are undergoing a ceaseless process of transformation. Consciousness is not the ground state of being, and neither are the energies of the four great elements, the various realms of consciousness, or the various samadhi. The ground state of being is that which can give birth to all these experiential realms. It is that thing which never changes and which stands on its own.

We may even think that our samadhi realms and high states of consciousness are empty or still, but they, too, are always still involved with movement. As with the changes in the river, their movement is so subtle that we can barely notice it. However, in relative terms we can say that some are higher, purer, or more rarified than others are, and thus "closer" to the original Mind. But these are just relative statements because if you are off by an atom, it is the same distance as between the earth and sky. Hence, no state of samadhi, however seemingly pure, is *It*. The Three Realms of Desire, Form and Formlessness are also built upon this principle of progressive refinement, but they, too, are also phenomenal constructions of Mind.

To bring this conversation back down to a mundane level and what it mean to you as an individual, we have to focus on the fact that our chi and consciousness are interlinked. There is a variety of chi flowing through the liver, lungs, heart, stomach and all the other organs of the body, and each of these organs have their own specific energy flows. This is something we know through Chinese medicine, ayurveda, and the teachings of yoga, Taoism, Esoteric Buddhism and so on. As individuals, we also have our own personalities, habits, and types of behavior, even down to how we may move our heads or wiggle our toes. Thus, we have our own individual habit energies, or habit chi. As with the seeds of the alaya, this habit energy flows like an endless river as well.

The purpose and process of cultivation comes down to this: *transforming these physical and mental habit energies into something better, and this is why chi and consciousness both become involved in the process of cultivation.* Spiritual cultivation comes down to transforming or purifying the on-going, ceaseless habit streams that define us and which have their ultimate basis in the alaya. On the outside we call them habits, but when we trace them back to their source we end up with the volition skandha, and beneath that with the alaya consciousness and its seeds which germinate and then manifest as habit energies. So while purifying our minds and behavior

means purifying our habits, we must also remember that this involves purifying the deep seeds within the alaya consciousness.

On the surface level, purifying our chi also means purifying our habits to some extent—or purifying our minds and behavior—and at the ultimate level this refers to the much deeper process of purifying the seeds of the alaya which are entangled in a never ending, onrushing torrent of sprouting seeds. You can word it in many different ways, but it is all the same thing although approached from different angles. In genuine spiritual cultivation, this is what we are ultimately doing or attempting to do—to transform the seeds or onrushing energy streams of the alaya, and make them all pure and virtuous through and through.

This is the meaning of transforming the alaya seeds, which is why the cultivation path starts with behavior and ends with behavior. This is why its process is behavior and why its fruit is good behavior. The alaya seeds are always subtly transforming and always will be subtly transforming, but can you ultimately guide these transformations as a master?

When you finally get to the stage of cultivating (purifying) the consciousness skandha, you can arrive at this very realm and transform all the seeds at their root which is called achieving a "revolution in the basis." You do not try to empty them, as would an Arhat. Rather, you accept both sides of reality and transform them into miraculous wisdoms. In transformation, the seeds of ignorance become wisdoms and the alaya consciousness truly becomes the matrix womb of the Tathagatas. Otherwise, if you do not transform these seeds into wisdoms, rather than just empty them, you could sit in samadhi for 80,000 eons and hope to stay out of samsara, but would simply fall out of samadhi in the end.

Sleeping, Death and Leaving Samadhi

The Arhats, who reach the realm of emptiness and try to "call it quits," can only be said to be taking a long vacation from the Three Realms. After all, there is no Fourth Realm to which they can go, nor is there any state of permanence to which they can attain. Even though they can cultivate high stages of samadhi, eventually they will lose their samadhi and enter the rounds of cyclic incarnation again.

A Buddha, on the other hand, completely controls his entry into, and involvement with the Three Realms, and compassionately does so for our benefit. As to us, we have no control over the process at all. Even if we attain the state of samadhi, we usually end up losing it and getting tossed about on the waves of karma because we never proceed far enough in our cultivation efforts to accomplish the whole task. Losing the state of samadhi is akin to falling asleep and landing in ignorance, and since these are all states of consciousness, we must understand all these situations.

The consciousness skandha naturally still operates while you sleep, but you lose your full sense of sixth consciousness functioning. What actually happens during sleep is that the first six consciousnesses are no longer fully active, but the solitary consciousness du-yin—which is the shadow side of the sixth consciousness—starts operating during dreaming. So all you have done is switch particular states of consciousness, all the while still remaining in the consciousness realm. Of course for someone who's broken through the conception skandha, their sleeping state has the same degree of awareness as when they are awake, so theirs is a different situation entirely.

Some people on the cultivation path are wise in that they do not waste their sleep time; they practice dream yoga or initiate contemplation practice during the state of sleep. Another practice is to try to catch hold of the primordial prajna wordless wisdom-knowing that momentarily manifests during sleep. In other words, at the time of sleep, consciousness and mind usually dissolve into unknowing so that memory and awareness are temporarily lost. But after that stage of unknowing fades—which is one of the possible states of no-thought we have previously mentioned—it just so happens that the primordial knowing awareness of Mind will momentarily emerge. Your prajna wisdom can flash for a moment because you are not concerned with your body and you can use that instant to gain insight into the dharmakaya. Tibetan Buddhism has created a number of yogas for cultivating this state, which is called the "clear light of sleep."

To put it another way, during sleep there is a temporary stage like unconsciousness, and then you awaken from that darkness. At the moment you awaken, you experience the primordial clear light nature of the mind, and you can learn to cultivate this state to make progress in your cultivation. The clear light simply manifests for a moment, and after the stage of clear light is released and the mind slips out of the clear light experience, your chi begins to follow its own natural inclinations, and you enter into the dream state. The way to cultivate the clear light of the mind, which is very similar to the true Mind, is to remain in that experience of clear light absorption for as long a time as possible until dreams occur.

Even if a practitioner cannot master this particular practice, or master the state of clear presence in their dreams, a keen cultivator will still examine their dreams to learn of their hidden bad habits which are often revealed through the indications given by the du-yin. This is another form of introspection, of "seeing your own faults." Spiritual cultivation is always about improving yourself and your behavior, hence this is a commendable cultivation activity that one can recommend. Recognizing negative personality traits in dreams is often a better indication for guidance than what others can give you because you can see it for yourself. Then the work is left up to you to try and change your habit energies for the better.

We often say that death is akin to sleep, but when a person dies because the forces of karma for that life are exhausted, the consciousness starts to retract from the body. This causes the sense faculties that depend upon the five consciousnesses to cease, and so the various chi within the

body start to dissipate including the warmth element which is drawn away. In this way, life passes away. Noncultivators usually go unconscious at this point in time, and before they arise in an intermediate bardo body, there occurs an experience similar to the clear light of sleep that is called the clear light of death. If you can remain in that state for a long while, then you can also cultivate towards enlightenment. Otherwise, when you lose your realization of the clear light you will have to assume another body and incarnation.

In the same way, after you attain a high stage of samadhi, if you are not careful then you will eventually drop out of that state of samadhi again. This is inevitable since all samadhi experiences are transient states of mind; they are not the unfabricated original nature. So when the right conditions arise dependent upon your seeds and karma, then it is inevitable that you will drop out of samadhi again. Because this is so damaging to cultivation practice, this is why it is considered a major breech of discipline if someone should fall out of their samadhi.

Everything is dependent upon the seeds of experience we have planted, and so to become truly enlightened, you have to transform all the seeds in the alaya consciousness. You have to produce a revolution in its basis. At that point the wisdom mind of perception will become the Wisdom Truth body, and the form you possess at that time will become the Great Bliss Body. When all the seeds are purified, you can be the same whether in form or emptiness because you will be beyond the dualistic realms. At that time all the samadhi will just be something you play with. So the important point is to ultimately awaken to the Tao rather than cultivate realms of samadhi, for samadhi are just training stations to ultimately help you awaken. In fact, as Buddha told his cousin Ananda, there are even beings in the universe who cultivate all nine realms of samadhi, and who still have not awakened to their original nature.

THE FIRST SIX CONSCIOUSNESSES

To review this all this information again, the vast depths of the ocean are akin to our alaya consciousness, the sixth consciousness of mind can be compared to the waves on the surface of the ocean, and our first five sense consciousness are like tiny ripples in these ocean waves. Together, the first six consciousnesses are like active instigators or energy drivers that keep the entire system in constant flux and transformation. If you can follow them back to their source in the alaya, however, you can attain the stillness of peaceful nirvana. But as the Dharma master Xuan Zang said, “For the ignorant, it is hard to separate consciousness from sense faculty,” and so they have troubles making this particular journey.

We can say that these ocean waves, or the fluctuations of consciousness, all arise because of the functioning of the seeds in the alaya. They arise because the alaya supports the separate sense consciousnesses just like the ocean supports the waves on its surface. While the objects perceived by each type of consciousness are so distinct that, as an example, the eye-consciousness grasps visible form and not sound, in actual fact the separate types of

consciousness are neither different nor nondifferent from the alaya, just as there is no distinction between the ocean and its waves. Zen master Lin-chi therefore said,

> The mind dharma is immaterial and pervades all things in the ten directions of space. When it works through the eyes, it is called seeing. When it works through the ears, it is called hearing, when it works through the nose, it is called smelling ... There is fundamentally but one pure brightness divided into six unions [six consciousnesses].

This also means that when you can trace these separate sense consciousnesses back to their source, they will cease to be split into separate functions such as hearing, seeing, tasting or touching, but will be pure, clean and undisturbed. So it is said,

> One pure brightness in its origin,
> It divides into six interacting aspects.

Thus, the process of cultivation involves calming these ripples which somehow miraculously appear on the face of ultimate clarity. You calm them by letting them operate, but in letting them operate you refuse to feed them the energy involved in clinging or rejection so as to totally detach from their manifestation. Rather, you just observe them, otherwise the very effort of trying to stop them gives them energy; whenever you want to avoid or stop something you are already paying too much attention. Hence, you do not try to calm them, but let them calm down of themselves by practicing the no-effort of not giving them any mind.

This is why we have the cultivation injunction, as in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, to practice detachment and withdraw the mind from all the senses because at the very moment any of these consciousnesses are functioning—whatever consciousness it is—the true basis behind them is always clear, vivid, peaceful and still. And from an esoteric standpoint, as you withdraw the five sense consciousnesses from external objects, the result will bring the chi upon which they ride into the sushumna central channel, which will enable you to attain samadhi.

The way our ordinary mind works is that the five sense consciousnesses access the five sense objects such as appearances, smells, tastes and so on. These five sense consciousnesses have no discernment. They just function to supply us with input information and it is up to us to do something with this information by analyzing it with the sixth consciousness. It is the sixth consciousness which then cognizes the general impressions of these appearances and designates them as objects. It maintains an ongoing internal dialogue that in effect, censors experiences by categorizing what it perceives. It likes to give experiences recognizable labels, like an army general who makes sense interpreting all the reports he's receiving from his five sense lieutenants.

The first five consciousness of sense therefore produce neutral indications and impressions like

the reflections that naturally arise in a mirror, while the sixth consciousness takes these and performs a preliminary cognition. Thus, the sixth consciousness functions as our ideational consciousness, our ordinary mind of mentation. It maintains a sort of internal dialogue that, in effect, forces our experiences into familiar categories through discrimination. It is the basis of the normal mental chatter, or internal thought dialogue inside our heads.

When you suspend the activity of the sixth consciousness, this suspension opens you up to the possibility of other forms of more direct awareness. This is where calming the mind fits into the overall process of spiritual cultivation. If you let go of a preoccupation with thoughts because they are no longer present, then you can possibly realize your prajna wisdom. Hence, most of the meditation techniques that beginning cultivators follow have the purpose of pacifying the ever roaming sixth consciousness and bringing its activities to a halt. This settlement of mental busyness is called cessation, stillness, samadhi, tranquility or emptiness. It is usually called the realization of emptiness because it is the emptiness of discriminative thought.

When we experience extreme shock, fear, joy or awe, it is often possible to experience a momentary halt in the workings of the sixth consciousness even without any prior spiritual training. In these situations, miscellaneous thoughts might suddenly halt so that the mind becomes quiet. This is a big secret, and the Tibetan school of Tantric Buddhism even says you might be able to momentarily see the Tao in such situations. Typically, however, people try to focus on a sound, a vision, their breathing and so on in order to bring about the required stage of cessation. That is how we get certain meditation techniques, such as Tien-tai cessation and contemplation practice, which are developed around this principle.

As we already know, the sixth consciousness has two aspects: a clear consciousness that comprehends, and a consciousness of images alone called the solitary consciousness, or du-yin. This du-yin, or shadow side of clear discrimination, is what modern psychology calls the subconscious, and this aspect of consciousness still belongs to the sixth mind. It is called the "solitary consciousness" because it is that aspect of the sixth consciousness which can operate on its own without requiring the informational input normally provided by the eyes, ear, nose and other sense consciousnesses. Hence, it is the "solitary head" or shadow side of the alert, clear aspect of the sixth consciousness. As we already know, it operates in the case of dreams, insanity, incoherence and even certain states of meditation.

Since it is free from the confines of the senses, the du-yin shadow consciousness can sometimes tap into the higher states of space and time. This is what sometimes enables you to see glimpses of the future. But psychic powers like this teeter on the edge of mental instability, so they are not a desirable thing even though cultivating them can produce unusual phenomena. For this reason and others, you should not attempt to cultivate the du-yin, but should but all your efforts into purifying your sixth consciousness. In many cases a person can attain psychic abilities or superpowers when they open up just one part of the brain, but since only a single area becomes

opened, this is really equivalent to an unbalanced mental situation as well.

When someone is in samadhi, they are not influenced by the sensory input of the first five sense consciousnesses, so at this time, you can also experience various supranormal situations that seem to go beyond space and time. However the difference between this case and the case of insanity or mental illness is that in samadhi you have complete control over yourself, and can manifest these powers at will. So the du-yin is an operational shadow state of the clear sixth consciousness when it is functioning in its own realm, free of the influences of the first five consciousnesses, but it is a state over which you have little or no control.

THE SEVENTH CONSCIOUSNESS

We always experience the arising of attachment, repulsion, or even neutrality towards what is distinguished by the sixth consciousness. This results are the workings of the seventh consciousness, which is the value judging consciousness that clings to notions of self in order to make the determinations that "I like this" or "I don't like that."

Sometimes the seventh consciousness is also called the "transmitting consciousness," because when you analyze what it does, you can say that it transmits messages from the sixth consciousness to the eighth consciousness. It is the interface consciousness between these two. Basically, it is a faculty of deeper intellect than the sixth consciousness, but not yet the ground state of consciousness. It is a consciousness of the original cognitive awareness and instinctive activity that comes along with self and life. In technical terms, it is also called the "*manas* consciousness."

The seventh consciousness is also called the "afflicted thinking mind" or "defiled mind consciousness." It gets these names because, in essence, it is an obscured mind. We say this obscured mind is afflicted, defiled or obscured because it takes objects as the self. In other words, it is always entertaining ego-centered thoughts, and thus we also say that it is an "afflicted mind" because it is polluted with egotism, which means that it perpetually grasps onto the thought of being an ego or self.

To say it another way, the seventh consciousness perpetually thinks about being an ego, and it clings to this ego-centered thinking. Everything it does is centered on an imaginary ego that it constructs through its own delusive thinking. And here's the key point regarding this consciousness and the road of spiritual cultivation—if you can dissolve this type of polluted thinking and pacify the seventh consciousness, you can reach the stage of "selflessness," "egolessness" or "non-ego" which corresponds to awakening to the Tao.

The seventh consciousness can also be described as the deep mind, or deep consciousness perennially afflicted with the four emotions:

(1) opinion about an I (ego belief)
(2) stupidity about an I (ego ignorance)
(3) pride about an I (ego conceit)
(4) love of the I (self-love)

In other words, the seventh consciousness always operates entwined with four afflictive thought-streams: self-belief, self-delusion, self-conceit, and self-love. By constantly revolving through these four notions, it creates an ever-present sense of individuality—a sense of intrinsic ego—and colors the impressions that objects make on the sixth consciousness. This is why it is the seventh consciousness that gives rise to the attitude of likes, dislikes and indifference, of negating, accepting, hating and liking which are all reflections of "this is me" in its analysis stream.

All these judgments are self-centered, revolving around the illusory concept of an imputed ego. For instance, objects in themselves have no power to attract the mind; rather, the mind projects attractiveness onto objects and then becomes attached. This attractiveness, or repulsiveness, comes from the seventh mind or seventh consciousness. In terms of Tao, nothing can be considered either pure or impure, which is a true state of purity, Hence, this type of judgment is an afflicted thinking mind or defiled mind consciousness.

Currently a hot topic in today's New Age movement is the subject of "personal transformation." Many people have written books and hold seminars on how to bring about "deep" changes in your personality and life, but none of this reaches to the depths of the seventh consciousness. They teach you how to visualize success, abandon old habits and bad tendencies, eliminate emotional afflictions, and open yourself up to positive change. While their effort is commendable, they promote all sorts of techniques that, frankly speaking, barely lead to any form of transformational kung-fu at all. These activities only produce surface change, if anything, rather than a genuine, lasting and true transformation at the deep level of inner being.

While the inherent idea of "personal transformation" or "self perfection" is the same idea as the path of spiritual cultivation, in terms of the path of cultivation we can say that what the New Age teachers are calling "transformation" is just baby stuff. It is a watered down, diluted version of the *real* process of transformation. What is the real process of transformation? Working on transforming the sixth and then seventh consciousness is *real* transformation. This is something substantial and is actually what people are really after. That stage of attainment qualifies as real cultivation, as the real stage of cultivating the path.

You can reach this stage in your cultivation when you get to the realm of cultivating the skandha of volition. But you have to break through the skandhas of form, sensation and conception and "see the Tao" before you can actualize the process of personal transformation that totally purifies away ego notions. You already have to purify away ego notions if you want to see the Tao, which is achieving the stage of selflessness or nonego, but even after this feat there are still

residual energy streams that must be purified. The stage of real cultivation practice is about this stage of cultivation work. When you start working on the seventh consciousness you are in this realm, so at this stage we can say you are finally on the cultivation path.

Just so that some people do not borrow this terminology and start to cheat you in saying that they have seen the Tao, remember that people typically only reach this type of realization after years of work mastering various samadhi and stages of cultivation kung-fu. You cannot just have some major mental realization without this previous effort and say you understand everything. Maybe you can gain some brilliant intellectual insight into these matters, but someone who lacks prajna and samadhi is not a sure spiritual guide.

Many people do indeed have peak spiritual experiences from which they think they have seen the Tao, and these experiences certainly change their lives in many positive ways. But if you cannot freely go in and out of the various samadhi and dhyana, do not deceive yourself into thinking you have actually reached this stage of spiritual realization. Your experiences may seem profound, but without having previously cultivated your chi, mai, kundalini, and so on, and without having attained the various kung-fu which correspond to breaking through the lower skandhas (such as seeing inside the body or viewing realms far away, being able to review your entire life sequence and past lives, being able to generate an illusory body, etc.), whatever you experience is probably just a minor calming of the sixth consciousness.

Real transformation, of the type which the New Age schools can only dream of attaining, starts to occur only when you reach the point in your meditation when you are finally starting to transform the seventh consciousness and your deep habit energies. You only enter upon this stage of practice when you finally start to purify the skandha of volition.

THE EIGHTH (ALAYA) CONSCIOUSNESS

The seventh consciousness deposits its impressions on the eighth consciousness, or alaya, which, as we have seen, functions as the storehouse of all the residual impressions left by the functioning of the prior seven consciousnesses. The alaya does no real judging on its own. Instead, it serves as the neutral storehouse of all the "seeds" or germs of everything within the Three Realms, including all our ideas and the impressions we experience. This is why it is often called the "storehouse of our seeds of experience." It is also sometimes called the "receptacle consciousness" due to the fact that these seeds lie within it. Since the intermingling of the seeds produces our karma, which is the retribution of actions we commit in either this life or from previous lives, it is also at times called the "retribution consciousness."

All the consciousnesses have various names, and these are just a few that we have for the alaya. Asanga said, "the objective world and the subjective ego are only manifestations of the universal consciousness [alaya]," which helps us further understand its great functioning. Since the fruits or

phenomena which evolve from it mature at varying times and in varying categories, it is also called the "varying maturing consciousness."

The universal ground of the alaya is a neutral state, like a mirror which simply reflects things but whose images are neither good nor bad in themselves. The alaya consciousness is omnipresent, but if it were not for the functioning of the other seven consciousnesses, it would not create good and bad karma or interact with phenomena. Therefore it is described as "nonrevolving and indefinite." In the novel *The Journey to the West*, the fact that the monk Xuan Zang always seemed so useless was because he represented this "nonrevolving" eighth consciousness which is ineffective by itself. In the story, the monk always had to rely on the efforts of the monkey Sun Wu-kung to get anything done because the monkey represented the actionable working mind or sixth consciousness.

In describing how consciousness works, it is easiest to say that the seeds within the alaya "surface" and are engendered: when conditions are proper, seeds that are normally covered sprout so as to give rise to the corresponding experiences. Thus, it is the alaya consciousness that ultimately gives birth to the manifestation of phenomenal states, and this happens when the proper conditions come together so that relevant experiences and circumstances can manifest.

In other words, the seeds within the alaya are always being "perfumed" (cross-pollinated, or cross-fertilized) by the first seven consciousnesses. Furthermore, the seeds within it are always being influenced by each other because of mutual interaction. This is the process of ceaseless, subtle transformation that defines the alaya's workings, and the subtle nature of this transformation is the reason that no super-computer could ever perfectly predict the karma determined by the alaya. Nevertheless, through this process of turning, perfuming or transforming, our karma is always being determined, and sometimes this karma can be foreknown.

As a side note, this is also the key for how you can change or defer unfortunate karma that is due. Simply prevent the necessary contributing circumstances from transpiring, and then the environment that would produce bad fortune will not occur. Rather, it will have to wait for another time to manifest when all the proper conditions come together. When you become enlightened, you will even learn how to change your karma rather than defer it. You will also become able to understand the eventual karmic results of all deeds, as well as see the prior acts responsible for someone's current karmic conditions.

While the various seeds within the alaya are engendered to affect the various consciousnesses and bring about experiential realms, we must remember that the consciousnesses simultaneously perfume the seeds, so they become in their turn causes which perfume and mature seeds, and which thereby in turn produce further seeds of experience. *The seeds, the consciousnesses that perfume them, and the seeds subsequently engendered by this perfuming revolve in a cycle,*

simultaneously and reciprocally acting as cause and effect. This is the perfuming of subtle transformation, a process of interconnected seeds rushing onwards as a torrential whole whose miraculous movements can never be stopped. Mind will always be, and the material world will always be, and there is no possible stopping of either. This is why you must learn detachment, and how to skillfully master these processes.

This is a very deep and complicated topic. It is so profound that it is very easy to take it the wrong way. The Dharma master Xuan Zang tried to summarize these principles by saying,

> a seed produces a manifestation, and a manifestation perfumes a seed (simultaneously acts as a cause and effect). The seeds, the manifestation and perfuming turn on and on, functioning at one and the same time as cause and effect. ... Consciousness, from beginningless time, is born and perishes again from moment to moment, ever successively changing. As cause it perishes and as fruit it is born again. Through the evolution of the other consciousnesses the alaya is perfumed and forms seeds (of future experience). Its sequence of cause and effect is like a rushing torrent which flows ever onward in sequence, carrying with it [seeds which] sometimes float and sometimes sink [assume greater or lesser roles of activity and passivity]. Thus, there is the successive sequence from beginninglessness of being born and perishing, so that there is neither permanence nor impermanence.

When you finally become a Buddha through your cultivation efforts, all the seeds of your alaya consciousness will have been transformed to become pure virtue. Your stream of mind events and behavior will have all assumed a virtuous character that is unimaginable. When you reach the realm of the alaya consciousness through spiritual cultivation and transform it into a purified, cleansed consciousness, then you can completely "illuminate mind and see the true nature." This is when you can transform it back into its original inherent identity as the matrix womb of the Buddhas. This is sort of like flipping any yin aspect of the alaya into a yang aspect entirely. When you do this we can call the alaya consciousness the "enlightenment Tathagata Storehouse," but before this achievement it is simply called the alaya or eighth consciousness.

Before becoming a fully enlightened Buddha, the three kinds of seeds that are necessary for attaining self-realization remain inactive. They are there, but you never activate them because you do not cultivate the conditions that lead to their germination. In other words, you do not put in the required efforts of spiritual cultivation, so the fruitional results of these seeds do not manifest, but remain covered. All beings naturally possess these three seeds, but they are not engendered until they are activated through spiritual striving. These three seeds include:

(1) the seeds for reaching the Hearer state of attainment (sravaka), which is achieved through listening to the dharma
(2) the seeds for reaching the pratyeka-buddha stage, which allow you to attain

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enlightenment without being taught
(3) the seeds for reaching the Bodhisattva enlightenment, which allow you to enter the Mahayana path

The alaya contains the seeds of all experiences, including the seeds of being attached to the physical body and sensations that are afflictive barriers to spiritual attainment. Thus, because of the seeds in the alaya, we all carry around the habit energy of five sources of error that are major barriers to cultivation progress, called the five fundamental dwellings: the love of views, love of desire, love of form, love of the formless, and love of ignorance.

These dwellings of mind always cause affliction and suffering. Only when you reach the stage of a Buddha can you be free of these views and experience the immediate presence, or crystal clarity of nirvana. At this point of spiritual attainment you will have transformed all the consciousnesses into wisdom functionings. The alaya acts as a storehouse of the seeds of impressions, but when it is finally transformed into an enlightened Buddha mind, all things are manifestly reflected and can be seen as they really are; there is no intercession of thoughts or idealized images in the way.

Thus, when someone empties the volition skandha and starts cultivating the pure aggregate of consciousness, they are at the very edge of enlightenment but not yet awakened to the great matter. At this point, a spiritual aspirant will be clear and illuminated both inside and out, and we say they will be able to "enter without entering." In other words, the six sense faculties will be empty and still, and they will no longer run off in disarray.

This does not mean that the sense consciousnesses will not work anymore, rather it just means they will be clear no matter what they confront, and so they will function without any obstructions. At this point you will be able to perceive things whether the sense organs are operating or not, so you will no longer be subject to the limitations of the six sense faculties. In fact, at this stage of attainment you can use the eye to hear or nose to see since you have reached the root source of the six sense consciousnesses where they are still undifferentiated.

The realm without entry is the impetus behind the famous spiritual cultivation method of Avalokiteshvara, which involves listening to sound to trace hearing back to its source. In this method, which was highly recommended for our world by the Buddha Manjusri, you return the function of the hearing-consciousness to the consciousness skandha, and then fathom the stillness or emptiness within to realize the self-nature and attain Tao. As Avalokiteshvara reported:

> I initially entered the stream of meditation through the sense of hearing, and thereby forgot the sound of what was heard. As a result, both sounds (disturbances) and silence (stillness) ceased to arise. Gradually advancing in this way, both hearing and what was heard both melted away and vanished, but I did not stop where they

> ended. When hearing and what was heard were both forgotten (became empty), there was nothing to rely upon because hearing left no impression in the mind. When a sense (like hearing) and the objects of sense both become empty (in this way), then emptiness and sense merge and reach a state of absolute perfection. When emptiness and what is being emptied are both extinguished (emptied or forgotten), then arising and extinction vanished. At this point the absolute emptiness of nirvana became manifest, and suddenly I transcended the mundane and supramundane worlds.4

Thus, it is said, "Entering the stream, you forget about where you are, and the entry is already still." It is also said, "Returning the hearing, listen to your nature till the nature reaches the supreme way." At this time you will be able to comprehend the source of all the beings throughout the entire universe, which means you will be able to "observe the origin."

Although people do not normally recognize it as such, the ability to perceive the fundamental nature face-to-face is actually the goal of modern science. But science goes about it in a way that will never succeed. Hopefully the time will come when scientists recognize that you do not have to perform investigations with external machines and instruments and mathematics to "observe the origin," but you can investigate reality using spiritual prajna and samadhi.

When you arrive at the skandha of consciousness because you have liberated yourself from false thoughts, you are almost free of the world of defilements, though you have not finished with it completely. Only when you finally free yourself from the aggregate of consciousness can you reach complete self-realization. In other words, enlightenment can be partial or complete, and partial enlightenment has its own various stages (or *bhumis*).

Upon enlightenment a practitioner's mind and body, together with the entire universe, become fused into one, and this whole seems illumined all the way through like a crystal clear sphere suffused with light and absent of any obstructions. This is pure, true wondrous illumination, the perfect purity of fundamental enlightenment.

When the Bible says God is light, it is referring to this state of empty, infinite, omniscient clarity presence rather than physical light. It is actually a state of perfect clarity, but the Tibetans sometimes call this "luminosity" or "illumination" for lack of better terms. They also call it the "clear light," which refers to the primordial knowing wisdom awareness that is unborn and unconstructed. All the spiritual schools have trouble describing this, so there are many different terms.

This is the thing that is inherent in life; this is what is real. Go East or West and it is still there, be born into any religion and it is still the same. Phenomena change but this never changes; it is always still there, always constant. We say this fundamental nature is empty, but it is also

wondrous existence. This is why we call it the *dharmadhatu* (the Realm of Reality), Tathagata (Thus Come One), *tathagatagarbha* (Womb of the Tathagatas), True Thusness and so on besides True Suchness, or Emptiness. When you reach this point of self-realization, you are free from reckoning by form, sensation, cognition, volition and consciousness and have thus cut off all the skandhas at the root. This is why you can see the karma of all beings in every direction, for you can understand the totality of empty but interdependent origination.

This stage of attainment is the hardest to describe, for words fail when talking of self-realization. Since it is beyond the five skandhas and has the capacity of wisdom awareness or direct knowing, we just refer to it as true mind. When through using your mind you can bring an entire galaxy to the palm of your hand for all to see, as seen in the *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra*, we are beginning to talk a little of the abilities of true mind. However, to exercise such functioning also requires great merit. As a lama once remarked to the Tibetan Master Gampopa, "A Bodhisattva can demonstrate miraculous powers by placing multiple galaxies into the smallest particle of dust. The dust particle does not grow bigger, and the galaxies do not grow smaller, yet the one can fit into the other. How amazing!"

Gampopa replied, "This is simply the nature of phenomena, wherein almost anything can be achieved. The eyes of human beings can see the whole of a face; a four inch mirror can capture horses and elephants; a small bowl of water can reflect the entire moon." Gampopa, after saying this, then transformed himself into a figure as large as a mountain, yet he still fit into a room that could only hold several people. The room did not grow larger, and neither did Gampopa's body grow smaller. This was an exhibition of the functioning of the capabilities of true mind, and since this demonstrative ability lies outside the realm of the five skandhas, we can truly call this ability "great merit."

If people want to evaluate such matters in more detail, they must cultivate to reach some stage of attainment in order to gain the appropriate understanding. They would also make headway if they studied the prajna teachings of the Madhyamika, the Mind-only teachings of Yogacara, and if they became familiar with the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the *Prajnaparamitra Sutras*, the *Flower Adornment Sutra*, the *Sutra of Queen Srimala*, and the Buddha Maitreya's various wisdom sastras which were transmitted by Asanga.

Why are prajna transcendental wisdom teachings so important on this particular journey? Because prajna is that which enables you to understand the Tao, and properly cultivate the spiritual path. Prajna transcendental wisdom is not ordinary human intelligence, because intelligence is conceptual in nature and limited to your previous knowledge, experience, feelings and images. The true dharmakaya, on the other hand, is inconceivable; only prajna transcendental wisdom can lead you to its very borders.

Prajna wisdom is beyond common intelligence and wisdom because it can lead you to

comprehend the essence and origin of life—our original, fundamental nature. Naturally intellectual study or conception or cognition cannot possibly achieve this end result because wisdom is only realized through the nonconceptual state, which is not, by the way, like a blank state of stupor or oblivion. The nonconceptual state can be likened to the surface of a calm, still lake wherein the stars and trees and sky are perfectly reflected—in clarity and distinctness—because the lake has no concept of itself to interfere with the reflection. It has no flaws or imperfections, and it does not function with any degree of attachment. *Therefore the reflections appear naturally as they really are, without any bias or distortion*. Prajna is the awareness direct knowing nature that sees things as they really are.

You only achieve the great prajna wisdom through completely engaging in the proper process of spiritual cultivation. Because of this effort of spiritual cultivation, at the moment of enlightenment, your own treasury of wisdom opens up. We say it "explodes forth," but all such words fail because this is something inexpressible that cannot be explained. For instance, it does not come forth through mental effort. Rather, it comes naturally—it just "flows"—yet you have to cultivate to reach this experience of awakening. It is so important that it is the only thing worthwhile in the universe. Your purpose in cultivating is to know it and experience it, and you tread the path of spiritual cultivation to get there.

REVIEWING THE FIVE SKANDHAS

People may think that the five skandhas are a totally fictitious invention of Buddhism, and that Buddhism is the only school which details such things, but this does not take into account that Taoism has a similar scheme of five skandhas as well. However, the Taoist classification scheme is almost entirely materialistic while the Buddhist classification scheme incorporates both the mind *and* form. What are the five skandhas in Taoism? They are the five elements of earth, fire, water, wind (wood) and metal.

This being the case, we must recognize that the Vedic schools of Hinduism also have a system of five skandhas known as the five elements. In fact, the Vedic schools also have a system of five *koshas*, or bodies, which are another skandha system although not as well defined. And if we make allowances for the space element, we can find a skandha scheme in early Greek and Arab thought as well.

All these cultivation schools have had need for such a scheme, and so now you can understand why we went into all these tiny details. You may not be able to use this information right away, but in time you will, and it is best to familiarize yourself with it as you climb the ranks of spiritual cultivation. As you gain proficiency on the spiritual path, it becomes easier and easier to use the teachings on the five skandhas to help you make further progress in spiritual training.

As a means of understanding the whole picture, we must ask ourselves how the Buddhist skandhas correspond to the five elements in Taoism. The first correspondence is that the wood element can be likened to the volition skandha because wood is characterized by the process of germination, a spreading out tendency, and the characteristic of constant renewal. For instance, grass (which represents the wood element) is full of life energy; even if it burns away it always grows back again, birthing and dying in an endless succession of generations. Thus, there is the saying, "No prairie fire can burn the grass utterly, for the spring wind blows it back to life again," that corresponds perfectly to the skandha of volition. This image of cyclical birth and death also provides insight into why we must change our habits at the root when on the road of spiritual practice, for if we only block our bad habits without fundamentally transforming them, they are bound to sprout again when we are not watching.

The fire element of Taoism is likened to the conception skandha because both provide illumination, and the water element can be matched with the skandha of sensation. As to the remaining consciousness and form skandhas, there are two different schools in Taoism from which we could choose to make appropriate correspondences. One school matches the form skandha with the earth element, as is logical, and the other matches the consciousness skandha with the metal element since consciousness and metal are both "hard" to change.

The school of Chinese astrology likens the metal element to the skandha of form because the metal element represents something extremely hard to change, like empty space. In this scheme, the earth element represents the consciousness aggregate, which is a very nice match because according to Chinese astrology, the earth element contains all the other elements within it. Since the lower four skandhas are all based on the skandha of consciousness, that is why the earth element can be appropriately taken to represent consciousness. Therefore, the correspondences match up quite nicely, but it is all dependent upon your scheme of usage. The main point, however, is that Taoism, too, also has the five skandhas, and so does Hinduism as well.

In review, we can quote two famous sayings that summarize the various functions of the five skandhas:

> Form is unborn, primordially void, like the sky.
> Sensation is the lasso that binds mind and object together.
> Conception, if you keep taking it as valid, is delusion.
> Volition, as samsaric actions, keeps you circling in the six realms.
> Consciousness, the expansion of ordinary mind, has eight functions.

Also,

> Forms are like balls of foam.
> Feelings are like bubbles.

Conceptions resemble mirages.
Volitional factors are like banana tree trunks.
Consciousnesses resemble magical illusions.

We can summarize the skandhas and their functions yet another way by referring to the process of transmigration from life to life. For instance, men and women are mutually infatuated by their bodies, which are products of the skandha of form. They are infatuated because they become attached to the pleasures of sensation embodied within the skandha of sensation. This attachment proceeds from subtle erroneous thoughts, which are the skandha of conception, and these conceptions are in turn due to habitual defilements (such as impure energy streams) harbored by the skandha of volition. Mind, which is the skandha of consciousness, is the next higher layer of this hierarchy and it is defiled by these defilements. Thus, the skandhas can also be arranged according to their sequence of defilement.

To become enlightened, we can say that the entire process or path of spiritual cultivation involves transforming the impure or obstructive yin nature of these skandhas to a pure nature or yang condition. This whole process represents a struggle because it is difficult to purify or transform the skandhas, and in the *Surangama Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha listed many of the possible errors that can arise along the road of spiritual practice, in terms of the skandhas. This material is so important that a translation of it is found in the appendix of this book. Before we become Buddhas, the alaya consciousness acts as the seed of the skandhas, whereas after complete enlightenment, the skandhas have become purified and the alaya becomes the "Tathagata storehouse," the matrix womb of enlightenment. With this revolution in purity, the skandhas, in effect, all become wisdoms and one becomes qualified to play in the universe.

Esoteric Buddhism uses five different Buddhas to represent five different types of wisdom which result from perfecting or purifying each of the aggregates. The central Buddha of these five is the primordial Tathagata Vairocana. Vairocana Buddha represents consciousness because he has given emanation to all the other Buddhas. We then have the Tathagata Amitabha who represents the conception aggregate, the Tathagata Amoghasiddhi who represents the volition skandha, the Tathagata Akshobhya who represents the form aggregate, and the Tathagata Ratnasambhava who represents the sensation skandha. In the Esoteric schools, the purified skandhas all become wisdoms, and so are represented by the highest level perfected Buddhas.

Each of these Buddhas thus represents a wisdom that is the transformation of a particular aggregate after enlightenment. The form aggregate becomes the Fundamental Mirror-like Wisdom, and the feeling aggregate becomes the Fundamental Equality (Equalizing, or Even-minded) Wisdom. The conception aggregate becomes the Fundamental Discriminating Wisdom or Subtle Discerning Wisdom, and the volition aggregate becomes the Fundamental All-accomplishing Action Wisdom. Finally, the consciousness aggregate becomes the Pure Absolute Wisdom of reality.

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These are the perfect wisdoms of complete enlightenment, and with their attainment, your wisdom functions in, or corresponds to, all the realms or experiences of reality. In other words, the school of Esoteric Buddhism uses five Buddhas to represent the five enlightened wisdoms we will possess after we purify the five aggregates. These five wisdoms are no other than the perfected states of the five aggregates that have been transmuted into liberating wisdoms through the process of self-cultivation. They correspond to all experiences in the universe, and so upon enlightenment we can achieve universal wisdom.

The Zen school deals with this transformation from a slightly different angle. As the great Zen master Hui-neng said, the sixth, seventh and eighth consciousnesses transform after enlightenment: the alaya consciousness becomes the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom (the Fundamental Mirror-like Wisdom), the seventh consciousness becomes the Fundamental Equality Wisdom, the sixth consciousness becomes the Profound Analytical Wisdom (or Fundamental Discriminating Wisdom), and the five sense consciousnesses become the Perfecting Wisdom, also known as the All-accomplishing Action Wisdom.

The Great Mirror Wisdom

What are these wisdoms? The Fundamental Mirror-like Wisdom or Great Mirror Wisdom, which represents the transformation of the alaya and the skandha of form, reflects all the possible manifestations of form and consciousness, and yet it remains stainlessly pure, clear, unsullied, and untouched. Everything that appears in it appears like a clear image seen in a mirror. Things appear as they truly are, with clarity and without sticking, and they never leave traces. This is truly the nondual state of realization.

The Equality Wisdom

The Fundamental Equality Wisdom represents the transformation of the seventh consciousness, and perceives the absolute essence, true reality of all phenomena. Since this fundamental essence is universal and everywhere equal—partaking of the single flavor of oneness—we have the name "Equality" Wisdom. The great Bodhisattva enlightened saviors, devoted to great compassionate acts for all beings, sustain their efforts in the midst of suffering and afflictions because their Equality Wisdom lets them see that all beings and circumstances are one with the absolute reality.

The (Analytical) Wisdom of Discrimination

When the sixth consciousness (or conception skandha) experiences a revolution in its basis at the level of enlightenment, it becomes the Fundamental Wisdom of Discrimination. This Analytical Wisdom is what enables the enlightened sages to accurately observe the process of cause and effect, or interdependent origination, which defines the phenomenal realm.

Because of this capability, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can see through the process of delusion that normally entraps sentient beings, such as the incessant ramblings of the ordinary sixth consciousness. It is because of the Subtle Discriminating Wisdom that they can devise various teachings and appropriate enlightening techniques that teach others how to attain self-realization by freeing themselves from ignorance and delusion.

The All-Accomplishing Action Wisdom

Lastly, the five separate sense consciousnesses and volition aggregate are transformed into the Fundamental All-accomplishing Action Wisdom. This is the wisdom that enables the enlightened to ceaselessly participate in the world with skillful, liberating activities. This is the wisdom through which the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas accomplish things with activity that crystallizes or exhibits the Tao in the world of transient phenomena. In other words, it is the wisdom behind accomplishing concrete actions in the world of interdependent relationships, rather than just the wisdom that lets the enlightened reach a discriminative understanding of such matters. Hence, it is the wisdom that lets the enlightened give form to their actions in the matrix realm of cause and effect.

Spiritual Cultivation from the Aspect of the Skandhas

Orthodox Buddhism praises emptiness as the highest principle of spiritual cultivation, and so it does not emphasize the realm of false realm of existence we call interdependent origination. However, Esoteric Buddhism focuses on this aspect of existence and thus provides many teachings on form, kung-fu and so forth. The problem is that upon entering this type of study, it is easy to get lost and lose sight of the true spiritual path.

You cannot say that either of these schools is higher than the other, for they simply emphasize different aspects of the same one thing. There are emptiness and interdependent origination, and both are mutually inclusive; both are also empty. Emptiness is full of Fullness, yet this Fullness is of the same nature as emptiness otherwise it could not exist; true Suchness gives birth to Thusness, which is of the same nature as itself.

One has to be careful about the Esoteric school and its teachings, for not all of the Tantric teachings passed down through the esoteric lineages are correct. Many of the later teachings include errors due to the adaptation of various Taoist, yoga and Bon practices, and because the school has tended to veer astray from original source materials by focusing on commentaries rather than original sutras. This has led to false versions of the teachings, and errors often compounded on top of errors.

For instance, some esoteric commentaries state that the skandhas take hold in the physical body because of certain physical features. Some say that the form skandha is related to the physical

body's flesh, the conception skandha is related to our blood, the consciousness skandha is related to the heat of the body, the volition aggregate is related to inhalation, and the sensation aggregate is related to exhalation. Actually, it is more proper to say that the earth, water, fire, and wind elements *all* have a close relationship with the skandhas, and this is as far as you should go with such correspondences.

As another example of this sort of straying, just as every living cell can be said to have the four elements contained within, we can say that every cell is also connected with consciousness. But some people in the Tibetan Consciousness-Only school now say that the sixth consciousness resides in the head, the seventh consciousness resides in the perineum, and the eighth consciousness resides in the *zhong mai*, or central chi channel called the sushumna. This is all wrong. It is not consistent with either science or with logic.

The *Surangama Sutra* explained this very clearly when it recounts a question that Buddha once asked Ananda, "If I hit your head, feet and arms all at the same time, do you feel pain in all these places at once or separately? Since you feel it all at once, you cannot say that consciousness is only in the head, or the feet or the arms—it is everywhere." Therefore you cannot particularize and say that the five skandhas are related to the formation of certain parts of the body. Instead, you should say they are related to the whole organism.

As we have reviewed many times, the standard or typical process of physical cultivation involves this sequence: first cultivating the chi to transform the body's wind element. Next, cultivating the mai and water elements (hormones, bodhicitta, etc.) of the body. Then cultivating kundalini, which represents the fire element of the body. Later you work on transforming the body's earth element, which is even more difficult, and then the body's space element.

This sequential emphasis is all related to the physical nature, and does not address the fundamental nature at all. It is related to matter rather than to mind, so one performs this sequence of cultivation only as a preliminary step to mind-only cultivation practice. The real path is in mind-only practice.

The big secret in all this is that while the true self will never die (and is never born), form will always be here, too. Because form will never disappear, the five elements will always remain. In fact, cultivation of the sambhogakaya Reward body is cultivating an appearance body (form) of the most purified nature of the five elements, which is why we say it will never decay. Mind will never be destroyed, and form will never be destroyed either. They will just continue to be transformed.

Therefore, since form, in its essential appearance nature, will always continue to be, in our cultivation efforts we must focus on the material side of existence as well as the mental side of "non-existence" (emptiness). We cannot just attain the dharmakaya and call it quits. After we

attain enlightenment, we must further increase our wisdom and finish fully transforming or perfecting the material side of our nature in order to cultivate and perfect a sambhogakaya Enjoyment Body.

In other words, you are not finished with enlightenment after you see the dharmakaya—or dharma (Truth) body—for you must perfect the sambhogakaya as well. This may seem a secret, but it was spelled out quite clearly in the *Surangama Sutra*, although people do not generally realize this.

Another secret is the following: Why does the Esoteric school use five Buddhas to represent the skandhas? Because their vows are all different, and so their functioning in the world of form is different. However, their root source is the same so they all have the same fundamental essence, which is why they are all enlightened Buddhas. We also share in this same fundamental essence, and that is why there is nothing ultimately stopping us from becoming Buddhas, too, except our own lack of efforts to cultivate.

While we have so far often talked of the sequence of cultivation practice, the Zen school has never bothered to record too many stories of cultivation kung-fu involving superpowers and changes in the physical body which transpire along the path. This is because they are not the fundamental issue, they are not the ultimate thing even though people often confuse them with what is important. The most we ever get from Zen is some beautiful poetry suggesting a refined mental realm corresponding to a stage of great attainment, but the description will usually employ some analogies involving the ordinary world. Zen is so direct and effective because it never gets distracted with side issues like this, for it is only interested in the fundamental matter of seeing and expressing the fundamental nature.

Kung-fu experiences, such as those we saw in Chapter 4, are something everyone, including Zen adepts, will naturally experience along the course of spiritual practice, but these are just distractions along the spiritual path. If you put too much effort into categorizing or fixating on these things, as is done in science, you can end up wasting years cataloging transient phenomena that will not stay, and you will produce another unwieldy Esoteric school with all its attendant problems.

Most likely you will end up producing a teaching of secrets and supernatural miracles and marvels which might attract many people, but which will also poison the true path of spiritual cultivation and end up leading nowhere. If you look at all the tumors of the Tao school, you can catch a glimpse of what this would likely produce. In emphasizing these things, you will never get very far on the path but will become stuck at some low level of phenomenal form and appearances. This result is inevitable.

As a meditator, with progress you will pass through a variety of unusual kung-fu experiences that

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can manifest in thousands of different ways because of your own particular karmic seeds, merit, and cultivation efforts. Thus, through personal practice you will gain some first hand experience of the matter of cultivation kung-fu. Academics, however, who know nothing about the actual practice and results of cultivation, can say nothing about these things. Not realizing that many of the kung-fu experiences of Zen practitioners simply go unmentioned—even though they match the experiences of the Tibetan, Hindu yoga or Tao schools—many academics even believe that Zen is only some psychological game. People read poems such as the following, and remain totally oblivious of their true meaning:

> When hunger comes, I eat my rice.
> When sleep comes I close my eyes.
> Fools laugh at me, but
> The wise man understands.

When a Zen master dies, for instance, he just dies. He does not exhibit various superpowers or produce a shrinking rainbow body as done in Tibetan Buddhism. After all, these do not indicate you have reached the ultimate attainment. When a Zen master dies, he just dies, and this is the Tao! However, a Zen master might choose to die in a certain fashion just *to show he has control over the process*. For instance, Zen master Lin-chi was fond of using playful methods all throughout his life. Just before he died he sat down, asked for a pen and paper, wrote down a poem, and threw away the pen as he passed away. His gatha read:

> The continuous flow of thoughts does not stop, what can you
> do about it?
> True boundless awareness can be said to resemble It!
> Beyond name and form, people cannot realize it.
> After splitting a hair, hone the sword at once!

In other words, that which can perceive that boundless awareness which can watch the stream of thoughts is almost the host. There are no words or language to describe *This One*, there is no experiential realm one can experience. This is something none can know because it has nothing to do with name and form, and is what gives birth to prajna wisdom. This is the realm of enlightenment, and it is not attested to or validated because of the exhibition of a rainbow body or bunch of colored lights. The wisdom of discrimination is just a function of this ultimate nature, and once you use this particular function, you must immediately return to the source once again.

The ability to exhibit a few superpowers in life or death, without having penetrated through all five skandhas to the end, is therefore a quite useless matter because this is not any form of real attainment. It just means you can perform a certain sort of acrobatics, or apply the mind in a certain way, and that is about all. Some people can ice-skate and others cannot, but with sufficient training they could all do so.

Similarly, with training most people can learn how to perform various feats of cultivation kung-fu. So these phenomenal ways to manipulate the mind are not really so special because they are just a result of sufficient training and nothing more. There are countless things you can exhibit through training and countless samadhi you can attain as well, but they are all false constructions and thus not the important thing. The *Surangama Sutra* has all these secrets within it, but few people know enough to be able to ferret them out.

Thus, we have analyzed the human psycho-physical complex, which we call the ego, entity, individual or soul, and broken it down into a fivefold group of aggregates called the skandhas. The skandhas are the fundamental constituents of our personality, and they are subject to a dynamic flow of incessant change, including alterations due to interactions between them. Typically, we mistakenly take these aggregates and call them a self even though there is no self within them. We mistakenly try to freeze these unstable categories into an ego by means of names and labels, by a constant inner dialogue within the mind. In the process, we take what is nonself as the true self through a misguided fixation to name and form, and that is essentially our method of creating self-delusion.

If we analyze our experiences through the insight of cessation-contemplation practice, however, this will enable us to break this particular habit of self-delusion. Wisdom enables us to identify our experiences not as real things in themselves, but as just various expressions of the skandhas. Through the process of mastering such discernment, we can progressively break both our fixation on these phenomena and our attachment to the skandhas. Thus, the method of shamatha-vipashyana cultivation practice is not necessarily the highest form of cultivation practice in the world, but it is a particularly useful means of spiritual cultivation. This is why it is found in nearly every spiritual school and religion.

All the world's religions stress selflessness and nonego, but they rarely tell you how to achieve this holy state. Here, however, we finally have a means that allows us to realize the absence of a self-so ego within the various realms of phenomena, and it is a means which perfectly accords with the various cultivation experiences you are likely to encounter. In short,

> How far you progress along the course of "freeing yourself from," or of "emptying out," "transforming," "purifying" or "becoming liberated from" the five skandhas is a true measure of your spiritual cultivation accomplishment.

The goal and measure of success in spiritual cultivation is to detach yourself from the five skandhas, whose essential nature is transitory, and thus become enlightened to our fundamental enlightenment which has never left us.

Whether one be a Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Jew, Moslem or the member of some other religious group, investigating matters using the categories of the skandhas, together with the insight-contemplation of shamatha-vipashyana, will enable an individual to say, "This experience is not the real me, this is not I, this is not mind, this is not my true nature." It is akin to the saying of "neti, neti" (not this, not this) in Hinduism. Upon directly, nakedly experiencing such a realization, the practitioner will be better equipped to more readily detach from whatever mental realm that arises. Exercising prajna transcendental wisdom is the means that allows you to do this and ultimately penetrate through to reality, but you can only develop your prajna wisdom through cultivating samadhi and great merit.

Therefore, because merit is an essential ingredient for success on the path of spiritual cultivation, a person on the cultivation path must do good deeds whenever possible. If you seclude yourself in the mountains and suffer from starvation and privation while you cultivate emptiness of mind, then it is true that you may burn up your old, bad karma without acquiring more of it. Thus, any success you achieve will not necessarily occur because your levels of good merit are increasing, but can occur because the relative proportion of bad to good merit decreases!

You have to be careful on this type of road because although every serious meditation practitioner must at some time go into retreat, and those who live their lives in this way while being supported by others (such as monks and nuns) must really devote themselves to cultivation practice. If through the support of others they live a life of ease and avoid the afflictions of this world, they will be burning up their stores of merit and incur a large debt that must be repaid in lives to come. You see, nothing in the universe comes without cost. Yet if someone succeeds in their cultivation while enjoying this support from others, it is relatively easy to quickly pay back one's debts.

From the point of view of the sixth consciousness, you can say that our physical body is a type of "external form." From the viewpoint of enlightenment, all the eight consciousnesses can be considered "external form," too! Therefore, since you are surrounded by external form everywhere, the cultivation path is wherever you are, and you do not have to go into some sort of retreat to avoid the world and cultivate.

To illustrate, once a little boy had to take a pee while he was visiting a monastery, and did so in front of a Buddha stupa. When a monk scolded him for being disrespectful to the Buddha, the boy asked where he should have peed since there were Buddhas in every direction! The point is that Tao is everywhere, so do not mistakenly feel that you can only succeed in cultivation if you make a perfect break with the world. Learn to cultivate within the world, and your samadhi will be a billion times stronger!

Phenomenal chaos does not impair the peaceful emptiness of the Tao, and so the individuals who cultivate while living ordinary lives develop the strongest and most stable samadhi. These

individuals are much more effective than those who can only meditate when the world is quiet. Testing your practice in the world on a daily basis is therefore the real way to develop your cultivation muscles. In fact, the purpose of spiritual cultivation is to make you more effective in the world, and the true sage never ceases to be active in the world because his activity is also the exhibited functioning of the original nature.

An accomplished sage might indeed retire for awhile when the timing or circumstances are not right, but this is a matter of tactics and strategy rather than a giving up of the vow of compassionate activity. An enlightened sage is constantly involved in a million-and-one ongoing activities of merit, but in their minds you can never discover the trace of a single feature. This is how you should be in your own spiritual practice.

It is true that our physical body is characterized as a form-dharma while the true nature of the mind is characterized as formless or void. Since the formlessness of the void is the common origin of everything, all genuine cultivation routes will inevitably involve cultivating mind because the mind can realize emptiness whereas form cannot. In fact, we can say that if a spiritual school never makes it to the point of cultivating the mind, then it is not a very advanced road of cultivation at all.

Form is indeed an obstacle on the spiritual path, and in spiritual cultivation we must strive to progressively *free ourselves from any attachment to form.* The very act of detachment, and the resultant freeing up of energy this initiates, will let form naturally transform along the proper road of spirituality transmutation. We do not have to try to transform form using the sixth mind of discrimination, but rather, just put ourselves in line with the original nature and then form will transform quite naturally, as it should. On the other hand, if we devote our energies in trying to transform form using the sixth consciousness, the most we will accomplish is to end up playing with our body consciousness. We will just increase the factors impelling a future rebirth and increase the internal friction that decreases a life span.

After ultimate success in self-cultivation, the real challenge of the cultivation path is to attempt to transform the world of form through good deeds and virtuous behavior. After all, there is no Fourth Realm to go to after you become enlightened, and phenomena will always confront us wherever we go. Therefore the challenge, or task at hand, becomes one of trying to make the universe a better place through skillful activities of all forms. This is what the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas set out to do, but as to the Arhats, they would rather just take a peaceful break for a long while.

In the universe, we will always be faced with the challenge of developing ever-greater self-perfection, and skillful means that spread compassion throughout the cosmos. In perfecting the environment, such as helping sentient beings for the better, we are really also transforming ourselves since interdependent arising connects us to all things in existence. This is how

achieving the self-nature of enlightenment is the way to also purify all of society.

You can therefore call spiritual cultivation a process of individual self-perfection, or a process of transforming the world, but the shift in terminology is just viewing the matter from different perspectives. They are both the same thing: save yourself and you save the world. Why? *Because of interdependent origination*.

In terms of the original nature, everything is already enlightened, peaceful and still, so things are fine as they are. In fact, from this standpoint, there is not any such thing as purity and impurity, good or evil, or even a sentient being. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not have this concept in their mind, and yet they continuously work for the benefit of others. They are always involved in the never-ending task of self-perfection and exhibiting skillful means in the world of relative relationships even though they are enlightened, for an enlightened being will never grasp himself as being in the state of fruition. Thus they always keep working. A Buddha's or Bodhisattva's task is never done; there is nowhere to rest. There is only the individual choice of what vows they wish to undertake, what deeds they wish to accomplish, and what skills they wish to master. These are also the questions confronting you.

As to the matter of our personal bodies, physical form is transformed in cultivation when you cultivate it directly, as done in Taoism or in the various esoteric schools, or this transformation can fall out as a natural by-product of mind-only cultivation that ignores form entirely. The choice of which route to follow is up to you, but you must be careful of the form schools because most of its adherents go astray. Nevertheless, one cannot even reach samadhi and dhyana unless your chi mai opens, which is a kung-fu achievement involving form, yet if you try to accomplish this directly through force, it is unlikely to happen.

No one in the Zen school, which has the highest record of success in the great matter, sets out with the intent to cultivate their kundalini or chi mai because you do not need to. This is an unnecessary deviation of the spiritual path. They just cultivate their mind and the rest comes as a freebie by-product. Doesn't that save a lot of time, worry, burden and effort?

Here's the best path to take: Emptiness is the root source of both form and mind, so in cultivating the common source and attacking the issue at the root, *this will end up taking care of both sides of the issue*. Thus, the *Heart Sutra* tells us,

> Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.
> Form is no different than emptiness, and emptiness is no different than form
> The same can be said for the skandhas of sensation, conception, volition and consciousness.

All the skandhas are empty, yet we cannot say that phenomenal existence is totally untrue, even though it is the realm of maya. We cannot say it is totally false because it is perfectly operative in the conventional sense. Therefore you cannot say it is real or unreal, existent or nonexistent, true or false. But you have to reach a stage in your cultivation where you can realize this every moment.

Arhats know this, and reach a high stage of self-realization themselves, but they tend to only cultivate the emptiness aspect of Tao without accepting the realm of phenomena in full. They do not embrace a full cultivation of the aspect of wondrous existence that is the realm of the Bodhisattvas. Because of this, we say that they achieve a *fractional* enlightenment and that they have a *remainder* to cultivate, and this remainder is something in which the five aggregates still remain.

We can say that despite their high level of attainment, therefore the Arhats cannot escape suffering forever. Their emphasis on emptiness alone means they only see one side of the matter, and thus are only half-finished which is why the Zen school calls them "half-baked." You can only escape suffering if you learn how to bring happiness to others and learn how to master the world of form, or relative relationships, and this is something they are lacking.

Spiritual cultivation effectively means to transform the five skandhas completely, and thus, the five skandhas or aggregates become a measure of the path and a means of cultivation in themselves. In short, we can say that the general direction of one's spiritual strivings is to free oneself from the influences of the five skandhas, which blind you from the true source of reality. The conceptual focus needed to do this and attain enlightenment requires an understanding of the skandhas, even though they have no ontological validity, and the basis of that understanding is what we have just provided.

The skandhas, together with Abhidharma analysis, are to spiritual cultivation what quantum physics is to science—a means of viewing phenomena from the most minute and discrete level. People who follow form schools that cultivate existence, such as modern scientists, rarely make contact with these principles so we have provided detailed information on the skandhas as a useful explanation of the sequence and purpose of the path in terms best suited to their own means of understanding. Nevertheless, the skandhas are not the only means to measure your progress in meditation and spiritual practice. There are still other ways to judge the degree of your cultivation accomplishment, which we will introduce in time.

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Chapter 6:
How to Correctly Interpret a Zen Master's Progressive Attainments

The five skandhas of Abhidharma analysis are a very important topic for meditation practitioners to master, but most people hate to study this type of information because it seems so "dry." The reason this material is so unpalatable is because people do not know how to apply it to their own spiritual practice. Hence, they are not able to correlate their understanding of the five aggregates to their own meditation kung-fu, or to the various stages of spiritual cultivation accomplishment in general. This is why we have briefly indicated how various cultivation experiences match with the progress you make in becoming liberated from the skandhas. The skandhas are just another one of the measuring sticks you can use to fathom the stage of progress in spiritual cultivation practice.

Most people think that the aggregates are just another intellectual, artificial classification system developed to logically prove that there is no real ego or individual. Actually, the aggregates are a wonderful system for measuring your stage of cultivation attainment, and a system of meditation in themselves. For instance, there is a very important question to consider regarding the very core of spiritual practice. Most forms of spiritual cultivation involve cultivating the principles of cessation and contemplation, but what exactly should you be contemplating once you have reached a stage of coarse discriminatory cessation? Awareness should still be kept alive rather than purposefully blunted or dimmed during cessation, so what should you be observing or watching? Since all phenomena that arise in the mind belong to the transient realm of birth and death, what should your wisdom-insight be applied to?

The answer is that you should turn your prajna insight around, by dropping any fascination with the skandhas, and contemplate the real nature of the mind in which they appear. You should "turn around within" and employ your abilities of wordless direct knowing to realize the empty nature of the mind, and of the self. This is the true essence of the mind—it is not your thoughts, sensations or any of the other skandhas. However, beginning meditators cannot instantly perceive this true nature of the mind since they become attached to the various mental pictures that arise within it, and which in turn block the possibility of this recognition. What is it that people normally attach to? The five skandhas!

For example, people commonly mistake the sensations of the body and their thoughts as their true mind, but these are just portions of the skandhas and not your true self. Hence, we explicitly outlined an entire chapter defining the skandhas in detail so that during contemplation, you can realize that what you are fixating upon or noticing is simply another artificial construction rather than the true nature of your mind. The skandha experiences are just things that appear to your mind, but are not your mind itself. And to see what is ultimately behind the skandhas and find

their root source is true spiritual cultivation practice.

If you apply your insight discernment during cessation-contemplation practice to note that the phenomena you experience are just various skandha moments, you can more easily detach from the skandhas to attain the emptiness of discrimination. You might also meditate on dependent-arising and the constituents of sense perception to attain the same type of realization, but a superior means is to understand that what you normally experience is nothing other than the aggregates. From this understanding, you can instantly detach from what you realize is a fruitless experience.

Understanding this, the Zen school thus, says, "drop everything," and thereby directly arrive at the true mind or true self. It says to discard everything in one fell swoop, and rest in the pure nature of the mind. Failing this method, you can use your knowledge of the skandhas as an alternative means to learn progressive detachment and achieve the same result, as this knowledge will help you identify the realm to which you are still mentally clinging. In recognizing the clinging, you thereby empower yourself to let go of your attachments.

In reality, "attaining Tao" (reaching self-realization) always means you must stop mentally holding onto everything. As taught by the Zen school time and again, and as taught by the sword of Manjusri Buddha and suggested by the name of the *Diamond (Cutter) Sutra*, you should use your wisdom to "cut off" every mental attachment in one fell swoop. Just drop mental attachments and then you are there in the pure presence of the true mind!

Unfortunately, regular people cannot seem to do this because of their attachments and subtle clingings, so they have to progressively cultivate their chi and mai little by little until they can purify their minds and bodies a bit. After accomplishing this, they can then attain a little proficiency in this direction. In other words, ordinary individuals sometimes require partial stages of attainment in order to truly achieve detachment from whatever it is that binds them. This is why they need to rely on cultivation kung-fu (such as purification of the chakras, chi and mai), and specific meditation exercises on the path.

One particular helpmate is when individuals apply their insight during spiritual meditation to notice, "Oh, this thing is moving, so it is not real and I can drop it," or, "This thing is an external form; therefore, it is not the real me, and I can safely ignore it." Similarly, they might note, "These things are always changing, so what is the use of clinging to them?" or "This thing will not be here if I do not meditate, which means it is a transient phenomenon and not Tao." In the Hindu schools people practice "neti, neti," meaning "not this, it's not this," and in this way they also try to drop attachment from all their experiences in order to penetrate through to recognizing their true nature.

This is just a sample of what people notice through the *vipashyana* insight in contemplation-

cessation practice, and such realizations will help to improve your level of meditation. It is not that spiritual practitioners should focus on or attach to these realizations. Rather, on the journey to true mind, applying the knowledge of the aggregates to your experiential realms simply helps you broaden your prajna wisdom and increase your stage of spiritual attainment. This is why they were taught in the first place; they are only meant to help you make cultivation progress. You do not need them as a classification scheme, but this scheme is there to help you.

What people are actually contemplating in meditation are therefore really the five skandhas. They contemplate a variety of different phenomena, all of which are exhibitions of the aggregates. In other words, the experiential realms we achieve in meditation are the five skandhas themselves—no more and no less. We call these experiences "samadhi" when they seem to be profound states of mind, but these states of mind are just skandha constructions, too. It is just that an ordinary (non-cultivating) individual does not usually know which skandha is acting up at any moment in time, and typically gets attached to the skandha activities so as to become enmeshed in the flow and lose the detached state of liberated presence. However, if you know the definitions of the five skandhas and apply your insight to whatever phenomena arise during cultivation, this will help you master detachment and become independent from these events. Therefore this is a way to help you make further progress with your stage of spiritual attainment.

Naturally it is best when meditating to forget about the five skandhas and everything else altogether, but some people just cannot do this, and so they need another method such as this to help them achieve success in achieving mental emptiness. If you cannot abandon everything in one stroke, the five aggregates method of progressive analysis is very helpful. Of course you should not be bound by the skandhas in the sense that you insist on purposely identifying every mental phenomenon as one of the skandhas before letting go. After all, it is stupid to impose a sickness where there is none, or to hold onto a phenomenon rather than allowing it to depart!

To insist on imposing a cultivation method upon a situation, when one is not actually required, is akin to polluting what is already pure and forcing medicine on those who do not need it. This is why the enlightened layman Vimalakirti criticized the teaching technique of Buddha's student Purnamaitrayaniputra, and told him,

> Hey, Purnamaitrayaniputra ... Don't put rotten food in clean bowls. ... [Since the people you are teaching are new to the dharma, they have open minds. Since they therefore] don't have any wounds, then don't hurt them by making any. Purnamaitrayaniputra, do not show a narrow path to those who want to tread the wide path. Don't try to pour the great sea into the print of an ox's foot.

For some people, however, knowledge of the skandhas will prove extremely helpful in enabling them to abandon their fascination with phenomena during meditative periods. When you can *identify something that is not you*, and can Thus, let go of it, naturally that will be helpful to your

practice of wisdom in spiritual discernment. Furthermore, if you can learn something that will help you understand your cultivation kung-fu, that is helpful, too. Therefore, understanding the skandhas will be an essential task for cultivation practitioners over the next several hundred years, so there is no way to avoid this topic. It provides a proper outward structure, measuring technique, and guidance methodology for the cultivation path.

Han Shan's Story

To further understand the skandhas and how they truly relate to spiritual kung-fu, it is helpful to examine how they actually apply to an analysis of the biographical stories of several famous cultivation practitioners. The first story we will examine is that of the famous Chinese monk Han Shan.

To clarify, there are two famous Chinese Zen monks named Han Shan. The first was a great poet, also known as "Cold Mountain," and an incarnation of the Buddha Manjusri. The second Han Shan had a much lower level of spiritual attainment, but is well known to us because he left an autobiography that described a variety of interesting meditative realms and spiritual attainments. We will analyze his case in detail, in terms of the material we have covered so far, to see how Han Shan's story can be used as a template for cultivation instruction. It will help us learn how to apply some of the material we have already covered.

As a bit of background on Han Shan himself, we must understand that before he was born, his mother had a dream that Kuan Yin Bodhisattva gave her a baby, so from the start we can surmise that he had exceptional spiritual talents. Han Shan was extremely talented in his youth, and especially liked studying Buddhist dharma. As an illustration of his talent, when he was nine years old he heard the *Sutra of Kuan Yin* and could understand it completely. But we must say that Han Shan's teachers were even more exceptional than the youth, for they encouraged him to study all sorts of literature besides religious sutras, and this included the Chinese classics. People wanting to understand the path of cultivation and influence culture and society on a grand scale must also do this today. Do not just study spiritual texts, but push yourself to read about history, psychology, medicine, science, marketing, economics, politics, and so on.

When Han Shan was ten his teachers asked him, "Do you want to become a monk, or an official?" Han Shan replied, "What is the highest official I can become?" His instructors replied, "You can become the country's Prime Minister." Han Shan then asked, "After someone becomes Prime Minister, what's next?" to which they said: "There is only retirement." Han Shan then said this did not interest him, and he instead chose to become a Buddhist monk in order to tread the path to spiritual realization.

The first story from Han Shan's biography, and its application to the five skandhas, occurred when he was about twenty-eight years old, and had been cultivating for a while:

Han Shan one day wandered to P'an Shan Mountain and climbed until he reached its peak. By the side of the peak, a hermit lived in a stone cave. His head was gray and his face was of the colour of earth. Master Han Shan saluted him, but the hermit did not respond and remained silent. Master Han Shan knew that he was no ordinary man and sat down near him. After a while the hermit made some tea, took a cup, poured the tea and drank it. Master Han Shan also took a cup, poured some tea and drank it. After tea the hermit put the cup back and continued his meditation as before. Master Han Shan did the same. Later the hermit cooked rice; and when it was ready, he put it before his seat, took a bowl and chopsticks and ate. Master Han Shan also took a bowel and chopsticks and ate. After the meal the hermit sat as before; master Han Shan did the same. At night the hermit went for a walk; master Han Shan followed him but went in the opposite direction. The next day at tea time, master Han Shan boiled [the] tea; and at meal time he cooked [the] rice. The hermit drank tea and ate rice with him, and at night they both went out and walked as they had done the previous night. This continued for seven days. Then the hermit began to ask: "Virtuous One, where do you come from?" Master Han Shan replied: "From the South." The hermit asked: "Why did you come here?" Master Han Shan replied: "To seek you, the hermit." The latter said: "The hermit's face is like *this* and has nothing peculiar." Master Han Shan said: "The first day as I entered this cave, I immediately uncovered the hermit." The hermit smiled and said: "For over thirty years I have lived in this cave, and I only now have met one of my line." He invited master Han Shan to stay with him, and the guest forgot about his return.

One night master Han Shan went out and walked as usual. Suddenly his forehead burst with a noise like thunder; everything—including mountains, rivers, the earth, his body, mind and the universe (itself)—disappeared entirely. That voidness was not comparable to ordinary empty space; this state of still voidness lasted about the time it would take five (Chinese) inches of incense stick to burn. Gradually he felt the presence of his body and mind and the firm stance of his feet on solid ground. Opening his eyes he gradually saw again the mountains, rivers and the earth; everything that had surrounded him previously returned to normal. His body and mind became light and joyful, and the effect of all this was indescribable. He moved his feet to walk and felt that they were as light as air. When he returned to the cave, the hermit asked: "Why did your stroll last so long tonight?" Master Han Shan told him about what had just happened, and the hermit said: "This is only the (manifestation of) the aggregate of form (rupa) and it is not your real nature. I have been here for over thirty years, and, except when the wind blew or it rained or snowed, I have had the same experience every night while walking. If one does not allow oneself to be attracted by it, it will not obscure one's fundamental nature." Master Han Shan accepted the hermit's teaching and bowed his thanks.1

What the hermit monk explained was that, despite the seeming profundity of his experience, Han Shan was still only operating within the skandha of form. In other words, he was still only experiencing phenomena within the form aggregate!

Han Shan experienced a state where his forehead seemed to burst with a loud noise like thunder, his surroundings disappeared completely, he forgot both his body, mind and his surroundings until the state of void gradually disappeared ... yet all this was still only a penetration through the

skandha of form! As his hermit friend warned him, the experience may have seemed profound, but if you do not attach to this type of experience and do not think it anything special, only then will you not be cheated by this sort of phenomena. This, he said, is the right way to cultivate spiritual practice.

There are many other such phenomena within the realm of form that will occur to a devoted spiritual practitioner and yet ultimately are far short of the Tao. Typically these experiential *visaya* will be phenomenal spiritual experiences produced by the interaction of the four elements of the body—interactions involving the jing, chi, chakras, mai and so forth. For instance, you might be traveling on the ocean and catch sight of a particular scenario where the sky, the water and the sunlight on the horizon all appear as if they merge into one single, immaculate body. This, too, is just an interaction of the four elements producing a particular scenario, and as unusual as it may appear, it also has little to do with Tao.

In your mind you can experience many wonderful mental realms on the pathway of spiritual cultivation, but they are all transient productions, and so they are not the true nature. The hermit therefore warned Han Shan: as long as you are not attached to this type of thing, you will not be cheated or misled by any sort of cultivation kung-fu. Lots of things like this will happen, so don't cheat yourself. In fact, Shakyamuni Buddha warned of all sorts of situations like this, which are recounted in the appendix. Shakyamuni Buddha always said, "If you do not take this as the Tao then it is a good thing, but if you take this as the Tao then it is a terrible phenomenon."

In a second case to consider, Master Han Shan and his friend Miao Feng later went into retreat at Wu Tai Shan, also known as Five Peak Mountain. As he reported in his autobiography, he became so absorbed in meditation that visitors appeared as if they were tree stumps, and upon being showed Chinese characters he could not recognize their meaning.

Despite these experiences, Han Shan still could not master his mind, and so he asked his dharma brother, Miao Feng, for some advice. As Han Shan explained,

> When we first arrived at the hut, the noise of the roaring wind and running water used to disturb me. Since it didn't seem to bother Miao Feng, I asked him for an explanation. He said, "The disturbance you feel is created within your own mind. You have grasped the sound and interpreted it as noise. You should listen without judgement, concentrating on the act of merely hearing so that no thoughts of any kind can arise in your mind. The ancients said that whoever hears without grasping, that is, whoever can listen to sounds without thinking, will soon attain the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara's All Pervading Wisdom.
>
> Hoping to master this technique, I went to a wooden bridge every day and tried to listen to the water without thinking about it or anything else. At first, all I could hear was noise. My mind kept thinking. But after a little practice, my mind began to settle down. Then, one day, when my thoughts had ceased to surge like the water, I became so immersed in the sound that I actually forgot myself.

> The noise and my existence were gone. Serenity enveloped my mind. After that, whenever I heard a sound that previously would have annoyed me, all I had to do was concentrate on that sound without mentally grasping it, and I would be lulled into the same serene state.
>
> Everyday I cooked rice and ate it with wild vegetables and porridge. Then, after the meal, I'd take a nice walk. But one day, while I was walking, I happened to stop and stand still, and in that blissful moment, I entered samadhi. Soon I ceased to be aware of anything except a great brightness, round and full, clean and still like a huge round mirror. Mountains, rivers, and the great earth, itself appeared in the mirror. When I regained consciousness, I returned to the hut and noticed that the rice cooker was covered with dust. How long had I been in samadhi? I couldn't guess. I was living alone at the time, and had no one to help me gauge the duration of this experience.2

In this story, Han Shan recounts that he was practicing dhyana meditation on Wu Tai Shan, and achieved a more profound type of samadhi than before because he had already broken through the skandha of form. He was not necessarily sitting there meditating in a lotus posture, because you can be in any type of position to practice spiritual cultivation. You might be standing under a tree, or sitting in a car, or even walking along a beach when you are meditating. In fact, whether you are standing, sitting, walking or reclining, you should always be practicing (in a relaxed manner) to attain, maintain, and increase your stage of samadhi; that is real spiritual practice.

Han Shan at this point in time was about thirty years old, and started to meditate using Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara's (Kuan Yin's) method for contemplating sound (which can be found in the *Surangama Sutra* and in *Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation*). As he said, the sound of the water falls could initially be heard because there were rushing thoughts in his mind. After a while, his concentration became so intense that he felt as if his body did not exist and the sound of the water was not heard either, and then all sound and noise vanished completely. He had entered into a deep state of samadhi where he could finally forget himself and detach from the outside world.

Later, Han Shan became absorbed in a samadhi where he could not feel the existence of his body or mind. It lasted so long that when he came out of meditation, he found that the food he had been about to cook had become spoiled, meaning he had probably been in samadhi for at least ten to twenty days. As he later reported, when he came out of samadhi he could not find his body and mind in the brightness, and his Zen understanding had tremendously increased. He no longer had any doubts about Zen, the truth of the dharma, or the proper way to practice. Because he experienced a great serenity within and without his body, and his mind remained wondrously clear, he wrote a poem to express his realization, writing,

> When in a flash the mad mind halts, inner organs
> And all outer objects are thoroughly perceived.
> As the somersaulting body hits and shatters space,
> The rise and fall of all things are viewed without concern.

This story of samadhi is similar to that of the Hindu sage Ramakrishna, who would periodically remain in samadhi for weeks at a time. Unfortunately for Ramakrishna, his students mistakenly thought he would die if they did not try to force some food down his throat during these periods, and so they used to force feed him when he was in that state whereas they did not need to do anything at all.

Actually, you can remain in samadhi for centuries without need of food, but most yogis only reach some minor cultivation realm and do not understand this stage of cultivation attainment. Socrates is another famous individual who could enter samadhi, while even standing barefoot on ice, and is reported to have remained motionless in that posture for hours. So there are certain degrees of samadhi where your body will remain still, you will not need to eat, and you will remain incognizant of the outside world for a very extended period of time.

At age thirty-one, Han Shan was invited to stay at one of his student's houses, the Prefect Hu. The Prefect asked Han Shan to compose a poem for the new Viceroy of the region, who had requested one. However, by this time Han Shan had attained a profound stage of mental quietness in his spiritual cultivation wherein thoughts were seemingly absent, and he could not write a poem because of this empty mental state, so he refused the request.

Prefect Hu did not understand this excuse and still wanted a poem, so he cleverly left a volume of poetry on the table. One day, Han Shan just happened to browse at this book of poems for just a moment. As soon as he flipped through the pages to examine them, the poems stimulated his thinking processes, and he started to write twenty or thirty poems in quick succession. In fact, it was as if a dam had burst, for now his thinking processes could not be stopped, and the words flew out of him as if all his pores were mouths spouting syllables!

As Han Shan reported of his experience,

> Imperceptibly, all the literary prose, poems and verses which I had read or written before appeared in front of me and crowded and filled space. They could not have been ejected even if my body had been nothing but open mouths, I did not even know what my body and mind were. I pondered closely over all this and felt as if my body were about to rise. I had no alternative but to let things take their course.
>
> The following day when the viceroy left, prefect Hu escorted him, and I was left alone. I thought of my experience and said to myself: 'This is exactly the Ch'an sickness that master Fa Kuang told me about. Now I have caught it, and who can cure it? What I can do now is to sleep and if it is deep I will be lucky.' I then closed the door and tried to sleep. At first I could not, but a long while later I felt as if I were sleeping while seated. A boy servant knocked at the door and pushed it but received no answer. When prefect Hu returned, he learned of this and ordered that the window be broken for the studio to be entered. I was seated, wrapped in my robe. He called me but

I did not answer. He shook me but I did not move.

There was a Buddha shrine in the studio, and there was a small musical instrument called a ch'ing on the table. (One day previous to this deep sleep) prefect Hu had picked up that instrument and asked me: 'What is it and what is its use?' I had told him: 'In the West (i.e. India) when a monk enters the state of Samadhi and cannot waken from it, this instrument is used to awaken him.' Prefect Hu suddenly remembered what I had told him and now said: 'Venerable Master, are you in the state of Samadhi?' He took the instrument, and, holding it close to my ear, struck it a few tens of times. I was slowly and gradually awakened. When I opened my eyes, I did not know where I was. The prefect said: 'Immediately after I left, you shut the door, and this is the fifth day. What have you been doing?' I replied: 'I do not know, and this is my first breath.'

After saying this I sat silent and reflected carefully, but I failed to realise where I was and from where I had come. I looked back to my stay on the mountain and my past journeys and all those events were like things seen in a dream; after searching, not a thing could be found (in my now stilled mind). All that previously had been in tumult in the great void was now as (still as) when the rains have passed and all the clouds dispersed. The air seemed thoroughly cleansed and everything was perfectly tranquil without a single appearance of shadows or images. The mind was empty and the surrounding objects were still; the resultant bliss was without compare. I said to myself [quoting the Bodhisattva Manjusri in the *Surangama Sutra*]:

'In utter purity, the bright light pervades all,
With its shining stillness enfolding the great void.
Worldly things, when closely looked at,
Are but illusions seen in dreams.'

These words spoken by the Buddha are true and not deceitful.3

Only advanced cultivation adepts encounter the experience of Zen sickness recounted by Han Shan. If this happens to you and you become attached to all the thoughts breaking forth, it can easily disrupt your spiritual attainments. The reason Han Shan could identify this rare problem in the first place was because he had previously visited Zen master Fa Kuang, who had a peculiar habit of humming, and talking and gesticulating all the time.

When Han Shan had asked the master about the problem, he was told that this was the result of the Zen sickness which Master Fa Kuang had experienced upon his first awakening. At that time, the words flowed out of him effortlessly, and because he did not have access to a learned master at the time who might have helped him "by beating [him] unconscious," he never fell asleep so that upon awakening his mind would have become clear.

Han Shan solved his Zen sickness by falling asleep, which is the standard cure, but what if you cannot sleep? What do you then do to solve this situation? If you cannot sleep and you are allowed to drink alcohol (some monks are not allowed to do this), you might drink some wine so

that you get drowsy. This will numb the brain and then you will be able to fall asleep. So you can either fall to sleep without help, or drink a bit so that you get drowsy and fall asleep.

Another means to solve this problem, for those who are already high stage practitioners *who have mastered continual presence of mind and absence of clinging*, is to just let this phenomenon die out naturally. However, this type of solution is well beyond the capabilities of normal practitioners, and only the great Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can use this particular route of practice. It is only for documentation's sake that we mention it so as to preserve the knowledge of this possibility for the few great ones who will come along in time. For everyone else, our original advice applies that you should try to fall asleep through drinking some wine and becoming drowsy. When the dammed up seeds of the alaya consciousness come rushing forth like this because the volition skandha gets suddenly stirred, drinking and then falling into a sound sleep is the safest solution for most all spiritual practitioners.

Why does this phenomenon occur? Because the alaya consciousness stores the seeds of everything we have ever done, and like a river or waterfall it is always flowing, flowing, flowing without stop. If you reach a state of calm, settled peacefulness, sometimes these verbal seeds of literature and poetry will sprout forth from just a nudge, like a fish that leaps out of a pool of calm water. When that happens, maybe you will find yourself speaking words in another language, or becoming extremely poetic in your expressions.

All of this is due to the onrushing seeds of the alaya suddenly rising to the surface. In fact, this helps explain why some people can often spontaneously speak in foreign tongues or learn them quite quickly, because the seeds of this experience are still present in the alaya consciousness, and something activates them so that they can issue forth.

The situation of Zen sickness is not something you should desire, and certainly not something you want to force into occurring. Since it is a trouble or affliction, you want to avoid it if you can, but the important thing is that there is a remedy if it occurs. Think of it in terms of when children are born with the ability to play the piano or speak languages without prior study, for in these instances where previously planted seeds of the alaya have been activated. This is exactly what we have here. When we start upon our spiritual practice, sometimes we obtain quick progress because the cultivation seeds we have planted in the past become reactivated, and all our present work in this life is in turn planting good seeds for future accomplishments.

Countless Chinese Zen masters have had experiences similar to Han Shan's Zen sickness, but they rarely recorded these things because, unlike the masters in India or Tibet, they never considered them that important. Han Shan, like Zen master Hui-neng, did not even write his own autobiography. Rather, his students recorded everything for him. The fact that the Chinese practitioners did not stress this type of event—which we will notice once again when we review the story of the Tibetan master Gampopa—is exactly the reason why Bodhidharma said that the

Mahayana path could flourish in China. The Zen school could produce so many enlightened adepts because they ignored this type of phenomena from the beginning to the end.

Today it is quite the opposite. Modern research and scientific method tells you that you should record all your spiritual experiences, after which a careful analysis will confirm whether they match the stories of old as well as the principles which have previously been expounded. We must do this in our current times so as to verify the spiritual path and its effects, for we want to rejuvenate the spiritual trail and do not want it to completely pass into extinction. Naturally, we should not be preoccupying ourselves with such concerns if we want to follow the great Mahayana path, but the route of scientific validation combined with cultivation kung-fu is the spiritual cultivation school appropriate for today.

The important task in trying to match these cultivation results with science is determining what samadhi Han Shan had attained, and asking why he could experience these states so easily as compared to other practitioners, especially those who were fervently struggling for similar cultivation progress. And why is it that we cannot seem to attain these same states ourselves?

The answer is not that Han Shan had some special holy status as a monk, for you do not have to be a monk or nun to attain these same states of achievement. To think that you do is a big delusion, and is just a way to cheat yourself out of the possibility of attainment. Nor should we simply say that Han Shan was able to attain these states because his merit was higher than others, although merit is indeed a necessary ingredient for ultimate success in spiritual attainment. So why did these experiences come so readily to Han Shan?

Here's the real scoop no one tells you: The principal reason Han Shan could experience these various stages of samadhi was because he engaged in *consistent practice* in conjunction with the fact that *he did not succumb to sexual desire*. Since *he did not lose his jing (semen) through sexual intercourse or masturbation*, this is the reason he was able to attain the various samadhi and dhyana relatively easily.

> In short, his great progress on the spiritual path resulted from the fact that he was a chaste youth, and did not lose his jing.

This is why most religions ask you to free yourself from sexual desires in the first place, for if you lose your jing too frequently or abundantly, there is no way you will attain enlightenment to Tao. Absolutely no way! You will not even be able to attain any state of samadhi. To attain the path, you need your jing to transform into chi, but if you lose your jing and chi, how can you ever expect this transmutation to come about? There are always three critical requirements you must remember for experiencing accomplishment on the cultivation path:

(1) You must *accumulate meri*t by always practicing good deeds and virtuous ways, and ceasing all forms of evil thoughts and bad behavior.

(2) You must *accumulate your jing without leakage* so as to be able to transform your jing into chi.

(3) You must meditate extensively to cultivate the *emptiness mindset* necessary for spiritual transformation.

Han Shan's progress was very quick because he had very little sexual desire, therefore he retained his stores of jing, and in cultivating emptiness his jing was able to transform into chi, and he thereby attained samadhi. This is why he was extremely successful—because he practiced celibacy, and was able to transform his jing into chi through cultivating an empty mind. The *Surangama Sutra* already told us that if you try to cultivate to attain samadhi without cutting off lust, it will be impossible to succeed, just as it is impossible to cook sand and turn it into rice. This one fact alone gives us a great hint as to why Han Shan was so successful.

The Hindu sage Ramakrishna is also reported to have rarely lost his jing, which contributed to his own remarkable cultivation progress. But in order to understand cultivation from a scientific standpoint, Ramakrishna's case serves as a double lesson because although he was a spiritual master with samadhi attainments, he died at a relatively early age due to throat cancer. This is something that could not possibly have happened if Ramakrishna had fully opened his *jen mai* energy channel, for the opening of the *jen mai* in the throat would have virtually eliminated any such possibility.

Opening the throat channel is required if people want to reach the stage of being able to control their birth and death. People typically think that opening their chi mai is an easy task, but as we will see in the biographical account of Yeshe Tsogyel, superficial openings are relatively easy to attain (in a sense, the nadi and mai are already open, otherwise you would be dead), but fully and completely opening the mai is not so very easy. In fact, it is quite painful and difficult. Anyway, while it is clear that Ramakrishna never fully opened his throat chakra due to a variety of evidence, there is yet another contributing factor to his situation that is related to Han Shan's story.

It is unfortunate that Western science has not yet proved that those who frequently lose their semen will tend to get sick easier, will have less vitality than others, and that it may even contribute to an early death. Science even belittles athletes as being superstitious when they refrain from sex before important events. They say that the athletes who believe sex may deplete them are just imagining things, but athletes are in tune with their bodies and are really the ones in the know. So whom should you really believe? We place our money on the athletes rather than

the academics and scholars who have not reached any relevant stage of attainment to understand this matter.

Western science also thinks that both Chinese and Indian medicine are being superstitious regarding this matter, but Western science is actually the one being superstitious. For instance, just because studies show young people will naturally masturbate does not mean that it is beneficial; it only shows that the seeds of sexual desire, which keeps human beings cycling within the Desire Realm, are deep and difficult to change. This is one of the examples in which Western science can take a single behavioral result and totally misconstrue matters. In this new century, scientists will form wisdomless opinions like this on all sorts of topics in all sorts of fields, and because their opinions will increasingly be made into law, there are all sorts of damage which narrow viewpoints will produce in society.

The additional principle we wished to bring out, which is related to Ramakrishna's case, is that those who *never* lose their semen at all, if they cannot transform it into chi, can also die at a young age. Those who lose too much, and those who lose little at all, can both suffer the same fate. If you can *transform* your jing into chi, you will make great progress in spiritual cultivation, but *if you cannot transform* your jing into chi, the act of retention is useless (other than for better health) and you will never be able to reach the highest stages of spiritual attainment. This is the important cultivation principle; retention without transformation is a deficient spiritual path. It is not success at all.

You can easily verify this when you start to really look at the aged monks, nuns and celibates of all religions. If they have stiff bodies and stern, wrinkled or dried up faces, it indicates that, while they may not have squandered their jing or chi during their religious lives because of strict sexual discipline, their lack of a joyous demeanor for life and a rounded countenance full of chi verifies that they have not been able to transform these substances at all. And why not? Because their minds were too rigid and inflexible, for they never learned how to cultivate emptiness. And because they never cultivated emptiness, they never transformed their jing to chi, which would have softened their bodies and personalities.

In Christianity, for instance, it is taught that to become one with God you must banish all your personal thoughts which stand in the way of this union. This is simply another way of phrasing the importance of emptiness meditation as the pivotal methodology of the spiritual path—since this means abandoning thoughts rather than pushing them away—but missing this in its entirety, hardly anyone in the Western cultivation traditions ever reaches samadhi anymore. There is nothing secret about the science of cultivation progress such that progress is being withheld from people. Perhaps it is due to the lack of good teachers, but there just are not any spiritual aspirants practicing according to the correct principles.

If you feel that much of the information in this book is new to you, and recognizing that you are

probably more educated than others in this field of spiritual striving by having an interest in educating yourself in this sort of material in the first place, then consider how much less others must know. That being the case, you can understand how little people understand about the correct form of spiritual practice.

To achieve any spiritual attainments, you must not only maintain the discipline of no-leakage, but also transform your jing into chi. If you forcibly refrain from sex in a rigid and solemn manner so that you do not "leak the elixir," and yet do not liberate lustful desires into emptiness, you will not make spiritual progress on the road of cultivation. It is just that simple. All the principles of cultivation usually have two sides to the matter, but people usually just focus on one side while missing the other. Sexual restraint is one thing, but *something* must happen to all this energy. What must happen? It must naturally transform into chi, or life force energy that brings about spiritual attainment, which will happen if you master mindfulness of emptiness meditation.

Some Other Notable Practitioners

In Ramakrishna's case, the fact that he suffered from throat cancer suggests that he never fully opened his *jen mai* channel, which runs down the front of the body. His biography reports that he never lost his semen at all, and turbid jing that is not transformed or excreted from the body can act as a poison under certain conditions. Without going into all the details, we should note that the pearls produced by oysters are sort of a solidified jing born as a type of irritation, meaning that they are a poison as well. When dragons produce their pearls through their own spiritual cultivation, this solidification of jing can be seen as a type of unwanted substance, too. We might value these things, but nontransformed jing is to be considered a poison rather than a precious relic.

The fact that Ramakrishna is said to have retained his jing without transforming it could certainly have been a contributing factor to his throat cancer. If you transform your jing and chi sufficiently, all your chakras and chi mai will fully open and when that occurs, there will not be any obstructions that might result in conditions like this.

Basically you must recognize that for someone who is enlightened, it is almost impossible to get throat cancer. The Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi also died from cancer, but his case pertains to a different type of cultivation deviation. While he also attained a great spiritual realization of emptiness in the realm of the high dhyana, it was also not to the level we could possibly classify as enlightenment.

As an adjunct to these discussions, you have to recognize that spiritual practitioners can choose to focus so much on one thing in their cultivation that they ignore everything else, and thus in terms of spiritual development, not all practitioners are necessarily well-rounded. Even for high stage practitioners, biases can develop over time, and of course there is the problem of habit

energies from many lifetimes possibly manifesting.

For instance, because of their path of training, some Arhats will develop superpowers through their cultivation while others may not, for some will cultivate their bodies and other will just cultivate prajna wisdom so that they can release their mind and let go of old habits, and see the world as illusion. They will not be moved when people criticize or praise them, and will not fall subject to mental worries and afflictions, and will not be tied by name, fortune, fame or status. Of course all the Arhats have the superpowers corresponding to the samadhi and dhyana if they cultivate them, but we are talking about the *real* superpowers involving transformations of the seeds of the alaya consciousness. Then again, the only real superpower is prajna transcendental wisdom, and as to the mundane kind, they are achieved or not depending upon the cultivation method you use.

The physical body of an Arhat will indeed transform no matter what cultivation path he chooses to follow, and he or she will attain a definite degree of physical kung-fu on the path. But an Arhat who cultivates wisdom and the enlightenment of emptiness will not necessarily develop the ability to be able to effect physical superpowers unless he or she so practices. This is a matter of his or her degree of cultivation as well as what he or she chooses to cultivate. The situation is like learning how to ice-skate; some people will go out of their way to learn how to ice-skate and others will not, but both groups have the inherent capability just the same.

Some Arhats will therefore develop miraculous superpowers on the path, and others may attain enlightenment (like Confucius) without exhibiting any superpowers at all, or simply choose not to show them. As long as you recognize the fundamental mind, in actuality that is all that matters. Hence the path of cultivating wisdom and emptiness is correct. But if you want to achieve all three enlightenment bodies—the dharmakaya Truth body, sambhogakaya Reward body and nirmanakaya Emanation body capability—you have to cultivate your physical nature, and in turn, you will thereby obtain all sorts of mundane supernormal abilities. These abilities, however, such as being to fly through the air, walk through walls, turn bricks into gold and so on—are not the *real* thing. The “real thing” is truly miraculous and beyond expression.

This discussion may seem out of our way, but we bring it up because we want to point out it is hard to evaluate a person’s ultimate stage of cultivation by simply looking at surface matters, such as the exhibition of psychic abilities. Therefore, in evaluating some of these cases, such as Ramana Maharshi’s, it is unwise to necessarily rely on hard and fast rules when trying to interpret matters.

There is an additional point we must note when we look into Han Shan’s story. After age thirty, Han Shan started teaching publicly, becoming extremely famous and having a tremendous impact on his generation, one that lasted until the end of the Ming dynasty. Even the emperor’s mother was influenced by Han Shan. Because of his fame and notoriety, which arose after age thirty, he

became too busy to deepen his cultivation practice and there is no evidence that he attained these high stages of samadhi anymore or went further in his cultivation development. What are the reasons or principles behind this? To answer, we must gain some insight from the story of another individual.

A famous Taiwanese practitioner named Guang Qin went into retreat in much the same way as Han Shan. Unlike Han Shan, Guang Qin ate nothing but fruit despite the fact that even the monkeys came to him with offerings. Guang Qin could not read, but because of his kung-fu he could sense things as sort of a psychic ability. One time he entered samadhi for several days and the monks around him, who did not understand matters, thought he was dead and began preparations to cremate his body. However, another monk heard of their plan and rushed to save him, knowing that he was in some type of samadhi attainment. So we can surmise from this one fact alone that Guang Qin was relatively accomplished as a spiritual practitioner.

Like Han Shan, Guang Qin had many spiritual experiences and encountered many spiritual visaya, but around age thirty he also started busying himself with teaching in Taiwan. This left him little time for cultivation practice and so, like Han Shan, he failed to continue making the same great strides in his progress that he had made previously.

The common principle to these stories, which is that the practitioners stopped making progress after they became overly entangled in worldly affairs, is something you have to think about most carefully. You have to contrast these stories with that of the great Zen master Hui-neng, who achieved his awakening and then disappeared into the mountains for several years in order to stabilize and complete his cultivation training. Many other masters took this same course of action. It was only when they solidified their awakening that they came out to publicly teach. For instance, many of the problems that Jesus encountered arose because he started to teach a bit too early.

If you followed the path of Indian or Tibetan cultivation and had the same experiences as Han Shan and Guang Qin, people would make a big deal out of it and say, “Wow, that’s great, that’s fantastic, that’s Tao!” But in actuality, these experiences really have very little to do with seeing your fundamental true nature. Whether you can fly through the air, become invisible, dissolve into space, or shoot light from the pores of your body—these feats are still only stages of kung-fu attainable in the lower skandhas, and are not exhibitions of the stage of self-realization we call enlightenment.

Many people can train themselves to be able to do these things as a result of one-pointed concentration, but how many of these people have fully broken through the five skandhas and gone on to achieve full enlightenment? When we carefully examine the Tibetan and Indian cultivation schools, we find that, unlike in Zen, very few masters have ever really achieved genuine enlightenment. They have achieved various high stages of samadhi attainment, but as to

enlightenment, that is a different matter entirely. Although many would argue with this statement, this is really a fact rather than an opinion, and by the time you get through all these ranking and measuring schemes, you will appreciate the difficulty of this achievement for those who do not cultivate prajna wisdom.

There is yet another story we can use to shed further light on these matters. According to Chinese history, at the time of Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty, some individual was cutting down a very large tree and discovered it was hollow inside. Inside this tree's center, the woodcutter found the uncorrupted body of a monk sitting in meditation. The story does not say how the people awakened the monk, because a special protocol must be used to awaken someone who's been in samadhi for a prolonged period of time. Anyway, after they successfully roused him, the monk immediately asked, "Where's my dharma brother?"

The people asked the monk who his brother was and he replied, "Hui-Yuan," who had founded the Pure Land school of Buddhism during the Eastern Jin period several hundred years earlier. The people realized that this individual, who was named Hui-Tzu, had been sitting in samadhi inside the tree for almost three hundred years!

Today's researchers, if they accepted this story as truth, would try to compare it to a case of hibernation rather than samadhi, for many now think that animal hibernation is similar to samadhi. Of course this is another example of science trying to classify things without any sort of understanding of their true natures. This monk was not in a prolonged state of sleep, but in an advanced realm of cultivation achievement. Hui-Tzu's case samadhi cannot possibly be compared to the dimmed consciousness of hibernation.

There are thousands of possible samadhi you can cultivate, and from each of these you can exhibit different types of kung-fu such as this. However, just because an individual has attained samadhi or can exhibit special kung-fu does not mean they have achieved enlightenment, nor does it mean they are necessarily following a spiritual path! This is a misconception you have to get rid of, even though it seems to be embedded in popular culture.

For instance, there are many stories of people who were cursed by sadhus in India, and so they suffered some form of supernatural misfortune. Would someone who is really treading the spiritual path hurt another individual in this way? Think carefully on these things! Psychic abilities, superpowers and samadhi-like attainments do not make one "a man of the path." When the demons opposed Buddha's enlightenment or tempted Jesus in the desert, they, too, had samadhi and supernatural powers as well! Hence, it is not the possession of superpowers which differentiates the Buddhas from the demons, but rather their compassionate mind and behavior.

Unfortunately, the people of the world today are not very wise about these matters. Lacking understanding, they believe that superpowers and psychic abilities prove that one is a spiritually

realized or more evolved spiritual being. And so we often find the simple-minded followers of various masters immediately claiming their teacher is an "incarnation of God" or "Avatar" simply because he can exhibit a little superpower or two. People love to see paranormal abilities when just being able to wiggle your fingers is a miraculous power, yet ordinary people do not realize this.

It would be much better if people realized that everyone has the Buddha nature, everyone has Tao, and that everyone is fundamentally enlightened and can do these things if they just put in the proper practice time and effort. To exhibit kung-fu such as this, it takes no more than time and proper cultivation practice. When people therefore think to themselves, "If I get Han Shan's samadhi, that's Tao," they are entirely in the wrong.

Even the various samadhi that Han Shan eventually cultivated are not anything especially significant, for what is so special about them? They are also false constructions of the mind; if you cultivate you can attain them, but stop cultivating and they go away. Since what does not stay is not real, you cannot say they are the ultimate nature.

The samadhi are not the Tao, but are only helpful practice or training stations to help you reach the Tao, and if you do not reach the Tao, they do not amount to much in themselves for they are just alternative states of mind. Yes, they are far superior to how you now are, but as the Fifth Patriarch of Zen said, "If you do not see your fundamental nature, then cultivating the samadhi will not benefit you." Lama Kong Ka, of the Tibetan tradition, also said, "Only after recognizing the intrinsic 'awareness-without-content' can a spiritual practitioner practice Mahamudra correctly." The point is that you have to complete the road of cultivation and ultimately succeed in spiritual realization, which is not a samadhi state itself. It is the Tao which you should be aiming for, and the samadhi are only practice stations to help you clean your mind and attain the Tao of self-realization.

People even think that sitting "facing the wall for nine years," as Zen master Bodhidharma did, is also Tao, but that is also just exhibiting another type of cultivation practice if you have not yet achieved attainment. Therefore to really understand these matters clearly and not go astray, people must study the Buddhist *Surangama Sutra*, which lists the fifty types of delusions and deviant paths a practitioner can mistakenly fall into along the way to self-realization.

No matter what your religious background, you need to know these fifty types of delusion as specified in the *Surangama Sutra*, for they involve the problems you will face in your spiritual cultivation as you make genuine progress on the spiritual path. A portion of the *Surangama Sutra* is included as an appendix in the back of this book to help you recognize these possible by-roads.

How to Arouse Someone from the State of Samadhi

As a rule you should not touch them or shake people who are in samadhi because this can hurt the individual. This is because when someone is in samadhi, his or her body becomes extremely soft and vulnerable. For instance, there is a famous story about a senior Chinese nun in the school of Buddhism who entered a stage of samadhi. A younger novice, not realizing her senior was in samadhi, nor aware of the rules of conduct in such matters, tugged on her senior's arm to arouse her. Her tugging pulled on the arm such that it kept extending out of the body, which hurt her senior after she came out of her contemplation.

When the senior came out of her samadhi, she asked what had happened and then instructed her junior that she was going to return to that particular samadhi, and that her student should push the arm back into its normal position when this happened. The story illustrates what Catholicism calls the spiritual power of "elongation," for this particular phenomenon has been dutifully recorded for various Catholic nuns in various instances. As we have often said, the same phenomena appear across traditions because the spiritual path is a nondenominational path, and kung-fu results are a nonsectarian affair.

In another story, the Bodhisattva Candraprabha was cultivating the visualization of the water element. When he entered this contemplation, his body disappeared and his meditation room became filled with water. One of his disciples saw the room filled with water, and being ignorant, threw a tile into its midst. When Bodhisattva Candraprabha came out of his samadhi, he felt a sharp pain in his body and could not figure out from where it had come because previously he had been perfectly okay. After discovering what had happened due to his student's behavior, he instructed his disciple to retrieve the tile the next time the water appeared in his room. After this, his pain vanished. In both these cases, disciples had disturbed their teachers' samadhi, which is a breach of the discipline of the path, and the only way to fix the situation was to renter samadhi to hopefully repair the damage.

Turning the body into water, through mastery of the water element visualization, sounds very interesting, so the question arises whether or not other types of similar attainments are possible? As we previously recounted, there are the water, fire, earth, wind, and space visualization practices, and each has their own types of kung-fu realization. The Tibetan master Gampopa, for instance, was known for being able to turn himself into a pillar of fire. Similarly, the great Arhats can perform eighteen different types of transformation by having the left side of their body turn into flames while the right side spouts water, or the right side becomes water while the left is in flames, or the top section of their body is in flames while the bottom gushes water, and so on.

All together there are eighteen types of transformation that the Arhats can exhibit when they are about to leave this world. Like Buddha's cousin Ananda, they can even generate an internal fire to burn their physical bodies when they die, and in this way leave the people with holy relics for remembrance (*sariras*). All these abilities are the results of cultivating high states of samadhi.

Sometimes when we get sick we can feel that the left side of our body becomes cold while the right side becomes hot, and this lets us understand a little about the phenomenal realms you can gain control over through spiritual cultivation. Some masters even leave this world in a rainbow body, and this, too, is just the result of another type of samadhi. It is just another result of being able to transform the four elements of the physical nature. In fact, while most people think that the rainbow body achievement is a very advanced stage of cultivation, it only corresponds to an achievement within the lowly skandha of form, and is not a very high stage of accomplishment at all. As *Masters of Meditation and Miracles* has summarized for us:

> The highest accomplished Dzogpa Chenpo meditators exhaust all existents into the true nature and unite their minds into the ultimate enlightened nature, the primordial purity. If they choose, they can also dissolve or transform their physical bodies into purity. There are two major categories of attainment, the rainbow body and the rainbow body of great transformation. Through the perfection of the meditation of cutting through (Khreg Ch'od), at the time of their death (over a period of a couple of days), their bodies dissolve and disappear. They leave no mortal gross form of flesh, bone, or skin behind but only the twenty nails and the hair of the body. Although this is a dissolution of the body and not a transformation of the body into a light body, it is called rainbow body, since during the process of dissolution there always appear tents, arches, and circles of rainbowlike lights of various colors around the body and the dwelling. Through the practice of direct approach (Thod rGal), they transform their mortal body into a subtle light body and remain in that as long as there is a service to perform for the benefit of ordinary beings. For such a person, not only his or her body but all phenomenal appearances have transformed into the form and nature of subtle light. However, ordinary people will not see his or her light body as it is, but will see nothing or will see it in ordinary form, as mentioned earlier in the chapter on Vimalamitra. Also there are many great Dzogpa Chenpo adepts who leave their body, in the form of relics (Ring bSrel), images, and/or letters, as the object of inspiration and the followers.4

Just as with Han Shan's achievements, you can say that these are all significant kung-fu accomplishments, but then again you must not be too impressed by any of this. Even if someone can ultimately turn into a rainbow at death, of what use is this to you? What does it mean in terms of your own stage of self-realization? Frankly, it cannot even light up your room, so what is all the fuss? Other people are other people and you are you, so it is only your own spiritual practice that is important. Furthermore, you should not get so excited about an achievement of the form skandha when there are four more skandhas to go!

If you remember that our emotions fluctuate all the time, this means that if you can stabilize your emotions then you have actually achieved one type of samadhi attainment. In fact, this particular samadhi attainment is more profound than any of these others we have mentioned! So you must not think that exhibiting superpowers or sitting there in motionless meditation is the way to practice dharma. Your mentality and behavior are the means for practicing dharma, for it is only

when you can remain calm and detached, and exhibit proper behavior during difficult circumstances that you can prove everything is empty and demonstrate mastery over your mind.

This is real samadhi attainment, and this is where real spiritual practice begins. Some masters in the world can do all sorts of kung-fu transformations because they spent time isolated in a cave and learned how to do these things, but put them in the real world and they lose their mental stability in a moment. When you think about it, then you have to ask yourself, "what type of attainment level did they really reach?" and you have to compare their attainment levels to the accomplished Zen masters who feel perfectly comfortable being a king, monk, or even general. People think that being able to light a fire with your thoughts is also a grand attainment, but we have matches in the world, so why would you want to spend years practicing to learn how to do that. Why should you practice for ten or fifteen years to become able to do something that you can accomplish in a minute with a pack of matches?

In cultivation, it is very important to understand these concepts: what is important is your mind and your behavior, and not psychic abilities or kung-fu exhibitions. That is the true measure of your samadhi attainments, for that is your real kung-fu, and perhaps that is the big lesson of this book. Your behavior should spontaneously accord with the outside world of conventional relationships, but your mind should remain outside this world in being stainlessly absent of grasping and attachment. This is the Middle Path of true spiritual attainment. Thus, we have a Zen saying which summarizes this Mahayana attitude quite aptly:

> Your mind, put it down.
> Put it down, and that's *bodhi*.

True spiritual cultivation is to stop grasping the affairs of the mind in order to attain bodhi, which is the mind of enlightenment, but you must still remain functioning in the world. After all, there is no Fourth Realm to go to. Your mind should transcend the world, but you must also still come here to compassionately help others and express your Tao. This is the bodhi of realization, the great prajna of spiritual enlightenment, and the great pathway of Bodhisattva enlightened activity.

English translations of Han Shan's story can be found in:

> *Practical Buddhism*, Lu K'uan Yu, Rider & Company, London, 1971.
> *The Autobiography and Maxims of Chan Master Han Shan, 1546-1623,* trans. by Richard Cheung, Zen Buddhist Order of Hsu Yun, www.hsuyun.org., Honolulu: Hawaii, 1993.

On the cultivation path, the most useful stories are not simply inspirational, but stories that recount the difficulties of the practitioner, how they surmounted them, their actual means of cultivation practice, any mistakes made along the way which we should be careful to avoid, and an analysis of the realms they reached. Such stories, if

they include all these factors, are exceptional. For instance, such Zen stories can be found in *Finger Pointing at the Moon*, which has not yet been fully translated into English, as well as *Lives of the Eminent Monks* which is lacking an English translation as well.

India has produced its own set of informative spiritual biographies. Just a few of these biographies and autobiographies, from which you can become acquainted with some simple cultivation principles, include:

Autobiography of a Yogi, Paramhansa Yogananda, Self-Realization Fellowship, California, 1993.
Living with the Himalayan Masters, Swami Rama, Himalayan International Institute, Honesdale: Pennsylvania, 1989.
Maharaj, T. S. Anantha Murthy, The Dawn Horse Press, California, 1972.
The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, M., Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1962.

1 Lu K'uan Yu, *Practical Buddhism* (Rider & Company, London, 1971), pp. 71-72.

2 *The Autobiography and Maxims of Chan Master Han Shan, 1546-1623*, Richard Cheung, trans. (The Zen Buddhist Order of Hsu Yun, Honolulu: Hawaii, 1993), p. 15.

3 *Practical Buddhism*, pp. 84-85.

4 Tulku Thondup, *Masters of Meditation and Miracles* (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1996), pp. 82.

Chapter 7:
The Spiritual Accomplishments of Four Famous Tibetan Adepts: Yeshe Tsogyel, Milarepa, Gampopa and Machig Labdron

By this point you have a passing knowledge of chi, the chi channels, chakras and kundalini from our earlier evaluation of common practitioners' meditation experiences, and perhaps from perusing *Tao and Longevity* which is the premier book in the field on these topics. We also have introduced detailed information on the five skandhas and their composition, as well as their relationship to the mind. From the case of Han Shan, we even have an idea as to how samadhi relates to kung-fu, but we have yet to really pull all this information together into one coherent whole.

To accomplish this task we will once again analyze the cases of various cultivation practitioners, but this time we will consider high-stage spiritual practitioners, for these are the only ones whose stories can illustrate some of these matters. Hence we will now be examining the stories of several people who actually succeeded in enlightenment. To understand these cases thoroughly, however, we must first review the information on the various stages of body transformation and meditation-fasting elucidated by the Tao school. In particular, we need to understand the sequential transformations and time periods necessary for transforming the body's physical nature.

If we can link this information with our actual case studies, matching the body's kung-fu physical transformations with attainments in samadhi and changes within the five aggregates, then we will begin to really make progress in our understanding of the various levels of cultivation attainment. But in order to make this conceptual linkage, we must select very special cases for analysis. This is why we are going to be analyzing very accomplished spiritual practitioners.

Since the Zen school rarely bothered to record this type of information for those who achieved enlightenment, and since the Tao school and yoga schools have not passed on too much information either, we must satisfy our requirements of analysis by using stories of individuals in the Tibetan cultivation tradition. This cultivation school, being form-based in nature, has a long tradition of recording the kung-fu experiences of spiritual cultivation. And luckily, some of the stories it has preserved belong to practitioners who did indeed succeed in spiritual enlightenment.

LADY YESHE TSOGYEL

Our first case study begins with one of the greatest female Tibetan adepts of all time, Lady Yeshe Tsogyel. Yeshe Tsogyel was born the daughter of a royal family, and at a very young age became the consort of the king of Tibet. The king later offered her to Padmasambhava, also called Guru Rinpoche, and she became his student and tantric consort.

Tsogyel received almost all the teachings that Padmasambhava gave in Tibet, which she dutifully recorded for posterity and sealed in many secret places (making them *terma* teachings). Our interest does not lie in this matter, however, but in Tsogyel's specific pathway of spiritual cultivation practice. The story of Yeshe Tsogyel's cultivation practice is important because it is particularly useful in illustrating the principles we have discussed on the sequences of Tao school transformation outlined in Chapter 3.

Specifically, Tsogyel's teacher Padmasambhava instructed her to follow a path of eight great cultivation austerities for her spiritual practice. He advised her to:

(1) Practice austerity of diet: subsist on mineral essences, extract the essences of ambrosial medicinal herbs and then eat air (as in the fasting-meditation practice of chapter 3).

(2) Practice austerity of dress: wear cotton cloth, then only bone ornaments, and then go naked, relying on the mystic heat of kundalini cultivation.

(1) Practice austerity of speech: perform recitation and visualization; sing prayers, songs and liturgies, and practice mantra and breathing (anapana or pranayama), and then stay mute; abandon all idle talk (both externally and internally).

(2) Practice austerity of body: perform prostration and circumambulation, physical *yoga*, and the lotus posture in formal meditation.

(3) Practice austerity of mind: develop the creative and fulfillment processes, cultivate the seed-essence of empty delight (through sexual cultivation to attain co-emergent emptiness and bliss) and abide in the *samadhi* of union.

(4) Practice austerity of teaching: bear the torch of the Buddha's doctrine; sustain the tradition, perfect the technique of transforming beings, and cultivate skill in discourse, debate and composition.

(3) Practice austerity of compassion: cherish others over yourself, treating aggressors like your sons, and gold and excrement alike.

(8) Practice austerity of benevolence: without concern for body or life; cultivate the *Mahayana* aspiration of selfless service to others.

Naturally, this is an extremely difficult ascetic path to follow, and cannot be recommended to just any cultivation practitioner. The only reason Yeshe Tsogyel had to tread this path was because

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her enlightened teacher knew her past karma and could tell that this path of practice was the best one to help her. He also knew she could ultimately succeed in this sequence of practice, otherwise he would never have revealed it. So unless you have an enlightened master to guide you in such matters, do not be so presumptuous as to believe you can duplicate these feats yourself.

Lady Tsogyel took a vow to practice these eight great austerities. When reading her story, we must remember that she had already attained both samadhi and a degree of attainment before she started along this path. As she recounts,

> First, I practised the austerity of dress by means of the mystic heat. On the mountain peak of Tidro where scree and glacial ice meet, protected by nothing but a piece of cotton cloth I meditated for one year. Initially the warmth of the mystic heat [kundalini] failed to arise within me, and I could hardly bear the piercing wind of the new year blowing about me, together with the frost and snow. Atsara Sale [my consort and helper] could not endure it, and he left me to serve the Guru as manservant. With my vow as witness I continued my meditation. Blisters erupted all over my body, convulsive pains wracked me within, I began to hiccough incessantly, and I came close to death. Then evoking my Guru I prayed [that he help me ignite the tumo fire].1

The Chinese, who like to describe cultivation affairs in a very poetic fashion, have a phrase to describe this particular state of kung-fu: “Heaven chi descends and earth chi ascends. If this does not become rain, it becomes thunder.”

In other words, Lady Tsogyel experienced these troubles because her ascending and descending prana could not meet, for as the school of Esoteric Buddhism states, “The energies that course above and below, Through the mind are brought to a kiss.” The situation is sort of like throwing a rock into a pond of water. When the rock hits the bottom of the pond, bubbles will rise to the surface. If the stone cannot reach to the bottom—which corresponds to certain chi streams in the body descending to the perineum—it is as if the two chi flows cannot meet because the chi channels are not fully opened. This is why she experienced the hiccoughs (“thunder”) and other physical problems.

This Chinese saying also reveals one of the unknown facts about empowerments, such as the blessings requested from Manjusri Buddha and Zhunti Buddha that would have been extremely helpful in this case. When you are to receive a genuine spiritual empowerment, the chi of the blessing must descend and meet your own ascending chi. If your own chi does not ascend to meet the chi of the blessings given by the Buddhas, the empowerment will have no effect at all. This is the truth of the matter, but various masters rarely tell you this sort of advanced material.

Even most Tibetan monks do not know this, so in a sense it is considered a secret of cultivation. It is not really a secret, it is just that people do not understand this matter. People typically run

around today collecting empowerments like trophies, but they are useless unless they correspond to true cultivation accomplishment. If people do not cultivate to the stage where the blessings can activate their own chi energies, it is really quite useless. Hence, a real empowerment is when you achieve a certain degree of kung-fu within yourself because of some degree of personal chi, shen and emptiness cultivation. This is when you achieve an actual empowerment, and the rest is just a symbolic affair.

Continuing with our story, Yeshe Tsogyel relates:

> ... From a slight respiratory movement brought about by karmic energy, the warmth of mystic heat was [finally] generated. Finding even greater certainty and faith in the Lama than before, [I sang a song asking him to show me his favor] ... And as I spoke Lama Orgyen himself appeared in a vision in the guise of an Heruka and gave me a skull-cup of chung to drink before vanishing like a dream.
>
> 'In this continuous visionary state my pleasure is real pleasure, warmth is real warmth, and happiness is spiritual joy.' I sang.
>
> Then my frost-bitten, blistered skin was sloughed off like the skin of a snake, and thinking that the time was propitious to practise the austerity of bone ornaments, I cast away my cotton cloth and decked myself with the various bones. That year I practised the austerity called 'the three precepts in one'. For the entire year I had nothing to eat, not even a single grain of barley; for food I relied upon stones and for drink upon water. Thus, I sustained my meditation. After some time my previous perception of the nature of mind, and its accompanying insight, had waned. My legs could not bear my body, my body could not support my head, my breathing from the mouth and nose ceased, and my mind seemed totally enervated. My condition grew worse, and finally, coming close to death, I prayed to my Lama, cried from the depths of my heart to my Yidam, and visualised an unbroken stream of offerings to the Dakini ...
>
> Then I had a vision of a red woman, naked, lacking even the covering of bone ornaments, who thrust her *bhaga* against my mouth, and I drank deeply from her copious flow of blood. My entire being was filled with health and well-being. I felt as strong as a snow-lion, and I realised profound absorption to be inexpressible truth.
>
> I decided that the time was ripe to go naked, depending upon the air for sustenance. So for a further year I meditated without any cover for my body with only the air I breathed for food. At first my respiration was easy, and various distinct visionary experiences occurred through the unimpeded play of Knowledge. Later an influx of doubt brought adversity. Respiratory movement ceased, my throat and gullet became extremely parched, my nose was as if stuffed with cotton wool, my bowels were filled with shooting pains, and my intestines shriveled. It seemed as though I would die. Then taking courage, marshaling my remaining strength, I sang [a song to my Guru asking for his loving compassion] ...
>
> And instantly the Guru appeared in a ball of light, smiling radiantly, and from the distance of a man's height in the sky in front of me, he admonished me Thus:

Listen, Daughter of Kharchen,
Royal daughter, infatuated with your own beauty and pleasure,
Ever wont to be intolerant of unpleasant situations,
Now is the time to employ both joy and pain as the path.
Turn whatever suffering arises into the path of pure pleasure,
And be less desirous of an easy life, faithful, virtuous consort.
Listen, Daughter of Kharchen,
King's consort, youthful and vain,
Ever wont to be bound by wantonness and self-will,
Now is the time to abandon futile self-indulgent pursuits.
Meditate upon impermanence, ponder the pain of the lower realms,
And be less ambitious, faithful, virtuous consort.
Listen, Daughter of Kharchen,
Lama's consort, conceited and proud,
Ever wont to consider yourself superior,
Now is the time to reveal your faults.
Do not hide your latent vices, lay bare your inadequacies,
And be less desirous of fame, faithful, virtuous consort.
Listen, Daughter of Kharchen,
Sanctimonious nun and hypocrite,
Ever wont to be over-extended in deceit,
Now is the time to throw off hypocrisy and dissimulation.
Expose your secret self and take courage,
And be less boastful, faithful, virtuous consort.

The Guru then descended to earth, sat upon a rock and continued, 'You are too repressed and too fervent in your practice. You should use essential elixirs of herbs and shrubs to cultivate the play of your intelligence and restore your body to health.' ...

Then I took Atsara Sale and a girl called Dewamo to Senge Dzong Sum in Bhutan, where we practised meditation. First, arriving at Senge Dzong, I extracted the essences of various medicinal herbs and shrubs and used them in an alchemical metamorphosis of my psycho-organism. Secondly, I imbibed the essence of minerals. Discovering that the mineral chongshi was the 'essence of all stones', I used it in my continued practice of the alchemical metamorphosis of my body-mind. Then my body became like a *vajra*; it could not be pierced by weapons. My voice gained the quality and tone of Brahma's sweet voice, so that even a proud tigress hearing it would be pacified and obedient. My mind became set in the *samadhi* that is like an immaterial *vajra*.2

Thus, we can find that Tsogyel lived for several years without eating, confirming our earlier discussion on bigu, or fasting-meditation practice. Naturally, the only reason she could do this was because she had already attained some stage of samadhi and opened up her energy meridians before she went into retreat. This is why she could reach the stage where she could survive on

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only chi alone. So we have taken some previous Chinese Tao school principles, and illustrated them with the story of a Tibetan esoteric practitioner.

Lady Tsogyel also ingested special minerals that helped adjust her internal organs and biochemistry, and she attained some of the stages mentioned in the Taoist sequences of practice. However, even though Lady Tsogyel had an initial foundation of spiritual attainment before going into retreat, we must also note that this foundation did not prevent problems from arising in her practice since the four elements of her body had still not been completely transformed. This is why she suffered difficulties in her practice; the four elements had not yet reached a state of balance and harmony.

India and Tibet are particularly known for using the sort of physical practice routine recounted here because these are form-based esoteric schools that are not based solely on pure prajna wisdom cultivation. They tend to concentrate more on the physical nature, and so they commonly use special yogic techniques to help adjust the body. Furthermore, in the past these schools lacked modern science and the ready availability of medicines, so practitioners needed to adjust their bodies using these special methods. Hence, while this is very difficult road of spiritual cultivation practice, if you chose to cultivate in the path and knew of no other method, then there was no other way to follow.

In ancient times, Bodhidharma knew China had the seed of the Mahayana path that wouldn't care so much about these matters, and so he introduced Zen into the country. At that time China had the Tao school, the Confucian school, Hinayana Buddhist cultivation methods, and all sorts of other cultivation techniques. The Zen practitioners in time inherited this great cultural foundation from which they could build a pure cultivation school, and so they did not pay too much attention to herbs, the body, personal suffering or cultivation kung-fu. Rather, they just paid attention to prajna wisdom and skillful compassionate behavior while ignoring all other phenomena, and that is why so many could quickly succeed in enlightenment.

In fact, this is why so many Zen masters attained enlightenment without having to follow the path we are recounting, for they only emphasized the prajna wisdom of looking into the mind and fathoming its origins while ignoring all other phenomenal manifestations. They already knew of these other possible cultivation roads, but decided it was best to tread the most direct pathway to Tao. This eventual mentality is another reason why Bodhidharma knew the Mahayana could flourish in China.

A pertinent question arises, though: if people pick up the Mahayana path of prajna cultivation, will they avoid the demonic or obstructive karma that normally arises to oppose someone's cultivation? In fact, difficulties will *always* arise to try and stop you from cultivating and succeeding in your cultivation, no matter what school you follow or road you take. The only solution is to surmount these difficulties rather than give up when they beset you. All the Zen

masters, for instance, faced the trouble of confronting people and performing various tasks in the world with all of its attendant problems, and this is its own kind of difficult test.

In recent times, the developments in human culture have allowed science and modern medicines to virtually eliminate many problems on the Hinayana path of cultivation (such as Yeshe Tsogyel's route), and so the obstacles thrown at us by fellow human beings now constitute the greater difficulties to surmount in spiritual training. In fact, the human involvements and afflictions are even harder to bear than any Hinayana path of seclusion, despite all the cases of physical suffering and deprivation we may read about on various Hinayana trails. Hence the suffering of the Mahayana path (which involves cultivating amidst others) is far greater than any physical, ascetic suffering, so the question becomes whether we can still pass through the gates of spiritual progress in the face of such difficulties. While it seems humanity has progressed to make the handling of physical aspects of the path much easier, human affairs and afflictions have accordingly multiplied to make the net difficulty of spiritual cultivation the same, or even harder than before.

In Yeshe Tsogyel's report, ninety percent of her suffering constitutes physical suffering, such as physical pain. Today people have medicine, massage, acupuncture and other methods available to deal with these problems, but, deep down, we only need these therapies because we concentrate too much on the body and do not enter deeply into prajna anyway. It is the way of Tao that the world will equalize matters, so as the Hinayana path of cultivation becomes easier, definitely the world will eventually increase mental and societal afflictions. Reflecting on this, Zen master Ta Chu Hui Hai said:

> Giving rise to mind and setting thoughts in motion [a stirred mind] is the delusive demon of the *devas*.
> Not giving rise to mind and not setting thoughts in motion [a stirless mind] is the delusive demon of the skandhas.
> Sometimes giving rise to mind and sometimes not giving rise to mind is the delusive demon of affliction.

In other words, when you let bothersome thoughts arise, you are still afflicted. If you do not let your thoughts arise by trying to freeze emptiness into place, your cultivation is still not right. Lastly, if it is half and half, you are still being tossed about on the waves of the emotions. What this means is that any type of thought—whether frozen or moving—is a mental affliction. In the world of society, you have to learn how to settle all these afflictions and still manage to continue cultivating spiritual practice. How can you settle these afflictions? By finding their root source, which is the source of birth and death.

Shakyamuni said that death is the greatest of all the devils and demons, and so even the enlightened Buddhas die when they come to this world. Buddha's great superpower adept

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Moggallana died, the wise, renowned Shariputra died, the layman Buddha Vimalakirti died, the previous Buddhas Kasyapa and Dipankara passed away—everyone left! Therefore, the Zen school wants you to understand the meaning of birth and death. It does not say you should conquer physical death by continuing to live forever in this world, which a Taoist Immortal aspires to, but wants you to understand the fundamental essence of birth and death, and to escape from the control of transient powers by penetrating through to their source. If you can understand that original essence prepositionally standing behind the Three Realms, then you can find that original nature.

All people are scared of death. For instance, if you give a king the choice of either giving up his kingdom or giving up his life, he will probably choose to part with his kingdom because he does not want to die. Chuang Tzu illustrated this point in a story about a sick king who was told he would live only if his arm was cut off. Naturally the king agreed to this mutilation, for life was more important than possession. So while the *Heart Sutra* says there is no birth and no death, even Hinayana ascetics who go off into the wilds want to live a long life, for they, too, are afraid of death. Shakyamuni himself succumbed to sickness, old age and death so whether you cultivate or not, you will have to face this phenomenon one day. However, cultivators have an edge up on others in that they can delay or transform this process, and can even determine where they will next be reborn. At the very least, they can handle this situation more skillfully than we can.

The lesson in all of this, when we see how many times Yeshe Tsogyel almost died, is that you must strive to realize that ever-present original nature of ours where birth and death do not exist. Suffering does not matter on this road of striving, for the objective is actually worth your death. And if you understand this issue clearly, you will be qualified to work on and actually succeed in transforming your physical body. However, all your cultivation work will be in vain if you do not ultimately recognize the source of birth and death.

This is why the Fifth Patriarch of Zen said that cultivating will not ultimately benefit you unless you see the Tao, for only then can you truly begin to correctly cultivate spiritual practice. The rest of the time is just playing around with various samadhi visaya that still are not the real nature. You may even think that cultivating the physical body is the way to Tao but cultivating the physical form is simply a small, expedient step along the spiritual pathway as well. To find our original nature, however, is something that saints and sages all over the world have continuously risked their lives for.

As a spiritual cultivation practitioner, you must first and foremost strive to realize the prajna of no birth and no death, and then your practice, kung-fu and superpowers will all be very powerful. If you encounter all these various experiences without cultivating formless prajna wisdom, then you will be in danger of attaching to phenomena and succumbing to the potential of dropping into lower states of being. After we die we never know where we will go next, so it is foolish to risk not working on the spiritual cultivation pathway in this life when authentic teachings on this

matter have finally come your way. So do not lose your chance now that an auspicious karmic opportunity has arrived.

Christianity teaches people to be unafraid of death, and says that after you die you will go on to live forever. It maintains that if you live a couple of virtuous years on earth, you will go on to live in heaven forever. On the other hand, if you do some wicked things on Earth, you will go on to live in hell forever. As to what happened before you were born, it does not say.

Other religions say that after death you will go to a place where you end up waiting for a long time until something else happens, but still you will end up living forever. There are all sorts of various religious teachings about what will happen and where we will go after we die, but most of these assumptions are based upon intellectual theories rather than the insights of the sages. Every religion that is based on the samadhi insights of the sages, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism, tells us that if someone goes to heaven after death, they will experience death once again after their heavenly merit is used up. At that time they will experience another transformation and be reborn into some lower state of existence because of reincarnation. They will keep passing through various states of existence in the cosmos, and will experience the ups and downs of the karmic merit they have earned due to their past actions and behavior.

The whole process is very much like an equilibrium seeking chemical reaction, and people will remain bound in this net of interdependent causes and effects until they learn how to completely detach from the realm of birth and death and become a master of the process. Attaining the Tao is the only thing that will finally enable someone to have this achievement within reach.

It is because people are scared of death that many religions promise both heavenly rewards as well as heavenly assistance for getting out of difficult situations. Of all the religions in the world, however, none can even compare with Buddhism for its helpfulness. For suffering, Buddhism has Kuan Yin Buddha to help you, for sickness there is the Medicine King Buddha, for the Pure Land there is Amitofo, for Hell there is the Earth Store Buddha, for wisdom there is Manjusri Buddha, for a perfect body there is Akshobhya Tathagata. Wherever you go, whatever you experience, whatever you want there is always a particular Buddha available to help you so you are never without assistance for even an instant. Even if you go to Hell there is a Buddha there to help you; even if you are alone in the universe, you still have your original nature.

The actual meaning behind all of this in Buddhism is that you never depart from the original nature for even an instant, and so wherever you go and whatever you do, there is always Buddha nature to be found and you are never alone. Even in the midst of suffering you never leave your Buddha nature, so that is the thing that you must find through your spiritual efforts. The *Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament) Sutra* reminds us:

> It should be known that there is not an infinitesimal place where the Buddha's body

> is not present. Wherefore? Because there is no place where the accomplishment of perfect enlightenment of the Tathagata does not reach.

Even when we suffer retribution in Hell for our bad deeds, the suffering we experience is all a function of our own mind, so why would we be so stupid so as to want to remain a slave of our thoughts, rather than free ourselves from their grip? The solution is to jump out of their control, to teach the mind to let go and attain enlightenment! The solution is to find their ultimate source, the source behind the birth and death of thoughts, so that you are always experiencing the realization of *That One* without obstruction.

If we do not succeed in enlightenment, we are just ignorantly letting thoughts control us when they are not actually our own mind, but just phenomena that appear within its horizons. They are just temporary karmic constructions that come and go without staying. Since they do not stay and they are not the real us, why should we let them control us, or continue to provide us with afflictions and suffering? They are not our real self, and since they cannot affect our real self, why drop into them and let them control us?

Suffering is a transient phenomenon, so there is no reason to become attached to suffering thoughts and sensations. This is why Lady Tsogyel, and so many other spiritual cultivators, were able to bear such difficulties in their spiritual practice—because they never became identified with suffering. Furthermore, there is no real entity within suffering anyway because there is no independent individual within the five aggregates. There is only the interdependence of the five aggregates being viewed with awareness, and the falsity of attachment to this network that causes all sorts of problems and affliction, but which never produces a real being.

There is no ultimate reality in suffering, and there is no ultimate reality in happiness, either. Thus in cultivation you have to find *That One* beyond birth and death, beyond joy and sorrow. Finding *That One* means finding the greatest bliss. From a conventional standpoint, if you cultivate joy and happiness rather than sorrow, then it will be easier for your yang chi to arise and to attain the bliss and joy of the first four dhyana. So this is why people normally choose to cultivate the positive when using the false to cultivate toward the Real. Even in the midst of suffering, you have to detach from the falsity of suffering, and then your yang chi will arise, bliss will be born, and your spiritual deliverance will be assured.

From this small discussion we can understand two great principles of Buddhism: that true mind itself is empty, and that karma, which is the empty existence of interdependent origination, always issues forth. You have the fact that everything is fundamentally empty, and yet conventional existence cannot be denied even though it is empty. Hence a spiritual cultivator must incorporate both these extremes by perfecting the great union of the two, or Middle Way.

As a spiritual practitioner you must learn how to abide neither in emptiness nor in existence, for

you have to live in the world to help others, but your mind should remain beyond it, and in this way the world will never affect you such that you lose your Tao. You must turn the awareness of your mind around to find that ultimate ground state beyond birth and death, which does not fall into either of these extremes. Furthermore, you must continue to function in the midst of the unreality of interdependent arising, which lacks any real unchanging substance, and while doing this your mind must be absent of clinging and simply reflect what arises without trying to attribute any real substance to the reflection.

The Zen school therefore likes to recount the story of the master T'ien-wang Wu, who was once thrown into the water by a military governor, to explain this. After he fell into the water, master T'ien-wang Wu floated up to its surface because a lotus flower magically appeared beneath him. That's how good were his samadhi and spiritual powers. Later in life, when he was dying in bed and crying with pain, one of his students said, "Master, don't shout so much. Everyone says you are enlightened, but if you keep up the noise, we'll lose face because they will say it isn't so."

Master T'ien-wang Wu replied, "Do you understand that when I'm crying in pain, there is one that is not in pain?" When the disciple said he did not understand, the master passed away in response as his final teaching. Yeshe Tsogyel here, and our previous cultivation cases as well, are therefore still emphasizing the suffering one. They are still emphasizing the phenomenal and functional appearances rather than that which is the fundamental one, and this is a case of mistaken emphasis.

To make the point clear, we can draw upon another famous story of an Indian and Chinese monk who were peacefully traveling together when they reached a river. The Indian monk used his superpowers to start walking across the water, in response to which the Chinese monk said, "I traveled with you for so long because I respected your cultivation, but now I can see you are no different than any ordinary individual." The Chinese monk then left him. In playing with spiritual powers, the Indian monk made the same mistake of emphasizing the phenomenal or the functional rather than remaining in tune with the fundamental. While this story may seem unrelated, but it is greatly connected with our main topic.

The Chinese culture could readily accept this sort of principle, which is why the Mahayana way could be introduced into the country, and so Bodhidharma took Indian Zen and introduced it into China**.** An alternative road of spiritual cultivation is for people to get involved in all sorts of kung-fu and superpowers and think this is something special, to think that this is the spiritual path. Cultivating after such things is like the case of someone who gets a little money and then spends it all on luxuries, mistakenly thinking this will make them happy. Most people think that special kung-fu is something great, so they actually waste their time running after these attainments, and even go so far as to mistakenly rank masters in terms of such outward displays. What a waste.

All we have read so far in Yeshe Tsogyel's story belongs to the same class of experience, for it is still within the skandha of form! On the other hand, what is really important is the original mind. The great Zen master Tao-hsin tried to teach this to Fa-jung of Ox Head Mountain about the mind, so he visited Fa-jung and acted frightened when he saw tigers and wolves surrounding Fa-jung's hut, prompting Fa-jung to ask, "Does this [psychology of fright] still exist [in you, a great master]?"

When Fa-jung did not get the point that the fundamental nature never moves, but there is natural accord with every situation, Master Tao-hsin seized a chance to write the word "Buddha" on the boulder upon which Fa-jung would normally sit. When the pious Fa-jung would not dare sit on so reverent a word, master Tao-hsin asked in turn, "Does this [upset mentality provoked from worshipping a Buddha image when you do not know where the real Buddha is] still exist?"

Thus, whether one experiences fear or upset, joy or anger, chi and mai sensations or other transformations of form, they are all just the appearances within the mind which are given birth in response to situations. They are not the fundamental true nature, and yet they will always continuously arise from this nature. You have to let them be born as a reflection of experience, and use them to correspond to the interdependent conditions of conventional circumstance. But you must also maintain awareness of their fundamental nature and not cling to these things themselves.

The mind is free to give birth to thoughts, but it essentially abides nowhere. This is why you should not try to hold it, for doing so is actually fruitless since the mind is formless. If you do not clearly understand the fundamental source of mind behind all of this, then all these experiential realms and other stuff are just a seeking of externals which distracts you away from the true.

Continuing with our story, Lady Tsogyel reported,

> Then with sublime purpose I thought that the time was propitious for me to practise the most pure austerity. In the first place, in order to purify the defilements of my speech, I practised approach and identification; through recitation and visualisation the deity invoked approached, and through meditation on Emptiness of the deity I attained union with that deity; and performing liturgical rites without respite I repeated *mantra* in a perpetual stream of sound. First I practised knowledge *mantras* and extended *mantras* (*dharani*), such as the One Hundred Syllable Mantra of Vajrasattva, making atonement by practice of the three classes of *kriyayoga-tantra*. Second, I recited the extended *mantras* of the *mandalas* of *upayoga-tantra* and *yoga-tantra*, such as those of the Buddha's Five Aspects and Three Aspects. Finally, applying myself with vigour to the very end, I recited the verbal confessions and vows of the *sutras*, the rules and regulations of the *vinaya* discipline, the practices of the Buddha Boundless Life, Amitayus, and the treatises upon language and logic, etc., of *abhidharma* metaphysics that cultivate the intellect.
>
> At first my voice developed a stammer, quantities of blood and pus oozed out of a rent in my

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neck, my throat became twisted, parched and paralysed, and various swellings of blood and pus erupted. I came close to death. But finally, however much I used my voice, there was no discomfort. My enunciation was distinct, and the sweet tones of my voice were mellifluous. Whether I spoke loudly, moderately or in a whisper, slowly, conversationally or swiftly, however I spoke I had perfect control. In short, I had been endowed with the sixty elements of speech, and I had gained the seven supports of a retentive memory.

In the second place, according to the procedure of *mahayoga*, I disclosed the *mandala* of the Sublime Accomplishment of the Eight Logos Deities. I recited *mantra* with visualisation until all the deities approached in visible form, and then, through absorption in Emptiness, I continued until I had gained union with them. Sitting in lotus posture with hands folded in meditation position, firstly, when the deities appeared, many signs such as blazing light arose and various qualities were generated in my mind. Secondly, I received instructive vision of the Yidam together with his authorisations, and mundane *siddhi*, and ultimate realisation in the Bodhisattva's *samadhi* that is like a *vajra*. And finally, I received a prophetic vision indicating liberation into the matrix of Kuntuzangmo.

In the third place, I opened the *mandala* of the Communion of the Lama's Mind according to the procedure of *lung anuyoga*. Training myself in *mantra*, control of vital energies [chi] and *samadhi*, I created the *mandalas* of the Mind Communion in the focal points of my psychic nerves [chi mai], and free of dichotomising concepts I apprehended the reality of psychic nerves, energy flows and seed-essence. At first my nerves ached, my vital energy flows were reversed, my seed-essence was paralysed, and the horror of death's proximity overcame me, but I continued to practise indifferent to these reverses. After some time the deities manifested themselves and I gained control over psychic nerves, vital energy flows and seed-essence; the flows of the four rivers of birth, old-age, sickness and death were dammed; and I was granted the title 'Siddha'.

[... Then] I extracted and consumed the essences of one hundred and eight psychotropic substances and medicinal shrubs. Then the Four Divine Great Sages appeared surrounded by four hundred and eight goddesses of medicinal substances, each holding a vase containing a different ambrosial panacea ...

Through a synchronistic coincidence of external events and inner needs, a human girl called Khyidren visited me and offered me a large quantity of honey. Consuming it, I began my practice of physical austerity. At first I practised circumambulation, and then, without respite or concern for the passing of day and night, I practised prostrations. But bones began to protrude through the wounds on my forehead, the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands, and a stream of blood and pus ran out of them. I continued regardless, practising countless different purificatory exercises of the body (*the majority of which can be found in various manuals of instruction*). At first my body became fatigued, exhausted, worn out. Then the seed-essence at the joints of my limbs turned to lymph, and feverish, aching, twisting, swelling, my tendons split apart, my muscles slackened, and my body lost its vitality. However, after the poisonous seed-essence separated from the pure, my consciousness expanded; permanently my seed-essence became the nature of Awareness, the knots in my tendons, veins and nerves were untied, their flaccidity became tension, their weakness was cured, their worn-out patches were restored, their breaks rejoined and their splits mended.

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Thus, a basis for the accomplishment of the Tantra was established.

Then in the extremely isolated meditation cave of Nering Senge Dzong and other places, after I had sworn an immutable commitment, I continued my physical austerity. I sat in mute *samadhi*, never relaxing the important points of posture, sitting immovable in lotus posture, my eyes set in a fixed gaze. The malicious local gods and demons, however, could not endure my *samadhi*'s glory, and created magical illusions, threatening me with seductive and fierce, embodied and disembodied, phantoms. First they projected themselves as various delectable foods, and repeatedly appeared in front of me. Then they transformed themselves into all manner of material objects, clothes, horses, oxen and every possible necessity and luxury that this world can offer. I overcame all these temptations with my *samadhi*'s radiance. Through my insight into the nature of the world as illusion, inasmuch as I felt profound disgust for attachment to worldly things, some of these phantoms dissolved; by changing earth and stone into dung by the power of my *samadhi* I rendered some repulsive; and some vanished after my wish that they became that district's future store of food and wealth was fulfilled.

On another occasion these demons projected themselves as charming youths, handsome, with fine complexions, smelling sweetly, glowing with desire, strong and capable, young men at whom a girl need only glance to feel excited. They would begin by addressing me respectfully, but they soon became familiar, relating obscene stories and making lewd suggestions. Sometimes they would play games with me: gradually they would expose their sexual organs, whispering, 'Would you like this, sweetheart?' and 'Would you like to milk me, darling?' and other such importunities, all the time embracing me, rubbing my breasts, fondling my vagina, kissing me, and trying all kinds of seductive foreplay. Overcome by the splendour of my *samadhi*, some of them vanished immediately; some I reduced to petty frauds by insight into all appearances as illusion; by means of the Bodhisattva's meditation that produces revulsion, I transformed some into black corpses, some into bent and frail geriatrics, some into lepers, some into blind, deformed, dumb or ugly creatures, and without exception they all vanished.3

Here we must note that Tsogyel's experience was what we call a spiritual test of temptation. These tests are very difficult to pass because they attack us at our weakest points. Before his enlightenment, Shakyamuni Buddha was tested with greed and lust while Jesus was tempted with economic and political power. Once during meditation, the Tibetan sage Milarepa was also tested by hundreds of vaginas, which appeared quivering in the air about him. He banished them by magically producing hundreds of penises to satisfy their lust, and thus they all disappeared.

Another story concerns the Zen master Nan Huai-Chin, who was locked in a mountain retreat room studying sutras after his enlightenment. One day while reading, he looked up and saw a distinguished looking white haired man in his room. As his room was sealed, he knew it was some supernatural being come to bother him, so he ignored the old man and continued his reading.

A while later he looked up and saw that the man had been replaced by a beautiful young girl,

who disrobed and stood naked in his chamber. Having already achieved enlightenment and not wishing to be bothered any more, he simply patted his thigh and said to her, "If you are tired, just come over here and sit down while I read." Realizing that she could not tempt him in any way, she finally vanished to leave him in peace.

If you have wisdom yourself, you will realize that the way individuals handle such cases often indicates their particular level of spiritual achievement. Fighting and conflict may indeed be necessary or unavoidable at times, but they are usually not the most skillful means possible for handling these affairs. Therefore, the way someone solves a potential conflict, because it exhibits their mastery of skillful means, is often a potent measure of their samadhi attainments and prajna spiritual wisdom. For instance, in *John* 8:3-11 there is the story of the woman accused of adultery and brought before Jesus. The crowd asked Jesus what to do saying, "The law of Moses tells us that such a woman should be stoned. What say you?" If Jesus said, "Yes," not only would the woman be killed, but also the crowd would say he was a hypocrite in always teaching about love. If he said "No," the mob would not only accuse Jesus of betraying the Law of Moses, but possibly stone him as well.

Jesus therefore bypassed either response, and wrote on the ground a list of human sins and said, "Let he who is without sin among you cast the first stone." In reminding the crowd of their own failings, he prompted the mob to naturally disperse, Thus, settling the situation in a peaceful manner and providing a wonderful teaching as well. Can we not call Jesus' response a sign of great wisdom and skillful means? On the enlightenment trail when your wisdom comes forth, this is how you exhibit it, and this is what compassionate activity is all about.

The Bible records that Jesus, who stayed in the desert for forty days doing fasting-meditation, was also tempted like Yeshe Tsogyel. A famous Hindu master was also tempted by a naked red female asura as well, who used to appear before him when he was first making the true break into the initial stages of samadhi cultivation. So when you really start to make progress, it is almost inevitable that you will be tested.

Anyone on the road to Tao is sure to be tested in many ways. Sometimes other beings will project themselves in a yang shen body and appear as your teacher, your guru, your spouse, your children, or even a close friend. In fact, the time when your practice is progressing is the time when you will be the most tempted, tried, obstructed and opposed in all sorts of ways; the phone will ring to distract you, you will become sick, you will lose money, the workplace will suddenly cause difficulties, sexual desire will arise, and so on will the problems arise endlessly. Thus, you have to be careful, and learn to trust and rely on your inherent prajna wisdom. As *Masters of Meditation and Miracles* summarized for us,

> Just before reaching a high realization, it is normal for many meditators to experience the final mental, emotional, and habitual struggles in various forms or degrees of temptations, fearful illusions,

threatening sounds, or painful feelings. Many great masters have had the same kinds of experience just before they entered into high states of realization. If you do not succumb to these kind of last-minute disturbances created by hidden subtle habits and get beyond all those final encounters by remaining in the realized nature, like shaking the dust from a rug for good, you will attain total freedom from mental and emotional obscurations with their traces. A person who is having a so-called smooth meditative experience might think, "I am doing so well that I have no shaking-up experiences," but the truth could be that he has not yet destroyed his mental and emotional defilements and their habits from the root.4

While the temptations Lady Tsogyel faced were themselves difficult to pass, you must note that the test of affection is perhaps the hardest to pass. So returning to our story,

Then these malicious gods and demons demonstrated their violent devices. The earth moved beneath me, shaking and quaking, emitting an empty roar louder than the bellow of a thousand dragons, with the intolerable banging of black lightning, the roaring of white lightning, the swishing of red lightning, the knocking of yellow lightning, the baying of blue lightning, the shimmering of iridescent lightning, and the blazing of the light of the sky. Likewise, I was threatened by a terrific display of weapons, various knives, sharp-pointed daggers and spears, all glistening steel-blue, bristling menacingly, jostling for space. I dissolved these apparitions with my *samadhi* of divine assurance.

Another day I was besieged by phantom herds of ferocious beasts. Tigers, leopards, bears, yetis and other carnivores appeared, roaring above and outside the cave entrance. From my right and my left, animals attacked from every direction, howling in their various styles, their mouths gaping ravenously, snarling in rage, beating their tails, their paws scratching at me, shaking their bodies, hackles risen, hair bristling. From the assurance I had gained from abandoning attachment to my body and love of myself, arose compassion for all these beasts, and they vanished. Then, leaving me with no respite, a vast army of billions of different insects and worms led by spiders, scorpions and snakes inundated the area. Some slipped through my sensory doors, some bit me, some stung me, some scratched me, some climbed over me, some jumped upon me, some fought each other, ate each other and left piles of carcasses scattered about. There was no trick that these insects failed to use to frighten me. I shuddered a little, yet I found pity in my heart, but the insects became increasingly terrifying and loathsome. 'Since I have often vowed that I will in no way be attached to any form of body, speech or mind,' I thought to myself, 'why should I now be afraid of such illusory tricks of spirits, the activity of sentient beings—insects—that is karmic manifestation?5

These scenes which Yeshe Tsogyel experienced were actually a result of her greedy and angry karma. As discussed previously, once the Zen master Yuan Huan Hsien was meditating and saw a snake trying to swallow him, which he realized was the manifestation of the fact that he could not get rid of his anger towards other sentient beings.

The right way to get rid of all these beings (or "manifestations") is to make offerings to them, as

we shall see in the story of Machig Labdron. And sometimes to dissolve the situation we must pray for assistance from the Buddhas, as when the monk Xuan Zang crossed the desert to bring Buddhist sutras back to China. If you have no wisdom for these matters, and try to use stagnant emptiness to make all these beings go away, you can actually become their meal and die. Hence in cultivation it is paramount that you increase your wisdom attainments so as to know how to skillfully deal with any situation! One thing is for sure, which is that you should never become afraid of these things, as the Buddhas will always protect you. The *Surangama Sutra* said,

> When you practice dhyana and samadhi, all the bodhisattvas and great arhats, whose minds are omniscient, remain unmoved, but the king of demons, together with the ghosts, spirits and lesser heavens witness the spontaneous collapse of their palaces, and the whole earth is shattered. All the creatures of land, sea, and air are startled. The worldly man, laboring in darkness, is unaffected, but the hosts of demons, though possessing the five supernatural powers, have not yet extinguished their passions and are Thus, still attached to the troubles of this world. How can they allow you to destroy their dwellings? This is why when you enter the state of samadhi, the ghosts and spirits, Deva Mara and monsters and demons swarm about to harass you.
>
> However, in spite of these maras' rage, they are afflicted with the passions of the world, while you enjoy wonderful bliss. They can no more touch you than wind can blow out light or a knife cut water; you are like boiling water and they are solid ice. As the warm air draws near, the ice is soon melted [which is why when the arrows and slings of the demons attacked Buddha, they turned into flowers and fell at his feet]. Though they rely on their supernatural powers, these are merely external and can only succeed in destroying you through your own internal five skandhas—form, sensation, conception, volition and consciousness. If the host is deluded, the guest will take advantage of him. When you are established in dhyana, enlightened and free of delusion, what harm can the maras do to you? When your skandhas are destroyed, and you enter a state of perfect clarity, then all evils are but dark vapors. As light overcomes darkness, they will perish as soon as they approach you. How could they dare to disturb your samadhi.

Another means to free yourself from these situations is to recite the *Heart Sutra* or Zhunti mantra. For example, Xuan Zang, hero of *The Journey to the West*, encountered all sorts of demons intent on destroying him when he began crossing the desert to India. To resolve the dangerous situations he often recited the *Heart Sutra* for personal protection, and which also reminded him that all these threats were empty.

Many people will be confronted by such things if their spiritual cultivation is high enough, or their vows to perform good deeds are great enough. The realms of evil always arise to try and stop goodness from taking hold, otherwise their realms will be in danger, so in knowing this you should be prepared to encounter all sorts of obstruction on the cultivation path, and come to recognize them for what they are. But as the *Diamond Sutra* also mentioned, if you are persecuted in this life because of your spiritual inclinations and thereby suffer, it is due to the karma from your past that is now being burned away and gotten rid of.

The Zen school masters also underwent many of these exact same experiences as Milarepa and Lady Tsogyel, only they just did not write about them. Zen has its own means for overcoming these obstacles because it is based on wisdom, on directly realizing fundamental mind. For instance, once a Zen master destroyed a demon temple in an area, and in response, a giant snake appeared poised to attack him while he was sleeping. How did he handle the situation? The master simply awoke and said, "How dare you!" after which he rolled over and went back to sleep. What could the snake do but disappear!

Another Zen master, without any special esoteric preparation, jumped into a lake poisoned by a naga who was bothering the area, and started swimming about to let the naga know who was the greater. Such was his level of spiritual attainment, and his skillful means of settling the situation. The naga knew he could not hurt this man because his cultivation stage was higher, and thus he had to comply with his wishes. Nevertheless, this type of acknowledgement was all achieved without a fight.

In another instance, once a great monastery in India was being harassed by a poisonous naga. Even five hundred accomplished monks could not drive it away with their collective samadhi powers. One day an enlightened monk came to the monastery, and rather than enter into battle with the naga, he simply said to the poisonous creature, "Will you please leave this place and go to a distant one," after which the troublesome naga respectfully left the area. This, too, was an example of supreme wisdom in enlightened activity.

A further story concerns the Zen master Tao Shu, whose students were bothered by the antics of a fox spirit who constantly played frightening tricks on them. The master did nothing, and the spirit finally disappeared after ten years time. The master then said, "Even myriad tricks must eventually have their end as everything has its limits, but as to the method of no-method, it has no limits." His answer truly illustrated that at times patience may be the only thing you can employ when incredibly strong forces go against you. Sometimes the solution to a situation is just a matter of waiting for the proper timing when everything will naturally change. So while these stories are not nearly as exciting as those of Tsogyel or Milarepa, they are the greatest types of story to tell because they represent the nuts and bolts of real cultivation achievement and illustrate how real situations are sometimes handled.

With this as a background, we can understand Yeshe Tsogyel's comments when she said,

> 'Because all behaviour is determined by positive or negative concepts, I should understand that whatever occurs, good or bad, is a mental construct, and so keep a level head.' With this thought I regained my assurance, and I sang:
>
> All phenomena are only tricks of the mind;
> I see nothing to fear in inner space.

All this is nothing but clear light's natural radiance;
There is no reason at all to react.
Since all activity is my ornamentation.
I should remain in mute meditative absorption.

And so saying, I entered the *samadhi* of universal identity in which there is no discrimination or evaluation, and the apparitions vanished.

Again a variety of shapes and forms appeared. Many limbs without bodies hung in space before me. Many exceedingly repulsive forms flashed in and out of my vision, writhing around in spectral configurations in space. An enormous head without a body, its upper jaw lost in the clouds and its lower jaw resting on the ground its tongue lolling in between, its fangs gleaming white, approached closer and closer. Other violent forms also appeared: within a castle the size of a mustard seed many men struggled and fought; fires blazed, floods poured forth, landslides hurtled down, tress fell, gales blew, etc., but always I would sit unmoving in vajra-like *samadhi*, and the forms would vanish.

'We are the legions of gods and demons, Khatra and Kangtra, come hither from the southern lands lying between E in Nepal and Ja in Bhutan,' pronounced a voice, and these demons proceeded to threaten me with various sounds. Some wept, some raged, some wailed and some roared. Then thunderbolts fell from above, fire blazed up from below, and in between rivers flowed backwards. Blizzards of various weapons swirled about me. In this manner they strove to obstruct my meditation. But with my intuitive understanding fully charged, my awareness expanded, my insight's nerves opened,
I sang:

Since I entered the dimension of dynamic space,
Reaching the Mind of the Great Mother, absolute, empty being,
The heart of the ten transcendental perfections,
Enjoying profound and perfect insight,
I am not to be cowed by visionary experience.
Every situation is a play of empty being.
The magical illusion that is the Lama's compassion:
Now stir my creativity still more!
Since I entered the dimension of spontaneity,
Reaching the Mind of Lama Kunzang,
The heart of Vision, Meditation and the Goal,
Enjoying the unstructured quality of every occurrence,
I am no coward in the face of my thought-forms.
Every event is a display of mental projections,
The thought-forms that are the Lama's compassion:
Now excite my creative skill still more!
Since I entered the dimension of pure pleasure,

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Reaching the Mind of the Lotus Born Guru,
The heart of all-encompassing Ati,
Enjoying the mind's immaculate nature,
I no longer possess a sense of impurity.
The welter of defilements are the stuff of reality,
The forms of vision that are the Lama's compassion:
Now inspire my creative expression still more!
Since I entered the arena of mystic practice,
Arriving at the heart of the *mahayana* mysteries,
Enjoying the identical flavour of pleasure and pain,
I have no preference for good or bad.
Both good and bad are lifts to peak experience,
To the visual experience that is the Lama's compassion:
Now arouse my creative potential still more!

At the end of my song legions of Indian, Nepali and Tibetan gods and demons again rose up. With three of their number—the red, blue and black—appointed as leaders, they attempted to create obstacles through many different devices, but they were in no way successful. Then they induced human beings to tempt me. Through these gods' and demons' machinations a thick black fog blanketed the land of Bhutan so that the day was as night. Thunderbolts and hail blighted the fields, blizzards swept down, pestilence struck, and confusion reigned in the land as these and other calamities struck the people.

'Who is harming us?' they asked one another. 'Why is this happening?'

A Bhutanese hunter had happened to catch a glimpse of me in my cave. 'There's a dumb Tibetan woman up there in the Nering Drak Cave,' he told them, 'She must be the cause. Why look any further?'

They all agreed with him, and forming a lynching mob they came up to the cave to kill me. 'You starving Tibetan corpse!' they cried. 'You have been practising black magic. Now our land of Bhutan is enshrouded in darkness. Thick fog has descended upon the country. Thunderbolts and hail have laid waste our fields, and pestilence and other disasters have befallen us. Remove your curses! If you refuse, we will kill you immediately!"

"It seems that the malicious devices of these gods and demons have harmed the local people.' I thought. 'There is nothing positive that I can do. I will account whatever occurs a creation of my mind and meditate upon it. Come what may I will not break my vow.' And refusing to answer them I kept still with my gaze fixed, staring at the nature of my mind.

'She's paralysed by guilt,' said some. 'Perhaps she can't hear us,' said others. So they threw ashes into my eyes and poked knives into my ears. I sat where I was, totally detached, thought-free. 'She must be a yeti!' they cried, and then they proceeded to shoot their arrows at me, beat me with their clubs, stab at me with their spears and slash at me with their knives. But no matter in what way they attacked me or with what weapons, they caused absolutely no harm to my body. They gave me the name Invulnerable Tibetan, and not knowing what to do, they disbursed to their

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homes.6

The reason Lady Tsogyel's body could not be hurt at this stage is because, like the Monkey King Wu-Kung in *The Journey to the West*, she had transformed it so as to purify the form and sensation skandhas. However, although nothing could hurt her body, she had still not reached enlightenment. Rather, hers was an achievement that resulted from working on purifying the form and sensation aggregates. But just because someone does not feel any pain and suffers no harm when another individual attacks them, it does not mean they have broken through the first two skandhas, for certain types of ghosts can enter a human body to temporarily produce the same sort of condition.

This just goes to show that you must be greatly experienced in wisdom and attainment before you can attempt to size up someone's stage of cultivation accomplishment. You cannot just judge matters on kung-fu demonstrations alone. You cannot judge matters by what someone teaches either, for someone can flawlessly parrot the words of Lao Tzu or Shakyamuni Buddha, and yet have absolutely no level of spiritual attainment. Nevertheless, you need to know the various ways of ranking cultivation kung-fu and spiritual achievement.

Continuing with our story, we find,

> Then the girl [Khyidren] who had previously brought me honey returned. She was the daughter of a Bhutanese king, and she possessed great wealth and power. Filled with high faith she prostrated before me, and then departed. Thereafter, from time to time, she would bring me buffalo milk and sometimes honey, serving me in every way that might please me.
>
> Not long after, led by devils, local demons and *nagas*, all the gods and demons who had previously threatened me with their illusions came to offer their lives to me. The devils, local demons and *nagas* in particular, vowed to protect my *dharma* and to destroy my enemies. ... Then, individually, they offered their lives to me, and departed.
>
> Similarly, all the great and terrible gods and demons of Tibet—Rahula, Dorje Lekpa and others—offered their lives, and promised to protect the teaching. Then the men and women who had previously tried to harm me gathered there, and confessing their faults they paid homage to me. ...
>
> At Paro Taktsang I began the last austerity to be practised for my own benefit. This was the austerity of 'the seed-essence of co-incident pleasure and Emptiness [sexual cultivation practice]'. With my consorts Atsara Sale, a Bhutanese boy called Sale and Atsara Pelyang, all three invigorated by nutritious herbal elixirs, I disciplined myself in the cultivation of creative skill to its full potential for seven months through day and night without respite. At first, shaking and trembling, my body was enervated and my mind was stunned and intoxicated. Lymph saturated my whole body, above and below, and diseased, aching, feverish and trembling, I came close to death.7

At this point in time, Lady Tsogyel switched her cultivation practice to the method of tantric

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sexual cultivation. If someone actually succeeds in this method, their attainment is not enlightenment but at most only the stage of the "Supreme Pleasure" samadhi, which is the highest samadhi at the top of the Realm of Desire. That is, if a cultivation practitioner actually succeeds in sexual cultivation practice, *the very most they can ever hope to accomplish is to be able to reach the top heavens in the Realm of Desire*. These are the fifth and sixth heavens of the Desire Realm called Paranirmita and Nirmanarati, respectively. In reaching these realms, an individual is on the border of the true samadhi attainments that lie within the Realm of Form, such as the first and second dhyana, but they have not yet made it this far.

Most of us drop into lust and are controlled by our sexual desires, but in Lady Yeshe Tsogyel's case she took hold of the process and actually used sex as a means of cultivation, as a means to break free from sexual desires. We must also note that the reason she almost died is that despite all her previous practices and progress, her chi mai were still not completely opened! It was because blockages still existed within her chi channels that she felt pain and cold.

Imagine that—despite all her work, kung-fu and samadhi attainments up to this point, she still had not fully opened her mai! From this we should recognize that the true path of form cultivation is not so easy, and that the modern claims of chi-gong practice that you can use your mind to open your mai is just nonsense. This is another reason why most masters choose to cultivate prajna wisdom rather than the physical body, because in cultivating prajna wisdom your energy channels will open naturally whereas in taking the route of cultivating your physical body, it seems as if the task is never completed!

Another factor to note here is that Lady Tsogyel did not become pregnant while practicing sexual cultivation. Was she still releasing eggs and undergoing menstruation? By this stage of her practice, Lady Tsogyel's reproductive system had been transformed so that she no longer experienced her monthly menstruation. She had reached the stage for female practitioners which many Tao school texts call the "return to maidenhood."

While we have discussed this in detail within *Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation: A Handbook for Entering Samadhi* (by William Bodri and Lee Shu Mei, Samuel Weiser, 1998), we will say again that any fertile woman who wishes to succeed in cultivation must reach the stage where her menstruation stops naturally. While we have little space to go into this particular stage of kung-fu, the particulars can be found in many popular Taoism books available today, especially the highly recommended *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics*, by Douglas Wile (SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 1992). This is currently the best book on the translated classics that discuss such important matters. As to simply books on sexual yoga, *The Tao of Love and Sex* by Jolan Chang, and *The Tao of Sexology* by Stephen Chang, are also both worthwhile.

Finally, as a point of correction we must note that the English translation of Lady Tsogyel's story often mentions "lymph" when it is actually referring to the body's hormones, or endocrine

secretions. One of the purposes of Tao school cultivation is to bring our physical nature to a state of optimum health, a state of naturally existent vitality often represented by reference to a virgin girl or chaste lad. The Tao school, Esoteric school and yoga schools achieve this state by cultivating the body's chi and its hormones (jing and chi), for they are both necessary food for the body. So continuing,

> But later, all the lymph was transmuted into the nature of seed-essence and pleasure flooded my entire body. Initially this pleasure was contaminated by passion, but soon it became a field of Awareness and finally an unremitting flow of Awareness. Red and white seed-essence gradually blended into an homogenous mixture, and the resulting seed-essence was not capable of evolving into dualistic vision. After placing my psycho-organism into the Conqueror's mandala, through offering pleasure and worshipping in pleasure the full potential of pleasure was aroused and sealed in the body of pure pleasure. Red radiance suffused my white body, and retaining the appearance of a charming, sixteen-year-old maiden, my body was transformed into the pure being of an Heruka Dakini Heroine (Vajra Varahi). At the same time I had a vision of Amitayus mandala, and in the immutable being of a vajra-body I accomplished the Immortal Knowledge Holder who is free of aging and infirmity. At that time I received a prophecy that I would live for 225 years in the world; Glorious Hayagriva and Vajra Varahi exorcised obstructive spirits; the Five Buddha Heroes and the Five Dakinis became my constant companions, accompanying me like shadows and performing whatever magical transformation was necessary with unimpeded efficiency; the Bodhisattvas gave auspicious benediction; and since I was now a Knowledge Holder with power over my life-span I was given the name Radiant Sky-blue Mistress of Life (Tsedak Tingwo Barma).8

Hence, after this, Lady Tsogyel finally reached some notable level of stable spiritual attainment. But even after all of this, do not make the mistake of thinking that Lady Yeshe Tsogyel had actually reached enlightenment, for at this stage she was still far from the mark. The most we can say is that she had achieved various states of samadhi and had transformed her physical body to some extent, but this still does not constitute enlightenment. In fact, without going further into the details, we can say that it was only when she got older that she really achieved the realization she sought, and even then her ultimate stage of realization was probably only the second bhumi, or second of the ten Bodhisattva stages of attainment! As Tsogyel said in summarizing her life,

> At the age of 13 I became the Emperor's Queen [consort];
> At the age of 16 my Guru's compassion embraced me;
> Reaching 20 I gained full initiation [received the empowerments of practice] and practiced austerities;
> At 30 I gained realization and worked for others' welfare;
> At 40 I identified with my Guru's mind;
> At 50 I vanquished devils and guarded the teaching;
> At 60 I propagated the scriptures and prospered the community;
> At 70 I discovered the nature of reality;

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When I reached 80 my Guru departed for the South-West;
At 90 I saw the face of reality as its essence [perceived the nature of reality directly];
At 100 my Knowledge [awareness] reached optimal fullness;
At 120 I became the Emperor's priestess;
At 130 I traveled throughout the whole of Tibet;
At 150 I concealed treasures and worked for others;
When I was 160 King Mutri Tsenpo died;
And at 170 I liberated my remaining disciples;
At 180 I projected apparitional forms in Lhopdrak;
At 190 I met my only elder sister, Queen of Siddhas, and receiving the supreme precept, attaining the *siddhi* of long-life, The marks of rebirth and death spontaneously dissolved.

If we compare this sequence with Confucius, who chose the path of cultivating true humanity (which is the route of cultivating the Tao by watching the mind and behavior) through correcting his mind and behavior, we can find that he mentioned a similar stream of progress in his own cultivation attainments (*Analects* II.4):

At 15 I set my mind on learning [cultivation];
At 30 I was established [firmly on the path of cultivation];
At 40 I had no doubts [as to the Way];
At 50 I understood the Decrees of Heaven [the ontological range of metaphysical thought];
At 60 I could remain unperturbed with everything I heard [his mind was detached];
At 70 I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing what was right [always in samadhi].

In reviewing these two life summaries, we can understand that achieving self-realization is not a quick or easy affair, and yet we meet so many people today who think they are already supremely enlightened. They have not passed through any hardships at all, and cannot demonstrate the slightest bit of samadhi attainments or any other signs of the path. In fact, they cannot exhibit anything, and yet they will claim they have got it because they intellectually realized something.

What an interesting but unfortunate situation this is, in that you will bump into many people who either deceive themselves, or try to cheat others with their stories. If you supply these people with even more information about the spiritual path, they will even use it to further a web of self-deception, or deceiving others. This is why you have to be careful about revealing so many cultivation matters, and yet the time has come to make the nondenominational path of attainment quite clear.

An interesting question arises whether people can actually live as long as Lady Tsogyel did. The answer is "yes" for those who become accomplished cultivation adepts by purifying their chi and mai, for the chi (life force) is the basis of longevity. The great Nagarjuna is said to have lived for several hundred years and, when the monk Xuan Zang finally reached India, it is said he even met Nagabodhi, one of Nagarjuna's students, who at that time was eight hundred years old. Master Nagabodhi had two students who were hundreds of years old as well. When Xuan Zang asked Master Nagabodhi to teach him, the master agreed but said it would first require about twenty years of ingesting special medicines and practicing special meditations. Since Xuan Zang had already vowed to bring the scriptures back to China, he declined the invitation.

Xuan Zang sacrificed himself to do a great deed for others, and we should note that his example is the real cultivation way. His behavior is the real Mahayana path! To attain all the various psychic abilities and supernatural transformations is nothing compared to the spirit he showed in this decision. This is the Bodhisattva way, which is to ignore hardship and suffering and forget about yourself and your own wants in order to compassionately bring benefit to others. For instance, even though both Jesus and Socrates could both have escaped death, their sacrifice was a similar example of the greatness of the Mahayana way.

MILAREPA

Since we have just reviewed the case of a successful female practitioner, it is only fair that we examine the case of a man who undertook a similar course of cultivation practice. Thus, we will now analyze the story of the famous Tibetan adept, Milarepa, which is probably the most famous story from the annals of Tibetan cultivation.

Many people know a little of the story of Milarepa, who learned black magic in his youth to wreak horrible revenge on those who had wronged his widowed mother. Later he abandoned these evil deeds and turned to the road of "true religion" (genuine spiritual cultivation), but for him the path was one of incredible difficulty. Nevertheless, he never flinched in the face of the suffering tasks he was asked to perform as a penance, and the great suffering he underwent for the purposes of cultivation is the basis of his incredible story.

Milarepa's teacher was the famous Marpa, who did not immediately accept him as a student. Rather, before giving him spiritual instructions, Marpa required Milarepa to build, knock down, and then rebuild a tall stone tower over and over again. To build the tower Milarepa had to carry stones on his back, and the efforts just wore him away. The task was similar to that of the Greek Sisyphus, who had to continually roll a boulder to the top of a hill in Hell, watch it roll down again, and then repeat the cycle indefinitely.

The work involved in building this tower produced terrible wounds on Milarepa's back, but these wounds, and the futility of the effort in tearing down and then rebuilding the tower time and

again, were Marpa's means to help his student purify his karmic obstructions. To recount too much of this story would be an injustice to you, for it would deprive you of reading one of the most inspiring stories of spiritual cultivation in existence, a story which we highly encourage you to read.

Marpa was the student of Naropa, who was in turn the student of Tilopa, who was himself an incarnation of the Buddha Maitreya. So we can say that the form-based school of tantric practices followed by Milarepa were introduced by Maitreya, and somewhat related to Yogacara. Marpa himself had several students and taught many different Tibetan cultivation techniques, but he especially instructed Milarepa in the practices of the tumo fire, or kundalini cultivation, which features prominently in the Tibetan tantric traditions.

It was traditional in Tibetan culture to only give certain teachings to selected students, but right before Milarepa†left his teacher, Marpa told Milarepa that he had received his whole teaching and assured him that he had not held anything back. He assured Milarepa that just because he was poor and had little to make in terms of offerings, he had never refused to tell him everything about the dharma. As Marpa said, it was Milarepa's endeavor toward enlightenment and his zeal which brought joy to Marpa, not any gold or gifts, and it was this zeal, as we shall see in his story, which ultimately carried him through his spiritual cultivation practice to ultimate success. All true cultivation teachers share this exact same characteristic in that regardless of the spiritual school you follow, all they delight in is to see your progress in spiritual cultivation.

When Milarepa was about to leave his teacher, Marpa used his superpowers to project the forms of the Hevajra, Chakrasamvara, Guhyasamaja and other yidams, and as a display manifested many visible and invisible spheres of light. Upon generating these forms, he made a particularly instructive announcement that all students of cultivation should note, for he said the following: "These are miraculous psychophysical transformations, and to display them casually serves little purpose. I have shown them only because Milarepa is departing."

Then as final words of instruction, Marpa also told Milarepa to identify all things with illusion and to take refuge in the barren mountains for his retreat practice. He also gave Milarepa a scroll of paper sealed with wax containing secret instructions that Milarepa was to read only if he encountered an insurmountable obstacle in his practice. After receiving these final instructions, Milarepa set off to practice in retreat.

Milarepa eventually found a cave in which to meditate, took a small mat as his seat, and vowed never to descend to an inhabited place for food, supplies, or for any reason whatsoever until he had completed his practice and achieved self-realization. This is the point where our recounting of his cultivation experience begins:

> Having Thus, prayed, I sustained myself solely on a thin soup with a little roasted barley flour,

and began meditation.

Even though a definite awareness arose in my mind concerning Mahamudra (the Great Symbol), I could not control my breath because of the weakening of my body; no blissful Fire of Tummo warmed me and I experienced intense cold. Then I invoked my lama with great concentration, and one night I perceived, in an inner state of lucidity, a multitude of women officiating at a sacrificial feast, who surrounded me and said, 'Marpa has sent us to tell you that if you do not feel the Fire of Tummo, you may use these methods of body, speech, and mind until the blissful warmth arises within you.'

They demonstrated yogic postures. I sought physical bliss through the sitting position known as the six interwoven hearths. I sought control of vocal energy through the force of the vital element in air. I sought and meditated on mental harmony through the vital powers of the self-releasing snake's coil, and soon the Fire of Tummo began to spread through me.9

Like Lady Tsogyel, Milarepa had already attained a stage of samadhi and kung-fu before leaving his teacher; otherwise, he would never have been able to undertake this practice. Therefore, Milarepa was able to initiate his kundalini energies before entering his retreat, for this corresponds to a rudimentary level of chi cultivation. But in actual fact, his previous accomplishment of kundalini was only a semblance dharma phenomenon. We can say it was definitely part of the kundalini process and phenomenon, but not yet a great one because the true kundalini arousal, and entry into the relevant samadhi, is not so easy to attain. The instructions that Milarepa received after talking to these dakinis were the ones he really needed for solidifying his practice, and so only after entering retreat was he able to really start cultivating this technique.

When we previously encountered Dr. Sannella's cases of ordinary meditators, not even one individual had yet reached the stage of cultivating their real chi, and not one had even attained samadhi. Therefore, how could we expect these individuals to have reached the stage where they were cultivating their kundalini to this extent? People today talk about kundalini because they know the word, and everyone thinks they are activating their kundalini when their body becomes a little hot in the belly, but rarely does anyone even scratch the surface of the matter. Even the modern accounts we read of Indian cultivators and kundalini at most just touch upon the outskirts of the genuine practice. But this is digressing.

Continuing with our story,

A year passed.

Then I had a desire to go out and refresh myself. I prepared to leave. But I recalled my earlier vow and reminded myself with this song:

... Do not indulge in wandering thoughts, but let the mind be tranquil.
If you indulge, you will succumb to unwholesome thoughts.

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Do not be distracted, do not be distracted, but attentive.
If you are inattentive, your devotion will be carried away by the wind.
Do not leave, do not leave, but stay where you are.
If you leave, your foot will stumble against a stone.
Do not seek pleasure but control yourself.
Seeking pleasure will serve no purpose.
Do not sleep, do not sleep, but meditate.
If you sleep, the five poisons of corruption will overwhelm you.

Having Thus, scourged myself, I meditated without distinguishing night from day. The quality of my practice improved and three more years passed in this way.

Each year I consumed one of my sacks of meal. And if I had nothing else to sustain me, it would have been the end of my life. When men of the world, having found one-tenth of an ounce of gold, rejoice over it and then lose it, they despair. But that cannot be compared to dying without having attained Enlightenment. For a life which leads to Enlightenment is more precious than a billion worlds filled with gold. I thought, 'What shall I do? It is better to die than to break my vow. I shall not go down to the village. I will not break my vow. But since it is for a religious aim, I must find just enough food to sustain my life.'

I went out in front of the White Rock cave where the sun was warm and the water excellent. Here were many nettles—an open place with a distant view. Joyfully, I stayed there.

Sustaining myself with nettles, I continued my meditation. Because I had no clothes on my body and no other nourishment whatever, my body, covered with grayish hair, became like a skeleton and my skin turned the color of nettles. When this happened, I took the scroll that the lama had given me and placed it on my head. From that time, although I did not eat anything, my stomach felt full and there was the taste of food in my mouth. I was tempted to break the seal of the scroll to look at it. But an omen warned me not to open it yet. So I let it be.

About a year passed. Some hunters from the market of Kirong who had no luck hunting suddenly came to my cave. Upon seeing me, they cried, 'It's a ghost!' and they ran away. I called out to them that I was a man and a hermit.

'That is hard to believe,' they said, 'but let us see.'

Returning, they rushed into the cave and demanded, 'Where is your food? Give it to us. Later we will return it in kind. If you refuse, we will kill you.' With these words, they threatened me.

'I have nothing but nettles,' I told them. 'Lift me up and see. I have no fear of being robbed.'

...

One after the other lifted me up and dropped me down again. Although my body, disciplined by asceticism, was filled with pain, I felt a terrible and unbearable pity for them. I wept. ...

Although I did not think of using sorcery, they eventually received retribution at the hands of my guardian deities. The regional chief punished the hunters. The leader was killed, and all the others had their eyes torn out, with the exception of the one who had said, 'Do not harm the hermit!'

After a year had passed and when all my clothes were worn out and the old fur coat given to

me by my aunt in payment for my field was in tatters, I thought of sewing together the empty flour sack and the rags of my clothes to make a cushion. But I said to myself, 'If I were to die this evening, it would be wiser to meditate than to do this useless sewing.' Meanwhile, having given up the idea of sewing, I spread the tattered fur over my cushion and pulled up the edges of the fur to cover my lower body. The upper body I covered with pieces of the sack wherever it was necessary. When this cloth fell apart, I began to think that my renunciation was going too far and that I must sew it together. But there was neither needle nor thread. I knotted the three parts of the sack to cover the upper, middle, and lower parts of my body and fastened these with bits of jute rope. I wore this by day; by night I put the scraps of fur over my cushion for as long as they lasted. And in this fashion I passed another year meditating.

... Some old hunters [once again found me] ... and they too became frightened. I explained to them at length that I was not a ghost but a hermit meditating in the mountains, and that lack of food was responsible for the condition of my body.

'We shall see if that is true,' they said, and they went into the cave.

There was nothing there but nettles. Deeply moved, they offered me a large supply of meat along with other provisions, and said, 'What you are doing is wondrous. Please save the creatures that we have killed, let them be reborn in the higher realms. As for us, wash away our sins.'

Having spoken, they paid their respects and left.

'What good luck,' I said to myself joyfully. 'Now I can eat like a human being.'

After I had eaten cooked meat, my body began to feel tranquil bliss. My health improved, my sensitivity was keener, and my practice was strengthened. I experienced a blissful state of emptiness as never before. I saw that the few gifts received in the mountain retreat were far more beneficial to me than a hundred offerings enjoyed in towns and villages.

I ate the meat sparingly, but what I saved eventually became infested with maggots. I intended to eat it after picking them out, but then I thought to myself, 'This is neither my fate nor my right. It is not fair to rob the maggots of their food. I no longer want it.' I left the meat as food for them, and returned to my ascetic diet of nettles. ...

Another year passed. One day some hunters from Tsa, not having shot any game, arrived at my cave. I was clothed in the sack gathered in three places by rope, and I was in deep meditation. At the sight of me, one of the hunters pointed at me with his arrow and said, 'Is it a man or a ghost? Is it a scarecrow? Judging by its clothes, it appears to be a ghost.'

I smiled and said, 'It is me, I am a man.'

They recognized me by the gap in my teeth.

'Are you Good News [Milarepa's name]?'

'I am he.'

'In that case, give us something to eat now. We will pay you back later. It has been many years since you came to the village. Have you been here all that time?'

'I have been here all along. I have nothing good for you to eat.'

'Give us what you eat yourself. That will be enough for us.'

'Very well. Make a fire and cook some nettles.'

When they had made the fire and cooked the nettles, they asked for meat.

I replied, 'If I had meat, my food would be nourishing. I have not had any for many years. Use more nettles instead.'

'Then we want bones.'

'If I had bones, my food would not be so tasteless. I have done without them for years. Just use more nettles.'

'But we cannot do without salt.'

'Use the nettles as salt.'

'It is certain that with such a way of eating and dressing you will never look normal. You are not a man. Even a servant eats his fill and wears warm clothing. There is no man on earth more miserable or pitiful than you.'

'Please! Do not speak that way. I was born the most fortunate of men. I have met Lama Marpa of the Southern Cliffs. From him I obtained the instructions which allow me to attain Buddha-hood in this life and with this body. By renouncing the world and meditating in this solitary mountain, I am trying to reach a goal in eternity. I have sacrificed food, clothing, and status, thereby destroying the enemies, passion and prejudice, in this very life. There is no worldly man braver or with higher aspirations than I. Although you were born in a country in which the teaching of the Buddha has been spread, you have not even the urge to listen to the Dharma, let alone meditate. There is no conduct more dangerous than piling up faults little by little, and handful by handful—it fills the depth and duration of hell. Now forever at peace, I shall have supreme bliss and from now on I am assured of happiness. ...

The hunters replied, 'You have said many beautiful things. Certainly you have the gift of speech. But, however commendable your example may be, we cannot follow it.' And with these words they went away. ...

[Later his sister Peta heard that he was seen at Horse Tooth White Rock.] Persuaded that this was so, Peta took a full jar of beer, which she had begged from door to door, and, with a small vessel filled with flour and mixed condiments, she arrived at Horse Tooth White Rock. She looked at me from the threshold. My body was wasted by asceticism. My eyes were sunk in their sockets. All my bones protruded. My flesh was dried out and green. The skin covering my fleshless bones looked like wax. The hair on my body had become coarse and gray. From my head it streamed down in a frightening flood. My limbs were about to fall apart. ...

[After talking for some time] she gave me the food and the beer. I ate and drank, and at that moment my mind became crystal clear. On that evening my practice was greatly enhanced.

The next day, after the departure of Peta, my body, unaccustomed to such food, knew both ease and discomfort. As my mind began to wander between positive and negative thoughts, I meditated with all my strength, but obtained no results.

Several days later, Zessay [to whom he had been formerly engaged] came to see me with Peta, bringing meat, butter, tsampa, and a great deal of beer. I had gone to look for water and met them. As I was naked, they blushed on seeing me, and they wept for my misery. They offered me the meat, butter, and flour, they poured the beer, and while I was drinking, Peta said, 'From whatever point of view one looks at my elder brother, one cannot call him a man. You should ask for alms and little by little eat the food that humans eat. I will give you what you need to make clothes.'

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> Zessay said, 'Whatever you do about asking for food, I too will give you clothing.'
>
> I answered them, 'I do not know when I shall die, and I have neither time nor desire to go begging to obtain food. Were I to die of cold, I would have little regret since it would be for religion. I would not find satisfaction by indulging in food, drink, and laughter with relatives and friends gathered around me, and by wearing fine clothes and having ample food obtained at the expense of my meditation. Therefore, I want neither your clothing nor your food. I will not listen to you nor will I go begging.' ...
>
> They left, and I ate the good food they had brought. The sensation of pleasure and pain and the feelings of hunger increased so much that I could no longer meditate. I thought that there was no greater obstacle for me than this inability to meditate. Breaking the seal of the scroll that the lama had given me, I looked at it. It contained the essential instructions to overcome obstacles and improve practice, instructions for transforming vice into virtue, and more especially the advice to take good food at this time.10

Here we should stop to note an extremely important fact. When Milarepa first ate the enriching food, his mind became confused and scattered. This was a critical point for him in his cultivation practice. At this time*, the nourishing food was actually medicine* and it caused all his chi to come up, and the sudden appearance of all this vitality entering his head was what caused his troubles.

The food, in its function of nourishment, provided the ancillary conditions he definitely needed for attaining enlightenment, just as Shakyamuni could not achieve enlightenment until after he had eaten the rice gruel and regained his strength. But in being without food for so long, it took him a while to become used to it. A lot of people think that the ascetics' practice of *tapas* or deprivation is the correct route of spiritual cultivation, but we need you to know that without a healthy body it will be impossible to attain the Tao! Therefore you must never purposely damage, hurt, maim or in any way destroy or harm your body on the road of spiritual cultivation. While you can decrease your food intake, you should not starve yourself to death, and it was only because Milarepa and Yeshe Tsogyel had reached an advanced stage of chi cultivation that they could survive on chi alone.

Generally speaking our nourishment in today's world is *too good*. It is because our nourishment is too rich that we generate so many thoughts, discriminations, emotions and desires that cloud our wisdom natures and the potential for spiritual realization. Thoughts never stop arising in our minds because of this, and so one of the reasons behind the early monastic injunctions not to eat after noon was to *cut down on both sexual desire and the excessive thoughts which food tends to fuel*.

The injunction to rise and recite prayers in the earliest hours of the morning (between 3:00 and 5:00), on the other hand, was to help monks avoid losing their jing during this time, as this is a yin hourly period when it is easiest to have nocturnal emissions. From this we can understand that most of the rules of cultivation discipline are not random affairs, but have definite, important

principles behind them. In following spiritual rules of discipline, you have to understand their purpose, and then try to match yourself with the purpose of the rules rather than just their outer format.

In Milarepa's case, eating the food stirred up many physical and mental reactions. With such chaos going on, even a Buddha would not have been able to instruct him on what to do. People always think that Buddhas know everything but whereas they indeed understand all the principles behind phenomena, you are still the only one who wears your physical body and knows all of its internal happenings. It is like being in a terrible storm alone when you are the only one who can judge matters. Hence, when you reach a stage such as this, regulating matters all depends upon your own wisdom because no one can help you. Food is always *either a poison or source of nourishment*, so on the cultivation trail you must ration its intake with care.

You can also consider sexual relations to be as poisonous or as useful as food, for the result depends on how you use them. The desires for food and sex are fundamental desires we all have since we are denizens of the Desire Realm, and it is how we deal with them which makes them good or evil. They are barriers to the spiritual path if we lack skill in their usage, but if we know how to use them properly, as did Lady Tsogyel, then they can be definite assists to our cultivation progress. What the famous Chinese general Yue Fei once said regarding military strategies applies to these two items: the best way to use them is all up to your wisdom.

Continuing with our story, Milarepa said:

> I understood that, through the force of my former perseverance in meditation, my nerves had absorbed creative energy. Due to my inferior food the energy remained inactive. Peta's beer had stimulated my nerves to some extent and Zessay's beer and food had completed the process. Following the directions on the scroll, I worked hard on the vital exercises recommended for body, breathing, and meditation. As a result, the obstructions in the smaller nerves [mai] as well as those in the median nerves were cleared away. I attained an experience of joy, lucidity, and pure awareness similar to what I had known about in theory. In fact it was an extraordinary experience of illumination which was very powerful and stable. Having overcome the obstacles, I realized imperfections as perfections; even through discriminating thought, I perceived the inherent simplicity of the Dharmakaya.
>
> I understood that in general all things related to samsara and nirvana are interdependent. Furthermore I perceived that the source consciousness is neutral [Nirvana, as well as birth and death, are all empty.] . Samsara is the result of a wrong point of view. Nirvana is realized through perfect awareness. I perceived that the essence of both lay in an empty and luminous awareness. More particularly, this special experience of my illumination was the fruit of my previous meditations and the immediate effects of the food and the profound instructions of the lama. I also had a very special understanding that the methods of the Esoteric Path (Vajrayana) are for the transformation of all sensory experience into spiritual attainment.11

After being malnourished for so long, only upon taking the nourishing food could Milarepa attain the state of self-realization. If you wanted to find a corresponding term in Taoism, you could think of this food as "earthly *dan* (medicine)." The exercises Milarepa learned from his teacher could also be considered the "human dan" of the Tao school, and because he had cultivated with initial help from heavenly devas so as to attain this stage of enlightened luminosity, you can say that he had received the "heavenly dan" as well. In Milarepa's case, this is another way in which you would match the categories of Esoteric school teachings with Tao school teachings.

As a general rule, you must always remember that spiritual cultivation encompasses the same basic processes no matter what spiritual school, sect or religion you follow, only some sects try to mystify the process or overly complicate it so that you easily become lost. No matter what school you follow, it is basic that you cultivate merit and mental emptiness without losing your jing and chi along the spiritual road. Otherwise you will not be able to rise to any grand ranks of achievement.

If you asked how Chinese Taoism approached these same stages of cultivation, in the school of *true* Taoism, which hardly exists anymore, you do not have to follow all sorts of contrived practices or memorize all sorts of definitions as you find in the Esoteric school of today. Rather, you must also accumulate your jing and chi without squandering them, and cultivate merit and a realization of emptiness. The Taoist alchemist Wei Po-yang summarized the spiritual cultivation path for us in saying:

> Cultivate yourself internally, being quiet and empty. Close off the leakages and solidify the spiritual stem. The three lights engulf, warmly nourishing the young pearl. Observe it there, the unobvious—so close by and easy to seek. Gradually there will be penetration into the tissues, and moistening of the muscles and flesh. ... Practice with care, resting neither day nor night. Practice for three years, become an Immortal and wander to distant places. Pass through fire without getting burnt, enter water without getting soaked. Being able to maintain this and accomplish forgetfulness, there will be eternal joy and no vexations.

This is the spiritual path, for it is just this simple. To understand it, you do not need to mention all the stages of opening the central channel, cultivating the chakras and chi mai and so on which are commonly found in Tibetan Buddhism. The record of the Zen school also proves that all extraneous commentary is unnecessary. But continuing with Milarepa's cultivation, we must recount that he reasoned:

> Because I owed all this to Peta and Zessay, I expressed my appreciation in meditation so that their merit would contribute to their Enlightenment. And I sang of the Essence of Interdependence ... Thus, I sang and, redoubling my efforts, I meditated.
>
> During the day I had the sensation of being able to change my body at will and of levitating

through space and of performing miracles. At night in my dreams I could freely and without obstacles explore the entire universe from one end to the other. And, transforming myself into hundreds of different material and spiritual bodies, I visited all the Buddha realms and listened to the teaching there. Also, I could preach the Dharma to a multitude of beings. My body could be both in flames and spouting water. ...

I thought that I should now work for the good of sentient beings. As I was reflecting on this a prophecy of the yidam came to me: 'Devote yourself wholly to meditation in this life, in accordance with the lama's instructions. There is nothing greater than serving the teachings of the Buddha and thereby saving sentient beings through meditation.' Again I thought, 'If I meditate as long as I live, I will be setting the best example for future disciples to renounce the world and meditate.' And I was certain that both the tradition of the Dharma and sentient beings would derive much benefit from that. ...

Then, carrying the pot in which I had cooked the nettles, I left Horse Tooth White Rock. But I was weakened by privation during long meditation and my foot, rough and cracked, stumbled on the uneven ground outside the cave, and I fell. The handle of the pot broke off, and the pot rolled down the slope. I ran to stop it. From the broken pot the layers of residue deposited by nettle broth broke loose in a single green piece which had the form of the pot. I consoled myself with the thought that all composite things are impermanent.12

Milarepa finally achieved enlightenment, and without burrowing into the details, we can say that his level of attainment was much higher than Lady Tsogyel's stage of realization, for it was comparable to that of an eighth stage Bodhisattva. Because of the hardships of his practice, and the high attainment level that he reached, these are reasons why Milarepa is so respected in the esoteric traditions.

Since we are talking about cultivation kung-fu, here we should also note that people often wanted to come and visit Milarepa after his enlightenment. But since Milarepa was capable of performing all sorts of supernatural transformations, he would sometimes change himself into a tiger and appear along the road to frighten them away. Although the tiger was just one of his nirmanakaya projection bodies, it could really eat people! Thus, you could say it was real, or you could say it wasn't real. Milarepa had succeeded in seeing the dharmakaya and in cultivating the yang shen projection body as well.

Of course, with a little attainment you can develop a similar ability as illustrated by the stories found within the biography of Shriman Tapasviji Maharaj. However, unlike Milarepa who used a projection body, the yogis who indulge in actual physical transformations of their normal bodies into animals (shape shifting) are just emphasizing the seeds that will cause rebirth as animals in some future life. So the transformative ability of shape shifting followed by lower masters, rather than transformation body emanations, is not something you should want to play with.

People often ask how and why you can have such superpowers in the first place. How is it

possible? It is just the nature of the universe that it's possible, only you just do not know the principles yet yourself. The ability is within the realm of the mind, and simply falls out of the process of cultivation.

When you are really liberated, you are totally free and whatever thoughts you have can be realized because you are one with the source. Of course to get to that point, your mentality has been purified beyond belief since you remain in a state that recognizes the absence of an ego and no longer hanker after money, power, sex, fame or fortune.

Unfortunately for ordinary people, they cannot materialize their thoughts and in fact have trouble accomplishing anything at all through scattered or inconsistent behavior. Milarepa, however, could even travel all over the universe, for he had achieved the state of the real *yang-shen* (yang body) talked about in the Tao school. In fact, Milarepa could project countless physically tangible nirmanakaya transformation bodies, which is a very high cultivation feat, and in that way perform all sorts of simultaneous activities to generate more merit. This is why we can say that he had the "real yang-shen attainment." If you attain prajna wisdom, you can also do this to some extent, but the limits of your abilities will depend upon your level of prajna attainment. So you must not think that you must cultivate your physical form in order to arrive at this attainment. All these things can be arrived at through the path of cultivating prajna wisdom.

As we review this famous case, the big question for practitioners to consider is which path should *we* follow, the path of cultivating prajna or the esoteric school practice of cultivating the physical body? In actual fact, the most appropriate path, as well as your ultimate success on that path, will depend upon your karma, merit, and practice efforts. The approach to Tao may take many different routes and the end goal is exactly the same, but you must choose your practices carefully. The point of books like this is to get you to realize how these various routes actually correspond to one another, and how they represent different aspects of the same striving, but follow the same general principles. If you can incorporate the correct principles into your path, then it is sure to show results.

The enlightened Padmasambhava had instructed Yeshe Tsogyel to follow eight particular austerities, and so her austerity practice is the path she followed. The enlightened Marpa had instructed Milarepa to cultivate the path of kundalini, and so this is the road he followed. If Milarepa had followed the Zen school, which is considered the apex of the Esoteric school, he would have eventually achieved the same enlightenment as through his kundalini practice. However, his teacher only knew of tantric yoga techniques, and this practice was the one he told Milarepa to follow. Thus it was because of their teachers that Milarepa and Tsogyel adopted certain practices.

It is unfortunate that the people in this world cannot physically see the prajna wisdom achievement of enlightenment to realize how superior it is. Because they cannot see it, they

cannot appreciate how great it is, and they cannot understand why all the enlightened Buddhas, in every direction, pay homage and make praise of transcendental prajna wisdom. No form attainments can possibly compare to attaining the great prajna transcendental wisdom which we all inherently possess, so the purpose of many spiritual schools is to uncover this direct knowing wisdom by first quieting the mind through the attainment of samadhi. This is when the veil covering prajna can be rent asunder, and we say it can be born. Unfortunately, people tend to treasure only the magical transformations you can demonstrate through cultivation, Hence, they are always seduced by outward displays of external kung-fu.

Milarepa achieved both superpowers and the Tao, and it is his perseverance in the face of difficulty, the nature of the painful path he followed, and the success he ultimately attained which inspire so much admiration in those who hear his story. It is really one of the few mandatory classics you should read if you tread the spiritual tread. The unenlightened cannot fault Milarepa in any way, but a Zen master might indeed comment, "Why did he take on so much trouble if it was not necessary?" The Zen school has a different way of teaching, and more people tend to succeed along the road of Zen than upon the road of esotericism, so this is something you have to think about most carefully.

GAMPOPA

Our next case for studying cultivation kung-fu involves Milarepa's student, Gampopa. Gampopa was originally a physician but decided to abandon all worldly activities after the death of his wife. In the pursuit of cultivation knowledge he studied with many religious teachers and achieved great renown for his spiritual scholarship. But he also knew that scholarship was not enough because it must be matched with cultivation attainment.

When Gampopa finally met Milarepa, who was destined to become his root teacher (the one who led him to enlightenment), Milarepa asked Gampopa what empowerments and teachings he had received. As the story goes,

> Gampopa replied that he had received the four empowerments of Guhyasamaja, the Hevajra empowerment, the magnificent blessings of Dakmema, the teachings of *Luipa*, the magnificent blessings of the Six-Ornament *Vajravarahi* from Lama Lodru of Maryul, and many empowerments from other lamas. He also told Milarepa that he had been able to remain seated in meditation for seven days.
>
> Milarepa just laughed and said, "So what? You sit for seven days and don't experience the *clear light*. You can't get oil from pressing sand, you get it by pressing mustard seeds. ... there are many tantric teachings [in Kadampa], but no quintessential instructions there. Although there is a complete generation and completion process in a single meditation practice, this is merely the

> samadhi of analysis. Meditating on the selflessness of the stages of the path has only a relative value. Practice meditation on the *Method Path*."13

Milarepa criticized Gampopa's cultivation for the same reason that Chinese Zen master Huai-jang criticized the student Ma-tsu, who later became one of Zen's leading lights. As the story goes, Master Huai-jang went to instruct the young Ma-tsu, whom he knew had great potential but whose closed views would not admit an opening for instruction.

Master Huai-jang asked him, "What is your aim in sitting meditation?" and Ma-tsu responded, "I want to become a Buddha."

Master Huai-jang then set himself in front of Ma-tsu's meditation seat and began rubbing a brick. After quite a while, Ma-tsu's curiosity was aroused and he finally asked Huai-jang, "Why are you rubbing the brick?" Huai-jang replied that he was polishing the brick to make a mirror. Ma-tsu scorned him saying, "How can a brick be polished into a mirror?" Zen master Huai-jang seized the moment and replied, "If polishing a brick cannot turn it into a mirror, how can sitting meditation make one into a Buddha?" Ma-tsu realized the errors of his ways from this dialogue, and then submitted to hear the proper instructions for true meditation from Master Huai-jang.

From this story, and the similar story of the Bodhisattva who sat for ten eons without gaining enlightenment, we can realize that sitting quietly with an even mind is not Tao. You can remain in a state of nonconceptual absorption for a prolonged period of time, but the practice of silent samadhi is not sufficient in and of itself for arriving at enlightenment. You have to cultivate prajna wisdom in addition to cultivating the cessation of random discriminatory thoughts. In terms of the physical body, you have to let it undergo transformation by experiencing the various joys and blisses of cultivation, but you must also search for the ultimate source of the mind, which is also the ultimate mother of these transformations. But since physical transformation is a necessary component of the path, that's why the Tibet school specifically tries to generate the kundalini yoga, for it will directly bring about the stage of physical bliss that you need to experience to enter the dhyana.

Another extremely important point to take to heart is Milarepa's comments on the practice of collecting empowerments. Milarepa told Gampopa, "I do not mean that your previous initiations are not good, those are excellent and profound teachings that you have received. I just want to stress the importance of a correct karmic relationship with the guru, and the absolute necessity for you to receive the blessing of my lineage."

In other words, he said that you can collect empowerments all you like, but these symbolic acts will not get you anywhere near the Tao. If they could, everyone who participated in religious ceremonies and received empowerments would already be enlightened. What is really important is to follow a teacher's guidance for attaining samadhi and then working to penetrate through to

the fundamental essence of mind and realizing that it possesses transcendental wisdom. This is what is important; everything else is subsidiary. You can go to many teachers for instruction on spiritual cultivation, but the one who teaches you how to attain samadhi and who leads you to enlightenment is your real teacher, your true root guru.

On this note, Milarepa also warned Gampopa not to trust those who merely philosophized about cultivation, but those who actually practiced meditation and achieved some level of definite spiritual attainment. Listening to the academics, intellectuals and scholars just is not enough because only those with achievement are qualified to really guide others. Scholastics without attainment may spout religious instructions without ever having attained wisdom insight or cultivation experience, so how can they reliably be spiritual guides?

On the road of spiritual cultivation, what you really need is a root teacher, someone who has experienced samadhi and can lead you to know the direct nature of the mind. The famous teacher Atisa had 155 gurus, many of whom gave him tantric empowerments, but he held the greatest reverence for Serlingpa, who was the one teacher who actually helped lead him to *bodhicitta*. The very greatest teachers are typically not scholastics, and some are not even educated at all, but those who can lead you to recognize the true nature of the mind.

Milarepa also gave further instructions to Gampopa regarding various esoteric matters of the Tibet school, saying:

> "In general, if you do not fully realize the true nature of your mind in the deepest sense, even if you temporarily experience bliss, *luminosity* and non-thought, you will not transcend the three worlds [of Desire, Form and Formlessness]. These are known as temporary experiences because they do not resolve the mind to its depths. ....
>
> "Primordial awareness exists pervasively in all sentient beings. All the Buddhas are luminosity in the dharmakaya. Yogis practice meditation using an infinite variety of skillful methods, and Thus, they can naturally realize the view. Conflicting emotions naturally cease. Dualistic thoughts are effortlessly self-liberated, and wisdom spontaneously dawns. At this time, one's realization and experience cannot be expressed in words. It is like the ecstasy of a young woman, or the dream of a deaf mute. Although this ground is in all sentient beings, they fail to recognize it. ...
>
> "Primordial awareness has no origins. Its gateway cannot be blocked in any way. It cannot be shown by any analogy. It cannot be described by any words. It cannot be demonstrated by any sophistry. Therefore we should not try to fabricate it. Just let go and relax in the realm of the natural state of mind."

Milarepa then sang this song:

> Looking into your own mind is the view, O, physician monk.
> This certainly is the highest view.
> If you look for the view outside of your mind,

It's like a blind rich person leaving home in search of gold.
Don't clear away the "faults" of dullness and mental agitation, O, physician monk.
This is certainly the highest meditation.
If you try to drive these "faults" away,
It's like lighting a butter lamp in broad daylight.
Stop alternating between acceptance and rejection, O, physician monk.
This is certainly the highest action.
If you are always accepting and rejecting,
It's like a bee trapped in a spider's web.
Rest at ease with confidence in the view, O, physician monk.
That is certainly the highest *samaya*.
If you search for the samaya elsewhere, without observing this precept,
It's like trying to reverse the flow of a river.
Develop deep awareness in your mind, O, physician monk.
This is certainly the highest fruition itself.
If you search elsewhere for the fruition of spontaneous self-perfection,
It's like a frog trying to leap into the sky.
Find the guru within your own mind, O, physician monk.
That is certainly the highest guru.
If you search elsewhere for a guru,
It's like trying to abandon your own mind.
In short, O, physician monk,
Everything that appears is nothing other than mind.14

In Esoteric Buddhism, most people think that you have achieved enlightenment when you attain the three aspects of bliss, illumination and no-thought. However, these are only particular characteristics of the spiritual path corresponding to the cultivation of jing, chi and shen. What you must realize is that only the stage of completely breaking through to the fundamental nature of the mind can be considered the feat of self-realization. The *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* therefore says:

> All living beings should keep away from illusions. The realm of illusions continues to exist because the mind clings firmly to the idea of avoiding them. This mind is an illusion and should also be kept away. The idea of keeping from this mind is an illusion, too and should also be avoided. The new idea of avoiding the illusion of keeping from the mind should also be avoided. When there is nothing further to avoid, all illusions vanish. By way of illustration, after a fire obtained from wood by friction has completely burned the two pieces of wood that produced it and when there is no more smoke, the ashes will scatter and disappear. Likewise the practice by the illusory subject by means of the illusory object does not lead to the annihilation of anything after the disappearance of all illusions. Virtuous man, when illusions are

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known as such, one will keep from them without using any expedients. When one keeps from illusions, one is enlightened without passing through any gradual stages.15

In other words, spiritual practice is not to give rise to false thoughts at any moment, regardless of where you are. When they arise, you should not try to stop them or clean them away or even interpret them. You just let them depart.

In other words, when delusive states of mind (realms of false conception) appear, you should not try to add any additional things to the situation. You should not try to understand the situation with extra knowledge, nor should you try to judge it. *Do not impose comprehension on the situation and do not try to distinguish the real in this noncomprehension*. You should not even ask yourself, "Am I right, am I in the clear light?" and you should not find reality in the state of unknowing. If you follow these steps, you will immediate detach from illusion and awaken immediately without any gradual steps. So the whole path to enlightenment is given here in these few words.

With these initial instructions and advice, and following the lineage of Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa and Milarepa, Gampopa went into a tumo retreat where he experienced the following:

The first night of his retreat, Gampopa meditated naked in a cave near the juncture of two valleys. Although he was naked and the night air was cold, blissful warmth arose within him spontaneously, and in this rapturous state he passed the night. Just before dawn he fell asleep, but his body remained rock steady in an upright sitting position. For seven days he meditated in this way, and continued to experience inner warmth and great bliss, the fruits of tummo yoga, effortlessly arising in him.

On the morning of the seventh day, he had a vision of the Buddhas of the Five Families in the five directions. The experience seemed profound, but when he reported it to Milarepa, the Jetsun replied, "This experience is like a man pressing his eyes and seeing two moons in front of him as a result. It is only due to your having captured and controlled the energy-winds of the *five elements*. It is neither good nor bad. Keep meditating."16

The means in which Milarepa responded to Gampopa here shows what a great teacher he was. The *Surangama Sutra* says that having the Buddhas from all directions show up is like seeing a second moon. If you do not take this as Tao, then you are on the proper path, but if you take this as Tao, your practice is wrong. In fact, all the fifty states of delusion mentioned in the *Surangama Sutra* say exactly the same thing. It is really wonderful attainment if you do not consider your experiential realms as Tao when you reach any particular stage of cultivation. If you take any experiential realm or visaya as the Tao, however, you have already fallen into the "realm of the devils." You must regard all cultivation experiences in this manner because they are transient things, and the Tao itself is not an experience.

Gampopa, in this situation, therefore was not encountering anything truly profound. From a scientific standpoint, it was only the friction between his psychological and physical states that actually gave rise to his vision.

> Although Milarepa had told him that this experience was of no particular significance, it inspired Gampopa. Delighted and full of enthusiasm, he continued to practice intensively for another three months.
>
> Then one day, in the midst of his morning round of practice, just before sunrise, he suddenly experienced the feeling that all the *three thousand world systems* in the universe were spinning around like a wheel turning. He grew very dizzy, felt a wave of nausea sweep over him, and then vomited many times. Drained, he fainted and fell to the ground. He lay there, unconscious, for a long time. When he finally revived, he consulted with Milarepa, who commented, "This experience is due to the energy-winds in the *left and right channels* entering into the *central channel*. It is neither good nor bad. Just continue with your meditation."
>
> One morning, Gampopa had a vision that his cave was thronged with *Avalokiteshvaras*. Each one had a moon disc atop his head.
>
> He reported this to Milarepa, who said, "This is due to the increase of *bindu* in the Great Bliss *chakra* at the crown of your head. It is neither good nor bad. Keep meditating."17

Once again, in this instance Milarepa revealed his great skillfulness as a teacher. In fact, every time Gampopa came back to ask a question about his kung-fu experiences, Milarepa never once over-emphasized the issue. Rather, he expertly dismissed the matter in an exceedingly quick but skillful way while encouraging Gampopa to practice further all the while.

Milarepa understood Gampopa's psychology quite well, and knew he must tell his scholarly disciple a little something in order to settle his academic habits, but without going into too much of an explanation because this would divert him from the main issue and might even lead him into making further intellectual complications. Thus, each time Milarepa explained something, he topped off the matter by dismissing it with the lines, "It is neither good nor bad. Keep meditating." This revealed his exceedingly skillful wisdom in teaching.

Milarepa illustrated a standard rule in all spiritual cultivation schools: you should not stress or overemphasize discussions on kung-fu at all, otherwise you will end up wasting precious time and deviating from the ultimate goal of spiritual development. Thus this injunction is a standard rule in the Zen school. The endless definitions students have to memorize in the Tantric schools actually lead to deviations from this standard, even though they have the intent of trying to place helpful graduations on the spiritual path. But since the path to enlightenment is totally natural, aren't they actually imposing a complication on this matter as well?

You can sit there for years discussing cultivation kung-fu experiences and the relevant cultivation biophysics behind the chi, mai, chakras, bindus, blisses and other transformations, yet it will bring

you no closer to the Truth. You can spend all this time talking about things, and yet be getting nowhere while time is wasting away.

Cultivation practice, and *only* the effort of actual cultivation practice, is what brings you closer to spiritual Truth. For instance, in teaching modern audiences, no sooner have you answered one practitioner's questions about their kung-fu then those same questions are repeated in a slightly different fashion by someone else, who mistakenly believes their physical experiences are extraordinarily significant, and singular as well. People get all tied up with these questions and their experiences, and then never let go of them to make further cultivation progress past the realm of form.

In fact, the more you tell people, the more questions will arise, and the more ammunition you end up providing people as ammunition for argument and confusion. This is why masters rarely discuss any of this material at all, or the reasons behind their suggestions. It usually just leads to compliance issues and challenges and all sorts of denials, so the less they say the better. In teaching we want to explain things so that people understand, but in giving too much information we end up producing the roots of error as well.

Despite this admonishment, whenever people hear about unusual kung-fu, they usually perk up their ears and run to listen to the matter. Then they start practicing with the hopes of attaining similar special states themselves rather than aiming to discover their fundamental ground-state basis. This is just natural since people are attracted to the strange and mysterious. This is why they want to know how to get psychic abilities, fly through the air, turn invisible or walk through walls.

Most modern students are actually lucky in the sense that their teachers, because they do not actually understand cultivation kung-fu, will try to mask their ignorance and recite a standard line telling students to ignore these things, pronouncing anything which arises as "mara." So without having full knowledge of the matter, modern masters reciting this response will still point most people in the right direction. Nevertheless, this type of response is not helpful if a practitioner is sick and actually has a problem requiring medical assistance, but then again this is something you have to catch yourself rather than depend upon someone else to find it for you.

Because of this possibility, most devoted spiritual cultivators typically make some efforts to familiarize themselves with medicine, and it is something we recommend because you must learn how to self-adjust your body on the road of cultivation, and in life in general. Today we have Western herbal medicines, nutriceutical supplements, chiropractic and bodywork adjustments, Chinese herbal medicine, Indian ayurveda, and all sorts of other advanced healing modalities. But from an unbiased standpoint, we honestly believe that the framework of Chinese medicine is the best one for helping students understand the physical changes that occur due to spiritual cultivation, no matter what school you follow. So whether you are Christian, Buddhist, Hindu,

Jewish, or so forth, when you have physical troubles due to your practice of spiritual cultivation, the school of Chinese Traditional Medicine is the first one you should turn to.

In terms of a physical analysis, Gampopa's kung-fu at this point was at the stage where his jing was transforming to chi as it arrived at the crown chakra in the head. As the jing reaches this chakra, it simultaneously changes to chi, which is an attainment similar to the Tao school's stage of "returning the jing to renew the brain." As this happens, the endocrine secretions of the pituitary gland activate and descend downwards to open the *jen mai* conception channel. Both the Tao school and the Esoteric school say that

> When your jing is full, you will attain bliss.
> When your chi is full, you will be able to see internal lights inside your body.
> When shen is full, you will attain no-thought.

When the Tao school says that a person's jing descends so that they experience physical bliss, this is the same as the "subtle drops" of *bindu* melting because of the tumo heat, as mentioned in the Esoteric school. This stage of tumo heat, or kundalini arousal, is also the stage of breath cessation called hsi, or internal embryo breathing in Taoism. When you are meditating and reach the real state of hsi, which starts when your external breathing stops and internal breathing becomes initiated, you will see an internal light, or luminosity, which the Zen school says is a result of the friction between the physical and psychological states. This internal light will allow you to see inside your own body, or as Han Shan experienced, to see objects at a distance. By staying in this stage and deepening the level of samadhi you thereby attain, you can eventually break through the skandhas of form and sensation.

As this short example illustrates, many spiritual schools do indeed describe the very same levels of spiritual experience, only they just use different words to do so. In this case we have the Tao school description of cultivating the chi, which is equivalent to the yoga master Patanjali saying "pranayama removes the covering of the inner luminosity," or Buddha's description of the form skandha attainment, or the descriptions of "inner light blazing" provided by various Islamic, Jewish or other saints and sages. This is also roughly equivalent to the divine love or *incendium amoris* stage of Christian cultivation practice. When Taoism calls this the state of cultivating the hsi, it is emphasizing the aspect of our fundamental vitality, or chi, rather than any phenomenal realms that manifest.

The fundamental root of life is revealed in the state of real hsi, and the longer you can stay in the state of cultivating your real chi without interruption, the faster your body will transform on the path of spiritual cultivation. This is when your shakti, or kundalini, is really being activated.

Kundalini is a state of warmth and peaceful bliss that pervades all the cells of your body, and is your true pre-natal vitality. It is always accompanied by warmth, which is why Christianity calls it *incendium amoris*, because warmth is a natural characteristic that always comes with life, and if warmth is absent then life will soon depart.

If you continue with your cultivation and proceed yet further, you will eventually start cultivating your shen, because with continued mastery of emptiness, the Tao school has already told us that "chi will transform into shen," and accordingly your field of mental awareness will become very open and clear. When your shen is cultivated you can then attain stable samadhi because shen is eventually "transformed into emptiness," which are the code words for genuine samadhi attainments. When emptiness is cultivated so as to "return to Tao," you will have no sense of time or space at all; emptiness will not longer exist, either. This is the real stage of cultivating the path; the previous steps can just be considered the preparatory exercises to get you to this point.

Cultivation kung-fu is, therefore, an exact science that follows a certain path and process no matter what spiritual school you use as your reference, and yet you must definitely recognize that some spiritual schools are far superior to others when it comes to grading and classifying matters encountered on the path. Tossing any prejudices aside, you have to use whatever school best satisfies your circumstances if you want to make progress in spiritual cultivation, for it is only the end point that counts.

The net conclusion from all this is that you can remain Christian and rightfully use Buddhist classification schemes if you wish, or remain Jewish and adopt Taoist cultivation notions. It does not matter as long as you strive for spiritual evolution and correctly climb the ranks of spiritual attainment; this is why many medieval Christians used various Jewish texts for cultivation purposes. If you think there is a God, isn't that what God would want … that you gain spiritual progress? He would not care about the particular path you tread (as long as it was virtuous), just your spiritual progress.

Now during sexual intercourse the semen and hormones, or jing, normally descend to the region of the genitals and are then usually lost through ejaculation or sexual orgasm. This, at least, is the normal turn of events. Here, however, Gampopa had cultivated to the stage where his jing and hormones ascended to the brain, with his jing transforming into chi.

When this type of kung-fu happens and you become drowsy or cannot respond quickly, it means something is wrong. Furthermore, you must know that the real return of jing happens in a state of no-thought; otherwise, "returning jing" would just be returning poison to the head. Injecting the brain with a syringe of semen would certainly cause damage, so returning jing to the brain has nothing to do with semen at all, which means that the jing here is not real semen. Rather, if we had to use any physical correspondence at all, we would have to refer to it as the most rarefied endocrine functions of the kidneys and reproductive organs in conjunction with a form of chi

energy. Another way to think of it is simply the generative forces of the physical nature.

Some people who practice Tao school methods sometimes feel an urge to release their semen because they cannot transform it, so they try hard to contain it using force or they try to forcibly lead it up their spine to the brain. This type of practice is quite harmful, as any forceful methods to pump the jing or chi to the brain can cause major physical problems. This is why people who try to "suck" sexual energies from their partners during sexual intercourse usually die from stroke or other cerebral problems.

Whatever happens through cultivation should happen naturally, without any artificial or forceful efforts on your part. The proper way of practice is that you simply rest the mind while maintaining awareness, and then a thousand transformations will naturally take place. After all, if there are any artificial efforts used, the path is not the path of Tao. In our examples, you must remember that the real jing is formless, so if you make the mistake of assuming that this jing is equivalent to semen, and then try to return the physical jing back to the brain, the result is even more poisonous than alcohol. The ascent of jing-chi to the brain happens normally to spiritual practitioners in a natural fashion, and if you attain a bit of superpower, you can actually see this material ascending to the brain in a spiritual aspirant who has worked very hard at his or her cultivation.

Some individuals who are practicing towards Tao also mistakenly think that retaining their jing and chi means that they should not even yawn or fart. The result of such noxious restraint is that the complexion of their face darkens from all the poisons being retained. Other individuals try to steal jing from their partners during sexual intercourse, and so they typically die quite terrible deaths and are usually reborn in the lower realms. They try to steal these substances from another even though once out of the body, our jing and chi are like shit, piss, phlegm and pus. So this is yet another example of the mistakes people often make along the road of cultivation when they adopt too many form-based, materialistic notions.

Even if they were not poisonous, trying to suck these substances from another is useless because these substances cannot penetrate through the hind region of the brain. Thus, people who try to steal energy from others through sexual yoga techniques will often develop shiny red faces with dark spots as indicative of the sickness they are bringing on themselves. Furthermore, they usually die suddenly from strokes or other related complications, and such are the results of the deviant paths people often mistake for the Way.

When a person achieves genuine spiritual kung-fu through the proper means of cultivation practice, we can say that their face will shine with the light of jade, their eyes will be clear and full of energy exhibiting their shen, their skin will become warm and soft, and their chi will become as refined and powerful as that of a dragon. This is the proper appearance of an advanced cultivation practitioner. You must remember that the real jing is not your physical

semen, the true chi is not your outward breath, and true shen is not a spirit if you want to reach this sort of attainment. Then you can practice correctly. While the Tao school describes things using physical terms, these terms correspond to esoteric substances rather than materials of gross matter.

Continuing,

> One evening at dusk, Gampopa saw the *Vajra Black Line Hell* [where individuals are sliced up into pieces according to black lines which are marked onto their bodies]. Along with this vision, his heart area became congested and felt like it was seizing up. A strong wave of *heart energy-wind* arose, stirring his entire body, and he became intensely depressed.
>
> He asked the guru, who said, "You have tied your meditation belt too tightly. It's too short for you, and it's binding your channels, causing a constriction in your *upward moving energy-wind*. It's neither good nor bad. Loosen your belt and keep meditating."
>
> The guru also gave Gampopa some additional inner yogic instructions for working with his *nadis*, *prana* and bindu. Armed with these teachings, Gampopa returned to his cave and resumed his meditative efforts.
>
> One day Gampopa had a particularly fascinating experience. He was able to see clearly the beings of the six realms, from the gods of the *desire realm* down to the beings in the hell realms. All of these beings were drinking and enjoying the nectar of the gods, which rained from the higher realms down into the lower realms, satisfying them all.
>
> However, he saw his mother in a very weak position, unable to partake of the nectar. She appeared to be very thin, sickly and weak, near death from hunger and thirst.
>
> He immediately went to see Milarepa and told him of his experience. Milarepa replied, "The rain of nectar is the increase of the bindu in your *right and left channels* in the throat center, the Chakra of Enjoyment. Your previous nausea was due to your energy-wind entering the channel system. This experience is due to the bindu coming into the channels. Your mother's inability to drink the nectar means that the mouth of your central channel has not yet opened. It is neither good nor bad. Keep on meditating, without hope or fear."
>
> So saying, he taught Gampopa some forceful and vigorous *yantra yoga* exercises, including leaping and tumbling movements.
>
> Gampopa returned to his meditation and practiced for another month. Then one day, due to the power of the yantra yoga movements, his body began to shiver, tremble, and shake uncontrollably; he began crying, and he felt an involuntary desire to shout. He thought, "What is happening? Am I possessed by demons?"
>
> He went and informed his guru, who told him, "The bindu is increasing in the dharmachakra at the heart center. It is neither good nor bad. Concentrate on your yantra yoga exercises, and do not stop them."
>
> From then on, Gampopa found that he need little food.
>
> One day he saw both a lunar and solar eclipse: the light of the sun and moon was completely obscured by thread-like clouds, the two thin tails of the demon *Rahu*.

> Gampopa went and told his experiences to Milarepa, who said, "This is caused by the energy-winds in the left and right channels entering into the central channel. It is neither good nor bad. You are a very brave man, physician monk. You are a mighty vulture indeed. Redouble your efforts."18

When we review all these marvelous experiences, it is easy to be amazed and get carried away, but a real cultivation practitioner should naturally develop the wisdom as to how they can handle these various affairs. In fact, a student should always strive to develop their personal wisdom so they can solve things themselves, for this will enable them to increase their fluency in skillful means and expedient methods. The Zen school would emphasize this as well. For example, during China's Tang dynasty, if a student kept asking his teacher this type of question, the teacher would certainly beat him with a stick to end the fixation entirely.

All these experiences, every one of them, *are at the level of transforming the four elements, so they are still transformations belonging to the aggregate of form*. Nothing that Gampopa has yet described deals with the higher skandhas of conception, volition or even consciousness. Thus, the Chinese Zen masters would not even record any this material, and this attitude is the reason why Bodhidharma said, "In China, we will be able to see the Mahayana." All these descriptions may sound great to us, but they still correspond to an extremely low stage of attainment. Even if the stage were really something profound, the Zen masters would at most describe it with just a few lines of artful poetry.

When Westerners read all of this stuff in Esoteric Buddhism, however, they think it is really great. They think this is all high-level stuff that no other school contains, even though Taoism and yoga contain all these same principles as well. These other schools also contain these teachings and various descriptions of these phenomena, but they just appear in a different format. Even Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have these stages if you practice correctly, and so does Western medieval alchemy! The Zen school, however, does not bother to record these matters because of their low status, and yet that does not mean that they are absent from the Zen school, for even Zen practitioners experience these things.

If we were to look at Gampopa's story from the view point of modern scientific investigation, we would also end up criticizing matters because the reports do not mention what is happening to his skin and urine at this time, or what is happening to his blood pressure, mental state or the level of Gampopa's sexual desire. Unfortunately, while we need this type of analysis for our modern era, a data dump of this nature can certainly cause trouble as well. For instance, a particular problem can arise through someone's cultivation to which people might say, "You are not getting enough nutrition." Resorting to their advice, a practitioner without great wisdom might mistakenly end up eating more, and destroy their spiritual practice in the process.

Thus, it is that people practicing modern science, and trying to match it to cultivation kung-fu

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without wisdom, can also hurt themselves through faulty analysis. To really cultivate, you must cultivate so that you do not care about these questions, and so that you do not value your body or life anymore. While it seems like we have more and more of these kung-fu principles appearing in modern books so that people can all speak the Tao school, Esoteric school, yoga and Zen school lingo, in actual fact we are getting further and further away from the real Tao and a real understanding of the spiritual path.

> At the end of his instructions, the guru mumbled, "There is a supreme being. Now is the time, now is the time, now is the time!" He then said nothing more.
>
> Gampopa returned to his cave and meditated with even greater energy. After one month, a vision of red Hevajra appeared before him. He thought, "The last time I saw Milarepa he said, 'Now is the time, now is the time.' He must have foreseen the appearance of this mandala of my patron yidam. This is what he meant by saying there is a supreme being. This vision must be the action of the yidam Hevajra."
>
> He asked about the meaning of this vision, and the guru replied, "The red bindu obtained from your mother, which was coming up from below, has been established and stabilized in the dharmachakra at the heart center. It is neither good nor bad. Keep meditating."
>
> Gampopa meditated with great exertion. Then one day, he saw the mandala of the skeleton form of Chakrasamvara, as described and taught in the yogic tradition of Luipa. He asked the guru about this. Milarepa replied, "This is because your *transformation chakra* at the navel center is now filled with bind. It is neither good nor bad. Just continue meditating.
>
> So Gampopa meditated diligently, and after fourteen days he had the sensation that his whole body had become as vast as the sky. From head to toe, his whole body, limbs and all, was full of sentient beings of the six realms. Most of them were drinking ordinary milk, and the rest were drawing milk down from the stars, and drinking that.
>
> He heard a roaring noise like the sound of a great storm, but he had no idea where it was coming from. At dawn he loosened his meditation belt, and the noise stopped.
>
> He asked the guru about his, And Milarepa answered, "This was because the *karmapranas* have driven the bindu into the hundreds of thousands of channels throughout your entire body. Now is the time to transform these karmic pranas into wisdom prana." Whereupon, Milarepa imparted to Gampopa the supreme tummo instruction for realization of the state of *Vajradhara* and sent him to practice.
>
> Gampopa continue to meditate. Then one day the whole valley of Gungthang seemed to fill with smoke. By late afternoon it was pitch black. He could not find the path, like a blind man he groped and crawled until he finally made his way to the guru's abode.
>
> Milarepa said, "It's nothing to worry about at all. Just relax, sit here and meditate."
>
> Milarepa then taught him the method of clearing away obstructions and blockages in the upper part of the body. Gampopa did the practice and the darkness dissipated like the dawning of day.19

Once again we must note that the Zen school does not require all these special instructions. As

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the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* suggests, all you have to do is drop everything, and such matters will resolve themselves naturally.

If you cultivate prajna transcendental wisdom in this manner, rather than focusing on the physical body, all your worries and concerns will naturally be resolved. These poisons will all be eliminated by the body without the need of any external force or artificial exercises. This is why the mind-only path is the highest path, the clearest path, and the most direct path to self-realization. Nonetheless, the Indian yoga, Tantric paths and lower Tao school teachings advocate various step-by-step practices and procedures for attaining specific stages of kung-fu, and for handling certain situations.

Of course this can be extremely helpful, but only if you take specific medicine correctly, and do not try to always hold on to it. If, however, you follow these paths and practice for specific targeted phenomena, you will end up confining yourself to particular cultivation stages. Why anyone would want to only cultivate to some fixed station, while the ultimate is at the doorstep, is a matter they must ask themselves. Such procedures for cultivating the physical nature will almost always confine you within the aggregates of form and sensation.

Continuing,

> Then one evening Gampopa saw his whole body as a skeleton without flesh, bound together by many energy channels. He asked the Jetsun about this experience, and he replied, "You are working too hard. You are practicing your *pranayama* too forcefully. Practice more gently."
>
> Thus, once again relying on the priceless oral instructions of his guru Milarepa to guide him along the path, Gampopa returned to his cave. His practice and experiences were now becoming very advanced. The prana flowed freely though his body now, and so he felt perfectly at ease and comfortable meditating on the bare rock surface without any meditation cushion.20

After this report, Gampopa left his retreat for awhile and met with Milarepa once again, after which he returned to his practice and meditated diligently for another month. As he recounts of his experiences,

> At the end of the month the faces of the seven Medicine Buddhas appeared to him. At that time he needed to breathe in and out only once a day. When he stopped the meditation on the inner winds and exhaled, the visions immediately disappeared.
>
> One afternoon, when he meditated and held his breath, he saw the limitless sambhogakaya Buddha-fields, with their infinite wonders. As he experienced these enjoyments, he became distracted and amazed by the marvelous scenes, and let out his breath. Suddenly he found that it was already evening. He thought of telling his guru, but was afraid that he might disturb Milarepa's meditation, so he did not go that evening. ...
>
> At dawn he meditated and again held his breath. This time he saw the faces of the thousand

> Buddhas surrounding Shakyamuni. When he went to Milarepa to make obeisance and recount his experiences, the guru said, "You need not tell me of your visions. I already know them. Now you have seen both the *nirmanakaya* and the sambhogakaya sphere of your yidam. You have not yet seen the dharmakaya sphere [he hadn't attained the enlightenment of "seeing Tao"], but that will happen soon.
>
> "... you will soon walk the dangerous path of siddhi [superpowers]. This level of attainment is full of obstacles, for once you have achieved these siddhis, the mara of the son of the gods will come to you. At that time, you should be very cautious, and be particularly careful to keep these powers secret.
>
> "Generally speaking, tantra is an esoteric teaching reserved for superior disciples, and accomplishment in tantric practice must also be developed in secrecy. Following the commitments carefully, a gifted disciple of highly developed capacity will not be influenced by this mara ..."21

What Milarepa related to Gampopa holds even today. In general, you can tell your teacher and fellow students about these particular experiences, but you should not tell them to others who will disparage them. Otherwise you will have violated the discipline of cultivation, and perhaps even harmed your listeners who have very little cultivation background, understanding or experience.

On the other hand, you should not hold back the true cultivation teachings from people who can profit by them, for helpfulness is the essence of the spiritual path. Withholding teachings from the qualified is also a breach of spiritual discipline in many spiritual schools as well. But you should note that there are many teachings you should not popularize because some individuals will use this type of material to hurt or cheat themselves and others.

The Tao school, therefore, warns that if you give this type of knowledge to the wrong people you will be punished. This is no joke, for it is a very serious matter! In fact, you may even lose your life if you reveal genuine esoteric secrets to the wrong people. This is why many tantric teachings were written in a "twilight language" which revealed teaching instructions in an allegorical fashion. In that way, only the accomplished would be able to understand their real meaning. Unfortunately, as traditions die the actual meaning behind this sort of material gets lost, but with all the information we are providing you, it should be possible for you to start retrieving much of this meaning for your own tradition, which is what we are after.

Anyway, after reaching this level of attainment, Milarepa said to Gampopa,

> "You can start to teach and spread the Dharma when you see the true nature of mind, and stabilize that realization. It is true that you have already experienced some realization, but in time you will see your mind essence even more clearly. That will be quite a different experience from those you are having now. Then you will see me, your guru, as the perfect Buddha himself, and a deep and unshakable conviction will grow in you. Then you will be ready to teach.

> "The yogi who can bring his inner winds to the tips of his fingers and send them out through his fingertips, can then overcome all the prana-hindrances. Are you able to do this yet, my son? Try! See if you can!"
>
> Early that evening Gampopa piled a heap of ashes on a slab of stone. He retained his breath, charged his fingers with prana, and pointed at the heap. Nothing happened.
>
> Undaunted, he persisted without a break. Darkness fell, the moon rose, and still the ashes did not stir. Then, at midnight, as Gampopa pointed his fingers with intense concentration, the ashes began to move slightly. Gampopa began to grasp the technique, and soon the ashes were swirling around in a circle as if a whirlwind wee sweeping them away!
>
> The next morning Gampopa went to see Milarepa, and joyfully recounted his experience of the night before. Mila said to him, "Good! You have not yet completely mastered the pranas, you have only partially controlled them. However, you have now channeled your prana properly, and so you need no longer stay here with me. Soon you will attain both the ordinary and supreme siddhis, and will perform miraculous transformations.22

Gampopa was instructed here to practice a form of pranayama to get the chi to come to his fingertips. If he had really cultivated his chi adequately, it naturally would have progressed to his fingertips already, which just goes to show that you should not be mislead by all the various descriptions of unusual kung-fu. As to all his wonderful descriptions of kung-fu, a true Zen master would have dismissed them and told him to get on with searching for the great matter, but this emphasis is typical of the Esoteric school teachings.

Consider this: rather than spiritually battle with a supernatural snake by demonstrating all sorts of advanced kung-fu and samadhi attainments, a Zen master would wake up and say, "How dare you!" to settle the matter. The Tao school, on the other hand, would employ all sorts of spirit catchers or exorcisms, and the Tibet school adepts would engage in all sorts of supernatural battles. Tell me, who is the high and who is the low in all this? With this question in mind, you must therefore remember that there are many ways of attaining cultivation kung-fu other than following the path of Esoteric Buddhism. It is certainly not the only, or highest method around. If you believe it is the supreme method in the world, you are just falling subject to dangerous propaganda.

From all this we can know that the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet simply offers another spiritual path, another set of methods for attaining Tao, but it is not the supreme one because most students following this path end up lacking something. After all this work, for instance, Gampopa is still only cultivating his chi and mai within the skandha of form. If he were cultivating great prajna transcendental wisdom, he would have all these attainments naturally.

At a much later stage, Gampopa was leaving Milarepa to start out on his own when Milarepa called out to him from far away and motioned for him to come back. We have finished our recounting of Gampopa's kung-fu experiences, but this final lesson is so important to our topic

that it we have cause to relate it. Gampopa did not know what Milarepa wanted, but he returned to receive what is probably the most instructive lesson so far:

> His eyes burning brightly, Milarepa said to him, "Who else but you deserves to receive this most precious quintessential instruction, even though it be of too great a value to be given away? Now come here, and I will give it to you! ...
>
> "Now look!" Milarepa said, and hoisted the back of his robe, revealing the cheeks of his buttocks, all covered with lumps of hard callus, like the hooves of an animal, due to having sat for so long on stony ground without a cushion. He said, "There is no more profound teaching than this. Now you can imagine the hardships I have undergone. My attainment of great realization came from this.
>
> "It has simply been due to persistent effort that I have accumulated merit and gained accomplishment. You need such effort, not any other doctrine. This is the essence of my teaching. Whether you become a Buddha or not depends on effort. With it, there can be no question about your liberation. Like a son, do what your father says!
>
> You should likewise continue to exert yourself with great perseverance in your meditation. You should continue sitting on one seat, in one place, until you attain realization. This is the most profound teaching in Buddhism: Practice!"
>
> This teaching made an indelible impression on Gampopa, giving him inspiration and courage on many occasions thereafter.23

Although we can criticize the Tibet school's emphasis on cultivating kung-fu, one cannot criticize the proper attitude to practice communicated here. Zen master Chang Ching taught us the same lesson by exhibiting the same attitude, for he wore out a total of seven meditation mats before achieving his final break through!

This is the type of determination will destroy any obstacles arising on the path. Even if the school or path you follow is incorrect, this sort of determination is indicative of true spiritual cultivation practice.

MACHIG LABDRON

Since we have reviewed the cultivation practice of two men and only one woman, it seems fair to end our outstanding case studies with the story of another woman who attained enlightenment: Machig Labdron, the Tibetan founder of the Chod Mahamudra practice tradition.

Although Machig Labdron and Yeshe Tsogyel both attained Tao and left a tremendous mark on Tibetan religious history, Tibetan society, although steeped in cultivation, still puts its primary emphasis on its male cultivation adepts. Thus, it has not acted any differently than many other

cultures in its lack of emphasis on female adepts as models of successful cultivation. This prejudice against women is something we unfortunately find wherever we go.

Buddha, which is a name for a person as well as the original mind, is in fact sexless, but as human beings there exist both males and females. Because men and women differ according to their mental and physical conditions, spiritual cultivation may affect each of the sexes in a different way, and hence we can therefore expect different kung-fu results to sometimes manifest according to the sexes. The same goes for age categories, for the young and old who devote themselves to spiritual cultivation will tend to have different results, too, and one's mentality (because of their occupation or upbringing) may tend to bias the results of spiritual cultivation as well.

This understanding of the potential for differences can help us readily accept what Padmasambhava told Yeshe Tsogyel about the female sex and cultivation in general:

> The basis for realizing enlightenment is a human body. Male or female, there is no great difference. But if she develops the mind bent on enlightenment, the woman's body is better.

This principle has to do with the fact that a woman's body is yin on the outside but yang on the inside, while a man's body is yang on the outside and yin on the inside. Therefore, men have a more difficult time transforming their physical bodies (which are yin) than women (whose bodies are yang), and therefore suffer more in overcoming sexual desire (which is a yin, or grasping phenomenon). Linking together all that we know so far, this suggests that most men will have more difficulty in becoming liberated from the aggregate of form. Women, on the other hand, will have more difficulties in mastering the realm of mind, and detaching from the afflictions of the emotions.

While the first barrier in cultivation is transforming the physical nature and detaching from the view of the body, the second barrier faced by both men and women is the barrier of becoming liberated from thoughts and emotions. However, for men who have succeeded at the first obstacle, this second task is a much easier to achieve than for the women.

Most women who make it to this stage fail in their cultivation due to emotional attachments, while most men fail in the earlier tests of trying to overcome sexual desire. But those men who do succeed in overcoming their physical bodies, few though there be, will usually have developed such prajna wisdom in the process that they can easily detach from their thoughts and emotions. Since women do not have as difficult time in practice to get over this first factor of desire as men do, they usually get hung up in the sensation, conception and volition skandhas. This is what

accounts for the relative high ratio of men to women who succeed in spiritual cultivation.

Most women, as we have said, fail at cultivation because they cannot detach from their emotions, and especially the emotions of love, anger or jealousy arising from sexual relations. This is because while a woman's body tends to be of the yang nature, their mind tends to be yin in nature, and subject to stronger habits of mental attachments. On the other hand, in transforming her physical body, a woman does not have as great a need to develop the wisdom view as a man does, since her female body is already better suited for cultivation purposes.

The fact that she has to work harder than a man to develop mental discipline helps explain why, as a general rule, there are many more disciplinary rules for female nuns than male monks in nearly all the cultivation schools of the world. Our discussion on this complicated matter is quite limited, but this small point helps us better understand Lady Tsogyel's cultivation situation, and why her guru appeared to her and started to criticize her pride while she lay dying! Part of this response was skillful means, and part was his attempt to help her smash through the barrier of believing in being an ego.

Both Yeshe Tsogyel and Machig Labdron were both able to attain enlightenment. However, each used a different means to attain the goal. While Tsogyel took the route of cultivating her physical body, Machig chose to emphasize the cultivation of prajna transcendental wisdom instead. This also separates her case from that of Milarepa or Gampopa, who both followed the path of kundalini cultivation although, of course, both also had to cultivate prajna wisdom. It is our good fortune to be able to review the case of someone from the Tibet school—and a female practitioner at that—who took the primary route of cultivating prajna wisdom rather than the physical nature, but we must still remember that she cultivated her physical body as well.

What route did Machig Labdron take? When she was young she studied all the Buddhist *Prajnaparamita* texts that discuss prajna transcendental wisdom, and this was her fundamental root mode of practice. But one of her teachers, Kyoton Sonam Dragpa, told her that an intellectual study of these teachings was not enough.

Time and again we find the same rule: intellectual understanding is no substitute for actual cultivation practice and experiential understanding. So the teachings on prajna have to be mastered by integrating them with your mind and behavior. As Machig's teacher discussed with her:

> "Young Acarya, you seem very learned indeed in the Prajnaparamita texts, but do you really know their meaning?"
>
> "Yes, I do," she replied.
>
> "So please explain it to me."
>
> She gave him a detailed explanation and commentary on the ten bodhisattva stages and the

five paths, showing the way to reach the final fruit of Buddhahood.

"You indeed appear to know well how to explain the meaning, but you have not yet integrated it totally in your mindstream."

"How does one do this?" she inquired.

"Everything you've said so far is what we call understanding. Your explanation of the ultimate nature of all phenomena is completely correct. But now you need to integrate this knowledge in your mind stream, and as soon as you succeed, the former mind enslaved by partial fixations will be replaced by a new state of mind free from all grasping at the reality of phenomena. Then, liberated from attachment to reality, you will be totally free of the conception of subject and object, equally divorced from all mental states related to action and agent. This understanding of nonduality is a great fire which destroys the darkness of ignorant clinging to a self. The essence of all teachings is to thoroughly examine the nature of your mind. So you should do it!"

With these words Sonam Lama went on his way. Labdron took up her recitation again, reflecting on the meaning of the lama's instructions. While reading the chapter on demons, she understood what he meant and an exceptional realization, such as she had never experienced before, arose in her. Free from any conceptualization, she eliminated the demon of ego-clinging and self-centeredness. This insight of realizing the non-existence of a self was like the sun dissipating darkness: the erroneous belief in the existence of a self was forever silenced. ...

She was twenty when she completed her years as [a reciter of the sutras for others] at Lama Tarpa's monastery. She requested an empowerment from him, but he replied, "It is impossible for me to grant you an initiation. You should address your request to Sonam Lama since you have a connection with him through aspirations made in previous lives."

... she arrived in the presence of Kyoton Sonam Lama, to whom she repeated the prediction of Lama Trapa. Seeing that she was a worthy vessel, the master agreed to her request for initiation.

In the temple of E'i Gangwa he gave (the young woman and four other yogis, Ngagpas Lokya Lhakyab, Ja Trompa, Jinglha Zao and Zhangton Ozerpal) the following initiations: the mind initiation by which one realizes the meaning of the four initiations through profound samadhi, according to the Sutra tradition of Dampa's lineage; a blessing transmission known as "Opening the Gates of Space"; and the empowerment of Mahamaya, the Grand Illusion Tantra, also from Dampa's transmission lineage.

During the invocation of the wisdom beings of the last initiation, just as the stars had become perfectly visible in the sky, Labdron's body rose about one cubit [six feet] above the ground. She displayed the twenty-four dance postures of the peaceful deities and sang in Sanskrit, the language of the gods, with the voice (of Brahma) endowed with sixty excellent qualities; and meanwhile her mind experienced the vajra-like meditative stabilization (Skt. *vajrapama-samadhi*), absorbed in the limitless essence of reality. Next, without being in any way hindered by the clay walls of the temple, she floated straight through them, rose in the air and disappeared.

The place where she landed was known as the Tree of Serlag, at the foot of which there was a spring called Hopo Namkhol (Sky-Boiler the Resplendent), the residence of the naga king Dragpo Dakyong (Wrathful Moon Protector). This place was so terrifying that no one could even bear to look at it. She immediately overpowered the naga king by her samadhi, and as he couldn't stand

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> this, he called for help to all the other nagas in the region. From everywhere they assembled into an immense army, showing an entire array of terrifying magical powers. Machig instantly transformed her body into a food offering for demons. Unable to destroy her, the demons were forced to surrender and offered her their life essence in order to survive. The naga king Wrathful Moon Protector and the others took an oath to never again harm living beings and to protect Machig's teachings. ...
>
> Finally, at dawn, ... the other disciples eventually found Machig at the foot of the Serlag Tree. They returned to the monastery and she went up to the lama ...
>
> Her companions pointed out that the evening before she had failed to obtain the main part of the empowerment, but the lama intervened: "What the rest of you have received in merely the initiation of the ritual substances, but Machig has obtained the empowerment into the ultimate nature of reality!"24

Here, Machig's story illustrates what we have emphasized as the real meaning of an empowerment. People today go around collecting Tantric empowerments and believe this is spiritual cultivation. However, the number of empowerments, initiations or blessings one collects is certainly no measure of one's level of spiritual attainment, or level of skill on the path. A genuine empowerment, in effect, means to actually see into the nature of the mind. Otherwise it is just an outward symbol of the hope for spiritual progress. Milarepa instructed Gampopa according to the same instructions but so many people are misled about this today, and use the received empowerments as a sign of spiritual attainment, that we must constantly re-emphasize this point.

This is such an important topic that we need veer aside for a bit and recount the contemporary story of Namkhai Norbu. As he tells us in his own words, Namkhai Norbu had been trained as a traditional Tibetan monk and received all the necessary esoteric empowerments, but still did not know the real meaning of a Tantric initiation. As he recounts,

> When I went to my master Jyanqub Dorje I was educated up to the hilt in the intellectual sense. My mind was filled with everything I'd learned in the monastic colleges. I thought that to receive transmission of the teachings, elaborate ritual initiations [empowerments] were essential, and I asked Jyanqub Dorje to give me a certain initiation. I asked him every day for days and days, but he always refused. 'What's the use?', he'd say. 'You've already received so many of these initiations from your other masters; initiations like that are not the principle of the ... teachings. Transmission isn't only received in formal initiations.' But no matter what he said, I remained fixed on the kind of perfectly performed ritual initiations other masters had always given me. I wasn't satisfied with his replies, and I wanted him to put on a special hat, prepare a mandala, and pour a little water on my head, or something like that. That was what I really, sincerely wanted; but he always continued to refuse.
>
> Finally I insisted so much that he at last agreed. He promised that about two months later, on the day of Padmasambhava, the tenth day of the Tibetan lunar month, he would give me the initiation I wanted, the empowerment of Samantabhadra and the peaceful and wrathful divinities

of the Bardo. This initiation is actually not very complicated, and a master skilled in such things could have completed it very quickly. But Jyanqub Dorje had never received a formal education, and he was not used to giving initiations. When the long awaited day finally came, the initiation took him from about nine in the morning till midnight! To begin with, he had to prepare himself by performing a rite of self-initiation. This took him until mid-day to complete. Then he began the initiation for me. But firstly, not being formally educated, he couldn't read the text, and then on top of that I saw that he didn't know how to do all the ritual things he was supposed to do. He wasn't that kind of a master. So he had a disciple present as an assistant who was himself an expert teacher, and he prepared all the mandalas and ritual objects. Then the disciple began to read the text to tell the master what he had to do next. But when he read out that the master should do a certain mudra, or gesture, Jyanqub Dorje didn't know how to do it, so they had to stop while he learned it. Then there was a whole long invocation that was supposed to be chanted, invoking all the masters of the lineage, and while chanting it, the master is supposed to sound a bell and a damaru, or small drum. Someone who is used to rituals can perform all this very quickly, but Jyanqub Dorje wasn't used to such things, and the whole situation became outrageous, a complete farce. First of all he worked out with his assistant what was written in the notes to the text. 'Ah!', he said, 'It says here that you have to sound the bell!' So he took the bell, and for about five minutes all he did was sound it over and over again. Then he read that you have to sound the damaru. So he sounded the little drum over and over for about another five minutes. The he suddenly said: 'Oh, now I see! You have to sound the bell and damaru together!', so he did that. But by then he had forgotten what it was that he was supposed to chant, so he had to go through it all again with the help of the disciple who could read. Jyanqub Dorje himself hadn't had the kind of education that involves study, but was a practitioner who, through the development of his practice, had manifested wisdom and clarity, and was Thus, a master. So he stumbled through the initiation taking all day and a good deal of the evening to do it. By the time he had finished I was almost in a state of shock, as I knew very well how an initiation should be done, and it was nothing like this.

But by then it was nearly midnight, and we were all very hungry. We sang the Song of the Vajra together many times, a short, slow, anthemic chant that leads the practitioner into contemplation through integration with its actual sound, its syllabic structure ensuring deepening relaxed breathing. This is characteristic of the way Zogqen works with ritual. Then we recited a short Gana Puja offering, and ate. After the meal the master gave me a real explanation of the true meaning of initiation and transmission and I realized that despite all the formal initiations I had received, I had never understood or entered into the true meaning of them.25

This story is wonderful in revealing the skillful means of the master, and once again we find the same teaching in that receiving empowerments, without mastering their import, is useless for true cultivation practice. The important matter in spiritual practice, and the only measure of attainment, is the level of one's prajna transcendental wisdom, which is the measure of one's ability to understand the true nature of the mind.

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Another point we can note here is that Machig's means for pacifying the nagas was quite different from the means Yeshe Tsogyel used to banish the demons that attacked her. Rather than fight the nagas by engaging in some sort of supernatural battle, Machig made an offering of herself while demonstrating such a high level of samadhi that the nagas could do no harm, and therefore had to submit.

Machig Labdron is especially known for teaching this type of offering, which is also a means of cultivation for freeing oneself from the skandhas. Machig originated the "Chod" practice called "Cutting Through The Four Demons, A Practice To Cut Attachment To The Aggregates By Offering One's Flesh And Blood As Food (For The Demons)." This practice is based on the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* and is similar to the skeleton visualization technique in that it transforms form through the process of abandoning form, which is done by mentally offering the body to other sentient beings.

But form is not the only aggregate that can be transformed in this manner, for if you detach from any of the skandhas, you can free yourself from their influence and purify their nature. For instance, by detaching from emotions and feelings, you purify the feelings and emotions and can break through the skandha of sensation. This, in fact, is the path of prajna. Machig's method of cultivation therefore dispenses with the step-by-step transformational scheme used by the Taoist and Tantric schools by dropping everything at once, as does Zen, and thus directly cuts away to the ever-undisturbed Reality that remains.

Later as her practice advanced, the dakinis gave Machig many visions and messages that she should unite with an Indian guru, Thopa Bhadra, in the practice of sexual cultivation. The reason Machig was advised to do so is because the sexual cultivation of Tantra she was to follow, if done correctly, is a very quick means to change the four elements of the physical body. Machig's wisdom was growing and her physical nature was certainly transforming in response, but because of karma she was advised that this particular practice could help her change her physical nature more quickly.

Although normal practitioners cannot use this means because they lack the foundational basis that would make it effective, it is one of the quickest ways to transform the body for someone who has *already* achieved stable samadhi, and can enable qualified practitioners to achieve a genuine taste of the first dhyana of the Form Realm. You must already have successful attainments in *the skeleton visualization and pranayama practices* before you can even consider this type of dual practice, and you definitely cannot use this cultivation method unless you have the requisite merit and have already achieved a certain stage of accomplished practice.

In China and Tibet, a realized master who wanted to transform his body quickly would sometimes undertake the highest versions of this practice by secluding themselves in a tent with

human or celestial (Buddha or Dakini) consorts as partners while they were surrounded by monks reciting prayers for protection and success. The tantric union would typically last for several days, and if the participants were good enough in their sexual cultivation practice, the area might become surrounded by rainbows and colored lights, and the tent might even seem to disappear as a sort of magical illusion during the practice.

Therefore, a bluish-black dakini told Machig, "[Thopa] Bhadra is an emanation of Buddhakapala. Unite means and wisdom, and practice the path of Secret Mantra. As a result, your family lineage will increase, your teaching will spread far and wide, and you yourself will eventually reach the tenth bodhisattva level." Machig then journeyed to a house where she met this particular guru, who was also a guest there. Although they initially did not talk together very much,

> ... on the evening of her seventeenth day there, on the eighth day of the lunar month, Bhadra and Labdron entered the meditative absorption of skillful means and wisdom. Light pervaded the entire house and the benefactress [of the house] Lhamo Dron, fearing that the butter lamps had set the house ablaze, ran up to have a look. All she saw was a five-colored light, similar to a rainbow, which pervaded the entire house and within this, all ablaze, were two moons in union, one white, one red. Apart from this she didn't see anyone, and frightened by it, she left the roof-top chapel and went back down to sleep.26

The only reason we are talking about this particular practice is to put it into perspective, for most people mistakenly believe it, too, is a path to Tao, whereas in actuality the highest one can attain from this practice is the samadhi which reaches the top of the Desire Realm heavens or perhaps just into the Form Realm. In cultivation, this is a good first attainment, but you must be able to master the various samadhi corresponding to the Realms of Form and Formlessness as well! Nevertheless, because the aggregate of form is greatly connected to the Realm of Desire, sexual cultivation (the "left-hand" Tao school) presents a genuine means for transforming the body's chi channels and mai. You have to think of this practice technique, if done correctly with the correct type of partner, as simply a means for quickly transforming the four elements of the physical body.

While this is a very abbreviated summary of a practitioner's path when compared to our previous extensive case studies, a full rendering of Machig's life can be found in other books and need not be recounted her. Because of her achievements in cultivating the path of wisdom, she was able help many people in their cultivation by introducing a new Mahamudra tradition into Tibet.

Though Machig was also a knowledge holder of the esoteric instructions on chi, kundalini, chakras, and channels like Milarepa, Tsogyel and Gampopa, her main route of cultivation was based on the wisdom route to Tao, the direct cultivation of the mind. This is why she, as well as the Zen patriarchs of China, did not undergo so many of the ascetic extremes of the others and yet still achieved enlightenment.

Machig's case therefore offers several interesting aspects for study as there is little in terms of kung-fu descriptions, and yet much in terms of the ranks of spiritual attainment. It is unfortunate that she is not better known to serve as a role model for others, for despite the number of people she helped liberate due to her Perfection of Wisdom teachings, she is not accorded as much recognition as she deserves, perhaps because of her gender. She is as yet the only female Tibetan adept to have had her teachings transmitted to India, and in addition to her sixteen main disciples, she transmitted her teachings to over 1,200 people.

The stories of our four Tibetan practitioners were drawn from:

Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel
Keith Dowman
Arkana Books, London, 1989.

The Life of Milarepa
Trans. by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa
Arkana Books, New York, 1992.

The Life of Gampopa: The Incomparable Dharama Lord of Tibet
Jampa Mackenzie Stewart
Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca: New York, 1995.

Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod
Jerome Edou
Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca: New York, 1996.

For the cultivation stories of other Tibetan practitioners in Milarepa's lineage that may prove of interest, please see:

The Life of the Mahasiddha Tilopa
Trans. by Fabrizio Torricelli and Acharya Sangye T. Naga
Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala: India, 1995.

The Life and Teaching of Naropa
Herbert Guenther
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1986.

The Life of Marpa the Translator
Tsang Nyon Heruka
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1986.

Masters of Mahamudra
Keith Dowman
SUNY Press, New York, 1985.

Two other books which will prove useful in understanding these matters include:

The Lotus-Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava
Trans. by Erik Pema Kunsang
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1993.

Dakini Teachings: Padmasambhava's Oral Instructions to Lady Tsogyal
Trans. by Erik Pema Kunsang
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1990.

Two other recent translations of Yeshe Tsogyel's story include:

Lady of the Lotus-Born: The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyel
Trans. by The Padmakara Translation Group
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1999.

Mother of Knowledge: The Enlightenment of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal
Trans. by Tarthang Tulku
Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, 1983.

Some other texts related to our main practitioners include:

The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa
Trans. by Garma C.C. Chang
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1999.

The Instructions of Gampopa: A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path
Trans. by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche
Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca: New York, 1996.

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1 Keith Dowman, *Sky Dancer* (Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca: NY, 1996), pp. 69-70.

2 *Sky Dancer*, pp. 70-74.

3 *Sky Dancer*, pp. 74-78.

4 *Masters of Meditation and Miracles*, p. 140-141.

5 *Sky Dancer*, pp. 78-80.

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7 *Sky Dancer*, pp. 84-85.

8 *Sky Dancer*, pp. 85-86.

9 *The Life of Milarepa*, Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, trans. (Arkana Books, New York, 1992), p. 117.

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13 Jampa Mackenzie Stewart, *The Life of Gampopa* (Snow Lion, Ithaca: NY, 1995), p. 51.

14 *The Life of Gampopa*, pp. 54-55.

15 Lu K'uan Yu, *Ch'an and Zen Teaching: Third Series* (Rider and Company, London, 1976), pp. 180-181.

16 *The Life of Gampopa*, p. 56.

17 *The Life of Gampopa*, pp. 56-57.

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20 *The Life of Gampopa*, pp. 59.

21 *The Life of Gampopa*, pp. 73-74.

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23 *The Life of Gampopa*, pp. 83.

24 Jerome Edou, *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod* (Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca: NY, 1996), pp. 132-135.

25 Namkhai Norbu, *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen* (Arkana, London, 1986), pp. 15-19.

26 *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod*, pp. 143-144.

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Chapter 8: Kundalini Yoga, the Four Stages of Intensified Practice, and the Five Overall Phases of the Spiritual Path

With enough material and cases finally behind us, we can now begin to better investigate the genuine method of kundalini cultivation and its attendant kung-fu, which has been amply illustrated through the biographies of our four Tibetan practitioners.

Kundalini plays an important role in both the Indian yoga and Tibetan schools of cultivation because it is a method of cultivating the physical body's pre-natal chi and energy meridians. After you accomplish this, you can definitely attain samadhi. After the physical body is fully transformed through cultivation, and if you sufficiently cultivate samadhi, you may even be able to obtain the Reward body (Enjoyment body or sambhogakaya) mentioned in Buddhism. Thus, cultivating kundalini is one of the practices for helping to transform the body and achieve the sambhogakaya.

Our coarse physical body, which we use in cultivation, is also a reward body since it is a karmic body, but it is a painful body of very low caliber rather than the type of "enjoyment" body we call the sambhogakaya. If you accumulated lots of good merit previously, then your physical body will be in good condition. Otherwise it will be in bad shape and will easily fall subject to illness and disease. Of course you can cultivate your physical body and turn it into a healthier vehicle, or even a physical enjoyment body that can experience the blisses of the dhyana, but this type of kung-fu still does not rank as the sambhogakaya Reward body. Nevertheless, since in cultivation you have to purify your physical body, we say that you must "create a new body" or "generate a new life."

We use this terminology because in spiritual cultivation you must work to reactivate the full functioning of your pre-natal vitality. Part of this "new life" refers to purifying your coarse physical body along with its esoteric chi structures, and another part refers to giving birth to the thought born body, and the sambhogakaya later on. But how do you bring about all these transformations? By initially cultivating the wind, water and then fire elements of your body, which means cultivating the chi, jing and mai, and then kundalini attainments. How do you, in turn, cultivate kundalini? As we know by now, it is done by first cultivating your chi and mai, and then reaching a point of breath cessation called hsi. That is when the dormant kundalini energy will become activated.

In Chinese culture there are various alternative names for kundalini, which the Tibetan Esoteric school often refers to as the tumo (or tummo) fire or "Fierce woman." Hinduism calls it "shakti," or spiritual force, and in the Sufi tradition it is called "the fire of separation." In Christianity it is called the divine fire, spiritual love, or "*incendium amoris*." All the world's cultures recognize

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this same phenomenon although they commonly use different terms to denote it. In fact, the Chinese Tao school has its own four technical terms for kundalini, which include:

- *zhuo huo* (clumsy fire or stupid fire),
- *ling neng* (spirit energy),
- *ling li* (spirit power), and
- *ling she* (spirit snake).

The most popular Chinese term for the kundalini energy is *zhuo huo*, meaning clumsy or stupid fire, which first came into use during China's Yuan dynasty. However, this term only became especially prevalent during China's later Qing dynasty. Thus, it is the preferred Chinese term for kundalini today and refers to the fact that kundalini lies dormant in the region of our tan-tien. Its dormancy is like a "stupid" man sitting motionless on the ground and unable to do anything. This is why the Hindus refer to it as a sleeping snake that is curled up in a coil, waiting to be awoken.

Although it is "covered" so that we do not normally perceive it, the kundalini force is something that has been actively present in us since our life began. It has always been there even though we do not normally recognize its presence. "Kundalini cultivation" attempts to reactivate this prenatal life force, as in how we would strike a match to ignite a fire, but this is only a first cultivation step out of the many steps necessary for completing the full cultivation cycle necessary for any type of genuine attainment. Furthermore, as with the sexual cultivation practices, kundalini cultivation can only take you as far as the top of the Desire Realm heavens. It is just a low level transitory phase on the spiritual path, and not a particularly important phenomenon in itself.

In India, kundalini is represented by the symbol of a serpent curled up three-and-a-half times; however, the Chinese use a different symbology altogether. In Northern Taoism, we have the Xuan-wu God, who is a warrior with great martial arts skills. This warrior has two generals, a turtle general and snake general. We usually see this turtle and snake together in sexual union, and this is another vivid Taoist symbol for the kundalini phenomenon.

Another Chinese symbol for kundalini is that of a man fishing with a coin on a string, with the coin being clenched in the mouth of a three-legged toad. The toad is used as a symbol because the kundalini energy is initiated from our perineum, which is located below our genitalia. The ugly toad represents a man's genitalia, and the toad only has three legs because they represent the triumvirate of jing, chi and shen essences that are cultivated during spiritual progress.

Since you must accumulate and store these three essences rather than lose them through leakage, they represent an "investment" in spiritual development, which is why we have the coin in the toad's mouth. This is a very wise symbol because it shows that jing, chi and shen represent the real wealth of all spiritual practitioners. If you accumulate these three substances, then the body's

real chi (kundalini) can awaken and ascend the body's energy channels, which are represented by the fishing line.

To be complete, we must remember that there is also a famous Tao school quote on kundalini that has escaped the attention of most individuals: "Pre-heaven chi arises from emptiness." This is a very direct statement about kundalini and its cultivation, yet most practitioners do not realize that the Chinese Tao school is talking about the kundalini phenomenon.

When Taoists talk about the initiation of kundalini, they usually talk about the state of hsi wherein the external breathing ceases and the internal (pre-natal, or "embryo") breathing within the body becomes activated and starts to function. That is the state when the tan-tien will get warm, bliss will start to be felt in every cell of the body, and the physical body will feel warm, alive and activated all over. This warmth and bliss, rather than the heat in the tan-tien, is the real blissful kundalini phenomenon felt in the entire body. It is not a hot phenomenon, but is actually a state of blissful warmth. Any painful heat felt near this stage of cultivation is a sort of frictional response to the initial arising of chi rather than the peaceful warmth of the kundalini bliss.

We are emphasizing these Chinese Tao school representations of kundalini to help change the common notions today that kundalini is only known to the Indian and Tibetan cultivation schools, is a high-stage phenomena, and that it is only aroused through yoga and esoteric practices. If you practice Zen, you will certainly experience this phenomenon as well, although the Zen school ignores this sort of thing including most other phenomenal stages of the path. Unfortunately, the people of today have become so enamored of the phenomenon that they have lost this proper perspective on the matter.

Kundalini is simply a nondenominational stage of the spiritual path, and Hence, all the genuine spiritual cultivation schools tend to mention it in some form or another. If you look at medieval European prints of alchemy, you will also find this phenomenon clearly depicted, and as to how it appears in your own religion, that's for you to find out. In terms of what it denotes regarding a practitioner's overall level of spiritual cultivation achievement, you must realize that it is only a very minor stage of the cultivation path that we can place in the category of initiatory practices. It is not the actual stage of true cultivation practice, for it only belongs to what is called the cultivation Stage of Preparatory Practices.

On the road of spiritual cultivation, people who wish to practice the method of cultivating the tumo heat (kundalini) as a helpmate for spiritual attainment must first start on their practice by accumulating merit and wisdom. Hence, the first or foundational stage of the overall cultivation trail is accordingly called the "Stage of Merit Accumulation and Study." Only if your foundation of virtue, discipline and merit is good enough can you then progress to the next stage of spiritual development and actually start to make some cultivation advancement. One of the requirements for making this advancement, such as experiencing the kundalini, is practicing the discipline of

sexual restraint.

The stage of cultivation practice, which follows the Stage of Accumulation, is properly called the "Stage of Preparation," and is broken into four intensified practice stages called *prayoga*. This Path or Stage of Preparation is also called *prayogamarga*, the Stage of Prayoga, the Stage of Preparatory Practices, the Path of Yoga, Path of Earnest Endeavors, Stage of Intensified Practices, and so on. It is the actual stage of intensified cultivation practice wherein a practitioner really devotes himself or herself to going after the samadhi and wisdom attainments required on the spiritual path.

After perfecting the four intensified practices belonging to this Stage of Practicing Preparatory Yoga Techniques, a practitioner might then have enough wisdom, merit and kung-fu to finally "see the Tao," which is the point of all the preparatory yoga practices in the first place. Their intent is to help you attain samadhi and wisdom, from which you might one day reach the point where you can realize your true mind and then understand what cultivation really entails. You might be able to see the Tao if you first become proficient in the samadhi and with prajna wisdom, so this is what you cultivate during the Stage of Preparatory Practices. The whole point of this stage is to go beyond the lukewarm yearnings exhibited by most spiritual practitioners, and actually delve into the intensified practices that will produce a spiritual adept.

Thus, the proper sequence of the cultivation path, if we are to abbreviate it to its essentials, is to first accumulate merit and virtue, and then engage in all sorts of advanced meditative practices that cultivate the chi, mai, kundalini and samadhi in preparation for an awakening. If you are successful in your spiritual efforts, then one day you might awaken to the third stage of practice, which is called the Stage of "seeing the Tao," and this corresponds to breaking through the skandha of conception. It also corresponds to the stage of "transforming shen into emptiness" in the Tao school, and "seeing the clear light" as mentioned in Tantric Buddhism. If you can see the Tao, then you can finally start to really cultivate practice towards complete self-realization. Up to that point, however, all your meditation work can just be considered preparation for this realization. It is only a preparatory effort whose job is to make this awakening possible.

This sequence is standard in all cultivation schools including Zen, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, for only after you "see Tao" or "see truth" can you understand how to properly practice on the road of spiritual cultivation. This is when the Stage of True Cultivation Practice can then begin. You can read and hear about all sorts of spiritual instructions and even understand the meaning of the words, but unless you can match your intellectual comprehension with a direct transcendental experience of the matter, so that everything "clicks" because the true meaning of the words materializes in a direct experiential understanding, you will only have an intellectual understanding of the spiritual trail, and nothing in terms of any genuine spiritual attainment. Hence, it is only after you understand the path from the standpoint of personal experiential insight that you can really start engaging in genuine cultivation practice. That is why

the Fifth Zen Patriarch said, "Before you see your original nature, you can get no real benefit from cultivation."

Before you "see the path" or "see truth," you can cultivate all you want but in some sense it is as if your efforts do not count. Of course, they lay the foundation for your realization, earn you rebirth in a higher spiritual realm, give you superpowers and transform your physical body, but this ultimately means little unless you succeed in seeing the Tao and realizing your true nature. Various kung-fu experiences may manifest in your practice during this time, and of course you are accumulating great treasures of merit, but until you "see the path," you will always lack the correct view to make your efforts really effective, no matter how intellectually brilliant you may be.

Without experientially seeing the path and realizing the true nature of the mind—which we call seeing the Truth, seeing Tao, reaching the stage of nonego and selflessness, or realizing the clear light—cultivation practice is really only planting good seeds that might result in the potential of spiritual realization in the future. This is why you must do many good deeds and accumulate as much merit as possible on the spiritual path; otherwise, you will not have enough merit to see the Truth (true mind) as a consummation of your efforts.

Only after you realize the Tao through prajna wisdom and know the true nature of the mind will you then know how to guide yourself and all your future cultivation practice efforts in the Stage of True Cultivation Practice. Unfortunately, many people can cultivate for decades without seeing the path, which explains their ultimate lack of cultivation accomplishment. Sometimes their failure is not due to a lack of effort, but because their merit and prajna wisdom are insufficient.

This, then, is the normal sequence of cultivation practice: to first accumulate wisdom and merit, to next engage in the four practices of prayoga that culminate in enabling you to see the path, and then upon successfully "realizing the Tao," you become empowered to correctly cultivating towards full realization. This is the stage where we say you are truly "cultivating." This sequence is thus called the Stage of Wisdom and Merit Accumulation, the Stage of Advanced Preparatory Practices, the Stage of Seeing the Tao, and then the Stage of True Cultivation Practice. If you can really perfect yourself, and purify the skandha of volitional impulse in the Stage of Cultivation Practice, then you might one day fully consummate the path by realizing the final Stage of Buddhahood, or Complete and Perfect Enlightenment. Hence these are the five Mahayana stages of overall cultivation practice.

In Tibetan Buddhism, this whole sequence—starting from one's early academic training as a monk novice—takes roughly twenty to thirty years to accomplish, and sometimes much longer. However, not everyone will require this amount of time or follow this exact route of cultivation. In fact, the course is actually much harder than described for some people when they do not

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practice correctly, and easier for those who concentrate on wisdom cultivation to reach the stage of seeing the Tao.

Many past spiritual masters had achieved a variety of samadhi attainments, but that in itself did not mean they had awakened to truth and realized the Tao. Nearly all who train on the road of spirituality, when they lack genuine prajna wisdom, merely attain samadhi or inert emptiness-clarity achievements, if anything at all. This is usually because they emphasize form attainments too much, and fail to fully bring forth the direct perception road of prajna wisdom. This is also what makes Buddhism special among all the religions and philosophies of the world, for Buddhism does not just settle with cultivating samadhi, but uses samadhi as the means to cultivating prajna wisdom. Samadhi alone cannot eliminate ignorance, or free you from disturbing emotions permanently. To do that, and ultimately fathom Reality, you need to cultivate prajna wisdom.

Revisiting the Steps of Transformation

When we are noticing the changes that occur in our physical bodies as we pass through these overall sequences of cultivation practice, we know that we will experience transformations in our chi and mai (the energy meridians), and then our kundalini energies. These, in turn, correspond to the wind, water and fire elements of our physical nature. After these elements are transformed, meditators can then access some degree of emptiness that will bring about significant transformations within the earth element of the entire body, and then the space element.

Hence, the reason people typically focus on cultivating the five elements according to this particular sequence when on the spiritual trail, and the reasons kung-fu manifestations most readily transpire according to this sequence, is because the wind element of the body is the easiest to transform, the water element is the next hardest to transform, transforming the fire constitutes a greater difficulty, and the earth element of the physical nature is even harder to purify. The most difficult element to transform of all is the space element of the physical nature, which takes well over a decade before you can really start to substantially affect it through your cultivation efforts. This particular element corresponds to the “all-pervading chi” of Tantra.

For someone who sees the path and then continues to devote himself or herself to spiritual cultivation practice, the bones of the body (the earth element) reach their initial stages of transformation after about a half-dozen years of concentrated cultivation practice. In actual fact, however, it takes at least double this time (twelve years minimum) for this transformation to attain a solid foundation, as that is how long it takes to transform the entire body.

To be perfectly honest, it takes several decades of repeating this transformative cycle over and over again, at ever higher and more refined levels, until we can say that the bones and the rest of the body are completely transformed, so it is not easy to accomplish everything. This is why few

people ever succeed in achieving the sambhogakaya Reward Body, for success in all aspects of cultivation takes a lot of time and effort, as well as wisdom regarding the correct means of practice. Arousing the kundalini energies is just one of the rudimentary signposts on the path indicating that you have cultivated your chi and mai, and are beginning to work towards cultivating the body's fire element.

The important questions relating to kundalini are twofold: (1) what is the intended purpose behind initiating the kundalini phenomenon, and (2) what is the result you should expect? Today, people talk about cultivating the chi, the meridians, kundalini, chakras, breathing methods and even sexual yoga on a very casual basis. They act as if they actually understand all the relationships between the chi, mai, kundalini, and the states of mental joy or physical bliss found in the lower stages of dhyana, whereas in fact, they know nothing of these things. And as people run after these phenomena because they heard a little of their description and know a bit of the proper vocabulary, they keep getting further away from genuine spiritual practice and the real cultivation mind dharma. Esoteric Buddhism, Taoism, and Indian yoga are spreading further and further in the West so that you can hear the terms kundalini, chi, chakras and samadhi spoken everywhere, but who has actually achieved them? Practically no one! So they cannot tell you reliable answers to these questions.

There are three requirements for truly understanding the kundalini phenomena. You should:

(1) know the proper theory and stages of the practice,
(2) be able to practice correctly, and
(3) achieve the authentic, relevant cultivation kung-fu.

In our original twelve cases from the book, *The Kundalini Experience*, we unfortunately could not find a single example of the genuine kundalini phenomena. However, in the cases of our outstanding Tibetan cultivators, we found the phenomenon as it truly exists, and even then the stories of Tsogyel and Milarepa show that a practitioner does not have any easy time in being able to initiate the "clumsy fire."

Most ordinary practitioners, because they do not work very hard with their spiritual efforts, or *because they lack an understanding of the correct cultivation principles,* will only encounter the phenomenon of chi in their cultivation, and for most people it will only be "wind chi" at that! Because they cannot retain their jing, or maintain their cultivation efforts such that their jing transforms into chi, they will not progress enough to touch upon the real chi phenomenon, and of course they will not progress to the stage of truly cultivating the mai, as we saw with Gampopa. What they therefore attain in terms of samadhi will only amount to resemblance dharma. These states closely resemble true cultivation stages, and produce signs of kung-fu such as small superpowers and psychic abilities, but they are not the real thing.

As we have often said, Esoteric Buddhism is one school which pays particular attention to cultivating the chi, the mai (energy meridians) and the tumo fire of kundalini. However, even in this school there are many practitioners who erroneously believe that once you initiate the kundalini fire, you will attain the Tao or at least be half-way there. But from what you have already learned, you can see that this is a grossly mistaken notion because cultivating the kundalini is still only cultivating the lowest skandha of form, and there are five skandhas to be cultivated in entirety! Furthermore, it might help you gain samadhi, but there are all sorts of samadhi attainments, and attaining one does not mean that you will attain the Tao and see your fundamental nature.

In short,

> Cultivating kundalini is just *a convenient means* of cultivation practice. It is just a minor method of prayoga and not the real heart of the dharma.

To successfully cultivate the kundalini is still far away from the goal of being able to see your true nature and become a Buddha because you still have to purify the skandhas of consciousness, volition, sensation, and conception. However, if a person actually breaks through their attachment to all these other skandha barriers and succeeds in enlightenment, then they should have achieved the kundalini attainment for sure.

Thus, we cannot say that the kundalini phenomenon is an undesirable goal of spiritual cultivation or even a by-path of the genuine route. It just happens, and is meant to arise due to the structure of our physical nature. Thus the important thing is the matter of focus, or matter of emphasis. What is correct? *The correct emphasis is to practice for enlightenment rather than to practice for the phenomenon of kundalini, and then the tumo fire will arise naturally*. That is the proper mindset for all spiritual practice rather than shooting for various states of kung-fu and form realm attainments.

Kundalini is one natural, physical phenomenon out of the many which will manifest on the cultivation trail. If a person achieves Tao they will have achieved the kundalini phenomena already, but if they do not have the kundalini level of attainment, it means they still have to do more practice to achieve something with their chi and mai.

To make matters clearer, we should recognize that Orthodox Buddhism contains several thousand volumes of writings. In all these writings, the topics of kundalini and chi mai cultivation are not emphasized at all. In fact, kundalini is only referred to as the fire element of the body because it corresponds to such a low stage of spiritual cultivation. Since it is not mentioned too

explicitly, some people mistakenly think it is not in this literature at all. Of course this is a misunderstanding often made by individuals who become fixated on the literal meaning of words without looking for the meaning behind them.

Master Tung-shan called this problem the "leakage of words," because people roll around in texts fixating on words rather than looking for their intended meaning. They focus on the finger pointing to the moon instead of the moon itself. If you fall into this trap and believe only in something if it is "written in the Bible," how will you ever be able to master the adaptive use of methods for cultivating practice, and to thereby realize the fruit of enlightenment? Such fixity, literal-mindedness, and lack of skillful means are insanity indeed. What people overlook is that kundalini practice and chi mai cultivation are all within the domain of the four intensified practices of prayoga, as mentioned in the *Surangama Sutra* of orthodox Buddhist literature, and this is where they are to be found in the orthodox Buddhist literature.

Shakyamuni was familiar with all the cultivation practices of his day, and there is no way that the kundalini phenomenon could be missed because this basic stage of kung-fu occurs for genuine spiritual practitioners regardless of their sect or religion. It naturally falls out from any genuine practice of cultivating the spiritual path. However, Shakyamuni very much disliked stressing the physical transformations of the body since true cultivation practice is always centered on the mind, and people who stress the physical characteristic of things typically end up aiming for physical attainments and leaving the true mind path entirely. Shakyamuni therefore emphasized the skandhas, eight realms of consciousness, and various ranks of samadhi for delineating the spiritual path rather than concentrate on such a minor phenomenon, and the Tao school adopted this same route of nonemphasis. Kundalini is such a minor component of the path that Shakyamuni Buddha told us it was part of the rudimentary stages of the prayoga intensified meditation practices.

If you read the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* or Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, you will also find very little actual emphasis on the kundalini phenomena. Rather, the emphasis is placed on samadhi instead, because this is the successful end result or objective of kundalini arousal. In talking of cultivation, Shakyamuni (who had undergone six years of ascetic practices, knew martial arts, and all sorts of yoga exercises as well) was very wise and always stressed the mind rather than the physical body. But the Esoteric school takes a different approach, and that is where all the trouble arises.

As a historical summary, while Buddhism was on its last legs in India it was also being actively introduced into Tibet, and from the Tibet of today, Buddhism is now reaching the rest of the world through the teachings of the Esoteric school. This influence of the Tantric Esoteric school, combined with the popularity of Indian yoga teachings and the popular biographies of masters who tasted a little of the kundalini phenomenon, are what have caused this topic to become so popular even though it represents such a minor stage in cultivation. Everyone now seems to know the word "kundalini" when it comes to spiritual matters, but lacking a complete

understanding of the cultivation trail, no one can place the phenomenon into the proper perspective.

From the point of view of the cultural development of humanity, we can say that the Esoteric Buddhism we now find in Tibet was colored by the influences of Indian yoga and Chinese Taoism in its development. Furthermore, we can also say that the cultivation schools of Indian yoga and Taoism were influenced by each other. These schools together reveal the full theory of kundalini yoga; likewise the full teachings on this topic must be sought through a combination of Indian yoga, Chinese Taoism, Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, and Orthodox Buddhist prayoga.

To restrict one's investigation of kundalini to the various schools of Indian cultivation or Tibetan Tantra, as is done today, is therefore quite misleading. To really understand this stage of cultivation attainment, you must access the relevant teachings from a variety of schools and see what they each have to offer. This is something you have to do with all important topics of spiritual cultivation. Unfortunately, the teachings which were available from Medieval European alchemy and the Persian cultivation traditions are no longer readily available, so we will have to restrict ourselves to the major Eastern schools and their findings.

The Four Intensified or Evolutionary Yoga Practices called Prayoga

We have continually said that cultivating the kundalini phenomena, as well as the chi and mai, falls within the province of the four intensified practices of prayoga. It is one of the four stages of the Stage of "Earnest (cultivation) Yoga Endeavor." However, we have still not made clear what the four prayoga practice stages within the Path of Preparation entail, so here is the answer. In the broadest sense they refer to the extra endeavor involved in cultivating for spiritual attainment. They specify the progressive, or additional intensified practices of the spiritual path you must undertake in order to make genuine spiritual progress past the stage of a beginner, and prepare yourself for finally being able to see the Tao. They are the various yoga stages you must cultivate in order to generate samadhi, access prajna wisdom, purify your body, stabilize your kung-fu, and prepare yourself for the actuality of realizing the Tao.

In short, you undertake these preparatory practices as "preparation" for seeing the Tao. They help prepare you, as practice stations, for ultimately seeing the Tao and then recognizing the true cultivation path. How? By helping you achieve various stages of samadhi and through which your prajna wisdom can grow, for it is prajna that can lead to an awakening. Without undertaking these advanced meditative preparatory practices—which go far beyond simply attending religious services or studying holy scriptures—you will not be able to complete these achievements at all, and certainly will not be able to attain even a small stage of genuine spiritual attainment. In fact, since the majority of people in the world never undertake these preparatory practices, *this is why they never attain anything substantial in terms of the overall realms of spiritual progress*, and this answers the question as to why very few people ever become saints or sages. It is not that

they are "selected by God" or gifted with grace. Rather, they simply fail to make the necessary meditative efforts that would win them these levels of spiritual attainment.

The four practice stages of prayoga can therefore be compared to a factory owner who has a large number of high quality materials sitting on his assembly floor, and all he has to do is add some effort to process the materials around him. He knows what to do in terms of the work of spiritual practice, and now he has to set himself to assembling all the materials and putting them to good usage. He has only to put all the pieces together to get what he wants, just like you who must cultivate according to the process we have laid out.

In other words, you can produce a finished product—which means reaching a definite state of spiritual attainment—when you *add some intensified effort* (hence, the term "intensified practices") to your cultivation practice, just like the factory owner can assemble raw materials according to a fixed process and produce a final result. Everything is available, so all you have to do is put in the required effort to make things happen, and then you will get a response. This work is basically intensified meditation, and thus advanced meditation practices with their results constitute the Stage of Preparatory Practices.

Hence, you have your physical body, an alert mind, knowledge of a variety of cultivation methods available, and the merit and wisdom to now know what you need to do on the path of spiritual cultivation. However, even though everything is potentially available, all this information is meaningless unless you subject yourself to the actual process of spiritual cultivation and engage in some meditation work. Rather than sit idle, you must devote some time and energy to the actual effort of cultivation practice. Then, like an assembly line that has been turned on, you will make spiritual progress and attain some cultivation results.

What are the proper things to practice? You must apply yourself to the four additional practices of prayoga that prepare you for the true cultivation path. This is why the prayoga practices are also called the preliminary Stage of Preparation, Stage of Preparatory (Evolutionary) Yoga, or Stage of Intensified Efforts

This Stage of Preparation is typically broken into four stages, which are the prayoga:

(1) the stage of warming, or heat
(2) the stage of the peak, or summit
(3) the stage of forbearance, or patience
(4) the stage of highest worldly dharma, or supreme mundane qualities

The meaning of the "warming" stage in cultivation, in terms of virtue and morality, is that you should transform all your bad thoughts into virtuous ones, and then transform these into purity. If you heat something you can soften it, so the warming stage refers to working on your personality

and behavior to make them malleable to the process of cultivation.

The "peak" stage of cultivation refers to reaching a very high level of mental purity and quietness, an experience similar to standing on the summit of a mountain and sensing a tremendous emptiness all around you.

The "forbearance" stage means stability or endurance, and refers to being able to cut off all the thoughts arising in your mind so that you can empty everything which comes to you, and peacefully remain in that state for awhile. This entails the idea of being able to go in and out of a state of kung-fu at will, so it has to do with your state of prajna wisdom.

Finally, the highest stage in the world, or stage of "supreme worldly dharma," refers to a stage of accomplishment totally beyond normal worldly phenomena. It means becoming the best kind of human being you can possibly be, and reaching the best level possible for any sort of attainment, because of having previously cultivated your prajna wisdom and samadhi to their maximum. In spiritual cultivation you practice a certain stage of attainment, gain proficiency at that stage, and then master it to its fullest extent so you can go in and out of it at will. Since at that stage you still have not yet "seen the Tao" and reached the absolute transcendental, any accomplishment just under this is ranked as the highest stage of worldly dharma.

The Stage of Warming

When discussing these four stages of cultivation, people typically say that the warming phase just refers to psychological principles such as getting rid of afflictive emotions, and so they usually explain this stage only in terms of virtue and moral provisioning. We sometimes hear that it means four things:

(1) doing any good not currently being done
(2) supporting all acts of goodness that have already appeared
(3) preventing evil acts by not allowing them to arise
(4) cutting off any instances of evil already arisen

People also say that the stage of warming refers to an increase in energy due to establishing practices of virtue, discipline and no-leakage, which means that your resources are now directed toward the positive rather than wasted on the negative. We cannot say these explanations are wrong, but they are not the complete picture because the stage of warming is accompanied by physiological characteristics as well.

Not many people can attain the physical stage of warming when practicing sitting meditation. From a physical point of view, the four elements of the physical body should always be in a state of warmth, and they should always be transforming to a higher degree of purity. Hence, bodily

warmth will definitely include the aspect of kundalini since kundalini represents the warmth element of life, and during kundalini cultivation the physical body will become purified and transformed as warmth is apt to do. However, the real reason this stage is called warming or heat is because it denotes that the fire of wisdom, which can "see the path of truth," will soon arise.

Just as two sticks rubbed together will give birth to fire, a cultivation practitioner at the stage of warming will start to gain some insight into what it means to cultivate, of what it means to cultivate the true nature of the mind. At this stage they will be hot on the trail of "seeing the path" because they will finally realize that the path means changing mental behavior. With this sort of understanding, the "fire of wisdom" will have begun to manifest itself, and so that is another reason we use this term "warming" or "heat" for this initial stage of more advanced cultivation practice.

This initial progress in spiritual realization, when accompanied by a degree of cultivation attainment, will actually bring about instances of physical warming in your body. For example, when you experience an instant of realization where you actually "see" something, it is not unusual for your whole body to experience a flash or warmth or even break out in a hot sweat, which is an example of the type of wisdom opening referred to by the stage of warming.

As to the esoteric phenomenological teachings, cultivating the chi, mai and kundalini are not very advanced activities because they are no more than this first intensified practice stage of warming. You must indeed cultivate your chi and mai and shakti on the cultivation trail, but this corresponds to only the first of the four intensified stages of practice, and it is not even an advanced stage of true cultivation practice.

The Stage of the Peak

As to the peak, or summit, stage of cultivation practice, when the chakra at the top of the head opens you will be in union with the whole universe because you will be able to connect with the whole cosmos and its universal energy. In this stage, life and death will be somewhat in your hands because you can come and go at will. Until you reach the peak when your crown chakra opens, however, you cannot generate the various blisses of the four dhyana because this entails your chi energies rising to the brain and opening up all the chi routes in this region. Thus, it is a profound accomplishment, but it still is not the stage of seeing the Tao.

As with the stage of warming, the peak cultivation stage has an actual physical correspondence, which is the phenomenon we have just mentioned. Because of what is happening, it is not unusual for various superpowers to develop at this stage of spiritual practice. But that is not the important thing because the stage of the summit also refers to a psychological aspect of cultivation in that the virtuous roots you have planted will reach a peak, after which they will no longer decrease or be lost. Thus, we say that in the stage of the peak, your "roots of goodness

will not be disturbed by misguided views."

In other words, this stage of intensified effort means that your cultivation efforts will have matured. They are not perfectly stable yet, but at this stage you will finally be achieving some level of samadhi attainment. In the intensified yoga practice stage of the peak, you will therefore definitely have achieved some vision or perspective of emptiness; your personality and behavior will definitely have transformed to the extent that now you have achieved some experience of emptiness, but that view is not perfectly stable. Before you were getting warm to this sort of attainment, and now you have got it, but your mastery is not yet stable.

We know by now that spiritual cultivation is a science, and that progress on this road proceeds in standard steps of attainment. Successfully cultivating a certain level of attainment means that you have abandoned the faults which characterized a previous stage of attainment in order to rise from the lower to the next higher. Since such an abandonment cannot be done all at once by most people, we have a graduated spiritual path of partial attainment stages, and at this stage of practice development there are a total of four progressive stages of prayoga cultivation effort.

The first of these practices phases is the stage of the peak. The summit stage constitutes an evolution from the previous foundational stage of warming, and attaining it means you are closer to abandoning any cultivation obstacles rather than just suppressing the factors of pollution which might obstruct you in your spiritual practice. When you diminish the factors of obstruction by purifying them, your cultivation progress will come forth.

The Stage of Forbearance

As to the third stage in prayoga cultivation practice, called patience or forbearance, it corresponds to a greater factor of progress and stability in the ranks of spiritual attainment. Due to your previous practice efforts you could cut off random thoughts and discriminations to reach some realization of emptiness, and now you can maintain your kung-fu achievements (some stage of emptiness realization) so as to be able to readily go in and out of them at will with maximum flexibility. This represents a further spiritual progression over the stage of the peak, just as reaching the third dhyana represents progress over the first and second dhyana, and so we can say it refers to an even more advanced stage of emptiness cultivation.

Another way of describing the stage of stability, or forbearance, is to say that the meditator becomes familiar with some high stage of samadhi emptiness attainment, and by remaining with it patiently and steadfastly, overcomes any "nonmastery" he or she may have in regards to that stage. It is easy to understand how this stage of progress is acquired after the stage of the summit has been reached and you keep pursuing your practice of cultivation attainment. At this point you basically stay with your level of attainment and carefully nurture it so that you do not lose it. Hence, your samadhi will eventually become strong and firm.

The *Diamond Sutra* says that if your merit is not great enough, you will become afraid when you realize (see) emptiness for the first time. However, here you not only reach a certain experiential realm, but you maintain your realization in steadiness without fear, and through this patient forbearance you gradually overcome any difficulties or uncertainties as to this stage of attainment. That is why your samadhi can become firm and strong at this stage of practice attainment, and why this stage has much to do with your level of prajna wisdom.

The Stage of Highest Worldly Dharma

The fourth prayoga stage, called the highest worldly dharma, is even higher than the previous three stages of intensified practice efforts. Because it is the last level of the preparatory stages on the Path of Preparation, it refers to the highest stage of achievement possible on the Path of Preparation (or for any other particular level of practice in question) before actually awakening to the Tao. In other words, when you cultivate a certain kind of kung-fu and reach its highest degree of perfection possible—because your wisdom and stability achieve the maximum perfection possible for that particular level of achievement—this is the stage of the highest worldly dharma *for that stage of attainment*.

In terms of cultivation kung-fu, the highest worldly dharma naturally refers to a scenario quite apart from ordinary experiential realms because it is much more liberated. It is still an experiential realm or visaya, which is why it is called a dharma in the first place. It is called a "worldly dharma," however, because you still have not yet realized the Tao at this stage of practice attainment, and so your accomplishment still belongs to the worldly domains. From this perspective, even the lofty fourth dhyana samadhi attainment must only be considered the highest *worldly* dharma rather than the stage of seeing the Tao.

How to Grade Yoga Achievements with The Four Stages of Prayoga

Every type of phenomenal kung-fu has its own four stages of prayoga including the stage of highest worldly dharma, but the truest and highest meaning of this stage, before you enter the Stage of Seeing the Tao, actually refers to attaining something extraordinary. It refers to transforming the ordinary human consciousness into a profound state of wisdom. You will still live in the world at this level of attainment, but you have already reached the stage where you start to function beyond the world even though your physical body is still here. So you are still in the world when you reach this attainment level, but you have reached a profound stage of egolessness or I-amness. When you reach the true stage of highest worldly dharma, whatever previously represented an obstacle to seeing the path has now been greatly overcome, so you are now ready to "see the path" and start cultivating the Tao if you can turn your insight around to recognize your fundamental nature. Everything is ready, and you only need the right circumstances to come together.

When we talk about the stage of warming, we can say that the meditator's target of attaining a high samadhi realm is still far away, but you get closer and closer to this goal as you progress through the stages of the summit, patience and highest mundane (worldly) phenomenon. In these last two stages of intensified cultivation practice, we can say that the sense of duality one experiences during meditation becomes progressively more subtle until it is no longer ascertained, and you achieve a requisite realm of emptiness kung-fu realization. In other words, the samadhi you experience becomes particularly profound, and a state of true nonego is almost reached.

These four stages of practice *therefore refer to graduated realms of samadhi attainments*; most people gain proficiency in the various samadhi levels before they can finally awaken to the Tao, so the four stages of prayoga are all about ranking your proficiency in samadhi attainments.

The accomplishment of the first dhyana has its own set of four prayoga stages, attaining the full measure of the second dhyana can be broken into four prayoga stages, the path to mastering the third dhyana can be broken into these four stages, and so on. Every type of kung-fu—whether you are talking about cultivating the chi or mai and so forth—can be broken into having four stages, or phases, of prayoga attainment. And the progression of the first to fourth dhyana can be viewed in reference to this fourfold set of practice stages as well since the four dhyana can also be considered four stages of intensified cultivation practice efforts.

Thus, when we talk about the stages of prayoga, we are talking about actual levels of cultivation attainment on the path and the mastery of specific experiential realms (kung-fu). But we must remember that the stages of prayoga spiritual attainment correspond to what emptiness means from an experiential level rather than from a purely intellectual understanding reached through reading books or attending lectures. With proficiency in samadhi kung-fu, hopefully your prajna wisdom will grow so that you can finally turn around one day and "see the path." That's when you will truly understand the meaning of self-realization, and the road of cultivation.

To "turn around within" is to know who is the formless knower, and when you realize this in full flower, this is when you will know how you have to practice to actualize the true spiritual path. The highest worldly stage right before this, however, can be called the highest worldly dharma and we can say it roughly corresponds to the fourth dhyana of Buddhism. But do not get the idea that you have to cultivate the four dhyana to awaken to the Tao, for we are only discussing this topic from the viewpoint or perspective of a graduated path.

As the *Complete Enlightenment* or *Surangama Sutra* both tell us, by cultivating high prajna wisdom you can certainly awaken without any specific intercessory skandha or samadhi cultivation. However for most people this high type of cultivation is virtually impossible, so we are emphasizing the structure of the graduated path in order to make things clear. We are also elucidating upon the normal correspondences between the various cultivation schools of the

world in order to help you have some faith in the process.

As stated, you should not make the mistake of assuming that the four stages of prayoga are simply one-time events, for every level of cultivation, every level of samadhi and attainment contains the four stages of prayoga. They all start with a warming approach to the matter, and end in the attainment, or achievement, of the highest stage of that phenomenon in question. Thus, even the simple act of learning to ride a bicycle can be broken into the four stages of prayoga from getting warm to worldly accomplishment; every kung-fu phenomenon has the four stages of prayoga within it.

To talk of matters using this vocabulary will help a practitioner identify where they are within a certain level of practice attainment, because every stage of cultivation attainment can definitely be broken into these four stages. In fact, the *Lotus Sutra* goes even further to say that the various realms of concentration, liberation and the rest are not actually nirvana, but are all just various means of intensified practice! They are all means of prayoga and that's it. In other words, *they are all just exercises in skillful means*. If you really want to understand the four intensified practices of prayoga at an even deeper level than given here, you must turn to the writings of Fa-zun, who was a student of Master Tai-xu, and read his teachings on these matters.

Here is a particularly important and very relevant secret about Buddhist cultivation that most people miss: since the chi, mai, and kundalini cultivation practices all belong to the four stages of prayoga, this is the particular domain in which Esoteric and Orthodox Buddhism explicitly intersect. In general, we can say that the Esoteric school emphasizes cultivating form phenomena while the Orthodox school emphasizes cultivating mind, so the two schools do not always share the same vocabulary and cultivation protocols. Naturally the two schools are not fundamentally at odds with one another, and must indeed interconnect in their practices at some point. This is one such area of intersection, since the stages of prayoga involve both esoteric physical cultivation and orthodox mind cultivation.

To encounter the real phenomenon of kundalini cultivation, we had to go to the stories of Milarepa, Gampopa, and Lady Tsogyel. According to their biographies, they had all achieved the tumo fire samadhi and eventually achieved enlightenment, but the kundalini samadhi they each achieved is not to be confused with the feat of attaining enlightenment or awakening to Tao. Attaining enlightenment requires much more work than just this initial phase of cultivation warming. This is why, for instance, Milarepa had to work so hard, and only after years of cultivating did he awaken.

In bringing up the point that these practitioners had achieved the tumo fire samadhi, we are only saying that they had achieved the samadhi resulting from proper kundalini cultivation. And in the larger scheme of things, the stage of kundalini cultivation (when you rank the phenomena that stand between chi-mai cultivation and seeing the Tao) is just the initial stage of warming practice.

If you practice correctly, with kundalini cultivation you might be able to eventually enter into various realms of samadhi, and your mastery of these realms—up to when you see the Tao—comprise the next three stages of the peak, patience and highest worldly dharma.

Real Empowerments and Austerity Practices

In Tibetan Buddhism it is very popular nowadays to go to a lama asking for an empowerment or initiation, such as a kundalini or fire element empowerment, but to really have an initiation or empowerment into some stage of cultivation, you have to first reach a certain level of samadhi. When you can actually reach a certain level of samadhi attainment, then the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will come to help you, and *this* constitutes an actual empowerment. The typical empowerment performed by a guru or master is just a symbolic ceremony similar to attending a Church or Temple service.

If we relate these facts to the stages of prayoga, it is only when you can achieve the first and second stages of prayoga, of warming and the peak, that you can be genuinely initiated. Before that time, you cannot get a genuine empowerment but only receive a symbolic empowerment of any stage of cultivation accomplishment.

To receive an actual empowerment means you must actually achieve a certain stage of kung-fu pertaining to the accomplishment of the stages of warming and the summit for that type of kung-fu. But let us not be too critical of the symbolic empowerments we see handed out today, for while they cannot substitute for real kung-fu attainments that you achieve by your own cultivation efforts, nonetheless, they can indeed help motivate some people to keep working hard at their spiritual cultivation practice.

If you want to talk about empowerments, you must know that there is really only one. There is only the "Real Empowerment" or "Great Empowerment" which you receive when you are about to become a Buddha with complete enlightenment (when at the tenth bhumi of Bodhisattvahood). After receiving this empowerment, you can become a master of religion and guide all living beings. When you talk of empowerments in the proper fashion, this is the *only* genuine one but since it only occurs for those just about to become Buddhas, most lamas know nothing about it.

As to our Tibetan cultivators, they had all achieved the tumo samadhi, so we can accurately say they had all received the kundalini empowerment. However, in order to attain this achievement, they first had to accumulate tremendous merit, cultivate their prajna wisdom that enables a perception of some degree of emptiness, and they all went through the austerity practices necessary for achieving this sort of attainment. "Austerity practice" does not necessarily mean living in a cave, practicing tapas, or begging for food. Rather, someone who lives in a modern environment while trying to help the world, doing what is difficult and suffering all sorts of

trouble for the people's sake, can also be described as undertaking austerity practice. In fact, this type of austerity practice is usually much harder than living in seclusion in the mountains where there is no one to bother you at all.

The Chinese say that there are two types of austerity practice, the second of which is "secret." This is the highest of the austerity practices because it means to remain in the world suffering all sorts of difficulties for the sake of others, while no one knows of your cultivation level and Bodhisattva deeds of commitment. This sort of austerity practice actively combines the practice of the path with the results of its fruit, making it the Bodhisattva way. It is easy to go off into the wilderness and cultivate by yourself without any troubles, but to remain in the world and to try to bring about peace in society, while personally cultivating in private, is a terrible way to suffer.

Now in the orthodox teachings of Buddhism, cultivating the chi, the mai and tumo fire is not explained in great detail, yet we can understand this process of cultivation through the following explanation. This life we are born into is shaped through karmic forces. Karma causes us to be born as humans, and the physical body we receive is a result of our karmic energies as well. You can say that we have all accumulated lots of bad karma because our present existence is much lower than heavenly beings, and so our physical nature accordingly lacks many good karmic traits.

This human body of ours is ugly and defective when compared to those of the devas, so we can truly say that our human existence is mainly characterized by bad karmic forces. It is not enough to say that we have bad physical bodies either, for the karmic forces we have inherited are being further influenced for the worse by the bad teachings and methods we come in contact with during life. When we act in nonvirtuous ways, we influence others in a similar manner as well, and this compounds our unfortunate situation. We are stuck with this dirty body of ours, and so on the path of spiritual cultivation it is necessary that we purify both it and our mind streams in order to recognize the Tao. If we do not make any efforts at purification, the muck is just too thick to allow for any sort of realization.

For human beings, the physical and psychological natures are always interacting with each other, making it very difficult for us to achieve a calm, clear, and quiet mind. Our physical body generates afflictions, and our minds are always burdened by mental difficulties as well. Furthermore, we are always clinging and attaching to these phenomena so as to increase our obstructions to enlightenment even further. For instance, we are easily bothered by people, noises, and other distractions. We let our displeasure affect us in detrimental ways so that we lose our internal peace.

Therefore, even though we may want to reach a state of internal quiet and empty calm, we suffer tremendous difficulties in this quest due to mental attachments, and so we can hardly accomplish anything like this at all. As a result, it is very difficult for us to uncover our inherent prajna

wisdom. We are always busying our minds, and so we can never realize that our transcendental knowing wisdom is actually clear, bright and empty of all this nonsense. It is what we are always actually using to know these phenomena in the first place, and yet we never recognize its existence because we always focus upon, and become preoccupied with the chatter that it recognizes.

If you look at the process of cultivation from a larger perspective, cultivating the chi, the mai and kundalini is only a way to change the four elements of our physical body so that we can purify this karmic obstruction. It is only a way to purify bad karma, and replace it with a better karmic scenario that is more in line with the ability to perceive the Tao. The process of spiritual cultivation is so structured that with progress we eventually suffer fewer and fewer afflictions that can obstruct our entry into samadhi, and the transformations which occur to our body-mind complex decrease the level of these afflictions. Cultivating our jing-chi-shen and so forth is Thus, an initial foothold in transforming the elements of the body so that we can attain a kung-fu reward body. This purified body makes it easier to progress on the self-realization path, for without it our physical body will just keep distracting us from realizing the Tao.

This is the essence of the method of the Esoteric school of Buddhism, as well as a broad-scale explanation of how its techniques mesh with Buddhism proper. The yoga intensified practices of the world are a means of cultivating the body so that it becomes more purified and thereby throws up less obstacles on the cultivation path. Purifying the body decreases our bad physical karma, and that makes it easier for us to enter into samadhi.

When you look at matters this way, this once again teaches us that merit is an important ingredient for spiritual practice. After all, decreasing bad karma, and increasing good karma, is exactly the production of merit. To cultivate merit, you must do every good deed possible in life; the effects from such an effort will definitely be felt on the road of spiritual cultivation. If your merit is insufficient, however, you will not be able to succeed on the spiritual trail, and so the injunction to always be cultivating good deeds is absolutely necessary advice for someone who wants to tread the spiritual trail.

Cultivating Chi Through Breathing Practices

To cultivate our chi on this trail, the basic methods employed by most authentic cultivation schools are the breathing exercises of anapana or pranayama. The First Zen Patriarch to visit China, Bodhidharma, taught the monks such techniques, the six yogas of Naropa are also methods of cultivating the chi, and hatha yoga is full of pranayama cultivation methods. The Tien-tai sect's *The Greater Cessation and Contemplation* and *The Lesser Cessation and Contemplation* also deal with various ways to cultivate the chi, and the modern qi-gong school focus on this practice as well. However, what most people miss entirely is the fact that these practices all involve cultivating your breath not to a state of activity, but *to a state of cessation*.

There is an additional condition to this as well: your thoughts at this time must also be pacified somewhat so that your busy mind is replaced by a relatively empty mind, and this empty mind is matched with this state of respiratory cessation. In other words, both breathing and thoughts must come to a stop; then the real chi of the body can activated and you will experience a genuine kundalini arousal.

If you use some sort of cultivation breathing practice and reach the point in cultivating your chi where your mind and this state of hsi come together, then you are almost at the stage where you are cultivating the kundalini. This would place you within the warming stage of the Path of Intensified Preparatory Practices.

Why should we try to cultivate our chi in the first place? If the flow of chi does not become smooth in our body, and if our breathing does not come to a stop, then our minds will always be scattered. Why? Because chi and consciousness are interlinked, and breath and chi are linked. A scattered mind therefore corresponds to scattered chi and scattered breathing, and scattered chi produces a scattered mind.

If you can therefore calm your thoughts, your chi will stop automatically and if you can calm your chi, then your thoughts can become pacified. *That* is what you really want to accomplish through pranayama breathing techniques. In fact, if you can really reach this initiatory state of cessation, then your true internal chi will awaken, which Taoists call the stage of internal embryo breathing, and you will experience the initiation of the true kundalini phenomenon. After this stage of kung-fu, then all the subsidiary kung-fu of the path will then have a chance to manifest.

During ordinary breathing, we do not normally match our minds with our breaths. If you *can* match the two, however, then your mind and your chi *will* merge and you will have begun to some level of genuine cultivation. At this point, you will finally be able to get rid of the miscellaneous random thoughts that normally run around in your mind and will achieve the state we call mental emptiness, which is a mind relatively empty of wandering discriminative thoughts.

When you cultivate in such a way that your breath stops naturally, and then thoughts arise once again, then your external breathing will once again commence. That is why you have to learn how to master this stage with forbearance, so as to maintain it for a long period of time. If you are really able to reach a state of cessation where your thoughts become still—because you have been doing some sort of breathing cultivation practice—then your chi will calm for sure and your kundalini will arise. Thus, you must keep practicing breathing exercises over and over until you finally master the stage they should lead to. Eventually your chi and mai will transform, and then one day your kundalini will naturally arise.

When you reach the point in cultivation where your chi (breathing) stops, this means that the wind element of your body is being transformed. Our physical body is a karmic phenomenon we

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have inherited, and our life force can be compared to a powerful wind within this body. Maitreya Bodhisattva called the activation of this life force the "big knife wind" because the body feels pain when it is initially activated. When the real chi force of the body is aroused and starts clearing out the chi channels, the process is as painful as a big knife gutting us.

Of course when the internal wind force within us finally becomes pacified because its circulatory channels are fully opened, then we can accordingly experience a truly clear, calm and open state of mind. This is when we can start to taste "mental emptiness." It is normally quite difficult for ordinary people to reach this sort of state, which is a target in all genuine roads of spiritual development, because to make any progress in this direction you must undertake some form of meditation practice, and few people do so.

As a general rule, you cannot possibly make any real spiritual progress unless you cultivate meditation in order to attain samadhi. For those who do not meditate, it is possible but extremely rare for them to feel completely physically refreshed and mentally peaceful unless they use some other method to balance their chi. Only when your chi becomes balanced will your mind become empty and your body feel extremely light, yet capable of ready action.

If you engage in cultivation, so as to purify and cultivate your chi, then you can experience this state all the time. When, through proper breathing and meditation, all the cells of the body transform even further and feel cozy, warm and blissful, this feeling goes beyond the initial balancing of your chi and can be compared to the stage of advanced kundalini cultivation. It is a physical bliss comparable to the bliss felt in the first dhyana, although it is much more diluted in magnitude. Remaining with it, eventually it will transform into the bliss of the first dhyana.

When Shakyamuni taught his disciples, most could reach the state of mental calm called emptiness quite easily, but today, the world has become so complicated and people have so many random thoughts that it seems no one can do it even after years of practice. This is one of the reasons that mental illness, rather than cancer, will become the major disease of this century. When you intake too much nutrition and use the mind too much, it becomes even more important to find mental peace, but it becomes more difficult to do so as well. It becomes difficult to do so because people lack the correct instructions for practice entirely, or even with instructions in hand, they fail to make a foothold in the correct means of practice effort.

When someone is cultivating their chi, they are also cultivating their chi mai. These chi mai energy meridians, or nadi, are related to our jing, or water element of the body, and include the muscle fibers which contain tiny nadi channels (mai) all scrunched together. Even genes and DNA are related to the water element of the physical nature, so advanced cultivation practice can affect these elements when the cultivation is good enough. It can affect the coarse chi that is partly responsible for your habit energies, and the genes responsible for natural inclinations as well.

When you cultivate your mai, we can also say you are at a point where you are transforming the body's water element into ching-se, the conscious materiality or "sentient matter" of the body. However, this is extremely difficult to do and is only completely achieved at much higher levels of spiritual cultivation. Hence, cultivating your chi mai is a complicated topic to fully discuss in detail. What is important to note about this topic is that the task of cultivating the chakras belongs to the stage of mai cultivation, whereas opening up the *tu mai* and *jen mai* energy channels is actually the stage of cultivating your chi. When we talk of the stage of cultivating the mai, this means that the *tu mai* and *jen mai* (or left and right energy meridians) have already somewhat opened.

After the chi mai and nadi energy channels in the muscle fibers open, the next step of cultivation kung-fu is for your internal organs to become transformed. This transformational process will often be accompanied by pain as all the poisons are ejected from the body, which is why Maitreya indicated it feels as if a big knife is cutting you up inside. After this stage of physical purification, the way will then be clear for the bones in your body to become transformed. Because bones are so dense (remember that our bones will remain after the rest of our body has decomposed), it is natural to expect that our bones would be the hardest physical items to transform along the course of cultivation. Surprisingly, they are not the most difficult of the five elements to change because the space element within the body is even more difficult to purify. The space element, however, is not a physical element per se. It is the space between all the body joints and intercellular spaces, which has its own subtle chi that must be transformed.

When you have cultivated to the extent that you can open all of your chi mai, your body will be able to experience a state of bliss such that you will no longer desire sexual relations. We call this stage of bliss the "Inner contact beautiful bliss." What this means is that when a meditator successfully cultivates their chi and mai, they will reach a point where they experience a sensation of wonderful physical well being and comfort, which explains the blissful feelings of the first dhyana.

If you can peacefully maintain this state of bliss, it will further your concentration and even speed up the process of physical rejuvenation that is happening along the path, so you want to abide in it as long as possible. How do you do that? By continually practicing, and refraining from losing your jing and chi upon this development. When a practitioner progresses further so that their chi stops and their shen becomes concentrated, that is when they will reach a state of sublime mental clarity.

We will not discuss in detail the external kung-fu phenomena that accompany these particular stages, because that is a book in itself. We also have to avoid giving in-depth descriptions of these transformations, because even though they represent such a minor level of cultivation, there are people who would try to use these descriptions for cheating others, or even as a measuring stick for criticizing others.

All that is safe to say is laid out in the book, *Tao and Longevity*, which we have previously referenced. We can summarize its contents by saying that the Tao school has minutely identified the sequence of transformations which every cultivator, of every school and religion, will pass through no matter what their form of spiritual practice. The results of cultivation practice are truly nondenominational: your jing will transform into chi, chi into shen, shen into emptiness, and finally you can break through this stage of emptiness in order to return to the Tao and awaken to self-realization.

It may sound like this process of sequential transformation immediately leads to complete enlightenment but in actual fact, all these stages still fall within the realm of cultivating the chi, mai and kundalini. In other words, *they still fall within the realm of the skandhas of form and sensation*. The stage of emptiness attainment—of shen transforming into emptiness—is roughly equivalent to the Hinayana stage of awakened realization, and this roughly corresponds to purifying the skandha of conception. The Taoist sequence of obtaining full enlightenment, which it calls returning to the Tao after emptiness is realized, therefore involves freeing oneself fully from the obstructions embodied by the skandhas of conception, volition and consciousness. This is the Stage of True Cultivation Practice, which culminates in the Stage of Buddhahood, or Perfect Enlightenment.

This match-up of stages between several cultivation schools only represents a very general, rough picture of the correspondences, as some overlap exists between the stages of various schools. Because of this overlap and fuzzy borders of various stages of attainment, a perfect match-up cannot be forced across all these schools, but the general picture involved in this human process of spiritual awakening is indeed the same, and these different spiritual schools do all describe the same thing. They just delineate the borders of various stages a little differently from one another, yet recognize the same overall sequences and spiritual process.

When you are actually at the stage of cultivating the chi, we can also describe matters by saying that your goal is to transform the "wind (chi) of bad thoughts"—or simply "bad karma"—into the "wind of good thoughts and merit." This explanation is quite wonderful because it matches quite nicely with the concepts of Confucian cultivation. In Confucian cultivation, you work on transforming yourself into the "real man" (which is called the "perfect man" or "perfected man" in Islam) by cultivating personal virtue in the world of behavior while simultaneously cultivating samadhi and wisdom. This is the same as turning evil into goodness, or transforming unwholesome karma into wholesome karma.

This road of virtuous conduct, which is akin to the *karma yoga* of Hinduism, the "Way of Margaret" in Christianity, the Platonic-Socratic goal of Greek philosophers, and *makhafa* path of Islam, is as valid a means of cultivating the Tao as the path of chi mai cultivation we have just discussed. These behavioral spiritual roads all involve cultivating virtuous thoughts and actions, but most importantly they all depend upon cessation-contemplation practice as the core of the

virtue-producing process. In other words, this type of cultivation path is also a genuine path. However, it also requires meditation, and specifically cessation-contemplation practice applied to your every thought and action. If you can follow this particular road of spiritual practice correctly, you can also experience the various ranks of cultivation kung-fu.

A virtuous mind engenders yang, while misguided thoughts engender yin, so in cultivating the yang of good thoughts and behavior you will accumulate the merit required to ascend to one of the heavens (in Christianity we would just say Heaven). Naturally, this accomplishment is comparable to the states you can experience through attaining samadhi and dhyana; therefore, ascending to the heavens does not necessarily depend upon mastering dhyana and samadhi because an ordinary person who cultivates virtuous thoughts and behavior can also get there.

Here's the caveat about this sort of practice. Any ordinary people who simply practice good deeds will indeed ascend to Heaven after death, but they will only reach the outer periphery of the higher Desire Realm heavens if they do not additionally practice meditation. If they do not cultivate meditation practice, they cannot possibly cultivate the virtuous mind free from bad thoughts and desires which matches with these higher heavens, and that is why they cannot be reborn in the highest heavens after death. To do so, you must cultivate the spiritual attainments that match with these realms, and they can only be reached through samadhi-wisdom cultivation. People who do good deeds and practice cleaning their minds can indeed enter the heavens of the Desire Realm, but only if they practice meditative cultivation can they reach the higher heavens, such as the Form Realm heavens, which correspond to dhyana attainments.

After your chi mai are all opened up from spiritual practice, then as long as you do not squander your jing and chi, your tumo kundalini fire will automatically be initiated and warmth will be produced naturally. At this stage, sometimes your whole body will instantly feel warmth in every cell simultaneously, which is the real kundalini bliss attainment. Sometimes this progression of real chi or kundalini will feel like it is moving through the body in waves like a sheet of rain running down a street. What you should know is that its manifestation can occur in a wide variety of ways. Since the chi is usually massing within the body at this stage, this is when you will usually become able to see inside your body, or see the lights of internal illumination.

The important point is that the manifestation of kundalini is only a true stage of attainment when it culminates in a *full body bliss*. But it is hard to get to this point because sexual desire will arise right at the edge of this accomplishment, and you have to turn this desire around, "inside-out" so-to-speak, without succumbing to it before you can experience this bliss.

Right before this achievement your sexual desire may become extreme, and it is only when you can transform it by letting go of the view of possessing a body, or being a body, that you can finally actually enter the true ranks of cultivation. This is why we say that the first step in cultivation is to free yourself from the view of possessing (being) a body. Without attaining this

sort of emptiness view, you will always be bound in the world of form despite any advanced cultivation work. While letting go of sexual desire sounds easy, at this stage it becomes even more difficult than previously because all of your yang chi is rising and becomes full. Many of the people who do not succeed in cultivation fail because of sexual desire, and so they must practice to reach this stage over and over again until they finally pass through it.

When people who meditate feel heat in the area of their tan-tien, they sometimes get very excited and think this is kundalini, but this initial heat phenomenon corresponds to a process of internal friction involving the four elements of the body. The result of this frictional process is like an internal fever, and is often called the phenomenon of "steaming the bones." All you have to do is mantra for several hours, or practice holding your breath for several minutes, and this phenomenon is sure to manifest.

Only after you reach the stage where your body has been cleaned and all the mai have opened will it no longer arise in a frictional form, and by that time your body will have transformed so that it is soft and warm all the time. When you are really able to initiate this stage of kundalini, you will experience a state of warmth, purity, clarity, bliss and calm. You will see a physical light appear inside the body, and you will begin to experience physical bliss. The light means that you are cultivating your chi correctly, and if you keep up with your efforts you will begin to enter the realm of samadhi attainments.

The Esoteric school of Buddhism says that if your jing does not descend then you cannot experience the stage of physical bliss that accompanies samadhi attainments. The Tao school also says that when your jing is full, you will rarely think of sex. These two statements are related because in order to experience the physical bliss of the dhyana, you cannot let your jing leak away through sexual relations (which would normally transpire when the hormones descend and initiate thoughts of a sexual nature). Thus your jing must become full, which will allow the transformation into chi. If you can cultivate emptiness and accordingly transform your jing, then you can reach the heaven of Transformation Bliss (Nirmanarati) near the top of the Realm of Desire. Of course you have to go even further than this in order to surpass this realm of attainment and actually achieve the first dhyana, for the first dhyana corresponds to the first level of the Form Realm heavens.

For ordinary people, however, "descending jing" typically results in ejaculation or orgasm, so it never gets the chance to come down and complete a full sweep of the body's mai. Unfortunately, that broad scope sweeping is necessary for opening them at the earliest stages of cultivation and which produces the stage of physical bliss when you are cultivating. People think that chi opens the chi channels, but the transformation of jing also helps push through or scrub away obstructions so that the chi flows can proceed with fewer obstacles. However, this degree of detail is not something we should enter into. What you must remember is that none of these transformations can be accomplished using any force, such as mental guidance. You always have

to cultivate them using emptiness meditation, and ignoring your physical body.

Zen master Nan Huai-Chin has two relevant sayings regarding this process of jing, chi and shen:

> If your chi does not reach cessation, you will not experience the internal light (caused by the interaction of the four elements).
>
> If your shen remains scattered, you will not be able to become clear of random thoughts (and reach the state of pure clarity and emptiness).

However, if you can truly attain the state where your thoughts seem to disappear, everything will become crystal clear like fine weather on a beautiful day. In other words, when your shen masses together, everything will become crystal clear to an extreme, and that is true samadhi.

The only way to explain this state is through an analogy. It is like when you are in the mountains tracing back a stream of crystal clear water, and at a certain place you find it opens into a large pool which is peaceful, calm and quiet everywhere. The water seems so clear that you can see everything down to the very bottom of the pool, and there is an endless expanse of cloudless sky above. There are no ripples of water in sight, and the whole area is extremely peaceful, calm, comfortable and cool. This is how crystal clear everything becomes.

In reading this analogy you can therefore understand that it is very hard to detach from the samadhi of bliss and joy that accompanies this stage because of its great attractiveness. But you have to practice detachment at each and every stage of the cultivation trail because all these visaya are unreal experiential realms. They are transient states, and not the absolute nature, so they are all false states of mind even though they have more reality than conventional reality. You must still cultivate further and let go of this stage to make further spiritual progress, for it is not yet the stage of seeing the Tao. It is just another phenomenal realm of attainment you encounter along the spiritual path. There is a popular saying that heroes are generals who conquer the world, like Caesar and Alexander the Great, but if you can jump out of this stage, this is when we can consider you a real hero even greater than kings and conquerors.

The comfortable stages of bliss and joy which accompany the various samadhi are so high that they are indescribable, and because they are so pleasant (remember that they match with the heavenly realms, which makes this understandable), they often present obstacles on the path because they are realms that attract attachment. In cultivation there are a myriad wonderful realms like this, but even if you can stay in such a realm for countless eons, you still would not attain the Tao. Like this world, you would still just experience a phenomenal realm rather than the ultimate, and after your karma was used up, you'd have to leave that state for something

much lower.

The overall importance of this discussion, as it relates to understanding your personal kung-fu and stage of cultivation, is to emphasize once again that the tumo fire samadhi can only help transform the form and sensation skandhas. The other three skandhas of conception, volition and consciousness are still left intact after this sort of practice is completed in full, so someone who successfully initiates kundalini still has a long way to go before they reach enlightenment.

Kundalini yoga is therefore not the only way to practice, but just a convenient means to practice which is used in very specific cultivation circumstances, such as those found in the Esoteric school. It is important to remember that you must cultivate emptiness for this and other phenomena to manifest, and you must continue cultivating emptiness *while* these phenomena manifest. Emptiness is what you must cultivate rather than kundalini specifically. In fact, the emptiness view is what you must cultivate at every step of the way.

Frankly, it is only after various such kung-fu transformations take place that you can even gain some small inkling of what the word "emptiness" really means. Even then, any understanding you reach will still just be a constructed perspective because it will still not yet correspond to the *real* emptiness we refer to as the stage of nonego, or seeing the Tao.

In other words, you have to go through all these various experiences of jing, chi, chakra, mai, shen and kundalini transformations—each of which has its own four stages of prayoga—on the spiritual path regardless of the school or sect you follow. Then you must finally arrive at a point of progress where you can experience some degree of mental emptiness, and only then will you achieve a true understanding of the real process of cultivation.

In making this sort of progress, once again no matter what school you follow you must keep abandoning the coarser experiential realms you achieve along the way no matter how beautiful, profound or attractive they may seem. We can even say that any emptiness stage you accordingly cultivate is a semblance dharma of the *real emptiness* tasted only at the Stage of Seeing the Path. Before that, any samadhi emptiness you may experience is still mainly a conceptual image of emptiness, and not the real thing.

It is true that when a practitioner gets to the point where they have initiated the real kundalini process, they have definitely made a big step in transforming their physical nature. However, if they died at this point or stopped for any reason whatsoever, *in a next life they would have to start all over again*. They could recover their past progress much easier than others, which is why some people in the world can attain cultivation achievements fairly quickly, but the objective is realizing the Tao through direct, naked experience. Real progress then starts after this point of realization—for then you can finally cultivate the real energy streams with which your identity is bound up—and the progress is classified according to ten stages, called the Bodhisattva bhumis.

These Bodhisattva levels of attainment comprise the Stage of True Cultivation Practice, and are the forerunner states to Complete and Perfect Enlightenment.

Thus, while successful kundalini cultivation may represent a big accomplishment in our phenomenal world of form, once again it does not really amount to very much in terms of the overall process of spiritual cultivation. We cannot stress this enough because of all the mistaken notions on the matter abounding in today's spiritual circles. It is even possible for you to become so mistakenly attached to the tumo fire phenomenon that you turn away from the correct path of cultivation and abandon, out of ignorance, the genuine pathway to enlightenment in total. At this point you would become no different from the hundreds of minor yogis, gurus, saints and so forth who gain samadhi, but who never amount to much because they think the stage of practice they have attained is the highest one, and so they never detach from it and work harder to proceed onwards. In one sense, we can say that they become complacent about their stage of spiritual progress.

Now in cultivating the chi, mai and tumo fire, you do not have to *strictly* follow the order of first cultivating your chi and mai, next cultivating the kundalini, and then cultivating emptiness (naturally you are cultivating emptiness all along, otherwise you could not achieve any of these phenomena). This is the general sequence most often cultivated, but *the actual sequence will greatly depend upon your personal karmic endowments*. So while we are revealing the general stages and sequences of spiritual development, you must remember that there are always exceptions and special cases along this route just as there are in most any other path of progress.

In most all the sequences of cultivation we will review, there is a general order of attainment that most people will follow, but there are always exceptions to this generalized sequence because of the past merits, prajna wisdom, karma and special endowments or abilities of individuals. Hence, some people with great merit and prajna wisdom will be able to attain the tumo stage in a very short while, some may achieve it instantly, and others will first need to practice their chi and mai cultivation extensively before they can taste it. Even if you do not succeed in this life, you should at least lay the foundation for this type of success because it can come in the after-life or in the next life to come. If you do not start now, when these teachings are available, when will you ever step into the path of higher spiritual evolution? Spiritual progress is something you have to earn by working at it; it is not just going to come to you.

As we saw with the case of Hui-neng and our twelve ordinary practitioners, the spiritual results can be dramatically quick for some people and slower for others. It is all a function of people's practice efforts, wisdom and karmic endowments. Sometimes in life, perfectly ordinary people without any notions of spiritual striving may suddenly have a spontaneous spiritual experience due to their karma. This may turn them to the path of spiritual cultivation, and may in fact lead to fantastic spiritual progress. Such cases are the result of past karma manifesting, and then follows the effort of improving upon initial endowments through further spiritual training and practice.

So these things are never "gifts from heaven," but rather, the seeds of past attainments in the alaya manifesting because of the proper timing or conditions.

The important principle is that for any of these experiences to initially occur, you will still need to have accumulated sufficient merit and engaged in prior spiritual practice. For these changes to progress further, you will also need to increase your current wisdom level and practice efforts. In short, without merit and wisdom, practice effort and time, nothing substantial will transpire on the spiritual cultivation trail. Thus, CULTIVATION PRACTICE + EFFORT + TIME + PATIENCE is the only formula which will give you CULTIVATION RESULTS (kung-fu stages of attainment).

Another important principle to note is the following: not only people who practice Taoism, Buddhism or Indian yoga can achieve the stage of kundalini initialization, but individuals following other spiritual schools and religions can experience this phenomenon as well. That is why it is known by various names in different schools, such as *incendium amoris* in Christianity. You cultivate correctly and then it will appear, no matter who you are; it is as simple as that.

The heavenly beings in the Desire Realm heavens can attain this stage of practice, *asuras* can attain it, certain animals who cultivate can attain it, and all sorts of other beings can achieve it. Basically, it is a shared path, a shared phenomenon, and is a nondenominational stage of spiritual experience. It is a common practice stage amongst all types of religious striving, no matter what mother religion is being followed. Therefore, we can know from this that:

> Kundalini cultivation is simply a convenient way to practice, but it is not the only way to practice and it is not the ultimate way to practice.

However, we can also say that kundalini yoga cultivation still ranks among the highest of the form-based cultivation techniques in the Desire Realm.

Sexual Desire and Sexual Cultivation

Sexual cultivation is yet another cultivation method originating from the Desire Realm heavens through which you can attain the Desire Realm jing-chi-bliss, kundalini-initiated samadhi. The correct application of the process of tantric sexual cultivation is like using fire to get rid of fire, meaning you use sexual activities to get rid of sexual desire and bring about a kundalini-type bliss.

We can also compare the use of sexual cultivation to hammering upwards from the underside of a

table in order to poke out a nail driven in from the top, because you are trying to use sex as a means of getting rid of sexual desire. Of course, this is a very difficult path to follow, just as it is difficult to hit, from below, a nail driven in from above. Everyone wants to try the sexual cultivation practices when they hear about them, but so few people are actually qualified for these practices that most everyone usually drops rather than progresses when they try them just a little.

Whenever ordinary people experience sexual desire, they do not usually realize that the kundalini energy is somewhat operative at that time. Because they do not seize this chance to make spiritual progress, they engage in sexual relations and thereby lose their accumulated stores of jing and chi. Since they lose these precious substances necessary for the path of spiritual cultivation, along with their jing and chi goes their chance to advance in cultivation attainments.

The question should therefore be, when your body is healthy and physical sexual desire arises without the psychological component of sexual thoughts, how do you use this opportunity to transform it into spiritual progress? What do you do to prevent the "elixir" from leaking? The type of sexual desire which arises due to the cultivation process can be compared to a room full of spinning gas molecules ready to ignite, and your task is to turn all these spinning molecules around from a clockwise to counter-clockwise rotation. That's the best analogy we can think of to describe the situation.

The first rule for accomplishing this task is to maintain mental emptiness without clinging to anything. You must not combine any physical borne sexual desire with your mental state, but instead remain empty of sexual desires and any other thoughts as well. In other words, you just have to remain in a state of detached emptiness. In staying with this state, and letting go of the feelings generated by the body consciousness, your chi will transform even further. One way to ignore the sexual feelings that arise is to cultivate the view of having no body, which means to forget that you have any body at all and to ignore it. The sixth consciousness is everywhere, so realize that the physical body is not you, and then let go. This is why we tell you that you must stop trying to bring the sixth consciousness into the body, and must forget that you are a body at all.

If your mind remains empty, then while your body may feel uncomfortable due to the massing energies, physical desire will find no foothold as long as do not let it. Thus, it will eventually pass away as its accompanying chi flow becomes purified and smoothened (due to the lack of any attachments which would interfere in such transformations).

If your mind achieves an even higher stage of emptiness, then the kung-fu transformations you seek will really come about, but if you just hold onto the same level of emptiness without trying to deepen your cultivation, your sexual desire may go away but then later return again. So you must always cultivate emptiness as much as you can when sexual desires arise, and in that way

your chi can become refined without interruptions. How do you cultivate the requisite degree of emptiness? By forgetting that you have a physical body; by becoming unmindful of your body.

This progressive elevated refinement will eventually bring about all sorts of physical transformations which will purify your body and make it subsequently harder for sexual desires to bind you. Your chi will usually rise during periods of sexual desire, so you should always use this chance to cultivate a higher state of emptiness even if you engage in sexual relations at this time. Remember, however, that it is the force of chi, after you let it accumulate rather than leak away, which is what eventually permeates the body and opens any internal chi mai that are closed that represent a barrier to spiritual realization. Hence, you must cultivate a deeper stage of emptiness in body and mind when you experience sexual desire.

The second rule to observe when sexual desire arises is to immediately apply yourself to anapana breathing methods, for this is another practice method that will help transform your body, your thoughts, and your desires. Another cure is that people should eat less when sexual desire starts to bother them, because its manifestation is generally related to excessive nutrition. After it has already arisen, however, there is no other solution but to both cut down on food intake *and* practice emptiness cultivation.

You might have to bear some uncomfortable feelings for awhile as the physical pressure builds from various chi channels encountering frictional obstruction, but this feeling will pass as the chi permeates the normally impenetrable areas of the body (which are largely responsible for the production of disease and onset of aging) and eventually brings about a physical bliss much greater than anything which sexual orgasm can produce.

Some skillful cultivation practitioners use (an extremely brief session of) sexual intercourse without leakage to calm themselves in this stage so that they can calm their sexual desire and make further spiritual progress, but most ordinary practitioners fail in such attempts. Hence, the essential point is to prevent any mental sparks of sexual desire from igniting in the first place, and to try to keep spiritually progressing so that the desire chi flows “turn inside-out” when they arise, and transform through emptiness detachment to produce the physical blisses of the dhyana.

What is best is when the mental sparks of desire do not ignite at all, for then there will be no fire of desire to bother you, and no desirous situation that must be countered. Prevention, in this case, is worth a pound of cure. This is why cultivating pranayama breathing techniques at this time, since they somewhat affect the body’s own internal chi flows, is often the best way to grab hold of and transform the situation. But every situation is different for this challenge, and it is hard to specify general rules. Handling the situation successfully depends upon the individual and their wisdom.

If we try to compare various spiritual cultivation schools and their stages once again, the Taoist

stage of transforming jing to chi can also be considered part of the stage when the tumo, or kundalini, is being initiated. Lao Tzu even commented upon this in saying that when you see a sleeping male baby with an erection, this condition (since babies are absent of conscious sexual desires) is the *zhuo huo* moving. It is the stage of kundalini becoming active because it is a manifestation of our pre-natal vitality. Kundalini energy, which accompanies us upon life, is this pre-natal vitality.

Ordinary male noncultivators who experience an erection, because their vitality begins to build, will normally start to match this phenomenon with thoughts of a sexual nature. Rather than remain pure and innocent like a baby, they will add sexual thoughts to the phenomenon and bring upon themselves their own cultivation downfall. In other words, they will start thinking about sex, and then they will end up engaging in sex, whether it is sexual intercourse or masturbation. Thus, they will end up losing their jing and chi through their own self-propelled acts of self-destruction. Furthermore, in "losing the elixir" they will end up losing the highest caliber jing and chi they have refined to that point (which is causing the trouble in the first place as it begins to stir), which is the necessary quality of esoteric materials required for cultivation transformations. This is how everybody misses the opportunity to both improve his or her physical health and make spiritual progress. It is not just the fact that people lose their jing and chi. They lose the high quality jing and chi that has been partially transformed along the cultivation trail. This is what causes the major setback.

Sexual yoga is a very clever method for attacking this problem, but it is also a dangerous practice because most practitioners drop into lust and desire when they enter this pathway. Even if it is not for spiritual purposes, however, there are still great benefits to be gained from learning the simple Taoists techniques for engaging in sexual intercourse without losing your jing. It is not safe to publicly mention the actual qualifications necessary for the higher Tantric sexual practices, but from the stories of Lady Tsogyel and Machig Labdron, you can easily determine that the qualified have already cultivated their mai and attained some degree of samadhi.

Some people may say to themselves, "I don't want to hear about these Desire Realm cultivation methods (whether it is kundalini yoga or sexual cultivation and so on) because they are not pure enough. These methods are too low, so I do not want to be involved with these things or hear about them at all. I just want to become a Buddha and jump out of the Three Realms without using any Desire Realm methods at all."

While this desire is quite commendable, basically speaking, these people are not modest enough. You should not disparage any of the genuine cultivation methods used in the Realm of Desire, for these various methods are all available for your own stage of existence. There is nothing wrong with any of these cultivation paths. Rather, it is just that they are inappropriate or useless for many classes of people, and so they should not be taught to groups who would use them to hurt themselves or thereby adopt entirely incorrect notions of the cultivation trail. All cultivation paths

have pitfalls, but it is ultimately the mind of the individual that makes certain practices good or bad. Just as a knife can be used to kill others if handled incorrectly, so the various methods of cultivation available in the world can prove dangerous if they are handled by the immature.

Step-by-Step Spiritual Transformations

If we try to put all these separate lines of thought together, we can summarize our discussions with the following synopsis. First, cultivating the chi, mai and kundalini are all methods for transforming the four elements of our physical body whose condition is dependent upon our individual karmic inheritance. This spiritual transformation or transmutation process takes a long time; it is not something that happens quickly, and it is typically accomplished according to a certain general order. This general sequence corresponds to the relative ease by which certain transformations can occur.

Transforming the physical body means clearing it of poisons and obstructions, so there are an almost unlimited variety of techniques you can employ in cultivation to help with this task. The practice of *siddhi* medicine, or external alchemy, is one such example of a methodology aimed at helping clear the body of poisons and opening up its chi channels. We can call this overall objective the task of purifying the body, bringing it to a state of optimal health, reestablishing internal balance, "harmonizing nature," or "opening the mai," yet it is all the same thing.

There are countless kung-fu cultivation practices in the world, but their common intent and purpose at the earliest stages of cultivation are to act in this direction and purify the four great elements of the human body. In other words, their job is to *help purify our accumulated bad karma*. An attuned or purified body becomes a more fit vehicle of the cultivation path, and with it you can more readily cultivate a steady mind and samadhi. From proficiency in samadhi, and through reaching more and more subtle or rarefied mental realms, you can finally reach a true stage of emptiness which we call "seeing the Tao." Then, because you reach a realization stage of true emptiness, rather than some conceptual image of emptiness, you will really know the proper meaning of the Tao, and the proper means of cultivation practice that lies in tune with this great objective. You will know the proper route and means for cultivating towards complete spiritual realization.

In terms of cultivating the body's four elements, spiritual practitioners usually start on the spiritual trail by cultivating the body's wind element, which corresponds to our chi, or prana. Cultivating the chi is usually achieved by practicing various breathing methods, such as the Indian pranayama, the Tibetan practice of the "nine bottled winds," the Buddhist practice of anapana, or the Tien-tai practice of cessation and contemplation. It is also achieved by simple emptiness meditation alone because this will naturally, and spontaneously, produce a stage of chi transformation where both breath and mind stop together. This process of cultivating the chi is simply the initial phase of transforming the physical body's wind element because, as we already

know, it is the easiest of the great elements to transform.

Entire schools of cultivation have been built around the practice of cultivating the breath, such as the six yogas of Naropa school and various Hindu yogic traditions. They are built around it because it is really effective. But if we want to really understand the various breathing practices used to cultivate chi, we must pay particular attention to the guidance provided by the Tao school, Tien-tai school, Tibet school and Indian yoga. Furthermore, we must also observe discipline over food and sex if we want to succeed with any of these techniques.

Cultivating the mai is the next spiritual stage of physical body transformations. This stage of practice involves transforming the water element of the physical nature. Cultivating the kundalini is the next typical phase of spiritual practice and involves transforming the fire or warmth element of the physical nature. So you first cultivate the body's wind, then water and then fire elements during a typical sequence of cultivation progress.

For any of these phases of cultivation practice to succeed, you need merit as an active ingredient in your endeavors, for without merit, any of the efforts you make will amount to nil. That is why so many people ultimately fail to succeed in spiritual practice. They think they are fine as they are and do not have to change their thoughts and behavior or perform acts of merit, but if you were so perfect already, you would already have realized the Tao. You absolutely cannot succeed in achieving the Tao without trying to become a better person, without actively working to always increase your wisdom and merit accumulations, so do not forget this. You cannot just disappear in the wilds and hope to succeed unless you are cultivating virtue.

Even when you accomplish these three initial transformations involving the chi, mai and kundalini—or the wind, water and fire elements of the body—you must still remember that they are not the ultimate end goal of cultivation. These are only the most minor of the preparatory phases of transformation corresponding to the prayoga stages of intensified cultivation practice. They are not the main crux of spiritual practice itself, but are just the ancillary results of the earnest endeavors of the path. These transformations help you purify your karma so that you become better qualified to eventually "see the path," after which you will be able to properly conduct yourself on the true road of cultivation practice.

For instance, it is typical for people to read countless books on Zen and then meditate, but only after several years of hard practice effort does everything "click" whereby they actually can realize the path after experiencing some sort of *kensho* or *satori*. That's the point when they reach an experiential realm, or *samaya*, wherein they realize some stage of emptiness and finally understand what this word entails. Only after experiencing this sort of visaya can they finally understand the true meaning of all sorts of spiritual texts and teachings that they may have previously encountered. Thus, these cultivation stages and techniques are simply preliminary phases of preparation for the real practice of spiritual cultivation.

In fact, no matter which cultivation method one talks about—kundalini yoga, sexual cultivation, chi and mai cultivation, anapana, the white skeleton visualization method, mantra practice and so on—they only help transform the skandhas of form and sensation so that you can finally fully concentrate on cultivating the mind and prajna wisdom. They do not qualify for the actual heart of cultivation practice themselves. They are all just preparatory work, and their physical results are typically phenomenal appearances within the skandhas of form and sensation.

These two skandhas are more concerned with the physical body, whereas the other skandhas are more directly connected to the mind. So even from this point of view, it can be understood that the various meditation methods of the world help you prepare for practicing towards the Tao, but they do not yet constitute the actual stage of practicing the Tao itself. You are only really practicing the Tao after you see the path and realize the meaning of emptiness, selflessness and nonego.

For the objective of cultivating the chi and mai, kundalini yoga is one of the highest methods available in the Desire Realm. The method of sexual yoga is also another method from the Desire Realm heavens, though we cannot say that it is higher than the orthodox path of cultivating the chi, mai and kundalini. Tantric sexual cultivation helps to transform the kundalini arising naturally from standard emptiness meditation and other orthodox concentration exercises. If you can succeed in transforming your sexual desires into bliss so that you jump out of the Desire Realm heavens, then you can start to climb the ranks of the dhyana and change your fundamental karmic habits. That is what spiritual cultivation is all about.

Some people will approach cultivation from an entirely different aspect than of focusing on the physical body. They will focus on the mind and prajna wisdom because if you cultivate the prajna view of emptiness, the transformations of the chi and mai will naturally occur without the need to resort to any specially constructed, artificial practices at all. This, for instance, is the path of the Zen school that heads directly for the Tao. A similar case can be made for part of the path of Tibetan Mahamudra. However, since most ordinary practitioners cannot scale such difficult heights, they must typically follow the laborious sequence of cultivating the chi, the mai, kundalini and only then, real emptiness.

In light of all this, you must realize that the esoteric path of step-by-step kung-fu practices is considered as belonging to a lower form of cultivation than the Zen school; they are not the highest form of cultivation in existence. If we had to rank cultivation schools, Zen would always be considered the highest school since it is basically the method of direct pointing to the original mind. This method of no- method works without any specific technique and applies in all situations and across all realms of being.

The next highest cultivation school would have to be either the school of true Taoism or the true Esoteric school, and you could make the case that either could occupy the second or third

posting in a ranking scheme. Fourth we would have the cessation-contemplation practices embodied in the Tien-tai, Confucian and Christian traditions, and also known as shamatha-vipashyana practice. This type of practice is generally higher than yoga and the schools of Pure Land practices.

The problem with this ranking scheme is that we are skipping a lot of details and caveats, so do not become affixed to the particular ratings we have presented. For instance, the Esoteric school is only considered a high stage path to Tao if we are talking about the *real* Esoteric school, and the *real* Esoteric school is Zennish in nature. Most of the practices taught today in the esoteric Vajrayana, Tantric and Tibetan schools, despite claims to the opposite, are in principle so attached to form that they belong to the fifth level ranking of yoga methods as a means of spiritual liberation. That is because what most people consider the Esoteric school is actually a collection of specific technology-related cultivation techniques, and Hence, yogic methods of cultivation rather than formless techniques for realizing true mind. Most of what you encounter in Tibetan Buddhism today is of this yogic character, so it is not a very high stage cultivation tradition.

Since cultivating kundalini is a common Desire Realm practice, then no matter which cultivation school you belong to, everyone can experience attainment in kundalini cultivation. Kundalini cultivation is a commonly shared path, meaning it is a similar phenomenon experienced in different schools although they may not mention it, or might talk about it in different ways from one another. Thus, it is not a unique practice to any particular school of cultivation.

This is an extremely important principle that you must always remember when you are analyzing the various spiritual schools of the world. As we already showed, not only do you find kundalini cultivation in Tibetan Tantra as the basic technology for tantric techniques, but you can also find it in Indian yoga, the Chinese Tao school, in Hinduism, Buddhist preparatory practices, medieval European and Arabian alchemy, Sufism, Christianity and so on. If you are an educated cultivator and look in the right places, descriptions for most all of the lower stage cultivation phenomena we have gone over can be found across all the world's genuine cultivation traditions. We normally call these schools "religions" but in fact, their purpose is to lead us to spiritual enlightenment, and so their cultivation techniques must all be analyzed in the ways we have been revealing.

The true Buddhist dharma, however, the dharma which is purely and particularly unique to Buddhism and which differentiates Buddhism from the other spiritual schools, concentrates on the principle of prajna. Buddhism emphasizes the path of cultivating great transcendental wisdom so as to break free from even the nine samadhi. Its only objective is to achieve perfect enlightenment and then express it throughout the Three Realms through compassionate behavior engaged in helping all sentient beings. When you tread this particular road of spiritual practice, your potential for spiritual achievement will depend upon the degree to which you can transform

your mind, your undesirable karmic tendencies, and your unwholesome bad habits. Thus, in some sense, we can say that true Buddhism is related to the true Confucian means of cultivation. We could also say that it is related to the inherent principles of Christianity as well.

In cultivating your chi, mai and kundalini, you are ultimately trying to change your physical body. Therefore, you are trying to change your karmic forces, i.e., your karmic inheritance. Because the condition of your body can in many cases influence your mental state, this also means that you are to some extent purifying the roots of some behavioral impulses. Therefore do not adopt the mindset that you are trying to cultivate the physical form on the spiritual road of practice, for while that is true, it is really the wrong idea. It is obstructive karma and habit energies you are trying to transform, and some of this begins to get cultivated away as you purify your physical nature.

The proper perspective in cultivation is that you are always cultivating your mind and behavior, and you are doing so by purifying ignorance and abandoning incorrect attachments. Through this process of abandonment you will end up purifying your mental habits, and from a subsequently achieved stage of emptiness or mental purity, all sorts of physical kung-fu transformations will naturally take place. In purifying the mind, you will also be purifying the basis of behavior, so another proper perspective of the path is that cultivation means purifying your actions and behavior.

Thus, by cultivating away a state of ignorance that clouds or enshrouds the mind, you will be purifying away your physical karmic obstructions along with your mindset of negative thoughts and habitual tendencies toward improper behavior. In cultivating your physical body, of course you will in turn be able to effect some change in your inherited behavioral predispositions so as to resist impulses that might formerly control you. A person's spiritual cultivation can be so deep that they can triumph over anything that would normally influence them—which is the real meaning of free will—and it is even possible through spiritual cultivation to effect a degree of mastery over one's genes and DNA. But make no mistake in claiming that transforming the physical body is the total key to changing behavior, for you can really transform the roots of behavior only when you concentrate on cultivating the mind. In short, the cultivation path of the mind is the true path of genuine cultivation practice.

Of course, after you achieve a certain degree of success with the physical transformations involved in spiritual cultivation, you will be in a position to finally enter a stage of samadhi attainment. The physical transformations of the body help you attain body samadhi, wherein the body consciousness no longer distracts you. From achieving the peacefulness of body samadhi with its pacified chi flows, one can then move on to achieving mental samadhi. The stages of mental samadhi, in turn, entail further physical transformations, as well as further reflexive changes involving your mental state. Mind and body are interlinked all along the way in spiritual cultivation, so that changes to the mind entail physical changes to the body and vice versa.

However, the purest overall way to describe the cultivation process is by focusing on the mind rather than the body.

The second best way to describe this process of spiritual climbing is by focusing on your behavior, for behavior is the mind expressed. The lowest way of describing the path is using the markers of physical transformations we have discussed, which limits any educated discussion to the realm of form. Even if it is ethereal or esoteric form, this type of discussion is restricted to form nonetheless, and is unsuitable for describing the highest stages and true path of cultivation practice.

Of course, the road to Tao is never just about the mind, and never just about the body, for you must also transform your behavior since this is how your understanding of Tao is expressed in the world of phenomena. Emptiness is the essence aspect of the Tao, form is the appearance aspect, and behavior is the functioning aspect of enlightenment. That is why we say that the path itself is ultimately one of behavior because *your behavior, being Tao expressed, is the actual expressional fruit or result of the path.* Because it is an expression of the mind, it reveals your stage of spiritual attainment, and because it is a factor of active expression, it demonstrates your mastery of great functioning.

No matter what stage you ultimately achieve through the path of spiritual cultivation, you will never annihilate the realm of transient phenomena, for that is the interdependent appearance or display aspect of the absolute. It is already empty, so it cannot be annihilated. So how you skillfully operate in this world of interchanging forms is the true measure of your wisdom, compassion, and enlightenment. It is the true measure of your cultivation achievement because it demonstrates how effectively you act in tune with the Tao, and illustrates your degree of perfection in understanding both emptiness and compassion.

The Tao is ultimately empty, and so the emptiness realm of mind is one means for describing the spiritual path. However, the functioning of the Tao as exhibited through personal behavior becomes another way to describe the spiritual path, just as did some of the physical transformations catalogued by Taoism. So the routes of mind and behavior, such as in Buddhism and Confucianism and even Socratic cultivation, are also alternative means for describing the spiritual trail.

If you cultivate your chi, mai and tumo fire successfully, and break through the psychological problems standing in the way of your seeing the Tao, such as holding to the view of being or possessing a body, you will gradually become able to achieve the four dhyana. Attaining these four samadhi will establish the foundation for yet higher spiritual attainments, and a detailed discussion on this aspect of the path is in yet another chapter to come. What you should therefore hope to accomplish by the preliminary practices of prayoga is to transform your physical body and your mind enough to break free of the view of the body, as well as the skandhas of form and

sensation. In conjunction with the proper cultivation effort, this will ultimately lead to attaining the four dhyana, and yet higher stages of cultivation accomplishment.

For various books that can help explain the more esoteric aspects of kundalini cultivation (including Tantric practices), or methods for cultivating the chi, please see:

Tao and Longevity: Mind-Body Transformation
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1984.

Tsong Khapa's Six Yogas of Naropa
Trans. by Glen Mullin
Snow Lion Publications, New York, 1996.

Readings on the Six Yogas of Naropa
Trans. by Glenn Mullin
Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca: New York, 1997.

Highest Yoga Tantra
Daniel Cozort
Snow Lion Publications, New York, 1986.

Kalacakra Tantra
Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey
Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Delhi, 1994.

Kundalini: Energy of the Depths
Lillian Silburn
SUNY Press, New York, 1988.

Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines
W. Y. Evans-Wentz
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967.

Teachings of Tibetan Yoga
Trans. Garma C. C. Chang
Carol Publishing Group, New York, 1993.

Chapter 9:
Essential Cultivation Principles which Few People are Ever Taught

At this point, we must reflect upon one of the ancillary purposes of this book, which is to help people proceed down the proper path of cultivation no matter what their particular spiritual school or current route of cultivation practice. This is an important concern, as there now exist a tremendous variety of cultivation paths and practices available to any spiritual aspirant, and choosing between these paths has now become a quite daunting affair.

The ultimate goal of all spiritual striving is called enlightenment, or self-realization, which we also call "becoming a Buddha." Therefore, a fundamental question we must ask ourselves on this journey is, "What exactly is enlightenment, and what exactly is the enlightenment dharma?"

There are many ways you can answer these questions, some of which may involve the terms dharmakaya, *bodhi*, nirvana, Buddha mind, prajna and so forth, but these various means all point to one and the same thing. Chinese culture says Buddha nature is the true self-nature of all beings in the universe. If a person is able to understand this and see his true self, then we say they have become a "Buddha," or become enlightened. We also say that they awaken, or realize the Tao, or see God's face. There are a variety of ways to express this, but Buddhism has analyzed this matter from so many more angles than other spiritual paths that we will continue to base our conversation around Buddhist teachings for a start.

Another word for Buddha is "*ru-lai*," which means that the true self, or fundamental nature, is the primordial nature which never comes and never leaves, for how can emptiness come or go? It cannot, because it is always here. However, while the fundamental nature never comes nor goes, this term also refers to the fact that it appears *as if* there exists a genuine coming and going of the fundamental nature in the world of phenomena, and that is because there are transformations of birth and death in the world.

As to various other terms that pertain to enlightenment, "*bodhi*" means the realization of wisdom, or awakening to one's fundamental Buddha nature, and the *bodhi* wisdom which allows you to realize your original nature is prajna, while the greatest prajna attainment of them all is *nirvana*. We also call nirvana the primordial mind ground, the essence of awareness, true Suchness, and countless other names which ultimately point in the same direction. They all point to *That Thing* we variously call Tao, enlightenment, self-realization, spiritual liberation, salvation, God, Brahman, Allah, or fundamental nature.

Naturally we will continue focusing on Buddhist terms in our explanations, but this is because of their usefulness rather than due to any prejudice. Of all the religions in existence, Buddhism

offers the most complete, logical, robust and comprehensive referential structure for understanding the whole of cultivation science. It cuts the pie, so-to-speak, in more cross-referential ways than any other spiritual school.

Buddhism, as an enlightenment path, has an entire host of terms like this to help guide individuals in their spiritual cultivation. But unlike many other religions, Buddhism has nothing to do with magic, superstition, blind worship or dogma. Rather, Buddhism is simply a collection of nondenominational and scientifically structured teachings that provide a solid framework you can use to help in your experiential search for Truth. Buddhism insists that you *must* search for spiritual truth yourself, rather than rely on someone else to give you enlightenment or do the cultivation work for you, and so you must eventually realize your ultimate essence from your own spiritual striving.

Buddhism says to prove everything, and even goes so far as to say you should not take the Buddhist position as being valid unless you authenticate it through your own personal experience. What other religion has the guts to tell you to take this stance? This means that Buddhism not only tells you the way, but that you can prove it.

In other words, Buddhism says you must engage in the personal experience of the spiritual path, and tread its various stages, in order to become liberated. You cannot just go to church, the mosque, or attend temple services and think that is all that must be done, and you are thereby a good person and destined to go to Heaven. Buddhism says that for any degree of spiritual attainment, it is going to require some intensified spiritual practice. People generally all say they want to do this but do not know how, and throughout this book we have been showing you the way.

According to Buddhism, belief, or faith, is not good enough to win you spiritual liberation. In fact, if you settle for somebody else's promises on this matter, without seeking your own personal proof, then you are practicing the blind faith or superstition which Buddhism abhors. This is not only being illogical and nonscientific, but this is a pretty risky stance to take although it appeals to those who do not want to be told they have to make any spiritual efforts. Frankly if you do not have to do anything, then there is no reason to even mention the path of spiritual practice or have religious paths in the first place. Since this does not seem too logical, you can see that this viewpoint has some major flaws to it.

Everything on the spiritual trail has to be proved through your own personal experience rather than accept our words for it, or even the stories of past masters even though they keep reiterating the same cultivation principles and conclusions. Hence when you encounter teachings on the various dhyana, superpowers and the like, these are not to be accepted on face value. These are all genuine phenomenal outcomes of the path, but they can and must be personally verified through your own spiritual efforts in order to have any real meaning. On the Buddhist path you

must cultivate to authenticate the existence of these states and thereby prove them. You cannot just settle for hearing the accounts of various meditation practitioners who have these experiences, but must become one of the participants who can report of them yourself.

All of Buddhism's various teachings can be viewed as just a single means or single path, namely a collection of expedient methods to help you get to the one goal of enlightenment. Buddhism is simply a tremendous collection of expedient or skillful means that help you achieve this supreme goal of self-realization. A "Buddhist" is not really someone who follows Buddhism per se (which is how society normally refers to the matter), but simply someone who wants to directly perceive their fundamental true self—which is the fundamental nature of all beings in the universe—and who sets about perfecting their mind and behavior to achieve this. Buddhism teaches you how to achieve these goals, as well as how to change your karmic fortunes and master the realms of birth and death.

Now we can also call this fundamental self of ours the "First Cause," God, the alaya consciousness, true Reality, the unmoved Mover, Allah, or even *tathagatagarbha*, but all these different terms are just symbolic representations of that one fundamental state. In cultivation, our single goal is to cultivate away impurities and mental obstructions in order to reach this one true nature and then *bring this realization into our everyday functioning*. Attaining the various samadhi, kung-fu and breaking through the skandhas are just the scenery one passes along the way to these objectives. They are just a sort of training routine for the spiritual path of ultimate awakening.

From a technical point of view, we say that the any person who wants to awaken to full enlightenment must achieve three enlightenment bodies: the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. The dharmakaya, or Truth Body, is another phrase for our formless, omnipresent, ultimate, absolute, void and yet all-embracing original nature. The sambhogakaya, or Enjoyment Body, is the beautified appearance body achieved by someone who has attained the Tao, and its beauty reflects all their spiritual merits. The nirmanakaya, or transformation body, is a functional projection body that an enlightened individual can send to perform all sorts of activities throughout the cosmos for the benefit of unfortunate sentient beings.

These three bodies represent different aspects of Suchness: fundamental essence is represented by the dharmakaya, the appearance aspect of Suchness is represented by the sambhogakaya, and the possible functions that can originate out of the fundamental nature are the nirmanakaya. These three Buddha bodies are often illustrated in Buddhist temples by three Buddha statues standing next to one another, and they correspond to the three objectives one must ultimately cultivate on the spiritual path. In other words, the spiritual path is not simply about seeing the Tao, or realizing the dharmakaya. After one awakens to the Truth Body of inherent Reality, they must also continue their cultivation to perfect the sambhogakaya Enjoyment Body and the nirmanakaya capabilities of enlightenment as well.

Taoism also has a triumvirate of figures to represent these exact same three principles. In various other religions, this trio goes by different names but is also present as well. For instance, the trio of Father, Holy Spirit and Son appears in Christianity; *ti*, *xiang* and *yung* appears in Chinese philosophy; and *sat*, *chit* and *ananda* appear in Hinduism. We always have these three different principles, but as regards the path of spiritual cultivation, the most useful terms seem to be the Buddhist explanations of the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies. In order to understand the details of the cultivation path, we have to fathom the meaning of these three bodies in detail, for they are intimately related to cultivation technology.

The Dharmakaya

The dharmakaya is just another name for the Tao. It is the fundamental original ground nature that we all share in common. It is our inexpressible, empty, stainless, formless original nature that lacks any signs or marks. There is a saying that runs, "If at all times you do not grasp appearances, you will see the Tathagata," and this refers to realizing the dharmakaya. In other words, awakening to the dharmakaya means "seeing the Tao," which is how the Buddhist and Taoist phraseology match up. "Awakening to the dharmakaya" is equivalent to "seeing the Truth," so the dharmakaya is often called the Truth Body of spiritual cultivation.

The Sambhogakaya

The sambhogakaya is the ultimate retribution body we create from all our virtuous acts that we commit throughout our endless incarnations within the cyclical existence of interdependent arising. Therefore, sometimes it is called our Enjoyment Body, Retribution Body, or Reward Body. In Taoism, we can think of cultivating to get rid of illness to attain long life as just one means of trying to produce the Reward body. In other words, opening the chi mai, chakras, channels and so on cultivates the Reward Body whereas a cultivation method, such as reciting Buddha's name to achieve cessation and perceive the Tao, is method of working to attain the dharmakaya.

In short, the sambhogakaya is a purified form or appearance body that we can enjoy as a result of our cultivation efforts and merits. It is a body of perfection that exhibits, through its magnificent appearance or display, our progress on the spiritual path. The better we practice, the higher our virtues and merits and kung-fu and excellences, and Hence, the more magnificent will be our sambhogakaya Reward Body.

The Nirmanakaya

Lastly, the nirmanakaya are the physical bodies that a realized being, once they have achieved success in their practice and become enlightened, can emanate everywhere so as to be able to save people in the mundane sphere. The nirmanakaya is not an ultimate body, but a temporary

body subject to the changes and transformations of ordinary phenomenal things. Together the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya are sometimes lumped together in classification as the *rupakaya*, or form body, but that is just a larger category of the notion of a possessing bodily form.

This nirmanakaya or "emanation body" is also translated as the "transformation body," or "*hua-shen*," because every moment it is transforming. It belongs to the phenomenal world, and this belonging necessitates that every moment it must be changing. When you see your never-changing true self you become a Buddha, and as an enlightened Buddha you can actually project thousands of nirmanakaya emanation bodies all over the universe, each of which can work towards any specific task you set for uplifting sentient beings. So when you read in a Buddhist sutra that, upon reading some holy work or performing some deed a certain Buddha has promised he or she will come and bless you, this is not nonsense. This is actually achieved by that Buddha through the projection of any invisible nirmanakaya, and those with superpowers can see this vow being fulfilled.

The ability to project these nirmanakaya bodies means being able to accomplish merit on a vast scale in a very short period of time. Since the nirmanakaya are actual physical bodies that can take a infinite number of different shapes and forms, they can include things like trees, shrubs, bacteria, rocks, light or even wind when a Buddha so wills it. They can be made out of all sorts of materials other than just jing, chi, shen, light and other essences you can read about. In one sense you can also consider all your thoughts to be nirmanakaya projection bodies since they ultimately originate from the fundamental nature, which is your natural Buddha body.

You can think of the nirmanakaya as the manifest functional forms of an enlightened individual who has come to help us in the world, the sambhogakaya as his magnificent transcendental appearance body which displays all his cultivation merits, and the dharmakaya as the common essence body, Truth Body or fundamental nature of us all. That is why we have the concepts of "substance," "qualities" and "actions" found in the various Vedic schools, such as the Vaisheshika school of philosophy. In terms of Chinese philosophy, these three principles of dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya correspond to the triumvirate of *ti* (substance), *xiang* (appearance or form) and *yung* (function), while in other schools we have a similar philosophical or functional trinity. In Christianity the Father principle corresponds to the dharmakaya, the Holy Spirit is the sambhogakaya, and the Son come to teach us is a nirmanakaya projection body of the Father.

Attaining the Three Enlightenment Bodies

What is important about the world's spiritual cultivation methods is that they are targeted at helping us awaken to the dharmakaya, which is our fundamental nature or "original face." They all claim to offer a practice methodology that leads us to realization of our fundamental essence of being. Naturally, this original nature of ours has never been missing and will never leave, but

people cannot realize the essence of their fundamental nature because they have become too attached to all sorts of thoughts and desires that muddle this possible realization. In the path of meditation practice, you try to let go of this mental busyness so that it naturally departs, and then with the resulting increase in mental purity, or emptiness, you can activate your prajna insight wisdom so as to be able to recognize the Tao.

All the genuine cultivation methods in the world, if a practitioner does not get sidetracked, aim at "detaching from," "reducing," or "purifying" our internal traffic jam of self-imposed mental complexity. When that is accomplished, you are in a better position from which to realize your fundamental true nature, which ontologically exists without any such pollution.

"Mental pollutions" are of the same essence as the fundamental nature, so fundamentally they do not obstruct it or stain it because they are empty. This is why it is craziness for us to attach to any mental phenomena in the first place, and yet we do because of wrong habits and false perspectives. Any mental obstructions standing in the way of regaining insight into our original nature are therefore imagined pollutions that we have created ourselves through incorrect mental habits, and spiritual cultivation is the process of learning to let go of (purify) these habits of mental ignorance so as to clear the way for a spiritual awakening into their fundamental source. Spiritual cultivation constitutes learning how to master mental detachment, including how to recognize that these imaginations are not real in the first place.

On the path of cultivation we therefore learn how to let go of our mental obstructions, for no one can "uncling" or "unclutter" our mind for us. We have to make the spiritual effort to do this ourselves, for only we can cultivate our own virtuous mental state. Terrible, isn't it? … We have to do all our own spiritual cultivation work ourselves because nobody else can save us. No one can perform a ceremony for us and have us awaken. All the work involved in achieving spiritual liberation is thrust upon our own shoulders, and that is the only thing which will bring spiritual liberation.

Now if we succeed at achieving the goal of self-realization, this enlightenment means recognizing the pure dharma body that is the fundamental source of both mental and material things in the universe. Such is the general roadmap of spiritual cultivation, and indeed, the main objective of Buddhism and most every other genuine spiritual school. Of course, Buddhism does not stop here, for to be complete, it says you must also cultivate the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies because you muster learn to master your functioning and appearance in the universe as well. So the whole road of cultivation involves cultivating not one, but three Buddha bodies.

Most of the Zen masters of the past who succeeded in enlightenment actually only awakened to the dharmakaya, and few ever achieved the other two enlightenment bodies. This is so important that we will say it again: even among those individuals who achieved the Tao in the past, most only realized the dharmakaya, and few ever completed the whole task of successfully cultivating

the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya as well.

The original Orthodox Buddhism of India later developed a branch of esotericism which is now found in Tibet, but both of these schools—the Orthodox and Esoteric schools of Buddhism—have the same objective of helping you become enlightened into the dharmakaya. Furthermore, although both schools emphasize different cultivation techniques, neither school is superstitious nor involved with idol worship, and they both have prajna emptiness as their ultimate guiding principle.

Both schools also state that anyone can become a Buddha because everyone is part of the enlightened fundamental nature; anyone can become enlightened since we all equally share in that same ground state true self. That original, fundamental enlightenment is already there so we do not have to create it. Rather, we must simply turn away from delusive preoccupations in order to awaken to it and recognize the face of reality as it really is.

Shakyamuni, of course, taught the Orthodox teachings of Buddhism while the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna later developed the Esoteric school out of Shakyamuni's teachings, and then it was carried over into Japan and Tibet. What is confusing about the Esoteric school today is its wide variety of contents; they are so diverse that they can be compared to the innards of a sausage which contains everything both good and bad inside. For example, the Esoteric school often talks about the five primordial Buddhas, four of whom are transformation bodies of the original Buddha Vairocana. Each of these Buddhas, being a nirmanakaya emanation body, is therefore known for a particular, specialized function. This can be taken to illustrate the specialized teaching nature of this school, how the Esoteric school tries to explain everything in detail, and can also help us understand that in the fundamental sense we are all the nirmanakaya transformation bodies of some enlightened Buddha. That is why we have the ability to determine the vows we wish to accomplish in the world.

The Ceaseless Transformations of the Universe

In terms of spiritual cultivation, we can also use this example to note that all the nirmanakaya transformation bodies are in a constant state of change and motion. Reincarnation is just one example of the process of change and transformation, but in fact every moment we are changing, every moment our cells and thoughts are instantaneously transforming into something different. In fact, the whole universe is like this without exception.

Ever since sperm and egg first came together to form the initial seed of our bodies, we have experienced this ceaseless process of change through an endless cycle of growing and dying. And because we need food and air to live, we are in turn transforming the other beings and the environment around us as we go through this process. Thus, the world consists of an entire complex of mutual interchange and interaction from which we cannot escape; it is one giant,

shimmering soup that never stays the same, and cannot possibly refrain from transformation. Taoism calls the whole thing "*zao-hua*," meaning "creation-transformation," for it is like the contents of a cooking pot which are always being bubbled and stirred and transformed.

A Taoist individual named Tan Qiao wrote *The Book of Transformation*, wherein he used physical principles to talk about the transformative aspect of the universe. He said our bodies could be compared to a giant chemical oven with internal reactions ceaselessly taking place inside. Our bodies are only a tiny fraction of the whole universe, and yet they exhibit this phenomenon of change on a small scale just as the entire universe does on a large scale. As Western alchemy correctly states, the microcosm indeed reflects the macrocosm.

This is where we must remember something important about the principles of cultivation: when we take emptiness to an extreme it appears to become form, while form taken to its extreme appears to become emptiness (for instance, the denseness of a point singularity). You can grasp this through the analogy of a strobe light: the extremely fast-blinking strobe light appears as if it is hardly moving at all even though its speed is unimaginable. So when emptiness builds itself into form, you will not see emptiness anymore, and when you reach the extreme of form, emptiness will appear as the result.

The mundane phases of mental stillness and movement are also similarly interrelated. When we achieve some degree of mental emptiness (stillness), it might seem as if there is a total lack of mental movement, but the extreme silence should actually still be considered a form of movement because it is not yet the Tao. In fact, we should actually think of it as being *great movement*, as we saw with the strobe light, for it really is a tremendously busy state of transformation. The only truly unmoving state is our original nature that gives rise to mundane stillness or tranquility as an illusive experiential realm. If you can turn your awareness around to realize that prepositional one, however, then you will be able to recognize what real no-change and no-movement is.

The fundamental question to ask is, "What is doing all this mental movement, and what is behind all this change?" All this sort of internal mental movement must be considered an empty display without any self-nature of its own; otherwise, if it had any validity to it, it would conflict with the changeless original nature. So when you analyze mental movements all you want, you will always find they have no fixed state of permanence in order to satisfy this condition. Mental movements are actually the empty functioning of your true self, and this empty display must lack true reality or else it would obstruct your original nature.

The Characteristics of Form and the Ultimate Nature

Our world of changing forms and phenomena is a realm of interdependent origination that is defined, or operates, through the multidimensional interlinkage of simultaneous cause and effect. Because everything in the cosmos is defined through dependence upon other causes and

conditions, and because nothing stays the same in the universe for even the tiniest moment, this cosmos and its contents (including thoughts) cannot be considered real at all. The cosmos is just a transient effervescent display which, on the surface, seems to be real. Nevertheless it exists in the nature of a dream or illusion that you cannot grasp and hold onto. It is an effervescent mirage that lacks any solidity, and that is how and why it can exist without conflicting with its true nature. As an illusion, it can exist because it is an illusion; it can exist because it does not matter since it is not real.

We call the underlying fundamental essence of this effervescent display our true nature, and we also say that it is empty and formless. For instance, it is not marked by sound, color, shape, or movement. It is formless because it defies all our attempts at definition, and we say it is empty because it lacks all objective attributes. When we hold discussions concerning this true self of ours, in general we usually just end up discussing the characteristics of the various empty appearances and functions it gives birth to. People analyze these things hoping to find that one original source, but the evaluations of science, logic, or thought itself can never reveal the original genuine basis behind interdependent origination. It is only through spiritual cultivation, and specifically through cultivating prajna wisdom, that one can find it.

What, then, is the true self or fundamental essence, and how do you reach it? If you can awaken to it, then you realize the dharmakaya and we say you become an enlightened individual, or Buddha. Actually you are a Buddha already since you have never been apart from your original enlightened true nature, and it is just that you simply have not yet awakened to this fact by realizing your original face. So that's what the path of spiritual striving is all about.

The question then becomes, since this original truth body of ours has no form, color or so on, how should we go about trying to realize this fundamental face of ours? The answer is the purpose for which the Zen school arose, for the Zen school does not use any artificial means to help us realize this fundamental nature. Rather, Zen training directly points to a realization of this one great matter. In the Zen school, a master might come to the front of his class and announce, "Class is now started" after which he might be silent for a minute or so and then announce, "Class is finished," and walk away.

To illustrate, once Emperor Liang Wu Ti invited Zen master Fu Ta Shih (Bodhisattva Fu) to expound upon the *Diamond Sutra*. As soon as the master ascended to the teaching seat, he knocked on the table once with a ruler and then left. Why? Because you cannot teach the dharmakaya since it has no form, no mark or coloring of any kind. It is wordless, empty, still. Therefore, a master who stands there silent is actually instructing us by teaching of the dharmakaya, or Truth Body. He is using the silence of emptiness to teach us about the pristine ground state nature of us all.

In another example, once Shakyamuni Buddha silently held up a flower in his hand, and his

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student Mahakashyapa smiled in response. Mahakashyapa understood Shakyamuni's message without words, so to Mahakashyapa was transmitted the authority of the Zen teaching. What was Buddha doing when he held up the flower? What exactly was he trying to teach? Can we say that anything constitutes a "special pointing" toward the dharmakaya if everything is the dharmakaya?

Everything always *is* announcing the dharmakaya, and so we have the saying, "The mountains, trees and whole earth are all chanting Buddha dharma." The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, "Beings teach, lands teach, all things in all times teach constantly, without interruption." A Christian might say, "God stuff is everywhere, so where is there less Godstuff or more Godstuff; since it is all Godstuff, how can some of it be fundamentally more pure than others?" The Hindu *Drigdrishya-viveka* says, "The attributes of existence, consciousness and bliss are equally present in the five elements, as well as in gods, animals and men. Only names and forms make one different from the other."

All these sentences essentially say the same thing, but few really understand the common meaning of these phrases. For instance the *Lotus Sutra* also tell us,

> All the dharmas from the origin,
> are in the form of nirvana.

This sentence also carries the very same message. But people rarely attain to the authentic realization of this teaching, including those who engage in spiritual cultivation. To understand its meaning, you must actually attain to nirvana, which means to attain spiritual realization.

The true nature never moves but is always here, has always been here and will always be here. Nothing can change it. Therefore, the Zen school instructs people to head directly for realizing that true nature while ignoring anything else which distracts from that possible realization. That is why it dispenses with practices that concentrate on transforming the physical body, such as chi or kundalini cultivation. Zen just lets these transformations happen naturally, and when they happen it ignores them because they are not the important thing. You do not need to concentrate on specific technologies to change the physical body or spiritually awaken; just turn around within the mind to see what is doing the knowing, and thus, awaken directly! That is the Zen method of spiritual cultivation practice.

Everything in the universe is constantly and incessantly changing, so Zen does not waste any time working on transforming any transient vehicles (the physical body) which are destined to change anyway. Rather, it just focuses attention on the attempt to experientially realize the fundamental nature of the mind, which is the dharmakaya itself. Any changes that should happen to the body will naturally happen on the spiritual path—if you are cultivating correctly—and so Zen rightfully says you do not have to force them into occurring. Zen is therefore the supreme path of spiritual cultivation since it holds onto nothing and just points directly to the Tao.

This explains why the Zen school ignores the kung-fu of the physical body, including superpowers and the like, which arise upon the path, for they are all transient phenomena that arise due to transformations. If you cultivate you will attain them and if you do not cultivate you will not attain them. Thus, they cannot be that *ultimate real one* which stays. They are not that prepositionally *real* thing. Zen focuses only on prajna wisdom, the aspect of primordial self-knowing that recognizes the true nature of phenomena and which lets you awaken to your fundamental essence. To the Zen school, life and death are like the going in and out of a room—such changes are all empty so there is no need to focus on or worry about them.

Nagarjuna, the "second Buddha" and founder of the Esoteric school of Buddhism, wrote a famous work, *Treatise on the Middle Way*, which listed eight no's regarding this ultimate. Rather than mention positive characteristics, he said

- It is never born, and never dies
- It has never left, and has never come
- It is not inconstant (impermanent), and is not constant (permanent)
- It is not one, and is not not-one

In the *Heart Sutra*, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara mentioned six similar insights:

- It is not born, and it does not die
- It is not impure, and it is not pure
- It does not increase, and it does not decrease

When the Buddhist sutras analyze matters, they talk about characteristics in this manner so that the descriptions can actually be used as cultivation meditations. This is the preferred approach rather than to recount stories of cultivators who radiated light from their bodies, flew through the air, walked on water, or performed all sorts of other supernatural feats. The close cousin of this sort of technique is found in Hinduism when it says "neti, neti!" Translated, this phrase means "not this, not this," for this particular cultivation technique is also trying to teach people to let go of all phenomenal realms. It is saying that whatever experience arises is not the original nature itself, but just another functional appearance … so let go of it!

Most of Buddha's students were not so foolish as to treasure superpowers, kung-fu and psychic abilities anyway, which is why so many attained the Tao during Shakyamuni's lifetime. That is one reason why we know that Shakyamuni was so great in spiritual accomplishment, for no other spiritual teacher during his lifetime had hundreds of students who attained the Tao from his instructions, or even just the samadhi attainments. Of course, we also have some great Zen masters like Ma-tsu who had dozens of students who awakened, and from this we can gain insight into Ma-tsu's own high stage of spiritual attainment. But Shakyamuni was very special. Shakyamuni never emphasized superpowers and the like, and in fact it he made it a breach of

discipline in the Buddhist order if any monks played with such abilities because it usually sends them down the wrong cultivation trail.

Superpowers and psychic abilities are just the dust which arises as you work to break through the skandhas and penetrate to the root source of body and mind. Paranormal abilities typically involve the skandhas of form and sensation, which are realms of impermanence, and many of the lower paranormal abilities depend upon there being a physical body; otherwise, they could never appear in the first place.

Most psychic abilities and strange powers also depend upon the workings of the sixth consciousness, which means that if you are hit on the head and go unconscious then you cannot perform any such feats at all! Consider that if such special abilities depend on some sort of a physical body for manifestation, how ultimate can they really be as objectives you should train for? The *Surangama Sutra* explained their illusive nature quite clearly when it talked about the fifty delusive states of cultivation, and we will fully examine these teachings in due time.

Existence and Nonexistence

There are many mistaken notions you can fall into on the road of spirituality, so it takes high wisdom achievements to navigate through the waters of the various spiritual doctrines we might encounter on the path. For instance, according to materialistic philosophy, which even existed during ancient Vedic times, some people think that after you die your existence is entirely over: "Poof!" you are gone, annihilated, and become extinct or nonexistent. According to this viewpoint, death ultimately ends all forms of an individual's existence.

An alternative view is that you will not be annihilated upon your death, but will go to some sort of heaven or hell. In other words you will simply go someplace else and continue living forever. Sometimes a spiritual school talks of the process of reincarnation; this teaching is a little better because it embodies the concept of ceaseless change and transformation. To complicate matters, we even have certain meditative realms, such as the state of nirvana identified in Abhidharma theory, where it is as if the body and mind no longer exist. Of course, this nonexistence is not an actual nonexistence—it is just a way of practicing kung-fu, and is still subject to the cyclic rounds of birth and death. When your karma for such a state is used up, down you come again to a lower realm of existence.

According to proper cultivation theory, you should not adopt either extreme of total materialistic extinction, or eternal permanence. You should not attach yourself to either extreme because they are both one-sided views, and thereby faults already catalogued by the five errant perspectives of the volition skandha. Nevertheless, it is very easy for ordinary people to fall into the mistake of either materialistic extinction or infinite permanence, and that is because they do not train their minds.

People following various Hinayana-like paths tend to fall into the first trap and believe that things cease to exist. Thus, some people cling to emptiness, and even (wrongly) mistake it for extinction. Some people make the opposite mistake, for they climb no further than some experiential realm because of their samadhi attainments, and hold onto the belief that their particular realm of realization is the highest stage of spiritual attainment, or just some eternal stage that will last forever. They forget the fact that it, too, is born of causes and conditions, and thus one day is destined to change and depart.

Real enlightenment, on the other hand, is neither permanent existence nor ultimate nonexistence. It is beyond these two extremes, for it is beyond characteristics. That is the meaning of formlessness, which we usually identify via the term "emptiness." The worldly realm, on the other hand, seems to both exist and not exist. And how so? Because everything seems real as long as it lasts, and yet last nothing can. Everything is operative according to logical laws of interdependent cause and effect, and yet the results are empty of true existence all the while.

Conventional reality is populated with infinite functioning occurrences, and yet they all lack any inherent existence. Everything that appears in conventional reality is empty of true existence, and yet the conventional world is still there in front of us, operating according to its own coherent structure of dependent arising and simultaneous-so co-definitions. If you cling to it and say it is existent then you are wrong, and if you say it is nonexistent then you are also wrong as well. Either side of the argument can be disproved. It cannot be nonexistent because it is there in front of you in the conventional sort of way, and yet it is not existent because it lacks the characteristics of existent true reality.

Properly speaking, you cannot say that it is real or not real, existent or nonexistent, true or false, and thus that is also the way to "hold" the mind. When the mind is truly empty, it does not fall into either of these extremes, for it is even empty of emptiness. We commonly say that the conventional world is a "false realm" as a sort of teaching technique, but if you cling to this realm as being false or nonexistent, you are making the same mistake as clinging to it as being existent.

We can gain some small understanding of these matters from a simple illustration. Is an event that happened to you twenty years ago still here? Since you can still think about it with your mind, you can say it is still here, but of course it is not really here since it happened in the past. Then again you can say it is still here in the sense that the present has incorporated that past into itself through the chain of cause and effect. Practically speaking, we can therefore say it is both there and not there; both statements are true, and both are also false.

This is why we say that everything is like a dream, for being there and not being there are both like an illusion. However, that which knows the event from twenty years ago, and which also knows today has never changed. It has never moved, so it is beyond both these categories. *That thing* which knows is beyond both stillness and movement, which are a dualistic couple like

samadhi and mentation. Hence when people cultivate samadhi, properly speaking they are not cultivating the original nature because it cannot be changed or cultivated. Rather, they are simply cultivating another visaya experiential realm, another constructed state of mind. Of course it is a very high state of mind that is tranquil, empty, and more in tune with the principles of the Tao than our regular confused state of mentation, but samadhi isn't *It*. To attain self-realization, you must drop any attachment to even the highest states of samadhi attainment, and yet you must cultivate the samadhi stations as training grounds for seeing the Way.

To reach spiritual enlightenment, Buddhism always points out that you must stay away from attaching to four categories of thought that can inhibit self-realization:

- Emptiness (nonexistence)
- Existence
- Emptiness (nonexistence) and existence
- Neither emptiness nor nonexistence

These instructions are equivalent to saying you must learn to stay away from abiding in any fixed judgments such as "this is right" or "this is wrong." You must spiritually practice by simply letting awareness actively operate, but without actively employing the sixth consciousness in a forced manner to make discriminations. When the sixth consciousness settles, the level of mental "cessation" resultantly achieved will help you experientially taste some meaning of emptiness and direct knowing.

Remember, however, that on the road of spiritual cultivation, pacifying the sixth consciousness is only an initial step of spiritual attainment. You must continue to purify even the seventh and eighth consciousnesses until you finally realize the Tao completely. We can say you must purify the five skandhas, or the eight consciousnesses, and we can describe the journey in a variety of other ways (such as achieving the three Buddha Bodies), but they all necessitate a road of spiritual progress. In fact, progress must eventually reach the stage of effortlessness, because all you do is act out of original prajna awareness.

In spiritual cultivation, you must work hard to prove or disprove all of this, and strive to recognize why we call the fundamental nature "true mind." The fundamental nature is called true mind, but you have to remember that thoughts are not the way to realizing Tao because when mental states arise, fundamental enlightenment does not increase. Therefore thoughts can in no way reveal it. Neither can they make it more perfect in any way, for they actually represent a state of falsity or ignorance. In fact, clinging to thoughts is what creates ignorance in the first place.

Mental attachment diverts attention away from that primordial nature which gives birth to our knowing abilities in the first place. That is why the process of spiritual cultivation involves having

us learn how to let go of our thoughts so as to reveal the pristine substrate of mind within which they appear. That is the fundamental mind, not the thoughts themselves! In your personal meditative investigations of the samadhi realms, you must be careful not to equate this "true mind" with the sixth, seventh or eighth consciousness!

Since thoughts are fundamentally empty in themselves, there is no need to cut them off on the road of spiritual cultivation. You should just refrain from clinging to or rejecting them because these extra efforts are not in line with the Tao of liberated freedom. By refusing to participate in them, thoughts will purify themselves without any efforts on your own part. That is why the Zen school says, "Just let go and you will naturally awaken."

Ontology and Spiritual Practice

The *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, attributed to Asvaghosha, takes a different approach to this entire topic. It talks of just two things: the true self and fundamental ignorance that accompanies it. The true self is there shining with primordial awareness, the enlightened nature, and yet this awareness is capable of producing a fundamental ignorance which is not really real. The *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* says you should never become attached to or transfixed on the operation of awareness, and then the unreal state of nonenlightenment will not ever bind you. In the highest sense, it does not even exist since you are always in the enlightened state, and nonenlightenment is what you are perceiving.

Here is one of the highest and most direct methods of spiritual practice: Just let fundamental awareness be, to do its own thing, and rest entirely within the enlightened sphere while naturally performing any required activities that you may have to do. Eat when you are hungry, rest when tired, and cultivate the fundamental mind. In not dwelling on what awareness makes you aware of, you will free yourself from any ignorant states that might arise and which might shroud your clear mind of enlightenment. In abandoning any attachment to random thoughts and thereby liberating yourself from the five skandhas, you will naturally arrive at perceiving the ever-present true nature.

Buddha once said to Ananda, "Even if you achieve all nine samadhi at this moment, you still will not end defilements or achieve the fruits of the Arhats." Why? Because the various samadhi states are still only creations of the mind. You have to let go of what we normally call the mind, even its most refined states, to reach the reality of what it truly is and see the self-nature. Only when you realize it can you achieve the selflessness stage of the Arhats. This is why the path is one of prajna awareness.

On the road of spiritual cultivation, you have to let go of all forms of consciousness because consciousness is still a construction. It is still a projection of that original nature with its primordial knowing awareness. Even if you get rid of all your seeing, hearing, feeling and

thinking—so that you are pure and clear inside and out—you will still be operating within the realm of consciousness and the "enlightenment of Tao" is beyond even this.

The realm of consciousness is not yet the true mind, but rather a first-level projection that is also defined through the net of interdependent arising. This is why you must even purify the alaya consciousness that is the ground state of all other forms of consciousness. You have to so cultivate that it "turns inside out," so that it experiences a revolution in its basis and becomes the miraculous Tathagata Storehouse that can give birth to all things.

When we see people with the kung-fu to fly or radiate light from their body, how can we consider it a big deal knowing that when they die, all these capabilities will be gone? They cannot be there all the time, and if they are not there continuously, what is their ultimate significance? People may think a billion years is a long time, but in terms of the original nature it is not even a microsecond. In fact it does not even exist because in terms of the fundamental nature there is no such thing as time. So being able to accomplish such unusual kung-fu phenomena is no more significant than being able to play a good game of billiards, but awakening to the fundamental nature—wow, that represents incredible, inconceivable merit!

All of the unusual kung-fu you may see on the road of cultivation just lets you know that this true thing behind it all exists; they are just external phenomena or functions letting you know that that Real thing is there. The flowers, trees, rocks, the telephone, everything around you, including thoughts and the five skandhas, are also phenomena letting you know it exists—they are all chanting the mantra of enlightenment dharma! False existence is always pointing to true existence. Yet even though you might understand *This One*, you are not enlightened yet and so you are not yet an awakened Buddha. You are fundamentally a Buddha, but not yet awakened.

All cultivation and all spiritual striving ultimately comes down to trying to realize the dharmakaya, the true nature or true self, and discovering that this true self is fundamentally empty, even empty of concepts of emptiness. It is so perfectly empty, the words "emptiness" or "void" are not even capable of describing how formless this emptiness is, because when these words still pertain to some concept of form when we use them.

Our fundamental nature is totally void, like an empty sky without stains, and yet it is this emptiness which gives rise to wondrous (dependent) existence. It gives birth to miraculous existence because of its extreme of emptiness, for emptiness—in being empty—has room to engender being. But what it gives rise to is a false being, an empty being that does not conflict with its unchangeable true nature. It produces a transitory effervescent realm that cannot last and isn't real for even an instant, otherwise it would conflict with its own never changing nature. And yet we can also say this false realm is real for as long as it lasts, even if the lasting is ultimately a nonarising.

The only word we have for this is "miraculous." Thus, there are two aspects to the Tao we must recognize: (1) the world of conventional, "miraculous existence" and (2) the empty fundamental true nature. These two realms are actually inseparable oneness. In other words, primordial nature and primordial ignorance are always in mutual identity. They are interpenetrable. To say it another way, nirvana and samsara, the state of realization and state of afflictions, are essentially equivalent. Yet it is the enlightened state which we must shoot for as the apex of spiritual striving. A famous Zen master once said, "In the universe, within time and space, there is a treasure hidden in the mountain of form," but the problem is how to get there, how to realize this hidden treasure.

At this very moment you are sitting there reading, and while twenty years from now that Real thing will still be here, the room you are in and this book may not exist at all. But that real thing will never move throughout all of this. Shakyamuni Buddha therefore warned one of his students, Moggallana, who was known for his expertise in superpowers, "No matter how high your kung-fu is, no matter what samadhi stage you reach nor superpowers you develop, you can never escape impermanence. Do not cultivate superpowers but cultivate the Tao instead."

The dharma of change is therefore supreme in worldly phenomena. Everything everywhere changes, for nothing can nor will ever remain unchanged. Even so, wherever you go, there you still are. Your body may change, the environment may change, but that ultimate knower is still there. In Heaven or Hell, in dullness, stupidity or alertness, there you still are. Realize *That One*! All the transformations around you are constantly turning, except for that Real, constant and unchanging thing, so why get excited about miraculous stories of kung-fu and think this is Tao? "Poof," they're already gone!

The Chinese often pose a question that addresses this issue, although it looks backward rather than forward: "Whatever you had before, where is it now?" The answer is that everything you previously had, even a second ago, is gone already. Any state you experienced has already been transformed. It is already empty of what it was, but that primordial awareness of yours is still here unmoving and never changing while various scenes pass in front of it. All *That One* ever does is continually watch all the passing scenes of transformation.

The true mind essence does not change because it is only the false mind that changes. The false mind belongs to the realm of phenomena, so the road of spirituality entails cultivating samadhi to reach a relative point of falseness cessation whereby you can realize that what you thought was your true mind was a false mind, and you can thereby detach from it. Read that again, for this is the spiritual path, and this is why cessation and contemplation practice works.

To come to know the true mind beneath the false one is exercising your prajna wisdom, and exercising prajna is the way to realize the Tao. But only after you practice cultivating samadhi and prajna can you attain this sort of realization and so that is the use of samadhi—it is simply a

method of preparatory training. As we said, cultivating samadhi is not cultivating Tao, it is just a means to empower your mind stream with clarity and stability so that you can realize your true, formless original face. Cultivating samadhi belongs at the Mahayana Stage of Intensified Preparatory Practices.

Thus, you can understand that whatever has been born will die because of impermanence, and that everything in existence will naturally follow this same sequence of birth and death enmeshed within cause and effect. The phenomenal realm can never depart from this sequence of creation and destruction, but will always change from moment to moment according to the laws of karma. This is all because phenomenal appearances are false realities defined by other false conditions. In fact, all the false conditions are bound up together in one large net of falsity that we call mara, illusion, samsara, interdependent origination, the phenomenal realm, or the Three Realms. They are constructions without a self-so nature created through the interdependent laws of causes and conditions. Because their existence comes about through dependence on causes and conditions, they are a false rather than true existence of nature.

If you let go of these impermanent things (such as thoughts) you will find that the True One behind them is empty like space, yet lucid with bright awareness. With every change, the previous state becomes extinct in the sphere of this formless true nature, so what can you possibly hold onto, and why are you trying to hold onto anything anyway? Realize the true nature; do not become fixated on what appears as your ordinary mind.

This entire world of ours is just like a great dream or illusion, which is why the *Diamond Sutra* says it is akin to a dream, a bubble, an illusion, or a flash of lightning. Like us, the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas are also cast members within this great dream, but of course they are like master magicians or top billed actors in this play since they are more capable than we are. On a conventional level we say that they can control their birth and death in this giant universe so as to assume any role they want. They can control their own actions rather than be impelled by karma, and so they have true free will in establishing and executing their own compassionate purposes.

Since they work for the benefit of others instead of taking a long break and enjoying themselves, this is what makes them Buddhas and Bodhisattvas after their enlightenment. If they did nothing at all, then at most we would call them Arhats. But they choose to act because they recognize that all other sentient beings are also within their mind stream, and thus they vow never to relax until all sentient beings have awakened.

When we therefore turn back towards the discussion of cultivation matters and kung-fu, we can realize that there really is no such thing as samadhi. It is just another phenomenon of the true nature, another empty experiential state that arises within true mind. Rocks are its creation, trees are its creation, thoughts are its creation, and samadhi is a mental creation as well.

All these things are empty; they are all false realms. You can conventionally say that samadhi is closer to the Tao than most other experiential realms, and yet how can it possibly be closer since it is still on par with any other phenomena? It is a stage of mental openness, but the sort of mental peace we find in samadhi is still a construction of consciousness—albeit highly refined—and it is not the "true emptiness" we speak of in cultivation.

This is why the Stage of Intensified Practices has you cultivating the various ranks of samadhi in preparation for the big breakthrough in seeing the Tao. Samadhi resembles the "emptiness of Tao," with the higher stage samadhi more progressively so, and yet this resemblance is as far from the mark as night is different from day since getting Tao is still a 0-1 affair. This is why Buddha said there are some people who can cultivate all nine samadhi, and who still have not seen their original nature. Samadhi is a guest and not the master, but we need the spiritual path of cultivating this resemblance realm in order that we might approach an awakening into the great matter.

From any proficiency you might attain in cultivating samadhi, your attachment to coarse phenomena will gradually subside and your prajna insight will grow so that you can shine awareness internally and realize the true nature. This is often described in the sense of "turning awareness around" so that your mind no longer abides in phenomena, but attains the state of nonabiding by experientially realizing what is experiencing phenomena and resting in that alone. This state of nonabiding is a true emptiness rather than just another mental image or label, for mental images are contents that normally fill this emptiness. Therefore, being empty of all images it is not in the realm of dualities we call conventional existence.

You may cultivate the nine samadhi and attain various superpowers, but none of this is real since it still is not the Tao. It is indeed the pathway to Tao, but not the Tao itself. Tao is empty of contrived states and phenomenal realms are false, and that fundamental ground state nature will always be here whereas these states will come and go; cultivate them and they are here, do not cultivate and they are not here. Of course while true mind will always be, false nature will always exist also but in a transient, empty fashion. Primordial enlightenment is accompanied by primordial ignorance, but do not use awareness to attach to this ignorance and then it remains nonexistent. You simply must learn how to detach from the false nature and find its source root to become its ultimate master. Once you are there, never leave that stage of realization.

Behavior as a Means of Cultivation

What is really going to ultimately matter after knowing the Tao is how you act your part in this dream-play of ultimate reality. This means that everything in cultivation, and the universe for that matter, ultimately boils down to your personal behavior. The path to enlightenment starts with behavior, because without cultivation and merit you will never awaken to your original nature. While it starts with the behavior of virtuous ways and compassionate deeds, it also ends with the

exhibition of compassionate behavior because this is how enlightenment is expressed. *Behavior is the ground, the means and fruit of the path*. The spiritual path is one giant seamless circle of behavior always being perfected at higher and higher levels, and the circle lacks any start or finish.

You have to be clear that just because everything is "empty," that does not mean behavior does not matter and that you can act with abandon, thoughtlessness, recklessness, irrationality, evil, anger, hatred or just absence of social decorum. Because karma defines the realm of wondrous existence, it is definite that you will suffer the karmic consequences of whatever actions you put into effect in the universe. Karma is inescapable, as is the suffering that characterizes phenomenal existence. Thus, an enlightened Buddha is one who awakens to, and then maintains full awareness of the fundamental nature while fully operating in the world of karma to help alleviate their suffering, for there is no Fourth Realm a Buddha can go to.

In effect, an enlightened individual is someone who perfectly masters the realms of both false existence and the mother nature. He achieves the Middle Way, which is free of extreme views, and thus knows both freedom and activity. He holds no attachments to phenomenal form, nor does he remain passive in real emptiness after having achieved the Tao. That is an option, but continuing to work in the realm of karma is his compassion, which is why all the enlightened beings who work for others are called Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the first place. If they did not make this decision after achieving complete enlightenment, then we would not call it complete enlightenment, nor would we call them Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The cultivation path of the Confucian school reflects this understanding and becomes a path of perfecting thoughts and behavior to achieve samadhi, prajna and Tao. By purifying their mind and behavior to arrive at samadhi, and by relying upon the higher and more advanced stages of samadhi they obtain because of the progressive behavioral merit they accumulate, Confucian cultivators are able to finally break through mental obstructions to achieve self-realization. And after enlightenment, they ceaselessly continue to work at perfecting their behavior, as is right, for there is always room for improvement as well as room to accumulate further excellences and skill in means. Hence, even with this school, the enlightenment pathway is a perfect circle; the start of the path is the same as the end of the path, and the process of the path is the meaning of the path with cause and effect becoming effect and cause, and the process all-in-one.

We can say that Christianity's emphasis on good works and behavior as a cultivation path follows this road as well, but any school that emphasizes behavior alone, without the adjunct of samadhi accomplishment and prajna, will require far too many eons of evolutionary striving to make it a worthwhile path to enlightenment. That is why the path of good behavior always requires meditation to be really effective.

Yes, you can eventually achieve enlightenment *after several eons* if you only perform good deeds

and cultivate virtue without meditation, but that is only if you do not make any errors or take any detours along the way, and you are sure to follow a bumpy road if you choose this route! Thus, *without cultivating the mind through meditation, it is theoretically possible, but in fact, nearly impossible to attain the Tao*.

All the beings that achieve enlightenment do so by cultivating meditative realization, which means that they cultivate the experiential realms of samadhi and cultivate their prajna wisdom. If you think you can "realize God" by good behavior alone, why are you not in the heavenly realms of existence right now? Do you really think you will be able to break out of the Realm of Desire without cultivating your mind and its wisdom nature?

The Nature of Conscious Thought

The dharmakaya, the true unborn self-nature that will never leave and has never arrived, has always been and has never changed. However, it is hard to awaken to the unborn nature of the dharmakaya through acts of charity and goodness by themselves. To realize it, you must purify your mind by abandoning mental pollutions (including any attachments to the five skandhas). But "purifying consciousness" is not the ultimate solution by itself, for consciousness is itself one of the five skandhas. Hence, consciousness is a product of other causes and conditions. Therefore, consciousness is not our ultimate nature nor ultimate goal (though some masters stop at this stage believing it is the final objective), for all types of consciousness still entail movement. Consciousness is not the ultimate substrate of knowing, for it is still a projection of the matrix of enlightenment.

Conscious thoughts never stop for even a second, even after you attain the Tao, so the problem is not thoughts per se, but that you mistakenly attach to this endless stream of shooting stars even though you know that this psychological aspect is not your true self. So do not try to block thoughts or spinnings of consciousness—just do not attach to them. Let them arise when they have to, but do not identify with them or feed them energy. Just shine awareness on them and they will naturally disappear, leaving behind (or we should say "revealing") an open mental substrate of illuminative clarity that is always there.

It is through mental clinging that we mistake our body, thoughts and sensations for our true self when they are nothing of the kind. They are merely phenomenal components within the web of infinite karma that creates the universe. They are just another part of the shimmering soup of undulating effervescence that is not our real self. From this standpoint, we cannot even say they are personal possessions, for they are ontologically equivalent to anything else "in existence." Even the idea of a self is just a stream of karmically linked ideas, and not a true thing.

Why are things set up this way? Because that is just the way it is. This is the nature of the phenomenal world: it is impermanent, it is transitory, it is devoid of self-nature, it is in constant

flux and flow, it is defined through interdependent origination, and all of this interdependence is empty. Consciousness gets attached to a body in the first place because the alaya consciousness appropriates a body. Hence, the proper cultivation route for all roads of spirituality is to ultimately detach from thoughts and sensations and the body, without clinging to or rejecting them, while maintaining the objectivity of pure awareness that does not attach to things. At first, awareness does not seem pure in this type of practice, but in time it will achieve the true meaning of "pureness." This happens when awareness becomes perfectly wordless such that you can attain samadhi and then prajna and self-realization.

There is nothing wrong with thoughts in and of themselves, as they will always continue to sprout forth in response to circumstances and situations. That is just the way consciousness works within this interlinked realm of phenomenal soup. That is just the way things are set up, and if you want to trace back the fundamental causes you have to cultivate enlightenment so as to be able to trace back the source of these conditions. The best approach on the road of spiritual progress is therefore not to try to get rid of thoughts using energy or effort, but simply to put yourself in line with the wordless awareness behind thoughts and sensations, and which knows the thoughts and sensations that arise. Employing this practice, your thoughts will eventually die down quite naturally.

The decrease in mental confusion resulting from spiritual cultivation is something that happens naturally, but the process of cultivation will never entirely rid you of your thoughts. What you have to learn is how to let things arise when they must, and then abandon them when they are no longer necessary. Therefore, proper spiritual training involves learning how to correctly deal with thoughts and other impulses, which is to refrain from clinging to them or rejecting them.

In cultivation, you let thoughts be born and die without injecting involvement energies, so you let awareness be borne and refrain from abiding in any particular mental state that arises. The methods for learning how to do this includes all the various forms of meditation and cultivation that teach you how to rest and let go. These methods are not ultimate in themselves, but just skillful means helping you to prepare for a fundamental awakening.

The Zen Master Yun-men once said:

> "In the universe, within time and space, there is a treasure, hidden in the mountain of form; it cognizes things, emptily shining, empty inside and out, alone and still, invisible; its function is a dark mystery."

This secret treasure is the true nature, the fundamental source of the whole universe that is found

only through investigating your mind. This original formlessness is forever empty, yet through its awareness we have all the mountains, rivers, people, worlds, consciousness, thoughts, emotions, and whatever of the universe. They are all within the true mind, for nothing exists outside of it. But this conventional existence is not a true existence because it constitutes a dreamlike projection of the true reality, dreamlike in the sense that nothing in it truly exists with a concrete nature.

To say it another way, no thing has a self-so nature of existence on its own terms. Rather, everything exists because of karmic inter-linkage, so the whole of creation is one big, dreamlike existence in total. It is like a mirage or illusion in that you cannot grasp it since it cannot stay. And yet, since the universe is a function of the true dharma body and seems to work perfectly in a logical, coherent fashion (due to cause and effect), we can also say it is not empty of existence. You cannot say it is real, and you cannot say it is unreal. This is where we operate, this is where we apply our great functioning, this is a realm of appearances. However, all throughout our functioning in this realm of appearances, our minds should be one in seamless union with the formless essence.

If you insist on staying in the emptiness aspect of true nature, while rejecting the conventional existence aspect, the most you can reach through spiritual cultivation is the nirvana of the Arhats. This is a nirvana with remainder, for in rejecting a portion of the All-That-Is, the Arhats still retain a sense of preferential clinging. Thus, the stage of the Arhats still has not perfectly dealt with the aspect of existence, which is the “remainder” of form. At this stage of spiritual attainment, cultivators still retain subtle habits that they have not dealt with completely, so they have not mastered all the aspects of the Tao. And since they have not mastered the aspect of phenomena completely, it means that have not perfectly resolved the display aspect of reality nor perfected their great functioning abilities in this realm. Arhats achieve realization into the selflessness of the ego, but they have to cultivate further to realize enlightenment into the selflessness of phenomena.

After reaching enlightenment, you must continue cultivating both your body and behavior, because you must strive to fully understand the aspect of wondrous existence and achieve perfect merit. You must strive to cultivate the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies as well as the dharmakaya, whose realization is considered the first initial step of spiritual awakening. That is why we call seeing the Tao the first step of the spiritual path, because it marks the beginning of the Mahayana Stage of True Cultivation Practice. Within this stage of practice, all three Buddha (enlightenment) bodies must be cultivated.

The dharmakaya has endless functions, and it is through and by these functions that we cultivate our sambhogakaya Enjoyment Body and nirmanakaya transformation bodies which constitute the full achievement of the enlightenment path. Hence, the perfect completion of spiritual cultivation is to fully master both the existence and emptiness aspects of Tao—which encompasses all three

bodies—and in that way you will become fully proficient in the aspects of both true and false existence while attaching to neither. That is when you become a real man, a true human being, or the "perfect man" as mentioned in Islam. Preferring the one emptiness side of this equation is not the full measure of Tao. At most it can only amount to just the nirvana with remainder, and this stage of spiritual attainment still bears the taints of spiritual ignorance.

Merit, Wisdom and Discipline Requirements in Spiritual Cultivation

No cultivation school can escape from three requirements necessary for attaining these goals: discipline, samadhi and prajna wisdom. No matter who you are or how great you are, even if you are a Buddha, you cannot escape from these three requirements behind authentic spiritual progress.

Discipline means focusing on transforming the body, mind and behavior to get rid of bad characteristics and replace them with good characteristics. Putting it another way, an alternative word for discipline is *merit*. Only in cultivating both discipline and accumulating merit can you reach that ultimate pure state which is neither virtuous nor nonvirtuous. Because it is neither virtuous nor nonvirtuous, we call it the "ultimate virtue," and that is its fundamental nature. In terms of the Confucian school, this Tao is our inherent "bright virtue" or "clear virtue," and the first steps for reaching it are to accumulate virtue and wisdom as in the Mahayana Stage of Merit and Virtue Accumulation.

As to the need for cultivating samadhi, our minds are so scattered and confused that we must transform our normal mentalities of ignorance into a state of crystal clarity and calm on the spiritual road. Otherwise, we will not be able to accomplish anything of spiritual significance at all. It is through samadhi that we can progressively understand a semblance of the original nature, and the quietude of samadhi helps us cultivate our prajna wisdom, which will make its ultimate realization possible. After attaining samadhi, we must try to always mentally be in line with that fundamental nature.

The mind can be compared to a great empty sky with birds flitting around here and there that appear and disappear without leaving any traces. So it spontaneously gives birth according to conditions, and can know what has been birthed through its own self-cognizance. In fact, your knowing right now is that knowing! However, to more clearly recognize those awareness abilities of your fundamental true nature, you must first cultivate transcendental prajna wisdom, that primordial wisdom knowing ability that directly recognizes the real nature of things.

Without prajna wisdom, which is nonconstructed wisdom illumination, one cannot possibly attain self-realization or awaken to the Tao. Thus, all forms of spiritual cultivation practice involve these three basic principles: discipline, samadhi and prajna transcendental wisdom. Without discipline, you cannot generate merit and, therefore, cannot enter into samadhi. Without samadhi,

you cannot banish ignorance and cultivate prajna wisdom. Without prajna you cannot realize Tao; you cannot see the Tao and cannot attain self-realization. Thus, all three of these principles are required on the spiritual path.

We call the process of spiritual awakening "self-realization" because you have to do this process yourself—not even a Buddha can do it for you. Others can help point you in the right direction, but that is about all. They can only point out the moon to you, but you still have to do the looking yourself, and not mistake the pointing finger for the moon! Thus, ultimately, you must make progress in spiritual attainment in the universe via your own efforts at learning and practicing cultivation.

Remember, though, that while you do indeed become liberated by your own efforts, it is proper to rely on the help of others, for someone must initially teach you, otherwise it is hard to get oriented into the path. Nevertheless, essentially no one does any spiritual saving for you, nor can anyone stand in your place as a proxy for the "receiving" of enlightenment. You have to make the efforts for spiritual liberation yourself, for this is why the process is called "*self*-cultivation" and "*self*-realization."

The true self-nature supports infinite functions and appearances—the physical universe being one such example—but the true nature itself is without characteristics. It is empty of everything, yet it is this emptiness that gives rise to all existence: the galaxies, stars, planets, people, space, everything! Therefore our ordinary minds as well as matter (what Plato called the spiritual and material natures) have exactly the same fundamental root.

These two aspects interpenetrate and can affect one another, but the material side usually disturbs the mind to the extent that fascination, or transfixion with phenomena, becomes the major barrier to spiritual realization. For instance, we conventionally say that most people are controlled by their jobs and the desire to make money, or the desire of getting this or that to the extent that it clouds their mind. Therefore, we can say that a major obstruction to cultivation is that people become influenced by the material aspect of great Suchness.

We create this world of maya, and then get stuck in our own realm of delusion that we have created. We succumb to the ignorance that we ourselves generate, and get caught up in a cascading effect of delusion piled upon delusion through linked interdependence. This net of interlinkage will never be broken, so you must learn how to detach from it to realize the Tao, and how to control it to exercise wise functioning. If you can see what gives rise to all this primordial ignorance by cultivating a clarity of mental emptiness insight, then you can banish ignorance entirely and achieve spiritual awakening. See ignorance to know it is illusion, and just by this recognition you can detach from delusion and awaken!

Some Various Roads of Cultivation Practice

A main principle or practice within spiritual cultivation is to use the functions of the fundamental essence to transform the physical nature—to tap into the great power of universal emptiness to transform the body as well as the false realms of consciousness. However, most people who are engaged in spiritual cultivation miss this point, and try to actively work on transforming their bodies using their mind. They fail to recognize that *you do not need to use the sixth consciousness to change the physical body*. Just recognize the original nature and through this act of recognition—even just by imitating this state of recognition—you will be able to tap into this infinite power and the physical body will accordingly transform all by itself.

Ultimately speaking, although we are getting ahead of ourselves, your real kung-fu is not your body, but your thoughts and behavior. Then again we can say that your real kung-fu is all the phenomena around you, for they are all your karma. Everything that we call karma is your kung-fu. Tap into even a semblance of the Tao, and all of this can and will change, and always for the better. All of this will transform itself, which is why those who spiritually cultivate can even affect their fortunes and destinies. These fated outcomes are linked by interdependence, and when you cultivate the Tao, you can tap into the power to change them, and cultivate the wisdom as to the method.

Every religious tradition has its own favored way of cultivating or seeking the truth. Buddhism commonly says there are 84,000 afflictions within one single moment of mind, and so there are also 84,000 dharma doors by which you can cultivate to free yourself from these karmic afflictions. Do not take this number literally, however, for it is just figuratively used to indicate a very large amount. Nonetheless, because there are so many different types of thoughts and afflictive emotions, there are also countless possible cultivation techniques you can use on the road of spiritual liberation, each of which can remedy a variety of afflictions. Buddhism, for instance, teaches an almost unlimited number of such techniques. There is a *secret basis* within most of these techniques, however, and that secret basis is the principle of cessation and contemplation that can lead to the cultivation of samadhi and prajna wisdom.

Humming a tune when you are scared is an example of an appropriate cultivation technique for dealing with fright. Sitting in a rocking chair in order to relax is also another example of skillful means, and, therefore, another cultivation method possible for resting the mind. These are not profound methods, but they are useful methods nonetheless. And what does Buddhism say about these methods? Use whatever works, as long as it is a virtuous path! This is all that matters, for spiritual progress is desired and there are many pathways that can reach the same goal. Whatever you use is all a function of your wisdom. That in itself is the road of spiritual cultivation.

Thus, there are thousands of possible cultivation techniques you could ever employ, each of which represents some means of handling a mental problem, until peacefulness can come to claim

your mental scenario once again. After all, no mental state stays since everything is impermanent, so if you master patience and thereby learn how to bear an unfortunate situation, that particular state will eventually empty itself and transform into something better. This is why the "Perfection of Patience" (a Buddhist *paramita*) is one of the highest of all possible cultivation methods. Even in the midst of great torture and suffering, the real mind never moves and remains unharmed, so the practice of patience is based upon putting oneself in tune with this nature through resemblance. It is also based on the common sense realization that any situation, no matter how bad, is bound to change.

Many of the world's cultivation techniques are also based upon the principle of using the false to cultivate the real because you cannot reach perfection in one stroke. In other words, you can train for enlightenment amidst illusion by means of something that is itself illusionary. This is also an entirely valid approach as long as you know what you are doing. So you can concentrate on some experiential realm in order to achieve samadhi and cessation, just as long as you recognize that this visaya is not real.

Another cultivation path is not to chop off delusions and replace them with some other delusory thing. Rather, in just letting awareness shine without effort, illusions will empty of themselves. They will depart to be replaced with something else, and eventually all these other things will also die down—like the ripples on a lake—to reveal the clear substrate nature. Using illusion, on the other hand, means purposely tying the mind to some specific outcome to achieve cessation. Of course it is proper to purposefully generate an illusion in order to attain samadhi if that method will work for you, as is done in special visualization practices. Basically, you can also take the path of using the false to cultivate the real as long as you know you are employing a falsity and recognize the underlying principles of what you are doing.

In the highest sense, there really is no step-by-step procedure for spiritual awakening. This is the message of the Zen school and the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra*. In fact, the no-step procedure is also secretly taught in the *Surangama Sutra*. But you have to come to know this within your mind, you have to see this directly and experience this through personal perception to understand what this means.

When delusions eliminate themselves because you do not cling to them, but rather just recognize them without becoming involved, then enlightenment will remain fully revealed without stains. The fact that illusions leave lets enlightenment abide in itself without stains or marks, but there is no need to say this since enlightenment is always without pollutions, anyway, and we simply do not realize it because of a wrong use of our awareness.

The original nature never moves, but is always there, immutable and unchanging. That is why you should not try to create anything through spiritual cultivation, but simply remove the barriers of ignorance and awaken to your originally enlightened nature. You do that by mentally resting,

by just letting go. Cultivation seems like it is one circular process when you describe it like this, and so at times it is very hard to discuss fundamental principles like this at all. The Zen masters typically dispensed with all this verbiage and simply prompted qualified students (who indeed meditated a lot) at appropriate times to help them awaken, but here we are using all these reams of paper to convey the idea. How are these words ever going to help you if you never devote yourself to daily meditation and cultivation practice?

Thus, to become an enlightened seeker is to return to that one single true nature which we all have and share, and to get there you must start with this present moment, and with none other than this present mind and body. The beauty of Buddhism is that it takes the quickest route towards this goal by dispensing with nonessentials and focusing on the prajna wisdom capabilities of Mind. It emphasizes this particular spiritual route so that you can arrive at enlightenment in this very lifetime.

Vedic Hinduism, on the other hand, sometimes emphasizes the performance of ceremonies. Christianity emphasizes the practice of good works, Islam emphasizes discipline, Taoism often emphasizes the physical body, Confucianism emphasizes virtuous behavior, but Buddhism is unique in simply emphasizing prajna wisdom as the path to enlightenment. *Saying it again, what distinguishes Buddhism from other philosophies and religions and cultivation schools of the world is the fact that it cultivates for prajna transcendental wisdom*. Most other schools cultivate for samadhi attainments, kung-fu, or heavenly returns, but Buddhism cultivates for prajna alone. This is why the extinction stage of the Arhats is attainable only through Buddhist prajna cultivation.

In Buddhism you do not wait for some one else to help you, believing that only another has the possibility of communion with the Tao. You just start practice without requiring anything other than the proper instructions, and the desire for enlightenment must come from self-motivation. Enlightenment is everyone's fundamental spiritual birthright since you already have it, and so you start on the road of spiritual attainment from right where you are, being perfectly equipped for the journey since nothing else is necessary.

On this trail you must personally work to uncover your inherent prajna wisdom and try to reach that ultimate state yourself, for no one can bring you there by getting rid of illusion for you. Thus there is no spiritual result except what you create through our own spiritual efforts. This is why all the genuine spiritual schools teach us to work hard through discipline and merit accumulation, because these are the fundamental requirements for cultivating samadhi, prajna wisdom, and then awakening.

All religions talk about charity, discipline, good deeds, virtue and so on with varying intensity because they are prerequisite companions of the path. They constitute the Stage of Wisdom and Merit Accumulation that orients you into the correct spiritual pathway to Tao. Most people never

go farther than this level of spiritual practice, but if you start upon the practice of meditation, then you can at least proceed to the Stage of Intensified Practice Effort, and lay a foundation for what is next to come. Otherwise you will lose your chance to accumulate merit and spiritual accomplishment, and every life you will have to start all over again.

We can say that modern science is also a type of cultivation school which investigates form in the same sense as does Taoism, yoga and Esoteric Buddhism. But because it does not emphasize samadhi and prajna wisdom, it will never enable you to scale the same spiritual heights as these schools of personal practice do. You cannot understand the samadhi and prajna achievements through scientific study, but must cultivate them yourself to prove and fathom them, for that is the only type of verification that is worth anything. Even reading spiritual books is not enough, but just useless academia.

Science will always remain bound in the realm of material investigations unless scientists personally cultivate the spiritual realms, and it will not ever be able to approach the higher phenomenal realms of mind since these only exist in the mind! For this reason, those who are in contact with genuine cultivation schools and teachings must consider themselves extremely lucky, for there are many schools and religions that offer very little in terms of genuine cultivation teachings at all.

It is not arrogance to say that being able to come in contact with the teachings within this book itself requires a great deal of merit. Please do not waste this merit, but use your current understanding and the present opportunity of this lifetime to work at the practice of proper spiritual cultivation, for you will never know when you will get this opportunity again.

If you say that all we have covered is not the proper spiritual path, then you still have the problem of explaining away the existence of all these spiritual realms, as well as paranormal abilities, yang shen emanation bodies, and all sorts of other kung-fu that naturally arise across all the spiritual traditions. The reason that the same stages of kung-fu happen across traditions is because they are nondenominational spiritual affairs. All you have to do is cultivate, and then you will prove this to yourself. But if you do not cultivate, then you really do not have any qualifications to criticize these accounts.

There are many spiritual schools which tell you that you must believe in certain dogmas, perform certain ceremonies, and follow certain disciplinary codes of conduct in order to be good, or be saved, or be liberated, or go to Heaven. This congregational religion says that, the spiritual school across the street says something else, and a third school says yet another thing. They all disagree with one another over matters which are usually just cultural conventions, and were examples of skillful means in that they were invented to help lead certain groups of people upwards and pacify certain mentalities.

Greater society definitely needs the guidance and structure of religion, but most people take religious instructions the wrong way. Usually they just become lukewarm spiritual bystanders, and never ever truly enter the genuine process of spiritual cultivation we have been revealing, yet all the while think they are being religious. Without the sort of personal effort involved with meditative training, they can never rise to the point where they can recognize what is true and false in another religion. They have no standards, other than the self-authorizing teachings of their own faith, to recognize what is simply a dogma meant to help people and yet which lacks a genuine universal standing.

Thus, the worst thing is that people following the road of "orthodox" religious practice rarely enter into the ranks of genuine spiritual cultivation practice. They might accumulate some small measure of merit in this life from attending religious services and ceremonies, and from being a good human being and doing good deeds, but that's about all. The only true spiritual progress comes from cultivating samadhi and prajna wisdom attainments, which are what make people saints or prophets or sages or awakened ones, etc., in the first place.

All the teachings in this book can be and should be personally verified by yourself if you make the effort of learning how to naturally rest your mind. You cannot claim that this resting is any type of artificial and therefore ontologically invalid exercise. Because resting the mind in its true self-nature is nothing artificial, it qualifies as an authentic, a nondenominational, perfectly scientific, nonreligious path. This is the essence of cultivating samadhi, and we have described it from several different dimensions, from a variety of angles, and in several revolutionary ways to give you as much confidence as possible in this path. There is nothing more we can do other than encourage you to make the practice effort yourself.

Teaching you how to properly meditate is like teaching someone how to drive a car, or even swim. If someone wants to teach you how to swim, they will tell you there is water involved in a swimming pool, and that if you jump in it will be over your head. Therefore you have to move your arms and kick your legs in a certain way in order to get to the other side of the pool. But look, until you actually jump in the water and do this, no real learning ever takes place. So with all we have taught you, it is only going to come to life after you sit down and start meditating. This is when all these principles and definitions will come alive. You actually have to sit down and start cultivating meditation practice.

It takes tremendous merit just to come into contact with these teachings, let alone understand this material and the pathway to Tao, but in terms of cultivation, the principles we have been revealing are the genuine heart of the matter. Having had the good fortune to come in contact with these teachings, please do not lose your chance to cultivate and make the spiritual progress people read about, dream of and hope for.

You, too, are no different than the past saints and sages if you simply put in the effort to

cultivate. You, too, wish to find meaning in life, and calm your mind so that it feels free of any afflictions. Now that you know all the principles, and having all the advantages that modern life now offers, limitless spiritual progress is ever open to you if you just make the effort.

Those wishing to learn more of the fundamental principles behind enlightenment might care to read:

The Awakening of Faith
Asvaghosha, trans. by Yoshito S. Hakeda
Columbia University Press, New York, 1967.

Three Texts on Consciousness Only
Trans. by Francis H. Cook
Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, Berkeley, 1999.

Chapter 10:
The Meditative Realms of the Nine Samadhi Absorptions

When we start to devote ourselves to spiritual cultivation practices with the target of settling our busy minds, we will eventually arrive at the calm purity and peacefulness of samadhi. But there are myriad types of samadhi just as there are myriad methods you can practice to attain these various realms of concentration wherein the mind seems absent of heavy discriminative thought. The process of becoming a Bodhisattva can even be considered a type of samadhi.

All of us can be considered the nirmanakaya transformation bodies of original enlightenment. We are the transformation bodies of the original fundamental nature, or the primordial Buddha Vairocana, each striving to recover that primordial state of ever present enlightenment. Despite this common basis of the enlightened nature, our thoughts, habits and merits differ from one individual to the next. This is due to the fact that the karmic streams of each nirmanakaya and its past activities are different.

We all share the same fundamental nature, or ground state of being, which is why many Zen masters speak of "seeing face to face" in reference to belonging to that same intrinsic foundation of enlightenment. Even so, our appearances and functioning behavior are all entirely different.

Despite this common ground state of being, our bodies and minds are also choked full of unwholesome karmic influences and obstructions, and each of us has different primary obstacles that prevent our awakening to enlightenment. Because of these obstructions, our only recourse on the spiritual path is to use whatever pain, joy, and other experiences we encounter to better allow ourselves to realize that dharmakaya true nature of ours. That, in effect, is the gist of spiritual cultivation practice.

Starting from wherever you are, without complaining of your current status (which is of no use), you must use whatever you have as a spring board for the journey to realizing your enlightened true nature, and samadhi is one of the realms you can cultivate that will definitely aid in this task. From samadhi you can cultivate prajna wisdom, and with prajna wisdom you can finally reach the enlightenment of spiritual realization. That is the spiritual liberation that all religions talk about.

Definite principles must be observed if you want to cultivate samadhi, and samadhi itself is absolutely essential to all the paths of self-realization regardless of any particular spiritual school you might follow. In fact, if your spiritual path lacks samadhi and prajna teachings, it is not safe to say that it is a very meritorious or advanced spiritual path, or perhaps it has simply fallen to the wayside.

There are common practice methods for entering into the samadhi states of meditative absorption that most religions follow, and there are also common levels of samadhi, which you can reach no matter what your particular school of spiritual training. Since the samadhi attainments are nondenominational and nonsectarian, the various samadhi are therefore another means often used to measure a person's stage of spiritual advancement. They are a genuine technique for measuring your stage of meditation achievement.

In general, we can say that there are eight major samadhi (also called "absorptions" or *jhana*) common to all the cultivation schools of the world, and an additional ninth samadhi also exists—called the "nirvana with remainder"—although its attainment lies only within the province of spiritual schools with great prajna wisdom teachings. As with the other samadhi, even this fractional nirvana cannot be equated with enlightenment, although it far surpasses these other realms and is only achieved through great prajna cultivation.

How can we define the differences between these nine samadhi? To start with, the first four of these mental absorptions are properly called the four "dhyana," while the remaining states are typically termed the *formless* "samadhi" absorptions. In colloquial terms, the first four dhyana are also sometimes called "samadhi" because they refer to a state of meditative concentration characterized by ease and peaceful mental unity. As the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* of Vasubandhu says,

> Dhyana is the application of a pure mind to a single object ... The nature of meditative concentration (dhyana) is concentration (samadhi).

The famous Chinese dharma translator Xuan Zang, who was immortalized in *The Journey to the West*, adopted the term *ching-lu* for his translation of the term dhyana. Xuan Zang got the term ching-lu from the Confucian classic, *The Great Learning*, and roughly translated, it means "stilling thoughts," or achieving stable concentration. Hence, the dhyana and samadhi are stages of mind, typically achieved through meditation, which are characterized by extreme mental calm (or emptiness) conjoint with awareness.

To be specific, since the samadhi states all involve concentration, we must try to answer, "What exactly is concentration?" We can describe concentration as the centering of consciousness on a single object, the binding of consciousness to a single point. Because of this, concentration is sometimes referred to as "one-pointedness" or "single-mindedness." That, in effect, is the nature of concentration; concentration is to be single-mindedly mentally centered or focused on some particular mental scenario.

All minds possess concentration since concentration is a mental event among the ten omnipresent

mental factors, but weak concentration cannot be equated with the extent of one-pointedness required of samadhi. The reason that samadhi is characterized by an extremely stable field of concentration is because most ordinary monkey-mind thoughts are absent within this state, and thus within samadhi there is very little coarse discriminatory activity.

The concentration realm of the samadhi or dhyana is a state wherein your mind has one-pointed focus and is calm, undistracted and unscattered. In this state, the mind is not excited to a state of disturbance, nor is it dulled to a state of blankness or torpor. In samadhi the mind is balanced, awake, and aware. Whenever our mind achieves this sort of empty but focused concentration, which is very different than our normal mental state of scattered discriminatory mentation, we can call it a type of samadhi absorption.

What are some of the other different terms used in place of "samadhi"? Sometimes it is translated as *samapatti* or *samaya* and even *satori* (in Japanese), and it is often translated as "taming," "rectifying," or "stabilizing the mind." When you become adept at fixing the mind on a single point so that it settles there without stirring, this is a state of samadhi absorption. For instance, in the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* Buddha says,

> When a meditator performs their practice while keeping truly still, then due to having purified their thoughts, a calm discernment will emerge as they become aware of the sensual cravings and delusional workings of their discriminatory mind. As these false thoughts and feelings, which intrude to corrupt their body and mind, start to become eliminated, from within will flow forth a relaxation and lightening up of their sensory agitations, along with a sense of quiet harmoniousness. ... This skillful state is samadhi, which is the bringing of the mind to rest when it ceases to chase after things.1

There are many different ways to describe the state of mental samadhi, but perhaps the best definition includes a description of how to reach this state.

Most spiritual practices for attaining samadhi are based on the principles of cessation and contemplation practice, which is also known as shamatha-vipashyana cultivation practice. The principles for this type of meditative practice were best outlined by Chih-i, founder of the Chinese Tien-tai school, who created the six step method of cultivating the breath to arrive at samadhi.

For our purposes it will be useful to go into some detail about these steps, for in this way you will learn how to enter into samadhi and how to deepen your realization of this spiritual state. The actual experience of samadhi is infinitely more important than just knowing the definition of the word.

THE SIX STEPS FOR CULTIVATING SAMADHI

The first of these six steps for cultivating cessation-observation is for a meditator to cultivate their breath just by watching it, or by *counting* it until it calms down. The next step is *riding* the breath, which means letting your awareness ride upon your breath so that it reaches an even calmer and more subtle state of flow. At this point, your breathing will become so subtle, and your thoughts will become so fine, that the two can blend into one.

The third step in cultivating samadhi is *cessation*, wherein your external breathing—because of relaxation—slows so much that it stops, and thoughts then seem to disappear or cease. This is the hsi stage of the Tao school, and this point constitutes the actual yogic practice of pranayama, for Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* says, "pranayama is the cutting off of the inhalation and exhalation." The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* provides us with yet another reference in saying:

> Just as salt dissolves in water and becomes one with it, so also in samadhi there occurs the union of mind with *atman*. Mind dissolves in breath and breath subsides. Both then become one in samadhi. This state of equilibrium results from the union of the *jivatnam* (individual self) and *paramatman* (divine self). When mind Thus, is calmed, we are in samadhi.2

Accordingly, when you reach the state of cessation your thoughts will eventually settle just as will any dust suspended floating in a glass of dirty water. All you have to do is maintain the third person observer-like awareness of the mind, and refrain from energizing your mind by adding lots of extra thought energy. Then your mental realm will eventually settle naturally all by itself.

If you continue with this practice according to the steps already outlined, the four dhyana can all be attained in your spiritual practice, but you should not attach to them when they arise. If you let the mind rest it will automatically become pure and clear, but you should never dwell with attachment in any state of clarity that arises. This is the correct practice of *cessation*, and this is what will result in the state of samadhi. If you focus on the breath and attain one-pointed concentration in this manner, coarse mental discrimination will die down and eventually become empty. This is a state of concentration, but in cultivation terms it is most often called "emptiness."

These first three initial steps of cultivation practice initial focus on the body somewhat, but at this point in Tien-tai practice, the focus should entirely switch over to the mind. In other words, after an initial emphasis on *physical calming and relaxation*, you must next turn inwards to cultivate the mind.

First we can say that you cultivate body samadhi, and next you work on attaining mental

samadhi. Mental cultivation means cultivating prajna wisdom rather than investigating phenomena, so the fourth step in Chih-i's six dharma doors is to switch from a focus on following your breath to observing your mind as your external respiration starts to calm down and diminish in coarseness. This practice is called *observation* or *contemplation*, and is the point when prajna wisdom can arise.

In spiritual practice, at the point of cessation when your breath has stopped and miscellaneous thoughts have died out, you should look into the mind and inquire, "What has stopped? What has reached cessation?" You should look into your mind and watch for thoughts, but they will not be there since they have died down. Yet that thing which has the power to recognize thoughts and observe them coming or going is still there, and that's *It*. That is what you want to find through cultivation, and you can find it by so relaxing that you let go of all things to realize it; the more you mentally let go of your body and mind, the more your prajna wisdom will arise and the greater it will become until you can achieve this realization.

Hence, at the stage of *observation* in your spiritual cultivation, you will reach a point where your mind is extremely calm, clear, crisp, and aware, absent of all the miscellaneous thoughts which normally trouble us. The state you reach will be one of emptiness, clarity, and cessation. And what can know in this state is our wordless, prajna wisdom that knows through direct knowing.

There are two mental characteristics absent in this state, but which can disturb it: (1) torpor, which is like a foggy, sleepy state of mind, and (2) mental excitedness or scatteredness. In normal situations our mind is always in one of these states or the other, but in samadhi there are no wandering thoughts, foggy thoughts, or scattered thoughts. The state of samadhi is so clear of random thoughts that it is like a clear sky free of clouds for ten thousand miles in all directions. Hence, after reaching some special state of cessation, the famous Zen master Han Shan wrote:

> My mind is like a bright moon,
> The lake is still and pure and clear.
> There is no comparison which can be made.
> Tell me how I can express this to you?

Thoughts can stop in our minds, but thoughts are not the mind. Thoughts are just phenomena that arise in the mind; they are things that appear in the mind. The mind is really completely empty but has the capability of awareness that can know arising thoughts; thoughts are just empty experiential realms that it can know, and so we say "experience." In fact, the initial state of mental emptiness and clarity which you can reach because of thought cessation is not really the mind either, but is still just a mental phenomenon or experiential realm known by the true mind! It is still a thought of emptiness rather than true emptiness. This stillness is like one super-big thought that you can still know, but it is not the prepositional you. Hence, at this stage of mental stopping achieved through cessation-contemplation practice, you are still within the realm of

phenomena arising out of the mind.

This situation of mental calming is like the lightness and darkness of day and night which are always alternating, but *That Thing* which can perceive the light and darkness is neither light nor darkness. *That Thing* which stands behind them never moves, and never leaves its place. In fact, it will never change and has never changed because It, itself, is empty and void of everything. By definition, this void is changeless.

All the infinite things tumultuously coursing through the past into the future cannot affect this fundamental one at all because they constitute a false realm empty as well. So that original thing will still be there throughout all the miraculous transformations, and yet it does not experience them as realities because they are falsities lacking a true existence. On the road of spirituality, we practice cultivating prajna wisdom and samadhi in order to return to *That One* and rest in its true nature without any efforts or artificialities. It is that fundamental one which we seek.

Therefore, the fifth step of the process of spiritual cultivation, according to Master Chih-i, is called *returning*. After the fourth step of contemplation and introspection, the mind can recognize its original nature, and thus return to its natural state. What does it return to? This is incredibly hard to describe, just as is the last step of cultivation called *purity*. You cultivate cessation and contemplation practice to quiet the mind, activate your prajna wisdom, and then realize the fundamental nature of the mind that is neither stillness nor busyness. When you can reach that fundamental face beyond stillness and busyness, and abide there without abiding, you have reached the sixth and final step of spiritual cultivation called *purity*.

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SAMADHI

The nine samadhi absorptions all involve some degree of purity, peacefulness, stability and concentration but in each of these meditative realms, the concentration and purity is of an entirely different character. As a result, these samadhi absorptions can only be considered training stages that help prepare you for realizing your fundamental nature. Someone with high wisdom can cultivate to realize their fundamental nature directly without having to cultivate these practice stations, and this sort of direct practice is laid out in the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* and *Surangama Sutra*. However, since most people cannot do this, the various samadhi realms are usually laid out in a graduated path of attainment so that people have some method to cultivate to the Tao.

In terms of the spiritual cultivation ranks involved in this training path for enlightenment, there are four dhyana, followed by four formless samadhi, and also the ninth great wisdom samadhi that is the nirvana with remainder of the Arhats. The four dhyana are what most spiritual schools focus upon, and are themselves levels of ever-increasing mental refinement. The first dhyana is the lowest of these attainments, the second dhyana is a degree higher in spiritual purity, the third

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dhyana is yet higher in terms of spiritual refinement, and the highest meditative level of the four is the fourth dhyana.

In terms of the degrees of progressive refinement, the first dhyana can be categorized as having the attributes of vitarka mental investigation, vicara mental analysis or consideration, physical bliss (rapture), mental happiness (joy) and one-pointed concentration (single-mindedness). As someone climbs the ranks of meditation, many of these characteristics are purified away so that by the time someone reaches the fourth dhyana attainment, they are solely abiding in a very ultra-refined state of just one-pointed concentration without any other coarse mental factors. In other words, the fourth dhyana can be characterized by the very purest stage of the calm abiding or single-mindedness that constitutes samadhi. The characteristics of the four dhyana can therefore loosely be summarized as follows:

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIRST FOUR DHYANA

Dhyana	Descriptive Factors, or Characteristics
1st	investigation (vitarka), analysis (vicara), joy, bliss, one-pointedness
2nd	joy, bliss, one-pointedness, (inner purity, or internal clarity)
3rd	bliss, one-pointedness, (equanimity, mindfulness, insight)
4th	one-pointedness; (completely pure equanimity, mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain)

As human beings we live in the Realm of Desire, but the four dhyana attainments correspond to higher mental states within the Realm of Form, which can be described as a type of energy realm. As to the four formless samadhi absorptions, they correspond to the heavens, realms, or states of mind characterizing the Realm of Formlessness. Thus when anyone cultivates a state of samadhi, we can loosely say that his or her mind finally matches with Heaven.

When a practitioner attains the first dhyana, we can say they have finally escaped from, or ascended out of the Realm of Desire, because this cultivation attainment places them at the initial entry level into the Realm of Form. The second dhyana corresponds to a firmer or higher level of being within the Form Realm, and by the time a spiritual practitioner has reached the third and fourth dhyana in their meditation work, their level of spiritual attainment has progressed to the very top stages of the Form Realm. When anyone achieves a dhyana attainment, their attainment level matches with the heavenly beings who inhabit the equivalent spiritual realm. Such an individual is in this world, and yet their mind is beyond it.

In this particular spiritual ranking scheme, each of the higher realms—as you would naturally expect—is progressively more refined, higher, or purer than the realms below it. For instance, the Desire Realm is equivalent to the material world of phenomena, the Form Realm can be equated with a higher energy world, and the Formless Realm can best be compared to a great transcendental spiritual realm. The Form Realm is so pure compared to the Desire Realm that you have no more sexual desire when you reach it; what you have is more akin to affection. In the Formless Realm, all sorts of gross thoughts are absent for it really is a profound stage of spiritual being.

The four dhyana of the Form Realm are common stages of spiritual attainment you can achieve through meditation practice. Thus, so they are commonly shared by most every genuine religious school. The four formless samadhi of the Formless Realm are also common stages of attainment as well, and include:

- the samadhi of infinite space (emptiness)
- the samadhi of infinite consciousness
- the samadhi of infinite nothingness
- the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought

Each of these four samadhi absorptions represents a stage of attainment in the Formless Realm. In other words, if you can attain any of these samadhi, it means you can reach the realm of experience of the various heavenly beings residing in the Realm of Formlessness. If you can cultivate any one of these samadhi to stability and master its attainment level, you might even be reborn in the corresponding heaven yourself.

The last samadhi of the nine is the “nirvana” samadhi of the Arhats. In this samadhi everything is gone —spirit, wisdom, consciousness—absolutely everything is emptied out. If you attain this samadhi you become a Great Arhat and can jump out of the Three Realms of Desire, Form and Formlessness, but this is only achievable if you also cultivate the transcendental prajna wisdom taught in Buddhism. Although it is a high spiritual state, this samadhi still has some remainders of imperfection because the individual who achieves it still retains a trace of subtle defilements, and these defilements will necessitate rebirth after an extraordinarily long period of time.

These nine samadhi are the basic practice vehicles people cultivate in order to attain the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya spiritual bodies. They are also a way of ranking or measuring someone's stage of cultivation attainments. While all beings share the dharmakaya body, which Westerners identify as God and Easterners as Tao, in actual fact few people actually attain self-realization and enlightenment because they cultivate incorrectly or do not put in the required effort.

Even monks and nuns, whose entire lives are devoted to spiritual cultivation, tend to take spiritual cultivation as a humdrum job after awhile, and attach to it no sense of urgency. As a result, they, too, fail to climb the samadhi ranks of spiritual attainment. Many even enter a holy order simply to avoid the world rather than because it gives them the perfect chance to search for self-realization. And so when we survey the various schools of the world, we can find many techniques for attaining samadhi as a stepping stone or practice vehicle along the path for awakening to the dharmakaya, but we find very few practitioners committed to actually attaining the ranks of samadhi. Those who attain some stage of samadhi today are rare indeed.

Religious people usually know all the teachings about spiritual cultivation, but what they are usually missing are the motivated efforts to attain the states of spiritual samadhi that can lead to genuine spiritual realization. Just studying words in holy texts is not enough, for you have to meditate to empty the mind in order to experience the spiritual states of Heaven. But even if we only considered very committed spiritual cultivation practitioners, we would still find very few people who practice meditation and other spiritual exercises correctly, because most people lack sufficient wisdom to know the meaning of the path, and therefore how to correctly apply themselves. If they have not yet "seen the path," then they usually end up spending practice time without making too much spiritual progress at all, and seeing the path requires merit, wisdom and hard effort. Thus it is that few people ever succeed in the great matter of spiritual self-realization.

No matter whether one follows a Buddhist path, Christian path, Jain path, Hindu path, Islamic path, Jewish path, Shintoist path, the Hinayana school, Mahayana school, orthodoxism or esotericism, Taoism or Confucianism or whatever, these samadhi absorptions are definitely within your reach. Everyone is capable of attaining them because everyone already has the Tao, and these are just levels of clearing the mind. All the great spiritual heroes of religious traditions were usually heroes precisely because they cultivated samadhi; without it they were nothing. In fact, it is the samadhi attainments that make someone a saint, guru, prophet, sage, avatar, Arhat, adept, master, initiated or accomplished one. You cannot elect or vote individuals into this stage, for they must practice to attain samadhi themselves.

The samadhi attainments are not evil ways, but just specific realms of mind which you can scientifically reach through the process of mental resting and nonattachment. How could that produce anything evil? In fact, to explain it using the Christian terminology employed by

medieval monks who cultivated samadhi: by letting go of self-thoughts and anything else that belongs to the ego, and thereby cultivating selflessness, one clears the mind of all selfishness and ego so that only the connection or fullness of God remains. The spiritual state resultantly reached is the spiritual state of samadhi.

Many different spiritual traditions therefore know of these samadhi, since they are the spiritual practice methods common to all schools (although classified under different names and terminology), but very few people can accurately characterize the various differences behind these states. To understand the stages of the cultivation path, we must therefore analyze these states of spiritual attainment in some detail.

THE FIRST DHYANA

Whenever a meditator can finally detach themselves from the view of being a physical body, or having a physical form, then the first dhyana can finally be attained. This sort of detachment will produce a wonderful experience of mental joy (or happiness) along with a comfortable feeling of physical bliss felt in every body cell. But you can only achieve this state if you detach from the body and mind, for that is the only way in which this physical bliss and mental joy will arise.

In the past, many Christian saints and lay cultivators were often described as having entered a state of "rapture," and many of these historical accounts used this term to refer to the joy and bliss characteristics of the first dhyana attainment. Of course, whether or not this was actually the first dhyana, or simply emotional fervor (as often seen in bhakti worship), depended upon whether or not a number of other dhyana characteristics were there as well.

If we connect the statements from the Esoteric and Tao schools that "bliss arises when the jing descends," "when full of jing, a practitioner does not think of sex," and "jing transforms into chi," we can correctly surmise that the first dhyana is somehow related to transformations involving a spiritual practitioner's jing and chi. Furthermore, an extremely intelligent person can pull together various other cultivation teachings we have gone over to understand how the first dhyana becomes the actual target of sexual cultivation practice, and how it corresponds to the bliss and emptiness brought about by kundalini cultivation. In short, the fact that the first dhyana involves mental joy and physical bliss, which are related to jing and chi, strongly suggests that its achievement involves attaining *a state of harmony between the physical and mental natures.*

When, as a meditation practitioner, you can actually succeed in abandoning the rigid mental hold you usually have on your physical body, and become free of habitually clinging to its sensations as well as free of the idea of being a body, you will naturally experience some degree of psychological joy and physical bliss. You will experience them because when you totally let go of the body and the mind, your chi circulations will flow freely without restriction. This free circulation will, in turn, produce positive mental and physical states.

Achieving the first dhyana does not necessarily mean that you will be free of the skandha of sensation, yet it does indicate definite progress towards the Tao. In addition, the very fact that bliss and joy arise through the first dhyana accomplishment serves to remind us that the root of the body (which experiences bliss) and mind (which experiences joy) are one, which should help focus our efforts in cultivation attainment.

When you attain the first dhyana, you will experience such mental joy and physical comfort in every cell that the experience will far surpass anything available within the Desire Realm, including sexual orgasm. Thus, you will get a taste of the pleasurable state experienced every moment within the higher Desire Realm heavens, and this bliss will signify a transformation beginning to take place in every cell of your body. But to attain this experiential realm, it is absolutely necessary that you first achieve one-pointed concentration, and there are various factors that can interfere with this accomplishment.

Factors Inhibiting Samadhi

The main factors that keep us from accomplishing any of the dhyana are our desires for fortune, fame, food, sleep and sex. In addition, we can also say that our attachment to sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, visibles, etc., also keep us from attaining the four dhyana. In terms of meditation, drowsiness (torpor) and excitedness are enemies of the dhyana, and in terms of psychology, the factors of desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt expand this list. You can mention any number of factors which serve as cultivation hindrances, but perhaps the biggest hurdle to attaining the dhyana are the five poisons.

The five poisons that inhibit the attainment of the dhyana are desire, anger, pride, ignorance, and doubt (lack of faith). As we have covered before, these are fundamental karmic forces that constantly create all sorts of mental troubles and afflictions. They are unwholesome mental factors that keep us ignorantly bound up with our bodies and ordinary mentation. For instance, you might begin to experience physical bliss through your meditation, and then sexual desire might seize you so that you end up losing your jing through masturbation.

Another problem is that the attachment to bliss might become so strong that this attachment ends up plateauing your cultivation progress because you end up holding onto that state. You might also become inflated with pride at reaching some stage of cultivation, which in turn might end up strengthening your view of the ego. You might also begin to have doubts, and wonder about the path and whether you can attain the dhyana at all. All these various hindrances can arise and inhibit your progress on the spiritual path.

These are not the only factors that can prevent your entry into the first dhyana. Naturally you must cultivate merit and wisdom, practice the discipline of accumulating and maintaining your jing without leakage, and must devote yourself to practicing meditation (through an appropriate

cultivation sadhana) in order to reach the first dhyana. These requirements are necessary for any sort of spiritual work and subsequent stage of attainment. Furthermore, if you do not work on detaching from deviant and erroneous views, you will have trouble entering any type of dhyana as well.

What are these deviant views that can inhibit the attainment of dhyana? As previously discussed when we dealt with the skandha of volition, they are the view of taking the body as the self, the view of taking anything in an extreme way, the view of holding onto subjective judgments (loving your own personal views), accepting incorrect knowledge and information as true, the view of improper discipline, and various false notions regarding the experiential realms you may encounter in cultivation. You have to jump out of these views in order to make any sort of substantial progress in spiritual cultivation. To detach from these things means being open in mind, and another word for this flexibility is emptiness.

These five views are fundamental karmic sources of trouble. If you can get past these views, you can reach the various dhyana and start to really transform your unwholesome tendencies, habits and behaviors. People today seem to have adopted the New Age mentality that simply going to conferences and workshops will help transform your thoughts and behavior. This is certainly a beneficial type of involvement; however, you can only really start to purify your unwholesome habits and mental afflictions when you start cultivating the mind on a deep level by mastering the various samadhi.

When you transform things at the deep level of mind, this is the only type of *real and lasting* transformation. In fact, you can only transform things at a level of true depth when you cultivate the samadhi and dhyana, because this is the only thing that can purify habit chi flows and reach down far enough to purify the roots of behavior. Otherwise, simple “changes in behavior” are usually just changes in outward conditions, or the result of binding yourself to a set of rigid rules and regulations that do not ever transform the fundamental impulses of your behavior.

Each of the characteristics of the first dhyana acts as an antidote to certain emotional afflictions which work to prevent this state from arising: applied thought counteracts doubts, the consideration of mental analysis counteracts the hindrance of torpor, mental joy counteracts aversion and hate, physical bliss counteracts agitation and worry, and the achievement of single-mindedness counteracts the factor of desire. Hence, you can see that we all have these root afflictions affecting us, and these afflictions are the enemies of the dhyana. However, the dhyana are also the antidotes to these afflictions, so cultivating the dhyana is the true way to go about the human being task of changing, which means perfecting, our behavior.

The karmic afflictions that prevent entry into samadhi and dhyana are like a big knot of karmic forces that will impel you to do things no matter how many spiritual conferences or sensitivity classes you attend. They will compel and push you to do things even when you know you should

not. Therefore, this is another reason why the mind and body must both be transformed before we can see the Tao, for otherwise the mind and body will both serve as obstacles on the path.

Both the mind and body can impel you to perform certain acts of behavior, so both have to be pacified on the cultivation trail, and brought to a higher degree of perfection. However, if you can transform the mind and body to the extent that the pressure behind these impulsive stirrings dies down, the obstacles on the path will be greatly lessened. Then it will be much easier to cultivate the dhyana.

There are many routes we can follow to cultivate a realization of the first dhyana. Regardless of the route or routes chosen, Chinese culture has two phrases of instruction that should help guide us through all these practices:

- Your mind should always be focused on one point (like using a rope to wrap your mind around one thing).
- You should separate (detach) yourself from your body and mind, and thereby attain joy and bliss.

Methods for Attaining One-pointedness

Naturally, there are many ways to attain the four dhyana and formless samadhi, and certain of these methods are common to a number of different spiritual schools. Mantra practice is one such method, as are visualization and breathing techniques. All the methods that help you concentrate on a single object fall into the category of spiritual cultivation practices as well.

The practice of sitting meditation is also a well-known means for cultivating the single-pointed concentration required of samadhi, and there are quite a variety of different physical positions you can use for meditation practice. But the question is, of all the cultivation techniques available, why is it that sitting contemplation is the most common technique?

The principles behind the use of sitting meditation (*zazen*) are very deep. In fact, they are so deep that they would require an entire book of explanations to fully cover the topic. However, with the little space we have, we can shed the following light on the matter.

The mind reaches samadhi when it attains a stage of one-pointed concentration, or absorption. Since mind and body are of one unity, if the mind reaches samadhi, the body will be able to attain samadhi, too, which means that its normal irritations will stop bothering us. And if we proceed

conversely, in trying to maneuver our body into samadhi (which means that it becomes relaxed but without leaking energy), this can help our minds arrive at a state of calmness as well.

Simply put, to initially attain samadhi requires a unity of both body and mind, so in stilling the body and calming its energy flows (by detaching from them and the sensations they generate), we can speed any efforts to calm our minds. Through the stability of sitting meditation, comforting the body helps still the mind for its entry into samadhi. In other words, if we can calm the body consciousness, we can detach from it and achieve the emptiness required of samadhi concentration.

Our bodies are used to moving around all the time and get quite restless if they are motionless for even the shortest while. That is because when are bodies are as yet unpurified or untransformed, their energy flows are not smooth. Even if we sit quietly somewhere with the intent of resting the body, we usually find ourselves shifting positions quite frequently in order to become more comfortable, unless of course we enter some stage of concentration wherein we end up forgetting about our bodies entirely. Therefore, if we want to attain samadhi, it will help to sit in a special posture that will eliminate this need for constant shifting; if the body can become peaceful through this special posture, then the mind can become peaceful as well.

This is one of the principles behind sitting in special postures for meditation practice. These special sitting positions may feel uncomfortable at first, but *they help bind our energies to stay within the circuits of our bodies*. Furthermore, the various saints and sages have found that once mastered, they are the best positions for eliminating the distractions of the physical nature. That is why sitting in meditation is one of the most important positions for spiritual practice.

Not talking—both internally and externally—also helps us to attain samadhi, although of course, some cultivation methods require us to recite mantras. But even in these cases, your mind should be internally listening to the mantra without adding any extra commentary to the sounds; the only sound experienced within mantra practice should be the sound of the mantra itself rather than any internal talking. There should be no second dialogue, and you should not impose any internal thought words of comprehension. In fact, when we are chanting a mantra there should not be *any* internal dialogue—the mental realm within should remain quiet. As Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva taught, all you should do is use your mind to listen. First you listen to the sound, then to the stillness or emptiness within, and then you forget them both to enter into samadhi.

In the first dhyana, the mind and body can enter into one-pointed concentration because they get absorbed into one thing, one scenario. One way you can achieve this concentration is through practicing the skeleton method contemplation wherein your whole mind becomes absorbed in visualizing your shining white skeleton absent of muscles and flesh. You have to practice this until you reach the point that the visualization totally absorbs you and eventually becomes a *constant habit*. In this way you will finally be able to achieve one-pointed concentration.

If you entertain any other feelings or sensations during this period of absorbed concentration, then you have lost this stage of concentration, as you are no longer focused. That is why you may have to practice technique for awhile until you finally achieve it. Every cultivation method takes practice, but you have to make every technique a continuous habit until you are practicing that technique always.

The breathing methods of anapana are another way to develop the one-pointed concentration required of dhyana. They involve cultivating the breath until it becomes so calm that the mind and breath unite into one. If you allow your mind to follow other things at this stage, then you have also already departed from this technique. You must want your cultivation practice, whatever it is, to become such a solid habit that you are always within a scenario of concentration (without a knitted brow, of course). Then you will actually be able to achieve samadhi.

Most of the methods for attaining samadhi require this habit of continual mindfulness, or *nien*. Mindfulness means grasping a technique and sticking with it with constant devotion, because lackadaisical or haphazard practice will not produce anything substantial in terms of spiritual attainments. Without mindfulness, you will make very little spiritual accomplishment whatsoever despite what you may believe. You will just go through the motions of practice for years without ever tasting any of the fruits of attainment.

Chanting the Buddha's name, or another mantra and even the rosary, are also popular means of reaching the scenario of single-minded concentration. But even though all these methods are really available, who is actually able to enter into samadhi? Not many people today. And why? Because people easily give in to distractions and do not maintain the required continuous effort of practice. When the phone rings, they interrupt their practice and fail to get started again. They let hunger or the desire to see a movie override their practice time. If they have to prepare for work tomorrow, they put their practice aside. There are many other excuses people use ... there is always some bad karma which people *let* get in the way of their spiritual practice efforts, and thus, the achievement of genuine spiritual progress is always a hope rather than a reality.

Think of a time when you were clear-minded and calm. Were you able to constantly maintain that scenario at all times whether you were lying, walking, sitting, standing, or whether you were experiencing a good time or were in the midst of a difficult situation? Not many people can do that, which is why a lot of people give up the world for a while in order to cultivate samadhi. They hope by getting away from the distractions of the world, they can full-heartedly devote themselves to the effort of cultivating dhyana.

In Esoteric Buddhism, there are a variety of cultivation practices whose intent is to actually keep you so busy that you cannot help but remain in a concentration scenario to complete the tasks they set, and so you thereby enter samadhi in this way. They ask you to simultaneously ring a

bell, recite a mantra, visualize some particular scenario, and move you hands in peculiar mudras, or hand gestures. They put a thousand demands on your concentration so that you become completely absorbed in what you are doing, and then get so tired that you finally give them all up to attain an empty mental state.

This is the intent of their own particular method for leading you into samadhi. It is a way of tricking you into the desired realm of concentration because the practices are not the important thing in themselves. They are not the holy thing, but just a means of overloading your mental abilities so that you develop a sharp single-minded concentration, or abandon everything to attain emptiness. In either way, you end up with concentration. Unfortunately, people lose sight of this fact and take the actual ceremony for the important thing, which is just one of the problems inherent in the Esoteric school of today.

The stark simplicity of a Zen tea ceremony has the same goal and intention, so you must remember that any ceremony and its aesthetics are not really the important thing. *Rather, the state of single-mindedness that is intended to be produced is the important thing, and whether or not you attain it is the measure as to whether the ceremony is successful.* Therefore, no matter what cultivation method or technique you follow, you must practice for samadhi attainments if you want to achieve the highest levels of spiritual accomplishment. There is no other way.

Milarepa, Gampopa, Yeshe Tsogyel and Machig Labdron all cultivated a variety of practices to initially achieve their samadhi, after which they devoted themselves to making it stronger and stronger until they finally had unveiled enough transcendental wisdom to realize—to experientially see—that the samadhi arise from within the realm of enlightenment. Samadhi is empty already, but when they saw where this emptiness came from—the true Emptiness-Without-Other—they were finally able to attain the true Tao. Thus, this is the normal sequence of spiritual cultivation practice: First you work hard to attain some stage of samadhi and then, using this basis as a foundation, you work even harder to further your cultivation attainments, and ultimately achieve the breakthrough to self-realization.

For the goal of spiritual progress or spiritual realization, there is no other choice than to practice some form of meditation to attain samadhi. Thus, we have briefly mentioned several ways of applying the mind so that it becomes unified into a single scenario; these are all bona fide ways to achieve the desired level of concentration.

The book, *Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation: A Handbook for Entering Samadhi*,47 contains many more methods than we have space to go into, and you are advised to study this text if you want to understand these cultivation techniques and their relevant biophysics in detail. Just as we are doing here for the principles of cultivation, this book takes a nondenominational approach to explain, in a highly integrated fashion that references many religions, the main spiritual techniques of cultivation. It tells why and how they work using explanations from a variety of different

spiritual schools and disciplines.

When ordinary people sit down to meditate, they might experience samadhi emptiness immediately at the start of their session, and yet lose it a moment later as they become distracted by all sorts of other stuff. When people follow the road of esotericism, the same thing might happen; you might "get it" as soon as you initiate practice. However, the moment you start complicating matters by adding commentary, you lose that initial state of immediate concentration. Other schools, such as yoga or Taoism, try to simplify things as much as possible by asking you to concentrate on the region of the third eye or the tan-tien below the belly in order to achieve concentration. Even with such simple practices, however, it is difficult to really focus on these spots and not become distracted by anything else.

In Zen, the principle is to head directly for realizing our true self-nature, so Zen is a school of no-method. The Zen method used by great masters is simply to use expedient means that point directly to the great matter in order to help spiritual disciples awaken. Later on, as it declined the Zen school in China started using the method of the hua-tou (or koan), where you keep concentrating on a question in order to try to attain the samadhi of concentration. You concentrate on a question such as "Who is this person walking, eating and calling Buddha's name?" or "Where did I come from?" or "What am I?" Since you are concentrating on a question while oblivious of all else, the intense questioning mood tends to cut through a lot of mental chatter and can subsequently produce one-pointedness.

Tying up distractions in this way is one possible means to arrive at single-minded concentration. The important focus of the question must therefore be to look within and try to answer "Who am I?" or "What am I?" These are the questions that most directly lead us to our true nature. Furthermore, when you adopt the hua-tou as a means of cultivation, you should always be in it because you should always be cultivating mindfulness. The investigation of the hua-tou must become a permanent habit just as in visualization practice, mantra practice, or any other type of practice. It has to become a permanent habit you always carry around with you so that you are always in that particular scenario. This is the mindfulness aspect of developing concentration.

Naturally, this principle of mindfulness applies across all the different cultivation methods, because in order to enter dhyana or samadhi you must become totally absorbed in some particular scenario, and that requires constant mindfulness. Without mindfulness, you would just be engaging in just another line of mental gymnastics. Hence, when a particular religious school wants you to follow the practice of worshipping some particular deity, you must not lose your head and think there is something ultimate about that particular deity. After all, both you and the deity have Tao, and so are fundamentally equivalent. The deity cannot give Tao to you; you have to awaken to it yourself. What you must recognize is the importance of one-pointed concentration on the deity as the crucial point of the cultivation practice to help you attain the Tao.

This is the inherent principle behind the bhakti yoga practice of devotion; it is irrelevant whether you worship Jesus or Krishna through bhakti, for they are both worthy spiritual examples and the state of samadhi that you resultantly reach is the important thing. The rest of the stuff you use to cultivate this state just constitutes skillful expedient means—whatever it takes to get you into that unified mental realm. If you are Hindu you use Krishna, Christian you use Jesus, Buddhist you use Buddha—it is all expedient means. When you are finally inside a scenario of single-minded concentration that you resultantly achieve, you should forget about absolutely everything—time, space, the body, mind—including the particular scenario you used to enter that state!

Forget it all, drop everything and detach from your thoughts! Then you will really be "one with God," you will really be practicing the Tao, you will really start to understand the meaning of nonego and selflessness, and you will really be in samadhi. You can describe this in a multitude of different ways, such as to say you are "cultivating emptiness," but it is the same principle no matter how you word it. This stage is what spiritual practice is all about. Attain that state, and then you will know this to be true. Otherwise, all these words are like useless garbage.

Whether we talk about Yeshe Tsogyel, Milarepa and Gampopa, or Machig Labdron, they had all specifically trained to achieve a unified scenario of mind, meaning they all worked very hard to attain samadhi. If you, yourself, cannot accomplish this feat, do not even be talking about your own genuine spiritual growth and real spiritual attainments. All these practitioners, and all the saints and sages, equally mastered some degree of contemplation training, because without it, they would have had no foundation of spiritual achievements whatsoever. When we read the Bible or some other holy text and wonder why all these past saints or prophets were so great, the reason is not because of "heavenly grace," but rather because they cultivated samadhi attainments. Spiritual accomplishment is not a thing handed to you, but something you must work for. If you seem to be luckier than others in this respect, it is just the carry-over of karmic rewards from past-life cultivation efforts.

Every now and then we find some individuals who do not need to practice too hard to attain samadhi because they already have vast prajna wisdom and a high degree of previous cultivation attainment. The famous Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Hui-neng, who was the incarnation of a very ancient Buddha, did not go through this prior training because his prajna wisdom was already so high from so many previous lives of practice. Thus, he said to the Fifth Patriarch of Zen, Master Hung-jen, "My mind abides in wisdom at all times and is not separate from the self-nature. ... What (spiritual practice) would you have me do?" Upon enlightenment he achieved the great mirror wisdom, which was the result of his cultivation merits.

There are all sorts of methods available for practicing to reach the one-pointed concentration required of the various samadhi and dhyana. In fact, the purpose of worldly religion is to give you these options of practice, and help get you started on their road of attainment. Another one

of the important jobs of religion—in addition to preserving these cultivation routes and continually making them available so that spiritual aspirants have a living road of practice to rely upon—is to explain them and teach you how to tread these paths. Otherwise, a religion is not doing its job.

Yet even though this is one of the responsibilities of religion, sometimes the ruling powers within organized religions try to persecute and even destroy individuals who actually attain the samadhi spiritual states. Other times the leaders of religions are well meaning and really want to help people, but just do not know what to teach about these things because the spiritual leaders lack any understanding themselves. When this is the case, true spiritual cultivators can still suffer religious persecution even though their spiritual attainments far surpass those of the established orthodoxy.

Christianity emphasizes that you should develop samadhi concentration through the road of prayer and giving (offering and good works). Hinduism places particular emphasis on bhakti yoga. The yoga schools stress various body and breathing exercises along with special mental contemplations. Judaism has Kaballah meditation, Tantra has its mantra practices and deity or mandala visualizations, and so on it goes. The world's spiritual traditions champion all sorts of paths of practice, but they are commonly designed to help you become absorbed in a mental realm of concentration wherein you forget all your troubles and mental afflictions. But this is not the final objective of these spiritual practices, for they only orient you into the initial steps of the required spiritual practice effort.

If successfully cultivated, the initial result of all these methods is the one-pointed concentration realm of the first dhyana. The first dhyana is not the sole property of any cultivation school, even though some schools make the claim that the road to spiritual salvation is theirs alone. Unfortunately, people always think that the four dhyana and other states of kung-fu attainment are unique to their own spiritual sect alone when they are naturally occurring, universal, nondenominational, nonsectarian phenomena.

Putting this mistake aside, the various schools of cultivation all agree on the need for spiritual aspirants to achieve a mental calm abiding marked by single-mindedness. This realization is what fuels the common use of these practices across spiritual traditions. Faith or belief are not enough; you have to attain the states of samadhi for true spiritual liberation.

When a scientist or philosopher becomes so involved in trying to solve a problem that he or she forgets himself or herself and his or her surroundings, this too is a type of concentration. However, it is best thought of as an ordinary person's samadhi because it lacks prajna transcendental wisdom and the absence of desire. Furthermore, it also lacks the characteristics of bliss and joy found in the first dhyana, which the Tibetan school refers to as physical and mental pliancy. Even scratching one's ears can be considered a type of mental absorption, though it

hardly qualifies as a spiritual cultivation samadhi. We can therefore understand that one difference between the attainment levels of various practitioners is the depth of their single-mindedness (emptiness) and the extent of their insight discernment (prajna wisdom). These are actually the appropriate measures of someone's genuine cultivation kung-fu.

Taoist tenets say, "If you achieve really deep concentration, then even your shen enters into it." The enlightened Chinese prime minister Kuan Tzu also said, "Your insight reaches to such an extent that your comprehension penetrates to things not apparent." Ordinary people typically concentrate on making money, on sexual indulgence, or going after fame that we can say they are almost insane with concentration. This is certainly one type of unified scenario, but it is a sick one. It is certainly not the unified scenario of spiritual cultivation.

The key points to this conversation are that (1) being unified in single-mindedness is a common principle to all cultivation schools, (2) there are various factors that inhibit entry into the samadhi of single-minded concentration, (3) the various samadhi absorptions are common to all beings throughout the universe because the principles of mind are the same, and (4) there are a variety of techniques you can use to enter into the stage of samadhi concentration.

Unfortunately, many people who normally try to meditate and achieve one-pointedness just sit there sleeping or playing with thoughts rather than work on becoming mentally unified, so they cannot taste any of the spiritual states they usually hope for. Then, since they cannot attain these states themselves, they do not believe they exist even though others report attaining them. Of course, there are even people who, out of stubbornness, will not believe in the phenomenal displays of superpowers and siddhis that originate out of these states, even when they see them for themselves! Hence opinionatedness and stubbornness, as previously stated, are enemies to cultivation attainment.

It is hard to teach or even interest individuals in the genuine process of spiritual cultivation. The job of a teacher is not to actually convince you of anything, but simply open the way to help you practice. You have to generate your own motivation as to whether you will go down the road of cultivation practice, and a teacher can only help guide your way once you have made this decision. If you do practice correctly, we promise that you will be able to produce all the results of spiritual practice stated, and then you will be able to convince yourself of the truth of the path. As several Zen masters explained, it was only after they had reached certain stages of attainment that they "had no more doubts," so the only proof you should accept is in your own spiritual attainment.

There are all sorts of mistakes that ordinary people can make when it comes to spiritual cultivation practice. For instance, even advanced practitioners typically believe that the Orthodox and Esoteric schools of Buddhism, which represent the two great roads of mind and body cultivation, do not contain the same principles. However, people who hold this view simply have

not studied deeply enough. For instance, these schools are definitely connected in the area of the samadhi, or mental absorptions. Once you understand the theory behind various meditation techniques, and once you spend some time thinking about their results, then you will begin to understand the cultivation path and be able to see these connections quite clearly.

Cultivation does not mean you can give up using your mind and forget about studying entirely, for you still have to explore matters and familiarize yourself with the theory of cultivation. You must still read, study and deeply investigate spiritual texts to comprehend everything. Theory without practice is useless; kung-fu accomplishment without understanding is useless as well. When you have understanding, merit and the success of practice attainment, you will finally be able to enter the first dhyana.

How much time will you require to achieve the first dhyana? It will depend entirely upon your efforts and background. In other words, your karma will determine how much time is required—both the karma from your past lives and *the extent of your efforts in this life which will bring the ripening process to fruition*. Remember that you are always in an ever present state of samadhi, but simply cover it over with thoughts so as to hide it. Let go of these thoughts, however, and samadhi will be unveiled instantly. Some people in Buddha's time attained samadhi in as little as three days.

The alaya consciousness contains the seeds for all the samadhi, as well as the seeds for your current situation, so all you have to do is cultivate to activate the seeds for the dhyana that are already resting there in your alaya consciousness. They are universal states, which is why all beings can achieve them. In the process of working towards this goal, your body will undergo various physical transformations that put you in line with this higher perfection. You will experience joy, bliss and all sorts of other sensations because as you climb towards one-pointed concentration, your chi and mai will transform, your kundalini will start to rise, and all sorts of internal blockages will become unstuck. These transformations are all the proper kung-fu of spiritual practice.

When all four elements of our bodies change, it is natural that we will experience various physical sensations. However, these sensations and physical transformations are not the important thing. The important thing is that mental concentration will result in the body transforming to a state much better suited for maintaining that state of concentration, and since frictionless emptiness is the mind's natural state, the physical state supporting this achievement will correspond to optimal physical health. Health is a physical phenomenon, so attaining the first dhyana cannot be separated from cultivating the body's jing, chi and mai. When you cultivate these to their prime, the natural result is optimal health and possible spiritual achievements.

In Shakyamuni's time, some students needed only a matter of days or even hours to reach the state of dhyana because their minds were simpler and uncomplicated and their concentration was

good enough. People like Milarepa and Lady Tsogyel suffered all sorts of hardships and required a longer period of time because they followed a path of body cultivation rather than a path of pure prajna wisdom. Shakyamuni Buddha, in his wisdom, rarely spoke of this route although he did explain the hard ascetic path of cultivation, for he underwent it himself. Mostly he emphasized the cultivation route of mind rather than the form practices of the Esoteric school.

Thus, the time it takes to achieve awakening will depend upon your merits, your efforts, and the path you choose, as exemplified in the case of Zen master Hui-neng. Master Hui-neng, by looking into his mind, reached enlightenment almost instantly. Afterwards, he spent the next fifteen years in seclusion working on transforming his body while stabilizing and deepening his spiritual attainment.

The Joy and Bliss of Dhyana

To attain the first dhyana, many people understand that you must liberate yourself from your body and mind to experience mental joy and physical bliss. However, nobody asks why this is so. When you detach from the body to attain some measure of calm, you will naturally experience some measure of mental joy. For instance, those people who undergo near-death experiences often feel a great joy because of being released from the clutches of the physical body. But in terms of the sequences of the spiritual path, if you loosen your hold on your mind and body without losing your jing, then your jing will become full and transform into chi. Next your chi will become full, your energy channels will open, your vitality will freely flow everywhere, and even your ching-se will become activated. How could you not feel a state of joy and bliss with all these accomplishments happening?

These events will naturally produce physical bliss (comfort), and if you become absolutely flooded with bliss while withdrawing from normally bothersome physical distractions, your mind will experience emptiness, freedom and joy. In other words, as your disturbing emotions settle down, joy and bliss will both naturally arise. Since body and mind are interrelated, bliss and joy will intensify as you loosen the tight restrictions normally binding your mental and physical states.

Eventually these two factors will pervade your body and mind to the extent that joy will help further your mental tranquility, and tranquility will give rise to a deepening of physical bliss. This generation of bliss will in turn help heighten your level of concentration, and the bliss together with concentration will both become more refined the longer and more devotedly you cultivate spiritual practice.

This entire process begins at the time you start to become free of afflictions and stabilize your emotions. If you can reach a state of internal tranquility, you can get rid of confusion and ignorance and give birth to prajna wisdom. Prajna wisdom clarifies or sees the way in which our mind manufactures thoughts and emotions, and thus, it can penetrate through our illusion of

being an inherent self. It is the empty awareness knowing that does not need words—our bright nonconceptual knowing awareness—and it lets us ultimately realize our fundamental nature. When you attain tranquility and have calmed your desires and afflictions, prajna wisdom can burst forth like flames on dry wood.

With prajna wisdom you can more readily abandon obstructions on the spiritual path, and then definitely climb the stairs of cultivation attainment. To attain the first dhyana you must therefore relinquish unwholesome mental factors that interfere with tranquility and prajna, such as the five poisons, and you must withdraw from sensual desires. Abandoning an interest in sensual desires means detaching from the body and thus becoming able to match with the higher realms of spiritual attainment. It also helps you maintain those attainments, through nonleakage, once you reach them. For instance, if higher spiritual beings have bodies different than ours, how can clinging to our bodies assist in gaining spiritual achievements?

To summarize the matter, we should say that freedom in both mind and body, which results in mental happiness and physical bliss, are necessary preconditions for attaining the first dhyana. In the higher stages of meditation, joy and bliss are actually viewed as gross mental and physical factors that inhibit further spiritual progress on the path. Nevertheless, in attempting to gain entry into the first dhyana, they are necessary components of the overall spiritual process.

We can therefore say that physical bliss and mental joy are necessary at the earliest stages of spiritual attainment, not just because they are generated as a result of mental concentration, but because they *contribute to* generating concentration. For instance, when the mind is joyful, it naturally settles into tranquility (stability). As Shakyamuni Buddha stated, bliss increases as tranquility increases, and bliss serves to perfect concentration. That is one of the reasons that physical bliss from chi cultivation is emphasized so predominately in the Tibetan school of Esoteric Buddhism and its various tantric yoga practices.

If you are able to cultivate a feeling of disgust for both the body and the world which motivates you to detach and separate from your physical nature, then gradually your chi will transform and your mai will open so that you can obtain the necessary factors of mental joy and bodily bliss that characterize the first dhyana. That is the purpose behind the white skeleton visualization technique, but in practicing this technique you must also *joyfully* imagine offering away your organs and flesh in order to allow the joy and bliss of the dhyana concentrations to arise. In other words, if you practice concentration while prohibiting joy and bliss from arising, you will not be able to reach even the first dhyana; you can never attain any spiritual states through a mental clamping down, or suppressive mental force.

Before you achieve this stage, however, you will still have to go through all sorts of suffering and troubles because there is no way to escape the painful nature of the world until you succeed at your spiritual cultivation. In fact, it is the pain of the world which motivates many people to turn

toward spiritual cultivation in the first place, for cultivation provides the only sure means to escape from the world of suffering. Even if you live a life of virtue, unless you succeed at spiritual cultivation you will have to return to the world once again for many more lives, and who knows what experiences your subsequent lives will bring? When your cultivation stage is so low, you cannot even pick where you will go and what you will do next, because karma will have you in its grips until you cultivate to the stage where you can become master of the process. That is when you will be able to come and go as you please.

Another reason people sometimes cultivate is because they want health and happiness; they run after cultivation because they are running after joy and bliss. However, the joy and bliss of the first dhyana are different from the happiness and joy of ordinary people when they make a lot of money, get married, engage in sexual intercourse, become famous, and so on. It is a joy and bliss of a much higher level than any physical or material concerns.

For lack of a better word, the joy and bliss of the first dhyana constitute "dharma happiness" which is very difficult to comprehend unless you actually achieve this stage of cultivation. We can borrow a Tibetan analogy which says that mental joy is akin to spotting water when you are thirsty in the desert, whereas physical bliss is like actually satisfying that thirst. Nonetheless, these experiences of joy and bliss cannot even begin to match the joy and bliss of the four dhyana. Thus, it is that people today only know the names of the four dhyana and their characteristics without truly being able to comprehend the actual meaning of these states.

Buddhism, for instance, is nothing but an organized set of cultivation techniques and prajna wisdom teachings, and it will eventually decline over time as fewer people end up cultivating to reach these states of samadhi and prajna attainment. As it decays, fewer and fewer people will become able to verify all its other teachings and explain them to others, and as people's wisdom life diminishes, fewer people will be able to accept these teachings as well.

An accomplishment in spiritual attainment is therefore necessary to keep the paths of spiritual cultivation alive. When religions no longer produce individuals with samadhi and prajna attainments within their ranks, they quickly turn into ossified power structures that actually look down upon the spiritual path and accomplished cultivators while becoming depleted of the ability to guide others to spiritual liberation. This is a calamity, but it is the way of this world.

Retreat Practices

If you really want to spiritually cultivate, you must lay a solid foundation of meditation practice and then go into retreat for a certain period of time to fully devote yourself to uninterrupted cultivation practice. It is normally useless to do this, however, unless you already have made great progress in transforming your jing, chi, shen and mai, whereby you know what you are doing. Otherwise you would just be kidding yourself that you were cultivating. You would end

up wasting time or using up your good fortune to enjoy a period of solitude, or would simply be torturing yourself for no reason at all.

If you really want to reach enlightenment, it is natural to go through all sorts of suffering because of the great value of what you are trying to attain. Furthermore, you will definitely go against the grain when you are giving up old habits and desires in order to create a new life, so a bit of suffering is to be expected on the spiritual trail. Hence, hard work is to be expected, and the only way to guarantee any degree of success in spiritual endeavors is to put in the hard work of cultivating samadhi.

There are two general paths through which you can attain one-pointed concentration. The first method requires that you go into isolated retreat like Milarepa, Gampopa or Lady Tsogyel. Undertaking an isolated meditation retreat, like Vasubandhu's brother Asanga, does not guarantee you will see the Tao in this lifetime. It might still require one or more additional lives for you to attain enlightenment, but anyone who is devoted to attaining the Tao will eventually attain it because it is always there, and firm desire will clear the path for spiritual attainment.

In actual fact, *there is no one who has not achieved an actual concentration in a former lifetime*, and since the seeds of these experiences lie dormant in the alaya consciousness, the various samadhi and dhyana are within the reach of all. Perhaps an individual will fail to attain these states of concentration in this lifetime because of insufficient practice at mentally nonclinging, but they can expect to succeed in a subsequent life of effort if they just make the necessary preparations, especially if they lay a strong spiritual foundation in this life. The problem is, will they have the cultivation teachings available in that lifetime? If they do not put sufficient cultivation efforts into this one, the future availability of accurate spiritual teachings is unlikely.

To be strictly accurate, any human being of determined will and unrelenting faith can expect to attain Tao within at most three lives, and perhaps this is your third life already! But you will need accurate cultivation teachings to follow, and you will need to cultivate both prajna wisdom and virtuous merit to break the pattern of ignorance that shields this realization, which is why the Stage of Accumulation (of merit and wisdom) precedes the Stage of Intensified Preparatory Exercises in spiritual practice.

The Stage of Merit and Wisdom Accumulation means you must first study spiritual teachings and tread the path of good deeds and virtuous ways while simultaneously practicing to gain some level of spiritual accomplishment. From doing this, you will finally be able to "see the path" and truly begin to cultivate correct spiritual practice. Before people "see the path" or "see the Tao," most of their cultivation efforts will have little spiritual power but after experiencing a genuine stage of emptiness and selflessness, they will truly know the way, and their efforts will have a great effect. That is why this is the normal sequence of spiritual practice.

The other means for obtaining one-pointed concentration is the Mahayana way of remaining in the world and suffering for the sake of others while cultivating all the while. This road of practice is really practicing austerities, for it definitely involves much more pain and suffering than simply going into retreat to meditate in a cave!

In other words, the Mahayana spiritual path of cultivation is to try to attain one-pointed concentration in the midst of worldly hustle and bustle, and you constantly test yourself in the world of troubles rather than in the silence of isolation. This road of practice really has you proving the truth of emptiness. You have to put lots of work into perfecting your outward behavior at the same time that you are cultivating your mind, and you must learn to look at everything that comes your way as if it were a dream. The results of this sort of practice are very strong, for as Zen master Hakuin said, "Meditation in the midst of action is a billion times superior to meditation in stillness."

This Mahayana means of cultivation is actually more difficult than a Hinayana retreat in solitary seclusion because you need a great unselfish mind to accomplish this way. You need to love and accept people, and you need mercy and compassion to take care of others and do the difficult things you vow to do while receiving slander, misunderstanding and suffering in return. Working for the benefit of others involves a lot of pain and trouble, yet you must still find the time to meditate in all this mess; otherwise, you will just become an ordinary charity worker with worldly rather than worldly *and* spiritual merit. In that case, life will quickly pass by, and while you will accumulate merit for the path, you will achieve no level of spiritual attainment whatsoever.

You might accumulate a vast amount of merit like a Mother Teresa or Albert Schweitzer in this way, but you will achieve little in terms of true cultivation attainment when you do not engage in meditation practice as well. Meditation practice is the only way to purify the mind and attain spiritual states, for you cannot clean the mind by thinking pretty thoughts, or by replacing old thoughts with new ones.

On the Mahayana path you have to face many people and many troubles, but if your vows of mercy and compassion are great enough, sometimes you can reach Tao even quicker along this route. This is possible because your merit will grow astronomically, and because you will develop sufficient prajna wisdom to be able to detach from, or skillfully deal with, all the various distractions, disturbances and disruptions of modern life. Those following the Hinayana road usually just become meditation teachers, but those following the Mahayana path can become generals, kings, saints and all sorts of other occupations.

As to those people who undertake the isolated forest, mountain and cave retreats to accomplish the stage of cultivating their kundalini, some of them never experience the tumo phenomenon prior to their seclusion. Therefore they must initially resort to visualizing the kundalini fire in order to "strike a match" to get it started. If you do the various exercises necessary to awaken

the kundalini, the tumo fire will always appear when you achieve a state of one-pointed concentration. The key, once again, is achieving a state of single-mindedness, which is why it is treasured in all religious schools (though not necessarily by the orthodox power structure of such schools, which typically fear that a practitioner's successful cultivation attainment will undermine their own religious authority).

The Discipline Required of the Path

As to the topic of discipline, which is required for cultivating kung-fu and spiritual attainment, discipline is already included within the nine samadhi. We have not discussed discipline as a separate feature of the path, because if you achieve single-minded concentration, it means you are already practicing discipline to a tremendous extent. In fact, when you are in one-pointed concentration, your discipline is actually stricter than any ordinary individual following some external code of conduct. Forget about dietary codes, "do–this-and–not-that," the number of times you should pray per day and so on—none of that is real discipline because only samadhi constitutes real discipline. These other things are just behavioral constraints that have no absolute standings themselves, but vary according to time and place. The real discipline is to attain samadhi, and you break the rules of discipline when you lose this stage of spiritual attainment.

While someone who holds to external behavioral discipline is to be praised, someone who "sees the path" and attains samadhi does not talk about holding to it anymore because they spontaneously perform disciplined conduct at all times. Samadhi gives rise to natural discipline—the disciplined mind of samadhi—and all the artificial disciplinary rules of the world are just imitations of this true discipline. Disciplinary codes are designed to help you enter into samadhi, and when you achieve that saintly state, you might even choose to break the rules of conventional discipline in order to teach others, as the famous monk Jigong often did. But only people of the highest attainment dare do so in a public way.

Many individuals can achieve the single-minded concentration of the first dhyana, but you can tell that they are still treading a deviant spiritual path if they become arrogant and proud, if they lose their affection for others, if they become selfish and do not want to be bothered by anything, if they become lazy and just want to meditate, or if their minds become so tight that they start measuring who is good and bad in terms of spiritual kung-fu and other attainments.

After you attain kung-fu, a real practitioner realizes that *everybody can attain kung-fu if they but simply practice*. It is like riding a bike in that everyone can achieve this feat of dynamic balance if they simply practice. Thus, the *Flower Ornament Sutra* says, "I now see that all sentient beings everywhere fully possess the wisdom and virtues of the enlightened ones, but because of false conceptions and attachments they do not realize it."

Everyone is fundamentally enlightened, everyone has prajna wisdom, and everyone can attain

samadhi and kung-fu. People need only unveil or uncover what already exists, and that unveiling requires the work of cultivation effort that entails the dropping or clinging to thought realms and mental states. This particular realization that everyone shares in the same fundamental nature helps you to become even more affectionate and compassionate as you progress in spiritual practice, for this is the correct attitude in all religious striving.

Mencius commented on this point in saying that a major problem with people is that they all want to be the teachers of others, meaning that we all want others to listen to us because we feel we are right, more clever, or more brilliant than the rest. Most of us fall subject to this improper, arrogant attitude. Mencius did not say you should not become a teacher. He just meant that you should not become arrogant and try to lord your knowledge or opinions over others. Therefore, there is a tradition in Esoteric Buddhism and Indian yoga that one should go and search for his or her guru. You actually go and inspect them, and meanwhile they inspect you; you check them out, and they check you out. The big questions both sides are looking to answer is whether the other person is humble or not, has integrity or not, is greedy or not, and whether or not they have great mercy.

Getting into any of the eight absorptions, which are common to all the world's cultivation schools as well as to all the beings in the Three Realms, requires that you be able to reach single-minded concentration. All the world's cultivation methods have this as one of their goals, so you should not let yourself get confused on this point or become side-tracked by other issues. Nothing is really sacred or holy in the ultimate sense, but since the calm abiding of one-pointed concentration is the way to Tao and the basis of all forms of cultivation, it is the method supreme to be prized above all others. When we can finally achieve the first level of single-minded concentration, we will enter into a state of joy and bliss of the first dhyana.

The particular level of joy and bliss is different for each of the four dhyana. Ordinary people, too, can experience joy and bliss, but this is much different than the joy and bliss of these transcendental states. When an individual, for instance, makes money through gambling or engages in sexual intercourse, this gives rise to the ordinary man's joy and bliss. So what exactly is the level of joy and bliss you can achieve through meditation? This is a big question.

Shakyamuni only provided us with the general principles for this answer, so you have to go and study the matter yourself to make some progress in your understanding. To go into it layer by layer would require an incredibly detailed knowledge of life science, medicine, psychology and all sorts of other studies, which is a task set before the cultivators of the next several hundred years. We can just summarize matters by saying that the joy of the dhyana is a wonderful psychological experience while bliss is akin to a wonderful physical sensation. Joy refers to happiness in the mind, and bliss refers to the physical body.

When someone wants to evaluate the status of various cultivation practitioners in the world, the

samadhi and dhyana are the *real* kung-fu of spiritual cultivation rather than whether or not an individual can shoot lights out of their body, walk through walls, foretell the future, fly through the air and so on. The samadhi and dhyana stages of meditation are the common province of all sorts of spiritual cultivation schools, so they are not theoretical constructs but the actual result of spiritual cultivation practice.

The prophets of the Old Testament, Christian saints of the Middle Ages, Immortals of the Tao school, sages of Confucian cultivation, Arhats of Buddhism, rishis or seers of ancient Indian yoga, and so forth were all spiritual greats precisely because they could achieve the realms of samadhi. If they did not achieve samadhi, they could not be prophets, they could not become Christian saints, they could not become Taoist Immortals or Confucian sages, etc. in the first place. Their spiritual status was the result of their own disciplined hard work at samadhi and wisdom cultivation achievement rather than some spontaneous gift from Heaven.

This is why we talk about this particular measuring scheme of practice, rather than go into all the superpowers and the stages of attainment to which psychic abilities might correspond. You can become a saint or sage when you attain samadhi, but to do so you must cultivate discipline. This is the discipline of practice, the discipline of nonleakage, the discipline of merit accumulation, and the discipline of constant mindfulness.

The Desire Realm Inhabitants, and Further Explanations of Joy and Bliss

Because we inhabit the Desire Realm, we experience a great desire for food and a desire for sexual relations, both of which tend to push us off the cultivation trail, and which we must surmount in the process of spiritual cultivation. Not only do these desires keep us bound in this lower Realm of Desire, but succumbing to them inevitably produces unpleasant results. For instance, sometimes you will eat a really good meal and feel very satisfied as a result of the joy of eating, but afterwards you may feel sick. Perhaps this is because you ate too much, or perhaps it is because you ate some spoiled food, or maybe you suffer from a particular food sensitivity.

Sexual relations may result in unpleasant reactions as well. What you are really after in these activities is the experience of joy and bliss, but you might actually end up feeling fatigued and disgusted. Eating delicious foods to satisfaction and enjoying sexual orgasm can be considered the happiness that ordinary individuals normally experience, but they cannot even touch upon the joy and bliss experienced in the meditative realms of the dhyana. Nevertheless, we need to employ these as analogies in order to help understand something of the cultivation joy and bliss of the dhyana.

Even the celestial beings of the Desire Realm seek joy and bliss, for all beings in the Desire Realm like to experience various kinds of enjoyment. As a general principle, all beings in the universe, whatever their realm or origin, all have the common goal of getting away from pain in

order to experience joy. Practicing dharma to become a Buddha is a form of pursuing this goal as well, so to get away from pain to enjoy joy and bliss is a general principle found throughout the Three Realms.

The Realm of Desire contains six heavens that include (from lowest to highest) the:

(1) Four Deva Kings Heaven
(2) Trayastrimsha (Thirty-Three) Heaven
(3) Yama (Flame, or Free from Strife) Heaven
(4) Tushita (Joyous Land) Heaven
(5) Nirmanarati Heaven (Transformation Bliss)
(6) Paranirmata-Vasanda (Constant Pleasure) Heaven

In all these heavens, the male and female beings still retain a desire to enjoy food and sexual relations, though this desire can be either coarse, fine, narrow or broad in scope. Therefore, all six heavens of the Desire Realm retain a shadow of male and female sexual relationships. The degree of joy and bliss experienced in each heaven, however, is based upon a different merit reward that is reflected by the higher or lower status of that particular realm.

The inhabitants of these heavens also experience a joy derived from the senses (which perceive appearances, sounds, smells, tastes and so on) as we do, but once again these experiences are more refined than those found on earth. Thus, the heavenly beings of the Desire Realm have experiences similar to our own, but their stage of joy and bliss is stronger, higher, and of greater longevity than ours. Why? Because the merit of the heavenly beings is much higher than our own, and so their experiences are naturally better than ours are. This has nothing to do with whether they have Tao or not, for it is just a function of merit and their resultant stage of being.

In the Yama Heaven, above the Thirty-Three Heaven, the devas embrace each other in order to experience sexual joy and bliss. In the next higher heaven of Tushita, the inhabitants hold hands to experience sexual joy and bliss, while in the Nirmanarati Heaven they smile at one another. In the Paranirmata-Vasanda heaven, the devas need only look at one another to satisfy sexual desire and experience joy and bliss.

We can see that the levels of sexual bliss in the universe are therefore based on progressively finer factors: jing in our human world, chi in the lower Desire Realm heavens, and shen in the upper Desire Realm heavens. The eye contact that produces sexual satisfaction in the upper heavens is related to shen, since shen, or spirit, is connected with the eyes (“the window of the soul”). The gaze of lovers is just a slight reflection of this higher type of relationship, and when they lovingly hold hands or stroke each other, it is a shadowy reflection of the Tushita heaven.

This short explanation helps to explain why the samadhi of desire and joy espoused in Esoteric

Buddhism is one of the cultivation methods used by heavenly beings in the Desire Realm. Sexual cultivation is not the highest method for practicing dharma because it can only take you to the top of the Desire Realm heavens. Nevertheless, if you have the requisite prajna wisdom, merits and foundation of attainments, you can make it into a genuine cultivation technique. A detailed discussion of this matter, however, would require an elaborate book involving all sorts of other factors like medicine, physiology, and psychology.

In this discussion we do not mention the joy and bliss experienced by animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings because these groups, and the last two in particular, experience very little joy and bliss. So the only reason we mention sexual relations is to link knowledge of this form of bliss with the joy and bliss attained in the first dhyana, and to note that the beings in the Desire Realm heavens try to use the bliss of sexual contact, in conjunction with emptiness meditation, in order to try and jump out of the Desire Realm and attain Buddhahood. But if your mind is not empty during this type of practice and you still retain sexual desires—because you have not attained samadhi and transformed your chi mai—this type of practice can produce major impediments on the cultivation path.

The main characteristics of the first dhyana are one-pointed concentration, and becoming mentally freed from the body and mind to attain mental joy and physical blissfulness. This stage of joy and bliss is already above that normally found in the Desire Realm, for it is a stage only experienced within the Realm of Form. When in Esoteric Buddhism we talk about the chi entering the central channel so as to produce samadhi realms of joy and bliss, we divide these experiences into four categories that correspond to each of the four dhyana: (1) bliss, (2) supreme bliss, (3) extraordinary bliss, and (4) innate (simultaneous) bliss.

In Esoteric Buddhism, you also have a Supreme Bliss Heruka, whose name indicates that what is being represented is one of the stages of cultivation. Esoteric Buddhism also talks about the "four empties," which are matched up with the "four blisses" of cultivation. All it is doing when it describes things in this way is take the first four dhyana and explain their characteristics in terms of the individual components of esoteric biophysics. Of course, no one in the Tibetan school will explain this to you, so if you do not study widely enough to connect all the parts, these issues will pass you by and what you have already learned will go to waste.

In the first dhyana, to become freed of the strictures of body and mind is so joyful that you will feel like you are outside of this world. Thus, to be reborn in the upper realms not only requires merit, but requires that you master the particular samadhi or dhyana that accord with these higher regions. One of the motivations for some cultivation practitioners is that they so dislike this world of suffering that they want to escape, and in the first dhyana you can finally start making some progress towards this goal of escaping from the lower realms.

The first dhyana enables you to achieve some degree of freedom from worldly feelings, and

promises rebirth in a higher realm after you die. In fact, when people first start to cultivate they are encouraged to contemplate four great truths that help to generate detachment from worldly phenomena and thus speed them on their way to attaining the various dhyana. These great truths all recognize the impurity of the world, and in particular that:

(1) the physical body is dirty and impure
(2) all conditioned states are painful; all sensations end in suffering
(3) all things are impermanent
(4) all phenomena have no self-nature; that is, all phenomena are empty, and there is no such thing as an inherent self or ego

From the fundamental point of view you can say that everything is clean, but from the world of phenomena you can say that everything is dirty. However, since from the fundamental standpoint the heavens in the Formless Realm are crude, and from the Realm of Desire we can say they are very pure, you can see that this is just a relative way of looking at matters.

After you attain the first dhyana, the question is how to rise above the joy and bliss of the Desire Realm to attain the stages of "supreme" and "extraordinary" joy and bliss mentioned in the Esoteric school, and which corresponds to attainment levels past the first dhyana. Can you even describe the difference between the pleasurable joy and bliss of the Desire Realm and the higher states of joy and bliss experienced in the Realms of Form and Formlessness?

Because even learned cultivators cannot do so, Buddhism uses the terms "joy and bliss" only as a way to roughly indicate the nature of these exceptional experiential states. Therefore, you should not get too attached to these words and ascribe too many definite characteristics to them. All we can say clearly in regards to the higher realms of Form and Formlessness is that their joy and bliss are already above those of the worlds in the Desire Realm. In the state of supreme clarity and calm, there is no joy and bliss whatsoever since they are dissolved in equanimity. When you reach dhyana, we summarize matters to an extreme by simply saying that you attain an experiential realm that involves clarity and calm, joy and bliss.

The Pre-Samadhi State of Ching-An

There is also a preliminary form of initiatory joy and bliss, called *ching-an*, or "lightness and calm," which is experienced by meditators before they attain a stable stage of samadhi. It is experienced when they first begin to open their energy channels. In Christian mysticism, this is the stage referred to as the "washing of the feet" since when it originates from the heels, the feet feel as if they were being bathed in a cool wind, or cool vapor of soft air. Naturally this state is different from sexual joy and bliss, and is an important stage cultivators will pass through on their way to attaining samadhi.

As *Tao and Longevity* comments to explain this state:

> When restlessness and torpor both disappear, and the mind suddenly fixes on a single thing in the absence of sleep and restlessness, then lightness occurs. For some, this sensation begins at the top of the head, whereas for others it originates in the soles of the feet.
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> When lightness begins at the top of the head, the top of the head feels fresh and cool as if cream were being gently poured over it [see Hakuin's duck egg Soma Cream meditation]. The Buddhists and Taoists call this "internal baptism." [This is a real empowerment] This sensation circulates around the entire body, the mind is rested, the body is relaxed, and one feels so soft and flexible that it often seems as if the bones themselves have dissolved. It is then natural for the body to become straight as a pine tree. The mind is clear and there are no feelings of restlessness or torpor in response to external surroundings. One experiences a natural state of joy. This experience of lightness, however, eventually disappears.
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> When lightness originates in the soles of the feet, one experiences sensations of either coolness or warmth, which move upward to the top of the head. It often feels as if this lightness moves beyond physical boundaries to penetrate the sky. The lightness that originates from the soles is much easier to retain than the lightness that originates at the top of the head. It does not disappear quite so easily.
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> Confucianists say that a person has the sense of spring when he has attained a state of quietude. Spring indicates feelings of warmth, growth, freshness, and joy. These feelings accompany experiences of lightness during meditation.
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> Lightness gradually fades when one is forced to deal with mundane affairs and cannot sustain his efforts to progress further. Thus, if possible, it is often best for a person who has reached this state to live alone in a quiet place.
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> Oftentimes one who continues to cultivate will notice that this phenomenon of lightness grows weak, but this does not mean that it actually fades away. On the contrary, if one remains in this state for a long while, the sensation of lightness will not appear to be as strong as it was at the beginning. It is very much like eating new food for the first time. In the beginning the taste is intensely fresh, but the continual eating of this same food day after day dulls the flavor and it will not appear to be nearly so refreshing as it was initially.
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> If one continues to maintain the state of lightness without interruption, then one's *samadhi* will become firm and stable. One will feel calm and clear. The *ch'i* channels throughout the entire body will undergo various changes, and the body will feel warm and harmonious and as if one is experiencing a strong internal orgasm. These feelings are difficult to describe but the Chinese often say that one is "internally touched by wonderful pleasures." A person can detach himself from worldly desires only by progressing to this point.3

We describe the stage of ching-an as a state of lightness and coolness since the general sensation is similar to dry ice vapor or air conditioning lightly pouring over the length of the physical body. When a practitioner attains this state, they must be careful not to have too much desire for this scenario because of its pleasant nature, for the desire is considered a violation of spiritual

discipline, and will actually impede the transformation of ching-an into samadhi. Ching-an, like all the stages of attainment, has its own different levels, and can be either great or small.

Tsong Khapa, in his *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, mentioned there are two major types of pre-samadhi ching-an which can occur. The first type is when the coolness starts from the top of the head and descends towards the bottom of the feet. The second type is when the coolness starts at the bottom of the feet, and then ascends upwards to the top of the head. Of these two types, the least stable one, or easiest one to lose, originates from the top of the head (the Hakuin duck egg meditation helps engender this state). However, if ching-an is initiated from the feet then it is much harder to lose. On this point we must remember that Buddhism stresses the big toes and the soles of the feet in cultivation, the long-lived Immortals emphasize having the chi reach the bottom of the feet, the skeleton meditation must be started from the feet and work upwards, and Taoism emphasizes that the true man "breathes from his heels."

During the first appearance of ching-an, the pituitary gland will secrete a sweet-tasting hormone that can extend your longevity. This is the famous "ambrosia" of the Greeks, "soma" of the Vedas, "grail wine" of the Medieval Christian mystics, "*madya*" (divine wine) of the Tantras, "sweet wine" of the Sufis, or "amrita" known in countless cultivation schools. For example, the Vedic *Svetasavatar Upanishad* of Hinduism refers to this state when it says, "Where the fire (*agni*) is enkindled, where the breath (*vayu*) is controlled*, where the nectar (soma) overflows*, there the Mind is born." This sentence refers to the transformation of jing into chi wherein the breathing stops (accordingly generating the state of hsi, or agni), the pituitary hormones are being secreted (soma), and samadhi ("the Mind") is about to be realized (born).

Taoism has many descriptions of this "dew" or "sweet nectar" descending, and in the European grail legends and medieval alchemy books we can find this same phenomenon referred to in abundance. If we wanted to search out an even more obscure cultivation school to demonstrate the universal nature of this stage, we can look to Alexandrine Gnosticism. In the school of Alexandrine Gnosticism, we have the perfect man, or cultivation practitioner, who descends into the Virgin's womb (the region of the tan-tien), removes the impurity contaminating the firstborn of water (the jing essence is purified and transforms into chi), washes himself (the *tu mai* and *jen mai* open so that chi can circulate over the body) and drinks from the living waters (the hormones, such as this sweet pituitary gland secretion, descend). Thus, no matter how the various cultures of the world disguise their descriptions of the common cultivation stages, when you know the relevant kung-fu you can understand everything at one glance.

Of course, these are just descriptions of small ching-an, the state of "ease and peace" which is the pre-cursor to samadhi. *In Taoist terms, it corresponds to the opening of the jen mai and tu mai channels, and in yoga or Esoteric Buddhism it corresponds to the opening of the left and right channels.* At this point you must be careful not to lose this stage out of laziness, which might prompt you to meditate less, and you should strive at all costs from letting your jing leak away

through sexual activity. This is a period for celibacy and sexual restraint. Nevertheless, small ching-an is still small ching-an whereas the great ching-an is harder to attain, and is much superior.

In great ching-an the body feels clear, soft and light, which means you are already at the stage of cultivating the chi, mai and tumo fire. From another aspect, we can say that the great ching-an corresponds to opening the central channel, but even the Esoteric school does not like to say this because people resultantly get attached to this idea, and then get entangled in all sorts of false expectations and in pursuing forced meditation methods to achieve this result. In actuality, if we wanted to be really accurate, we would have to say that the real great ching-an corresponds to the stage of complete enlightenment, so you cannot take the discussion of this matter too lightly.

To attain the first dhyana, one's kundalini, chakras, chi, mai, etc. must already be open and operative, otherwise you would not be able to experience the joy and bliss of dhyana. Therefore, in reaching the first dhyana we can say that the cultivation practitioner succeeds a bit in abandoning their view of being or possessing a body. Even ordinary people can do this at times, for you might forget your body when you get into a fist fight. However, the difference between forgetting your body during a fight and forgetting the body at the level of the first dhyana is really a prajna achievement, just as the difference between the samadhi of a scientist or athlete, and an enlightened master's samadhi, is due to the existence, or lack of, prajna transcendental wisdom.

You can try to relate the event of achieving the first dhyana to the first and second skandhas, but this is very difficult because you cannot make any sort of correlation with exactness. For instance, when you are liberated from the form and sensation skandhas, can you definitely say you have liberated yourself from the view of possessing a body? The answer is no! And why? Because the root of the view of the body lies within the seventh consciousness, so if you have not freed yourself from the five skandhas to a major degree, you cannot get rid of the view of the body in entirety. To really get rid of the view of the body is very difficult indeed, which is why Lao Tzu said it bothered him so much.

How about matching up the first dhyana with the Taoist transformation sequence of jing, chi and shen? Here we can say that to achieve the first dhyana you must not let the jing leak away by succumbing to sexual desire. Otherwise, you will not be able to transform your jing into chi. The biological bliss you experience at this point can occur because your jing becomes full (through no-leakage) and then descends. At this point, the ching-se in all your cells becomes activated, which is why you can experience physical bliss. Another way of putting it is to say that since you are transforming your body into ching-se, you will naturally experience joy and bliss.

In addition to all this, to reach the stage of the first dhyana you must have already opened up the body's chi channels, otherwise you could not achieve the necessary state of mental unity and calm. Therefore, to be able to reach the first dhyana, you must at least have reached the stage of

cultivation such that your jing has transformed into chi. When the chi reaches the brain your thoughts will be lessened, so the stage of the first dhyana will require chi cultivation in some measure. This does not mean you have to force your chi to do something, but simply means that you must reach the stage where your jing transforms into chi naturally.

Many people today casually talk about Mahayana and Hinayana cultivation, but hardly anyone understands all these interrelationships, nor has even achieved the authentic first dhyana. To do so, you need both prajna wisdom and merit. Basically, to achieve the first dhyana you must achieve the mental attainment of transforming the root afflictions, so achieving the first dhyana is not the result of simply cultivating the physical body.

As we saw, Lady Tsogyel underwent many tests to see if she had really transformed the poisonous habits of her mind. Milarepa, Gampopa, and Yeshe Tsogyel were all successful in achieving the first stage of dhyana, but they all went through much pain and suffering before they attained their higher samadhi. Thus, you should not think that you can attain the first dhyana without any trouble, or that it is so easy. That is why there is the Zen poem:

> Above the valley lies a blanket of white clouds
> The birds returning to their nests become lost.

Occasionally you might be able to experience the ching-an state of lightness and peace, but the real difficulty is to maintain it at all times with mindfulness so that it develops into the first dhyana. Once you reach any stage of cultivation accomplishment, discipline means that you do not lose that stage of attainment. You do not cling to it with attachment but rather, you maintain it with mindfulness until it transforms into a yet higher stage of attainment.

THE SECOND DHYANA

The Buddhist sutras do not describe the second dhyana in much detail, but the second dhyana also involves one-pointed concentration, inner purity, mental joy and physical bliss. We say that the joy and bliss of the second dhyana is higher than that of the first dhyana, but to really understand the difference between these stages requires you to experience them yourself, otherwise these various descriptions will simply be words you cannot digest.

It is the feeling of being freed from this world that generates the joy and bliss of the first dhyana, but the joy and bliss of the second dhyana are based on an even greater degree of detachment. In the first dhyana you feel wonderful because the mental discomfort caused by the five poisons is lessened, and you can become free from worry. In the second dhyana you feel wonderful because you can finally begin to feel free from the contamination of suffering.

People like to talk about the various samadhi and esoteric structures of the body, but from this

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progression we can realize that moral cultivation is actually a cultivation path as well as a means to free oneself from suffering. And so the cultivation roads of Socrates and Confucius, which stress the task of perfecting human virtue and behavior, are also seen to easily lead to the first and second dhyana accomplishments.

Unfortunately, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have no better words to describe all these various states, so the best we can say is that the second dhyana is more refined in terms of clarity, calmness and brightness than the first dhyana. The mental state of the second dhyana is even more calm and quiet than in the first dhyana and the accompanying feelings of joy and bliss are much more refined and stable. In the second dhyana, you will feel quite free of the pain and afflictions caused by normal mental and physical pressures, and this is freedom from the contamination of suffering.

How does one get to the second dhyana? The process is to initially achieve stable mastery over the first dhyana, contemplate its defects, and then abandon these gross factors so as to rise to the second dhyana. Through prajna observation you basically identify, and then abandon, those factors whose absence will lead to a more peaceful and refined state.

To put it yet another way, after gaining proficiency over the first dhyana, you use your prajna wisdom insight to recognize any coarse mental factors which still exist in that state. In so doing, you will eventually be able to identify the factors of applied and sustained thought (vitarka and vicara) which helped you initially enter the first dhyana. If you cultivate wisdom within the first samadhi, your wisdom will enable you to recognize that the mental factors of vitarka and vicara now appear as impediments to a more peaceful and higher stage of meditation. Thus to get to the second dhyana, these coarse mental factors must be abandoned.

While these mental factors are necessary helpmates for arriving at the first dhyana, to the higher stages of meditation they appear like ripples and wavelets in water that disturb its peaceful nature. Only when a meditator abandons the coarsity of these factors can they rise above the first dhyana to reach the second dhyana, which is more tranquil and sublime than the first. However, this transition may not be an entirely smooth affair. In the course of making progress, a practitioner might even feel they are retrogressing. This feeling of being muddled during the transition is like the darkness before dawn but after it ends, the purity and clarity of the second dhyana will appear. Hence, during this transition phase, you do not hold tightly onto the first dhyana and prevent it from changing, but just ignore the evaporation of first dhyana coarsities until the transition process is over.

In terms of the physical body, Taoism would say that attaining the first dhyana requires that you refine your jing and transform it into chi. You cannot let your jing leak away, and you must cultivate emptiness so that jing can naturally transform into chi. This means that you must not attach to thoughts, you must avoid sexual leakage, and you must avoid putting any effort into

using the sixth consciousness. If thoughts do arise, you should remain aware of them but you should not do cling to them or inject them with energy. Prajna awareness is what knows the thoughts but is not the thoughts themselves, and to recognize and abide in this empty awareness nature, which does not abide anywhere, is the proper road of spiritual practice.

If you practice in this way, then your chi mai will naturally open, your jing will transform into chi, your chi will become full, and you will reach the bliss and joy of the first dhyana. All it takes is time and effort and then the process will naturally transpire just as it should. As the Zen master Huang Po once instructed:

> If you only learn to develop unmindfulness at all times while walking, standing, sitting and reclining, you may fail, in the course of time, to leap over [to Reality] solely because of your insufficient strength. But if you so continue for another three, five or ten years, you will surely awaken in the end.

Reaching the second dhyana requires that you go a step further than the first dhyana, and refine your chi to transform it into shen. When your chi is full you do not think of eating, and when shen is full you do not even think of sleeping, so the point after which you are near or firmly established in the first dhyana is a much safer time to undergo the fasting practices of the Tao school, as we saw in the stories of Milarepa and Yeshe Tsogyel. If you choose to undergo this type of ascetic retreat, you must also renounce your body and dedicate your life completely to this effort. You have to totally renounce honors, attachments and desire, even the desire for food and sex. Otherwise your retreat will be useless, or may end up in disaster.

Transforming chi into shen to attain the second dhyana also means you must reach the stage where your chi and mai stop moving; the mai will have opened and your "chi will stop," which means that your external respiration will cease and all the body's life force will come to a rest. While your external respiration ceases, your body's cells will continue breathing, and since your chi channels are all clear, this cellular respiration is all that you will need for the body.

When you can reach the second dhyana it becomes possible to remain buried underground for several days without oxygen and be revived later, but this is not the pathway to Tao, or spiritual cultivation. Some people in India and the Arab countries can do this feat through a type of artificial physical training other than mastering the second dhyana, so if you see this feat, be careful of jumping to conclusions that it is even a genuine dhyana attainment.

THE THIRD DHYANA

To attain the third dhyana, a cultivation practitioner must continue using the same method he previously employed in ascending from the first dhyana to the second. A meditator must attain the second dhyana, identify those defects that actually perturb its seeming serenity, and abandon

those gross mental factors that now clearly appear to his or her discernment as irritations.

In the first and second dhyana, we say that joy and bliss are both present. In the third dhyana, however, a practitioner has made such meditative progress that the entanglement of mental joy, even highly refined, is now abandoned. At this stage, a meditator recognizes that the excitement of mental joy can disrupt his or her inner calm and serenity, and therefore abandons all traces of this type of thought. The feeling of physical bliss remains in the third dhyana, however, so we are still involved with the skandhas of form and sensation since bliss is felt by the physical body. However, this feeling of bliss is even more refined than in the two preceding dhyana. In fact, it is quite beyond anything felt by the beings within the Desire Realm.

Without the thought of mental joy to produce excitement, and due to the absence of other gross mental faults, an individual enjoying the third dhyana will not be lending support to any factors that might perturb their mind, and so they will develop a high degree of meditative equanimity. This equanimity will deepen even further when you reach the stage of the fourth dhyana. From a Taoist point of view, this mental equanimity is related to the fact that the third dhyana involves cultivating your shen and refining your shen into emptiness. From a physical standpoint, by the stage of the third dhyana you can also reach a point where your pulse will actually stop.

Technically speaking, we can therefore say that the third dhyana is characterized by equanimity, mindfulness, insight (discernment), bliss and single-mindedness. When people want to be brief about the matter, they simply say that it is characterized by bliss and single-mindedness (concentration). However, Buddhist Abhidharma analysis can expand upon this list of characteristics greatly. To give just one example, a complete Abhidharma analysis of the first dhyana reveals that it can be broken down into a list of thirty-three indispensable components, although we normally mention only five.

As to the longer list of factors characterizing the third dhyana, the characteristic of equanimity arises from the fact there is an absence of anything that might cause mental imbalance. It is a joy that is free from mental movement toward any type of object. Mindfulness is defined as a factor which holds an object in contemplation without letting it float away, and in the third dhyana, mindfulness protects this equanimity. Awareness or discernment is the aspect of wisdom that can scrutinize an object of contemplation and grasp its nature free of delusion, so awareness is associated with this mindfulness. It is because of discernment, or insight, that we can identify any defects that threaten the serenity of a particular dhyana.

In the stage of the third dhyana, your cultivation attainments are firmly grounded in the Realm of Form, and we can sub-partition this dhyana into three great levels. Each of these levels pertains to a particular Form Realm heaven with its own individual nuances that correspond to higher or lower degrees of purity and merit.

THE FOURTH DHYANA

To reach the fourth dhyana, you will have to strengthen the third dhyana's stage of meditative equanimity by abandoning even the excitation of extremely refined physical bliss, with the result that you only experience pervasive equanimity. Thus, in the fourth dhyana you will only experience equanimity, mindfulness and one-pointedness of mind; physical bliss will have disappeared. As before, each of the mental factors remaining in this dhyana are more refined than in the previous three dhyana because the gross factors that previously contaminated the mind's purity are now absent. Accordingly, the mindfulness aspect of the fourth dhyana ranks above the mindfulness aspect of the third dhyana because of a higher degree of equanimity.

The reason why joy and bliss are progressively eliminated as you progress through the four dhyana is because they are actually factors which interfere with mental stability, so spiritual progress demands that these factors be abandoned. If you believe that the rapture of a saint is a high spiritual stage, wherein a saint loses control of both their body and mind through an experience of ecstasy, you can now understand that this is a very low stage of spiritual cultivation, and most probably is actually a deviation from the spiritual trail!

Each successive dhyana represents a progressive increase in mental purity and stability and detachment. This is because concentration and clarity increase as such turbid factors are successively discarded. As we have discussed, the general method one uses to ascend from one dhyana to the next is to progressively eliminate the coarse dhyana factors which you discover through your prajna insight, namely the insight discernment capabilities which are born through cessation-contemplation practice (shamatha-vipashyana).

Basically, through meditation you can attain the realm of a particular dhyana. After attaining a degree of stability with regards to that dhyana, you will eventually become able to contemplate its characteristics with some clarity. From this insight contemplation, you will be able to notice certain factors that are inhibiting a more perfect mental serenity, and so you abandon these factors to ascend to the next higher realm of spiritual attainment.

By the time we come to the fourth dhyana, the experiential realm has already completely progressed past any stages of joy and bliss, meaning a practitioner can only attain the fourth dhyana when they can finally leave behind all their different thoughts. That is the only way they can reach the requisite realm of calm, concentration and clarity which corresponds to the fourth dhyana—you must get rid of all your tiny troublesome random thoughts so that you become pure and clear and everything is empty.

When you feel the joy and bliss of the lower dhyana, this is actually because your discriminative thoughts are not yet abandoned, for otherwise, you could not know of these experiences. Feeling

the joy and bliss of the lower dhyana also means that those realms are still involved with the skandhas of form and sensation. Thus, the state of the fourth dhyana is extremely empty, more peaceful and secure than anything so far experienced. We can also say that it involves cultivating the skandha of conception because it is no longer involved with form and sensation. Cultivating the fourth dhyana is also getting close to totally and entirely emptying the sixth consciousness of discrimination.

In the fourth dhyana you are finally free of a large degree of your discriminative thoughts, and with this accomplishment you can therefore look upon all the previous dhyana, and pre-dhyana stages, as being quite coarse in nature. Thus, we say that this stage is characterized by neither pain nor pleasure, but by great equanimity and single-mindedness of concentration. In the fourth dhyana, we say you have abandoned thoughts to become pure and clear, which is a state of *great emptiness attainment*. It is a state of pure being, and since there are but few thoughts of the ego at this stage, it is a state of relative selflessness that many Arhats take as a stage of liberation.

While the first dhyana is characterized by an absence of random thoughts ("thoughts stop" because you achieve one-pointed concentration), in the second dhyana you can find your chi stopping (the breath comes to a halt), in the third dhyana your pulse may stop, and in the fourth dhyana you can reach a great stage of emptiness which corresponds to purifying the skandha of conception. From this point onwards, you have to work on fully transforming the skandhas of conception, volition and consciousness so as to "abandon emptiness and return to Tao." This is the Stage of True Cultivation Practice that leads to the Stage of Buddhahood.

Naturally these various correspondences cannot be matched up in such a strict fashion; we can only say that these various stages from different cultivation schools are related. Hence, when this type of kung-fu materializes, you must not immediately jump to the conclusion that you have reached such a high stage of attainment. These are just the general indications from roughly matching Tao school teachings with Orthodox Buddhism, and the fourth dhyana accomplishment does not yet mean you have seen the Tao. It does not mean that you have achieved enlightenment, but you are very close if you can turn around to find the ultimate source of the mind's ability for attention and perception.

From another standpoint we can say that the first dhyana has both vitarka and vicara, or seeking and observation. When you get to the stage where there is no vitarka, but just vicara, this is the realm of the second and third dhyana. At this point there is just a mental watching, a consistent purity and clarity and concentration. The stage where there is no vitarka and no vicara characterizes the fourth dhyana as well as the formless samadhi of the Formless Realm. In actual fact, these higher instances are still the small stage of no vitarka and no vicara; they are not the absolute extinction of seeking and watching.

HOW OTHER SPIRITUAL SCHOOLS DESCRIBE THE FOUR DHYANA

We can use this explanation and categorization scheme to finally make sense of the various samadhi posed by several Indian yoga authorities, a task that has befuddled scholars and pundits over the ages. If we take the writings of Patanjali, Vyasa and Vacaspati Mishra (in his *Tattva-Vaisharadi*), we find a sequence of four samadhi whose degree of refinement increases in stages.

These samadhi, despite a difference in names, perfectly match with the four dhyana. In fact this *has to be so* because the four dhyana are shared cultivation stages spanning all the different cultivation schools. It is just that in Buddhism, their sequence and attainment is openly described in detail whereas in other schools they are not often so clearly commented upon. In fact, in some other spiritual schools the commentaries on the dhyana are nonexistent because the founding (and subsequent) spiritual adepts just never got that far.

According to the classical Hindu yoga schools, a practitioner progresses through the samadhi by first gaining proficiency at a grosser stage of spiritual attainment, and by then developing dispassion toward this stage so as to progress to the next higher, subtler, purified, or refined level of meditative accomplishment. Just as in the progression through the four dhyana, the higher realm of concentration is viewed as purer or more refined than the lower, but this purity is only relative. Nevertheless, the mind is thus encouraged along a graduated process of refinement, all of which corresponds to higher and higher accomplishments within the Realm of Form.

The first samadhi in these schools is the *vitarka samadhi*, which is a samadhi still involved with the cogitation of thought that involves examining an object. This is nothing less than the first dhyana, for none of the other dhyana are still involved with the vitarka of coarse mental grasping. Thus the objects of vitarka samadhi meditation are rather coarse, namely the *gunas* of Hinduism and their products.

Vedanta, namely the Samkhya school of philosophy, offers a wide variety of suggestions for these objects of support, which are objects used as a point of focus in meditation. For example, you can meditate on the five elements, on a material form (such as the sun, a flame, etc.), or on a deity such as Vishnu or Shiva, or even on the image of Jesus, or a chakra or Sanskrit letter. All these forms serve as a point of focus in meditation so that a spiritual aspirant can generate one-pointed concentration and attain the state of samadhi.

Next we have *vicara samadhi*, which is a samadhi of just vicara. The second and third dhyana of Buddhism can both be classified as just vicara, which is mental reflection or observation, but the third dhyana is distinguished by the fact that it is characterized mainly by bliss (*ananda*). Hence, the third dhyana corresponds to the stage of *ananda samadhi*, and the Hindu sage Vyasa confirms this understanding with the description: “Rapture is bliss.” This leaves the second

dhyana as the sole correspondent for the vicara samadhi of classical Hindu yoga, and its stipulation as the second samadhi in the series matches up with the second dhyana ranking as well.

The last samadhi is *asmita samadhi*, which is described as a samadhi of merely I-am-ness. This is the fourth dhyana where there is only one-pointed concentration and profound emptiness, but where the practitioner has not yet freed himself from the confines of the egocentric seventh consciousness. He has reached a stage of selflessness, but it is not the complete selflessness of the Tao.

In summary, vitarka samadhi corresponds to the first dhyana. Vicara samadhi corresponds to the second dhyana. Ananda samadhi corresponds to the third dhyana. Asmita samadhi corresponds to the fourth dhyana. As the Hindu sage Vyasa says of the four Samadhi:

> The *vitarka*-conjoint *samadhi* actually accompanies all four. The second one, with gross thought (*vitarka*) having been terminated, is accompanied by subtle thought *(vicara*). The third one, with subtle thought having been terminated, is accompanied by bliss (*ananda*). The fourth one, with that bliss having been terminated, is merely I-am-ness (*asmita*). All these *samadhis* are dependent on, conjoint with, or accompanied by supportive factors.4

Even though you become free from random thoughts when you attain the fourth dhyana, it is not yet the highest stage of spiritual accomplishment one can reach. All these samadhi involve supportive factors as the focus of concentration because they all correspond to attainments within the Realm of Form. To progress even further in cultivation accomplishments, you have to also be able to attain the samadhi absorptions of the Formless Realm which are no longer involved with gross mental objects of support at all.

As a general principle, we can only say that the experiential realm of the fourth dhyana involves liberation from random thoughts to reach a deep state of clarity and calm. We provisionally describe this stage as “empty,” though there are emptier stages still. All the dhyana have various graduations of achievement, and there are nine different levels of achievement within the fourth dhyana, each of which corresponds to a different Form Realm heaven due to the slight differences in psychology and merit. Naturally you could subdivide any stage of concentration into as many levels as you would like, but Shakyamuni Buddha divided each of these dhyana into a specific number of stages based on a variety of factors, including the different merits they each imply.

While the Taoists, because of their emphasis on the physical nature, would describe the process of proceeding from the first to fourth dhyana in terms of jing, chi, shen and emptiness transformations, Buddhist sutras describe the ascent according to the principles of mind

(psychology) and merit. Other schools may describe parts of this progression via biophysical kung-fu or other factors, but the Buddhist descriptions most closely address the heart of the matter.

Basically, Buddhist teachings say that the four dhyana are linked together in a graduated sequence of development in which each lower dhyana serves as the basis for the higher, and the higher in turn represents a more purified version of the lower states. Thus, to attain the dhyana,

> If they become separated from sensual desire and from non-virtuous qualities, a monk [cultivation practitioner] can enter into and abide in the first dhyana, in which there is conceptuality and analysis, joy and bliss, and which arises because of separation from hindrances. ... Due to diminishment of the factors of conceptuality and analysis, he can enter into and abide in the second dhyana, which is characterized by internal tranquility, one-pointed concentration of thought, which is devoid of conceptuality and analysis, but which has joy and bliss. ... Due to detachment from joy, the monk will dwell in equanimity, have mindfulness and clear understanding, and experience the bliss in body and mind of the third dhyana. ... Through eliminating both pain and pleasure, and due to the previous disappearance of sorrow and happiness, the monk can enter into and abide within the fourth dhyana which is devoid of pain and pleasure, a state of equanimity and absolute purity of mindfulness.

All four dhyana still belong within the domain of consciousness, so even though one attains the fourth dhyana, a spiritual practitioner has not yet escaped consciousness even though he has escaped from random thoughts. These four dhyana constitute great spiritual cultivation attainments, but they do not constitute the whole spiritual path; there is still much more work to go.

It is very easy to attain various superpowers when you attain the various dhyana, but having attained various siddhis does not mean you have attained any of the dhyana! Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* devotes an entire chapter to supernormal powers which can developed from certain spiritual concentrations, so it speaks of all these things in detail. For instance, it mentions that if you concentrate to master the chi currents that control the lungs and upper part of the body, you can walk on water. If you can control the force that governs your chi, you can surround yourself with a blaze of light, which is akin to the Christian event of transfiguration. You can also make your body as tiny as an atom, develop supernatural hearing, supernatural sight, knowledge of distant places and so on.

You just have to purify your chi and shen and then concentrate in the appropriate way to attain these special abilities, so of course this means accomplishing a one-pointed concentration within the realm of the four dhyana. Simply by controlling the mind you can gain these supernormal abilities, and while they can provide more insight into nature than is yet possible by modern science, they still are not the ultimate matter. These, too, are just temporal abilities.

Buddhism mentions six types of psychic powers, but these are by-products which naturally arise due to progress made on the cultivation trail that ignores them. There is the ability of supernatural sight, which allows you to see anywhere, the ability of supernatural hearing which allows you to hear sounds anywhere, the ability to know past lives, the ability to know the minds of others, the extinction of outflows (the destruction of the afflictions of greed, hate, stupidity or desire), and the "complete spiritual penetration" which entails miraculous supernatural abilities such as being able to fly through space, become invisible, transform one object into many or many into one, or appear anywhere at will.

Buddhism also mentions "five eyes," or five types of vision that you will naturally attain from cultivating the correct spiritual way. There is a saying that summarizes these "eyes" and their penetrations:

> The Heavenly eye penetrates without obstruction.
> The Fleshly eye sees obstacles but does not penetrate.
> The Dharma eye only contemplates the mundane [affairs of worldly existence].
> The Wisdom eye understands true emptiness.
> The Buddha eye shines like a thousand suns.
> Although their illumination differs, their substance is one.

Supernormal powers themselves are just functions of the realm of consciousness because they are actually the result of various machinations of thought. Thus, they cannot be considered anything special other than a particular way of holding the mind. In this sense, even having a good memory can be considered a type of superpower, but people do not realize this.

Furthermore, just because someone has attained various siddhi superpowers and psychic abilities does not mean they are a more spiritual or "advanced" person than other individuals. We often see this strange view promoted on television or in the movies, whereas psychic abilities can originate from sickness or mental instability. If someone is hit in an accident such that it opens their chi mai, it is possible to attain all sorts of strange psychic abilities. Even demons and ghosts have psychic abilities and superpowers, so possessing them does not mean you are spiritually exceptional. However, such are the misconceptions people tend to base themselves on when trying to judge someone's level of spiritual cultivation achievement.

Frankly, most cultivation practitioners who develop and then widely demonstrate these abilities—such as supernatural hearing and sight, being able to know the future or being able to project their chi—tend to get dragged down by such powers. These various abilities are just obstructions on the path because they can cause people to lose sight of their original aims and goals in cultivation.

The reason someone can cultivate the four dhyana is because they have accumulated enough

merit and put in the required cultivation efforts. Cultivation practice, plus patience, plus time, produces this result. Although the four dhyana are important vehicles on the path of realization, we cannot consider they are what is fundamental in Buddhism. They might be hard for ordinary people to attain when they do not put in the requisite meditation efforts, but they still represent an incomplete level of attainment in the overall scheme of cultivation experience.

The real accomplishment of Buddhism or any religion is to see the Tao and attain enlightenment. Nonetheless, we cannot fault the four dhyana in any way, and must recognize that they are common stages of the spiritual cultivation path shared by all schools of genuine spirituality, so you must become familiar with these stages and learn their various characteristics as well as the general level of attainment which they represent. They do not yet embody the ultimate, but they are still a common measuring stick of the spiritual progress you can make toward this goal.

Various States of No-Mind or No-Thought

As we have mentioned, each of the four dhyana can be broken into finer graduations, each of which corresponds to slightly different conditions of accomplishment. This is a common characteristic of any measuring system, for even the five skandhas can be further sub-divided into various categories. Thus, on a similar note, it is not surprising to find that the state of no-mind (mindlessness, nonperception, or "not having mind" or "no-thought") traditionally has five different situations, called "stations," where it can occur:

- mindless sleep (wherein you forget everything)
- mindless unconsciousness (experienced during fainting, coma, or a concussion with memory loss)
- the samadhi of no-thought (the samadhi without thought)
- the heaven of no-thought (a heaven without thought in the Form Realm)
- the samadhi of extinction (a state of one-sided emptiness, representing a great tranquility similar to the nirvana of the Buddhas, found at the highest level of the Formless Realm where the functioning of emptiness annihilates the functioning of body and mind)

There is also the "nirvana without remaining dependency" achieved by the Mahayana Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. This is the only correct form of "having no mind," for in this stage the ignorance of the alaya consciousness becomes extinct as it transforms into the great mirror wisdom. That is when you reach the purity of inherent true nature.

We sometimes say that a Buddha is omniscient because the great mirror wisdom is eternally present to all objects without failure of memory or perceptive error. When you return to your fundamentally enlightened status, this wisdom is your naturally existent state.

In cultivation, there are also several states that involve an empty gap between two moving processes, and this intercessionary gap of peaceful stillness, called a *bardo* state, is often used as a point of focus for spiritual cultivation. For instance, this type of gap can occur:

- between the state of being awake and falling to sleep
- between two thoughts
- between a state of dreaming and having no dreams (while sleeping)
- between the inhalation and exhalation of the breath
- between death and rebirth (the bardo period)

All these intercessionary situations can and do serve as the basis for particular methods of cultivation. For instance, recognizing that gap of no-mind between thoughts is cultivation of the cessation and contemplation practice of the Tien-tai school. When you practice to recognize the state between waking and sleeping (as is common in many yogic schools), or between dreaming and not dreaming, this is related to the dream yoga of the Esoteric school.

Cultivating the gap between the in-breath and out-breath is the basis of anapana or pranayama practice, and all the other breathing practices of the world. And the state immediately after death that proceeds rebirth—the bardo state—is the focus of the various Tibetan bardo cultivation practices for attaining enlightenment. The adherents of Kashmir Shaivism even make a science out of contemplating the state of contact or no-contact with a physical or mental phenomenon, so there are many states with a "gap" that can be used as an entry point of focus for entering into samadhi.

In most all the cultivation techniques based on intercessionary phenomena, people try to focus on that gap of emptiness between two states of movement. You do not focus on the states of movement themselves, which are akin to the birth and death of the volition skandha, but on that peaceful state of empty stillness between them. If you concentrated on the moving things you would be concentrating on birth and death, or the transient things rather than the thing which stays.

During that peaceful intercessory situation, the sixth consciousness is inactive for a moment, and discursive thought is therefore relatively nonexistent. This gap of pausation is not the Tao itself or the prajna emptiness of cultivation doctrine. It is just a momentary calming of the sixth consciousness. However, various cultivation techniques can be built around this empty situation into order to familiarize practitioners with some understanding of emptiness, as well as help them enter into the first dhyana. You need some type of method for entry into the dhyana; these are just some of the methods available.

These particular cultivation techniques are just the minor initiatory methods that can help practitioners familiarize themselves with emptiness, after which they can deepen their

understanding so as to eventually "see the path." While none of these situations correspond to the true wisdom emptiness of cultivation, techniques that focus on these resting situations can help practitioners familiarize themselves with the meaning of the path.

With continued practice of such techniques, in time spiritual cultivators will gain some cultivation accomplishment and eventually recognize the true way to spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, none of these states are the actual samadhi of emptiness espoused by Hinayana cultivation, nor are they the prajna of emptiness either. But you can build definite methods of cultivation practice around these states, and pursuing these methods can indeed help you enter into samadhi.

THE FOUR SAMADHI OF THE FORMLESS REALM

In addition to the four dhyana, we already know that there is also a more refined set of meditations called the four formless samadhi. These are also known as the four formless meditations, four formless absorptions, or four formless concentrations. As with the four dhyana, the four formless samadhi are considered "shared stages" or "common stages" on the spiritual path, although while they are called "shared" it does not mean that all people achieve them.

The entire set of eight absorptions, which includes the four dhyana, is a "shared set of attainments" within the reach of many different cultivation and religious schools. Together, the four dhyana and four samadhi make eight vehicles which are alternatively known as the eight samadhi, eight concentrations, eight absorptions, or eight *jhanas*.

There is a wide variety of different terms for these eight concentrations, so you must not get too confused about the matter when you encounter all the various names or descriptive substitutions which are possible. As to the ninth samadhi, which corresponds to the extinction stage of the Arhats achieved by cultivating great transcendental prajna wisdom, it is found only within the province of the Buddhist wisdom teachings because Buddhism cultivate great prajna transcendental wisdom while other schools just emphasize samadhi.

To attain this extinction stage, a practitioner must cultivate the great transcendental wisdom, and the highest stages of wisdom teachings are definitely absent in all other spiritual cultivation schools. For instance, the Vedic schools have thousands of practices, but they do not have this teaching, which explains why these schools could not produce a Buddha prior to Shakyamuni. Only with the arising of the Hindu sage Shankara, and his non-dual path, were the great wisdom teachings to obtain somewhat of a foothold in the Vedic tradition.

As indicated by their name, the four formless samadhi represent a stage of meditative attainment that no longer corresponds to the Realm of Form. Accordingly, the stage of attainment they represent surpasses the physical material world (Desire Realm) and even the energy world (Form Realm). Though there are some slight differences in the names used by various translators to

signify these states, the four formless samadhi absorptions are commonly known as:

- the samadhi of infinite space (the infinite form samadhi)
- the samadhi of infinite consciousness
- the samadhi of nothingness
- the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought

We cannot say that these four samadhi are progressively attained in the same manner of the four dhyana—which are typically mastered one after the other—and yet we could also say this as well. You might sit down to meditate and spontaneously experience the samadhi without thought and without no-thought, or the samadhi of infinite space, but you will not be able to maintain these experiential realms unless your concentration and kung-fu were stable and strong enough.

You will also recall that when you abide in a particular dhyana, the levels below you appear gross and undefined, while the levels above you appear more peaceful and refined. As we have said, this is because the lower four dhyana all refer to graduations of the Form Realm. Since the formless samadhi correspond to the Formless Realm, we cannot say that one formless samadhi is higher or lower than another. They are merely different, so you do not have to cultivate them in any particular order. Then again, you can say that they are arranged in a hierarchical ranking by order of purity.

Some schools will mistakenly tell you that the formless absorptions are attained one after the other in a progressive fashion, but this is incorrect. For instance, in the first dhyana you might also be able to reach the samadhi of infinite space even if you cannot reach the other three dhyana. As another example, in the second dhyana you might be able to reach all the formless absorptions without having attained the third or fourth dhyana. Therefore, the view of progressive attainment of the formless absorptions is incorrect. Attaining them depends entirely upon your qualifications.

We can say that the four dhyana correspond more to the aspect of our physical forms, whereas the formless absorptions have more correspondence to our psychological aspect, which is why they are "formless." Hence in one sense you can say the formless absorptions are higher than the four dhyana since the Realm of Formlessness is higher than the Realm of Form. However, in another sense you cannot say that they are higher, but only different like salt and sugar which are both used for cooking.

However you approach the issue, we have to say there are definite differences between the formless samadhi themselves in terms of the cultivation kung-fu attained, and the "object" of contemplation which is the focus of the state.

THE SAMADHI OF INFINITE SPACE

The first of the four formless samadhi is the samadhi of infinite space, also known as the samadhi of boundless space, limitless space, or infinite emptiness. Despite its name, this samadhi still resides within the domain of consciousness because you still need consciousness to know you are in it. While it is a samadhi that has broken away from the Form and Desire Realms, it is not yet a samadhi that has broken away from consciousness.

In this samadhi absorption, the appearance of forms disappears to the mind, and all thoughts of the Form Realm are eliminated because the meditator perceives everything as limitless space, without obstruction or variety. They have the perception, "this realm is infinite like space." For instance, when the Hindu adept Ashtavakra experienced this particular stage of realization, he described it by saying,

> I am boundless like space; the created universe is like a jar [filled and surrounded by space]. Hence, there is no [need for] relinquishing, accepting, or dissolving [the world]. Such is wisdom (*jnana*). Where is darkness or light, where cessation? Indeed, where is anything at all for the sage who is ever immutable and untroubled? There is no heaven and no hell, not even living liberation (*jivanmukti*). In brief, nothing [that could be grasped by the mind presents itself] to the yogic vision.5

To understand this stage of meditation, we must remember that during sitting meditation some people can occasionally reach a state where they can no longer feel their body. In this type of experience, we can say that the practitioner has temporarily forgotten the form and sensation skandhas yet without being liberated from these aggregates. They have only forgotten the skandhas because, if you analyze this event in detail, you will find that the feeling of "not having yourself" is itself still a type of knowing!

This is not to say you are not making great cultivation progress when you reach this type of experiential realm, and remain in it, but we are simply correcting the claim that this is the ultimate emptiness samadhi. Because one still has the sensation of not having a body, we know this experiential realm is not completely empty! You must remember that in order to attain the Tao you must ultimately forget everything, including the fact you are forgetting, because ultimate emptiness is even empty of the knowing of emptiness. That is why we say you must forget yourself.

How can we describe the feeling of space attained in this samadhi? When Zen master Tung-shan achieved this state, he wrote of his experience as "far away, separate from me." This stage, where he had forgotten his self, was the realm of boundless space. When Zen master Ling-yuan became enlightened upon seeing a peach blossom, he only experienced the realm of infinite space as well.

But since these examples are hard for us to comprehend, there are several other examples we can employ to obtain some idea of this state (although putting forth an image of emptiness is definitely polluting the point).

The first example might be when you are riding in an airplane and you look outside to experience the space around you, which extends in every direction. Naturally, this feeling of space in the sky is quite different than the feeling of space you have when you sit within an empty room, for it is vaster and much more liberated. Now suppose you move even farther away from the Earth's atmosphere, and into outer space, and are in that vacuous region between planets. Modern science knows there is still stuff within this void, such as virtual particles and energy streams, so it is not *really* empty. Nevertheless you still feel it is empty, even emptier than the sky.

The point is, in this samadhi it feels like there is a great emptiness abounding everywhere, but the samadhi of infinite space is not yet completely empty because there is still something there. What is still there? Consciousness is still there, the consciousness that knows this state.

Actually, there are seven elements that always abide within physical emptiness: the earth, water, fire, wind, and space elements as well as perception and consciousness. So we can say that empty space still contains the elements of form, including perceptions (like sound and taste), and consciousness.

In the past, people could not verify these principles using the science available at the time, but we now know that empty space does contain things that are either invisible, or so small, or so momentary that they usually go unnoticed. For instance, when you have two pieces of metal hanging in a vacuum-jar, they will be pulled together because of gravity and electrical attraction. Even if the jar has no air, you therefore cannot say the jar is entirely empty. Quantum electrodynamics tells us that even a perfect vacuum of empty space will give birth to virtual particles that are constantly born and die, so because of the advanced principles of quantum physics, you cannot say that space is empty for certain.

To better understand this samadhi of limitless space, suppose you reach a particular state of mental emptiness as if, in an analogous physical sense, you were in outer space. The stage of emptiness we are speaking of does not mean that nothing exists at all, so it is also called the "infinite form samadhi." This term may seem paradoxical, but it is to remind us that the extreme of emptiness is actually form. Thus, this name also reminds us that the space we are speaking of is still an aspect of form. *It is not that one negates forms when you achieve the samadhi of limitless space, it is just that the practitioner does not take to mind the phenomena of forms*.

In terms of cultivation kung-fu, when you are in this samadhi you will experience light, but not a brilliant light. If you can master this samadhi and stabilize your experience, you can be reborn into the Formless Realm at the level that corresponds to this samadhi, the Absorption of Infinite

Space. How can you attain this realm? You have to cultivate the meditative absorption that views form as gross and imagines that there is only space everywhere.

In the *Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, Buddha even spoke of how to practice in order to attain this samadhi. He said, "Contemplate space within the body, and always contemplate the body as being void, like an empty cage, or like a receptacle for steam cooking. [Lama Tsong Khapa said to train by imagining that the body is like an empty bag, or balloon] ... Thus, you will eventually be able to transcend form and eliminate the view of the body. As the body becomes like infinite space, so does other external form. At that time you will have succeeded in contemplating the emptiness of infinite space."

THE SAMADHI OF INFINITE CONSCIOUSNESS

All the sutras of Buddhism mention these various formless stage samadhi, but even the Esoteric school does not explain them in detail, and the descriptions in various Hindu or yoga manuals are so incomplete or misleading that these various levels are often intermixed and mistakenly taken for one another. We must note, however, that all these formless samadhi are still within the domain of consciousness, so they are all related to what Buddhism classifies as the seventh and eighth (alaya) consciousness. Only when you reach enlightenment and transform the eighth consciousness can we say you have superseded their realm.

In Zen we say that the sixth and seventh consciousnesses screen our minds from awareness of our inherent Buddha-nature, but even when you arrive at the level of the eighth consciousness, you still have to transform the basis of the alaya in order to completely attain Tao. You have to produce a revolution in its basis so that all its seeds become wisdoms, and so that its yin nature of ignorance becomes a yang nature of wisdom.

The samadhi of infinite consciousness is another of the Formless Realm absorptions and is best described as an experiential realm of boundaryless consciousness wherein everything appears to be consciousness only. In this formless samadhi absorption, you only experience undifferentiated consciousness, which is why the samadhi is called the "absorption of limitless consciousness." As in the previous samadhi of infinite space, in this state you do not take to mind any external phenomena, but only your own mind. Hence, in this state, your experiential focus can be said to represent a type of spiritual realm.

Some yogis mistake this samadhi for the ultimate stage of liberation, but the realm of only consciousness still is not the Tao. In actuality, since you are actually discriminating that there is only consciousness, you are still subject to a refined form of discrimination. Hence, emptiness is not there completely.

The realm of consciousness experienced in the samadhi of infinite consciousness is different from

the eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, taste-consciousness and sixth consciousness of ordinary mind. In fact, in this samadhi there is no more joy and bliss, no chi, no mai, no form, no kundalini, no body and so no eyes, eye sense, object of eye, eye-consciousness and so on.

The formless samadhi of infinite consciousness is basically a scenario of infinite limitless consciousness, and since consciousness represents the existence side of Tao, we say it is a samadhi of infinite existence. However, the infinite consciousness samadhi is also a scenario of infinite emptiness because the mind expands forever to experience infinite voidness. In this state, both body and mind seem to have become absolutely void, and yet the awareness of knowing still exists. That is why we say consciousness still exists, and hence we get the samadhi of infinite consciousness.

To try and communicate this particular experiential realm, we can turn to a Sung dynasty poem, from the Confucian school, which actually paints a picture of the infinite consciousness samadhi:

> The Tao is so grand it is beyond the sky and earth.
> Our consciousness is so grand that all the changes
> are within its realm of perception.

In the samadhi of infinite space, though we can say that space represents a certain type of emptiness, space is still a type of external phenomenon which is not inherent in our pure mental continuum. In other words, infinite space is still an object, so to rise above this realm you have to gain liberation from that condition. However, there is no such thing as space within consciousness, for the knowing of space would actually represent a transformation of consciousness into some type of thought. Therefore, *space is a factor that disappears in the samadhi of infinite consciousness,* and this accounts for part of the difference between these states.

The formless absorption known as the samadhi of infinite consciousness is a realm in which all thought objects have been eliminated; only mind itself exists in this realm. To rise to this realm of meditation, you have to view infinite space as gross and seek only infinite consciousness instead.

THE SAMADHI OF NOTHINGNESS

The sages tried very hard to find a better name for the samadhi of nothingness but simply could not find one. Because the name fails to accurately communicate the essence of this samadhi, sometimes the Chinese, Indians and Tibetans just refer to this absorption as the seventh samadhi, or the third formless samadhi absorption.

To find the right descriptive words for any of the formless absorptions is quite difficult because

these samadhi are all far beyond the normal range of human being experience, so the seeming vagueness of this descriptive term is understandable. On the other hand, it is practically useless to simply say that one samadhi is more refined than another without any detailed explanation of their characteristics. We definitely need some sort of descriptions and characterizations in order to be able to understand these various stages of cultivation, otherwise people will always think they have reached the end objective of the spiritual path when they are still only aspirants at the beginning or in the middle of the trail. So naming these samadhi and describing them is extremely important, but in so doing we often run into this quandary of finding the proper words.

Two important questions arise when trying to describe the samadhi of nothingness: how is this samadhi different from the samadhi of infinite space, and how is it different from the samadhi of no-thought? To answer these questions, we can turn to the story of Shakyamuni Buddha, who practiced for three years to attain the samadhi of no-thought. In achieving this feat, we must remember that Shakyamuni was young, healthy and full of vitality at the time. In addition, he had incredibly great wisdom from countless lives of cultivation, and possessed the merit of a king.

From Shakyamuni's story, it is apparent that it is quite difficult to attain this samadhi, which only occurs when the mind's functioning is arrested. Because Shakyamuni discarded this realm, we also know it is not the Tao, either. Why isn't it the Tao? Because this kind of experiential realm, where you have no thoughts, is also a creation of your mind! Since it does not address the ultimate ruler of the mind, it is not the true objective of spiritual practice.

Thus, in Buddhism, the samadhi of no-thought is actually considered an outside path because you can remain in this realm for a long time without making any real progress at all towards spiritual liberation. Nevertheless, some traditions of yoga mistakenly regard this state as the ultimate. They regard it as deliverance even though once your karma for this state is exhausted you will fall out of it, and will still remain within the realm of cyclical existence.

You can say that the samadhi of no-thought is indeed a state of spiritual penetration, and yet the people who champion this state as the ultimate are confused and muddled since they do not understand the profound truth of the matter. Because of the potential for error regarding this state, the *Abhidharmakosabhasya* comments,

> The Nobel Ones consider this samadhi a precipice and calamity, and do not value entering it. On the other hand, ordinary people [mistakenly] identify the state of no-thought [nonperception] with true deliverance, and have no idea of "going out" from it. Hence, they cultivate the absorption that leads to it.

Of course this does not mean we should look down on anyone who attains this realm of concentration (the samadhi of no-thought). Anyone who does reach this level of attainment will be rewarded with rebirth in the upper regions of the Realm of Form, which is a tremendous

accomplishment. What we have to do is recognize that this still is not Tao, and is really an outside cultivation path even though it is a state of spiritual attainment.

In running after the samadhi of no-thought, as compared to the samadhi of nothingness, you are actually trying to halt your consciousness to produce a state of no-thought. Since you are using pressure or force to cover thoughts, this means you are still using consciousness as a tool in order to attain this samadhi.

We are using the term "cover thoughts" in this explanation, but this choice of words is not perfect. It is more accurate to say you are trying to "push thoughts away" so as to make it impossible for gross delusions to manifest, yet even so you still do not attain liberation from samsara when you reach this state.

Thus, the samadhi of no-thought still retains the taint of the subjective nature because getting into this stage means you are still trying to do something. Furthermore, since you are suppressing gross thoughts, feelings and discriminations, you are only *temporarily* avoiding the afflictions they represent without abandoning these subtle discriminations of the mind. For instance, when you fall into a deep sleep, all the mental activity of which we are normally aware ceases and it is as if we have become mindless, but when we wake up it is all there again. The samadhi of no-thought can be compared to this temporary state of sleep, because after you come out of this samadhi you are right back where you were before.

An example from history helps explain this. There was a student at the time of the third Buddha, Kasyapa Buddha, who entered a particular samadhi in order to wait for the fourth Buddha of this world, Shakyamuni. However, he stayed in this samadhi well past Shakyamuni's death, and the monk Xuan Zang found him on his way to India. When Xuan Zang found him and aroused him out of his samadhi, he informed him that Shakyamuni had come and gone, so the meditator decided to pass away to assume rebirth again. In all that time, this practitioner had managed to isolate himself from the gross afflictions of the world and remain in samadhi without his body disintegrating for thousands of years, but he had made no further progress in his cultivation attainment while thus absorbed. Hence, this type of prolonged absorption, which is a similar characteristic of the samadhi of no-thought, offers no beneficial progress towards realization at all.

Of course you should not match the description of this stage to the mistaken practice of beginners who try to freeze their minds and totally block thoughts from arising. The suppression of thought will not produce the samadhi of no-thought, but may actually produce a state of unclarity and ignorance which Tsong Khapa warned would lead to rebirth as an animal. This happens because you are suppressing the mind into a kind of forced stupidity.

Unfortunately, many meditation practitioners misunderstand the meaning of cultivation

instructions and try to do exactly this. They mistakenly think they should sink their mind into oblivion through pressurized no-thinking, which is their false interpretation of "no mind." This lack of understanding is why it is hard for them to "see the truth" or "see the path."

The samadhi of nothingness, on the other hand, is superior to the samadhi of no-thought. In attaining this state, you have already reached the Formless Realm and are not suppressing consciousness. Chuang Tzu wrote about this samadhi when he wrote of the story of a gigantic fish called *kun* which cultivates for thousands of years and then miraculously turns into a great bird called *peng* (jing transforms into chi). Most people take Chuang Tzu's essays as just interesting literature, as they do with the novel *The Journey to the West*, and so they entirely miss their spiritual cultivation content. For instance, in this story Chuang Tzu was actually explaining the changes in the chi and mai that occur as a result of spiritual cultivation practice.

In Chuang Tzu's story, the kun bird starts flying and eventually arrives at an infinite place of nothingness; this was his description for the samadhi of nothingness. Your first thought upon initially entering this realm is "there is nothing at all," because only nothingness appears to the mind. Yet this is not the stage of real emptiness, which goes to show that emptiness must never be confused with nothingness. Anyway, this is how knowledge works: Chuang Tzu lived in China and was not privy to Buddhist or Hindu cultivation schools, and yet he came up with a similar description for this samadhi which he described through his own literary devices.

Therefore, the key is that if you are still applying some subtle effort, you are still applying consciousness to try and push away thoughts when you attain the samadhi of no-thought, but in the samadhi of nothingness, your consciousness naturally achieves this stage of emptiness. When you attain the samadhi of infinite consciousness, you have eliminated the idea of all thought objects, and you gain liberation from even that realization. You do not have any thoughts of having done something, or having attained liberation or made progress from a lower stage of attainment.

In this samadhi of nothingness, space is not an object of the absorption, and consciousness is not an object of mental absorption either. It is as if you are not taking anything to mind, and so we use the word "nothingness" for lack of better words. Here you view even consciousness as gross, and so you abide in a state of no discrimination; it is as if you attain a realm of having nothing at all.

All these high level samadhi belong to the Realm of Formlessness, and so our words are inadequate when we try to use ordinary Desire Realm language to explain and describe these scenarios. We can only hint at them using our poor literary devices, and this is the best we can do.

THE SAMADHI OF NEITHER THOUGHT NOR NO-THOUGHT

The next samadhi is the absorption of neither thought nor no-thought; this is the samadhi that Shakyamuni took three years to master under the guidance of one of his teachers, Master Aratakalama. The very name of this samadhi gives us an excellent clue as to its characteristics.

The first part of the name, "neither thought," means that this stage of samadhi is absent of ordinary mentation. It is a mental realm absent of the thinking and false thoughts of ordinary mental activity. However, the second part of the name, "nor no-thought," does not mean you do not know things and it does not mean you are not aware. It is still a stage where you are able to be aware of everything even though there is no ordinary false thought or thinking.

To better understand what this samadhi entails, we can rephrase its title as the "samadhi without thought and without no-thought." In this way, we can get the proper idea that this realm is absent of ordinary discrimination (it is a stage "without thought") but since discrimination is not totally absent, the second half of its name indicates that it is also "without no-thought."

Some people translate this stage as the samadhi of "neither perception nor nonperception," but this name tends to be misleading. Perhaps its best designation is its title as "The Peak of Cyclic Existence," for it corresponds to rebirth at the highest levels of the Formless Realm where sentient beings have incredibly long life spans with no hints of unpleasantness, and only the subtlest of mental discriminations. Nevertheless, this stage of accomplishment is still subject to the subtle afflictions of the confusions of perceptions and thoughts.

Now how can we understand this state? Shakyamuni, upon attaining this realm, asked whether in the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought there was still a self. If you say there is a self, then it is not the stage of liberation. If you say there is not a self at this stage, then it should not be called "neither thought nor no-thought." So even though a practitioner reaching this stage can temporarily cause the coarser forms of false thought and affliction to stop, extremely subtle forms of affliction still exist in this state.

The best way to describe this samadhi is through the process of comparison, and so the first question arises, how is this samadhi different from the samadhi of infinite consciousness? The answer is, in the samadhi of infinite consciousness you still have awareness. You are still employing consciousness so you are not yet free of the factor of consciousness. However, in the samadhi without thought and without no-thought, you are not using the evaluative, discriminative functions of consciousness.

You cannot say the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought is one of emptiness and you cannot say it is an experiential realm of existence, either. In a way, it is akin to the du-yin solitary

consciousness where it seems as if the sixth consciousness is there and yet not there, active and yet not active.

There are several analogies we can use to help describe this state. It is like when you are half asleep and half awake, but neither one nor the other. It is also like when you have forgotten where you placed your keys, but you also know where they are. The Tibetan school of Esoteric Buddhism often uses the example of a fine thread to describe this state. When we look for the continuation of an extremely thin thread, sometimes we cannot find it and think it has been severed. However, if we look extremely closely, we can sometimes find the thread even though it is very fine.

Accordingly, this state seems perfectly absent of ordinary discrimination and mentation, but when we look very closely, it still exists there on an extremely subtle level. This level is so subtle, however, that it does not appear as if discrimination really exists at all. It is both there and not there, and so we have neither thought nor absence of thought. We do not have conscious thought and we do not have the state of absolute no-thought.

Another way of explaining this stage is to refer to the particulars of mandala visualization practice. Ordinary people do not normally achieve the proper level of attainment when they practice mandala visualizations, which is the samadhi of infinite consciousness. When practicing visualizations, they usually attain some stage similar to the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought, whereas the actual goal of visualization practice is to attain the samadhi of infinite consciousness.

It is too bad that even the masters of this school do not instruct their practitioners about this sort of detail. Unfortunately, most people—and we are speaking of only those who attain some success in this type of meditative practice—only reach the level where they forget the mind and body but still retain some awareness of this fact. This is not the actual samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought, although it is similar to this state.

To try and summarize, we can say that the samadhi of limitless space focuses on the aspect of emptiness, the infinite consciousness samadhi focuses on the aspect of existence, and the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought is somewhere between the two. It is almost as if it is half of one and half of another, which is why we can somewhat compare it to the du-yin scenario of the sixth consciousness.

When ordinary people practice visualizations, they usually feel that they forget their mind and body, yet they are also aware of this fact; their mind is not so clear but they know of this unclarity. As a result, this attainment scenario is similar to the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought. The real attainment level of visualization practice, on the other hand, should actually be the infinite consciousness samadhi.

Shakyamuni's Experience with the Samadhi of Neither Thought nor No-Thought

While Shakyamuni took three years to attain the state of no-thought, he took another three years to attain the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought. But after he mastered this high stage, he knew it was not enlightenment, either. The attainment level of the samadhi of neither thought nor no-thought still belongs to the Formless Realm, and thus it is still within the skandha of consciousness.

Being within the domain of consciousness means that if you cultivate properly you can have this attainment, but you will never reach it if you do not cultivate towards it. The fact that it can disappear and no longer be there means it is a phenomenal realm, and so it cannot be the ultimate state. The Real is always and ever-present, it cannot come or go, and so the Real cannot be any type of artificial construction or function of spiritual practice. It must always be genuinely there, and through cultivation practice you just finally awaken to recognize it. That is why we say you "awaken to it." You become enlightened to that original enlightenment that was always there and ever will be there, and thus, it is not a stage of attainment you can create.

Therefore, after achieving all these states, Shakyamuni ultimately abandoned all these advanced meditation realms that people claimed were the absolute stages of salvation because he realized they can all disappear. They were not the fundamental substrate. They were not the fundamental substance or essence we call God or enlightenment or Tao or Brahma or whatever. Since they are all transient states, they are not that ultimate thing—that never changing ground state of being.

Relying on this strong foundation of profound cultivation attainments, Shakyamuni Buddha further applied himself to many other cultivation practices, including six years of extreme ascetic practices in searching for the Tao. It is because he went through all these various attainment levels and practices, which he investigated thoroughly and mastered through and through, that we can use him as our reference for today when on the path of spiritual seeking. It is because of Shakyamuni's complete efforts that we can take his teachings as a guide to our own efforts. In light of Shakyamuni's own efforts, it is laughable to review the number of individuals who presently claim they are enlightened or know the proper way to spiritual salvation when they have not even mastered the first dhyana!

To summarize, we can say that the four dhyana are still involved with the chi and mai as well as form and sensation, and thus they still belong to the skandhas of form and sensation. Many sadhus, monks and sages today reach various meditation realms within the first four skandhas, especially the lowest skandha of form, and mistakenly believe they have reached the ultimate, which they call "nirvikalpa samadhi." It is hard to convince them of their error, which is partly due to strong egos, and partly due to the pollution of views.

No matter what their level of attainment, they think "I am right and you are wrong and I cannot

possibly be mistaken; what do you possibly know?" Just witness the stories of many talented worthies in the Zen school who thought they had reached enlightenment upon some lower rung of attainment, and you will realize this often happens. Without a good teacher, it is really hard to correctly climb the spiritual ladder all the way to the end.

On the other hand, some people are more honest with themselves when reaching an incomplete stage of attainment in that they know it, but then they become self-satisfied and complacent in their subsequent spiritual practice, anyway. Since they do not strive further, most never reach a modicum of true enlightenment. In fact, many do not reach enlightenment simply because they lack good teachers, or because it is a very difficult task requiring devoted practice and extraordinary merit. Sometimes their lack of attainment is simply because they lack these relevant teachings.

Looking at the various masters such as the Indians Ramakrishna, Yogananda and Muktananda, we can find these practitioners all attained various realms of samadhi, a degree of kung-fu, and sometimes a bit of prajna wisdom, but not one attained enlightenment. People like to refer to the Chinese monks Hsu Yun and the lesser Han Shan as enlightened, since they were familiar with emptiness and had attained a bit of prajna wisdom, but these monks did not attain the true stage of enlightenment, either.

In the West you find people like Rudolf Steiner and Edgar Cayce who had psychic (clairvoyant) abilities, but they lacked the orthodox samadhi attainments entirely, and were certainly ignorant of prajna wisdom and emptiness. Then you have individuals like Meister Eckhart and Padre Pio who never reached enlightened, either, but only achieved various stages of dhyana attainment. The same goes for countless Biblical prophets; while many indeed attained some degree of samadhi, none had achieved enlightenment.

You also have the founders of various modern religions, spiritual sects or spiritual movements who totally lacked any type of samadhi spiritual attainments, and there are even various groups which try to "elect" individuals into sainthood, which amounts to the mistaken belief that you can actually elect someone into samadhi. Sagehood, as you know, depends upon personal spiritual awakening—it is not attained from another or attained by decree. If people remain deluded, then they remain ordinary humans; if they awaken, then and only then do they become saints and sages, and an election has nothing to do with the process. What does an election into sainthood, which is sometimes a political decision, have to do with this process at all? We could go on and on, but these examples are sufficient to show that attaining enlightenment is not an easy feat, and people have many mistaken notions on the matter.

If your chi mai does not open, you certainly cannot achieve the four dhyana. But if your chi mai all open, can you call it enlightenment? If you open all your chakras, is this the meaning of Tao? The answer to both questions is "no," for these feats rank at the very lowest stages of spiritual

attainment, and they do not even equate with seeing the path! Even if you can achieve every dhyana and samadhi, Shakyamuni warned that this is not yet enlightenment because you can still attach to false thought and take it to be what is real. Self-realization is not that simple, for you have to overturn or purify even the skandha of consciousness.

Some people curb their egos and do not go so far as to claim they are enlightened, but they still go around claiming much higher attainments than they actually have. For instance, many think they have attained various dhyana when their chi has become temporarily full because of the good health resulting from spiritual cultivation. Sometimes they even mistake this minor accomplishment, which is not even free of the skandha of form, as the samadhi of infinite consciousness or samadhi of infinite space! It may sound silly after reading all this, but you would be surprised at the number of people who take some small experience and blow it out of proportion.

There are even those who, in reaching the samadhi of infinite consciousness, actually believe they have broken through the skandha of consciousness, so there are many ways by which you can go wrong with your notions. That is why you most often need an enlightened master to guide you on the cultivation path. For instance, when the novice Japanese Zen monk Hakuin was just beginning to make progress in his cultivation, he attained an initial experience of emptiness that was actually just a minor experiential realm. It was just a minor opening of the sixth consciousness. However, Hakuin firmly believed that his experience was unique in the world, and that no one had ever experienced a stage as high as his, and that he had broken through to ultimate attainment. As he recalled, “My pride rose up like a mighty mountain and my arrogance swelled like a tidal wave.” This experience is typical of most practitioners. Even Han Shan was confused at his first little bit of attainment.

Luckily, Hakuin’s teacher, Master Dokyo, refused to confirm Hakuin’s experience as the Tao, and Hakuin never received any approval from his master for the many other such experiential realms he encountered, one after the other. Each time he made some little progress he repeated the exact same pattern of believing he had broken through to final attainment, and each time his master kept calling him a “poor cave dwelling devil” for making such errors. Thus, a spiritual master is often necessary to prevent you from making such presumptuous mistakes. When we look around us at all the people claiming they are enlightened in order to cheat others, or because they are cheating themselves, we just hang our own heads in sorrow.

When Zen master Hsueh-tou Ch’in was still cultivating, his attitude was a little better than most people for he reached a realm “where everything before my eyes was completely exposed and totally silent and still. For more than half a month, no signs of motion arose.” Ch’in later lamented that he did not meet a master with an enlightened eye and skillful technique to break up this realm for him, for he recognized the truth to the saying, “If you do not get free of your perception of truth, it blocks correct perception.”

Shakyamuni talked about a variety of possible errors you can make when you reach the higher stages of cultivation, errors that he called the fifty mara demons of delusion. Those deviant paths will certainly appear to tempt you if your attainment reaches high enough. Jesus was tempted, Buddha was tested, Tsogyel was tested, Milarepa was tested ... everyone who sincerely cultivates will be prompted to go down false paths, or succumb to self-deception.

Therefore, we should remember what Shakyamuni told his student Ananda, "Right at this moment, even if you attain the nine samadhi, you still will not end defilements (achieve the extinction of outflows) or achieve the fruits of the Arhats." These states are only the shadow of enlightenment for they still belong to the dust of consciousness. Despite their inconceivable nature, *they are not the fruit of self-realization*.

The various samadhi are all based on consciousness, meaning they are not the truth itself but just the shadow of the truth. And so, even though they represent an extremely high stage of spiritual achievement, they are just another way for you to deceive yourself if you are not careful. They are simply practice vehicles that help train you, that help you purify your mind so that you might one day see the Tao. However, they are not the Tao itself even though they may be formless stages of attainment.

People who tread the path to enlightenment must always be careful of the deviant paths which veer away from Tao because those who take particular, discrete stages as their cultivation targets (such as specific levels of kung-fu or superpowers), instead of pursing their fundamental essence, end up wasting their time and deviating from the great matter.

It bears repeating why the Zen masters have never followed the approach of progressively leading one through kung-fu and samadhi bit-by-bit, as you might find in India or Tibet, and as we saw with the story of Gampopa. Rather, they have always pointed directly towards *bodhi*, which is the pure enlightenment mind. The Zen school has always emphasized the imageless attainment of the prajna transcendental wisdom and on this path, a Zen practitioner must pay no attention to the various experiential realms that arise. After all, experiential realms (*samaya*) are like the weather and the weather, good or bad, always passes. Phenomena will change, the weather will change, and these experiential realms will pass away, so they cannot be considered the ultimate foundational nature that we are seeking.

On the other hand, the Zen masters have also said that attaining bodhi is seeing only the beautiful side of the matter, and is not the whole thing, either. There is also the realm of existence to be understood and mastered. Therefore, you still need to understand all nine samadhi of cultivation, only after which you can say you have finished the whole course and understand both sides of the matter. And not only must you attain the Tao, but in addition to realizing the dharmakaya, you must cultivate the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya as well.

THE SAMADHI OF EXTINCTION

The ninth samadhi is the attainment stage of the great Arhats, or the Arhat's stage of extinction. It is sometimes called the "nirvana with remainder" (remaining dependency) because it is the highest possible samadhi in the Formless Realm for those who are not Buddhas or Bodhisattvas.

When a great Arhat dies, he or she can show you eighteen different transformations of their body, and even burn it into ashes so that nothing is left. When they are about to leave this world for good, the Arhats sometimes perform this type of miraculous display, which has given rise to the saying, "They reduce their bodies to ashes and extinguish their knowledge."

As an example, Buddha's cousin Ananda reached the stage of an Arhat and at the age of one hundred and twenty, knew he was about to pass away. The kings of two states heard that he would soon die, and hurried to bid him farewell. Knowing that each side would wish to claim his funeral relics, and wishing to prevent any possible disputes, Ananda used his superpowers to raise his body into the air and let it be consumed by the fire element so that both countries could share in his relics (sariras). To encourage faith in the path, this is something the Arhats typically do.

Other people can sometimes demonstrate the same transformations that an Arhat can do even though they have not yet achieved this stage of attainment, so you should not jump to conclusions and believe someone is a great Arhat just because they can exhibit similar feats. In fact, we can say there are two kinds of Arhats. Some Arhats will not even have the same superpower abilities as other Arhats, who do choose to cultivate them, because they only focus on prajna wisdom in their cultivation and do not go out of their way to cultivate the physical supernormal abilities. Of course, a genuine Arhat will have the normal cultivation kung-fu and the attendant superpowers that go along with his or her stage of attainment, but not necessarily those powers that represent the great transformational abilities of the basis.

Let's put it this way. *Even if you attain enlightenment, you will not immediately have the ability to fly through the air or walk through walls* unless you can also transform your physical body, which is why you must achieve the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies in addition to the dharmakaya. With great wisdom you can see the dharmakaya and awaken, but your physical nature still needs time to undergo transformation. Some Arhats just cultivate wisdom rather than their physical nature, and so they may lack the ability to display various physical superpowers. They will just be able to remain clear in all situations, let go of their old habits, and not be tied down by name or fortune, but their clarity of emptiness, prajna and seeing the world as an illusion will not necessarily produce the kung-fu of supernormal physical abilities unless they so cultivate them.

As you can thus, surmise, it becomes very difficult to judge someone's stage of cultivation attainment from just the outward display of the paranormal phenomena they can demonstrate. That is why we have the stories of various Hindu and Tibetan masters challenging one another, for the ignorant master with lower achievements usually knew nothing of the superior one's sublime achievements. Because of ego and pride, which demonstrates their inferior status, they challenged their betters, whom they perceived as lacking superpowers altogether. For instance, when the Taoist Immortal Lu Ch'un-yang met the enlightened Zen master Huang-lung Nan, he could not tell that the master was anything other than an ordinary monk!

In general, human beings are most impressed by tales of siddhi powers and external kung-fu, and totally ignore the invisible but much higher accomplishment of prajna wisdom. In making the mistake of judging only what they can see, humans end up grouping the high with the low and the low with the high. Thus, it is said that a second degree Bodhisattva understands all the kung-fu of a first degree Bodhisattva, but the first degree Bodhisattva can understand little about the cultivation stages of those higher than himself.

In general, the higher always understand the lower, but the lower have no comprehension of the higher until they actually reach that stage. This is not surprising. If we look at children, we can say that they certainly do not understand their parents. And yet when they reach adulthood, as mature individuals they finally realize what their parents were talking about and why they acted the way they did. As they get older they pass through all these stages of maturity that their parents passed through, but before that time, they cannot understand them.

If we go back to those who can perform the eighteen transformations of an Arhat, it is a definite fact that their chi mai must already be open for them to be able to control the fire element of the body. But now an important question arises: if you open up all your chi mai, will you necessarily have superpowers like this? No, not necessarily.

As we mentioned, some great Arhats practice to get superpowers and so obtain them, while others practice for prajna wisdom and, due to their lack of efforts, do not obtain any such superpowers at all. You can cultivate just transcendental wisdom, or wisdom and phenomena. Thus, there are two types of cases even for this advanced state. This is how difficult it is to judge matters from the external perspective, which is why behavior and transcendental wisdom are proper measuring sticks for attainment.

With this in mind, you can see how it is hard for the public to distinguish between great men like Confucius, who never exhibited any superpowers at all, and adepts like Milarepa, who exhibited supernatural transformations in abundance. We cannot say for sure that Confucius did not attain superpowers through his cultivation, for he might have attained them and refused to use them out of discipline. After all, Confucius knew of the world of ghosts and spirits, but refused to talk of spiritual beings and unnatural phenomena. In fact, when one of his students asked how we should

serve the spirits of the dead and spirits of heaven, Confucius rebuked him by replying, "You cannot even serve humans, so how can you serve the spirits?" If you are trying to establish a spiritual path for humanity, it is best to leave such topics alone.

Confucius said this because his goal was to teach people what it really meant to be human in the world, and this certainly does not involve superpowers and the paranormal. For his message and goal, to talk about siddhis would have muddled and polluted this great deed. Therefore, Confucius did not teach the path of cultivating chi channels and chakras and samadhi, but taught the path of virtue, behavior and knowing the mind as a means to Tao. As to Milarepa, we know that he cultivated his body greatly, and so his superpowers were quite strong.

The Confucian Wang Yang-Ming wrote that he himself developed various superpowers and played with them for awhile, but he later discarded this fascination after he realized this path was useless and did not amount to much of anything. There is evidence from Plato's dialogues that Socrates had also attained superpowers, such as being able to foretell the future, but he also practiced restraint in their use. Like Confucius, he taught what it meant to be human in the world, and paranormal abilities play no part in this sort of discussion. Wisdom and behavior are much more important. So as can be seen, it gets very tricky in ranking people and their stage of cultivation accomplishments.

Nevertheless, when Arhats are ready to leave this world, it is common for them to display their superpowers that they may have kept hidden throughout their lives. It is at this point that they rise into the air and demonstrate these various transformations, saying something along the lines of,

> My life in this world is over.
> My practice and conduct have been established.
> My task is done, I have paid off all my karmic debts.
> I will never need come back again.

In actuality, we cannot say the Arhats have entirely escaped the Three Realms of Desire, Form, and Formlessness because their cultivation has only earned them a very long respite from the cycle of transmigration. They have reached a stage of selflessness, but they have not freed themselves from the pull of transmigration entirely.

After an extraordinary large number of kalpas, indicated by the symbolic number of 84,000 eons, they will use up their merit and will need to return to the lower realms to start cultivating again. Thus, we can only consider their escape a type of very long vacation. Time means nothing in the ultimate sense, since it is relative in the various realms of existence, so we cannot really say this is a "long" vacation either. In one sense, you can say that it is over in the time of a finger snap, or from the standpoint of the Tao, conventional existence is no existence at all.

Even the Bodhisattvas cannot escape the Three Realms, for there is no other Fourth Realm where they can go. You can only learn how to control the process of transmigration, and choose where you are going to go and what you are going to do next within the Three Realms. That is why Bodhisattvas make their vows and then continue to go about exercising their enlightened functioning in the world.

For instance, many Bodhisattvas continue returning to our lower realm, rather than stay in the more pleasant heavens, to help banish suffering in our world through transmitting spiritual teachings that will lead people onwards to spiritual liberation and enlightenment. Thus, they return to our painful world of suffering to help us while cultivating ever increasing levels of prajna wisdom, merit, and skillful means. Since there is no way to escape the Three Realms, and no security for even the tiniest moment, they spend their time working to master skillful deeds throughout the Desire, Form and Formlessness Realms. They continually work on purifying all their behavioral seeds while helping to liberate others and mastering all sorts of excellences. This is how they express the enlightened functioning of the Tao.

The Zen school says the Arhats, in their desire to escape the world, only focus on one side of the matter—the emptiness side of Tao. In their cultivation, they still hold onto the view of emptiness so strongly that they miss the fact that emptiness can give rise to the wondrous side of existence, and they shun conventional reality. While their attainment stage is a nirvana, it is called "nirvana with remainder" because it is not the pure nirvana of the Buddhas, which has totally finished with the control of birth and death.

We therefore say that the nirvana realm of the Arhats is "fractional" because it lacks the immeasurable purity and totality of inconceivable merit that accompanies the nirvana realm of the Buddhas. The Arhats at this stage still retain the extremely subtle habit of clinging to emptiness, and this is their "remainder." It represents subtle tendencies, subtle habits of clinging that they have not yet gotten rid of. Therefore it is an imperfection to the complete cultivation of the Tao.

Since Arhats lack the highest merit of complete enlightenment, they still retain subtle defilements that will eventually require their rebirth. On the other hand, even though the Buddhas have finished with birth and death, out of choice they keep entering the world of form to save beings and eliminate their sufferings instead of taking long vacations in pleasant realms. This, of course, is what makes them Buddhas rather than Arhats who seek seclusion or who worry about only their own enlightenment.

The Buddhas not only know the emptiness aspect of Reality, but they become fully functional in the aspect of wondrous existence and do not shun it. They know the Middle Way of functioning in both realms simultaneously without abiding in either, so they are not attracted nor repelled by either extreme. Yet, since becoming involved in the Three Realms is the exercise of compassion, they enter these realms fearlessly to save as many beings as they can.

In Esoteric Buddhist practice, most people follow the Hinayana approach of cultivating to achieve the basic four dhyana and four formless samadhi. Although they may then become able to escape the Realm of Desire and achieve rebirth in the Realms of Form or Formlessness, and although they might be reincarnated in the high stage Buddha realms, the most we can say is that they have escaped from this world.

The Zen school calls these adepts "half-baked" because while they have escaped from this world to dwell in higher planes of existence, they have not achieved the whole dharma. Thus, they are only "half done," from which comes the terms "half-baked," "fractional," or "with remainder." When they finally cultivate their wisdom high enough to realize that there is nothing to separate themselves from, and therefore nothing to avoid, then we can say they have totally abandoned their delusions. Of course, after that realization and the fact that they vow to work in the realm of cyclical existence for the sake of all beings, only then will we be able to call them Bodhisattvas or Buddhas.

OTHER SAMADHI ATTAINMENTS

Esoteric Buddhism is famous for the displays of various samadhi powers. All the great masters of Esoteric Buddhism, whether they were from the Red, Yellow or other sects, followed a strict regimen of cultivation to reach their stage of spiritual attainment. The reason they were able to attain great levels of kung-fu was because they mastered various samadhi. Of course, whether they could achieve the ninth samadhi of the Arhats, or complete enlightenment beyond even that, is another matter entirely, but for now we must re-emphasize that the eight lower concentrations are commonly shared by all genuine cultivation schools.

When heavenly beings, demons, asuras or animals spiritually cultivate, they also follow the general principles and order of the eight samadhi; there is no way to avoid them on the proper road of spiritual practice. These are, in actuality, the various templates of spiritual practice. You must therefore understand these stages of attainment to comprehend either your own or another's meditative progress on the spiritual path.

In terms of basic physical cultivation kung-fu, in addition to trying to master the various samadhi, it is also correct to say that you cannot get away from the fundamental basics of "cultivating your chi and mai" on the spiritual road, which actually means "transforming your chi and mai."

> But if you actively set out to cultivate the chi, the mai, chakras, bright points and kundalini, the very best you could ever hope to do is to arrive at the third dhyana.

If through your cultivation efforts you can achieve the first and second dhyana, it is certain that your chi and mai will have already been transformed and your kundalini already initiated. Nevertheless, achieving the first and second dhyana is no guarantee that you will be able to arrive at the third dhyana.

The third dhyana is still involved with the physical bliss of physical form, so any sort of materialistic cultivation can, at the utmost, only take you as far as this stage of cultivation, if at all. *This is an extremely important point to consider in your cultivation practice, and a reason why most practitioners of the Esoteric school fail in their cultivation practice.*

It would be terrible to waste your time and efforts targeting yourself at just this incomplete degree of attainment. Hence one should not devote themselves to cultivating the physical body, but should aim for mental attainments instead. And if one shoots for mental attainments, they will certainly end up cultivating their physical nature, but they will not be able to totally abolish disease unless they reach the realm of the third dhyana.

Now before we return to discuss the five skandhas in detail as a means of measuring your stage of spiritual achievement, we should once again review the stories of Han Shan on Wu Tai Mountain, and the Taiwanese master Guang Qin. With what we already know, we must ask ourselves what samadhi these individuals had achieved?

For instance, if you sit in meditation yourself, and a certain amount of time goes by without your knowing it, and you can only be aroused from your samadhi by the sound of a bell—is this the samadhi of no-thought, the samadhi of nothingness, or the samadhi of drowsiness?

A related question is the following: When you reach a state in which you know nothing, are you actually in a state of samadhi and if so, which samadhi? Is it correct to say that the goal of spiritual cultivation is to reach the state in which you know nothing? As to the story of Hui-yuan's dharma brother, who remained in samadhi for so long that a tree grew up around him, what type of samadhi was this … and if you can personally attain this type of samadhi, can we accurately say that your chi mai are all open?

To answer at least one question straight off the bat, if your chi mai are not open then it is difficult to sleep for even twenty-four hours straight, so a person's chi mai must be open if they are able to remain in samadhi for several hundred years! But what about the type of situation where you do not have to eat for a week—are your chi mai all opened in this situation? And as to the term we sometimes find in Chinese called the "samadhi of drowsiness," if you are drowsy then you cannot be in samadhi, so why do people use this term and call it a "samadhi"? Also, is it physically possible for a person to be so drowsy that they will actually sleep for several continuous days, which is in some ways similar to sitting in continuous samadhi? In fact, modern medicine does recognize certain sleeping diseases where you can actually sleep yourself to death.

In these cases, you will sleep until you die. So when we come across the term, "samadhi of drowsiness," it does not mean the samadhi of cultivation. Rather, it is just a literary term and title.

Sitting in meditation cannot be considered samadhi, either, because "sitting practice" is just maintaining a special posture for a fixed period of time in order that you can thereby better reach an experiential realm of samadhi. If your body becomes calm and no longer bothers you, we also colloquially call this "body samadhi." Doing sitting practice is just a way, or just a means of practice, to help you achieve mental samadhi but the practice of sitting itself is not samadhi. This is what Zen master Huai-jang told his student Ma-tsu. If sitting in meditation were samadhi, we would all simply sit down and then experience all these great experiential realms. But who does?

All these issues have to be solved, and they are all very serious issues regarding the cultivation of samadhi, prajna wisdom, and discipline. To start, we can say that if knowing nothing is samadhi, then all the rocks in a quarry are also in samadhi. In fact, if knowing nothing constitutes samadhi, then all these rocks would be at a higher stage of cultivation attainment than we are! If you simply eat the right pills today, you can also get to the state where you do not have to eat for a week either, so we can dismiss these two misconceptions as the samadhi of true cultivation attainment.

As mentioned previously, there are actually several scenarios where you do not know what is going on because your thoughts are arrested, and you can reach a state of mindlessness in these states of deep sleep, unconsciousness, the samadhi of no-thought, the heaven of no-thought, the samadhi of extinction, and the stage of complete nirvana. Does Buddhism recognize these various stages? Of course, but the question is, what type of experiential realm do they really represent?

If you want to cultivate toward self-realization, the eight samadhi are the standard means for approaching the path. This is the case no matter which particular spiritual school you follow. This is why, in fact, the eight samadhi are called "common spiritual methods" or common levels of cultivation attainment—the higher gods and lower animals all cultivate these very same realms. But if you do not understand the theory behind these meditative stages, it is very easy to take the route of outside paths that do not lead to enlightenment.

This is precisely why most yogis fall short of the Tao. Lacking the proper teachings entirely, Western monks, nuns, priests, reverends, rabbis and mullahs are in even worse shape despite their spiritual hopes and aspirations. They are in worse shape because they do not know the proper spiritual teachings and practices, and hence they tend to go astray in their spiritual practice. This is why to learn the path to Tao, most everyone of spiritual attainment in the past ended up going to learn from the East.

What is the meaning of the "outside paths" of cultivation? The term "outside path" does not refer to the fact that a path is outside of Buddhism. Buddhism itself, for instance, is considered an outside path of the Vedas. Rather,

> an "outside path" means a cultivation path wherein you are searching for dharma, but you are searching for enlightenment outside the mind.

You will never find Enlightenment searching outside of the mind, which is why an outside path is a deviant road of practice. As to the paths we refer to as "the devil's Tao,"

> the "devil roads" are cultivation pathways where you remain confused and ignorant, pathways wherein you cannot master yourself.

Even though they are being adulated today, shamanic trances and hypnotic states are examples that fall into this category of spiritual deviation. These roads seem to have great appeal today, especially to academics trying to do research and write papers, but they are actually experiential realms where you are not in control of the mind, and they do not ever lead to spiritual enlightenment or any of the dhyana. They are not the path of Tao in any way, shape or form.

You can therefore understand that the cultivation practice of psychics who fall into trances, such as Edgar Cayce, are considered "outside paths" even though du-yin type abilities have sometimes provided the world with useful information. These are not genuine pathways of spiritual cultivation because they are not pathways to self-realization, and so *they do not constitute proper pathways of spiritual practice*! In a sense you can simply call them deviant practices. People may desire these things, but they are lusting after the wrong targets.

While the material offered by shamans and those who fall into trances or "channel" information to us may actually at times be quite useful, it is actually a crime to call these "pathways of spiritual cultivation." When people cultivate to have an OOBE (out-of-the body-experience) through astral projection, this is not the pathway of spiritual cultivation, either. In fact, this popular practice of trying to have an "astral projection" is quite harmful because it tends to destabilize the individual and can lead to rebirth as a wandering ghost or asura! The people who attain these abilities only know of this one life, and they do not see the long term consequences of this sort of misguided practice.

Ordinary individuals do not understand these issues clearly due to their own lack of cultivation

attainment, so they are easily misled. It is difficult to understand the nature of the du-yin side of the sixth consciousness, but the ability to project the mind out of the body is actually an achievement on the borderline between sanity and mental illness. Why would you want to cultivate such a thing? Chasing after auras, hypnotic regressions, superpowers, channeling, trances, trying to open chakras—we could go on and on citing various mistaken practices. The point is, none of these practices constitute the true cultivation path, or a true spiritual path. *They are all just tumors of the genuine spiritual traditions.*

BUDDHISM AS A GUIDE TO CULTIVATION

In explaining all these matters we have tended to rely on Buddhism as a guide, but you must understand that this particular book is not intended to venerate Buddhism or fixate upon Buddhism. It is simply that in trying to discuss the great topic of spiritual cultivation, we need to use the most scientific explanations possible that are found within Buddhism alone. This goal means we have had to rely on Buddhism—or the Tao school, or Indian yoga, or the Esoteric school and other schools whenever appropriate—because of the wonderfully organized, rational and scientific structures it provides for cultivation practitioners.

No cultivation school truly offers as much as Buddhism does in terms of elucidating the great transformational path to enlightenment, and revealing the robust internal logic of the path. But for some reason, people tend to confuse the main concerns of Buddhist science—the cultivation of samadhi, prajna wisdom, virtue, discipline and merit—with minor academic footnotes such as the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, which they mistakenly take as its main teachings.

Buddhism is actually the science of enlightenment, rather than some ordinary dogmatic religion. It is a central teaching school of human being science, the science of life. It tells of many self-cultivation practices, but asks you to prove everything yourself and accept nothing on faith which is why it does not fear attack on Buddhist teachings. As Shakyamuni Buddha said:

> Do not believe on the strength of traditions even if they have been held in honor for many generations and in many places; do not believe anything because many people speak of it; do not believe on the strength of sagas of old times; do not believe that which you have imagined yourself, thinking a god has inspired you. Believe nothing that depends only on the authority of your masters or of priests. After investigation, believe that which you yourself have tested and found reasonable, and which is for your good and that of others.

Buddha also said:

> Monks and scholars should examine my words,
> In the way that a goldsmith tests gold by burning it, cutting it and rubbing it.

> Only then should my words be accepted,
> But not out of respect for me.

Therefore, do not be swayed when you see the word "Buddhism" in this text and take our words as the promotion of some ancient Asian religion. One should look past the religious aspect of the matter and simply regard "Buddhism" as an alternative term for "cultivation science" or "being human science." The way we use the term is in reference to an already existing, rationally organized, scientifically structured path for guiding spiritual cultivation practice.

Other people may have stamped the Buddhist body of knowledge with the title of "religion," but that is not how we are using the material. The true gist of Shakyamuni's teachings are absent of any religious overtones, and are more akin to science than anything else. In fact, the rational, scientific format that Shakyamuni constructed out of the practices of his time, and out of the teachings of other Buddhas, is the reason it is very appropriate for our modern world. Our modern times crave a body of logic and scientific approach behind the outcomes of spiritual cultivation and the stages of the spiritual path.

We have seen how Buddhism likes to say that there are 84,000 mental afflictions you can fall into, and so there are 84,000 "trouble samadhi" you can cultivate to counter these afflictions. But we should really call an experiential realm a samadhi only if it is the result of a refined practice that cultivates one to purification. For example, you can practice the visualization of the water element, and if you succeed, your body will disappear and the whole room where you are sitting will fill with water in its place. In the spiritual cultivation practice of fire visualization, when you succeed the room will be filled with a pillar of fire in place of your body, though sometimes you can still see the shadow of the person still sitting there.

Since both these cases are the results of a refined cultivation practice and the attainment of one-pointed concentration, we can properly say that this is attaining the water element samadhi or fire element samadhi, respectively. But to label ordinary afflictions as samadhi, even though it is quite accurate in one sense, is also misleading in another. During afflictions the mind is extremely scattered and chaotic, but even when we attain a very stable mental state, it still may not be true samadhi. To understand what samadhi is not, you have to go and study the *Yogacarabhumi Sastra*, which talks of the twelve realms that are not samadhi.

Of course, the fire samadhi attainment we speak of here is quite different than the kundalini fire. In addition, if you practice zazen sitting meditation and feel that a certain part of your body becomes hot, that is neither the fire samadhi nor kundalini either. Chinese medicine calls this phenomenon "steaming the bone" because it indicates a type of fever, infection or even friction inside the physical body, but it certainly is not the samadhi of the tumo fire.

In actual fact, *kundalini is not hot, but is just a feeling of blissful warmth*. What people normally

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mistake for kundalini are the initial frictional stages of clearing the chi mai, which Maitreya called the "Big Knife Wind," and this frictional stage is often why the Tibetans refer to kundalini as the "Fierce Woman" to denote the yin nature of this chi purification. So even when "samadhi" is a seemingly appropriate term, we still have to be careful of its usage.

As we previously covered, kundalini actually belongs to the "warming" stage of prayoga which occurs far before you can actually "see the path," and all eight samadhi and every level of attainment also have their own warming stages since they can all be partitioned into the four stages of prayoga. Thus, the eight basic samadhi are each like a soup containing many ingredients. You cannot say that the ingredients are the soup, but you cannot have the soup without all these ingredients. Basically, every samadhi and every stage of Bodhisattva attainment has the four prayoga within them.

The four dhyana and four formless absorptions also each have a stage of generation and completion which we can use to characterize these realms, or we can use the four prayoga. This is why the Bodhisattva Maitreya emphasized the importance of prayoga in an individual's cultivation practice; even in talking about samadhi, its development can be broken into stages.

Of the eight samadhi, the first four dhyana are heavily involved with the form and feeling skandhas, although of course the fourth dhyana is treading into the realm of the conception aggregate. The four formless samadhi have a more spiritual or nonmaterial focus even though they are still related to the physical nature. If you can attain these four formless samadhi absorptions, your chi and mai must already have been purified to a certain degree, but in the formless absorptions we do not talk much about this type of physical kung-fu anymore because you have attained to a formless realm. For instance, when you are in the samadhi of nothingness, how can you possibly talk about the chi and mai anymore? What does the body have to do with the samadhi of nothingness or infinite space? We do not focus on our material body when we get to the four formless absorptions, but we know its cultivation must be a prerequisite to get to this stage.

As to Han Shan and the famous monk Hsu Yun, they are reported to have stayed in samadhi for ten or twenty days at a time, but when they came out of it they had forgotten everything for a short while. There are many Indian yogis who can remain in samadhi for extended periods as well, so we know it is an attainment that runs across all the various spiritual schools. Sometimes, when you immediately come out of this type of stage you cannot even recognize the people you know anymore. If samadhi entails remaining aware, how can we explain this?

To be exact, which may offend some people who feel these two are some of the spiritual giants of Buddhism, neither the case of the lesser Han Shan nor Hsu Yun can be categorized as a case of true samadhi. Rather, Han Shan's example of remaining in samadhi for several days, and then not remembering anything when coming out of it, is a combination of drowsiness and the samadhi of

no-thought. But to be able to really understand this explanation, you must not only master the theory of the five skandhas in intricate detail, but must master the schools of Yogacara (the school of Mind-only), Madhyamika (the school of the Middle Way) and Prajnaparamita (the school of Prajna Great Transcendental Wisdom). Otherwise, you will not be able to comprehend these matters at all.

There is a great importance to studying these various schools, and it is not just because of academic purposes. Some people, for instance, think that Yogacara is just a type of academic or theoretical philosophy, but this is quite mistaken. Without understanding these schools and the five skandhas, you will not be able to distinguish between the various ranks of meditation accomplishment, nor will you be qualified to form your own analysis of someone's meditative achievements, either.

If we want to understand Master Han Shan's situation, we can turn to the story of the Iron Ox master Tieh Nieu, who was very diligent in his practice. One day, however, he fell asleep in the Zen meditation hall, which was against the temple rules. The master of the temple, Hseuh Yen Ching, knew this student had finally reached some stage of attainment and so the master said, "You know you have violated the discipline of the Zen hall by sleeping during practice, and therefore must be punished. What is your excuse?" The disciple's reply, from which he got his name, was this:

> The iron ox has no strength and stops tilling the field.
> He just lies down and sleeps in the snow with rope and plow.
> The great earth is entirely covered with white silver in all directions.
> Where can you hit me with your golden whip?

In Master Han Shan's case, we find the drowsiness element involved because he could not remember anything, he could not stay aware. But even if you still can remember everything after you remain seated in meditation for several days, does it automatically qualify as samadhi? The answer is also "no," because this result can simply come from concentration without samadhi. As you can see, unraveling these various quandaries is a complicated affair, and it is not something we can trust to nonpracticing scholars or the uninitiated.

Orthodox Buddhism has a relevant story about a king who once conducted an experiment on concentration. Shakyamuni Buddha had said, "If you are able to concentrate your mind and put it on one thing, there is nothing you will not be able to accomplish." To test this, the king selected a prisoner who was about to be executed and told him that they were going to put an oil wick lamp on top of his head. If the condemned man could keep it on his head for three days and nights without falling off, the king would pardon him of the death penalty for his crimes. With his life at stake, the man put all his effort into maintaining his attention and succeeded in the challenge, proving that Buddha was correct. But was this the samadhi of spiritual cultivation? Of course

not!

In China's Qing dynasty, the Emperor Yongzheng, who had achieved a degree of Zen enlightenment, once ordered a talented monk to lock himself in a room and commit suicide if he did not attain enlightenment within seven days' time. Pressured by the threat of death, the monk finally put all his efforts into practice and succeeded in awakening. Here we have extreme concentration resulting in some form of spiritual breakthrough. Like the case of the condemned prisoner, we must attribute this accomplishment not just to the practitioner, but to the skillful and compassionate means of the Emperor. Only in this case the monk awakened, whereas in the other the prisoner simply cultivated concentration.

However interesting these stories may sound, they are not good examples of cultivation samadhi. For instance, the prisoner's case is the samadhi of ordinary concentration rather than the samadhi of prajna wisdom insight achieved through spiritual self-cultivation. It is a good example to illustrate the topic of kung-fu, such as the concentration states achieved by Olympic athletes, but these states do not qualify as prajna samadhi, either. In fact, anyone who tries hard enough and trains consistently can achieve this sort of concentration and the concordant resultant special kung-fu. The reason is because attaining kung-fu results from a simple equation:

Method + Practice Effort + Time + Experience = Kung-fu Results

This is the scientific process behind training professional athletes, solving complicated problems, discovering scientific breakthroughs, and cultivating any type of special skills at all. If you take ice skating or bicycle riding as an example, someone teaches you the basic method, you put in the practice efforts, you fall several times but keep trying, and with experience and time you finally master the skill. Therefore attaining kung-fu is not anything special, and the worldly concentration we can often achieve certainly is not in the same class as the prajna wisdom samadhi leading to enlightenment.

The contemporary Zen master Nan Huai-Chin once played with the "stupid emptiness" or "stubborn fool emptiness" samadhi in order to investigate it, for it is not the samadhi of no-thought nor the samadhi of infinite emptiness. When he left this particular realm three weeks later, he picked up a pen but could not remember how to write, but after about five days he gradually returned to normal again. Hence, from this example we can know that our memory is neither a permanent or impermanent thing.

Modern science says that your mind will atrophy if you do not or cannot use certain parts of it, just as not using your muscles will cause them to weaken. The Tibetan school has issued a similar warning in that practicing any samadhi which cultivates dullness means you will risk being reborn

as an animal. But you should not be scared away from meditation because you fear you might fall into this type of samadhi, for if you could really achieve this state, people should bow down before you because that is how difficult it is to achieve.

People adopt all sorts of reasons to excuse themselves from cultivating or as the Hindus say, from "devoting some time to God." To refuse to start cultivating or refuse to finish your spiritual practice because you are afraid of achieving a very high, although incorrect practice, is foolishness indeed. The important point is to start upon the road of disciplined meditation practices that will lead to samadhi attainment, for they are the crux of spiritual achievement. They are one more way in which you can measure your stage of spiritual development.

Frankly speaking, meditation is the core of the spiritual path, regardless of the religion one follows, and without any sort of samadhi attainment, it is hard to say that someone has any stage of spiritual achievement at all.

For more information on these various states of spiritual attainment, please see:

Working Toward Enlightenment
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by J.C. Cleary
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1993.

To Realize Enlightenment
Huai-Chin Nan, trans. by J.C. Cleary
Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1994.

Meditative States in Tibetan Buddhism: The Concentrations and Formless Absorptions
Lati & Locho Rinbochay, Zahler & Hopkins
Wisdom Publications, London, 1983.

The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation
Mahathera Henepola Gunaratana
Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka, 1988.

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1 Hubert Nearman, trans., "The Scripture on Fully Perfected Enlightenment," in *Buddhist Writings*, (Shasta Abbey, California, 1994), p. 309.

2 Hans-Ulrich Rieker, *The Yoga of Light* (Dawn Horse Press, Middletown: CA, 1996), pp. 144-145.

3 *Tao and Longevity*, pp. 125-127.

4 Pandit Usharbudh Arya, *Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali with the Exposition of Vyasa* (The Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of the U.S.A., Honesdale: Pennsylvania, 1986), p. 241.

5 Georg Feuerstein, *Sacred Paths* (Larson Publications, Burdett: New York, 1991), p. 109.

Chapter 11:
Purifying the Skandhas and the Fifty Great Spiritual Paths of Delusion

To understand all the samadhi and their various offshoots—for there are actually an infinite number of samadhi you can enter based on these nine—it is imperative that we reference the very last chapter of the *Surangama Sutra*. This chapter is called "The Fifty Mara-States of the Five Skandhas Affecting Practitioners During Meditation," and discusses the various phenomena which will occur as you liberate yourself from the five aggregates. Since it reveals fifty great errors you can make in your spiritual cultivation as you pass through the aggregates, it actually talks about fifty forms of delusion caused by the aggregates.

Of course, there are far more than fifty possible errors you can fall into when you are cultivating through the five aggregates, for the *Surangama Sutra* just summarizes the general categories where you can go wrong. As Buddha warned the cultivation practitioners who had come to hear him teach:

> I have already instructed you in the correct methods of practice, but you are not yet aware of the subtle deceptions of the evil maras when you practice meditation. When the mara-realms appear before you, if you are not able to distinguish them and your minds are not pure and balanced, you will fall into erroneous views. These may take the form of your own skandha-maras, Deva Mara, ghosts and spirits, or evil demons. If your mind is not clear, you may mistake thieves as your own sons, or take small progress as complete achievement, like the ignorant monk who after reaching the fourth and final dhyana announced that he had attained sainthood. No sooner had he earned his heavenly reward than signs of his fall appeared. As he vilified the arhats, he reaped the fruits of his own karma and fell into the eternal hells. You must listen carefully as I explain this to you in detail.

In reading this, anyone will realize that this is both extremely wonderful and extremely crucial cultivation knowledge that is absolutely essential for our world. Hence, we have even commissioned a special translation of this material for you by Douglas Wile, and have included it as an appendix to this book so that you always have it as a ready reference.

The world has seen many fine translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, but there are only one or two translations of the *Surangama Sutra* detailing all this material, even though it is one of the most definitive guides available for understanding the cultivation trail. In fact, because of its structure, it is perhaps the most appropriate cultivation text for the scientific tenure of our times. You must be careful not to underestimate this information because it is very advanced. It is far more advanced than anything contained in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* or the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

If someone can take the information on these fifty erroneous cultivation routes and continue to improve upon the translation as well as add a commentary from modern scientific thought, he or she will end up making a big contribution to human culture and society. As with solving Fermat's last theorem, hopefully some talented individuals will rise to this great challenge, as well as the challenge to produce the most beautiful but accurate translations possible of the *Diamond Sutra* and *Heart Sutra*.

THE SKANDHA OF FORM

The first set of instructions in the *Surangama Sutra* start out by addressing the skandha of form and the troubles which materialize as you try to liberate yourself from this aggregate. Shakyamuni Buddha said:

> Ananda, you must know that when you sit in the meditation hall with thoughts extinguished and a clear mind, you will no longer be affected by movement or stillness, and memory and forgetting will be as one. In this state as you enter samadhi, you are like a man with sharp eyes who is standing in the dark. Although your mind is clear, it does not yet shine. This is called 'the state conditioned by the skandha of form.' When your eyes are bright, you will clearly perceive all ten directions of space and no longer dwell in darkness. This is called 'the end of the skandha of form,' and it allows you to transcend the kalpa of impurity, whose root cause is stubborn and erroneous thinking.

Thus, through your spiritual cultivation efforts, you may finally achieve a realm of single-mindedness where all your random thoughts disappear and you experience only clarity and calm. This occurs when you finally break free of the solidified false thoughts that are the basis of the skandha of form.

For example, suppose your spiritual practice technique involves reciting Buddha's name or a mantra of some other type. After practicing correctly for awhile, you may reach the stage where you do not even realize you are reciting a mantra anymore. At this point, your mind will be clear and serenely calm without any stray random thoughts. If you can continually stay in this state at all times—whether walking, sitting, standing or lying down—then this is reaching a type of samadhi. But if you can only stay in samadhi when you are quietly meditating in a sitting posture, we cannot call it samadhi at all; the best we can say is that you are just practicing your legs and experiencing just a minor bit of mental stilling.

Thus, the bigger question is, do you really need a particular method, such as reciting mantras, to reach a state of one-pointedness? Is it absolutely essential to be employing some technique, where your mind becomes absorbed in one thing, in order to attain samadhi? And, if you do not bother to use any practice method at all, can you expect that your chi will still transform, your chakras unfold, and your mai will still open?

The big secret within the *Surangama Sutra* is that you do not need to use any particular cultivation technique if you follow the method of no-method. If you follow the Zen way, you will naturally experience all the samadhi of the cultivation trail and achieve enlightenment, only your trip will be quicker and have much less difficulty.

There is no need for the mind to grip onto any artificial technique, or to employ special force of any sort in cultivation if you just drop everything and let the mind rest in its own natural state. Since everything is natural, and since Tao is not an artificial creation, in actuality you do not need to superimpose a method on top of this naturalness to attain realization. You must simply let go of whatever mental realms you are creating to see who is doing the experiencing. In fact, you already have samadhi—just let go of holding onto mentation and it will appear.

All you must do is just let go and drop everything, to give yourself a rest from clinging and attachment so as to remain natural in the dharma world. Since there is no artificial effort involved in this process, there is no way you can avoid making great progress with this method of no-method. In fact, this letting go as a means of practice is the only means that has any ontological validity or significance.

On the other hand, in the Hinayana cultivation schools of the world (the term Hinayana is not unique to Buddhism, but actually refers to spiritual cultivation focused on saving the self rather than others), you actually put a method on top of the Tao—like reciting the Buddha's name, cultivating your chi, or doing visualization exercises—even though the fundamental basis is naturally pure. You get busier in order to tie up your miscellaneous thoughts, and when you can tie them up, you discard the whole package to realize the emptiness of mind. You can indeed practice this way, but it is not the only way to practice.

One of the big secrets within the *Surangama Sutra* is that you do not need a particular artificial method to cultivate, but can fully achieve the path just by activating your prajna wisdom. This means staying fully aware while resting the mind where there is no abode. When you successfully practice this direct method, your chi, mai, chakras, kundalini, bindus, bodhicitta and so on will transform automatically without the necessity of any special efforts or techniques. Just let go of the mental clinging that normally binds you, and eventually your mental realm will become pure and clear. This "secret" cultivation method of the *Surangama Sutra* is only secret because people simply do not realize it is there. It is "secret" only because they do not understand it.

If you follow this route and approach the borders of the skandha of form because of your cultivation, your mind will initially start to open, but not completely. It is a scientific tenet that mind and body are interrelated, so if neither is properly balanced, it will be difficult to get away from all your random thoughts. However, when you practice this technique the two will become harmonized quite naturally such that you will indeed accomplish the first steps towards freeing yourself from the form skandha.

Buddha was extremely kind, so he gave several other examples in the *Surangama Sutra* to explain this process more clearly. Suppose, for instance, that a person has good eyes but is shut inside a dark room. This analogy, of course, was Buddha's way of representing the spiritual stage where someone is trapped because of the binding limitations of the skandhas. But just as being entrapped in the form skandha is like being in a dark room, those who continue cultivating will one day break through this skandha and see some light.

As an aside, Esoteric Buddhism has a method of darkness retreat where you sit naked in a dark, double-enclosed room in order to attain the visual superpowers. Someone who has entered the darkened retreat will gradually begin to see light, although there is no external light source. Naturally it is not sunlight, moonlight, nor star light because there is no light in the room at all. It is just that with the proper cultivation, the eye superpower will begin to function. If Buddha were alive today, he would explain this phenomenon using the principles of modern science.

Continuing with our example, this cultivation scenario, where the mind is clear and calm but not yet open, is as if you are in a dark room, meaning your mind does not see the light of prajna yet; you have not broken through the form skandha or attained realization. Today's movies mislead us in portraying spiritual states with various physical lights when they do not involve such things at all. They only involve self-illumination, which is the clear awareness knowing or understanding of prajna wisdom. If you run after some experiential realms of light as levels of attainment, you are actually proceeding further away from Tao. Physical light is not the spiritual path; when we use the term "light" in spiritual teachings, it only represents the clarity of awareness.

Shakyamuni Buddha warns that when you first practice this cultivation technique of no-method, you will reach a certain stage of attainment but not yet be cognizant of the wisdom light associated with the true self. The mind will begin to open, but not fully. Since you are not yet enlightened, you will not be fully awakened to the prajna wisdom of the mind, so the *Surangama Sutra* says, "It is like a clear eyed man who is put in total darkness. His essential nature is wondrous and pure, but his mind does not yet radiate light. This is called the domain of the skandha of form."

If we return with this information to the story of Han Shan seeing the Wu Tai Mountain and rivers all bathed in light, we must remember that his hermit friend, who was his teacher at the time, warned him this was nothing special. What Han Shan had achieved was simply an effect generated by the five elements as he dissolved away the solidified false thoughts of the form skandha, and the light he saw seemed to extend everywhere because the five elements extend throughout the physical environment. In other words, his experiential realm was still within the domain of the skandha of form!

The *Surangama Sutra* says, "If your eyes are bright, and the light shines through in all directions, and there is no more darkness, this is called the end of the skandha of form." Thus, if we think

back to the darkness retreat of Esoteric Buddhism, we can realize that the dark room stands for our own body and the skandha of form, and we only begin to "see the light" after we make progress in our spiritual cultivation practice. That is when our awareness will begin to open.

Buddha elucidated ten delusive byways connected with progress through the skandha of form, and ten paths of deviation associated with each of the other skandhas as well. We do not have the space to list all these possible errors, so you must either obtain a copy of the *Surangama Sutra* or go to the appendix to study the extensive descriptions yourself.

If you can avoid these ten mara states and escape from the skandha of form, we allegorically say that "everything opens," that your eyes have light and there is no darkness anymore. As Buddha explained,

> Ananda, when disciples practicing samatha to realize samadhi are no longer susceptible to the skandha of form, they will see the minds of all the Buddhas like reflections in a clear mirror. But this is like winning a prize that cannot yet be enjoyed, or like a man having a nightmare, whose limbs are free and whose mind is normal, but because of an evil influence is unable to move. Therefore, this is called 'the skandha of sensation.' If the nightmare ceases, then the mind can leave the body, observe one's own face, and come and go as one pleases without any hindrances. This is called 'the cessation of the skandha of sensation,' and this state allows one to transcend the kalpa of the corruption of doctrinal views. If we examine the cause of this, it is false intelligence and erroneous thinking.

All this happens, of course, only when you break through the form skandha. It happens when you escape the domain of the form aggregate and have started work on transforming the skandha of sensation.

After you free yourself from the skandha of form, even though you do not yet have enlightenment, you can liberate yourself to some degree from the influences of the material world. The reason you cannot immediately reach enlightenment at this point is because everything you do is still based on thought. Thought is based on consciousness, so you still must purify all the layers of consciousness (which includes all the other skandhas since the consciousness skandha is their base) before you can become enlightened.

You are still relying on consciousness when you arrive at this stage of practice, and in fact, we can say that if your mind is not strong enough, you cannot even reach this stage of attainment. From a careful analysis, Buddha therefore said that you are still in a state of firm thought when you reach this realm, but based on this not-so-insignificant accomplishment, it ranks as a significant level of spiritual kung-fu.

Can we say that freeing yourself from the form skandha is the result of your wisdom opening up?

Absolutely, so we do not even talk about the four dhyana and four samadhi in this accomplishment when we follow the method of the *Surangama Sutra*, for they are all included within this method of no-method. This path is to just let go of everything, so there is no specific method to follow. You even let go of the type of samadhi you are in. You just "give everything up," which is a form of charity practice. Of course, in this case you will still experience the classical kung-fu descriptions of the four dhyana, but you must remember that the over-arching method you are using contains all the smaller ones, whereas the minor ones do not contain the superior. Since you are directly cultivating consciousness, and since the four dhyana and four samadhi are all within the domain of consciousness, naturally you will experience them all without striving to do anything in particular.

The question arises as to why we have the aggregate of form in the first place. Why was it produced if it is an obstacle causing so much trouble? The reason we have the skandha of form is because we have always used awareness wrongly and held firmly to thought from beginninglessness. Tibetans like to say that the enlightened nature is "empty in essence and luminous (clear) in nature," which means that a natural display occurs in the mind wherein anything at all can manifest. When we cling to the mental thoughts that arise as a display and then hold onto them, then we get form. So an even deeper question accordingly arises, why have we always been clinging in this way from beginninglessness?

To explain, we must remember that the form skandha encompasses the four great elements and space that make up the physical world. Once we enter our mother's womb, we naturally make contact with these elements and get attached to the concept of form. Even in the state between death and rebirth, when we are lacking a physical body, we still attach to the idea of form in our consciousness, but it is a more subtle type of form. While in the mother's womb it is form, and before this it is form as well.

While you do not possess a physical body in the dream state, even here you still hold onto the idea of possessing a form body. We therefore have developed the deep-seated habit of taking the physical body as our true self, and over time this has become a very firm, persistent idea. Where does this view originate from? It is due to firm thought on the view of having a body, and being a self. That is why a Zen master once said, "The body is like a cage" and Master Yun-men said, "Within heaven and earth, in space and time, there is a jewel, hidden in the mountain of form." Lao Tzu commented for all of us, saying that most of his trouble was due to the fact that he had a physical body.

If you can let go of all your random thoughts you will be able to finish with the skandha of form, but what is the best method to use for achieving this? In the *Surangama Sutra* we do not take the approach of step-by-step kung-fu such as cultivating the wind, water, fire and earth elements of the body, or progressing through the dhyana and various samadhi. Rather, its method is based on being liberated by prajna wisdom. Hence, there is the poem:

> You solve the problem by addressing the origin [through prajna]
> Instead of looking beyond the beginning [at the results of kung-fu].

In other words, when you cultivate in such a way that begins attacking the problem at its roots, you are subtracting from rather than adding to your problems.

On the other hand, by following the road of kung-fu rather than cultivating prajna wisdom (and directly addressing the root), you end up generating more rather than fewer problems. You end up increasing your obstacles and problems rather than decreasing them. You become even more complicated when complication is not even necessary, and when it amounts to an extra burden or confusion on the path. This, in fact, is one of the main downfalls of the various esoteric schools whose techniques, in the hands of those lacking prajna wisdom, can end up prolonging the process of cultivation as well as your stay in cyclic existence!

Thus, it is that all the artificial methods of the various yoga schools, including extreme asceticism and so forth, violate the purity of the original natural basis. Only the Zen school avoids this problem by targeting the Tao directly. In this school, *you do not superimpose any method on yourself whatsoever*. Hence, we say that "no gate is also a gate," which is the big prajna wisdom secret contained within the *Surangama Sutra*. Ordinary people think this sutra belongs to the Orthodox school of Buddhism and miss this profound, esoteric cultivation message.

Now in the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* Buddha said,

> All the sentient beings mistakenly take the four elements as their true self, and they mistakenly take the six sense objects as the true mind.

This sutra is also a very important text to study because it teaches the vision of the *Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra*. It says that all dharmas are nothing but consciousness, and everything is but Mind-Only. If you understand this sutra, then you have already attained the Flower Ornament view.

This body given to us by our parents, together with our six consciousnesses, are only second and third level projections of our fundamental nature. Our true self has always been there, but ordinary people mistakenly take these shadow projections for it instead. We do this even though there is no logic behind this action. This body we have, for example, is only a particular combination of the four elements at any one given moment in time. The very next moment the combination, location, proportion and structure of these elements will change, so there is no

reason to hold onto this body, but just let it go. That is the Zen technique of cultivation practice.

The Mahayana approach to Tao is to drop your body and your thoughts, whereby you pay no attention whatsoever to the kundalini, chi, mai or other sensations and experiential realms which arise. Worriers may think they will miss something, so in this route will you still have the experience of the chi, the mai, the chakras and so on? If you ask this question, it already means you are too attached to this matter, and such concerns will inhibit your practice. Nevertheless, the answer is "Yes." When you can really let go of things, naturally the chi will circulate and become full, the mai and chakras will open, the kundalini will arise and so forth. But as Zen master Chia-shan indicated, "The dragon carries the pearl in its mouth, paying no attention to the fish swimming by." You cultivate empty awareness without paying too much attention to the all effects that result from this sort of practice.

The *Surangama Sutra* tells us that in our cultivation, we should look on our physical body, and the various skandhas, as if they were there and as if they were not there. That is the way to properly cultivate because it attacks the problem from the root. This explanation is actually using a lot of words to discuss the matter, for the Zen school would just say, "let it go, let it all go" which encapsulates the meaning entirely. But whether we use few words or a lot of words, the actual practice is difficult to perform.

This is a tall order for most people, so most spiritual practitioners resort to sitting meditation in order to practice. That is, they take the time to sit quietly in the lotus posture and try to let go of all their thoughts that arise by cultivating the detachment of an observer. Sitting meditation is like being put into jail, however, because even if you attain the state of feeling calm, clear and bright, you are still stuck in the realm of the form aggregate. When you close your eyes, you see inescapable darkness from which you cannot jump out; it is like being in "the darkness of our own prison." But if you can liberate yourself from these feelings you will know that this physical body is not the true self, nor will you take the six consciousnesses as the true self, either. If you can "open up your eyes," so-to-speak, there will not be prajna darkness any longer.

Taoism is always talking about cultivating our jing, chi and shen: transforming jing into chi, chi into shen, and shen into emptiness, after which you must break even this stage of relative emptiness. Whether it is the road of Taoism or another genuine spiritual path, you must absolutely let go of everything to see emptiness. However, on the road of Taoism, can you say you have broken through the skandha of form and all the other skandhas as well after you achieve all these transformations? In fact, while the Tao school suggests that these transformations are all there is to the entire process of cultivation, they are actually just a snapshot of the spiritual path.

When you break through and are no longer constrained by the skandha of form, it is possible that a manifestation of physical light extending throughout the environment may appear. You can read

about this light in Buddha's description of the ten possible delusive mara states that can manifest when you are cultivating through the form skandha. Actually, there can be lots of different physical changes at this time, such as becoming temporarily immune from injury. For instance, for some practitioners, fire will not burn them, nor will a knife cut them. But this is only a temporary achievement experienced as the mind begins merging with the void. It is not Tao, and it is not anything especially wonderful. Even certain ghosts, when they enter a body, can produce this effect as well.

When you break out of the form aggregate you will be able to see everything clearly, but not everywhere in the Three Realms. Usually, meditation is like being in darkness, but the result of freeing yourself from the skandha of form is that you begin to open up all your chi channels, including the central channel, or sushumna. Thus, some people will have the temporary experience of being able to see distant places, as Han Shan did, but this can also result from a partial opening of the sushumna channel without being liberated from the form skandha.

The ten possible deviances pertaining to the skandha of form recount many of the strange experiences we sometimes find advanced cultivation practitioners experiencing. In one of these, Buddha warned that a spiritual cultivator could become too attracted to this type of experiential realm:

> Continuing to penetrate further and deeper with this mind, suddenly in the middle of the night far in the distance you will see market-places, wells, streets, and lanes. You may see relatives, clansmen, and family members, or you may even hear them speak. This is called, 'remote visions of the overworked mind taking flight.' This is not sainthood. Not confusing this with sainthood is called 'an excellent level.' If you do misinterpret it as sainthood, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

When someone cultivates and still maintains awareness of the chi, mai and tumo fire with attachment, this is still a low stage of cultivation within the form skandha. So the Tao school's various stages of transformation are all still within the form aggregate, they are still only a tiny fraction of the overall process of cultivation. Why can't you jump out of this? Buddha answered that it is because of your firm grasping to thoughts from beginninglessness.

When we say you are getting rid of your view of the body, it basically means that you are getting rid of your firm grasp on the idea that the body is you, and you are detaching from the heaviness of the body to the extent it no longer seems as if it is there. To actually achieve this involves cultivating the body to a state of optimum health, which includes adjusting the hormones and breath and cultivating the chi and mai to a state of balanced openness and fullness. But this also happens when you just take a rest and "drop everything" as can be seen when individuals return after a vacation. Since they left all their concerns behind and rested during this period, they look wonderfully refreshed upon their return. In taking a mental break, of course they got better.

Naturally, your life span will also be extended through this process of nonclinging because increasing your vitality and bringing the body to a state of optimum health increases your longevity accordingly. In addition to the health benefits, when the body reaches a state of healthy equilibrium, it becomes much easier for a spiritual practitioner to mentally let go and achieve the mental detachment required in cultivation. This method is therefore one of cultivating the body so as to detach from the body, like using fire to put out fire.

From this short explanation we can know that the process of cultivation, if not for spiritual purposes, is a method that can help banish sickness and increase longevity.

> Cultivation is not an evil or artificial process, for it is a scientific, inherent process that naturally accords with the functions of the universe.

Since cultivation is not artificial in any way, we cannot buy into the excuses of those who might claim it is evil, unnatural, or ungodly. Using Christian terminology, we can even say that being natural and empty is to abandon the obstructions that separate you from God, including the selfishness of your own thoughts. In this way, the process of spiritual cultivation will bring forth your union with the highest of all spiritual states.

Any individual who achieves cessation through samadhi can eventually jump out of the form skandha and enter the domain of the sensation skandha. At that point we say that they will see the true mind as if they are looking into a clear mirror. Another way of describing matters is to say that it will seem like they already have something but cannot use it; they know every thought that they have quite clearly and can check their mind, but they just cannot seem to do anything with their ability. In other words, they cannot fully utilize what they have, so it is like being in a bad dream where you are struggling and cannot move because your power is not yet strong enough.

Let us go into this example. Sometimes you might have a dream where you cannot move at all, or you dream that your legs do not work and you cannot run away from some situation. Even though you know your arms and hands are there, the reason you cannot move them is because some heaviness has touched your mind, keeping you immobile, yet you remain clearly aware of everything. Freeing yourself from the form skandha is similar to this scenario. You are clear about things, but you still do not have the power to do anything about them.

When you free yourself from the skandha of form, ideas will still come and go in your mind but they will float here and there without bothering you too much, and you will still be involved with contact and feeling. Your mind will feel like empty space, but comparatively speaking, this stage

is like a little cloud floating in the sky as compared to the great vastness of the universe. However, now you will know how great and boundless your mind truly is. You will be able to realize that our physical bodies are only a minor thing, like tiny bubbles in the great ocean.

It also becomes clear at this point that the proper cultivation path means returning to the natural state of the true self. You therefore learn to cultivate by taking this body as if it is both there and not there. Whatever you do, you try not to cling to it. This is the point where you are finally working on the sensation skandha in your cultivation.

THE SKANDHA OF SENSATION

The first question that arises regarding the skandha of sensation is: where does this skandha come from? Shakyamuni Buddha said it arises from our beginningless habit of being accustomed to contact and feeling. It is the accumulated end result of having become habituated to feeling contact with sensations.

These deep seated habits are also the reason it is difficult to escape from the domain of sensation and feeling. You might understand all these things after you free yourself from the skandha of form, as if looking in a mirror where you can see everything crystal clear, but with only this low level of spiritual cultivation, you still cannot use this understanding to totally master yourself. Your mind may be clear now that you understand things, but you still do not have sufficient cultivation power to surmount them.

Therefore in the sensation aggregate, it is as if you already know everything and you have an understanding of matters, but you are still stuck. You are still stuck because you are still subtly attached to the habits of contact and feeling. This is why Buddha said there are also ten kinds of outside paths or obstacles that can appear when you are cultivating freedom from this skandha. If you understand the real path of cultivation, these temptations will not confuse you.

The seductive possibility of superpowers is just a minor attraction when compared to these temptations, and look how many people get hooked by superpowers. The ten “demon” states of the sensation skandha are even more destructive than paranormal powers in how they can lead you astray, for if you succumb to these particular delusions you will actually be cutting off your prajna wisdom life.

If you triumph over these by-paths, however, you can be compared to someone who wakes up from a nightmare. It is as if there was a devil in a dream sitting on top of your body, immobilizing you, but now he is no longer there. Of course, there was no actual devil in the first place, for this is just a way of explaining things. The point is that now your mind will no longer cling to your body, and so you can detach from it to escape the configurations of sensation. As a result, you will experience a feeling of joy and comfort as if merging with the vastness of the universe.

At this point, you can also let go of your body and leave it at will. In other words, your mind is free to leave the body at any time. Ordinary people cannot do this, but when you really attain this stage you can develop the yang-shen (yang body) of the Tao school. However, when you generate an actual yang body you will still have the feeling that your original physical body is still there, although this depends upon your degree of remaining attachment. Here you are entirely free, for you can separate from the body completely, but you still have not transformed the seventh and eighth consciousnesses. As Buddha describes the situation:

> Ananda, now those disciples who practice samadhi and in whom the skandha of sensation is already exhausted may find that although the stream of transmigration has not yet ended, the mind is able to take leave of the body like a bird from its cage. Having reached this level, their mortal body is able to experience the sixty stages of the development of the a bodhisattva towards Buddhahood and freely assume any form, or travel anywhere without obstruction. This may be compared to a man talking in his sleep, who though he has no awareness of what he is doing, nevertheless makes perfect sense to those who are not asleep. This is called 'the effect of the skandha of conception.'

As Buddha said, when you are no longer constrained by the sensation aggregate, your mind will be free to leave the body because your physical nature no longer presents an obstacle for you. Furthermore, you will be able to overcome confusion and transcend defilements over all the different views, such as subjective opinions and opinionatedness. You will no longer be confused and attached to vain understanding and illusory clarity, so you will attain the correct view in cultivation matters. In short, you will no longer be bound by the empty reflections of your false thinking.

This means that in breaking free of the aggregate of form, you will no longer be constrained by the material world, and in breaking free from or exhausting the skandha of sensation, you will no longer be constrained by views. Your mind and body can now separate from such things so that false thoughts become like bubbles, and empty out.

Why are people constrained by the sensation skandha in the first place? Buddha said that the reason we are affected by it is because we are controlled by illusions and imaginations; we are controlled by illusory thoughts and empty reflections of false thinking. To abide in the domain of the sensation aggregate means you are still grasping at this type of thing.

Tao, or enlightenment, is our stainlessly clear and formless true self, but we always imagine it to *be* something. Like seeing the moon reflected in water, we get attached to some particular illusory form or appearance and take it to be something real whereas it is not. Thus, the reason we have sensations is fundamentally due to illusory thoughts. They are like jailers who imprison us within this aggregate. But when we free ourselves from them, this type of false thought is greatly diminished and cannot hold us any longer.

Therefore, let us consider two famous poems in the *Altar Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. The senior monk Shen-hsiu, who was not enlightened and had an imperfect understanding of spiritual cultivation, wrote a poem that said:

> The body is the Bodhi tree,
> The mind is like a mirror bright,
> At all times you must wipe it clean,
> Lest dust on it alight.

This poem shows he was still functioning within the domain of the sensation skandha. On the other hand, Hui-neng, who became the Sixth Patriarch of the Zen school, wrote on the wall of the monastery:

> Bodhi originally has no tree,
> The mirror also has no stand,
> Buddha nature is originally clean and pure,
> So where can dust alight?

As you can see from what you already know, both the mind and thoughts are empty. The bodhi mind of enlightenment just *is*, without preconditions, and sees things as the empty illusions they are. Even emptiness is void of the thought of emptiness, and to succeed on the spiritual path you must cultivate yourself in line with this view of no-view. This is always the proper way to spiritually practice, and it will enable you to become free of the skandha of sensation.

THE SKANDHA OF CONCEPTION

When you are finally liberated from attachment to the sensation skandha due to your cultivation efforts, you will no longer have this feeling something is pressing on the body, and the pressure of your physical nature will therefore be greatly lessened. At this point you will have initially entered the domain of the skandha of conception, which Buddha described by saying, “It is like a man soundly sleeping who talks in his sleep. Though the man knows nothing about it, his words are clearly enunciated and in order. Those who are not asleep understand everything he says. This is the domain of the skandha of conception.”

Buddha’s metaphor therefore explains that you can detach from the mind (as in sleeping) due to your cultivation efforts up to this point, but you still cannot be your own master. The reason for this is that false thoughts are still moving and floating conceptions still remain, so you are like a man detached from these lingering things, but because they are still there you have not yet awakened.

Why are you not yet awakened? Because you still do not have the superpower of “complete no-

leakage." If you are able to obtain the state of complete no-leakage, it means you are able to remain in a state where not even one thought arises, where the mind is always stainlessly clear. When you reach the stage of mental no-leakage, it means that your mind will not move anymore even if some disturbing or frightening scenario faces you. Keep in mind that this is not the "no leakage" of jing that we discussed earlier in regards to sexual restraint. What we are describing here refers to the fact that your stainless mind does not become polluted by becoming covered with false thoughts.

We cannot say your thoughts do not move at all in this scenario, but that even if they do move, everything will seem empty. Heavenly beings are known to have the five superpowers of the heavenly eye, heavenly ear, knowing other people's minds, knowing the past and future, and having deva foot ubiquity, but they do not possess this superpower of no-leakage. Only the Hinayana Arhat has attained this
stage of spiritual cultivation because he has pacified the conception skandha, and calmed his sixth consciousness.

As a result of this explanation, you can understand that a virtuous man who cultivates to the skandha of sensation will initially still be constrained by feelings, but eventually he will be able to separate his mind from his body like a bird that can escape his cage. Once he is liberated from this skandha, his compassion can overflow like the Buddha's, and he will be able to understand every scenario of the physical body. This is entering the domain of the conception skandha. By this stage, a cultivator will be able to obtain the mind-generated body, called the *yi-sheng-shen*, which is higher than the yang-shen of the Tao school although we cannot make a perfect match-up between these states of kung-fu. In trying to match the various attainments of the spiritual path from the indications provided by different schools, producing perfect one-to-one correspondences like this is never that simple, and yet we can definitely say that these stages are related.

The Yang Shen Body

Each type of kung-fu attainment on the spiritual trail has many different levels of achievement and the level of attainment will depend upon a practitioner's prajna and merits. We can, for instance, say that the Christian mystic, Padre Pio, had definitely achieved the yang shen (body double) attainment as was also the case of the Hindu swami thrown in jail who was reported in Paramhansa Yogananda's famous autobiography. But without more information, we cannot state for certain what stage of this attainment they had reached, nor whether they had broken through the sensation skandha.

There is the famous story of a Chinese master who wanted to test two of his students who had achieved the yang-shen attainment. The master instructed both of them to use their yang shen bodies to go some distance, pick up a flower, and then return with it. They could both generate a

solid yang body double which could be seen and touched by others, but only one of them had cultivated high enough to use it to retrieve items at a distance, proving that he had a much higher level of attainment. Hence, the only safe thing we can say when we are making certain comparisons between various spiritual schools and stages is that certain cultivation phenomena are related, and we should not get into too many details about the matter. The details are only important when you finally reach those stages yourself, and at that point in time you will no doubt have a good master to guide you. Here we can only say that you can "generate a life" when you finally free yourself from the sensation skandha.

When you achieve this feat and are no longer constrained by anything, you can start to go anywhere in the universe at will. But suppose you are in this world experiencing pain in the stomach such that you want to leave this world for good. To just leave the body so that it dies would be a violation of discipline, and all religions agree unanimously on the injunction of no-killing. To leave in this manner is not the meaning of "being able to escape birth and death," for that comes at a much higher stage of spiritual attainment. This type of leaving is suicide, and constitutes trying to escape your duties in this life and your karma. If you have not paid all your debts to the world, you cannot leave just yet. Even the Esoteric school talks about this principle, and says that when you achieve this level of attainment, you should stay in the world and simply live in the body as if it is a suit you put on or take off.

Some people at this stage of spiritual attainment can leave their body and die whenever they choose, but it is not certain that everyone at this level will attain this ability. We therefore say you can leave anytime you want, but you still do not have the no-leakage superpower. You still have not reached that fundamental realm beyond birth and death, the fundamental original nature that gives birth to the notions of existence and nonexistence, because thoughts are still screening its realization. You are still like a person within a dream who, after you wake up, cannot remember what you said while sleeping whereas the people around you could understand everything you spoke. If you had attained the stage of no-leakage, however, this sort of thing would not happen because you would be aware of everything, and in control of the situation.

At this stage of exhausting the skandha of sensation, however, you can still go everywhere and give teachings similar to a Bodhisattva's, and these teachings will come out naturally. Sometimes, in regular life, people say things or give teachings that are perfectly correct, and yet they do not understand what they are saying at all. Of course, this particular phenomenon is not this same high stage of attainment, but it is an analogous event. What you have to understand is that this ability to spontaneously provide appropriate cultivation teachings is a capability that sometimes arises within the domain of the aggregate of conception. In part, this helps explain the spontaneity of the Zen masters and their always appropriate responses.

Exhausting the Conception Aggregate

There are ten outside paths you can encounter when you finally reach the skandha of conception and are cultivating to liberate yourself. If you can let go of the mind-generated body and all the functions generated from thoughts (such as holding fast to form, imaginary emptiness, imaginary clarity and so on), you can free yourself of the delusive thinking that characterizes the conception skandha. This principle is described in the Sixth Patriarch's poem where he wrote:

> The mirror has no stand,
> Where can the dust alight?

When the power of the conception skandha is exhausted, you will know why you were born as the particular individual you are in your particular place, and you will know where you will go next when you die. You can also review every tiny detail of your life, just as is reported by those who have near-death experiences. In your case, however, you will have control over the review, and it can extend across multiple lives stretching into the past and future.

We therefore say that from top to bottom, from beginning to end, "there are no defects" because you are now outside the skandha of conception. There is no more dust and dirt on the illuminated true nature of mind. Buddha therefore told us about this experience, saying:

> When thoughts no longer arise in the mind, and the mind is like a mirror free of dust and dirt, it is able to reflect every detail of one's present incarnation from beginning to end. This is called 'the end of the skandha of conception.' At this level they can transcend the defilements of the passions. If we examine the cause of all this, it is the all-pervasiveness of erroneous thinking.

In other words, if your moving thoughts are ended and floating conceptions are dissolved away, it is like getting rid of any dust and dirt which has settled on the enlightened mind. The mind will have perfect clarity through and through. The birth and death of thoughts will be equalized, and there will be perfect awareness from beginning to end. This is truly awakening to the Tao, seeing the Tao, realizing the dharmakaya, seeing the clear light, or settling the sixth consciousness.

This is a description of exhausting the domain of the skandha of conception, and in breaking free of this skandha you can then transcend the defilements of affliction. So when you are free of the aggregate of conception and finally purifying the domain of the volition skandha, you will be able to get rid of all the troubling mental afflictions you previously had. Buddha explained:

> Ananda, as the disciples practice samadhi and free themselves from the skandha of conception, common delusions appear. Now they are constant in waking and sleeping, and their consciousness becomes as empty and pure as a clear blue sky, no longer subject to the shadow of coarse sense impressions. The earth, together with all its mountains and rivers, are observed as reflections in a

> bright mirror. Impressions come without sticking and leave without a trace. They are able to react to externals unfettered by old habits. Now the ultimate reality and source of creation and destruction are fully revealed. They will see the twelve classes of living beings in all their variety throughout the ten directions as essentially sharing the same state of life, although they do not as yet understand the source of their existence. In this frame of mind things appear as a shimmering mirage that disturbs the mind's purity and explains the ultimate cause of the illusion of sense perception. This is called the skandha of volition, or action that passes on its effects.

Why are people constrained by the conception skandha in the first place? Because of the power and function of thoughts. Thoughts are so powerful that they just have this ability. In fact, we undertake all the various practices of spiritual cultivation precisely for the reason that we want to free ourselves from the addictive power of thoughts.

For ordinary individuals doing sitting meditation, sitting is just the beginning of experimenting with the path for enlightenment. Most of us close our eyes when sitting in meditation, and some people can sit for long periods of time whereas others can sit only for a short while. Most people are also familiar with the concept of separating their mind from their body. This does not mean leaving the body in some type of "astral projection" or OOBE out-of-the-body experience, for this is not the spiritual path, although it is a possible outcome from cultivating through the skandhas. Rather, it means detaching from the habit of clinging to emotions, thoughts and the impressions of the six senses so that the mind attains a continuous state of clarity and calm.

When you can attain this type of freedom from the body and its sensations, then as Buddha says, you would be like a bird that is extremely joyful from finally escaping out of its cage. The prison of thought attachment will be broken. To do this and thereby free yourself from the form, sensation and conception skandhas is very difficult, and by now you have some understanding of the difficulties involved. Most people, for instance, are not even able to do something simple like sit with their eyes open and detach from the functioning of vision. However, this can be a very useful procedure since the effects of meditating in this manner are very different than when you meditate with your eyes closed.

The Eyes and Seeing

Strictly speaking, in ancient times "sitting meditation" did not involve closing the eyes, but since modern people use both their minds and eyes too much, closing the eyes during meditation is a good way to give them a rest. Actually though, in meditation you should open your eyes a little bit because as the Tao school correctly instructs, "the curtain should be let down just a little."

In ancient times, whenever someone practiced the skeleton method visualization, anapana (pranayama) practice or another cultivation technique, they would use their eyes to observe their nose and heart. They would align themselves in this manner while observing their internal

thoughts through contemplation. Sometimes they would use their eyes to observe just the tip of the nose in order to promote a healthy posture, for in so doing your body will straighten naturally. Thus, the general rule during meditation is for the eyes to be two-thirds closed and one-third open, and your mind should be watching your thoughts.

You can confirm the naturalness of this position when you look at young children who are sleeping. When healthy children are sleeping, their eyes are relaxed and open just a little bit because they are full of shen, and this is also why the statues of meditating Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have partially opened eyes, which also reflects this fact. We are not saying you should look at anything in particular when your eyes are open during meditation, nor should your eyes be looking at anything specific. When you tell this to people, some mistakenly try to prevent seeing anything at all by rolling their eyeballs up, which is very bad. On the other hand, if you open your eyes fully during meditation you may eventually run into trouble because then it is likely your old habits will be invoked and you will become attached to whatever you see.

The Hinayana schools therefore suggest that your eyes be halfway open and halfway closed when you are meditating. Though they are not particularly focused, they should be pointed as if you are looking three steps ahead. The Mahayana method is to meditate with eyes completely open, since the practice is in the ordinary world, and they should be looking about five steps forward. Of course you are not supposed to actively look with your eyes during meditation, for these are just the positioning instructions for how you should relax your eyes during the meditation session. In other words, these are just the positioning instructions, and after you position your eyes you must remember to relax them and let them go.

People normally meditate with the eyes closed because this partially inhibits the eye-consciousness from fully functioning. When fully open, old habits make it hard to disengage from the eye-consciousness. But if you can open your eyes during meditation, and can separate the effects of the eyes from the mind, this is a very good type of spiritual practice. It is something you can even practice when watching television, but do not try to fool yourself and call watching television cultivation. Sitting with the eyes open a little will actually help you better comprehend how to separate the effects of the eyes from the mind, and it is a practice suited for dealing with the world of men rather than the ascetic's world of an isolated cave. That is why we mention this practice for freeing yourself from the various skandhas.

At the beginning of the *Surangama Sutra*, Buddha has a conversation with Ananda where they discuss the location of the mind, and come up with seven conclusions: the mind is not inside the body, nor outside, it is not in the middle of inside or outside, it is not in space, and so on. The conclusion they reach, which science has finally reached, is that the mind is nonlocal, meaning that it is everywhere.

Since everything is also a creation of our true fundamental nature, or "original face," you are

wrong to try to bring the mind into your body, and you should not even focus on consciousness either. You should not fix your "original face" (fundamental nature) to consciousness and assume this is it, for consciousness, too, is just an interdependent creation of the real.

Consciousness is not yet the ultimate, fundamental essence. Yet even in terms of consciousness, we can accurately say that the sixth consciousness is nonlocal. It is not limited to the body, but is everywhere. However, if you keep fixing it within the body, you keep reinforcing the view of the body, and it is then difficult to get anywhere with your spiritual cultivation efforts. Unfortunately, this is the great error of most Esoteric school practitioners.

The *Surangama Sutra* often discusses "seeing," which is just a way of saying you awaken or realize something. Another type of seeing is when you open your eyes and see light, because in the universe there exists all sorts of lights given off by the stars, the sun, electric lamps, the five elements, and so on. When you close your eyes, a normal person sees darkness. But what about the blind? What do the blind see? Can they see at all? Buddha says they can see, but what they actually see is darkness.

In terms of relativities, when light comes, darkness will disappear and when darkness arrives, light will disappear. This is as scientific an explanation as one could get in ancient times. But that fundamental thing which can perceive that you are seeing or not seeing is not in either the light or darkness, nor does it change with the alternation between light and darkness. That fundamental thing is what you must find in cultivation, and if you can emanate lights from your physical body, transform it into thousands of shapes, roam the universe at will or even live for thousands of eons without finding *That One*, then you are still not enlightened. You are still not through the five skandhas.

How do you find that fundamental true nature? When you return the light of the sun to the sun, and return the obstacles of the wall (that prevent seeing) to the wall, and return your thoughts to their source, there is still something you cannot return to anything else. What is left that you cannot return to any prior causes or conditions is really that fundamental essence from which seeing and all the other sense functions arise. What cannot be returned to anything else is the fundamental root source of everything, and that fundamental root source is *you*. It is what you really are. This fundamental nature is what gives birth to thoughts as well as to hearing, smelling and all the senses such as seeing. It gives birth to appearances and prajna wisdom as just two of its many functions.

Of course, seeing the path and seeing the true nature of Tao are different than eye sight. As the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* of Hinduism says, "You cannot see the seer of sight, You cannot hear the hearer of hearing, Nor perceive the perceiver of perception, Nor know the knower of knowledge." The *Surangama Sutra* also tells us,

> When you are able to see the true self, that "seeing" is not the seeing which is associated with the eyes. This "seeing" is detached from ordinary seeing, and the ordinary seeing cannot reach it.

That seeing is the exercise of prajna wisdom, a type of wordless knowing or awareness perception that has nothing to do with sight at all. But an important question arises, why in the *Surangama Sutra* did Buddha talk about seeing after discussing the mind?

In the Tao school there is a famous book called the *Yin Convergence Classic* which says, "the eyes are the window of the mind." It also says, "The key is in the eye, the key is in the mind." For instance, in politics your eyes observe everything closely, so "the key is in the eyes." But since how well you can strategize and utilize what you discover is all up to your mind, so also we have the phrase, "the key is in the mind." In some sense, seeing and the mind are related.

Your eyes will naturally open when you wake from sleep. When tired, your eyes will naturally close. Accordingly, it is easy for you to enter a yin scenario when you sleep and a yang scenario when you are awake. Why are we discussing all this? Because we previously discussed the essence of seeing, the birth of prajna wisdom perception, and were comparing the situation to a man who was talking in his sleep. He was talking in his sleep because he was still in a yin scenario. Thus, he was not able to avail himself of his full awareness, which is what it is like when you are not enlightened. That is why we say he was not yet awakened, and had not yet seen the Tao.

To free yourself from the constraints of form, sensation and conception is very difficult because it requires prajna wisdom, but the first step is to free yourself from the skandha of form. Vision is that sense which is related to form or appearance. To start to break away from form you must know how to detach from your seeing, and must eventually come to understand that seeing which sees your seeing. That seeing, or clear prajna wisdom awareness, is what you must cultivate to free yourself from all the skandhas. When you can activate that prajna seeing which can "see the Tao," then you are on your way to great advancement in spiritual practice.

Breaking Free of the Skandha of Conception

To break free of the skandha of conception, you must not deliberately push thoughts away because that is the method for cultivating the samadhi of no-thought. Rather, you must accomplish this escape naturally without a pushing effort, but through detachment so that thoughts dissolve away effortlessly. When the sutra says that you can get rid of the dreams of ordinary people, this is the same teaching found in the *Heart Sutra*, where it says that "the minds of the Bodhisattvas are free of obstructions and harbor no delusions."

The idea of dreams disappearing and harboring no delusions is referring to remaining in a state of

emptiness, calm and clarity whether you are asleep or awake. Since you can remain clear even when you are asleep, by purifying the conception skandha you will even be able to make clear decisions even while dreaming, and so we say that in this stage your "dreams disappear." We can also say that the waking state appears as if it were a dream, which is why we are told to cultivate by seeing the world in this way, for this particular scenario is also a stage of accomplishment of the Bodhisattvas.

Thus, the sutra tells us that when the conception skandha is ended, a person's ordinary dreamlike thoughts will be dissolved away, and a full awareness will remain the same whether the person is awake or asleep. They will finally get rid of all the dream-like thoughts that ordinary people have and only experience a serene realm of pristine mental clarity. Since your mind will be clear even during your sleep, it will be as if you do not dream anymore.

Upon cultivating through the skandha of conception, your resultant state of illumination will be empty and pure like a clear sky, and will be absent of any more reflections of coarse sensory objects. You will view the world's various phenomena, such as lands, mountains and rivers, as if they are images in a clear mirror; the images will come without sticking, and leave without a trace. You will be able to perceive and respond with empty receptivity, without any of your old mental habits of attachment. All there is is pure essential reality and at this stage, and the root source of birth and death will finally be revealed. That is why this is called a stage of awakening, illumination, or enlightenment.

The Third Zen Patriarch Seng-ts'an said, "If your eyes are not asleep, then dreams will disappear by themselves. If your mind does not move (there is no discrimination), then everything is one." This means that if you really want to understand the volition skandha, you must be fully free of the conception skandha first. Whether asleep or awake, your mind must always remain in the same realm of empty clarity where there is no heaviness or pressure on the mind. In this state, everything in the past will seem like a shadow or illusion, or as the poem says,

> A thousand rivers have water,
> There are moons in a thousand rivers;
> Ten thousand cloudless miles,
> The ten thousand mile sky.

While there is only one moon shining down from the sky, every river contains the moon. The fact that every river reveals the moon's reflection, that every river has an imaginary moon, means that all activities are permeated by the fundamental nature without obstruction. And as for ten thousand miles of clear sky, this means that the mind is unobstructed like a clear sky extending in all directions, which is a simile for the fundamental self once again.

The reason why the ancient Chinese used so many colorful literary expressions like this when

describing the various states of cultivation attainment is because strenuous logic and complicated details were never encouraged in Chinese culture. As a cultural tendency, the ancient Chinese sages always preferred simple, poetic ways of explaining things, so to understand their reports on cultivation matters, you must not only be fluent in ancient Chinese literary styles, but in cultivation knowledge as well.

Even if you can read ancient Chinese cultivation texts, you can only accurately decipher the material within them if you have reached a certain stage of meditation attainment. Unfortunately, these heavy requirements are why so few people today even recognize the great spiritual accomplishments of people like Chuang Tzu, Confucius and Mencius. Most people appreciate their writings as either pure literary or philosophical pieces, and however commendable this appreciation is, it entirely misses the cultivation content and cultivation purposes of this literature, and in particular the descriptions of cultivation kung-fu.

A question arises that if you can free yourself from the aggregate of conception, can you still think and do things? Of course, for as the sutra says, “the cultivator will perceive and respond with empty receptivity, [but] without any of his old habits.” For instance, you only need take a look at Shakyamuni Buddha and all the other masters who became enlightened. Could they still do things, or was it that they no longer functioned in the world?

In fact, as a spiritual practitioner makes proper progress in spiritual cultivation, they should become even more effective in the world, or they are doing something wrong! When we normally do things, our minds and hearts are burdened with the tasks and responsibilities we have. After attaining liberation from the skandha of conception, however, everything becomes very light and no longer produces any mental pressure. Hence, you can do everything even better than before, because there is no pressure on your mind when you finally exhaust the conception aggregate. Everything is so clear and afflictions are greatly reduced, so your wisdom and effectiveness can become truly great.

When such accomplished practitioners see mountains and rivers, everything is crystal clear. They do not mentally attach or cling to anything any longer; no mental realm sticks in their minds but is simply reflected. The sages of all spiritual schools instruct us never to mentally cling to experiential realms because they are unreal, illusory phenomena that always change like stormy weather, and hence they cannot possibly represent true reality. Phenomena are not the important thing. Rather, *That One* which knows phenomena, and which you find through spiritual practice and training, is the ultimate important thing. Prajna wisdom is the only prize you have on the spiritual path, for without prajna wisdom you will be unable to realize the Tao.

Mental nonclinging, and letting phenomena arise and depart while remaining mentally detached from this birth and death, is the path of spiritual cultivation all the way to the end. We also call this path emptiness cultivation, which is the rule that you should always be cultivating the

emptiness of mental discrimination through detachment; it is not that discrimination never arises, but that you simply do not attach to it, and let random thoughts simply pass away.

Conception is one of the five omnipresent factors of mind, so you do not try to cut off conception on the path of spiritual cultivation. Rather, you just let it freely function without attachment and when you attain this sort of proficiency, you will have finally made spiritual progress in the direction of nonclinging and "reflection." If you have not broken free of the conception skandha, however, you will still be buffeted by thoughts and you will still attach to them to obstruct the free functioning of your mind.

Another way of describing freedom from the skandha of conception is through the analogy that dust will not stick to a perfectly clean mirror. For ordinary people the mental dust will indeed accumulate; they will cling to it and it will appear as if it piles up. But when you have finally purified the skandha of conception, your mind will seem stainless so that there is no place for the dust to stick. The dust of thoughts may float here and there every now and then, but it will also disappear quickly and will not stay or obstruct anything.

Hence, when you cultivate to purify the skandha of volition, you will still be able to react to whatever happens to you, but now your wisdom nature will always be functioning freely without obstruction. Accordingly, your reactions will be even more efficient, skillful and powerful, and they will start to resemble the refined spontaneity of the Zen masters. You will properly react to all situations even better than before, but during the circumstances that arise and after the situations are over, there will be nothing to which you will cling. Thus, in this stage, it is easy to start getting rid of any old habits you have.

Old habits have the tendency to cheat all of us, but in this state you are no longer controlled by mental habits so much. You are very clear in your mind, and everything seems like a dream that you can remain detached from. It is certainly not a sleep time dream, for saying it is like a dream is just a way of describing things, and yet on the other hand you can indeed say that conventional reality is dreamlike. Perhaps the best description is that your mind is so clear that it is absent of agitation. No words can describe this state, so we say, "It is true, it is correct, it is real." It is so hard to describe this matter that the Zen masters rarely spoke of it. If they wanted to say anything, they just wrote a few lines of poetry that only the enlightened could understand.

Zen Misconceptions

To achieve this level of attainment involves tremendous meditation effort and merit, and yet society today commonly believes Zen is just some psychological game or exercise in fancy, intellectual word-play. The reason for this great misconception is because many translators of Zen material have been academics or intellectuals who have never ever cultivated meditation practice themselves, nor have they ever reached any level of kung-fu spiritual attainment. In

addition to never having practiced meditation, many do not even believe in Zen, and yet they churn out what they believe are accurate translations of these texts!

Other practitioners have been deceived because the Zen school does not like to focus on various experiential realms, for it considers them a distraction that should not merit any attention. The most you will find in Zen is a few lines of poetry on such matters, and even then most people cannot recognize that they are referring to high spiritual states of being. Hence if you do not reach these realms yourself, you are bound to misunderstand even these few lines of discussion.

With this type of treatment, the Zen school cannot help but to be misunderstood. However, even high level Zen practitioners themselves take these teachings the wrong way. For instance, in becoming free of the conception skandha, our floating conceptions are dissolved away and thoughts do not stir. Many practitioners who reach this attainment level mistakenly take this stage as the ultimate, and fall into lesser vehicles, when there is still more work to accomplish on the path.

Zen is really the great Mahayana school, for unlike the "saints" of other schools, most of the great Zen masters could equally serve as kings or generals. This is not the case with many other spiritual teachers today—life after life they may practice asceticism and meditation, but it seems that they could not survive for one minute in the mundane world, and so they can only become professional meditators. People honor such notables as spiritual saints, but in becoming professional meditators without being able to function effectively in the world, they show that they have not mastered the fundamental aspect of great functioning. They only end up concentrating on stillness, which is the easy side of the matter. People who take this road life after life can become great emptiness meditators and teachers, but that is about all. The great Zen masters, on the other hand, could do everything with equal ease.

THE SKANDHA OF VOLITION

While becoming liberated from the skandha of form is related to medicine, psychology, physical anatomy and physiology, becoming liberated from the skandha of sensation is related to changes in the body's nerves, breathing, and hormones. Liberating oneself from the skandha of conception involves even further transformations of the brain, and by this time, the brain cells have already been greatly transformed through the route of cultivation. Only after you transform these three, and can talk of the "true one," can you finally start to discuss the volition skandha.

In the Zen school, the Zen masters tell students to investigate hua-tou, which means to focus all their attention on a koan. When people "break through" the koan, it means they finally understand something. However, this type of realization is only in terms of understanding and comprehension, rather than in terms of actually piercing through the skandha of volition. So using a hua-tou, which might help you get through to the skandha of conception, will not help

one break free of the skandha of volition. To escape the clutches of this realm, you will have to use some other cultivation technique.

The force of the conception skandha is already very great, so only when you are free of the aggregate of conception can you arrive at the realm of impulsive volitions and gradually start to transform it. We can say that the aggregate of conception is most closely related to the sixth consciousness, whereas the seventh consciousness is most closely related to the volition skandha. It is only after you transform the sixth consciousness that you can move on to transforming the seventh, for to transform the seventh consciousness you need to rely on the sixth consciousness. In fact, until you can pacify the volition skandha, there will be no way to truly cut off the skandhas of form, sensation and conception because they will keep arising forever. And when you have reached the consciousness skandha, which is the realm of inverted false thought, then you can finally work on transforming the alaya consciousness into the pure Tathagata wisdom. But it is very hard to get to the realm of the alaya because the volition skandha is so strong and powerful.

As we said previously, the earth is always rotating, the moon is always turning, our blood is always circulating, atoms are always vibrating, and from the micro to the macro, the universe is always engaged in a constant state of motion. All this motion is due to the ceaseless functioning of the volition skandha. Throughout time people have been searching for a perpetual motion machine, and they need to look no further than the universe itself since it is always moving. This is the type of power that the volition skandha has.

Some people lose sight of this fundamental fact and ask, "Why can't I open my *tu mai* or *jen mai* energy channels?" In fact, the chi channels are always moving and always open, otherwise you would be dead. The Tao school pays a lot of attention to the lower stages of cultivation in instructing people on how to transform these things, but in truth they are always transforming because of the volition skandha. *That is why there is no need to concentrate on them to transform them*, and why the Zen school can still produce the same results as the Esoteric school without having to focus or concentrate on transforming the body.

When you finally purify the conception aggregate and attain to the domain of the volition skandha, you will be able to clearly see the fundamental forces behind birth and death. You will know just by looking at a person when they will die, where they will be reborn next, and all sorts of other details. You will naturally be able to see this without having to sit in meditation, because by this stage you will always be in samadhi. Only now you will have this capability to understand the destiny of beings in every direction.

According to various classification schemes, we can say there are twelve different types of sentient beings, or six realms of beings, or nine different types of sentient beings, or sentient beings in ten directions, but these are all just different ways of classifying the same group. The

point is that you will be able to observe all the different types of sentient beings throughout the cosmos in each and every realm when you reach the cultivation stage of the volition skandha.

You will also be able to see past lives as well, but your knowledge of these lives will still be limited because you will not have reached full enlightenment. So while it is said that an Arhat will be able to see 80,000 eons into the past, which is an incredibly long amount of time, in fact a fully enlightened Buddha has limitless omniscient vision. That is why Shakyamuni Buddha could accurately speak of events thousands of eons in the past or future.

There is a famous story that illustrates this. At one time a man wished to join the Shakyamuni's Buddhist order in ancient India, but the admissions monk refused because in surveying the man's past with his supernatural vision, the monk came to the conclusion that this aspirant had no karmic connection with the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha admitted the man, however, and told the monk that while he could see 80,000 eons in the past, his vision was still limited.

Buddha reported that in the 80,001st prior eon, the man in question had been a dog. One day during this time, this dog had gone out to eat some excrement and had gotten some on his tail. Close by, something fell which frightened the dog, and the dog started to run. After the dog stopped running, he came upon the stupa of an Arhat who had died, and started to take a pee. Unwittingly, the dog started wagging his tail and flung some excrement on the stupa.

This was actually the stupa of Shakyamuni's remains in that past eon, and because of this affair, Shakyamuni claimed it was enough of a connection to join the order. Excrement may be nothing to us, but to a dog this is fragrant food, and in unthinkingly flinging it upon the stupa, the dog—which was now the man—had in effect made an offering "while not dwelling in form." Thus, he gained immeasurable merit in that Shakyamuni permitted him to become a monk.

Under Shakyamuni's tutelage, this man even reached the enlightenment stage of an Arhat, which just goes to prove that the Arhat monk who wanted to refuse him admission, even though he was gifted with the Arhat's supernormal abilities to see into past karma, had been wrong! We can also learn from this story that when we recite the name of any particular Buddha even once with respect, such as the various Buddhas whose names may only appear once or twice in all the sutras, this is establishing an equivalent auspicious connection, and is something we encourage you to do. This is setting up the potential to meet those Buddhas and receive their teachings in the future, for this is how karma works. Even if you belong to a different religion and recite the Buddha's name only three times, this is enough of a connection for receiving pure spiritual teachings. How can this possibly hurt you?

Anyway, in reaching the domain of the volition skandha you can see far into the past, but you cannot yet entirely understand all the causes associated with sentient beings and their existence. What you can understand is that behind all life is one fundamental energy source, and that

common energy source is always moving about like twirling smoke, which we can describe as a wavering heat haze.

In a way, we can compare this force to an atomic bomb because of its great potential power. Before it explodes, an atom bomb is just an unimpressive, silent piece of equipment that sits in stillness. However, after it explodes, it is very powerful with seemingly limitless potential—everything is there—form, sound, everything! The force of life has a certain shimmering quality to it and might not seem very impressive, but this force is incredibly, tremendously powerful just like an atom bomb. It sucks us into the road of transmigration, and if you do not spiritually cultivate, there is no way to control it. You can only control it when you learn to become the master.

Chuang Tzu described this force of life using the analogy of "a wild horse." Normally, people read Chuang Tzu's essays and think he is talking about an ordinary wild horse which has four legs and eats grass, but this was the best literary phrase he could come up with for describing this wavering force of life. Why did Chuang Tzu use this simile? Because a wild horse is a powerful creature which runs everywhere without control. It always moves this way and that, just like the forces within the skandha of volition. A wild horse is like dust or smoke in that it can twist or turn and move anywhere. Fang Yung of Ching He, who was the court minister who edited the Chinese translation of the *Surangama Sutra*, admired Chuang Tzu's writings, and so he polished his editing of the *Surangama Sutra* using terms that Chuang Tzu liked to use.

From this discussion we can know that the force of life is something we can see after we reach a certain stage of cultivation, namely the entrance into cultivating the volition skandha. As can be recalled, "life force" is one of the "factors not associated with mind" found within the volition aggregate, so Vasubandhu's explanation of the skandhas was actually referring to the stages of meditation as well. Anyway, this life force is seen as a shimmering movement and is the fundamental mechanism behind all our senses, body parts, and so on.

This fundamental shimmering force gives off a faint kind of light and if it can settle in a state where it is serene and calm, like an ocean which is clear without waves, you can break free of the volition skandha and become free of the force of reincarnation. The *Surangama Sutra* says,

> If these mirage-like disturbances of our purity are allowed to revert to their original nature, and this original nature is allowed to revert to its original purity, then with the purification of our habits, they become like the passing of ripples that leave behind clear water. This then may be called the cessation of the skandha of volition. In this way a man may transcend the defilements that afflict living things during the kalpa of impurity. If we examine the origin of these defilements, the root cause is erroneous thinking.

In other words, this pure but chaotically shining aspect of the original nature can eventually settle

to reveal its original clarity. The life force is always there, like electricity in the air, but normally we cannot see it. When we arrive at the volition skandha, we can see this force fluttering about and if we detach from it, it will settle to resume its original nature.

Now, think about this for a moment. If you have to let the life force settle, does not this mean you have to let your chi settle? If that is the case, how can playing with the chi and mai, as done in the Esoteric schools, possibly be a fundamentally correct cultivation path? Pacification comes not through suppression, but by letting everything die down by refusing to give anything energy. We can therefore see that if you just detach from everything without interjecting any effort, in time you can reach the Tao.

Consider the life force once again and answer the question, what is its original nature? The *Surangama Sutra* already told us that the true nature of wind is emptiness, the true nature of water is emptiness, the true nature of fire is emptiness, the true nature of the earth element is emptiness. You must therefore realize the inherent emptiness of even this force, the force of life. Once this force settles to its original state, it is like water changing from cloudy to clear after the waves die down. Thus, we can compare this state to still water because the waves of change no longer arise. Two poems from the Zen school refer to this state:

> The night is still as are the 30,000 miles of ocean waves;
> The moon is bright in the sky, under the staff of the heavenly wind.
>
> Lake Tai-hu stretches 36,000 acres;
> Whom can I tell about the moon in the mind wave?

These poems describe exhausting the skandha of volition and arriving at the realm of consciousness only, whereby an individual can transcend the defilements of sentient beings. Reaching this stage, you will be liberated from the defilement of transmigration and will only reincarnate on earth again if you make a vow, like the great Bodhisattvas, to come back and save others.

Buddha, however, is somewhat vague when he comes to this point, and does not give too many details or explanations. All he says is that the root of the volition skandha is hidden false thinking of limitless depth. It is so deep and hidden that it generates unknowable thoughts. Hence, false thinking is responsible for all sorts of manifestations: solidified false thinking forms the basis of the form aggregate, illusory false thinking forms the basis of the sensation aggregate, comprehensive false thinking forms the basis of the conception aggregate, and hidden false thinking forms the basis of the volition aggregate.

From a physical point of view, the fundamental force of the volition skandha is related to the *jen niao*, or diencephalon area of the brain (composed of the hypothalamus, epithalamus and

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thalamus regions), so cultivating through the mental realm of this skandha will in some ways involve transformations of the brain. That is another reason that we say that the human roots of life are in the head. In contrast, consider that plants have their roots in the ground. While the roots of plants extend themselves into the ground, however, once we master cultivation, the nerves of our head are like antennae that extend into endless space, and our nourishment comes from emptiness.

In cultivating through the skandha of volition, there are once again ten outside paths where a cultivator can go astray, but you should not be afraid of these paths. If you have real kung-fu and wisdom, these mara states of delusion will not even arise. Nonetheless, in regards to the experiential realms which can arise and lead one astray, Buddha always warned practitioners:

> If you do not take this [experiential realm] as the thing you are after, then you are correct. Then you have the correct view. If you take this as what you are after [the Tao], then this is an outside path.

The *Diamond Sutra* also reminds us that whatever has form is illusory, but if you can see every scenario as unreal, then you can see the true self and be free of cultivation errors. If you lack an enlightened master, this is the way to guide yourself through the various realms you might experience; everything is dreamlike, and appearances are ultimately empty of true reality.

When we say that you are no longer constrained by the five skandhas, we must remember that *there is nothing to exit from the start*. As the *Heart Sutra* says, originally the five skandhas are all empty; they are equivalent to emptiness and no different from emptiness. Essentially they are all empty—they are all illusive constructions of the mind which we can say exist (from a conventional standpoint) and yet do not exist (from the ultimate standpoint). So it is our mental habit of clinging which is wrong.

Buddha once said: "Ananda, knowing the arising of falsity, we speak of falsity's causes and conditions. Since falsity is originally nonexistent, when we speak of falsity's causes and conditions, these are originally entirely nonexistent." Here we have the same principle: you can say falsity exists and you can say that it does not exist. This is the case with all five skandhas.

Therefore, the only thing that actually happens during cultivation is a process of detachment, or transformation. You do not get rid of fundamental ignorance, you just transform it. For instance, in cultivating the alaya consciousness you must transform its seeds into wisdom. You cultivate so as to produce a revolution in the basis of the alaya, but not to destroy it. There is no Fourth Realm to go to, so how you deal with the realm of false existence (the Three Realms) is what matters, and this is the factor of great functioning applied to transforming the world. Hopefully, by this stage of cultivation you will vow to become a Buddha or Bodhisattva who decides to devote themselves to compassionately helping others, because if you do not, you cannot call any

spiritual attainment a complete enlightenment if it refuses to embrace the realm of form.

Thus, when we say "jump out of" or "break through" or "purify" or "exhaust" the skandhas, this is simply a terminology of convenience. In particular, when we free ourselves from the skandha of volition, it is like letting a working machine wind down and stop. The machine actually keeps turning even when it has "stopped," but this turning is very, very slow. It is just too slow to notice. Then again, we can say it is turning very, very fast—so fast you cannot notice it like the blinking of a strobe light—but this is something hard to explain.

The strobe light, which is blinking very fast and yet appears to be blinking slowly, is a wonderful analogy to use for this situation. Another example of this principle is the fact that the earth is spinning at an incredible rate on its axis, and rushing through space at an incredible speed in its orbit around the sun, and yet we experience very little evidence of this fantastic motion at all. When you come to the realm of the volition skandha you can understand this, but for now you can only hear about the principle.

When you finally become liberated from the volition skandha, the volitional force that you previously could not see clearly turns out to be karma. As you progress through the skandha of volition, suddenly your experiential realm will seem to explode, and you will surmount the constraints of it to become united with the void.

As Buddha reports:

> Ananda, as the disciples practice samadhi and the skandha of volition comes to an end, within the nature of all things in the world the subtle perturbation in the perfect purity that is the common life force shared by all living things suddenly breaks open. At this point, the fine fabric of samsara, together with the deep thread of pudgala karma and feeling and response, are all radically suspended. Now they have reached the threshold of the great enlightenment to nirvana, like the cock's crow that causes us to gaze to the east where brilliant rays already appear. The six senses are empty and still and no longer galloping abroad. Within and without are perfect clarity, and one enters a state were nothing stains our consciousness. Profoundly penetrating the origin of life of the twelve classes of living things in the ten directions, they can contemplate the source of their attachment without feeling any attraction themselves. Now they have already achieved an identity with all things in the universe; daylight dawns and all secrets are revealed. This is called 'the realm of the skandha of consciousness.' In the midst of the world's attraction they are able to preserve their consciousness of identity, for they have overcome the six senses, which now function separately when activated or revert to unity when not in use; hearing and seeing have become interchangeable in their purity. The world of the ten directions, together with their body and mind are like glass, which is perfectly transparent within and without. This is called 'the end of the skandha of consciousness.' In this way the practitioner can transcend the defilements of life and contemplate the source of impurity, which arises from insubstantial imaginings and foolish thoughts.

The force of volition is like a long nail hammered so deep into wood that it is difficult to remove. This is because the force of impulses and volitions are associated with our concept of an inherent ego, and with subsequent attachments that arise as the six senses combine with the eight consciousnesses and revolve around the idea of a self. Because of dependent arising, karmic forces will always reappear in the universe, forcing you to pay off all your debts when conditions are right, so karma is like a hidden fine net that spans across all the planes of existence. The threads of this net are so fine that it is difficult to get a good understanding of the matter until you are finally cultivating to purify the skandha of volition.

If we practice meditation but cannot let go of our thoughts, we will have to reincarnate again and again because this force is like a powerful magnetic field so strong that no piece of iron can escape its pull. Karma is so strong that it helps forge the false views of an ego that continually trap us in the skandhas.

The New Age schools try to paint a rosy picture and put a sugar coating on this scenario by saying we choose the life that we live each time before we are born, but in actual fact, it is karma that determines everything. The karmic force behind rebirth determines the life we are born to experience and all the situations we are to encounter. There is nothing we can do about it unless we have the power of cultivation behind us enabling us to transform things as we wish, but still within karmic bounds. Only an enlightened master has the real power to choose how and where he goes. You can say that we choose our karma in that we are the ones who make it and therefore are the authors of our fates, but that is about all you can honestly say.

We simply come into life to work out whatever it is we have merited from our past lives, and which karma causes to manifest due to actions performed in the past and those performed in the present. That is also why you can change karma—because you can act in this life to change the fate you have created. You are the author of your fate, so Buddhism and the Zen school say you can change its outcome if you cultivate wisdom, discipline and merit so as to apply them to your current circumstances.

Because you have infinite past lives, you cannot say that what you experience in this life is due to one previous life only. Rather, a little bit of karma taken from many previous lives works to shape this life, and whatever is due to return to you from any of these past lives can only do so in this one if circumstances are meet. With karma from all these past lives jockeying to manifest, what appears in this life is due to the proper timing and circumstances coming together.

You can only experience so much in one life, and only what conditions allow. Therefore your karma in life will sometimes be good and sometimes bad—you can never be hit with everything at once. We are the ones who determine the shape of our fate because what appears in our life is entirely due to our own previous actions. Since we are the ones responsible for the causes that create our karmic returns and recompense, then from another sense we can say that we choose

the life that we live. The outcome may not be what we have imagined, but by our past actions and by the laws of karma, we are the ones who have produced it!

When you are free of the skandha of volition, however, you will no longer be as constrained by karmic force as you were before, for now you will know how to transform matters to your liking. However, if your kung-fu is not high enough, you still will not be able to escape rebirth, and there is nothing you will be able to do about it unless you cultivate further.

THE SKANDHA OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Once you are finally free of the pull of the skandha of volition, you will be cultivating the ground of the skandha of consciousness and can then start to comprehend nirvana and your true self-nature. As the *Surangama Sutra* says, you will "turn towards the sky of nirvana." Inside and outside you will be profoundly clear and illuminated, and you will completely comprehend the original source from which all beings in the universe receive life. You will find what is common to all sentient beings, which is the realm of the skandha of consciousness.

In the *Surangama Sutra*, Buddha gave an example to explain how to proceed from the volition skandha to start cultivating the consciousness aggregate. At this point you are almost at nirvana, and the light of wisdom which can experience the true self is ready to burst forth very soon. The situation is similar to a rooster calling in the early morning to announce the coming dawn. When the cock crows, it means that daytime will come very soon, and the sky will be bright in the East. Thus, when you reach the realm of the skandha of consciousness, you are near to complete enlightenment, but not there quite yet.

When you reach the skandha of consciousness, your six senses will all be void and calm, and this stage of emptiness will no longer disappear. You will still, of course, have the perception of the outside world and be aware of everything, but you will not need to say, "I want to go into samadhi" because you will always be in samadhi. This is why the Mahayana path has you cultivating practice in the world, and if we retrace our steps a bit, you can realize that keeping the eyes open a little during meditation is also a form of preparation for this stage.

Inside and outside your mind, you will see everything as clear as crystal when you reach the skandha of consciousness; your senses will still function but you will not mentally attach to what they perceive nor to the few thoughts that arise in your mind. Thus, you will still able to hear and see everything, but it will be as if you are not using the senses at all, for you will no longer cling to them. Any mental stickiness will be gone, and the senses will operate wholly without clinging.

When you finally reach the consciousness skandha through your cultivation efforts, you will be able to fully understand and comprehend the sentient beings in every direction of the universe, and know their common root source of life. Therefore, you will be able to understand why

people are reincarnated as dogs, men, cows, birds, kings, beggars, asuras, heaven or hell denizens and so forth.

As to yourself, if you no longer want to reincarnate in the world, you will not have to incarnate here again because now you will be totally free of the volition skandha, and the incredible magnetic power of this skandha will no longer be able to suck you into birth and death. You therefore need not react to the strong attractive force of rebirth which is always present due to the net of interdependent origination we call karma. At this point you must remember what Shakyamuni Buddha ultimately awakened to upon his enlightenment: the union of emptiness and interdependent origination.

When you reach the realm of the consciousness skandha, you will also be able to see all the dharma worlds in every direction, and need no longer pay any attention to the form, feeling, sensation, or even volition skandhas, for they will already be calmed down. You will discover that everything is mind-only, and that any moving thought will lead to its manifestation. Thus, you will know the secret associated with life, and you will know the fantastic power of the mind from having cultivated to this level. And yet, even though you can know all these things, you will still not be at the stage of complete and perfect enlightenment because you will not have transformed this skandha completely.

Naturally, there are also ten outside cultivation paths where one can go wrong at this stage, and thereby miss enlightenment completely because of clinging, ignorance or misunderstanding. For each of the previous four skandhas, Buddha enumerated ten different delusions by which one could go astray in their cultivation efforts, but at this point he switches terminology and talks of "outside paths." After explaining each group of ten delusive paths one could succumb to, Buddha would usually say something like:

> The above are the subtle states of mara discerned by past Buddhas while abiding in vipasyana [contemplation insight] as they practised passionless shamatha [cessation]. If you are familiar with these mara states beforehand, you will be able to keep your minds free of defilement. In this way you will not fall into unorthodox views, the maras of the five aggregates will be swept away, the heavenly demons will be crushed, the powerful ghosts and spirits will take fright and run away, the spirits of the rivers and hills will no longer come to trouble you, and you will achieve complete Bodhi without the slightest deficiency. Even beginning from the most unenlightened state, you can progress to Nirvana and no longer suffer delusion and perplexity.

Or he would say something like,

> Ananda, the above ten states associated with the practice of dhyana all arise from the interaction of the ... aggregate ... with the meditator's mind. When these reactions manifest, deluded practisers do not reflect on them, nor are they able to understand their causes. They claim they have attained

> sainthood and falsely proclaim their enlightenment. By so doing, they break the prohibition against lying and fall into eternal hells. After my nirvana, you must transmit this teaching in the Dharma ending age so that all living beings may awaken to this message. Hence, do not allow the heavenly mara demons to take advantage of such states, but be on your guard as you strive to realize the Supreme Tao.

In the consciousness skandha, even Arhats and pratyeka-buddhas are considered followers of these ten outside paths, for their title as an "Arhat" or "pratyeka-buddha" shows they fall outside the gate of true enlightenment, which is complete and perfect Buddhahood. Because of their mode of practice, they prefer the emptiness side of true Reality and reject the existence side of reality, so they are not completely free of the tie of subtle habits. Hence, they do not penetrate through to realize the authentic fruit of enlightenment.

For all beings there is only one thing—the fundamental true self-nature—but to completely realize our common, original face you must first purify your mind by rising through the various ranks of samadhi in training. Cultivating samadhi can be compared to the process of dust settling in a glass of water. As you make progress in meditation and stop clinging to your thoughts, they will eventually disappear just as the dust in dirty water will eventually settle when you stop shaking the water and leave it alone. That is when you will experience the peaceful state of samadhi, which is a clarity or concentration empty of agitation by coarse thoughts.

We can therefore say that when your thoughts settle, with merit and cultivation practice you will attain samadhi and prajna wisdom, and with prajna transcendental wisdom you will be able to slice through all the barriers to Tao. Practicing and practicing, you will finally attain to the task of purifying the consciousness skandha itself wherein you will realize in full measure that all beings share one thing in common.

Ordinary people call it the alaya, but enlightened people call it the Tathagata storehouse because they transform the alaya consciousness. When you finally purify the consciousness skandha and overcome it, then as Buddha explains:

> When the skandha of consciousness is overcome, then all of your senses are coordinated, and you can enter the first stage of the indestructible wisdom of the bodhisattva, whose perfect and clear mind is transformed into pure crystal, containing a precious moon within. In this way you transcend the ten stages of bodhisattva faith, the ten stages of unfertilized wisdom, the ten necessary actions, the ten commitments, the four good roots of development, and all the ten stages of the bodhisattva's fifty-two stages of progress to Buddhahood, omniscience, and perfect clarity to enter the Tathagata's magnificent sea of perfect and complete bodhi and revert to the state to which nothing can be added.

In ordinary people, the six consciousnesses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and

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mind all function separately. When you have finally cultivated the realm of the consciousness skandha, which embodies the root source of consciousness, then the sense consciousnesses are no longer separate but become unified because you reach the mother root of consciousness. Therefore, the ear can see, the eye can smell and so on; all the sense consciousnesses become unified into one. Your seeing and hearing will permeate what is around you, and can function interchangeably with perfect clarity.

To be clear, Buddha said that there are some beings that can see without eyes or hear without ears, so there are some beings whose physical structure and makeup also permits this. At this stage, however, we are talking about an omniscient field of unified consciousness that spans the Three Realms and can interchangeably function through any of the separate, isolated sense consciousnesses.

You can call this a supreme superpower if you would like, but it is not really a superpower at all. In fact, the best way to describe it is to say that everything is "open." The only way to describe it, and imperfectly at that, is that you do not need to move your ear to hear, for you already heard; you need not move your eyes to see, for you already saw. The whole dharma world in every direction, along with your body and mind, is transparent and crystal clear inside and out. It is like a crystal clear sphere, with everything fused into one whole, suffused with light and without any obstructions or imperfections.

This is the end of the realm of the consciousness skandha. At this point you can transcend the defilements of life because you can finish with the root of life in the Three Realms of Desire, Form and Formlessness.

The Five Pollutions and the Skandhas

Until cultivating through the consciousness skandha, you cannot totally escape from the defilement (pollution or turbidity) of life. For instance, in escaping from the form skandha, you can become free of the defilement of time (kalpa). Breaking free from the skandha of sensation, you free yourself from the defilement of views. Breaking free from the skandha of conception, you can free yourself from the defilement of worries and afflictions.

Breaking free from the volition skandha, you can escape the defilement of sentient beings, and breaking free from consciousness skandha, you can escape the defilement of birth. Why can you escape from the defilement of birth? Because everything that takes birth is born from consciousness. Even earth, wind, water, and fire are ultimately born from consciousness. If you can escape or detach from consciousness, however, then you can free yourself from these defilements.

This world is full of the five pollutions, or turbidities. The form skandha suffers the defilement of

time because war, pestilence, sickness, and famine arise as time goes by, which causes form to suffer decay. In addition, as time progresses our vitality decreases, life loses its savor, and it gets harder to do things. These are all manifestations of the defilement of time.

The sensation skandha is polluted because wrong views (deviant, erroneous, and bad ideas, etc.) arise to color our emotions and sensations. Thus, even when we spiritually cultivate, we tend to become lax in our cultivation practice because we adopt incorrect views that lead us astray.

The skandha of conception is polluted with the irritation of afflictions and the defilement of evil passions. Hence, we always seem troubled and are never happy; we are always suffering from some type of mental instability because of the pollutions defiling the conception skandha.

The volition skandha is polluted because of the unceasing turning of transmigration, because people reject moral laws and thereby suffer from the law of causality, and because our bodies and minds are weak and increasingly subject to illnesses and pains.

As to the consciousness skandha, it is polluted because man's life span is short, his life force continually grows weaker, and because his birth involves semen, genes, and other dirty things. In a sense we can say that Padmasambhava, who was born out of a flower, was free of this fifth pollution of birth, but does this necessarily mean he was enlightened? No, not at all. All we can say was that he was free of the pollution of normal birth.

The Tao school has a beautiful statement that is appropriate to this topic:

> Disbursement (of the body) results in chi;
> Massing together again you have form.

This is just a way of saying that you do not need to employ all these dirty pollutants to be born. When you need a form, a thought will instantly produce the shape that you want—the phenomenon of birth can be just this clean and beautiful. Then again, it can be just this ugly.

Complete Cultivation

The Arhats and pratyeka-buddhas see human existence only as something dirty to be avoided, and so after their enlightenment they do not want to return to this world again to help other beings. They are afraid of the pollution of birth and transmigration. They do not see life as the aspect of marvelous, wondrous existence that it is. But if you take birth in this realm, then you can do whatever you set out to do and accomplish great vows of merit to help others.

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This is why Buddhism has two great schools—one that talks about ultimate existence, and one that talks about ultimate emptiness. You cannot say that the universe is either existing or nonexisting, so you cannot hold to either extreme. But you do need to cultivate emptiness, to concentrate on the emptiness aspect to reach Tao, for you must free yourself from the habit of mentally clinging to form to reach its fundamental true substrate.

Even the existence spiritual schools depend upon emptiness for their process of spiritual cultivation, because there is no other way to properly cultivate spiritual practice. After mastering emptiness all the way to the end, however, you still have to cultivate existence. For instance, you have to cultivate this physical body and attain the nirmanakaya and sambhogakaya bodies, because to attain the dharmakaya and call it quits is not enough. You must complete the whole thing without leaving anything out, without bypassing any remainder. After you attain enlightenment, you have to cultivate your functioning and appearance capabilities in the realm of form.

When you awaken to full enlightenment by fully detaching from all form and appearances, you have really completed a full circle, because the realm of mundane existence will always still abide. This conventional existence is empty, and yet this empty mundane existence of interconnected empty functioning still exists! Therefore, you cannot just say everything is empty and turn your back on the world, because you still have conventional form and behavior to deal with. The world of phenomena, false as it may be, is still characterized by interdependent origination and behavior, or functioning, and will always produce karmic recompense. This may all be empty, but it is there nonetheless, so now you have to learn how to master it.

Even the Buddhas cannot escape from karmic returns, for that is how the universe works—there is no way free of the dependent arising nature of the realm of phenomenal form. Even if you become an Arhat and can thereby escape the Three Realms for 84,000 eons, if your cultivation is incomplete you will have to return sooner or later, so you might as well complete the whole thing. Hence we say that achieving enlightenment entails one full complete circle because behavior is the start of the cultivation path, the process of the path, the end of the path, and the objective or meaning of the path. To describe this interdependence, all we can say is that the way (behavior) and the path are fused into one.

With good behavior and by cultivating virtue, cause and effect will cause you to accumulate merit so as to make progress on the spiritual path, and this merit in turn becomes a type of wealth which you can use to help others in the world, too. Hence, the path of cultivation is indeed one big circle that starts and ends with behavior. Everything is empty, but from another aspect existence is not empty. Understanding matters from the advantage of awakening, you cannot say that Tao is either existent or nonexistent. It is empty and yet it functions; functioning it is empty. There is no Fourth Realm to go to, so where can you abandon the importance of behavior in all this? Once enlightened, you still have to master great functioning throughout the Three Realms.

The fundamental cause behind consciousness in this loop is a force that you cannot see. The aggregate of consciousness is actually "the dust of the dharma." Buddha says that the causes of the consciousness skandha include "apparitions, empty nothingness, delusions and false thoughts." Thus, consciousness itself is ultimately due to false thoughts, due to confusion, or what we call upside-down thinking: it is due to taking black as white and white as black, taking falsehood as truth and truth as falsehood.

This is one reason why the Mind-only school of Yogacara says that in the realm of consciousness, we confuse the false for the true and the true for the false; we take the realm of ignorance for the Real, and turn our back on our real fundamental nature. The very reason we have the skandha of consciousness is because we take the wrong thing as the right thing, for this skandha itself is actually empty, though we take it for the underlying true reality. That mistaken use of awareness is the origin of the consciousness skandha, which is the root skandha of all the others.

Cultivation is a way to recapture our inherent original purity, but in this world of five pollutions, many people delve into mystical superstition or inflexible religious formalism and actually get more polluted rather than purified. Instead of becoming clearer, they get worse because of how they take religion. A cultivator who can break through the consciousness skandha, however, can finally reach the enlightened realm of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas and be free of all these errors and know how things really stand.

Transmitting the Enlightenment Teachings

To help those people who really desire this, what we have gone over throughout this book is the gradual path of spiritual attainment. Buddha told Ananda in the *Surangama Sutra* that after receiving all these teachings, practitioners should develop a vow to master them, to free themselves from the five skandhas, and transmit these teachings to later generations. In that way, the people of the future would be able to gain access to the true cultivation teachings, and could avoid dropping into wrong spiritual ways.

Of course, that is exactly the problem we have today. Science is going one way, psychology goes another, religion is headed in yet another direction, and thousands of crazy spiritual schools and cultivation sects are popping up everywhere without an inherent road of practice or clear understanding of the basis behind it all. By studying the principles embedded within the *Surangama Sutra*, however, you will be able to avoid many of the spiritual errors that can arise on the pathway to God, or Tao or however you wish to call the supreme objective. Then, in turn, you will be able to properly protect other people from going astray, help them abandon their bad thoughts and nonvirtuous ways, and guide them onto the correct path of cultivation practice from the very start.

The reason that Buddha transmitted this sutra and all its detailed contents is purely because of his

desire to help. As Buddha said, "All creatures are my companions," and "The people and I are from the same womb." Because of his great mind of compassion, Shakyamuni Buddha announced in the *Lotus Sutra*:

> All the Buddhas want to enable sentient beings to open up their enlightened perception, and make it pure and clean, and so they appear in the world. They want to show sentient beings the perception of the Buddhas, and so they appear in the world. They want sentient beings to awaken to the perception of the Buddhas, and so they appear in the world. They want to enable sentient beings to enter into enlightened perception, and so they appear in the world.

Shakyamuni repeated this message once again in the *Surangama Sutra*, where he asked us to help:

> Protect sentient beings, nurture them, pity them, rescue them. Wipe out the causal factors of evil, and enable their bodies and minds to enter into the knowledge of the Buddhas, so that from the beginning of the Path to its consummation, they will encounter no divergent roads.

The Tao of enlightenment, our original true nature, is the fundamental truth or our fundamental self. It is what we call God, or the bedrock of our being. Enlightenment is what we really are, and we need only awaken to this fact by spiritually cultivating and abandoning delusions.

This awakening of enlightenment is not an intellectual realization, for it is an experiential perception arrived at after you finally break through the skandhas by learning detachment from mental ignorance. As to the various samadhi you can encounter on this spiritual path, they must be considered only training stations along the way to this one great objective. But the final objective is to realize the Tao, our fundamental original nature.

Esoteric Buddhism uses two terms to describe this fundamental nature: Mahamudra and the Great Perfection. The true self, the original state, is pure and perfect and real. We cannot describe it with words because we would run out of them—it is wondrously indescribable. The best we can do to indicate *This One* is to borrow a line from the *Heart Sutra*: "It has no beginning nor ending, it is not increasing nor decreasing, it is not pure nor impure."

The Creation of Consciousness and the World

In this very original state, there is no life or death, no coming or going, no creation or destruction. There is neither the slightest stain nor pollution. There is no Father, Son or Holy Ghost. Originally, all beings are in this state of perfect purity without stain or confusion, without any signs of birth and death, and they never move from this state. The reason we have all these turbidities now is because we are not in tune with the source, and view these things from a topsy-turvy untruthful level. Actually, all these pollutions are not really there. They are not truly

existent. Only the Tao is at this moment existent. It is through the falsity of thoughts that we have these other things, and if we learn how to drop the habit of attaching to false thoughts, they will disappear.

Everything springs from false thinking, everything is created by the thoughts of beings, and so the pollutions screening our original nature emerge with thought attachments. Thoughts themselves are not wrong, because they are empty and do not stay, but holding onto them is wrong. The fundamental nature is originally immaculate, peaceful and calm, but when thoughts move, the material world is formed, and yet that material world is an empty world, a world of ignorance that is not truly real. Thus, we can say that the world emerges because of false states of mind, which is just how the consciousness skandha is formed. But how does mind and consciousness generate the material world? Science will study this for centuries, but it will never know.

A Buddhist story, however, gives us the answer. Once there was an individual by the name of Yajnadatta who loved looking at himself in the mirror. Yajnadatta became transfixed with his appearance, and began to believe he was so handsome that he actually fell in love with himself. The ancient Greeks told a similar myth in the story of Narcissus. One day he looked in his mirror and thought he could not see his head, and went crazy. Sometime later he looked again and could see himself again, and so was cured of his temporary madness.

This story tells us that for all beings, what we see in the outside world is just a reflection of our own true nature. If we become transfixed and fall in love with this so as to become deeply involved in clinging and attachment, we will "lose our head" and forget our true self. This wrong use of awareness makes us become topsy-turvy upside-down crazy. Once we return to our true self, however, then all will be well once again.

The truth is actually in ourselves, but we keep looking for it elsewhere. We keep looking for it in "outside paths," which are paths outside the mind. We keep doing dharma practice, cultivation and so on—we keep looking in externals for this ultimate thing without recognizing that it is already here in us and has always been here.

In the same way Yajnadatta became confused and could not find his own head, people become confused and spend their time looking to experience chi and chakras and kundalini when what they are really seeking is already obtainable just by letting go of thoughts, and using the mind correctly. There is no need to go looking for enlightenment in externals, and yet we continually do silly things like this. Thus, we never get any closer to the absolute nature, but continually cover it over.

All things in existence are created by movements of the mind, just as Yajnadatta's mistake was a mistake of the mind. You think this world actually exists—just as Yajnadatta thought he had no head—but it is actually created by the movement of the mind. When you can realize this by

seeing its true emptiness, this is the point when you reach past the skandha of consciousness.

This illusive world is unreal and of mind only. It is transitory and without substance, holding nothing that can be grasped. If a man gains insight into that ultimate one which is free of thoughts, however, then he will know how the thoughts which characterize the mind will arise, transform and cease to be. He will know this because he will be identical with that ultimate nature, and be free of the transient Tripe Realm of birth and death. In attaining enlightenment, it is really enlightenment resuming its own essence, awakening to its own unmoving nature.

The important question is, why did your thoughts originally come forth in the first place? The answer is: *there is no reason at all*. That is the way it is; that is what it is supposed to be like. There was no mistake at all—that is just the nature of it. Fundamentally, falsehood has no cause but false thinking sets it up. Primordial ignorance and True Suchness are perfectly interdependent from the beginning, and that is okay. It is just the way it is. Where error comes in is how we use our Mind of awareness, for incorrect usage can entail losing the pure experience of our true nature.

The Buddha is called the "Tathagata" because he comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. At every moment he is one with the essential nature, so where is there any coming and going? It only *seems* as if he is coming or going because there is the realm of phenomena, but that realm passes by while *It* stays. Falsity being false, it can exist in the realm of the Real precisely because it is false and thus, empty. Being false it is empty, and being empty it does not matter since it does not conflict with the real or obstruct it. This nonexistence does not conflict with the unchangingness of true existence, which is why it can exist. If you ask where the original cause of falsity lies, all you need realize is that falsity does not inherently exist, and being unborn we do not need to discuss it. Falsity is unproduced.

As to the origin of things, we already explained it. False thoughts give rise to the worlds of sentient beings, which means *these worlds are subordinate parts brought about by transformations of the capabilities of mind.* Falsity originally has no basis, but the identities of cause and effect are established in the midst of false thoughts. If you look for a reason behind this, we can give it a name and call it karma, but we give it a name only because you keep looking for something, as even karma is ultimately empty of reality. For instance, sometimes in this world you have a problem and go to a psychiatrist where you end up blaming your parents, your family, your environment or your upbringing. None of these reasons are real, they are all just false thoughts, but you sought out a reason, and this is what you come to. In talking about karma and independent origination, or dependent arising in the realm of primordial ignorance, we have the same situation.

Where are thoughts from? From karma? If so, where is karma from? Actually karma itself also arises from emptiness, for nothing is ultimately there. That is why we call it *empty*,

interdependent origination. You cannot get rid of the realm of existence, and yet it is nonexistent because it is empty. Being empty of true existence, we can say it is unproduced. So how can we talk of its existence in the first place? Of course, we are also wrong if we affix to the emptiness side and do not recognize that empty displays seem to be there as long as they exist, even though we cannot grasp them. This, too, is also a type of wrong attachment. The Middle Way, the correct way, is not to get attached to either extreme but to simply function, and to function compassionately because while sentient beings do not truly exist, karmically we have a reality that needs help.

When you fully analyze the karma of a cup or the book in front of you, you know that they are also fundamentally empty. Thus, some people call everything "God-stuff" and say God created the whole thing. It is perfectly all right if you wish to use this terminology instead of "Tao," "enlightenment," "true nature," "fundamental Suchness," or even "self-realization." Call it "God," call it "Heaven," call it the "Supreme Principle," call it the "Absolute nature." Calling it "Tao" will do, "Allah" will do, "God-stuff" will do, "Tathagata" will do, "Nirvana" will do, and "fundamental face" will do also. Just do not personalize it by making it into a person or thing, for you should follow the Ten Commandments that say not to make any image of the divine.

Do not hold onto any thoughts which arise in the mind, and then you will be one with the Tao. You could use hundreds of different names for this great spiritual matter, but they will not change the fundamental essence at all. The empty nature of things is just the way the universe is; that is its anthropomorphic construction. Ultimately, there is no person or being or reason behind it. It is the way it is just because it is the way it is. That is its nature, and you will find no ultimate reason in the realm of dependent origination since everything is dependent upon everything else.

We keep looking for a reason, but there is no reason: that is the way it is. As to the purpose of life, it is what you choose it to be. It is what you select as your own personal Bodhisattva vows to be accomplished within this dream play. Your purposes are what you choose to accomplish, and in becoming the master you can accomplish them. You can accomplish anything because everything is born from emptiness, so what is it that you cannot ultimately bring about?

As to emptiness itself, with the appropriate karma, it too will appear. It is like getting light out of an electric bulb; only if you have the right conditions of bulb and electricity will you be able to produce some light, and so if the right conditions of karma arrive, you can realize emptiness even though the thought of emptiness is also an illusion. Emptiness just *is*.

Everything is created by karmic force, but everything is also fundamentally transitory, illusory, without substance or true existence. All things are fundamentally empty, but we keep analyzing and calculating matters hoping to find something real in the whole mess—some deterministic fixed atomic structure or energy flow or Star Trek "sub-space" upon which everything is grounded. In cultivation, however, we ask you to jump out of all this because you can never find

an ultimate answer this way … there is always something more even behind quantum foam. Cultivation asks you to jump out of all this dependent origination for even dependent origination is just a name—an empty construct.

Everything is empty. It is there, yet it is also illusory. The trick is to realize the fundamental essence which gives birth to false existence, and then learn how to master *all* of this false existence—the emptiness aspect and existence aspect. There is no place to go, so that is all there is to do. If you can do that and return to help others, then you are indeed a Buddha or Bodhisattva. If you do not choose to involve yourself with the "existence" aspect to help others, but wish to remain in the nirvana of inactivity after enlightenment, then you cannot merit these spiritual titles, but are simply an Arhat. It is only because you choose to help others after attaining enlightenment that we can call you a Buddha. Without that vow help you are no Buddha at all, but simply awakened to your inherent selflessness.

Buddha said to Ananda that when thoughts move, they first emerge due to ignorance, but fundamentally the Tao is still empty. The self-nature is pure from the beginning but primordially accompanied by ignorance, and being defiled by ignorance, a defiled state of mind (false thoughts) comes into being. Even though they are empty, false thoughts set up karma; therefore, karma is ultimately due to false thinking.

The fundamental nature, or original mind, has no marks of its own, so the conception of the entire world of objects can only be held based on man's deluded mind of ignorance. That is why all things are often compared to mirrored images that lack any solid objectivity—they are only the mind, and are unreal:

> The Buddha said to Ananda: "In the enlightened state there is no trace of birth and death, defilements, or even voidness, for these all arise from false thinking. It is from this primal enlightened mind that arises the illusion of the material world, just like Yajnadatta, who convinced himself that his real head was a mere shadow. Falsehood fundamentally is without cause, but its causality is produced by false thinking. Those who are confused by this consider it perfectly natural. Even voidness is in truth an illusion, how much more so causality and nature. All of these are examples of the skandha of volition functioning in the false minds of living things.
>
> Ananda, if you know from where false thinking arises, then you can speak of its cause. However, if there is no source of false thinking, then the source of the cause of false thinking does not exist. How much less when you do not know from whence it arises and regard it as spontaneous? For this reason the Tathagata must enlighten you to the fact that root cause of the five skandhas is in all cases false thinking.

As the *Diamond Sutra* said, form is not actually form, but is simply called form for convenience sake. Some people who do not know the fundamental emptiness of karma theorize that life came from spontaneous arising, but this is just a concept, too. For example, what is spontaneous

arising? Can you make a person out of empty space? Impossible—you still need men and women to produce a new life. You still need the interdependence of causes and conditions coming together. So you must ultimately understand neither karma nor emptiness are real. That is why Buddha said, "The origin of all the five skandhas is false thought. It is all illusory anyway." Hence, all the five skandhas are themselves created by illusory thought, by false thinking. *In fact, the secret basis of all five skandhas is false thought.*

Shakyamuni Buddha not only told us that all the skandhas are a production of false thought, but he also analyzed the boundaries of the five skandhas. He pointed out that emptiness is the boundary of the skandha of form; if you break out of the form skandha, you can attain some degree of emptiness. Contact establishes the borders of the feeling skandha, for when you can separate your mind from contact with sensations, you free yourself from the feeling domain. Memory and forgetfulness mark the boundaries of the conception skandha, while the volition skandha is defined through the limits of birth and death.

This is why you can escape the forces of reincarnation to some extent when you liberate yourself from the volition aggregate. But the birth and death of transmigration are just a physical affair. Real birth and death deals with how things arise out of the original nature and then disappear once again into quiescence. They arise and depart, and yet nothing changes at all. Knowing *That One* is to understand birth and death and fathom the borders of the volition skandha.

As to consciousness, it is the last skandha and the most difficult one to define. When an individual breaks through the compound of consciousness, they put an end to the deluded mind stream, fully realize the perfect dharmakaya (the essence of mind, or Truth Body), and their wisdom becomes genuine and pure. What an accomplishment this is! Those who accomplish this are truly the teachers of gods and men.

The original, true nature is so fundamentally clean, clear and pure that if you do not try to embellish your fundamental mind, you will always be in perfect tune with true reality. Relying on consciousness is one such embellishment, however, so attaching to consciousness will ultimately bring you out of the consciousness skandha. In other words, being perfectly clear and calm is the boundary of the consciousness skandha, for the original nature and fundamental source is also fundamentally pure and clear.

Thus, we can now see how the Zen school guides students with its attempts to directly enlighten, as there are no intercessors in the process. As Buddha said,

> Ananda, these five skandhas all arise from the five kinds of false thinking. If you wish to know the shallowness or depth of the causes and boundaries of the skandhas, form and voidness are the boundaries of the skandha of form; contact and separation are the boundaries of the skandha of sensation; memory and forgetfulness are the boundaries of the skandha of conception; destruction

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> and creation are the boundaries of the skandha of volition; entering in stillness and uniting with stillness are the boundaries of the skandha of consciousness. These five skandhas build one upon the other. They originate with the skandha of consciousness, but their elimination must begin with the skandha of form. In theory, they may all disappear with sudden enlightenment, but in reality it is not the work of an instant. Rather they are overcome gradually one by one in order.

The five skandhas are all generated from illusory thought, and so they are all interrelated. The five skandhas all relate to each other like the five elements in Chinese astrology which mutually generate and interact with one another. If we follow the main principle, however, we can understand that when the mind moves you have birth. Life emerges because of one thought; life (the beginning of anything) is created because of mind. That thought is born and then instantly dies, and the only problem comes in when we try to attach to it and invest it with a reality of which it is lacking, and which it will always lack. That is the case of attaching to fundamental ignorance, and losing our enlightened perception. As we wrote previously,

> All dharmas arise from the mind,
> All dharmas are extinguished by the mind.
> When the mind arises, all dharmas arise;
> When the mind is extinguished, all dharmas are extinguished.

The Cultivation Path of Gradually Exhausting the Skandhas

Therefore, on the cultivation path you first start working on the form skandha and try to extinguish the obstacles created by this barrier through cultivating emptiness. From first to last, mental emptiness cultivation is Thus, the fundamental means of spiritual cultivation no matter what spiritual school you follow. If you really have great wisdom prajna, once you understand emptiness you will no longer be confused or have doubts about the spiritual path and your cultivation will take the right direction.

Nevertheless, to get to the ultimate attainment and return to Buddhahood, you will still need to cultivate in a step-by-step, orderly fashion to attain that ultimate goal, and it all starts with cultivating through the skandha of form. Of course, some people might first be liberated from some other skandha (such as the volition or conception skandhas) due to their past life merits and prajna wisdom abilities, but the form aggregate is typically the first skandha one passes.

It is not easy to learn how to empty the mind, so sometimes you have to do it gradually, especially when your strength and ability do not empower you to cut off everything in one stroke. As with all things in life, most people tend to experience spiritual cultivation progress in stages although this is not absolutely necessary for those of great wisdom.

Initially on a spiritual path, you will usually seem to make a great deal of progress. This is like

doubling your funds when you start with only one dollar in your hand; going from one dollar to two is quite easy and constitutes a hundred percent increase in income, so the initial gains are quite large. However, since it is difficult to double ten million dollars to get twenty million dollars, spiritual progress seems to take longer and require more effort when you reach higher and higher levels of cultivation attainment. This is because the obstructions are subtler, and it requires more time and cultivation wisdom to free you from such subtle attachments.

Once there was a female student of the Wisdom Buddha Manjusri who understood all of the enlightenment teachings, who understood on a deep, experiential level that life and death were fundamentally empty. Even though she understood matters ever so clearly, whenever that force turned her she could not escape its grip, and asked Manjusri for the reason. Manjusri replied that it was because her power was not yet strong enough, so she had not cultivated enough to resist the forces of karma. She understood everything and had realization, but still needed to do some more cultivation work so that her power could mature and she could detach from impelling forces. You, too, might be able to understand all this material, but only with the accomplishment that comes from cultivation will you be able to put it into effect and prove the Tao. You must still wait for your power to mature, and that only comes from spiritual cultivation practice.

Life and existence are both due to the mind. If you want to extinguish their pull on you, you must start by cultivating through the realm of form. You must start by transforming the form aggregate. As much as you would like, you just cannot jump to the consciousness skandha immediately and presto, gain enlightenment, for there are too many obstacles you must first eliminate. Thus, the first changes in kung-fu you are likely to experience on the spiritual path will involve the chi and mai, but these are a long way from the end goal.

All sorts of physical body changes, superpowers and kung-fu can arise when you are cultivating the form and sensation skandhas, and we have gone over this previously. You can experience the transformation of jing to chi, chi to shen, your chakras spinning, the central channel opening, the blisses descending and the “empties” arising ... but they are not Tao at all. In fact, most all the good progress of spiritual cultivation comes when practitioners are working on transforming the later skandhas.

Therefore, do not be misled by the many people who attain some simple ranks of samadhi or superpowers and believe they have attained great stages of realization. As Buddha enumerated and described in the *Surangama Sutra* (see the appendix), there are at least fifty great ways in which one can go astray in cultivation, and

> Deluded and wayward cultivators do not know their own capabilities and cannot distinguish these states when they manifest. Thus, they wrongly declare that they have attained the holy rank.

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It is easy for another to cheat you if you are not informed, but it is even easier for you to cheat yourself when you succumb to self-inflation. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are the most humble of beings, so do not fall into this trap and deceive yourself into thinking that you are higher along the spiritual trail than you really are. Do not make this mistake, and become flippant when it comes to analyzing the various levels of spiritual attainment. Cultivation attainment itself requires the merit of heroes, and analyzing this attainment requires tremendous prajna wisdom. It is a supremely challenging affair.

For further reference, please see the complete translation in the appendix, done by Douglas Wile, of the fifty skandha demon paths. One can also reference:

The Surangama Sutra
Trans. by Lu K'uan Yu
B. I. Publications, Delhi, 1966.

The Shurangama Sutra: Volumes I-VIII
Trans. by Hsuan Hua and The Buddhist Text Translation Society
Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, California, 1977-1996.

The Fifty Skandha-Demon States
Hsuan Hua, trans. by The Buddhist Text Translation Society
Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, California, 1996.

To philosophically understand the interconnection between our fundamental nature and primordial ignorance, perhaps the clearest account (and a beautiful piece of literature as well) can be found in:

The Awakening of Faith
Asvaghosha, trans. by Yoshito S. Hakeda
Columbia University Press, New York, 1967.

Chapter 12: The Internal Principles of Cessation and Contemplation are Embodied within All Genuine Spiritual Practices

The Bodhisattva Maitreya's system of cultivation, as transmitted by Asanga and clarified by Vasubandhu, is the Mind-Only (Consciousness-Only) school of Vijnana, also known as the Yogacara school. This school is very important for any type of esoteric practice, especially for Tantra or Esoteric Buddhism, because its particular emphasis is on cultivating the human physical form (with its chakras, mai and kundalini). Hence, it sometimes focuses on the realm of existence rather than just emptiness. Every school of spiritual cultivation has its own philosophical basis, and the theoretical basis behind the various form schools can be found in the school of Yogacara.

It is said that the Esoteric school teachings were first developed by Nagarjuna, who was able to access Shakyamuni's esoteric teachings that were locked away in a stupa in southern India. As a result, the foundational origins of the Esoteric school of Buddhism actually predate the time of Buddha's death. Nevertheless, the Esoteric school today is very different from the method of cultivating realization that Shakyamuni Buddha taught when he was still in the world, and it is also very different from the teachings transmitted by Nagarjuna when he opened this stupa and created a pure esoteric path for cultivators.

When Shakyamuni originally left the world, his disciples divided into four different sects. The character of these divisions was very different than the divisions we see in political parties today. This differentiation arose because of specialized interests and different attractions toward particular cultivation methods rather than because of disagreements on the overall theory or teaching of cultivation science. As happens everywhere, those with similar interests, methods and levels of attainment naturally associated in like-minded groups that developed their own specialized vocabulary for easy communication. Thus, while four different groups developed, the fundamental principles of all four sects were exactly the same.

The highest of these original four schools was the School of Elders (Sthavivas), comprised of the students who had achieved the highest levels of cultivation attainment. This group consisted of the Arhats and others who had achieved enlightenment, including Mahakashyapa.

After Shakyamuni had passed away, this assembly convened a gathering of several hundred members to record Buddha's teachings, but they did not permit Ananda to enter their midst. Ananda was in fact the single most essential member to the group because he was present during all of Shakyamuni's most important lessons and could recall all his teaching lessons verbatim. Nevertheless, the leader of the group, Mahakashyapa, refused to let Ananda join them because of his lack of cultivation attainment. This refusal shocked Ananda, but it was Mahakashyapa's way of skillfully teaching Ananda.

Being ashamed of himself and the fact that he was not allowed into this gathering, Ananda went away from the assembly. He realized that he had not achieved any level of true cultivation attainment in his life because he had not cultivated very much during all the years he was Buddha's attendant. Rather, he had simply devoted himself to listening to dharma discourses, and he had thought this was good enough.

Because of this rebuff by Mahakashyapa, in the following week Ananda devoted himself wholeheartedly to cultivation practice. Despite all his years as Buddha's attendant and listening to his teachings, it was only when he really applied himself to those few days of practice that he finally attained samadhi and achieved the spiritual level of an Arhat, after which he went and knocked at the assembly's door.

Mahakashyapa already knew that Ananda's practice had been successful, but he told Ananda that if he had really reached the requisite stage of spiritual attainment, he need not ask anyone to open the door for him. As a test, he told Ananda to use his newly gained spiritual powers, which he would now have by virtue of his standing as an Arhat, to enter the room at will. Accordingly, Ananda used his superpowers and entered the chamber through a crack in the door to be welcomed into the assembly. So the initial refusal to permit Ananda into the assembly, though it actually could not proceed without him, displayed Mahakashyapa's own teaching style, which forced Ananda to finally make cultivation progress.

Mahakashyapa said to Ananda, "It was because I wished you to clear away your passions and realize sainthood that I compelled you to go out. You should understand this and bear no grudge against me." Ananda replied, "If I bear a grudge against anyone, how can I be said to have reached any stage of attainment?"

Hence while Buddha had appointed Reverend Mahakashyapa his successor, who went on to become the First Zen Patriarch in India, Ananda eventually became the second in this line of spiritual transmission. His story shows that you can know all the spiritual teachings by heart, but spiritual reading, memorization, recitation and study are useless compared to attainment. Even Ananda—Buddha's attendant—only attained spiritual realization after he wholeheartedly applied himself to cultivation practice.

Another school of the original four divisions, called the Realistic school or Sarvastivadin lineage, has links with Buddha's son Rahula, and it is this school which concentrated on the reality aspect of phenomena. While fundamental true reality is empty, this school emphasized the existence aspect of fundamental nature. Hence, we can say it was the forerunner of the Mind-Only school of Maitreya, which later developed into Esoteric Buddhism.

The fundamental principles of Mind-Only Yogacara doctrine were elucidated by Maitreya in a short number of texts, one of which is the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*. One of the reasons that the

famous monk Xuan Zang went on his arduous journey to India was in order to obtain the original teachings of the Yogacara school, in particular, Asanga's *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice*. This work is related to Tsong Khapa's famous *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* (the *Lam Rim*), which is based on Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. This book, in turn, is based on the *Yogacarabhumi sastra*, which is itself based on the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*. Hence, a lot of important cultivation works are based on this very short sutra because it reveals the basic steps on how to become fully enlightened once someone reaches the Bodhisattva stages of attainment. It is a text that should guide all cultivation practitioners and fortunately there are now several versions available in English.

When knowledgeable people talk about the basic methods of spiritual cultivation practice, they cannot help but mention cessation and insight, or *shamatha* and *vipashyana*, because these principles are inherent in all true cultivation techniques. In cultivation, we talk about samadhi and prajna wisdom, cessation and contemplation, stillness (stopping) and introspection, calming and insight, *chih* and *kuan*, but they are all synonyms for the same two cultivation principles. They are all talking about shamatha and vipashyana, which are both major topics in this work.

In brief, cessation is that aspect of cultivation that focuses on the kung-fu of samadhi, or stillness (emptiness). Contemplation or insight (wordless discriminative knowing) is that aspect which focuses on prajna wisdom. If you want to talk about cessation and contemplation practice today, you can refer to some Tien-tai or Tibetan works but, there is really no way to understand the practice deeply unless you refer to the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*.

At the lower stages of cultivation practice we talk of the principles of cessation (stopping) and contemplation (observation, or watching), and at the higher stages of practice we talk of samadhi and prajna transcendental wisdom. The big secret, or unspoken principle of the Mahayana cultivation path is that this set of principles is common to all four dhyana, the four formless absorptions, and even the nirvana with remainder: all cultivation techniques are based on cultivating cessation and contemplation, or samadhi and prajna wisdom. They rely on cessation and contemplation in some form or another.

Cessation and contemplation will enable you to free yourself from the constraints of form and phenomena, and from the constraints of heavy afflictions. If you achieve true cessation and contemplation, for sure you will achieve all four dhyana, so these states are all called samadhi.

The highest samadhi on the Mahayana trail is the Suchness of Tathagatahood, the nirvana samadhi. To comprehend the function of nirvana is called prajna wisdom, and if your transcendental wisdom is high enough that you can fully comprehend nirvana, then this is called enlightenment. So the process of cultivating the Tao is completely based on deep cessation and contemplation practice, but we cannot really go into this in an introductory book like this. To fully understand it in detail, we need an accurate and insightful translation and commentary of the

Sandhinirmocana Sutra, especially for chapter six of this work.

The *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*

The *Sandhinirmocana Sutra* is a very brief text of only eight chapters. The first chapter consists of a preface explaining why we have this work, and the second deals with the topic of ultimate existence or ultimate meaning. In this second section, the adjective "great" has been appellated to existence so that we have the phrase "great existence;" otherwise, people would confuse the intended meaning of the text with the simple materiality aspect of the universe. They would miss the fact that it is really discussing True Being or Suchness rather than just materialistic existence.

When you finally reach enlightenment, you will discover that there actually is a principle of existence, as well as the principle of emptiness serving as the core guiding principle of the path. Emptiness must always be the core principle of spiritual practice, because without understanding emptiness, you will get nowhere in terms of spiritual attainment. Yet emptiness is also matched with the principle of fullness.

All his life Buddha spoke of impermanence, suffering, no-self, and emptiness as expedient means, but when teaching the Mahayana path in the *Nirvana Sutra* near the end of his life, he suddenly changed directions and spoke of permanence, bliss, selfhood and purity. Thus, we know that there is a causal stage of spiritual cultivation, and a fruition stage in which such virtues can be known. However, what many people do not realize is that the purity, self, bliss and permanence spoken of in the *Nirvana Sutra* actually refer to emptiness!

While there are these two possible schools of cultivation which focus on either emptiness or existence matters, essentially there is still only one basic, ultimate principle: emptiness which is fundamentally empty, completely empty, utterly empty, ultimately empty. However, people easily forget this point or fail to comprehend it fully, so proponents of these two schools of existence and emptiness, because of not understanding matters clearly, have debated for over two thousand years. Of course the enlightened ones do not debate because they understand matters completely, but the academics squabble continually, for what else are they to do? How else can they keep themselves occupied?

For instance, the existence school scholars do not believe that you can become a Buddha instantly, but believe it takes at least three full eons of effort, as the orthodox teachings state. The Zen school, however, says one can proceed directly to realizing Tao—since that is what we are—without the necessity of a long, drawn-out process. It counters the Traditionalists saying, "How do you know you have not already reached the end of your third eon of effort?" Then again, the Zen school does recognize that purifying the physical body and cultivating away habitual tendencies is a step-by-step gradual process, as the *Surangama Sutra* so aptly stated. Hence, there are all sorts of such debates going on while the wise keep silent, but the ignorant argue

back and forth because they do not understand matters. For instance, the Esoteric school always insists upon co-emergent emptiness and bliss, but the Zen school remains silent because it takes this as a natural occurrence.

The third chapter of the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra* is particularly noted for its discussion on the effects of consciousness, and ends with the famous gatha,

> The storehouse consciousness [alaya] is very deep and subtle;
> All its seeds are like a torrential flow.
> I do not explain it to the ignorant,
> For fear they will cling to it and consider it a self.

The fourth chapter of the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra* goes on to talk about the phenomena and forms of the world and how they were created. It states that in the very beginning, the mind was originally empty but then awareness started to cling to ever-present empty ignorance, which accompanies the fundamental enlightenment, and thus it began to attach to falsity. In trying to firmly hold onto this changing falsity, mental activity developed its own roots.

Tracing the process backwards, if you do not produce any causes to move your mind, you can definitely regain that original fundamental state and realize your original, intrinsic perfection. The sastra therefore makes three points: all things arise through co-dependency or interpenetration, you have become biased and mentally cling to what is entirely imagined rather than what is real, and the true or real nature of reality is perfect *bhutatathata*, perfect signlessness.

In the fifth chapter of the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*, Buddha reminds us that all dharmas, all methods for Tao, all teachings, knowledge, wisdom, phenomena, appearances, functions and so forth have no self-nature. Why? Because they are fundamentally empty from the start. The reason teachings assume some particular form at some moment is because of karma, but this particular karma will not last forever. It is only good for a moment because everything is subject to incessant change.

No forms, effects, appearances, or functions have a self-nature. Even their causes have no self-nature, and the causes of those causes going backwards as well all lack a self-nature. Everything is fundamentally empty going all the way back to primordial karma and ignorance and the ultimate—these are all fundamentally empty, too. So Buddha was correct when he said he never taught a dharma, and he made this point quite clear in the *Diamond Sutra*. Everything being empty and quiescent without ultimate arising, what did he ultimately teach? He only pointed to the Tao, and did not teach a thing.

In the sixth chapter of the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*, which is perhaps the most important chapter for those who are practicing on the path, the Bodhisattva Maitreya questioned the Buddha about the Mahayana path. The conversation went somewhat as follows:

> At that time the Bodhisattva Maitreya addressed the Buddha saying, "World-Honored One, depending upon what and abiding in what do Bodhisattvas of the Great Vehicle cultivate cessation and observation?"
>
> The Buddha replied, "Maitreya, good son, you should understand that all Bodhisattva dharma teachings are expedient means, and Bodhisattvas of the Great Vehicle should abide in and depend upon the great vow of never deviating from the Annutarasamyaksambodhi to cultivate cessation and observation."
>
> Maitreya then asked, "The Buddha has taught us that this practice can have four kinds of content. The first content scenario has conceptual images [discriminatory thought]. The second scenario does not have conceptual images. The third scenario involves doing things. The fourth one refers to the scenario of accomplishing whatever we choose to do. Among these four, which scenario is the object of cessation, which one is the object of observation, and which one is the object of both cessation and observation?"
>
> The Buddha answered the Bodhisattva Maitreya and said, "Good son, one of the above four is related to cessation, and it is the scenario without conceptual images. One is related to observation, and it is the scenario with conceptual images. Two are related to both cessation and observation, and they are the scenario of involvement with all phenomena, and the scenario of accomplishing what we do."

To paraphrase this passage, Maitreya asked Shakyamuni Buddha, "What do the great Bodhisattvas cultivate, what do they rely on for their cultivation, what scenario do they stay in?"

From this passage, and from other materials within the text, Buddha answered that all cultivation methods depend on using something which is not real (in itself) to get to the Real. In fact, it is because of these untruthful things that you can get to the Real thing, so in cultivation it is proper to use the false to cultivate to the Real. Thus, the cultivation path does have some validity to it, and its ultimate result has validity as well.

This, in essence, becomes the basis of the Esoteric school, which places a large emphasis on cultivating the physical form in order to attain various stages of samadhi. The basis of the Esoteric school is to largely rely on breathing and visualization methods to cultivate our false, physical form in order to arrive at some stage of higher spiritual attainment. The Esoteric school says it is okay to cultivate the false, in order to recognize the real, if you know what you are doing and do not become further confused in the process.

The path to becoming a Buddha may seem endless because there is no physical state of existence we can call perfection. Shakyamuni Buddha therefore said that what is most important in this

process is that you should never abandon your great vow of continuing to always cultivate in order to reach the supreme truth, and the methods you should rely upon are the principles of cessation and contemplation. The Bodhisattvas should never abandon that vow to seek supreme enlightenment, and must never stop working for ever-increasing perfection. Furthermore, they must exercise or display their Tao in the universe to help other unawakened beings.

Bodhisattvas must constantly work to improve themselves, perfect themselves, and perfect skillful means of compassionately liberating others. They should never call it quits and go somewhere to rest. Buddha said that cessation-contemplation should guide their cultivation practice, and that anyone who vows to perfect this sort of practice is guaranteed to attain ultimate success in Buddhahood.

Maitreya replied that, based on the great amounts of time he had spent with Buddha, he could summarize the necessary cessation-contemplation practices into four methods:

Method 1: Using the discriminative ability of consciousness

When people focus on the *jen mai* and *tu mai* channels in their spiritual practice, this is using the discriminative consciousness in cultivation. When using discrimination, you have a form or symbol in your mind that you end up focusing upon. The Zen school is famous for using the koan technique of concentrating on a question such as, "Who is chanting Buddha's name?" This is using discrimination as well, although the purpose of the koan is to tie this discrimination up so as to reach cessation. In Esoteric Buddhism, practitioners are sometimes told to visualize Buddhas having multiple hands grasping different objects, and multiple feet stepping upon different things. All of these various items can be said to symbolize the discriminative aspect of consciousness. As another example, when you are trying to visualize a Buddha in cultivation, you are only visualizing an image rather than the real thing. What you discriminate is related to consciousness, so whatever you visualize is just the discrimination of some phenomena. Even though this is not the real mind, this approach is a valid means to initially cultivate which Maitreya called "using the discriminative ability of consciousness." *This is basically a method of focusing on images on consciousness, or manifestations of the mind.*

Method 2: No discrimination

In the *Surangama Sutra*, you are told to let everything go, to put everything down, to give everything up, to drop clinging to all your thoughts and attachments. This is not the samadhi of no-thought, but is instead the principle of not relying on discrimination in your spiritual cultivation. So in this particular method of cultivation practice, you do not attach or cling to the workings of sixth consciousness, or the components of the skandha of conception. If you meditate, however, and say my chi is moving here and so on, this is related to the discriminative abilities of consciousness.

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On the other hand, when you just let everything go, or "drop everything" as the Zen school teaches, this is the cultivation method of no discrimination employed in the proper form of cessation and insight practice. This is the no-thought or no-mind practice of the Zen school. This is basically a method of contemplating the mind, *a method of prajna transcendental wisdom*. Because you are using only wisdom knowing rather than discriminative thoughts, a person checking your brainwaves during this type of practice would find that they are relatively flat.

Method 3: The Bodhisattva Method

In this method you are actually cultivating while performing various activities to help the world. For instance, you might be working in a business, a political organization or government body, a school, a nonprofit organization, as a doctor, lawyer, etc., so that you are coordinating an entire host of activities while cultivating at the same time. Just imagine the great flowering possible in the West if modern Christianity could integrate its concepts of charity, virtue and good works (deeds) with the Mahayana ideals of wisdom and expedient, skillful means, as well as the collective shared cultivation methods for attaining samadhi and transcendental wisdom. This merging of Christianity with the Bodhisattva path (which is the dual practice of cultivating both prajna wisdom attainments and compassionate activity in the world of the phenomenal for the benefit of other sentient beings, pursuing this way without limit), would have utmost benefit for the world. The Bodhisattva method of cessation and contemplation practice is to cultivate both samadhi and prajna equally while in the midst of activities aimed at helping the people.

Method 4: The Buddha Method

In this method, you have already reached enlightenment, so you already possess cultivation kung-fu and attainment. In short, *you are one with the Tao all the time*. All that is left is to exercise your great functioning to fulfill the vows you have determined to actualize in the Three Realms of conventional existence. Hence, whatever your vow, you work to realize it and cultivate it to fruition. After Buddhahood, whatever you set your mind on doing, you work to achieve it and never stop, which is the Buddha's cultivation path of Tao. This is the path of fulfilling your Buddhahood duties or your compassionate vows to help all sentient beings. Why can the Buddhas absolutely succeed in accomplishing whatever they want? It is not because of their superpowers, *but because everything starts with emptiness*. Since all things, all activities, all accomplishments, all affairs start initially from emptiness, then in always being empty and being birthed from emptiness, the Buddhas with their wisdom are always ready to be able to give birth to act so as to bring about and accomplish whatever they want.

After summarizing matters in this way, Maitreya then asked which of these four cultivation paths

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were related to just cessation, which of the four were related to just contemplation, and which of the four were related to cessation and contemplation together?

In striving to understand Buddha's reply, we must remember that these teachings were being given to an audience of Bodhisattvas who were already close to complete enlightenment, so while the answers may sound simple, they are actually not so easy to understand. There are many things we cannot discuss about this sutra because its level of instruction is far beyond the groundwork principles we want to convey in this text.

Going further within the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*, the Bodhisattva Maitreya also asked the Buddha how many types of contemplation there are? Buddha in turn answered that there is contemplation of specific form, contemplation of the seeking mind (vitarka), and contemplation of observing mind (vicara).

The text does not explain these in detail, but in vicara contemplation, we can say that your mind is at ease and is able to achieve more subtle or clear seeking because you are able to be there as a more silent observer. The vitarka contemplation is a more active and grosser type of contemplation, wherein you want to see all the thoughts in your mind. So, some of these points are left out of the text because it offers abbreviated answers for the great Bodhisattvas, and yet it contains all the information you need to know about cessation-contemplation practice.

In response to the questions, Shakyamuni Buddha also taught Maitreya Bodhisattva that there are three types of cessational single-mindedness, though you can alternatively say there are eight kinds. For instance, the first dhyana has its own state of cessation, the second dhyana has its own state of cessation, the third dhyana has its own state of cessation, and thus, the four dhyana and four formless samadhi all have their own kind of cessation for a total of eight.

The answers Buddha provides to this question are all very scientific, but if you do not reach those particular levels of attainment yourself, then you can never know what those types of cessation really are. Furthermore, we have even left out the fact that each type of cessation has its own four levels of prayoga. This does not just refer to the eight samadhi, but the ten Bodhisattva bhumis also have their own levels of cessation and contemplation, as well as their own four stages of prayoga!

If you know the original nature, you can realize that these teachings are a very concise and convenient way of explaining things, but the only people who can truly understand this without a lot of explanation are those with sharp wisdom. For ordinary people without any sort of cultivation attainment, we cannot go deeply into these lessons at all. Nevertheless, there are some simple things we can discuss, such as the fact that the obstacles for successfully achieving cessation involve physical kung-fu such as the body, feelings, sensations, the chi and mai, and attachments to things like wealth, sex, fame, or sleep. These, of course, are Hinayana

obstructions to achieving cessation while the Mahayana obstructions include sleepiness, torpor, mental dislikes (e.g., hating sitting meditation), doubts, and subtle arising thoughts.

One example of a possible obstacle to contemplation (cultivating prajna) would be reading a religious sutra and not understanding it. The obstacles for both cessation and contemplation would include factors such as not being focused or diligent enough in your cultivation practice, or achieving a little cultivation progress and feeling it is so good that you do not need to strive for a higher state.

Another excuse is living as a layman because you like the lifestyle, and thereby excusing yourself from cultivation practice by saying that this is the Mahayana way. The *Sandhinirmocana Sutra* is filled with all sorts of lessons like this, and its stage of transmission is so high that it is even used by the Bodhisattvas at the upper ranks of realization to help guide them to complete and full awakening.

The *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* can also be used to help us better understand how cessation and contemplation principles can be practiced for reaching dhyana. The *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* says that these three factors of cessation, contemplation and dhyana can be grouped in different ways to produce twenty-five kinds of cultivation (meditative practice) that will enable you to arrive at pure and clean imperturbability. They are:

The single practice of cessation
The single practice of contemplation
The single practice of dhyana
Cessation followed by contemplation
Cessation followed by dhyana
Cessation followed by contemplation and ending in dhyana
Cessation followed by dhyana and ending in contemplation
Cessation followed by simultaneous practice of contemplation and dhyana
Simultaneous practice of cessation and contemplation followed by dhyana
Simultaneous practice of cessation and dhyana followed by contemplation
Contemplation ending in cessation
Contemplation ending in dhyana
Contemplation followed by cessation and ending in dhyana
Contemplation followed by dhyana and ending in cessation
Contemplation followed by simultaneous cultivation of cessation and dhyana
Simultaneous cultivation of contemplation and cessation followed by dhyana
Simultaneous cultivation of contemplation and dhyana followed by cessation
Dhyana followed by cessation
Dhyana followed by contemplation
Dhyana followed by cessation and ending in contemplation

Dhyana followed by contemplation and ending in cessation
Dhyana followed by simultaneous practice of cessation and contemplation
Simultaneous practice of dhyana and cessation followed by contemplation
Simultaneous practice of dhyana and contemplation followed by cessation
Perfect threefold practice.

Cessation is a type of mental calming, mental stillness or pacification that produces what we figuratively call a state "empty of discriminative thought." Emptiness results when you cultivate the mind so as to detach from its thinking, knowing and feeling processes in order to achieve an experience of continuous mind without any gaps or breaks. In other words, the experience of continuous mind means the experience of true mind, which is the real mind we all have that is buried beneath our thought processes. So another way of describing emptiness is to say that it is continuous engagement with the mind of no-gap.

If you concentrate to have the mind come to an abrupt stop on one point, like driving a knife into a spot on a table, then you will achieve the cessation of random thoughts. Cessation is simply a result of cultivation kung-fu, but cessation is what results in samadhi. There are many ways to achieve cessation, such as chanting Buddha's or Krishna's or Jesus' or Allah's name. All you have to do is listen to the chant within, and forget yourself. If you just listen to the sound as a sort of "bystander" or "watcher" who does not make any comments on the chanting, then soon there will no thoughts at all, and you will eventually achieve single-minded concentration. When you can unify your entire mind into one state, this is the correct state, this is samadhi.

What we call contemplation, observation, insight, or prajna wisdom is to then wordlessly observe the quiet mental realm of tranquility that has been produced. You observe the mental realm of quiet you have produced, called samadhi, and then with prajna you can realize that it, too, is a mental construction. This quiet is still an image of consciousness, a manifestation of the mind. But *that which knows the samadhi* state of stillness without using mental constructions is the formless mind of prajna. That is the thing you want to cultivate because prajna is what helps you realize your true mind of Tao.

Whenever you truly cultivate samadhi, within that samadhi there are still ever-changing, minor thoughts going on all the time. You still have subtle forms of knowing and feeling within samadhi, and these are what should become the object of your contemplation practice until they die away. In identifying them, and then detaching from them, you are withdrawing your energies of support that will cause them to eventually evolve themselves out of existence.

At the lowest levels of contemplation practice, contemplation is related to seeing or visualizing with the mind. For instance, a cultivation practitioner in the Esoteric school might focus on images as an assist to concentration, such as visualizing Buddha images on their skeleton to produce figurine shaped sariras on the bone, but this is just low level practice to help achieve

cessation. When you have transcended all the images within samadhi (including no-thought since it, too, is an image), and know that even this is only consciousness, then you can recognize that it is not the ultimate Tao. The ultimate Tao and this function are just one thing.

At each progressive stage of cultivation you achieve an even higher stage of samadhi, which of course, must be matched with yet a higher stage of prajna wisdom or discriminative reflection for recognizing the true mind. When you see the true mind, that is called awakening to the path, seeing the Tao, attaining the clear light, or breaking through the skandha of conception. Only then will you know how you should correctly practice towards complete realization.

We can say that dhyana and samadhi are like a spinning top; after moving about, the top just rests in one place, turning silently and peacefully abiding in one place of one-pointedness. When you achieve the stopping of discriminative mental cessation and thus dhyana, then you are cultivating kung-fu. But this is just an attainment of stability and quiet, which is of no use in itself. There are many masters who can cultivate all sorts of samadhi, and yet if they do not turn around to realize the fundamental knower who knows the samadhi, they will not realize the Tao. The fundamental nature is what you must come to realize, and *that* is seeing the Tao.

When an enlightened master sees someone spiritually talented but stuck in this state of ignorance, they go out of their way to help nudge them awaken to the true path, because samadhi is not it. That was the reason Zen master Tao-hsin went to Ox Head Mountain and visited Fa-jung to teach him. He did this because he knew Fa-jung was ready for seeing the true nature.

Buddha said that the correct practice of no-discrimination, as we find in the *Surangama Sutra* and in the Zen school, applies when there are no thoughts in the mind but you are perfectly aware and know everything completely. This is when the use of prajna wisdom really blossoms, and direct knowing comes to the forefront. No-discrimination meditation does not mean blankness or stupidity or a state of blunted ignorant stupor. Rather, this type of meditation has the goal of reaching a state of quiet but concentrated, alert awareness. As Master Yung-chia said, “Alert tranquility is right, indifferent tranquility is wrong.”

No-discrimination practice is actually related to the cultivation of prajna. On the other hand, when you are using coarse discrimination, this is related to the practice of stopping in order to attain samadhi. As to the last two categories of practice that Buddha discussed with Maitreya in the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*—the Buddha’s practice method and the Bodhisattva’s practice method—in these cases we have both contemplation and insight. The Bodhisattvas practice both these principles at each and every Bodhisattva level, whereas at the Buddha stage of complete enlightenment your cultivation is effortless, and you are in them all the time because you have achieved perfect enlightenment.

To understand these two cardinal principles of cultivation at a more mundane level, consider that

you need to master cessation when you go to work in a company, because you need the ability to focus without becoming distracted or subject to agitation. At the same time, you need to be able to observe and analyze things, which is discrimination or wisdom. The enlightened master Confucius therefore taught that people should always be working on cessation and contemplation practice, especially in their everyday worldly affairs. They are the basis of everyday affairs, and you can extend this basis into the realm of spiritual cultivation so as to eventually achieve enlightenment. So Confucius took these two principles of the path, and linked them with mundane life in order to bring cultivation into everyday affairs.

When cultivating cessation, the important thing is to let everything go so that the mind naturally settles. When cultivating contemplation insight, your prajna wisdom must reflect upon the true nature of what is being contemplated; you must make specific analysis of the mental state or image that is produced, and see it as being an empty reflection. Thus, you must let your mind be born without letting it cling to any of the states that become born. In terms of worldly affairs, when chaos rules you must let things settle, and after they begin to settle, you must use your wisdom to guide and shape events to your liking. Hence in Chinese history, during periods of economic and political chaos the laissez-faire Tao school would come to the forefront in helping society, but during periods of stable prosperity, the guidance of the Confucian school would come to the forefront.

We must remember another important principle discussed within the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra*: an image that is an object of contemplation is not different from the mind itself, because any image is just ideation-only. When an individual concentrates on an image, they actually see the mind as an object. They image is actually the mind appearing as an object, so the reflected image is just mind stuff rather than the real thing. To put it another way, the image seen is not different from the mind. Buddha commented that all sentient beings are topsy-turvy because they do not take these manifestations as images in the mind. Rather, they take them as the real things, as independently existing objects rather than as the dependent images they really are.

Is it possible for the mind to cognize the mind? In effect, nothing cognizes anything, because neither the mind nor objects are independent entities. Consciousness just experiences itself in a sort of loop, for only when discursive cognition arises does the mind appear as subject and object. All things originally have no mental images, so in each moment of awareness, the mind is still and unborn and you can use this principle to rank your stage of cultivation. If you are still in the realm of duality, however, then you are still not close to Tao.

Thus, through the *Sandhinirmocana Sutra* we have revealed the four basic methods, or principles, inherent in all the various cultivation exercises you can employ. Furthermore, a little known fact is that this sutra, along with the *Source Mirror*, can be used by Bodhisattva stage

seems to be the most instructive summary for ending our discussion on the importance of this matter:

> In Zen and the Teachings, there are two methods, most honored of the myriad practices of the ten perfections. At first they are called stopping and seeing [cessation and contemplation], to help new learners; later they become concentration and wisdom [samadhi and prajna], roots of enlightenment.
>
> These are only one reality, which seems to have two parts. In the silence of the essence of reality is stopping by comprehending truth; when silent yet ever aware, subtle seeing is there.
>
> Concentration is the father, insight the mother; they can conceive the thousand sages, developing their faculties and powers, nurturing their sacred potential, giving birth to buddhas and Zen masters in every moment of thought.
>
> Concentration is the general, insight he minister; they can assist the mind monarch in attaining the unexcelled, providing forever the means for all to realize the Way, in the manner of the enlightenment of the ancient buddhas.
>
> Concentration is like the moonlight shining so brightly that the stars of errant falsehood vanish. If you can hold up the torch of knowledge, so much the clearer. Irrigating the sprouts of enlightenment, it removes emotional bondage.
>
> Insight is like the sun shining, breaking up the darkness of ignorance. It is able to cause the Zen of the ignorant with false views to turn into transcendent wisdom.
>
> A brief time of silence, a moment of stillness, gradually build up into correct concentration. The sages, making comparatively little effort, ultimately saw the subtle essence of the pedestal of the spirit.
>
> As soon as you hear even a little bit of the Teaching, it can influence your subconscious such that seeds of awakening develop. The moment you turn the light of awareness around, accurate cognition opens up; in an instant you can accomplish Buddha's teaching like this.
>
> The power of meditative concentration is inconceivable; it changes the ordinary into sages instantly. Boundless birth and death is thereby severed at the root; the nest of accumulated ages of mundane toils is destroyed. This is the water that stills the mind, the pearl that purifies the will; its light engulfs myriad forms, lighting a thousand roads.
>
> When you open your own eyes, there are no obstructions; originally there is nothing in the world that constrains. When thieves of attention and reflection are quelled in a timely manner, then the sickness of obsession with objects suddenly clears up.
>
> Washing away the dirt of thoughts and cleaning away the dust of confusion reveals the body of reality and strengthens the life of wisdom. Like an immutable mountain, like a still sea, even if the sky should flip and the earth overturn, you would not be changed. Bright as crystal imbued with moonlight, serene and unbound, you are independent.
>
> No one can measure the insight of wisdom; it naturally manifests the light of mind according to the occasion. It is the leader of myriad practices, the spiritual ruler at all times. It evaporates the ocean of misery and shatters the mountains of falsehood.

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When the clouds of illusion withdraw completely for a while, the gold in the poor woman's house shows up all at once, and the pearl embedded in the wrestler's forehead re-emerges. Cutting through the web of folly, interrupting the flow of desires, the awesome power of the great hero has no peer; it can cool the iron beds and copper stakes of hell and cause the results of the actions of demons and antagonists to cease. Settling disputes, fulfilling honor and justice, everywhere it shows people the wisdom of the buddhas. Biased and perverted knowledge is all subordinated to the source; both the smallest and greatest alike receive direction.

One-sided cultivation of concentration is pure yin; it corrodes people and erodes right livelihood. If you use accurate insight to illuminate meditation, all things will naturally be clear as a mirror.

One-sided cultivation of insight is pure yang; it withers people and makes them linger on the way. You should use subtle concentration to help contemplative exercise, like the clear list of he moon removing a film of mist.

I recommend equal cultivation of concentration and insight, not one-sided practice. They are originally one entity, not two things. It is like a bird flying through the sky with two wings, or like a chariot drawn on two wheels. Thus, in the course of ordinary life you climb up onto the shore of awakening, then sail the boat of compassion on the ocean of karma.

There is concentration on the concrete, in which everything is accomplished by placing the mind on one point. There is concentration on the abstract, in which one must only look directly into the essential nature of mind.

There is contemplation of the concrete, in which one clarifies the characteristics of things and develops judgment. There is contemplation of the abstract, in which it is suddenly realized there is no One and no Beyond.

Insofar as concentration itself is insight, they are not one, not two, not any calculation of mind. Insofar as insight itself is concentration, they are not the same, not different, beyond looking and listening.

Sometimes they are operated together, so you are tranquil yet perceptive, penetrating the teaching of the real. Sometimes they both disappear; neither concentration nor insight, this transcends ordinary standards.

Entering concentration in one atom and arising from it in a multitude of atoms is something natural in the context of transcendent insight. While absorbed in the state of a child, you discuss the laws of reality in the state of an elderly person. If you can see into a single object, all objects are the same; an atom near at hand or a land far away—all are comprehended. On the road of true suchness, you discourse on birth and death; in the ocean of ignorance, you expound the complete religion. The eye can do the enlightened work of the nose; entering concentration in an atom of matter, you arise from concentration in an atom of scent.

Mind and objects are always the same; it is views that differ. Who speaks of not working on cultivation—waves are originally water. Neither silent nor shining, beyond words and thought, yet tranquil and perceptive, effective without compare: temporal and true both carried out, you open the right road; substance and function helping each other, you embody the subtle message.

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I urge you not to throw away time, for it's swift as an arrow, fast as a stream. Distraction is entirely due to lack of concentration; stupidity and blindness are caused by lack of true knowledge.

Genuinely true words should be admitted into the ears. A thousand scriptures and ten thousand treatises indicate the same thing: the total effect of concentration and insight should never be forgotten—in a moment you return at once to the state of real awareness.

Concentration needs practice; insight needs learning. Don't let the spiritual pedestal be dimmed at all.

A massive tree grows from a tiny sprout; effective work gradually accumulated produces value and excellence. Even an ape that learns concentration [samadhi] is born in a heavenly realm; a little girl, with a moment's thought, enters the door of the Way.

When you can help yourself and also help others, then cause and effect are fulfilled; no one can talk of doing this without concentration and insight [samadhi and prajna wisdom].[1]

For further information please see:

The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning
Trans. by John P. Keenan
Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, Berkeley, 2000.

Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course
Trans. by Thomas Cleary
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1995.

Wisdom of Buddha: The Samdhinimocana Mahayana Sutra—Essential Questions and Direct Answers for Realizing Enlightenment
Trans. by John Powers
Snow Lion, New York, 1996.

Stopping and Seeing: A Comprehensive Course in Buddhist Meditation
Chih-i, trans. by Thomas Cleary
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1997.

Four extant English translations of the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra*, along with useful information on the Tien-tai tradition, can be found in:

Ch'an and Zen Teachings, vol. 3
Lu K'uan Yu (Charles Luk)
Rider and Company, London, 1962.

Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice: The Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition
Trans. by Hubert Nearman
Shasta Abbey, California, 1994.

Complete Enlightenment
Ch'an Master Sheng-yen
Dharma Drum Publications, Elmhurst: New York, 1997.

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation
Trans. by A. Charles Muller
SUNY Press, Albany: New York, 1999.

The only English translation of the *Nirvana Sutra* is found in:

The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra
Kosho Yamamoto
The Karinbunko, Japan, 1974.

The work on contemplation and insight by Zen master Yung-ming was translated by Thomas Cleary, and can be found in a wonderful little volume which provides other useful excerpts from the Zen masters:

The Five Houses of Zen
Thomas Cleary
Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1997.

Thanks go to Shambhala Publications, Boston, www.shambhala.com , for permission to reprint the excerpt from *The Five Houses of Zen*.

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1 Thomas Cleary, *The Five Houses of Zen* (Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1997), pp. 151-155.

Chapter 13:
The Road of Tantric Cultivation for Opening the Sushumna Central Channel

The Esoteric school has hundreds, perhaps thousands, of particular teachings that detail all the tiny phenomenal changes that accompany the process of spiritual cultivation. Discussions on chi, mai, chakras, kundalini, bindus, clear light and illusory bodies—it's all there. But of course, these phenomenal changes are not the important thing in cultivation, and they usually correspond to only the lowest stages of the cultivation path. Furthermore, while this information may appear useful, what the Esoteric school does in terms of micro-gradating the stages of the path is not necessarily a helpful thing.

The various kung-fu experiences that the Esoteric school mentions do indeed occur, and they do indicate certain things in terms of the overall stage of someone's cultivation attainment. However, they refer to physical affairs rather than the great matter of enlightenment itself. Ultimately, they just refer to things outside of the mind. They only involve temporal matters rather than transcendental affairs. In many cases tantric teachings can be compared to a bunch of disciples in training sitting around day after day discussing any auspicious dreams they have had, along with their possible meanings. Everything in the world is a dream, so why overemphasize such matters? Most of the things focused upon within tantric cultivation are transient phenomena, none of which are real.

The problem with studying the esoteric form school teachings, whether they concern themselves with chi, chakras, yang bodies or whatever, is that people who hear of these various phenomena tend to take them as the *purpose* or *objective* of the cultivation path rather than as the *scenery* that appears along the path. They take them as something they should be purposefully striving to experience.

This sort of misplaced fascination is understandable because people are naturally attracted to the unusual or mysterious, but the problem is that, in essence, *these form-body instructions simply swap one focus of attachment for another*, and this is what lands people in trouble. Spiritual practitioners on these paths usually stop concentrating on their physical body of flesh and bones, and start fixating on an esoteric "astral body" of chi instead which has all sorts of chakras and chi channels. Although you can say that this body is higher or more refined than your physical nature, people who cultivate this body still make the mistake of believing they are this new body. When people start practicing the esoteric path, it is very easy to fall into this type of trap, and very hard to climb out of it.

Meditation practitioners readily develop the habit of clinging to images of the human body when its form is used in cultivation, and in turn they begin to think this is the universal way to practice.

But what makes people so sure that they will always possess a human-like body, or that this is the right way to practice in the first place? If you are not always going to possess this type of body, then there is no reason to concentrate on its form so much, especially since any bodily form is not the real you anyway. That is why even the sambhogakaya is referred to as an appearance aspect, or simply empty display aspect of the dharmakaya. From a higher perspective, what is even the point of artificially occupying consciousness with form to begin with? Like the low level practices in chi-gong, fixating on the physical form is none other than playing with concepts in consciousness!

Down the line, other practitioners reading or hearing of the unusual esoteric experiences catalogued on the spiritual path make yet another type of mistake, for they begin to think to themselves, "If I do not have this type of experience, then I am not making any spiritual progress." As a result, they set about trying to spin their chi in various directions, "push" open their energy meridians, establish microcosmic prana circulations, open their chakras, pray to meet the dakinis, and so on it goes.

All this sort of work is in vain. People can always forcibly produce the experience of internal wind through concentration practice, and thereby generate all sorts of unusual feelings (along with misconceptions), but this does not amount to any sort of real spiritual attainment or real kung-fu. Yes, this can produce some minor physical results and realms of semblance gong-fu on the path, but the results are still all within the realm of illusion. So what is the point of these efforts?

Just take a look at what we can readily see around ourselves today. Nowadays, people everywhere have heard of the word chakras, and know about their general locations such as near the heart, solar plexus, at the third eye and so forth. There are even all sorts of public classes available that teach exercises for "opening the chakras." Of course, this is ridiculous from the standpoint of true cultivation, because the chakras can only unfold during the stage of cultivating the mai; you cannot force them to open because they only develop through the cultivation of emptiness. The chakras start manifesting when you abandon the process of discrimination and analytical thinking, rather than because of listening to music or practicing guided imagery.

Nevertheless, society has all these classes with eager students speaking the proper words, yet no one seems to know even the most basic, fundamental principles regarding spiritual cultivation. The esoteric schools have therefore become a hub of busy individuals anxiously interested in entertaining marvels and miracles that actually poison the true cultivation route to enlightenment. Unfortunately, because people are attracted to the mysterious, many have turned to it in dizzying numbers.

As a guide to this particular situation, we need but note that in the history of China, the early Taoist masters sometimes wrote of the physical experiences they encountered because of their

own meditation practice. As with today, later generations of students read these highly individualistic journal accounts, and reversed the implications of what they studied. Rather than cultivate emptiness, in which all these things will naturally transpire, they adopted the notion that these various experiential realms *had* to happen, and so they changed the mode of cultivation practice to one which tried to *force* these various events into manifestation through visualized imaginations. How sorrowful indeed.

This is just one single sample problem which the desire to experience these phenomena has engendered. While this happened in ancient China and lead to the decline of the Tao school, this same behavior is found imitated in all sorts of spiritual schools today. Unbeknownst to people, this quest for imitation cuts off one's wisdom life, and curtails the full potential of one's possible spiritual progress.

What has happened is that spiritual practitioners have taken heed of the specific kung-fu manifestations of the cultivation path, and tried to *bring them into the causal process of the path*. They have adopted this mode of practice in hopes that it will make their progress quicker, but more often than not it has been for the worse rather than for the better, despite the fact that this seems a logical course of action. What is particularly lamentable is a further elaboration upon this idea which many have also adopted, which is the false notion that this sort of path is the only true or worthwhile way to become enlightened in this life. Hence many people mistakenly pay adulation to the Tibetan Esoteric school because of just this reason.

You will find numberless people today who have adopted this notion that Esoteric Buddhism is supreme among all paths, and Tibetan Tantra in particular, and who also think that other cultivation techniques are not even worth consideration. Of course this is an incorrect notion to begin with, but when you start to press these practitioners to test their understanding of the esoteric cultivation path, you will find that the situation is even worse.

These practitioners not only fail at comprehending the esoteric path, but also are commonly blind to even the standard *basic* principles of spiritual cultivation! If they cannot even understand the orthodox path of cultivation along with nondenominational cultivation principles, how can they understand the esoteric path they have chosen? And by what standard can they then say it is the best?

The Chakras

Despite all these drawbacks, there are, nevertheless, many wonderful things we can learn from the esoteric schools that have to do with the energetic structure of the body and various experiential stages of the cultivation trail. To be complete in our discussions on how to rank your level of meditation or spiritual progress, we must therefore review some of the yardsticks used by the Esoteric school for the very lowest stages of the path. At the highest stages, however, it all

comes down to whether you are cultivating the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya.

You should never make the mistake of disrespecting the Esoteric school, but rather, should pay attention to the ways in which you can take its medicine correctly or incorrectly, for everything in the world can either be harmful or helpful depending upon your wisdom in usage. It is not that the Esoteric school is actually wrong, but that most of the people who follow it end up hurting themselves through practicing incorrectly, even despite instructions to the opposite. This is by far the general rule rather than the exception, and if you talk to various monks of the Tibetan tradition who have traveled long in their studies and practiced hard and looked at the situation, you will privately hear the very same concerns.

One of the first Esoteric school lessons to learn is that from an esoterically oriented anatomical point of view, the existence of various chakras in the body is a fact rather than science fiction. Because they are a low stage phenomenon that almost anyone can experience with some training, we commonly find them symbolically represented in many spiritual schools, and even explicitly mentioned in the various spiritual texts of quite a few religions. While the Tao school prefers to refer to them through the discussion of elixir fields, many other traditions like to mention the chakras specifically.

In brief, our body's chi channels converge at a number of centers, called chakras, and in each center they converge (because of the branches involved) in a shape similar to a flower or the spokes of a wheel. Each chakra can be described as possessing a certain number of petals. In other words, the chi channels have places where they meet together, wherein smaller channels branch out from the larger channels like the petals on a flower, or spokes on a wheel or umbrella. The central nexus of these branches, which are often places where the chi channels become obstructed or restricted, are termed chakras.

The chakras are like organs in that different ones are responsible for different functions in the body's energy system. They are responsible for distributing chi (prana) throughout the body, which accordingly moves throughout the chi mai. The circulation of the body's chi controls various hormonal secretions (bindus or jing), which in turn, by means of the endocrine-energy mechanism, governs our physical structure.

This is how the body's energetic structure interfaces with the coarser physical structure of the body. Just as there is a reflexive relationship between thoughts and chi, there is also a relationship between our chi and our hormones, which are the body's wind and water elements. In fact, the whole science of feng shui, or geomancy, is based upon the relationship of these two elements in nature.

What does Orthodox Buddhism have to say about the chakras? Shakyamuni Buddha already explained them when he spoke about the four elements. He said there existed various invisible

energy configurations that belonged to the skandha of form, and these included the chakras. Hence, the key principle to recognize is that cultivating the chakras constitutes a stage of cultivation *within the skandha of form.*

Chakras are energy forms that are experienced through the cultivation of consciousness, meaning that they manifest because of developments produced by the process of spiritual cultivation which tend to "germinate them," or cause them to "more fully flower." For example, in dreams you have an energy body of subtle chi, and you know from your own experience that it can experience sensations. The chakras, too, are subtle energy configurations composed of the essences of chi and the five elements. Chakras are simply manifestations within the realm of form, and they do not appear because you fall asleep, but manifest because you start down the road of spiritual cultivation practice. People can even become more intuitive or psychic when the chakras start to more fully function.

Relying upon the classical descriptions from both the Vedic yoga and Tibetan esoteric schools, we find that seven chakras are most often stressed in cultivation texts:

***Muladhara* chakra** (root chakra). Muladhara means "root support." This chakra is located at the base of the spine, and corresponds to the sacrococcygeal nerve plexus. This chakra is also known as the *adhara* chakra, or "support center," and is reported as the silent resting place of the dormant kundalini. The *Gherand Samhita* of Hinduism says, "The kundalini rests at the muladhara chakra in the shape of a serpent with three and a half coils." In schools of modern psychology, this chakra is related to issues of safety and security.

***Svadhisthana* chakra** (genital chakra). Svadhisthana means "her favorite resort," or "one's own abode." The Tibetans, on the other hand, call this the "bliss guarding center." It is located at the level of the genitals or pubic bone, just above the sexual organ and directly in front of the coccyx bone. In the New Age schools, it is considered a center that deals with physical power, and thus, is intertwined with issues such as sex, money, and power.

***Manipura* chakra** (navel chakra). Manipura means "City of the Shining jewel." This name is quite understandable since in Tibetan tantra, this is the principal abode of the operational tumo fire which gives rise to the emanation of great bliss. The *Gautamiya Tantra* says, "The Manipura chakra is so called because it is lustrous like a sparkling jewel," which is certainly true when the kundalini becomes activated. The Tibetans, however, call this chakra the "center of emanation" (*nirmana* chakra). It is located at the level of the navel, corresponding roughly to the region of the solar plexus. Since this is the approximation area where a fetus grows, this is one reason why it is called the

chakra of transformation. This chakra is particularly related to the feelings of joy, bliss and a healthy body, and it is especially emphasized in the Tao school. The fire of the inner heat abides here, which is used to melt the jing, giving rise to physical bliss in the body. In popular psychology, people trace issues of self-esteem and personal power to this center.

***Anahata* chakra** (heart chakra). Anahata means "not hit" or "unstruck [sound]." The Tibetans call this the "center of dharma" (dharma chakra), or "wheel of truth." It is located at the level of the heart, with petals (branches) pointing upwards, and corresponds to attainments within the Realm of Form. The heart chakra has six knots which are hard to open. If this chakra does not open all the way, you cannot see the Tao, and therefore you cannot attain enlightenment. If you open it a little, you will sometimes attain the "clear light" of awareness, but not all the time. At the time when the chakra opens fully there will be a great bursting sound like thunder, and afterwards it will be like seeing the light. To open it, however, the other chakras will have to open first. Nevertheless, opening the heart chakra will enable you to experience the clear light of consciousness. Since the subtle drops of bodhicitta which support the experience of deep sleep are said to reside in the heart chakra, focusing on the heart chakra before sleep is the basis of the clear light of sleep yogas.

***Visuddha* chakra** (throat chakra). Visuddha means "purgation" or "purity." Tibetans call this the "center of enjoyment" (*sambhoga* chakra). It is located at the level of the throat, which corresponds to the laryngeal plexus, and its sixteen branches or petals are turned upside down like an umbrella. Unless the throat region around this chakra is opened, you will not be able to get rid of random thoughts. When Jesus forgave his tormentors while hanging on the cross, this is one piece of evidence showing that he had reached the stage of opening the throat chakra. In terms of New Age psychology, this chakra has to do with judgment, knowledge, and making choices.

***Ajna* chakra** (the pineal gland or brow chakra). Ajna means "command" and this chakra is located between the eyebrows just above the nose, and is related to the pineal gland. This is the "third eye," or "eye of Shiva" referred to in popular occult literature. In India, women typically mark this spot with various colors as a reminder to cultivate. The Egyptian cultivation tradition represented this chakra with a snake emerging from the forehead on the hat of the Egyptian king, and in the Buddhist tradition it is represented by a jewel placed at the center of the eyebrows. Sometimes it is also represented as a two-petaled lotus flower. It is a frequently cited point of concentration in many forms of meditation practice, across a variety of spiritual schools, because it is the top

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entry point of the central channel. In other words, it is a place where the ida, pingala and sushumna chi channels all meet together, which is why it is often used as a focus of attention in various schools of meditation.

***Sahasrara* chakra** (the crown chakra, or Brahman chakra). In Tibet, this chakra is known as the center of great bliss (*mahasukra* chakra) and is located at the crown of the head. In terms of physical anatomy, it is related to the pituitary gland. Sahasrara means "one thousand" so people describe this chakra as figuratively having one thousand petals. The name actually means that this chakra's importance is of a vast significant magnitude. This chakra corresponds to attainments within the Realm of Formlessness.

Today it is common for people to write books about the chakras mentioning that they have a certain color, sound, psychic ability or deity association. People also speak of various correlations with animals, elements, senses and all sorts of other things. The situation is similar to the correlation sets people associate with the trigrams of the *I-Ching*, or with the astrological signs of the Zodiac, or even Tarot cards.

Popular traditions differ regarding these correspondences, and there are also disagreements concerning the authentic characteristics of the chakras. Practically no one writing on this sort of material today has had any genuine, first hand, stable experience of these matters. Therefore, few can speak about this topic with any sort of authority. Most authors just regurgitate material from one ancient text or another without actually knowing whether it is correct or not, and so a lot of information you can now read about the chakras is not entirely correct. This is not even mentioning the fact that such information has little significance in itself anyway even when it is true, and it really is not too useful at all on the path of spiritual cultivation. However, there are a lot of individuals today who are making money based upon some reference to this or that chakra.

These seven chakras which the esoteric schools often mention are not the only important chakras of the physical nature because there are innumerable chakras throughout the body. For instance, there are several other important chakras within the head region that commonly go unmentioned. One little known esoteric fact, even amongst "masters," is that a real Bodhisattva does not leave his body using the crown chakra, but rather uses another of the head chakras located slightly lower down and towards the back of the top of the skull.

As to the sweet saliva that descends in the state of ching-an, this is due to the *lalana* chakra in the throat, also known as the *kala* chakra. This chakra is rarely mentioned by New Age teachers even though this stage of cultivation is so basic that even the Bible (*Judges* 15:19) describes it: "God clave a hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived."

Hence, this stage is not mentioned simply because so few of these people have ever reached even a rudimentary stage of cultivation attainment. Furthermore, no one mentions that the twelve cranial nerves of the head will act like various antennae after the chi channels in the brain become opened, and someone who cultivates well will also be able to see countless sacred chakras floating in space and extending upwards above the head. When you cultivate, there are even chakras extending from the tips of the fingers and toes, and various curved smooth surfaces of the body.

Despite all these various other chakras, in terms of the esoteric teachings, one normally finds an emphasis only on the crown, throat, heart and navel chakras. These four are basic to cultivation technology, which is why they are so often emphasized. They are so basic that the American Hopi Indians even speak of them in their tradition, as do the Sufis of Islam who refer to them as the Teacher (head chakra), Mysterious (throat chakra), Secret (heart chakra) and Self (navel chakra). For the purposes of cultivation attainment—at least for the lower stages of the path—these four chakras are all that many schools deem important. Why bother with so many other chakras if you only need to discuss these four? This, in itself, is a very important principle.

To really know how many chakras there are, as well as their usage, process of formation and significance, you must engage in the practice of spiritual cultivation yourself. Hence, their various descriptions are not actually that important, but practice is important. An even bigger question is far more important, which is whether opening all the chakras constitutes enlightenment?

The answer to this question is no, but cultivating to the extent that you open all the chakras does indeed provide *a good foundation from which you can better cultivate so as to become able to see the Tao*. To have all the chakras open is definitely a spiritual accomplishment that naturally happens along the spiritual path, and it is something highly commendable, but accomplishing the great matter of enlightenment is not that easy. To think enlightenment is as easy as opening all the chakras is one of the first major delusions which people usually have to discard about these matters, and yet it is a common notion that people seem to have concerning this topic.

Chi Channels, Chi Flows, Habit Energies and Superpowers

The next point we can confirm from the esoteric form schools is that there are indeed various mai, nadis or energy channels in the body. These meridians are not referring to the nerves, lymph channels or blood vessels of the physical body but to “psychic nerves” that transmit the vital chi energies. Whether you reference Chinese Taoism, Hinduism, Hatha yoga, Tibetan esotericism, Christianity, Persian alchemy, the Greek mysteries, Judaism, European Alchemy, Sufism, etc., all these schools commonly recognize the actuality of these energy channels because their existence always becomes clear during the process of spiritual cultivation. Acupuncture, body work and medicine are also now discovering that these channels really do exist.

Just as we saw a differing emphasis among the world's cultivation schools regarding the chakras, some schools emphasize only one or two particular chi channels (such as the *tu mai* and central channel). Other schools emphasize just the three main chi channels (such as the front-back-central channel complex or the left-right-central channel complex), some emphasize five channels (as in the five cardinal directions), some emphasize eight channels (as found in Taoism), and some focus on a twelve channel system. Then we also have all the countless energy meridians identified by acupuncture practice, along with the three to four hundred special acupuncture needling points. These needling points have already started to become incorporated into Western medical practices, and they are akin to the *marma* points of Indian ayurveda.

Thus, there are all sorts of subsidiary chi channels to contend with in the human body, regardless as to how many major channels we take as the basis of our anatomical cultivation system. For instance, the Tao school makes a special point of emphasizing the extra chi meridians of *tai mai*, *yang chiao mai*, *yin chiao mai*, *yang wei mai*, and *yin wei mai* in addition to the *tu mai*, *jen mai* and *chong mai* energy channels. When a person can finally open all these meridians, then he or she will attain a state that Chuang Tzu described as, "No feelings of body and limbs, no illusions, leaving form and forgetting intelligence. This is great communication (or communicating with the entire universe). This is called sitting to forget."

One reason that Chuang Tzu is so famous is not just because of the literary value of his works, but because his writings incorporate a high level of cultivation teachings like this which people somehow inherently recognize. Whether we are talking of *The Journey to the West*, the Greek myths, Dante's *Inferno*, or other famous literary works, in many cases the greatness of a literary piece stems from the fact that it secretly incorporates the profound teachings of spiritual cultivation science.

In terms of figures, the Tibet school says that there are eight primary chi channels that subdivide into three parts each. This produces 24 important chi channels, and each of these 24 channels subdivides into a further three sections to produce 72 channels. Each of these 72 channels then subdivides into 1,000 smaller nadis. With each of the minor 72 channels dividing into 1,000 smaller channels, we arrive at 72,000 channels in the physical body just as we would arrive at a countless number of capillaries starting from some original number of major veins and arteries. But do not hold to this number as an exact count of this matter. It is just a figurative number rather than an exact amount.

Some sutras will say we have 72,000 channels, some will say 80,000 or 84,000, and some will use another number all together. Some will say that we have 14,000 nerves, and modern science even has its own count for these numbers. Some ancient spiritual texts simply say there are as many "subtle pathways" or chi channels as there are hairs on the body, so we can know from this that the actual number is not the important thing.

What is important is that the chi of the body flows through all these nadi or mai, and since chi and consciousness are linked, transforming consciousness will definitely have some effect on transforming the mai. Unfortunately, not all the mai of the body are completely opened and cleared of obstructions when you first start cultivating spiritual practice, and thus the earliest phases of spiritual cultivation are greatly occupied with clearing out all the obstructions within these chi channels. If you work to clear them out, at the very least you will become healthier and extend your life span, so this is a worthwhile task whether from spiritual or more practical motivations.

In various places of the body, the chi mai come together in different shapes, and the major intersections include the chakra locations. In particular, the top and bottom of the central channel are very important locations since a lot of critical chi channels connect in these two places. The channels extending out of each of the major chakras are also important enough to have specific names. This may sound funny, but consider that anatomists also have names for every bone, ligament, muscle, nerve, artery and vein in the physical body, and they classify the different functions of each as well.

Thus, in terms of the anatomical details, sometimes our knowledge of the channels can get very specific. For instance, we know that the central channel (or sushumna) is composed of three subtle sheaths: the outer *vajra nadi*, the web-like *chitrini nadi* within this outer casing, and the subtle *brahma nadi* within the chitrini nadi. As another example of the extensive cataloging which is possible, one of the mai in Tibetan esotericism is called the *devadatta mai*, and if you can open this normally restricted mai, then you can free yourself from much of your bad behavior.

The Tao school does not discuss this mai with the particularity that the Esoteric school does, for it just talks about opening the twelve closed links of the throat. The Tao school just simplifies things rather than layers you with detail upon detail. In presenting a more rounded, or globular version of events, it communicates the essentials without becoming bogged down in details or injecting sources of potential error into the path.

Because our modern era is one of scientific investigation, people will eventually be able to deeply probe into all this material, so all these things must be revealed and the correlations between the various cultivation schools must be brought out. This is an absolute necessity, so we are performing the work of great unification for you. Through this work and others, people will eventually become able to recognize the inherent consistency and truth of spiritual cultivation. But in terms of the great matter of enlightenment, you must remember that you do not need to know this type of information at all, and it will most likely constitute a burden or mental obstacle rather than a help. It is information specific to the human body during a person's journey to enlightenment, but other beings possess entirely different esoteric anatomies just as they possess different proportions of jing, chi and shen (and other elements which do not apply to our

situation). Therefore the information does not have any sort of universal applicability.

The only common cultivation principles across the various beings and realms are the principles of mind, which is another reason why the Zen school and its teaching methods rank supreme. Why is that so? Because the Zen teaching is a special transmission outside the scriptures that does not establish any verbal formulations, and points directly to the mind to enable beings to see their true nature and become Buddhas. It does not depend upon the body or physical form, and in directly pointing to the mind without depending upon any other method, the Zen school is the highest cultivation method possible. It is free of methods and free of forms—a direct pointing only. How can you get any higher?

When we compare the teaching methodology of Zen with the teaching system of the Esoteric school, the question becomes what the purpose of all this extra esoteric detail is for? As we can remember with the story of Yeshe Tsogyel, she once practiced a contemplation on the major chi channels of her body, taking them as a mandala in her visualization practice. Hence, in the esoteric form school practices, the channels can indeed serve as a point of focused concentration for certain types of practices, but this should only be done for a short period of time. Why would you ever want to concentrate on a chi channel? Because you might want to establish a state of one-pointed concentration that would draw the winds within the central channel. Of course if you just rested your mind, this result would just happen naturally because all the chi channels would become opened and filled with chi.

In addition to this answer just provided, we must recognize that each individual chi channel carries a specific form of chi or wind element, and that if you can master the functions of these individual chi flows in terms of their interconnection with the sixth consciousness, you will become able to perform various low-level supernormal feats. One possible explanation behind certain low stage psychic phenomena—but not all of them—is that they correspond to mastering certain types of chi flows in the body. Of course this does not apply to the high stage phenomena, which have to do with the mind directly, but only with minor things. Whether high or low, however, such results still belong to the realm of birth and death.

Most cultivation schools will mention that there are five primary pranas, or chi flows in the body. In the *Upanishads* they are termed the inhalation wind, exhalation wind, intermediate wind, death wind and the dissolving wind. In yoga these five are described as the ascending, descending, middle, left and right moving pranas. These five also have names in the yoga schools: *prana* (“life holder”) corresponds to the earth element, *udana* (“upward moving”) corresponds to the wind element, *apana* (“downward moving”) corresponds to the water element, *samana* (“one like fire”) corresponds to the fire element, and *vyana* (“the encompasser”) corresponds to the element of space, or ether.

When the primary pathways (*vayu*) for these chi become knotted, blocked or swollen, then

certain parts of the body become starved of vitality with the result that sickness results. Chinese medicine is emphatic on this point, stating that *the hundred diseases all start because of wind*. In terms of Indian philosophy, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* refers to a similar point in saying, "Hiccup, asthma, cough, pain in the head, ears, eyes and other related diseases are (all) generated by disturbances of the breath [chi]." In short, all disease in the body is related to an unhealthy flow (an imbalance) of chi.

If we turn to physical correspondences, the yoga schools say that *prana* concentrates around the region of the heart and is responsible for respiration; *udana* concentrates around the throat region and is responsible for the flow of liquids and secretions; *apana* concentrates around the genital region and is responsible for the lower gastro-intestinal and urinary functions; *samana* concentrates around the navel region and is responsible for the digestion (so is often called the gastric fire); and *vyana* concentrates around the body, especially around the head, and is responsible for our bodily movements and postures.

While the Tibet school and Tao school offer countless other discussions on this topic, we will refer to an Indian source, the *Prapanchasara Tantra*, which also notes that "*akasha* (the space or ether element) is in the ears, *vayu* (the wind element) is in the skin, *agni* (the fire element) is in the eyes, *apas* (the water element) is in the tongue, and *prithvi* (the earth element) is in the nostrils." Of course there are countless other correspondence systems we might choose to bring up as well to show you the extent of the cataloguing that has developed for these things. For instance, Tibetan esotericism mimics the Indian teachings in saying that we have the life-sustaining wind, downward clearing wind, fire-accompanying wind, upward-moving wind, and pervasive energy wind. In the Chinese cultivation schools we have the chi of five elements: the red sparrow (front), black turtle (back), blue dragon (left), white tiger (right) and yellow center chi.

These names describe both the various chi types and their corresponding mai. Sometimes the Chinese use the symbolism of the five elements (earth, wood, water, metal, fire) or five organs (lungs, heart, liver, stomach, kidneys) to denote these various chi, but the point is that they are definitely accounted for in the Chinese cultivation schools. Furthermore, Chinese medicine divides the body's chi into five major categories: organ chi, meridian chi, nutritive chi, protective chi and ancestral chi.

Thus, we must note that the various cultivation schools of the world use different terms for these five major chi flows, yet they all reference the same thing, although perhaps using different aspects of the same phenomena. If you become an expert on chi, it is true that you can become an expert on medicine, weather forecasting, astrology, feng shui and all sorts of esoteric arts, so people who cultivate and open up their mai often become natural experts on various branches of esoteric knowledge such as this.

Of particular importance to this body of knowledge is the Chinese *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, which explains what happens to the body's chi flows as you encounter nine different conditions. For instance, if you become frightened, your body's chi will flow downwards, which is why people, when frightened, sometimes urinate or have uncontrolled bowel movements. Fear, therefore, represents a problem in cultivation because not only does it result in a paralysis that inhibits change, it also causes you to lose chi. The *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* also states that sorrow or sadness causes chi to dissipate, while a mood of concentration will cause it to condense. For those who want to study the flow of chi and match it with modern psychology, a lot of incredibly useful information is available in the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*.

What does Orthodox Buddhism say about these matters? It says that the chi is always coursing through the body, and that the body is always experiencing a state of large or small sickness even though we do not normally recognize it. Sometimes we meditate and feel sore, which Buddhism calls experiencing the arising of the "big knife wind" or "small knife wind." When the chi initially starts transforming the body, it is possible to experience all sorts of painful sensations as it starts to open up internal obstructions, and it is because the process can be so painful that it is often referred to as the knife wind.

The yogic literature on kundalini awakening also refers to the chi feeling as if it is cutting you up inside. This happens when the kundalini starts to penetrate closed regions of the body, so the yoga schools explain the phenomena a bit differently than the poetic Buddhist descriptions of the process. In either case you can experience eight sensations such as pain, itching, cold, warmth, weightlessness, heaviness, roughness and smoothness when this begins to happen as a result of the frictional forces being experienced in the body.

Hatha yoga simplifies this description even further, saying that as your chi begins to enter the body's central channel, or "*zhong mai*" in Chinese, the body will at first perspire, and then tremble. When it comes down to concentrated practice efforts, instead of specifying all the various chi types and their routes, yoga pranayama practice usually focuses on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, as well as the respiratory gap between these two chi flows.

This respiratory gap is called the "intermediate chi," which is the stage of hsi in the Tao school. It is also the real center and focus of genuine Hindu pranayama practice. As Patanjali said, real yoga is between the in-breath and the out-breath, and this is the focus of genuine pranayama practice. Since thoughts and breath (chi) are linked, Patanjali's words also point to the importance of cessation-contemplation practice for discerning that empty pause between one's thoughts when one's chi is calm, and turning it into something universal.

In spiritual cultivation practice you cannot transform your chi by relying on sensations, because feelings and sensations are always involved with movement and are therefore by definition

unreliable. But awareness is not based on chi, and awareness can separate or detach from the body. Thus, in cultivation, to bring about any stages of transformation, it will not be beneficial to try to adjust your chi channels by playing with sensations. Rather, to adjust matters you must learn how to cultivate the pure awareness of the mind that can detach from the body and its sensations. This, in fact, is a way to cultivate prajna wisdom. You cultivate emptiness and the illuminating empty awareness of your self-mind because prajna awareness functions without attachment. In just watching or observing mental events without attachment, you will not interrupt any internal chi flows within your body, and not being jostled, they will settle to their true balanced state of calm, which will correspondingly produce a natural state of mental clarity.

If we go back wishing to link together the indications of Buddhism, medicine and the Esoteric school, we must start with the fact that our chi and consciousness are separate, but they share the same source and can interact with each other. Just as a weather front gives birth to a variety of winds flowing in all directions, there are a variety of chi fronts flowing through all the body's internal organs, and each of these organs has its own specific, characteristic chi flows. Here is an even bigger way to view things. Since we also have our own individual personalities, habits, and forms of behavior, thus, as individuals we, too, can be represented as a unique set of habit energies, or *habit chi flows*. There is no such thing as an individual self since all conventional existence is defined through interdependent origination, so what we are can be viewed as just a locus cloud of karmic chi energies.

Keeping this in mind, you can see from yet another aspect how the process of cultivation comes down to the task of transforming your physical and mental habit energies. We must try to purify them and make them more refined. We must try to abandon any bad habits or evil ways we have become attached to, and replace them with good habits and more virtuous behavior. Recurring bad habits are like a river of chi that cannot stop, so purifying our behavior can be viewed from the aspect of purifying our chi and its habitual flows. Since chi is related to thoughts, this really means transforming the mind.

When you think of the individual as a flowing collection of dirty chi streams, you will more readily recognize why we say that cultivation comes down to transforming our habitual mental streams of activity. Just like the seeds of the alaya, the chi circulations of the personality and physical nature are involved in an endless flow, and if we do not purify these streams or learn how to detach from them, we will never arrive at the ability to see the Tao.

From a humanistic viewpoint, this makes behavior the beginning, the process and fruitional result of the spiritual path as well. From the standpoint of karma or astrology, this even tells us that when an unfortunate karmic period arises that connects with our chi flows, the only way to change the situation is to detach from the pull of these flows and what they might impel us to do. Thus cultivation is definitely the only true way to change one's fortune and destiny—by resisting or detaching from the karmic flows that would impel us into a certain karmic destiny—and the

only way to truly actualize the meaning of "free will."

It is hard to stop something that never ceases flowing, so in spiritual cultivation you learn to purify your physical and mental habits by transforming them at the root, which will in turn cleanse your chi flows and bring them into a harmonious state of balance. In other words, the proper way to cultivate your chi channels is by cleansing the mind, and the way to purify the mind is to learn detachment through emptiness meditation.

The proper way to spiritually cultivate therefore actually has nothing to do with concentrating on this or that macrocosmic or microcosmic chi circulation. If you try to change your chi through the force of other chi, you are doing nothing more than adding more chi turbulence into the picture.

Various Schools Discuss the Chi and Chi Channels

In talking about esoteric things, the Tao school in particular likes to say, "the three flowers assemble at the top," and "the five chi return to the *Yuan* (origin)." As we have mentioned in previous chapters, the jing, chi and shen are the three flowers which "assemble at the top." This particular phrase refers to the stage when the eight extra chi meridians are all open, and a practitioner can thereby forget their body, and reach a point in their cultivation when the jing has transformed into chi and chi into shen.

At this time a spiritual practitioner will say that the physical body seems to be both there and not there. It will seem as if it exists and yet does not exist. This is a stage where a cultivation practitioner can turn inward and forget himself or herself, and so the top of the head will feel as if it has opened and a clear, cool and pleasant feeling pervades the body like the sun shining through an open window in Spring time.

This is the Taoist stage of "sprinkling the head (baptism) with clarified butter," and it is a genuine stage of real empowerment, not some symbolic empowerment granted by a guru in a ceremony. It is also a time when it is easy to experience astral projection. However, despite what various New Age cultivation schools may say, people should never try to forcibly produce astral projections, for if they do they may turn down the wrong roads on the cultivation trail. Despite what others may claim in their search for miracles and marvels, playing with such things constitutes a deviation from the true path of spirituality.

On the other hand, the "five chi returning to *Yuan* (the source)" refers to a stage, shortly after the "three flowers assemble at the top," wherein the breathing seems to halt, but the entire body feels as soft as cotton. The physical body feels quite warm and pleasant even though the coarse external respiration of the body has ceased. In this stage one is not conscious of the body anymore, and ordinary thoughts and feelings seem to melt away. But this still is not the stage of

chi transforming into shen because attaining this transformation requires that you must still proceed even further in your spiritual practice. Nevertheless these are some of the rudimentary esoteric stages, although we have described them using the terminology of the Tao school.

To be complete in our discussions of chi, we must also mention that in the Tibetan school of Esoteric Buddhism, the five principal energy flows are accompanied by an additional five secondary energies, for a total of ten major chi currents. These secondary energies constitute subdivisions of the original five chi, and are known as the moving energy, fully-moving energy, perfectly moving energy, very moving energy, and certainly moving energy.

All of these secondary chi energies pertain to the specific functioning of the five senses, and in several sutras and tantras, the sequential formation of these chi routes and chi flows during a fetus's development are outlined in detail. Despite such specificity, however, you must be very careful about trusting the accuracy of some of these texts.

If you wanted to get very specific about all the chi mai, we could go into even more detail. For instance, the Hindu tradition focuses on the ida, pingala and sushumna channels, but also mentions seven lesser nadis. These are: the *gandhari*, connected to the left eye, *hastijihva*, connected to the right eye, *yashaswini*, connected to the left ear, *poosha*, connected to the right ear, *alambusha*, connected to the mouth, *kuhu*, connected to the reproductive organs, and the *shankhini*, connected to the rectum.

This information naturally has correspondences in Taoism and in Tibetan esotericism, but the Hindu Upanishads go even further by discussing the *jihva*, *kurma*, *saraswati*, *vishvodari*, *payaswini*, *saumya*, *varuni*, *shura* and *vilambha* channels as well. We could go on and on elucidating upon esoteric anatomy in this way, but for our purposes the main channels are the primary five.

In terms of the sequences and processes of cultivation, the yogic chi mai practices of India hold an extremely strong relationship with Indian ayurvedic medical practice, whose theoretical underpinnings differ markedly from those of the school of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Because of this difference in emphasis between the two medical systems, and even though the Indian and Chinese cultivation schools both talk about the chi mai, the Indians concentrate on the central (sushumna), left (ida) and right (pingala) chi channels in their cultivation practices while tending to ignore the *tu mai* (back) and *jen mai* (front) channels which the Chinese emphasize.

The Tibetans received much of their yogic and tantric literature from India, so they mimic the Indians in concentrating on the left, right and central channels (which they visualize as white, red and blue in color, respectively) although they also recognize the existence of the front and back chi channels. The difference, therefore, is simply a matter of emphasis, as we found illustrated by the abbreviated Tibetan concentration on only four of the major chakras.

Regardless of the cultivation tradition we might turn to, all the schools emphasize the importance of opening the central chi channel in order to be able to obtain samadhi, for as the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* says, "When the chi flows through the sushumna central channel, the mind becomes steady." It also states, "When the nadis are impure, chi cannot penetrate into the sushumna. Then the yogi achieves nothing, nor can he reach the state of deep concentration (samadhi)."

Turning to the Chinese *I-Ching*, the second hexagram comments, "When the middle chi is harmonized, chi is stabilized naturally and shen will properly condense in the right place. Beauty is within and flows to the limbs." This statement actually refers to samadhi attainments as well. *The Yellow Emperor's Classic* of Chinese medicine also talks of the chi entering the central channel, at which point seeing a dark blue sky will indicate that your chi has become stabilized and your main chi mai have opened.

Various other cultivation texts from a wide variety of religious schools emphasize the cardinal importance of the central channel. *Tao and Longevity*, which pulls together the various ideas regarding the mai, jing, chi, shen, and samadhi, reminds us:

> If one does not actually open the left and right *Mai* and the middle *Mai*, then it will be absolutely impossible for him to enter into genuine *samadhi*, or experience the condensing of *shen* and accumulation of *ch'i* and the cultivation of *ch'i* to transmute it into *shen* to enter the state of Taoism referred to as *heaven inside heaven*. In other words, after the *Jen Mai* is opened up, the left and right *Mai* of esoteric Buddhism and yoga will naturally open up and, consequently, the *ch'i* can circulate without obstruction. At this stage one begins to enter the Tao and moves beyond the practice of the techniques of meditation alone. One will also begin to see some hope of opening the middle or central *Mai*, which remains.1

Thus, in spiritual cultivation, when the front and back or left and right chi channels open up, only then can one finally begin working on the central channel.

An Introduction to Tibetan Esoteric Practice

The Esoteric school of Tibet, which originally developed out of Indian tantric teachings and practices, discusses many methods for getting one's chi to enter into the central channel, and a researcher will find a great commonality between these two schools. However, much in the Indian tantric tradition still remains a closely guarded secret, or an open secret that is hard to unravel because of the way in which various yogic texts were written. The same can be said of Medieval European alchemy.

Since many of the relevant cultivation practices and theory on the central channel have already been transmitted to Tibet and become intertwined with various Taoist teachings, and since a vast amount of Tibetan commentary is already readily available on this topic, we will restrict our

discussions of Tantra to the materials of the Tibet school.

The reason we are often using the term "Tibet School" in our discussions is because Tibetan Buddhism no longer reflects the school of Esoteric Buddhism that Nagarjuna originally laid out. In Tibet, the original teachings of Esoteric Buddhism have become intertwined with those from the schools of Yoga, Taoism and Bon—much of which constitutes a pollution—so much of what has developed in Tibet over time is something peculiar to itself that is separate from true Esoteric Buddhism. In fact, that is why Lama Tsong Khapa had to correct so much mistaken Tibetan material.

Tibetan esoteric practice differentiates itself from other schools in that it always talks about "co-emergent emptiness and bliss." The point of the Esoteric school is that if you attain the samadhi of emptiness but do not work on transforming the body so as to attain the various realms of physical bliss connected with chi transformations, you will never attain Tao. However, it tends to forget that you must first empty the view of the body and attain emptiness in order to generate the mental joys and physical blisses of the path that can transform your physical nature. In cultivation, you cannot get anywhere emphasizing the existence aspect of conventional reality, but must always cultivate according to the principles of emptiness.

In cultivation, even if you practice your chi, your mai and kundalini, you may never end up realizing the emptiness aspect of the Tao. You may become so fixated upon playing with your bodily form that you never accomplish any mental stage of nondiscrimination whatsoever. In that case you will only be increasing your causes for life and death, and you will not be able to escape the clutches of reincarnation because you will not be able to become the master. You will never, in this manner, become the master of your own mind, nor of your fate. On the other hand, if you simply attain a state of nonconceptual absorption without transforming your physical nature of five elements, you will not be able to reach the highest levels of spiritual attainment, either. Hence both body and mind must become purified along the path, but you should never take the deadly route of focusing upon the body side of this duo.

On the cultivation path you must be careful to avoid cultivating only the body and not the mind. Conversely, you must also be careful not to cultivate a "dead tree Zen," wherein you cultivate mental clarity and stillness, but never enable the vital energies of your body to become transformed because you are engaged in a subtle form of mental holding, attachment, blocking or clinging. Cultivation definitely involves a mind-body connection, so both aspects must undergo transformation. Then again, while we must absolutely focus on the mental aspect of this duo for the highest spiritual progress, do not forget that both mind *and* matter must transform along the spiritual path. Otherwise, you can only achieve the dharmakaya, and not the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya bodies.

This information about the possibility of "dead tree Zen" is nothing new to the Zen masters, for

they already know about the possible error of cultivating "dry Zen." Simply cultivating stillness produces the "ground of dry wisdom," which is a realm of emptiness clarity that lacks the joy and vitality of life. For instance, there is the famous story of an old woman who sent her enticing daughter to flirt with an old Zen monk, and who subsequently chased him from the hut she had been providing him. She realized that despite so many years of practice, he had only achieved this type of dry wisdom attainment, and so she no longer wished to support this sort of incorrect practice.

The stage of dry Zen may seem like a high stage of wisdom clarity attainment, but it is certainly not Tao, it is certainly not Zen, and it is most certainly not the Way. Make no mistake: even Zen students can go wrong, which is why they, too, need good masters to guide them along the spiritual path.

The Zen masters know of this possible error of dead tree Zen, and so practitioners in the Zen school simply let the body become transformed naturally and avoid blocking the mind to produce clarity, which is a common mistake in many cultivation traditions. They do not spend time concentrating on physical transformations, nor do they prevent their occurrence either.

As to the practice of mental holding or blocking, it can produce what seems like a sort of empty clarity, but suppressing thoughts inhibits the circulation of vital energy and only produces a sort of limiting, stupid state of mind since it is forcefully halting the workings of the sixth consciousness. Successful practitioners cultivate mental emptiness without suppressing thoughts or trying to force any transformations to transpire along the path. If you practice this way you will progressively encounter the four dhyana, and the four dhyana already embody the realms of joy and bliss and chi mai transformation which you want to happen.

One way to progress in Tao entails mastering the four dhyana as well as the formless samadhi absorptions. Although they did not normally use such words when describing their cultivation practice, from ancient times to the present, there has never been a Zen master who did not attain the fruit of enlightenment through the diligent devotion to such practice in meditation work. Thus, the Zen school indeed recognizes all these possible stages of progress, but practitioners accomplish them in a natural, nonforced, nonartificial manner.

The Zen school instructs people to keep meditating to reach the Tao despite whatever signs or marks arise on the spiritual path, and if these samadhi realms appear, then so be it. Zen practitioners just use them as purification vehicles that can help them keep on the track of searching for the fundamental roots of the mind. The Zen school therefore tends to dispense with kung-fu particulars and heads for the heart of the matter by cultivating nonattachment and nonego to naturally accomplish the spiritual way. As the Buddhist scriptures warn, "When the causal ground is not genuine, the results obtained are twisted." Hence, the Zen school dispenses with much of the artificial techniques used by the esoteric schools, and ignores the experiential

realms that arise as well. It does not get bogged down or side-tracked by such matters.

The Esoteric school, on the other hand, takes an entirely different approach and using forceful techniques, tries to purposely generate various stages of emptiness and bliss co-joined, as well as various particular marks or signs of the cultivation journey. It tries to cultivate things in stages whereas Zen just heads directly for the ultimate source. The theory of the Esoteric school is that the co-emergent joy and emptiness are so strong that through their conjunction, you can break through many cultivation barriers, and so you try to cultivate the four dhyana by concentrating on their components. But a big secret is that the Esoteric school, for reasons we cannot get into and which would be hotly disputed, does not say that these empties and blisses are the components of the four dhyana.

The co-emergent joy and emptiness of the Esoteric school are no different from the characteristics of the four dhyana, which are also stages of emptiness and bliss, only the Hinayana and Orthodox schools never describe things in this way. The Esoteric school does not like to say practitioners are simply cultivating the four dhyana either. Nevertheless, in either case you must generate the joys and blisses of the dhyana, which are states of prajna wisdom along with samadhi realization. The great Tibetan master Tsong Khapa said that you have to generate emptiness and bliss together to experience supreme joy, and instructed us that we must rest the mind in bliss and blend this with the beyond-conceptuality consciousness. Only in doing so can you train to experience the Tao.

While there is nothing wrong with these statements, the Tibetan school of esotericism often turns to very forceful, artificial techniques to light the initial spark that will produce these scenarios. There is nothing really wrong with that, either, unless you hold too tightly to these things and think this is the only way to cultivate. The problem arises in that most practitioners who follow this school are not very wise, and so they fall into clinging to these methods without understanding their underlying inherent defect: *they involve bringing the sixth consciousness into the body, and thus involve clinging to the sixth consciousness*. Thus, instead of guaranteeing liberation, these methods can actually lead to further delusions and realms of attachment. Not recognizing this point, most practitioners in these schools, even when they do attain the samadhi, often retain very subtle degrees of attachment throughout their cultivation practice. The situation is different, of course, for those who choose a path of prajna cultivation all the way.

Using Esoteric school parlance, joy and bliss are high stage phenomena of supreme yang nature, and they belong to the realm of existence, or being. Hence, the procedure of the Esoteric school is to cultivate the existence aspect of reality (the physical body and physical bliss), together with the emptiness aspect of reality, in order to attain Tao. In essence, this is jointly cultivating the realm of life and death (existence, or being) along with Nirvana (emptiness). This is a beautiful way to explain things, which may sound more appealing than just saying you should cultivate the four dhyana, so from this aspect it should be commended.

In the final achievement, however, no matter what particular school you follow, you must be wise enough not to mentally abide in the causal realm of life and death, and be compassionate enough not to remain in Nirvana. This world is full of pain and suffering, but a true spiritual cultivator must exhibit compassion and keep selflessly entering the Three Realms in order to help others along the path awaken. Out of choice, they become reborn in this world simply because their wisdom and energies are needed. A cardinal idea inherent in tantric cultivation is to therefore cultivate joy and bliss in this world while mentally transcending its afflictions. One cultivates attainment of the path, and then tries to integrate this attainment with one's everyday affairs.

The Esoteric school feels that only bliss and emptiness co-joined can allow you to achieve this end goal of transcendence. Only their simultaneous completion will allow you to attain the highest, highest Tao, which is the Bodhisattva ideal of emptiness and compassion. Bliss and ecstasy alone, as in *bhakti* yoga or Christian mysticism, is considered only one half of the total picture; the attainment of emptiness and clarity alone is the other.

In effect, Buddha awakened to empty co-dependent arising, so you have to cultivate *both* emptiness and existence. You must cultivate the joy and bliss which correspond to the conventional existence aspect of co-dependent arising, and the emptiness of mental discrimination that corresponds to the peacefulness of Nirvana. This union in cultivation is the Tao, where empty clear presence is integrated with joyful functioning in the world. This is also the Tao of the Mahayana Bodhisattva savior who is in the world but not of it, skilled in living by karmic law without being trapped by the realm of samsara.

With this as a background, an important question arises as to how the particular concepts of Esoteric Buddhism relate to the Orthodox school of Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism maintains that it achieves the same end using different means, but because of the great philosophical importance behind the two approaches embodied in these schools, we must ask whether the two paths are in agreement or in conflict with one another. Only then will we be able to answer all the people who say that one school is higher than the other. To come to an answer, we must understand a little bit of history regarding these schools, and an understanding of their principles.

The Esoteric School and the Tantric Tradition

When Shakyamuni delivered the teachings we now call Buddhism, he first taught the Hinayana, and then the Mahayana path. Both of these schools were means of cultivating toward enlightenment, although the Mahayana path proceeds much farther in extent than the Hinayana and is broader in concept. When the Hinayana master Vasubandhu first heard there were Mahayana teachings that went beyond the Hinayana, he criticized this as nonsense. However, when he heard the Mahayana teachings that his brother Asanga learned from the Bodhisattva Maitreya, he found them so profound and wonderful that he wanted to cut out his tongue for having doubted these things. That is how profound and wonderful is the Mahayana path.

The Mahayana teachings are so great that they can absolutely rejuvenate an entire world, or simply a spiritual tradition, if their contents can be absorbed into that world or tradition. In fact, this is one of the potential hopes for an even further blossoming of Christianity in the West. Aside from this, you cannot criticize the Hinayana for falling behind the Mahayana in terms of scope and splendor, because without the solid groundwork foundations provided by Hinayana cultivation methods, you could not possibly attain the Mahayana path. Thus, there is ample room and definite purposes for both schools in the world. In short, one cannot exist without the other.

These two schools—the Mahayana and Hinayana—are called "the causal vehicle" because they are based on cultivating the conditions that lead to enlightenment. In other words, they are "causal" schools because if you cultivate the necessary conditions for enlightenment, then in the future you will attain enlightenment. These paths cultivate the "causes" leading to enlightenment; they focus on the causative process behind attaining self-realization, and involve cultivation exercises that "look forward."

Since attachment to form is a major deterrent to this process, form is not stressed on any pathways of Orthodox Buddhism. Rather, prajna wisdom and the emptiness of mind are stressed, and the cultivation path is described in terms of detaching from form and phenomena, including mental states. If you can learn detachment, you can abandon the view of having or being a body or self, and more quickly reach the prajna realization of mind that is the basis of all spiritual attainment.

In effect, Shakyamuni Buddha originally taught the doctrine of emptiness to reverse our habit of grasping at an "I." He taught this path to reverse our habit of apprehending and grasping to a self in persons and phenomena. If we can abandon our habit of grasping to an internal or external "I," we might be able to reach the stage of selflessness, emptiness or nonego wherein we can realize our absolute nature.

If you do not empty the view of the self, then you cannot attain mental emptiness or purify the seventh consciousness. Furthermore, if you do not get past the view of being a self or body, there is no way that the joys and blisses of the spiritual path will arise. However, if you do attain the emptiness of letting go, they will all arise quite naturally but even when they do arise, you have to refrain from holding onto them. You cannot remain attached to them, but must let them empty out so that you progress even further in cultivation by climbing the ranks of the dhyana. So where is there any fuss or argument between these various schools?

In the Hinayana, the potential for escaping from personal suffering is used as the motivation for spiritual practice, whereas in the Mahayana, the goal of saving all beings becomes the motivation behind spiritual practice. The Hinayana school focuses on disillusionment with samsaric indulgence, and this gives rise to the job of detaching from phenomena in order to become liberated from the suffering of samsara. For this goal, emptiness and detachment are stressed at

every turn. On the other hand, since the Mahayana path emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal of compassionate service to others, skill in means is stressed at every turn, including expedient means in selecting effective cultivation practices for others. Since skillful expedient means requires wisdom and flexibility, prajna wisdom is extremely stressed on the Mahayana trail. Naturally this is not the only reason it is stressed, for if you do not cultivate prajna transcendental wisdom, you will not be able to realize your self-nature (see the Tao) in the first place.

After Shakyamuni died, the esoteric tradition holds that he incarnated again as the enlightened being Padmasambhava through "miraculous" birth in a lotus flower. He then traveled around Tibet transmitting the Esoteric school teachings. Yeshe Tsogyel, whose biography we have dealt with, was both his tantric consort and student, and she recorded many of these teachings that were passed down to us and became part of the tantric path.

The tantric vehicle is called "the resultant vehicle" rather than the "causal vehicle" because, in a manner similar to the later history of the Tao school, practitioners in the Esoteric school try to bring foreknown kung-fu results of the path—things which result *after* attaining the higher stages of spiritual attainment—*into the very process of the path from the beginning*. In other words, practitioners try to imitate the resultant phenomenal effects of high stage cultivation in their preliminary meditations, with the hopes to thereby more speedily bring about the actual higher stages of spiritual experience and attainment. So the tantric vehicle, or school of Vajrayana, is the vehicle that emphasizes meditations incorporating the experiential kung-fu results of the path into the process of the path. It tries to put the *results* of the path into the process of the path, and is therefore called the "resultant vehicle." It takes the end product, and puts it into the process of achievement.

In understanding this particular tradition, the story of Padmasambhava's birth out of a lotus flower is of particular importance. First, this birth, in itself, symbolizes the body's chakras. Also, because he relied on a lotus flower for his birth—which is a type of consciousness transference technique used by high adepts who want to preserve much of their knowledge from their previous life—we cannot say that he was a monk or a regular person either.

Another issue comes up in that through his supposedly previous incarnation as Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava first taught all the teachings on emptiness (non-form) before he introduced the esoteric teachings on form, so symbolically speaking, this teaches us that we must master the one set of teachings before the other. In other words, you cannot practice the form school teachings without mastering the emptiness teachings as their foundation, otherwise you will go astray in your cultivation efforts. This is why even the Esoteric school requires people to study the sutras for many years before they are introduced to the form based teachings of tantra.

Padmasambhava introduced many teachings on chakras, mai and kundalini into the tantric tradition, in addition to the standard teachings on emptiness, suffering and nonexistence. He

mixed a lot of these things together, as did Nagarjuna when he originally established the basis of the Esoteric school. As stated, the basic idea of the tantric teachings is to supplement the natural results of cultivation attainment into the path ahead of time, through the process of specific meditations and particular yogic applications, in order to make faster progress in spiritual practice.

This is the inherent purpose of concentrating on the physical form in cultivation—*to hopefully speed up progress on the spiritual path*. This particular approach sounds so logical, but the records of this school, as well as the Tao school of China and yoga schools of India, show that it is fraught with all sorts of pitfalls and dangers that only a hero can triumph over. In fact, all the pitfalls arise precisely because the school chooses this route of concentrating on form!

Practitioners of esotericism and yogic tantra tend to go astray quite often when compared to the other cultivation schools, and even evil people have used the techniques of these schools to do bad things. Worst of all, because of the school's insistence on visualizing form, practitioners in this school almost always develop a habitual attachment to phenomena, and this habit of clinging they develop is something they cannot easily discard even in countless subsequent lives. An example of a visualization effect running across incarnations can be seen when an individual develops the signs of stigmata because of intensive visualization and concentration practice (on Jesus' wounds) which they performed in a previous life. Just as a cultivator can produce the figure of a Buddha in his or her bones, which shows up upon cremation, due to concentration practice in this life, this sort of effect can run across lives.

People usually think stigmata are a sign of holiness when they occur, but they are actually indicative of intensive practice that became too attached to form. These individuals were able to reach the state of cessation in a previous life—from cessation and contemplation practice—but did not cultivate sufficient prajna wisdom correctly to let go of their visualized concentration. Hence, the effects of visualization were imprinted, as a sort of residue, upon their karmic chi body. So while this type of meritorious mark indicates a previous history of their cultivation efforts, it also illustrates a failure to master the real gist of cultivation practice. Such are the dangers of the form schools and their techniques.

Yet another cause of stigmata, or of the flesh weeping blood, is that an individual has been unable to let go of a past trauma and the grief is carried over into the present incarnation. When an individual experiences extreme regret or sorrow, they can actually exhaust the amount of water that their body has allocated for crying, and can shed blood instead. There is a famous story of a Chinese king who wept tears of blood after his country was wiped out in an epidemic. The historical date of this incident preceded the birth of Jesus Christ, and demonstrates that this phenomenon is not exclusively found in Christianity.

When someone cuts off their wisdom life, because of an intensified attachment to form which he

or she self-inflicts through misguided practice, this is perhaps the worst of all the possible mistakes you can make in spiritual cultivation. In terms of actual cultivation results rather than just theory, when you teach people the form school teachings and visualization techniques, they tend to take this medicine incorrectly and cling to it life after life. Furthermore, practitioners following esoteric teachings often end up doing all sorts of crazy things in society.

As an example, history clearly shows that when esoteric sexual cultivation teachings became popular in a society, its people tended to employ these methods to their own detriment or to inflict harm on others, and nearly everyone retrogressed rather than made progress because of such "esoteric" practices. Even when those who are pure hope to use these methods to make progress quickly, they fail to recognize that *there is no quick way to attain wisdom other than true emptiness cultivation*. We need only look at the harm on society caused in Tang dynasty China, due to the importation of the sexual practices, to see how destructive they can be on a society as a whole, and can then realize why the Esoteric school was subsequently outlawed in the country. Very few individuals can reach ultimate enlightenment using the Esoteric school, for its very nature constitutes clinging and it is fraught with all sorts of seductive dangers.

Nevertheless, you have to stand back for a moment and realize how great the scope of Buddhism is. It is so great that it offers teachings on the mind-only way of pure prajna, as well as teachings for spiritual attainment that rely upon cultivating physical form. There are teachings for all sorts of individuals at all sorts of levels of attainment, and who have all sorts of capacities of understanding and ability. You can cultivate the existence aspect of reality, the emptiness aspect, or the Middle Way between the two.

The form teachings were initially introduced by Nagarjuna so as to help people with a certain type of mentality, but Shakyamuni introduced the most successful and surest pathway of cultivation practice. Nevertheless, while Shakyamuni stressed nonego, suffering, emptiness and impermanence, in the *Nirvana Sutra* he turned around and spoke of permanence, bliss, selfhood and purity which are all concepts of positive existence.

In other words, during his initial years of teaching, Shakyamuni Buddha first spoke of the concepts of nonexistence, and then at the very end of his life—after he had laid a sure foundational basis of the path—he spoke of the concepts of existence that formed the central basis of the Esoteric school. Thus, the philosophical ideas of existence—which lead to the cultivation of the physical form and physical reality—are not alien to Orthodox Buddhism. In fact, there is no difference between the orthodox sutra vehicle and the esoteric vehicle in terms of the Buddhahood, or enlightenment, that is to be attained. But the methods and efficiencies for getting there are quite different.

It is a fact that you must cultivate starting with your present physical body, and you must start from where you presently are. People always have difficulty looking for the starting place of the

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spiritual journey, but it is as simple as starting in this present moment. This is where you start because it is your present karmic situation, so cultivation starts with just this body and mind as you have now, and needs no further prior preparation. As soon as your mind even considers the idea of searching for enlightenment, you have started on the journey.

As to your physical body, it is "false" or "untrue" in the sense that it is not your real self, for it is only an impermanent construction of causes and conditions within the illusive realm of form. However, before attaining enlightenment you need to rely on this false body to reach your true body, the dharmakaya, and you need to use this false body, as an expression of your functioning, if you want to help others. So the search for enlightenment starts with what you have at this moment, for there is nothing else to wait for. You do not have to wait for some sort of better conditions to start training in spiritual practice, for what you have is certainly enough. All you have to do is start.

Using your present body for cultivation is like the process of seeking water—to seek water, you first need a good container. Thus, you first work on purifying this body of yours in cultivation, and you use the more purified body you produce as a vehicle through which to attain Tao. That is why we sometimes have the yang bodies of Taoism (the "body doubles") and so forth come forth. These are the bodies which naturally arise from the purification processes of cultivation, which are natural nondenominational productions which occur in the Tao school, yoga schools, Buddhism, Christianity (see the story of Padre Pio) or whatever. In fact, to be able to produce another body like this equates with the lowest Tao levels of the esoteric path, a stage equivalent to the accomplishment level of the Taoist Immortals. But even these various form bodies are not immune to decay, and they are certainly not real. You can generate these things and play with them for centuries, but they do not constitute *That Thing* which is ultimately real.

The Esoteric school likes to play with intangible thought born illusory bodies before it generates the equivalent of the yang shen. The question is, why does it play with these things? It is not because the thought borne bodies have beautiful appearances. Rather, it is because our physical and mental bodies are considered too dirty as vehicles to support the cultivation of the Tao. Hence, the Esoteric school says you need to use the illusory body, which is composed of a more refined state of chi, as a more fit vehicle for succeeding on the path of realization.

In other words, the Esoteric school takes the route of cultivating the physical body because it believes that our physical nature, as it is, represents too much of an obstructive burden on the path. It believes that our untransformed physical nature of five elements actually works against us, and its inherent impurities prevent us from seeing the Tao. But whether it is this or that particular body, we must remember what Zen master Yun-men said: "Within heaven and earth, in space and time, there is a jewel, hidden in the mountain of form." The important thing is not a purified or impure body, but that ultimate thing beyond.

The illusory body is not the real thing. It is a projection of the mind so it is not real. Rather, it is that ever-present jewel, the source of prajna awareness, which constitutes the fundamental thing you must seek. Because prajna wisdom lets you realize the inherent emptiness nature of all things, you must cultivate prajna as a necessity for the spiritual path rather than go after cultivating an illusory body. The emphasis in spiritual cultivation is always on prajna wisdom, and then its application in behavior through skillful or expedient means as demonstrated in the *Lotus Sutra*.

You must indeed rely on a physical body to cultivate, but through the process of cultivation you will naturally purify the body and thus, in time be able to detach from it. The detachment form the body is the whole point of the purification in the first place. Only in detaching from the body will you be able to experience the mind's fundamental emptiness, and the bliss of the physical nature which is just a sensation. However, most people who cultivate get stuck focusing upon their body, unaware that the only way to really experience the emptiness and bliss of the dhyana is to get rid of the view of the body. When they run after cultivating these things specifically, they typically only produce semblance or resemblance dharma.

Here, however, is where a major emphasis in the path to Tao differs among the various schools. The Zen school says from the start that if you cannot see the fundamental nature, all the body and form practices are worthless. You can spend eons cultivating these practices and never get closer to Tao if you do not stop fixating on form altogether. Hence, the Zen school skips all the details about our chi, mai, chakras, and kundalini as well as the steps regarding physical purification, and attaining an inner body and so on.

Why does the Zen school ignore all these phenomena? Because the Zen school does not want people getting side-tracked in their striving for enlightenment. The physics of the process remains the same, so why talk about it? The Zen school does not want people becoming attached to manifestations of form, nor does it want them to start playing around with constructions of consciousness either. After all, everything is a construction of consciousness, and if playing with consciousness could help you climb the ranks of spirituality, we would all have PhD's already! All these things are unrealities anyway.

Esoteric Buddhism, on the other hand, has a fondness for this stuff and says you cannot get to Tao unless you purify and transform the physical bodily form, for this is the form which supports consciousness. It proposes that if the energy matrix of this form is unclean, then so will be the corresponding consciousness, and an obstructed or impure consciousness will not be able to experience any profound spiritual realms, or realize any great ranks of spiritual achievement.

Esoteric Buddhism therefore insists you have to begin the path from the basis of cultivating physical existence. It laughs at the Zen school saying, "How can you achieve enlightenment if you do not transform your body? This is what you are missing. That is why our school is higher."

It also mistakenly thinks that the Zen school only leads to the dharmakaya achievement. But how many Esoteric school masters really and truly even make it this far?

The propaganda of this school makes you think the numbers of its successful adherents are quite large, but frankly speaking, they are exceedingly small indeed. Scanning history and the multitude of the world's spiritual schools, Zen wins hands down in terms of the number of people who actually attained genuine enlightenment. Compared to the Zen school, there is no comparison whatsoever with any other school around. But now the Zen school is virtually nonexistent.

The Zen school says, "It is perfectly true that you have to transform the body, but this transformation happens anyway as you cultivate the samadhi, dhyana and skandhas, so why make any fuss about it? The important point is not form, for form takes care of itself. Form naturally transforms as it has to in order to fall in line with the trail, so do not force the issue and try to create any more artificial forms on the cultivation path according to some design you have developed in your mind. After all, how do you know what form you should cultivate, and how do you know that your design is correct?

"If you do not realize detachment and emptiness, but just continue playing with the chi and chakras and mai and kundalini, *you will actually only be increasing your causes for life and death*, and you still will not be able to jump out of cyclical existence. If you do not realize the fundamental essence, then all your playing with form is useless. It will amount to nothing but a waste of time. Don't you even know that if your mind is peaceful and kind, and you simply match your breathing (your chi) with your thoughts, then the central channel will automatically open and the body will instantly transform? Why do you have to invent all these artificial exercises?"

Unfortunately, people who study the esoterics of cultivation tend to become attracted to its mystical aspects, and thus, they easily succumb to the notion that this school is the only proper way to cultivate because it readily talks about all sorts of kung-fu marvels. People forget that kung-fu occurs in all spiritual traditions, including the Zen school, but proceeding in this manner, they get mired in all the details of esotericism and start clinging to this or that aspect for countless lives, all because of the incorrect habits they establish due to a form-based preference of cultivation practice. For instance, they meditate upon this or that chakra or mai, form an attachment to the visualized image, and continue to carry around this habit even when they no longer have a body equipped with such instruments. Yet, on the other hand, if you think that the esoteric path is worthless, then why did Shakyamuni Buddha cultivate his body as well as his chi, mai, and so on?

From Shakyamuni's own example, we must realize that the Esoteric school is not to be despised. Rather, we must understand how to properly place its teachings within the overall framework and context of true cultivation teachings. This is why both Tsong Khapa and Atisha said that students should only study the esoteric tantras *after* they had first mastered the orthodox sutra teachings.

The Zen school also says, "attempting to master Zen without a thorough knowledge of the scriptural teachings is like trying to run before learning how to crawl." The Esoteric school says, "theory and practice must be mixed together like water and flour."

In other words, to be able to master the Esoteric school, you must first understand the orthodox teachings. Nevertheless, in terms of the theory and practice of esotericism, even the Esoteric school recognizes that

> The highest form of Esoteric Buddhism is Zen.
> The peak of the Esoteric school is Zen.

This is why when Zen master Hui-neng, who taught Hui-ming how to see his original mind, told him there was actually nothing esoteric about the spiritual path. After teaching Hui-ming how to find his original mind, Hui-ming asked, "Are there any other esoteric teachings besides what you have just taught me?" Zen master Hui-neng replied, "What I can tell you is not esoteric. If you reflect inwardly, you can find what is esoteric within you."

In the olden days, we could bypass the need to hold a detailed discussion on these matters because very few people even knew of the Esoteric school or its teachings. Today, however, if you do not know some of the theory of the esoterics behind attainment, as well as the various states of kung-fu that will happen to a practitioner, you will always feel like you are in darkness. Hence, we have to break open all these teachings to explain their principles and their commonality with all the other spiritual traditions.

Tibetan Tantra

Master Tsong Khapa of the Tibetan School was one of the greatest of those who analyzed and summarized the esoteric teachings, and what Tibetan Buddhism has today owes much of its existence to him. No matter how smart you are, without Master Tsong Khapa's earlier writings and the effects they have produced over the ages, this information would be lost to you without him.

The knowledge of the Esoteric school is not just due to the understanding that he provided us. Actually, without the efforts he put into organizing this school and correcting its errors (which just goes to prove that the school can contain many mistaken notions, otherwise there would not have been any errors needing correction), the teachings of this particular lineage would never have been passed down.

There are many other teachers from the original Tibetan tantric lineage whose names are also still

familiar today. There is Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, and Gampopa, just to name a few. There are also a wide variety of tantras and tantric traditions, just as there are the major Red, White, Yellow and Black schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

With all these traditions, the various teachings can become quite confusing. For instance, there are the Action Tantra, Performance Tantra, Yoga Tantra, and Highest Yoga Tantra (*kriya*, *charya*, *yoga*, and *maha anuttara yoga* tantra) schools. And within these traditions there are all sorts of specific Tantras—such as the Guhyasamaja, Cakrasamvara, Hevajra, Kalachakra, Yamantaka, Vajrabhairava and other Tantras.

These Tantras can be divided into categories of male, female or nondual tantras; method and wisdom tantras; buried and clear tantras; tantras using desire as the path, those using aggression, and those using mental lethargy as a force for the path to enlightenment. The segmentation of the schools in various fashions like this becomes almost endless. From this one paragraph, you can already gain some idea as to how easy it is to drop into these definitions and become lost.

The Yoga of Marks

Regardless of the Tantric tradition and its various means of classification, it is common for the tantric (or esoteric) cultivation teachings of all schools to be broken into two major stages of practice. The first of these stages is typically called the yoga of marks, yoga with symbols, or yoga of characteristics. In essence, the purpose or emphasis during this stage is to perform various preparatory and purification exercises, such as visualizing oneself and others as enlightened mandala deities, in order to generate merit and initiate the process of cultivating your mai and chi. Despite any cloak of mystification, the purposes and processes of this stage are really that simple.

The Yoga Without Marks

The second stage of these paths is usually termed the yoga without marks, yoga without symbols, or yoga without characteristics. Its purpose is to enable you to gain control over all the chi energies of the body, including those within the secondary channels, and bring them into the central channel. When the chi enters the central channel you can gain samadhi, so the details of the second phase of the paths always focus on the technology of samadhi attainment. This is where the blisses and joys of the dhyana arise, which the Esoteric school calls the blisses and empties.

The Generation and Completion Stage Yogas

For the Esoteric school, the path is therefore generally divided into two sections. We have a first stage of yoga with symbols, and a second stage of yoga without symbols. In another tantric

tradition called the Highest Yoga Tantra, there are also two stages but these are called the "generation stage yogas" and "completion stage yogas." In simplest terms, the generation stage yogas consist of preparatory practices that transform the physical nature and ripen your mindstream for the real attainments of cultivation, which thereafter happen in the completion stage yogas.

In the Highest Yoga Tantra tradition, as before, you must first master the generation stage yogas before you can master the completion stage yogas. Of course, many people want to jump directly to the completion stage before going through all the generation stage processes, and maybe they will even be able to attain some stage of emptiness and calm when they try this. However, trying to skip the generation stage of Tantra is useless because it is the prerequisite stage of preparation that allows the completion stage to come about. It is basically a stage of physical purification, akin to the Tao school process of jing transforming into chi, wherein the mai of the body become cleansed and opened, but samadhi has not yet been born. When the chi becomes purified, enters the central channel, and the four dhyana arise, this is the completion portion of the path.

Some people want to accomplish both the generation and completion stage yogas, but they do not want to undertake the common, shared practices of the cultivation path that are championed in both the Esoteric and Orthodox vehicles. However, if you do not follow the methods common to the Orthodox vehicle and the tantric outline of cultivation—such as cultivating merit, wisdom and studying the sutras—you will end up going astray or down an evil path in your cultivation efforts. So regardless of the tantric vehicle, there is (1) a preliminary stage of practice, and (2) a main body of intensified yogic practice, and (3) you have to complete them both in order to achieve any cultivation success. In completing the first stage of the path you will naturally enter into the second, and you cannot enter the second stage, which entails actually cultivating samadhi, unless you first complete the preparatory practices in the first.

The first of these two phases encompasses accumulating merits, performing prayoga practices (the Path of Preparation or application), and then finally understanding the path. The second phase, after you finally understand emptiness and know how to proceed in practicing correctly (because you have done your chi-mai cultivation correctly and attained some emptiness realization), constitutes the actual stage of cultivation practice. Then, of course, we have the final event that is the completion of spiritual attainment. You can call this the third stage of the path, but we typically just refer to it as complete enlightenment, perfect self-realization, or Tao—the Stage of Complete Attainment, Buddhahood, or No More Training.

While the Zen school speaks of the three stages of seeing the path, cultivating the path, and attaining Tao so as to carry out vows, and while the orthodox Mahayana school speaks of the five stages of accumulating merits, performing the prayoga preparatory practices, seeing Tao, cultivating the path and attaining Tao, the tantras encompass this process in their two stages of yoga. The generation stage and completion stages of the esoteric path are just another way to

subdivide the five larger stages of Mahayana progress.

The Stage of Generation

We can better understand the esoteric stage of generation if we compare spiritual cultivation to the task of building a large mansion. To build the mansion, we must first lay the foundation, so we need to collect all the necessary money, labor, building instructions, permits, building materials and so forth. Maitreya calls this the Stage of Accumulation wherein you must turn all your good behavior into fortune capital for the path. Only after you have all these materials can you start assembling them together—the initial stage of generation.

Switching to the explanations of the Mahayana path, after you have wisdom and merit, you must process them by engaging in advanced meditative efforts, which constitutes the Stage of the Intensified Preparatory Practices called prayoga. The Stage of Intensified Practices is like cutting the stones for making a house, mixing the concrete and so forth; you are performing all this work in order to build some degree of cultivation achievement. These activities are all akin to the initial processing activities of meditative work still within the stage of generation. When you finally get to the point where you are filling in the structure of the mansion, this is the stage of completion when you are erecting the actual building. As the Bodhisattva Maitreya said, this analogy includes the steps of seeing the path, cultivating the path, and achieving the ultimate result.

The generation stage yogas, in the Highest Yoga tradition, often refer to a special type of deity yoga wherein you visualize generating yourself in the image of a beautified deity or Buddha body. This is also called the yoga of fabrication, or the yoga of mental projection. Deity yoga is the main cultivation vehicle at this stage of cultivation practice because mastering a visualization will bring about an initial purification of the body's five elements, and is a way of cultivating one's chi.

In the Hindu equivalent of bhakti yoga, sometimes the practitioner will intensely visualize Krishna, Shiva or Vishnu, in order to attain the one-pointedness of cessation, purify their body through the resultant kung-fu which arises, and attain samadhi. You can attain the same results by practicing the white skeleton visualization practices of Orthodox Buddhism, which cultivate your own body from within. The only twist is that in Highest Yoga Tantra, you are trying to visualize yourself in the very form body (rupakaya) of the Buddha that you hope to attain as a personal emanation.

The principle here is that you are visualizing a resultant form of the spiritual path that you have the potential to attain, so you are bringing this visualized end product of the path into the actual sequence of the path. You do not actually have to assume this form at all when you become enlightened, because the whole purpose of this visualized image is simply to set up a suitable mind object as the central focus of one-pointed concentration.

If you actually have a karmic connection with a particular form, this is a reason why one particular beautified form might be chosen over another as a point of focus for this sort of technique. This is also why the form people concentrate upon is often chosen with the assistance of a master who knows what connections you might have. The only reason you pick one form over another is because it will serve as a better support for the target of samadhi concentration. In other words, *all you want to do is pick a suitable object of concentration so as to attain samadhi.* Other than that, there is nothing mysterious about the process.

In terms of esoteric biophysics, the generation stage corresponds to the cultivation phase wherein the chi has not yet entered, abided, or dissolved within the central channel. That particular accomplishment, of course, is an actual stage of samadhi attainment that you can achieve only after you have seen the path at least somewhat, meaning you have had at least a minor taste of an emptiness realm. We can therefore say that the purpose of the generation stage yogas is to enable you to first attain some degree of spiritual stability through chi and mai purification, which means chi and mai cultivation.

Through practicing deity yoga or other visualization methods, you thereby train to learn how to concentrate your mind and bring about cessation in the normal train of discriminative thought. With cessation you gain mental stability, and this naturally prepares the way for possible samadhi attainments. Since cessation leads to the purification of the chi and mai, all these factors are wrapped together in the stage of generation practice.

Borrowing from the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* of Hinduism for a further explanation,

> When the nadis are impure, breath [chi] cannot penetrate into the sushumna central channel. Then the yogi achieves nothing, nor can he reach the state of deep concentration. Only when the nadis, which are still impure, are purified can the yogi practice pranayama successfully.

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* also says that if you really work hard, you can purify your mai in about three months of devoted practice. This, of course, is the one hundred days of "laying the foundation" we also find in Taoism, and the three months celibate training as a monk practiced by all young men in Thailand's Buddhist tradition. The generation stage yogas therefore have the goal of transforming the jing into chi, and bringing about the normal sequences of spiritual progress which we already covered in the chapter on the Tao school, and which also correspond to cultivating the skandhas of form and sensation.

The Completion Stage

The completion stage of cultivation progress will then "complete" the process of spiritual transformation that you began in the generation phase of tantric practice. In the generation stage

you practice pretending that the chi withdraws into and abides within the central channel, which is akin to pranayama breathing practice, but the process actually occurs in the completion stage of practice when you reach it.

If the winds ever do enter, abide and dissolve within the central channel while you are still at the stage of generation, you have then reached what the Zen school calls "the blind cat bumping into a dead rat." You can fortuitously experience a small taste of emptiness, but you will have no control over the process and cannot re-enter it at will. The Tibet school says this is only "an instance of the stage of completion in the mindstream of someone within the stage of generation." Since it is not stable, it really cannot be claimed as the initiation of the tantric completion stage at all. It only constitutes a fleeting glimpse of a samadhi clear light experience, and that is all.

No matter how secret, exotic, mystical, holy, complicated or privileged the Esoteric school material is presented as being, in the generation stage we are simply pursuing our basic process of cultivating the chi and mai. For instance, the Esoteric school heavily depends upon visualization and mantra exercises to do this, but the esoteric nature of these practices should not confuse you as to what they are trying to accomplish. Visualizing oneself as a mandala deity is basically a form of chi practice, while mantra recitation is chi and mai practice as well.

If you throw away all the superstitious mysticism and extra colorings added by the Tibet school over the years, in the generation yogas (or yogas without marks) you are basically approaching spiritual cultivation through chi and mai practice to cultivate the wind, water and then fire elements of the body. If we want, we can also link this process to the Taoist stages of cultivating jing and chi and shen, or we can talk of the process in terms of the skandhas. It is a process we have gone over many times in many different ways. However, because of the complications introduced by the Esoteric school, this basic path and its principles easily become lost.

The completion stage yogas, which are also known as the second path, the path beyond creative imagination, or the path beyond mental projection, begin after the generation stage is completed. Basically, the completion stage refers to a higher level of cultivation attainment, namely, the process of finally being able to attain stable samadhi after all the preparatory work of chi and mai cultivation has been mastered.

Thus, "completion stage yogas" is just a fancy term for the point where the chi is starting to enter, abide and dissolve within the central channel, which in turn enables you to finally approach the realms of samadhi. If you can attain proficiency in the samadhi and then enlightenment, you can attain the dharmakaya and sambhogakaya bodies. Thus, the completion stage "completes" your transformation into a Buddha, equipped with all the relevant spiritual bodies you can achieve through cultivation.

As ardent practitioners, the question we must ask on the road of cultivation is whether we need to know that our chi must enter the central channel in order for us to attain samadhi? Furthermore, do we have to try to create or construct a sambhogakaya Enjoyment body through visualization efforts?

Not at all! In fact, knowing this information should not be soteriologically necessary on the spiritual trail if it is to be an authentic path. Furthermore, knowing this information might even interfere with the process of spiritual attainment because once known and expected, now there is the danger that you will always be checking up on yourself with desirous anticipation and clinging for these states. You might therefore end up adding too much imagination to the natural process of attainment, and too many intellectual commentaries.

Hence, the Zen school, and or even Taoism and Orthodox Buddhism, bypass these risks and skip such explanations entirely because they are superfluous anyway. This is besides the fact that they should be ignored anyway since *these accomplishments are all within the realm of illusion*. In fact, it is better to explain the overall process in terms of prajna wisdom principles and simple explanations rather to enter into the never ending cycle of tiny details and explanations as we saw with Gampopa.

If we reflect on our original analysis of twelve cultivation practitioners with mistaken notions, or Gampopa with his endless questions, and if we factor in the history and efficiency of the tantric schools as compared to the Zen school of direct pointing, how can we deny the sometimes destructive or pollutive aspect of this extra knowledge without begging yet further analysis? But just because a school has drawbacks and can be used wrongly, this does not mean we should ignore it or excessively criticize it. There is good in everything, just as there is bad. Hence, we must continue to analyze the Tantric tradition in order to establish firm cross-references to the stages of attainment in the world's various other cultivation schools and traditions. Otherwise, practitioners will always think they are missing something when they hear about the claims of the tantric path and are not introduced to any of this knowledge.

As we always say, the spiritual attainment levels reached by different schools may be the same, but various spiritual schools categorize them and describe them in entirely different fashions. For instance, Confucius sometimes described cultivation in terms of managing or perfecting one's relationships with others; he emphasized the behavioral aspect of great functioning as a cultivation trail although out of necessity, he also talked of samadhi and prajna wisdom attainments. Buddha, on the other hand, talked about the mind, and in yet other schools we find an emphasis on spiritual kung-fu. In Taoism you have a body focus, in Confucianism a behavioral focus, and in Buddhism a mental focus. Three different schools, with three different sorts of emphasis, illustrate the variety of teachings possible for the spiritual trail—each emphasizing a different aspect of the spiritual journey—and yet the enlightenment they ultimately search for is the same.

Specialization of the Tantras

Now in the Tibetan tradition it is often said that one should concentrate on learning the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (*The Tantra of the Secret Assembly*), because if you understand the techniques therein, you can use this particular Tantra as an infrastructure for understanding all the other tantric systems, just as Buddhism itself can be used as a portable, general-purpose structure for understanding most of the cultivation schools of the world. Where this task begins to get difficult is when the various tantras adopt specific labels for all their various stages and practices, for these names themselves can end up confusing the practitioner, and the practices within each tradition must be referenced in a certain way so as to correspond to one another.

For instance, the Kalachakra completion stage consists of six yogas: individual withdrawal, dhyana, energy concentration, retention, subsequent mindfulness, and samadhi. The Guhyasamaja completion stage consists of six yogas with more fanciful names: body isolation, speech isolation, mind isolation, illusory body, clear light, and great union. The meaning of these terms is not exactly what one would expect because of the names. In fact, the meanings cannot possibly be understood unless you do a detailed study of the tantric texts and refer to various commentaries (as well as master the yogas themselves). Furthermore, these stages do not exactly match with one another.

Since each tantra focuses on different aspects of the cultivation path, navigating through these details can be quite confusing. The *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, for instance, is known for particularly emphasizing the path of illusory body yogas, whereas the *Heruka Tantra* elucidates upon the clear light yogas, and the *Yamantaka Tantra* skillfully combines the two. Hence different topics are emphasized in the different esoteric tantras, but nevertheless, they all work at guiding us toward the same ultimate end. In terms of kung-fu, there may be a difference in what each tantra emphasizes, but the fundamental wisdom principles of cultivation remain the same throughout. Hence while the levels of accomplishment espoused by various tantras may be different, they all try to accomplish the same thing.

Perhaps the most popular set of tantric exercises known to people today are the Six Yogas of Naropa, especially as practiced in the Tibetan Gelugpa tradition. What are these six yogas? They include the practices of (1) inner heat, (2) illusory body, (3) clear light, (4) consciousness transference, (5) forceful projection, and (6) bardo yoga. But you do not necessarily have to say there are only these six yogas, because you can also partition these six practices into sets of two, three, four, six or even ten branches! But as with other classifications of the Esoteric school, the fine details of classification and definition do not really matter as long as you know the general principles.

> In fact, if you understand the principles of the system well, then the manner in which you practice the Six Yogas is not that important. You should simply adopt the practice arrangement with which you feel most comfortable. In mastering the various yogas, one typically starts from the fundamental guidelines, and slowly builds from there.

Hence, there are quite a few different cultivation exercises available in the various tantric systems, and it is this variety which tends to bewilder as well as excite cultivation practitioners. You should not view them as contradictory, however, nor feel that they will lead to different ultimate attainments. The ultimate intents and goals of the various tantras are the same, but the techniques each employs can be markedly different.

A Short Analysis of the Tantric Tradition

Since most of these Tantras were transmitted from India, which developed its own yoga and tantric traditions, and since some were filtered through China with its Taoist influences, we can find a commonality between many of the Tibetan tantric techniques and the esoteric or secret yoga practices found in India and China. In fact, the original development of Tantra within India itself, before it was transported to Tibet, can be described as a synthesis of the Madhyamika's prajna contemplation practices (involving cultivating the mean between emptiness and conventional existence) with the theories of Yogacara Buddhism and the techniques for cultivating practice already found in Brahmanism and yoga. But going into this historical synthesis would require several books to give a complete picture of the matter.

The point is that the biophysical component within the process of human cultivation is the same the world over, and since the tantric methods address this biophysical aspect, and since they have been transmitted to other countries as well, to some extent they can be found in most spiritual traditions. Furthermore, they recognize many of the basic esoteric principles of the human cultivation path, and try to incorporate these principles into the training path.

The genuine principles of the Esoteric school are just ordinary cultivation principles. They are not really secret, but the air of mystification has admirably served to keep the transmissions alive, while also beneficially motivating practitioners to hold onto the path until its completion. For example, the practices of secrecy and guru worship have been quite helpful in preserving many sadhana practices as well as spiritual lineages. Then again, this secrecy aspect is the reason why many lineages have also been lost over the course of time.

According to Esoteric school principles, it is a violation of discipline to teach those who are not qualified for Vajrayana (tantric) teachings, but in addition, it is also a violation of discipline when

you refuse to impart teachings by withholding them from qualified students. According to the strict rules of discipline in these schools, teaching or not teaching is not just a matter of personal fancy. If a teacher does not find someone to teach or refuses to teach a qualified student, then a lineage is doomed to extinction.

If we analyze the various esoteric exercises and teachings, all these various practices can essentially be classified into two stages. First, there are the yogic exercises for getting the chi to enter into the central channel, which is also known as the sushumna or middle mai. Next, there is a second stage consisting of cultivation exercises, or yogas, that are performed once the energies have been withdrawn from other areas and concentrated in this channel. Thus, the first requirement of the Tantras is to get the chi to enter into the central channel, but to do so, you must first prepositionally cultivate the chi and mai otherwise it will not be possible. That is why you have the preliminary generation stage practices on the tantric paths. If the mai are not already cleansed of obstructions to some degree, this latter step is an impossibility, just as it is impossible to cultivate chi if you let your jing leak away.

Through the eyes of other cultivation schools, we might say that the tantric purification process is one of purifying the wind and water elements of the body, for this is akin to cultivating the chi and mai. To do this, you have to cultivate merit, virtue, discipline (not losing the jing semenal essence) and engage in devoted meditation of some sort. You can ingest special medicines to help speed this process a little, as is done in the wai-dan practices of Taoism, but science will never discover or invent a substance that will refine the chi or open the mai. The process of cultivation will always require the discipline of emptiness meditation.

Of course, after the chi and mai have been cultivated to a sufficient extent, one's kundalini will be activated, meaning that the state of hsi will appear if one is sufficiently successful. Kundalini activation, we already know, is akin to cultivating the fire element of the body, or having the shakti become activated so as to initiate one on the path. In fact, this is the real fire empowerment spoken of in esoteric circles. However, this still only constitutes a minor step in cultivation since it still only encompasses the first prayoga stage of heat, or warming. Nevertheless, if at this point—where your real chi circulation becomes initiated through embryo breathing—you can forget your body and mind, then you can begin to attain the various ranks of samadhi. By gaining proficiency in the samadhi, you can then scale the ranks of cultivation attainment, break through the confining nature of the skandhas, and ultimately attain enlightenment.

There is no great mystery to the process of cultivation, for it is as simple as this. All along the way you will encounter various mental experiences and physical changes called kung-fu, such as the progressive purification of your body, the generation of a nonobstructive thought-born body (called the illusory in the Tibet school), an experiencing of the emptiness nature of awareness, and so on. All these things, however, are just the extraneous scenery along the way to the goal

rather than the destination itself. In fact, experiencing the clear light through prajna wisdom is only the stage of "seeing the path," and after that there is still a long way of cultivation to go.

Once you realize the clear light of awareness—or empty clarity of awareness—because you have trained at purifying the mind through mastering various samadhi and cultivating your prajna wisdom, then you can finally understand what all the masters and spiritual schools have been talking about all along. Then and only then can you really understand how to cultivate practice correctly after you reach this stage of seeing the Tao and recognizing the mind's true essence, so this is the point after which you can really start cultivating realization.

If you are successful on that road of True Cultivation Practice, then you will end up with the true attainment of Buddhahood. But the entire process requires merit, discipline, and the hard diligent work of ceaselessly cultivating practice, which means purifying the body and mind while forgetting the body and mind. Hence, spiritual cultivation follows the principle of detachment from form the entire way, and we can also call this the cultivation of emptiness.

The Esoteric school, on the other hand, takes one tiny footnote out of this larger process—the fact that you can attain samadhi when the chi starts to enter the central channel—and constructs a big edifice out of it. Then it starts to add all sorts of special stages that typically confuse practitioners and serve as objects of attachment. It is not necessary to know any of this information as to the overall process of attainment, but that is how this particular school is structured.

The Esoteric school is constantly focusing on this micro level of analysis and asking, "What exercises do you perform to achieve this particular level of attainment? What happens next?" Without relying solely on prajna wisdom, it tries to specify everything down to the tiniest detail so that you have an encyclopedic catalog of what to do in such-and-such a situation. And, it tries to bring results into the causes of the path, rather than have the causes naturally produce results in the forward direction, as they should. In a way, its practices are like a set of parents that put too much pressure on their child by hurrying him along too much.

What is the problem in all of this?

> You cannot say that this esoteric material is wrong, but that esoteric practitioners become too attached to form. And once you become attached to form, your cultivation method is all wrong.

Why does the Esoteric school focus on the existence aspect of Tao? The answer is because it is based on the Consciousness-Only school. The Consciousness-Only or Mind-Only school always

talks of consciousness, which the Esoteric school takes as "existence." However, in actuality the Consciousness-Only school is actually only talking of emptiness. The Hinayana school says all existence is impermanent, so conventional existence is only a "false existence." The Mahayana, however, calls it "miraculous existence," even though it is empty, because it stresses compassionate activity in this realm to help all sentient beings. So the Esoteric school just turns cultivation matters around and focuses on attainment from the aspect of miraculous existence.

If we turn to the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, we would find that this, too, introduces some of the existence teachings found within Esoteric Buddhism. Of course these teachings are not the esotericism that the Japanese and Tibetans talk about, for Buddha taught the Flower Ornament teachings when he was in the heavens of the Realm of Form, and his audience was all the high level Bodhisattvas. Yet in that sutra, Buddha makes the point that everything—all phenomena—are generated from the capacity of the original nature: all form comes from emptiness, so it is no different than emptiness.

In Mahayana Buddhism you try to see emptiness, and from there you can accept the realm of false existence with its compassionate call for activity to relieve the suffering of sentient beings. But this existence realm is empty, as we know, and from that aspect there is no such thing as a sentient being. Yet from the aspect of conventional existence, there is still need to act, and so the activity should be as virtuous, compassionate and helpful as possible. This is what requires skillful means.

The *Lotus Sutra* has a phrase: "All Three Realms are due to mind, all the infinite methods are consciousness." Hence, this is how we have the name of the Consciousness-Only school, which is the basis of the Tibetan school of Esoteric Buddhism. We have the self-nature, or fundamental nature, and we have form and appearance both born of this fundamental, empty self-nature. Hence, in the esoteric schools, or even in Orthodox Buddhism, we can say that there are thousands of special consciousness meditations available for cultivation, such as the Six Yogas of Naropa. Most cultivation methods concentrate on emptiness, but a large number of the Esoteric methods use form as an entry vehicle for realizing emptiness. Unfortunately, this emphasis on realizing emptiness is what the form-school practitioners most often forget after they enter into the Esoteric school.

On the one hand you can be broad in scope and say that the purpose of all these techniques is to help you attain samadhi, and ultimately the Tao. On the other hand, you can be more specific and say their primary purpose is aimed at getting the chi to enter, abide and "dissolve" within the central channel. Why should the chi enter into the central channel if spirituality is essentially just a mind-only path? Because if it enters the central channel, then you can quickly transform your physical body of form, clarify consciousness, and more readily attain the Tao.

Regardless as to how you describe matters, you cannot attain this achievement unless you have

already cultivated the chi and mai. If you have already accomplished this preliminary stage of attainment—meaning the yoga of marks, the generation stage yogas or the Mahayana stage of preparatory practices—the esoteric schools tell you to use special visualization, mantra, mudra and breathing practices for forcing the chi into the central channels, once they have been sufficiently prepared.

The cultivation methods employed in the world may vary considerably from school to school, but we must always remember that the ultimate target of all these methods is the same. As a single example, the various esoteric schools like to practice vajra chanting (where you do not move your lips or teeth) to get rid of all the miscellaneous thoughts of the sixth consciousness. If you practice Hindu *japa* mantra recitation for a long time, then the chi and the sound will become one, and there will be no more random thoughts either. This is done in Hinduism as well as Islam, Christianity and Judaism. In Christianity, if you lose yourself in reciting the rosary, this accomplishes the same task and achieves the same result.

As a practitioner calms the mind through this sort of practice, the chi will enter into the central channel. Hence, vajra chanting can lead the wind to enter the central channel, *just as the Zen school says will happen naturally when you match your thoughts with your breath*. But if you do not learn how to integrate your mind with your chi, you can chant for a thousand years and it will be useless; you will get no spiritual results at all, but just collect a bit of merit for not having occupied the mind with nonvirtuous thoughts. In other words, if you just continue chanting while letting your mind roam everywhere, you will never make any headway in this sort of spiritual practice. To make chanting or recitation practice effective, you have to be practicing concentration at the same time which is why a number of schools tell you to simultaneously focus on visualizing some objective.

Still other spiritual schools simply say "watch your breath" as a form of spiritual or religious practice, without providing too many other instructions, and the wisest practitioners soon realize this means that the inner chi of the body—which they can start to perceive as they climb the various stages of meditation—should be combined with their thought. This instruction does not actually mean the breath of the nose and lungs, but the chi within the body that you will perceive once you start making progress in advanced meditation. When Shakyamuni Buddha spoke about knowing whether your breath was warm or cold, coarse or fine, he was talking about the chi within your body that you will eventually begin to feel as you progressively purify your chi mai.

When a practitioner's chi enters the central channel, he will naturally give birth to an illusory body and experience the stages of emptiness and bliss mentioned by the various spiritual schools. So the vajra chanting practice particular to Tibetan Buddhism is nothing mysterious or holy or peculiar once you know the principles. Rather, it is simply another practice for calming the mind in order to get the wind element to enter into the sushumna central channel. We have the same practice in the Christian recitation of the rosary, or in Hindu chanting, and in other religious

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traditions. Sufism and even Judaism have similar practices as well.

When analyzing cultivation matters, you absolutely must search for this commonality across the world's spiritual traditions since all spiritual cultivation is based upon the same set of basic of cultivation principles. In this particular instance, the fundamental nature of wind and mantra are the same since the sound of wind in the mai is like a mantra; all you have to do is put a sea shell next to your ear and hear a hum naturally come out to prove this. Hence, when you do mantra practice correctly, it allows you to concentrate all the wind into the central channel, rather than in the left or right mai, and that is why mantra practice is found in a variety of religions. The Esoteric school says that it gets your chi to enter your central channel, other schools says it helps you develop concentration, and other schools tell you it leads to the love of God. These are different aspects being described, but the same results happen nonetheless.

The Esoteric school calls this stage "verbal isolation," but it is basically the state of hsi described by Taoism. It is simply a particular point in spiritual cultivation when less random thoughts appear in the mind because one's chi and mental state have become pacified. Tibetans refer to it as a point when you start to detach from language and stop superfluous talking, but what they actually mean is that you quiet the incessant internal dialogue of the sixth consciousness.

So now we have described this practice in terms of yet another measuring system we have previously covered—the workings of the sixth consciousness! Needless to say, this goal of having the chi enter into the central channel through mental quietness, or mantra practice, is one reason monks in most traditions are told to refrain from useless chatter. The rules of discipline in many religious schools try to make use of the inherent principles necessary for success in spiritual cultivation.

In summary, you have a variety of cultivation methods to choose from in the esoteric schools, but basically, you want to use a method that will bring your chi into your central chi channel. Young people are particularly full of chi, so they easily ignite the desire for sexual relations when the chi is stimulated through spiritual cultivation. The hormones and sexual essences are all a sort of life force, and because ordinary people cannot get the chi to enter the central channel, they typically end up wasting any progress they make on the path when sexual desire arises.

Couples engaging in sexual intercourse make a different sort of mistake, for they do not realize that at the moment of joy and bliss during sexual congress, they have the potential to let go of their thoughts and realize the nature of emptiness. Without this simple instruction, they always lose the chance to change their bodies as well.

Sexual desires are easier to get rid of when you become older, since with age the impulsive stimulation caused by hormones becomes less, but love becomes a much more difficult problem to deal with since in aging, people's habits of clinging tend to become stronger. In addition, older

people do not have as much jing as they once did, so it is more difficult for them to experience the joys and blisses of the dhyana. In fact, many elderly people cannot even smile, so the joys and blisses of the dhyana are entirely out of the question until they can first rejuvenate their bodies to some extent.

Youthful practitioners lose their vital essences through sexual activities, and their problem is made worse by the fact that they do not know how to preserve their jing during sexual intercourse. Elderly practitioners have few stores of jing and chi left at all, so their problem is one of accumulation. If your jing is not full you cannot generate the physical bliss of the cultivation path, if your chi is not full you cannot initiate the stage of internal light within your body, and if your shen is not full you cannot attain emptiness and no-thought. All these things we have been speaking of are linked together.

The first rule of the Hinayana path is "no sex," but the first rule of the Mahayana path is "no killing." The deep meaning of the sexual prohibitions includes not even thinking about sex, for as sensitive individuals will note, even this will cause a loss of jing and chi. Of course the Mahayana road does not mean that sex is forbidden to the layman, but there are still restrictions on when and where you can have sexual intercourse. Even a lay practitioner should not engage in sex whenever they want, for it is unwise to engage in sexual intercourse when a woman is pregnant, when a woman is undergoing menstruation, during the midst of a thunderstorm (or tornado, hurricane, earthquake, etc.) and during a wide variety of other conditions. In fact, the Tao school and yoga schools have categorized a whole number of conditions unfavorable for sexual intercourse because of unfavorable chi conditions.

When individuals lose their jing and chi through sexual relations, they lose the downward moving chi that you want to have ascending upwards. You want this particular wind, whose seat is in the lower abdomen, to turn upwards and ignite the tumo fire. The Tao school simply tells you to focus on the region of the dan-tien as a point of concentration in order to ignite the spark that will make this happen, but this instruction is not exactly correct. The esoteric schools, on the other hand, go into specific detail and tell you to cultivate a very strong tumo fire in the navel chakra of transformation, because then the chi will definitely ascend, the subtle *bindu* drops (jing-hormone essences) will melt, and the four joys and empties will then accordingly be generated.

When any bliss is accordingly cultivated, it says that you should use the inherent ecstasy of this joy and bliss to deepen the experience of emptiness, you should strive to effect the union of emptiness and bliss to realize prajna wisdom. Basically, you try to match mental emptiness with physical bliss and enter a state of dhyana. If you have the one-pointedness of joy and can realize emptiness at this stage, you will eventually experience the union of emptiness and bliss. Orthodox Buddhism does not want to emphasize this, however, because it takes this union as an ordinary act. The Esoteric school, however, breaks this event apart into pieces, spelling out all these details, and then says you have to combine them together when they are not separate entities in

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the first place.

If you do not initially cultivate some stage of emptiness, physical bliss will not arise and you need the physical bliss of cultivation to be able to forget your body and deepen your realization of emptiness. Bliss just refers to the fact that the physical body is being transformed, and since this involves chi, once again we know that chi and mai cultivation are major components of the initial stages of spiritual cultivation. Cultivate your chi and mai, your body will transform, you will experience the bliss of the physical body and experience mental joy, and will be able to enter into the emptiness of the dhyana.

In actual fact, the two principles of bliss and mental emptiness are meant to feed off one another. This level of emptiness, however, does not refer to just some minor stilling of the sixth consciousness. This emptiness is based on the seventh consciousness in which it is as if you are knowing while there is no thinking. If you can get the chi to enter the central channel, then you will be able to stabilize your chi and eventually experience this type of emptiness and direct knowing all the time, and prajna wisdom will be born. To do this, you must abandon the view of the body (of being a body or possessing a body), which is why people commonly practice the skeleton visualization and anapana meditation practices in the orthodox traditions. Of course in the esoteric traditions, people engage in all the various yoga practices we have gone over. If you cannot through these practices obtain some degree of emptiness, then the subsequent experiences of joy and bliss will never arise.

In the Hinayana school, you try to contemplate emptiness to generate the stages of joy and bliss, and the fewer random thoughts you have, the higher will be your resulting stage of dhyana. So the Hinayana cultivation trail explains the process of cultivation in terms of mind, and very little in terms of chi. In the Esoteric school you try to cultivate co-emergent emptiness and bliss in order to give rise to clear wisdom, so the idea of consciousness and chi are mentioned together. A big problem here is that chi only refers to the lowest stages of the cultivation path, and if you keep clinging to it, you will doom yourself to an incomplete and very low level of spiritual attainment because you will never reach the higher stages of spiritual practice.

From prajna wisdom you can realize that the past, present and future are all empty, and from this realization you can reach the extreme of emptiness. Through true emptiness you can realize the clear light and generate the illusory bodies of spiritual cultivation, which can appear because of the chi cultivation necessary to get to this stage of attainment. The two arise together because you need the highly purified, refined chi of the illusory body as a purified mount for the mind of clear light realization. Thus, the illusory body of tantra corresponds to a union of bliss and emptiness attainment, which is a dhyana attainment or the chi to shen attainment of the Tao school. In the Mahayana School, this corresponds to results within the Stage of Intensified Preparatory Practices depending upon the degree of someone's spiritual achievement.

When Chi Enters the Central Channel

As far as the school of Tibetan Buddhism goes, Master Tsong Khapa summarized the fact that the basis of attainment for all these various methods, which are aimed at controlling the chi and subtle energies and bringing them into the central channel, is the inner heat yoga, or tumo fire, which is essentially a breathing cultivation technique. By now you also know that the result of inner heat yoga corresponds to the stage of warming, shakti, hsi or kundalini. Achieving the tumo fire, the warming stage of prayoga, is the foundation for most of the Esoteric school practices, and mantra yoga is just one of the most common ways to achieve this stage of practice.

When you detach from thoughts using mantra yoga, then and only then can you reach the warmth or heat stage on the Path of Preparation. In other words, you first have to cultivate the wind, water and then finally the fire element of the body before your chi can enter into the central channel so as to bring about samadhi. If we switch to the Hindu yogic tradition, we can find exactly the same teaching, for the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* says,

> There are 72,000 nadis in the body. Sushumna is the central nadi which contains the shabhavi shakti. This has the property of being able to bestow bliss upon the yogi. All other nadis (chi channels) are not as important. Guide the prana (chi or "wind") into the sushumna central channel and kindle the gastric fire and awaken the kundalini. Only when the prana flows through the sushumna will there be samadhi. All other methods are futile. When the breath is suspended [because the prana or chi reaches a point of cessation due to fullness], then discursive thinking will also be suspended. He who has power over his mind can also control prana. The two causes that activate the mind are prana and the sources of karma; death of one of these is the death of the other. When the mind is absorbed, breathing subsides; when prana is absorbed into the central channel, then mind also is absorbed.2

This yoga teaching is no different from the teachings of the Tao school, Orthodox Buddhism or any other tradition because this fundamental process does not vary across human bodies, but always remains the same. You first cultivate your jing, chi and mai, and then you can cultivate the prenatal breathing, or kundalini energies. The cultivation biophysics of the human body are the same no matter what spiritual path or practices you cultivate, so this process will happen no matter what school's practices you undertake. As a result, you can recognize that this sequence of transformation happens in Zen as well because it is simply describing the human biophysical component of cultivation. Hence how could it not occur in Zen? What can happen, however, is that the Zen masters refuse to say much about it.

No matter what spiritual school or religious tradition you follow, these sequences of purification will happen just as surely as muscles grow bigger with use, and just as surely as veins and arteries will carry your blood regardless of your race, sex, nationality, color or tradition. But underneath

the complicated trappings of the esoteric umbrella—with all its warnings, definitions, sub-definitions, mystification and secrecy warnings—the simplicity of this process gets lost quite quickly. Tantra is supposed to provide a map to the overall sequential process of attainment, and yet you need so many commentaries to unravel and guide you through this "map!"

So far, however, we know that the school of Esoteric Buddhism works with coarse and subtle energies, which we recognize as chi, and it gets this cultivation chi to enter into the central channel. Compared to the Zen school, the methods it uses are particularly form-dependent because they ask you to use various esoteric forms as the focus of one-pointed concentration. Some schools ask you to visualize the three channels, or special chakras with flaming Sanskrit syllables, or various deities and mandalas, and so on in order to have you attain mental stabilization. Mental one-pointedness will then encourage the prana to enter your central chi channel leading to the brain.

In terms of its reservoir of techniques, the various form schools (Tibetan Buddhism, yoga and Taoism) have many different sets of practices, but they are mostly artificial techniques that involve a preconditioning of expectations. As a result, most all of these practices encourage mental clinging. Furthermore, since many of the esoteric methods require you to generate yourself in the form of a deity, which is visualizing yourself as having a beautified rupakaya (sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya) body, the form body you intensely visualize may not be the one best suited to your needs. This is why it should only be picked by an enlightened master, for only an enlightened master can know your karma, and thus, the causal form that is in accord with the nature of the rupakaya to be attained. Otherwise, in picking a deity form on your own, you may personally choose a unsuitable vehicle for visualization, which would waste valuable energy like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Frankly, to achieve quick attainment in the Esoteric school, you must really have a good guru, preferably one who is an *enlightened* teacher rather than someone who just has high samadhi attainments. If your teacher is not good enough, he will not understand what type of transformations you have been going through at your stage of practice progress. But if you follow a good teacher, you will be able to arrive at a profound stage of cessation-contemplation quite quickly. Of course, finding a good teacher requires merit, and merit requires that you already make some efforts to master the spiritual path. If you do not get started by practicing yourself, there is little chance that "a master will just appear."

In this polluted world, qualified cultivation teachers are scarce. "Rare" is an even better word. If you are fortunate enough to meet someone who can teach you, this is even more rare than rare and requires incredible merit, especially if the teacher has awakened. If you want this to happen, remember: if something is bad, do not do it; if some action is good, no matter how insignificant, then perform it. In cultivation, you need this foundation of accumulated merit to attract a good teacher and accomplish the results of spiritual practice. If you do not accumulate merit, on the

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other hand, then it will not be possible for you to succeed on the path. If you are not a virtuous person, then a good teacher will not teach you either.

What exactly is the process behind esoteric yoga, or tantra? Using the explanation of the tantric teachings, you meditate upon the inner heat yoga, which causes the shakti or kundalini to arise, in order to give birth to the "four blisses" and "four empties." In other words, you first attain the stage of cultivating the fire element of the body, by doing all the necessary preparatory work we have previously covered, so that you can learn to generate the inner heat yoga. Its subsequent mastery will bring about the four blisses and four empties, which are basically the characteristics of the four dhyana.

There is an esoteric process behind these empties and blisses that we will get into, but we must put this aside for the moment. The important point is that these blisses and empties must be simultaneously generated, or unified when they appear, so that you experience *co-emergent* emptiness and bliss. No matter which one you attain first, your purpose is to integrate the two together. From this stage of accomplishment, you can cut down all your bad habits and then go on to achieve enlightenment.

It is not common to be able to just jump into generating the inner heat yoga without all the preparatory work. As we have explained, a variety of different spiritual schools tell us that it is typical to first successfully cultivate the wind and water elements of the body, which are equivalent to cultivating (or purifying) the chi and mai. Naturally this is not absolutely necessary since for some people a wisdom attainment is immediately possible, but this type of reward is dependent upon karmic endowments. Another point to note is that this process of preparatory training in cleaning the chi mai and activating the inner heat yoga is still contained within the skandhas of form and sensation. The kung-fu resultantly attained, and the states of concentration or physical transformation reached therein, all belong to the skandha realms of form and sensation.

The Biophysics of the Cultivation Path

Up to now we have talked of the overall process of cultivation in terms of various samadhi absorptions, skandhas, the five elements, realms of consciousness, and so on, and except for some teachings from Taoism, we have not focused on the actual biophysical aspects of this transformative process. It is the Esoteric school that provides an explanation of the esoteric, biophysical counterpart to the spiritual attainment process. While the Esoteric school is not necessarily the highest of the cultivation schools, from this respect it can serve the needs of modern science.

Because of its emphasis on technology, the modern world is moving farther away from spiritual cultivation and religion, and needs to know that cultivation is not just a matter of science fiction,

or religious myth and legend. Since the practice of science depends upon measurement and categorization, then in the search for truth and answers it is inevitable that science will eventually study the findings of the Esoteric school, whose lowest stages of accomplishment—since they correspond to physical phenomena—it will eventually learn how to measure. Even today, people are finally beginning to slowly recognize the reality of the mind-body connection, despite the obviousness of the connection, and attempting to measure various form aspects of the mind. Thus, these principles have some definite purpose for today, but not necessarily via the format in which the Esoteric school is inclined to teach them.

The biophysical idea put forth by the Esoteric schools of cultivation is that by mastering the inner heat yoga, there are various energies or subtle substances within the psycho-physical mechanism that will dissolve, activate or be energized because of the warming of the heat element. In terms of process, as a practitioner reaches the stage of cultivating the fire element of the body and subsequently masters the kundalini heat yoga, their vital energies will eventually be brought into the central channel. The Esoteric school says that this process melts "subtle drops" which, together with the chi, are brought to the various chakras resulting in transcendental states of attainment.

A practitioner following tantra therefore ends up working with the energy channels, the chi, the chakras and *bindu* drops (made of jing, or hormones) in order to progress along the various stages of spiritual practice. How the tantric school differs from Orthodox Buddhism is by describing this involvement in detail and establishing many minor events that can become possible errors of mental clinging. Furthermore it employs an entirely new terminology, for it calls the higher experiential realms "blisses" and "empties" rather than the characteristics of the dhyana. These experiences are accomplished by melting substances called "subtle drops." These are called *bindus*, *thigle*, *bodhicitta* or *bodhimind* substances, and correspond to the jing of the Tao school, the water element of Buddhism, and to what modern science knows as hormones and endocrine secretions.

These "subtle drops" are considered male or female, yang and yin, or white and red in nature, and they carry the potency to induce "the impure perceptions of the world." In other words, they function to support the subtle chi energies of the body-mind complex; they serve as focal points for chi and various states of consciousness, including various instincts which act as obscurations to enlightenment. In the process of cultivation, these drops can be brought to enter the central channel, assembled at the heart chakra, and then made into the basis of a purified subtle body. So from the esoteric, biophysical point of view, they are extremely important substances.

The Esoteric school teaches that these bindus, or drops, have all evolved from the original white drop of the father and red drop of the mother contributed at the time of conception. These drops run throughout the body and coat the inside of the chi channels like frost. Like hormones, the drops also perform different functions in the body. From a physical standpoint, the white drops

(which predominate at the top of the head) contribute to the development of protein in the body, while the red drops (which predominate at the region of the solar plexus) contribute to the development of blood. When you experience samadhi and bliss, this achievement is related to the balancing of your hormones and blood, and to the balancing of consciousness and chi. Therefore from a biophysical point of view, these drops are biophysically related to samadhi achievement, meaning that certain hormone secretions play a role in producing some of the physical characteristics of this state.

Tantra discusses various drops responsible for the occasion of the waking state, called "body drops," which normally abide in the region of the head. It also mentions drops responsible for the dream state, or "speech drops," which abide in the throat region. There are also drops responsible for the state of deep sleep, or "mind drops," which abide in the region of the heart. And there are the drops of sexual ecstasy, known as the "drops of the fourth occasion" or "exalted wisdom drops."

These four types of drops are responsible for four different types of awareness, and there are at least four different types of clear light to match with these states, as well as others we have not mentioned. Esoteric school teachings say that the subtle drops are the biophysical counterparts on which certain states of mind depend, including the state of ignorance and obscurity we characterize as the ordinary mind.

When the drops are purified and mass together through the process of the tantric yogas, or through any other route of spiritual cultivation, they give rise to the experience of the blisses and empties. That is how the Esoteric school describes the process, but we can also add that the drops are responsible for the states of joy and bliss within the first four dhyana. It is just that Orthodox Buddhism does not care to describe them in this way. Orthodox Buddhism simply says that the states of physical bliss and mental joy are produced through cultivation, and the chemical processes behind this production are not indicated, nor are they actually important.

In terms of modern science, we can perhaps think of the bindus as various hormones and lymph secretions, or subtle forms of jing, that effect the body and mind, and we must note that *the process of cultivation will involve transformations of these substances*. The drops, or bindus, are said to mainly coat the insides of the mai and rest in the chakras, but to a certain degree they also flow throughout the body at random, driven by the winds of karmic predisposition. When we say that you must transform your habit energies and personality in cultivation, this therefore has correspondences to transforming the drops or chi winds that circulate in your body.

In cultivation we try to untie the knots in the channels so that the drops in the head region can melt and descend (which will correspond to the dissolution of chi within the central channel). What methods do we use to untie the knots in the channels? We have discussed Tao school methods, Tantric methods, Buddhist methods, and Zen school methods that all accomplish this

task equally. Even Hatha yoga attests to the importance of this objective by saying, "The sushumna is straightened through asanas, pranayama and mudras." When the channels are loosened, opened, purified, untied or however else we wish to word it, the bodhicitta drops can descend and give rise to the experience of bliss conjoined with emptiness, but this is still a type of emptiness having form. It is not yet the prajna wisdom emptiness desired of the path.

Naturally, these teachings mirror the cultivation principle that in order for bliss to be generated, jing must descend. In fact, in the process of generating the four blisses and empties, the melted drops (bodhimind substance, or bodhicitta) must eventually arrive in the pelvic region and be retained without orgasm or ejaculation. Otherwise, the fourth "innate bliss" cannot manifest. This condition is particularly difficult for male practitioners to tolerate, so in order to succeed at this stage they must master emptiness and discard the view of the body, practicing detachment from physical pulls and sensations. Otherwise, if they give way to leaking because of sexual desire, they will not be able to attain or rest within the inseparable union of emptiness and bliss.

In esoteric biophysics, because the different drops correspond to different states of consciousness—such as deep sleep (a dreamless state), the dream state, wakefulness, and sexual bliss—this is similar to the ideas within the Hindu *Upanishads* that the self is subject to four states of consciousness, namely, wakefulness, dreaming, sound sleep and death. As mentioned, each of these states has its own "clear light" of realization, or awareness. There has to be some correspondence like this because the tantric yogas were originally developed in India and must therefore incorporate this earlier knowledge. Furthermore, this must be so because the process of cultivation is the same regardless of the school one follows.

Therefore, in the process of meditation, one cultivates the physical body so as to activate these substances, because together with the chi, these are the substances which help bring about the joy, bliss and emptiness experienced during the dhyana and samadhi. Of course, you do not need to understand, or even know anything about the subtle drops to succeed in cultivation. We tell you about them because we are trying to bring many diverse teachings together, give you an idea of the big picture of the cultivation trail, and to show you that no school has an exclusivity on the spiritual truth. If you take these concepts away with you, that in itself is a tremendous amount of wisdom progress.

As the stage of warming melts the drops, the Esoteric school explains that they descend through the central channel (and the rest of the body) to pass through the chakras so as to help generate the various blisses or mental joys. Bliss is experienced by the physical body, and when the body is calmed through this appeasement, the mind can detach from the body to experience the realm of joy. This, in effect, is equivalent to the mental joys and physical blisses of the four dhyana.

We are always talking about the joys and blisses of cultivation, but what is the nature of the joy and bliss inherent in our fundamental selves? This inherent joy and bliss can best be seen in a baby

who is always happy, for that example is closest to the inherent one. If you can learn to cultivate this type of joy and bliss every moment, then you can eventually cultivate both detachment and clearness. Then you can experience what Tibetans call the clear light, though it is not a physical light at all. As to when the bodhicitta melts and you experience the joys and blisses of cultivation, you must also remember that these are not the inherent one. Only if you allow emptiness to manifest, and cultivate prajna wisdom, can the joys and blisses transform themselves into the real one.

Some people who reach a state of clarity or clearness because of cultivation cannot sleep at night. Not being able to sleep and yet not being tired, they feel it is a sickness when it is actually a stage of kung-fu. The kung-fu stage is that they are very clear because of their shen has become full. In fact, this clarity was previously explained through the Tao school saying, "When the jing is full you do not think of sex, when the chi is full you do not think of eating, *and when the shen is full you do not think of sleep*." Only now we are approaching the issue of clarity and detachment from the aspect of the Esoteric school, so we have to make all these correspondences. Clarity, in short, is not something to fear on the path.

Some people in cultivation can successfully generate the joys and blisses, but if they mistakenly become attached to this realm of experience, they can easily become reborn as asuras (angry gods still within the Realm of Desire who are only one step above humans, and who have not yet rid themselves of passions). With this warning in mind, you must remember that the joys and blisses of spiritual cultivation are only an aid to the ultimate target of cultivating prajna and emptiness. If you just remain absorbed in this stage without learning emptiness and detachment, the most you can hope for is to become a useless saint wrapped in ecstasy, and not cultivating away your bad habits, you will be reborn in the asura heavens.

The Four Blisses

What are the actual tantric physical "blisses," or mental "joys," that are generated as the chi is brought into the central channel and the bodhicitta drops are melted and flow through the sushumna? There are:

- The first bliss, known as "bliss" or *ananda*, which occurs when the substances in the channels melt, and together with the chi are brought to the crown chakra. In the Tao school, we say that the three flowers assemble at the top, meaning the jing transforms into chi and then shen at the top of the head to produce bliss. In the tantric tradition, attaining the first bliss is related to attaining an emanation body, or nirmanakaya, but we should think of this as being related to attaining the first dhyana.

- The second bliss, known as the "supreme bliss" or *parama-ananda*, occurs when

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the chi and channel substances collect at the throat chakra. According to Esoteric school doctrine, cultivating the stage of supreme joy is related to cultivation of the sambhogakaya Reward body.

- The third bliss, known as the "special bliss," "extraordinary joy" or *virama-ananda*, occurs when the chi and substances flow to collect at the level of the heart chakra. If you can open up the heart chakra, then you can see the Tao or realize the dharmakaya. Many schools concentrate on other chakras, but if you want to understand enlightenment dharma, the heart chakra is key.

- The fourth bliss, also known as the "innate bliss," "spontaneous joy," or *sahaja-ananda*, arises when the energies collect at the navel chakra. This is the greatest bliss of the four, and is generated when the bindus and chi collect at the great chakra of transformation, which is the base of the heat yoga tumo fire.

These special states of joy and bliss are so powerful that because of them, you can break away from your habits of anger, stupidity and ignorance. As the literature of every cultivation school states, the blisses experienced through cultivation fill every cell of the body completely, and are a hundred times more intense than ordinary sexual pleasure. Why? Because during sexual orgasm the tumo fire is ignited only momentarily, your chi does not flow within the central channel, and the subtle drops (jing) merely pass by the central channel without going through it. The esoteric schools also tell us that the blisses generated when the drops ascend through the central channel are more powerful and intense than the blisses and joys which occur when the drops descend, and so the most intense blisses are known as "innate blisses."

These special states of joy and bliss are infinitely more profound than the state of "flow," "the groove," "being centered," "the zone," "the white space," "peak experience," "perfect mental serenity," "ecstasy," or "white moment" reported in professional sports literature. This is only a type of lower mundane samadhi, a psychological space in which an athlete's performance seems supernormal because they experience perfect mental serenity and calm, their conscious thought seems suspended in abeyance, their concentration is heightened to an extreme, time appears as if standing still, and the athlete feels as if fully alive, connected with all things, and living completely in the present.

This is a wonderful state, but it is actually far below even the lowest ranks of true samadhi although it gives an indication of the potential of the state. In fact, it is disrespectful to the term to even call this a "mundane samadhi" because this state lacks most of the *spiritual* characteristics of what can be called samadhi. Animals, too, can also cultivate states of samadhi, but the animal mind can usually be characterized as having a lower state of clarity than the human mind.

For purposes of comparison, an athletic "peak experience" arises from an optimum attunement of the body in conjunction with mental concentration. It is much higher than the ordinary state of mentation, but this psychological state of peace and quiescence still resides within the realm of the mundane. It is not the samadhi of Tao, nor a mark of progress on your cultivation towards the Tao because it does not help you get rid of desires or help you make progress in freeing yourself from birth and death.

A Taoist would explain that this state results from the yin and yang energies complementing each other, or because our various vital energies reach a state of full but balanced harmony that brings about a corresponding psychological state. Just as in successful cultivation, the state of "flow" we are describing is a state marked by the optimal harmonization of blood, hormonal and respiratory functioning, but it lacks transcendental wisdom.

Also, unlike the higher states of spiritual cultivation, athletes can enjoy this state but they cannot control it or enter it at will. That is why athletes who taste this type of experience once will work for years trying to regain it. They remember how it once touched their life, but they do not know how to go about re-experiencing that stage and bring it into their everyday living. They associate it with their athletic activity, and so their love of sports deepens after they bump into this state when it is actually the road of spirituality and its results that they are seeking.

Though they do not know it, people searching for the state of flow are really trying to spiritually cultivate. The target they are after is commendable, but is much lower than any of the genuine realms of samadhi attainment. Properly speaking, the blisses of cultivation cannot properly be compared to this type of minor ecstatic experience because the cultivation accomplishments are so far above it. The cultivation blisses, for instance, can also be brought into the daily life where they can remain continuous experiences. They also last longer than peak athletic experiences as well as the transient experiences of sexual joy and bliss.

The physical blisses of spiritual cultivation are unique in that they are totally beyond anything a normal human ever experiences without cultivation, whether blissful experiences be pursued through drugs, sex, sports or other means. Because they are so unique, the samadhi blisses are also the target of much clinging and attachment, which is why a spiritual practitioner must learn how to detach from experiential realms at every step on the spiritual path. Cultivating detachment and attaining "Emptiness" are not to be feared because it is through these that you will actually attain the "Fullness" of Tao.

As we already covered in our discussion of the first dhyana, a practitioner who cultivates a state of bliss and joy can develop a strong concentration. In other words, bliss serves to perfect concentration. The environment of bliss gives rise to one-pointed concentration and therefore helps in the stabilization of the emptiness mindset while full conscious awareness is maintained. If someone can remain in a state of empty mind and bliss, remaining permeated or saturated with

these two aspects without getting attached—straddling the middle of emptiness-bliss without becoming ensnared by either extreme—it is easy to transform the physical body quickly.

It is easy to transform the physical body in this state because in this realm, the body's hormones, chi and mai reach refined states and optimum levels wherein the chi and hormones can circulate freely without obstruction. When athletes attain their experience of "flow," they also taste a bit of this stage although at a far, far lower level of accomplishment. The longer you remain in this state and let it permeate the body, the quicker the physical nature can be transformed, and the more fit a vehicle it can become for the successful accomplishment of spiritual cultivation.

Naturally there are ranks we can establish as to the coarser and the more refined levels of this sort of bliss achievement. There are always more than one set of measuring sticks we can use to judge meditation progress, and this ranking scheme is one such alternative. To continue progressing through these experiences from one level to the next, you must avoid holding onto any realm but instead keep your mind "abiding in," "centered in," or "directed toward" emptiness so that you always experience ecstasy conjoined with emptiness and awareness, but without attachment. That is how you will progress from one level of cultivation bliss to the next, which is by refusing to hold onto that level, and actually detaching from it so that it becomes refined into something higher.

The Four Empties

In terms of this sort of measuring system, the Esoteric school describes the existence of the four "empties" or emptiness stages that match with the four blisses and which manifest as the wind, or chi, is dissolved into the central channel. These empties are subtle forms of consciousness that realize varying degrees of emptiness, but these degrees of emptiness clarity are not yet that realization of emptiness we call self-realization. Using Tantric terminology, these four stages of attainment are described as follows:

- As the wind element, or chi, starts to dissolve in the central channel, a practitioner initially experiences a stage called "appearance." This stage is the "appearance empty" or "empty" that is the first of the four empties. It is called "empty" because it is devoid of both gross conceptions and the chi winds upon which they typically ride. It is also called the mind of "radiant white appearance" because one can describe this scenario as an experience of pale light, akin to a sky in the early evening in which the moon has just risen and casts a pale sheen. That is why it is called "appearance," because an appearance like moonlight dawns. It is also referred to as a "vision of whiteness" although it is more like a clear autumn sky pervaded by moonlight. Chuang Tzu of the Tao school said that this stage is so balanced and so nice that it is "white." This stage physically corresponds to the white bodhicitta at the top of the head melting, and then descending or dripping

down to the top of the heart.

- With progress, this stage dissolves into the second empty, which is known as the "very empty" because it is devoid of the mind of appearance along with the chi flows that serve as its basis. It is also described as the stage of "proximity" or "increase," in which there is a vision of redness. That is why some texts call it the mind of "red increase." It is also called the "increase of appearance" because its vivid appearance is more like sunlight than moonlight. In this stage the practitioner can see a reddish shaded light that is much like a sky pervaded by sunlight. In terms of the subtle drops, this stage of attainment is due to the red bodhicitta ascending so that the red drops touch the bottom channels of the heart chakra.

- With further progress, this stage next transforms into the third empty, or "great empty." This "great emptiness" is the tantric stage of "proximate attainment" or "near attainment." This stage is called the mind of "near attainment" because of its proximity to the dawning of the clear light. In this stage, there is a vision of overwhelming darkness or blackness, like the sky before dawn. As we saw in the *Surangama Sutra*, this darkness *must* be because there *must* be darkness before dawn, just as yin has to reach its zenith before the birth of yang. In fact, the more intense one's vision of darkness, the more dominant the clear light experience will be when it emerges. In terms of esoteric biophysics, it is a stage where the red and white bodhicitta drops meet at the heart chakra, thus, initially covering one another and producing confusion such that the consciousness experience is one of blackness. Since black is just a color, there is nothing to be worried about at this stage. There are, in fact, many beings that like darkness; it is only our discriminatory mind that causes us to like sunlight. The point is, darkness and light are relative phenomenal opposites that having nothing to do with the Tao, and there is no need to be afraid at this stage of cultivation attainment.

- This stage of proximate attainment then dissolves into the mind of "clear light" where there is a vision of clear radiance, free from any conditions. This is the stage of "completely empty," "all-empty" or "utter emptiness," but it is still not enlightenment. It is called the "all empty" because it is entirely void of all subtle and coarse chi flows, as well as their accompanying minds. This is a stage of extreme lucidity that we can compare to an extremely clear, bright and radiant sky that is totally free from any blemishes, including clouds. The sense of clear light can be compared to the sky at dawn, when there is neither sun nor moon nor darkness. The Zen school describes this point in saying that the mind is like a clear mirror. However, this stage of clear light it is not the *true* clear light of self-realization that even the most evil karma can never extinguish. Far from being the true "clear light," it is still a clear light with form. As to the internal biophysics of

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> this stage, esotericism explains that it occurs when all the chi have dissolved into a very subtle state and the red and white drops have dissolved into the red and white parts of the indestructible drop located at the heart chakra. As the *Chudamani Upanishad* of Hinduism says, "When the red bindu moves upward by control of prana, it mixes with the white bindu and one becomes divine. He who realizes the essential oneness of the two bindus when the red bindu merges with the white bindu, alone knows yoga."

This completes the description of the four blisses and four empties of the tantric schools. We know that the blisses and empties are not the same thing because at the time of death you will experience the four empties, but not the four blisses. Furthermore, the blisses deal with the physical body, and the empties deal with the mind. There is also a big secret here, a big secret that no one in the Tantric schools bothers to tell you. If we turn back to our knowledge of the first dhyana, it too has the realms of joy and bliss. The second dhyana is characterized by a higher stage of joy and bliss, and the third and fourth dhyana have higher degrees of emptiness and bliss as well.

Here is the secret: if you unite the four emptiness characteristics of the four dhyana with the four physical blisses of the four dhyana, you already have co-emergent emptiness and bliss! You have the "being," or existence aspect of bliss, which is the blissful ecstasy from the Realm of Form attainments. Together with that, you also have the nonexistence formlessness or emptiness attainments. It is all right here in the four dhyana—the bliss of the body and the empty no-thought nature of the mind.

Mind and body interact with each other, and if you understand Tantra you will be able to attain this undifferentiated union. This is the perfect union, the Middle Way. When you attain it, everything you see will appear to be a manifestation of bliss and emptiness. How did Buddha describe this for the Orthodox school? He said you should simply cultivate the four dhyana as practice training vehicles, and that everything should be viewed as if it were a dream. This state is actually co-emergent emptiness-bliss, the Middle Way from which you can realize Tao.

This is how you attain enlightenment, and how a Buddha can transcend the world of form while at the same time remaining involved with it to carry out vows and perform acts of compassion. This is it, only we have explained it from an entirely different angle.

You already know there is an aspect of conventional existence that we call karma, dependent arising, or interdependent origination. This empty, energetic nature of the universe is not real, but it functions with interdependent rules and will never be destroyed. You also know there is an emptiness aspect of voidness behind the outward veneer of this realm of falsity and delusion. The process of straddling both, integrating both, recognizing both, unifying both is called co-emergent emptiness and bliss, or the Middle Way. Whereas the Tantric path says you must

cultivate the empties and blisses separately and then unify them, Shakyamuni simply said you have to cultivate the four dhyana as the practice stations to self-realization.

The Tantric tradition breaks the process of spiritual cultivation into such indiscernible tiny pieces that you miss this realization of the big picture. It makes you memorize all sorts of useless details, and mystifies the process so that you get lost or encumbered. Nevertheless, this is it, this is the big secret. Buddha describes the process by saying you gain proficiency with the nine samadhi—those of the Form Realm and Formlessness—and all the while you try to attain Tao by searching to realize where these states come from. He also explains the process in terms of breaking through the skandhas, first the form-related and then the more intangible of the five aggregates. But to attain these states you need merit which accrues from active engagement with the world, and so when you attain enlightenment the pathway is still one of compassion and charity as well, because enlightenment can never truly be called complete as long as the Three Realms remain unenlightened.

Taoism describes the cultivation path by saying this: you achieve emptiness after experiencing various physical transformations between jing, chi and shen, which is the same thing as the Tantric path only without the discussions of chakras, blisses and empties. You pass through all these realms of transformation and with enough prajna wisdom, can finally surpass the impermanent, false and artificial. Then you return to the world and integrate your realization with your behavior to manifest or exhibit what you have learned.

You must work to spiritually realize the fundamental wisdom essence without any characteristics, which is the dharmakaya, but then you have to reveal it or manifest it in the world. In the process towards this end you cultivate an empty form or appearance (xiang) body from your accumulation of meritorious energies, and this is the sambhogakaya. It is a pure illusory body, a magnificent appearance body composed of very subtle fundamental energies that can display your past merits.

With realization and appearance, or the dharmakaya and sambhogakaya realizations, you still have the task of acting in the world, which is called exercising your *tai yung* or great functioning. After enlightenment, this you do through the use of the nirmanakaya, which are the varieties of forms you can manifest for the sake of helping living beings. As a Buddha or Bodhisattva, your mind is in the continual state of the nondualistic clear light, or dharmakaya, but your nirmanakaya emanation bodies are projected everywhere in the universe, functioning for the benefit of other sentient beings in the realm of phenomena. Because your mind is empty and omniscient, you can handle the affairs of a vast number of these projected beings and thereby accumulate even more merit at a fantastic inconceivable rate.

In light of this information and way to look at the spiritual path, much of the esotericism you see today, such as yoga and chi-gong practice, is just playing with tricks of consciousness, playing

with internal wind to achieve tiny ends rather than aiming at the great end of cultivation. What you can find in these offshoot paths often violates the cardinal principle of cultivation, which is to allow those spiritual transformations that are supposed to occur to do so naturally. For instance, there are tantric yogas for "shaping" one's chi energies into an illusory body.

Such a thought-born body can be created by the seventh consciousness, and not just formed by the sixth consciousness. But why does it have to be forcefully shaped, and why *that* particular shape? Should not the illusory body, if there is such a thing, simply arise naturally? If you create a body by visualizing its shape, what is to say that the shape you choose is the right one, or the best one? Would that not be just another illusory form anyway, and are you not supposed to be detaching from form on the cultivation trail?

In the Tao school, people also try to force various kung-fu events into happening prematurely. People mistakenly think they can guide their jing into their mai using their mind, and then return it to the brain so as to become younger. Or they think they can guide their chi to open the *tu mai* and then *jen mai* channels. Of course, this only results in the re-circulating of physical poisons, and you can see all the practitioners gone astray from such mistaken efforts because their faces become dark red or black in color.

Tao school practitioners therefore make the same mistakes as tantric practitioners in many places, but even Tao school practitioners know that the yang shen is born naturally without the use of force, and without being specifically targeted as an object of spiritual attainment. In being perfectly natural, you will not have an artificial end in cultivation and you will achieve the full blossoming of whatever final effect is supposed to naturally happen! You will end up contacting the real rather than some false design or some artificial construction. This is the meaning of, "Do not put a head on top of the one you have already got."

To attain proficiency in tantra, however, you have to purposefully generate each of the four "joys" and "empties" in a precise and exact manner. You use a specific technology to attain proficiency in manifesting these states, and you are instructed to remain with these states for some time in order to cultivate familiarity with their characteristics. This is no different than the need to cultivate proficiency at attaining and switching between the first, second third or fourth dhyana at will.

Another problem in the tantric schools is that the adherents, including lamas, try and use sexual intercourse as a means to generate the blisses and empties, but practically no one succeeds in this way, and everyone suffers accordingly. The theory behind this is sound, but sexual cultivation can only take you to the first dhyana past the top of the Desire Realm heavens at best, and since most people are not qualified for the practice from the start, most never learn to do it correctly.

As we stated, the object of Tantra is to cultivate the tumo heat so as to bring the chi into the

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central channel and melt the subtle drops. Then, you retain the subtle energies produced at each of the chakras for a prolonged period of time, which will give rise to the four empties and joys. Thus, you try to generate and then remain within each of the individual stages of co-emergent emptiness and bliss. In attaining these stages, you purposely hold yourself at each level of attainment to become familiar with its characteristics, and help stabilize the attainment. In this case, abiding in the stages is not actually clinging, but is the idea of not regressing and losing a stage once you have attained it. This is just a different way of teaching you how to cultivate the stability of the four dhyana.

Hence this is the Highest Yoga Tantra system. You cultivate co-emergent emptiness and bliss during the meditation session, and then you progress slowly so that you can bring this attainment into your ordinary everyday experience, just as you should strive to bring any samadhi attainments into your everyday experience. Whether you are talking about the nine samadhi, or the various samadhi of co-emergent emptiness and bliss, at all times and places you must remain in the stage of samadhi if you can. That is being in the world and not of it. To attain the state of samadhi and then lose it is one of the greatest violations of cultivation discipline.

This is the supreme emphasis of the Esoteric school, which emphasizes the existence nature of reality by focusing on co-emergent emptiness and bliss. If you simply attain a samadhi of nonconceptual absorption for a prolonged period of time—a stage of "dry Zen" stillness clarity without any physical transformations—there cannot be any great signs of cultivation progress, and you will not reach the highest levels of spiritual attainment. You will cling to some level of empty awareness as being the right way to practice. The Tibet school says that the emptiness realm you can achieve from co-emergent emptiness and bliss is so strong that it will enable you to break many such barriers so as to finally see real emptiness, which is to realize the dharmakaya.

Hence, this is the general esoteric path, with the relevant biophysical explanations, for the objective of attaining enlightenment. Of course, as one progresses through the stages of this path, there are specific kung-fu signs that will manifest just as they do for the four dhyana. These signs herald the progress of your practice, and people can use them to judge their spiritual progress in meditative attainment.

Summarizing so as to keep the big picture in mind, as one progresses in the "heat yoga stage of attainment," one gains control over the coarse and subtle chi circulations within the body. As the body settles, these chi energies withdraw into the central channel, causing both inner and outer signs of kung-fu to manifest. As these signs appear, they can be taken as a small measurement of one's spiritual progress on the cultivation path. Eventually, a meditation practitioner will attain the joys and empties, or the special realms of samadhi, and ultimately the true clear light of dharmakaya, although in the Esoteric school there are all sorts of various "clear light" stages other than the ultimate one.

Ways of Accidentally Seeing the Tao

You might be asking whether you must do all the complicated steps of the generation stage to "see the Tao," to see the fundamental nature? Isn't there an easier way, a more natural way without going through a number of artificially forced exercises?

In fact, according to some of the lesser known teachings of Esoteric Buddhism, there are some instances in which a person might, just for a moment, accidentally experience a taste of the Tao. For instance, when you have become a little inebriated and are really relaxed, that is a condition wherein you might be able to fully let go of everything, while maintaining awareness, so as to suddenly see the Tao.

When you are so exhausted and tired that you totally let go of everything, this is also a situation where you might glimpse your fundamental nature.

When you get so angry that you totally let go of everything, or when you are so extremely sad that even your breathing stops, and when you experience an extreme state of shock or fright, these are also conditions where you might be able to see the path.

When you lie in a state of relaxation after making love, you may be able to realize emptiness there as well.

At the moment just before you awake in the morning and it seems as if the world before you is half existence and half emptiness, half there and half not there, in that moment you might realize the Tao as well.

People rarely talk about these things, but there are many situations wherein your prajna wisdom can become unveiled and you attain a bit of awakening. When you think about it deeply, you will realize that it has to be this way. The Tao cannot remain hidden forever, so there must be some situations of total peace and relaxation wherein it can appear. But this type of realization can only happen momentarily, and can only happen to those with sufficient cultivation merit.

Signs that the Chi Flows are Entering the Central Channel

The Esoteric school does not rely on these spontaneous events in the hopes that you will see the Tao. Rather, the Esoteric school, and most every other cultivation sect, trains you to practice in a step-by-step fashion in order to bring about the event of realizing your self-nature. This idea is not only commendable, but also very logical and scientific. It is based on the principle that you can progressively purify or refine or elevate yourself so as to realize the highest states of spiritual existence.

Once you accept that no act of grace from above will suddenly arrive to provide you with self-realization, you will realize that true spiritual development involves the work of meditative effort. The very initial, preliminary signs of this sort of cultivation progress are that the air flows through both nostrils evenly, whereas normally our respiratory breathing is stronger in either the left or right nostril. After prolonged periods of meditation, this evenness in nostril breathing can be taken as an external sign indicating that the chi has started to enter the central chi channel. In the tantras, from that point onwards one should visualize the chi as entering into the central channel, and you should continue cultivating from there.

Most every cultivation school mentions that a practitioner should watch for the time when the nostril breathing is even, especially the schools of yoga which teach alternate nostril breathing and the eight classical techniques of pranayama (*sahita-kumbhaka* or "joined pot," *surya-bheda-kumbhaka* or "sun-piercing pot," *ujjayi-kumbhaka* or "victorious pot," *shitali-kumbhaka* or "cooling pot," *bhastrika-kumbhaka* or "bellows pot," *bhramari-kumbhaka* or "beelike pot," *murccha-kumbhaka* or "swooning pot," and *kevali-kumbhaka* or "solitary pot"). The idea behind such exercises, which correspond to the first half of tantric practices, is to help open up the body's chi channels which will thereby purify the body make it more healthy.

In the Zen school, a good practitioner also watches his or her breath. This practice means matching breath with thoughts so that the chi will automatically enter the central channel. Of course matching thoughts with the breath means calming both so that they seem to unify into one within the stage of cessation, or emptiness. When this happens, anyone will naturally enter a state of quiescence and attain samadhi.

On this road of Zen practice, no forceful technique is required other than relaxation and letting go, and yet you will attain all the samadhi and dhyana just as well. In fact, the process is so simple that people often refuse to believe in it! They do not believe this practice can actually be that effective because they feel that nothing can be that simple, and that there must be something extra or secret. But when you think about cultivation deeply, you will realize that this simplicity is actually the way it is supposed to be, and that religions and special practices are all artificialities that can obfuscate the matter.

In terms of spiritual cultivation, the simplest way is usually the highest, best, and most perfect path. But because the simplest way is the highest, it is also the hardest to follow because we desire something more exciting and more complicated, and do not believe that things could be this simple. We have this notion that we must be "doing" something, and simply matching our thoughts with our breath so that they calm down and unify cannot be it, so we look for something more strenuous and mysterious rather than follow a truly genuine road to the Tao. But did you ever consider that if the path to Tao were to be something genuine and authentic, rather than something artificially created, that this type of technique would be the most valid one?

By relying on nothing from the start, the Zen process is actually more profound than Tantra, and avoids many undesirable side-effects of the other schools which require the presence of an attentive master during the cultivation process. In using the artificial *forceful* techniques, there is always the danger of disturbing the body's chi energies, and as we saw with Zen Master Hakuin, forced techniques can result in both physical and mental problems. This is why the schools of Tibetan Buddhism have all sorts of medical texts dealing with the deviations that develop from the overuse of too forceful or strenuous meditation efforts. Hence, in all the yoga schools and esoteric schools which rely on forceful cultivation techniques, there are usually very special techniques to which practitioners must adhere in very specific sequences in order to avoid harmful pitfalls on the path.

People can actually hurt themselves with these specialized forcing techniques, which is why they are normally kept secret. Yet you do not really need to hear about any of these techniques because in reading this far, you already know more than most of these adherents anyway. If you just cultivate the emptiness of sixth consciousness discrimination, your jing will transform into chi and then shen, and you will realize emptiness and achieve all these esoteric transformations. That is all you really have to know. Even saying that is too much, but if you want an explanation, it is a very good explanation because the ideas of jing, chi and shen can be linked to Chinese medicine, whereas explanations in terms of chakras and chi channels have obvious drawbacks.

For someone who does successfully achieve some degree of cultivation attainment from any of these techniques, it is important to ask whether there are any initial signs that the chi has entered and abides within the central channel. Are there any signs that the central channel has become fully open?

To answer this, first we must recognize that this is the stage that we mentioned in our discussion of the Tao school, the one in which the external breathing seems to cease. In other words, when the respiration seems to stop and the state of hsi has been activated, the chi has started entering within the central channel. When the functioning of the central channel is initiated and it becomes open at both ends, it will initially feel like you are upwardly and downwardly communicating with infinity. You will naturally experience a clear, empty state described as "not a single cloud in ten thousand miles of blue sky." Whether it is day or night, the twinkling stars of the whole sky will appear in front of your eyes as clearly the words on the page appear now.

In this state you can forget all your ordinary sensations and feelings, abandon the coarse concepts of an ego, and forget about all the dualistic concepts of right and wrong. This is indeed a stage of emptiness, equivalent to an "empty" of the Esoteric school, but in Taoist or Zen meditation it simply *happens* without being forced. Just cultivate correctly and it appears when you let go. Furthermore, this experience amounts only to an initial stage of attainment, yet opening the central channel will provide you with the foundational security needed for the ability to attain the Tao. Just remember that while this accomplishment *is* considered important, it is not the whole

picture. When you finally open the central channel, you still have to work hard and work carefully to finish the great matter of cultivation. Opening the central mai is still only a minor initial step on the path.

According to Esoteric school teachings, the stages wherein all the various chi are drawn into and dissolve within the central channel are marked by a particular sequence of signs. We have to remember that when the central channel first opens, you will see a dark blue color like the sky at dusk. However, when you initially open the channel and have this experience, you are still within the realm of the form skandha; the form element is still the main realm of experience. You have to progress much further in your meditation before you attain the empties and blisses.

To be complete in our description, we must mention what happens before the four empties and blisses begin to manifest fully. The primary chi of the body are brought into the central channel and dissolve, and this dissolution is characterized by a number of distinct signs, called "marks." In fact, the signs of these dissolutions experienced in attaining samadhi also correspond to the experiences that occur at the time of death. Therefore, in terms of process, we cultivate meditation, and eventually the chi of the five elements gets drawn into the central channel. As this happens:

- When the earth chi energies dissolve into those of the water element, there is a vision that can be compared to seeing a mirage of water. It is like being out in a desert and seeing a watery apparition that is not really there. This is why we say the vision is like an illusion, or hallucination.

- When the water element chi energies dissolve into those of the fire element, then the fire element predominates. As a result practitioner momentarily see a smoke-like vision which resembles the still haze that hangs in the air within a room where a great deal of incense has been burned.

- When the fire energies dissolve into those of the wind element chi, there is a vision like the flickering of fireflies, or sparks.

- When the wind energies, which carry conceptual thought, begin to dissolve into mind, there is an experience of visionary consciousness called "appearance" which can be compared to seeing the light from a butterlamp undisturbed by wind. This type of lamp light is very still and faint, but gives off a constant radiance.

One should not be too particular about these signs because the sick and mentally ill can also experience these states. The Zen school just ignores this type of transient phenomenon entirely rather than become attached to appearances, for as the *Diamond Sutra* says, "whatever has form is an illusion." As we can remember from the story of Gampopa,

> On the morning of the seventh day, he had a vision of the Buddhas of the Five Families in the five directions. The experience seemed profound, but when he reported it to Milarepa, the Jetsun replied, "This experience is like a man pressing his eyes and seeing two moons in front of him as a result. It is only due to your having captured and controlled the energy-winds of the *five elements*. It is neither good nor bad. Keep meditating."[3]

Thus, the explanation of these matters is just another area where the esoteric teachings add unnecessary complication. This is why Milarepa said, "Just keep meditating."

If you recognize the principle of emptiness you do not need to know all these kung-fu details because in knowing what they are, you will begin to look for them or start to analyze them, and then you will be stuck. That is why Zen masters emphasize searching for the mind rather than for the marks of the path. Just ignore all the experiential realms that arise, since they are not the real you or fundamental nature, and to do this you keep cultivating ever greater degrees of emptiness and mental detachment.

Remember that Milarepa, who had already been through all these stages, kept advising Gampopa to keep on practicing and ignore all the possible phenomenal realms that arose. As a doctor, however, Gampopa was stuck on asking questions and could not let go of needing some kind of explanation. The danger in that sort of behavior is that questions lead into even more questions still, and the more information you are given, the more obstructions you will create for yourself on the cultivation path. We are not exaggerating about this, for it is so true. If you adopt this sort of habit, you will end up never making any spiritual progress at all.

This is why Shakyamuni Buddha warned that when you come upon a man who has been shot by an arrow, you should not pause to ask questions about who made the arrow, what it was made of, or why he was shot. Naturally, if you were to ask all of these questions, the victim would die long before you even began to treat his wounds, but that is what people do on the spiritual trail, and as a result their spiritual life dies because they never make any spiritual progress at all. Shakyamuni Buddha told this story to illustrate that we have to be single-minded in our push for cultivation progress, and pretty much ignore the experiential realms that arise along the way. Then again, he also gave teachings on all these various experiential realms, but in a wonderful way that explained matters without giving them sticky handles that attracted too much attachment.

When it comes to spiritual cultivation today, you will find that most types of scientists, and doctors in particular, tend to have the worst habits when it comes to this sort of barrier. Because of their training, their minds become fixated with the barriers of orthodoxy, and so they have the most difficulty understanding or accepting the principles of cultivation science. You can readily realize this when you note that doctors, for instance, often will not accept natural remedies that have worked for hundreds of years, so how can you expect them to go beyond this sort of

behavior and readily accept something totally beyond their realm of training or experience? They are basically indoctrinated not to accept anything other than what already fits comfortably within the framework they have already been taught.

Scientists, on the other hand, are to be commended for their training and their use of logic. The problem with scientists, however, is that they are also extremely biased, and will conform too much to established ways until the establishment itself changes. Otherwise, their reputation and research funds will be at stake. For instance, we can dig up countless stories where scientists commonly refused to acknowledge things, even when they saw them with their own eyes, if those things contradicted the principles that were commonly accepted to be fact! Anyone who deviated from the established position was persecuted.

Another problem is that scientists become fixated on mathematics, and many will refuse to go into an investigative arena unless the topic can be surrounded with mathematics that explain it. Unfortunately, scientists can be just as prejudiced as religious scholars, who must defend their faith against another, and they readily forget that much of scientific discovery came from analyzing the exceptions to the known principles of the day, which is why they readily dismiss anomalies or evidence that might put them in trouble with orthodoxy.

People all want to see new and strange things, but when they see them and do not understand them, and when they cannot find an equivalent principle to explain matters using what they already know, they tend to shun what they have seen. This close-minded attitude of cognitive dissonance is the opposite of the spirit of investigation which scientists are supposed to embrace, but you will find it all the time in the world because noncultivators are tied up by the five errant perspectives of the volition skandha. Since Gampopa was trained as a doctor, of course he could not just ignore any of the experiential realms that arose when he cultivated. Because of Gampopa's personality, Milarepa had to pat him on the head and give him some little explanation each time he came before he could send him on his way back to practice.

The sequence of experiences Gampopa encountered constitutes typical signs of progress on the cultivation path, but what he encountered is no different than any of the other many transient experiential realms one might encounter. Since you have to pass through these things—and the quicker the better—detailed explanations are neither necessary nor useful. However, because at this time we are opening the doors to scientific explanations, we should still ask about the cultivation esoteric biophysics behind these experiences. But we should also note as a caution that Taoism and Esoteric Buddhism, as well as many other form schools for that matter, are overly biased with attachment towards these things simply because they have gone into the details of describing them.

Various cultivation schools have spelled out many inconsequential and transient details of the path with the result that later people have mistakenly taken these as the main thing, or as things

that must happen on the spiritual trail, and become fixated on their attainment. Actually, everyone on the spiritual path will have different experiences, and it is only the main principles of spiritual cultivation (such as cessation and contemplation, merit and prajna wisdom, etc.) that matter. Unfortunately, the depressing fact is that most people will somehow become attached to these phenomena now that they have been described, and they will keep looking for things that only last for seconds anyway.

You may think we are overemphasizing this, and that our warnings make this is easy to avoid. However, you will indeed encounter countless Tao school and Esoteric school practitioners who, although they know of these warnings, prove time and again that they are extremely attached to these things. That is because while most people are smart enough in the real world to make millions of dollars and run businesses or even countries, they are intelligent but actually deficient in wisdom. The best course of action is to therefore keep them from this information in the first place.

Some Useful Cultivation Practices

The first principle behind successfully attaining these stages is that you must master the tumo heat, or inner heat yoga. Tsong Khapa told us there were three major ways to do this: by meditating on the navel chakra, meditating on symbolic letters at the level of the chakras, and by performing certain breathing techniques (namely vajra breathing). Perhaps the most popular method is to visualize a small flame in the region of the tan-tien so that the white bodhicitta will begin to flow downwards, but you cannot use that method forever; eventually you must switch to methods other than visualizing the navel fire. But if you can stay in that scenario and allow all thoughts of the past, present and future to go empty, then the clear light emptiness will eventually appear and the illusory body will arise.

Of course, there are many kinds of other preliminary practices and exercises that can help you attain this goal, such as imaging that your body—from head to toe—is entirely empty of material substance. You imagine it is like an empty, transparent balloon filled with light, and as flexible as an empty sack because all your bones have melted away. Like one big empty sack, there is not a single barrier in your body that can block the chi or mai. Of course this attainment can also materialize if you use the skeleton visualization method, and at its advanced stages imagine that your bones turn to dust. So you can certainly get to the same stage of practice through different cultivation efforts championed by different schools.

This type of internal emptiness visualization is “seeing things with the dharma eye,” or using the “mind’s eye,” and with it you direct all your energy inwards rather than let it leak outside. That is why the chi can collect so that you reach the stage of “inner luminosity” and see an internal light. So of course this explains various Tao school cultivation phrases, and even the Tao school practice of inner vision. When you visualize a mandala or Buddha at a point within the body, such

as at the top or bottom opening of the central channel, the purpose of this visualization is to pull your mental concentration (and hence, the chi flow winds) away from external sense objects, and to draw your chi into the central channel.

You can also use the skeleton meditation of Orthodox Buddhism, the nine-bottled wind method of Tantric yoga, or the Hatha yoga practices of pranayama to accomplish the same thing. Men sometimes visualize a small flame in the region of the dan-tien, perform anapana, or engage in other practices as well to get the same results. All the separate tantras as well as the world's different cultivation schools have their own sets of recommended cultivation exercises for pulling the chi into the central channel. The possible preparatory exercises you can employ are endless, but they are all involved with cleaning the physical body, purifying the mai, cultivating the chi, and finally arriving at some stage of samadhi emptiness. Do you see how all the explanations and descriptive schemes we have gone over are now starting to interconnect?

We must remember that along the course of spiritual cultivation you end up cleaning, purifying and transforming the physical body *so that you can forget the body by ensuring that it no longer offers any obstructions to practice*. You purify your chi so that the mind which rides on the chi can detach or "separate itself" from the body.

Contrary to what some of the New Age schools seem to suggest, you cannot force the process of spiritual attainment, because the maturation of this cleansing process and the opening of the chi mai takes a certain definite amount of time which the Tao school has already catalogued. And if your chi and mai are not sufficiently transformed, you will never reach the state of hsi wherein you stop breathing and the "clumsy fire" arises. If that does not happen, then all these other transformations will never transpire.

Do not allow yourself to become confused and think there is anything religious involved in this process other than cultivating merit, working hard at diligent practice, and cultivating prajna wisdom. You simply have to clean all the dirtiness from the body, and so Taoism says, "Breathe out the old, breathe in the new."

The Path of Sexual Cultivation

We also have the possibilities of mantra and sexual cultivation practice for getting the chi to start entering into the central channel, although sexual cultivation is only possible for someone who has already transformed their chi and mai and attained a sufficient measure of samadhi and prajna wisdom cultivation. The Tibet school says that sexual cultivation practices can help an individual gain control of the unwieldy "all-pervading chi," which is the most difficult chi to control, and bring it into the central channel. This is the chi energy within the body's joints that corresponds to the space element. Even the Tao school says that you really only begin to start transforming these particular energies after years of spiritual practice.

Why does it take so long to get a good handle on this type of chi? Because this chi corresponds to the space element of the body, and as we said in our initial lesson on the Tao school sequences of cultivation practice and transformation, this is the most difficult of the body's five elements to transform. The earth element corresponds to the downward running wind that is hard enough to master, but the space element wind is even harder to control.

Because sexual cultivation, in theory, lets you gain some control over this wind, the tantric school discusses using sexual practices for brief periods of time in spiritual cultivation. It talks about mastering chi through sexual practices, but neglects to say that the real reasons for this practice are its strategy of using fire to fight fire to help you break away from sexual desire. Sexual desire is the characteristic of the Desire Realm, and if you can break out of this, you can enter the Form Realm that can only be reached through samadhi attainments. Most beings in the Desire Realm have two sexes, and there is always an interaction between these two just as there is an interaction between yin and yang. Sexual desire keeps us entrapped in this interaction, and when you want to reach the higher stages of Tao, you must break away from the pulls of sexual desire by harmonizing your yin-yang energies.

Most monks in the world's spiritual traditions cultivate in solitude and bring about that necessary yin-yang harmony by themselves. In fact, this is the preferred mode of practice because the solitary method involves very few troubles. In some cases, however, Taoist and Esoteric school practitioners will try to accomplish this harmonization through the path of sexual relations, which entails all sorts of problems and dangers. It is not the easiest route to accomplish, which is why regular people engaging in sexual intercourse do not even have a clue as to what sexual cultivation is all about. The most they can usually say along these lines is that at times they "feel connected" with their partner during sexual intercourse, and yet they are entirely ignorant of the role that the chi and chi mai play in this "connection" process.

According to the *traditional* school of Tibetan Esoteric practices, which is no longer in real existence, there were originally only three times during which one was permitted to engage in sexual cultivation, and all of this had to be supervised by a truly enlightened master, rather than just a master with samadhi attainments. One of the three options allowed individuals to practice sexual matters at the beginning of their cultivation so that they could then give up sexual desire entirely. Another path was to let individuals engage in sexual cultivation in the middle of their practice when they needed it to make the jump to samadhi, which would take them out of the Desire Realm. The third possibility was for the practitioner to wait until they had succeeded in attaining samadhi, and then allow them to use sexual practices only once or twice to finally jump out of the Realm of Desire completely. You see, like kundalini yoga, sexual practices can only help you get to the top of the Desire Realm. Their only purpose is to help you attain the first dhyana, whereby you can leave the Desire Realm completely and enter the Realm of Form.

With the goal of samadhi in mind, the Esoteric school specified various categories of sexual

consorts for sexual cultivation including the *karmamudra* or "action mudra," which was an actual physical partner, and the *jnanamudra* or "wisdom mudra," which was an imaginary, visualized sexual consort. In the practices of sexual cultivation, cultivators would have sexual intercourse with a partner, and when their bodies filled with chi such that they started to feel joy and bliss in every cell, would attempt to realize the mind of emptiness, but without "leaking."

The Tibet school explains that the inherent method of sexual cultivation is to use desire to generate a powerful bliss consciousness which can destroy the very roots of desire. The theory behind the method is to use fire to fight fire, or hammer a nail in the bottom of a table to excise a nail driven in from above. This is why the sexual intercourse in this type of practice should be desireless, and yet joyful. Unfortunately, ordinary noncultivators do not know any of these principles at all, and so they carelessly lose their jing through ordinary sexual activities as well as their chances of quickly transforming their physical nature. This is one of the reasons that people get sick and age quickly.

Some people who say they are cultivating actually seek sexual companions with the idea of stealing chi energies from their partner. Nowhere is this idea consistent with Buddha's teaching about the way to Tao, but many people who claim to be practicing Esoteric Buddhism adopt such evil notions. Taking other people's chi in this way is no different from taking their money, for both takings constitute stealing, and yet people never consider this because of their greedy minds. Furthermore, the first principle of Buddhahood is to benefit others, and to give rather than take. So how could this sort of attitude be in line with the spiritual cultivation path?

Once again, this is why you are only truly qualified to engage in cultivation sexual practices if you have already achieved some stage of attainment, your partner is qualified, and you have already "seen the path." Then this particular tantric practice might possibly be helpful in changing the central channel. If you do not have the prerequisite qualifications of wisdom and kung-fu, wherein your chi mai have already opened somewhat, then you are simply trying to grow a lotus flower in the midst of fire, and will never be able to do it.

Aside from the actual entering into of sexual union, another interesting point to consider is that all the specified methods of sexual cultivation (such as exchanging glances, laughing and touching, kissing and hugging and so forth) can be seen as imitations of the main sexual practices of the higher Desire Realm Heavens. This is why they are specified as the acts of Tantra, anyway. For human beings, however, the major form of sexual cultivation involves intercourse through the sexual organs.

As we saw with the cases of Lady Tsogyel and Machig Labdron, when these accomplished adherents of the form school wanted to change their bodies particularly quickly—*after* they have already achieved accomplishment in the samadhi and chi mai attainments—only then did they engage in this sort of practice. Even then, these practitioners only engaged in sexual cultivation

for a short while. They used it to accomplish the specific transformational ends they desired, and then they were done with it.

Basically, sexual cultivation is just a physical practice to help someone get over the pull of the body and achieve body samadhi. To properly enter into this type of cultivation, you must already have met some prior qualifications in that you have some control over your vital energies from having already attained the inner heat yoga. Furthermore, you already know that this practice can only help you get through the ranks of the Desire Realm heavens. Despite what people may tell you, it cannot take you any further than that.

Coarse Consciousness Rides on Chi

When chi is withdrawing into the central channel, the coarse winds of the body tend to become settled. Why is this important? Because consciousness rides on the chi winds, and if the chi becomes calm, consciousness will then become calm. That is the whole basis of mental samadhi attainment. In other words, chi and consciousness are linked in that consciousness rides on the chi just as an equestrian rides on a horse. For consciousness to become clear, the carrier vehicle upon which it rides must settle for if the carrier becomes pacified, then consciousness will clarify.

This relationship holds for the rudimentary stages of cultivation, but you cannot extrapolate here and think that this relationship between chi and consciousness holds for the highest levels of cultivation. The highest levels of mind, consciousness, and spirituality are totally independent of chi. We are only talking about the levels of consciousness corresponding to the lower rung stages of the cultivation ladder.

In referring to these lower stages, if we were to say that the mind assumes a body, that body would necessarily be composed of chi. In fact, the higher the level of consciousness, the more refined, clear, purified or subtle would be the corresponding chi flows, and other refined essences (shen, light, etc.) as well. Since chi transforms into shen, and shen into emptiness, once again this is a reminder that the strong link between chi and thoughts really only applies to the coarsest levels of consciousness encountered at the initial stages of real cultivation.

As to the higher stages of spiritual attainment where mind and phenomena are directly connected, we will leave this sort of discussion aside until you get there. Nevertheless, in regards to the lower stages, whereas the Tao school talks of jing, chi, shen and then emptiness, and while Orthodox Buddhism talks of dhyana realms of attainment, a practitioner with high prajna and cultivation accomplishment will realize that these are great ways to describe the path without injecting byways that might lead to error, and yet they are not the entire story.

Now we know, in terms of the process of creation, that form (or appearance) arises when the mind moves. The Tao school also says that when form disburses you get chi, but when chi

condenses, you get form. We also have the basic principle that chi and thoughts (consciousness) are linked. Thus, the two principles of chi and thought (mind, or consciousness) are interconnected from any one of these aspects, and these explanations are the inherent crux of the mind-body connection which modern medicine and science are still trying to fathom.

The various schools of cultivation are far ahead of modern science, however, for they already instruct us that the mind and its chi must become united in order for spiritual progress to occur, and which is the basis for many low stage superpowers. When the mind and chi become one, only then does that unity initiate the real process of spiritual and physical transformation.

This is why anapana is so popular as an initial cultivation technique. If, through anapana or pranayama breathing practices you can mentally link emptiness with the state of hsi between breaths, then you will make enormous progress in spiritual matters. When your external breathing stops during hsi, your internal chi becomes activated through embryo breathing and starts initiating all sorts of alchemical transformations. This is the stage you want to reach in cultivation—called the stage of warming in the Mahayana tradition, and shakti or kundalini arousal in the Indian schools. In Christianity this stage is called the fire of divine love, and these various descriptions are basically all the same thing. When you can combine this settled breath state with an emptiness or stillness of consciousness, then all sorts of physical transformations will come about including the mental clarity that corresponds to spiritual attainments.

In other words, we can say that mind and chi are related to each other like milk and water; if the one dries up, so does the other. If one stops then the other stops, too. Since each is dependent on the other, the suspension of one causes suspension of its partner, and we can make use of this principle on the path of spiritual cultivation. Indeed, that is what many practices at the lower rungs of cultivation try to do. One of the routes to calming the mind is to therefore calm the breath because in doing so, the mind will then begin to settle.

You can also approach matters from the opposite end, for if you calm the mind then your breath or chi will calm accordingly. After they both calm, you have to let go of everything so that the two can naturally reach a state of unity without force, and then subside into the state of cessation that will initiate your internal embryo breathing. When they start to unify, the internal kundalini chi will arise, your chi will enter the central channel, and then you will begin to forget yourself and be able to attain samadhi.

In a sense we can say that our consciousness is like a cripple who has eyes but no legs. In other words, our mind can grasp things, but consciousness must rely on something to move about. As to the porter it relies upon, that is our chi.

“Minds” are therefore basically inoperative without the winds of chi as a medium for their movement. Thus, the mind is like a horseman, and winds are like his mount. The rider, or mind,

has the capability of controlling the chi, but only if he learns how to become a master. So if you learn how to control your mind, then you can learn how to control the prana of your body. If you learn how to control your prana, then you can develop kung-fu along with various paranormal abilities. Yet simply learning how to control the chi and develop all sorts of psychic abilities is a far cry from the road of spiritual cultivation, or even the claim of being a spiritual cultivator.

We have talked about the mind being crippled when it is by itself without chi, but what about chi when it is not accompanied by consciousness? Our chi cannot function alone either, because it lacks specific direction when the mind is not present to provide guidance. Chi by itself is therefore like a blind person with legs. He can move but does not know where to go, so he needs the direction of thought to guide him. The lame must therefore climb on the back of the blind so to speak, so that together they can move about with purpose and direction. This is the basis behind many methods of cultivation.

> In tantra, you aim to gain control over consciousness to gain control over the chi (winds), whereas learning how to concentrate chi leads to learning how to concentrate consciousness.

We can understand this connection between chi and consciousness better if we examine what happens when a person dies. As a person starts to die, the chi starts to leave the body. Consciousness therefore has nothing upon which to ride, so it begins to depart as well. As to the physical body, it starts to immediately degrade when the life force is no longer present to support it. So consciousness leaves, chi leaves, and the body starts to disintegrate.

The details of this entire process, including how the alaya and other levels of consciousness leave the body they have appropriated during life, are explained exhaustively in Esoteric Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism explains that when you are dying, the red bodhicitta drops also ascend while white bodhicitta drops descend, and many phenomena accordingly transpire as these drops mix and the various chi of the body start to dissolve. As the chi leaves, consciousness follows, and then life is over. That is one of the reasons we say “the mind is destroyed” when prana is no longer there.

The Esoteric school details many of the stages behind this death process, but there are some important details it leaves out. As a person dies, their chi starts leaving the body, including the various chi of the five elements. In particular, the downward moving wind will finally start leaving through the anus, and when this occurs nothing can save you.

In Taoism, we say that you lose your jing through the sexual organs, chi through the back of the neck, but you lose your shen from the anus when you pass away. Hence once again we have a

confirmation of various spiritual traditions and their teachings, which is further confirmed when Hinduism says that Yama, the God of Death, lives in the rectum as well.

People do not lose their blood when they die, but they always defecate and lose their shen. One of the important results of this principle is that you must always be careful in giving older people laxatives, because you want to prevent them from losing too much of the downward moving wind. If they lose too much, they might not live long.

To counter the possible loss of chi and shen through the strain of passing their stools, smart people sometimes adopt the protective habit of clench-exercising their teeth during excretion so that the chi and shen ascend upwards rather than descend downwards. The point that we are making, though, is that the various chi of the body all start to depart, and when the death process has reached the stage where the downward wind departs, then no amount of heroic efforts will be able to save someone.

Some people say that chi and consciousness, or chi and the mind, are one body. They say this because consciousness can indeed command the wind element of the body, which means that chi and consciousness are somehow linked. Naturally, consciousness and chi are born of the same ultimate mother, so fundamentally they *are* one. They are two sides of the same fundamental nature: awareness and energy, mind and matter, essence and appearance, or however you want to word it. That is why we have the dharmakaya and sambhogakaya spiritual bodies, for one body represents ultimate essence, and another represents appearance. Neither will ever be destroyed, so death does not amount to any sort of annihilation either. Rather, physical death is just the start of a rebirth, so the cyclical process of reincarnation should be viewed simply as a process of recycling.

While chi and mind are therefore separate, they are also fundamentally one. As we discussed earlier regarding these two aspects, neither the original mind nor matter will ever be destroyed. Matter will just continue to be transformed in endless, endless cycles that will lead to all sorts of phenomenal transformations and appearances. As to consciousness, when it withdraws from the body, it does not get destroyed in terms of absolute extinction or annihilation, but simply goes on to appropriate a new life. In other words, form and energy are never annihilated which is why a Buddhist sutra says, “the characteristics of the world are always there.”

Phenomena are always within the realm of false existence. They are simply ephemeral existence lacking in true reality, which is an existence characterized by ceaseless change and impermanence. Empty they exist and existing they are empty, and all the time phenomena are involved in transformation and do not exist in the manner they appear to be. That is why in cultivation you have to awaken to the nonexistence of an inherent ego. In other words, you must abandon any mental attachments to nonreal states in order to awaken to the real. What do you awaken to? To what never dies, to what is always been there, to what you truly are. That is the

goal of spiritual cultivation, and when you know this you can forget about all sorts of spiritual dogma, because the rest is just the methodology to get you there.

If we wanted to get very specific with all these related Esoteric school teachings, we could say that our physical body has five types of wind, or chi, and each corresponds to one of the five elements. Furthermore, these five types of chi, or prana, perform different sorts of functions in the body. Alternatively, we could complicate things a bit more and say that there are ten types of chi if we were to include the five subsidiary types of the wind element noted by various esoteric schools. But since all 72,000 mai have chi flows inside, taking this route we could also correctly say there are 72,000 different types of chi, or we could alternatively say there are 72,000 types of mind! We could also say that in a moment of thought there are 84,000 afflictions, and therefore 84,000 possible cultivation methods to calm them!

The point is that in a single moment you entertain numerous subtle thoughts of such speed that only the awakened can recognize this. All of these thoughts involve chi, and all are actually afflictions. If you want to become enlightened, you have to learn how to detach from all 84,000 afflictions in a moment of thought, and so you train in practice for doing so, and this culminates in enlightenment. As you clear the mind of various levels of affliction, you can ascend to various spiritual realms and if your prajna wisdom is born, you can possibly awaken to realize the enlightenment of the Tao.

Whenever Shakyamuni Buddha discussed the wind element, he was usually talking about chi or prana. Buddha rarely liked to mention chi at all because people tended to become too fixated on this topic. Because of wisdom and experience, he knew that people easily become fascinated from the material results of spiritual cultivation, and with this fascination were only a few steps away from mistakenly succumbing to the views of materialism or permanence. It is like the topic of the alaya consciousness: even with his profound explanatory capabilities, Shakyamuni Buddha knew people would mistakenly take it as some sort of self, so he rarely spoke of it.

You have to recognize that no state of chi, however refined, is fundamentally real or graspable since it is in a constant state of change that is always subject to co-dependent arising. When you consider these principles, it becomes apparent why you should not put too much emphasis on Taoist, yogic or Tibetan teachings on chi and chi bodies. The only reason we are discussing them so much is to explain all these matters for the modern era of science. Being privy to the information in this book, therefore, makes you very lucky for we have gone into making all these connections and revealing all these open “secrets” which you would not be able to get from a hundred or even thousand cultivation books.

While we always say you should not focus on chi too much, the lowest steps of spiritual cultivation can be viewed from the standpoint of purifying your chi. This is because the process of meditation ends up cultivating your chi, and thus purifying or refining it. In cultivating your

mind and thus, your chi, *you refine the basis upon which consciousness rides so that your mind can more easily settle, after which you can thereby attain samadhi*. Refined chi results in a refined mentality, so the process of pacifying or emptying the mind can be seen as a process of cultivating one's chi to a higher state of purity and perfection. This is also what helps get rid of habit energies.

Whether you initially approach spiritual cultivation through the doorway of chi or mind calming, both chi and the mind must both become purified. The yoga of cultivation is a reflexive process in that calming or purifying one will produce a similar result in the other, so a good teacher attempts to help get noncultivators started on the spiritual path regardless of the initial doorway they choose to follow. Eventually it becomes a pure mind-only path, as it should, which the wisest cultivators recognize from the start, but since this does not always appeal to people at first, the best teachers offer people multiple ways to enter the Tao. That, in itself, is an illustration of their skillfulness or expedient wisdom.

In some yogas, "refining the basis upon which consciousness rides" means that you generate an impure and then pure illusory body specifically for cultivation purposes. The reason you do this *is because the untransformed physical body is just too dirty a vehicle to use for the task of attainment*. That is why we always talk about the task of transforming and purifying the four elements of the physical nature, recognizing that chi is the body's wind element. *Hence, the "illusory bodies" we encounter in Esoteric school discussions are just fancy terms for more refined states of chi, and the ability to detach the mind from the coarse physical body and have it arise on more subtle levels.*

Since consciousness rides on chi, in cultivating the finer states of chi, you are basically trying to eliminate the wind elements that would normally disturb the mind. Another way of saying it is that you are trying to detach from the body. That is why you first cultivate the coarse, and then subtle illusory body. You first free yourself of coarse mental afflictions, and then move on to purifying the subtle mental afflictions, both of which are involved with definite chi flows. While the Esoteric school says that the experiences of bliss and emptiness are supposed to be "sealed" or isolated (experienced) within the impure and pure illusory bodies, what this actually means is that you are not going to be able to experience the bliss of the dhyana until your chi has been sufficiently cultivated. Taoism thus says the same thing, but simply describes the process using a totally different terminology.

If you do not transform the physical body, then you cannot attain body samadhi, and without being able to forget about the body, it will be hard to cultivate your mind. Cultivation is as simple as that, and you do not have to worry about how to generate this or that illusory body. Just cultivate emptiness from the start, and both the physical body and its chi will naturally undergo all sorts of purifying transformations that will enable you to achieve the path.

The process is entirely natural and nonartificial, so no special visualization techniques need be applied. Whatever sort of chi body that is supposed to be produced will be produced naturally, if one is required at all. Thus, you do not need to set out on purposefully producing the impure or pure illusory body as the Esoteric school instructs. If you simply cultivate emptiness, the Tao school has already told us that this type of thing has the potential to happen naturally. What many practitioners who focus on illusory bodies even fail to recognize is that *our physical body is also an illusory body*, so we should not restrict ourselves into thinking that the illusory body which relies on chi, bodhicitta and clear light is the only one.

In terms of the actual sequence of this process for generating an illusory body, it is a process of cultivating samadhi, which is in turn dependent upon the chi energies entering your central channel. For that to happen, the body's earth chi energies will first dissolve into those of the water element, whereby we have the experience of seeing a mirage. Next the water chi energies will dissolve into those of the fire element, whereupon a vision of smoke appears. In short, the various energies will all "dissolve" or become pacified, so all the coarse energies, or coarse chi of the body will start to settle.

Some people say that the chi of the five elements will "withdraw," others say they "settle," some say they "dissolve" or become "pacified" … it does not really matter what we say as long as you get the general picture. For instance, we refer to the five element winds as "coarse energies" because it is the more refined chi, or refined mental states that match with samadhi. This means, of course, that the coarse energies in the body have to become pacified during cultivation. How do they become pacified? Holding them will not pacify them, but in cultivating emptiness this pacification will be perfectly accomplished. That is when the internal chi will become activated—since yang will be born from the stillness of yin—and start ascending the central channel. This is the general principle you have to recognize.

If we describe the march towards samadhi in this way, this is where cultivation biophysics once again comes in. As we mentioned, the channels and other areas of the body contain substances called bindus, or "drops," which we might think of as hormones or endocrine secretions while Taoism refers to them through the catch-all term "jing." After these initial chi dissolutions of the five elements occur, the Esoteric school says that the subtle drops in the body will begin to melt, which means that special hormones in the body will start becoming active.

The Esoteric school says that red female drops will collect in the region of the heart chakra, which will give rise to a vision of redness and an emptiness mindset called "appearance." Following this stage, the white male drops will collect, whereupon a practitioner will experience the emptiness stage of "proximity" that is accompanied by seeing a white light. Next the red and white drops will collapse together, intermingling (so to speak) as in sexual intercourse. This will produce the stage of utter blackness, and the mindset of "proximate attainment."

At this point you are getting near to some definite level of cultivation attainment, but you have not yet awakened to see the path. Sometimes people get frightened when they experience blackness during this stage. However, for people who have practiced mastering emptiness or no-thought, and who do not become so afraid that they withdraw from this natural process, this experience of blackness is no different than the time of the new moon when the sun has not yet risen. You have to remember that darkness is just a color and nothing permanent, and this fact should help you when you reach this experience.

Black light or darkness is nothing to be frightened of because it is just one type of calmness. Everywhere you go in the universe there is always you, and when the blackness stage is over you will have light once again, so do not be afraid. It is just a temporary experience you must go through before realizing the clear light of the mind. In Taoist terms, we say that from the extreme of yin, yang is born, and this principle explains everything in entirety.

Of course the Esoteric school thinks it is the only one that describes this stage, but even the Zen school describes this same stage using the poetic words that "the sun and moon shed no light." Hence once again, we have another school's confirmation of the nondenominational nature of the spiritual cultivation path, and a reminder not to become too enamored with the teachings of the Esoteric school by believing it is the only one with unique truths.

The Tibetan Bardo Yogas

This dissolution process, which follows with an experience of the clear light, does not only occur to spiritual aspirants cultivating samadhi. It also occurs at the time of death, and this is the reason that the bardo stage yogas were invented in Esoteric Buddhism. The light of existence seen after you die is also recognized in Taoism, so the concept of the clear light of awareness is known to many cultivation schools. However, since a form of subtle wind is involved with clear light of death, it cannot be the ultimate clear light of enlightenment.

When you die, the body may feel pain, but the primordial clear light is still unmoved and the original mind is not disturbed. If you can match your own awareness with the death clear light awareness during this time, then you can use this experience to cultivate the dharmakaya, or primordial clear light of Tao. That is the basis of the Tibetan bardo yoga of death.

Because a practitioner can also experience the clear light of sleep, and not just the clear light of death or the clear light of meditation, the Esoteric school has developed another cultivation technique called dream yoga. In this particular yoga, a practitioner tries to consciously induce the blisses and empties during the time when chi energies dissolve in the state of sleep. If you can maintain full awareness during this process, it is also possible to experience a state of clear light realization, which also must be matched with the ultimate clear light of existence.

The most relevant yoga, however, is the death bardo yoga. At the time of death, the energies of your body will dissolve much like they do when the chi enters the central channel. There is, at this time, an opportunity for you to experience the clear light, and in this process of dissolution, an illusory body will appear. As someone dies, the power of the four elements will slowly dissolve, as will the sensory abilities and the five consciousnesses empowering them. As these various chi dissolve, there will be inner and outer signs of each dissolution that perfectly match with the experiences that occur when the chi enters the central channel.

Because of this fact, it is therefore quite possible for you to cultivate during the time of death. However, you can only do so if you have already been taught all this material. You can only hope to successfully accomplish the bardo yoga if you already understand the stages of death because of prior cultivation work and training, and the principles of practice. Furthermore, you can *only cultivate successfully at the time of death if your mind is clear* and you are unafraid.

If you remain cognizant during the death process, and refrain from becoming frightened, and if you have some familiarity with the techniques and bardo experiences to be expected beforehand, then you will have the opportunity of using this period to attain spiritual awakening. But in the moment they realize they are dying, most people will experience fear because they suddenly no longer possess a body. Since they have not rehearsed all this before and do not understand the process, the state will be too unfamiliar to them, and it is doubtful that they will retain the presence of mind to cultivate at that time. This is why preparatory training is the key to success to this form of cultivation practice. The death process is a great hope because if someone has not caught Tao in this life, they can still use this opportunity between lives to realize it.

The dying process definitely presents an opportunity to realize some stage of emptiness. But as the *Diamond Sutra* warns, because they lack great merit, most people will get frightened when they first encounter emptiness since they will fear it is some kind of annihilation rather than a freedom and liberation. If you can accept this emptiness without getting attached to it, or getting frightened and trying to push it away, then it may be possible to recognize the dharmakaya. If you can recognize it and do not become overwhelmed by fear, then you can become the master and free yourself from re-entering the rounds of reincarnation.

This explains why some practices in esoteric yoga rehearse the energy dissolutions that occur during the death process. If you become familiar with these processes in advance, you will not become afraid of death when the time arrives, and it certainly arrives for everyone. In other words, if you train in line with the manner in which you will die, and become accustomed to this process through meditations that parallel the stages of death, then you will not be afraid when the time to depart actually comes. After the stages of dissolution appear and the clear light of death arises, you will be able to grasp this great opportunity for enlightenment. You will not have your physical body, but even so, you will be able to attain the Tao.

This rehearsal form of practice is the basic principle behind the bardo yogas, which are extensively outlined in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The bardo yogas practice using visualized chi bodies because the body you will use in the bardo state is composed of chi. Nevertheless, if you want to reach Buddhahood in the bardo state, a familiarity with chi bodies is not enough. You must also work to master some stage of emptiness, which is the ability to abandon the mind of mentation. When it is absent of thought, you must also strive to see the mind for what it really is, which is the functioning of prajna wisdom.

That emptiness you realize when you abandon the mind is called the "clear light," and "clear light" only refers to the fact that the mind is universal and clear with perfect awareness, as well as absent of all ego-notions. If you can integrate the death existence clear light stage of realization with the light (emptiness) of abandoning mind, then you can transform the death existence light into the abandoning mind light, which is the state where no thoughts arise. It is then that you can realize the Tao.

Say, for instance, that you visualize a Wrathful Reward body or the Zhunti Buddha during the dying process (the Tao school alternatively says to visualize arising in the form of an infant). If you do this, then the Zhunti Buddha body you visualize becoming will replace your illusory death body at this stage, and your yin body will change into a yang body. Why does this happen? Because when you form the thoughts to do so, then if you have sufficient concentration your chi will follow the visualization. The body in the bardo state is composed of chi, so it can readily be affected by the mind, but we want a yang body instead of a yin body during this experience.

Actually, the mind is the important thing—the real thing—rather than the pliable chi. This is why the Zen masters say we all have a jewel hidden in the mountain of form. The jewel is the mind, not the body or its chi. Our body or its chi, phenomena and appearances all constitute the mountain of form. Hence, if you have been practicing projecting yourself as a Buddha before death, the chi will naturally correspond to your thoughts at the time of death, and you will have the chance to make use of a more refined chi body to realize a more refined state of mind.

To accomplish this, however, you must first master that empty gap between thoughts in ordinary life. In other words, you have to practice mastering cessation-contemplation practice, and you have to practice these visualized scenarios such as imagining you are Zhunti Buddha and that the universe is empty of reality. If you practice and establish the necessary karmic connection through preparation, then when the real opportunity arises you will have the true ability to achieve it.

What the Esoteric school practitioners often fail to realize is that true Zen school practice is even higher than these various yogas, for the Zen adepts realize that they are emptiness and emptiness is them, so there is no need to ever visualize being any sort of Buddha King. When the clear light appears, they recognize it instantaneously without any seams or divisions. True Zen practice is

therefore wonderful preparation for the moment of death because even in the bardo state, most ordinary people will still retain their normal desires for sex, money, power and so forth.

As a result, since Esoteric school practitioners tend to focus on form rather than behavior, even those who gain some proficiency in the bardo yogas will still be forced to reincarnate in lives they do not want because they did not concentrate in their spiritual practice on purifying their habits and desires. But there is no reason to go into this in detail because this is information we previously explained extensively. We also extensively talked about how the various bardos, or periods of intercession, remain at the core of most cessation and contemplation methods. The death bardo practice is just another one of the many such methods available as a means for cultivation practice.

The main point is that the mind can cause changes in the chi of your bardo body, especially if you practiced this ahead of time through various visualization exercises designed to bring about one-pointed concentration. Though we cannot see it in the mundane world, thought offerings to the Buddha or hungry ghosts can really transform into a genuine offering as well because chi always accompanies thoughts, and these thoughts can produce corresponding chi forms. This is why the Esoteric school always instructs its practitioners to make many such offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for doing so can help generate a degree of merit.

With this in mind, you must always be careful of your thoughts since you now know they can in some way materialize, which is yet another reason why the crux of spiritual cultivation is to work at transforming your thought patterns and behavior. Even if you attain an awakening, you must still work on fully purifying the habit energies of the volition skandha, which is a manifestation matrix of all your karma. Thus, after awakening to the Tao and seeing the Path, we still have the Stage of True Cultivation Practice before Complete Enlightenment—the Stage of No More Learning. It is only when you can purify everything that you are qualified to enter the ranks of the Buddhas.

In summary, various Esoteric Buddhism teachings exist whose purposes match perfectly with those of the Orthodox school of Buddhism. Furthermore, the esoteric stages of attainment are not unique, for they are found in the other spiritual cultivation schools as well. The Esoteric school of Vajrayana, therefore, cannot really claim any sort of spiritual pre-eminence, which is a natural tendency of all religions and spiritual schools, as well as of different peoples and races. However, on the other hand you must indeed credit the tantric yogas as being much more specific and detailed sets of cultivation technologies than the practice instructions typically found in most other cultivation schools. Of course this can be a blessing, and this can be a curse.

While many will be drawn to this sort of specificity, which is why Nagarjuna formed this school in the first place, in most cases this extreme specificity will be detrimental to spiritual practitioners. That is why esoteric yoga techniques have usually been kept secret, or limited to

just the highest cultivators with prajna wisdom who could take these instructions correctly. Even so, the practices of the Esoteric school are also designed, as are the practices of most any genuine cultivation school, to help an ordinary individual transform their body, experience the samadhi, and ultimately attain enlightenment. The various esoteric schools may not be the highest schools in terms of cultivation teachings, but they also have their merits such as this.

> Basically, the problem with the esoteric schools is that their way of expressing things is too complicated, and they focus too much on illusions. The warning we wish to make is that if you get attached to this or grow too fond of this, you will naturally run into trouble.

Comparing Spiritual Schools and Their Stages of Cultivation

If we want to understand how the esoteric and Mahayana teachings correspond to one another, or learn how to match these teachings with those from other schools like Taoism and Zen, we would have to start by examining the general outlines of them all. In Zen we have the stages of seeing the path (or awakening), cultivating realization, and carrying out vows. In the Mahayana we have the five stages of accumulating merits, the path of preparatory yoga (which includes the four steps of prayoga), seeing the Tao, cultivating the Tao, and then Buddhahood or final attainment. In the Esoteric school, we have the stages of generation and completion. Furthermore, the Esoteric school has four yogas behind this sequence of attainment: mantra yoga, samadhi yoga, body (form) yoga, and cleaning yoga. In the Esoteric school, if you can use these four yoga cultivation methods, then you will be able to escape from the rounds of cyclical existence.

What is the "body yoga," or "form yoga" of the Esoteric school? It is a method of cultivation that eventually gives rise to a coarse and then fine (unclean, and then clean or purified) illusory body. To try and achieve this yoga, you either have to have a teacher guide you through it, or you have to accomplish it by visualizing yourself and your guru as one. If you can cultivate the ability to abandon the mind, then you can attain the illusory body achievement of body yoga.

Taoism calls this accomplishment *dan* since it represents the combination of chi and the true essence together. But in order to reach this stage of accomplishment, you have to learn how to escape from meaningless talk and mental chatter. To do this, in turn you must first quiet the mind by practicing mantra yoga.

In order to succeed in mantra yoga, you need a great desire to leave this world, which you can only do by succeeding in cultivation. With this type of motivation, you will be able to succeed in accomplishing mantra yoga, which involves using mantra practice (such as vajra chanting) to

calm the mind and separate from mundane mentality. Other spiritual schools use different cultivation methods, but the Esoteric school chooses this form of practice as its route of accomplishment.

In practicing mantra yoga, you do not speak too much or involve yourself with mundane matters too much. Rather, you focus on repeating a special type of mantra. For instance, you might constantly recite "Ohm Ah Hung" in order to calm your thoughts, and other mantras will work as well. "Mantra yoga" does not mean that the words you chant bear some mystical holy power that will magically change your situation. Rather, chanting mantras is simply a means of learning how to mentally focus and abandon thoughts to attain some degree of emptiness. The result of correct practice is not wanting to talk too much externally or internally, which tends to produce an inner peace and quiet that is free of normal mental chatter. This is basically the process of calming the sixth consciousness which we know is the basis of the path. It is calming the incessant inner talking of the mind, which is a principle we know as cessation.

Done correctly, the effect of mantra yoga on both the body and mind is tremendous. For instance, if you chant "Ohm Ah Hung" well over 100,000 times, you can open up your heart chakra to some extent and extend your life span by at least five years. This is a particularly important mantra used in many schools because the "Ohm" matches the sound of wind entering the body, "Ah" matches the sound of wind staying in the body, and "Hung" matches the sound of wind leaving the body. The mantra, "Ohm Ah Be Lah Hung Chit!" will help change the five elements of your body, the Zhunti mantra will help you attain prajna wisdom and change your fortune, and the Amitofo mantra can be used to attain inner silence as well. So can rosary recitation if you know how to properly practice it.

If you do mantra yoga well, you will attain the samadhi of detaching from thoughts. After a long time at this practice, you will even begin to forget that you are reciting the mantra, just as you would forget you were reciting the rosary if you did it long enough. In fact, the idea is to do it for so long, while listening to the sound within, that the thought does not even arise anymore that you are chanting, which is the meaning of "leaving the mind."

The mind will then become calm and clear through mantra yoga practice, but that does not constitute samadhi just yet. Rather, we can say it is at a stage somewhat, but not completely similar to one-pointed concentration. Hence, to abandon the habit of clinging to the body, the Tibet school likes to use this preliminary step of mantra yoga, the fruit of which is the elimination of internal nonsense talking. It helps you abandon the crazy monkey mind within so as to quell the thunderous volume of the sixth consciousness. But since there is still more work to do past this, this is just an initial stage of cultivation practice.

From mantra yoga you can attain the state of abandoning the mind, which is the fruit of samadhi yoga. The state of abandoning the mind is like the Zen school stage of seeing the Tao, or seeing

the fundamental nature. In tantric parlance, it is the stage when the clear light and the illusory body arise. So after success in chanting practice, you will attain the samadhi yoga (dhyana) result of no random thoughts, and can eventually experience the clear light of the mind if your wisdom is high enough.

The Process of Cleansing or Purification is one of Refinement

Zen describes the mind of enlightenment as a clear mirror. It is as if "the mind were a clear mirror" or "ten thousand mile cloudless sky" because there are no random thoughts since the mind is clear. Since Tantra wants you to generate a clear illusory body to realize this, you have to start cleaning or transforming your physical body (by cleaning the chi and mai) to begin the entire sequence of this process. In fact, that *is* the process—it is all a process of purification. It is a process of both physical and mental cleansing and refinement. The aspect of physical purification refers to cleaning the mai and accomplishing all sorts of internal biophysical transformations. The mental purification pertains to developing prajna wisdom by abandoning the confusion of normal mentation.

Almost every spiritual school, from Confucianism to Taoism to Buddhism to Hinduism, says that you have to transform your habits and your physical body on the spiritual trail, and again this is the principle of cleansing. To say it another way, you must purify *all your obstructive karmic inheritances* to succeed on the cultivation path. This physical body of ours is not real, but before you reach enlightenment you need to use this false body to arrive at the true body, the true nature. You must therefore purify this body to get it into tip-top realization potential, which is why some schools have you imagine a Buddha on the top of the head issuing light, why we have the so-cream practice of Zen master Hakuin, or the skeleton method, or why some people visualize the Zhunti Buddha inside their body purifying everything with his light. Whichever cultivation route you choose among the many available, you can only purify your body by cultivating emptiness, which you can think of as an exercise for cleansing the mind.

All the practices of anapana, skeleton visualization, so-cream and so forth help clean the physical body. And when the body is transformed to even a minor degree, it is possible that it will not decay even after death. Furthermore, you may even find relics (called *sariras*) inside after a cultivator's body has been cremated. For instance, when the Communists arrived in Tibet, they opened up Tibetan Lama Tsong Khapa's tomb and found his body still there, totally uncorrupted, even though he had died hundreds of years earlier.

Christianity's Saint Bernadette of Lourdes was also exhumed thirty years after her death, and witnesses found no trace of corruption or bad odor on her body either. Witnesses reported that the body of the Hindu guru Paramhansa Yogananda stayed perfectly preserved after his death, and many other individuals have been able to transform their chi mai to reach this state called "incorruptibility" in Roman Catholicism.

Many saints from all sorts of traditions, when cremated, also show the relics of sariras that prove they were able to transform their body to some degree. All these instances are proof that the chi mai have been cleansed and transformed, and the nondenominational occurrences help to prove the nonsectarian principles of the path, and the common kung-fu stages of spiritual cultivation.

These are all examples of successfully cleansing and transforming the physical body, and there are varying degrees of attainment that can be used to grade this sort of accomplishment. For instance, some people can purify the coarse aspects of their physical bodies and exhibit "rainbow bodies" (which are based on their body's subtle energies) upon their deaths if they transform the body's five elements. But do not get taken into believing this is a great thing, because this is still just an accomplishment within the lowly skandha of form.

The rainbow body is no evidence of spiritual enlightenment or even profound attainment. It does not indicate that the individual attained Tao, nor does it indicate that they attained any high degree of samadhi either. In fact, it actually is a very low stage of attainment. Zen masters do not exhibit this accomplishment because when the Zen masters die, they do it in a way to show that they have control over the process of death, which is a higher accomplishment than just exhibiting control over just the energy structure of the physical body.

To clean the physical body, Tibetan Buddhism has many different methods, such as the nine bottled winds practice, and you can also rely on the common methods of the various cultivation schools to transform the physical nature. Even the "completion stage" of the Esoteric school should be viewed simply as the process of transforming the mind and the five elements of the body into the mind and body of a Buddha, so it is all the same principle.

The fundamental essence will not ever be destroyed, and the five elements will not ever be destroyed either, and since they will just continue to be transformed, this is what you do on the cultivation trail in order to help yourself attain a realization of your fundamental essence. So what you are doing in cultivation is just transforming your mind and physical nature. It is just one big process of transformation through the cultivation of purification practices.

The key to these practices is to put yourself in tune with the original nature, and then the vast energies of that nature will circulate within so as to transform your body and mind stream quite naturally. The result, when you maintain prajna awareness, is ultimately gaining control over mind and matter, birth and death. That is when you become master in this play we call existence.

In conjunction with basic imageless meditation on emptiness, Orthodox Buddhism and Zen rely on the skeleton method visualization technique (contemplating the impurity of the body) and anapana to accomplish this task of body purification and transformation. If done well, these two methods are actually the only ones anyone needs to rely on. For instance, unlike the complexities of the Esoteric school, when you practice anapana you do not need to visualize opening the mai

to attain samadhi and dhyana. If you do not need any extra efforts, then why bother with extra baggage and try to imagine this sort of complication?

As a famous biologist once said, it would be easier for a novice to manage the instrument panel of a Boeing 747 and fly the aircraft, than to take over all the functions of the liver for just thirty seconds, so why are you even bothering to imagine how you should circulate your chi? You just cannot correctly do it, and you should not even be going down this route in the first place. The Zen school lets this purification process happen naturally and does not make a ludicrous attempt to tell the body how it should do its work. No amount of study could teach you to do the jobs your body was born to do.

Taoism has its own form of practice, similar to the skeleton contemplation method, which it calls "internal vision." In this practice, you also visualize clearing the barriers inside the body using the "mind's eye." Since you are turning all your spiritual energy inward rather than letting it leak outside, this will help purify your body's five elements. This is also how you can cure your internal diseases and illness, for where you put your mind, your chi will follow.

When Buddhism first entered into China, a large number of laymen succeeded in attainment because they only had just the two simple methods of internal skeleton visualization (which is somewhat similar to Taoist inner viewing) and anapana. After more methods flourished and things became more complicated, however, the number of people who succeeded in spiritual practice dropped tremendously.

Thus, we have a general rule in cultivation: *The more methods and information you give people, the more they will tangle themselves up.* When you think about it, you can realize that this multitude of methods is, from one aspect, a sign of the weakness of the Esoteric school. From this aspect, you can even criticize all the information provided in this text as well, and yet from another angle it is time to unify the spiritual paths and make clear the processes and stages of spiritual cultivation.

In Buddha's time, people's minds were much simpler and clearer than today, so he did not need to provide a lot of explanations for the cultivation methods he taught. Furthermore, some people could succeed in as little as a week using either the practice of anapana or the skeleton visualization method. If your basis is good enough today, you can expect to achieve samadhi in four to six months, and a good basis of emptiness in as little as two weeks. Of course if you can remain in dhyana for just a few hours, that is long enough for the wind to enter your central chi channel.

From samadhi yoga you will eventually see the clear light and attain the unclean illusory body, but this is not good enough for full enlightenment because your chi is still too unrefined. You still have to keep working harder, detaching from more subtle states of mind and appearance at each

step of the spiritual way.

Why does the illusory body arise along this route? No one in the Esoteric school bothers to ask this, but we can answer it in several ways. It arises because the seeds are already in the alaya, because we are all nirmanakaya bodies of the primordial Buddha, because the extreme of yin naturally gives birth to yang, and because when you detach from the body and mind they die so as to give birth to a new life. These are all valid ways of answering the question. Perhaps the best answer is the one we have previously given: the illusory body is just a fancy term for a more refined state of chi, and thus the ability to detach the mind from the coarse physical body and have it arise on more subtle levels.

All these explanations are true, though they all explain the same process from different angles. The illusory body is inherently present in the seeds of the alaya, and this life form arises naturally in cultivation since you have not yet finished with the skandha of volition. In the process of cultivation, you let something be formed from emptiness (the unclean illusory body), and then you must take this existence and return it to emptiness once again. That is why we say the Esoteric school concentrates on the aspect of existence. The Tao school explanation is much prettier, and simpler too, because it says that you let shen transform into emptiness (which is still a Hinayana stage of false existence), and then you return this emptiness to Tao.

Moving forward, with further cultivation you will be able to obtain the supreme light of the clean yoga (there are no more random thoughts anymore; everything is empty but there is still existence since there is “light”) and in the stage following this, you will be able to attain the clean (clear) illusory body, or form yoga. After this, if you can achieve a union of the supreme light of the clean yoga combined with the clean illusory body of the body yoga, then you will attain the union of emptiness with bliss, and then see the Tao.

Eventually, you can attain the Stage of No More Learning as well as the Union of Wisdom and Compassion, but you must be absolutely absent of distinctions for this achievement to occur. If you want to leave the world at these higher stages of attainment, there is absolutely no way you can attain the Stage of No More Learning. The Stage of No More Learning has some equivalences to the stage of a liberated Arhat, and it is called the stage of “compassion and wisdom” rather than “the union of emptiness and bliss.” The Arhat stage, therefore, contains all the roots of wisdom. However, if you only see the emptiness side of the Tao, you may not attain all the other wisdoms of discrimination. Even though we prize prajna wisdom above all else in cultivation, there is still the aspect of existence to be fully dealt with. There is still the necessity for compassionate interaction with other sentient beings who desire help and assistance.

When you reach the stage of an Arhat, if you are purely devoted to helping others, this is truly treading the Mahayana Path and you will quickly attain the necessary wisdom seeds. If you do not have the mind to benefit others, and do not make the vow to work for the infinite sentient

beings, then you will not be able to obtain the seeds of wisdom. If you do have this type of mind, however, then you can obtain the seeds of wisdom for everything. Yet before you can really achieve the great mind of compassion, you really must develop the mind which wants to leave this world because you recognize it as a sea of bitterness and suffering. That is how you will really develop motivation for the spiritual path.

Requesting Enlightened Beings to Help You in Your Own Cultivation

How can you possibly succeed in all this practice? Esoteric Buddhism says you must cultivate the vows of the four infinite minds or immeasurables: infinite loving kindness, infinite compassion, infinite sympathetic joy, and infinite equanimity. You must lay down a solid foundation of practice in the generation stage, generate the mind of bodhi, and then make your vows before you can succeed in the completion stage yogas. If you make the vow to help others, then you can pray to the Buddhas for help in achieving several important goals in cultivation.

In asking the Buddhas for help, you should pray that you can attain a body as soft and healthy as a baby's in order that your physical nature becomes an aid rather than an obstacle to the path. You should ask for help in opening all your chi mai, whereby your body will become soft and smooth. You should ask the Buddhas to help you learn how to make you chi begin to circulate smoothly without obstruction, and then you will be able to become calm and abandon all your violent tendencies. You should pray for help in mastering the dan-tien fire so that you reach the stage of calmness, bliss and warmth (kundalini).

When you pray for these things, you are asking for help in transforming the four great elements of the body. This concept of pacifying the body's four elements can even be extended to the four elements of society at large, which is why Chinese culture has a two line poem expressing this notion:

> The wind is calm, and the rain is smooth
> The land is safe, and the people are at peace.

On the cultivation path, it is natural to ask the Buddhas for help in transforming your physical nature. You also need help to obtain the union of bliss and emptiness wherein there are not any random thoughts anymore. A practitioner of the path should also want help to change the bad habits they inherited from the untransformed alaya consciousness, so that their mind is into the dharma fully. Hence, it is proper to ask the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to help you fully integrate with the dharma of Tao completely, so that you are not greedy for joy or bliss but can match theory with behavior and integrate with everything you have learned. You want to ask the Buddhas to help you abandon your self-love so that you can fully help others and quickly attain the seeds of prajna wisdom. With all these qualities, then you can hope to succeed at spiritual attainment.

If you get to this stage, your body will also develop more handsome or beautiful features. More importantly, you will have the potential to obtain true prajna wisdom. With both the physical and mental natures transformed to the best state possible, we call this a point of no more learning. From childhood until now, whether you are an Emperor or commoner, this stage is what we are all after for it is the best we can be, and the very highest target we can go after. All the hard work of spiritual cultivation is to get to this point. But to get here, Esoteric Buddhism says you have to cultivate emptiness and bliss from the causal ground, and to do so you need the clean illusory body because the coarse physical body is just too impure.

Originally we all have the seeds of Buddhahood, but are just too polluted to realize it. That is why we need to clean ourselves up a bit, and therein lies the long process and practice of spiritual cultivation—purifying the body and mind. Do not get too stuck on the idea of purifying form as part of this process, however, because the only way you will be able to transform the form body is by liberating the mind from clinging to thoughts, and this is accomplished through emptiness attainments. In that way, the body will purify itself naturally in all the ways and directions it should.

You must work hard at your cultivation until you eventually generate a body of ultra-refined chi, which as Mencius noted, will be reflected in refined behavior. Since chi and consciousness are linked, only with the most refined chi-mind can you start to catch any intuitive glimpse of the Tao. Thoughts and chi are never separated; if your thoughts are moving, your chi will move and if your chi is not moving, the sixth and seventh consciousnesses will be clear. At that point of cessation and clarity, you will make the progress you want in cultivation. However, this still corresponds to the lowest stages of the spiritual path because the highest stages do not apply to chi at all.

On the spiritual path, you must even purify the alaya consciousness, which is the covering (dark) side of the Tathagata Storehouse. It has all the seeds of virtuous, nonvirtuous, and neutral functions, and they all must become purified. In the process of cultivation, we do not talk of "emptying" the seeds of the alaya consciousness. Rather, we talk of overturning the basis of the alaya and transforming this consciousness into wisdom. This is akin to changing yin into yang, and so it is called "producing a revolution in the basis."

To get to the point where you are refining your chi to the highest extent, the barriers are quite large. This is why some schools say you have to accumulate three full eons of merit in order to succeed at cultivation. The Zen school, on the other hand, does not shirk at this responsibility but says that *maybe those three full eons are already over*. It does not throw any psychological barriers in the way of practice, nor discourage practice, nor increase discouragement by reminding people of phrases like this. It heroically jumps right in and heads toward the heart of the matter by cultivating the original essence. The Esoteric school, on the other hand, talks about many techniques and stages you must go through.

Many of the cultivation methods available in the world, including some from the Esoteric school, do little to help you break through some of the barriers of the path. On the road of spiritual practice, at the very least you want to reach the stage of becoming able to see the clear light and obtain the illusory body, which results from abandoning the mind, and you have to surmount the obstacles that are in the way. What is the true method of progress? For the gradual path, it is a function of cessation and contemplation practice, or samadhi and prajna wisdom cultivation. It is all a function of emptiness and prajna cultivation, together with the cultivation of merit. If you follow these basic principles, you will be able to reach some stage of true spiritual practice.

If we talk about cultivation using the terms of the Esoteric school, it seems an incredibly complex and dauntless path. That is why the simplest explanation, with the injunction to always keep practicing, is actually the best way to lead people on the road of practice. People usually think the Esoteric school contains the highest and most secret methods, but this is a misconception caused by a biased misunderstanding on the part of the school's proponents.

This sense of superiority is common among many close-knit groups, especially those bonded together by a similar racial or other heritage. In India, however, yoga cultivation practitioners are a bit more honest and straightforward than in Tibet, because they usually follow just one simple method of practice without claiming it to be supreme. If you simply look into your own mind and cultivate, and make this into a habit, then when you die you will still have accomplished a lot. That is real cultivation, and this practice does not really need a name.

What about Taoism? The Tao school focuses on jing, chi, shen and the mai. Since birth, all the mai are not fully open, hence Tao school practitioners want to open up all 72,000 mai to obtain health, longevity, and spiritual rewards. This is the meaning of the transformation of jing into chi, chi into shen and shen into emptiness, but this stage of emptiness subsequently reached is only the Hinayana emptiness accomplishment instead of the great emptiness of enlightenment.

The Mahayana road says that you must strive to attain emptiness and then "break up the emptiness." You have to return this emptiness to the Tao by abandoning all concepts of emptiness, and all clinging to empty experiential realms. That is how you return to the fundamental nature, at which point you will access that life which is there forever. The Mahayana recognizes that the fundamental nature of chi is emptiness, and perceiving that emptiness, you will have found the fundamental nature of chi and everything else. The Tao school also says that when thoughts disburse you get chi, but when chi condenses, you get form. Many of the Tao school methods therefore concentrate on chi and form.

Matching the Orthodox and Esoteric Paths

We are skipping all the tiny details of esotericism, but you are getting the big picture of the path. All the genuine schools inter-link, and you just have to learn how to understand them. For

instance, people think that Buddha never mentioned all the central channel experiences of light and color in the Orthodox school sutras. What they fail to realize is that it is all there, and you just have to know how to find the information. Buddha taught about all these things, but he taught this information in a way that was best for encouraging and promoting cultivation progress, and in such a way that would avoid the problems of all the other schools around him at the time.

As a small example, our life has the capacity to generate energy in the form of light, such as an aura or halo about the head. What we can generate from the body is similar to the light of physics, so we can call it an "analogy light." But when we talk of this type of light, we are actually talking about changes in consciousness. When Buddha talked of light in the sutras, in most instances you cannot read it as simply light, because he was talking of wisdom awareness and the mind. He simply used the term "light" to speak of consciousness or wisdom because just as light lets you see in the dark, wisdom lets you see and understand. The people around him were all of high enough stages to know that the different lights he mentioned were simply reflections of different levels of consciousness.

Buddha also had several analogies that he used for prajna and the true nature, a fact which most people, unfortunately, do not understand. For instance, Buddha used the term "true essence" to denote the "clear light" of the Tibet school. When you think about it, and when you study history and look around you, you can then answer the question: which term is easier to understand, and which one is more likely to lead you astray?

Using Esoteric school parlance, after you open your chakras and mai, you will see various experiential realms of color, and that is what the Esoteric school students tend to focus upon. As we saw with the case of Gampopa, your body will also undergo all sorts of various sensations and transformations, and the Tao school has taught us this as well. Buddha already clearly explained that eight types of sensations will turn up along the cultivation: pain, itching, cold, warmth, weightlessness, heaviness, roughness and smoothness.

All these sensations are experiences of consciousness, and so they are all accompanied by different chi flows and forms of light. The sensations (and colors) are also due to the friction between the physical and psychological states, and this is what Buddha chose to use in expressing the Esoteric school stages. In other words, he avoided the unusual in favor of the ordinary, and focused on consciousness to prevent the errors we now commonly see on the esoteric paths. After all, the whole path is actually about consciousness anyway, which is what the Zen school aptly emphasizes.

Another example is the dissolutions the Esoteric school mentions that happen during the various stages of death. Buddha also knew of these, and often talked of the various experiences produced by the interactions of the four elements, such as appearances like a dream, like dew, like sparks

of fire, moving water and so on. In the orthodox teachings, Buddha was familiar with all these stages as well as the schools of Indian yoga and their teachings of "marks." However, he rarely spoke of matters in this way, *and yet so many people became enlightened*. This result is something we must ponder and contrast with what has actually been produced out of the various esoteric schools. Samadhi attainments can indeed be found in practitioners of the esoteric schools, but as to enlightenment, this is another matter entirely. In this school it has been much rarer than the esoteric biographical accounts would have you believe.

Buddha wisely delivered all sorts of esoteric material in a way, by which people would not tend to get attached, which in it is an illustration of his vast prajna wisdom. For instance, we can ask why Orthodox Buddhism does not talk about the mai and chakras. In fact, Buddha already covered these items when he said that the four great elements each have their own individual nature and separate domain. That is how he dealt with the esoterics of the spiritual path. Past this, what really is the use of knowing the names of all the chakras, or various details about them? The Esoteric school says that its information is not revealed in the other teachings such as the Hinayana or Mahayana schools, but in fact the adherents of this school simply do not know where to look, or how to interpret things. Their wisdom is simply not high enough. You have already seen a large body of such correspondences.

If we turn back to the basics concerning progress along the cultivation path, after the chi and mai have been cultivated to a certain extent; your kundalini (or stage of hsi) will be activated which is akin to cultivating the fire element of the body. However, this stage of "shakti arising" is basically only the prayoga stage of warming. The Tibet school says you should accomplish this through mantra yoga, and so Tibetan mantra yoga practice corresponds to the Mahayana stage of warming when it is successful. Furthermore, whether your result is coarse, fine or subtle, this is all akin to merit accumulation for the path.

When you can go further and forget your body and mind, and begin to attain the various ranks of samadhi, we can say that the samadhi yogas of the Tibet school correspond to the prayoga stage of patience or forbearance. Furthermore, just as the warming stage in the Mahayana means you are detaching from the coarse physical body, attaining samadhi means that you are finally detaching from the coarser levels of the mind. You are finally purifying the mind by abandoning discriminative attachments and cultivating emptiness.

In attaining samadhi states, at this point we are finally into the higher levels of the skandhas, so at this stage of cultivation you can start viewing your spiritual progress through this measuring system as well. Up until this point, you were simply cultivating various aspects of the form and sensation skandhas. As you detach from the gross levels of consciousness—which is mastering the various samadhi and skandhas—this finally corresponds to the prayoga stage of highest worldly dharma. In the Esoteric school, this is equivalent to the form (body) yoga.

Thus, the Mahayana stage of the supreme worldly dharma corresponds to the esoteric practice of the body (form) yoga whereby you generate an "unclean," or coarse illusory body. It is not that you have to go out of your way to purposefully generate it, but when you reach the point where all the thoughts are empty, the illusory body will suddenly arise. Even though it is initially a coarse illusory body, we can still say that this body consists of refined chi, and because of this, you might be able to realize the true nature of the mind, and "see the path."

In other words, you might be able to experience some stage of clear light, or emptiness, through the cultivation of an illusory body made of chi. In Zen we say that you "see the Tao" and that "the mind becomes like a clear mirror" when you reach the full, rather than partial clear light realization, for the impure illusory body can only recognize various states of samadhi emptiness rather than the real stage of seeing the Tao. So the full clear light realization of seeing the Tao refers to the stage where you purify the skandha of conception, but the term of seeing the clear light is often used by the Esoteric school for samadhi-dhyana prajna-emptiness attainments.

In the orthodox teachings we simply say "everything is crystal clear" when you see the Tao, and you have to be careful to determine whether this refers to a samadhi or Tao realization as well. Only after reaching the point of seeing the Tao can you have the certainty and security of cultivating the spiritual path correctly. As the Fifth Zen Patriarch said, if you do not see the Tao (because of not reaching this stage), before that, all your practice is just accumulating merits.

If you continue to progress and reach the point where you have generated a "clean" or purified illusory body and seen the Tao, you will come to the actual stage of "cultivating the path." After that comes the attainment of perfect and complete self-realization which constitutes the Stage of No More Learning or Buddhahood. Of course, there are bhumi levels between the Stage of Seeing the Tao and Buddhahood, but to go into them would constitute overload, and anything we could give on the Bodhisattva grades of attainment is beyond the level of this text.

Cultivating the clean illusory body is akin to the Mahayana stage of cultivating the path, and this is the stage of the union of emptiness and bliss. Due to the union of emptiness and bliss, you will be able to attain the Buddha body and Buddha mind, which once again is the Stage of No More Learning. Hence, the progressive stages of detaching from the body and from consciousness correspond to the Mahayana stages of warming, the peak, and forbearance. When you attain the unclean illusory body, this corresponds to the Mahayana stage of the supreme worldly dharma. It is still a worldly dharma because you have not attained the enlightenment that is beyond the world. Since we are still involved with an illusory body, the title of this stage makes sense from this angle as well.

Actually, to be perfectly precise without trying to throw a wrench into all these graduations, all the practices and stages of achievement, even up to the ninth bhumi level of a Bodhisattvahood, are all just the intensified, "adding methods" of prayoga. And if you focus on the prayoga

methods without focusing on the Bodhisattva practices, you are entirely wrong! The Mahayana path is equivalent to the tantric stage of completion, so without the Bodhisattva mind you will not be able to complete it.

Nonetheless, our bodies are not initially clean enough for the climb to spirituality, but after they become purified, they match with the stage of the supreme worldly dharma. And this is how Taoism and Esoteric Buddhism parallel each other, for they both believe that this physical body of the four elements can be transformed using our spiritual energy. We are undergoing a continual process of transformation anyway, so the goal of physical purification is certainly within the realm of possibility. But whereas the Mahayana Great Vehicle says we do not have to guide the process, the Esoteric school tries to purposely bring the fruits of the path into the process of the path.

In either case, the process is like a silkworm that eats his leaves, spins a cocoon, and dies inside (incubates in a state of samadhi) so as to transform into a moth. The self-nature never dies, nor does the material realm—it is just always being transformed. Nobody ever says this clearly, but this is what is happening, and the Esoteric school chooses to focus on such descriptions which, unfortunately, tend to throw all but the best of practitioners off the correct road of spiritual practice.

While Taoism takes the route of trying to free the body of restrictions so that this can happen more easily, the idea of the Esoteric school is not just to supplement the process, but to encourage it along like a parent who pushes their child a little too much. In this respect, we can say it is much too attached to form. Anyway, what we have covered is how the various terminologies of the different cultivation schools match up.

There is no great mystery to this process of spiritual cultivation when you follow the indications of the Zen school, Taoism or the Mahayana teachings, but if you drop into the Esoteric school, then be doubly careful. We have adequately discussed the Esoteric path, but if you are still confused about the topics we mentioned, you can see the complexities we have been warning about. None of this information is secret, nor is any of this anything you really need to know. If you simply continue with emptiness cultivation from beginning to end, that is actually enough instruction for you to be able to reach enlightenment.

The problem with the esoteric schools is that their explanations become too complicated, and that they focus too much on form and appearance. If you make this mistake, you are bound to take a wrong turn in this endless cycle of samsara, or simply delay your cultivation progress for who knows how many lives. Why, then, would you want to risk making such a mistake when we have already told you the basic principles of the path?

If you actually understand the methods of cultivation, along with its theory and practice, then we

call this wisdom which is what you want to cultivate. The *Surangama Sutra* says that *when you detach from all form and appearance, that is the dharma*. Hence, in the process of spiritual attainment, you must never lose sight of emptiness for one moment, not even one moment. If you attain samadhi, the true discipline of any religious sect is not to lose it, not to leave it. If you attain the dharma body but are not attached to the dharma body, that is prajna transcendental wisdom.

For further information please see:

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1 *Tao and Longevity*, p. 73.

2 *The Yoga of Light*, p. 155.

3 *The Life of Gampopa*, p. 56.

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Chapter 14:
The Great Learning, Confucian Cultivation, and the Way to Actualize Universal Salvation

The 20th century can be called the century of insanity as regards spiritual cultivation. Nowadays there are many people who say they are seriously practicing Esoteric Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, yoga, Christian cultivation, Jewish cultivation, and Islam who are all just playing around with superstition, nonsense and outright craziness. People say they are engaging in spiritual practice with the goal of spiritual liberation whereas in actual fact, they are doing nothing but playing with their chi and mai and false notions of consciousness.

All the modern practitioners we see today are just playing with sensations so as to trigger their body consciousness, and toying around with their inner thoughts rather than actually cultivating towards samadhi and true spiritual prajna wisdom awareness. Of course it is perfectly all right to play with consciousness if you know the correct theory and principles of spiritual cultivation practice, but if you are not clear about these things, then playing with consciousness is clearly misguided. This will get you nowhere, at the very best, and at the worst, constitutes a grave danger to your wisdom life. You can only cultivate the false to get to the real if you really know what you are doing.

Today, we can compare people, in terms of their cultivation understanding, to children playing around in Elementary school. Because they lack concentration and maturity, the children simply run around everywhere in a disorderly fashion playing games. They pick up this game and then that game without completing anything, and delve into everything without understanding anything at all. They make a big mess here and then there, and then leave their mess and forget about everything all together. The most we can say as regards cultivation efforts is that the vast majority of what we see in the world is nothing but play.

With regards to modern man's understanding of cultivation and true spiritual development, we also have to call him "superstitious" because he does not even really understand the purposes, procedure and desired outcomes of the spiritual cultivation path. In other words, he is superstitious because he is not clear about what he is doing. Most of the time he is not familiar with the various spiritual practices espoused by most of the world's religions, and knows nothing about the various nondenominational stages of spiritual attainment. He just blindly believes in various dogmas he's been exposed to, and takes them as the "gospel truth," without actually knowing if or why they are true. That, in fact, is the definition of superstition.

Today's spiritual aspirants do not know how they should properly practice for spiritual attainment, nor are they aware that there are various stages as to what is supposed to happen because of their cultivation efforts, and yet they still engage in religious cultivation anyway even

though they lack this necessary comprehension. Without any type of guidance like this, what can be the ultimate result? Without any overall comprehension of the matter, this type of behavior is therefore nothing other than the practice of ignorance and superstition, and few people will ever reach any sort of degree of spiritual achievement.

Of course one of the purposes of this book has been to give people an objective stance for what they have been doing, or supposed to be trying to accomplish, on the spiritual path. Whether they want to follow this route or that route, we have supplied an incredible amount of explanatory information and guidance in just this one volume alone. All we can say is that it is extremely unfortunate that more people do not know the real principles of spiritual practice, and it is doubly unfortunate that they cannot guide themselves properly on the path because they lack the understanding yielded by prajna transcendental wisdom.

We can say that there are two types of faith or belief in the world that can empower spiritual practice: faith that arises because of transcendental wisdom, and blind faith. Blind faith is what ordinary people follow in most of their spiritual efforts because they do not understand the true principles of spiritual practice. Someone told these people they should do this or that—perhaps from an ancient holy text—and they simply follow the instructions without really comprehending them. In essence their motivation to try this or that, without any multidimensional understanding as we have put forth, amounts to no more than superstition.

Faith as a motivator to spiritual practice is a positive thing if you comprehend the process, but without this comprehension, we simply have the prejudice you normally see in the world religions as everyone sticks to the dogma of the religious group they have been born into, each claiming it to be the supreme, and without understanding any of the nondenominational underlying principles of spiritual evolution at all. As Yung-ming warned us, “Faith without understanding increases ignorance, while understanding without faith increases subjective opinions.”

When Shakyamuni Buddha gave his teachings over two thousand years ago, he did not want anyone to be superstitious. Rather, he grew up in a time when all sorts of spiritual practices abounded, each claiming to be the best one as well as the only one offering the final truth. Shakyamuni wanted people to be able to experientially fathom what is real and genuine and worthwhile amidst all this chatter, so he taught people to fully comprehend spiritual cultivation and cultivation principles.

Shakyamuni also wanted people to match this type of understanding with their own cultivation practice efforts and results, for that is the only way to make any genuine spiritual progress; you have to travel the path to understand the path, and then match your progress with cultivation principles. Even if you do happen to luckily stumble across the correct spiritual path and do start to practice, without properly understanding the *principles of the path* you are bound, at some point, to get stuck on some plateau of spiritual progress. You may even become attracted to a

false spiritual path. This is why Shakyamuni provided so many teachings.

Of course most people today do not even get this far, so the best we can say for them is that they are very superstitious in their own spiritual efforts. Why? Because they just practice some ancient technique handed down from the past, and hope for results without knowing if or why the technique should work or even what they should be hoping for. They do not even know if they are being conned with an ineffective practice, or just cheating themselves with their own incorrect practice efforts.

For instance, people often engage in "sitting meditation" and think this is spiritual practice, but sitting there quietly does not mean that you are working towards the Tao. People say, "Oh, this guy is sitting in meditation, so he is practicing spiritual cultivation and engaging in spiritual development," but that common misconception could not be further from the truth. You can sit all you want in meditation, but if you are not cultivating emptiness then you are basically just stretching your legs. Most people who sit there have a veritable riot going on in their heads, and this is not spiritual practice at all.

If we turn to examine the fundamental principles of spiritual cultivation, one of the questions we must ask ourselves is: "What is cultivation all about?" The Tibet school says cultivation is about such-and-such, the Zen school says another thing, the Tao school says yet another thing, Christianity says this and Judaism says that, and the Orthodox school of Buddhism says something different altogether. Every school has put together its own answer that protects its religion. However, the Zen school has a key phrase we should always remember: "Mind is Buddha." From this phrase we can know that if you end up playing with things outside the mind, such as chi channels, body sensations and the various experiential realms such as the skandhas or samadhi, then you are just playing with ghosts and illusions.

Real spirituality and spiritual striving has to do with finding this true mind, and nothing else. This is why the Zen school tends to look with disfavor upon the esoterics of yogic tantra, Taoism and Tibetan Buddhism. The Zen masters take one look at the practices of these schools and seeing right away that this is not the Tao, shake their heads, laugh, and then walk away. Of course these schools have developed a logical body of justification for their practices over time, as all religions and spiritual schools must do out of competitive necessity, but that does not mean they are correct.

Remember that all the fancy scenarios you can possibly experience are not your true mind. They are not your original nature. They are not your fundamental face, nor your original essence, nor God's presence, nor whatever else you may wish to call them. Yet people continually enter the esoteric orders, admire all the special teachings and methods (paying particular attention to the emphasis on superpower stories and strange scenarios), and then they think, "This is it! This is great! This is wonderful! This is so unusual that it must be the Tao." But this is not the Tao, for it

is just playing with machinations of consciousness.

As the Hindu sage Ramakrishna said, "When you behold God, you are not God," so if we focus on any scenario in this way and think it is the Tao, then we are no longer having the experience of pure Tao. Rather, we are only dropping into a falsity instead—an experience of our personal imaginative construction instead of the true Tao which cannot be identified with any of this at all. The true Tao is actually the fundamentally empty essence that can give birth to the "empty display images" that arise. Do you want to know what "God" is? That's what God is. God is the Tao, emptiness, formlessness, or however you wish to call it.

So what is the mind? When you are sitting there in meditation, all sorts of various thoughts and sensations and scenarios will arise. Are these the true mind? No, for they are just projections or images of consciousness that appear in the mind. They are just interdependent things that arise in the mind, and can be compared to the minor ripples that appear on the surface of a lake. They are mind stuff of course, but not the true mind essence. Rather, they are its "false projections" or empty displays created through phenomenal interdependent origination, and the members of this interdependent net include even thoughts such as being an ego-being.

The mind gives birth to all these experiences, which are empty in their nature, and being empty they cannot stay as really existing entities. They belong to the phenomenal realm so they only arise due to interdependence—due to prior causal conditions—and thus they also pass away in tune with their effervescent nature. Since they are not the mind, once again we have the question as to what is the mind, and where is it located?

To answer the matter, consider the following questions: You have thoughts when you are awake, but do you still have thoughts after you die? The materialist says that we cannot think without the nervous system, and so, with a dead nervous system, the question becomes: "Where does your mind go when you die? What happens?"

If you do not experientially know the answer to these simple questions, then any sort of amazing kung-fu or esoteric superpowers you may attain through spiritual cultivation in life are useless. Without being able to answer this question from the standpoint of an experiential realization, any sort of unusual abilities you develop through cultivation are just a form of cheating yourself, regardless as to how amazing those abilities may seem and how far you may travel on the spiritual trail.

Paranormal abilities are nothing but functions of the mind like any other, functions that exhibit the possible machinations of consciousness. If you do not ultimately realize the fundamental face beneath all these possible phenomena, your efforts at spiritual practice are just wasted efforts in cultivating something transitory within the realm of the phenomenal. That is why the early Zen masters consistently said to one another, "If you do not see the fundamental essence, then your

efforts at cultivation will not amount to much."

Thoughts are effects partially dependent upon the physical side of our being—they are dependent upon us having a brain and nervous system so we can "be heard in our head," but these physical organs are not something you can ultimately rely upon or depend upon. After all, temporality and impermanence characterize the physical—it is the very realm of birth and death. Because of this, in the Zen school they always ask the following question, "What is your original nature? What is your fundamental face? Where were you before you were born, and where will you go after you die?"

In modern parlance we might ask the following: when you are alive you experience thoughts and psychological sensations through the conduit of the physical body, but if the brain and nervous system get damaged, can you tell me whether the mind will still be there? If you are a materialist who truly believes that the mind disappears entirely when you die, then what should you be searching for during this life?

To answer all these questions, we must first consider that when you sleep, your mind is still there but that the brain is, for the most part, in a resting state. However, even though the brain is largely resting, when you sleep you can still experience dreams, which are thoughts, and thus, we know that you still possess the mind during sleep. But what about after death?

In truth, if you discover through spiritual practice what and where the mind ultimately is, then you will know what happens when you die. If you discover through spiritual cultivation what the real mind is, then when you die you will have perfect confidence and will be absent of any fear. Otherwise if you do not know the answer to this basic question, all your manipulation of sensations along with your meditation practice and the spiritual kung-fu you achieve will have amounted to just the practice of useless game playing. It will not have meant anything or added up to anything at all.

In other words, the Stage of Intensified Practice is something all spiritual aspirants must go through, but it only amounts to something or accomplishes something worthwhile if you finally succeed in making it through to the Stage of Seeing the Tao. So if you open all your chakras and can generate all sorts of samadhi achievements and superpowers and extra bodies, but you still are not clear about the answer to this basic central question, then from the fundamental sense it is all useless; you are still trapped in the realm of phenomenal delusion. Though you may thereby achieve a high stage of spiritual existence, you are still lost within the Three Realms of existence.

Thus, there are two basic questions in life, or we can say there are two basic questions in cultivation science since it is the process of understanding life: (1) where did you ultimately come from before your birth, and (2) where will you go to upon your death? Today people ignore the metaphysical aspect of these questions (such as the usual belief that God is an omnipotent

person-like being who creates ever-increasing numbers of souls, just as a running faucet continues to pour out ever-increasing amounts of water) and only talk about the physical body when they discuss this matter.

For example, people ignore possible spiritual and metaphysical origins, and say that you ultimately appear because of genes. No one, however, can explain from where genes ultimately come. In terms of a physical understanding, people find it impossible to trace any physical roots back further than genes and DNA, and so they start from this sort of physical basis as their explanation for existence. Accordingly, their search for ultimate answers remains bound in this physical sphere.

As to what happens after death, what researcher has died and come back to give us any definitive answers to these questions? The people who bring back "near-death experiences" only report of "false-death" experiences, and science does not even believe most of these reports anyway, but tries to explain them away or ignore them altogether. So these reports are not authoritative. You must also consider that these people have not actually died since they "came back," so their accounts, even if believed, do not give us an answer as to what the ultimate finality experience of *real* death is. Since these reports also come from people very low in cultivation achievements, who lack any substantial samadhi and prajna attainments, thus, despite the consistency of the reports, much that is recalled is suspect as to what *really* happened. Therefore, where you actually come from in a fundamental sense, and what happens to you upon death still are not answered in any fundamental way.

If you *really* know where and what the mind is, then just knowing these answers means you have succeeded, at least partially, in spiritual cultivation. To know these answers means you will have attained some degree of personal realization, some stage of spiritual attainment, some measure of awakening or seeing the Tao. People think that to get to this realization you must sit quietly in meditation searching for the mind, but naturally that cannot be right, for if you do that, your true mind will actually be searching for itself. This is similar to attempting to use your sense of sight to "see seeing," or attempting to use a knife to cut itself. It is like "attaining the Self;" you already have the Self, so it cannot be attained once again. That is why we say that correct spiritual practice is effortless spiritual practice in which the mind learns to let go and rest solely in itself. That is how it finds self-realization. That is how it "awakens."

As Shakyamuni Buddha said, you really cannot gain enlightenment because you already are enlightened. It is already there. How, he therefore asked, can you gain something you already have? In effect you only awaken to what is already there, and this awakening is not really an "obtainment" since you already have what you are after. You just turn awareness around from focusing on externals to wake up and realize what is already and has always been there.

In spiritual cultivation, all you can really do is attain knowledge of this true Self, which is to

awaken to a pure experience of the *fundamental you*. Hence, even if you practiced cultivation for 10,000 eons you could not attain anything substantial whatsoever. You can only awaken to the *Real* that is always there, so the key issue becomes learning how to use what you realize in terms of activity, behavior or exercising functioning. Imagine the magnitude of all this: all the effort of the spiritual path comes down to expressing your behavior.

What you must ultimately awaken to is already here in perfectly clear presence, only we keep fixating on external objects so as to screen any recognition of its presence. And what we call its functioning that we are responsible for—our daily thoughts and behavior—are biased and contaminated by the impurity of evil karmic volitional impulses. That is why spiritual cultivation always comes down to purifying the mind and behavior, for it is this functional involvement which is what we can control in the world at large. You first cultivate to see the Tao, and afterwards you can attain to the Stage of True Cultivation Practice where you really and truly work at purifying and correcting your behavior and its underlying habitual energy streams.

The Tao is as the Tao is, and its emptiness nature cannot be changed. Cultivation therefore ultimately comes down to a process of purifying and perfecting that which we can control, and this corresponds to the world of phenomena and our behavior (by thought, word and deed) within it. But to really purify our behavior, we have to first recognize that root state from which it is born, meaning we need to spiritually realize the Tao.

To know *The One* is the purpose of spiritual cultivation, which is why the Zen school has the famous challenge, "Show me your original face." Of course, when you realize your original face, you must still learn to seamlessly function in perfect union with this fundamental nature at all times, and do so without blemish or pollution or obstruction. You have to learn how to match with this original face at all times in the realm of interdependent phenomena, for that is the full Tao—you have to master both nirvana *and* samsara, emptiness and dependent origination, essence and appearance and function.

Mastering your behavior, of course, does not mean that you will never again ever make any errors in life or that bad things will never happen to you, for the material realm of interdependent phenomena, by its very definition, means that karma from an endless past must be resolved through phenomenal methods of resolution. Enlightenment, on the other hand, means that you never lose full realization of that original nature and that your actions become a perfectly natural, spontaneous expression of that nature during your responses to the karma you have created, and through the efforts you make to create new karma for the future. Enlightened activity means exhibiting that pure nature without bias from any sort of sullied contamination. That type of union with the Tao is what we call being perfectly free.

Of course all spiritual practitioners want to know, what is this "original face" of ours? In so many cultures, no question seems as appropriate as this one. Whether you call it the "fundamental

nature" or "primordial principle" or "God" or something else, these names all focus on the very same thing. Ultimately, they try to capture several related issues: what is our fundamental essence ... who or what am I? And where do the universe and I come from? … What are we made of? Where did I come from and where will I go after I die?

If we answer these questions using the terminology of Buddhism, we would have to say, "There is only fundamental emptiness, and emptiness is the real thing. That is the dharmakaya. That is the original nature. But that is also the Tathagata Storehouse that gives birth to all existence."

In other words, formlessness characterizes the ultimate fundamental reality, and yet this emptiness is not inert because it gives birth to miraculous existence. Of course, this "existence sphere" of ours is empty of substantial existence, and yet we can say it is conventionally real for as long as it lasts, and it is defined by a dependent determination that is empty. Learning how to detach from everything so as to realize the fundamental essence of this display is the means for achieving spiritual enlightenment, just as it is the means to learning how to master this display and your functioning in this display realm as well.

Another way of asking the same question is to say, "What is Buddha? What is our fundamental nature?" The answer is: Mind is Buddha. Mind is our original nature. Mind is the basis of enlightenment. Of course with this answer, now we have to ask, what is Mind?

Mind is not the product of the brain, or any sort of conscious projection such as thoughts or samadhi states, so we should never attach to thoughts and the various visaya that arise in the mind. We should never attach to them because we cannot hold them. They are not the real you, they are not the mind, and they cannot stay anyway. You should not fear that thoughts will block the original nature either, for the thoughts that arise in the mind (no matter how bad) are empty falsities. So do not burden yourself with guilt as to any bad thoughts that may arise in your mind, for as long as you do not act on them you are pure through and through.

No matter how much we may try to hold onto them, thoughts will always depart and so bad states of mind will turn into good states of mind if we are just patient and allow them to eventually leave. During that time, of course, we should not act on any evil impulses that may arise, otherwise we fall subject to them and become controlled by their fate. No one should blame themselves for the bad thoughts that arise from the interdependence of phenomena and karma, but should indeed refuse to give them further energy. Remember that it is not wrong that bad thoughts momentarily arise, but it is wrong when you *hold onto bad thoughts with determined intent*. If you learn spiritual cultivation and start down the road of meditative practice, you will in time learn how to turn such bad states into good states as part of the spiritual trail.

Thoughts, whether for good or bad, clutter the mind's recognition of its true nature when we

hold onto them so we have to learn—through meditation—how to let go of thoughts and how to stop giving them energy. To do this is actually much harder than it sounds because we must break the force of habit. Nevertheless, it is not really work at all because no energy is involved, so the effort is actually effortless when it is mastered! All you have to do is watch the mind and let it rest in its own nature.

Energy is normally involved with our mental realm since we are usually pursuing, holding onto, or playing with thoughts every moment of our lives. Knowing that this is the problem, some people even become afraid, believing that they will never learn how to let go of thoughts, but this fear is totally irrational for this reason: it is nearly impossible to *hold onto* thoughts! In fact, we would have to build a shrine to you if you could single-mindedly hold onto one thought for even three minutes, for there is not a person alive who can do it. Hence, there is no need to worry about having the ability to empty thoughts, because they naturally empty of themselves.

Thoughts do not stay, so they always leave, and you could not hold them if you wanted to. They cannot bother you forever since they are destined to shortly depart, so why should you fear them? You just have to learn how to watch them without too much attachment or involvement, and then gradually their hold on you will dissipate. In time, you will even be able to recognize from this practice the clear substrate behind your knowing of thoughts. The more you detach from being pushed around by thoughts or pursuing them, the more your prajna wisdom will eventually blossom forth. That's why this practice is a very sure spiritual trail.

Confucian Cultivation, the Exodus of Moses, and the Chinese Exodus of Tan Fu

This is how we would answer things using Buddhist principles, but we could turn to the Confucian school and come up with the very same answer. In fact, we can find all the different stages of spiritual cultivation in Confucianism just as we find it in Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, yoga and other major religions. However, Confucius phrased the majority of his cultivation teachings in terms of harmonious relationships between human beings and human behavior since he was describing the path in terms of active working engagements with the world.

The problems during Confucius' day involved the chaotic structures of society, and so that is one reason he choose this way to phrase the pathway to Tao. And since the language Confucius used was from an ancient, foreign culture, no wonder its true meaning has been gradually lost over time so that people nowadays entirely miss the real points of his teaching. Nevertheless, the message and instructions of Confucius on this great matter are no different than those found in the world's other great cultivation schools. He, too, talked of cultivating samadhi and prajna wisdom as the pathway to spiritual enlightenment. Being enlightened and wishing to help humanity, how could he not have talked about these things, for this is the roadway to the Tao!

For instance, a clear picture of his recommended path of cultivation, which we can match with all

the other cultivation schools, comes to us in *The Great Learning* written by Confucius' student Tseng Tzu. The time during which Tseng Tzu wrote *The Great Learning* was approximately the same time during which Socrates appeared in ancient Greece. From this we can quickly recognize a standard principle that the world's sages often appear in different places at roughly the same time in order to impart an important cultural impetus to mankind. The impulses they try to instill, which typically serve as the foundations of national and world cultures, are all based upon all the principles of self-cultivation as the road of self-development. When religions arise which lack these important teachings, then you can suspect that their leaders had very low levels of cultivation accomplishment.

To understand how a similar impulse can appear in different parts of the world at the same time, we can look at Tan Fu, the forefather of China's Zhou dynasty, who lived during approximately the same era as Moses. Most everyone knows the story of how Moses took his people out of Egypt, and that he gave them the Ten Commandments, which helped, fashion a new culture. However, they do not know that this was not a singular historical occurrence. The same type of Exodus and founding of a new culture can be found in the story of Tan Fu in China. So actually, both cultures were fashioned on an exodus; Jewish culture was fashioned by an Exodus, and the Chinese culture was fashioned by an Exodus as well. However, the original motivations and purposes behind each of these events were quite different, and the differences help explain the differences between the psyches of these two cultures. Since most people know the story of Moses, let us turn to the story of the equivalent large scale event which happened in China, and which served to found the Chinese civilization.

The ancient Chinese Duke Tan Fu can be considered one of the major founders of the Chinese culture as we know it today, and it is his story that we must recall to understand the Chinese version of "Exodus." Because Moses was able to perform so many miracles, it is certain that he attained some degree of samadhi, but Tan Fu's level of cultivation was akin to a stage of realization.

Tan Fu owned a large area of land that he cultivated, and because of his great virtue and wisdom, the people of the surrounding areas took him as their natural leader. During his lifetime, some barbarian tribes attacked his territory in order to seize its wealth, so Tan Fu yielded it to them. After that, the barbarians attacked again, but this time they demanded power over the entire land and control of its people. The people wanted to fight the invaders and asked Tan Fu to be their leader but he refused, saying, "When a ruler is established, it should be to the people's own advantage. Now these barbarians are attacking because they want to take my land and people. What does it matter whether the people are my subjects or their subjects? The people want to fight because of me, but I cannot bear to kill people in order to rule them." This is another aspect by which the origins of Chinese culture differed from Jewish culture, for while King Saul became king of Israel, Tan Fu refused this honor for the people's benefit.

Tan Fu therefore took his family, and crossing several great rivers and mountains, migrated to another region of China. Taking his wife, whose virtue matched his own, and all of his relatives with him on the trip, he left his home and gave the barbarians everything that they demanded. Following their sage leader's example, all of the local people joined Tan Fu and began a great exodus. Supporting their aged and carrying their weak, the people flocked to join the Duke in his new home just like the Jews who followed Moses out of Egypt. However, in this case the Chinese people all voluntarily followed Tan Fu because they respected his virtue, wisdom and leadership abilities. They followed him out of respect for his Tao, which is why he became their natural leader.

Tan Fu eventually settled below Mount Chi in China where he abandoned the people's former barbarian customs, had walls and buildings constructed to form cities, established the offices of various officials, and established the people's dwellings. By establishing the agricultural and organizational basis of the nation, and due to the instructions he gave and virtuous example he set, he and his family can be said to have laid the true foundations of Chinese cultural civilization. While the stories of Tan Fu and Moses are obviously very similar, the differences between the Chinese and Judaic civilizations become apparent through them as well, including insight into the different temperaments and fates of these peoples because of their actions.

Now in Buddhism there is often talk about a Wheel Turning King, or Chakravartin, whose merit is great enough that he bears nearly all the physical marks of being a Buddha. Why can the merit of this great worldly king be compared with the merit of a Buddha? Because this type of world ruler is very rare; he conquers the world *so as to bring peace and harmony to it*. He is a world ruler who has the wisdom and cultivation abilities to bring peace to mankind, and thus, he is destined to exhibit the requisite physical marks that display this sort of merit.

In a micro-sense you might look at these merit marks from the standpoint of any individual who masters themselves through cultivation. In other words, the human body is a little world in itself, and the individual who succeeds in spiritual cultivation ends up transforming their physical body so that it exhibits the relevant kung-fu or marks of spiritual cultivation. This transformational kung-fu is equivalent to the merit mark signs that a Chakravartin or Buddha are born with due to their many lives of cultivation merit. But the actual idea of a Chakravartin Wheel Turning King is a layman who cultivates to the rank of Buddhahood and then works to bring peace to all the world and society. This is what a Buddha does, and so to some extent the Wheel Turning King will have some of the physical merit marks of a Buddha.

According to tradition, there are seven things that a Wheel Turning King needs in order to accomplish his task of saving society, and one of these seven treasures is a "female jewel," meaning a wonderful wife. This is necessary because the extreme of yang will give birth to yin, so a great yang force will always become surrounded by a great yin essence. Therefore it is desirable that the inevitable yin factor surrounding a great ruler (yang) be as pure and virtuous as possible.

You do not want the yin forces appearing in the form of eunuchs, criminal activities, corruption, pestilence, shady dealings, spy activities, mental illness, decay or death. Rather, you want the yin forces surrounding a great ruler to be a pure, divine female. Because a Chakravartin Wheel Turning King has this female jewel as his companion, he can therefore better balance his own nature, raise a good family, and become a better ruler.

With this in mind, when history records that Tan Fu's wife was as virtuous as he was, we then know that she was qualified to be called a female jewel. Over time she gave birth to three virtuous sons whom she started teaching while each was still inside her womb. All three sons grew up and had families, but the third son, Chi Li, in turn produced a son who everyone recognized as exceptional. When Tan Fu saw this child, who would later become the King Wen of *I-Ching* fame, he knew his family would prosper. Because he had some measure of Tao, he could tell by the boy's features that he would grow up to be an individual of great virtue and talent, and so he wanted him to inherit the stewardship of the family.

According to the Chinese tradition of the time, however, it was the oldest son who must inherit the stewardship and leadership of the family when the father died. This meant that Tan Fu's eldest son was due to inherit the family helm, and only if he died would the second son become the family patriarch, and only if he in turn died would the third son finally become the family's leader. Only after this improbable sequence of events would this exceptional grandson become first in the line of succession.

The first and second sons, knowing their father's wishes, and without having to be asked, both voluntarily sacrificed themselves and left the family holdings so that there would be no impediment to this grandson taking over the family helm. *They sacrificed themselves to insure the future propagation of their father's cultural impetus*. This family, because of exemplary deeds such as this virtuous deference, is the one that actually established the basis of the Chinese cultural relationships.

First, we must recognize that the Exodus was motivated by virtue, and second, that Tan Fu set the example of wise and virtuous living by doing everything for the people. Third, now even his sons voluntarily gave up everything they had for the benefit of that society. This self-sacrifice is exactly why Confucius always praised the Zhou dynasty. It not only laid the foundations of Chinese culture, but the virtue and ideals of the founding members of the Zhou family itself, as demonstrated by these and many other events, show that they all believed in self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community and humanity. Can we not say that this is the Tao, or the Bodhisattva way?

This is the correct spirit of cultivation, of the Bodhisattvas, of the Taoist sages, of the Christian and Hindu Saviors, and all the truly enlightened individuals. All these individuals—if genuine—sacrifice themselves for the benefit of society. Spiritual cultivation practice does not require any

guru worship of enlightened beings, for the only thing demanded by a true spiritual master is the spirit of friendship, respect, and help normally offered to others. When you read Confucius and find him praising the Zhou dynasty of China, he did not do this because of guru worship but because he wanted to highlight these examples of self-sacrifice, and wanted this standard of morality and virtue to become instilled in its people once again.

This is a short background of the Zhou dynasty, and the reason we went into it was to show the parallels between what Moses did, in founding the Judaic civilization from the start of Exodus, and what the Zhou family did in China in leading an Exodus as well. In the Chinese case, this voluntary mass departure to follow Tan Fu and accept his teachings was the starting point of the Chinese culture known today. There are many more lessons we could go into because of this family, but our lesson here revolves around the sacrifices people make if they wish to follow the Bodhisattva way.

The "Great Learning" of Confucian Cultivation

Confucius often brought up the example of the Zhou dynasty because he wanted to teach the idea of virtuous character, as did Socrates in the West, and so he ultimately phrased the process of spiritual cultivation in terms of virtue and behavior. He phrased the path of cultivation in terms of harmonious relationships between fellow men. Because the China of his days was marked by dozens of principalities, each fighting for power and characterized by its own unique governing system, Confucius talked of the proper relationships between the common man and his ruler (or superior), and between the people, their government and society as a whole.

The major troubles of his day could be viewed in terms of relationships, and so this was the major means by which he delivered his message. Yet even so, most Chinese do not recognize that Confucius also talked of samadhi, the effects of the chi and mai, and of prajna wisdom and our ultimate fundamental nature! They get lost amidst all the discussions on relationships that helped establish peace and propriety in Chinese society over time, and miss these lessons entirely. The West understands the teachings of Confucius and his actions even less.

The reason these important lessons on samadhi, prajna and other cultivation matters go unrecognized is that people no longer understand the terminology that Confucius used. This just compounds the fact that people do not really understand what samadhi and prajna are in the first place, either, even if the words of explanation are as direct and clear as could be. Confucius spoke in an ancient vernacular, using a different cultural vocabulary than the Chinese of today, and he emphasized a different aspect of the cultivation path than that of the solitary renunciate. Those who later interpreted the works of Confucius and whose words became the standard for Chinese culture, such as Chu Hsi, were intellectuals rather than people with any cultivation achievement, and so the actual cultivation content of his works was destroyed in the hands of experience-lacking academics and scholars.

The West saw the same thing happen when Plato and Aristotle followed in Socrates' footsteps, and ended up with intellectual interpretations and analyses of "spirituality" in place of any emphasis upon the actual practice of (image free) spiritual cultivation. Despite the influence of the Gnostics and Neo-Platonists, by the time St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas had come along, the Western path had already been sealed in a Church-dominated, institutional framework wherein the original instructions on cultivation given by Socrates were lost altogether. The same thing eventually happened to Confucianism in that it became so structured and formalized in terms of ceremonies that its original cultivation messages were lost, although you can still find the standard principles and practices of spiritual cultivation in *The Great Learning* of Confucius.

The point we must make over and over again is that the process of true spiritual cultivation, as well as the stages of the spiritual path, are the same no matter what spiritual school one follows, assuming the path is a genuine one. You will find the very same principles of cessation and contemplation and the various stages of kung-fu and attainment in all the different genuine religious schools because these are nondenominational facts; if you cultivate correctly, then you will definitely experience these things when your kung-fu and merit are good enough. If you do not experience these things, then it is not because they do not exist. Rather, it is because your merit and kung-fu are not yet high enough either.

It is the purpose of each religion or spiritual school to explain these things in a vernacular appropriate to the people, and to preserve and transmit them to future generations. So the cultivation path and its stages are not simply some symbolic or psychological or fictitious matter, but an actual sequence of material and spiritual attainment! You can indeed interpret them symbolically, as a Joseph Campbell might do, but without the work of cultivation to accompany this process of interpretation, you will often miss the genuine message entirely.

Confucius' general cultivation teachings are to be found in *The Great Learning*, and in that work, he points out that "the great learning" in being a human being constitutes three things:

> The Way of the Great Learning consists in clearly exemplifying illustrious virtue, in loving the people, and in resting in the highest good.

Confucius called the first of these three cultivation tasks "*ming de*," which is the injunction to understand our illustrious, clear, or "bright virtue." Confucius used a different terminology than what we are used to, but the meaning of finding one's bright virtue is equivalent to seeing the Tao. It is equivalent to revealing our innate wisdom, which means exercising our capacity to realize enlightenment. His words refer to attaining or awakening to our true nature, and they mean realizing the dharmakaya. They mean striving to learn where life ultimately comes from, which is just another phrase for cultivating towards the Tao, and naturally this entails learning to master the true basis of life and existence.

We can also say that cultivating true wisdom is learning how to properly act as a person, and once you penetrate to your root fundamental nature and understand how to act, then you will have achieved the internal clarity or luminosity of prajna wisdom. This is also ming de: recognizing your inherently clear fundamental nature. It means to truly understand the nature of the universe, and where life fundamentally comes from.

Confucius called the second aspect of the great learning "*qin min*," or love for the people. This ideal is the same as that embodied in the Mahayana path of cultivation practice, which is to give new life to the people in performing compassionate deeds for their benefit. Hence, it means to so love the people that you do compassionate things in the world for humankind and society. It means becoming helpful and useful to the world for the people's behalf. It means spreading what you spiritually understand to all the people of the world so that you truly do help all people. This is how you demonstrate your love and concern for them, and how you become truly helpful to society and to mankind.

This Confucian ideal of benefiting the world is basically the Buddhist ideal of the Bodhisattva savior, as well as the Christian ideal of the savior who joyfully participates in the sorrows of the world in order to help liberate others. It is also the Greek ideal of the philosopher king espoused by Plato—a king who has prajna and samadhi attainments and who works to benefit the people. Whatever school we examine, this idea of helpful participation with society and mankind, despite any suffering entailed on its behalf, is a cardinal tenet of cultivation. In fact, this is how *the individual results of personal enlightenment interconnect with and uplift society*.

To further encapsulate this idea, Confucius, in all his teachings, always put forward the social aim of great harmony under heaven. He took proper social and cultural norms as the guide for harmonious political order because, with this as a standard, a country would become able to realize the objective of everyone under heaven living peacefully. This recognition of the interdependent relationships between people, and how those relationships should be structured, was his idea that men should love one another and therefore work to help one another.

The third requirement of *The Great Learning* is "*zai zhi yu zhishan*," which is resting in the highest good, or dwelling in the highest perfection. The word *zhi* means to stop or rest, and so Confucius was using the humanist terminology of the time to teach the people to always be as good as they can be, and to never stop cultivating until they reached the highest goodness. People should only stop in the highest good, which means that they must cultivate the Tao and remain in that state.

By now we know that samadhi is a stage of spiritual achievement where the tumultuous mind comes to a halt, so "resting in perfection" also has the lower connotation of achieving samadhi and always remaining in that state, and even better, achieving Tao and never losing that stage of attainment. Attaining the Tao is essentially achieving perfection, and it is this achievement which

enables you to express your fullest humanity when it is exhibited by appropriate behavior. Hence, we have the saying of Dharma Master Tai-xu, who from the Buddhist perspective said, "Look up to Buddha, but perfect your human character. If you achieve true humanity, you achieve Buddhahood: this is called true immediate reality."

Taken together, the three principles that Confucius expounded upon are the basis behind human culture; these three things are what an individual should learn in the course of their life, and so the struggle or path to learn these things constitutes "the great learning." Socrates spoke of similar objectives when teaching his fellow Greeks, and even though his teachings constitute the essential foundational bricks of Western culture, his own particular spiritual impetus has been lost over time as well. We must note that these great spiritual messages more often than not get lost or become corrupted within so short a time span as even one or two generations.

In Buddhism, these same ideals of working on samadhi attainments, working to attain enlightenment, and working to save the people were transmitted through the Bodhisattva ideal of individuals working on self-perfection and trying to live by the six perfections. These six perfections, also called *paramita,* embody the ideals of charity and generosity, ethics and virtue, patience, joyous energetic effort, samadhi concentration, and prajna transcendental wisdom. When someone is cultivating the Mahayana Path, they are working on cultivating these six virtues or perfections.

Buddhism also tells you to find your inherent nature, purify your karmic habits, and work with all that you attain for the benefit of others in order to help lift them up, which is also another way of expressing the Bodhisattva Path. The cultivation path of Buddhism is described in a much more elaborate fashion than in Confucianism, but you can see that "the great learning" of Buddhism espouses ideals similar to those of Confucianism.

Christianity also espouses many of these same ideals as well, but in its external public dogma it is missing most of the important details of cultivation science, which is the science of life. Christianity has within it the beginnings of the great Bodhisattva ideal of Buddhism, yet is missing the scientific explanations of the skandhas, samadhi and dhyana, Taoist jing-chi-shen transformations, as well as other pertinent information such as the necessary Consciousness-Only school teachings required for the spiritual path of today. In fact, most European people in the Medieval past were persecuted if they mentioned any of these things freely, and so they had to phrase these things in allegorical ways so that no one knew what cultivation monks and nuns or lay individuals were really talking about. This is why they developed various alchemical texts that seem nonsensical to the uninitiated.

If today Christianity absorbed all this sort of cultivation knowledge and combined into itself the various Confucian ideas on self-cultivation, it could initiate another great golden age for the Western spiritual traditions. In other words, the Confucian template offers a great behavioral

model for society to follow, and if Christianity could combine Confucian ideas with its own behavioral teachings on self-perfection while also absorbing the necessary teachings of Buddhism, Western civilization would experience a blossoming and flowering never before possible. Then it could develop a true cultivation type of cultural education, and become capable of educating people on how to fully consummate the great learning through all three Buddha bodies (the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya).

This is where we have to stop ourselves for a moment and ask, what is the real purpose of education in the first place? What should we be learning in life? Well, there is democratic education with democratic ideals, and there is also Communist education with Communist ideals. There is agnostic education, Christian education, Islamic education and scientific education and all sorts of other kinds of education. You can continue partitioning things in this manner, but these groupings are just the representation of ideals and their content is all just technical stuff. In other words, it is all education with a bias.

When you look at what *The Great Learning* is saying, however, you will readily find that the meaning of true education is *learning how to be a mature human being.* It is learning how to cultivate the human vehicle to its highest possible excellence, as well as human behavior and perception to its highest possible perfection. This type of education is without bias because it is the fundamental standard.

There is no capitalistic, democratic or special religious notion embedded in this type of learning, for it is expounding upon a universal type of learning. This type of learning entails awakening to the original nature, getting rid of the old habits of obstruction which stand in the way of this realization, and then functioning in a helpful manner for others while remaining perfectly in tune—in seamless cognizant realization—with that original fundamental nature of Suchness.

What should this "true learning" entail? Ultimately, it means uncovering our true fundamental existence that is free of any religious coloring or connotation. In other words, it means learning how to "realize the true mind" or "original face" of fundamental being. It also entails becoming useful for the world, which in turn entails learning how to perform compassionate activity to help save society. This is what the Buddhists call "skillful" or "expedient" behavior. Basically, it means learning how to attain to and constantly exhibit a state of pure virtue in both an active and passive form.

Whether you are an Emperor or beggar, this is the essential learning you must incorporate into your life. No matter what your position, these are the important things because they define what being human is all about. Discovering your true nature, working for others, and always resting in the fundamental state of pure virtue—these three things are the definition of being human.

Buddha said that the gods have lives so enjoyable that they do not want to work on cultivation to

achieve these ends, and animal lives are too painful or delved in ignorance to make this realization possible. With the human life, however, the possibility of achieving these goals is maximized to the extreme, and this type of learning is what should be paramount in life.

No matter what you do in life as your career or occupation—and even if you have no career—these goals should be your life's objective. They represent an end goal that is barred to no one, and work that everyone should be performing. Drunks, prostitutes, beggars and kings have all achieved Tao in the past, so everyone is equipped for the journey. The realization is just a matter of the effort. In life, whoever you are and no matter what position you may hold, you must constantly work to get rid of the inherited karmic bad habits which impede your realization of the Tao, and from this you can work on purifying your other karma as well. That is why working toward the Tao is a path that everyone should follow.

Since aiming to recover the Tao is the only way to become a full, true or perfected human being, we could also reverse matters to say that learning to be truly human is "the Way." Learning to be truly human is the Tao, as well as the way to the Tao, and so this humanistic angle of looking at matters is the angle Confucius chose for transmitting the spiritual path. But he was not the only enlightened adept to choose this particular route, for Socrates chose to phrase matters in a similar humanistic fashion as well. In short "*learning the Tao" or "cultivating the Tao" means learning how to be truly human*. It means learning how to become a real person—*the* real person—or as Islam says, it is the way to become the "perfect man."

This is the inherent message of the famous Confucian work, *The Great Learning*. In Taoist terminology, if you become a "real" or "true" person you are someone with the "great learning." In Islam, it is the "perfect man" who attains the "great learning." In Buddhism it is the Bodhisattva, in Hinduism the saint, and so on it goes. So whether we are talking about Socrates, or the sages of India and China or any other spiritual leader, this message appears again and again, but so few people cultivate this route that true men rarely arise. This pathway does not involve superpowers or kung-fu or seeing strange lights and hearing unusual sounds. It comes down to being honestly human, and you only achieve this status through the process of cultivation practice.

The format and instructional style of this one great message has varied across cultures as well as time, and different aspects have been stressed through one means or another for different purposes, but this is what is essential in life. Within this process of "great learning," which is the cultivation path of human being science, people always get confused by psychic powers and special kung-fu abilities which arise along the way. They commonly become fascinated and misdirected by the chi, mai and chakras, and all sorts of other things *which are outside the mind*. They drop into these things and become lost regarding the meaning of the true spiritual path. In other words, they drop into outside paths and look for enlightenment outside the mind!

These other experiences are not the Tao! They are simply other mental scenarios, which is why we are bothering to show how all these systems interrelate, and what their common enlightenment message really is. Viewed in this light, studying all the various branches of the arts and sciences cannot be considered "real learning" either, for this involves studying mere collections of words and labels. Of course, this type of familiarity is useful and necessary for modern life because it lets you earn a living, but it is not the kind that teaches you how to live. This type of learning teaches you how to master superficial functions rather than penetrating to the great essence of the matter. It never even touches upon the life force of the body, let alone the true path of cultivation science!

Frankly speaking, modern scientific study can be considered a sort of play-time involved with the skandha of form rather than any sort of true learning. True learning, on the other hand, is the process of getting to know your fundamental self and where the universe and the mind came from. True learning also involves learning how to reveal this fundamental, true self through enlightened activity for the benefit of the world, and for the universe as well (since your scope of activity can indeed extend that far as soon as you start achieving even the lowest ranks of samadhi attainment).

You must therefore ask, how is studying form going to help you achieve these objectives? While searching for the true mind, which is ultimately behind all your thoughts and sensations, and striving to purify your behavior will indeed enable you to achieve this objective, science does not yet understand this at all. It does not recognize the true spiritual path even though the true mind behind everything is the one source of both matter and mind, that *One Thing* which is fundamental in all life and being.

Confucius' definition of "learning" involves the meditative search for samadhi and transcendental wisdom to help achieve this objective of finding our true nature (or illustrious virtue), and this type of wisdom means learning how to do everything you set your mind on and how to accomplish many vows. In the greater sense, "great learning" consists learning to become a mature individual who can interact with the world in an effective and responsible way. It constitutes the idea of growing up and learning to take responsibility for actions, for after all, karma is going to make you responsible for your actions whether you want it to or not, and whether you are aware of it or not, and thus it is best to know this ahead of time.

The great learning constitutes learning how to work, act and behave in society in such a way that helps to benefit the world and bring peace to the land, and instructs you where your mind should dwell while in the midst of this never-ending process. These concepts are all imbedded in the teaching ideals of *The Great Learning*, which encapsulates the highest perfection goals of the evolutionary striving of the human spirit.

The Seven Step Confucian Process for Attaining Samadhi

The question is, how do you accomplish the three goals stated at the outset in *The Great Learning*? What do you do so as to pursue them? Confucianism, like Buddhism, reveals a process for doing so that also clearly lays the various stages of the cultivation path. Furthermore, the stages that Confucius taught also match the stages of cultivation we have previously discussed from other genuine cultivation traditions. Just as with the various other stages we have gone over, they are a scheme you can use to measure your own progress on the spiritual trail. They are another measuring system for ranking and rating your meditative or spiritual progress.

Confucius said that to attain the three objectives within *The Great Learning* entails a seven step process. Essentially, you must learn how to rest in the highest good. Resting, in turn means knowing where to stop, because if you learn how and where to stop the mind, you will be able to attain samadhi and remain with that state. Of course, this is a basic step in all the world's cultivation schools, for as the first line of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* says, "Yoga is the intentional stopping of the fluctuations of the mind." Hence, the major principle that Confucius taught is how to stop the mind by mastering one-pointedness to attain samadhi.

There are two steps to stopping, however, for first you must learn how and when to stop, and second, you must actually stop. You start with awareness—which is the first step—and then you actualize the achievement of stopping. So you must learn how to stop the busyness that normally clouds your mind, and in stopping this sort of pollution, you train to eventually reach samadhi. Of course there are various transformative steps involved in actually attaining samadhi, so these are some of the other seven steps that Confucius talked about.

Continuing according to Confucius' explanations, after you learn stopping and actually achieve it, then you can reach a state of mental stillness. This stillness is an ever-present quietude accompanying all you do because your samadhi-like mindset is becoming deeper, and so achieving stillness is the third step of the seven step process. First you have awareness, then stopping, and then stillness which is almost, but not quite samadhi. After attaining this stillness, the fourth step according to Confucius is to reach a state of true peacefulness, which is sort of like the Christian idea of grace. Actually, this refers to a state of body-mind cultivation wherein there is constant physical renewal since the chi mai are all activated, and the mind is just about touching samadhi. It constitutes a stage of physical and mental transformation that corresponds to the stages delineated by the Tao school.

After attaining this state of peacefulness, Confucius said you could then reach the sixth step of cultivation and attain prajna wisdom. In other words, he taught people they must first attain samadhi, and then they could cultivate their prajna wisdom. He did not just flat out say you must cultivate samadhi, but mentioned that physical and mental transformations are involved on the spiritual trail. So you first need awareness and knowledge, next you must have a cultivation

method that leads to the cessation of wandering thoughts, then you must achieve some initial success at this, and from that you will experience a fruit which involves mental and physical transformations. From the foundation of attaining samadhi, Confucius said the next step was learning how to really think, or know, which meant cultivating your inherent prajna wisdom.

After attaining prajna transcendental wisdom, Confucius said you could finally achieve the seventh step of spiritual cultivation, which is attainment or obtainment. With samadhi and prajna wisdom you can achieve any goal you desired in the physical world, but the real goal was to develop these two foundational pillars, and then obtain *ming de*, which meant to realize your original nature.

This is therefore the sequence of Confucian cultivation as laid out in *The Great Learning*, and as you can see, it is essentially no different than any other spiritual tradition in that it focuses primarily on cultivating the mind. In a nutshell it says: first cultivate samadhi; from samadhi, cultivate prajna wisdom; with prajna wisdom, illuminate your mind so as to eventually realize your inherent true nature. Isn't this the path of spiritual cultivation we find with all the other genuine cultivation schools?

Of course, when you read *The Great Learning* and discover these teachings, you are not going to begin thinking of chi and mai and kundalini because Confucius rarely mentioned physical kung-fu at all. Mencius discussed kung-fu in a more open fashion than Confucius did, but because of what he wanted to accomplish Confucius chose to phrase these transformations in terms of behavioral virtues and perfections. As a result of his decision, you were never going to be misled down the path of emphasizing form-dependent kung-fu if you followed his teachings, and yet the path of spiritual development Confucius revealed is the same as that of Buddhism or Taoism or yoga and any other genuine spiritual trails. It is simply that he revealed the path in a different manner altogether by emphasizing behavior. Hence we have thus verified the spiritual path from yet another independent angle, and come upon the very same teachings once again.

Mencius, who appeared after Confucius had already died, went into a little more detail about the various stages and methods of cultivation, including how to cultivate your chi so as to attain samadhi-dhyana. However, Confucius already had revealed everything people needed, although he explained things using the terminology of being human. He talked about participating in relationships and cultivating virtues rather than in terms of the specific kung-fu of the Esoteric school, the mind elements of Buddhism, the primordial energies of Hinduism, and so on.

Just to be clear, let us review the Confucian path with its other cultivation equivalents. Confucius called the spiritual trail *the great learning process of cultivation*, which meant learning how to become "the real man," or "perfected being," and he said there are seven overall steps to this process. The first and second steps include "knowing" and "stopping." You have to first know how to stop the mind in order to stop, so we can say that you have to follow some spiritual

practice to arrive at the mental station of cessation. "Knowing" is thus equivalent to a stage of both study and initial cultivation practice as we would find in the Buddhist Stage of Merit and Wisdom Accumulation.

As would be expected, the "stopping" Confucius mentioned is also equivalent to the mental cessation of bothersome floating thoughts espoused in all cultivation schools. Therefore, if we follow the universal principles of cessation-contemplation practice, we can know that once you reach the state of cessation you also have to practice observation, and this, too, can also be considered a form of knowing. So knowing and stopping are the start of the road of Confucian cultivation practice. How much better would be the West if they knew this!

From knowing and stopping you can attain samadhi, so from these two you can reach Confucius' goal of eventually attaining samadhi. You cultivate one-pointedness, or mental stopping, and from there you can achieve the fourth step of achieving calmness or stillness. From this stillness or calm you can make progress so as to attain the fifth state of "*an,*" which refers to a state of physical peace or comfort, and this involves the physical transformations that we have gone over previously within the Tao school.

At the sixth step or stage of Confucian practice, you reach the state of deep and careful thought which is equivalent to the prajna wisdom of being able to know clearly. This is true knowing without thought, and it blossoms when you cultivate samadhi. Finally there is the final Confucian step of attainment, which equates with seeing the Tao or attaining enlightenment.

People think these seven steps only apply to spiritual cultivation, but Confucius wisely laid out his path in such a way that these steps readily apply to worldly affairs as well, and thus, the Confucian road of spiritual cultivation is something that can be used to guide your daily life. In fact, it is a cultivation path that can guide all the affairs of mankind. For instance, most people must learn when and how to stop things when they have gone too far, and this particular skill equates with knowing when and how to stop.

Of course, in spiritual cultivation we have this fundamental problem of actually learning how to stop our thoughts even though we already know of this fundamental need. For instance, people can sit in meditation for three days without their thoughts calming down one bit. No matter how long they meditate, or what spiritual practice they follow, because they cannot solve this basic problem they get absolutely nowhere with their spiritual yearnings, and success escapes them in their worldly efforts as well.

This failure to enter a state of tranquility is all because they do not know how to stop, or even knowing how to stop, they will not or cannot apply their understanding of cessation to the situations that arise. They do not learn how to concentrate to a point of single-mindedness so that nuisance situations can be ignored and bothersome thoughts can be discarded. They do not

know how to stop hanging onto the thoughts in the mind and since they never learn detachment, cannot let them die down so that prajna knowing can arise. People are always supplying their thoughts with extra energy without letting them become born naturally without effort, and without letting them leave after they have come. It is not so much that thoughts are wrong, per se, but that you should not hold onto them and let this attachment blind you from the Tao. It is this clinging to transient delusion which actually keeps you from recognizing your fundamental nature.

Only after you learn how to stop the monkey mind can you reach the stage of spiritual samadhi. We can compare this type of stopping to turning off a machine and letting it cool off and rest. The first step of spiritual cultivation is learning how to stop the mind's busyness, which is learning how to stop your miscellaneous thoughts by achieving samadhi. But as Confucius pointed out, this need applies to all worldly affairs as well.

For instance, if you have to conduct some important business negotiations, it is absolutely essential to grasp beforehand the key points and key issues. You must know what you can give and what you need to take in the negotiations, and when to be firm or flexible. This, too, is "knowing and stopping." That is why we always say that this idea of knowing and stopping—the principles within cultivation in general—is inherent in successfully conducting worldly affairs. That is also why spiritual cultivation, and especially cessation-contemplation practice—can and should become an inherent part of your daily life.

From the practice of stopping you can attain samadhi, and because of samadhi you will naturally attain tranquility or stillness. It is only through physical and mental stillness that you can reach the state of *an*, and feel that your body is being transformed, so the peaceful state of an is the Confucian stage corresponding to the physical chi and mai transformations which happen in spiritual cultivation. In other words, because of cultivating towards samadhi your physical body will naturally transform. This is why we eventually get the joys and blisses of the first few dhyana, which always occur after your chi channels have become opened.

In Tibetan esotericism, this kung-fu transformation of *an* peacefulness would roughly correspond to the achievement of "physical pliancy" or "suppleness," wherein you achieve a feeling of physical lightness and readiness of high well-being. When Confucius talks about the state of an, which means a state of peacefulness or contentment, this actually referred to the Tao school and Esoteric school stage of the opening of all the chi mai. This is why you can reach a state of perfect physical comfort and well being at this point, because the chi mai have been transformed. This transformation leads to an even higher stage of samadhi.

After *an*, we have what Confucians call "*lu*," which means being able to uncover your inherent wisdom. *Lu* is equivalent to the prajna dhyana attainment of spiritual cultivation, so it is basically the Confucian way of referring to prajna wisdom. Remember that when you achieve stopping or

cessation, you still need the practice of contemplation (observation) in order to make spiritual progress, so samadhi and prajna wisdom must be co-joined in spiritual practice.

First Confucius speaks of attaining samadhi and experiencing the deeper physical transformations of cultivation, such as the bodily blisses, and then he talks about your prajna wisdom arising. Thus, we can find that Confucius spoke of the same principles of cultivation that Shakyamuni Buddha did in discussing the dhyana; only the terminology is different. Historically speaking, when Buddhism later arrived in China and revealed things in a more elaborate way, because of these parallels it actually enabled the people to understand Confucius' teachings even better.

Confucius pointed out that life already has *ming de* as its basis. Life already fundamentally possesses the original nature of "bright virtue." After you go through this seven step process of cultivation practice, you can ultimately awaken to this inherent *ming de*. Otherwise, what else might you want to awaken to? Naturally there is nothing else that is ultimate because every possible else-thing is a projected creation of *This One*.

Transforming the World With Personal Spiritual Cultivation

Everything else is therefore a function or appearance aspect of our inherent fundamental nature. So while recovering and revealing that inherent clear virtue is the whole point of spiritual cultivation, your subsequent actions and behavior—your "great functioning"—all must proceed from complete agreement with that spiritual realization and are perfected in greater or lesser degree dependent upon the stage of your enlightened attainment. Behavior is what you get to exercise in the world; this is what you have to perfect. You perfect it by mastering selfless activity, and selfless activity is compassionate activity that takes on the pains of the world so as to help others.

Essentially, this is why your everyday activities exhibit the degree to which you have attained the Tao, and are your carrying out of the Bodhisattva vows of practice. Since there is no Fourth Realm to go to after you become enlightened, your behavior must have some purpose to it, otherwise there is no need to act at all. What you therefore select as those purposes becomes your own Bodhisattva vows. If you choose to save all the beings in the Three Realms, starting from your present community and relationships, then you become a Buddha. On the other hand, if you awaken but choose to ignore the plight of other sentient beings, then we cannot say you are a Buddha even if you have awakened to the fundamental Truth.

In that case, you can most only become an Arhat. If you choose not to act for fear of the tangling karmic involvements helpful assistance would require in the world of phenomena, then you will never become a Buddha at all. At most you can become an Arhat who achieves his own personal salvation, but you will never learn how to fully master both true existence and false phenomenal existence if you turn your back on other sentient beings. Even if you do become an Arhat

through the motives of self-interested spiritual realization, you will only become an Arhat with remainder.

To become a Buddha means to serve others. It means to devote yourself to compassionately helping other beings escape the suffering and misery of their past karma, and helping them to become spiritually enlightened. This is what we have explained how to do and the road marks along the way, for this is the core basis of all spiritual paths. Before enlightenment and after enlightenment, you must adapt yourself to local circumstances and conditions by engaging yourself with society in order to perform helpful, beneficial, enlightening deeds for humanity. This is what Zen and Buddhism call the functioning of "skillful means." This is also the Middle Way, or Bodhisattva Path of behavior. The practice of the path is the fruit of the path, so you actualize the path through your behavior. But in order to have proper behavior, you must purify the mind.

The cultivation path starts with behavior and ends with behavior, so ultimately there is no cultivation path of chi mai practice and chakras that is valid. There is only the practice of virtuous mind and behavior as the genuine road of cultivation—abandoning selfish thoughts and purifying obstructive karma. In other words, the beginning, end, and means of cultivation are all essentially the same, and that sameness revolves around discovering the Tao and exhibiting the Tao. Fundamental nature never changes but the "great functioning" adapts to every situation. The "great functioning" is how we use the Tao, namely our behavior.

In terms of the Tao, proper "behavior" means being socially coordinated to the extent that will best help self and society. That is why we say that your behavior must be "skillful." It is impossible to just wave your hands and enlighten people instantly because their karmic ignorance is just too thick, and hence you must work through the social methods of the time to save them.

This is why Zen emphasizes the principle of expedient skillful means, which means to act in spontaneous accord with all worldly situations from the intent of helping others to spiritually awaken. The Sufis also say that you should "wear the outer garment of the law, but you [must] wear the inner garment of the transcendental way," meaning that you have to conform to societal conditions when exhibiting enlightened activity, and yet you must never leave the enlightenment pathway.

These explanations are all basically the idea of integrating your spiritual attainments into your worldly life so that you always act out of the transcendental while working in the world for its benefit. This is how the spiritual trail connects and interacts with society—*the connection is through you and it is dependent upon the degree of your Tao*. You are the one who fulfills "God's activity" or purposes in the world. What are those purposes? They are the ones you select out of your own wisdom and compassion for the greater good. They are the purposes you select as your own chosen Bodhisattva vows after you reach the stage of nonego wherein individual

selfishness has been abandoned. Throughout the world, those people who can do this are truly the ones to be respected.

Reaching a stage of samadhi is an imperfect level of achievement, but it is still an accomplishment that allows you to act more in tune with the Tao. We can also use religious vernacular and say it is the only level able to seamlessly act in tune with "God's will," because to a greater or lesser extent, it is a spiritual stage of nonegoic emptiness that approximates the Tao much better than conventional mentality. If you go further so as to reach the stage of perfect selflessness, wherein you actually see the Tao and become enlightened, that accomplishment corresponds to reaching a *real* stage of nonego. In a real state of selflessness, the perfect accomplished nature can now perfectly shed its light through you as a conduit for positive influences on society. This is why the enlightened Zen master, for instance, are able to accomplish great things for society.

As you go up the ranks of the Bodhisattva bhumi, the ever increasing stages of cultivation you accomplish are even more pure and more effective conduits for activity that can help society, and hence, Bodhisattva behavior is no different in meaning than of acting in accordance with "God's will." In other words, all liberating activity in society has to come from man's own efforts, but these efforts can only be the most conductive of the highest nature when they originate through someone who has attained the Tao. How do you get to that stage? By cultivating the spiritual path, by cultivating away selfishness and cleansing impure volitional impulses. You have to reach the Stage of Seeing the Path, and then engage in the Stage of True Cultivation Practice.

True spiritual cultivation means that you work at becoming a master of living in conformity with the laws of karma, while simultaneously trying to accomplish your chosen vows of helping uplift the world. What are your chosen vows? Whatever positive things you decide they should be, whatever you decide the meaning of your existence will be in this ever-transforming cosmos. They are whatever role you decide to fulfill in this great effervescent play, whatever positive things you decide to accomplish for the universe and mankind. In other words, the purpose of life, of your existence, is all up to you. There is no God's purpose, there is only what you set as your own Bodhisattva vows.

The Confucian, as well as the Buddhist ideal is thus, to embody this inherent call to compassionate action fully in yourself and exhibit it throughout all your behavior, in every degree, until *you are only pure virtue manifesting in behavior*. What a tremendous accomplishment, the accomplishment of realizing the Tao! To do this means getting rid of bad habits, which in turn means purifying your karma. That, of course, is the only way to bring about free will because free will means your actions are freely selected apart from the pull of karmic impulses. If you can realize the Tao, you have this capability through detachment, and can therefore easily change your karma or the karma of nations.

We know by now that the true path of spiritual cultivation entails triumphing over the momentum

of forces embodied by the skandhas, such as freeing yourself from any attachments to the body as well as attachments to thoughts, sensations and to the pull that karmic impulses normally would have over you. That is why the early Greek cultivators used to frame the path in terms of resisting the pulls of the senses, and why the Hindu yoga cultivators mentioned the same. To cultivate the Tao, you must learn how to withdraw your mind from the pulls of the senses, which means to disengage from the sense consciousnesses and become liberated from the skandhas.

Of course this is only part of the story, because to become a form of pure virtue manifesting in activity also means working for the world, and the rationale behind doing so is simply because you are part of the world and it is the right thing to do. You should do this because *this entire world is your karma*. It is all part of your mind stream, and so you must work to purify it as well. Through dependent origination, there is no part of creation that is independently separate from you—there is no way you can remove yourself from any tie with the Three Realms. This is why purifying the Three Realms becomes the objective of all the Buddhas, for the Three Realms are your karma.

You are linked to everything in existence, so it is natural that you should extend your benevolence everywhere like a Buddha. But if you take the narrow viewpoint and become an isolated ascetic who turns his back on society, this is trying to reject your union with interconnected oneness even though you actually cannot annihilate it. Measured in this light, we can say you still have not seen the whole Tao if you choose this course of action. If you act in this way, perhaps we can call you an Arhat who has seen the Tao, but we certainly cannot call you a Buddha or Bodhisattva.

Naturally this does not mean that a true cultivation practitioner should never go into spiritual retreat in order to make spiritual progress and realize the Tao. Rather, it means that once they attain the Tao, they should dedicate their efforts to the spiritual upliftment of others, for this is the only thing of value in the world. Even when the Bodhisattvas do keep apart from the world because of special reasons, they still maintain the intent to benefit the entire world and help other sentient beings. They only withdraw from the world for certain reasons.

We can continue to go on and on with this sort of discussion, but you can already see how enlightened activity means interlinking with society in helpful ways. You can also now see that Confucius taught most all the basic cultivation principles we find in the world's traditions, including the graduated steps of the spiritual path. Whether or not people actually understood Confucius and actually attempted to properly cultivate the path he laid out is another matter entirely, just as it is with modern day Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems and so on.

The Great Learning also states, "Things have their roots and branches, and affairs have their endings and beginnings." This sentence expresses another common cultivation principle, which is the idea of impermanence or temporality that we find over and over again in most religious

teachings. The idea of this phrase is that if you know the nature of arising and ceasing, or birth and death, then it is almost Tao already.

In other words, *to know the source of birth and death is to know the fundamental nature because to find the source of birth and death is to discover the origins of the phenomenal realm*. The main idea is that if you trace things back to their source, you will trace things back to the fundamental nature and will eventually find that birth and death are ultimately empty. On a more micro level, if you know when to start and stop something, this is the knowing of endings and beginnings, and it is from this practice that you can learn to attain samadhi and cultivate prajna.

Today we strive with all our might and put all our energies into learning specialized knowledge and skills because these are what enable us to make our living. But can we call this "learning"? We pay great homage to mathematicians, PhD's and scientists, but do these people represent the zenith of human knowledge and learning? In the light of what Confucius said, the type of knowledge these people master does not constitute learning at all, and it certainly does not constitute wisdom. Their attempts at learning are really just attempts to master specific technologies and have nothing to do with discovering our true nature, which is discovering what it means to be truly human.

From the Buddhist perspective, trying to master technical knowledge is just playing around with experiential realms. Of course this knowledge is useful in terms of the conventional world, but from the higher perspective it is just using our abilities to play around with mental functioning rather than recognize our true essence, and that's *real learning*. That is why Confucius taught that a man needs to learn how to stop his restless mind, for it is through this type of learning that he can get rid of ignorance and reach samadhi. He has to investigate his mind to get to its true source, and in this getting true knowledge can finally be born. From samadhi he can cultivate wisdom, and with prajna wisdom he can resolve the great question of self-realization, as well as formulate various means for how to help the world.

In Confucianism, this procedure for learning how to help the world is laid out right before us, and the methodology starts with the personal process of self-cultivation. The way Confucius presented it, cultivation is not some abstract process with some theoretical link to the world at large, for it *is* the process of loving the people and extending that love through efforts to save them. This is why Confucius traveled from realm to realm seeking a ruler who would put his principles into action. Self-cultivation is the process of helping heal the world and working to save mankind.

In effect this is the Bodhisattva ideal of Buddhism—the Enlightened Hero who participates in the universal matrix for the benefit of all beings. Christian theology says that God's son came down voluntarily, and cheerfully participated in the sorrows of the world by allowing himself to be crucified for the benefit of all people. So Buddhism is not the only one which tells us that

Bodhisattvas choose to be reborn in this world for its benefit, for Christianity tells of a Savior who is born into the world for our benefit, and in Hinduism it is the Avatar who also does the same. The actions of these individuals are devoted to the welfare of the world because *this world is our karma*, and for spiritual advancement to be realized, our karma must be purified. You could not escape a connection with this world anyway, and so it is for this world that one's actions should be dedicated. Once again, this is how the idea of the Tao interconnects with the idea of engagement with society.

Since we must all participate in worldly activity, we should all be careful as to the intent and form of our actions, as well as the ultimate usefulness or unwholesomeness (namely, the fruits) of them. You must train yourself to view the interconnectedness of all things in order to judge the good or bad of any course of action, and you can start to gain some proficiency in observing these things and in recognizing unintended consequences by employing cessation-contemplation practice. As we have been stressing, shamatha-vipashyana practice is not only a means of spiritual cultivation practice that will lead to enlightenment, but also a useful daily habit that will help you succeed with your worldly affairs.

In the ever-flowing quantum soup that we take as conventional reality, it makes sense that the actions we execute be as useful, harmonious and helpful to as large a sphere as possible. Typically, this usually equates with establishing a "golden mean" of conditions, for if you are not careful with every type of effort you make, your actions and relationships can produce disruptive effects with disastrous consequences. Lacking the characteristics of wisdom and skillfulness they can further entangle a doer in a sticky snare of unfortunate karmic consequences.

Since what is good changes with the time and location, any actions you choose to undertake in the world should not follow a strict script but should always embody the adaptive idea of "skillful means" as revealed in the *Lotus Sutra*. They should not become fixed and unchanging affairs, but should imitate the flexible expedient methodologies employed by the Zen masters.

All of the ever-moving elements of existence are interconnected, so it is impossible not to participate in the world of human relations. However, while we all participate in the world of relationships, our minds should never abide in any fixed state because we have to get to the point where our bright functioning continuously operates without any restrictions. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, "the mind should abide nowhere." Only in this way will you be able to naturally and spontaneously respond in accord with any situations that arise. You should do everything your responsibilities call for in the world of societal relationships, but your mind should always remain outside of attachment to the world, transcendent of ordinary affairs. This is why the Sufis say to wear the garment of the law, but mentally cultivate the transcendental way.

While your mind is in touch with the Tao, "transparent to the transcendent," the Bodhisattva way is to use your will to work for the benefit of others in a harmonious manner. This is your

involvement with the world as well as the exercise and exhibition of your compassion. This is the expression of your Bodhisattva vows, and the skills and talents you gain in acting this way become your Bodhisattva excellences, namely the merits that will show up in the appearance of your sambhogakaya Enjoyment Body.

When Socrates, who established the Western tradition, spoke about the search for virtue, how to be a human being, and that it was paramount to do the right thing even when the consequences might mean death, this was also the same teaching that you must act in the world while holding to the mind of Tao. Mankind has heard this same message over and over again, but it only embodies the greatest power when it comes from individuals who have attained some genuine stage of realization.

This is why some people who preach virtue are totally ignored, for they have no stage of cultivation attainment whatsoever and so their words carry no power. The true sages, saints, prophets, masters, and others of the past who spoke of these matters were not just intellectuals, or priests or philosophers or theologians. They were people who had actually attained some stage of spiritual realization, which is why their words were able to have the effect they did.

Many revolutionary aspirants today should therefore heed the warning that if they want to change the world, they are unlikely to make much positive headway unless they first succeed in achieving some degree of self-cultivation and spiritual realization. Even then, they will still need to cultivate a high degree of prajna wisdom in order to be able to determine the best course of beneficial action for society because simply having the Tao does not mean you will never make another mistake. To effect positive change in society, you not only need wisdom but proper timing, which is an ability which depends upon wisdom. However, this is a complicated topic we would rather not get into because it would out of necessity, for clarity's sake, include an analysis of where certain spiritual leaders of the path may have gone wrong.

As we have already established, the message that you must participate in the world and cultivate virtuous relationships, so as to bring about peace and harmony and balance, is also the path of spiritual cultivation. The Tibet school refers to this as "integration with daily activities," but most people think this definition means re-entering the world *after* attaining samadhi. In the Confucian and orthodox Buddhist schools, the path and process are one of integration with the world from the very start.

Yes, you may go into retreat in order to attain samadhi or further your samadhi, but both before and after such an attainment you must be trying to attain samadhi during all your daily activities. Even the practice of washing your clothes can become an exercise in cultivating samadhi. This is why the Zen masters would yell at their students to "Look, look" or be mindful. Thus, the fruit of the path *is* the path; the process, beginning, and result of the path are all one. Cultivation is not something you put on your left side while you put your behavior on your right side. The two

have to become intermixed, for they are actually one in terms of method and goal.

Bringing Peace to the World Through the Mastery of Self-Cultivation

Why should you aim to bring peace and harmony to the world as the path of spiritual cultivation? Because you must purify this karma of yours, and because there is no better way to repay the benevolence of the world—which has given you life and supported you—or to repay the benevolence of your country, society, parents, patrons and teachers than in trying to bring about peace in a nation.

You do not need anyone to tell you this, but another factor to consider, in the larger sense, is that a peaceful world means a world of tranquility, calm and joy. These are basic attainments of the spiritual path for the individual spiritual cultivator, and thus, *if you consider society as a single individual, they are the characteristics society needs in order to progress along in its own path of evolutionary spiritual advancement.* Only through peace can society transform, and so only if society finds peace can it climb the ranks of spirituality as well. That is why the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas always bring teachings that will help bring peace and prosperity to society.

The progress of mankind is not just a matter of achieving better economics, but a matter of progress on the spiritual path as well. Spiritual progress equates with kung-fu, so this naturally translates into better health, morality, peace of mind *and* spiritual knowing. People always say they want society to mature along lines of spiritual progress, but unless society as a whole can find tranquility, there is no way that society as a whole will be able to develop the attributes corresponding to samadhi and prajna wisdom development. Who is to help bring about peace in society? Certainly not ordinary religious functionaries, businessmen or political officials. Only the sages and their teachings can do this, which is why they put a tremendous amount of time in leaving teachings that can help transform cultures.

Since you already know that stillness and bliss are the basis of samadhi and prajna, you therefore know that peace and happiness in the world are necessary for the further uplifting of society's spiritual evolution. But how can you achieve this if you cannot simply force peace upon the world? Since individuals who attain samadhi and prajna are the only ones who have personally achieved peace and tranquility, they are the ones—rather than the politicians—whom you have to consult on this matter. They are the only ones who can tell you the appropriate strategies for society. Aside from specific strategies that address the particular circumstances of the moment, they will all tell you that the Confucian way of spreading peace and harmony to the world is the correct one, for it teaches that this grand objective must start with the cultivation of the individual and the perfection of his human relations. In other words, self-cultivation is the means through which peace can be brought to society.

We are all interconnected in a societal field of oneness, and are always in accord with the inter-

linked items of existence that constitute co-dependent arising. If you perfect one of the elements in these links, its effect is definitely felt in all the other links because of interconnectedness, just as "the vibration of an electron shakes the universe." Thus, you can truly save the world by beginning with yourself. First work on saving yourself through achieving success in self-cultivation, and after you have mastered yourself you can then effectively work on saving others. You start on this great task of helping others by first enlightening yourself, and from your basis in cultivation accomplishment you can then work to accomplish others' spiritual liberation.

What is the methodology for saving the world taught in *The Great Learning*? If you teach all the people in society to understand their *ming de*, or fundamental nature, then there will be "peace in the world." Hence this goal starts with self-cultivation. But from a macro-level, you have to look at world peace in terms of countries. Peace must overtake each country one at a time until there is peace worldwide. For peace to overtake a single country, that country must in turn be governed well and have established peace within its borders. To be able to govern a country well, this means its people must first be able to govern smaller units well, which means they must learn how to establish harmonious relationships within states, communities and families. To govern a family or company well—which are the smallest of these units—people must first become able to govern themselves well.

People must learn how to cultivate their own person so as to become master of themselves. In other words, bringing peace to the world once again means that people engage in the process of self-cultivation. From self-mastery, of course you can then work effectively towards bringing peace to society, but this larger effort must start with the personal work at self-mastery.

Bringing peace to the world and helping others, therefore, ultimately comes down to cultivating yourself, to taking responsibility for yourself. This is why Confucius posed the meaning of cultivation in terms of our relationship with others and our relationship to the world at large. He taught the same cultivation process and stages as found in Taoism, Hinduism, or Buddhism, but he expressed them in a different manner because that was the method most appropriate for his time and culture, just as scientific explanations are the appropriate presentational form required for today. Such is the pattern of behavior we typically see of the enlightened sages when they choose how to act—it is all an exhibition of skillful means, the outward adaptive functioning to the circumstances at hand.

The behavior of the enlightened sages has no fixed form or format. Rather, their actions and teachings must be classified as adaptive: they always correspond to the requirements or circumstances of time and place. People think in different ways and are situated at different stages along the spiritual spectrum, so they need to be taught in different manners because of their varying mental tendencies. That is why there are so many different forms of spiritual teachings in the world. One method or spiritual stream does not fit the karma of all, so there must be many paths people can follow at all sorts of stages of advancement.

The problem is that people never realize this adaptivity and nonexclusivity, and they make another mistake by formalizing past enlightened teachings given for a particular moment and turning them into something fixed and unchanging. In so doing, they lose the original intent of the matter, and replace the possibility of living progress with dead routines. Of course it is not that formalism is incorrect or unprofitable, but that ossification and having the wrong spiritual view is incorrect. Furthermore, in most cases of formalization, it already tells you that these adherents have lost the true eye of the dharma by replacing the intent of wise action with the letter of the law, and that with this fall in wisdom, it will therefore be hard to awaken them.

The Great Learning says that to cultivate yourself well, you first need the correct mind. You need the correct view or perspective, namely the proper sort of understanding. "Setting your mind right" in Confucianism is therefore akin to the struggle to "see the path," "see the truth," or "see the Tao" as spoken of in the Zen school, and from this you will always know how to guide yourself correctly. Naturally this means first realizing the fundamental nature of all things and then in turn, finally understanding the correct means of true cultivation practice.

Confucius says that attaining the correct view—seeing the path—results in attaining the state of sincerity (*cheng*). This sincerity, however, is something more than just common sincerity or honesty. This sincerity means direct, authentic, genuine mind. It means acting out of the genuineness of fundamental mind, and so it is natural state that is not contrived. It is the naked, true mind naturally released from all ossified contrivance so that it abides in its own genuine state of natural purity. In other cultivation schools we might refer to this sincerity through the words "openness" or even "emptiness," but Confucius just called this sincerity. Still other people call this *straightforwardness*, or directness.

Being sincere means revealing your mind without crookedness or artificiality, so being sincere is the natural result of knowing the Tao and exhibiting the Tao. Thus once again in Confucianism, we have instructions on the Tao phrased in terms of virtuous human behavior, and yet these instructions match with all the previous ways of describing the spiritual path. In Confucian teachings, to act directly out of your original mind is called being straightforward, and so the task in Confucianism is as in other spiritual paths—to see the Tao and then act in constant attunement with this stage of realization. This is the Bodhisattva path, or the practice of activities that constitute "loving the people."

Now in order to have *cheng* sincerity, we now know that you first need the wisdom of clear knowing. Backtracking we must ask, where does this wisdom of clear knowing ultimately come from, and how do you attain it? Today we would phrase this as, "how do you cultivate prajna transcendental wisdom," and in Western parlance we would ask, "how do you arrive at a realization of God?" But Confucius did not phrase things in this way. Because of a difference in terminology, he did not use the word prajna or God but simply spoke of clear knowing instead. That was his own term for prajna transcendental wisdom.

We still have to ask, however, where does this knowing ultimately come from? For instance, how do you know the thoughts in your mind? Where do those thoughts come from and how is it that you can perceive them? When you are sitting in meditation as an example, how is it that you know you are sitting? Is this knowing in the brain, the heart, or the mind? Does it depend upon the brain in any way? Is it a physical thing that ends at death, or does it carry over beyond death? If this knowing knows thoughts, can it be a type of thought itself? Where does this clear knowing ultimately come from and what is its ultimate origin?

Confucius said that knowing actually comes from "investigating things," or *ke-wu*. You achieve true knowledge by investigating things because after things are investigated, true knowing can be realized. What is true knowing? It is knowledge of the highest realization, seeing of the fundamental nature, recognition of the truly Real, knowing things as they truly are, realizing the union of emptiness and interdependent origination. Mind and the material universe are unified into one, and in spiritual cultivation you work on experientially tracing these two aspects back to their single fundamental source. Only then can you discover *the one real source*. That root source is the fundamental essence, and knowing *That One* is true knowing just as the path to this knowing is the great learning. *That One* is the ultimate host, and true knowing, or prajna, is a guest of *That One*.

Confucius said that to trace things back to their source, you must follow the path of *ke-wu* by investigating things back to their source basis, always searching for their fundamental nature. Thus investigating things is essentially Confucian terminology for the cultivation path. Whereas to us, "investigating things" might mean the road of modern scientific measurements, to Confucius it also has the connotation of contemplating or investigating the mind as in cessation-contemplation practice. After all, this is the form of investigation that will give you attainment into the furthest type of knowing possible. When you investigate or search for the true mind behind the creation of thoughts and everything else, your wisdom will be born and from it you can come to recognize that fundamental nature. Acting out of perfect union with the fundamental nature, you can then act to save the entire world.

What is ultimately behind all the phenomena that you investigate? What can you ultimately realize through clear knowing? The *Surangama Sutra* already told us:

> The fundamental nature of wind is emptiness; when you arrive at emptiness, you have arrived at the fundamental nature of wind. The fundamental nature of water is emptiness; when you arrive at emptiness, you have arrived at the fundamental nature of water. ... This fundamental nature pervades the entire dharma realm, and responds to people's conditions. As to how much you can understand of its nature, it depends upon your wisdom and spiritual attainments.

In other words, the fundamental nature is ultimately behind all phenomena. It is the one source of

both matter and mind. In investigating things and developing your clear knowing, you can ultimately arrive at the Tao and achieve complete enlightenment. That, in essence, is the path of Confucian cultivation.

In summary, after you have reached the stage of transforming the body, opening all its chi channels and transforming chi to shen and then shen to emptiness, you can achieve some degree of "knowing" equivalent to prajna wisdom. Then, because of prajna, you can discover the state of true sincerity. In attaining true sincerity you will have the correct mind, also called the correct presence, the correct view, or correct way. Living life with true sincerity is exhibiting the Tao, which, in turn, is revealing the heart of realization.

With this correct view and correct method, you can finally guide yourself correctly so as to cultivate properly and purify your errant behavioral streams. That is what is done in the Stage of True Cultivation Practice that comes after the Stage of Seeing Tao. From cultivating yourself properly you will, in turn, become better able to manage your family, from managing your family you can influence the community and state, and from managing the state well you will become able to arrange the world and bring about peace everywhere.

This all shows that you need not be some monastic to achieve the spiritual path, but anyone can including a busy king or politician! In fact, this task of bringing peace to society is what a Chakravartin Wheel Turning King does, and is what the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, saints and sages all attempt to do. In effect, they are all enlightened, but each chooses a different means for accomplishing what he or she decides upon as his or her objective.

In the light of accomplished activity, cultivation becomes the means for "re-entering the world" and acting so that you can achieve such grand results. Without undertaking the process of spiritual cultivation, however, you will never be able to really and truly reach a state of full effectiveness with your actions. In fact, it is easy to see that those leaders whose actions were most effective in history, and whose names are still known after countless generations, mostly include people who cultivated some degree of spiritual realization rather than those who built some large company or made a lot of money. From this we can realize that if you do not gain some degree of skill in stopping and knowing, meaning cultivating samadhi and prajna, your achievements will always be on the small side of greatness. Worse than that, your actions might even turn out to be quite destructive.

Whether you are a country's leader or a common person, everything always comes down to the need to cultivate yourself. In fact, this is the one important task in your life that you cannot leave unintended. The congregational religions have you going to church or the temple, attending religious ceremonies and services—but they are all rather useless compared to this major effort needed for self-perfection. They are just a diluted, lukewarm striving compared to working on meditation so as to develop samadhi and prajna wisdom. This is what you should be

concentrating on throughout all your activities, whatever they may be. In fact, only this is true religion, or true spiritual practice. If you do not think it is, you are forgetting the main thing and getting bogged down by minor stuff instead. And if you do not understand this principle by now, what can we say?

Purifying your Behavior

In truth, you cannot govern your country well, your society well, your corporation well, your family well, nor whatever else without first cultivating yourself. You have to know how to master yourself before you can lead others. To govern any of these other things, you need discipline, character (virtue) and insight (wisdom). Today we simply lump these requirements together and call them "character building" basics because we have lost full knowledge of the cultivation principles behind them, yet we still recognize that character and behavior are the basis of spirituality, not to mention the determinants of future good fortune. Character is indeed destiny, and the proper way to perfect your character is to engage in self-cultivation, for your character will indeed become perfected as you start to fulfill the requirements of the path.

Whether you use the Confucian way, Buddhist way, Christian way or any other path for your spiritual practice, they all follow the same basic cultivation principles, including requiring you to focus on cultivating virtue so as to perfect your personal character and behavior. This should be your main focus in life no matter whatever religion or school you follow—everything should focus upon the process of self-cultivation and the perfection of personal behavior.

To know the Tao is to recognize fundamental emptiness and selflessness, but the expression of this truth is all reflected through behavior, which means that realizing the Tao is only part of the story. You have to realize the Tao, but you must do so in order that you can turn around and save the world. Any true cultivation path will therefore always emphasize behavior, for fundamental emptiness cannot become any more perfected than it already is, but behavior is how the Tao can be perfected in the world of phenomena, and how excellences can be brought to this realm.

The process of self-cultivation behind character building, in turn, means learning how to purify your thoughts. You already know that this means becoming able to stop the mind (which today Christianity has started to call "centering") so as to attain samadhi. Working toward this achievement, the body becomes transformed so that it, in turn, becomes a more fit vehicle for spiritual cultivation.

Spiritual cultivation entails cultivating samadhi and transcendental wisdom, embodying pure virtue in all your actions and behavior, and working responsibly in the world to save it rather than leaving it to decay. Spiritual cultivation is not a matter of following religious ceremonies or of honoring various gods or ancient traditions, for what does that ultimately do? Nothing substantial at all.

True spiritual seeking means cultivating to find the true Self—the fundamental unmoved Mover—and then further cultivating so as to reveal it and express it through personal behavior, for ultimately that is the only thing you can control. It means cultivating so that you can become a more perfect vehicle for the Tao to express itself in the world of phenomena, and using your behavior to make the world of phenomena a more perfect place for sentient beings. It entails achieving great results in almost any endeavor, and this translates into being able to change the universe for the better despite the interlinked evil karma of all the beings within conventional existence.

To find the Tao and then exhibit it through refined behavior is everyone's true life- path and career; because of inescapable karma, behavior is the one thing for which you must ultimately assume responsibility in the Three Realms, and is the one thing you can control. Hence, behavior is what you must learn how to purify, and you can do this by becoming in tune with the Tao.

Of course this purity does not mean subjecting yourself to a shackle of codes and regulations in order to control behavior, for that leaves the originating, motivational mind untouched. It does not purify the habitual energy streams behind your desires and passions, but just keeps them smoldering and ready to ignite when given the chance. Rather, the discipline necessary for achieving purity of behavior means that the mind must never fall out of the state of highest samadhi, and actions must always be born out of this state.

The definition of proper behavior therefore becomes any form of positive deed for the good of mankind that issues forth from this state, even if this entails breaking normal conventional rules or regulations. After all, the normal rules and guidelines of religion were invented by man for man; they were invented by cultivation adepts to help establish peace and order in society and thereby help guide mankind upwards. In order to cultivate and perfect your behavior, you must therefore become as these past greats had become and seek out the roots of behavior which ultimately lie in the mind, for mind gives birth to thoughts and thoughts give birth to behavior. To really spiritualize your behavior, you must first learn to recognize the fundamental—the mind's original basis from which everything has come.

This is the best way of explaining the process and stages of cultivation, and it is all right here in the Confucian route of self-perfection that is devoid of esoteric gibberish and gobbledygook. We could talk of chi channels, mai, kundalini and chakras and skandhas and samadhi and psychic abilities and experiential visaya and so on, but this type of discussion has the potential of losing you to deviant spiritual paths. Believe it or not, the Confucian route of perfecting behavior by cultivating the mind can actually be a more direct route to enlightenment, for those with wisdom, than what is offered by the form-based schools which always concentrate on these things.

Let us try a mini-proof of this statement. Go pick up a book on Tibetan tantra or yoga and ask yourself whether you immediately understand all the stuff inside it. If you do not, it is only giving

you more room to doubt, become confused, become attached, or distracted from the main cultivation trail. Furthermore, while you can say that all the miraculous forms and experiences described in these texts are true and existent, then again you can also say they are false because they all correspond to impermanent, transitory phenomena.

Why bother to emphasize these things at all since they are not the important thing? They are all just other dependent arisings that are no different, in essence, than the passing scenes we might see on a TV screen. The great danger is that once people drop into playing with this mess of mara states, many will never burrow out of it, just as certain groups of people cannot pull themselves away from the attraction of gambling, or drugs, or alcohol, or the TV. This sounds like a theoretical worry, but when you look at the history of the various esoteric schools, this is the standard rule rather than the exception. And yet, we must also say that some people need this sort of spiritual path, but that does not also mean that they can cultivate great wisdom through it.

This type of attached fascination to form is the reason why very few yogis, gurus, Rinpoches, sadhus, monks, rishis, seers, sages, masters, adepts, prophets, etc. ever reach the ultimate stages of spiritual cultivation. It is why few ever reach total enlightenment. Instead, most people—and here we are even talking about people much higher on the spiritual scale than most because they are already able to generate samadhi—get attached to some experiential realm by taking it to be real, and drop into the habit of playing with its related machinations. They do not understand that *the circle of the path has no reality at any point; there is nothing ultimate at any point along the way*. Even emptiness is empty of emptiness, so there is nothing one can ever rely upon! That is why you will never find a Zen master affixing to any experiential realm which arises, for the main issue is to find that one fundamental source behind it all, and then to act out of that realization. This is the Bodhisattva vow of behavior.

Nevertheless, in this book we have also defined various alternative ways of looking at your stage of cultivation progress because people today are fixated on this way of viewing matters. Today people need explanations that take into account the phenomenals of science, and will accept nothing other than "a scientific explanation" for how to measure someone's stage of cultivation progress. Unfortunately, modern science is way behind the science of cultivation whose phenomenal principles were already discussed in the Mind-Only or Consciousness-Only school of Madhyamika centuries ago.

Modern Science Lags Behind Cultivation Science

Modern scientists (and psychologists) are so far behind that they think they are ahead, and so when scientists discover things like atoms, and uncertainty principles, and energy-matter conversions and so on, they think they are the first in line and at the head of the class. However, what is thought true today is often overturned tomorrow, and there will be 22nd century, 23rd century and 24th century science, etc. to upset everything we now know. The funny thing is that

with just a little bit of samadhi attainment, you will understand many teachings on these matters provided hundreds of years ago, and will be able to fathom things better than most of all the world's scientists put together! Thousands of years ago Buddha already talked about other galaxies and forms of life, wave-particle duality, and extra sorts of bodies that most people cannot even dream of. These are all just small examples of the many phenomena you can discover through the process of spiritual cultivation, and so whom are all these people fooling? Who's catching up to whom?

The theoretical principles of the truth we can reach through scientific investigations were greatly influenced by the ideas of Kant. Philosophers typically believe that Kant's ideas were quite new, but even his ideas were already covered by the teachings in various cultivation schools which specialized in cultivating form. That is why we often say that the Consciousness-Only school, in particular, is the philosophical school best suited for modern science (and psychology, medicine, etc.) and its investigations of form.

Eventually, science will start catching up and experientially proving all the mind-body connections we have been discussing, as well as the changes in one's chi and mai that occur along the road of cultivation, including the existence of the chakras and the samadhi-dhyana. But because these findings will always, by their very nature, be restricted to the lower skandhas, we can also already know ahead of time that the findings of science will always be restricted to the lowest end of the scale of cultivation attainment.

In short, one day science will reach various breakthroughs that recognize spiritual cultivation principles, but it will probably only reach a plateau that refuses to recognize things higher than chi. It will eventually master chi, but very little beyond that. As to the emptiness known by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with their prajna wisdom, and the capability this sort of realization engenders, science cannot even begin to dream about these things. But if you cultivate and reach even a small degree of spiritual attainment yourself, you will be able to leapfrog this sort of learned, self-imposed ignorance in one stroke!

With wide vision one can eventually recognize that unfortunately, none of the things which science is presently studying will ever lead people to Tao. They cannot lead people to the spiritual ranks of attainment unless people themselves start to spiritually cultivate along the lines we have indicated! Neither can we take the apparent phenomena of the universe recognized by science as indicative of the Tao either, other than to say that the world of maya is the clothing of the Absolute. The universe is simply the empty, transient, shimmering display of the Absolute nature defined through a vast interdependence of infinite cause and effect relationships, and that is about as far as you can get concerning its ontological origins. Even the proof for the truth of this statement can only come from personally traveling the path of spiritual cultivation yourself and gaining some stage of attainment within its ranks. However, this type of investigation—although more real and worthwhile than the "orthodox" sort of scientific investigation that we

take as legitimate and genuine—is not something science today yet considers acceptable.

Since all phenomenals are in the realm of birth and death, studying them cannot possibly lead you out of this realm of birth and death. If you study the conventional sphere, you can define all the laws or relationships that comprise the realm of cause and effect, but you can never leave the conventional realm of transient, phenomenological reality. However, the path of mind-only cultivation can indeed enable you to attain this sort of liberation.

This is why religious leaders have spoken of this accomplishment as "salvation," for it can free you from the realm of birth and death. Studying the kung-fu phenomenals of spiritual cultivation will indeed produce a larger picture of the universe that verifies all the spiritual teachings we have gone over, but even these investigations will always be stuck in the realm of form. How will you ever escape the realm of form if you keep focusing on studies of matter, form, and appearances? You have to study the root original mind instead, and the only way to reach it is by probing to the origins of the mind.

Actually, all form belongs to the realm of birth and death. In terms of its fundamental substrate, forms and appearances are just various machinations of consciousness and even when you discover this fact, you still have to recognize that consciousness is not yet the ontological ground bed of reality. For instance, while we can say that the alaya consciousness is a first level projection of the fundamental nature, it is still not the ground state of existence-being we call the Tao. So while we absolutely need to know about science and use it as far as possible to learn about the universe and improve our material circumstances, the information it provides can actually be poisonous if we stay narrow-minded by engaging in mental clinging.

Because of an incorrect type of fascination with science, we are always in danger of enmeshing ourselves in spiritual roads and routines that lead us further and further away from true spirituality, from true spiritual accomplishment. Given all the information we have revealed, however, anyone can freely cultivate the road of true spirituality to end up scientifically verifying what has been stated, and it is this sort of courageous spirit of investigation—regardless of one's denomination—that we must encourage for today's world.

In other words, do not argue about things according to the standpoint of inbred biases and preconceptions. Just cultivate correctly to see what everything turns out to be. Just cultivate to discover the truth without holding any preconceived notions. But be sure you do not stop at any point along the way of this spiritual journey, and deviate from the main road of spiritual practice due to a misplaced fascination with the phenomenal.

The Zen school avoided this possibility entirely by bypassing any concerns with phenomenal matters all together. Confucius avoided the issue by focusing on behavior. Buddha in his infinite kindness provided all sorts of alternative teachings for people at various levels and stages of

understanding, and in these teachings he rarely emphasized the body or kung-fu at all. But as he said after reaching enlightenment and before he started teaching others, the true enlightenment dharma is hard to teach no matter how you try to phrase it.

Accordingly, Shakyamuni did not even want to start down the road of teaching at all. It was only because the heavenly gods intervened and beseeched him to teach that he started giving instructions about the path to enlightenment and the practices for reaching it. Shakyamuni's reticence in spite of his boundless mind of compassion is a perfect indication of how difficult it is to talk about all these matters correctly, or even gain an audience that can understand them.

The Path Ahead

We, ourselves, are also fumbling in terms of picking the right words to use in teaching these things and making them clear, as well as deciding upon how much to say and not say. In more cases than not, it is what we have left out that is extremely important, but we just do not have an audience which can receive this sort of material. However the main point from all this verbiage—from this book in its entirety—is the injunction that you should strive to directly know your fundamental nature, which is the true source nature of your mind. Even if you can only put a little effort into the striving, please do so and begin quickly. In that way you will establish a karmic connection with the process of cultivation which is sure to bear fruit in the future.

Cultivation is not some psychological game, not some mythological affair, not some figment of one's imagination, and not some science fiction nonsense. *It is real spiritual transformation based on scientific principles*, and spiritual cultivation is bound to the path of behavior that involves a road of continuous self-perfection and doing good things for mankind.

The genuine goal of true religious spirituality is to find that original spiritual basis of ours, to fully recover this inherent virtue so that we are always awakened to its presence, and then to incorporate this achievement in compassionate functioning in the universe. There are no other goals more challenging nor worthwhile than these. In fact, this is what gives meaning to life. This type of spiritual path represents the apex of evolutionary striving although of course there is no such end ever in sight; the great work is never done since even the Buddhas are constantly working on perfecting their perfections, and embellishing their excellences. Nonetheless, this route of cultivation is the real basis of character building. It is the process for "becoming a mature individual." This is the road of great learning that teaches you how to become a spiritual adult. If you attain this type understanding we speak of, only then can you talk of spiritual cultivation.

All this various material we have provided, and all the nondenominational connections we have demonstrated, has been to help you gain confidence in the genuineness of the spiritual path. The purpose has been to help you understand that spiritual cultivation and its results are not some

invention of science fiction, superstitious nonsense, or that the world's various religions each hold a different spiritual truth. The spiritual cultivation path has a basis of common principles even though it has been described in different ways across the world's various religions, for in essence it is the same path even when cast in a different form. Its variety in presentation has only come about due to varying sorts of emphasis made in response to different cultural proclivities, and then of course every path has also accumulated a variety of bogus or contaminated materials over time as well.

All the world's religions speak differently of the fundamental path in order to respond to different potentials, but in their core essence they all say basically the same things. With all the information we have provided, we hope that you can now be introduced to many more spiritual teachings, and become skilled at reading in-between the lines of various spiritual traditions. If you attained some stage of samadhi then we could talk more about certain topics, such as what is right and wrong on various spiritual trails, but with samadhi attainments you will readily be able to figure out many such falsehoods yourself.

Keeping this in mind, do not become lost or get sidetracked on the spiritual trail by insisting that this religion is the right one, or that one is wrong. Think of all the spiritual trails in the world simply as expedient means with possible corruptions that may have been accumulated over time. Furthermore, do not get confused about the ultimate genuineness of spiritual cultivation or its ultimate purpose just because it manifests in different forms in different cultures. Do not become fixated on the fact that some of these forms or "truths" are higher than others. The core of spiritual cultivation is all that matters, and that core is true spiritual striving, true spiritual development, true spiritual evolution, true "religiousness."

This truth has had to appear in different forms so as to adapt to the wide variety of potentials we see in the world. It has to assume higher and lower shapes so as to present avenues of advancement suited for people at all stages of development who do not all share the same degree of fortunate karma or enlightened wisdom. Nevertheless, spiritual cultivation is the means for finding answers to the fundamental questions which motivate all these various religions, as well as science and philosophy. It is the means to satisfy man's need to know the meaning and purpose of life.

Everything else in life is secondary to answering these great questions about our original life, to nakedly experiencing our fundamental nature, seeing our original nature, and then exhibiting it in the world through adaptive skillful behavior. Everything else is secondary to realizing the Tao and then crystallizing this realization in virtuous activity that is extended everywhere. This is the one true goal of the spiritual path, and this goal is actually achievable in truth, not just theory, because you are already one with the fundamental answer.

All you must do is simply turn your investigating mind within to recognize its fundamental,

thoughtless source. The Tao is not something you have to make or create, just something you have to recognize. It is something you have to awaken to because it is always present. Once you recognize it, you must learn how to keep all your actions in tune with it so as to become a selfless conduit for the perfect functioning of the accomplished nature.

If you persevere one-pointedly in trying to realize the Tao and abandon all the obstructive mental distractions that shield you from this recognition, nothing can stand in your way of its final achievement. How can anything stand in the way since obscurations by their very nature are destined to depart? They are illusions by their very nature in the first place, and it is through cultivation that you can come to recognize this so as to let go of this self-imposed ignorance.

We have listed the many guideposts of the spiritual path, which are also the distractions, to help with the journey, so nothing now stands in your way of realizing self-enlightenment except personal perseverance and personal effort on the road of spiritual cultivation practice. We sincerely hope this work has been of some small help in making clear this journey, and hope our other materials do the same.

Appendix:
The Fifty Mara-States of the Five Skandhas Affecting Practitioners During Meditation

Translated by Douglas Wile

Just as the Buddha was about to quit his dharma-platform, he grasped the inlaid teapot beside his lion throne and turned his precious body. Then, once again leaning back in his seat, he declared to the great assembly and to his most learned disciple Ananda: "You sravakas and pratyeka-buddhas must turn your minds to the achievement of the supreme bodhi. I have already instructed you in the correct methods of practice, but you are not yet aware of the subtle deceptions of the evil maras when you practice samatha-vipasyana meditation. When the mara-realms appear before you, if you are not able to distinguish them, and your minds are not pure and balanced, you will fall into erroneous views. These may take the form of your own skandha-maras, Deva Mara, ghosts and spirits, or evil demons. If your mind is not clear, you may mistake thieves as your own sons, or take small progress as complete achievement, like the ignorant monk who after reaching the fourth and final dhyana announced that he had attained sainthood. No sooner had he earned his heavenly reward than signs of his fall appeared. For vilifying the arhats, he reaped the fruits of his own karma and fell into the eternal hells. You must listen carefully as I explain this to you in detail."

Ananda rose to his feet, and together with all the assembled neophyte saiksa students, they gratefully prostrated themselves at the Buddha's feet and awaited his compassionate instruction.

The Buddha said: "You must all understand that there is no difference between the universal mind of the twelve types of beings birthed in the worlds of suffering and illusion, and that of the Buddhas of the ten directions. However, because of distorted thinking, people become ignorant and greedy, and ignorance and greed become universal. Therefore, the original, absolute void is ceaselessly transformed into illusion, and thus, the world is created. In reality, this very earth came into being from the stubborn and erroneous thinking of the unenlightened. You must know that voidness is created in your own mind like a wisp of cloud against a clear sky; how much more so the worlds within this void. If just one among you realizes your true nature and reverts to the original source, then the whole void is obliterated. Would not all the nations of this void be shaken and shattered?

"When you practice dhyana and samadhi, all the bodhisattvas and great arhats, whose mind-essences are in perfect accord, remain unmoved, but the king of the demons, together with the ghosts, spirits, and lesser heavens witness the spontaneous collapse of their palaces, and the whole earth is shattered. All the creatures of land, sea, and air are startled. The worldly man

labors in darkness and feels no change, whereas the hosts of demons, who have acquired the five supernatural powers but have not yet extinguished their passions, are still attached to the troubles of this world. How can they allow you to destroy their dwellings? This is why when you enter the state of samadhi, the ghosts and spirits, Deva Mara, and monsters and demons swarm about to harass you.

"However, do not be concerned about the maras' rage, for they are afflicted with the passions of the world, while you enjoy wonderful bliss. They can no more touch you than wind can blow out light or a knife can cut water; you are like boiling water and they are like solid ice. As the warm air draws near, the ice is soon melted. Though they rely on their supernatural powers, these are merely external and can only succeed in destroying you through your own internal five skandhas—form, sensation, conception, volition, and consciousness. If you are deluded, they will take advantage of you. When you are established in dhyana, enlightened and free of delusion, what harm can the maras do to you? When your skandhas are wiped out, and you enter a state of perfect clarity, then all evils are but dark vapors. As light overcomes darkness, they will perish as soon as they approach you. How could they dare to disturb your samadhi?

"However, if you fail to awaken and are deluded by the five skandhas, then you, Ananda, will become the offspring of Mara and aid him in his work. This is like the despicable Matangi, who used spells to try to cause you to violate one of the eighty thousand rules of the order. At that time, however, your mind was pure and you did not succumb. This was a potential threat to your precious bodhi-wisdom and to your very being, and you might have ended up like a minister of state who finds himself suddenly dispossessed, destitute, and hopeless.

The Ten Mara-States of the Skandha of Form

"Ananda, you must know that when you sit in the meditation hall with thoughts extinguished and a clear mind, you will no longer be affected by movement or stillness, and memory and forgetting will be as one. In this state as you enter samadhi, you are like a man with sharp eyes who is standing in the dark. Although your mind is clear, it does not yet shine. This is called 'the state conditioned by the skandha of form.' When your eyes are clear, light floods the ten directions, and you will no longer dwell in darkness. This is called 'the end of the skandha of form,' and allows you to transcend the kalpa of impurity, whose root cause is stubborn and erroneous thinking.

1. "Ananda, in your present state of penetration and clarity, the four elements of the world cannot entwine you, and after a short time your body will be free of all hindrances. This state is called 'the outward diffusion of clear consciousness' and is but a temporary manifestation resulting from your progress in meditation. It does not mean that you have reached sainthood. This stage, although it is called 'an excellent level of attainment,' should not be confused with

sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

2. "Ananda, once again, in this state of penetration and clarity, you will attain internal discernment of your own body and may even see worms inside. However, although you perceive your body thus, there will be no harm. This state is called 'the diffusion of clear consciousness into the body' and is but a temporary manifestation resulting from your progress in meditation. It does not mean that you have reached sainthood. This stage, although it is called 'an excellent level of attainment,' should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

3. "Continuing with this mind to penetrate both within and without, the higher and lower souls, the mind will, and the spirit (though excepting the physical body) all intermingle as host and guest. Suddenly, you will hear a voice in the middle of the air preaching the dharma or proclaiming its secret meanings in the ten directions. This state is called 'the mutual separation and union of spirit and the higher and lower souls.' This attainment sows good seed, but it is temporary and is not sainthood. This stage, although it is called 'an excellent level of attainment,' should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

4. "Continuing with this clear and penetrating mind, your inner light will shine forth and bathe everything in the ten directions with the golden hue of sandalwood, and all creatures are transformed into Buddhas. Suddenly, you will see Vairocana, the embodiment of truth himself, seated on a throne of heavenly light surrounded by a thousand Buddhas and countless nations and lotus blossoms, all appearing at once. This is called 'the effect of the awakening spirituality of the mind.' The penetrating light of the mind illuminates all the worlds. However, this is a temporary stage and is not sainthood. This stage, although it is called 'an excellent level of attainment,' should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

5. "Continuing to contemplate with this clear and penetrating mind, if you persist in repressing and controlling your thoughts, the effort will produce the desire for release. Suddenly, then, the ten directions of space will be filled with the colors of the seven or of a hundred precious gems. Without clashing, the green, yellow, red, and white colors will each manifest in all their purity. This is called 'the effect of excessive repression.' This is a temporary stage and is not sainthood. This stage, although it is called 'an excellent level of attainment,' should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

6. "Continuing to investigate with this clear and penetrating mind, your inner light will become concentrated, and suddenly at midnight in a dark room you will see all sorts of objects just as if it were broad daylight. These objects will persist and will not disappear. This is called 'the clarity of mental refinement penetrating obscurity.' This is a temporary stage and is not

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sainthood. This stage, although it is called ‘an excellent level of attainment,’ should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

7. “Continuing, as your mind merges with the void, suddenly your four limbs will feel like grass or trees. Even if burned by fire or cut with a knife, you will feel nothing. Flame cannot burn you, and cutting your flesh is just like whittling a stick. This is called ‘the union of inner and outer worlds eliminating the four elements and realizing perfect purity.’ This is a temporary stage and is not sainthood. This stage, although it is called ‘an excellent level of attainment,’ should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

8. “Continuing to pursue purity with your mind, when you have reached a very high level, you will suddenly see all quarters of the great earth, with its mountains and rivers, transformed into the Buddha’s pure land, complete with the all-pervading radiance of the seven precious jewels. You will also see all the Buddhas, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, filling space, together with beautiful temples and palaces. Your unimpeded vision will be able to see hells below and heavenly deva palaces above. This is called ‘the result of prolonged contemplation of likes and dislikes.’ However, this is not sainthood. This stage, although it is called ‘an excellent level of attainment,’ should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

9. “Continuing with this mind to penetrate further and deeper, suddenly in the middle of the night far in the distance you will see market-places, wells, streets, and lanes. You may see relatives, clansman, and family members, and may even hear them speak. This is called ‘remote visions of the overworked mind taking flight.’ However, this is not sainthood. This stage, although it is called ‘an excellent level of attainment,’ should not be confused with sainthood. If you do misinterpret this, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

10. “Continuing with this mind to penetrate to the furthest extent, you will see men of good wisdom, whose bodies undergo countless changes without reason. This is called “demonic influence on the perverse mind.” You may experience Deva Mara enter your innermost mind and spontaneously preach the dharma and its profound meaning. This is not sainthood. Not confusing this with sainthood helps to undermine the work of Mara. If you misinterpret this as sainthood, you will be attacked by hordes of demons.

“Ananda, these ten manifestations of dhyana are the result of the interaction of the skandha of form with the practice of meditation. Living things are stubborn in their delusion and not reflective. Hence, when they experience these conditioned phenomena, they are bewildered and do not understand them, proclaiming that they have attained sainthood and are enlightened. In this way, they fall into the hell of uninterrupted punishment. After my nirvana, in the age of the degeneration of the dharma, you must proclaim these teachings to prevent Deva Mara from

exploiting these states and to protect yourselves and realize the supreme Tao.

The Ten Mara States of the Skandha of Sensation

"Ananda, when disciples practicing samatha to realize samadhi are no longer susceptible to the skandha of form, they will see the minds of all the Buddhas like reflections in a clear mirror. But this is like winning a prize that cannot yet be enjoyed, or like a man having a nightmare, whose limbs are free and whose mind is normal, but because of an evil influence is unable to move. Therefore, this is called 'the skandha of sensation.' If the nightmare ceases, then the mind can leave the body to observe one's own face and come and go as one pleases without any hindrances. This is called 'the cessation of the skandha of sensation,' and one thus, transcends contaminated views. If we examine the cause of this, it is false knowledge and erroneous thinking.

1. "Ananda, disciples at this stage of their practice will find themselves surrounded by great brightness and become aware, as a result of excessive inner self-control, of a feeling of infinite pity. As this feeling swells, they may begin to view mosquitoes and gadflies as their own infant children. With great pity in their hearts, they may find themselves spontaneously weeping. This is called 'a breakdown from the rigors of practice.' If they realize its origin, there will be no harm, and if they do not misinterpret it as sainthood, after a time it will automatically disappear. Should they confuse this with sainthood, the maras of pity will enter their minds, and they will feel great pity for people they meet and give way to uncontrolled sobbing. This abnormal reaction may cause them to fall into a lower state.

2. "Ananda, those disciples who practice dhyana will find that as the skandha of form recedes, the skandha of sensation manifests. Now, with the prospect of final success before them, they may feel overwhelmingly excited and develop an attitude of unlimited boldness. With a fierceness of mind and a will equal to all the Buddhas, they may proclaim that with one thought they can transcend innumerable kalpas. This is called, 'overconfidence arising from practice,' but if recognized, it will not result in harm. It is not, however, sainthood, and understanding this, after a time it will automatically disappear. If they confuse this state with sainthood, the maras of madness will enter their minds, and they will become boastful and arrogant with the people they meet, oblivious to both the Buddhas above and humanity below. This abnormal reaction may cause them to fall into a lower state.

3. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana will find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, they will see before them no signs of progress and behind them former attainments disappear. Their intellectual capacities will weaken, and they will enter a destructive state. Turning around and seeing no hope, they may experience a sense of great mental dryness and exhaustion that leads to a state of unremitting deep reflection. If they take this as a sign of diligence in practice, this is called 'losing one's mind through ignorance.' If

they recognize these signs, there will be no harm, but if they confuse this with sainthood, the maras of unforgetfulness will enter their minds, cling fast day and night, and hold it in suspension. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

4. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana will find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, the faculty of wisdom outstrips samadhi. Swollen with a sense of pride, they may become convinced that they have equaled Vairocana—the embodiment of wisdom— and become prematurely satisfied with this small accomplishment. This is called 'loss of common sense through over stimulation of the power of discrimination in meditation.' If one recognizes this, there will be no harm. However, this is not sainthood, and if misinterpreted, the maras of inferiority and self-satisfaction will enter their minds, and they will announce to everyone they meet that they have already reached supreme enlightenment. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

5. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana will find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, they will find themselves not only without further progress, but losing their previous gains. Contemplating the gulf between mortality and nirvana, the path seems difficult and dangerous, and suddenly they will feel inconsolably depressed. Feeling as if they were lying on a bed of iron or drinking poison, they may lose their will to live. They may even ask others to make an end of their life and thus, gain release from torment. This is called 'being at a loss for the appropriate method,' but is harmless if they recognize it. This is not sainthood, and if misinterpreted, the maras of constant sorrow will enter their hearts and cause them to cut their own flesh, or even take their own lives. They may also suffer prolonged depression that drives them to escape to wild places and avoid contact with other human beings. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

6. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana may find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, they will experience a feeling of purity and peace that suddenly gives rise to a sense of unlimited joy. This exhilaration may become uncontrollable. This is called 'lightness and ease unchecked by wisdom,' but if you recognize it, there is no harm. However, it is not sainthood, and if they misinterpret it, the maras of joyfulness will enter their minds. They may burst into laughter when they meet people and sing and dance in the streets, saying that they have gained liberation. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

7. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana will find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, they may feel that they have already reached their goal and suddenly give way to unjustified conceit. All at once they may consider themselves superior to everyone and fully victorious. They may feel unjustifiably accomplished or smug in their inferior status. In their hearts they look down on all the Buddhas; how much more so the novice sravakas and pratyeka-buddhas! This is called 'progress without sufficient wisdom to save

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oneself from pride,' but if they recognize it, there is no harm. This is not sainthood, but if they misinterpret it, the maras of pride will enter their minds. They will cause them to show disrespect for stupas and temples, to destroy sutras and images of the Buddha, and to declare to their patrons: 'These images are but gold and bronze, earth and wood; the sutras are merely tree leaves and rag fiber. Your own body contains the eternal reality of Buddha-truth; to ignore this and instead to worship clay and wood is truly foolish.' Those who are taken in by his words may join him in destroying the images and sutras, or bury them underground. They mislead the people and will be condemned to hell. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

8. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana will find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, and in the midst of spiritual illumination and realization of the truth, they may experience a feeling of great harmony and infinite lightness of heart. They may feel that they have achieved sainthood and great contentment. This is called 'comfort and purity gained through intelligence,' but if they recognize it, there is no harm. This is not sainthood, but if they misinterpret it, the maras of craving ease and purity will enter their minds, and they will become self-satisfied and stop seeking further progress. The majority of these act like ignorant monks who mislead people and fall into eternal hell. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

9. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana may find that as the skandha of form recedes and the skandha of sensation manifests, in a moment of realization they will apprehend the insubstantial and luminous nature of phenomena. In this state, suddenly they may gravitate towards a belief in absolute extinction and discard the law of causality. As they enter this void, their minds become empty to the point of believing in permanent extinction. If they recognize this in time, there is no harm. This is not sainthood, but if they misinterpret it, the maras of voidness will enter their minds, and they may ridicule the vows of monasticism or dismiss them as Hinayana. They may say that after the bodhisattva has realized voidness, there no longer are any sins. Hence, they may even indulge in drinking, meat-eating, and licentiousness in the presence of their gullible patrons. Because of the power of this demonic influence, they will exert control over others, who will fail to question their genuineness. As time passes, demonic possession may lead to consuming urine and feces together with wine and meat, all under the rationale that everything shares the same voidness-nature. They violate the Buddha's rules of morality and discipline and lead others into sin. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

10. "Continuing, those disciples who practice dhyana may find that as the skandha of form recedes, and the skandha of sensation manifests, they will experience luminous voidness penetrating the mind and bones, and suddenly a feeling of boundless love arises. As the feeling of love becomes intense, they will go mad, and madness turns into craving. This is called 'irrational desires arising from the stillness and peace of meditation.' If they recognize it, there will be no

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harm. This is not sainthood, but if they misinterpret it, the maras of desire will enter their minds, and they will insist that desire is the bodhi path. They may preach the doctrine of universal desire to laymen and that practicing sexual indulgence is called 'being a child of the dharma.' The power of this demonic influence will prevail during the dharma-ending age and hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of ignorant people will be swayed. When the demon is weary, it will depart the victims' body, leaving them without power over people and exposing them to the law of the land. For deceiving others they will fall into eternal hell. This is an abnormal reaction and will cause them to fall into a lower state.

"Ananda, these ten conditions associated with the practice of dhyana all arise from the interaction of the skandha of sensation with the practice of meditation. When these reactions manifest, deluded people do not analyze them, nor are they able to understand the causes. They claim that they have attained sainthood and falsely proclaim their enlightenment. For this they fall into eternal hell. You my disciples, after I pass into nirvana, must transmit this teaching in the period of the end of the Buddha-law so that all living beings may awaken to this message. Do not allow Deva Mara to take advantage of you during meditation, but guard yourselves well as you strive to realize the supreme Tao.

The Ten Mara-States of the Skandha of Conception

"Ananda, now those disciples who practice samadhi and in whom the skandha of sensation is exhausted, although the stream of transmigration has not yet ended, the mind is able to take leave of the body like a bird from its cage. Having reached this level, their mortal body is able to experience the sixty stages of the development of a bodhisattva towards Buddhahood and freely assume any form or move anywhere without obstruction. This may be compared to a man talking in his sleep, who though he has no awareness of what he is doing, makes perfect sense to those who are not asleep. This is called 'the effect of the skandha of conception.' When thoughts no longer stir in the mind and random ideation is eliminated, the mind is like a mirror free of dust and dirt that is able to reflect every detail of his present incarnation from beginning to end. This is called 'the end of the skandha of conception.' At this level one can transcend the defilements of the passions. If we examine the cause of all this, it is the all-pervasiveness of erroneous thinking.

1. "Ananda, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, may become enamored of this state of perfect clarity in samadhi. In this condition they may be tempted to sharpen their faculties in pursuit of skillful means to gain advantage. At this time Deva Mara will exploit this situation by entering the body of a bystander, who will preach the dharma, and unaware of his possession will claim to have attained the supreme nirvana. He will approach the ambitious practitioner and assume the pulpit seat to preach the dharma. The possessed man will alternately appear to the ambitious practitioner as a monk, as Indra, a woman or a nun, or a glowing body in a dark room. The practitioner will become confused, take this man as a bodhisattva, and believe his teachings. His

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mind will thus, be shaken, and he will violate the monastic rules and secretly pursue worldly desires. He will be fond of holding forth on coming calamities, good fortune, and strange events. He may also predict the appearance of Buddhas in certain places, or the kalpa of scorching fire, or strife and wars in order to frighten people and cause them to ruin their family fortunes. This is called 'ghosts becoming maras in their old age and harassing practitioners.' When the maras are weary of their victim, they will abandon his body. The ambitious practitioner and his possessed master will both be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

2. "Ananda, once again, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of perfect dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may feel an urge to roam abroad. Projecting their thoughts, they may crave new experiences. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will preach the dharma, and unaware that he is possessed, claim that he has attained the supreme nirvana. The possessed man will approach the restless practitioner and preach the dharma. Without changing his own form, his listeners will suddenly visualize themselves as seated on precious lotus blossoms. With bodies that have been transformed into golden rays of light, they will gather to hear the words of the possessed man. Most of his listeners will have these extraordinary experiences, and in their ignorance, take him for a bodhisattva. For his part, he will give in to dissolute habits and violate the monastic rules, secretly indulging in carnal desires. He will be fond of announcing the appearance of Buddhas in the world and identify them by person and place as incarnating Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Seeing these events, the practitioner will bewitched and succumbs to perverted views, thereby destroying the seeds of Buddha-wisdom. This is called 'old drought ghosts becoming maras to harass practitioners.' When weary of their sport, the drought ghosts will depart the body of the practitioner. Both practitioner and master will be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

3. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of perfect dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a craving for spiritual union and concentrate all of their thinking on this desire. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will begin to preach the dharma, and unaware that he is possessed, even claim to have reached the supreme nirvana. He will approach the seeker of union, and assuming the pulpit, begin to preach the dharma. Without changing his form or that of his listeners, he is able to induce his audience to expand their consciousness even before they hear his words. Their thinking will become overactive, and some will be able to see their former lives, read other people's minds, peer into hell, and know all good and evil deeds in the world. Some will be able to chant gathas and recite sutras. They will all become ecstatic with these new experiences. The practitioner in his delusion will take the possessed man as a bodhisattva and become enamored of

him. He will violate the monastic rules and secretly indulge in carnal desires. The possessed man will hold forth on the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, detailing their level of attainment, period of manifestation, and genuineness. When the practitioner sees these things, he becomes brainwashed and easily enters upon the path of heretical enlightenment. This is called 'goblins who in their old age become maras to disturb the practitioner.' When the goblins become weary of their sport, they depart the victim's body. The practitioner and his possessed master will both be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

4. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of perfect dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire to get to the root of things and glimpse the beginning and end of all phenomena. They may sharpen their mental faculties and strive for detailed analysis. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will preach the Buddha-dharma, and unaware that he is possessed, claim that he has reached the supreme nirvana. He will approach the source-seeking practitioner, and assuming the pulpit, will preach the dharma. With an air of awe-inspiring authority, the possessed man will be able to sway the seeker and win the submission of his listeners before uttering a single word. His listeners will be persuaded that their own flesh-and-blood bodies, transmitted father to son generation after generation, are identical with the eternal nirvanic and bodhi dharmakaya of the Buddha. He will point to the present world and call it the Buddha-land and maintain that it is identical with the pure-land paradise and the golden Buddha-body. The practitioner will believe him absolutely, lose his former faith, and submit to him body and soul, believing this to be utterly unique. The average listener will be deluded and mistakenly take him for a bodhisattva. Now, giving in to their own inclinations, they will then violate the monastic rules and secretly indulge in carnal desires. The possessed man will be fond of saying that the eyes, ears, nose, and tongue are all pure-lands and that the sexual organs of man and woman are the true abode of bodhi and nirvana. The ignorant will believe these perverse teachings. This is called 'bewitching fiends who in their old age become maras to plague the practitioner.' When the fiend is weary of his sport, he departs the victim's body. The disciple and his possessed master will then both be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

5. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of perfect dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire for spiritual communion. Their minds will wander the universe searching and seeking for profound insights. Deva Mara will take advantage of this condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will approach the practitioner and preach the dharma, and unaware that he is possessed, claim that he has attained the supreme nirvana. He will go to the seeker of spiritual communion, and assuming the pulpit, will preach the dharma, causing his listeners to temporarily believe that he is a hundred or a thousand years old. His listeners will feel great

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affection for him, and becoming devoted followers, will serve him all manner of food and drink, clothing, bedding, and medicine. They will never tire of waiting on him. He will cause all of his listeners to believe that he was their teacher and intimate in a former life. They will develop a spiritual attachment to him, stick to him like glue, and consider this a unique experience. The practitioner in his delusion will believe him to be a bodhisattva and gravitate to him, violating the monastic rules and secretly indulging in carnal desires. The possessed man will be given to claiming that in a previous age and in a past life he saved such and such a person, or that such and such a person was a wife or brother in a past life and that he comes again to save them. He will claim that his followers will return to such and such a world and serve such and such a Buddha. Or he may claim that there are other glorious heavens where the Buddha and all the Tathagatas dwell. The ignorant believe this nonsense and lose their original consciousness. This is called 'pestilent ghosts becoming maras in their old age and plaguing practitioners.' When they become weary of their sport, they abandon the victim's body. The disciple and his possessed master will then both be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

6. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire for deeper knowledge and strive to know their previous lives. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will preach the dharma, and unaware that he is possessed, claim to have attained supreme nirvana. He will approach the practitioner, and assuming the pulpit, preach the dharma. He will cause his listeners to each know his own karma, or he may tell a certain man that, although he has not yet died, he has already become an animal. He may tell another to stand on his tail, and the first man will indeed be unable to stand up. On seeing this, his listeners will be greatly moved and submit to him. If a thought arises in any of their minds, the man will know it immediately. He will insist on austerities that go beyond the Buddha's precepts, and will condemn the monks and curse their followers. He will expose people's private affairs, not sparing them any ridicule. He will be fond of foretelling coming fortune or disaster, and his predictions will be accurate down to the smallest detail. This is the powerful ghost who has become a mara in his old age and come to plague the practitioner. When the mara is weary of his sport, he will abandon the victim's body. Both the practitioner and his possessed master will then be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

7. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire for deeper penetration and search for seclusion and peace. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will preach the dharma, and unaware of his possession, claim that he has attained the supreme nirvana. He will

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approach the place where the disciple dwells, and assuming the pulpit, begin to preach the dharma. In this place the possessed man will unexpectedly discover a large precious pearl. Sometimes the mara will appear in the form of an animal with a pearl in its mouth, together with other precious gems, prophetic documents, heavenly registers, and all manner of miraculous things. He will give these things to his listeners and then adorn his own person with them. He may also attempt to seduce his listeners by burying a pearl under the ground, which illuminates the surrounding area. All his listeners consider this most extraordinary. The possessed man will eat only medicinal herbs, abstaining from food, or he may live on a single hemp seed or grain of wheat per day. With the help of the mara he will remain plump and healthy. He will condemn the monks and curse their followers, without sparing them any ridicule. He will be fond of revealing the secret location of treasures and the retreats of holy men. Proceeding to these places, they will actually encounter strange men. This is called 'the ghosts of forests, earth, cities, rivers, and mountains becoming maras in their old age.' They may also encourage licentiousness and violation of the Buddha's rule, or secretly indulge in the five desires with followers. Or, going even further, he may subsist on wild vegetation and refrain from any fixed occupation in order to plague the practitioner. When the mara is weary of his sport, he will abandon the victim's body. The disciple and his possessed master will then both be subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell. You must be aware of this danger and not reenter the cycle of samsara. The deluded will fall into eternal hell.

8. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire for spiritual insight and all its manifestations. He will seek to plumb the source of transformations and search for supernatural power. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will preach the dharma, unaware of his possession, and claim that he has attained the supreme nirvana. He will approach the seeker of spiritual insight, and assuming the pulpit, preach the dharma. He may hold a flame in his hand and place a pinch of fire over the head of each of his listeners. The flames will be several feet high, but will not give off heat, and will not burn the person. He may also walk on water just as if it were dry land, or sit motionless in midair. He may slip into a bottle or a bag, or even walk through walls without any obstacle. Only knives and weapons can affect him. He will call himself a Buddha, and though he is a layman, will receive the obeisances of monks. He will condemn the Buddhist rules and curse the followers. He will expose people's private affairs, sparing no ridicule. He will be fond of boasting of his supernatural powers and sovereign mastery. He may cause his listeners to see Buddha-lands, which are demonic illusions without any reality. He praises acts of licentiousness and refrains from criticizing bestial behavior. He will take these shameful acts as methods for transmitting the dharma. This is called 'powerful spirits of the mountains, sees, winds, rivers, earth, or all the demons of the plant kingdom accumulated over countless kalpas, or dragon demons, or dying immortals reborn as demons, or declining immortals who are anticipating death and whose bodies are possessed by other ghosts and who

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become demons in their old age to harass the practitioner.' When these demons become weary of their sport, they abandon their victim's body. The practitioner and his possessed master then both are subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

9. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire for extinction in nirvana, to penetrate the nature of transformation, and seek for profound voidness. Deva Mara may take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will then preach the dharma, and unaware of his possession, claim to have attained the supreme nirvana. He will approach the disciples, and assuming the pulpit, preach the dharma to the assembled. Suddenly, he will disappear without any trace, and then suddenly reappear and disappear again at will. Or he may appear as transparent as crystal, or his limbs may be as fragrant as sandalwood. Or his excrement and urine may appear like rock candy. He will condemn the Buddhist rules and curse the monks. He will preach the invalidity of the doctrine of causality and deny reincarnation and the distinction between the worldly and saintly states. Though he has attained voidness, he secretly indulges in desires of the flesh and holds that followers who likewise indulge will also attain voidness and discard causality. This is called 'the subtle essences of eclipses, gold, jade, and supernatural herbs, unicorns, phoenixes, turtles, and cranes, which surviving for tens of thousands of years have become spiritual and appear across this land and who in their old age become maras to harass the practitioner.' When they are weary of their sport, they abandon their victim. The practitioner and his possessed master are then both subject to the law of the land. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

10. "Continuing, those disciples who have purified the skandha of sensation and are no longer assailed by troublesome worries, in a state of dhyana and in the midst of samadhi, may conceive a desire for longevity, and painstakingly searching for immortality, seeking to exchange our mortal state for eternal life. Deva Mara will take advantage of the practitioner's condition to possess an innocent bystander, who will preach the dharma, and unaware that he is possessed, claim that he has attained the supreme nirvana. He will approach the disciples, and assuming the high pulpit, begin to preach the dharma. He will be given to talking of distant places and of unobstructed travel, sometimes journeying ten thousand miles and returning in the blink of an eye with items fetched from those regions. Or he may demonstrate his ability to cause someone to sprint from one side of a small room to the other without ever being able to reach the opposite wall. These things will inspire faith in his listeners and belief that he is a Buddha in their midst. He will proclaim that all living things are his offspring and that he is the begetter of all buddhas, that he now manifests in the world, that he is the primal Buddha, and that his appearance is spontaneous and requires no spiritual practice. This is called 'Deva Mara living in the world and commanding her minions, such as jealous (female) chamanda demons, and the four deva-king's vital essence vampire demons who exploit the meditative state of practitioners whose minds are

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not yet steadfast to consume their vitality.' These demons may not possess another man, but may appear directly to the practitioner as one wielding a vajra to confer longevity or as a beautiful woman who seduces him and exhausts his organs before a year is out. The practitioner mumbles to himself as if talking to a ghost. If he fails to recognize these demons, he will suffer the consequences of the law, and will probably perish from exhaustion before his punishment is carried out. In this way the practitioner is harassed and even brought to death. You must be aware of this danger and avoid returning to the cycle of samsara. If you remain deluded and ignorant of this, you will fall into eternal hell.

"Ananda, know that it is during the kalpa of decline that these ten mara-states afflict the practitioners of my dharma. Some demons possess human bodies, and some appear in their own form. They all claim omniscience and advocate lustful desires and violate the rules and rites of the Buddhist order. From demon master to demon disciple, this licentiousness is transmitted, and in this way practitioner's minds are deluded by this evil influence, which lasting for hundreds of generations causes even the sincere to become followers of the demons. After they die, they become his minions, and not having true knowledge, fall into eternal hell.

"Ananda, there is no need for you to enter nirvana at this time. Even if you attained the state of arhatship that is beyond study, you must be willing to reenter the world during the kalpa of declining dharma to express your compassion and save right-minded and faithful living things so that they will not be possessed by maras and will obtain right knowledge and views. Now that I have saved you from the cycle of birth and death, you may repay my kindness by carrying out my teachings.

"Ananda, these ten phenomena associated with the state of dhyana are all the product of interactions between the skandha of conception and the practice of meditation. Living things are stubbornly deluded and unable to evaluate their own level of accomplishment. When they encounter these experiences, they do not understand and claim that they have attained sainthood. For their boastfulness they fall into eternal hell. After my passing into nirvana, you disciples must transmit my teachings to all living things for the sake of their enlightenment. Do not allow Deva Mara to take advantage of you, but guard yourselves well and strive to realize the supreme Tao.

The Ten Mara-States of the Skandha of Volition

"Ananda, as the disciples practice samadhi and free themselves from the skandha of conception, ordinary delusory thinking disappears. Now they will be constant in waking and sleeping, and their consciousness will become as empty and pure as a clear blue sky, no longer subject to the shadow of coarse sense impressions. The earth together with its mountains and rivers seem as if they are reflections in a bright mirror. Impressions come without sticking and leave without a trace. Hence, the practitioner is able to react to externals unfettered by old habits. Now the ultimate reality and source of creation and destruction are fully revealed. They

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will be able to see the twelve classes of living things in all their variety throughout the ten directions as essentially sharing the same state of life, although they do not yet understand the source of their existence. In this state of mind things appear as shimmering mirages that disturb the mind's purity, and this explains the ultimate cause of the illusion of sense perception. This is called the skandha of volition, or action that passes on its effects. If these mirage-like disturbances of our purity are allowed to revert to their original nature, and this original nature is allowed to revert to its original purity, then with the purification of our original habits, they become like the passing of ripples that leave behind clear water. This then may be called the cessation of the skandha of volition. In this way a man may transcend the defilements that afflict living things during the kalpa of impurity. If we examine the origin of these defilements, the root cause is subtle erroneous thinking.

1. "Ananda, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated and clear and are no longer troubled by the ten classes of heavenly maras, can now look deeply into the origin of living things. Having discovered the origin of creation and destruction and observing the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, if they then begin to indulge in misguided calculation and discrimination, they will fall into two theories of the nonexistence of causality.

The first is the practitioner who concludes that phenomena appear with no fundamental cause. Why is this? Because at this level they have already obliterated their life impulse, and based on the eight hundred powers of the organ of vision, they perceive all living things throughout the eighty thousand kalpas as reincarnating over and over. Because they see nothing beyond these eighty thousand kalpas, they come to the conclusion that all living things within the ten directions over the eighty thousand kalpas arise without cause, and as a result of this exercise of discrimination they miss universal knowledge and fall into an unorthodox path that obscures their bodhi-nature.

The second case is the practitioner who concludes that results appear with no fundamental cause. Why is this? Because this man has examined the root nature of life and discovered that human beings give birth to human beings and realized that birds give birth to birds; crows are always black and cranes always white. Human beings are upright and animals horizontal. Whiteness is not produced from washing, and blackness is not produced by dyeing. For eighty thousand kalpas this has never varied and will be so even after my present body is no more. Finding no such thing as bodhi-nature in this process, he wonders how such a thing could exist and concludes that all phenomena are fundamentally without cause. Calculating and discriminating in this manner, he misses universal knowledge and falls into an unorthodox path that obscures his bodhi-nature. These two theories of the nonexistence of causality are the first heresy.

2. "Ananda, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated and clear can no longer be troubled by maras. In looking deeply into the origin of all classes of living things

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and observing the continuous subtle disturbance that operates ceaselessly, if they exercise their powers of discrimination, they will fall into the four theories of universal permanence.

The first is the practitioner who looks deeply into the nature of the mind and its objects and finds that both are without cause. In his meditative practice he becomes aware that during twenty thousand kalpas all living things within the ten directions experience birth and death, and that nothing being lost within this cycle, he takes this to indicate permanence.

The second is the practitioner who looks deeply into the four primal elements—earth, fire, water, wind—and finding that these elements survive in spite of the ceaseless process of creation and destruction affecting all living things in the ten directions for forty thousand kalpas, takes this to indicate permanence.

The third is the practitioner who looks deeply into the six indriyas—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—the manas, or faculty of intelligence, and the retention of memories and concludes that the source of consciousness is eternal. Through practice he realizes that during eighty thousand kalpas living things are never lost but ceaselessly cycle, and in thinking deeply on the nature of their continuation, he takes this to indicate permanence.

The fourth kind of practitioner has already exhausted the source of the third skandha, or conception, and concludes that the flow of life has ceased, and that the concept of creation and destruction being obliterated in his mind, he naturally comes to the conclusion that there is no creation and destruction, and that this constitutes permanence. From this conception of permanence he misses the Buddha's universal knowledge and falls into an unorthodox path that obscures his bodhi-nature. These four theories of wrong permanence are the second heresy.

3. "Again, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, who concentrate their minds, will no longer be taken advantage of by the maras. Now, looking deeply into the root of the various classes of living things, and observing the continuous subtle disturbance that operates ceaselessly, if they exercise their powers of calculation and discrimination, they will fall into one of the four kinds of perverse views regarding permanence and impermanence.

The first is the practitioner who observes that his own subtly clear mind pervades the ten directions, and takes this to be his own spiritual self. From this he concludes that since his own self fills the ten directions, and since within this luminous and immutable nominal self all living things are born and die, therefore the nature of mind is permanent, whereas that which is born and dies is impermanent.

The second type of practitioner does not look into his own mind, but contemplates the countless realms of the ten directions and concludes that those that are destroyed in the kalpa of destruction are impermanent and those spared are permanent.

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The third type of practitioner also observes his own mind and finds that it is composed of subtle particles. These circulate throughout the ten directions, and without changing in their fundamental nature, are capable of causing the body to instantly exist or not exist. Its indestructible nature he calls the permanence of the self, and everything that is born and dies and flows from this self he calls impermanent.

The fourth type of practitioner realizes that the skandha of conception has been exhausted, but observes the ceaseless flow of the skandha of discrimination and concludes that this represents permanence. Since his first three skandhas—form, sensation, and conception—have already been exhausted, he calls them impermanent. By thus, discriminating between permanence and impermanence, he falls into unorthodox paths and obscures his bodhi-nature. These four theories of wrong permanence are the third heresy.

4. "Again, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated can no longer be troubled by the maras. Now, looking deeply into the origins of living things and observing the source of the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, if they begin to make discriminations on the basis of time, perception, self and other, and creation and destruction, they will fall into four types of theories regarding finitude and infinity.

The first is the practitioner who calculates that the source of life flows on without end. That portion belonging to the past and future he considers finite, and the continuous flow of his present mind he calls infinite.

The second is the practitioner, who contemplating eighty thousand kalpas and beholding all living things therein concludes that since he has no knowledge of the period before the eighty thousand kalpas, it is infinite. That place where all living things dwell he calls finite.

The third is the practitioner who calculates that his own knowledge is universal and of an infinite nature because all other people appear within his field of knowledge. However, because their knowledge does not appear in his mind, he concludes that they do not possess infinite minds, but are finite in nature.

The fourth practitioner looks deeply into the fourth skandha, or action that passes on its effects, and finds it empty. Based on his observation, he concludes that within each living body there exists half creation and half destruction, and that everything in the world is half finite and half infinite.

Thus, all of these practitioners who discriminate between the finite and the infinite fall into an unorthodox path and obscure their bodhi-nature. These four theories of finitude and infinity are the fourth heresy.

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5. "Continuing, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated are no longer troubled by the maras. Now, looking deeply into the origin of living things and observing the source of the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, if based on his own knowledge he exercises his powers of discrimination, he will fall into four categories of erroneous views concerning the existence of an undying entity.

The first type of practitioner looks into the origins of the process of transformation; where he observes change he calls it transformation, and where he observes continuity he call it constancy. What he is able to observe he calls creation; what he does not observe he calls destruction. That which preserves its nature through the process of transformation he calls increase; that which is discontinuous through the process of transformation he calls decrease. Wherever creation appears he calls it existence; wherever disappearance occurs he calls it nonexistence. This is all the result of exercising his powers of discrimination. When approached by seekers for his explanation, he replies: 'At this moment I am simultaneously created and destroyed; I exist and do not exist; I increase and decrease.' With these kinds of wild statements he confuses his listeners.

The second type of practitioner carefully scrutinizes his mind, and finding that it has no locus, concludes that its existence cannot be proven. When asked to explain his viewpoint, he answers with the one word 'nonexistence.' Apart from nonexistence, he has nothing to say.

The third type of practitioner carefully scrutinizes his mind, and finding that its locus is everywhere, concludes that he has proof of its existence. When asked to explain, he answers with the one word 'existence.' Apart from existence, he has nothing to say.

The fourth type of practitioner sees both existence and nonexistence, but because of this duality, his mind is confused. When asked to explain his viewpoint, he answers: 'Existence includes nonexistence, but nonexistence does not include existence,' and all manner of nonsense that defies reason. By discriminating in this way, he creates confusion and nonsense, and thus, falls into heresy and obscures his bodhi-nature.

These four absurd notions concerning the undying and related false theories are the fifth heresy.

6. "Continuing, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated, are no longer troubled by the maras. Now, looking deeply into the origin of living things and observing the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, and in the midst of the infinite life stream, if the practitioner begins to exercise his faculty of discrimination, he will fall into the error of believing that after death our form remains.

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He may stubbornly cling to this body and claim that his physical form is identical with his self. Or he may feel that his all-encompassing self contains all realms and claim that the self possesses form. Or he may feel that physical appearances that present themselves follow the self through its cycles and claim that form belongs to the self. Or he may believe that the self is a property of the flow of samskara (form) and claim that the self resides within form.

All of the above arise from the belief that form continues to exist after death. In this way, the deluded practitioner goes round and round, postulating sixteen types of form. Or he may conclude that fundamentally mental suffering and bodhi coexist without contradiction. Because of the erroneous view that form exists after death, he falls into an unorthodox path and obscures his bodhi-nature. The theory that among the five skandhas form continues to exist after death is the sixth heresy.

7. "Continuing, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated are no longer troubled by the maras. Now, looking deeply into the origin of living things and observing the source of the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, and after first eliminating the skandhas [form, sensation, and conception], if the practitioner continues to exercise the faculty of discrimination, he will fall into the belief that after death there is no form, and hence, his mind will be unbalanced. Seeing the skandha of form vanish, physical appearance no longer has a cause; seeing the skandha of conception vanish, the mind is without attachments; and knowing that the skandha of sensation has vanished, there are no longer any aggregates. Thus, although the skandhas have disappeared, even though life remains, without sensation and conception, it is the same as grass and trees. If form does not even exist in the present, how then can it exist after death? As a result, he speculates that form does not exist after death. Reasoning in this way, he posits a theory of eight aspects of formlessness. Hence, he asserts that nirvana is without cause and effect, everything else being merely names and subject to annihilation. In this way, he concludes that nothing survives after death, and thus, falls into an unorthodox path and obscures his bodhi-nature. This theory that within the five skandhas form does not exist after death is the seventh heresy.

8. "Continuing, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated, are no longer troubled by the maras. Now looking deeply into the origin of living things and observing the source of the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, they are still subject to the skandha of volition. Having seen the annihilation of the skandhas of form, sensation, and conception, they may conclude that existence and nonexistence automatically cancel each other. This type of practitioner falls into the belief that after death neither existence nor nonexistence are valid and thus, puts forth nonsensical theories. When subject to the skandhas of form, sensation, and volition he believed they existed, but on further penetration concludes they did not exist. Now, in the midst of the stream of the skandha of volition, he sees non-existence as not nonexistence. Continuing in this vein, he penetrates the realm of the four skandhas and concludes that the eightfold negation of form is arbitrary, that it can equally be said

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that after death form exists or does not exist, and that the skandha of volition is likewise in a state of constant flux. Thus, he concludes that he has awakened to the truth that existence and nonexistence are both invalid, the real and the unreal ungraspable. From this he concludes that there is nothing that can be asserted about death, and that all is murky and nothing can be said of it. Thus, he falls into an unorthodox path and obscures his bodhi-nature. This theory that within the five skandhas nothing can be asserted about our state after death is the eighth heresy.

9. "Continuing, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated are no longer troubled by the maras. As they look deeply into the origins of living things and observe the source of the continuous subtle disturbance in this clear state, if they exercise the faculty of discrimination may determine that nothing exists after our final end. This type of practitioner falls into the theory of the seven annihilations. He may conclude that the body is destroyed, or that desire is destroyed, or that suffering is destroyed, or that joy is destroyed, or that indifference is destroyed. Continuing in this vein, he sees these seven aspects as thoroughly and irrevocably annihilated. For his belief in annihilation after death he falls into an unorthodox path and obscures his bodhi-nature. This theory that within the five skandhas all is annihilated after death is the ninth heresy.

10. "Continuing, all of the disciples fixed in samadhi, whose minds are concentrated are no longer troubled by the maras. As they look deeply into the origin of living things and observe the continuous, subtle disturbance in this clear state, if they exercise the faculty of discrimination may conclude that there is existence after death. This type of practitioner will fall into the false theory of the five conditions of nirvana. He may conclude that the realm of desire is the true foundation of nirvana because of his delight in contemplating the perfect clarity of the six devaloka heavens of sensual pleasure; or he may conclude that the first dhyana heaven is the true foundation of nirvana because it is free of worldly cares; or he may conclude that the second dhyana heaven is the true foundation of nirvana because the mind is without suffering; or he may conclude that the third dhyana heaven is the true basis of nirvana because it is full of joy; or he may conclude that the fourth dhyana heaven, where both suffering and happiness are no more and one is no longer subject to birth and death in samsara, is the true basis of nirvana. Thus, he mistakes samsaric heavens for the true state of non-action and takes refuge in these five heavens as the ultimate basis of nirvana. Continuing in this vein, he will conclude that these five manifestations constitute true nirvana and will thus, fall into an unorthodox path and obscure his bodhi-nature. This theory of the five false manifestations of nirvana within the five skandhas is the tenth heresy.

"Ananda, it is these ten kinds of wild interpretations of dhyana, which are all due to the interaction of the skandha of volition with the practice of meditation, that causes them to have these realizations. Living things are stubborn and deluded and unable to assess their own level of accomplishment. When they experience these phenomena, they misinterpret them and claim to have reached sainthood. For violating the commandment against lying, they fall into eternal hell. You disciples must take my words, and after I pass into nirvana, transmit them during the

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dharma-ending age in order to awaken them to this truth, and so that the maras of the mind will not cause them to bring retribution upon themselves. They must be vigilant and wipe out perverse views. They must train their bodies and minds to awaken to the truth and not stray from the supreme Tao. They must refrain from wishful thinking or complacency after a little progress, but must be models of the highest enlightenment and purity.

The Ten Mara-States of the Skandha of Consciousness

"Ananda, as the disciples practice samadhi and the skandha of volition comes to an end, within the nature of all things in the world the subtle disturbance in this clear state that is the common life force shared by all living things suddenly breaks open. At this point, the fine fabric of samsara, together with the deep thread of the karma of transmigration and feeling and response are radically suspended. Now they have reached the threshold of the great enlightenment to nirvana, like the cock's crow that causes us to gaze to the east where brilliant rays already appear. The six senses are empty and still and no longer galloping abroad. Within and without are perfect clarity, and one enters a state where nothing stains our consciousness. Profoundly penetrating the origin of life of the twelve classes of living things in the ten directions, they can contemplate the source of attachment without feeling any attraction themselves. Now they have already achieved an identity with all things in the universe; daylight dawns and all secrets are revealed. This is called 'the realm of the skandha of consciousness.' In the midst of the world's attractions they are now able to maintain their identity with the world, for they have overcome the six senses, so that the senses are able to unite or function separately, and hearing and seeing are interchangeable in their purity. The world of the ten directions, together with his own body and mind are like glass, which is perfectly transparent within and without. This is called 'the end of the skandha of consciousness.' In this way, the practitioner can transcend the defilements of life and contemplate the source of its impurity, which arises from insubstantial imaginings and foolish thoughts.

1. "Ananda, you must know that as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they will revert to the source of the skandha of consciousness. Although they have wiped out the illusion of birth and death, they have not yet reached the perfection of nirvana. Nevertheless, they are able to unify the six senses or use them independently. The are also able to unify their consciousness with the consciousness of all living things and achieve a state of omniscience. However, if in reverting to this state of perfection they take it as the cause of true permanence and regard this as the superior interpretation, they will fall into the error of holding onto the notion of causality and become an adherent of the Kapila doctrine, that holds primordial obscurity as the origin of reality, and thus, miss the true bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the first false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which holds that the consciousness attained produces the effects experienced. In this way one strays far from perfect enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of heresy.

2. "Ananda, progressing further, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the

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voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, before realizing the wonder of nirvana, in reverting to this state of pure consciousness, they may survey the universe and regard it as their own body, insisting that the twelve classes of living things throughout boundless space all flow from it. In this way they will fall into the error of holding that they create what they do not in reality create, and thus, become adherents of the deva Mahasvara, who appears in a limitless body. Thus, they miss the true bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the second false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which holds that the mind is the ultimate creator and that this is the highest attainment. In this way, one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of arrogance for asserting the omnipresence of the self.

3. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, if before realizing the wonder of nirvana, they cling to the skandha of consciousness, they may take it that the body and mind both flow from this state and that boundless space in the ten directions also arises from this. Then they will insist that the realm from which all of this is expressed is the true, permanent, indestructible body. As a result of concluding that consciousness is permanent, they will be confused regarding both noncreation and also creation and destruction. For complacence in this deluded interpretation, they will fall into regarding what is not permanent as permanent and become adherents of Ishvaradeva, the divine creator of all things. Thus, they miss the true bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the third false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which holds the causality of mind, and therefore produces an erroneous conclusion. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of false perfection.

4. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, before realizing the wonder of nirvana, they may believe that their understanding is perfect universal knowledge, and based on this knowledge, insist that even the plant kingdom is sentient, no different from mankind. Likewise, plants being the same as men, when men die they return as plants. For this indiscriminate application of the concept of universal knowledge, they fall into attributing knowledge where there is no knowledge and become adherents of the doctrine of Vasistha and Sani, who held that everything is sentient. Thus, they miss the true bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This then is called the fourth false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which incorrectly concludes that the omniscient mind is the ultimate attainment. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of false knowledge.

5. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, if before realizing the wonder of nirvana, they succeed in harmonizing the functioning of the six senses, they may find the source of creation in these harmonious transformations. In the midst of this they may be tempted to worship the brilliance of fire, the purity of water, the freedom of wind, or

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the creativity of the earth. They may take these elements as the fundamental causes of creation and insist that they are the permanent reality. For attributing creativity to that which has no power to create, they become followers of the doctrine of Kasyapa and the Brahmins, who devote themselves to the worship of fire and water and seek to escape the cycle of birth and death. Thus, they miss the true bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the fifth false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which engages in worship of the elements, losing one's mind in the pursuit of external objects, and thereby chasing false causes and effects. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of distorting the laws of transformation.

6. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, before realizing the wonder of nirvana, and in this state of perfect clarity, they may conclude that this state of consciousness is itself void and that all transformations end in annihilation. Taking refuge in eternal annihilation, and believing this to be the superior interpretation, these practitioners fall into relying on what is unreliable and become adherents of the dhyana of thoughtlessness. Thus, they miss the bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the sixth false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which posits perfect annihilation and mindlessness and leads to voidness and fruitlessness. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of annihilation.

7. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, before realizing the wonder of nirvana, and in this state of perfect constancy, they may desire to attain immortality of the body and share in the perfection and everlasting deathlessness. For insisting on the superiority of this interpretation, they will fall into coveting the unattainable and become adherents of the immortality seekers. Thus, they miss the bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the seventh false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which consists of clinging to the source of life, leading to foolish causes and bitter fruits. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of foolishly clinging to longevity.

8. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, if before realizing the wonder of nirvana, they may contemplate the fundamental unity of the source of life and come to fear the total annihilation of this material plane, and therefore use their mental powers to retire to a lotus palace, display the seven treasures, and surround themselves with beautiful women, then for insisting on indulging in this fantasy, these practitioners will fall into regarding as real what is not real and become adherents of the heavenly demons. Thus, they miss the bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the eighth false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which generates the effects of heterodox thinking and reaps the bitter worldly fruit. In this way one strays far from

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enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of Deva Mara.

9. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, if before realizing the wonder of nirvana, practitioners in the midst of this clear understanding of the source of life begin to make distinctions of fine and coarse, true and false, and seek results from the law of cause and effect, they will turn their backs on the path of purity. By attempting to put an end to suffering, and taking pride in this achievement, they will make no further progress. Insisting on the superiority of this interpretation, they will fall into arrested sravaka stage practice and become adherents of the ignorant monks and uneducable devas of the four dhyana heavens. Thus, they miss the bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the ninth false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which takes perfection of consciousness as realization of the fruits of nirvana. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of fettered voidness.

10. "Continuing, as the disciples come to thoroughly comprehend the voidness of the skandha of volition, they are able to wipe out the concept of birth and death. However, before realizing the wonders of nirvana and in the midst of this perfect and pure consciousness, they may seek to probe more deeply into its marvels, take this as nirvana, and no longer strive for further progress. Believing this to be the superior interpretation, they will be arrested at the pratyeka-buddha stage and become adherents of selfish enlightenment. Thus, they miss the bodhi of the Buddha-nature and lose correct knowledge and correct views.

This is called the tenth false condition of the skandha of consciousness, which consists of believing that pure consciousness bears clear fruit. In this way one strays far from enlightenment, turns one's back on nirvana, and sows the seeds of perfecting one's own consciousness without seeking to help other living things.

"Ananda, these are the ten states of dhyana in the midst of which you may lose your head and become complacent before reaching the ultimate goal. This is the result of the interaction of the skandha of consciousness with the practice of meditation. Living things are stubborn and deluded and unable to assess their own level of accomplishment. Encountering these experiences, they delight in old habits and delusions, and resting on their laurels, take these as their final refuge. They claim to be satisfied with this so-called supreme bodhi, and violating the Buddha's prohibition against lying, become contaminated with the evil karma of heretics and maras and finally fall into eternal hell. As to those sravakas and pratyeka-buddhas, whose minds become arrested at their respective levels of attainment, they are not able to make further progress. You disciples must uphold my teachings and proclaim them after my nirvana during the dharma-ending age in order to awaken all living things to this doctrine and not allow the maras of false perception to bring calamities upon yourselves. Strive always to protect yourselves and conquer heterodoxy. Teach them to enter body and mind into the wisdom of the Buddha and throughout the course of their practice never to stray onto deviant paths.

"Tathagatas as innumerable as particles of dust over kalpas as numberless as the sands of the Ganges have passed through this dharma-door to enlighten their minds and attain the highest Tao. When the skandha of consciousness is overcome, then all of your senses are coordinated,

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and you can enter the first stage of the indestructible wisdom of the bodhisattva, whose perfect and clear mind will be transformed into pure glass containing a precious moon within. In this way you will transcend the ten stages of bodhisattva faith, the ten stages of unfertilized wisdom, the ten necessary actions, the ten commitments, the four good roots of development, and all the ten stages of the bodhisattvas progress to Buddhahood, omniscience, and perfect clarity to enter the Tathagata's magnificent sea of perfect and complete bodhi, and revert to the state to which nothing can be added. These are the subtle mara-states detected by past Buddhas, as they abided in vipasyana and practiced passionless samatha. If you are familiar with these mara-states, you will be able to keep your minds free of defilement. In this way you will not fall into unorthodox views, the maras of the five skandhas will be swept away, Deva Mara will be smashed, the powerful ghosts and spirits will lose their nerve and take flight, the spirits of the rivers and hills will no longer appear to you, and you will achieve complete bodhi without the slightest deficiency. Even beginning from the most unenlightened state, one can progress to nirvana and no longer suffer delusion and depression."

The Falseness of the Five Skandhas

Having heard the Buddha's instruction, Ananda rose from his seat and prostrated himself at the master's feet. Then, without forgetting a single word, he recited the Buddha's message to the assembled. Now, addressing the Buddha he said: "The five kinds of falsehoods arising from the five skandhas are rooted in the thinking mind, but we have not yet received your detailed explanation. Moreover, should the five skandhas be wiped out simultaneously or one at a time, and what are the boundaries between them? We only hope that in your compassion you will purify our vision so that we may serve as guiding lights for all living things in the dharma-ending age ahead."

The Buddha said to Ananda: "In the enlightened state there is no trace of birth and death, defilements, or even voidness, for these all arise from false thinking. It is from this primal enlightened mind that arises the illusion of the material world, just like Yajnadatta, who convinced himself that his real head was a mere shadow. Falsehood fundamentally is without cause, but its causality is produced by false thinking. Those who are confused by this causality consider it perfectly natural. Even voidness is in truth an illusion, how much more so causality and nature. All of these are examples of the skandha of volition functioning in the false minds of living things.

"Ananda, if you know the source of false thinking, then you can speak of its cause. However, if there is no source of false thinking, then the source of the cause of false thinking does not exist. How much less when you do not know its source and regard it as spontaneous? For this reason the Tathagata must enlighten you that the root cause of the five skandhas is in all cases false thinking.

"The original cause of your body is your parent's thought to give birth, but without a thought in your mind to be born there would have been no way for the thought of your incarnation to enter their minds. As I have said before, if you think of the taste of vinegar in your

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mind, your mouth will begin to water; if you think of scaling great heights, the soles of your feet will begin to feel sore. However, neither the mountain cliff nor the vinegar actually exist. If your body were not subject to the same falsehood, how could saliva appear at the mention of vinegar? Therefore, you should know that your physical form is called 'substantiality,' or the first kind of false thinking.

"As I have mentioned, the mere thought of scaling great heights was sufficient to produce the sensation of soreness, and this sensation was able to affect your body. These positive or negative feelings run about wildly together. This is called 'empty reflection,' or the second kind of false thinking.

"Your thoughts are able to direct your body; if your body was not the same as your thoughts, how could your body follow the orders of your body? From all our impressions of the external world, the mind generates thoughts and the body reacts. In the waking state the thinking mind is active, and in sleep these thoughts manifest as dreams. Thus, it is thoughts that stir up false feelings. This is called 'pervasiveness,' or the third kind of false thinking.

"The process of transformation never ceases, and everything is in constant motion. Nails grow and hair sprouts, energy declines, and wrinkles appear. This goes on day and night without our noticing. Ananda, if this is not you, how can your body undergo these changes; if it really is you, how is it that you are unaware of them? Therefore, there is continuity in the functioning of discrimination that goes on unceasingly. This is called 'concealment,' or the fourth kind of false thinking.

"Furthermore, if you say that your perfect, clear, still, and unshakable consciousness is permanent, why does it not go beyond what you see, hear, feel, and know? If it is the real, it should not be influenced by false habits. How is it that you have experienced viewing a strange object in the past, and after many years completely forgotten about it, but suddenly when you see the same unusual object again, you seem to remember it as if it were never lost. This shows the continual contamination of your perfect, profound, and unshakable consciousness. How can this be determined? Ananda, you must know that this mental stillness is not genuine. It is like flowing water that looks still at first glance, but is simply flowing too fast for us to perceive it. It is not that there is no flow. If consciousness is not the source of false thinking, how can one be influenced by wrong habits. If you are not able to harmonize the functioning of the six senses, you will never be able to wipe out false thinking. Thus, what you experience as seeing, hearing, feeling, and knowing is a subtle sequence of old habits, and your inner stillness and apparent absence of impressions is not genuine. The fifth kind of confusion is 'subtle thinking.'

"Ananda, these five skandhas all arise from the five kinds of false thinking. If you wish to know the shallowness or depth of the causes and boundaries of the skandhas, they are as follows: form and voidness are the boundaries of the skandha of form; contact and separation are the boundary of the skandha of sensation; memory and forgetfulness are the boundaries of the skandha of conception; destruction and creation are the boundaries of the skandha of volition; entering in stillness and uniting with stillness are the boundaries of the skandha of consciousness.

"These five skandhas build one upon the other. They originate with the skandha of consciousness, but their elimination must begin with the skandha of form. In theory they all

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disappear with sudden enlightenment, but in reality it is not the work of an instant. Rather, they are overcome gradually, one by one in order. I have already shown you how to unite the six knots in a cloth. What is still unclear that prompts you to inquire further? You should grasp the root cause of false thinking and issue a warning to practitioners in the dharma-ending age ahead that they may come to understand its falsehood and learn to detest its arising, and so that they learn of nirvana and not become enamored of the three worlds of desire, form, and formlessness.

"Ananda, if there is a man whose being expands to fill the ten directions of space with all its seven treasures and who then offers these to the Buddhas as numberless as particles of dust and serves them devotedly with a faultless mind, what would you say of him? What are the rewards of serving the Buddha in this way?

Ananda replied: "Space is infinite and the treasures within are boundless. Once a man offered only seven coins to seven Buddhas, and for this he was rewarded with rebirth as a heavenly king; how much more so the illimitable rewards of serving the Buddhas with unimaginable treasures that fill space and the Buddha-lands."

The Buddha answered Ananda saying: "The words of the Buddhas and Tathagatas are without falseness. If there was another man, who though guilty of committing the four sins and ten sins, and after experiencing all manner of eternal hells, in one instant had a desire to open this dharma-door in the dharma-ending age for the benefit of the uninitiated, this man's sins would be wiped out and his suffering in hell would become joy in heaven. His reward would exceed that of the other man who faithfully served the Buddhas by a hundred fold, thousand fold, ten thousand fold, and incalculable times.

"Ananda, those who read this sutra, uphold these vows, and practice my teachings will gain merit that transcends this kalpa. If you are able to rely on my teachings and practice accordingly, you will achieve bodhi and not be disturbed by the maras."

After the Buddha had expounded this sutra, all the monks, nuns, male and female devotees, together with all the devas, men, bodhisattvas, sravakas, pratyeka-buddhas, rsis, and newly initiated ghosts and spirits were all filled with great joy, bowed to the Buddha, and departed.

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Glossary

agni: fire element

alaya: the eighth consciousness, also known as the receptacle consciousness, which stores the seeds of all our impressions, and is the base of all the other forms of consciousness

ananda samadhi: the third dhyana, or samadhi of physical bliss unaccompanied by mental joy

anapana: breathing practices, of many types, meant to still the breath so that breath and mind can become one

Arhat: an individual who wins awakening, but who does not devote himself to the universal enlightenment of all other sentient beings

asmita samadhi: a samadhi of merely I-am-ness, equivalent to the fourth dhyana

asura: an angry god of the Desire Realm, who is one spiritual stage in evolution above the human being, yet still has the habit of developing an angry mind; akin to a fallen angel

bardo: an intercessionary period between two moving states, most often used to signify the temporary period between death and a new rebirth

bhakti: the cultivation practice of worshipping an enlightened celestial being

bhumi: ten stages of enlightenment, attained by the Bodhisattvas, before perfect and complete enlightenment

bigu: fasting practice

bodhi: prajna wisdom, or the enlightenment mind

Bodhisattva: an enlightened individual, who works for the benefits of all beings, but who has not yet attained the complete and perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood

brachmacharya: celibacy, sexual restraint, the nonleakage of not losing jing

chakra: an energy center within our body, made of chi, where various chi channels interconnect

with one another

chi: the vital energy of the body, also known as prana, or life force

chi-gong: a series of breathing practices, which are widely practiced in China for health and longevity purposes

ching-se: sentient matter, or conscious matter; the living interface matter between consciousness and the gross materiality of our physical bodies

ching-an: the pre-samadhi state of lightness and peace

citta: mental activity

daka: a male celestial being, akin to a male angel

dakini: a female celestial being, akin to a female angel

dan: medicine, or elixir; the real elixir substances of the body are internal essences such as jing, chi and shen rather than external substances

dharma: a cultivation teaching; a thing or idea or concept; a method of spiritual practice; the Buddha's teaching

dharmakaya: the Tao, fundamental nature, Truth body, absolute nature, ultimate reality, *This One*

dhyana: a state of spiritual concentration

du-yin: the unclear side of the discriminatory mind, also known as the shadow or solitary consciousness, which functions during dreams and other special states

fan chi: the minor wind chi of the body, as opposed to the vital chi kundalini energy of the body

four elements: the elements of wind (growth or movement or chi), water (liquidity, cohesion, hormones, jing), fire (kundalini, warmth), and earth (bones, solidity) that comprise the physical body and universe; the fifth element is space, and the terms "five elements" and "four elements" are used interchangeably

hsi: a stage of cultivation when external breathing stops, and internal embryo breathing ignites, which corresponds to the arising of kundalini energy

ida: one of the three main chi channels of the body; the left chi channel

incendium amoris: Christianity's term for the kundalini fire

japa: mantra practice

jen mai: the chi channel of descending chi located in the front of the body

jhana: another word for a state of samadhi absorption

jing: the semenal or generative energy of the body that transforms into chi, or life force, during the process of cultivation

klesa: a mental affliction

koshas: bodies

kundalini: the real chi of the body, which is aroused through spiritual practice

kung: emptiness

kung-fu: any experiential state or ability that is the result of spiritual attainment, such as psychic abilities, your stage of meditation yoga, physical transformations, or experiential realms

mai: the energy channels, energy meridians, acupuncture channels, or nadis of the physical body through which chi flows; sometimes called psychic nerves

mantra: a special phrase, repeated over and over in spiritual cultivation, so as to calm the mind

mara: a delusive demon, the realm of delusion

ming de: Confucian term for original essence or fundamental nature

nadi: chi channels

nien: mindfulness

nirmanakaya: transformation, emanation, or projection bodies, also known as hua-shen; bodies which the enlightened beings take on in order to deliver sentient beings

paramita: a perfection

paratantra: the dependent nature of the phenomenal universe, or the realm of interdependent origination defined by infinite simultaneous co-defining relationships; karma

parikalpita: a false conceptual nature that we impress or project onto phenomena through the incorrect use of our minds

parinispanna: another term for the absolute or true fundamental nature

pingala: one of the three major chi channels in the body; the right chi channel

prajna: transcendental spiritual wisdom, or the clear direct knowing of emptiness and phenomena, without words or intercession, that is a natural function of the original nature, and which cause us to call it Mind

prana: chi, or life force

pranayama: cultivation breath practice; anapana

prayoga: the four stages of warming, peak, forbearance and highest worldly dharma that can be used to characterize all cultivation kung-fu, and especially the Mahayana stage of Intensified Preparatory Practices

qin min: Confucian term that embodies the Buddhist ideal of the Bodhisattva vow to love the people and devote oneself to helping them all reach enlightenment

rupakaya: the form body that consists of the nirmanakaya and sambhogakaya bodies when taken together

sadhana: spiritual practice, meditation practice, or cultivation effort

samadhi: a state of mental concentration wherein coarse thoughts stop and the mind becomes detached from its environment; dhyana

sambhogakaya: one of the three Buddha bodies, called the Enjoyment body, which reflects all the merits one has accumulated throughout their many lives of cultivation

samsara: the realm of relativity, conventional existence and illusion, or mara, characterized by impermanence and suffering

sariras: relics

satori: Japanese word for samadhi

seventh consciousness: the egocentric mind that is the base of the sixth consciousness

shakti: spiritual energy, or the arousal of chi energy inside the body

shamatha: the aspect of cessation, stopping, or getting the mind to halt on a point so that thoughts cease; shamatha at its extreme eventually turns into samadhi

shamatha-vipashyana: cessation-contemplation practice, also known as chih-kuan practice

shen: spirit of the human nature; chi transforms into shen during spiritual cultivation, and shen can transforms so as to realize emptiness

shunyata: emptiness, the void

siddhi: superpowers, psychic abilities, paranormal abilities

sixth consciousness: the discriminatory mind

skandha: there are five skandhas (of form, sensation, conception, volition and consciousness) which cover over our experience of our original nature

sushumna: the central chi channel of the body, which leads to the brain

Tathagata: another respectful name for Buddha

tan-tien: lower region of the belly, which is often a focus in various cultivation practices

Three Realms: the Realms of Desire, Form and Formlessness

ti: the great essence, or formless substance, of the original nature which is empty, immaterial, imperceptible; also known as the Tao, Truth Body, dharmakaya

tumo fire: another word for kundalini energies

tu mai: the chi channel of ascending chi located in the back of the body

vicara: a very refined type of mental seeking or contemplation

vicara samadhi: equivalent to the second dhyana

vipashyana: the aspect of contemplation, observing or watching the mind that transforms into prajna wisdom

visaya: an experiential realm, a spiritual state, a stage of kung-fu

vitarka: a very rough or gross type of mental grasping, or seeking

vitarka samadhi: equivalent to the first dhyana

xiang: great appearance aspect of the original nature

yin: adjective meaning negative, stillness, and receptivity

yang: adjective meaning positive, active, and auspicious

yang-shen: a visible, tangible projection body you can feel and touch

yin-shen: an invisible projection body, or astral body, made of chi

yung: the great functioning aspect of the original nature

zazen: Japanese for sitting meditative practice

zhong mai: the central chi channel of the body, or sushumna

Other Books of Interest

If you enjoyed this short text, you might be interested in other related works by the authors:

Translated Works of Zen and Esoteric Master Nan Huai-Chin:

Grass Mountain: A Seven Day Intensive in Ch'an Training with Master Nan Huai-Chin, trans. by Margaret Yuan and Janis Walker, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1986).
Tao and Longevity, trans. by Wen Kuan Chu, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1991).
Working Toward Enlightenment, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1993).
To Realize Enlightenment, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1994).
The Story of Chinese Zen, trans. by Thomas Cleary, (Charles E. Tuttle, Boston, 1995).
Basic Buddhism: Exploring Buddhism and Zen, trans. by J.C. Cleary, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1997).
The Insider's Guide to the Best and Worst Spiritual Paths and Practices, co-author William Bodri, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
The Story of Chinese Taoism, trans. by William Brown, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).

Books by William Bodri:

Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation: A Handbook for Entering Samadhi, (Samuel Weiser, York Beach: Maine, 1998).
Socrates and the Enlightenment Path, (Red Wheel/Weiser, Boston, 2001).
Kuan Tzu's Supreme Secrets for the Global CEO, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
The Insider's Guide to the Best and Worst Spiritual Paths and Practices, co-author Nan Huai-Chin, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).
The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience, (Top Shape Publishing, Reno: Nevada, 2002).

If we had to recommend just two books for getting started on the path of spiritual practice, we would have to recommend ***Tao and Longevity*** and ***Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation*** from this list. ***Tao and Longevity*** explains the relevant terminology of the spiritual path, as well as the various stages of spiritual practice and the gong-fu that you will experience as you advance in

spiritual progress. It is a primer for the entire subject of spiritual cultivation. ***Twenty-Five Doors to Meditation*** explains a wide variety of different meditation methods, along with why and how they work, which you might use to get started on the spiritual path. Both works are the most advanced texts of their type in the world.

If you are particularly interested in more information like the type presented in this volume, a more advanced version—with far more examples and cases taken from the world's cultivation traditions—can be found in ***The Various Stages of the Spiritual Experience***. Further details on these various ranking and explanatory schemes can also be found in the volumes, ***Working Toward Enlightenment*** and ***To Realize Enlightenment***, published by Samuel Weiser.

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