

Transforming Reality through Vocalization of Salvific Truth

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IN ORDER TO STIMULATE reflection on the Shin Buddhist concept of practice in relation to other Buddhist traditions, I believe that the idea of practice in Pure Land can be productively pondered by considering not only the diversity of contemporary and historical notions of nembutsu within the Shin tradition, but also the diversity of analogous, even related, practices in the broader religious context of East Asia.

Such considerations could of course extend not only throughout the East Asian context, but also into the Buddhist traditions of India and Tibet, and even into traditions that are usually thought of as Hindu, as Richard Payne and others have been showing through their far-reaching research. I lack the expertise to range far into Indian or Tibetan forms of religious practice, but I do believe that I can stimulate reflection on the nature of nembutsu practice by comparing and contrasting such forms of practice with analogous traditions of practice in other forms of East Asian Buddhism, and even in the Taoist tradition of China. What I shall attempt to do here is to identify, in the broadest interpretive terms, points at which the paradigms and practices of those historically contiguous traditions seem to agree, and the points at which they diverge.

Of course, in order to identify those points of agreement and divergence, one must first identify the nature of nembutsu practice itself, which of course brings us right to the very focal point of the symposium. It goes without saying that over the course of Pure Land Buddhist history, varieties of nembutsu practice have encompassed what might seem to comprise a quite incongruent variety of assumptions. Indeed, the very fact that Jōdo Shinshū exists—as a form of Buddhism distinct from other Japanese forms of Buddhism—rests in part upon Shinran’s carefully nuanced explication of the nature of nembutsu practice and of the soteriological implications of such practice. Various expositors over the generations—indigenous to the tradition and beyond it—have attempted to explain this or that form of nembutsu practice, sometimes in illuminating ways, sometimes in misleading ways. Some have called nembutsu practice a “devotional” activ-

ity—assuming that it is essentially comparable to Christian “worship” or “prayer.” Others, more insightfully, have explained nembutsu practice in terms of what we think of as meditation. Certainly, the etymology of the term *nembutsu* itself supports the latter approach.

But the historical usage of the term *nienfo* also indicates that from the time of T’an-luan in sixth-century China, Pure Land practitioners often understood the practice of *nienfo* in terms of what the practitioner does with his or her *voice* as well as with his or her consciousness. It is upon that point that I shall focus here, because it is a concept of practice that we see also in the distinct but analogous practices of Shingon Buddhism—and its broader “esoteric” antecedents throughout South, Central, and Eastern Asia—and even in Taoism as well. And it is from the basis of those analogies that one can appreciate the nuances of Shinran’s perspective.

In sum, we might say that some religious practitioners saw salvific potential in a practitioner’s vocalizational actions, just as others saw salvific potential in a practitioner’s visualizational actions. But for Shinran, of course, it was always important for the practitioner to realize that the salvific power of both types of action was a power that derived in the first instance from Amida himself, not from the individual body, voice, or consciousness of the practitioner.

Some might wonder what such issues of practice could have to do with Taoism. But that is because it was only very, very late in the twentieth century that scholars began to rediscover many important elements of the Chinese Taoist heritage by research into texts in the *Tao-tsang*—the so-called Taoist “canon.” That immense collection of texts was completely unknown to non-Taoist scholars in China until the late twentieth century as well. Hence, all who read or wrote about Taoism in previous generations had little idea of the richness and diversity of Taoist models of religious practice.

For instance, late in the fourth century, Taoists in south China began to circulate a new set of scriptures that they called the Ling-pao scriptures. As I recently wrote:

Ling-pao scriptures, such as the *Tu-jen ching*, “Scripture for the Salvation of Humanity,” told of a great cosmic deity—a personification of the Tao simply called Yüan-shih T’ien-tsun, “The Heavenly Venerable One of the Primordial Beginning.”¹ Anxious to save humanity, that deity sends an emissary to reveal the *Tu-jen ching*, which is itself an emanation of the Tao. The practitioner was instructed to recite the text, thereby re-actualizing its primordial recitation by the deity and participating directly in its salvific efficacy. Though materials like the *Tu-jen ching* had significant influence upon later generations of Taoists, the entire Ling-pao corpus remained unknown, even to most specialists, until nearly the end of the twentieth century.²

Scholars such as Stephen Bokenkamp have demonstrated the extent to which the Ling-pao scriptures had been inspired by certain texts of Mahayana Buddhism. But there are also certain specific models of visualizational Buddhist practice that can be shown to have been inspired by earlier elements of Taoist practice.

Certainly, no religious tradition—even Hinduism—has had a more diverse and expansive array of religious practices than Taoism. But on Taoist terms, all models of ritual and/or meditative practice—including both visualization and vocalization—can ultimately be explained as models by which the individual practitioner personally takes part in a process through which reality itself is transformed. The assumption that religious practice actually transforms reality is a model that Taoism shares with many, if not all, traditions of “esoteric” Buddhist practice in India, Tibet, China, and Japan, including the Shingon tradition.

At the most basic level, certain assumptions are common to both the “esoteric” tradition of Buddhism—sometimes called “tantric Buddhism”—and to China’s indigenous Taoist tradition. One common assumption is simply that most people live fundamentally unaware of the true nature of the reality within which their lives take place. As a consequence, they live their lives on terms that are not in accord with the true nature of their *own* reality. Such lives are thus inherently flawed and ultimately fruitless. However, the true nature of people’s reality is not ontologically alien to them. So the issue is not that people must learn about something that is basically other than themselves. Rather, they must learn about the actual basics of who they now are. Such a learning process is not an intellectual process, but rather a process involving a change in *experiential* awareness. This is one of the few points at which we can see a fundamental continuity between the ancient Chinese text called *Chuang-tzu* and the many later forms of Taoist religious practice.

In some Zen traditions, we are told quite similar things. For example, we generally learn in Zen—even in its Chinese antecedents—that for a person to learn how to swim does not imply a need to bridge some ontological gulf between “the person who can swim” and “the person who cannot swim”: rather, the ability to swim is inherent within each of us, though most people have not yet become aware of, and have not yet begun to practice, any such ability. In addition, becoming aware that one is, indeed, a swim-capable person is not something that one learns from being told so, not even by someone whose views we deeply value. Rather, becoming aware that one can indeed engage in swimming is a process that requires that one personally undergo the actual experience of being in the water, of bringing to bear one’s motor skills, etc., in a manner that allows one to manage effectively within the watery environment. Here, of course, I am echoing ideas of Dōgen, the twelfth-century founder of Japan’s Sōtō Zen tradition.

Both Taoism and esoteric Buddhism seem to assume something quite similar: both are directed toward teaching capable individuals how to gain an experiential access to a reality that has been there all along, but was merely not previously realized. And yet, as to some degree in Hinduism, Buddhism, and even Confucianism, both Taoism and esoteric Buddhism assume that certain specific sets of practices have the proven capability to help bring a practitioner into an experiential awareness of dimensions of his or her own reality to which he or she hitherto remained oblivious.

It is here that we find fruitful ground for comparing such notions of practice with the range of Pure Land nembutsu practices, and the range of ideas about nembutsu practice, within the broader Pure Land tradition. Even Shinran would have agreed that Pure Land practice might be said, in a very broad sense, to be “directed toward teaching capable individuals how to gain an experiential access to a reality that has been there all along, but was merely not previously realized.” Other Pure Land theorists seem to have differentiated the practice of the living person from the eventual realization of the ultimate goal of what Westerners persist in terming “enlightenment”: in earlier Pure Land thought, the goal of “becoming (a/the) Buddha,” *jōbutsu*, seems generally to have been associated with the practitioner’s ultimate fruition after having undergone *ōjō*—a rebirth of personal consciousness within the realm called Jōdo, which Amitābha has created and opened to us. And that earlier Pure Land soteriology—even up to Shinran’s teacher, Hōnen—seems always to have assumed that the individual’s practice of nembutsu represented an essential personal investment in a salvific technique that the Buddha had shown us to be necessary for effecting *ōjō*—that is, for transforming oneself sufficiently to be able to pass beyond this impure world of suffering called *sahā*, and into the pure world of bliss called *Sukhāvati*. However, Shinran—to some degree prefiguring John Calvin—feared that such a theoretical model lapsed from an appreciation of *tariki*—the salvific power of Amitābha—into what he felt to be a virtually heretical investment in *jiriki*—a belief that the practitioner can, by his or her practice, save him or herself. Here we see what could be called a doctrinal insistence that *soteriological models of practice* must be carefully distinguished from *models of soteriological practice*. To Shinran, no personal practice can, in itself, have salvific power or efficacy, for all true salvific power rests entirely in Amida himself. (The difference between Shinran and Calvin, of course, is that Calvin argued that God has “elected” that some souls will receive salvation and that others will not, whereas Shinran—like all Buddhists, to my knowledge—was more of a Universalist, believing that Amida has provided salvation for all, and that all will eventually accept it.)

To facilitate comparison of Pure Land nembutsu models with soteriological models of practice in other East Asian traditions, let me interject

here an insightful comment about Taoism that Professor Donald Harper made several years back. At a meeting in the year 2000, Harper said:

Taoism is about personal transformation within a universe that is set up for such transformation.

The same can generally be said about the esoteric Buddhist tradition, including Shingon. In Shingon thought, if I understand Kūkai correctly, personal religious practice results in an experiential awareness that one's own reality is in fact nothing *other* than the reality of the Buddha himself. And yet, inversely, it seems that one cannot realistically expect one's personal religious practice to *result in* such an experiential awareness of buddhahood unless one's practice also is performed *with* such an experiential awareness to begin with. Here we see some of the many subtle nuances of the term *sokushin jōbutsu*—"becoming (a/the) Buddha in this very person."

At a conference in Boston a few years ago, I argued that what esoteric Buddhism shares with Taoism is a set of closely related, though I think still distinct, sets of practices. I argued that in both cases, those sets of practices are designed to facilitate or effect a meaningful personal transformation. And I argued that in both cases, the nature of those practices, and the nature of that transformation, are rooted in the act of learning to experience, and work with, the true structures and energies that subtly link our personal experience to the rest of our living world.

It is true that, to a large degree, even Confucianism fits that general model, at least in certain of its formulations. But the so-called "cultivation of sagehood" pursued by some late-imperial Confucians diverges from the paradigms that esoteric Buddhism shares with Taoism on certain significant points. For instance, with the apparent exception of Mencius—whose call for a cultivation of "a flood-like *ch'i*" might seem to qualify him as a Taoist—Confucians were seldom interested in exploring the transformative implications of the practitioner's own bodily energies, or the connectedness of those energies with the life-field in which our lives are embedded. It was perhaps for that reason that one young aspirant in Ming times, Wang Yang-ming, was frustrated, and in fact sickened, by his attempt to gain an experiential awareness of the continuity between the subtle informing structures of his own being—his *li*, usually translated as "principles"—and the subtle informing structures of a nearby grove of bamboo. An enduring tradition for most Confucians has been an assumption that any such subtle informing structures fall within the range of things that "the Master" (i.e., Confucius) did not speak about—things that living practitioners should perhaps "respect, but keep at a distance." In other words, because of the overriding social/political vectors that Confucian tradition always valued, an individual's efforts to engage in such transformational practices was generally assumed to be suspect.

Among Taoists and esoteric Buddhists, by contrast, the “practices designed to facilitate or effect a meaningful personal transformation” are perceived to lie specifically and directly within “the subtle informing structure of one’s own being,” and even, to a large extent, within what might be called “the practitioner’s own bodily energies.” In both traditions, the fundamental activity in which one should ideally engage is a “cultivation of reality” that takes place through a newly experiential engagement with certain subtle forces, structures, and energies that are inherent to our reality. In part, one learns—as the unfortunate young Confucian was unsuccessful in learning—that all such structures and energies stretch throughout all that is real, both within one’s own personal form and throughout what unperceptive minds regard as the external universe. And yet, one “learns” such things only in the way that a person learns to swim—by engaging in a process of experiential immersion. The practice of swimming is one that can take place only as we take action within the water, as we experience its buoyancy and its currents, and as we learn to integrate our bodily actions and indeed our very perceptions with the subtleties inherent to the substance that we call water. Moreover—to extend the metaphor—the truly perceptive practitioner may even come to a realization that the nature of that substance and the nature of our own substance are ultimately not other than each other. Indeed, the truly perceptive could actually become aware that all that is true of the liquid environment in which one swims is also quite true of what we usually take to be our own internal, individual endowment. In other words, “as without, so within,” and vice versa.

It is here, in what might be crudely called the affirmation of the body, that we see something shared by esoteric Buddhists and Taoists, while not fully shared by other traditions. In esoteric Buddhism, as in Taoism, our personal bodily realities have salvific significance, and in certain key ways those realities are, or at least can be, fundamental for one’s spiritual practice. The physicality of Taoist practitioners is, like that of esoteric Buddhists, something that the practitioner learns to engage with, and consciously activate, in a new way, in a manner somewhat like a swimmer learning to engage his or her own perceptions and movements with the subtle properties of water. But there are also subtle differences between how esoteric Buddhists and Taoists have generally understood such processes. And by examining those differences, we may more fully appreciate the range of subtle differences in how Buddhist practice is understood among Shin theorists, other Pure Land theorists, and the wide array of theorists within Shingon Buddhism and Zen Buddhism.

Let me begin with the earliest known model of Taoist cultivational practices, the model vaguely suggested in the classical text called the *Nei-yeh*, and more fully particularized in the *Huai-nan-tzu*. In the *Nei-yeh* (to which many elements of later Taoist imagery and practice can be traced),

the term *tao* is used as a vague and imprecise synonym for terms such as *ch'i*, which refer, imprecisely, to the salubrious life-forces that the practitioner must work to cultivate. In terms of such theory—if the word “theory” may even be applied to such an inchoate set of ideas—the term *tao* was a nebulous marker for something that we might articulate as “the realities that one ought to cultivate.” Within that context, the term *tao* was often used synonymously with such terms as *shen*, a term that corresponds quite nicely with the English word *spirit*. I have styled the practices that such texts commend forms of “bio-spiritual cultivation.” But in that model of practice, one does not see the practitioner using his or her *voice* at all, any more than one sees him or her engaging in any form of visualization.

In later centuries, those who self-identified as “Taoists” developed a wide range of conceptual frameworks, along with a wide range of individual and group practices. Many of those practices can easily be understood as meditative practices, while others cannot. But then again, we have today no living practitioners or theorists who actually understand and perform many of them. Consequently, our understandings of such religious practices have depended, and continue to depend, upon the sensitivity and expertise of scholars who have, to some degree, studied and interpreted a set of surviving texts that may, or may not, truly describe those practices fully or meaningfully.

For instance, the T'ien-shih, or “Heavenly Master” Taoist tradition is generally believed to have begun in the second century CE, though all our extant “Heavenly Master” texts seem to date from later centuries. In many such texts, we find references to religious practices involving use of the practitioner's voice. But most of them have usually been interpreted as referring to practices that we today would probably simply call chants, or prayers, or invocations of divine blessings—practices that have never been understood as very comparable to nembutsu practice.

During the fourth century CE, however, two new Taoist traditions emerged, both derived from sacred texts claimed to contain revelations from beings within higher realms. The Shang-ch'ing revelations do instruct the practitioner to visualize the “realized ones” (the *chen-jen*, a term derived ultimately from *Chuang-tzu*) and to visualize one's own personal bodily realities, one's *ch'i*, being projected into and merging with the *ch'i* of the “realized ones” themselves. However, Shang-ch'ing soteriological models, to my knowledge, do not feature vocal practices at all.

But the Ling-pao revelations, at the end of the fourth century, certainly do. As I mentioned earlier, the primary Ling-pao scripture, the *Tu-jen ching*, “Scripture for the Salvation of Humanity,” was itself a salvific reality: it invites the practitioner to participate directly in its salvific efficacy by vocalizing the words of the text, thereby re-actualizing its primordial recitation by the great cosmic being who, long ago, embodied his own salvific power in the text's words.

In the Ling-pao model, as in the several interrelated Shang-ch'ing models, one sees the practitioner taking part in activity that can be said to have soteriological overtones, as indeed one can, broadly, say about nembutsu practice. But I am not quite sure that I would see the earlier Taoist model of "bio-spiritual cultivation" in those terms. I believe that that is because the bio-spiritual model laid out in the classical *Nei-yeh* seems to suggest that the practitioner is ultimately not transforming him- or herself into a new state or condition, as much as he or she is restoring and revitalizing his or her natural condition—a condition of holistic integration with all of Life's life-giving energies. In the *Nei-yeh*, we do read that a practitioner who successfully takes part in such practices can have a subtle, transformative effect upon the qualities of other persons. But we do not seem to find the idea that the practitioner is somehow transforming reality itself, or even transforming his or her own personal reality on any fundamental level.

The Ling-pao model of practice seems to have marked a turning point in these regards. That is because the model of practice envisioned in the *Tu- jen ching* itself is a model that expects the individual practitioner to engage in a vocalization whereby the salvific power of a great cosmic being is integrated with the practitioner's own reality. The practitioner is not said to become one with that being, or fully to become that being. So we do not have anything here that seems to constitute a jōbutsu. Hence the Ling-pao model of practice seems to resemble the Pure Land practice of nembutsu more than either of them seem to resemble the practices of Shingon Buddhism or Zen.

More material for fruitful comparison is found in elements of Taoism that emerged during the T'ang period (618–907). The Taoist leaders of T'ang times came to envision their tradition as a comprehensive synthesis, a synthesis now said to include all such potent non-Buddhist traditions of practice—the *Nei-yeh's* model, the Shang-ch'ing model, the Ling-pao model, and many, many others. However, the formulators of the comprehensive Taoist synthesis—a synthesis that the Taoists entitled *tao-chiao*—maintained a stress on "bio-spiritual cultivation." Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen, for instance, an illustrious Taoist master who lived from 646 to 735, explained the Taoist life in a variety of terms, including such terms as *cultivating reality* (*Hsiu-chen*). One text attributed to Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen is the *Fu-ch'i ching-i lun* (On the Essential Meaning of the Absorption of Ch'i), part of which is also known by the title *Hsiu-chen ching-i tsa-lun* (Miscellaneous Discourses on the Essential Meaning of Cultivating Reality). Instead of a simple outline of useful physiological practices, the *Fu-ch'i ching-i lun*—which has now been well-explicated by Western scholars like Ute Engelhardt and Livia Kohn—is an organized explication of the nature of bio-spiritual reality, with guidelines to help the practitioner sublimate personal deficiencies and establish a healthy, ch'i-filled personal existence.

As many scholars of East Asian Buddhism know, it was around Ssu-ma's period that Taoists and the so-called tantric Buddhists of the Chen-yen, or "Shingon," tradition were learning each other's ideas and practices. Few would call Ssu-ma's *Fu-ch'i ching-i lun* a text about tantric practices. But I will argue that the term "cultivating reality"—hsiu-chen—is a key to understanding those two traditions' theoretical links.

T'ang Taoists like Ssu-ma were of an ecumenical bent: they were happy to explain their tradition's ancient practices on any terms that facilitated their understanding and acceptance among the learned audience of their day. Such terms included not only the various new Taoist models that appeared during earlier times, but also various models that their Buddhist associates had expressed—as long as the label "Buddhist" was not visible on the outside of the shirt, so to speak. It seems that what qualified any given religious model for acceptance into the Taoist synthesis of T'ang times was simply (a) that it was textually articulated and (b) that it made at least some effort to avoid being seen as exclusively Buddhist. (Even the Ling-pao scriptures *pretended* to be non-Buddhist.) And it was for these reasons that Taoists who encountered the tantric traditions of Buddhism had no more trouble finding useful elements in tantric models of practice than they had had finding useful elements in such otherwise disparate items as the *Chuang-tzu* and the *Tu-jen ching*.

Before I turn entirely away from the historical arena, let me make sure to mention what seems to be a fundamental and deeply meaningful point of contact between the Taoists of the Six Dynasties onward and the tantric practitioners of China and Japan—Buddhist and otherwise. First, I shall note with regret that I cannot even to begin to attempt to ponder the highly pertinent Japanese tradition known as Shugendō. Shugendō—the origins of which seem to be at least as old as the Shingon tradition that was planted in Japan by Kūkai—is a tradition whose practitioners cultivate the abstruse spiritual properties of life without necessarily tagging their practices to any canonized texts, any recognized lineages, any temple institutions, or any conceptualized theories. Rather, they keep their activities to themselves, living as *yamabushi* in the mountains of Japan, and engaging in what their tradition is called: Shugendō, a term which translates quite literally as "the Tao of Cultivation and Refinement." The very term *shugen*—in Chinese, *hsiu-lien*—is the generic Taoist term for self-cultivation, from the formative period onward, through T'ang times to the present day. The connections between Shugendō and Taoism deserve fuller attention.

Here I can only mention a few specific continuities between Taoist cultivational traditions and those of the East Asian Buddhists of the so-called "esoteric" traditions. Though there were elements of esotericism—hence perhaps "esoteric Buddhism"—in several schools of Heian Buddhism, they are best known in the forms that have come down to us in what is called

Shingon. When I teach Shingon to my students, one thing that I make sure to do is to explain the ramification of that tradition's very name. Conventional wisdom says that the term *shingon* (Ch. *chen-yen*) translates the hoary old Indian term, *mantra*. But those standard translations tend to obfuscate the religious and cultural realities by translating the Japanese term *shingon* as "true words." Surely no educated person would find much meaning in such a vague term, for we all know that members of virtually any tradition would tend to consider their tradition as resting upon "true words." It is only from a study of Chinese Taoism—specifically, its grandly ecumenical T'ang incarnation—that we learn that the term *chen-yen* means much more than "words that are correct in their meaning."

Throughout the pre-T'ang Taoist tradition—and indeed, down to modern times—the word *chen* was a constant favorite used by Taoist writers and practitioners to denote life's deepest and most rarefied realities, the realities at which Taoist practice is always aimed. The *chen-jen*, or "realized person," was a standard Taoist term for a person who has fulfilled Taoist spiritual ideals. And into Sung and Yuan times, the great Taoist masters of the past were often commemorated with the honorific *chen-jen*.

However, the word *chen* was not merely the core of a Taoist term for a person who had achieved the goal of Taoist practice: it was, more enduringly, a term that denoted the goal of practice itself. One of the earliest classics of Taoist "Inner Alchemy" theory is entitled *On Awakening to Reality* (*Wu-chen p'ien*), by the eleventh-century writer Chang Po-tuan. "Inner Alchemy," as most here know, was a constantly evolving system of spiritual transformation through meditational discipline and refinement.

Not usually associated with "Inner Alchemy," however, was the twelfth-century figure Wang Che or Wang Ch'ung-yang, the reputed founder of the Ch'üan-chen tradition—the primary living Taoist tradition in China today. While some of the texts attributed to Wang may well have been composed by later followers, it is noteworthy that one such text was entitled the *Wu-chen ko*. That title is usually translated as *The Song of Awakening to Reality*. The word *wu* in the title is the same Chinese word that Ch'an Buddhists in China used to refer to their ideal of "awakening," and it endures in Japanese Zen as the word *satori*. However, seen in the historical context of earlier Taoist ideals, perhaps the title of Wang's work should be translated as something more like *The Song of Awakening and Realization*. For in Taoism, the term *chen* seems never to have been reified as an ontological "thing-in-itself." Rather, the term *chen* is always used in a context that involves the practitioner's growing connection with the deeper dimensions of things. Hence, the term *chen* generally seems to translate better if we use words that suggest a process of intentional spiritual change or transformation, a progressive process of realization or perfection. In fact, one distinctive Taoist soteriological assumption—emphasized explicitly in many Taoist texts

from T'ang times onward—is that the process of realization or perfection must always be a gradual or progressive process—not something that can happen suddenly, as we know that many Ch'an and Zen models assume. I will note in passing that the importance of the term *chen* as an expression of the Taoist spiritual goal is shown by its integration into the very name of the Ch'üan-chen tradition, which perhaps means something like “the Completion or Perfection of Realization.”

When, in early T'ang times, the tantric traditions of Buddhism were formulated into what would become the Shingon of Japanese history, the term by which those traditions became known employed the same highly resonant term that Taoists, from Chuang-tzu to Wang Che, had embraced—the term *chen*. The term *chen-yen* or *shingon*, like the term *mantra*, never denoted merely “words that are correct in their meaning.” Rather, these terms relate to a personal practice by which one transforms one's fundamental reality through a specific and efficacious vocalization, a practice comparable to the vocalizations of the primordial salvific Word advocated in the Ling-pao *Scripture of Human Salvation*. So while a few emperors up to the late seventh century—in Tibet as well as in China—amused themselves by staging debates between and among Buddhists and Taoists, many of the leading participants in all such traditions were quite happily learning from each other, in terms of both theory and practice.

The fact that East Asian Buddhists and Taoists were intensively studying each others' practices, and even assimilating useful elements of each others' practice and theory, was little-known to scholars of the twentieth century. And that interplay was not just a one-way street, with members of either tradition slavishly copying from the other. Rather, it has begun to become apparent that during the heyday of Taoism in China—during T'ang times—practitioners of Buddhism and Taoism seldom looked upon each other with suspicion or sectarian disdain. For example, the name that Saichō gave to his “Tendai school” in early Heian times was originally the name of a mountain in China, Mt. T'ien-t'ai, where Buddhists and Taoists had practiced in close proximity to each other for generations. Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen himself lived at Mt. T'ien-t'ai, and the Buddhist elements in some of his teachings likely owe more to his personal interaction with Buddhists there than to any reading of Buddhist texts.

Another example is the Shingon tradition, which took form when two foreign *ācāryas* took residence in the Chinese capital, Ch'ang-an, in the early eighth century. Their first Chinese convert, I-hsing, had evidently been a master of Taoist learning before his conversion. The T'ang emperors in those days knew and loved Taoism, the dominant religion among that era's upper classes, and it seems that it was largely at the T'ang imperial court that “Chen-yen and Taoism influenced each other,” as Charles Orzech has written.³ Though such forms of “esoteric Buddhism” are now commonly

called “tantric,” it is clear that these particular traditions—indeed, like the traditions that we call Ch’an or Zen—took form in T’ang China, as new translations of Buddhist texts were grasped to give new depth and meaning to ritual traditions that were rooted as deeply in Taoism as in earlier Buddhist traditions. These profound links between Taoism and the “tantric” traditions of East Asia are not coincidental, and they are not merely of historical interest. Rather, they demonstrate a profound and ongoing interaction between the two traditions, by which characteristic practices and teachings of each were enriched.

So to conclude, let me compare the various models of spiritual practice that I have touched upon here. In regard to the “bio-spiritual” model of self-cultivation found in the ancient *Nei-yeh*—and preserved in certain later strands of Taoism, down to the present—a metaphor comes to mind, the metaphor of a radio receiver. The radio waves being broadcast this moment by any local radio station are invisible, and they flow, undetected, all around, and through, each person in the local area. In the later Taoist conceptual model, such unseen forces can be called *chen*, “the truer or deeper dimensions of reality concerning which non-practitioners remain unaware.” In the case of the life-forces called *tao*, “spirit” (*shen*), or “life-energy” (*ch’i*), as in the case of the radio waves, very few people have any awareness that such invisible forces permeate not only our individual persons but also the continuum of time and space and matter and energy in which all persons exist. To become aware of such forces—much less to gain proper benefit from them—it is necessary to have a properly tuned receiver. That receiver must not only be properly designed, but its user must also see that it is properly powered and properly tuned. In Taoism and in esoteric Buddhism, each person’s personal life-matrix may be compared to just such a receiver. And the practices articulated in each tradition are designed to effect the proper tuning of the practitioner’s bio-spiritual receiver.

Yet, such is not to say that tuning my own receiver is more real or more important than the tuning that my neighbor is doing, or that tuning my receiver is somehow a turning inward upon myself, a rejection of my interconnectedness with others. Rather, it is simply a given of my situation that I am capable of learning to tune my own receiver, but I cannot, in any direct sense, attune the reception of Tony Blair, or even that of my dearest friends. Prime Minister Blair is the only person who can learn to do the tuning necessary for *him* to gain the benefit of the unseen forces that flow around and through us all. So in that sense, the spiritual practices envisaged by esoteric Buddhists and Taoists are, by necessity, practices that only the individual can undertake and perform—though in so doing he or she is intrinsically working to engage him- or herself more fully with a set of invisible realities that connect his or her personal reality with all of reality. Any person may engage in such practices, and appropriate teachings

are offered for anyone willing and able to learn them. Yet, in both Taoism and esoteric Buddhism, such practices are not assumed to be proper for *all* individuals to undertake, for many do not have the proper awareness, and the proper self-discipline, to engage in such practices in safety. The invisible forces needed to use a radio receiver include not only the harmless radio waves themselves, but also an invisible force called electricity. If a person misuses, or has improper contact with, that invisible force, the results can be catastrophic, even deadly. So in both traditions, the process of self-transformation is offered for all individuals who have a seriousness of purpose, a trust in the teachings of those who have real knowledge of all the factors involved, and enough respect for others, and for the realities of life, seen and unseen, to guard those who are not properly engaged and attuned to the possible perils of improper action.

In part for these reasons, the Taoist tradition, like Shingon and other esoteric Buddhist traditions, has held a special place for men—and sometimes women—who have mastered such processes, and can tune their own beings in such a way as to extend the resulting benefits to others around them. These are people who accept the role of bridging the gaps between the practitioners who have mastered life's invisible forces and those who do not themselves engage in such practices. Taoism has never disdained such non-practitioners, but has rather, from the days of the *Nei-yeh* and *Tao te ching*, taught that a practitioner can and should exert him- or herself so as to extend the benefits of his or her practice into the lives of others who cannot or will not engage in such practices themselves. For Taoist priests and priestesses, the basis on which their other activities are founded has always been a life of self-cultivation: that life requires them to labor productively—through what we might call moral discipline, meditation, and appropriate ritual action—to participate fully in the reality of life's subtle, unseen forces, the forces that they often called *chen*. In senses that are thus impossible in Western religions, Taoists could—and indeed were expected to—effectively *become* the Tao, and to act in this world as its living embodiment. In those senses, the performative liturgical activities of the Taoist priest or priestess always constituted a meditative and ritual embodiment of the Tao itself.

In other words, Taoist models of practice have generally assumed that proper practice results in something quite analogous to the *jōbutsu* of East Asian Buddhist models found in Shingon and elements of other subtraditions. In the Ch'an and Zen traditions, one finds divergent ideas as to whether proper practice results in *jōbutsu* in any transformative sense. Some Ch'an/Zen theorists suggest that it does, as we see in the old Rinzaï adage, *kenshō jōbutsu*—one perceives the true inner nature and becomes (a) Buddha. Dōgen, of course, argued to the contrary, since assuming that practice results in a transformation from “non-buddhahood” to “buddha-

hood” requires the quite heretical assumption that there is an inherent ontological dichotomy between the two. Indeed, one could say that the entire Mahayana tradition—back to the earliest sutras of *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* of Nāgārjuna—rests on the insistence that, from the level of perception characteristic of a Buddha, there is no ontological dichotomy between anything and anything else. Therefore, in the Perfection of Wisdom, one already has *buddhatā*—the state or condition of being a Buddha—and must merely engage in such intellection or religious practice that might be necessary for the practitioner’s mistaken belief that he or she is *not* already the Buddha to be eliminated. The sword of Māñjuśrī, which cuts through that illusion, is nothing other than *Prajñāpāramitā* itself.

Let us go further, into Pure Land thought. Hōnen insisted that in our unfortunate age of *mappō*—the last days of the truth—the subtly nuanced practices of earlier Buddhist traditions cannot truly be expected to result in the soteriological result that may have been quite possible in earlier days. For Hōnen, it was not so much that such earlier practices—including visualizational meditations—were false, or even theoretically inferior. For him, the issue is merely that we are now living under a state of emergency, in which it would be foolish to try to rely upon any soteriological model or practice other than the “single-practice nembutsu.” We can simply take comfort in the blessed reliability of the salvific power of that nembutsu, which Amida established for us to use in case of need, such as ours today. For other Buddhists of his day, however, such thinking seemed to undercut certain ideas of practice that were soteriologically essential, if not actually necessary, to qualify as a practitioner of Buddhism in the first place.

I shall leave it to others to take these issues further into the subtleties of Pure Land thought. We all know that Shinran, for instance, assumed the soteriological necessity of trusting ourselves to *tariki*, for the *ōjō* or “rebirth in the Pure Land” provided by Amida is not to be attained by means of any personal practice: it already inheres within all sentient beings as *shinjin*, which has been instilled in all of us by virtue of the “Original Vow” of Amitābha. So we do not actually transform reality, or even our own human reality, by our practice of nembutsu. Perhaps, in a sense, Shinran’s perspective is more analogous to that of Dōgen than we may have usually imagined. For Shinran, one cannot generate *ōjō* by means of the practice of nembutsu. Much less can one use the practice of nembutsu to generate a personal transformation that constitutes *jōbutsu*. To assume so would be to assume that a foolish little mortal like you or me could, in this very life, do what Amitābha did. Amitābha, through lifetimes of diligent practice as a bodhisattva, experienced *jōbutsu*. Having learned from his own personal experience how long and arduous that path always is, Amitābha vowed to extend the salvific power of his own buddhahood to all sentient beings whose consciousness is fully opened to it. And it is within that conceptual

framework that all nembutsu practice must be situated in the Shin Pure Land tradition.

So the vocalization of salvific truth in Shin practice is ultimately quite reminiscent of the Ling-pao model of early medieval Taoists: the practitioner's soteriological success is ultimately dependent upon the salvific power of a great cosmic being, who has revealed himself (or, in the case of Yüan-shih T'ien-tsun in the *Tu-jen ching*, possibly "herself") and has offered us all an opportunity to connect oneself and engage oneself in that being's salvific power by means of properly focused vocalization. That practice, in each case, is not a matter of experiencing some *kenshō*, some new awareness of the nature of one's own reality. Nor does it result in the practitioner experiencing *jōbutsu*: the Ling-pao Taoist practitioner does not actually become Yüan-shih T'ien-tsun, just as the Shin Pure Land practitioner certainly does not transform him- or herself into a being comparable in nature to Amida. Nor does he or she somehow transform his or her own nature in such a way that he or she becomes merged or identified with Amida.

Further comparative analysis of the soteriological models found in these interrelated religious traditions may result not only in greater insights into all of them, but also in a greater appreciation of the uniqueness of Shinran's thought within an extremely rich and varied context of religious thought.

NOTES

1. Yüan-shih T'ien-tsun seems to have been an abstract figure created by the composer of the *Tu-jen ching*, not the focus of any pre-existing cultus. One should also note that scholarly references to Yüan-shih T'ien-tsun nearly always assign a masculine gender to this figure, though the scripture itself does not seem to specify any gender.
2. Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 88. The first full translation and study of the *Tu-jen ching* appears in Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 373–438. A recent summation of our knowledge of Ling-pao traditions is Yamada Toshiaki, "The Lingbao School," in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 225–255.
3. Charles Orzech, "Chen-yen," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 3:237.