

# the secret and sublime

## Taoist Mysteries and Magic



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### Chapter 6

## The Nameless: Taoist Mysticism

*The One Mind, omniscient, vacuous, immaculate, eternal, the Unobscured Voidness, void of quality as the sky, self-originated Wisdom, shining clearly, imperishable, in Itself that Thatness . . . To see things as a multiplicity, and so to cleave unto separateness, is to err – The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation.*

*Therefore let desire be stilled while you contemplate the Mystery; when desires reign, you behold (only) its outward manifestations – Lao-tzû*

*Today there is a wide measure of agreement which on the physical side of science approaches almost unanimity, that the stream of knowledge is heading towards a non-mechanical reality; the Universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine. The old dualism between mind and matter disappears – Sir James Jeans*

Taken by itself, the previous chapter would do scant justice to the Taoist sages, whose whole philosophy – whether in relation to statecraft, education or being – drew life from a mysterious root. The awe-inspiring implication of their teaching must somehow be conveyed, even at the cost of fumbling and stumbling. Near the heart of things, words fail and, as Lao-tzû put it, 'He who knows does not speak.' Words, so the teaching goes, can be transcended by directing the consciousness in upon itself; within the mind, shrouded by the mists that hover in deep valleys, lies a treasure discoverable only by direct intuition. Understandably Lao-tzû called it the Nameless – yet because this treasure, embedded in the consciousness of every sentient being, anteceded them all, he

also called it the Mother of Heaven and Earth. It was from concern for others that the sage, ruefully aware of the limitations of words and concepts, went so far as to disregard his own dictum by writing a five-thousand-word treatise; the same compassion impelled his spiritual descendants the Ch'an (Zen) Masters and their admirers – those staunch upholders of the 'wordless doctrine' – to produce whole volumes of explanations and pithy aphorisms. Unbroken silence, like using sacred images for fuel on a winter's night, is altogether too extreme. All the same, the difficulty of finding words just to discuss ideas *about* the ineffable, to say nothing of trying to describe it, is truly formidable. Semantically, traps abound; conceptually, chasms yawn. Each assertion threatens to thicken the primordial mist instead of shedding light. To speak in terms of is and is not, of laudable and otherwise, is surely the antithesis of a canny approach to the non-dual Tao, but how else is one to speak at all?

To take just one example. In rendering the famous sentence from the *Tao Tê Ching* as 'The name which can be named is not the Eternal's name' rather than employing the more usual, but meaningless translation 'eternal name', I have inadvertently set up an entity, the Eternal. This naturally is a synonym for the Tao, but it attributes the quality of eternity to that which is beyond all qualities and pairs of opposites. 'God' is a still less appropriate synonym, conveying as it does the idea of a being rather than a state and, what is worse, of a creator standing apart from his creation. 'The Ultimate' or 'Ultimate Reality' is not much better, since it suggests something lying beyond the world of form rather than a One that is identical with and inseparable from the multiplicity of its creations. No wonder Lao-tzû preferred to call it the Nameless!

Chinese mystics (Taoist and Buddhist) are not alone in recognizing that perception of the Nameless is a wholly intuitive experience demanding such vivid and immediate awareness that the thinker and his thought, the beholder and the beheld, are one. Knowledge, discrimination, logic, analysis, reason and every variety of conceptual thought must be banished. None of them will serve. Therefore the need for perfect stillness, outside and in. Without, there must be no boundaries, the mind being free to penetrate all objects and perceive their interfusion; within, self-consciousness must be annihilated. The fruit of such intuition is

a liberating transformation; the mind, freed from the tyranny of dualism and self-assertion, roves at will, transcending self and other, recognizing the ego as a ghost of what never was nor ever will be. Pure harmony results, a limpid perception of the seamless unity of the formless Tao and its myriad forms, be they people, animals or objects. Profound compassion stirs. Fear and anxiety vanish. Henceforth, ups and downs, good and bad, life and death, are one. Now is the secret treasure-house illuminated by a pearly gleam. The Tao itself is manifested as that which, penetrating, encompassing and interfusing each of the myriad objects, constitutes their real nature. That small fragment of mind which the adept has hitherto mistaken for his own is seen to be the universal mirror forever reflecting impartially the changing scene. Things come and go across its surface leaving no trace. When he recovers from his awe, he can scarcely help laughing; in retrospect his resemblance to the well-frog that mistook a tiny portion of the sky for the limitless heavens seems gloriously funny. If he does not laugh, it will be because the awe resulting from such an experience lingers long. Sensations of being encompassed in brilliance; of elation, bodily lightness – ecstasy even – these are the terms used by mystics of many faiths to describe the joy that crowns their sublime experience. Their unanimity on this (and on so very many other matters) points to their having travelled by various roads to an identical goal, besides increasing the likelihood of the experience's validity. The following summary of what I heard from an old gentleman trained wholly in the Taoist tradition who visited me not above two years ago is in most respects a typical exposition of mystical teaching.

'The Tao is to be found in inner stillness. It reveals itself as One – timeless, formless, all-pervading. In it all creatures and objects have their being. The same may be said of your gold-fish and the water in which they swim, but the likeness is only superficial. One could take a fish out of the water and put it back; but the separateness of creatures and objects either from one another or from the Tao is illusory. Apart from the totality which is the Tao, they have no being. The Tao and the myriad objects *are not two!* Unlike water which rises from the lake as vapour and flows back to it in streams, the Tao's creations do not rise from it, nor do they return to it, they and the Tao having never at any time been apart. They *are* the Tao. This faculty of being one and many

simultaneously is a mystery that can be apprehended but not explained.

'When I speak of goodness and of beauty, I speak of the Tao. When I speak of bad and ugly, I speak of the Tao. Self is the Tao. Other is the Tao. Distinctions between opposites are false at the beginning, illusory in the middle, and erroneous at the end. If you suppose otherwise, you will be tormented by demons – demon longings, demon fears. You will struggle all your life against fiends of your own imagining, weighing gain against loss as though there could be anything in the entire universe that is not yours already. What wasted energy! What needless tears!

'It is not enough for you to suppose that you know these things. You must perceive them directly. Listening to sermons, memorizing classics will do you no good. You must look within your mind. Even then you will see nothing clearly, unless you lose awareness of a self that looks. There is no such person, I assure you – there is a looking, but no looker. Yet banishing the concept of being one who looks can be difficult. Therefore prepare yourself by limiting your desires, requiring nothing of the world beyond what is needed for sustaining bodily well-being. Meanwhile, practise the art of *kuan* (inner vision) daily. This will still the restless waves of thought and sharpen your awareness. Awareness must be acute, but objectless. No looker, no looked-at, just looking. Do you understand? I mean your mind must be indifferent to the objects it reflects, performing its function like a mirror. When there is no attachment, true seeing arises. With seeing comes serenity. Serenity puts an end to woe. In the absence of woe, joy will fill your body to overflowing. Certainty of the rightness of your doing and of the truth of your seeing will flush your cheeks and make your eyebrows dance.'

Though he spoke with the conviction that comes from direct intuition and what he said reminded me in many ways of a hundred Taoist and Buddhist expositions, taken as a whole it had a special Taoist flavour and an archaic one at that. That is to say, his interpretation of his direct intuition was strictly in the manner of the Taoist ancients, betraying nothing of the influence of later Masters. The mystical experience itself I would judge to be timeless and unvarying – not so its depth or degree, nor the application that is made of it. In the light of what was taught by later Taoist adepts as well as by Buddhists and mystics of other

faiths, I am inclined to think that Lao and Chuang (like the friend whose words I have quoted), differed from these others in one of two ways. Either their experience was less intense, a series of intuitions that fell short of ultimate illumination, or else they did not draw (or thought it best not to reveal) certain awe-inspiring implications. To all appearances, those sages had no special goal beyond achieving the joyous serenity and absolute freedom that follow from becoming cheerfully indifferent to the most cruel blows which fate may hold in store. They did not insist that failure to achieve conscious union with the Tao prior to death might have tragic consequences.

In tracing the development of Taoist mysticism, one is bound to begin with Lao and Chuang. Since there are no authentic texts covering the two-and-a-half millennia separating them from the Yellow Emperor, one does not know the extent to which their predecessors anticipated their doctrine of mystical intuition. The art of wood-block printing had yet to be invented and no manuscripts penned by earlier mystics survive, unless one counts those fragments attributed to the Yellow Emperor which are concerned not with doctrine but with yogic method.

Typical of Lao-tzû's mystical aphorisms are the following:

'There is something that arose from chaos before the world was born. Silent and invisible, it exists of itself, unchanging. Penetrating everywhere, it never ceases. One may deem it the Mother of the World. Not knowing its name, I call it the Tao. If pushed to describe it, I should say it is big; yes, big and flowing; flowing and far-reaching, far-reaching and (yet) returning.

'The world had an antecedent that can be called its Mother. Knowing the Mother, you will come to know the child. Knowing the child, go back and hold fast to the Mother, then all your life you will be secure.

'Non-being is the name given to the source of the world's beginning. Being is the name given to the Mother of the Myriad Objects. Yet are these fundamentally one, differing only in name. Therefore let desire be stilled while you contemplate the Mystery; while desires reign, you behold (only) its outward manifestations.

'(Non-being and being) – these two are fundamentally the same, though different in name. Their sameness is what one calls a mystery. Mystery upon mystery – such is the gateway to all secrets.'

These selections, which touch upon some fundamental concepts of Taoist mysticism, can, if interpreted in the light of similar passages in the *Tao Tê Ching*, be interpreted as follows:

Since before the world was born, there has been the Tao. Silent and invisible, it is spontaneous, immutable, all-pervading, inexhaustible, the primal cause from which the whole universe derives its being. Lying beyond all categories of thought, it is vast, reaching to infinity and yet close at hand. By knowing the Tao one comes to know the multiplicity derived from it; whereas understanding of its individual manifestations cannot replace contemplation of the Tao itself as a means of achieving unshakeable security. (Security connotes the utter serenity that stems from viewing poverty and wealth, life and death, as equally welcome experiences; nothing can disturb one who welcomes everything without exception. The analogy of mother and child is of but limited application, for there are other passages in the *Tao Tê Ching* which make it quite clear that the Tao and its creations are not to be thought of as at any time apart. Probably it is used in the sense that mother and child are of one flesh and also that the formless preceded the world of form. Being and non-being are in fact identical.) This view coincides exactly with the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine that, while all beings are by nature void, there is no void standing *behind* the realm of form, void and non-void being two simultaneously valid aspects of the one reality. The identity of being and non-being is a mystery to be perceived only through intuition, which cannot be attained until inordinate desires and self-assertion have been eliminated; for as long as the 'self' is felt to be real, the formless aspect of the Tao can by no means be perceived. Resolution of the paradox that the Tao is simultaneously being and non-being, form and formlessness, is the gateway to the perception of all mysteries. Intellectual acceptance of their identity is not enough; it must be intuitively experienced and the intuition must be palpable. (There is a world of difference, for example, between the conviction that honey is sweet and actually knowing its taste from experience.)

Those familiar with the teachings of mystics of other faiths may notice that two elements are lacking in Lao-tzû's exposition. First, apart from the injunction to still desire, nothing is said about the method of seeking intuitions of the Nameless; as a matter of fact, the *Tao Tê Ching* does contain one or two apparent references

to contemplative sitting, but none that is not also open to a different interpretation. Second, there is no hint of what most mystics look upon as a man's highest goal, that of death-transcending union with the nameless (the Godhead, Nirvana, etc.). It is possible to infer, then, that Lao-tzû was rather a quietist than a mystic in the full sense of the word. Was he perhaps one of those fortunate persons to whom intuitions of the Nameless came virtually unsought, thus obviating the need for special contemplative or other yogic practices? Again, was he content not to speculate about possible sequels to the present life, or did he regard the matter as one too sacred (or too difficult) to be touched upon in his exceptionally brief work?

With Chuang-tzû, the case is somewhat different. He fits in more closely with the general notion of a mystic. Whereas many passages in his work merely confirm or expand upon Lao-tzû's quietist tenets, there are some others which reveal familiarity with yogic exercises. Concerning the world's origin, he speaks of a Great Beginning, wherein was non-being from which arose a formless One that impregnated its myriad creations with its own *tê* or virtue; and he calls for a return to that virtue which derives directly from the Original Source. 'Being identical (with it), you will be empty; being empty, you will be great.' He declares that the Tao makes one of all things, be they little stalks or giant pillars, lepers or lovely women, things ribald or shady, grotesque or strange; hence wisdom lies in making no distinctions. Of special interest is his very practical advice for translating the wisdom gained through mystical intuition into a way of life. He asserts that one can be liberated from all cares and rendered impervious to shock, sense of loss or grief by a complete renunciation of dualistic thought. By accepting all that happens as the play of circumstance—dream-like play in that nothing can be truly apart from the immaculate perfection of the One which alone is real—it is possible to pass through life armoured against even the worst mischances. (I remember hearing this point explained by a Taoist who put it thus: 'When in a dream the dreamer becomes aware that the upraised sword exists only in his imagination, the glittering horror arouses laughter.')

Some writers make much of apparent differences between Lao and Chuang; however, the fact that the *Tao Tê Ching* merely hints with extreme terseness at matters which Chuang-tzû sets

forth at length does not necessarily point to great differences of view-point, as a short work and a reasonably long one are not altogether comparable. Still, on the face of it, it does appear that, whereas Lao-tzû contented himself with extolling the majesty of the Tao, as a no-thing – utterly sublime, constant and eternal – Chuang-tzû gave more thought to the means of winning accord with it, though both agree that the prime necessity is the elimination of dualistic thought. Since opposites belong together, to cleave to one and abhor the other is plainly absurd. Fame and shame, wealth and want, life and death come and go turn by turn, so why make distinctions? How much better to accord freely with the Tao by accepting each transformation with undisturbed equanimity. Longing to be other than one implies rejection of identity with the ever-changing, always constant Tao, whereas recognition of that identity banishes fear as well as disappointment; disaster does not exist for a man who cheerfully accepts the inevitability of unceasing change in his condition, sustained by his knowledge of that ultimate transcendence over change which is inherent in his being inseparable from the Tao.

Chuang-tzu, in enjoining glad acceptance of whatever may befall, was not advocating mere fortitude. For him, there was no question of stern submission to misfortune; what was needed was the wisdom to understand that every kind of up and down is as necessary to nature's pattern as are sunshine and storm, and that the pattern taken as a whole is perfect. He would have had no patience with a man who, standing amidst the smiling fields of summer, talked nostalgically of moon-lit snow, or who bemoaned the drabness of winter while amusingly grotesque silhouettes of naked branches were there to be enjoyed. Viewing all opposites as two parts of a whole, Chuang-tzû saw in death so little cause for tears that he was found singing and beating a drum during the obsequies of his wife, a lady of whom he had been genuinely fond!

Weakness and softness – as of water, infants, females – were qualities he extolled, perceiving that it is by yielding to circumstances that one conquers. He could see no sense in striving to grasp what lies out of reach or clutching at what is already on its way out. As to those woes which no philosophical or mystical insight can banish altogether, such as extreme want or mortal danger, his prescription for guarding against them was to be in-

conspicuous, lowly, unassertive, to give the impression of being incomplete, imperfect, of little value, so that rulers and robbers would pass one by.

Chuang-tzû's familiarity with yogic methods for cultivating direct intuition of the One is borne out by many passages of his work. It seems likely that he himself practised one or more of those involving closing the doors of the senses and raising the state of consciousness with the assistance of a form of yogic breathing for which the Taoist term is 'breathing like an infant', or 'breathing like a foetus in the womb'. This can be gathered from the following quotations, of which the opening sentence recalls the Ch'an (Zen) conundrum about the sound of one hand clapping.

'You have heard of flying with wings, but never of flying without wings. You have heard of the knowledge that knows, but never of the knowledge that does not know. Look into the closed room, the empty chamber where brightness is born! Fortune and blessing gather where there is stillness. But if you do not keep still – this is called sitting but racing around. Let your ears and eyes communicate with what is inside, and put mind and knowledge on the outside . . . Can you really make your body like a withered tree, your mind like dead ashes?

'When I speak of good hearing, I do not mean listening to others; I mean simply listening to yourself . . . If the gentleman can really keep his vital energies intact and not dissipate his seeing and his hearing, then he will command corpse-like stillness and dragon vision, the silence of deep pools and the voice of thunder. His spirit will move in the train of Heaven, gentle, easy in inaction, and the myriad objects will be dust on the wind . . . The essence of the Perfect Way is deep and darkly shrouded; the extreme of the Perfect Way is mysterious and hushed in silence. Let there be no seeing, no hearing; enfold the spirit in quietude and the body will right itself . . . Be cautious of what is within you; block off what is outside you, for much knowledge will do you harm. Then I will lead you up above the Great Brilliance, to the source of the Perfect *Yang*; I will guide you through the Dark and Mysterious Gate, to the source of the Perfect *Yin* . . . Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget you are a thing away from other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless . . . Forget things, forget Heaven, and be called a forgotten of self. The man who has forgotten self

may be said to have entered Heaven . . . Let his spirit ascend and mount upon the light; with his bodily form he dissolves and is gone.'

As to the more ascetic and acrobatic forms of yoga, they seem to have aroused Chuang-tzû's scorn. Speaking of Induction (to use Waley's rendering of the name of a contemporary school of yoga), he declares: 'To pant, to puff, to hale, to sip, to spit out the old breath and draw in the new, practising "bear-hangings" and "bird-stretchings", longevity their only concern – such is the life favoured by scholars who favour Induction.' Nevertheless, Chuang-tzû has traditionally been credited by the exponents of the internal alchemy with having been one of their number, for he remarks in one passage that 'the True Man breathes with his heels'. This has been taken by some to indicate his familiarity with a particular method of yogic breathing to which I referred in Chapter 4; however, others aver that the exercise was introduced much later by yogins who found it advantageous to employ a chance phrase culled from Chuang-tzû's work as a sort of 'scriptural authority'.

The fact that the yogic theory and practice known to the early sages had a great deal in common with Indian yoga led Waley to assume that, even as far back as the third century B.C., Indian influence had somehow made itself felt in China; but, to one familiar with the development of mysticism throughout the world, it seems unnecessary to stretch the imagination that far. It is observable that contemplatives belonging to many faiths have often arrived independently at rather similar methods of wresting the treasure from the secret store-house in the mind.

If, on the doubtful assumption that the views of each of the two sages are *fully* represented in their respective works, we take it that Chuang-tzû's cultivation of intuition by yogic methods was a step forward from Lao-tzû's quietism, we must still regard Chuang-tzû's teaching as an archaic form of mysticism because of his seeming lack of concern with achieving death-transcending union with the One. However, the matter cannot be judged with any certainty, as his utterances on death, some of which are quoted in my chapter on philosophy, vary so widely in their implications. There is a particularly macabre passage suggesting that he regarded the tranquillity of the grave as the most admirable form of serenity. In it he relates a fanciful conversation with a skull

which pours scorn upon the notion of returning to life. Said the skull: 'Among the dead there are no rulers above, no subjects below and no chores of the four seasons.' Wrinkling its brow it added: 'Why should I throw away more happiness than kings enjoy?' Against this, the sage's putting into Lao Tan's (Lao-tzû's) mouth the words: 'Why don't you make him see that life and death are the same story?' can be taken in two senses – that there *is* a sequel to what is commonly termed death or that there being none just does not matter. Then there is the passage, 'How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?' This could be taken to imply belief in a very desirable state of existence beyond the grave, but could equally be regarded as mere speculation analogous to the passage in which the sage, awakening from a dream of being a butterfly, speculates as to whether or not he is now a butterfly dreaming of being a man. On the other hand, the passage 'Some day there will be a great awakening when we shall know this is all a dream' very strongly suggests belief in a blissful state to come. Perhaps the key to the enigma is contained in the words 'That which kills life does not die; that which gives life does not live.' Interpreted in a mystical sense, this means that individual beings are mere shadows with no lives of their own, mere waves in the eternal ocean that lies beyond the dualism of life and death. This would accord with the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy that, in an ultimate sense, there are no beings to enter Nirvana, nor anything that has ever been apart from it. Yet, even if we accept the very likely hypothesis that Chuang-tzû and the Buddhist mystics were pointing to exactly the same truth, there remains a difference of approach. With Chuang-tzû there is no urgency to make sure of reaching the transcendental goal, no impulse to 'carry the fortress by storm'. It is as though he were content to let the future take care of itself, content with having won the freedom that arises from serene dispassion. He does not seem to share the concern of later Taoist mystics about the fading into nothingness of the *hun* and *p'o* souls of those who die without having experienced mystical intuition. Can it be that he assumes that everyone, whether conscious of the Tao or not, will be re-absorbed at death into its formlessness and thus share perpetually in its vast consciousness? It is more likely, I think, that he implies the non-existence of beings who seemingly live and die; in other

words, all that really lives in each of us is the undying Tao, which each wrongly takes to be a separate entity belonging to or constituting himself. There is no way of knowing for sure. Unless we postulate that Lao and Chuang kept back certain teachings, believing it unwise or unnecessary to commit them to words, their philosophy, because of its focus on the proper living of this very life – the Here and Now – might reasonably be called mystical humanism. Though it falls short of certain later developments, it offers a very pleasant and at the same time admirable philosophy of life. The qualities to be looked for in its exponents include: quiet acceptance of the twists and turns of fate; a disinclination to interfere; a warm affection for beings both beautiful and ugly, arising from the perception of nature's seamless unity; a comfortable absence of self-consciousness and a spontaneity which, besides being delightful in itself, might beget rare skill in performing tasks involving co-ordination of hand and eye – Chuang-tzû was fond of relating stories about chefs, wood-cutters, carpenters, wheel-wrights and so on to illustrate this point. As simple frugality and distaste for ostentation would preclude any thirst for luxuries and expensive novelties, pleasure in simple things would be all the keener; moreover, feeling a zestful interest in everything that could possibly happen would certainly prohibit boredom. A man thus trained would be loved and valued by his friends, because never in the way; his inner happiness would prove infectious. Even in those relatively prosaic terms, his lot could be described as enviable, to say nothing of the likelihood of his being able to enter at will into the bliss discoverable in the 'secret chamber' of the mind.

The other literary sources from which we might hope to gain information about Taoist mysticism in its earlier days – the works ascribed to Kuan-tzû, Han Fei-tzû and Lieh-tzû for example – are so widely regarded as later compilations of material of varying and uncertain date that it is difficult to deduce any worthwhile conclusions from them or to put them into proper historical sequence. In the *Huai Nan-tzû*, written several centuries later, some attempt is made to analyse the works of the Tao in terms of the interaction of *yin* and *yang* – the positive and negative principles. A school of Taoism much concerned with the *yin* and *yang* grew up and so did another which associated its teachings intimately with the *I Ching* (*Book of Change*), but neither of these

schools is of direct concern to the development of Taoist mysticism. By the third and fourth centuries, the Tao was equated by some philosophers (Wang Pi among them) with what was called *pên-t'i*, the original substance of the universe; thus it ceased to be regarded as a no-thing or no-being and became *pên-wu*, pure being. The thoughts of another great Taoist philosopher, Kuo Hsiang, wandered off in the opposite direction; he held that the myriad objects transform themselves spontaneously, each acting in accordance with its own inherent principle. But to define the Tao and its workings is to leave the realm of intuitive experience and enter upon mere philosophic speculation. Perhaps those sages, while succeeding in attaining direct intuition of the Nameless, failed to recognize the futility of attempting to give concrete expression to the mystery. Scholars have ever been fond of precision, preferring literal 'truth' with all its limitations to the amorphousness that surrounds that which is beyond categorical exposition. How much more to be admired is yet another of Lao-tzû's terms for the ineffable – the Shapeless.

A particularly interesting development in the fourth century A.D. was Tao Shêng's doctrine of sudden illumination, which was later to exercise a lasting influence on the thinking of the Ch'an (Zen) Masters. For centuries, Chinese mystics continued to dispute whether direct intuition of the Tao is or is not instantaneous. Personally, I am inclined to think that the dispute can easily be resolved in true Taoist fashion by reference to water. Bringing cold water to the boil is a gradual process; yet, at a certain temperature, the change from non-boiling to boiling is sudden. In other words, for those not fortunately gifted with unsought intuition, preparation for attaining it is gradual and often arduous, but the intuition or illumination, when it comes, is of course instantaneous.

My use of the phrase 'intuition or illumination' reveals a quandary into which all students of Chinese and Japanese mysticism are bound to fall. For some reason the writings of various Masters fail to make a clear distinction between those light, passing intuitions of the Nameless now known in the West as *satori* and the final stage of illumination which Buddhists call Supreme Unexcelled Enlightenment. Though distinctive terms do exist for both of them, the manuals of meditation and books of anecdotes are often vague upon this point; it is by no means always clear

whether a reference is to the supreme, eternally liberating mystical experience or to one or other of the preceding stages along the way. Some might say that there is no qualitative difference; but surely a young monk who has achieved his first *satori* is not identical (except in a potential or latent sense) with a Supremely Enlightened One, a Buddha!

The encroachment of Buddhist terminology into an essay on Taoist mysticism is inevitable. No one knows at what stage the two religions began to influence each other; but, though they maintained their separate identities all along, the interaction was tremendous. Each borrowed enormously from the other – even Tibetan Buddhism shows Taoist influence. It is now generally recognized that the Ch'an (Zen) School of Buddhism, though its *doctrine* remained entirely faithful to the Mahayana derived from India, owes an enormous debt to Taoism, which seems to have been the chief source of its methods, language, fondness for nature, special concern with the Here and Now and emphasis on *sudden* illumination, to say nothing of its art-forms, which are often indistinguishable from those of wholly Taoist inspiration. Such phrases as 'the Buddha-Mind is omnipresent', 'no thought (*wu-nien*)', 'a doctrine without words', 'forget self' are very close to Taoist aphorisms. Ch'an (Zen)'s informality, down-to-earthness, fondness for apparent absurdities, lavish use of paradox and of conundrums unsolvable by logic or conceptual thought seem like echoes of Chuang-tzû. However, this in the present context is by the way. Of much greater importance to our thesis is the likely influence of Buddhist thought on the later development of Taoist mysticism.

Buddhist mysticism can be bracketed with mysticism in its Christian, Moslem (Sufi) and other world-wide forms, in spite of being free of the least suggestion of theism; for, while sharing the Taoist conception of the Ultimate as a No-being, it is imbued with that sense of urgency which is found also in theistic mysticism – urgency to achieve not mere intuitions of the One but absolute and everlasting union. The One, which Chinese Buddhists often call the Tao, is equated with *Sunyata*, the Great Void in which all things have their existence and whose nature all things share. Full experiential knowledge of the world's void nature is called Enlightenment. The casting off of the last shreds of ego-consciousness so that, at death, there occurs a merging with the Void, is variously

termed liberation, final illumination, and attainment of Nirvana. By this achievement both extinction and immortality are transcended, for it is recognized that from the first there has never been anything to extinguish, the ego-entity being a mere illusion; therefore nothing dies, but conversely there is no shadow of individuality left to be immortal. When 'the dew-drop slips into the shining sea', not a particle is lost, yet nothing remains that is distinguishable from the sea. It is also taught that, in reality, this ultimate experience is not an *attainment* but a full *realization* of a unity that in truth has never from the first been ruptured. The devotee's overwhelming thirst for this realization and the joy which it bestows are both described in terms which vividly recall the ecstatic language used by theistic mystics in describing their thirst for and attainment of union with the Godhead.

The gradual change that overtook Taoist mysticism, bringing it into line with mysticism generally, is susceptible to three explanations: first, that there was no change, that the seemingly lower-key quietism of Lao and Chuang was identical with mysticism in its fully developed form, but for the greater reticence with which it was propounded; second, that the change occurred as a direct result of Buddhist influence; third, that it occurred independently of Buddhism, being in fact inevitable, since intuitive experience of the One cultivated by Buddhists and Taoists alike was bound to lead to recognition of the possibility of a great death-transcending apotheosis. By Taoists this apotheosis, instead of being called Nirvana (Buddhist) or everlasting union with the Godhead (Christian), became known simply as Returning to the Source.

Thus, with the passing of time, the final goal of Taoist and Buddhist mystics became recognizably one, as it had been factually one from the beginning, but there remained a great difference in their thinking in regard to the alternative to achievement of the apotheosis in this very life. To Buddhists, that alternative was terrifying – aeon upon aeon of being tossed relentlessly by the waves of a dark ocean, undergoing the tribulations of existence after existence before once again attaining a state conducive to further progress. To Taoists, on the contrary, the alternative was merely cessation of existence – a prospect not likely to inspire actual terror except perhaps in the young. But how splendid, how dazzling was the goal contemplated for those who did succeed



in achieving full illumination, that ineffable, ego-shattering experience by which the last shreds of ego-hood are burnt up, so that the individual merges forever with the Tao, albeit the physical body of an illumined one may continue to lead a wraith-like existence until death, whereafter no gradual fading into nothingness can take place, there being nothing left to fade.

The final step in the direction of unifying Buddhist and Taoist concepts was the embracing of the doctrine of rebirth by a certain number of Taoists. Unfortunately there is no means of knowing to what extent this development was general. My guess, based on the rather haphazard contacts with Taoists described in this book, is that only a relatively small minority ever became adherents of this essentially Hindu-Buddhist doctrine.

All of the foregoing applies only to the purely mystical aspect of Taoism. Devotees who entertained popular notions regarding the various heavens and hells, or who contemplated transmogrification into some sort of immortal state for its own sake, though numerically very important, have little to do with the developments just described. Incidentally, within the folds of both Taoism and Buddhism there were always large numbers of borderline cases, that is to say people who, though convinced of the possibility of Return to the Source (or Nirvana), felt so overwhelmed by the difficulties involved that they made no serious attempt to achieve that goal. Such people can be called mystics in the sense of holding mystical beliefs, non-mystics in terms of practice and experiential realization.

Finally we come to a very important insight, especially widespread among Buddhists: the identity of the immaculate Source with pure mind. This is a momentous concept; for, if mind alone is seen to constitute the whole stuff of the universe, then all mysteries are solved. To those who hold mind and matter to be separate, the limits to which the one can act upon and affect the other seem well defined; whereas, in the absence of this dichotomy, it can be readily appreciated that the power of mind to act on mind is unlimited. The Buddhist doctrine is that the spotless, illimitable Void perceived during mystical illumination is pure mind in its quiescent state, while the unending flow of appearances falsely conceived to be separate objects is pure mind engaged in the play of thought. To use a telling Taoist expression, *these are not two!*

Westerners, on first encountering the doctrine of mind only, are apt to ask for a definition. Does mind in this context connote the totality of so-called individual minds or a sort of over-mind, Mind spelt, so to speak, with a capital 'M'? Asians reared in the ancient traditions find the question puzzling. How can these be two?

This doctrine of mind as the only reality requires that a distinction be made between 'illusion' and 'delusion'. If the world did not exist at all, its seemingness would be a delusion, whereas the mystical doctrine is that what is perceived does in fact exist, but that faulty perception endows it with illusory qualities that distort its real nature. Entities are real, but not in the sense of being truly separate from one another, of having each its own-being. Container and contained are one; it and they are pure mind.

Both Taoists and Buddhists were agreed that mere intellectual understanding of the mystery of the Tao or Void is powerless to unbind the chains of woe. The true nature of oneself and all else must be consciously experienced; the truth must be made as tangible as the heat of the sun upon the skin. However, Buddhists emphasize much more strongly than did the ancient Taoist sages that banishing the mists of conceptual thought is a prodigious task involving skill and pertinacity. There has to be a turning of the adept's mind upon itself, a mental revolution, an intuitive experience of indescribable profundity. Both intellect and logic are enemies closely linked to the false perceptions at the root of human woe.

Progress with the yogic exercises aimed at achieving the ultimate experience of union may lead to the development of extrasensory perception or even of startling, almost magical powers; the adept is, however, warned not to attach much weight to them, to regard them as potentially harmful distractions likely to attract unwanted credit and renown. The true miracle lies in achieving an awareness that bestows greater powers than kings and emperors enjoy. Leaving the conquest of the world and of negligible fractions of illimitable space to others, the yogin bends his endeavours to the much greater feat of conquering himself. He thus becomes imbued with such wisdom and compassion that his very presence radiates a gay serenity that is palpable to others. The descriptions of illumined beings and of those close to ultimate illumination, as

recorded by mystics belonging to many faiths, are often lyrical. With increasing imperviousness to human error, human woe, there arises a sense of balance and harmony so perfect that withdrawal into a state of bliss can be achieved at will. The world loses its terrors; laughter comes so easily that accomplished adepts are frequently mistaken for simpletons. Death is no more to be feared than dropping off to sleep on a summer afternoon. As the mind, no longer fettered by duality, joyously recognizes its unity with pure, bright, illimitable Mind – the Tao, the Godhead – there comes a sense of being able to soar throughout the universe at will.

That the mystical experience is no fantasy is demonstrated by the extraordinary degree of unanimity found among mystics of every age and clime. If a reasonable allowance is made for three diversive factors – differences of religious and cultural background, the need of each mystic to employ terms familiar to those about him, and the immense difficulty of bending language to describe what lies beyond the furthest confines of conceptual thought – it is apparent that all the world's mystics have spoken with one voice of an experience common to them all. Since error spreads as easily as truth, this unanimity would lose much of its power to astonish, were it established that all mystics have been people exposed to a single tradition which, some two or three thousand years ago, miraculously spread throughout the world, leaping across the vast mountain-barriers and limitless tracts of wilderness or ocean which bounded the scattered centres of civilization in those days; but can anyone seriously suppose that certain groups within the ancient and medieval cultures of China, India, Egypt, the Middle East, classical Greece and Eastern and Western Christendom were *all* pervaded by an identical tradition – one, moreover, which in all but two cases formed no part of the orthodox religious teachings that flourished around them? Dismissing that supposition as too wild, we are left with but two alternatives – either we must believe that countless madmen and dreamers were visited by an identical fantasy, or else accept the mystics' enigmatic pronouncements as being rooted in direct intuitive experience of the 'Really So'!

Though I have had opportunities to enter more deeply into Buddhist than into Taoist mysticism, it was from a Taoist teacher,

Tsêng Lao-wêng, that I gained the highest insight that can ever be vouchsafed to a person of such ordinary attainments as my own. I recall his revelation with gratitude and awe. It stemmed from an experience so close to the heart of things that whether or not his exposition is held to reflect Buddhist influence matters not at all; for, beyond a certain level, all such distinctions fade. His belief in transfiguration leading to total absorption in the Tao was subscribed to by innumerable Taoists who were certainly not conscious of having inherited a mixed tradition, since it had been transmitted from one Taoist adept to another over a space of many centuries. I shall relate the story in detail, as being at once dramatic and fully representative of Taoist mysticism in its most developed stage. What I came upon so unexpectedly includes a fair sample of the teaching given to Taoist adepts in my day; its blend of humour and sincerity has such an authentically Taoist stamp that it would not be too far-fetched to find in it echoes of Chuang-tzû and the Ch'an (Zen) Masters, even though it dealt with a type of mystical experience that goes far beyond simple mystical humanism.

That the Master known as Tsêng Lao-wêng spoke from direct knowledge conferred by full illumination strikes me as unquestionable; for, though I do not possess the high intuitive powers required for detecting an adept who has reached the goal, Tsêng Lao-wêng's presence conferred a direct communication of bliss from heart to heart that was all the more remarkable in view of my own unadvanced state.

The year was 1947 and the place not a great monastery, nor even a hermitage in the ordinary sense, but a house in the north-western precinct of Peking inhabited by less than half-a-dozen Taoists. Towards the end of World War II, they had been driven from their mountain retreat by guerrilla operations conducted by Chinese partisans against the Japanese invaders. Though, as refugees, the recluses adhered to the regimen to which they had been accustomed, they had exchanged their distinctive costume for the silk or cotton gowns worn by Peking laymen in those days, so as to avoid unwelcome attention. Since the end of the war, conditions in the countryside being too disturbed to permit a return to their hermitage, they had clung to their temporary refuge, not even bothering to acquire Taoist robes to replace those discarded when danger threatened. Probably their neighbours

were unaware of their calling. My coming to know of their existence was due to a chance remark dropped by Yang Tao-shih, a young recluse whom I sometimes visited in the White Cloud Monastery. I had happened to remark rather tactlessly that, of the many wise hermits encountered during my wanderings, the few who had betrayed signs of being, as I fancied, closest to illumination had almost all been Buddhist.

'That may be so,' replied my friend, 'but I wonder if even one of them surpasses the Taoist recluse known as Tsêng Lao-wêng? Lao-wêng (Old Gentleman) is an unusual title for a recluse, but he dislikes being styled Immortal and, for reasons best known to himself, prefers now to pass for a layman. Few people even remember how he was styled in the days before he was driven from his mountain retreat.'

'His name is of no importance. I have noticed you are something of a cynic; so, if even you consider him an accomplished sage, he must be well worth meeting.'

'Ah, yes. But they say he is not fond of receiving visitors. That in itself is a sign of wisdom, don't you think? I love visitors, but then, unlike Tsêng Lao-wêng, I have no talents to hide. A true sage shrinks from the public gaze and, above all, from becoming a local curiosity, which to a man of his calibre can so easily happen.'

'All the same, do please try to arrange a meeting. I am all agog and I promise you it is not just idle curiosity.'

I could see that my good-natured friend regretted mentioning the elusive Master Tsêng, but I persevered until he could not courteously avoid a promise to try his best.

By the time that promise bore fruit, autumn had given place to winter and Peking had become a strangely silent city, so thick was its carpeting of snow. One day I dropped in at the White Cloud Monastery to find my Taoist friend huddled over a charcoal brazier, from which he obligingly detached himself just long enough to fetch a wine-kettle and a small earthenware jar from a shelf in the corner, braving the icy chill that seeped in through the windows of translucent paper.

'One needs friends on a day like this,' he exclaimed, beaming. 'I had no sooner wished for an excuse to broach this jar of peach brandy – a sure aid to longevity – than you appeared like one of

those amiable demons who can be summoned by a flash of thought. By the way, Tsêng Lao-wêng has sent for you.'

'Tsêng Lao-wêng? Ah, but of course – now I remember. When did the message come?'

I saw from his face that it had been long enough ago for the question to be embarrassing; although, what with the pitiless wind and snow during the last few weeks and the distance from the monastery to my house, his not having notified me was excusable.

'A while ago,' he said rather too casually. 'Come to think of it, by now they may have left for Hangchow. You should have paid your respects to him much sooner.'

'Was that my fault?' I burst out, wafted by the fumes of the strong peach brandy beyond the bounds of Taoist courtesy.

'If you had been kind enough to visit me more often, then' – he handed me a slip of paper with the address.

It was no use regretting the number of times I had put off summoning a hooded rickshaw, inadequately quilted against the cold, for the long ride to his monastery. Now, of course, just in case Tsêng Lao-wêng were still in Peking, I should have to make an even longer expedition that very afternoon to a secluded section of the north-west corner of the city. There was nothing for it but to drink another warming cup of the mulled peach brandy and set out as soon as possible. I knew of no way of summoning one of the great city's half-dozen taxi-cabs at short notice, and horse-drawn vehicles were colder than rickshaws; so I had no choice.

An hour or two later, a draughty covered rickshaw set me down before the last house in a lane that petered out in the gigantic shadow cast by the city's northern ramparts. All that could be seen above the outer wall of this unobtrusive dwelling was some rooftops emerging from among the bare, snow-laden branches of the trees within its courtyards. The brasswork on the gate was green with verdigris and the scarlet-laquered door panels, far from showing up bravely against the sombre grey-brick wall, had faded to a dull, uneven pink. The early dusk of winter was at hand and it was obvious that callers seldom chose that hour, for there was no response to my repeated knocking until I had grown stiff with cold. Even then, one gate-panel opened only just enough for the gate-keeper to take stock of me.

'The Lao-wêng is not receiving,' he announced flatly. 'Their Reverences said nothing about a visitor.' Too cold and dispirited to face the prospect of a miserable journey home without first warming myself at a stove and drinking the hot tea unfailingly served to visitors, however inopportune their arrival, I persisted to the point of rudeness. At last the burly fellow stood back, opened the gate a little wider and gestured with his chin towards a doorway across the forecourt. The flagstone pathway had been cleared of snow earlier that day, but already it was half obliterated by small avalanches from the skeletal old fruit-trees rising on either hand.

Wishing that dour man had had the courtesy to lead the way and announce me, I watched him withdraw into the warmth of his quarters near the outer gate; then I hurried over to the doorway he had indicated and pounded on it with numbed fists. No one came. Too cold to stand on ceremony, I let myself into a small parlour that was very murky because so little light now filtered through the paper windows; but at least it was warm, thanks to an iron pipe zigzagging across the ceiling from a stove in an adjacent room. To the left was a door cloaked against the cold by a wadded curtain of blue cloth; that the room beyond was occupied could be deduced from a line of golden light just above the door-sill; still, what with the ponderous wooden door *and* the curtain, it would not be surprising if no one had heard my frantic pounding. Having no other way to make my presence known, I called out, as though expected, 'Wo lai-la! (I have come).'

Again there was no answer, and so I gathered courage to push aside the curtain and open the door beyond. In crossing the high sill, I stepped – into another century!

Lit by thick candles of crimson wax was a scene that might have been set in the T'ang dynasty over a thousand years ago. What little furniture there was, apart from the shelves piled with blue-cloth ivory-hinged book-boxes that lined the walls, had been so arranged as to leave a wide space in the centre. There, seated cross-legged on floor-cushions with their backs to the door, were three figures clad in long gowns the skirts of which had been tucked beneath them. Backs erect, heads just perceptibly inclined, they maintained such stillness that neither sound nor movement betrayed their breathing. Even from behind I could see that the

one sitting closest to the further wall was an elderly person, for parts of a luxuriant white beard were visible on either side of his face. Clad in a layman's gown of coarse grey cloth, he had drawn up his hair in a bun and concealed it beneath a home-made cap of soft black material. His companions sat behind him and at a distance from each other, so that the three meditation-cushions formed the points of an equilateral triangle; this, I believe, had no esoteric significance, but was simply an arrangement that gave each meditator ample space. The younger men wore the high-necked gowns of wadded dark-blue silk that formed the winter garb of prosperous Peking merchants in those days; their close-cropped heads were bare like those of laymen; nevertheless one could sense that they were no amateurs at the art of meditation. There was no ikon to be seen, but smoke curled from a single stick of incense set in an antique tripod that stood to one side of the bearded figure.

As no one showed any awareness of my presence, I sat down cross-legged behind them, taking care to make no noise. The wooden floor was cold, but to have sat in a chair – and thus at a higher level than the recluses – would have been discourteous. Thirsty and tired, I hoped the meditation period would soon be over. To pass the time I studied a peculiarly fascinating wall-scroll, an ink-painting depicting a Taoist immortal making his way across an ice-bound river to a pavilion standing amidst a grove of snow-covered cedars. Executed with a masterly economy of brush-strokes, it suggested rather than portrayed this scene and yet presented it more vividly than a meticulously detailed oil-painting could have done. That the traveller was an immortal was apparent not from his costume but from his seeming to sweep forward with irresistible power, serenely unhampered by slippery, cracked ice or treacherous snow-drifts. I had seldom seen a painted figure so marvellously imbued with life. But gradually my interest in the picture waned, for I discovered with some surprise that inexplicable sensations of buoyancy and well-being had driven away both boredom and fatigue. Presently they became so intense that, had I had anything to eat or drink since those little cupfuls of peach brandy whose effect had worn off hours before, I should have suspected someone of doctoring it with some sort of euphoric drug. As it was, no one seemed aware of my presence, and even the longed-for cup of tea had not materialized. I cannot hope to

describe the quality of those rapidly mounting sensations, but I remember smiling at the thought that a newly transmogrified immortal, very conscious of his weightless, jade-smooth body and freedom to soar effortlessly among the clouds, would be likely to feel something very much akin to them. Their source was not to be found within myself; after a while I recognized it as a strikingly intense form of the joy that comes from being in the presence of a person of great mystical achievement. If the holy sage's inner joy can communicate itself to others in such great measure, who can imagine the bliss that wells within the sage himself? Probably the authors of those Taoist texts which speak of immortals serenely winging their way over mountains and oceans were hinting in veiled language at the very sensations of which some emanations were now filtering into me. My thirst had vanished. Gone, too, was my shyness at the thought of having to explain my intrusion. In their place had come an exquisite happiness that was centred on nothing in particular, and a feeling (which should have been, but was not, alarming) that the entire cosmos, lovely, shining and beautifully ordered, was somehow contained within the narrow confines of my skull. Having said all this, I have gone but a little way towards conveying the richness of the experience, which, at the very moment when it seemed about to produce some sort of fabulous climax, ceased!

When the once-tall incense-stick had burnt down to its stub, the old man stirred and lightly tapped a bronze bell concealed from my view. Small responsive movements indicated that the other meditators had returned to their ordinary state of consciousness and were adjusting themselves to it, preparatory to rising. As for my own return, it had been brutally sudden; the source of my joy had been switched off like a light. By the time the vibrations of the little bell or gong had died away, I was my old self — anxious about my invasion of their privacy, rather tired and quite dreadfully thirsty.

Rising from their cushions, the recluses turned towards me, betraying not the least surprise at finding an intruder — a foreign devil at that — scrambling awkwardly to his feet in their meditation-room. The two younger men smiled a welcome and the bearded elder strode forward, throwing out his arm suddenly to prevent my prostrating myself as courtesy demanded.

'No ceremony, I beg you. Sit down and be at ease. Tea is

coming. You must think us remiss to keep you waiting so long for refreshment after your cold journey all the way from the White Cloud Monastery.'

I drew in my breath. Grinning puckishly as though amused at my regarding telepathy as a matter for astonishment, he motioned me to a chair and took one separated from mine by the width of a table just broad enough to accommodate the two bowls of pale-green tea now served by one of his disciples. The effect of this proximity was to restore something of the joyous serenity I had felt earlier, the difference in intensity being no doubt attributable to his having descended from the incalculably exalted level of consciousness attained during meditation.

'So kind of you to have hurried over.'

Hurried over? Indeed I had, but as my visit to the White Cloud Monastery had been made on an impulse, my friend there could not possibly have told the old gentleman to expect me that afternoon, and there was no obvious reason for the latter's knowing from where and at what speed I had come. Not for the first or last time in my life, I felt uncomfortable in the face of a prescience that makes one's thoughts seem visible.

'I should have hastened to pay my respects much sooner, but for —'

Gracefully he waved his hand. 'No apologies. You came as soon as you could.'

Clutching at a simpler explanation, namely that he had been expecting some other visitor from the White Cloud Monastery, I blurted out: 'Venerable, are you quite sure you know who I am?'

'That, no!' he exclaimed, eyes crinkling with amusement. 'Such knowledge would be miraculous, wouldn't it? Does one ever know that much even about himself? If you can tell me truly that *you* know who you are, I must bow down to you as my Teacher.'

'Please, Venerable!' I answered blushing. I was speaking in a conventional sense. My insignificant name in its Chinese form is P'u Lo-tao and my humble cognomen Chu-fêng. Perhaps you were expecting —'

'I was expecting P'u Lo-tao and P'u Lo-tao is here. That's all that matters. I, as you may know, am the person generally called Tsêng Lao-wêng, so we need no further introduction. Another few days and you would have found us gone to Hangchow, as one

of my pupils is suffering from the harshness of this northern winter. Please be as happy as I am that we have managed at least this one fortunate meeting.'

If a scholar's eye were to fall on my description of this incident, its owner might feel like complaining: 'Pooh-pooh, that mountebank recluse of yours guessed who you were from the fact of your being the one foreigner to seek him out. Naturally your friend at the monastery gave him your name when arranging for you to meet the old rascal. What you say about telepathy is just an instance of the cunning of those fellows.' Well, there was a great deal more to it than that. I have never lost the rather eerie conviction that Tsêng Lao-wêng had somehow known I would come that very afternoon; that as soon as I had entered the room he had sensed my presence at once and deliberately transmitted a share of the serene, object-free joy that was the fruit of his meditation. But when I pressed for confirmation that that was so, my halting question was characteristically answered by a peal of laughter. Had Tsêng Lao-wêng admitted to powers of foreknowledge and telepathy, *then* I should have had reason to doubt; had he denied them I would have been left guessing; for, among Taoists, the wielders of genuine powers, if they were saintly men, could no more be persuaded to confess to them than a Buddhist Arahat can be brought to admit to having crossed Nirvana's brink.

The tea, served in cups of unremarkable design that were replenished, when required, by the watchful disciple, was too delicious to be drunk without comment. Pleased by my enjoyment of its colour and fragrance, Tsêng Lao-wêng told me from what province and which mountain the thin green leaves had been carried and how the tea had been brewed in melted snow, the city's water-supply being unsuited to its delicate flavour. Presently he remarked:

'Your going to such trouble to visit me is flattering. How may I best be of service to you?'

'You mean, why have I come, Venerable? I have been longing to meet you ever since I heard our mutual friend describe you as an illumined sage.'

Tsêng Lao-wêng sighed and answered resignedly: 'Why do people talk so? Such words are tedious. You will find no sages here, just this old fellow and four or five other very ordinary

men who are students of the Way. It must be disappointing for you.'

'Do not blame Yang Tao-shih, Venerable. He wished only to make me see for myself that Buddhists do not have a monopoly of wisdom.'

'And does seeing an old man distinguished by nothing more than an unusually bushy beard convince you that they do not?'

What could I say that would not sound like flattery, which he obviously disliked? 'Venerable, it is just that, as most of my teachers are Buddhist, I am ignorant about what Taoists mean by such terms as wisdom and illumination, and about their methods of approaching the Tao.'

He laughed. 'How strange. Can there be two kinds of wisdom, two kinds of illumination, Taoist and Buddhist? Surely the experience of truth must be the same for all? As to approaching the Tao, be sure that demons and executioners, let alone Buddhists, are as close to it as can be. The one impossible thing is to get a finger's breadth away from it. Do you suppose that some people – this old fellow, for example – are nearer to it than others? Is a bird closer to the air than a tortoise or a cat? The Tao is closer to you than the nose on your face; it is only because you can tweak your nose that you think otherwise. Asking about our approach to the Tao is like asking a deep-sea fish how it approaches the water. It is just a matter of recognizing what has been inside, outside and all around from the first. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I believe I do. Certainly my Buddhist teachers have taught me that there is no attaining liberation, but only attaining recognition of what one has always been from the first.'

'Excellent, excellent! Your teachers, then, are true sages. You are a worthy disciple, so why brave the bitter cold to visit an ordinary old fellow? You would have learnt as much at your own fireside.' (His harping so much on his being just an ordinary old fellow was not due to exaggerated modesty, being a play on the words of which his title, Lao-wêng, was composed.)

'Venerable, please don't laugh at me! I accept your teaching that true sages have but the one goal. Still, here in China, there are Buddhists and there are also Taoists. Manifestly they differ; since the goal is one, the distinction must lie in their methods of approach.'

'So you are hungry not for wisdom but for knowledge! What a pity! Wisdom is almost as satisfying as good millet-gruel, whereas knowledge has less body to it than tepid water poured over old tea-leaves; but if that is the fare you have come for, I can give you as much as your mistreated belly will hold. What sort of old tea-leaves do Buddhists use, I wonder! We Taoists use all sorts. Some swallow medicine-balls as big as pigeon's eggs or drink tonics by the jugful, live upon unappetizing diets, take baths at intervals governed by esoteric numbers, breathe in and out like asthmatic dragons, or jump about like Manchu bannermen hardening themselves for battle – all this discomfort just for the sake of a few extra decades of life.) And why? To gain more time to find what has never been lost! And what of those pious recluses who rattle mallets against wooden-fish drums from dusk to dawn, groaning out liturgies like cholera-patients excreting watery dung? They are penitents longing to rid themselves of a burden they never had. These people do everything imaginable, including swallowing pills made from the vital fluids secreted by the opposite sex and lighting fires in their bellies to make the alchemic cauldrons boil – everything, everything except – sit still and look within. I shall have to talk of such follies for hours, if you really want a full list of Taoist methods. These method-users resemble mountain streams a thousand leagues from the sea. Ah, how they chatter and gurgle, bubble and boil, rush and eddy, plunging over precipices in spectacular fashion! How angrily they pound against the boulders and suck down their prey in treacherous whirl-pools! But, as the streams broaden, they grow quieter and more purposeful. They become rivers – ah, how calm, how silent! How majestically they sweep towards their goal, giving no impression of swiftness and, as they near the ocean, seeming not to move at all! While noisy mountain streams are reminiscent of people chattering about the Tao and showing-off spectacular methods, rivers remind one of experienced men, taciturn, doing little, but doing it decisively; outwardly still, yet sweeping forward faster than you know. Your teachers have offered you wisdom; then why waste time acquiring knowledge? Methods! Approaches! Need the junk-master steering towards the sea, with the sails of his vessel billowing in the wind, bother his head about alternative modes of propulsion – oars, paddles, punt-poles, tow-ropes, engines and all the rest? Any sort of vessel, unless it founders or pitches you

overboard, is good enough to take you to the one and only sea. Now do you understand?'

Indeed I did, though not with a direct understanding firmly rooted in intuitive experience that matched his own; but I pretended to be at a loss, hoping his voice, never far from laughter, would go on and on and on; for, just as his mind when lost in the bliss of meditation had communicated a measure of its joy, so now it was emanating a warmth, a jollity that made me want to laugh, to sing, to dance, to shout aloud that everything is forever as it should be, provided we now and then remember to rub our eyes. I could have sat contentedly listening to him hour after hour, day after day. Overwhelmed with love and admiration only partly inspired by his words, I did not guess that he had yet a still more precious gift for me, one that would remain when the magic of his presence was withdrawn, the very secret that had been denied me by the Abbot of the Valley Spirit Hermitage, who had held the mystery too sacred to be lightly revealed.

Tsêng Lao-wêng's talk of rivers flowing into the ocean had put me in mind of Sir Edwin Arnold's lovely expression of the mystery of Nirvana, 'the dew-drop slips into the shining sea', which I had long accepted as a poetical description of that moment when the seeming-individual, at last free from the shackles of the ego, merges with the Tao – the Void. This I knew to be an intensely blissful experience, but it was Tsêng Lao-wêng who now revealed its shining splendour in terms that made my heart leap. Afterwards I wondered whether Sir Edwin Arnold himself had realized the *full* purport of his words. At a certain moment in our conversation when Tsêng Lao-wêng paused expectantly, I translated the beautiful line for him and was rewarded by a smile of pleasure and surprise. Eyes glowing, he replied :

'My countrymen are wrong to speak of the Western Ocean People as barbarians. Your poet's simile is penetrating – exalted! And yet it does not capture the whole; for, when a lesser body of water enters a greater, though the two are thenceforth inseparable, the smaller constitutes but a fragment of the whole. But consider the Tao, which transcends both finite and infinite. Since the Tao is All and nothing lies outside it, since its multiplicity and unity are identical, when a finite being sheds the illusion of separate existence, he is not lost in the Tao like a dew-drop merging with the sea; by casting off his imaginary limita-

tions, he becomes immeasurable. No longer bound by the worldly categories, 'part' and 'whole', he discovers that he is coextensive with the Tao. Plunge the finite into the infinite and, though only one remains, the finite, far from being diminished, takes on the stature of infinity. Mere logicians would find fault with this, but if you perceive the hidden meaning you will laugh at their childish cavils. Such perception will bring you face to face with the true secret cherished by all accomplished sages – glorious, dazzling, vast, hardly conceivable! The mind of one who Returns to the Source thereby *becomes* the Source. Your own mind, for example, *is destined to become the universe itself!*'

His wise old eyes, now lit with joyous merriment, bored into mine. For a fleeting moment, I was able to share in the vastness of his inner vision. The bliss was so shattering that I was compelled to lower my gaze. For a person in my state of unpreparedness, prolongation of that flash of limitless insight would have been more than flesh and blood could bear.