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A stairway to heaven : Daoist self-cultivation in early modern China

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The Return to Emptiness

Inner alchemy describes a system of gradual self-cultivation in which an adept, step by step, ascends a stairway to heaven. With the completion of each stage of cultivation, he attains a higher rank in the hierarchy of immortality. In this process, he completes the “three passes” of cultivation as he gradually transforms from a common man into a human immortal, a terrestrial immortal, a spirit immortal, and finally a celestial immortal. But what exactly is supposed to be at the top of this stairway? What was the ultimate objective of inner alchemy? How did these inner alchemists imagine ultimate salvation? These are the questions that will be examined in this chapter. Inner alchemy texts appear to give a range of different answers to these questions. A close reading of key passages will bring us closer to an understanding of this issue.

There are, I propose, two basic answers to the question of what constitutes ultimate salvation in inner alchemy. One answer follows from the hierarchical models of immortality. At the top of the stairway, the adept attains “celestial immortality.” The figure of the celestial immortal—an immortal that has ascended into the celestial realms—has been described since the fourth century as the highest achievement of cultivation and was imagined as an official in a celestial bureaucracy that mirrored the imperial bureaucracy on earth. As a celestial official, the celestial immortal would be appointed in a post according to his ethical qualifications and could rise in the hierarchy of celestial officials according to his merit.

Another answer follows from the model of the “three passes,” the three stages of the cultivation process. In the first pass, the adept transforms his essence back into *qi*. During the middle pass, the adept uses this replenished yang *qi* to transform his yin spirit into a yang spirit. During the upper pass, this yang spirit is trained to exit and enter the body at will. The final task of the upper pass involves the final exit of the body as the adept remains in a continuous state of samadhi. The spirit “returns to emptiness.”

But what does that actually mean? What is it exactly that returns to emptiness and what is this emptiness, anyway? Different passages suggest different interpretations. Some passages clearly suggest that “emptiness” describes the mind or the spirit and the adept is apparently supposed to return to some original state of mind in which there was no thought. We can call this the psychological interpretation of “emptiness.” Some passages suggest that “emptiness” describes space, the void, the existential emptiness beyond the highest heavens. This is also what the sequence of the cultivation process suggests. After training the immortal yang spirit to dwell outside the body and roam through emptiness, it can finally leave the body for the last time to dwell as an immortal, disembodied spirit. This is also what is suggested by the biographical narratives of the masters, who, in the last phase of their lives, retreat to the mountains, enter samadhi, and let their spirits return to emptiness as they leave their body of flesh behind. This is what we can call the cosmological interpretation of “emptiness.” What does Wu say exactly about these apparently inconsistent scenarios? How can we understand this ambiguity?

This chapter has three sections. First, I will discuss some passages on the scenario that depicts the celestial immortal as an official in the heavens. We will consider the idea of the celestial official, Wu’s description of this idea, and the use of a talisman as a passport to enter the heavens. In the second section, we will examine the scenario of the spirit returning to emptiness. We will see how the categories of the “psychological” and the “cosmological” do not match the understanding of emptiness in these texts. We read passages on each particular interpretation of emptiness and we will consider the notion that both perspectives could be valid at the same time. In the third and final section, we examine five aspects of the description of ultimate salvation: What does the adept practice? What happens to his body and spirit? Which are the kataphatic descriptions of ultimate salvation? Which are the apophatic descriptions? What is the meaning of the paradoxical descriptions of the “self” in its final state?

The Celestial Immortal as a Celestial Official

The model of immortality that recognizes five types, or five ranks, of immortality suggests that the highest attainment of inner alchemy is celestial immortality. Here, I will briefly consider the trope of celestial immortality, then I will present a few passages from Wu's writings which show us how this trope was used, and finally I will discuss the idea of a special talisman which Wu says was transmitted in his Longmen lineage and which functioned—aside from its function as a sign of an orthodox transmission—as a passport to the heavens.

The Idea of the Celestial Official

At least as early as the *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity*, that is, in the early fourth century, celestial immortality has been presented as the highest achievement of cultivation.⁶¹⁰ This work also refers to the highest attainment as an “immortal official” (*xianguan* 仙官).⁶¹¹ In the early Song, the *Chapters on Awakening to Perfection* simply states that celestial immortality is the highest objective of inner alchemy.⁶¹² The *Transmission of the Dao* also defines the celestial immortal as the highest of the five ranks of immortality and describes it as follows:

As far as celestial immortals are concerned, when [a terrestrial immortal who] is in the realm of dust continuously applies his skills and obtains release that is called a spirit immortal. When a spirit immortal who is restricted to dwell in the three isles, transmitting the way among the people, has merit on the way and has conducted himself virtuously among people, and when this meritorious conduct has been satisfactory, he receives a document from heaven to return to the Grotto-Heavens; that is called a celestial immortal. Since he is a celestial immortal, if he is restricted to dwell in the Grotto-Heavens, he fulfills his duty as a celestial official; the lower ones are called water officials, those in the middle are called earth officials, and those at the top are called celestial officials. When one has great merit in the heavens and on earth, as well as great conduct now and in the past, one can be transferred and promoted through the various offices, successively holding posts in the thirty-six Grotto-Heavens to return to the eighty-one Yang-Heavens and then successively holding posts in the eighty-one Yang-Heavens to return to the Natural Realm of Emptiness of the Three Purities.

天仙厭居塵境，用功不已，而得超脫，乃曰神仙。神仙厭居三島而傳道人間，道上有功而人間有行，功行滿足，受天書以返洞天，是曰天仙。既為天仙，若以厭居洞天，效職以為仙官，下曰水官，中曰地官，上曰天官。於天地有大功，於今古有大行，官官升遷。歷任三十六洞天，而返八十一陽天，歷任八十一陽天，而返三清虛無自然之界。⁶¹³

The spirit immortal obtains release from the body and the world of dust and it can dwell on the Three Isles, the isles of the immortals in the eastern sea.⁶¹⁴ To become a celestial immortal, the spirit immortal must await an order or request from the celestial authorities in the form of a “letter from heaven” (*tianshu* 天書). Whether or not he receives such a letter apparently depends on his moral conduct. When he receives such a letter, he can return to the Grotto Heavens where he is restricted to dwell. Here, the celestial immortal can start his career as an “immortal-official” (*xianguan* 仙官). Presumably depending on the degree of moral cultivation, the immortal can initially be appointed as “water official” (*shuiguan* 水官), “earth official” (*diguan*

⁶¹⁰ The earliest appearances of the term “celestial immortal” are found in the *Baopu zi* and *Shenxian zhuàn*. Ge Hong suggests that his description stems from earlier “scriptures on immortality” (*xianjing* 仙經). He says, “According to scriptures on immortality, superior scholars who ascend to emptiness with their whole body are called celestial immortals. Mediocre scholars who roam the famous mountains are called terrestrial immortals. Minor scholars who first die and then cast off [their dead body] are called corpse-liberated immortals. 按仙經云，上士舉形昇虛，謂之天仙。中士游於名山，謂之地仙。下士先死後蛻，謂之尸解仙。” See *Baopu zi neipian*, 2.11a. Also see Robert Campany's translation in his *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 75–76. He reads 舉形 as “rise up in their bodies” instead of “whole body.”

⁶¹¹ *Guan* 官 is a basic term for a government official. The “immortal-official” (*xianguan* 仙官) is first mentioned by Ge Hong in the *Baopu zi* and in the *Shenxian zhuàn*. The related term “celestial official” (*tianguan* 天官) appears in many early texts in variety of meanings. One of the earliest texts mentioning the celestial official is the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮; probably dating to the Warring states Period, 481–221).

⁶¹² The text says, “If you study immortality, you should study celestial immortality: only the Golden Elixir is the highest principle. 學仙雖是學天仙，惟有金丹最的端。” Translation in Pregadio, *Awakening to Reality*, 27.

⁶¹³ *Zhong-Lü Chuandao jī*, 1.5a-b.

⁶¹⁴ The Three Isles are usually taken to refer to Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈, and Yingzhou 瀛洲.

地官), or “heaven official” (*tianguan* 天官). Again, on the basis of moral conduct, this immortal-official can successively be promoted through the ranks of celestial officialdom, going through all levels of the system of heavens to the thirty-six grotto heavens and the eighty-one yang heavens. When he has traversed all these offices, he finally returns to the three highest heavens of the three purities, which is described here as the “natural realm of emptiness 虛無自然之界.”

Wu’s Celestial Official

Wu Shouyang also presents celestial immortality as the highest objective and he gives various passages in which he describes this state of being as something attainable through cultivation and as a state that has indeed been obtained by various historical persons. In this introductory passage, Wu briefly states what he considers the main objectives of cultivation:

The experts of immortality (i.e., “Daoists”) cultivate the way to become an immortal; the first verification is longevity without dying and the ultimate verification is the governing of heaven and earth.
仙家修道為仙，初證則長生不死，極證則統理乾坤。⁶¹⁵

Here, the whole process of cultivation is divided into the “first verification” and the “ultimate verification.” The first verification is the result of the cultivation of lifespan, the attainment of long life. The ultimate verification is referred to here as the “governing of Qian and Kun.” Qian and Kun are here synonymous with Heaven and Earth and thus describe the entire cosmos. In other words, the ultimate verification of cultivation consists of becoming a celestial official in charge of some sector within the cosmic administration. In the annotations to this passage, Qiu Chuji is cited as saying, “every inch of the earth and every foot of the heavens are all being governed.”⁶¹⁶ In the same passage, the Prince of Ji asks Wu how this is supposed to be imagined:

His highness the Prince of Ji once asked: “Celestial immortals are the ultimate of emptiness-nonbeing, how do they govern Qian and Kun?” Master Chongxu answered: “In the beginning of cultivation, when you take charge of the inversion of Qian and Kun, and when you take charge of the peaceful union of heaven and earth, that is also the beginning of governance. When the way is completed, [governance] will be like the Most High Three Great Celestial Worthies who are in charge of the [heavens of] Jade Clarity, Highest Clarity, and Great Clarity; the Jade Emperor who is the master of the myriad heavens; the Dark Emperor who is the Guardian of the Heaven of the Northern Pole; Eastern Florescence who is the emperor of the East; the World-Honored One who relieved the world and saved the people in the Western Heavens (i.e., India); the Officers of Heaven who administer the heavens, the Officers of Earth who administer the earth, and the Officers of Water who administer the waters; the Three Clarities who have those who manage the Nine Empyreans and the Thirty-Six Grotto-Heavens; those who manage the Twenty-Four Parishes, such as Celestial Master Zhang who administers the Yangping parish; those beneath the world of dust (the mundane world) who manage the Eighty-One Grotto-Heavens, those who are in charge of the Five Peaks, Li Jing from the Tang [Dynasty] who is in charge of the Central Peak, Zhang Zifang from the Han [Dynasty] who is in charge of Mount Wangwu, Xu Jingyang who is the one in charge of the Palace of the Elixir Platform; the Elder Wang Xi who is the one in charge of the upper isle of Penglai, Juanzi who is the one in charge of the middle isle, and Chen Tuan who is the one in charge of the lower isle of Penglai; the perfected man Zhongli who is the dharma teacher of the southern regions; Shao Jian who is in charge of Mount Kuanglu (Mount Lu in Jiangxi); Yang Taijun who is in charge of Mount Tiantai (Zhejiang); or the Three Perfected Lords Mao who are in charge of faults and bliss of the Three Primes. This all comes from the explanations of the *Taiqing yubua xianshu* and the stories of the common people. When you look at it on the basis of this, the words from perfected man Qiu had already been developed before.” The prince said: “Indeed.”

又昔吉王殿下問曰：天仙虛無之極，如何統理乾坤？沖虛子曰：初修時，主顛倒乾坤，主天地交泰，亦是統理之始。道成時，如太上三大天尊之主玉清、上清、太清者。玉帝為萬天之主者。玄帝之北極鎮天者。東華之帝東方者。世尊在西天救世度人者。天官管天，地官管地，水官管水者。三清有九霄、三十六洞天之理者，有二十四治之理者，如張天師管陽平治之類。塵世之下有八十一洞天之理者，有五嶽之主者，唐李靖主中嶽者，漢張子房主王屋山者，許旌陽為丹台宮主者，王喜先生為蓬萊上島主者，涓子為中島主者，陳搏為蓬萊下島主者，鍾離真人為南

⁶¹⁵ *Tianxian zhengli qianshu*, *biji*, 5.1a-2a, 7597.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*: “寸地尺天皆有所轄.” This quote appears in the *Changchun Qiu zhenren ji Xizhou daoyou shu* 長春邱真人寄西州道友友書 which can be found in the *Zhenxian zhibi yulu* 真仙直指語錄 (DZ 1256).

州講法師者，邵堅為匡廬山主，楊太君為天臺山主，三茅真君主三元罪福事。此皆出於《太清玉華仙書》之說及世人傳誦者。以此觀之，邱真人之言，亦先發明之者矣。王曰：是。⁶¹⁷

Wu refers to one specific text and to the stories of the common people as the sources of his portrayal of the heavenly realms and its administrators.⁶¹⁸ This depiction is, in other words, Wu's own particular bricolage from a variety of sources and does not necessarily represent one coherent tradition. Interestingly, the question of the prince concerns the relation between the notion that celestial immortals are supposed to return to ultimate emptiness and the notion that they are appointed as celestial officials. Wu's answer appears to assume what we usually refer to as macrocosm-microcosm theory; that is, human beings are a miniature cosmos, structurally and functionally analogous to the great cosmos. In the beginning of cultivation, the adept is understood to govern his internal microcosmos. At the end of cultivation, when the way is completed, governance of the cosmos means that the adept, now a disembodied spirit immortal, assumes office in the otherworldly bureaucracy.

Wu does not present a full picture of this bureaucratic system, but he gives some examples, based on one text and stories he apparently heard, of various types of beings that are in charge of various domains within the otherworldly cosmos. These beings include persons we only know as deities but also historical persons, such as the first celestial master, or Chen Tuan, both of whom have posthumously acquired a semi-deified status. This passage appears to present all these figures as various types of celestial immortals who are showcased here as examples of immortals who are known, from scriptures and stories, to have assumed office in the otherworldly bureaucracy in charge of various offices.

The Talisman

Wu refers a number of times in his texts to a talisman, or perhaps a set of talismans, that should accompany initiation in the orthodox Longmen lineage. He refers to this talisman in his signature, thus making it an integral part of his identity as a genuine Longmen master.⁶¹⁹ He compares the talisman with the robe and bowl used by Buddhists, presenting it as an emblem of privileged transmission. In another passage, he compares it with the “registers” (*fulu* 符籙) from the Zhengyi school, effectively positioning both in the category of those who study the Dao while allowing the Quanzhen school to occupy the superior position in this relationship. But, besides being an emblem of orthodox transmission, the talisman is also represented as having a practical function at the time of ascending to heaven:

This talisman refers to what is spoken of in the *Scripture of the Cavern of Spirit*: the tally to ascend to Heaven is used with a green girdle. When [the adept] is ready to ascend, the Gods of the [Five] Peaks detain the person and do not let him ascend if they do not see this tally. If the Water Spirit does not see this tally, then it detains the person and does not allow him to ascend. If the Earth Governor does not see this tally, then one cannot ascend and cross over. If the Heaven Governor does not see this tally, he closes the Heavenly Gates and does not allow one to ascend and enter. If one obtains the tally, one can go forward and enter the Purple Palace to have an audience with the Great Lord of the Dao. Hereafter, none of all the various divinities dares to detain you. This is one of the things possessed by disciples initiated by celestial immortals.

符節者，即《洞神經》云：升天券以青素帶，身臨升之日，五岳不見此券，則拘人不得升；水神不見此券，則留人不令升；地官不見此券，則不得升度；天官不見此券，則閉天門不令升進。得券則前入紫府見大道君，然後一切諸神不敢拘制。此天仙度弟子之所有事者。⁶²⁰

According to Wu, this talisman is described in the *Scripture of the Cavern of Spirit*, a text that is now lost.⁶²¹ He

⁶¹⁷ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.2a-b, 7597.

⁶¹⁸ *Taiqing jinque yuhua xianshu baji shenzhang sanhuang neibi wen* 太清金闕玉華仙書八極神章三皇內祕文 (DZ 855) or simply the *Taiqing yuhua xianshu* 太清玉華仙書.

⁶¹⁹ I have also discussed this talisman and its role in Wu's Longmen identity in van Enckevort, “Quanzhen and Longmen Identities in the Works of Wu Shouyang.”

⁶²⁰ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 3.53a-b, 7537.

⁶²¹ The *Scripture of the Cavern of Spirit* (*Dongshen jing* 洞神經) appears to be the name given to a version of the *Sanhuang wen* 三皇文 that became known in the mid-sixth century. The latter is the main scripture of one of the three divisions of the canon, containing the Cavern of Spirit (*Dongshen* 洞神) texts. The original *Sanhuang wen* nor this *Dongshen jing* are extant, but it is described, in the *Taishang dongshen sanhuang yi* 太上洞神三皇儀 (DZ 803), as having consisted of talismans along with explanations of these talismans. This original text was gradually expanded from three to eleven scrolls. The *Dongshen jing* version consisted of the *Sanhuang wen* in three scrolls and the *Badi jing* 八帝經 (Scripture of the Eight Emperors) in eight scrolls. This version was again expanded with the

probably learned this from quotes in another unnamed scripture.⁶²² In any case, the talisman is described as a tally (*quan* 券) that disciples who are initiated by a celestial immortal receive, presumably during the process of transmission as an aspect of initiation. This tally is needed upon the day of ascension to heaven, when the adept needs to show it to various divine officials. Presumably, these officials possess the counterpart for this tally so as to be able to grant adepts legitimate entrance. Thus, the talisman or tally functions almost as a passport that allows entrance into heaven. In another passage, where the receipt of the talisman is directly connected with the Quanzhen school, its origin is attributed to the Most High Lord Lao (Taishang laojun), via the Jade Emperor and the (palace) of Purple Tenuity (*zimei* 紫微).⁶²³ Again, it is described as that which must be checked on the day of ascension to allow one to be ranked among the immortals in the celestial bureaucracy.

If we take these passages together, the following story emerges. The talisman is said to originate from the deified Laozi, Taishang laojun, who dispatches the Jade Emperor in the Palace of Purple Tenuity to confer the talisman on the disciple. This happens, presumably, by mandating a master to transmit the talisman to the disciple during the rituals of initiation. Then, on the day of ascension, the adept carries this talisman with him on a green girdle. He uses the tally as a passport to be admitted to ever higher levels of heaven, successively being checked by the Gods of the [Five] Peaks (*wuyue* 五岳), the Water Spirit (*shuishen* 水神), the Earth Governor (*diguan* 地官), and the Heaven Governor (*tianguan* 天官). Finally, after passing the gate of heaven (*tianmen* 天門), the adept is allowed entrance in the Purple Bureau (*zifu* 紫府) to have an audience with the Great Lord of the Dao (*da daojun* 大道君).

The Cosmological and Psychological Return to Emptiness

The model of the three passes of cultivation suggests that inner alchemy culminates with a “return to emptiness” (*huanxu* 還虛). The third stage is called “refining the spirit and returning to emptiness” and, after three years of training the spirit to leave and enter the body, the adept enters constant samadhi while he returns to emptiness. Some passages suggest that this return to emptiness should be understood in a psychological sense while other passages suggest that we should understand emptiness in a cosmological sense.⁶²⁴

Psychological Emptiness

In the context of the cultivation process, the return to emptiness first occurs in the preliminary stage of the refining of the self. This stage is explained in most detail in two different chapters, explaining this stage as

addition of three further texts. See Yamada Toshiaki's entry on the *Sanhuang wen* in EOT, 837–839.

⁶²² The passage quoted by Wu does not appear in the *Taishang dongshen sanhuang yi* (see note above). A slightly differently formulated passage appears in the *Yuanshi wuliang duren shangpin miaojing sizhu* 元始無量度人上品妙經四註 (DZ 87), a collection of commentaries to the *Duren jing* by Yan Dong 嚴東 (fl. ca. 485), Xue Youqi 薛幽棲 (fl. 740–54), Li Shaowei 李少微 (fl. 625?), and Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (fl. 631–50), and collected by Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 (?–1094) with a preface dated 1067. The passage is cited in this text as derived from a *Dongshen jing shengtian quan* 洞神經昇天券. Another instance of this passage, almost identical to the passage in the *Yuanshi wuliang duren shangpin miaojing sizhu*, occurs in the *Yuanshi wuliang duren shangpin miaojing neiyi* 元始無量度人上品妙經內義 (DZ 90), another commentary to the *Duren jing*, compiled by Xiao Yingsou 蕭應叟 (fl. 1226). The “tally to ascend to heaven” (*shengtian quan* 昇天券) itself is mentioned in a number of scriptures in the *Zhengtong daoqiang*, including the *Taishang dongshen sanhuang yi*, where it is said to be missing.

⁶²³ See *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 2.14a, 7471: “all those who wish to learn the “Covenant with the Powers of Orthodox unity” (*zhengyi mengwei* 正一盟威) are conferred the talismans and registers by the imperial Lords who are put in charge by the highest authority. [All those] who wish to learn the Return of the Golden Liquor to the Elixir [field] of the Quanzhen way of immortality are conferred the talisman by the [Palace of] Purple Tenuity of the Jade Emperor of the way of immortality who is dispatched by the Most High Lord Lao. Therefore, those who possess the talismans and registers can rise [in the hierarchy] and confer them again [i.e., to others lower in the hierarchy]. Only those who possess the [Quanzhen] talisman will receive the “fire” and the “medicine” in secret... When the way is completed and [the adept] ascends, then, when [the celestial authorities] check the (Zhengyi) talismans and registers, [the adept has to] assume his assigned post, and when [they] check the (Quanzhen) talisman [the adept] will be ranked as an immortal or perfected. 凡有願學正一盟威者，上命所司帝君等授以符籙。願學全真仙道金液還丹者，太上老君，親遣仙道玉帝紫微，授以符籙。所以有符籙者，復可陞授符籙。有符節者，始得秘受火藥。…及道成飛昇，驗符籙，則歸原職。驗符節，則列仙真。”

⁶²⁴ Perhaps we should emphasize here that “cosmological” does not necessarily refer here to something “out there,” in deep space. Rather, the distinction between the “psychological” and the “cosmological” is between something “in the mind” and something outside the mind, “in reality.” Hence, there is the added connotation of the imaginative versus the real.

consisting of two distinct practices. First, in the fifth chapter of the *Straightforward Essays* on “refining the self,” he describes it as a program of disciplining one’s thoughts and behavior by upholding certain precepts. Second, in the first chapter of the *Recorded Sayings*, the text for advanced disciples, Wu explains that the more advanced aspect of refining of the self consists of the “first return to emptiness” (*zhuichu huanxu* 最初還虛). Here is how Wu describes this return to emptiness:

“Emptiness,” that is before the division of Vast Concealment, at the beginning of Ultimate Nonbeing.⁶²⁵ At this time, there were no heavens, no earth, no mountains, no rivers, and also no people, no self, no insects and no grasses and trees. The myriad phenomena were all empty and obscured without a sign. This is precisely the original substance of inner nature. To “return to emptiness” means to revert to the start of Ultimate Nonbeing so as to finish that original substance of inner nature.

虛也者，鴻蒙未判之前，無極之初也。斯時也，無天也；無地也；無山也；無川也；亦無人我與昆蟲草木也；萬象空空，杳無朕兆，此即本來之性體也。還虛也者，復歸無極之初，以完夫本來之性體也。⁶²⁶

Wu is providing a cosmological explanation of “emptiness” as a time before the creation of the cosmos; the time before the division of original chaotic unity, the time of ultimate “nonbeing.” But he is clearly also providing a psychological interpretation of “emptiness” as the original substance of the spirit. This becomes more pronounced when we look at the actual method to accomplish this, which is described as “only consisting of [maintaining a state of] ‘no mind’ in facing conditions.”⁶²⁷ The “conditions” (*jing* 境) are the objects of perception, the things one perceives. To return to emptiness means to make or keep the mind empty of the content of perception:

Then, when you look at heaven and earth, there is no form of heaven and earth; when you look at mountains and rivers, there is no trace of mountains and rivers; when you look at others and yourself, there is no appearance of others and yourself; when you look at insects, grasses, and trees there is no shadow of insects, grasses, and trees. The myriad phenomena are all empty, even one thought does not arise, the six roots (the organs of perception) are stable and they are not contaminated by even one particle of dust (i.e., the impression produced by the object of perception). This is then precisely the state of completion of the original substance of inner nature. If you return to emptiness like this, the mind of the past is unobtainable, the mind of the now is unobtainable, and the mind of the future is unobtainable and you instantaneously verify the highest one vehicle; why would you then still need to cultivate the gradual method of refining the self?

於是，見天地，無天地之形也；見山川，無山川之跡也；見人我，無人我之相也；見昆蟲草木，無昆蟲草木之影也；萬象空空，一念不起；六根大定，不染一塵；此即本來之性體完全處也。如是還虛，則過去心不可得，現在心不可得，未來心不可得，頓證最上一乘，又何必修煉己之漸法也哉？⁶²⁸

The original nature of the mind is as empty as the cosmos in the beginning of its development, totally devoid of any phenomenon. Originally the mind is empty, but at a certain time the mind is filled with the perceptual content of phenomena that seem to exist in a past, present, and future time frame. People, animals, vegetation, the environment, and also the self, they all seem to exist as things. But when the adept empties his mind again, the sense impressions of all these things disappear and the mind is empty again.⁶²⁹

As seen above, the chapter on the “first return to emptiness” describes this return to emptiness as a preliminary stage to the cultivation process of the three passes. The last chapter discusses the “final return to emptiness.” The practice that is described here follows, in the order of the cultivation process, upon the exit of the spirit and the practice of “nursing” which involves the gradual training of the yang spirit to leave

⁶²⁵ Vast Concealment (*hongmeng* 鴻蒙) is one of several names for primordial chaos. The *Zhuangzi* has several passages that connect various images of primordial chaos (importantly, Hundun 混沌 and Vast Concealment) with a mental state before, or beyond, sensory perception. See Kohn, *Sitting in Oblivion*.

⁶²⁶ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.22b, 7631.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*: 惟在對境無心而已

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁹ Interestingly, this return to emptiness is presented here as the highest possible achievement, the highest one vehicle. It is suggested here that an adept should empty his mind at the first stage of cultivation but it appears to be assumed that this will probably not be completely successful. Thus, ordinarily, an adept would have to proceed with the gradual method of disciplining the mind to then go through the whole process of gradual cultivation of inner alchemy; the end of which is again formulated to be a return to emptiness. But if one would succeed, an adept would have instantaneously verified, that is, experienced, the highest achievement and the gradual cultivation method would become senseless.

the body for ever greater distances and time period:

The “refining of the spirit” means that there is no spirit that can be concentrated [anymore]. Because during the time of “maintaining the center” and “nursing” there is still a spirit that “silently illuminates.” Hereafter, the spirit is not one’s own spirit, it has reverted to Ultimate Nonbeing and it has verified emptiness by embodying it. Even if it would go through a hundred million kalpas just to finish its lasting inner nature, how could it just be specifically nine years of facing the wall? We speak of nine years only because we wish to let those who have just verified spirit immortality know that “returning to emptiness” is the first task of verifying celestial immortality. Thus, within nine years you (gradually) don’t see a great way anymore that can be cultivated and you don’t see immortality or buddhahood anymore that can be verified. Hereupon, the mind has completely transformed with it (i.e., with emptiness) and the method has completely been forgotten with it, when you bring it to silence there is nothing to bring to silence and when you illuminate it there is nothing to illuminate. About which spirit can you speak then? Thus, we force a term on it to establish a method and call it simply the final return to emptiness.

煉神也者，無神可凝之謂也。緣守中乳哺時，尚有寂照之神。此後神不自神，復歸無極，體證虛空。雖歷億劫，只以完其恒性，豈特九年面壁而已哉！九年云者，不過欲使初證神仙者，知還虛為證天仙之先務也！故於九年之中，不見有大道之可修也，亦不見有仙佛之可證也。於焉心與俱化，法與俱忘，寂之無所寂也，照之無所照也，又何神之可云乎？故強名以立法，名為末後還虛云爾。⁶³⁰

Here, again, emptiness appears to qualify the spirit. During a process of continuous meditation, the spirit itself disappears. In the end, the adept lets his yang spirit “return to Ultimate Nonbeing” (*fugui wuji* 復歸無極) where it “verifies emptiness by embodying it” (*tizheng xukong* 體證虛空). But, are we still speaking about an epistemological condition of the mind? Or is this the yang spirit that is actually thought to leave the body to return to the outer fringes of the cosmos, beyond the numerous layers of heaven to empty space? Or, alternatively, does the yang spirit travel back through cosmological time, returning to an earlier state of cosmogenesis? Or are perhaps both true: is the return to emptiness simultaneously psychological and cosmological? Let us first consider a few more passages that emphasize the cosmological interpretation.

Cosmological Emptiness

While there is no doubt that some passages clearly describe emptiness as a quality of the mind, other passages suggest that “emptiness” should be understood in cosmological terms, as the void that precedes the formation of the cosmos. We already saw this in the short passage above where the description of the third stage suggests that the spirit is to be relocated to the realm of emptiness as a celestial immortal. This emptiness is still present at the margins of the cosmos, above the multiple layers of heavens. During the process of “nursing,” the adept “regulates the spirit to exit the shell” (*tiaoshen chuke* 調神出殼). Wu’s detailed descriptions clearly suggest that this was not intended as a metaphor. The spirit is supposed to leave the body through the “celestial gate,” the fontanel at the top of the head. It is said to penetrate the skull with a bang.⁶³¹ Outside the body, the spirit can take on the semblance of a human body or simply travel around as a formless spirit. By using his thoughts, the adept projects the spirit out of his body and into the sky or recollects it in his head. It is described as a dangerous process since the spirit can get lost and be unable to return to the body. Therefore, it must be trained to leave and come back by letting it exit for increasingly longer durations, traveling ever greater distances, first expressed in “steps” (*bu* 步) and then in “miles” (*li* 里). The adept recollects the spirit in the upper elixir field in the head and, when he exits, aims to reach the “great emptiness:”

When [the spirit] exits, the Great Emptiness is the place to escape to. When you let [the spirit] in, the upper field is the location to retain and nourish it.

⁶³⁰ *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.36b-37a, 7638-39.

⁶³¹ This is suggested by a quote from Zhongli Quan, “thunder at the celestial gate; ghosts and spirits are frightened 雷震天關鬼神驚.” This quote is from the *Pomi zhenyao ge* 破迷正道歌 (DZ 270), attributed to Zhongli. Wu explains, “the celestial gate opening like thunder speaks about the exit of the yang spirit 天門開如雷震，言出陽神者.” See *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.103b, 7454. In another passage, Wu explains, “[The spirit] only penetrates the bone (skull) at the old soft opening without moving. This explains that the spirit penetrates the bone to exit just like fire penetrates water to exit without going through an opening 但透其舊軟竅之骨而不動，言神透骨而出，如火透水而出，勿由孔竅也。” See *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 3.43b, 7532.

出則以太虛為超脫之境，收則以上田為存養之所。⁶³²

The “great void” (*taixu* 太虛) appears in several texts as one of the names for the primordial void that precedes the formation of the cosmos or as a name for one of several stages in the process of cosmogenesis. Wu appears to use this term here to denote the farther removed location in the sky where the spirit travels to, what we might call, outer space. The next passage also clearly suggests that the return to emptiness should be understood in cosmological terms. Emptiness is here explicitly described as a state of being disembodied. To return to emptiness means to leave the body and dwell in space as an independent spirit:

[When the spirit is] in the bodily shell, it is not empty. To return to emptiness means that [the spirit] does not attach to the bodily shell. There is an old saying, “to enter metal and stone without obstruction.” When you have a bodily shell, there is obstruction. When the spirit that has exited the bodily shell attains emptiness there is therefore no obstruction.

在軀殼則非虛。還虛者，不著於軀殼。古云入金石無礙者。有軀殼則有礙，出軀殼之神至虛，故無礙。⁶³³

And in the following passage:

When the spirit has been exited, it has spiritual power and can transform, After the spirit has exited, the spirit is empty without obstruction and thus it is able to transform. When the spirit has not exited yet, the form of the body (身形) forms an obstruction and it is unable to transform. **and when one refines one’s spirit that is able to transform and returns it to emptiness to unite with the Dao, that is called a celestial immortal. Regarding a celestial immortal, its substance is the same as the celestial Clear Emptiness and its virtue is the same as the celestial Ultimate Nonbeing of the Void Cavern.**

出神矣，則為神通變化；出神後，則神虛空無礙，故能變化。未出神則身形為礙，不能變化。煉其能變化之神，而還虛合道，則曰天仙。天仙者，體同天之清虛，德同天之空洞無極。⁶³⁴

Again, emptiness is associated with the disembodied spirit that can move about, in emptiness, without obstruction of the body. The celestial immortal is this free spirit that has left the body and returned to emptiness.

The Equivalence of Cosmology and Psychology

Although I have arranged the passages above according to their emphasis on either a psychological or a cosmological understanding of “emptiness,” we can see that most of these passages actually combine psychological and cosmological aspects. As a matter of fact, it is often not directly clear with which of these categories we are dealing. What are we to make of this? Fortunately, scholars who study Buddhist scriptures have encountered the same kind of issues that we encounter in these inner alchemy texts. There are passages and concepts that at times seem to suggest psychological states of mind, associated with meditative experiences, and at other times clearly suggest cosmological states or realms. Perhaps the best example is the idea of the realms of rebirth. Some passages clearly suggest that human beings are, after death, actually reborn in the realm of the hells, or the heavens, or one of the other realms that together make up the realm of samsara. Other passages suggest that entering the heavenly realm or entering the animal realm means that one’s state of mind resembles the conditions of this metaphorical “realm.” In the first case, the passages would favor a cosmological interpretation that considers the realms as “locations.” In the second case, the texts support a psychological interpretation that sees the realms as metaphors for what are really subjective “experiences.”

We often tend to take such categories as the “cosmological” and the “psychological” for granted, but analogous concepts in premodern Chinese, in as far as they exist at all, did not only have different connotations.⁶³⁵ These domains of reality and human experience were simply differently categorized and

⁶³² *Dandao jiapian, biji*, 6.36a, 7638.

⁶³³ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo, biji*, 5.27a, 7610.

⁶³⁴ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 2.20b, 7474. Void Cavern is another term describing the primordial chaos (Isabelle Robinet, EOT, 1043).

⁶³⁵ The whole notion of the “psychological” must obviously have meant something very different to a person living in pre-modern China than what it probably means to most of us post-Freudians. Further, there must have been a great variety of views on the category of the psychological in, let’s say, the pre-Han period, the Song dynasty, or the late Qing, or for someone without formal education, someone steeped in conventional literature, or someone trained in Buddhist meditation. When we examine Wu

demarcated. Buddhologist Rupert Gethin has formulated the “principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology.”⁶³⁶ Simply put, it suggests that the Buddhist accounts of cosmology are simultaneously also accounts of the structure of consciousness. Other Buddhologists have also examined aspects of this equivalency. Here, I will briefly examine some important aspects of this principle of equivalence.

One Map, Two Territories

Buddhist cosmology can be characterized as an account of all possible experience and a map of human life. This map is both a map of the structure of the cosmos as well as a map of the structure of consciousness. These structures are thought to be analogous. Hence, these cosmological accounts could be characterized as a singular map that represents two different territories.⁶³⁷ As seen above, a clear example is the notion of the “realms.” But many other elements of the cosmological map appear to display this same principle of equivalence. The notion of emptiness is, I believe, another clear example.

Being in Two Realms at the Same Time

Any sentient being will be in a certain cosmic realm at any given time as well as in a certain psychological realm at any given time and these do not necessarily conform. Thus, for example, when a being is born in the human realm as a human being it is possible to experience mental states that conform with the realms of the hells or heavens.⁶³⁸

Samsaric Mobility

The fact that a being can be in realm A and have mental states conforming with realm B is the basic mechanism behind what I propose to call “samsaric mobility,” the idea that one can move up or down in the hierarchy of realms with every rebirth. When mental states correlating with different realms than the one in which one currently experiences life become habitual, one will eventually be reborn in this other realm.⁶³⁹

Samadhi as the Locus of Equivalence

Richard S. Cohen, has described the state of samadhi as the nexus, the “locus of equivalence,” between the cosmological and psychological realms or the outer and inner world. He clarifies that samadhi should be understood as a state of mind rather than a technique. He adds that it is not merely a state of mind, noting that a meditator, according to the Buddhist sources, “can move around the cosmos, from earth to heaven or hell, mentally, by entering into specific states of samadhi.”⁶⁴⁰

Two Possible Interpretations; Two Necessary Interpretations

Buddhologist Paul Williams notes that the realms of samsara must at least also be cosmological realms of rebirth to be able to explain that rebirth in the six different realms takes place at all.⁶⁴¹ We may add that the realms must at least also be psychological states to be able to explain how a human being, during the process of cultivation that takes place within one particular lifetime, can progress from one realm to another. In other words, it appears that both interpretations must necessarily be true for the doctrine of the realms to make sense at all. The rejection of either one of these perspectives would cause inconsistencies and irresolvable problems interpreting certain passages.

Shouyang’s views on “the psychological,” mental activity was associated with the spirit (the *shen* or *xing*) residing in the heart. In terms of functions, this spirit was associated with thought and perception and also with the sense of “self.” The spirit was sometimes imagined as something that can move through the body and out of the body through the sense organs to contact the object of perception. During meditation or after death, the spirit was thought to leave the body. It could roam in the world, ascend to the heavens, live in a spirit world, or be reborn in another body. This means that the “psychological” was not inseparably connected with the body, let alone the brain, or even the heart. Psychology was not something experienced “between our ears.” The psychological could also be “outside” in the cosmos when the spirit left the body.

⁶³⁶ In Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 119–120.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 121–122.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122–123.

⁶⁴⁰ Cohen, *The Splendid Vision*, 84.

⁶⁴¹ Williams, Tribe, and Wynne, *Buddhist Thought*, 57.

Macrocosm-Microcosm Theory

I suspect that some readers may at this point in the examination wonder if and how all of this relates to so-called macrocosm-microcosm theory, the idea that the microcosm of the human being and the macrocosm—that is, the cosmos—are analogically related to each other. This is indeed an important idea in inner alchemy. Wu speaks of human beings as a “small heaven-and-earth” (*xiao tiandi* 小天地) that functions according to the same laws of yin and yang as the actual heaven-and-earth. Although there is some overlap between macrocosm-microcosm theory and the principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology, we should clearly differentiate these concepts. The principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology distinguishes between our consciousness and its cognitive constructions and the “reality” outside of our minds, the cosmos, out there in space, as well as here, in and around our own physical bodies. It is associated with the mismatch between the modern categories of the cosmological and the psychological and the premodern categorization of these classes. Macrocosm-microcosm theory, however, functioned within the premodern classification of the world. It assumed a different understanding of cosmos and psychology.

Idiosyncratic Emphases

Although our academic textbook presentations of traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism often tend to suggest a great deal of conformity, historical reality shows a lot more variation. Buddhists and Daoists did not always agree among themselves about the “correct” interpretations of basic doctrines. On the contrary, the accumulated religious literature of these traditions is *also* a record of the disagreements between the thinkers and writers of these traditions. Even though both the cosmological and psychological interpretation are often certainly possible and sometimes probably necessary, specific texts might still emphasize one of these perspectives over the other. I will restrict my comments here to the tradition of inner alchemy. Traditional scholars as well as modern scholars of this tradition have made attempts to devise classification schemes in order to arrange the diversity of traditions that took shape from the Song onwards.⁶⁴² Such classification schemes indicate that some traditions emphasized a cosmological interpretation of inner alchemy while other traditions emphasized a psychological interpretation.⁶⁴³

The Literal and the Metaphorical

There is perhaps an instinctive tendency among scholars to associate a preference for literality with naivety and a preference for the metaphoric with sophistication and, in the same vein, to associate the literal with the popular and the metaphoric with the elite. Although “statistically speaking” this may or may not be the case, there is, I would suggest, no self-evident correlation between these two variables and assuming this generalization to be true would inevitably lead to erroneous conclusions on the level of the individual.⁶⁴⁴

Psychologization and the Rejection of Cosmology

One of the characteristics of the encounter between modernism and traditional religions is a tendency to psychologize discourses on cosmology.⁶⁴⁵ In the field of Chinese religions, this has been shown most clearly

⁶⁴² The most famous classification scheme was devised by Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–92) and can be found in his *Zhongheji* 中和集 (DZ 249; 2.13a-17a). Surely inspired by similar Buddhist systems called “classification of teachings” (*panjiao* 判教), Li distinguishes Nine Grades of Side Doors (*pangmen jiu pin* 傍門九品), which he considers to be marginal traditions, and Three Vehicles of Gradual Methods (*jianfa sansheng* 漸法三乘), the proper inner alchemy traditions, of which the highest level is the Highest One Vehicle (*zhuishang yisheng* 最上一乘).

⁶⁴³ Like other classificatory schemes, Li Daochun’s system not only allows for a variety of interpretations in order to account for students of different levels of understanding, but also suggests a particular hierarchy that puts the “psychological” interpretation at the top. Li is representative of a group of inner alchemists who de-emphasize the body (*shen* 身) and instead emphasize “spiritual” cultivation. Pregadio refers to Chen Zhixu’s “radically spiritual interpretation” (EOT, 263), adding that Chen resembles in this respect Li Daochun and Liu Yiming (leaving aside here the issue whether Pregadio is correct in his characterization of Chen Zhixu, which is at odds with the conclusions of Clarke Hudson as well as most traditional and modern Chinese scholars who identify Chen as a sexual alchemist). Li is often grouped together with Liu Yiming and Min Yide. Robinet describes Li’s teachings as having a tendency to idealism (EOT, 635), which again suggests the same primacy of the subjective and psychological. For more on Li Daochun, see Crowe, “The Nature and Function of the Buddhist and Ru Teachings in Li Daochun’s (fl. Ca. 1288) Wondrous Way of Peerless Orthodox Truth.”

⁶⁴⁴ Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 126–127.

⁶⁴⁵ Aware of the contested nature of the concept of modernity, I will not examine this debate here in great depth except for to say that I follow David McMahan’s characterizations and I’m thinking in particular of those elements with a direct impact on the

to be the case in modern interpretations of Buddhism.⁶⁴⁶ As David McMahan's study of Buddhist modernism shows, this encounter involves modernizing forces among Buddhists in Asia as well as among those who identified with Buddhism in the West, each coming to these issues with their own discourses on modernity. Through these complex processes, modern forms of Buddhism have taken shape that are characterized, amongst others, by detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization. As McMahan suggests, the psychologization, that is, the interpretation of Buddhism as psychology, serves the "demythologizing and detraditionalizing functions of modernization."⁶⁴⁷ Both practitioners and scholars play a role in this process of modernization.

Very similar processes clearly appear to have been at work in the modernization of Daoism and inner alchemy, although the Daoist emphasis on the body provides perhaps less ground for presenting Daoism as a purely psychological teaching, as has often been the case with Buddhism. One of the most influential scholars to interpret inner alchemy for a western audience as well as a scholar who is probably the clearest example of the psychologization of inner alchemy is Isabelle Robinet. For Robinet, the cosmological discourse of inner alchemy is a didactic strategy to appeal to an illiterate audience and the correct understanding of inner alchemy entails that it is as a form of discourse aimed at psychological enlightenment.⁶⁴⁸ At the highest level, inner alchemy is purely "psychological," or "mental," or "mystical," a "technique of enlightenment."⁶⁴⁹ We have to be precise here. Robinet does not ignore the cosmological discourse of inner alchemy. On the contrary, she analyzes this discourse in detail and, as a matter of fact, identifies it as having a foundational role in her understanding of Daoism.⁶⁵⁰ But this cosmological discourse is ultimately not a description of "reality." It is a tool to achieve illumination.⁶⁵¹ Robinet saw Daoism as a "nominalist" tradition, rejecting the idea that reality could be adequately described in language. This Daoist stance on language is used to explain every contradiction and inconsistency:

Deeply nominalist, like Buddhism but unlike Confucianism and Legalism with their realistic tendency, Taoism has, since its origin, set at the basis of its discourse the powerlessness of the word and of thought. Taoists have always considered that the images they borrowed from Han thinkers and with which they built their fantastic visionary structures were only images, a conventional "language" that they must transcend. This may be why the deconstruction characteristic of the literate classes' speculations on cosmology could not affect them—it was carried on in the name of a scientific and rational truth or reality which is not that of Taoism. Thus, the contradictions inherent in the cosmological system that Taoists adopted could not upset them.⁶⁵²

But the images and the paradoxical language were not employed by Daoists to everything. In the writings of Wu Shouyang, as in many other writings, a large part of the texts is written in conventional language—adhering to a classical, non-contradictory logic—considered to be descriptive of what was thought to be ordinary reality. The language of paradox is only employed in some specific "technical" situations and in the description of the final state of the spirit.⁶⁵³ This specific aspect of Daoist linguistics should not be used as a trump card to "explain" every contradiction.⁶⁵⁴

interpretation of religion: the rejection of tradition in general, rationalism, and scientific naturalism and at the same time the reaction to these developments in Romantic expressivism. See David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

⁶⁴⁶ The best study on this subject is David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

⁶⁴⁷ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 52.

⁶⁴⁸ To be precise, these are not her literal words but my brief characterization of her views.

⁶⁴⁹ Robinet, *Taoism*, 216. I am aware that "psychological," "mental," and "mystical" are different terms with their own complex histories and certainly no synonyms. The point here is that notions such as "mysticism" and "spirituality" have undergone their own processes of psychologization and when these terms are used, they usually all point to the same idea, namely the subjective, psychological experience of religiosity.

⁶⁵⁰ Robinet, *Taoism*, 260.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, 261–262.

⁶⁵³ Wu Shouyang takes recourse to ambiguous language when he describes technical situations when things are in the middle of a process of change, not any longer this but not yet that, or when he describes a point of balance on a continuum that cannot be expressed in clear terms. I call this "technical" issues to suggest that the paradoxical language is needed here to describe the details of the cultivation process. The soteriologically most relevant example of paradox is related to the issue of the "existence" of the spirit after cultivation. Here, the use of paradoxical language is in effect a statement about the nature of reality.

⁶⁵⁴ In Robinet's studies of inner alchemy, Li Daochun is one of the most frequently cited authors and her understanding of the inner alchemy tradition appears to be based in large part on his *Zhonghe ji*. His emphasis on the psychological, along with his classification of other teachings, is obviously eminently suited to substantiate a modern psychologized interpretation. Consistently presenting Li Daochun as representative of the highest form of inner alchemy, she puts the Zhong-Lü school, with what she describes as a physical praxis, at the lowest end of the spectrum (Robinet, *Taoism*, 255). One wonders if she thought that the writers of the Zhong-Lü texts would have agreed with Li's and her's classification schemes. Clarke Hudson has also remarked on Robinet's

An Outsider's Perspective

As we saw, the texts themselves provide room for various interpretations. As Gethin emphasizes, the psychological interpretation is not a modern invention projected on what was really a cosmological understanding of the world. In other words, the existence of a psychological discourse, or what would be termed a psychological discourse in modern terms, is undeniable. At the same time, the existence of a cosmological discourse is just as undeniable, as many passages show that these cosmological accounts of realms and beings were read, at least by some, as descriptions of reality. But it is also clear that different authors each had their own idiosyncratic emphases. If we aim to disentangle the idiosyncracies of these various authors and our own academic interpretive perspectives as outsiders—and if we want to avoid reproducing the sectarian biases within the tradition—we need to provide space for the coexistence of different perspectives without privileging one of these as the “real” perspective to which others can be reduced.⁶⁵⁵ Buddhists and inner alchemists had a radically different idea of what “reality” was to begin with and it strongly appears that in their view of reality there was no problem with the coexistence of a psychological and cosmological understanding of “emptiness.”

Daoist Emptiness and Buddhist Nirvana

The ultimate objective of inner alchemy is described as a return to emptiness that is simultaneously cosmological and psychological. Fascinating as this may sound to an aspiring immortal, the actual practice of the final stage of cultivation is described in the least detail. Wu explains this lack of detail in one particular passage, saying that there is simply not much to say about this stage because it consists of effortless practice.⁶⁵⁶ Despite this lack of detailed instructions, we can find various passages that provide further characterizations of this final stage that can help us to make more sense of this aspect of inner alchemy. As with all stages of the cultivation process, Wu also notes what he believes are the Buddhist equivalents of the Daoist concepts. This is not only interesting for the fact that he makes these associations but also helps us fill in the gaps in our interpretation of Wu's understanding of inner alchemy concepts. In the final part of this chapter, we will examine these descriptions of the final stage.

I have thought it practical to examine this variety of themes by distinguishing a few general questions. First, there is the question of what an adept is actually supposed to do. The “practice” is described as not actually being a practice, but rather something that occurs instantaneously and effortlessly; a state of constant and complete samadhi. Second, there is the question of what happens to the body and the spirit. The texts suggest that the spirit leaves the body, leaving behind a corpse, dwelling through the cosmos as a disembodied spirit. This spirit is formless but can manifest itself in human or other form. Third, is the question of how we should characterize this final state. Descriptions include returning to emptiness, uniting with the Dao, returning to Ultimate Nonbeing and, in Buddhist terms, complete and perfect enlightenment. Fourth, is the question of how to describe what this final state is not. Such negative (apophatic) descriptions include the idea that the spirit has escaped the cycle of rebirth, transcended the cycle of kalpas, and has attained nirvana in the sense of the complete extinction of cognitive activity. The fifth and final question concerns the fate of the “self.” How should we describe what is supposed to happen to the self during the final state? Does it still “exist” as a yang spirit in the cosmos? Is it “extinguished” after the realization that the “self” was a hypothetical construct to begin with? The texts suggest that this problem cannot be expressed in language because of its binary nature. “Being” and “nonbeing,” or “existing” and “nonexisting,”

preference for Li Daochun's texts, saying: “In fact, many of her insights are based on a close reading of a single alchemical author, Li Daochun 李道純 (d. 1306), and thus do not take account of different teachings within the tradition.” See Hudson, *Spreading the Dao*, 14. Earlier, Douglas Wile had written a somewhat critical review of Robinet's monograph on inner alchemy, *Introduction à l'alchimie intérieure taoïste, l'unité et la multiplicité*. Robinet has written a response in which she explains her views on some of the issues discussed here. Again, she emphasizes that “That is why the technical aspect of their discipline, with all its numerous and somewhat confusing varieties, are placed by the *neidan* authors in a very secondary position.” (Robinet, “Response to Douglas Wile's Review of *Introduction à l'alchimie intérieure taoïste*,” 148). She acknowledges Wile's observation that she ignored the material aspects saying, “Moreover, these physiological aspects assume many varieties, according to diverse schools, sometimes with large discrepancies and sometimes with small ones, so that it is necessary on the physiological level to stick to a single school or interpretation if we want them to make sense. That is why, in writing this particular book, I “totally eradicated the material base” [...], as indeed many of the *neidan* authors I have studied explicitly do.” (Ibid., 146). She further repeats, as in other places, that according to her, it has been sufficiently demonstrated that Daoists were not concerned with physiological immortality.

⁶⁵⁵ Methodologically this involves, I suggest, actively searching for multiple possible ways of interpreting as well as actively searching for counter-evidence to limit the range of possible interpretations.

⁶⁵⁶ See *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.114b, 7459 and further.

are just categories that simply do not apply to the final state. Hence, the final state of the self can only be described in the language of paradox. Alternatively, the inner alchemists simply describe it as being “true,” but in a sense of “truth” that transcends binary language (thus, without implying its opposite). This “true self” does “not exist” and neither does it “not ‘not exist.’” Everything else that could be said about it would simply miss the point.

The Practice of the Final Stage

The third stage of the cultivation process can be further divided in two separate stages: the three years of nursing (*sannian rubu* 三年乳哺) and the nine years of facing a wall (*jiunian mianbi* 九年面壁) or nine years of great samadhi (*jiunian dading* 九年大定). The three years of nursing begins when the adept attains great samadhi and has created the yang spirit. Now, this yang spirit must exit the body to travel through space. In a period conventionally fixed at three years, the adept trains his spirit to travel over gradually increased distances and periods of time, continuously letting his spirit return to his head to be nourished, until he is able to let the spirit travel to the farthest regions of space. When this has been successful, he can proceed to the final stage of the whole inner alchemy process in which he is said to enter great samadhi and return the spirit to emptiness.

This practice that is no practice is referred to in several ways. First, the practice is described, in what are perhaps the most descriptive terms, as “constant samadhi” (*changding* 常定). Sometimes suggesting a technique, samadhi is a mental state of concentrative absorption. Thus, we might say that the adept is understood to constantly maintain this state of samadhi. Other terms could be described as negative (apophatic) descriptions of this constant samadhi. It is described as not being “practice” (*lian* 煉) and as effortless (*wuwei* 無為) instead of requiring effort (*gongfu* 工夫).⁶⁵⁷ During the first stage, the practice is said to evolve from no effort to effort (*cong wu ru you* 從無入有). During the second stage from effort to no effort (*cong you ru wu* 從有入無). During the third stage there is simply no effort anymore. The last stage is also described as a subitist method (*dunfa* 頓法) that is contrasted with the gradual approach (*jianfa* 漸法) during the preceding stages. This suggests again that the adept is not taking a step-by-step approach but attains the final state in an instant.

Body and Spirit

What happens to the adept, during this final stage, in terms of the body and spirit? What appears to be suggested is that the final stage coincides with the final exit of the spirit and the physical “death” of the adept. As the spirit leaves the body, it may manifest itself in physical form but this is not necessarily so. When it does, this is called the body outside the body (*shenwai youshen* 身外有身). Wu explains several times that the spirit is formless and one should not limit oneself (拘) to a bodily form. But he does state the possibility of the spirit manifesting itself in form:

If you wish to manifest a body, so that people can see it, you can just make a body (了身) outside the body. One body, many bodies, a hundred bodies, a thousand bodies, or a trillion bodies; you can transform them endlessly. This is possible because the yang essence and yang *qi* have returned to the origin and reverted to emptiness. Because the ancient immortals were able to do this, they used it to inspire the people to develop an intense ambition. Just like the Buddha used skillful means to transform people. How could you restrict the [notion of a] “body outside the body” to [simply being an] expression?

若欲顯身，令人見之，身外便能了身。一身多身、百身千身、萬億身，皆能變化無窮。如此者，是因陽精陽炁，歸元還虛所能也。古仙遂即所能然者，為鼓舞人趨向決烈之志，如佛之善巧方便化人，豈拘拘以身外身為言哉！⁶⁵⁸

This is an interesting passage for several reasons. For one, because Wu characterizes the “body outside the body” as a Daoist type of “skillful means,” the pedagogical strategy used by Buddhists in order to adapt

⁶⁵⁷ The notion of “refining” (*lian* 煉), or “practice” as I interpret it here, is usually associated with a step-based, or at least a gradual, type of practice (*jianfa* 漸法) and as such contrasts with notions such as effortless (*wuwei* 無為) “practice” or subitist methods (*dunfa* 頓法).

⁶⁵⁸ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.93a, 7449.

their teachings to the abilities of their students. Immortals, Wu suggests, used their skill to produce a body outside the body to impress potential students. But not, as one might expect, by telling stories about these formidable skills. The immortals supposedly roused the students' imagination by actually showing their skills. Hence, this passage is one of many that clearly suggests that the idea of the spirit leaving the body and being able to manifest itself in form was considered to be just as real as many other things one has not actually personally verified; as real, that is, as the emperor in Beijing.

The idea that, during the last stage, the adept leaves the body as a spirit, leaving behind the body as a corpse, was apparently not a matter of doctrine—that is, the texts never seem to mention the corpse—but it is suggested by the descriptions of the cultivation method and by the biographies. The cultivation method suggests that, all along, this spirit is being prepared to leave the body and that it is necessary to leave the body because it limits the spirit. Even though one might be able to avoid physical death for a long time, eventually every embodied spirit would perish anyway when the kalpa of destruction ends the current cosmos. Hence, one creates a yang spirit able to live outside the body and trains it, during the three years of nursing, to travel through space. At some moment, this spirit leaves the body indefinitely. This is also the suggestion of the biographies, which have Cao Huanyang and Wu Shouyang retire from the world to finish their last task and issue the yang spirit.

The Final State in Positive Terms

The final state is described in positive terms (kataphatic) in various ways. When the spirit leaves the body for the last time, this is described as returning to emptiness, uniting with the Dao, or returning to Ultimate Nonbeing. To unite with the Dao (*hedao* 合道) is a trope that can be found in many texts but the meaning of this phrase never seems to be explained in any more concrete terms than that the spirit is somehow supposed to merge with the Dao. In the passages in which Wu mentions this idea we also do not find much information to provide this notion with more substance. Occasionally, Wu refers to the third stage with the phrase “refining the spirit, returning to emptiness, and uniting with the Dao.”⁶⁵⁹ This “uniting with the Dao” is sometimes presented as a distinct additional stage of cultivation.⁶⁶⁰ That is clearly not the case with Wu Shouyang, who presents “uniting with the Dao” as one way of describing the final return to emptiness. Similarly, the return to emptiness is often described as a return to Ultimate Nonbeing (*wuji* 無極). The term “emptiness-nonbeing” (*xumu* 虛無) is also often used to describe this final goal, combining the ideas of emptiness and nonbeing. This is again to be interpreted in a psychological as well as a cosmological sense; emptiness-nonbeing conforms with the pre-heaven state of Ultimate Nonbeing that precedes the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極) and it is also the pre-heaven state of spirit and *qi* when the spirit is without cognitive activity and the *qi* is untouched by the passions.

In positive Buddhist terms, the final state is described as the attainment of enlightenment. Wu uses several terms of Buddhist origin to describe this. Let us briefly review what appear to be some of the main terms and see how Wu explains them.

In the final state, the adept experiences “constant samadhi” and this cultivation of samadhi never ends.⁶⁶¹ This is also described as the correct samadhi (*zhengding* 正定; S. *samyak-samadhi*), the eighth and final

⁶⁵⁹ See *Xianfo hexong yulu*, *biji*, 1.102b (7453) and 1.114b (7459): 煉神還虛而合道

⁶⁶⁰ The idea of uniting with the Dao is already mentioned in the *Daode jing*, where it is described as “uniting with the Dao” (*tongyu* 同於道; chapter 23) or “being [one with] the Dao” (*nai* 乃道; chapter 16). See Michael, *In the Shadows of the Dao*, 81. The exact phrase *hedao* 合道 can be found throughout Daoist texts. In inner alchemy, it is sometimes suggested that this represents an additional stage that has been added in later developments to the main three stages. Chen Yingning, for example, claimed that this stage was added later to the original inner alchemy sequence. See Liu, “Scientizing the Body,” 164. However, this idea already occurred in the *Chuandao ji* where it takes the place of returning to emptiness: “and then you refine the form, after refining the form you refine the *qi*, after refining the *qi* you refine the spirit, [and so?] you refine the spirit to unite with the Dao; only then it is called the completion of the way. ...而後鍊形，鍊形而後鍊氣，鍊氣而後鍊神，鍊神合道，方日道成...” (*Xinzheng shishu Zhong-Li chuandao ji*, 23b).

⁶⁶¹ Many passages state that the adept finally continues in an endless state of samadhi and Wu regularly quotes the same line, attributed to Shakyamuni, to make his point: “I therefore say, the beginning of exiting samadhi is the beginning of entering samadhi. Even though celestial immortality has already been realized, there is not a moment that you are not in samadhi. Hence, the World-Honored One also said, ‘The realm of emptiness has a limit but my cultivation never has a limit.’ That is exactly this. After the end of the cosmos, when you have transcended the kalpic cycles, there is also no moment that you are not in samadhi. 我故曰：出定之初，即為入定之始也。雖天仙已證，亦無不定之時也。故世尊亦曰：“虛空界盡，我此修行，終無有盡。”正如此也！至於終天地之後，超過劫運，亦無不定之時也。” (*Tianxian zhengli zhibun zengzhu*, *biji*, 4.78a, 7587)

practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddhist concept of *bodhi* (also transcribed as *puti* 菩提), which refers to the knowledge that enables the liberation from samsara, is usually translated as “awakening” (*jue* 覺). This term also means something like “awareness” and as such also refers to the mind or the self, or perhaps we should say the awakened mind. I will use both translations here to emphasize this dual meaning. A bodhisattva is literally a “being” (*sattva*) intent on cultivating such an “awakened mind” (*bodhi*). A buddha is someone who has attained full awakening-awareness (*zhengdengjue* 正等覺, or simply *zhengjue* 正覺; S. *samyak sambodhi*). Wu explains that this full or “correct” awakening-awareness refers to constant awakening-awareness.⁶⁶²

The term “perfect awakening-awareness” (*yuanyue* 圓覺) is explained by Wu as signifying the completion of the way of awakening-awareness (*juedao* 覺道). He compares it with utmost emptiness and tranquil extinction.⁶⁶³

Another distinction is between “intrinsic awakening-awareness” (*benjue* 本覺) and “actualized awakening-awareness” (*shijue* 始覺). This is explained as a matter of perspective: from the enlightened perspective, every being is already awakened-aware (intrinsic), but from the ordinary perspective one needs to go through a gradual program of training to realize this fact, to “actualize” it.

The *Flower Garland Sutra* makes a distinction between “equal awakening-awareness” (*dengjue* 等覺) and “sublime awakening-awareness” (*miaojue* 妙覺). Wu explains “sublime awakening-awareness” as the most subtle form of constant awakening-awareness and apparently the same as “perfect awakening-awareness” (*yuanyue* 圓覺).⁶⁶⁴

In one passage, Wu explains some of these terms as follows:

Awakening/awareness, that is a buddha or an immortal. During dhyana-samadhi, the awakening/awareness shines in samadhi; during emptiness-nonbeing and during tranquil extinction, it is the awakening/awareness that shines in emptiness-nonbeing and tranquil extinction. Hence, immortality and buddhahood are from beginning to end all by way of the shining awakening/awareness. The shining awakening/awareness is the real realization in the mind. If there is no shining awakening/awareness, then its falsely claimed to be cultivation and there is absolutely no real realization. It is only verbal samadhi.

覺者，是佛、是仙。當禪定時，則覺照在禪定；當虛無時、寂滅時，則覺照在虛無、在寂滅；所以仙佛自始至終皆由覺照。覺照者，心中之實悟也；若不覺照，乃是假說修行，而全無實悟，只為口頭三昧是也。⁶⁶⁵

The Final State in Negative Terms

The final state is also described as a transcendence of the ordinary state of being. Hence, this “transcendence” is also defined by what supposedly has been transcended. In other words, the final state is also defined in negative terms (apophatic) by what it is not. The main recurring negative descriptions of the final state are

⁶⁶² “Correct awakening-awareness” (*zhengjue* 正覺) is described as constant awakening-awareness during the tranquility of dhyana-samadhi: “Correct samadhi is when during dhyana-samadhi [there is] tranquility and constant awakening-awareness. 正覺者，為禪定中寂而常覺。” (*Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.121b, 7463).

⁶⁶³ Wu describes “perfect awakening-awareness” (*yuanyue* 圓覺) as the completion of the path of awakening-awareness; i.e., the path of Buddhist cultivation. He equates perfect awakening-awareness with the Daoist concept of utmost emptiness-nonbeing (and in this passage with the Buddhist concept of tranquil extinction, which is nirvana, here presented as a Daoist concept!): “Perfect awakening-awareness means that the path of awakening-awareness has been perfected; that is what Daoists call the limit of empty-nonbeing and tranquil extinction. 圓覺者，覺道圓滿，即仙家言虛無寂滅之極處。” (*Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 2.50b, 7489). It appears that *yuanyue* 圓覺 is a term of Chinese origin that has no precise Sanskrit equivalent.

⁶⁶⁴ Sublime awakening-awareness (*miaojue* 妙覺) is described as the most sublime state of correct awakening-awareness. “Sublime awakening-awareness, that is the most sublime state of correct awakening-awareness, when you have verified and entered the realm of Grotto Emptiness and Mysterious Wonder, in the time when there were no heaven and earth [yet], when awakening-awareness was still existing by itself, when the path of awakening-awareness is perfected and you have transcended the kalpa’s. It is attained through actualized awakening-awareness and intrinsic awakening-awareness and there is nothing else to attain. Hence, the path of awakening-awareness must be entered and accomplished through the orthodox knowledge and vision of the immortals and buddhas. Therefore, I say, that it is also impossible without knowledge and vision. 妙覺者，即正覺之精妙處，證入洞虛玄妙之境，於無天地時，覺猶獨在，覺道圓滿而超劫者是也。覺既圓滿，即是妙覺。由始覺本覺而至，非別有所至。所以覺道，必由仙佛正知見，以入以成，故曰無知見也不可。” (*Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.75a, 7440). In practice, correct awakening-awareness, perfect awakening-awareness, and sublime awakening-awareness appear to be often used almost interchangeable.

⁶⁶⁵ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.107a-b, 7456.

the idea of having ended the cycle of rebirth, having transcended the kalpic cycles, and having attained nirvana (meaning extinction). All of these concepts originated in the Buddhist tradition. To start with the problem of rebirth, the idea is that if one is able to become immortal, and hence avoid death, there will also be no more rebirth:

Those who end birth-and-death do not have birth-and-death anymore and that is called completing not being born and not dying. Since common people are born with a body it must be difficult not to die. Since when you die you do not have a body (anymore), it must be difficult not to be reborn. This is the inevitability of a normal principle. It is something that normal people are unable to avoid. If you want to end birth-and-death, you must protect this body and avoid death. If the intelligent nature is constantly in this body, there is no nature that can be reborn in another [body]. In this way, birth-and-death are naturally completed. If you cannot protect this body and reach a point of certain death, [your] nature leaves this damaged body and quickly searches an anchor to rely on and will certainly be reborn in another body. How can you say that because you die now you have completed birth-and-death? Only immortals and buddhas are able to not die and not be reborn. Only the way of the immortals and buddhas is the way of not dying and not being reborn. Because they let spirit and *qi* remain stable (in samadhi) without separating from the body, they have the achievement of the samadhi of complete tranquility and complete extinction. Thereafter, they can protect their body and not die and achieve not being reborn, which is truly completing birth-and-death. This is the dharma expounded by immortals and buddhas that teaches people the explanation of leaving the evil paths and the directions of suffering of rebirth far behind.

了生死者，生死已無，了不生不死之謂也。凡人既生有身，必難得無死；既死無身，必難得不生；此常理之必然，亦常人之不能不然者。欲了生死，必保得此身不死；靈性常在此身中，更無何性往彼受生；此生死自然了矣。若不能保身而至必死，則性離此壞身，急尋依泊，必復生為彼身；豈可以今之死，而冒稱為了生死乎？唯仙佛能不死、而不生；唯仙佛之道，是不生不生之道也。以其使神氣住定不相離身，有寂盡滅盡定之功，然後能保身不死，而得不生，為真了生死也。此仙佛所說之法，教人遠離惡道苦趣之說也。⁶⁶⁶

Death is something that is connected with the body; when the body perishes, the spirit eventually transits through one of the six paths of rebirth to inhabit a new body. At the final stage, the adept lets his spirit leave the body and, in the eyes of the world, he “dies.” But in the view of inner alchemy, this is not associated with “death.” On the contrary, by creating a yang spirit and enabling it to dwell in the cosmos without a body means having become a spirit immortal and signifies that one has avoided death. Not experiencing death, one will never be reborn again and one has escaped the cycle of rebirth.⁶⁶⁷

But as a free-dwelling yang spirit roaming the cosmos, this spirit is still part of this cosmos and since this cosmos, according to Buddhist cosmology, will eventually be destroyed, to really become immortal one still needs to transcend the cycle of the kalpas. Wu repeatedly states that the final stage also involves “transcending the revolution of the kalpas” (*chao jieyun* 超劫運). There are various explanations of what *jieyun* 劫運 is; some read it as the misfortune of the kalpas, some as apocalyptic celestial movements. Wu uses this term to refer to a cycle of kalpas—very long periods of time—following each other, ending with the destruction of the complete universe, the kalpa of destruction (*huaijie* 壞劫). In the kalpa of destruction, the cosmos (*tiandi* 天地; heaven and earth) will be destroyed. Hence, if an adept really wants to continue his existence, he needs to transcend the cosmos itself in order not to be destroyed during the kalpa of destruction. One transcends the kalpas, Wu says, when one attains constant samadhi:

The endless samadhi is precisely the cultivation of transcending the kalpic revolutions. If the kalpic revolutions come about, [you are] only in samadhi and thus [you] will not be destroyed along with the kalpa. 無盡之定，正是超劫運之修行。若劫運至，只在定中，故不隨劫壞。⁶⁶⁸

In passages translated below, returning to emptiness and nonbeing means returning to a state before the coming into being of the cosmos and before the coming into being of a “self.” In this pre-heaven state, one has transcended the revolution of kalpas.

The return to emptiness of the spirit is also equated with the Buddhist soteriological objective of

⁶⁶⁶ *Xianfo hezhong yulu*, *biji*, 2.90b, 7509.

⁶⁶⁷ That might explain the otherwise somewhat tautological phrase “longevity without dying” (*changsheng busi* 長生不死). Instead of the endless cycle of “birth-and-death,” one obtains a long life and no more death.

⁶⁶⁸ *Xianfo hezhong yulu*, *biji*, 2.6b, 7467.

nirvana. Wu uses both the transcription *niepan* 涅槃 as well as the translation “tranquil extinction” (*jimie* 寂滅). According to the Buddha’s biography, he had two experiences of nirvana: once, at thirty-five, when he became enlightened and ended the causes of rebirth and once, forty-five years later, when he died. The interpretation of these separate events gave rise to two concepts of nirvana: “nirvana with remainder” (*youyu niepan* 有餘涅槃; S. *sopadhisesa-nirvana*) and “nirvana without remainder” (*wuyu niepan* 無餘涅槃; S. *anupadhisesa-nirvana*). What remains after attaining the first state of nirvana is the body and the mind as well as the karma of this present and final lifetime. The final nirvana occurs at death and signifies the end of the body as well as the consciousness and thus, without something remaining, ending the cycle of rebirth.⁶⁶⁹ Wu explains his understanding of these terms as follows:

Entering nirvana and not yet really verifying it is what the World-Honored One called “nirvana with remainder.” Gradually pursuing it from here is called the gradual method. This method and this principle are referred to in a metaphor by the immortal saints as “nourishing the embryo.” When it is completed in the end, there is no exhalation and inhalation and it is the samadhi of complete extinction. If a man and a woman in the world of mortals start to have intercourse, there are only two *qi* that unite as one and there is no embryo yet and there is absolutely no thing. The appearance of production-and-cessation has ceased. The traces of exit-and-entrance have become tranquil and have gone extinct. The mind has become a mind without production-and-cessation. The body has become a body without birth-and-death. As soon as you obtain this, you suddenly are directly one with emptiness. Hence, the immortal saints called it in a metaphor the “completion of the embryo.” The World-Honored Buddha called it “nirvana without remainder” and, after this, he emerged from the womb and emitted his spirit.

入涅槃而未實證，世尊謂之有餘涅槃。由此而漸趨者也，猶稱為漸法。即此法此理，而仙聖喻之曰：養胎也。其終成也，無呼吸而滅盡定矣。若人世男女，始媾之時，只二炁合一而未成胎，渾然無物也，生滅之相滅已。出入之跡寂滅，心為不生不滅之心，身為不生不死之身。從此一得，頓然直與虛空同。故仙聖喻之曰胎成也。世尊佛謂之無餘涅槃，而後脫胎出神。⁶⁷⁰

Nirvana with remainder, as Wu explains it, is attained during the second stage of cultivation when the “embryo is nourished” (*yangtai* 養胎). Wu associates it with the extinction of the respiration. Nirvana without remainder is attained when the spirit exits the body and there is no more respiration nor any activity of the mind.⁶⁷¹

The Paradoxical Final Fate of the Self

The “spirit” that returns to emptiness, is also described as the “true self” (*zhenwo* 真我). In the last lines of his autobiography, Wu tells us how he completed his filial duties before he finally could completely devote himself to the last stages of cultivation. Then, he continues his poetic description of the final stages of the cultivation process:

With disheveled hair and a dirty face for many years, ... sitting up straight on my meditation cushion without falling asleep; ... as soon as I let it happen, I suddenly transcend the measureless kalpas; there is no need anymore to speak of [the time] before being born. When you are in samadhi until you transcend the kalpas, you have verified [the “time”] “before not yet born.” Then, there is no way to speak about it again. When you [would] speak about “not yet born” again, there [would also] be a “born” and you would get bogged down in two meanings. **Before heaven and before earth, “I” was already there,** “I was already there” refers to the original spirit that precedes heaven and earth. It is that with which one transcends the kalpas without being destroyed along with Heaven and Earth. **Not giving birth to a “self”, that is the “true self”;** The true self is the greatly tranquil substance of inner nature [which appears] when you do not develop the thought of the existence of a self. [This true self] exists beyond heaven and earth and the revolutions of the great kalpa and therefore it is not destroyed along with them. When a self exists, it is still

⁶⁶⁹ The last nirvana is also called “final nirvana” (*banniepan* 般涅槃; S. *parinirvāṇa*). While these two basic modes of nirvana are thought to be attainable by every human being, Buddhist eschatology distinguishes a third type of nirvana reserved for the Buddha alone. This is the “final nirvana of the relics” (*śarīra-parinirvāṇa*). When, at some point in the future, the teachings of the Buddha have disappeared, his relics (*śarīra*), which are enshrined in numerous locations all over the world in stupas, will be reassembled again into his body. See PDB, 590.

⁶⁷⁰ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.90–91a, 7447–48.

⁶⁷¹ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.91a, 7448: “without remainder means that being and nonbeing do not enter the tranquil and extinguished mind and respiration. 無餘者，無有不入寂滅之心與息也。”

something from after the coming into existence of heaven and earth. When [this self] is brought forth by heaven and earth then why would it not be extinguished by heaven and earth? If there does not exist a self, then it is similar to the non-existence of heaven and earth. When heaven and earth are destroyed, this self is also destroyed. Both of these are not the true self. Only the self that is not a self is the true self. **When I reach the point where earth and heaven do not exist and do not ‘not exist,’** The non-existence of non-existence and [the simultaneous] non-existence, this is the ultimate of the utmost ultimate. This is what the scripture calls “mystery of mysteries, marvel of marvels.” **Only then “this” might be celestial immortality.** “This” is the true self; not non-existing and [simultaneously] non-existing. Because “I” am not non-existing and at the same time “I” am non-existing, I regard heaven and earth as “not non-existing and at the same time non-existing.” I regard the revolutions of the great kalpa as “not non-existing and at the same time non-existing.” Although heaven and earth are destroyed along with the kalpa, [they are] nevertheless a “not non-existing and at the same time non-existing” heaven and earth, so how can they be tied to me? Therefore [my true self] is not destroyed along [with them] but permanently exists in the “not non-existing and at the same time non-existing.” That is why I said that only “this” is this true self.

蓬頭垢面已多年，...蒲團兀坐不成眠。...一任頓超無量劫，不須猶說未生前。定到超劫，則證到未生前矣。無可再說，再說未生即是有生，落二義者。天先地先先有我，先有我即先天地之元神，所以超劫運者，不隨天地同壞。不生有我是真我。真我，則不生有我之念，是大寂性體。在天地及大劫運度之上，故不隨以壞。若有我，則猶是天地之有後者，為天地之所生，焉不為天地之所滅；若無我，又同天地之無，天地壞我即壞，皆非真我；惟我而不我，是為真我！我到地天無無無，無無亦無，是至極之極。即經所謂玄之又玄，妙之又妙。方許天仙是這個。這個者，是真我；無無亦無。我既無無亦無，視天地無無亦無矣。視大劫運度無無亦無矣。天地雖隨劫壞，猶若無無亦無之天地，何繫於我？故不隨壞，而常存於無無亦無！故曰這個方是這個真我。⁶⁷²

Ordinarily, people “give rise to the thought of the existence of a self” (*sheng youwo zhi nian* 生有我之念) and thereby bring this “self” into existence. The ordinary “self” is thus a conceptual construction. The fact that it is a conceptual construction or a belief means that it belongs to the category of phenomena that came into existence after the birth of the cosmos or “heaven and earth;” it belongs to the realm of post-heaven. Belonging to the cosmos, this constructed “self” is inevitably bound to be destroyed, along with the destruction of the cosmos at the end of a kalpa. Instead of thinking that one has a “self,” or thinking that one does not have a self, one should return to the pre-heaven state of affairs in which there was no “being” and no “non-being,” no “self” and no “non-self.” Such a state of affairs, which is supposed to transcend the existence of concepts altogether, can only be expressed in terms of a paradox: “no non-being and non-being” (*wuwu yi wu* 無無亦無). Applied to the cosmos, one cannot state about the pre-heaven that it exists but also not that it does not exist. Applied to the self, it also means that the self cannot be said to exist but can neither be said to not exist. Instead of giving rise to thoughts of an existing or non-existing “self,” one should return to the substance of the spirit (*xingtǐ* 性體) that is “great tranquility” (*daji* 大寂).⁶⁷³ Wu says that the self exists before the cosmos in the pre-heaven realm and it is called the “true self.” This true self is the original spirit (*yuanshen* 元神) that has transcended the cosmos and the kalpic cycles. This “true self” is the celestial immortal.

⁶⁷² *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 3.58b-59b, 7539–7540.

⁶⁷³ Soothill and Hodous gloss “great tranquility” (*daji* 大寂) or “great tranquility and extinction” (*dajimie* 大寂滅) as translations of *parinirvāna* (*banniepan* 般涅槃; final nirvana). Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 87.