

THE NOTION OF “FORM” AND THE WAYS OF LIBERATION IN DAOISM

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Dans certains textes taoïstes et des sources liées à la cosmologie classique, la « forme » (xing) est représentée comme étant le seuil entre le Dao et les objets. Elle est non seulement considérée comme une étape ontologique et cosmogonique se situant entre les « images » (xiang) et la matière (zhi), mais aussi comme le sanctuaire de l'esprit (shen). C'est à ce propos que l'appendice Xici au Yijing dit : « Ce qui est au-dessus de la forme s'appelle le Dao ; ce qui est au-dessous de la forme s'appelle l'objet ». D'autres textes décrivent pareillement la forme comme une phase intermédiaire dans le processus ontologique allant du Sans-forme (wuxing) aux « dix mille êtres ». Parmi ces textes figure un apocryphe de la période Han sur le Yijing qui décrit ce processus comme se produisant en quatre étapes dans lesquelles la première est représentée par le chaos indifférencié (hunlun), tandis que les autres trois sont représentées respectivement par le souffle (qi), la forme, et la matière. À la fin de ce processus, la forme revêt encore son rôle d'intermédiaire en tant qu'à la fois contrepartie et sanctuaire de l'esprit. De cette façon, comme l'indique le Huainan zi, la forme est, avec l'esprit et le souffle, l'un des trois constituants principaux de la vie.

Sur cette base, le neidan et d'autres traditions soutiennent que le lieu de la sublimation alchimique n'est pas le corps matériel (ti) mais la « forme », et que c'est en dépassant cette forme qu'on atteint le Dao. Se différenciant de ces traditions, le neidan a formulé ses propres doctrines en puisant à d'autres sources anciennes. Un exemple est ce qu'on appelle la « libération de la forme » (xingjie). Cette notion apparaît pour la première fois dans un manuscrit de Mawangdui, le Shiwen (Dix questions), où l'on dit que « ce qui coule dans la forme (liuxing) produit la vie ; mais lorsque par cet écoulement on engendre un corps [...], la mort se produit ». Le Shiwen distingue ainsi la forme du corps en disant que, si par l'engendrement de la forme, la vie se manifeste, c'est par l'engendrement du corps que la mort apparaît. Pour inverser cette séquence, l'on se doit de cultiver son souffle afin de remplir la forme grâce à « l'essence culminante du Ciel et de la Terre ». La personne qui est capable de faire ceci obtient la « libération de la forme ». En tant qu'exemple de « métamorphose » (bianhua), la « libération de la forme » est également associée à la « libération du cadavre » (ou « du corps mortel », shijie). La relation entre ces deux notions est explicite dans certaines sources taoïstes des Han et des Six Dynasties où la forme est l'objet de la sublimation après la mort. Dans la voie des Maîtres Célestes (Tianshi dao), le lieu indiqué pour cette purification post mortem est le Palais du Taiyin (Grande Obscurité),

que le commentaire Xiang'er du Daode jing décrit comme « le palais où ceux qui ont accumulé le Dao subliment leur forme » avant d'obtenir une deuxième naissance (fusheng) après la mort. Dans le corpus Lingbao on trouve la description d'un rite permettant aux morts de sublimer leur forme dans la Grande Obscurité et leurs âmes célestes (hun) dans le palais méridional (Nangong). Après quelques années d'une telle sublimation du corps et de l'âme, l'on revient à la vie. Pour les adeptes taoïstes du Shangqing ceci peut aussi être offert aux ancêtres par des pratiques de méditation. Grâce à ces pratiques, les ancêtres, baignés dans « l'eau du raffinage », peuvent sublimer leur forme avant de « recevoir un nouvel embryon ».

La réalisation par le dépassement du corps constitue le concept fondamental de ces différents courants de pensée et de pratique. La « forme » fournit ainsi la médiation nécessaire dans ce processus vers la libération. Le neidan dans ce cas, comme dans beaucoup d'autres, hérite et développe des idées et des notions qui proviennent de divers contextes allant des textes taoïstes fondateurs, de la cosmologie, des traditions religieuses des Han et des Six Dynasties, jusqu'aux pratiques du rituel et de la méditation.

Several texts belonging to different traditions of *neidan* (inner alchemy) mention the term “refining the form” (*lianxing* 鍊形, 煉形). The *Anthology of Zhongli Quan's Transmission of the Dao to Lü Dongbin* (*Zhong-Lü chuandao ji*; ca. 800) devotes an entire section to this subject, stating that “to obtain a long life free from death, you should refine your form so that you can dwell in the world, preserving yourself for one kalpa after the other.”¹ Li Daochun (fl. 1288-92) writes that “the Golden Liquor (*jinye* 金液) refines the form and the Jade Talisman (*yufu* 玉符) protects the spirit; when form and spirit are both wondrous, they are one with the Dao and merge with Reality.”² A work containing brief explanations of several dozen *neidan* terms, the *Questions and Answers on the Golden Elixir* (*Jindan wenda*; ca. 1260), defines “refining the form” saying that “it means refining the form and transmuting it into pneuma (*qi*), refining pneuma and transmuting it into spirit (*shen*), and refining spirit and joining with the Dao.”³

The immediate precursors of these and other texts are the Tang works on Daoist meditation that include “refining the form” within a sequence of practices

¹ *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* 鐘呂傳道集, in *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 (Ten Books on Cultivating Reality; CT 263), 16.6b.

² Li Daochun 李道純, *Zhonghe ji* 中和集 (Anthology of Central Harmony; CT 249), 1.6a. “Jade Talisman” appears in several terms related to meditation (for an example, see note 64 below); in *neidan* it seems to refer to practices related to one's inner nature (*xing* 性), while “Golden Liquor” refers to practices related to one's vital energy (*ming* 命). See, for example, *Taishang Laojun shuo chang qingjing jingzhu* 太上老君說常清靜經註 (Commentary to the Scripture of Constant Clarity and Quiescence Spoken by the Most High Lord Lao; CT 755), 1.30b. On the phrase “form and spirit are both wondrous” see *infra*.

³ Xiao Tingzhi 蕭廷芝 (fl. 1260-64), *Jindan wenda* 金丹問答, in *Xiuzhen shishu*, 10.10a.

that later would also become typical of *neidan*. The *Scripture on Concentration and Contemplation* (*Dingguan jing*) describes the sequence as follows:

For the person who attains to the Dao, there are altogether seven stages:

1. Obtaining concentration and ease of mind: one becomes aware of all impurities.
2. Eliminating illnesses derived from former lives: body and mind are light and lively.
3. Preventing untimely death and other harms: one reverts to youth and returns to one's destiny.
4. Reaching a longevity of ten thousand years: this is called being an Immortal (*xianren*).
5. Refining form into pneuma: this is called being a Real Man (*zhenren*).
6. Refining pneuma and achieving spirit: this is called being a Divine Man (*shenren*).
7. Refining spirit and joining with the Dao: this is called being an Accomplished Man (*zhiren*).⁴

夫得道之人、凡有七候。一者心得定易、覺諸塵漏。二者宿疾普銷、身心輕爽。三者填天損、還年復命。四者延數萬歲、名曰仙人。五者鍊形為氣、名曰真人。六者鍊氣成神、名曰神人。七者鍊神合道、名曰至人。

The last three stages in this sequence are the same as those mentioned in the *Questions and Answers*; they are familiar to all students of *neidan*, with the single difference that most *neidan* texts mention the refining of essence (*jing*), instead of form, into pneuma—a point to which we shall return below.

As a doctrinal notion and a technical term, however, the history of “refining the form” begins long before the Tang period. Its origins lie in the views regarding the relationship between the Dao and the world of multiplicity that various Chinese traditions have reiterated in different ways and adapted to different contexts. As we shall see, since early times it was recognized that “form” is one of the key notions for defining this relationship. Daoism has continued to investigate these ideas throughout its history and has associated them to a variety of ways of liberation, some of which, focusing in particular on death and the post-mortem, will be examined in the last part of this essay.

To understand this complex of ideas, the first point to consider is the difference between *xing* 形, or “form,” and *ti* 體, the Chinese term closest to the English word “body.” Although *xing* is sometimes translated as “body,” the early definition of *xing* as “image” (*xiang* 象), dating from around 100 CE, shows that it does not denote the physical body.⁵ That a difference between *xing* (“form”) and

⁴ *Dingguan jing* 定觀經 (CT 400), 6b-7a.

⁵ See *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Elucidations of the Signs and Explications of the Graphs; 100 CE; ed. by Chen Changzhi 陳昌治, 1873), 9A.7b, which states that “the form is an image” (*xing*, *xiang ye* 形·象也). We shall return to this definition below. The term *ti* is defined in the same text, 4B.7b, as “what gathers the twelve dependent parts” (*ti*, *zong shi'er shu ye* 體·總十二屬也). Tuan Yucai's 段玉裁 (1735-1815) commentary lists the twelve parts in four groups: (1) top of the head, face, and chin; (2) shoulders, spine, and pelvic bone; (3) arms, forearms, and hands; (4) thighs, tibiae, and feet.

ti (“body”) exists is also suggested by the fact that, in *neidan* and in other practices, one “refines the form” (*lianxing*) or “nourishes the form” (*yangxing* 養形); these two compounds are not attested with *ti* instead of *xing*, and so one does not “refine the body” or “nourish the body.” An additional significant detail is that *xing*, as a technical term in the compound *lianxing*, is not interchangeable with words whose meanings include “form,” such as *rong* 容, *fan* 範, *yang* 樣, *zhuang* 狀, *ge* 格, or *se* 色.

For the purpose of introducing the discussion that follows, one might say that while *ti*, or “body,” refers specifically to the material frame and the physical substance of human beings and other living or inanimate entities, *xing*, or “form,” is what identifies and defines the single entities as such, and distinguishes them from each other. The frequent association of “form” and “name” in the compound *xingming* 形名 shows that forms play a function similar to the one played by names in making an entity apprehended as an individual object. The association between form and individuality, with all the limitations of individuality including its inevitable final disappearance, is clearly implied, and often explicitly stated, in many of the sources quoted in the present essay. As forms are changeable and bound to decay, they must be transcended in order to attain to the Dao, which is “formless” (*wuxing* 無形) and therefore is the only permanent or “constant” (*chang* 常) reality.⁶

Dao and Forms

The classical statement on form in early Chinese thought is a sentence in the “Appended Statements” (“Xici”) to the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*):

What is above the form is called the Dao; what is below the form is called an object.⁷

形而上者謂之道·形而下者謂之器。

The term *qi* 器, literally meaning “vessel,” is used in this sentence as a synonym of *wu* 物, “thing”; it denotes any entity that exists in the world of form, distinguished from the Dao which is above form.⁸ The same term occurs in another famous

⁶ On “forms and names” see Yates, *Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huanglao, and Yin-Yang in Han China*, pp. 23-25. Yates points out the “metaphysical foundation” of this notion as found in the Mawangdui manuscript entitled *Jingfa* 經法 (Canon: Law), which states that forms and names emerge when Non-Being generates Being and then the particular entities.

⁷ *Yijing* 易經, “Xici” 繫辭, text in *A Concordance to Yi Ching* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series; Beijing, 1935), A.12 (p. 44). See also trl. Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 323. Another passage in the same text, A.10, states: “[What has] a form is called an object” (*xing, nai wei zhi qi* 形·乃謂之器); see Wilhelm, p. 318.

⁸ Chan Wing-tsit remarks that *qi* “is a technical philosophical term that should not be understood in its popular meanings of an instrument, an implement, or a vessel, or be distorted to mean matter, substance, or material entity. Philosophically it means *a concrete or definite object in contrast to the Tao which has neither spatial restriction nor physical form*. It also includes systems and institutions, or any thing or affair that has a concrete form” (Chan Wing-tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 784; emphasis mine).

statement, found in sec. 11 of the *Laozi*, which Daoist authors often quote or refer to in order to illustrate the relation of form to formlessness:

One molds clay to make a vessel, but the use of a vessel lies in where there is nothing.
 埴埴以為器、當其無、有器之用。

A "vessel" here is an object whose function is to provide a lodge for formlessness. As we shall see, this is one of the main functions of form mentioned by other texts.⁹

The close association between the sentences from the *Book of Changes* and the *Laozi* quoted above is illustrated by Du Guangting (850-933). In his commentary to sec. 11 of the *Laozi*, Du cites the *Book of Changes* to explain how form belongs to the domain of the objects instead of the domain of the Dao:

All the ten thousand things are generated from Non-Being, and all forms are established from the Dao. First there is the Dao, then there is the form. The Dao is above the form, and the form is below the Dao. Therefore [the *Book of Changes* says:] "What is above the form is called the Dao; what is below the form is called an object." Although the form dwells on the boundary (*ji*) between the domains of Dao and the objects, the form is above the objects (*zai qi shang*) and is not in the Dao (*bu zai dao*). Once there are form and matter can there be the use of an object. Therefore [the *Book of Changes*] says: "What is below the form is called an object."¹⁰

凡萬物從無而生、眾形由道而立。先道而後形。道在形之上、形在道之下。故自形而上謂之道、自形而下謂之器。形雖處道器兩畔之際、形在器上不在道也。既有形質可為器用、故云形而下者謂之器。

As explained by Du Guangting, form is intermediate between the objects and the Dao, but belongs to the realm of the objects and not to realm of the Dao. This provides a first explication of why form must be transcended in order to attain to the Dao.

The main scripture on the doctrinal foundations of Chinese alchemy, the *Token for the Agreement of the Three According to the Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi cantong qi*), also refers to the sentence from the *Laozi* quoted above. Exploiting the dual acceptations of the words *wu* 無 (Non-Being, there-being-nothing) and *qi* 器 (object, vessel), the *Token* rephrases the sentence from the *Laozi* into an explicit statement on the origin of Being from Non-Being, saying: "It is by Non-Being that Being is produced: the use of a vessel lies in its emptiness."¹¹ In his commentary to this sentence, Chen Zhixu (1289-after 1335) quotes the same passage of the *Book of Changes*, saying:

Why is there the dyad of Non-Being and Being? With the division of the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) there are the state prior to Heaven (*xiantian*) and the state

⁹ The term *qi* is also found in sec. 28 of the *Laozi*: "When simplicity scatters there are the objects" (*pu san ze wei qi* 樸散則為器).

¹⁰ Du Guangting 杜光庭, *Daode zhenjing guangsheng yi* 道德真經廣聖義 (Extended Interpretation of the Emperor's Exegesis of the *Daode jing*; CT 725), 11.18a.

¹¹ *Yi wu zhi you, qi yong zhe kong* 以無制有、器用者空. See *Zhouyi cantong qi*, sec. 2 in the recension by Chen Zhixu 陳致虛, *Cantong qi fen zhang zhu* 參同契分章注 (Commentary to the *Cantong qi*, with a Division into Sections; Siku quanshu ed.), 9b.

posterior to Heaven (*boutian*).¹² What is the state prior to Heaven? “What is above the form is called the Dao”: this refers to using Being to enter into Non-Being. What is the state posterior to Heaven? “What is below the form is called an object”: this refers to entering from Non-Being into Being.¹³

無與有為兩者、何也？太極之分有先天有後天。何為先天？形而上者謂之道。以有入無也。何為後天？形而下者謂之器。從無入有也。

In this passage, Chen Zhixu relates “what is above the form” to the principle of Non-Being, and “what is below the form” to the principle of Being. He adds that what is above the form pertains to the state “prior to Heaven,” and what is below the form pertains to the state “posterior to Heaven,” i.e., the states before and after the generation of the cosmos.

The phrases “entering from Non-Being into Being” (*cong wu ru you* 從無入有) and “using Being to enter into Non-Being” (*yi you ru wu* 以有入無), which also occur in many other texts, formulate another important doctrinal point. The first phrase refers to the Absolute permeating the relative, which in fact, from its point of view, does not even exist. The second phrase refers to the movement from the relative to the absolute: within the relative domain, as we shall see, the forms, which pertain to the principle of Being, are an image of the Absolute, and can be “used as a means” (*yi* 以) for comprehending the non-duality of Non-Being and Being.

From formlessness to form

The relation between the Absolute and the relative is described as a hierarchy of different states, or as a “shift” occurring in stages, only in order to explicate in what it consists from a relative point of view. Thus the arrangement of the two items in the “Appended Sayings” to the *Book of Changes* is vertical (“above,” “below”), as is also throughout Daoism: in this view, providing an explication of the world means formulating a hierarchy of states that serves to illustrate the origin of each of them in the one immediately above it, and ultimately in the Dao. The frequent use of the words “to transmute into” (*bian* 變) or “to generate” (*sheng* 生) to describe the relation between one state and the next shows that the hierarchy is both ontological and genealogical. Accordingly, the emergence of the cosmos is often described as a sequence of transmutations leading from the Formless (*wuxing* 無形) to form, and hence to the “ten thousand things” or the “ten thousand creatures” (*wanwu* 萬物). Borrowing sentences from the *Laozi*, the *Huainan zi* (Book of the Master of Huainan; ca. 139 BCE) describes the two ends of the continuum as follows:

Now, the Formless is the great forefather of creatures, and the Soundless is the great ancestor of sounds. [...] Therefore you look at it and cannot see its form, you

¹² This sentence does not refer to the division of the Great Ultimate into Yin and Yang, but to its emergence as marking the division between the pre-cosmic and cosmic states (“prior to Heaven” and “posterior to Heaven”).

¹³ Chen Zhixu, *Cantong qi fenzhang zhu*, 9b (sec. 2).

listen to it and cannot hear its sound, you follow it and cannot get to its person.¹⁴ It is formless, but what has form is generated from it; it is soundless, but the five sounds resonate from it; it is tasteless, but the five tastes take form from it; it is colorless, but the five colors are developed from it. Therefore Being is generated from Non-Being, and the actual is generated from the empty. What is below heaven is its fold, and thus names and actualities (*mingshi*) dwell together in it.¹⁵

夫無形者、物之大祖也。無音者、聲之大宗也。[...] 是故視之不見其形、聽之不開其聲、循之不得其身、無形而有形生焉、璘無聲而五音鳴焉、無味而五味形焉、無色而五色成焉。是故有生於無、實出於虛。天下為之圈、則名實同居。

In another passage, the *Huainan zi* illustrates how the forms are related to the Dao after they are generated. According to this passage, the forms are transient; their final disappearance—their death, in the case of living creatures—is due to the fact that the Principle that generates them and supports them during their existence eventually leaves them. For this reason, this Principle neither can be equivalent to the form itself, nor can it be affected by the alterations of the form in which it temporarily resides.

Therefore forms come to depletion but spirit never undergoes transformation; this is because when what undergoes no transformation responds to what is transformed, it will never reach an end even throughout one thousand alterations and ten thousand reversals. Undergoing transformations means returning to formlessness; not undergoing transformations means living as long as Heaven and Earth. Now, the death of a tree is due to the fact that what makes it green (*qing qing*, “what greens its greenness”) leaves it. So how could the tree itself be what causes the tree to live? The same is true of the formlessness of what fills the form. Therefore, what gives life to life (*sheng sheng zhe*) never undergoes death, and it is what it gives life to that dies; what transforms the things never undergoes transformation, and it is what it transforms that undergoes transformation.¹⁶

故形有摩而神未嘗化者、以不化應化、千變萬珍、而未始有極。化者、復歸於無形也。不化者、與天地俱生也。夫木之死也、青青去之也。夫使木生者豈木也？猶充形者之非形也。故生生者未嘗死也、其所生則死矣。化物者未嘗化也、其所化則化矣。

The passage quoted above is inspired by the *Zhuangzi*, which says:

That which makes things things (*wu wu zhe*) has not boundary between it and things; it is things that have boundaries, and those are called the boundaries of things. Having a boundary with what is not a boundary means that the boundary is not a boundary. We speak of the filling, emptying, withering, and dying of things. What makes them full or empty is neither full nor empty; what makes them wither and die has no withering or death; what causes them to begin and

¹⁴ Compare *Laozi*, sec. 14 (“If you look at it, you do not see it: it is called invisible. If you listen to it, you do not hear it: it is called inaudible. If you grasp it, you do not get it: it is called imperceptible”) and sec. 35 (“If you look at it, this is not sufficient to see it; if you listen to it, this is not sufficient to hear it”).

¹⁵ *Huainan zi* 淮南子 (Book of the Master of Huainan; Zhuzi jicheng ed.), 1.10-11. See also trl. Larre, Robinet, and Rochat de la Vallée, *Les grands traités du Huainan zi*, p. 61.

¹⁶ *Huainan zi*, 7.105. See also trl. Larre, Robinet, and Rochat de la Vallée, p. 91.

end has no beginning or end; and what causes them to accumulate or scatter has no accumulation or scattering.¹⁷

物物者與物無際、而物有際者、所謂物際者也。不際之際、際之不際者也。謂盈虛衰殺、彼為盈虛非盈虛、彼為衰殺非衰殺、彼為本末非本末、彼為積散非積散也。

According to both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainan zi*, just as the principle that generates an object and maintains it during its life span is unaffected by its transformations and disappearance, so too is the absolute Principle that “gives life to life” and “makes things things” outside and beyond life itself. It generates but is not generated, it transforms but is not subject to change, it is not born and therefore never dies. This formless Principle, says the *Huainan zi*, “fills the form” of the objects that it generates, but is not affected by or concerned with the changes and the extinction of those objects.

This way of seeing, and the linguistic artifices used in the *Huainan zi* to express it, are reminiscent of another statement in the same text: any individual thing (*fenwu* 分物) “is not the non-thing that makes things things (*fei buwu er wuwu zhe ye* 非不物而物物者也),” because “what makes things things is not among the ten thousand things (*wuwu zhe wang hu wanwu zhi zhong* 物物者亡乎萬物之中).” The one who can revert to this transcendent Principle, who “can return to what he was generated from, as when there were not yet forms (or: as when he had not yet a form, *ruo wei you xing* 若未有形), is called a Real Man (*zhenren*).”¹⁸

Oneness and forms

Whatever images and terms they may use, the common feature in the passages quoted above is that form is intermediate between the objects and the Dao, and establishes “boundaries” among the single objects and between them and the Dao. These boundaries exist only from the point of view of the individual objects, while the Dao has no boundaries between itself and the objects it generates. When the hierarchy that occurs among the Dao, form, and the objects is represented as a sequence of temporal stages that lead from one to the other, it turns into a cosmogony. An early description of this sequence is found in the *Laws of Qian, the Fountainhead* (*Qianzuo du*), an apocryphon on the *Book of Changes* dating from the first or the second century CE. To explain the rise of Yin and Yang (here referred to as *qian* 乾 ☰ and *kun* 坤 ☷) and the subsequent generation of the “ten thousand things,” this text describes a process that occurs in four stages. The first is the inchoate state of “chaos” (*hunlun*), while the other three see the emergence of pneuma (*qi*), form, and matter, in this order. Here too, the description borrows terms and phrases from the *Laozi*:

¹⁷ *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Zhuzi jicheng ed.), 22.328. See also trl. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 241-242; and Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings*, p. 62.

¹⁸ *Huainan zi*, 14.235.

In ancient times, the Sage (i.e., King Wen, Wenwang 文王) determined the waxing and waning [of cosmic cycles] based on Yin and Yang, and established *qian* and *kun* in order to encompass Heaven and Earth. Now, what has form is generated from the Formless. From what then may *qian* and *kun* have been generated?

This is why it is said: There are the Great Simplicity (*taiyi*), the Great Beginning (*taichu*), the Great Commencement (*taishi*), and the Great Purity (*taisu*). The Great Simplicity is when there is not yet pneuma, the Great Beginning is the commencement of pneuma, the Great Commencement is the commencement of form, and the Great Purity is the commencement of matter.

[Initially] pneuma, form, and matter are together, not yet separated from each other. Therefore this is called "chaos" (*bunlun*): "chaos" is the term for when the ten thousand things are inchoate and complete in each other (*xiang buncheng*), but are not yet separated from each other.¹⁹ If you look at it you do not see it, if you listen to it you do not hear it, if you follow it you do not get it.²⁰ Therefore it is called Simplicity. In Simplicity there are no confines of forms (*xingpan*).²¹

Simplicity alters itself and there is the One; the One alters itself and there is the Seven; the Seven alters itself and there is the Nine. The Nine is the accomplishment of the alterations of pneuma. Then it alters itself again and becomes the One. The One is the commencement of the alteration of forms (*xingbian*): the clear and light ascend and become the Heaven, the turbid and heavy descend and become the Earth.²²

昔者聖人因陰陽定消息、立乾坤以統天地也。夫有形者生於無形、乾坤安從生？故曰：有太易、有太初、有太始、有太素也。太易者、未見氣也。太初者、氣之始也。太始者、形之始也。太素者、質之始也。氣形質具而未離、故曰渾淪。渾淪者、言萬物相渾成而未相離。視之不見、聽之不聞、循之不得、故曰易也。易無形畔、易變而為一、一變而為七、七變而為九。九者氣變之究也。乃復變而為一。一者、形變之始。清輕者上為天、濁重者下為地。

The shift from the first to the second stage (Great Simplicity to Great Beginning) is from absence to presence of pneuma, and from nothingness to the One. Forms emerge at the next stage (Great Commencement) but are not yet provided with matter, which is produced at the fourth and last stage (Great Purity). This stage, however, only marks the end of the first set of transmutations, as shown by the numerical emblems mentioned in this passage. The sequence first goes from the implicit 0 (the Infinite as the principle and origin of Oneness) to 1, 7, and finally 9. The last three figures denote Pure Yang, or *chunyang* 純陽, the state of Oneness before the rise of Yin and Yang; the

¹⁹ The *locus classicus* of the phrase *buncheng* is *Laozi*, sec. 25: "There is something inchoate and yet complete, born before Heaven and Earth."

²⁰ Compare again *Laozi*, sec. 14 (see above, note 14).

²¹ The phrase *xingpan* here cannot mean "confines among forms," since at this stage there are not yet forms at all, and no particular objects or creatures.

²² *Qianzuo du* 乾鑿度, in Yasui Kōzan and Nakamura Shōhachi, eds., *Isho shūsei* (Complete collection of apocryphal texts), 1A, pp. 23-25; duplicated in 1A, pp. 38-39. For another translation of this passage see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2, pp. 97-98.

commentary to the *Laws of Qian* by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200) relates them to the three transmutations that occur within Oneness, respectively resulting in the emergence of pneuma, form, and matter. Then the cosmogonic process continues with a new transmutation; in numerical emblems, 9 reverts to 1. The One now governs the “alteration of the forms” (*xingbian*) by generating the Two (Yin and Yang, or *qian* and *kun*, or Heaven and Earth), which in turn give rise to multiplicity.²³

Images and forms

In one of the representations of cosmogony found in the *Huainan zi*, before Heaven and Earth are generated there are “only images without forms.” Forms begin to exist only after the distinction between Yin and Yang arises:

In ancient times, when there were not yet Heaven and Earth, there were only images without forms. Deep! Obscure! Broad and wide, boundless and measureless! Vaporous and opaque, vast and cavernous! No one knows where this came from (lit., “its gate”). There were two spirits (*shen*) generated from the inchoate, which aligned Heaven and oriented Earth. Empty! No one knows where it ends. Overflowing! No one knows where it stops. Thereupon it differentiated itself and became Yin and Yang, it separated itself and became the eight poles. The firm and the yielding (i.e., Yin and Yang, or *qian* and *kun*) completed each other, and the ten thousand things took form.²⁴

古未有天地之時、惟像無形、窈窈冥冥、芒芘漠闕、瀕濛鴻洞、莫知其門。有二神混生、經天營地、孔乎莫知其所終極、滔乎莫知其所止息、於是乃別為陰陽、離為八極、剛柔相成、萬物乃形。

Here, as in many other accounts of the cosmogonic process, Yin and Yang (which the *Huainan zi* calls the two “spirits”) are spontaneously generated from the inchoate; they establish Heaven and Earth, their further differentiation produces the cosmos (the “eight poles”), and their joining is the origin of forms.

Before all this happens, there are “only images without forms.” These “images” (*xiang* 象, 像) are forms in a state not yet actualized. Du Guangting

²³ This cosmogony is also found in an apocryphon on the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (Book of Filiality), which extends it with the addition of the Great Ultimate (*taiji*, the One as containing the Two, or Yin and Yang) as the fifth and last stage, thereby creating the series of the so-called “Five Greats” (*wutai* 五太: Great Simplicity, Great Beginning, Great Commencement, Great Purity, and Great Ultimate). See *Gouming jue* 鉤命決 (Determinations on Securing the Mandate), in *Isbo shūsei*, 5, pp. 76-77. Later, in its extended form, it entered other texts including the *Liezi* 列子 and the *Yuanqi lun* 元氣論 (Treatise on Original Pneuma); see *Liezi* (Zhuzi jicheng ed.), 1.2 (trl. Graham, *The Book of Lieb-tzu*, pp. 18-19); and *Yuanqi lun*, in *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds; CT 1032), 56.1a. As Isabelle Robinet pointed out (“Genèses: Au début, il n’y a pas d’avant,” pp. 134-135, 139-140), the five-stage sequence is also adopted by several *neidan* texts.

²⁴ *Huainan zi*, 7.99. See also trl. Larre, *Le Traité VII du Houai nan tseu*, pp. 53-54.

states that “the first tokens of forms (*zhaoxiang* 兆形) are called images; they are the beginning of the birth of things” and “the commencement of form and matter” (*xingzhi shi* 形質始).²⁵ Li Daochun, paraphrasing the *Laozi* (sec. 1), writes that “the image that can be imagined is not the Great Image” (*xiang ke xiang, fei daxiang* 象可象·非大象), but is also “the mother of forms and names” (*xingming zhi mu* 形名之母).²⁶ In the next stage, images take form, and become actual entities when forms are provided with matter. This makes it possible to understand the sense of the early definition of “form” as “image,” as well as the statement in the *Zhuangzi*, to which we shall refer shortly below, that forms are “an image of the Formless.”

The Function of Forms

The ultimate consequence of the generative process outlined in the texts quoted above is the subject of a famous passage in the *Zhuangzi*, where the dialectical philosopher Hui Shi 惠施 is portrayed as upset by Zhuangzi singing and drumming shortly after his wife has died. In this passage—Zhuangzi’s response to those who, like his friend Hui Shi, held different views on “forms and names”—Zhuangzi replies by saying that at first he did grieve for the loss of his wife, “like anyone else.” Then he realized that death is the continuation of the series of alterations (*bian*) that lead from the “boundless” (*huanghu* 芒芴) to pneuma, then to form, and finally to life (or “birth,” *sheng* 生):

I looked back into her beginning, and initially there was no life. Not only was there no life: initially there was no form. Not only was there no form: initially there was no pneuma. Mingled together in the boundless, an alteration occurred and there was the pneuma; the pneuma altered and there was the form; the form altered and there was the life. Now, with another alteration she has gone over to death.²⁷

察其始而本無生。非徒無生也、而本無形。非徒無形也、而本無氣。雜乎芒芴之間、變而有氣、氣變而有形、形變而有生。今又變而之死。

Except for the emergence of matter, which here is not mentioned, the sequence described in this passage is the same as the one seen above in the *Laws of Qian*: the inchoate state, pneuma, form, and finally life. Death is the subsequent step in this process: as we have read above from the *Huainan zi*, for every form “undergoing transformations means returning to formlessness.”

The story in the *Zhuangzi* essentially reiterates a statement in the *Laozi* (sec. 50), where the prevalent course of existence is described as “exiting from life and entering into death” (*chusheng rusi* 出生入死). The identity of views between the two texts in this concern is underscored by Li Daochun, who joins words from the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi*, respectively, in the first half and the second half of this passage:

²⁵ *Daode zhenjing guangsheng yi*, 8.21a and 11.2b; see Robinet, “Genèses,” p. 131.

²⁶ *Zhonghe ji*, 1.6b; see Robinet, “Genèses.”

²⁷ *Zhuangzi jishi*, 18.271. See also trl. Watson, p. 192, and Graham, pp. 123-124.

形化則有生
有生則有死
出生入死
物之常也

The form alters itself and there is life,
since there is life there is death:
exiting from life and entering into death
is the constant way of creatures.²⁸

Forms as images of the Formless

The sequence that leads from the generation of forms to their disappearance, or their death, is meaningful only within the relative domain. Although the forms are generated from formlessness, the Absolute principle is unaffected by their transiency and disappearance: from the point of view of the Absolute, forms are nothing in the literal sense of the term. Within the relative domain, instead, forms perform the function of being temporary lodges—or “vessels,” according to the metaphor of the *Laozi* and the *Book of Changes*—for formlessness; this function is performed in accordance to the laws of the domain to which forms belong, based on which forms undergo beginning and end, change and decay, birth and death.

Looking at forms as nothing but the Formless has made it possible for Daoism to avoid qualifying forms as “illusory” (with the exception of formulations borrowed from Buddhism, an example of which will be found later in this essay), on the one hand, and propounding a pantheism, on the other. Since the Absolute is the only Reality, and forms do not have existence outside it, each particular form partakes in that Reality. This is the “real form” (*zhenxing* 真形) of each particular object, which is intrinsic to and not separated from it but, like the Absolute, is not manifested. The “real form” of an object represents “not a reality hidden behind the veil of appearance, as we are often accustomed to think in the West, but a reality inherent to existence itself, and underlying it.”²⁹

This notion constitutes one of the foundations of the Daoist ways of liberation, which do not consist in “perfectioning” or augmenting what one has received from Heaven but exactly in the opposite process, namely in lessening and draining away what hides or obscures it. In this regard, the *Zhuangzi* admonishes that for human beings the issue does not lie in having a transitory and limited individuality, defined (among other conditioning factors) by forms. For the *Zhuangzi*, the issue lies in the attempt made to compensate for those perceived limitations by “adding” something to one’s individuality, and in performing actions with that purpose. Doing so, says the *Zhuangzi*, means following the sequence that leads from life to death, and amounts to no less than living like a ghost (*gui*) that “is extinguished but still has actuality”:

What is shameful about the state of dividedness (*fen*, i.e., particularity or individuality) is that one wants to add to it; and what is shameful about adding to it is that one acts for this purpose. Thus, by going forth [into life] without returning [to the Dao], one appears like a ghost. This is because by going forth

²⁸ *Zhonghe ji*, 1.5a.

²⁹ Robinet, *Laozi et le Tao*, p. 20.

one does find something, but what one finds is death: one is extinguished but still has actuality, just like a ghost.³⁰

所惡乎分者、其分也以備。所以惡乎備者、其有以備。故出而不反、見其鬼。出而得、是謂得死。滅而有實、鬼之一也。

This passage concludes by saying that one may become “settled,” or “stabilized” (*ding* 定), by not being dependent on the transiency of forms, and instead by letting “what is provided with a form be an image of the Formless” (*yi youxing zhe xiang wuxing zhe* 以有形者象無形者). Accomplishing this does not require a process of “increase” or of perfecting but rather of “decrease” (*sun* 損) or of return, as the *Zhuangzi* says quoting the *Laozi* (sec. 48):

Practicing the Dao is called decreasing day by day; decrease and then again decrease, until there is no doing; when there is no doing there is nothing that is not done.³¹

為道者日損、損之又損之、以至於無為。無為而無不為也。

“Form and spirit are both wondrous”

By complying in this way with the world of multiplicity, says the *Zhuangzi*, one’s form and spirit (*shen* 神) are “complete”:

By holding to the Dao, one’s virtue is complete; when one’s virtue is complete, one’s form is complete; when one’s form is complete, one’s spirit is complete; when one’s spirit is complete, this is the Way of the Saint (*shengren*).³²

執道者德全、德全者形全、形全者神全。神全者、聖人之道也。

This passage emphasizes the close relationship between form and spirit in the relative domain, where the form (instead of the body) is the counterpart of spirit in the sense meant by some texts that will be quoted shortly below. In the state in which the form is “an image of the Formless,” however, there is no fundamental difference between form and spirit, as both represent the same Reality. In that state, according to a formulation that recurs in works by Li Daochun, Chen Zhixu, and many other authors, form and spirit are defined as “wondrous” (*miao* 妙). Liu Yiming (1734-1821) explains that this term refers to form and spirit in the non-dual state of emptiness prior to their differentiation:

In the inchoateness of the One Pneuma, where neither Being nor Non-Being are established, where both creatures and self (*wuwo*) return to emptiness, form and spirit are both wondrous (*xingshen ju miao*).³³

一氣混然、有無不立、物我歸空、形神俱妙。

³⁰ *Zhuangzi*, 23.347. See also trl. Watson, p. 256, and Graham, pp. 102-103.

³¹ *Zhuangzi*, 22.319. See also trl. Watson, p. 235, and Graham, p. 159.

³² *Zhuangzi*, 12.195. See also trl. Watson, p. 135, and Graham, p. 187.

³³ Liu Yiming 劉一明, *Wuzhen zhibi* 悟真直指 (Straightforward Directions on the *Wuzhen pian*), in *Jingyin Daoshu shi'er zhong* 精印道書十二種 (Reprint of *Twelve Books on the Dao*; Jiangdong shuju ed., 1913), 3.3b (commentary to poem 7). The same expression is found in Li Daochun’s *Zhonghe ji*, 1.6a (quoted at the beginning of the present essay), and in Chen Zhixu’s *Jindan dayao*, 5.2a. Compare the use of *miao* 妙 in the term *miaoyou* 妙有

Form as residence of spirit

The role played by form after the world of multiplicity and the individual creatures are established is emphasized in the *Huainan zi*, where form is said to be one of the three major constituents of life with spirit (*shen*) and pneuma (*qi*):

Now form is where life resides, pneuma is what fills life, and spirit is what controls life. If any of them loses its place, all three are harmed.³⁴

夫形者、生之舍也。氣者、生之充也。神者、生之制也。一失位、則三者傷矣。

Like the last passage quoted above from the *Zhuangzi*, this sentence formulates the interdependence of form and spirit. It also underscores, however, the priority of spirit over form in the conditioned world: form is where life resides, but spirit has control. Ge Hong (283-343) also uses the image of form providing a lodge for spirit; he associates spirit with the principle of Non-Being and form with the principle of Being, and illustrates the precedence of spirit over form saying:

Being depends on Non-Being to be generated, and form requires spirit to be established. Being is the palace of Non-Being, and form is the abode of spirit. Therefore [the forms] are compared to a dike: if a dike crumbles, water is not retained. They are [also] likened to a torch: if a torch is exhausted, fire does not stay. [Similarly] if the person is wearied spirit scatters, and if pneuma is depleted life ends.³⁵

夫有因無而生焉、形須神而立焉。有者、無之宮也。形者、神之宅也。故譬之於堤、堤壞則水不留矣。方之於燭、燭糜則火不居矣。身勞則神散、氣竭則命終。

Ge Hong's statement that "form requires spirit to be established" echoes a passage in Xi Kang's (223-62) *Treatise on Nourishing Life* (*Yangsheng lun*), where the relation of form to spirit is also likened to that of a country to its ruler:

Essence and spirit on the one hand, and form and body frame (*bai*) on the other, are related to each other in the same way as a country is related to its ruler. If the spirit is vexed inside, the form is disrupted outside. This is like a ruler being muddled above, and his country being in disorder below. [...] Therefore the gentleman knows that form depends on spirit to be established, and spirit requires form to be maintained.³⁶

精神之於形骸、猶國之有君也。神躁於中、而形喪於外。猶君昏於上、國亂於下也。[...] 是以君子知形恃神以立、神須形以存。

Similarly, among *neidan* texts, the *Anthology of Zhongli Quan's Transmission of the Dao to Lü Dongbin* states that "in human life, form and spirit [respectively] are

("wondrous Being") to denote the state in which Being (or existence) is undistinguished from Non-Being in "real emptiness" (*zhenkong* 真空).

³⁴ *Huainan zi*, 1.17.

³⁵ Ge Hong 葛洪, *Baopu zi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature), ed. by Wang Ming, *Baopu zi neipian jiaoshi*, 5.110. See also trl. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320*, p. 98.

³⁶ Xi Kang 嵇康, *Yangsheng lun* 養生論 (Sibu congkan ed.), 3.3b. See also trl. Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-century China: The Essays of Hsi Kang*, p. 24.

the outside and the inside (*biaoli* 表里).” In spite of their interdependence, however, “spirit is the ruler of form, and form is the residence of spirit.”³⁷

Form, essence, pneuma, and spirit

In one of the passages quoted above, the *Huainan zi* replaces the customary triad of essence, pneuma, and spirit as the constitutive elements of life with the triad of form, pneuma, and spirit. This replacement is based on the notion that “essence” (*jing*) is the source of existence for everything that is provided with a form; existence as whole is born from an “essence” spontaneously produced from the Dao (*Laozi*, sec. 21). As we have seen in passages quoted at the beginning of this essay, the same replacement occurs in both the *Scripture on Concentration and Contemplation* and in the *Questions and Answers on the Golden Elixir*, which mention the refining of form into pneuma as one of stages of the meditation and the *neidan* practice, respectively.³⁸

In other instances, form is explicitly said to be generated from essence.³⁹ This is first stated in the *Zhuangzi*, which says:

Essence and spirit are generated from the Dao. Form is initially generated from essence.⁴⁰

精神生於道。形本生於精。

Li Daochun refers to this notion when he explains how spirit, pneuma, essence, and form are related to the well-known passage in the *Laozi* (sec. 42), according to which “the Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two

³⁷ *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji*, 16.5b-6a.

³⁸ The *Scripture on Concentration and Contemplation* defines the first of the final three stages of the meditation practice as “refining form into pneuma” (*lianxing weiqi* 鍊形為氣). In the *Questions and Answers*, the first stage of the *neidan* practice is designated as “refining form and transmuting it into pneuma” (*lianxing huaqi* 鍊形化氣) instead of the more common “refining essence and transmuting it into pneuma” (*lianjing huaqi* 鍊精化氣). In both cases, the transmutation of form into pneuma is followed by the transmutation of pneuma into spirit and by the reintegration of spirit into the Dao. Similar examples are found in other *neidan* sources; see, for instance, the section entitled “Lianxing huaqi” in the *Xishan qunxian huizhen ji* 西山群仙會真記 (Records of the Gathered Immortals and Assembled Real Men of the Western Hills; CT 246), 5.3a-5b. “Refining the form” in order to make it “clear” (*qing* 清) and joining it with pneuma is also mentioned by Wu Yun 吳筠 (?-778) in his *Shenxian kexue lun* 神仙可學論 (An Essay on How One May Become a Divine Immortal Through Training), in *Zongxuan xiansheng wenji* 宗玄先生文集 (Collected Works of the Elder Who Takes Mystery as His Ancestor; CT 1051), 2.11b.

³⁹ This does not contradict other statements quoted above, where forms are said to arise from the joining of Yin and Yang, as Yin and Yang generate forms by joining their essences with each other; in the case of living beings, for instance, the joining of the male and female sexual essences generates a new life.

⁴⁰ *Zhuangzi*, 22.323.

generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things.” Li Daochun’s explication is as follows:

“The Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things.” Void transmutes itself into Spirit, Spirit transmutes itself into Pneuma, Pneuma transmutes itself into Essence, Essence transmutes itself into Form. The above is called “continuation” (*shun*).

道生一、一生二、二生三、三生萬物。虛化神、神化氣、氣化精、精化形。以上謂之順。

According to this passage, the Dao generates the One, the first determination of Non-Being and the principle of the unity of existence; this corresponds to Emptiness (or Void) generating Spirit (*shen*), which in this respect is the world’s “universal self.” The differentiation of the One into the Two, or Yin and Yang, corresponds to Spirit generating pneuma (*qi*), the energy that sustains the world of multiplicity provided by the polarity of the two complementary principles (Heaven and Earth). When Yin and Yang join to each other they give life to the Three, which represents Oneness reestablished at the level of each individual entity; this corresponds to Pneuma generating Essence, the “seed” that in turn gives life to the single entities. The continuous reiteration of this process results in the multiplicity of the “ten thousand things,” or the world of form.

Li Daochun establishes the correspondences mentioned above in order to show that the principles that regulate the *neidan* practice in its most common codification are based on the principles outlined in the *Laozi*. Li Daochun’s explication of this point deserves attention, as it provides an illustration of the principle of “using Being to enter into Non-Being.” The term that Li Daochun mentions at the end of the passage quoted above, “continuation” (*shun*), denotes in the *neidan* vocabulary the sequence that leads to birth and life, but ultimately to death. “Inversion” (*ni*) is the opposite process, which makes it possible to “exit from death and enter into life.”⁴¹ Accordingly, the stages of the *neidan* practice are the same as those mentioned above, but in a reverse order. The first step, in particular, consists in re-ascending from form (the last of the four transmutations in the downward sequence, associated with the stage of the “ten thousand things”) to essence. Li Daochun describes the stages of the entire process as follows:

The ten thousand things hold the Three, the Three return to the Two, the Two return to the One. Refined into the Culminant Essence, Essence transmutes itself into Pneuma, Pneuma transmutes itself into Spirit. The above is called “inversion” (*ni*). The writings on the elixir say that continuation achieves the human beings, while inversion achieves the elixir.⁴²

萬物含三、三歸二、二歸一。鍊乎至精、精化氣、氣化神。以上謂之逆。丹書謂順則成人、逆則成丹。

⁴¹ On “inversion” in *neidan* see Robinet, *Introduction à l'alchimie intérieure taoïste*, pp. 131-145.

⁴² *Zhonghe ji*, 2.5b.

Chen Zhixu also refers to the same passage from the *Laozi* quoted by Li Daochun, and continues by saying:

Those who know this Way please their Spirit and guard their Form. They nourish the Form to refine Essence, accumulate Essence to transmute it into Pneuma, refine Pneuma to join it with Spirit, and refine Spirit to revert to the Void. Then the Golden Elixir is achieved.⁴³

知此道者、怡神守形。養形鍊精、積精化氣、鍊氣合神、鍊神還虛、金丹乃成。

The main idea that determines the sequence of *neidan* practice, therefore, is that each component of existence should be reintegrated into the one that precedes it: Form into Essence, Essence into Pneuma, Pneuma into Spirit, and Spirit into Emptiness. Neither Li Daochun nor Chen Zhixu provide details on which practices one should perform in order to do so. Their purpose is to show the analogy of *neidan* with the principles formulated in the *Laozi*. If the practice reaches full fruition, it leads to the state in which the lower and the higher components of existence—form and spirit—are reintegrated into Emptiness, and in which “form and spirit are both wondrous.”

Form and Body

Several themes that we have examined so far are summed up, or rather anticipated, in a passage in the *Zhuangzi* that describes the generation of the One from the Great Beginning (*taichu*, a term we have met above in the *Laws of Qian*, but here denoting the state of Non-Being), and the generation of forms from the One. The faculty through which the Dao gives life to the particular creatures and objects through the intermediation of the One is its Virtue (*de*). This happens through a “flowing movement” (*liudong* 留動),⁴⁴ at the end of which creatures and objects acquire their “life principle” and their form.

In the Great Beginning there is Non-Being: there is no Being and there are no names. This is where the One originates: there is the One but there are not yet forms. Things obtain it and are generated: this is called Virtue (*de*). In the not-yet-formed there are divisions but no intervals: this is called Mandate (*ming*). There is a flowing movement that gives life to things. Things achieve their life principle (*shengli*): this is called Form. The form and the body (*xingtǐ*) harbor the spirit, each according to its regulating norm: this is called Nature (*xing*).⁴⁵

泰初有無、無有無名。一之所起、有一而未形。物得以生、謂之德。未形者有分、且然無間、謂之命。留動而生物、物成生理、謂之形。形體保神、各有儀則、謂之性。

In addition to explicating how forms depend on the Dao, it is worthy of note that this passage associates form with two other notions, namely *ming* 命 (Life)

⁴³ *Jindan dayao* 金丹大要 (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir; CT 1067), 4.7b.

⁴⁴ *Liu* 留, as well as *liu* 溜, are synonyms of and attested variants for *liu* 流, “to flow”; see *Dai Kanwa jiten* 大漢和辭典, entries nos. 17943 and 21808.

⁴⁵ *Zhuangzi*, 12.190. See also trl. Watson, pp. 131-132, and Graham, p. 156. I have translated *wu* 物 as “things” in this passage, but this word also means “creatures.”

and *xing* 性 (Nature), both of which later would acquire importance in the doctrines on which *neidan* is based. *Ming*, more literally rendered above as “mandate,” is the “imprint” that Heaven confers to each entity, including its life span, its “destiny” (also included in the notion of *ming*), its function in the world, and the assigned allotment of vital energy. *Xing*, instead, is the parcel of “spirit” (*shen*) that each living being harbors in its individuality, which the *Zhuangzi* defines as “form and body.”

Besides this, the passage quoted above also provides clues to understand the term *wujian* 無間 (“without intervals”), that appears in several other Daoist texts. At the stage of inchoate continuity prior to the origin to the forms there is no differentiation, and thus there are no “intervals” among forms. These “intervals” occur when forms separate from each other, giving rise to differentiation and multiplicity.

“Flowing into the form”

According to the *Zhuangzi*, the generation of creatures is due to a “flowing movement” from the One to the individual beings, which is completed when they obtain their form. Essentially the same idea is found in the “Commentary on the Judgments” (“Tuanzhan”) of the *Book of Changes*, where the process is denoted as “flowing into the form” (*liuxing* 流形). Here the origin of forms is represented by the hexagram *qian* 乾, which cosmologically stands for the One, or Pure Yang:⁴⁶

Great indeed is *qian*, the Origin! The ten thousand things owe their beginning to it, and thus it encompasses Heaven. Like clouds passing and rain being distributed, all the individual things flow into their form.⁴⁷

大哉乾元。萬物資始、乃統天。雲行雨施、品物流形。

The phrase “flowing into the form” also occurs in descriptions of the gestation process, which is often analogically compared to the generation of the cosmos.⁴⁸ For the *Guanzi* (a work that reached its present form in the first century BCE, but contains portions as early as the fifth century BCE), “a human being is water; when the essence and pneuma of man and woman are joined, water flows into the form (*sbui liuxing* 水流形).” “Water” here refers, according to the same text, to the liquid essences (*jing*) that “flow through the joints and the vessels” and are, with pneuma and spirit, one of the basic constituents of the human being. The gestation process continues with the

⁴⁶ Like other emblems of the Yang principle, *qian* represents both Yang as the principle complementary to Yin, and Yang as the state before the differentiation of the One into the Two, i.e., Pure Yang (*chunyang*).

⁴⁷ *Yijing*, “Tuanzhan” 象傳, on the hexagram *qian* 乾 (p. 1). See also trl. Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 370.

⁴⁸ For instance, the *Huainan zi*, 7.99, describes human gestation immediately after quoting from sec. 42 of the *Laozi* the sentence “The Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things.”

formation of the viscera, the flesh, and the individual parts of the body.⁴⁹ One of the Mawangdui manuscripts (approximately dated to the third century BCE), the *Book on the Generation of the Embryo* (*Taichan shu*), also applies the phrase "flowing into the form" to the first stage of gestation: "In the first month [the embryo] is called 'flowing into the form'" (*liuxing* 留 [= 流] 形).⁵⁰ Ge Hong similarly writes that "those who transmit pneuma and cause it to flow into the form (*shouqi liuxing* 授氣流形) are one's father and mother; the one who receives and possesses it is oneself (*woshen* 我身)."⁵¹

"Exiting from death and entering into life"

The *Ten Questions* (*Shiwen*), another Mawangdui manuscript that contains the phrase "flowing into the form," is the earliest extant source in which the notion of form is associated with a practice based on the "inversion" of the process that leads from life to death. As we shall see in the last part of this essay, the ideas formulated in this text are closely related to those underlying doctrines and practices of medieval Daoism.

The phrase "flowing into the form" occurs in the *Ten Questions* in a question asked of Rong Cheng by the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi):⁵²

When people first dispense the purity that flows into the form, what is obtained so that life occurs? When flowing into the form produces a body, what is lost so that death occurs?⁵³

民始蒲淳溜(流)形、何得而生？(溜流)形成體、何失而死？

In a clear statement about the difference between "form" (*xing*) and "body" (*ti*), the *Ten Questions* distinguishes the rise of the form from the rise of the body, and contrasts them by saying that with the rise of the form one "obtains" something and this leads to life; with the rise of the body one "loses" something and this leads to death. In his reply, Rong Cheng teaches the Yellow Emperor how to invert the sequence that leads from form to body, or from life to death, saying that "the essence of cultivating pneuma is to exit from death and enter into life." This is done by filling the form—rather than the body—with the "culminant essence of Heaven and Earth" (*tiandi zhi zhibing* 天地之至精):

The essence (i.e., the essential thing) of regulating pneuma is to exit from death

⁴⁹ *Guanzi* 管子 (Zhuzi jicheng ed.), 14.236 (sec. 39).

⁵⁰ *Taichan shu* 胎產書, 3; trl. Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts*, p. 378. In this and the following quotations from Mawangdui texts, I replace *xing* 刑, which appears in the original manuscripts, with the standard graph for "form," *xing* 形.

⁵¹ *Baopu zi*, 7.137. See also trl. Ware, p. 127.

⁵² On Rong Cheng 容成, who is known elsewhere as a teacher of sexual techniques, see Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan*, pp. 55-58.

⁵³ *Shiwen* 十問, sec. 4; trl. Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, p. 393. In this and the next quotation from the *Shiwen*, I replace the graph for "body," written with the *rou* 肉 radical in the manuscript, with the standard graph, *ti* 體.

and enter into life. [...] To fill the form with this is called concentrating essence.⁵⁴

治氣之精、出死入生。[...] 以此充形、此胃(謂)搏(搏)精。

The “culminant essence,” according to Rong Cheng, “is born in the signless, grows in the formless, and is achieved in the bodiless.”⁵⁵ As shown by these three terms (*wuzheng* 無徵, *wuxing* 無形, *wuti* 無體), the “culminant essence” is equivalent to the original, intangible “essence” that gives rise to the world of multiplicity. Rong Cheng continues by explaining that one should produce it by cultivating pneuma (breath), and finally adds: “Eliminate the foul, treasure the ordinary, and spirit then flows into the form (*shen nai liuxing* 神乃溜形).”⁵⁶

“Exiting from death and entering into life” (*chusi rusheng* 出死入生), the phrase mentioned by Rong Cheng in the passage quoted above, is the reverse of “exiting from life and entering into death,” found in sec. 50 of the *Laozi*. Rong Cheng’s reply, thus, provides an early example of the notion of inverting the sequence that governs the ordinary course of life. “Exiting from death” results in a second birth into a different state in which, as we shall presently see, one is “released from form” and “becomes spirit.” *Neidan* texts of different dates and subtraditions, including the *Secret of the Golden Flower* (*Jinhua zongzhi*; seventeenth century), use the same phrase to formulate the purpose of their doctrines.⁵⁷ Liu Yiming mentions it in several of his works, such as his commentary to the *Token for the Agreement of the Three*:

Alas! This elixir is not greater in size than a speck of powder, a bit of dust, or the tip of a knife. [However] its divine power and its wondrous faculty can enable one to exit from death and enter into life, confer its properties to a withered bone and restore life to it, and open a blind eye and restore light to it.⁵⁸

噫。此丹之大、不過一粉一提一刀圭。其神通妙用。能出死入生、能點枯骨復活、能開瞽目復明。

⁵⁴ *Shiwen*, sec. 4; trl. Harper, p. 396, slightly modified.

⁵⁵ *Shiwen*, sec. 4; trl. Harper, p. 393. On the Dao as “signless” in the *Guanzi* see Harper, *id.*, p. 384, note 1.

⁵⁶ *Shiwen*, sec. 4; trl. Harper, p. 394, slightly modified.

⁵⁷ See *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* 太一金華宗旨, ed. by Zhan Ranhui 湛然慧 in *Changsheng shu Xuming fang bekan* 長生術續命方合刊 (Joint Publication of *The Art of Long Life and Methods for Increasing the Vital Force*; Beijing, 1921), p. 29 (sec. 8). I am grateful to Monica Esposito for this reference. Other editions of the *Jinhua zongzhi* have *chusi busheng* 出死護生, “exiting from death and preserving life.” It may be added here, given the universality of the theme of the “second birth,” that *chusi rusheng* has been used to translate into Chinese the final part of John 5:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

⁵⁸ *Cantong zhibi* 參同直指 (Straightforward Directions on the *Zhouyi cantong qi*), sec. “Zhu” 注 (Commentary), in *Jingyin Daoshu shi'er zhong*, 2.3a. See also, in the same collection, Liu Yiming’s commentary to the *Wuzhen pian*, 1.2a (poem no. 2), and his *Xiangyan poyi* 象言破疑 (Smashing Doubts on Symbolic Language), 2.9b. The term *dian* 點 in Chinese alchemy refers to the elixir transferring its properties to anything that is added to it, like “projection” in Western alchemy.

"Release from the form"

By inverting the sequence that leads from life to death, the *Ten Questions* continues, one achieves "release from the form," or *xingjie* 形解, and becomes "spirit" (*shen*):

Longevity is born of growth and accumulation. As for the fullness of that life: above it scans heaven and below it spreads over earth. The person who is capable of it invariably becomes spirit. Thus he is capable of achieving release from the form.⁵⁹

長壽生於蓄積。坡(彼)生之多、尚(上)察於天、下播於地、能者必神、故能形解。

To illustrate the background of "release from the form," another notion closely related to the later Daoist ideas of transcendence, one again has to start from the *Zhuangzi*, which contains its first occurrence. In a dialogue with Marquis Wen (Wenhou 文侯), Tian Zifang 田子方 illustrates in a few sharp words the deep virtue of his master. Having heard those words, Marquis Wen remains speechless for a whole day, then assembles his attendants and tells them:

Truly distant, that gentleman of complete virtue! I used to think that the words of the sages and the wise men, and the practice of humanity (*ren*) and justice (*yi*), were the ultimate. After hearing about Zifang's master, my form had obtained release and I didn't want to move, my mouth was locked and I didn't want to speak.⁶⁰

遠矣、全德之君子！始吾以聖知之言、仁義之行為至矣。吾聞子方之師、吾形解而不欲動、口鉗而不欲言。

Here *xingjie* appears to denote a state of quiescence and detachment that results from a sudden insight.

In the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*; ca. 90 BCE), the term "release from the form" occurs in a passage denouncing the practices performed by some *fangshi* 方士, or "masters of the methods." The *Records* says that these masters "practiced methods for immortality and for the release from the form through dissolution and transformation, relying on services offered to gods and demons."⁶¹ Although some modern scholars have seen in the term *xiaohua* 銷化 (lit., "decomposition and transformation") an allusion to alchemical practices, its meaning in this passage appears to be different. The mention of "dissolution and transformation" together with "release from the form" and "services offered to gods and demons" suggests that this term refers to thaumaturgic methods for replicating and multiplying one's form (ubiquity), or for dissolving it and hiding it (invisibility). These methods are described in several

⁵⁹ *Shiwen*, sec. 4; trl. Harper, p. 398, slightly modified. "Growth and accumulation" refers to generating and increasing the "culminant essence": "Thus he who is skilled at cultivating pneuma and concentrating essence accumulates the signless. [...] To cultivate pneuma there is a norm; the task lies in accumulating essence" (trl. Harper, pp. 394 and 396, slightly modified).

⁶⁰ *Zhuangzi jishi*, 21.307. See also trl. Watson, pp. 221-222.

⁶¹ *Shiji* 史記, 28.1368-69.

sources.⁶² Ge Hong refers to some of them, saying that they were performed in order to conceal oneself, disappear and reappear at will, or “divide one’s form (*fenxing* 分形) and become one thousand,” and describes them as instances of the “method of dividing one’s form” (*fenxing zhi dao* 分形之道).⁶³

The same view of “release from the form,” as well as the notion of “becoming spirit,” appear five decades after Ge Hong, and in a closely related context, in one of the Shangqing revealed texts, the *Scripture of the Eight Arts for Concealing Oneself within the Earth* (*Yindi bashu jing*). This text teaches how to ingest a talisman in the eight nodal days of the year (*bajie* 八節, i.e., the equinoxes, the solstices, and the first day of each season) for a period ranging between one and eight years. Through this practice, an adept achieves progressively higher states of transcendence, from being “consubstantial to spirit” (or “spirits,” i.e., deities, *yu shen tong ti* 與神同體) until he finally rises to the highest celestial domain, the Heaven of Jade Clarity (Yuqing 玉清). In the sixth year, this practice allows him to “release his form (*jiexing* 解形) becoming ten thousand, and transform his person (*huashen* 化身) becoming one thousand.”⁶⁴

While the *Zhuangzi*, the *Ten Questions*, the *Records of the Historian*, and the *Scripture of the Eight Arts* understand the term *xingjie* (or *jiexing*) in four different senses, it is significant that they all use it. “Release from the form” does not denote a specific practice or method, and refers in a general way to transcending the boundaries of one’s individuality. This may happen through a sudden insight as in the *Zhuangzi*, a self-cultivation exercise as in the *Ten Questions*, a thaumaturgic method as in the *Records of the Historian*, or a meditation practice as in the *Scripture of the Eight Arts*.

“Form” and “mortal body”

In his notes on the passage of the *Records of the Historian* referred to above, the second-century commentator, Fu Qian 服虔, indicates that *xiaobua* (“dissolution and transformation”) refers to *shijie* 尸解, or “release from the corpse,” one of the Daoist methods of leaving the world that will be examined in the next part of this essay.⁶⁵ Although this gloss might at first seem perplexing, or even questionable, its meaning becomes clearer in the light of occurrences of the word *shi* to denote not specifically a corpse, but in general the “mortal body,” either living or dead. Han and post-Han sources use the compound *sishi* 死尸,

⁶² See Robinet, “Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse in Taoism,” pp. 48-50 and 51-57, respectively.

⁶³ See *Baopu zi*, 18.325-26; trl. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, pp. 305-306.

⁶⁴ *Yindi bashu jing* 隱地八術經 (CT 1359), 1.2b-9b, on the Jade Talisman for Flying into the Numinous (*feiling yufu* 飛靈玉符); summarized in *Wushang biyao* 無上祕要 (The Supreme Secret Essentials; CT 1138), 27.7b-8a (see Lagerwey, *Wu-shang pi-yao: Somme taoïste du VIe siècle*, p. 109). For more details on this method see Robinet, “Metamorphosis,” p. 51, and *La révélation du Shangqing dans l’histoire du taoïsme*, 2, p. 142.

⁶⁵ *Shiji*, 28.1369, note 1.

hardly translatable as "a dead corpse,"⁶⁶ and the phrases *shi si* 尸死 and *shi sheng* 尸生, unlikely to mean "a corpse dies" and "a corpse lives," respectively. The latter two phrases occur together in a passage in the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*, produced by the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao) and dating from about 200 CE:

When the mortal body dies (*shi si*), that is wearing out; when the mortal body lives (*shi sheng*), that is accomplishment. Only by guarding the Dao without being full and overflowing is one able to transform wearing out into accomplishment.⁶⁷

尸死為弊、尸生為成。獨能守道不盈溢。故能改弊為成耳。

This passage refers to options given to living human beings, and not to a post-mortem renewal; its subject, in other words, is not the "corpse" but the "mortal body."⁶⁸ Pointing out that *shi* 尸 in the term *shijie* denotes "all the corruptible aging factors of the physical body," rather than the corpse itself, Anna Seidel referred to Joseph Needham's translation of *shijie* as "release from the mortal part."⁶⁹ This translation in some cases is indeed more appropriate than "release from the corpse," for the main idea underlying *shijie*, as we shall presently see, is that to obtain transcendence one should first leave one's perishable body. Although "release from the form" and "release from the corpse" are not exactly the same—the latter requires undergoing death, the former does not—Fu Qian's gloss associates these two notions as instances of transcending the mortal body.

Liberation from Form

The term "release from the form" (*xingjie*) appears to have progressively faded into disuse from the Six Dynasties period (third to sixth century) onward, when it was replaced by other terms including "refining the form" (*lianxing*). Despite this, the notion of "release from the form" constitutes a link between the ideas and practices of *Ten Questions* and those reflected in medieval Daoist

⁶⁶ See *Zhen'gao* 真誥 (Authentic Declarations; CT 1016), 4.16b, and *Wushang biyao*, 29.10a and 87.11b-12a. The *Taiping jing*, ed. by Wang Ming, *Taiping jing bejiao*, 186.570, has *si zhi shi* 死之尸.

⁶⁷ *Laozi xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注, ed. by Rao Zongyi, *Laozi xiang'er zhu jiaozheng*, p. 19. See also trl. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, p. 100.

⁶⁸ The passage quoted above refers to a sentence from the *Laozi* (sec. 15), which in the *Xiang'er* commentary reads as follows (I italicize the meaningful terms): "The one who embraces this Dao does not desire fullness. It is through this lack of fullness that he is able to *wear out* and then again reach *accomplishment*." (In the last sentence, the Heshang gong and the Wang Bi texts of the *Laozi* have "he is able to wear out without newly accomplishing.") Both this *Laozi* sentence and the passage of *Xiang'er* commentary quoted above become clearer in relation to another sentence of the *Laozi* (sec. 45): "The great *accomplishment* seems to have something missing, yet its use is never *worn out*. The great fullness seems to have something unfilled, yet its use is never exhausted."

⁶⁹ Seidel, "Post-mortem Immortality, or: The Taoist Resurrection of the Body," p. 230; Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, V.2, p. 297. Needham does not use this translation throughout his work.

sources. The traditions represented by these sources reformulate the doctrinal views on form examined in the first two parts of this essay in the light of one of their central concerns, namely the ways of realization that make it possible to attain liberation from form and to “return to the Dao.”

An illustration of this renewed context is found in the *Pivot of Meaning of the Daoist Teaching* (*Daojiao yishu*), a work dating from ca. 700 but largely based on Six Dynasties sources. The *Pivot of Meaning* includes both “refining the form” and “release from the corpse” among the transformations (*bianhua*) that one can achieve by means of the “various practices” (*zhongshu* 眾術) described in texts of the Daoist Canon. These practices, as stated in the *Pivot of Meaning*, include meditation methods such as visualizing one’s inner deities (*sisben* 思神), the “fasting of the heart” (*xinzhai* 心齋), “sitting in forgetfulness” (*zuowang* 坐忘), and “pacing the void” (*buxu* 步虛), as well as methods for channeling inner and outer essences and pneumas to various loci within the body.⁷⁰ After saying that “in all these practices heart (*xin* 心) and pneuma interact (*xiangshi* 相使), so that one mysteriously communicates with the Divine Way (or: with the Way of the Deities, *shendao* 神道),” the *Pivot of Meaning* continues as follows:

As for the relevant transformations, they are of three types. The first is “ascending to Heaven in broad daylight” (*bairi shengtian*). This means that when the practice is completed and the method comes to achievement, the 36,000 deities, the Three Ones (Sanyi), and the Imperial One (Diyi) merge into a single body achieved in wondrous Oneness. Therefore one can roam together with the gods, which means that one’s entire person ascends to Heaven.

The second [type of transformation] is “release from the corpse” (*shijie*). Some replace their corpse with a sword or a bamboo staff; all of a sudden they rise up and go, and abruptly they are no longer there. Some leave behind their skin. Some receive a funeral and are buried, but then if their coffin is opened there is only a staff or a shoe. Some roam to the five sacred peaks, while some can rise to Heaven. In the Southern Palace (Nangong) there is the Court of Flowing Fire (*liubuo zhi ting*); in the Golden Gate (Jinmen) there is the Water of Smelting Refinement (*yelian zhi shui*). All those who inwardly ascend to Heaven while they are alive must first go to the Court of Fire (*huoting*) in order to refine their form and spirit, while those who rise to heaven after their death must first go the Courtly Pond (*tingchi*) in order to refine their celestial soul(s) (*bun*) and body frame. All this accords with the results of their practice (*gongye*).

The third [type of transformation] is “transfer through extinction” (*miedu*). The mortal form (*shixing*) does not become ashes, as if the corpse is guarded by the Great One (Taiyi) itself. Sometimes, after years, the corpse reverts to be a human being.⁷¹

論其變化、凡有三種。一者白日昇天。謂功成道備、三萬六千神及三一帝一混合為體、成乎妙一。故能與神俱遊、即身而昇天也。二者屍解。或以刀劍竹木代尸、俄爾昇舉、歛失所在。或遺皮殼。或受殯埋、後開棺中、但有杖舄。或遊五嶽。或

⁷⁰ *Daojiao yishu* 道教義樞 (CT 1129), 2.22b.

⁷¹ *Daojiao yishu*, 2.22b-23a. Note, in the last paragraph, another reference to the One (here appearing in its deified form as the Great One, or Taiyi 太一) as the principle governing forms.

可昇天。南宮有流火之庭、金門有冶鍊之水。凡生而內飛登天者、亦先詣火庭、鍊其形神。死而昇天者、亦先詣庭池、鍊其魂骸。皆隨其功業也。三者滅度。尸形不灰、如太一守尸。或經年歲、尸還成人也。

This passage arranges into descending grades and briefly describes three varieties of transcendence. "Form," and its refining, play a central role in all of them. Before we look at these ways of transcendence in some detail, it is important to consider some of the underlying notions.

Ways of realization

The varieties of transcendence such as those referred to in the *Pivot of Meaning* are those made accessible by Daoist practices that existed when this work was compiled, including the meditation and visualization methods mentioned above. Despite different formulations, practices that were developed in later times, such as inner alchemy, offer access to comparable states of transcendence. Although performing these practices may serve as a preliminary to complete liberation, they lead to more limited degrees of realization, represented for instance as ascension to Heaven or incorporation in the celestial bureaucracy.

The state of complete liberation, which is an integral identification with the absolute Principle, is at the basis of the *Laozi*, and is described in many passages of the *Zhuangzi* and of several other texts (including, for instance, parts of the *Huainan zi*). Significantly, even when these works allude to practices and techniques, they do not give details on them, and warn instead that their performance does not on its own lead to complete liberation:

Inspiring and expiring while emitting the sounds *chui* and *xu*, exhaling the old and inhaling the new [breath], hanging like a bear and stretching like a bird, these are only methods for longevity. This is what the masters who practice *daoyin*, the people who "nourish their form" (*yangxing*), and those who pursue a longevity like Pengzu's are fond of.

Now, being lofty without having ingrained ideas, practicing self-cultivation without relying on benevolence and righteousness, administering the government without looking for merit or fame, being peaceful without [the need of] contemplating rivers and oceans, being long-lived without practicing *daoyin*, means forgetting everything but possessing everything. Calmly residing in the Ultimateless while having all pleasing things follow oneself—this is the Way of Heaven and Earth, and is the virtue of the sage.⁷²

吹呴呼吸、吐故納新、熊經鳥申、為壽而已矣。此道引之士、養形之人、彭祖壽考者之所好也。若夫不刻意而高、無仁義而修、無功名而治、無江海而聞、不道引而壽、無不忘也、無不有也。澹然無極而眾美從之。此天地之道、聖人之德也。

In dwelling he has no shape, and in abiding he has no place. In movement he has no form, and in quiescence he has no body. He is there but looks as if he were gone, he is alive but looks as if he were dead. He comes in and out of the spaceless

⁷² *Zhuangzi*, 15.237-238. See also trl. Watson, pp. 167-168, and Graham, p. 265.

and has gods and demons at his orders; he sinks into the unfathomable and enters into the spaceless. He exchanges his form with what is different from him. End and beginning for him are like a ring, and nobody knows his patterns. This is how his essence and spirit can lead him to ascend to the Dao. This is where the Real Man roams.

As for inspiring and expiring while emitting the sounds *chui* and *xu*, exhaling the old and inhaling the new [breath], hanging like a bear and stretching like a bird, bathing like a duck and leaping like a gibbon, glaring like an owl and staring like a tiger—these are for the people who “nourish their form” (*yangxing*), and he does not confuse his mind with them.⁷³

居而無容、處而無所、其動無形、其靜無體、存而若亡、生而若死、出入無間、役使鬼神、淪於不測、入於無間、以不同形相嬗也、終始若環、莫得其倫。此精神之所以能登假於道也。是故真人之所游、若吹啣呼吸、吐故內新、熊經鳥伸、鳧浴蟻躩、鷗視虎顧、是養形之人也、不以滑心。

In some Daoist texts, this state of transcendence is defined as the one possessed by the so-called Celestial Immortal (or Celestial Transcendent, *tianxian* 天仙), who “raises his form and ascends to the Void.”⁷⁴ Liu Yiming describes this state as follows:

Those who bring to completion (i.e., exhaustion, *liao* 了) both *xing* and *ming*, who have a body beyond their body, whose form and spirit are both wondrous, who are one with the Dao and merge with Reality, are Celestial Immortals. [...] Only the Celestial Immortals shed their illusory body and achieve a *dharmakāya* (the “body” of Buddhahood), go beyond the “fashioning transmutations” (*zaohua*)⁷⁵ and are without life and death. Being able to shed both life and death, their longevity equals that of Heaven, and they last eternally without decaying.⁷⁶

性命俱了、身外有身、形神俱妙、與道合真者、天仙也。[...] 惟天仙脫幻身而成法身、超造化之外、無生無死。能脫生死、與天齊壽、永久不壞也。

Different Daoist texts refer to the entirely realized being with different names; the *Laozi*, in particular, calls him the “saint” (*shengren* 聖人). However he may be designated, the main point to consider in the present context is that, having achieved the supreme realization, form is neither an advantage nor an hindrance for him; if he is liberated “in his form,” it only because he has attained liberation in a state that, from a relative point of view, involves having a form; but since his own state is one in which there is non-duality of form and spirit (in the sense seen above, described by the phrase “form and spirit are both wondrous”), he has already transcended form and its limitations. In fact, for an entirely realized being, “ascending to the Void” does not even entail a change of state, for he has

⁷³ *Huainan zi*, 7.104-105. See also trl. Larre, Robinet, and Rochat de la Vallée, *Les grands traités du Huainan zi*, p. 90.

⁷⁴ *Baopu zi*, 2.20. See also trl. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320*, p. 47.

⁷⁵ I.e., they go beyond the manifested world, ruled by impermanence and change.

⁷⁶ *Wuzhen zhizhi*, 1.1b (commentary to poem 3). Note the mention of the “illusory body” (*huanshen* 幻身) juxtaposed with the *dharmakāya* (*fasen* 法身).

achieved complete liberation in life. For this reason alone, he continues to deal with the world of multiplicity, and to benefit the domain in which he lives by his mere presence, until the conditions that support his existence are exhausted. From a relative point of view, death for him consists only in releasing the residual traces of self-identity; from an absolute point of view, which is the one in which he constantly dwells, his self-identity is already null, for he is identified with absolute Principle. Nothing therefore is left to be perfected after his existence is concluded. "Life and death do not differ for him," says the *Zhuangzi*;⁷⁷ "he takes life and death as a single transformation (*yihua* 一化)," adds the *Huainan zi*.⁷⁸ Having spent his life according to the "mandate" or the "destiny" (*ming*) that Heaven had assigned him, he leaves the world when he has completed to perform his function in it.

For those who look at such a being and try to understand how he may have attained his state, there is no other way than following his example. As Claude Larre has written: "Lorsque le corps est dans la totale dépendance de l'esprit, la question de savoir comment on peut s'élever dans le ciel ne se pose pas, ne se pose plus."⁷⁹ There is no specific operation or method involved in achieving complete liberation in life, for any practice—meditation, alchemy, or other—may prepare to it but operates within the domain that the adept is called to transcend. The final purpose of every practice is to reveal the limitations of that domain.

"Ascending to Heaven in broad daylight" and "release from the corpse"

Even though they are not the same as complete realization, the three forms of deliverance described in the *Pivot of Meaning of the Daoist Teaching* are all examples of "exiting from death and entering into life." This phrase does not mean inverting the course of aging and indefinitely prolonging the length of life, but entering into a different state of being. As shown by the passage quoted above, some can achieve liberation during their lifetime, others after undergoing death.

The highest degree of realization mentioned in the *Pivot of Meaning* is "ascending to Heaven in broad daylight"; the next one is "release from the corpse." The relation between these two ways of deliverance becomes clear by examining the features that distinguish them from each other. The first point to consider is that "ascension to Heaven in broad daylight" is deemed to be a higher variety of "release from the corpse." According to a passage found in three major Daoist works, one of the differences between these forms of transcendence is the time of the day in which the adept leaves the world:

⁷⁷ *Zhuangzi*, 2.46. Also in *Huainan zi*, 7.103; see trl. Larre, *Le Traité VII du Houai nan tseu*, p. 62.

⁷⁸ *Huainan zi*, 7.104; see trl. Larre, p. 64. These sentences do not mean mere "indifference to death," or if they do, it is in the sense that nothing changes when death happens. According to the *Huainan zi*, the realized man "subsists (*cun* 存) but seems to be gone, he is alive but seems to be dead" (7.104; see trl. Larre, p. 65).

⁷⁹ Larre, p. 247.

Leaving in broad daylight is called superior release from the corpse. Leaving at midnight is called inferior release from the corpse. If it happens around morning or evening, that is called [becoming] a governor of the underworld (*dixia zhu*).⁸⁰

白日去謂之上尸解也。夜半去謂之下尸解。向曉向暮之際、而謂之地下主者也。

The last form of deliverance mentioned in this passage is intermediate between the other two, and in turn gives access to two spiritual ranks: “governor of the underworld” which is higher, and “marshal of spirits” (*guishuai* 鬼帥) which is lower.⁸¹ Here, however, we should focus our attention on the first two forms of transcendence. This passage shows that although the term *bairi* 白日 is usually translated as “in broad daylight,” it refers more precisely to the time of midday, in contrast to the second form, which is the “release from the corpse” proper and occurs at midnight (*yeban* 夜半). The hagiographies of Daoist immortals, in fact, provide many examples of ascension to Heaven occurring exactly at midday.⁸²

The second point to consider is that the phrase “ascending to Heaven in broad daylight” is very often associated in Daoist texts with the image of riding a carriage of clouds driven by dragons.⁸³ The adept who undergoes this form of liberation typically becomes a member of the celestial bureaucracy by rising to one of the heavens distinguished in Daoist cosmography, i.e., to the heaven corresponding to the state of realization attained at the time of death; in that way he obtains a “rank and function” (*weiye* 位業) determined by the practice to which he has devoted himself.⁸⁴ From there, he does not return to the human world; on the contrary, as shown by several texts including the *Supreme Secret Essentials*, he can continue his progress toward higher states of realization.⁸⁵ By contrast, “release from the corpse” occurs by undertaking a descent to the palace or domain of Taiyin 太陰, or Great Darkness, located in the tenebrous regions of the extreme north, which in traditional Chinese cosmography is situated “below” instead of “above” (except when the north is equivalent to the Center). The direction of the journey undertaken to undergo “release from the corpse,” in other words, is opposite to the one followed to ascend to Heaven.

These two ways of deliverance, therefore, are distinguished by opposite but corresponding features: ascent and descent, midday and midnight, light and darkness, Sun (*ri* 日) and Moon (*taiyin* 太陰). Moreover, ascent to Heaven is the

⁸⁰ *Zhen'gao*, 4.17a; *Wushang biyao*, 87.4b (Lagerwey, *Wu-shang pi-yao*, p. 185); *Yunji qiqian*, 84.8b.

⁸¹ A “governor of the underworld” may rise to a higher state every 140 years, a “marshal of spirits” every 280 years. See Yoshikawa Tadao, “Nicchū mu'ei: Shikai sen kō,” pp. 196-204.

⁸² See Yoshikawa, “Nicchū mu'ei,” pp. 176-185.

⁸³ See, for instance, *Zhen'gao*, 2.9a, 14.8a, 14.9a, and 14.9b.

⁸⁴ The *Daojiao yishu*, 1.13a-22b, contains a very detailed classification of states of transcendence in the section entitled “Weiye.”

⁸⁵ In its chapters devoted to different states of transcendence (j. 83-100; Lagerwey, *Wu-shang pi-yao*, pp. 47-48 and 181-221), the *Wushang biyao* states that some of the immortals who inhabit a particular Heaven are on the way to ascending to the next one.

way of non-return to the world: one continues one's spiritual journey ascending from one empyrean to the next. On the contrary, descent to Great Darkness, as we shall presently see, is the way of return: one obtains a "second birth" and comes back to the world.

"Refining the form in Great Darkness"

"Release from the corpse" is reserved to those who have not attained a state sufficient to ascend to Heaven during their life, and need to go through a further period of refinement that cannot occur in the form in which they presently dwell. Accordingly, this type of liberation is said to consist of undergoing a "metamorphosis of one's form (*xing zhi hua* 形之化)."⁸⁶

Since the release from, or rather *of*, the mortal body is a necessary step to continue one's purification, the refining process takes place in the Great Darkness after one who is ready for it has "feigned death" (*tuosi* 託死).⁸⁷ The earliest description of this process, which also includes the earliest mention of the phrase "refining the form," is found in the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*. This work explains the sentence "obliterating selfhood without coming to an end" (*moshen bu dai* 沒身不殆, now found in sec. 16 of the *Laozi*) saying:⁸⁸

Great Darkness is the palace where those who have accumulated the Dao refine their forms (*lianxing*). When there is no place for them to stay in the world, the worthy withdraw and, feigning death, pass through Great Darkness to have their images (*xiang*) reborn again. This is "obliterating selfhood without coming to an end." The profane are unable to accumulate good deeds, so when they die it is truly death. They are taken away in service of the Earth Office.⁸⁹

太陰道積練形之宮也。世有不可處、賢者避去、託死過太陰中、而復一邊生像。沒而不殆也。俗人不能積善行、死便真死、屬地官去也。

Some passages quoted earlier in this essay suggest that the statement about "having their images reborn again" is to be understood in a literal sense: leaving one's mortal body and refining one's form results, at first, in entering again into a state in which neither form nor matter exist, but only an image. After the adept's form has been "refined," his body is recalled to the Great Darkness and is returned to him. This process culminates in a "rebirth," or a "second birth"

⁸⁶ *Wushang biyao*, 87.1a (Lagerwey, *Wu-shang pi-yao*, p. 185); also in *Yunji qiqian*, 85.1a.

⁸⁷ On the Great Darkness see Robinet, "Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse," pp. 63-66; Seidel, "Post-mortem Immortality," pp. 230-232; and Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, pp. 46-48.

⁸⁸ As distinguished from "form" (*xing* 形) and "body" (*ti* 體), *shen* 身 (approximately translated above as "selfhood") refers to the entire person, including its physical aspects as well as its non-physical aspects such as "spirit" (or "spirits," *shen* 神), thinking, emotions, personality, social identity, and so forth.

⁸⁹ *Xiang'er*, 21; trl. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, p. 102, modified. The Earth Office (*diguan*) is one of the three headquarters of the supernatural administration, located in Heaven, Earth, and Water.

(*fusheng* 復生), in a body that preserves itself indefinitely. Commenting on the sentence “Those who die without perishing are long-lived” (*si er bu wang zhe shou* 死而不亡者壽, now found in sec. 33 of the *Laozi*), the *Xiang'er* says:

When a Daoist's practices are complete, the spirits of the Dao call that person to return. Departing the world through feigned death, the person passes through Great Darkness to be born again and not perish. That is longevity. Commoners have no good merits, and when they die, they belong to the Earth Office. That is to perish.⁹⁰

道人行備、道神歸之。避世託死、過太陰中、復生去為不亡。故壽也。俗人無善功、死者屬地官、便為亡矣。

The *Central Scripture of the Nine Real Men* (*Jiuzhen zhongjing*), one of the main Shangqing revealed texts, gives a similar account of the rebirth process: the adept feigns death and goes to Great Darkness, where his form is refined and his body and inner spirits are re-assembled beginning with the five viscera and the bones.⁹¹ A passage once found in this text adds another detail. The adept who obtains “release from the corpse” receives his second birth by going again through his embryonic development:

Sometimes a person temporarily dies and goes to the Great Darkness, where he is submitted to the jurisdiction of the Three Offices. His flesh becomes ashes and rots, his blood sinks into the earth, and his veins are dispersed. Yet his five viscera are still alive, and his bones are like jade. The seven earthly souls (*po*) are camped in attendance, and the three celestial souls (*bun*) guard his lodging; the Three Primes (*sanyuan*) vitalize his breath,⁹² and the Great Spirit (*taishen*) is enclosed within; the Great One (Taiyi) makes a record of his spirit [in the registers of the immortals], and the Controller of Destinies (Siming) takes charge of his joints; the Five Old Lords (Wulao) assist his flourishing, and the Imperial Lord (Dijun) polishes his matter. Then they make him reappear when they wish, whether in thirty years, in twenty, in ten, or in five. When he is about to come to life again, they collect his blood and build up his flesh, reanimate his liquids and coagulate his fluids, restore his matter and make him return to the embryo, complete his form and cleanse his matter. Thus his semblance (*rong*) is better than it was before he died. This is what is meant when we speak of a Real Man refining his person (*lianshen*)⁹³ in the Great Darkness, and changing his appearance (*mao*) in the Three Offices.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *Xiang'er*, 43; trl. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, p. 135. On this passage see also Robinet, “Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse,” p. 63, and Seidel, “*Post-mortem* Immortality,” p. 230.

⁹¹ *Dijun jiuzhen zhongjing* 帝君九真中經 (Central Scripture of the Nine Real Men of the Imperial Lord; CT 1376), 1.9b-10b. See Robinet, “Metamorphosis,” p. 63, and Seidel, “*Post-mortem* Immortality,” p. 231.

⁹² “Control his breath” (*quanxi* 權息) in the *Zhen'gao*, “guard his breath” (*buxi* 護息) in the *Yunji qiqian* (see below, note 94).

⁹³ “Refining his form” (*lianxing*) in both the *Zhen'gao* and the *Yunji qiqian*.

⁹⁴ *Wushang biyao*, 87.10b-11a (Lagerwey, *Wu-shang pi-yao*, pp. 186-187). Slightly shorter versions of this passage are found in the *Zhen'gao*, 4.16a-b (trl. Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching,” pp. 182-183), and the *Yunji qiqian*, 86.5a. A note in

若其人或暫死而適太陰、權過三官者。肉既灰爛、血沈脈散者、而猶五藏自生、白骨如玉。七魄營侍、三魂守宅、三元歡息、大神內閉、太一錄神、司命秉節、五老扶華、帝君寶質。或三十年二十年、或十年五年、隨意而出。當生之時、即更收血育肉、生津結液、復質反胎、成形濯質、乃勝於昔未死之容也。真人練身於太陰、易貌於三官者、此之謂也。

After rebirth, the adept returns to live in the world, typically on a mountain but at times among other human beings; along to his change of form, he is sometimes said to change his name. The purified form and body that he has received are necessary to him because he had not entirely transcended his state and must continue the refining process, in a state different from the one in which he existed earlier. The newly received body continues to subsist indefinitely so that he may continue his search for a higher form of liberation. The final release from the world of form may happen at any time, or at the conclusion of the cosmic cycle in which he lives.⁹⁵

One word, finally, is necessary on one of the most typical aspects of "release from the corpse." As is said in the *Pivot of Meaning* and many other texts, if the coffin of one who has "feigned death" is opened, the corpse is found to have been replaced by some object—typically a sword, a staff, or a sandal.⁹⁶ These implements perform a function similar to the "replacement bodies" (*tishen* 替身) used in some Daoist rites: they represent the negative and "unrefined" aspects of the adept, the bonds to the world that had made it impossible for him to achieve a higher form of liberation in life.⁹⁷ This function in turn is related to another, and

the *Zhen'gao* states that this passage was originally found in the manuscript of the *Jiuzhen zhongjing* that belonged to Xu Mi 許謐 (303-376). In all three texts, the passage continues with the famous story of Zhao Chengzi 趙成子 undergoing rebirth in Great Darkness; see Robinet, "Metamorphosis," pp. 63-64, and *La révélation du Shangqing*, 2, p. 77; and Strickmann, pp. 183-184. On the Three Offices see note 89 above.

⁹⁵ It should be noted that this understanding of the purpose of "release from the corpse" is different from but not alternative to the religious beliefs of the particular time and place in which the early Daoist doctrines on liberation were transmitted. According to these beliefs, "release from the corpse" involved deceiving the spirits that descend to summon one's soul(s), and the change of name had the purpose of circumventing the spirits that maintain the "registers of death" (*siji* 死籍). Robert Campany has paid attention to this and related features and has shed light on several aspects of "release from the corpse" in his *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, pp. 52-60. It seems clear, though, that "ascending to Heaven in broad daylight" is not a "nonillicit method of transcendence" contrasted to a supposedly illicit "release from the corpse," and that the reason why the latter is deemed to be a lower form of liberation is not merely its "deceptive character" (*id.*, p. 59), although one might be led to believe so if only the religious aspects are considered and no attention is paid to the doctrinal aspects.

⁹⁶ Here too, there are differences in the levels of deliverance with which these objects are associated: the sword represents a higher form of "release from the corpse," the staff a lower one. See *Yunji qiqian*, 84.4b, and Yoshikawa, "Nicchū mu'ei," p. 190.

⁹⁷ On the "replacement bodies" used in Daoist exorcist and funerary rites see Schipper, "Chiens de paille et tigres en papier: Une pratique rituelle et ses gloses au cours de la tradition chinoise," especially pp. 88-89.

more important one. Isabelle Robinet appears to be the only scholar to have noticed, based on earlier work by Marcel Granet and Max Kaltenmark, that swords, staffs, and sandals are symbolic of flight and ascension. Swords, as Granet remarked, are associated with dragons or even turn into dragons, the animals that pull the “carriage of clouds” of one who rises to Heaven. Sandals, as Kaltenmark pointed out, “are mythically related to birds.”⁹⁸

Liberation through ritual and meditation

For the majority of human beings, on the other hand, liberation is accessible only after death, with help from their descendants who perform rites on their behalf to ensure that they are not kept forever in the netherworld. This process is also described as “refining the form.” In a Lingbao text devoted to “transfer through extinction” (*miedu* 滅度, the term used by the *Pivot of Meaning* in the passage quoted above), the priest calls on the officers of the netherworld to let the deceased go to the palace of Great Darkness in order to “refine and adjust its form and body frame” (*lianchi xinghai* 鍊飭形骸). At the same time, the officers are asked to let the celestial souls of the deceased ascend to the Southern Palace (Nangong 南宮). After a number of years, the refined body and the purified celestial souls reunite for rebirth.⁹⁹

Ritual, however, is not the only way to grant release to one’s ancestors. Shangqing texts describe meditation practices performed by adepts for the same purpose. Freed by virtue of their descendants from their confinement in the netherworld, the ancestors to the seventh generation “become able to refine their matter (*lian zhi* 鍊質) in the Southern Palace, and undergo a transformation into immortals at the embryonic state (*taixian* 胎仙);¹⁰⁰ they “are delivered from the Three Paths [of existence] (*santu* 三塗) and receive a new embryo (*gengtai* 更胎) in the Southern Palace.”¹⁰¹ The *Pivot of Meaning* also alludes to similar Shangqing

⁹⁸ See Robinet, “Metamorphosis,” pp. 60–62; Granet, *Danses et légendes dans la Chine ancienne*, p. 499, note 1; Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan*, pp. 40 and 52. As we have seen (note 96), swords are associated with the higher form of “release from the corpse,” which is “ascending to Heaven in broad daylight.” This happens by riding a chariot of clouds pulled by dragons, the animals into which the swords transform themselves. Staffs and sandals similarly appear to signal that the adept will continue his spiritual journey on earth, with the intention of ascending, finally, to Heaven.

⁹⁹ *Miedu wulian shengshi miaojing* 滅度五鍊生尸妙經 (Wondrous Scripture on Salvation through Extinction and the Fivefold Refinement of the Corpse; CT 369), 7b–8a. See Bokenkamp, “Death and Ascent in Ling-pao Taoism,” pp. 7–14. On the petitions addressed for the same purpose to the rulers of the underworld see, in this issue of the *Cahiers*, the study by Franciscus Verellen. Based on the *Miedu wulian shengshi miaojing* and the Shangqing texts referred to below, the Southern Palace is not only the locus of refinement for the living adepts, as stated in the *Daojiao yishu*, but also for the deceased.

¹⁰⁰ *Zhen’gao*, 13.1a.

¹⁰¹ *Wushang biyao*, 97.5a (Lagerwey, *Wu-shang pi-yao*, pp. 206–208). For more examples see Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing*, 1, p. 172, note 2. The Three Paths of existence are rebirth in the earth-prisons, as a hungry ghost, and as an animal.

meditation practices for the living when it mentions the Court of Flowing Fire and the Water of Smelting Refinement, which were intended for inner purification by fire and water. These practices also resulted in generating an inner immortal embryo.¹⁰²

Concluding Remarks

The relation between the notion of generating an embryo in Shangqing and the comparable notions in *neidan* has been examined by Isabelle Robinet.¹⁰³ Despite their less pronounced imagery and their virtual abandonment of the inner gods, the Tang meditation texts that mention "refining the form," such as the *Scripture on Concentration and Contemplation*, are in turn the heirs of the Shangqing meditation practices. Having briefly looked, with these texts, at one of the direct antecedents of *neidan*, these notes may end here.

As we have seen, from a relative point of view, forms are the threshold between the Dao and the objects; they define the particularity and individuality of the "ten thousand things," and provide supports to "return to Dao." Forms are the last stage—or the stage before the last, if matter is also included—in the sequence of transmutations that leads from the Dao to the particular objects, which different sources represent either as a hierarchy of states originating in Dao, or under the guise of a cosmogonic process. Beyond the differences in the single formulations, the various states and stages can all be referred back to three main ones: the Dao (which includes the principles of Non-Being and Being, neither of which is manifested), Oneness (where manifestation begins, and where all forms are included), and the multiplicity of forms. All these states and stages, it is worth remembering, have a meaning only from a relative point of view; the Absolute does not go through any alteration or transformation, and nothing exists outside it.

The Daoist ideal of the entirely realized being builds on these basic notions. Even if the realized being lives in the manifested world, he is identified with the absolute Principle and therefore has transcended all the states related to individuality, including form. The remaining traces of individuality are abandoned by him when he leaves the world after he has performed his function in it. Death for him is not a change of state, for he has reached the state in which no change can occur. The Daoist legacies that, from the Han period onward, provide various ways of realization apply the same principles to particular domains and offer more limited states of deliverance. Their ways of liberation are related to the notion of "refining the form." In some cases, liberation means ascension to a particular Heaven, from which an adept can ascend to higher states. In other cases, it requires leaving the mortal body and being reborn with a body that preserves itself

¹⁰² On these practices see Robinet, *Taoist Meditation*, pp. 187-198 (especially 189 and 197), and her "Randonnées extatiques des taoïstes dans les astres," especially pp. 162-165 and 214-217.

¹⁰³ Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing*, 1, pp. 174-180.

until final liberation can be attained. If neither of these ways of deliverance is possible, a deceased can be liberated by his descendants, by means of ritual or meditation practices.

As it does in many other cases, *neidan* inherits these ideas and builds part of its discourse upon them. These words of Chen Zhixu show why form should be transcended:

One should search for the state prior to Heaven (*xiantian*) before the rise of form. In the state posterior to Heaven (*houtian*), after the rise of form, there are human beings and things, not the Golden Elixir.¹⁰⁴

須求先天未形者是、若後天地已有形者、人也、物也、非金丹也。

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¹⁰⁴ *Jindan dayao*, 5.1b.

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