Pure/Religious Experiences in the *Chuang-tzu* 
and Buddhism: 
In Search of the Pure Land  

Hoyu Ishida

Although the *Chuang-tzu*, a classical Chinese text of philosophical Taoism, was written by more than one person at different times and we occasionally find some inconsistency in its textual arrangements and arguments, the notion of the Tao (the Way), Heaven or Nature is always found throughout the text as an underlying theme. Because of the textual inconsistency and difficulty, it is not easy to analyze coherently the messages in the work. Therefore, as for the *Chuang-tzu*, I would like to limit my discussion mainly to Chapter II, the *Ch'i wu lun* ("Essay on Seeing Things as Equal"). The reason for choosing this chapter is that it is widely believed both by Eastern and Western scholars to be the major philosophical chapter of the whole text.

In examining this chapter, we find that there are many similarities between the *Chuang-tzu* and some forms of Buddhism. In the case of the *Chuang-tzu*, the Tao cannot be attained by words or concepts at all but it is only to be experienced. *Chuang-tzu*, the author of the *Chuang-tzu*, denies in particular the notion that language aids in the attainment of the Tao. We are able to see a similar notion of negating language, for example, in the Zen idea of *furyoku monji* (non-dependence upon the words and letters of the scriptures, indicating that satori or enlightenment cannot be captured by words and letters). In examining the *Vimalakirtinirdeśa-sūtra*, we also find an interesting similarity of totally casting away the notion of language. The *Chuang-tzu* and Buddhism further agree on avoiding dichotomies—subject vs. object, good vs. bad or right vs. wrong. This article, focusing on

1 In this paper, however, I follow the tradition of regarding Chuang-tzu as the author of the text for convenience sake.

2 For example, Chapter III does not seem to belong to the first seven chapters (The Inner Chapters), and even within each chapter we find some inconsistency in arguments.

the relationship between language and enlightenment or perfection in the light of the notion of "pure" or "religious" experiences, examines the *Chuang-tzu* and some forms of Buddhism—Zen, the *Vimalakirtinirdeśa-śīśa* and the Pure Land tradition with emphasis on Shinran.

( 1 )

The beginning of any written document generally carries not only an introduction but also an important idea or hint of the whole work. The *Ch'i wu lun* is not an exception. We find a conversation between Nan-kuo Tzu-ch'î and his disciple, Yen Ch'eng Tzu-yu. When Tzu-ch'î was seated leaning on his armrest as he was staring up at the heavens and breathing quietly, he looked as if he were vacant and had lost his companion. Yen-ch'eng, realizing the state of his master's mind, asked him, "What is this? Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!" Tzu-ch'î noticing that Yen Ch'eng could tell the different states of Tzu-ch'î's mind, admired him and said, "You do well to ask the question, Yen. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that?" Tzu-ch'î is saying that he lost himself when he was in a kind of trance-like state of mind; he was experiencing the Tao at that moment. His self or ego was no longer attached to anything but was free, being with the spontaneous working of the Tao, Heaven or Nature. His body was like a withered tree and his mind was like dead ashes. This chapter begins suggestively by introducing an aspect of a Taoist sage.

Chuang-tzu is trying to get across a notion of the Tao, Heaven or Nature in this important chapter. As for the use of the Tao, Heaven and Nature in this paper, I deal with these three respective terms in the same way without distinguishing among them: Burton Watson in his footnote for *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* says that by Heaven Chuang-tzu means Nature and the Way. Although these words have their own meanings and connotations, I deal with them as one concept and there is no significant difference among the three in this chapter of the *Ch'i wu lun*.

The Tao is the natural, spontaneous working itself, the working in which there is no human endeavor or discretion. While the Tao is natural and spontaneous, the nature of human action is self-centered, attached to things

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and intentional. This difference between the Tao or Nature and human nature is what Chuang-tzu wants us to become aware of. Because of human self-centeredness or attachment, Chuang-tzu says, a person suffers:

Once a man receives this fixed bodily form, he holds on to it, waiting for the end. Sometimes clashing with things, sometimes bending before them, he runs his course like a galloping steed, and nothing can stop him. Is he not pathetic? Sweating and laboring to the end of his days and never seeing his accomplishment, utterly exhausting himself and never knowing where to look for rest--can you help pitying him? I'm not dead yet! he says, but what good is that? His body decays, his mind follows it--can you deny that this is a great sorrow? Man's life has always been a muddle like this.6

The idea that one's suffering is derived from one's being self-centered or attached to things is also precisely the message of Buddhism. In the first place, Buddhism sees life as *du’kha* (suffering). There are eight kinds of suffering in human life: birth, old age, illness, death, separation from beloved ones, meeting with those one dislikes, not obtaining what one seeks and the suffering or pain from the vigor of the five aggregates constituting one's body and mind. These are simply human experiences. Buddhism, through seeing things as they are, faces reality and maintains that life is *du’kha*. Life is seen as suffering especially to unenlightened ones.

In order to eliminate suffering, Chuang-tzu suggests that we leave everything to the Tao, where one releases one's attachment or holding on to things in the realm of the Tao, thereby living naturally and spontaneously, and becoming free from the bondage of suffering. (This throwing everything up to the Tao reminds us of the teaching of Pure Land Buddhism, which will be discussed later in this article.) Before talking about one's experience of the Tao as a way of getting away from suffering, we would now like to see how Chuang-tzu understands the human world.

According to Chuang-tzu, a person is living in the realm of discrimination or distinction--making value judgments and naming things such as right or wrong, beauty or ugliness, etc. Chuang-tzu sees that everything is relative and varies with one's perspective. He argues:

Everything has its "that," everything has its "this." From the point of

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view of "that" you cannot see it, but through understanding you can
know it. So I say, "that" comes out of "this" and "this" depends on
"that"--which is to say that "this" and "that" give birth to each other.
But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death
there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be
unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be
acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be
recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must
be recognition of right.⁷

Chuang-tzu is saying that everything has its opposite: this or that and right or
wrong, but that they are relative. Right and wrong are simply different
interpretations of one and the same thing from different viewpoints. Chuang-
tzu then says:

What is acceptable we call acceptable; what is unacceptable we call
unacceptable. A road is made by people walking on it; things are so
because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so
makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so
makes them not so. Things all must have that which is so; things all
must have that which is acceptable. There is nothing that is not so,
nothing that is not acceptable.⁸

Chuang-tzu is arguing that things are evaluated and judged from our own
evaluation and judgment, and so are named as such and such. However,
things that are named are just named for our convenience. Therefore, if one
sticks to one's own (selfish) judgment believing that it is the only true way,
then, Chuang-tzu says, one can never obtain the way of Tao but instead will
suffer; this can be also found in the Buddhist teaching as one of its
fundamental doctrines.

Chuang-tzu's skepticism or perspectivism extends to different species
of living things. Chad Hansen in his "Ancient Chinese Theories of Language"
says that Chuang-tzu "intends his insight to be broader than mere spatial
perspective. Being human is itself a perspective. Even the judgments we all
agree on are relative to our perspective."⁹ Chuang-tzu says:

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⁷ Ibid., pp. 39-40.
⁸ Ibid., p. 40.
⁹ Chad Hansen, "Ancient Chinese Theories of Language" in Journal of
Now let me ask you some questions. If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a roach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Mao-ch'iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which know how to fix the standard of beauty for the world?\(^\text{10}\)

Chad Hansen sees that language conventionally provides terms which are appropriate only to relative use and says that language is "a system of distinguishing and evaluating that is perspective bound--that is, each person uses the language from his own perspective.... What is subjective is our employment of a language to express and embody or 'position'." Hansen also asserts that "Chuang-tzu has absorbed the paradigm of intellectual activity as the forming of preferences and the making of choices through language distinctions."\(^\text{11}\)

According to Hansen, Chuang-tzu sees the activity "as an immediate one like perceiving--not an outcome of a reasoning of argumentative process."\(^\text{12}\) Hansen's view is that man experiences the activity immediately and spontaneously; however, language prevents him from experiencing it, since language makes man dichotomize the activity into the subject-object confrontation with reasoning and arguing, from which we get engaged in making distinctions, judgments and values such as right or wrong, and beauty or ugliness--the realm of discrimination. As long as one lives in this kind of realm, one cannot escape not only from the discriminatory world but also from the world of attachment, because of the notion of self or ego, which is the cause of suffering in this realm. By entering into the realm of the Tao,

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\(^{10}\) Watson, pp. 45-46.
\(^{11}\) Hansen, p. 275.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 274.
however, one is able to attain non-discrimination and become free from any attachment, since one perceives the activity immediately and spontaneously without dichotomizing things. In the Tao the notion of ego is gone. Chuang-tzu urges us to illuminate "in the light of Heaven." Since the Tao is the "state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites," if one realizes it, then one no longer makes any judgments and distinctions.

In order to liberate oneself from such a world of discrimination and self-attachment in which a person is suffering, one has to leave oneself totally to the working of the Tao or to be merged into Nature. In this state of encountering and being merged into the Tao, one totally loses oneself and stops dichotomizing things and making judgments. Therefore, when one is not taking any action, one's body becomes like a "withered tree" and the mind becomes like "dead ashes"--the static aspect of the Tao. Chuang-tzu says that "Heaven and earth are one attribute; the ten thousand things are one horse...the Way makes them all into one.... We have already become one, so how can I say anything?"

The idea of oneness can be elaborated, for example, in the theory of "pure experience" by a Japanese philosopher, Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945), who exemplified Japan's attempt to assimilate Western philosophy into the Oriental spiritual tradition. In the opening page of his major work, *Zen-no kenkyō*, (1911; Eng. trans., *A Study of Good*, 1960), he says:

To experience means to know events precisely as they are. It means to cast away completely one's attitude of discriminative reflection, and to know in accordance with the events. Since people include some reflection even when speaking of experience the word "pure" is here used to signify a condition of true experience itself without the addition of the least thought or reflection. For example, it refers to that moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound which occurs not only before one has added the judgment that this seeing or hearing relates to something external or that one is feeling this sensation, but even before one has judged what color or what sound it is. Thus, *pure experience* is synonymous with *direct experience*. When one experiences directly one's conscious state there is as yet neither subject nor object, and knowledge and its object are completely

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13 Watson, p. 40.
14 Ibid., pp. 40-43.
united. This is the purest form of experience.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Nishida, pure experience is directly perceived experience, in which there is only experience taking place and there is no recognition of the subject (one that perceives) and the object (that which is perceived). For example, when one is practicing riding a bicycle, there is a dichotomous relationship between the subject or the person who is riding a bicycle and the object or the bicycle. While one is practicing and cannot manage the bicycle, the bicycle still does not belong to him or her: he or she is not one with the bicycle, thereby not being able to ride it yet. After practice, one can ride it freely. At the moment when one is naturally riding the bicycle, one is no longer conscious even of the fact that one is riding a bicycle. Just a state of bicycle riding is taking place. There is no subject or object recognized consciously at that moment. At this very moment, the doer of the action ceases to think whether the rider is the subject of action or the object (bicycle) is doer. Since the rider and the bicycle are merged together when pure experience is taking place, the rider is again not sure whether one is riding the bicycle or the bicycle is riding the rider. This metaphor reminds us of the last story of the \textit{Ch'i-wu-lun}:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.\textsuperscript{16}

The message of a religion has to be realized through experience. Chuang-tzu especially denies the dependence on the language of making distinction, judgments and values for the sake of "experience." Beyond the linguistic realm of dichotomy, one should realize the Tao in casting away all forms of reasoning.

( II )

Next we would here like to examine a Buddhist text, the


\bibitem{16} Watson, p. 49.}
Vimalakṛtivinirdeśa-sūtra, which has had a profound influence on Mahāyāna Buddhism in general. Kenneth Ch'en in Buddhism in China explains the background of this sutra's rising out of the so-called Mahāyāna movement:

The sutra probably arose out of the dissatisfaction of laymen with the corruption and inactivity of the monks who shut themselves up within the walls of the monasteries without looking after the needs of the laity. This dissatisfaction is expressed in the glorification of the layman Vimalakṛtivīra and despisal heaped on such Hīnayāna arhats as Sariputta, Ónanda, and Kassapa, who are depicted here as ignorances.¹⁷

The highlight of the sutra is the attitude that Vimalakṛtivīra, the layman hero, took when he was asked to comment on the meaning of nonduality. Vimalakṛtivīra first asked the bodhisattvas who had gathered together around him to explain how they entered the Dharma-door of non-duality (i.e. how they entered enlightenment). Each and every bodhisattva gave a sophisticated philosophical answer to it. When the bodhisattvas had given their explanations, they all addressed Mañjuśrī, the idealization or personification of the wisdom of the Buddha:

"Mañjuśrī, what is the bodhisattva's entrance into nonduality?"

Mañjuśrī replied, "Good sirs, you have all spoken well. Nevertheless, all your explanations are themselves dualistic. To know no one teaching, to express nothing, to say nothing, to explain nothing, to announce nothing, to indicate nothing, and to designate nothing--that is the entrance into non-duality."

Then, the crown prince Mañjuśrī said to the Licchavi Vimalakṛtivīra, "We have all given our own teachings, noble sir. Now, may you elucidate the teaching of the entrance into the principle of nonduality!"

Thereupon, the Licchavi Vimalakṛtivīra kept his silence, saying

nothing at all.

The crown prince Mañjuśrī applauds the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: "Excellent! Excellent, noble sir! This is indeed the entrance into the nonduality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds, and ideas."

When these teachings had been declared, five thousand bodhisattvas entered the door of the Dharma of nonduality and attained tolerance of the birthlessness of things.\textsuperscript{18}

In this sutra, after the bodhisattvas tried logical expositions on the question of what non-duality was, Vimalakīrti gave the answer just by keeping silent. By this gesture, those who had gathered there finally realized the message of non-duality.

Enlightenment cannot be captured by words or concepts no matter how sophisticated or complex they may be, since enlightenment is the immediate and spontaneous experience of non-duality. Therefore, if one attempts to express enlightenment in language, one cannot get into the state of non-duality. One cannot have pure experience: one is still dichotomizing the event in the concept as long as one tries to reason things out in language. Therefore, one needs to experience and express it without language or any other human device, as Vimalakīrti demonstrates by the gesture of keeping sheer silence. This sheer silence has a certain commonality with a method of Zen's directly transmitting enlightenment from mind to mind beyond words (ishin-denshin).

Pure Land Buddhism gives a notion of Amida Buddha as the savior of sentient beings, which is similar or equivalent to that of the Tao in the \textit{Chuang-tzu}. In the \textit{Chuang-tzu}, as discussed before, in order to eliminate suffering, one must leave everything up to the Tao. One then releases one's attachment or holding onto things in the realm of the Tao, thereby completely becoming free. In Pure Land Buddhism, when one whole-heartedly relies on the working of Amida Buddha, one is saved and attains birth in the Pure Land (\textit{ÖjÖ}). In the traditional teaching of Pure Land Buddhism, birth in the Pure Land is to come after one's death. Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism in Japan, however, gives an

existential notion to birth in the Pure Land, which is to be settled here and now, not just after one's death.

Shinran's religious experience has two opposite norms: while he realizes that he is hopeless about liberation due to his innate nature of being self-centered and attached to things, he rejoices in the saving power of Amida Buddha. In other words, his assurance of birth in the Pure Land lies in his realization of falling in hell. In the Tannishō (Notes Lamenting Deviations), Shinran says:

I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Hōnen Shōnin and, saying the Name, plunge utterly into hell, even then I would have no regrets. The person who could have attained Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices might regret that he had been deceived if he said the nembutsu and so fell into hell. But I am one for whom any practice is difficult to accomplish, so hell is to be my home whatever I do.\(^{19}\)

We are able to trace two qualities in Shinran's religious experience back to Shan-tao (613-681), a Chinese Pure Land master. He analyzed this realization or awareness and explained that it is made up of two qualities simultaneously. One is the awareness of oneself or the "profound realization of oneself as incapable of salvation" (ki-no-jinshin in Japanese), and the other is the awareness of Amida or the "profound realization of Amida's saving power" (hō-no-jinshin). The profound realization of oneself as incapable of salvation is to "deeply recognize that one is now an ignorant sentient being filled with evils in the realm of life and death, and that one has been constantly submerged and transmigrating from time immemorial with no hope of liberating oneself out of it." The profound realization of Amida's saving power is to "deeply recognize that the Forty-eight Vows of Amida Buddha will take in and save sentient beings, and that one will assuredly gain birth in the Pure Land through the power of Amida's Vow without any doubt or anxiety."\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Shinran, Tannishō: A Primer, tr. Dennis Hirota (Kyoto: Ryukoku University Translation Center, 1982), p. 23.

\(^{20}\) Shinshō shōgyō zensho vol. I (Kyoto: Oyagikōbundō, 1941), compiled, Shinshō shōgyō zensho hensansho, p. 534.
Pure Land Buddhism in general maintains that the Nembutsu, the recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha in one's total devotion, leads one to birth in the Pure Land after one's death. Although Shinran does not directly deny this fundamental notion of birth, he rather emphasizes one's realization of or awakening to Amida's working and one's assurance of birth in the Pure Land here and now. This realization of the working of Amida Buddha's compassion is called shinjin ("entrusting mind of faith"). According to Shinran, the attainment of shinjin is the ultimate religious experience, and birth in the Pure Land is then spontaneously and naturally settled. The Pure Land is not a mere corporeal existence or place to go, but Amida's "symbolic" expression of what is true and real, which he has made accessible to us, and in which one's "religious experience" takes place--the symbol which is true and real in terms of one's profound realization of oneself as incapable of salvation and one's profound realization of Amida's saving power.

There are three interpretations regarding the location of the Pure Land.21 The most popular interpretation is that the Pure Land is many millions of miles away in the west, from where the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life, named Amida Buddha, is constantly sharing the compassion of his enlightenment with all sentient beings, especially those who are suffering. Thus, Amida Buddha is working on us by transforming himself into the formula of Namu-amida-butsu. By becoming aware of the work of Amida's universal compassion and by totally releasing ourselves to Amida, we will be born in the Pure Land. Since this whole process is the work of Amida, the Nembutsu serves as an expression of our gratitude to Amida.

The second interpretation of the Pure Land is highly philosophical. According to some interpreters, there is no concrete thing or substance called Pure Land, since everything is ōśnya (empty) in its essential exist and is only upāya (skillful means), which leads to a profound understanding and realization of sunyatā (emptiness). This interpretation, however, does not deny the concept of a Pure Land.

The third interpretation is that the Pure Land exists anywhere and everywhere. We have only to realize it. In Shin Buddhism D. T. Suzuki says that Pure Land is right here and that those who have eyes can see it around them. Though acknowledging that his Pure Land doctrine conflicts with the traditional or conventional explanation, Suzuki states that Amida is not

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presiding over an ethereal paradise, but his Pure Land is this dirty earth itself. Pure Land is in the world— but not of the world. The key to realizing Pure Land lies in our daily conduct and deep self-reflection, although the final realization is made possible by Amida at the moment one truly comes to realize one's own self-centered and limited mode of being.

Shinran maintains that what is essentially important is not how many times one recites the Nembutsu for the sake of birth in the Pure Land, but whether or not one is aware of the working of Amida Buddha within oneself. In this regard, we are able to see that the notion of non-dependence on words or letters observed in the *Chuang-tzu*, Zen Buddhism and the *Vimalakirtinirdeśa-sūtra* can also be found in Shinran's not depending on the recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha for the attainment of enlightenment or birth in the Pure Land. Both in the *Chuang-tzu* and Shinran, "pure" or "religious" experience is the core of the matter, thereby freeing one from bondage and liberating one from the delusion of dichotomizing things such as "good" or "bad," or "right" or "wrong" (though I am not saying here that the experiences in the *Chuang-tzu* and Shinran are the same). Regarding dichotomizing things and making distinctions, Shinran says in the *Tannishō*:

I know nothing of what is good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as is known in the mind of Amida, that an act was good, then I would know the meaning of "good." If I could know thoroughly, as Amida knows, that an act was evil, then I would know "evil." But for a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are lies and gibberish, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.

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23 Shinran, *Tannishō: A Primer*, p. 44.