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Meditation, Vision and Visualization in Daoism and Buddhism

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Abstract: Textual evidence points at a rather late date of the occurence of meditation in China. In addition, Chinese meditation appeared suddenly, i. e. without any apparent previous development, and in an already sophisticated form. On the other hand, India had witnessed long living and continuous meditative traditions. This may be taken as a possible indication pointing to a Chinese adaptation of an originally foreign concept.

Keywords: meditation, Buddhism, Daoism, visualization

1 Early meditation in China

Textual evidence points at a rather late date of the occurence of meditation in China. In addition, Chinese meditation appeared suddenly, i. e. without any apparent previous development, and in an already sophisticated form. On the other hand, India had witnessed long living and continuous meditative traditions. This may be taken as a possible indication pointing to a Chinese adaptation of an originally foreign concept.[1]

The oldest extant Chinese source known so far referring to breathing meditation is the so-called "Duodecagonal jade tablet inscription on breath circulation". The text is engraved on each side of a twelve-sided cylindrical jade object of unknown function and uncertain date.[2] The object itself was interpreted either as an ornamental part of a sword sheath (which Wilhelm

1 Various scholars have dealt with the question of early Indian influences on the China of the Warring States and Western Han periods, for example Conrady 1906, Liebenthal 1968, or, more recently, Mair 1990, and others. However, this topic needs a systematic investigation.

2 Photograph provided in Wilhelm 1948, pl. xix. The text was translated by Wilhelm, op. cit.: 387, Needham 1956: 242 and Roth 1999: 162f. Roth also reproduces his critical version of the Chinese text.

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considered "not very probable"),[3] or as a sword-handle.[4] Others assumed that it was the knob of a Daoist's stick.[5] Whereas some take it to be of Qi State provenance and dated not long after 400 BC,[6] Guo Moruo compared the style of its characters with those on a bronze object found near Luoyang which was dated approximately 380 BC.[7] Gilbert Mattos, on the other hand, suggested "an origin in the San Jin area during the last part of the fourth century BC."[8]

The inscription reads:

> 行氣,[深](吞)則蓄；蓄則伸；伸則下；下則定；定則固；固則萌；萌則長；長則[退](復) ；[退](復)則天；天機春在上；地機春在下；順則生；逆則死。

which Harold Roth translated as:

> To circulate the breath, swallow it, then it will collect; when it is collected, then it will expand; when it expands, it will descend; when it descends, it will become stable; when it is stable, it will become firm; when it is firm, it will sprout; when it sprouts, it will grow; when it grows, it will return; when it returns, it will become heavenly. The heavenly dynamism is revealed in the ascending [of the breath]; the earthly dynamism is revealed in the descending [of the breath]. Follow this and you will live; oppose it and you will die.

Whatever the various sentences within this text may mean technically – its initial phrase 行氣 (*xing qi*), "to circulate breath", indicates clearly that the description as a whole must refer to a breathing technique.

2 Meditation in *Guanzi*, *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi*

The earliest traces of this apparent meditation technique are preserved in philosophical works like the *Master Guan* (*Guanzi* 管子),[9] *Master Zhuang* (*Zhuangzi* 莊子) and the *Old Master* (*Laozi* 老子; a.k.a. *Daode jing* 道德經

3 Needham 1956: 242, referring to Chen Mengjia, and Lo Chen-yü according to Wilhelm 1948: 385.
4 Needham 1956: 242.
5 Wilhelm 1948: 385.
6 Needham 1956: 242.
7 Roth 1999: 162.
8 Roth 1999: 162, referring to an unpublished paper by the late Gilbert Mattos.
9 On chapter "inward training" (*nei ye* 内業) of the *Guanzi*, see Roth 1999 and Eskildsen 2015: 13–19.

[Scripture of the way and its inner power])[10] which may also date back to the late fourth/early third century BC (or shortly later).[11]

Concentrating – due to limited space – on *Zhuangzi*, an excerpt taken from this text may serve as an example. Here Confucius, who under the influence of Laozi has develvoped from a Confucian to a Daoist,[12] is telling his disciple Yan Hui that he ought to fast in order to make further progress in his studies. Fasting, however, does not mean abstaining from drinking alcohol and reducing the intake of nourishment as usually practiced before sacrifices. Rather, it means the "fasting of the mind" which Confucius explains in the following way:[13]

> 仲尼曰：「若一志，無聽之以耳而聽之以心，無聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。」

Its translation reads:

> If you unify your attention (一志, *yi zhi*), don't listen with the ears, listen with the mind. Don't listen with the mind, listen with the breath. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops at what tallies with it. It is the breath that being empty awaits the arising of objects. Only the Way gathers in emptiness. Emptiness is the "fasting of the mind".[14]

Roth, commenting this passage, says: "The fasting of the mind is an apt metaphor for the apophatic practice of systematically removing the normal contents of consciousness. This passage provides a relatively concrete reference to a meditation practice in which one focuses on the breathing."[15]

According to *Zhuangzi*, this practice includes some preparation in order to minimize possible disturbances during the process after which one assumes an upright position (*zheng* 正).[16] If properly done, this will lead to the practitioner's tranquillity (*jing* 靜) of the mind. tranquillity leads to lucidity (*ming* 明), lucidity

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10 For the *Laozi* in this connection, see Roth 1999: 144–153 and 185–190 *et passim*, and Eskildsen 2015: 8–15.

11 The following later texts can be added to this list: *Lüshi chunqiu* of the late third century BC and *Huainan zi* of the second century BC, cf. Roth 1997.

12 Hess Bumbacher and Bumbacher 2009.

13 *Zhuangzi yinde* 9/4/26. Note that the interpretation of the context of this passage is somewhat problematic, as discussed in Eskildsen 2015: 9–10.

14 Compare Roth 1997: 154, Bumbacher 2009: 234, and Eskildsen 2015: 9.

15 Roth 1997: 155.

16 "Upright position" (*zheng* 正) may refer to the "fourfold aligning" of body (*zheng xing* 正形), limbs (*zheng si ti* 正四體), vital energy (*zheng qi* 正氣), and mind (*zheng xin* 正心), as described in the *Guanzi neiye*, see Hoffert 2015: 167. Also cf. Eskildsen 2015: 15–19, especially p. 17 for a different interpretation of *zheng* 正.

to emptiness (*xu* 虚) of all conscious content, and "when one is empty," and thus experiences an all-encompassing unity with the *dao*, "then one takes no action and yet nothing is left undone."[17]

That breath meditation as practiced by early Daoist philosophers proceeds through various stages is well attested in quite a series of relevant texts, although the number of stages may vary.[18] The relevant passages of these philosophical texts, when dealing with breath meditation, share a common vocabulary whose main characteristic[19] involves:

- Following or guiding the breath while one is in a stable [upright] sitting position.
- As one does this, the normal contents of consciousness gradually empty out and one comes to experience a tranquillity that, as one's practice develops, becomes quite profound.
- Eventually one comes to fully empty out the contents of consciousness until a condition of union with the Way is achieved.
- This union is referred to by distinctive phrases such as "attaining the One" (*de yi* 得一), "attaining the empty Way" (*de xu Dao* 得虚道), and "the Profound Merging" (*xuan tong* 玄同).

Phrases such as "guarding the One" (*shou yi* 守一),"embracing the One" (*bao yi* 抱一) or "holding onto the One" [*zhi yi* 執一][20] usually refer to the resulting mode of being. Figures who have reached this state of deep concentration are in the *Zhuangzi* characterized as outwardly looking like having a "mind like dead ashes", e. g.

> 南郭子綦隱机而坐，仰天而噓，荅焉[...]。顏成子游立侍乎前，曰：「何居乎？形固可使如槁木，而心固可使如死灰乎？今之隱机者，非昔之隱机者也？」
>
> Ziqi of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing – vacant and far away [...]. Yan Cheng Ziyu, who was standing by his side in attendance, said, "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!"[21]

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17 *Zhuangzi yinde* 64/23/66–70; also cf. Roth 1997: 305–306. Note that this passage appears *verbatim*, probably as an implicit *Zhuangzi* quotation, in *Lüshi chunqiu* 25/3.5, see Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 631–632.

18 A comparative table is conveniently provided by Roth 1997: 312f.

19 Roth 2000: 32.

20 Roth 1997.

21 *Zhuangzi yinde* 2/3/1; translated by Watson 1968: 36, Romanization adapted to *pinyin*).

or

> 形若槁骸，心若死灰，真其實知，不以故自持。媒媒晦晦，無心而不可與謀。彼何人哉！
>
> Body like a withered corpse, mind like dead ashes, true in the realness of knowledge, not one to go searching for reasons, dim dim, dark dark, mindless, you cannot consult with him: what kind of man is this?[22]

What may happen inwardly is described by Lao Dan on behalf of Confucius:

> 孔子[...]曰：「丘也眩與？其信然與？向者先生形體掘若槁木，似遺物離人而立於獨也。」老聃曰：「吾游心於物之初。」
>
> Confucius [...] exclaimed, "Did my eyes play tricks on me, or was that really true? A moment ago, Sir, your form and body seemed stiff as an old dead tree, as though you had forgotten things, taken leave of men, and were standing in solitude itself!" Lao Dan said, "I was letting my mind wander in the beginning of things."[23]

The tremendous impact this experience had on the individual is nowhere in the *Zhuangzi* described in any detail, for a simple reason: It goes far beyond anything one usually experiences during a life time and, therefore, it cannot be described by means of language. The only hint given in the *Zhuangzi* which may indicate its quality is provided by Big Concealment who tells Cloud Chief:[24]

> 墮爾形體，吐爾聰明，倫與物忘；大同乎涬溟。
>
> Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget [that] you are a thing among other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless.

3 Early Buddhist meditation in China

It seems that in India, on the other hand, a tradition of meditation involving several stages may predate a comparable Buddhist meditation technique,[25] probably informing the latter. Although the problem of dating Indian sources is a notorious one, it is not impossible that both Indian meditative practices are

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22 *Zhuangzi yinde* 22/58/24; Watson 1968: 237.
23 *Zhuangzi yinde* 21/55/24; Watson 1968: 224–225.
24 *Zhuangzi yinde* 11/28/54, Watson 1968: 122.
25 Mukherjee 1995 and 1996. Also cf. Bronkhorst 2000, Wynne 2007.

older than the Chinese example and one might even speculate that the former may have influenced the latter.

However, in the early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts made during the Han dynasty, the term *shou* 守 was adopted "to denote the effort of concentration of mind"[26]. It even appears in the translated title *Da anban shou yi jing* 大安般守意經 (*Mahā ānāpānasmṛti sūtra*, T.602).[27]

The meditation technique described in this text consists of the concentration on the breath as it enters and leaves through the nostrils (*ānāpāna*), in order to reach a state of mindfulness (*smṛti*) and, finally, an absorption of mind (*dhyāna*). It outlines the six basic stages of 1) counting the breath, 2) following the respiration, 3) calm, 4) observation, 5) returning, and 6) purifying. [...] The last two stages are explained as 'unifying the mind' and 'guarding the mind'.[28]

That the Parthian An Shigao, after his arrival in Luoyang in 148 AD, concentrated on translating Buddhist meditation texts cannot be just by accident. He certainly responded to a demand of his Chinese followers. Perhaps already being acquainted with the Daoist "guarding the One" technique they may have been eager to learn other meditation forms as well. Buddhism thus seems to have satisfied a need which made it easier for this foreign religion to gain acceptance by the Chinese.

4 A new form of meditation: Daoist visualization

Roughly two decades later, Chinese sources reveal the existence of a new form of meditation. Now technical terms like *si* 思 (lit.: think, contemplate), *sixiang* 思想 (lit.: contemplate and imagine), *sicun* 思存 (lit.: contemplate and preserve), *cun* 存 (lit.: preserve), or *cunxiang* 存想 (lit.: preserve and imagine) appear both in inscriptions and scriptures. Usually collocated with an object, these characters mean "concentrate your mental efforts on the image of", "meditate on", or "visualize", like in the phrase *si shen* 思神 "contemplate the divinities". This new technique, already a common feature of various popular religious movements by the second half of the second century AD, serves an entirely different purpose than to fully empty out the contents of consciousness until a condition of all-encompassing unity with the cosmos is reached. Although its practice may begin with breathing exercises, too, it in fact aims at visualizing an internal "organ" or a god in order to secure his or her presence or to establish a direct communication.

26 Kohn 1989b: 152.
27 Zürcher 1991: 279.
28 Kohn 1989b: 152.

The *Stele to Wangzi Qiao* (*Wangzi Qiao bei* 王子僑碑)[29], erected in 165 AD and attributed to Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192), begins with describing how an emissary on imperial command offered sacrifices in honour of the spirit of the former prince Qiao who had turned into an immortal and at whose grave a temple had been erected. Qiao's spirit had become famous for his power to immediately cure sick and emaciated people who used to come to this place, cleanse their bodies, and pray for help – as long as they sincerely believed in his power. The inscription then says that "ardent Daoists" (*hao dao zhi chou* 好道之儔) came from afar "some [of whom] would converse about visualizing in order to pass through the cinnabar field" (*huo tan si yi li dan tian* 或談思以歷丹田). This is the first occurence of the term "cinnabar field" (*dan tian* 丹田).[30] In a text of perhaps the end of the Later Han, the *Laozi zhong jing* 老子中經 (Old Master's Middle Text),[31] the cinnabar field, a spot inside the human body located below the navel, is described as follows:

> 經曰：丹田者，人之根也；精神之所藏也；五氣之元也；赤子之府，男子以藏精，女子以藏月水；主生子，合和陰陽之門戶也。在臍下三寸，附著脊膂，兩腎根也。丹田之中，中赤，左青，右黃，上白，下黑，方圓四寸之中。所以在臍下三寸者，言法天、地、人。
>
> The scripture says: "The Cinnabar Field is the root of the human being. This is the place where the vital power is kept. The five energies [of the five phases] have their origin here. It is the Red Child's home. Here men keep their semen and women their menstrual blood. Meant for the procreation of children, it houses the gate of harmonious union of *yin* and *yang*. Three inches under the navel, adjacent to the spine, [the Cinnabar Field] lies at the base of the kidneys. It is scarlet inside, green on the left, yellow on the right, white on top, and black on the bottom. It is four inches around. Its location three inches below the navel symbolises the trinity of Heaven, Earth, and Humans."[32]

It is, however, not clear what the phrase "some would converse about visualizing in order to pass through the cinnabar field" on the *Stele to Wangzi Qiao* actually means. Either it means that the breath is to be visualized as it passes through the cinnabar field and, possibly, beyond. Or it refers to the meditating Daoists themselves who ought to visualize their own passing through the

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29 Yen K'o-chün 1948: 75.3a–b. English translation in Holzman 1991: 79–81, partial translation in Ebrey 1981: 38–39; also see Seidel 1969: 58–59; Pregadio 2006: 127; and Raz 2008: 1028–1029.
30 Pregadio 2005: 204.
31 On the *Laozi zhong jing*, see Schipper 1979, Schipper 1995, Bumbacher 2001, Schipper 2004b, Lagerwey 2004, Pregadio 2006: 131–141, Kohn 2008c, von Brasch 2009, Puett 2010: 238–243, Iliouchine 2011. To my knowledge, no complete translation of this text into any Western language exists at present.
32 *Laozi zhong jing* A13a. Compare Schipper 1993: 106–107.

cinnabar field in order to meet there those body gods[33] that dwell it as their residence.

For the first possibility we find a reference in a work dating from the second century AD,[34] the *Huang ting wai jing jing* 黃庭外景經 (Scripture of the Yellow Court, Outer View).[35] The relevant sentence reads:[36]

> 呼吸廬間入丹田。
>
> Breathe in and out and through the thatched cottage; thus [the breath] enters the cinnabar field.

As for the second possibility, the god to be encountered within the cinnabar field is the (divinised) Confucius, as the *Laozi zhong jing*, says:

> 經曰：丹田者，人之根也。[...] 神姓孔，名丘，字仲尼，傳之為師也。
>
> The scripture says: "The cinnabar field is man's root. [...] Its spiritual being is called Kong, [whose] first name is Qiu, and [whose] style is Zhongni. According to tradition, this spiritual being is a teacher."[37]

In any case, the sentence in question definitely alludes to visualization as a meditation technique. Visualization was the means by which one could meet the gods residing in one's own body to communicate with them.

The second stele inscription, cognate to the *Stele to Wangzi Qiao*, is the *Inscription for Laozi* (*Laozi ming* 老子銘)[38], dating from September 24, 165 and made by the court official Bian Shao 邊韶. Its text contains the sentence[39]

> [老子]存想丹田太一紫房。
>
> [Laozi] visualized the cinnabar field and the purple chamber of the Grand Unity.

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33 On the body gods, see Bumbacher 2001.

34 Robinet 2008: 511.

35 Bumbacher 2001: 154, Robinet 2008, English translation in Saso 1995, partial translation in Kohn 1993: 181–188. Also see Homann 1971, Schipper 2004c: 96–97, Pregadio 2005: 206–211, Pregadio 2006: 131–141, Puett 2010: 244–248.

36 Schipper 1975: 1*.

37 *Laozi zhong jing* A13a.

38 On the *Laozi ming*, see Seidel 1969: 43–50 *et passim*, Kohn 1998: 40–41, Kohn 2008b: 621–622; French translation in Seidel 1969: 121–128; for an English translation, see Csikszentmihalyi 2006: 105–112.

39 *Li shi* 3.1a–4a, present sentence on 3.2a.

This refers to Laozi when he, still a mortal being, practiced meditation to become an immortal. While visualizing his cinnabar field[40] as well as the "purple chamber of grand unity" in his head his body was transformed when this *dao* was accomplished and he – like a cicada that leaves behind its *exuvias* – left the world.[41]

In July 1991, archaeologists discovered a stele in a Han dynasty tomb in Caizhuangcun 蔡莊村, located east of Luoyang (area of Anle, east of the Liang county of Henan), called *Stele to Fei Zhi* (*Fei Zhi bei* 肥致碑) and dated 169 AD.[42] It commemorates a local cult dedicated to a certain Master Fei Zhi. Its inscription, too, refers to the visualization form of meditation, as can be seen in the following phrases:

> [許]幼子男建，字孝萇，心慈性孝，常思想神靈。
>
> [Xu] You's son Jian, styled Xiaochang, [while his] heart was kind and [his] natural disposition was filial, constantly visualized [his body-] gods.[43]

After 185 AD but before the end of the Han,[44] members of an unknown early Daoist affiliation – located in the area of Chengdu in present-day Sichuan[45] – composed a text which is extant only as a manuscript found at Dunhuang (ms S 2295). It is entitled *Laozi bianhua jing* 老子變化經 (*Scripture of Laozi's transformations*).[46] In this text, Laozi addresses his followers, saying:

> 精思放我，神為走。
>
> [If] while visualizing you are loosing me, [your] spirit will go away.[47]

The adherents of this tradition obviously had to visualize Laozi within their own body where he resided both in their essence (semen) and in their spirit (*wu yu*

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40 Note that the four early Daoist texts quoted so far do not show any evidence for the existence of more than one cinnabar field within the human body at all. It is not before Ge Hong's 葛洪 *Baopuzi nei pian* 抱朴子内篇 (*Master Who Embraces Simplicity: Inner Chapters*), written ca. 317 AD, that an upper, a middle, and a lower cinnabar field are explicitly mentioned (in *juan* 18).

41 *Loc. cit.*

42 Schipper 1997, including ink rubbing reproduction as well as traditional print of the Chinese text with a French translation; English translation in Csikszentmihalyi 2006: 152–155.

43 Schipper 1997: 241; different translation in Csikszentmihalyi 2006: 154.

44 Seidel 1969: 74.

45 Seidel 1969: 73.

46 Reproduction of ms S 2295 inSeidel 1969: 131–136; on the *Laozi bianhua jing*, see Kohn 2008a: 617–619, Raz 2012: 26–32; French translation in Seidel 1969: 60–73.

47 *Li shi*, loc cit., Seidel 1969: 71.

jing shen 吾與精神).[48] If they could preserve Laozi's mental image this god would save them from the imminent apocalypse.

This notion of visualizing the deified Laozi (the Most High Lord Lao, Taishang Laojun 太上老君), the manifestation of the One or the *dao*, within the human body did not go unchallenged. Members of the Daoist Heavenly Master tradition, while not questioning this form of meditation as such, severely criticised it. In a commentary to the *Daode jing* which is attributed to them they expressed their critical view. This was done in the so-called *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary[49], written before 255 AD, which has come down to us only as an incomplete manuscript (covering chapters 3 through the end of chapter 37), obtained from the Buddhist grottoes at Dunhuang by Sir Aurel Stein in the early twentieth century and now housed in the British Library[50]. As shown by Anna Seidel, it takes issue at several places with Daoists who localise the One (*viz.*, in its manifestation as Laozi) in any specific part of the human body. One example can be seen in the following passage:[51]

> 道也。今在人身何許？守之云何？一不在人身也，諸附身者。悉世間常僞伎，非眞道也。一在天地外，人在天地間，但往來人身中耳。都皮裏悉是，非獨一處。
>
> Now, where does the *dao* reside in the body of a person? How can a person hold it fast? The One does not reside within the human body. Those who say that it entrusts itself to the body are the same ones who are forever practicing false arts in the mortal world. Theirs is not the true *dao*. The One exists beyond heaven and earth. Entering into the space between heaven and earth, it comes and goes within the human body; that's all. It is there everywhere within your skin, not just in a single spot.

As the author of the *Xiang'er* clearly states, some of his contemporaries not only believe that the One, in the form of a deity, resides within the human viscera and that's why they give it the name of the respective organ. But they also visualize it by closing their eyes, in order to obtain good fortune.[52] To facilitate meditation they imagine the divinity's coloured clothes, give it a name, a form and a size – which the *Xiang'er* considers wrong.

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48 Loc. cit.

49 A general introduction into what survives of the *Xiang'er* commentary and its first integral translation into any Western language is to be found in Bokenkamp 1997: 29–124. Edition of Chinese text in Rao 1991. Also see Schipper 2004a, Puett 2010: 230–237, Eskildsen 2015: 62–74, Kleeman 2016: 79–96.

50 Ms S 6825.

51 Zongyi 1991: 12, translation Bokenkamp 1997: 89.

52 Rao *loc. cit.*, Seidel 1969: 79, Bokenkamp 1997: 89.

Several early Daoist texts are still extant that describe gods as they usually reside in Heaven yet can – by means of visualization – be brought into the human body and can be made to dwell in specific organs, in order to control them. This concept is fully developed, for example, in the already mentioned *Laozi zhong jing* and the *Huang ting wai jing jing*.

Once visualized, these gods can be addressed by means of prayers or other forms of communication. A passage of the *Laozi zhong jing* may serve as an example. It introduces a whole divine family consisting of the Supreme Ruler of Heaven, his wife – the Jade Maiden of Obscure Radiance of the Ultimate Yin –, and their son:

> 經曰：道君者，一也；皇天上帝中極北辰中央星是也。乃在九天之上，萬丈之巔，太淵紫房宮中。衣五色之衣，冠九德之冠，上有太清元氣，雲曜五色。華蓋九重之下，老子、太和侍之左右。姓制皇氏，名上皇德，字漢昌。人亦有之，在紫房宮中，華蓋之下，元貴鄉，平樂裡，姓陵陽，字子明。身黃色，長九分，衣五色珠衣，冠九德之冠。思之長三寸，正在紫房宮中，華蓋之下。其妻太陰玄光玉女，衣玄黃五色珠衣，長九分。思之亦長三寸，在太素宮中，養真人子丹，稍稍盛大，自與已身等也。子能存之，與之語言，即呼子上謁道君。道君者，一也。乘雲氣珠玉之車，驂駕九極之馬，時乘六龍以御天下。子常思之，以八節之日，及晦朔日，日暮夜半時祝曰：
> 天靈節榮真人，王甲願得長生，太玄之一，守某甲身形，五藏君候，願長安寧。
>
> The scripture says: The Lord of the *dao* is the One. He is the Supreme Ruler of Heaven, the Middle Pole, the central star of the Northern constellation (*beichen*; i. e. the Pole Star). Then he is above the nine heavens, on a 100,000 foot [high] peak, in the palace of the Purple Room of the Grand Abyss. He wears five-coloured vestments, he is crowned with the Nine-Virtues crown. Above him is the Primal *pneuma* of Supreme Purity; he is [seated] under a nine-storied canopy of glittering five-colour clouds. Laozi and Taihe stand in attendance on each side. His clan name is "Rule the Polar Star", his personal name is "Virtue of the Polar Star on High", his style is "Glory of the Han". [When] the human being has him too, he is in the palace of the Purple Room [in the human body], [seated] under a flowery canopy, in the county of Primal Nobility, in the village of Peaceful Joy. His family name [then] is "South Slope of the Hill" and his style "Brightness of the North". His body is yellow, he is nine-tenths of an inch high, and wears clothes of five-colour jewels. He is crowned with the Nine Virtues crown. *Visualize* (*si* 思) *him* as being three inches high, [sitting] right in the palace of the Purple Room, under a flowery canopy. His spouse is the Jade Maiden of Obscure Radiance of the Ultimate Yin. She wears vestments of black and yellow five-colour jewels. She is nine-tenths of an inch high. *Visualize her* also as being three inches high. She dwells in the palace of Grand Simplicity, she feeds the son of the True Person with Cinnabar. He grows little by little, so as to becoming as big as your own body. If you can *preserve him in meditation* (*cun* 存) speak with him. Then he will call you

> to go up to visit the Lord of the *dao*. The Lord of the *dao* is the One. He rides a chariot of cloudy mist [covered with] pearls and jade, and [a team of] horses of [the heaven of] the Nine Extremes. At times he rides [a team of] six dragons in order to drive to the earth. [When] you long *visualize* (*si* 思) him on the eight nodal days and on the first and fifteenth day of each month, when the sun sets and at midnight, utter the invocation, saying:
>
> Heavenly Spirit of Regulating Glory, [I], the True Person Wang Jia[53] wish to obtain a long life. [You], the One of Utmost Mystery, guard my body. Noble lord of the Five Viscera, I wish lasting peace.[54]

Incidentally, a remarkable parallel can be found between another divine couple dealt with within the *Laozi zhong jing* and a pair of gods in the oldest of the Indian *Upaniṣhads*, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad* of the seventh to sixth centuries BC, give or take a century or so.[55] In the *Laozi zhong jing* it is said that

> 東王父者[...]在左目，王母在右目[...]。[56] [...]上治目中，戲於頭上，止於乳下，宿於絳宮紫房。[57]
>
> The King Father of the East [...] is in the left eye; the Queen Mother is in the right eye.[58] [...] Above they rule in the center of the eye and play on top of the head. They stop beneath the nipples and lodge in the purple chambers of the Scarlet Palace (= heart).[59]

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad*, Janaka, the king of Videha, is talking to the famous teacher Yājñavalkya who when discussing the self (*ātman*) says:

> [...] the true name of the person in the right eye is Indha. [...] What looks like a person in the left eye, on the other hand, is his wife Virāj. Their meeting place is the space within the heart [...].[60]

Do we see here another example of a possible Indian influence? Could it be that not only the idea of a couple of divine beings each residing in one eye and both meeting within the heart but also the whole Daoist concept of body gods may have been informed by a version of this Indian notion? In principle, there

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53 At several places, the adept calls himself by this name when invoking the gods. Professor Jao Tsung-i, of Hong Kong Chinese University, sees in this usage a possible allusion to the interregnum of Wang Mang (private communication).

54 *Laozi zhong jing* A3b–4a, also cf. Schipper 1995: 120–121.

55 Olivelle 1998: 12.

56 *Laozi zhong jing* A2b.

57 *Laozi zhong jing* A3a.

58 Iliouchine 2011: 33.

59 Cahill 1993: 35–36.

60 BU 4.2.2; Olivelle 1998: 109.

is no reason not to allow Indian concepts other than Buddhist to have been transmitted to China and influenced her traditions in one way or another. Note that visualization, this new type of meditation, too, appeared in Chinese texts all of a sudden, not as the traceable result of an evolution of any indigenous tradition. Although it goes without saying that independent innovations in religious beliefs do often occur – as far as visualization is concerned, the just mentioned earliest Daoist testimonies date from a time when Buddhist texts describing precisely this form of meditation had become available in Chinese translations.

5 Buddhist visualization

In India, mental vision or visualization seems to have been part and parcel of various religious traditions. Already in the *Bhagavadgītā* evidence of such a contemplative activity can be found, namely the iconographic visualization of a god:[61] Kṛṣṇa says in verse five of the eighth chapter:

> Whoever at the time of death, when he casts aside his body, *bears me in mind* (*smaran*) and departs, comes to my mode of being: there is no doubt of this.

And the same god declares in verse 23 of the seventh chapter:

> Whatever state one may bear in mind (*smaran*) when he finally casts aside his body is the state to which one goes, for that state makes one grow into itself: so ever bear me in mind (*anusmaran*) as you fight, for if you fix your mind and *buddhi* on me you will come to me: there is no doubt of this.

In addition, we hear Kṛṣṇa in the second verse of chapter twelve responding to a question by Arjuna:

> The one I consider most controlled (*yuktatama*) is the one who fixes his mind on me and meditates (*upāsate*) on me, ever controlled, possessed of the highest faith.

Buddhism, too, had its own tradition of visualization – *buddhānusmṛti*, visualizing the Buddha (or a *bodhisattva*). One of the oldest extant Buddhist Pāli texts[62], the *Sutta Nipāta* in a section held to belonging to the oldest strata has a Brahmin named Piṅgiya (the "wise") saying:

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61 For the following, see Beyer 1977: 333.
62 Williams 1994: 217.

> There is no moment for me, however small, that is spent away from Gotama [Buddha], from this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding [...] *with constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes*, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him.[63]

Various forms of *anusmṛti* (literally, "recollection", "remembrance", and, by extension, "calling to mind", "keeping in mind"; cf. *smṛti*, commonly translated as "mindfulness") had been part of general Buddhist practice since the earliest times, as Paul Harrison remarked, and are amply attested in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese translations of the Sanskrit *āgamas*.[64]

In Mahāyāna texts, however, only recollections of the Buddha, the *vinaya*, and the *saṃgha* were important, and among these three *buddhānusmṛti* was pre-eminent.[65] In a canonical collection of the pre-Mahāyāna,[66] the *Ekottarāgama*, we see an *āgama* passage that describes the *buddhānusmṛti* in detail:[67]

The Lord said:

> A *bhikṣu* correct in body and correct in mind sits cross-legged and focuses his thought in front of him. Without entertaining any other thought he earnestly *calls to mind* (*anusmṛ-*) *the Buddha*. He contemplates the image of the Tathāgata without taking his eyes off it. Not taking his eyes off it he then calls to mind the qualities of the Tathāgata – the Tathāgata's body made of *vajra*, endowed with the ten Powers (*bala*), and by virtue of the four Assurances (*vaiśāradya*) intrepid in assemblies; the Tathāgata's countenance, upright and peerless, so that one never tires of beholding it; his perfection of the moral qualities (*śīla*) resembling *vajra* in indestructibility, like *vaiḍūrya* in flawless purity.

Buddhānusmṛti was further developed in the early Mahāyāna. The *Pratyutpanna [Buddha saṃmukhāvasthita] samādhi sūtra*, one of the earliest *sūtras* translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema in 179 AD, makes it clear that if one strictly observes its directions for the practice of the *pratyutpannabuddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi* (the *samādhi* of direct encounter with the Buddhas of the present) then the Buddha Amitāyus would appear in front of the meditator:[68]

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63 *Sutta Nipāta* vv. 1140, 1142; translation Williams loc. cit. (emphasis added, SPB).

64 Harrison 1978: 36.

65 Harrison 1978: 37.

66 Although the Hīnayāna scriptures are written in Pāli, there must have existed a canon of its own written in Sanskrit. Fragments of such belonging to the Sarvāstivāda are seen among manuscripts found in East Turkestan and in Nepal as well as in Chinese and Tibetan translations. Here the Pāli expression *nikāya* corresponds with the term *āgama*.

67 *Ekottarāgama* 554a20ff., Harrison 1978: 38 (emphasis added, SPB).

68 *Banzhou sanmei jing* 905a10; Harrison 1998: 13ff.

佛告颰陀和。[...]如是颰陀和。菩薩若沙門白衣。所聞西方阿彌陀佛刹。當念彼方佛不得缺戒。一心念若一晝夜。若七日七夜。過七日以後。見阿彌陀佛。於覺不見。於夢中見之。

The Buddha said to Bhadrapāla: "[...] In the same way, Bhadrapāla, *bodhisattvas*, whether they be ascetics or wearers of white (*sc.* laymen or laywomen), having learned of the Buddha-field of Amitābha in the western quarter, should *call to mind the Buddha* in that quarter. They should not break the precepts, and *call him to mind single-mindedly*, either for one day and one night, or for seven days and seven nights. After seven days *they will see the Buddha Amitābha*. If they do not see him in the waking state, then they will see him in a dream."[69]

Here, *bodhisattva* means the Buddhist adept, the one who practices visualization. Once in the state of *samādhi*, the person who meditates will receive the Buddha's oral presentation of the *dharma* in direct transmission. The *sūtra* continues:[70]

譬如人夢中所見。不知晝不知夜。亦不知內不知外。不用在冥中故不見。不用有所弊礙故不見。如是颰陀和。菩薩心當作是念。時諸佛國界名大山須彌山。其有幽冥之處悉為開闢。目亦不弊。心亦不礙。是菩薩摩訶薩。不持天眼徹視。不持天耳徹聽。不持神足到其佛刹。不於是間終。生彼間佛刹乃見。便於是間坐。見阿彌陀佛。聞所說經悉受得。從三昧中悉。能具足為人說之。

It is like the things a man sees in a dream – he is not conscious of day or night, nor is he conscious of inside or outside; he does not fail to see because he is in darkness, nor does he fail to see because there are obstructions. It is the same, Bhadrapāla, for the minds of the *bodhisattvas*: when they perform this calling to mind, the famous great mountains and the Mount Sumerus in all the Buddha-realms, and all the places of darkness between them, are laid open to them, so that their vision is not obscured, and their minds are not obstructed. These *bodhisattvas mahāsattvas* do not see through [the obstructions] with the divine eye, nor hear through them with the divine ear, nor travel to that Buddha-field by means of the supernormal power of motion, nor do they die here to be reborn in that Buddha-field there, and only then see; rather, while *sitting here they see the Buddha Amitābha, hear the sūtras which he preaches, and receive them all. Rising from meditation* they are able to preach them to others in full.

Instead of having to wait until he is reborn into Amitābha's Buddha-field, the adept, when practicing *buddhānusmṛti*, can perceive himself here and now being carried to other Buddha-fields to see the present Buddhas living there and expounding the *dharma*. The devotees are believed to retain what they are taught during their

69 Harrison 1998: 17–18. (emphasis added, SPB). For a translation of the Tibetan version which may be close to the lost Sanskrit original (but does not concern us here, as we are interested in Lokakṣema's version), cf. Harrison 1978: 43.

70 *Banzhou sanmei jing* 905a17ff., Harrison 1998: 18 (emphasis added, SPB).

pratyutpannabuddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi and to be able to communicate it to others once they emerge from this state of meditation. As the old canon (which survives as the Theravāda canon written in Pāli) was closed, this was one way that allowed to introduce new scriptures as *buddhavacana*.

In sum, the original form of meditation in China was a multi-stage breathing technique leading to a condition of union with the One or the Way (*dao*) and thus eliminating any distinction of subject and object. (This form may already have been influenced by early Indian traditions). During the Later Han dynasty a new technique, visualization, appeared in Daoist contexts. Although towards the final years of Emperor Cheng 成 (r. 33–7 BC) of the Former Han, in 14 BC, the official Gu Yong 谷永 submitted a memorial[71] containing the quite obscure sentence "[...] and those who [practice] the technique of transforming the coloured five granaries (*hua se wu cang zhi shu zhe* 化色五倉之術者)"[72], it was only during the Later Han that Li Qi 李奇 commenting this sentence gave it a meditational interpretation, saying:[73]

> 思身中有五色，腹中有五倉神。五色存則不死，五倉存則不飢。
>
> *Imagine* that within the body there are five colours, and within the belly there are the spirits of the five granaries, [when] the five colours are preserved [in meditation] then one does not die, [when] the five granaries are preserved [in meditation] then one does not starve.

It was also during the same period that the first Buddhist meditation texts were translated into Chinese, and these texts were dealing with both a multi-stage meditation technique leading towards "unifying the mind" and akin to the Daoist "inner cultivation" as well as with the visualization of the Buddha. Obviously, Buddhism was offering a technique for which a demand existed in China. Accordingly, two of the texts translated by Lokakṣema are, as Harrison says, "explicitly devoted to *samādhi* practice: the *Pratyutpanna [buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita] samādhi sūtra* and the *Śūraṃgamasamādhi sūtra* (Lokakṣema's version of this is now lost). Further, many other texts in this corpus and elsewhere contain long lists of *samādhi*s [...]."[74]

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71 In this memorial, Gu Yong was basically criticising the activities of the specialists in esoteric techniques (*fang shi* 方士) that were summoned to court by the emperor who still did not have male offspring.

72 *Han shu* 25B: 1260. Cf. Ngo 1976: 25. Note that already to Xun Yue 荀悅 (148–209) this sentence must have been problematic as he reformulated it in his *Records of the Former Han* (*Qian Han ji* 前漢紀) into "[...] and those who [practice] the technique of transmutation of the 'yellow and white' (*huang bai bianhua zhi shu* 黃白變化之術)", thus interpreting it as an alchemical technique, *Qian Han ji* 26.9b.

73 *Han shu* 25B1261.

74 Harrison 1995: 65.

This makes it quite probable that Daoist visualization may have been a consequence of the introduction of the Buddhist *buddhānusmṛti* technique into China. However, once the Daoists had learned this form of meditation, they used it to their own ends, to visualize their own gods.

6 Further development in Daoism

Towards the end of the Han dynasty, Daoists of the Heavenly Master tradition developing the technique of visualization further integrated it into a quite complex ritual. When a parish member consulted his or her master in case no doctor could heal the disease she or he was suffering from, the patient first had to answer a series of questions in order to allow the master to find out what kind of transgressions the patient had been made which urged the gods to send the disease as a form of punishment.

Then the master wrote a document, a "petition" (*zou* 奏)[75], which was precisely modelled after petitions used in the secular administration. The steps to be followed are described by Nickerson as follows:[76]

> First, incense was to be burned. The brush and ink used were to be reserved only for petitions (and perhaps for copying scriptures); they certainly were not to be employed for worldly tasks.
>
> The text of the petition had to be treated with great care: it was to touch neither the surface of the petition table (a cloth was placed over the table), nor one's own clothing, nor the ground. During the writing, the brush was not to be dipped in water or placed in one's mouth.
>
> Elaborate rules specified the size and spacing of characters on the page – words like demon and death, for instance, could not appear at the top of a line – and limits were placed on the number of corrections that could be made in the text: three characters only in the case of a short petition.

Ideally, the text of the petition should not touch on more than three subjects: the supplicant's disease or difficulty and its probable cause; his or her formal expression of repentance for relevant transgressions; and the request to the relevant celestial officials for help and exorcism. Which deity was relevant constituted a serious issue as much as the proper amount of remuneration for the god's services. To find the right addressee, the priest used an old manual that in its earliest form goes back to the Celestial

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75 On Daoist petitions, see Cedzich 1987: 61–159, Bumbacher 2012: 83–96, Kleeman 2016: 353–373.

76 *Chisong zi zhang li* 2.3b-4a, Nickerson 1997: 251–252, Kleeman 2016: 356.

Masters[77] of the second century.[78] Remuneration was decided among priest and family and depended on the rank of the deity whose help was requested.

Once the petition had been written down, the priest proof-read it and prepared it for delivery to the heavenly deities. This involved another ritual, the "sending off" of the petition. Its first step was called "handing over the petition" (*cao zhang* 操章), another procedure adopted from the civil administration.[79] The priest visualized and – in meditation – formally asked several divinities of the celestial administration within his own body to take the petition and see that it would safely go to the Most High in Heaven. After this, he added the address of the Most High Lord Lao with all his epithets (consisting of fifty-two characters) as well as the date of the event and the official destination: "Unit-staff of the Three Heavens".

The next step consisted of "sealing the document" (*feng zhang* 封章). The proper procedure is described in the *Petition almanach of Master Chisong* (*Chisong zi zhang li* 赤松子章曆):

> 畢。如法緊卷。以香度過。仍以全紙封之。題云。謹謹詣虛无自然金闕玉陛下。下具所受法位。泰玄都正一平炁係天師平治左平炁門下版署。三品大都功兼左廉察祭酒赤天三五步綱元命真人臣某謹封。
>
> [Once the taking over is] concluded, one binds the scroll tightly and passes it through the smoke of the incense. Usually by means of an entire [piece of] paper one wraps [it] up. [Its] title reads: "Respectfully addressed at the Jade Throne of the Golden Gate of the [Heaven of] Spontaneity of the Void."
>
> Below [it], one completely [writes one's] ordination rank, [for example:] Grand Inspector of Merits, third grade,[80] Deputy of the Left-Wing Chancellery of the Pneuma of Peace [belonging to] the Peace of the *yang*-"Parish" of the Celestial Masters Connected to the Pneuma of Correct Unity of the Exalted Mysterious Capital; also Left-Wing Inspecting Libationer, True Person of the Original Mandate [possessing the register of] "Walking on the network of the red Heaven [according to the rules of] the three and five," your servant so-and-so, respectfully seals [this petition].[81]

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77 For a study on the early Celestial Masters, cf.Kleeman 2016.

78 Citations of this manual survive in the *Dengzhen yinjue* (Secret instructions for the ascent as an immortal) and elsewhere, e. g. the *Qianerbai guan yi* 千二百官儀 (Manual of the 1200 officials). See Cedzich 1987: 35–41.

79 Cedzich 1987: 89.

80 This translates *dugong* 都功, the sixth of a total of twenty-four offices that formed the administration of Celestial Masters parishes (*zhi* 治). It was in charge of registering lower ranking officials based on merit as well as administering taxes and other duties of the membership. Cedzich 1987: 93n170, citing the *Penal code of the mysterious capital* (*Xuandu lüwen* 玄都律文) according to the *Pearlbag of the three caverns* (*Sandong zhu'nang* 三洞珠囊) 7.18a.

81 *Chisong zi zhang li* 2.22b.

Following this, the document was placed in an envelope to be tied and sealed:

> 入函以青絲三道纏。然後以蠟填印池。用九老仙都之印。印之。次以青紙外封。先以朱點上下。不得顛倒。然後封兩頭。題作全字朱書各。以印。印之。外封題云。奉為大道弟子具官銜姓名。某事。請拜某章若干通。謹詣三天門下。請進三天門下。字須平寫。請進字於三天門下側注。次題法位如前。某甲謹封。謹封處以印。印之。
>
> Put [the petition] into an envelope and tie it with three green-blue silk-strings. Seal it with wax and apply the seal of the capital of the nine ancient immortals. Wrap it in a piece of green-blue paper and mark it with red [ink] at the top and bottom – never inverting the order. Close it at both ends, write the character "intact" in red ink on them, and finalize it with a seal.
>
> The notice on the outer wrapper reads: "Having the honor to be a disciple of the Great Dao, I – with title, family name, and personal name so-and-so – on behalf of such-and-such matter beg permission to send such-and-such a petition in so-and-so many copies and with it respectfully approach the chancellery of the Three Heavens."
>
> The characters for "[I] beg permission [...]" ought to be written horizontally, the characters for "[I] respectfully approach [...]" [ought to] be written sideways. Next, indicate your ordination rank as before [and write]: "So-and-so has respectfully closed it." The place of the last words cover with a seal.[82]

Having thus readied the petition for delivery, the priest submitted it in an act of visualization to the throne of Lord Lao, accompanied by the officials of his own bodily administration, his body gods, whom he had released before in meditation. He kowtowed in front of his desk, visualized a red *qi* (氣) originating in his heart and moving up to Heaven, passing hundreds of miles in one instant. The deep red passageway formed by this *qi* was bordered by long rows of magnificent trees. The priest walking on this way of *qi* soon came across a yellow path made by the light of the sun and the moon. He continued his journey until, after five or six miles, he perceived a hazy purple shape in the distance which, upon approach, turned out to be Heaven's gate guarded by armed guards.[83]

Attended by his body god General Zhou and the divine official on duty, the priest entered the sacred precinct followed by his personal jade lad who was there specifically to deliver the petition and was holding it in his hands. In the western part of the gate tower, the priest paid respect to the Master of the Law of the Three Heavens and Correct Unity, i. e. Zhang Daoling, the alleged founder of the Heavenly Master tradition. Kowtowing, he informed him about the particulars of the present case and entered the Heavenly Gate of the Phoenix Palace.

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82 Loc. cit.

83 *Chisong zi zhang li* 2.23b–24b; Cedzich 1987: 95–97, Kleeman 2016: 366–369.

Soon an immortal dressed in red and wearing a dark cap, i. e. Grand Unity, approached the jade lad, took the petition from his hands, and carried it into the palace, where he temporarily deposited it, while the priest and his companions waited outside. Coming out of the palace Grand Unity guided the priest into the palace and to the throne of the Most High placed at the far end of the palace hall. The Most High was dressed in nine-coloured clouds, wore the cap of ninefold virtue, and was attended by two Perfected. Grand Unity then took up the deposited petition and handed it over to the Most High who glanced through it. Grand Unity then received it back and, upon the Most High's request, displayed it at the jade steps of the throne of Great Clarity.

The officials then verified the formalities on the document, such as address, sender, ranks, etc., then had it taken to an official in the department on duty. The priest and his body god kowtowed before the Most High and retreated. Once outside of the palace, they took leave of Zhang Daoling. The priest together with the jade lad and his accompanying body gods made a jump to return to the quiet chamber on Earth where this vision ended. He then prayed that his petition shall be heard.[84]

Note that the Daoist visualization of a red *qi* originating within the heart is *mutatis mutandis* comparable to the early Buddhist contemplation of the fire element within the monk's body as described in the *Dhātuvibhanga sutta*.[85]

In principle, visualizing the Daoist heavenly palace complex with its inhabitants is somewhat akin to visualizing a Buddha in his Buddha-field. In both cases it is a kind of other-worldly paradise together with its "ruler" (the Most High or a Buddha) that are envisaged. However, whereas in the Buddhist case the focus lies on the direct encounter with the Buddha and his teaching, in the Daoist example emphasis is placed on the description of the heavenly palace as the direct copy of the earthly imperial palace and the interactions between the priest and his "entourage" with the heavenly beings emulate the corresponding administrative activities on earth.[86]

One might argue, on the other hand, that ancient China already knew some sort of "cosmic flight". In fact, in various poems to be found within the *Songs of Chu* (*Chu ci* 楚辭), dating from the fourth c. BC to the Former Han[87], journeys into the upper realms are described. In the *On encountering trouble* (*Li sao jing* 離騷經), e. g. it is said: "[...] I looked all around over the earth's four quarters, circling

84 Cedzich 1987: 96–97.

85 MN, 3.241; see Greene 2012: 140. On early Brahminic element meditation, cf. Wynne 2007: 30–35. On the Buddhist adaptation, cf. Bronkhorst 1993: 66–67.

86 This was but a consequence of the fact that, when after AD 184 the Celestial Masters took control of much of what today is called Sichuan and organized a network of "parishes", they successfully established a religious and military administration that operated parallel to the decaying Han system. See Bumbacher 2012: 97–112.

87 For a study and English translation, cf. Hawkes 1985.

the heavens till at last I alighted" (*lan xiang guan yu si ji xi, zhou liu hu tian yu nai xia* 覽相觀於四極兮，周流乎天余乃下)[88] or "[...] I set off at morning from the Ford of Heaven, at evening I came to the world's western end" (*zhao fa ren yu tian jin xi, xi yu zhi hu xi ji* 朝發軔於天津兮，夕余至乎西極).[89] The cultural context of these poems, however, is entirely different from the meditational one of the Celestial Masters or the Buddhist *buddhānusmṛti*. According to Hawkes,[90]

> [...] we find that the 'early' poems in it, i.e. those traditionally believed to be of pre-Han provenance, divide quite naturally into two classes: those which are functional, explicitly shamanistic and in which the presence of the poet – if there is one – is unseen; and those which are personal, confessional or self-revelatory, in which the poet speaks to us in his own voice and the shamanism, if there is any, is incidental, a mere part of the background of received ideas and beliefs on which the poet draws for his materials.

If this analysis is correct and the poems in question indeed reflect shamans' ecstatic flights, then this tradition is entirely different from the Daoist master's visualization of his journey to heaven along a red passageway formed by his own *qi* and accompanied by internal gods he had "created" in meditation and released from his body, for two reasons.

First, the shamans' trance was an altered state of mind induced either by dancing and playing the shaman's drum or by ingesting drugs (or both) such as *cannabis*. Hemp (*ma* 麻) is even explicitly mentioned in the "Great master of fate" (*da siming* 大司命) of the *Nine songs* (*jiu ge* 九歌) of the *Chu ci*: "I have plucked the glistening flower of the Holy Hemp (*zhe shu ma xi yao hua* 折疏麻兮瑤華)"[91].

Second, if one "falls in trance", one loses control over the mental activities and can barely influence the hallucinations one experiences. In most cases it is an external actor, an attending person who by, e. g. clapping the hands has to bring the shaman "back to normal". Visualization – or meditation in general –, on the other hand, is a conscious state of deep concentration and full awareness. The meditating person always has total control over the process.

Nevertheless, knowledge of the existence of this southern, shamanistic tradition may have made the various forms of visualization, these new techniques of meditation, more acceptable to the Chinese.

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88 *Chu ci* 1.33b, tr.Hawkes 1985: 74.
89 *Chu ci* 1.45b-46a, tr.Hawkes 1985: 77.
90 Hawkes 1985: 38. Also cf. Waley 1989: 14.
91 *Chu ci* 2.17a, tr. Hawkes 1985: 111.

7 Conclusion

The Chinese and Indian texts discussed revealed that in ancient Asia various techniques of meditation were practiced, starting in northern India perhaps in the seventh or sixth century BC and in China a few centuries later.

Breathing meditation which closely observed the breathing process and thus allowed to enter ever deeper levels of concentration could lead to the experience of an all-encompassing unity with the *brahman* (India) or the *dao* (China). Early or "philosophical" Daoism must be considered the direct result of such meditative experiences. Indian Buddhism inherited this method from the Brahmins. In Buddhism, meditation was from the very beginning part and parcel of the religious tradition. In fact, as Gautama had reached enlightenment during meditation, it was a cornerstone of the daily practice of his adherents and doctrinally sanctioned in the last couple of stages of the eightfold way. As – at least in some Daoist circles – meditation already played an important role, it does not come as a surprise that the earliest Buddhist texts translated into Chinese were meditation texts.

Mental vision or visualization, an entirely different form of meditation current in ancient India, was to be found, e. g. in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Buddhism, especially Mahāyāna Buddhism, cultivated this method, too. As the (Pāli-) canon was closed, the convenient way to introduce new notions as taught by the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), in order to comply with new social and/or religious circumstances, was to have him orally present his new teachings to the adept in visualization. Visualization thus served to legitimize new (Sanskrit) sutras.

In China, visualization appears around the time when the first Buddhist visualization texts were translated. From the presented pieces of epigraphical and textual evidence the conclusion can be drawn that various Daoist communities from Sichuan to Meng (commandery of Liang, Henan) and up to Luoyang practiced visualization as a new form of meditation no later than from the year 165 AD onwards. Several Daoist texts of the 2nd and early third century AD refer to mentally concentrating on the image of a divinity or its dwelling place within one's own body and fixing it there, so that the adept could communicate with the deity and profit from his or her protective power.

However, Daoism did not stop here. Rather, it further developed visualization into a complex healing ritual. In this a document stating the trespasses and the repent of the sick parish member who was asking for help had to be written which then had to be brought to the attention of the highest god in heaven. This was to be realized in meditation in which the priest first released

some of his body gods as his companions. Next, he let a red *qi* originate in his heart that left his body to form a road up to heaven on which the priest together with his companions moved to the heavenly palace carrying the document. Once the petition was transmitted to the god and its contents were approved by him, the priest returned to earth.

Breathing meditation as well as visualization as mental techniques are obviously similar both in their Indian and Chinese variants. The geographical proximity of both cultural spheres speaks in favour of cultural influences rather than convergences.[92] As the Indian instances precede the Chinese ones, the direction of influence in these cases must have been from the west to the east. Even isolated motifs such as the divine married couple in both eyes, the fire element in the Buddhist monk's body and the red *qi* in the Daoist's heart, and the monk visualizing his visit of the Buddha-field or the Daoist visualizing his journey to the heavenly palace may have taken the same way. These are, however, only weak hints. The important question of possible influences between India and China – apart from the obvious spread of Buddhism to the Far East – deserves a full multidisciplinary research programme.

Notwithstanding the mentioned similarities and whether or not the Daoists have borrowed the technique of visualization from the Buddhists, this form of meditation was obviously "flexible" enough to be applied in quite different religious contexts. In Buddhism it could serve to encounter a Buddha (both at the actual place or in a distant Buddha-field) and receive his new instructions, in Daoism it could be used to place the gods inside the own body and communicate with them or/and to visualize various forms of *qi* within the body and manipulate them, in order to ensure good health and secure longevity. The Daoist's meditative journey to heaven as part of a healing ritual was, of course, totally different from "teaching sessions" with a visualized Buddha. If indeed the Chinese had borrowed foreign techniques of meditation, they adapted and integrated them into their own contexts, thus providing them with semantic contents quite distinct from the original.

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92 The meaning and great importance of convergence in, e. g. biological evolution is discussed at length in Morris 2003. The concept might *mutatis mutandis* prove fruitful in the humanities as well.

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