

RESTORING THE ONE:
MEDITATION AND LIGHT VISIONS IN EARLY DAOIST TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This presentation describes a predictable and relatively invariant sequence of clear light visions induced by meditation and demonstrates that references to this vision sequence appear in early Daoist and Pre-Daoist texts. For example, in the *Elegies of Chu* (*Chu-ci*), ca. 200, B.C.E., a shaman stimulates a "returned view" (*fan-kuang*) of a "celestial breath" (*qi*) by "ingesting" sunlight and then "visualizing" (*cunjian*) colored light bathing inner organs. In the *Scripture of Great Peace* (*Taiping jing*), circa 32, B.C.E., the celestial lights are generated by meditating to "Preserve the Light of the One" (*Shou-i*). The first visions are yellow-green rings described in Daoist texts using metaphors of "chariot wheels," "Jade Girdles," "Orbed Phosphors," and "Green Glares." The second type of vision - the amorphous purple cloud with a bright, pearl-like node at its center - is described by metaphors of "Revolving Auroras," "purple pneumas [*qi*]" which contain "a fiery pearl within the darkness," or as the "Palace of the Moving Pearl." A shift from calm meditation to paroxysmal visions is also described: "the fusion of the One (*hun-i*)" begins with a "whirlwind" (*hui-feng*) or "fiery wind" (*piao*) which has "the form of ten thousand things," but this gives way to tranquility and a bright, all-encompassing light, "The Great Ocean of Energies." Visible in that ocean is a bulbous shape variously described as "a turtle," "a sacred mountain" (*Kunlun*) with the inverted, bulbous shape of a hanging bowl, a mushroom, or a navel. Some texts describe this vision as a white moon that hides a "Jade Fetus" and "newborn babe;" from that moon shoot three white beams, "lunar efflorescences" that "spurt forth as a bridge across dark waters." Finally, Daoist texts describe a culminating vision - a bright "white sun" or "Liquid Fire" that "burns" away all impurities, leaving a "great brightness of vascillating radiance," "a white light that penetrates all regions of inner space."

A. INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I will describe a sequence of clear light visions that can be induced by meditation, then I will consider some examples of similar light imagery in the early Daoist scriptures. These observations can only be preliminary and provisional since I am relying on the few texts available in English translation. It is my hope those here today whose knowledge of Chinese language and culture far exceeds my own will help correct my misunderstandings, which would seem to be inevitable. My goal is a modest one: to provide some new ideas about what questions to ask when studying trance induction in Chinese shamans, past or present.

B. THE INITIAL SET OF MEDITATION-INDUCED, "SLEEP-ONSET" VISIONS

A person who is already skilled at "empty-mind" meditation can learn to generate clear light visions by keeping the attention fixated on the center of the dark visual field and remaining passive, that is, detached from all striving. The first light images to appear are: (1) *yellow-green rings* that shrink in diameter, seeming to "recede" toward a distant point; (2) *shapeless, cloud-like waves*, usually colored *dark blue or purple*, that expand across the visual field in a swirling movement; and (3) a *pearl-like eye-shape*, that is, a node of brighter, whiter, opalescent purple that appears at the center of the darker purple cloud. The bright node alternates between a solid-looking, disk-shape - the *pearl* - and an *eye-like ring* which forms when the brightness of the central node ebbs back from the center, opening up a tiny, black hole that resembles the pupil of an eye with a bright iris surrounding it. The dark hole then fills in as "splinters" of bright light shoot down into the pupil from the ring of the iris. This is the image of a "third eye."

These light images induced during the early stages of meditation are generated by brain mechanisms that would normally govern the transition from waking to the first

nightly episode of slow wave sleep [Nicholson, 1996; 2002d]. Indeed, these early-stage light images sometimes appear to people who are relaxed and waiting to fall asleep. These meditation-induced, "sleep-onset" light images have been described in ethnographic studies of shamanistic cultures and in autobiographies of many religious mystics [Nicholson and Firnhaber, 2001]. It seems likely, then, that similar images will be described by Chinese shamans and Daoist masters.

1. Meditation-Induced Light Visions Are Described in Pre-Daoist Texts

In "The Elegies of Chu" (*Chu-ci*), written in the 3rd Century, B.C.E., there is this description of a shamanic "far-off journey" (*yuanyou*): "I look within . . . to find the place where life's energy rises," and enter an "empty and tranquil" darkness. There the traveler sees a "flow of energy, rising ever upward . . . All dazzling essence, flashing back and forth." He "eats the six energies" of the sun while also "guarding the purity of the spirit light within." He flies through "a Great Brightness," sees "Yang in its gentle flashes, not quite bright," "wander[s] on the floating waves of steady mist," and - note the color here - "traverse[s] fresh blue clouds, . . . floating freely [Kohn, 1993, pp. 251 - 257]."

I should explain what is meant by the phrase, "eats the six energies." This refers to the Daoist practice of "retentive visualization" (*cunjian*) [Bokenkamp, 1997, p. 288] in which a meditator employs the imagination to visualize colors and then direct them at the bodily organs. Of course the meditator cannot actually see the physical organs; instead, he imagines colored light moving through the stations of a interior symbolic landscape described in Daoist myths. The basic idea is that "similar things attract," so that, by visualizing light moving through the map of the mythic interior landscape, the

visualizer hopes to attract the attention of the celestial deities who are associated with each of the organs and to elicit a response. The desired response is a "returned view" (*fan-kuang*), that is, a celestial light vision that flows spontaneously in the mind without any effort by the visualizer [see Robinet, 1993, p. 61; Schipper, 1993, pp. 171 - 172]. The important point to remember is that a successful visualization has the same outcome as an empty-mind meditation - the induction of visions of free-flowing light (*qi*).

An example of light visions being induced by empty-mind meditation is found in another early text, *The Scripture of Great Peace* (*Taiping jing*), written about 32, B.C.E.. The technique is called "Preserving the Light of the One (*Shou-i*)":

With prolonged practice you will be able to see within your body. The physical body will become gradually lighter, the essence more brilliant, and the light more concentrated. . . . / To practice guarding the light of the One, when you have not yet attained concentration, just sit quietly with your eyes closed. There is no light seen in the inner eye. / Practice guarding the One like this for a long time and a brilliant light will arise [Kohn, *Ibid.*, pp. 194 - 195; italics added].

2. The Daoist Texts Describe Visions of Yellow-Green Colors and Ring-Like Shapes

In *The Scripture of Great Peace*, the first lights that are seen look like wheels:

The splendor of yang starts to shine and spreads its light within the Original Beginning, soaking all the heavens; its breath [qi] turns and circles like the wheels of a chariot [Translated in Robinet, 1993, p. 110; italics added].

In the *Book of Great Profundity* (*Ta-tung ching*), a text from the Highest Purity (*Shangqing*) school, there is an explanation of why the first spirit-lights that one sees are a blend of yellow and green: the Original Father who lives in the head sends a green "breath" (*qi*) down through the body at the same time that the Original Mother, who lives at the base of the trunk, sends a yellow "breath" upward. When these two lights meet and blend in "The Yellow Court of the Heart," yellow-green illuminates the body of the adept like the sun and moon [Robinet, *op. cit.*, p. 102].

In another Highest Purity text (*Shangqing yupei jindang taiji jinshu*), there is a reference to a light called the "Jade Girdle" (*yupei*) [Little, 2000, p. 205]: the meditator is instructed to "visualize the energy of the Jade Girdle [as it] descends from the Nine Heavens and encircles his or her body." The word, "girdle," connotes a ring and "jade" can have a green color. While this is a visualization, it is reasonable to infer that this metaphor was chosen because it described the light the visualizer hoped to call down from heaven.

In another Highest Purity text, *The Upper Scripture of the Purple Texts Inscribed by the Spirits*, a poem refers to "Orbed Phosphors," "Green Glares," "Revolving Auroras," "Dark Blazes," and "Whirlwind Simulacra." With the exception of the whirlwind, which I address below, all of these metaphors are good descriptions of the sleep-onset light visions. This poem has long puzzled experts like Robinet and Bokenkamp; they conclude that it must serve as a memory-aid to recall names of celestial deities [see Bokenkamp, op. cit., p. 314n], but I propose that these lines must also describe actual light images.

3. Daoist Texts Describe Purple Clouds with Bright Centers ("Pearls" or "Eyes")

Many Daoist texts state that, as a meditator visualizes the light of the sun circulating in the body, he will see a purple light descending from the heavens. This light has an opalescent glow and looks like the pupil of an eye:

[W]ithin the sunlight auroras there will be *also a purple pneuma [qi], as large as the pupil of your eye, but wrapped in several tens of layers and flashing brilliantly This is called the flying root of solar efflorescence, the jade placenta, mother of water. . . .* [*Purple Texts*, in Bokenkamp, op. cit., p. 315; italics added]:

Schipper calls this the "third eye" and points out that the Daoist master uses it like a mirror: staring at this mirror is said to reflect celestial light away from its place of arrival in the head (Upper Cinnabar Field) and to send it down to the Lower Cinnabar Field and the kidneys, where it can be processed by "inner alchemy" into a vision of the One [Schipper, op. cit., pp. 105, 171 - 172; Robinet, op. cit, p. 61].

In *The True Lord of the Supreme One Who Dwells in the Cinnabar Palace (hsüan-tan)*, this bright node in the purple cloud is called a "fiery pearl":

[C]oncentrate on the pole star. A purple breath descends from it which enters into my hsüan-tan palace. . . . / I then concentrate on the sun which enters into my hsüan-tan palace. It fills the palace and penetrates to the center of the purple breath. Then I see it as a fiery pearl within the darkness. [Maspero, quoted in Robinet. op. cit., p. 130].

The pearl metaphor also appears in *The Scripture of Immaculate Numen (Su-ling ching)*, where the symbolic inner landscape is envisioned as nine "cavities" inside the head. The text states that a meditator first sees green and purple lights, which are the spirits that guard the gate to the first cavity, the, later, upon reaching the fourth cavity, he sees "The Palace of the Moving Pearl" (*liu-chu kung*) [Robinet, op. cit., p. 129].

C. LIGHT IMAGES GENERATED WHEN MEDITATION IS DESTABILIZED

The brain mechanisms that govern the transition to sleep are sensitive and can be easily destabilized. An effective way to destabilize the brain's sleep mechanisms is to lose sleep. After sleep loss, brain cells become abnormally excitable. Then, when the sleep mechanisms start to fire, as they would during meditation, there is an increased chance that the mechanisms will be destabilized, triggering a shift to paroxysmal activity, specifically, to onset of a type of hyper-synchronous firing called a "petit mal" seizure. If the person keeps meditating, the petit mal seizure may be followed by a

subcortical (hippocampal) seizure [Nicholson, 1999, 2002d, 2003]. I experienced this kind of destabilization myself when, just before dawn, after having slept only 4 out of 48 hours, I triggered a seizure by trying to use meditation to put myself to sleep.

It seems likely that sleep loss and self-induced seizures will be described in Daoist texts, since adepts are advised [*Book of the Yellow Court*, Schipper, op. cit., p. 135]: "Stay awake, day and night, and you will be immortal."

The meditation-destabilized, paroxysmal light images, which are *continuations* of the initial, sleep-onset images, are: (4) a bright *star-like image*; (5) a *tunnel-like stream of dark rings*; then, in a sudden reversal of direction, (6) a *radiating spray of tiny bright flecks* along with non-visual symptoms typical of petit mal seizure; (7) a *dawn-like image* with gradual brightening and bluing of the entire visual field; (8) a small, *translucent-white bulbous glow* that looks like a moon in the blue sky; (9) *three thin white rays* appear in the place of the bulbous "moon" when it disappears; (10) the rays undergo changes; then, finally, one sees (11) *sheet-lightning flashes* accompanied by non-visual symptoms typical of hippocampal seizure.

4. Daoist Texts Describe Muscle Tremors and Visions of Wind-Blown Light-Flecks

In *The Book of Great Profundity (Ta-tung ching)*, the goal of the meditator who has awakened the light energies of both the body and the heavens is to "fuse" the two energies into one by "inner alchemy": "by the fusion of the One (*hun-i*), one is born into the light of the (celestial) Emperor [Robinet, op. cit., pp. 104 - 105]." This is brought about by a "whirlwind" or "tornado" (*hui-feng*): "the whirlwind brings about fusion with the Emperor [Ibid., op. cit., p. 109]," which signals "the beginning of the body's return

(*fan*) to life [Ibid., p. 113]." Robinet notes that the whirlwind is set in motion by the twistings of the purple light:

The breath [*qi*] is then transformed into *a purple cloud which goes through the same circulatory process finally "whirling" (hui-lun) and "twisting itself" into the form of the Emperor One, which brightens everything "like a white sun"* [Robinet, op. cit., p. 110; italics added].

And here, in the Preface to the same text, it states that:

The *Ta-tung* . . . makes [the primordial breath] *revolve (hui-hsün), purifies the spirits and rejoins with the Tao, causes a propitious wind to blow and guides the dance within the void. Suddenly (hu), the respiration disperses the form of the ten thousand things and, at the height of movement, there is tranquility again - obscurely, all around, the Miracle of the Emperor One. This is what is called the Whirlwind of the Unitive Fusion* [Robinet, op. cit., p. 116 - 7; italics added].

In the *Chen-kao*, describes the same experience as *piao*, a "violent or wild or fiery wind" or "fast chariot" [Robinet, op. cit., 113 - 114]. The adjective, "fiery," is interesting, because it suggests that the whirlwind experience involves visions of wind-blown sparks, as in the radiating spray I describe. Also, other descriptions of the *piao* say the meditator feels like a cloth fluttering in the wind or that he "twirls around like a falling leaf, [and] abandons himself to things and is spontaneous [Ibid., p. 116]." This would be a good description of the "petit mal" symptoms that occurred during my vision of the "radiating spray" - a compulsion to arch the back, pull the head back against the bed, and let the mouth drop open.

5. Daoist Texts Describe a Dawn-Like Vision, Then a Bulbous Moon-Like Vision

In *The Book of Great Profundity* passages cited above, the whirlwind ends in a "dispersal of the ten thousand things" that instills "tranquility" and "brightens everything 'like a white sun'." In a commentary on this text, Schipper notes that the vision of diffuse brightness after the whirlwind is also described as "the Great Ocean of

Energies," and that a bulbous shape - a turtle's head - pokes up through the surface of the ocean:

We now arrive in the watery lower world. Here again sun and the moon are found, this time in the kidneys. They cast their light on the Great Ocean of Energies (ch'i-hai), which covers the whole of the lower body, and wherein a large turtle swims [Schipper, op. cit., p. 106-7; italics added].

The parallels between this vision of a turtle's head poking out of an ocean-like expanse of blue and the vision I've described of a translucent-white bulbous glow are striking, and this observation is reinforced by other metaphors used in this same text to refer to the same vision. For example, as Schipper continues, he adds that the sacred mountain of Kunlun also sticks out of the ocean:

In the middle of the ocean rises the K'un-lun, the sacred, inverted mountain with its narrow base widening towards the top, giving it the outline of a mushroom. The mountain has a hollow summit (the navel), which gives access to the deepest recesses of the ocean [Schipper, op. cit., pp. 106 - 107].

In this regard, it is important to note that Kunlun is also called "the Tortoise Mountain" [Bokenkamp, op. cit., p. 344], and that Kunlun is described in another text, *The Record of the Ten Continents (Shizhou ji)*, as "shaped like a hanging bowl [Kohn, op. cit., p. 55]." Kunlun is also said to be hollow and sunk in like a navel.

How can we explain these references to mythical turtle's heads, bowl-shaped mountains facing upside down, mushrooms, and navels? What experiences might lead someone to choose these particular metaphors? I propose that all of these puzzling metaphors become understandable once we view them as attempts to describe a specific type of clear light vision - the white bulbous image - that appears during the meditation-destabilized sequence I've described.

This interpretation also explains a different type of metaphor that has puzzled the experts [Bokenkamp, op. cit., pp. 285 - 286]: the *Purple Texts* state that the adept will

see the vision of an inner moon that glows white with "yang-essence," that is, with energy transmuted from male seminal fluid. This is a strange because Daoists usually consider the moon to be feminine, and, indeed, here too the moon is said to hide a "Jade Fetus" and "newborn babe." The paradox, then, is that the moon hides both the male yang-essence and the fetus in the female womb. To confuse even more, the text states (see above) that the Jade Placenta is an efflorescence from the masculine sun! How can these strange juxtapositions be explained?

I propose that the paradoxes are resolved if they are seen as the author's attempt to describe what happens in the sequence I've described: a white bulbous image appears in an ocean of blue, moves back and forth, and then suddenly ruptures, leaving three rays of white light shining against a dark visual field. Now consider these lines of poetry:

Moon essences, phosphors of the night, [e]xalted on high in the Dark Palace May the fetus fly in; May the newborn babe gradually emerge. The circling yin joins thrice, It's beams mystically darkening in all directions [Bokenkamp, op. cit., p. 319; italics added].

[T]he moon now wanes, now waxes. The luminous essence glows within, [t]hen spurts forth as a bridge across dark waters. . . . I now feed on lunar efflorescences, [j]oining thereby with the Perfected [Ibid., p. 320; italics added].

Bring to me the waters of lunar efflorescence, . . . Stored in heaven, concealed in the moon, The Five Numinous Ladies Let fly their beams of light in nine paths, To illumine my [head] [Ibid., p. 320; italics added].

The white bulbous image that I saw looked very much like a pale white moon hanging in the sky - or like a tiny white Jade Fetus flying in the sky. Then, as the bulb moved back and forth, it did indeed look like the head of a baby trying to push through the vaginal opening. When the bulb vision suddenly disappeared and the bright blue visual field became dark again, I saw three white rays shoot up from the place where

the bulb had formerly been. The analogy to seminal fluid ejaculated by males is obvious - and in fact the poems make this analogy explicit: the "luminous essence *spurts* forth." One line even specifies that there are three beams ("thrice").

6. Daoist Texts Describe White, Sheet-Lightning Visions and Burning Experiences

In Lao-tzu's *Dao-de ching*, the progenitor of all Daoist texts, the adept is urged to seek a state of mind beyond all cognition, a state described as an all-encompassing white light [Schipper, 1993, p. 139]: "Can you, by Non-Knowledge, let the *white light* penetrate all regions of the (inner) space?"

In a Great Peace text, *Three Ways to Go Beyond the Heavenly Pass* (*Tiganguan santu*), adepts are advised:

Last, meditate on the Passgate Star. This is the Heavenly Pass of Mysterious Yang, the *great brightness of Vascillating Radiance*. Here the Tao Lords of the Highest Jade Emperor reside [Kohn, op. cit., pp. 264].

The final stage of the standard sequence of meditation-induced visions, as I've described it, is a series of lightning-like flashes accompanied by paroxysmal symptoms - loud crackling, buzzing sounds, muscle tremors, currents of energy running through the body, and orgasmic sensations. This cluster of symptoms is often described by Western mystic as a "burning." It is not surprising, then, that the goal of Great Purity meditation is, in Robinet's words, a "self-cremation":

[T]he exertion of the adepts who practice the Great Purity exercises *ends with an imaginary self-cremation*. Thus adepts see "a red breath envelop their bodies and everything turns to fire; the fire engulfs their bodies. Body and fire become but one substances. Inside and outside, all is light." This is called "purification (or "refining," *lien*) by the sun and moon" or "dying and living again" [Robinet, op. cit., p. 169; italics added].

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