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Buddhism and Taoism appeared as religions almost simultaneously in the first century A.D. in China during the early part of the Eastern Han dynasty. At first, it was difficult to tell the difference between Buddhism and Taoism. Emperor Ming (r. A.D. 58–75) of the Eastern Han dynasty said of his brother, Liu Ying, the Prince of Chu, that he “reads the subtle words of Huangdi and *Laozi* [Taoist thought], while upholding humane sacrifice to the Buddha.” This message tells us that the text Liu Ying read was a Taoist scripture (the original literature of Taoism that comprised the ideas of both Taoism and the Immortality school) but that the sacrifice he performed was according to Buddhist practice. Traditional religious sacrifice in China included killing animals as tributes to gods, a practice forbidden by Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhist sacrifice can be called “humane sacrifice.” On the other hand, in their search for immortality, the Qin-Han alchemists used fruit as tribute, as Buddhists did. With respect to methods of sacrifice, Taoism and Buddhism shared similarities from the very beginning. In addition, as seen in the Buddhist *Sutra in Forty-two Sections*, which came into China and was translated into Chinese during the Eastern Han, the Buddha was similar to the supernatural immortals of Chinese legends in his longevity, changeability, and ability to fly. This sutra, like similar Taoist texts, teaches people to purify their minds and to reduce their desires (*qingxin guayü*). Generally speaking, in the beginning, people could hardly tell the difference between Buddhism and Taoism.

Why? The reason is that the form in which Buddhism entered China differed from that in which it emerged in India. The early Buddhism that emerged in India did not treat the Buddha as a deity. Its teaching was mainly to prove the transitoriness or emptiness of the “self.” The Mahayana school of Buddhism that developed later regarded the Buddha as a deity but at the same time

insisted that everything was transient or empty. The *Sutra in Forty-two Sections*, the earliest sutra to enter China, lacked a complicated doctrine but included Mahayana deities. Buddhist doctrine from different periods and different levels in India came into China at around the same time, and the different doctrines overlapped with one another. All of them went through selection and simplification at Chinese hands, intentionally or unintentionally.

The Buddhism that was imported into China during the Eastern Han was easily confused with Taoism through the late period of the Eastern Han (after the middle of the second century A.D.). As more Buddhist sutras were introduced and translated into Chinese, Buddhism spread farther and farther. At the same time, Taoism also developed. The first Eastern Han Taoist scripture, the *Classic on the Great Peace (Taiping jing)*, was written. In view of these developments, Buddhism and Taoism became more distinct in people's minds. Naturally, differences and debates between the two began to arise.

The Taoism reflected in the surviving text of the *Classic on the Great Peace* is, strictly speaking, this-worldly, not otherworldly. The main idea of this Taoism is to advocate the harmony of the three *qi* and the ascendancy of emperors and kings (*he sanqi, xing diuwang*), to achieve the Great Peace (*zhi taiping*). The so-called three *qi* are the great positive (*taiyang*), the great negative (*taiyin*), and harmony (*zhonghe*), the equivalents of heaven, earth, and man; or the sun, the moon, and the stars; or the mountains, the rivers, and the land; or father, mother, and son; or the monarch, the ministers, and the people; and so forth. These kinds of triadic designations seem to come from the *Laozi*. It is said in chapter 42 of the *Laozi*, "One comes from Tao, two from one, three from two, all things on the earth from three." The *Laozi* believes that, if the three are getting along harmoniously, the world will be in great peace; that is, a quasi paradise will be built in the human world. How then should the three be made harmonious with each other? The *Laozi* thinks that the principle that *yang* is superior and *ying* inferior must be followed and that people have to be "filial to parents, obedient to teachers, and loyal to the sovereign." In the *Classic on the Great Peace*, there were, of course, many other teachings dealing with self-cultivation, incantations, and even the secrets of how to become immortal. Therefore, considering these elements, Taoism is a synthesis and an accretion of elements of traditional Chinese culture because it comprises the ideas of the Taoist, Confucian, Yin-yang, and Immortality schools. Naturally, a religion like Taoism that originated in the soil of Chinese culture spread easily among Chinese people. The *Classic of the Great Peace*, although not yet clear and radical, already contained notions that belittled Buddhism.

The popularization of Buddhism in China was different from that of Taoism. As it spread, Buddhism constantly confronted resistance and attempts at reform from Chinese traditional culture. During the late period of the Eastern Han, a person named Mouzi wrote an essay entitled "Mouzi on the Settling of Doubts" (*Mouzi li huo lun*), in which he answered people's criticism of Buddhism and tried as best he could to establish a total defense of Buddhism. For

example, Chinese tradition valued filial piety, so the Buddhist practice of leaving the family (*chujia*), forsaking parents, wife, and sons, was criticized as not being filial. Mouzi responded that the mercy of the Buddha could keep the country of the person's father from disasters, thus ensuring good fortune, and also that the Buddha could "release the soul" of the person's parents and brothers from suffering; on these grounds, therefore, Buddhism could not be considered as not being filial.

Some people also held that believing in the Buddha meant abandoning Chinese Confucian orthodoxy. Mouzi's response was that the way of Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius was the way of governing the world, while the way of the Buddha and *Laozi* was the way of nonaction, each having its own use. Mouzi himself understood and approved of all three: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Yet some people still thought that the purpose of self-cultivation was to become an immortal supernatural being and that, since according to Buddhism death was inevitable, there was no benefit to be expected from Buddhism. In reply to this criticism, Mouzi quoted from the Confucian Classics, showing that human beings were not immortal anyway. He also quoted from chapter 23 of the *Laozi* that "even the heaven and the earth could not last forever, let alone human beings." Generally speaking, when accusations were leveled by the Confucian school, Mouzi usually borrowed from the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* to defend himself; when the criticism came from Taoism, which believed in human longevity and immortality, he made references to both Confucianism and Taoism to refute it.

Modern Chinese thinkers once devised a theory of coping with foreign powers, known as "using barbarians to control barbarians" (*yi yi zhi yi*). In fact, Mouzi had thought along these lines in ancient times. To introduce foreign theories, Mouzi had already employed the method of "using Chinese to control Chinese." Yet, there were big differences between the two methods. As for "using barbarians to control barbarians," one should first "learn the strong points of foreigners," learning from the foreign culture to reform oneself. Therefore, although one's purpose is to resist foreigners, one's action accustomed oneself to foreign ways. When "using Chinese to control Chinese," however, one must first find points of similarity and commonality between a foreign theory and a Chinese theory so that one Chinese theory could oppose another Chinese theory. To do so, the foreign theory first had to be sinicized to a certain degree. Therefore, although the purpose is to introduce foreign culture, the action leads to the sinification of foreign ideas. It appears that both methods are likely to be used during cultural exchanges between Chinese and foreigners.

Mouzi defended the spread of Buddhism in China, but, unavoidably, he misunderstood certain Buddhist doctrines. The problem of Chinese Buddhist monks misunderstanding the original meanings of Buddhist doctrine existed throughout the period A.D. 65–420.

During the period of the late Eastern Han and the Three Kingdoms, the

number of Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures increased considerably. With respect to their contents, these translations fell mainly into two categories. One was the *dhyana* practice of Hinayana, which, in order to acquire personal experience of the power of the Buddha, emphasized calmness of mind (*samadhi*), expulsion of all distracting thoughts, and thinking and imagining only in accordance with Buddhist doctrine. The other was the *prajñā* theory of Mahayana. Sometimes *prajñā* is translated as “wisdom.” However, it is not ordinary wisdom but the wisdom of nonwisdom that negates ordinary wisdom. The full name of *prajñā* is *prajñāpāramitā*, meaning the highest degree of wisdom. Through special wisdom like *prajñā*, people can realize *Sunya* and cross to the yonder shore of salvation.

During the Wei-Jin period, both the *dhyana* practice of Hinayana and the *prajñā* theory of Mahayana were very popular in China. Why? Because not only did both have many things in common, but both also interacted with Taoist thought and Taoism in China. More specifically, Buddhist *dhyana* practices and Taoist breathing exercises developed an affinity, while Buddhist *prajñā* theory and Taoist metaphysics in the Wei-Jin period influenced each other deeply.

First, I will discuss the relation between the *dhyana* practice of Buddhism and the breathing exercises of Taoism. The connection of breathing exercises with Taoism can be seen in certain ideas of the Taoist school, such as chapter 7 of the *Laozi*, which states, “The sage puts his own person last, and yet he is found in the foremost place; he treats his person as if he were foreign to him, and yet that person is preserved.” The chapter on “The Great and Most Honored Master” in the *Zhuangzi* talks about “sitting and forgetting everything.” The chapter on “Nourishing the Lord of Life” of the *Zhuangzi* also expresses the idea of protecting one’s body and the whole life. *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* talked about the human body and life only to calm the mind in order to nourish life, without any religious purpose, such as seeking immortality. Buddhism regards *dhyana* as a religious practice and a bridge leading toward the Buddha land. This point provides an insight into Taoism. Wei Boyang of the Han and Wei period practiced alchemy as an important means of cultivating and becoming immortal; he also considered breathing exercises as the meditation of internal alchemy. Wei Boyang believed that if one sits quietly, stops thinking, concentrates on things within his body, and applies his mind to directing a certain circulation inside his body, he will achieve the goal of cultivating his essence, breath, and spirit. In addition, if one at the same time takes an elixir, with an interaction of inner and outer pellets, he can achieve immortality and become a supernatural being. Of course, no one has ever become immortal through the exercise of alchemy. However, the Taoist breathing exercises became popular throughout China and remain so to this day; they are practiced by people as a way of maintaining good health.

Second, I would like to talk about the relation between the Buddhist *prajñāpāramitā* theory and the ideas of the Taoist school. This topic is very rich and complex. I shall use only the simplest terms to explain the relation between the

two in terms of two main aspects. First, Taoist ideas were interpreted in Buddhist intellectual terms. The most representative thinker in this respect was Wang Bi (226–249), a scholar who lived during the period of the Three Kingdoms. His main work is the *Annotation to the Laozi*. In chapter 40 of the *Laozi*, it states, “All things under heaven sprang from It as existing; that existence sprang from It as nonexistent.” Wang Bi’s interpretation is, “All things under heaven depend on It for life; but the beginning of It is the void [*wu*].” All things start from It as existing, but existence is based on It as nonexistent. This is Wang Bi’s theory of “void/existence.”

In the Wei-Jin period, scholars were fond of discussing nothingness, a phenomenon that accorded with Wang Bi’s idea of “nothing-existence.” However, it is clear that Wang Bi’s theory of “void/existence” was influenced by the *prajñā* theory of Buddhism that holds that all is empty. Wang Bi’s annotation to the *Laozi* is incomplete and incorrect because, in chapter 2 of the *Laozi*, it is said that “existence and nonexistence give birth the one to the other.” Wang Bi did not annotate this sentence, pretending not to see it. In reality, *Laozi*’s concept of existence and nonexistence has two levels. On the level of phenomena, things become existent from nonexistence; then they become nonexistent from existence. The two are generated mutually. On the level of essence, this process cannot be comprehended by the senses since *Tao* has transcended phenomenon. In this respect, *Tao* is nonexistence. In chapter 41 of the *Laozi*, it is said, “Loud sound is impossible to hear, and a great figure cannot be seen.” Wang Bi did not satisfactorily annotate this passage; neither did James Legge. Its original meaning is that the sound that transcends phenomenon (great sound) cannot be heard and that the figure that transcends phenomenon (great figure) cannot be seen. However, *Tao* is not truly nonexistent; it is said only that “the *Tao* is hidden, and lacks name; but it is the *Tao* that is skillful at imparting and making them complete.” Therefore, *Laozi*’s *Tao* may seem nonexistent but is actually real. We can find this explanation of *Tao* in passages from chapters 21, 25, and 41 of the *Laozi*. Wang Bi used “nonexistence” to interpret *Laozi*’s *Tao*, but he took a one-sided approach to the problem.

In the second aspect, the relation between the *prajñā* theory and the ideas of the Taoist school in China are illustrated by the fact that many Chinese people who were studying *prajñāpāramitā* had a deep understanding of *Laozi*’s and *Zhuangzi*’s thought. Consciously or unconsciously, they applied Taoist terms and ideas in their understanding and interpretation of the *prajñāpāramitā* theory of Buddhism. Borrowing Taoist terms to express similar ideas of Buddhism is called “matching the meaning” (*ge yi*). The person who clearly set up this method of “matching the meaning” and systematically applied it to interpreting Buddhist doctrine is Fa Ya, a monk who lived during the Jin dynasty. However, earlier than Fa Ya, Mouzi had already unconsciously applied this method. For instance, the word *nirvana* of Buddhism was almost impossible for Chinese people who knew only the Confucian Classics to understand. Mouzi borrowed a Taoist term, translating it as “nonaction,” which was much easier to under-

stand. Nevertheless, if one really took Buddhist *nirvana* for Taoist “nonaction,” it would in the end lead to misunderstanding. Both Dao An (314–385), a famous monk who was a contemporary of Fa Ya’s, and Hui Yuan (334–416), Dao An’s student, also a well-known monk, used the method of “matching the meaning” to explain Buddhist scriptures. Later, Dao An became aware of the problem of this method, and he no longer used it.

Dao An’s refusal to interpret Buddhist doctrine by the method of “matching the meaning” showed that he was aware of the fundamental differences between imported Buddhism and indigenous Taoism. Yet, on a subconscious level, Dao An and Hui Yuan were still unable to understand thoroughly the *prajñā* theory of Buddhism on account of the influence of Taoism.

The kernel of the *prajñā* theory is that all phenomenal things are assumed to exist but are really empty of permanency. Since being is assumed but only emptiness is real, then emptiness has reached the level of “essence” or “entity.” Thus, people would think that essence is empty, or, as Deists would put it, “nonbeing” is the ultimate reality. However, according to the logic of the *prajñā* theory, adepts are not allowed to rest content with the belief that essence is empty, that is, to assume that emptiness is reality and to maintain it. The *prajñā* theory asks people to continue to negate and to consider emptiness itself as appearing to be being when it is in fact nonbeing. After explaining that this is empty, that is empty, and everything is empty, the text of the *prajñā* scripture instructs adherents to say “empty emptiness.” Why? Because real emptiness itself exists in the condition of assumed being; therefore, real emptiness itself is not absolute. Following the logic of *prajñā*, since real emptiness is not absolute, it can only be assumed to exist but is really empty. Dao An could not follow the logic of *prajñā*, so when he encountered emptiness, he thought that he had reached the entity of “void” (*wu*). His interpretation later became one school of the *prajñā* theory based on the theory of “void as the source of reality.” However, he did not comprehend thoroughly the essential meaning of the *prajñā* theory.

Hui Yuan (334–416) had the same problem as his master as he cultivated the *dhyana* of Mahayana. Among various meditations of the *dhyana*, a popular one is to think of the Buddha and the Buddha land wholeheartedly, which enables one to perceive the Buddha and the Buddha land (a kind of hallucination arising from an extreme concentration of thought). Hui Yuan cultivated himself according to the *dhyana* of Mahayana for going to the Pure Land of the Buddha after death. He took seriously the Buddha that he saw when sitting in meditation and believed what happened was true. Later, in correspondence with Kumarajiva, who was then in north China, Hui Yuan asked, “Was the Buddha that I saw when sitting in meditation a Buddha in my mind or a Buddha outside my mind who came inside to meet the one in my mind?” He asked this question in great seriousness, but Kumarajiva replied playfully that his question could not really stand because the Buddha that one saw in meditation would rightly explain the *prajñā* idea of “assumed being but really emptiness.”

That Hui Yuan seriously asked whether it was being or emptiness shows that he, too, did not comprehend the *prajñā* theory thoroughly.

In short, in the period A.D. 65–420, there was much interaction and mutual influence between Buddhist and Taoist religious practice and thought. The level of religious interaction was somewhat less than that of intellectual cross-fertilization. What I am attempting in this short presentation is, in the words of a Greek scholar, only an “opinion” arousing thought, not “knowledge” reflecting truth. In terms of the *prajñā* of Buddhism, my discussion is “assumed to exist but really empty.”

Editor's note: For further information on the encounter of Buddhism with Taoism during the period covered by this paper, see the excellent study by E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959).