Han-Shan Te-Ch'ing:
A Buddhist Interpretation of Taoism

By Sung-Peng Hsu

Published in Journal of Chinese Philosophy 2 (1975) 417-427

I. INTRODUCTION

Han-shan Te-ch'ing[a] (1546-1623) was one of the major Buddhist thinkers and reformers of the late Ming period. He was interested in Taoism throughout his life, and wrote four important works on it.[1] The purpose of this paper is to present Han-shan's view of Taoism and point out the philosophical problems involved. It is Han-shan's belief that the three religions of China, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, are ultimately originated from the same source, which he calls the Mind. But they differ among themselves as the developments of the Mind and the paths to salvation. While Confucianism will be discussed to some extent, the paper will focus on Han-shan's view of Taoism. For our discussion I would like to distinguish between questions about reality and questions about salvation. Though the two kinds of questions are closely related, there are important differences that make the distinction necessary.

II. QUESTIONS ABOUT REALITY

Both Taoism and Buddhism appeal to reality to answer many basic questions of religion, but their respective views about reality are not identical. They differ considerably in many respects. It is Han-shan's view, however, that in spite of their differences they are originated from and teach about the same ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is called, among other names, the Mind.

It is well known that the Buddha himself and Hinayana Buddhism in general refrain from talking about the ultimate reality. It is held that such a talk does not tend to the edification of religion or solve the sufferings of the world. It is in Mahayana Buddhism that the question of ultimate reality is dealt with in some way. Even though the Madhyamika school avoids affirming a positive being as the ultimate reality, its overwhelming interest in rejecting any affirmation seems to betray its ultimate concern for defending something. It is debatable whether *sunyata* refers to the ultimate reality itself. In any case, other Mahayanist schools are less scrupulous about affirming an ultimate reality. The term *dharmakaya* or *dharmadhatu* (Essence of Dharma) indicates how positive it has become in name if not in meaning. Generally speaking, it is the affirmation of the ultimate reality, together with its transcendental and negativistic background, that has attracted the Chinese mind. Without the affirmation Buddhism would have always remained a foreign religion; with it there has been the development of Chinese Buddhism represented by Hua-yen, T'ien-t'ai, and Ch'an schools.

The evolution of the concept of ultimate reality in Mahayana and Chinese Buddhism has a strong soteriological significance. This is largely due to the fact that its concept has been derived from that of *nirvana,* originally the Buddhist state of salvation. It is not an object of intellectual investigation but the state to be confirmed by religious experience. Since according to a Mahayanist doctrine everyone has the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, the potentiality is affirmed as something equivalent to the ultimate reality, variously called *dharmakaya,* Buddha-nature, Self, Mind, etc. The fact that Han-shan generally

refers to the ultimate reality as the Mind has its Buddhist background, but it may have also been due to the predominance of Wang Yang-ming's philosophy of Mind in the late Ming period. 'Mind' was then the common term for ultimate reality.

Han-shan's conception of the Mind is a complex one. His philosophy is universalistic in orientation. According to him, all things are originated from the Mind, including not only physical phenomena but also schools of thought. Every school finds a place in his scheme of things. Thus their concepts about the ultimate reality are subsumed under the heading of the Mind. Han-shan's basic philosophical thought is that of the Hua-yen school. Like the latter, he has developed a system of classification of teachings *(p'an-chiao).*[b]

What is of particular significance to our discussion is the extension of the universalistic spirit beyond Buddhism to Confucianism and Taoism. Like all the Buddhist schools, Confucianism and Taoism are given proper places in the great family of the Mind. But they are lower in status than all the Buddhist teachings. Nonetheless, all the three religions are alike the 'shadows' and 'echoes' of the Mind.

The expressions 'shadows' *(ying)*[c] and 'echoes' *(hsiang)*[d] may have been inspired by the second chapter of the *Chuang Tzu,* 'Ch'i wu lun'.[e] The title has often been translated as 'On the Equality of All Things' *(ch'i-wu lun).* But according to Han-shan it should be understood to mean 'On Equalizing all Theories about Things' *(ch'i wu-lun).*[2] Like the piping of earth, man, and heaven that produces all kinds of sound in response to circumstances, all theories about things are but men's different responses to the piping of the Mind. Thus the different religions are called the shadows and echoes of the Mind.

Han-shan uses the age-old distinction between *t'i*[f] (substance or the noumenal) and *yung*[g] (function or the phenomenal) to explain the relation between the Mind and the three religions. The Mind is the *t'i* or source of the three religions, and the three religions are the *yung* or developments of the Mind. From the standpoint of reality, *yung* means the evolution, development, or functioning of *t'i.* In this sense, the three religions are the shadows and echoes of the Mind. But, as will be shown later, *yung* can also have a soteriological meaning, in the sense that the three religions are the three vehicles of salvation. The best summary of Han-shan's conception of the Mind is expressed in the famous Buddhist saying, *san-chieh wei-hsin, wan-fa wei-shih*[h]*,* which means that the three realms of desire, form, and the formless are mere Mind, and that the ten thousand *dharmas* or things are mere ideation or consciousness. It is not easy to explain the exact meaning of the saying. It is clear, however, that the Hua-yen, T'ien-t'ai, and Wei-shih philosophies are somehow synthesized in it. On the one hand, the *t'i* (Mind) and *yung* (three realms and ten thousand *dharmas)* are regarded as the two sides of a coin. They reflect and penetrate each other according to the understanding of the Hua-yen and T'ien-t'ai philosophies. On the other hand, the two are not simply the two sides of a coin but related cosmologically as the source and development through ideation according to the understanding of the Wei-shih philosophy. Generally speaking, their relationship is not strictly that of production or evolution as it is understood in Confucianism and Taoism. Yet there is also some element of that in the Buddhist thought. Moreover, the Buddhist thought as expressed in the above saying may have been shaped partly by those of Confucianism and Taoism.

It is on the basis of this understanding of the Mind that Han-shan talks about the three religions as the shadows and echoes of the Mind. The following quotations show Han-shan's thought on this point.

> The Buddha's wisdom is completely contained in the eight words: *san-chieh wei-hsin, wan-fa wei-shih.* Since they are mere Mind, the three realms are empty and contain nothing. Since they are mere consciousness, the ten thousand *dharmas* develop from consciousness.[3]
>
> I studied Confucius' teachings in my childhood, but failed to understand them. Then I followed Lao Tzu's path, but was unable to comprehend it. Finally I became the disciple of the Buddha, but did not reach him. Then I withdrew myself into deep mountains and great lakes in order to contemplate the Mind in quiescence. As a result I have come to understand the truth that the three realms are mere Mind, and that the ten thousand *dharmas* are mere consciousness. From the standpoint of the Mind and consciousness, all forms are shadows of the Mind, and all sounds its echoes. All sages are but the upright shadows, and all teachings of words none other than the harmonious echoes. Since the ten thousand *dharmas* are the manifestations of the Mind, all the professions of government administration, speech and language, and financial enterprises, etc., are in accordance with the right *dharma.* Since nothing exists apart from the Mind, all *dharmas* are real. The unenlightened people attach themselves to the *dharmas* without realizing their subtlety *(miao)*[i]. If we enlighten the Mind that is in us, then there would be no *dharma* that lacks the subtlety. To realize the subtlety of both Mind and *dharma* only the sages can do.[4]

Han-shan wishes to destroy the distinction between the Buddhist *dharma* or teaching *(fo-fa)*[j] and the secular learning *(shih-ti)*[k]*,* the latter including Confucianism and Taoism. Both are originated from the Mind. He holds that to make such a distinction is just like drawing a circle on the ground in order to define oneself as either inside or outside, and also like making a boundary in the great void. The Mind is the source of all things, but in itself it is void.

III. QUESTIONS ABOUT SALVATION

From the standpoint of reality, *yung* or functioning is simply the evolution, manifestation, or individuation of *t'i* or essence. In itself there is no necessary soteriological implication. Thus the question of *yung* cannot be equated with the question of salvation. But, as explained earlier, Buddhism is basically concerned with the question of salvation. Just as the ultimate reality, Mind, has a strong soteriological significance, that which is derived or developed from the Mind also has a predominantly soteriological meaning. According to Han-shan, all the different teachings have been developed mainly, if not solely, for the salvation of mankind. Each religion has its particular soteriological function, and the differentiation of the three religions can be justified in terms of their different functions in the overall purpose of salvation. Thus the three religions can be distinguished on the level *of yung,* even though they are originated from the same *t'i. Yung* has not only metaphysical meaning but also soteriological significance.

From the standpoint of salvation, the three religions, according to Han-shan, agree that there is the fact of evil in human life and that man needs salvation. Their differences arise only on the basis of the basic agreements. Moreover, Han-shan holds that all the three religions agree on regarding self-attachment *(wo-chih)*[1] as the fundamental evil. The term self-attachment can be interpreted to mean anything from selfishness to the attachment of oneself to something else.

Han-shan believes that there are gross and subtle forms of self-attachment. The attachment of oneself to a particular religion, for example, is considered a subtle form of self-attachment. It is in the interpretation of self-attachment that the three religions differ. According to Han-shan, Confucianism interprets self-attachment as a gross kind, such as attachment to one's benefits (selfishness); Taoism interprets it as a subtle kind, such as attachment to virtue and learning; and Buddhism interprets it as the subtlest kind, such as attachment to desire or will to live. In order to solve the various kinds of self-attachment, the three religions propose different methods of salvation.

Self-attachment in Buddhism is equivalent to the craving or desire explained in the Four Noble Truths. It is regarded as the cause of all sorrows, pains, and sufferings. To solve the latter it is necessary to extinguish the former. This is the Buddhist path to salvation. The method of extinguishing desire is called *chih-kuan*[m] or 'cessation and concentration' by Han-shan. Han-shan applies the same kind of logic to the explanation of the Confucian and Taoist views of evil and method of salvation. Thus there are the Confucian and Taoist methods of 'cessation and concentration' specifically aimed at extinguishing their respective kinds of self-attachment.

Han-shan employs the doctrine of the Five Vehicles *(wu-ch'eng)*[n] to classify the three religions. The Five Vehicles are those of Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas, Sravakas, gods (or heaven), and men. The first three are the Buddhist vehicles of salvation. Han-shan identifies Confucianism as a vehicle of men and Taoism as a vehicle of heaven. The five vehicles are vehicles of salvation on different levels. Though by themselves they do not take a man to the Mind, taken together they do. One starts with the vehicle of men (Confucianism) and transfers to the other vehicles at the end of each ride.

The different vehicles are provided for men in their various states and conditions of self-attachment. According to Han-shan, the Confucian vehicle teaches men how to 'live in the world' *(she-shih* or *ching-shih),*[o] the Taoist vehicle how to 'forget the world' *(wang-shih)*[p] and the Buddhist vehicle how to 'leave the world' *(ch'u-shih).*[q] The three vehicles, however, do not differ in kind but only in degree. Han-shan says:

> You would ask me, "If the three sages' teachings are all for the extinction of self-attachment, they would agree in the essence *(t'i)* of no-self. Why then are there the distinctions in functioning *(yung)* of 'living in the world', 'forgetting the world', and 'leaving the world'?" I say, even though in their *t'i* and *yung* they are the same, they differ in the degree of depth and extension. If Confucius really teaches the existence of the self (as the ultimate reality), then his teaching can only be for the benefit of the self. How can it be for living in the world? If the Buddha and Lao Tzu really teach leaving or forgetting the world, then their teachings can only be for the salvation of the self. How can they be for the salvation of the world? Thus it is known that from no-self there can be living in the world, and from saving the world there can be no-self.[5]

It is important to note that in this quotation self-attachment is regarded as the evil, its extinction as the method of salvation, and the no-self as the Mind or state of salvation.

In addition to the use of the Five Vehicles, Han-shan also employs the doctrine of the Eight Consciousnesses of the Wei-shih school to differentiate the three religions. According to him, the Confucian teachings deal primarily with the functioning of the sixth consciousness, the sensecenter *(mano-vijnana),* by means of the seventh consciousness, the center of intellection *(manas-vijnana).* He calls the sixth consciousness the center of making *karmas,* and the seventh consciousness the center of originating life and death. In other words, Confucianism deals with good and bad *karmas* by means of human-heartedness, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge. But these virtues do not solve the problem of life and death.[6]

In Han-shan's judgment, Taoism is more advanced than Confucianism, for it deals with the seventh consciousness by means of the eighth consciousness, the store-house consciousness *(alaya-vijnana).* He regards the eighth consciousness as equivalent to the Taoist teaching of the subtle truth of emptiness *(hsu-wu miao-tao).*[r] In other words, Taoism has solved the problem of life and death, but fails to go beyond the store-house consciousness to the Mind, and mistakes the subtle truth of emptiness as the Mind itself. According to Han-shan, Buddhism alone can penetrate the veil of the eighth consciousness. This is because the Buddhist 'cessation and concentration' is superior to those of the other religions in breaking the ignorance of self-attachment.[7]

Though Confucianism is inferior to Taoism, it is still given a proper place in Han-shan's scheme of things. After all, one has to start with the vehicle of men in search for salvation. He cites the supposed facts that the Buddha observed all the necessary rules of conduct, especially filial piety, before and after his renunciation of the world. China would not have been as civilized as it was without the Confucian teachings. Moreover, he cites the Confucian texts to show that Confucius himself had an esoteric understanding of the Mind. His followers however miss the wood for the trees, and attach themselves to the non-essentials.[8]

But after all these having been said, Han-shan discusses with approval the Taoist criticism of Confucianism. He believes that Lao Tzu's purpose in criticizing Confucianism is to break its attachment to man-made value and knowledge. Thus he says:

> Having pity on the Confucian attachment to the virtues of human-heartedness and righteousness, Lao Tzu says that it is due to the overuse of the intellect. If we could but abandon sageliness and discard intellect, then the people would benefit a hundredfold. If we would destroy measures and weights, then there should be no fight and struggle among men. Truly it is due to the harm of thirst and desire. Thus it is said: "Do not display the objects of desire, so that the people's hearts would not be disturbed." [9]

The way of men is 'action', but the way of heaven is 'non-action'. By criticizing Confucianism, Lao Tzu has brought men from the vehicle of men to the vehicle of heaven.

Han-shan believes that the first chapter of the *Lao Tzu* embodies the basic teachings of the work. In interpreting it, he puts particular emphasis on the word *kuan*[s] (contemplation), which is regarded as the Taoist form of 'cessation and concentration'. His interpretation of the chapter may be rendered as followed:

The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth;
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
I always rest my mind on non-being in my daily life
so that I can contemplate the subtlety of Tao.
I always rest my mind on being in my daily life
so that I can contemplate the outer fringe (or evolution) of Tao.
Being and non-being are really the same;
They have different names only after they are mutually produced.
The unity of being and non-being is called *hsuan*[t] (Mystery).
To contemplate more deeply and profoundly on the *hsuan*
(i.e., the unity and identity of being and non-being)
so that even the contemplating mind is completely forgotten,
This is the door of all subtleties.[10]

According to this interpretation, the first two lines deal with the ontology of Tao, the next two lines with the cosmology of Tao, and the rest of the chapter basically with the method of attaining unity with Tao. The emphasis on contemplation is of particular significance. It is held that the contemplating mind itself should be extinguished, for it presupposes the duality of subject and object and represents a subtle form of self-attachment.

Whether the Buddhist understanding of meditation is read into the interpretation is one question that can be raised. In any case, the interpretation shows Han-shan's high evaluation of Taoism. In fact, Han-shan regards some aspects of Taoism as approaching the vehicle of Boddhisattvas. He says:

> According to Lao Tzu, the greatest calamity is in having a body, thus he teaches the way of extinguishing the body to attain the realm of *wu*[u] or non-being. Moreover, the greatest cause that burdens the body is in having knowledge, thus he teaches the way of abandoning knowledge to enter the realm of *hsu* or emptiness. These teachings are similar to those of the vehicles of Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. He is like a Pratyekabuddha because he, having lived in the time before Buddhism came to China, realized the truth of non-being by contemplating the changing nature of the world. Judging from the fact that he regards emptiness, non-being, and *tzu-jan*[w] or spontaneity as the final principles, his teachings are heterodox. But judging from the facts that his heart was full of compassion for the salvation of the world and that he attained the realm in which man and heaven mutually penetrate each other and in which being and nonbeing mutually reflect each other, he is also like a Bodhisattva. From the viewpoint of expedience or skilful means, he was really (a Bodhisattva) appearing in the form of Brahma in order to teach the world. From the viewpoint of reality, he was the one who had attained the *samadhi* of emptiness through pure living according to the vehicles of men and heaven.[11]

Han-shan expresses similar view about Chuang Tzu. According to him, the *Chuang Tzu* is really a commentary on the *Lao Tzu.* Chuang Tzu's basic teaching is likewise stated in the first chapter, 'Hsiao-yao yu'[x] (Free and Easy Wandering). He says:

'Free and easy' *(hsiao-yao)* means infinite self-contentment and self-realization. It is like what in Buddhist scriptures is called the unlimited liberation. According to the Buddha, liberation is the state in which all desires, delusions, and pains are extinguished. Likewise, Chuang Tzu explains liberation as the transcendence from the confine of the body, the extinction of intellectual games, and looking upon the achievement and fame of our life as a burden. This is because the spontaneity of emptiness *(hsu-wu tzu-jan)*[y] is the home of the great Tao and the realm of free and easy wandering…. Those who do not attain the free and easy wandering are simply due to the fetter of self-attachment.[12]

In short, Han-shan regards Taoism as the highest expression of Chinese philosophy. It prepared the way for the coming of Buddhism into China. Its function in China is parallel to that of Brahmanism in India. Both Taoism and Brahmanism are vehicles of heaven, which is followed by the Buddhist vehicles of salvation. This is why Seng-chao[z] (c. 374-414) and Tao-sheng[aa] (c. 360-434) employed the Taoist thought to explain the Buddhist teachings.[13]

IV. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to present Han-shan's view of Taoism in terms of questions about reality and questions about salvation. Though the two sets of questions are logically distinct, we have found that in Buddhism the answers to them are closely tied together. The philosophical problems involved have been pointed out, but it is not the time to discuss them in detail. Nevertheless, the philosophical problems indicate the general nature of Han-shan's thought.

Han-shan regards Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism as having been originated from the Mind. They differ only in their developments from the Mind *and* their functions for human salvation. Since he understands the nature of Mind and the nature of salvation from the Buddhist perspective, it is inevitable that in interpreting the other religions he tends to read the Buddhist meaning into them. At the same time, since the three religions are different on the level of *yung* or functioning, Han-shan does not obliterate their major differences. The balance between identity and difference is of course a delicate and difficult task. In any case, he wants to maintain a universalistic outlook toward all religions.

University of Delaware

NOTES

1. On Han-shan's life and thought, see Sung-Peng Hsu, 'The Life and Thought of Han-shan Te-ch'ing (1546-1623)', Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1970. There is a section on Han-shan's views of Taoism and Confucianism, pp. 292-316. The present paper is written for a different purpose and on a different principle of structure. New materials are also included for discussion. Han-shan's works on Taoism are: (1) *Han-shan hsu-yen"*[bb] (Han-

shan on Regarding Taoism as an Introductory Remark to Buddhism), in *Han-shan ta-shih meng-yu chi*[cc] (Collection of Master Han-shan's Dream Roamings), *chuan* 45, pp. 50-75; written in 1576. (2) *Kuan Lao Chuang ying-hsiang lun*[dd] (On the teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu as the Shadows and Echoes of the Mind), also known as *San-chiao yuan-liu i-t'ung lun*[ee] (On the Identity in Origin and Differences in Development of the Three Religions); written in 1590. (3) *Tao-te ching chu*[ff] (Commentary on the *Tao-te ching),* written in 1607. (4) *Chuang-Tzu nei-ch'i-p'ien chu*[gg] (Commentary on the First Seven Chapters of the *Chuang Tzu),* written in 1620. The last three works were collected together and printed in Taiwan in 1972 by Liu-li Ching-fang,[hh] Taipei. The present paper is based on this edition. (Note: This dissertation was later revised and published by Pennsylvania State University Press in 1979 as *A Buddhist Leader in Ming China: The Life and Thought of Han-shan Te-ch'ing, 1546-1623*.)

2. *Chuang Tzu nei-ch'i-p'ien chu, chuan* 1, p. 1.
3. *Han-shan ta-shih meng-yu chi, chuan* 4, p. 26.
4. *Kuan Lao Chuang ying-hsiang lun,* pp. 4-5.
5. *Tao-te ching chu,* Introduction, p. 46.
6. *Kuan Lao Chuang ying-hsiang lun,* p. 25.
7. *Ibid.,* p. 26.
8. *Ibid.,* pp. 21-24; also *Tao-te ching chu,* Introduction, pp. 43-45.
9. *Kuan Lao Chuang ying-hsiang lun,* p. 15; cf. *Tao-te ching,* Chapters 3 and 19.
10. *Tao-te ching chu,* pp. 51-52.
11. *Kuan Lao Chuang ying-hsiang lun,* pp. 19-20.
12. *Chuang Tzu nei ch'i-p'ien chu, chuan* 1, pp. 2-3.
13. *Kuan Lao Chuang ying-hsiang lun,* pp. 5-9.

Glossary

a. 憨山德清
b. 判教
c. 影
d. 響
e. 齊物論
f. 體
g. 用
h. 三界唯心萬法唯識
i. 妙
j. 佛法
k. 世諦
l. 我執
m. 止觀
n. 五乘
o. 涉世，經世
p. 忘世

q. 出世
r. 虛無妙道
s. 觀
t. 玄
u. 無
v. 虛
w. 自然
x. 逍遙遊
y. 虛無自然
z. 僧肇
aa. 道生
bb. 憨山緒言
cc. 憨山大師夢遊集
dd. 觀老莊影響論
ee. 三教源流異同論
ff. 道德經註
gg. 莊子內七篇註
hh. 溜璃經房