CHAPTER TWO

SELF, PRAXIS, EXPERIENCE

Early Quanzhen Daoism was a community of religious adherents orienting themselves towards the Dao as sacred and seeking to realize a condition of Complete Perfection. As such, the early Quanzhen adepts embraced and advocated a religious system wherein existential and soteriological concerns were central. This Daoist eremitic community consisting of at least thirteen elite renunciants, the Quanzhen adepts who had fully dedicated themselves to Wang Chongyang’s religious model, as well as the subsequent monastic order represent a fundamentally different way of understanding and organizing personal identity and social involvement. They represent a way of life rooted in religious commitments. Intensive religious training involves a radical reorientation in one’s life. Committing oneself to ethical rectification, ascetic discipline, poverty, abstinence, seclusion, sustained meditation and so forth, as the early Quanzhen adepts did, also involves a commitment to a different understanding of personhood and the nature of existence. Assuming that one wants to understand such a religious system, one must determine which aspects or attributes deserve careful investigation. The biographical, historical and textual contours of early Quanzhen Daoism point towards religious praxis as primary. But what is religious praxis? Does religious praxis involve specific views of self, and how does religious praxis express and actualize such views of self? Is “self” encountered, constructed or actualized? In what ways do such concerns influence the types of experiences that are expected to follow from dedicated training? In order to answer these and related questions, one must clarify the possible meanings and applications of “self,” “praxis,” and “experience.” In terms of the present discussion, I seek to understand how best to conceptualize personhood, transformative praxis and mystical experience, especially as these categories pertain to religious traditions in general and Quanzhen Daoism in particular. Such theoretical reflection and clarification will then be employed as an interpretative framework to understand the religious system which was early Quanzhen Daoism.
Theoretically speaking, conceptions of self are ubiquitous. Every discussion, whether anthropological, historical, philosophical, psychological, or scientific, assumes some conception of self. So, when Varela and his colleagues combine cognitive science and Buddhist mindfulness/awareness meditation (Pali: *vipassana*; Skt.: *vipaśyāna*), with its emphasis on the five aggregates (*skandha*) and the emptiness (*śunyata*) of independent existence (personal identity), to conclude “not only [that] cognition and experience do not appear to have a truly existing self [*anatman*] but also that the habitual belief in such an ego-self, the continual grasping to such a self, is the basis of the origin and continuation of human suffering and habitual patterns” (1993, 80), this too is a conception of self, however experientially sound or soteriologically convincing it may be. As Gallagher and Shear comment, “[The] variety of responses to the problem of self includes assertions that there is no self; that the idea is a logical, psychological, or grammatical fiction; that the sense of self is properly understood and defined in terms of brain processes; that it is merely a constructed sociological locus, or the center of personal and public narratives, or that it belongs in an ineffable category all its own” (1999, x). These are fundamentally normative issues (i.e., what is “the self” really?).

Reflections and insights concerning self in turn involve some of the most perennial and pragmatically-significant questions. What does it mean to be a human being? (Or alternatively conceived, how did one come to be a human being?) What does personhood, whether a social endowment or condition of self-actualization, entail? Is self body, mind, consciousness, animal, human, divine, or some combination of these or other attributes? Beyond one’s own perceptions and/or social circumstances, is there some thing that may be identified as “self”? What capacities, both known and unknown, do I or you as human beings have?

Such considerations could take one in an unending array of theoreti-