

Light Born of Darkness: The Ontology of Light in Master Nan Huai-Chin's *Wo shuo Cantong qi* (我說參 同契)

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Abstract

This article reconstructs an ontology of light from the lecture commentary of Nan Huai-Chin 南懷瑾 (1918–2012) on the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契, published as *Wo shuo Cantong qi* 我說參同契 (*My Talks on the Cantong qi*). Beneath their oral, digressive, and practice-oriented surface, the lectures articulate a consistent three-level account of light. On a cosmological level, all phenomenal luminosity is reflective and derivative, figured in the trigrams Kan 坎 and Li 離 and in the "mother-light" and "child-light" of sun and moon. On an anthropological level, spirit (*shen* 神) is identified with light within a triad of light, heat, and force corresponding to spirit, essence, and vital breath. On an ontological level, the "light of the self-nature" (*zixing guangming* 自性光明) is generated out of extreme darkness and stillness, yet is ultimately located neither in brightness nor in darkness (Huang 2026, 55–94). This doctrine inverts the emanationist priority of light over darkness familiar from Neoplatonic and Illuminationist metaphysics while converging with the Buddhist doctrine of the luminous mind. Light, in Nan's reading of the *Cantong qi*, is not the first principle but the first phenomenon: the primordial signature of an unconditioned ground that transcends the polarity of light and dark.

Keywords: ontology of light; Nan Huai-Chin; *Cantong qi*; internal alchemy (*neidan*); self-nature; luminous mind; Daoism

1. Introduction

Few symbols are as universally freighted with ontological weight as light. In the Mediterranean and West Asian traditions, light tends to stand at the summit of being: the Platonic Good is figured as the sun, Plotinus describes emanation as the diffusion of radiance from an inexhaustible source, the First Epistle of John declares that "God is light," and Suhrawardī erects an entire metaphysics upon the "Light of Lights" from which all lesser lights descend (Plotinus 1991; Suhrawardī 1999). In these systems darkness is privative: an absence, the terminus of emanation, the index of non-being. The Chinese alchemical tradition developed a different account, at once physical, physiological, and metaphysical, in which darkness plays a generative rather than privative role. Its foundational scripture is the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (*The Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the Book of Changes*), traditionally attributed to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽 of the second century CE, though modern scholarship regards the received text as composite and its final redaction as possibly considerably later (Pregadio 2011). The later tradition revered it as the ancestor of all alchemical scriptures, and it stands at the head of the entire Way of the Golden Elixir (Pregadio 2012).

This article examines the ontology of light articulated in one of the most widely read modern commentaries on that scripture: *Wo shuo Cantong qi*, the transcribed lecture series of Nan Huai-Chin 南懷瑾 (1918–2012), delivered at his Shifang Academy (Shifang shuyuan 十方叢林書院) in Taipei in the early 1980s and published in three volumes in 2009 (Nan 2009). Nan, born in Yueqing 樂清, Zhejiang, and active in Taiwan from 1949, moved freely among Chan Buddhism, Daoist internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), Tibetan tantra, and the Confucian classics, and acquired the reputation of one of the great Chan masters of the modern era (Despeux 2017, 349). He was equally a builder of institutions for

the diffusion of his teaching: the publishing house Laogu chubanshe 老古出版社 and the Shifang Academy, both established in 1977, produced and transcribed the lecture series on which his enormous readership rests (Despeux 2017, 362–363). The *Cantong qi* course belongs to the productive interval between the end of his three-year retreat in 1980 and his politically motivated departure for Washington in 1984 (Despeux 2017, 363–364), and it is a summa of his mature teaching on the relation between cosmology and contemplative practice. Goossaert and Palmer describe Nan as "typical of the modern urban maître à penser, blurring the lines between the academic, political, spiritual, and ideological repertoires," and members of all Three Teachings regarded him as a sage (*shengren* 聖人), though no religious institution ever formally recognized him (quoted in Despeux 2017, 371–372).

Speaking of "ontological light" requires justification, since Nan never uses so scholastic a phrase. The justification is internal to the text. Throughout the lectures Nan distinguishes lights that are phenomenal (sunlight, moonlight, lamplight, the visionary photisms of meditation) from the radiance of the "self-nature" (*zixing* 自性), which is not a phenomenon at all and appears only when phenomenal seeking has been abandoned (Nan 2009, 2:120). One principle lifts this distinction from phenomenology to ontology: "brightness and darkness are two phenomena; that which can be bright and can be dark is not located in brightness or darkness" (明暗是兩個現象，那個能明能暗的不在明暗上面) (Nan 2009, 2:114). The sentence performs the classical ontological gesture, distinguishing beings from their ground, within the register of light. This article takes it as a hermeneutical key and reconstructs, from Nan's deliberately unsystematic oral teaching, the doctrine it implies.

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the text, its genre, and the scope of the study. Section 3 analyzes the cosmological stratum: a theory of reflected luminosity built upon the trigrams Kan and Li and the dyad of sun and moon. Section 4 examines the anthropological stratum: the identification of spirit with light within the triad of essence, breath, and spirit (*jing qi shen* 精氣神). Section 5 turns to the ontological stratum: the generation of light from darkness and the location of the ground beyond both. Section 6 considers the practical corollary, and section 7 sets Nan's account in comparative perspective.

2. The Text, Its Genre, and the Scope of This Study

The *Cantong qi* is, by Nan's own admission, "the most difficult book to study" in the Daoist corpus (Nan 2009, 1:45). He glosses its title as the "joining" (*can* 參) of three "identical" (*tong* 同) bodies of learning "sealed" in a single tally (*qi* 契): the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, the alchemical arts, and the science of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). The scripture's difficulty lies in its systematically overdetermined symbolism, in which a single term (white and black, lead and mercury, metal and water) may simultaneously denote a cosmological process, a calendrical position, a physiological event, and a stage of realization. Nan warns that the tradition supplies "no fixed boundary" between these registers; only saturation in the whole text shows which is operative at a given moment (Nan 2009, 2:114).

Nan follows the Qing dynasty recension and subcommentary of Zhu Yuanyu 朱元育 (Yunyang daoren 雲陽道人), the *Cantong qi chanyou* 參同契闡幽 (Zhu 1669), interlacing close glossing with anecdote, polemic against contemporary "energy-channel" enthusiasms, and constant triangulation among Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian vocabularies. The genre matters for method. These are transcribed oral lectures, not a treatise; their unit of coherence is the image and the aside, not the syllogism. A doctrine can be recovered from such a text only by identifying recurrent structures across dispersed passages. The wager of this article is that, with respect to light, such structures exist, cohere, and amount to a position of real philosophical interest, one the lecture genre conceals but does not compromise.

A delimitation of scope follows. What is reconstructed here is Nan's synthesis: a twentieth-century reading of the *Cantong qi*, avowedly inflected by Chan, Yogācāra, and Tibetan tantra. No claim is made that this ontology belongs to the Han-era scripture itself, whose doctrinal profile is a matter for

philology and is assessed differently in the specialist literature (Pregadio 2011; 2012). The object of study is a modern act of interpretation, significant because of its enormous readership and its author's position at the crossroads of the three teachings. Critical distance is doubly warranted in Nan's case: Despeux has shown that he exercised deliberate control over the diffusion of his image and that his afterlife exhibits the classic mechanics of hagiography, from the staging of his death to the construction of a Tibetan-style stupa at the Taihu Academy (Despeux 2017, 383, 388). A commentator so invested in his own exemplarity must be read as constructing, not merely transmitting, the tradition he expounds. Where the argument below speaks of "the tradition," then, it means the tradition as Nan constructs it.

A note on conventions. Chinese characters are given in traditional form, following the original Taipei edition cited throughout by volume and page number; translations from the lectures are my own. Four terms structure the analysis: *guang* 光 (light) and *guangming* 光明 (luminosity) range across physical and contemplative registers; *shengguang* 神光 (spirit-light) names light as the operative mode of spirit; *zixing guangming* 自性光明 (luminosity of the self-nature) is reserved for light in its ontological dimension. The stratification of these terms tracks the three levels around which the analysis is organized. Passages of the *Cantong qi* itself are quoted as they appear in Nan's text; for the corresponding sections in the critical edition and English translation, see Pregadio 2011.

3. The Cosmology of Reflected Light: Kan, Li, and the Mother-Light

Nan's account begins, as the *Cantong qi* begins, with the trigrams. The scripture declares that Qian 乾 and Kun 坤, pure yang and pure yin, are "the door and gate of change, the father and mother of all hexagrams" (Pregadio 2011, sec. 1), while Kan 坎 and Li 離 form the "enclosing walls" within which change operates. Nan reads this architecture as a theory of luminosity. Li 離, yang lines enclosing a yin line, is the sun: "within utmost yang there is utmost yin," symbolized in ancient lore by the "golden crow" (*jinwu* 金烏), the dark spot within the solar disk. Kan 坎, yin lines enclosing a yang line, is the moon, and of the moon Nan insists repeatedly: "the moon does not itself emit light; it absorbs the light-energy of the sun and reflects it; only thus is there this luminosity" (Nan 2009, 1:121).

This observation is not casual naturalism. In Nan's hands the reflective character of moonlight becomes the master analogy for the derivative character of all phenomenal luminosity. Commenting on the image of "the sun-mercury as flowing pearl" (汞日爲流珠), he explains the monthly cycle: at the dark of the moon the earth interposes itself and the moon "cannot absorb the sun's light"; after the third day of the lunar month the alignment shifts and the moon "reflects back a sliver of light," the "reborn *po*" (*zaisheng po* 再生魄), as Nan calls it. The anthropological consequence is drawn at once: "Where is this soul? In the sun, for the moon's light is the reflection of the sun. It is the same with the two aspects of our life" (Nan 2009, 2:173). Ordinary discursive consciousness is lunar: a borrowed radiance, real but reflected, waxing and waning with the body's cycles of essence and breath.

Nan formalizes the relation in a pair of terms borrowed from Tibetan tantra: mother-light and child-light (*muguang* 母光, *ziguang* 子光). "The moon's light, being the reflection of the sun's light, is the child-light; the mother-light is the light of the sun" (Nan 2009, 2:186). Practice is accordingly named the "meeting of mother and child luminosities" (母子光明會合), the reunion of derivative consciousness with its radiant source. Yet at precisely this point Nan performs a gesture of deliberate reticence that is crucial for the ontological reading. Asked, in effect, why the sun itself shines, he answers that "behind that which enables the sun to emit light there is something further," and that here "the Daoist books do not discuss, and the Buddhist scriptures fall silent" (Nan 2009, 2:186). The mother-light is not the last term. Even the sun, the maximal phenomenal light, is the effect of a ground the cosmological register cannot name. This regress of luminosity, from lamp to moon to sun to the unnamed, is Nan's cosmological staging of the ontological difference.

For the practitioner, the reflective cosmology culminates in a figure of luminous equilibrium: "sun and moon join like jade disks; the armillary sphere halts its wheel" (日月合璧，璇璣停輪). Nan recalls witnessing the rare event the first phrase names: the sun rising in the east while the full moon still

hangs in the west, the two lights facing one another across the sky. He reads it as an emblem of the state in which the primary and reflected lights of the person stand in perfect mutual presence, while the celestial machinery, the Northern Dipper "turning the wheel" of the Milky Way, comes to a standstill (Nan 2009, 2:119). The true aim of the channel-opening practices fetishized by his contemporaries is nothing but this: not sensation, not heat, not visionary display, but the stilling of the whole luminous economy in a plenitude so complete that the body is forgotten "as an infant's new life begins." The dark of the moon receives a symmetrical reading. At the "juncture of obscurity and renewal" (*hui shuo zhi jiao* 晦朔之交), when moon and sun travel together and no light appears, "the moon's blackness is embraced by the sun" (月晦日相包), gestating the crescent of the following month (Nan 2009, 2:186). Full manifestation and total occultation are two poses of a single choreography, and neither is privileged. The practitioner must learn to read the absence of light as light's deepest phase.

Two further features of this stratum deserve notice. First, the indestructibility of light's source. Glossing "metal does not lose its weight; sun and moon keep their constant form" (金不失其重, 日月形如常), Nan observes that through millions of eclipses "the luminosity of sun and moon is never diminished": occlusion is an accident of position, never a loss of essence. "Gold represents the self-nature, and the light of sun and moon represents the inherent endowment of life: however it is transformed, its fundamental nature never changes" (Nan 2009, 2:186). Second, the periodicity of manifestation. The five dark nights of the interlunium teach that the disappearance of light belongs to light's own rhythm: "in fact the light is not absent; another yang is being conceived" (Nan 2009, 1:402). Darkness is gestation, not annihilation. Both features recur, transposed, in the contemplative anthropology to which we now turn.

4. Spirit as Light: The Triad of Light, Heat, and Force

The hinge between cosmology and ontology is Nan's modern gloss on the triad of essence, breath, and spirit (*jing* 精, *qi* 氣, *shen* 神). "The essence, breath, and spirit of which the Daoists speak may be compared, in contemporary terms, to the light, heat, and force of physics: spirit is light, essence is heat, breath is force" (Nan 2009, 1:315). The formula recurs with variations: "Spirit is the 'light'-energy of the cosmic sun, which transforms into a 'force,' that is breath; and breath, arising, generates 'heat,' that is essence" (Nan 2009, 1:339). The three are "in reality one thing: all are transformations of spirit" (Nan 2009, 1:339).

The formula does three kinds of work. First, it renders the alchemical vocabulary commensurable with a modern physicalist idiom without reduction. Nan is careful to say "compared to" (*biyu* 比喻), and he insists that the alchemical *qi* 炁 is "a life-energy, not the air of respiration" (Nan 2009, 3:159). Second, it establishes an order of priority within the human constitution. The cosmogonic sequence runs downward from light: "spirit-light transforms into breath, breath transforms into essence, and they congeal" (神光化氣, 氣化精). Embodied life is the condensation and coarsening of an original luminosity, and the alchemical opus is defined with perfect economy as the reversal of this sequence: "to restore this life, one must walk the road in reverse," refining essence back into breath and breath back into spirit, until one "returns to that metaphysical spirit-light" (Nan 2009, 1:315). Internal alchemy simply is the retro-conversion of embodied existence into its luminous principle, an application of the logic of inversion and return that Robinet (1989) identifies as *neidan*'s central original contribution to Chinese thought. The "reverted elixir" (*huandan* 還丹) is light returning to itself.

Third, the formula licenses Nan's comparative universalism. Having identified spirit with light, he observes that "many religions everywhere speak of light: the Pure Land school speaks of the Western paradise as luminous throughout; Christianity likewise; the first chapter of John says God is light" (Nan 2009, 1:339). The biblical reference is loose: the verse is 1 John 1:5, in an epistle rather than the Gospel, a slip that itself illustrates the freehand character of his comparativism. The comparison is nonetheless offered as evidence, not ornament. The ubiquity of light-language in religious discourse indicates, for Nan, that all traditions gesture at the same structural fact: the root-form of life is

luminous. Where they differ is on light's relation to darkness, and there, as the next section shows, Nan's *Cantong qi* makes its distinctive claim.

One qualification belongs to this stratum. The luminosity of the self-nature, though prior, is conditionally manifest. "The clear and pure luminosity of nature comes from the fullness of essence... if essence and spirit are not full, the light of the self-nature cannot come forth" (Nan 2009, 2:123). Nan reads this dependence through the scripture's five-phase riddle "metal is the mother of water; the mother is hidden in the child's womb" (金爲水母, 母隱子胎): metal, which "represents nature and the luminosity of the self-nature," must be sought within water, the dark register of essence and desire in which it lies concealed (Nan 2009, 2:123). The dependence is asymmetrical. Essence does not produce the light; it un-occludes it, as planetary alignment un-occludes the moon, and this asymmetry is what distinguishes an ontology of light from a physiology of photisms. The light is "not something you cultivate into existence; it is what our life originally possesses, covered over by acquired desires, afflictions, and deluded thought" (Nan 2009, 2:396). Cultivation removes occlusion; it does not manufacture radiance.

5. Light Born of Darkness: The Ontological Stratum

The thirty-third lecture bears a section heading that could stand as the emblem of the whole doctrine: "Luminosity comes from darkness" (光明來自黑暗). The textual occasion is the verse "know the white, keep to the black, and spirit-luminosity comes of itself" (*zhi bai shou hei, shenming zi lai* 知白守黑, 神明自來), an alchemical radicalization of *Daodejing* 28's "know the white, keep to the black" (知其白, 守其黑). Nan frames the verse within what Zhu Yuanyu calls the "mutual operation of the two openings" (*liang qiao hu yong* 兩竅互用), the interplay of doing and non-doing (*youwei* 有爲, *wuwei* 無爲) that governs the entire method: deliberate practice prepares a stillness in which what matters happens without deliberation (Nan 2009, 2:113). His exposition deserves quotation at length:

The problem we now encounter is this: one knows that which is originally white and pure, yet in practice, when the eyes close, all is pitch black. Even so, do not seek luminosity; do not take up some separate method of cultivating light. For when the black has lasted long enough, yin reaches its extreme and yang is born, and the luminosity of the self-nature appears: "spirit-luminosity comes of itself." It is not that you deliberately go looking for a light; rather, at yin's extreme, yang is born of itself. (Nan 2009, 2:113)

Three claims are compacted here. The first is practical: the pursuit of light is self-defeating, because any light one could pursue would be an object for consciousness and hence lunar, a child-light. The second is processual: darkness is the generative matrix of light. "The scriptures all emphasize luminosity, but luminosity is born from darkness" (Nan 2009, 2:114). Nan grounds this in the cosmogonic dictum "heaven's one gives birth to water" (*tian yi sheng shui* 天一生水): the first-born of creation is not fire but water, dark, formless, downward-tending, and light emerges from it as the "yellow sprout" (*huangya* 黃芽) emerges rootless from sand. The lead symbolism carries the same logic: "lead is outwardly black, but within it embraces the golden flower" (鉛外黑, 內懷金華). The base, heavy metal harbors radiance at its core, as the practitioner stilled into total obscurity harbors the incipient elixir (Nan 2009, 2:114–115, 120).

The third claim is the ontological one, the principle quoted at the outset of this article, and Nan marks its difference in register: "do not suppose that black and dim means wrong. In reality, brightness and darkness are two phenomena; that which can be bright and can be dark is not located in brightness or darkness" (Nan 2009, 2:114). The generative thesis is here subsumed under a transcendence thesis. Light and darkness alike are phenomenal modifications of a capacity, the "able-to-be-bright-and-dark" (*neng ming neng an* 能明能暗), which is neither. The grammar is that of the Chan and Yogācāra analyses of awareness Nan elsewhere invokes: as the seeing of forms is not itself a form, so the ground of the alternation of light and dark is not a term within the alternation. "Self-nature's luminosity" is therefore, strictly speaking, a catachresis. It names, with the least misleading of the available phenomenal predicates, a ground that the predicate cannot reach.

Nan's description of the light's actual manifestation confirms the strict reading. At the extremity of stillness, "you see with closed eyes a luminosity pervading inside and outside; it is not sunlight, not moonlight, not lamplight; it is the luminosity of the self-nature, stronger than those lights, and auspicious" (Nan 2009, 2:120). The triple negation cancels the three classes of phenomenal light in turn: celestial-primary, celestial-reflected, artificial. What remains pervades "inside and outside" precisely because it is not located in the visual field at all. At the doctrine's terminus, in the account of the perfected elixir, even the residual positivity of "light" is withdrawn. The consummation is a "luminosity filling the great void" that is "not luminosity with form, but also not formless luminosity; as soon as one says empty or existent, both are wrong... one can only say it is unspeakable, inconceivable" (Nan 2009, 2:396). The ontology of light completes itself apophatically: light was the ladder, and the ladder is withdrawn.

It is worth pausing on how radically this inverts the Mediterranean pattern. In Plotinus or Suhrawardī, darkness is the far edge of emanation, the exhaustion of the ray; being and light are convertible, and the first principle is Light in superlative degree. In Nan's *Cantong qi*, darkness is functionally prior in the order of manifestation, since light is born from it, while the first principle is prior to the polarity as such. Darkness is thereby rehabilitated: not privation but potency, "the mother of living things" in the water symbolism of the five phases (*wuxing* 五行) (Nan 2009, 2:114). Yet the rehabilitation stops short of dualism, for what darkness gestates is precisely luminosity, and the ground beyond both is named, when it must be named, from the side of light (*zixing guangming*), never from the side of dark. The asymmetry is delicate: darkness has processual priority, light has semantic priority, and the ground has ontological priority over both.

6. The Praxis of Inner Illumination: Sinking the Three Lights

Because Nan's ontology is articulated in a commentary on a manual of practice, its verification is contemplative rather than argumentative. Two practical figures dominate the lectures: reversal of the light's direction, and suspension of its phenomenal operation.

The first is the technique Nan calls "the spirit-light shining inward" (*shengguang neizhao* 神光內照) or "turning back to shine" (*fanzhao* 返照): the withdrawal of the visual spirit from external objects and its redirection into the body, the practice that early texts call "preserving the spirit" (*cunshen* 存神) and Buddhism calls contemplation (Nan 2009, 1:210). Its charter is the verse "the original root conceals its light; inwardly illumine the bodily frame" (原本隱明, 內照形軀). The "concealing of light" is the cessation of outward radiation, the eyes no longer pursuing forms, the ears no longer pursuing sounds; the "inward illumination" redirects that economized radiance upon the practitioner's own organism, until "with eyes closed, the circulation of breath and blood and the condition of the five viscera are seen with total clarity," the "inner vision" (*neishi* 內視) of the tradition (Nan 2009, 2:54; cf. 1:275). Nan is emphatic that this inner seeing "does not use the physical eye; it is a capacity belonging to the self-nature" (Nan 2009, 2:54). Under discipline, the ontological light exercises a cognitive function that derivative perception cannot perform. The whole apparatus of later Daoist physiological practice, from guarding the elixir fields to circulating the "river chariot," descends from this one principle of reversal.

The second figure radicalizes the first. The same chapter continues: "the three lights sink into the ground; warmly nourish the pearl-child" (*san guang lu chen, wen yang zi zhu* 三光陸沉, 溫養子珠). In nature the three lights are sun, moon, and stars; in the human being they are the eyes, the ears, and the mind (Nan 2009, 2:54). Their "sinking" is the complete subsidence of the faculties' luminous outflow, a state Nan equates with the Chan formula "the empty void shatters, the great earth sinks level" (虛空粉碎, 大地平沉), in which even the sensation of the body and the spatial frame of experience dissolve. Only in this silence does the "warm nourishing" of the pearl-child, the germ of the reverted life, the child-light reunited with its mother, become possible. Nan's deflationary honesty intervenes: "of all who study quiet sitting, who can truly accomplish the sinking of the three lights? It is all empty

boasting" (Nan 2009, 2:54). But the sequence is doctrinally exact and recapitulates the ontology point for point: the light is first turned from objects, then suspended as a faculty, and only then does the non-phenomenal luminosity "come of itself." The practice is the ontology enacted in the first person.

Between reversal and sinking stands the doctrine's temporal joint: the "living zi-hour" (*huo zishi* 活子時) and the "return of the one yang" (*yi yang lai fu* 一陽來復). The hexagram Fu 復 (Return), five yin lines over a single nascent yang, encodes the moment at which light-from-darkness becomes operative in practice: "when thought is truly emptied, the one yang returns; spirit condenses, breath gathers" (Nan 2009, 1:197). Crucially, the zi-hour is "living," not calendrical. The birth of the light is indexed not to midnight but to the psychosomatic event of extreme stillness, whenever it falls. This completes the anti-teleological character of the discipline. The practitioner cannot schedule illumination, cannot pursue it, cannot even watch for it, since watching is itself an outflow of the very light that must sink. One can only produce the conditions in which the yang of luminosity is born of itself. Practice is thus formally identical to the cosmology: lunar work, a discipline of phases, whose sole imperative is fidelity to the dark phase in which nothing appears to be happening.

The praxis also supplies the doctrine's error-theory. The problem of evaluating meditative photisms was not new; luminous visions pervade Daoist meditation literature from the Han onward, where their status was already contested (Eskildsen 2015). Nan is scathing about practitioners who report such lights as attainments: "you say your channels are open and there is light, you see things; seeing ghosts! Whatever realm you see, it is a phenomenon, not the Way" (Nan 2009, 2:307). The criterion derives directly from the transcendence thesis. Any light that appears and disappears, that can be gained in meditation and lost afterward, is by that fact phenomenal: "if this moment you radiate light and shake the earth, the next moment you neither radiate nor shake; it must change, for it is a phenomenon" (Nan 2009, 1:125). The ontological light cannot appear as one experience among others because it is the ground of the experienter; what can be watched is never it. At the other extreme stands mortality: the "spirit-light falling to the ground" (*shengguang luodi* 神光落地), the dimming gaze of the old, marks the withdrawal of the borrowed radiance toward its source, a departure of the *hunpo* 魂魄 souls that practice aims to forestall or master (Nan 2009, 1:276). Between visionary inflation and mortal extinction, the narrow way is the disciplined return of luminosity to its unmanifest ground.

7. Comparative Horizons

Three juxtapositions sharpen the doctrine's profile.

First, the Neoplatonic-Illuminationist family. Suhrawardī's *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* shares with Nan the intuition that light is the least inadequate name for what is most real, and both traditions describe the sage's consummation as absorption in luminosity (Suhrawardī 1999). But the architectures are inverted. For Suhrawardī, the Light of Lights is maximally manifest; darkness, the "barzakh" or body, is sheer poverty of light; ontological rank and luminous intensity are strictly convertible. For Nan, manifestation as such, including luminous manifestation, is already secondary. The source is manifest neither as light nor as dark, and phenomenal light must subside for the source to disclose itself. Where Illuminationism ascends a gradient of brightness, the alchemical path descends into the black, trusting darkness as the womb of the true light.

Second, the Buddhist doctrine of the luminous mind (*prabhāsvara-citta*), which Nan invokes constantly and deliberately. The mother-and-child schema is imported from Tibetan tantra; the "self-nature's luminosity" is glossed with the tathāgatagarbha logic of an intrinsic radiance adventitiously obscured; the apophatic terminus is Madhyamaka in cadence. Nan asserts outright that "the esoteric methods of Tibet and those of the Daoists are practically identical: luminosity arises depending on breath, no-thought depending on spirit" (Nan 2009, 2:114). What the *Cantong qi* material adds is a fully elaborated cosmological and physiological mediation. The luminous mind of the Buddhist treatises has no monthly phases, no tidal metabolism of essence and breath; Nan's light does. This embedding of ontological luminosity in the rhythms of moon, water, and body is the distinctively alchemical, and distinctively Chinese, inflection of the doctrine.

Within the Daoist tradition itself, the nearest analogue is the *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* 太乙金華宗旨 (*The Secret of the Golden Flower*), whose central injunction, "turning the light around" (*huiguang* 回光), made photic reversal famous in the West through Wilhelm's translation and Jung's commentary (Wilhelm 1962; on the text's Qing-era spirit-writing origins, see Mori 2002). Nan's lectures can be read as restoring that late, streamlined manual to its doctrinal source. The *Golden Flower* begins from technique and leaves the metaphysics largely implicit. The *Cantong qi*, on Nan's reading, supplies the scaffolding: why the light can be turned (it is spirit, not optics), why turning it suffices (occlusion, not absence, is the problem), and why even the turned light must finally sink (the ground lies beyond the polarity the light inhabits). The Jungian reception, translating the golden flower's radiance into a symbol of psychic integration, inverted the doctrine's vector: what for Jung figured the self's wholeness is, in Nan's tradition, not a content of the psyche at all but the ground no psychic content can figure.

Third, the biblical identification "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5), which Nan cites approvingly but selectively. The clause he does not quote, "no darkness at all," is what his ontology denies at the level of manifestation and relocates at the level of ground. The ultimate is indeed beyond darkness, but its economy of manifestation passes through darkness essentially, not accidentally. The convergence Nan claims is thus real but partial: the traditions agree on light as the privileged name of the ultimate and diverge on the ontological dignity of the dark.

Together these comparisons suggest a label: apophatic luminism with a generative theory of darkness. Light is the semantically privileged, phenomenally penultimate expression of a ground beyond the polarity; darkness is the matrix through which that ground releases its expression. Whether the label fits the early *Cantong qi* itself must be left to specialists; Pregadio's judgment that the scripture subordinates both cosmology and alchemy to the "non-doing" of the Way (Pregadio 2011) is at least congruent with the reconstruction offered here. What can be affirmed is that Nan renders the position with a clarity and practical specificity that few sources in any tradition match.

8. Conclusion

Read through its statements on light, *Wo shuo Cantong qi* discloses a three-tiered doctrine of impressive coherence. Cosmologically, all phenomenal light is reflected from a source that the cosmological register itself cannot name, and light's periodic disappearance belongs to its own rhythm. Anthropologically, spirit is light: the triad of essence, breath, and spirit maps onto heat, force, and light, human life is condensed luminosity, and the alchemical work is its retro-conversion, the child-light's return to the mother. Ontologically, light itself is penultimate: born from the extremity of darkness, indestructible under occlusion, yet finally a catachresis for a ground that "can be bright and can be dark" while being neither. The disciplines of the tradition, turning the light around, sinking the three lights, nourishing the pearl, translate this ontology into method.

The construction inverts the emanationist priority of light over darkness while stopping short of dualism, converges with the Buddhist luminous mind while embedding it in an alchemical cosmophysiology, and completes itself in an apophysis that withdraws even the predicate of luminosity from the ultimate. If ontology is the discourse that distinguishes beings from their ground, then Nan's scattered, anecdotal, insistently practical lectures contain, perhaps despite themselves, a genuine ontology of light: one in which light is not the first principle but the first phenomenon, the primordial self-showing of that which never shows itself. "Spirit-luminosity comes of itself": the doctrine's deepest claim is lodged in that final reflexive. What is truly light was never lit, and therefore cannot go out.

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