

FOUNDATIONS OF TAOIST PRACTICE

by Jampa Mackenzie Stewart

When you try to define Taoism, you immediately run into trouble. The great Taoist philosopher and author of the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu, begins his first chapter with the warning words,

The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

Thus Westerners are not the only ones who have a hard time defining Taoism; the Chinese have had difficulty time agreeing on just what Taoism is for millenia. Taoism is sometimes defined as a ritualistic religion, as a philosophy, as Chinese folk religion, as alchemy, as a system of magical lore, or as a series of health practices similar to yoga. The adherants of each school often look with disdain on the others as being heterodoxy, heresy, or simply incomplete portions of the great Tao.

The Chinese word Tao (pronounced "dow") means "the way, the path." In the common sense it refers to the way of doing anything, or the pathway to some destination. In its higher meaning, Tao refers to the way of the universe, the way things are. As a spiritual system, Tao means the way to achieving a true understanding of the nature of mind and reality, to the way of living in harmony with the changes of Nature. Thus the Tao is the goal, the path and the journey all in one.

A Taoist then, is "a follower of the Way," the same title by which the early Buddhists and Christians dubbed themselves. The earliest Taoists appeared at least four thousand years ago in a time when people lived close to Nature and were awed by its power and its mystery, whose agricultural lives and deaths were intimately intertwined with the fluctuations of floods and droughts, heat and cold, day and night, and the changing of the seasons.

Just as the Judeo-Christians believe that God created humanity in the image of God, so too did the Taoists conclude that each person is a microcosm of the universe, and that the patterns of human society are a microscopic reflection of the cosmic patterns. These early Taoists saw that Nature was in a constant state of flux and change, and that these changes followed certain discernible and orderly patterns. They reasoned that by watching the changes in Nature and by understanding these patterns, they could apply Nature's principles to their own lives and thus move into harmony with the flow of the universe, with the Tao, with themselves. The person who attains highest union with the Tao is called a *hsien* or immortal, one who has "Returned to the Source," to the true ground of being.

Over the centuries many branches of Taoist teachings grew, all aimed at integrating the various activities of one's daily life with the Tao. These include such diverse disciplines as meditation, dietary guidelines, Chinese medicine, *Qi Gong*, martial arts, sexual practices, military strategy, astrology, outer and inner alchemy, divination, magic and talismans, ritual, *Feng Shui* (geomancy), sacred architecture and

the arts. Yet the Taoist arts were originally designed as a wholistic, mutually supportive and interdependent framework within which one could cultivate oneself to achieve the fruit of immortality.

As in Tantra, Taoists have always viewed knowledge as power, and are usually secretive and discriminating about who receives the full transmission. Even if a capable disciple meets an accomplished master, it still takes decades (if not a lifetime) to practice and master the many aspects of Taoist study. As a result, nowadays most people calling themselves Taoists study and practice only one or two branches of the Taoist arts. The late 20th century teacher Cheng Man-Ching was highly lauded as a "Master of the Five Excellences" because he had achieved skill in just five of the Taoist arts: martial arts, Chinese medicine, painting, poetry and calligraphy.

Thus, the Taoist arts have become divorced and isolated from the trunk and roots of Taoism. Moreover, most of the arts have become secularized. Clinically, Chinese medicine in modern practice is usually applied more to remedial care than to promoting spiritual super-wellness. Meditation has become largely a stress management tool. Chinese astrology, divination and geomancy are nowadays used more for gaining success in business, romance and home sitting than for achieving spiritual breakthrough. Contemporary people more often study *Qi Gong* and the martial arts for health, fitness and personal power than for laying the groundwork of immortality.

Despite the achievements of health, wealth and love, the only certainty in life is that it will end in death. Maintaining health and wealth is of limited value if one's life lacks meaning. I believe that while the aforementioned benefits of the Taoist arts are both real and good, the ultimate goal of Taoism is immortality. Immortality is synonymous with enlightenment, conscious union with the universal mind, and with the attainment of a spiritually transformed body that will last forever like heaven and earth.

Therefore the purpose of this article is to examine the various Taoist arts from the perspective of the Taoist yogi on the path to becoming an immortal, to see how all of these branches relate to the trunk of Taoist beliefs and goals.

THE BASIC VIEW OF TAOISM

Although there are many diverse arts flowing from the wellspring of Taoism, all of these different arts are grounded in the same set of principles, what Taoists see as the fundamental laws of Nature applying to all things, high and low. These principles form the core of Taoist "general systems theory." By developing a working knowledge of these natural principles, you will have the master key to open the mysterious portals of the Tao.

Wu Ji

In the beginning, nothing existed. In Chinese this is called *Wu Ji* (meaning absolute nothingness). *Wu Ji* is synonymous with the Buddhist word *sunyata*, meaning emptiness, the void, pure openness, no boundary. *Wu Ji* is also sometimes referred to as

the mystery, the nameless, the great mother, the source. Thus Lao Tzu says, "That which can be named is not the eternal name." Words cannot describe *Wu Ji*; it is beyond any thought, idea or concept, yet it can be directly experienced. Conscious realization of *Wu Ji* is called "Returning to the Source."

Qi

The first principle to manifest out of *Wu Ji* is primordial energy. The Chinese call this energy *Qi*. *Qi* (pronounced "chee") means breath, air, wind, or energy, and is similar in meaning to the Sanskrit word *prana*, the Hebrew word *Ruach* (breath of God), and to the Tibetan word *rLung*.

Qi is the force of all movement, from the movements of waves and sub-atomic particles to the movement of stars and planets. *Qi* is the force moving world systems into creation, existence and destruction; everything manifests out of *Qi*, exists as a form of *Qi*, and returns to *Qi*. In living creatures it becomes the life force and source of all metabolism. *Qi* is even the root of the movement of consciousness, of thought, sensory awareness and emotions.

The activity of *Qi* is what holds things together: atoms, molecules, our bodies, the earth, the solar system. When the pattern of *Qi* becomes exhausted, death occurs, the life force leaves, buildings disintegrate, change occurs.

Yin And Yang

The nameless is the mother of heaven and earth.

---Lao Tzu

As soon as *Qi* appeared, it moved as Yin and Yang. The Chinese character for Yin depicts the shady side of a mountain, while the character for Yang depicts the sunny side. Thus some characteristics of Yin are earth, receptiveness, darkness, cold, moisture, heaviness, descension, contractiveness, stillness. Yang, by relative contrast, is heaven, creativity, brightness, warmth, dryness, lightness, ascension, expansion, activity.

Everything in the relative world of existence can be viewed in terms of Yin and Yang. However, Yin and Yang are not separate; they are like the two poles of the same magnet. Thus, nothing is entirely Yin nor entirely Yang; each contains the other. The interdependent existence of Yin and Yang is known as *Tai Ji* (the Most High). *Tai Ji* and *Wu Ji* are seen as inseparable.

Yin and Yang create each other; as soon as you have a front, you must also have a back. Yin and Yang check and balance each other; if something is too hot, you balance it by adding cold. Yin and Yang also transform into one another; activity naturally transforms into rest, night transforms into day.

Life is peaceful when Yin and Yang are in harmony and balance, when the transitions from Yin to Yang and Yang to Yin are gradual and even. When either Yin or Yang becomes too extreme or when the transitions from Yin to Yang are unusually sudden and abrupt, harmony and balance are lost. These imbalances may appear as health problems, relationship difficulties, trade deficits, or unseasonal weather; all the changes in the universe can be analysed by understanding Yin and Yang.

Wu Hsing - The Five Phases

Yin and Yang are further subdivided into *Wu Hsing*. *Wu* means five, while *hsing* means form. Thus *Wu Hsing* is translated as the Five Forms, Five Phases (of *Qi*

transformation) or most commonly as the Five Elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. The Five Phases describes in more detail the stages of Yin and Yang changes.

The first phase is Wood, the lesser Yang, the phase of generation. Wood is associated with new plant life and growth, with spring time, with the planting and sprouting of seeds, with the east and the dawning of the new day.

The second phase is Fire, the Greatest Yang, the phase of expansion and radiance. Fire is associated with the full bloom of plants, with summertime, with the south and with mid-day.

The third phase is Earth, the balance of the Yang and Yin forces, and the phase of stability. Earth is associated with the ripening and maturing of the seeds and fruits of plants, with late summer, with the center and with late afternoon.

The fourth phase is Metal, the lesser Yin, the phase of gathering. Metal is associated with reaping the harvest, with autumn, with the west and dusk.

The fifth phase is Water, the greatest Yin, and the phase of storing and contraction. Water is associated with storing the harvest, with winter, with the north and with mid-night.

When the Five Phases are in balance, they work in two ways: they generate and nurture each other and they control and restrain one another. The Generation Cycle (*Sheng* Cycle) occurs when the phases interact in their natural order: Wood nourishes Fire, Fire creates Earth (ashes), Earth generates Metal (the distillation of minerals), Metal creates Water (condensation), and Water nourishes Wood. This is also called the mother - son cycle.

The Controlling Cycle (*K'o* Cycle) occurs when every other phase relates: Wood restrains Earth (plants prevent soil erosion), Fire controls Metal (a blacksmith's forge), Earth restrains Water (a dam), Metal controls Wood (screws and nails, a woodworker's tools), and Water controls Fire.

The following chart illustrates other correspondences of the Five Phases. Of particular importance to the Taoist yogi are the relationships to the internal organs of the body, and the emotions.

The Pa Kua

The *Pa Kua* or Eight Trigrams are a further differentiation of Yin and Yang. The *Pa Kua* are represented in octagonal configurations corresponding to the eight points of the compass. The *I Ching* (Classic Book of Change) is based upon the 64 possible combinations of the *Pa Kua*, and represents a more minute analysis of the stages of change in the universe.

The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.

Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.

Ever desiring, one can see its manifestations.

---Lao Tzu

Thus all existence unfolds from the emptiness of *Wu Ji* into *Tai Ji*, the dance of Yin and Yang. From Yin and Yang things are further differentiated into the Five Phases and the Eight Trigrams. From these all of the myriad forms of existence come into being. Dazzled by the various appearances, we forget who we are and where we come from.

Taoist spiritual practices seek to reverse this process. All phenomenal forms can be summed up in the eight trigrams, the eight trigrams can be simplified to the Five Phases; the Five Phases can be reduced to Yin and Yang, and when Yin and Yang come into equipoise, one can perceive *Wu Ji*.

San Bao - The Three Treasures

Another way of describing the coming into existence and the Return to the Source is in terms of the *San Bao* or Three Treasures within each of us: *jing*, *Qi* and *shen*.

Jing corresponds to our physical body in general and our sexual energy in particular. *Jing*, too, circulates throughout the body via the eight extraordinary channels, and is stored in the kidneys.

Qi also circulates throughout the body via the twelve ordinary acupuncture channels, and is stored in the lower abdomen and the internal organs. There are two categories of *Qi* in our bodies. The first is *hereditary Qi*, which is our constitutional strength inherited from our mother and father through the union of egg and sperm. The second type is *acquired Qi*, which is the energy that we draw from the air we breathe and the food we eat.

Shen corresponds to spirit, consciousness, and mind. Although it pervades the entire body through the blood, *shen* is housed in the heart in particular and in the internal organs in general. In fact, *shen* is totally insubstantial, and pervades not only the entire body, but the entire universe!

Emptiness gives birth to *shen*, spirit. *Shen* gives birth to *Qi*, energy. *Qi* gives birth to *jing*, essence or form. Form gives birth to discrimination, to desire and aversion, and to confusion about who and what we truly are. Thus the Taoist yogi seeks to transform *jing* back into *Qi*, to transform *Qi* back into *shen*, to transform *shen* back into emptiness.

The Three Dan Tians

The *Three Dan Tians* (Cinnabar Fields, Elixir Fields) are the inner alchemical cauldrons where transformation of the Three Treasures takes place. *Jing* is transformed into *Qi* in the *Lower Dan Tian* (also called the Yellow Court), located in the space between the navel, kidneys and sexual organs. *Qi* is transformed into *shen* in the *Middle Dan Tian* (also called the Crimson Palace in reference to the heart), located in the center of the chest. *Shen* is transformed into emptiness in the *Upper Dan Tian* (also called the Crystal Room) in the center of the brain.

The Three Bodies

Our physical body corresponds to *jing*, essence. Our energy body is our subtle body whose structure is composed of the *Three Dan Tians*, the internal organs' energy fields, the energy channels and the *Qi* flowing through them. The spirit body is the subtlest of the three, and is composed of the energy of purified mind, *shen*.

The Three Forces

On the macrocosmic level, *shen* or spirit corresponds to the Yang energy of heaven, *jing* corresponds to the Yin material form of earth, and *Qi* corresponds to the atmospheric energies as the product of the intercourse between heaven and earth. You can also see the Three Forces as different forms of *Qi*: *Tian Qi* (Heavenly Energy) of the stars, sun, moon and planets; *Di Qi* (Earth Energy), and *Da Chi* (Atmospheric Qi). Through learning to connect our Three Treasures with the Three Forces, we can enhance and strengthen our bodily energies, restore our health and vitality, and prepare ourselves to return to the Source.

THE PATH

Meditation

Meditation is the central pillar of Taoist practice. Without meditation, the other Taoist arts are empty vessels. There are many types of Taoist meditation, including the inner alchemical meditations for circulating, balancing and transforming the *Qi*; visualization methods; purification techniques; chanting the scriptures; dream practice; astral flight; and following the breath. Taoist meditation can also have different goals -- spiritual, health promotion or curative.

Ritual and magical rites are also encompassed under the category of meditation. Ritual and ceremony can be seen as a form of externalized group meditation. During Taoist ritual and ceremony, many of the same processes of purification and harmonization of Yin and Yang that take place on an internal level during solo meditation are extended out to socially harmonize the congregation and their environment, restoring the people and their homeland to balance and harmony.

Magical rites often involve meditation on talismans, invocation of one or more of the pantheon of Taoist divinities, or the extension of one's *Qi* beyond one's body for healing, subduing negative influences or attracting positive forces.

While we ordinarily think of meditation as a sitting practice, Taoists also do standing meditation, walking meditation, lying down meditation, sleeping meditation and moving meditations. These help one to integrate meditation into the changes of one's daily life.

Taoist meditation always begins with relaxation techniques to put one into a receptive state for the main body of the meditation session. Then one focuses the mind upon the object of meditation. The object of meditation varies with the practice; it may be a visualization, the inhalation and exhalation of breath, a specific area in the body, a talisman, the circulation and refinement of *Qi*, or the nature and quality of one's mind.

Of particular interest are the Taoist inner alchemical meditations, where instead of focusing the mind upon a mantra, a koan, or a visualization, one uses one's own *Qi* as the object of meditation. Lieh Tzu said, "The mind leads and the *Qi* follows." By focusing the mind upon specific energy centers in the body, the *Qi* is automatically activated there. *Qi* can then be felt through the classic sensation of tingling, heat, expansion, pulsing, vibrating, distension or effervescence.

Commonly these meditations begin by focusing on the lower *Dan Tian*, where the *Original Qi* is stored. Once activated, the *Qi* can be directed through the acupuncture channels in the body until it flows strongly without blockage or obstruction.

At this stage it is also vital to conserve the *Qi* we already have, to seal the "leaks" in our energy bodies.

The five colors blind the eye.
The five sounds deafen the ear.
The five flavors dull the taste
Too much thinking weakens the mind.
Desires wither the heart.

---Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Chapter 12

The chief "thieves" that rob us of our *Qi* are: excess negative emotional indulgence, too much sensory input, and our reproductive system. Negative emotions are necessary and even essential, but when they become chronic they are extremely debilitating. Sensory input can be pleasant, but too much outward sensory fixation results in addictive and compulsive stimulation which drains the *Qi* of the internal organs. More will be said later about losses of *Qi* through the reproductive system

At the same stage that the Taoist meditator focuses on *activating and moving the Qi*, the process of *refining the Qi* begins as well. It is not enough simply to have ample *Qi*: one's *Qi* must also be *conserved, purified, balanced* and *transformed* into virtuous *Qi*. As I said earlier, all movement of the mind as well as of the body is motivated by *Qi*; *Qi* is the mount upon which the consciousness rides. To have a virtuous and illumined mind, one must have virtuous *Qi*.

In Taoist alchemy, the *Qi* is refined by bringing it to various centers and channels in the body where it is combined, balanced and transformed, purifying the negative emotions and giving birth to the positive virtuous attitudes. These virtuous attitudes are the foundation of the *immortal body*. Certain Taoist meditations also work on "reuniting the mother and son," on reconnecting the *Qi* of the sensory organs to their respective corresponding internal organs.

It is primarily through meditation practice that *jing* is transformed into *Qi*, *Qi* into *shen*, and *shen* into emptiness. All of the other practices can be seen as supports to meditation.

Qi Gong

Qi means energy or breath, while *gong* means skill. Thus any Taoist exercise that works with breath training could be called a *Qi Gong* practice. The most important

training is allowing the breath to become very natural. The qualities of natural breathing are for the breath to become *quiet, soft, smooth, even, long* and *deep*.

Each thought and emotion registers in the breath. For example, we hold our breath when concentrating on a math problem; we pant when sexually aroused; we sigh and breath laboriously when depressed. Conversely, each change in the breath influences the mind. Returning the breath to its natural resting state activates the relaxation response, highly beneficial and healing to both body and mind. This deep relaxation allows the true "inner breath" to emerge, creating *virtuous Qi* as the energetic steed for wisdom mind.

Taoists practice *Qi Gong* for different reasons: for improved health and fitness, healing, to improve martial arts skill, and for spiritual development. For the Taoist adept, *Qi Gong* serves to nourish the Three Treasures. The more physically active *Qi Gong* exercises strengthen and repair the subtle "wiring" of the energy body, and develop a strong and supple matrix for the movement and refinement of *Qi*. Certain *Qi Gong* standing postures also help to "ground" one's energy as the foundation for tapping into the limitless reserves of transpersonal *Qi* in Nature.

Like the Native Americans, the early Taoist shamans saw that through connecting to the animal powers they could restore outer balance and harmony with the forces of nature. The Taoist emperor Yü the Great, of the early Hsia dynasty, ecstatically danced the movements of a bear to harmonize heaven and earth and to stop the floods in his land. His dance was known as "The Pace of Yü," and is still ritually practiced by Taoists today.

It was not long before Taoists transferred this same reasoning to the microcosm of their own bodies. Of the earliest known *Qi Gong* forms, many were derived from the movements of animals. The *Qi Gong Classics (Tao Yin Tu)*, discovered in the tomb of King Ma in 1973 and dating back to the second century BC, illustrated over 40 *Qi Gong* postures used for promoting health and healing specific illnesses; over half of these postures were animal movements. Hua T'o, the renowned second century Taoist physician, wrote, "Flowing water does not become stagnant; active door hinges do not rust." Therefore, Hua T'o devised a series of *Qi Gong* exercises for his patients known as the *Wu Jin Xi (Wu Chin Hsi)* or "Five Animal Frolics," based upon the movements of the crane, bear, monkey, deer and tiger.

Unlike Western exercise, which focuses primarily on muscular development and cardiovascular fitness, *Qi Gong* exercise is concerned with strengthening all of the internal systems. There are specific exercises for nourishing each of the internal organs, the sensory organs (eyes, ears, etc.), the tendons and ligaments, and the reproductive organs. There is even a whole system of *Qi Gong* exercises for strengthening the bone matrix and marrow.

Regular *Qi Gong* exercise has been scientifically determined to enhance one's ability to emit high levels of electrical, magnetic and sub-sonic charge. This ability of *Qi Gong* practitioners is being used extensively in China for healing; there are now hundreds of *Qi Gong* hospitals and clinics throughout China where ailments ranging

from arthritis to cancer are being successfully treated with *Qi Gong* therapy, either by itself or in conjunction with acupuncture, herbs or Western medicine.

Chinese Medicine

Spiritual practices take a long time to bear fruit. Good health and long life are an essential foundation for successful practice. Thus the venerable Taoist Ko Hung wrote in his famous alchemical text, the *Pao-pu-tzu*, that "there was no one among the Taoists who did not practice the medical arts along with the Taoist arts."¹

Firstly, in order to live away from society and meditate, the Taoist had to be self-sufficient and know the healing arts simply to survive in good health.

Secondly, the internal organs have energetic, emotional, spiritual, earthly and cosmic correspondences as was illustrated in my earlier discussion on the Five Phases. Like the Dineh or Navajo people of the southwestern United States, the early Taoists saw health not only as an internal balance, but also as a balance between the individual and the forces of Nature and the cosmos. Knowing how to strengthen the organs and maintain the balance and flow between them can compensate for inherent weaknesses that may make one more vulnerable to adverse seasonal and astrological influences.

Disease and natural disaster are a sign that the people have fallen out of harmony with the Tao. The cure is to reestablish a correct relationship with Nature, with society, and within the individual. The early Chinese character for doctor depicted a feathered shaman holding a quiver full of arrows and doing an ecstatic dance. The arrows, presumably, were to drive off evil influences. Later this concept was extended to the use of acupuncture needles. Many, if not the majority, of these shamans were women. They would go into trance and journey to the spirit world, or channel divinities to diagnose the cause of the problem.

Chinese medicine later grew to incorporate the diagnostic frameworks of Yin and Yang, *Qi* and Blood, the Five Elements and their inner organ correspondences, the Three Treasures and other frameworks as well.

Chinese medicine also divides the causes of disease into External Factors (environment, climate, astrological influences and spirits), Internal Factors (the seven pathological emotions of excess anger, joy, worry, pensiveness, sadness, fear and shock²), and Neither External nor Internal Factors (overwork, excess sex). Treatment modalities include meditation, diet, herbal medicine, *Qi Gong*, acupuncture, moxibustion and massage.

Martial Arts and Military Strategy

While fighting and war may sound contradictory to spiritual work, knowing how to protect oneself was vital to survival in China where outlaw bands roamed the

¹ Robinet, Isabelle. *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity*. Translated by Julian F. Pas and Norman J. Girardot. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

² Maciocia, Giovanni. *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine*. New York: Churchill Livingstone, 1989. p. 130

forests and mountains preying on wandering travelers. Furthermore, because of their wisdom the Taoists were often sought as advisors to kings and emperors when their empires were threatened by invasion. Lao Tzu himself devoted more than a few chapters of the *Tao Te Ching* to military advice, while Sun Tzu's manual on Taoist principles of military strategy, *The Art of War*, has been studied for over 2,000 years by generals of many nations, including General George Patton.

Taoist martial arts are renowned throughout the world. People practice these arts not only for self-defense, but for health and fitness as well as spiritual development. *Taijiquan* (*T'ai Chi Ch'uan*), the most famous of the Taoist martial arts, is based on the interplay of Yin and Yang and leads to a profound understanding of these principles. Similarly, *Xingyiquan* (*Hsing-I Ch'uan*) is based on the Five Elements, while *Baguachang* (*Pa-Kua Chang*) is a study of the eight trigrams in movement. These three martial arts strengthen the body, cultivate the *Qi* and breath, develop suppleness and openness of the acupuncture channels, and focus the spirit. Thus in Taoism the martial arts are an important adjunct and support for spiritual practice.

Sexual Practice (Jing Gong)

Sexual practices have been part of Taoism from its earliest records. Over 4,600 years ago the Taoist Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, achieved immortality through sexual yogas. After reigning successfully for 100 years, he is said to have "ascended to heaven in broad daylight."

Since then, Taoism has included many practices for working with sexual energy. These practices are often grouped according to purpose.

Central to both medicine and alchemy is the necessity of both strengthening and conserving the *jing* (sexual energy) for health and immortality. For men, *jing* is lost primarily through ejaculation, while for women, *jing* is lost through menstruation and childbearing. Therefore the arts of male sexual *Jing Gong* center around methods for ejaculation control as the foundation for conserving, strengthening, circulating and transforming sexual energy. For women, *Jing Gong* emphasizes exercises to control the menses (known as "slaying the red dragon").

Sexual fitness and hygienic practices were aimed at a general audience; celibate monks, householders and yogic adepts alike benefitted from learning how to keep their reproductive systems healthy. These practices include Jade Egg exercises for strengthening the vaginal muscles and increasing orgasmic potential in women, breast massage, and testicle massage.

Taoist literature and oral tradition also includes practices for attaining enhanced sexual pleasure and harmony with one's partner. These teachings were written primarily for house holders, and were called *fang-chung* ("bedchamber art") literature. Like the *Kama Sutra* of India and the "pillow books" of Japan, they included variants of position and techniques for stimulating one's partner, genital reflexology, ejaculation control for men, and ways of enhancing arousal in women.

Men are seen as Yang; like fire, men are generally quickly heated and quickly cooled. By contrast, women are seen as Yin; like water, women are slow to boil, but

then stay hot for a long while. To achieve balance, men need to learn the art of maintaining their fire long enough to bring their women to the boil; women need to learn how to boil more quickly and fully and to not extinguish their men's fire too soon. This is the Taoist art of Yin and Yang balance.

Taoist adepts have a wholly different emphasis than the householder. Their goal is immortality, not pleasure alone. Therefore, Taoist male and female adepts engage in sexual union as an expedient practice to exchange, enhance and balance their yin and yang energies. Although many Taoists achieve immortality as celibates, dual cultivation or "grafting" (borrowing Yin or Yang energy from one's partner) is viewed by many as a rapid path of inner alchemical transformation.

Diet

Food is one of the primary sources of *Acquired Qi*, and thus diet cannot be ignored by the Taoist yogic practitioner. However, diet is considered a support practice and not a central cornerstone of spiritual development as it has become for many modern day fanatical followers of dietary regimens.³

Taoist dietary guidelines are both gentle and flexible. In fact, the nuclear trigrams of the 27th hexagram of the I Ching, Nourishment, are all Yin lines, indicating the 2nd hexagram, The Receptive. This indicates that the core idea of diet is flexibility. Rigid dietary teachings were never part of Taoism. *Moderation* is the foremost rule; neither too much nor too little. Overeating and overdrinking dull the mind and strain the body. Otherwise, there are few general prohibitions; alcohol, caffeine, even tobacco were permitted in moderation by those able to be temperate. In fact, there are even ancient collections of Taoist drinking songs in praise of the fine qualities of wine.

Dietary guidelines vary with the individual, depending on one's constitutional makeup, strength, and the season of the year. There are several ways of classifying foods. One way is dividing foods into *building foods* and *cleansing foods*. Building foods are those that help to build the body's substance; foods such as meats, grains, and the more starchy vegetables and fruits are building foods. Cleansing foods are the more watery fruits and vegetables; foods such as green leafy vegetables, celery, bok choy, strawberries, tomatoes, peppers and the like. In general, a diet should be made up of both categories to stay in balance, with a higher ratio of building foods eaten during the fall and winter to provide warmth and energy, and a higher ratio of cleansing foods eaten during the spring and summer for cooling and flushing.

Another system of food categorization is by the Five Phases. Ideally one should a variety of foods encompassing all of the five flavors (sour, bitter, sweet, spicy and salty) each day. The proportion of each flavor would vary according to season and to one's own constitution.

Lightly cooked foods are preferred to raw foods. Eating raw foods is compared to burning green wood: hard to burn, lots of smoke and waste, and little heat.

³ "By dispensing with starches a man can only stop spending money on grains, but by that alone he cannot attain Fullness of Life." Ko Hung, *Pao-p'u-tzu*.

The mountain yogi, undisturbed by the hectic pace of the city, living in the pure air and sun with few distractions to stir the passions and emotions, usually eats a pure and light diet of simple vegetables and fruit, and eventually consuming only tonic herbs. The older Taoist classics advocate the elimination of grains, meats, garlic and onions for the yogi. Grains were considered to feed "The Three Worms" which reside in the Three Dan Tians and gradually devour one's life force. The energy in grains is heavy, and one doing extensive meditation would naturally incline to give them up. Meat was avoided; the beneficial spirits residing in the adepts body "have a horror of blood, the Breath of which wounds them, causes them to flee, and thus shortens life."⁴ Onions and garlic turn the outer breath foul, and are considered to have a similar polluting effect on the inner *Qi*.

Total fasting is generally avoided, as it tends to weaken and slow down one's digestive system, like letting the fire go out. One exception, however, is for the Taoist adept preparing for a long out-of-body journey. Here the yogi must become a true breatharian for weeks or months before leaving the body. Otherwise food left in the intestines would putrify or harden, causing serious problems upon the adept's return to the body.⁵ Another advantage of becoming a breatharian is the ability to remain in meditation retreat in the mountains for lengthy periods of time without needing supplies.

In general, the appropriate diet of a city Taoist must be quite different from that of a mountain yogi on retreat. In the *Pao-p'u-tzu* the great second century Taoist alchemist Ko Hung cautions, "If you consider it inconvenient to break with the world, abandon your household, and live high on a peak, you will certainly not succeed in abandoning the Five Savors. If you would not distress yourself, it is best not to dispense with [eating] starches but merely to regulate the diet, for which there are about a hundred methods."⁶

If a city person tries to eat too rarefied and pure a diet, he or she may become overly sensitive to the gross influences of the city environment and may be too easily thrown out of balance and become ill. Thus city dwelling Taoists often practice "strategic impurity," ingesting very moderate amount of meat, alcohol, caffeine, white flour or sugar in their diet. Again, moderation is the key word, and this is never to be construed as advice for those with a propensity for addiction.

Feng Shui (Geomancy)

The art of choosing a suitable place conducive to spiritual practice is a major consideration for Taoists. *Qi* moves over and through the earth just as it moves

⁴ Maspero, Henri. *Taoism and Chinese Religions*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981. p. 335.

⁵ Ware, James R., translator and editor. *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung (Pao-p'u-tzu)*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966. p. 243

⁶ Ibid, p. 244.

through the body. Certain spots are known to be sacred because they have powerful balanced energy that can greatly aid the meditator's quest.

Feng means wind, while *shui* means water. Thus *feng-shui* implies the art of discerning the flow of *Qi* in Nature. Taoists seek quiet sites that are protected from fierce winds, floods and landslides, have an ample supply of water, possess beautiful views and inspiring rock formations. The place for a retreat should also be near enough to a town or village to get supplies when needed, yet far enough away to assure solitude. There should be a balance between sun and shade, warmth and coolness. Ample pine trees are a great asset, as pines give off a rich *qi* that Taoist yogis can absorb.

When the environment is not perfectly balanced (which it rarely is), geomantic cures can be applied to correct geomantic imbalances. Commonly used cures are mirrors, lights, talismans, red ribbons, and Pa Kua symbols.

The directional correspondences of the Five Phases and the internal organ *Qi* are also vitally important to Taoists. Taoist yogis draw the *Qi* of the five directions into the body to strengthen and balance the internal organs. There are also animal spirits associated with the five directions. The Taoist adept can shamanically summon these animal spirits to form a protective shield against evil influences.

The Eight Trigrams correspondences are also considered vital when orienting a building, placing rooms and designing the interior. Geomantic compasses (lo-pan) are often used to interpret the specific influences of directional orientations. These orientations are interpreted differently for each member of the household based upon their astrological birthchart.

Astrology

There are auspicious times for practice as well as auspicious places. Chinese astrology relates the movements of the heavens to human anatomy and physiology. Each day is divided into twelve two-hour periods, during each of which the *Qi* flows more strongly through a specific acupuncture channel in the body. For example, from three to five in the morning, the *Qi* flows strongest in the Lung meridian. The lungs are considered "the master of *Qi*," since they are the organs through which we draw in the breath of life. Therefore, the hour of the lungs is the time when one can get the optimum benefit out of *Qi Gong* practice. It is also the best time to treat lung problems with acupuncture.

The sun has powerful *Qi* and has an obvious effect on earthly life. The sun is the essence of Yang and corresponds to the heart and the Fire element. The yearly revolution of the earth around the sun is called the Yellow Route. Taoists divide this 365 day cycle into 24 solar periods of about 15 days duration, each considered a mini-season. Internally these periods correspond to the 24 separate vertebrae of the spine. There is a Taoist practice of 24 *Qi Gong* sets, each set corresponding with a specific solar period and practiced during that time to connect with the unique *Qi* of that mini-season. Other *Qi Gong* practices can be practiced just after sunrise and just before sunset for absorbing solar energy.

Despite this solar breakdown, the Chinese calendar is lunar, beginning on the first new moon during the reign of Huang Ti, the Yellow Emperor. The moon is the essence of Yin, and is related to the kidneys and the Water element.

There are specific days when the sun and moon energies are particularly potent and accessible. During the solar solstices and equinoxes, the sun seems to stop. Taoists call these days Doors, and according to ancient lore the Taoist seeking immortality must pass through these Doors at those times to be received by the lord who grants the fruits of immortality unique to each of these celestial regions.

There are also key holy days for gathering the solar essences which are related to the lunar months following the Spring Equinox (called by the Taoists the Golden Door), and key days for gathering the lunar essence following the Fall Equinox (called the Eastern Well).

In general, the very best days for gathering the solar essence are the solstices and equinoxes, while the best days for gathering the lunar essence are the new and full moon.

The planetary energies are directly related to the five viscera, as is seen in the Five Elements correspondence chart. These energies can be drawn at will by the adept for healing oneself and others.

The stars and constellations are also vital to Taoist practitioners. Individual stars and constellations each have their own unique *Qi* and bodily links. For example, the stars of the Big Dipper, known as the Bushel, correspond both to the seven bones of the skull and to the internal organs. The 28 constellations in the four quadrants of heaven are correlated with the Five Elements, the Five Seasons, the Five Directions and the five viscera.

The North Star is of particular importance, as it is the gateway of the Nine Heavenly Realms. The energy of all Nine Heavens issues through the North Star and can be absorbed through the crown of the adept as violet light, nurturing, purifying and balancing the Yang force in the body.⁷

THE FRUITION OF TAOIST PRACTICE

By following the Tao throughout one's life, living a path of simplicity and moderation in harmony with the patterns of Nature, one can eventually realize the Tao.

"When he achieves salvation, the adept will wear a feathered garment, will ride on light and straddle the stars, or will float in empty space. He will have wind and light as a chariot and dragons as steeds. His bones will shine like jade, his face will be resplendent, his head will be circled with a halo, and his whole body will radiate a supernatural light as incandescent as the sun and moon. He will be able to realize all his desires and will enjoy an endless youth and a longevity equal to that of heaven and earth. Moreover, he will know the future, will be able to travel a thousand *li* in a single day, and will be able to immerse himself in water without getting wet or walk through

⁷ Chia, Mantak and Maneewan. *Awaken Healing Light of the Tao*. Huntington: Healing Tao Books, 1993.

fire without getting burned. Neither beasts nor weapons will have any power over him. He will command the forces of nature and the spirits."⁸

There are different stages and levels of immortals (*hsien*). In the *Pao-p'u-tzu*, Ko Hung describes three levels. The first is "the deliverance from the corpse" (*shih chieh*), wherein the adepts are unable to transform their bodies sufficiently during their lives. Thus they either shed their bodies at the moment of death, or continue their refinement after death until the body disappears and the coffin is left empty. They transform the physical Five Elements of their bodies into the subtle energetic dimension of the Five Elements, and avoid the hell realms.

"Earthly immortals" achieve an immortal body, but are unable to ascend to the heavens, and thus inhabit sacred mountains, distant isles, and paradisiacal regions on earth. Even though they are not at the highest level of perfection, earthly immortals still enjoy great powers.

"Heavenly immortals" are said to ascend to the heavens in their metamorphosized bodies in broad daylight. They are also called "flying immortals." Nonetheless, there are also the "Masters of the people of the world," who although capable of transcendence do not return to heaven but continue to incarnate indefinitely in order to preserve and transmit the Taoist teachings.⁹

SUMMARY

In the pursuit of knowledge, every day something new is acquired.
In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.
Less and less, until *wu-wei* [effortlessness, not-doing] is achieved.

Nothing is done, yet nothing is left undone.

---Lao Tzu

At first it seems contradictory that so many complex practices were devised by Taoists to attain natural simplicity. Isn't natural simplicity our birthright? Well, a good Taoist answer is: it is and it isn't.

Taoists call our natural state of being "the Uncarved Block." That is our true nature, innocent and pure as a newborn baby. Yet how many of us have maintained that natural state of innocence in our bodily movements, in our energy flow, and in our hearts? What most of us call natural is not natural at all; it is merely habitual. We have lost touch with nature, both in our interrelationship with the natural world and with our own true pure and holy nature.

With any art it takes years of disciplined training to achieve effortless and perfect skill. Effortlessness is a process of refinement, of getting rid of all that is extraneous until only the pure essentials are left. I once saw a film of Picasso, in his eighties at the time, painting an entire beautiful mural on a wall in less than ten minutes! He made it

⁸ Robinet, *ibid*, p. 45.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 47.

look so easy, yet we know it took decades of disciplined training before Picasso refined his skills enough to quickly produce such a marvel of balance and beauty with nothing excess, nothing lacking.

If it takes so long to master the art of painting, how much more to master ourselves, to let go of our unbalanced habits of body, speech and mind, to Return to the Source, to become the Uncarved Block! Still, as my old *Tai Ji* master, Shing, once told me, "The time is going to go by anyway; so, you might as well be learning something!"

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