

A TAOIST  
PATH TO  
IMMORTALITY

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The Nature Of  
Things

## A TAOIST PATH TO IMMORTALITY

The Taoist secret of power is to follow the nature of things, a sensitivity and skill obtained by minute concentration on the Tao running through natural objects of all kinds. This knowledge and skill cannot be handed down but is that all the men of old took with them when they died (Chuang Tzu)

Through extolling the initiative comprehension and skillful handling of matter, the Taoist did make progress over the ages (for example, in alchemy) can be seen.

Taoism, along with Confucianism, is one of the two major indigenous philosophical traditions that have shaped Chinese life for more than 2,000 years.

In the broadest sense, a Taoist attitude towards life can be seen in the acceptance, yielding, joyful and compromising side of the Chinese character, an attitude that offsets and complements the moral and duty-conscious, austere and purposeful character of philosophy.

The essential Quest of Taoism is how to gain, preserve, and increase the vital force through a realization of harmony. On the basis of the Chinese concept of a concentric, well-ordered, and single universe. Confucianism built its' wisdom of the order and functioning of human society in accordance with the Whole; and Taoism expressed the individual's as well as the group's need of harmony with the perceptible and the imperceptible Great Order (Tao) in all variations of magic, religion, and mysticism. To live in harmony with the universal mechanism without intervention (wu-wei) anywhere is to preserve one's energy.

This preoccupation with the vital force is one reason for that lack of speculative thought distinctive of Taoism. Taoist mystics are poets, priests are technicians of the occult, and thinkers are specialists in alchemy, ritual, or pharmacognosy.

There are no theologians in the Western sense and few philosophers in the Buddhist sense. This accounts for the Taoist weakness in competing with Confucians and Buddhists in debate. This also accounts for the fact that among the highly developed religions, Taoism is the one with the least rationalization, in which

the communication of man with the sacred appears in its most immediate and unreflective form.

Yin and Yang are often referred to as two “breaths” (ch’i) Ch’i means air, breath, or vapor, originally the vapor arising from cooking cereals. It has also come to mean a cosmic energy. The Primordial Breath is a name of the chaos (state of Unity) in which the original life-force is not yet diversified into the phases that the concepts Yin and Yang describe.

Every man has a portion of this primordial life-force allotted him at birth, and his task is not to dissipate it through the activity of his senses but to strengthen, control, and increase it in order to live out his full span of life.

You can heal the sickness in your body by the power of your own mind. Energize your body by sweeping it from, top to toe with positive thought vibrations.

And when your mind is weak, transform it by the action of your In dwelling spirit. Human being is unity-in-trinity, he is a Unity of Body, Mind and Spirit.

You are a spirit dwelling in a body. You are eternal and will never die. The spirit is the real you, Tao’s ‘breath’ becomes the ‘breath’ of life’ for man, by which we can infer that man is really a spirit dwelling in a body. You can also infer that the spirit of man is in unity with Tao.

Man’s spirit is connected to the body by a ‘silver cords and when this ‘cord’ is severed, physical death occurs. The spirit gives life to the body.

Thus, you can overcome the fear of death by living in the spirit and remembering your unity with Tao.

By the action of the spirit, you can renew your mind, heal your body of sickness, and transform your life. Do this through spiritual disciplines,

Recite daily: I am spirit, I am spirit dwelling in a body. I am eternal. I am peace.

You are what you think, because the mind controls your body and your life.

Tao is the natural heritage of man, but, in the majority of cases, that heritage has been set aside by other interests. This quest of Tao may, and must, be undertaken, if men are to regain that tranquillity, that complete contentment, which can never be acquired by the worldly minded. The steps in the process are similar to those which are the common places of mystics generally.

(1) The first stage is purgation. As Lao Tzu says, "Only one who is eternally free from earthly passions can apprehend the spiritual essence of Tao.

Chuang-tzu says of the sages, or perfect men, "They wear the forms of men, but are without human passions." The process is a long and painful one, and Lieh-tzu (Licius) is represented as telling an ambitious disciple of his own experiences as a novice, when for the space of three years his Master did not design to bestow a glance on him, and nine years passed before he attained that inner unity which was his aim. "I have not yet succeeded in cleansing my heart of impurities and discarding wisdom," is the confession of a professed teacher, who failed to achieve such harmony with Tao as would have enabled him to overcome the opposition of material laws.

(2) The second stage is illumination, when virtue requires no longer a conscious effort, but becomes an unconscious habit. Lao Tzu constantly deprecated the interested 'virtue' of his own times, when the would-be 'virtuous' were characterized by acute self-consciousness and were actuated by mercenary motives.

(3) Many instances are given of the third stage. when an inner unity is attained, notably by Lieh Tzu (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) e.g., that of Shang Ch'iu K'ai, who thus explained his extraordinary independence of natural laws; "My mind was simply One, and material objects thus offered no resistance. That is all"; and Tzu Hsia, who said: "The man who have harmony with Tao enters into close unison with eternal objects, and none of them has the power to harm or hinder him."

This is the goal of Taoist ambition, namely to attain to such an unconscious harmony with nature as to become the unresisting vehicle of Tao, and partake of its properties which render the Taoist immune from the limitations which are imposed upon the uninitiated by the laws of matter, space, and time. This third stage included also that independence of external aids which is expressed by Lao Tzu in the words, "without going out of doors, one may know the whole world," etc.

In the broadest sense, a Taoist attitude toward life can be seen in the accepting and yielding, the joyful and carefree sides of the Chinese character, and attitude that offsets and complements the moral and duty-conscious, austere and purposeful character ascribed to Confucianism. Taoism is also characterized by a positive, active attitude toward the occult and the metaphysical (theories on the nature of reality) whereas the agnostic, pragmatic Confucian tradition considers these issues of only marginal importance although the reality of such issues is, by most Confucians, not denied.

More strictly defined, Taoism includes: the ideas and attitudes peculiar to Lao Tzu (or Tao Te Ching; Classic of the Way of Power), the Chuang Tzu, the Lieh Tzu, and related writings; the Taoist religion, which is concerned with the ritual worship of the Tao; and those who identify themselves as Taoists.

Taoist thought permeates Chinese culture, including many aspects not usually considered

Taoist. In Chinese religion, the Taoist tradition often serving as a link between the Confucian tradition and folk tradition has generally been more popular and spontaneous than the official (Confucian) state cult and less diffuse and shapeless than folk religion.

Taoist philosophy has found the way into all Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. Various religious practices reminiscent of Taoism in such areas of Chinese cultural influence indicated early contacts with Chinese travelers and immigrants that have yet to be elucidated.

There is also a tendency among scholars today to draw a less rigid line between what is called Taoist and what is called Confucian. The two traditions share many of

the same ideas about man, society, the ruler, Heaven, and the universe ideas that were not created by either school but that stem from a tradition prior to either Confucius or Lao Tzu.

Viewed from this common tradition, orthodox Confucianism limited its field of interest to the creation of a moral and political system that fashioned society and the Chinese empire; whereas Taoism, inside the same world view, represented more personal and metaphysical preoccupations.

The aged Taoist sage became a saint because he had been able to cultivate himself throughout a long existence; his longevity in itself was the proof of his saintliness and union with the Tao. Eternally he had a healthy, flourishing appearance and inside he contained an ever-flowing source of energy that manifested itself in radiance and in a powerful, beneficial influence on his surroundings, which is the charismatic efficacy (Te) of the Tao.

The mystic insight of Chuang Tzu made him scorn those who strove for longevity and immortality through physiological practices. Nevertheless, physical immortality was a Taoist goal probably long before and alongside the unfolding of Taoist mysticism. The adept of immortality had a choice among many methods that were all intended to restore the pure energies possessed at birth by the infant whose perfect vital force Lao Tzu admires.

Through these methods, the adept became an immortal (hsien) who lived 1,000 years in this world if he so chose and, once satiated with life, "Ascended to heaven in broad daylight." This was the final apotheosis of the Taoist who had transformed his body into pure Yang energy.

Taoists prefer to convey their ecstatic insights in images and parables. The Tao is low and receiving as a valley, soft and life-giving as water, and it is the "mysterious female," the source of all life, the Mother of the Ten Thousand Beings. Man should become weak and yielding as water that overcomes the hard and the strong and always takes the low ground; he should develop his male and female sides but "prefer femininity," "feed on the mother," and find within himself the well that never runs dry.

Tao is also the axis, the ridgepole, the pivot, and the empty center of the hub. The sage is the “useless tree” or the huge gourd too large to be fashioned into implements. A frequent metaphor for the working of the Tao is the incommunicable ability to be skillful at a craft. The skilled artisan does not ponder on his action, but, in union with the Tao of his subject, he does his work reflexively and without conscious intent.

Much ancient Chinese mythology has been preserved by the Taoists, who drew on it to illustrate their views. A ‘chaos’ (Hun-tun) myth is recorded as a metaphor for the undifferentiated primal unity, the mythical emperors (.Huang Ti and others) are extolled for wise Taoist rule or blamed for introducing harmful civilization. Dreams of mythical paradises and journeys on clouds and flying dragons are metaphors for the wanderings of the soul, the attainment of the Tao, and the identity of dream and reality.

Taoists have transformed and adapted some ancient myths to their beliefs. Thus, the Queen Mother of the West (Hsi Wang Mu), who was a mountain spirit, pestilence goddess, and tigress, became a high deity the Fairy Queen of all immortals.

Long life and the vital force were common concerns of all Taoist traditions and inseparable from saintliness. The original still of the infant or even the embryonic state in which the vital force is still perfectly concentrated and undiminished was the ideal of the mystics, who sought it in trance, as well as developed countless formulas and practices to restore the infant’s complete Yang energy to the physical body.

This effort, however, made them shift away from the classical ideal of adaptation to the course of nature and attempt a reversal of the natural flow toward death. Thus, the ideal of Yin and Yang as complementary, which implied the alienation of life and death, changed into a desire for the victory of life-giving Yang over Yin.

For the ancient Chinese in general, spirit and matter formed a continuum of more or less rarefied or crude vital energies, deriving from Heaven and Earth. Man was believed to be composed of several kinds of vital energies, to which the Western

dichotomy of spiritual and material is not particularly relevant. The techniques of longevity were intended to prevent this scattering of these energies, which would result in death. They also sought to refine the coarse, perishable energies and transform the heavy mortal body into a light immortal one.

The Chinese ideogram for “immortal” (hsien) depicts a man and a mountain, suggesting a hermit; the older form of hsien, however, shows a man dancing around, flapping his sleeves like wings. To become immortal is to be “transformed into a feathered being.” Image comes from the mythology of eastern Chinese tribes who claimed bird ancestors, worshipped bird deities, and held religious rites with bird dances performed on stilts. The affinity of the Taoist immortals to birds (crane, phoenix, magpie, stork, or raven) is a persistent theme in iconography and legend.

There are many categories of immortals. The highest are those who “ascend to heaven in broad daylight.”

There are also those who live in terrestrial paradises (on holy mountains or islands) for centuries without growing old and later appear disguised in this world to transmit their immortality formulas and magical powers to worthy adepts. Lower immortals do not reach paradise before dying and apparent death (shih chieh), leaving their sandals or their canes in the coffins to take on the appearance of their corpses.

The techniques of longevity, the detailed of which correspondence between the human microcosm and the macrocosm are at the basis of all techniques to “nourish the vital force” (yang-hsing). The communication between the five inner organs (lungs corresponding to metal, heart to fire, spleen to the earth, liver to wood, and kidneys to water), all other body organs, and the outer world proceeds through the orifices (nose for the lungs, ears for the heart, mouth for the spleen, eyes for the liver, and the lower orifices for the kidneys). All these orifices are passageways for entry and exit of vital forces and have to be closely guarded. Because the orifices are sense organs and desires result in loss of vital force, the senses have to be carefully kept in balance lest disease be caused through over indulgence in any one of the corresponding desires.

All dietary regimens are intended to nourish the respective organs in right proportions with foods and medicinal herbs containing the energy (ch'i) corresponding in quality to their respective elements. A preliminary step in diet is complete abstinence from all cereals in order to starve and kill the "three worms", or the "three corpses," which are maleficent demons inside the body that work to hasten its decomposition.

In order to make all energies in the body reach their proper place and to maintain a continuous circulatory process, the adept practices "gymnastics" and "Body building" called "to conduct (the breath) and to stretch" (or to attract it to its proper place, Tao Yin).

Chuang Tzu stated that ordinary people breathe through the throat but the saint breathes through the whole body, starting from the heels. The Taoist breathes not only atmospheric air but solar, lunar, and the directions, guiding the green emanation of the east to the liver, the red emanation of the south to the heart, and so on.

Others inhale the emanations of dawn in spring, of noon in summer, of dusk in autumn, and so on. Others warn against the practice of this discipline in the latter part of the day, because the universe exhales dead air from noon to midnight. Another method taught how to "feed on air" by retaining breath and conducting it throughout the body. One who could hold this breath for the time of 1,000 respirations would become immortal.

This inner breath was viewed as man's share of the primordial life breath contained in the lower of the three "cinnabar (mercuric sulfide fields)" of the body centers located in the head, chest, and abdomen). This life breath is conducted, in a closed circuit like that of the embryo, through the body and directed by means of the "inner sight" (nei-kuan), an inward turned vision of the eyes (considered a source of light). In case of sickness, the inner breath is conducted to the diseased organ and heals it.

The first sacred text of Taoism (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), mentions the ability of the interior vision to discern the gods residing in the five organs. Books like the Classic of the

Yellow Court owe their popularity to the enumeration of thousands of gods in all parts of the body, the same gods as those residing in the macrocosm.

Meditation establishes communication with these gods, either by making the external gods descend and visit their organs in the body and fortify it or by externalizing the inner gods disposing them in a mandala (a symbol of the universe) around oneself. The latter practice is a preparation of religious ceremonies and recitation of sacred texts.

The sexual techniques of the 'inner chamber' (fang chung) go back to antiquity. Their aim was to secure vitality, longevity, and male progeny. Specifically Taoist practices were the 'Way of the Yin' of the immortal Yung-ch'eng, a technique to make the semen return and repair the brain" (huan ching pu nao). This technique consisted in the prevention of ejaculation during the sexual act and was thought to make the semen (ching, a potent mixture of all physical energies) circulate mixed with breath through the body from the lower to the upper 'cinnabar field", there to vitalize the brain.

Immortals are often depicted with a huge skull that is the storeroom of their Yang energy. Another idea was to blend seminal essence with breath in the "lower cinnabar field' and there to form the "mysterious embryo" of the new real body.

For the 'repairing of the brain," the male adept also needed to absorb as much as possible of female Yin essence (and vice versa). It was therefore desirable to have intercourse with a succession of partners. This led to the much' communal "union of breaths" (ho ch'i), a highly ritualized ceremony that might have resembled more a group ordeal than an orgy).

The abstention from ejaculation exists equally in Tantric practices, which were known to the Taoists since T'ng's times or earlier. As in Tantrism, the sexual terminology refers also to mental operations because only thought processes can make semen and breath circulate and 'marry' to thus create the immortal man.

Chuang Tzu's descriptions of the indescribable Tao, as well as of those who have attained union with the Tao, are invariably poetic. The perfect man has identified his life rhythm so completely with the rhythm of the forces of nature that he has

become indistinguishable from them and shares their immortality and infinity, which is above the cycle of ordinary life and death. He is “pure spirit”. “He feels neither the heat of the brush lands afire nor the cold of the waters in flood”, nothing can startle or frighten him.

Not that he is magically invulnerable (as the adepts of physical immortality would have it), but he is “so cautious in shunning and approaching, that nothing can do him injury.”

“A man’s life thus rides the clouds as his carriages and the sun and moon as his steeds.” The theme of the spiritual wandering (yuan yu), which can be traced back to the shamanistic soul journey, crops up wherever Chuang Tzu speaks of the perfect man.

Those who let themselves be borne away by the unadulterated energies of Heaven and Earth and can harness the six composite energies to roam through the limitless, whatever need they henceforth depend on’.

These wanderings are journey’s within oneself; they are roaming through the infinite in ecstasy. Transcending the ordinary distinctions of things and one with the Tao, “the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit, the Sage has no fame.” He lives inconspicuously among men, and whatever applies to the Tao applies to him.

Dietary and breathing techniques can prolong life so as to give time for the preparation of the elixir of immortality, which was composed of cinnabar (tan, for its red, or Yang, color and its transmutability) and gold (chin, for its incorruptibility).

Alchemy evolved early in connection with metallurgy. The patron of alchemy was the Yellow Emperor (Huang Ti), who ascended to Heaven after the casting of a sacred metal crucible. This legend is alluded to in the alchemical recommendations given by Li Shao Chun, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century, BC alchemist, to the emperor Han Wu Ti, the earliest known reference to alchemy in any literature of East or West.

Later, Taoist alchemists sought to produce liquid gold and pure (nine times transmuted) cinnabar, or a combination of both in an “elixir of immortality”.

The practice of the techniques of immortality was restricted to the affluent and educated few. The pantheon, ritual, and moral codes, as well as the theocratic organization of the early

Taoist temple bear much closer similarity to the Imperial and Confucian ideologies than to Buddhism. Folk Taoism came to be deeply influenced by the Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation and punishment in hells.

The legendary first celestial master, Chang Tao-Ling was a magician and faith healer. His descendants evolved into a hierarchy of priests who treated the sick by ritual and prayer, using charmed water and talismans. Because disease was believed to be caused by sin, the sick were sent to “pure (or calm) houses” in order to repent and to recite the Tao Te Ching. They also were supposed to make amends by doing public works, such as road building.

The moral code was based on the Tao Te Ching, of which Thai Seong Loh Khoon (that is, Lao Tzu deified) became the divine reveler. Moral conduct was rewarded with health and long life; immorality caused sickness, premature death, and according to later text; suffering in hell.

Taoism, distinguishes itself from Western mysticism by its conscious techniques and to give access to mystical experience. These disciplines of learning to “sit in forgetfulness” are akin to Plotinus “concern to be deaf to the words of senses and to keep the soul’s faculty of apprehension one-pointed.” Where the soul is fully awake as regards Tao, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of himself’

In the way of the Celestial Masters, first developed in the mountains of the province of Szechwan. There, a certain Cheng Tao-Ling, in AD 142, is said to have received a revelation from Thai Seong Loh Koon (Lord Lao the most High). The deified Lao Tzu bestowed on Chang his “orthodox and sole doctrine of the authority of the covenant” (Cheng Meng-Wei Fa), meant as a definitive replacement lapsed into demonism and degeneracy.

The Mao Shan revelations of the most brilliant synthesis of the Way of the Celestial Masters with the indigenous traditions were the principal beneficiaries of an extensive new Taoist revelation.

Furthermore, building upon the way of the celestial Masters, the Mao Shan revelations envisaged some reform of the practices of the parent sect. Its sexual rites in particular were stigmatized as inferior practices, more conducive to perdition than to salvation. Other rituals of the Celestial Master were allowed to continue in use among the Mao Shan adepts but were relegated to a subordinate position. Thus, the movement did not reject but rather incorporated and transcended the older tradition.

According to Chuang-Tzu there is a very special class of spiritualized being. They share none of the anxieties of ordinary folk and have the smooth, untroubled faces of children. These “supreme man”, or “perfect men”, are immune to the effects of the elements, untouched by heat and cold.

They possess the power of flight and are described as mounting upward with a fluttering (hsien) motion. Their effortless existence was the ultimate in autonomy, the natural spontaneity that Chuang Tzu ceaselessly applauds. These striking portraits may have been intended to be allegorical, but whatever their original meaning, these immortals (hsien), as they came to be called, were to become the center of great interest.

The pure literary descriptions of their freedom, their breathtaking mobility, and their agelessness were construed as practical objectives by later generations. By a variety of practices, men attempted to attain these qualities in their own persons, and in time Chuang Tzu’s unfettered paragons of liberty were to see themselves classified according to kind and degree in a hierarchy of the heavenly hosts.

Ko Hung, the author of Pao-pu-tzu - “He Who Holds to Simplicity” stressed that all known Immortals had themselves once been men and so their state must be attainable by men today. The essentials are a good teacher and tireless perseverance. To mineral elixirs he accorded a place above all other means of attaining everlasting life.

Long narratives containing descriptions of the stages and methods by which they had achieved perfection through midnight interviews with the visionary.

One of the most complex and interesting phenomena in Chinese religions history is Lao Tzu's advancement from sage to God. A scroll found in the walled up deserted library at Tan-Luang, the Book of the Transformations of Lao Tzu (Lao-Tzu Pien - Hua Ching) shows him in cosmic perspective, omnipresent and omnipotent, the origin of all life. His human manifestations are listed, followed by his successive role in legendary history, as the sage was counselor of emperors.

Next, five of his more recent appearances are mentioned, dated AD 132-155, and localized in West China, where a temple is said to have dedicated to him in 185 AD. Then the God speaks, to describe his own powers. He recommends to his votaries the recitation of "My book in 5,000 words" (Tao Te Ching) and enjoins a meditation on his own divine attributes as they appear within the adept's body.

Finally, he calls upon the faithful to join him, now, when he is about to strike at the tottering rule of the Han dynasty.

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