

THE SUBTLE BODY ECSTASY OF DAOIST INNER ALCHEMY

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In Daoist mysticism, the body plays a much more central role than in comparative Western models. This is especially clear in the tradition of Daoism called inner alchemy, which arose in the Song dynasty and has remained dominant both among monastic and lay practitioners to the present day. In this model, the internal energies of the person are gradually and systematically refined from grosser, easily felt vibrations and secretions to pure *qi*, the original cosmic energy as present in the individual, and from there to spirit, the divine power that pervades the universe. Adepts transform who they are as persons to become one with the Dao, but they do not do it merely through mental reorientation. Their entire physical structure changes as the powers of the cosmos manifest in them and the Dao takes over their being. Mystical experience in this context is thus very much an embodied event.

Key words: Daoism, mysticism, religious experience, body cultivation, inner alchemy, Five Phases, *qi*, Healing Dao.

Mystical Experience

Descriptions of personal mystical experiences in the Daoist tradition are hard to find. Authors typically refrain from becoming too personal, and the overall tendency in the literature is to express the experiences of the mystic in generalised instructions and the listing of warning signs. This is different from Western religions where the experience is at the pivot of it all and is described as overwhelming and ineffable, timeless and yet full of knowing certainty (James 1936), and where mystics have described its wonders time and again as they have their agonies when it eluded them for a period in the so-called dark night of the soul (Underhill 1911).

There is no strong emphasis on personal experience in Daoism. There are experiences, yes – the complete oblivion of all, for example, described often as “the body like a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes”, and the ecstatic visions of the

gods and palaces of the otherworld, to name the most common. But there are very few personal reports on the overwhelming and powerful nature of certain specific experiences that could be compared in impact and importance to their Western counterpart. This lack can be explained as a general feature of Chinese culture, where religious autobiography was not a major genre, and the earliest first-hand accounts of the troubles and delights of the quest for perfection only appear after contact with Western missionaries in the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

Still, even before this period mystical manuals contain warnings and instructions regarding specific experiences. For example, the *Dingguan jing* (Scripture on Concentration and Observation), a Tang-dynasty text, says quite explicitly:

If there are thoughts and fantasies during concentration,
 Manifold delusions and countless evils,
 Also specters and wicked sprites
 Will appear accordingly.
 But when you see
 The Perfected or Lord Lao,
 Divine wonders and amazing sights,
 This is an auspicious sign. (Lines 27–28; Kohn 1987, p. 138)

Similarly, the *Zuowang lun* (Discourse on Sitting in Oblivion) of the 8th century is very clear about the difficulties that adepts can expect to face and outlines the radiance of spirit and boundless joy they may eventually attain (see Kohn 1987). Yet neither has quite the same importance, the same centrality as the mystical experience in the Western interpretation of mysticism. While Western mystics fixate on the experience, it seems, the Chinese concentrate more on the transformation of body and mind. The key to being a mystic, then, is not whether one has had a certain experience, but to what degree one's self is being transformed into cosmic dimensions, how sagely and non-acting one has become (Kohn 1992).

The underlying reason for this difference in emphasis regarding experience is the nature of the worldview at the foundation of the two religious systems. Western traditions pose a transcendent divine agent, a God totally other; their mystics accordingly concentrate on rare visions of the deity, granted through his mercy, that are overwhelming, ineffable, and entirely out of this world. The Chinese tradition, on the other hand, sees its ultimate in the Dao, a divine force so immanent that it is even in the soil and tiles, so much a part of the world that it cannot be separated from it. Oneness or union with the Dao is the birthright of every being, not a rare instance of divine grace. It is natural to begin with, and becomes more natural as it is realised through practice.

The Chinese mystical experience of oneness with the Dao, quite logically, is astounding only in the beginning. It represents a way of being in the world completely different from ordinary perception, sensually and intellectually determined. The longer the Daoist lives with the experience and the deeper he integrates it into his life and being, the less relevant it is. Thus, neither is the experience itself the

central feature of the tradition, nor is there a pronounced “dark night of the soul”, a desperate search for a glimpse of the transcendent divine.

The Body

Another major difference between the two traditions is the continued emphasis the Chinese place on the body in the transformation to a celestial being. Unlike in the West, where body and soul are radical opposites, body and spirit in Daoist mysticism, though clearly distinguished, are not seen as opposites. Rather, they represent different aspects of the same continuum of the Dao and have to be purified in equal measure. As Maxime Kaltenmark puts it,

Chinese terminology reflects subtle differences between states of a more or less ethereal quality, but of one and the same principle lying at the foundation of all the complex functions of man. The gross conditions of the body are as much included as are its finer essences and the higher mental states which make up holiness.

This then is the reason why one can say that the Chinese do not make a clear-cut distinction between what we call body and mind. Their outlook is in general much more oriented towards life as an organic whole and ongoing process. (1965, p. 655)

The challenge for the mystic, then, is not to overcome the body in favour of the spirit but to transform the entire body-spirit continuum to a higher level and come to experience himself as the divine replica of the cosmos in oneness with the Dao.

This perspective is again based on the worldview of the underlying oneness of everything in the Dao. In this framework, the human body is seen as an accumulation of cosmic, vital energy known as *qi* and evaluated in terms of its energetic workings rather than as a solid, ultimately fragile entity. *Qi* is at the root of everything that exists, whether natural or supernatural, human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate. It generally appears in the complementary forces yin and yang, which correspond to night and day, shadow and light, resting and moving, feminine and masculine, tiger and dragon, mercury and lead, and so on. They cannot exist without one another but continuously engender and develop in mutual interaction, moving in cycles of days and seasons, of inner circulation and outer rhythm. They are further subdivided into categories of lesser and greater and associated with the Five Phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), symbolic representations of their developmental patterns. In this more complex form, the phases of *qi* are then set into a relationship with the key organs of the human body, its senses, material constituents, psychological agents, and emotions.

Qi comes in two major forms, prenatal or primordial and postnatal or ordinary. Primordial *qi* is the cosmic parent of yin and yang, the power of the universe at its creation, the original purity of the cosmos in its most potent form. It is the ultimate neutral energy, the highest creative power, the most essential force of all existence.

Everybody at birth receives a set amount of primordial *qi*, but even that amount is already miniscule compared to the intensity of the primordial power of the cosmos (Winn 2001). Postnatal *qi* is ingested through breath, food, and interaction with others. It mingles with the primordial reservoir deep within and most commonly diminishes it until the person becomes spiritually disconnected and physically weak, and eventually dies. Lack of primordial *qi* in this system is the reason why so many people feel alienated from God, nature, and each other, and why they tend to believe that the gross, dense, physical reality they see around them is all there is.

The Daoist endeavour consists in the recovery and replenishing of the tiny spark of primordial *qi* that is buried within all human beings. All *qi* continuously moves in the body in a smooth regular rhythm dictated by the cosmic patterns of yin and yang. It is in a state of ongoing flux, continuously changing, constitutes health or sickness, moods and tempers, and determines how we work, eat, and sleep. As and when the spark of primordial *qi* is ignited and strengthened, it will “gradually dissolve one’s suffering and struggle and restore life to its innate state of grace and effortless, nonactive (*wuwei*) communication with Heaven, Earth, and all nature. Cultivating primordial *qi* is growing Heaven and Earth within” (Winn 2001, p. 14).

To do so, practitioners begin with cultivating *qi* as it appears in the body in its most tangible and concrete form – as *jing* or essence. *Jing* is the indeterminate aspect of *qi*, also described as *qi* in transition from one determinate form to another (Porkert 1974). Put most concretely, *jing* is no longer the *qi* of the eggs in the omelet and not yet the *qi* of the eggs as assimilated in the body of the eater. As Michael Winn describes it, “*jing* is perhaps best understood in Western terms as primal matter. It is the raw fuel that drives the pulsating rhythm of the body’s moment-to-moment cellular division and reproduction of itself” (2002, p. 20). Governed in the body by the kidneys and the Phase water, it is also closely related to the psychological power of the will or determination, the innate power to “seek pleasure, and to fulfil a specific destiny” (Winn 2002, p. 20). It is also the source of a person’s charisma or magnetic power, of sexual attraction and an innate sense of wholeness. In its most concrete form *jing* in the body appears as sexual energy, i.e., semen in men and menstrual blood in women. Much of Daoist cultivation accordingly begins with the control and reorientation of sexual energy.

Eventually this *jing* is purified and made more subtle and transformed into *qi* that is then moved consciously around the body in various cycles. This *qi* in turn is further rarified into *shen* (spirit), which is a third form *qi* assumes in the human body. *Shen* is understood as the inherent higher vitality of life, the power of consciousness, and the ability to think. It is closely associated with the individuality’s outlook and personality and is said to reside in the central organ of the heart. It governs the emotions and has the most impact on the mystical transformation. Ultimately, spirit is also the goal of mystical attainment: the transformation of a baser *qi* being into an entity of pure spirit.

To achieve this, various methods of cultivation are employed, including formalised body movements, breathing exercises, ritual ceremonies, meditations, visualisations, and so on. It should be understood, however, that none of these practices

– however beneficial they may be for health and long life and good fortune – are undertaken to obtain or acquire *qi*. Rather, *qi* is already there, and the practitioner already *is* part of nature's infinite *qi*-field. The task is not to change the basic set up of being human but to recognise one's true nature as part of the Dao, to "understand the unconscious communication patterns that are always flowing between one's microcosmic (personal) *qi*-field and the impersonal (macrocosmic) *qi*-field" (Winn 2001, p. 13).

Inner Alchemy

The tradition within Daoism that makes most obvious use of this understanding of the body as cosmic *qi*-field is known as "inner alchemy" (*neidan*). A complex system of techniques that integrated physical longevity methods, spiritual meditations, operative alchemy, and the intricate symbolism of the *Yijing*, it can be traced back to the Tang dynasty (618–907) but came to flourish in the Song (960–1260), especially in south China, where it was practised by various schools.¹ Inner alchemy describes mystical attainment in terms of three stages – transforming *jing* into *qi*, *qi* into *shen*, and merging *shen* with the Dao, in the form of interior spiritual entity known as the golden elixir or the immortal embryo.

Inner alchemical practice begins in the first stage with taking control of the *jing*, the sexual energy. For men, this means that they must avoid losing semen through ejaculation while women, through a series of meditations and breast massages learn to lessen and eventually stop the flow of menstruation. Instead, practitioners retain their *jing* and reverse its flow, making it move up the spinal column "to nourish the brain". The brain, according to Chinese traditional medicine, is the Ocean of Marrow, and marrow is *jing* as manifest in the bones. Every time *jing* is lost through sexual activity, therefore, the brain, the bones of the head, and the skeleton of the body are weakened and become more brittle.

The *jing*, moreover, that travels up the spine is not the semen that would be ejaculated during sexual intercourse or lost in menstruation but its refined form, the *qi* from which the semen arose in the first place. At the top of the head, the reversed *jing* unites with other yin secretions of the body and, once it begins to overflow in the cavity there, descends again through the front of the torso to the energy centre in the abdomen known as the lower cinnabar field. Circulated mentally in spiralling movements, the *qi* is stored here and forms the interior cauldron for the concoction of the elixir, the spiritual womb for the growth of the immortal embryo.

The process of *qi* circulation is known as the "microcosmic orbit" and still actively actively practised today (see Chia 1983; 1985; Winn 2002).² Undertaken

¹ For a general survey on inner alchemy, see Needham et al. (1983); Skar–Pregadio (2000). Studies of specific texts and schools include Baldrian-Hussein (1984); Lu (1970); Darga (1999); Wilhelm (1962); Cleary (1992). For conceptual analysis, see Robinet (1989; 1995).

² There is a certain similarity between the microcosmic orbit and the Indian practice of Kundalini yoga in that both make interior energy flow backwards up the spine. However, in Daoism the

after preparatory meditations, chanting of sacred sounds, and the activation of the *qi* in the five inner organs, it is accompanied by rhythmic breathing and the regular holding of breath. Also, the technique is practised in synchronicity with the yin-yang patterns of the seasons and matched with appropriate visualisations, seeing for example the rising yang-*jing* as solar, and the descending yin-*qi* as lunar energies. Through this refinement, the *qi* in due course opens up to unveiling a kernel of grain or a pearl in the lower cinnabar field – the first concrete inkling of primordial *qi* within. Called the “mysterious pearl” or the “pearl of dew”, this is the seed of the divine elixir from which the immortal embryo will eventually grow. It indicates the successful completion of the first stage.

During the second stage, the transformation of *qi* into *shen*, the immortal embryo grows over ten months in the lower and middle cinnabar fields (abdomen and solar plexus). It is nourished by the rhythmic ascent and descent of *qi* which creates a great abdominal openness and allows the increasing sublimation of interior *qi* into spirit. Understood as a reversal of the cosmic process of creation, it involves reverting the five phases to the three primal forces (water, fire, and earth), and the coupling of the reversed energies of fire within water (yang within yin) and water within fire (yin within yang) – the latter often expressed with the help of the symbols of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes). More primordial *qi* is assembled and the three cinnabar fields are turned into powerful alchemical cauldrons for its further refinement (Winn 2002, p. 18).

This process requires the strongest meditative awareness yet – long periods of quiet sitting and deep inner stillness. After ten months of nurturing with primordial *qi*, the newly developed subtle body, the immortal embryo is ready to be born. For this, it is moved gradually upward along the spine until it reaches the upper cinnabar field in the head. From there it can leave the body through the top of the head, undertaking excursions to the celestial spheres as it pleases. The birth of the embryo into a free-moving spirit power signifies the adept’s rebirth on a new level and a new yin body, an immortal being of softness, purity, and light.

The third stage, following this spiritual rebirth, is not described in great detail in the texts. They mention that the yin body is increasingly transformed into a body of pure yang, essentially through deeper absorption and meditative practice. Eventually it becomes pure, luminous spirit and is reintegrated into cosmic emptiness. In the course of this process, the adept acquires supernatural and magical powers that are, however, not considered of major importance by the tradition. The main objective is final deliverance, achieved through the overcoming of individual identity and all body-mind duality.

The modern school of inner alchemy as taught by Mantak Chia subdivides this last stage into five levels:

goal is to circulate *qi* all through the body and gradually grow a spiritual self within, while in Yoga, the practice serves to open the energy centres in the torso and guide the energy upward in a linear (rather than circular) flow to eventually achieve union with an absolute self somewhere above the head. See Gyatso (1982); Short–Mann (1988); Winn (2002).

1. the birth of the immortal child through the absorption of higher forms of yin and yang, the sun and the moon, and by opening communication with the five spirit centres and the divinities of the four directions;
2. the maturation of the immortal child through feeding of the true elixir of the sun, a series of meditations arranged according to one's astrological birth elements that involve the absorption of planetary power and ecstatic travels to the solar system;
3. the crystallisation of the primordial spirit by focusing on the centre in the head and there absorbing and interiorising various astral forces, such as the Big Dipper, the Polestar, and the four Great Star quadrants, eventually attaining the ability to travel freely around them;
4. the merging of Heaven and Earth through opening a cosmic void within, where Heaven and Earth come together in primordial unity and where the physical body and personality of the adept fully dissolves into primordial *qi*;
5. union with the Dao, a spontaneous event that occurs when virtue, destiny, and cultivation are complete (Winn 2001, pp. 28–30).

Within this overall framework, then, two major sets of experiences can be described: the sense of energetic openness and interior subtlety as a being of pure *qi* when the microcosmic orbit is fully opened; and the mystical realisation of the spirit being both within the body and in its travels through the otherworld.

The Microcosmic Orbit

An early description of the transformative experience of the microcosmic orbit is found in the *Xiwang mu shize* (Ten Rules of the Queen Mother of the West), a work on women's inner alchemy of the 18th century (Despeux 2000, p. 397). The text notes that the *qi* refined through extensive breast massages will spontaneously begin to move about in the body. Once adepts become aware of this, they should actively guide it downward through the abdomen and divide it into two streams at the hips, spiralling it to the left and right in the course of thirty-six respirations. Getting warmer and more active, the *qi* begins to move up the spinal column, first slowly and hesitantly, then with increasing speed and vigour. To unblock hindrances along the spine, adepts clap their teeth seventy-two times and take thirty-six deep nostril breaths before the practice. To prevent *qi* from staying in the genital area and flowing out of the body, they contract the muscles of the pelvic floor with some force and place both hands over the pubic bone, at the same time actively visualising the upward flow of *qi*.

Once the *qi* has begun its upward course, practitioners raise both hands overhead, spreading and releasing the fingers at regular intervals twice thirty-six times, first slowly and lightly, then a bit faster. Next, they place their hands on their hips and shrug the shoulders thirty-six times, allowing the *qi* to pass through the Double Pass at breast level, the upper spine, and the Jade Pillow at the occiput. Any blockages found there can be further dissolved by clapping the teeth and concentrating on the nape of the neck. Once the *qi* has moved all the way up through the Niwan Palace

to the top of the head, adepts move the lower lip above the upper to encourage the *qi* to descend along the front of the skull toward the nose.

They roll the tongue against the upper palate to establish a connection between the two central energy meridians in the torso, the Governing and Conception Vessels, thus allowing the sweet dew of the *qi* to descend further. It flows down naturally towards the Purple Gate near the heart, where it is held for a short period. Moving further down through the abdomen, it divides at the hips and is spiralled thirty-six times as before, then concentrated in the cinnabar field and rotated thirty-six times each to the left and the right (Despeux 1990).

This free flow of *qi* through the body brings with it a sense of ecstasy and an increased subtleness of bodily perception. It constitutes the reorganisation of personal consciousness and bodily awareness on a subtler and more refined level. Practitioners gain a sense of being part of the flow of the Dao rather than separate individual entities.

A first-person account of this experience of the microcosmic orbit has been transmitted from the early 20th century, when Jiang Weiqiao (1870–1955), a learned and sickly young man who later became known as Master Yinshi, experimented with Daoist inner alchemy to cure himself of tuberculosis. To achieve his self-healing he set up a rigid schedule of meditation and physical exercises, establishing a daily routine that closely resembled monastic discipline. He got up around three or four in the morning and practised “quiet sitting”, as he calls his meditation, for an hour or two. Breakfast and a short hike, “always facing east, to absorb the energy of the rising sun” (Jiang 1985, p. 90), were followed by a rest and study period to culminate in another phase of quiet sitting around ten o’clock. After lunch he would spend some time pacing slowly around the room. Beginning at about three o’clock, he practised the seven-stringed lute or went out for another walk. Dinner and another two hours of sitting in the evening concluded a busy day of self-healing.

In the course of a year, he managed to strengthen his *qi* and began to experience its strong power within:

I had started my regimen on the fifth day of the third month of the year 1900. However, I had to endure many pains and hardships and I was remiss and idle in some thing or another practically every day.

Later I learned how to leave things to nature, and my spirit became fresher and healthier every day. Before, when I had gone out for a walk I would make it for two or three miles, then had to rest for tiredness and exhaustion. After a few months of practice, once I got going I could walk on for ten miles and more and never feel the strain.

Every time I sat down to meditate, I would focus my awareness on the cinnabar field in the lower abdomen. I could feel a cloud of hot power there. It came and went, rose and ebbed. I was quite amazed by it.

Then, on the twenty-ninth of the fifth month, during the evening sitting, it happened first: All of a sudden there was this intense rumbling movement in the cinnabar field in my lower abdomen. I had been sitting in quiet meditation as usual, but this was something I really could not

control. I was shaken back and forth helplessly. Then an incredibly hot energy began to rise at the bottom of my spine and climbed up further and further until it reached the very top of my head. I was startled and alarmed. (1985, pp. 91–92; Kohn 1993)

In traditional terms, this experience reveals the power of the primordial *qi* over all living beings and is a first sign of the practitioner's growing oneness with Dao, an initial step toward the dissolution of ego and the attainment of perfection. For Jiang Weiqiao, it was the first discovery of an energy that pervaded and nourished his body, a powerful, yet ultimately controllable agent, not a mystical divine force of universal creation. Later, as he describes it, the experience was repeated several times until the hot *qi* that rose along his spine no longer left the body through the top of the head but returned through the face and chest area to the lower abdomen. After undergoing the spontaneous establishment of the microcosmic orbit, he continued to use his power over the circulation of *qi* whenever he felt weak or sick, sometimes guiding it to flow freely, sometimes directing it to whatever part of his body felt unwell.

Another first-person report on the establishment of the microcosmic orbit is by Michael Winn, a long-term seeker of spiritual cultivation in the Indian and Chinese traditions. In the beginning of his quest, he studied Rajneesh's *Book of Secrets* and followed its breathing instructions to the point where he could slow his breath down to almost a complete standstill. Then

one day, after two weeks practice, I felt my breath stop completely. During a long pause between breaths, I entered a deep, peaceful state, and felt I no longer need to breathe air. Suddenly my whole body shook, then exploded into an intense orgasm and I watched myself catapulted into the space around me, with a clear vision of my body expanding rapidly through the walls of the room. After this initial explosion, I felt like a mushroom cloud above a nuclear blast, with the debris of my former consciousness blown to bits and slowly raining back down on my transparent body in blissful droplets. (2002, p. 7)

Here the opening of the *qi* body is not felt as a circulation of energy but rather as an explosion, a dissolution of the former, apparently solid foundation of self and body into tiny droplets of energy that were dispersed through space and slowly came back to settle in the personal sphere. Still, the event is very similar – the *qi* manifests violently with a rumbling and begins to move entirely on its own and without any conscious control of the practitioner. This control is only learned over time and exercised carefully in proper training.

Such training is undertaken in the contemporary Daoist practice of inner alchemy in a school known as The Healing Dao, of which Michael Winn is a leading practitioner today. The Healing Dao was originally founded by Mantak Chia, a Thai of Chinese ancestry. Born in 1944, he was recognised early for his spiritual potential and began the practice of Buddhist meditation at age six. Later he moved to Hong Kong where he studied various *qi* techniques, such as Taiji quan, Aikido, and Qigong. There he also met a Daoist master, known as the One Cloud Hermit, who taught him

the secrets of inner alchemy over a period of five years. Developing his own system, in 1973 he founded The Healing Dao in Chiangmai, Thailand, and in 1978 brought it to the West.

According to Chia, practitioners begin their endeavour by becoming conscious of their inner organs and the *qi* flow within. Then they gradually learn to open the microcosmic orbit. About the experience accompanying this, he says:

Most people have some sensations during their meditation. These may be warmth, heat, or tingling at the sacrum, Gate of Life, Third Eye, or tip of the tongue, or cold or numb areas. Some people feel an effervescence like champagne bubbles. You may experience mild electric-like shocks anywhere in the body; the body may shake rhythmically or suddenly jolt.

Also, the hands, feet, or whole body may become unusually hot; in fact, you may feel strong sensations of heat anywhere in the body. Those who are visually oriented may see a light inside their heads, or points along the orbit may light up. If you have any of these sensations, you may conclude that *qi* is circulating. (Chia–Chia 1993, p. 478)

The reason for these various sensations in the body is that “we have begun to absorb *qi* from Heaven, Earth, and the Higher Self, and our channels are widening to absorb additional bursts of *qi*” (1993, p. 484). This is considered very beneficial and an important step on the way, leading to a sense of self and body that is no longer limited to ordinary consciousness but grows into a dimension of subtle energetics and cosmic connection. The mystical dimension of existence here is opened through the physical experience of the body and the reorganisation of self in terms of *qi* flow and the perception of subtle energies. Experience is determined entirely by the body – but the body is transformed into a more subtle, more cosmic, more divine entity.

The Immortal Embryo

This transformation of the body is further intensified in the second stage of the alchemical process, when the inner seed of the elixir, created by the systematic circulation and collection of *qi*, blossoms forth and gives rise to the immortal embryo. Over ten months of intense meditation, this spiritual alter ego of the practitioner grows to completion, and a primordial light begins to shine through the entire body. Adepts then enter a state of deep absorption, lying immobile as if dead, appearing pale in complexion, and apparently not breathing at all. They need a helper at this time who watches over them day and night for however long the state persists, which may well be up to six days. All noise and shouting that might startle them must be avoided, lest the tenuously growing spirit embryo be injured and the adept be afflicted by madness or demonic forces. When they come out of this absorption, nostril breathing begins very subtly and the divine light opens up. One can then call out to them in a low voice. They slowly begin to move and will gradually rise, get dressed, and take some

nourishment, still remaining vigilant since the process is not yet over. Rather, the most important part is still to come: the exiting of the spirit into the celestial realm (Despeux 1990).

The first exiting of the spirit embryo is known as “deliverance from the womb”. It is the adept’s celestial rebirth and is accompanied by the perception of a deep inner rumbling, like a clap of thunder. Then the celestial gate at the top of her head bursts free and opens wide, and a white smoky essence can be seen hovering above her. The spirit passes through the top of the head and begins to communicate actively with the celestials, transcending the limitations of the body. Before this exiting procedure, adepts actively move the immortal embryo from the middle to the upper cinnabar field, using rhythmic breathing and/or the recitation of sacred sounds.

As long as the adept has not entered a state of very deep absorption, the embryonic spirit is not yet fully detached from the *qi* circulating in the body and cannot leave. Once absorption is attained, on the other hand, and the spirit has begun to move on its own, the adept easily maintains concentration and may experience various strong internal states. For example, she may have a vision of a shower of heavenly flowers, perceive divine perfumes, or see an image of a seven-storied pagoda. According to Wu Chongyu of the Ming dynasty, “leaving the state of great absorption is accompanied by different phenomena in every individual. Some see a shower of celestial flowers, others see wind and clouds”. The *Dadan zhizhi* (Pointers to the Great Elixir) of the late 13th century similarly has:

As your perfect *qi* rises, your ears will hear the sounds of wind and rain. Then inside your head there will be the sounds of harps and gold and jade. In your Heavenly Pond [mouth], the Metal Liquid [saliva] will gush forth like a cool stream. Some will flow up into the brain, some will congeal into pearly dew, some will enter into the gullet. Its flavour will be sweet and delectable.

Later, inside your head you will hear the sounds of flutes, zithers, harps, and chimes. Or you may hear the call of the crane, the cry of the monkey, or the chirping of the cicada. ... When the spirit reaches its exit point, you will hear a huge clap of thunder. (Eskildsen 2001, p. 150)

After its first exit, the spirit learns to come and go freely and communicate widely with the otherworld. In the beginning, it moves rather slowly and does not travel far from the body, then, supported by further meditative exercises known as “nursing for three years”, it gradually gets used to its new powers, moves about faster and travels further afield until it goes far and wide without any limitation. As the spirit enters into these cosmic ventures, the adept exhibits supernatural powers: she can be in two places at once, move quickly from one place to another, know the past and the future, divine people’s thoughts, procure wondrous substances, overcome all hazards of fire and water, and has powers over life and death. Known as “spirit pervasion”, this indicates the freedom achieved by the spirit and also manifest in the practitioner.

Few first-person accounts are found on this part of the practice. Michael Winn mentions that he, at some point in his intensive training, found his sleep needs drastically reduced and experienced different spiritual powers, “ranging from bursts of telepathy and foreknowledge of the future to experiences of the entire universe collapsing into a single point” (2002, p. 8).

He also reports on a dramatic experience of cosmic merging in a situation of what the Daoist tradition calls “dual cultivation” or partner practice:

We had sat naked for a few minutes, facing each other in cross-legged meditation position to tune in. We were both suddenly overtaken by a powerful energy field with extremely intense and unusual vibrations. Not a word was spoken, as our mental, emotional, and speech faculties were completely suspended, but we later confirmed having an identical experience.

One aspect of our consciousness began experiencing a very yang orgasm, expanding out of the bedroom faster than the speed of light, whizzing through galaxies, exploding supernovas, and then beyond. Another part of us was orgasmically imploding inward with opposite and equal force, grounding and concentrating the great intensity in our physical bodies. (2002, p. 26)³

Here the energy fields of the two practitioners merge in an explosive and powerful manner, moving both outward as their spirits travel into the planetary vastness of the otherworld and inward as the body is opened to cosmic emptiness and primordiality. The experience is overwhelming and transcendent, yet firmly grounded in the energetics of the body, the result of years of practice and the cultivation of subtle forms of *qi*.

However, even this high level of mystical attainment is not the ultimate goal of inner alchemy, which is only reached after further meditative practice, known as “wall gazing”. This technique is adopted from Chan Buddhism, whose first patriarch Bodhidharma is said to have realised full enlightenment by sitting in a cave and gazing at a wall for nine years. In this very final phase of the process, the adept whose body is already transformed into pure light has yet to fully overcome its limits and melt utterly into cosmic emptiness. The process takes nine years or 3000 days, a number symbolic of highest yang and great completion.

A poem attributed to the great lady adept Sun Buer (1119–1182) describes it as follows:

All your tasks already well fulfilled,
Just sit down in a corner, concentrate the spirit,
Feel your body rest on purple clouds,

³ A similar experience, reported by an outside observer, is also described in Shi (2002). Here a Daoist master demonstrates partner practice for a visitor, inviting a Buddhist nun to join him. They remain fully clothed, but streaks of light energy begin to flash to and from their bodies, creating a *qi*-field of movement and bliss.

Your whole being calm, floating on weak waters.
 The *qi* forces melt together, yin and yang unite,
 Spirit, Heaven, Earth all are only one.
 Concluding the great work, you see the Gate of Jade
 Emerging from the mists – and heave a deep, long sigh.
 (Chen 1934; Cleary 1989)

The deep meditative absorption in this stage, perfected over long years of practice, involves the attainment of complete purity, tranquillity, and nonaction. Mind and spirit are no longer of this world but illuminate the infinite, and the adept is fully integrated into the heavenly spheres. Eventually he or she sheds her earthly form and ascends upward, mounting a cloudy chariot or riding on an immortals' bird. She receives formal empowerment from the palaces above and becomes an acknowledged member of the heavenly host. Received by the divine ladies at the court of the Queen Mother, she is led to the immortals' paradises and attains the ultimate state of mystical achievement.

Conclusion

The mystical experience in Daoist inner alchemy, the most recent and still practised form of Daoist cultivation, can therefore be described as a form of subtle body ecstasy. Practitioners learn, through breathing, gymnastic, and meditative exercises, to open themselves to a level of experience that is not accessible to ordinary, dualistic, outward-oriented consciousness. They realise on an experiential level – as opposed to the purely theoretical or intellectual understanding of concepts and doctrines – that the universe consists of various fields of *qi*, primordial, postnatal, yin, yang, fire, water, five phases, and so on.

Feeling the *qi* in its different levels within, refining sexual energy (*jing*) into *qi* and *qi* into spirit (*shen*), they systematically reorganise their experience to a wider, more inclusive, more open, a strongly cosmic level. Doing so, they essentially reprogram their conception of the universe with its various signs, metaphors, and symbols towards an energetic perception, a mode of communication with nature in its own way, a *qi* based way of being in the world. In the course of this transformation, moreover, they discover internal levels of existence they never suspected and learn to interact with beings of the supernatural plane – ghosts, demons, gods, immortals, and various planetary entities. Their universe expands both within and without, and they become denizens of the larger universe, flowing streams of *qi*, pure aspects of the Dao.

Their experiences, moreover, although not commonly described in personal narratives are extraordinary and suprasensual, raising the individual's consciousness to intense levels both within and without. What, then, do they teach us about the nature of mystical experience? As seen from the Daoist tradition of inner alchemy, mystical experience is transcendent of ordinary consciousness and common perception, not transcendent in the Western sense of experiencing something totally other but transcendent in that it goes far beyond the world to a deep, underlying level of

existence that is always there, always accessible, always present, but not usually perceived.

Mystical experience, moreover, is immensely physical and takes place firmly on the basis of the body. This body, however, is not a clod-like lump of material solidity but a replica of the universe, an entity of flowing, subtle energies that are activated through systematic cultivation and take on a life of their own, superseding and eventually replacing the individual's personal consciousness. Mystical experience means the dissolution of self and body and mind into the larger cosmic flow of the Dao, the recovery of the universal power of primordiality, the attainment of a state at the original creation of all.

Mystical experience according to the Daoist tradition is also very much determined by culture. It is consciously and actively created through a series of exercises that apply physical movements, breathing techniques, and specific guided meditations. While the very highest level of total dissolution is something that happens on its own and cannot be controlled, all other stages and experiences along the way are systematically prepared and learned. This, again, is why there are so few personal narratives: people know what to expect and when to expect it, they are guided kindly but firmly by a master who knows the body energetics and can give helpful support at all stages. It is accordingly no accident that the two first-person reports on the establishment of the microcosmic orbit cited above were written after the *qi*-flow opened up unexpectedly and without a teacher's guidance. The practitioners were surprised and amazed and wondered what they had stumbled into – experiencing mystery not unlike their Western counterparts but with access to a tradition that could map their route and provide them with support and reassurance.

Mystical experience in the Daoist tradition, to sum up, is therefore more like a well-prepared, cosmic peak experience in the sense of Abraham Maslow. According to him, peak experiences are special moments of complete happiness, fulfilment and meaning. Transcending the ego and giving people a sense of unity with all-that-is, they may come about through love, creativity, art, or being in nature, and are characterised as times of greatest maturity, individuation, and selflessness, moments of perfect health and unity (Maslow 1964, p. 73). They are common to humanity but differ in degree and interpretation. Although arising of their own accord, they can be invited to occur. The more an individual accepts peak-experiences positively and acknowledges them as a meaningful part of life, the more frequently they recur. The higher the frequency of peak-experiences, the more positively they are felt and the more the individual's consciousness moves into what Maslow calls Being-cognition, the psychological equivalent of the selfless cosmic consciousness of the mystic, a state of openness and freedom and a sense of rightness and oneness with the cosmic flow (Maslow 1964, p. 83).

Daoists in the tradition of inner alchemy, therefore, use the worldview of intermingling, flowing *qi*-fields to create an environment that invites peak experiences of varying strength and intensity, from the smooth and open *qi* circulation in the microcosmic orbit through the sense of spiritual presence in the creation of the immortal embryo to the ecstatic excursions into the far reaches of the universe. Daoists

learn to be open to the *qi* reality within and without, they train to flow along with it, and they attain mystical transcendence both within this world and within this body.

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