

Immortal Taoist Rituals

The candidate then receives the main ritual instruments: the sword and the bowl of austral water, which he holds for a moment, the sword in his right hand and the bowl between the fingers of his left. These are then taken away and he receives the audience tablet, a long curved ivory rectangle, which he holds respectfully with both hands in front of his chest so that the upper edge comes up as high as his mouth. In this position, standing at the center of the altar, he will receive the final consecration.

This is administered to him by his Initiating Master normally an older Tao-shih, who is renowned in the area and is a guild member and friend of the family. The latter begins with a ritual similar to that of "the opening of the eyes" for statues and ancestor tablets, transferring his own vital energy to the ordinate. Afterwards, he read aloud the Immortal's Certificate, which he then transfers to the ordinate. The disciple then kneels before him with bowed head. The Initiating Master takes a flame-shaped pin, which he sticks onto the top of the ordinary crown. This convergent of the flame, which completes the consecrate won is gesture full of meaning. The flame, flower of Gold or Flaming Pearl, illustrates the one energy, the original vital breath (**chi**) emanating from the disciple's body. Now that he is ordained, he is able to recognize and externalize this energy, to make his body shine and to create his own universe, a place of order and peace, a sanctuary in which all beings passing through will be transformed.

He recites the formulas of invocation and consecration---which call on the Heavenly Worthies, the gods and the spirits as well as the texts of purification, elevation and confession. He beats the wood block in front of him on the central table to indicate the rhythm. This is essential for, as we have seen, the whole ritual is set to music. Imitating the external pattern of a hearing at the imperial court, with hymns, dances, presentation of petitions and banquets, the ritual is expressed in the most diverse vocal forms: recitations, psalms, canto, instrumental interludes, and elaborate gestures. The text of the ritual is there on the altar table in manuscript form and it is the assistant cantor's responsibility to turn the pages as the ceremony progresses; but the written word is a prompt, at the very most. The complexity of the ritual is such that it must be completely integrated by all a participant. It is through the music, and more precisely the rhythm, that this integration is achieved. The acolytes and the Great Master in particular identify the successive parts and exact moments of the action much more readily by ear than by notes in the manuscript.

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In China, religion was formerly not distinguished from social activity in general. Even its most distinguished representatives, the Taoist masters, were generally integrated in lay society and enjoyed no special status. In modern times and in imitation of Western culture and its concept of religion as something setting humanity apart from nature, the authorities have applied themselves to the task of classifying and dividing the people, trying in vain to convince the ordinary peasant that he was either a Confucian, a Buddhist, a Taoist, or more recently still in keeping with the party line---simply "superstitious." By definition, the Tao is indefinable and can be apprehended only in its infinitely multiple aspects. A principle at once transcendent and immanent, the Tao is unnamable, ineffable, and yet present in all things. It is far more than a mere "principle". The first meaning of the character Tao is "way": something underlying the change and transformation of all beings, the spontaneous process regulating the natural cycle of the universe. It is in this process, along this way, that the world as we see it, the creation of which we are an integral part, find its unity.

But we should be careful not to extend this notion of unity to the Tao itself. The Tao may make whole, but is not itself the Whole. It gives birth to the One, it can be the One, and then it can again split this unity into fragments, divide it. "The Tao gave birth to the One, the One to the Two; the two produced the Three and the Three the Ten Thousand Beings" says the Tao-te ching. This generative action of the Tao is called its "power" Te, a word which is also after translated as "virtue." But virtue comes from the Latin Virtues and the root word, meaning "male" whereas the Tao's action, its creative power, is on the contrary feminine.

The Tao is flux, transformation, process (“way”) of alternation, and principle of cyclical time: “Nameless, it is the origin of Heaven and Earth; named, it is the Mother of the Ten Thousand Beings”.

The absence of any definition is not only characteristic of Taoist philosophy, but also of the practice of Taoism and of its very existence in the world. For almost two thousand years now, the people have lived in communities organized around the local temple, observing festivals and holding ceremonies that correspond to the liturgical structures of Taoism and calling on its masters without, however, professing the “Taoism and calling on its masters without, however, profession the “Taoist religion” in a conscious way. As a religious and liturgical institution, Taoism, the social body of the local communities, has never had any true governing authority, or canonical doctrines, or dogma in evolving a confessional choice.

Nor in the course of its long history has Taoism ever known any internecine strife or any serious rivalry among its several branches for nothing is further from the spirit of the Tao than cabals and factions. On the contrary, Taoism tends to absorb and harmonize all its currents in order to overcome its contradictions and outlast the vicissitudes of the world. It succeeds in this not by adhering to any formula or doctrine but by modeling itself on the Tao and its effect in the reality closest to us, in our own physical bodies. “The Tao is not far off; it is here in my body” say the sages.

The historical nature of the Tao-Te Ching is shared by almost all the texts that make up the Taoist Canon. The latter, which comprises some fifteen hundred works and is representative of Taoist literature through out the centuries, abounds in work that carry no signature, no date, nor any proper name. It is as if, to their authors, linear history made no sense at all and as if individual authorship was considered contrary to the nature of things. Furthermore, Chinese official historiography, though exact and abundant, is virtually silent on the subject of Taoism, which stands apart from or even in opposition to the cult of the state and its ideology. Indeed the annalists prefer to ignore Taoism as much as possible. Therefore, the dynastic annals do not reflect its importance in the life of the nation.

In fact, it is a kind of upside-down mountain in the shape of a mushroom rising from the waters. It represents the land of immortality, either Mount K’un-lun, dwelling place of the Queen Mother of the West---the great goddess of the setting sun and of death, who offers initiates invited to her banquets peaches that confer Long Life---or else the island of the rising sun, in the sea of the East, home of the Immortals. On the distant mountain of Ku-yeh live divine beings. Their skin is cool like frosted now and they are delicate and shy like virgins. They eat no cereals, only breathe wind and drink dew. They can protect all beings from the plague and ripen the crops. These men! What power [te]! They embrace the Ten Thousand Beings, making them into a single one. The men of this world may beg them to bring order but why would they tire themselves with the concerns of this world? These men! Nothing can hurt them: were the waters to flood even to the sky, they would not perish; were it to become so hot as to melt stone and burn the land and mountains, they would not even feel warm.

Immortals mentioned above: light, shy, doing good without acting or interfering, so absorbed in the universe that they gather all of creation into themselves. The great deluge and the great heat wave are apocalyptic themes; only the real Being, the True, the Pure will survive. We also find here a mention of the abstinence from grains, which is a characteristic aspect of Taoist dietetics. The simple mention suffices to call up the vast range of practices for “tending life” in the search for immortality.

Among them, shen, referred to above, constitutes the purest of the celestial energies. Shen is a regulating element, which is also called hun, “cloud soul.” In opposition to these heavenly spirits stands the soul corresponding to the terrestrial ch’i, called ching. From a physiological point view, ching designates bone marrow and sperm or menstrual blood. Ching resides in the kidneys, shen in the heart (the organ of thought).

	Cosmological	Physiological	Theological
Higher	Shen	Hun	Shen
Lower	Ching	P’o	Kuei

Each human thus has god-souls and demon-souls, which differ from the great gods of the pantheon only in their relative strength. The hun fills the role of director-spirits. Enjoying freedom of movement, they leave the body during sleep or trance. It is assumed that they go to Heaven at specific times to report on a person’s activities; but they are just and accuse their host only in the case of a serious sin. This controlling function is common to all the gods.

The p’o on the contrary, deliberately aim to destroy us. They are the spirits of the skeleton, that which is heaviest in the human body, most earthbound. This close tie to the earth makes it difficult for them to tolerate the authority of the higher spirits. They try by every means to free themselves in order to rejoin their natural environment---to enable the skeleton to return to earth. It is, therefore, the job of the director spirits (shen, hun) to dominate, discipline and contain them.

If a person reaches the natural term of his life, that is, the end of his phase or his revolution in the cycle, then everything is in order. His higher souls his shen---go to make up an ancestor, whereas his bones---his p’o---are buried according to the science of Chinese geology so that their power may be mastered and be beneficial to his offspring.

The souls of the dead are the treasure of the living: each family possesses in the hun and p'o souls of its ancestors a certain number of vital spirits, which constitute a sort of charisma familiarly. By virtue of its very complexity, the human body is the eminently able to charge itself with energy and thus to transmute itself. "Of all beings, the human is the most spiritual" say the Taoist texts, for with a round head (like Heaven), square feet (like Earth), five viscera (like the planets), and so many other points of correlation with the surrounding universe which can be put into correspondence with a great many spatiotemporal cycles. He or she is able to preserve this body thanks to everyday religion, as well as to work towards its perfection by conscious, directed action. Thus, each person can not only live a healthy life, but also radiate energy, that is, become transcendent.

Immortal's Certificate

Conferred by the Chancellery of the Three Heavens, granting admission to rank and office. Respectfully, it is noted that the Tao is unique and venerable as the creator of the Three Heavens that, of the ten thousand practices, keeping is the most precious. Thus, neither the tin staff (khakkara) [of Buddhists monks] nor the white robes [of sect members] can be considered admirable; only that which is transmitted secretly between allies and is capable of forging a True Heart may be considered fit to promote civilization and bring glory to the country, to bring peace to the family, and to preserve oneself. On this day, there is in this prefecture disciple so-and-so heir to the ritual [tradition], whose Fundamental Destiny is controlled by his birth in such and such year (full date), and controlled from above by such and such star of the Dipper constellation.

Considering that the above-mentioned disciple has sought refuge with his whole heart in the Orthodox Tao, that he intends to serve the Mysteries, and that he wishes to receive the transmission of the liturgical rites, without, however, having found an Eminent Master, and fearing that his name might not be known in the Palaces of the Heavens, and that he might not have any authority in the Offices of Hell, he was fortunately able to find heads of the community (their names are inserted here) who took from their own possessions to prepare the appropriate ceremonies. They have observed that the above-named disciple has a respectful behavior, that he is fully and firmly resolved, and that, consequently, he deserves that ordination [literally: "passage"] be conferred on him.

The disciple has respectfully presented incense and pledges in order to invite so-and-so, as Initiating Master, to come into the house [of the disciple] to install a ritual area and to lead the rites of transmission there. Henceforward, when the above-named disciple---who has taken the oath "to effect transformation on behalf of Heaven" and to save men and benefit all beings---performs any liturgical services, at his home or elsewhere, we hope that he will obtain an immediate response, that by the solemn rites the gods will rejoice and the demons will submit, and that by the acts of purification as will know peace. "The human body is the image of a country" say the Taoists. There they see mountains and rivers, ponds, forests, paths, and barriers, a whole landscape laid out with dwellings, palaces, towers, walls, and gates sheltering a vast population. It is a civilized state, administered by lords and their ministers. One obtains the inner vision by looking within, by turning the pupils to the inside and keeping the eyes half-closed to let in light from the outside. The eyes not only relay light from the end the moon, but also are considered to add their own luminous energy, so as to become themselves the sun and the moon of the inner universe. These sources of light are to be directed toward the center, in the head between the eyebrows. In the center, there is a third source of light, identified with the pole Star (the third eye), which acts like a mirror and reflects the light of the eyes and directs it within.

What do we see there? The landscape of the head consists of a high mountain, or rather a series of peaks around a central lake. The lake lies midway between the back of the skull and the point between the eyebrows (the Pole Star and mirror). In the middle of the lake stands a palatial building, where there are eight rooms surrounding a ninth, central one. This is the Hall of Light (ming-t'ang), the house of the calendar of the kings of ancient China. In front of this palace and the lake around it, lies a valley (the nose). The entrance to the valley is guarded by two towers (the ears). Inside one, hangs a bell and inside the other, a stone chime. Whenever someone passes, they are struck---something we perceive as the ringing of the ears. At the far end of the valley runs a stream bringing water from the big lake into a smaller one at the other end, where it rises like a fountain (the mouth and saliva). A bridge (the tongue) crosses over the smaller lake to a lower bank where there stands a twelve-story tower (the trachea). It marks the border between the upper world and the middle regions.

These regions have their own sun and moon (the breasts). The middle world is covered by the clouds (the lungs), which hide the central constellation of the Dipper. Below it is a large dwelling, colored bright red (the Heart). In front of this Scarlet Palace lies a courtyard of yellow earth (the spleen); this is eye Yellow Court, the body's ritual area and the meeting place of its inhabitants. Opposite the court stands a simple structure called the Purple Chamber (the gallbladder), which is the place of retreat, the silent room adjacent to the ritual area. Farther on there is tall building called the granary or warehouse (the stomach)?

Beyond the stomach, a forest indicates the location of the liver. In this area one also finds the altars of the God of the Earth and the god of the Harvests (the large and small intestines). Now we have reached the frontier of the middle region.

The Cinnabar Field is the root of the human being. This is the place where the vital power is kept. The five energies [of the Five Phases] have their origin here. It is the embryo's home. Here men keep their semen and women, their menstrual blood. Meant for the procreation of children, it houses the gate of harmonious union of yin and yang. Three inches under the navel, adjacent to the spine, (the Cinnabar Field) lies at the base of the kidneys. It is scarlet inside, green on the left, yellow on the right, white on top and black on the bottom. It is four inches around. Its location three inches below the navel symbolizes the trinity of Heaven, Earth, and Humans. One is Heaven; two, the Earth; three, the Human Being; four, Time. That is why the (Cinnabar Field) has (a circumference) of four inches. It is modeled on the Five Phases, which is why it has five colors. The Cinnabar Field is located in the region of clear water, in the village of the High Hill: it is also called the Palace-that-keeps-the-Essence.

The vision of the lower region as described by the Book of the Center corresponds to that of a body reclining on its back, the usual position in ancient meditation. The highest point of the body, that is the hollow summit of the K'un-lun Mountain, is thus the navel. The whole land-scape of the body is organized around this central point: "The human destiny is the navel, called the Central Summit, the Great Abyss, the K'un-lun, the Solitary Pillar, also named the Five Fortresses.