

Taoist Esoteric History – Mantak Chia

To some the phrase "Taoist yoga" may conjure up the ancient stances of the Chinese martial arts or the stylized poses of the Peking opera. But Taoist yoga has little to do with poses or stances: rather, it is a precise science of cultivating the body's subtle energy, or Chi, for balancing and healing the body and mind. And according to old Chinese texts and a handful of modern masters, it is a safe and sure practice for attaining enlightenment as well. One such modern master is Mantak Chia who has been teaching the methods of his Taoist lineage in North America since 1977. Neither a scholar of ancient texts nor a workshop educated purveyor of fashionable growth techniques. Chia is apparently the genuine article — a man who has studied since childhood with a series of authentic masters and has been specifically empowered to pass on to others the ancient teachings of Taoist yoga.

Taoism and Taoist Adepts

Taoism is a religion a philosophy and a way of life that has existed in China for over 2,500 years and parts of it are several thousand years older than that. Over the millennia Taoism has meant different things to different people. According to Orientalist John Blofeld, scholars identified it with the philosophies of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. To most ordinary folk, Taoism was a loose agglomeration of shamanistic and occult practices. Yogis who wanted to rejuvenate their bodies and prolong their lives combined philosophy and practice with the secrets of internal alchemy. And to mystics seeking union with the Sublime, the Tao was the esoteric heart of all those teachings. According to Blofeld. Tao (literally, "way" or "path") can mean the undifferentiated unity from which the universe evolved or the supreme creative and sustaining power that nourishes all creatures. It can mean the way nature operates as well as the course or path we should follow in order to rise above mundane life and achieve enlightenment. Taoist philosophers see the world and everything in it as "a seamless web of unbroken movement and change." What look to us like separate entities — people, animals, events, thoughts — are really just temporary patterns and wave in a dynamic flux. The aim of Taoist spiritual practice is to recognize and cultivate the harmony inherent in this flux, inherent in every dynamic situation or relationship: between oneself and the Earth, between oneself and others, and between the emotions and energies within oneself. Pursuit of inner harmony has led to great spiritual accomplishment in some, tranquility and peace of mind in others, and supernatural powers (used for good or ill) in still others. The emperors of China traditionally were fascinated with the Taoist yogis reputation for seeing into the minds of others, controlling the weather, and in some cases manipulating or harming others at a distance. They would attempt to cajole and sometimes force their Taoist advisors to use their magical powers for political ends. An unfortunate effect of this was that great secrecy and intrigue grew up around the Taoist practices. The original esoteric system was often taught only piecemeal, lest any one individual become too powerful. As a result, the teachings became scattered or were held secret by a select few. Communist suppression of religion in the 1950s and 1960s forced many Taoists underground or to Taiwan. One story, told to Master Chia, is particularly chilling. Apparently soldiers of the People's Republic of China, out combing the countryside for a periodic census, stumbled on nearly a thousand mysteriously immobile old men sitting in meditation in caves of the Five Sacred Mountains of central China. These hermits didn't respond to any stimuli, didn't seem to have any need for food or sleep, and didn't even seem to breathe. The soldiers collected them and placed them, still sitting cross-legged, in a grassy field. Then they tried to wake them. But nothing the soldiers could do would rouse them. The old men were apparently absorbed in deep meditation and were out of their bodies traveling in other dimensions — a very high state in Taoist practice. To the Chinese army, however, these silent meditators were a menace. Word of their existence might spread among the populace and rekindle the peasants' deep-seated reverence for the ancient teachings. The Chinese government, still embattled with traditional Chinese culture, could not afford to have the people learn of these remarkable adepts — so the army doused them with gasoline and set them a fire. In the light of such stories, it should not be surprising that Taoism has only begun to reemerge in the last few years. Yet Taoist practices continue to permeate Chinese culture. Today hundreds of millions of mainland Chinese practice Chi Kung exercises and t'ai chi ch'uan; and acupuncture and herbology, offshoots of Taoist internal alchemy, remain very popular. In addition, Peking's White Cloud Taoist Monastery now boasts 40 young adepts, who are strictly celibate and vegetarian, wear traditional black robes, tie their hair in Top knots, and study the internal alchemy of the Dragon Gate Sect. Yet translations of Chinese texts and Taoists willing to teach their secrets have remained scarce for Westerners until Mantak Chia decided that these Taoist methods were far too valuable to be kept hidden. Born in Thailand in 1944 of Chinese immigrant parents. Chia says he learned the internal alchemy directly from an accomplished Taoist adept. White Cloud Hermit, who fled his mountain cave in China during World War II and settled in the mountains outside Hong Kong. Young Chia was a particularly apt candidate to inherit this venerable tradition. As a child of six he practiced Buddhist meditation with local Thai monks and white in grammar school in Hong Kong, learned t'ai chi chuan, aikido, and Hatha Yoga from two Chinese masters. Later while in his 20s, he studied Kundalini Yoga from an Indian yogi in Singapore. From various other masters the young Chia learned a synthesis of Taoist, Southern Buddhist and Ch'an (Zen) teachings: a

healing technique called *Buddhist Palm*: a new martial arts system combining *Thai Boxing* and *kung fu*: a secret Shaolin technique for collecting internal energy and powers and the *Iron Shirt* and *Steel Body* techniques for strengthening muscles and tendons. His primary teacher however, was *White Cloud hermit*, who taught *Mantak Chia* every level of what he now calls *Taoist Esoteric Yoga*.

What is Taoist Yoga?

Like meditational Indian yoga, *Taoist Esoteric Yoga* cultivates the subtle life force its Indian counterpart, *Taoist yoga* recognizes various kinds and levels of *chi*. The goals of both systems are the same spiritual growth and ultimately, enlightenment. In other ways, however, *Taoist yoga* differs from the Indian system. For one thing *Taoists* do not see the body and its pleasures as *maya*, illusion. But rather as a valuable storehouse of energy and impulses, *Physical pleasure* is thus not to be transcended immediately, but first cultivated and utilized, and then transcended only in the final stage of development. *Taoists* also do not use subtle vibrational methods, such as mantras and visualizations, to transform gross emotions and impulses into higher, spiritual ones. Rather, they use subtle energies to awaken even subtler and more powerful energies, which are used in turn to awaken yet more refined and powerful energies. The first technique *Master Chia* teaches, for example, is called the *Micro cosmic Orbit*. (See the sidebar accompanying this article.) In this practice, *ch'i* is first collected in the navel area and tailbone, up the spine to the perineum and tailbone, up the spine to the crown, and down the top of the head and face to the palate. The tongue is then touched to the roof of the mouth, completing a circuit between the "governor meridian" along the back and the "functional meridians" along the front of the body. After returning to the navel along the throat and chest, the *ch'i* continues to circulate around the body along this new orbital path. *Taoists* believe that all *ch'i* is generated in the navel area, in the subtle energy center called the *tan t'ien* (corresponding to the Japanese *hara* and the yogic third or *manipura chakra*). The energy from other subtle dimensions is believed to enter the physical realm at point. If one concentrates on the navel. *Taoists* teach, one can feel an accumulation of warmth and tingling energy in the area, and with proper instruction and practice one can learn to use this *ch'i* to great advantage, awakening the innate healing energy in the body and conferring ever-increasing health benefits, this technique is said to open up the circular meridian route, which is used later in more advanced practices. It is also the first step in learning to consciously direct *ch'i* another technique needed for advanced inner work. After mastering the *Microcosmic Orbit*, the *Taoist yoga* student learns how to send *ch'i* along several other subtle channels, the arms and legs: the vertical channel, or "thrusting route." That is said to arise through the middle of the body from the perineum to the crown: and the waist, or "belt route." In the *Fusion of the Five Elements* practice the student learns to harmonize the different kinds of internal energies recognized by Chinese medicine (hot, cold, warm, cool and dry, and mild), energies traditionally associated with specific internal organs. This harmonization is said to create what *Master Chia* calls a kind of perfect inner weather, which greatly enhances digestion and, more importantly, balances and harmonizes the emotions.

Transforming Sexual and Emotional Energy

According to *Master Chia*, negative emotions, instead of being released, acted out, or "dumped" on others, can be gathered in the *pakua* (crucible or cauldron) in the *tan t'ien* and transformed back into neutral *ch'i*. When these negative emotions have been drawn from their organs of origin (anger from the liver, sadness from the lungs, arrogance from the heart, fear from the kidneys, and worry from the spleen), the various corresponding virtues begin to emerge. These virtues can then be blended and transformed into compassion, which is the essential food of the spirit body. "Without compassion," *Chia* explains, "Advanced spiritual practices are impossible." "But most people are not ready to develop compassion," he continues. "They need to develop their physical and energy bodies first. So we teach them about energy and health. The energy or soul body is like a booster rocket to boost the spirit body free of this incarnation."

Taoists claim that when the physical energies are properly balanced and transformed, the physical body gives birth to an energy (or soul) body, which in turn gives birth to the spirit body, the vehicle through which we achieve enlightenment. In other words, basic *ch'i* can be used to generate subtler and still more powerful *ch'i*, and so on as one works one's way through ever-more spiritual dimensions of being. The most powerful way to generate *ch'i*, say the *Taoists*, is to cultivate and transform — or, as *Master Chia* puts it, "recycle" — sexual energy. He teaches methods for utilizing sexual energy while in an unaroused state by tapping the abundant reproductive energy of the ovaries and testicles. He also teaches methods for utilizing the energy of full sexual arousal, the most powerful *ch'i* generator of all, both in solitary practice (self-stimulation) and together with one's lover. *Master Chia* differentiates between ejaculation and orgasm and between what he calls "inward" (or "upward") and "outward" orgasm. "Sexual energy is spiritual energy," he claims, "and should be worked with rather than suppressed. One can't perform advanced spiritual practices without first working directly with the physical energy." As a result, *Chia* encourages his students to have orgasms during lovemaking but teaches them how to rechanneled the energy inward and upward for spiritual purposes. According to *Master Chia*, a man can have many "inward" orgasms without ever ejaculating.

Internal Alchemy

The most advanced practices of Taoist yoga, known in traditional texts as “internal alchemy,” utilize the subtle channels that have been opened, the internal elements and emotions that have been balanced, and the energies that have been stimulated and accumulated in other techniques. Western readers have often been confused by the coded language used in these texts, with their reference to “cinnabar,” “lead,” and various internal pots, furnaces, and cauldrons for forming a “golden elixir” and an “immortal fetus.” According to Chinese scholar and Taoist practitioner Kenneth Cohen, even texts in the original Chinese are difficult to understand, probably because, he says, the words were meant as mnemonic devices for those already initiated into the yogic practices. Cohen says that even the well-known classic *The Secret of the Golden Flower* was grossly mistranslated, by Richard Wilhelm, into ethnocentric Western psychological terms. Mantak Chia explains and teaches these heretofore secret alchemical processes very simply, to those of his students who have learned to generate an abundance of the more refined levels of ch’i. He calls them the Lesser and Greater Kan and Li practices, or “steaming.” In these practices the energies of two or more chakras are combined with the energy of the sexual organs and drawn to the navel. The heat or internal fire generated is said to “boil” the energy in the navel cauldron (pa kua) to a steam, which is forced under pressure up the subtle channel in the middle of the body to the crown of the head. According to Mantak Chia, this “steaming” practice causes the physical body to undergo a profound change. The heart and circulatory system become much more efficient: the circulation is increased, but the heart rate is slowed. The immune system function is enhanced, as is the general physical vitality. The thymus gland in the chest, which in most adults has atrophied, begins to regenerate and grow larger, and the pituitary gland in the middle of the head also alters and grows. These glandular alterations start to enliven and expand the person’s spiritual faculties — or, as mentioned earlier, the physical body “gives birth to the soul (or energy) body.” At first this soul body is just a baby, “fed” by the nourishment of the regenerated glands, particularly the thymus. At a certain point of development, after the soul body is fully grown, it in turn gives birth to the spirit body, and the pineal gland, just above the pituitary in the middle of the head, begins to enlarge. At first the spirit body too, is just a baby, but it receives, nourishment from the ever-more-refined ch’i of the physical and soul bodies. Ancient Taoist texts make reference to “immortals,” Taoist masters hundreds of years old who live on dew, pine nuts and the invigorating high mountain air. These texts also refer to generating a “fetus,” through alchemical practices, that later becomes an “immortal spirit body” capable of taking the adept all the way to the highest enlightenment. According to Mantak Chia, this is exactly what “steaming” and other advanced practices are designed to do. The Taoist yogi does not become physically immortal, but rather becomes capable of exceptional longevity and youthful health and vigor. These elderly adepts often look like men and women of middle years. White Cloud Hermit, for example, Mantak Chia’s primary teacher, still had black hair, an unlined face, and the vigor of a young man at the age of 96. The yogis’ remarkable longevity and health allows them to continue their advanced practices for many decades in one lifetime. “The physical body is the starting point,” says Mantak Chia, “and it contains the potential ‘wealth,’ or ch’i, to take the person all the way to enlightenment.” In the Taoist system the “wealth” is increased by the preliminary and advanced practices, particularly the conservation and recycling of sexual energy. This “wealth” is then transferred to the next body, the energy body, where it is refined further and ultimately passed on to the infant spirit body. When the spirit body has grown to adulthood, the Taoist adept can leave the physical and energy bodies behind and ascend to full enlightenment. “Which is more important in reaching a distant shore,” asks Mantak Chia, “the boat, the engine, or the captain?” The physical body is the boat, he explains; the soul body is the engine that powers the boat; and the spirit body is the captain that is in charge of the whole trip, the one who eventually steps onto the shore and leaves both boat and engine behind. The idea of growing new subtle bodies for spiritual purposes sounds very much like the old Indian yogic belief, which is shared by some Western metaphysical schools, that we have different subtle sheaths, or bodies, on different dimensions — the emotional astral body, the mental body, the causal body, the soul body, and so on. As we grow spiritually, these higher bodies are said to awaken from their latency, and we begin to inhabit them more, and our physical bodies less.

Taoist and Indian Yogas Compared

One major difference between the Indian and Taoist yoga systems is that the Taoist do not combine ch’i cultivation with devotion to a teacher. Master Chia is very insistent on this point, claiming that Taoist students do not seek the teacher’s grace or power for spiritual awakening, but rather look to the master for instruction on how to awaken their own latent energy potential. He does admit that Taoist teachers will direct some of their own ch’i into a student’s meridians to give a momentary boost, as his own teachers did and as he does with his Microcosmic Orbit students. But one need not surrender one’s will to the master or create an alliance of devotion and dependence. Indian and Taoist yogas also differ in their handling of kundalini energy. Certain meditation practices, breathing techniques, and other methods are said to arouse this latent energy, causing it to ascend through the central subtle channel in the body, piercing and opening each chakra as it rises, until it fuses with the crown chakra at the top of

the head, (See “Kundalini Demystified” in the September October 1985 issue of Yoga Journal.) So powerful is this arousal that practitioners — particularly those without adequate instruction or guidance — occasionally undergo a “kundalini crisis.” an arousal that has apparently gone awry. People in crisis may experience hallucinations, intense and unpleasant physical sensations, or frightening and seemingly uncontrollable rushes of energy or emotion. Mantak chia has a simple explanation for such problems: the energy is being improperly channeled. Taoists believe that running energy from the tailbone to the crown is only completing half the circuit. Since the head and brain are “hot” and the tailbone is “cold.” so much heat accumulates that the person may become extremely uncomfortable, and the body may even be damaged. They feel the kundalini energy should be directed down the top of the head to the forehead and palate, then through the tongue (which is placed against the roof of the mouth) to the throat chakra, and on down the functional meridian to the tailbone. This of course is exactly the route traced by the Microcosmic Orbit. The Taoists believe that its route through the lower part of the body should cool off the hot energy. In their view, to achieve a balanced spiritual development, one shouldn't just go to “Heaven” in the crown chakra, but one should also come back to “Earth” in the root chakra, thus maintaining a perfect equilibrium between the two components while still in physical existence. Bringing the energy back into the denser, more physical dimension of the root chakra and the physical body' does not coarsen the individual nor retard his or her spiritual growth. they say. After all, the physical body' is the only vehicle available to us for generating spiritual experience in the first place. Mantak Chia has worked with a number of Western mediators and yoga students who came to him, usually as a last resort, to help them with their kundalini crisis. He simply taught them how to complete the Microcosmic Orbit, and many had profound relief from what in some cases was unbearable discomfort.

Unveiling the Ancient Secrets

Although Taoist philosophy has long been available to us through translations of Lao Tzu and books about Chinese history and culture, the specific techniques of its “alchemy” or yoga have been kept as closely guarded secrets, passed from master to student only after years of preparation and initiation. Why is Mantak Chia so freely teaching these ancient teachings now? “The world can really use some help right now.” He says. “And the peacefulness, calm, health and vigor the Taoist system can give to individuals can be multiplied in our societies. Just think of what the world would be like if we were all calm and healthy and emotionally balanced.” To learn more about Taoist Esoteric Yoga or Master Mantak Chia workshop schedule, or to contact any of his nationwide centers.

Microcosmic Orbit Meditation:

The Microcosmic Orbit meditation does not consist of stilling the mind, watching the breath, visualizing a deity or symbol, or reciting a mantra. It is rather a process for generating and circulating a warm, tingling current of ch'i (vital energy) around the body at the midline: up the spine, over the head and face, down the chest and belly, under the genitals, and back up the spine, over and over again. This is not an imagined movement of one's attention over the skin, but a very palpable flow that takes the meditator into a peaceful yet energized state. According to Master Mantak Chia, when properly performed, the Microcosmic Orbit meditation confers profound and lasting health benefits, strengthening and cleansing the internal organs from within. Once the Taoist student is proficient in the technique, he or she need only focus the attention on the navel, and the circulation of warm, healing energy will begin automatically. To become proficient, however, the student must first learn to generate ch'i in the navel, then to “open” 12 more centers along the Microcosmic Orbit route, and then to pass the ch'i through each center until it begins to circulate by itself. According to Master Chia, with 15-30 minutes of practice twice a day, this practice can be learned in anywhere from several days to a year or two. Students usually learn the Microcosmic Orbit directly from Master Chia or one of the teachers he has trainee. With that in mind, we offer the following abbreviated description not as a set of complete instructions, but rather as a brief glimpse of the process, designed to whet the reader's curiosity for further, study.

Generating Chi in the Navel:

The Microcosmic Orbit meditation is done sitting on the edge of a chair, the back comfortably erect and the head bowed, slightly. Because sexual energy is a part of the ch'i that circulate through the body, men should allow the scrotum to hang freely off the edge of the chair, to keep it from being constricted in any way. The hands are clasped gently in the lap, with the left hand on the bottom and the right hand on top. The process used for generating energy in the navel is also used for generating energy in and “opening” each successive point along the route. The Taoist student concentrates on the navel and directs the inner vision there, even though the eyes remain closed. He or she presses firmly on the navel with the index finger for a minute or so, then returns to the hands-folded position, concentrating on the residual sensation of finger pressure. This is done repeatedly until a sensation of warmth, tingling, tightness, or expansion (or all of these) arises at the navel center. Once the sensation has been established, the student sits with it until the end of the meditation. (Each meditation session lasts from 15 to 30 minutes.) Some people will feel a strong and continuing warmth in the navel after only a

few session: others may need to focus and concentrate there twice daily for several weeks before any stable sensation arises. Circling the navel with the right fist ends each meditation. Men circle the navel 36 times clockwise, making ever-larger circles (but no larger than 6 inches in diameter), and 24 times counterclockwise, in circles that gradually become smaller. Women make 36 counterclockwise and 24 clockwise circles.

Opening the Microcosmic Orbit Centers

After the meditator has learned to summon energy easily to the navel center (and the finger technique is no longer needed), he or she begins to practice on the next center, the "ovary palace" or "sperm palace," using the same techniques as for the navel center. After this center is easily filled with ch'i — that is becomes warm and tingling - the student learns to open the next center, and so on around the route. Several days to weeks may be spent on each center in turn. However, the meditation always starts with the navel center and the "open" centers that follow it, with, several minutes spent concentrating on each. And every meditation ends by gathering energy back into the navel with the fist - circling method. Ch'i is not generated in the centers, as it is in the navel rather, the centers are opened so the ch'i can flow freely. The Taoists believe (and the meditation confirms this belief) that the ch'i will flow nationally through the Microcosmic Orbit as long as the various centers are not blocked. Since many centers on most people are blocked, however the initial stages of the Microcosmic Orbit concentrate on unblocking them. The most effective way of cleansing a blocked center is to focus ch'i there twice daily for several weeks.

The following centers along the "governor" (back) and "functional" (front) meridians are used in the Microcosmic Orbit:

"Sperm Palace" and "Ovary Palace": Approximately 1½ to 2 inches above the pubic bone at the level of the prostate gland in men (acupuncture point CO3) and midway between the ovaries in women (point C04). Slightly higher in women than in men.

Perineum: On the small patch of skin midway between the anus and the penis or vagina.

Coccyx: At the tip of the tailbone, an inch or so above the anus.

Kidney Point: On the "governor meridian" along the spine opposite the navel, between the second and third lumbar vertebrae (G04)

Adrenal Point: On the "governor meridian" slightly above the adrenal glands, between the 11th and 12th thoracic vertebrae (G06)

Cerebellum: At the bony protrusion on the bottom half of the back of the head, at the level of the cerebellum or lower brain.

Crown of the Head: The top of the head, corresponding to the crown chakra in Indian yoga.

Brow Point: On the forehead between the eyebrows corresponding to the brow, or sixth chakra.

Palate: The meditator places the tongue firmly against the soft part of the roof of the mouth. This conducts the ch'i energy from the brow center (in the middle of the head) through the bridge and tip of the nose into the palate and on down to the throat center.

Throat: At the base of the throat, at the level of the thyroid gland, corresponds to the throat chakra

Heart: Above the heart on the breastbone, corresponding to the heart chakra

Solar Plexus: In the inverted "V" of the ribs, over the stomach. Corresponds to the solar plexus chakra

Navel: The meditation ends at the navel, with the clockwise and counterclockwise circle.