

Embarking on the Taoist Way - Solala Towler

For me, I have not only learned from my masters but the most important way I have learned is from the people around me - the students, friends, children, even the trees and flowers. Sometimes I look at the flowers. They never charge me anything to look at them. They are so generous. The sun is so generous, passing its light to all people, poor or sick, rich, it does not matter whom. If you are standing in the sun the sun is shining upon you, so generous - the wind, the rain, all of nature, so selfless. Can we be that selfless? We are not. If we can learn from the universe itself to become selfless, then we have attained Tao.

Wandering Taoist

The cold wind blowing off the western desert ruffled the beard of the old man riding slowly atop the water buffalo. It whipped 'round his traveling cloak and made him shiver deep within his robes. He tried wrapping the cloak a little tighter around his shoulders but it did him little good. It was a bad time of the year for traveling, but that could not be helped. The stolid beast plodded on slowly toward the frontier. A horse would have been faster, but this beast was steadier, more sure-footed in the mountains and ate very little. He supposed it was a bit of reverse vanity that prompted him to travel on so humble a mount, the last vestige of the once proud royal archivist.

Lao Tan was leaving his post and his life in court behind him and heading toward the western frontier. Life in the capital had been going from bad to worse. In fact, as far as he was concerned, the whole society was falling apart. The court intrigue nauseated him, the constant political maneuvering gave him a headache, and it seemed as though cynicism was trickling down even into the lower classes. The tradesmen and shopkeepers were far more interested in making money than in being of good service. Even the farmers, the bedrock of civilization, were showing signs of dissatisfaction and doubt about their own lives.

Everywhere he looked Lao Tan saw signs that society was askew. It seemed to him that the Way had truly been lost and that things were only going to get worse. Even his students had become cynical, more interested in acquiring mystical powers than simply learning how to live in accord with the eternal Way, as if there were anything more powerful than that.

Armies were massing all along the borders of the various fiefs, ready to go at each other's throats at a moment's notice. And no longer were there chivalrous knights errant as in days past, seeking to redress the wrongs suffered by the weak at the hands of the rapacious strong. The ancient rules of combat in which battles were fought by favorites, thus avoiding needless bloodshed, were being ignored. Now, armies went at each other in wholesale slaughter, while the poor peasants whose lands they ravaged in battle suffered the loss of their crops, their sons and even their daughters to the bloodthirsty soldiers.

All in all, it had seemed like a good time to leave the festering swamp that society had become and head into the wilderness to pass his days in contemplation of the Way. So he had said good-bye to his students and his position, and since his wife had left this world of dust years before, he mounted his sturdy buffalo alone and slowly plodded toward the setting sun.

At the end of the day he reached the outermost gate of the kingdom. He slowly and stiffly dismounted and turned to the gatekeeper who had come out of his tiny hut to greet him. Wen-shih was a longtime friend and student and was about as old as Lao Tan himself.

"Master Lao," he said, coming forward, his wrinkled face breaking into a broad smile. "It's so good of you to visit. Are you on a vacation from the capital?"

"No," answered Lao Tan, "I'm afraid I'm done with all that. I am on my way out there." He pointed to the vast desert on the other side of the pass.

Wen-shih frowned. "But that way is very hard, and may even mean your death."

"No matter," said Lao Tan. "It is time for me to leave my old life behind and see what the Tao has in store for me."

Later, after a simple but delicious meal, Lao Tan and his friend sat by the fire and listened to the night sounds around them.

"Master Lao," began Wen-shih, "if you are really going, never to return, I beg you to please write something for your students so they may have some of your wisdom to refer to in the troubled times ahead."

"I am afraid that if they did not hear me when I was actually speaking to them, they surely will not listen to mere words on paper," answered Lao Tan.

"But," entreated Wen-shih, "if things are really getting as bad as you say, then we will surely be in need of whatever wisdom you can leave us."

"I dislike writing things down," answered Lao Tan, getting up and stretching. "I feel there is really no way to convey the immensity of the Way in simple words, no matter how clever or polished. Now I must go to bed, old friend. I will be leaving at first light."

Before going to bed, Lao Tan sat awhile, thinking over what Wen-shih had said. He did feel a little guilty about leaving his students and friends back at the capital. Perhaps writing a few lines would not be such a bad thing after all. It might even help him formulate his thoughts a little better in his own mind. He got out his writing implements and began mixing his ink. Then, with his brush poised over a long strip of bamboo, he stopped.

How could he possibly put into words the immensity and depth of the Way? How could he, in a few lines, bring forth all that he had experienced and learned in a lifetime of seeking the great and sublime Tao? For a moment the thought overwhelmed him. But even though he was quitting this sad and misguided world, he felt responsible to the people who were struggling under the weight of fear and ignorance. If it was possible to leave behind a small token of his concern for them, he felt he had a duty to do what he could.

And so, after taking one deep breath "from the bottom of his heels," he put his brush to the bamboo and began to write.

*"The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be spoken is not the eternal name."*

Down By the River

The old man sat on the muddy bank of the great river, fishing quietly and watching the water flow. He liked it here, out with the sun and the mosquitoes, his toes squishing delightfully in the mud, his bottom getting wet with the early morning dew. He didn't mind a little dampness. He just liked sitting by the river and watching the water flow by. His line trailed out into the water, though he used no bait. Whether or not he actually caught a fish was not important. The simple act of sitting by the river, toes in the mud, line dancing over the water, was enough for him.

The old man had been a philosopher and student of the Way for quite some time. He knew he was not popular with certain segments of society, those pedantic logicians and the like who used words as a screen to hide behind or else brandished them like weapons. His teaching had always been a bit convoluted and full of riddles, puns and a sublime sense of the ridiculous. As for arguments with other scholars and philosophers—he just wasn't interested. He often said that if two people argue and one wins and the other loses, does that mean one is right and the other wrong? Or are they both partly right and partly wrong? Or are both all right and also all wrong? Waiting for final answers is like waiting for nothing, he told his students. Look at everything in relation to the great Tao and leave differing viewpoints as they are. That's the way to live out one's life in peace and harmony.

He knew he was often laughed at behind his back, and sometimes to his face. So what? He didn't care! He knew what he knew and he also knew what he didn't know and that was enough for him. Still, his fame had spread lately and he was continually being bothered by people seeking the ultimate truth, as if such a thing could ever be conceptualized and put into plain words. Besides, it wasn't up to him to tell people the "ultimate truth." He could only share his truth, and even that changed from day to day just like the ongoing cycles of the seasons. No, he was better off here by the river alone except for the mosquitoes and an occasional bird. He loved looking at the river and thinking about the great, unfolding Way and his place in it. He had learned a lot just by sitting here and watching the water flow by. He noticed that many people's energy flow was like water. Some people just had little trickles, like a small creek. Other's energy was clogged and muddied, like a dammed up stream. Others' was wild and turbulent like a river in the spring. Others' flowed serenely along, like the great river in front of him. Still others' flowed fast and furious like the rapids he knew were up river, then at other times it grew sluggish and heavy like the part of the river that flowed past the village downstream. The trick was to find a rhythm that suited one's self and try to stick to that. It was far better to be harmonious and consistent than it was to change one's flow every other day or even many times a day. He himself had been quite turbulent in his youth, but a combination of self-cultivation and suffering had changed that. Now he just liked to sit here, toes squishing, line dancing, mind empty, bottom soaking, and enjoy the day. Suddenly he heard a commotion behind him. Two men were sliding down the muddy bank toward him. They wore the insignia of messengers for the local lord who lived on the other side of the river, in a great castle. The old man had never seen this great lord, since the lord did not condescend to travel among the common people. Years ago the old man had lived in the capital and had known many such men. They were mostly a very boring and irritating crowd, their energy stuck in their feet. They were the reason he had left the capital long ago and retired to this small village by the river.

The two messengers, who wore costly robes of silk, were struggling to hold up their hems to avoid getting them muddied. They were out of breath by the time they reached the old man, who sat with his back to them.

"Honored sir," they panted. "Are you the one they call ——?" They used an honorific title he had been given years ago at the capital in recognition of his sagehood. He thought at first of denying it but realized they already knew who he was when they first climbed down the riverbank. They were only using a formality. He knew it all so well—the empty, flowery phrases that fell from their tongues like rancid butter. Sighing, he got up slowly and turned to face them. "Yes," he answered. "I am that most unworthy person." He knew how to play the game. The two silken messengers looked at each other. Could this really be the great sage that their lord had sent them after? Why, he looked like a ragged fisherman! Yet there was something about his direct and piercing gaze that held them for a moment, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. Then, just as suddenly, it was gone again and the old man stood before them, idly picking his nose.

"We have been sent by the great lord of this province to bid you come to his castle so he may humbly prostrate himself before you and beg of you to share some small part of your great wisdom with his lowly household."

What a crock! The old man knew just what would happen if he allowed himself to be led to the castle. Hours and hours of fawning and false modesty, to be followed by days and days of being a virtual prisoner, arguing with a dim-witted nobleman who had never had an original thought in his head. He would have to deal with whatever other "sages" the noble had ensconced there to argue philosophy in front of him. All his life he had dealt with those high-minded, longwinded Confucians who confused propriety and wisdom, duty and Tao, classics and true spiritual freedom. He wanted no more to do with them.

And the logicians were even worse. How they loved to confuse and conspire with endless torrents of words-words with no spirit, no real energy behind them, words that clouded the mind and induced a narcotic, hypnotic effect that numbed the mind to the true reality of the Way. How many endless hours had he already spent trying to get them to let go of their precious concepts and opinions and open themselves to the simple, unadorned truth of the integral and eternal Way?

No, he could not stomach any more of that. He had to find a way to turn them away without incurring the wrath of their great lord. Suddenly an idea came to him. "You have the shell of a ritual tortoise at the castle, do you not?"

The two messengers did not know what to say. This old man was a little abrupt. They had expected him to jump at the chance to be set up in the castle. After all, he would be paid well for his efforts and he would be wearing much finer clothing than the old rags he presently wore and be enveloped in much richer surroundings

than this mosquito-infested, muddy riverbank.

"Yes," answered one of them, finally. "We do have a great and ancient tortoise shell which, as you most assuredly know, great sage, is used for divination at certain times of the year. "

The old man could imagine the pomp and circumstance of the divination ceremony: The ancient tortoise shell would be carried into the hall of divination between rows and rows of seated nobles and servants, stiff and formal. The procession would be accompanied by the ancient singsong music of the Confucians, more irritating and less musical than the whining of the mosquitoes in his ear. Endless speeches and formal testimonials would follow. At last would come the ceremonial heating of the tortoise shell; the cracks, which appeared on it, could then be read. Would the year in question be good or bad for the great lord and his fief? The priests were not fools; they were not stupid enough to share bad tidings, even if they read them on the tortoise shell. The great lord would not want to know about the floods, the many farmers going hungry, the diseases and the pestilence that would be visited upon the common people that year. No, the great lord would want to hear how beneficent and wise he was, what a great ruler of men he was, what a generous and compassionate father to his people he was. The very thought of it made the old man want to vomit right there at the silken feet of the great lord's messengers.

"Well," he said, "what do you fellows think? I can see you are intelligent men. If the tortoise himself had been given the choice between being slaughtered for his shell to be venerated for hundreds of years or to be left alone to drag his tail in the mud, what do you think the tortoise would have wanted?"

The two messengers looked at each other again. Was this some kind of test? They had been told that the old man was a bit odd, some even thought him crazy. They both decided to take their time in answering, just in case. Finally one of them took a deep breath and spoke. "I suppose," he said slowly, "that if it were truly up to the tortoise, why of course he would rather have been left alone to, as you say, drag his tail through the mud." "Then that is precisely what I intend to do with mine," said the old man and abruptly turned his back on them, his muddy bottom winking obscenely. He gathered up his fishing line and trudged down the bank, singing an old folk song at the top of his lungs.

The messengers watched him for some time as he walked slowly away. What would they say to the great lord? They were not even sure themselves what had just happened. To think they had walked all this way and gotten muddy and mosquito bitten for this! It was true, they would tell their lord, the old man was crazy, not a sage, not a wise man. Just a crazy old man sitting on his ass in the mud.

He spoke for a generation weary of hearing about benevolence and righteousness in the midst of slaughter. He advocated a return to simplicity in order to regain individuality. He rejected the mass behavior of man the bad animal, and urged a rediscovery of spontaneity. He believed that the only discipline was self-discipline. All that contained the possibility of good, all that was constructive and all that was evolutionary, was summed up in the phrase 'the attainment of Tao.'

He is brilliant and mystical, philosophically pragmatic, witty and delightful, successful in being untainted by the need to succeed and, most importantly he is free. He is his own person, wandering through life like wind and water enjoying its many delights without cumbersome attachments. The core of Chuang Tzu is this sense of ultimate freedom. He manages to exist quite sanely in the chaotic world, enjoying the best of humanity without being dragged under. He seems to see through all the veil of human sufferings camouflaging the eternal truth.

The true man of old did not mind being poor. He took no pride in his achievements. He made no plans. Thus, he could commit an error and not regret it. He could succeed without being proud. Thus, he could climb mountains without fear, enter water without getting wet, and pass through fire unscathed. This is the knowledge that leads to Tao. The true man of old slept without dreaming and woke without anxiety. His food was plain, and his breath was deep.

The true man of old knew nothing about loving life or hating death. When he was born, he felt no elation. When he entered death, there was no sorrow. Carefree he went. Carefree he came. That was all. He did not forget his beginning and he did not seek his end. He accepted what he was given with delight, and when it was gone, he gave it no more thought. This is called not using the mind against Tao and not using man to help heaven. Such was the true man. Walking on it forms a path. A thing has a name because of its being called something. Why is it like this? Because it is! Why is it not like that? Because it is not! Everything has its own nature and function.

Anyone who tells you they can explain the universe and your place in it for you is off the track. They are just spouting their version of the truth. Even Taoists would admit that there are as many versions of the truth or the Tao as there are living beings on this planet or any other. Certainly there are valuable guides and teachers along the way who can help us advance and gain greater knowledge, but to give up your spiritual sovereignty to someone else is a foolish thing to do. Listen to them, watch what they do, and use whatever applies to you. Take the best, then leave the rest.

He does not set himself apart from others and above them. And yet there is a difference; he differs "in his heart" from other men, since he is centered on Tao and not on himself. But "he does not know in what way he is different." He is also aware of his relatedness to others, his union with them but he does not "understand" this either. He merely lives it.

One of Lieh Tzu's stories describes two men, one the owner of a large estate and the other a lowly worker on that estate. By day the worker toils unremittingly in the fields, falls to his bed exhausted at night and dreams that he is the owner enjoying a wonderful life, full of luxuries. Meanwhile the landowner spends his nights sweating and tossing through horrendous nightmares in which he is working in his own fields all day long. He awakens exhausted each morning.

In this story we see how the balance of the Tao is enacted in these two men's dream life. The lowly worker can deal with his lot because during the other half of his life he is enjoying the luxuries of being a rich man. On the other hand, the rich man is tortured at night while he experiences the hard life that his workers must live. Eva Wong gives a wonderful description of Lieh Tzu: Lieh-Tzu lives in our world. He talks about experiences we can

understand, he speaks about life and death, fortune and misfortune, gain and loss, things we are concerned with, and problems we want to solve in our lives. He talks about the mad race for wealth and renown and the hazards of seeking social recognition. He scorns social pressure and the empty pursuits of the rich and famous. He talks about friendship, human communication, dreams, reality and learning. He speaks things we do not dare to speak of, but when we listen to him, we may smile, laugh, or nod in agreement. The awakening from ignorance is not rude but soft. It is as if someone gently shook us and woke us from a deep sleep.

He is the eternal wanderer who tranquilly takes things as they come, putting forth energy when needed but inwardly relaxed. When things go well he enjoys them to the full, though rather in the manner of someone charmed by an unexpected vista or primrose in a wood, who rejoices in their beauty for a little while, without the least desire to cling or to possess, and then passes on. When ills befall, he accepts them without repining, knowing full well there can be no up without down, no summer without winter, no growth without decay; besides, he is quick to discover beauty in the seemingly dreary and to find compensations in what to others might appear to be unmitigated ills.

To Dream the Impossible Dream

There was once a rich man from the country of Ch 'ou. He had a huge estate and many workers, whom he drove unmercifully Day after day they toiled under the hot sun to fill the coffers of the rich man.

One of these was an old man who had been working for the rich man 's family for many years. His body was nearly worn out with hard work and little rest; his muscles were stringy and his breath came in gasps, but still the foreman drove him on. At the end of the day, however, once he had laid his weary head down on his rice bag pillow, he dreamed he was a rich man with a huge estate. All night long he was waited upon by servants, fed rare delicacies and entertained by beautiful women who played lovely and haunting melodies and danced ancient and graceful dances for him. He spent the entire dream in idle pursuit and as a finale he dandled his fat young sons on his knees and laughed into the night.

Of course, upon waking, the old man was once again the lowly laborer who spent his day in endless toil. When the noonday break came and he sat heavily down to eat his rice, his face showed his weariness. His friends would then try to console him. "No need," he would say. "By day I am a slave to the rich man but at night I am the rich man. I spend half my life working his fields but the other half I spend in ease and comfort. Therefore do not pity me."

On the other hand, when the rich man, who spent his days in useless frivolity, laid his head upon his silken pillow, he tossed and turned and groaned all through the night. He dreamed he was a common laborer in his fields. All through the dream he worked, bent over, with muscles aching and sweat pouring down his face. For his noon meal he ate the coarsest rice with no flavor and, instead of sweet wine, he drank brackish water, not even tea. At the end of his labors he collapsed on his pallet, all alone in his little hut—his wife had died long ago and his children had left to find a better master far away His life meant unending toil, with no rest and no respite, for his master was cruel and demanding. This life was truly miserable.

When he awoke in the morning the rich man's muscles ached as if he truly had worked in the fields all night, his bed was soaked with sweat and his mouth tasted dry and dusty.

When he complained to his friends they told him, "Do t worry. By night you may suffer but by day you are a rich man, well respected in the business community, and you have far more than you will ever I need. You are at the top of the ladder; that is why you dream at night that you are at the bottom. You cannot have it both ways. Things must balance. That is why you have those vexing dreams."

The rich man thought about this, as each day he awakened more weary than the day before. He took to walking over his estate to try to relax his agitated mind. He saw his workers there, toiling in the hot sun all day. He noticed in particular one old man who never stopped working; he was shriveled and bent over by many years of hard labor. Yet he never complained, never shirked, and always had a small smile on his face. "I envy that man," he thought. "He has nothing yet seems so much happier than me."

The old worker saw the rich man watching him. He noticed how the rich man looked drawn and tired. His skin was pasty and drooped from his face in an unhealthy way. He noticed that the hands of the rich man, as soft and manicured as they were, shook and that his soft, fat body looked weak and tremulous.

After a time, the rich man decided it would be better if he changed his ways, since he was not happy with the way things were going. He lightened up on his workers, gave them more time off and began himself to be more physical, which, after a time, made him feel immeasurably better. Not only that, but his nightmares went away and he slept more soundly than he had in years.

As for the old man, he too began to enjoy his waking life more and did not need to escape each night into dreams. Instead he too slept soundly. As the ancient sage says: "The True Men of old forgot themselves when awake and did not dream when they slept."

The principle of the Uncarved Block or P'u in Chinese is an essential element of Taoist philosophy and practice. It is the concept of the simple, uncluttered and natural man and woman and their way of life.

The "holy fool" is one who is not actually a fool in the real sense, but is called that by a society, which does not understand his or her action. This is because the Taoist is operating outside of the norm, or what society at large considers normal. To the highly rigid and structured Confucian society of the Han dynasty and beyond, the Taoists, with their free and "wild" (in the sense of nature) ways, were often regarded as fools and rebellious outcasts, content to live" in the world but not of it."

The experience of "life as a dream" frees us from the awful burden of always having to do it right, of toiling under the enormous weight of having to be 'on the job' at all times. It frees us also to make mistakes and allows us the freedom, the privilege, of starting over again, time after time if need be. And, most of all, it frees us to change, to begin anew, to metamorphosis into whatever lovely and colorful butterfly we always wanted to be but never felt the permission or strength to become.

Remember, the Tao does not judge, it does not punish, it does not condemn. We do those ourselves. And as we judge, so also can we forgive ourselves and others who have wronged us through their own mistaken sense of reality. And we find, in that forgiveness, an even greater sense of freedom and unlimited potential—for growth, exploration, and an enlarged sense of the Tao and our place in it.

Through forgiveness, through trust, through taking chances with ourselves and others, and through returning to our "original nature" —our own sweet simple and natural self, our own "uncarved block" —that we can begin the journey that leads back to its beginning, to our original nature, or Tao.

Become the kind of person whose wish is infectious. Then what you want, others will want, and while you seem to do nothing (*wu wei*), everything will be done. The power of the infectious wish comes from certain virtues: compassion, moderation, and humility. These virtues and their power are *te*.

Te cannot be achieved, however, until you have erased the aggressive patterns etched by society into your nature. You must return to your natural self, to *p'u*. You must discard morality and ambition, for if you keep these you will never be capable of compassion, moderation and humility. When you discard some of your wishes, you will have them all.

Water is the blood of the earth, and flows through its muscles and veins. Therefore it is said that water is something that has complete faculties...It is accumulated in Heaven and earth, and stored up in the various things (of the world). It comes forth in metal and stone, and is concentrated in living creatures. Therefore it is said that water is something special.

The passage ends by saying: Hence the solution for the sage who would transform the world lies in water. Therefore when water is uncontaminated, men's hearts are upright. When water is pure, the people's hearts are at ease. Men's hearts being upright, their desires do not become dissolute. The people's hearts being upright, their conduct is without evil. Hence the Sage, when he rules the world, does not teach men one by one, or house by house, but takes water as his key.

The idea is not to avoid or run away from them or, on the other hand, try to ram head on into them, but by going slowly and assuming the quality of water, we can, perhaps, find a way to either flow around, over or under them. Like water, be patient and persevere enough to realize that in time things will change, because that is the nature of all things. The only constant is change.

Water does not judge. Water does not discriminate, it does not attach labels or attempt to use its will to bend objects or situations to its own specifications. We all want to shape situations to our own specifications in order to be happy. We all want things to go right for us as much as possible; we all want to be in the driver's seat. But as Graham says: "The alternation of joy and sorrow, life and death, is itself the Way, and we run counter to it when we strive to perpetuate joy and life." (author's italics). Later on he says, "We must respond differently to different situations; action should depend, not only on subjective standards, but on the objective situation, to which we should adjust ourselves with the immediacy of the shadow adjusting itself to the moving body."

The universal Mother is the origin of the untraceable formless energy it is called Tao. The Universal Mother comes from the interplay of formless and form nothingness or something, non-being and being. The Universal Mother is the origin of the formless and formed. She is nothingness or non-being. Thus she is the source of all things and all being. Thus, the entirety of the universe is the Universal Mother. Ancient Taoist believed that humans were born of a combination of stardust and earth elements. In other words we are literally children of the earth, aligned internally and eternally and forms.

Like a Flower Unfolding

The woman, sitting still and quiet in her little hut at the foot of the mountain, was old, even ancient. She had lived alone in her small home for more years than she could remember. She had come when she was a young woman, barely out of childhood, to escape an unwanted marriage, something quite unheard of in her time. But she had always been a stubborn and willful child, full of questions about everything under heaven.

"Where do dead people go when they die?" she had asked her father when her beloved grandmother died. The air had been thick with incense and the chanting of the Buddhist monks. Her father had sat upright and stiff at the edge of the room while his mother was chanted into the next world. His daughter sat next to him, fidgeting constantly, trying to see through the haze of incense to where her grandmother lay, stiff and so quiet. "Will I see her again, baba?" she had asked.

Her father had turned to her and hissed, "Be quiet. Do not ask so many questions; it is unseemly." Her father had been a strict Confucianist and did not like to talk about the dead. Confucius had taught that it was bad for men to talk of ghosts and spirits. Better to keep one's attention to the world of solid reality and all the myriad rules of relationship and composure.

She had insisted and was finally sent from the room. But that had not stopped her questions. "Why is the sky so blue and the earth so brown?" she asked her mother. Her mother, who worked all the time it seemed, had no time for useless questions from a silly girl and always found chores for her to do when she asked such questions. But even that had not stopped her.

"Why can my brothers study and learn to read and write but girls cannot?" she had asked. "Why must mama work all the time, day and night, while baba sits in the courtyard drinking tea and spitting watermelon seeds with his friends? How is it that big brother can learn to fight with the sword and spear and I cannot? Why, when we go to the temple to burn incense and kowtow to the gods, can we not hear their answer? Why do they say that Lady Kuan Yin hears all prayers yet she allowed *nainai* to die? Why do the gods allow the rain to stop and the fields dry up and blow away? Why will no one listen to me?" she cried loud and often.

The young girl was often punished for her incessant questions. "Do not question the natural order of things," she was told. "It has been this way for all of time and will be this way for all of time to come. You are a girl and so have already been shown disfavor by heaven," her mother explained. "You must not question, you must learn how to behave yourself like a proper lady." Beginning on her thirteenth birthday she was given lessons from a

book called the Nu-chieh. She learned that she should always submit to the males in the family and never allow any male outside of the household to behold her face. She was never to question the authority of the males in her family—first her father, her brothers and, ultimately, her husband and even her sons. She was to keep her head lowered in a room of males and to exit the room backward, with a meek and shuffling step. This infuriated her. She didn't really know why. All the women of her family accepted this guidance without question. It was their lot in life, they understood. It was heaven's will that men should rule over women. It was nature's and heaven's law. Her name was Chen Hua. Chen was her family name and Hua, or Flower was her personal name. When her parents had named her, they had expected her to be a delicate and submissive flower but they had ended up with a thorny, prickly one. No amount of punishment or lecturing seemed to make any difference. Finally, in exasperation, they decided to marry her off as soon as possible. Perhaps the strong and stern influence of a husband was what she needed. She would, of course, move into his home and be under the power of his mother, her mother-in-law. Perhaps she could force some sense into this stubborn and willful girl. It was not that her parents did not love her, but they worried that her stubborn attitude would only cause her misery in life and so wanted to spare her further suffering. They truly felt that if she would only learn to let go of her own ideas and submit to the will of heaven and become a good submissive wife, she would be more likely to have a happy life. When Chen Hua heard them planning her marriage to a neighboring farmer, a man twice her age and ugly to boot, she was furious. She would not submit to this, she vowed. But what could she do? Her parents had complete authority over her life. She couldn't just march in and defy them. It was unheard of. They could lock her in her room without food for as long as it took for her to yield. They could beat her or even kill her if they wanted without being punished by the authorities. After all, she was only a girl, and a disobedient one at that.

So she decided to run away. In those days she was fearless, and with the ignorance of youth she didn't think about the dangers in the wide and unknown world. She wrapped a few clothes and a ball of cold rice in a head scarf and stole out of her family's compound in the dead of night. No one would ever have imagined her doing such a thing and it was late morning before anyone would even notice she was gone. She intended to be far away by then. Her destination was a distant mountain, a Taoist mountain. She knew that if she could manage to get that far the Taoists would take her in. She had met one once when her mother had taken her to the temple to offer prayers for a good harvest. Chen Hua has always loved the statue of the Lady Kuan Y'm, even if she did let her die. Kuan Yin herself had been a headstrong young girl once and had been deified to become a goddess, "She Who Hears The Cries Of The World." Chen Hua loved to light incense in front of the goddess and look up into the beautiful face with its slight smile, the smile of love and compassion for the whole world. The goddess held a small flask of heavenly nectar in one hand—one drop of which was said to cure anyone of any disease or pain—and her other hand was folded in a gesture of benediction and blessing. While mother was speaking with the head priest and Chen Hua was happily gazing up at the calm, beautiful face of the goddess, a Taoist monk plunked himself down beside her. Unlike the Buddhist monks she was used to, his head was not shaved. His hair was long and a bit matted, coiled up in a loose knot on the top of his head and held with an ancient jade pin. His robe was very dusty and a bit ragged and he gave off the pleasant smell of pine trees and earth.

She, of course, did not speak to him or even look at him except out of the corner of her eye. Presently the Taoist looked over at her and, gesturing with his chin to the goddess, said "What do you think, is she pleased with all the incense and kowtowing everyone does to her?"

Chen Hua was confused. What had he meant by that? Of course the goddess would be pleased. That is what goddesses wanted, wasn't it? To be worshipped and sacrificed to. She decided to ignore this dirty, dusty Taoist and didn't bother to answer.

The Taoist turned away from the goddess then and, crossing his legs, appeared to go into a deep meditative trance. His breathing became very deep and slow; his abdomen enlarged to an alarming size when he breathed in and then shrank back in so far on his exhale that Chen Hua, out of the corner of her eye, could imagine his ribs sticking out.

Presently he opened his eyes and said, without looking around at her, "You know, all your questions do have answers. It's just that no one around here knows them."

Chen Hua jumped. How did he know about all her questions? She couldn't help but turn around and look at him. He still sat with his back to her, breathing in that deep yet forceful way. She regarded him a moment, a little afraid yet very curious.

He spoke up again. "There is a place where all your questions can be answered. Of course it is a bit far and for a girl, quite impossible to reach."

"What do you mean?" asked Chen Hua, her innate stubbornness asserting itself. "Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean that I can't do whatever I want to do!"

The Taoist chuckled to himself. "Of course, of course," he said. "I only meant that for most girls it is impossible. For some it is not only possible but of vital importance. Otherwise how can they ever hope to attain Tao?"

What did this strange monk mean by "attain Tao"? Thought Chen Hua. She had never heard of such a thing. When her father spoke of Tao he meant the natural order of filial relationship, which usually ended up meaning the submissiveness of women to men. She was not interested in that Tao: She had never heard her father mention anything about attaining Tao; he usually talked more about submitting to Tao. But perhaps this ragged monk meant something different.

She decided to admit to her ignorance, something she always found difficult to do. "What do you mean by this Tao that you speak of attaining?" she asked. When the Taoist turned around and smiled at her she felt relieved. He was not making fun of her, she decided.

"I'm afraid that to try to put the Tao into words is like trying to catch the wind in a jar. You may hold up the jar and try to catch some of the wind in it, but when you open it later you will find that it is empty. Anyone who tries to explain Tao in words will end up with an empty jar in the end. Tao is something that must be experienced, not

explained."

They sat and talked for a long time. The Taoist, who appeared to be very young but spoke as someone with much life experience, explained to the young girl that asking questions was fine as long as one was prepared to accept the answers when they came. The best answers came from Nature, or better yet, from within one's own self, deep within where the true Self Nature dwelt.

He told her a little more about the Taoist community in the mountains where anyone was accepted as a student, male or female. It was difficult to reach, he said, and only someone of strong heart and spirit could get there. But if they succeeded, there was no end to the answers that could be found there.

She had been able to get only vague directions before her mother arrived to whisk her away from this strange, hairy man. That night Chen Hua lay awake for a long time, wondering what it would be like to live in a place where she could ask any questions she wanted, and where she would be treated equally as a boy.

She was determined to find out, because that is exactly where she was going. She was not going to spend the rest of her life waiting on her husband and her sons, never allowed to have a thought of her own. She wouldn't let herself be sold into marriage to an old man who would do heaven knows what to her young body to satisfy his own male lust. She was going to reach this mountain and find these Taoists if she died trying.

She almost did die trying, too. It was a long journey for one so young. Countless times she yearned to give up, to just let go and die and be done with the endless torture of exhaustion and fear and hunger that followed her on the days of her journey. She begged and argued and even stole a few times to survive but she finally arrived with her virtue intact. She was so near death from exhaustion and starvation that the Taoists who discovered her outside the temple gate early one morning were roused to pity one who had obviously given so much of herself to find them.

Chen Hua spent the following days resting and eating the strong herbal broths the Taoists prepared for her. One, a young woman who was called Willow, spent much time with her, explaining the ways of the Taoist community. She listened to Chen Hua's many questions about what it was they did there, how they did it and why they did it and had tried to answer as many of them as she could. But most, she explained, would have to be answered by Chen Hua herself and that would take time and effort and much, much patience.

Oddly this made sense to Chen Hua, so she stopped her ceaseless questioning and decided to watch and listen, seeing how much she could understand for herself.

After she felt strong again she was introduced to the rest of the community and formally welcomed. The abbess was an old woman with a still-thick bun of white hair pinned to the top of her head. Willow told her that the abbess was over ninety years old although she looked scarcely older than Chen Hua's own mother, who was in her early fifties. Abbess White Pine welcomed Chen Hua to their community high above the world and told her she could stay as long as she liked and would be taught anything she wanted to know.

This excited Chen Hua immensely. Before long she was sitting in classes with other young girls and boys, studying the words of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu and other ancient achieved ones. She began to learn the simple yet powerful movements, many based on animal movements, that the Taoists did to begin each day. She learned about Chi, or primal energy, and how it moved through her body and how to produce a stronger and more vital current with the use of specific herbs and movements.

She learned about the Immortal Sister Yu who taught herself Taoist breathing methods from an old book she had found. At the age of fourteen, she, like Chen Hua, ran away from an unwanted marriage and went into the mountains, to search for a legendary alchemical workshop. She was also told about Immortal Sister Zhang who healed people by projecting her own energy into them. There was also Wu Cailuan, the daughter of a Taoist adept—because of her great spiritual influence, her scholar husband retired from society himself and went off with her to pursue their spiritual cultivation. She studied the sacred writings of the great Taoist immortal Lu Dong-bin and his female disciple Ho Hsein-ku.

She was taught that, as serious students of the Way, men require nine years to attain immortality while women need only three. She learned that women were considered superior to men in the ways of the Tao, that their nature was water and their substance flowers. She was taught that women are represented by the hexagram in the ancient book of the I Ching (Yi Jing) as K'un, receptiveness, not, as she had been taught in her youth, submissiveness. K'un represents the virtues of the Earth. It is symbolized by the mare. It is primal yin energy and allows all things to become manifest. She learned how to sit in meditation. Man's center is in the lower dan tien, in the lower abdomen, she was taught. Woman's center is between the breasts, the heart center. She was taught how to regulate her breath and calm her heart and concentrate on the shan zhong point, between the two breasts, just above the solar plexus. She was taught how to massage her breasts in various ways and for various numbers of circulation and then how to circulate the accumulated female energy through her waist and sexual organs and then throughout her body.

Later on she was taught more advanced practices such as "slaying the red dragon" in which she was able to stop her menses and circulate the energy that she had lost every month. Her complexion became soft and rosy and she remaining youthful for many years. She learned how to go so far into herself that the border between what she thought of as her own personal self and that of the greater universal self was crossed and she felt herself expand into a feeling of spaciousness and grandness that she had never experienced before. She felt her own Chi and that of the universal chi blend and become one in a way that allowed her to travel on the wings of light and receive answers to any question she cared to ask.

After a number of years passed she began to ask less and less and allow herself to receive more and more, naturally, effortlessly, and in that way she was able to relax into something close to Tao itself.

The Taoists were unique for their time because they received both men and women into their community, without discrimination. Indeed, they venerated the female, or yin aspect of life over the male, or yang aspect. Though they recognized that the universe consists of both, still they deferred to the female whenever they could.

"Know the yang," they said, "but hold to the yin." They spoke often of the power of the overcome the soft to overcome the hard. They used water as an example; malleable to the extreme of taking whatever shape it was enclosed in, soft to the touch yet capable of creating great canyons with its strength. They spoke of the power of patience, flexibility and surrender, surrender to the great and eternal Tao.

Look to Nature," her teachers never tired of telling her. "Nature is the greatest teacher, greater than any book or any master. Observe the seasons, watch how animals conduct themselves—how they move, how they rest, what they do when they are sick or injured."

This planet we live on is alive," they told her. "She has intelligence power. Send your roots down deep into her and draw up the pure yin Chi. The stars are alive; they move amidst the spaces of the universe in great spiral dances. They are the source of yang Chi. Each of us is a microcosm of the entire universe. Each of us is a planet, separate yet interrelated with all other stars and planets."

She learned, in her meditation, to experience that connectedness, that relationship with all life around her. "It is only in relationship to all other life," she was taught, "that we ourselves exist. Lao Tzu says we can know beauty only because of ugliness, can experience good only because of evil. Reality does not exist in a vacuum but only in relationship to all other forms of reality, including ourselves."

She learned to go deep within herself and work with her elemental forces in order to produce the great medicine, so much more powerful and eternal than any she could ever hope to make in an alchemist's laboratory. She became an inner alchemist, an inner explorer, and she traversed the mountains and deserts of her inner landscape to find ever-new places of wisdom and delight.

Her teachers spoke of Tao as "the Valley Spirit" and "the Primal Yin." They used the image of the valley to symbolize the creativity and fecundity of the Tao. "The Tao is like an empty vessel," they said; "it can be used but never emptied." They spoke of the natural superiority of women over men in the energetic sense. "Man is fire," she was taught, "while woman is water. Fire is bright and impressive but all too often burns out without attaining anything of real value. Water, while it may take longer to come to boil, remains so for a longer time and can attain great things." Women, they believed, were naturally closer to Tao and thus had an easier time in self cultivation. Secret practices were passed down from woman to woman that enabled them to reach great heights of insight and power, touch the surface of Tao and, if they persisted, to finally, one day "attain Tao," at which time they would become an immortal.

Chen Hua was still not quite sure what "attaining Tao" really meant but she was content in the knowledge she had gained and she felt stronger and more centered and rooted with each year.

For a while she had had a consort, a young man from a far away village who had traveled here, like her, to escape from a life of drudgery and ignorance. Together they had practiced dual cultivation and had shared their energies, their potent fluids. They had danced with each other on the winds of delight and had brought each other to the brink of ecstasy and then over. She had absorbed his vital essence into her own body as he did hers. Together they created a spiral of energy that reverberated into the world around them and sometimes took on a life of its own. She had also done practices to unite the yin and yang within her own body. She blended and melded her own internal energies, creating what was called the Golden Embryo, in which she gave birth to a new self. No longer was she the stubborn, ignorant girl who asked endless questions—she was now a mature and self realized woman, a sage.

Now she lived alone at the base of the mountain. She had left the community of Taoists a few years before, deciding that for the last bit of her journey it would be best to remain alone. Her years with her fellow students of the Way had been fruitful and satisfactory. Her consort had gone on to another mountain to study with a master herbalist. She missed him but felt his presence within her constantly. The experiences they had shared had bonded them forever. Even now she could feel his cool touch on her body.

Her practices were of such a deep and subtle nature that it was difficult to live in close quarters with others. She was practicing the refinement of her energy to such a level that she needed to be able to control her personal environment as much as possible and so had to leave the family of Taoists that she had spent her life with. Besides, too many pilgrims were now drawn to their once solitary community and their constant noise and equally constant questions had begun to irritate her. She smiled when she remembered the many questions of her youth but realized that, while she wanted to answer all the pilgrims' questions, it took her away from her own practice. She was too far into it now to be distracted.

So she lived alone in her small yet comfortable hut by the noisy little creek; it filled her dreams with the music of water, of the ever flowing, ever faithful power of the yin, the Primal Valley Spirit. She spent her days in meditation, alternating between still sitting and slow, simple movement. Each day brought her closer to what the ancients called "attaining Tao," when she as Chen Hua would cease to exist and her hun and po spirits would separate and return to the earth and the universe from where they came. Her immortality would be a complete emergence into the undifferentiated oneness called Tao. Then like a flower unfolding, she would open her petals to the sun and radiate the true colors and joy of life itself.

In the meantime she lived her life, simply and gracefully, and greeted each new day as a gift, a wonder and a lesson to be treasured and learned.

Chi can be thought of as "basic life force" energy, prana, breath or simply vital energy. Ted Kaptchuk calls it "matter on the verge of becoming energy on the point of materializing." In some ways, it is the very stuff of life. It is what animates us, what gives us life. It warms us, keeps our organs in their places, and directs all our movements.

There are different kinds of chi with different jobs to do. There is protective chi, or wei chi. It lies like an invisible electrical shield between the skin and the muscles. Its job is to keep out invading pathogens, or "outside evils." When our Wei Chi is low, our resistance to colds, and more serious viral invasions is weakened.

Another kind of Chi is the organ Chi. It is responsible for maintaining the strength and integrity of each organ in our bodies. When this kind of Chi is weakened, our organ functions suffer and we are likely to have trouble

breathing, digesting our food or sleeping. We may also suffer from a general feeling of fatigue.

Yet another kind of Chi is meridian Chi, which travels the pathways (called meridian or channels) throughout our bodies, linking organs to each other and to organ systems, and helping the blood move and stay within its channels. Meridian Chi is what acupuncturists tap into when they insert their needles.

Chi may also be thought of as electricity. It can't be seen, yet it most certainly can be felt. You can even think of the meridian system in the human body as an electrical system complete with junctures, fuse boxes and miles of wiring, all connecting in one great multi-level energy circuit.

Primal Chi can also be thought of as the animating, creative force of the universe.

How can the universe be alive? Because it is the continual transformation of primal chi, the pivotal energy and living soul of the universe. Primal chi functions as the subtle connection of the universe in the same way that the nervous system functions in the human body. It extends itself primordially as the self-nature of the universe.

Jing

Jing, sometimes referred to as prenatal Chi, is a combination of the Chi of both our parents which we receive at conception, and it governs our constitutions. Conception at a time when one or both parents are under the influence of alcohol, or when they are seriously unhealthy, or even when they are emotionally overwrought can lead to poor jing, which in turn produces a weak constitution. It also regulates our hormonal and reproductive systems, controls our growth throughout life, and regulates our central nervous system, including the brain, spinal cord and bone marrow. It is said that it takes seven mouthfuls of food to make one drop of blood. It then takes seven drops of blood to make one drop of jing, which is why it is called "essence" and considered extremely precious. Jing is said to be stored in the kidneys, the repositories of sexual and reproductive energy. The aging process has much to do with using up our jing (ideally little by little) as we go through life. Unfortunately men lose small amounts of jing with each ejaculation, which is why they tend to be outlived by their female partners.

Shen

The last treasure is the shen or spirit. It may also be called consciousness, that which makes us human. It gives our lives meaning and links us with our divine source. The shen is said to reside in the heart, though it is visible to practitioners in a patient's eyes (just as in the old adage that "the eyes are the mirror of the soul"). A traditional Chinese physician can tell the seriousness of a condition by looking into the patient's eyes. Bright or clear eyes indicate that the shen or spirit is strong; then the chances of recovery are good. Clouded, glazed or unfocused eyes indicate a more doubtful prognosis. The shen is also the seat of the mind. Cognitive thinking, short-term memory and the ability to reason are all qualities of the shen. It too is formed at conception, but is replenished continually thereafter.

Organs

Remember that in Taoist thought the human body is a microcosm of the entire universe. Our organs, also called heavenly orbs or celestial spheres, are analogous to, even directly related to, the heavenly bodies of the solar system. They are regarded as living, pulsing, vibrating centers of energy within our bodies. This link with the heavenly bodies in space explains why astrology played such a major role in traditional Chinese thought. Herbs give everlasting strength, whereas regular foods give only temporary strength.

Stephen T. Chang

The Taoist sages were very adept at observing nature, and they learned the use of many herbs by watching what animals ate when they were injured or sick. It was over 5,000 years ago that the great emperor Shen Nong discovered the properties of a great many herbs by ingesting them himself—a brave though potentially fatal way of going about it! Originally, herbs were thought of as food—highly nutritious, beneficial food. "The ancient Chinese formulae, or recipes, spoke of herbal "soups" rather than teas. Herbs were eaten as part of the daily meal, cooked into soups or broths, or eaten as salads. There were, of course, purely medicinal herbs, but for the most part, herbs were used as a means of strengthening or maintaining the integrity of the body. The Chinese also use a great many substances in their pharmacopoeia, some of which may be surprising. A compendium by the famous physician Li Shi-zhen (published in 1596) includes 1,892 entries. Of these, 1,173 are botanical ingredients, 444 are zoological or animal derived, and 275 are derived from minerals. The most recently published pharmacopoeia lists 5,767 entries! Over thousands of years of observation, exploration and experimentation, the Chinese herbalists were able to find specific uses for an incredible range of substances, from the lovely chrysanthemum flower to the lowly earthworm!

A Visit to a Practitioner

A visit to a practitioner of Chinese medicine will be a bit different from an appointment with a Western physician. The practitioner may begin by asking a lot of questions, some of them seemingly quite strange. Do you feel hot or cold? Do you have any pain? How many times do you get up at night to urinate? Are you thirsty? Do you crave hot drinks or cold ones? How are your bowel movements? How is your sleep? Do you have headaches or dizziness? If you are a woman, how is your menstrual cycle? Is it regular? Is the flow thick or thin? If you are having any discharge, what color is it and is there any odor?

All the while the practitioner is talking with you, she will also be observing your facial color, the manner in which you are breathing, the tone and volume of your voice, the way you move. Even the way you sit on your chair can tell a practitioner of Chinese medicine a lot about your internal condition.

The practitioner may then look closely at your tongue, observing its color, its size and the presence of any coating or moss, including its texture and color. The tongue is a mirror of the internal organs. Over the millennia, tongue diagnosis has evolved into a fine art. Then, perhaps strangest of all, the practitioner will feel the pulses along the wrists of both your arms. Those who are trained in Chinese medicine can learn a great deal from palpating three adjacent areas along the medial of both arms. Those who are trained in Chinese medicine can learn a great deal from palpating three adjacent areas along the medial artery of the wrist. Feeling for strength, rate of pulsation and the depth of each pulse, they can ascertain the health and integrity of all the major organs. A

master can even detect a history of childhood illnesses and the problems, all from feeling the wrist!

Along those pathways are certain points that are used to either access or tonifying the Chi in that area. Several important points often used in Chi kung practice are the Bai hui point at the top of the head (the crown chakra), the tian mu point between the eyebrows (the third eye), the shan zhong point (the heart center), the wei lu point at the bottom of the sacrum, the hui yin point on the perineum, the yang quan points at the bottoms of the feet and the lao gong points on the palms of the hands. When these points are energized and "opened," the Chi in the pathways can run smoother and stronger.

An easy way to feel Chi is to create a Chi ball between your two palms. Hold them out in front of you at shoulder or waist height. Now imagine there is a solid ball of energy between them, about the size of a beach ball. Then gently push your hands together, squeezing the ball between them. Next, expand the ball by pulling your hands apart. Do this simple exercise a few times and you will begin to feel a subtle yet solid, rubbery presence between your palms.

You have learned that one can know this elusive, seemingly invisible self through meditation, through studying in the works of the ancients, through delving deeply into the murky depths of our being. You can also know the self by practicing Chi Kung—the Chi Kung of quiet reflection in the midst of activity; Chi Kung of balance, integrity and free flowing; the Chi kung of trusting in the beneficence and joyfulness of life; the Chi kung of trusting in your own innate and rarefied nature, the same nature as that of Tao itself; the Chi kung of learning to balance and harmonize with your often turbulent emotions; the Chi kung of sex and relationship; the Chi kung of allowing yourself to feel your own energy moving joyfully through the channels of your body; the Chi kung of learning to allow that energy flow, that joyfulness emerge and flow with others so that we can all join together in one great Chi kung dance.

We are all capable of becoming masters of our own destinies, directors of our own movies, creators of our own epics, lovers of our own lives. We can do this with grace, humility and thankfulness. Perhaps then we can become the person Lao Tzu describes who is able to see simplicity in the complicated and able to achieve greatness in little things. The line between confused human being and sage is, in reality, a thin and tenuous one. All it takes is being open to learning, growing, making mistakes, confronting our own fears and ambitions and a willingness to leap into unknown.

One thing that people don't talk about very much is that there is something about it that is so precious, so special, something to really love and treasure. Once that opens for you there's no doubt in your mind about it. There is no end to the road you walk when you are on your path. That is something that I hope people will remember, that the path of Tao is a path that is very special and it is a living path that will provide for you forever once you get on it.

Being a Taoist means not being a blind follower of anyone or anything that is not natural, that is not aligned with the positive unfolding of the Tao itself. In the West there is no Taoist pope to lay down rules and regulations of what a Taoist should or should not be. Instead, Taoism is the process of learning how to connect with our own inner wisdom and guides so that we may better attune ourselves with the source of all wisdom and build our lives upon that.