

## *Secret & Sublime Taoist's Magic - John Blofeld*

It goes without saying that not every recluse dressed in antique Chinese robes, wearing a top-knot secured by a jade peg and living in a hermitage or monastery, consciously entertained that supremely exalted aim. Truly dedicated sages, accomplished yogis, simple-minded dabblers in real or imagined marvels (and even charlatans, perhaps) were sometimes to be found within the same community. Taoists, being tolerant kindly men, were not likely to drive anyone from the monastery gates for lack of spiritual qualifications or even to punish a colleague for misbehavior, the use of punishment being one of the characteristics of conventional society they most deplored. Visitors, too, were always welcome. Each community had its guest-rooms; no charge was made for bed, food and wine, it being assumed that a guest would freely offer what he could afford. Someone so unappreciative of warm and generous hospitality as to leave no offering at all would still be seen on his way with smiles and bows as though it did not really matter if the recluses were left with nothing to live on but air and dew, for they were a courteous people with modest expectations to whom hardship came easily. As to Taoism's being the progenitor of the first hippies, close on fifteen hundred years ago there nourished some widespread Taoist-minded communities known as the Light Conversationalists. Their prescription for discovering whether life had meaning, and if so what, was to live in frugal but happy accord with nature's rhythms, which generally involved fleeing from places where man-made laws imposed artificial limitations on people's spontaneity. They rather hoped to discover true understanding of life's meaning by seeking it in the stillness of their own undisturbed minds; meanwhile, just in case life might offer nothing meaningful to understand, they enlivened their days with wildly unconventional behavior and by conversing at a deliberately fantastic level for the fun of it; yet, though the Confucian establishment mocked them, they were entirely serious in their underlying aim and in their opposition to every sort of threat, coercion, punishment or violence. They were free souls born to smile contentedly at each fresh recognition of their kinship with nature. As I have said, my fear that Taoism may be on the point of vanishing from the earth has persuaded me to regard as something of a sacred duty the task of recording my memories of it as a living force remarkable for the variety and interest of its manifestations. If (as is all too probable) my record contains serious errors and omissions, or if in striving to entertain the reader I have dwelt at too great length on some weird but relatively unimportant aspects, I beg forgiveness of my Taoist teachers and of Taoism's guardian deities. What I have written is partly intended for those now traveling the world as I used to travel through China, possessing very little money or luggage, but managing to come close to the local people. Living was fortunately cheap in those days, my monthly expenses being around five pounds (then \$20 US) when on the move and much less when I settled for a while in some hermitage or monastery. My mode of traveling was to walk, ride on mule back, take passage in small river-craft or country buses, put up at cheap inns (one-and-three pence or \$.25 US a night) and eat in the simplest cook-shops. I mention this because I like to believe that, for as long as the world contains wanderers and wonderers who are frugal in their habits, lovers of people in their endless variety, sincere in their pursuit of truth and able to laugh at themselves, the spirit of Taoism will live on. It should be regarded as composite characters/Naturally, after the passage of so many years-nearly all the events recorded took place in the nineteen-thirties - I have had to reconstruct most of the conversations and some of the background details and even to invent appropriate names for hermitages and recluses whose real names escape my memory. However, even the smallest details of conversation, personalities, events and backgrounds possess at least poetic truth in that I have fabricated nothing that is not strictly in line with what I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears while in a Taoist milieu. Almost all the Taoists I encountered were 'magicians', yogins, philosophers and mystics all in one, but with differences of emphasis, I never came across one who disbelieved in the existence of gods and spirits, though quite a few attached little importance to such beings, holding (with Buddhists) that an individual's ultimate development depends upon himself. Gods and demons, if left well alone, are less likely to complicate the issue by kindly meddling in the one case or malevolent muddling in the other. The philosopher Lao-tzu (the Aged Master) was, according to the historian Suma Chien, born in Hu county in the State of Ch'u in the sixth century BC. Sumamed Li and given the name Erh, he was also known as Li Tan. Popularly credited with looking old at birth 'as a consequence of having stayed some seventy years in his mother's womb', he subsequently became a historian and was put in charge of the archives of the State of Ch'u. There, hearing of his immense learning, Confucius paid him a visit and requested instruction in the ancient rites, only to receive a telling rebuff. To quote his own words: 'Few understand me. Those who calumniate me are honored. Therefore must the sage disguise himself in coarse garments, hiding in his breast the jade of wisdom.' Seeing the sad decline into which the State of Ch'u was falling, he mounted an ox and departed westwards through a pass, whose keeper begged him to record his wisdom before leaving the world behind, whereupon he dashed off the two volumes of the Tao Te Ching (amounting in all to only five thousand characters) and left for an unknown destination. Nevertheless, it is variously recorded that Lao-tzu lived to a hundred and sixty or over two hundred years of age. Furthermore, in the case of the ancient Taoist sages, the evidence adduced to prove that they did or did not exist, that they did or did not write the works ascribed to them, is so slender that the best of scholars is reduced to making intelligent guesses. One thing is sure - a person or a concept labeled Lao-tzu made a very deep and beneficial impression on the evolution of the Chinese people. As ancient traditions are often found to contain more truth than the iconoclastic works of scholars ill-supplied with factual materials, I prefer to suppose that Lao-tzu existed in the sixth century B.C. and wrote the classic known variously as the Lao-tzu or the Tao Te Ching, thus aligning myself with the vast majority of Taoist believers. The true mystic, though full of compassionate concern for the welfare of all beings, cannot help being immediately preoccupied with his own progress, since liberating the mind from the delusions conjured by the senses is something neither god nor man can do on his behalf; self-cultivation is needed before one can benefit the world, and self-realization must come before one can claim to know or teach truth. As to the word 'Tao' itself, it is a term of great antiquity long used by different philosophers in as many senses as the word 'God' is employed by different schools of religion. Literally meaning 'way' or 'path', it was later used by the Confucians to mean the divinely ordained path of rectitude; by the Buddhists as an equivalent of Fa (Dharma, Doctrine of the Buddha); and by the Taoists to mean a combination of the undifferentiated unity from which the universe evolved; the supreme creative and sustaining power which nourishes the myriad creatures; the way in which nature operates; and the course which men should follow in order to rise above worldly life and achieve harmony with the Ultimate. There is something evolved from chaos, antecedent to heaven and earth, silent and vast, spontaneous and immutable, omnipresent and eternal, which can be regarded as the Mother of Heaven and Earth, 'The Way gave birth to one, the one to two, the two to three, the three to

all the myriad objects which, carrying the yin (negative female principle) and embracing the yang (positive male principle) owe their harmony to the blending of these two'. '(Mere) mouthing about the Way makes it seem insipid, tasteless; (for it is so subtle that) the eye cannot behold it; hark and you will not hear it; yet its functions are inexhaustible.' 'Its summit does not dazzle; its base is not obscure. Intangible (in a manner) not to be described, it leads back to the state of void. Thus one speaks of a shape that is no shape, of an image that has no form; one speaks of what is indistinct, shadowy. Stand before it, you will not see its head; follow it, you will not see its tail. By holding fast to this primordial Way, the present can be governed. Awareness of the primal origin is called (bearing) the imprint of the Way.' In fact, Te does not mean exactly power, but rather virtue - to Confucians, virtue in the moral sense; to Taoists, in the biblical sense of the virtue that went out of Jesus when the woman touched his robe. Christian mystics may see an analogy between the Tao and God, the Te and the Holy Spirit or the Christ Within, though of course there is no vestige of anthropomorphism in either of the Taoist terms. Mahayana Buddhists may perhaps equate Te with the Buddha-root enshrined in the heart of each sentient being. Another peculiarly Taoist term that needs clarifying is wu wei (non-action). This does not mean quite what it says, but rather not going beyond spontaneous action that accords with needs as they arise; not indulging in artfully calculated action and not acting with the intention of exceeding the very minimum required for effective results. Thus, profit-motivated action is totally excluded. Wu Wei is based on the mystical concept that, if we keep still and listen to the inner promptings of the spirit, we shall act spontaneously, correctly, efficaciously, yet hardly giving the matter a thought, just as branches naturally bend towards the sun or as kittens make an untaught response to scratching noises. Towards the end of his life, he settled upon Mount Lo-fu and devoted himself to searching for the precious formula. It is written that, in his eighty-first year, he vanished from human ken, leaving his clothes behind him, this being the usual manner of hinting at a sage's transmogrification. His personal life must have pleased even his non-Taoist contemporaries, as he combined his devotion to 'alchemy' with ethical views derived from the Confucians. Incidentally, modern scientists interested in the development preceding the point at which alchemy gave place to chemistry esteem Master Ko Hung as a fellow-scientist remarkably knowledgeable by the standards of his day. From the five-thousand-word Tao Te Ching alone, it is possible to derive mystical, cosmological, religious, philosophical, ethical, yogic, naturalistic, political, educational and even military lessons, as well as hints of magical practice and at least one piece of information of importance to adepts in the white-tiger/green-dragon (sexual) yoga. In the book of Chuang-tzu, too, most of these elements are present, but mystical or quietist philosophy plays a larger and more emphatic part. The Taoist (and also the Buddhist) view is quite to the contrary—namely that the Supreme Being is not a being but a Non-Being which cannot possibly be concerned with whether Mr. Wu has a fine day for his wedding or little Wang passes his primary-school examination; but that there are indeed a goodly number of divinities, from the high gods, who, though not truly immortal, endure for eons, to nature-spirits whose paltry life-spans can be numbered in centuries, to say nothing of the many categories of demon. Western man has forgotten those hierarchies of beings variously known as gods or angels, demons or goblins, once manifest to the entire human race under various names and guises, as evidenced by the scriptures of every world-religion; but this does not mean that those beings have forgotten. The founders of Taoist hermitages, for example, had a genius for choosing spots abounding in mountain torrents, limpid pools well suited to be the haunt of dragons, ancient pines and cedars, and curious folds of rock concealing mysterious grottos. Their dramatic loveliness was there for all to see. Not so the magic portals; for they, being conjured from the mist, displayed their rainbow colors only to those with eyes to see and, even then, not often; one might spend months or years in their vicinity and discover nothing more astonishing than the sweetness of the smiling hermits who guarded their secrets. The appearance, manner and speech of some of the Chinese and Tibetan sages I met so convinced me of their high wisdom and integrity that I felt bound to respect the totality of their beliefs and practices, including those which, judged superficially, seemed to me of doubtful value. Only by immersing oneself in the ideas and practice they taught could one become qualified to make the distinctions implied by acceptance or rejection. The purpose of the yogis was to achieve health, rejuvenation, a vigorous old age, long life and even physical immortality by a combination of meditation and yogic exercises based on the so-called internal alchemy. Visualization, breathing and other physical exercises were involved; but, as with the yogis of other religions, the methods were kept secret, being transmitted partly by oral instruction and partly by manuals couched in alchemical terms. Taking the manuals at their face-value, some Taoists did in fact seek formulas for transmuting base metals and for compounding an elixir that would confer radiant health and immortality. Certain of their colleagues probably smiled into their sleeves at such simple-mindedness, but who knows how many of the professed alchemists were not just pretending, for the benefit of outsiders, to be engaged in an external search for the exotic formulas popularly associated with longevity? The Taoists, rightly conceiving that, since names are by their nature limiting, the Illimitable must be nameless, chose the provisional name Tao which, since its primary meaning is Way, carries with it the subtle implication, so familiar to Mahayana Buddhists, that the goal and the path to it are in essence one. Moreover, all mystics are agreed that whatever name they use for the Ultimate - Tao, Godhead, Sunyata, etc. - can at best be a makeshift, since nothing can be predicted of a state beyond time and space that transcends all dualities. Even to say that It exists or does not exist is to belittle It, since each of those terms excludes its opposite and is therefore finite. The nature of the goal can be known only to those exalted beings who have realized it for themselves. If one can accept the identification of the source and being of all with mind, in which supposition some physicists now support the mystics, then ten thousand obstacles to understanding vanish and everything falls into place. Even miracles are explained — by mind, disease is cured; breath, blood and semen are marvelously controlled; flesh is made impervious to fire; objects are caused to appear and vanish; barriers of space and time are conquered in a flash. Conversely, if this perception is rejected, then mystics and their admirers (including the present writer) may appear as charlatans or fools! Acceptance requires that we regard this universe not as illusory in the sense of not existing, but as a reality which, filtered through our faulty senses, is apprehended as other than it is, with the result that we falsely assume each entity to have its own being, instead of recognizing all of them as interdependent, transitory semblances with no true being outside the Tao. Those who do not understand the powers developed by yoga suspect conjuring or fraud; yet most people who are prepared to undergo the severe rigors of yogic training - often including from three to seven years spent in solitary confinement — can certainly acquire them. Not such powers are important; rather they are hindrances to progress, since they distract the mind from its true goal and draw unwelcome attention. This is the reason why spectacular miracles are seldom seen; those able to perform them guard their powers from the eyes of the profane, whereas those eager to display them are generally too shallow-minded to attain them. Hence travelers merely hoping for demonstrations of supernatural arts are

doomed to disappointment or to becoming the prey of charlatans; whereas those who thirst for true wisdom and therefore set little store by marvels are likely to behold sights which to those others remain quite maddeningly elusive. The aged temple showed signs of neglect, but its money tiles and weathered gray-brick walls still resisted inclement weather after five whole centuries of existence. It was inhabited by a solitary recluse, a dignified figure clad in Taoist garb who looked about eighty. His face was a network of wrinkles; his movements had the grace and alertness one comes to expect of elderly Taoists, whose extraordinary exercises preserve health and youthful vigor for many decades. I admired his antique clothes – a long robe of bronze-colored cloth with enormous flapping sleeves resembling the wings of butterflies, and a curious stiff hat from the center of which protruded a topknot of gray hair secured by an elaborately carved peg. A pretty ten-year-old child, longhaired and wearing a sky-blue robe, appeared; it was impossible to determine whether it was a boy or a girl. This child served us with pale-green tea in thick earthenware bowls, and some saucers of pine kernels, melon seeds, and sweetmeats made of rice flour. My host, whose name was Ch'ing-t'an Hsien-jen, (the Immortal of the Limpid Pool) soon called for heated wine, which the child brought in a narrow porcelain jar placed in a bowl of warm water to maintain its temperature at a higher level than is common for Western-style wines. Yellowish-green in color, the mild wine tasted delicately of herbs. At first our conversation followed the usual stilted lines, host and guest courteously requesting details about each other; but when he perceived I was eager to learn something of Taoism, the recluse became less formal. Between the first and second jars, he persuaded me to don a padded Taoist gown as a protection against the evening chill, and led me into the main courtyard where he showed me several curious objects, including a rockery composed of fantastically shaped stones brought by some long-departed emperor from close to the frontier of Burma. This cunningly fashioned landscape, complete with mountains, grottoes, pools and Winding River, produced the illusion of a distant scene. Half closing my eyes, I could imagine a great range of mountains with contours pleasingly grotesque. 'You see, it is not just an ornament, but the present dwelling of the Great Master Po Yün who was abbot here three hundred years ago. It would be disrespectful to place it closer to the ground. 'You mean his spirit lives here?' 'Certainly and his body, too. It is his whim to be tiny and he is generally invisible; but, as you see, the Immortal eats and drinks like humans, though very little and not often. He chose to assume the stature of a very small dragon-fly, so they say.' Permit me to expound wu-wei. It only appears to mean "action rooted in not-ness". What it really means is "action rooted in non-being". And what is non-being? It is the Great Non-Being, a name for the Sublime Tao which is the formless matrix of a myriad forms. As I interpret it, wu-wei simply means "action rooted in the Tao". What we shun is calculated activity, which can never be spontaneous, harmonious, free!' 'Activity in itself is not harmful, but it must be just an instinctive response to immediate needs. Calculation or self-interested forethought leads to demon-action. Only activity proceeding from a mind that resembles a calm, deep pool of stillness can be free from undesirable results. Therefore I rise two hours before dawn and sit in meditation until noon, cultivating perfect inner stillness. When no thought moves, I feel the pulsing of the Tao. Then I am one with the plants whose sap pulses through their leaves, one with the stars pulsing with the glowing energy of fire. Because my thoughts are stilled, the Tao flows through me, its movement unimpeded. My words and actions are a natural, uncalculated response to present circumstances. A tree growing in the shadow of a wall does not think "in order to live, I must bend my leaves towards the sunshine and drink the water with my roots". It does those things spontaneously. Its spontaneous activity proceeding from stillness fulfils its needs.' 'Certainly not. The Tao does not declare: "Let this or that be so" or "I shall do thus and thus". Nor is it separate from spirits, people, animals, rocks or plants. It is not just the source of being, but the being of all beings, the fullness and the nothingness of all things. Acting spontaneously, exerting no will, it acts gloriously. By according with its action, I, who am eighty-three years old, may hope to live perhaps for another thirty years—another fifty even; but not many people attain that great age in their fleshly bodies. Flesh must die, for the Tao, though changeless, is ever changing and none of its myriad creations endures long. 'Why then do Taoists think so much in terms of immortality?' 'By personal immortality is sometimes meant relative immortality, the ability to endure a few eons in some bodily or spiritual form. What are eons in comparison with the everlasting Tao? Only the Tao as Being-Non-Being is truly immortal; the entities it forms never cease to change. Their constituents must ultimately dissolve.' 'It would be more difficult. What is needed to prolong life even by a few decades is perfect serenity, the result of freedom from restriction. How is that possible in a city where man-made laws and man-made custom compel us to behave like demons?' Taking up a position cross-legged on a cushion placed on the ground, he embarked on some curious breathing-exercises so that the chi (universal psychic vitality) would circulate freely through his body. At the beginning he made violent motions of the arms, his sleeves flapping like wings. The next stage consisted of a rotating movement made by the muscles of his abdomen; despite the cold, he lifted up his robe to reveal his stomach, which looked as if it might contain a writhing python. Presently he grew still and his breathing subsided until no sound was audible. Simultaneously all movements of his body ceased. To all appearances, I was alone with a corpse sitting upright on the floor. How long this endured, I do not know. Barely able to keep awake, I saw the room grow light, and presently noticed that his eyes, long shut, were open and fixed on me. 'So you see, my young friend, how it is done. The preliminary exercises were designed to induce circulation of the chi. Later, I grew calm and my breathing became imperceptible even to myself. Meanwhile, my consciousness was directed to my nostrils, to promote awareness of the rhythm of my breathing. Next I concentrated on the Mysterious Gate of the Square Inch, which lies midway between the eyes; there it normally stays unwaveringly until noon.' 'What do you feel at such times?' 'I have no feeling. Though bliss arises, it is not my bliss, but an attribute of the Tao shining through that ghost, my body.' 'What do you know about the Tao?' I asked with deep interest. 'The Tao? Oh, the Tao is big, big, big.' He spread out his arms to show me. 'Everything you see or hear or touch has the Tao. It's everywhere – in me, in you. No, that's wrong. Grandfather says it is I, and you. I can fly from here to the Dipper Star, but not get away from the Tao. Do you know what Grandfather said yesterday?' 'White Tiger is lead, but also semen. Green Dragon is cinnabar, but also the woman's sexual fluid.' All I could gather from Pien's explanation was that the sexual yoga involved conducting sexual intercourse as often as possible within the limits of special times and seasons of the year, using a technique based on carefully numbered thrusting movements and regret abstinence from orgasms. Without permitting his own yang-fluid to leave his body, the adept must cause orgasm after orgasm in his partner, so as to absorb her yin-fluid and, by uniting the yin and yang, create a sort of cell or embryo within himself; and there was something, which had to be drawn up to the top of the head. According to an ancient and once widespread tradition, the founder of Taoism was not Lao-tzû, but the Yellow Emperor who is believed to have reigned more than four-and-a-half millennia ago! Taoism's magical practices and, above all, its more exotic yogis were largely attributed to him and he was therefore venerated as much as

Lao-tzû. In any case, by the third century B.C., it is certain that strange beliefs and practices already antique when Lao-tzû was born, had become co-mingled with that sage's teaching and that the reigning Emperor Shih Huang-ti was an ardent devotee of magic. 'The Three Pure Ones! Enthroned in the center is the Jade Emperor, embodiment of the First Principle that is to say of the formless Tao Itself. On one side is a sacred being known as Heaven's Marvelously Responsive Jewel, who represents the harmonious working of the Tao's positive and negative components. On the other side you surely recognized a representation of the Venerable Sage Lao-tzu. You must understand that poorly educated people, unable to comprehend the formless, prefer to pay respect to easily recognizable forms. It is but right to express mysteries in a way they can grasp without too much exertion, otherwise they would fail to pay homage to the Sacred Source and its endless manifestations. Naturally they cannot appreciate the subtle teachings of our great sages; nevertheless, they venerate Lao-tzu for other reasons, such as his having been born white bearded and deeply wrinkled as a consequence of-passing eighty-two years in his mother's womb, or his success in attaining to an immeasurable age. Even though the truth of these matters is disputable, such beliefs help such people to see him as a very mysterious and miraculous person, which is exactly what he was; so they arrive, at the inner core of truth despite their unfortunate ignorance. I suppose, that, like Niang Niang (another Taoist Goddess) and Kuan Yin (a Buddhist Bodhisattva depicted in China as female), she was really a form of the Mother Goddess worshipped under many names throughout the ancient world until, in the West, she was supplanted by-or transmuted into – the Virgin Mary. Depictions of divinity in female form are surely a response to a deep, though sometimes unperceived, human longing. 'On Mount Lo-fu in my native province of Kwangtung, there is a famous Immortal known as the Cloud Wanderer. Not very long ago, the youngest daughter of my cousin, who is, by the way, a tea-merchant, fell victim to a malady that caused violent seizures. She sickened only months prior to the date fixed for her marriage to a wealthy Hong Kong lawyer, and so her parents naturally concealed her misfortune as far as possible, hoping to have her cured in time for the wedding. In vain they summoned practitioners of Western medicine and doctors skilled in our Chinese healing art. Two months were wasted before an intimate friend thought to call in the Cloud Wanderer, who instantly and with good reason diagnosed possession by a member of that particularly vicious type of demon, which seeks to prolong its existence by battenning on the bodies of healthy youths and maids. Thus they destroy their victims one after another. It is pitiful. ' "Be calm," the Immortal told her parents. "Illness might have had a lingering aftermath, whereas when I have compelled this demon to leave her she will be strong and well - unless fatal inroads have already been made on her stock of vital energy. You would have done well to summon me before." "Ideally speaking, this practice should be embarked upon in one's sixteenth year, for it is then - provided one has never suffered an emission — that one's vitality is fully developed yet unimpaired. Loss of semen involves a fatal expenditure of yang-force, which can however be repaired by skilful gathering of the yin-force in the manner just explained. As to the female partner, there is a saying: "Silver weighing fourteen ounces is desirable; it should never have been subject to smelting." This points to a girl of fourteen who has hitherto been a virgin. Girls of fifteen or sixteen will do very well, but in these days they are not easily procured, unless by marriage, which is inconvenient for dedicated recluses. Therefore is it said: "For dual cultivation, there are four prerequisites - place, method, financial means and partner." If the adept is a woman, all that has been said hitherto applies in reverse, but she will inevitably require many partners, for the male essence is easily exhausted. "Third, treatises on alchemy expound the fusion of white lead and red cinnabar to produce the golden pill. By exponents of the sexual yoga, white lead is taken to mean the yang-fluid, and red cinnabar the yin-fluid; the golden pill is, of course, no other than the immortal fetus, which results from their blending. Furthermore, the sexual act is compared to the union of water and fire; the over-lavish expenditure of these elements is noted as a prime cause of early death; whereas, skillfully blended, they become a potent life force. Alchemy of this sort was certainly familiar to King Wen (1150 B.C.) whose wisdom is enshrined in the Book of Change, wherein the sixty-third hexagram known as Chi-Chi (completion) and written thus, consists of the trigram K'an, symbolizing water, placed above the trigram Li EE, representing fire. This brings to mind a cauldron placed upon a stove and therefore pictures alchemic fusion. Tao Te Ching: 'The highest virtue is like water which benefits the myriad creatures without contention.' Recluses were fond of murmuring homilies on water to visitors in search of instruction and this one was no exception. Pointing out that water, the most pliable and docile of all elements, is also the most powerful, he went on: 'No matter what the obstacles, water reaches its goal, whether by uniting with the air and getting a free ride, or by skirting round things or patiently eroding them. Consider how marvelously it bends all things to its purposes; voiceless, it generates sounds both musical and thunderous by contact with the other elements; tasteless, it conveys all tastes and odors; colorless, it reflects all hues. An exemplary embodiment of the Tao, it demonstrates that there are peaceful ways of solving all problems, accomplishing all ends. When puzzled by some conundrum, look to water for the key.' 'If people lived by the Tao, there would be no cities. Moderate in their desires, they would require no artifacts beyond those made at home by weaving, sewing, pottery and carpentry; not given to lust, they would sire children in numbers their communities could comfortably sustain.'

**Those characteristics were:**

1. A healthy impatience with tiresome and restricting conventions, but not necessarily with convention as such; for example, they clung to their distinctively antique garb, probably because it was loose, comfortable and exceedingly attractive without being fussy or expensive.
2. A taste for frugality, which was by no means drab or puritanical, for they delighted in whatever simple pleasures their mountain retreats afforded.
3. A ready acceptance of life as it came, an absence of discontent that reminded me of Chuang-tzu's famous saying: 'Since the sage does not have the feelings of a man, right or wrong cannot get at him. When I talk of his having no such feelings, I mean he does not allow likes or dislikes to get in and do him harm. He just lets things be the way they are instead of trying to help life along.'
4. A preference for being inconspicuous, undemanding and un-combative, and the breadth of vision to submit gracefully to adverse circumstances when submits they must.
5. A care to avoid involvement in public affairs or civic duties, that was more than compensated for by their extreme hospitality and kindness both to travelers and to the local peasants.
6. A flair for running their communities with a bare minimum of regulations.
7. A readiness to laugh engagingly at mishaps as well as at what they took to be their own inadequacies and follies, so that grumbling and pomposity were scarcely to be found among them.
8. An inner stillness and a keen enjoyment of natural beauty, coupled with considerable powers of intuiting nature's

processes and rhythms. Their reverence for natural phenomena, particularly rocks, water, wind and moon, was at once touching and poetic. Li T'ai-Po's delightful poem, 'Three with the Moon and My Shadow' is so perfectly Taoist in feeling as to reveal the poet's close kinship with Taoist sentiment. This was true of many of the greatest Chinese poets.

'I'll tell you another thing. No man can help another beyond feeding him when hungry or tending him when sick, unless by setting him in the way of thinking things out for himself, which can be done better by example than by words, and very often not at all. This means that a man's first duty is to himself; for, unless he has cultivated the Way, what can he have to say that is worth the listener's trouble and what sort of example is to be expected of him? He must learn how best to live; then others, envying his content and well-being, will come of themselves to ask questions; some may even heed his answers, especially if he gives them sparingly. Unfortunately the minds of men today are so rotted by contagions contracted at school that it is hard for them to see truth even when it lies, as usual, right before their eyes.' 'The remedy is to find your own truth and live by it. In that way, you will save yourself trouble and perhaps draw a few others away from their senseless clawing at the slippery precipices of dualistic thought by convincing them that the sound of bamboos creaking in the wind is a wholesome substitute for concepts. When the wind blows, the bamboos creak; when it dies away, they grow silent without giving a moment's thought to the relative virtues of creaking or silence. Bamboos just respond to circumstances. If the wind becomes a gale, they readily bow their heads and thus avoid being broken. When you chose Chu-feng (Bamboo Wind) as one of your Chinese names, you did well, for the bamboo, green even in old age, very strong and yet pliant, soft within and un-ashamed of bending, is symbolic of Taoist wisdom; and the wind, so free in its movement, so unexpected in its immediate action and yet predictable in terms of cycles, is the very breath of the Tao. Your having selected such a name marks you as being some-thing of a Taoist, whether by choice or in spite of yourself.'

'The Tao is to be found in inner stillness. It reveals itself as One — timeless, formless, all-pervading. In it all creatures and objects have their being. The same may be said of your goldfish and the water in which they swim, but the likeness is only superficial. One could take a fish out of the water and put it back; but the separateness of creatures and objects either from one another or from the Tao is illusory. Apart from the totality, which is the Tao, they have no being. The Tao and the myriad objects are not two! Unlike water which rises from the lake as vapor and flows back to it in streams, the Tao's creations do not rise from it, nor do they return to it, they and the Tao having never at any time been apart. They are the Tao. This faculty of being one and many simultaneously is a mystery that can be apprehended but not explained.

'When I speak of goodness and of beauty, I speak of the Tao. When I speak of bad and ugly, I speak of the Tao. Self is the Tao. Other is the Tao. Distinctions between opposites are false at the beginning, illusory in the middle, and erroneous at the end. If you suppose otherwise, you will be tormented by demons — demon longings, demon fears. You will struggle all your life against fiends of your own imagining, weighing gain against loss as though there could be anything in the entire universe that is not yours already. What wasted energy! What needless tears!

Typical of Lao-tzu's mystical aphorisms are the following:

'There is something that arose from chaos before the world was born. Silent and invisible, it exists of itself, unchanging. Penetrating everywhere, it never ceases. One may deem it the Mother of the World. Not knowing its name, I call it the Tao. If pushed to describe it, I should say it is big; yes, big and flowing; flowing and far-reaching, far-reaching and (yet) returning. 'The world had an antecedent that can be called its Mother. Knowing the Mother, you will come to know the child. Knowing the child, go back and hold fast to the Mother, then all your life you will be secure. 'Non-being is the name given to the source of the world's beginning. Being is the name given to the Mother of the Myriad Objects. Yet are these fundamentally one, differing only in name. Therefore let desire be stilled while you contemplate the Mystery; while desires reign, you behold (only) its outward manifestations. '(Non-being and being) - these two are fundamentally the same, though different in name. Their sameness is what one calls a mystery. Mystery upon mystery-such is the gateway to all secrets.' Since before the world was born, there has been the Tao. Silent and invisible, it is spontaneous, immutable, all-pervading, inexhaustible, the primal cause from which the whole universe derives its being. Lying beyond all categories of thought, it is vast, reaching to infinity and yet close at hand. By knowing the Tao one comes to know the multiplicity derived from it; whereas understanding of its individual manifestations cannot replace contemplation of the Tao itself as a means of achieving unshakeable security. (Security connotes the utter serenity that stems from viewing poverty and wealth, life and death, as equally welcome experiences; nothing can disturb one who welcomes everything without exception.) The identity of being and non-being is a mystery to be perceived only through intuition, which cannot be attained until inordinate desires and self-assertion have been eliminated; for as long as the 'self is felt to be real, the formless aspect of the Tao can by no means be perceived. Resolution of the paradox that the Tao is simultaneously being and non-being, form and formlessness, is the gateway to the perception of all mysteries. Intellectual acceptance of their identity is not enough; it must be intuitively experienced and the intuition must be palpable. Weakness and softness — as of water, infants and females were qualities he extolled, perceiving that it is by yielding to circumstances that one conquers. He could see no sense in striving to grasp what lies out of reach or clutching at what is already on its way out. As to those woes, which no philosophical or mystical insight can banish altogether, such as extreme want or mortal danger, his prescription of guarding against them was to be inconspicuous, lowly, unassertive, to give the impression of being incomplete, imperfect, of little value, so that rulers and robbers would pass one by. 'You have heard of flying with wings, Taut never of flying without wings. You have heard of the knowledge that knows, but never of the knowledge that does not know. Look into the closed room, the empty chamber where brightness is born! Fortune and blessing gather where there is stillness. But if you do not keep still — this is called sitting but racing around. Let your ears and eyes communicate with what is inside, and put mind and knowledge on the outside . . . Can you really make your body like a withered tree, your mind like dead ashes? 'When I speak of good hearing, I do not mean listening to others; I mean simply listening to yourself. If the gentleman can really keep his vital energies intact and not dissipate his seeing and his hearing, then he will command corpse-like stillness and dragon vision, the silence of deep pools and the voice of thunder. His spirit will move in the train of Heaven, gentle, easy in inaction, and the myriad objects will be dust on the wind. The essence of the Perfect Way is deep and darkly shrouded; the extreme of the Perfect Way is mysterious and hushed in silence. Let there be no seeing, no hearing; enfold the spirit in quietude and the body will right itself. Be cautious of what is within you; block off what is outside you, for much knowledge will do you harm. Then I will lead you up above the Great Brilliance, to the source of the Perfect Yang; I will guide you through the Dark and Mysterious Gate, to the source of the Perfect Yin. Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and

eyesight, forget you are a thing away from other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless. Forget things, forget Heaven, and be called a forgotten of self. The man who has forgotten self may be said to have entered Heaven...Let his spirit ascend and mount upon the light; with his bodily form he dissolves and is gone.' There is no way of knowing for sure. Unless we postulate that Lao and Chuang kept back certain teachings, believing it unwise or unnecessary to commit them to words, their philosophy, because of its focus on the proper living of this very life - the Here and Now - might reasonably be called mystical humanism. Though it falls short of certain later developments, it offers a very pleasant and at the same time admirable philosophy of life. The qualities to be looked for in its exponents include: quiet acceptance of the twists and turns of fate; a disinclination to interfere; a warm affection for beings both beautiful and ugly, arising from the perception of nature's seamless unity; a comfortable absence of self-consciousness and a spontaneity which, besides being delightful in itself, might beget rare skill in performing tasks involving coordination of hand and eye - Chuang-tzu was fond of relating stories about chefs, wood-cutters, carpenters, wheelwrights and so on to illustrate this point. As simple frugality and distaste for ostentation would preclude any thirst for luxuries and expensive novelties, pleasure in simple things would be all the keener; moreover, feeling a zestful interest in everything that could possibly happen would certainly prohibit boredom. A man thus trained would be loved and valued by his friends, because never in the way; his inner happiness would prove infectious. Even in those relatively prosaic terms, his lot could be described as enviable; to say nothing of the likelihood of his being able to enter at will into the bliss discoverable in the 'secret chamber' of the mind. But to define the Tao and its workings is to leave the realm of intuitive experience and enter upon mere philosophic speculation. Perhaps those sages, while succeeding in attaining direct intuition of the Man-less, failed to recognize the futility of attempting to give concrete expression to the mystery. Scholars have ever been fond of precision, preferring literal 'truth' with all its limitations to the amorphousness that surrounds that which is beyond categorical exposition. How much more to be admired is yet another of Lao-tsu terms for the ineffable - the Shapeless. This doctrine of mind as the only reality requires that a distinction be made between 'illusion' and 'delusion'. If the world did not exist at all; its seemingness would be a delusion, whereas the mystical doctrine is that what is perceived does in fact exist, but that faulty perception endows it with illusory qualities that distort its real nature. Entities are real, but not in the sense of being truly separate from one another, of having each its own-being. Container and contained are one; it and they are pure mind. Both Taoists and Buddhists were agreed that mere intellectual understanding of the mystery of the Tao or Void is powerless to unbind the chains of woe. The true nature of oneself and all else must be consciously experienced; the truth must be made as tangible as the heat of the sun upon the skin. However, Buddhists emphasize much more strongly than did the ancient Taoist sages that banishing the mists of conceptual thought is a prodigious task involving skill and pertinacity. There has to be a turning of the adept's mind upon itself, a mental revolution, an intuitive experience of indescribable profundity. Both intellect and logic are enemies closely linked to the false perceptions at the root of human woe. With increasing imperviousness to human error, human woe, there arises a sense of balance and harmony so perfect that withdrawal into a state of bliss can be achieved at will. The world loses its terrors; laughter comes so easily that accomplished adepts are frequently mistaken for simpletons. Death is no more to be feared than dropping off to sleep on a summer afternoon. As the mind, no longer fettered by duality, joyously recognizes its unity with pure, bright, illimitable Mind - the Tao, the Godhead - there comes a sense of being able to soar throughout the universe at will. 'My countrymen are wrong to speak of the Western Ocean People as barbarians. Your poet's simile is penetrating - exalted! And yet it does not capture the whole; for, when a lesser body of water enters a greater, though the two are thenceforth inseparable, the smaller constitutes but a fragment of the whole. But consider the Tao, which transcends both finite and infinite. Since the Tao is All and nothing lies outside it, since its multiplicity and unity are identical, when a finite being sheds the illusion of separate existence, he is not lost in the Tao like a dewdrop merging with the sea; by casting off his imaginary limitations, he becomes immeasurable. No longer bound by the worldly categories, 'part' and 'whole' he discovers that he is coextensive with the Tao. Plunge the finite into the infinite and, though only one remains, the finite, far from being diminished, takes on the stature of infinity. Mere logicians would find fault with this, but if you perceive the hidden meaning you will laugh at their childish cavils. Such perception will bring you face to face with the true secret cherished by all accomplished sages - glorious, dazzling, vast, and hardly conceivable! The mind of one who Returns to the Source thereby becomes the Source. You own mind, for example, is destined to become the universe itself!'