Nuovo Giornale di Filosofia della Religione
Nuova Serie, N. 2/2022, pp. 410-427
ISSN: 2532-1676

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SEEKER'S PROGRESS
MYSTICAL TEMPORALITIES IN DAOIST CULTIVATION**

Mystical traditions divide the progress of their seekers into distinct stages. Thus, the Buddhist tradition works with the Noble Eightfold Path, divided into three major divisions of discipline or morality (*sīla)*, focused concentration or meditative absorption (*samādhi*), and wisdom or insight leading to enlightenment (*prajñā*) (RAHULA 1974). The Yoga system of Patañjali similarly acknowledges eight limbs in three parts: body-based purification and control through ethical restraints and physical postures, breath- and mind-centered focus on sensory withdrawal and deep concentration, plus absorption and oneness in ultimate *samādhi* (HEWITT 1977).

Echoing this, the mystical quest in Christianity begins with the Purgative Life, during which seekers empty and purify the old self with the help of predominantly physical practices. Moving on to the Illuminative Life, they learn new modes of thinking and feeling with meditative and spiritual techniques. The quest is over and the desired state achieved when they reach the Unitive Life, where all opposites are integrated on a new God-based level of being (KOHN 1992, 28).[1]

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), the great writer on religion and spiritual practice, proposes a somewhat subtler version of this as she distinguishes five stages: awakening or conversion, self-knowledge or purgation, illumination, surrender or "the dark night of the soul," and union. Expanding on the traditional threefold pattern, she adds a stage of initial conversion – a primary mystical experience or unprecedented immersion in the unitive state – as a first level of entry into the mystical endeavor; plus the stage of surrender, a phase of loneliness and helplessness before the full attainment of union (1911, 157-58; 1966; ELLWOOD 1980, 168).

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** Il presente contributo è apparso nel volume, edito da L. Kohn, "*Time in Daoist Practice: Cultivation and Calculation*", St. Petersburg, FL., Three Pines Press 2021.

[1] These three levels are also known as the Active, the Interior, and the Super-essential or God-seeing Life (HAPPOLD 1970, 56).

In Daoism, a threefold division applies that is both similar and different to these modes, as first outlined by James Miller (2015). Seekers here begin their quest with conversion, the first glimpse of the mystic life that engenders a radical break in outlook and sets them on a completely new course. Next, they enter a prolonged phase of intensive training, which is based on ethics and asceticism like the Purgative Life and yet also focuses on the establishment of new values and ways of being like the Illuminative Life. Something akin to the dark night of the soul appears in the fundamental requirement of surrender to the master, the gods, and Dao as well as in multiple trials and tests to eliminate emotional states that have the potential to derail the quest. Third, and finally, Daoists enter the Unitive Life by merging with Dao in immortality, attaining oneness with the original power of creation.

These various stages and levels, moreover, each have their own temporalities. As James Miller points out, conversion is an unexpected and often sudden event, a singular or "unique moment that has a one-off decisive effect upon the religious narrative." Training, second, involves "repeated events or ritualized moments that through constant rehearsal accumulate to form a second kind of religious experience." Oneness in immortality or transcendence, third, opens the seeker to eternity, the ultimate timelessness of Dao (2015, 19).

Seen from the perspective of J. T. Fraser's set of multiple temporalities, seekers undergo conversion by experiencing a singular opening to proto-temporality, the quantum world of swirling, unpredictable yet powerful waves-cum-particles that is instantaneous, synchronous, immediate, and nonlocal (FRASER 1999, 59-60; KOHN 2021, 220). Seeing the power of Dao underlying the universe, their ordinary sociotemporal ways of moving in organized patterns from birth to death, following a calendar, planning a career, and other similar endeavors are upset in ways that cannot be undone, and they set out on their quest.

Their training, next, lasts many years and is marked by repetition. Here seekers transform the fundamental structures of their bio- and noötemporality, the very way they are in their bodies and minds, toward the more planetary level of eotemporality. They submit to repeated cycles of trials, instruction, and intense practice – from physical exercises through dietary modification and fasting to all different kinds of meditation – moving in structured patterns yet also progressing. Rather than a strict cycle, temporality here manifests as a spiral, repeating and reverting yet also moving gradually to higher and subtler levels of being.

Third and last, the ultimate attainment of oneness or immortality marks the overcoming of time in atemporality, the state of pre-creation and a level of absolute potentiality that is both all-present and transtemporal.

Daoists speak of it in terms of chaos, emptiness, and Dao, all signaling the complete unity of all in the underlying ground. Here the initial mystical experience is made permanent and the seeker becomes infinite, eternal, and ultimately free from time (KOHN 2021, 254).

Conversion

There are numerous accounts of conversions in mystical literature, but one of the best known is by the prominent Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902). After an evening spent discussing philosophy and poetry with friends in 1872, he was riding home in a carriage when he had an extraordinary experience.

> All of a sudden, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by and intellectual illumination impossible to describe. . .
>
> The illumination itself continued not more than a few moments, but its effects proved ineffaceable. (BUCKE 1901, 7-8)

This moment of reaching beyond ordinary perceptions and conceptions then set him off on a quest for cosmic consciousness and the exploration of alternate ways of being in the world.

Like other mystical experiences, this event was overwhelming and completely unexpected, "a sudden, seemingly spontaneous flash of absolute power or ecstasy" (ELLWOOD 1980, 69). Other typical characteristics, as described first by William James (1842-1910), include ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (1936, 371). Since it is by nature ineffable, it cannot be explained in ordinary terms; still, descriptions commonly include references to timelessness and the transcendence of the phenomenal ego as well as reports of being grasped by something higher and greater and accounts of merging both with the deep root of creation and its ultimate goal (STACE 1966, 44; HAPPOLD 1970, 45).

The experience may happen on its own and be just that – an exceptional experience. It turns into a conversion when it triggers a quest: the person develops the urge to make the state glimpsed so briefly accessible at will and eventually constitute the permanent reality of his or her mind (KOHN 1992, 21). In that case, it can be described as a "primitive experience, in which there is a radical transformation of the experiential self sense and radical axiological and existential grounding" in a new and different reality (KING 1988, 275). Often interpreted as the direct

manifestation of a force seen as absolute or an agent conceived as divine, the experience is unexpected and singular, a brief moment in time, yet it also opens access to deeper dimensions and the quantum-level of proto-temporality, where all is in constant flow and time can move in every which way.

The most famous and best known conversion experience in Daoism shares many of these characteristics. It is the Yellow Millet Dream, experienced by the leader of the Eight Immortals, Lü Dongbin 吕洞賓. As recorded in the *Zengxiang liexian zhuan* 繒像列仙傳 (Illustrated Immortals' Biographies) of the Yuan dynasty, he was born in 796 as Lü Yan 吕严. Well educated, he yet failed to pass the official examination in 836. On his way back home, he spent the night at an inn on the outskirts of the capital – today the site of the Baxian gong 八仙宮 (Palace of the Eight Immortals) in Xi'an – where he shared a meal with a stranger. As the millet cooked over the brazier, Lü fell asleep and dreamed.

> He returned to the capital as a candidate of the imperial examination and passed it at the top of the list. Starting his career as a junior secretary to one of the Boards, he rapidly rose in rank to positions at the Censorate and the Hanlin Academy. Eventually he became a Privy Councilor, after he had occupied, in the course of his unbroken success, all the most sought-after and important official posts.
>
> Twice he was married, he further dreamed, and both wives belonged to families of wealth and position. Children were born to him. His sons soon took themselves wives, and his daughters left the paternal roof for their husbands' homes. All these events happened before he even reached the age of forty.
>
> Next he found himself Prime Minister for a period of ten years, wielding immense power. This corrupted him. Then suddenly, without warning, he was accused of a grave crime. His home and all his possessions were confiscated, his wife and children separated. He himself, a solitary outcast, was wandering toward his place of banishment beyond the mountains. He found his horse brought to a standstill in a snowstorm and was no longer able to continue the journey. (YETTS 1916, 790; KOHN 1993, 125)

At this point Lü wakes up, greatly surprised that, while he went through an entire official career and family life, the millet is not even fully cooked. In this, he experiences a classic modification of ordinary time in proto-temporality. In some ways, the dream is like the Rip van Winkle effect, where somebody enters an alternative reality for a while and returns only to find that centuries have passed and he is meeting his descendants of seven generations – a common theme also in Daoism (KOHN 2021, 241).

Still stunned, Lü is even more amazed when his dinner companion laughs and chants:

"The yellow millet simmers yet uncooked,
A single dream, and you have reached the world beyond!"
Lü gapes in astonishment.
"Sir," he stammers, "how is it that you know about my dream?"

His companion – in fact the Han immortal Zhongli Quan鍾離權 who had sought Lü out intentionally, knowing that he had great immortal potential – explains that from a perspective of Dao, fifty human years are but the twinkling of an eye and that his experience offered the "great awakening that the world is but one big dream." Lü accordingly turns his life around and pursues oneness with Dao under Zhongli's guidance.

In due course growing into a senior immortal of high standing, Lü himself appears many times to potential masters and converts them by orchestrating similar experiences. A prominent example is the founder of the school of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真), Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112–1170). The off-spring of a wealthy family, he received a good education but only attained a military prefectural degree and, after the fall of the Northern Song in 1127, ended up serving as a minor official collecting taxes on alcoholic beverages in Ganhe 甘河 township near Xi'an (KATZ 1999, 69; ESKILDSEN 2004, 4).

A heavy drinker, in 1159, he once sat in a local butcher shop imbibing when he had a vision of two spirit beings, later identified as Zhongli and Lü, who transmitted secret instructions to him. Acting increasingly more eccentric, he met the same immortals again in the following year in another village pub and received more transmissions that inspired him to look beyond his worldly career. A year later he left his post and set himself up in a tomb-like hermitage in the Zhongnan range, undergoing ascetic training under both human and divine masters.[2]

This tradition has continued unabated. Even today, a meeting with a divine figure in a dream still serves as a potent way to guide people into Dao. A recent example involves the monk Wang Liqing. As Adeline Herrou describes it,

> He lost both parents at the age of twelve and found himself isolated and poor, the responsibility of his maternal grandmother. When he turned sixteen, she also died, and he lived alone in the family house since none of his relatives – being poor themselves – could take him in.
>
> Then the goddess Guanyin appeared to him in a dream. In this dream, he saw a tree stump floating down a river that transformed into a beautiful young woman. Guanyin sang a sad song to him.
>
> "Are you going back home?" he asked.

[2] ESKILDSEN 2004, 7-8; KATZ 1999, 70; MARSONE 2001, 100.

She responded, "Do you have a car?"

Neither of them did, so he stopped a passing tractor and climbed on it. Trying to help the young woman up, she was suddenly at his side. After sharing some food with him, she again became a tree stump. (HERROU 2013, 123-24)

Wang Liqing woke with a vivid memory of this, but it took him a few more years of minimum-wage misery to realize that Guanyin had shown him the way and enter the Daoist community.

In this mode, the conversion is short and momentary and involves some kind of altered state – a dream, intoxication, or deep meditation – during which the future cleric is open to encounter the divine and receive messages from the beyond. As Louis Komjathy notes,

> Adepts must recognize mystical encounters with immortals and other anomalous experiences for what they are: triggers for a conversion process, inspiration for greater commitment, guidance for deeper understanding and practice, and/or confirmation of successful training. (2013, 227)

Other Modes

In another mode, the appearance of Dao in a person's life is still singular and unexpected, but the groundwork for it is laid by a major disruption of ordinary life through disease. While not mystical per se, disease has the same effect as a powerful experience, causing a radical departure from ordinary life and an altered state of awareness. If linked to spiritual healing, moreover, it can cause a complete turn-around in the person's life trajectory.

A case in point is Feng Xingzhao 冯兴钊 (b. 1945), the great rebuilder of temples and inspiring teacher of European Daoist lineage holders. He got sick in his teenage years.

> Medicines and treatments remained ineffective. Finally, in 1961, his mother, desperate to find a solution to her son's illness, took him to the Leigutai 雷鼓台 (Terrace of Rolling Thunder) to pray to the god Zhenwu 真武 (Perfect Warrior). Through divination, the deity told her that her son was destined to live in the temple and become a Daoist and that this was the only way to restore his health. Thus [the resident abbot] Yang Faxiang 杨法祥 became Feng's master and initiated him as a 30th-generation Daoist priest. (MARTIN 2015, 100)

Something very similar also happened to Wu Baolin (b. 1954), Daoist initiate and master of Chinese medicine, now in Santa Monica. He got struck with disease at age four. "The diagnosis was an advanced case of 'white water,' a noxious disease of the blood which had almost run its

course, so that Little Wu had only two weeks to live." Desperate, his mother left him at the gate of the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Temple) in Beijing, whose head abbot "treated him with acupuncture, medicinal herbs, and external qigong, using his own internal power to eliminate the negative properties from Wu's bloodstream while replenishing the boy's vital life-force (*qi*) and stabilize his fragile state." In the course of a year, the child got better and returned home, but promptly got sick again, recovering only when back at the temple. Thus it became clear that "he was destined to become a Daoist monk. He was duly entered into the monastic ranks and began to learn the specialized techniques that had saved his life" (WU et al. 2012, 3-4).

A number of American Daoists and qigong masters similarly came to Dao through disruptive physical conditions – ranging from long-term chronic ailments that proved resistant to medical treatments through almost complete paralysis caused by an accident to severe incapacitation due to stroke. Quite commonly, they had only minimal spiritual endeavors in their lives before, and the healing through Daoist means signaled a major turning point in outlook and career.

In other cases, they were already engaged in meditation but got recruited to the Daoist path through disease. Michael Rinaldini is a case in point. Inspired by W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* in his high school years, he explored various spiritual traditions and became a follower of Zen Buddhism. Then things changed:

> It was not until the mid-1990s, and mainly due to health reasons, that I transitioned towards traditional Chinese medicine. At that time I began to train as an acupressure therapist and took qigong instruction from various American teachers. In a very short time, I realized that this was the path I had been searching for ever since I first read *The Razor's Edge*. (RINALDINI 2008, 181)

In a yet different mode, there is no disease or particularly altered state. Rather, adepts come to Dao through a recognition of divine features, undergoing a more conscious turning point. One example is the story of the Gourd Master (Hugong 壺公) as recorded in Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283-343) *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Biographies of Spirit Immortals). The Master made a living by selling efficacious medicines in the local market but he gave most of his money away to the poor. In addition, he "always had a large gourd hanging in front of his medicine stall. At sunset, when the market closed, he would promptly leap into the gourd" (KOHN 1993, 122; CAMPANY 2002, 161). Fei Changfang 費長房, the market guard, observed this and, immediately aware that it signaled great divinity, decided to pursue a spiritual calling and asked to become his disciple.

The Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清) master Zhou Yishan 周義山, later styled Perfected Purple Yang, came to Daoist cultivation in a similar manner. As the *Ziyang zhenren neizhuan* 紫陽真人內傳 (Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang, DZ 303) records, he noticed the strange looks of a humble, rather ragged seller of straw sandals in the market and pursued his acquaintance to eventually become his disciple (MILLER 2015, 20; 2008, 114).

Besides being unexpected, disruptive, and singular, all these modes have in common that the conversion is engineered by Dao. Whether represented by a deity or immortal, apparent in dream, disease, or strange behavior, Dao actively makes the selection and transforms an ordinary person into a seeker.

The most blatant example of this is the recruitment of the internal alchemist Wang Liping 王力平 (b. 1949) by three senior Daoists from Laoshan in Shandong, members of the 16th and 17th generations of the Dragon Gate (Longmen 龍門) lineage of Complete Perfection. Realizing the need for a powerful disciple to carry on the tradition in the uncertain times under Mao, they divined what qualities they required and where to find them. They then set out on the long track to Liaoning in the far northeast and, in 1960, showed up on Wang's doorstep, requesting food. When he generously offered what little he had, they were well pleased and demonstrated various supernatural feats, enticing him away from regular schooling and into the world of Daoist cultivation (CHEN and ZHENG 1997, 6, 99).

Training

While the conversion is singular and disruptive, unexpected and transformative, often involving altered states of consciousness that connect to the simultaneity of prototemporality, training is repetitive and cyclical, long and intense, more in line with the regular orbits and predictable movements of the stars in eotemporality.

It works in two distinct ways, including two fundamentally different kinds of practices. It moves first in a purgative way to empty and free the individual from the thought and feeling patterns of past habituation. Then it proceeds in a more illuminative dimension to fill the resulting void with new modes of cognition and intuitive knowledge (PROUDFOOT 1985, 147). Both employ physical as well as meditation practices, but to a different degree. Much happens simultaneously, and individual practitioners often work differently, especially in traditions that require a close master-disciple

relationship, yet there are certain basic structures and typical modes of practice.

To begin, during the stage of emptying, mystics feel that commonly accepted feelings and conceptions hinder the development of the desired state. Also, any involvement with, and dependence on, the senses constitutes a major obstacle, as do ordinary forms of cognition, the value systems of society, and any relevance attached to physical sensations and feelings. In response, seekers embrace new values, in Christianity described as poverty, chastity, and obedience. As Evelyn Underhill says,

> By poverty the mystic means an utter self-stripping, the casting-off of immaterial as well as material wealth, a complete detachment from all finite things. By chastity he means an extreme and limpid purity of soul, cleansed from personal desire and virgin to all but God. By obedience he means that abnegation of selfhood, that mortification of the will, which results in a complete self-abandonment, a holy indifference to the accidents of life. (1911, 205)

Daoists, too, embrace these values, placing themselves in a position of Dao and releasing all social and emotional ties. A firm commitment to Dao constitutes the root condition for all successful training, and values of non-attachment are the subject of a series of trials or intense practice sessions that aspiring trainees have to pass. These come in a regular sequence, each slightly different from the next but in essence serving the same purpose: the thorough overcoming of all ordinary social conditioning and complete freedom from all emotional attachments and fears of the common world.

A good case in point is Lü Dongbin. After his conversion, Zhongli Quan makes him go back home and live in ordinary society, but arranges for a set of ten situations that normally would cause strong emotional reactions and social engagement. Thus, when Lü comes home, he finds his entire family dead from a mortal sickness. He remains without "feelings of vain sorrow" and sets about preparing the funeral, when "lo and behold, they all rise up alive and well."

Next, he sells some of his property in preparation for becoming a hermit and is offered only a fraction of its value. "He acquiesces and, handing over the goods, walks away without anger or engaging in dispute." Third, on his way to celebrate the New Year, he is accosted by a beggar demanding alms and, without any attachment, greed, or worries about facing his family without the proper gifts, hands over all he carries. When the beggar demands more and gets aggressive, Lü just "keeps smiling and apologizes profusely."

After this, he is asked to watch a flock of sheep and lays himself down without a trace of fear to be eaten by a tiger, soon scaring the beast away.

Fifth, he reads in his study when a beautiful woman comes along asking for shelter. Without desire or lasciviousness, he lets her stay, patiently resisting the "hundred different ways she tries to snare him from the path of virtue." And so it goes on, testing his complete freedom from all attachment to material goods, ambition for official service, as well as fear of death, disaster, and demonic persecution. Eventually he passes, and Zhongli Quan exclaims, "I have subjected you to ten tests, all of which have left you utterly unmoved. There can be no doubt you will succeed in attaining Dao" (KOHN 1993, 130-31).

The same emphasis on remaining unmoved also occurs in the case of Wang Liping, who is subjected to long periods of solitary confinement with stringent requests for physical stamina and intense meditation instructions. Thus, the three masters first dig a pit in the ground, just about big enough for the boy to sit cross-legged. Lighting some incense in the four corners, they lower him into the narrow, dank, and dark space and have him sit immobile for four hours while focusing his attention. When he wavers or complains, they scold him and push him to keep his focus. "Unless you eliminate the poisons and delinquent tendencies in your heart as soon as possible, collect our spirit and develop your nature, how can you attain the Way?" (CHEN and ZHENG 1997, 26).

After several months of this, they repeat the process again, this time shutting him into a large wooden box, the upper part studded with sharp spikes. Now his position is to stand without moving, which seems easy at first, but then they hoist the box up into a tree, where it sways in the wind, so he also has to maintain his balance (1997, 34). After two months of this, they make him enter a large earthenware urn where he has to practice in a squatting position. This they place over a cesspit, so he must also overcome all disgust and aversion to foul smells and substances (1997, 36). Fourth and finally, in this purgative sequence, they have him practice in a graveyard where they conjure up all kinds of eerie sounds and specters to make him overcome any remaining fears. "Repeating these practices over and over again," the biography says, "Wang Liping developed great stability and self-possession" (1997, 37).

While undergoing such trials and ordeals over and over again, seekers not only relinquish ingrained cultural and personal patterns but also acquire a great deal of stamina and come to understand the world in a new way. Adepts come to embrace the worldview as presented in their chosen tradition and make it their own through prolongued and repeated personal experience. Some see God's grace in the clear radiance in everything, others discover their inherent Buddha-nature, yet others see everything in the light of Dao and *qi* magic (KOHN 1992, 31).

Wandering

To enhance and deeply implant this vision, seekers receive training in all manner of spiritual methods, a process that similarly works in repetitive cycles but now centers on seeking instruction from different masters and involves travels to a variety of places. Formally called "cloud wandering" (*yunyou* 雲游), this goes back far in Daoist history and was formally instituted by Wang Chongyang, the founder of Complete Perfection. As the *Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun* 重陽立教十五論 ([Wang] Chongyang's Fifteen Discourses on Establishing the Teaching, DZ 1233) says,

> Cloud wandering is to pursue inner nature and destiny and search for mystery and wonder. One who wanders like this climbs high mountains with dangerous passes to visit enlightened teachers without tiring. He crosses distant streams with turbulent waters to inquire about Dao without slackening. Then, even a single saying received in the right spirit may open up complete understanding. The great realization of life and death dawns within, and you become a master of Complete Perfection. This is the true practice of cloud wandering. (KOHN 1993, 87)

Daoist travel, then, has three objectives: self-cultivation, seeking out perfected masters, and exploring. That is, as they travel adepts use the living energies of different mountains and rivers to enhance their own *qi*, connecting to nature while continuing to pursue internal refinement. They also work with different masters, often also including Buddhists, to become proficient in a large variety of methods and thus embrace the entire spectrum of spiritual technology. In addition, on their journey, they expose themselves to all manner of life situations and come to experience the world in new ways, to see things in a new light (CHEN and ZHENg 1997, 101). As Adeline Herrou notes,

> Nobody can ever know what landscapes, what natural features, what people, or what gods one may encounter on the road. Whether an adventure without preset destination or a trip with a precise goal, the monastic form of traveling is an open-ended hike, an aimless wandering, a journey of discovery – looking both for masters and for oneself. (2013, 214)

As they travel, moreover, Daoists are exposed to the rhythms of days and months, closely following the course of the sun and the moon and looking to the constellations for guidance. Strongly aware of the changes in energy in the course of time, they work increasingly in an eotemporal mode.

Training in this manner has been part of the tradition from the middle period. Thus, after receiving initial instructions, Zhou Yishan wandered to twenty-four sacred mountains. "In each place he encountered a Daoist

immortal, received further teachings, and made progress along the way" (MILLER 2015, 21). His hagiography lists the names of places, masters, scriptures, and methods in a highly formulaic manner, emphasizing the repetitive nature and long duration of this phase.

Lü Dongbin similarly gained a certain level of mastery in the arts of Dao and magic sword techniques. Then he took to wandering: "For over four hundred years, he constantly journeyed around the country, visiting places as far apart as Henan and Hunan, Zhejiang and Shaanxi," both learning and spreading Dao (KOHN 1993, 132).

Wang Liping, too, after being trained in many different methods locally, traveled all over. For the first four years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), he and his teachers wandered incognito and stayed in villages rather than at religious institutions, which by then had all been shut down. But, again, there was a repetitive pattern. They would arrive in a village, make contact with the locals, provide some entertainment for them – such as performing a martial arts routine – help them with medical advice as needed, receive food and lodging, and then again take to the road (e. g., Chen and Zheng 1997, 108). As restrictions eased in the early 1970s, they visited many different Daoist mountains – from Huashan and Qingcheng shan in the west to Laoshan in Shandong and all the way to Changbai shan in Liaoning. They traveled for about another four years in this way, time and again meeting hermits, learning practices, and engaging in self-cultivation (1997, chs. 13-15).

Another form of Daoist wandering happens mentally, in ecstatic excursions to the heavenly realms. This, too, matches the repetitive structure of this phase in the training, as classically documented in the "Yuanyou" 遠遊 (Far-off Journey) poem contained in the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of the South). Here the seeker, after intense preparation, such as "supping the six essences and drinking the night dew," whirls out of his bodily constraints and travels into the heavenly spheres. He reaches the southern end of the universe and meets the immoral Wangzi Qiao王子蹻 who lectures him about the nature of Dao, then moves on to connect to many deities in all different sections of the sky, striding higher and higher, always curious and always learning (HAWKES 1959, 197-98).

Excursions to the stars as part of Daoist training were formalized in the school of Highest Clarity in the 4th century CE. Here adepts visualize themselves traveling first around the far reaches of the world, then move on to visit various celestial regions, where they engage with gods and immortals to receive instructions and enhance their vital energy (ROBINET 1989). Working with planetary rhythms in eotemporality, they match the course of the sun and the moon, traveling with them to the Golden Tower (east) in spring, the Palace of Universal Yang (south) in summer, the

Eastern Pool or Gate of the Moon (west) in fall, and the Palace of Eternal Frost (north) in winter.

Governed by the tutelary spirits of their directions, these are divine mansions "placed in the blue depth of the sky or floating serenely on banks of clouds, encircled by colored mists" (SCHAFER 1977, 248). Inside, moreover, "each of these palaces is a paradise complete with a tree of life, where birds with golden feathers nest and the fruits of immortality grow, and with a spot of water – spring or lake – where the sun and the moon purify their rays" (ROBINET 1989, 168). In each, Daoists admire the buildings, pay homage to resident deities, join the stars as they bathe in the waters, and partake of the divine fruit, becoming more and more celestial themselves.

Oneness

Eventually they reach the final goal and become one with Dao, in other traditions called God, buddhanature, Brahman, or the universe and in all cases characterized by atemporality or timelessness. This manifests both in permanence, that is, infinity or forever time, and in immediacy, i. e., being eternally present in the present moment. As Abraham Maslow says, "Mystics have a sense of intense immediacy; they do not evaluate things in terms of polarities and conflicts, but transcend dichotomies to take in the whole" (1964, 91).

As they maintain complete communion with the absolute order and submit to the inflow of its supernal vitality, seekers embrace an ultimate reality, "which is at once static and dynamic, transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal – both the absolute world of pure being and the unresting world of becoming" (UNDERHILL 2011, 394).

At one with the core of creation, accomplished mystics have no sense of time passing and share the infinity of the universe. They also function in what Zen thinkers call "pure experience," a fundamental way of being and perception that precedes the differentiation into subject and object in a state of "absolute nothingness" (Nishida 1990, 3; Nishitani 1982). Here self and world are merged in immediate oneness. "Pure experience, realized as an existential modality within lived *praxis*, becomes a non-dual union with the ultimate ground of reality" (KRUEGER 2006). This ground of "nothingness" in Zen, moreover, is the "nonbeing" (*wu* 無) of Daoism. As the *Zhuangzi* says, "The myriad beings come from nonbeing. Being cannot create being out of being; inevitably it must come forth from nonbeing. Nonbeing is absolute nonbeing, and it is here that the sage hides himself" (ch. 23).

The medieval hagiography of Zhou Yishan expresses it similarly, noting that heaven has nonbeing or nothingness in the form of space, mountains have it as grottoes, and human bodies have it in the form of energy vortexes called "grotto chambers." The perfected, the fully realized mystics of Daoism, as they merge with Dao enter this place of nothingness and "are able to simultaneously inhabit all realms of the cosmos, the earth, and the body… Precisely because the nothing of the body is the same as the nothing of the earth and the nothing of the heavens, all three dimensions of the cosmos can be contained in each other" (MILLER 2015, 27). In other words, they coincide both spatially and temporally, exist forever and are immediately at one.

In the more concrete dimensions of the seeker's life, this manifests in two distinct ways: a complete sense of peace and surrender to the divine, based on a loss of all sense of self and socially defined identity; plus a great surge of energy and the development of extrasensory powers.

For example, Saint Catherine of Genoa notes that in a state of union with the divine, the soul is immersed in an ocean of utmost peace and has no sense of selfhood:

> When the soul is naughted and transformed, then of herself she neither works nor speaks nor wills, nor feels nor hears nor understands, neither has she of herself the feeling of inward or outward, where she may move. In all things it is God who rules and guides her. (UNDERHILL 1911, 402)

The *Zhuangzi* commentator Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312) similarly says that for the sage, instead of knowledge, there is "unknowing" (*wuzhi* 無知*),* literally, "nothingness knowing;" instead of conscious mental activity and feeling, there is "no-mind" (*wuxin* 無心*)* or "nothingness mind." He "forgets and again forgets" or "decreases and again decreases," as the *Daode jing* has it (ch. 48), to eventually merge with Dao. This ultimate oneness of existence then works both within and through the sage. By becoming fully one with all, he dissolves in the flow of life, attains perfection and harmony. There is no more self in the ordinary sense but only universal principle.

> This life of mine, I did not bring it forth. Thus, all that occurs throughout my life of perhaps a hundred years, all my sitting, getting up, walking, and staying, all my movements, all my quiet, all hurrying and resting of mine – even all the feelings, characteristics, knowledge, and abilities I have – all that I have, all that I do not have, all that I do, all that I encounter: it is never me, but principle only. (Kohn 1992, 75)

In such a state, the person no longer acts due to individual feelings, wishes, and intentions and has no concerns for past or future. Rather, Dao, the pure creative force of the universe, pervades him in each present moment, simultaneous and immediate. Daoists describe this as resting in "spirit pervasion" (*shentong* 神通), that is, being suffused and directed by pure spirit, the subtlest form of *qi* and most potent energy at the root of creation.

Since this suffusion means freedom from intention and reflection – planning and remorse, fear and worry – Daoist perfected as much as other mystics do not experience time in the same way as ordinary people. It never lags but is always present, opening mystics to great surges of vitality. Strong and vigorous in body and mind, they utilizing these surges as they return to ordinary society and enter the Life of Action, vibrantly present as "a center of creative energy and power in the world" (HAPPOLD 1970, 10 1).

A shining example in the Christian tradition is Teresa of Avila, who "was moved by the spirit to leave her convent and began, in abject poverty, the foundation of new houses." She worked tirelessly and inspired numerous people around her who "received the infection of her abundant vitality." Evelyn Underhill comments,

> This reproductive power is one of the greatest marks of the theopathetic life: the true "mystic marriage" of the individual with its Source. Those rare personalities in whom it is found are the *media* through which that Triumphant Spiritual Life which is the essence of reality forces an entrance into the temporal order and begets children: heirs of the abundant vitality of the transcendental universe. (1911, 394)

Daoists, too, have this productive power, working ceaselessly and with great energy. Numerous historical figures bear witness to this fact, be they founders of schools, compilers of scriptures, advisers to emperors, restorers of temples, masters of martial arts, and more. A modern example is again Wang Liping, who completed his training right around the end of the Cultural Revolution, but could not teach openly since temples still remained closed and the political climate was highly restrictive. As instructed by his masters, he returned to his family, took a job in a factory, got married, had a son, and to all intents and purposes led an ordinary life – working tirelessly to support his kin while continuing his cultivation in private.

A decade later, in 1985, the masters decreed that he should emerge from concealment, and he began to give lectures and workshops, making Daoist arts available to the general populace. Soon he became a major spokesperson, teaching seminars and workshops on breathing, energy circulation, quiet sitting, personal healing, and Daoist thought all over the

country. Eventually, his lectures and demonstrations drew tens of thousands, and prominent popular and political figures came to learn from him. This ended with the Falungong crack-down in 1999.

Like many other Daoists who alternate times of "entering the mountains" to develop personal cultivation with those of "leaving the mountains to spread the Dao," Wang moved back into the shadows. He emerged again in 2007, when he offered his first public lectures in China and also started to teach Westerners – the masters seeing China as increasingly hazardous to religious health. Since then, his following has grown substantially, he teaches actively both in China and overseas, writes volumes of detailed practice manuals (WANG and BARTOSH 2019), and is forever on the road to provide in-depth instruction and training (www.dragon-gate-academy.org; www.longmen.edu).

Besides youthfulness and immediacy, he and his masters also manifest "spirit pervasion" in its classical meaning of supernatural or extrasensory powers (CHEN and ZHENG 1997, 47, 104). Traditionally immortals have been famous for their ability to transport themselves to far-off places in an instant, visit different temporal realms to return only after centuries have passed, and take on any energetic form or shape (KOHN 2021, 239). They also manifest the powers of spirit through various feats of extrasensory perception and connect to different dimensions of the world in subtle ways. They display nonsensory knowing, receiving information in various psychic ways through telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition. And they can direct their intention into the interconnected universe, leading to a direct impact, an active modification of the world through telekinesis or psychokinesis (ZOHAR 1983, 1-2).

Oneness predicates these powers and overcomes time because, in the holographic universe, all existence is connected on the quantum level of prototemporality and all living beings are constantly submerged in a sea of telepathic suggestions and other psi-based phenomena. Russell Targ systematizes this fact with the notion of eight dimensions: three dimensions of space plus time active on two levels – the real world of matter and the quantum world of cosmic consciousness. Closely intersecting, each real dimension is paired with its subtle counterpart, allowing any two locations on the "real" plane to be connected by a path of zero distance and zero time (2012, 203, 212). In other words, all is one and the seeker finds his center at the timeless core of all, after passing through the sudden and singular event of conversion and the predictable and repetitive cycle of testing and training.

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