

COSMOLOGY AND SEXUALITY IN DAOISM

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“How can one preserve one’s essence, according to Daoist art of sexual practice”?

Please note that I adopted the pin-yin transliterations in this essay apart from where the Wade-Giles spellings appear in some of the quotations used.

In order to address this question comprehensively, it is necessary to take a look at the fundamental principles of Daoism, the philosophical and religious aspects that evolved and gave shape to this unique belief that has influenced Asian thinking for thousands of years. Daoism evolved into a theoretical system that provided explanations about everything, from the workings of the cosmos to human spirituality.

The ancient Chinese were fascinated with longevity; they had a strong desire to live forever. In observing flowering, procreation and death in the natural world, the Daoists considered that they were beholding a ‘mistake’ in nature. A mistake in so much as the seeds of nature appeared to be liberally and literally tossed away on the wind. The Chinese thought that to withhold one’s own seed would help lead to the elongation of life. Bearing fruit maybe nature’s order but immortality could be humanity’s greatest achievement. Daoism gave guidance to people on how to live a healthy emotional and physical life in order to achieve the Tao and to become immortal.

Daoist teachings of physical immortality did not necessarily imply that humans would no longer die. It aimed rather to prolong physical life in order to afford more time to cultivate a spiritual body. Daoist considered that lovemaking was a vital factor in elongating life, it was linked to good health and was very much an integral part of the natural order. Sexual activity enhanced the *Qi*, harmonized yin and yang and strengthened the organs by the flow of positive energy through the body’s meridians. Pao Pu Tzu (Ko Hung) a Daoist Master in the 4th B.C.E. declared that the ‘Best medicine and nourishment of the whole world cannot help you if you do not know and believe [in] the Tao of Loving...’

DAO – THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE ONE

The most fundamental and defining idea in Daoism is that of Dao. All Daoist aspiration and activity can and must be understood in light of this idea.

'He who knows (the Tâo) does not (care to) speak (about it); he who is (ever ready to) speak about it does not know it.'(1)

It is not easy to describe or to understand what Dao is. It is shapeless, nameless and ambiguous. Dao gives order to everything yet it is not intended. It is the composer of the universe yet not related to it. Dao is not a deity but stands as a model for human behaviour. 'There is no one Taoism and no one single Taoist experience. Yet there are patterns, manifestations, to be observed. Like the Tao, the experience is and yet is not, remains hidden and only occasionally emerges from the shadows.'(2)

Whilst the ability to define too tightly the nature of Dao remains elusive, the notions of preservation and essence included in the title of this work seem absolutely central. Perhaps the one area of life where these two ideas coalesce with the greatest intimacy and intensity is in the act of procreation and sexual relations generally. Whatever degree of individual longevity could be achieved through adherence to Daoist principles, ones name and line was best preserved through the bearing of children, the facilitating of successive generations.

It was ones essence in a literal sense that allowed this propagation to occur. In a metaphorical sense this essence became to Daoists the most precious resource for dually funding self-preservation as well as self-perpetuation.

The Great Tao has no form;
It brings forth and raises heaven and earth.
The Great Tao has no feelings;
It regulates the course of the sun and the moon.

The Great Tao has no name;
It raises and nourishes the myriad beings.
I do not know its name-
I call it Tao.

(Qingjing jing – Scripture of Purity and Tanqility)

The ancient Chinese did not have one particular God; they surrendered to the will of Heaven and its fate. They understood that the nature and the responsibility of humanity were to live and act in harmony with the intention of the Heaven. To behave according to the virtue of Heaven would bring infinite success and happiness. Their outlook was fundamentally altruistic in valuing the benefit that an action would bring to humanity as a whole, above any individual gain or profit.

Philosophical expressions of the Dao are represented in the *Daode jing* (Scripture of the Dao and the Virtue), one of the most influential works that has been attributed to Laozi in the 3rd B.C.E. It explained Dao as a creator of the worlds, emphasizing modesty and the enhancement of spiritual life. Other significant texts of philosophical Daoism are from *Zhuangzi*, which appeared at about the same time and present Dao in the form of stories and tales.

The Tao that can be told
 Is not the eternal Tao.
 The name that can be named
 Is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth;
 The named is the mother of the myriad beings.

Always remain free from desires-
 And you can see its wonder.
 Always cherish desires-
 And you can only observe its outcome.

Both these develop together
 But have different names;
 They are part of the mystery.

Mysterious and more mysterious-
 The gate of all that's wondrous.

(Daode jing – Scripture of the Tao and the Virtue chap.1)

In Chinese thought matter and spirit are one entity and not separate as in Western thinking. According to Chinese tradition, achieving Dao involves the whole person, including the body.

Daoism does not require from the follower abstinence from earthly joys or the denial of desires. On the contrary, it advocates nurturing healthy living and enjoying earthly happiness.

Daoism has no dogma or formality. The experience of thousands of years showed Daoists that the best solution for ending worldly troubles were to be found in love and sex. They believed that 'nearly all destruction or self-destruction, almost all hatred and sorrow, almost all greed and possessiveness, spring from starvation of love and sex.'(3)

Daoism appears as a quasi-religious all-encompassing culture, with a philosophy that encouraged the preservation of youth and the search for elixirs of immortality in order to achieve longevity. At first it was the Royal households and upper echelons of learned society that were most actively engaged in this quest. With time, knowledge and awareness of the outer and inner elixirs became more widely spread throughout the general population.

Daoism dates back to the 2nd C.E. when the humanised god of Dao Zhang Daoling established the first Daoist school as a Celestial Master. The school taught the virtues of living, purity and exorcism. The earliest Daoist practitioners in Chinese history were the magico-technicians (*fangshi*). These healers advocated individual cultivation to extend physical life, in order that the soul better access the world of the Gods. To help achieve immortality they used astrology, numerology (careful study of *I Ching* -Book of Changes) as well as techniques of acupuncture, dietetic and shamanism.

The theories, practices and beliefs evolved over centuries, from disciple to disciple and shaped Eastern thinking. The roots of Daoism are not clear, or rather not yet able to be attributed to a singular prophet or source.

Qi, Yin and Yang and the Five Agents

In ancient China, people believed that everything was a manifestation of a universal energy – Qi. This in turn was driven by the complementary yet contradicting forces of yin and yang. As men were considered yang and women were considered yin, harmonization of their most intimate interactions could produce the strongest possible manifestations of Qi. Thus the arena of sexual relations was regarded as a key area for cultivation and manipulation. Five elements –wood, water, fire, metal and earth – described human and natural phenomenon forming a united and interconnected pattern.

When the Yellow Emperor asked *Su Nü* what was the root of the *tao* of cultivating life, she answered: '*Ch'i* is the root of the *tao* of cultivating life. *Ch'i* is able to circulate the blood. Blood can be transformed into *ching*, and *ching* can nourish the spirit. As long as the spirit survives there is life. When the spirit dissipates there is death. *Ch'i*, then, is the root of spirit.'(4)

Qi means breath in Chinese. Every cell in our body depends on air to keep us alive. Daoist masters considered that the flow of energy in our rhythmical breathing is like the breathing of the universe and moves through everything. Thus *Qi* connects all beings with the greater universe as a whole.

As the principal life force without which humans are not able to survive, breath is one of the most accessible sources of energy. Chinese philosophy classifies all things as yin exhalation or yang inhalation. The act of love is most profoundly an act of energy respiration. One breathes in the other's yin, inhales this life energy to flow through the body and exhales it back to the partner. Breathing exercises are a simple way to learn about the subtle workings of the Tao. It was observed that as breathing is vital for good health and consequently for long life, the regeneration of the body towards its elementary state should start with it. Taiji practices and special breathing exercises were designed to cure ailments and strengthen the organs. These exercises are meant to nourish the yin and yang of the human body, fusing and uniting the two energies to revert back to a primordial energy state, which permeates and maintains all life.

It was thought that the body is constituted in a way that channels energy along the 'meridians' via which pure *Qi* flows separately from the blood circulation. Meditation was one of the most useful tools to help Daoists masters how to feel and to regulate this energy flow. Gymnastics, massage and acupuncture were designed to open up these meridians from any blockages for the improvement of overall health and longevity.

I Ching states the 'one yin and one yang is called the Tao', meaning that man and woman unite their energies for all creatures to be born. When Dao created the world from chaos, two distinctive energies emerged, which were complementary opposites. They gave existence to heaven and earth, sun and moon, light and darkness, hot and cold. These forces – yin and yang – represent Dao in its most elementary and paradoxical form, always constant yet ever changing. They gave life to a myriad of things – humans, animals and plants. Yin and yang are complimentary forces to one another and they merge into one unity. They are found in everything in the world, the sun and moon, heaven and earth, fire and water, inhaling and exhaling. In this schema, men are yang with more active volatility than women; they are fire and are quicker to spark, more easily agitated. Women are yin, softer elements, more placid and calm, they are water that ultimately quenches fire and completes the circle.

According to Daoist belief, the road to pure spirit immortality starts with long life through the nourishment of energy. Yin and yang harmonizes the energy that originated in the heavens. There are several practices to cultivate and refine the body and energy to accomplish spirit immortality. Physical exercises constitute key ways towards the Dao and attaining a healthy body to elongate life. Taoist tradition recognised that love, food and exercise were all vital in supporting life. None however without the other would achieve the desired longevity.

In Chinese cosmology, the Five Agents – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water – are fundamental elements in understanding the body as a network of energy channels. Five inner organs or orbs - liver, kidney, lungs, spleen and heart - are associated with five senses, five emotions, and five psychic centres and so on as holding place for the *qi*. In traditional Chinese medicine, health is determined by the state of interconnectedness between these five orbs and the universe, the weather and seasons and society as a whole.

Thus we see that Daoist understanding of the body is fundamentally linked with the cosmos. In Daoism, the aim is to revert towards a level of primordial *qi*, to the phase of creation where the body was in harmony with the universe. 'Heaven nourishes human beings with the five energies; Earth nourishes them with the five flavours. The five energies enter the nostrils and are stored in the orbs of the

heart and the lungs. They take care that the five colours are perceived to the fullest and that the five sounds are heard properly.’(5)

In the collection of meditation methods, the *Taiping jing shengjun bizhi* (Secret Instructions of the Holy Lord on the Scripture of Great Peace) that appeared in the Han dynasty in 32 B.C.E., it was observed that different light colours within different areas of the body correlated to the energies of the five agents with their directions and their holding areas within the body. It was postulated that humans gain spirit from the heavens, essence from earth, and energy from the middle harmony of heaven and earth. These three energies support each other while melting into the ‘One’.

Humans originate from the primordial *Qi* of chaos, which carries essence and which becomes spirit to transform into light. In order to elongate life, one must value, cultivate and harmonize energy. Part of this cultivation involves the maintenance of vital energy within the body and practices to guard from its unwanted escape. This in turn helps facilitate the transformation of the physical into pure spirit.

Energy represented itself in different ways within the body. One of the forms from which it sprung was physical nourishment. Nutrition was highly important in ancient China as a means of improving health. It is necessary to control what one eats to increase the body’s health status towards greater alignment with the Dao. The Daoist diet required ‘abstention from grains’, refrain from meat and alcohol for physical purification and metabolism to restore the body’s original balance.

P’eng Tsu explained to the Yellow Emperor: ‘By treasuring his *ching*, cultivating his spirit and consuming herbs a man may indeed attain long life. However, if he is ignorant of the *tao* of intercourse, the taking of herbs will be of no benefit. The mutual fulfilment of man and woman is like the mutual dependence of heaven and earth. Because heaven and earth have attained the *tao* of union, they are eternal; because mankind has lost the *tao* of intercourse, he suffers the onset of early death. If we could but avoid those things that gradually injure our bodies and learn the art of yin and yang, this would truly be the *tao* of immortality.’(6)

We can see from the above quotation that sexual energy was considered an important form of *Qi*, the original force of life in its most concentrated form. This energy is referred to as 'essence' or 'jing' and represented as semen in men and menstrual blood in women. Re-circulating this *Qi* to nourish the brain and other organs in the body is designed to conserve it within and avoid losing it to the outside.

Sexual energy was in fact considered the most highly valuable energy for the purpose of spiritual growth and emotional development. Sexual practice was included as a department of Chinese medicine and was treated in the context of health and healing. Sexual essence or jing is created and stored in the body, however humans need to learn how to tap into it and transform it into spirit. 'The methods of chi cultivation may have evolved over the millennia, but the principle has remained the same: The ching or sperm power is a super potent force readily available to men, awaiting only their harvest. Sexual essence is a building block for expanding our personal universe, the foundation for human love and evolution.'(7)

Ancient Chinese contemplated that it was possible to transform instinctual sexual energies into something greater and more divine. The failure to control such valuable energy may impede achievement of the deepest human potential.

Strong focus on the physical healing of the body and the harmonization of all aspects of internal energy flow, were prerequisite in order to attain Dao within the greater scales of life, nature and the cosmos. Thus internal harmony and balance paved the way for longevity, fulfilment and peace.

Tao of Love and Sex – Harmony of Yin and Yang

Daoist cultivation of sexual energy leads to an understanding that all living things are one. Man and woman must recognise that qi flows from them and back to them and that energy means life. It is understood as it is experienced and with increasing comprehension selfish motives start to slowly disappear. To take away something from the other is to take away from oneself, for one is the other. Daoist sexual technique draws jing from the sexual organs via the spinal cord towards the brain then circulates this sexual energy through rejuvenating the whole body.

The major sexual classic of China is *Su Nü jing* named after the Plain Maiden (Sunü), a celestial lady who taught sexual techniques to the Yellow Emperor. These practices provided in part a foundation for the medical and religious traditions. According to Daoism, sexual techniques serve to revert 'essence' to nourish the body as opposed to letting it flow out. Sexual intercourse aims to stimulate the 'essence' and when this valuable substance becomes apparent, applied concentration can re-circle it to nurture the body.

The most important male tenet of Daoist lovemaking is: to strengthen vitality by reverting his essence to nourish the brain and organs via the regulation of ejaculation – *coitus reservatus* - and by absorption of female yin essence to supplement his yang energy. According to Daoist tradition, male ejaculation and male orgasm are separate things. Ejaculation is not the pinnacle of pleasure and this vital essence should not be wasted irresponsibly. Daoist intercourse is beneficial to both men and women. Furthermore, a Daoistly harmonious love life may improve relationships with other people, help eliminate negative emotions and promote good health and balanced life.

Manatak Chia explains that Daoist sexual Kung Fu offers a unique and superior way of orgasm, with its particular element of male non-ejaculation. Specific exercises practiced over time lead to a mastering of particular muscles making it possible for climax without loss of the vital essence. The higher power of this type of lovemaking often leads to spiritual awakening. Men feel rejuvenated because they no longer lose energy, 'the sages considered one drop of semen equal in vital power to one hundred drops of blood.'(8)

Having mastered the art of the non-ejaculation orgasm, men can preserve their vital essence while satisfying their partner as often as she wants. In this way, they are both benefiting from each other's essence, from each other's sexual energy. All Daoist texts put high significance on frequent lovemaking but emphasise infrequent ejaculation. The more the man makes love, the more he preserves his yang essence bringing him closer to immortality. P'eng Tsu said: 'The Yellow Emperor mounted 1,200 women and thus achieved immortality, whereas the ordinary man cuts down his life with just one.'(9)

Jolan Chang explains that women played a very important and equal role in the philosophy of Daoist lovemaking. Some took advisory roles to the Emperor and some became masters of the tradition in their own right. For yin and yang to be in harmony, a man must fully satisfy his woman. The sexual union of men and women mirror yin and yang on the cosmic level, their distinctive individual attitudes to life, harmonised through Daoist sexual practice, help create harmony on Earth.

'...that Chinese sex life through the centuries had been remarkably healthy, free from the aberrations of sadism and masochism (with the exception of the fetishism of the bound-feet custom, unknown before the tenth century, and today entirely a thing of the past), but immensely skilled in happy variations and mutual donations.'(10) Ancient Taoist tradition considered men and women equally valuable partners; it was only much later in Chinese history that women were forced into a more inferior role. 'For some men love is a compassionate struggle for domination and surrender; to the Taoist it was more a lawful play of opposites.'(11)

Daoists acknowledged women as sexually superior to men. Their capacity for sexual pleasure is bountiful, far greater than men's. Also, according to Daoist observations, women do not lose much energy during intercourse as a consequence of orgasm, the longer the lovemaking lasts the more energy is accumulated. The Classic of Su Nü states that 'woman is superior to man in the same way that water is superior to fire.' Chinese tradition described man as fire that burns very fast, and woman as water that extinguishes fire. Men may have considered themselves vulnerable and unequal originating from the premise that woman can have multiple orgasms and are able to reproduce, whereas man's erection can be limited. Mantak Chia noted that Chinese Daoists believed that the energy loss of male essence over time weakens the physical health and can lead to emotional anger towards women.

Douglas Wile observed that men saw 'enemy' in women because of his inherent handicap in the bedroom. Only if he is able to control his yang energy with 'each act of coition with emission exposes his "Achilles heel" and saps his will to rule, but multiple contacts without ejaculation reinforce his right to dominance.'(12)

Cultivating female sexual energy had a similar base to that of men's sexual techniques. Many parallels have been found between the methods used by men to reverse the jing for the purpose of longevity and spiritual growth. Manuals directed women on how to collect essence more advantageously from young men. By using yang to nurture her yin essence, numerous illnesses can vanish and she can enjoy long life. Both sexes are able to harvest the other's sexual energy in a mutually beneficial fashion while uniting in harmony.

Certain manuals were created for the male to give advice on how to choose young 'un-knowledgeable' women and how to change them regularly in order to take their essence while never ejaculating themselves. The female yin essence would thus help halt man's aging and keep him young forever. Ancient texts advised the variety of positions for lovemaking to best avoid illnesses and boredom with one another. *Su Nü* advised that 'when a couple practise the Tao of Loving correctly the male will remain healthy and youthful and the female will avoid a hundred diseases. Both will enjoy it thoroughly and at the same time increase their physical strength. But if they do not know how to practice it correctly then lovemaking can be harmful to their health.'(13)

Su Nü replied to the Yellow Emperor when he told her that he did not want to make love any more: 'No, you must not do that. Heaven and Earth have their opening and closing, yin and yang have their activities and changes. We human beings must not do things against nature. When yin and yang are not in communion they can no longer compensate and harmonize each other. We breathe so that we can make love exchange old and used air for fresh air. Then the jade stem is not active will atrophy. That is why it must be regularly exercised.'(14)

Su Nü also gave detailed instructions on how many times a month men of different ages should ejaculate for optimal health and not just for the purpose of having children. The health status of both partners, the time of the day, weather conditions and the positions of the planets at the time of conceiving were important to avoid physical deformities in the newly born child. Many different aspects of a woman such as her age, looks, habits, build as well as whether conditions, and she gave birth already should be considered carefully in choosing her or not for intercourse. *Su Nü* gave guidance on the longevity of foreplay, rhythms of penetration and stages of withdrawal. Her advice in the Classic of *Su Nü* covered what to do and what not to do in order that one's lifespan increase. Her expert advice included: 'to change female partners brings increased benefit. More than ten partners in one night is especially good. If one constantly has intercourse with the same woman, her *ching-qi* will become weak, and this is not only of no great benefit to the man, but will cause her to become thin and emaciated.(15)

However, this principle of the bedchamber was intended solely for the improvement of health and was not intended as a free license to allow womanising.

There were also meditational practices where the reversal of sexual energy was undertaken without a partner. This solo activity may seem to echo the Christian tradition of priestly celibacy. However, the latter was always about denial and suppression presenting a path to salvation via righteous abstention of all things carnal. For the Daoist, whether alone or with partners, the physical aspects of his sexuality were always to be embraced as part of the route to optimal health, spiritual growth and development.

In conclusion

The aim of Daoist practices was to become an accomplished immortal. To be summoned eventually by the celestial heaven to take part in the administration of this and other worlds. ‘..once they have served with merit in various offices, may take some time of leave. They may whirl around the heavens in free enjoyment of movement and the journey; they may also, for the pure fun of it, go back to the world of mortals, be born as emperors and kings, as court ladies or as wandering mendicants.’(16)

There was an evident joyousness associated with living a Dao life. A happiness and fulfilment that arose from the correct flow of *qi*, in order to balance yin and yang was to attain robust physical health. The balanced body in turn acted as fertile ground for the evolution of higher spiritual development and helped support cosmic harmony on the larger scale. Daoism paid careful attention to sexual practices that acknowledged the highest potential for fulfilment that bodily unity could bring. It was therefore imperative that this potential was fully understood and realised rather than wasted.

‘The ultimate joy of immortal life is the easy, leisurely feasting among the crowd of the celestials. Imperial lords invite to fancy banquets, dragons and phoenixes sing and dance, jade maidens and celestial lads serve divine snacks – a life of delight and beauty, of song and pure joy.’(17)

Today, we witness in the West an increasing enthusiasm for Eastern health practices in the form of Qi gong, Taiji, and meditation, acupuncture and Daoist approach to sexual practice. A growing interest is shown in Chinese medicines, sciences and the arts. Far from being consigned to history, the idea of the Dao appears to be very alive. Through these traditions, though only recently embraced by the West, we find a connecting line back to the original Daoist quest: Longevity.

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