



The Pine Valley Daoist

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

I was wandering around some hidden parts of the monastery one day, poking into places where I had never been, when I found a secluded alcove, almost completely covered with a Polygonum vine. I pushed it away and in the grotto-like space there was a space of wall polished flat, and upon it could be seen an ancient inscription carved intaglio. It said:

perfect lord empty quiescence great dao song

dao not far within body even if all things empty
essence not empty essence if not empty with qi
resides qi return primal sea life without end want
spirit not leave body leave not even one thing on
consciousness platform when things in body spirit
not clear exhaust disperse essence spirit damage
tendons bones spirit drive qi qi retain form no need
variety technique long life self occur technique easy
know dao hard to realise even if realise achievement
not focus practice so thousand ten thousand
students in the end not even one or two succeed as
soon as spirit go out bring back spirit comes back
into body qi self return do like this morning morning
evening evening of itself red infant give birth true
fetus

Guo dragon pine valley dao person write



TRACES OF BLACK ink remained here and there in the curves of the characters, so I knew that at some point this carving had been used to make scrolls by the art of *tāyin* (拓印): stone rubbing.

Stone rubbing is a long and painstaking process, taking about three hours for each inscription. The fat monk had consented to teach me the arcane art one hot day in summer a few weeks before. It involved laboriously inking the whole stone, being sure to not miss a single spot. Then one applied moistened rice paper with care and precision, so that it was square, accurate and smoothly adhered to the stone. Finally one pounded evenly and repeatedly over the paper with an instrument called a *tābaō* (拓包) which he said looked like a lady's hair bun with a handle. I said I thought they looked more like defibrillator contacts, but the fat monk ignored that and just told me to keep going. He was carrying on his instruction from a spot a short distance away where he was sitting with his pot of tea and a cup. The spot was also conveniently in the shade.

I was completely soaked in sweat by the time he was satisfied with the results. He put down his teapot and came over to slowly peel away the paper. He held it up.

We stood admiring a perfect copy of the

inscription, with white characters on a black background, when just at that moment the Abbot entered the courtyard and strolled over to check the result.

"Hmm, good job, Fatty," he said. "But I hope you have learned your lesson, and that next time you'll think twice about tormenting Cook the way you do."

"Yes, I have indeed, Fangzhang. And please allow me to say that even though your punishments are strict, they are fair."

The Abbot hesitated, looked from one of us to the other with narrowed eyes, pursed his lips and left without another word.

"Punishment?" I said suspiciously. He gave me his innocent look.

"It's what I call the economy of the Dao. I learned my lesson, and you learned yours."

I paused to make a deliberate choice in my reaction, and decided to ignore the provocation, although every instinct shouted that I had a right to be angry. I took a deep breath, and asked him what he had done to torment Cook.

"Nothing much," he said, "a bit of laxative in the soup ..."

The Daoist was one of those who provide a chance of improvement for everyone.

ANYWAY, that had been the end of summer. Now it was autumn, and I took out my notebook to copy down the new inscription I'd found. When I finished, I looked over the lines of characters. I could tell that they were to be read from top to bottom, and successive lines went from right to left. But since there was no punctuation, and no capitals or other clear indications of where a sentence might start or end, it was rather hard to make sense of it. Meaning seemed to peek out here and there, but was amorphous. I headed for the library.

I heard voices inside. Before going in I looked through the window and saw the fat monk grinding ink to practice calligraphy and talking to someone. The person he was speaking to looked familiar, but it took some time before I recognised the boatman who had ferried us across the river all those months ago. He was not only out of context, being here in the library instead of in a boat on the river, but was also very nattily dressed in city clothes.

I walked in, and he greeted me effusively. The whole room was rich with the thick earthy-pine smell of the fresh ink the fat monk had ground. The boatman said he'd been visiting Shijie at her restaurant, and thought he would stop by to see the fat Daoist. He asked what I'd been up to. I showed them both the notes I had made, and told them where I'd found the inscription.

"Hmm, I'm not familiar with that alcove," the fat monk said. "You'll have to take me there. But who has not heard of Xu Qing Zhen Jun, the Perfected Lord of Empty Quiescence? He is the one mentioned in the title here, a Song dynasty master by the name of Zhang Ji-Xian."

"Every Chinese knows his name," said the boatman.

"Why?" I asked.

"He was one of the original Daoist rock stars," the boatman said, with a faraway look in his eyes. "The very first words in *Shui Hu Zhan*: Outlaws of the Marsh, are his name: Zhang the Celestial Master."

"Why don't you write a copy of the inscription out properly and we can all have a look at it," the boatman suggested.

"Good idea." The fat monk laid out some large sheets of smooth paper. "I'll use *shengxuan*," he said, "The characters will look nicer."

He studied the characters for a bit, narrowed his eyes, then wrote out a line at a time, from top to bottom, taking his time with each character.

Then he held it up, examined it with disapproval, and shrugged. "Well it's good enough to use for getting at the idea of it." He placed it back on the table and smoothed it over. "The first thing is to *duàn jù*: break the sentences. We are looking for units of meaning."

He picked up his brush, and dipping only the tip in ink made a small circle next to the third character. "Dao not far, that is the first unit." He looked at me and said "In the old days, since there was no punctuation, you had to give the whole piece some thought before you read it out loud. Your ability to make intelligent breaks demonstrated your understanding of the meaning."

He made another little circle after the word "body". "The Dao is not far, it is within your body."



The Abbot.

■ Xiaoyao Xingzhe has lived and worked all over the world, having crossed the Gobi in a decrepit jeep, lived with a solitary monk in the mountains of Korea, dined with the family of the last emperor of China, and helped police with their inquiries in Amarillo, Texas.

After going through the whole document, it made much more sense to me.

Song of the Great Dao by the Perfected Lord of Empty Quiescence

Dao is not far, it is within your body. Even if all things are empty, essence is not empty. Essence not being empty, it resides with *qi*. *Qi* returning to the primal sea: life without end. Aim for the spirit to not leave the body, and let not even one thing remain in your heart.^a When things are in the body the spirit is not clear, exhausting and dispersing essence and spirit, damaging tendons and bones. Spirit rides the *qi*, *qi* maintains the form: no need for a variety of techniques, long life occurs naturally. It is easy to know technique, but the Dao is hard to realise. One may achieve some realisation, but then not concentrate on practice. This is why hardly one or two out of 1000 or 10,000 have any accomplishment. When the spirit goes out, bring it back, when the spirit comes back into the body the *qi* returns by itself. Do like this every morning and every evening, and naturally the red infant will give birth to the true fetus.

Calligraphy of Guolong the Pine Valley Daoist

“So the first sentence means don’t go looking outside, trying to find the Dao in fantastic exercises or religious spectacles, look within yourself and find your essence.”

“It’s like that joke,” the boatman said.

“No it isn’t,” said the fat monk. “Now, the second sentence ...”

“You know the one,” the boatman continued, unperturbed. “A man is on his hands and knees, looking around under a streetlight one night, when his friend comes along, and hears that the first man is looking for a key.”

“Yes, very funny,” said the fat Daoist. “If we can just ...”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I want to hear the rest.”

“SO after a while the friend asks the first man where *exactly* he lost the key, and the first man says that he lost it in his house. The friend gets angry and asks why in the blue blazes are they looking outside, if that’s the case, and the first man says well ...”

“*The light is better out here*,” both the fat

a. The literal term is *líng tái* (靈台) “the platform of consciousness”.

monk and I finished the joke for him.

The boatman looked mildly surprised. “Oh, you’ve heard it before?”

“Only a million times.”

“And how many times have you thought about it?”

That stopped us. “It’s just a joke,” I said, lamely.

“And this is all just life,” the boatman said, gesturing around. “You sit on *that* river in your little body-boat and if you do nothing about it, you just get swept downstream to that great big waterfall in the sky.”

The Daoist nodded. “Despite the atrocious mixing of metaphor, that is a pretty good description of one aspect of what we call the *nì fǎ*: the method of reversal. Another is referred to here, in the second sentence.”

I was silent, admiring the segue.

He was pointing at the paper. *Even if all things are empty, essence is not empty.* “That means, look within the body, and essence will become full.”

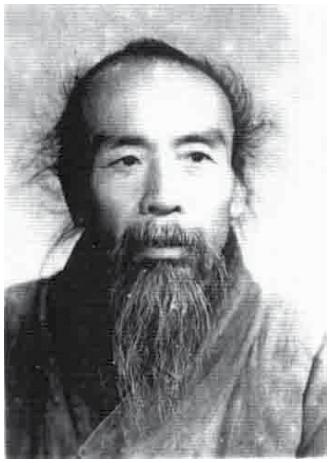
“Where is the reversal in that?” I asked.

“Looking outside of yourself all the time is *shùn*: following the flow, just going along with everything outside as usual. Turning the light around and looking within takes effort, at least at first, so that is *going against the flow*, the flow of your usual habits. That effort accumulates *xìng*: essence.”

The boatman objected. “That is only the most superficial meaning. There is a deeper meaning to that second sentence that links it to the third and fourth. And that is ‘when you reach that particular mental state where all things appear empty, but you are aware of essence and know directly within yourself that essence is not empty, then in that state it connects with the *qi* both within you and without you, and thus you are connected to everything. In that state, power and longevity are endless.’”

“That is very true.” A voice from the door made us turn. It was the Abbot. We all stood up in respect.

“Zhu Yuan-Yu^b says something that relates to this in his commentary on the first line of the *Can Tong Qi*. He said – and it always impressed me – that:



The boatman.

b. Zhu Yuan-Yu (朱元育, fl 1669) wrote two exceedingly clear and practical commentaries to classic texts, one on the *Can Tong Qi*, the other on the *Wu Zhen Pian*.

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One must exhaustively search out the information^c from before birth, and only then will one know that Heaven and Earth originated here, human life had its beginnings here, and the path of alchemy also established its foundations here. Even before the primordial chaos, a single *qi* without sign or portent, which could not be told of nor named, empty and vacuous without borders or body: this is called True Emptiness. But this 'emptiness' is not empty: a marvellous 'isness' exists; this isness within emptiness is the beginning of no-beginning, which if forced we could call the beginning of Heaven and Earth; the emptiness with isness is the beginning of the beginning, which if forced we could call the Mother of the Ten Thousand Things.

When the Abbot finished, he turned to go, but the three of us entreated him to stay. He told us that he had an errand, but would return in a short time.

When he had left, I said how incredible it was that he could just reel off all those lines of commentary. The fat monk and the boatman laughed.

The boatman turned to me and said "Before Fatty was here, the Abbot used to be the monastery's librarian. The story I heard is that once a wandering Daoist wanted to borrow a rare book, which the Abbot reluctantly lent to him. When he realised that the book was never going to be returned, the Abbot just sighed, sat down, and wrote the book out again from memory."

I expressed my amazement.

"You can train the mind to near perfect recall of things you read or witness, by putting yourself into an attentive and focused state as you face those things. It is not really very hard to do," said the fat Daoist. "In fact, forgetfulness is really just a form of distraction. You don't remember because you were not present to begin with."

"Which reminds me of a joke," said the boatman.

"No way," the fat monk said. "We'll miss dinner if we keep listening to your stories."

The boatman sighed, then turned to

c. The word used is "xiāoxi": 消息. A line or two later, the "path of alchemy" is *dān dào*: 丹道.

gather some kindling and prepared the *fenglu* to boil water for tea.

"So what does this next line mean?" the fat monk asked, turning to me. "When things are in the body the spirit is not clear."

"Um," I said. "Maybe it means you should do a cleansing purge or a fast or something."

The boatman chuckled as he lit the stove.

"No," the fat monk objected, "a fast or a purge is sometimes a helpful thing to do, especially after there has been overindulgence leading to a feeling of physical grossness or lack of sensitivity. But that sentence goes deeper."

The Abbot came in just at that time, and we shuffled about making room for him. He sat down on an upturned bucket, and the boatman handed him a cup of freshly brewed tea, then poured one each for the rest of us. The fat monk pointed out where we were, and the Abbot nodded.

"The term *shēn* 'body' here need not be limited to the physical body," he said. "Often, in fact, the concept of 'body' is split into *xíng*: form, and *tǐ*: physical body. The *xíng* is rather more amorphous and serves as a link between the more gross physical body and the *qi*, which in turn links to the *shén*/spirit. But the *xíng* includes the sensation of being a solid body stuck in a world of physical objects. One of our early goals is to be able to dispense with that sensation, to release from the form, and to *dí chú xuān lán*^d as Laozi says, to purify our deep perception."

The boatman grinned. "And then he says without a body, what worries can one have?"

"Well," I said, "tendons and bones sound pretty solid and physical to me."

"It's all levels of *qi*," the fat Daoist said. "Zhang Ji-Xian framed his teaching particularly in terms of spirit and *qi*, which is equivalent to what we nowadays most often call essence and life." He leaned over and poured the Abbot more tea.

The Abbot took up the discussion. "If you block the essence, life will suffer. But you can free that blockage by eliminating artificial delimitations – such as the illusion that you are a separate physical object in a universe of separate physical objects." He shrugged. "Anyway, it is crucial to remember that these

d. *di chu xuan lan* (滌除玄覽)

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People say it is hard to realise the Dao. But still, almost everyone has had some experience of it.

are only ways of speaking about something that is intrinsically impossible to put into words. Say, speaking of remembering ..." The Abbot put his finger to his temple and seemed to concentrate. Finally he turned to the fat monk. "I almost forgot, Fatty. I thought I'd warn you that Cook is coming over a bit later."

The fat monk looked puzzled. "Warn? Why warn me?"

The Abbot gave a little smile and said "I just thought you should know. Now, where were we?"

"The illusion that we are separate bodies within this granular universe," said the boatman, kneeling by the *fenglu* with his back to us. He was fanning the flame, boiling more water for tea.

"Indeed. Getting rid of that illusion," said the Abbot, "allows you to access the inconceivable power that flows freely through everything, that we could call the Dao. That power supports those relatively more dense levels of *qi* that give the spirit a temporary anchor and base of operations here."

"I still want to know why I should be warned that Cook is coming," the fat Daoist said.

"Forget I mentioned it," said the Abbot, waving his hand. "Now here where it says 'spirit rides the *qi*' means that the spirit rides the *qi*, ascending as high as the *qi* is clear; the *qi* in turn transmits its clarity to the *xíng*, the bodily form, the physical effect of which is an enhanced life-span without the need for a myriad of *yangsheng* techniques."

The fat monk was sitting silently, looking down and frowning.

The boatman stood up and craned his neck, looking at the document. Then he read out the following characters: *It is easy to know technique, but the Dao is hard to realise. One may achieve some realisation, but then not concentrate on practice.* He smiled at the Abbot. "People say it is hard to realise the Dao," the boatman said. "But still, almost everyone has had some experience of it."

He poured tea for all of us. The fat monk waved his away. The boatman shrugged and put it on a shelf not far away.

"Yes, a momentary experience of the

Dao is very common," said the Abbot. "A sensation of wholeness and connection, of depth and meaning. But most do not realise that it is an invitation, a call for them to search for and return to their origin. They just shrug and let it go past."

I understood what he meant. "So that experience of the Dao is, in effect, not realised," I said.

The Abbot nodded. "Then there are those who do realise its significance, and get interested for a while, even study, but they do not attend to their practice consistently."

"It's like planting a crop but forgetting to water or hoe," said the fat monk, finally looking up. "You might get something, but it would be hard to tell the wheat from the weeds." He reached across to where his tea cup was sitting on the shelf.

"That reminds me of a story," said the boatman.

"Me too," said the fat Daoist, lifting his cup from the shelf. "I'll tell mine first. There once was a scholar who happened to catch a glimpse of the king's daughter, a girl with a face like the moon. Seeing her pass by, the scholar was struck dumb in amazement at her beauty. At that moment, the princess chanced to glance at the scholar, and he saw her give him the tiniest hint of a smile." The monk paused and took a sip of tea.

"What happened then?" I asked. "Did the scholar follow the princess to the palace? Make heroic journeys so that he might show the king he was worthy of his daughter's hand? Solve some incalculable riddle that had been plaguing the kingdom?"

"No, sadly," said the fat monk. "He spent the rest of his life telling people that the princess had smiled at him, and how amazing it was."

"My man was more lucky," said the boatman. "He came across a well one bright night and looking in, saw a reflection of the moon in the water at the bottom. Thinking that the moon had fallen in and could not get out, he rushed to tell his Daoist teacher, who laughed and suggested that he haul it up with some rope. So the man went home for some rope, tied a knot in the end, and threw that end down the well. It happened to catch on a rock at the bottom, so when he tugged and heaved, he thought it was pulling on the tip of the moon's crescent.

Suddenly the rope slipped loose, he fell flat on his back, and saw the moon riding high in the sky above. 'You're lucky my teacher knew what to do!' he said, pointing at the moon. 'And if it weren't for my efforts you'd still be stuck in that wretched well!'

"So," the boatman said, "sometimes, if we just follow the instructions of those who have trodden the path, even if they sound silly, and keep up our efforts, then – with a bit of luck thrown in – it may be enough to help us see things as they really are."

There was a knock on the door of the library. I went to open it, and there was Cook, carrying a covered platter. We greeted him, and he stepped over the threshold and set down the platter on the table. He did not know the boatman, so we introduced them, and then Cook lifted the covering off the platter with a flourish. Underneath were some truly beautiful dumplings, still steaming. The fat monk's eyes lit up at first, and then became wary, looking back and forth from Cook to the Abbot.

Cook carried a small bowl of the steaming dumplings over to the fat monk. They looked slightly different to the others, richer, more luscious.

"Here you are, Fatty," he said. "I made these ones especially for you."

The fat monk looked at him, then the dumplings, narrowed his eyes, hesitated, and finally said "I'm sorry Cook, I really don't feel very hungry today."

The cook lifted his eyebrows, glanced at the Abbot, and said, "But Fatty, these are your favourites!" He urged the bowl towards him.

The fat monk pushed it away. "Really I couldn't eat a mouthful," he said. The cook shook his head and set the bowl down on the table by the platter.

Meanwhile the Abbot, the boatman and I were helping ourselves. The dumplings were delicious. As they disappeared I could see the fat monk's eyes following each one and seeming to grow desperate. At last the Abbot said "Come on Fatty, why don't you have yours?" and pointed towards the bowl sitting on the table. A sly smile perched on the corner of his lips.

"Truly, *Fangzhang*, I cannot." The fat Daoist seemed to be in agony.

"Well, you won't mind then," said the

Abbot, and scooped the dumplings into his own bowl, and ate them all up.

The fat monk's eyes widened and his face grew red. He opened his mouth to say something, and the Abbot looked at him. "Yes, Fatty?"

The fat monk shut his mouth. He seemed to be gritting his teeth. "Nothing, *Fangzhang*."

The Abbot smiled. "Well then, why don't we finish the discussion we were having? Is there anything that still is unclear to anyone?"

"Only the Red Infant," I said.

"Fatty?" the Abbot said.

The fat monk swallowed and turned to me with an effort. "The reference to the Red Infant simply shows that this is the period of warm nourishment rather than intense effort, speaking in terms of the firing process." As he spoke his gaze lingered on the empty platter.

"Mmm, warm nourishment," said the Abbot. "So very apropos. Well, everyone, I suggest we go and let Fatty think about the lessons of the Dao. Come on now."

And we all trooped out, leaving our librarian behind. The last out was the Abbot, who closed the door with a big smile. "Thank you, Cook," he said in a low voice. "Well done. I think we'll have peace for a while now."



Meditation on the Red Child (*chizi*), an expedient image of the inner self.