



Pouncing Tiger, Soaring Dragon

*The highest secrets of alchemy are three:
The essential water of vitality;
The fire of the spirit; and
The earth of attention.*

— Ancestor Lü, in *Secret of the Golden Flower*

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

THE CAVE'S MOUTH OPENED onto a broad flat space. Just visible were the gently waving tops of the pines that grew at the foot of the cliff below us. Green forest stretched for miles, but an errant sparkle betrayed a river's run in the distance. The warm breeze of late afternoon sighed through the branches, carrying a delicate scent that contrasted sharply with the tone of what I was hearing.

"Be merciless," the fat monk said. "Cut them once, then jam them up against a

wall, then cut again. They might try to run, but there's no way out. Then you kill them!" He gave an evil, sadistic laugh. "Use a single stone to kill them dead, each and every one."

He slapped the piece down on the Go board with a solid *thwack*, completely demolishing my position on the right. It was infuriating. He gave me his innocent look.

"Say, is your concentration up to par?" he asked, as we swept the *weiqi* pieces into black and white groups, then stored them away. "You've been looking a bit distracted recently. Anyway, I wanted to show you a restorative method. And by chance it is from that book you've been asking about: the *Zhong Lü Chuan Dao Ji*."

Ah! *The Passing of the Dao from Zhong to Lü*, the classic work detailing the conversation in question and answer form between the Daoist patriarchs Zhong-li Quan and Lü Dong-Bin. It was a basic outline of internal alchemy. I had it in my bag, in an English translation that meant precisely nothing to me.

"That's funny. It's pretty clear," the Daoist

said when I confessed this to him. “Maybe you just need some orientation to get a grip on the terms. Or maybe the translation is not so good. We’ll see.” He stood up, twisting his back this way and that. “Hmm, I’m a bit stiff myself after our game.”

He led the way into the cave, stretching his hands toward the ceiling some 20 feet above. Deeper in the cave it was cooler, but still quite bright, and there were several wooden benches and a table to sit at. From one of the deep pockets in his robe, he pulled out a rolled manuscript, opened and spread it out on the table, and pressed it flat with a couple of stones.

“This is the section on Dragon and Tiger,” he said, gesturing at the wood-block print characters running from top to bottom on the page.

“It is relatively straight-forward, but to understand it, you need to keep the *Taiji Tu* and its associations pictured in your head.” He glanced at me with a worried look, then said, “Um, maybe I’d better draw it for you.”

He swept a flat space in the dust on the floor, then used a stick to draw a circle putting a reverse “S” shape in the middle, then drew rough characters around it: “Wood” on the left, “Fire” at the top, “Metal” on the right, and “Water” at the bottom.

“There you go,” he said. “Yang on the left,

yin on the right. Now let’s look at what the manuscript says.”

Lü said: Dragon is the image of Liver, tiger is the spirit of the Lungs. Here, from the midst of Heart fire, fluids are generated, and these fluids are true water. The midst of true water is murky, unfathomable; hidden here is the true dragon. Dragon is not in the Liver, it emerges from the trigram Li. Why is this?

Also, from the midst of Kidney water is generated true qi, and this qi is true fire. In the midst of true fire, faintly faintly, is hidden the true tiger. This tiger is not in the Lungs, but is generated from the trigram Kan. Why?

He used the stick to trace the circle clockwise, starting at the bottom, and said “Kidneys are the depths of yin, still and quiet. Then when that watery quietness has reached an extreme of stillness, a point of energy emerges, yang energy that grows up and outward until it manifests. This is like the rising of the sun. The rising of the sun begins at midnight, even though we only see it at the dawning.”

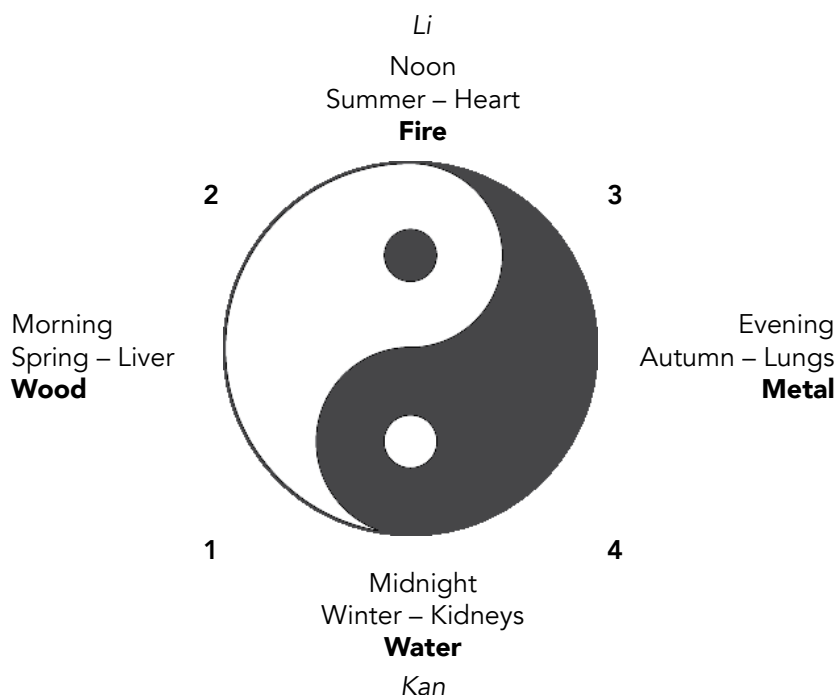
He pointed at the character for Wood on the left. “This is where that yang energy, hidden but gradually growing, finally manifests, just like the sun lifting over the horizon. Yang increases until it reaches the peak,” he pointed at the top, “then it begins its decline, and yin increases.”

I was impatient. This was utterly basic stuff. What was he labouring it for? I couldn’t help but interrupt. “Yes, I know. And the Dragon is the symbol of that growing yang energy rising up, while Tiger is the symbol of that increasing yin energy moving downward. Dragon rules the sky of yang, Tiger rules the earth of yin. So what?”

The Daoist was unperturbed. “If it were that simple, why then does it say ‘Dragon emerges from the trigram Li’ which is here at the top, the place of Fire, instead of from the trigram Kan, which is Water, at the bottom?” He looked at me, eyebrows raised.

I was silent. I literally hadn’t seen those words, hadn’t taken them in.

“And why does it say ‘fluids are generated from the midst of Heart fire?’ Do you know about that?” He was inexorable.



My mind raced. My Chinese medicine theory was not bad, thanks to discussions with friends, but Heart fluids? Wasn't that blood? No, wait ... sweat. But that didn't seem to fit. Definitely must look it up when I get back, I thought.¹ All this took only a second, but the fat monk gave me no more time. "The point is that there are levels of subtlety here. The unconscious physical level is described by Chinese medicine theory, while Daoist theory goes beyond that, describing what happens when you add deliberate conscious intent into the mix. And there are several degrees of subtlety in that as well."²

"What applies to all levels is the obvious and well-known principle that yang activity ascends until it can do so no longer, then transforms into yin and descends again into stillness, only to be born again."

He tapped the stick on the ground. "What we see here is that each stage of any level of this cycle contains within it the living tendency of its opposite."

"For example, if we are talking at the level of internal alchemy, the descending tiger should retain the flexible open awareness of the dragon, while the ascending dragon should have the solid determination of the tiger. It really is quite marvellous how viewing it from this angle opens up a rather dead theory into an organic complex living thing. It is like looking carefully at a flower and seeing how its patterns repeat more and more subtly."

Taken aback momentarily by his unusually poetic turn of phrase, I struggled to understand. "But these words here: *xin sheng ye*: Heart producing fluids. How does Heart fire generate fluids? It doesn't make sense. How can you get fluids from fire?"

He laughed. "You are thinking narrowly. Nothing exists in isolation, and we are talking here about an organic whole: a whole system, if you like. The fluids that are generated are not created out of nothing, but are transformed from potential into manifestation."

He pointed at the circle, again. "Dragon carries Kidney water upwards, hidden within true yang qi. When this qi reaches the Heart, this water is steamed out within the Lungs, and manifests as Lung fluids descending with Tiger. Zhongli Quan

describes it somewhere."

He shuffled through the pages, then said "Ah, here it is." He spread out the sheet, and pointed.

Liver qi guides Kidney qi from below upward to reach the Heart. Heart is Fire. When the two qi meet and mix, steaming takes place in the Lungs, and Lung fluid descends "from the Heart" This is why it is said that "Heart generates fluids".

"Like I said, there are different levels at which this can be understood, the medical, the qi gong, and the alchemical, and within each one there are degrees of accuracy and usefulness. But what I wanted to show you was the alchemical aspect, the transformative aspect. That would be the most useful for you."

*In the dark deep stillness of the North
Swims a creature.*

*Huge—no one knows how huge!
Its name is Kun.*

*Transforming, the creature flies.
Its name, now, is Peng.*

*When Peng ascends, he stirs up the waters
for three thousand miles around.*

*Spirals upward—a whirlwind which lifts
him ninety thousand miles high.*

*Wheeling in majesty, Peng turns and
heads South.*

*Borne by the wind for six months,
he comes to rest
In the Lake of Heaven.*

— Zhuangzi, c.250 BC

The Daoist stood up and, still carrying his stick, walked to the mouth of the cave. I followed, and as I reached him he gestured out over the forest and up into the evening sky. "At a basic level," he said, "yin is the body, like the earth here, and yang is the mind, the sky. The mind can be trapped within the body, never leaving it and its concerns, or it can look up and soar into the heavens."

"What we don't often realise is that this very soaring can attract beneficial influences back to us, celestial influences that assist us to break the hold the body has



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You turn the light around to quietly observe the source of thoughts, you suddenly find that your mouth has filled with sweet saliva, which we call gan lü: sweet dew. These are the fluids generated by the mind

on our attention, and free us to be much more creative than we might otherwise be. This is ‘manifesting the Dao within the everyday world.’”

As the sky darkened outside, I noticed the rising moon peaking over the treetops. A cool evening breeze had sprung up. The Daoist circled his arm from horizon to horizon. “So dragon is the soaring mind of Dao, that when it reaches a peak descends again to earth, carrying with it the dew of celestial influence, while tiger is the human mind ‘enlightened’ to some extent by the Dao mind, and carrying that positive influence into action. Bit by bit the mind of Dao and the human mind merge; what is called ‘making real knowledge conscious, and making conscious knowledge real.’”

He pointed upward. “Normally, the subtle mind of Dao is obscured by our everyday concerns, just like those stars were obscured by the daylight. What we are trying to do is to bring that subtle mind of Dao into awareness, so that it can help inform and guide our actions, like the stars can guide our path on a journey. To do this, we need to pay some attention inwardly, and let those everyday concerns dissipate. This is letting quietness accumulate until stillness reaches a peak: and that is when the mind of Dao can manifest.” He took his stick and, bending over, drew a trigram in the dust at the mouth of the cave. I could just see it by the light of the rising moon.



“This is the trigram *Zhen*, Thunder,” he said. “See how there is one yang line under two yin lines?” He pointed with the stick. “This is a graphic illustration of what happens: the mind of Dao—the yang line—appears within, after attaining profound stillness.”

“And the profound stillness would be shown by *three* yin lines.”

“Yes, you’re starting to get it.” He straightened up, and stretched again. “This is where I can tell you the other aspect of ‘*xin sheng ye*: Heart generating fluids.’ Don’t forget that *xin* also refers to ‘mind’ as well

as Heart. When you get everything set up right, you are relaxed yet focused and present, the mind has settled down, and you turn the light around to quietly observe the source of thoughts, you suddenly find that your mouth has filled with sweet saliva, which we call *gan lü*: sweet dew. These are the fluids generated by the mind: *xin*.” He gave me a look. “But don’t get fixated on saliva, for god’s sake. It is just a minor indication that you are basically doing most things right, so far. It is not important by itself. Say, are you hungry? Or is it just me?”

AFTER A LEISURELY but light dinner seated at the wooden table, we strolled out to the mouth of the cave again and stood looking at the moon. It had long since cleared the trees, and dominated the evening sky, now a darkly luminescent royal blue. The Daoist turned and faced the mouth of the cave. “Anyway, I brought you here to witness something incredible.”

“What?” I asked.

“Impossible to describe,” he said brusquely. “Follow me.”

We entered the dark rear of the cave, the fat monk disappearing ahead of me as I felt my cautious way ahead, step by step. Just then a flicker appeared in the darkness ahead, and in its light I saw the Daoist holding something above a flame. A torch! It took light and illuminated a heavy wooden door, effectively hidden back in a crevice. The hinges creaked, and a large iron key disappeared into a pocket as he pushed through, then turned and beckoned me to enter.

The air was different in the narrow passageway, a mild breeze tinged with sulphur. The sound of trickling water echoed there, but I had no time to look around before the torch receded into the distance. I hurried, the stone floor and walls just visible. After several twists and turns, the light up ahead descended jerkily to the level of my feet, then disappeared. A reflected glow showed steps spiralling down to the right; one turn, a landing, and I caught up to him.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Just imagine you are entering a space deep within yourself,” he replied cryptically, then gestured for me to be silent. Another passage, and again a set of spiralling steps.

Three or four turns later we emerged onto a level space just as the torch spluttered and died away to an ember; there was light for only about two feet in either direction. I could not see the walls, but it felt like a tiny chamber.

"Never mind," said the Daoist. "I can find my way back."

"You can find your way back?" I said. "What about me?"

"You are staying here." He shushed me as I started to protest, then held the torch low and swept it around to search the area. "There is a flat rock somewhere just ... yes, here." He grabbed my hand and guided me several steps to a low seat. The top had what felt like a woven reed mat on it as a cushion. He pushed down on my shoulders until I sat.

"This is a place very conducive to deep meditation."

"But what should I do?"

"Do nothing. Sit and allow emptiness to manifest."

"How long for?"

He did not answer, just patted my shoulder and turned back toward the passageway. The torch was useless now, only a spark left, yet his movements were confident. I heard his footfalls fading on the spiral steps, and then there was silence. Silence and blackness.

*Reaching the extreme of emptiness,
keeping quiet steadily,
as myriad beings act in concert,
I thereby watch the return.*

- Lao Zi, chapter 16

A faint almost imperceptible breeze played across my face in the tiny chamber. This, then, could not be a self-enclosed space, there had to be some opening to the greater world. Do nothing, he had said. Luckily I had experience doing nothing. The Daoist had explained that even our own concept of a self was "doing" – we constantly have to imagine ourselves into existence. "If you let go of that effort, even your sense of self would disappear," he had said. "This is doing nothing. But it can be dangerous, if you have not developed a stable personality: this is why we insist on normal integration into society as a

prerequisite for Daoist study. You have to both be, and not be, as it were." All this ran through my mind, but as the darkness seemed to thicken around me, my thoughts quietened. My breathing deepened, and slowed. Time became a liquid thing, not so much flowing as lapping gently around me, until it enveloped me in stillness.



After an eternity of blackness, there was a queer lessening of the obscurity below, little tendrils of luminescence that seemed to glow, now a bit brighter, now fading, almost as if they were waving. Weirdly, that undulation seemed to be part of me, and could be *felt* as well as seen. It moved without time, and without ending.

Gradually I saw that the light throughout the whole chamber was growing. It slowly spread around me until it revealed that the space was not tiny and enclosed as I had imagined, but a huge cavern. From my small seat of rock, the roof arched high above, and below me was a pool of water within which stalagmites reached upward. To either side caverns and vaults opened out, and I could see vaults beyond vaults disappear into the subterranean distance.

Suddenly and without warning the brightness increased to an intensity that could only come from the sun itself. In that instant, the light exploded, reflected from each surface in the cavern as if from a million tiny mirrors. Each of the mirrors reflected each of the others, and within that infinitude of reflections, there was no room for me. I was blinded into non-existence.



"Mica" the fat monk said, scratching himself. We had just shared some left-over spring-onion cakes for a meagre breakfast, and he was completely unimpressed with my tales of wonder. "It is a completely natural phenomenon, nothing spooky or supernatural at all."

"But it exploded! Light everywhere!"

"That whole cave is one big sheet of mica," he said, "shattered into millions of



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tiny reflecting facets. Only two times each year does the sun line up perfectly with the aperture leading inside to cause that effect.”

I was still excited. “Well, what about the waving sprouts? The tendrils of light that came up first?”

“Some bioluminescent micro-life must have come alive at a certain point during the night, and the variations in the luminosity made them seem to wave like sprouts in a stream.” He gave me a look of mock severity. “You need to keep your imagination in check. It makes you prone to jump to erroneous conclusions.” But then he grinned. “But I understand how you feel: the first time I sat on that mat it blew me away.”

And try as I might, I couldn’t better that description.

Endnotes

1. I asked Nick Dent, who immediately pointed me at Tang Rong-Chuan. The very first paragraphs in his *Xue Zheng Lun* say:

A person’s body is nothing but yin and yang. Now yin and yang are actually water and fire, while water and fire are actually qi and blood.

Water transforms into qi, fire transforms into blood. What do we mean by water transforming into qi? Qi is engaged with matter, and its reversion to water is clearly verifiable. Actually, the body’s qi is generated from within the Sea of Qi in the Dantian below the navel, and the organs in that region are the Kidneys and Urinary Bladder, just the area that water returns to and gathers in. This water cannot transform itself into qi, it depends upon the Heavenly yang within the breath inhaled through the nostrils, which from the bronchioles of Lungs leads Heart fire down to below the navel. Steaming the water, it makes it transform into qi.

This is like the trigram Kan from the Yi Jing (Book of Changes): one yang born from within water, and that yang becomes the root of generative qi. Once the qi is generated, that which follows the channel of Taiyang as it is distributed over the surface of the body becomes protective qi, while that which rises to the Lungs supports breathing...

2. Later the Daoist told me about the book *Zhong He Ji*—the Book of Balance and Harmony—which describes nine grades of praxis, describing lower, middle and upper level practices, and then breaking each level into three levels. The lowest of the low are the false paths; the highest of the high is the transformation of one’s life into formlessness. In between, many of the same terms are used, but at each level they have a different meaning and significance. For example, at a lower level, *jing* refers to semen; in the higher levels it refers to a formless essence that both sustains and destroys.

3. “This combination is expressed in terms of ‘inversion of *fire* and *water*.’ In the ordinary worldly human being, it is said, fire is above water: just as fire rises, consciousness is volatile and given to imagination and wandering thought; and just as water flows downward, real knowledge tends to become submerged in the unconscious, to sink away into oblivion. Thus when fire is above and water below, consciousness and real knowledge go their separate ways and do not combine. Inverting fire and water makes real knowledge stabilise consciousness and remove volatility, while fire ‘warms’ water so that consciousness brings real knowledge into action in life.” Thomas Cleary, 1987, *Understanding Reality*. University of Hawai’i Press. p. 17.

