

Alchemy, Demonology and the **Abbot**



早知燈是火
飯熟幾多時。

*If we'd only known that the lamp was fire
Our rice would have been long since cooked.*

—Zen saying

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

THE DAWN TREK to the Daoist monastery had been beautiful. Morning sun sparkled on frosted branches, the fresh snow undisturbed but for the tracks of a few small animals. Several times the path disappeared, hidden under a blanket of white. Coming around a large boulder, two startled birds flew off, leaving a branch vibrating in the otherwise still forest. Snow fluttered softly down, settling on the thin rim of ice that had formed on the goldfish

pool by the gate.

The banging from the heavy gargoyle knocker was loud, but needed repeating, and still several minutes passed before the bolt on the gate rattled. The large wooden door opened a crack, then shuddered to a stop. There was mumbling on the other side, and several kicks, before the gate opened enough to get through. The gatekeeper seemed grumpy, and barely bothered to look up before he shuffled forward to push the gate shut again. He silently gestured into the courtyard by way of greeting, and turned away. The large three-legged *ting* was emitting only the barest threads of incense smoke.

The library was still closed, so I followed the narrow corridors between the buildings, past the kitchen, and up behind the *guan* that led to the practice area higher on the mountain. Here on the path the snow had been trodden down, and a few patches reached by the morning sun had already begun to melt.

The Daoist was standing on the flat space overlooking the lake. He was facing

outward, legs apart, knees slightly bent, hands clasped in front of him. The area around him was clear of snow, but did not look as if it had been swept. A crescent moon, translucent in the early morning light, hung over the purple mountains on the far side of the lake.

Still warm from my walk, and waiting for him to finish, I stretched for a few moments, then stood in the same posture. Several minutes later he circled his arms slowly around and down, then stood straight and turned.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “Standing in the morning is a great way to gather qi.” He looked at my posture. “You know, there’s a better way to hold your hands, if you want to try it. Instead of just crossed in front of you – which is fine, by the way – you can try this *shou jue*, a hand posture called ‘son and mother.’” He showed me how to place the right thumb in between the base and first crease of the ring finger of the right hand, then place the left thumb into the circle made by the right thumb.

“The right hand then wraps around your left thumb, and the left hand wraps around the right hand” he said. “That makes a *taiji* symbol. See?”

He observed and made corrections. “Toes slightly grip the ground,” he said. “That lifts *Yongquan*, the point on your sole, up a bit.” He pushed my chin in, and touched the mastoid process on each side behind my ears.

“These are the jade pillars, they need to be erect. That will extend the spine. Meanwhile, gently contract the anus. That helps to tuck your tailbone in.”

After 10 minutes I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. The area below my umbilicus felt distended, and I just couldn’t stay still any longer. I stood up and complained.

He grinned. “Your qi is gathering. But it is blocked in the lower abdomen. Try some cloud hands.”

After two short sections, the distended feeling had dissipated.

“So what was that all about?” I asked.

“That hand posture gathers qi rapidly. Too rapidly for you, with poor qi circulation. And you were probably all tense, learning a new posture. It is easy to have qi accumulate and

block up in the abdomen, or in the chest.”

He leaned over and, with a certain childlike delight, scooped up a handful of snow, packed it into a snowball, and threw it high up and out, over the edge of the slope and the roofs of the *guan*. He paused to watch the arc of its flight, then turned back to me, smiling. “That tendency for qi to become blocked is why my teacher always recommended a general relaxation of the body and the mind, rather than to focus too intently on specific points. He said that women in particular have to be careful of focusing their attention on the abdomen.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “All the books say to concentrate on the lower *Dantian*. I haven’t read that it is harmful for women. How could it be? Learning *taijiquan* or any martial art, teachers always say to focus on the abdomen.”

“Ah, *The Books*,” he chuckled, brushing the snow from his hands. “Well, focusing in the lower abdomen is fine when you are practising martial arts, because your body movement will disperse any adverse accumulations of qi.” He rubbed his abdomen. “It’s mainly in sitting meditation that women have to be careful. There is just so much more that can go wrong for women in that area. So while men can focus on the abdomen for a certain period in the beginning stages of meditation, women should avoid it, and instead focus on the area *Shanzhong*, between the breasts. But in any case these are only temporary measures, used at certain times, under the direction of your teacher.”

He looked around. “Anyway, you can ask Shijie about that some time. Let’s go grab some breakfast.”

We made our way down the trail, back to the *guan*, and headed for the kitchen. There was a line of young monks standing outside the door.

“What’s going on?”

“Cook has locked us out,” one said to us. “Why?”

Another monk grinned. “Seems he came out to empty a bucket and got hit right in the head with a snowball. He wants the culprit.”

The fat monk turned to me and whispered “Not a word.” *



Standing in the morning is a great way to gather qi.

■ Xiaoyao Xingzhe is a wandering correspondent for The Lantern.





The problem is, there are many aspects and qualities involved in our body-mind totality, and an imbalance can derail or delay the alignment you are looking for.

We were sitting in the library. The cook had relented, eventually, and fed everyone.

“I’ll tell him, one day. Maybe in the spring,” the Daoist had said, after leaving the kitchen a safe distance behind us.

It was a bit stuffy in the small library. A coal stove warmed the room from the corner. The fat monk bent over the ink stick he was rubbing on the inkstone.

I cleared my throat. He ignored me, the inkstick going round and round. The rich smell of freshly ground ink filled the room

I plunged in anyway. This was the question that had brought me to the monastery today, after all.

“You’re always going on about alchemy,” I said. “But what I want to know is ...”

“I’m always going on?” the fat monk interrupted, raising one eyebrow. “I seem to recall ...”

“What I want to know is,” I said, cutting him off, “how is that different from simply searching for and aligning with the Dao?”

“Well, essentially there is no difference,” he said. “If you align yourself with the Dao perfectly, you could say that there is no you, only the Dao.” He scratched his head. “But that would not be completely accurate, because in fact there is you, distinct and present, but your will and actions move with the Dao, as if you were not ...”

He put his hand down and frowned at me in mock severity. “Ai Ya, haven’t you read the first line of the *?” He put down the inkstick and went to put a pot on the stove.*

The fat monk came back and sat down. I took up my question again. “OK, I get that. But why have alchemy at all then?”

“Well, there are different levels, always. One can live in general alignment with the Dao relatively easily. You live well, and die well, following the principles of simplicity and retirement, moving in the world with as light an impact as possible, keeping in mind your duties to yourself and to others.” He laughed. “For many people, that is quite hard enough, believe me.”

True, I thought, even for those interested in living harmoniously.

The Daoist poured a bit of water into the well of the inkstone, then continued “But if you want to align with the Dao efficiently,

alchemy gives you the guidelines and techniques that help with that alignment.

“The problem is, there are many aspects and qualities involved in our body-mind totality, and an imbalance can derail or delay the alignment you are looking for.”

The teapot boiled. I went over to make some tea, and thought about this. Part of that statement had caught me. Setting down his cup in front of him, I asked:

“What do you mean, ‘many aspects and qualities involved in our body-mind totality’?”

The fat monk sipped his tea and looked at me. “You have a body, right?”

“Yes.”

“And a mind? You have a mind?” He lifted his eyebrows and stared at me with amusement.

“Yes. And no, they are not separate, and yes, they influence each other.” He had trapped me on this one before.

“You bet they do. And those mutual influences can be quite complex, and much of the time subconscious. What the would-be alchemist must do is enhance the awareness of those interactions, bring much more of it into consciousness, and identify as far as possible the different components involved. This is how alchemical studies begin. It is what my teacher called ‘the price of admission.’”

“What type of components are we talking about?”

He lifted out a large piece of paper from a shelf and spread it out flat on the counter.

“I love the feel of good *xuan zhi*,” he said, rubbing a portion between his thumb and forefinger. “It feels almost wet, it is so smooth, compared to my normal practice paper. And it absorbs the ink in such a lovely way. But here you go.”

He picked up his brush, dipped it into the water well on the inkstone to moisten it, rubbed it on the side, then dipped it into the freshly ground ink.

Then he wrote five characters on the paper, saying “The five basic components are *shen*, *jing*, *xing*, *qing* and *qi*. Spirit, vitality, essence, feeling^a and *qi*.”

a. 情 *Qing*: feelings. Cleary calls this “sense”.



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My first article I read by Volker was an amazing piece called The Great Qi (1995). I have been a fan of Volker's writing ever since, for its in-depth scholarship coupled with a practical clinical sense, and his rare appreciation of the value a deep association with an authentic current of tradition can bring into one's practice.

– Steve Clavey



**A TRUDY ZIPF &
SUE COCHRANE
COLLABORATION**



Go beyond the everyday *jing/vitality*, which is simply sexual energy, to find its more subtle basis: *yuan jing*: the original vitality before it manifests as sexual energy.

神 气 情 精

“It helps to identify them if you know where they tend to concentrate. *Shen/spirit* (神) in the head, *jing/vitality*^b (精) concentrates in the lower part of the body. *Xing/essence* (性) and *qing/feeling* (情) tend to follow the *yi/attention* (意), but left to their own devices, *xing* will ascend and *qing* will descend. And then there is *qi* (炁) in the middle part of the body.” He paused for a moment. “You could put *yi/attention* in the centre, instead of *qi*. That also works.”

I hadn’t really gotten all of that. I’d been distracted by something he had said earlier that tweaked my interest. “The price of admission? Admission to what?”

“To the study of alchemy, which is the harmonious manipulation and alignment of those components. If you cannot identify your tools and building materials, you will be hard put to do anything, except perhaps wreak havoc.”

It didn’t sound very hard to me. Five components? I said so.

“Ah, but that is only the most obvious, the everyday *hou tian* aspect. There is also the *xian tian* aspect, that of primal correspondence.”

He picked up the inkstone and looked at the bottom, then got busy grinding more ink. Finally he laid it aside, added a dash of water to the ink, then looked at me. He said “To realise this, you have to go beyond the everyday *jing/vitality*, which is simply sexual energy, to find its more subtle basis: *yuan jing*: the original vitality before it manifests as sexual energy.

The everyday *hou tian shen* is simply the

b. 精 *Jing*, usually translated in medical texts as “essence” Xiaoyao follows Cleary in using the word “essence” to translate 性 *xing*: the essential nature (ed).

conscious mind, with all its thoughts. The *hou tian qing* is simply the rise and fall of emotions. You need to go back behind, before the emotion, to that which lies beneath. The ground of emotion, as it were: *yuan qing*. You can only do this by quieting the mind and refining your ability to sense within yourself.”

He put the original piece of paper aside, and laid out another fresh sheet. Then he took up a large brush, one with a black onyx shaft, narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, with a large head of white goat’s hair. He filled the brush with ink while looking contemplatively at the paper, then lifting the brush, drew a large and not-quite-perfect empty circle, black and round.

“When you find that fundamental ground of thought and emotion, the quiet state before emotions and thoughts emerge, that is called *Zhong* – the Centre. And that posture allows the influence of Heaven to pass down through you, to Earth.”

Without refilling his brush, he made a long straight stroke from above to below, directly through the circle, the now dry brush tailing off below. It formed the character *Zhong*.



The snow was falling again outside, making little triangles of white in the corners of the window. The room now felt cosy rather than stuffy.

He took his time cleaning the brush in the water, then laid it aside before saying “Within alchemy itself, there are again different levels. We are not talking about *wai dan* here, mind; that should go without saying. But even within *nei dan* – internal alchemy – there are a number of ways to approach it. My teacher emphasised that the safest and sanest method was to approach the practice through essence, rather than through trying to manipulate the body. This is what we call the *xu wu da Dao*: the great Dao of absolute nonresistance.”

He looked up for a moment, thinking, then he quoted:

The Wenshi Jing says, *If you can see the vital spirit, you gain lasting life; if you can forget the vital spirit, you gain transcendent life. Forgetting the vital spirit means emptiness climaxes, quietude is attained, and vitality naturally transmutes into energy, energy naturally transmutes into spirit, and spirit naturally returns to emptiness. This is the study of the Great Way of absolute non-resistance.*^c

I was a bit confused. Many of the books I had seen about Chinese alchemy in English emphasised a complicated system of forced circulations and gatherings, and techniques of concentrating on specific points or sexual gymnastics.

He laughed. "We have plenty of that in China too, never fear. But my teacher suggested that I concentrate my reading on pre-20th century authors, especially those of

c. 文始經曰: 能見精神而久生. 能忘精神而超生. 蓋忘精神者, 虛極靜篤, 而精自然化炁. 煦自然化神. 神自然還虛. 此虛無大道之學也. This is a quote from the *Xian Xue Zhen Quan* (仙學真詮), the translation from Thomas Cleary's *Practical Taoism*.

the northern school. There, the warnings of such exemplars as Li Dao-Chun, Liu Yi-Ming, and Zhang San-Feng are very well represented, so people at least have the information available that there is another way."

He picked up a smaller brush and wrote two characters on either side of a piece of paper, *xing*/essence on the left, and *ming*/life on the right.

性 命

‘’

The way of essence, though, is not superficially exciting and mysterious, no magical techniques to hint at or hold back, nothing to adorn oneself with or prop up your ego, and so, naturally, not a lot of people are interested.

He said "Let's put it like this. We have talked about *xing ming shuang xiu*, the mutual cultivation of essence and life, many times. There needs to be a balance between the two. But when you start from essence, everything happens naturally, in its own time, it is simple, safe, and easy to do. When you start working from the life side, you need the close personal attention of a teacher to monitor you constantly, as it

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is so easy to go wrong and cause yourself problems both physical and mental."

He stood up, stretched and looked around before continuing "The way of essence, though, is not superficially exciting and mysterious, no magical techniques to hint at or hold back, nothing to adorn oneself with or prop up your ego, and so, naturally, not a lot of people are interested."

There was a knock. "It's open!" he called, but there was no response. Annoyed, he stood up and went to the door to look outside. I followed him to check how deep the snow had become, and was standing behind him when he opened the door. There was no one there. He glanced down, said "Hey, here's a footprint" and bent over to look. Just as he did so, a barrage of snowballs came through the door, hitting me full in the face and chest. He stood up, pushed me back into the room, and slammed the door, leaning against it with his shoulder, laughing.

"Guess Cook figured it out," he said. "You OK?"

I brushed snow from my eyebrows and off of my clothes. Snow had gone down my neck and was busily melting its way into my underclothes. My blood boiled for revenge. Steam from ice-water rose from my head. I took a step forward.

The Daoist put his hand on my chest. "Hold on, where are you going?"

I told him.

"Revenge is for the emotionally immature," he said. "Like Cook. We are bigger than that." He brushed off my shoulders, then patted my upper arms as if fluffing up a pillow. "Aren't we?" he ended.

"No way. I'm going to pulverise them."

"That's the spirit! Let's go."

After an exhausting search throughout the grounds of the *guan*, snowballs in hand, all we had turned up was the gatekeeper, startled when we'd jerked open the door to the dunny. We trudged back to the library, vigilant but certain Cook and his accomplices had gone to ground. We put on a kettle for more tea, and sat down.

"Anticipation sweetens the final stroke," the fat monk said. "We'll let him stew."

When I refused to encourage any more puns, he gave up and said "Right, where

were we?"

I said we had been talking about approaching the cultivation of essence and life primarily from the side of essence, and he nodded.

"That's right. And those who reach a certain level with this are called *Zhen Ren* – true people. Zhuangzi was the first person to use that phrase, and you know how precise he was in his use of words. But it's interesting, isn't it? If someone who is indissolubly linked with the Dao is a True Person, what does that make the rest of us?"

"Um ..."

"Well, false people, of course." He stood up and poured the tea. "From one point of view, ordinary people like us are just walking corpses, diseased and plagued with demons."

I was surprised, and said so. "You mean you believe that stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"Demons. You know. Exorcisms. The spooky stuff."

Light glinted from his gold tooth.

"I keep forgetting you don't live here," he said. "Maybe it is different where you come from. It must be, from that sneer in your voice. Everything is neat and explained, nothing mysterious ever happens, and you can't imagine that it ever would, or could." He swirled his tea around in his cup. "Well, life isn't that tidy, even if you train yourself to ignore what happens all around you. Take demons, now."

"Yes?" I leaned forward.

He laughed. "One part of you sneers, the other part of you can't wait to hear about 'the spooky stuff'. Demons are real, although not the type of 'real' you can catch and put in a jar." He gestured at his head. "You can be possessed by harmful patterns of thinking and acting, for example, that can destroy your ability to simply live a happy life. We all know people like that."

He stood up, drained his cup, and set it on the counter. Then he said, "But for those aiming to refine themselves and align with the Dao, to whatever degree, this demon problem becomes crucial."

"What do you mean, crucial?"

"Well, for one thing, we have to become more subtle. We are aiming for more than just an average happy life. We can't hope to



We also need to see that some things – things people think are good – are in fact demons possessing us even more effectively.



People need to know the whole story, not just be attracted by the 'secrets'.

align with the Dao and carry all of our usual baggage with us, we have to divest ourselves of those negative tendencies that keep us going around in circles.”

He threw his hands up in exasperation. “You know this. Everybody does. Greed, hatred, pride are clearly demons that need exorcising. But we also need to see that some things – things people think are good – are in fact demons possessing us even more effectively. Addiction to the peace of meditation. Greed for enlightenment. Compassion that is really just an indulgence in sentimentality. Making an idol of your teacher. Becoming proud of your spiritual experiences. All of these are the demons that can possess whole groups of spiritual seekers.”

I was silent. Many things seen in the West had just fallen into place.

He filled our teacups, took a sip, then continued, “Greed is a key factor here. People think that since it is greed for something spiritual, it is OK. But it is still greed. If you go after enlightenment to enhance your self-esteem, well, you get what you aim for. But there is worse news.” He paused to spit out a tea leaf.

“What?”

“Remember that the aim of many of our Daoist techniques is to reduce the fixation on ourselves, on our self, and open us to greater communication with life around us.”

“Yes, so what?”

“Well, the problem is, that sense of self acts as a protective barrier to influences that could be harmful to us. Surely you know people who have gone a bit nuts, even if only temporarily, after meditating.”

I nodded. All too common.

“They in fact are the lucky ones. The unlucky ones seem, to themselves, to have tapped into some power that makes them smarter, or more psychic. It doesn’t last, but meanwhile they get all sorts of inflated ideas about themselves, set up cults, and generally go around doing what we call ‘the work of demons’. This has led to no end of trouble for real teachers.”

“So how can you tell the difference between a real teacher and someone who only thinks that they are a teacher?”

“You have asked this before. Basically, it comes down to your own sense of what

feels right. What makes you interested in Daoism? If you have thought about your own motivations, and you are pretty sure you are not in it for the glory,” here he paused and smiled, “then your own sense of sincerity will be enough.”

I thought for a bit. He moved over to the counter and began to unpack some boxes.

“So,” I asked, after a while, “you said it doesn’t last, those psychic abilities and sense of power.”

“Yes, because they are linked to those parts of ‘you’ that are unreal and transitory. The danger is that those parts can use this energy, while it lasts, to fulfil personal desires and objectives, and this becomes a great danger all around. And this is why there is such secrecy around these teachings. Say, think you could help me with these books?”

I stood up and moved a stack of books from the counter to a shelf in the back, meanwhile commenting that one could find almost anything on the web or in books these days.

“That is why I am being particularly open with you now. People need to know the whole story, not just be attracted by the ‘secrets’; they need to be able to recognise from within themselves when a path or a teacher is helpful, and when harmful. And this comes down to, first, having the information, and second, remembering and using it.”

Having finished the unpacking, we sat in silence for a while. The snow fell still, outside the window. Then I remembered something.

“You said the sense of self acts as a protective barrier. But you also said Daoist techniques reduce the fixation on our self, and open us to greater communication with life around us. Isn’t that a contradiction?”

“When you were a little child, I’ll bet your mother told you to never, ever, cross the road by yourself.”

I was shocked by the change in direction. “Yes, but what does that ...”

“That was then. But you grow up. Things change. You learn how to cross the road safely. Similarly, we are taught how to handle those subtle entities that can affect



us, taking advantage of lowered shields, so to speak, as we reduce the hardness of the shell of our self-concept.”

Ah! Here was my chance to learn the art of fighting demons. “OK, so how do you handle those entities? How do you fight demons?”

A passing cloud darkened the window behind him briefly, then the sun shone through, falling in a patch on the dusty wooden floor.

“You refuse to invest it with energy,” he said. “These things only have the energy that you yourself give them. The Chan people have investigated this in great detail. They say that fear of demons is itself possession. Likewise, if you are emotionally attached to attaining Buddhahood, that too is actually a demonic state. But on the other hand, if you are unconcerned about demonic states, that is the *Fo Jie* (佛界): the Buddha realm.” He laughed. “I love the way they put things sometimes. It gets right to the point.”

He turned to me and frowned. “Don’t forget, this is only a way of speaking. Demons are not ‘real’ in the way popular culture likes to portray them. It is more the effects that count.” He went silent, and a thoughtful look came over his face.

“But it is a useful example of something that is crucial in studying alchemy: the very careful use of terminology. Just like in Zhuang Zi. And in this case, ‘demon’ is a technical term for a state or idea that possesses you. The popular use of the word is very sensationalist, however. A demon is some sort of monster that is coming to get you.”

“So what?”

“So you need to be aware of when a term is being used technically, if you want to understand alchemical texts.” He shook his head. “So many readers, scholars even, mistake a technical term in this literature for the popular usage, and then assume the author was a superstitious primitive. And all because they don’t know that words can have special uses.”

“Like what?”

“The Chan people, again, have taken this to a fine art,” he said. “A word is a sign, but it can refer to many different things. They use a familiar word to point to something

unfamiliar, to help you reach toward it. If you invest some energy and attention into contemplating the word or phrase, it will indeed often guide you from within.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Sure.” The fat monk thought for a moment. “How about a simple one like ‘breath’. While we generally say *hu-xi* (呼吸) for breath, the Chan people use the alternative word *xi* (息). They don’t make a big deal about it, and leave the student to realise that the word is made up of two parts, *zi* and *xin*: self (自), and mind (心). So your breath is what brings your mind and your self together, it makes you present.”

I thought about it for a second. Didn’t seem very deep. I said so.

“You really want me to spell it all out for you?” He shook his head. “It is the effort you yourself expend which makes this real, so I am not doing you any favours. But notice that self (自) is actually a picture of the nose. You know when we say ‘myself’ we point to our nose? This perfectly captures the Chan posture of meditation, eyes gently focused on the nose, aware of breathing, aware of mind and thus aware of self.”

I found myself a bit cross-eyed.

He continued, “The word *xi* (息) has also taken on a number of other meanings, all of which are intended here, and all of which students gradually discover and relate to the greater reality by themselves. It means to rest, to pause, to grow, to profit.”

He stood up, stretched, and finished by saying “So each little realisation is a minor enlightenment, and each one gives you a little packet of energy that takes you one step further along. I’ve just ruined that for you, in regards to this word, at least. But there are other words.”

Now I was keen to try. “How about another one, maybe not from Chan, but from alchemy. Don’t tell me, let me figure it out for myself.”

The Daoist laughed. “You’re either hot or cold, you know that? OK, here is one. Normally when we write the word *qi* we write it like this: 氣. But in *neidan* alchemy, especially when referring to primal *qi*, we write it like this: 煙, made up of *wu*/nothing (無, simplified to 无) and *huo*/fire (火, in its



Each little realisation is a minor enlightenment, and each one gives you a little packet of energy that takes you one step further along.



Whatever you look at,
use your eyes to draw in
their spirit, as if you were
inhaling. Don't make your
own spirit run outwards.
That is a sure way to drain
yourself.

radical form 𠂇). Chew on that for a while.”

He went to the window and stood there silently for a moment, then opened the door a crack before sticking his head out cautiously and looking around. Then he turned to me and said, “Grab your coat. I told the Abbot I'd bring you over so he could check you out.”

“What! The Abbot? Why does he want to see me?”

“He doesn't, really. But I said that you didn't seem to be going away, and perhaps something more can be done with you.”

The Abbot's rooms were in the rear hall, on the top floor, at the end of a long balcony corridor. Before we knocked, we turned towards the railing. The view was calming. It looked out over the whole *guan* complex, down the hill and out over the lake to the mountains on the other side.

When we turned around, the Abbot was standing in the doorway. He was small and wizened, but had healthy red cheeks and intensely bright eyes. He looked me up and down, then smiled. “So you're the one Fatty has been telling us about. Come in, come in.”

Fatty? I looked at the fat monk. His face was stoic.

We entered the room and bowed in respect. The Abbot waved his hand. “Don't worry about that. Make yourselves at home.” He sat on a cushion at a bench next to a window at the back of the room. The window looked out at the hillside behind the *guan*, where some terraced fields had been dug out. The stubbled furrows were now coated in snow. He sat with his eyes closed, a slight smile on his face.

I looked at my friend and saw that he too had sat and closed his eyes. I found a chair and sank into it, eyes downcast. Four or five minutes went by, when suddenly the fat monk and the Abbot opened their eyes simultaneously. The Abbot gestured in my direction, and said to the fat monk “Not much innate talent.”^d

Then turning to me, he said “Do you know how to look at flowers?”

“Yes,” I said, puzzled. Of course I knew how to look at flowers. Who didn't? Maybe it was all a pose and the old man was actually senile.

“We think you don't.”

The fat monk seemed to be having a hard time suppressing a smile. My first reaction was that the old man was having me on, but remembered similar occasions, and each time there was a point to the foolery, and a lesson involved, if I could keep my ego out of the way.

“*Daozhang*, please teach me how to look at flowers,” I said sincerely.

“Hmm, maybe you're not so bad after all,” he replied, flashing a look at the fat monk. Then he turned back to me and said, “Most people, when they look at flowers, or anything, extend their spirit outward from their eyes.” He brought a long bony finger to his eye and then pointed outward. “What you should do, instead, is bring the vitality, energy and spirit of that flower right into your heart.” He brought his finger back to his eye, then down to his heart.

Then he extended his arm and pointed all around. “Trees, mountains, rivers, Heaven and Earth! Whatever you look at, use your eyes to draw in their spirit, as if you were inhaling. Don't make your own spirit run outwards. That is a sure way to drain yourself.”

He said to the fat monk “Tell him the dangers involved in this technique.”

The fat monk went red. I was puzzled, then fascinated. Obviously there was some history here. But he began to speak before I could speculate further.

“Be careful what you look at like this. Remember you are drawing the qualities of these things into your heart and mind. Make sure they are things you want to be there. You might have trouble getting them out.”

I was just about to dig into his past experiences, when the Abbot spoke.

“You were right, Fatty. He is pretty shaky in lots of areas. But he has sincerity, and that makes up for a lot.”

He reached out a thin, aged hand and pulled down a little blue cloth-bound book from his bookshelf. “He needs some solid grounding in the fundamentals. It will be good teaching experience for you, too. Go through the *Xing Ming Gui Zhi*^e with him, and keep us informed.”

d. Literally “Little basis, little capacity”: 根小, 器小.

e. *Xing Ming Gui Zhi* (性命圭旨, Principles for Essence and Life) is the shortened title for a late Ming text (1615) known as the *Xing Ming Shuang Xiu Wan Shen Gui Zhi* (性命双修万神圭旨, Collected Principles for the Mutual Cultivation of Essence and Life). The author is anonymous, and all we know is that he or she was an advanced disciple of Yin Zhen Ren, the True Person Yin – likewise unidentified. However, this text is very commonly recommended in the Northern school of Quan Zhen Daoism as a balanced treatment of basic *neidan* alchemical principles, illustrated by integrated quotes from Confucianism and Buddhism.