

Bái Yùchán (1194-1229?) was a key figure in Southern Song dynasty Daoism and internal alchemy. The following is written as a discussion with his teacher Chen Nan (d. 1213), the fourth patriarch of the Nanzong lineage.

The excerpt translated below is section four of the *Zazhu Zhixuan Pian* (miscellaneous essays guiding toward the mystery)¹ found in Bai's *Xiuzhen Shishu* (Ten Books on Cultivating Trueness); other essays in this section include discussions of the valley spirit, ascent and descent of yin and yang, and a discussion on the chamber of the elixir.

This particular passage is notable for how clearly it states that context will determine the meanings of alchemical terms, and for its precise directions regarding getting to grips with the practice.

Resolving Confusions in Cultivating Transcendence

(Xiū Xiān Biàn Huò Lùn)

《修仙辨惑論》

海南白玉蟾，自幼事陳泥丸，忽已九年。偶一日在乎巖阿松陰之下，風清月朗，夜靜煙寒，因思生死事大，無常迅速，遂稽首再拜而問曰：玉蟾事師未久，自揣福薄緣淺，敢問今生有分可仙乎？陳泥丸云：人人皆可，況於汝乎。

Bai Yuchan from Hainan island had studied with Chen Niwan since he was young. Before he knew it, nine years had passed. One day, amidst the mountain crags, under some pines, when the moon was full and the night was still, Bai Yuchan was thinking about death, the brevity of life, and impermanence. He arose, and kowtowing to his teacher, said: Your student Bai Yuchan has not followed you for long, and having assessed himself, knows that his innate ability is meagre. But he dares to ask: can he hope to become an immortal in this lifetime?

Chen Niwan said: Everyone can, why not you?

玉蟾曰：不避尊嚴之責，輒伸僭易之問，修仙有幾門，鍊丹有幾法？愚見如玉石之未分，願得一言點化。

Bai Yuchan said: Although it is pushing the bounds of propriety, I would like to ask a presumptive question: how many avenues exist for cultivating transcendence (*xiūxiān* 修仙)? How many methods are there for refining the elixir (*liàndān* 鍊丹)? From my ignorant viewpoint, it is like being unable to differentiate jade from a rock. Please give me a word that can spark transformation.

¹ The text of which can be found here: <http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=591641>

陳泥丸云：爾來，吾語汝。修仙有三等，鍊丹有三成。夫天仙之道，能變化飛升也，上士可以學之。以身為鉛，以心為汞，以定為水，以慧為火，在片餉之間，可以凝結，十月成胎。此乃上品鍊丹之法。本無卦爻，亦無斤兩，其法簡易，故以心傳之，甚易成也。

Chen Niwan said: Come here, and I'll tell you. There are three levels of cultivating transcendence, and there are three completions in the refining of the elixir. The path of Celestial Transcendence (*Tiān Xiān* 天仙) is the ability to change and transform, to ascend in flight (變化飛升). It can be studied by superior persons of learning. *Lead*, (*qiān* 鉛) here, is the body; *mercury* (*gǒng* 汞) is the heart/mind; *water* is settled quietness (*dìng* 定); *fire* is wisdom (*huì* 慧). In the space of a brief moment, it can congeal (*níngjié* 凝結); within ten months the foetus is complete. This is the highest quality method of refining the elixir, and in itself needs neither depiction by trigram lines (*guàyaó* 卦爻) nor measurement of 'dosages' (*jīnliǎng* 斤兩)². The method is simple and uncomplicated, and passed on from heart to heart; extremely easy to complete.

夫水仙之道，能出入隱顯也，中士可以學之。以氣為鉛，以神為汞，以午為火，以子為水，在百日之間，可以混合，三年成象。此乃中品鍊丹之法。雖有卦爻，卻無斤兩，其法要妙，故以口傳之，必可成也。

The path of Fluid Transcendence (*Shuǐ Xiān* 水仙) is the ability to move between the hidden and apparent (*chūrú yǐnxiǎn* 出入隱顯). It can be studied by those of middling learning. Here, *qi* is lead, spirit is mercury, *wǔ* (午, meaning variously 'noon', 'the peak of yang', 'high summer' and so on) is fire, *zǐ* (子, meaning variously 'midnight', 'the deepest part of yin', 'winter' and so on) is water. In the space of a hundred days it can be compounded (*hūnhé* 混合), and the image (*xiàng* 象) completed within three years. This is the middle level method of refining elixir, and while it does use depiction of trigram lines it does not need description of dosages. The method needs subtlety (*yào miào* 要妙) and thus is transmitted orally; it is definitely possible to complete.

夫地仙之道，能留形住世，庶士可以學之。以精為鉛，以血為汞，以腎為水，以心為火，在一年之間，可以融結，九年成功。此乃下品鍊丹之法。既有卦爻，又有斤兩，其法繁難，故以文字傳之，恐難成也。

The path of earthly transcendence (*dì xiān* 地仙) is the ability to remain living on the earth (*liúxíng zhùshì* 留形住世); anyone can study it. Here, semen (*jīng* 精) is

² Bai's teacher explained the science of "dosages" as "the subtle application of adding and subtracting" (抽添運用之細微) in his *Cuì Xū Piàn* (翠虛篇 Emerald Emptiness Essay).

lead, blood is mercury, the Kidneys are water, and the Heart is fire. It can be fused together (*róngjié* 融結) within a year, and the effect completed within nine years. This is the lower level method of refining elixir, needing both depiction of trigram lines and dosages, quite complicated and difficult, and is thus passed on in writing; but I am afraid it is hard to complete.

上品丹法，以精神魂魄意為藥材，以行住坐臥為火候，以清淨自然為運用。

The superior elixir method uses vitality, spirit, *hún*, *pò*³ and intent (*jīng shén hún pò yì* 精神魂魄意) as medicinal substances,⁴ for the firing process it uses movement, halting, sitting and reclining, and in application it is all quiet stillness and being-simply-as-one-is.

中品丹法，以肝心脾肺腎為藥材，以年月日時為火候，以抱元守一為運用。

The middle level elixir method uses Kidneys, Heart, Liver, Lungs and Spleen as the medicinal materials, for the firing process the year, month, day and hours, and the application is to embrace the Source and hold to the One (*baò yuán shǒu yī* 抱元守一).

下品丹法，以精血髓氣液為藥材，以閉嚥搐摩為火候，以存想升降為運用。

The lower level elixir method uses semen, blood, marrow, qi and fluids as the medicinal materials, for firing process it uses closing off, swallowing, striking and rubbing (*bì yàn léi mó* 閉嚥搐摩), and the application is to concentrate on ascent and descent (*cúnxiǎng shēngjiàng* 存想升降).

大抵妙處不在乎按圖索駿也。若泥象執文之士，空自傲慢，至老無成矣。

One should not try to “choose a champion racehorse from a diagram” – the wonderful aspect within all this is not to be found like that. Someone who is overly literal and attached to images and words might become puffed up and vain, but even by old age will have attained nothing.

³ *Hún* is the ethereal soul, yang, luminous and volatile, linked with the yang ascending energy of the Liver; *pò* is the earthly soul, yin, dull and heavy, linked with the yin descending energy of the Lungs.

⁴ The reader would be expected to know that these five are arranged around the taiji symbol in the north, south, east, west and centre respectively, and that this arrangement illustrates their application and their qualities.

玉蟾曰：讀丹書許多年，如在荊棘中行，今日塵爭鑑明，雲開月皎，總萬法而歸一，包萬幻以歸真，以未知正在於何處下手用功也？

Bai Yuchan said: I have been reading alchemy books for many years, and it has always been like walking amongst brambles and thorns. Now, today, it is as though the dust has settled, the mirror is clean, the clouds have opened and the moon shines clearly. Finally the myriad methods have been unified, and all the fantasies brought back to reality. But I still do not know exactly where I should place my hand to begin the work.

陳泥丸云：善哉問也。夫鍊丹之要，以身為壇鑪鼎鼐⁵，以心為神室，以端坐習定為採取，以操持照顧為行火，以作止為進退，以斷續不專為防隄。

Chen Niwan said: That's a great question. The crucial thing in refining the elixir is to use the body as the altar, the oven, the cauldron and stove (*tán lú dǐng áo* 壇鑪鼎鼐). Take the heart as the chamber of spirit (*shénshì* 神室); gather and harvest by sitting upright and practicing stillness (*duānzuo xíding* 端坐習定); attend to the fire by managing attention (*caōchi zhàogù* 操持照顧); proceed or withdraw through activity and cessation (*yǐ zuòzhǐ wéi jìntuì* 以作止為進退); and use deliberate breaking off of concentration as your defence (*yǐ duànxùbùzhuān wéi fángdī* 以斷續不專為防隄).⁶

以運用為抽添，以真氣薰蒸為沐浴，以息念為養火，以制伏身心為野戰，以凝神聚氣為守城，以忘機絕慮為生殺。

Take application as increase and decrease; use the smoke and steam of True Qi to bathe. Use attention to the breath (*xī niàn*)⁷ to nourish the fire, and your battlefield activity should be the subjugation of your body and mind. You withstand the siege by congealing spirit and gathering qi, life and death are decided by remaining aloof from the world and cutting off worry.

以念頭起處為玄牝，以打成一塊為交結，以歸根復命為丹成，以移神為換鼎，以身外有身為脫胎，以返本還源為真空，以打破虛空為了當。故能聚而成形，散則成氣，去來無礙，逍遙自然矣。

That place where thoughts arise is the mysterious female, kneading all into one is connection (*jiaōjié* 交結). Returning to the root and restoring life is the completion of the elixir, transferring the spirit is changing cauldrons. Having a

⁵ Reading *zào* 竈 for *áo* 鼐.

⁶ A form of mental discipline that trains one to focus or detach attention at will, very important to prevent “possession” by undesirable states of being.

⁷ 息念 could and does also mean “ceasing thought”, and the phrase can be broken down even further to provide yet more avenues of praxis.

body outside the body is being reborn, returning to the fundamental and coming back to the source is True Emptiness. Breaking apart that Emptiness (*dǎpò xūkōng* 打破虛空) is the true completion (*liáo dāng* 了當).

Thereafter, one is able to gather and become a form (*jù ér chéng xíng* 聚而成形), or to disperse and become qi (*sàn ér chéng qì* 散則成氣), coming and going without obstruction, free and easy, being-just-as-one-is.

玉蟾問曰：勤而不遇，必遇至人，遇而不勤，終為下鬼。若此修丹之法有何證驗？

Bai Yuchan says: If one is diligent and disciplined, one will eventually encounter a realised person; but if one has had the encounter but does not do the work, one ends up only as a lower ghost. But what experiential evidence is there for this method of refining the elixir?

陳泥丸云：初修丹時，神清氣爽，身心和暢，宿疾普消，更無夢寐，百日不食，飲酒不醉。到此地則赤血換為白血，陰氣鍊成陽氣，身如火熱，行步如飛，口中可以乾水，吹氣可以煮肉，對景無心，如如不動，役使鬼神，呼召雷雨，耳聞九天，目視萬里，徧體純陽，金筋玉骨，陽神現形，出入自然，此乃長生不死之道畢矣。

Chen Niwan said: When one is just beginning to refine the elixir, the spirit is clear and the qi fresh, the body and mind harmonious and free. Old illnesses clear up, there are no disturbing dreams, one can go without eating for a hundred days, and drink wine without becoming drunk. At this stage, red blood turns to white blood, yin qi is refined into yang qi, the body burns like fire, and one walks as if flying. Water put into the mouth evaporates, you can cook meat just by blowing upon it. Looking upon scenery without caring, unmoved no matter what, you employ ghosts and spirits as your servants, with a call you bring on thunder and rain. Your ears perceive the nine heavens, your eyes can see for ten thousand miles. Your whole body is pure yang, with golden tendons and jade bones, your true form is revealed to be yang spirit, coming and going naturally; this and only this is the finish of the path of long-life-without-death.

但恐世人執著藥物火候之說，以為有形有為而不能頓悟也。夫豈知混沌未分以前，烏有年月日時；父母未生以前，烏有精血氣液。道本無形，喻之為龍虎；道本無名，比之為鉛汞。

Still, I am worried that worldlings will become fixated on the words about “medicinal substances” and “firing process,” taking them as physical and something to act on, and thus be unable to achieve insight. Don’t they know that prior to the differentiation of the original chaos, there was no ‘year,’ ‘month,’ ‘day’ or ‘hour;’ before the birth of your parents, you had no semen, blood, qi or fluids. The Dao is formless, so we use analogies of ‘dragon’ and ‘tiger.’ The Dao has no nomenclature, so we make comparisons of ‘mercury’ and ‘lead.’

若是學天仙之人，須是形神俱妙，與道之合真可也，豈可被陰陽束縛在五行之中，要當跳出天地之外，方可名為得道之士矣。

The study of Celestial Transcendence needs both form and spirit to be subtle (*miaò* 妙) that together with the Dao one may unite with the True. One must not become bound by yin and yang into the midst of the five elements, but instead leap beyond heaven and earth: only then can one be termed Attainer of the Dao (*dédaò zhī shì* 得道之士).

或者疑曰，此法與禪法稍同，殊不知終日談演問答，乃是乾慧；長年枯兀昏沉，乃是頑空。

Some may doubt and ask whether this method and the Chan method are not almost the same, but they do not know that just conversing in question and answer sessions all day is only a dry “wisdom,” spending the year sitting silently in a daze is just inflexible “emptiness.”⁸

然天仙之學如水精盤中之珠轉灑灑地活潑潑地，自然圓陀陀光燦燦，所謂天仙者，此乃金仙也。夫此不可言傳之妙也。人誰知之，人誰行之？人若曉得《金剛》《圓覺》二經，則金丹之義自明，何必分別老釋之異同哉？

In fact, the study of Celestial Transcendence resembles a pearl in a crystal bowl, revolving magnificently, vivaciously; spinning naturally like a top, gleaming: what we call Celestial Transcendence is actually a Golden Transcendence, a marvel incapable of description. Who can know it? Who can bring it into practice? If a person knows the two classics *Jīn Gāng Jīng* (Diamond Sutra) and *Yuán Jué Jīng* (Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment), then the meaning and significance of the golden elixir will become clear—why should there be any need to distinguish between Daoism and Buddhism?

天下無二道，聖人無兩心，何況人人具足，箇箇圓成，政所謂處處綠楊堪繫馬，家家門閭透長安，但取其捷徑云耳。

There are not two paths under heaven, the heart of a sage is only one: it need not be said that everyone has the capacity, each and every one can attain enlightenment. This is what is meant by the proverb *there is always a tree to tie your horse, every doorway can lead to the capital* [ie there is always a way to

⁸ This is the sort of statement that a certain type of academic loves to grasp as evidence of inter-religious conflict. But here Chen Niwan is referring to a degenerate form of Chan (as his statements in the next few lines demonstrate) which has lapsed into the use of convoluted statements and ‘turning phrases’ which, far from their original intention of sparking insight through incongruous juxtaposition, were being used by ‘teachers’ to confuse students and maintain a spurious superiority.

achieve what you want] ... it is just a matter of selecting the route by which you travel.

玉蟾曰：天下學仙者紛紛然，良由學而不遇，遇而不行，行而不勤，乃至老來甘心赴死於九泉之下，豈不悲哉。今將師傳口訣，醵木以傳于世，惟此漏露天機甚矣，得無譴乎？

泥丸云：吾將點化天下神仙，苟獲罪者，天其不天乎。經云，我命在我，不在於天，何譴之有？

Bai Yuchan said: So many people in the world are studying transcendence, but it is often the case that many study but never encounter [a teacher], or they encounter but do not practice, or they practice but without discipline, and because of all this reach old age and complacently go to their death, residing in Hades: is this not a pity? I am going to take your words to me today and carve them into wood to pass on all over the world. But leaking Heaven's intimate secrets like this is a serious matter, will I be reprimanded?

Chen Niwan said: I am sparking spiritual transcendence and transformation in the world; making this a crime would mean Heaven being less than Celestial. Anyway the classic says: my fate is in my own hands, not in Heaven's—who would reprimand you?

玉蟾曰：祖師張平叔三傳非人，三遭禍患，何也？

Bai Yuchan said: our founding teacher Zhang Boduan tried to transmit the Dao three times to people who were unworthy, and three times met disaster. What was this about?⁹

泥丸云：彼一時自無眼力，又況運心不普乎。噫，師在天涯，弟子在海角，何況塵勞中識人為甚難，今但刊此散行天下，使修仙之士可以尋文揣義，妙理昭然，是乃天授矣乃何必乎筆舌以傳之哉。

Chen Ni wan said: Those were times that he lacked discernment, and clearly was not employing his heart to its fullest. Sigh. The teacher is in the heights of Heaven,

⁹ Zhang Bo-Duan learned from Liu Haichan who warned him about careless transmission. Zhang tried three times to pass on the Dao to people who were not suitable, and each time failed. He made a vow to no longer transmit the Dao carelessly.

As a result he carefully composed the book *Wu Zhen Pian* (Understanding Reality). In the postscript Zhang Boduan said

"In this book of mine, everything is made ready for you, the verses and songs have the firing process of the great elixir, and all the subtle directions. Those who have an affinity for this matter must have the bones of a transcendent, then when they read this book carefully and with wisdom it will inspire clarity. They can search the text to unravel the significant meaning of terms, there will be no need for personal oral transmission by my humble self. This book is in fact a bequest from Heaven, not my own presumption."

the disciple in the ocean's abyss; it goes without saying that it is difficult to really know people in the midst of one's work in the world. The present widespread publication of this can make those studying transcendence search out texts, assay their meaning, and clarify the subtle principles. This is receiving the instruction of Heaven, why should one necessarily only receive transmission by tongue or pen?

但能凝然靜定，念中無念，工夫純粹，打成一片，終日默默如雞抱卵，則神歸氣復，自然見玄關一竅。其大無外，其小無內，則是採取先天一氣，以為金丹之母，勤而行之，指日可與鍾呂並駕矣此乃已試之效，念學仙者無所指南。謹集問答之要，名之曰《修仙辨惑論》云。

If you can be silent and still, free from thought even in the midst of thought, your meditation pure and unadulterated, turning into a single whole, silent all day long, like a hen incubating her eggs, then your spirit will return and your energy will come back, and you will spontaneously see the opening of the mysterious pass.¹⁰ There is nothing beyond its greatness, nothing more fine than its subtlety: it is but making the one primal qi into the mother of the golden elixir. Carried out with discipline, a day will come when you can ride with Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin!

The intention of this writing is to carefully gather the important parts of this question and answer session for the student who has no guiding compass, and thus it is called "Resolving Confusions in the Study of Transcendence."

¹⁰ The translator nicked this sentence from Thomas Cleary where it was quoted in the "20th Century Taoist" section of his *Vitality, Energy and Spirit*, and in fact it was this that inspired the translation of the whole "Treatise" when no other English translation seemed available.