

The Valley Spirit Not Dying

By Bai Yuchan

Introduction

(by translator)

The text translated here is by Bái Yùchán (1194-1229?), a key figure in Southern Song dynasty Daoism and internal alchemy. This is section five of the *Zazhu Zhixuan Pian* (miscellaneous essays guiding toward the mystery),¹ an essay which discusses chapter six of the *Dao De Jing*:

*The valley spirit not dying
Is called the mysterious female
The opening of the mysterious female
Is called the root of heaven and earth.
Continuous, on the brink of existence,
To put it into practice, don't try to force it.*

(T. Cleary translation from *The Essential Tao*)²

What is remarkable about the essay is how Bai describes the yin and yang aspects that make up the mysterious female, his unreserved depiction of the different functions and qualities of the centres in the upper, middle and lower body, and how specific Bai is regarding the indications for practice, with warnings such as:

Just when the qi of the mysterious female has entered its most fundamental, the quiet can be lost through excitement and the ability to sustain this state lost through becoming stirred up. What you want is a gentle continuation without letting it break.

The essay is also an exercise in concentration, as Bai Yuchan shifts terminology frequently (ie, using different terms for the same referent), so that in order to comprehend the thread of his thought one needs to read mindfully.

The Valley Spirit not dying

“Valley” means the celestial valley (天谷 *tiān gǔ*). “Spirit” means the primal spirit (元神 *yuán shén*) of the individual. The celestial valley is a place for creation and contains the void, while the valleys of earth contain the ten thousand things and carry mountains and rivers.

Humans have the same endowment as heaven and earth: we too have a valley. This valley conceals true oneness (真一 *zhēn yī*) and is the residence of the primal spirit.

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

² The notes on this chapter found at the back of that book are a useful complement to Bai Yuchan's explanation here.

And so it is that the head has nine palaces, responding to the nine heavens above.³ One of these palaces is called *Nìwǎn* (泥丸 Mud Pellet). It is also called *Huáng Tíng* (黃庭 Yellow Court), and is also called *Kūnlún* (崑崙 Mt. Kunlun), and is also called *Tiān Gǔ* (Celestial Valley). It actually has a lot of names.

Now the palace in which the primal spirit lives is empty like a valley and the spirit resides there, which is why it is called valley spirit. While the spirit exists there is life, when the spirit departs there is death; during the day it comes into contact with things, at night it comes into contact with dreams; it is unable to reside in peace. Before the yellow millet is done cooking, before waking from the kingdom of Nanke,⁴ there has been a lifetime of honour, disgrace and riches, a hundred years of sorrow, worry, joy and delight, all tasted in the space of one dream, drawing the spirit out to wander, unable to return. This is where the road to life and the road to death diverge, and the path between darkness and light is cut off.

From this we can see that you are not born of yourself, but rather the spirit gives birth to you; you do not die of yourself, but the spirit causes you to die.

If the spirit can reside in its valley and not die, how then should the person die?

Now the reason that the valley spirit does not die is due to the mysterious female (玄牝 *xuán pìn*). The implication of 元 *yuán*⁵ is yang, is heaven; while that of 牝 *pìn* is yin, is earthly. There is a deep purport in these two qì of the mysterious female; one cannot understand this without oral instruction by a realised person.

The *Ling Shu Nei Jing* (靈書內經 Spiritual Pivot Inner Classic) says⁶ “Heavenly valley primal spirit, if guarded, makes you True.”

What this is saying is that at the top of a person’s body [in the head] there is the heavenly valley *nìwǎn* (天谷泥丸) which is the residence that stores the spirit; in the middle of the body is the receiving valley crimson palace (應谷絳宮 *yìng gǔ jiàng gōng*), which is the residence that stores the qì; and in the lower part of the body is the spiritual valley gate of the primal (靈谷關元 *líng gǔ guān yuán*) which is where essence is stored.

The heavenly valley is the palace of the primal, the house of the original spirit, where the nature of consciousness has its existence, the epitome of spirit.

The Sage is the epitome of Heaven and earth, knowing the source of change and transformation, the spirit stored in the palace of the primal while the qì soars in

³ I.e. the eight directions and the center, on the celestial plane.

⁴ These each refer to stories about lifetimes which are dreamt in the space of a few moments. The first is the famous story of Lü Dongbin’s testing by Zhongli Quan in which he rose to the heights of power and fell again over a 18 year period that was actually a dream taking place during the boiling of his millet. The second is similar, a man who became powerful in the kingdom of Nanke woke to discover that Nanke was a nest of ants living in the tree under which he had fallen asleep.

⁵ The character 元 *yuán* (primal) which historically has been substituted for the character 玄 *xuán* (mysterious) when necessitated by imperial name taboo.

⁶ The words Bai Yuchan quotes (天谷元神，守之自真) are not found in the text of the *Ling Shu* available to us today, but the content of the text that we have today only came to be fixed close to the period of Bai Yuchan’s lifetime, so it is possible that he is quoting from an earlier variant now lost. Nathan Sivin says: “The career of the text now called *Huang ti nei ching ling shu* or simply *Ling shu ching* is more obscure between the Han and the Sung periods ... Shih Song, ‘regretting that *Ling Shu* has long been out of circulation,’ submitted to the government a 24-*chuan* edition he had prepared by comparing a copy ‘preserved in his family’ with parallel passages in other works.” This latter edition was published in 1155.

the residence of the female (*pìn fǔ* 牝府). When spirit and qi interact and respond, one with the other, this naturally makes you true and unified with the Dao, no longer subject to birth and death.

Hence the saying: *The valley spirit never dies; it is called the mysterious female.*

The functioning of the Sage is within the mysterious female, creating transformation in the midst of murky obscurity (*huǎng hū* 恍惚). Just when the qi of the mysterious female has entered its most fundamental, the quiet can be lost through excitement and the ability to sustain this state lost through becoming stirred up. What you want is a gentle continuation without letting it break.⁷ “On the verge of existence” (*ruò cún* 若存) means it exists when you just go along with the natural flow, the spirit after a long time will calm, the breath (*xī* 息) will rest of itself, and your essential nature enters being-of-itself, the marvelous function of *wuwei*, at no time reaching the point of working it or forcing it. This is why Laozi’s chapter says “use it without exhausting it” (*yòng zhī bù qín* 用之不勤).

Viewing it from this angle, the mysterious female is clearly the proper path for the ascent and descent of the *qi mother* from its two sources, one above and one below.⁸

Worldlings do not thoroughly investigate right down to the root, they only say “the nose is *the mysterious*, and the mouth is *the female*” ... but what they then take as “the door” is anyone’s guess. All this type of thing misses the marvellous subtlety here. Unless one is an advanced adept, how can one thoroughly investigate this underlying principle?

⁷ Or, as Laozi says in the chapter being discussed here: “soft and gentle, as if it existed” (*mián mián ruò cún* 綿綿若存).

⁸ *Zhuāngzi Jí Shì* (Collected Commentaries on the Zhuangzi 莊子集釋) p. 248 says: “ ‘When Fuxi achieved the Dao, he united with the qi mother’ ... ‘qi mother’ (炁母) is the mother of yuan qi (元氣 primal qi), which responds to the Dao. Because he achieved the highest Dao, Fuxi could draw the eight trigrams and evolve the six lines, regulating yin and yang and bringing together the yuan qi.” (Zhuangzi, chapter 6 “The Great Ancestral Teacher” : 莊子. 大宗師)

The “two sources, one above and one below” are celestial and earthly, with all that implies. The harmonious integration of the two streams that flow from these two sources is the goal of all deep training, from whatever culture or tradition. What Bai Yuchan is indicating—and this is not stated as clearly in most places—is that the locus for this integration is to be found in the mental poise that is engendered and sustained via the mysterious female.