

Sword & Lute



By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

"You mean, you really don't remember?"

I frowned. What the Daoist was saying seemed incredible. How could I forget a whole group session with Shijie, and one that the fat monk claimed was outstanding for its brilliance?

THE FAT MONK and I were sitting in the empty dining room of the monastery. Cook was across the table eating his early dinner and, in between bites, explaining what he'd meant earlier in the day when he'd brought up "meat buns for the mind".

"When you are sitting quietly," Cook said, taking a bite, "listening to your breath,

chanting or" he chewed and swallowed, "repeating a phrase, often random chaotic thoughts will disturb you, breaking your peace, like a barking dog out in the street." He gestured vaguely toward the outside of the monastery, his chopsticks grasping a flopping bit of green like a lion shaking prey.

"Slow down," the fat monk said. "We'll wait."

Pointing to his tunic he turned to me and said "Last thing I need is sauce all over my newly washed clothes."

Then he looked at Cook expectantly. Cook took a few last bites and put down his chopsticks. "OK, well you know there are many ways to stabilise your mind," he said. "The goal is just to set all of your concentration upon one thing. I call this 'using a meat bun to strike the dog'."

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Understanding how a tool works should not make you lose respect for the tool.

He and the fat monk laughed together. “Not very elegant phrasing, I know, but...”

“I’m not sure it’s completely original,” the fat monk observed, pursing his lips.

Cook looked offended. “Never said it was. In fact, I got it from the Chan monk Ji Gong.”^a

“I still don’t get the meat bun for the mind part,” I said.

Cook turned to me and said “Your mind loves chewing on things...”

“Not only the mind,” the fat monk interrupted.

Cook ignored him and continued “... so trying to get the mind to stop and be peaceful is a recipe for frustration. But if you give it something to chew on, something nutritious, something that occupies it and yet still points to the celestial, then underneath all that activity the real self is working away, bringing about a realignment at the deeper levels.”

He moved his flat hand along the table. “At a certain point in the alignment, the mind is able to calm down naturally and acquiesce. This is what is called a bringing together, or harmony.”

Cook went on, “All your random chaotic thoughts are the barking dog, and whatever you have been given to stabilise your mind, whether it is a phrase, a koan, a mantra or a pattern in a story, all these things are the meat bun.”

He mimed throwing a meat bun to a dog. “They occupy the doggy mind and shut it up, stopping the barking, while the real self goes about its business of aligning itself with reality. If the dog starts barking again, you just hit it with more meat buns. Finally it gets full and goes away, and you are left in peace. At that point you don’t need to go on throwing meat buns, you can just stay quiet.”

I sat up and said “So you stop reciting?”

“If you are using the recitation to aim toward contemplation, yes. There are other uses for reciting.”

“But what if the thoughts return?”

“If the dog starts barking again, hit it with more meat buns.”

The fat monk was grinning, a faraway look in his eye.

a. 濟公 1130-1209. Ji Gong lived in the Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou as Chan Master Daoji (道濟禪師) and was famous for his mad adventures.

“But if the dog is not there, you don’t need to keep throwing buns. You can pass from meditation into contemplation, from activity into stillness, from noise into quietness.”

I still had something that puzzled me.

I said “But people always make such a big deal about the ‘holy words’ or their ‘secret mantra’. If all you are doing is distracting the mind, why not just think about anything, then, like poker, say, or your favorite TV show?”

Cook and the fat monk looked at each other.

The fat monk said, “Several important reasons. The first is that your meat bun has to actually have meat in it. If the mind does not think it is important, you will not get the effect.^b Second, it is because you want the mind occupied with things that more or less reflect the celestial pattern and make it easier for your deeper self to align, not harder.”

I shook my head and frowned. “But doesn’t telling me this make it harder for it to work? If I know that the ‘secret mantra’ is not earth-shatteringly important, won’t I lose respect for it?”

“Understanding how a tool works should not make you lose respect for the tool. And don’t forget the proper tool should be chosen precisely for its alignment with a greater reality.”

b. “Narrowly focused attention is the province of the left hemisphere, and an increase in stress, fear and excitement actually inhibits the spread of neuronal recruitment in a manner that favours this very closely targeted kind of attention within the left hemisphere. Yet while the left hemisphere is preoccupied with its quarry, like Eliot’s dog with its meat, the right hemisphere is actually freed, its vigilance also in a state of enhancement, to see the scene afresh, once more authentic, not overlaid by the familiarity that the left hemisphere would normally bring to the scene. The left hemisphere would have pre-digested it, as it were, into another picturesque scene of mountains, lakes or starry skies. The initial effort of close attention is needed, but, its work done, it must give way to an open receptivity, a sort of active passivity.” – *The Master and his Emissary: the Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Iain McGilchrist, Yale University Press, 2009, p.377.

Zen also uses a similar technique. “Conceptual exercise alone is held to be too shallow and ephemeral to exert the force necessary to break through deeply established mental conditionings. The ‘doubt feeling’ (gijo), deliberately produced by certain Zen verbal devices frustrating linear thought, is one way in which such force is accumulated and directed in order to pierce this veil of inertia.” – *Shōbōgenzō, Zen Essays by Dogen*, Thomas Cleary, University of Hawaii Press, 1986, p.8.

“How do we know that’s the case?”

“Until you develop your discernment, you have to listen to others, especially your teacher. Otherwise—but this is far more perilous—fellow Wayfarers more advanced than you. Classical texts are usually reliable, unless they have been used as instruments of conditioning by the culture, which is unfortunately not uncommon.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like this,” I complained.

“I have dumbed it down a little,” Cook said. “But it is there in the classical literature.”¹

Then he got up to go and inspect the preparations for dinner, and before long the place had filled with jostling hungry Daoists.



After Cook left, the fat monk had referred to Shijie’s disquisition on the second chapter of the *, and I’d said I’d never heard it.*

Now he looked at me in puzzlement. “But you were sitting right next to me that night.”

I shook my head. “Sorry. It’s gone, if it was ever there.”

“Sometimes I wonder about you,” he said. He reached out and grabbed a kitchen assistant monk passing by and whispered in his ear. The monk glanced at me, and nodded, then headed off toward the kitchen.

Before long he’d come back, bringing a steaming bowl of sweet black sesame soup with *which he set down in front of me. It was a favourite of mine, although I had not had it for quite a while.*

The fragrant scent of the sesame mixed with sugar and red rice wafted toward my nostrils, and I circled my spoon in the soup to cool it, nudging the white balls of sugared glutinous rice here and there. When was the last time I’d had it? Something stirred in my memory.

As the flavour from the first spoon filled my mouth, I remembered.

當年

The fat monk and I had been at the market and were on our way to Shijie’s vegetarian restaurant when he looked up and said “Uh oh, it looks like rain.”

I glanced up. Dark clouds were slowly rolling in from the east. The air smelt wet and had a crackly feeling to it. The change of light and darkened hue gave a movie-set appearance to the trees, the street, and the occasional vehicle passing.

The first fat drops began to fall while we were still one street away.

Puffing slightly, we paused inside the door of the restaurant’s kitchen, shaking ourselves off.

It was hot. Pots of all sizes boiled away on tops of stoves, ovens baked and roasted. Our wet clothes began to steam, as if in harmony.

The fat monk took his time leading me through the array of cooking vessels.

“Have you ever seen Shijie’s kitchen?”

“Yes, lots of times.”

“I know we’ve walked through before, but have you ever stopped and *seen* it?”

“I’m seeing it right now.”

“I don’t think you are, not in the sense I mean.”

“OK, what do you mean?”

“This place is like a working depiction, in a crude physical way, of the work that Shijie is doing with this group, in this restaurant.”

I knew that Shijie ran the business as a framework for training a group of Daoist wayfarers, all of whom acted at various times as cooks, waiters, dishwashers and so on. But I had no clue what the Daoist was on about. I shook out one sleeve that was still dripping from the rain.

He could see my confusion from the look on my face. He smiled. “See how each pot is cooking at a different rate? Some boil fiercely, some simmer, some have been turned off and are left in a state of *mèn* (悶) with the lid on so the steam can’t escape.”

He gestured around. “Some vessels here hold fermented substances. Some hold grains that have been grown with just the right amount of sun, soil, water and air, and are then, at the right time, gathered, beaten to remove the chaff, cleaned and stored in



Memorable: Sweet black sesame soup.

preparation, perhaps, to be made into bread or noodles.”

He took his forefinger and drew a yin-yang symbol in a container of yellow millet that stood close by.

I knew how his mind worked by then, and so I said “And *that* process of making bread also involves a terrible grinding, then a mixing with water and heat, and then kneading, then a leaving alone, before another set of kneading.”

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. “Yep. Can you imagine what the grain thinks about it all?”

I grinned. “There is still the oven to go.”

“The difference with us is, we do it by choice. If the grains could choose, most of them would run away. We choose to bear the pounding, the soaking, the fire and the heat, because we know it is the only way toward transformation.”

There was a faint sound of thunder in the distance.

The door from the outside opened just as lightning flashed. One of the workers came into the kitchen, shaking out then folding an umbrella, and the fat monk said “I’ll give these things we brought from the market to Lao Pan, and then I have to go to the front to greet someone.”

“Who?” I asked.

“You’ll meet them later. You go on ahead.”

I went on through the kitchen to the front of the restaurant and the stairs that led to the room above. That room was used for special banquets during the hours the restaurant was open for business. Other times it was used for the meetings of the Daoist group Shijie was teaching.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, over the sound of the rain on the roof, I could hear the deep resonant sound of a *qín* being plucked, the ancient Chinese musical instrument that was the epitome of culture. I also heard,

muffled but distinct, *clump*, *scrape*, *bump*.

I climbed the stairs and stopped before the top. With my head on the level of the last step, I slowly peeped one eye around the edge of the open door that led into the room.

It was Lingling playing the *qín*, while the tall girl Xiaojing danced with a sword. I saw her leap and twirl.

The next instant, I found the tip of the sword not two inches from my eye.

“Didn’t your mother tell you it was impolite to spy?” Xiaojing said, standing up and sheathing the sword with a flourish.

Lingling grinned. “He’s always had his eye on you,” she said with a laugh in her voice.

“He almost had his eye on my sword,” Xiaojing said with a humph, and turning her back on me walked to the other side of the room and propped the sheathed sword in a corner.

I finished climbing the stairs, walked over to the *qín* and said to Lingling in a low voice “What’s her problem with me? Whenever I show up, she just seems to get irritated.”

“She does complain about you a lot,” Lingling agreed. “But you know what they say...”

She was interrupted when Xiaojing came over, sniffed and said “Don’t play your *qín* to a wet dog.”

Lingling laughed. “I think the phrase is *to a cow*,” she said.

“Well, wet dog is what he smells like.” She gestured around at the room. “Come on, we have to clear up. The meeting will start soon.” She turned to me and said “If you can be bothered, we could use your help.” Then she turned and began to move chairs.

Lingling and I moved a table into an alcove, then I picked up some chairs and carried them over to Xiaojing.

“What is it exactly that you don’t like about me?” I asked.

She looked at me. “I never said I don’t like you.” She straightened, eyes sweeping the ceiling, then her head bent and she sighed. “I guess I just don’t have the patience that Shijie says I need. That’s why she pushes you and me together so often. You get to come here just because you are friends with the librarian. But there are others who *do* deserve it, and aren’t so lucky.”

I knew she was right.

Real Chinese sayings

To play a *qín* to a cow.

對牛彈琴 duì niú tán qín

“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.”

Master Guyan

Shijie stood in the centre of the circle of seated students.

“I was expecting some important visitors tonight, but perhaps the weather ...” she was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. The fat monk stuck his head around the door and gestured. Shijie turned to the group and said “Everyone please stand to honour my teaching uncle, Master Guyan, who is bringing some of his own students to visit with us tonight. They have come a long way.”

Soon after we could hear a troop mounting the stairs, and a group of young and middle aged Daoists, all in dripping and bedraggled black robes, entered the room, followed by an older man with a white beard who did not seem to be at all wet. He was in an old grey low-collar *tang* jacket with loose black trousers.

At the top of the stairs they spread out in a semi-circle, with the white-bearded man in the centre. Shijie led the group in bowing to the newcomers, and they bowed back, like a black swan dipping its wings.

Then Shijie gestured for her students to find the visitors chairs, and she and the fat monk went over, bowed again with their hands clasped in front of them, and spoke quietly to the old man.

The old man nodded, and Shijie returned to the middle of the circle, motioned for everyone to sit, then said “Let us start, as always, by maintaining several minutes of silence while extending the deepest part of ourselves toward contact with that spirit that moves with the Dao.”

Everyone has an opinion

I’m not sure if it was the excitement of having visitors, but for the first time I could really feel a sense of invigorating power grow with the silence.

Then Shijie lifted her head and looked around. “Someone asked me not long ago,” she said, “about the second chapter of Laozi’s *. Because it is at the front of the book, people may assume that they understand it, and certainly anyone with the least interest in Daoism has read it or heard it. All of you, of course, know it by heart.*

“But in fact, the second chapter of Laozi is often confusing for people,” Shijie said.

“Xiaojing, can you recite it please?”

The tall girl stood and began “*Tiān xià jiē zhī měi zhī wéi měi* ...”

When everyone has an opinion about what beauty is, there is ugliness.
When everyone knows for sure what goodness is, it is anything but good.
And so: Being and non-being give birth to each other
Hard and easy complete each other
Long and short give shape to each other
High and low overturn each other
Music and voice harmonise with each other
Front and back follow each other.

In this way, Sages deal with matters by not-doing, and practise wordless teaching; working at ten thousand things without shirking, creating but not possessing, doing without grasping, accomplishing without identifying. Because they don’t identify^c with the accomplishment, it never disappears.

The unity of Heaven

When she finished, there was silence, except for the patter of rain on the tiled roof. Many of the group had their eyes closed, having been listening intently.

“The unity of Heaven is flawless,” Shijie said. “Once you start talking about beauty you have introduced distinctions into the unity and of course there is ugliness. This is injuring the Dao within you. Everyone has theories about beauty and the good. But this is not as good as the alternative.”

“What’s the alternative?” someone asked.

“Direct perception, a direct knowing of the good, the beautiful and the true.”

Shijie sighed, and said “People no longer search for the single qi of empty nothingness^d but instead just go around talking about what they like and don’t like and what’s nice and not nice.”

She looked around the room. “This is to attend to trifles and neglect essentials. Once

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People no longer search for the single qi of empty nothingness but instead just go around talking about what they like and don’t like and what’s nice and not nice.

c. 不居 *Bù jū*, literally “dwell within, occupy, claim, assert”.

d. 虛無一炁

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When a wayfarer begins practice, the search is unfathomable, ungraspable. It is like looking within infinity!

you have the unity, to go back to these things is a retrograde step. It is getting trapped in the yin and yang of the later heaven^e not the single unified *yuan* qi of the primal Heaven.”^f

A thunderclap sounded in the distance, and some of the students stirred.

Searching within yin and yang

Shijie paused, then said “But not everyone can do this right away. When a wayfarer begins practice, the search is unfathomable, ungraspable. It is like looking within infinity! So the ancient practitioners gave some guidelines for searching *within* yin and yang, because at least there is a degree of palpability. Remember, however, the goal is to dissolve all this, not to get stuck in ‘states’ or search out weird experiences.”

One of the black-robed Daoists looked at Master Guyan, who nodded.

Shijie went to the side of the room, picked up a chair and put it in the middle of the room, then sat down. She said “The usual interpretation of the rest of this chapter focuses on states encountered during the search for the internal elixir, the *Nei Dan*.”

Another thunderclap, and a burst of rain against the windows. Shijie raised her voice a little to be heard clearly.

“So when Laozi says *being and non-being give birth to each other* this means movement giving rise to stillness, and stillness giving rise to movement, leaving the *mysterious* (玄 xuán)—which among other things means Heaven—and entering the *female* (牝 pìn)^g meaning—again among other things—*earth* and thus harmonising yin and yang. Heaven gently raining its influence down on earth...”

“Or not so gently!” someone said, and everyone chuckled, including Shijie. The black-robed Daoists looked scandalised, but the white-bearded man smiled broadly.

When everyone had settled, Shijie said “The internal weather has its storms, it’s true. But when we allow things to settle into stillness, the weather is calm, and the rain from Heaven is gentle, nourishing and indiscriminate. When that happens, earth can lift its stabilisation to embrace heaven,

e. 後天.

f. 先天一元之炁.

g. The whole phrase was 出玄入牝 chū xuán rù pìn.

and humanity stands in between as recipient and indeed agent.”^h

She paused and looked around. “That is just the first line of these six yin-yang differentiations: *Being and non-being give birth to each other*. This aspect includes all of the others, and the discussion of this line alone could fill several books.”

She looked at the fat monk and said “In fact, I think it already does.”

Lute and sword

She continued “*Hard and easy complete each other* points out the interaction of firm and flexible, soft and hard, easy and difficult. That is the normal course of a life or any path; sometimes you’re struggling uphill, sometimes you can just coast.”

People around the room looked at each other and nodded.

Shijie continued, “But it doesn’t take Laozi to tell you that. No, here it indicates the pattern of activity that we deliberately employ in our search: a period of intense activity and concentration followed by a period of relative relaxation. We refer to this by the phrase ‘lute and sword’ (*qín jiàn* 琴劍).”

“But why?” Lingling asked. Her own lute stood on its end next to her, wrapped in its protective cloth.

Shijie said “The lute is an instrument of culture, gentility and learning, so here it evokes the gentle and easy. The sword is the martial instrument of vigorous cutting off, so it evokes the strong and hard.”

Lingling nudged Xiaojing, who blushed.

Tripod and furnace

Shijie said “This process is also one aspect of the alchemical *hǔ* *hù*, the *firing process*, a vigorous boiling alternated with a gentle simmering. We refer to this in the phrase ‘tripod and furnace’ *dǐng lù* (鼎炉). Sometimes, to make sure that a reader will register the idea of *hard and easy completing each other*, we will use the phrases together, like this: *dǐng lù qín jiàn* (鼎炉琴劍).” She sat silently for a moment.

“What about the rest of the Laozi chapter?” someone asked.

h. Later Shijie said that the very structure of the word 王 wáng—ruler—illustrated this fact. The three horizontal lines show Heaven, humanity and earth and the central vertical line is that which connects them.

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We don't pay
attention to the echo
we get back from the
world, and we keep
on making ugly noises
and we still call it
singing.”

“Oh yes. Xiaojing, where was I?”

The tall girl had been giggling with her friend, but now sat up straight, paused for a moment and said “Um, *long and short*.”

The cosmic circle

“*Long and short give shape to each other* refers, on the one hand, to the breathⁱ that we gently employ in particular situations: a somewhat shorter in-breath and a somewhat longer out-breath.” Shijie made a vertical circling motion with her hand as she continued: “The phrase however also points to the *xiao zhou tian*, the small cosmic circle, the *qi* circulating through the *Du* and then the *Ren* channels along the back and the front. The *Du* channel up the back is longer, and *Ren* channel along the front is shorter.”

Putting her cupped left hand palm-down at chest level, she cupped her right hand below her umbilicus and said “The next line, *high and low overturn each other*, refers to the fire above which must be made to descend, and the water below which must be made to ascend.” She shifted her hands so that the lower hand took the place of the higher hand, and then returned them to their original places. “That way you get this cycle of one overturning the other, the trigram *Li* descending to fill the gaps in the trigram *Kan*, while the middle yang line of *Kan* completes the gap left by the broken yin line in *Li*.”

The world is a mountain, our actions a voice

“In the next line, *music and voice harmonise with each other* is the intrinsic harmony that becomes perceptible when the spirit dissolves and the flow of *qi* is all. Every channel is open, moving.”

Shijie looked upward with her palms raised. “It's like a flock of geese calling together, each responding to the other and moving as one.”

Then, turning slowly, she pointed back and forth between the circumference of the circle and her heart.

“In a group such as ours,” she said, “in which we strive for subtle harmony, the inner self of each individual calls to me and to each other. Like a note of music, from

i. Shijie and the fat monk had stressed the importance of the warning against forcing the breath, saying that trying to alter the breath before one was ready had caused more problems than almost anything else they could think of.

moment to moment the call of that inner self has its pitch and timbre, a taste if you will, that announces whether it is in tune with the group and with the greater reality.”^j

Then Shijie turned to the white-bearded man and said “Master Guyan, would you like to say more on this?”

He stepped forward with a broad smile. When he spoke I was surprised at the vigour in his deep and resonant voice.

“That certainly applies to group development,” he said, sweeping his arm around the circle. “But for the average person it carries another meaning, which you could say was less deep, but perhaps more broadly applicable.”

Just then a loud clap of thunder made us all jump, and drowned out Master Guyan's next words.

“... *yin sheng xiang he* do mean music and voice harmonise each other,” he said. “But the words *yin sheng* can also mean ‘voice and echo’. You call out, and your echo comes back to you. Feedback. Sensing.”^k

He paused for a moment.

“Think,” he said, “of the world around us as a mountain—a mountain that echoes feedback. Our actions are our voice. The world, if we bother to take notice, echoes the feedback of our actions to us, so that we might learn. We just have to pay attention.” His laugh came again, loud and unrestrained. “But how often do we say to ourselves ‘I am singing with such a beautiful voice, I don't understand why that echo came back sounding so ugly!’ We don't pay attention to the echo we get back from the world, and we keep on making ugly noises and we still call it singing.”

He laughed again, gestured toward Shijie, and sat down.

Living midnight

Shijie continued, “*Front and back follow each other* again refers to the small cosmic orbit, the *living midnight* of *zǐ* (子) spreading up the *Du* channel of the back, while the noonday sun of *wǔ* (午) descends along the *Ren* channel in the front. Male and female

j. In fact, one of the silk texts of Laozi found at Mawangdui had “thought and sound match each other” (意聲相和) instead of “music and voice” (音聲相和). One can see only a “heart” radical is different under the first character.

k. The word he used was *gǎn yìng* (感應).

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After a while the spirit and the breath will unite and you will find yourself in a dim and dusky land, the land of wú wéi.

mate, *Creative* and *Receptive* come together and cannot bear to part.”

Shijie was silent for a moment, then said: “These six lines of opposites take us from the yin-yang of later heaven and return us to the *wú jí* of the pre-heaven. This is the foundation from which teachers teach, which is described in the rest of this chapter. But we have covered that extensively in previous sessions, so there is no need to go over it again.”

She looked around. “We are going to take a break and have some refreshment, and then Master Guyan will give a short teaching to wind up the evening. He would also like to talk one on one with a few of you.”

Several of the students had descended the stairs to the kitchen, and now returned with trays carrying bowls of black sesame soup. In the soup floated white *tang yuan*: balls of sweet glutinous rice-flour.

We each took a bowl and sat sipping the hot liquid from our spoons.

Black and stagnant blood

The fat monk came over and sat down next to me. “You are one of the people Master Guyan would like to speak to,” he said.

“I am? Why?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But maybe I should warn you about him. He was our teacher’s fellow student and they used to get up to all sorts of mischief together.”

“Like what?”

“I’ll tell you stories later. But I can say that he worked as a porter, back in the days when that meant carrying very heavy loads, like full barrels of oil, suspended on each side of a yoke that they carried on their shoulders. He’s pretty tough.”

The fat monk shook his head. “By the end of the day, the pain would be terrible. Only one thing allowed them to sleep at night.”

“What was that?” I imagined some powerful drug that would stop the pain and knock them out.

“Cupping,” he said. “My teacher said they would use plum-blossom needles to break the thickened skin on the shoulders, which was as tough as leather. Then they would apply cups to pull out the blood. It was black and stagnant. But once that blood was out, the porters could sleep.” He shook his head. “Our teacher did that for his teaching brother, every day.”

The gate of the mysterious female

Master Guyan walked into the circle and stood quietly until all the bowls had been collected and everyone had settled. Then he stood for a while longer, his eyes searching the circle. I might have imagined it, but they seemed to linger on me for a while before moving on. When the silence reached a peak, he spoke.

“Lao Zi, here in the second chapter, specifically gives you an indication of the best method of internal working. He says that whenever you start to meditate you must set aside all the complex interrelations of the mundane world (萬緣 *wàn yuàn*). You must not let the slightest thing become fixated in your mind, no ideas of beauty or ugliness, don’t think of what you have to do, just close your eyes and mouth and observe the empty nothingness of the *dantian*. Remember, this is a gentle attention, nothing forced. Men on the lower abdomen, women in the chest. This is important!”

He looked sternly around the circle.

“While you are concentrating the spirit, you also regulate the breath. At the same time, you use that same regulating to concentrate. This should be your sole concern. After a while the spirit and the breath will unite and you will find yourself in a dim and dusky land, the land of *wú wéi*.”

He was silent for a long moment before beginning again.

“When this stillness and nothingness reaches a peak, there will suddenly be a subtle movement; this is *yōu wéi*. Keep to these parameters, delicately follow this subtle thought which is not a thought.” He spiralled his hand up and up. “You ascend, the spirit rides the *qi*, the *qi* rides the spirit. You know nothing, but within that unknowing there is a special kind of knowing. You feel nothing except that within that there is a subtle feeling.”

Again, a long moment of silence.

Many people around the circle had their eyes closed.

“This,” Master Guyan continued, “is how the gate of the mysterious female (玄牝之門 *xuán pìn zhī mén*) is established. Strictly maintaining these parameters, the spirit congeals outside of phenomena. One inhale, one exhale, a coming and a going, devote yourself to directing *qi* to return to

this mysterious orifice (玄窍 xuán qiào). With every breath, let yourself fall back on the natural Way of Heaven, which is the root of heaven, earth and humankind, the foundation of sages, teachers and immortals. Refine yourself until you find the truth within where there is no beauty or ugliness. This is the secret heavenly mechanism of my path. I do not divulge it lightly. It is not to be discussed outside of this circle until a certain number of years has gone by."

Again his eyes caught and held me in their fierce glare, then passed on.

Indigestion

I sat on my chair in front of Master Guyan. He had been looking steadily at me for several minutes in silence.

"Yes," he said finally. "You are the source." He glanced at the fat monk, then tilted his head toward me. "Its nothing irredeemable," he said, "but he'll need separation or it will become toxic for him."

I thought to myself *Hey! I'm sitting right here!* but dared not make a sound. The fat monk had warned me to be on my best behaviour.

Master Guyan turned back to me. "You have been exposed to much, and on many levels. In some aspects this has benefited you, but in far too many others the basis was insufficiently prepared and this material has been unable to be harmoniously processed."

"What do you mean?" My voice was shaky. I rubbed my palms on my pants to get rid of the moisture.

"You have indigestion," he said. "Spiritual indigestion. You need a period of time away from all thoughts of meditation, qi-gong, breathing exercises, mystical texts and so on."

"So you want me to stop coming to the monastery for a little while?" My voice was lighter. That was not too difficult. I could stay away for a couple of weeks, no problem. "And what did you mean," I said, growing bolder, "that I was the source?"

He laughed loudly. "Jing Xin runs her group well, like an orchestra, everything in harmony, everything in tune." He fixed me with his eyes. "Except for a single piccolo, quite distinctly flat, out-of-tune. I had a bit of trouble distinguishing the origin of this discordant note."

"But I was the source?"

He nodded. "Now," he said. "Lean forward just slightly."

I did so, and he put his hands on either side of my face. I could feel a slight warmth on my temples.

"Look at me," he said.

I did, and his eyes were a dark abyss. They held me fixed, my mind an empty and receptive chamber into which his voice echoed.

"Forget about this place and time. Go now and do not come back until your heart once again reminds you that it is time to wake up. In the meantime live a normal happy life. Be kind to others. Allow this material to digest without disturbance."

He sat back and, looking at the fat monk, said "When, or rather if, he does come back, let him remember at his own pace, don't force it. Check repeatedly whether he has assimilated what he has been exposed to."

Then he leaned forward and, putting his hands on the top of my head, said in a deep and sonorous voice "Now pass from yang into yin. Let the descent of metal carry you into the silence of water. In stillness and quiet let the warm germ of *zǐ* ferment, like yeast slowly growing in dough. Do not return until the dough is ready for more kneading. Go now, in silence and peace."

And I stood up, left the restaurant, the town, and the country itself.

It was years before I returned.

In the dining hall

"So that was it!" I said. "I could never seem to focus my mind on exactly why I had left, I just knew that I had to, and that coming back did not feel right."

"Yes, and when you still couldn't remember, after all this time, I thought I'd better apply a little food therapy."

"What ... oh! The black sesame soup."

"Yes. Not only would the taste and smell reach the deeper parts of your mind, the visual symbolism might awaken what you'd forgotten."

"Visual symbolism?" I frowned. Then realised what he meant. "Ah! The black soup is the silence and quiet of water."

"Yes," he said. "And the white balls of *tang yuan* are the visual equivalent of *zǐ*, the single dot of yang within the depths of yin, the seed



of *living midnight* from which yang grows once more.”

“It’s nice to be back,” I said.

Endnote

1. Later, I followed up and asked Cook where in the classical literature he’d seen this idea, and he said it was in the *Wu Zhen Pian* (Understanding Reality). “It is not describing the meat buns part,” he said, “so much as the very subtle working away of the true self underneath all the distraction.”

Understanding Reality, Part II, 14.

The mind of Tao has the form of water, the human mind has the form of fire; so the mind of Tao and the human mind contain the four natures of metal, wood, water and fire.

But the four natures are separate; if you want one energy to produce them, this depends wholly on the work of heaven-earth (*wǔ 戊*) and earth-earth (*jǐ 己*) [the subtle yin and yang attributes of the utmost centre, i.e. earth.]

Heaven-earth (*wǔ 戊*) is yang earth: it is the original energy (*yuán qì 元氣*), which manifests as basic trust (*xìn 信*). Earth-earth (*jǐ 己*) is yin earth; it is intention (*yì 意*), which manifests as desire. Water takes in heaven-earth (*Kǎn nà wǔ 坎納戊*); in the mind of Tao this is basic trust. Fire takes in earth-earth (*Lí nà jǐ 离納己*); in the human mind, this is intent.

If you want to rectify your mind, first make intent sincere. Once intent is sincere, earth-earth is

stabilised and the mind is calm. If you want to traverse the Tao, first establish basic trust (*xìn 信*). Once basic trust is established, then heaven-earth appears and the mind of Tao manifests.

But of course the idea also appears in other contexts, and in strikingly similar terms:

That there is an analogy between mystical experience and some of the ways in which poetry is written I do not deny . . . what happens is something negative: that is to say, not ‘inspiration’ as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers . . . The more seasoned reader, he who has reached, in these matters, a state of greater purity, does not bother about understanding; not, at least, at first . . . And finally, there is the difficulty caused by the author’s having left out something which the reader is used to finding; so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of ‘meaning’ which is not there, and is not meant to be there. The chief use of the ‘meaning’ of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a nice piece of meat for the house-dog.

— T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* [1932-33 Norton Lectures, published Harvard University Press, 1933]

AD TO COME CHINA BOOKS