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## WHICH IS THE DAOIST IMMORTAL BODY?

### *Introduction*

Daoist hagiography has transmitted a large number of accounts of the so-called «immortals» (*xianren*). In these works, immortals are depicted as extraordinary human beings endowed with multiple powers. As described by Benjamin Penny, the immortals' powers include the ability to transform themselves into different creatures or objects; the possession of extraordinary bodies, devoid of the signs of aging and capable of stunning feats; the skill of controlling people, animals, and objects, by means of their mastery of *qi*; the gift of healing; and the faculty of predicting the future<sup>1</sup>. The main power possessed by the immortals, however, is certainly the ability to reach indefinitely long life spans in their ordinary bodies. It is especially in hagiographic works that the idea of human «perfectibility» is understood in a sense that is, at the same time, most elementary and most idealistic: not only attaining an exceptional longevity, but also the immortality of the physical body.

Hagiography has played in China an important role in creating an image of Daoism that was easily understood by persons of different education and background, and that was also tolerable by followers of other intellectual or religious traditions: after all, the tales about the immortals are only tales. To some extent, and with all necessary qualifications, the same is true of the dominant, «popular» image of Daoism in the Western world; and it is even true of certain Western scholars, who have tried to fit the complexity of Daoist doctrines into those imaginative anecdotes, reducing them to literary tropes instead of following the opposite procedure. When we look at other

1. Penny, «Immortality and Transcendence», esp. 125-26.

sources, belonging to the various traditions that have evolved during the history of Daoism, a different picture emerges. These sources show that Daoist adepts did not intend to reach immortality in their physical body; they intended, instead, to use the physical body in order to generate a new person (*shen*) that is not subject to death.

In this study, I will try to outline two ways to attain immortality described in Daoist sources. Needless to say, many other Daoist practices promise their followers the attainment of «immortality»: to mention only a few, these range from breathing practices to diets, and from meditation on the inner gods to the ingestion of elixirs. The two ways described here, however, have in common the fact that they clearly do not envision an immortality in the physical body. The first one consists in going through a «simulated death» followed by the refining of the physical body; the new perfected body obtained through this process then becomes the foundation and the focus of one's practice. The second way consists in generating an «embryo» that is unaffected by death, and is the seed of one's rebirth as an immortal. Although these two ways are closely related to one another, for the sake of clarity I will describe them separately. In the last part of this article, I will briefly look at Internal Alchemy (Neidan), which in this, as in several other cases, inherits earlier traditions but gives them a new significance.

#### FORSAKING THE MORTAL BODY

The earliest description of the first way of attaining immortality – forsaking one's mortal body – is found in a source related to the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao), which originated in the late 2nd century as a local Daoist movement based on communal ritual, but developed to become one of the two main Daoist traditions of the present day. Based on a revelation by Lord Lao (Laojun), the divine aspect of Laozi, one of the main scriptures of this tradition is a commentary, dating from ca. 200 CE, on the work ascribed to Laozi himself, the *Daode jing* or *Book of the Dao and Its Virtue*<sup>2</sup>.

2. On the Way of the Celestial Masters see Kleeman, *Celestial Masters*, and for a shorter account, Hendrischke, «Early Daoist Movements». For the *Daode jing* commentary see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 29-148. The second main Daoist tradition of the present day is Quanzhen (Complete Reality).

«Rebirth in Great Darkness»

The *Daode jing* commentary of the Celestial Masters describes twice a process that leads to one's rebirth as a perfected, immortal being. The adept «simulates death» (*tuosi*) and goes to the Palace of Great Darkness (Taiyin, in the extreme north of the heavens), where his bodily form is refined<sup>3</sup>. As a result, he obtains a «rebirth» or «second birth» (*fusheng*) in a body that preserves itself indefinitely. This practice can only be performed by advanced adepts:

When a Daoist's practices are complete, the spirits of the Dao call that person to return. Departing the world through a simulated death, the person passes through Great Darkness to be born again and not perish. That is longevity<sup>4</sup>.

In the second passage we read:

Great Darkness is the palace where those who have accumulated the Dao refine their [bodily] forms (*lianxing*). When there is no place for them to stay in the world, the worthy withdraw and, simulating death, pass through Great Darkness to have their images reborn<sup>5</sup>.

Since the release from, or rather of, the mortal body is a necessary step to continue one's cultivation, the refining process takes place after one who is ready for it has «simulated death». Leaving one's mortal body and refining one's form results, at first, in entering again into a state in which neither form nor matter exist, but only an «image» (*xiang*). After the adept's bodily form has been refined, the process culminates in his «rebirth».

3. On the Great Darkness see Robinet, «Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse in Taoism», 63-66; Seidel, «Post-mortem Immortality, or: The Taoist Resurrection of the Body», 230-32; and Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 46-48.

4. *Xiang'er*, ed. Rao Zongyi, *Laozi xiang'er zhu jiaozheng* (Annotated critical edition of the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*), 43; trans. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 135. See also Robinet, «Metamorphosis», 63, and Seidel, «Post-mortem Immortality», 230. – Except where otherwise noted, as in the present case, all Chinese primary sources are cited in this article from their edition in the *Daozang* (Daoist Canon).

5. *Xiang'er*, 21; trans. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 102, modified.

Admittedly, several facets of the practice remain unclear in these two brief descriptions. About two centuries later, a more elaborate account of the rebirth process is found in one of the main scriptures of the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) tradition, which is based on meditation practices. Here again, the adept goes through a «temporary death» and moves to the Great Darkness; then his bodily form is refined and his body parts and inner spirits are re-assembled, beginning with the five viscera and the bones<sup>6</sup>. A passage once found in the same text, but now preserved elsewhere, adds two important details. First, the process is supervised by several deities, including the Great One (Taiyi, the supreme god) and the Controller of Destinies (Siming), the deity charged with destiny and with the length of life of each individual:

Sometimes a person temporarily dies and goes to the Great Darkness, where he is submitted to the jurisdiction of the Three Offices<sup>7</sup>. His flesh becomes ashes and rots, his blood sinks into the earth, and his veins are dispersed. Yet his five viscera are still alive, and his bones are like jade<sup>8</sup>. The seven earthly souls (*po*) are camped in attendance, and the three celestial souls (*hun*) guard his lodging; the Three Primes (Sanyuan) vitalize his breath, and the Great Spirit (*taishen*) is enclosed within; the Great One (Taiyi) makes a record of his spirit [in the «registers of life and death»], and the Controller of Destinies (Siming) takes charge of his joints; the Five Old Lords (Wulao) assist his flourishing, and the Imperial Lord (Dijun) polishes his matter.

Second, and more important, the adept receives his second birth by «returning to the embryo» (*fantai*), or going again through his embryonic development:

Then they make him reappear when they wish, whether in thirty years, in twenty, in ten, or in five. When he is about to come to life again, they collect his blood and build up his flesh, reanimate his liquids and coagulate

6. *Jiuzhen zhongjing* (Central Book of the Nine Realized Ones), 1.9b-10b. See Robinet, «Metamorphosis» 63, and Seidel, «Post-mortem Immortality», 231. On Shangqing see Robinet, «Shangqing: Highest Clarity».

7. The Three Offices (*sanguan*) are the deities of Heaven, Earth, and Water.

8. In the Daoist view, the five viscera (liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys) and the bones are the main components of the physical body. They are «still alive» and «like jade» as a result of the adept's earlier practices, and therefore they ensure that he may revive after his «simulated death».

his fluids, restore his matter and make him return to the embryo, complete his [bodily] form and cleanse his matter. Thus his semblance (*rong*) is better than it was before he died. This is what is meant when we speak of a realized person (*zhenren*) refining his own person in the Great Darkness, and changing his appearance in the Three Offices<sup>9</sup>.

This account clearly shows that the process does not consist in refining the physical body in order to make it immortal. Rather, the adept is entirely re-generated by returning first to the state of «embryo».

«Release from the Mortal Body»

The generation of a new immortal body is even more apparent in the Daoist practice of *shijie*, or «release from the mortal body»<sup>10</sup>. Different varieties of this practice have existed, but on the basis of Daoist hagiography the main points can be summarized as follows: (1) The adept goes through a «simulated death»; this is the main element that ties the «release from the mortal body» to the accounts seen above. (2) When the coffin of the adept is opened, his corpse is found to have been replaced by some object – typically a sword, a staff, or a pair of sandals, but sometimes also clothes or texts. (3) Having released himself from his mortal body, the adept changes his name. (4) He never goes back where he came from; instead, he retires on a mountain, but sometimes lives among other people or even «in the city market».

9. *Wushang biyao* (The Supreme Secret Essentials), 87.10b–11a. Slightly shorter versions of this passage are found in the *Zhen'gao* (True Announcements), 4.16a–b (trans. Strickmann, «On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching», 182–83), and the *Yunji qiqian* (Seven Lots from the Bookbag in the Clouds), 86.5a. A note in the *Zhen'gao* states that this passage was originally found in the manuscript of the *Jiuzhen zhongjing* that belonged to Xu Mi (303–76), who was one of the recipients of the Shangqing revelations. In the final sentence, the other two versions have «refining his form» (*lianxing*) for «refining his own person» (*lianshen*).

10. *Shijie* is also translated as «release from the corpse», «corpse deliverance», and in several other ways. See Robinet, «Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse in Taoism», 57–66; Seidel, «Post-mortem Immortality», 230–32; Cedzich, «Corpse Deliverance, Substitute Bodies, Name Change, and Feigned Death»; and Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 52–60.

Beyond the hagiographic accounts, a rare description of how «release from the mortal body» actually occurred as a Daoist practice is found in another major source dating, in its original form, from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century. This source shows that «release from the mortal body» took place by means of meditation practices, but also involved ritual features. The relevant passage begins by stating that *shijie* is «the method of low-ranking immortals» (*xiaxian zhi dao*), but nevertheless enables one to become at least a «terrestrial immortal» (*dixian*), i.e., an immortal who does not ascend to Heaven but continues to reside on earth. It continues by describing the practice itself. After he ingests a medicine and draws a talisman (*fu*), the adept visualizes himself as «being dead». Then he takes off his clothes, changes his name, and «enters the mountains» never to go back where he was born or had lived:

After you have ingested the Medicine for the Release from the Mortal Body for the prescribed number of days, write the talisman [of the Highest Mystery of Living Unseen] in red on white silk, and place it on your belly. On a *wu* or *ji* day, lie down, your head pointing towards the west, and visualize yourself being dead. After quite some time, take off your clothes, leave them where you have lain, and head straight to enter the mountains. When you are far away, change your name. Never return to your hometown. Right after you have left, people will find that where you had lain there is a corpse. But suddenly, after a while, no one will know where your corpse is to be found<sup>11</sup>.

This account shows that «release from the mortal body» requires meditation practices. At the same time, ritual aspects are also involved: in a quite literal sense, the adept stages his death, and his associates—family or Daoist companions—participate in the performance. They state that the corpse has disappeared and has been replaced by other objects. These objects perform the same function

11. *Lingbao wufu xu* (Explanations on the Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure), 2.25a-b; translation based on Cedzich, «Corpse Deliverance», 28, modified. I follow Cedzich's emendations to the text, which do not affect its substance. The method for compounding the Medicine for the Release from the Mortal Body (*shijie yao*) is found in the same text, 2.25b-26a. The talisman of the Highest Mystery of Living Unseen of the Numinous Treasure (*Lingbao Taixuan yinsheng zhi fu*) is also reproduced in 2.25a-b. The *wu* and *ji* days symbolically represent the center of the cosmos.

played by the «replacement bodies» (*tishen*) in the early funerary rites: they replace, in a ritual sense, the deceased, whether his death is real or only «simulated»<sup>12</sup>.

Two further points require attention. First, the change of name of the person who performs *shijie* has been described as a simple trick to elude the spirits charged with enacting the directives of the «registers of life and death», where the lifespan of each person is established; deceived by the adept's change of name, those spirits would be unable to locate him and cause his death. Yet, the expression «changing name» (*gaiming*, *gengming*) is homophone of and equivalent in meaning to «changing destiny» (*gaiming*). The change of name does not merely intend to cheat the spirits. It is symbolically equivalent to the meditational and ritual act of «taking off the clothes»: one discards one's old persona<sup>13</sup>.

Second, the text quoted above defines *shijie* as «the method of low-ranking immortals», and analogous statements are found in other Daoist sources. These sources clarify the reason of this inferior status: *shijie* is performed by an adept who has attained an advanced state, but not sufficient for «ascending to Heaven in broad daylight» (*bairi shengtian*) in his entire person; therefore he needs to undergo a «transformation of his bodily form» (*xing zhi hua*) and to «refine his bodily form» (*lianxing*). While he still dwells in a physical body, he becomes able to focus on his perfected body<sup>14</sup>.

12. This is the original meaning of the word *shi*, more commonly meaning «corpse» or «mortal body». In the early funerary rites, the deceased was personified by a living person, typically the grandson. In this sense, the term *shijie* can also be understood as «liberation by means of a simulated corpse».

13. Robert Campany has defined the practice of *shijie* as «deceptive»: in his view, it is performed «by subterfuge», with «trickery», «with intent to deceive», and in order to «dodge» one's destiny. See Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 52–60 (expressions quoted from pp. 58 and 59), and his «Living off the Books: Fifty Ways to Dodge *Ming* in Early Medieval China». That this understanding disregards the main feature of *shijie* is shown, first of all, by how Campany describes the function of the objects that replace the adept's body: they would be «the substrata of the ritually and meditatively produced illusory corpse that replaced the adept's own body long enough for him to escape». In other words, what the adept would produce by meditation and ritual is an «illusory corpse», in order to elude the spirits and preserve his «own body». On the contrary, the «illusory corpse» is precisely the adept's own body, which he intentionally abandons, by means of meditation and ritual, as he generates a «true body».

14. See the statements found in *Zhen'gao*, ch. 4; *Wushang biyao*, ch. 87; and *Yunji qiqian*, ch. 84 and 85. Here again, Campany misses the point when he

Finally, one question obviously occurs: If «release from the mortal body» serves to leave one's ordinary body and to generate a perfected body, why should the mortal body be returned to the adept who wanted to liberate himself from it? The function of this «recovered» body is to provide a means to cultivate the perfected body. The story of Li Tieguai («Iron-Crutch»), one of the most popular immortals in Chinese lore, is especially instructive in this regard. While he was roaming away in spirit, his disciples mistakenly thought that he had passed away, and burnt what they believed was his corpse. As a consequence, since his ordinary body was not anymore available, he adopted the impaired body of a dead beggar. This story clearly shows that what is to be «perfected» is not the physical body: Li Tieguai needed a body only in order to continue his Daoist practices. Even in this uncommon case of a forced «release from the mortal body», the focus of the practice is the perfected body.

#### GENERATING THE EMBRYO

As we have seen, in one of the versions of the «rebirth in Great Darkness» the deities cause the adept to «return to the embryo». This idea is developed in other Daoist practices, where it is the adept himself who generates his own inner embryo. The concept of «changing destiny» is even more manifest in the context of these practices than in those discussed above.

Possibly the earliest source to mention the idea of «returning to the embryo» is the *Taiping jing*, or *Book of Great Peace*, originally dating from the 1st or 2nd century CE, and deemed to document the earliest stages of Daoist religion. This work does not say that adepts should generate that embryo by themselves; it states, instead, that one should «be like a child within the womb» (*ru bao zhong zhi zi*) or «return to one's embryonic state in the womb» (*fan qi baotai*), an expression explained as meaning «to dwell with the Dao» (*yu dao*

states that «The deceptive character of this mode of *shijie* is also reflected in the low status it receives in [...] rankings of methods of religious advancement», while «ascending to Heaven» is a «nonillicit method of transcendence» (*To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 59). Indeed, «release from the mortal body» is an inferior form of liberation compared to «ascending to Heaven»; inferior, but by no means illicit.



*ju*). Significantly, however, one of the relevant passages states that this occurs by means of meditation practices:

Therefore, the major sages of antiquity instructed people to meditate deeply (*shensi*) and have far-reaching thoughts, to shut their nine [bodily] openings, to rest their four limbs, and to make themselves inchoate (*hundun*). When one is similar to a circle without end, when one is like a child within the womb that does not attend to any affair, then one can attain this principle<sup>15</sup>.

It is also worthy of notice that here the adept is enjoined to return to the embryonic state. In the examples that we shall see below – as well as in Internal Alchemy – there is a fundamental difference: one does not return to the embryonic state within the maternal womb; instead, one generates an embryo within one's own metaphorical womb.

«*Merging Breaths*»

A first example of this different image of the embryo is found in sources related to the early Way of the Celestial Masters. One of several ceremonies performed in its communities was the so-called «merging breaths» or «merging pneumas» (*heqi*), a rite of sexual conjunction that has been described as «an austere and intricately choreographed exercise». The purpose of the rite was not the creation of a human embryo, but of the embryo of a perfected being called Taokang, or Peach Vigor, conceived by both the male and the female through the coagulation of three «breaths» (*qi*):

15. *Taiping jing*, 68.1b; trans. Espeset, «Prenatal Infancy Regained: Great Peace (Taiping) Views on Procreation and Life Cycles», 75, slightly modified. The second expression cited above, «returning to one's embryonic state in the womb», is found in 103.1a; see Espeset, 76. As noted by Espeset, the *Taiping jing* comprises a reach symbolism focused on the imagery of procreation and the figure of the child.

16. Mollier, «Conceiving the Embryo of Immortality», 90. On the «merging breaths» rite see also Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*, 186–202, and Kleeman, «The Performance and Significance of the Merging the Pneumas (*Heqi*) Rite in Early Daoism».

On the left the Supreme, on the right the Mysterious-Old, and the Most High: these three breaths are born together within our bodies and inchoately become one. This is named Peach Vigor (Taokang) [...] He stands precisely in the Gate of Destiny<sup>17</sup>.

It is significant that this embryo is generated in the Gate of Destiny (*mingmen*), a locus in the abdomen – a first hint to the fact that the conception of the inner embryo is closely related to one's fate or destiny, and especially to a change in one's fate or destiny. Through the generation of the embryo, those who perform the rite become «seed-people» (*zhongmin*), perfected human beings who will attain salvation at the end of the present cosmic cycle:

Together we uphold the Way and its Virtue. We beg for long life and enduring presence, and to become seed-people<sup>18</sup>.

The generation of the embryo is also briefly mentioned, in a different context, in the Celestial Masters' *Daode jing* commentary, already quoted above about the «rebirth in Great Darkness». One passage of this work states:

Those who practice false arts in the mortal world have established glib and deceptive arguments, basing themselves on this perfected text (i.e., the *Daode jing*) [...] [They say that] nurturing the embryo and refining the [bodily] form should be like making clay into pottery<sup>19</sup>.

Despite the severe deprecatory tone, this passage shows that practices for the generation of an inner embryo already existed as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The precise reason of the criticism is not stated,

17. *Shangqing huangshu guodu yi* (Initiation Ritual of the Highest Clarity Yellow Book), 14b.

18. *Shangqing huangshu guodu yi*, 15a.

19. *Xiang'er*, 14; trans. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 92, slightly modified. This passage purports to explicate the sentence, «In what is there lies the benefit, in what is not there (i.e., *emptiness*) lies the function», found in sec. 11 of the *Daode jing*. The *Daode jing* illustrates this aphorism with the metaphors of the empty space in a vase, in a room, and at the center of the wheels that move a carriage. These three objects provide benefit to those who use them, but only because their function is to embrace emptiness. With regard to the practitioners of the methods criticized by the *Xiang'er*, the metaphor alludes to fashioning a symbolic empty space – the womb – in order to hold the embryo.

but when the passage is read in light of the «merging breaths» practice, a possible reason emerges. The text here refers to adepts of other traditions, who generated and nourished an inner embryo by means of different practices – in particular, meditation on the inner gods, which was discouraged by the early Celestial Masters. Those practices, moreover, were performed for a different purpose: not for the creation of the «seed-people» who would preserve and transmit the Dao to future generations, but for individual salvation.

*The «Embryonic Immortal» and the «Knots of Death»*

After the allusive reference in the *Daode jing* commentary by the Celestial Masters, the first extant source on Daoist meditation practices that mentions the generation of an embryo is the *Huangting jing*, or *Book of the Yellow Court*, a work in poetry that exists in two versions—an earlier one called «Outer» («Wai»), probably dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and a later one called «Inner» («Nei»), probably dating from the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. One verse of the «Inner» version briefly mentions an «embryonic immortal» (or «immortal at the embryonic state» *taixian*) who dwells in the three Cinnabar Fields (*dantian*):

The spirit of the lute in the three platforms causes the embryonic immortal to dance<sup>21</sup>.

20. As is well known, the issue of practices based on visualizing the inner gods in the early Way of the Celestial Masters is controversial. Yet, one passage of the *Xiang'er* commentary (12; trans. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 89) definitely seems to reject them: «Now, where does the Dao reside in the body of a person? [...] The One does not reside within the human body [...] Those who forever practice false arts in the mortal world point to [one of] the five viscera and call it “the One”. They close their eyes and practice meditation, hoping by these means to seek good fortune. This is wrong». Franciscus Verellen notes that the *Xiang'er* «affirmed the a priori invisibility of the Dao, the deities within the body and the spirits of the organs, and even forbade attempts to visualise them». See his «The Dynamic Design: Ritual and Contemplative Graphics in Daoist Scriptures», 165.

21. *Huangting jing*, «Inner» version, sec. 1. According to one of the commentaries, «spirit of the lute» (*qinxin*) stands for «harmony of spirit» (*shenhe*). The three Cinnabar Fields are found in the areas of the abdomen, the heart, and the brain, but are devoid of material counterparts. «Three platforms» (*sandie*) is a synonym of «three Cinnabar Fields». On the *Huangting jing* see Robinet, *Taoist Meditation*, 55–96.

No further details are given about the «embryonic immortal», but somehow more clearly, the *Yellow Court* also instructs adepts to generate a «living being» (*shengshen*) in their own womb:

By coagulating the essence and nurturing the womb, you will generate a living being; preserve the embryo, stop [the flow of] the essence, and you will live a long life<sup>22</sup>.

While these verses of the «Inner» version of the *Yellow Court* have no correspondence in the earlier «Outer» version, it is difficult to establish whether they already reflect a direct influence of Shangqing meditation practices, which include methods for the creation of an immortal body, or an immortal self, by means of a return to a self-generated embryo.

The main example of these Shangqing practices is the one called «untying the knots» (*jiejie*), in which an adept re-experiences his embryonic development in meditation<sup>23</sup>. According to one of the texts that describe this practice, the human gestation process causes the formation of «knots» (*jie*) and «nodes» (*jie*); their function is to «hold the five viscera together,» but they are ultimately responsible for one's death:

When one is born, there are in the womb twelve knots and nodes that hold the five viscera together. The five viscera are obstructed and squeezed, the knots cannot be untied, and the nodes cannot be removed. Therefore the illnesses of human beings are due to the obstructions caused by those nodes, and the extinction of one's destiny (*ming*, i.e., one's death) is due to the strengthening of those knots<sup>24</sup>.

To «untie the knots» of death (*jiejie*), the practitioner is instructed to perform a complex meditation practice that lasts one year. Signif-

22. *Huangting jing*, «Inner» version, sec. 20. The «essence» (*jing*) is, for a male adept, his semen.

23. On this practice see Robinet, *Taoist Meditation*, 139-43; Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing dans l'histoire du taoïsme*, 1:178-79 and 2:171-74; and Bokenkamp, «Simple Twists of Fate: The Daoist Body and Its Ming», 158-62. On the Shangqing views of the embryo, and their relation to earlier descriptions of the gestation process, see Katō, «Tai no shisō», where the «nodes» are discussed on pp. 106-12.

24. *Shangqing jiidan shanghua taijing zhongji jing* (Highest Clarity Book of the Central Record of the Higher Transformation of the Nine Elixirs into the Essence of the Embryo), 3a-b.

icantly, the practice begins on the anniversary not of his birth, but of his conception<sup>25</sup>. In the first nine months, he receives again the «breaths of the Nine Heavens» (*jiutian zhi qi*, called Nine Elixirs in the title of this work), and each time one of his inner organs is turned into gold or jade. In the last three months, he visualizes the Original Father in the upper Cinnabar Field, and the Original Mother in the lower Cinnabar Field, whose Breaths conjoin in the middle Cinnabar Field to generate, this time, an inner immortal body<sup>26</sup>.

Once again, the conception of this body is closely related to the Daoist idea of «changing destiny.» As Stephen Bokenkamp has noted in his study of «untying the knots of death», in Chinese physiognomy (*xiangshu*) the bones are the main bodily feature related to one's destiny. In the method summarized above, the bones of the newly generated embryo begin to be formed in the second month of gestation; it is also in that month that the deities take note of the destiny of the newly conceived embryo – that is, of the adept's changed destiny as an immortal<sup>27</sup>.

#### THE IMMORTAL BODY IN DAOIST INTERNAL ALCHEMY

In the traditions surveyed above, the focus is on the conception of an immortal embryo. It is in Internal Alchemy, or Neidan, that not only the generation, but also the gestation and the delivery of the embryo become, in many cases, the main object of the discourse and the practice.

Internal Alchemy is a complex—and by no means unitary—discipline that developed from around 700 CE. While it is often described as merely «physiological», it actually merges in different ways and to different extents several earlier traditions of doctrine and practice: teachings from the *Daode jing*, early Daoist meditation practices, imagery and terminology from External Alchemy (Waidan), methods from the disciplines of «nourishing life» (*yang-*

25. «To perform this practice, if for example you were born in the 7th month, then you were an embryo in the 10th month» (17a). The practice, accordingly, should begin on the 10th month.

26. Id., 24b–25a. The last part of the practice is actually more complex than my brief summary might suggest. See the studies cited in note 23 above.

27. Bokenkamp, «Simple Twists of Fate», 159–60.

*sheng*, especially those concerned with breathing), as well as doctrinal principles drawn from Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and Buddhism, to mention only the most important components<sup>28</sup>.

Neidan aims to produce the elixir within the alchemist's own person according to two main models of doctrine and practice. The first model consists in purifying one's mind of defilements and passions, in order to «see one's Nature» (*jianxing*), which is equated to the elixir. In the second model, each of the three main components of the cosmos and the human being – spirit (*shen*), breath (*qi*), and essence (*jing*) – is reintegrated into the previous one, in order to invert the sequence in which they come forth from the Dao, and to return to the inception of the process. This model has been codified in different forms of practice. In the main codification, the practice is framed into three stages: (1) «Refining Essence to Transmute it into Breath» (*lianjing huaqi*); (2) «Refining Breath to Transmute it into Spirit» (*lianqi huashen*); (3) «Refining Spirit to Return to Emptiness», or the Dao (*lianshen huanxu*)<sup>29</sup>.

#### «Embryonic Breathing»

One of many points of contact between Neidan and earlier traditions is the practice of «embryonic breathing» (*taixi*), consisting in an extremely tenuous form of breathing that emulates the one of the embryo in its womb. This practice existed since the first centuries of our era, but the first source devoted to it is the *Taixi jing*, or *Book of Embryonic Breathing*, a very brief work dating from the mid-8th century, precisely the time of formation of Internal Alchemy<sup>30</sup>.

According to this work, «embryonic breathing» serves to maintain one's spirit (*shen*) in a state of quiescence, which in turn prevents breath (*qi*) from being dispersed. However, as we read in the com-

28. The best survey of Neidan in a Western language is found in Yokote, «Daoist Internal Alchemy in the Song and Yuan Periods». The overview in Pregadio and Skar, «Inner Alchemy (Neidan)», is still useful but somewhat outdated.

29. On the Neidan practices see Despeux, *Zhao Bichen: Traité d'alchimie et de physiologie taoïste*, 55-82; Robinet, *Introduction à l'alchimie intérieure taoïste*, 147-64; and Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*.

30. The most detailed description of «embryonic breathing» in a Western language is still one of the studies included in Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, 372-79, and 497-541 *passim*, which was first published in 1937.

mentary – possibly written by the same author of the text – the human embryo's breathing is not simply an image or a model for the practice: the embryo should be generated by the practitioner himself. Ordinary people, we are told, give birth to an embryo through the stimulation and the exchange of their Yin and Yang *qi*. Those who cultivate the Dao, instead, conceive the internal embryo through the coagulation of their own «stored breath» (*fuqi*): they «constantly store their breath under the navel (i.e., in the lower Cinnabar Field) and guard their spirit within themselves. Spirit and breath join one another and generate the Mysterious Embryo (*xuantai*)»<sup>31</sup>.

The close relation of «embryonic breathing» to Internal Alchemy is apparent. Indeed, in addition to being an autonomous practice, «embryonic breathing» later became an important component in the main codification of Neidan practice, with an important difference compared to the explanations in the *Taixi jing*. In Neidan, the embryo is not conceived by means of «embryonic breathing»: its conception occurs through the coagulation of *jing* (essence) in the first stage of the practice. «Embryonic breathing», instead, is at the center of the second stage of the practice, designated – consistently with the views of the *Taixi jing* – as «refining Breath to transmute it into Spirit». In this context, the practice is described as based on the internal circulation of one's «hidden breath» (*qianqi*), a term close in meaning to *fuqi* or «stored breath»<sup>32</sup>.

### *The Embryo in Internal Alchemy*

As mentioned above, Internal Alchemy often represents the alchemical process as the conception, gestation, and birth of an embryo: just like they did with regard to the early meditation practices, here again practitioners invest themselves with the task of «regenerating» themselves<sup>33</sup>. When the compounding of the Internal Elixir is represented in this way, the first stage leads to the conception of the embryo; the second stage consists in its gestation; and the

31. *Taixi jing zhu* (Commentary on the Book of Embryonic Breathing), 1a-b.

32. Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 44-46.

33. See Despeux, «Symbolic Pregnancy and the Sexual Identity of Taoist Adepts».

third stage ends with its delivery. As is common in alchemy, backward and forward processes, or regressive and progressive sequences, occur at the same time: while one goes backward along the stages of cosmogony, the inner embryo grows.

After its delivery, the embryo, which has now become an infant, is called «the person outside one's person» (or «the self outside oneself», *shen zhi wai shen*) and is defined as one's own «true person» (*zhenshen*). It is then «breast-fed» (*buru*) and nourished for nine symbolic years (the time that, according to tradition, Bodhidharma spent in meditation facing a wall after he transmitted Chan Buddhism from India to China). As the practitioner «returns to Emptiness», his immortal self – a perfected replica of his person – learns how to roam throughout spacelessness and timelessness<sup>34</sup>.

While the conception, gestation, and birth of the alchemical embryo have sometimes been described as processes that occur in the ordinary, physical body, Neidan authors emphasize that the embryo is only a «metaphor» (*biyu*). Among them is Wu Shouyang (1574-1644):

The embryo is nothing but Spirit and Breath. It does not mean that there is truly an infant; it does not mean that it is something provided with a form and an image [...] It is like an embryo in the womb: it does not breathe but cannot be without breathing... It is as if an embryo comes to life, therefore one uses the metaphors of «pregnancy», of «moving the embryo», and of «delivery»<sup>35</sup>.

#### *The Elixir and the «True Body»*

Catherine Despeux has been the first Western-language author to write on the concept of the embryo in Neidan in relation to the Buddhist *tathagata-garbha* («sagely womb» or «sagely embryo»),

34. On the embryo as a perfected «replica» of oneself see Despeux, «Symbolic Pregnancy», 167 and 178 (including the picture). One of the sources quoted by Despeux states about the infant: «Its body and appearance are similar to mine».

35. *Tianxian zhengli zhilun* (Straightforward Discourses on the Correct Principles of Celestial Immortality), quoted above from the shortened version found in Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 101. On Wu Shouyang see Van Enckevort, «The Three Treasures: An Enquiry into the Writings of Wu Shouyang».



which is usually described as an image of the latent Buddha-Nature and the innately awakened mind<sup>36</sup>. Yet, Neidan does not use the embryo only as an image of one's true mind. Displaying one of the main examples of the synthesis of different traditions, several Neidan sources define the alchemical embryo as one's «dharma-body» (*fashen*), the true body of Buddhahood, which is free of birth and death. Another Neidan master, Liu Yiming (1734-1815), writes:

By gradually extracting and gradually augmenting, you go from Non-Being to Being, and from the subtle to the manifest. In ten months the embryo is complete: like a fruit that ripens and falls to the ground, you deliver your dharma-body. This is the Great Elixir<sup>37</sup>.

Although the dharma-body is in the first place the unmanifested but perfect body of the Buddha, some Buddhist traditions extend this concept to each individual. Neidan inherits this view, seeing the dharma-body as complementary to «true Nature» (*zhenxing*), also called «celestial mind» (*tianxin*) or «mind of the Dao» (*daoxin*). The celestial mind is the «true mind», and the dharma-body is the «true body». Just like the «true mind» is unmanifested, so is also the «true body». Both the «true» mind and body are devoid of birth and death, but both are obscured by the ordinary mind and body, respectively. Liu Yiming states:

People nowadays speak of the body and the mind, but they only know the illusory body and mind, and do not know the true body and mind [...] The illusory body is the body of flesh; the illusory mind is the human mind. [...] The dharma-body is buried and the illusory body takes charge, the celestial mind retires from its position and the human mind takes power<sup>38</sup>.

The Elixir is both the «true» celestial mind and the dharma-body. Liu Yiming also equates the Elixir with the «true Nature» (*zhenxing*) or, using another Buddhist term, the «fundamental Nature» (*benxing*). In a well-known passage, he says:

36. Despeux, «Symbolic Pregnancy», 151-52.

37. *Xiuzhen houbian* (Further Discriminations on the Cultivation of Reality; Yihua yang ed., 1880, repr. in *Zangwai daoshu*, vol. 8), 14a-b; translated in Liu Yiming, *Cultivating the Tao*, 62. On Liu Yiming see Pregadio, «Discriminations in Cultivating the Tao».

38. Id., 6a; Liu Yiming, *Cultivating the Tao*, 39 and 41.

Golden Elixir is another name for one's fundamental Nature, inchoate and yet accomplished. There is no other Golden Elixir outside one's fundamental Nature. All human beings have this Golden Elixir complete in themselves: it is entirely realized in everybody. It is neither more in a sage, nor less in an ordinary person. It is the seed of the Immortals and the Buddhas, the root of the worthies and the sages<sup>39</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

Nothing better than the passages quoted above could show that for a Daoist adept – whether he goes through the Great Darkness, or performs the «release from the mortal body», or unties the «nodes of death», or generates his own embryo – the center of attention is not the ordinary body, but the «true body». As Catherine Despeux has said in admirably clear words, the physical body of the adept «becomes the double, perhaps even the shadow, of his true inner body», and not vice versa. The physical body «is no more than a field of operations, and the carnal aspect fades in front of the true identity of the «real» (*zhen*) being»<sup>40</sup>.

Let me conclude this essay with a brief summary of a dialogue between another Neidan master, Chen Zhixu (1290-ca.1368), and one of his disciples, which concerns the relation between hagiography and Daoist doctrine<sup>41</sup>. The disciple asks what happens after one achieves the Internal Elixir: «Is this body (*shen*) still subject to death and to passing away?». Chen Zhixu replies: «This is difficult to say». Pressed by his disciple for more details, he adds:

When the common people hear something secret, they understand something coarse. They say that after the divine immortals attain the Dao, they must have a long life by preserving their bodily form, and they indefinitely remain in this world. Those are vulgar discourses. For the Immortals and the Buddhas it is not like that.

39. *Wuzhen zhizhi* (Straightforward Pointers on the *Awakening to Reality*; Yihua yang ed.), 1.4b.

40. Translated from Despeux, «Le corps, champ spatio-temporel, souche d'identité», 112.

41. The dialogue is found in *Jindan dayao* (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir), 14.1a-4a.

Chen Zhixu then describes several types of transcendence, including «ascending to Heaven in broad daylight» and performing «release from the mortal body». Referring to the stories of various immortals, he concludes that they are free to do as they like: some leave the world, some continue to live in it. «Is this something that the ordinary people of the world can ever comprehend?».

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

- bairi shengtian* 白日升天  
*benxing* 本性  
*biyu* 比喻  
*buru* 哺乳  
 Chen Zhixu 陳致虛  
*dantian* 丹田  
*Daode jing* 道德經  
*daoxin* 道心  
 Dijun 帝君  
*dixian* 地仙  
*fan qi baotai* 反其胞胎  
*fantai* 反胎  
*fashen* 法身  
*fu* 符  
*fuming* 復命  
*fuqi* 伏氣  
*fusheng* 復生  
*gaiming* 改名 («changing name»)  
*gaiming* 改命 («changing destiny»)  
*gengming* 更名  
*heqi* 和氣  
*Huangting jing* 黃庭經  
*hun* 魄  
*jianxing* 見性  
*jie* 節 («nodes»)  
*jie* 結 («knots»)  
*jiejie* 解結  
*Jindan dayao* 金丹大要  
*jing* 精  
*jiutian zhi qi* 九天之氣  
*Jiuzhen zhongjing* 九真中經

Laojun 老君  
 Laozi 老子  
*lianjing huaqi* 煉精化氣  
*lianqi huashen* 煉氣化神  
*lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛  
*lianshen* 煉身  
*lianxing* 煉形  
*Lingbao Taixuan yinsheng zhi fu* 靈寶太玄陰生之符  
*Lingbao wufu xu* 靈寶五符序  
 Liu Yiming 劉一明  
*mingmen* 命門  
 Neidan 內丹  
*po* 魄  
*qi* 氣  
*qianqi* 潛氣  
*qinxin* 琴心  
 Quanzhen 全真  
*ru bao zhong zhi zi* 如胞中之子  
*sandie* 三疊  
*sanguan* 三官  
 Sanyuan 三元  
*Shangqing jiudan shanghua taijing zhongji jing* 上清九丹上化胎精中記經  
 Shangqing 上清  
*shen zhi wai shen* 身之外身  
*shen* 神 («spirit»)  
*shen* 身 («person»)  
*shengshen* 生身  
*shenhe* 神和  
*shensi* 深思  
*shi* 尸  
*shijie yao* 尸解藥  
*shijie* 尸解  
 Siming 司命  
*Taiping jing* 太平經  
*taishen* 大神  
*Taixi jing zhu* 胎息經注  
*Taixi jing* 胎息經  
*taixi* 胎息  
*taixian* 胎仙  
 Taiyi 太一  
 Taokang 桃康  
 Tianshi dao 天師道

*Tianxian zhengli zhilun* 天仙正理直論  
*tianxin* 天心  
*tishen* 替身  
*tuosi* 託死  
 Waidan 外丹  
 Wu Shouyang 伍守陽  
 Wulao 五老  
*Wushang biyao* 無上祕要  
*Wuzhen zhizhi* 悟真直指  
*xiangshu* 相術  
*xianren* 仙人  
*xiaxian zhi dao* 下仙之道  
*xing zhi hua* 形之化  
*Xiuzhen houbian* 修真後辨  
 Xu Mi 許謐  
*xuantai* 玄胎  
*yangsheng* 養生  
*yu dao ju* 與道居  
*zhen* 真  
*Zhen'gao* 真誥  
*zhenren* 真人  
*zhenshen* 真身  
*zhenxing* 真性  
*zhongmin*

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## ABSTRACT

FABRIZIO PREGADIO, *Which is the Daoist Immortal Body?*

Daoist hagiographic works depict the so-called «immortals» (*xianren*) as extraordinary human beings endowed with several powers, the most important of which is the ability to reach a life span of indefinite length with their ordinary bodies. When we look at other sources belonging to the traditions that evolved during the history of Daoism, a different picture emerges. These sources show that adepts make use of the physical body in order to generate a new person (*shen*) that is not subject to death.

Among others, early Daoist works (ca. 2nd-6th centuries) describe two main ways to attain immortality. The first is by going through a «simulated death» followed by the refining of the physical body, which then serves as a support for adepts to continue their practices. The second way consists in generating an inner «embryo» that is unaffected by death, and is the seed of one's rebirth as an immortal.

Internal Alchemy (Neidan), which developed from ca. 700, inherited elements of both practices. The refining of the basic components of one's own person results in the generation, gestation, and delivery of an embryo. In certain traditions, the embryo is seen as one's «dharma-body» (*fashen*), the unmanifested body of Buddhahood, which is free of birth and death. Despite the differences of perspective, here again the ordinary body is seen a support used to generate the immortal body.

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