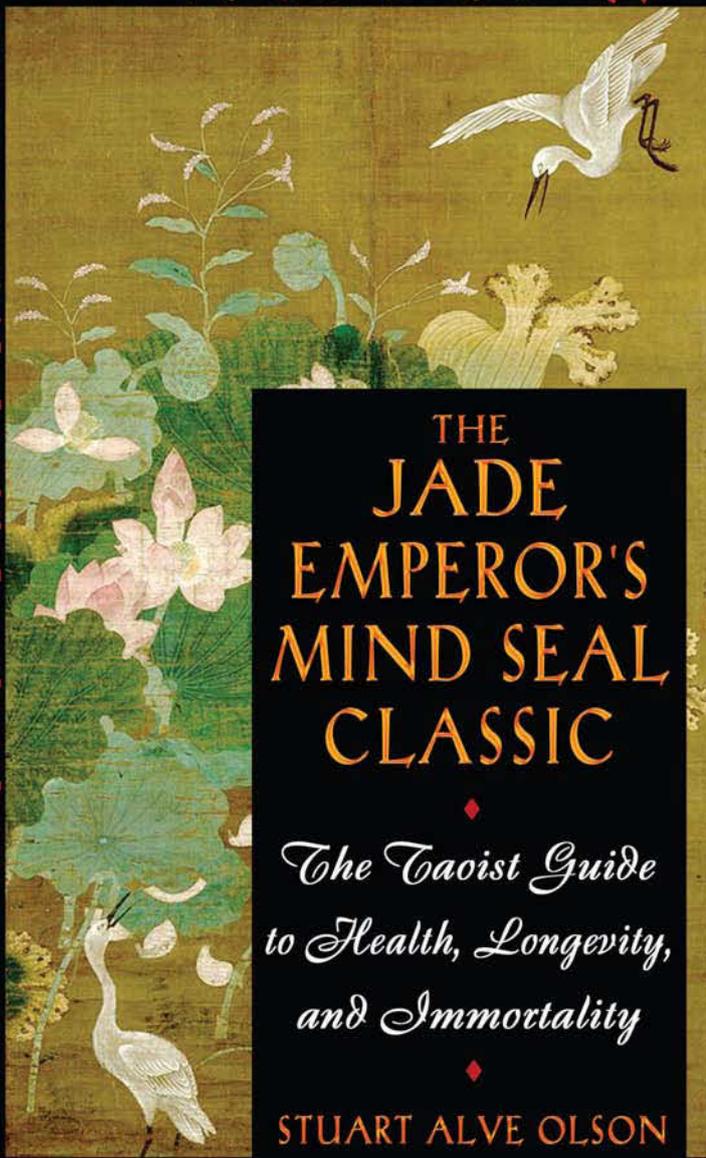


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*The Taoist Guide
to Health, Longevity,
and Immortality*



STUART ALVE OLSON



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*To the memory of a true immortal,
Master T. T. Liang
(January 23, 1900, to August 17, 2002)*



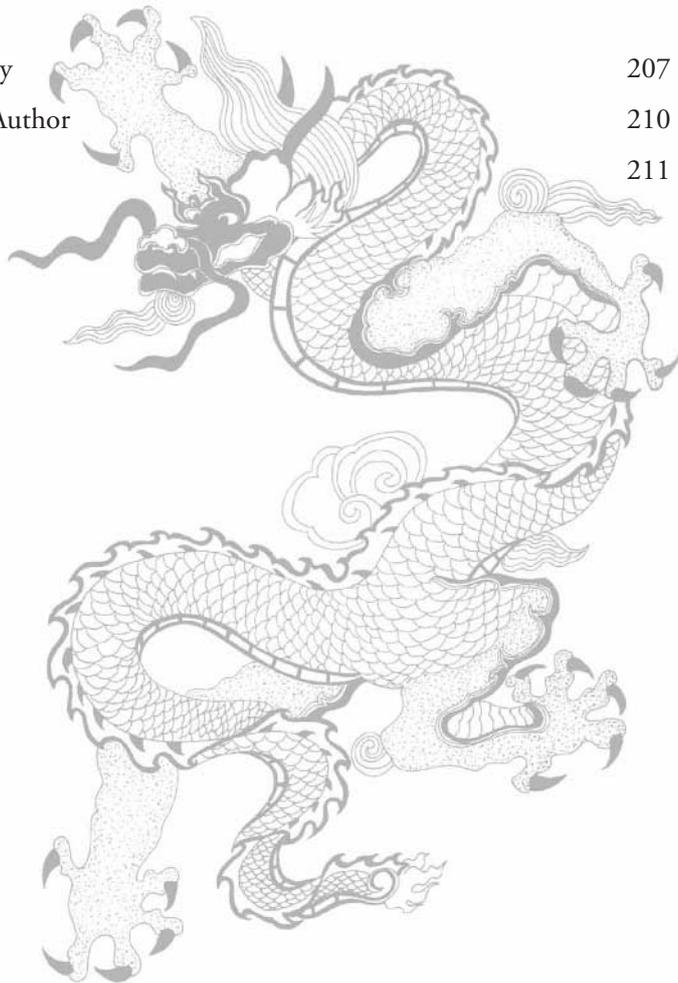


The Jade Emperor seated in his court

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FOREWORD

In my travels as a Taoist priest I'm often asked if there is a book on Taoist cultivation and immortality that I can recommend, but in all honesty, there have been very few that I feel reflect the teachings I have received in China. In recent years scholars have produced high-quality translations of Taoist texts that have enhanced our understanding of traditional Taoism. However, Taoist cultivation requires personal guidance, and without this personalized attention the very style and nature of cultivation texts limits their accessibility. In spite of this, there is no doubt that books play an important role, and the right book at the right time can open doors and be a great inspiration to the sincere seeker.

In addition, more books are appearing that offer instruction in Taoist-related practices. They are often a random collection of physical qigong exercises, visualizations, and sexual gymnastics. Some of these methods may indeed improve the quality of life, leading to health and relative longevity, but these books generally have little to say on immortality. Many Western Taoists seem to be uncomfortable with the term *immortality* and are attempting to create a type of Taoism that fails to acknowledge its importance, but in Chinese Taoism this concept goes back thousands of years to the very roots of the tradition itself.

Lao-tzu is known in the West for his teachings in the *Tao Te Ching*, but in Chinese tradition he takes on greater significance as an embodiment of the Tao and immortality. This is demonstrated in the ceremony of bowing three times to Lao-tzu before a Taoist altar. The three bows are known as Tao, Ching, and Shi. The first acknowledges the Tao and immortality. The second acknowledges the Ching, the classic texts that are a vehicle for the immortals' teachings. The third acknowledges your *shifu* (teacher), who

introduces the view of immortality. In this view our true nature is an expression of the Tao. Like clouds in the sky, we appear but have no existence separate from the original source. In the cultivation of meditative stillness we reveal and express our true nature in a simple and natural way.

I am very pleased to be writing the foreword for this book, which is a rich exploration of the Taoist concept of immortality. Stuart is a Taoist adept who writes as a friend with an honesty and enthusiasm for Taoism that is contagious. He expresses the flavor of Chinese Taoism with ease and simplicity, so everyone can identify with the concepts of personal cultivation that he conveys. I know of no other contemporary translator and author who presents his writings in quite this way. This book is definitely one to have in your backpack when you go cloud wandering!

—TAOIST PRIEST SHIJING
CHAIRMAN OF THE BRITISH TAOIST ASSOCIATION,
COFOUNDER OF THE AMERICAN TAOIST ASSOCIATION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much appreciation goes to the late Master Tung Tsai [T. T.] Liang for first giving me his copies of *The Jade Emperor's Immortality Classic* and the *Pao P'u Tzu* and for helping me with some of the more difficult concepts expressed in these works. But mostly I wish to thank him for his years of instruction, guidance, and friendship, which made life itself more enjoyable. He was truly, as Ko Hung describes in the *Pao P'u Tzu*, a corpse-freed immortal.

Without question I must also thank my teacher, the late Ch'an Master Hsuan Hua, and all the monks and nuns at the City of Ten-Thousand Buddhas. They changed the course of my life, and by pure example revealed to me the meaning of self-cultivation. To all of them I bow with the deepest respect.

So many thanks to Patrick D. Gross for his valuable help and suggestions with editing.

To Professor Wu Yi, who first taught me about Lao-tzu's philosophy during my residency at the City of Ten-Thousand Buddhas, my deepest gratitude for all his patient tutoring.

To the most wonderful Taoist priests, Shijing and Shidao, of the British Taoist Association, for all their kind support of my work and their generous help in providing several pieces of artwork, as well as for Shijing's writing of the foreword to this work.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the indispensable help given so generously during the many phases of this book over the years by Jay and Page Cowles, Joanne Von Blon, Harry Cunliffe, Richard Peterson, Loa Lian Hwa, Lara Puffer, Karen Morodomi, and possibly the Jade Emperor himself.

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❧ PREFACE ❧

The subject of immortals and immortality has preoccupied my thoughts throughout my life. When very young I felt immortal, like most of us do. As a teenager I couldn't fathom the idea of being even thirty years old, thinking that was certainly the limit of how old I wanted to be. Seeing my parents and grandparents at their ripe old ages of forty and beyond, it never registered in my naive mind that I too might someday be that old. When I finally made it to thirty, my mind still felt young, even though I could feel differences in my physical capabilities. Everything was changing, and thoughts of becoming old crept slowly into my mind, as did the anxieties of maintaining health. I felt as though life, aging, and death were but a cruel joke. Having long read books on Chinese, Tibetan, and Indian spiritual philosophies and practices, the word *immortality* frequently passed before my eyes. Yet the actual decision to search diligently for immortality evaded me, as the separate goals of maintaining health and attaining enlightenment preoccupied my thinking.

But all this changed when I met Master T. T. Liang—he at age eighty-two and I at thirty-two. He was a master of t'ai chi and I was a wannabe Buddhist cultivator. Much to my surprise, it was his martial-art abilities that had such a profound effect on me. I knew of no one even in his sixties who could be as physically playful as Liang. Constantly humiliating my seemingly younger and stronger physical condition, he would throw me around like a rag doll. It took me quite a while to actually put in perspective a man of eighty-plus years who was quicker, more agile, and more focused than I. Many times I asked myself, What is wrong with this picture? My own father, at age seventy, was sick with cancer and had long been physically weakened by his age. Needless to say, Liang changed my entire perspective on aging. Little did I know he would change my perspective on immortality as well.

As I will discuss later in the book, the term *immortality* has various meanings, ranging from a state of consciousness at death that allows the spirit and mind to live on to actual physical immortality, where both the body and mind live on. But no matter the meaning, the idea of immortality in its various forms has preoccupied history more so than it ever did my young mind.

Liang introduced me to many Taoist writings, like the *Pao P'u Tzu* and *The Jade Emperor's Immortality Classic*—texts that were written specifically for the purpose of helping seekers and adepts attain immortality. For nearly thirty years I have studied and practiced certain aspects of Taoism and have found all of them very useful and beneficial. This book, then, is in many ways a record of my personal search on the subject of immortality and immortals. My spiritual interest and inclinations have long been slanted toward Chinese philosophy, especially Taoism, and the Chinese, more than any other culture in history, have been obsessed with the notion of immortality since their history began more than five thousand years ago.

Am I an immortal? No. Do I believe in immortality? Yes. But my views on this subject have changed drastically over the years. I find it exciting and encouraging to believe in immortality and immortals while simultaneously thinking that to live long is not necessarily a vehicle for happiness. If I had to put my feelings into one expression, it would be the old Chinese adage “Live long with youthfulness.” As long as one feels young, useful, and healthy, age is unimportant. Likewise, the search for physical immortality can be meaningful only if done with the purpose of bettering all of humanity. Who would want to spend endless years living in solitude within some remote mountain region with no friends or enjoyment of what life has to offer? Life is precious, and obviously this is what is at the heart of searching for immortality: to preserve life. But I am not an immortal and thus cannot honestly say what immortals enjoy or how they occupy their time. In the end I am but a frog in a well looking up at only a small fraction of the sky.

With this said, my search for the Elixir of Immortality continues. How could one stop searching for such a wonderful alternative to death? I think

of present-day immortals like Li Ching Yun (died in 1936), who lived two hundred and fifty-some years, or people in the former Soviet republic of Georgia during the early 1900s who reportedly lived an average of 175 years. There are numerous other examples in almost every present-day culture. So why not I, or why not you? Nature is full of living things that live for well over a hundred years, and what is the secret to that longevity? Less than a hundred years ago the average age of a human was only forty-two; presently it is eighty. We have doubled our life span. Can it be doubled again?

There are many questions regarding immortality, the most prominent being: Is it possible? And if so, how? Modern-day medical science, knowingly or unknowingly, has been searching for immortality as well, discovering and inventing countless means of prolonging our lives. But like so many discoveries we think are new, they are but rediscoveries. “There is nothing new under the sun” is a saying that applies even to the subject of immortality. This book explores Chinese Taoism’s answers to our questions about immortality.

The nucleus of this book is the text of *The Jade Emperor’s Mind Seal Classic*. *The Jade Emperor’s Mind Seal Classic* goes to the heart of how a person can achieve ultimate health, longevity, and immortality, providing a very focused perspective on the usefulness of the Three Treasures that are needed for anyone wishing to achieve these goals. Moreover, the text of the mind seal classic is itself a centerpiece of Taoist practice, and I wish to give it as much importance as would any sincere practicing Taoist monk or nun. This is by no means a statement that the other texts included in this book—“The Immortals” from the *Pao P’u Tzu* and “The Three Treasures of Immortality” from the *Hsien Tao Ching Tso Ching*—are not as valuable or informative. The supporting texts are illuminated in their significance when placed alongside *The Jade Emperor’s Mind Seal Classic*.

The three translations and related commentary in this book are organized to assist the reader in developing a progressive theoretical understanding of the concepts outlined in the mind seal classic. At the outset, I present from Ko Hung’s *Pao P’u Tzu*, which argues and defends both the possibility of and reasons for belief in immortals and immortality. From

here I take the reader to *The Jade Emperor's Mind Seal Classic*, which outlines the “how-to” of immortality. Last, I provide a translation of “The Three Treasures of Immortality” and elaborate on the deeper and practical meanings of *ching*, *qi*, and *shen*.

This book is aimed purely at the layperson interested in Taoism, and each section directs itself to a particular view of self-applied practice and philosophy. The translations are written in a manner that is very accessible to the modern reader. Even though the sections overlap and interconnect, they provide a clear overview of Taoist thought. The information within this book has been presented to be both practical and informative, and will aid readers interested in Taoism and general philosophy in better understanding other prominent texts, such as the *Secret of the Golden Flower* and *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality*.

This book as a whole has been a work in progress for many years. The text from *The Jade Emperor's Mind Seal Classic* and that of “The Three Treasures of Immortality” are the first translations of these texts ever to appear in English. The chapter on immortals by Ko Hung from his work the *Pao P'u Tzu* is only the second English translation of which I am aware. James R. Ware, in his book *Alchemy, Medicine & Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung* (Dover Publications, 1966), provides the only full translation of Ko Hung's entire work. His work was pioneering, to say the least, and I respect it greatly. Yet his Christian and European influences permeate the book in many ways and distract from what the spirit of this great treatise has to offer. My translation of the chapter on immortals, therefore, was done intentionally from the standpoint of Taoism. I hope I have succeeded in providing more of the Taoist spirit contained within the original text.

The first translation that I did for this book, in 1984, was *The Jade Emperor's Mind Seal Classic*. The text appeared so cryptic—and in some cases, naive—that I simply dismissed it by tucking it away in my files. However, over the years I found myself frequently going back and referring to this text, as well as finding many references to the importance of this text in regard to almost every sect of Taoism. Then, in 1992, I published the first edition of

this book, which contained just *The Jade Emperor Mind Seal Classic* and “The Three Treasures of Immortality” sections. Now, with the addition of Ko Hung’s chapter on “The Immortals,” I feel this book is finally complete.

I hope this work will play a small part in the formation of Americanized Taoism. It would be erroneous to propagate the idea that Westerners should just imitate the ancient Taoists of China. We need to find our own Taoism so that it may blend and adapt into our culture and times. There must equally be an embracing of the past, though this “reaching back” must be accompanied by simultaneous movement toward the future.

Throughout China’s history, the indigenous philosophy of Taoism has undergone a vast array of changes and developments. Discussed in more detail in chapter 1, the history of Taoism extends from the time of the legendary period of Fu Hsi (2800 B.C.)—inventor of the Eight Diagrams—to today’s popular Dragon Gate sects. Taoism has a nearly five-thousand-year history, during which time it was influenced by individuals, social movements, and cultural changes. Each successive generation interacted with, built upon, and, at times, branched off from the philosophical developments that preceded it.

Taoism received influences from Buddhism and Confucianism as well. A pantheon of countless immortals, earthly and heavenly, deities, and spirits abounds. The array of traditions, schools of thoughts, sects of teaching stretches one’s imagination. One of the basic tenets of Taoism has always been adapting to change, which was first formulated by Fu Hsi himself. Taoism in America will adapt to change as well. American Taoism will acquire its own history, just as it did in China and throughout the rest of Asia.

If we look at the lifestyles associated with the Taoist adepts and adherents of the past, we find a variety as diverse as the different beliefs, teachings, and sects created throughout China’s history. There were those who took to wandering aimlessly about remote mountains; those who went into solitary hermitage in the high mountains; those who cloistered with others in hermitage retreats; those who entered monasteries (public and non-public); those who belonged to religious temples and organizations; those who lived

with their families and “blended in” quietly with society; those who sold their skills of talismans, magic, fortune-telling, music, art, or crafts on the streets of cities and villages; and those who chose never to reveal the fact that they were Taoists and simply lived in whatever environment they were in, taking no pains to forge a Taoist pretense.

All occupations can be conducive to the Taoist—beyond the ascetic-reclusive-hermit-contemplator—be it a painter, musician, artist, writer, businessman, gardener, and so on. Taoist ideals can be applied anywhere. How a person decides to apply the teachings, and which type and where, is really a moot point. The teachings of Lao-tzu, the heart of all Taoist thought, can and should be applied to all walks of life, situations, and cultures.

I do not agree with the opinions of writers who claim Taoism is dead. It is true that the Ch’ing dynasty has all but been annihilated by the Red Tide. But the ideas and heart of Taoism still thrive. The fact that the majority of us live in concrete and brick environments does not deter any of us from realizing our inner essence, from entering the Tao.

Chuang-tzu himself goes to great lengths in his writings to admire men who excel in their crafts and occupations with what he calls “spontaneous ease and natural efficiency.” Living in caves, hermitages, and high mountain retreats was never the mainstay of Taoist life or philosophy. The Tao exists in all things—be it a remote cave in the mountains or a cramped cubicle in a skyscraper above a crowded city. The mainstay was, in fact, living in accordance with *wei wu wei* (active non-contention) and achieving inner tranquillity. This results in “returning to the Source” (to become one with the Tao), which is like a droplet of water entering the ocean—it does not merely disappear and become undistinguishable and insignificant; it becomes the ocean, taking on all the strengths and vastness of the ocean. Achieving Tao is not a negative dynamic, but rather a positive one.

Admittedly, the romantic notion of living peacefully in a hermitage in the mountains, abiding by the “naturally just so,” is appealing to just about every human being. However, Lao-tzu clearly states, “[T]he truth does not lie beyond your own front door.” We need not look to how sages of the past in China lived in order for us to attain our own Way of coursing in the sublime Tao.

It is a fool who believes that environment brings inner peace and wisdom, as the wise man knows that both lie only in himself. We need not, if we choose, don the blue T'ang dynasty robes of a Taoist monk, or wear our hair in a topknot, or wander into the green plush of yonder mountains in order to seek the Tao. It is right under our nose.

However, Taoism (like Buddhism) will adapt to our culture and manner of society. There will be purists and reformers as in China. There will be debates and arguments as in China. There will be charlatans and true men as in China. And there will be separatists and followers as in China. And while all of this is forming, Taoist ideas will continue to flow like water, filling the low, empty places of our society and beliefs.

Taoism, in its essence, is not bound by a culture. It may have been formed in the Middle Kingdom, but it will grow far from the ground that Lao-tzu trod. The great need of humankind to enter mystical union with its true, original self will always be a task that certain factions of every culture will pursue. And the idea of Tao, despite differences of semantics, has been sought within every culture. But I do believe the Chinese did it best.

The very seed of Tao, the fruition of Tao, the experience of Tao, can never be lost. The words of many of these ancient Taoist adepts may have been burned, or may have been hidden, but those are just words. Lao-tzu himself warns us immediately in the *Tao Te Ching* about words, as the first verse runs: "The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name."

Some Chinese have gone so far as to think that Westerners cannot comprehend or apply the teachings of Taoism. This is absurd—as absurd as when Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism, was told that he could not achieve enlightenment because he was a southerner, a barbarian in those times. Hui Neng responded that whether a man was a southerner or a northerner, the original Mind, the Buddha nature, was one and the same with all men. Hui Neng went on to become the single most influential Buddhist in Chinese history.

We must also come to terms with another problem that emerges when one is employing doctrines, ways, and practices of another culture: Not all Chinese

have knowledge of either the foundations or the inner workings of Taoism. Too many Westerners have been preyed upon and lulled into studying with teachers whose singular merit appears to be that they are Chinese. Once, while staying in a place north of Beijing, I befriended a Chinese man who was truly a delight and whose company I sincerely enjoyed. He was a very gracious host, and, because he was the hotel manager at the place where I was staying, I received treatment none of the Chinese or Russian guests received—he really loved talking about things American. One day we were sitting in the hotel garden discussing the history of nearby temples when he interrupted and asked, with some embarrassment, if it was possible for him to go to America and teach kung fu. I asked, “Do you know kung fu?” He said he did not, but could learn. I chuckled and said it would not be a good idea. He then inquired, “Okay, how about I do Chinese cooking?” Again I asked if he knew how. His reply was, “No, I don’t, but I can learn. Besides, how can Americans tell good kung fu from bad kung fu, good Chinese cooking from bad Chinese cooking? I am Chinese, so they will believe it is good.” I responded, “Indeed most Americans cannot distinguish these things, but nonetheless bad kung fu and bad cooking should not be the means for your making a living.” He laughed and agreed, and made one last query, “How about I just get married to an American girl? I already know I will be a bad husband, but I know I can be a great lover, and that’s what American women want, right?”

As Ko Hung in his work *Pao P'u Tzu* states, “[M]ore care should be given to the selection of a teacher, than [to] the method he teaches.” It would be similar to people thinking that I am a great skier just because I and all my ancestors are pure Norwegian. As we say in American slang, just because one can “talk the talk” does not mean one can “walk the walk.” I could not teach anyone to ski (actually I dislike it and am very poor at it), nor can I tell the Norwegian folklore of Thor, nor recount the numerous tales of dragons that inhabit the fjords and mountains there. I do not say all this to denigrate Chinese teachers of Taoism—most certainly not! All my teachers have been Chinese. Yet I have met many who, for lack of a better term, were just “talking the talk.” All in all, I have met and known many good, reputable Chinese teachers, and “round-eyed” ones as well, and have also met impostors from

both shores. As Taoism integrates into the West and more and more lineages fall into the hands of Westerners, Ko Hung's advice will become ever more important. Choose well!

In the West, the stage for Taoism's entry was first set by the lifestyles and beliefs of the Native Americans (the West's original Taoists). Not unlike Mao and his band of thugs, who sought to annihilate Taoism in China, the so-called Christian White Man tried viciously to eradicate the American Indian way of life. Nonetheless, Taoist-like philosophies appear in various pockets of postcolonial American thought. Henry David Thoreau made a great contribution by writing *Walden*, and anybody who reads this American classic will surely see his Taoist tendencies and thoughts. Unknowingly, the beatnik, hippie, naturalist, and Zen generations opened the gate for Taoism to enter mainstream culture in the West. In the way that Taoism always does, it glides through this open gate, entering slowly, quietly, and almost without notice.

The free thinking associated with Taoist thought is appealing to many Westerners. This free thinking quality, however, is an aspect of Taoism that communist China has worked hard to destroy. Presented as a "societal cure," the cultural revolution may have been the type of medicine that, when applied excessively, transforms into a toxin. The result appears to be a contemporary China that has disassociated with much of its Taoist past. The policies of the new regime in China have created at least two generations that received no spiritual training and are without question being indoctrinated against free thinking. Who knows how many more generations will be affected in that country?

Like it or not, the West is the refuge of Taoist (and for that matter Buddhist) thought, philosophy, religion, and practice. The Chinese may not always like how we Westerners shape or interpret Taoism on our shores—just as we may not approve of their interpretation and adaptation of Western ideas and politics on their shores.

Both my Buddhist and t'ai chi teachers commented on how they preferred teaching Americans rather than Chinese. They shared an opinion that Chinese students, generally speaking, carried too much baggage from their culture, and an arrogance about being Chinese, and therefore believed they understood

everything being taught to them. Americans, the teachers, said, came to them clean and, as the Christian term implies, with “childlike faith.” But as Americans, our downfall is twofold: our propensity to be too analytical and our rationalism. Too many years of psychoanalysis and Freudian thought has caused us to categorize everything in terms of fact and myth, not realizing, as the Chinese did, that they are one and the same. If we are to understand and practice the teachings of Tao, these two failings must be remedied.

The future sages, immortals, mystics, and adepts of Taoism will be, for the most part, other than Chinese. We may not even call that which emerges “Taoism.” We may discard much or embrace even more than was intended. Without question, it will permeate Judeo-Christian thinking, as has already begun. We now see large portions of our society showing appreciation for Chinese culture (especially of the pre-Mao period): Chinese art (most of which was influenced by Taoism), meditation, t'ai chi, qigong, herbalism, acupuncture, astrology, and poetry and literature.

We “round-eyed” Westerners, who write, teach, practice, and study things Taoist, have a grave responsibility to learn from, but not live in, the past; and to apply that learning to, and live in, the present. If Taoism teaches anything, it is to live in the here and now. Without this, Taoism is doomed to exist as a hungry ghost, a shadow of how it once was, wandering about aimlessly, undernourished, and never finding root. Better to rebuild and restore its essence within a new land, with new ideas and perspectives, and new adherents of the Way, be they of Asian descent or Western. This is a great opportunity for both cultures.

Will Taoism ever restore itself within China? This is a most difficult question. I know of no one who can answer it with any certainty. My only response would be drawn from an experience I had in Indonesia. On a certain occasion I was teaching a large group of Chinese people t'ai chi—something that, as a “round-eye,” caused me a bit of embarrassment. After I had been teaching every morning for two months, an elderly Chinese woman came up to me and said, “I now know the world is really round.” Grinning with puzzlement, I asked her what she meant by that. She explained in a very delightful and amusing manner, “We are all Chinese, and t'ai chi is Chinese,

yet a ‘round-eyed red-haired devil’ comes all the way around the earth to teach us t’ai chi. This is really marvelous that you learned so well, and would generously come and give it back to us. It is truly an honor for me to call you *sifu* (master).”

With all that has been said, it is my heartfelt hope and desire that Taoism will flourish in the West, with the participation of both cultures. Taoism needs a home, and our culture needs the simplicity and tranquillity that Taoism has to offer. Our world is becoming ever more complicated, obstructive, and confusing. The notion of following the way of life that Lao-tzu exemplified in his *Three Treasures*—frugality, compassion, and humility—would certainly benefit not only a person, but a nation and the world as well.

In conclusion, I hope this book provides something of use to the reader. This work is due mostly to my good fortune of having studied and met with teachers who justly deserve the title of “immortal.” At best, I serve as a tiny mirror reflecting just a bit of their vast light of wisdom. My commentaries throughout this book are derived from my own practice and study of Taoism, and I make no claim to being an authority on this subject. Those who make such claims only contradict the essence of Taoism anyway. Hopefully my insights from nearly thirty years of research, practice, and study will in some way make clear the reasons for embarking on the Way and for searching for the ultimate goal of Returning to the Source.

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