

The Search of Earthly Immortality

The mainspring of Taoism is non-acting (wu-wei). What usually acts in us is the empirical self. By bringing this to a standstill through meditation we enable the overself to find its expression. Non-acting is « waiting » for the spirit to stir when selfish human motion has ceased. In this higher stage of contemplation, « the last strip of worldly territory and the first dawning of Tao », looked at as the « peak of meditation », « the body is like a piece of dead wood, the heart like burnt-out embers, with no emotions nor intentions left ». There the light of Tao begins to glow.

Letting the presence of Tao dawn upon us means being pervaded with wisdom in its original form — but actually nothing new is created, as wisdom ever lives in Man's secret essence, even if involved in his lower ego, dimmed and tangled up by his tendencies and emotions. A state of quiet, of inner transparency must set in if essential Power is to reveal itself.

Inexcitability and contentedness, the love of nature and of all beings, a wisdom neither rejecting sense-impressions nor letting them get the upper hand, an even temper in any situation, whether peaceful or stormy, and often the stoic endurance of pain as well as the cool facing of death: all these inborn features of the Far-Eastern peoples can only be explained through a secret and vital religiousness resting, as a whole, on the all-pervading tradition of Tao even if it has nearly disappeared as an ascetic path.

« With a retinue of a thousand people Chao-hsiang-tsu was hunting on the Chung-shan mountains. In order to rouse the game he set fire to that wild area, and the blaze could be seen twelve miles away. Suddenly in the midst of that enormous pyre a man was seen coming out of a rock, wallowing in the flames and getting away in a pall of smoke. Those who witnessed this were convinced he was a supernatural being. They were therefore greatly surprised when they saw him come towards them as if nothing had happened. Chao hsiang-tzu had a closer look at him and saw that he was a man of flesh and blood as anybody else. He then started talking to him and asked him what his secret was which allowed him to walk into the rocks and to stand unruffled in the midst of a fire.

— What is a rock? What is a fire? Was the answer.

— Why... what you were getting out of a few minutes ago was a rock and what you walked through was a fire!

— Ah! said the man, I hadn't the slightest idea...

Fully attuned with the forces of nature and unspoiled by intellectual quibbling, that man neither found resistance in rock nor was burned by fire. This episode, told by Lieh-tzu, is apt to show a Westerner the « subtle » aspect of Chinese soul, the individual's faculty to draw inexhaustible forces from a mysterious being-in-tune with the very source of organic vitality. The follower of Tao will find in nature's purity a fostering affinity, awakening vibrations of the original harmony within him. In it he can rest utterly free from any inner restraint, drawing for action on that treasure of absolute spontaneity and natural creative force.

Any Chinese, and any Japanese for that matter, bears in his national kernel the imprint of a Taoistic kind of wisdom. One could even say that every individual in a greater or lesser degree carries in his blood the memory of the Tao, the unconscious virtue of detachment and of the « void ». It is one of the inner features of the race. Whenever the conversation turns upon the mystery or the puzzle of the far-eastern soul an element is always meant which cannot be grasped by any standard of western thinking, but on which the knowledge of the Tao doctrine can shed light.

It is a century-old doctrine which cannot exactly be termed « ever-green » in the light of the recent developments in Eastern Asia. It survives however, as an attitude of the soul of those peoples, and is, rather than a mere doctrine, a way of life leading beyond any doctrine, beyond rationality, beyond anything hindering the flow of Infinite into the human soul.

One of the conquests of the old Tao ascetic was the unmasking of « death's snare » or the « deliverance from the body » through the secret force of Shi-chiai. For the ascetic death is a fallacy. The only reality is that the soul and the Infinite are one. This identity cannot be hindered by the physical body, which disappears as a contradiction at a certain moment, so that death is neither an end nor a dissolution, but an appearance concealing the secret of real life. When the being finds itself again, that contradiction has been solved. This may be a key to that wonderful magical experience termed « the body's resolution » or « the freeing of the corpse » — a state of apparent death, according to the *Yün-chi ch'i-ch'ien*.

For the ascetic who had realized Tao, death was a make-believe. If his tomb was opened after his death, a sword was found in it, the earthly symbol of a spiritual power.

« Wang-tzu Chao's tomb is in Ching-ling. In the age of the Fighting Kingdoms somebody re-opened it and instead of his body found a Sword. Somebody grasped at it to have a closer look and the sword suddenly flew up into the air and vanished from sight ».

« Tung shun-chi had been born at Hui-nan. In his youth he practised the Breath (breathing exercises coupled with meditation) and refined his own form. At the age of a hundred he had not grown old. One day he was unjustly charged and thrown into jail, where he passed away. When they opened the door of the cell to bury his body they could not find it. He had re-absorbed it into his spirit and, made immortal, vanished ».

« When Li Chao-chün was on the point of death, Emperor Wu dreamed he was climbing Mount Sung with him. A messenger riding a dragon and bearing the ensign of his dignity alighted from a cloud, crossed their path half way up and said: « T'ai-yi, the Great One, begs

Chao-ch'ün to come ». The Emperor woke up and said to those around him: « From the dream I had I know that Chao-ch'ün is going to leave me soon ». A few days later Chao-ch'ün said he was ill and died. Time went by and the Emperor had his tomb opened: his body could not be found. There remained nothing but his clothes and his cap ».

The *Pao-pu tsu* tells us different tales, all dealing with the ever-recurring theme of « the body's resolution ». We shall see how other traditions chime in with this in places or even match it absolutely sometimes: it will be enough to mention the disappearance of Bodhi-dharma's body after his death.

The quest of eternity in original Taoism entails the quest of a life independent of birth and death. This path is known as *ch'ang-cheng*, the « endless way » along which every enlightenment is a step towards the ultimate transformation of the body. It is not a release of Spirit from matter as western religiosity can conceive, making Immortality follow Death as a consequence of the soul's deliverance from the body — a goal towards which the body is an encumbrance — but a change restoring the bodily being to its essential original state. The Solution of the Corpse is not a restoration of physical existence with the limits it entails either, but a thorough spiritualization of that bodily state which bears corpse-like features even during life, as the isolated, finite, perishable human body bears witness to its unreality by its very being cut off from its first source. Those initiates therefore did not strive to achieve the release offered by natural death, with its fateful power to sever what lives forth from what is subject to decay, but to get rid of death itself, which is the last stage of bodily decay. This can remind us already of the « spiritual rising from the dead » of hermetic tradition, achieved in initiatory death. « Man's soul, Plutarch says, experiences at the moment of death the same passion as those who are initiated to the Great Mysteries. Logos corresponds to logos, the deed to the deed. To die we call *τελευτᾶν* and to be initiated *τελειοῦσθαι* ».

In the Han age the adept's task consisted in developing the inner embryo within himself as the germ of immortality. That embryo would spring into life, gradually permeate the subtle body and go so far as to act and appear in the realm of the plastic, vital forces. Man is described by the Taoists as being composed of head, chest, belly and limbs (the cerebro-sensorial system), the organs of breathing and blood circulation (the rhythmical system), and the system of metabolism. These are called the « cinnabar fields », *tan-t'ien*, as cinnabar was thought to be the food of immortality. The transforming force initiation drew on was expected to operate in those three fields, in which we can recognize the seats of thinking, feeling and volition. Meditation and contemplation are apt to lay in them the ground for that transformation, proceeding from the subtle to the coarser elements. The last stage of transformation reaches its limit in the skeleton. The bones represent the earthliest part of one's bodily frame, set against the influence of spirit from the depths of the physical organization. In the human organism, terrestrial forces polarize in the bones, in opposition to the heavenly influence at work through the soul. The bones entail the experience of bodily death, even if they bear the mark of spirit in their shape, the skeleton, which in fact symbolizes death.

The « solution » or disappearance of the corpse is the mark of the final mutation of the bodily frame down to the bones, and therefore of the ultimate achievement of deathlessness. It ought to be stressed

here that no mere immortalization of the physical body is meant, but rather a leading back from the category of matter to that of spirit, coupled with the experience of death. In other words, to pave the way to the Corpse Solution, the body must actually become a corpse first and set itself a limit which was in fact present in life itself. The adept must cross the threshold into the realm of death in order to acquire there the final form of the work prepared in earthly experience. This change can clearly not be accomplished before that limit is revealed in its objectivity. In Western alchemic initiation, likewise, the stage of the « resurrection from the dead » is only possible after death and burial. Some sentences connected with the final stages of initiation in Gnosticism and the Mysteries of Isis will be enough to show the links: the Egyptian Ka, « the source of the changeless corporeal frame », and the expression: « the breathing of bones » from the Jewish Kabbalah, referring to the soul when released from the bodily fetters.

The inner quickening and burgeoning of the original embryo, subtle and innerly aglow, paving the way to the deathless body, so as to make the final act of death equal to eternal life, recalls the alchemic operations meant to prepare the « garment of glory » or the « immortal body » of hermetic initiation. This gets different names in the several traditions, as « *nirmāṇakaya* » or « the body shaped through projection — or transformation » of Mahāyāna Buddhism, or the *siddha-deha* of Haṭhayoga. On the other hand the breathing of the embryo mentioned in the Tai-hsi-ching, by etherifying the body through the flow of Chi, the plastic etheric force, recalls the Indian and Tibetan breathing practices, the prāṇāyāma and the steps leading to the birth of the « diamond body » of Vajrayāna and the several expressions technically recognizable in Hesychasm, called by some « Christian Yoga », at a time when Chinese esoteric alchemy had started dealing again with the body's transformation, as is borne out by Tung P'o's *Treatise on the Dragon and the Tiger*.

But the subject of Shi-chiai can be clearly traced in older Taoism already. According to the subtle terminology of that school, the form (hsing) impressed on the body is imparted by the shaping etheric forces to a physical substance which is condensed ether itself. There is therefore such a thing as an « etheric body », an executive of the aims of spirit on the physical plane, similar to Hindu tradition's « *lingaśarīra* ». When the adept identifies his own centre with the *Kung-shên* spirit, called otherwise « space spirit », « spirit of the valley » and by Lao-tsu *Ku-shên* or « spirit of the abyss », the foundations of deathlessness are laid and the embryo starts its transforming breathing which will lead the bodily frame back to the spirit through the etheric body.

An interesting detail is that the breathing of the embryo works according to the fullness of the original spirit in new-born babies, as the Spirit's creative power can act to its full extent in these innocent beings, still undefiled by the evils of craving and the distortions of intellect. Which reminds us of the Redeemer's words in St. Luke's Gospel about children: « Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein ». In the original commentary to the *Tai-hsi-ching* the same teaching sounds as follows: « He who succeeds in keeping his etheric fluid and his spirit as spotless as in a child, the pure active principle (yang) vivifying all his being, will convert his old age into youth and conquer eternity ». In both images we can find a hint at revival through initiation, implying the extinction of the usual personality woven on the loom of cosmic

delusion and attached to it by craving and the ties of the mind.

In his work *The Holy Grail* J. Loverlayn thinks that the Shi-chiai has the power to revive in man the centre of the primordial heavenly force slumbering in the middle of his forehead, and accordingly connects Taoist symbology with the one of the Grail. In the western myth the Grail chalice is said to have been carved by the Angels in an emerald which fell from Lucifer's head on his fall. In the Indian tradition *urnā* is the name of the forehead gem, Shiva's third eye, embodying the « sense of the eternal ». The awakening of the forehead centre, yoga's *ājñācakra*, corresponds to the recovery of the Holy Grail, but also to the reconquest of the « primordial state », the original heavenly condition whose loss meant to man the beginning of the chain of re-births (*samsāra*), of the experience of the finite and illusory world (*Māyā*), thus giving rise to the precariousness of an existence limited to the perceptible and the vital, which can only end in death.

The path of Initiation returns to man his original dignity both in eastern and western traditions. It re-awakens the sense of eternity in him. As this was lost, birth, finite existence and death had become necessary and interdependent. The quest of the Grail, as well as Rājayoga and the quest of Tao in the East, enables the pupil of Initiation to reconquer the sphere of Deathlessness.

The Shi-chiai, as the resolution of the physical state, is the last stage of such an enterprise. The resurrection of that spiritual virtue which precedes any birth and any death grows into a power of transmutation, removes the mineral limit from the human being, thus resolving the need of physical existence at its very roots. The physical body gets re-absorbed into the power of whose retrenchment it was itself a symbol, a symbol wrongly raised to a reality supporting the whole of the fictitious, much-too-human, perishable world conspicuously marked by pain and death. When that retrenchment is done away with, the world of the ego peters out, and the importance of earthly appearances vanishes. A material frame thoroughly permeated by the « Chi » is not subject to death any longer. Death only sets in for a while, as it is actually a kind of « temple death », a state of deep slumber enabling the spirit permanently to join the subtle and the etheric body in order to work the final transmutation. Thus the body vanishes into the One from which it had never essentially been severed.

A comparison with the symbology of Grail is justified by the fact that according to that legend the sight of the Holy Grail secured recovery and deathlessness to the inmates of Montsalvat. On the other hand, the carving of the Chalice out of an emerald from Lucifer's forehead can lead us to understand how it hints at the loss of divine vision (*vidyā*) or of the original Knowledge, instead of which intellectual understanding has arisen, reflected and limited (*avidyā*) to the head, its seat. The sight of the holy Chalice works through the heart, viz. in the seat where, according to Taoist teachings, the transfiguring breath of the original embryo acts. Thus the blood, pervaded by the *Chi* again, is etherealized and flows in a subtle current towards the head. The Grail, likewise acting through the heart, awakens a power tending to restore original Knowledge in the very place where it lost part of its power by binding itself too tightly to the world of matter, i.e. in the brain. The spiritual sight which is the condition of deathlessness is lit again in the formerly dimmed light-centre (*ājñācakra*). Its loss was necessary in order that man might develop individuality and freedom in his effort to reconquer Knowledge.

This very theme could also be considered in the light of other

traditions. It suffice to quote one sloka preserved in the Chāndogyopaniṣad, saying: « There are a hundred and one veins in the heart, only one of which rises into the head. He who climbs through it ascends towards Deathlessness ». On the other hand, according to Tantric Yoga, the conquest of Freedom and Immortality presupposes a process of transmutation which builds a « divine body » (divyadeha) being at the same time a « knowledge body » (jñānadeha), a body woven of Immaculate Light. This begins to take shape when the central eye (ājñācakra) buds into life, the eye of Shiva which burns baser passions to ashes.

In the Taoist symbology of the « cinnabar fields » the centre of higher light corresponds to the Ni-huan Palace, or to Nirvāṇa, situated in the brain, and later, in the *Mystery of the Golden Flower*, to the « heavenly heart » or the « yellow middle », the centre ruling the circulation of light in blood. This light, shining through the body, frees it from the law of gravity, from illness and death. Ultimately the body, restored to its essential principles, is no more a captive of the snare of appearances by which the two fatal forms of necessity are made inevitable: sorrow and death. Their fatality or unescapableness are bound to their independence of human will inasmuch as man still lacks inner freedom and decision.

The correlation between death of what is seemingly alive — the illusory ego element — and deathlessness is once more apparent. If that death takes place during natural life man has conquered eternity already and his physical death is nothing but the last act in the world of appearances. The inner embryo has actually consumed selfishness up to its last bodily supports by permeating the several sheaths of man up to the physical body. Therefore the body becomes ethereal and light. « Light and subtle » are the bodies of the mysterious beings who, according to Chuang-tzu, are dwelling far away on the Ku-sha mountains and presiding over the destiny of the world: « they feed on morning dew, live on the clouds and the wind, ride flying dragons and wander happily beyond the limits of human perception ».

The eternal being slumbering in man, when awakened, frees itself from the illusory garment of selfishness and at the same time from the coarseness which is its vehicle in the body, not unlike the snake casting off its slough or the butterfly struggling free of its grub. Birth into eternity is thus connected with initiational death or the body's apparent death. That is why the ancient disciple of Tao seemed to die, was buried according to the usual ritual, but his body suddenly disappeared, wholly re-absorbed into the bodiless light of the spirit that ever was, according to the superhuman virtue of *Shi-chiai*.

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